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IR in Iran and South Africa: A Comparative Study*

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Abstract

As the self-image of International Relations as a "hegemonic discipline", under the influence of the American IR community, is questioned and challenged, the issue of "others" in IR, particularly those in the global South, and their approaches to and understandings of the "international" are becoming increasingly significant. IR communities in the global South are perceived to have different understandings of the "international," which need to be reflected in IR to make the discipline more inclusive and global. As it is assumed that IR scholars in the more active and powerful countries in the international system have more interest in understanding the world, IR communities in countries known as regional powers can be seen as good candidates for having their voices heard in IR. This article, a comparative study of IR in South Africa and Iran as two major regional powers, examines the reception and application of the Western-centric IR by Iranian and South African IR scholars, as well as their home-grown innovations in order to illustrate the way in which the plurality in IR is reflected in scholarship in these two countries. Despite similarities in experience, their differences indicate the way in which voices from the global South are far from being monolithic.

Keywords: Global IR, Iran, Non-Western IR, Regional Powers, South Africa

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1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, when Stanley Hoffman (1977) called International Relations (IR) "an American Social Science", American hegemony in the discipline has been almost taken for granted (Smith, 2000; 2002; 2011). Yet, even if the "American-ness" of the discipline is no longer true in all aspects (Turton, 2015; Kristensen, 2015), the Western-centric[1] nature of a significant part of IR, is hard to refute. The fact that almost all famous IR theories and what are regarded as legitimate methodologies applied to IR studies are of an American or European origin, together with the general observation that the number of internationally active Western IR scholars and journals significantly outnumbers those of the non-Western world, make such claims almost axiomatic. Although these observations might be true about almost all disciplines, it is most significant in social sciences in general and IR in particular, where not only are issues of meaning and culture involved but also power relations have significant consequences.

The Western-centrism of IR has some important aspects. Firstly, IR's basic assumptions about legitimate knowledge are based on Western theories of knowledge (Vasilaki, 2013; Tickner, 2013); European/Western understanding of history is taken to be universal world history (Inayatullah & Blaney, 2004; Acharya & Buzan, 2007); the "analytical concepts" used in IR (state, sovereignty, anarchy, diplomacy, regimes, etc.) are almost all Western (Puchala, 1997, p. 129). Secondly, almost all IR theories are produced in the West and by Western scholars - not just the mainstream theories such as realism, liberalism, and conventional constructivism, but even critical approaches such as Marxism, poststructuralism,

1. We use the terms 'Western-centrism' and 'Eurocentrism' interchangeably.

feminism, and Critical Theory. Furthermore, all of them can be criticized for their Eurocentric features (see Hobson, 2007; Shani, 2008; Tansel, 2015; Hobson & Sajed, 2017). Thus IR has been charged to reproduce itself "by either silencing or expropriating knowledge production at the margins of the 'self'" (Fonseca, 2019, p. 47). The implications of this state of affairs, however, are not a matter of consensus. Those who believe in the universality of knowledge may not see this Western-centeredness as problematic (for example, Mearsheimer, 2016), while those who look for more diversity and pluralism in the discipline, acknowledge the necessity of engagement with non-Western IR (Turton, 2015; Katzenstein, 2016). Some (see, for example, Acharya, 2011) argue for the necessity of this engagement because Western-centeredness prevents Western social science in general and IR in particular from understanding the rest of the world or even taking non-Western countries into account. As various experiences lead to different perspectives, engagements with IR scholarship in the non-Western world is necessary to make the discipline more inclusive, egalitarian, and pluralist, besides making it more successful in understanding and explaining the world affairs. It is thus to the benefit of IR as a discipline to put an end to its "deafness" and look for new intellectual resources in non-Western[1] parts of the world (see Puchala, 1997; Aydinli & Mathews, 2000; Tickner, 2003; Smith, 2010).

Following the calls for more inclusiveness and plurality in IR during the last two decades, there have been attempts to bring the periphery "in" and to promote dialogue among IR communities of scholars (see Hobson, 2007; Acharya, 2011; Hutchings, 2011;

1. It is important to point out that neither the West nor the non-West are monolithic and that they have had mutual constitutive effects.

Moshirzadeh, 2020). Among the first attempts in this regard, one may mention the publication of a special issue of the *Asia-Pacific Journal* in 2007, where the absence of IR theory in Asian countries was addressed (Acharya & Buzan, 2007) and later, further developed into a book (Acharya & Buzan, 2010). In 2009, in *International Relations Scholarship around the World* (Tickner & Waever, 2009), the editors and contributors sought to show the ways in which international life is understood around the globe, including in the non-Western world. The International Studies Association (ISA), as the main institution representing the international IR community initiated the 'Global South Caucus' and later the 'Committee on the Status of Engagement with the Global South' in order "to increase the participation, status, and visibility of Global South scholars" (International Studies Association, n.d. a; International Studies Association, n.d. b). In 2015, the ISA chose "Global IR and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies" as its main theme, followed by the publication of a special issue of *International Studies Review* devoted to a series of articles and a forum on global IR (see Acharya, 2016). Furthermore, many books and articles have been published, in which the state of IR and IR theories in various regional and national settings have been discussed. Therefore, one may see that there has been significant change since 2003, when Arlene Tickner (2003, p. 296) argued that, although "critical self-reflection within IR has undoubtedly led to increased intellectual tolerance and pluralism," there have not been many "systematic efforts" to investigate into non-Western perspectives. Yet, it seems that still there is much to be done, from investigating into IR teaching, research, and theory-building in various countries to comparative studies across countries and regions.

As the state of IR in both Iran and South Africa have been studied to some degree[1], in this article, we intend to present a comparative study of IR in these two countries as two major regional powers. The ways in which Western-centric IR is received and applied by IR scholars, as well as the home-grown innovations that have emerged from Iran and South Africa will be discussed to illustrate the way in which the plurality in IR is reflected in scholarship in these two countries. Despite similarities in experience, there are also differences between IR in these two countries, which highlight and bring, highlighting that bringing in voices from the global South is far from a monolithic endeavor. In what follows, we first look at Iran and South Africa as two important regional powers. In the second part, we provide an overview of IR in the two countries with an emphasis on the origins of IR and how it has been practiced. In the third part, home-grown innovations will be discussed. The concluding part includes a discussion on commonalities and differences of IR in Iran and South Africa.

2. South Africa and Iran as Regional Powers

As noted above, the discipline of IR has, to date, paid negligible attention to knowledge about international relations that has been produced in countries outside of the core. This has various reasons, including realism's overriding interest in the great powers as the only actors that matter for the study of IR, but more importantly, because of the Eurocentric understanding of the world. While there has been an interest in regional powers in the global South in the

1. For South Africa, see for example, Taylor (2000); Vale, (2004); van der Westhuizen (2005); Schoeman (2009); Smith (2008, 2009, 2013); and for Iran, Moshirzadeh, (2018).

practice of international relations, this has been less pronounced in the study of IR, with most work on regional powers coming from area studies[1]. While a number of concepts have been used to describe the role of states such as Iran and South Africa in global affairs, the focus in this paper will be their shared identity as regional powers. The position and status of these regional powers are due to traditional indicators of power, such as population, military and economic strength, as well as to institutional and ideational power (Nolte, 2010).

In the case of South Africa, despite recent challenges, the country is still regarded as a regional power in sub-Saharan Africa, based on its material (specifically economic and military) capabilities, as well as its political, diplomatic and ideational influence (Smith, 2018a). In claiming to represent regional interests in various multilateral fora, South Africa has also been recognized as a regional leader by the international community. Evidence of this can be found in South Africa's membership of exclusive organizations, such as the G20 and the BRICS, and the fact that its leaders have often been invited to multilateral fora of the advanced, industrialized countries (such as the G7/8 and World Economic Forum), where they are regarded as spokespersons not only for South Africa, but also for the African continent as a whole. The powerful countries in the West have also looked towards South Africa as a strategic state that should be at the forefront of resolving regional crises.

Iran is also regraded as a regional power in the Persian Gulf as well as the Middle East region. Its vast territory, population, economic size, and regional influence make it a middle power with

1. See, for example, the GIGA's Regional Powers Network https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/rpn

regional influence. Even some hostilities towards Iran and the fact that it is not in a friendly regional environment can be seen as resulting from counterbalancing efforts by other countries that see it as a regional power with hegemony-seeking intentions, although it denies such ambitions and practically does not possess the economic and military power needed for a regional hegemon (see Moshirzadeh, 2020). The Islamic Republic defines itself as "an inspiration for the world"[1]. This too, implies having ideational influence, especially at the regional level. Thus, numerous institutions have been created to promote this in various forms. They are active in various countries, with the idea of promoting Iranian/Shiite culture. Most of its political and military presence in the region may be seen as the result of its primary interest in ideational influence.

Before continuing, we should ask why it is important to focus on regional powers in the discussion on IR from the global South? For one, a state's position of power in the international system is often reflected in the level of IR theorization. We might therefore expect scholars in regional powers such as Iran and South Africa to be active in this regard, an issue that will be further discussed in this article. Secondly, regional powers tend to be centers of knowledge production in their respective regions. For example, studies measuring academic output based on publications in ISI indexes show that South Africa produces about half of all output in the social sciences and more than three times more than Nigeria, the second most productive country (Mouton, 2010, p. 64). They also exercise ideational influence in a more indirect way. Many scholars from the region receive their tertiary (and sometimes also secondary) education in South Africa, and are therefore socialized

1. See *The Twenty Year National Vision* (2005).

into a particular approach to IR. Regional powers also receive more attention from the international community due to their perceived regional influence; one can therefore assume that there would be more interest thinking on IR emerging from these states than from others in the global South. In addition, recent historical work in IR has revealed that states like South Africa were much more influential in the establishment of the discipline of IR than previously recognized. In their 2016 article on the alternative origins of IR, for example, Thakur, Davies and Vale argue that the ideas and method of what was to become IR were first developed in South Africa, thereby challenging the conventional origin story.

According to an important Iranian strategic document, *The Twenty Year National Vision for the Dawn of the Solar Calendar Year 1404 [2025]* (2003), in 2025, Iran seeks to become the leading country "in the Southwest Asia (including Central Asia, Caucasus, the Middle East) in economic, scientific, and technological terms with a focus on software movement and *academic production*, [and] rapid continuous economic growth, …"[1] [emphasis added]. Although its economic planning has almost completely failed, especially due to sanctions, its academic record is still notable. Of course as far as humanities and social sciences are concerned, the international publications of Iranian scholars are limited mostly due to linguistic barriers. The number of publications in these fields, according to SCIMAGO website, follows that of Turkey among its neighbors. Iran also has a large community of IR scholars with numerous academic journals reflecting their work, much of which is also used at universities in neighboring countries, especially in Afghanistan. In order to make

1. Translated by the author from the Persian text. The text is available in English at: https://irandataportal.syr.edu/20-year-national-vision

the publications more reachable, publishing books in English is encouraged at universities.

Furthermore, many Afghan and Iraqi students (as well as some from Lebanon, Turkey, and Central Asian countries) pursue their graduate and postgraduate studies in Iran. In order to mitigate the limits imposed by linguistic barriers, some Iranian universities have begun offering courses, seminars, and graduate programs in English in order to pave the way for absorbing more foreign students especially from the region. Despite financial constraints faced by the higher education system in Iran due to sanctions and poor economic conditions, the government continues to offer scholarships to students from neighboring states, and the global South more broadly.

In the following section, the origins of IR in Iran and South Africa are briefly introduced to be followed by a discussion on the way in which IR is practiced in the two countries.

3. The Development of IR in Iran and South Africa

3. 1. Origins

It seems that the first text on international relations appeared in Iran in the 1870s, when the Iranian King, Nassereddin Shah Qajar, asked an Iranian diplomat, Mirza Mehdi Khan Momtahenoddoleh, to inform him about the existing arrangements in Europe. On the basis of his "twenty-five years of diplomatic experience" and some French sources, he wrote a handbook in which he introduced various rules of modern international life from balance of power to diplomatic immunities, to rules regulating international treaties, war, peace, impartiality, dispute settlements, and the like (Momtahenoddoleh, 1379 [2000 A. D.]). As a field of study,

International Relations in Iran emerged in 1899 when the 'School of Politics' for training Iranian diplomats was established. Later, the School was joined by Law School and School of Commerce and in 1935, when the University of Tehran was established, the Faculty of Law, Political Science, and Economics was formed. When the Center for Graduate International Studies (CGIS) was formed in 1965 at the University of Tehran, it offered an MA program in International Relations for the first time in Iran. In the course of time, as more universities offered undergraduate and graduate programs in Political Science, international studies became a part of the curricula of major universities. International Relations is deemed as a subfield of political science and is a part of its curriculum in undergraduate programs. IR MA and PhD programs are offered either by IR departments (in major universities) or the departments of Political Science (in smaller ones). Initially IR was more legally oriented with more focus on international legal studies. It was with the Americanization of the academia in the 1960s and 1970s that this was somehow modified (see Mosaffa, 1386 [2007 A. D.], pp. 162-164).

Contrary to conventional accounts that IR in South Africa developed as an offshoot of Political Science, Thakur, Davies and Vale (2017) argue that the ideas and method of what was to become IR were first developed in South Africa. They explain the way in which the ideas that were initially inspired by the peculiarities of the racialised South African state and its position in the British Empire circulated transnationally, and were instrumental in the creation of what became the field of International Relations. This points to the fact that, in many cases, the conventional history of the development of IR often overlooks the role of race and empire, which scholars interested in the alternative origins of IR are now increasingly uncovering. Despite this early history, IR as a

discipline remains overshadowed by Political Science, with the study of IR being subsumed (with one exception – the University of the Witwatersrand) under departments of Political Studies or Political Science.

3. 2. Practice

During the Shah's era, there was not much relevance between Iran's position in and interactions with the world and the knowledge that was produced on international relations at the universities. In the MA program offered by the CGIS, there was one MA course that dealt with Iran's foreign policy, and few seminars, roundtables, or lectures, which were more directly related to Iran's foreign relations or its regional environment were held from 1965 to 1978.[1] Even the publications did not cast much interest in issues related to Iran. Most of the published books were either translations of Western sources or relied on Western material. Iran or its foreign relations were therefore not the focus of worldwide publications. In a few books, in which few pages were dedicated to Iran, the country's constitution and Shah's nationalism and his 'charismatic' leadership were the only points discussed (Behzadi, 1354 [1975 A. D.]; Nazem, 2536 [1977 A. D.]). The same was true as far as journal articles are concerned. The journal published by the CGIS, for example, included only a few articles dealing with Iran's foreign policy or its regional environment and the books it published included translation of books on European political unification, UN activities, history of international relations, comparative foreign policy, IR theories, and the like[2]. It

1. Interview with Nasrin Mosaffa, who was an MA student at the Center before the revolution and later became its director for thirteen years (1997-2010).
2. The journal published 12 issues until spring 1979. This assessment is based on the review of eight available issues.

seems that the Center sought more to produce knowledge appropriate for Iran's involvement in international institutions.

The Islamic Revolution, followed by the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979 can be seen as a turning point. In the decades after the revolution, the number of universities increased dramatically and many of them began to offer undergraduate and graduate programs in political science, regional studies, and IR. This resulted in an unprecedented increase in the number of PhDs in IR and their entrance into the IR community mostly represented by the Iranian Political Studies Association and Iranian International Studies Association (both formed after the revolution)[1]. In 1980, following what was called the "Cultural Revolution", the universities were shut down and the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution was formed to realize the Islamization of universities as one of its main objectives. The curricula and syllabi were to be comprehensively revised to become Islamic and free from "negative impacts of the West." Some courses on Islamic political thought and Islamic history were added to undergraduate Political Science program, a course on the international implications of the Islamic revolution and courses on imperialism and the Third World were added, and Iran's concerns were taken into consideration in some syllabi together with a critical interpretation of the history of foreign affairs. Furthermore, specific academic institutions were established in the course of time to promote the idea of Islamic political science and International Relations by adding courses and/or conducting research based on Islamic jurisprudence (Moshirzadeh, 2018) and "chairs for theorizing" (besides other incentives) were established to encourage homegrown and/or Islamic theories in various fields including IR.

1. For more information about them, see http://www.ipsa.ir/en and http://www.iisa.ir/en

During the last forty years, various policies have been adopted to encourage "relevant" research, i.e., considering Iranian/Islamic ideas, country's problems, national interests, Iran's foreign policy, Iran's regional and international environment and the like. A study on one of the oldest academic journals, i.e., *Politics: The Journal of the Faculty of Law and Political Science of the University of Tehran* shows that the major themes of the articles on international relations were theoretical issues, peace and conflict, and foreign policy. The first two themes may reflect what may be called the Political Science/IR tradition at the University of Tehran, which has been more theory and law-oriented. Geographically, Iran, Asia and the US were the main areas addressed (Moshirzadeh & Khaje Naeeini, 1393 [2014 A. D.]). Furthermore, an increasing interest in studying various aspects of the Islamic world has led many scholars to focus on this issue and dedicate new journals (such as the *Journal of Political Research in Islamic World* and the *Journal of Strategic Studies of the Islamic World*) to publish such studies in particular[1]. Research on published articles that dealt with Iran's foreign policy indicates that the majority of them have policy implications/prescriptions. Furthermore, addressing the foundations of Iran's foreign policy, issues such as the Middle East, nuclear policy, public diplomacy, and relations with great powers formed the major themes discussed in the articles (Moshirzadeh, Mahroogh & Khoshkar, 1393 [2014 A. D.]). There is also a near-consensus among the Iranian IR community that a home-grown IR is one that considers/promotes Iran's national interest (Moshirzadeh, 2018, p. 107). These altogether may reflect the fact that there is a degree of congruity between the state's priorities and IR scholarship.

1. The authors would like to thank one of the reviewers who suggested that this point too should be taken into account.

Although Iranian scholars have been more or less aware of the theoretical debates in the West, they were not a part of it. The more or less isolated character of the Iranian IR community has been a result of linguistic barriers, difficulties in obtaining visas for participating in international conferences, and limited financial support due to general economic conditions resulting mostly but not solely from sanctions.

Arguably most of Iranian scholars' work is based on applying existing IR theories to important issue areas from an Iranian perspective. One may distinguish some major theories that have influenced the Iranian IR, among which Realism and constructivism seem to be the most influential ones. The results of a 2014 survey suggest that constructivism is the most popular theory, but not hegemonic, as 37% of the respondents (IR professors at public universities) saw it as the most helpful theory. Realism was the second most popular endorsed by 32% of the respondents (Moshirzadeh, 2018, p. 107). Yet, some of the prominent IR professors are self-professed realists who have influenced a new generation of IR students who apply (mostly structural and to a lesser degree, neo-classical) realism to different issues in their theses and dissertations. Furthermore, most of the original IR texts translated into Persian are those of prominent American Realists (including Morgenthau, Waltz, and Mearsheimer). It should be noted, however, that what may be labelled as a kind of "Iranian Realism" reflects a rather critical understanding of the existing order, making it far from the "conservative" version dominant in the West. Although liberalism is less advocated or applied, the interrelationship between international law and International Relations as two main fields of study at universities has led to the formation of a discourse of international society with some liberal overtones (Moshirzadeh,

2015). Critical theories are also applied in the study of international relations and foreign policy.

Methodologically speaking, Iranian IR production has perhaps a paradoxical nature. Due to the policies of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (responsible for higher education), much under the influence of natural science academicians, many academic journals expect the authors to clearly state their hypotheses, methods, reliability and validity measures, etc. This may give the articles a positivist appearance[1]. However, only a few articles in IR practically follow the procedures. They usually claim to follow "descriptive-analytical" method that is rarely ever defined. That is why when a prominent positivist Iranian scholar studied the PhD dissertations in political science and IR at the University of Tehran he reached the conclusion that few of them were "scientifically sound" (Eftekhari, 1387 [2008 A. D.]).

Until early 1990s, Iranian IR scholars' publications were not noteworthy, as there was insignificant institutional pressure for that. Yet, with a change in regulations, as well as a rapid increase in the number of scholars, the number of publications grew dramatically. New academic journals were formed to publish scholarly work. Most of the journals, however, are in Persian and just two in English[2]. As the new generation of IR scholars, unlike the previous generations, are graduates of Iranian universities, they lack the necessary command of English to become active at the

1. According to research done on articles on foreign policy more than 72 percent of the articles that were studied had positivist orientation in this general formalistic sense. See Moshirzadeh, Mahroogh, and Khoshkar 1393 [2014].
2. *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* (*IRFA*) and *Journal of World Studies*. Until the mid-2000s the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), a prestigious research center affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, published *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*.

international level. During the last few years, however, under institutional pressures making publications in journals cited at the Web of Science has become a necessary condition for academic promotion, and this has led some to publish in English. These few publications, however, are mostly related to Iran's foreign policy and/or regional developments. Even scholars with acceptable level of English have not been much successful in international publications, perhaps due to gatekeeping practices and the fact that non-native speakers of English cannot easily write an academic article because of lacking stylistic capabilities and the straight line of reasoning dominant in English (see Turton, 2015).

The domestic environment and the role of the state undoubtedly has a tremendous influence on the development of a field like International Relations, which is closely related to the affairs of the state. This is reinforced by Wæver (1998), who emphasizes the importance of a state's foreign policy orientation in influencing the nature and focus of IR. In South Africa, under the apartheid era, this was reflected in the fact that the security and foreign policy of the state were the main subjects for IR scholars at the time, reflecting the dominance of the state and its ideology. Reflecting the position of the apartheid state as one isolated by the international community, and its own discourse of being under constant threat or "onslaught" from the outside world, realism became the obvious perspective through which one could view international relations. This state of affairs was further exacerbated by the academic boycotts, which resulted in an academic community that, like the state, was increasingly isolated and therefore cut off from the IR debates that were happening in the rest of the world in the 1970s and 1980s in particular.

Following the democratization process and South Africa's return

to the international community after 1994, the emphasis similarly fell on helping to make sense of South Africa's new international role, and particularly what foreign policy strategies it would and should pursue. In addition, what van der Westhuizen calls the curse of "policy relevance" (2005, p. 1), referring to the pressure to conduct research that has direct bearing on urgent societal challenges rather than more abstract theoretical issues, soon determined the type of research most scholars would conduct. In short, policy-relevant research dominated, and to some extent continues to dominate, IR in South Africa.

Today, South Africa's IR scholarship still mainly concentrates on South Africa's foreign policy and security/conflict studies. According to the 2017 TRIP[1] study results, the majority (40%) of respondents identify South African foreign policy as their main area of research, followed by comparative foreign policy at 20%. IR also has a strong regional focus in South Africa, with almost 70% of respondents citing sub-Saharan Africa as their main region of research (Maliniak, Peterson, Powers & Tierney, 2017). This focus seems to reflect the dominance of the African agenda in South Africa's international relations, as a stated foreign policy priority. Alongside the emphasis on policy relevant research, since 1994, there has also been pressure to do Africa-focused research. This is linked to the post-apartheid government's efforts to establish its identity as first and foremost that of an African state, in light of the apartheid government's isolation from the continent, bot self-imposed and externally imposed.

1. The Teaching, Research & International Policy Project is aimed at providing a snapshot of IR scholarship and teaching around the world, based on surveys conducted with IR scholars. The 2017 TRIP survey includes IR scholars from 36 countries. Of the 13,482 individuals identified, 3,784 responded for a response rate of 28 percent. For more information, see: https://trip.wm.edu/

Like other post-colonial states, South Africa's higher education system was shaped according to the colonial model, and this continues to be reflected both in the institutional cultures and in academic traditions. Western intellectual hegemony in the field of IR remains pervasive. This has the effect that, for the most part, IR syllabi in South Africa do not look very different from those in London or Washington DC. The continued bias towards the global North is reflected in the most recent TRIP study, which indicates that respondents still regard Western institutions as superior with regards to training future IR scholars, with Oxford, Cambridge and Yale cited as the top institutions for PhD candidates. Relatedly, the boundaries determined by mainstream IR scholars in the West about what constitutes legitimate fields of concern to IR and, significantly, what constitutes theory, were entrenched and passed on to students, who in turn reflect this in their choice of thesis topics.

With regards to the role of language in gatekeeping, many scholars (including Waever, 1998) have argued that IR is an Anglo-centric discipline, as a result of which, scholars who are not proficient in English are almost automatically excluded from publishing in international journals. In contrast to Iranian scholars, South African scholars have a slight advantage in that, while it may not be their first or second language, most have received either all or some of their postgraduate education in English, and also tend to write their PhD dissertations and subsequent publications in English. This means that their work is, at least in theory, more accessible to an international audience. The three recognized journals publishing in the field of Political Science/IR – *Politikon*, *Politeia* and the *South African Journal of International Affairs* are also all English medium journals.

A cursory overview of publications by South African scholars indicates that the largely a-theoretical nature of South African IR seems to have persisted, following such criticisms by Vale (2004), Schoeman (2009), Smith (2013), with most publications being either a-theoretical or applied theory. In terms of theoretical approach, realism remains dominant, while many scholars indicate a preference for constructivism (more than 30%) (Maliniak et al., 2017). In practice, however, the stated preference for constructivism generally translates into a rather general recognition that ideas matter, rather than a systematic and rigorous engagement with constructivist principles. Surprisingly, given the frequent anti-imperialist narratives used in the practice of South Africa's foreign policy, this approach is not reflected in academic research, with only a handful of scholars using a critical theory approach [1]. Overall, there is little, if any attempt to theorise, particularly from an explicit and distinctly South African positionality, in the way that we see happening in the Chinese IR, for example.

Despite being an African country in the global South, due to its history of prolonged colonization under the apartheid regime and the continued dominance of a Eurocentric approach to higher education, much of the IR scholarship produced has remained conventional in approach, with a focus on South Africa and Africa (Smith, 2013). As part of former president Thabo Mbeki's "African Renaissance" project, there was renewed interest in resurrecting and recognizing indigenous knowledge systems. While this was meant to be a continental project, it was facilitated in South Africa through government, particularly through the parliament calling on the country's science councils to launch research agendas focusing on indigenous knowledge.

1. See, for example, Vale (2001), Leysens (2001) and Leysens (2008)

In recent years, however, there have been increasing calls for the decolonization of higher education in South Africa. There was an upsurge with the emergence of the Rhodes Must Fall movement, which started at the University of Cape Town in 2015 and subsequently spread to other universities in South Africa and abroad: the demands were varied, with some linked to specific institutional practices as well as university fees (#RhodesMustFall soon morphed into #FeesMustFall and #FreeDecolonized Education). One of the common factors of these movements was the call to decolonize the academy. According to Zondi (2018, p. 17) it entailed "a call for a fundamental rethinking and redoing of how knowledge is produced, taught and disseminated". In many discussions, the calls to 'decolonise' soon became indistinguishable from calls to 'Africanise'. In other words, there was an emphasis on drawing on knowledge that was purely African, leading to concerns about nativism, as expressed by scholars such as Achille Mbembe (2001). While there were no specific references to the field of IR, there were demands to revisit the way in which all subjects were taught, and to emphasise African perspectives and authors, a debate which had existed in other African countries following the decolonization process. It resulted in a plethora of seminars, conferences and workshops on the topic. Questions ensued about whether it was possible to dismiss some knowledge as 'Western' and replace it with what is purely 'African', as this assumed simplistic understandings of the multiple origin of ideas and arguably underestimated the role of intercultural interactions across centuries in producing knowledge.

In general, the focus has primarily been on addressing the pedagogy of coloniality, with less emphasis on the production of decolonial research. There has been very little academic research in

IR that engages with these demands. Exceptions include Siphamandla Zondi's 2018 article and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni's book (2013a), which actually preceded the protest movements. The latter is concerned with three related themes of empire, global coloniality and African subjectivity and while it does not have an explicit focus on the field of IR, Ndlovu-Gatsheni does reflect on the implications for IR. It demonstrated the intricate embeddedness of Africa within global power structures and how this embeddedness produced a particular kind of African subjectivity. Zondi (2018) asks what a decolonial turn in IR might entail, suggesting that it is linked to the question of epistemic justice and that a first step involves identifying coloniality in IR as a strategy.

Despite the focus on Africa in terms of the content of South African IR scholarship, and the recent calls for Africanising higher education, there have been almost no attempts at theoretical contributions drawing on African ideas, nor explicit engagements with what IR would represent from a (South) African perspective. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's work (2013a, 2013b) on pan-Africanism as a subaltern world view, one that counters Eurocentric worldviews is an example. Relatedly, despite South Africa's role as a regional power, and the ideational influence that it exercises and arguably seeks to exercise in the region, there has been no concerted effort by the government to encourage the development of home-grown IR approaches. This is a lost opportunity, as, given the unique history of South Africa and recent work on the early history of IR in the country (see Thakur & Vale 2020), the opportunities to play a leading role in developing theoretical approaches that take race and empire seriously, abound.

Having considered the development and practice of IR in Iran

and South Africa, respectively, we now turn to the topic of theory-generation, particularly theory that is reflective of local, geographical and cultural peculiarities.

4. Homegrown Innovations

It seems that institutional arrangements to promote non-Western homegrown theoretical and non-theoretical studies were rather inspiring to encourage Iranian IR scholars to produce such material. A glance at the published work during the last three decades suggests that there has been a growing number of such studies -- even though it constitutes a rather small portion of the entire publications. Some theoretical concepts (such as power, security, peace, war, globalization) have been revisited from an Iranian/Islamic point of view. These, however, have not yet led to a reconceptualization to be applied in practice. Some Islamic norms of conduct in foreign and international relations have been formulated. However this has not led to the production of a Islamic international political or normative theory even if interesting ideas have emerged. Principles such as human dignity, respect for diversity, freedom and equality, peaceful coexistence, refuting violence, observing ethical standards, observing pacts and treaties, dialogue, reciprocity, and military deterrence are offered as Islamic guidance to international conduct (Alikhani, 1390 [2011 A. D.]). One of the interesting endeavors in this regard is the application of rational fundamental principles that underlie Islamic jurisprudence to international order. A PhD student of IR, in his dissertation suggests that principles such as respect for possessions (leading to recognition of sovereignty), not harming and not being harmed, necessity of compensation in case of harm, and prioritizing bad to worse, which belong to the foundation of the Shiite jurisprudence,

can become the principles of a rational international order (Sayednejad, 2015).

Ongoing ontological and epistemological discussions have been developed, which may have theoretical implications. Ghrayagh Zandi, (1394 [2015 A. D.]), from an "ontological point of view", sees four possible roles for Islam as a perspective on international relations: as a religion, as an ideology (fundamentalism), as an identity, and as an ethical stand; and sees the latter with its emphasis on peace, justice, and observing agreements as the most helpful; he illustrates in his article the way in which this perspective can lead to new international regimes. Dehghani Firoozabadi (1389 [2010 A. D.]; 1394 [2015 A. D.]), on the basis of Islamic philosophy and jurisprudence, has developed the foundations for an Islamic theory of international relations and discusses various Islamic perspectives on the meaning and possibility of developing an Islamic IR theory.

These concepts have been initially introduced by Iran's political leaders and then adopted and developed by IR scholars. One that has been welcomed by IR scholars in Iran is the idea of dialogue of civilizations put forward by President Khatami in the 1990s. The idea has been discussed in many books and articles from various perspectives, applied to aspects of international life, and somehow theorized, although mostly within the existing Western theoretical frameworks (Salimi 1377 [1998 A. D.]; Moshirzadeh 2004; 2007; 2010). Another concept is "soft war" (including phenomena such as propaganda, psychological war, etc.), which were first used by Ayatollah Khamenei, and much discussed and applied since to international politics, foreign policy, and domestic politics by Iranian academicians (Keshavarz-Shokri 1390 [2011 A. D.]; Eftekhari 1398 [2019 A. D.]; Jahanparvar 1398 [2019 A. D.]).

Certain theoretical models, inspired by Western theories, but somehow modified have been introduced, among which two have been developed by more well-known IR scholars. Seifzadeh (1370 [1991 A. D.]) developed a "systematic conceptual theory", and a version of critical realism, which has led to a conceptualization and a form of model building by Ghasemi (1391a [2012a A. D.]; 1391b [2012b A. D.]). Although at the academic level, these attempts have not been seriously discussed by peers, nor have they been mentioned in Iranian textbooks on IR theories, they have been taken as a theoretical guide to research by graduate students.

Theoretical discussions in Iran, however, have not yet led to an Iranian theory of international relations despite its role as a regional power with a distinct Shiite identity and a sense of agency in world affairs. One may suggest that lack of appropriate relations between the academia and the state could have been an obstacle to the proliferation of a widely accepted Iranian theory in the field of IR. From the point of view of practitioners, academicians cannot be trusted and/or their knowledge is irrelevant or practically inapplicable. On the other hand, academicians feel discouraged as a survey suggests that most of them see a gap between their knowledge and existing practices (Sariolghalam, 2009).

A reason for lack of theorization may be the rareness of endogenous theorizing in the disciplines that have usually inspired IR in the West, such as sociology, psychology, and economics. In all of these, Iranian scholarship has been more a "consumer" than a "producer." The same is true about history, as there have rarely been an Iranian perspective on historiography. Systematic data production and robust research can be a basis for theory-building, which is not very significant in Iran due to the fact that most of the published research adopts a more analytical and a less explanatory

approach, mostly based on existing findings and less producing significant new findings[1]. Even when new data is produced or collected, especially by research conducted for government agencies, the results are rarely published (Seyyedemami, 1389 [2010 A. D.], p. 145). Certain studies have attributed the lack of robust research practices and theory building to inappropriate methods of teaching; lack of updated syllabi, and unmotivated instructors (Hajiyousefi, 1385 [2006 A. D.]; Ranjbar, 1382 [2003 A. D.]; Moshirzadeh & Masoudi, 1389 [2010 A. D.]; Delavari, 1389 [2010 A. D.]). Other studies suggest that there is not a strong tradition of academic debate in Iran: IR scholars do not enter into dialogues with each other (except for debates on current international issues, which is often tied to political polemics). Colleagues usually do not express much interest in reading and commenting on others' manuscripts (Taghavi & Adibi, 1389 [2010 A. D.]). This may be a reason for qualitative shortcomings and a lack of elaboration on the ideas raised and/or their theorization.

If one limits the interpretation of 'homegrown innovations' to new theories drawing on local contexts, the offerings in South Africa are rather sparse. If, however, one broadens the definition to include reinterpretations or modifications of existing frameworks and the introduction of new concepts, then it is possible to identify more examples. Two examples were highlighted in a previous paper (See Smith, 2018b): the first is the reinterpretation of the concept of "middle power" by South African scholars who argued that there are specific characteristics that set emerging middle powers like South Africa apart from traditional middle powers. This is a useful illustration of the way in which an existing concept

1. Delavari (1389 [2010]) shows how political science in Iran suffers from lack of studies leading to significant findings.

can be adapted in order to make it more applicable to a particular context. The second is the introduction of a novel analytical framework based on the introduction of the concept "isolated states" by IR scholar Deon Geldenhuys, helping not only to refine the conceptual differentiation between terms like isolation, alienation, obscurity, seclusion and isolationism, but providing a novel framework through which one can measure the international isolation of states.

In terms of drawing on indigenous cultural concepts, the notion of *ubuntu* may be helpful. Essentially, ubuntu can be regarded as an indigenous world view, which can be roughly translated as the idea that "people are people through other people" (Marks, 2000, pp. 182-183). While African scholars such as Tieku (2012) and Murithi (2006, 2007) have applied the concept to African diplomacy, human rights and conflict resolution respectively, it has received surprisingly little attention amongst South African IR scholars. This, despite the fact that the term appeared in the title of the country's 2011 foreign policy white paper: "Building a better world: the diplomacy of ubuntu". In both Qobo and Nyathi's (2016) article and Le Pere's (2017) article, emphasis put is on criticizing South Africa's foreign policy, rather than exploring the notion *ubuntu* as a potential source for thinking differently about IR. Two examples of scholars who explore the latter are Smith (2012) and Zondi (2106). Smith argues that the concept of *ubuntu* may serve as an explanatory tool to help understand how African states engage with each other and the international community, and how viewing international relations from this lens could underline often neglected principles such as shared humanity, which could in turn inform the responsibilities of citizens and states towards one another. Taking a slightly different approach, Zondi (2016, p. 109) unpacks the Inter-Parliamentary Union's suggestion that the

concepts of *sumak kawsay* and *ubuntu* could serve as alternatives to colonial models of development, arguing that through them, we can "envisage a decolonial humanism marked by truly pluriversal ways of being, power and knowledge".

5. Comparison and Conclusion

While the above comparison has highlighted considerable differences between Iran and South Africa, there are also important commonalities in terms of the development of IR. The first is that, in both countries, from the 1970s onwards, the discipline developed in isolation, or what van der Westhuizen calls a "culture of insularity" due to either academic boycotts that formed part of international sanctions regimes and/or problems related to obtaining visas, financial support, etc. The result was that for both countries, the disciplinary debates of the 1970s, 1980s and early1990s largely bypassed the domestic IR community. This has had a direct impact on the level of theoretical debate and local theory generation. At the same time, major political transitions (the Islamic Revolution and the end of apartheid, respectively) resulted in changes in the social sciences, with demands for an approach to knowledge production that reflected the interests and culture of Iran and South Africa. While in Iran this was based primarily on religion, with calls for an Islamization of the social sciences, in South Africa this development was much more in line with the country's post-1994 emphasis on its identity as an African country, first and foremost, and an attempt to break from its colonial past.

IR in both countries has, in recent decades, been marked by a strong emphasis on foreign policy and studies exploring the regional roles of Iran and South Africa. In the case of the latter, the

primacy of the 'African agenda' in the government's approach to international relations is reflected in the plethora of IR studies focusing on South Africa's role in Africa, and the importance of its African identity in how it perceives of its position in the international system. Likewise, in Iran, a large body of existing research is either about Iran's foreign policy, where Iran's identity as an Islamic/Shiite revolutionary country, as well as its power position in the region are discussed, or its "significant others" in the international system are the focus of studies. Relatedly, both countries have seen a drive towards what could be called policy relevant research, the result of which has, in both cases, been the neglect of more theoretical research, specifically theory generation.

Both countries also share a foreign policy posture often characterized by explicit anti-imperialism and anti-Westernism on the one hand, and solidarity with the global South on the other. In light of the emphasis in both countries on policy-relevant research, this suggests that there would be a concerted effort encouraged by the state to develop alternative, non-Western theoretical approaches to the world. To date, despite some initiatives related to Islamization and Africanization, respectively, we have not seen this translating into significant theoretical innovations. While certain scholars seem content to apply (sometimes in a slightly adapted or localized form) existing theories, the expressions of discontent with the persistent Western-centrism of IR and the social sciences more generally, particularly in South Africa in recent years, have not yet borne the fruit of extensive homegrown theorizing. Fledgling attempts to introduce home-grown concepts, whether based on Islam or on Africana philosophy, to IR studies, should be encouraged as they can be seen as starting points for the development of endogenous theories in both countries.

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