

ANTI-SYSTEMIC REVOLUTIONARY COUNTRIES IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM: ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN AND RELIGIOUS BRANDING

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Abstract: *Nation branding concerns the overall perceptions toward a country at the international level. Different countries acquire different branding based on their positive characteristics and advantages, such as economy, culture, politics, governance, tourism, etc. The question that may be posed here is that, whether religious branding, as an important type of branding, can be identified and introduced to the world. Can religion branding be a positive and decisive element in raising a country's profile, enhancing its soft power, and subsequently spreading a positive image of a nation? Currently, the Islamic Republic of Iran has expanded its sphere of influence and power through religious branding, although this power is anti-systemic and at odds with the structure and norms of the international system. By analysing the religious dimension of the branding of the Islamic Republic of Iran, this article concludes that Iran has been able to develop its religious branding in the world, which has an Ummah-centered and global dimension. Such development of branding contradicts the dimensions and components of nation branding and internationally accepted norms, resulting in the international system regarding Iran as an anti-international order and revolutionary country.*

Keywords: *Branding, Religion, Iran, Islamic Republic, Reputation, International system.*

Rezumat: *Țările revoluționare anti-sistemice din sistemul internațional: Republica Islamică Iran și promovarea religioasă. Promovarea națiunii (nation branding) ia în calcul percepțiile generale față de o țară, la nivel internațional. Țări diferite își construiesc imagini diferite pe baza caracteristicilor și avantajelor lor pozitive, precum*

economie, cultură, politică, guvernanta, turism etc. Întrebarea care se pune în acest caz este dacă promovarea religioasă, ca tip important de promovare a imaginii unei țări, poate fi identificată și prezentată lumii. Poate fi promovarea religioasă un element pozitiv și decisiv pentru creșterea imaginii unei țări, sporirea puterii sale blânde (soft power) și, ulterior, pentru răspândirea unei imagini pozitive a unei națiuni? În prezent, Republica Islamică Iran și-a extins sfera de influență și putere prin branding religios, deși această putere este antisistemică și acest tip de branding vine în contradicție cu structura și normele sistemului internațional. Analizând dimensiunea religioasă în măsurarea imaginii naționale a Republicii Islamice Iran, acest articol concluzionează că Iranul a reușit să-și construiască în lume o imagine religioasă, cu dimensiune globală și centrată pe Ummah (comunitatea credincioșilor musulmani). O astfel de evoluție a construirii unei imagini contrazice dimensiunile și componentele brandingului națiunii și normele general acceptate la nivel internațional. De aceea, în cadrul sistemului internațional, Iranul este considerat o țară revoluționară, poziționată împotriva actualei ordini internaționale.

INTRODUCTION

Nation branding is a diplomatic-political term pertaining to the whole image and perception of a country by international stakeholders. Currently, each country enjoys a certain image and makes strategic efforts to promote this image. No region in the world has experienced such ups and downs in its image and brand as the Middle East. While in the construction of a nation brand, political, cultural, social, and sports activities are of importance, most theorists of branding and public diplomacy have considered religion to play a less important role in nation branding. Religion is one of the factors which, along with politics, governance, tourism, economy, and industry can greatly contribute to nation branding and increases the soft power of countries. A glance at the Middle East proves that today's Shiite and Sunni branding and religious wars are used as a form of soft power for the expansion of Middle East countries' sphere of influence and subsequent development of a positive and powerful nation brand.

Today, the structure of the international system and the relations of the Middle East countries with the West¹, especially the US, have fundamentally affected nation branding in these countries. Good relations with the West and, above all, the US, cause these countries to develop a globally positive image, and poor relations with Western countries and failure to make progress in the

¹ In this paper, West refers to an extensive value system (intellectual, economic, political, military, etc.) developed by the United States and major westernized countries.

international system orients these nations toward revolutionary, anti-systemic, and negatively branded nations. Iran is a good example to study in this regard. Before the Islamic Revolution, and during the Cold War in the 60s and 70s, Iran was a powerful and reliable ally of the West. Iranian nation branding was characterized by positive components, such as a developing country with a reliable leader, a stable system, brilliant economy, leading industry, etc. After the Islamic Revolution, Iran became a revolutionary, anti-systemic, and anti-Western country. Since then, Iran has had low status in nation brands ranking and failed to create a favourable international image. Having been affected by Western relations and its negative image in the international system, Iran suffered from sanctions imposed by the Western countries as well.² These sanctions delayed the branding and development of this country in industry, economics, tourism, urban development, education, etc. It is generally acknowledged that, in the age of globalization, without establishing good relations with global powers and moving in the direction of internationally accepted norms, the nation branding and imaging of a country in public diplomacy cannot grow positively and moves toward negative branding. The current investigation is a case study on Iran to prove this claim.

NATION BRANDING IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Today, every country has a reputation and image at home and abroad and possesses a specific brand. The national brand refers to the sum of all the perceptions of one nation in the minds of international citizens, including investors, stakeholders, politicians, doctors, ordinary people, etc.³ Some components contribute to building the nation branding of a country and can shape and refine it. They include people, place, culture, language, history, food, fashion, celebrities, economics, international and global activities, sports, etc.⁴ The national brand permanently exists, whether strong or weak, clear or ambiguous, and with or without a conscious effort to shape the national image

² Mehrdad Pahlavani, *Serious impediments to Iran's branding and rebranding*, in <http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/en/news/1978754/serious-impediments-to-iran-s-branding-and-rebranding> (Accessed on 03.09.2018)

³ Masood Khodadadi, *Challenges of Branding Iran: Perspectives of Iranian Tourism Suppliers*, in "Tourism Planning & Development", 2017, vol. 16:1, pp. 112-117.

⁴ Peeter W. J. Verlegh, *Country Images: Why They Influence Consumers*, in Go F.M., Govers R. (eds.) *International Place Branding Yearbook 2010*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 45-51.

in the minds of international audiences.⁵ Most experts widely acknowledge the existence of national brands, though there is disagreement regarding what the nation's branding refers to and how it is formed. Such confusion has its roots in the conceptualization and different interpretations of the nation brand and the branding process.⁶ Some definitions of this notion based on different levels are as follows.⁷

At the first level, the simplest way to treat the notion of nation branding is to consider it as a visual symbol or a slogan. Bearing this in mind, a brand can easily be located and communicated. At the second level, as an umbrella brand, nation branding may encompass different components of the national brand, such as tourism, exports, military power, etc.⁸ At the third level, nation branding can be regarded as a specific name or as a co-brand. For instance, the name of Samsung is tied to South Korea, creating a co-brand for South Korea. For international audiences, South Korea is associated with Samsung and its advanced IT and electronics industry⁹. At the fourth level, nation branding pertains to the image of a country, its reputation, and position,¹⁰ something similar to the branding of a large corporate.¹¹ At the fifth level, nation branding aims at creating and protecting the competitive characteristics of a nation in the world.¹² At the sixth level, nation branding contributes to the enhancement of a country's soft power¹³,

⁵ Ying Fan, *Branding the nation: What is being branded?* in "Journal of Vacation Marketing", 2006, vol. 12 (1), pp. 5-14.

⁶ Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*, Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 14

⁷ Arash Beidollahkhani, *Nation branding and national image making: new interdisciplinary perspective for political Science and international relations*, in "Politics quarterly", vol. 49, Issue 4, Winter 2020, pp. 999-1020. <https://dx.doi.org/10.22059/jpq.2019.224197.1006992>

⁸ Keith Dinnie, *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice*, Oxford, UK, Butterworth Heinemann, 2008, p. 200.

⁹ Kim Lee, *Nation branding and sustainable competitiveness of nations*, PhD thesis, University of Twente, 2009, p. 43.

¹⁰ Ying Fan, *Branding the Nation: Towards a Better Understanding*, in "Place Branding and Public Diplomacy", 2010, vol. 6, Issue 2, pp. 99-100.

¹¹ Katharina Petra Zeugner-Roth and Adamantios Diamantopoulos, *Advancing the country image construct*, in "Journal of Business Research", 2009, vol. 62, pp. 726-740.

¹² Simon Anholt, *Competitive identity: the new brand management for nations, cities and regions*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 21.

¹³ Ying Fan, *Soft power: The power of attraction or confusion*, in "Place Branding and Public Diplomacy", 2008, vol. 4 (2), p. 150.

and lastly, nation branding is about building a national identity, which may not be entirely obvious, but is actually one of the most complex links and processes.¹⁴ Fig. 1 shows this ranking.

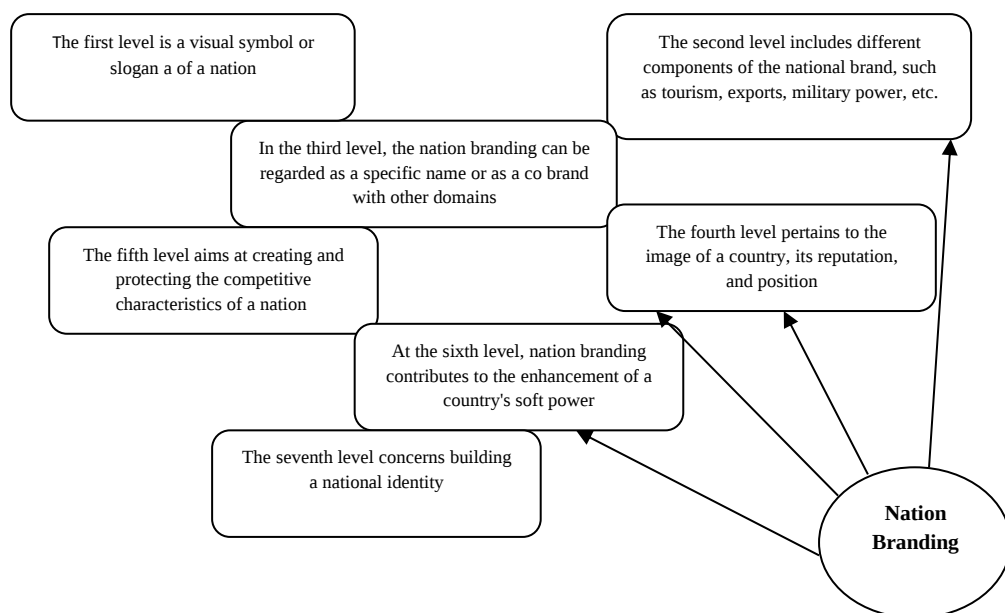


Figure 1- definitions of nation branding as levels

Various definitions of nation branding reflect a significant difference in the focus, intentions, and consequences of enacting nation branding. Based on various definitions and conceptualizations offered by scholars and experts, nation branding encompasses the following components (Fig. 2).

Based on the definitions offered, none of the goals for branding a nation could be achieved without cooperating with global powers. In fact, according to Robert Govers, nation branding and place branding are based on some agreed-upon indices, referring to the effect of a country outside its borders.¹⁵ This effect involves economic, political, security, and geopolitical dimensions. If the presence of a country in the international system is not based on the recognition of the global powers and compliance with international norms, then the nation branding may be

¹⁴ Melissa Aronczyk, *Branding the nation: the global business of national identity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

¹⁵ Frank Go, Robert Govers, *International place branding yearbook 2011: Managing reputational risk*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 34.

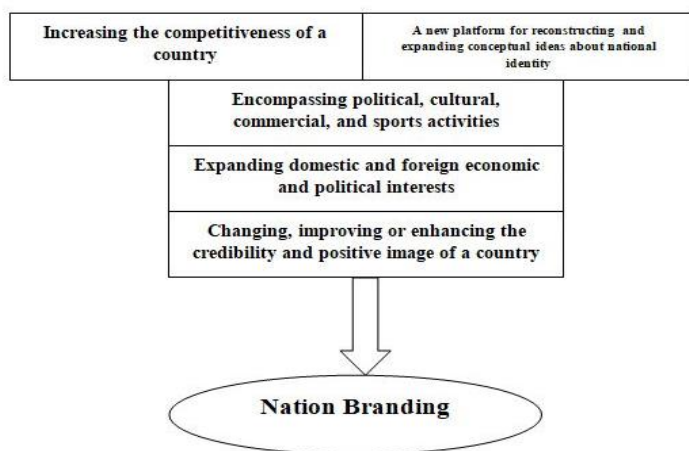


Figure 2- Components of nation branding

negative, and even the country may fail to develop a favourable places branding.

COUNTRY IMAGE AND INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION

"A country's image is the subjective and objective attitudes of the international audiences toward a nation driven by governments, the media, particular beliefs and public emotions, with functional, normative, aesthetic, and emotional dimensions"¹⁶. More clearly and comprehensively, "A country's image is the mutual and correspondent conceptualization of foreign attitudes towards a country, territory, history and traditions, economy and politics, values and norms, public culture and its political organizations".¹⁷ This picture is formed by interaction with the national identity as well as the citizens' perceptions of the nation's politics, culture, economy, society, etc.¹⁸ Accordingly, while the identity of a country is formed by citizens' perception of themselves and their country,¹⁹

¹⁶ Alexander Buhmann, *Measuring Country Image, Theory, Method, and Effects*, Fribourg, Springer, 2016, pp. 40-41.

¹⁷ Arash Beidollahkhani, *Nation branding and national image making process in Iran's contemporary period*, PhD dissertation, Faculty of law and Political, Tehran university, 2017, pp. 76-78.

¹⁸ James Pamment, *British Public Diplomacy and Soft Power: Diplomatic Influence and the Digital Revolution*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 91.

¹⁹ Wally Olins, *Making a National Brand*, in J. Melissen (Ed.), *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, New York, Palgrave-MacMillan, 2005, pp. 171-172.

the image of a country is constructed by the interaction between citizens' perception of their country and the attitudes of the international audience about that country".²⁰ The Fig. 3 below shows this process.

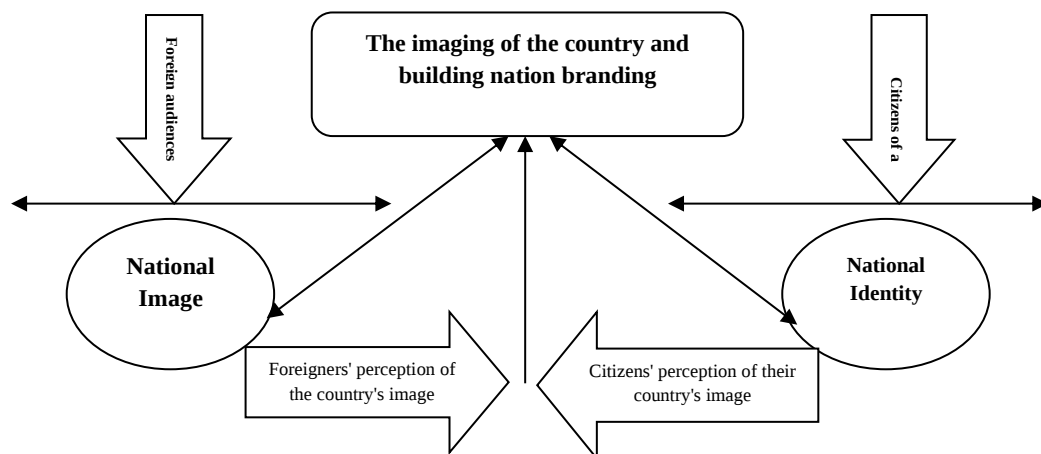


Figure 3- The process of linking national image with national identity

Often, there is a gap between image and identity. Identity refers to what exists and is real while the image is how something is perceived. Generally, nation branding is related to the image of a country and how it is shaped. It aims at narrowing the gap between a country's identity and its image.

Individuals and countries wish to be recognized on the basis of their own perception and the country's identity. However, their image is formed not by themselves but rather by the perceptions of others, and each person perceives the image of another person separately from the self-image perceived by that person.²¹ Proper management reduces the gap between a country's image and identity. But sometimes, building an international image and reputation of a country is based on some generalizations and subjective stereotypes, yielding an obscure and negative image and identity of that country to most international

²⁰ N. Kaneva, *Nation branding in post-communist Europe: identities, markets, and democracy*, in N. Kaneva (editor), *Branding post-communist nations: Marketizing national identities in the 'new' Europe*, London, Routledge, 2012, p. 11.

²¹ Philip Kotler and David Gertner, *Country as brand, product, and beyond: A place marketing and brand management perspective*, in "Journal of Brand Management", 2002, vol. 9 (4/5), pp. 249-261.

audiences.²² The perception of a country at the international level is largely based on the subjective attitudes and stereotypes of the mainstream media and international organizations, which are mostly owned and directed by global powers.²³ Iran is among the countries with an international negative image and branding in western public opinion and Western media since the Islamic Revolution in the 1980s.²⁴ Much of this attitude results from media, political, economic, international, and legal campaigns created against Iran. Further explanation in the next section follows.

IRAN'S RADICAL CHANGE IN BRANDING AND NATIONAL IMAGE

The image of Iran in the last four decades was very unstable, much like other Middle Eastern countries. The Iranian government was the security, economic, and political ally of the West before the Islamic Revolution. Iran was a symbol of modernism and development in the Middle East in the time of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Much of Iran's industrial, political, cultural, social, and economic relations were supported by the West and the US. Western and American companies used to implement Iran's massive industrial and development plans. The portrayal of Iran's branding in the Second Pahlavi era in the Western media was positive, and Iran was regarded as a strategic partner of the West in the Middle East.²⁵ In the midst of World War II, most Western theorists and politicians realized the importance of Iran as a bridge to victory.²⁶ After the end of the Cold War and the withdrawal of British forces from the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, the US entered the Persian Gulf and the Middle East as an alternative power. At that time, most of the Arab states of the Middle East, as well as other US allies,

²² Jorge De Vicente, *State Branding in the 21'st century*, Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Thesis, Fletcher international school, Tufts university, 2004, p. 10.

²³ Niall Caldwell and Joao R Freire, *The differences between branding a country, a region and a city: applying the brand box model*, in "Journal of Brand Management", 2004, vol. 12 (1), pp. 50-61.

²⁴ Richard Wike, *Iran's Global Image Mostly Negative, from pew research Center*, in <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2015/06/18/irans-global-image-mostly-negative/> (Accessed in 18.06. 2015)

²⁵ Christian Emery, *US Foreign Policy and the Iranian Revolution: The Cold War Dynamics of Engagement and Strategic Alliance*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 67.

²⁶ Mohammad Gholi Majd, *Iran under Allied Occupation in World War II: The Bridge to Victory & A Land of Famine*, Lanham, University Press of America, 2016, p. 32.

lacked either the necessary power or stability or were part of the Soviet front. Iran, as a new US ally, shared borders with the Soviet Union and could play an important role in the region against the influence of communism.²⁷ Nixon-Kissinger's strategy of protecting the Persian Gulf security by Iran also expanded Iran's power and increased Western trust in it. It was after the transfer of this role to Iran that the US and the West left the decision to Iran to purchase various weapons. Iran then became the largest importer of weapons from the US. The Point Four Program, along with the Marshall Plan in the 40s and 50s, were other factors that contributed to the growth of the Second Pahlavi government and strengthened its ties with the West.²⁸

During this period, Iran built a positive image as a developing country led by peaceful leadership. Iran enjoyed a positive place branding in the 50s and 70s as a fascinating country with the oldest, richest, and most influential art and cultural heritages in the world.²⁹ A large number of tourists and Orientalist scholars visited Iran annually, writing about it in books, media, magazines, and newspapers. Many Western leaders came to visit Iran, including queens, presidents, political and cultural figures, social figures, and celebrities. Western companies' investment in Iran increased in the 60s and 70s.

Pahlavi's policies and measures greatly contributed to Iran's favourable place branding. Celebrating the 2500th Anniversary of the Persian Empire and inviting heads of states and holding various celebrations and meetings worldwide expanded Pahlavi's positive image.³⁰ Pahlavi's cultural investments and the high costs spent worldwide on improving the cultural image and appeal of Iran's place branding were other measures that led to the expansion of Iran's positive image. In the 50s, Iran was a fascinating country for investors, entrepreneurs, and tourists, and Iran was reflected in media to the international audience as an appealing country in the religious Middle East. However, the Islamic Revolution altered this branding and attractive image.

²⁷ Roham Alvandi, *Iran and the Cold war*, in "Iranian studies", 2014, vol. 47, No. 3, pp. 373-378.

²⁸ Idem, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 101-102.

²⁹ Andrew Scottcooper, *The Fall of Heaven: The Pahlavis and the Final Days of Imperial Iran*, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 2016, p. 39.

³⁰ Robert Steele, *British Persian studies and the celebrations of the 2500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire in 1971*, Master thesis of philosophy in faculty of humanities, Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 2014, pp. 35-37.

THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION OF IRAN: A RADICAL CHANGE IN IRAN'S IMAGE AND NATION BRANDING

The Islamic Revolution of Iran emerged with the purpose of justice, peace, and the establishment of a divine government. Iran's revolution victory, which had its basis on Islamic ideology, began when Western countries were moving toward a worldly and materialistic life based on liberal democratic thought in the late 20th century. Accordingly, the emergence of this revolution turned attentions to Iran.³¹ Iran, as a country that, according to Western intelligence analysis, had left no room for growth of Islamist movements and whose people were tending toward western ideology confounded Western politicians and thinkers. But, neither the Western intelligence agencies nor the Pahlavi regime could grasp the widespread Islamism that had spread in Iran.³² The advent of the Islamic Revolution was sudden and unexpected for Western thinkers, politicians, and analysts and prompted many of them to study and theorize about it. The course of events in the Islamic Revolution of Iran, namely, the hostage-taking at the US Embassy, the West's ambiguity and misunderstanding of the nature of the Islamic Revolution, the spread of radical anti-Israel Shiite Islam, and the Iran-Iraq war injected anti-Western ideology as part of the Islamic Revolution's entity. In the following years, the pace of domestic, regional, and international evolutions highlighted the ideological dimension of the new political system and pessimized Western countries to the Islamic Revolution.³³ The domestic upheavals of the early years of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, including the suppression, mass executions, and ousting of political groups by force, made the Islamic Revolution branding, as well as the image of its leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, increasingly negative in the world.³⁴ The West and the US were still willing to interact with the leaders of the Islamic Revolution on regional and strategic issues. However, the ideological anti-west approach adopted by the Islamic revolution, as well as the

³¹ David Armstrong, *Revolutions and World Order: The Revolutionary State in International Society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 130.

³² Robert Jervis, *Why intelligence fails: Lessons from the Iranian revolution and the Iraq war*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2010, pp. 43-44.

³³ David Armstrong, *Revolutions...*, p. 139.

³⁴ Chad Nelson, *The evolution of norms: American policy toward revolution in Iran and Egypt*, in "Journal of Human Rights", 2017, vol. 16 (4), p. 500.

Iran-Iraq war, made issues even more complicated. In the next years, the anti-Western nature of the political system developed by the Islamic Revolution in Iran increased the attacks by media in Western countries. Iran's hostility to the US and some Western nations over regional, diplomatic, and domestic issues made Iran's branding and image negative. In the 1990s, after the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the consolidation of the Islamic Republic, a new model of governance was introduced to the world with a religious brand.³⁵ The place branding of Iran in the Western media was no longer built on a magnificent and fascinating culture and a stable country. The negative image resulted from Iran's opposition to an international system that was based on the interests of Western powers.³⁶ Iran developed a new image which defined it as a frightening country, a supporter of terrorism, a repressor, anti-liberalism, and anti-democracy. Some of the internal measures of the Iranian political system further weakened its positive brand and oriented it toward developing a negative religious brand.

RELIGIOUS BRANDING OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC: RELIGIOUS NEGATION

As mentioned earlier, Iran's Islamic Revolution happened at a time when religion was no longer regarded as a nation's symbol, at least in the West.³⁷ Prior to that, discussions on religion and politics had been largely forgotten in the West. However, the revolution in Iran, as one of the most secular countries in the Middle East in the 1970s, changed the attitudes of some scholars. Moreover, the Islamic Revolution awakened much of the political and radical Islamist movements in the Arab world. Basically, religious-based policy-making was the fundamental ideal of radical and fundamentalist Islamic movements that happened in Iran after the Islamic Revolution. Nowadays, the Islamic Republic of Iran presents itself in the world on the basis of religion. Iran's religious branding and that of some Middle Eastern countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia) are referred to as sectarianism by some mainstream media in the West. However, in the Islamic ideology of the Islamic

³⁵ Mara Einstein, *The Evolution of Religious Branding*, in "Social Compass", 2011, vol. 58 (3), pp. 331–338.

³⁶ George Lawson, *Halliday's revenge: revolutions and International Relations*, in "International Affairs", 2011, vol. 87 (5), p. 1077.

³⁷ Lilly Weissbrod, *Religion as National Identity in a Secular Society*, in "Review of Religious Research", 1983, vol. 24, No. 3, p. 201.

Republic, it is regarded as a rational policy with a peace-making orientation, which aims to extend all around the world. Attitudes toward religion in religious countries in the Middle East vary from that of the West, and religious identity and religious branding are part of the educational, cultural, international, and even economic propaganda of the political systems of Middle Eastern countries, including Iran.

Iran's support for the anti-Western Islamic movements around the world is based on the idea of justice and the full support of the Muslim brother, which is in line with the national interest of the Islamic Republic's political system. Currently, the Islamic Republic provides overt support for the movements such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. However, in the Western perspective, these groups are terrorist groups, and Iran is a supporter of terrorism. Iranian public diplomacy is also based on formal and informal support for marginalized groups in Muslim countries based on an ideological-pragmatic view. However, considering that Iran's policies are at odds with those of the US and its allies, Iran's policy is portrayed as being in support of terrorism, leading to Iran's negative place branding as an insecure, underdeveloped, dangerous, and anti-women country. Countries worldwide avoid making deals with Iran, and it tolerates different sanctions. Revolutionary, anti-hegemonic, anti-Western, and religious image has made Iran's branding and its image in the world negative,³⁸ which is even worsened by Western propaganda and mainstream media.

NEGOTIATION WITH THE WEST: DEVELOPMENT AND IMPROVEMENT OF NATION BRANDING AND POSITIVE IMAGE OF IRAN

In recent years, the nuclear negotiations with P5+1 countries and the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) agreement diminished the challenges between the West and Iran. Meanwhile, many Western countries, including Germany, France, and the UK, as well as their media, partially improved their portrayal of Iran's image.³⁹ Some European channels and media started

³⁸ Robert Snyder, *The U.S. and Third World Revolutionary States: Understanding the Breakdown in Relations*, in "International Studies Quarterly", 1999, vol. 43 (2), pp. 265-290.

³⁹ *US, Britain, France, Germany back business with Iran after nuclear deal*, in <https://www.india.com/business/us-britain-france-germany-back-business-with-iran-after-nuclear-deal-1200152/> (Accessed on 20.05.2016); Ali Fathollah Nejad,

promoting Iran's place branding and characterizing it as a fascinating and unknown destination for tourists.⁴⁰ Some large companies and corporations mentioned Iran as a desirable place to invest.⁴¹ Signing a nuclear deal and compliance with international rules, which are in line with the interests of world powers, automatically improved Iran's nation branding in EU and Western media campaigns.⁴² This reflects the unfair and double standards of the countries on the nations' image and branding. The international system plays an important role in negative or positive views toward a specific country. Based on these double standards, the West and the US display a positive place branding of the Emirates (Dubai, Abu Dhabi, etc.), Qatar, and Saudi Arabia and ignore their financial and weaponry support for terrorist groups because these countries are partners of Western and regional countries and buy and sell weapons and goods and respect international values. However, a country like Iran is considered as supporting terrorism and being a threat to world peace. These countries' low status in human rights ranking is being ignored in order not to interrupt the international flow of selling and purchasing arms and goods.⁴³ After the nuclear deal, Iran's image was somewhat enhanced in the West, but there are still many internal and external problems. These include external problems like

German-Iranian Relations after the Nuclear Deal: Geopolitical and Economic Dimensions, in "Insight Turkey", vol. 18, 2016, No. 1, pp. 57-79.

⁴⁰ Hugh Morris, *Tourism to Iran set to rise sharply after nuclear deal*, in <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/middle-east/iran/articles/how-iran-tourism-industry-boomed-since-the-nuclear-deal/> (Accessed on 11.06.2018).

⁴¹ Amir Paivar, *Investing in Iran after the lifting of sanctions* BBC, in "Persian Business reporter", <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-33639124> (accessed on July 2015).

⁴² Michael Birnbaum and Carol Morello, *European companies beat US to Iran business after nuclear deal reached*, in <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/aug/25/europe-us-iran-business-nuclear-deal-sanctions> (Accessed on 25.09.2015); Riccardo Alcaro, *Europe's Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal: Less than a Success, More than a Failure*, in "The International Spectator", 2021, 56:1, pp. 55-72, DOI: 10.1080/03932729.2021.1876861.

⁴³ Lerna K. Yanik, *Guns and Human Rights: Major Powers, Global Arms Transfers, and Human Rights Violations*, in "Human Rights Quarterly", vol. 28, no. 2, 2006, pp. 357-388; Afrah Nasser, *US Resuming Arms Sales to UAE is Disastrous*, in <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/15/us-resuming-arms-sales-uae-disastrous> (Accessed on 15.04.2021); Giovanna Maletta, *Seeking a Responsible Arms Trade to Reduce Human Suffering in Yemen*, in "The International Spectator", 2021, 56:1, pp. 73-91, DOI: 10.1080/03932729.2021.1876862.

contradiction of Iran-US regional and international interests, the election of the new US President (Donald Trump), and the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement and imposing double pressure on Iran. Some internal problems affecting Iran's image include the Syrian issue, democracy seeking, human rights movements, and corruption in the Islamic Republic.

CONCLUSIONS

The Islamic Republic, as a revolutionary and rebellious state in the international system, has shown that religion can also be the basis of branding for a country. However, using religion as the basis of public diplomacy must conform to the accepted values of the international system. Otherwise, religion may adversely affect the country's image. Nowadays, the nation branding of Iran is no longer reminiscent of the historical and cultural image of the Second Pahlavi government, but in the present-day public perception, this country with a religious branding is characterized by revolutionary-ism, radical religion-ism, dictatorship and closed space, repression, tyranny, an ailing economy, corruption, etc. Religious branding can prosper even if it does not have an anti-Western and anti-systemic ideology (e.g., Saudi Arabia). Although the nuclear deal and the signing of economic and industrial agreements with some Western countries have helped to some extent to improve Iran's image, Iran's branding in the West is still negative. This is because of the dual and contradictory international standards that determine nation branding and the positive and negative image of a country.

The Islamic Republic's religious branding pursues ideological, economic, political, and cultural goals that are completely rational within Islamic thought. From the perspective of the Islamic Republic, the religious branding of this system is currently internationalized and recognized by the West, though negatively, and has achieved some success in the region. In the ideology of the policy-makers of the Islamic Republic, the increase in the regional and soft power of Iran is defined on the basis of this religious branding. Examples include the spread of Shi'ism in various countries and the support of revolutionary groups and Muslim minorities in other countries. It seems that if the West and, above all, the US can recognize some of the Islamic branding elements in the regional dimension, the security and strategic challenges posed by Islamic Republic's measures will be reduced. The nuclear deal was one of the cases that, while recognizing some of Iran's interests, controlled and diminished some of the anti-systemic measures of the Islamic

Republic of Iran at regional and international levels. The nuclear deal, if not violated by either party, is able to reduce the cost of the Islamic Republic's anti-systemism in the future and brings religious branding into peaceful interactions with the multipolar international system, helping Iran to engage in peace-based international interactions with other countries.

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