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Cinematic Representations of Iran after 9/11 and their Instrumentalization by the American Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT: This paper is part of PhD research that studies the audiovisual representations of Iran by the American Popular Culture from 1973 until the present, emphasizing the films and series representing the country that were released after 2001 and were mainly productions of the Hollywood Industry and the Conglomerate American Media. Findings so far suggest that the majority of the audiovisual images referring to Iran construct the profile of a country that is Oriental, backward, condoning human rights violations, and being described as a state sponsoring terrorism. Such descriptions endorse the country’s positioning on the “Axis of Evil” and legitimize American foreign policy in the Middle East. What is striking is that the majority of the biased cinematic storytelling regarding Iran does not directly coincide with the skyrocketing Islamophobic depictions of Arab Muslim populations, which was one of the many repercussions of the tragic events of 9/11, but rather the majority of the racialized viewings of Iran seem to take place during 2005–15 and can be associated with the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the agony of Western governments for non-proliferation of Iran and the imposition of economic sanctions to the country because of its nuclear program.

KEYWORDS: Iran, USA, Islamophobia, Economic Sanctions, Soft Power, UN Security Council

PART I: REPRESENTATIONS

Ever since 1979 when the Iranian Revolution broke out and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran, and other Middle Eastern countries have been viewed as the racialized Others, based on which the West could identify itself and its core values. So, if the West, and especially the US and Europe, were to be democratically governed and endorse scientific and technological progress as well as logical reasoning, the Middle East was perceived as authoritarian, backward, mystical, and religiously driven (Said 2003).

This Orientalistic worldview was not solely an indirect result of globalization and the rise of fundamentalism in the Middle East but dates back to the Orientalistic discourse and artistic representations of the Middle East by the 17th and 18th century scholars that cemented the Western superiority based on the Easterners’ inferiority. According to Edward Said, the East is not a concrete place to be found somewhere on a map, but it is a Western construction shaped by the dominant representation systems (Said 2003) and therefore it has been often represented in a generic, stereotypical manner, reducing its varieties in a single, easy to be manipulated, entity. Western authority figures have been presenting the inhabitants of the East as subordinate or politically immature to secure the legitimacy of their conquests. An ideological pattern also exploited by George Bush Jr. to legitimize the invasion of Iraq and the War on Terror as a freedom project created to promote liberty and Western democratic values in the East, in an effort to topple the “axis of evil.”
A consequence of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 was among other things the rise of Islamophobia and Islamophobic depictions, especially concerning the Arab Muslim population by the media and entertainment industry that took a more patriotic turn during its Post-9/11 Conglomerate Hollywood Period resulting in the production so-called “militainment” movies and TV series like *Homeland*, *Jack Ryan* or *24* to name a few (Basley and Brook 2019, 105).

In addition, according to Holland, the fictive script of the modern American TV series is often in line with the American political discourse (Holland 2019). Thus, when series do not reproduce or legitimize the political discourse (*24, Homeland*), they either criticize the American policies (*House of Cards, West Wing*) or highlight the same progressive trends that emerge in the sociopolitical field e.g., *Friends* (Holland 2019).

In regard to the Middle East and Iran in particular, the conglomerate media have been indeed producing films and television series promoting the American geopolitical interests in the region like regime change in Iran (*Homeland, Syriana*) or presenting Iranian people as utterly fanatics or terrorists (*Argo*), while highlighting the superiority and technological, cultural and political supremacy of the United States (*West Wing, 24*). Such portrayals serving US interests endorse the ideological doctrine of the clash of civilizations (Huntington 1993) and could be considered manifestations of American soft power (Nye 2004).

According to Nye, soft power can be distinguished from hard power, which is enforced by military intervention or economic measures of pressure like sanctions and can be defined as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (Nye 2004, 10). In this case, the legitimization of US policies in the Middle East is expressed by the Hollywood Industry which constitutes the number one “exportable product” of the American soft power, a term which is increasingly emerging in the Iranian political discourse as “soft war” (*jang-e narm*), thus signifying the “soft” influence of the West in the Iranian current state of affairs (Blout 2017). In light of the above, it can be inferred that both Orientalism and soft power are theoretical interpretative models which reproduce certain ideological narratives.

The basic goal of this ongoing research is to identify whether Iran has been portrayed in an Orientalistic, Islamophobic, or Iranophobic way by the American popular culture, when its representations take place and how they can be correlated with the American foreign policy followed in the Middle East. To examine how the ideology of Orientalism and soft power is expressed in the films and television series referring to Iran, this research makes use of the epistemological tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and especially the model of Teun van Dijk which traces how ideology is dispersed in texts—in this case, audiovisual texts—not only on micro- but also on macro-level (van Dijk 1998). The sociopolitical and historical context of the films/series’ production and narrative time serves as the macro-level, while ideology to be found in dialogues, cinematography, and also in the (non) availability of subtitles or captions from Persian into English, is studied as the micro-level.

As far as the current findings regarding the time frame dating to 2000–21 are concerned, the data collected so far suggest that in the majority of the films and series examined, the country of Iran can be associated with the themes of captivity and escape (*Rosewater, Septembers of Shiraz*) and the Iranian people do not usually seem to have a background story explaining their actions but are portrayed as crowds, religiously driven or villains. In addition, in most of the films and series, the women are presented as oppressed and very regularly seem to be dressed only with black chadors. Further themes discussed in the films are the development of Iranian nuclear facilities (*Tehran, Homeland, The Operative*), the involvement of the country in acts of terrorism (*Argo, Syriana*), the complicated foreign affairs between Iran, the US, and Israel, and the oil crisis. A considerable number of films and series affiliate Iran and
Islam with terrorism (*Homeland, Syriana, Argo*) and human rights violations (*The Stoning of Soraya M.*). In the same films and series, the United States is portrayed as a country abiding by the rule of law, supporting human rights and democratic values and the characters of the American people are more structured.

Whenever Iran is not directly linked to terrorism, there are images of violent demonstrations and severe state oppression connected with it. Another point of interest is that the country is nowhere to be found but is only referred to. When Tehran does appear on screen, it is portrayed as technologically underdeveloped (*West Wing, Veep*) resembling the early post-Soviet states (*Homeland*). All these images not only shape an Orientalist portrait of the country but also comply with the American political agenda. This explains why there are many films and series promoting the idea of regime change (*Homeland, Syriana, West Wing*) and expressing the “necessity” of Western intervention in the country in order to progress. Such narratives endorse the American soft power and a neocolonial viewing of Iran, legitimizing the War on Terror unleashed in the Middle East ever since 2001.

There were indeed cinematic and television portrayals with neutral or positive Iranian characters to be found in this research, however, these roles fall under the category of post-racial media representations (Alsultany 2013) and are often depicted as suffering or being ridiculed like Farah in the third season of *Homeland* who had to endure Saul Berenson accusing her of wearing the hijab by saying “You wearing that thing on your head is one big fuck you … to the people who would have been your co-workers … except they perished in a blast out there. So, if you need to wear it, if you really need to … which is your right, you’d better be the best analyst we’ve ever seen” thus suggesting that Muslim characters can be tolerated as long as they exist in a cultural and religious vacuum (Halse 2015). The only film associating Iran and its people with positive connotations
is *The Operative*, where rarely discussed issues in Western cinema like the economic sanctions against Iran and the assassination of Iranian scientists, are raised. Nevertheless, this spy drama is also set in a politically unstable environment.

As far as the cultural representations of Iran are concerned, those films or television series with a higher amount of negative or stereotypical depictions of Iran and the Iranian people made use of cultural appropriation techniques (*300*, *Argo*), while also implying a theme of cultural incompatibility between the West—affiliated with the ideals of progress and liberty—(*Veep*, *Rosewater*) and Iran/the East which is interconnected with Islam and a lack of progress. A typical example of such rhetoric can be traced in *West Wing* when President Bartlet screams outraged that the Ayatollah should have said “and maybe if our citizens didn't spend quite so much energy denouncing the infidels, they'd have time to build a damn medical school!"

Particularly interesting is the fact that there are certain blockbuster films (*300*, *300: Rise of an Empire*, *Alexander*) that tend to co-relate ancient Greece and Israel with the West and with the values of liberty and democracy. These very same films, though, projected a distorted version of history not only of ancient Persia but also of ancient Greece and echoed Huntington’s own definition of democracy (Huntington 1993).

Therefore, by representing the West/the US as culturally superior, not only do they Orientalize the East as inferior, but also promote the Western soft power represented by its cultural supremacy. In contrast, the cinematic and/or television portrayals characterized as positive or neutral make frequent references to the Achaemenid dynasty and their great kings like Cyrus and Darius and so they seem to revive the pre-Islamic glory of the Achaemenid dynasty to differentiate ancient Persia from the modern Islamic Iran. For example, in *Septembers of Shiraz*, a prisoner wonders if anyone remembers when the country was just, to whom another replies “Cyrus the Great. We were all equal. Muslim, Christian, Jew … didn’t matter. We were a great empire.”

Another variable discussed is the space that the Persian language occupies in the material under examination. In the same “neutral” films, which are often biopics and independent American or European productions, certain lyrics of great Iranian poets like Hafez and Rumi are often recited, and it is also worth mentioning that those films, illustrating more favorable pictures of Iran and the Iranian people, are also the ones with the higher percentages of linguistic visibility of the Persian language. So, in this case, the Persian language is considered a source of credibility that makes the plot more plausible. On the other hand, very few films have their entire dialogue captioned and what is mostly detected so far is the complete absence of English subtitles when certain phrases are pronounced in Persian.

There is a smaller number of films that have their entire Persian-speaking dialogue captioned, but what is more common is the articulation of certain untranslated salutations or basic phrases in Persian. These phrases are usually spoken by characters falling under the categories of “villains,” “guards” or “people of lower social status” such as house cleaners (*Septembers of Shiraz*), whereas the English language is mostly associated with positive attributes and non-Iranian characters (*The Stoning of Soraya M.*). In many cases, the protagonists of the same films/series spoke in English with either an American or British accent. Thus, it was easier for the audience to identify with them and not with the negatively portrayed characters who often seemed to be culturally incompatible with the protagonists and hence the viewers.

Moreover, in some cases when something mentioned in Persian is considered important for the plot, it was translated directly by the white protagonists, who command the language (*Argo*, *Homeland* etc.). It is crucial for the receiving audience to be manipulated so as to consider Iranians as inferiors both mentally and culturally and not in a position to verbally express themselves and their ideas, as in this way they will have to rely on the Americans to help them communicate their message, an idea which cultivates the dominant discourse of the American
elite, according to which Americans are “obliged” to guide the East verbally, culturally, and politically (Said 2003).

Last but not least, it is also worth noting that the ideologies of Orientalism and the War on Terror are not established solely in film dialogues and character representation, but they could also be the byproducts of the films’ musical background and editing techniques. The most typical example of this is evident in the film *Argo* when before every conflict scene one can hear an ominous arabesque tune playing in the background. In the same film, editing also acts as a tool disseminating dominant ideology and so what is verbally articulated is counter-balanced by what is visually presented on the screen e.g., when the occupants of the embassy suggest that they are not terrorists, but they are shown torturing the blindfolded American hostages, a manipulation technique which ultimately traps the audience.

Even though the ideological doctrine of War on Terror did not leave Iran intact, the findings regarding the 2000–21 period suggest that the peak of the negative cinematic portrayals of Iran took place after the end of Mohammad Khatami’s second term and in particular the period between 2005–15. The increase in Islamophobic depictions coincided with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and later with Hassan Rouhani as presidents of the Islamic Republic of Iran and thus could be correlated with the development of Iran’s nuclear program and the economic sanctions imposed by President Obama and certain countries of the European Union. However, after the signing of the JCPOA agreement between P5+1 (member-states consisting of the UN Security Council, Iran, and Germany), not only the economic sanctions but also the negative cinematic portrayals of Iran have been reduced.

**PART II: ECONOMIC SANCTIONS**

When Iran is not associated with non-proliferation, terrorism, the clergy, or human rights violations, the current political discussions usually focus on the economic sanctions that have been imposed on the country. A substantial number of papers discuss the effect of sanctions on Iran’s economy, health sector, on regime status, and the (non) empowerment of the Iranian civil society or focus on whether these measures are effective and to what extent. Nevertheless, there is still a gap in the existing literature discussing a possible linkage between the negative media representations of Iran and the economic measures enacted against it.

Even though Iran has received a disproportionate number of sanctions in the last 30 years, there are indeed numerous countries that are sanctioned worldwide like Cuba, Sudan, North Korea, and Russia. Economic sanctions were first implemented during the Cold War and are considered to be a non-aggressive diplomatic way of solving transnational disputes. However, as means of exercising pressure, they fall under the category of hard power
(Nye 2004) and their non-belligerent character is often disputed (Pape 1997), as “smart sanctions may well succeed in smart bombs” (Fathollahi-Nejadi 2014, 49).

Economic sanctions can be defined “as restrictions on economic activity imposed by one international actor on another with a specific purpose” (Özdamar and Shahin 2021, 1648) and may take different forms. They could be multilateral or targeted, affecting individuals (freezing of assets), sectoral (overall embargos, arms proliferation, targeting technological or commodity goods), they could target a country’s economy (investment restrictions, banking bans, etc.) or their purpose could be to ensure world peace. Except for financial restrictions, the purposes of economic sanctions could be enforcing a behavioral change (e.g., regime change), constraining a country’s behavior, or signaling one’s message (Özdamar and Shahin 202, 1648).

One of the first series of sanctions against Iran was enacted in 1979 in the form of Executive Orders (Executive Order 12170) by President Carter during the Iranian Embassy siege and was lifted in 1981 pursuant to Algiers Accord (Katzman 2022). In the 1980s, the country of Iran was sanctioned for terrorism-related causes and was designated as a “state sponsor of terrorism” for supporting the Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian resistance groups like Hamas (Katzman 2022). However, US sanctions targeting Iran’s economy and having severe repercussions started in 1995 with Executive Order 12959, which banned US trade and investment, whereas in 1996 “Iran and Libya Sanctions Act” (ILSA) was enacted authorizing US penalties against third countries’ firms conducting business with Iran. After Libya’s removal, the Act was renamed as the “Iran Sanctions Act” (ISA) and its triggers were waived during the JCPOA agreement and reinstated in 2018 after the US withdrawal from the agreement (Katzman 2022, 32). Another important restrictive measure on Iran’s economy by the United States, which is worth taking into consideration, was the “Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act” (CISADA) of 2010 whose purpose was to “limit Iran’s access to the international financial system and reduce the ability of Iran’s import-export community (referred to as the “bazaar merchants” or bazaaris) from obtaining letters of credit” (Katzman 2022, 34).

For the purposes of the ongoing research, a juxtaposition between the negative media representations of Iran and the economic sanctions placed against it has been attempted. Except for ISA and CISASA imposed by the United States, it has been observed that all sanctions of the UN Security Council—where the US is a veto member and whose seat is located in New York—against Iran which had the form of Resolutions and targeted the Iranian nuclear facilities, were imposed between 2006 and 2015. This time frame coincides with the findings of the current research regarding the peak of the negative media representations of Iran, and are listed chronologically below: (Rahman 2015, 119).

- UN Security Council Resolution 1884 (2011)
- UN Security Council Resolution 2049 (2012)

The main difference between UN sanctions and any other type of sanctions is that they are legally binding, must be implemented by all the 193 member states of the United Nations and the justification for the sanctions is usually the violations of human rights by the
sanctioned countries, non-compliance with NPT and the advancement of international peace. Another difference is that compared to other kinds of sanctions which could potentially have a negative impact not only on the target but also on the sender of the sanctions due to the “interdependent nature of trade” (Özdamar and Shahin 2021, 1650), this does not happen to be the case with UN sanctions. The above-mentioned UN sanctions were put in force under article 41 of Chapter VII of the UN charter, according to which all UN sanctions that reference this article “represent actions taken with respect to threats to international peace and acts of regression. Article 41 of that chapter, in general, provides for the enforcement of the resolution in question through economic and diplomatic sanctions, but not military action” (Katzman 2022, 44).

At this point, it is worth noting that these sanctions were superseded by resolution 2231 (2015) and were lifted in 2016 after the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) by the members of the UN Security Council, Germany, and Iran, the subject of which the nuclear non-proliferation of Iran and thwarting it from creating weapons of mass destruction (WMD), in exchange for which several sanctions imposed by the US, and sanctions imposed by the UN and the European Union against Iran would be lifted. The aforementioned restrictions were reimposed in 2018 after President Trump withdrew from the agreement, restored all the previous sanction waivers, and enforced harder sanctions on Iran and especially targeting the oil sector. This crippled Iran’s economy, triggered the 2019 protests in Iran, and worsened the Iranian socioeconomic sector, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Katzman 2022). In addition, in 2019, among other things, President Trump sanctioned the Iranian Central Bank, the Supreme Leader, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC or Pasdaran), while also designated the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)3 and called for the resuspension of SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) messaging service.4 In response, Iran had been complying with its nuclear obligations until August 2019 according to IAEA (Katzman 2022, 46) but their compliance has been decreasing ever since, and uranium has been enriched until the present moment.

Furthermore, one cannot fail but briefly comment on the effects of the economic sanctions on Iran. Even though the sanctions have been described as “smart” or “targeted” and not unilateral, several collateral consequences have been inflicted on Iran because of them. Research on the repercussions of the economic sanctions against Iran suggests that these economic measures did not only affect the Iranian nuclear program—the basic target of the sanctions—but crippled the country’s economy, caused soaring inflation, and decreased the country’s GDP (Arastirmalari et al., 2020). In addition, the sanctions have not managed to create civil unrest and result in regime change but rather “despite such claims that crippling sanctions undermine regime stability, all the evidence points to the fact that sanctions contribute to regime resilience” (Fathollah-Nejadi 2014, 60) and that women, students, and workers have been disproportionately affected instead (Fathollah-Nejadi 2014, 57).

The economic sanctions against Iran have deteriorated Iran’s public healthcare sector and the Iranian patients’ access to drugs, especially those regarding the treatment of cancer, multivesicular diseases, and diabetes (Setayesh and Macke, 2016), and have worsened the situation of patients suffering from cancer (Shahabi et al. 2015), hemophilia (Karimi and Haghpanah 2015), thalassemia (Karimi and Haghpanah 2015), multiple sclerosis and diabetes (Setayesh and Mackey 2016), a situation resembling the collapse of the public healthcare system in the Mediterranean countries as a result of the imposition of severe austerity measures inflicted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).5 Last but not least, it seems that economic sanctions on Iran have been counter-productive in many ways as, except for the above-mentioned consequences, they seem to have triggered the Iranian domestic market and its commercial relations and energy reliance on China.6
PART III: COMBINATION OF SOFT AND HARD POWER

Findings so far suggest that the most Islamophobic and negative media representations of Iran, which were the ones propagating the discourse of the elite (Van Dijk 1998) reached their peak between 2005 and 2015.

When combined with the peak of UN Resolutions against Iran, which were not direct sanctions imposed by the US but by an international organization where the USA is a veto member and took place between 2006 and 2016, it can be assumed that these Hollywood films and TV series could be indeed products of the American soft power. These increase the appeal of the United States as the mediator of world peace and order, while also stigmatizing Iran as a threat to international peace and a state closely related with terrorism. This emotionally charged storytelling could be also viewed as an intersemiotic translation of the American foreign policy in Iran.

In addition, one cannot fail but notice that the negative representations of the country by the entertainment industry are extremely significant for the Americans, because storytelling promoting a neocolonial viewing of Iran legitimizes the economic sanctions against the country based on the argument that they deserve it because they are a threat to world peace. Therefore, any negative repercussions on the Iranian people or the social services in Iran can be considered collateral damage.

As a result, soft and hard power against Iran seem to be working hand in hand in order to achieve the desired results i.e., non-proliferation and later regime change and the function of the one source of power exercise completes the functioning of the other in order to exert maximum pressure. This argument is also supported by the fact that after the signing of the JCPOA agreement not only the US sanctions and a number of other sanctions against Iran were lifted, but also the negative representations began to drop and so the films, especially the independent productions, became more critical.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to present the images with which the country of Iran is often associated in the modern cinematic discourse and whether these representations could be instrumentalized for the exertion of the desired American foreign policy in Iran and the entire MENA region. In the majority of cases, Iran is indeed portrayed in an Oriental manner and so it is often included in narratives that are in line with the ideology of war on terror and thus link Iran with terrorism, fanaticism, and severe state oppression. There are indeed more critical films, which show a significant degree of cultural and linguistic awareness regarding the Persian culture and language, however, these are very often either European or independent American productions and thus they cannot be included in the category of audiovisual pop culture products addressed to Western viewers.

The peak of the data collected so far and pertaining to the 2000–21 decade, suggests that the climax of negative representations of Iran took place the decade between 2005 and 2015 that is when Obama and Ahmadinejad were presidents of the United States and Iran respectively. This time frame coincides with the peak of the UN Security Council’s Resolutions against Iran’s nuclear program and energy sector. Yet, when certain sanctions were lifted after the JCPOA agreement, so did the most biased and Orientalistic cinematic representations of Iran begin to drop. Therefore, there seems to be a linkage between the negative audiovisual representations of Iran, the country’s nuclear ambitions, and the West’s fear of Iran having the ability to create weapons of mass destruction.
This parallel course between the negative representations which can be considered as products of the American soft power and the economic sanctions, being restrictive measures against Iran and showcasing the Western hard power, implies that both hard and soft power is exercised against Iran so that the desired foreign policies of the USA and the West, in general, could be ensured. Negative representations could also have an additional function, which is legitimizing any measures or executive orders issued against Iran, so that the humanitarian and economic crisis, which is taking place at the moment in Iran, could be considered collateral damage of the “smart” and “targeted” economic sanctions.

What is more, both hard and soft power measures, have two targets i.e., both the country of Iran and the Western firms or countries conducting business with Iran and also the Western public’s opinion. Especially, as far as the films are concerned, the domination of the Western media and cinema with Orientalistic and Islamophobic audiovisual narratives, not only overwhelms the Western public with terrifying images, thus managing to acquire their consent for the Western economic policies but also forms a framework under which Iran must be understood which is in line with the Western political agenda.

An analysis of data concerning a wider period and seeking to draw a parallel line between the negative representations of Iran and other countries and the economic sanctions imposed on them could shed more light on this research. In addition, it could also be interesting to study whether there is a connection between the rapid increase of negative representations of certain countries in the media and a set of severe economic restrictions imposed on them, for example the link between negative representations of Southern-European or Latin American countries and the austerity measures the IMF enacted against them.

ENDNOTES

1Given the fact that CDA is mainly applied in texts, all film materials studied were considered ”audiovisual texts” (Sokoli 2011, 42). Sokoli defines the audiovisual text as the combination of audible and visual channels and of verbal and non-verbal elements and thus concludes that the audiovisual text is comprised of audible verbal elements (dialogue), audible non-verbal elements (sounds, background music), visual non-verbal elements (images), and visual-verbal elements (subtitles) (Sokoli 2011, 52).


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