

Ownership goes beyond states

Soft power as important in validating Iran's claim to trio Islands



By Seyed Javad Tahaei
Researcher at
Center for
Strategic Research

This article explores the concept of ownership in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran and suggests that certain changes are necessary in this regard. The main hypothesis is that, in addition to formal and legal ownership of its territories and islands, Iran also needs to establish spiritual and intellectual ownership of sorts — something that could be termed “reclaimed ownership”.

The article argues that we need to gradually change our understanding of “ownership”. As Iranians, our modern perspective on our country often focuses on nationalist criteria that are relatively recent, whereas Iran’s history spans thousands of years. Moreover, we tend to think of ownership in physical or territorial terms, but it would be beneficial to shift towards a form of ownership that is relational and spiritual. While possession is a personal matter, ownership, in essence, is a relational concept. It is defined as a legal relation between an individual and a thing.

It is important to note that this perspective pertains to a future in which Western schemes against Iran have diminished and the country has assumed a high level of regional power. Therefore, in the current environment where tensions run high, this discussion is intended solely to deepen understanding, without immediate practical or operational implications.

Rethinking Iran

In general, Iran is not a country that can be defined by military or hard power. Throughout history, Iran has been more of a cultural and spiritual reality than a political or military power. Therefore, at this time, it is better to broaden our understanding of our collective identity. We need to understand who we are and what we can strive to become.

The main idea is that concepts like power, security, influence, and ownership, which are often linked with the term ‘national,’ do not align well with the cultural and ethical essence of Iran’s history. Iran cannot act as a military superpower or have the kind of influence beyond its borders in the way that countries such as the United Kingdom have. Moreover, Iran’s diverse and multifaceted social reality makes it difficult for the Iranian government to act swiftly and effectively. Historically, Iran has often been synon-

ymous with having a robust culture and a weak government. Specifically, since the advent of Shia Islam, Iranian culture has been able to smooth challenges that might have arisen from Iran’s geopolitical position, transforming the country into a cultural authority in the world rather than a regional political power. Iranians have focused more on interacting with, attracting, understanding, and even admiring the ‘other’. This ability to admire others has been a key factor in establishing Iran’s cultural authority.

According to this view, Iranians can be effective cultural influencers, but they cannot be effective political dominators. Aggressive policies and enmity towards neighboring nations, instead of strengthening Iran, harm its cultural potential. History shows that Iran has always flourished through relationships and interaction with others, not through enmity and

border-setting.

From this perspective, current policies that are based on national ownership and displays of power, although valid, lack maturity and depth. Displays of territorial pride and national anger might satisfy some feelings in the short term, but in the long term, they hinder the spread of Iranian culture.

Iranians should move towards opening themselves up to neighbors and presenting a cultural image that predates the era of nationalism. Our neighbors should see Iran as a cultural reality, not as a hard power ready for military action. The Iranian government should strive for neighbors to see the Iranian people, rather than an image of Iran’s nationalistic state. In foreign policy, we should showcase the historical Iran that was open to interaction and attraction, not the modern Iran that has been focused more on defining

and separating itself from others.

Modern Iran, due to its tendencies towards domination and thoughts of achieving superiority, has diverged from its authentic path. The Islamic Republic of Iran was formed to end this trend, but this project has not yet been fully realized. Iran is better defined through its interaction and recognition of others, rather than through border-setting and differentiation.

If this perspective is correct, it can be concluded that Iran should be defined more as a cultural and spiritual reality. The more the Iranian government allows cultural-social activities of the society to take the lead, the more it represents the real history of Iran. A deeper understanding of Iran’s cultural potential in pre-modern periods can increase the confidence and openness of Iranian diplomacy, providing new solutions for various issues.

Ownership: A fresh outlook

According to Hannah Arendt, concepts like ownership and class do not fully capture the realities of the modern world; rather, they are interpretations that limit our understanding of these topics. Throughout the twentieth century, the concept of ownership was caught in a dichotomy: liberals believed that the goal of politics should be to protect personal ownership, while socialists argued that liberation from personal ownership would automatically lead to improved political life.

In this discussion, ownership for us is more of a philosophical concept rather than a political or social one. Iran’s ownership of certain territories and islands is indisputable, but the key question is how to exercise this ownership. As Vincent stated, ownership for use is better than ownership that is just for power. In other words, legal and physical ownership is only part of what ownership entails; true ownership is achieved when it is accompanied by initiatives and prac-

tical actions after acquiring it. These actions demonstrate that we not only own something but also actively use and develop it.

When someone truly possesses something, there should be calmness and confidence in their actions. If ownership is properly established, our behavior should be positive and creative rather than tense and reactive. If ownership does not lead to development and real life, it is incomplete. For example, the more a barren land is cultivated, the stronger the ownership over it becomes. Ownership should be such that it leads to initiative and creativity. If the government can act creatively and proactively in foreign affairs, its policy will not be limited to security and legal matters alone. The stronger the ownership, the more the government can distance itself from what it owns while still feeling secure. In contrast, the weaker the ownership, the more it needs to display power. Excessive emphasis on ownership can be

a sign of weakness. Complete ownership does not need to be displayed because if it becomes a matter of awareness, it may lead to questions and doubts. When we truly own something, it becomes part of our identity and existence.

Ownership helps us achieve freedom. Philosophers like Walter Lippmann and Friedrich Hayek have argued that ownership is the foundation of freedom. Through ownership, humans can enter history and civilization and expand their living space. Ludwig von Mises also stated that private property and civilization are inextricably linked.

Ownership gives people identity and distinguishes them within society. This characteristic means that the development of ownership concerns not only individuals but also society as a whole. Expanding ownership brings legitimacy and influence, and the fact that ownership is inherently relational creates inequalities that are not necessarily unjust. The order of the Leader of Iran’s Islamic

Revolution to build housing in the Persian Gulf islands (April 29, 2020) could be seen as the beginning of a process to strengthen Iran’s ownership of these areas. After ownership is solidified, softer policies that attract neighbors can be more beneficial.

In summary, Iran’s interactive and inviting policies on various issues indicate that Iran has reached the stage of complete ownership of its assets. This type of ownership transforms from a legal and objective process to a cultural and human reality. In other words, the more Iranian territories are built and inhabited, and life flows through them, the stronger Iran’s ownership becomes.

Ultimately, ownership becomes complete when it is accompanied by interaction and participation. The goal is for Iran’s ownership of territories and islands to be subconsciously accepted by opposing governments, and to let collaboration and interaction prevail, instead of dis-

