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## Populism, the international and methodological nationalism: global order and the Iran-Israel nexus

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### Introduction

Recent years have seen a surge in the prevalence of populist agendas. Whilst these include European states such as Poland, Hungary, Italy, France, the UK (Gusterson, 2017) and Greece (Chryssogelos, 2017), a ‘global rise of populism’ involving the Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Africa, and the US has also been identified (Moffitt, 2016: 1-2). Furthermore, issues that affect the ‘international’ – that is ‘relations between social orders’ (see Go and Lawson, 2017: 2, fn 3) - have featured heavily in populist agendas; from immigration to trade and environmental multinational agreements. Yet, the extensive scholarship on populism largely remains the domain of Political Theory and Political Science (Jones, 2018) focusing primarily on populism’s relationship with democracy, or lack of it (Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017). Consequently, much of this scholarship seeks to explain populism’s emergence *within* individual states, rarely looking at the influence of and its implications for the international. Meanwhile, there is a surprising poverty of discussions of populism in International Relations (IR)<sup>2</sup>. Yet, the interrogation of populism in IR is crucial for a better understanding of how populists simultaneously challenge domestic politics, endeavour to maintain their populist political order, and explicitly engage with how politics are conducted on the international level.

For instance, Donald Trump’s election as US president highlights the relationship between the US, Israel and Iran. Notably, Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Islamic Republic of Iran have each been identified as ‘populist’ (Abrahamian, 1993; Ansari, 2008; Dorraj and Dodson, 2009; Filc, 2011; Gusterson, 2017; Holliday, 2016). For Trump (2017a, 2017b), Iran is a ‘rogue regime’, a ‘threat’, and a destabilising, destructive force that fuels sectarianism and requires isolating. Following repeated criticisms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, or ‘Iran nuclear deal’) on 8 May 2018, Trump (2018)

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of ‘legacy of subalternity’ was developed as a visiting fellow with the University of Exeter’s Centre for Political Thought in autumn 2014. I would like to thank Robert Lamb and Dario Castiglione. Earlier versions of this article were presented at BISA 2016 (CPD working group sponsored panel); at BRISMES 2016 (Societal factors sponsored panel); and at the BISA ISMMEA working group workshop (2017). I would like to thank CPD and ISMMEA working groups for providing an environment to discuss my work and for funding to attend their workshops. I am very grateful to Adrian Holliday, Mehri Honarbin-Holliday, Nitasha Kaul, Philipp Lottholz, Brieg Powel, Paola Rivetti, Olivia Rutazibwa, Edward Wastnidge and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this article. Any misunderstandings remain mine.

<sup>2</sup> My observation is that despite the proliferation of populism literature, very little looks beyond the borders of nations and states.

announced US withdrawal from the JCPOA, referring to Iran as ‘the leading state sponsor of terror’. A week later, the new American Embassy was opened in Jerusalem following Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. These international actions are favourable to Netanyahu (see Netanyahu, 2017).

Such dynamics reaffirm the need for further interrogation of populism that explores the relational nature of domestic, regional and international politics. The Islamic Republic’s construction of Israel, which is grounded in a populist domestic political context, provides an ideal case study. In addition to the international affecting the domestic, the domestic populist agendas often extend beyond a state’s borders. This can be, as shall be illustrated below, the articulation of global order, whose norms and values that are said to govern the international, through populist discourse. Furthermore, not only is the construction of global order ‘international’ in that it provides a framework for ‘relations between social orders’, it is also both transnational and global because that framework both represents ‘transboundary relations’ and is ‘spatially expansive’ (see Go and Lawson 2017: 2, fn 3). Thus, the *interconnectedness* between the ‘domestic’ and ‘international’, or ‘internal’ and external’ (Go and Lawson, 2017), that is *integral* to populism, needs to be probed. In light of this, borrowing from Global Historical Sociology (GHS), Global IR and Ernesto Laclau’s notion of populist discourse this article puts forward a new conceptual framework for the study of populism bridging the gap between Comparative Politics and IR.

While GHS facilitates exploring the interconnectivity between the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ of populism, Global IR provides the epistemological framework for how we address something that is ‘spatially expansive’ in the field of IR. As a means of better understanding our world we must embrace diversity in the articulation of populism and ensure that certain actors and/or localities are not marginalised in that process. Building on previous critiques of IR’s Eurocentricity and debates on how to rectify this (Acharya and Buzan, 2010; Tickner, 2011; Tickner and Waever, 2009), Amitav Acharya (2014b: 647) criticised IR for marginalising ‘those outside the core countries of the West’, calling instead for a Global IR that ‘transcends the divide between the West and the Rest’. Doing Global IR includes recognising multiple forms of agency that embrace local constructions of global order; integrating the study of regions and area studies; and a having pluralistic universalism that recognises and respects diversity (Acharya, 2014b: 649). Notably, IR would benefit from embracing the existing comparative approach *across* regions evident in populism studies (see Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017) as it is indicative of a pluralistic universalism. It acknowledges similarities between populist agendas regardless of their location.

In light of IR’s marginalisation of non-West actors, and bearing in mind the case study at hand, it is contended that *doing* Global IR requires a better understanding of actors that are often constructed as the ‘other’ in academia and/or the practice of politics by positioning such actors as the ‘self’. This involves area studies knowledge; facilitates reducing the division between the ‘West’ and ‘the rest’; and enables appreciation of marginalised constructions of global order. Thus, this article also responds to reductionist analyses that present Iran’s actions as being dominated by a single static characteristic, for instance as a ‘threat’ (see Amidror, 2007; Duus, 2011; Sherrill, 2012). Such constructions are perhaps not surprising because the Islamic Republic has been considered ‘the enemy’ by many Western policy-makers since its establishment in 1979. The implication in such works is that Iran is *always* the rogue, static

‘other’ that is fundamentally different to the *forever* benign, yet (paradoxically) fluid ‘self’ in the context of *both* IR and foreign policy.

The article draws on Laclau’s understanding of ‘populist discourse’ to highlight the interconnectivity between the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ integral to the populism of two Islamic Republic presidents: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani. Although the Islamic Republic is a multi-institutional government with varied political stances, and despite the Supreme Leader being head of state, the president presents Iran’s portrayal of itself to the world. It is argued that these populist discourses *simultaneously* articulate the need to maintain the Islamic Republic’s legitimacy and populist credentials both inside and outside Iran; delegitimise Israel; and construct global order in terms of the ‘oppressor’/‘oppressed’ binary. This is done by equating the Islamic Republic not only with Iranian ‘people’, but also with a ‘people’ in the international, the Palestinians. This is articulated in opposition to Israel, which is constructed as *not* being of ‘the people’ because of its occupation of Palestine. Crucially, these populist discourses are grounded in the particular social, intellectual and historical context of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Consequently, the article provides a novel approach to examining Iran’s construction of the international contributing to other studies that highlight the complexity of its relationship with the international (see Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016; Warnaar, 2013; Wastnidge, 2015; Zaccara, 2016) and the relational nature of domestic and international politics (Haji-Yousefi and Mohamadyan, 1375/2017<sup>3</sup>; Halliday, 2001; Matin, 2007, 2013).

This research is based on a long-term discourse analysis of Islamic Republic elites’ texts. Research on Ahmadinejad was part of a project that looked at the idea of ‘democracy’<sup>4</sup> at state and non-state levels during Mohammad Khatami’s (1997-2005) and Ahmadinejad’s (2005-13) presidencies. The Persian for democracy, *mardumsālārī* and *dimukrāsī*, were the signifiers. Building on this, a discourse analysis of Rouhani’s texts (2013-present) was conducted; ‘Israel’, ‘Zionism’, and ‘Zionist regime’ were the signifiers.

The article first puts forward the conceptual framework. It then highlights the historical and intellectual context of the 1979 Revolution through an adaptation of the ‘legacy of subalternity’ (Halliday, 2016) before showing how Iran simultaneously constructs Israel and global order as part of populist discourses.

### Populism and the international

The notion of populism continues to be contested (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015; Aslanidis, 2016; Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017; Moffitt, 2016; Müller, 2017; Stavrakakis and Jäger, 2017). Laclau (2002: 12-13) contends that it is ‘hopeless’ and ‘irrelevant’ to make a distinction between ideology and movements, as is evident in much populism scholarship, because in seeing populism as an ideology or movement there will always be an ‘avalanche of exceptions’. Instead, he stresses that there is populist *discourse* and that ideologies and movements reflect populism, albeit to varying degrees (Laclau, 2005). Importantly, historical context is essential to making sense of the political orientation and character of populism (Howarth, 2005: 204).

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<sup>3</sup> The Gregorian calendar is not usually used in Iran. Therefore, Iranian and Gregorian dates are given.

<sup>4</sup> It is appreciated that ‘democracy’ is contested both in political theory and its use in Iran.

For Laclau (2002: 74), a precondition for populism is ‘the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the “people” from “power”’. In other words, there needs to be a hegemonic situation whereby ‘the people’ feel excluded from the political project of the elite and ruling classes, or ‘a reservoir of raw anti-status-quo feelings’ (Laclau, 2002: 123). In such a political order, it is possible to articulate a discourse that builds on this ‘antagonistic frontier’ and discursively construct ‘the people’ as a political actor. Consequently and of note, the discourse also divides the political arena into two camps (Laclau, 2002: 87). This is facilitated through ‘equivalential chains’ (Laclau, 2002: 74, 96) that equate a political identity with other identities or signifiers through discourse. For instance, ‘the people’ is equated with ‘the oppressed’ or ‘underdogs’ in opposition to ‘the elite’, who is equated with ‘the oppressors’. Consequently, populism ‘melds different sources of dissatisfaction with elite power, where the ambitions of the relatively marginalized find common cause with the sufferings of those who are considerably more oppressed within the social hierarchy’ (Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017: 402). Populist discourse also assumes ‘a homogeneous notion of the people’ and de-emphasises ‘difference among the group on whose behalf they claim to speak’ (Lowndes, 2005: 146).

In post-revolution situations, these processes of constructing two opposing equivalential chains and homogenising ‘the people’ are successful in that the aims of ‘popular sovereignty’ and ‘self-rule’ are achieved. Consequently, the social standing of those discursively constructing ‘the people’ changes from being ruled and excluded to being the ruling elite, or part of it. The legitimacy of ruling populist institutions then ‘relies on broad public acceptance of the idea that political representation allows expression of “the people’s” interests and their sovereign will and authority’ (Canovan, 1999; Laycock, 2005: 173). In other words, the now ruling elite needs to maintain its legitimacy by reasserting its populist credentials. This is done by continuing to divide the political arena into two groups (Holliday, 2016: 924).

However, it is necessary to move beyond methodological nationalism and state-centrism (Go and Lawson, 2017; Wimmer and Schiller, 2002) because populism influences and is influenced by the international. Indeed, international, transnational and global processes are entangled in social sites and these should be made explicit in scholarship (Go and Lawson, 2017: 4), including that on populism. Thus, despite Laclau’s tendency towards methodological nationalism, the idea of an antagonistic frontier is used to highlight antagonism that transcends the constructed ‘internal’/‘external’ border. For instance, imperialism, threats to sovereignty, and global neoliberalism affect so-called ‘internal’ politics and *vice versa*. Furthermore, the notion of equivalential chains allows for the appreciation that both ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ can be simultaneously equated with an issue or political actor that transcends the ‘internal’/‘external’ boundary, such as ‘the oppressor’ and ‘the oppressed’. Additionally, ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’ may be part of a wider global elite or transnational movement respectively.

Global IR’s aim of transcending the distinction between the West and non-West and integrating area studies is, to a certain extent, evident in populism scholarship, a lot of which is based on in-depth knowledge of and long-term research on a locality. A global approach is also evident in the assertion of a comparative approach (Laclau, 2002: 5), especially one that encourages ‘a broader cross-regional perspective’ (Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017: 400; see also Dorraj and Dodson, 2009; Filc, 2011; Hadiz, 2014; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). This

is welcome because they do not assume that the character of populism can be reduced to a geographic identity, such as the ‘Third World’ in opposition to the ‘West’. After all, it must not be *assumed* that similarities cannot exist across locations without empirical interrogation to support the assertion. However, while comparative approaches are embraced, it is not sufficient to simply compare populism in different societies if populism is to be better understood. This is because they remain grounded in methodological nationalism by restricting the analysis to a ‘domestic’ context.

Considering the large body of populism literature, very little addresses the international. Those that do can, broadly speaking, be divided into two categories. The first is the relationship between foreign policy and populist leaders or groups in government (Dodson and Dorraj, 2008; Tudoroiu, 2014; Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015). However, these remain examples of methodological nationalism because the domestic and international are seen as distinct political spheres. The second category concerns, to varying degrees, the relationship with and/or construction of an external ‘other’, such as anti-imperialism/imperialism (Abrahamian, 1993; Colás, 2004; Mead, 2011; Yu, 2014) and xenophobia (Inglehart and Norris, 2017; Reyes, 2005). Related to this can be the relationship with global neoliberalism (Gusterson, 2017; Hadiz, 2014) and ‘international structures of political economy’ (Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017: 407).

This second group makes steps towards demonstrating interconnectivity. For instance, Hadiz (2014: 129) highlights a ‘New Islamic Populism’ that ‘has been forged within certain historical and social processes’, such as the post-Cold War environment and globalisation. Walter Mead (2011) draws attention to the anti-colonialism of ‘tea parties’ in eighteenth century British North America and how this has informed a brand of contemporary American populism. He shows how this influences American foreign policy. Oscar Reyes’ (2005) analysis of former UK Conservative Party leader William Hague’s pre-election campaign shows a populist discourse where boundaries between the domestic (position regarding criminality and homosexuality in UK law), regional (position on the EU), and international (asylum seekers of a foreign land) are blurred. Alejandro Colás (2004) argues that Islamism in the Maghreb can be understood in terms of a religious populism that is in response to capitalist imperialism. Angelos Chryssogelos (2017: 475) highlights that the context in which populism exists ‘is never a domestic strategy alone.’ Rather, ‘domestic discourses of difference and the external adaptation are mutually dependent.’

#### [Legacy of subalternity and the international](#)

Appreciating intellectual and historical context is essential (see Go and Lawson, 2017; Howarth, 2005) to a better understanding of populism. In post-revolutionary contexts, an appropriate framework for this is an adaptation of the ‘legacy of subalternity’. Through a detailed engagement with Antonio Gramsci’s notion of the national-popular collective will, it has been argued that the creation of the Islamic Republic is an example of subaltern groups (Iranian masses) that successfully overthrow the state hegemon (Pahlavi regime) and establish themselves as the new hegemon (the Islamic Republic) because they had the national-popular collective will. In post-revolution situations, the legacy of subalternity facilitates a better understanding of how a previously subaltern populist movement, having achieved its aims of becoming the ruling elite, maintains its legitimacy through populist discourse. In this context,

the now post-revolutionary *elite* constructs itself as synonymous with ‘the people’ (Holliday, 2016: 918, 927).

In Iran’s case, ideological diversity regarding political aspirations for post-Pahlavi Iran characterised the pre-revolutionary political climate (Abrahamian, 1982; Ansari, 2003; Holliday, 2016: 921; Keddie, 2003). This diversity included several left-leaning opposition groups and intellectuals (see Abrahamian, 1982: 451-73, 483-95). The international, part of which is the rejection of what was considered as US hegemony, was integral to aspirations for the re-ordering of Iranian society and politics and the Left was instrumental in this. For instance, political and social aspirations were influenced, to varying degrees, by Mohammad Musaddiq’s call for ‘freedom and independence’ integral to the nationalisation of oil in the 1950s (Holliday, 2011a: 30-35); Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s 1962 *Occidentosis/Westoxication* which presented the ‘West’ as the hegemonic ‘other’ (Boroujerdi, 1996: 53; Mirsepassi, 2000: 96); and Ali Shari’ati’s ‘Return to the Self’, which replicated Franz Fanon’s ‘return of the oppressed’ and complemented Al-e Ahmad’s approach to the ‘West’ (Boroujerdi, 1996: 106, 112). Shari’ati and Al-e Ahmad drew from the Marxist tradition and blended it with Islam (Ansari, 2003). Shari’ati became particularly influential by creating a new understanding of Islam as a revolutionary ideology aimed at abolishing all ‘oppression’. Significantly, this involved Shari’ati substituting ‘working class’ as the key agent for change with ‘the people’, ‘the ruled’ and ‘the oppressed’ (Matin, 2013: 131, 134). This became prevalent in Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini’s discourse, who would become the architect of the Islamic Republic.

Leading up to the revolution the secular Left became less prevalent with secular nationalists and left-wing parties being ‘either suppressed or co-opted’ (Ansari, 2003: 200-1). In this context, drawing on Shari’ati’s and Al-e Ahmad’s ideas, Khomeini’s religious nationalism became increasingly popular among students (Ansari, 2003: 200-1). Furthermore, it was Khomeini who ‘succeeded in forcing the Westerners out and branding the Pahlavi dynasty as an agent of foreign influence’ (Rajaei, 2008: 153). He constructed a ‘dark background of exploitative international relations’ whereby imperialism, and its ‘internal factors’ were intent on removing Islam from Muslim countries and ‘sustaining their backwardness’ (Matin, 2013: 137-38). Significantly, Israel and Zionism were considered as an extension of that imperialism and foreign influence (Abrahamian, 1993). Through this religious nationalism (Ansari, 2003), or Latin American style populism (Abrahamian, 1993), Khomeini galvanised the opposing forces towards revolution.

Rejection of this ‘global arrogance’ was reflected in Khomeini’s construction of an antagonistic frontier between two camps: the oppressed (proletariat, toilers, downtrodden) and the oppressors (the rich, their foreign patrons, capitalist class) (Abrahamian, 1993: 47, 132-33; Matin, 2013: 140). Israel was integral to this. For instance, Khomeini constructed Israel as “‘the most intolerable symbol’ of Western tyranny against Muslims’ (Dabashi, 1993: 426) or as a “‘cancerous tumor’ for the countries of the Middle East and the Muslim World, a stooge of Western imperialism to usurp Palestinian lands’ (Kamrava, 2014: 166). Notably, despite this, Iran had a secret arms deal with Israel, and the US, during the Iran-Iraq War when Iran ‘bought over \$500 million worth of arms from Israel between 1980 and 1983’ (Arjomand, 2009: 135). At the same time, Iran was instrumental in training Hezbollah in southern Lebanon amidst the 1982 War between Israel and Lebanon.

Many Iranians felt that the only way to end external interference was through the removal of the Pahlavi regime and a re-ordering of Iranian society. The interconnectedness between the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ is evident in what have come to be considered the norms and values of the 1979 Revolution. These have been described as social and political justice (Menashri, 2007); self-sufficiency and ‘territorial integrity and security’ (Maleki, 1995: 747); ‘cultural and political independence’ (Adib-Moghaddam, 2005: 266); and anti-imperialism and resistance against the foreign oppressor (Adib-Moghaddam, 2005: 266). Importantly, the issue of Palestine - its occupation and the failure to respect Palestinians’ human rights - has been an essential part of the resistance against what is believed to be western imperialism (Abrahamian, 1993).

This historical and intellectual context reflects the interconnectedness of the ‘external’ and ‘internal’ at the time of the 1979 Revolution. It also highlights the importance of the *legacy* of subalternity. These are evident in the revolution’s norms and values and Khomeini’s populist discourse. Through the construction of equivalential chains, ‘the people’ were equated with ‘the oppressed’ in opposition to ‘the oppressor’. The Pahlavi regime, Zionism, and Western hegemony were made equivalent to one another as ‘the oppressor’. Consequently, the equivalential chains both discursively construct an antagonistic frontier and builds on an existing situation whereby ‘the people’ are excluded from the ‘the elite’s’ political project.

#### The discursive construction of Israel and global order through populist discourse

Similar equivalential chains are articulated in Ahmadinejad’s and Rouhani’s populist discourses. However, the pre-revolution subaltern movement is now the elite. In this context, ‘the people’ are *simultaneously* equated with the Islamic Republic government, and ‘the Palestinian people’ as part of the ‘oppressed’. Israel, as the ‘other’, is equated with the ‘oppressor’ by constructing it as *not* being of ‘the people’. Evidently, the antagonistic frontier and the two equivalential chains transcend the ‘internal’/‘external’ divide. Notably, this process homogenises ‘the people’, ‘the Palestinian people’, and indeed Israel. These discourses are articulated in specific interconnected international and domestic contexts. The international involves the othering of Iran. The domestic involves the need for the Islamic Republic to remain faithful to its social base and populist credentials integral to which is its legacy of subalternity. This is essential to maintain the Islamic Republic’s legitimacy as a post-revolution government and regime survival (Holliday, 2016). In the specific context of IR and its tendency to marginalise the ‘non-West’, the ‘self’ and ‘other’ in the practice and analysis of global politics needs to be rethought (see Campbell, 1992; Dalby, 1988; Pan, 2004; Walker, 1993). Thus, this section views the Islamic Republic as the ‘self’, focusing on its construction of the international. In so doing, it is possible to illustrate how populist discourse simultaneously constructs several aspects of the social world: the actor who is articulating it and its relationship with its own population; that actor’s relationship with others in the international system; and global order.

Integral to these populist discourses is the rejection of a particular view of global order, often referred to as ‘global arrogance’, that can be understood in terms of Robert Cox’s ‘US hegemony’, or Acharya’s ‘American World Order’, or ‘American-led liberal hegemonic order’. While Cox (1981: 144) argued there was an American hegemony, Acharya (2014a: 3) argues

that the ‘American World Order was for the most part not really a global order. Rather, it was a relationship among a group of like-minded states, mostly Western, led by the US.’ The norms and values of such a world order include ‘democracy, democratic community, progressive change, collective problem solving, shared sovereignty, [and] the rule of law’ (Ikenberry, 2011: 11-12). Significantly, Acharya (2014a: 5) also argues that the ‘liberal hegemonic order narrative tends to downplay regional forces or present them as a threat’. It is not surprising then that the Islamic Republic, not part of the ‘like-minded states’, is considered as a threat by the likes of George W. Bush, Trump, Netanyahu and some academic approaches. However, as will be highlighted below, in Iran’s construction of global order, Iran is not a ‘threat’, ‘rogue regime’, or ‘destabilising force’ in need of isolation, or indeed an ‘axis of evil’. Rather, it is the champion of ‘the people’ and the defender of human rights, self-determination, democracy, and the rule of law. Israel, seen as an extension of Western imperialism and hegemony, is constructed as not being of ‘the people’.

The antagonistic relationship between Iran and Israel at the state level is in many ways governed by each actor’s construction of the ‘other’ as the ‘enemy’. For Israel, a number of interrelated factors contribute to Iran being the ‘enemy’. These are the use of bellicose language regarding Israel and the perception that racist language is aimed at undermining Israel’s legitimacy and right to exist (Rezaei and Cohen, 2014: 443); Iran’s support for Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and Syria (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016; Bahgat, 2006; Gasiorowski, 2007: 128-132; Menashri, 2007: 153-67; Salamey and Othman, 2011: 209-10; Takeyh, 2006: 87); the belief that Iran’s nuclear project is military rather than peaceful; and the view that Iran wishes to exert its influence throughout the region by way of the ‘Tehran-led arc’. Trita Parsi (2007: 162-64) argues that these are part of the wider aim to establish Iran as a *future* threat to the West as a whole, as opposed to just Israel because of the continued prevalence of Khomeini’s ideology. The likelihood of Iran actually attacking Israel is the subject of considerable debate (Rezaei and Cohen, 2014: 451).

For Iran, Israel is the ‘enemy’ because it is seen as an extension of US hegemony, which is related to the Palestine issue. Since the 1979 Revolution, Palestine has remained a key concern of Iranian foreign policy (Halliday, 2001; Warnaar, 2013; Juneau, 2014). To varying degrees, the populist discourses of Ahmadinejad and Rouhani represent a continuation of Khomeini’s discursive construction of Israel. However, while the Palestine issue remains central to ‘Iran’s Islamic credentials’, Rouhani has not been as confrontational as Ahmadinejad (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016: 623). Notably, despite the fluidity in Iran’s relations with Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA), the Islamic Republic has maintained its self-portrayal as champions of the Palestinian people. For instance, although Hamas refused to back Bashar al-Assad’s government at the start of the Syrian Civil War (Sherwood, 2014), Rouhani continued to present Iran as the Palestinian people’s champion. The continued centrality of Palestine is evident in Rouhani’s (1396/2018a) speech to the 2018 Parliamentary Union of the Islamic Conference. He states that following the defeat of Da’ish/Islamic State, the issue of Palestine has returned to ‘its rightful place which is the first priority of the political agenda of the Islamic ummah.’

Ahmadinejad’s election followed Khatami’s two-term presidency. Khatami was popular among students, intellectuals, the women’s movement, and religious and ethnic minorities because of his aspirations to reform the Islamic Republic with ideas of Islamic

democracy and civil society (Ansari, 2006b: 96-98; Holliday, 2011a: 114-21). However, by 2005 many felt betrayed because of Khatami's perceived failure to reform the Islamic Republic. This contributed to Ahmadinejad's electoral victory through reformists boycotting elections (Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007: 58). Furthermore, a different social base supported Ahmadinejad. Vowing to return to the values of the 1979 Revolution (noted above), Ahmadinejad presented himself as the people's candidate and the champion of the poor (Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007: 60, 62; Naji, 2008: 82) who would fight the elite's corruption and cronyism (Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007: 62). He also had support among the Basij and Revolutionary Guards (Naji, 2008: 71).

The international context of Ahmadinejad's presidency is the so-called 'Global War on Terror' and the EU, US and UN sanctions regimes. In the context the 'War on Terror' former US President Bush (2002) positioned Iran as part of an 'axis of evil'. Iran was constructed as part of 'Islamist terrorism' and as a threat to 'the peace of the world' because of its support for Hamas and Hezbollah. This was despite Iran's cooperation with the US against the Taliban in Afghanistan (Ansari, 2006a: 186-87). In the name of the 'War on Terror', two of Iran's neighbours – Iraq and Afghanistan - were invaded by US-led coalitions. Furthermore, the region witnessed Lebanon's 2006 33-day War, the 2006 election of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and the 2008/9 Gaza War (Operation Cast Lead). For Israel, the 33-day War was Israel's war against Iran with Hezbollah being seen as the 'frontal commando unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' (Schiff, 2006). The sanctions regimes, in response to Iran's nuclear programme, represented a state of 'neither peace, nor war' for Iran's democracy movement and was considered to be a threat to human rights; activists were targeted because they were considered a threat to national security (Holliday, 2011b).

In this environment, Iranian diplomats were required to not only defend the regime's 'sociopolitical policies against western accusations', but also to highlight the shortcomings of Washington's so-called 'arrogance and hegemony' (Amuzegar, 2007: 47). Palestinians were constructed 'as the ultimate victims' deserving protection from other oppressed countries (Warnaar, 2013: 111). Events such as 'A World without Zionism and America' and the 'Review of the Holocaust: A Global Vision' portrayed Iran to the Palestinians as a Shi'i and non-Arab government vying for the 'title of Palestine's "saviour"' (Amuzegar, 2007: 48). Ahmadinejad's 'populism international' carved him as 'the figure of an anti-imperialist hero' who was 'committed to redressing the imbalance in the international system in favour of the long-suffering Third World' (Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007: 107). This made him popular on the 'Arab street'. Constructing the Islamic Republic as the champion of the oppressed in face of perceived Zionist hegemony was also articulated through bellicose language regarding Israel. Ahmadinejad stated 'this Jerusalem-occupying regime must vanish from the page(s) of time', or as the original Persian is often translated; 'Israel must be wiped off the map' (Naji, 2008: 140-1). Certainly, holocaust denial and this view of Israel needs to be highlighted, as Farhad Rezaei and Ronen Cohen (2014) do. However, Ahmadinejad also articulated a more nuanced populist discourse, embedded in which is the relational nature of Iran's legacy of subalternity and the construction of global order.

In September 2005, at Ahmadinejad's first United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Ahmadinejad (2005) positioned Iran on the moral high ground stating that Iran is the 'manifestation of true democracy in the region' and that it is dedicated to 'respect for the rights

of human beings'. With specific reference to Palestine, he states that justice is required to achieve a durable peace. This would be 'an end to discrimination and the occupation of Palestinian land, the return of all Palestinian refugees, and the establishment of a democratic Palestinian state' with Jerusalem as its capital. By the time of Ahmadinejad's second UNGA, Hamas had won the legislative election in the Gaza Strip. The US, Israel and the EU all rejected the election despite the belief that it was free and fair (Usher, 2006: 2). Following Hamas' refusal to create a unity government with Fatah, Israel and the US withdrew their funding and Iran offered to make up the PA's shortfall (BBC, 2006). In this speech, Ahmadinejad (2006) criticises the 'Zionist regime' and those who support it for not appreciating the democratically elected Palestinian government. He states that with regard to the Palestinian people, the ideas of democracy, self-determination, respect for rights, international law and justice 'have no place or value.' This is evident, Ahmadinejad states, in the manner in which the elected Palestinian government is treated and in the 'support extended to the Zionist regime'.

Ahmadinejad's 2009 Quds (Jerusalem) Day speech is particularly interesting because of its context. It follows two significant events. The first is the 2008/9 Gaza War. According to B'Tselem (2014), the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, the magnitude of harm to the local population was unprecedented: '1,391 Palestinians were killed, 759 of whom did not take part in the hostilities'. The second is the Ahmadinejad's controversial re-election (see Ansari, 2010; Ehsani et al, 2009) following which the Islamic Republic's 'democratic' credentials were openly challenged on Iran's streets. Despite this, Ahmadinejad (2009) constructed the Islamic Republic as synonymous with 'the people' and linked it to the Palestinians. He does this by stating that when there are 'free elections' in a state like Iran, 'they say no, there is no democracy'. 'They' implies the West. Ahmadinejad goes on to state that 'When democracy reaches Palestine, it is sacrificed at the feet of the murderous Zionist government'.

By linking Iran's 2009 election to the 2006 election of Hamas, Ahmadinejad justifies his legitimate credentials as the champion of 'the Palestinian oppressed'. This is indicative of a populist discourse that constructs the Islamic Republic *as* 'the people', which in turn constructs the Islamic Republic not only as a rightful state hegemon essential for regime survival, but also as an actor with legitimacy in the international system. Simultaneously, these speeches articulate a populist discourse by invoking values that are thought to defend 'the people'. This articulation implicitly delegitimises Israel because of its association with the *lack* of 'freedom and human rights' and its responsibility for the lack of Palestinian democracy.

In 2013, Rouhani was elected as president. His candidacy represents the Islamic Republic's desire to reassert its legitimacy following the unpopularity of Ahmadinejad among many Iranians and the 2009-10 uprisings (Holliday, 2016); intra-regime political battles (Sherrill, 2014: 70); a deteriorating economic situation due to Ahmadinejad's economic policy and sanctions (Menashri, 2013: 8); and a desire to come out of isolation both within the regime and among many Iranians (Ehteshami and Zaccara, 2013: 7). Rouhani was supported by Khatami. He was also popular in the provinces with considerable support from ethnic minorities. Furthermore, many Iranians favoured Rouhani to prevent a more conservative candidate winning (Harris, 2013). In this context, Rouhani's populist discourse establishes the Islamic Republic as synonymous with 'the people' reasserting that the Islamic Republic remains faithful to its legacy of subalternity (Holliday, 2016). This is reflected in the use of

language that constructs ‘the people’ as a political actor through terms that invoke ‘the people’, such as ‘elected by the people’, ‘of the people’, and ‘democracy’ (Holliday, 2016: 925). In a television interview 100 days after being elected, Rouhani (1392/2013b) stated: ‘the government works as the servant of the people and as someone who is the agent of the people.’

In terms of international context, while the nuclear issue almost brought Iran to war during Ahmadinejad’s presidency, Rouhani’s administration negotiated the JCPOA with the P5+1 and was generally considered ‘as a step forward for Iran’s foreign policy’ (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016: 628). Importantly, Rouhani (1392/2013b) sees the nuclear issue as connected to the will of ‘the people’. This is not surprising considering the social base supporting Rouhani and their desire to engage with the world. Despite the nuclear issue being integral to the antagonism between Iran and Israel, Rouhani endeavoured to set a new tone. He sent Rosh Hashanah greetings through Twitter to the world’s Jewish communities (Monshipouri and Dorraj, 2103: 133) and ‘condemned the “crime” of mass killings of Jews by the Nazis’ in an interview with CNN (Monshipouri and Dorraj, 2103: 133; Rouhani, 1392/2013c). Despite the clear departure from Ahmadinejad’s presidency, the same equivalential chains associated with Palestine continue to be articulated through Rouhani’s populist discourse.

In addition to the ongoing cold war between Iran and Israel, the regional backdrop to Rouhani’s presidency can be seen in terms of the Islamic Republic’s support for Assad in the Syria Conflict; Iran’s role in combatting Da’ish/Islamic State; the intensification of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry; and the continued failure to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict. In this context, Rouhani (1394/2015) states that Iran is in favour of stability and security in the region. For Rouhani (1396/2018b, 1396/2018c), this is to be achieved through ‘political resolution, cooperation and negotiation particularly with the countries of the region’; combatting ‘terrorism’<sup>5</sup>; and allowing the people of the region to be in charge of their own destiny. Furthermore, ‘foreign powers and states should not interfere in the affairs of the region and nor should they think about selling their weapons’ (Rouhani, 1396/2018c). It is clear that Israel continues to be seen as an extension of American hegemony under Trump. In this regard, Rouhani (1396/2018c) stated that in the White House there is someone that is ‘influential and Zionist’ who continues to have relations with Israel and that is undoubtedly influential in the region and the world.

At the 2013 UNGA, Netanyahu (2013) described Rouhani as a ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’. Shortly afterwards, in an interview with the American NBC, Rouhani was asked about both Netanyahu’s description of Rouhani and the fact that Ahmadinejad ‘had people believing that he wanted to wipe Israel off the map’. In response, Rouhani (1392/2013a) states:

Firstly, an occupier and usurper government, which does injustice to the people of the region and has brought instability to the region with its warmongering policies, shouldn’t allow itself to give speeches about a democratically and freely elected government that has come about by means of the free votes of the people.

Rouhani goes on to state: ‘We have announced that we are not seeking nuclear weapons and will not be’, and puts forward that ‘an aggressive country in the region’ should not talk about ‘a popularly and democratically elected government’ in such a way. In response to the second point, Rouhani outlines his aspirations for the region: ‘the rule of the people’s votes’. With

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Terrorism’ is generally used by Rouhani to refer to Da’ish/Islamic State and others with a similar ideology.

specific reference to Palestine he states: ‘we also believe that the ballot box should solve and determine the issue. The votes of all people ... all those who belong to the land of Palestine, that’s what we respect’. The message of ballot boxes, votes and elections is reiterated in Rouhani’s CNN interview (Rouhani, 1392/2013c). Here, Rouhani creates an antagonistic frontier that transcends ‘internal’/‘external’ boundaries. While Iran is constructed in terms of ‘democracy’ and both the Iranian ‘people’ and the Palestinian ‘people’, Israel is constructed in terms of ‘occupier’ and as ‘aggressive’ and ‘warmongering’.

This antagonistic frontier is also articulated in Rouhani’s (1396/2018a) 2018 Islamic Conference speech. Here, he pays considerable attention to the importance of democracy in the Islamic world stating that ‘Islam is the religion of democracy and peace, and not the religion of war’. The ‘Zionist regime’, on the other hand, is constructed as being responsible for ‘destroying the stability and security of the Middle East’ because of continued occupation and depriving Palestinians of basic human rights. Notably, equivalential chains are constructed whereby the Islamic Republic, Islam and democracy are equated with each other. For instance, Rouhani states: ‘Strengthening democracy and paying attention to the views of the people is our most important means to confront the West.’ This strengthening and attention is, for Rouhani, through ballot boxes, parliamentary tribunes, and free media. Following Trump’s withdrawal from the JCPOA and his declaration of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, Rouhani (1397/2018a, 1397/2018b) establishes Iran as law abiding, while Israel and the US are seen as being unfaithful to *international* law regarding the status of Jerusalem and the JCPOA.

While these populist discourses are constructed in relation to both domestic and international political contexts, the discourses themselves also conflate the division between the domestic and the international by advocating the interconnectivity between ‘internal’ and ‘external’. This is evident in the construction of an antagonistic frontier that transcends an ‘internal’/‘external’ divide. Implicit in the terms ‘democracy’, ‘democratically and freely elected’, ‘votes of all people’ and ‘ballot boxes’ is the belief that despite having succeeded in becoming the state hegemon, the Islamic Republic has remained faithful to its legacy of subalternity, and therefore its legitimacy. Simultaneously, the Islamic Republic sees itself as part of the wider *transnational* Islamic world that defends ‘the people’ and ‘the Palestinian people’ in opposition to Israel. Furthermore, these are discursively constructed in relation to norms and values usually associated with the American World Order that are assumed to govern the international. Consequently, both Ahmadinejad and Rouhani construct a world that is divided between two camps whereby ‘the people’ as part of ‘the oppressed’ are separated from ‘the elite’, or ‘oppressor’ that is not of ‘the people’. This is a very powerful discourse because it constructs a situation in which ‘the people’ and states that see themselves as synonymous with ‘the people’ are excluded from the political project of states that are seen to be hegemonic in the region. Indeed, as part of the project to globalise IR, it is necessary to appreciate multiple approaches to the international.

## Conclusion

Society, and therefore populism as a social construction, does not exist in isolation of the international. Thus, populism cannot be simply about ‘domestic’ politics. The interconnectedness of the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ integral to populism is evident in three ways. First, while populism evolves in an ‘internal’ environment whereby ‘the people’ feel excluded

from the social and political order put forward by ‘the elite’, that environment is influenced by the international. Second, and often contemporaneously, populist agendas influence and/or reconstruct the ‘external’. This can be through the construction of global order. Finally, it is transnational in that both ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, and the norms and values they articulate, have relationships that extend beyond the ‘internal’/‘external’ boundary. This article has shown that a borrowing of Laclau’s equivalential chains and antagonistic frontier provide suitable analytical tools to highlight the interconnectivity between the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ in populist discourses.

Crucially, populism is *global*. Consequently, how populism is interrogated needs to reflect its global nature. The implication of not appreciating this global nature is that not only might we fail to better understand populism, whenever and wherever it is manifested, but also that we fail to identify similarities *and* relationships between populist discourses in different localities. The contention here is that borrowing from Global IR and GHS provides the appropriate framework for understanding populism as a global phenomenon and its complex relationship with the ‘internal’ and ‘external’. This is because of how they encourage us to see the world; as a complex set of social and political relations that are grounded in historical experiences and transcend nation and/or state boundaries extending *throughout* the world.

Finally, as Acharya has argued, embracing the global in IR requires us to change the focus of research to appreciate the so-called non-West and how they construct the international in all its diversity. Significantly, Acharya’s call for eschewing cultural exceptionalism and transcending the ‘West’-‘rest’ divide involves bringing area studies back into IR and to not consider it as ontologically separate to the study of international politics. Area studies, regardless of the location, is important for understanding social and political dynamics, their relationships with the international, and the historical contexts that have brought such relationships about. Obviously, part of this process is to appreciate that it is not just the ‘West’ that acts. The contention here is that, in the context of localities or actors that are often perceived of as the ‘other’ in academia and/or foreign policy, that locality and/or actor must be re-constructed as the ‘self’. In so doing, it is possible to better understand such an actor’s perception or construction of the international.

By positioning the Islamic Republic as the ‘self’ in global politics, the article has demonstrated that the Islamic Republic does not construct itself as a ‘threatening rogue state’. Rather, it sees itself as being of ‘the people and the champion of the oppressed, unlike Israel. Evidently, grounded in social, historical and intellectual contexts, its relationships with its social bases and the region, and its construction of the international are interconnected. Consequently, this article encourages us to embrace populism as an aspect of our global orders.

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