

Educating Resistance Civic Education and the Rise of Defensive Nationalism in Iran against the United States

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Abstract

This study examines how civic education in Iran contributes to the construction of defensive nationalism amid prolonged geopolitical tensions with the United States. While previous studies have separately explored Iranian nationalism, anti-Americanism, and civic education, limited scholarship has systematically analyzed how educational discourse mediates geopolitical conflict and transforms it into everyday understandings of citizenship and national identity in non-Western contexts. To address this gap, the study employs a qualitative research design using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze 12 official civic education textbooks for grades 10–12, national curriculum policy documents, and state-sanctioned instructional materials issued by the Iranian Ministry of Education between 2020 and 2025. While simultaneously promoting narratives of resistance, sovereignty, and moral obligation as core elements of citizenship. Defensive nationalism, understood as a form of nationalism oriented toward protecting sovereignty against perceived external threats, characterized by a protective orientation toward perceived external threats rather than expansionist ambitions. However, the study also finds that such narratives are not passively internalized; instead, students actively negotiate and reinterpret national identity within broader socio-cultural and global contexts. Addressing the limited scholarship on how civic education mediates geopolitical tensions through nationalist discourse in non-Western contexts analytical and by demonstrating how education functions as a key site for the production of geopolitical consciousness and political subjectivity in contemporary Iran.

Keyword: critical discourse analysis; geopolitical education; anti-Americanism in Iran.

I. INTRODUCTION

Although the relationship between nationalism, civic education, and geopolitics has attracted growing scholarly attention in recent

years, limited studies have systematically examined how civic education transforms prolonged geopolitical tensions into institutionalized forms of citizenship and national

identity, particularly within non-Western contexts such as Iran. Iran represents a critical case where national identity is continuously reconstructed in response to both internal ideological dynamics and external geopolitical pressures, especially in relation to the United States. Recent studies emphasize that contemporary nationalism is no longer a static ideological construct but a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by global political contestations (Akbarzadeh., 2021; Darvishi & Yousefi., 2022). In this regard, Iranian nationalism reflects a strategically constructed form of political identity that responds to external geopolitical pressures through the institutional reinforcement of resistance, sovereignty, and ideological cohesion, particularly within educational and civic discourses.

The persistence of Iran–United States antagonism remains a central factor in shaping Iranian political identity. Recent geopolitical analyses suggest that U.S. foreign policy toward Iran particularly sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and military containment has reinforced nationalist sentiments within Iranian society (Juneau., 2021; Maloney., 2020). As Juneau (2021) explicitly states, “external pressure has historically strengthened rather than weakened nationalist cohesion in Iran”. This dynamic indicates that nationalism in Iran is not merely reactive but evolves into a structured response to perceived external domination. Consequently, anti-American sentiment should not be interpreted solely as ideological hostility but as part of a broader framework of defensive identity construction.

In the post-2020 geopolitical landscape, the concept of nationalism itself has undergone significant transformation. Scholars argue that contemporary nationalism increasingly manifests as defensive nationalism, particularly in states experiencing sustained external pressure (Mylonas & Tudor., 2021; Skey., 2022). Defensive nationalism refers to a form of nationalism that emerges under conditions of sustained external pressure, where national identity is constructed through narratives of protection, sovereignty preservation, moral resistance, and opposition to perceived foreign domination rather than through expansionist or exclusionary ambitions. In Iran, this phenomenon is particularly evident, as national narratives increasingly emphasize resistance, independence, and cultural resilience against Western hegemony (KhosraviNik., 2022).

Within this context, civic education emerges as a crucial mechanism through which such narratives are institutionalized and reproduced. Recent research highlights that education systems play a pivotal role in shaping political subjectivity and national identity, particularly in politically sensitive contexts (Zembylas., 2022; Sant et al., 2020). Civic education, in particular, should not be understood solely as a mechanism for fostering democratic participation, but also as a contested pedagogical space where states construct political legitimacy, shape national consciousness, and negotiate competing understandings of citizenship, identity, and ideological belonging. As (Sant et al., 2020) argue, “citizenship education is inherently

political, as it involves the construction of norms, identities, and allegiances”. This perspective is especially relevant in Iran, where civic education is closely aligned with state ideology and national narratives.

Empirical studies focusing on Iran indicate that educational content increasingly incorporates themes of resistance and anti-hegemony. For instance, (Rahimi and Hosseini., 2021) found that school curricula frequently frame the United States as a symbol of global domination, thereby reinforcing a dichotomous worldview of “us versus them.” Similarly, (Karimi., 2023) notes that “educational discourse in Iran systematically embeds narratives of resistance, portraying national identity as inseparable from opposition to external powers”. These findings suggest that civic education functions as a strategic tool for cultivating a specific form of nationalism rooted in resistance.

At the same time, recent scholarship cautions against viewing this process as purely top-down or deterministic. Studies on youth political attitudes in Iran reveal a more complex picture, where individuals actively negotiate and reinterpret national narratives (Shahrokni., 2022; Khosravi., 2021). This aligns with broader theoretical shifts that conceptualize nationalism as an everyday and contested practice rather than a fixed ideological imposition (Fox & Miller., 2020). Thus, while civic education plays a significant role in shaping national identity, its effects are mediated by social, cultural, and generational factors.

Despite these scholarly advancements,

insufficient attention has been given to how civic education systematically institutionalizes geopolitical narratives and transforms them into everyday understandings of citizenship, resistance, and national identity within the Iranian context. Existing studies tend to examine nationalism, anti-Americanism, and education as separate domains, while overlooking the complex interaction between educational discourse, geopolitical conflict, and identity formation. While recent studies have examined Iranian nationalism (Akbarzadeh., 2021), anti-Americanism (Juneau., 2021), and civic education (Sant et al., 2020; Amin et al., 2025) as separate domains, few have explored their intersection in a systematic and theoretically integrated manner. In particular, the role of civic education in producing defensive nationalism has not been sufficiently theorized or empirically examined. This gap is significant, given that education represents a key site where geopolitical narratives are translated into everyday understandings of citizenship and identity.

This article addresses this gap by introducing the concept of defensive nationalism as an analytical framework for understanding the relationship between civic education and geopolitical tension in Iran. Unlike traditional forms of nationalism that emphasize expansion or homogenization, defensive nationalism is characterized by its reactive and protective orientation. It emerges in contexts where external threats are internalized and rearticulated as central components of national identity. In Iran, this process is particularly salient, as narratives of

resistance against the United States are deeply embedded within educational discourse.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative and interdisciplinary approach. First, it bridges the gap between macro-level geopolitical analysis and micro-level educational practices, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how nationalism is constructed and reproduced. Second, it advances the theoretical discourse on nationalism by elaborating the concept of defensive nationalism in a non-Western context. Third, it contributes to the field of civic education by highlighting its role not only as a pedagogical domain but also as a political instrument for shaping national identity under conditions of conflict.

Ultimately, this study argues that civic education in Iran plays a central role in constructing and sustaining defensive nationalism in response to the United States. By embedding narratives of resistance, historical memory, and ideological opposition within educational practices, the state fosters a form of citizenship that is deeply intertwined with geopolitical consciousness. However, this process remains dynamic and contested, reflecting the complex interplay between state power, individual agency, and global influences in shaping contemporary national identity. democracy.

II. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in a critical interpretive paradigm to examine how civic education in Iran contributes to the construction of defensive

nationalism in the context of Iran–United States relations. Given the study’s focus on the institutional production of ideology, geopolitical narratives, and national identity formation, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was selected as the primary methodological approach because it enables the examination of how power relations, ideological structures, and political meanings are reproduced and legitimized through educational discourse within broader socio-political contexts. CDA enables the systematic exploration of how power, ideology, and political narratives are embedded and reproduced through language in institutional contexts (Fairclough., 2021; Wodak., 2021). As (Fairclough., 2021) argues, “discourse is not merely a reflection of social reality but a constitutive element of it”, making it particularly suitable for analyzing educational materials that shape civic consciousness. This approach is further supported by recent applications of CDA in political and educational research, which highlight its capacity to uncover hidden ideological structures within curricular texts (KhosraviNik., 2022; Baker et al., 2020).

The data corpus for this study consisted of 12 official civic education textbooks for grades 10–12 published between 2020 and 2025, six national curriculum policy documents issued by the Iranian Ministry of Education, and eight publicly accessible instructional materials, including teacher manuals and state-sanctioned educational media selected based on their relevance to citizenship, nationalism, and geopolitical discourse. These sources were

selected through purposive sampling to ensure their relevance to the study's focus on state-mediated civic education (Palinkas et al., 2020). Purposive sampling is particularly appropriate in qualitative research where the objective is to obtain information-rich cases that illuminate the phenomenon under investigation. Recent methodological literature emphasizes that such sampling strategies enhance analytical depth rather than statistical generalizability (Campbell et al., 2020).

The analytical procedure followed a three-stage CDA framework adapted from Fairclough's model, consisting of textual analysis, discursive practice analysis, and social practice interpretation. In the textual analysis stage, the study examined lexical choices, metaphors, ideological labels, and binary oppositions related to nationalism and foreign threats. The discursive practice stage focused on how educational narratives were institutionally produced, circulated, and legitimized within state educational structures. Finally, the social practice stage interpreted these discursive patterns within broader geopolitical tensions between Iran and the United States, particularly in relation to identity formation, resistance narratives, and state ideology. In the first stage, the study examines lexical choices, metaphors, and narrative structures within the selected texts to identify representations of national identity and the United States. In the second stage, it analyzes how these texts are produced and consumed within institutional settings, focusing on the role of state authority in shaping educational discourse. In the

third stage, the findings are interpreted within broader socio-political and geopolitical contexts, particularly in relation to ongoing Iran–U.S. tensions. This multi-layered approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how discourse operates across different levels of social reality (Wodak., 2021; Reisigl & Wodak., 2020).

To ensure methodological rigor and interpretive credibility, this study employed multiple validation strategies throughout the research process. Data triangulation was conducted by comparing discursive patterns across textbooks, curriculum documents, and instructional materials, while theoretical triangulation integrated perspectives from nationalism studies, critical pedagogy, and discourse theory to strengthen analytical interpretation. In addition, an audit trail documenting coding decisions, thematic development, and interpretive procedures was maintained to enhance transparency and consistency. The study also adopted a reflexive approach by critically acknowledging the researcher's interpretive position and the potential influence of epistemological assumptions on discourse analysis. First, data triangulation is conducted by comparing findings across multiple data sources, thereby reducing the risk of bias associated with single-source analysis (Flick., 2020). Second, theoretical triangulation is applied by integrating insights from nationalism theory, critical pedagogy, and discourse studies to strengthen interpretive validity (Zembylas., 2022). Third, an audit trail is maintained throughout the research process to ensure

transparency and replicability of analytical decisions (Nowell et al., 2021). These strategies align with contemporary qualitative research standards that emphasize trustworthiness, credibility, and reflexivity as key indicators of methodological quality (Braun & Clarke., 2021).

Furthermore, this study adopts a reflexive stance, acknowledging the researcher's positionality and its potential influence on data interpretation. As recent scholarship highlights, "reflexivity is essential in discourse-oriented research, where interpretation is inherently shaped by the analyst's perspective" (Braun & Clarke., 2021). By explicitly engaging with this dimension, the study seeks to maintain analytical rigor while critically examining its own epistemological assumptions. Ethical considerations are also addressed by ensuring that all data sources are publicly available and do not involve human subjects, thereby eliminating concerns related to confidentiality or informed consent (Israel., 2020).

Overall, the methodological framework of this study is designed to capture the complex and multi-layered nature of civic education as a site of ideological production. By combining Critical Discourse Analysis with rigorous qualitative procedures, this research provides a robust foundation for examining how defensive nationalism is constructed, institutionalized, and reproduced within the Iranian educational system in response to geopolitical tensions with the United States.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Iranian civic education materials and situates them within broader scholarly debates on nationalism, education, and geopolitics. The analysis reveals four dominant discursive patterns: (1) the construction of the United States as a hegemonic "Other," (2) the institutionalization of resistance narratives, (3) the pedagogical production of defensive nationalism, and (4) the emergence of negotiated nationalism among youth. These findings are discussed in relation to recent Scopus-indexed scholarship (2020–2026) to ensure analytical rigor and contemporary relevance.

1. Constructing the United States as a Hegemonic "Other"

The first major finding indicates that Iranian civic education systematically constructs the United States as a hegemonic and interventionist power. Across the analyzed textbooks and policy documents, the U.S. is frequently represented through lexical patterns such as domination, interference, and cultural invasion. This aligns with recent studies suggesting that geopolitical adversaries are discursively framed as existential threats to national sovereignty (KhosraviNik., 2022; Mylonas & Tudor., 2021).

More specifically, narrative structures often invoke historical episodes such as sanctions regimes and diplomatic conflicts to reinforce a sense of enduring hostility. As Azizi (2022) notes, "state narratives in Iran consistently frame the United States as a destabilizing force in both

regional and domestic affairs”. This framing reflects a broader discursive strategy in which national identity is constructed through opposition, a phenomenon widely documented in contemporary nationalism studies (Skey., 2022; De Cleen., 2021).

Importantly, this construction is not merely rhetorical but pedagogically embedded. Educational texts present simplified binaries of self (Iran as moral, sovereign, resistant) versus other (U.S. as aggressive, imperial, unjust). Such dichotomization reinforces what Brubaker (2020) describes as “groupism,” where social reality is organized into clearly bounded and oppositional categories. In the Iranian case, this binary serves as a foundational element in shaping civic consciousness.

2. Institutionalizing Narratives of Resistance

The second finding highlights the centrality of resistance as a core narrative within civic education. Within the analyzed educational materials, resistance is not presented merely as a temporary political response to geopolitical conflict, but as a moral and civic obligation embedded within the construction of ideal citizenship. Themes such as sacrifice, martyrdom, self-reliance, and anti-hegemony are repeatedly framed as ethical responsibilities of Iranian citizens, thereby transforming resistance into an institutionalized and emotionally legitimized component of national identity formation. This is evident in recurring themes such as self-reliance, martyrdom, and anti-hegemony, which are consistently emphasized across educational materials.

Recent research supports this observation, indicating that resistance has become a key ideological pillar in Iranian state discourse (Karimi., 2023; Rahimi & Hosseini., 2021). According to (Karimi., 2023), “resistance is framed not only as a political necessity but as a moral obligation embedded within national identity”. This moralization of resistance transforms it into a normative expectation for citizens, particularly students.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding aligns with the concept of resistance identity as articulated in contemporary social theory, where identities are formed in opposition to perceived domination (Castells., 2020). However, the Iranian case extends this concept by demonstrating how such identities are actively produced through formal education systems. Civic education thus functions as a site where resistance is normalized, legitimized, and transmitted across generations.

3. Pedagogical Production of Defensive Nationalism

The third and most significant finding relates directly to the study’s central concept: defensive nationalism. The analysis demonstrates that civic education in Iran systematically cultivates defensive nationalism through pedagogical narratives emphasizing vigilance, collective resilience, historical victimization, and moral resistance against perceived foreign threats. Unlike expansionist or exclusionary forms of nationalism, this defensive orientation frames national identity primarily through the protection of sovereignty, ideological continuity, and cultural

survival in response to sustained geopolitical pressure. This form of nationalism is distinct from aggressive or expansionist variants; instead, it is oriented toward protection and preservation.

This finding resonates with recent scholarship that identifies a global rise in defensive forms of nationalism, particularly in states facing external pressure (Ben-Porat et al., 2021; Bieber., 2022). In the Iranian context, defensive nationalism is constructed through a combination of historical narratives, ideological framing, and pedagogical practices. For example, lessons often emphasize past experiences of foreign intervention as cautionary tales, reinforcing the need for constant vigilance.

To illustrate this pattern, the following table summarizes key discursive elements identified in the analyzed materials:

Table 3.1 Discursive Construction of Defensive Nationalism in Iranian Civic Education

Discursive Element	Representation in Texts	Ideological Function
Historical Memory	Emphasis on foreign intervention (e.g., coups, sanctions)	Reinforces mistrust and vigilance
National Identity	Iran as sovereign, moral, and resilient	Constructs positive self-image
External Other	U.S. as hegemonic and interventionist	Justifies resistance

Citizenship Norms	Duty to defend nation and values	Institutionalizes loyalty
Moral Framing	Resistance as ethical obligation	Legitimizes ideological stance

As illustrated in Table 1, defensive nationalism operates not as a singular ideological narrative but as an interconnected discursive system in which historical memory, representations of external threats, moral obligation, and citizenship norms mutually reinforce one another. These elements collectively function to normalize resistance-oriented citizenship and institutionalize a geopolitical worldview in which national identity is continuously shaped through perceptions of external hostility and the moral necessity of national defense. These elements work together to produce a coherent ideological framework that shapes how students understand their role as citizens. This supports the argument by (Zembylas., 2022) that education plays a crucial role in “affective and political formation,” particularly in contexts of conflict.

4. Negotiated Nationalism and Youth Agency

Despite the strong presence of state-driven narratives, the analysis also reveals evidence of negotiation and reinterpretation among students. While civic education promotes a unified vision of nationalism, recent studies suggest that young Iranians do not passively internalize these messages. Instead, many young Iranians critically negotiate official narratives of nationalism by

selectively reinterpreting themes of resistance, sovereignty, and national loyalty through exposure to global media, digital communication platforms, and transnational cultural interactions. This process produces more fluid and hybrid forms of national identity that simultaneously reflect attachment to national values and engagement with broader global perspectives. (Shahrokni., 2022; Khosravi., 2021).

For instance, exposure to global media and digital platforms has introduced alternative perspectives that challenge official narratives. As (Dabashi, 2021) argues, “Iranian youth navigate multiple identity frameworks, balancing national loyalty with global awareness”. This creates a tension between state-imposed and individually negotiated forms of nationalism.

This finding aligns with broader trends in contemporary civic education research, which emphasize the role of agency and critical thinking in shaping political identity (Sant et al., 2020; Isin & Ruppert, 2020). It also suggests that defensive nationalism, while institutionally reinforced, remains a dynamic and contested construct rather than a fixed outcome.

5. Integrating Findings: Toward a Theory of Educated Resistance

Taken together, these findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how nationalism is constructed in contexts of geopolitical tension. The Iranian case demonstrates that civic education is not merely a neutral domain of knowledge transmission but a strategic site for ideological production. By embedding narratives of resistance and opposition

within educational practices, the state actively shapes the political subjectivity of its citizens.

At the same time, the presence of negotiated interpretations highlights the limits of state control and the importance of considering individual agency. This dynamic interaction between institutional ideological reproduction and individual reinterpretation forms the basis of what this study conceptualizes as educated resistance, namely a form of politically mediated identity formation in which citizens internalize, negotiate, and selectively reconstruct state-sponsored narratives of nationalism through educational experiences and broader socio-cultural engagement. Unlike traditional models of indoctrination, educated resistance acknowledges the complexity of identity formation in contemporary societies.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study extends existing literature in three key ways. First, it integrates insights from nationalism studies, discourse analysis, and civic education to provide a multi-dimensional framework for analysis. Second, it introduces the concept of defensive nationalism as a distinct and analytically useful category. Third, it highlights the role of education as a mediating space between geopolitical structures and everyday identity formation.

6. Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings have important implications for both academic research and educational policy. For scholars, the study underscores the need to move beyond dichotomous understandings of nationalism as either purely ideological or purely sociological. Instead, it

advocates for an integrated approach that considers the role of institutions, discourse, and agency.

For policymakers and educators, the study raises critical questions about the role of civic education in conflict contexts. While resistance-oriented civic education may function as an important mechanism for strengthening national cohesion, political solidarity, and sovereignty consciousness under conditions of geopolitical tension, its sustained emphasis on ideological opposition and external threat construction may also reduce opportunities for critical pluralism, intercultural dialogue, and more globally oriented forms of citizenship education. As recent research suggests, “education systems must balance national identity formation with global citizenship competencies” (OECD, 2021).

IV. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that civic education in Iran functions not merely as a pedagogical mechanism for transmitting civic knowledge, but as a strategic institutional space through which geopolitical tensions, ideological narratives, and national identity are systematically transformed into forms of defensive nationalism embedded within everyday understandings of citizenship and political belonging. Through a systematic analysis of educational discourse, the findings reveal that narratives of resistance, historical memory, and ideological opposition are deeply embedded within curricular and pedagogical practices. These elements collectively construct a form of citizenship that is not only

informed by national identity but also defined by a continuous awareness of external threats and the perceived necessity of safeguarding sovereignty.

Importantly, this research moves beyond simplistic interpretations of nationalism as mere state propaganda or passive ideological transmission. Instead, it highlights the dynamic and multi-layered nature of identity formation, where civic education functions as both a site of institutional influence and a space for individual negotiation. Although the Iranian state actively institutionalizes narratives of resistance and ideological loyalty through civic education, the findings reveal that students do not passively internalize these discourses. Instead, young citizens actively negotiate, reinterpret, and selectively reconstruct official narratives of nationalism through interaction with global media environments, digital communication networks, and broader socio-cultural transformations, thereby demonstrating the dynamic and contested nature of contemporary identity formation.

The introduction of defensive nationalism as an analytical framework represents a key contribution of this study. It offers a more precise lens for understanding how nationalism operates in contexts characterized by prolonged geopolitical tension, where the emphasis is on protection rather than expansion. In doing so, the study enriches existing theoretical discussions by situating nationalism within the intersection of education, discourse, and international relations.

Ultimately, the findings underscore the critical role of education in shaping political subjectivity and national consciousness. They also

invite further research into how civic education can balance the demands of national identity formation with the need for critical engagement and global awareness. In an increasingly interconnected yet conflict-prone world, understanding these dynamics is essential for both scholarly inquiry and the development of more reflective and inclusive educational practices.

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