



Transformation of the Concept of Security in Constructivist Theory: From Negative to Positive and Sustainable Security (A Case Study of the Islamic Revolution of Iran)

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Scientific Research	Objective: This study seeks to develop an analytical framework to explain the threefold transformation of security, negative, positive, and sustainable, within constructivist theory. The central research question concerns how the progression from negative to positive and ultimately to sustainable security can be theoretically reconstructed as a continuum. Sustainable security is conceptualized as a third stage that accounts for the long-term continuity of security in revolutionary and non-Western contexts. The article further aims to demonstrate the achievement of sustainable security through normative institutionalization. The Islamic Revolution of Iran serves as a case study to validate this model.
Article history: Received: 2025-12-06 Received in revised form: 2026-02-25 Accepted : 2026-04-11 Available online: 2026-10-24	Research Method: This qualitative and analytical study is based on an analysis of the works of constructivist theorists as well as historical and political documents related to developments in Iran following the Islamic Revolution.
Keywords: Sustainable Security, Negative Security, Positive Security, Constructivism, Islamic Revolution of Iran.	Findings: The findings demonstrate that negative security is based on survival, threat deterrence, and the redefinition of the enemy. Positive security centers on social empowerment, trust, and the reconstruction of state-society relations. Sustainable security is realized when security norms are internalized within collective identity and reproduced through inter-subjective institutionalization. Analysis of post-revolutionary developments reveals a transition from reactive security to institutionalized and multilayered security.
	Conclusion: Sustainable security is not simply an additive combination of negative and positive security; instead, it represents a distinct quality arising from the normative internalization of security. The stage-based formulation advanced in this study contributes to the theoretical development of constructivist approaches in security studies. It offers a novel framework for analyzing the transformation of security in revolutionary and non-Western contexts. These findings may also serve as a foundation for comparative studies in other countries.

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Introduction

The intellectual shifts following the end of the Cold War and the intensification of globalization prompted international relations scholarship to move beyond purely material and state-centric approaches, placing greater emphasis on the influence of social structures, norms, and collective identities in shaping international politics. Within this context, constructivism, by foregrounding concepts such as culture, identity, and inter-subjectivity, enabled new approaches to reconceptualizing security at the international-system level (Reus-Smit, 2021 AD/1400 SH).

Consequently, security, like other political concepts, became a central focus of constructivist theorizing in international relations studies with scholars such as Alexander Wendt, Peter Katzenstein, Michael Barnett, and Emanuel Adler, are based on the assumption that the fundamental structures of international relations emerge from social structures and that changes in thinking about international relations can contribute to transformations in the global security environment. In other words, changes in actors' inter-subjective understandings of the structures of international relations lead to the redefinition of threats and interests and, consequently, to transformations in security patterns. By moving away from materialist and realist perspectives, this approach gives greater prominence to subjectivity and social interaction in explaining security-related actions. Whereas realists generally understand security within the framework of military threats posed by states, and liberals broaden its scope to include structural threats and non-state actors, constructivism, rather than defining "Threat" as a fixed category, emphasizes the social process through which something becomes constituted as a threat. This perspective enables cultural and identity-based categories to acquire new significance in the understanding of security, an aspect that had been overlooked in earlier theories (Onuf, 1998: 132-133). From the constructivist perspective, identity, norms, and culture not only define actors but also shape the behavioral and value frameworks of states and the international system (Farrell, 2002).

The central question of this study is how, within the framework of constructivist theory, the transformation of the concept of security from the negative stage to the positive stage and ultimately to sustainable security can be reconstructed as a continuum within the theory itself. In this study, negative, positive, and sustainable security is conceptualized as three successive stages in the historical and social transformation of the concept and practice of security in a revolutionary society such as the Islamic Republic of Iran. These stages are defined as follows:

- 1) Negative security: A focus on survival, threat deterrence, and the epistemology of fear;
- 2) Positive security: A focus on empowerment, social trust, and justice;

- 3) Sustainable security: The stable and long-term integration of both dimensions within the context of collective identity and the institutionalization of norms.

The principal objective of the study is to reconstruct this tripartite model within constructivist theory logically and to demonstrate the internal connections among its components on the basis of the concepts of identity, culture, and norms. In fact, the “Transformation of the concept of security” in this study does not refer to a comparative examination of constructivism and other theories of international relations; rather, it refers to an intra-theoretical reconstruction of the transformation of security within the conceptual framework of constructivism.

In summary, this article aims to demonstrate the analytical transition from negative to positive and ultimately to sustainable security within the logic of constructivism. The case study of the Islamic Revolution of Iran is utilized exclusively as an empirical test of the coherence of this analytical model. Thus, the study’s primary orientation is theoretical, emphasizing the development of a conceptual framework for security within constructivism rather than the simple application of theory to a historical case.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, the literature and the existing research gap are reviewed. The qualitative research method and analytical approach are then introduced. Subsequently, the theoretical foundations of the research are outlined, with particular attention to the principles and major perspectives of constructivism. The third section analyzes the three dimensions of security, negative, positive, and sustainable, while the fourth section presents findings from the analysis of these dimensions in the context of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. The article concludes by summarizing the overall findings and highlighting the theoretical and practical implications of constructivism for understanding the transformation of the concept of security.

1. Research Background

A systematic review of the theoretical literature indicates that, within the constructivist framework, security is regarded as a social phenomenon shaped by norms, values, and collective identities. Numerous studies in this field have examined the theoretical dimensions of security from a constructivist perspective.

For example, Abbasi Ashlaghi and Farrokhi (2009 AD/1388 SH) have proposed an analytical framework for security in international relations based on constructivism, while Mousavifar and Forati (2023 AD/1402 SH) have analyzed social crises arising from generational divides using a constructivist approach. In international scholarship, Newman (2001 AD), through the introduction of the concept of human security, has emphasized the individual as the referent object

of security. Karacasulu and Ozgurün (2007 AD) have examined the contribution of constructivism to the transformation of security studies, emphasizing the role of identity and norms. Tsai (2009 AD) has analyzed the emergence of the concept of human security from a constructivist perspective and has regarded it as dependent on collective awareness and identity. Aria (2025 AD) has demonstrated that security is not an objective reality but rather a social phenomenon dependent on normative legitimacy.

In the field of studies related to post-revolutionary Iran, numerous studies have also addressed specific dimensions of security. For example, Eghbali et al. (2016 AD/1395 SH), focusing on the Persian Gulf region, examined the roles of Iran and the United States in shaping regional security structures. Ghasemi (2018 AD/1397 SH), in an article entitled "The Geopolitics of the Axis of Resistance and the National Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran Based on the Discourse of the Islamic Revolution," demonstrates how the discourse of the Islamic Revolution has contributed to strengthening the Axis of Resistance against global hegemony. Allahyari et al. (2021 AD/1400 SH), drawing on Mitzen's theory of ontological security, have explained the identity conflict between Western culture and the culture of the Islamic Revolution. Similarly, Havasi and Nemati (2024 AD/1403 SH), in their study, have identified the ethnic crises of the first decade of the Revolution as a factor contributing to the weakening of national security.

Overall, a review of these studies indicates that although previous research has addressed various dimensions of security, most studies have been fragmented and one-dimensional, with each focusing exclusively on a particular aspect of security, whether military, cultural, or social.

Consequently, relatively few studies have attempted to examine the transformation of security across three successive levels, from negative security to positive security and ultimately to sustainable security, within the theoretical framework of constructivism. Most previous studies have been limited to explaining threats and the deterrent dimensions of security (negative security) or certain social and identity-related dimensions (positive security). In contrast, the third stage, namely, the transition to sustainable security, which incorporates both the deterrent and empowering dimensions of security within a historical and social context, has received comparatively little attention.

Accordingly, the principal gap in previous research lies in the absence of a comprehensive framework for explaining the security continuum from its negative and positive stages to its ultimate sustainable form. The innovation of the present study therefore lies in the fact that, drawing on constructivist theory, it not only theoretically reconstructs and analyzes the tripartite conception of security but also employs the experience of the Islamic Revolution of Iran as a case study

to test, validate, and enrich this analytical framework. In this way, rather than applying a theory to a historical event, the study seeks to demonstrate the utility and development of the theory for explaining security dynamics in an empirical context. Accordingly, the novelty of the study does not lie in comparing constructivism with other theories, but in proposing a three-stage framework internal to constructivism itself and empirically testing it in a non-Western context.

2. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a theoretical–analytical orientation. Its primary objective is to explain the transformation of the concept of security through a three-stage model, negative security, positive security, and sustainable security, within the theoretical framework of constructivism and to assess its applicability through a case study of the Islamic Revolution of Iran.

Data were collected through documentary research and involved a systematic examination of constructivist theoretical texts, the works of scholars in this field, and historical and political documents related to the Islamic Revolution of Iran. In this study, qualitative research refers to a focus on interpreting meanings, concepts, and social constructs within their historical and discursive context. Accordingly, conceptual analysis is formulated on the basis of qualitative interpretive approaches in the social sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017), while the case study is designed with reference to the explanatory case-study model (Yin, 2014). The theoretical level of analysis is the international system; however, the case study is examined at the state-society level as part of the inter-subjective structure of the international system. The case study of the Islamic Revolution of Iran is not treated as a shift in the level of analysis but rather as an empirical example at the same theoretical level, through which the reproduction of norms, identities, and security patterns within a revolutionary society is analyzed. In other words, although the case study is examined at the domestic level, the analysis focuses on inter-subjective structures that, within constructivist logic, are regarded as part of the structure of the international system.

The data-analysis method is based on conceptual analysis and interpretive case-study analysis. In this study, conceptual analysis refers to the logical and intra-theoretical reconstruction of the concepts of negative, positive, and sustainable security within the constructivist framework. In this context, the first two stages, negative security and positive security, have been extracted and re-constructed through a critical rereading of the security literature and the works of theorists such as Bill McSweeney, Rita Floyd, and Paul Roe, each of whom emphasizes an aspect of liberation from material threats and, subsequently, the redefinition of security in identity-based and normative terms.

By contrast, the third stage, termed “Sustainable Security,” represents a theoretical extension and formulation proposed by the authors of the present study. It has been developed on the basis of constructivist logic and the linkage among identity, norms, and the inter-subjective reproduction of security, and seeks to explain the transition from a reactive condition of security to a condition in which security is internalized and reproduced.

The case study of the Islamic Revolution of Iran is subsequently employed to test the coherence and applicability of this conceptual model. Accordingly, the “Stages of security transformation” (negative, positive, and sustainable) belong to the theoretical level of the model and should not be conflated with the “Stages of research implementation.” Therefore, the research process is organized into three methodological steps:

- 1) Deriving a conceptual framework for the transformation of security from constructivist literature and critical security studies;
- 2) Reconstructing the three-stage theoretical model of security at the conceptual level;
- 3) Applying the model to the case study of the Islamic Revolution of Iran through the analysis of official and historical documents.

This distinction demonstrates that the stages of the research concern the research process itself. In contrast, the threefold conception of security is formulated as an independent theoretical model at the analytical level. Since the present study is based on documentary and library research, it does not involve human subjects and therefore does not raise ethical considerations related to human participants. Nevertheless, the principles of academic integrity and accurate citation have been observed.

3. Theoretical Framework: Constructivist Theory

Constructivism, as a theory of international relations, represents a fundamental shift away from traditional paradigms that emphasize material capabilities and state-centric models, such as realism and liberalism, toward a framework that recognizes the role of ideas, norms, identities, and social constructs in shaping international interactions. Developed by scholars such as Alexander Wendt, this approach provides analytical tools for examining how such social constructs influence the behavior of international actors and the development of global norms. At the core of constructivism is the proposition that international relations are not governed solely by static material balances of power but are dynamically shaped by inter-subjective social realities. These realities include shared beliefs, collective identities, and cultural contexts that guide the behavior of states and their foreign-policy decisions. According to Wendt, the structures of human asso-

ciation are fundamentally determined by shared ideas rather than material forces (Pratisti et al., 2020: 65).

This proposition underscores constructivism's emphasis on the role of identity and culture in international relations and stands in contrast to traditional theories that emphasize the predominance of hard power (Agius, 2025). Indeed, one of the most important contributions of constructivism is its emphasis on the role of norms in shaping state behavior. Norms function as shared understandings that guide actions and influence relations among actors.

Finnemore and Sikkink even distinguish between "Constitutive Norms," which determine what actors are and what they are capable of doing, and "Regulative Norms," which constrain actions once an identity has been established (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001).

Constructivism also reconceptualizes states' interests and identities as fluid rather than fixed. The interaction between domestic political perspectives and international pressures demonstrates how identities can be constructed, transformed, and even challenged (İpek, 2013). For example, the constructivist approach has proven highly effective in analyzing how collective identities shape diplomatic alliances and conflicts, as illustrated by Turkey's support for Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This case demonstrates that Turkey's actions were influenced not only by strategic interests but also by shared cultural identities and historical ties with Azerbaijan (Khairunisa, 2022).

The role of non-state actors is another fundamental dimension emphasized by constructivism. This approach expands the analysis of international relations beyond states to include non-governmental organizations, transnational networks, and international institutions that promote norms and values (Weber, 2013: 516-543). This broader perspective clarifies how non-state actors can influence state behavior and reshape the policy-making landscape by promoting particular ideas and norms.

Furthermore, constructivism emphasizes a more comprehensive understanding of agency within the international system. In contrast to perspectives that view states as passive recipients of international norms, constructivism argues that states actively participate in the construction and reconstruction of social realities and norms. By taking into account the dynamics of identity and contextual influences on state behavior, this approach adds complexity to traditional theories of international relations and demonstrates that states can reconstruct their identities through interaction within international institutions and contribute to the development of global norms (Jackson, 2024: 37-48).

The distinction between "What is" and "What ought to be" is highlighted as one of the central issues in constructivist analysis. Constructivism recognizes the

normative dimensions that influence political action and encourages researchers to consider not only the current state of the international system but also what can or ought to exist. This critical reflection has important implications for understanding global issues such as human rights, environmental governance, and conflict resolution, encouraging researchers to examine how norms evolve and how they can be promoted or challenged in different contexts (Madubuko, 2024: 115-156).

It is noteworthy that constructivism has also faced challenges and criticisms, particularly regarding its empirical applications and the explanation of its foundational principles. Critics argue that the approach often assumes that norms lead to compliance while overlooking the power dynamics involved in the implementation of those norms. In addition, some scholars have pointed out that the Eurocentric assumptions of constructivism may marginalize non-Western perspectives and offer a limited conception of normativity that overlooks local adaptations (Wang-Kaeding, 2015).

In response to these criticisms, constructivist theorists have revisited their approaches and emphasized the importance of reflexivity and contextualization in their analyses. Consequently, constructivism has emerged in international relations as a theoretical framework that emphasizes the centrality of social constructs such as norms, identities, and cultures in shaping the behavior of states and non-state actors.

Accordingly, constructivism provides a theoretical basis for reconceptualizing security not as the “Absence of Threat,” but as a “Dynamic and Social Construct” produced through the interaction of identity, culture, and inter-subjective structures. In light of these theoretical foundations, the present study seeks to reconstruct the threefold conception of security, negative, positive, and sustainable, within the constructivist framework and to demonstrate how this theoretical model can enrich our understanding of security at both the domestic and international levels.

4. Results

4.1. Negative Security

In this study, security is analyzed not merely as a material condition, but as an interpretive and socially constructed category. Nevertheless, negative security is generally associated with the concept of “Traditional Security” in international relations (Wolfers, 1952). Negative security is grounded in an “Epistemology of Fear,” an approach that focuses on identifying threats and resorting to violence, ultimately shaping the ways in which security is understood and practiced. This epistemology, through the attempt to comprehend and objectify death, makes

it possible to identify threats and enemies (Huysmans, 1998). In fact, this constitutes security as survival (McSweeney, 2009). Within negative security, the “Knowledge of Death” becomes a universal concept through which efforts to overcome or postpone death acquire meaning. The identification of dangers and enemies, which emerge through the materialization of death, provides a basis for legitimizing and justifying the use of force. By focusing on violence, this approach restricts the recognition and acknowledgment of diverse actors, since the monopoly on violence remains in the hands of the state in order to prevent its proliferation. Such a negative and decontextualized conception of security came to dominate the discourse of the twentieth century, particularly during the Cold War (Gjørv, 2012: 839-840).

This negative conception of security maintains its dominance through a particular logic according to which the state is responsible for providing security to other actors. This concept is known as “Trickle-down Security,” whereby the values and interests of society concerning security are incorporated within the framework of the globalized state (Gjørv & Rottem, 2004). In this context, the concept of human security has emerged and has also received attention from constructivist scholars. As McSweeney points out, advocates of the narrow conception of human security focus on “Freedom from Fear” as a guiding principle and, in practice, operate largely within the framework of negative security, a concept rooted in fear, danger, and death. Peter Burgess likewise argues that “Human security is often defined negatively in terms of threats, risks, or violations of rights, rather than in its positive sense.” (Burgess et al., 2007: 68)

This conception of human security is evident in state-centered approaches, such as the doctrine and documents concerning the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Within this approach, the individual is regarded as a passive actor, while the state is viewed as an active actor that employs instruments such as military intervention to ensure human security. This does not mean that state intervention is always negative; in some circumstances, such intervention is necessary. Therefore, negative security should not be regarded as synonymous with traditional security. These perspectives are also present in critical security studies, such as the Copenhagen School, as well as in human security studies. For this reason, human security cannot be directly equated with positive security (Gjørv, 2012: 840-841).

Negative security does not fully enhance our understanding of security and insecurity across different contexts in which the use of force may have little role to play in providing security. In such contexts, humanitarian assistance, social activities (such as environmental, gender, identity-related, and other forms of action), or economic incentives may play a more effective role. Because of the dominance of the state within negative security, any potential security actor outside

the state is largely overlooked. This neglect limits our understanding of security perspectives and the processes through which security is produced by non-dominant actors, particularly non-state actors. In this regard, negative security can be understood as “Security from Threat,” while positive security can be understood as “Security as Empowerment.” This distinction between positive and negative security parallels Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between negative and positive liberty, that is, “Freedom From” and “Freedom to.” (Cherniss & Hardy: 2010)

Overall, negative security is generally associated with “Traditional Security,” which is defined on the basis of assumptions concerning the state and global security issues and relies on security instruments such as the military. This type of security refers to the absence of direct threats and dangers to individuals’ lives and freedom. Negative security focuses on preventing violence, war, and armed conflict and, in essence, entails maintaining peace and preventing the occurrence of violence and conflict. From this perspective, security is defined as an absence condition, in which no threats exist and individuals are protected from physical harm and external threats.

However, within the constructivist framework, a threat is not regarded as merely material or objective; rather, it is the product of actors’ perceptions and inter-subjective constructions. Accordingly, in this article, negative security is understood not merely as the physical absence of a threat, but as the absence of a “Legitimately and meaningfully perceived threat” within the normative and discursive structures of a political community. In other words, within this framework, negative security operates at the level of collective perceptions and understandings of threats, and the absence of a threat is realized when actors do not represent a particular phenomenon as a threat. In this sense, negative security approaches the inter-subjective level of analysis, where, in Alexander Wendt’s view, a threat derives not from the material nature of power itself, but from its social meaning.

4.2. Positive Security

In the previous section, we discussed negative security. However, not only is there an intuitive logic suggesting that security extends beyond what is embodied in the negative security approach, but there is also a growing body of literature addressing other dimensions of security (Gjørsv, 2012: 842). For example, some definitions of security emphasize peace of mind and empowerment rather than fear. The term “Security” derives from the Latin *securitas*, meaning freedom from anxiety or worry. Cicero understood it as the absence of anxiety, which is essential for the realization of a fulfilled life (P. H. Liotta & Owen, 2006: 87). Security is associated with a sense of safety and stability, particularly in the form

of routines and expectations, in the sense that we can rely on certain things in the future and develop our capacities accordingly. Thus, there is a parallel discussion to that of negative security in which security and its processes are considered a desirable “Good” not only for the state but also for various units, including individuals (Gjørsv, 2012: 842). This becomes increasingly evident, particularly when we observe that the latest security instrument, the military, demonstrates that negative security alone is incapable of reflecting actual needs. Depending on the context, practices, and values, increased insecurity may result more from neglecting the role of other actors than from recognizing their contribution to security dynamics.

Positive security extends beyond fear and the use of force. According to McSweeney, positive security is grounded in an empowering epistemology and creates secure spaces that strengthen capacities and capabilities. This type of security emphasizes the production of security and the preservation of fundamental and just values. Its primary foundation is trust. McSweeney points to the relationship between ontological security and trust, emphasizing that trust is a relationship formed through everyday routines. Such trust can range from parent-child relationships to collective trust within society. Everyday security is built upon trust in good governance, respect for the rule of law, cooperation, and an open society. Nils Bubandt likewise emphasizes the importance of social ties in creating and maintaining security (Gjørsv, 2012: 843).

McSweeney believes that positive security focuses on human needs and understands security as a comfortable and desirable condition. He states: “This human conception of security, manifested in the primary and fundamental relationship between human beings and the world around them, has profound implications for our understanding of international security and security policy.” (McSweeney, 2009: 15)

McSweeney bases his analysis on ontological security, or concern for everyday and human needs. In other words, routines and the reduction of chaos provide ontological security for individuals and communities and consequently generate positive security. In this respect, McSweeney’s concept of positive security is similar to human security.

Paul Roe likewise argues that positive security should not be restricted solely to individual needs but should also extend to states. He further emphasizes that the determination of positive security needs should be based on the values of justice. Roe also maintains that ontological security alone is insufficient, because routines can be shaped by relations with enemies and threats, which lead to negative security, as well as by relations with friends, which create supportive relationships (Roe, 2008).

Rita Floyd distinguishes between the “Highly Negative” conception of security advanced by Ole Wæver and the Copenhagen School, which focuses on securitization processes, and the “Highly Positive” conception of security developed by Ken Booth, Richard Wyn Jones, and the Welsh School, which views security as emancipation. Based on an assessment of the outcomes of an action relative to alternative options, Floyd calculates the “Value” of those outcomes and consequently examines their effects on security (Floyd, 2007: 337-338).

The efforts of Roe and McSweeney demonstrate that a multi-actor approach is appropriate for positive security, although each has focused on a particular level, individuals or states. Floyd continues to emphasize the state level, while the potential relationship between these levels has not yet been fully explored. Roe explicitly establishes a connection between the two levels, arguing that the “Promotion of human and minority rights” by states inevitably intertwines the security interests of both levels, namely states and individuals. However, he views this as a one-way process in which the state occupies a passive supportive position. Overall, these scholars have contributed to the development of the concept of positive security and argue that positive security should be shaped on the basis of human needs and the values of justice. They also maintain that positive security should extend to states and other institutions and that relationships and routines among different actors can contribute to the creation of positive security (Roe, 2008: 793).

Research on positive security addresses the questions of how, for whom, and through which institutions security is produced, while clearly identifying the values and contexts underlying security practices. An empowering epistemology broadens the scope of security practices beyond violent methods and brings non-state actors into the field, while also demonstrating the diversity of security practices. Positive security bears considerable similarity to the literature on human security, in which individuals and communities are recognized as primary security actors. These actors seek security not only to avoid threats but also to strengthen their own capacities. In this process, security practices are often separated from the violent methods employed by states, which are based on the use of force. Many of these practices are nonviolent and include humanitarian, developmental, economic, educational, environmental, and social-network initiatives (Hough, 2008). Even when states are unable to provide security, individuals and communities often resort to nonviolent means of securing themselves by drawing upon the resources available to them.

In this respect, negative security is generally associated with force, whereas positive security is often based on nonviolent methods. Understanding both positive and negative security requires a three-stage process:

- 1) Identifying the actors and their capacities to produce security;
- 2) Examining the epistemology underlying security practices; and
- 3) Analyzing the values associated with these practices.

The first stage emphasizes identifying the various capacities of actors to produce security, while the second involves analyzing the epistemological assumptions underlying security practices. Finally, the third stage concerns determining the appropriate conception of justice, with the aim of defining justice in a manner that strengthens empowerment across a broad range of actors and moves toward a principle of democracy and empowerment (Gjørsv, 2012: 845).

Thus, positive security can be understood as the creation of conditions in which individuals are not only protected from threats but are also capable of realizing their potential and living a life of quality. This type of security focuses on meeting human needs, social justice, human rights, and sustainable development, while creating conditions that enable individuals to participate actively in society, exercise their rights, and enjoy equal opportunities. Within this framework, security is defined not merely as the absence of threats but as an active and empowering condition in which individuals experience well-being and security.

4.3. Sustainable Security

Sustainable security refers to the simultaneous realization of negative and positive security in a manner that is continuously maintained over time. In fact, sustainable security is a condition in which patterns of negative and positive security have become institutionalized at the level of inter-subjective structures and are sustained over time through normative reproduction.

This comprehensive and multidimensional approach addresses the root causes of conflicts and crises and seeks sustainable solutions to resolve them. Sustainable security emphasizes the importance of international cooperation, economic development, social justice, and environmental protection and is regarded as a dynamic and long-term process requiring the active participation of all stakeholders. This approach redefines security in today's globalized world, where traditional threats are no longer the sole focus of security and where well-being, development, and the protection of civilians also receive significant attention. Although military capabilities are essential for states, diplomacy and development can provide more cost-effective options for preventing crises and managing common challenges more effectively.

Sustainable security also addresses emerging global threats such as terrorism, poverty, climate change, energy insecurity, and food insecurity. It emphasizes the need for an integrated approach to foreign policy and national security. This new approach introduces the concepts of collective and human security and

focuses on balancing the three principal instruments of foreign policy, defense, diplomacy, and development (CAP, 2009).

Sustainable security clearly reveals the profound and reciprocal relationship between development and security. The absence of development constitutes one of the principal causes of instability and insecurity in different societies and makes comprehensive and global approaches to addressing security challenges imperative. Accordingly, sustainable security emphasizes the need to focus simultaneously on the security of states and the security of people. This approach goes beyond traditional perspectives by paying particular attention to human security. This concept has emerged from interdisciplinary analyses in the fields of international relations, economics, development, and conflict. It specifically addresses fundamental individual freedoms grounded in human needs and psychological security.

Within this framework, the distinction between national security and human security is clear; however, despite being conceptually distinct, the two are fully compatible and can be aligned with one another. National security primarily focuses on protecting states and their capacity to confront external threats. In contrast, human security emphasizes individual security and examines existing challenges from the perspective of individuals and communities. These two levels of security are simultaneously interconnected, such that national security cannot be sustainably achieved without attention to human security. The primary objective of human security extends beyond state boundaries and directly addresses the management of threats that endanger human life and dignity domestically, externally, and at the transnational level.

Similarly, sustainable security requires an integrated approach that actively addresses a range of issues, including poverty, climate change, and social and political challenges, while seeking comprehensive and lasting solutions to ensure security for all (Smith, 2008). Sustainable security entails strengthening states' capacities to confront non-traditional, transnational, and regional security threats, as well as enhancing cooperation among multiple stakeholders. In practice, it provides a framework for the participation of non-state actors, such as the private sector, civil society organizations, the international community, and local communities. Sustainable security encompasses various domains, including climate security, food security, and economic security, among others (RSIS, 2024). Overall, sustainable security refers to the simultaneous and continuous realization of negative and positive security. In addition to traditional threats, it takes into account emerging global challenges such as poverty, climate change, and terrorism. This comprehensive approach emphasizes economic development, social justice, and international cooperation and seeks to create conditions in which

security can be sustainably ensured for individuals and communities. Sustainable security focuses on the reciprocal relationship between security and development and requires the active participation of all stakeholders.

5. Analysis

To empirically test the three-stage theoretical framework of the transformation of security in constructivism, it is necessary to examine a case study that can reveal the relationship between identity-based, cultural, and normative concepts and actual security processes. Accordingly, the Islamic Revolution of Iran has been selected as a prominent example of the transformation of security within a non-Western context. It represents a phenomenon in which security was elevated from the level of survival and threat to the level of meaning, identity, and social sustainability. The following analysis focuses on the three stages of negative, positive, and sustainable security. It examines the transformation of the understanding and realization of security in the experience of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this section, the experience of the Islamic Revolution of Iran is used as a case study to test the three-stage sequence of security transformation. This sequence does not imply that each stage completely replaces the preceding one; rather, each subsequent stage is built upon the previous stage, incorporates it, and develops it further.

5.1. The Islamic Revolution of Iran: The Manifestation of Negative Security in the Discourse of Survival and Resistance

At the stage of negative security, the Islamic Revolution of Iran can be understood as a direct response to a set of political, cultural, and security threats that had profoundly affected the individual and collective life of Iranian society during the Pahlavi era. This understanding of security is directly connected to what is known in international relations theories as “Traditional Security,” in which security is defined in terms of survival and focuses on identifying and repelling threats through the use of force (Wolfers, 1952; Huysmans, 1998; McSweeney, 2009). In other words, negative security draws upon an epistemology of fear, in which death and threat are assumed to be objective and identifiable phenomena, thereby legitimizing the use of force to eliminate them (Huysmans, 1998). From this perspective, the state is the primary security provider and possesses a monopoly over the use of force, while other actors are regarded as passive (Gjorv, 2012: 839-840). In pre-revolutionary Iran, the Pahlavi regime functioned as the principal source of threat and insecurity. Relying on the support of foreign powers, particularly the United States and certain Western governments, the regime had established extensive political and economic dependencies that seriously threatened national independence (Darabi, 2003 AD/1382 SH). Domestically, institutions such as

SAVAK functioned not merely as intelligence agencies but also as instruments of widespread repression that undermined citizens' personal and political security through the arrest, torture, execution, and elimination of political opponents (Shahedi, 2007 AD/1386 SH: 631-670).

From the perspective of negative security, this situation represented a clear instance of "Security as Survival," in which Iranian society perceived itself as being under constant threat of political, cultural, and even physical death. In addition, by weakening cultural and religious values and norms, promoting a Western lifestyle, and restricting the role of religion in the public sphere, the Pahlavi regime generated a form of identity insecurity that threatened the cultural and social security of the population (Najafzadeh et al., 2016 AD/1395 SH).

Accordingly, the Islamic Revolution was a response to circumstances in which security in its negative sense, that is, freedom from threat and coercion, had become a vital necessity. From a constructivist perspective, therefore, the Iranian people's response to this situation was not merely a material or political reaction; rather, it was shaped by a set of meaning-giving and identity-forming norms. Concepts such as "Martyrdom," "Independence," and the "Islamic Ummah" became normative mechanisms for the reproduction of security within the revolutionary discourse (Ahmadpour, 2024 AD/1403 SH).

These concepts generated a form of "Normative Security" by fostering a sense of belonging, collective commitment, and legitimacy for resistance against threats. In doing so, they moved security beyond the level of mere survival and connected it to the levels of meaning and identity. In other words, the Islamic Revolution demonstrated that security derives not only from the material power of the state but also from the internalization of values and norms that mobilize collective action toward the preservation of national and religious identity.

Following the victory of the Revolution, as emphasized by the concept of negative security, the focus on repelling threats and safeguarding survival remained prominent. The confrontation with the Nojeh coup attempt (Sepehr, 2010 AD/1389 SH), the struggle against domestic armed groups such as the Mojahedin-e Khalq (Nazari et al., 2024 AD/1403 SH), and efforts to contain separatist movements in border regions were clear examples of the continuation of negative security during the early years of the Islamic Republic.

The culmination of this approach emerged during the imposed Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988 AD/1359-1367 SH). During this period, security was defined almost entirely in terms of survival and the repulsion of the enemy, while the defense of the borders and the existence of the political system became the primary objectives (Amou et al., 2023 AD/1402 SH). Indeed, as McSweeney reminds us, negative security is fundamentally concerned with "Knowing and Postponing Death,"

(McSweeney, 2009) and in the Iranian experience, this meaning was manifested in resistance and perseverance in the face of foreign aggression.

Another important characteristic of negative security in the context of the Islamic Revolution was mass mobilization and the active participation of the people. Millions of people became involved on the battlefronts and in various spheres of defense, demonstrating that within the revolutionary discourse, negative security was not confined to the state but became a collective project for the preservation of survival (Motaharnia, 1997 AD/1376 SH).

This development is consistent with existing critiques of the negative-security literature, which emphasize that a state-centered conception of security renders non-state actors passive (Gjørsv, 2012: 840-841). In Iran, however, a different experience of negative security emerged: the people themselves entered the arena as active agents of negative security and the concept of “Trickle-down Security” (Gjørsv & Rottem, 2004) was, in a sense, redefined in a manner whereby people were not passive recipients but direct security actors.

It can therefore be concluded that negative security played a central role in the Islamic Revolution of Iran both during the Pahlavi era, as a response to political, cultural, and security threats, and in the post-revolutionary years, as a means of defending against internal and external threats, particularly the imposed war. This experience constitutes a clear illustration of what theorists of negative security describe in terms of the focus on survival, the repulsion of threats, and the legitimization of the use of force (Wolfers, 1952; Huysmans, 1998; Gjørsv, 2012). Thus, the experience of negative security in the Islamic Revolution of Iran is not merely an expression of “Security as Survival”; it also demonstrates that even material phenomena such as war and threat can be reinterpreted within a social and normative framework. This experience showed that negative security can transcend the state level and become a collective, popular project, a development that laid the groundwork for the transition from a discourse of survival toward empowering security grounded in social trust, the concept known in the theoretical literature as “Positive Security.”

5.2. The Islamic Revolution of Iran and the Transition to Positive Security: From Physical Survival to Social Flourishing

With the victory of the Islamic Revolution, positive security emerged as one of the fundamental pillars of politics and society in the new Iran. Unlike negative security, which focuses primarily on eliminating threats and ensuring physical survival, positive security emphasizes creating conditions for growth, well-being, human dignity, and social empowerment. At the theoretical level, positive security represents what recent security literature has described as a transition from an

epistemology of fear to an empowering epistemology (Gjerv, 2012: 842).

This perspective views security not merely as the absence of threats, but as the presence of trust, stability, and opportunities for the realization of human capabilities. Similarly, McSweeney conceptualizes positive security in terms of creating safe spaces, strengthening capabilities, and establishing social and ontological trust (McSweeney, 2009: 15). This theoretical transformation found a clear manifestation in the experience of the Islamic Revolution. The Revolution's central slogans, such as "Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic," referred not merely to liberation from external and internal threats, but also conveyed a deeper aspiration to provide an environment conducive to the individual and collective flourishing of the people.

The referendum on the Islamic Republic held in April 1979 and the numerous elections conducted in subsequent years indicated that the people had moved from a passive position, as conceptualized within negative security, to the position of active security agents (Nemati et al., 2022 AD/1401 SH). This broad participation reflects precisely what the literature on positive security emphasizes: security is produced not merely "For the People," but "By the People" through their active participation (Roe, 2008: 793).

From a constructivist perspective, positive security in the Islamic Republic was, in fact, the product of a transformation in collective identity and norms. The revolutionary discourse redefined security not merely as the preservation of survival, but as the manifestation of religious, justice-oriented, and people-centered values. Within this framework, "Mutual trust between the state and the nation," "Social Responsibility," and "Public Service" functioned as security-producing norms and constituted the theoretical foundations of positive security. In the social and economic spheres as well, numerous manifestations of positive security can be identified in the Islamic Revolution. The institution of Construction Jihad established with the aim of developing rural areas and alleviating deprivation, represents a clear example of creating positive security through development and social justice. By drawing upon popular capacities, this institution developed infrastructure that itself became part of the ontological security of rural populations, as it brought greater stability and predictability to their everyday lives (Deputy Directorate for Planning and Programming, 2001 AD/1379 SH).

Similarly, the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, through its support for vulnerable groups, represented a clear manifestation of attention to human security, a form of security grounded not in coercion, but in meeting basic needs, justice, and human dignity (Ghanbari et al., 2016 AD/1395 SH: 142-144). Along the same lines, the "Basij" popular mobilization was not merely a military force; it also functioned as a socio-cultural institution that realized the empowerment

dimension of security through activities ranging from literacy programs to development projects (Moradzadeh, 2009 AD/1388 SH).

In light of theories of positive security, what occurred in the Islamic Revolution can be understood as a transition from security as the “Absence of Threat” to security as the “Possibility of Flourishing.” Social trust, which McSweeney identifies as a central element of positive security, was manifested in the discourse and emerging structures of the Islamic Republic. This trust assured people that their participation and efforts toward social justice and development were recognized and valued. This corresponds to what Rita Floyd identifies in her discussion of positive and negative security as the distinction between security based on fear (negative) and security based on emancipation and justice (positive) (Floyd, 2007: 337-338).

Overall, the Islamic Revolution, by moving beyond the framework of negative security, elevated positive security to a national and social level. During this period, security no longer meant merely defense against an enemy; rather, it meant ensuring conditions for active popular participation, development, social justice, and human dignity. This experience demonstrates how a political-social transformation can constitute a practical manifestation of theories of positive security and establish a connection between theoretical debates and realities on the ground. At the same time, the Islamic Revolution’s experience, by establishing normative foundations of justice, trust, and participation, paved the way for the transition to the third stage, namely sustainable security, a stage in which security is sustained through development, culture, and social institutions.

5.3. The Islamic Revolution of Iran and the Transition toward Sustainable Security

The combination of negative and positive security within the concept of “Sustainable Security” can be clearly observed in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Within the framework of constructivist theory, sustainable security is not merely a continuation of hard security; rather, it is the result of the internalization of norms, the institutionalization of social trust, and the integration of the material and ideational dimensions of security (Buzan & Hansen, 2009: 35; Wendt, 1999: 278).

In other words, sustainable security emerges when a society is able to establish a balance between repelling hard threats (the negative-security stage) and creating sustainable foundations for development, justice, and collective identity (the positive-security stage) (Gjørsv, 2012: 843). In the experience of the Islamic Republic, this form of security, as the third stage of security transformation, represented a conscious effort to institutionalize the combination of survival and well-being within a religious–national identity.

From a constructivist perspective, these efforts were not merely institutional

in nature; they reflected the emergence of a form of “Collective Security Identity” in which security was defined not in opposition to the other, but through the continuity of revolutionary values and cultural independence. In this regard, the establishment of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij popular mobilization played a dual role. On the one hand, they served as defensive and deterrent instruments against military threats and international terrorism; on the other hand, over time they developed into socio-cultural and constructive institutions that played roles in relief efforts, the reconstruction of war-affected areas, literacy programs, and social participation (Ahmadi Sepehr Kheyber, 2000 AD/1399 SH; Moradzadeh, 2009 AD/1388 SH).

Meanwhile, local institutions such as the Islamic city and village councils and popular social organizations, particularly after the 1990s, contributed to the emergence of a form of endogenous and normative security by strengthening social participation and increasing political legitimacy (Bazi & Hedayati, 2017 AD/1396 SH), a form of security that emerged from trust and social participation rather than from state control alone (Roe, 2008: 793). This process can be understood as a constructivist step toward institutionalizing collective values and redefining the state-society relationship within a normative framework.

Sustainable security in the Islamic Republic was not confined to the political or military sphere but also expanded into the scientific, economic, and cultural domains. One important dimension of this security was technological and scientific independence, which was pursued during the decades following the Revolution. Investment in defense industries, medicine, nuclear technologies, and nanotechnology represents an example of this approach, because technological capacity and scientific self-reliance create a layer of structural security that enhances resilience against external pressures (Miremadi, 2016: 98).

These advances contributed to the development of a form of ontological trust within Iranian society, that is, confidence in the continuity of social order and the capacity for survival without external dependence. Within the same framework, attention to social justice and balanced development also constituted an integral component of sustainable security. Institutions such as the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation and the Mostazafin Foundation not only served welfare functions but also, at the normative level, contributed to the reproduction of the system’s social meaning and legitimacy (Ghanbari et al., 2016 AD/1395 SH).

This model, as Floyd argues, elevates security from the level of fear and threat to that of emancipation, justice, and flourishing (Floyd, 2007). Nevertheless, the full realization of sustainable security in the Islamic Republic of Iran has been accompanied by challenges, including economic sanctions, geopolitical pressures, and other difficulties (Ghorbani Sepehr & Ebrahimi, 2023 AD/1402 SH). These

challenges demonstrate that sustainable security, in its constructivist sense, is a dynamic and continually reconstructed process rather than a fixed condition. Overall, sustainable security in the Islamic Republic of Iran represents the integration of hard and soft security. On the one hand, it relies on defensive capabilities, deterrence, and the preservation of national independence; on the other hand, through the expansion of social justice, institutional trust, scientific development, and cultural participation, it has achieved a degree of social and ideational sustainability.

This hybrid model demonstrates that, within the constructivist framework, sustainable security is not merely a product of material power; rather, it rests upon the normative, identity-based, and cultural foundations of society. Thus, security in the Islamic Republic has progressed from the level of survival and threat prevention to the level of the reproduction of meaning, identity, and norms, a concept that can be understood within constructivism as the ultimate stage of security transformation, namely “Sustainable Security.”

Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of reconstructing and explaining the three-stage transformation of the concept of security, from negative to positive and subsequently to sustainable security, within the theoretical framework of constructivism. The study sought to demonstrate how key constructivist concepts, namely identity, culture, and norms, establish the internal connection among these stages and reconceptualize security not as a static and material phenomenon, but as a dynamic and social process. The Islamic Revolution of Iran was employed as a case study not as the primary subject of the research, but as an instrument for validating the theoretical framework, thereby demonstrating the coherence of the three-stage model within a real historical-social context.

The findings of this study demonstrate that, within the constructivist framework, the transformation of the concept and practice of security can be reconstructed as three successive stages, not merely as three parallel levels: the stage of negative security (survival and resistance), the stage of positive security (trust and empowerment), and the stage of sustainable security (the long-term integration of identity, culture, and deterrence). At the stage of negative security, the Islamic Revolution, as a response to the threats posed by the Pahlavi regime and external pressures, redefined security from a normative perspective and demonstrated that even phenomena such as war and mass mobilization are rooted in social constructs such as “Martyrdom” and “Independence.” The transition to positive security, through institutions such as Jihad-e Sazandegi and the Basij popular mobilization, elevated security from the absence of threats to the possibility of

flourishing and social justice and institutionalized mutual state-nation trust as a key norm. Ultimately, sustainable security in the Islamic Republic, through the integration of defensive capabilities with cultural and scientific development, transformed security into a long-term, identity-oriented project. This integration not only answers the research question, namely, how security transforms within constructivism, but also fulfills the broader objective of the study: to provide a theoretical framework that moves beyond a Western-centric understanding of security and enriches it through a non-Western example such as Iran.

Compared with previous studies of security, the findings of this research offer several distinctive contributions. First, unlike classical approaches, such as realist or institutionalist theories, which define security primarily in terms of the state and survival, this study demonstrates that, within the constructivist framework, security is a social and multidimensional phenomenon that emerges through the interaction of people, the state, and culture. Second, at the theoretical level, the findings support the views of constructivists such as Wendt and McSweeney, who emphasize the social character of security and the role of norms in its production. At the same time, however, the article goes beyond these approaches by introducing the elements of “Endogenous Transformation” and “Collective Security Identity” into the theory. It demonstrates that security can be reproduced not only through interaction among states, but also within a society through the institutionalization of shared values. Accordingly, the contribution of this study to the security literature lies in presenting a three-stage empirical model for explaining the dynamics of security in revolutionary and post-revolutionary societies. Third, at the practical level, the findings of this research may also be useful to policymakers in the fields of national, cultural, and social security. A constructivist understanding of security, particularly under conditions of external pressure and economic sanctions, can contribute to a reconsideration of security policies by shifting the focus from purely hard-power defense toward strengthening social trust, distributive justice, and popular participation, elements that constitute the foundations of sustainable security.

Nevertheless, the present study has certain limitations. Its focus on the Islamic Revolution as a case study limits the extent to which the three-stage model can be fully generalized to other countries. Furthermore, empirical examination of quantitative indicators in the areas of human security, social justice, and institutional trust could complement this theoretical framework in future research. Future studies are therefore encouraged to test the three-stage model of security transformation in other cultural and civilizational contexts, such as Latin American societies, the Arab world, or East Asia, in order to clarify the comparative capacity of constructivist theory to explain indigenous patterns of security.

Moreover, an interdisciplinary approach drawing on political science, sociology, and cultural studies could be employed to examine the influence of discourses and media on the reproduction of security norms. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that security, in its constructivist sense, is a dynamic, social, and meaning-based process rather than merely a condition characterized by the absence of threats. The Islamic Revolution of Iran, by transforming security into a collective and normative project from the very first stage (negative security), demonstrated that security can be redefined on the basis of identity, trust, and justice. This finding not only opens a new horizon for theorizing about security but also demonstrates that security becomes sustainable when it is institutionalized both in the minds of people and within the institutions of society.

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According to the authors' declaration, this article has no conflict of interest.

Compliance with Research Ethics Principles

The authors observed ethical principles in conducting and publishing this scientific research, and this has been confirmed by all of the authors.

Data Availability Statement

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