

The Sectarian Factor In Iran's Regional Foreign Policy In The Post-Islamic Revolution Period

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ABSTRACT

The 1979 Islamic Revolution fundamentally transformed the conceptual foundations of Iran's foreign policy. In the post-revolution period, religious and ideological factors, particularly sectarian considerations, began to play a central role in shaping the country's regional policy. In the context of sectarian politicization in the Middle East, Iran aligned its foreign policy with Shi'a religious and cultural principles, viewing regional Shi'a communities as a key pillar in strengthening its geopolitical influence. This process not only defined the distinctive features of Iran's foreign policy but also influenced the formation of a new geopolitical balance in regional security.

Keywords: - Iran, Islamic Revolution, regional foreign policy, Middle East, sectarian factor, politicization of religion, geopolitical influence, religious-ideological factors, regional security, Shi'a crescent.

INTRODUCTION

In studying Iran's foreign policy, particularly its regional activities, the Shia branch of Islam—which has played a central role in shaping this policy—holds particular significance. Moreover, understanding Iran's historical, socio-political, and religious structure enables a deeper comprehension of the political-religious dynamics in the region. Iran's Shia identity became particularly pronounced with the establishment of the Safavid state in the 16th century. By adopting Shia Islam as the official state religion, the Safavids profoundly influenced not only the country's religious structure but also its political and social

systems. During this period, Shia Islam became the central pillar of state ideology, shaping a distinctive religious identity within Iran's territory.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution provided an opportunity to redefine and consolidate Iran's Shia identity. Following the revolution, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran was formulated on the basis of the "Islamic-Shia theories" advanced by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Recognized as a charismatic leader and the founder of the Shia Islamic system, Khomeini was able to align all political parties, socio-political actors, state institutions, and various segments of

society with his ideological vision, thereby setting the primary directions for both national and international policy. In the contemporary era, Iran's Shia identity has become a decisive factor not only in domestic politics but also in its regional and international relations.

As the ideological and intellectual leader of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini deepened the political theory of Shia Islam and developed it around the concept of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist). This theory emphasizes that to ensure justice within the state and society, maintain social order, and safeguard the continuity of Islamic values, political authority must reside in the hands of religious leaders. Through this framework, Khomeini provided a theoretical basis for establishing Iran's new political system in the post-revolutionary period.

The roots of the Velayat-e Faqih concept trace back to the historical and divine heritage of Shia Islam. Within the Shia tradition, Imams are considered divine leaders who provide guidance in both religious and worldly matters. However, with the occultation of the Twelfth Imam (Imam Mahdi), a leadership vacuum emerged in the Shia world, creating a gap in both religious and political authority. Khomeini argued that this gap should be filled by the faqihs, i.e., experts in Islamic jurisprudence. According to him, in the absence of the Imam, the faqihs possess the authority to guide the community.

This theory was implemented in practice and reflected in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, adopted in 1979. The Constitution designates the religious leader (Rahbar or Velayat-e Faqih) as the highest authority of the state, granting him extensive powers. These powers include control over the armed forces, oversight of the judicial system, determination of the general direction of state policy, and authority over key appointments. Consequently, Iran's governance model closely intertwines religious authority with state affairs.

Shia clerics play a central role in state administration, actively participating in both legislative and executive processes. This has become one of the primary factors defining the ideological and political character of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The principle of Velayat-e Faqih exerts significant influence not only on domestic policy but also on foreign policy, emerging as a central framework shaping Iran's regional and international political position.

To strengthen its relations with Shia groups in the Middle East, the Islamic Republic of Iran has consistently pursued various strategies. These strategies combine religious and ideological bonds with political and military cooperation. Tehran regards Shia communities as key instruments for expanding its geopolitical influence in the region, providing them with both ideological and practical support.

In Lebanon, one of Iran's most important allies is Hezbollah. Established in the 1980s with the support of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Hezbollah strengthened through Iran's ideological, financial, and military assistance, becoming a significant political and military force in Lebanon. Through Hezbollah, Iran has supported resistance activities against Israel and protected the interests of the Shia community in Lebanon. Simultaneously, Hezbollah has functioned as a mechanism for safeguarding Iran's strategic interests in Syria and other regional states.

In Iraq, particularly following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Iran's influence increased substantially. Tehran exerted significant control over Shia political parties and paramilitary groups. Among its closest allies is the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces), which operates actively in both political and military arenas. With Iran's support, these groups not only enhanced the political power of Iraq's Shia community but also reinforced Tehran's strategic position in the region.

In Yemen, Iran supports the Ansar Allah movement (Houthis). Iranian military and logistical assistance has transformed this movement into a major political-military force in the country's civil war. This support has been interpreted as a strategic move in geopolitical competition with Saudi Arabia and has contributed to the international escalation of the Yemeni conflict. Moreover, during the Syrian civil war, Iran supported the Bashar al-Assad regime to protect its regional interests. Tehran provided financial, military, and logistical aid to the Assad government and mobilized several Shia militia groups under Hezbollah's leadership. Iran's activities in Syria have been crucial for maintaining its influence in Lebanon and enhancing its capacity to counterbalance Israel politically and militarily. Although the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is formally based on the Constitution adopted in 1979, in practice, these principles often manifest through particular interpretations. The preamble of the Constitution frames the Iranian Revolution as "an action ensuring the victory of the

oppressed over the oppressors” and emphasizes that the role of the national army and the Revolutionary Guards extends beyond defending geographical borders to actively promoting God’s law and sovereignty worldwide.

Article 3, Clause 16 of the Constitution provides a clear articulation of principles guiding Iran’s foreign policy. According to this provision, foreign policy is to be organized based on Islamic criteria, adherence to the covenant of brotherhood among all Muslims, and the protection of the oppressed globally.

Furthermore, Article 11 of the Constitution emphasizes, as one of the main directions of Iran’s foreign policy, the issue of unity and cooperation among Muslim nations. This article directly references the Qur’an, specifically verse 92 of Surah Al-Anbiya, highlighting that Iran’s foreign policy is rooted in religious-ideological principles and prioritizes the reinforcement of political, cultural, and economic unity among Muslim countries.

Article 154 of the Constitution sets out universal values in foreign policy. It declares that “the Islamic Republic considers ensuring the welfare and happiness of humans in all societies as its primary objective, recognizing universal values such as independence, freedom, and justice as essential rights for all peoples. Simultaneously, it adheres to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Accordingly, the Islamic Republic declares its support for the legitimate global efforts of peoples who consider themselves oppressed and are struggling against colonialism.”

While these principles establish the ideological foundations of Iran’s foreign policy, in practice, they are often implemented in conjunction with geopolitical interests.

The enshrined principles indicate that the Islamic Republic of Iran seeks to create a legal and conceptual framework to ensure the stability and continuity of the Revolution both domestically and abroad. In particular, fostering cooperation with movements in other Muslim countries that resist social injustice and political oppression, supporting their positions internationally, and combating authoritarian regimes globally are defined as core directions of Iran’s foreign policy. In line with this objective, in 1980, the International Conference of Islamic Freedom Movements was held in Tehran, and the Supreme Coordination Council of Foreign Islamic

Revolutions was established. Additionally, the establishment of institutions such as the Permanent Hajj Services Committee, the International Congress of Friday Imams, and the International Islamic Propagation Bureau demonstrates that Iran’s foreign policy has been shaped on religious and spiritual foundations.

Consequently, just as the internal political principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran are oriented toward Islamic values and the struggle against social injustice, its foreign policy is likewise shaped in the same ideological spirit. This is clearly reflected in the views of Imam Khomeini, who emphasized in one of his speeches that the Islamic Revolution was not confined to the national level, stating, “Our revolution is not only for Iran but must serve as a source of hope for all oppressed peoples.”

Therefore, the principles enshrined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, together with the revolutionary leaders’ vision, manifest in a harmonious manner, serving as a key ideological foundation for shaping the country’s foreign policy. In this framework, foreign policy not only aims to protect national interests but also to safeguard the rights and interests of various peoples while aligning with principles of international justice. This approach, on the one hand, reflects Iran’s aspiration to position itself as a leading actor within the Muslim world, and, on the other hand, expresses a foreign policy course oriented toward promoting equality and justice in the international arena.

However, there is a significant divergence between the foreign policy principles outlined in the Iranian Constitution and the political practices observed in reality. While the Constitution emphasizes the formation of Islamic unity, opposition to colonialism and authoritarian regimes, and strengthening cooperation among Muslim states, Iran’s foreign policy often developed in directions contrary to these objectives.

For example, the slogan “Neither East nor West, only Islam,” promoted in the post-1979 revolutionary period, quickly lost its relevance. Iran engaged in a prolonged war with its neighboring Muslim state, Iraq, which contradicted not only the idea of Islamic unity but also the constitutional principles. Similarly, in the 1980s, Iran’s efforts to destabilize regimes in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, support demonstrations in Kuwait, and deploy the Islamic Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon led to severe diplomatic crises

with regional states. As a result, diplomatic relations were severed with Lebanon in 1984, Egypt in 1987, and Saudi Arabia in 1988. By the late 1980s, except for Syria and Libya, Iran's relations with most Arab states had become strained. Relations with Afghanistan also deteriorated following the Taliban's rise to power. Overall, until the political landscape in Iraq fundamentally changed in 2003, Iran's foreign policy prioritized expanding its regional influence and supporting ideologically aligned political systems over fostering Islamic unity. This approach often conflicted with constitutional principles and heightened mistrust and competition among Muslim states. Moreover, as seen in the Armenian case, Iran did not hesitate to cooperate with non-Muslim states to secure its national interests.

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq created a new geopolitical environment in the region. Iran seized this opportunity to reinterpret its claim to leadership in the Muslim world, framing it specifically as leadership of the Shiites. This deepened the Sunni-Shia divide in the Middle East and, in a sense, adapted the Safavid model to contemporary geopolitical conditions. By placing Shiism at the center of state ideology, Iran sought to strengthen its political and religious influence in the region. Although the historical centers of Shiism are located in Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, Iran endeavored to present itself as the political patron of this school of thought.

Thus, while Iran's foreign policy is theoretically grounded in Islamic unity and global justice, in practice it prioritizes national interests, regional influence, and the consolidation of Shia ideology. This approach, rather than reinforcing Iran's position in the Muslim world, has often led to isolation.

Through its foreign policy activities, Iran has effectively politicized Shiism, a belief system traditionally separated from politics, and transformed it into an instrument of statecraft. Following the occupation of Iraq, Iran became the patron of the Iraqi Shia, shifting the center of Shiism toward Iran. Today, it is no coincidence that Iran is the first country associated with Shiism globally.

Iran interpreted the onset of the "Arab Spring" within the framework of its foreign policy concept as an "Islamic awakening." Tehran sought to compare these movements to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, viewing them as mass movements directed against the West and the United States.

Accordingly, political changes in Egypt and Tunisia were positively assessed by Tehran as opportunities to expand its ideological influence in the region. However, as the uprisings spread to Syria, Iran's position shifted dramatically, given the potential activation of opposition forces within its own domestic political environment. Consequently, Tehran adopted a pragmatic policy, actively supporting the Assad regime in order to preserve the stability of the Ba'athist government in Syria. According to scholars, Iran's policy was driven not only by alliance obligations but also by its geostrategic interests. As Iranian-born political scientist Vali Nasr notes, "For Iran, the collapse of power in Damascus would not only have undermined Syria but would have dealt a serious blow to Shia influence throughout the region."

Moreover, the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad regime could pose strategic risks for Iran in three main respects. First, the "Shia Crescent" forming along the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut axis could be disrupted, thereby weakening Iran's geopolitical influence in the region. Second, the interruption of military and financial support channels to Hezbollah could significantly diminish Iran's position in Lebanon. Third, a reduction in Iranian influence in Syria could strengthen the geopolitical standing of regional rival states such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, potentially altering the balance of power in their favor. The collapse of Assad's regime would thus represent not only the loss of a key ally but also a serious blow to Iran's position as a regional power center. Scholars of Iranian politics emphasize that Iran interprets the crisis in Syria as a matter of "strategic depth," with the survival of the Assad regime seen as essential to maintaining regional influence and consolidating the "Shia Crescent" concept.

Furthermore, Iran has pursued its regional strategy not only through ideological and politico-military means but also via economic instruments. Specifically, by developing new energy and transport infrastructures, Tehran aims to secure an influential position within the regional economic system. In this context, the concerns of the Gulf states regarding Iran's policies are understandable. Their apprehension is linked to the possibility that the "Shia Crescent" concept could be implemented not only ideologically but also politically, militarily, and economically, motivating Gulf countries to strengthen strategic cooperation with Israel in defense of their security interests.

CONCLUSION

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's foreign policy was shaped by a combination of ideological, religious, and geopolitical factors. The Vilayat-i Faqih principle, grounded in the Shia school of thought, became a decisive framework not only for domestic governance but also for guiding the country's foreign policy. While Iran sought to present itself as the protector of the "oppressed" within the Muslim world, in practice, its priorities focused on expanding regional influence and consolidating control over Shia communities. This approach was particularly evident in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. The crisis in Syria was interpreted by Tehran as a matter of "strategic depth," with support for the Assad regime serving to strengthen the "Shia Crescent" concept. Simultaneously, Tehran leveraged economic tools, including energy and transport infrastructure, to expand its regional influence. However, a significant gap emerged between the principles of Islamic unity and justice enshrined in the Constitution and the policies implemented in practice. As a result, Iran's foreign policy often became a factor that heightened competition and mistrust among Muslim states rather than fostering unity.

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