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## Religion and Geopolitics in Iranian Foreign Policy

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## Religion and Geopolitics in Iranian Foreign Policy

Dr Edward Wastnidge<sup>25</sup>

Saudi Arabia and Iran, as key power brokers in the Middle East, continue to couch their bilateral relations in antagonistic terms as they chafe against each other in a battle for influence in the region. Characterising this rivalry in the purely sectarian terms of a deep-rooted Sunni-Shi'a enmity is simplistic and fails to understand the complex geopolitical dynamics at play. However, for the Islamic Republic, Iran's religious identity as the pre-eminent 'Shi'a power' gives it a means of influence and co-optation over its co-religionists. A key element of building such relationships is its transnational religious networks which form the basis of much of its cultural and religious diplomacy work.

### Religion, justice and contemporary Iranian foreign policy

Iran's commitment to the core revolutionary themes of 'justice', 'resistance', and the cultivation of Shi'a networks act as a continual thread in its foreign policy since the revolution. While high-level diplomacy relating to Iran is often cast in terms of its elected President and their own foreign policy outlooks,<sup>26</sup> this only tells part of the story, with the religious networks and cultural outreach work fostered by the Islamic Republic abroad coming under the purview of the Supreme Leader.

Iran's ability to make use of its transnational links to Shi'a communities has been aided by regional developments, most notably the ouster of Saddam Hussein and coming to power of a friendly government in Iraq. Iran's position as the Shi'a metropole gives it the ability to make use of its transnational religious networks as and when they serve its national interests. This has long been the case in its sponsorship of Hizballah, and also in the religious justification seen in taking the fight to Daesh in Syria and Iraq. Iran sees itself and by extension Shi'a communities it has ties with, as a victim of sectarianism in the region. The Islamic Republic has tied this fight to its long-standing resistance narrative, and thus carrying out its own 'war on terror' in the face of the Sunni 'takfiri' threat.<sup>27</sup> Resistance to Israeli and Western aims in the region, support for the Palestinian cause, and protection of the Shi'a draw on ideas of 'justice' and which form part of the Islamic Republic's constitutionally-defined foreign policy objectives,<sup>28</sup> which seek to give support to the oppressed.

### Religious networks

Having abandoned the active export of the Islamic revolution in the 1980s, Iran went on to invest in building its diplomatic and religious infrastructure, expanding its religious outreach activities across the Shi'a world, drawing on its position as something of a Shi'a metropole in a demonstration of its growing soft power. This, in combination with the repression of Iraqi Shi'a until the removal of Saddam Hussein, meant that Iranian centres of religious learning, most notably Qom, came to rival and in some cases overtake the traditional Shi'a centre of Najaf in Iraq, though the balance has been redressed somewhat in recent years.<sup>29</sup> Iran's transnational religious linkages help to provide legitimacy for Iran's actions in terms of its activities in the region. This can be seen in its application of a religious overlay in its active military engagements in Iraq and

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example: Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit (Eds.), *Iran in the World: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy*, 2016, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan; Maaik Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad: Ideology and Actions*, 2013 New York: Palgrave MacMillan; Edward Wastnidge, *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami*, 2016, London: I.B. Tauris.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Wastnidge, 'Iran's own 'War on Terror': Iranian foreign policy towards Syria and Iraq during the Rouhani Era, in Luciano Zaccara (ed) *The Foreign Policy of Iran under President Hassan Rouhani* (Palgrave MacMillan, forthcoming 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Article 3.16 of Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (in Persian), available online at: <http://www.moi.ir/Portal/File/ShowFile.aspx?ID=ab40c7a6-af7d-4634-af93-40f2f3a04acf>. English version available online at: [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran\\_1989.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.pdf?lang=en)

<sup>29</sup> Ali Mamouri, 'Competition Heats Up Between Qom, Najaf', *Al Monitor*, May 2013: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/qom-najaf-anxiety-competition-shiite.html>

Syria, such as through the channelling of 'shrine defenders' to conflict zones from Shi'a communities in the region.<sup>30</sup> This gives Iran a significant role among Shi'a communities that it can utilise to enhance its standing among its co-religionists.<sup>31</sup>

Iran has historical ties to Iraqi Shi'a which go back to long-standing religious and familial ties with shrine cities in southern Iraq, most notably Najaf and Karbala. The latter, being the site of the martyrdom of the third Shi'a imam, Hussein, carries great significance to Shi'a worldwide and symbolises the fight against oppression and unjust rulers which has proved so foundational to the Islamic Republic's revolutionary message. These ties were also strengthened through political sanctuary provided by the Islamic Republic to Shi'a opposition fleeing Saddam. Similarly, the religious links with Lebanese Shi'a are well-documented and go back centuries, as do religious ties to the Shi'a populations in Bahrain, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>32</sup> The centrality of Iran in the Shi'a world can be seen in the cosmopolitan nature of Qom - the centre of Iranian religious learning. Here students and clerics from across the world attend its various seminaries, and then go back to their own countries having earned their religious education in Iran, further cementing ties.

However, this transnational network not only comprises traditional 'religious' activities affiliated to the *hawza* but also involves the educational and diplomatic missions undertaken abroad by the Iranian government. The transnational linkages that Iran has as a result of its position as religious hub are used as vector to enhance diplomatic relations and deepen ties with communities across the Shi'a world, acting as an enhancer of its soft power.<sup>33</sup> This work is carried out through various parastatal organisations, such as the Ahl ul-Bayt World Assembly, Islamic Culture and Relations Organisation (ICRO) and the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation (*Emdad*). The Ahl ul-Bayt grouping brings Shi'a scholars and religious leaders from around the world together every four years for a conference in Tehran.<sup>34</sup> The ICRO direct Iran's cultural diplomacy and employ its cultural attaches abroad – they have a flexible remit in terms of their cultural outreach,<sup>35</sup> though much of its work is done in the religious sphere. *Emdad*,<sup>36</sup> as one of Iran's largest charitable foundations, carries out development work primarily inside Iran, but also has an active international operation providing development assistance to Muslim communities worldwide.

Iran thus has a multiplicity of networks which draw on its position as a centre of Shi'a learning and influence, and which allow it to harness an identity-based narrative that finds a practical utility in both its soft and 'hard' engagements in the region. Its position as a Shi'a metropole gives it a means of influence among Shi'a worldwide, with its cultural and religious outreach work further reinforcing ties to these communities.

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<sup>30</sup> Wastnidge, *Iran's own 'War on Terror'*

<sup>31</sup> For an example of how this translates into positive views of Iran's regional role among Iraqi Shia, see Fotini Christia, Elizabeth Dekeyser, and Dean Knox, 'To Karbala: Surveying Religious Shi'a from Iran and Iraq', *MIT Political Science Department Research Paper*, No. 2016-39. 2016

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Sabrina Mervin (ed), *The Shi'a Worlds And Iran* 2010, London: Saqi Books: London.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Wastnidge, 'The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power – from Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War', *Politics*, Vol. 35, issue 3-4. 2015.

<sup>34</sup> See website of the Ahl ul-Bayt World Assembly: <http://www.ahl-ul-bayt.org/en/introducing-the-assembly>

<sup>35</sup> Wastnidge, *The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power*

<sup>36</sup> See website of the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation: <https://portal.emdad.ir/>