

Religious Conviction or Pragmatic Strategy? Analyzing Iranian Foreign Policy from 2005 to 2020

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Iranian foreign policy from 2005 to 2020, examining the interplay between religious ideology and pragmatic strategy. It argues that while religion plays a significant role in shaping Iran's worldview and justifying its actions, pragmatism is the dominant driver of its foreign policy decisions. Through case studies of Iran's relations with Syria, Azerbaijan, and various non-state actors, and its policy towards Chechnya and Xinjiang, the paper demonstrates how Iran prioritizes national interests and strategic goals, even when they conflict with its foundational principles. The analysis covers the presidencies of Ahmadinejad and Rouhani, highlighting the continuity of pragmatic approaches despite differing political styles. The paper concludes that understanding Iranian foreign policy requires acknowledging the complex interaction of religious rhetoric and strategic calculation, with pragmatism ultimately guiding Iran's pursuit of regional influence and its engagement with the international community.

Key Words

Iranian foreign policy, pragmatism, religious ideology, Middle East, Syria, non-state actors

Introduction:

The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the most significant countries in the Middle East, with a solid historical, cultural, and religious standing among the nations of the region. Its cultural and religious influence extends to a vast area. Iran's foreign policy has always been of keen interest to both scholars of international relations and political leaders because any action or policy of Iran affects the entire Islamic world in general, and the Middle East in particular. There has always been a sense of unpredictability about Iranian foreign policy and its underlying principles. A debate exists regarding what drives Iranian foreign policy: the religious revolutionary ideology of the 1979 revolution, or crude national interest and pragmatism. Answer is, a mixture of both.

If we carefully examine the Iranian foreign policy of the presidents between 2005 and 2020, we can see that primarily pragmatism was the fundamental foreign policy principle but this should be understood in the context that what may seem irrational and non-pragmatic for an external observant, might be totally pragmatic and rational

for someone in Iranian power structures but this assertion does not imply that religious ideology was excluded from the decision-making process entirely. Religion has become a crucial component of the Iranian political structure after the Islamic revolution of 1979, and it is the single largest domestic legitimacy-conferring factor of the current Iranian regime¹. If we investigate Iranian history, we can perceive that this pattern has existed since the earliest Iranian empires, when religious and cultural connection was one of the most salient characteristics of empires and states; the first cosmopolitan, multicultural state was established in Iran by Cyrus the Great², and he was motivated by pragmatism in doing so.

In the two decades of the confrontational and conservative Ahmadinejad and the moderate reformist Hassan Rouhani, there is one shared underlying factor in the foreign policy of both leaders: the employment of Islam, more specifically of Shia Islam, as a foreign policy instrument. They employ the Islamic card pragmatically where it benefits them—for example, in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—and disregard it when it does not align with their defined foreign policy objectives.

Iran's support for Shia groups and regimes in Syria and Yemen isn't primarily driven by their Shia identity. Instead, it's rooted in national interests and geo-strategic considerations. Islam plays a significant role in how Iran defines its national interests, as backing Muslims is a key part of its political ideology. To maintain domestic legitimacy, the Iranian government needs to present itself as a supporter of Islamic groups. However, Iran mainly backs groups whose goals and actions align with its foreign policy objectives, which became particularly focused regionally during Ahmadinejad's tenure

Iran's foreign policy goals can generally be seen as opposing the USA, Israel, allied Arab states, and resisting Western dominance³. But why is this ongoing confrontation with Israel and the USA so essential? After all, it has been Iran's primary foreign policy focus for over four decades. The roots lie in several key events: America's support for the Shah's regime, which was overthrown by the Islamic Revolution in 1979; the US embassy hostage crisis; a history of foreign

¹ Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Soviet Era* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010).

² Rouhollah K. Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy," *Middle East Journal* 58, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 549–559.

³ Kasra Aarabi, "The Fundamentals of Iran's Islamic Revolution," *Institute.global*, Tony Blair Institute, February 11, 2019, <https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/fundamentals-irans-islamic-revolution>.

interference in Iran's affairs; and the revolutionary ideology centred on resisting Western dominance in the Islamic world⁴. Opposition to Israel is particularly crucial because it is the USA's strongest ally in the Middle East. For Iran, opposing Israel reinforces the legitimacy of its Islamic revolutionary identity — after all, how can a semi-theocratic Islamist government reconcile with a state involved in the occupation of Palestine, a sacred Muslim land? Thus, opposing the USA, Israel, and their allies has become one of the *Raison d'être* of the Iranian revolution and the existence of current Iranian regime⁵.

This paper will briefly discuss the Iranian foreign policy timeline from 2005 to 2020 and then it will go on to discuss examples of Iran's precedence to pragmatism over religious idealism and its use of religion as a foreign policy instrument.

General overview of Iranian foreign policy between 2005-2020

Between 2005 and 2020, Iran saw two different presidents who diverged in their fundamental foreign policy approaches. Ahmadinejad was more conservative and confrontational, while Hasan Rouhani, who was promoted as a reformist and regime insider, was open to discussion and pledged to resolve Iran's foreign, nuclear, and regional crises through dialogue, and to bring relief to the declining Iranian economy⁶.

When Ahmadinejad became president, a change in Iranian foreign policy was imminent⁷ due to the failure of the previous reformist government under Khatami to initiate a meaningful dialogue with the West, specifically with the USA. This failure, weakened the reformist and conciliatory section of the ruling elite and strengthened the conservatives. Consequently, Ahmadinejad adopted a more regional and confrontational approach and the region was also going through serious changes in the form of US Invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. The United States had a military presence on three fronts surrounding Iran, with its occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and military bases in Gulf countries.

⁴ Speech (on American Conspiracies) | Iran Data Portal," n.d., <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/speech-on-american-conspiracies>.

⁵ Speech (on American Conspiracies) | Iran Data Portal," n.d., <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/speech-on-american-conspiracies>.

⁶ Rodger Shanahan, *Iranian Foreign Policy under Rouhani* (s.l.: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2015)

⁷ Maaïke Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Post-2005, Iranian foreign policy became aggressive, focusing on increasing its diplomatic and strategic foothold in the region. Afghanistan and Iraq both had deep cultural and religious ties with Iran, as the majority of Iraq's population was Shia⁸ and held the Iranian clergy in high esteem, moreover Iran had started to use these religious ties to develop deep strategic inroads in Iraq as early as 1980s⁹. Dari, a dialect of Persian, was an official language of Afghanistan and spoken by a significant portion of its population. Alongside these linguistic ties, Afghanistan was deeply influenced by Persian civilization¹⁰ and had a long history of Iranian political influence in the form of Iranian backed armed groups in Afghan-Soviet war and subsequent civil war¹¹. As a result, Iran amplified its influence in both countries, with its efforts in Iraq yielding unprecedented outcomes.

Iran's regional strategy produced favorable results in countries like Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, where its ties with regimes and local anti-status quo groups strengthened. This growing influence was viewed with hostility by Gulf countries, led by Saudi Arabia¹². While most Arab regimes were pro-Western, their populations were largely anti-American, and Iran's strong anti-American stance resonated with the sentiments of the large sections of general Arab populace. The fear of Iran's rising influence and the increased association of local Shia populations in Gulf countries with Iran's anti-West rhetoric, combined with the historic Arab-Persian rivalry, fuelled a confrontational posture from GCC countries. However, Iran's engagement with Arab Shias in Iraq helped mitigate the ethnic dimension of this escalating rivalry to some extent.

⁸ *Estimated Percentage Range of Shia by Country*, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2009/10/Shiarange.pdf>.

⁹ Marie Ladier-Fouladi, *Iran-Iraq Relations and Pan-Shia Strategies* (2022), (hal-03913440).

¹⁰ Maaïke Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹¹ Hafizullah Emadi, "Exporting Iran's Revolution: The Radicalization of the Shiite Movement in Afghanistan," *Middle Eastern Studies* 31, no. 1 (1995): 1–12.

¹² Maaïke Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Ahmadinejad's anti-Zionism and Holocaust denial became one of the most problematic and controversial aspects of his foreign policy¹³. On several occasions, he outright denied the horrific events of the Holocaust¹⁴. Additionally, Iran attempted to establish a diplomatic bloc of underdeveloped third-world countries opposed to American unilateralism. While this initiative was not wholly successful, it did yield some positive outcomes, such as improved relations with Bolivia¹⁵.

This period was marked by Iran's nuclear conflict, mounting global pressure, and economic sanctions due to its insistence on continuing its 'peaceful' nuclear project. Despite significant isolation from the international community and an economy in virtual free-fall, Iran successfully resisted pressure from the USA and its allies.

When Rouhani assumed leadership, Iran was in a deep economic crisis and facing global isolation over its nuclear program. Rouhani adopted a conciliatory tone and initiated meaningful dialogue with the West and regional countries to negotiate a deal on the Iranian nuclear issue and pull Iran out of its spiralling economic decline¹⁶. During these years, Iran's covert and overt involvement in regional military conflicts continued to escalate, particularly in Syria.

The sudden rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria provided Iran with another legitimate reason to become militarily involved in both countries, thereby increasing its regional influence¹⁷. Rouhani's primary objective was to steer Iran out of the

¹³ Kevin Whitelaw, "Ahmadinejad: Holocaust 'Opinion of Just a Few,'" *NPR*, September 25, 2009, Middle East section, <https://www.npr.org/2009/09/25/113171156/ahmadinejad-holocaust-opinion-of-just-a-few>.

¹⁴ Ali A. A. Aghdaci, "An Analytical Review of Ahmadinejad's Foreign Policy Frameworks in Terms of Constructivism Theory," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 5, no. 3 (2020): 209–22.

¹⁵ Iran and Bolivia Are Natural Allies: Ahmadinejad," *Al Arabiya English*, Alarabiya, September 2008, <https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2008%2F09%2F01%2F55845>.

¹⁶ Shahram Akbar Zadeh and Dara Conduit, *Iran in the World: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹⁷ Martin Chulov, "Amid Syrian Chaos, Iran's Game Plan Emerges: A Path to the Mediterranean," *The Guardian*, October 8, 2016,

economic crisis. Consequently, during his tenure, Iran engaged in substantial negotiations on the nuclear issue, culminating in a deal in 2016 with the USA and five other countries. As a result of the nuclear agreement, many restrictions imposed on Iran were lifted¹⁸. After years of stagnation, the Iranian economy, which is heavily dependent on oil exports, began to recover, with Iranian oil exports returning to pre-sanctions levels¹⁹.

However, with the election of Donald Trump, a populist leader with no significant background in diplomacy or politics, relations soured once again. In 2018, Trump withdrew from the nuclear deal, citing that the agreement failed to address Iran's other regional covert activities²⁰. In December 2020, Iran resumed uranium enrichment to pre-deal levels²¹.

During this period, Iran was successful in preventing the fall of the Assad government to rebels²² and played important role in the war against ISIS, which interestingly saw Iran and USA, cooperating²³. Moreover, the GCC's military intervention against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels also failed to produce significant results, as the Houthis continued to control vast territories in Yemen.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/08/iran-iraq-syria-isis-land-corridor>.

¹⁸ BBC News, "Iran Nuclear Deal: Key Details," November 23, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33521655>.

¹⁹ Shahram Akbar Zadeh and Dara Conduit, *Iran in the World: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

²⁰ Zack Beauchamp, "Iran Nuclear Deal: Trump's Withdrawal, Explained," *Vox*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/5/8/17328520/iran-nuclear-deal-trump-withdraw>.

²¹ Iran Abandons Uranium Limits | Arms Control Association, "Arms Control Association, 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-01/news/iran-abandons-uranium-limits>.

²² Al Jazeera, "Syria's War Explained from the Beginning," *Al Jazeera*, April 14, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/14/syrias-war-explained-from-the-beginning>.

²³ Ariane Tabatabai and Dina Esfandiary, "Cooperating with Iran to Combat ISIS in Iraq," *Washington Quarterly*, Fall 2017.

Key Determinants of Iranian Foreign Policy:

Iranian foreign policy has certain distinct characteristics that remain unchanged regardless of who holds the presidency. These include revolutionary Islam, Persian nationalism, and the direct relationship between Iranian foreign policy and its domestic environment. The Islamic Republic of Iran was established as a revolutionary Islamic state. In its early years, Iran's doctrine of exporting the revolution and its self-declared status as a revolutionary state earned it many adversaries worldwide. Iran extended support to any regime or group with an anti-American and anti-Western unilateralist stance²⁴. However, over time, this religious and revolutionary fervour diminished, with a turning point occurring when Iran even accepted U.S. assistance in the Iran-Contra affair to acquire weapons to fight the Iraqi army²⁵.

In the last two decades, Iran's religio-revolutionary fervour has significantly waned, as a new generation has come of age. This generation, having no memory of the revolution, is exposed to liberal and educated values from the Western world and priorities personal growth, freedom, and financial stability over religiously motivated revolutionary ideals²⁶.

Another key feature of Iranian foreign policy is Persian nationalism. Although Islam, in essence, strongly opposes racism and prohibits ethnic or linguistic nationalism, nationalism in Iran persists even within its Islamic framework. Throughout post-revolutionary history, the theocratic government has frequently employed Persian nationalistic symbols for various purposes²⁷.

²⁴ Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Soviet Era* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010).

²⁵ Rieffer-Flanagan and Barbara Ann, "Islamic Realpolitik: Two-Level Iranian Foreign Policy," *International Journal on World Peace* 26, no. 4 (2009): 7–35.

²⁶ Maysam Bizaer, "Iran's Rising Generation Z at the Forefront of Protests," *Middle East Institute*, October 5, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-rising-generation-z-forefront-protests>.

²⁷ Ali M. Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Ali M. Ansari, *The Politics of*
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Religious Conviction or Pragmatic ...

In the Iranian governing structure, the Supreme Leader is the highest authority and has the final say on all foreign policy issues, particularly relations with the USA, Saudi Arabia, and Israel²⁸. Article 110 of the Iranian constitution grants the Supreme Leader the authority over matters of war and peace, making his consent essential for declaring war or establishing peace with another state or sub-state entity²⁹. The Supreme Leader's decisions are influenced by various factors at any given time, including political factions, the strength of the IRGC, and the broader global situation. Both conservative and reformist factions within the Iranian clergy and political class have held varying degrees of influence over Iranian foreign policy. Despite his immense power, the Supreme Leader does not override the prevailing majority opinion of the time³⁰. The Supreme National Security Council is the body responsible for formulating foreign policy, with membership comprising the heads of various governmental institutions, political leaders, and representatives of the Supreme Leader. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the state institution responsible for implementing Iran's foreign policy. In recent years, particularly following heightened military conflicts, the IRGC has also begun wielding significant influence in shaping Iranian foreign policy, particularly concerning Middle Eastern countries.

Case studies:

This section will analyze Iran's foreign policy from 2005-2020 through case studies of its relationships with Syria, Azerbaijan, and Saudi Arabia, as well as its involvement with regional armed groups and its positions on Xinjiang and

Nationalism in Modern Iran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

²⁸ Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan and Barbara Ann, "Islamic Realpolitik: Two-Level Iranian Foreign Policy," *International Journal on World Peace* 26, no. 4 (2009): 7–35.

²⁹ "Leadership in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Leader.ir*, 2023, <https://www.leader.ir/en/content/14132/Leadership-in-the-Constitution-of-the-Islamic-Republic-of-Iran>.

³⁰ Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Soviet Era* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010).

Chechnya, to reveal the interplay of ideology and national interest that informed its actions.

1) Iranian support for secular Syria:

Iran's historical relations with the secular Syrian Arab republic and, more recently, its active participation in the Syrian civil war on religious pretexts can be understood as a good example of Iran's use of religion as a tool for both foreign and domestic policy. Relations between the Iranian ruling clergy and the Assad family date back to the final days of the Pahlavi dynasty³¹. Later, these relations were leveraged to build a strong alliance between the two countries.

Apparently, there were no clear ideological reasons for this strong strategic relationship, as Iran is an Islamic republic with elements of Iranian/Persian identity deeply embedded, while Syria Arab republic was a secular Arab republic with a Baathist nationalist orientation. On the surface, both countries were ruled by Shias, but a significant theological divide existed between the Iranian Imami Twelver Shia creed and the Syrian Alawite Shia faith. Until recently, Imami Twelver Shias did not consider Alawites as Shias or even Muslims³². What, then, prompted Iran to invest billions and deploy thousands of soldiers and nationals on Syrian frontlines to secure the Assad government against the rebellion of the opposition? Pragmatic, realist geo-strategic interests.

The most significant of these interests was the similar regional stance and political alignment of Iran and Syria on the political map of the Middle East. Both countries were anti-American and anti-Israeli, and enjoyed good relations with Russia. Over the last decade and a half, Iran faced global isolation due to economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure from the West and the USA over its nuclear program. Consequently, it needed all the allies it could secure, and Syria remained its strongest ally in the Middle East during this period.

Defiance against America and resistance to Israel were foundational elements of the Iranian revolution, as evidenced by the famous slogans "Marg bar Amreeka, Marg

³¹ Edward Wastnidge, *Iran and Syria: An Enduring Axis, Middle East Policy* 24, no. 2 (2017).

³² Aymenn J. Al Tamimi, "Looking at Alawites," *The Levantine Review* 1, no. 2 (2012).

bar Israel” (Death to America, Death to Israel)³³. To maintain pressure on Israel and deter any possible Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities, Iran supported Hezbollah and Hamas through Syria. A friendly Syrian government was essential to keeping Israel in check and supporting other anti-Israel organizations in the Levant. This brings up a complex contradiction: at the onset of the Syrian civil war, Hamas, fundamentally the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood³⁴, was supported by Iran³⁵. However, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, part of the Syrian opposition, was fighting Iranian-backed Shia militias and the Syrian Arab Army³⁶.

The use of religion as a foreign policy tool has never been more evident in Iranian foreign policy than during the Syrian civil war. The war initially began as a general public uprising against an autocratic, undemocratic regime, much like other episodes of the Arab Spring, but it quickly escalated into a civil conflict, with serious sectarian undertones due to the intervention of Iran and other Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia and Qatar³⁷. The Iranian government blatantly employed Shia symbolism and rhetoric to drum up support and recruit fighters for the secular Syrian government³⁸.

Thousands of Shia fighters were recruited from Afghanistan, Pakistan³⁹, and Iran to fight in a civil war between a secular government and its population. Initially, the

³³ Masoud Kazemzadeh, “U.S.–Iran Confrontation in the Post-NIE World: An Analysis of Alternative Policy Options,” *Comparative Strategy* 28, no. 1 (2009): 37–59.

³⁴ Tareq Baconi, *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

³⁵ Rola El Hussein, “Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Hezbollah,” *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 5 (2010): 803–15.

³⁶ Dara Conduit, “The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Spectacle of Hama,” *Middle East Institute* 70, no. 2 (2016): 211–26.

³⁷ “The Syrian Crisis and the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, n.d., <https://www.fpri.org/article/2012/10/the-syrian-crisis-and-the-saudi-iranian-rivalry/>.

³⁸ Ilan Zelayat, “Realpolitik and Jihad: The Iranian Use of Shiite Militias in Syria,” *Digest of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 2 (September 2019): 296–328.

³⁹ Aydin Guven, *Review of Iran-Backed Zainabiyoun Brigade Could Become Pakistan’s New National Security Problem*, Anadolu Agency, February 25, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-iran-backed->

Iranians were limited to advisory roles, but they soon became entangled in intense fighting on multiple fronts against Syrian rebels ⁴⁰. Iran alone was not the only country guilty of using religious and sectarian symbols in drumming up support for their proxies in Syrian civil war. Even though Iran's Syrian policy was primarily driven by its national interest, the virulent Anti-Shia stance of ISIS gave some credence to the religious rhetoric of Iran.

2) Iran's pragmatic relation with Shia Azerbaijan:

Another aspect of Iran's foreign policy where religion takes a back seat is its relationship with Azerbaijan. Relations between the two countries should have been ideal due to several factors: both are Shia Muslim nations, and around 22-30 million Azeris⁴¹ live in Iran's northern provinces bordering Azerbaijan and are well integrated into Iranian society. However, due to various factors, relations between the two countries are far from ideal. During the decade-long Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which culminated in December 2020 when Azerbaijan regained control of the region by force, Iran maintained a policy of neutrality. Despite one party in the conflict being Muslim, Iran, ideologically, should have supported Azerbaijan throughout the conflict. Some refer to this as "negative neutrality" due to Iran's apparent inclination towards Armenia⁴².

There were several distinct reasons for the apparent coldness in relations between the two countries. Azerbaijan has territorial claims over Iran's bordering provinces, populated by millions of ethnic Azeris. Although Azerbaijan does not pursue this agenda explicitly, Iran remains wary of any future escalation, as occasional statements by Azerbaijani officials and diplomatic moves, such as hosting conferences for secessionist groups in Baku, have sent clear messages to Tehran that this issue remains unresolved⁴³.

zainabiyou-n-brigade-could-become-pakistan-s-new-national-security-problem/2033585.

⁴⁰ Edward Wastnidge, *Iran and Syria: An Enduring Axis, Middle East Policy* 24, no. 2 (2017).

⁴¹ Anar M. Valiyev, *Azerbaijan-Iran Relations: Quo Vadis, Baku?*, September 2012 (s.l.: PONARS Eurasia).

⁴² Anar M. Valiyev, *Azerbaijan-Iran Relations: Quo Vadis, Baku?*, September 2012 (s.l.: PONARS Eurasia).

⁴³ Shahram Akbar Zadeh and Dara Conduit, *Iran in the World: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

In addition to this apparent concern, the Turko-Persian rivalry also shapes Iranian policy toward Azerbaijan. Although Azerbaijanis are Shia in faith, they speak a Turkic language and maintain strong diplomatic ties with Turkey, which supported Azerbaijan during the recent Nagorno-Karabakh war with diplomatic, financial, and military assistance⁴⁴.

Another point of contention is the disagreement over exploitation rights for gas reserves in the Caspian Sea⁴⁵. Perhaps the most significant factor contributing to strained relations is Azerbaijan's strong military and economic ties with Israel and the USA. Azerbaijan is a major buyer of Israeli weaponry, with a \$1.6 billion deal signed in 2011⁴⁶.

During Ahmadinejad's presidency, relations between Iran and Azerbaijan were frosty due to his aggressive and confrontational stance toward the US, Israel, and their regional allies, of which Azerbaijan was a key supporter. Azerbaijan maintains strong economic and security ties with Israel, being a major oil supplier to the country. Both nations viewed Iran as a security threat⁴⁷. These factors fostered close Azerbaijan-Israel relations at the expense of Iran's discomfort and apparent alignment with Armenia. During this period, Iran boosted trade with Armenia by developing trade centres and easing visa regulations to facilitate cross-border commerce. Armenia also resisted American pressure to adopt an anti-Iran stance on its nuclear program, consistently advocating for a peaceful resolution to the crisis⁴⁸.

⁴⁴ Turan Gafarli, "One Nation, Two States: Turkey's Stance on the Recent Escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan," n.d., <https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Turkey-Azerbaijan-Armenia.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Maaïke Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁴⁶ Oğuzhan Göksel, "Beyond Countering Iran: A Political Economy of Azerbaijan-Israel Relations," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 4 (2015): 655–675.

⁴⁷ Thomas Grove, "Azerbaijan Eyes Aiding Israel against Iran," *Reuters*, October 1, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/azerbaijan-eyes-aiding-israel-against-iran-idUSBRE88T05N/>.

⁴⁸ Elaheh Koolaei and Mohammad Hossein Hafezian, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the South Caucasus Republics," *Iranian Studies* 43, no. 3 (2010): 391–409.

During Rouhani's presidency, some rapprochement between Iran and Azerbaijan was observed, initiated by the Iranian president's vow to shift away from the aggressive foreign policy stance of his predecessor. He met with Azerbaijani President Aliyev multiple times in 2014-2015, declaring Azerbaijan a "brotherly country"⁴⁹. However, hopes for above-average relations remained slim due to Azerbaijan's close defense and economic ties with Israel.

Iran's relationship with these countries confirms the notion that agreement with its regional outlook and stance is the cornerstone for developing strong bilateral relations, irrespective of faith, governance style, or political ideology. Any country that opposes US hegemony and its regional allies can become an Iranian ally, even a secular socialist Arab nationalist state like Syria.

3) Ignoring principle of Islamic solidarity when necessary: case of Chechnya and Xinjiang:

Post-revolutionary Iran has always touted its Islamic credentials and always insisted on being an Islamic power. Iran has always vowed to defend the oppressed Muslims irrespective of the region and country and this vow was made part of Iranian constitution. But this apparent principle of Islamic solidarity takes a back seat when it does not suit Iranian objectives. In confrontation against USA and west Iran was depending on diplomatic support of Russia and china, although this support was often limited and conditional but still any help was welcome in circumstances which Iran was facing in backlash of its nuclear program. Both Russia and China had their own domestic problem with local Muslim minorities. During the initial years of Ahmadinejad, Russia was facing a low-level Islamic insurgency in Caucasus, more specifically in Chechnya⁵⁰, conflict was near ending after two brutal wars spanning over almost one decade in which thousands of Muslim Chechens had perished fighting invading Russian Army⁵¹. Although the conflict had subsided by 2005 to a

⁴⁹ Rodger Shanahan, *Iranian Foreign Policy under Rouhani* (s.l.: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2015)

⁵⁰ "NEW ATTACKS FORCE KREMLIN to LIFT INFORMATION BLOCKADE on CHECHNYA," *Jamestown.org*, May 18, 2006, <https://jamestown.org/program/new-attacks-force-kremlin-to-lift-information-blockade-on-chechnya/>.

⁵¹ Misha Gutkin, Victoria Kupchinetsky, Natalia Latukhina, and Victor Vladimirov, "First Chechen War: The Moment When 'Russia's Democratic Post-Soviet Dream Ended,'" *Voice of America*, December 13, 2024, ISSN: 2789-1038

great extent but still there were sporadic clashes between Chechen rebels and occupying Russian forces and there were huge allegations of human rights violation by human rights and Islamic groups against Russian government and allied Chechen militias⁵². Similarly, China also had shady domestic policies about Muslims of Xinjiang, called East Turkestan by various Muslim and pan-Turkic groups. China was blamed of running concentration camps of local Uyghur Muslims, where millions were kept locked without any trial. Official government statement said that they were institutes attended voluntarily by locals⁵³. Moreover, communist Chinese authoritarian regime was blamed of forcing cultural assimilation, de-religiousation of local Muslim population and forced demographic change by settling Han Chinese people in Xinjiang most commonly in the second decade of 21st century. But successive Iranian governments kept their silent on these issues because at that time Iran desperately needed allies in the world to counter the increasing US pressure and also needed access to nuclear technology of Russia, so the clause of commitment to Muslims found in article 3 of Iranian constitution was conveniently ignored⁵⁴. Mild toned statements were given by Iranian leadership about these issues, but it was clear to everyone that these statements are just being made for domestic consumption and have no inherent value in Iranian foreign policy⁵⁵.

4) Iran's dealing with non-state actors in middle east:

While a lot has changed since the 7th October 2023 attacks and Syrian regime change but this article strictly deals with Iran's policy of proxy groups between 2005-20. Iran has long utilized non-state actors as strategic assets in its foreign policy endeavors in the Middle East. There are multiple reasons and objectives

<https://www.voanews.com/a/first-chechen-war-the-moment-when-russia-s-democratic-post-soviet-dream-ended-/7899845.html>.

⁵²“ Widespread Torture in the Chechen Republic: Introduction,” *Human Rights Watch*, 2024,

⁵³ BBC News, “China's Hidden Camps - BBC News,” *BBC News*, 2015, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/1dt-sh/China_hidden_camps.

⁵⁴Ahmed W. Sami, “Iran and Chechnya: Realpolitik at Work,” *Middle East Policy* 8, no. 1 (2001)

⁵⁵ Samuel Ramani, “Iran's Careful Approach to China's Uyghur Crackdown,” *The Diplomat*, n.d., <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/irans-careful-approach-to-chinas-uyghur-crackdown/>.

behind Iran's adoption of this strategy. Contrary to the general perception that Iran exclusively supports Shia groups in Middle Eastern and Muslim countries, certain Sunni Islamic groups also receive Iranian political, financial, and military assistance⁵⁶.

The first reason for Iran's support of these groups was to expand its influence in a region where it faces opposition from hostile countries like Saudi Arabia and Israel. With most Gulf countries were under Saudi Arabia's strong diplomatic influence and this bloc enjoyed successful backing from America, it was unwise for most nations in the region to cultivate closer ties with Iran. As a result, Iran had limited maneuvering space in the diplomatic landscape of the Middle East and had to turn towards non-state entities in the region. The second reason lied in Iran's anti-Israel, anti-USA stance, where many of its policies were shaped by the fear and anticipation of future conflict with the USA, Israel, and their allies. Iran used these groups as a deterrent against any potential military attack or engagement by the USA, Israel, or Gulf countries. Although these organizations were not capable of posing a comprehensive military challenge to Iran's rivals, they can significantly increase the cost of any attack against Iran and made Israel bleed both militarily and economically, something which we saw in the last year in the form of war between Hamas and Israel in Gaza, Hezbollah and Israel in Northern Israel and Southern Lebanon and constant missile attacks by Yemeni based houthi rebels on mainland Israel and international shipping in the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait.

Iran supported entities that act as parallel states within states, offering a range of services beyond their military roles. Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and various militias all had specialized arms that replicated state functions, including social welfare, education, and healthcare⁵⁷. This policy was not Shia-centric, as Sunni groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad also received Iranian aid⁵⁹. While at the same

⁵⁶ Rola El Hussein, "Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Hezbollah," *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 5 (2010): 803–15.

⁵⁷ Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: How Hezbollah Became the Middle East's Most Powerful Armed Group* (New York, N.Y.: Random House, 2011).

⁵⁸ Tareq Baconi, *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

⁵⁹ Rola El Hussein, "Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Hezbollah," *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 5 (2010): 803–15.

time, Iran was not on good terms with Iraq's Sadrist Shia groups, having orchestrated a split that led to the creation of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq⁶⁰.

The only prerequisite for Iranian support was opposition to its rivals. Hamas, a Sunni group, opposes Israel and therefore received Iranian support. The Houthis opposed the Saudi-backed government in Yemen, making them recipients of Iranian assistance. There is a common oversimplification regarding Iran's religious ties with these groups. For instance, while it is often assumed that Iran supported the Houthis because they were Shia, it is overlooked that the Houthis are Zaydi Shias, who have significant theological differences from Iran's Twelver Shias and are considered theologically closest to Sunnis among all Shia sects⁶¹. Meanwhile, despite their shared ideological and religious perspectives, the Iranian regime and Muqtada al-Sadr were not on good terms⁶² during the time period under discussion.

5) Irani-Saudi Rivalry:

The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is one of the most significant features of Middle Eastern regional politics. This conflict is often oversimplified as a sectarian rivalry between Sunni Wahhabi Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran, but a closer analysis reveals that it extends beyond the apparent religious dimension⁶³. It is a struggle for regional hegemony, with Iran asserting leadership of the Muslim world

⁶⁰ Sam Wyer, "Middle East Security Report 7: The Resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq," *Understanding War*, 2012.

⁶¹ Zaydiyyah | History, Beliefs, & Jurisprudence," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, n.d., accessed February 2, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zaydiyyah>.

⁶² David Gardner, "Muqtada Al-Sadr Challenges Iranian Influence in Iraq," *Financial Times*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/d135f7d4-576d-11e8-bdb7-f6677d2e1ce8>.

⁶³ Kevin Dupont, "Religion or Politics?: An Analysis of Sectarian Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia - The Cornell Policy Review," *The Cornell Policy Review*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.cornellpolicyreview.com/religion-politics-iran-saudi-arabia/>.

and the Middle East based on its demographic, cultural, and historical credentials, while Saudi Arabia claims influence through its oil wealth and custodianship of two of Islam's holiest sites.

Religion and sectarianism are, in fact, tools in this conflict, with both nations employing sectarian rhetoric and symbolism to rally supporters around their nationalist causes. This rivalry can be analyzed in economic, political, and historical contexts. During the decade and a half of Ahmadinejad and Rohani's rule, this cold war between the two nations escalated sharply. Under the presidency of the conservative Ahmadinejad, Iranian foreign policy adopted a confrontational tone, forming the so-called "axis of resistance" comprising Iran, Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Sunni groups Islamic Jihad and Hamas⁶⁴.

This axis championed the Palestinian cause and vowed to resist the USA and its allied regimes in the Middle East. Iran's close ties with Hamas and Islamic Jihad helped dispel allegations of being solely a Shia sectarian power and cultivated a favorable perception among the broader Arab population. This was a clever diplomatic manoeuvre by Iran, effectively blending soft and hard power to enhance its regional influence against Saudi Arabia.

The so-called Arab Spring, which began in 2011, turned violent in several countries and evolved into proxy wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran successfully supported the Houthis along Saudi Arabia's southern border and thwarted Saudi-backed rebels opposing its ally Bashar al-Assad⁶⁵. Another instance of Iran's use of the religious card was seen in the eastern oil-rich province of Al-Hasa, populated by Shia Arabs and vital to Saudi Arabia's economy due to its vast oil reserves and the presence of Saudi Aramco. Iran leveraged the Shia connection to foment unrest in the area, which yielded some results. In February 2016, a prominent Shia cleric, Al-Nimr, was sentenced to death by the Saudi government on charges of sedition, prompting sharp reactions from Iran's Supreme Leader⁶⁶. Similarly, during the Arab Spring, Shias in Bahrain protested against their government, prompting Saudi

⁶⁴ Maaïke Warenaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁶⁵ Hassan Ahmadian, "Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Age of Trump," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 60, no. 2 (2018): 133–150.

⁶⁶ BBC News, "Saudi Arabia Breaks off Ties with Iran after Al-Nimr Execution," January 4, 2016, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35217328>.

Arabia to deploy its army to suppress the unrest. The Bahraini government accused Iran of inciting these protests⁶⁷

Thus, it can be concluded that religion was strategically employed by Iran to counter its regional rivals in what was fundamentally a struggle for influence and dominance.

Conclusion:

The Middle East in the 21st century witnessed two major events: first, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, and second, the Arab Spring. Both these events significantly shaped Iran's regional and foreign policy. These events had far-reaching effects on Iran, with the war in Iraq eliminating the threat of a strong adversary and the Arab Spring sparking public protests in Gulf countries. The war in Iraq, followed by civil wars in various Middle Eastern nations, altered the region's power dynamics, and Iran astutely exploited this gap, using the chaos to expand its influence in countries like Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

Iran pursued specific geostrategic objectives in the region, the most important being opposition to the USA and its Gulf oil state allies. This increased influence was made possible by the strategic use of both hard and soft power. Iran's foreign policy is often viewed through a religious lens, where its actions are interpreted as those of a sectarian state. One of the most prominent features of Iran's foreign policy over the past two decades has been its use of the insecurity felt by Shia minorities in other Muslim countries to serve its geostrategic interests.

Shias are a minority within the global Muslim population, and their religious center of focus lies in Iran. Due to various political and economic factors, along with the failure of political state-building programs, Arab countries have struggled to foster a strong sense of national identity among significant segments of their populations. Furthermore, many borders in the Middle East are arbitrarily drawn lines imposed by colonial European powers and lack any real social foundation. Consequently, a significant portion of the populations in these Arab countries prioritize their faith, sect, and tribe over the nation-state. As a result, many shias in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Iraq often hold their Shia identity and soft corner for Iran's ruling Shia clergy—the central authority of Shia Islam—above national loyalty.

Iran capitalized on this sense of insecurity, positioning itself as the guardian of Shia Muslims worldwide and using this allegiance as a foreign policy tool to extend its influence throughout the Middle East. During the one and half decades under

⁶⁷ Hassan Ahmadian, "Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Age of Trump," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 60, no. 2 (2018): 133–150.

discussion, Iran leveraged this "trump card" as a deterrent against the USA and its regional allies, a strategy that appeared effective, as the USA refrained from direct military action against Iran. This is despite Iran's blatant and open support for Shia resistance groups in Iraq against the USA and its persistent nuclear program during Ahmadinejad's presidency. Despite the religious and sectarian rhetoric and symbolism, Iranian foreign policy during the presidencies of Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani remained predominantly pragmatic, with decisions made strictly according to national interest as defined the ruling islamist regime.

Iran's use of religion as a foreign policy tool, while notable, is not an isolated case. A survey of recent history reveals that many major powers, regardless of their own religious or secular foundations, have strategically invoked religious elements to further their national interests. This pattern can be observed in the actions of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, among others, demonstrating that the instrumentalization of religion is often a calculated component of statecraft.

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