

## Religion and Behavioral Patterns in Iran's Foreign Policy: A Comparative Study of the Pahlavi II Era and the Islamic Republic

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### Abstract

This research presents a comparative analysis regarding the influence of religion as a key component of national identity on behavioral patterns in Iran's foreign policy across two distinct periods: that of Pahlavi II and the Islamic Republic. The significance of examining religion arises from its impact on national interest formulation within constructivist frameworks, where identity constructs play a pivotal role. The primary objective of this study is to elucidate how recognizing religion's position as an identity factor can enhance our understanding of behavioral patterns in Iran's foreign policy. Addressing the inquiry into religion's influence on these patterns during both eras, this paper posits that while religion was one of many influential factors in Pahlavi II's foreign policy landscape, it did not substantially integrate into national identity or affect foreign policy decisions at that time. Conversely, within the Islamic Republic framework, religion emerges as a fundamental ideology and an independent variable that shapes foreign policy behavior. The research findings ultimately reveal that during Pahlavi II's era, national interests were defined through the lens of modern state identity, whereas Shia ideology became central to shaping foreign policy identity in the Islamic Republic. Consequently, religion has demonstrated a significant direct impact on behavioral patterns within this political context.

### Keywords:

Religion, National Identity, Constructivism, Foreign Policy, Iran.

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## Introduction

Throughout history, from ancient civilizations and imperial eras to the establishment of nation-states and modern times, religion has consistently exerted a significant influence on domestic politics as well as on the dynamics of regional and international relations in diverse forms. As a cultural framework comprising attitudes, norms, beliefs, ideals, and rituals, religion creates a collective identity among its followers, allowing them to distinguish themselves as "us" from those who do not share their faith, referred to as "others." The most straightforward expression of religion as a source of identity and legitimacy in foreign policy decision-making is seen in the differentiation between allies and adversaries. Politicians articulate and interpret national objectives and interests through specific ideological doctrines, which subsequently shape the nation's interactions within both regional and international contexts. While many countries publicly endorse the separation of religion from politics, an analysis of their actual policies reveals a notable influence of ideological considerations in their dealings with other entities.

The impact of religion on establishing relationships and determining their quality with other societies is also observable in Iran's historical context. Nonetheless, the patterns of behavior that policymakers adopt in foreign policy within any given political system are intrinsically linked to their definitions of national interests and their interpretations of the country's role in international affairs. This relationship can be further clarified by taking into account various sources of identity—namely Iranian identity, Islamic identity, and modernity—within their overarching worldview.

The impetus for undertaking this research lies not only in its potential to enrich the existing theoretical literature but also in its objective to provide clear findings that assist scholars and practitioners in developing a more nuanced understanding and analysis of the identity-based roots of foreign policy and their effects on national behavioral patterns. In addressing the question of how religion has shaped behavioral patterns in Iran's foreign policy during both the Pahlavi II era and the Islamic Republic, this paper contends that during the Pahlavi II period, religion served as one among several influential factors within state foreign policy but did not effectively integrate into national identity as a determinant of foreign policy. Conversely, in the context of the Islamic Republic, religion operates as an ideology and functions as an independent variable that underpins identity in shaping foreign policy behavior. To derive accurate findings, this study employs Alexander Wendt's constructivist methodology, which conceptualizes identity as a dynamic intersubjective construct that is central

to defining and formulating both domestic and foreign policies. Consequently, this article begins with a review of relevant research literature before exploring Wendt's constructivism as the theoretical framework guiding this investigation. It then addresses the post-secular shift concerning the revival of religion within international relations, specifically through a historical examination of religion's role and influence within Iranian society and politics. Ultimately, by clarifying how religion acts as an identity component influencing state behavior in foreign policy across both periods—Pahlavi II and the Islamic Republic—this paper will evaluate the themes discussed throughout.

### **1. Research Background**

The existing literature on this topic can be broadly categorized into three segments: the first category comprises studies that investigate the interplay between constructivism and foreign policy in Iran. These studies primarily focus on identifying and analyzing the determinants that shape foreign policy. For instance, Rahman Ghahremanpour, in his work "Identity and Foreign Policy in Iran and the Middle East" (2015), asserts that the concept of identity in foreign policy is intricately linked to power dynamics; among contemporary international relations theories, constructivism offers a robust theoretical framework for this discourse. Similarly, Saeed Chehrazad's "A New Paradigm of Iran's Foreign Policy" (2023) examines Iranian national identity through its three constituent elements—Islamism, Iranian identity, and modernity—discussing their implications for Iran's foreign policy within a constructivist theoretical framework.

Additionally, notable non-Persian contributions include Maaïke Warnear's book "Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad" (2013), which posits from a constructivist viewpoint that Iran's foreign policy behavior is most comprehensively understood through the ideological lens of governmental foreign policy shaped by its self-perception as a regime altered by the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This perspective suggests potential models for other nations experiencing similar transformations.

Nevertheless, a significant portion of research addressing this theme—including works by Ebrahim Motaghi and Hojat Kazemi (2007), Seyyed Davoud Aghaei and Elham Rasouli (2009), Vahid Nouri (2013), Ali Bagheri Dolatabadi and Hossein Siapoushi (2020), Mohsen Khalili and Hossein Jafarzadeh (2013), Mehdi Abbaszadeh Fathi (2021), Reza Eltiaminia and Hamid Dorj (2020), Ali Darabi (2015), and Ali Fallahi (2001)—has been published as articles. All these studies converge on the

notion that a confluence of Religious and Nationalist factors, varying across different historical contexts, shapes Iran's foreign policy.

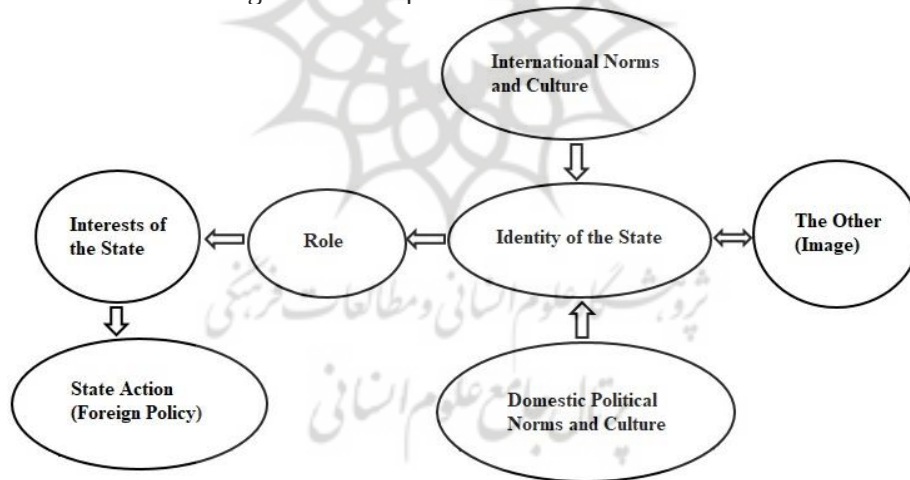
The second category of studies pertains directly to the influence of identity and religion on the foreign policy of nations. Notably, the book "Role Theory in the Middle East" by Yasemin Akbaba and Özgür Özdamar (2019) aims to analyze and assess the impact of ideational, religion-focused factors on the concept of national roles across four Middle Eastern countries, including Iran, in a comparative framework. The authors argue that religion must be treated as an independent variable in the examination of national foreign policies. Additionally, Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid's article "Islam As Statecraft: How Governments Use Religion In Foreign Policy" (2018) investigates the dimensions of religious rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, employing the concept of "geopolitics of religious soft power" to analyze how their Islamic promotional strategies have adapted to shifts in regional and global contexts.

Further contributions to this discourse include works by Elham Rasouli Sani Abadi (2011), Majid Behestani (2013), Ardeshir Sanaie and Mona Kavianpour (2010), Seyyed Jalal Dehghani Firouzabadi and Reza Zabihi (2012), Mohammad Hassan Khani and Hossein Mohammadi Sirat (2018), Wahabuddin Ra'ees and Abdol Moghset Bani Kamal (2016), Hichem Kadri and El Fatih Abdullahi Abdelsalam (2020), as well as Edeard Wastnidge (2020).

A comprehensive evaluation of existing research reveals that the majority of studies addressing the role of religion (as an identity component within constructivist theory) in foreign policy have predominantly been published in English. In contrast, this subject has either been neglected in Persian literature or has been confined to somewhat formulaic discussions that merely outline Islamic principles and regulations concerning foreign policy. Furthermore, by categorizing the available literature into distinct groups, it becomes evident that there has not been a thorough scientific investigation that spans from before the Islamic Revolution and through the Pahlavi II era to the present day; rather, most analyses have been episodic. The originality of this study within constructivist theory lies in its intention to describe and analyze the foreign policy behaviors of Iran during both the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic in a comparative framework, with a direct emphasis on how these behaviors are influenced by religious identity. Consequently, as we observe a revival of religion within international politics, it is appropriate for this field of research to also undergo a rejuvenation.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The analytical framework for this article is grounded in the significance of identity within foreign policy, specifically through the lens of Wendtian constructivism. Alexander Wendt is recognized as the principal theorist of constructivism; in his seminal work "Social Theory of International Politics," he critiques Kenneth Waltz's perspective and the dominant realism in international relations by highlighting the importance of subjective factors, meanings, and perceptions held by actors. Thus, actor identity lies at the heart of constructivist theory. According to Moshirzadeh (2005:332), "Identity refers to understandings and expectations about oneself that are specific to roles." While mainstream international relations theories, particularly realism, contend that actor identities within the international system are static, constructivists argue that these identities are socially constructed and shaped by domestic political culture on one side and international norms and values on the other. Furthermore, they emphasize how these identities influence the formulation of interests and actions. Consequently, state actions in foreign policy—rooted in their perceptions of roles—are contingent upon their understanding of their identities and interests, both of which can evolve. The accompanying diagram depicts the interrelations among these concepts.



**Diagram 1.** Identity and Constructivism in International Relations  
(Alexandrof, 2003:38)

This diagram demonstrates that the identities of nations are historically constructed through a variety of internal and external factors. As a result, adopting a Wendtian perspective suggests that any given state may

embody multiple identities, which manifest in distinct behaviors over time according to each identity. In alignment with the focus of this article, we assert that the influence of religion as an identity component—interacting or conflicting with national elements that shape identity in both domestic and foreign policies among Iranians across various historical periods—has exhibited variability. Furthermore, both objective and subjective international contexts significantly affect the nature and extent of this influence. Thus, the degree to which this internal source of identity operates as an independent variable in foreign policy during the Pahlavi II and Islamic Republic eras can be articulated through this Wendtian constructivist framework, resulting in diverse attitudes, perceptions, and behavioral patterns as dependent variables.

### **3. Religion in Iran's Foreign Policy: Identity and Interest**

Historically, religion has consistently served as a significant variable within international relations; however, its prominence has varied over time. The marginalization of religion can be traced back to the Enlightenment period when modern states began to derive their legitimacy not from religious foundations but from the will and desires of their populations. This shift resulted in rational, empirical, and technical principles supplanting religious values and norms previously established by religious authorities. Furthermore, social sciences—foundational to secularism—argued that elements such as ethnicity or religion are primitive variables lacking rational explanations for understanding societal dynamics; thus they were deemed insignificant. Intellectual thought within international relations has also been shaped by behaviorism and quantitative methodologies (Fox, 2010:32). During this period, realism emerged as the prevailing discourse in international relations, advocating for the exclusion of intangible factors in favor of tangible elements like military or economic power.

Nevertheless, after the Cold War and particularly from the 1960s and 1970s onward, there has been a notable resurgence of religion on the global stage due to several factors. Firstly, this revival can be attributed to modernity's dual impact; specifically, modernization has destabilized traditional societies while simultaneously creating a vacuum that fosters aspirations for transcendence. This modernization process has led to feelings of anomie and alienation across numerous societies; thus religious principles have become instrumental in establishing new identities and loyalties (Fox and Sandler, 2010:22). Concurrently, modernization efforts in certain countries—initially promising growth and social well-being—have faltered, resulting in a backlash rooted in religious sentiment against Western ideologies; one manifestation of this is the rise of religious fundamentalism

(Fox and Sandler, 2010:39). Additionally, globalization plays a crucial role in this resurgence; while it has provided greater opportunities for religious expansion, it has also intensified religious conflicts—leading to increased interactions among various religious groups. In this context, advancements in communication technologies and mass media have facilitated these groups' efforts to disseminate their beliefs more effectively (Shahin, 2022:109; Fox and Sandler, 2010:38).

Another significant factor is the conclusion of the Cold War, or more specifically, the emergence and subsequent decline of communism, which has historically impacted the role of religion on both national and international stages. The disintegration of communism provided Christianity and Islam with opportunities to expand within their respective regions and assume a more influential role in the foreign policies of their associated states (Shahin, 2022:117).

Moreover, following the revolution, new directions emerged within the humanities that aimed to elucidate current circumstances. For instance, a burgeoning trend in the sociology of religion called rational choice or economic theory posits that increased freedom to choose one's religion in many modern societies has resulted in a heightened interest in religious affiliation (Fox and Sandler, 2010:39).

Studies examining the influence of religion on politics have progressed to such an extent that some researchers have introduced the concept of "geopolitics of religion," referring to the intersection between religious beliefs and political agendas. This relationship frequently transcends geographical boundaries to advance political and national goals. Government officials employ various strategies and instruments within their foreign policy frameworks to pursue national interests. Thus, politicians often leverage religious actors for their purposes within domestic politics as well as internationally; conversely, these religious figures also impact decision-makers (Kadri, 2020:34). As a source of soft power, religion significantly shapes societal attitudes toward contemporary international issues, reflecting a shift towards religious privatization alongside a resurgence of religion in public life across various societies. This revival introduces multiple challenges for security and international order in an increasingly globalized environment where cultural influences overshadow traditional territorial divisions (Kadri, 2020:29). In essence, "religion fundamentally undermines the importance of territorial demarcation" (Cimber, 2006:124).

Four primary roles are attributed to religion within international relations: 1) providing legitimacy to political actors, particularly those who

depend on religious ideologies; 2) exerting direct or indirect influence on the worldviews and perceptions held by leaders and political elites; 3) facilitating the creation or identity formation of transnational political events; and 4) fostering fundamentalist political-religious movements (Omidi and Zare, 2010:115). The concrete evidence of religion's resurgence in foreign policy can be observed in significant occurrences such as Iran's Islamic Revolution, the emergence of right-wing Christianity in the United States, the September 11 attacks, messianic beliefs within religious Zionism in Israel, President Bush's rationale for the invasion of Iraq citing an "axis of evil," and religious justifications for conflicts between Israel and Palestine.

The Middle East stands out as a geographic area where the interplay between religion and politics is particularly significant. This region's political history—being the cradle of monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam)—is intrinsically linked with religious issues. Bernard Lewis argues that "the political distinctions among these three faiths are manifestly reflected in their sacred narratives' foundational accounts. Consequently, there persists an inherent connection between faith and power that characterizes Islam distinctly from its two counterparts" (Lewis, 2020:11). Historically speaking, governments throughout Middle Eastern history have been fundamentally religious entities; their identity and existence—whether during the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties (1st to 6th centuries AH) or throughout the Ottoman Empire (14th to 20th centuries)—have been articulated through Islamic caliphate concepts. These regimes derived their legitimacy from religious foundations. Nevertheless, within the Sunni-dominated context of the Middle East, Shia Muslims have consistently constituted a minority group; thus they have frequently been viewed as "illegitimate and oppressed," as articulated by John Esposito (Esposito, 2003:33), which has profoundly influenced Iran's political-religious narrative.

In pre-Safavid Iran, particularly during ancient times such as the Achaemenid Empire, domestic policies and foreign relations were deeply rooted in principles of religious tolerance and coexistence. According to Lambton (1995:212), "The establishment of the Safavid dynasty marked a historic moment when Iran achieved its first independent and unified government after Islam." The formal adoption of Twelver Shia Islam during this period laid the groundwork for a religiously governed state while simultaneously increasing the influence of Shia clerics. This development also intensified ideological tensions between Shia-dominated Iran and its Sunni Ottoman neighbors. Consequently, these sectarian divisions played a

central role in shaping Iran's foreign policy with European powers during Safavid rule.

During subsequent dynasties such as Afsharid and Zand, religion's role in politics diminished significantly. However, under Qajar rule, Shia Islam regained prominence not only in internal governance but also within foreign policy frameworks—this time acting as an ideological counterbalance to state authority. External factors like Afghan invasions further contributed to this resurgence by exacerbating governmental instability and enabling religious scholars to emerge as an independent social force. Nikki Keddie aptly observes that weak state structures combined with decentralization often promote strong religious leadership (Hazir, 2014:45). Internally, another key factor was the lack of religious legitimacy among Qajar rulers compared to their Safavid predecessors. Unlike Safavid kings who possessed inherent religious authority due to their Shia lineage, Qajar monarchs relied heavily on clerics as sources of legitimacy and sought their approval. For instance, Hamid Algar highlights that Muḥammad Ḥusayn Kāshif al-Ghiṭa—a prominent cleric during Fath Ali Shah's reign—endorsed his rule by referring to him as his "deputy." Kāshif al-Ghiṭa even issued a religious decree obligating Fath-Ali Shah Qajar to wage war against Russia, making compliance with this directive a spiritual duty for the king (Algar, 1990:48).

The Tobacco Protest of 1890 represents a pivotal moment in the intersection of religion and politics, marking a significant religious movement that influenced foreign relations independent of state authority. This movement exemplifies a clash between the social power of Qajar monarchs and religious scholars, ultimately leading to the king's concession and the annulment of the tobacco concession agreement. Consequently, this event illustrates how religion impacted foreign policy through a competing force against governmental authority, grounded in principles opposing domination and framed within an anti-colonial struggle against foreign control. Following the Tobacco Rebellion, it is evident that within Shia Islam, resistance to colonialism emerged as a dominant theme among clerics, supplanting the traditional tribal monarchy of the Qajar dynasty. This shift elevated clerical authority to a more global stature as they faced stronger international forces (Dabashi, 2011:237).

During Pahlavi I's rule, significant transformations occurred in both governmental structure and church-state relations. With the establishment of Iran's first modern national government during this period, Reza Shah concentrated on modernizing the country while simultaneously seeking to

reduce the influence and power of religious scholars. This led to considerable opposition from clerics regarding his domestic policies.

This analysis reveals how internal dynamics alongside external pressures can either bolster or undermine religious influence, thereby shaping historical narratives related to national identity. Within this framework, constructivist approaches can effectively elucidate causal relationships between religion as an identity variable and governmental policies.

#### **4. Foreign Policy of Pahlavi II: Religion on the Margins of National Identity and Foreign Policy**

The foreign policy of Pahlavi II illustrates how religion functions as a peripheral element within the broader context of national identity and foreign relations. The historical role of religion as an identity factor in Iran's foreign policy is significant. To comprehend the nature and influence of religion in foreign policy actions during the Pahlavi era, it is imperative to first analyze the components that shape domestic political culture and subsequently examine the identity norms and international cultural context prevalent during that time. This foundational understanding allows for a detailed exploration of religion's role in shaping the behavioral patterns of Pahlavi's foreign policy.

Until the era of Pahlavi I, the primary sources of identity for Iranian society were rooted in Islam and Shia beliefs, supplemented by essential elements defining Iranian heritage. However, following the deposition of the Qajar dynasty and Reza Shah's ascension to power, a cultural shift emerged characterized by a form of Westernization or quasi-modernity, which became a third facet of the identity framework for Iranians. Thus, Reza Shah's establishment of a so-called "modern national state" necessitated targeted efforts to redefine Iranian identity as a cohesive nation with a singular linguistic and cultural foundation.

The political culture during Pahlavi II can be characterized by several key elements:

**Iranian Nationalism:** This form of ancient nationalism is marked by an admiration for the grandeur of Iran's historical legacy and a disdain for developments following the Arab conquest. It gained traction from the late 19th century onward, particularly after the Constitutional Revolution (Ahmadi, 2003:70). A significant factor contributing to this nationalism was a shift in external circumstances; initial interactions with foreign powers resulted in substantial territorial losses during conflicts that weakened Iran's military, economic, and political standing. This decline adversely affected

the morale of Iranian elites. The pursuit of lost imperial glory became a fundamental aspect of national identity within Iranian antiquarianism (Ahmadi, 2003:71). Additionally, since Reza Shah's ascension to power and alongside radical nationalist movements emerging in Europe, many Iranian intellectuals endeavored to articulate national identity through an emphasis on Iranian characteristics. By focusing on pre-Islamic history and ancient Persia, they sought to enhance nationalistic fervor. In this vein, government initiatives included renaming months of the year, commemorating a 2,500-year celebration of the Persian Empire, and reforming the Solar Hijri calendar. This strategy required fostering an "othering" dynamic wherein "Islam was positioned as an ideological other; Iranian Muslims were viewed as an internal other; and Arabs were perceived as an external other" (Tajik, 1998:85). The concept of antiquarianism emerged as a pivotal semantic foundation for Iranian nationalism during Pahlavi's reign by revitalizing ancient customs and practices aimed at constructing new cultural and social frameworks conducive to establishing a novel order across political, social, and cultural spheres. In this context, religious traditions were often depicted as impediments to progress. Ultimately, "the ideology promoted by both Shah and his regime sought to merge principles of Iranian nationalism with monarchy to such a degree that they became indistinguishable; within this framework, Islam was rendered irrelevant" (Alavian & Nikraves, 2021:160).

**Quasi-Modernism (Westernization):** It characterizes the Pahlavi narrative from Reza Shah's era through to the conclusion of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule, which consistently underscored a model of authoritarian modernization. This approach was predicated on a deliberate distancing from Islam and traditional practices, alongside a radical embrace of antiquarianism and a commitment to Western pathways. Such top-down modernization efforts culminated in cultural discord and intensified identity divisions within Iranian society. While traditional values were systematically dismissed, there was a failure to provide credible and legitimate alternatives that could be institutionalized.

**Secularism:** The intertwining of radical nationalism with authoritarian modernization facilitated the emergence of a concept advocating for the separation of religion from politics; both movements contributed to the marginalization of Islam. From the viewpoint of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the incorporation of these elements into societal and political frameworks was perceived as a pathway to ushering in an era defined as "Great Civilization."

In examining the international context and its influence on Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's foreign policy, it is crucial to recognize the significant impact of the Cold War. Gasiorowski posits that international political dynamics and the actions of superpowers—including countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt—played a critical role in shaping and constraining Pahlavi's foreign policies (Gasiorowski, 1992:329). Within the bipolar framework of the Cold War, forming alliances or coalitions with one of the power blocs became an unavoidable strategy aligned with prevailing cultural norms in international relations. Concurrently, as noted by Laclau and Mouffe, an external adversary helps solidify identity boundaries; therefore, opposition to the Soviet Union served both as a unifying internal force and as a directional influence on Iran's foreign policy during this period (Mousavinia, 2014:121). The priorities in policymaking included emphasizing regime security over national security, increasing military budgets for regime militarization, establishing or enhancing security organizations and military alliances, and aiming to fulfill a gendarmerie role in regional affairs (Samiei Esfahani, 2021:9). In this context, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi perceived the Soviet bloc and communism as the primary threats to Iran's national security. Consequently, he joined the Baghdad Pact in October 1955 to foster closer ties with the United States. This alignment between Iranian foreign policy and U.S. interests further legitimized Iran's regional actions under Nixon's doctrine as a stabilizing force for security and stability.

In light of international developments during the 1960s and 70s, actors within the Middle East sought alterations to the regional power structure. The enduring border disputes, ethnic tensions, and historical conflicts among these actors were intensified within the context of the Cold War. Additionally, it is important to factor in previously mentioned religious tensions. Consequently, prospects for cooperation among nations diminished while military rivalry and confrontation emerged as dominant themes. During this period marked by Britain's exit from the Persian Gulf and support from radical Arab states such as Iraq, Egypt, and South Yemen for revolutionary groups aligned with Eastern bloc interests, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi recognized that despite his suspicions toward other Persian Gulf actors, it would be more prudent to coexist with emerging regional nations while prioritizing strategic security concerns over territorial disputes. His acknowledgment of Bahrain's independence, support for establishing an independent emirate in Qatar, and facilitation of forming the United Arab Emirates—albeit after initial opposition—were actions indicative of what Rouhollah Ramezani referred to as an "Iranian peace" during the 1970s. This

era highlighted a conservative rather than revolutionary behavioral pattern within the regime (Fuller, 2019:88 and 95). Thus, it can be concluded that Shah's regional strategy centered on enhancing and safeguarding Iran's national security within the Persian Gulf.

Both internal factors and international identity-forming elements have significantly influenced foreign policy formulation. The conviction in top-down modernization intertwined with nationalism effectively marginalized religion from formal political discourse. However, religious policies during Pahlavi II exhibited variability across different periods. Before the Iranian coup d'état of 1953, there were some weak religious initiatives such as establishing an Islamic sciences faculty and forming a student corps by both the Shah and his court; these initiatives fundamentally aligned with maintaining compatibility with monarchical foundations. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi aimed to project a religiously devout image consistent with his personality traits while adhering to ancient traditions where Iranian kings sought religious legitimacy. During this timeframe, societal expressions of religiosity were also notably subdued. Overall, until 1963, clerical leaders maintained a largely passive political role within society. For instance, Ayatollah Borujerdi prioritized preserving clerical authority and dignity; he adopted a conciliatory stance towards Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to prevent weakening his regime and risking subjugation to foreign powers (Manzoor-al-Ajdaad, 2019:420). Regarding foreign policy involvement during this period, evidence primarily consists of correspondence between Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister's office concerning Ayatollah Borujerdi's "request" directed at "the royal presence regarding relations between the Shah's government and Saudi Arabia" in 1941 aimed at addressing issues faced by Iranian pilgrims in Saudi Arabia (Manzoor-al-Ajdaad, 2019).

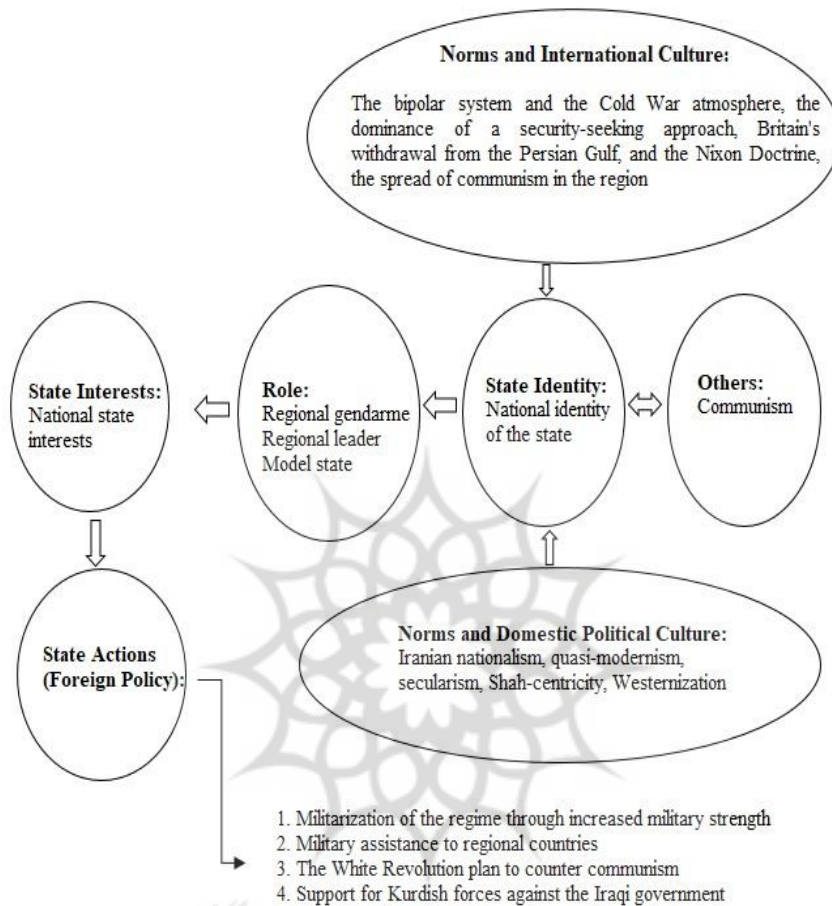
Beginning in the 1950s, various laws and regulations were introduced to reform mourning ceremonies and sermons, while the Shah refrained from endorsing restrictive legislation targeting Baha'is. A notable indication of this shift in governmental religious policy is reflected in its approach toward Mohammad Taghi Falsafi, who emerged as the most distinguished preacher during the Pahlavi II era. The regime's backing for Falsafi stemmed from its utilization of his philosophical discourses against Marxism to serve its interests (Mazaheri, 2022:248). Nevertheless, during the 1960s, as Falsafi's criticisms of the regime intensified, governmental tolerance towards him waned. Initially, his sermons primarily focused on moral education; however, they later incorporated political issues such as "the threat posed by Zionism to the Islamic world, critiques of Iran's

collaboration with Israel, advocacy for the Palestinian cause, condemnation of U.S. foreign policies, and objections to the regime's antiquarian tendencies" (Mazaheri, 2022:250), which ultimately resulted in his imprisonment.

The Pahlavi government aimed to disseminate a conservative and apolitical interpretation of Shia Islam that highlighted its compatibility with monarchy. Nonetheless, its overarching aspiration was to construct a secular society modeled on Western paradigms wherein religion would recede from public life into private domains. The Shah sought to consolidate Iran's fragmented identities under the ideology of Pahlavism and promote a unified national identity. This national identity served as a focal point for Pahlavi modernism in contrast to Islamic identity (Bashiriyeh, 2004:19-20).

The White Revolution serves as a significant example through which one can examine the influence of international dynamics on domestic perspectives. The Shah's initiative to align with the Western bloc catalyzed the onset of the White Revolution. During a period marked by heightened tensions in the Cold War between superpowers, the United States exerted pressure on the Iranian government to reform its agricultural structure and implement land reforms out of concern for Soviet influence (Milani, 2004:100). Thus, both the White Revolution and land reforms emerged as strategies within the Cold War context aimed at curbing communist expansion while simultaneously reflecting the Shah's aspirations for extensive social, cultural, and economic transformations to modernize Iran. Additionally, Iran's foreign policy actions during this era included aiding Pakistan during its 1971 conflict with India, providing arms and training to Yemeni royalist factions, supporting Kurdish forces in their struggle against Iraq, and acting as a regional gendarmerie in the Dhofar War. The motivations behind Iran's involvement in this conflict included apprehensions regarding communist encroachment in the Persian Gulf following Sultan Qaboos's request for military support. Furthermore, "the Omani monarchy was perceived as a defensive barrier against Arab nationalism" (Fuller, 2019:91).

In conclusion, the influence of both internal and external identity-forming factors on Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's foreign policy can be delineated in the following manner:



**Diagram 2.** The connection between identity and foreign policy during the Pahlavi era.  
(Source: Authors)

As illustrated in Diagram 2, the Shah adopted a role for Iran shaped by a combination of internal norms and principles governing the international context; this role encompassed being a regional gendarme, leader, protector of the region, and model state. Constructivist theory suggests that perceptions of threats or the nature of other states act as foundational frameworks for state actions and inform how a government conceptualizes its role. Thus, national interests are articulated by policymakers within this context. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi functioned as the exclusive decision-maker regarding foreign policy and aimed to define

Iran's interests primarily through support for maintaining existing conditions. However, this stance was not only misaligned with prevailing realities but also lacked appeal among the general populace.

Moreover, an analysis of domestic culture reveals that while religion has significantly influenced Iranian society's worldview, it has not actively informed policymakers' cognitive frameworks; therefore, national interest has prevailed over religious identity. The foreign policy behaviors exhibited by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi were rooted in a political culture derived from Pahlavism, characterized by elements such as Iranian nationalism, Western orientation, secularization of society, Shah-centricity, and modernism. These factors steered Iran's foreign policy toward strengthening ties with Western powers to such an extent that Azghandi (2020) described Pahlavi II's foreign relations using the concept of a "puppet state," while Hushang Mahdavi (1998) labeled this era as one marked by dependency on Western influences. The principal "other" identified by the monarchical regime was communism and Soviet imperialism; consequently, Shah's policies were fundamentally focused on curbing their influence. To counteract pan-Arabist and communist ideologies promoted by figures like Gamal Abdel Nasser and entities such as the Soviet Union in the region, he extended financial and military support to Shia factions in Lebanon and Zaydi Shia in northern Yemen.

In his notes from May 23, 1975, Asadollah Alam highlights these covert aids (Alam, 2023:78). Following Iran's accession to the Baghdad Pact, Gamal Abdel Nasser endeavored to forge a regional alliance against the Shah by expanding the Arab Republic of Egypt. In contrast, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi aimed to utilize the Shia minority in areas such as Lebanon and Yemen through a network supporting non-state actors to combat the rising pan-Arabism among Sunni factions. This apprehension simultaneously reinforced the Pahlavi regime's partnership with Israel. Thus, one could assert that religion did not function as an independent variable in foreign policy decision-making; instead, it was utilized instrumentally to advance the national interests envisioned by the Shah. The founding of the Organization of Islamic Conference in 1969 through collaboration between Morocco and Saudi Arabia exemplifies this notion, as it was driven by motivations to counter Gamal Abdel Nasser's vision of Arab unity while also serving the Shah's objectives to solidify his authority and strengthen regional policies. Additionally, factors such as the Arabs' defeat by Israel, the occupation of Jerusalem, and the burning of the Al-Aqsa Mosque were also presented as cultural-religious incentives for this initiative.

## **5. Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Religion as Ideology and Framework for Foreign Policy**

Following the triumph of the Islamic Revolution and the formation of the Islamic Republic, there was a profound shift in the sources of identity and, consequently, in the political culture of society. The religious aspect of identity emerged as a central component. Religion transitioned from being viewed as opposition to occupying a position within governance and authority, resulting in a relationship between religion and state in Iran that surpassed the traditional historical dynamics between religion and politics in the nation. The components of identity that constitute the political culture in this new era encompass several key elements:

**Islamic Religious Identity:** The changes in cultural foundations following the revolution were profound enough to assert that Islamic identity now signifies that of the Islamic Republic, shaping its foreign policy interests and objectives (Moshirzadeh, 2004:12). As articulated, "the primary characteristic and foundational element of this system, which derives its legitimacy from religion, is its Islamic nature. Thus, its principal commitment and function are to uphold faith and adhere to Islamic ideals and values" (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2009:13). This importance is evident in the new constitution, which recognizes Islam's completeness and comprehensiveness by stating that "the constitution of the Islamic Republic delineates Iran's cultural, social, political, and economic institutions based on Islamic principles and norms while reflecting the genuine aspirations of the Muslim community" (Constitution of the Islamic Republic). Consequently, political Islam serves as a central component in shaping the cultural and political framework of society.

**Shia Islam:** Political Islam is fundamentally rooted in a Shia interpretation that acts as a central framework for understanding actions and reactions within society. The values, principles, and symbolic elements inherent in Shia Islam constitute the basis for the identity and legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. Key principles such as martyrdom culture, the anticipation of the Mahdi's return, taqiya (dissimulation), opposition to oppression, loyalty (tawalli) and disavowal (tabarri), rejection of domination, imamate, enjoining good and forbidding wrong, and jihad have significantly influenced individual and collective behaviors among Iranians from their struggle against the Pahlavi regime to the establishment of the new system. Additionally, symbols such as the Ashura movement, mourning ceremonies for Imams, Islamic commemorations and holidays, along with the activities of various religious institutions like mosques—especially during the consolidation phase of the Islamic Republic—have played a crucial role.

**Western Aversion:** While the slogan "Neither East nor West" emerged during protests that led to the Islamic Revolution's success and has since been referenced as a fundamental governmental principle, actual policies have predominantly reflected an aversion to Western influence—particularly anti-American sentiment—as a core concept. Consequently, modernity—which was once viewed as an integral aspect of Iranian identity—is now frequently portrayed as being at odds with "cultural exchange," instead being termed "cultural invasion." The principal rationale behind rejecting Western values stems from concerns regarding their potential effects on religious culture and their capacity to undermine traditional national culture.

Alongside these internal changes, there have been significant transformations in the norms and international culture that have shaped identity over recent decades. The international system's structure underwent a shift in the 1990s due to events such as the conclusion of the Cold War, the dissolution of bipolarity, advancements in communication technology, and globalization. These developments established a foundation for new identities and behaviors within international relations, necessitating a revised approach to foreign policy issues. For example, as global power dynamics transitioned from a bipolar to a multipolar framework, nations increasingly aspired to assume roles as regional powers within this global order. This trend has fostered shared objectives and identities among groups of countries within specific geographic regions under the umbrella of regionalism. In this regard, states are motivated to bolster their capabilities, particularly at regional levels. As such, we observe an increasing diversification of actors and opportunities for new or smaller entities to engage in meaningful influence.

Moreover, military strength is not the sole determinant of power; various other tangible and intangible elements—such as economic strength, technological prowess, informational resources, and soft power—also contribute significantly to defining a nation's power. This reflects a complex and multifaceted understanding of power within the international landscape. Coupled with advancements in communication technologies that have effectively transformed our world into a global village, this evolution has facilitated the rise of civil society actors and subnational entities. As a result, states are no longer regarded as exclusive political actors capable of exerting unilateral control over public sentiment. Collectively, these dynamics can be interpreted as components of an overarching trend toward globalization across multiple dimensions that inevitably influences changes in national foreign policies.

Consequently, the semantic and identity foundations of Iran's foreign policy actions have experienced a profound transformation on both domestic and international fronts. Within the domestic sphere, there are now varied criteria for delineating the "self" and the "other," framed through a redefined understanding of fundamental political concepts within a religious context. In this framework, political jurisprudence serves as the primary interpretative authority in foreign policy, overseeing and regulating the nature and extent of relationships among Muslims both within their community and on a global scale, extending beyond just the Islamic Ummah. Political jurisprudence includes principles such as reconciliation of hearts, public interest, da'wah (invitation), enhancement of power and capability, adherence to promises, taqiyya (dissimulation), Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, rejection of domination, and justice (Sayyad Shirazi & Mohammadi, 2020:117). Each principle has given rise to specific foreign policy actions under different internal and external conditions. For example, while the Islamic Revolution in Iran has its roots in liberation movements that emerged globally after World War II, it has also exerted influence on these movements through its central tenet of revolution exportation within its foreign policy. The normative source for this concept is found in the principles of reconciliation of hearts and invitation within Shia jurisprudence.

The analysis of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic reveals that the Islamic Ummah is now prioritized over the concept of national sovereignty. The interests about Iran's territory and the protection of its existence and territorial integrity are framed within Islamic interests. Thus, it can be asserted that the paramount interest of Islam prevails over all national concerns. Ruhollah Khomeini articulated this perspective by asserting: "I frequently emphasize that nationalism is a fundamental cause of Muslims' misfortunes because such nationalism positions the Iranian nation against other Muslims, and similarly places the Iraqi nation in opposition to others. These divisions are orchestrated by colonial powers to prevent Muslim unity... Islam has come to unify all ethnicities. It resembles the ribs of a comb; none possesses superiority over another—neither Arab over non-Arab, nor non-Arab over Arab, nor Turk over any others, nor any ethnicity over another, nor white over black, nor black over white; none holds virtue above another. True virtue is found in piety, commitment, and adherence to Islam" (Ruhollah Khomeini, 1999:281). As such, a substantial aspect of Iran's foreign policy actions is embedded within an ideological context. Therefore, in instances where conflicts arise between values and norms of international relations and religious beliefs in foreign policy, religious

values, and principles are prioritized to uphold the legitimacy of the regime, as delineated in the constitution.

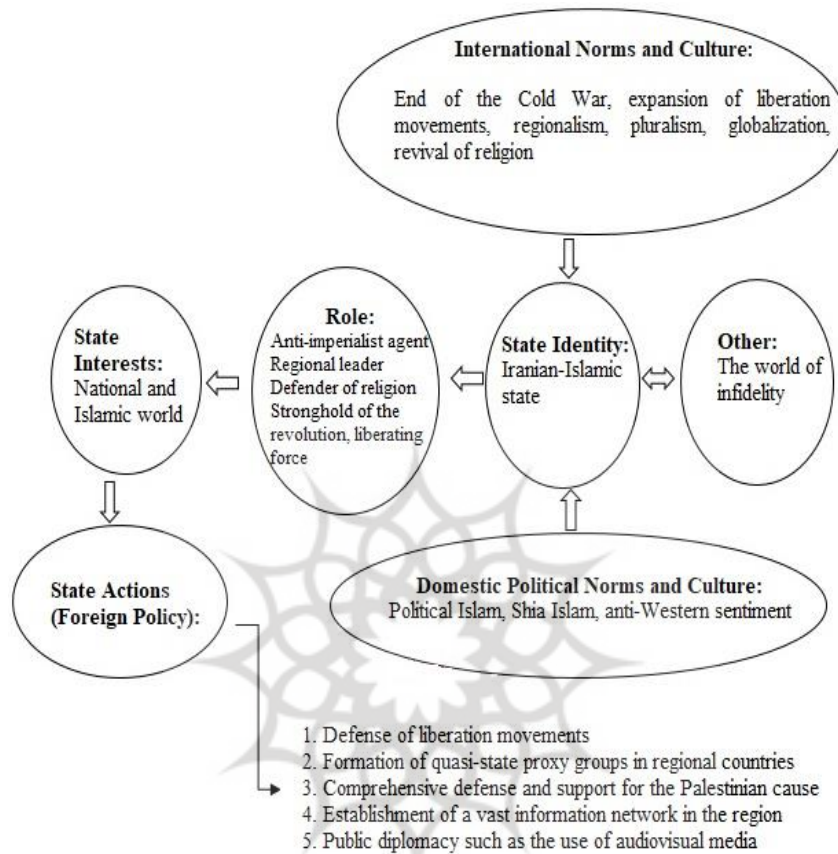
Conversely, certain regional developments—such as the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and the rise of a Shia government in Iraq—have enabled Iran to capitalize on its normative connections and transnational relationships with Shia communities more effectively. At the same time, U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq redirected international political culture towards a focus on security concerns. Within this framework, labeling Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil" the U.S. President has heightened perceptions of its conflict with America, casting it as a battle between good and evil infused with a stronger religious narrative. In recent years, initiatives aimed at creating a strategic coalition dubbed "Arab NATO" against Iran's influence in the region have intensified anti-Iranian sentiments among both regional societies and governments. As a result, there has been an increase in anti-Iranian and anti-Shia attitudes, prompting Iran to implement policies designed to enhance its influence over regional quasi-state actors.

The Islamic Republic is actively working to construct a religious geopolitical framework within the region to legitimize its political actions. This includes efforts to engage Shia populations in Bahrain, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq (Kadri, 2020:34). One significant tool employed by the Islamic Republic in response to shifts in international political culture and advancements in communication is public diplomacy—evident through the establishment of international media outlets. Furthermore, organizations like the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization function as religious propaganda arms for the Iranian state, playing crucial roles in reinforcing transnational religious connections between Iran and the broader Islamic community. These relationships encompass not only traditional religious activities linked to seminaries but also educational and diplomatic initiatives undertaken by Iran abroad. The growth and proliferation of such quasi-state entities operating globally illustrate a complex and multifaceted representation of Iran's intertwined spiritual and political objectives within international affairs (Wastindge, 2019:1).

Saudi Arabia represents another significant example of the enduring relationship between politics and religion in the Middle East, having invested billions of dollars over more than fifty years to promote Sunni doctrine globally. This governmental support for transnational religious initiatives is driven by political objectives aimed at defending and ensuring the regime's longevity (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018:10). As primary

contenders for power in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, and Iran engage in a conflict that manifests as a deep-seated sectarian rivalry between Sunni and Shia factions. Both nations lead proxy wars within the region, a phenomenon often described as an Arab Cold War (Brooks, 2018; Hiro, 2018). Iran's involvement includes training and developing proxy forces aligned with its revolutionary exportation strategy and Islamic internationalism. The notion of a Shia crescent fits within this framework of Islamic internationalism; it originates in Iran, traverses Iraq and Syria, and culminates in southern Lebanon. This crescent could potentially disrupt the traditional power balance in the region, illustrating the concurrent impact of internal identity-forming norms (the religious culture of Shia Islam) alongside external influences (regionalism).

A further radical illustration of a shift in foreign policy pertains to relations with Israel. The Islamic Republic and Israel, both characterized by ruling identities grounded in religious ideologies, endeavor to extend their spheres of influence within the Middle East to fulfill their respective interests. Iran's opposition to Israel and its support for Palestine—an issue that holds significant identity and existential importance—are rooted in jurisprudential principles such as justice, rejection of domination, and resistance against oppression. Consequently, the Palestinian issue is perceived by Iran not merely as a domestic or Arab concern but rather as an Islamic one. While ideology is a crucial factor in this context, strategic considerations also play an essential role; these include maintaining a balance of power in the region, establishing regional arrangements, engaging with Arab actors, and addressing security threats from Israel—particularly its attempts to isolate Iran and assert itself as the preeminent regional power responsible for national security (Sanaie & Kavianpour, 2010:220). Thus, policymakers have structured their actions around an identity defined by resistance to oppression and imperialism as derived from Shia Islam for the Islamic Republic. In this framework, relations with the United States—seen as a clear manifestation of imperialism—are considered incompatible with Islamic law; therefore, Iran is compelled to vigorously counter U.S. political and cultural initiatives based on its anti-imperialist stance. Support from the Islamic Republic for Palestinians or quasi-state groups in Yemen can similarly be interpreted through this lens of being an "anti-imperialist" force and a "defender of religion" (Akbaba & Ozgur, 2019:150).



**Diagram 3.** The Relationship Between Identity and Foreign Policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran  
(Source: Authors)

As illustrated in Diagram 3, fundamental transformations in the elements that shape both internal and international identity have altered the definitions of "the other" and "the non-other." The Islamic Republic has redefined its identity as a political actor within the context of Shia Islam and has begun to engage with other actors within a newly established identity framework in international relations. This evolution has resulted in a distinct understanding of its role as a national state, characterized primarily as a bastion of revolution and liberation, a regional leader, an anti-imperialist agent, and a defender of particular beliefs. As a result, national interests have been re-evaluated; with the proliferation of Shia geopolitics, there is an

anticipation for shifts in the political landscape of the region that align with what is perceived as the higher interests of Islam—interests that are regarded as synonymous with national interests.

### **Conclusion**

The revival of religion in international relations since the 1960s and 1970s underscores the importance of recognizing and integrating the role of religion as a significant variable in analyzing foreign policy decision-making. It should be acknowledged as a fundamental identity factor that helps explain and clarify behavioral patterns within international relations. An examination of relevant research shows that while this trend has gained more traction internationally, it is less prominent in domestic studies. By investigating how religion influences foreign policy behaviors in practice, it becomes feasible to mitigate inconsistencies in policies and foster a more cohesive approach that aligns with national interests. Accordingly, through a comparative analysis framed within constructivist theory between the Pahlavi II era and the Islamic Republic, we illustrated that during the Pahlavi II period, religion functioned primarily as a norm—one among several factors shaping foreign policy—and thus did not substantially contribute to national identity's influence on foreign policy. Conversely, in the Islamic Republic, religion operates as an ideology and serves as an independent variable that underpins identity in shaping the nation's foreign policy actions.

In the context of constructivist theory, analyzing actions and behavioral patterns in foreign policy is no longer merely reliant on material resources; instead, it posits that intangible structures of meaning and concepts—such as identity and its constitutive norms—are equally influential in determining interests and shaping actions. During the Pahlavi II era, domestic political culture was characterized by key identity elements including Iranian nationalism, Westernization, quasi-modernism, secularism, and patrimonialism. On an international scale, actor behavior was influenced by norms arising from Cold War dynamics, bipolar bloc divisions, a focus on security concerns, the spread of communism, and the Nixon Doctrine within the Middle East. In this context, there is little evidence of a religious framework acting as a cognitive influence on state political actions. Consequently, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's government defined its role as a regional gendarme, regional leader, and model state with a focus solely on initiatives aimed at preserving its existence and enhancing national material power. Even when covertly assisting Shia groups in Lebanon and Yemen, this action was driven not by ideological or belief-based affinities but rather

by national material interests alongside targeted political and military objectives—such as countering Soviet communism and Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arabism while extending its regional influence. This analysis suggests that the prevailing identity was articulated primarily in terms of Iranian nationality without any significant connection between political affairs and religious matters. During this period, Iran's identity was formally defined as a modern national state with religion positioned at the margins of this identity. At this time, religion primarily served an active role in opposing both internal despotism and external colonial forces; notable examples include Ayatollah Kashani's and Navvab Safavi's initiatives to recruit volunteers for Palestine or scholars' opposition to legislation regarding provincial councils as a foreign colonial conspiracy.

At the same time, the remnants of religious identity beliefs and concepts remained alive beneath the nationalistic actions of the regime due to their historical roots and the enduring presence of religious authorities; these embers ultimately ignited during the winter of 1979. The internal norms that shape domestic political culture within the Islamic Republic encompass values and attitudes associated with political Islam and, more significantly, Shia beliefs. These include a broad spectrum of principles such as rejection of domination (*naft subūl*), reconciliation of hearts (*tālīf qulūb*), *taqiyya* (dissimulation), justice, and resistance against oppression. Additionally, anti-Western sentiment forms a substantial part of these identity constructs. Furthermore, following the end of the Cold War, developments such as regionalism, an increase in political actors, the rise of liberation movements, U.S. military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the emergence of ISIS have transformed conditions in the Middle East and led to new identity frameworks within international cultural contexts. Unlike previous periods when religion was overlooked or dismissed in international relations, we are currently witnessing a resurgence of religious influence in politics.

In this environment, the Islamic Republic has adopted new roles for itself in its interactions with foreign actors—identifying as an anti-imperialist agent, a bastion of revolution and liberation, a defender of faith, and a regional leader. These roles stem from discontent with existing conditions and efforts to instigate change. Indeed, Shia religious political culture has cultivated an enduring revolutionary spirit among its followers; this is evident in the reformist tendencies displayed by the Islamic Republic in its foreign policy. Influenced by this dissenting spirit, Iranian leaders view the international system as unjust and therefore reject the current order in international relations while seeking to redefine it. Examples of Iran's

actions reflecting this approach include supplying arms to Yemen's Ansar Allah group, influencing government formation processes in Iraq and Lebanon, establishing a comprehensive information network throughout the region, training proxy forces, and supporting Bashar al-Assad's regime during Syria's civil conflict.

Consequently, as religion has transitioned from a peripheral to a central role in politics, the primary unit of identity is now recognized as the Islamic Ummah. The importance of defining this identity is highlighted by the fact that both regimes have embraced the role of regional leader, despite their fundamentally different ideological and organizational frameworks. Nonetheless, due to these two distinct identity foundations, the policymaking and actions of these states in fulfilling this role have adhered to conflicting patterns. Notably, the ideological legacy that shapes foreign policy behaviors within the Islamic Republic has sometimes resulted in fragmentation and inconsistency or personal biases influencing national interest pursuits. This oscillation between national interests and the religious identity foundations that affect policy decisions has led the Islamic Republic at times to deviate from pragmatism and become mired in idealism that is disconnected from practical realities.

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