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## The Evolution of the Role of Culture in Iran-France Relations through the Lens of Iranian Elites,

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### Abstract

Iran valued and positioned France and its culture inside a conceptual image of its own civilization prior to the Islamic Revolution. Even if France lags behind Iran in solid political connections and contacts, its cultural richness, led to the highest degree of presence in Iranian society and among its intellectuals in the cultural sphere. Such a link was susceptible to a social and political upheaval in Iran, following the country's revolution. This study employs unstructured interviews to examine a representative sample of 19 political, cultural, and academic elites, comprising both pre-revolution Francophones and post-revolution executives, focussing on their perspectives and elite experiences within the historical-cultural context of bilateral relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and France. This research focuses on the question of how the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran faced the continuity and persistence of this historical cultural trend and what relationship it established with it through a distinct process.

**Keywords:** Culture, Francophone Community, Iranian Elites, Iran-France Relations, Islamic Revolution

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## 1. Introduction

While France has always been viewed as a third power factor in Iran's foreign policy history, the two countries' mutual obligations have been impacted by the dynamics of British and Russian ties, and lack a notable sense of continuity and consistency. France was the second European state to form an alliance with Iran during the Qajar dynasty. Despite their attempts to do so, the French were beaten by Britain's enormous influence in the Iranian court. Since the Safavid era and the establishment of the first bilateral international relationships between the two nations, Iran has maintained a thriving cultural relationship with France, one of the few European powers, in addition to its turbulent political and security ties. Prior to the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the most important expressions of the relationship between France and Iran since the Safavid era were cultural aspects. Academic interactions, French literature and translations, cultural partnerships, and the use of French in French schools for Iranian Francophones are all seen as important indications of these cultural relations. Regardless of their influence on Western culture through their contribution to Islamic civilization, Iranians' rich history consisting of more than thirty centuries of art and handicrafts, the continuity of their cultural identity since the founding of the first global state more than 2500 years ago, and their role in the formation of the first international society that respected the religions and cultures of the peoples under its rule (with historical events like the liberation of Jews from Babylonian captivity and the influence on Greek, Arab, Mongol, and Turkish civilizations) provided crucial background for this issue. Iran valued and positioned France and its culture inside this conceptual image of its own civilization prior to the Islamic Revolution. Even if France lags behind Iran in solid political connections and contacts, its cultural identity led to the highest

degree of presence in the Iranian society and among its intellectuals in the cultural sphere. Such a link was susceptible to a social and political upheaval in Iran following the country's revolution.

While culture was marginalized as a subsystem of interactions, the worldview of the Islamic Revolution's leaders and the principles of the Islamic Republic turned political and security concerns between Iran and Europe, notably France, into the centre of antagonistic ties. The leaders and elites at the centre of the revolution, who were mostly trained in Europe and America, were instrumental in the movement and assumed enormous post-revolutionary duties. Despite this backdrop, the idea that the two nations' elites would use culture as the foundation for a significant political and economic partnership between France and the Islamic Republic of Iran did not come to pass. Therefore, this research focuses on the question of how the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran faced the continuity and persistence of this historical cultural trend and what relationship it established with it through a distinct process. This is because the evolution of the role of culture in the complex, tumultuous, and sometimes confrontational relations between Tehran and Paris, given its background in the history of bilateral relations, is a matter worthy of examination in the analysis of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

### 1. 1. Literature Review

The cultural links between Iran and France have always been the most significant aspect of the literature concerning the analysis of bilateral relations between the two nations. These publications have either been solely devoted to this topic, or placed within a wider

analysis, with the majority concentrating on elucidating the nature and extent of this relationship. In 1970, prior to the revolution, Ghaem Maghami authored a book entitled *History of the Spiritual and Political Relations between Iran and France*, which explores the origins of the moral and spiritual affinity between the French and Iranians, emphasising the impact of Iranian culture and civilisation on France and Europe as a central theme of the work. The author, inspired by the profound cultural connections between the two nations, composed the book and examined the historical significance of this relationship from the period of Aryan migration to Europe. Ghafari's 1989 publication, *History of Iran and France: Relations from the Assassination of Naser al-Din Shah to World War I*, allocates an entire section to the scientific and cultural interactions between Iran and France, illustrating the cultural impact of France in Iran and the origins of this influence through documentation and relationship analysis. This book analyses the importance of the cultural relationship between Iran and France during a specific era, in contrast to previous works. The significance of the work is in the realisation that the ramifications of the relational dynamics it delineates become apparent in the subsequent decades and on the cusp of the Islamic Revolution. However, the importance of French cultural impact on the brink of the Islamic Revolution is a neglected element and frequently disregarded facet in articulating the cultural links between the two nations.

In 2011, Varzi published an article entitled *The French Revolution of Iran: Religion, Philosophy, and Population*, which examines the influence of Islamic thought on revolutions and collective actions, while also acknowledging the significance of French ideas among Iranian revolutionaries. The essay is significant, as it elucidates how the French Enlightenment, due to

French cultural impact in Iran, established a foundation for Iranian revolutionaries. The article *Ontology of Cultural Relations between Iran and France: Emphasising Contemporary Iranian History before the Islamic Revolution*, authored by Pourarian and Nikpour Badr and published in *the Journal of Cultural History Research* in 2017, examines the significance of French cultural influence on the Iranian society during the revolution, highlighting how culture can enhance international relations and potentially establish profound political or economic connections between nations. The authors analyse the relationship between Iran and France within this context and, while detailing this connection and the influence of French culture, conclude that although this influence has waned since a particular historical juncture, French culture remains a substantial component of the educated layers of the Iranian society. A book entitled *Orientalism vs. Occidentalism: The Reciprocal Cultural and Literal Image of Iran and France until the Islamic Revolution*, by Nanquette and published in 2017, examines the ways in which the prevailing conditions of the relations between Iran and France have obscured the cultural interactions and civilisational representations of the two nations. The prevailing representation of Iran in the French media characterizes it as a rogue state fixated on its nuclear aspirations, whilst the Iranian press portrays France as decadent and imperialistic. She analyses the cultural history of the connections between the two nations within a critical perspective. The book accurately recognises a cognitive disparity in the recent ties between Iran and France; however it does not delve further into this matter. An examination of the authored works reveals that the fluctuations in cultural relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and France, the significance of culture in this relationship, its contribution to state-building post-revolution, and its status concerning

political, economic, and particularly security dimensions remain unaddressed.

## **1. 2. Data Collection Method: Unstructured Interviews**

Interviews are regarded as a prominent qualitative research method in foreign policy studies, possessing two notable advantages: firstly, they provide access to firsthand information in conditions where the researcher is unable to employ extensive relevant documents due to momentary and spatial limitations; secondly, they facilitate valuable engagement with the various parties involved in the research context, mitigating issues related to confidentiality and specialized terminology for the researcher (Mello & Ostermann, 2023, p. 423).

Qualitative interviews are classified into three types: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured, distinguished by the differing levels of factors and indicators that affect the interview situation. Unstructured interviews, which are conducted without a predefined framework or structure, aim at generating knowledge through direct verbal interaction. The purpose of unstructured qualitative interviews is to elicit and emphasize the most significant impacts, experiences, situations, concerns, settings, and lived lessons of the respondents, which cannot be uncovered without the interview process (Leavy, 2014, p. 286).

Unstructured interviews, predominantly utilized in interpretative researches, are done via open-ended questions, devoid of predetermined questions, aiming to elicit particular, structured responses. Conversely, once the talk starts, the researcher adeptly steers the enquiries and the trajectory of the dialogue, informed by the interviewee's narrative and previous replies, exhibiting notable

flexibility. This quest for flexibility allows the researcher to leverage unknown story elements and capitalize on "unexpected moments" for enhanced understanding (Huddleston et al., 2022, p. 550).

This study employs unstructured interviews to examine a community of 19 political, cultural, and academic elites, comprising both pre-revolution Francophones and post-revolution executives, focusing on their perspectives and elite experiences within the historical-cultural context of bilateral relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and France before and after the revolution. The examination lays out a series of broad guiding questions designed to limit direction and involvement in the narration of interviewees' narratives, therefore preserving their perspectives from the author's pre-existing beliefs and expertise. Due to the researcher's inadequate skill, aptitude, and resources to embrace all experiences and historical lessons of this statistical community, a conceptual, thematic, and chronological framework needed to be established for their storytelling.

### 1. 3. Data Analysis Method: Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis method is used to analyse the data obtained from the interviews. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data (Clarke & Baraun, 2017). A theme is a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data relevant to the research question. Writing-up process in this method involves weaving together the analytic narrative and (vivid) data extracts to tell the reader a coherent and persuasive story about the data, and contextualizing it in relation to existing literature (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Thematic

analysis' key characteristic is the systematic process of coding, examining of meaning and provision of a description of the social reality through the creation of theme. To facilitate coding, different types of codes are recognized in thematic analysis "Conceptual code" identifies key elements, domains and dimensions of the study phenomenon; "relationship code" identifies links between elements, domains and dimensions; "participant perspective code" identifies the participant's positive, negative, or indifference comments about a particular experience; "participant characteristic code" shows the general characteristics of participants (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 103).

Through the synthesis of responses and examination of narratives, four recurrent themes in the proposed topics were discerned: the role of France in Westernisation and Iranian perceptions of the West, the significant influence of Francophones in Iran on the triumph of the Islamic Revolution and the initial establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, France's pivotal position in the Western sphere and the assertion of culture as the primary basis for engagement with France, and lastly, the imperative to mitigate the security standpoint in Iran and the political standpoint in France as a foundation for cultural relations.

#### **1. 4. Theoretical Framework: Neo-Functionalism Theory**

Neofunctionalism is considered one of the important and foundational theories of European integration, which was introduced during the era of behavioralism in political science in the United States and continues to be a subject of discussion and inquiry among researchers in International Relations and Foreign Policy studies. The central idea of this theory is that integration between countries is a process that begins through gradual



cooperation in specific subject areas and, upon reaching functional cooperation in that subject, this pattern extends to another area, which is referred to as "spillover". This theory has three important elements: first, functional spillover; second, political spillover; and third, the creation of supranational institutions for functional management. Functional spillover means that integration in a specific functional area drives the actors and elites of the involved countries towards greater integration in other areas. For example, in Europe, this issue began in the economic sector (coal sector) and led the elites to extensive collaborations in other energy sectors. By political spillover, it is meant that integration in specific areas leads to increased public support for creating a new political interaction space and even new institutions. With the realization of these two functions, integration can lead to the realization of the third element, which is the creation of mutual trust between countries towards transnational institutions and organizations, so that integration can be managed at an institutionalized and extensive level (Obydenkova, 2011, pp. 89-90).

Ernst Haas, as the most prominent theorist of neo-functionalism, emphasizes the "processual" nature of the subject of function and the purposeful role of actors seeking their own interests in advancing thematic functionalism and the spillover theory. The emphasis on actors and their interactions indicates that in neo-functionalism, the principle of interaction process is important, which arises from a complex network of actors seeking their own interests. In other words, these benefits and gains arise from the functioning of each distinct domain, which encourages the development of integration. From the perspective of neo-functionalism, the aforementioned interaction processes cause the involved actors to gradually influence internal political processes in

terms of persuading them towards the benefits of external integration, and encourage more interest groups to lobby within domestic governmental structures to take advantage of these benefits. According to Haas, some functional areas have higher spillover capacity and potential compared to other areas; this is due to the high material capacity and interests of that area. In fact, the higher the driving force of needs and expectations, the stronger the level of functional communications and interactions becomes. For this reason, economic domains defined at the lower policy level and directly impacting the daily lives of people in countries have greater pull and capacity in terms of spillover and achieving integration compared to vast issues like culture (Rosamond, 2000, p. 62).

Functionalism, unlike intergovernmentalism, which sees integration as isolated events such as negotiations and agreements and considers the state as a uniform and cohesive actor, relies on the multifaceted and variable nature of actors and integration. Its level of analysis is not limited to the domestic political level, but extends beyond national borders, where elites, especially non-governmental ones, can create international integration and even transform it into transnational organizations and institutions as a "community" (Wiener & Diez, 2009, p. 48).

## **2. France: A Window of Iran's View of the West**

Iranians' study of the West started with first interactions through various lenses, subsequently leading to an evolution in both the methodologies of comprehension and the breadth of this understanding. France was the most pivotal component of this fabric, significantly influencing the Iranian study of the West

through its literature and language. The term "Farang", in the Iranian culture, originates from "Frank" in France, reflecting the preference of Iranians for pursuing education abroad in France. This occurrence served as a basic element that, from the mid-19th century, facilitated the cultural engagement between Iran and France, with partnerships and ties predominantly advancing in cultural domains. Iran dispatched many students to France, and in reciprocation, Christian missionaries arrived in Iran for evangelistic purposes, while many French educators were welcomed at Dar ul-Funun. French was the inaugural foreign language instructed in Iran and profoundly influenced the Persian language (Bakhshandeh, 2012).

The enduring custom of the Qajar monarchs using personal French doctors resulted in a pronounced French influence on Iran, culminating in the establishment of the modern medical system in the country by the French. The concrete realisation of this was the establishment of the Tehran School of Medicine. Through this process, France emerged as a fundamental component of the cultural and educational legacy of Europe in contemporary Iran, as demonstrated by the education and cultural formation of Iranian leaders and politicians. The majority of educated Iranians with academic credentials were proficient in French until the early 20th century, and several individuals in prominent political roles had their education in France. Moreover, a significant contingent of foreign educators employed by the government were French, so reinforcing the foundation of French influence on Iran's educational system during the Reza Shah period. This impact manifested in several domains, including administration, legislation, educational institutions, pedagogical methods, textbooks, curriculum, examinations, and the standards of Iran's educational system. By 1930, the Ministry of Education employed twenty-three French

instructors, and French was taught as a second language in nearly all government secondary schools of that era (Keddie & Matthee, 2002, p. 185). The presence of French archaeological missions in Iran, a crucial element of the cultural and scientific relations between the two nations, was significant due to the French monopoly established through signed contracts; this interaction extended beyond governmental levels to include the citizens of both countries (Ghafari, 1989, p. 105). Undoubtedly, the four-hundred-year history of Iranian-French relations illustrates a shared cultural interest (Hellot-Bellier, 2007). France's devotion with Iran and Iranian culture, which relies on Orientalism, literature, travelogues, and the framework of philosophical understanding, has consistently been evident and significant (Sharif, 2019). Iranian studies in France also have a long history in France (Hourcade & Mellott, 1987). According to French researchers, the encounter between France and Iran's rich history and heritage dates back several centuries. In 1669, the “École des Jeunes de Langues” opened in Paris with the first chair dedicated to the study of Persian. Travel reports exploded at the end of the 17th century. By 1680, more than 1,100 were devoted to Persia. The numerous and informative testimonies of French travellers, who often published their travel journals in Iran, introduced the French intelligentsia to the wealth of Iran's heritage from the 17th century (Voisin, 2023, p. 243).

In the interviews conducted, thirteen of nineteen Iranian elites explicitly and implicitly acknowledged the aforementioned trend as noteworthy. A member of the cultural elite, possessing significant political ties post-Islamic Revolution and recognised as an intellectual and activist of the revolutionary era, remarked, “between 1961 and 1976, our fascination with Western culture was predominantly focused on the French” (Man, Cultural Director, 70

years old, 2023). Moreover, a prominent Iranian scientist, who served as an advisor to presidents following the revolution, remarked, “The cultural impact of France in Iran was profound for our generation; I had read 'Père Goriot' before I even knew the geographical location of Paris, and I was aware of the Maison Vauquer boarding house, including its number of rooms and other details” (Man, Philosopher, 76 years old, 2023). The Iranian political elite acknowledged the significance of this cultural context. One of Iran's ambassadors to France articulated the societal and individual perceptions of Iranians towards France as follows:

Iran of the past, a century ago, possessed a relatively nuanced understanding of France, particularly among its elites, albeit with varying degrees of leniency. In Iran, the language associated with intellectualism, intelligence, and prestige was French, rather than English. We started the revolution with a common cultural foundation, as the two nations had an established relationship (Man, diplomat, 71 years old, 2023).

The questioned elites, despite lacking academic knowledge of France, had their understanding of the country influenced by literature and language. During the interviews, French vocalists such as Édith Piaf, Charles Aznavour, and Yves Montand were often cited as preferred performers. During the interviews, references were made to Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, *The Little Prince*, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, and works by Jean-Paul Sartre, among others, as these texts and translations of French literature constituted the most accessible foreign literature for that generation of Iranian elites. In an interview with a cultural elite and a companion of Ayatollah Khomeini in Paris following the revolution, the pre-revolutionary environment for religious youth was articulated based on personal experience: “Ultimately, we were

devout youths, and the publications released by the publishing house, translated by Mr. Aram and others, predominantly focused on France and its history and literature, which we used” (Man, Cultural Director, 70 years old, 2023).

The respondents repeatedly highlighted that France had been identified by Iranians through its literature and even through their imagination. An Iranian political elite remarked:

My mother had perused nearly all the translated French literature; she had consumed such a plethora of French tales and novels that when I first took her to Paris, despite never having visited the city before, she possessed narratives about the streets of France. For instance, I would identify this as Saint Antoine; she would reference a specific book or mention Joan of Arc, among others (Man, Diplomat, 56 years old, 2023).

Another interviewee, an activist of the Islamic Revolution in France and a cultural elite post-revolution, recounted: “Upon my arrival in France, I had perused all literature pertaining to Napoleon; the sole remaining objective was to visit Napoleon's residence on the island of Corsica, which I accomplished after the revolution” (Man, Cultural Director, 70 years old, 2023).

The cultural influence of France via literature and storytelling in Iran served as a bridge to the Western world. French culture has integrated more significantly into the Iranian society, compared to other Western nations. Consequently, several Iranians and the intellectual elite before to the revolution saw the Western influence in Iran as predominantly French. A cultural elite and political activist of the revolution said on the circumstances of himself and his peers before to the revolution: “If we had a window to the world, it was initially opened by France” (Man, Cultural Director, 70 years old, 2023). This perspective corresponds to historical

facts; throughout that period, the French language was the medium of culture and education in Iran and, broadly, in the Middle East, with prevalent European ideas mostly attributed to French intellectuals (Nanquette, 2017).

Consequently, Iranian intellectuals and educated persons in France exerted considerable impact among literary readers. Political elites following the revolution, who were student activists during the revolutionary period, also corroborate this. One individual acknowledged his/her experience: “Our intellectuals originated from France; they were writers and thinkers, and France held a distinct preeminence in this domain. French literature was esteemed and significantly influential in Iran” (Man, Literature Specialist, 58 years old, 2023). Subsequent to this phenomenon, the adoption of the French language as the medium of education, intellectualism, and elitism in Iran led to the emergence of interest in the concepts of the French Revolution inside the Iranian culture. The comprehension of the concepts of the French Revolution in the Middle East, particularly in Iran, was shaped by the prevalence of the French language. Keddie, in her work on the French Revolution and the Middle East, addresses this issue and examines the prevalence and supremacy of the French language among Middle Eastern elites as the basis for their engagement with the core concepts of the French Revolution (Keddie, 1995, p. 233).

### **3. The Interplay between French Polarity and Iranian Identity within the Notion of Independence**

Throughout history, from the Great French Revolution to Napoleon and beyond World War II, all governments and elites in France have underscored the nation's distinctiveness and its rich cultural

and civilisational heritage. It is widely held that, similar to the English's reputation for Atlanticism and the Germans' post-World War II commitment to pacifism in foreign policy, the French have consistently esteemed themselves as a unique country. This conviction is prevalent among the elites and intellectuals of France, who assert that French culture contains distinctive features that set it apart from other cultures (Daheshyar, 1386 [2007 A.D.]). An analysis of the cultural interactions between Iran and France reveals two features that have also been evident in dialogues with Iranian elites. First, France possesses a cultural distinctiveness from the Western world, rooted on cultural polarity and self-sufficiency. Secondly, from this viewpoint, it has intellectual and theoretical similarities with Iran. Discussions with Iranian elites indicate that they perceive France as possessing a distinctive cultural and civilisational standing, and the French self-attribute is perceived by Iranian elites as a form of independence. France's cultural autonomy is evident in conversations concerning the historical and prospective aspects of their relationships. The cultural richness and autonomy of France are two highlighted notions in this context.

One of Iran's political elites articulates his comprehension of France by stating, "France possesses a completely independent identity. France is France. The literature, culture, and history of France are profoundly rich and deeply ingrained, with its art, diverse attractions, and music contributing to a distinct and autonomous identity" (Man, Diplomat, 56 years old, 2023). Iranian elites recognize the cultural richness of France and articulate it via many perspectives. "France possesses substantial assets. The pocketbook was initially released in France. *Les Misérables* was initially released in pocket size" (Man, lawyer, 76 years old, 2023). This pioneering aspect of France is highlighted in personal encounters. The criteria for identity independence are delineated by



the French, as explicitly stated by Iranian elites in an interview: “When we establish these criteria in language, literature, art, and cinema, France consistently ranks first, second, or at most third” (Man, Diplomat, 56 years old, 2023). The French emphasis on their language was cited in the interviews as a manifestation of cultural autonomy, with one of Iran's diplomats in France referencing it as a significant principle:

Many of the songs and melodies in English in Disney have all been dubbed by the French. They exerted further effort. This indicates their concern about their language. A governmental edict prohibited officials and authorities from utilizing English terminology. They would incur penalties; specifically, in interviews, speeches, and numerous affairs (Man, Diplomat, 75 years old, 2023).

The cultural richness and independent character of France, as recognized by Iranian elites, has conferred a unique position regarding France among them. The interviews underscored this, particularly on the cusp of the Islamic Revolution: “In the Western world, France occupied a distinctive position among both religious and secular elites” (Man, Cultural Director, 70 years old, 2023). Political elites emphasized this in their discussions and conversations: “We shared numerous commonalities in our dialogues; due to that independence I referenced, especially in the cultural domain” (Man, Diplomat, 75 years old, 2023). An academic elite emphasizes France's significance:

France plays a pivotal role, not only for Iran, but for numerous countries globally, in uncovering literary, cultural, and artistic movements in other nations. American literature between the two World Wars was initially acknowledged in France. Subsequently, authors such as Hemingway and Faulkner progressively attained global prominence. France appears to

have served as a pivotal hub for the dissemination of literary trends globally, despite not being the primary language of science and culture (Man, philosopher, 76 years old, 2023).

In this regard, a distinguished scholar and notable professor of French literature asserted: “Numerous cultural connections traverse through France. Several movies achieved prominence via France. A number of our works have received accolades. Our writings traversed France, accompanied by French translations, and attained global fame. Our songs frequently traversed France. France served as a conduit for us globally” (Man, Literature Specialist, 58 years old, 2023). Iran's involvement in the 1900 Paris World Exhibition sought to showcase the Iranian culture, signifying the nation's inaugural worldwide cultural presence (Ghafari, 1989, p. 84).

The idea of France as a nation with a rich and autonomous culture has prompted Iranian elites to seek a semblance or, alternatively, an affiliation within the sphere of independent and entrenched cultural identity. One of the foremost scientific authorities articulates this matter as follows: “We are a nation with a cultural heritage. Regarding cultural, literary, philosophical, and human concerns Allameh Tabatabai engaged in scholarly discussions with Henri Corbin, while Dr. Nasr provided translations” (Man, Cultural Director, 75 years old, 2023). An influential cultural elite and activist from the revolutionary era recounted their experience:

Prior to reading 'Nasayeh al-Muluk' by Khajeh Nasir, I presumed that a work authored by Khajeh Nasir, given his reputation as a politician, would exhibit certain parallels with Machiavelli. I intended to do a comparative analysis. I have read Machiavelli, but I have not read Khajeh. Subsequently, I perused it. The initial translator of this work, 70 years prior, was a Frenchman. The French share significant cultural and

civilizational similarities with us. The earliest comprehensive encyclopaedia created by the French had 17 chapters concerning Iran (Man, Cultural Director, 70 years old, 2023).

An ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran in France during the early years of the revolution recounts his experience with Ayatollah Khomeini, the revolutionary leader, stating: “Imam's perspective on France was cultural; on one occasion, during a private meeting, he urged us to undertake cultural initiatives there” (Man, Diplomat, 70 years old, 2024). Shams al-Din Amir-Alaei, the first ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to France, delivered a message from the revolutionary leader to Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the then President of France, which expressed gratitude for France's hospitality and asserted, “The relationship between Iran and France has consistently been spiritual and cultural, and France has never intervened in Iran's domestic affairs” (Amir Alaei, 1362 [1983 A.D.], p. 171). This observation is also evident in the perspectives of Ayatollah Khamenei, the current leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Despite his severe criticism of the West, he somewhat tempers his position toward France. He has cited Joan of Arc, France's national hero, and commended France's strategy under Charles de Gaulle's tenure as an independent policy. According to a member of the political-scientific elite, “France possesses a recognized independent identity due to its productive culture” (Man, Diplomat, 56 years old, 2023).

#### **4. The Francophone Community on the Verge of the Islamic Revolution**

The social background and experiences of the questioned elites affirm a robust Francophone presence inside Iranian society prior to the Islamic Revolution. The assertions of the elites during the

Islamic Republic regarding pre-revolutionary Iran and their experiences corroborate the assertion made by Bouvier, the Swiss traveller and author of the renowned travelogue "The Way of the World", who articulated: "In Tehran, many individuals who will never have the opportunity or resources to visit Paris and speak French fluently" (Bouvier, 1999). The supremacy of the Francophone sphere among the elite and intellectuals endured until the 1960s and extended until the 1979 revolution. Following the overthrow of Mossadegh in 1953 and the rise of American economic and political dominance, British influence fairly diminished (Richard, 2003). This phenomenon was crucial for an Iran undergoing a revolution characterized by a pervasive popular movement. Since the Qajar era, Iranian elites and educated persons have established a significant Francophone community in the social realm through the learning of the French language. The social prestige of France, whose linguistic influence encompassed various cultural aspects, significantly contributed to the Iranian revolution and the emergence of the post-revolutionary generation, despite Iran's lack of affiliation with the Francophone and Arab spheres and the substantial political and economic engagements with Iran. France maintained a significant presence in Iran via Catholic missionaries and French educational institutions. In Tehran, the educational institutions included the Alliance Française schools, the Lazarist schools of Louis and Jeanne d'Arc, the Iranian-French Razi schools, and the Israeli Union schools, which taught the majority of the Iranian elites (Nanquette, 2017, p. 11). In 1839, a French priest founded the inaugural modern school in Iran. Despite the absence of official establishment or management, the French language acquired societal worth and impacted the selection of foreign language instruction in the nation (Mahboobi Ardakani, 1379 [2000 A.D.]).

Subsequently, in the next years, France's preeminence in Iran was underscored by the elevation of the French language to the status of a principal medium within a substantial segment of the government. Many schools founded by European missionaries educated Christians in the French language and subsequently extended this education to Muslims. Since 1890, the World Union of Jews has taught young Jews from Iran, as well as Muslims seeking modernity, in contemporary sciences in French, with instruction often provided by European educators. In the economic domain, customs, administered by Belgian personnel since 1900, compelled the entire Ministry of Finance to function in French. In 1911, the constitutionalists appointed an American treasurer general, Morgan Shuster, to restructure the taxation system, accompanied by four French-speaking colleagues, therefore establishing French as the operational language (Richard, 2003). The first foreign-language newspaper in Iran, composed exclusively in French, was published daily in Tehran from March 1935 until the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution in 1978. It mirrored the experiences of French nationals in Iran during their engagements with the country (Bombardier, 2013, p. 195). Before then, the fourth page of the journal *Sharq*, overseen by Seyyed Zia Tabatabai, was published in French (Ghaffari, 1989, p. 171). The Qajar royal court utilized French as its language, and throughout the Pahlavi era, Paris remained the cultural centre of Iran for aristocrats, students, artists, Marxists, and subsequently the clergy. Initially, France supplied the Iranian elites with the principles of the French Enlightenment, which commenced in the late 19th century; afterwards, it presented a novel radical framework for prospective Iranian revolutionaries' religious tradition via postmodern and postcolonial ideas. Despite the onset of Mohammad Reza Shah's reign and his particular focus on Britain

and the USA, France's influence gradually waned, facilitating the growing presence of the United States and the United Kingdom in Iran. However, the educated classes, particularly the intellectuals, remained significantly influenced by French libertarians. The interplay of cultural and political views thus initiated a new chapter in Iran's history and the ensuing events (Pouranian & Badr, 2017, p. 19).

The elites involved in the revolution and who held positions under the Islamic Republic were also part of the Francophone community, a fact they highlighted in their interviews. One of the scientific elites who served as a cultural ambassador in France post-revolution stated, "My acquaintance with France was family-related; through my father. My family was Francophone, and there was consistently a favourable disposition towards France and the people inside the family" (Man, Cultural Director, 60 years old, 2023). A distinguished legal elite engaged in formulating the Islamic Republic of Iran's constitution remarked:

France held a familial significance for me. I was proficient in French prior to acquiring the ability to read and write Persian. My family was culturally pro-France. We were raised in a pro-France household, influenced by both my father and mother. French was our primary language and, at one point, the predominant language of Iran (Man, Lawyer, 76 years old, 2023).

A member of the cultural elite and management articulated the matter as follows:

For our generation, currently aged 65 to 70, France possesses a historical context. The initial languages introduced to Iran were French. During my upbringing, although my father was adept in English, the predominant language spoken in our home was French (Man, Cultural Director, 70 years old, 2023).

Another interviewee, who was part of the political elite, articulated his perception of France as:

My uncle was a friend and associate of Mr. Shariati. They both travelled to France together. I became acquainted with France through my uncle. This comprehension was predominantly cultural; my uncle's remarks pertained to scientific and cultural discourse, and I have a favourable perspective of France as a result (Man, Diplomat, 73 years old, 2023).

In addition to the socioeconomic background and individual affiliations of the respondents, 15 out of 19 highlighted the significance of the Francophone community in Iran for the bilateral connections between the two nations post-revolution. This emphasis stemmed from two perspectives: firstly, the significant presence of the French language and Francophones within the Iranian society and among social activists prior to the revolution, and secondly, the favourable perception of France during the revolution and the formation of the Islamic Republic, attributed to the influential Francophone circle surrounding Ayatollah Khomeini. A cultural manager and activist from the revolutionary era asserts:

The perception of France established post-revolution differed from that prior to the revolution. France occupied a unique position during the revolution among other countries. The first generation of the revolution were captivated by France, had been raised there. Our intellectual community at the onset of the revolution was Francophone (Man, Cultural Director, 70 years old, 2023).

Upon examining the generation of Bazargan and his contemporaries, one discerns that they constituted a collective—Bazargan, Qotbzadeh, and Banisadr—who received

their education in France. During that period, our intelligentsia received their education in France. The intellectual elite of the era predominantly utilized the French language (Man, Cultural Director, 70 years old, 2023).

A political elite about the Francophone community asserted:

Certain elites who impacted the revolution were affiliated with the Francophone community that was also associated with the Pahlavi regime. Ehsan Naraghi serves as a notable example. Despite enduring jail or limitations during the initial years of the revolution, they remained active catalysts and directed society (Man, Diplomat, 56 years old, 2023).

Another insider stated: “During the early stages of the revolution, the Iranian Francophone community, including individuals like Mr. Habibi who were allied with Imam, played a crucial role in fostering relations with France” (Man, Cultural Director, 60 years old, 2023). Moreover, a member of the cultural elite along with management asserted:

The generation that assumed control of the revolution was the Francophone generation, their intellectuals. Numerous Francophones were present among the elites and those in positions of authority. They constituted a connecting association. The principal leaders of the revolution, including the president and Bazargan, were all Francophones, establishing this relationship. The Islamic Revolution arose as a Francophone movement in resistance to America and Americanization (Man, Cultural Director, 60 years old, 2023).

Francophones played a pivotal role, and the pre-revolutionary climate in Iran was predominantly influenced by Francophones in the social domain. The portrayal of the revolutionary period from the viewpoint of an academic elite substantiates this concept.



During that time, I recall that the revolution was occurring, our university instructors were predominantly trained in France and were Francophones, proficient in French, and France exerted considerable influence in the field of science. The Iranian revolutionaries and intellectuals maintained strong ties with France, exemplified by Shariati, who was educated there and founded the Hosseiniyeh Ershad. For example, Bazargan. The initial or interim administration, led by Bazargan, received his education in France. Most members of Bazargan's cabinet were educated in France, since they were affiliated with the National Front, which featured individuals such as Sahabi and other intellectuals predominantly from France. Our intellectuals, particularly authors and thinkers, sprang from France, which exerted considerable impact in this domain (Man, Literature Specialist, 58 years old, 2023).

The prevalent language among these elites, as articulated by one, was: “The influential figures were those grandmothers and grandfathers who spoke French, had been educated at the Alliance, and whose offspring had become revolutionaries; for them, the French language represented a social class” (Man, Diplomat, 56 years old, 2023).

The questioned elites consistently highlighted the historical significance of the French language and literature in Iran as a factor of convergence between the two nations during the Islamic Republic of Iran. According to one of Iran's ambassadors to France,

The element of convergence has been the historical relationship between Iran and France, and prior to the emergence of the English language, French was the predominant foreign language in Iran. Historically, a significant number of our elites pursued higher education in France, which likely fostered a favourable disposition towards the country; these elements may have

contributed to the establishment of amicable ties with France (Man, Diplomat, 73 years old, 1402).

The significant role of France in the social landscape of Iranians, both prior to and during the revolution, is also seen in the elites' perception of France post-revolution.

Despite the French government's frequent anti-Iranian policies, I have resided in France since childhood, receiving my primary education there. I am intrigued by the culture, society, and character of France. I am a Francophone; should I travel overseas, my initial destination will be France (Man, Cultural Director, 60 years old, 2023).

A cultural elite and activist from the revolutionary period asserts:

France captivates me; if I were to choose a place to reside now, it would be France. I appreciate their culture and social relationships. My language is French, and I have experience with it. All of my children are Francophone. Individuals have an attachment to the location of their education (Man, Cultural Director, 75 years old, 2023).

One of the political elites articulates the matter differently:

The Francophones within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or elsewhere inadvertently inclined towards collaboration with France. For instance, if inquired about an institution to associate with, I would instinctively reference a French university. Francophones excel at teamwork, particularly in academic and scientific partnerships (Man, Diplomat, 60 years old, 2023).

A prominent cultural elite and active cleric in the revolution underscores the significance of the French language in another statement:

Our recommendation has consistently been to employ an additional language alongside English, such as French, similar to the period preceding the revolution, for both France and the 49 Francophone nations. Upon the conclusion of my time, I addressed the matter of including French as a third language in France, given our collaboration with Francophone nations, significant countries in Western and Northern Africa, as well as Muslim countries who utilize French (Man, Cultural Director, 62 years old, 2023).

The Francophone heritage in the Iranian society before to the revolution has served as a pivotal reference for consultation and conversation in informal encounters with the French in the years following the revolution. A member of the cultural elite remembers a meeting with French elites, stating, “I informed them that the US and the UK are currently absent in Iran, and that Iran is the most stable nation in the region. Iran has always been Francophone; you must fill the vacuum created by the US and the UK. In all my meetings, this fact was acknowledged” (Man, Cultural Director, 70 years old, 2023).

## 5. Paradigm Shift: Cultural Dynamics Influenced by Politics and Security

The ideas and perspectives articulated by Iranian elites toward France in the pre- and post-revolutionary period provide a robust, cohesive, and fundamental framework in their understanding of Iran-France relations. The historical ties between Iran and France in international relations persist in the perceptions of Iranian elites concerning bilateral relations and their future direction. Cultural connections, cognitive frameworks, and the empathy of the

Francophone community are regarded as crucial instruments for strengthening and sustaining relations with France, a perspective virtually unanimously endorsed by both political and non-political elites interviewed. From the viewpoint of a Francophone elite:

We shared numerous cultural affinities with France, and following the revolution, we possessed a theoretical framework derived from the French Revolution, perceiving France as the birthplace of democracy; these ideologies inclined us towards fostering relations with France, both during revolutionary Iran and prior to the revolution (Man, Diplomat, 73 years old, 2023).

The elites, recognizing the current difficult period in ties with France, saw culture as the last viable avenue. The primary domain of convergence that fosters not only interaction, but also the potential for cooperation is culture. They assert that culture is the sole referential lens. A political elite asserts that “political convergence is challenging at this juncture; however, if both parties are willing, there exists potentials in cultural, academic, and scientific domains” (Man, Diplomat, 60 years old, 2023). An academic elite and a cultural administrator asserts that:

If both parties are inclined to enhance relations, culture could serve as the vanguard. Given the extensive communication channels and historical ties between the two nations, there is a potential to restore relations. The forefront should be culture and art.

An intellectual and legal elite contends that “We have scrutinized the principle of cooperation. The divide is unlikely to transform into reconciliation, and if it does, it will occur inside this cultural domain” (Man, Lawyer, 76 years old, 2023).

The emphasis on the theme of culture is due to its impartiality, apolitical character, and insensitivity, particularly in light of the

current state of Iran-France ties. A political activist from the revolutionary era and a cultural and political manager thereafter underscores this issue. In addressing the inquiry on the strategy he would implement towards France in the present context, he asserts, “I would endeavour to initiate from sectors where issues can be resolved. We should concentrate on domains that are less politically charged or not exclusively political” (Man, Cultural Director, 75 years old, 2023). An additional expert in the interview elaborates, “The cultural and educational domain is less problematic, and its advantages for other relational dimensions are more significant, particularly in the scientific and academic realms” (Man, Diplomat, 69 years old, 2023). Distinguishing the cultural domain from the political sphere, according to these persons' perspectives on Iran-France relations, aims to safeguard it from any harm that may disrupt political ties and to uphold its role as the cornerstone of the relationship with France. From the viewpoint of a clergyman and university administrator:

Our cultural endeavours must remain distinct from the political realm, and we should endeavour to maintain this separation. Politicians ought to pursue their own course; we are uninvolved in political matters. Political connections have fluctuations. Academics should consistently collaborate on scientific and university-related issues, being indifferent to political swings and deals. Cultural figures ought not to be political figures. Our language is cultural; infusing a political colour into all our endeavours is detrimental. This problem also persists in our relations with France. At the embassy's cultural events, they would coordinate the occasion with a certain subject and audience, and we would conduct it accordingly with a cultural focus and composition. We must delineate the tasks; we are engaged in scientific and scholarly pursuits, and we need to have already accomplished that. Our engagement with

universities was characterized by our intellectual authenticity, rather than a diplomatic approach (Man, Cultural Director, 62 years old, 2023).

The viewpoint of these elites, emphasizing scientific, academic, and archaeological domains concerning France, underscores the significance of culture in the historical context of the bilateral foreign relations, while also highlighting the necessity of returning to a historical potential to sustain the relationship from their perspective. A prominent scientific advisor to the Presidents of Iran articulates the matter as follows:

In scientific domains, it is imperative to restore the interests of the French; their focus should extend beyond current issues in Iran to encompass academic and research endeavours. If the Iranian government intends to take action on this matter, and if there are individuals really contemplating this, they should revisit the origins of French influence in Iran; specifically, the history, civilization, and cultural heritage of Iran (Man, Philosopher, 76 years old, 2023).

A political elite articulates his proposal as a significant solution: “In the cultural domain, if we can restore the conditions that existed in the years preceding the revolution, our cultural, scientific, and academic relations to their normative state, the conditions influencing our political relations will naturally enhance” (Man, Diplomat, 69 years old, 2023).

A member of the scientific elite reflected on the declining state of culture, asserting:

Currently, they do not engage in disputes regarding the Achaemenids; instead, they negotiate or debate nuclear energy or human rights, or contemporary issues in general. Consequently, scrutiny of these contemporary challenges has

markedly intensified. Institutions operating in France, such as components of the CNRS, prioritize these topics. In France, there has been a decline in classical studies about Iran (Man, Philosopher, 76 years old, 2023).

According to these participants, the difficulty in Iran-France ties arises from a divergence from the historical cultural connection. From their viewpoint, the representation of France post-revolution differed significantly from that of pre-revolutionary France. The preeminence of the political domain over the cultural dimension in relations is apparent in the relational disorder from the perspective of these elites. Some ascribed it to France's activities, while others pinpointed Iran as the source. An experienced Iranian ambassador in France stated:

A distinctive characteristic of France, uncommon in other Western nations, is that when political relations become strained, this tension permeates all aspects of interactions and dealings with the French. From the doorman at the entry to the conference venue, you perceive his intense scrutiny, extending to the leaders of corporations, academic institutions, and their cultural and social domains, all of them. Consequently, this is a characteristic I observe less frequently in other nations. Due to its uncertain impact, France addresses the matter with considerable severity as long as the political climate is unsettled, and this concern is palpably evident (Man, Diplomat, 70 years old, 2023).

A cultural elite asserts, “Although we maintain that scientific, cultural, and academic discourse ought to be distinct from politics, the French do not concur with this perspective. The French deemed non-political contacts to be dependent on favourable political connections” (Man, Cultural Director, 60 years old, 2023). Another academic elite remarked:

It appears that in France, the cultural and academic environment is influenced by politics, and any political decision is executed accordingly. At the conclusion of Mr Khatami's tenure, the policy advocated for academic exchanges; but following Mr. Ahmadinejad's victory, France's policy shifted to oppose such ties. These factors have exacerbated the relations (Man, Cultural Director, 60 years old, 2023).

The security angle is also emphasized from Iran's standpoint. A cultural manager said, "We implemented restrictive measures regarding France, exemplified by our stance on the IFRI centre, which was unwarranted; indeed, a security perspective should not permeate the cultural domain" (Man, Cultural Director, 60 years old, 2023).

Aside from the political viewpoint, cultural elites highlighted Iran's security perspective regarding cultural relations:

At certain times, these relations were indeed restricted; during Ahmadinejad's second term, the nation's environment became security-focused, leading to a decline in these relations. Currently, during Mr. Raisi's administration in 2023, the situation is as challenging as it was during that period and has diminished considerably. Should the security climate improve somewhat and exchanges proliferate, resulting in the arrival of their cultural icons and filmmakers, as well as the participation of our filmmakers and theatre practitioners, alongside the organization of festivals, these factors alone will engender a naturally favourable wave of linkages (Man, Literature Specialist, 58 years old, 2023).

A political elite articulates the relationship between the security and cultural domains as follows:

In the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly concerning France, executive matters such as



economy and culture are delineated within the scope of diplomacy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nonetheless, this cultural discourse is constrained by the parameters of diplomacy; for instance, university security intersects with our cultural sphere and that of France (Man, Diplomat, 69 years old, 2023).

One of Iran's diplomats in France asserted that the French failed to recognize their cultural significance in Iran. He stated:

France has been naive, as it has failed to optimally cultivate relations despite the existing capacity and sympathy towards them in Iran; it has consistently deviated from the correct path. It has consistently refrained from utilizing possibilities directly in the context of relationships. The French established a purported cultural centre in Iran to promote the French language; nonetheless, all the spies they dispatched operated under this pretence, resided in the area, and started their activities from there. For example, Ms. Rice (Clothilde Reiss), who travelled to Iran in 2009, was apprehended and incarcerated, resulting in a schism between Iran and France. She arrived in Iran as a French language instructor; however her primary objective was espionage; she intended to teach French in Iran but instead found herself at Isfahan University of Technology. She resided in the dormitory and was overseeing the nuclear facility from that location. The matter was intricate and profound, culminating in the exchange of two Iranian inmates in France. All of these were components of the difficulties that had emerged (Man, Diplomat, 73 years old, 2023).

From an alternative viewpoint, a member of the political elite argued: "The French sought to establish a cultural centre in Iran for the instruction of the French language and other cultural

endeavours. However, they were unwilling to reciprocate with a cultural centre in France” (Man, Diplomat, 75 years old, 2023). Furthermore, a highly experienced Iranian ambassador in France underscored this notion during his interview:

The historical civilizational and cultural connections have always been paramount, and I regard the cultural bridge as the most significant element in transforming the environment and fortifying relations. In recent years, it has had several challenges, primarily stemming from mutual scepticism and hostility. While the French side persists in its investment in the Mojahedin and anti-revolutionaries, it cannot anticipate the establishment of a climate of trust and optimism inside our decision-making institutions. This matter impacts our cultural and scientific interactions. It impacts our academic and research institution affiliations. My comprehension of ties with France suggests a significant potential (Man, Diplomat, 70 years old, 2023).

Furthermore, a distinguished academic expert discusses the subject:

The French were pioneers in specific domains in Iran, especially in archaeology. French scholarship on Iran mostly focused on classical studies, encompassing both pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, with an emphasis on cultural, philosophical, mystical, and literary dimensions. Nonetheless, these political oscillations occasionally resulted in the complete severance of cultural relations, leading to the total closure of the IFRI Institute in Tehran for political reasons, the specifics of which I do not remember. Conversely, Iranian studies in France have increasingly focused on modern eras, resulting in the neglect of areas where the French were formerly regarded as pioneers.

There has been a decline in the number of individuals in France engaging in study on pre-Islamic Iran or Iranian history overall. The emphasis transitioned to contemporary events and political occurrences. These relationships are completely contingent upon political swings. Cultural relations between Iran and France could be significantly more expansive, provided that the parties involved can safeguard these relations from the impact of the political climate (Man, Philosopher, 76 years old, 2023).

## 6. Conclusion

This article examines the role of culture as a transformational force in the bilateral ties between the Islamic Republic of Iran and France, using the historical backdrop of their connections before the revolution. This study was conducted through interviews and an analysis of the viewpoints of a varied array of Iranian political, cultural, and academic elites and administrators, who were part of the Francophone community prior to the revolution, and held top political and cultural positions thereafter. Their ideas delineated a continuum of elite viewpoints throughout three historical periods: prior to the revolution, on the cusp of the revolution, and after the revolution. The analysis of these varied perspectives and experiences within this chronological framework revealed that the interplay between French culture and both general and elite Iranian society has been critical in the historical context of bilateral ties between Iran and France. The relationship and acknowledgment of France as a creative and autonomous culture have established and reinforced a civilizational and cultural polarity for France in the perceptions of Iranians.

The relationship between France's social and cultural influence

in Iran and the political domain originated during the 1979 Revolution, a period when Iran was on the verge of revolution and possessed a notable Francophone cultural community that contributed to both the revolution and the subsequent political and cultural governance, as corroborated by the primary perspectives of elites and their experiences gathered through specialized interviews in the current study. The Iranian socio-cultural interaction with the French culture in post-revolution Iran underscored the significance of culture in the dynamics between the Islamic Republic of Iran and France, ultimately resulting in a paradigmatic shift in the role of culture within the historical relations between the two nations.

For more than a century, the French culture has been interwoven with the Iranian society in significant cultural domains such as language, literature, and education, and this cultural affiliation was apparent on the eve of the Islamic Revolution. The Francophone community prior to the revolution exhibited two manifestations: firstly, the overarching intellectual movement, and secondly, the proactive circles and leaders of the revolution. The Islamic Revolution fundamentally transformed the Iranian society into a crucial component of the post-revolution political framework, heavily shaped by French cultural influences. Prior to the revolution, the Iranian culture had cultivated a significant cultural affiliation with this nation, although France consistently functioned as a tertiary influence in Iran's political landscape, often perceived differently and overshadowed by other countries, particularly Britain and Russia. The cultural linkages with France, in a country that experienced a revolution, facilitated a more intimate contact between Iran and France at governmental and political levels, surpassing the pre-revolutionary era and enhancing capabilities in this sphere. Nonetheless, this process did not unfold as anticipated;

specifically, the cultural and formative characteristics of the Francophone society prior to the revolution failed to serve as a catalyst for the transition of relations from the social domain to the political arena. This link primarily served as a bridge to sustain the relationship and counteract disintegration causes.

The intelligentsia from the Francophone community prior to the revolution, together with post-revolution cultural and political figures, characterize culture as the sole means and avenue for sustaining and mending connections. Nevertheless, culture was unable to sustain its role at this level and progressively became subject to political and security considerations. In the absence of a significant cultural connection between Iran and France, culture has evolved from a fundamental basis and a means of sustaining relations into a linked and intertwined indicator within political and security dynamics; whereas prior to the revolution, it served as the foundation of the relationship, and in the initial years following the revolution, it was the driving force behind the relations.

A division among the Francophones existed from the outset, and France observed this occurrence as well. The extensive backing for the revolution among Francophones brought about a division within the Francophone community and, subsequently, in France, as seen by the appearance of individuals such as Abolhassan Baniadr in Paris. The nascent Islamic Republic perceived France as a sanctuary for its adversaries, comprising erstwhile revolutionaries, and more critically, as a participant in the intelligence war and a principal backer of Iraq's war against Iran, with France being the foremost Western ally of Saddam. Consequently, the Francophones inside the framework of the Islamic Republic had strategic dilemmas and uncertainties concerning France. Nonetheless, the largest contingent of Iranian

students was dispatched to France shortly following the war, with emphasis placed on the cultural domain in conjunction with the prevailing political tensions. However, the security viewpoint ultimately excluded culture from the bilateral relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and France. Over time, France positioned itself as a component of the international security apparatus against Iran, and the French elites cultivated a holistic view on Iran, leading to a diminished grasp of the nation, while a bloc-oriented viewpoint came to dominate their ties. The IFRI<sup>1</sup> Institute was closed under this security-focused context.

Nonetheless, the interviewed elites regarded culture as a means to restore relations and an integrating element, characterising it as the central aspect of the potential for improving relations with France. According to Ernst Haas's neofunctionalism theory, as outlined at the article's outset, in fragmented or hostile political and security contexts, the potential for cultural interactions to spill over into other domains, including politics, is impossible. Culture is relevant when interactions at other levels yield outcomes. On the other hand, based on the premise of integration in neofunctionalism theory, there is no prospect for processes and structures beyond the state. Iran is a unified state, and outside forces cannot function within its structure, particularly under circumstances where governmental security concerns prevail. Consequently, the existing dynamics of the relationship and the configuration of the political system and governance in Iran have progressively marginalized culture from its pivotal position in Iran-France ties.

In circumstances where security dominates relationships, cultural and academic interactions are similarly influenced and

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assessed via a security perspective. Consequently, it may be claimed that a significant transformation has transpired here. Consequently, it can be asserted that the cultural relationship between Iran and France has undergone five major phases. First, the cultural impact of France in Iran was mostly based on culture, which corresponded to the Third Force concept in Iran's foreign policy. Secondly, the Francophone community, on the brink of the revolution, focused on the anticipation of augmenting France's influence in Iranian politics. Third, the function of culture as a minimum component in sustaining bilateral ties (the beneficial impact of culture). The fourth stage involves culture shaped by political influences, whereas the fifth stage pertains to the paradigmatic transformation of culture within a security-centric framework, resulting in a diminished role in bilateral relations.

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