

JIS



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Specialized Studies

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Year 6, Issue 16, October 2022

16

- The Question of Government in Contemporary Shiite Political Thought
- Religious Reform in Iran: A Reading in Light of the Absolute Guardianship of the Jurist
- The Impact of Israel's Octopus Doctrine on the Image of the IRGC
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- The Impact of Internal and External Factors on Iran-South Korea Relations



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THE QUESTION OF GOVERNMENT IN CONTEMPORARY SHIITE POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Introduction

The question of government and the nature of the state have long been among the thorny and contentious issues over the course of Shiite history, stirring debate between the Shiite community and other sects and movements. The Twelver Shiite community merged into the existing states before and after the age of occultation until the Safavids emerged as a political force acting along sectarian and ideological lines. According to the traditionalist vision of Shiite political jurisprudence, the Infallible Imam is the one tasked with establishing the government and any attempt to establish the state in his absence is a violation of his mission. What is said about the revolutionary nature of Shiism — that as soon as one uprising was put down, another broke out — does not generally apply to Twelver Shiism, but rather to the Ismaili or Zaydi Shiite sects.

This does not negate the fact that some Twelver Shiite affiliates served in both Sunni and non-Sunni governments, with some taking on ministerial portfolios and other executive positions during the rule of the Abbasid caliphate and beyond. However, they did not seek to usurp power or rule in the name of the sect. As a result, the Shiite community was fully integrated into the existing state at both the social and administrative levels.

Within the Shiite community in modern times, wrangling and disputes have occurred over the nature of the government and the concept of the state. Shiites sensed the crisis and embarrassment that befell them since the advent of the modern state; after the traditionalist Shiite community became active and effective and the political system transformed into an institutional and modern one. Reformist and revivalist voices began to advocate for a reconciliation of Shiite heritage with the modern state. The traditionalist movement, on the other hand, held fast to the old Shiite heritage. New movements emerged from within the old movements as well as divergent propositions and contradictory readings. They engaged in disputes until some ascended to power while others remained within the ranks of the opposition, complaining of expulsion and exclusion by their Shiite coreligionists.

In this study, we seek to highlight these divergent schools within contemporary Shiism, navigating their political theories and attempting to predict each school's potential future — both in reality and theory. Given the importance of such a study, we will pursue an approach based on analysis and extrapolation until the desired dimensions, contexts, and outcomes are understood.

The Imamate in Shiite Political History

Traditionalist Shiite political thought had always been established on two pillars: *infallibility* and *religious texts*. Hence, the conundrum it faced was deeper than that of Sunni political thought when the modern state emerged and the shifts that the global arena experienced in the early 19th century. To understand the enormity of the challenges and conundrums that befell traditionalist Shiite political thought under the modern state, we must first clarify some key points that served as the foundations of political theory for early thinkers within the traditionalist Shiite community. And if we want to understand the nature and mission of the state in contemporary Shiite political thought, we must first come to grips with the concept of the state in Shiite Kalām and the fierce Kalām debates that were ignited over it. Although these debates occurred in a specific context, the new contexts are not very different from the old ones. In addition, the religious elites derive their legality and legitimacy from the political heritage, which confers some sort of sanctity or even authority. Therefore, understanding and absorbing this political heritage is important.

Between the Theory of Waiting for the Reappearance of the Imam and the Position of the Imamate as a Pillar of the Shiite Doctrine

For the Sunnis, the imamate, in all its political aspects, is not doctrinal. As Ghazali puts it, “As an issue to be considered, the imamate is not a fundamental issue, nor is it an intellectual aspect. Rather, it is a jurisprudential matter. It

is a source of arousing communal tensions.”⁽¹⁾ It is a minor jurisprudential issue rather than a definitively established matter. Unlike the Sunnis, Twelver Shiites do not consider the imamate to be so. For Twelver Shiites, the imamate is a fundamental and “doctrinal” issue rather than a jurisprudential or “trivial” issue. Shahrastānī said that “the imamate is not a fundamental pillar of doctrine, as there is no definitive and certain ruling that an imam must be identified.”⁽²⁾

Shiite *Kalām* scholars, however, rendered the imamate to be obligatory, arguing that it is one of the pillars of the Shiite doctrine. It is one of the fundamentals of Shiism and this point has become a source of unanimity among Twelver Shiites. This conclusion resulted in dangerous rulings, such as rendering a person to be an unbeliever — as adopted by some Twelver Shiites— if he did not believe that the imamate was a fundamental pillar of the doctrine. In this respect, Al-Shaykh al-Saduq, a Persian Islamic scholar, stated that “it must be held as a belief that those who reject the imamate are just like those rejecting prophecy. And those who reject prophecy are like those who reject God’s oneness.”⁽³⁾ Theologian Al-Shaykh al-Mufid stated that “Twelver Shiism holds that whoever denies the imamate of one of the infallible imams or rejects the obedience that God has rendered obligatory, he is misguided, an unbeliever and worthy of dwelling in the Hellfire forever.” In clearer and bolder words, Ibn Naubakht said that “those who reject the religious texts (on the imamate) are pagans, according to the vast majority of our fellow scholars.”⁽⁴⁾ Shiite scholars differed about the sources that rendered the establishment of the imamate obligatory. Most of them said that the religious texts were the source, but they disputed over the chain of the imams. Imam Hassan’s household (descendants of Imam Hassan) believes that Imam Ali’s household and his grandchildren (from both Imam Hassan and Imam Hossein) are worthy of the imamate — without referring to religious texts. Accordingly, Zayd ibn Ali rebelled against Umayyad rule as did Muhammad ibn Abd Allah ibn Hasan who rebelled against Abbasid rule. Abu Ja’afar al-Mansur rejected both views. Twelver Shiites argue that imams should come from the sons and grandchildren of Imam Hossein — from the eldest son downwards. This led to disagreements among the grandchildren of Hossein. After the demise of Ja’far al-Sadiq, they disputed over who should be the next imam and divisions within each school of thought emerged. These differences contradicted the religious texts, leading in the end to *ijtihad* in appointing the imam. This led to further inquiries about the nature of the state among Twelver Shiites.

Political Decline in the Time of Occultation

Shiite jurists considered that the idea of establishing a state or government was not plausible for Shiites as long as the Infallible Imam was in occultation. Sharif al-Murtaza (died 435 AH) said, “We do not have to instate princes

[imams] in case of helplessness of the Imam or instate the imamate at all. Instating the imams and electing him is neither of our duties nor are we asked to establish laws because by doing so, we take the blame in case of disregarding them.”⁽⁵⁾

The absolute guardianship of the Shiite jurist and his authority over all political and jurisprudential affairs was never considered before Khomeini ascended to power in Iran. But when he took power, Wilayat al-Faqih theory was adopted, with the absolute version of Wilayat al-Faqih being adopted in 1988. Iranian religious elites started claiming that the theory was one of the indispensable necessities of the Shiite sect. Moreover, they claimed that previous Shiite jurists had adopted Wilayat al-Faqih.

Prior to Safavid rule, and throughout Shiite history in general, Twelver Shiite jurists never sought to establish a state or a political system, nor did they have a unanimous political position. They did not even attempt to assume power because it was not within the scope of their duties, but rather fell within the remit of the Infallible Imam’s mission.⁽⁶⁾

Some Shiite movements, such as the Zaydi Buyids and the Ismaili Fatimids, ascended to power and seized rule at various points in history. However, the political effectiveness of various Shiite movements and factions did not result in a change in the Twelver Shiite doctrine. Furthermore, the establishment of a government was one of the contentious issues between the Twelver and Zaydi Shiites, who consider rebellion against tyrannical rulers — and seizing power — obligatory. They rejected the taqiya principle, and made rebellion a necessity for being worthy of the imamate position.⁽⁷⁾

Imam Zayd, whom Zaydis ascribe to, was always critical of his brother Muhammad al-Bāqir, who avoided politics. The adherents of Twelver Shiism disagreed with the Zaydis on this critical point. Meanwhile, Khomeini and the Iranian elites rejected Twelver Shiite heritage and returned to the revolutionary Zaydism in regard to matters related to the state and governance. Governance was also one of the sticking points between Twelver Shiites and Ismailis, who favored political uprisings and established states.

In general, the Twelver Shiite community remained dedicated to the hawza, engaged in jurisprudential teachings, while occasionally supporting the Buyids and Fatimids due to close sectarian affiliations. Despite being a stone’s throw away from taking power on numerous occasions, they did not seek it.

At the time, Shiite clerics did not believe in Shiite political hibernation or working on a special political project separate from the ummah’s public affairs. Senior Twelver jurists served in government, including the Abbasid dynasty, and held some executive positions. Sharif al-Murtaza (436 AH) — one of the historical Twelver Shiite religious authorities — held political positions under Abbasid rule. He justified this by saying that “righteous people and scholars

can still take over positions in different times under unjust rulers.”⁽⁸⁾ He did not stipulate that a ruler must be just for clerics to cooperate with him and work under his rule, but they should cooperate with him in any way possible regardless of whether he is just or not. Sharif al-Murtaza did not believe the Shiite sect would establish a political system. “We should not establish rulers if the imam is powerless [they do not run/govern the state],” he believed. “We are not also required to identify an imam. Selecting an imam is not one of our obligatory duties, nor are we obligated to carry out God-ordained punishments, for which we will be held accountable if they go unimplemented.”⁽⁹⁾

Murtaza’s theory of allowing cooperation with all rulers, the illegitimacy of rebellion against them, and not considering the establishment of a state that represents the Shiite community in particular, appears to have been the defining feature of Shiite political thought for several centuries after his death. Sayyed Radhi ud-Deen Ali ibn Musa ibn Tawus took over the leadership of Alawites in Baghdad and other cities under the Mongol ruler Hulagu Khan in 1263 AD\661AH. After his death, his eldest son, al-Mustafa, took over the position. Cleric Yusuf al-Hilli, father of prominent Shiite jurist Hilli, agreed with him, justifying such acceptance by claiming that God chooses these positions for them and that they did not seek them.⁽¹⁰⁾ Ali bin al-Muahhar al-Hilli, also known as Allama Hilli, urged Ijaitü, a ruler of the Ilkhanid dynasty, to convert to Shiism. But, as he lay dying, he ordered the ruler to return to Sunni Islam as the state’s official doctrine.⁽¹¹⁾ ‘Ali Mu’ayyad, the ruler of Sarbadar, summoned Shiite cleric Sheikh Abu Abdullah Muhammad Jamal Ad-Deen al-Makki al-Amili al-Jizzeeni, better known as ash-Shahid al-Awwal, to serve as a religious authority and decipher the jurisprudential issues of the time. The ruler stated that there is no religious guide in Khorasan who can guide Shiites to the best religious injunctions, a justification Amili could not reject.⁽¹²⁾ “It is a duty for you to head to this land and teach its residents (the best religious injunctions) and guide them, lest I and all Shiites of Khorasan lodge our complaints to the Prophet and infallible imams against you,” said the ruler of Sarbadar in a letter to al-Amili.⁽¹³⁾ Despite the fact that the Sarbadar ruler was Shiite, Amili did not go to him and did not claim absolute guardianship at the time. This strengthened the line of thought inherited since the reign of Baqir, Murtaza, and other Shiite jurists, favoring awaiting the reappearance of the Infallible Imam while participating in any existing government, Sunni or otherwise, and not seeking to establish a state for the Shiite sect or seizing power from the government. The Sarbadar ruler was unconcerned about guardianship. His message was simple: encourage people to join the sect and direct them accordingly. Perhaps the ruler desired a jurist to legitimize his actions and assist him in consolidating his rule. Amili’s refusal indicates that Shiite jurists kept a distance between themselves and Shiite rulers, for the

most part, the same distance that they kept between themselves and Sunni rulers⁽¹⁴⁾ prior to the shift that occurred under the Safavids.

Even Shiite clerics who rendered working for rulers unlawful such as Muhammad ibn Idris Helli did not limit such a prohibition to Sunni, Shiite, or Mu'tazilite rulers. Working with any ruler became unlawful except the Infallible Imam. They thus believed in total passive awaiting (for the Infallible Imam's reappearance) and completely avoiding politics — whether under a Sunni, Shiite, or any other government — until the imam reappears.⁽¹⁵⁾

As a result, the main line of Shiite political jurisprudence was the line of awaiting the reappearance of the Infallible Imam, however, some Shiite clerics embraced total passive waiting while others did not object to working under an existing government, regardless of its credibility or justness — without any sort of guardianship. This line became fundamental to the Shiite sect. And it could be argued that the doctrine on the state was a strategic rather than tactical position.

This situation remained unchanged in theory and practice until the Safavid takeover of Persia in the 16th century. The Safavids politicized the Shiite sect. When they seized Persia, a watershed moment occurred in Shiite political jurisprudential theory, with a shift from the concept of awaiting the reappearance of the imam to shah-jurist joint rule and the jurist legitimizing the shah's rule. This shift, however, did not occur in the traditional base of Shiite jurisprudence, but rather among the clerical elite who benefited from Safavid rule. This new shift was strongly opposed by traditionalist clerics who had previously rejected any political involvement during the imam's occultation. Even those who saw no harm in working for the ruler during the occultation did not consider the establishment of a state in the name of the sect that rules on behalf of the Infallible Imam to be lawful. Every government, according to those clerics, shall be deemed illegitimate until the Infallible Imam reappears. As a result, the establishment of the Safavid state ruling in the name of the sect and attracting Shiite clerics — to confer sacredness and legitimacy — provoked the Shiite clerical community.

However, as time passed and the Safavid rule institutionalized Shiite religious institutions by establishing a scholastic hierarchy and financial structure, the door was opened for greater participation of clerics in government — with the goal of securing some financial resources.⁽¹⁶⁾ However, the participation was from the standpoint of working for the ruler rather than establishing the guardianship of the jurist. The shah remained at the apex of the hierarchy, with the authority to appoint and dismiss jurists from official positions in the state. It is said that engaging jurists was one of the factors that helped ease the extreme version of Shiism pursued by the Safavids at the start of their rule.⁽¹⁷⁾

Pro-Wilayat al-Faqih and the Question of Government

During the 1905 Constitutional Movement, clerics were divided into two camps: those who supported the Constitutional Movement, including Ayatollah al-Khorasani, Mirza Naini and others and those who supported dictatorial rule, including Fazlollah Nouri, who had insulted the Constitutionals as morally decadent secularists. When Khomeini came to power, he embraced Fazlollah Nouri's radical anti-constitutional and anti-modern-state stance. He ignored the efforts of the Constitutionals, who sought to secularize the state in a rational and even religious manner. Khomeini honored Fazlollah Nouri, the leader of the anti-Constitutionalist camp, naming one of the streets of Tehran after him and putting his picture on commemorative postage stamps.⁽¹⁸⁾

This was an official declaration by pro-Wilayat al-Faqih supporters that they owe their intellectual roots to Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri and his radical stance toward secularists, liberals and reformists, as well as against modernity and its outcomes in general. Khomeini and pro-Wilayat al-Faqih loyalists did not stop there, but used pro-Wilayat al-Faqih, militia, and hawza-linked proxies to crack down on reformist Shiites at home and abroad, making the reformists' position within the Shiite community critical and difficult due to political and religious defamation and distortion. The critical elements of pro-Wilayat al-Faqih political jurisprudence included the following:

Divine Government

Wilayat al-Faqih loyalists argued that the guardian jurist was appointed by God Almighty rather than chosen by the people. The Assembly of Experts' election of the guardian jurist is a revealing of his identity rather than a choice that is made. According to this theory, the imam\guardian jurist does not derive his legitimacy from the people, but instead from the one who appointed him: God. Therefore, the government is shrouded in sacredness in its actions and deeds. It is a theory close to the divine command theory devised by Saint Augustine (354-430 AD) who argued that man is inherently a sinner based on the original sin committed by our forefather Adam, resulting in his descent to Earth. There should be an authority to prevent sinners from indulging in their sins. He contended that the universe's law dictates that people should be divided into two segments: rulers and ruled. This is necessary for upholding justice on the one hand and to atone for the first sin on the other. As a result, coercive power is required. Furthermore, justice can be achieved only in a religious state established by the church/clergy or subject to the direction of the latter.⁽¹⁹⁾ The Jewish people established the City of God or Kingdom of Christ first, followed by the Church and Christian empire. Consequently, any conflict between the City of God and the Kingdom of Satan will end with the City of God victorious, as peace can only be established under its auspices.⁽²⁰⁾

There is no watchdog to oversee the supreme leader's earnings and actions. Pro-Wilayat al-Faqih supporters justified the absence of institutions by claiming that inner checks and balances exist in the persona of the supreme leader/guardian jurist such as piety, justice, jurisprudential knowledge, and so on. As a result, there is no need for external checks and balances. Otherwise, the supreme leader, the entire juristic community, and the representatives of the Infallible Imam will be accused of not being just or trustworthy —two basic conditions that any jurist in general, and the supreme leader/guardian jurist in particular, should meet. Hojatoleslam Mohsen Kadivar attributes the guardian jurist government's repression and dictatorship to its belief that it is a divine government. He attempts to deconstruct the reasons for repression in the Iranian state under Islamist rule. He contends that the interaction of four basic components have shaped the current Shiite government's philosophical foundation: the first is the earlier Shiite jurists' theory of the Infallible Imam; the second is Plato's theory of philosopher king; the third is the theory that links absolute authority with human perfection; and the fourth is the practical wisdom inherited from the ruling traditions of ancient Persia.⁽²¹⁾ Consequently, dictatorship based on the philosophy of divine rule, according to this opinion, is established on gnostic and evidence-based fundamentals rather than on political circumstances and a power struggle resulting in a disorganized dictatorship. Hence, such dictatorships will continue as long as the religious elites and incubators that shape their thinking in the hawza remain in place. Overall, Khomeini and pro-Wilayat al-Faqih supporters' divine right theory marked a turning point in Shiite political thought. Khomeini came out to stage a coup against modernity, its values and political constructs at a time when states — under pressure from people as well as from the process of modernization itself — were shifting toward institutions and the entrenchment of human rights and popular oversight over government performance.

Khomeini as part of his theory argued that the government is appointed by God rather than by man. According to him, the Islamic government is a government that enforces divine law over the people.⁽²²⁾ Elsewhere, he said, "All the affairs and necessary duties of the governments should be in accordance with the divine law — even obedience to rulers."⁽²³⁾ According to this philosophy, when it is said that a jurist obtains his guardianship if the people or the Assembly of Experts approve of him, this has nothing to do with legitimacy and legality according to Khomeini's theory. This is because neither the people nor the Assembly of Experts confer legitimacy on the guardian jurist. They only reveal his characteristics and guardianship or set them in motion.⁽²⁴⁾ So, rather than being dismissed by the people, the supreme leader is dismissed automatically if he loses the characteristics or requirements that

designate him as a supreme leader. This is merely a theoretical argument, and questions remain about how it can be implemented in practice, as well as how the guardian jurist dismisses himself if one of his characteristics or conditions are negated.⁽²⁵⁾

The divine mandate theory, according to Khomeini, extends beyond the historically and traditionally known boundaries. He gave himself vast powers, including the ability to suspend one of the most fundamental religious obligations if he believes it will cause Muslims harm, based on his own understanding and judgment. As Khomeini himself puts it, the government has the ability to ban — temporarily, in circumstances detrimental to the interests of the Islamic country and when appropriate — pilgrimage which is deemed one of the five divine pillars of Islam.⁽²⁶⁾

Marginalizing the Public

The belief of pro-Wilayat al-Faqih supporters in the divine nature of the position of the guardian jurist necessitates the exclusion of the people from any political role or guardianship over the appointment or dismissal of senior officials. According to Kadivar, in a pro-Wilayat al-Faqih (guardianship-inspired) government, the people do not participate in conferring legitimacy on the government. The public sphere is not under the people's authority, nor is it considered a matter over which they have a say. It is a completely divine matter. It is a realm that is overseen by the Divine Legislator, who delegates it to jurists. The leader is a guardian of the people, not just the person who is chosen to rule. As a result, no law is considered unless it is approved by the guardian jurist and those appointed by him. Furthermore, even if elected by all members of the public, no official can achieve legitimacy unless ratified and approved by the supreme leader. In the public sphere, the people are expected to adjust their views to align with the guardian jurist's views and will — rather than the other way around, where the leader is the one adjusting his views to align with popular and national will.⁽²⁷⁾

Defenders of the Wilayat al-Faqih theory warn against granting the people any political power. According to the late Ayatollah Misbah Yazdi, the legitimacy of the jurist's guardianship is derived from God's legislative authority. In general, no guardianship shall be legitimate unless it is founded on divine appointment and approval. Furthermore, he said, "If the government is not installed this way, giving it legitimacy, it should be considered a form of a blasphemy against God's legislative power."⁽²⁸⁾ He states unequivocally, "The people have no part in governance under the guardian jurist other than to support him. The people have no right to elect the supreme leader."⁽²⁹⁾

However, an important question about the relationship between republicanism and modern state theory/philosophy arises here. This problem or contradiction is addressed in a straightforward and frank manner by senior cleric

Mohsen Gharavian, "Ruhollah Khomeini was compelled to embrace republicanism, but he had never believed in the republic."⁽³⁰⁾

Sadiq Haqiqat said that the people have "no right to choose the ruler under the doctrine of divine legitimacy. Instead, if the question of not considering the people's opinion and abolishing the principle of election could be used as a means to attack and defame Islam, then the people could participate only ceremonially and honorably as a secondary measure and out of necessity."⁽³¹⁾

As a result, everything said about the Iranian state's republican and democratic principles by supporters of Wilayat al-Faqih's rule is just sect-dictated taqiya and political pragmatism for interacting with the international community and its institutions. On the ground, however, the principles and fundamentals which Wilayat al-Faqih adherents believe in, take precedence over all others. The argument of Sadiq Haqiqat supports Gharavian's assertion that the post-1979 political system in Iran was founded on disbelief in the republic and its requirements, but it was forced to embrace republicanism. As a result of this paradox, the political system recognized and granted the people merely honorary and ceremonial roles such as holding elections, electing Parliament, and delegating some powers to it.⁽³²⁾

Therefore, the guardian jurist has the authority to act on the reached *ijtihad*, and the *ummah* should obey him without any protest or hesitation. This gives him additional absolute powers and allows him and any other jurist to seize power by force or through a military coup and then monopolize it, repressing public freedoms and rights, abolishing parties, dissolving the consultative assembly, or enacting new laws that violate the Constitution and Sharia. Khomeini also issued a decree establishing the Special Court of the Clergy, which is still in place today, which is against Islamic equality and man-made laws, issuing whatever rulings it wants against whomever it wants in whatever manner it deems appropriate.⁽³³⁾

Reformists and the Theory of Ummah's Guardianship

Versus the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih which sparked discussions and debates within the *hawza*, Shiite clerics opposed to this theory emerged, outlining civilian and constitutional viewpoints side by side with jurisprudential and philosophical evidence. The religious hierarchy (*marjaya*) in Najaf has strongly opposed Wilayat al-Faqih theory. Ayatollah al-Khoei took a harsh line toward it. There were personal differences between Khomeini and Khoei. Despite being traditionalist and conservative, the *marjaya* does not believe but in Wilayat al-Faqih over *hisbiya* issues; social affairs of the people, or daily tasks that require an authorized guardian to supervise them as endowments, funerals, and inheritance.⁽³⁴⁾ It adheres to the line of waiting (the reappearance of the imam) which is based on the premise that the states established during the

occultation of the imam are all illegitimate. But it has followed the principle of choosing the lesser of two evils pursued by veteran marjayas earlier in the 20th century. The absence of the Infallible Imam and dictatorship are two evils. Removing one of them is surely better than enduring both of them combined, according to the viewpoint of Mirza Naini.⁽³⁵⁾ Hence, he legitimized shoura (counselling) elections, upholding plurality and so on. Then Sistani, who took over the Shiite religious hierarchy after Khomeini, followed suit and even approved “choice and shoura” and what he called the endorsement of the believers during occultation.⁽³⁶⁾

It seems Wilayat al-Faqih is among the major contentious issues between the Najaf and Qom seminaries. Najaf, as a traditionalist marjaya, wants to preserve Shiite traditions even on matters of political jurisprudence. It embraces the line of waiting and *hisbiya* guardianship. But at the same time, it fears the expansion of the clout of the guardian jurist and its dominance over Iraq and Najaf, which could cause harm to its religious reading and strategic interests. This is because the guardian jurist does not confine his dominance and jurisdiction to Iranian soil but expands it to include the entire Shiite community and even the entire Muslim world. In addition, Qom fears a major and historically influential religious establishment such as Najaf, which will threaten its clout throughout the Shiite community or stand in the way of expanding the absolute version of Wilayat al-Faqih.

This is the case for the supreme religious hierarchy and the traditionalist hawza. For the reformist jurists, Shiite jurist Mohammad Mahdi Shams al-Din argues for the ummah’s guardianship over itself, making the public, to whom Khomeini paid no heed, the core center of the state, at the heart of the ruling apparatus. He said, “We believe that the ummah is a guardian over itself. And we lay out this theory versus Wilayat al-Faqih theory. On this basis, we call for the establishment of Islamic governments in the Muslim communities where every Muslim community in the political geography of the Muslim world establishes its respective state and models its institutions on the basis of general jurisprudence.”⁽³⁷⁾

Shams al-Din believes that it is necessary for Islam to be functional within the ummah rather than the state. In other words, the ummah should stick to Islamic beliefs regardless of whether Islamists are in power or not. According to him, obtaining power is not necessary for establishing the rules of Islam, and the essence of Islam is far bigger than being confined to the levers of power and state. Islam flows through the veins of the entire Muslim nation, with ordinary Muslims standing up in defense of it.

Shams al-Din rejects exercising violence for the sake of establishing an “Islamic state,” an approach pursued by Sunni and Shiite Islamists, since the Islamic system and government and the entire question of governance is an

issue entirely related to the unseen and rituals. He believes that the project of the Muslim Ummah does not mean ruling out the political project, i.e., the project of establishing a state, but he argues that there is little evidence to support the notion that Islam is interested in establishing a state to the extent of provoking social strife to achieve it, consequently undermining the project of the Muslim Ummah.⁽³⁸⁾

Finally, Shams al-Din's recognition of the "ummah's guardianship over itself" theory made him cling to the principle of shoura, making it a central part of Shiite political thought. He said, "The principle of shoura in public matters is the most important constitutional political principle for all Muslims. The proofs of this principle, according to the Quran and Sunnah, suggest that neither any political rule held by any fallible ruler, nor any disposal of the general affairs of society will be legitimate without pursuing the principle of shoura. The ummah should run its public affairs via shoura and the ruler should rule via shoura, and he is obliged in Sharia to conform to whatever this shoura may determine."⁽³⁹⁾

Another Lebanese jurist, the late Mohammad Hossein Fadlallah, was a big fan of Wilayat al-Faqih theory after the revolution. In the late 1980s, he changed his mind and proposed that there could be multiple guardian jurists, with each Islamic region having a guardian who handles its affairs. After 2000, Fadlallah completely rejected Wilayat al-Faqih theory, claiming that it could only be maintained if the preservation of order hinged solely on it. Muslims, he claims, can unite around another formula whenever they want as long as it does not contradict Islamic principles. As a result, Fadlallah came much closer to Shams al-Din's theory, even if he did not explicitly say so or agree with every detail of it.⁽⁴⁰⁾

There is another enlightening movement which has evolved out of the hawza, but it is considered to be among the enlightened and secular movements, not related to the Islamist reformists. Among this movement is the Iranian intellectual Mohammad Mujtahid al-Shabestari who calls for establishing a Western-style democracy. He attacks the hawza and clerics because they pit democracy against religion. According to him, this has far-reaching political and cultural ramifications for Iran and this approach would exclude people from the arena of political engagement, instead opening the door for despotism and dictatorship. In reality, the advantages and benefits of a democratic government far outweigh the ramifications and losses resulting from abandoning the moral principles and religious instructions that could occur under a democratic government.⁽⁴¹⁾

Abdul-Karim Soroush embraces a similar view, rejecting the clerical government and divine right, opting instead for the civilian democratic alternative.⁽⁴²⁾ Yet, there is Mostafa Malekian who attempts to reconcile any

seeming contradiction between religion and democracy. He argues that there is a possibility to hold elections among those embracing different religions without monopolizing a certain reading or excluding or expelling those embracing opposing views and versions. At the same time, he contends that it is impossible for the government to be clerical and democratic at the same time. It is either clerical or democratic.⁽⁴³⁾

Therefore, it appears that it is Najaf versus Qom, and it appears that, despite their differences, the reformists and enlightened persons are all united in the face of Wilayat al- Faqih. They believe that democracy is the best approach to heal divisions and run the country in modern times, with societies including a diverse set of sects, religions, races and sexes. Najaf agrees with much of this vision, but it rejects the prevalence of democracy over the well-established foundations of religion (not to infringe on the well-established religious principles and keep them apparent within the levers of the state). This is the narrative of Khavand and Naini. Therefore, Najaf and part of the contemporary reformist Shiites are a natural extension of the old Shiite reformist school.

Conclusion

We conclude that there are divergent opinions in contemporary Shiite political thought about the role of government and the nature of the state. There is a heritage-centered, traditionalist vision conducive to the line of political waiting (for the imam's reappearance). This view is as old as Twelver Shiism to the extent that Shafei jurist Abu Hamid al-Ghazali called them "those waiting" (for the imam's reappearance). Zaydi and Ismaili Shiism were the political versions of Shiism at that time though some Twelver Shiites attempted to seize power at some points in history — but without legal or religious cover.

During the Safavid reign, the government attempted to politicize the Shiite sect and consolidate its legitimacy by elevating a cohort of clerics to its services who legitimized its acts in the face of the Ottomans outside and the Kizilbashis inside the state. In modern times, Shiite clerics have found themselves in a dilemma against the backdrop of political variables and regional and international shifts. When people staged protests and revolts, they always referred to the clerics in order to address the injustices inflicted on them by the government. But when the clerics themselves became government officials, this referral ended as the clerics themselves were the ones inflicting injustices on the people. In search of a solution to this problem, some marjas and jurists laid out Sharia-inspired meanings and interpretations of shoura and democracy. Meanwhile, there was another movement that wanted to keep the dictatorship unchanged to preserve the financial interests and the prevailing political structure. These two camps have been controlling the Shiite landscape to this day. The first camp supports Wilayat al-Faqih

and keeping the guardian jurist and his jurists in power and at the top of the Shiite hierarchy. The other camp believes that there is no solution but the democratic, civilian, and shoura-inspired state. Nonetheless, there are minor differences on certain details and variations within each camp. But on the other hand, each camp monopolizes a certain religious reading and rejects all the other sects and readings. The first camp claims that the Iranian jurist has an absolute guardianship over all Shiites, not only over Iranians. Moreover, its guardianship is effective over the entire clerical community, making all the other marjas subject to his guardianship and custodianship.

The fact that this camp is now in control of the Iranian state, with economic, military, and political clout as well as state resources, cannot be overlooked. As a result, the remaining theories are simply intellectual attempts in light of stagnation in philosophical, jurisprudential, political, and Kalām thought. There are no realistic prospects for gaining power and establishing the desired civilian state. Furthermore, pro-Wilayat al-Faqih supporters not only have caused a political gridlock in Tehran, but also in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. They exercise political custodianship over all these countries, attempting to place all these countries, peoples, and resources under the guardian jurist's custodianship. As a result, Shiite reformists outside Iran face the same crises as reformists within Iran.

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RELIGIOUS REFORM IN IRAN: A READING IN LIGHT OF THE ABSOLUTE GUARDIANSHIP OF THE JURIST

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Introduction

Since the death of Othman Ibn Affan, differences among Muslims over the position of political leadership and the caliphate contributed to the emergence of movements, denominations, and sects. Muslims were divided over the conflict between Ali Ibn Abu-Talib and Muawiyah Ibn Abi Sufian, which pitted the two factions against each other in the Battle of Siffin (37 AH). This battle marked the beginning of the division of Muslims into political parties competing for control of the caliphate. Shiites contended that political leadership should be assumed by members of the Prophet's Household, particularly the descendants of Imam Hussein while Sunnis argued that the caliph should be chosen from among the Quraysh. Kharijites, meanwhile, argued that the caliph could be anyone from among Muslims even if he is an "amputated servant"—on condition that he is pious and just. Shahrastani explained the disagreements on this matter, saying, "The sword in Islam has been raised over the imamate more than any other cause."⁽¹⁾ Hence, over time, the question of political leadership (imamate) was integrated into the pillars of the Shiite doctrine. Consequently, Sunnis and Ash'ari theologians responded to Shiites on the question of imamate, insisting that the issue is a secondary issue in Sunni textbooks in general and Ash'ari ones in particular.

The nature of the differences among Muslims was political at first, then religious, contributing to the formation of various Islamic schools of law (jurisprudence) such as Mutazilites, Shiites, Kharijites, Murji'ites, Ahl al-Hadith (People of Traditions), Māturīdites, and others. This study focuses on the nature of Twelver Shiism, how it developed over time, and how this school of jurisprudence contributed to the establishment of Safavid rule in Iran. So, what are the distinguishing characteristics of Shiism: how did contemporary attempts at religious reform in Iran emerge? How did these attempts address the vast challenges to open up the entrenched doctrine of Twelver Shiism? Have the efforts of reform by individuals such as Ali Shariati, Abdul Karim Soroush, Mohammad Mujtahid Shabestari and others succeeded in reforming the doctrine of Twelver Shiism? These are the questions that are addressed in this study.

Is the Doctrine of Twelver Shiism Dynamic or Fixed?

Though Shiism emerged during the early stages of Islam, textbooks related to some fundamentals of Shiism appeared later in the 4th Hijri century. Important Shiite jurisprudential collections emerged from that point until the present. These collections shaped the identity of Shiism and its characteristics that set it apart from other Islamic sects.

The question of imamate is a central issue in Shiite thought in general, and it is regarded as a matter of religious doctrine rather than a matter of politics. Imamate is a religious doctrine to Twelver Shiites, not a political or worldly issue subject to expediency. The imamate is assumed by imams who have been designated by the Prophet. Up until Jafar al-Sadiq, the Prophet had designated Ali, Hassan, and Hussein. At that point, the difference between Twelvers and Ismailis arose. The former claim that Mousa al-Kazim was the legitimate Shiite imam (whose successor should have been Ali al-Rida, succeeded by Mohammad al-Jawad, Ali al-Hadi, Hassan al-Askari (his son Mohammad, the Mahdi, is the 12th imam who supposedly went into occultation in the city of Samarra and his followers are waiting for his reappearance to this day)⁽²⁾ while the latter insist the successor should have been Ismail.

Twelver Shiites believe that the imamate is not among the issues over which the masses (the Muslim community) should have a say. According to them, the imamate is one of the rules and pillars of Islam. The Prophet did not overlook or devolve such an important issue to the Muslim Ummah, but instead an imam is divinely appointed. Hence, he is infallible; he does not commit major or minor sins. They also contend that Ali was designated as an imam by the Prophet, citing a plethora of texts that they pass on and adhere to. ⁽³⁾As a result, Twelver Shiites believe that an imam is appointed based on a

clear religious text rather than based on the Muslim community's choice, as is the case in the Sunni school of thought.

However, Twelver Shiites insist that an imam with the best criteria must be designated, and they refuse to appoint an imam whose traits are not the best. They believe that their imams inherited the Prophet's knowledge as well as of other prophets. During the caliphate of Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, this doctrine was clear. Twelver Shiites do not permit an imam whose criteria is less than another to lead as this would be against the Holy Quran. If an imam is to guide people on different religious and scientific issues, he must be the best in terms of religious knowledge and piety.⁽⁴⁾

Shiites' perception of knowledge's centrality in the chain of imams (the 12 imams) means that clerical knowledge is limited to these revered figures. Furthermore, following the Quran and the credible traditions (Sunnah) passed on through the Prophet's household, an imam is a source of law. Shiites will never accept a tradition unless it has been passed down through their chain of narrations. An imam, according to them, is an inheritor of prophetic knowledge, and he transcends mortals because of his constant connection with divine knowledge. An imam does not achieve his high status by seeking knowledge or following legal proofs, but rather wisdom is inherent within him, i.e., the imam's knowledge is an essential component, and his knowledge of the unseen is built into his nature and essence after being passed down through a long chain of transcendent beings such as angels and prophets. Knowledge was originally a luminous quality that passed down from one prophet to the next, eventually reaching Prophet Mohammed and passed on to Ali, Fatima, and then the luminous quality (knowledge) was manifested in the Fatimid imams.⁽⁵⁾

Given that the imams' knowledge is one of the sources of law, Twelver Shiites, unlike Sunnis, reject unanimity of the learned (scholars with knowledge), analogy, or *ijtihad* except from the designated imams. According to Twelver Shiism, an imam is a source of rulings and he holds exclusive authority to oversee Muslim affairs and decide on all matters within the framework of lawful and unlawful. Twelver Shiites disagreed with Sunnis about the unanimity of scholarly opinions, displaying strong opposition to analogy [*qiyas*].⁽⁶⁾ When analogy was distorted, they resorted to the direct legal opinions issued by imams, which they transmitted immediately or after the process of *ijtihad*. The latter, *ijtihad*, should be flawless, without unanimity of scholarly opinions or analogy, but with a Quranic text, transmitted narration from one of the imams.⁽⁷⁾

Twelver Shiites believe that religion cannot be fully established without the guardianship of an imam. They regard it as one of the fundamental pillars of religion, and one's belief cannot be valid unless it is accepted. No emulation

of forefathers, family members, or mentors is deemed valid and acceptable, regardless of their experience and knowledge base. Guardianship of the imams is equivalent to the Oneness of God and Prophethood.⁽⁸⁾ The imamate is the cornerstone of Twelver Shiism since it alone has the right to interpret monotheism, prophethood and knowledge can emerge only through it. It has the authority to guide people on matters of doctrine as well as issue jurisprudential opinions.

Twelver Shiites also reiterate the imams' infallibility, claiming that they never err or slip up. They are the continuation of the prophet's chain. According to Mohammed al-Fayoumi, "An Imam, like the Prophet, should be infallible, free of all sins, inner and outer, from infancy to death, deliberate and unintentional. He should be immune from errors and blunders, like the Prophet, and he is the guardian of Islamic law and a vigilant observer of religion. They claim that the evidence that has led them to conclude that prophets are infallible is the same evidence leading them to conclude that imams are also inerrant."⁽⁹⁾

As a result of this infallibility, Twelver Shiites believe it is impossible for an imam to make a mistake. Therefore, because the imam's appointment is a God-ordained function, committing a sin by him is impossible. If he sins, all of the jurisprudential rulings he ordered are flawed, which would cause enormous havoc.⁽¹⁰⁾

As a result of the Twelver Shiite perception of imams as flawless figures, we find that they exalt the imams to the exclusion of the Prophet's image. They argue that Ali's descendants have been the most influential and effective throughout Islamic history. They claim that during their lifetimes, the imams were the most effective. Imams, according to them, are "exalted individuals upon whom God has bestowed His grace and entrusted His guardianship. They were at the pinnacle of human perfection in terms of knowledge, piety, courage, generosity, chastity, and having sublime morals and good traits. No human being can be endowed with what they were exclusively endowed with. As such, after the Prophet's death, they deserved to be imams and sources of guidance on all religious and worldly matters that concern people, as well as sources of clarification and deduction of legal opinions."⁽¹¹⁾

As such, Shiites restrict divine knowledge to imams and bestow infallibility and perfection on them. Therefore, knowledge is esoteric for Twelver Shiites, provided solely by imams and chosen jurists after them.

It is clear that Shiites have conferred holiness on the teachings of their imams. Twelvers believe that the commands of imams are equivalent to that of God; their prohibition (of a certain matter) is equivalent to that of God; disobeying them is like disobeying God; the imams' friend is God's friend; opposing them is like opposing the Prophet and opposing the Prophet is

opposing God. Therefore, a man should submit to the imams and their orders and execute whatever they order. Shiites believe that God-ordained Islamic legal rulings can only be derived from their sources of knowledge and such rulings would be invalid if taken from any other sources. A responsible mortal cannot perform the obligations designated to the imams. They will not know whether they have fulfilled their obligations unless they follow the path of the imams. The imams are like Noah's Arc: those who get on board will survive, while those who do not will drown in the dark and salty sea, and be consumed by waves of ambiguous issues, aberrations, false allegations, and disputes.⁽¹²⁾ Thus, the imams are presented to have supernatural powers over the universe, allowing them to control people, their past, present, and future. In light of the foregoing, many stories have been related about Shiite imams, particularly about their miraculous acts to entrench their presence in the Shiite mindset. Some of the fundamentals of the Shiite doctrine can be traced back to ancient Persia. The Persians always viewed their rulers as divine figures chosen by God to adjudicate between the people and had vested sovereignty in them. In addition, God had breathed His spirit into them, which is one of the fundamentals of ancient Persian doctrines passed down to Shiites.⁽¹³⁾

During the occultation of the hidden imam until his reappearance, Shiites moved from the imam's guardianship to the jurist's guardianship. According to Twelver Shiism, a jurist can take over guardianship of the public. They reported that Imam Askari passed down a narration from his grandfather, Imam Sadiq, that a jurist is one who "who guards his soul (against misdeeds), observes his religious obligations, defies worldly whims, and obeys the orders of the Twelve Imams. Then people can emulate him. He is known as *āyatu llāh* (sign of God), and he like the imams should be treated with the same degree of holiness, submission, and obedience in *ijtihad*. No one has the authority to challenge his *ijtihad* and rulings (doctrinal and jurisprudential)." In this regard, Twelver Shiites insist that God has vested the jurist with similar divine powers as the imams in terms of superiority over all mankind and authority over all peoples. He also oversees the affairs of the *ummah* and leads in deducing jurisprudential rulings from religious sources as well as those related to worldly matters.⁽¹⁴⁾

Thus, Twelver Shiites transferred the quality of infallibility from the imam to the guardian jurist. Jurists were granted vast authority over all the affairs of this sect's adherents. After the age of Major Occultation, *khoms* (the religious obligation that Shiite Muslims must pay; one-fifth of their wealth to the hidden imam) was included in Twelver Shiism. Given that the hidden imam has not reappeared, but his representatives exist, *khoms* should be paid to them instead.⁽¹⁵⁾ As a result, the issue of the guardian jurist and the allocation of *khoms* to him were included in the Shiite doctrine after the Major Occultation.

A devout Shiite lives a spiritual life and is characterized by *taqiya* (denial) as an essential and primary approach in dealing with others until the reappearance of the hidden imam. *Taqiya* is a Shiite practice of remaining silent and concealing one's identity to avoid persecution. Haidar Amoli claims that "all God's secrets, all illuminating secrets, and God's wisdom are trusts that are preserved in the hearts of *awliya* (God's friends). They shall be entrusted only to those who have the right to bear them," adding that these secrets entail Sharia rules and may, if violated, invoke God's wrath. This is why the imams themselves instructed their followers to follow *taqiya*.⁽¹⁶⁾

In fact, Twelver Shiism bestows infallibility and holiness on imams, granting them the authority to legislate beyond the Quran and Sunnah. Since the Major Occultation, Twelver Shiism has also transitioned guardianship from imams to jurists, resulting in the establishment of the guardian jurist theory. Jurists can continue ruling until the reappearance of Muhammad al-Mahdi. When Imam Mahdi returns, Shiites will stop following *taqiya*. In Twelver Shiism, this represents a static perception of the dynamic arc of history. Twelver Shiism became the official doctrine of the state from the Safavid era (1501-1736) to the present day. According to French Iranologist Henry Corbin, Twelver Shiism has been the official doctrine of the Iranian nation for the past five centuries. Several favorable factors contributed to Iranians choosing this version of Islam since its advent in Iran.⁽¹⁷⁾

Fayoumi supports this argument; the Shiite doctrine is linked to ancient Persian doctrines. "Among the things that Muslims have copied from ancient Persian doctrines was that the latter used to view their kings as divine figures that God chose to adjudicate between people and infused His spirit into them," Fayoumi says.⁽¹⁸⁾ As a result, Safavid Shiism differs from Alawite Shiism in terms of the gnostic Persian spirit that dominated it, as well as regarding religion as a path for the hereafter and a means of avoiding the entrapments of worldly life.

In light of the aforementioned, we understand that the Twelver Shiite doctrine dominates Iran. It places the ayatollah, the guardian jurist, at the top of the power structure of clerics. His spiritual authority exceeds the political authority of the president of the republic. He also has guardianship over the president himself. As a result, religious authority has become inextricably linked to political authority. The unquestionable nature of the ruling system of the guardian jurist is derived from ancient Persian culture. Several questions arise here about the role of the religious reform movement in Iran, the goals it sought to achieve, its position on the official state version of religion, whether it succeeded in its goals, or whether Shiism succeeded in thwarting all external reform efforts due to its dogmatic teachings, personalities, and centralized structure. These questions seek to examine the roles of prominent leaders of

religious reform who confronted the guardian jurist system. In particular, the study identifies the points on which religious reform figures focused on when questioning this unalterable ruling system.

Religious Reform and Criticizing the Clerical Government

Iran's religious reform movement has focused on criticizing clerics' authority in Twelver Shiism, with them having far-reaching authority over people and societal movements in general. Ali Shariati (1933-1979) said, "After the period of great prophets who clearly and truthfully conveyed God's message of religion, the fate of religion was controlled by hostile, inhumane colonial powers known as the spiritual class, transcendent figures, sufis, monks, and priests. They used religion to deceive the people, both individually and collectively, because religion, particularly upright Islam, is designed to care for both the individual and society."⁽¹⁹⁾

Ali Shariati revealed the extent to which the clerical and religious authority are closely intertwined. He believed that "the clerics wielding authority sought to take over the political authority to control the destinies of the people, enslave mankind and act tyrannically toward them."⁽²⁰⁾

Abdolkarim Soroush (1945-present) criticizes the clerics within the Iranian religious establishment for earning a living from religion, thus losing credibility. "If the clergy want to have a more influential say over the realities of people's lives and the matters that concern them, they should stop making religion the source of their breadwinning," he said.⁽²¹⁾

Because of the hawza's dominance, and the people's dominance over clerics to the extent that they can influence their direction, the religious reformists tried to craft a notion of clerical independence to accord them a sense of "dignity." The Shiite clerics are dependent on the public because they receive their money from the *khoms* they collect from people; i.e., people pay the clerics in accordance with Shiite religious principles. Barjourdi says, "I thought, when I become a marja, that I need to infer rules/laws and people need to follow these rules. People shall follow any fatwa I issue. But when I issued some fatwas, I discovered it is not this way."⁽²²⁾

No alternative can be practically implemented to achieve independence of clerics from the public. The political system will not allow the independence of clerics. Therefore, the problem between the state and the hawza will remain.

No doubt the criticisms leveled by reformists against the clerics in Iran are vast. For example, Soroush is severely critical of Iranian clerics. He said, "After the victory of the revolution, running the affairs of the state rested with clerics. The country is governed on the basis of Wilayat al-Faqih which places the jurist at the top of the government and political power, having the final say over all affairs. Of course, such a jurist must be a mujtahid and have

completed his religious instruction in the hawza, a madrasa from which jurists and clerics graduate.”⁽²³⁾

Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, a reformist, believes that Wilayat al-Faqih demolished the legitimacy and foundation of public opinion — elections — in appointing the political, economic and social systems upon which the political legitimacy of the ruling system is established.⁽²⁴⁾

Soroush explains the enormity of Iran’s clerical quandary, which is caused by the religious oligarchy’s control over the state, “As a result, the situation in our society after the revolution was shaped by the fact that the minority had triumphed and taken power. Those who were vulnerable had their grievances resolved, and clerics who studied jurisprudence and *usul* in general gained intellectual and political standing within society. They regard the rest of the world’s intellectual and political systems as null and void. They see themselves as the bearers of truth.”⁽²⁵⁾

Soroush reiterates that the clerics’ control over the public sphere is based on their use of jurisprudential authority as it is considered as one of Islam’s most important pillars. Jurisprudence is important for clerics. He claims that clerics raised the theme of “jurisprudential Islam” in the Iranian republic and worked to strengthen and highlight its foundations.⁽²⁶⁾

It is true that Soroush criticized Iran’s clerics, but he also condemned the hawzas (religious seminaries) because of their control over the social and political spheres in Iran. As the government is led by clerics, hawzas have the final say over political and governance issues. Clerics would not have such power and authority if the government was not based on religious rule. Power is delegated to religious elites in a clerical government. Religious institutions bestow power and authority on those who meet the requirements. Today, a cleric is a judge, heads the court and derives his authority from the guardian jurist. He is viewed with more importance, holiness, and reverence than anyone else.⁽²⁷⁾

Soroush also mentioned that the conflation of clerical knowledge with power has had a negative impact on religious knowledge in the hawzas. “The hawza began to speak the language of politics, not common sense,” he said. The evidence indicates that the hawza is weak and incapable of providing logical and orderly evidence in every case. Instead of guiding and admonishing those in power, it facilitates the ambitions of the ruling elite by providing religious legitimacy. The hawzas issue legal opinions and fatwas that are only consistent with the desires and ambitions of those in power .⁽²⁸⁾ All of this reflects the symbiotic relationship between the Iranian political system and the hawza.

Soroush emphasized that the hawzas have imposed a religious elite on Iran that dominates all spheres. Clerics who graduate from the hawzas control all aspects of Iranian life. He said, “Before the revolution, the hawzas

had never achieved such prominence. Today, however, the situation is completely different. We do not say that university graduates are not given job opportunities or appointed to government positions, but their circumstances are not the same as clerics. Clerics hold the strings and can effectively intervene in all matters, details, and minor issues. They control the major state levers. And the religious establishment has been and continues to be a unified front — a cohesive body. This party has seized power and has worked to keep the other parties at bay.”⁽²⁹⁾

The most dangerous criticism directed at the hawzas is that they use their religious role to control all aspects of Iranian life. Soroush says, “The hawzas address and communicate with the masses. The teachings of the hawza are incompatible with the elites’ ambitions. Their teachings should not be limited to enlightening people about jurisprudence and answering muqalids’ questions. Instead, they interact with the public on the one hand while leading efforts to guide them (to the right path) on the other.”⁽³⁰⁾

When it comes to discussing religious matters, hawzas define the parameters of religious knowledge and who is excluded. Soroush mentions, “The spirit of holiness that the hawza enjoys enables it to shut out opinions and jurisprudential matters and keep them concealed, which prevents breaking down, analyzing, and delving deeply into their details.” He added, “No one has the courage to criticize and filter them, allowing old and inherited opinions and theories to dominate the intellectual sphere, gaining holiness over time, with scholars protecting and guarding these old theories and opinions. This is the essence of intellectual decline and loss.”⁽³¹⁾

Mostafa Malekian, a prominent Iranian philosopher, attempted to demolish this “illusionary” sanctity, urging to look for the origin of the texts’ sacredness which the clerics use against their rivals. The clerics, according to Malekian, sanctified the narrators of texts, so they evade any criticism or discussion. “Is our perspective toward those who are beyond criticism and discussion correct?” Malekian asked.⁽³²⁾

The hawza seeks to exclude all opposing opinions and thoughts. Clerics continue to call for the elimination of all opposing beliefs, which destroys intellectual wealth. Soroush said, “Those people say that they have eliminated opponents in the spheres of jurisprudence and creed.” He stated that some argue that eliminating opposing doctrines is for the public interest, yet it is not even in the interest of the elites because this will ultimately cause harm to everybody. Verified knowledge cannot be achieved but through debates between different schools of thought.⁽³³⁾ Thus, Soroush calls on Shiite clerics to be open to opposing schools of thought as well as to modern cultures based on international ideas.

Soroush also criticizes the nature of hawzas' jurisprudential knowledge because it is based on absolute obedience between student and teacher. Hence, it is traditional, static, and changeless. He said, "Knowledge is where there are never-ending questions." He argued that a knowledge that lacks questions will not evolve. Any jurisprudential establishment that opposes raising questions and attacks those who ask questions will witness a decline in knowledge and cause confusion in the minds of its followers."⁽³⁴⁾

Soroush points out that the sciences of the hawza are based on belief and submission. These sciences are not subject to criticism and opposition. Thus, those in charge of the hawza are in dispute with the scholars of modern sciences. Soroush believes that both parties hurl accusations at each other. The scholars of modern sciences accuse hawza clerics of being static and regressive while the latter accuse the former of "relativeness, Occidentalism and disbelief."⁽³⁵⁾

Moreover, Soroush criticizes the exclusionary orientations of the hawzas in Iran. He said, "We live under the Islamic Republic, and we speak daily of disbelieving Eastern and Western ideals, and we believe that intellectual breakthroughs are null and void, and we see ourselves exclusively on the right side of things." He added, "And these perceptions and allegations make us oblivious to the need for more rigorous analysis and in-depth study of these sciences. We shouldn't just say that our scientists concluded that these ideas are false, abandoning analysis and critical thinking."⁽³⁶⁾

Soroush also believes that Iranians must study opposing intellectual systems and that they must be open to others in order to study thought and philosophy. He said, "This will broaden horizons and put an end to the static nature of religious thought, allowing the intellect to play a larger role in *ijtihad* and thinking." He added, "The clergy, particularly in the last century, did not receive adequate philosophical and theological instruction. *Fiqh* and *usul* dominate hawza studies, and the majority of clerics spend the bulk of their lives studying *fiqh* and *usul*, with the exception of a few clerics who had a desire to study philosophy, theology, and exegesis. Philosophy, theology and exegesis are not officially taught in the hawza."⁽³⁷⁾ As a result, one of the characteristics of Iranian Shiite reformers was their criticism of clerical authority. According to them, one of the reasons for political and religious dictatorship is this political authority, which controls society through clerics appointed in state institutions who wield excessive power.

Closed-Off Guardianship and Openness to Religion

Shiite religious reformers in Iran have criticized the closed-off nature of the (absolute) guardianship of the jurist. They see the need to end the guardian jurist's monopoly over religion, a guardianship that mandates a unilateral

and narrow vision and interpretation of revealed texts. This vision and interpretation are imposed by the political authority that dominates the public sphere in Iran. Soroush emphasizes the importance of multiple interpretations of religion and the need to accommodate pluralistic religious views. According to Soroush, "Our understanding of religious meanings and texts is necessarily diverse and multifaceted, and these diverse and multiple versions of understanding religion cannot be reduced to a single dominant vision." He added, "Religion is not only diverse and multifaceted, but it is also ever-changing. The secret is that the religious text is silent, and we continuously seek to understand and interpret religious texts, whether in jurisprudence, hadith narrations, or the Quran, by drawing on our intellectual conclusions."⁽³⁸⁾

Soroush criticizes Iran's clerics for adopting a unilateral interpretation of religion, claiming that the "adherents of each sect believe they are solely on the true path. As a result, each sect believes it has a sacred standing in the eyes of God. But, if each sect believes it that holds a monopoly on the truth, does not this imply that the world is descending into chaos?"⁽³⁹⁾ Furthermore, each sect believe others are not doing enough to understand faith properly because "they are intellectually poor and cannot be rebuked or reproached. But we have reached the true understanding of religion and have become the survivors, as they allege."⁽⁴⁰⁾

Malekian classifies religious pluralism into two types: plurality in the righteousness of religions (believing that all/many religions are right) and plurality in the destiny of human beings in the hereafter; i.e., despite having diverse religions people may have plural destinies. The two types are ultimately different. Yet Malekian by this argument prompts clerics to think out of the box; out of believing in one singular religion and to believe in religious pluralism.⁽⁴¹⁾

Soroush also offers numerous justifications and pretexts for the importance of belief and the various paths that lead to it. He says, "When God created mankind and imbued him with the aura of intellect, He created multiple languages and dialects, provided diverse reasons for and proofs of existence, established many intellectual stops and stations, sent many messages, and issued calls across a diverse spectrum, divided people into various communities and tribes to act, not out of arrogance, but out of a desire to know each other."⁽⁴²⁾

Soroush defends the diversity of religious interpretations as the essence of everything. He claims that "the multiple interpretations are actually multiple facets of the truth." God, in a well-known religious sense, has over a thousand names. Truth is not confined to a single facet solely because it has multiple facets, but also because the perspectives of those who look at this truth have different angles that contribute to the diversification of interpretations.⁽⁴³⁾

Soroush believes that those with intimate knowledge of God justify multiple interpretations because of differing viewpoints. He said, "When interpreting the phenomenon of multiple facets of divine revelation, we see ascetics and Muslims say that when the views of those who went through the experience and revelation become diverse, the total of all these experiences become varying and diverse."⁽⁴⁴⁾

Soroush also reveals that religious pluralism is a result of the diverse manifestations of God's existence. He said, "The secret behind the diverse religions does not lie in the different social circumstances which led to the distortion of religions — which necessitated the emergence of a new religion — but instead of the diverse manifestations of God Almighty in the universe. As the realm of the universe is diverse, the realm of legislation is diverse, too."⁽⁴⁵⁾

According to Soroush, religious knowledge is relative, thus it can be true or false, and relativity is the path to belief in many aspects of religious understanding. This is due to the fact that when religion enters human history, it is subject to the acts, understandings, and behaviors of human beings. Further, clerics superficially tackle the philosophical complexities generated from modernism. They believe that Islamic jurisprudence can address all problems. If they cannot find solutions to specific problems, they claim that these problems are enemies' plots and should be eliminated to protect society from such problems.⁽⁴⁶⁾

According to the prominent leaders of religious reform, the vividness of religion stems from the multiple meanings that can be drawn from the revealed texts, which contributes to multiple readings when interpreting the texts. To Soroush, "The multiple readings result from the existence of varying interpretations of a certain single text. Therefore, we see multiple versions in the realm of explication. We accepted multiple readings and views in this area and no interpreter or expositor had alleged that he is the seal of interpreters or explainers. This reflects the vividness of religion and our scientific awareness of it."⁽⁴⁷⁾

On the other hand, the multiple readings of religion spring from the movement of society, influence and their evolution. Soroush believes that social experiences in turn give religion an integrated and comprehensive dimension. Muslims, through their conquests and acquaintance with new cultures, contributed to spreading and expanding philosophy, theology, and morals. In fact, they contributed to the expansion of Islam, moving it from the realm of totality to the sphere of detailed explanation. Thus, it could be said that as long as the door for such experiences is open, religion will continue to integrate and expand.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Social Function of Religion

Indeed, the reality of piety in Iranian society was a strong motivator for the religious reformation movement, which saw it as imperative to criticize this reality as it dominated everyday life. Iranian societal piety was because of the merging of Iran's political and clerical authorities, as well as clerics controlling the social sphere through a static and closed-off version of religion that excludes others, focusing on eschatological rather than societal issues, and rejecting all modern achievements. This prompted Ali Shariati to criticize this version of religion, claiming that the clerics have created *estehmar* (stupefaction); i.e., to deceive the laity which follows a two-pronged dynamic. The first is based on making people ignorant as well as directing minds toward aspects related to ignorance and disregard for critical issues. The second is distraction, which diverts a man's attention away from demanding his rights by preoccupying him with partial rights. This is under the guise of jurisprudential priorities; to make people focus on marginal issues rather than significant issues.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Shariati emphasizes that religion becomes a source of stupefaction when clerics speak solely on eschatological and unseen issues, causing them to turn a blind eye to the injustices overwhelming society. Clerics urge people to abandon this life and focus on the next life. Shariati highlights that clerics say, "Abandon this worldly life because the final end is always death. Save all of your needs, desires, and feelings for fulfillment in the afterlife and posthumously. The time you'll be waiting for isn't all that long. They are worthless after 30, 40, or 50 years. When this period is over, everything will be at your disposal, and you will be among those who will live forever (in the Gardens of Aden). They are the years of your brief life. They have no value. So, abandon the worldly life and leave it for those seeking it."⁽⁵⁰⁾

Old cultural heritage is employed to fool people, focusing mainly on morals, mysticism, glorifying the past, intercession and admission to heaven to justify and legitimize the static version of religion that is propagated. This version of religion prevents people from properly addressing their reality.

According to Shariati, the religion of polytheism and fooling the laity (stupefaction) perpetuate the backward status quo in Iran. Shariati invokes quotes of Karl Marx about this pattern of religion. He said, "Religion indeed is the opium of the people and it was invented to make people accept deprivation and misery in this world under the guise of belief and afterlife. Any attempt to change this situation is a defiance of God's will and desire and obedience to His command. Such a conclusion is true per se and cannot be denied."⁽⁵¹⁾

Shariati focused on the idea that religious discourse for the people should be revolutionary in nature, and religion should be transformed into an ideology for change rather than a tool for perpetuating the static and unchanging version of religion. The religion of stupefaction and polytheism "is a regressive

form of religiosity. It attempts to justify unjust conditions by disseminating metaphysical beliefs. It also seeks to defame creedal and religious principles, such as the distortion of belief in the Day of Judgment, sacred places, and supernatural forces, in order to persuade people that their situation is the best situation and that they should be content with it because it reflects God Almighty's will. It is their God-given ultimate destiny," Shariati says.⁽⁵²⁾

Shariati contends that the religion of "stupefaction" controls people by terrorizing and intimidating them rather than showing mercy, viewing God from one angle — that of fear and intimidation and looking at God's attributes such as awe and might, which are interpreted in a dictatorial sense by the polytheistic religions. God's attributes in the Abrahamic religions which date back 2,000 or 3,000 years stem from two paths. First is God's love, which includes worshiping God's attributes of absolute *jalal* and *jamal* (mercy and beauty). Second, God's care, sovereignty, generosity, and protection.⁽⁵³⁾

Through his Marxist reading of religion, Shariati reiterated that capitalism helps polytheistic religions that fool the laity to remain dominant and sovereign. He said, "The essential element which polytheistic religions have focused on over the course of history is the economy; a small elite possesses nearly everything while the vast majority remains disenfranchised. This element itself needs religion to preserve itself and sustain its presence and justify its survival and perpetuation. This is because religion is the force that is capable of making man submit, convincing him of accepting submission and humiliation."⁽⁵⁴⁾

Shariati's rejection of Iranian religious patterns that perpetuated the static situation and the unchanging nature of society does not mean he rejected the role of religion in man's life. He based his thought on the Iranian Islamic self. He reiterated the importance of religion in the spiritual and social life of man and that man should return to the authentic self, given that Islam is a religion for monotheism and liberation. According to Shariati, the monotheistic religion is the one that nourishes its followers and adherents with a critical view of all that is surrounding them in the material and moral settings and grants them a sense of responsibility to address the status quo, prompting them to consider changing it.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Shariati emphasized the importance of developing one's revolutionary self, the self that is capable of breaking free from constraints and dominating unchanging versions of religiosity. A man should be free of changelessness, decline, and deterioration in himself and society. He believes that this self should focus on the social function of religion, with rituals referring to the ongoing communication between God and man rather than the display of formal ritual aspects and oral supplications. Thus, rituals from Shariati's perspective would become "a tool for rebelling against traditions and narrow

social frameworks, carving out a true human presence, reviving man's quest for the true meaning of his existence, unearthing the precious spiritual treasures, and reaching a higher stage than mystics in our heritage. This state represents the consciousness of the heart, a deeper, and more sincere and sublime form of devotion. This is the true sense of devotion or, as the Quran puts it 'the Covenant of Intuition.'"⁽⁵⁶⁾

Additionally, Shariati focused on the importance of striving and its role in change. Striving, in the broader sense, is not confined to acts of worship but includes efforts in the intellectual, economic, political and health domains as well as helping people. It even includes a Muslim's sleep and efforts to earn a living.⁽⁵⁷⁾

As a result, Shariati concluded that it is critical to cultivate a social struggle project based on seeking to liberate man by refining the deeper aspects of his soul, reestablishing a new relationship between God and man for the benefit of both man and society. Thus, Shariati sought to liberate religion from the constraints imposed by static and backward Shiite orientations of religion. In addition, he sought to establish a new theology through which he aimed to liberate man and develop and revitalize the reality of society in mullah-ruled Iran, where clerics have the final say.

In his focus on the importance of the social function of religion, Shariati concluded that scholars and thinkers must restore religion's revolutionary outlook. And they should resurrect the revolutionary version of true religion, instilling it in the hearts of the people. The role of scholars and thinkers is to cultivate a vivid and conscious religious affection so that the people can understand the true sense of monotheism and realize the extent of contradictions between the religion of monotheism and the religion based on worshipping the *taghut* (tyrant) other than God, to be able to precisely identify the polytheistic religion disguised in monotheism and to put an end to all kinds of showy piety all over the world — to practice true religion, not one that is an outcome of ignorance or fear.⁽⁵⁸⁾

Soroush believed that this vision is important and has an important role in influencing the youth in Iran. Shariati paid special attention to the social function of religion and its role in liberating man and society. Soroush believes "Shariati mentioned that the form of religion that does not benefit people in this life will not benefit them in the hereafter. Before the revolution, many young men were moved by this rhetoric. It inspired them to rise up and use religious impulses to change the backward reality and revolt against the status quo to establish the rule of true religion."⁽⁵⁹⁾

Soroush followed in the footsteps of others in emphasizing the importance of religion's social function and the importance of religiosity in improving people's conditions and lives. True religion should play an important role in

people's lives around the world. It was revealed with the intention of building and spreading prosperity on the planet. People should take advantage of this opportunity. According to Soroush, the version of religion that focuses on everyday matters reflects the fact that man wants to embrace religion to benefit him in his daily life and to serve his life within the ever-changing reality. In other words, in this version of religiosity, the most important thing is how man can best benefit his life, live a good life, and in an environment conducive to doing good deeds. A religious man who wishes to embrace religion while seeking to improve his life will realize that life with religion is far superior to life without religion, as facing life's challenges and difficulties will be much easier.⁽⁶⁰⁾

From this perspective, Soroush advocated for connecting religion and society through "the sort of religiosity that focused on the matters of worldly daily life." Soroush believes that this type of religiosity is known as "worldly religiosity," as opposed to eschatological religiosity, which is best suited to secularism. *Secularism* does not clash with *religion* and does not represent its polar opposite. Many Islamist thinkers and reformers worked to achieve the mentioned pattern of religiosity in social reality. They worked their entire lives to demonstrate that religion does not contradict everyday life. Both secularism and religion are life's keys and safes, each complementing the other.⁽⁶¹⁾

True, Soroush emphasized the significance of religion in social life. However, he also stressed the significance of religion in people's lives. He reiterated that the morals enjoined by religion help man to be disciplined, curb worldly lusts, and ensure adherence to piety in individual and social life. This is the most important thing we need to understand and apply in real life.⁽⁶²⁾

As a result of Soroush's interest in the importance of religion in the functioning of society, he has called for the pursuance of secular religion, a kind of religiosity which pays attention to worldly matters. He said, "The secularist version of religion — the religion pursued to attain worldly gains — is the sort of religion that serves worldly purposes and becomes subordinate to it. The criterion of whether a religion represents the truth is how far it serves man's worldly life. This explains the meaning of 'the ideological religion' term, since ideology has a religious (clerical) purpose,⁽⁶³⁾ which is the eschatological aspect of religion." In light of the importance of connecting religion with society, Soroush has reiterated the importance of correcting our understanding of religion and how to make the best use of it in regard to worldly matters, where religion and civil society reconcile with one another.

Conclusion

Iranian reformists, including Shariati, Soroush, Shabestari and others, have used their writings to intellectually influence a large segment of the

Iranian youth. Some of their writings, such as Shariati's, were inspiring and paved the way for the Iranian revolution. Hashemi Rafsanjani argued that Shariati's reading of religion shaped the awareness of many Iranian youths because he was aware of their spiritual conditions. Mohammad Reza Hakimi believes that Shariati recognized the importance of having a religion that is compatible with the needs of our time. As a result, he was able to bring an entire generation of young people to the front of Islam. Despite some Iranians' praise for Shariati's efforts, Khomeini, who was familiar with everything Shariati was writing in exile in Paris, reacted to Shariati's books with silence, refusing to express any opinion on them. I believe that Khomeini was largely dissatisfied with Shariati's approach, though it contributed to the opposition of the shah's government. The situation in Iran under Khomeini reflected what Shariati wrote against, the establishment of a radical and backward theocratic government.

The story ended with Shariati being assassinated. Musa al-Sadr explained that the shah's government as well as the clerics who considered themselves to be the exclusive guardians over religion, believed that interpreting religion was their exclusive right, and that they alone are the ones who best understand religion and none has the right to express their different understanding of it in Iran. These actors stood against Shariati. Mostafa Qamaran stressed that fanatical clerics crushed Shariati and they did not hesitate in attacking or levelling accusations against him. This ended up with the conservative movement in Iran being victorious. All the efforts of Shariati were reversed when Khomeini took over as the imam of Shiites, with the guardianship of the jurist and the clerics wresting control over social and political life in Iran.

Both Shariati and Soroush started their reform efforts by criticizing religious education. Their international travel and academic studies in humanities such as philosophy and sociology had a significant impact on their reformist views. Thus, modernity had a significant impact on the religious reform movement in Iran and the advancement of reformist views that aimed to break the shackles imposed by the closed-off version of Twelver Shiite religiosity and the absolute tyranny of the guardian jurist.

Shariati was eventually assassinated in London by the shah's intelligence agents, with the blessing of the clerics. After rejecting his epistemological/hermeneutical theory, "The Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge," and calling his religion and doctrine into question, Soroush ended up living in the West. However, Shabestari's works were crucial in criticizing and exposing how far the Safavid version of Twelver Shiism in Iran was static.

The Iranian religious reform movement influenced large and diverse segments of Iranian society, particularly the youth and women. It influenced the

Shiite public. However, this did not result in a viable alternative that counters the clergy-controlled social and political spheres in Iran. This is because of the inextricable link between religious authority and political power, with authorities using repressive and violent tools against any dissenting voice. This is evident in the protests the Iranian people launch against the obligatory hijab, poverty, and tyranny. These protests actually oppose the Wilayat al-Faqih ruling system and its religious interpretation. The Iranian people believe this ruling system is marked with setbacks and political failure. Are the protests further proof of the failure of religious and political reform in Iran, so the only way out of the current Iranian crisis is a revolution?

Endnotes

- (1) Shahrastani, *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Nihal (Book of Sects and Creeds)*, trans. Gamil Sidqi (Beirut: Dar al Fikr al Arabi, 1997), 24. [Arabic].
- (2) Sohair Mokhtar, *Shiite Jihad* (Beirut: Dar al-Jeel, 1978), 202. [Arabic].
- (3) *Ibid.*, 200.
- (4) *Ibid.*, 203.
- (5) Ali Sami al-Nashar, *The Origin of Philosophical Thought in Islam* (Cairo: Dara al-Maarif, vol. 2), 113.
- (6) "Analogy in Islamic fiqh denotes the connection of something without a text to its judgment by another textual matter with a judgement by virtue of a shared cause between the two." See "The Sixth Source: Analogy (Qiyas)," IIUM, accessed October 2022 ,31, <https://bit.ly/3ztWrcW>.
- (7) *Ibid.*, 26.
- (8) Muhammad Ibrahim al-Fyouni, *Shi'ites, Populism and Twelverism* (Cairo: Dar al-Fakr al-Arabi, 2002), 2: 405.
- (9) *Ibid.*, 206, also see Henry Corbin: *Twelver Shiites*, trans. Thoqan Qarqoot (Cairo: Madbouly Bookshop, 1992), 1: 403. [Arabic].
- (10) Fayoumi, *Shi'ites, Populism and Twelverism*, 403.
- (11) *Ibid.*, 407.
- (12) *Ibid.*, 406-407.
- (13) *Ibid.*, 400.
- (14) Mohammed Fayyad, *Shiite Factions* (Cairo: General Organization For Culture Palaces, 2012), 258. [Arabic].
- (15) *Ibid.*, 258-259.
- (16) Henry Corbin, 110.
- (17) *Ibid.*, 23.
- (18) Fayoumi, 40.
- (19) Ali Shariati, *Al-nabaha wal Istihmar (Intellect and Stupidification)* trans. Hadi Al-Sayyid Yassi, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar Al-Amir, Edition, 2007), 109. [Arabic].
- (20) *Ibid.*, 52.
- (21) Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason and Freedom*, trans. Ahmad al-Qabbanji (Beirut: Al Intishar Al Arabi Foundation, 2010), 71.
- (22) Haidar Hobballah, *Islamization of Sciences* (Beirut: Al Intishar Al Arabi Foundation, 2017), 365. [Arabic].
- (23) Abdolkarim Soroush, *Wider Than Ideology*, trans. Ahmad al-Qabbanji (Beirut: Al Intishar Al Arabi Foundation, 2010), 58. [Arabic].
- (24) Muhammad Mujtahid Shabastari, *A Critique of the Official Reading of Religion* (Beirut: Al Intishar Al Arabi Foundation, 2017), 44. [Arabic].
- (25) *Ibid.*, 44-45.
- (26) *Ibid.*, 24.
- (27) *Ibid.*, 58.
- (28) *Ibid.*, 71.
- (29) *Ibid.*, 60.
- (30) *Ibid.*, 61.
- (31) *Ibid.*, 61.
- (32) Mostafa Malekian, *Articles and Sayings on Philosophy, Religion and Life* (Beirut: Al Intishar Al Arabi Foundation, 2013), 272. [Arabic].
- (33) *Ibid.*, 42.
- (34) *Ibid.*, 70.
- (35) *Ibid.*, 57.
- (36) *Ibid.*, 43.
- (37) *Ibid.*, 38.
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THE IMPACT OF ISRAEL'S OCTOPUS DOCTRINE ON THE IMAGE OF THE IRGC

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Introduction

Iran's discourse to promote the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is based on what it believes to be its security successes in the Middle East; its proxies penetrating Arab countries. However, Israel started to distort the IRGC's image of strength and cohesion in line with its strategy to confront Iran. Former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett code-named this strategy "the Octopus Doctrine."

This paper explores Israel's revised strategy to directly confront Iran's regional movements and nuclear activities that may lead to its development of a nuclear weapon. Israel rejects a nuclear Iran and has openly declared hostility toward Tehran. It also examines the potential impacts of Israel's strategy that identifies the IRGC as the most prominent organization representing the power of the Iranian political system. The strategy defines the standing of the IRGC in Iran's security approach and strategy. In addition, this paper looks at Mossad's countermeasures against IRGC operations, and possible impacts on the image of the IRGC.

IRGC Domestic and Regional Standing in Iran's Security Strategy

On May 5, 1979, Khomeini established the IRGC under his decree after the overthrow of the Pahlavi government.⁽¹⁾ The IRGC consists of various elements, expresses revolutionary enthusiasm and loyalty to Wilayat al-Faqih. The IRGC has approximately 125,000 soldiers who are assigned across the organization's land, air, and naval forces.⁽²⁾ The IRGC is a critical pillar of the Iranian political system and plays an important role in Iran's security and deterrence strategy.

The Standing of the IRGC in Iran's Internal Security Strategy

The IRGC has an important role to play in Iran's security strategy through:

■ **Preserving the revolution and its gains:** According to Article 150 of the Iranian Constitution, "The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, organized in the early days of the triumph of the Revolution, is to be maintained so that it may continue in its role of guarding the Revolution and its achievements."⁽³⁾ The ideas and structure of the IRGC developed over time and it turned into the ideological guardian of the revolutionary Iranian political system.⁽⁴⁾ The IRGC began to pursue political and economic goals along with its security duties. The IRGC has a special standing in the political system as it is a close ally of the supreme leader; it enjoys his permanent support.⁽⁵⁾

The traditional Iranian army does not enjoy the same standing as the IRGC in terms of tasks and budget. In 2017, for example, the government allocated about \$7.5 billion of the national budget to the IRGC, while the army got only \$2.7 billion and nearly \$1 billion has been allocated to the IRGC Resistance Mobilization Force (more commonly known as the Basij Force) since 2007.⁽⁶⁾

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has involved the IRGC in the political arena, violating Khomeini's commandment and writings. Khomeini said, "I want the IRGC to withdraw from the political arena, because this interference will prevent its harmony, and lead eventually to its collapse."⁽⁷⁾ The greatest evidence of the IRGC's political interference was under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was an IRGC member, and he appointed five IRGC members as ministers in his government, in addition to the fact that dozens of parliamentarians were former IRGC members.⁽⁸⁾

Beyond the political arena, the IRGC oversees media outlets, and runs training and educational programs designed to foster loyalty to the government, prepare citizens to defend the homeland, and bolster its credibility in the eyes of other actors. On the economic front, strategic industries and commercial services fall under the control of the IRGC, and it engages in several illegal activities such as smuggling, arms sales, and money laundering.⁽⁹⁾

The IRGC is like a private actor in Iran, with its affiliated banks and financial institutions among the largest listed on the Tehran Stock Exchange.⁽¹⁰⁾ The IRGC also runs charitable organizations that provide social services inside

and outside Iran known as *bonyads*. The latter have played a major role in expanding its support base.⁽¹¹⁾ In addition, they have supported the IRGC in tackling natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods.

From the aforementioned, the role and importance of the IRGC in maintaining Iranian security, covering all its political, economic and social dimensions, becomes clear.

■ **Facing internal opposition and popular protests in times of crisis:** The IRGC plays a major role in suppressing protests and demonstrations in Iran. The protests and crises that Iran has faced in recent years include the protests of 2017 and 2018, as well as the fuel crisis in 2019 and the water crisis in 2021.

In fact, the political system has expanded the role of the IRGC and Basij rather than narrowing it. Moreover, the Basij gained greater control over law enforcement after the creation of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, in which its members were authorized to arrest people for religious offenses.⁽¹²⁾ Recently, the ramifications of the Basij having so much power were evident after its members were involved in mistreating women who protested against the mandatory hijab in Iran.

In short, the IRGC has been operating as a broad social, political, and economic organization with its influence extending to every corner of Iranian political life and society.⁽¹³⁾

The IRGC's Significance in Iran's Regional Security Strategy

Iran exercises its foreign policy strategy through embracing two mindsets: the "state mindset" and the "revolution mindset." While it practices the first in its dealings with other states and governments, it uses the second in its relations with militias and armed groups. Iran therefore represents a case of extreme complexity and contradiction in discourse and action, and duplicity at other times.⁽¹⁴⁾ The government applies the state mentality, while the IRGC embraces the revolution mentality. This duplicity is more apparent under a "reformist" presidency as during the tenure of former President Hassan Rouhani.

The IRGC has significant importance in Iran's regional neighborhood, especially in the Middle East, it has created strategic depth through using the sectarian dimension of Wilayat al-Faqih to influence Shiite communities, in addition to financing, arming, and training agents and proxies. However, it is fair to say that the operations of the IRGC extend beyond Iran's immediate neighborhood.

The following points explain the IRGC's role in implementing Iran's foreign policy strategy:

■ **Exporting the revolution abroad and creating agents in the targeted countries:** Through the ideology ingrained in its leaders and members, the IRGC is considered to be a major supportive organization for "exporting the revolution."

This task is assigned to the IRGC's arm abroad, the Quds Force, which was established in 1990 after the Iran-Iraq War. The Quds Force is responsible for exporting the revolution, establishing partner militias, providing them with material and financial support, as well as training and advising them.⁽¹⁵⁾ These militias include the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi groups like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Badr Organization and Hezbollah in addition to the Houthi militia in Yemen and the Defenders of Shiite Shrines in Syria. The late General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, had a major role in this external strategy because of his significant influence inside Iran and abroad, and given his close ties with militia leaders, as well as his effective role in persuading Russia to intervene militarily in Syria in 2015. Soleimani stated at that time, "Indications of exporting the revolution have become evident in all regions, from Bahrain and Iraq to Syria, Yemen, and even North Africa."⁽¹⁶⁾

However, Soleimani's assassination on January 3, 2020 in a US strike in Iraq led to confusion in the resistance axis that he led, especially since his successor, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, does not have the same charisma.

■ **Executing military operations and assassinations in other countries:** The IRGC often conducts military maneuvers to demonstrate its power. In September 2008, the IRGC officially assumed responsibility for defending Iranian interests in the Arabian Gulf. While its naval forces have minimal control capabilities, they have a variety of assets at their disposal to threaten shipping lanes in the Gulf and Caspian Sea, and the ability to block the Strait of Hormuz.⁽¹⁷⁾ In recent years, Iranian attacks on ships increased in the Gulf region, in addition to the confiscation of oil tankers and the downing of drones. These events prompted former US President Donald Trump to form a US-led military coalition to protect navigation in the Arabian Gulf and strategic corridors in the region.

Moreover, the IRGC carries out assassinations abroad. On August 10, 2022, Washington announced that it had thwarted a plot by the IRGC to kill former US National Security Adviser John Bolton, while Turkish intelligence foiled another plot to assassinate eight Israelis in Turkey.⁽¹⁸⁾

Recent Mossad Methods to Counter IRGC Operations

Iran wants to be a major regional power in the Middle East with the possibility of joining the nuclear club. Other regional powers, especially Israel, reject this Iranian ambition. Therefore, Israel has engaged in secret battles, known as "shadow wars," since 2004 with Iran, but Israeli attacks have increased recently against Iran's proxies. Israel has also started to infiltrate Iran to carry out assassinations of Iranian figures linked to the country's nuclear program and IRGC commanders; some of them are interrogated by Israeli agents inside Iran as part of Israel's Octopus Doctrine.

The following points address Israel's responses to threats posed by the IRGC.

Unconventional Israeli Methods in the Secret War Against Iran

Israel views a nuclear Iran as an existential threat which has prompted it to launch preventive attacks and a secret war that has become almost public against Iran. Israel also rejects any international agreement on the Iranian nuclear program and considers itself not bound by it, and always reserves the right to act according to its interests and security, especially against the backdrop of Iranian and IRGC hostile discourse against Tel Aviv. Israel prefers the selective military option by targeting areas where Iran's nuclear sites are located. Therefore, in 2018, Israel worked to persuade former US President Donald Trump to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear agreement that the Obama administration signed in 2015.

While the current US administration, led by President Joe Biden, is trying to conclude a new agreement with Iran, Israel rejects this path and works to achieve its own outcomes even if it is concluded, especially putting an end to Iranian missile development, arms transfers, and the financing of terrorist groups by all means possible such as the following:⁽¹⁹⁾

■ **Tracking proxies through third countries:** After the Arab revolutions, Israel found itself surrounded by Iran's allies in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, which are arenas for Tehran's proxies. To counter this, the Israeli General Staff launched a low-intensity military campaign known as "the campaign between wars," with heavy air domination since 2013, to target the pro-Iranian axis in Syria and Iraq. These air raids have intensified since 2018 on the Tehran-Beirut corridor, and Israel has avoided attacking Iran directly. They target convoys carrying weapons for Hezbollah. Israeli Chief of Staff General Gadi Eisenkot stated that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF/TSAHAL) carried out 2,000 raids in 2018 against Iran-affiliated targets. Israel regularly launches air strikes targeting Damascus International Airport to prevent Iranian planes carrying military equipment from landing there, as well as on the air base of Iranian forces in Tartus.

■ **Targeting nuclear sites and threatening Iranian cyber security:** The Iranian-Israeli cyberwar is evident, as Israel has targeted Iran's nuclear sites with repeated cyberattacks. In 2021, former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said at a press conference held with former US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in Jerusalem, "Iran has not and will not give up its ambition of possessing nuclear weapons, and Israel pledges to prevent it from obtaining it."⁽²⁰⁾

Netanyahu made this statement without commenting on the official Iranian accusation against Israel of committing sabotage acts at Iran's Natanz nuclear site on April 11, 2021.

In October 2015, Herzi Halevi, the head of the Israeli Military Intelligence Directorate, responded to a question about whether Israel would go to war in the next decade, "We are already at war with Iran. It is a technological war, our engineers are fighting theirs, and this fighting is expected to grow in the future."⁽²¹⁾ Israeli cyberattacks also targeted several Iranian military and civilian sites, yet again, Israel did not acknowledge the attacks.

Israel possesses advanced cyberwarfare capabilities far superior to Iran's, as Israel is one of the major countries in the cyber space globally. On May 18, 2020, Israel carried out a cyberattack on the Port of Shahid Rajaei, which caused severe damage in retaliation for an Iranian cyberattack attempt.⁽²²⁾

■ **Targeting Iran through the Octopus Doctrine:** This strategy includes practices that Mossad has always carried out against Israel's enemies, especially assassinations. Former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin targeted weapons of mass destruction sites, and authorized the assassination of engineers, scientists and diplomats to prevent the development of a weapons of mass destruction program in the region.⁽²³⁾ But this new strategy is different from previous Mossad operations, because the targeted country is Iran (a country which always boasts about its strength), the intensity of operations against Iranian territory is high, and Israel claims responsibility for the operations. Therefore, the Iranian political system, most prominently the IRGC, have been caught off guard as Israel's policy of engaging in a secret war against Iran's proxies has shifted to their sponsor; the Iranian political system at home.

The term "Octopus Doctrine" was first used by the current Alternate Prime Minister of Israel Naftali Bennett who said in his interview with *The Economist*, "We are applying the Octopus Doctrine. We are no longer targeting the tentacles with Iran's proxies. We have created a new equation by targeting the head."⁽²⁴⁾

The Octopus Doctrine, is based on the following elements:

■ **Targeting military and scientific figures associated with the Iranian nuclear program inside Iran:** In this context, Mossad captured and interrogated IRGC official Yadullah Khedmati inside Iran after interrogating Mansour Rasouli, an officer in the Quds Force. Based on the information obtained, Israel stated that it thwarted Iranian attempts to "assassinate a US general in Germany, a journalist in France, and an Israeli diplomat in Turkey." A statement by the Israeli government's presidency stated, "The supreme leadership in Iran ordered, financed and approved these plans, and it was scheduled to be implemented by the IRGC."⁽²⁵⁾

Israel also carried out a series of assassinations against Iranian scientists inside Iran. Five figures were major targets over 10 years from 2010 to 2020. The most prominent figure was Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh who was assassinated by

Mossad in 2020. Fakhrizadeh was a key figure in the military sector of Iranian nuclear activities. According to Richard Goldberg, the director of the National Security Council at the White House, to combat Iranian weapons of mass destruction under former US President Donald Trump, "Mohsen Fakhrizadeh would not have been killed without a massive security breach inside Iran."⁽²⁶⁾

Israel has also carried out more recent assassinations, including the targeting of an engineer at the Parchin military site that develops missiles and drones. A small drone attack targeted an engineer in late May 2022. In addition, Israel assassinated another aviation engineer named Ayoub Entezari by poisoning him in the city of Yazd city on May 31, 2022.⁽²⁷⁾ IRGC officers also did not survive a series of Israeli attacks inside Iran, including Colonel Hassan Sayyad Khodaei, who was found dead in his car in Tehran this year.

In response to these acts, the IRGC carried out retaliatory operations, but they were not comparable to the Israeli operations in Iranian territories despite the success of some of them.

■ **The theft of documents related to Iran's nuclear program:** On January 31, 2018, Mossad stole Iran's nuclear archive from a warehouse in Turqzabad.⁽²⁸⁾ Additionally, Mossad stole confidential documents from the Aerospace Organization near Tehran. Yossi Cohen, former director of Mossad, admitted to the previous operation, and the documents were digitally smuggled to Israel, even before the Mossad agents left the headquarters of the Iranian archive.⁽²⁹⁾ In reference to the Israeli intelligence penetration into Iran's security apparatus and upper-level systems, former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said, "The highest official who took charge of Israeli counterintelligence in the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence was a spy for Israel himself."⁽³⁰⁾

■ **Attacks on Iranian drone facilities:** The targeting of Iran's drone facilities is included in Israel's new strategy in order to confront Iran's growing drone development program. These attacks are part of Israel's preventive defensive strategy, because Iranian drones have targeted Israel several times.⁽³¹⁾

The Potential Ramifications of the IRGC's Deteriorating Image of Strength

Generally speaking, stereotypical images can be both positive and negative. This is applicable to the case of describing the strength of the IRGC; it might be positive or negative depending on the receiver of the stereotypical images. While the IRGC's strength, about which the Iranian political system boasts, represents a positive factor for the revolutionary system, its foreign militias and "hardliner" governments, it represents a negative factor for the Iranian people, who desire change and reject Iran's foreign policies. The Iranian people also condemn the government's violence at home, especially against trade unions, and its rejection of "reformist" parties. Moreover, the army does not favor the growing influence of the IRGC and its interventions in the

Iranian political and economic spheres. In addition, the peoples in the region have been affected by Iranian interference in their countries' internal affairs through the Quds Force and its proxy militias.

The following points highlight the impact of Israel's Octopus Doctrine on the IRGC's stereotypical image:

Impact on the Image of the IRGC Inside Iran

The Octopus Doctrine represents a setback for the IRGC and its image of strength, deterrence and prestige that the Iranian system promotes inside Iran. The negative impact can be noted through the following points:

■ **The Iranian people's declining confidence in the IRGC's intelligence:** One of the organizations responsible for Iranian security is the IRGC Information Protection Organization, which was founded in 2009 and headed by cleric Hossein Taeb since its establishment until the government dismissed him due to Israeli operations inside Iran. Mohammad Kazemi, a military officer, now heads the organization.⁽³²⁾ The organization's image has been shaken because of the large number of Israeli assassinations in Iran. These assassinations caused embarrassment to the Iranian political system, although the IRGC tried to downplay assassinations or thefts that occurred in front of the Iranian people through threatening to retaliate, or by not acknowledging the incidents, or minimizing their seriousness, or even trying to mislead the public by arresting people unrelated to the incidents.

The Israeli operations also created a state of confusion and led to blame against IRGC officials. The head of the Strategic Center of the Iranian Parliament said that Iran had turned into a "sanctuary for spies," and lawmakers demanded the resignation of senior IRGC security and intelligence officials. The Israeli operations also impacted IRGC commanders, as the IRGC Commander Brigadier General Hossein Salami said, "This intelligence war has turned today into the most realistic war," and warned that "the enemy brought all its means into the field" and reminded his comrades that "Many regimes were overthrown by world powers through intelligence operations."⁽³³⁾

Thus, the series of Israeli assassinations shook the standing of the IRGC, and even drove a segment of officers to feel insecure. Currently, the Iranian economy is suffering under the Raisi government, who belongs to the "hardliner" current that agrees with the IRGC's orientations. Iran may witness a new wave of price rises and consequently the return of protests and more clashes with the IRGC-affiliated Basij Force. During the 2018 unrest, protesters rejected Iran's regional policies by chanting slogans such as: "Neither Gaza nor Lebanon, I sacrifice my life for Iran!" and "Leave Syria and take care of our problems!" As well as "Death to Hezbollah!" With regard to Hezbollah, Iranian public opinion considers it the greatest beneficiary of Iranian generosity and accuses the IRGC of promoting it in Lebanon.⁽³⁴⁾

The IRGC's embarrassing situation multiplied when affiliated members and companies were exposed for engaging in corruption and this coincided with Israeli operations in Iran. After the embezzlement case of about 8,000 billion tomans in the Quds Force-affiliated YAS company, the IRGC is currently facing a scandal of corruption in Mobarakeh Steel Company in Isfahan, as an embezzlement estimated at 92,000 billion tomans was disclosed.⁽³⁵⁾

The IRGC's modest performance against the Israeli strategy gave an opportunity for the "reformist" movement to criticize the organization. It can be noted that an Iranian "reformist" politician commented on Israel's capabilities to infiltrate Iran and carry out operations in the country, to the British Financial Times newspaper. He said that it is "as if Israel has set up a large-scale organization in Tehran," adding,

"Israel runs its operations freely in Tehran; it is clearly targeting the image of a secure Iran, to discredit its greatness among the people."⁽³⁶⁾

■ **The rise of the Iranian regular army's (Artesh) stature:** In 2020, the Assistant Coordinator of the Iranian Army Commander Admiral Habibollah Sayyari made statements to the Iranian news agency IRNA showing the differences between the regular army and the IRGC. Sayyari launched an unprecedented attack against the IRGC, without mentioning the name, which revealed a "state of tension within the army" regarding the IRGC's escalation of influence in various political and economic sectors. Sayyari said, "We (the army) do not interfere in politics ... Politicism is harmful for the armed forces ... It is not in the interest of the armed forces to interfere in the economy ... the armed forces should avoid parallel work."⁽³⁷⁾

However, Tehran decided to connect the Iranian army with the IRGC to develop the country's missile and unmanned aircraft programs because of Israel's new strategy. Iranian researcher Masoud Rezaei revealed in an article published by the US National Interest website that there has been an increase in the number of joint platforms between the Artesh and the IRGC. He explained that the Artesh's military parade in April 2022 was an official announcement of its repositioning in Iran's defense strategy.⁽³⁸⁾

Impact on the IRGC's Regional Power Image

The following points explain the impact of the Octopus Doctrine on the IRGC's regional image:

■ **The credibility of Iranian deterrence:** Iranian officials often make statements on the country's deterrence capabilities, but the Israeli Octopus Doctrine toward Iran has revealed major flaws. Masoud Rezaei indicated that this strategy "reduced the credibility of Iranian deterrence."⁽³⁹⁾ The successful Israeli assassinations, bombings, and sabotage operations inside Iran were followed by failed assassination operations by the IRGC. US officials said, "The failure of Iran's plan to assassinate two former US government officials confirms

the IRGC's incompetence."⁽⁴⁰⁾ Moreover, Turkish intelligence succeeded in thwarting the IRGC's plan to assassinate Israelis inside Turkey. On August 30, 2022, the Iranian opposition-affiliated channel, Iran International, reported that the US Navy had thwarted the IRGC's attempt to seize an unmanned ship operated by the US Fifth Fleet in the Gulf. Thus, there was a regional exposure of the IRGC's inefficiencies, while Iran's propaganda machine was keen to polish the image of the IRGC and present it as an "indomitable force."

■ **The "axis of resistance:"** Iran and its proxies are facing popular rejection in many countries in the region, including in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen despite the ongoing killings, assassinations, and repression of opponents and demonstrators. The peoples in the region have publicly declared their rejection of Iran's loyalists, their policies and corruption in addition to Iranian interventions through the Quds Force in the internal affairs of their countries. The resistance axis run by the Quds Force has been suffering since 2018, and the situation worsened after the assassination of Qassem Soleimani in 2020. The massive popular demonstrations in both Iraq and Lebanon in October 2019 forced the axis of resistance parties to disengage from their major projects supporting Iranian ambitions. In Lebanon, demonstrators criticized the rampant corruption and the dire state of the economy. The Lebanese people also directly attacked Hezbollah and held it responsible for the explosion at Beirut port in 2020,⁽⁴¹⁾ which led to the party's loss in the Lebanese parliamentary elections in May 2022. Currently, political differences in Iraq are also increasing with Muqtada al-Sadr's supporters rejecting Iran's interventions through its militias in their country.

Because of the regional circumstances, particularly the failure of Iran-affiliated militias in Arab countries, ongoing Israeli attacks and the stalemate in the nuclear talks, Iran has started to focus on strengthening its military capabilities. This may lead to reducing its funding for its proxies, especially in light of Israel's monitoring of them and efforts to prevent their financing by intensifying attacks, especially inside Syria.

Conclusion

Israel's strategy toward Iran, including sabotage operations, bombings and a series of assassinations inside Iranian territory, has greatly impacted the reputation of the IRGC at home and abroad. The IRGC no longer appears to be a prominent power with super regional activities and capabilities. It has lost much of the power aura that surrounded it, which was magnified by the Iranian political system through the sponsorship of proxies and militias throughout the Arab world. The Octopus Doctrine has impacted Iran's defense strategy and prompted it to make amendments by giving a greater role to the Artesh through increasing the quantity of its military equipment and raising its quality.

Under the Israeli Octopus Doctrine to escalate the shadow war inside Iran, the IRGC's effectiveness, efficiency and reputation is expected to decline further. Thus, the Iranian political system is likely to resort to rehabilitating the Artesh to maintain internal security and cover Iranian intelligence failures. This will have an impact on limiting Iranian military and material support provided abroad, thus undermining the effectiveness and capacity of Iran's arms affiliated to the so-called axis of resistance. Iran will focus on restoring the reputation of its revolutionary forces, which the Iranian political system depends on to guarantee its survival.

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IRANIAN MEDIA DISCOURSE: MANUFACTURING OF IMPACT AND INFLUENCE IN THE ARAB WORLD

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Introduction

This paper attempts to examine a central question about Iran's political and ideological discourse in the Arab world that is projected through its various domestic and regional media outlets. The paper also looks at the impact of Iran's media discourse on public opinion. This is based on the premise that media outlets are strategically important tools for Iran, particularly for projecting its political and sectarian project. These tools could be used to aid Iran's export of the Iranian revolution or to deter global powers and their allies as well as to push Tehran's influence in the region and limit the influence of regional political and religious actors. Understanding Iran's clout and influence remains difficult without first understanding how its propaganda-based media outlets operate. This can only be done through examining their patterns, strategies, and resources.

Iran has presented a unique model of propaganda in terms of style, scale and results which was noticed during major regional events including the Iranian revolution in 1979, the two Gulf Wars, the Lebanese wars in 2000 and 2006, and the so-called Arab Spring. Tehran attempted, via its propaganda campaigns, to influence public opinion and deepen its clout through these events, while undermining influential regional actors. This influence of public opinion has been part of Iran's "axis of resistance" soft power policy to create spheres of Iranian clout.

Based on the aforementioned, the study aims to answer two key questions: what are the primary premises of Iran's political and sectarian propaganda project in the Arab world? To what extent can we understand Iran's expansionist mindset by studying its media discourse?

Iranian Propaganda: Deconstructing the Mechanisms of Creating Influence

The discussion of Iranian propaganda is, in fact, inextricably linked to the history and identity of the post-1979 revolution. It can be further explained as follows:

A Revolution for all Muslims

The revolutionary media network established an effective propaganda model, even before removing the shah and establishing the new republic. It consisted of a wide range of variables to influence and direct public opinion at home and abroad toward the desired outcomes of the Iranian revolutionaries. The revolutionaries were able to complete their mission by basing revolutionary propaganda on two key themes: the first was to ensure the acceptance of a "theocratic theory" based on Wilayat al-Faqih, which was promoted to fill the vacuum left by the shah's departure; and the second was to generate revolutionary populist rhetoric primarily based on demonizing others and absolving the revolutionaries of blame. Hence, Iran created an "axis of rejection" which promoted the "axis of good" in the face of the "axis of submission" which reflected the "axis of evil."

Immediately after overthrowing the shah's regime, Khomeini used all available means at his disposal to entrench his rule, achieve domestic legitimacy, and harness international support. He waited for the right moment to export the revolution to the entire Muslim world, which was armed with slogans such as "Death to America, Death to Israel, God is One, Khomeini is the Leader," and other slogans that aimed to influence public opinion in the Islamic world and turn the Iranian revolution into a revolution for all Muslims against American hegemony and Western-backed regimes.

The propagation that the Khomeini-led revolution was an "Islamic revolution" was part of the revolutionary propaganda. According to this propaganda, the revolution had the support of all Muslims, not only "conservative" Iranians.⁽¹⁾

This discourse aimed to bond ideologically with Sunni Islamist movements — especially as they viewed the Iranian revolution as a chance to practically implement their slogan of “Islam is the solution” and establish a parallel Islamic state modeled on its sister government in Iran — taking advantage of the political circumstances that the Arab countries were experiencing at the time. This prompted several figures and leaders of Sunni Islamist movements to bless the revolution and express sympathy with it to the point of expressing fascination and complete alignment with it. Those leaders included Abdesslam Yassine, the founder of the Moroccan Al Adl Wal Ihsan (Justice and Charity) Group, that published the *Jama'a* magazine shortly after the Iranian revolution's success. Yassine devoted many pages in the first issue to introducing Ayatollah Khomeini's book *The Islamic Government*,⁽²⁾ and in the first issue he chastised Sunni scholars, saying that they were “in complete heedlessness.”⁽³⁾

Morocco's official religious elites supported the Iranian revolution. The League of Moroccan Religious Scholars acknowledged Khomeini's so-called victory of the Islamist movement in Iran. In a letter signed by its Secretary General Abdellah Guennoun in February 1979, the league said, “It is a blessed movement that you lead with wisdom and vision in pursuit of the Islamist awakening and liberation from the foreign hegemony imposed by the East and West on politicians, Arabs, and Islamic peoples.” However, the league later reversed its support, issuing a fatwa in 1980 declaring Khomeini to be an unbeliever.⁽⁴⁾

The Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI), now known as the Nahda Movement, led by Rachid Ghannouchi, dedicated the third issue of the fifth year of its *Al Maarifa* magazine to the Iranian revolution, with a cover picture showing Khomeini raising his hands and supplicating. The picture was accompanied by the headline “Islam Has Triumphed” written in red (see Figure 1).⁽⁵⁾ The magazine released a cover with the headline “Prophecy Comes True: The Prophet Chooses Iran for Leadership” in the eighth issue of the same year.

Figure 1: Covers of Al Maarifa Magazine

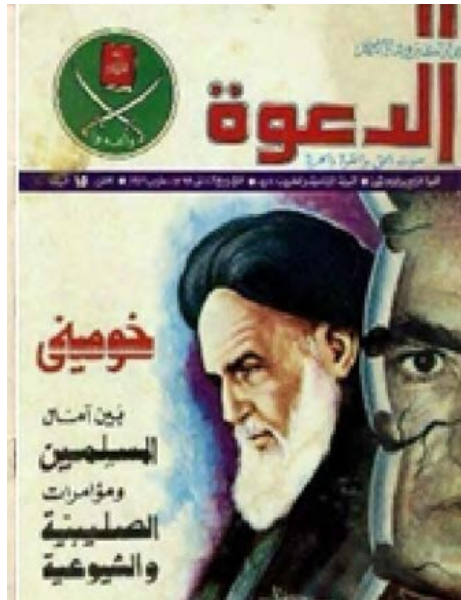


Translation of titles from left to right: “Prophecy Comes True: The Prophet Chooses Iran for Leadership,” “Islam Has Triumphed,” and “Leaders of the Contemporary Islamic Movement.”

Note: All covers were published in the same year, 1979.

Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt welcomed the Iranian revolution and this was reflected in its famous *Al Dawa* (Islamic Call) magazine. The magazine dedicated some of its issues to celebrate Iran's triumph. It published a photo of Khomeini (see Figure 2) along with the caption "Khomeini Between the Hopes of Muslims and the Conspiracies of the Crusades and the Communists."

Figure 2: Cover of *Al Dawa* Magazine



Translation: "Khomeini Between the Hopes of Muslims and the Conspiracies of the Crusades and Communists," *Al Dawa*, Issue 2, March, 1979.

The influence of the Iranian revolution on Sunni Islamist revolutionaries was clearly visible. The Iranian revolution generated feelings of liberation under the banner of religion, and the revival of the caliphate which fueled momentum among Sunni movements despite the sociological, historical and religious differences between the Sunni and Shiite political models.

This Sunni Islamist enthusiasm worked in favor of Iran's propaganda apparatus. Sunni Islamists helped in promoting the notion that the Iranian revolution had unified and rallied Islamic public opinion around a single goal (establishing an Islamic government). Sunni religious elites had at the time clearly expressed their desire to break free from the shackles of Western hegemony and oppressive rulers in order to establish the Islamic caliphate. Iranian propaganda was successful in enticing the Sunni Islamist movement,

and it also served as a means for the Sunni world to open up to the Shiite ideological experience, which was based on propagating and revitalizing Shiism. This was a politically defining moment in the history of the new republic, especially as the revolutionaries opposed submission and advocated rejectionist policies and resistance. This paved the way for an increase in the number of people embracing Shiism.⁽⁶⁾

Iranian propaganda was driven by Tehran's objective to increase its presence in the region and export its revolutionary model to the rest of the Islamic world. This is in addition to using Sunni religious elites and their media outlets to spread sympathy and the spirit of the revolution throughout the Islamic world. The concept of investing in figures and religious memory were important aspects for Iran's propaganda machine. Khomeini made every effort to present himself as a descendant of Ahl al-Bayt (the Household of the Prophet) to win over the support of Iranian, Arab, and Islamic peoples. Furthermore, this enhanced Khomeini's religious legitimacy and credentials as the new republic's spiritual supreme leader. Iran went to great lengths to portray itself as a victimized Islamic country. From its inception to the present day, the notion of victimhood has remained a key pillar of Iranian political and religious discourse. To strengthen its position and gain more sympathy, the Palestinian cause was incorporated into the Iranian propaganda campaign, whether by antagonizing Israel and the United States, or through forming and supporting its regional proxies such as Hezbollah, which turned into a profitable franchise for Iran after serving as an icon for Islamic resistance. This was especially apparent during Hezbollah's major battlefield and propaganda victories against Israel in 2000 and 2006.

Creating Prestige: Political Posters as an Example

Whoever reflects on the birth of the "Islamic Republic of Iran" will notice, without much effort, that its establishment was primarily attributed to the effectiveness of its propaganda machine, which played a decisive role in creating and promoting its image. This new image was evident through analyzing posters and graffiti that explained the revolution's orientations, that had been carefully constructed to influence domestic opinion, strengthen its external position, and achieve more support and solidarity. To fully review the propaganda during and after the revolution, one needs to analyze political posters because they are deemed as documents which sum up the history of Iran's propaganda machine. Posters are still prominent and play an important role as part of Iran's contemporary propaganda tools — to be discussed in detail in this study.

When the hegemony of one ruling system reaches its climax, society resorts to expressing its ambitions and dreams via new methods, including art. Society utilizes art to craft new symbols or myths that oppose tyranny, accordingly, art

creates new meanings. The political posters created and distributed during the Iranian revolution by artistic and creative figures, particularly by those who were committed to the revolution's spirit, clearly redefined the values and social criteria for people to embrace. ⁽⁷⁾ During wartime, posters were always used to disseminate various ideological messages. These messages typically covered social, political and religious topics, and are usually delivered through text and images. Iranian posters and graffiti were an influential means to mobilize the people and communicate during the Iranian revolution. ⁽⁸⁾ Overall, the employment of posters was carefully done and part of the propaganda campaign. Portraits of "Khomeini the Hero" were ubiquitous across all modes of communication. They were strongly presented in posters or in graffiti in public places. ⁽⁹⁾ The political posters that were produced and published during the Iranian revolution were not an exception, but they were rather a defining feature of the revolution.

Iranian propaganda attempted to create a framework of good and evil, with "We and the Others" often presented to depict this dichotomy. This framework was used to demonize adversaries (the Others) such as the shah, the United States, Israel, and the former late Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, etc. Iran's propaganda machine, on the other hand, worked to create an iconic image of the revolution's leader, Ruhollah Khomeini. Most of the time, he was depicted as a superhero (see Figure 3).

It was self-evident that Iran's propaganda reflected the revolution's general political parameters. As a result, good versus evil was used to present Iran's foes in such a way so that all societal segments understood and expressed feelings of attachment to the revolution and were willing to resist in defense of the revolution. In sum, this dichotomy of the world was used to shape public opinion to ensure loyalty to the revolution and its values and secure support for the new political and religious decisions and choices.

Figure 3: Posters During the Iranian Revolution and the First Gulf War



Note: Phrases are written in Arabic and Persian.

As previously mentioned, metaphorical expressions transmitted through political posters had a significant impact on creating a specific perception about the revolution and rallying support for it. The propaganda focusing on a single personality was in harmony with the fragile psychological state of Iranian society at the time. Society at that time was ready to be rallied and mobilized behind a person capable of leading the rebellion against the status quo, in the hope of ending the deadlock and decline that society was experiencing. Therefore, the iconic image of Khomeini fitted the general context and nature of Iranian society, which had long waited to achieve its unfulfilled dreams.

In fact, political posters played a critical role in the struggle for change as they outlined the ideology and social ideals.⁽¹⁰⁾ The use of political posters and graffiti as well as other means of communication during the early stages of the revolution was not by chance. Their use reflected the social reality where illiteracy and poverty prevailed. These propaganda tools were critical in spreading revolutionary sentiments throughout Iranian society and the wider Islamic world. Illiteracy was prevalent in Iranian society; people were unable to read or write and most people had little political knowledge. Alternative sources of information were absent and society was fed with stereotypes and information was framed by “one source of media and one truth.”

The objective of the Iranian propaganda machine was to transmit revolutionary sentiments to the masses and unite them in a careful way without excluding any social segments. Thus, at the time, political posters were an effective tool in unifying the sentiments of those who were either literate or illiterate, without consideration for social categorizations. From the projection of the new Guardian Jurist system to exporting the revolution, the new ruling elite did not hesitate to use all available means, including printed papers, posters, graffiti and cultural magazines as well as other means to promote the new revolutionary ideology and values.

Following the success of the revolutionary propaganda machine in achieving the goal of the revolutionaries – seizing power – Iran sought to export the revolution to the rest of the Islamic world. It conveyed the message as Khomeini claimed, that the establishment of the Islamic government in Iran was only the first step toward establishing a globalist Islamic state.⁽¹¹⁾ This expansionist vision sparked conflicts, feuds and schisms throughout the Islamic world. The First Gulf War between Iraq and Iran was one of the consequences of this vision.⁽¹²⁾ Iran’s expansionism has been clearly visible in the middle of the 21st century, and it has exploited satellite television channels to spread its ideological clout throughout the region. Various regional countries, blocs and organizations have competed fiercely in the field of satellite television channels to win the battle of influence and create

awareness for their respective political and religious ends. As a result, satellite television channels have become a new arena for soft wars, with objectives shifting depending on context and interests.

The Iranian republic attempted to curb the influence of foreign media outlets. At the end of the 1970s and 1980s Islamic programs were broadcasted primarily to enhance the religious legitimacy of the Iranian leadership. Angry local viewers described Iranian television — in protest against its content — as “mullah-vision” due to its tediously repetitive content. When satellite technology entered the arena in 1993, foreign shows were popular among the Iranian public in the beginning. In response, and to protect society against the potential moral mischief of foreign shows, the Iranian government imposed a ban on satellite dishes in 1995 (a law still officially in place). However, the Iranian masses quickly developed strategies to circumvent this ban.⁽¹³⁾

In light of this foreign competition, Iranian authorities worked to develop media infrastructure as a key pillar of the revolution. The death of Khomeini, the first Iranian supreme leader, changed little about the revolutionary propaganda’s orientations (the spirit of the revolution). Rather, his successor Ali Khamenei continued down his path and imposed control, enhanced his legitimacy and extended influence. Tehran did not hesitate to employ different propaganda tools to export the revolution.

Dominance and Monopolizing Media and Press Discourse

Iran’s radio and television organization is directly linked to the supreme leader. This linkage was in response to concerns that media outlets could be used against the new revolutionary setup by counterrevolutionary forces. However, the continued linkage between the highest source of political authority and the media apparatus and its later evolution made it the chief mouthpiece of the revolution’s political orientations. This connectivity also revealed the importance of this media apparatus in building public opinion internally and externally. Over the years, it has undergone major developments in terms of structure and focus, as well as the creation of affiliated media outlets, which have aided the promotion of Iranian discourse on strategic issues.⁽¹⁴⁾

Imposing control over the media and banning satellite dishes as well as tightening control over the internet was clearly reflective of the republic’s approach to the media. The Iranian state established exclusive control over radio and television broadcasting as stipulated in Article 44 of the Iranian Constitution. In the same context, Article 175 states, “The appointment and dismissal of the head of the Radio and Television of the Islamic Republic of Iran rests with the Leader.” In light of such political restrictions, Iranian media has become merely a political tool to impose control and secure the aspirations of the supreme leader and his allies.

Local media has typically been used to eliminate all forms of Iranian opposition as well as to smear the reputation of dissidents. During the 2009 presidential election, for example, Khamenei denied former late Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani access to media outlets to respond to corruption allegations leveled against him and his family by presidential candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during a televised interview. One month after the election, Rafsanjani's Friday prayer sermon, in which he blasted the repression of protests and called for political reconciliation to overcome what he called a crisis, was banned from broadcast.⁽¹⁵⁾

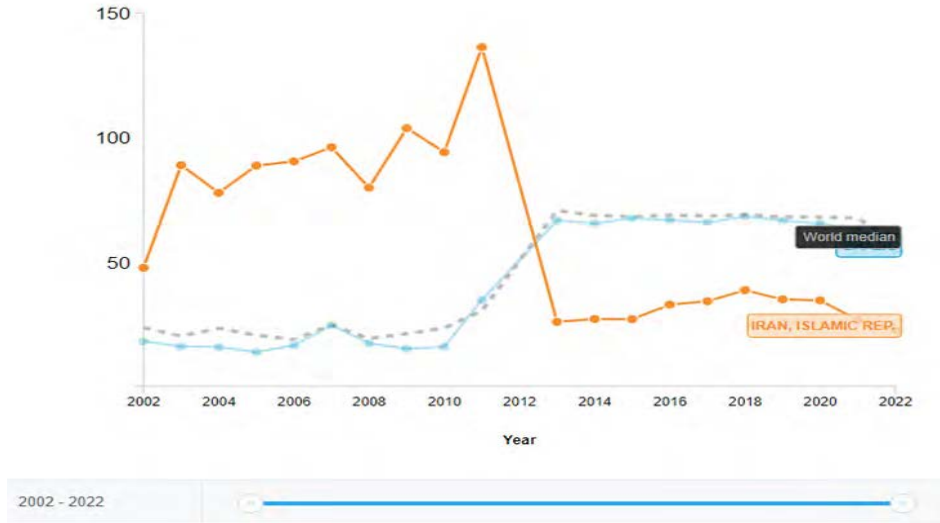
As a result of the supreme leader's control over power and, by extension, control over media outlets, opponents faced cooptation or elimination after their resources were hijacked or nationalized. The media was used to justify acts of repression against opposition forces, whether individuals or groups. This negatively impacted public perceptions toward media and severely restricted freedom of expression. As a result, hundreds of newspapers and magazines whose editorial policy was inconsistent with the republic's political and religious orientations were banned.

Absolute control over media outlets and means of communication is important in Iran's policies and strategies. As Iran's media is under the direct supervision of Iran's supreme leader, this reflects the fact that it is as important as other institutions or apparatuses like the military and religious organizations in the Iranian republic.

To this day, restrictions on media outlets are still in place. Several journalists have faced prosecution, arbitrary arrests, and heavy sentences. Iran is one of the most dangerous places to work as a journalist. According to the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, Iran ranked third-to-last out of 180 countries in 2022, ahead of only North Korea and Eritrea, a ranking that reflects the reality of press freedom in Tehran. There are currently 512 male and female journalists imprisoned in Iran.⁽¹⁶⁾

Repressive practices toward journalists, and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting's (IRIB) exclusive control over news, clearly reflects the state's continuous attempts to impose dominance over the generation and dissemination of news, thereby controlling the flow of information. As previously mentioned, Iran has been significantly isolated from the rest of the world due to its controlled political reality and difficulty in accessing independent news information. The aforementioned have also contributed to widening the gap between Iran and the rest of the world, especially when it comes to press freedom (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index (2002-2022)



Sources: World Bank website; data from Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index ⁽¹⁷⁾

Since 1979, the Iranian government has arrested, detained, and even executed at least 1,000 journalists and bloggers. The brutal crackdown on press freedom, however, is not limited to the local press; the consequences of such repression extend to Iranian correspondents working for foreign media outlets.⁽¹⁸⁾ All of this is justified under the guise of protecting the republic’s principles, as stipulated in Article 24 of the Iranian Constitution, “Publications and the press have freedom of expression except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public.” According to the “Mass Communication Media” in the Preamble of the Iranian Constitution, “The mass communication media, radio and television, must serve the diffusion of Islamic culture in pursuit of the evolutionary course of the Islamic Revolution.” This restriction and control over the press and media institutions is evident in Iranian press law, which allows the Supervisory Press Board to issue decisions and assess the press in the country according to the board’s political orientations.

One example of such a crisis was the decision to close down a local newspaper called *Kalid* [Key in Persian] for insulting the country’s highest authority. The newspaper published a caricature implying that the country’s poverty is the fault of the supreme leader. A hand and a pen were also depicted in the caricature, referring to Khamenei’s hand (see Figure 5).⁽¹⁹⁾ This decision

was based on Article 27 of the press law, which stipulates that if the supreme leader is insulted, the publication's license will be revoked and withdrawn. Moreover, the newspaper's editor-in-chief and editor will be subject to judicial proceedings. This raises a number of questions: is this type of criticism considered an insult? What are the characteristics of criticism? What are the characteristics of an insult?

Figure 5: Caricature Showing Khamenei's Hand Drawing the Poverty Line



Despite having total control over the media and journalism, new Iranian media spaces have arisen. These are led by activists and journalists who are opposed to the Iranian political system. These media spaces pose a significant challenge to official Iranian propaganda, especially given the country's ongoing social unrest and tensions. As a result of the decline in trust in state media and the public turning to foreign channels, the Iranian ruling elite spared no effort to eliminate foreign channels and accused new media spaces of collaborating with external enemies. It is worth noting that these activists

and journalists prefer foreign media discourse over Iranian local media due to their background and past experiences; they were forced to leave their country.

The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in IRAN (GAMAAN), an independent research foundation specialized in analyzing and comprehending positions in Iran, carried out an opinion poll covering the period from February 17 to February 26, 2022. The poll had a sample of 27,000 to determine the direction of public opinion and Iranian sources of news. According to the poll, Iran International, Manoto TV, BBC Persia and Voice of America were the most popular and influential news sources in Iran. More than half of the sample polled expressed trust in Iran International and Manoto TV. BBC Persia received 27 percent of the respondents' trust, followed by state-run television, which received 14 percent. In the same context, 74 percent of respondents stated that they had no trust in Iranian state television. According to the poll results, 33 percent of the respondents said they watched Iran International on a daily basis, making it Iran's most popular foreign Persian-language channel.⁽²⁰⁾

Some local press reports indicate that the decline in Iranians tuning into local media outlets is because of increased levels of political pressure imposed on new media spaces. This has prompted several of them to leave the country. Iran's Shargh newspaper⁽²¹⁾ stated that Iran International channel's performance as a key influencer of public opinion is because of its recruitment of talented journalists who left the country. It recruited talented Iranians who were unable to work under the harsh circumstances in Iran.

However, despite leaving the country, campaigns of targeting foreign channels and new Iranian media spaces have not stopped. In 2017, authorities in Tehran opened a criminal investigation against 150 BBC employees, including contributors, on charges of conspiring against Iran's national security; all their assets in the country were frozen.⁽²²⁾

Iranian state-run media outlets published photos of Iranian reporters residing in London, describing them as a mafia gang.⁽²³⁾ These UK-based reporters have not escaped the attention of the establishment even though they reside outside the country. A report published by The Times newspaper in December 2019 stated that the Iranian authorities had waged an intimidation campaign targeting journalists and employees of Iran International based in London. Iranian officials interrogated their relatives and froze their assets and possessions and threatened to kidnap them from the streets of London if they did not stop working for this channel (which aired footage of the widespread protests that swept across Iran in the wake of the hike in gasoline prices).⁽²⁴⁾

Dozens of journalists working for BBC Persia received the same treatment. The channel held a conference to condemn the Iranian campaign that targeted its employees. The threats against journalists included confiscating

their passports and banning them from selling or purchasing properties. An internal poll conducted by the BBC showed that 45 employees of BBC Persia said that Iranian authorities had interrogated their fathers while 40 others said their brothers and sisters had been interrogated.⁽²⁵⁾ There is no doubt that such campaigns make it difficult for journalists to work and for information to flow.

Over the course of four decades, media outlets have been used not only to convey Iranian propaganda, but also to intimidate journalists and dissidents both inside and outside Iran. Through television interviews and shows dedicated solely to defamation and misinformation, the IRIB has promoted all forms of psychological torture, defamation, aired coerced confessions, and violated the privacy of dissidents and their families.

A report released by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) in 2020 titled "Orwellian State: Islamic Republic Of Iran's State Media As A Weapon Of Mass Suppression"⁽²⁶⁾ sheds light on the employment of media outlets to suppress dissent. The report provides a detailed analysis of 151 media shows aired on the IRIB over the past decade, including confessions of 355 individuals. This is in addition to defamatory content against 505 individuals. "The impact of these programmes is not limited to the victims. It also affects the victims' families and their reputation. Many of the victims described these programmes as a means of mental and psychological torture with long-lasting impacts. They asserted that the impact of these programmes on their family life and their reputation cannot be easily undone and that many of the audiences who have no access to independent sources of information believe the defamatory accusations made in these programmes. The majority of the interviewees mentioned the illegal use of their private data as the most damaging and traumatizing part of their experience," the report highlighted.⁽²⁷⁾

There is no doubt that the Iranian media environment is restrictive, if not repressive, making it difficult for the media to flourish and for journalists to survive. According to Reporters Without Borders, Iran is still one of the world's five-biggest jailers of activists and journalists. The Iranian ruling elite sees media outlets as a tool to penetrate the region and support its ideological and sectarian platforms.

To achieve this end, Iran continues to massively invest in its media industry, making efforts to establish a competitive diplomatic media (as some major powers do in the region). The diplomatic media aims to speak on behalf of the Iranian political system and create a better environment for the system at home and abroad, whether through proxies or figures officially linked to the status quo. However, the ultimate goal is to create a local public opinion that is in harmony with the ideals of the Iranian political system. This is in addition to establishing external media outlets that express the view of Iran's political

system and export the values of the 1979 revolution on a wider regional scale to serve Iran's presence as a regional power and expand its sphere of influence beyond the region.

Iranian Media and Its Hegemonic Tendencies: Shifting From Making an Impact to Creating Influence

Propaganda is an integral part of the Islamic republic's history. It would later take shape and advance further with the establishment of the IRIB, a monolithic media octopus that expresses the revolutionary ideology and promotes the doctrine of resistance. It promotes a pro-revolutionary line at all levels. Iran's media discourse is in line with the narrative pushed by major state-run institutions such as the supreme leader's office, the IRGC, economic/diplomatic entities, and Tehran's proxies, whether parallel organizations or militias. The media industry is quite significant for the Iranian political system, this is evident in Khamenei's call for a media jihad⁽²⁸⁾ to counter the media invasion, as he has labelled it.

Iran is depending on media outlets to promote its orientations and shape opinion internally and externally as part of its efforts to expand and achieve regional clout. It has been observed that Tehran's investment in the media industry is as significant as its investment in other strategic industries such as the military and security industries. It spares no effort to broaden its media reach in the region, as evidenced by the findings of a vast array of reports that focus on Iran's media landscape.

The IRIB's budget is 140 trillion riyals (\$560 million), according to a report by the Iranian Parliament's research center. This figure excludes the IRIB's share of the government budget, which is equal to the total annual taxes paid by all government employees. From the government budget, its share amounts to 50 trillion riyals (\$200 million).⁽²⁹⁾ In addition, the Iranian government updated its budget, allocating an additional \$71.4 million to the country's cyberspace program which the IRIB has benefited from, whose share in the budget was \$63 million. The "cyber section" of the Islamic Development Organization (IDO) received another \$8.4 million.⁽³⁰⁾

In the same vein, a report by the European Journalism Centre's (EJC) Media Landscapes website provides a general overview of Iran's media landscape. Because of its enormous human investment potential, it considered the IRIB to be one of the most important media institutions in the Asia-Pacific region, if not the world. The IRIB employs over 40,000 people worldwide and has branches in over 20 countries, offering services in multiple languages. In addition, it runs 17 national channels, 30 regional channels, and nine international channels. Among the most important of these channels is Al Alam TV in Arabic, which debuted in 2003 in a style similar to Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. Additionally, the IRIB owns the English-language Press TV

channel, which was launched in 2007 and Sahar channel, a multilingual channel whose activities began in 1990, with shows broadcasting in Kurdish, Urdu, Azeri, Bosnian and French⁽³¹⁾ as well as in African languages such as Swahili and Hausa.⁽³²⁾

Iran also owns the Spanish-language Hispan TV media network, which is considered among the most popular networks in Latin America, according to research conducted by The Polish Institute of International Affairs.⁽³³⁾

On the other hand, Iranian news agencies are among the most active in the world, with the Islamic Republic News Agency topping the list. It is the state's sole official news agency. Other news outlets consider themselves to be independent but in fact they are affiliated with the IRGC. There are a significant number of news agencies that offer services in multiple languages. Mehr News Agency which specializes in providing news on Iranian foreign policy was founded in 2003 and is the most important of these mentioned agencies. The news agency also covers political, economic, cultural and religious issues in Arabic, English, Turkish, Russian, Persian, and Dutch. Over 300 correspondents work for the news agency which has five regional offices. It has signed agreements with over 17 foreign news agencies in Asia and Europe.

Aside from these news agencies, there are other specialized agencies that focus on specific internal or external issues. The most important of these news agencies is the Al-Quds News Agency which focuses on Palestinian issues. The Iranian Students' News Agency, the Women's News Agency, and the International Quran News Agency are also prominent.⁽³⁴⁾

Against this backdrop, an important conclusion can be drawn: Iranian penetration into the region was not accidental or the consequence of Arab, US or Israeli clout in the region. Rather, Iran's understanding of the value of news and propaganda has played a key role in furthering its clout in the region through shaping opinion and putting pressure on regional governments. Iran has worked for four decades to expand its media network to the point where its scope and influence have expanded to encompass regional and international domains as well. Previously, the United States shut down a number of websites associated with various Iranian media outlets, some official and others affiliated with groups linked to it. They spread false news and participated in targeted misinformation campaigns such as the Houthi-run Al Masira channel, Al Alam channel, LuaLua TV channel, Palestine Today channel, Al Naba, Al Kawthar, and other channels. Iran condemned the US move, calling it a flagrant violation of freedom of expression. In light of this, Iran took advantage of the opportunity to promote the axis of resistance versus the axis of submission. According to the IRIB, "while the democratic government of the United States reiterates support for free expression, it practically shuts

down media outlets with support from Israel and Saudi Arabia, Washington's two historic allies in the Middle East."⁽³⁵⁾

Through the US move, Iran aimed to demonize some of its adversaries in the region, particularly Saudi Arabia. In terms of international relations, Saudi Arabia serves as a bridge between the Sunni and Shiite worlds. Iranian media channels have penetrated Arab media networks in recent years, primarily through Arabsat and, to a lesser extent Nilesat, placing Iran at the heart of a strategic battle to win the hearts and minds of the Arab people. Iran has attempted to discredit its main regional competitors by slandering the reputation of their media outlets. It continuously promotes the notion that rival news outlets are close to the White House to weaken their credibility in the region. Iranian media outlets frequently accuse Gulf media outlets of being pro-Zionist, while Iranian propaganda pulls at the heartstrings of the Muslim world, especially by exploiting anti-US feelings in the region. Iran hopes to strengthen its position and promote its political model by doing so. The Yemeni crisis is regarded as a clear example of this, as proven by media coverage and ground realities. As a result, all Arab attempts to resolve the Yemeni crisis, whether through political or military options, have been sabotaged by the Iranians. Pro-Iranian media refers to US forces as "foreign forces," while Gulf forces are referred to as "mercenaries." This labelling helps in Iran's political and military defamation of these countries and their allies, as well as propping up the legitimacy of any potential military or logistical support it provides to the Houthis.⁽³⁶⁾ This is in addition to other Iranian media practices through which Iran spreads its views on the world but without credibility or neutrality.

Iran has been able to develop a comprehensive propaganda model, whereas the Arab media landscape has yet to recognize the importance of the propaganda machine in reaching out to other peoples to influence the way they think and to shape positions of governments. The limited data available reflects the scarcity of Arab media outlets that broadcast in more than 10 languages, unlike Iranian media outlets. Thus, the expansion of Iranian propaganda activity beyond Iran's boundaries is not coincidental but planned and targeted. This includes a focus on Eastern Europe, the United States, Africa, and Asia.

The major Arab channels, whether funded by Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, or other countries such as Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera, have formed a powerful media model and have helped in shaping local and international public opinion, as well as in providing competition to the Iranian media octopus. However, the lack of coordination between regional media outlets — each country operates its media unilaterally to strengthen its own views on the

region and the world — impacts their media dominance and allows Iran to spread further its own narrative in the region.

This competition may have some impact on Iran's influence in the region. However, this impact is nominal primarily due to the tensions and ongoing disagreements between the countries in the region, which impacts their media policies and effectiveness in shaping public opinion. While Iranian propaganda focuses on defaming regional countries and increasing Tehran's clout by establishing religious, political and economic prestige, Arab media outlets focus more on internal disputes and communal conflicts.

The Iranian propaganda machine has had a significant impact in the region for Iran at various levels. Despite a string of internal crises and the persistence of international sanctions, Tehran has managed to strengthen its position as a regional power in recent years, particularly following the 2011 Arab Spring. This is despite major regional countries exerting efforts to limit its expanding regional role. Tehran has made great strides in its expansionist policy, which has been implemented on an unprecedented scale. It controls four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus and Sana'a, not to mention its growing clout in the Horn of Africa and some African countries.

Based on the foregoing, Iranian media has a presence almost everywhere, catering to all social segments and age groups. For example, when compared to Arab countries, Iran's media has gone a long way, particularly its cinema industry. Every year, Iranian cinematic works compete for international awards such as the Oscars, which they have won on two previous occasions in the category of foreign films. The first time Iranian cinema won an Oscar was in 201 for the movie "A Separation," and the second time was in 2017 for the film "Salesman." The movies were directed by Asghar Farhadi who chose to boycott the Oscars in protest against US President Donald Trump's decision to bar citizens of certain countries, including Iranians, from entering the country.⁽³⁷⁾ "Wolf and the Herd," an Iranian animated movie for children, was nominated for an Oscar for short animation in 2021.⁽³⁸⁾ Iran's interest in making movies for children will enhance Iranian media and Shiite networks dedicated to children such as Hodhod and Taha, which are broadcasted through Nilesat and Arabsat satellites that cover the entire Middle East.

It is worth noting that the animated film industry is not viewed merely as a source of extravagance and entertainment in Iran's propaganda strategy. Rather, the industry is at the heart of its propaganda strategy. It has created a number of animated films in support of Tehran's agenda, including a short, animated film depicting Donald Trump's assassination, which sparked widespread outrage. Following the assassination of Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, it was immediately released. Tehran spent \$100 million to create a series of children's films demonizing and distorting the image of

the United States such as the one produced after Soleimani's assassination in early 2020.⁽³⁹⁾

Overall, Iran has used its propaganda power to secure more support and divert the attention of adversaries, particularly in the Gulf region. A protracted media war has erupted, with both sides employing every possible media and propaganda tool. Iran has maintained its strong presence on Arab broadcasting networks such as Nilesat and Arabsat. As previously stated, Iran's propaganda drive is motivated by its expansionist ambitions. Its media apparatus is no less important than its various diplomatic and political apparatuses.

This extensive Iranian media presence with two of the Middle East's leading satellite operators; Nilesat and Arabsat, reflects the Iranian political system's expansionism. The political system, through its expansionism, aims to enhance its influence in the region under the pretext of defying Western dominance, leading to the implementation of an Islamic ruling system all over the region. This is in line with the Shiite doctrine that supposedly opposes surrender, i.e., surrender to the West or the "oppressors" as Twelver Shiites claim. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has been presenting itself as the sole legitimate representative for all Shiites in the region. Meanwhile, it enhances its ambition to become the sole and biggest representative of all Muslims.⁽⁴⁰⁾ This expansionist ambition dominating the Iranian mindset has translated into the establishment of various media channels supportive of its sectarian project in the region.

Today, there are hundreds of channels disseminating Iranian sectarian and political orientations. Through a random survey of media channels, whether those broadcasting directly from Tehran or through its proxies in Arab and European countries, we find that Tehran has 85 channels promoting its political and doctrinal ideology.

Throughout the Iranian establishment's 42-year rule, these channels have helped to promote Iranian propaganda in the region. Iran has essentially promoted the idea that the Arab regimes are clients and pawns of major world powers, and has sowed the seeds of sectarianism by questioning Sunni Islam, paving the way for the spread of Shiism and Iranian expansionism. In addition, Iran has exploited the Palestinian cause for the sake of its political aims.⁽⁴¹⁾ The establishment of similar media outlets will continue. Over time, channels like Al-Mayadeen, iFilm, Al-Alam, Fadak, Al-Hod Hod, Taha, Al-Kawthar and others have achieved widespread acceptance in Sunni spheres, without ignoring the local Shiite social makeup, which constitutes cultural, social and religious realities which cannot be bypassed or denied. However, the concept of "We and the Other" is deeply entrenched in some Iranian media outlets that operate in the region. Fadak TV channel is an example of this hate-based

sectarian Iranian propaganda. Thus, sectarianism is an important dimension of Iranian propaganda in the region.

Its media strategy of creating various media outlets whether television, radio, newspapers, or social media, helps Iran to create a balanced, unrestricted, and flexible media network that targets all segments of society.

To fully examine Iran's media propaganda in the region, one needs to also review its performance on social media platforms. In its strategy of establishing diverse media outlets, Iran has utilized social media platforms as they are deemed instrumental in enhancing the country's influence in the region. On the other side, opponents of Iran's political system also resort to social media to express their opinions away from the severe restrictions imposed by the IRIB. The Iranian authorities always ban platforms that are against the revolutionary and doctrinal values of the ruling system.

Iranians, as previously stated, prefer to follow news via the internet and foreign satellite channels. Despite the Iranian government banning the use of satellite dishes and blocking social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Telegram, nearly 70 percent of Iranians are still connected to such platforms, albeit illegally. However, millions of citizens, including activists and dissidents, use filtering systems to access banned websites and platforms (such as changing a VPN). The most prominent opponents have personal Facebook and Twitter accounts.⁽⁴²⁾

Due to the notable impact of social media on Iran's media propaganda, the Iranian political system has attempted to control social media platforms through imposing restrictions on the flow of information and freedom of speech and has launched misinformation campaigns. Twitter and Facebook have banned Iranian accounts linked to spreading misinformation in favor of the Iranian political system.

For Iran, information dominance is central for both its domestic and foreign policy. Iran sees itself involved in an ongoing information war with Sunni Arab powers and neocolonial Western powers, particularly the United States. Several Iranian officials believe that if the country loses the information war, the Iranian state will implode. Based on this perception, Iran has prioritized the development of digital broadcasting which is much more difficult for the United States or its allies to target. Iranian hackers affiliated with the political system use sock puppets (fake identities that malicious individuals use to deceive other people online)⁽⁴³⁾ on various social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to control the flow of information. When the United States and Iran began negotiating, the number of accounts increased exponentially. These accounts were used to mislead the public and promote the Iranian version of events. Until 2020, 2,200 accounts for 6 million Facebook users were identified, while 8,000 accounts were identified for

nearly 8.5 million Twitter users.⁽⁴⁴⁾ In data analyzed by a host of researchers from the Computational Propaganda Project at Oxford University, tweets from 770 Twitter accounts potentially linked to Iran were analyzed. They concluded that the use of Arabic content on Twitter was intended to promote other Iranian digital and media sites rather than to communicate with Arab users. According to the study, the impact of Iranian propaganda on Twitter remains very limited compared to other websites and digital platforms, owing to the limited use of this platform in the Arab world. However, it is the preferred platform for elites instead of Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Notwithstanding its limited impact, Iranian propaganda aimed at Arab users has promoted the Iranian narrative in the region, particularly against Saudi Arabia and its royal family, while expressing support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the Houthi militia. The study discovered a link between the use of hashtags and the issues that concern Tehran by analyzing data from over 23,000 Arabic hashtags. Among the most popular hashtags, one most frequently finds anti-Saudi hashtags like (#Anti-SaudiArabia/ #Saudi Arabia), Yemen is second with the hashtag (#Breaking Al-Masira/ #Yemen), Syria is third (#Syria), Iraq is fourth (#Iraq), Palestine is fifth (#Palestine), and Libya is sixth (#LibyaAlMukhtar). The Iranian propaganda machine has used a variety of methods to popularize these hashtags, including impersonating news and political entities, as well as public figures such as media professionals, human rights defenders, politicians, and clerics. Furthermore, in these hashtags and posts, Iran has used less formal Arabic language (local Arabic dialects).⁽⁴⁵⁾

The methods used can be traced to the early days of social media platforms in the region. In 2009, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei openly called for promoting Iranian content via digital platforms. He invoked a similitude, “Promoting content is the most effective international weapon against our foreign rivals.” Upon this call, the IRIB in 2011 established seven digital brigades consisting of media specialists and experts. They are composed of 84,000 members specializing in producing and disseminating Iranian content on social media platforms.⁽⁴⁶⁾

In 2018, the International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM), which is affiliated with Iran, declared its intention “to become the largest virtual media network across the globe, in line with our steadfast determination to defend the oppressed peoples of the world.”⁽⁴⁷⁾ It is a massive organization that seeks to influence internet users and is behind a major disinformation campaign. It creates content in over 11 foreign languages and focuses on internet content creation, such as breaking news services, the release of mobile apps, the production of animated cartoons and caricatures, as well as religious content and other communication content. The goal is to promote Iranian media platforms, including conducting a systematic misinformation campaign

and spreading fake news in a way that is compatible with Iran's strategic interests. Khamenei himself underpinned the significance of digital influence operations for Iran's survival. His view reflects how Iran's political system has used digital media outlets as a strategy parallel to its diplomatic and geopolitical strategies. Ben Nimmo, a fellow at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, said the IUVM network displayed the extent and scale of the Iranian operation.⁽⁴⁸⁾

All of these propaganda campaigns, which can be examined and easily accessed on social media platforms, demonstrate how Iran views its objectives and geopolitical disputes, whether by emphasizing Tehran's role as part of the regional resistance axis or by emphasizing foreign intervention and demonizing Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies. As previously seen, the same process is clearly visible in official media outlets or those affiliated with Tehran. In a nutshell, all of these communication mechanisms aim to keep the establishment's clout intact, and maintain its interests by winning new allies, whether within the traditional spheres of Tehran's influence or beyond — at the expense of its regional rivals.

In contrast, as previously stated, we can see that Iran's media discourse, in all of its forms, is based on the promotion of a media network that carefully crafts political and religious messages. These messages are aligned with the aspirations of large segments of the grassroots in the region because they stimulated the popular uprisings across the Arab world because of a decline in trust in governments in light of their poor performance. To make this media network effective, Iran has adopted a central media strategy to influence and manufacture public opinion through using sock puppets and creating new media outlets.

Some may believe that political propaganda promoted through traditional media outlets has become obsolete as a result of technological advancements in the media industry, the spread of open broadcasting platforms, and easy access to information. Iran, on the other hand, is aware of the role and benefits of traditional propaganda. It uses traditional methods not only to communicate its point of view to the rest of the world, but also to create some sort of balance between the messages it transmits internally and externally. It blocks access to international broadcasting, bans digital website platforms, defames dissidents at home, and implements other practices based on "internal intimidation" with the goal of limiting the flow of opposing media discourse internally and externally, with opponents depending on traditional media outlets and social media platforms. These practices aim not only to influence and defame the credibility of anti-Iranian messages, but also to make Iran's propaganda content more effective throughout the Arab sphere in order to achieve the highest level of impact through the "bias framing" of events. This

Iranian media strategy encourages listeners and viewers to sympathize with any content that is related to the network of deliberately crafted messages, i.e., the core of Iran's media propaganda. Therefore, viewers/followers are subliminally influenced by Iran's media discourse — as illustrated by Sunni media outlets which in the past were a medium to promote the “spirit of the Iranian revolution.”

Conclusion

Iran has been able to promote its political and sectarian narrative over the past decades thanks to its propaganda machine. It has been successful in dominating the Middle Eastern political and media landscape. But there is an important conclusion to be made: making a positive or negative statement about the level of influence and impact of Iranian propaganda remains highly relative, given the fact that Iran's media propaganda may have varying degrees of success on the ground; and regional and international geopolitical shifts may accelerate the pace of influence, hence extending its ambitions on a larger regional scale. To develop a mechanism that can accurately monitor and assess the influence of Iran's media propaganda, one needs to take into consideration the variations of this influence and its varying degrees of success. This is in addition to exerting more effort to better comprehend the process of making propaganda influential, and the history of Iran's ideological incursions into the Arab and Islamic world.

Apart from Iran's pursuit to lead the Islamic world and its activities to penetrate sovereign nation-states and spread its influence, there are three main observations one needs to consider when measuring/assessing the influence of Iran's propaganda. First, the success of Iran's propaganda is evidently linked to the failure of counter-balancing actors, i.e., politicians, media professionals, and clerics. The potential power vacuum resulting from the failure/absence of influencers opens the gate for Iran to promote anti-Western sentiments amid growing public discontent in the region. Iran's propaganda always claims to be neutral, but it supports the narrative of the oppressed and tarnishes the images of rivals — as previously explained. The second observation is based on understanding what Iranian media aims to convey about “us?” Who are “we” according to Iran's propaganda? Finding answers to these questions helps in understanding the extent of Iran's influence. Yet, one also needs to examine these questions in light of sociological factors, social presentations of individuals about their homeland, and their social representations of Iran and its promoted issues. Only then does the real extent of Iran's influence and the penetration of its ideology into the collective mindset become clear. This also includes measuring the possibility of inefficiency/weakness of Iran's anti-Western propaganda in the region. The third observation is based on fully

comprehending Iran's propaganda since the manufacturing of the so-called axis of resistance and using it as a tool for political mobilization in the region. The future of Iran's influence relies on its ability to acquire new allies whether from its traditional spheres of influence or beyond. Iran provides unflinching support to its militias to penetrate territories that are seemingly marginal to Arab states, i.e., they are not of great strategic significance. Iran, therefore, developed its media propaganda apparatus to cover all regions across the world, including North and East Africa, Latin America and some Asian countries. The structure of this media apparatus extends across a vast regional scope, like an octopus. It not only spreads informative content, but it has evolved to the extent of being able to compete with mega international news networks. Iran has become aware of the significance of advancing through its media industry. In a nutshell, turning a blind eye to Iran's far-reaching media octopus may eventually lead to it curbing its rivals in the region.

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IRAN'S POLICY TOWARD MAGHREB DISPUTES: DIMENSIONS AND LIMITS OF ITS INFLUENCE

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Introduction

The study aims to identify the nature of Iran's policy toward the Algerian-Moroccan dispute over Western Sahara. For decades, Iran has taken advantage of any intra-Arab dispute to advance its radical project and expand its strategic achievements. In addition, it has advanced its soft and hard power in the Maghreb, with the latter based on its forward defense strategy. The Maghreb region is not excluded from Iranian military options, although the region is not a top priority for Tehran's strategic calculations. However, the Maghreb's geopolitical position as an entry point into Africa and its geographical and demographic linkage to Iran's project in West Africa are all reasons which have motivated Tehran to seek more influence in the region. West Africa has turned into a competitive arena for many emerging regional and international powers. Iran's intervention in the region is based on exploiting intra-Maghreb disputes, particularly the Algerian-Moroccan dispute over Western Sahara.

The study mainly investigates the determinants of Iran's policy toward the Algerian-Moroccan dispute, and attempts to explore the dimensions and objectives behind this dispute. The study is based on an analysis and interpretation of Iran's position on the Western Sahara conflict, and it seeks to examine Iran's expansion of its clout in the Maghreb, particularly in light of its African aspirations. A number of important questions arise: what are the determinants of Iran's policy toward the Arab Maghreb countries? What are the limits of Iran's penetration into this region? What is the reality of Maghreb-Iranian relations amid the Algerian-Moroccan dispute? What are the implications of the Moroccan-Israeli rapprochement on Iran's policy toward the Algerian-Moroccan dispute? And how will Iranian policy toward the Algerian-Moroccan dispute be influenced against the backdrop of current developments? The study attempts to answer the aforementioned questions through discussing four topics: the determinants of Iran's policy toward the Arab Maghreb countries in light of its sectarian and geopolitical considerations; second, Maghreb-Iranian relations amid intra-Maghreb differences (the Algerian-Moroccan dispute as an example); third, Moroccan-Israeli rapprochement and growing Iranian ambitions; and fourth, the future of Iranian policy toward Maghreb disputes against the backdrop of current developments.

The Determinants of Iran's Policy Toward the Maghreb in Light of Its Sectarian and Geopolitical Considerations

Iran-Maghreb relations differ from Tehran's relations with the countries of the Arab Mashreq. This is due to a number of causes and motives, particularly Iran's sectarian motives and its Persian nationalism. The Arab Mashreq countries currently view Iran as a historical opponent that has a strong attachment to the Persian Empire and a country that has numerous geopolitical and strategic bases, making it a greater threat than any other. This historical context and background is missing from the determinants of Iran-Maghreb relations. The countries in the Maghreb achieved independence from European colonial countries in the 1950s and 1960s. Iran-Maghreb relations took off after the 1979 Iranian revolution.

After the fall of the shah's government, fluctuation has been the main feature of Iran-Maghreb relations. Differences have characterized Iran's relations with each of the Maghreb countries; bilateral relations with Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia and Mauritania have differed depending on factors such as interests, context, and time. Some factors explaining Iran's varied relations include the position of the Maghreb countries on the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq War as well as Iran's position on domestic and regional disputes in the Maghreb.

Iran-Algeria relations have experienced a number of transformations. Relations between the two sides started with Iran's political support for the Algerian revolution against French colonialism, resulting in close relations between the two countries post-independence. Friendly relations were reflected in many files, particularly the success of Algerian mediation between Iran and Iraq, culminating in the 1975 Algiers Agreement. Algeria's balanced position during the Iran-Iraq War maintained relations between Algiers and Tehran. After 1979, the change of Iran's political system did not impede bilateral relations. However, Iran's position on the cancellation of the 1992 Algerian legislative elections was a key turning point in Iran-Algeria relations leading to diplomatic relations being severed between the two sides. This coldness between the two lasted for nearly a decade and did not end until Abdelaziz Bouteflika took over the Algerian presidency. Iran-Algeria relations entered a phase of relative stability against the backdrop of Algeria's regional calculations and its need to establish a balance with Tehran considering its commitments in the Arab sphere. In addition, the resetting of relations was based on Algerian national interests and international calculations. Algeria's relations with Iran and other pivotal Islamic countries such as Turkey are often seen in the context of its longstanding thorny issues with France because of Paris' past occupation of Algerian territories. France has similar issues with the other Maghreb countries.⁽¹⁾

Although the 1979 revolution is a key factor in the history of Iran-Maghreb relations, Iran-Morocco relations have experienced various transformations. The shah's government was close to the Moroccan monarchy because of their proximity in political identity and loyalty to the West. However, Morocco's support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War was critical in determining Iran's position on the Sahara dispute. These files have always overshadowed Iran-Morocco relations, resulting in cautious rapprochement or tension. The decades of consensus during the Pahlavi dynasty marked the greatest period of warmth between the two sides. This period of consensus ended after the 1979 revolution; Morocco was the first destination for the shah after fleeing Iran. The level of relations between the two sides drastically declined, reflected in the appointment of a chargé d'affaires by both countries. After Morocco supported Iraq in the war with Iran, the latter responded by officially recognizing the right to self-determination of the Sahrawi people. This Iranian position contributed to diplomatic relations severing between the two sides in January 1981; this severance in relations lasted for 10 years. Relations resumed in 1991, however, they were characterized by a cautious rapprochement. Then, relations were severed again in 2009 but resumed in 2015 only to be severed once again in 2018 due to Iran's support for the Polisario, according to Morocco's narrative.⁽²⁾

Iran's relations with Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania have also been characterized by volatility. Iran-Libya relations were much more stable due to Libya's position on files such as the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. However, Iran's relations with Tunisia and Mauritania fluctuated between severance and cautious rapprochement.

The Arab Maghreb countries are less aware of the historical concerns of the Arab Mashreq countries; the latter remain doubtful about Iran and its motives. The Maghreb countries have moved toward acceptance of Iran's policy; to play a role in the region through which it can flex its political and strategic weight, allowing it to present itself as a pivotal country in the Middle East, bordering the Arab Mashreq. Iran has a presence in the region, and its future role cannot be erased but it can be arranged within the framework of acceptable limitations. However, accepting Iran in the Arab region has been limited due to the tools and objectives of Iranian foreign policy. Most Arab countries, especially those in the Arab Mashreq, perceive Iran as a threat to their national security, with some perceiving Iran as an existential threat.

Many Maghreb countries have severed their relations with Iran at different periods, which were very often based on regional calculations and Iran's position on regional conflicts in the Maghreb; most prominently the Sahara conflict and Iran's approach to the internal affairs of the Maghreb countries. Iran's approach triggered suspicions because it reflected its attempts to expand its soft power through promoting Shiism — a sectarian determinant in its foreign policy. The Maghreb countries completely reject Iran's attempt to spread Shiism. However, the Maghreb position is not related to its opposition to Iran's influence in the region. The Maghreb countries sometimes adopt stances against Iran as part of their political coordination with the Arab powers such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Their stances usually do not impact Iran-Maghreb relations.⁽³⁾

Shiism: An Explanatory Approach to Iranian Policy Toward the Maghreb Countries

Shiism has been one of the most important determinants of Iranian foreign policy since the 1979 revolution, and is one of the major drivers of Iranian policy in the Islamic world in general and the Arab region in particular. The Maghreb countries are not an exception to this Iranian determinant, although Shiite influence in the Maghreb disappeared centuries ago when the last Shiite emirate dissipated in the region. However, Shiism re-emerged driven by the Iranian project of Wilayat al-Faqih, one of Iran's key tools of penetration. The Arab Spring revolts in Tunisia and Libya jolted the region, and even the Moroccan monarch was forced to pursue political reforms in response to popular protests. In light of these revolts, Iran attempted to exploit the course of events to serve its expansion projects, however, its efforts differed from one country to another.

No official statistics are available to identify the extent of Shiite penetration in the Maghreb countries; however, several reports have warned of a significant increase in the number of Shiites there. Iran's attempts to spread Shiism have been countered by official apparatuses and unofficial entities; government and popular rejection, expressed through religious and political currents. Although the aforementioned have successfully limited the threats of Shiite expansionism in the Maghreb, they did not eliminate it permanently. Shiism still exists on the ground, with the existence of Shiite sleeper cells that increase their activity during periods of political instability as witnessed in Tunisia, Libya, and to a lesser extent in Morocco after the so called "Arab Spring" in 2011. Iran's activities to spread Shiism increased in frequency and quality; under the cover of civil society institutions and private schools such as the Progressive Messengers Association and the Imam Muhammad al-Shirazi Commission in Morocco.⁽⁴⁾

Iranian embassies in the Maghreb support the promotion of Shiism via soft power tools such as the organization of cultural activities and book fairs as well as tourist and commercial exchanges. Tunisia attracted nearly 5,000 tourists in 2015. Iran has always participated in the Annual Book Fair in Rabat, and Algeria and Tunisia have promoted Iranian cinema, which supports the promotion of Shiism via indirect ways. To achieve its sectarian objective, Iran attempts to form regional alliances with economic, cultural and tourist dimensions. This is the case especially with Algeria and Morocco, which are considered a gateway to Western and sub-Saharan Africa. Iran uses this platform to promote its sectarian cultural project in West Africa as well through investments and Shiite missionaries. This promotion of Shiism might explain the diplomatic crises between Iran and a number of Maghreb countries; for example, Algeria deported the Iranian cultural attaché Amir Mousavi in 2018 after he was accused of violating his diplomatic role by supporting the promotion of Shiism in Algeria. It is reported that the number of Shiites in Algeria is approximately between 1,500 and 3,000. The promotion of Shiism is a key soft power tool that Iran depends on to promote its sectarian project in the Maghreb; this has been authorized at the highest levels of decision-making in Tehran. In his speech marking the occasion of Nowruz, the Iranian New Year, in March 2014 Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said, "I have named this year 'The Year of Economy and Culture with National Determination and Jihadi Management.'" In his speech, he focused on the influential impact of culture on Iran's expansionist project.⁽⁵⁾

The Pragmatic Dimension Amid Iranian Geopolitical Calculations Toward the Maghreb Countries

Iranian policy toward the Maghreb countries can be best described as a mixture of "sectarianism and pragmatism," given the duality of "religion

and interest.” Iran seeks to extend its sectarian influence in the Maghreb countries and link it to its larger sectarian project in West Africa. Meanwhile, Iranian geopolitical and geostrategic calculations are not devoid of benefits for Iran’s soft and hard power alike. Northern and West Africa, traditional French spheres of influence, have become an arena for competition between the major powers: the United States, Russia and China and emerging regional powers such as Turkey, India and Israel. Therefore, Iran is striving to find a foothold in this region and link it to its geostrategic spheres of influence in West Africa. Figures show that nearly 7 million people have embraced Shiism in the Maghreb. Iran has worked to secure a foothold there through relying on the Shiite community through politicizing and militarizing it, like the Nigerian Hezbollah. This promotion of Shiism is part of Iran’s security doctrine which is based on its “forward defense strategy.” The aim is to turn many countries, especially the Arab ones, into Iran’s front line of defense in line with its national security considerations. The Maghreb countries can provide Iran with several economic investment opportunities, starting with energy, a strong area of cooperation with Algeria and Libya, to tourism, a hallmark of its relationship with Tunisia and Morocco. Iran’s geostrategic calculations have always linked its pragmatic ambitions in the Maghreb to its deeper aspirations in West Africa, which is rich in resources such as oil, gas, uranium, gold and precious metals, estimated at about \$13 trillion, according to studies by Africa Group and Africa Investor. The heavy presence of Hezbollah (the Lebanese version) and businesspeople closely associated to it, reflect the proliferation of Shiite networks in West Africa. They actually control the trade of gold and diamonds as well as many other precious metals in several African countries. The economic dimension is still present in the Maghreb countries, including West Africa, therefore, the sectarian and pragmatic dimensions of Iran continuously integrate, with campaigns to promote Shiism happening alongside investment and economic initiatives.⁽⁶⁾

Maghreb-Iran Relations Amid Intra-Maghreb Disputes (Algerian-Moroccan)

When speaking of bilateral relations between Iran and the Maghreb countries, Iran’s relations with Algeria and Morocco automatically come to the fore as a measure for many Iranian geostrategic and geopolitical considerations. Algeria is a gateway to Africa and is the largest and most pivotal Maghreb country; geographically it comprises 2.4 million square kilometers of land, and demographically it has a population of 50 million people. Algeria holds an estimated 12 billion barrels of proven crude oil reserves, proven gas reserves of about 2.4 trillion cubic meters, a population of 45 million people and has the largest phosphate reserves in the world (70 percent of global reserves), and the majority of these reserves are in the Sahrawi region, which has been riven

by chronic conflict for nearly half a century. Morocco enjoys similar strategic privileges to that of Algeria.

The aforementioned facts have many political and strategic implications for Iran's relations with Algeria and Morocco as they are the two main countries for Tehran's foreign policy approach in the Maghreb. The political differences between Algeria and Morocco over many files, particularly the Sahara file and its regional and international repercussions, have contributed to making these two countries of great significance for Iran. These differences aid the penetration of many regional and international powers that seek to find and expand their spheres of influence in the Maghreb, similar to Iran and Israel. This quest for spheres of influence is fixed in Iran's strategy. This is evident not only in the Maghreb but also in other strategic circles, where Iran seeks to expand its influence by exploiting inter-state differences.

The Western Sahara Conflict: Iran's Gateway to the Maghreb

After the Iranian revolution and in February 1980, Iran officially announced its recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and the Polisario Front in the midst of strained relations between Iran and Morocco. Iran officially announced that it would not exploit the Algerian-Moroccan dispute over the Western Sahara conflict to enhance its strategic objectives. Iranian officials reiterated this position on several occasions, emphasizing Iran's desire to find a political solution to resolve the dispute. However, these assurances did not convince Morocco, which has always been suspicious of Iran's role in this file. The reality on the ground proves undoubtedly that Iran, amid the current regional and global balances, will not significantly impact the direction of the Algerian-Moroccan dispute over Western Sahara. Iran depends on a number of dimensions to disrupt the aforementioned balances, such as the entry of Israel into the equation after it normalized relations with Morocco in 2020 and the two sides increased security and military cooperation. Iran hopes this development will result in Algeria embracing it much further in the face of Morocco-Israel normalization. Algeria is aware that the nature of Iran's presence in the Maghreb and the current equation will hamper Tehran's role in the Moroccan-Algerian dispute. This does not mean that Iran will not exploit the differences between Morocco and Algeria to further its geopolitical goals.

Iran-Algeria relations have been stable since their resumption in 2003. They later developed following the "Arab Spring" in 2011, given their common positions on many regional issues. The dynamics of Iran-Algeria relations are influenced by three main determinants as follows:

■ **Regional and international:** Algeria finds it necessary to balance between its relations with Iran and its commitments to the Arab countries — while ensuring its relations with Iran do not clash with anti-Iran Western countries.

■ **National interests:** Algeria uses its relations with Iran to confront international powers such as France and the United States which support Morocco in the Western Sahara conflict.⁽⁷⁾

■ **Algerian ruling elite:** This determinant relies on the extent to which Algeria's ruling elite, especially the Francophones, accept rapprochement with Iran. This determinant is one of the main obstacles that thwart Iran's economic penetration and share of investments in Algeria, like Turkey and China — which have significantly increased their investments.

Morocco-Iran relations were marked with tension even during periods of cautious rapprochement. Relations between the two sides were severed many times due to Iranian interference in Moroccan internal affairs by supporting Shiism and the Polisario Front. Some believe that Morocco wants to use this Iranian card to gain the support of the Gulf countries led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in many files, most notably the Western Sahara file and to obtain greater support from Western powers led by the United States. Morocco-Israel normalization in 2020 is not free of the aforementioned goals. The severance of Morocco-Iran relations since 2018 have only been limited to Moroccan strategic calculations, especially on the Western Sahara case. Morocco's bond with Iran historically and culturally is much deeper than Iran's bond with the rest of the Maghreb countries, even if political interactions do not reflect this bond currently due to the regional situation that has blocked this rapprochement between the two sides. The current conditions leave Morocco in dire need of improving its relations with the Gulf countries, especially the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, much more than its need to establish strategic relations with Iran. Morocco is betting on strong French and American support regarding the Western Sahara conflict. All these factors will contribute to the total severance of relations between Morocco and Iran.

Algerian-Moroccan Differences and Conflicting Perspectives on the Boundaries of Iran's Penetration

In 2009, Morocco severed its relations with Iran for several reasons including Iran's statements about Bahrain and Morocco, accusing Iran of interfering in its internal affairs. The severance of relations has again come to the fore after Morocco accused Iran of militarily supporting the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian embassy in Algeria.⁽⁸⁾ This infuriated Algeria, which officially replied that Morocco had no right to involve Algeria as a party to the crisis between itself and Iran and it had no right to interfere in Algeria's diplomatic and internal affairs. Algeria-Iran relations are normal; they can be stable and at other times strained, just like any other bilateral relationship. Algeria believes that Morocco is not really concerned about Algeria-Iran relations. According to the Algerian point of view, Morocco exploits Algeria-Iran relations to strengthen its position on the Western Sahara conflict in the eyes

of international powers. Morocco aims, as Algeria claims, to gain the sympathy of Iran's rivals so they support Morocco in its confrontation against Algeria. It is worth noting that Morocco's timing of severing ties with Iran is not a mere coincidence. Its accusations against Iran of supporting the Polisario Front through Hezbollah are not new. Therefore, Algeria raises questions about the timing of cutting off relations and the accusations levelled against it.⁽⁹⁾

According to one of its leaders Abi al-Bashir, the Polisario Front denied Moroccan accusations of its cooperation with Iran and Hezbollah. He added that Iran is one of the 80 countries in the world that recognizes the Sahrawi Republic, and it does not receive any support from Iran other than political support. He accused Morocco of using this card to get closer to the Trump administration as well as by preparing the ground for normalizing its relationship with Israel. Iran also denied Moroccan accusations about the reasons behind its severance of relations with Tehran. Iran believes that Morocco's goal behind cutting relations goes beyond what has been officially declared, given the fact that Iran's position on the Western Sahara conflict has not changed for a long time.⁽¹⁰⁾

According to the aforementioned discussion, it seems quite unlikely that a settlement of the Algeria-Morocco disagreement on the Western Sahara conflict will be reached given the fact that each party to the conflict adheres to its position. The Polisario Front insists on holding a referendum for self-determination. On the other hand, Morocco categorically rejects this referendum by insisting on its approach to end the dispute, the autonomy of Western Sahara, which is rejected by the Polisario Front. Amid this controversy, the region appears likely to be a hotbed for foreign interventions, and Iran is not far away from taking advantage, especially given the growing Israeli presence via the normalization of Morocco-Israel relations, and the desire of the current Iranian government led by President Ebrahim Raisi to increase Iran's presence and expand it to include the security and military aspects in Africa in general, rather than only limited to the cultural, sectarian and economic aspects that were prevalent in its relations with Africa during the period of Rouhani's government.⁽¹¹⁾

Morocco-Israel Rapprochement and Iran's Growing Ambitions for Penetration

In the first official remarks of an Arab official to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the political arm of the Israeli lobby in the United States, Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita stated on May 5, 2021 that Morocco and Israel need to "work as allies," adding that "there is no limit" for Israeli-Moroccan ties.⁽¹²⁾ Some argue that such remarks reflect the progression in Morocco-Israel relations; they have gone beyond the limits of normal diplomatic relations. It is believed that Morocco's dependence on Israeli lobbies in many Western countries is to place pressure on Western

governments so that they are in line with Morocco's position on the Western Sahara conflict. According to Algeria, Morocco-Israel relations have gone beyond mere security and military cooperation; it views their relations as a threat to its national security.

Although Morocco has successfully achieved strategic benefits through its alliance with Israel, such as changing Washington's position, with it adopting the Moroccan position to end the Western Sahara conflict during the Trump administration, this alliance risks escalating tensions further with Algeria. This alliance is one of the most important reasons which prompted Algeria to sever its relations with Morocco in the summer of 2021, especially given the hostility of Israel to Algeria due to its historical and immediate position on the Arab-Israel conflict, and the active role of Algeria in curbing joint Israeli-Moroccan efforts to accept Israel's membership in the African Union as an observer country; an Israeli aspiration for more than two decades. Algeria perceives the Israeli security and intelligence presence on its western border as one of the threats to its national security and political stability, especially amid the growing security and military cooperation between Morocco and Israel and the visits of senior Israeli intelligence and military leaders to Morocco and the signing of a number of agreements.⁽¹³⁾ The last visit by Israeli Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi was on July 18, 2022, and the two parties signed defense agreements. It was preceded by a visit of Defense Minister Benny Gantz on October 24, 2021, and the two parties signed a security agreement which Israel has never signed with any other Arab country according to Western reports.⁽¹⁴⁾

Accordingly, in light of these facts, Iran is keen to exploit Algerian-Moroccan differences over the Western Sahara conflict to penetrate the Maghreb countries. Therefore, Iran will have an opportunity to present itself as one of the alternatives at Algeria's disposal to confront the Morocco-Israel alliance. Algeria has so far not shown great enthusiasm to increase the current level of interactions with Iran to include security and military cooperation similar to Morocco's relations with Israel. However, the future cannot be predicted due to the current ambiguity about the repercussions and nature of the risks of Israel's presence on Algeria's western border.⁽¹⁵⁾

The Future of Iran's Policy Toward the Algerian-Moroccan Dispute Amid the Current Developments

The current Algerian-Moroccan dispute does not reflect the common bonds of their peoples. The dispute over the Western Sahara has attracted the attention of regional powers that foster strategic aspirations to expand their spheres of influence in the region. Iran has aimed to expand its radical project based on the dualism of sectarianism and pragmatism, and it is fully aware that the Algerian-Moroccan dispute is one of the most important tools for extending its influence into the Maghreb region, which

is an important link to its project in West Africa. Iran has become more interested in securing further influence in the Maghreb following the Israeli presence there which it deems as a destabilizing factor in the region; especially in light of the growing political, military and security alliance between Morocco and Israel. Their cooperation has been practically translated into agreements and mutual visits. Israel and Iran are seeking to exploit the Algerian-Moroccan dispute and turn it into another proxy war scenario for the sake of their respective strategic interests. The current developments, including the severance of Moroccan-Algerian relations since the summer of 2021 and the Israeli presence, which has fueled the dispute further, are a strategic opportunity for Iran to achieve potential benefits. This opportunity will inevitably become an additional means of pressuring the West that seeks to curb Iranian nuclear ambitions.

Israel is unhappy over Algeria's position on the Arab-Israeli conflict and over its obstruction of Israeli efforts to penetrate the institutions of the African Union. Therefore, Tel Aviv seeks to inflame Algerian-Moroccan differences. This is of common interest for both Israel and Iran though this common interest takes different forms. Israel, through its explicit alliance with Morocco, openly supports Morocco against Algeria. This was evident in their normalization process. Iran is cautious in declaring its goals, mainly due to the Arab and international commitments to which Algeria attaches importance when managing its relations with Iran.

The rising conflict between Algeria and Morocco will clearly have consequences,⁽¹⁶⁾ especially as regional parties to this conflict, led by Israel and Iran, fuel this conflict and the Arab fold is unable to resolve this conflict. This escalation will encourage the ambitions of those wishing to exploit this conflict, serving only their interests. Iran urgently wishes that the current developments will push Algeria to warm to it, allowing both sides to expand their areas of convergence in defiance of the Morocco-Israel alliance, which seems to have advanced since normalization. If the two brotherly countries do not reconsider their visions to forge new understandings that help resolve their differences and if the position of Arab countries, especially the pivotal Arab countries such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, do not counter Iran's ambitions and even Israel's ambitions, the status quo may escalate into a proxy war given the current strategic developments. Algeria believes that the Morocco-Israel rapprochement poses a threat to its national security. On the other hand, Morocco thinks that Iran is seeking to achieve a rapprochement with Algeria through the Western Sahara conflict. Therefore, the region will potentially be on the verge of entering a proxy war in which Iran and Israel will aim to settle their strategic scores.⁽¹⁷⁾

Conclusion

The inter-Maghreb differences, particularly the Algerian-Moroccan dispute, are an ideal opportunity for Iran to increase its penetration into the Maghreb region and link it to its sphere of strategic influence in West Africa. This will inevitably prepare the ground for a crescent similar to the “Shiite crescent” in the Arab Mashreq, but with bolder goals since the African crescent will be closer to Europe, which seeks to preserve its traditional influence in North and West Africa, after the region has emerged as a hotbed of regional and international competition between many powers: the United States, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, Israel, and India. Israel’s entry into the equation after it normalized its relationship with Morocco has made the situation worse. This alliance has changed the traditional balance in the region, which has continued since the outbreak of the Western Sahara conflict in 1975 after Spain left the region. This new situation, i.e., the new balance of power, will inevitably provide a new opportunity for Iran to penetrate the region by either consolidating its relations with the Polisario Front, which aspires for developments to take place in this longstanding conflict — especially after the US recognition of Morocco’s sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2020. Iran is also betting on enhancing its relations and the scope of its cooperation with Algeria in light of new developments. Unlike Rouhani, Raisi works effortlessly to expand Iran’s influence outside its traditional spheres of influence within the Arab world and is now much more aggressive in its regional and international efforts to achieve further influence, especially in Africa and the Maghreb countries.

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IRAN'S "LOOK TO THE EAST" POLICY: CASE STUDY OF INDONESIA

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Introduction

Iran's "Look to the East" policy is an outcome of its antagonism with the United States, particularly against the backdrop of the latter's withdrawal from the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal in 2018 and the subsequent sanctions on Iran. This foreign policy approach of Iran seeks to mitigate Tehran's international isolation by building political, religious, economic, and cultural relations with the East.

This study investigates the dynamics of bilateral relations between Iran and Indonesia in recent decades. The study analyzes the various interests Tehran pursues in Indonesia and the means it uses for this end while considering the limitations and constraints that impede the development of Iran-Indonesia relations. The study focuses on three main topics: the factors influencing/impacting Iran-Indonesia relations; Iran's soft power policy in Indonesia; and the dimensions of Iran-Indonesia relations.

Indonesia with a collective Muslim population of approximately 240 million⁽¹⁾ has long been regarded by Iran as an important pillar of its religious, economic, and foreign policy objectives. Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country with the highest Muslim population, is a significant variable in Iran's "Look to the East" policy in Southeast Asia. Academics and policymakers have traditionally evaluated the bilateral relations between Iran and Indonesia through the prism of their relations with other countries, notably with the United States and Saudi Arabia.

Although Indonesia, in accordance with its pluralist and politically secular traditions, has resisted any religious and sectarian influence from Iran since the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution, this has not stopped Tehran from pursuing various interests in Indonesia, such as the promotion of the Iranian model of "religious democracy" in Indonesian politics and society, and sectarian ideas based on the principles of the Iranian revolution. In addition, Iran has pursued various illicit activities in Indonesia to mitigate the impact of the US-led economic sanctions on the country's domestic front.

Previous studies on Iran-Indonesia have mainly focused on religiopolitical perspectives as part of the broader scholarship on Shiism in East Asia. This includes Umar Assegaf's paper in which he discusses the social identities among Indonesian Shiites in the era after the overthrow of Indonesia's former President Suharto. Assegaf provides a historical outline of how the Shiite community in Indonesia was viewed with suspicion in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, and an overview of how the Iranian revolution, which was perceived as a victory of Islam over the Western-backed Pahlavi government, attracted the attention of Indonesian religious scholars and academics.⁽²⁾

Chiara Formichi examines the conversion of some Indonesians to Shiism from the 1960s until the 1980s and its impact on Shiite devotion in contemporary Java, an Indonesian island with a Muslim majority population. Formichi states that although the Indonesian government feared political instability in Indonesia in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, what the then regime in Indonesia failed to grasp was that "The most powerful consequence of the revolution was the diffusion of literature on Iran-Persian history and philosophy, which mostly fed the brains of those dissatisfied with religion rather than with the political status quo." Formichi discusses the personal stories of four Indonesian men who converted to Shiism after the Iranian revolution and how this impacted the formation of the next generation of "Shiite devotees" in Java.⁽³⁾

Hilman Latief gives a thorough overview of Shiite institutions, groups, schools and publishers that emerged in Indonesia in the wake of the Iranian revolution. The author also identifies prominent Indonesian academics

and religious leaders who were instrumental in spreading the religious and political ideas that formed the basis of the Iranian revolution.⁽⁴⁾

As can be seen from reviewing pre-existing scholarship on Iran-Indonesia interactions, most of it focuses more on the topic from a historical and religious studies perspective. As a result, there is currently a literature gap as there is no significant research that discusses Iran-Indonesia relations in the context of international relations and diplomacy. Through descriptive analysis, this study will examine the relationship between Iran and Indonesia and pinpoint Tehran's main foreign policy objectives in the Southeast Asian country.

Factors Influencing/Impacting Iran-Indonesia Relations

Strategic Location

At the confluence of the Pacific Ocean, the Strait of Malacca and the Indian Ocean, Indonesia boasts a key geostrategic location in the Asia-Pacific region. Indonesian waterways are used by more than half of all international shipping. They are located along the seaways that connect East and South Asia with Oceania, making it the world's biggest archipelago country, with 17,000 islands stretching 3,200 miles from east to west.⁽⁵⁾

Given that Indonesia's western island of Sumatra is situated next to one of the most important maritime passageways in the world, the Strait of Malacca, this country's strategic location is crucial to the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy. The strait connects Singapore, Peninsular Malaysia and the Indonesian island of Sumatra, and shortens the distance between the Middle East and the massive Asian markets by connecting the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific Ocean (China, Japan, and South Korea). Indonesia is a crucial regional participant in the Indo-Pacific security architecture created by the United States and other Western powers like the European countries and Australia because of its geostrategic location in the Indo-Pacific area and its status as the largest maritime country in Southeast Asia.

There have been several documented cases where Iran has attempted to exploit Indonesia's strategic location in the Indo-Pacific for its transnational illicit activities.

In accordance with its Archipelago Sea Lanes (ALKI) regulations, Indonesian authorities detained two oil tankers in 2021: the Panamanian-flagged MT Freya and the Iranian-flagged MT Horse, which were transiting Indonesian waters on their way to China. They were seized on suspicion of illegally smuggling oil through Indonesian territorial waters in violation of the right of transit passage.⁽⁶⁾ According to media reports, both had disabled their automatic identification system (AIS), which is required by Indonesia's

Ministry of Transportation to monitor vessel movements in Indonesian waters.

A report issued by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) stated that Iranian-affiliated drug gangs are encroaching on Southeast Asia's expanding methamphetamine industry, which has had an astonishing rise and is now spreading throughout the region.⁽⁷⁾ Another study from the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction stated that Iranians were one of the top two nationalities of people detained for trafficking methamphetamine in Indonesia, and noted an increase in reports of methamphetamine being smuggled into Indonesia from Iran.⁽⁸⁾

Several Iranian nationals have been detained in Indonesia during the last decade on charges of transporting drugs. For example, in 2009, seven Iranians were detained for reportedly bringing 371 capsules of methamphetamine into Bali Island.⁽⁹⁾ Also, in the same year, Indonesian authorities arrested 10 Iranian citizens on similar charges of being in possession of \$10 million worth of methamphetamine on international flights into Jakarta.⁽¹⁰⁾ In 2014, Indonesian authorities detained two Iranian citizens in West Java on charges of carrying 70 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine worth approximately \$9.5 million.⁽¹¹⁾

In 2021, an Indonesian district court in West Java sentenced 12 members of the Bali Nine heroin smuggling drug gang to death by firing for smuggling about 400 kilograms of methamphetamine. Iranian national Hossein Salari Rashid, who received a sentence with his wife, was referred to by the head of the Sukabumi prosecutor's office as the "mastermind of the crime."⁽¹²⁾

Indonesia's Significance in the Islamic World

Indonesia has a special position in the Arab and Islamic world because of it having the largest Muslim population. This makes Indonesia an important country in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and a significant arena of competition. Competing powers have actively built connections with Islamic scholars, academics and government-affiliated and private religious institutions in Indonesia to strengthen their religious credentials. More light can be shed on this phenomenon by examining the donations made to Indonesian religious seminaries and Indonesian universities for the study of the Arabic language and Islamic sciences, as well as through investigating the sources of funding for the construction of mosques; the latter has received generous donations from influential Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Turkey.⁽¹³⁾ During a state visit to Indonesia in 2017, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia allocated a budget of \$13 billion to fund education, businesses, and religious institutions in Indonesia.⁽¹⁴⁾ In addition to making substantial investments in the Indonesian economy, the UAE also built a mosque in its diplomatic district that was named after the

current President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, in recognition of his contribution to fostering relations between the two countries.⁽¹⁵⁾

The Muslim World League (MWL), which is headquartered in Makkah, has actively worked on numerous construction, charitable, and educational projects with the Indonesian government and private organizations.⁽¹⁶⁾ For example, the MWL signed a cooperation agreement in 2020 with the Foundation for the History of the Prophet Muhammad (□) to construct the Prophet Muhammad and Islamic Civilization History Museum in Jakarta. Indonesia's then Vice President Jusuf Kalla, who was also serving as the foundation's chairman of the Board of Trustees at the time, was present at the signing ceremony.⁽¹⁷⁾

Despite having the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia is often described as a multi-ethnic, multireligious and pluralistic country that practices and promotes the moderate form of Indonesian "Nusantara Islam." In the words of Rumadi Ahmad, a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Sharia and Law in the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta, "At a time when many Muslim countries globally have been involved in political conflicts, civil wars, and other strife, Indonesia remains an oasis of pluralism, a model Muslim country. The Indonesian version of democracy not only disproves the myth that Islam and democracy are incompatible but also demonstrates how Islam can be managed and maintained within a modern nation-state. Indonesia is a Muslim-majority country, with 230 million Muslims comprising 87.2 percent of the total population. Yet Islam is not the national religion. In fact, there is no official religion mentioned in the Indonesian Constitution."⁽¹⁸⁾

The Shiite Minority in Indonesia

Shortly after the Iranian revolution in 1979, the new Iranian republic pledged in its Constitution to propagate the revolution's ideology beyond its borders and called for a revolution throughout the Islamic world. In a speech, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the revolution's first supreme leader, urged the Iranian people to "endure hardships and pressures" so that the Iranian government could fulfil its primary duty of promoting Islam worldwide.⁽¹⁹⁾

The Iranian revolution opened up new opportunities for Iran to carry out the "Supreme Iranian plan" inside and outside the country. The new government adopted a strategy whereby it encouraged Shiite groups and communities outside of Iran to carry out its transboundary project.⁽²⁰⁾

Despite being a country with a Muslim majority population, Indonesia also has sizable minorities of Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucianists. Sunnis make up the bulk of Indonesian Muslims. At least 1 million Shiites live in Indonesia, especially in Jakarta, Makassar, and Bandung.

The Shiite community has had a presence in Indonesia since the ninth century, it is believed that Ahmad ibn 'Isa al-Muhajir, the great-grandson of

the sixth Shiite Imam, Ja'far as-Sadiq, migrated from Basra to Hadramout in southern Yemen. Ahmad ibn 'Isha's descendants later travelled eastwards and reached Java, where many settled.⁽²¹⁾ However, it was the Iranian revolution that had a significant impact on Shiite identity within Indonesia. A more assertive and socially active Shiite community emerged that actively engaged in religious preaching and encouraged many Indonesians to join the Shiite sect. Many Indonesian academics, religious experts and students who had lived and studied in Iran during the political upheaval of the Iranian revolution returned to Indonesia after the event.

Latief identifies two main groups that played an essential role in spreading Shiite thought in Indonesia after the Iranian revolution: the first was the Qom alumni, which consisted of Indonesian students who had studied in the hawza in Qom, Iran, and then returned to Indonesia, and the second was a student group at the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB). This group ran a circle of knowledge at the university which promoted Shiism and the teachings of the Iranian revolution.⁽²²⁾

Iran's Soft Power Policy in Indonesia

Through propagating the Iranian revolution's ideology, Iran has aimed to achieve influence and establish a support base among Muslims worldwide. This propagation has combined both hard and soft power. Examples of Iranian hard power have been apparent in numerous countries. For example, in Iraq, where Shiites make up the majority of the population, the Iran-affiliated Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and other militias continue to have significant influence in the country through penetrating state apparatuses, exercising violence and attacking Western and Arab interests.⁽²³⁾ Even in countries where Shiites constitute a minority as in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the IRGC has recruited them to fight in Iran's proxy wars in Syria and Iraq.⁽²⁴⁾

In countries where it does not enjoy a demographic advantage, such as in Indonesia, Iran deploys soft power to propagate the philosophy of the Iranian revolution. This involves propagating the Iranian revolution's political framework, a hybrid political structure, through different mediums. This idea of a "religious democracy" was highly appealing to a religious audience consisting of devout or conservative Muslims.⁽²⁵⁾ Farish A. Noor attributes this to a phase in history where "Muslim societies were grappling with the dilemma of how to construct a postcolonial modernity that was on the one hand modern and at the same time authentically local – at times couched in terms that were ethno-culturally essentialist and reductivist."⁽²⁶⁾ The Iranian revolution also provided a window of opportunity for Muslim Brotherhood-aligned politicians and religious leaders throughout Southeast Asia to capitalise on the popularity of Iran's revolution which they believed would significantly expand their own electoral base. According to Noor, "It was

hardly surprising that Southeast Asian governments were perturbed by the developments in Iran. In Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, dissident Islamist parties and movements openly supported the Iranian revolution and its underlying principles. In Indonesia, groups like the Komando Jihad under the leadership of Islamist firebrands like Imran bin Zein began mobilising their followers and issuing a call to arms, taking the Iranian revolution as their cue."⁽²⁷⁾

Education and Research Cooperation

The distribution of Iranian literature in Indonesian universities significantly increased after the Iranian revolution. The literature's subject matter included readings on Iran's contemporary governmental structure, religious practices, and culture. In addition to the Shiite community in Indonesia, some Muslim conservatives were drawn to the "religious democracy" political model that emerged in Iran as well as some leftist groups that saw the Iranian revolution that toppled the Pahlavi government as a victory over American imperialism. Sofjan states that following the Iranian revolution, Iranian Shiite scholars and ideologues such as Murtadha Mutahhari, Ali Shariati and Tabataba'i enjoyed a large following.⁽²⁸⁾

Currently, the Islamic Cultural Center (ICC) of the Iranian Embassy in Jakarta disseminates Iranian literature and is readily accessible in university and public libraries throughout Indonesia and has been translated into Bahasa Indonesia, the country's native language.⁽²⁹⁾

Several universities in Indonesia, such as Indonesia University (U.I.) and Islamic State University (UIN) in Jakarta and Yogyakarta respectively, and Gadjah Mada University and Hasanuddin University in South Celebes, as well as Muhammadiyah Universities in Jakarta, Malang and Yogyakarta have set up study centers known as "Iranian corners," where religious and political literature authored by Iranian scholars is available.⁽³⁰⁾

The Indonesian figures and organizations identified by Latief that have played a critical role in disseminating Iranian literature in Indonesian universities and actively facilitating educational exchanges between the two countries include the following:

■ Husein al-Habysi: An Indonesian religious scholar who had converted to Shiism and established the Islamic educational institution called Yayasan Pesantren Islam (YAPI) in Bangil, East Java and he has maintained an intellectual network with Shiite scholars in Iran and has facilitated the transfer of thousands of Indonesian students to study at religious institutions in Iran;⁽³¹⁾ Assegaf states that "The activities of Hussein al-Habsyi's pesantren in Bangil greatly contributed to the spread of Shiism in Indonesia, and any analysis of Shiite genealogy in the archipelago would not be complete without mention of him."⁽³²⁾

■ Jalaluddin Rahmat: A lecturer at Padjadjaran University-Bandung and founder of the Ikatan Jamaah Ahlul Bayt Indonesia (IJABI) who has authored several papers and books, and played a vital role in spreading Shiite traditions in both rural and urban areas, and mentored students who studied about religion and politics in post-revolution Iran.⁽³³⁾ Assegaf refers to him as “the most active intellectual in spreading Shiism on campuses and more broadly to the educated middle class of Indonesian Muslims.”⁽³⁴⁾

■ The Fatimah Foundation: A Jakarta-based organization founded in 1997 that publishes an annual journal called *An Naba* and has published many other sectarian and communally provocative articles in Bahasa Indonesia, English and Arabic such as “The Deviations of the Doctrines of Ahlu Sunnah wa al Jama,” “The Blemished Wahhabis’ Characteristics,” and “The Mistakes of Muhammad’s Companions.”⁽³⁵⁾

■ The Al-Jawad Foundation of Islamic Studies: An organization based in Bandung, West Java, that declares its mission “to practice the teachings of the *ahlul bayt* in daily life, individually and communally, and to propagate them extensively within society.”⁽³⁶⁾ Marcinkowski describes the political orientation of the Al-Jawad Foundation as a whole to be “the official line of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”⁽³⁷⁾

Iranian diplomats and officials have been regular visitors to Indonesian universities, delivering lectures on several domestic and international issues concerning Iran. Other than holding such events at Indonesian universities, similar events have also been organized in Iranian universities that have seen the participation of Indonesian students, academics, and officials. One such event was held in 2018 called the National Dialogue entitled “Grounding Indonesian Unity, Realizing Social Justice” at the Imam Khomeini International University in Qom. The event saw the attendance of Octavio Alimuddin, the Indonesian ambassador to Turkmenistan (stationed in Tehran), and several Indonesian students studying in Iran.⁽³⁸⁾

Several Indonesian students are given scholarships by the Iranian government to attend Iranian universities. The Shiite religious city of Qom is where most Indonesian students in Iran are based. In a reciprocal move, the Indonesian government also announced in 2019 that Iranian students would be eligible to apply for the DARMASISWA scholarship⁽³⁹⁾ to study the Indonesian language, arts, music, and crafts.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Media and Culture

After the Iranian revolution, bilingual literature was the principal tenet of Iran’s soft power in Indonesia, but over time, it started to invest significant capital in penetrating Indonesian print and electronic media.

Articles and other literature supportive of Iran’s foreign policy and its political and theological ideas are no longer only found in journals or

magazines issued by Shiite organizations but have also now found a space in the country's mainstream media.

A 2021 article published in the Bahasa Indonesia daily *Gerusi* called for cultural exchanges between Indonesia and Iran and discussed Shiite customs. The article referred to the visit of a group of Indonesian writers to Qom on the Iranian government's invitation and echoed Tehran's position on the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The author presented three post-Iranian revolutionary traits that Indonesia should learn from and possibly embrace:

- First, the resilience of the Iranian people in the face of external dangers posed by foreign ideologies, and politics.
- Second, despite the longstanding economic sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe on Iran, infrastructure construction has proceeded at a rapid pace as though the embargo has had no bearing on the country's ability to maintain its economic independence.
- Third, Iranians continues to uphold their unique culture, and speak in Persian.⁽⁴¹⁾

The Iranian Embassy in Jakarta has, on an annual basis, facilitated interactions between Iranian and Indonesian journalists and media outlets. For example, in 2009, a delegation of Iranian journalists led by Mehdi Sarrami, manager of digital media affairs at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance was sent by the Iranian government to Indonesia. During the visit, members of the delegation asked for help from Indonesian media outlets to help Iran "counter the misinformation that has demonized the country."⁽⁴²⁾

In 2015 the Iranian Embassy in Jakarta, on behalf of Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, invited numerous senior Indonesian journalists to the country where they visited several Iranian media outlets such as Iran Daily, Financial Tribune, Iran News Agency, and the private news agency Mehr News Agency. Mohammad Taqi Roghaniha, the managing director of Iran's Cultural and Press Institute, said, "The presence of Indonesian media in Iran is very important to obtain first-hand information and offset the Western propaganda against Iran. Western press coverage about Iran is inversely proportional to the actual situation."⁽⁴³⁾

To appeal to Indonesians from all political and religious backgrounds, the Iranian government also launched initiatives to promote the Persian language and culture. The Iranian Embassy has annually organized Nowruz (the Persian New Year) festivities at the National Library of Indonesia, with the attendance of Iranian and Indonesian officials.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Iranian films have also achieved popularity in Indonesia, with several of them screened over two days in 2019 by the ICC in Indonesia at the National Library in the country. According to Mehrdad Rakhshandeh, cultural adviser at the Iranian Embassy in Jakarta, the event strengthened relations between

the two countries because the films highlighted shared religious and cultural values.⁽⁴⁵⁾ A year later, on Java Island, at the 15th Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival, seven Iranian films were shown. Four Iranian films were then shown at the 14th Bali International Film Festival in 2021.⁽⁴⁶⁾

In 2017, on the eve of the month of Muharram, Iran started broadcasting live sermons in Bahasa Indonesia. The Shiite community in Indonesia has since annually gathered at the ICC, which was built in 2002 with funding from Iran to commemorate the month of Muharram.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Iran-Indonesia Relations: Dimensions

Economic Relations Against the Backdrop of Sanctions

On several occasions, Iran and Indonesia have expressed a desire to strengthen their trade and commercial ties, particularly in the energy sector. However, US-led Western sanctions against Iran have made this problematic. Iranian exports to Indonesia stood at \$16.1 million in 2020 compared to \$221 million in 1995. Petroleum coke (\$8.07 million), tropical fruits (\$4.19 million), and carbonates (\$1.14 million) were the top goods shipped from Iran to Indonesia in 2020. On the other hand, Indonesian exports to Iran have increased at an annualized rate of 1.63 percent over 25 years, from \$132 million in 1995 to \$198 million in 2020. In the same year, the main products exported from Indonesia to Iran were nuts (\$113 million), palm oil (\$18.7 million), and coconut oil (\$9.79 million).⁽⁴⁸⁾

Energy has been the main component of economic cooperation between Iran and Indonesia. Both countries have collaborated on industrial projects and signed bilateral agreements in various fields. The two countries signed a joint agreement in 2008, the day after Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's state visit to Iran, to build a 300,000-barrel-per-day oil refinery in Indonesia as part of a joint venture between the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) and Indonesian national oil company Pertamina, and a 360,000-barrel-per-day plant to refine gas liquids in the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas and a 1 million tons-a-year urea plant in southern Iran.⁽⁴⁹⁾

The Iranian nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which eased some of the international sanctions against Iran in exchange for Tehran limiting its nuclear program, was signed by Iran and the P5+1 in 2015 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council — China, France, Russia, the United States and the UK plus Germany).

Indonesia welcomed the JCPOA, noting in a statement from its Ministry of Foreign Affairs that "The agreement proved the effectiveness of peaceful ways to solve problems in line with the Indonesian position which has always called for diplomacy and dialogue in seeking a solution to the problem over Iran's nuclear program."⁽⁵⁰⁾ Since then, bilateral trade relations between Iran

and Southeast Asian countries rapidly developed. A trade delegation from Indonesia visited Iran a couple of months before the JCPOA to participate in the Iran-Indonesia Economic Commission. The then Iranian Minister of Communication Mahmoud Vaezi and the then Indonesian Co-coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Sofyan Djalil inked an agreement during the event to raise the trade volume to \$2 billion.⁽⁵¹⁾

Indonesia expanded its oil sector collaboration with Iran shortly after the JCPOA. The two countries inked a lucrative agreement under which they would work together on a project worth \$8.4 billion as per which a 300,000-barrel refinery would be built in Indonesia.⁽⁵²⁾ A deal to jointly construct an oil refinery with a 50,000-barrel daily capacity in East Java Island, Indonesia, was later reached in 2015 by Iran, Indonesia, and China.⁽⁵³⁾

The Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, and past sanctions and more were imposed on Iran. The sanctions also applied to any country that purchased oil from Iran and financial institutions that conducted transactions with Iranian banks.

In the aftermath of the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA, Indonesia issued a statement in which "regret" was expressed over the withdrawal.⁽⁵⁴⁾ A statement issued by the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs termed the JCPOA as an important achievement of diplomacy that contributed to the promotion of the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons as well as stability in the world.⁽⁵⁵⁾

The United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA also impacted Indonesian firms. In 2019, the United States District Court for the District of Columbia charged an Indonesian citizen named Sunarko Kuntijoro and three Indonesian-based businesses, PT MS Aero Support (PTMS), PT Kandiyasa Energi Utama (PTKEU), and PT Antasena Kreasi (PTAK), with violating US sanctions against Iran by exporting US-origin goods and technology to the Tehran-based aviation firm Mahan Air. This airline was earlier listed as a Specially Designated National and Blocked Person (SDN) for providing financial, material and technological support to Iran's IRGC-affiliated Quds Force.⁽⁵⁶⁾

A year later, two Iranian citizens, Sahebali Moulaei and Mohsen Faghihi, along with two Indonesian citizens, Arnold Kaunang and Alfrets Kaunang, were charged with 19 counts of exporting US aircraft parts to Iran in violation of US export laws and sanctions against Iran by a US federal court in the Eastern District of Virginia. The court ruling also mentioned the existence of "front companies" with offices in Indonesia that were used to hide the country of origin to facilitate the purchase and export of US-made aviation parts to Iran.⁽⁵⁷⁾

In 2020, Indonesia abstained from voting in response to a United Nations Security Council resolution proposed by the United States that called for an extension of the arms embargo on Iran. According to the Director of International Security and Disarmament at Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Grata Endah Werdaningtyas, Jakarta took the position of abstention because it considered the draft resolution to be inconsistent with the JCPOA.⁽⁵⁸⁾ A year later, during a visit to Indonesia, the then Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif praised Indonesia for supporting the JCPOA and for pushing UNSC Resolution 2231⁽⁵⁹⁾ into practice. Zarif also expressed hope that the two countries' business relations would continue to improve through the establishment of the Iran-Indonesia Joint Business Commission and other agreements.⁽⁶⁰⁾

Since the start of the JCPOA talks, Indonesia expressed its support for an agreement between Iran and its Western counterparts. The JCPOA, according to Indonesia's envoy to Tehran at the time, Octavio Alimudin, was the only option for Iran to advance and for the international community to keep track of Iran's nuclear activities. The envoy further stated that Indonesia would be able to purchase liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) from Iran under the JCPOA, which was previously prohibited under the embargo; this helped increase bilateral trade between Indonesia and Iran.⁽⁶¹⁾

The then Permanent Representative of Indonesia to the United Nations in Vienna Darmansjah Djumala expressed Indonesia's support for the JCPOA during a meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors. While urging the United States to resume negotiations with Iran, Ambassador Djumala acknowledged positive developments such as a bilateral technical agreement between Iran and the IAEA that would allow the nuclear watchdog to carry out its duty of monitoring and inspecting Iran's nuclear program.⁽⁶²⁾

In 2021 during a virtual meeting between the Iranian Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdul Reza Zabib and the Director-General of the Asia Pacific and Africa at the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Abdul Kadir Jailani, the two countries agreed to complete the negotiations on the Indonesia-Iran Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA).⁽⁶³⁾

In May 2022, an Indonesian delegation led by the Deputy Chairman of the Indonesian House of Representatives Coordinator for Industry and Development Rachmat Gobel visited Tehran. The Iranian side, during the negotiations, emphasized the necessity of establishing a specialized working group to lay out a plan for promoting the expansion of commercial ties between the two countries. The Iranian side also stressed that the trade commitments made during President Widodo's visit to Iran in 2016 were not met.⁽⁶⁴⁾

Agenda of Bilateral Visits and Meetings

Formal diplomatic interactions between Iran and Indonesia continued after

the Iranian revolution, as mentioned earlier, despite Indonesian concerns about the spillover of the "religious democracy" political model that was in contradiction to its secular and inclusive values as well as against the religious beliefs of the majority Muslim population.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Iran managed to gain the sympathy of a significant section of the Indonesian population, which has been exploited by visiting dignitaries from Iran during state visits to Indonesia.

The 2006 state visit to Indonesia by former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was the ideal illustration of Iranian populism in the country. According to classified American diplomatic cables published on WikiLeaks titled "Indonesia/Iran: Ahmadinejad a Difficult Guest," Indonesia attempted to play a diplomatic role to help in resolving the conflict between Iran and the United States. Despite Indonesia's desire to play a constructive role as a mediator, the American cables noted that the then Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was taken aback by Ahmadinejad's belligerent bluster, hardline ideology, and disrespectful behaviour toward his Indonesian hosts during his state visit to Jakarta, including his "aggressive rhetoric and breaches of protocol, which alarmed and embarrassed President Yudhoyono."⁽⁶⁶⁾

Ahmadinejad, during his visit, was received warmly by Indonesian students and Muslim groups. During his meetings and public events, he described Israel as a "cancer" and a "tyrannical" regime and repeated his assertion that Islam would supplant liberal democracy as the world's dominant ideology, calling on all Muslims to reject liberal democracy and the West. The American cables also noted that President Yudhoyono claimed that Ahmadinejad continued with his rhetoric at the D-8 summit (the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation, also known as Developing-8) in Bali to mobilize support for his country's nuclear program. President Yudhoyono was worried that his and Indonesia's international reputation would suffer because of the country's association with Ahmadinejad.⁽⁶⁷⁾

Another paragraph from the leaked American cables stated that the National Security Advisor to the Indonesian President Patti Djalal said "President Yudhoyono was in a 'bad mood' and believed that Ahmadinejad had abused Indonesian hospitality by his verbal attacks on Israel and strident acts while on Indonesian soil. It is one thing to make these comments for domestic audiences in Iran, Djalal said, but it is disrespectful to the host to do so while on a state visit. Yudhoyono now fears that association with these tirades may have damaged Indonesia's international reputation."⁽⁶⁸⁾

During a guest lecture at a university in Depok, Ahmadinejad defended the Iranian nuclear program and scathingly criticised Israel. This was met with applause from an enthusiastic crowd of students. During the talk, some students carried banners reading "Iran in Our Hearts" and "Nuclear Power

for Peace.” Ahmadinejad generated a loud applause when responding to a question he found to his liking, and he spontaneously offered a student a scholarship to study in Iran.⁽⁶⁹⁾

In December 2016, Indonesian President Joko Widodo paid a state visit to Iran. During the visit, which occurred nearly a year after the implementation of the JCPOA, President Widodo held bilateral meetings with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, where the two leaders discussed cooperation in the energy sector.⁽⁷⁰⁾ During the meeting, the Indonesian premier committed to buying more than 500,000 metric tons of LPG from Iran. President Widodo was accompanied by 60 Indonesian entrepreneurs who explored trade and investment opportunities in Iran.⁽⁷¹⁾ President Widodo also held a separate meeting with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The press release of the meeting published by the Office of the Supreme Leader of Iran mentioned that the low level of economic exchange between Iran and Indonesia does not reflect the considerable capacities of the two countries. “By determining [clear-cut] time intervals, the volume of economic exchange between the two countries must increase to such figures as high as \$20 billion a year,” the press release said.⁽⁷²⁾

Conclusion

Considering this study, the following two observations can be made. First, Indonesia hopes to establish itself as a “middle power” in international relations by participating in bilateral and multilateral engagements with Iran. As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia hopes to leverage this position and play a more proactive role in bridging the differences between Iran and the West. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis has highlighted Jakarta’s ambitious foreign policy to project itself on the international stage, best exemplified by Indonesian President Widodo’s state visits to Moscow and Kyiv.

Second, Jakarta has vigorously opposed any Iranian populism or revolutionary rhetoric within its borders. This can be deduced by noting that no Iranian head of state has made a state visit to Indonesia since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s controversial trip there in 2006.

Whether the JCPOA is revived or not will be the key factor in determining the future of relations between Iran and Indonesia. Jakarta, driven by “economic pragmatism,” wants to improve its economic ties with Iran, especially in the energy sector. The Indonesian government and businesses may be encouraged to access the Iranian energy market if the JCPOA is reinstated, but the enthusiasm may not be as high as it was following the adoption of the agreement in 2015 due to the bad experiences after the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the JCPOA. Recent events such as the killing of the Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani that heightened tensions between Iran

and the United States; the escalation of attacks launched by the Iran-backed Houthi militia on Saudi Arabia and the UAE; and the impasse at the Vienna talks due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict have put Jakarta in a tight spot, where neutrality and a policy of economic pragmatism with Tehran may no longer be a viable option. Iran, meanwhile, will continue to use all the resources at its disposal, from Indonesia's Shiite minority to its revolutionary and anti-Western rhetoric, to strengthen its position and influence in the country.

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THE IMPACT OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS ON IRAN-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

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Introduction

The study sheds light on the characteristics, dimensions and prospects of Iran-South Korea relations in light of developments concerning the freezing of Iranian assets in South Korea following the imposition of US sanctions. The study also looks at the significance of both countries in their regional spheres in addition to the impact of international factors on their relations given South Korea's affiliation with the United States that leads the unipolar international system. On the other hand, Iran is affiliated with the anti-US and anti-unipolar countries such as China and Russia as well as other regional and international allies.

The following key questions will be studied: what is the nature of Iran-South Korea relations? What are the internal and external factors impacting their relations? In addition, sub-questions related to the strategies and dimensions of each country will be looked at, particularly at how they impact the nature of relations.

Internal Factors Impacting Iran-South Korea Relations

Political experience teaches that despite ideologies and principles of political systems, political pragmatism often determines relations between countries regardless of their position in the international system. The nature and approaches of the ruling systems in Iran and South Korea offer insights into the patterns and characteristics of relations between both countries:

The Inclusive and Ideological Nature of Iran's Political System

Following the triumph of the Iranian revolution in 1979, an ideological religious system known as Wilayat al-Faqih came into existence and the Wali al-Faqih, known as the "special envoy of divine providence," assumed full control over the entire system and society. This system based on a politicized version of Shiism was projected for all Muslims, and one that would protect the weak and fight against the arrogant. Iran's religious elite presented this revolutionary political system as an alternative to the Western system to counter the world's arrogant powers. Iran's revolutionary ruling system established its foreign policy and relations on a somewhat different footing compared to that of the previous Pahlavi government.

This new direction of foreign policy invoked the ire of world powers, especially of the United States and its allies, as Iran was attempting to present its religious-based system as an alternative to the Western capitalist system led by the United States and its allies. US allies such as South Korea and some of Iran's neighbors were concerned that the Iranian ruling system had successfully presented itself as an ideological alternative by the end of the 20th century; a critical point in history which witnessed the end of the Cold War.

One cannot judge Iran's ruling system only in accordance with its ideology and political principles that are stated to regulate the country's internal and external affairs. Pragmatism has been adopted by Iran's Wilayat al-Faqih system; evident in many aspects of the country's foreign policy. For example, Iran's position on the United States is based on pragmatism and *realpolitik*, despite the fact that it is presented as the country's enemy.⁽¹⁾

Although the Iranian political system depends on revolutionary ideology and has used it to survive over the last 40 years, pragmatism has been utilized when needed to maximize the ruling system's interests. As a result, even though South Korea is an ally of those countries that Iran classes as forces of global arrogance, Tehran based on pragmatic calculations established relations with Seoul.

The Liberal Nature of South Korea's Political System

Unlike the Iranian political system, which is totalitarian in nature, in which one person exercises exclusive power, tilting toward China and Russia, the South Korean political system is pluralistic, democratic, and tilts toward the West.

Since its founding, South Korea has witnessed many political developments that have led to democratic rule being embedded with popular consent in the country. The South Korean Constitution mentions an integrated presidential system with a legislative body, and the president is directly elected for five years to office and his term is non-renewable.⁽²⁾ This system is different from individual-focused systems but is consistent with the US political system on the other hand.

Yoon Suk-yeol of the South Korean conservative People Power Party, who is biased toward the United States, won the 2022 presidential election, with Lee Jae-myung, the liberal candidate, standing against him. South Korea's foreign policy will continue to have an anti-Iran slant and a pro-US one under Suk-yeol's rule.⁽³⁾

Ideology is a significant determinant when analyzing Iran's foreign relations; the Iranian government still runs the country's foreign policy in line with revolutionary principles such as "exporting the 1979 revolution," advancing the country's regional project at the expense of the West and most prominently the United States, developing the country's nuclear capabilities, and promoting nationalistic orientations. Thus, in light of these principles, Iran diverges significantly from the orientations of South Korea, the United States' strategic ally. Despite this divergence, apart from trade relations between South Korea and Iran, both have also pursued other goals.

External Factors Impacting Iran-South Korea Relations

A number of factors have contributed to the failure in the development of Iran-South Korea relations which has impacted the trade dimension between the two countries. These factors are as follows:

The North Korea Factor

The North Korea factor has significantly impacted the nature of Iran-South Korea relations due to the positive relations between Tehran and Pyongyang; Seoul's archenemy; given their joint cooperation in the development of nuclear activities and ballistic missiles. Therefore, the direct threats posed by Pyongyang on Seoul have impacted the latter's relations with Pyongyang's allies in the Middle East, especially with Iran.

Seoul is aware of the nature of relations between Tehran and Pyongyang since the victory of the Iranian revolution in 1979. Pyongyang and Iran after the revolution found common ground because of their anti-Western rhetoric and opposition to the Western political system. Pyongyang's supply of weapons and missile technology in the 1980s to Tehran was the most prominent feature of North Korea's support for Iran's government amid its war with Iraq. North Korea also depended on Iran to obtain hard currency. Since the 1980s, strong

relations between the two countries have developed, especially in the military field.⁽⁴⁾

Both countries are aware of the common need for coordinating against US encirclement policies. They both desire for the United States, an ally of Seoul, to lose its dominant position in the international system. Both Tehran and Pyongyang are under siege, isolated and facing economic sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies because of their nuclear/missile programs and ambitions. They therefore have a common enemy. Because of US hostility, Iran and North Korea have adopted similar political and military positions which have raised fears among Washington's allies. These positions are seen as an impediment to relations between South Korea and Iran.

The conservative current in Seoul is taking a tougher position on Pyongyang unlike the liberal current, and the latter's relations with Iran are likely to strain further. In an article published by Foreign Affairs magazine in February, President Suk-yeol, when he was a presidential candidate, promised that if he was elected as the country's president, his administration would take a tougher stance against Pyongyang and he also criticized the conciliatory approach of his predecessor Moon Jae-in toward Pyongyang, and called for tougher sanctions on Pyongyang, and he classed North Korea as the "main enemy" of his country.⁽⁵⁾ In reference to the Russia-Ukraine war, during the presidential debate, Suk-yeol said that "the country's national security and peace cannot be protected by paper and ink." On another occasion, he said, "Peace is meaningless unless backed up by force."⁽⁶⁾ Therefore, the tough policies of Suk-yeol toward Pyongyang and his efforts to strengthen military cooperation with Washington in East Asia will have a profound impact on inter-Korean relations and their foreign relations and alliances, especially when it comes to the Middle East.⁽⁷⁾

The China Factor

Beijing leads the international axis against the United States and is an ally of Seoul. In addition, China is one of Seoul's largest trading partners, and the most prominent strategic ally of Tehran. Therefore, Beijing is a major variable in influencing the pattern of relations between Iran and South Korea. Chinese trade with South Korea has become a major pressure card in influencing Seoul's policies toward Beijing's strategic allies. Beijing's close relations and its significant influence in Pyongyang have increased the relevance and impact of its policies on Seoul's foreign and security policies in East Asia.⁽⁸⁾

Iran is a regional power in the Arab Gulf region in particular, and the Middle East in general. Therefore, Iran's relationship with China is an important determinant in the power balance equation within the region. Seoul's foreign policy is closely related to Washington's foreign calculations, and it attempts to embrace positions in line with these calculations, especially when it comes

to Iran. If Seoul continues to pursue unfavorable policies toward Iran, this will only increase Chinese influence in the Middle East in several fields, but it may also risk the political and economic role of Seoul in the Middle East and Iran, threatening its economic interests with Tehran.⁽⁹⁾

Many experts believe that Pyongyang's position has become tougher toward its southern neighbor against the backdrop of US-Chinese escalation in the South China Sea in general and in regard to Taiwan in particular. China, Pyongyang's strategic ally, took escalatory military action following Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. China has also expressed its strong objection to the deployment of further THAAD missile systems in Seoul.

The Gulf Factor

The Gulf states are in conflict with Iran due to its recent destructive project in the Arab world. Therefore, the Gulf factor is of great significance because it impacts relations between Tehran and Seoul, especially as the strategic alliance with the United States binds South Korea and the Gulf countries. In addition, economic and commercial factors have a great impact on Gulf-South Korea relations. Seoul has developed bilateral relations with the Gulf countries and attempts to prevent conflicts that could harm its interests in the Gulf. Therefore, South Korea has adopted a bilateral approach toward both its allies and adversaries to secure its interests but at the lowest possible political cost. This includes the separation of security relations from economic and commercial relations, and the adoption of a neutral approach as much as possible when conflicts erupt between its allies and adversaries.⁽¹⁰⁾

Given the nature and resources of the Gulf, developing relations with the Gulf countries is of great importance, especially as they can act as an alternative source for Seoul's energy needs. South Korea ranked eighth in the world in 2018 in terms of consumption and imports of crude oil. Its import of oil from the Gulf stands at 73 percent and 45 percent for liquefied gas. The volume of intra-regional trade between South Korea and the Gulf countries reached its apex in 2014, amounting to \$110 billion, which was more than 10 percent of the combined South Korean trade volume that year. This figure has dropped in subsequent years due to the decline in oil prices.⁽¹¹⁾

Bilateral trade between South Korea and the Gulf is not only limited to oil but also includes the exchange of goods as Seoul has deemed the Gulf markets as important for the sale of its goods. The Gulf, which aspires to move toward a non-oil-based economy, needs new strategic partners. Therefore, to this end, there is significant cooperation with South Korea in the fields of engineering, procurement, construction, smart agriculture, and defense. South Korea deployed its naval forces abroad for the first time to take part in the Joint Task Force (151CTF) and the Alliance to Combat Piracy around the Gulf of Aden and the Horn of Africa.⁽¹²⁾ Seoul places relations with the Gulf countries at the apex

of its strategic priorities, even though some of them are in conflict with Iran because of its expansionist policies in the region. The United States and its European allies foster Gulf-South Korea relations, while Iran resents South Korea's approach toward the Gulf countries.

Therefore, Iran criticizes Seoul's support for the US military presence in the Middle East as it views this presence as a direct threat to its national security.⁽¹³⁾ On the other hand, the United States and the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have welcomed Seoul's approach as it increases international pressure on Tehran and serves the goals of peace and stability in the Middle East, which is home to vital resources and strategic waterways. Seoul also contributed to international security efforts to protect strategic corridors such as the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab by supplying a military contingent that was stationed off the Omani coast in 2019;⁽¹⁴⁾ it helped in protecting incoming trade and oil tankers. This was undertaken when Iran engaged in the so-called "tankers wars" with it targeting oil tankers in the Arabian Gulf as part of its strategy to counter Trump's maximum pressure strategy. At the beginning of 2020, the South Korean Ministry of Defense expanded its deployment to the waters of the Arabian Gulf. To achieve balance in its relations with Iran, it announced that it would not be part of the US Naval Mission to counter Iranian escalations. Days after Iran's attacks on Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019, Riyadh requested help from Seoul to develop its air defense system.⁽¹⁵⁾

Seoul is directly involved in the conflict between the United States and Iran. By making a major change in its security-commercial diplomacy approach, Seoul tilted toward the Arab countries at the expense of Iran while it carefully attempted to avoid risking its trade relations with Iran. The potential commercial, strategic, and diplomatic outcomes because of its relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council changed South Korea's orientation toward Iran. The Gulf variable has had a profound impact on South Korea's policies toward Iran and the Gulf countries.

The US Factor

The US factor has a significant impact on South Korea's relations with Iran. This is not only because of the nature of economic and military relations between South Korea and the United States and the nature of the Korean political system that is based on Western capitalist thought, but also because of the fact that Seoul is part of the US-international axis. The South Korean economy rapidly flourished because of US aid and its military presence that protected the South Korean political system.⁽¹⁶⁾ Seoul played a pivotal role in implementing US encirclement policies against the communist camp in East Asia during the Cold War.⁽¹⁷⁾

As part of this US-South Korea partnership, Seoul is committed to embracing US approaches toward the latter's opponents around the world and against Iran.⁽¹⁸⁾ This partnership has significantly impacted Seoul's foreign policy toward Iran. For example, Seoul was forced to join the international economic sanctions against Iran before reaching the 2015 nuclear agreement, and committed to the US unilateral sanctions on Iran when the Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear agreement in 2018. At the beginning of 2022, the South Korean Foreign Ministry announced that the US administration allowed it to compensate \$61 million to the Iranian Diani group to settle a dispute dating back to 2010. This was a rare exemption from the strict US sanctions imposed on Iran. The South Korean Foreign Ministry added, "The license allows using the US financial system to pay compensation to the Iranian private investor."⁽¹⁹⁾ This indicates that Seoul could only provide this compensation with US consent.

As Israel is also a special and strong US ally in the Middle East, South Korea's relationship with Tel Aviv impacts its relationship with Iran, especially amid Seoul's recent bolstering of relations with Tel Aviv.⁽²⁰⁾ The Israeli and South Korean sides signed a free trade agreement in 2021 which reflected a clear shift in the direction of Seoul's diplomatic approach in the region.⁽²¹⁾ South Korea was hesitant to strengthen its relations with Israel, a powerful ally to the United States because Seoul enjoys good relations with the Arab states. However, after some Arab countries signed the Abraham Accords with Israel, and others established diplomatic relations, Seoul no longer feels the need to be careful about advancing its relations with Tel Aviv.

The Nature of Iran-South Korea Relations

Despite the geographical distance between the two countries, Iran and South Korea have regional and international clout. Their interactions in the mentioned arenas have a significant impact on determining the nature of their relations. Historically, Iran was one of the first countries in the Middle East to establish diplomatic relations with Seoul, particularly in 1962. Since then, bilateral relations developed based on trust and diplomatic and commercial cooperation against the backdrop of their affiliation with the United States in the context of the Cold War. Tehran at the time was one of Seoul's most important allies in the United Nations when it came to its key goals: the anti-communist approach and support against North Korea.⁽²²⁾

By 1979, relations between Tehran and Seoul witnessed fundamental transformations because the Iranian revolution impeded political convergence and left relations to be purely commercial in nature. As a result, the two countries struggled to establish an organic trade link, and both were isolated from the wider geopolitical developments in their respective regions.⁽²³⁾

Iran's foreign policy post-1979 created a new framework of relations with Seoul because of its ideological character and anti-US stance. Despite this, Iran sought to boost trade relations with Seoul on the basis of expediency and national interests.

However, trade cooperation between Tehran and Seoul did not develop into strategic economic relations but rather remained commercial in nature. This was due to many factors, mainly internal, regional, and international determinants. Therefore, pragmatism and maintaining national interests characterized Iran-South Korea relations. As for foreign policy, the two countries opted to separate politics from the economy and commerce and focus primarily on trade.

As the Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear agreement on May 8, 2018, the volume of trade between the two countries declined in light of the US sanctions on Iran. Before these sanctions, Iran was exporting oil to South Korea and importing industrial equipment, auto parts and household appliances. Tehran's relations with South Korea turned sour because of the dispute over Iranian frozen assets worth \$7 billion. Seoul refused to hand them over to Tehran because of US sanctions. Relations between Tehran and Seoul, which had been friendly throughout history, turned hostile after the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement given the strategic nature of US-South Korea relations.

Seoul acts in accordance with US policy toward Iran, thus impacting Iran-South Korea relations. However, Seoul-Washington relations vary between the Korean conservatives and the liberals. Under former South Korean President Moon Jae-in, Seoul tried to balance its relations and seek an independent path in foreign relations without shifting away from the United States. However, under the conservative current, which the current South Korean president adheres to, Seoul has tilted further toward Washington and aligned itself with US policy toward Iran. Hence, Iran-South Korea relations have come under strain and have not expanded into the strategic domains.

The Repercussions of Internal and External Factors on Iran-South Korea Relations

Given the factors impacting Iran-South Korea relations, interactions between Tehran and Seoul have mainly focused on economic and commercial aspects only, and have not taken on strategic dimensions. This lack of development in relations is because of the durability of US-South Korea relations and the US sanctions on Iran.

The Oil Factor in Iran-South Korea Relations

South Korea is the fifth largest oil importer in the world, and was one of the largest and most significant buyers of Iranian oil before the United States

withdrew from the nuclear agreement in 2018. Iran's oil exports constituted the most important source of revenues for the Iranian national budget. Seoul reduced its imports of Iranian oil after 2018 significantly in order to preserve its strategic relations with the United States. Seoul's imports of Iranian oil decreased from 10 percent in 2011 to 5 percent in 2013 after it ceased imports for two months in 2012 due to US sanctions. After receiving a temporary US waiver, Seoul resumed the import of Iranian oil, but at a lower rate than the pre-sanctions period.⁽²⁴⁾

Due to the US sanctions on Iran, Seoul's import of Iranian oil declined in July 2018 by over 40 percent, the lowest level since 2015. It went down further in 2019 because Seoul did not receive a new US waiver to buy Iranian oil, and it froze \$7 billion worth of Iranian assets. Tehran has repeatedly demanded the unfreezing of its assets.

Although US sanctions have contributed to lowering imports in recent years, South Korean refineries and petrochemical companies are seeking to supply markets with Iranian oil in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war and the rising price of oil because of the compatibility of Iran's oil with South Korean refineries, and South Korea's boycotting of Russian oil imports. The inclination to replace Russian oil in South Korea with Iran's has increased since the Russia-Ukraine war.⁽²⁵⁾

Trade Between Tehran and Seoul

Trade relations between Tehran and Seoul have witnessed growth as well as contraction because of the US factor over the past three decades. However, the total trade volume between the two countries indicates undoubtedly that Tehran was the largest and most important trading partner of Seoul in the Middle East. Seoul remained the third largest partner of Iran in terms of imports between 2015-2018. Their trade relations fluctuated depending on US sanctions on Tehran because of its nuclear ambitions. This poses a permanent challenge to the development of Iran-South Korea trade relations.

The trade volume between the two countries reached nearly \$17 million in 2011 and dropped to \$14 million in 2012 due to international sanctions on Iran. South Korea's imports from Iran of non-oil goods and products fell in 2012.⁽²⁶⁾ Bilateral trade increased, except in 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015, indicating the impact of the international sanctions on Iran. Bilateral trade went upwards when sanctions were lifted between 2015-2017. During 2017, Seoul ranked Iran as one of its most important and major trading partners. South Korea was Iran's third most important partner. Iran maintained a trade surplus with South Korea between 2008 and 2017.⁽²⁷⁾

During 2019, South Korea's export of orthopedic items, electrical control panels and medical items to Iran reached \$282 million. It imported from Iran crude oil, copper scrap and fruits amounting to \$1.89 billion during the

same year. Due to the conflict between Iran and the West and the sanctions on Tehran over its nuclear ambitions, bilateral trade drastically declined.

In 2019, South Korea exported \$282 million worth of goods to Iran, mainly orthopedic appliances, electrical control boards and medical instruments. In the same year, Iran exported \$1.89 billion worth of goods to South Korea, especially crude petroleum, copper scrap and fruit juice. Such figures indicate that bilateral trade declined due to the sanctions imposed on Tehran by the West to curb its nuclear program. South Korean exports to Iran have decreased at an annualized rate of 0.92 percent, from \$352 million in 1995 to \$282 million in 2019. By contrast, during the same period, Iranian exports to South Korea have increased at an annualized rate of 2.32 percent, from \$1.09 billion in 1995 to \$1.89 billion in 2019.⁽²⁸⁾

After the lifting of sanctions on Iran, Seoul mainly exported cars, spare parts, steel planks, digital/imaging equipment and household appliances such as televisions, refrigerators and freezers. On the other hand, the main component of South Korean imports from Iran was crude oil, 98.3 percent of total imports. Other imports include liquefied natural gas, zinc products, minerals, crustaceans, and jellyfish.⁽²⁹⁾

Level of Investment Between Tehran and Seoul

Iran is an important market for South Korean automobile parts, telecommunications and electronics in the Middle Eastern countries. South Korean companies have implemented several investment projects in Iran such as in the energy sector.⁽³⁰⁾ However, US-Iran tensions escalated under Trump as a result of which major South Korean companies such as Hyundai, Samsung and others sought alternative markets in the region.

As the South Korean conservative president took office, he used more radical language against Pyongyang, thus impacting Seoul's relations with Iran, the most important Middle Eastern ally of North Korea and he has worked to warm relations with the Gulf countries, some of which are in conflict with Iran because of its regional adventurism. The South Korean president will unlikely make significant efforts to encourage South Korean companies to reenter the Iranian market or to enhance bilateral relations.

Conclusion

If the new South Korean president adopted a policy similar to that of the former president, economic relations between Tehran and Seoul could have improved with the latter releasing Iran's frozen assets after it played a positive role in the recent nuclear talks in Vienna. However, Iran-South Korea relations have a new variable which will not help in boosting relations, even if Seoul unfreezes Iran's assets. The new South Korean president adopts a different policy which is more based on tilting toward the West, especially advancing

South Korea's relations with the United States at the expense of its traditional allies in the Middle East.

Seoul is explicitly committed to US policies and approaches, including its anti-Iranian policies. However, the study reveals that Seoul enjoys relative room for maneuver, i.e., to maintain relations with Iran while adhering to US policy. Seoul's relations with Tehran may vary according to the political background of the new leader; some leaders strictly adhere to US policies against its rivals while other leaders adopt a balanced policy toward US rivals without violating US principles.

The conservative trend in Seoul tends to take a more committed stance to US policies and a more hawkish posture toward Pyongyang. The new South Korean president, who is affiliated with the conservative current, takes a more committed stance to the United States, and is more hawkish toward Pyongyang than his predecessor.

Diplomatically, Iran may become an uncomfortable diplomatic partner for Seoul. This is due to fact that Seoul is an ally of the United States and has strategic interests in Central Asia. Iran has sought to exercise influence and strengthen its foreign policy in Central Asia, which may direct Seoul toward the Gulf countries and Israel. Currently, Seoul clearly gives priority to the Gulf countries.

Finally, relations between South Korea and Iran may return to normal, but they will not rise to a strategic level because of US-South Korea relations. In addition, South Korea's inclination toward the Arab Gulf countries and Israel will increase. Some Arab countries will also settle their problems with Israel through their partnership with the Gulf countries that ensure energy security and will enhance their technological cooperation with Israel. Consequently, South Korea's relations with Iran will regress further.

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