

## GEOPOLITICS OF RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER POLICY BRIEF #3

# IRAN'S SHIA DIPLOMACY: RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND FOREIGN POLICY IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

By Edward Wastnidge

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Organizations such as the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization and the religious outreach arms of the Iranian state play an important role in helping cement transnational religious links between Iran and the wider Muslim world. Such links not only take the shape of traditional religious activities affiliated with the seminaries but also involve educational and diplomatic missions undertaken abroad by the Iranian government. The outreach and development of such parastatal organizations operating across the world highlights a complex and multi-layered articulation of Iran's combined spiritual and political mission in global politics.**

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Iran's foreign policy draws on core Shia themes around fighting oppression and injustice to craft messages capable of transcending sectarian and regional boundaries.
- The utilization of such themes leverages Iran's position as a global religious hub, but its projection of religious soft power is just one aspect of a multidimensional foreign policy.
- Iran's cultural and religious diplomacy is agile and multifaceted and can shift gears depending on the target audience.
- Iran relies on various parastatal organizations to enact its cultural and religious diplomacy on the world stage.



This brief is a product of the Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project, a multi-year, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study state use of religion in foreign affairs.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the founding of the Islamic Republic, Iran's leaders have sought to harness both universalistic and particularistic Shia claims to legitimacy in the Muslim world. Beginning with attempts to actively export the Islamic Revolution in the 1980s, Iran has invested in building its diplomatic and religious infrastructure and expanding its religious outreach activities across the Shia world, drawing on its position as something of a Shia metropole in demonstration of its growing soft power. Iran also translates this into its wider international diplomacy, drawing on common themes of fighting oppression in its efforts to build links with the Global South and resist U.S. dominance in world affairs. The following overview of Iran's religious soft power explores the ways in which religious identity informs the diplomacy of the world's pre-eminent theocracy, highlighting how religiously grounded notions of justice and resistance to oppression have informed its foreign policy thinking and diplomatic reach.

The Islamic Republic contains a range of parastatal organizations which carry out religious outreach and soft power projection across the Shia world. These not only take the form of traditional religious activities affiliated with the *hawza* (seminaries) but also involve the educational and diplomatic missions undertaken abroad by the Iranian government. Thus, one can see how the transnational linkages associated with Iran's position as religious hub are used as a vector to enhance diplomatic relations and deepen ties with communities across the Shia world.<sup>1</sup>

This brief starts with an overview of religiously informed notions of justice that are foundational in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. It then goes on to examine how religious identity informs the foreign policy and diplomacy of Iran. The analysis of the role of Shia identity in Iranian foreign policy looks at two broad aspects. Firstly, it illustrates how elements of Iran's Shia identity are utilized to help provide a justification for its strategic

engagements in the region. Secondly, Iran's cultural diplomacy and soft power strategies are examined, as illustrated through the example of state-sponsored outreach and development initiatives in the work of the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), with a particular focus on Lebanon.

## THE RELIGIOUS ASPECT OF IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY: SEEKING JUSTICE, RESISTING OPPRESSION

Iran utilizes specific historical and cultural characteristics that allow religion to be part of its varied foreign policy repertoire. The foundation for much of this foreign policy thinking comes from a conception of justice that provides a contextual basis for understanding the role of religion in Iran's foreign policy. The Islamic Republic's views on justice are informed by a particular framing of injustice arising from two interrelated points: firstly, the historical framing of Iranian political Islam as an ideal that draws on the religio-philosophical heritage of Shiism, and with it the idea of rallying against injustice; and secondly, the subsequent position of the Islamic Republic as a historically counter-hegemonic power that has often chafed against Western-defined norms in the international system. Justice can therefore be seen as a continual thread that has been maintained in Iran's diplomacy since 1979, showing an ongoing desire to maintain the heritage of the revolution as well as the continued importance of the supreme leader as the embodiment of revolutionary ideals who has final say in all matters of state.

Islamic historical reference points have a long-standing tradition in the political Shiism of the Islamic Republic, and the clergy have an enduring role in the affairs of the Iranian state. Iranian politics has been made in coordination with the clergy since Shiism became the state religion under the Safavid Empire in 1501. However, though Iran's revolution in 1979 was not the beginning of the clergy's relationship with politics, a tradition of

quietism historically predominated until Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's rise to prominence, when he sought to bring the clergy into politics in a much more activist sense. As such, politicized articulations of religious events—such as the revolutionary interpretation of Hussein's death (the Prophet Muhammad's grandson and third imam)—are a relatively recent, twentieth-century phenomenon, which finds its roots in the writings of key Shia scholars such as Musa al-Sadr and Ali Shariati.<sup>2</sup> Thus, once the Islamic Republic was established, we see religiously defined notions of justice as constituting a key part of the Islamic Republic's worldview, which remain relevant today.

The formation of the Islamic Republic institutionalized clerical rule, and with it, Khomeini's ideas on justice—which also became manifest in its international outlook. As Iranian political scientist Homeira Moshirzadeh notes,<sup>3</sup> justice can be seen as providing a “meta-discourse” that gives meaning to Iranian foreign policy in general. The fight against oppression is therefore key in Khomeini's thinking on justice where he encourages an Islam that “repudiates oppression and an Islam in which the ruler and the people from the lowest walk of life are equal before law.”<sup>4</sup> Key to his political thought was emphasizing a type of Islam “whose standard-bearers are the bare-footed, oppressed and poor people of the world.”<sup>5</sup> This was a form of political Shiism that drew in part on the intellectual heritage of Shia modernizers such as Ali Shariati. This emphasis on populist egalitarianism saw him revive and invoke the Quranic concept of the *mostazafin* (the oppressed), a term which went on to play a key role in the Iranian Revolution.<sup>6</sup> The idea of supporting the *mostazafin* became key in Khomeini's worldview and was important in shaping Iran's subsequent foreign policy outlook. Thus, there was a strong Third Worldist hue that heavily influenced the ideological course of the revolution and the Islamic Republic's self-perception on the world stage, which has

important corollaries for the way in which the country enacts its cultural and religious diplomacy even today.

## RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND DIPLOMACY

The idea of supporting the oppressed and seeking justice is something that is foundational in Iranian foreign policy—regardless of the different political orientation of successive Iranian administrations—because it forms part of the Islamic Republic's constitutionally defined foreign policy objectives. Two articles of the constitution spell this out explicitly. Article 3.16, for example, describes the Islamic Republic as “...framing the foreign policy of the country on the basis of Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unsparing support to the *mostazafin* of the world.”<sup>7</sup>

H. E. Chehabi and Hassan Mneimneh schematize the ways in which the Islamic Republic reflects this thinking within its foreign policy by referring to three concentric circles.<sup>8</sup> Support for the oppressed starts with an outer circle of Third World countries and liberation movements, a middle circle comprising the Muslim world, with Shia Muslims forming the inner circle. The ways in which this support continues to be articulated to this inner circle can be seen in its well-documented, recent strategic engagements, and in its religious and cultural diplomacy in the region, both of which are discussed in the following section. The emphasis on fighting oppression manifests itself in a counter-hegemonic discourse that seeks to challenge perceived U.S. imperialism in the Middle East and beyond. Thus, we see Iran utilizing such a discourse in its cultivation of ties with other similarly minded states and causes in global politics, ranging from its support for Palestine to its close relations with Venezuela and in recent key figures' vocal support for the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

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## Iran's Religious Power and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Iran acting as the protector of the Shia is an important aspect of its foreign policy, although this factor is far from the only consideration in its regional outreach and tends to be multifaceted depending on the audience in question. For example, this outlook has shaped Iran's recent military engagements in Syria and Iraq alongside more conventionally understood national security concerns. Firstly, in terms of Iran's involvement in Iraq, while the primary concern was about keeping ISIS as far from its borders as possible, providing support to its co-religionists has also been an important consideration. With ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups in the region espousing a sectarian narrative that led to massacres against the Shia, Iran felt duty bound to act in its very own "War on Terror."<sup>10</sup> This sectarian targeting of the Shia taps into a wider Shia experience of being persecuted by Sunni Wahhabi extremist forces in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq. As Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's representative in Iran, Javad Sharestani, summed it up: "...we've been fighting Wahhabis in the region for more than 100 years."<sup>11</sup>

As a result of the perceived existential threat to Iran from Sunni extremist groups operating in Syria and Iraq, Iran committed its special forces and military advisors to both countries. In Syria, the Shia population (in terms of adherents to Twelver Shiism as practiced in Iran) is far smaller, and the emphasis has instead been on defending Shia religious sites, most notably the Sayidah Zaynab shrine in Damascus. This was emphasized by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Major General Rahim Nowi-Aghdam in encouraging members of Iran's Basij paramilitaries to volunteer, stating: "If you do not volunteer to fight in Iraq and Syria, I will go myself, and I will martyr myself in the defense of Sayyida Zeynab or the Shia shrines in Iraq."<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note that the sectarian narrative that is currently articulated in much media analysis is problematic in terms of its equating of geopolitical competition with centuries-old, immutable sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia. Despite the appeals to Shia identity by the Islamic Republic, their tactical deployment in the region is borne primarily of realpolitik considerations in countering Saudi hostility and the objectives of specific extremist groups opposed to Iran and/or Shiism. Iran's involvement in these two conflicts has a strong geopolitical, strategic rationale in terms of preserving its interests and maintaining its national security. However, religion does have a useful role to play in terms of attracting volunteer fighters to help in defending Shia shrines. This can be seen in the channeling of Shia volunteers from Iran's large Afghan diaspora and the alleged facilitation of Shia volunteers from further afield in Pakistan and Iraq. What can be observed in this military involvement, therefore, is Iran's use of religious "overlays"<sup>13</sup> to serve as a justification for its actions, drawing on its transnational linkages in an instrumental way.

## Cultural Diplomacy and Exchange: Religious Soft Power Channels

Iranian cultural diplomacy is particularly active in countries or among communities where it has shared strategic objectives in addition to common religious ties. As shown in the case study of the ICRO below, this draws upon long-standing ties with Lebanese Shia and is furthered through the shared aims of promoting resistance to combat Israeli and U.S. goals in the region. Other religious soft power channels—such as the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation,<sup>14</sup> the Ahl-ul Bayt World Assembly,<sup>15</sup> and the Assembly for the Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought<sup>16</sup>—are important parastatal organizations that the Islamic Republic utilizes in its global religious outreach, diplomacy, and development work.

Iran also supports religious education across the world in various colleges and centers such as the al-Mustafa International University,<sup>17</sup> and it distributes printed materials through its publishing houses such as Alhoda,<sup>18</sup> which operate in conjunction with its various religious and cultural outreach centers.

## THE ISLAMIC CULTURE AND RELATIONS ORGANIZATION

The Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO) is a noteworthy actor in terms of projecting Iranian soft power amongst Shia communities worldwide, as it is the main channel for extending Iran's diplomatic reach through cultural diplomacy initiatives.<sup>19</sup> It runs Iran's cultural bureaus abroad; though it has a particular focus on the Muslim world, it also operates in non-Muslim countries. In the host countries, the ICRO acts as the base from which Iranian cultural attachés (known as “cultural councilors”) carry out their work. It is important to note that the ICRO operates separately from the diplomats employed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran, who run the country's embassies abroad. Rather, the ICRO reports directly to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who directly appoints members of its ruling council. It operationalizes Iranian soft power through sponsoring cultural events and collaborations in the countries in which it operates.<sup>20</sup>

According to the Iranian cultural attaché's office in Lebanon, a country where the ICRO has an active presence on account of long-standing ties between Iran and Lebanon's Shia populations, the ICRO is responsible for “...managing cultural relations with countries and cultural propaganda activities of the Islamic Republic of Iran abroad.”<sup>21</sup> Activities the ICRO commonly undertakes in a host country include: Persian-language teaching; promotion of religious and cultural dialogue; supporting the cultural needs of Iranian expats and students living in the host country; implementing cultural agreements between

Iran and the host country; cooperation with cultural, educational, literary, and artistic institutions; holding cultural weeks, festivals, and exhibitions; communication with cultural and scientific elites; and attending various cultural events in the host country. It has a fairly flexible remit in terms of the outreach work and communities it targets, and it has “complete freedom” to cooperate with whomever it chooses,<sup>22</sup> so long as its work does not explicitly conflict with the Islamic Republic's declared foreign policy aims. The ICRO is most active in countries with large Shia communities such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Pakistan; fellow Persian-speaking nations such as Tajikistan; and close strategic allies such as Syria.

An example of the kind of work done by Iran's cultural diplomacy arm can be seen in the activities of the ICRO cultural center in Beirut, which sponsors numerous cultural and artistic events in Lebanon. Though much of their work is based on religious events, they are also highly active in cultural production that reinforces the idea of the Axis of Resistance – the alliance of Iran, Hezbollah, Syria, and also at times certain Palestinian factions against Israel, the United States, and their allies. These efforts highlight the continued significance of core revolutionary ideals around fighting injustice that are rooted in the modern political Shiism of the Islamic Republic. For the ICRO in Lebanon, “...the cultural dimension of the idea of resistance is part of Iran's foreign policy and relations between the two countries.”<sup>23</sup> This is a repurposing of the revolutionary vanguard role cultivated in the early years of the Islamic Republic, with Iran crafting a role that sees itself constituting the hub of resistance to Israeli and U.S. policies in the region.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, looking beyond Lebanon, one can see the ICRO's continuing role in helping to maintain the resistance axis with its 2020 “Conference of Resistance Scholars” in Baghdad, where both Sunni and Shia ulama from across the Middle East were present.<sup>25</sup>

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## CONCLUSIONS

Organizations such as the ICRO and the religious outreach arms of the Iranian state play an important role in helping cement transnational religious links between Iran and the wider Muslim world. Such links not only take the form traditional religious activities affiliated with the *hawza* but also involve educational and diplomatic missions undertaken abroad by the Iranian government. Thus, one can see how the transnational linkages Iran has developed as a result of its position as a religious hub are used as a vector to enhance diplomatic relations and deepen ties with communities across the Shia world. This aspect of Iran's foreign policy and diplomacy is multifaceted and complex, combining religious soft power projection and cooperation along with its own national security concerns. As the primary example discussed here demonstrates, the ICRO works very much in the cultural domain but helps amplify narratives that are sometimes based on religiously defined notions of fighting oppression. It also synthesizes these with wider geopolitical concerns, as seen in its contribution towards resistance-themed activities in Lebanon and the wider Middle East. The outreach and development of such parastatal organizations operating across the world, of which the ICRO is just one example, highlights a complex and multilayered articulation of Iran's combined spiritual and political mission in global politics.

## NOTES

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2. Laurence Louër, *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East* (London: Hurst & Co, 2012), 12.
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4. Ruhollah Khomeini, "Speech in Commemoration the 17th Shahrivar (Black Friday Massacre), Qom, 1979," in *Sabife-ye Imam: An Anthology of Imam Khomeini's Speeches, Messages, Interviews, Decrees, Religious Permissions, and Letters*, vol. 9 (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 2008), 425 [English translation].
5. Ruhollah Khomeini, "Letter to Mr. Mohammad Reza Kazemi, on Hussein and Sharia, October 25, 1968," in *Sabife-ye Imam*, vol. 2 (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 1990), 204 [in Persian].
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10. Edward Wastnidge, "Iran's Own 'War on Terror': Iranian Foreign Policy towards Syria and Iraq during the Rouhani Era," in *Foreign Policy of Iran under President Hassan Rouhani's First Term (2013–2017)*, ed. Luciano Zaccara (Singapore: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 107–129.
11. Private audience with Ayatollah Ali Sistani's representative in Iran, Javad Sharestani; Qom, Iran; 2017.
12. Andrea Spada, "Iran: General Nowi-Aghdam Urges Recruits to Fight in Syria as Assad stumbles," *Islam Media Analysis* (June 15, 2015): <http://www.islamedianalysis.info/iran-general-nowi-aghdam-urges-recruits-to-fight-in-syria-as-assad-stumbles>.
13. Wastnidge, "Iran's Own 'War on Terror.'" 14. The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation (also known in short form as "Emdad") is one of largest charitable foundations in Iran. It primarily focuses on domestic charitable work but has also historically had an active international arm carrying various development projects across the Muslim world. See website at <https://portal.emdad.ir/> [in Persian].
15. The Ahl-ul Bayt World Assembly brings scholars and religious leaders from the global Shia community together every four years for a conference in Tehran. It also has operations in other countries, often in conjunction with the ICRO. See website at <http://www.ahl-ul-bayt.org/en/>
16. The Assembly for the Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought is a yearly conference hosted in Tehran. The assembly aims to promote greater unity across the various sects that make up the Islamic ummah. See website at [www.taghrib.com](http://www.taghrib.com) [in Persian].
17. Based in Qom, the university provides religious training and education for non-Iranians from across the globe. It also operates a number of affiliate colleges and centers internationally. See website at <http://en.miu.ac.ir/>.
18. See <http://alhoda.ir/en>.
19. See for example, H. Harsij, M. Toyserkani, and L. Jafari, "The Geopolitics of Iran's Soft Power," *Political Science* 4, no. 2 (2012): 225–269 [in Persian]; Nadia von Maltzahn, "Iran's Cultural Diplomacy," in *Iran and the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honour of Mohammad-Reza Djalili*, ed. Clément Therme, H. E. Chehabi, and Farhad Khosrokhavar (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2013), 205–221; and Edward Wastnidge, "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power," *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (2015): 364–377.
20. Wastnidge, "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power."
21. Author interview with Iranian cultural attaché's office, Beirut, 2018.
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23. Author interview with Iranian cultural attaché's office, Beirut, 2018.
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### About the Author

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## ABOUT THE PROJECT

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The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project represents a multi-year, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study state use of religion in foreign affairs. Through a global comparison of varying motivations, strategies, and practices associated with the deployment of religious soft power, project research aims to reveal patterns, trends, and outcomes that will enhance our understanding of religion's role in contemporary geopolitics.

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