Realpolitik Disguised: 
Religion in Iran’s Foreign Policy

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Abstract

The proposed paper aims to examine the role of religion in Iran’s foreign policy. Being the world’s sole Islamic Republic, Iran’s domestic and foreign policy has often been considered to be completely driven by religious ideology. However, at a closer look, realpolitik appears to be the guiding principle of Iran’s foreign policy. While in the case of Lebanon Iran has nurtured a client relationship with the Shiite Hezbollah political movement, this was dictated by Iran’s strategic interests and not by its religious affiliation. When Iranian interests ordered otherwise, then religion would be sidelined. This was the case in the Nagorno Karabakh war of the early 1990s, when Iran indirectly supported Christian Armenia in its war against Shiite Muslim Azerbaijan. Similarly, Iran did not object the US invasion of Afghanistan, which aimed to topple another Islamist regime, the Taliban. Although Iranian foreign policy is based on realpolitik, the Iranian regime has increasingly employed religious rhetoric in its foreign policy. In this paper it is argued that religion per se does not play a key direct role in the formation of foreign policy preferences in Iran. Nonetheless, the use of religious rhetoric in foreign policy does play a major symbolic role in the domestic field as a tool for the legitimisation of the regime. This may be due to two main reasons. The rise of the regional and global role of religion and the recognition that religion as a key identity element in the Middle East cannot be dismissed.
Introduction - Religion and International Relations

While the role of religion in politics has been a field which has enjoyed considerable appeal in recent years, the influence of religion in foreign policy has remained a field relatively understudied. There are several reasons for this. Some dominant schools of international relations would not consider religion as a significant parameter in foreign policy.¹ Realist theorists of international relations in general dismiss the role of ideational factors in the definition of national interest and formation of foreign policy. In their view, religious or cultural differences would not be in a position to shake the anarchic nature of the international system, influence the ways states seek to address their security dilemma and thus shape state policies. Liberal theorists who consider the role of identities and ideas as important in the definition of national interest and formation of foreign policy also tend to dismiss the role of religion. The main reason for this is that their secularist bias, that is they view religion through the prism of modernisation theory.² Religion is understood as a parochial relic, bound to disappear with the successful completion of the modernisation process. Nonetheless, even constructivism, an approach which primarily focuses on the role and influence of ideas and norms in the formation of foreign policy, does not appear to develop a close interest in religion. In the seminal work of constructivism in

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international relations by Alexander Wendt, there is no explicit reference to the role of religion, and no major work has focused on it ever since.

In recent years, nonetheless, many have admitted that religion’s influence on foreign policy is a topic that merits bigger academic attention. The role of religion in foreign policy is not positively correlated with the level of economic development or modernisation. Even states-pinnacles of modernisation such as the United States belong to those where religion has become a major formative element in foreign policy-making. Religion can influence the definition of national interest and the views of key actors. In studying this field, this paper embarks upon the preliminary work of Warner and Walker who have developed an analysis framework regarding the role of religion in foreign policy. Their analysis focuses first on the “mechanisms of transmission and then on the content of the messages that link religion and foreign policy.” Religion influences the relationship between foreign policy and

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3 Alexander Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999)


5 Warner and Walker, "Thinking About the Role of Religion in Foreign Policy: A Framework for Analysis"

agents, institutions, interests, as well as on the crystallisation process of power, ideas and culture. In their view:

....what is transmitted about religion along these pathways is information about the appropriate actions to take, based on religious beliefs about human nature, society, and the world. In other words, information from the worldview contained in a particular religion identifies relevant aspects of the political universe and provides guidance for ethical action in that environment.

Depending on the receptivity of the agents and the energy in the transmission of this information, its message may be relevant and applicable to states as well as individuals. These possibilities raise two questions for investigation: what is the nature (content) of this information and how is it transmitted (with what force and via what channels)?

While the nature and the modalities of religious influence on foreign policy remain a topic open to discussion, it could safely be argued that religion can be considered a permissive condition for many foreign policy initiatives. A term which will help us better understand the way religion influences politics is “religious

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7 Warner and Walker, "Thinking About the Role of Religion in Foreign Policy: A Framework for Analysis", p. 118
entrepreneurship." As religious entrepreneurs, one defines those social actors employing religion-based rhetoric in the public sphere with the aim of winning the battle of ideas and to further their political agenda.

**Religion and Politics in the Middle East**

The role of religion in politics appears stronger in countries which have succeeded Middle Eastern empires. This has to do with the role religion played in the Middle Eastern socio-political context. Religion has been the key identity marker throughout the history of the pre-modern Middle East. What the *millet* system implied was a division of Ottoman subjects on the basis of their religious affiliation. Ethnic, linguistic or other affiliations mattered little. Therefore, removing religion from national identity-building proved to be a most daunting and complex task. With the exception of religion there was virtually no other binding element which could spur social mobilisation and rally public support. While secular political movements emerged as a repercussion of the Enlightenment in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century, they primarily referred to the non-Muslim minorities of the Empire and they failed to make considerable inroads into the majority of the population. Hence nationalist revolutions that broke out remained an elite affair that had to be translated into the language of religion that the masses would better understand. On the other hand, it soon became clear that religion remained the single most important popular mobilisation tool in large parts of the developing

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world. This was even more pronounced in the lands which enjoyed a clear Muslim majority.

In the eyes of secular nationalists, religion was considered to be one of the main reasons for the subjugation of the region to Western colonialism and imperialism as well for its economic underdevelopment. Hence secularisation was seen as *sine qua non* for the economic and political development. This position was adopted by modernist, nationalist movements which aimed at ridding their home countries of the deleterious influence of religion. Kemalist, Iranian or Nasserite modernisation often turned religion into a scapegoat and relegated it to medieval obscurantism. According to the tenets of modernisation theory, religion was bound to lose its clout in the process of Western-inspired social transformation. On the other hand, it was a daunting task to marginalise the role of religion in the post-medieval domain. Hence many regimes that aimed to modernise their newly established states had to walk a tightrope between modernisation and secularisation on the one hand, and instrumental use of religion, on the other. An interesting distinction had already been attempted in Turkey by Ziya Gökalp. By distinguishing between civilisation, religion and culture, Gökalp attempted to distinguish between the cultural content of religion which had to be preserved and actually used as nationalist, against the purely religious elements that had to be marginalised. This ideological construction was adopted by several postcolonial nationalist movements as it seemed to serve their nation-building goals very well.

Main Part

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9 Ziya Gökalp, *Türkçülüğün Esasları* (İstanbul: Kum Saati Yayınları, 2001)
This paper belongs to a greater project aiming to investigate the role of religion in the formation of foreign policy of three states Turkey, Syria and Iran. The selection of countries is linked with their different arrangements of state-religion relations. Turkey has been professing since the foundation of its republic a French-style laïcité, which entailed removal of religion from the public sphere and its subjugation to the state. In Syria, the rise of Baathism also meant the removal of Islam from the public sphere and the rise of a regime which professed secularism but had links with the country’s Alawite minority. Iran is the world’s sole self-declared Islamic Republic, a hybridic regime combining elements of theocracy, authoritarian and democratic regimes.

Since the foundation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iranian foreign policy has been officially shaped by the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). This body is staffed by both secular and religious figures. On the secular side, senior officials represent the ministries of foreign affairs, intelligence and the interior, as well as high-ranking military figures. The religious side is represented by the Revolutionary Guards, Iran’s main security body formed following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, are notable. Other bodies which have a bearing on Iran’s foreign policy include the national parliament, the Majles, the Guardian Council—an influential 12-member body of six clerics and six conservative jurists picked by the Supreme

\[10\] On this, see also Hugh Barnes and Alex Bigham, *Understanding Iran: People, Politics and Power* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2006).

Leader, the Expediency Council, which acts as interlocutor between the Majles and the Guardian Council. The main sources contributing to it are a volatile and turbulent regional environment and the “exigencies of a faction-ridden republican, theocratic polity with its own unique system of checks and balances and complex decision-making”.12

The main argument of this paper is that in the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, religion is playing less of the role many would expect in the formation of Iranian foreign policy.13 Religion is indeed utilised as a tool to rally public support or increase the legitimacy of a regime which claims to be a religious one. Religious rhetoric has increased in recent years especially under the administration of Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Harsh attacks against Israel or the United States may be often packaged in religious garment, yet they remain rational from a realpolitik perspective. This does not mean that religion cannot have a significant impact on the formation of foreign policy. The case of Iran does not imply that realpolitik always prevails and that religion serves only as window-dressing for other motives. Secularist or “non-religious” states may appear to be more susceptible to religious influence in their foreign policy formation. Indeed secularity may be considered to have certain commonalities with religious interpretations of domestic and foreign


13 For a recent overview of Iranian foreign policy, see Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri, Iran's Foreign Policy : From Khatami to Ahmadinejad, 1st ed (Reading, Berkshire, U.K.: Ithaca Press, 2008).
policy. Preliminary findings in the cases of Syria and Turkey support this position. The limited impact of religion on Iranian foreign policy allows for a wider discussion about the characteristics of the Islamic Republic of Iran. While this is a very interesting research project, it lies, however, beyond the ambitions of this paper.

Three cases will be studied to substantiate the thesis that the use of religion in Iranian foreign policy is in fact based on realpolitik considerations. First, Iran’s relations with Azerbaijan, with emphasis on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Relations between Iran and Azerbaijan are of particular interest, as Azerbaijan is a neighbouring state to Iran, shares cultural and religious feature with Iran and has maintained a long-standing religious conflict with a Christian state, Armenia, over the control of the Nagorno Karabakh province. Second, Iranian-Turkish relations with reference to the controversial Iranian nuclear programme will be investigated. Given the Islamist roots of the incumbent Turkish government, religion may have been one of the reasons for the improvement of Iranian-Turkish relations. Finally, the relations between Iran and Syria will be investigated under this viewpoint. Given that the Syrian regime professes secularism but largely represents the country’s Alawite minority, religion is often earmarked as the main reason for one of the most atypical and long-lasting alliances in the Middle East.

**Relations with Azerbaijan**

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The Nagorno Karabakh Conflict

The current Armenian-Azeri confrontation over Nagorno Karabakh is rooted in the early years of the Soviet Union. Both Azerbaijan and Armenia after a short period of independence that followed the demise of the Russian Empire in 1917 were forced to join the newly established Soviet Union in 1920. The demarcation of the boundaries of Transcaucasian Soviet Republic was an issue that would be resolved in Soviet level. In June 1921 the Caucasus Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Russia declared that Nagorno Karabakh would remain as a territory of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), enjoying autonomy. In 1923 part of the Nagorno Karabakh area was formed into the Autonomous Oblast (Region) of Nagorno Karabakh, which was later renamed into Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO).

The dispute remained latent during the following years, although both Armenians and Azeris were not content with the Nagorno Karabakh status. Armenians considered Nagorno Karabakh to be historic Armenian territory, which Armenia SSR was deprived of due to Soviet manipulations, while Azeris thought that Nagorno Karabakh was an inseparable part of Azerbaijan; therefore any form of


Nagorno Karabakh autonomy should be abolished. Nevertheless, perestroika and the first signs of the decline of the Soviet Union would revitalize pre-Soviet conflicts and competitions. The Nagorno Karabakh conflict could be no exception.

On 20 February 1988 a session of the 20th convocation of the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region adopted a resolution seeking transfer of the region from Azerbaijan to Armenia. On 13 June 1988 the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijan SSR denied the application; however on 15 June 1988 the Supreme Soviet of the Armenian SSR approved the resolution and appealed to the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union. The Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union rejected the application, abiding by the Article 78 of the Soviet Constitution, which set the consent of the Union’s Republics as precondition for any territorial changes; on the other hand, a Special Representative of the Soviet authorities was appointed, and Moscow undertook direct control of Nagorno Karabakh between 20 January and 28 November 28 1989. Relations between Azeris and Armenians in Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh and Armenia deteriorated constantly. The Armenian minority in Azerbaijan and the Azeri minority in Armenia became the target of riots and gradually were forced to move to the republic of their ethnic origin.

and 1994 the armed forces of Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh came into direct conflict. The Azeri army managed to invade and occupy substantial part of the region\(^{18}\); however, the Nagorno Karabakh army managed not only to reoccupy the most part of the region, but also to occupy large territories of Azerbaijan proper. On 12 May 1994 a tenuous cease-fire was put into effect and is still holding today.\(^{19}\)

One would expect that ethnic and religious affinities would position Iran firmly on the side of Azerbaijan in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno Karabakh. Azerbaijan is a Shiite-majority Muslim country, one of the very few Muslim countries in the world with such a strong Shiite presence. In addition, ethnic Azeris constitute a substantial part of Iran’s ethnic breakdown. As much as 20 percent of the Iranian population is estimated to have Azeri ethnic roots. Even figures as senior as the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, are of Azeri ethnic descent. Nevertheless, the Iranian stance in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict turned out to be very different. During the escalation of the conflict, which allowed the Armenian troops not only to control the territory of Nagorno Karabakh but also advance into the territory of proper Azerbaijan and occupy territory on the Iranian border, Iran remained silent. Contrary to Turkey which took a sharp vocal position in favour of

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\(^{19}\) International Crisis Group (ICG), *Armenia and Azerbaijan: Preventing War [Europe Briefing No 60]* (Brussels, 2011)
Azerbaijan remaining short of a military intervention, Iran did not take sides in the conflict. This was widely considered to be linked. The fear of the rise of separatist Azeri nationalism in Iran and the emergence of “Southern Azerbaijan” as well as the identification of Azerbaijan with Turkey’s strategic interests in the region brought Iran closer to the Armenian position. Shiite Islam and ethnic bonds proved insufficient bonds to change the Iranian position.

**Relations with Turkey**

The evolution of Iranian-Turkish relations in view of Iran’s nuclear programme is another key area where the role of religion in Iranian foreign policy may be manifested. Ushering in a new era in Turkish-Iranian relations has been a facet of an overall reorientation of Turkish foreign policy. Under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) the Middle East has gained more weight and become a key region for Turkish diplomacy. This was in line with the new strategic doctrine introduced by Ahmet Davutoğlu, the chief foreign policy advisor of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who in May 2009 rose to the post of Foreign Minister.

According to Davutoğlu’s vision, Turkey is a “central power” and possesses “strategic depth.” This means that Turkey should no more shape its regional strategies and policies in accordance with the strategic priorities of its Western allies,

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21 For more on this, see Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumu* (İstanbul: Küre, 2001).
most importantly the United States. On the contrary, it had to establish its own strategic agenda and priorities, which would not necessarily coincide with these of the United States or Europe. In Davutoğlu’s view, Turkey had to dissociate itself from its established militaristic and firmly pro-Western image and foster a new image in which Turkey’s soft power, translated into economic, cultural and political clout would prevail. According to that view, Turkey should claim a leading intermediary role in all regional conflicts in the Middle East, resolve all pending bilateral disputes and build strategic cooperation with its neighbours. This allowed for a reconfiguration of Turkey’s relations with Iran, which should not be a function –or even hostage– of US- or European-Iranian relations. In a recent article, Davutoğlu stated that

....our allies should take into consideration Turkey’s unique position. As a growing economy and surrounded by energy resources, Turkey needs Iranian energy as a natural extension of its national interests. Therefore, Turkey’s energy agreements with Iran cannot be dependent upon its relationships with other countries.22

Turkey’s new Iran policy has comprised a clear attempt to achieve its emancipation from US Middle Eastern policy.23 Ever since the rise of AKP into power in 2002,

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23 On Turkey-Iran relations, also see International Crisis Group (ICG), Turkey and the Middle East: Ambitions and Constraints [Europe Report No 203] (Brussels, 2010), pp. 16-18 and Heinz Kramer,
Turkey has increasingly taken distance from US strategies and policies in Iraq, Israel and other Middle Eastern states. It is also indicative that Davutoğlu in his writings includes Iran to his privileged group of states which due to their history and geography have a “central power” status and enjoy “strategic depth.” Hence he prioritizes the development of strong Turkish-Iranian strategic relations. Iran and its energy resources are more important for Turkey than its Western allies might consider.

Energy has been an area where Turkish-Iranian cooperation has flourished. The cooperation, which had begun in the mid 1990s through the construction of a pipeline for the export of Iranian natural gas to Turkey has been consolidated and included Turkish investment in the Iranian natural gas upstream sector. According to a 2008 Memorandum of Understanding Turkey’s TPAO would participate in the development of South Pars, Iran’s largest offshore natural gas field. Bilateral trade reached 10 billion dollars in 2008, with the aim to reach 20 billion by 2013. Yet there was much more than mutual economic gains in Turkish-Iranian relations. A series of official visits highlighted the level of mutual understanding at the top level, and public opinion of both countries seemed to agree. During his official visit to Turkey in August 2007, Iran’s President Mahmud Ahmadinejad was cheered by Turkish citizens when he went to pray in the historic Sultanahmet mosque in Istanbul. This was all the more important given Iran’s increasing alienation at the international level. The Iranian nuclear program has caused fear and concern about the true intentions of

the Iranian regime. Iran’s potential interest in developing nuclear weapons has worried not only the United States, Israel and Europe, but also Arab states, most notably Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

Religion and the Iranian Nuclear Programme

Many suspect religion to be one of the main reasons for the affinity between Ankara and Tehran. The AKP, Turkey’s government party since 2002 comes from the ranks of Turkish political Islam, and this was perceived to be sufficient reason for a close relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Religious affinity was indeed the reason why Turkey’s first Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan aimed to improve bilateral relations and signed the first natural gas deal with Iran in 1996. Nevertheless, it was rather pragmatism and not religion behind the determination of the AKP government to upgrade relations with Iran and claim a key role in its nuclear controversy. The Iranian nuclear crisis provided a golden opportunity –as well as a litmus test– for Foreign Minister Davutoğlu to implement his vision about Turkey’s proactive foreign policy and autonomous strategic role. Distancing itself from the United States and the European Union, Turkey claimed a leading mediating role in the Iranian nuclear dispute. It has refused to side with Western pressure aiming to stop Iran’s uranium enrichment program, objected to the imposition of any sanctions against Tehran and defended Iran’s right to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. In accordance to this vision, Turkey has aimed to spearhead international mediation for a compromise solution. In his visit to Tehran in February 2010, Davutoğlu attempted to broker a deal for the enrichment of uranium necessary for Iranian nuclear power plants under conditions which would preclude
the possibility of developing nuclear weapon capabilities. Turkey’s interventions aimed further than minimizing the risk of developing nuclear fuel for Iranian power plants. In a speech in Washington DC in December 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan defended a nuclear-free Middle East and accused the Western states of double standards when dealing with issues of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. This was a skilful implication of Israel, a country which is not a signatory of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty but is believed to possess nuclear weapons, in Iran’s nuclear controversy. Turkey attempted to reshape the agenda of nuclear non-proliferation in the Middle East in a way that did not only include Iran but also Israel.

While the Iranian nuclear crisis allows for the articulation of Turkey’s regional leadership and autonomous strategic planning ambitions, one begs the question whether it has had any real impact on the crisis itself. The jury is still out on this. Several experts point at the widening of diplomatic manoeuvring space which Turkey’s diplomatic activism has secured. It would be hard to deny the significance of building dialogue and communication channels between the Iranian regime and the West, especially as far as the prevention of sanctions and further escalation are concerned. On the other hand, the deal which Turkey and Brazil clinched with Iran on 17 May 2010 bore little fruit, as far as the crux of the crisis is concerned. Failing to win Iran’s abolition of its domestic uranium enrichment program meant that the international community would not consider the agreement satisfactory. The 10 June 2010 decision of the UN Security Council to impose additional sanctions on Iran due to its nuclear program was a consequence of this and was made despite the dissenting votes of Turkey and Brazil. This had two lessons for Turkish diplomacy.
First, to be an efficient mediator, Turkey needed to maintain close working relations with the West. Second, Iran did not perceive Turkey to be its sole intermediary with the West. Turkey’s role in the resolution of the Iranian nuclear question was not considered indispensable by Iran. In other words, Turkey’s attempt to claim a mediating role between Iran and the West on Iran’s nuclear program has so far produced few tangible results. The problem persists, and no final solution has been achieved on the question of safely enriching Iran’s uranium for peaceful purposes. It has, however, underlined the emancipation of Turkey’s strategic planning and foreign policy, as well as its ambition for a leading role in the Middle East. Turkey’s regional interests have become too important to be compromised by US, European or Israeli concerns regarding Iran and its nuclear ambitions. The endgame of the Iranian nuclear conundrum will provide evidence on whether this reconfiguration was rational or a case of strategic overstretch.

Did, however, religion play any role on the Iranian side? The Islamist roots of the AKP government and the strong popularity of Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan throughout the Middle East were definitely welcome features for the Iranian administration, they were, however, by no means the critical features. Iran’s nuclear ambitions were indexed to the volatile strategic environment in the Middle East, Central and South Asia. The inclusion of Iran to the President GW Bush-inspired “axis of evil”, the US invasion and occupation of two of Iran’s neighbours, Afghanistan and Iraq and the rise of a debate in the United States regarding a possible strike against Iran all contributed to increased Iranian interest in the development of nuclear weapons. Following the example of other “pariah” states
such as North Korea that viewed the development of nuclear weapons as an indispensable tool for regime survival, the Iranian state saw the development of nuclear weapons as critical in its attempts to avert its further encirclement by US forces in the Middle East, Central and South Asia and minimise the threat of subversion. The choice of Turkey as a mediator had less to do with the religious identity of its government and more with its position as a “new emerging power.”

Being a member of the G-20 and enjoying one of the highest economic growth rates in the world, Turkey belongs to the greater “BRIC” family. Hence it appears to hold the middle ground between the Western developed world and “underdog” Iran. It is no accident that Turkey was joined in this mediating effort by a “senior” BRIC member, Brazil. Brazil’s participation watered down the religious hue of the initiative and gave it a clearer realpolitik perspective.

**Relations with Syria**

The alliance between Iran and Syria has been one of the most paradoxical and yet enduring strategic partnerships in the Middle East. It has been considered a paradox due to the historic feud between Iran and the Arab world. Syria has been one of the pillars of pan-Arabism, and one would expect it to take an inimical position against Iran, given the disputes which Iran has had with Arab countries, such

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24 This consists of states like Mexico, South Africa, Indonesia and South Korea, which alongside Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC), make up for a constantly higher percentage of world economy and look forward to translate this economic dynamism into political and strategic clout.

as Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, the Syrian-Iranian alliance has proved to be one of the most resilient in one of the most volatile regions in the world. Many considered Shiism to be the key pillar of the Syrian-Iranian partnership. Despite the secularist claims of the Syrian regime, the vast majority of the ruling elite originates from its Alawite minority.\textsuperscript{26} The perceived religious affinity between Alawism and Shiite Islam was considered to be the key reason for the alliance. While the links between Alawism and Shiism are rather exaggerated, \textit{realpolitik} again was the key ground for the Iranian-Syrian partnership. The feud between Iraq and Syria over the leadership of the Arab world proved more resilient than pan-Arabist feelings. Hence Syria opted to support Iran in its long war against Iraq, alone in the whole Arab world. This relationship survived even the end of the Iran-Iraq war and became deeper through strategic cooperation in Lebanon and Palestine and other Middle Eastern disputes. The consequences of the September 11 attacks and the identification of Iran and Syria in the “Axis of Evil” also meant that their alliance would maintain its strength.\textsuperscript{27} Therefore, it was not religion but a rational and perfectly secular calculation of the national interests of both countries that led to the strategic convergence of the two countries.

\textsuperscript{26} Syria hosts some of the most important Shiite shrines and a significant Shiite minority. Yet the Alawite minority of the country is bigger and has risen to a key political role following the rise of the Hafiz al-Assad regime in 1970. While many identify Alawism with Shiism, this is an oversimplification. While Alawism and Shiism share several cultural features, Alawism combines several other influences and is not a version of Shiite Islam.

Conclusion

The position of Tehran in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno Karabakh, its relations with Turkey and Syria have manifested that converging strategic interests and not religion have been hiding behind foreign policy choices of the Islamic Republic. While it is not inconceivable that theocratic regimes may be indeed influenced by religious values and norms, it appears that Iran rather instrumentalises religion to pursue its national security interests in a purely secular fashion. *Realpolitik, religious nationalism or short-term domestic political interest* appears to be a stronger influence than religion. Hence religion ends up supporting policies and worldviews remarkably different from those initially identified at the official discourse of politicians. Iran constitutes an interesting case study, as it has been proclaimed to be the world’s sole Islamic Republic. Hence, it would be reasonable to expect a disproportionately high impact of religion on foreign policy-making, in particular given the strong presence of religion in official public discourse.

What appears as a conclusion from the study of religion as a determinant of foreign policy in Iran is the incidence of religious entrepreneurship and the largely pragmatic nature of foreign policy making, despite the frequent use of religious symbols and rhetoric. These refer to the need of governments to raise the legitimacy of their foreign policy overtures based on the religious nature of the regime. In effect, religion becomes instrumentalized with the aim to popularise and legitimise pragmatic foreign policy decisions and increase public support for the regime. In some cases though, nationalism may comprise a useful substitute for religion. *Realpolitik* decisions that cannot be justified on religious grounds can appear more
palpable on the basis of nationalistic considerations. Even in the Islamic Republic of Iran, realpolitik may prove stronger than religion.
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