

IDENTITIES AND FOREIGN POLICY IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC: THE DYNAMICS OF GEOPOLITICAL EXPEDIENCY

ARTICLE

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Iran's place in the international system is predicated on a particular worldview that has strong domestic roots. The existence of the Islamic Republic, its revolutionary experience, its ideas about how the world should look, and Iran's place within it, are conditioned by domestic factors that have influenced its foreign policy. This is particularly prescient in terms of the different identities that have gone on to influence its foreign policies over the last few decades. The 'international', in terms of the wider international system and Iran's geopolitical environment, also shapes the domestic in terms of exerting an influence on how the world is perceived by Iranian policy-makers. Hence, the international and domestic are arguably interwoven when it comes to Iranian foreign policy in the Islamic Republic era.

This paper offers a schema for understanding how different Iranian identity currents are intrinsic to the ideational bases that shape Iranian foreign policy. This is an explanatory framework based on four key Iranian identity markers that are prominent in its foreign policy priorities. It should be noted here that these are more about Iran's immediate geopolitical environment. Iran is considered to be a 'Middle Eastern' country, but it is an important neighbour, and in many ways a connector of wider regional systems, neighbouring Central and Southern Asia, as well as Europe and Russia. This shapes its engagement with such regions and has allowed Iran to draw on its historical and cultural ties with geocultural zones and regions beyond the Middle Eastern milieu. The four identity markers that will be explored here are as follows: the 'Persianate World'; the 'Shi'i World'; the 'ummah'; and the 'resistance'. These are initially presented individually, but a key point is that these are areas that intersect in many ways, and this will be evidenced as the paper progresses.

1. The Persianate World

Iran has a long history of attempting to reach out and reinvigorate a sense of a wider Persian cultural space, drawing on the common language bonds with parts of Central Asia and Afghanistan. This became especially prominent after the fall of the Soviet Union. Here, a wider systemic event provided an opportunity for Iran to try and craft a foreign policy based on certain commonalities. The policies that Iran pursued towards Central Asia are a good example of how Iran drew upon its soft power resources from the 1990s onwards, in particular with the fellow Persian-speaking nations of Tajikistan and Afghanistan, with relations often framed in terms of their shared culture and language. Iran has sought to make use of its cultural and historical links with Central Asia ever since the states of the region gained independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union

in 1991. Iran regularly draws on cultural commonalities such as the celebration of the Persian New Year Norouz across the region and invited regional heads to the first international celebration of Norouz in Iran in 2010. Under former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), Iran sought to establish a 'Union of Persian-Speaking Nations' between the three Persian-speaking states, which drew on cultural linkages as a means of furthering cooperation and making use of the common Persian bonds between them, though the initiative was never fully realised.

2. The 'Shi'i World'

Iran acting as the protector of the Shia is an important aspect of its foreign policy – something that dates back in practical terms to its patronage of Hezbollah and other Shi'i groups from the 1980s onwards. As a centre of religious learning, Qom has international seminaries which train Shi'i ulema from across the world, enabling Iran to exert considerable influence amongst its co-religionists. Although rooted in the 'spiritual realm', drawing on Iran's position as the Shi'i metropole on account its position as the world's pre-eminent theocracy, this has a very overt material/hard power manifestation too, helping justify more recent military engagements in Syria and Iraq.

However, it is important to note here that the sectarian narrative as articulated in much media and academic analyses is problematic in terms of its equating of geopolitical competition with centuries old, immutable sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia. Despite the appeals to at times overt Shi'i reference points by the Islamic Republic, their use in the region was born primarily of realpolitik considerations in countering then-Saudi hostility and the aims of extremist groups that it was combating, such as Daesh. Iran's involvement in both Syria and Iraq had a strong geopolitical, strategic rationale in terms of preserving its interests and maximising its influence in both states. What one can observe in such engagements is the use of religious 'overlays', which serve as a justification for its actions, thus drawing on transnational linkages in an instrumental way. In some ways this has parallels with the idea of 'spiritual security' – a concept utilised in Russian national security discourse, and which relates to the close ties between the Orthodox Church and the state in Putin's Russia.

3. The Ummah

Iran's desire to assume a leadership role for the world's Muslims is foundational to its revolutionary experience, and provides an important, continual thread from 1979 to the present day. Though rooted in the political Shi'ism of the Islamic Republic, there has always been a strong emphasis on Islamic unity in certain aspects of its foreign policy. This also has a constitutional basis – here one can point to article 3.16, which 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 (the oppressed) of the world."

At a rhetorical level, this has some parallels with the Islamic Republic's use of Shi'i identity narratives, most notably in terms of support for the oppressed. Notions of fighting injustice are vital, and so issues such as the struggle for Palestine are held up as one of the most

important ummah-wide concerns. Iran's position in global Shi'ism in many ways helps drive its emphasis on Islamic unity, seeking to ameliorate the impact of its minority status within the ummah. On a practical level, this is manifested in Iran's efforts at promoting very much top-down, de/anti/sectarian initiatives, most notably its annual Islamic unity weeks. These events are hosted in Tehran and run by the Assembly for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought, inviting Muslim scholars from around the world to work together on issues of Islamic unity.

4. The Resistance

The notion of resistance is partly predicated on an Islamic Republic worldview that incorporates elements of political Shi'ism, emphasising themes such as fighting injustice and supporting the oppressed. As with ummah-wide emphases, this is also set down in the Islamic Republic's constitution, with article 154 stating: "The Islamic Republic ... supports the just struggles of the mostazafin [oppressed] against the mostakbirun [tyrants] in every corner of the globe." This had its initial expression through Iran's founding of Hezbollah in its fight against Israel. The alliance with Syria is a key component too – here we have a very much secular state that has a key geopolitical role in countering Israel and providing support for Hezbollah. The resultant 'Axis of Resistance' is a multifaceted outcome of this combination of identity with geopolitical realities in the region. As such, it exists simultaneously as a form of alliance network, an ideological community, a security community, and an economic network.

In recent decades, the axis has been expanded to include Iran-aligned groups within Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces, the Houthis in Yemen, and key Palestinian factions including Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The idea of resistance, as a fundamental aspect of Iranian foreign policy and those of its immediate allies, also has a wider import beyond the region in terms of how such actors perceive the international system. This is a worldview that regularly chafes against predominant, US-led conceptions of world and regional order. It is also something that has helped shape a sense of solidarity with other counter-hegemonic forces in world politics. Hence one can observe relationships being developed by Iran and Axis members with states such as Russia, Venezuela and Cuba, as well as continued emphasis on the role of China in a changing world order.

How and Where Do Such Identities Intersect in Iranian Foreign Policy?

The identity markers discussed here should not be considered as discreet 'silos'. They intersect in many ways, and they are also co-constitutive, helping shape and reinforce one another in different geopolitical settings. As a means of providing a model for how and where these different identities intersect, the following explanatory diagram is drawn from the idea of 'Ikigai'. This is a Japanese concept, usually applied on the individual level as something that gives a person a sense of purpose, or a reason for living. Rather than taking the individual as the unit of analysis, it is used here instead to look at the different identities which give 'meaning' to Iranian foreign policy. In it, we can observe the areas in which the different identity currents intersect, shedding light on some important foreign policy concerns of the Islamic Republic.

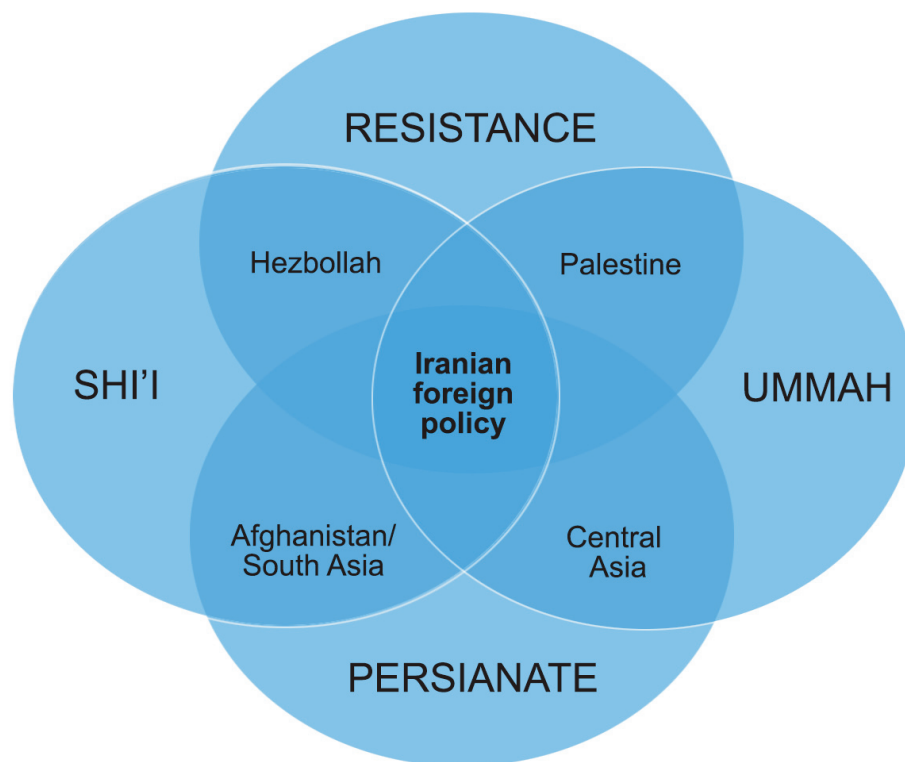


Fig 1. Iranian foreign policy 'ikigai'. Credit: Edward Wastnidge, 2023.

As can be seen in the above, there are some clear areas where identity markers intersect and at which one can observe important foreign policy concerns for Iran. Thus, we can see how ideas based on Shi'ism and the resistance intersect most obviously around Hezbollah, where the political Shi'ism of the Islamic Republic has been utilised in the fight against Israel and in other military engagements by Iran and its most important ally. The Palestinian cause sits at the juncture of the resistance and ummah identity streams, playing a key role in shaping Iran's discourse about both ummah-wide issues and regional politics. The intersection of the ummah with the Persianate world can be clearly seen in Iran's Central Asian outreach, with Iranian foreign policy towards this region often couched in terms of common Islamic heritage, culture, language and history. The meeting point of Iran's Persianate and Shi'i worlds can be seen in the long-standing links with the Hazara in Afghanistan, which Iran has supported since the revolution. Iran's cultural links with South Asian Shi'i communities in Pakistan and India are also important to note here, acting as a key focus of Iran's cultural outreach work historically.

Geopolitical Expediency

If one wishes to extrapolate further, then it is also possible to conceive of the wider international system as something around this collection of identities and interests. There are important external factors that play into all of this, and the intensity or level of their use and Iran's engagement with them often come down to matters of geopolitical expediency. Naturally, the role of the US is a big factor. The US' actions globally, and within the Middle East, are very important in the resistance worldview. The enmity suits much of Iran's foreign policy narratives because it derives much of its ontological security from its position vis-à-vis the US, so it is expedient to keep referring to the US' pernicious role in regional and international affairs.

The schema offered above does not of course explain every aspect of Iran's foreign policy, nor does it intend to. For example, if one looks at 'the ummah' there are numerous examples of Iran not fully following through on causes of concern to the wider Muslim world such as Kashmir, or the Uighurs, as it is not always geopolitically expedient for them to do so. Similarly, with the 'Shi'i world' – Iran has an increasingly delicate relationship with Azerbaijan, a fellow Shi'i majority though avowedly secular country, and some Iraqi Shia have also protested against Iranian influence in the country. One of the most interesting areas in which geopolitical expediency plays a role is with the Taliban. Iran nearly went to war with the group in the late 1990s and actively supported anti-Taliban forces, particularly among its Hazara and Tajik communities, prior to and during the US-led invasion. The Taliban 1.0 were virulently anti-Shia, and also largely Pashtun. Taliban 2.0, however, has sought to present itself in a more inclusive light, with Tajiks and even Hazara now forming part of its ranks. Iran is therefore having to co-exist and develop relations with the Taliban as it adapts to new geopolitical realities.

Conclusion

The identity markers outlined in this paper are rooted in key domestic concerns that are intrinsic to the Islamic Republic's worldview. They show how identities in their myriad forms are fundamental to understanding the roots of a foreign policy of a state such as Iran, and they imbibe that foreign policy with a depth of meaning that cannot be explained away by purely systemic determinants. Naturally, wider systemic issues remain an important feature. One can view Iran's relationship with the US on such terms but the core elements discussed here have a major role to play and help us to explain some of the directions Iranian foreign policy has taken over the years – especially in its immediate geopolitical environment. They are not perfect categories, and geopolitical expediency often wins out and refutes such neat categorisations, but the identities are tools that are both applied and ascribed regularly when we look to understand Iranian foreign policy in the Islamic Republic era.