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SECTARIAN DILEMMAS IN IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY: WHEN STRATEGY AND IDENTITY POLITICS COLLIDE

Afshon Ostovar

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About the Author

Afshon Ostovar is the author of *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Oxford University Press, 2016), and an assistant professor in the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School. He was previously a research scientist in the Center for Strategic Studies at CNA, a nonprofit research organization in the Washington, DC, area. He has also served as a fellow at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, and has taught at Johns Hopkins University.

Ostovar's research focuses on conflict, religion, and security in the Middle East, with a specialty on Iran and the Persian Gulf. His book, *Vanguard of the Imam*, examines the rise of Iran's most powerful military—the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps—and its role in power politics, regional conflicts, and political violence. The book is the first comprehensive history of the IRGC and a thematic history of the Islamic Republic, from its roots in the Islamic revivalism of the nineteenth century to the impact of sanctions and the Arab Spring on Iranian foreign involvement. Ostovar is a contributor to *War on the Rocks* and *Lawfare*, and his commentary regularly appears in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Politico*, *Vox*, the *Guardian*, and other popular media. He earned a bachelor's degree, summa cum laude, in Near Eastern Studies from the University of Arizona and a doctorate in history from the University of Michigan.

Summary

The Islamic Republic's foreign policy is a product of its self-interest. Striving to protect Iran's Islamic theocracy from external threats drives the country's approach to foreign affairs. That approach can, at times, look aggressive or pragmatic. A sectarian angle also exists. Given its relative alienation from its neighbors since the 1979 revolution, Iran has relied on a strategy of forming relationships with nonstate groups to help promote its strategic interests. Although it supports Sunni groups, such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas, Iran's backing of Shia organizations has most angered its neighbors. That practice, often fused with the unofficial policy of exporting the revolution, has paid dividends for Iran strategically but has also hardened perceptions of its confessional bias.

Religion and Iranian Behavior in the Middle East

- Religion has been an inseparable component of Iranian decisionmaking since the 1979 revolution.
- Since the revolution, Iran's leaders have stressed their commitment to Islamic unity. They downplay the Shia character of the Islamic Republic when speaking on foreign policy issues and continue to express the pan-Islamic, as opposed to Shia-centric, tenets of the revolution's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.
- Despite its pan-Islamic aspirations, since 2003, Iran's strategic approach in the Middle East has focused on supporting Shia armed groups. Working through those nonstate clients has helped Iran greatly expand its regional influence, particularly in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

Conclusions

- Religious identity and beliefs influence Iran's approach to foreign relationships, but they do not dictate them. Religion matters little in Iran's state-to-state relationships, but it figures more prominently in Iran's relations with nonstate groups.
- Essentializing Iran's foreign policy as sectarian obscures more than it reveals about its behavior. However, as the Middle East has grown more sectarian since the fall of Saddam Hussein and the Arab Spring, so too has Iran's regional behavior.

- Iran's operations in Syria provide the most overt examples of its sectarian behavior. Iran has facilitated the involvement of thousands of non-Syrian Shia militants to help defend the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Even though Iranian leaders stress the legitimacy of the intervention in Syria, and deny any sectarian agenda, Iran's military and its affiliates frame their role in that war in distinctly confessional terms.
- Iran's regional activities cannot be divorced from the explosion of Sunni sectarianism across the Middle East. Iran accuses its Sunni neighbors of supporting the rise of Sunni extremism and feels compelled to counter that behavior by doubling down on support to Shia allies of its own.

Introduction

With wars raging in the Middle East, more attention is being paid to Iran's regional role. The Islamic Republic is actively supporting its allies in the region's main conflicts—Iraq, Syria, and Yemen—which has put it on the opposite side of most of its neighbors. That divide is more than political or strategic: it is sectarian. Iran and its main allies are all Shia or considered as such. Together they are fighting against Sunni forces backed by Sunni-led states. This dynamic has deepened the region's descent into sectarianism and has exacerbated political disputes between Iran and many of its Sunni neighbors.

Iran's critics, especially Saudi Arabia, view its foreign policies as sectarian and expansionist. They argue that Iran has been exploiting political unrest across the region to champion its militant Shia clients and undermine the Sunni-dominated status quo. They see Iran's endgame as an expansive, transnational, pro-Iranian Shia polity stretching from Iran to Lebanon and encompassing Iraq and Syria—something akin to a resurrected Persian empire, but with the Shia faith and allegiance to Iran's supreme leader as the unifying characteristics. Such a scenario is worrisome to Iran's neighbors and something Saudi Arabia and others appear committed to preventing.¹

The Islamic Republic's foreign policies are aimed at advancing its strategic interests. Sectarianism plays a role in those policies, but not in the single-minded, all-encompassing way that Iran's critics suggest. Indeed, for most of its history, the Islamic Republic has followed a largely nonsectarian path. Iran's leaders have long emphasized pan-Islamic ideals and courted Sunni allies. The majority of scholars who have studied Iranian foreign policy since 1979 do not describe that record of behavior as sectarian, meaning primarily aimed at advancing a pro-Shia agenda. Rather, they see Iran's decisionmaking as closer to *realpolitik*.²

However, the sectarian element in Iranian foreign policy has increased over the last decade. The primary catalysts for the country's shift toward a more clear-cut favoring of Shia clients and allies in the Middle East were the toppling of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the Arab Spring beginning in late 2010. Those events and the conflicts they ignited—particularly in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen—have sharply divided the interests of Iran and its neighbors. Fearful of each other's intentions, the behavior of Iran and its Arab rivals has moved increasingly in a sectarian direction. Such sectarianism runs counter to Tehran's official positions, but close relationships with Shia allies have become

The Islamic Republic's foreign policies are aimed at advancing its strategic interests.

the basis of Iranian influence in the region. With its allies threatened in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, Iran has doubled down on its pro-Shia strategy as a way of protecting its regional interests and investments. This has been exemplified in the behavior and rhetoric of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)—Iran’s preeminent military organization and the leading agency in its strategic activities in the Middle East. In addition to being heavily involved in the region’s conflicts, the IRGC has begun to portray its allies and clients as a unified Shia front with regional ambitions.

Iran’s Reputation and Competing Visions of Sectarianism

In 2016, as part of their bitter feud, Iran and Saudi Arabia exchanged public accusations of sectarianism that reached as far as mainstream media outlets in the United States. In September, the *New York Times* published an op-ed by Iran’s foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, entitled “Let Us Rid the World of Wahhabism.”³ Zarif contends that Wahhabist Islam has become a plague, unleashing terrorism and murderous tumult across the Middle East and throughout the world. He calls Wahhabism a “theological perversion” that has “wrought havoc” and had a “devastating” impact in Islamic communities. The violence committed by jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda is a direct result of “Riyadh’s persistent sponsorship of extremism,” he argues, and this violence is at the root of the current conflicts in the Middle East. He accuses Saudi Arabia of “playing the ‘Iran card’” to induce its allies to take part in the Syrian and Yemeni wars, and he concludes that “concrete action against extremism is needed.” Even though Riyadh caused the mess, Zarif “invite[s]” Saudi Arabia to be part of the solution. That gesture rings hollow given the accusatory tone of the piece. It is clearly a polemic against Iran’s neighbor and archrival, another salvo in their ongoing cold war.

However, Zarif also speaks to Iran’s view of sectarianism and sectarian conflict in the Middle East. They are not organic, but rather the by-products of a misguided effort by Saudi Arabia and its Western allies to isolate Iran and curb its influence. Has Iran contributed, in any way, to the region’s current sectarian morass? Not according to Zarif. The blame is entirely one-sided.

The September 2016 op-ed followed another that the Iranian foreign minister wrote months earlier in January. In that piece, entitled “Saudi Arabia’s Reckless Extremism,” the veteran diplomat argues that while Iran’s president, Hassan Rouhani, has made “friendship with our neighbors, peace and stability in the region and global cooperation” priorities for Iran, as evinced by the July 2015 nuclear deal, “some countries,” particularly Saudi Arabia, have stood in the way of Iran’s efforts at “constructive engagement.”⁴

Zarif thus begins a similar broadside against the Saudi regime. He lists several reasons why Saudi Arabia is harming regional security. Riyadh is not only obstructing Iran's efforts at compromise and friendship but also is involved in the "active sponsorship of violent extremism." Zarif links Saudi Arabia to terrorist attacks in the West, al-Qaeda affiliates in the Middle East, and extremism around the globe. Zarif frames the Saudi war in Yemen, Saudi support for Syria's Islamist rebels, and other acts as ways to bait Iran and "derail the nuclear agreement" by exacerbating tensions in the region.⁵

The January op-ed appeared at a flashpoint in Iranian-Saudi relations. Eight days earlier, the Saudi government had executed Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a senior Saudi Shia cleric and political activist, along with forty-six other prisoners (mostly Sunni radicals). The incident caused ire in Iran and elsewhere, with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei warning that the Saudi monarchy would suffer "divine revenge."⁶ Iraqi Shia militias allied with Iran also promised vengeance.⁷ Fury over the execution of al-Nimr culminated in a large protest outside of the Saudi embassy in Tehran. During the demonstration, a group of hardliners stormed the embassy and set it on fire.

The fallout for Iran was quick. Saudi Arabia and all of its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies (except Oman), plus Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan severed or downgraded diplomatic ties with Iran. The incident was an embarrassment for Iran. The government scrambled to stem the blowback by claiming the attack had been the action of rogue elements and arresting some of the individuals involved. Zarif's open letter fell into that context, but instead of an apology, it was an attempt to defend Iran by casting Saudi Arabia as the real culprit of regional unrest.

Later that month, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, Zarif's counterpart, responded in kind through a *New York Times* op-ed of his own. The Saudi official responds to what he calls "outlandish" lies by reminding Zarif of Iran's reputation:

We [Saudi Arabia] are not the country designated a state sponsor of terrorism; Iran is. We are not the nation under international sanctions for supporting terrorism; Iran is. We are not the nation whose officials are on terrorism [watch] lists; Iran is.⁸

Foreign Minister al-Jubeir further charges that, in condemning Saudi Arabia, Iran "opts to obscure its dangerous sectarian and expansionist policies," rather than making the necessary effort to transform into a "respectable member of the international community." For the Saudi foreign minister, Iran's sectarian behavior has been "consistent since the 1979 revolution." He points to Iran's stated "objective of exporting the revolution" as the basis of its foreign policy ills, and he lists Iran's support for Shia groups, "Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and sectarian militias in Iraq" as proof of

Iran's continued sectarian agenda. This behavior runs counter to Iran's stated desire for cooperation, al-Jubeir argues:

While Iran claims its top foreign policy priority is friendship, its behavior shows the opposite is true. Iran is the single-most-belligerent-actor in the region, and its actions display both a commitment to regional hegemony and a deeply held view that conciliatory gestures signal weakness either on Iran's part or on the part of its adversaries.⁹

Those comments should not be seen simply through the lens of Saudi-Iranian tensions. Rather, Middle Eastern officials widely share this perspective of Iran as a sectarian and expansionist actor in the region. In March 2015, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan accused Iran of "trying to dominate the region" through supporting Shia groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.¹⁰ In Iraq, he

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highlighted the involvement of the Quds Force, a division of Iran's IRGC, as especially sectarian. Commenting on the Quds commander, Major General Qassem Suleimani, who oversees Iranian military operations abroad, Erdoğan claimed: "This is someone I know very well. . . . So, what is [Iran's] objective? To increase the power of Shi'ite[s] in Iraq. That's what they want." A number of Arab states have made similar indictments regarding Iran's activities outside its borders. Nearly the entire Arab League, which represents twenty-two states, formally condemned Iran's foreign "meddling" at its annual 2016 meeting.¹¹ Lebanon was the only league member not to sign the declaration.

The anxiety held by many Muslim states concerning Iran's perceived sectarian aspirations is mostly rooted in the rhetoric and behavior that Tehran's leaders adopted after the 1979 revolution—the ethno-nationalism of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and Iran's history as a Shia state since the early modern Safavid dynasty are deeper sources of tension, but they are not the focus here. The revolution introduced a radical form of Shia Islamism and anti-monarchical views to Iranian politics. That ideological turn terrified the Persian Gulf's Arab monarchies and neighboring Iraq.¹² With political activism rising in Iraq's politically disenfranchised Shia-majority community, Saddam Hussein felt his country was especially vulnerable to Iran's revolution. He claimed that Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980, which set off the nearly eight-year Iran-Iraq war, was necessary to shield Iraq and the Sunni Arab world from the spread of the radical Shiism of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—the father of the revolution and Iran's first supreme leader.¹³ The GCC, which was formed by the Arab sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf to create a unified front against Iran, backed Saddam Hussein in the war. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in particular bankrolled much of his war effort.¹⁴

As problematic as he was, the Iraqi leader was considered by some to be a vital bulwark against Iran's ambitions in the Middle East. He governed the

most populous Shia country in the Arab world, which houses the most important Shia centers of learning and pilgrimage. Through arrests, torture, and murder, Saddam Hussein ensured that Iran's Shia revolutionary fervor would not take root in his country, or be embraced by Iraq's prominent ayatollahs and potentially spread to Arab Shia communities elsewhere in the Persian Gulf. So when he was toppled in 2003, and Shia parties began to gain political power in Iraq, fears of expanding Iranian sectarian influence and regional ambitions skyrocketed in neighboring Gulf states.¹⁵

Sensing Iran's growing influence in the newly established Iraqi democracy, Jordan's King Abdullah II warned in 2004 that by building a support base in Iraq, Iran was actually seeking to establish a massive Shia "crescent" that would spread from Iran through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.¹⁶ This geographic bloc of like-minded polities would challenge the status quo of pro-Western Sunni dominance in the Middle East. Abdullah's caution was that if Iraq were to become dominated by pro-Iranian Shia parties, this could have a cascading effect in the region. Shia-Sunni tensions could reemerge, which could destabilize Persian Gulf states that have sizable Shia minority populations, such as Saudi Arabia. This would "propel the possibility of a Shiite-Sunni conflict even more" outside of Iraq, Abdullah argued.

From the perspectives of many Arab states and Turkey, if not that of the general observer, recent history has borne out the sectarian conflict that Abdullah warned would occur. They see Shia-dominated, post-Baathist Iraq as the genesis of what has become a series of sectarian-driven conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, as well as in the Arab Spring protests in Bahrain and the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. Iran is blamed for all of the turmoil. To its critics, these crises are a direct product of Iran's unchecked ambitions to control the region through the sowing of sectarian discord and the establishment of powerful Shia armed groups across the region.¹⁷

Is Iran a Sectarian Actor?

Iran's activities in the Middle East are well-documented and can appear sectarian in nature. There is no question that Iran is heavily involved in today's conflicts in Iraq and Syria. The scope of Iranian activity in Yemen is murkier and more disputed,¹⁸ but Iran does little to hide its support to the Zaidi Shia Houthis and their Ansar Allah movement.¹⁹ The fact that Iran's allies in these conflicts are non-Sunnis who either share the same brand of Shiism as Iran's leaders (Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi militias) or identify with other forms of Shia Islam (Alawism in Syria and Zaidism in Yemen) is also not in question. Such connections give Iran's foreign policy a clear sectarian angle. But is Iran's foreign policy driven by sectarian interests, or is it more complicated than that?

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When one analyzes Iran's strategic behavior and decisionmaking, it is important to note that the country has two main levels of foreign policy, both of which are overseen by the supreme leader and subject to his authority, but which differ in content and form. The first level is state-to-state policy, which in most cases is managed by the elected government in Tehran. The second level is Iran's relations with nonstate clients, which are overseen by the IRGC and mostly managed outside of the government's purview.

Iran's foreign policy can seem contradictory. As the country touts the supremacy of its Islamic system of government, and remains the world's most vocal proponent of anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism, its relationships show a more diverse picture. Although Iran's most ardent allies are nonstate actors, mostly Shia Islamist groups, Tehran maintains productive state-to-state ties with a host of countries that espouse a number of non-Islamic systems. Iran is famously closer to India than its Muslim neighbor Pakistan, and Tehran has long favored largely Christian Armenia in its ongoing disputes with largely Shia Azerbaijan.²⁰ Iran's most ideologically committed civilian and military leaders have also had no difficulty developing important links with atheistic regimes, including those of China, North Korea, and Venezuela.

Most of Iran's relationships are not driven by ideological or religious considerations.

Iran's troubling and awkward relationship with al-Qaeda also indicates that there is more to Iranian foreign policy than sectarian goals. A smattering of al-Qaeda operatives and their families have lived in Iran on and off since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The first wave, including family members of Osama bin Laden, arrived in Iran having fled U.S. forces in Afghanistan. They were put in detention by Iranian authorities and held on ambiguous legal grounds. Internal al-Qaeda documents seized in the May 2011 Abbottabad raid that killed bin Laden speak of Iran as an enemy, not an ally, and of the group's members in Iran as prisoners. Iran is also referred to with racial and anti-Shia sectarian epithets.²¹ After Iran's release of some al-Qaeda members in 2009, an internal memo written to bin Laden or his lieutenants suggests that the release might have been triggered by the organization's operations against Iran, including the kidnapping of an Iranian "trade deputy in the consulate in Peshawar [a city in Pakistan]." The author of the letter further indicates that al-Qaeda communications with Iran were virtually nil: "They [Iran] did not send any messages to us . . . this is their mentality and method. They don't want to show that they are negotiating with us or reacting to our pressure. . . ."²²

There appears to be some form of ongoing interaction between Iran and al-Qaeda. Aside from those captives, other al-Qaeda operatives appear to have been allowed to come to Iran and live relatively freely. As recently as July 2016, the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned several operatives believed to be living in Iran for actively supporting terrorist operations across the region, including in Syria.²³ What purpose al-Qaeda members living in Iran serve,

what status they have, and how openly they are able to conduct business is unclear. Although Iran and al-Qaeda are at war in Syria and in Yemen, the two seem to have developed a mutually beneficial relationship, at least concerning the activities and presence of al-Qaeda members operating from Iran. As a 2012 West Point report on the Abbottabad documents concludes, the Iranian–al-Qaeda relationship is “fraught with difficulties.”²⁴ Iran probably values its limited al-Qaeda presence as a form of leverage that could be used, at various times, against the United States, neighbors such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, or the states that the al-Qaeda suspects hail from.²⁵ The U.S. Department of the Treasury believes that Iran has struck a bargain with the jihadist organization, allowing it a small presence in return for no al-Qaeda–sponsored terrorism or recruitment within its borders.²⁶ Iran might also see al-Qaeda members as potential hostages of its own should it need them. Whatever the case may be, it speaks to an uncomfortable political arrangement.

Why does the Islamic Republic pursue relationships that are hard to square with its religious beliefs? Generally, it is because they correspond with the regime’s politics and antagonism toward the United States, or because they serve some other economic or strategic purpose. Most of Iran’s relationships are not driven by ideological or religious considerations. Rather, Iranian foreign policy, like that of most states, is based on a number of factors. When religion does come into play, it usually intersects with more paramount national security and strategic interests. In many ways, the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy has been fueled by its own realpolitik inclinations—inclinations that have enabled it to engage in arms deals with the United States and Israel during the Iran-Iraq war, maintain a limited relationship with al-Qaeda, and strike a strategic partnership with Russia.²⁷

The Problem With Exporting the Revolution

To understand the rationale behind Iran’s foreign policy, one should note that the 1979 revolution was above all a rejection of foreign dominion over Iran, especially the influence of the United States. Anti-Americanism and anti-imperialism were themes that unified Iran’s diverse revolutionary movement. Revolutionaries used a popular slogan—neither East nor West—to assert their desire for Iran to strike a politically and ideologically independent path. The revolution included strands of Iranian nationalism and Islamism, which, echoing philosopher Frantz Fanon, framed Shia Islam as Iran’s true native political system. Khomeinists also had a strong pan-Islamic agenda.

After the revolution, Khomeinists emerged as the dominant faction. Their commitment to anti-Americanism was as firm as their desire to establish an Islamic form of government following Khomeini’s thesis of clerical rule

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Iran's leaders embraced a radical form of internationalism, viewing foreign policy as the management of antagonisms.

(*velayat-e faqih*). This system of theocratic government, which was adopted in the Islamic Republic's 1979 constitution, placed near-total control in the hands of a single senior Shia cleric, the supreme leader (*rahbar*), who would oversee all branches of the state and have veto power over decision-making. Iran's two supreme leaders to date—Khomeini, who held the post from 1979 until his death in 1989, and Ali Khamenei, who succeeded Khomeini that year and has been in power ever since—have acted more as stewards of the decisionmaking process than as micromanagers. Under Khamenei, the supreme leader's office has become more involved in the policy process than it had been under his predecessor, but even so, as long as official bodies remain within the parameters that the supreme leader sets, they are generally afforded space to pursue their agendas.

Aside from the supreme leader, other governmental institutions were created after the revolution to take on the everyday tasks of building and enforcing policy. The democratically elected executive branch is formally responsible for Iran's foreign policy, while the appointed Guardian Council—a board of Shia clerical and civilian jurists—vets candidates for office and ensures government policies comport with Shia law. Today, the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) is Iran's most important body for strategic decisionmaking and is composed of top government officials, military chiefs, and representatives of the supreme leader. The SNSC is said to officially sign off on major foreign policy and strategic decisions—whether they are initially generated by the government or the IRGC—before they are put into action.

What animated Iran's decisionmaking calculus after the revolution was an all-encompassing trepidation that the United States or its allies would attempt to overthrow the fledgling revolutionary regime. Iraq's invasion of Iran in September 1980, and the war that followed, was a manifestation of that fear. The support that Western states and Iran's Arab neighbors provided Saddam Hussein during the war was proof to Iran that Washington and its allies would go to great lengths to defeat the revolution.²⁸ Iran was surrounded by hostile states and alienated from much of the international community. Iran's only friend in the region was Syria under Hafez al-Assad, who shared a mutual antagonism for Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Tehran's leadership did not see their alienation as an outcome of their own hostile behavior and rhetoric; rather, it was part of an imperialistic conspiracy aimed at rooting out the nascent Islamic Republic and destroying its theocratic system. As Khomeini asserted in 1984, the war was not against Iran, but against the Islam that Iran promoted:

The superpowers are intent on opposing Islam at present. The other puppet regimes would do likewise. . . . Is it Iran that threatens them or is it Islam? If they call on the Arabs to unite, it is a call to unity against Islam. They consider Islam to be against their interests. You . . . should note that all the powers have risen against Islam and not against Iran. . . . If they find the opportunity and if you do not pay attention Islam will be uprooted.²⁹

The war confirmed for Iran's leaders that in order to truly safeguard their revolution, its ideology and politics must be spread outside Iran's borders. The best defense, in their estimation, was a good offense. Iran's leaders embraced a radical form of internationalism, [that rejected] the norms of liberal internationalism.³⁰ Their approach included a policy of exporting the revolution, which meant taking the revolution's politics and ideological values to other oppressed polities—especially in the developing world—and helping like-minded liberation and Islamic movements achieve self-determination.³¹

The IRGC was the prime mechanism for this policy. As the organization stated in 1980:

We have no recourse but to mobilize all of the faithful forces of the Islamic Revolution, and with the mobilization of forces in every region, we must strike fear into the hearts of our enemies so that the idea of invasion and the destruction of our Islamic Revolution will exit from their minds. If our revolution does not have an internationalistic and aggressive worldview the enemies of Islam will once again enslave us culturally and politically.³²

It was under the rubric of exporting the revolution that Iran pursued partnerships with a range of nonstate actors. Through the IRGC, Tehran funneled support to the mostly Sunni Palestinian movement—it also backed Christian Palestinian militants, such as George Habash and his secular Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. A similar effort led to the organization of non-Iranian Shia groups that, unlike the Palestinians, not only accepted Iranian support but also adopted Khomeinist ideology as their own. Hezbollah in Lebanon is the foremost example of the IRGC's success in cultivating a closely knit allegiance with a foreign entity along shared political and religious lines. The other lasting successes are the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its Badr military wing, which were established by Iraqi Shia expatriates in Iran and trained by the IRGC during the Iran-Iraq war.³³

The assertive behavior of supporting nonstate groups in the Middle East thus became a foundational element of Iran's post-1979 foreign policy. Iran's leaders considered this approach to be essential to the long-term success and security of the Islamic revolution. Although the scope of Iran's foreign activities waned

Supporting nonstate groups in the Middle East became a foundational element of Iran's post-1979 foreign policy.

throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s as the country focused on healing its war-torn economy, it continued to support allied groups outside its borders and looked for opportunities to expand its client base, as it did in Bosnia during the Balkan war of the 1990s.³⁴

Over time, these relationships became vital strategic investments that paid dividends for Iran. With them, Iran was able to develop an outsized role for itself and its clients in the Middle East's most important conflicts and political issues, including the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the U.S. occupation of Iraq, and the ongoing war in Syria. Alienated by its neighbors, Iran found value in making friends with nonstate groups.

The Limits of Pan-Islamism and Emergence of Nonstate Clients

Although the Islamic Republic is a distinctly Shia enterprise, Khomeini discouraged overt Shia sectarianism. Instead, he emphasized pan-Islamism and regularly made appeals to Sunnis on the basis of Islamic unity. Khomeini would charge that the enemies of Iran's revolution—the United States, Israel, and imperialism—were the enemies of Islam writ large, and that they sought to weaken the global Muslim community by exacerbating interconfessional disputes. In a 1980 declaration, Khomeini asserted:

More saddening and dangerous than nationalism is the creation of dissension between Sunnis and Shi'is and diffusion of mischievous propaganda among brother Muslims. . . . I extend the hand of brotherhood to all committed Muslims in the world and ask them to regard Shi'is as cherished brothers and thereby frustrate the sinister plans of foreigners.³⁵

Beyond such calls for unity, Khomeini also wanted Iran's version of Islamic government, which thrust clergy into positions of political authority and policymaking, to inspire other Islamic societies to adopt similar theocratic systems. He adopted pan-Islamic causes, and made the Palestinian issue paramount, to show that his movement and the interests of the Islamic Republic had common cause with the wider Muslim world. Khomeini and many of the most ardent proponents of exporting the revolution—such as Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri (the once-assumed successor to Khomeini), his son Mohammad Montazeri, and Ali Akbar Mohtashami—considered support to the Palestinian movement to be Iran's foremost foreign policy concern.³⁶ Ayatollah Montazeri even charged the IRGC with leading support to the Palestinians, stating:

Liberation of beloved Jerusalem is an important issue to us. Consequently, in order to realise the slogan "Today Iran; tomorrow Palestine" and to strengthen the profound bond between the Islamic revolution of Iran and the Palestine

revolution, it would be appropriate for the [IRGC] to implement certain programmes both inside and outside the country in order to strengthen ideological foundations as well as to promote and expand their religious knowledge of Palestinian Muslims.³⁷

Support to the Palestinians trumped any latent pro-Shia, sectarian inclinations. A prime example early after the revolution was Iran's staunch backing of former Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah organization in its conflict with the Shia Amal Movement in southern Lebanon—an organization established by the Iranian cleric Musa al-Sadr and his lieutenant, Mustafa Chamran, himself a prominent personality in Iran's revolution.³⁸ The Amal Movement was a communalist enterprise focused on the social and political uplifting of Lebanon's long-marginalized Shia community. However, Amal quickly fell out of Khomeini's favor because it was seen as asserting the interests of the southern Lebanese Shia over those of exiled Palestinian militants in Lebanon—the latter had established bases in Shia areas through confiscation and coercion, thus provoking tension and conflict with Amal.³⁹ Iran eventually broke ties with Arafat after the Palestinian leader supported Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war, but support for the broader Palestinian movement and for Palestinian militant groups remained a priority for Tehran.

Ardent support for the Palestinians, however, did not translate into much support from Sunnis for Khomeini or his cause. Rather, the particular Shia flavor of Iran's Islamic revolution and theocratic system, which was firmly rooted in the Shia clerical tradition, severely mitigated the attraction of the Khomeinist model for Sunni Islamist constituencies.⁴⁰ Iran's activists tried to make inroads with Sunni Muslim movements from Eritrea to the Philippines, but the Khomeinist message remained a tough sell.⁴¹

Sunnis were not alone in their lack of receptivity. Senior Shia clergy outside of Iran widely criticized the cornerstone of Khomeini's ideology—Islamic government ruled by the clergy—for being an errant departure from the traditional apolitical role of clergy in Shia societies.⁴² Khomeini's ideas did not gain much purchase in clerical circles and were largely unattractive to lay Shia communities in South Asia and the Arab world.⁴³

However, Khomeini's message did somewhat resonate with already-politicized Shia activists in Iraq and Lebanon. Iranian revolutionaries (including both clerical leaders and early members of the IRGC) had established informal networks in Lebanon and among the Iraqi Shia before the revolution. They were able to utilize their preexisting connections with Arab Shia activists and, with state backing, transform those relationships into the formation of pro-Iranian client organizations.⁴⁴

These efforts benefited from the social and political dislocation caused by regional conflicts. In the case of Hezbollah, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon provided a turning point for Shia domestic politics. Israel's occupation

of southern Lebanon accelerated a split within Amal, the more militant activists of which moved firmly into the pro-Palestinian camp and became more receptive to the ideology and politics of Khomeini.⁴⁵ In Iraq, Saddam Hussein's suppression of Shia political groups, which escalated violently after the Iranian revolution, further radicalized Iraqi Shia activists and led to a surge of Iraqi Shia exiles settling in Iran. Iran's support to these constituencies produced Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Iraqi expatriate organizations of the SCIRI and Badr in Iran. All of these groups embraced the broad framework of Khomeinist ideology.

Iran had less success elsewhere. In the 1980s, Iran tried to develop like-minded clients among Afghanistan's Shia and Sunni Tajik Islamists. The Soviet war in Afghanistan provided an opening for Iran's support, and though that support helped develop some nominally pro-Tehran clients within the country, those groups never coalesced into a sustainable movement.⁴⁶ Iran retained contacts with Hazara and Tajik militias and continued to provide them support during the 1990s and early 2000s, but that support did not translate into special affinity for Khomeinism or Iran's political objectives more broadly.⁴⁷ Similarly, the IRGC's intervention in the Balkan conflict of the early 1990s, where it funneled arms and support to Bosnian Muslim militias, was relatively short lived and unsuccessful at establishing a lasting pro-Iranian movement.⁴⁸

Ties to Hezbollah and Palestinian groups became a strategic asset for Iran after the war with Iraq. Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, these relationships afforded Iran a credible deterrent against outward Israeli and U.S. aggression. By being able to threaten escalation by proxy, Iran could leverage its clients as tools in dealing with its two primary enemies. It is likely that this dynamic crystallized for Iran the value of developing and maintaining such client networks in strategically important locations.

More broadly, the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 was a turning point in the Middle East. It provided an opportunity for Iraq's long-oppressed Shia to return to politics, and it opened the doors to Iranian influence. Iran's allies in the SCIRI, and the organization's IRGC-trained and IRGC-aligned Badr military wing, soon returned home from exile and became part of Iraq's new political reality. Internal Iraqi politics proved a complicating factor for Iran's relationships. Seeking to distance itself from the perception of being an Iranian proxy, the SCIRI changed its name to the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq (SICI), and its clerical leaders downplayed their previous commitment to Khomeinism.⁴⁹ This encouraged a split with Badr, which, under the leadership of Hadi al-Amiri, formed a new political entity dubbed the Badr Organization, which remained close to the IRGC and Tehran.⁵⁰

The U.S. occupation of Iraq coincided with the administration of then U.S. president George W. Bush and its escalating rhetoric toward Iran. After

being dubbed part of an “axis of evil” in Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address, Iran’s leaders began to worry about a growing military threat from the United States.⁵¹ Iran’s secret nuclear program, revealed to the public in the fall of 2002, gave the Bush administration a *casus belli* for ratcheting up the pressure. The presence of hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops right across the border in Iraq, not to mention also in nearby Afghanistan, was threatening to Iran. In response, the IRGC began a covert effort to organize and train small Iraqi Shia militias and use them to target U.S. forces.⁵² Through its Shia clients, Iran possessed the ability to harass and target U.S. forces by proxy, and it could threaten to escalate that violence should the United States ever strike Iran. Unlike Iran’s more above-board allies in Iraq, the militias were much more extreme in their politics, more in line with Iranian ideology, and more involved in sectarian violence, particularly during the 2006–2007 civil war.⁵³ Iran pursued a similar strategy in Afghanistan, where it provided weapons to segments of the anti-U.S. insurgency. However, those links have not led to the creation of a client base as strong and committed to Iran’s agenda as that found in Iraq.⁵⁴

As the Iraqi militias grew in size and influence, they became a way for Iran to influence Iraqi politics from below. Combined with Iran’s long-lasting contacts with Badr and the SICI, as well with more recently groomed ties to other prominent Shia politicians, Iranian influence was able to permeate Iraqi political dynamics. Beyond giving Iran tremendous influence there, those relationships, particularly the IRGC’s close proximity to extremist Shia militias, also presented Iran as a decidedly sectarian actor in Iraq.

Claims [of pan-Islamic unity] are undermined by Iran’s actual behavior in the Middle East.

Sectarianism and the Arab Spring

Like his predecessor, Ali Khamenei has been an advocate of Muslim unity. To Khamenei, divisions in the Muslim world are not natural, but rather the product of U.S. propaganda and the policies of U.S. allies. He even disputes the Shia character of the Islamic Republic, asserting, for example:

Ever since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the arrogant powers have been trying to portray our revolution as a Shi‘i revolution . . . [but] if our revolution had been a Shi‘i revolution, we would have become separated from the Islamic world and had nothing to do with it. They would have had nothing to do with us either. They would have expressed no hostility to our revolution. But they have noticed that our revolution is an Islamic revolution.⁵⁵

Such claims speak to the reputation Khamenei would like for Iran to have. But these claims are undermined by Iran’s actual behavior in the Middle East, especially since the Arab Spring.

Iran initially hailed the popular protests that spread across the Arab world in late 2010 and early 2011. That enthusiasm was ironic, given how Iran had suffered through its own explosion of mass unrest following the contested 2009 reelection of then president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Despite condemnation from the West, Iranian security forces viciously put down these demonstrations, ignoring the legitimate grievances of ordinary Iranians and dismissing the episode as a foreign plot to overthrow the regime. But when protests erupted across Bahrain and Egypt, Iran's leaders cheered the outpouring of discontent as righteous and legitimate. Iranian officials were particularly vocal regarding Bahrain, where they called on the ruling Sunni al-Khalifa family to respect popular democracy and the will of the country's people. As the Iranian supreme leader's top foreign policy adviser, Ali Akbar Velayati, saw it, the problem was simple:

The people of Bahrain have said that they are not at war with anyone. They call for [negotiations] between themselves and the regime. They are calling for a one-man-one-vote system . . . It should not be that the Shi'i would be regarded as a second-class citizen in Bahrain. Between 60 to 70 percent of the people there are Shi'i. They, proportionate to that 60 to 70 percent, have to have the vote.⁵⁶

For Velayati, the issue in Bahrain was not one of religious identity but one of fairness. Shia or not, the people of Bahrain deserved to have their voices heard. And just because Iran also happened to be majority Shia did not mean that its support for co-religionists in Bahrain was driven by sectarian interests. Rather, Velayati cited his country's broad support for all Muslims to rebuff accusations of bias:

Have we not, us the Islamic Republic, supported Hamas and Islamic Jihad who are both Sunnis? Have we not supported Bosnians who are Sunni brothers? . . . These kinds of conspiracies, where they would say that as the Bahrainis are Shi'i they are acting under the influence of Iranians against a Sunni government; this has lost its meaning these days.⁵⁷

The notion that Iran cannot be sectarian because it has Sunni friends is one of the more common arguments Iranian authorities such as Velayati make when disputing perceived sectarian inclinations. This has not been effective at allaying the concerns of Iran's neighbors.

As Middle East experts Toby Mathiessen and Frederic Wehrey have shown, the February 2011 protests in Bahrain were not spurred by sectarianism and certainly were not engineered by Iran. It was a populist, grassroots movement by a marginalized, yet demographic-majority community, seeking greater inclusion and political reform.⁵⁸ A Shia uprising, however, regardless of the reason, triggered the deeply ingrained fears of Gulf Arab leaders, who have long

worried that Iran could use Shia populations to destabilize their monarchies. They saw Iran's hand in the unrest and collectively moved to crush it.

Iran did Bahrain's protest movement no favors by standing out as its main champion, particularly after the movement was violently put down by a Saudi-led GCC military operation. Bahraini authorities already had linked some local Shia activists to the IRGC, which made the latter an easy scapegoat used to undermine the legitimacy of the protests. When IRGC-affiliated commentators began threatening reprisals in response to the intervention, they helped make the tenuous links between Iran and the protest movement appear more substantial. An editorial in the IRGC-linked *Javan* newspaper wrote:

Saudi and UAE troops should know that with the first bloodshed or massacre of the people of Bahrain, they will expect a harsh response that will not only render the Bahraini king and the ceremonial Saudi and UAE troops insecure, but also the US military base of 5,000 people will not remain safe and will bear a heavy blow with mutual responsibility. Eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth is the Koranic logic that is awaiting them. These countries must also accept the spread of the revolutionary movements in their own countries.⁵⁹

The author further concluded that while Washington and its allies were losing out in the Arab Spring, Iran was making "progress with regard to its objectives."⁶⁰ He confidently asserted: "The changes in the Middle East region are in line with Iran's objectives." Such statements made it evident that, from the IRGC's perspective, the Shia uprising in Bahrain served Iran's agenda.

Iran's eager endorsement of the Arab Spring stumbled when it hit Syria. There is no shortage of hypocrisy in international politics, especially not in the Middle East, and Iran is no exception. As Iran hailed the will of the people in Bahrain, it condemned the foreign plot that was causing disorder in Syria. Unlike the demonstrations in Egypt and Bahrain, which threatened unfriendly governments, the protests in Syria put Iran's foremost ally at risk. Syria under Bashar al-Assad has been Iran's only state ally in the region, and more crucially, a central node in its strategy against Israel and the United States. Assad has been the linchpin of Iran's support to Hezbollah and a core member of Iran's axis of resistance. When the protests spread beyond the Syrian government's control, the IRGC stepped in to help Assad crush the mounting rebellion. IRGC Quds Force chief, Qassem Suleimani, explained Iran's motivation: "[America's] main goal is to break the resistance front." He added, "We will support Syria till the end."⁶¹

Iran's enemies and rivals have backed Syria's largely Sunni rebels. This has raised the stakes for Tehran. Iran has concluded that if Assad were to be defeated, his replacement would be the client of the United States or Gulf Arab

Iran's eager endorsement of the Arab Spring stumbled when it hit Syria.

rivals, and therefore inimical to Iranian interests. For Iran, backing Assad has not been simply a means of preserving strategic interests. It has been a necessity to prevent a virulently anti-Shia movement, patronized by Iran's enemies, from taking root in the region. As one editorial in the conservative *Siyasat-e Ruz* newspaper later put it:

It is one of the unattainable dreams of the USA and its ally Al Sa'ud that Iran would become like Syria. They were dreaming that after the [Bashar al-Assad] collapses, it would be Iran's turn to be raided by takfiri, Salafi, and Al-Qa'idah groups just as they are doing in Syria. In fact, Al Sa'ud has begun a war with Iran, whose soldiers are not the army of Saudi Arabia, but rather the radical Wahhabi and takfiri terrorists who are at enmity with and hostile towards Shia Islam. The news and reports of the anti-Iranian and anti-Shi'i stances by some clerics in this group against Iran is spread to intensify the anti-Iranian atmosphere.⁶²

By equating *takfirism* and Wahhabism, Iran further muddies the water of identity politics.

To defend its role in the Syrian war, Iran regularly has claimed to be fighting a foreign conspiracy aimed at toppling the legitimate government in Damascus. But the sectarian dimensions of the conflict have been impossible to conceal. Iran's allies in Syria are the loyalists of Bashar al-Assad. Although these loyalists include Sunnis and Christians, Alawites—the same Shia minority community that the Assad clan hails from—have held most positions of power in the regime. As the war has progressed, Iran has facilitated the entry of Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, and eventually Shia Afghan and Pakistani mercenaries to help the loyalist effort. This has made Iran's side of the conflict distinctly Shia and sectarian, much as the Sunni rebellion has also become.

Iranian and IRGC officials have done their best to deflect the issue by rejecting any sectarian agenda out of hand, and by emphasizing that their war is not with Sunnis, but rather with terrorists and *takfiris*—a term widely used to describe the ideology of jihadist groups, such as the Nusra Front and the self-proclaimed Islamic State, which view fellow Muslims who do not share their literalist beliefs to be apostates and therefore not protected under Islamic law. However, for Iranian officials, the *takfirism* of the Islamic State is synonymous with the Wahhabi strain of Sunnism that Saudi Arabia promotes. For example, Ali Akbar Velayati has referred to Saudi Arabia as the “origin” of *takfirism*, adding: “Wahhabism is an extremist and incorrect interpretation of Islam and its exports are Daesh, al-Nusra, and al-Qaeda. . . . Therefore the presence of Saudis in [Syria] is closely related to Takfiri terrorist groups.”⁶³

Similarly, commenting on the Islamic State and other jihadists in Syria and Iraq, the Iranian speaker of parliament, Ali Larijani, has claimed that such groups have “no relationship” with Islam and that Sunnism “rejects and denies the principles and thinking” of the Islamic State and its ilk. Rather, he continued, “it is only the Wahhabis” who ascribe to such beliefs.⁶⁴ Ayatollah Sadegh

Larijani, the brother of the parliamentary speaker and himself the head of Iran's judiciary, has proclaimed that "takfiri and Salafi currents are not related to Islam" or Sunnism, but are ideological sects created by the West "to weaken Islamic societies" from within.⁶⁵

Iran's antipathy for Wahhabi and Salafi jihadism is unsurprising. Both teach that Shiism is a dangerous and deviant sect, the believers of which are beyond the fold of Islam.⁶⁶ As Saudi Arabia's top cleric, Grand Mufti Abd al-Aziz Al al-Sheikh, told a Saudi journalist in September 2016: "You must understand, they [the Iranian regime] are not Muslims. They are sons of the Majous [that is, Zoroastrians]. Their hostility to Muslims is ancient, specifically with Sunnis."⁶⁷ The rhetoric of Iranian officials is rooted in that shared antipathy.

However, by equating *takfirism* and Wahhabism, Iran further muddies the water of identity politics. It is a way of confusing the sectarian dynamic in Iraq and Syria, by asserting that the other side is not actually Sunni, but rather an extreme ideological movement (*takfirism*) that is beyond the pale of Islam and, therefore, not even Islamic. Like the case of the Saudi grand mufti, such rhetoric allows Iranian officials to indulge in their own game of *takfir*—articulating who is and who is not a Muslim and justifying actions accordingly. To neutral observers of Wahhabism, such accusations might touch on truth, but as a foreign policy tool, they only beget further acrimony from Iran's Sunni neighbors.

Toward a Transnational Shia Movement

Through its nearly four-decade history, the Islamic Republic has acted in chiefly nonsectarian ways when it comes to its broader foreign and regional policies. There are examples in which shared sectarian backgrounds have facilitated Iran's relationships with nonstate clients, primarily with Hezbollah and Iraqi groups, but when viewed against the totality of its foreign policy actions, those relationships are not enough to suggest that Iranian foreign policy has been primarily driven by a pro-Shia impulse.

However, since the Arab Spring, Iran's regional behavior has shifted toward a more outward sectarianism. Sectarianism has become a way for Iran and its Sunni rivals to defend their interests and equities in the region's conflicts. Like its enemies, the IRGC seems to have embraced that logic, and now sees its side, and the regional political battlefield as a whole, through a sectarian lens. The statements of IRGC officials, combined with the organization's behavior, attest to that shift and suggest that its agenda in the Middle East has become dominated by confessional concerns.

IRGC Major General Qassem Suleimani has asserted that Iran's place in the Muslim world is second to none, saying: "Although a number of Islamic countries claim to lead the Islamic world today . . . none are able to fulfill this

Since the Arab Spring, Iran's regional behavior has shifted toward a more outward sectarianism.

perilous responsibility other than Iran.⁶⁸ What enabled Iran to rise to such heights, when so many other Muslim countries had failed to do so? Its dedication to foreign involvement, Suleimani argues. As he puts it, “Supporting Islamic and revolutionary warriors and defending Muslims and Islam from [enemy] assaults” have allowed Iran to “take leadership of the Islamic world.”⁶⁹

Suleimani sees Iran’s power as emanating from two fundamental sources: “The greatness of the Islamic revolution” and the revolution’s impact on the “cherished Shiite faith.” He points to Iraq as an example where “Shiites now have seized the right to govern” to illustrate the impact of Iran’s influence. At no other point in history have the “struggles of the Shia or that of the Shia clergy” produced the same “global effects” as the Islamic revolution, according to Suleimani.⁷⁰

These statements encapsulate the themes of Iranian exceptionalism that most irk Iran’s neighbors. Suleimani is simultaneously claiming that Iran has leadership of the Muslim world while also linking Iranian influence to its foreign activities and Shiism. As much as Iranian officials often downplay the confessional angle of Iran’s extraterritorial activism, Suleimani celebrates it, offering the achievements of the Shia in Iraq as a prime example of the revolution’s political impact.

While Suleimani holds up Iran as the leader of the entire Muslim world, his meaning is much narrower. For Suleimani and Iranian authorities in general, the Muslim world is divided between those who support Islam and those who support Islam’s enemies. Iran’s clients and allies are part of the former, the so-called axis of resistance, and most of Iran’s Western-friendly Sunni neighbors are part of the latter. Conflicts in the Middle East are divided along these lines and driven by Islam’s enemies and their surrogates. The Islamic State and other jihadist groups are seen in that context as tools the West has created and used to destroy Islam from within. As IRGC Brigadier General Iraj Masjedi explains, the “Saudis, Americans, and Zionists” are using the Islamic State to “destroy the real Islam—the front led by the Shia.”⁷¹ In describing Iran’s role in Syria, another IRGC commander, Ismail Heydari, has claimed that the war is not a civil conflict, but rather a battle of “Islam against the infidels. A war of good versus evil.” On the side of good are Iran, Hezbollah, and Iraqi and Afghan mujahideen—all Shia actors. On the side of evil are Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, UAE, America, France, and “other Europeans.”⁷²

Similarly, when discussing the plight of the Palestinians, the secretary of Iran’s SNSC, Ali Shamkhani, has stated that while “Sunni states are staying silent regarding the inhumane crimes of the Zionist entity, the greatest amount of support to the oppressed Palestinian people has come from Shia Iran.”⁷³ Shamkhani’s point is that while some states only condemn Israeli policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians with words, Iran does so with actions. It talks the talk and walks the walk. But what is more interesting is Shamkhani’s sectarian framing,

The fact that Shia Iran is helping Sunni Palestinians is meant to shame Sunni states. This also reaffirms Iran's Shia identity.

Instead of subverting sectarian associations, Iranian officials through these statements feed into sectarian narratives with their own rhetoric. These statements also speak to a certain intellectual honesty, in that even Iran's officials know that their political movement—however they describe it—is largely Shia and runs counter to the interests or policies of most Sunni states. The sectarian dimensions of the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts are evident. Iran's closest allies in these contexts are Shia or perceived as such. Although Iran's leadership tries to obscure that inconvenient truth through various rhetorical lines, the religious symbols and language used to describe the involvement of Iran and its allies betray any nuance.

For example, IRGC leaders routinely assert that the war in Syria is nonsectarian, but rather a war between a legitimate government and foreign-backed terrorists. Mazaher Majdi, the deputy commander of the IRGC's Ansar al-Husayn Brigade, once even described the loyalist forces in Syria as “130,000 Sunnis defending their country [who] need our help.”⁷⁴ But like the IRGC itself, its entire project in Syria is steeped in Shia confessional language and symbolism. Take the name of Majdi's own command, the Ansar al-Husayn Brigade, which translates to “Helpers of Husayn” and is a reference to Imam Husayn—the third Shia imam and its most revered martyr and hero. Such names are how the IRGC marks its religious identity.⁷⁵

Those same outward signs of confessional identity permeate Iran's network in Syria and give it an unequivocal sectarian guise. To help overstretched forces in Syria, the IRGC developed a unit known as the Fatimayun Brigade composed of between 3,000 and 13,000 (estimates vary) Afghan immigrants from Iran—primarily Shia Hazaras with some Sunni Tajiks.⁷⁶ Afghan immigrants are something of an underclass in Iran; they are often poor, with limited educational and employment opportunities. Most have impermanent status, and legal residency is difficult to attain. The methods used to recruit Afghans for war play to those motivations, as recruits are offered monthly stipends, work permits, or residency papers.⁷⁷ Some seem to have been recruited from jails and given pardons in exchange for military service.⁷⁸ Smaller numbers come from outside Iran, including from Afghan communities in Syria and from Afghanistan proper.⁷⁹ A similar unit, known as the Zaynabiyun Brigade, is composed of several hundred to a few thousand (again, estimates vary) Shia of Pakistani origin. Most come from the Pakistani Shia expatriate community in Iran, particularly those associated with al-Mustafa International University in the city of Qom.⁸⁰

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Neither the Afghan nor the Pakistani units are billed as mercenary forces, or even as a foreign legion. Rather, they are defined in religious terms. Retired IRGC Brigadier General Mohammad Ali Falaki, who served in Syria, has emphasized that point: “They fight in Syria due to their commitment to Islam, not because of ethnicity . . . but [out] of their commitment to Shiism.”⁸¹ This idea is conveyed by the two groups’ names, which both honor revered members of the Prophet Muhammad’s family. Fatimaiyun (which could be rendered as Devotees of Fatima or Partisans of Fatima) is an homage to Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter and the wife of the first Shia imam, Ali. It is through Ali and Fatima that the remaining eleven Shia imams are descended, making her the matriarch of Shiism. She is revered for her saintly qualities, and she holds an unparalleled station within the pantheon of Shiism similar to that of Mary in Catholicism. The name Zaynabiyun (or Devotees of Zaynab) similarly honors the daughter of Fatima, who accompanied her brother, Imam Husayn, during his last stand and martyrdom at Karbala in 680 CE. Her heroic actions in that founding episode of the Shia religion earned her a revered place in its spiritual tradition. She died as a prisoner in Damascus, where a famous mosque dedicated to her memory became a Shia pilgrimage site and the center of a largely Shia neighborhood.

Some might view such religiosity as superficial. Even if that were the case, the chosen symbolism would still be important. It is not only intentionally and self-consciously employed by the groups’ overseers in the IRGC but also an unobvious display of sectarianism not lost on Sunnis.⁸² Both of these brigades are meant to represent Shia armies composed of pious Shia warriors. Commenting on the devoutness of his troops, the Fatimaiyun commander, known by the nom de guerre Karbala, has said: “The takfiris have no faith and so many fear death. But we do not fear martyrdom.”⁸³ The commander’s nom de guerre is significant, too. By adopting the name Karbala, the commander evokes the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and draws a linkage between his fighters and their spiritual ancestors.⁸⁴ Any hint of secularism is missing. If these groups’ goal is nonsectarian, it is completely concealed by the religious cloaking of their organizations.

The religious manner in which the IRGC refers to the participants in its Syrian operations and their mission is revealing. Perhaps the best glimpse the public has had into Iran’s ground operations in Syria comes through film footage taken from the camera of an IRGC filmmaker who was killed in an ambush by a Syrian rebel group in late August 2013. That rebel group released the footage to provide evidence of Iran’s role in the conflict, and the British Broadcasting Corporation later transformed the footage into a short documentary.⁸⁵

The video centers on an IRGC unit that oversees a contingent of Syrian militia called the Sayyida Ruqayya Brigade near the city of Aleppo. Sayyida Ruqayya is the title Shia use for the daughter of Imam Husayn. She died in prison as a child a few years after her father’s martyrdom. She was buried in

Damascus, where a mosque was later built in her honor. Like that of her aunt Zaynab, her name is used as a marker of both Syrian and Shia identity. It evokes the injustice of her father's martyrdom, the cruel imprisonment of his family, and the historical oppression that the Shia endured under Sunni dominion after the Karbala massacre. By adopting her name as their own, the IRGC and its Syrian allies in the film footage represent the protectors of Sayyida Ruqqaya both literally and figuratively. They are defending the territory that holds her tomb and are fighting to preserve the legacy of the Prophet's family in Syria.

The way Iran describes its war in Syria, particularly in memorializing its soldiers killed there, draws on analogous religious connotations. Soldiers killed in Syria are hailed as martyrs, and they are buried with both the honors of patriotic soldiers and with the reverence of fallen religious heroes.⁸⁶ Iranian officials describe them as having died “defending the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab”—an honorific used for the sister of Imam Husayn. The Sayyida Zaynab Mosque in Damascus, which according to Shia belief houses her tomb, became the central metaphor for Iranian involvement and sacrifice in Syria. The image of the mosque's golden dome adorns Iran's memorials of the hundreds of its Iranian, Afghan, and Pakistani soldiers killed in action.⁸⁷

Iran describes its role in the war against the Islamic State in Iraq in similar terms. Iraq is home to the most sacred Shia shrines, including that of Imam Husayn in Karbala and that of Imam Ali in the city of Najaf. The historical legacy of Shiism in Iraq has made it sanctified ground for the Shia. When Iranian soldiers began getting killed in Iraq shortly after Iran's intervention to back up the government of then prime minister Nouri al-Maliki in June 2014, they were described as having died “in defense of the holy shrines.”⁸⁸ Again, this statement had literal and figurative connotations. While Iran has defended the government in Baghdad, it also has seen itself as defending the sacred ground of the imams from the anti-Shia scourge of Islamic State. This view has been shared across Iran's leadership, with even the generally more circumspect President Hassan Rouhani vowing that Iran would not “spare any effort” to protect sacred Shia sites in Iraq.⁸⁹ As with Iran's Syrian martyrs, the placards and memorials of soldiers killed in Iraq often bore the imagery of that country's Shia shrines.⁹⁰

In Iraq, in Syria, and in Yemen, Iran's closest allies are Shia. Lebanese Hezbollah, various Iraqi Shia militias, Afghan and Pakistani foreign legions, the largely Alawite Popular Mobilization Forces in Syria, and the Zaidi Shia Ansar Allah organization in Yemen comprise a vast network of Iranian clients that all share a confessional identity. That these partnerships are based on shared sectarian affiliations is difficult to dispute, even for Iranian authorities, who generally emphasize the nonsectarian nature of these relationships. What is more is that these partnerships appear, especially to Iran's enemies and Sunni rivals, to be transforming into a transnational movement of Shia militancy under the command of Iran.⁹¹ This is not a misperception, but rather

something the IRGC, too, feels it has achieved. As retired IRGC Brigadier General Falaki explains:

A Shia Liberation Army has been formed. It is now under the command of Hajj Qassem Suleimani and obedient to the authority of the leader of the revolution [that is, Iran's supreme leader]. This army comprises a single front in Syria, a single front in Iraq, and a single front in Yemen. The manpower for this army cannot come [solely] from Iran's military forces. In whatever region it is deemed that this army is needed, the people of that region should be organized and provided the necessary support.⁹²

Falaki describes the Shia Liberation Army as being in lockstep with Iran's leadership. Its members collectively operate "under the command of their Revolutionary Guard brothers" and share Iran's goals. Together, "with one uniform, under one flag, as one organization, and as one front they fight jihad."⁹³ Even though the vast collective is said to include Sunnis, Shiism is the animating force of its identity.

Falaki's comments caused a minor stir in the Arab and Western press. The explicit sectarianism of the Shia Liberation Army did not escape notice. Perhaps in an effort at damage control, the original Iranian website that published the interview, Mashregh, removed the word Shia from Falaki's quotations. Even as outward signs of sectarianism have increased, this deletion reaffirms that the sensitivity toward appearing sectarian has not declined in Iranian officialdom.

The IRGC's effort at establishing a transnational Shia movement composed of militant groups and activists from across the greater Middle East and South Asia has benefited from the hardening of confessional identities since the Arab Spring. Violent suppression of Shia protests in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, combined with the wars in Syria, the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq, and the Saudi-led intervention against the Houthis in Yemen have all contributed to a collective sharpening of identity among the region's Shia. Toby Matthiesen has recognized this phenomena unfolding in what he calls "the Shia public sphere," where the symbols used to sacralize the conflicts in Iraq and Syria have widely "spread through social media and Shia satellite channels . . . strengthening transnational sectarian identities."⁹⁴

The wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen are not simply strategic for the indigenous Shia (or Alawis and Zaidis). They are fights for survival. Defeat in these conflicts does not mean losing leverage against enemies, as is the case for Iran: instead, it means potentially losing villages, cities, or entire confessional communities to the bloodlust of implacable foes, or at least succumbing to their brutal dominion. It is unsurprising that the region's Shia would therefore sympathize with Iran and its allies, if not support them. Iran and the IRGC have been able to harness that support because the Shia have no other power willing to side with them. Time will tell what becomes of the IRGC's network, but the signs of a burgeoning transnational movement are there. The Shia militant groups loyal to Iran already see themselves as a global association under the

spiritual and political authority of Iran's supreme leader.⁹⁵ That vision has been forged by a shared unity of purpose in the region's conflicts. The longer these conflicts endure, and the more severely contested identity politics become, the stronger the bonds between Iran and its clients will grow.

Conclusion

As central as Shiism has been to Iranian domestic policies, how it has impacted foreign policies has been less clear cut. Religious identity and beliefs certainly influence Iran's approach to foreign affairs, but they do not dictate them. Religion is one of many factors that fuel Iran's behavior, and often is not the primary or even secondary consideration. The Shia character of the Islamic Republic might make Iran's leaders more predisposed to supporting Shia outside of Iran than not. Yet, those inclinations are generally curbed by the regime's self-interest. It would therefore be inaccurate to label Iran's approach to foreign policy as sectarian (meaning primarily driven by Shia-centric beliefs and goals). Sectarianism is a latent and inescapable facet of Iranian foreign policy, but confessional aspirations are not what drive the bulk of Iran's decisions.

Iran might not see itself as a sectarian actor. But circumstances and an aggressive regional policy have progressively moved it in that direction. The revolution and the war with Iraq made Iran deeply unpopular with its neighbors. Alienated, and unwilling to temper its politics, Iran became increasingly dependent on its nonstate clients to gain influence in the Middle East and leverage over its rivals. Despite the country's links to some Sunni groups, Iran's most important relationships have been forged with fellow Shia. These relationships have given Iranian foreign policy an undeniable sectarian guise. They have also provoked the indignation of Iran's neighbors and stiffened their own sectarian inclinations.

Since the Arab Spring, as conflict and political unrest have exacerbated communal divisions across the Middle East, Iran's policies, and the actions of the IRGC in particular, have fed the flames of difference more often than not. Iran is not alone in this regard. Saudi Arabia's decades-long sponsorship of its intolerant brand of Sunnism, both in the Middle East and globally, is an undeniable factor. The support Arab states give to Sunni Islamist organizations across the region—not to mention these countries' sectarian policies toward their own Shia populations and more broadly—has also worsened confessional divisions. The rise of Islamist and jihadist organizations—including Ahrar al-Sham, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State—has shaped the current conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen as much as Iran's clients have.

Iran might not see itself as a sectarian actor. But circumstances and an aggressive regional policy have progressively moved it in that direction.

Who is to blame for the Middle East's current sectarian woes? Arguments can be made for various culprits. Arab states blame Iran. Iran blames the United States, Israel, and Arab neighbors, above all Saudi Arabia. Everyone blames America. But such narratives are simplistic, lack self-criticism, and selectively ignore the exogenous and the endogenous sources of identity politics. It has been a collective effort, and Iran has played its part. While Iran's foreign policy writ large exists mostly beyond the confines of confessionalism, this much is clear: as Iran's neighborhood has become more sectarian, so has its behavior.

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