

Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus

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Opportunities and Constraints

By

Shabnam Dadparvar

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-4778-7

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-4778-0

*This is dedicated to all my amiable colleagues at Tianshui
Normal University in China, who always answer my questions
and requests with a smile*

本书献给天水师范学院所有和蔼可亲，古道热肠的同事们
(王兰)

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PREFACE

Dear esteemed researchers,

I am honoured to introduce the outcome of an extensive two-year investigation into the intricate relationship between Iran and the South Caucasus. This book presents a captivating exploration of the historical ties between the two territories. Once an integral part of Iran, the South Caucasus underwent separation due to circumstances arising from conflicts with Russia in the nineteenth century. Despite this division, the enduring connections have persisted throughout the ages. This research offers a comprehensive overview of the interactions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the independent republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, focusing on the post-Soviet era. Diligently examined is the period from the government of Hashemi Rafsanjani until 2022, when Ebrahim Raisi assumed the presidency. This research endeavours to explain Iran's foreign policy priorities, goals, hurdles, and challenges by drawing upon a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including official statements, original documents, academic publications, and expert analyses. The contemporary developments that unfolded following the 2020 Karabakh conflict are central to this investigation. While the primary focus remains on the South Caucasus, readers will comprehensively understand Iran's foreign policy within the broader international system. In this exploration, a rigorous examination of the political, economic, and cultural relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the South Caucasus republics is conducted. It also delves into the geopolitical variables that influence the policies and behaviour of both regional and trans-regional nations. This research provides a valuable resource for scholars and students of Middle Eastern, Caucasus, and Iranian studies. It aims to advance readers' understanding of the complex relationships between Iran and the South Caucasus. What distinguishes this research is its encompassing analysis of Iran's relations with all three republics, spanning from the period following the Islamic Revolution to 2022. Recognising the enduring influence of geopolitical factors, the findings presented in this study will remain pertinent and significant for researchers in the foreseeable future. Hopeful that this book inspires further exploration and discussion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to the Dean of the History Department at Tianshui Normal University and Professor Jia for their unwavering assistance during this research. Additionally, my gratitude goes to Dr. Vali Kaleji, who possesses a Ph.D. from the University of Tehran. His profound insights played a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of this study. I would also like to thank my friend Aghil for his invaluable assistance in meticulously arranging the book's contents. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the invaluable aid of my family, friends, and colleagues in Iran, who facilitated the acquisition of essential information.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy pertains to strategic choices and undertakings made by sovereign governments in their interactions with other nation-states or international organisations to safeguard their interests as a cohesive political entity. The manner in which a country engages with external actors on regional and global platforms is profoundly formed by both its domestic circumstances and its standing in the international arena. In the wake of the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran's foreign policy experienced a notable paradigm shift, characterised by adopting an Islamic-revolutionary approach. This transformation stemmed from distinctive strategies, methodologies, and institutional frameworks, collectively referred to as "discourse" within international relations literature.

In its historical context as Persia, Iran assumes a paramount geopolitical position endowed with pronounced strategic significance. It resides at a critical juncture, positioned between Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Persian Gulf region on one frontier and the Mediterranean/Levant region and South Asia on the opposing front, thus underlining its substantial strategic value.

In the early 1990s, Iran faced significant domestic and international developments such as the end of the Iraq war, the death of *Ruhollah Khomeini* (the former Supreme Leader of Iran), the presidency of *Hashemi Rafsanjani*, the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. These events marked a turning point in the country's regional and international status, with the emergence of new independent states and transforming Central Asia and the South Caucasus into a buffer zone between Iran, Türkiye, and Russia.

The alteration of global power dynamics significantly influenced the course of developments within the South Caucasus region, engendering a fundamental reevaluation of objectives and incentives among both local and transregional actors. In the wake of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, the emergence of sovereign nations within the South Caucasus—specifically Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia—assumed heightened importance for Iranian authorities. This significance was primarily predicated on the region's profound historical, cultural, and geographical affinities with Iran, interwoven with a complex tapestry of ethnic and demographic interconnections that intermittently gave rise to conflicts. Undeniably, the

developmental trajectory of the South Caucasus was profoundly shaped by its well-entrenched ethnic communities, encompassing a heterogeneous array of groups, including Azeris, Armenians, Kurds, Georgians, Abkhazians, and Talyshis, among others.

The South Caucasus region assumes heightened strategic and energy significance within the geopolitical landscape. In terms of strategic considerations, enduring disputes and territorial claims about the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which trace their origins back to the Soviet era, persist as sources of tension, frequently culminating in armed conflicts. Moreover, the region's unique geographic location, situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, has garnered the attention of various international actors, including the United States, European nations, China, Türkiye, and Israel. Notably, the issue of energy transit, particularly the transportation of Azerbaijan's oil and gas reserves through Georgia en route to Europe, has rendered the region of paramount importance for Western nations. Consequently, since the early post-Soviet era and the execution of pivotal agreements related to the exploration, extraction, and transportation of oil and gas resources, Western influence within the region has steadily expanded. Given these multifaceted dynamics, the ramifications of the South Caucasus' geopolitical intricacies on the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran assume pronounced significance, a dimension that this research diligently examines and elucidates.

The cultural dimension is another notable aspect of the South Caucasus. Its ancient history has made it a melting pot for various cultures and religions, with the region undergoing the rise, growth, and decline of multiple civilisations and religions over the centuries, all of which have contributed to the current situation. During the *Sassanid* era, the Iranian government exerted control over the Caucasus, which served as a tributary to the Iranian kings for many historical periods. The historical governance of the region oscillated between Iranian rulers and locally appointed leaders under the auspices of the central Iranian government. However, instances of Caucasian declarations of independence were recurrent during periods of Iranian government vulnerability attributable to internal strife or external conflicts. The waning influence of the Iranian government in the Caucasus became particularly pronounced with the decline of the *Safavid* rule, followed by the emergence of the Afsharid and *Zand* dynasties. Ultimately, in the early 19th century, during the *Qajar* era under *Fath Ali Shah's* reign, the Caucasus formally separated from Iran. Notwithstanding this geopolitical division, Iranians maintain enduring cultural affinities with the Caucasus populace, particularly in its southern precincts, sharing numerous customs

and rituals, the exploration of which constitutes a focal point of this research.

The South Caucasus region's historical ties to Iran, its pivotal geographic position facilitating land connectivity with the Russian Federation and Northern Europe, and its adjacency to the Caspian Sea collectively underscore its pronounced importance for the Islamic Republic of Iran. In light of these geopolitical and geoeconomic imperatives, Iran perceives this region as a pivotal component of its security and economic interests. In acknowledgement of the region's significance and its proximity to Iran, this comprehensive study undertakes an exploration of the multifaceted challenges, opportunities, limitations, and pertinent issues that have defined the relationships between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia during the period spanning from 1990 to 2022.

The pivotal juncture of this research revolves around the 2020 Karabakh conflict, its consequential effects on the Islamic Republic of Iran, and its intricate interactions with neighbouring republics. Additionally, this study delves into the far-reaching ramifications of this conflict, not only for Iran but also for the broader regional landscape. It scrutinises the future prospects of governmental relationships within the region. Consequently, it becomes imperative to furnish a concise outline of the chapters encompassed within this book:

Chapter One: This chapter is dedicated to elucidating the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran through the prism of international relations theories and the discursive frameworks adopted by various governments in the post-Islamic Revolution era. An integral facet of the analysis lies in the distinct interpretations held by Iranian officials regarding the nature of the international system, the prevailing global order, and prominent theories within the field of international relations. It is essential to underscore that Iran's foreign policy exhibits a multifaceted character, rendering it challenging to provide a comprehensive explanation by applying any single international relations theory. Moreover, Iran's foreign policy has been distinctly influenced by its constitutional principles, setting it apart from the foreign policy approaches adopted by major global powers and certain regional actors. Iran's resolute stance of non-recognition toward Israel and its contentious relationship with the policies of the United States of America, both in the region and on the global stage, stem from divergent interpretations and delineations of the prevailing international order. This chapter illuminates Iran's foreign policy through the analytical framework of various international relations theories, encompassing Idealism, Realism, Neorealism, and constructivism. Furthermore, it offers a comprehensive

exposition of the multiple articles within the Iranian Constitution, thereby augmenting readers' comprehension of the foundational tenets that underlie Iran's foreign policy stance.

The "decision-making structure" aspect holds pivotal importance, exerting a substantial influence on the effective execution of a nation's foreign policy. A country's constitutional framework delineates the formal hierarchy and procedural mechanisms governing decision-making processes, encompassing routine matters and critical contingencies. In this section, a meticulous examination of the decision-making structure within the Islamic Republic is undertaken, shedding light on its key institutions. Furthermore, this segment delineates the diverse discursive approaches adopted by successive Iranian governments in their dealings with South Caucasus countries. The salience of these discourses lies in the fact that each Iranian President has brought a unique perspective to the forefront, which has played a consequential role in either engendering opportunities or imposing constraints on Iran's foreign policy initiatives.

Chapter Two: This section offers an overview of the South Caucasus region, probing its pronounced geopolitical significance. The emergence of freshly established nations within this territory has given rise to a spectrum of economic, political, and cultural opportunities for neighbouring states. Consequently, this segment explores the distinctive attributes characterising the South Caucasus region, the domestic processes underpinning the formation of nation-states, and the intricate web of security challenges it grapples with. The complex terrain of security issues that pervades this geographical expanse, coupled with the ongoing state-building endeavours within the constituent republics, continues to profoundly impact the contemporary policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran. As a result, delving into the internal dynamics of this region becomes imperative for a comprehensive understanding of the interactions between Iranian officials and their counterparts in these nations. Notwithstanding the opportunities that emerged for Iran to rekindle historical affinities and expand its regional influence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the initial turbulence within the newly independent republics and the enduring conflicts in the region presented formidable impediments.

Chapter Three: Building upon understanding the South Caucasus region's internal dynamics established in the preceding chapter, this part is dedicated to analysing the bilateral connections between Iran and Azerbaijan. The objective is to meticulously examine the shared goals and disparities in the national interests of these two nations, ultimately forging a conceptual framework that elucidates the amplifying divergences in their bilateral relations. This study places particular emphasis on tracing the

variations in interests and policies across distinct temporal epochs. It scrutinises the potential avenues for political, economic, and cultural collaboration between Iran and Azerbaijan. It concurrently addresses the formidable challenges that impede such cooperative endeavours, spanning political, security, economic, cultural, and environmental domains. Furthermore, the analysis offers insights into the complexities stemming from Azerbaijan's political, military-security, and commercial associations with Israel, the United States, NATO, and Saudi Arabia and assesses the resultant implications for Iran.

This section offers a comprehensive historical account of Azerbaijan's trajectory preceding its attainment of independence. It encompasses the Islamic era and the subsequent disentanglement from the Soviet Union. Additionally, the study meticulously explores the historical backdrop of Iran's interactions with Azerbaijan, establishing Azerbaijan as a distinct political entity and proceeding through its journey to independence. This historical narrative extends into the contemporary era, spanning 1989 to 2022, as marked by the presidential terms within Iran. A focal point of particular significance within this section is the thorough analysis of *Hashemi Rafsanjani's* diaries concerning Azerbaijan during its early period of independence. This academic investigation delves into the intricate matter of the proposed accession of the Republic of Azerbaijan to Iran, as articulated by Aliyev in the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution, drawing chiefly from *Hashemi's* memoirs. The primary objective of this study is to glean insights into the perspectives and experiences of Rafsanjani, a prominent figure in Iranian politics who played a pivotal role in shaping Iran's foreign policy during that crucial juncture.

Furthermore, this section thoroughly examines the foreign policy strategies of diverse Iranian presidents and their respective engagements in politics, culture, and economics vis-à-vis the South Caucasus. Given the distinct discourses espoused by each President, this analysis systematically evaluates the policy choices undertaken by particular Iranian administrations. The study extends its purview to scrutinise the geopolitical factors that influence Iran's foreign policy, encompassing energy-related approaches, the contentious legal status of the Caspian Sea and Aras River, and the intricate web of shifting alliances and rivalries. Additionally, this chapter delves into the pivotal theme of ethnocultural relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, expounding on how Azerbaijan's cooperative overtures with other governments impinge upon its relationship with Iran.

Chapter Four: Continuing the exploration of Iran's interactions with the South Caucasus republics, this chapter delves into the intricate relationship between Iran and the Republic of Armenia. The historical foundations of

this bilateral partnership are meticulously elucidated, tracing back from the *Achaemenid* era through the tumultuous period of the 1917 Russian Revolution and culminating in the emergence of an autonomous Armenian state. Employing a comparative lens regarding the preceding chapter, this section further dissects the multifaceted dimensions characterising the bilateral relations over the tenure of diverse Iranian administrations, spanning from the era of *Hashemi Rafsanjani's* leadership to the presidency of *Seyed Ebrahim Raisi*. This chapter offers a comprehensive analysis of the convergent elements that have facilitated cordial relations between the two nations and underscores the role of Iranian Armenians in fortifying these ties. Acknowledging the intertwined histories of the two peoples, a dedicated section delves into the cultural and traditional affinities shared between Iran and Armenia.

Chapter Five: This chapter delves into the intricate dynamics of Iran-Georgia relations, shedding light on the historical epochs of their interaction, particularly in the context of Georgia's independence. Georgia is a nation of profound significance due to its unique cultural and geopolitical attributes. Iran was among the first countries to extend recognition to the independence of Georgia, thus initiating diplomatic relations, a facet that will be subjected to comprehensive analysis within this chapter.

However, the relationship between Iran and the Republic of Georgia has been marked by fluctuations and instability. This volatility primarily emanates from the shifting foreign policy trajectories of the Georgian government and the varying discourses of successive administrations within the Islamic Republic of Iran. Following the 2008 war, Georgia sought closer ties with the United States and NATO to counterbalance Russia. This development brought it into discord with Iran's foreign policy, characterised by an anti-Western orientation. Consequently, tensions emerged in the bilateral relations between these two nations. Therefore, this chapter conducts a thorough and all-encompassing analysis to dissect the many factors influencing the intricate interplay between Iran and Georgia across a spectrum of political, economic, and cultural domains. Furthermore, a meticulous examination is dedicated to Georgia's affiliations with other governments, elucidating the genesis of these relationships and their subsequent impact on interactions with Iran.



Chapter Six: This section of the book marks a pivotal juncture, as recent geopolitical developments have exerted a profound impact on the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Notable events such as the Karabakh War and the Russia-Ukraine conflict are emblematic instances of the unfolding transformative shifts. Consequently, the primary objective of

this chapter is to provide an exhaustive and systematic exploration of the ramifications of these transformations, both for the South Caucasus region and Iran. The chapter meticulously unravels the strategic implications stemming from the Second Karabakh War and the enduring crises within this region, emphasising their intersections with the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Furthermore, it delves into the roles played by various external actors in this context.

This section delves into the opportunities for Iran in the wake of these developments and the constraints it confronts. Key subjects such as the Zangezur corridor, connectivity routes, and the Silk Road are thoroughly examined. Additionally, the historical context of the railway route between Iran and the Caucasus is elucidated, alongside the measures taken to revive it. The research findings underscore that the geopolitical landscape of the Caucasus has the potential to generate tensions, compounded by the internal fragility of the constituent republics and their attraction to regional and trans-regional powers. These direct and indirect dynamics exert tangible impacts on Iran's national security. Of particular significance among the indirect threats emanating from the geopolitical factors in the Caucasus is the presence of regional and trans-regional powers that hold adversarial and competitive stances vis-à-vis Iran. Notwithstanding the mounting threats, the author posits that Iran possesses the requisite capacity to undertake pivotal measures to harmonise with its national interests. Iran can navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape by adopting an appropriate policy stance and capitalising on available opportunities.

In conclusion, this chapter offers a forward-looking perspective on Iran's interactions with key entities such as the European Union, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the South Caucasus republics, focusing on convergent and divergent policies and considerations. The analysis culminates in a succinct summary of the research findings, synthesising them to provide a comprehensive and holistic perspective on the subject matter at hand.

Notes

-  Epithets, honorifics and titles have been omitted.
-  Some maps presented in this book depict the region before the outbreak of the 2020 war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

CHAPTER 1

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN; INTERNAL FEATURES



Iran: A Concise Historical Overview of the Land

Iran, also known as Persia in the past, is a country in southwestern Asia (Figure 1.1) characterised by mountainous terrain, an arid climate, and a diverse ethnic population. Officially named The Islamic Republic of Iran, it boasts a captivating cultural and social legacy that dates back to the ancient *Achaemenid* era. This rich heritage has endured through the ages, shaping the country's identity and contributing to its diverse and fascinating history. Iran is home to one of the oldest civilisations in the world, which can be traced back to the formation of *Elamite* kingdoms in the fourth millennium BC. The *Medes*, an ancient Iranian people, first unified the country in the seventh century BC, and it reached its territorial zenith during the reign of *Cyrus the Great*. His rule became one of the most powerful empires in human history (Axworthy, 2016, 3-5).



Fig. 1-1 Iran's Geostrategic Location

In the seventh century AD, the Arab Muslims launched a conquest of the empire, resulting in Iran's Islamisation. As a result, Iran emerged as a prominent hub of Islamic culture, giving rise to a flourishing era of artistic, literary, philosophical, and architectural achievements that permeated the Muslim world and beyond, commonly known as the Islamic Golden Age.¹ After the Islamic conquest, a sequence of native Iranian Muslim dynasties materialised over the ensuing two centuries until the

¹ The Islamic Golden Age marks a remarkable era in the history of Islam, characterised by a flourishing of science, economics, and culture. This extraordinary period is traditionally recognised to have spanned from the 8th century to the 13th century. During this time, Islamic societies made significant advancements in various fields, impacting the world and contributing to human knowledge and progress.

region fell under the dominion of the *Seljuk* Turks and later the *Mongols*. The *Safavids*, a dynasty that emerged in the 15th century, eventually reconstituted a united Iranian state and instilled a sense of national identity by proselytising the populace to the Shia sect of Islam. In the 18th century, during the reign of *Nader Shah*, Iran wielded the most formidable military might in the world. However, during the 19th century, several conflicts with the Russian Empire precipitated significant territorial losses for Iran (Khater, 2011, 2).

Towards the end of the *Zand* dynasty's rule in Iran, the country experienced widespread unrest, providing an opportunity for the Russian Empire under the leadership of *Catherine* to invade and annex Iranian territories. However, *Aqa Mohammad Khan Qajar* later emerged as a key military leader, successfully defeating Russian forces in crucial battles. Notably, he triumphed over Catherine's armies in the *Arran* province, now known as the Republic of Azerbaijan, and liberated Tbilisi in Georgia (Fig. 1-2 shows Iran's territory during the Qajar dynasty) (Farmanfarmaian, 2008, 113).

During the early 20th century, Iran was embroiled in a complex struggle characterised by two distinct challenges. On the one hand, Iranians fought to preserve their national sovereignty against mounting colonial pressures. On the other hand, the country's strategic significance attracted the attention of major colonial powers such as Great Britain and Russia, who competed for influence in the region in what came to be known as the "Great Game." Eventually, in August 1907, these powers agreed to divide Iran into separate spheres of influence, with the Russians assuming control over the northern regions and the British dominating the southern areas. Map 1.3 illustrates Iran's geopolitical situation in the 19th and 20th centuries (Atabaki, 2009, 98).

In pursuit of nationalising its oil industry, Iran's actions incited an Anglo-American coup in 1953. Consequently, the political landscape witnessed an upsurge of authoritarian governance under the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, along with an expansion of Western political influence. Subsequently, following the Iranian Revolution (Fig. 1-4) of 1979, the Islamic Republic (Fig. 1-5) was founded under the leadership of Ruhollah Khomeini (Fig. 1-6), thereby assuming the role of Iran's inaugural Supreme Leader (Riazaty, 2016, 45).

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the subsequent collapse of the Pahlavi dynasty, the Islamic Republic has dominated this country's political system. As established through a referendum, its Constitution features a separation of powers model, encompassing Executive, Legislative, and Judicial systems. At the apex of the country's governmental structure, the Supreme Leader is the head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

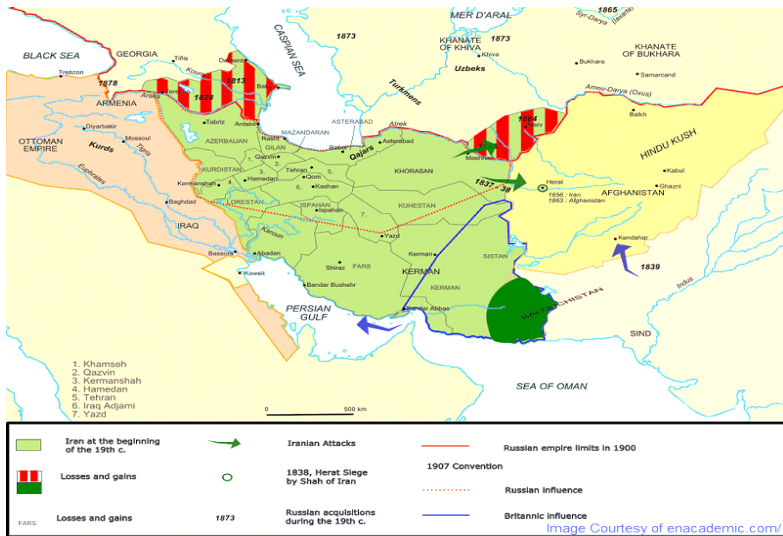


Fig. 1-2 Iran's map during the Qajar Dynasty

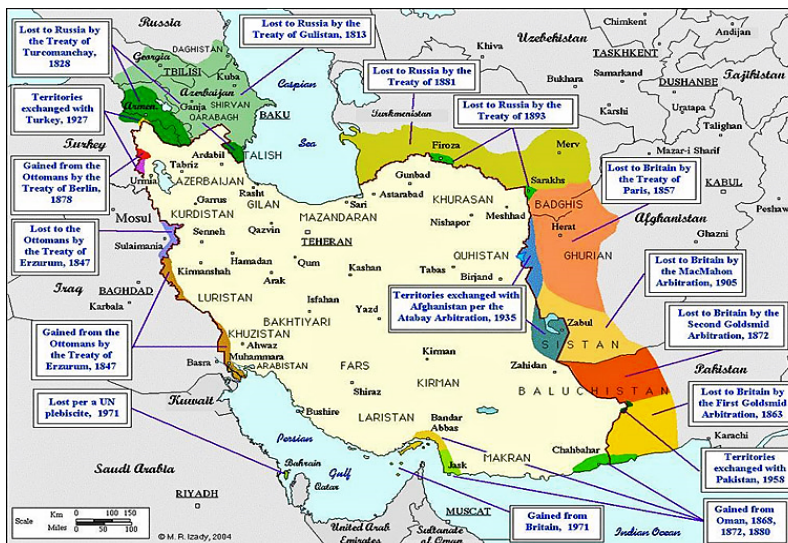


Fig. 1-3 Territorial changes of Iran in the 19th and 20th centuries



Fig. 1-4 The Victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979

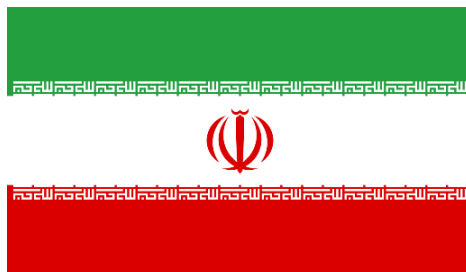


Fig. 1-5 Islamic Republic of Iran's flag since 1979. It features three horizontal stripes in green, white, and red. Green is significant for Islam; white signifies peace, and red represents courage. The flag also incorporates a red emblem positioned at the centre, adorned with a white stylised script that spans both the red and green stripes. The inscribed text, rendered in the Kufic script, bears the words "Allah is Great" and is reiterated 22 times. This repetition symbolises the triumph of the revolution on the 22nd day of the month Bahman in the Iranian calendar, which corresponds to the 11th of February

The Islamic Republic of Iran shares its borders with Iraq and Türkiye to the West, Azerbaijan and Armenia to the northwest, Turkmenistan and the Caspian Sea to the north, and Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east, while its southern coast is bounded by the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf (Fig.1-1) (Kouhi-Esfahani, 2019, 1-2). The country boasts a land area of 1.648.195 million square kilometres and a populace of approximately 85 million (National Statistics Center of Iran website, 2022). Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Tabriz are among its most populous cities.

Analysing Iran's Foreign Policy: Insights from International Relations Theories

Foreign policy assumes a crucial role in the governance of a nation, delineating its interactions and commitments within the international community. Many factors, such as economic considerations, political dynamics, social conditions, historical events, and cultural values, influence this complex aspect of statecraft. Together, these elements indicate a nation's approach to diplomacy and international relations, defining its position and role in the global arena. The behaviour of the countries depends on domestic and international pressures, such as public opinion, interest groups, and global alliances. Successful foreign policy necessitates an in-depth comprehension of the international system, including the motives and roles of other actors. It also mandates the ability to anticipate and respond to transformations in the global environment, including emerging threats or opportunities. Theories in international relations can serve as tools for understanding and predicting the conduct of nations in the international system. Internal discourses, including political discussions and public opinion, can also form a state's foreign policy choices and priorities.

Similar to nations worldwide, the actions of the Islamic Republic of Iran are influenced by the interplay and confrontation of many internal and external factors. The Islamic Revolution 1979 instigated a paradigmatic shift in Iran's behaviour, resulting in modifications to its theoretical concepts, objectives, priorities, and the impact of decision-making bodies on its foreign policy (Afrasiabi, 1994, 5-10). For scholars delving into this subject, the primary focus of inquiry centres on discerning the significant factors that influence Iran's behaviour, encompassing the mechanisms and entities responsible for crafting its foreign policy. To address this inquiry effectively, a thorough exploration of varied approaches and international theories becomes essential, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of the fundamental governing principles of this system. Nevertheless, owing to the Islamic nature of Iran's governance, its foreign policy cannot be exclusively elucidated by a single theory. Instead, its behaviour has showcased nuances under each consecutive administration. As a result, this chapter examines the theoretical foundations that underlie Iran's participation in the international system. It then proceeds to evaluate each government's actions within the context of these theoretical frameworks.

Idealism

The theoretical approach of Idealism in International Relations is rooted in the optimism and intellectualism of the 18th century and the liberalism of the 19th and 20th centuries (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff, 1991, 20). Idealists assert that human nature is inherently cooperative and predisposes individuals towards positive actions. According to the idealistic perspective, the causes of violence, war, and conflict are not inherent traits of human nature; instead, they arise from deficient institutions and limited opportunities for progress and prosperity (Guzzini, 2013, 17). These conditions foster selfish behaviour and harm towards others. However, this framework considers human behaviour correctable and capable of perfection (also cited by Azghandi and Mardijoo, 2017, 37-38).

This approach is based on the notion that politics can be adapted to ethical standards and that international norms, legal rules, and moral values can be internalised as the foundation for international behaviour. Idealism is prescriptive and policy-oriented, grounded in abstract principles such as cooperation, collaboration, and unity (Kaarbo and Ray, 2010, 13). This approach suggests that foreign policy based on these principles is more effective and efficient than one based on competition, hostility, and war.

However, the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran have a different interpretation of Idealism in foreign policy, which emphasises religious and Islamic-Shiite ideals, values, and norms that differ significantly from the values and standards of theorists and adherents of idealistic policy in international relations (Dehghani FiroozAbadi, 2009, 43). This approach is rooted in the ideological expression of political culture, specifically observed in the political behaviour of the Iranian population following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which was led by *Ruhollah Khomeini* (Dehghani FiroozAbadi, 2007, 14). This movement brought about a significant shift in the global power dynamics and Iran's local and global circumstances. The conceptualisation of Idealism in Iran's external relations involves an ideal vision for humanity and its translation into practical action in the real world (Sariolghalam, 2009, 64).

This variant of Idealism presupposes articulating an envisioned state of affairs within the confines of the Islamic faith. Generally, as posited by the leadership of the Islamic Republic, the most salient components of Idealism in Iran's external relations encompass Islamic-Shiite universalism, anti-domination, right-seeking, justice, independence, peace, and dignity (Gharayag Zandi, 2008, 3-8).

In this vein, Islamic globalism, a cardinal tenet of Idealism in Iran's foreign policy, comprises three elements of discourse and practical action in foreign affairs. Firstly, it entails striving to make the Shia international

community the foremost strategic objective of Iran's foreign policy. Given the present domestic and international realities, such Idealism may be actualised over the long term. Secondly, it involves seeking to overhaul the existing international order, which is deemed inadequate in establishing the desired world order. Thirdly, it encompasses the promotion of the Islamic Republic's desired world order based on the Islamic mission of Shi'a (Azqandi and Mardijo, 2017, 36-40).

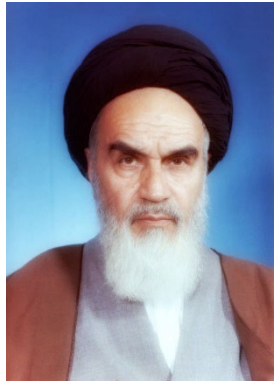


Fig. 1-6 *Sayyid² Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini*, also known as *Ayatollah Khomeini*, was an Iranian political and religious leader who served as the first supreme leader of Iran from 1979 until he died in 1989

The principle of anti-domination, originating from Islamic Shiite and Iranian ideals, constitutes a prominent tenet of Iran's foreign policy. This principle entails the rejection of dominance and colonialism globally. Iranian authorities assert that this discursive element includes the optimal approach to international order, aiming to achieve freedom and emancipation from structures of subjugation and oppression (Moshirzadeh, 2018, 43-64). Furthermore, the pursuit of rights and justice represents a fundamental

² In the Arab world, the term "Sayyid" corresponds to the English words "lord" or "master," precisely when used to address a descendant of Muhammad. In the Shia tradition, "Sayyid" is an esteemed title bestowed upon individuals recognised as direct descendants of the prophet Muhammad through his grandsons, Hasan and Husayn ibn Ali, who are the sons of Muhammad's daughter, Fatima, and his cousin and son-in-law, Ali. For female descendants, the titles "sayyida," "syeda," "alawiyah," or "Sharifa" are used to honour their lineage. Publicly acknowledging one's status as a Sayyid and distinguishing oneself from non-Sayyids can be achieved by adopting the title and, in the case of Mullahs, by wearing a black turban.

component of Iran's foreign policy, reflecting a longstanding aspiration of the Iranian people.

The fourth element of Iran's foreign policy is 'independence', characterised by safeguarding national identity and attaining freedom. Iranian officials posit that the historical injustices perpetrated by dominant colonial powers towards Iran before the Islamic Revolution and their extensive intervention in the nation's affairs underscore the imperative of independence. Additionally, the significance of justice within the Islamic faith has elevated independence to a strategic priority within Iran's foreign policy framework (Moshirzadeh, 2007, 522-525).

Another element of Iran's foreign policy is peace, grounded in the discourse of Shiite Idealism. This principle denotes the absence of war and violence within the international community and extends to eliminating concealed structural violence within the global system. Additionally, the concept of dignity - encompassing honour and pride - constitutes another dimension of Shiite Idealism in international relations (Dehshiri, 2018, 201-210). Thus, preserving national dignity represents a core objective of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, which is actualised through the lens of Realism.

Realism

Realism, a prominent international relations theory, can also elucidate Iran's foreign policy. It has consistently maintained its position as the predominant and enduring theoretical framework in international relations, mainly due to its compatibility with the behaviour of political leaders in the global system and its traditional interpretation of international politics.

Realism is a theoretical tradition and school of thought widely acknowledged as a viable approach within international relations (Moshirzadeh, 2009, 22-24). Its suitability is derived from its inherent characteristics and applicability to the intergovernmental system, which is characterised by competition among nations. Realism emerged after the *Westphalia Treaties* in 1648³, which marked the beginning of the modern state system and

³ The Peace of Westphalia, established in 1648 through agreements among European nations, signalled the conclusion of the Eighty Years War between Spain and the Dutch and the German segment of the Thirty Years War. Negotiations for peace talks occurred in the Westphalian cities of Münster and Osnabrück, and the Spanish-Dutch treaty was formally signed on January 30, 1648. This historical event is widely seen as a significant turning point that promoted tolerance and secularisation. Moreover, the settlement strengthened the authority of the imperial Estates, granting them the power to form international alliances and make crucial decisions, including

established the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity as the fundamental elements of international relations. According to Gilpin (1980), Realism posits that pursuing power, competition, conflict, and self-interest are inherently human characteristics that cannot be eliminated. Consequently, war is an inevitable feature of international politics. Realists maintain that countries prioritise their national interests above principles, ethics, and rights and constantly strive to acquire and enhance their power (Dufour, 2020, 86). *Hans J. Morgenthau*, a prominent classical Realist thinker, outlines this approach as a codified theory of international relations in his book *Politics Among Nations* (1948). Political Realism is characterised as a worldview that, in contrast to Idealism, holds a pessimistic view of moral progress and human capabilities and regards war, violence, and power-seeking as expressions of human nature. In his book, *Morgenthau* articulates the six principles that underpin this theory:

- Politics operates under objective laws that are deeply connected to human nature. These laws imply that humans possess innate characteristics and inclinations that shape their political actions. These objective laws are not the creations of any specific individual or group but inherent aspects of human nature. As a result, comprehending politics necessitates a thorough understanding of these objective laws and how they exert their influence on political behaviour.
- When the concept of national interest is framed in relation to national power, it indicates that a nation's power and influence play a crucial role in shaping its interests. The pursuit of national interest lies at the core of a nation's foreign policy, and this objective is frequently sought through the attainment and retention of power—whether it be military, economic, or cultural power.
- In political Realism, the ever-changing nature of national interest reflects its dynamic character. The specific content of a nation's interest is subject to continuous transformation, influenced by the prevailing political and social context during the formulation of foreign policies. Pursuing national interest is considered the essence of politics, guided by objective laws deeply rooted in human nature.
- According to political Realism, applying abstract moral principles to politics is impractical because politics operates in a domain of power and interest, distinct from morality. While moral principles can guide individual behaviour, politics often demands actions to pursue

those related to peace and war, alongside the emperor (Asbach and Schröder, 2016, 312).