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THE ROLE OF SHIISM IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN*

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Abstract

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 caused Iran to shape its foreign policy along with its domestic political structure, within the framework of a certain Shiite understanding of Islam. Within this context and through the use of the explanatory case study method, this study aims to examine the effect of Shiism within the foreign policy of the post-Revolution Islamic Republic of Iran. First, the foreign policy-making process of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its various elements were discussed within the framework of the views of the Republic's founder, the Supreme Leader Khomeini. Second, the effect of Shiism within and on Iranian foreign policy and affected regions will be explored and discussed. This study reports that Shiism is the most significant determining element in Iran's foreign policy following the 1979 Revolution, that the country's foreign policy approaches are not entirely Shiism-oriented, that there are deviations from this strictly Shiite approach, and that Iran's foreign policy also includes realpolitik approaches.

Keywords: *Iran, Shiism, Iran's foreign policy, Khomeini, Realpolitik.*

İRAN İSLAM CUMHURİYETİ DİŞ POLİTİKASINDA ŞİİLİĞİN ROLÜ

Öz

1979 İran Devrimi sadece İran'ın iç siyasi yapısını değil, aynı zamanda ülkenin dış politikasını da belli bir Şii İslam anlayışı çerçevesinde şekillendirmiştir. Bu bağlamda açıklayıcı durum çalışması yöntemini kullanan bu çalışma Devrim sonrası İran İslam Cumhuriyeti dış politikasında Şiiliğin etkisini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Öncelikle İran İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin dış politika yapım süreci ve çeşitli unsurları, Cumhuriyetin kurucusu Dini Lider Humeyni'nin görüşleri çerçevesinde ele alınmış, akabinde Şiiliğin İran dış politikasındaki etkisi politikanın aktif uygulandığı bölgeler üzerinden tartışılmıştır. Bu çalışma Şiiliğin İran'ın dış politikasında son derece etkili olduğunu ortaya koymakla birlikte ülkenin dış politik yaklaşımının tamamen Şiilik eksenli olmadığını, kimi zaman reel politik bir yaklaşımı da içerdiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *İran, Şiilik, İran dış politikası, Humeyni, Reelpolitik.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Religions not only determine lifestyles within societies but also comprise one of the basic elements of interstate relations. In the post-Westphalian era, when modernist and secular theories began to analyze events by considering national interests and power, the relative influence of religion in international relations decreased. Although the modernist paradigm that came to the fore in the 20th century claimed that religion was not a main determinant, drawing its role in international politics to the axis of national interests, social constructivist and post-structuralist approaches nevertheless claim that religion and/or culture were indeed the main determinants. In addition to the increase in theoretical studies on identity politics, events such as September 11 have led to an increase in religion and culture-based approaches in international relations (Çoban Oran, 2017: 11–12). In this process, some studies (e.g., Almond et al. 2003; Haynes, 2009; Huntington, 1993; Juergensmeyer, 1993, 2008) dealing with the importance of religion in terms of conflict and peacebuilding have come to the fore.

Considering the influence of evangelicals on the USA, Jewish nationalists on the State of Israel, and Wahhabism on Saudi Arabia, beliefs seem to be effective in shaping the domestic and foreign political approaches of states. The same is true in the case of Iran, where the Shah's regime was overthrown by the 1979 Revolution and a new system was established within the framework of Shiism. Studies on Iran and Shiism generally start with the White Revolution period that emerged in the 1960s, subsequently experiencing a rapid increase with the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Before the Revolution, "Shiite identity" did not play a role in Iranian political decisions, as evidenced by the Shah of Iran's relations with Lebanon and the Palestinian issue. While the general opinion until the Iranian Revolution was that Sunni Islam determined the social and political culture of the Middle East, the Iranian Revolution brought Shiism to the world agenda by changing this perception. The Iranian Constitution of 1979 foresees the implementation of foreign policy in a way that focuses on Shiism and adopts the concept of exporting the Revolution outside of Iran. In this context, one of the questions that the study seeks to answer is whether Iran follows a foreign policy in accordance with the provisions in the Constitution. Authors such as Wastnidge (2014), Ramazani (1980), and Algar (1969), who stand out with their studies that focus on Iran and Shiism, discussed the transformation of Iran's foreign policy after the Revolution and underlined that the understanding of the Ummah of Islam in the Khomeini period could be replaced by an understanding of Shiite Islam. Many authors such as Sandıklı and Salihi (2011), Deniz (2018), Hafeziniya (2017), Efeğil (2012), Adibelli (2012, 2017), Şahin (2006, 2008), Oktav (2011) and Bingöl (2013) mention policies carried out within the framework of the Shiite understanding of Iran and discuss conflicts in the Middle East and the power struggle in the region within a sectarian context.

This study aims to address the religious aspect of Iranian foreign policy by focusing on the reflection of Shiism after the 1979 Revolution. While it is accepted that Iran's foreign policy has developed according to an axis of Shiism within this study, the question as to whether there are practices that go beyond this axis remains; this study aims to explore this issue. It is also important to seek answers through exemplary practices as to where, how, and why the understanding of Shiism is used in Iran's foreign policy. This study benefited from primary and secondary sources written in Turkish and English. This study tries to reveal how Shiism is generally positioned in Iran's foreign policy after the Revolution by adopting the explanatory case study method and makes use of the fields of History, Sociology, Theology, Political Science, and especially International Relations. In accordance with this framework, the study first examines the factors affecting the Iranian foreign policy-making process, such as Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, ideology and religious identity, the concepts of Shiite crescent and velayet-i faqih theorized by Khomeini, Iranian identity and anti-Westernism. Following the significant background, the role of Shiism in Iranian foreign policy, which constitutes the main part of the study, is discussed by highlighting the places where this policy is implemented. In the conclusion part, the findings of the study are presented along with a brief summary.

2. THE FOREIGN POLICY-MAKING PROCESS OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Iran, which has been trying to become a regional power since the Revolution through its rich historical and cultural background and geopolitical position, sees itself as the most important actor in determining the future of the Middle East in general and the Gulf region in particular. Elements such as its geopolitical and geostrategic

position, the desire to protect its territorial integrity, historical experience and rivalries, Western countries' interventions in Iran's domestic policy, the inhomogeneity of ethnic structure, religious understanding, and its national identity are all factors affecting Iran's foreign policy and construction process.

The Leadership office, the highest political and religious authority of the Islamic Republic of Iran, was established within the framework of Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of *velayat-i faqih*. The Supreme Leader is the leader of the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Ummah, according to Articles 57 and 110 of Iran's Constitution of 1979. The Supreme Leader, which determines the general policies of the country, is vested with wide powers from the appointment of the commanding level of the armed forces to the judiciary, from the press to the dismissal of the president with the consent of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, from deciding on war and peace to the mobilization of the armed forces.

Although the presidency is the highest authority after the Supreme Leader, the president is obliged to carry out domestic and foreign policy in a way that does not conflict with the Supreme Leader. Since the Supreme Leader has absolute authority in determining the general policy of the country, the president cannot be an active actor in domestic and foreign politics alone. The Ministry of Intelligence and the Quds Force within the Revolutionary Guards Army, which are in direct contact with the Supreme Leader due to their positions in the Supreme Security Council, are effective in the foreign policy-making process (Lim, 2015).

Iran, which sees itself as the protector of all Muslims, aims to protect the oppressed, support the territorial integrity and independence of Muslim countries, protect the rights of Muslims, and establish peaceful relations with them (Art. 3, 152). Within this context, Iran also aims to create an attraction power for both Muslim countries and non-Muslim anti-Western countries and tries to strengthen its religious ties with the Muslim world by using different foundations and aid organizations. Iran reveals its spiritual and political mission in global politics through parastatal organizations operating in different geographies of the world. This mission, the foundations of which were laid in the 1980s with the attempts to export the Revolution, is still maintained in the Islamic world through activities for the development of the diplomatic and religious infrastructure, especially in those regions with significant Shiite populations.

Having undergone a radical transformation with the 1979 Revolution, Iran adopted a foreign policy understanding aimed at establishing Islamic unity (Koç, 2020: 169–170). Although factors such as anti-Westernism, Persian culture, geopolitics, and realpolitik are individually significant in the country's foreign policy-making process, religious ideology activity remains at the forefront. Within this context, it is necessary to mention the views of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder and first Supreme Leader of Iran, the Iranian identity, demographics, and the tools used in Iranian foreign policy.

2.1. Khomeini, Ideology and Religious Identity

The source of sovereignty is based on divine legitimacy in Zoroastrianism, the dominant religion in Iran before Islam, where religion and state relations have developed intertwined in every period. One example of this is that the Achaemenid Emperor Darius based his power and legitimacy on Ahura Mazda, the creator deity (Rigiderakhshan, 2020: 402). In the Safavid period, the understanding of Shiite Islam developed with the inclusion of culture, unlike that of other Shiite states. This understanding, based on religious and cultural foundations, maintained its effectiveness until the Pahlavi period when nationalism was prioritized. The religious identity, which was kept in the background during the Pahlavi period, began to show itself very strongly with the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

Among the various factors affecting Iran's foreign policy, geopolitics and identity are secondary to ideology. The ideology that Khomeini outlined was influenced by the lessons learned from the Shah regime's practices and Iranian political history. Khomeini gave the Iranian foreign policy its ideological color, even though there were some deviations from his aims in terms of the approaches (Güleç, 2018), which stipulate that the views and philosophies of the leaders should be known to understand the foreign policy ideologies and strategies of the countries. Khomeini was not only the leader of the Revolution and the new Iranian state, but also a leader who was able to influence large sections of the Iranian population in the pre-revolutionary period. In

addition to religious lessons, Khomeini also provided suggestions to a limited number of students in madrasahs on political, economic, and social issues. During the pre-revolutionary period, he opposed the Shah's policies and consequently experienced periods of imprisonment and exile. During these processes, many of his students and family members lost their lives. Although the doctrine he initially created by combining traditional and modern views changed with the Revolution, he succeeded in influencing many intellectuals. In particular, the form of government he created by benefiting from the teachings of Islam, Shiite political thought, democracy, and republic, and his being an implementer of these, makes Khomeini stand out as a unique figure (Algar, 2009: 30–48).

The intellectual landscape of Iran during the years leading up to the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 was marked by a wide range of ideologies and intellectual currents. Although there were leftist ideas and intellectual contributions, it's worth noting that the ideology of the Islamic Republic, as developed by Khomeini, was heavily influenced by Islamic and Shi'a political thought, rather than strictly leftist ideologies. Although there was some collaboration between leftist factions and the new authorities during the early years of the Islamic Republic, these partnerships were short-lived. Khomeini's concept of an Islamic State, based on Islamic law and principles, diverged from the more secular and leftist views of some intellectuals and activists.

According to Khomeini, who sees the world as a field of struggle, even if there is no worldly victory in the mortal realm, the right thing must be done and thus spiritual victory must be achieved (Humeyni, 1991: 267–269). This effect is seen in Khomeini's writings. For example, based on what happened in Karbala, he classifies people in the world as being oppressors or oppressed. Accordingly, believers in Khomeinist ideology are generally the oppressed, and non-believers are the oppressors. Khomeini, who also uses these definitions politically and places the administrations in the Persian Gulf on the side of the oppressor, sees all the oppressed as the same, whether they are Muslims or not. Likewise, the old regime of the Shah is seen as being on the oppressing side, and the Iranian people as on the oppressed side. Based on this idea, he divides states into two groups: the first are oppressing countries, which exploit other countries' resources and oppress them by using force, including the USA, the former USSR, Israel, and those who cooperate with these states; the second group, the oppressed, though mostly comprising Muslim peoples, also includes non-Muslim oppressed peoples (Humeyni, 1991: 144–145).

Another distinction made by Khomeini is the classification he made according to the ideologies of the prominent parties of the Cold War period. Oppressive countries include the USA and those who follow the capitalist ideology, as well as the USSR and those who follow the socialist ideology. Leaving aside the ideological distinction between the two, these two superpowers were seen as dominating and controlling all other countries. according to their respective ideologies. Countries that submit to the pressures of the USA and the USSR are worth nothing. According to Khomeini, Iran became a free and sovereign state through its people when they resisted Shah's regime and achieved independence (Ramazani, 1986: 22).

The third distinction in Khomeini's thoughts concerns morality and spirit. In this distinction, the world is divided into those who follow Allah's way and faith and those who follow the devil's way and unbelief. Accordingly, the Qur'an and the Sunnah are seen as the guiding sources of faith. The path of belief, which Khomeini defined as the right path, and the path of unbelief, which is opposite to this path, are always at war. Khomeini stated that Iran moved into the path of faith and truth with the Revolution, with a spiritual war being declared against the USA, Israel, and the USSR, the representatives of unbelief, superstition, and oppression. Regarding this issue, Khomeini (1981: 185, 214) said: "We are at war with international communism as well as with global western plunderers led by America, Zionism, and Israel. America is worse than England; England is worse than America. The Soviet Union is worse than both..." Accordingly, the ideological foundations of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran are the following principles of Khomeini (Ramazani, 1983: 21–22):

1. The rejection of allegiance to the superpowers of the bipolar system during the Cold War is expressed as a 'rejection of all kinds of allegiance'. According to this principle, which does not mean cutting off relations, foreign relations should be within the framework of equality and mutual interests.

2. The USA is the 'great devil', that is, the greatest enemy.

3. Israel and Zionism should never be reconciled, and the struggle and war must continue until Zionism is destroyed. Movements that fight against Israel and strive for the liberation of Jerusalem should be supported.

4. The oppressed people should be protected and cooperated with.

According to Khomeini, great powers want to destroy the states established by Muslims, seize their lands and goods, and enslave their people. They are ready to do anything to achieve these goals. Khomeini propounded the argument that the Ottoman Empire was divided and plundered in this way and these policies will never end (Hunter, 1990: 39).

To Khomeini, who was against monarchies, most of the regimes that rule Muslims are illegitimate. There are two reasons behind his opposition to monarchies: the first reason is based on Imam Hussein's struggle against Muawiya and Yazid, who turned the caliphate into a sultanate system; the second reason concerns the oppressive policies of the Shah regime in Iran. When we look at the discourses and teachings used during the Revolution, it is seen that the supporters of Khomeini position themselves as the soldiers of Imam Hussein, who was against the sultanate. Furthermore, he argued that all monarchies came to power and survived through oppression and violence (Khomeini, 1981: 169). The effects of these thoughts are seen in Iran's relations with the countries in the Persian Gulf. According to Khomeini, who stated that the rulers of these countries divided the Islamic ummah and were the representatives of oppressive forces, these monarchies came to power with the help of the oppressing great powers and protected their thrones with their help. Khomeini's words "Sacrifice your blood to protect Islam and overthrow tyrants and parasites" provides a good example by which we can understand his opposition to monarchies (Metkin, 2016: 103).

Another important element in Iranian foreign policy-making process is the understanding of pan-Islamism. According to this understanding, which came to the fore with the Iranian Revolution, the cause of the bad situation in which Muslims find themselves in is their alienation from the holy path of Islam. Considering Iran's foreign policy principles and approaches, it is seen that it is positioned against the unipolar international system led by the USA. For this reason, Muslims and oppressed peoples must cooperate to change this order (Khomeini, 1981: 206).

Another approach used to define Iran's sectarian doctrine towards the Islamic World is the theory of *Ummu'l Qura*. According to Khomeini, the state established in Iran after the Revolution will be the center of an Islamist world order that will include the entire Islamic Ummah. This doctrine, which has become a very important strategy of the post-Khomeini foreign policy approach, was theorized by Ali Khamenei's advisor Muhammad Javad Larijani under the name of the *Umm al-Qura* theory. *Umm al-Qura* represents a state that will have authority over the entire Islamic Ummah. The theory is based on the fact that Iran became the leader of the Islamic world with the revolution and that all Muslims should accept Khomeini's leadership and custody (Aarabi, 2020: 27) In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to establish Islamic governments in various countries with the awareness of revitalizing the understanding of Shiite Islam and ultimately to establish a single Islamic government under the leadership of *Umm al-Qura*. (Elias F. & Erol M.S., 2021: 24–25) This approach shows that Iran is trying to centralize its position in the Islamic World and make itself a religious and political center. However, according to Alsulami ve Elghonemi (2016: 30-31), there has been a shift in the concept of 'exporting the revolution' with the emergence of the expansionist Shiite geopolitical strategy since the fall of Iraq in 2003. The theory of Umm Al-Qura has been transformed into a geopolitical doctrine, which the regime has deployed to pursue regional and international dominance, particularly over the Arab region.

It is important to answer the question of whether there was a significant change in Iranian foreign policy after Khomeini's death in 1989. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei became the new Supreme Leader and as a loyal follower of Khomeini's views, he continued to emphasize the principles such as Islamic governance and exporting of the Revolution, Iran's commitment to anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, and opposition to Western influence, which have always been central to Iran's foreign policy. It seems that while Iran's foreign policy showed continuities during this transition, there were also some changes or adaptations made in response to evolving regional and global dynamics. For example, he introduced a more practical approach to foreign policy compared to the revolutionary fervor of the early years and started a policy of economic and diplomatic engagement with Asian countries, particularly China, India, and Russia.

The Shiite identity manifests itself in the strategic decisions of Iran's foreign policy, which is shaped by the ideology of the Revolution. The principles that comprised the strategic decisions are based on different variables, such as *velayet-i faqih*, anti-imperialism, anti-Westernism, Shiism and Iranian nationalism, and Iran's geopolitics and history.

2.1.1. Theory of *Velayet-i Faqih*

Khomeini's understanding of *velayet-i faqih* brought a new dynamism to Shiism in state and administration issues. Shiite ulama established good relations with the state and was fully involved in political and social life during the Safavid Era (1501–1736). This period stood out as the period when the ulama discovered their influence on the people and the rulers. Shiite ulama, who acted relatively dependent on the state from the Safavids to the Qajar Period (1794–1925) in Iran, began to completely dominate the religious, political, and social areas in the same period (Uyar, 2000: 83–84). Following the historical background in Iran, Khomeini put forward the view that there should be no separation between religion and government in an Islamic state with the theory of *velayet-i faqih*, arguing that modern state administration and social life should closely resemble the administration and life as it was during the early years of Islam. According to this understanding, it is believed that the legitimate rulers got their leadership right from the Prophet Muhammad through the Imams (Humeyni, 1991: 56–57). The theory institutionalized in Iran accepts the Leadership Office as the decision-making, implementation, and supervisory authority on all important issues in the country.

2.1.2. The Policy of Exporting the Revolution

Based on the idea of exporting the Revolution, the foreign policy was also motivated by a desire for the Iranian Revolution to take place in other Islamic countries as well. Accordingly, the efforts of Muslims and the oppressed to rid themselves of "pro-Western despotic rulers" should be supported. In this process, Iran will take on the protection of Islamic revolutionary movements by helping the oppressed peoples outside the country. As can be understood from Khomeini's words: "The fact that the Islamic Revolution stays within the borders of Iran means the end of the regime" (Tüysüzoğlu, 2017: 10), the idea of exporting the Revolution is also necessary for ensuring the security of Iran's new regime. With Khomeini, the protection of the oppressed and Muslims has become one of the central elements of Iranian foreign policy. Khomeini (Humeyni, 1992: 137–138) said the following regarding this issue:

"...Iran is an example for the oppressed peoples. The oppressed in the world should see that the empty-handed Iranian people can resist and defeat the great powers by relying on faith, unity and Islam... Muslims and even the oppressed from all segments of society should rise... Today, our Revolution has been exported; Islam is on the agenda everywhere, and the oppressed have pinned all their hopes on Islam... Hopefully, with the spread of the Islamic Revolution, the evil forces will be pushed into seclusion. The government of the oppressed will be established and the necessary preparations will be made for the government of the Mahdi of the last time."

In the first years of the Iranian Revolution, in which Shiite and Sunni brotherhood was emphasized and sectarian differences could be ignored, the understanding of Islamic brotherhood was underlined and focus was given to the universal aspect of Islam. Accordingly, Khomeini prohibited criticism of the first three rightly guided caliphs, let Shiites pray behind the Sunnis, and declared those fatwas that contradicted this issue to be invalid (Gündoğan, 2016: 190–192). While calling for unity over the brotherhood of Muslims, the Islamic confession of faith "There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His servant and messenger" was determined as the basic principle.

As mentioned above, one of the reasons behind the idea of exporting the Revolution was the concern about ensuring the security of the newly established regime. While the Shah regime continued to exist in harmony with the international system, the new regime existed through its struggle against the international system and its actors. Iran, which was pushed into isolation due to its harsh attitude toward the surrounding countries and international actors, used the idea of exporting the Revolution to escape this situation. After the Revolution, the new regime, which shaped domestic politics and sought out new pursuits in foreign policy, was faced with two

options. The first was the establishment of governments in neighboring states that adopted the same views and ideals. The second was to form alliances with states opposed to the dominant powers of the international system. According to Khomeini, Iran would be defeated if it remained closed to the world and was unable to spread the Revolution. Within this context, Iran preferred to adopt moderate approaches in pursuing both options. Efforts to export the Revolution were undertaken in two ways: peaceful propaganda and actions based on military force. Although Iranian rulers mostly used peaceful propaganda methods, there were periods when military force was used (Ramazani, 1983: 12–21), as seen in the example of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Khomeini said: “Our war is a war of faith and has no geographical borders. In this war of faith, we must form a great Islamic army all over the world” (Şahin, 2011: 254). Such discourse is of great importance in terms of embodying Iran’s revolutionary ideology and putting it into practice in foreign policy.

Iran adopted more inclusive discourses during the first years of the Revolution, but these changed in subsequent years, turning into discourses and practices in which the tendencies of the Shiite sect became more decisive. Attempts to export the Revolution were also implemented, mostly in the first decade of the Revolution. Within this context, in the war that started with Iraq in 1980, Iran provoked the Iraqi Shiites and tried to get them to enter the war on their side to spread the Revolution. The idea of exporting a revolution, which had the potential to change balances by creating a domino effect in the Middle East, remained in the background during the Iran-Iraq War (Hinnebusch, 2003: 194) However, in this process, Iran institutionalized the idea of revolution ideology by combining it with Iranian nationalism. In addition, Iran had provided support to the Shiite movements operating in Lebanon since the 1980s, and even sent its Revolutionary Guards to the region. The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has unhesitatingly declared that they support such movements. Furthermore, another aspect of the idea of exporting the Revolution is that Iranian diplomats showed Iran as a model for Muslims in the countries where they operate (Ramazani, 2013: 128–147). By the end of the 1990s, this policy seems to have been pushed into the background. The reason for this is that the idea of exporting the Revolution has an aspect that pushes the countries of the region to unite against Iran.

It is important to underline one more point here that the political situation within Iran may also play a significant role in shaping the country’s foreign policy. In this sense, there are two main factions within the government - the conservative and reformist factions, and both can have different priorities when it comes to foreign policy decisions. Reformist leaders tend to focus on diplomatic engagement, human rights, and international cooperation, while conservative leaders prioritize national sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and resistance to perceived Western influence. Leaders may adopt strategies such as seeking foreign investment or pursuing regional economic cooperation to alleviate economic pressures, During Mohammad Khatami’s presidency (1997-2005), there was a more reformist and pragmatic approach taken compared to other leaders who had a more conservative stance. However, it’s crucial to note that the Supreme Leader, who is constitutionally responsible for determining and supervising the general policy of the state, holds significant influence over foreign policy and plays a crucial role in shaping the overall direction of the country.

2.2. Iranian Identity and Anti-Westernism

Iranian culture, which has survived into the present day in different ways, such as oral and written literature, traditional crafts, and architecture, also plays a considerable role in the construction of the national identity of Iran as a country. Throughout history, this millennia-old culture has spread not only in Iran itself but also across a large geography, as far as India, Anatolia, and Central Asia (Sarıkaya, 2012: 113–115). Ancient Iranian culture also holds an important place for Iranians today, who position themselves differently from other nations (Cottam, 1979: 22–29), especially from the Arabs. For example, the Achaemenid Empire, which dominated a large part of the ancient world, provides a great source of pride and motivation to the Iranians today in terms of reaching those lands in the past and as a leader of those regions. This understanding, the foundations of which were laid during the Pahlavi Era, continued until and after the Iranian Revolution. When compared to the Alexandrian Empire, the Achaemenid Empire is often overshadowed by that of Alexander the Great despite being similar in scope and lasting far longer than the Empire of the Macedonians. This might help emphasise the reasons why Iranians are so proud of this history and why they might consider themselves as being unfairly ignored or ‘looked over’ as a great culture by Western and other perspectives.

The Achaemenid and Safavid Empires have been the greatest influence regarding the formation of the Iranian state identity. The imperial legacy of the Achaemenids is one of the reference points that shapes Iran's regional policies today. The Safavids, on the other hand, are seen as a role model state for the Islamic Republic of Iran in terms of both the spread and institutionalization of Shiism within the regions under the hegemony of the Safavid Empire. All of these legacies prevent Iran from pursuing an inward-looking policy, causing it to see its intervention in those situations it considers unfair in line with its political interests as being legitimate, as well as to evaluate such interventions as humanitarian.

With the Revolution, anti-imperialism and anti-Westernism also increased in Iran. Anti-imperialism can be seen as one of the key motivations of the Revolution, as it was carried out against the Shah and the West, which was seen as the "Shah's collaborator". It is for this reason why Iran sees itself as the protector of exploited and oppressed peoples and builds its foreign policy according to this approach. Iran, which was skeptical of the policies of the West, cut off its relations with Israel and the USA after the Revolution while trying to improve its relations with countries that positioned themselves against the West such as Cuba and Angola. At the same time, Iran, which left Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1979, conducted its relations with Türkiye and Pakistan through Organization for Regional Cooperation and Development (ORCD).

Since the Revolution, Iran has been motivated by its perception of the USA and its allies as a threat. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei argued that the USA never accepted the Islamic Revolution and that it tried to end the Revolution by supporting opponents to the post-Revolution regime within Iran, by imposing economic sanctions on Iran, and by supporting Iran's regional enemies, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel (Reuters, 2014). Iranian political and military leaders also claim that the US military presence around Iran reflects a hostile attitude toward Iran and that it is the USA's intention to attack Iran if Iran pursues any counter-policies (Salvin, 2014). The accusation that radical Sunni groups operating within Iran have been created and financed by the USA to weaken Iran is motivated by this allegation.

2.3. Iran's Demographic Structure and Geopolitics

Iran has a population of approximately 85 million people and is one of the most populous countries in the Middle East. More than 90% of the country is Shia, with almost the remaining 10% being Sunni (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023a) in addition to a very few people of other religions such as Bhai, Christian etc. Persians, peoples of Turkish origin, Kurds, Balochs, Arabs, Armenians, and many other different ethnic groups live in the country. The total population of Shiites in countries other than Iran, most notably Azerbaijan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and India, is approximately 200 million. Although the Shiite population seems to be relatively small within the religious demographic structure of the Middle East, they live in strategically important regions.

Geopolitics comprises all those advantages and disadvantages concerning the effect of geography on politics and international relations; the concept focuses on political, military, and economic activities regarding competition for the control of geographical areas in which strategic resources are located in the world (Gürses, 2013: 7). Accordingly, even if a country's rulers or political system changes, no radical change is expected in that country's foreign policy since its geography does not change. Neighboring Iraq, Türkiye, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, Iran also controls the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic waterway, and borders the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Gulf of Oman. The fact that Iran is located in a critical region where valuable resources such as oil and natural gas are extracted and transferred all over the world increases the role and importance of this country. Due to its geographical location, Iran is also at the key point of important projects such as One Belt One Road (OBOR), which is considered to be a modern reincarnation of the historical Silk Route, as well as the International North-South Transport Corridor. For this reason, Iran works hard to be effective in the surrounding geography and enters into a power struggle with international powers and actors.

On account of its geographical location, Iran's foreign policy is in a state of alarm because it is situated in one of the highest-risk areas in terms of conflict in the world. This geography is the Middle East, where geopolitical competition is both fierce and long-lived, and is extremely important in terms of valuable natural resources; extremism and conflicts in the region are intense, and there is considerable instability due to the activities of

terrorist organizations and civil wars. Iran is also a transit country for international organised crimes such as arms and human trafficking, with members of armed organizations operating in the area mostly coming from Asia to the Middle East.

Oil and natural gas are geopolitically important for Iran, which is a center and transfer point of underground resources. These resources not only offer Iran a serious power potential in terms of realizing its national interests, but also affect Iran's internal and external security in geopolitical terms. Due to its geopolitical position, Iran has always attracted the attention of international actors. For this reason, the country was occupied during both world wars when international powers were in conflict. As a result of these occupations, the need to remain suspicious of great powers has been etched in the social memory of the Iranian people, and has subsequently become a major factor affecting Iran's foreign policy. In this context, Iran's geopolitical position carries both an opportunity and a risk potential concerning its foreign policy.

2.4. Religious Aspect of Iranian Foreign Policy and Foreign Policy Tools

Iran is trying to create an impact on Muslims through issues such as opposing the USA and Western policies, supporting the Palestinians, defending the rights of the oppressed people, and promoting both its religious and political interests by spreading Shiism in different geographies. In doing so, Iran uses its diplomats, who have diplomatic immunity. In addition to social and cultural activities, it also propagates Iranian culture and Shia propaganda through various aid organizations and foundations under its influence. Iran also aims to develop relations with Shiite communities and bring them to a point of defending Iranian policies (Yeğin, 2017: 21–22).

Iran also utilizes certain parastatal organizations that operate within the framework of soft power elements; these include not only traditional religious activities but also various diplomatic missions, such as education undertaken by the Iranian government abroad. It can be said that Iran uses these organizations as a tool to develop diplomatic relations with its transnational connections related to its religious center position and to deepen its relations with communities in the Shiite world. Iran also uses its "Shiite identity" to help justify its strategic goals and connections in the Middle East. Iran's cultural diplomacy and soft power strategies are generally carried out through the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), which is Iran's de facto public diplomacy institution, and other similar organizations.

Iran benefits from certain historical and cultural features that allow religion to be a part of its various foreign policy accumulations. The basis of this foreign-policy approach comes from an understanding of justice, which provides a contextual basis for understanding the role of religion in Iranian foreign policy. There are two main reasons for this: the first is the idea of being just and framing Iranian political Islam as a historical ideal that determines the religious and philosophical legacy of Shiism; the second is Iran's positioning itself as a counter-hegemon against Western oppression.

The idea of supporting the oppressed and spreading justice is one of the key elements in Iranian foreign policy, regardless of the different political tendencies in Iran. Chehabi and Mneimneh (2021: 23–33) schematize Iran's way of reflecting this thought within its foreign policy according to three concentric circles. According to this schema, the third-world countries comprise the outer circle, the Muslim world comprises the middle circle, and Shiite Muslims comprise the inner circle. The claim of counter-hegemony as a discourse manifests itself in Iran, which seeks to challenge the perception of US imperialism in the Middle East and beyond. It is noteworthy that Iran uses such rhetoric to improve its ties with those actors with whom it has commonality, from its support of Palestine to its close relations with Venezuela and the support of prominent Iranian figures to the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA. Iran also aims to develop its place in global politics through this rhetoric (Al-Monitor, 2020).

2.4.1. 'Shia Crescent' and Protection of Holy Places

The concept of the 'Shia Crescent' was first used by Jordanian King Abdullah II in 2004 to point out the Shiite entity as an element that could change the balance in the Middle East. The Crescent starts in Lebanon and passes through Syria, Iraq, and Iran, extending to Bahrain. The concept, which is mostly used as a geopolitical term,

describes the region in which Shiites are in the majority or where they are most active. It is possible to include Azerbaijan, Western Afghanistan, and Yemen in this region. Iran has assigned itself the mission of the protector of the Shiites in its foreign policy and is to increase its effectiveness by providing all kinds of aid, including sending soldiers to the Shiite groups living in this geography. Some authors interpret Iran's policies toward the region as "the turning of the Shiite Crescent into practice" (Emeç, 2020).

Iran's primary concern in terms of its presence in Iraq is to support the Shiites. Several years ago, Iran tried to keep the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) away from its borders as much as possible, and, when such radical groups carried out massacres against Shiites, Iran felt obliged to wage its own 'War on Terror' in the region (Wastnidge, 2020). These Iranian targets include a wider Shiite population in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq, which had been attacked by radical groups. As a result of the threat to Iran by radical groups operating in Syria and Iraq, Iran has deployed its military units to both countries. At this point, Iran also attracts volunteer fighters whose aim is to protect religious sites such as mosques and shrines and recruits large numbers of volunteers from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq.

Since the invasion of Iraq by the USA in 2003, Iran has tended to protect its national interests and increase its effectiveness in the region by using discourses such as the protection of holy places and aid activities in the name of the Mahdi. Iran has tried to legitimize its presence in Syria, where the Shiite population is less than the Jafari Shiism, with the discourse of protecting holy places such as the Sayyidah Zainab Shrine in Damascus, adds the discourse of protecting the Shiites in Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon, where the Shiite population is high (Kamadan, 2022).

2.4.2. Religious Power and Cultural Diplomacy

The theory of *velayet-i faqih* is an important soft power factor for both Iranian and non-Iranian Shiites as it institutionalizes Jafari Shiism. Although Iran gives priority to the Middle East region in line with its Shiite activities, it also engaged in efforts to spread Shiism in Africa, South Asia, and the Americas. However, the fact that the majority of Shiites live in the Middle East remains a facilitating factor for Iran to implement its policies in this region. Iran also tries to make the city of Qom as an educational and tourism center, and to ensure that Shiites from different countries visit Iran. Therefore, it aims to bring the members of different branches of Shiism closer to their understanding and create an impact on these branches accordingly.

Iranian cultural diplomacy continues actively between those countries or communities with which it shares strategic goals as well as religious ties. Religious soft power channels such as The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, The Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly, and The World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought are important parastatal organizations used by Iran in its global religious aid, diplomacy, and development efforts. Moreover, Iran conducts joint studies by connecting with education centers in different geographies through various universities and training centers such as al-Mustafa International University (Ametbek, 2021: 125–139).

Among the foundations and organizations that Iran uses as a tool for religious-cultural diplomacy and soft power, the Mostazafan Foundation of Islamic Revolution, Barakat Foundation, Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs, Saadi Foundation, and the Farabi Cinema Foundation can be given as examples. More than a third of Iran's economy is controlled by these foundations, all of which are directly linked to the state. The organizations related to Iran are also financed to a large extent through the revenues generated by these foundations (Saeidi, 2004: 479–498).

3. THE ROLE OF SHIISM IN IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

In this forthcoming section, we will delve into the situation of the Shiite population in various other countries. Considering the paramount influence of religious ideology on Iran's foreign policy, it would be prudent to engage in a more in-depth exploration of the specific religious principles or doctrines that underpin Iranian foreign policy decisions. This could encompass a deeper examination of how Shiism shapes their approach to regional and international relations. To enhance the depth of our analysis, it would be advantageous to illustrate the impact

of Shiism on foreign policy with concrete examples. Moreover, it is necessary to provide detailed instances of situations where this principle was not effectively applied in events occurring within Iran's neighboring regions.

Shiites make up about one-fifth of the world's population of Muslims. Countries with a Shia majority are Iran, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Iraq, with Shiites constituting the largest sectarian group among Muslims in Lebanon. In addition to these populations, there are also significant numbers of Shiites in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Syria, Kuwait, Oman, Jordan, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. In the Persian Gulf countries, especially in Saudi Arabia, those places in which the Shiites have settled are geostrategically important, generally due to their natural gas and oil resources. Iran keeps the problems of Shiites in different countries on the agenda, shows that it stands by the people living in these places, and tries to influence them by interacting with them through organizations such as Hezbollah and Hashd al-Shaabi. Iran, which uses hard and soft power elements in various regions such as the Middle East, South Asia, Caucasus, and Africa, aims to protect its national interests and increase its effectiveness in these regions.

3.1. Places Where the Shia Policy is Implemented

The Middle East is of vital importance in terms of protecting Iran's national interests, ensuring its security, and expanding its sphere of influence. Every achievement in this region, which is the center of Iran's foreign policy, is extremely important for the country. About 65% of the population of Iraq, the key country in the Middle East for Iran, is Shiite. The presence of important places for Shiites in Iraq allows Iran to increase its influence in this country with the discourse of protecting the holy places. Hashd al-Shaabi, one of the groups supported by Iran in Iraq, claims that it aims to protect cities such as Karbala, Najaf, Basra, and Samarra, as well as the shrines these cities contain, all of which are considered sacred for Shiites. Hashd al-Shaabi, which has very close and deep relations with the Iranian state and army (Kılıç et al., 2018: 46–63) is also linked to Shiite organizations operating in Iraq, such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Badr Organization, Sadr Movement, Kataib Hezbollah, and Kata'ib al-Imam Ali (Yeşiltaş and Duran: 2018; Sowel, 2015). Iran's gains in Iraq after 2003 may be damaged as a result of the loss of power of the Shiite bloc and the potential factors that may strain Iran–Iraq relations. While Iran wants the continuation of the support of the Shiites in Iraq through its soft power elements, it also supports various Shiite militia groups to ensure stability and security in Iraq. It therefore aims to prevent Iraq from posing a threat to itself and the country from becoming entirely under the control of the USA.

The Shiites, who comprise roughly 10–15% of the population of Saudi Arabia, generally reside in the eastern cities of that country where there are rich oil fields. The Shiites here are directly affected by the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Bahgat, 1999: 79–80). The sectarian rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia deteriorated during the Iran–Iraq War when the Saudi authorities helped the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. The possibility of this war ending in favor of Iran and its concern about stability in the region caused Saudi Arabia to increase its financial support to Iraq. Proxy wars transpiring in the Middle East comprise an ongoing sectarian power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Within these proxy wars, Iran acts together with the 'Axis of Resistance', comprising Syria, Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis, and certain Iraqi Shiite groups, occasionally supported by Russia and China. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has close relations with the League of Arab States, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the People's Mojahedin Organization, the Kurdistan Region, certain Sunni organizations, the Yemeni Government, Albania, Israel, the USA, and the European Union.

The proxy wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia are carried out across the geopolitical, economic, and sectarian effects of the parties trying to increase their regional influence; both supported the opposing side in the political disagreements and conflicts in Bahrain, Lebanon, and Qatar, and especially in those of Syria and Yemen. These conflicting interests also manifest across a wider area, including Nigeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, North and East Africa regions, South Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, the Balkans, and the Caucasus.

Bahrain, whose population is mostly Shiite, is ruled by a Sunni Caliph dynasty. Bahrain is important for Iran, not only in terms of its Shiite population but also because of its rich underground resources. In addition, Iran considers Bahrain as part of its territory. The attitudes of Shiites in Bahrain toward their government have brought the Bahraini administration closer to Saudi Arabia and have even made it dependent on that country. Protests initiated by the Shiites in 2002 forced the Bahraini government to undertake reforms. The Shiites, who

want to act within the framework of the principle of equal citizenship, are not recruited into the army and are often excluded from state bureaucracy compared with the Sunni population (Ayhan, 2013: 133–134). Within the context of tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Bahrain government generally acts in partnership with Saudi Arabia.

Approximately 25–30% of Kuwait's population consists of Shiites (Infoplease, 2023). Kuwait, which has common historical ties with Iran, faced devastating effects as a result of the Iranian Revolution and provided financial and logistical support to Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War. Apart from this exceptional case, Kuwait describes its relations with Iran as “excellent and historic” (The National, 2014). Qatari Shiites, who comprise about 5% of Qatar's population, are generally very wealthy and coexist peacefully with and within the Qatari administration. Qatar's sharing of the South Pars, also known as the North Dome field, the richest natural gas field in the world, with Iran is one of the reasons why Qatar follows a foreign policy that distances itself from tensions in the region. Qatar, like other Gulf monarchies, is disturbed by Iran's sectarian-based foreign policy. However, Qatar, because its relations with Iran are generally more distant and independent from the influence of Saudi Arabia, unlike that of other Gulf countries, sometimes faces pressure from these countries. Qatar advocates dialogue with Iran and makes calls to other countries to do the same (Independent Türkçe, 2021).

The population of the United Arab Emirates is approximately 15–20% Shiite, and the country is also home to hundreds of thousands of Iranian and Indian Shiites. Most Shiites in the United Arab Emirates, like those in Iran, are Jafari. Despite this, and despite Iran's attempts to implement its policy of exporting the Revolution in the United Arab Emirates, the United Arab Emirates acts alongside the Gulf Cooperation Council against Iran's sectarian-based foreign policy.

Iran officially recognizes Palestine, the majority of which is Sunni, rejects the two-state solution, and does not recognize Israel, arguing that Palestine is an inseparable whole. Iran ideologically believes that it has the right and capacity to lead the Islamic Ummah (Hamanei, 2018: 102-114) and, for this reason, needs to defend a just cause by attaching a universal meaning to justice. Iran's support for the Palestinian issue is also related to the implementation of the rhetoric of defending and supporting the oppressed against the oppressors, a point often emphasized by Khomeini and which is also included in the Iranian Constitution. According to Alavi (2019, 106–165), Iran, a country that has shaped itself around anti-Zionism, skepticism toward the USA, and Islamist policies, also supports the Palestinian cause because it allows Iran to expand its ideological and political influence in the Muslim world. For Iran, the Palestinian cause is at the top of its strategic goals while also reflecting the country's fundamental revolutionary values. Anti-Zionism and the struggle against the occupation of Palestine are vital components of both Iranian political discourse and the revolutionary aspect of Iran, which is accused of pursuing sectarian policies.

The Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas, was founded in 1987 as the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. It gained popularity among Palestinians due to the growing influence of Islamist ideology as the Arab nationalist and socialist ideology of the Palestine Liberation Organization weakened (Asa, 2020: 1) Hamas, along with Hezbollah, Syria, certain Iraqi Shiite groups, Houthis, and Iran, is considered an important part of the ‘Axis of the Resistance’. However, after the Syrian Civil War began in 2011, Hamas opposed the Assad government and supported the opposition, leading to strained relations with Iran. In 2017, Hamas left the Muslim Brotherhood and adopted a more neutral position on Syria. Despite their differences, both Iran and Hamas view Israel as a common enemy, which has led to a softening of their relationship (Şarkül Avsat, 2019).

The popularity of Hezbollah, which established its political wing in Lebanon in 1992, has resulted in an increase in Iran's influence in the Middle East. For Iran, Lebanon is both a front line against Israel and a base for its activities in Africa. Therefore, Iran maintains good relations not only with Hezbollah but also with the Lebanese army (Tasnim News Agency, 2021). Many training centers in Lebanon have been established through the support provided by Iran. Such activities are largely managed by the Islamic Culture and Communication Organization. Within this framework, educational institutions operating under the name of Al-Mahdi Schools provide education in line with the ideology of Hezbollah. It carries out social activities in many fields such as repairing places damaged by Israeli attacks or natural disasters, providing clean drinking water, supporting

agricultural activities, building health institutions, feeding the poor, and supporting the families of Hezbollah members who have lost their lives (Yeğin, 2017: 72–73). Hezbollah is not only an armed organization, but over time has become a very important actor capable of acting independently of the Lebanese state. Iran's sectarian activity in Lebanon is not only conducted through Hezbollah, and Iran also carries out its political and cultural activities in Lebanon through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran and various foundations.

Data from 2012 indicates that Syria, whose population is 15% Arab Alawite and Isma'ili, a branch of Shia Islam, was dragged into a civil war that involved different actors following the protests in the Arab Spring, a process that spread to the rest of that country (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023b). With the war, Iran's influence on the Arab Alawites and other Shiites in the country increased. Iran, which made great efforts to prevent the collapse of the Assad administration, has been influential in the departure of Shiite militias from different countries to Syria by using the discourse of protecting holy places in Syria. Iran, which carries out the activities of these militias through the Quds Force (Harris, 2015: 16-17), has gained an area through which it can open up the Mediterranean and thereby increase its influence as a result of the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War. This was also one of the purposes behind the establishment of Hezbollah. However, reaching Lebanon was not easy due to the Syrian government and Saddam's administration in Iraq. Although the regional interests of Syria and Iran have not always been in agreement, the elimination of the possibility of disrupting Syria's relations with Iran as a result of the Syrian Civil War relieved the Tehran administration. Iran is trying to increase its influence on the 'Axis of Resistance', which includes Iran itself; this geopolitical term has been used since 2010. Iran therefore hopes to increase its influence in the region through a discourse of protecting holy places there.

Iran motivates local and foreign Shiite groups active in the Syrian region with the rhetoric of Mahdism and the protection of holy places. The Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force undertook the management and administration of these militias (Smyth, 2013), which came from different geographies such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Africa (Harris, 2015: 22–24). Among these groups are militia groups such as Al-Abbas, Imam Hussein, Khorasan, Fatimiyyun, and Zeynebbiyun Brigades.

To consider the issue in the context of Turkey, the relations between Turkey and Iran, which have been in competition since the Ottoman and Safavid periods, when the Sunni-Shiite struggle began, developed positively in the first half of the 20th century as both countries followed policies close to the West. However, this situation was reversed with the 1979 Revolution in Iran and the September 12, 1980 coup in Turkey. Iran accused Turkey of trying to export the secular and democratic regime, and Turkey accused Iran of trying to export the theocratic regime (Gündoğan, 2011: 98–99). In order to prevent the success of Iran's policies to realize the Shiite crescent, it is trying to act together with anti-Iran Sunni groups by following policies aimed at Sunni identity in the region. Especially in the ongoing struggle in the Middle East, sects are used as foreign policy tools. Alevi, the largest religious/sectarian group in Türkiye, constitute approximately 15–20% of the general population (Güneş, 2019: 64). Although Turkish (Anatolian) Alevi are, like Iranian Jafaris, Twelver Imams, there are cultural, ethnic, and religious differences between the two groups (Karakaya-Stump, 2015). Anatolian Alevism comprises secular and democratic cultures, unlike Jafari Shiism in Iran (Güneş, 2019: 64). In addition to these differences, it is not easy for Iran to reach Anatolian Alevi nor make them adopt its own understanding of Shiism due to reasons such as Anatolia being distant from Iran, the Anatolian Alevi population being connected to different '*dedes and pirs*', and foreign/non-Alevi not being allowed in most *cem* rituals. Although it is known that Shiite missionaries carried out activities to reach Alevi and Caferi in Türkiye, there are a few Anatolian Alevi who later adopted Jafari Shiism, though it is not known whether these individuals were influenced by Iranian-backed Shiites (Öğüt, 2019).

Shiites also comprise approximately 10–15% of Afghanistan's population, a country that was ruled by Iranian rulers in the past (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023c). The majority of Hazaras living in Afghanistan who speak Dari, also known as Eastern Persian, are Shia. Iran's activities in Afghanistan are largely focused on this ethnic group. Due to its historical, geographical, and economic interaction with Afghanistan, Iran is sensitive to the various developments that transpire in Afghanistan. On account of its potential to directly affect its national security, Iran tends to conduct its relations with Afghanistan within a pragmatic framework. This trend is the reason why Iran was the first country to recognize the Taliban administration after they returned to power in

Afghanistan in 2021. Although Iran cooperates with the Taliban to protect its commercial interests, it aims to increase its influence in Afghanistan by filling the power vacuum created after the US withdrawal from the region through Shiite militias. Considering Iran cooperates with the Taliban to protect its commercial interests, it is not expected that Iran will engage in talks concerning the possibility of engaging in destructive action in Afghanistan (Yılmaz, 2021: 124–126).

About 200 million Muslims live in India, which is the second most populous country in the world and has a total population of approximately 1.4 billion people (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023d). Although the number of Shiites in India is uncertain, it can be stated that an estimated 45 million Shiites live there, the majority of which are Jafaris (Ethirajan, 2016). In this sense, India is home to the second-largest Shia population in the world after Iran. Iran maintains relations with the Shiites living in India through various foundations and organizations. In addition to the Shiite foundations established by Iran in India, there are also foundations established by Indian Shiites. One of these is the Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust, which is run by Indian clergy who have been educated in Iran. Iran is particularly interested in Muslims living in India. During his visit to India in 2018, the President of Iran at the time, Hassan Rouhani, visited a Sunni Mosque and delivered messages of unity and solidarity (Hindustan Times, 2018). Indian Shiites, who have very close relations with Iran, are active in many fields in India, such as art, religion, politics, and the business world, and have gained the sympathy of Indians generally through various training and aid activities. Through these people, Iran aims to expand its foundations to reach wider audiences, thereby spreading Iranianism and Shiism in order to become more active in India and its significant Muslim population.

The Shiite presence in Morocco dates to the Idrisids, who were affiliated with the Zaydi branch of Shiism that existed in the region in the 8th century (Al-Kaisi, 2019: 124). Iran's sectarian activities involving Morocco, the majority of whose population is Sunni, started via the use of Lebanon-based publications that were economically supported by Iran. Iran mostly carries out its activities in this country via Moroccans who work in various European countries, especially those of Spain and Belgium, who have been Shiitized through Shiite institutions and foundations in these countries (Elad-Altman, 2007: 3). Today, with the widespread use of the internet, the abovementioned publications have been replaced by online platforms.

Nigeria is the sixth most populous country in the world with a population of approximately 220 million people. Muslims comprise 53.5% of Nigeria's overall population with Christians comprising 45.9% (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023e). It is estimated that 5–17% of Nigeria's Muslim population of approximately 115 million people are Shia (Tangaza, 2019), meaning that Nigeria is home to the largest Shia population in Africa. Shiism in Nigeria began to gain recognition and power in the 1980s with the efforts of Nigerian Ayatollah Ibrahim Zakzaki, who was supported by Iran. Iran carries out its activities in Nigeria through an organization called the Nigerian Islamic Movement, which was founded under the leadership of Zakzaki, and which aims to establish a state similar to that found in Iran (Doukhan, 2016). Iran also provides education to Nigerian students at important Shiite centers such as Najaf and Qom.

Iran also aims to establish a sphere of influence in the Balkans, particularly in the countries of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Approximately 60% of Albania's population is Muslim, of which around 2.1% are Bektashis (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023f). Iran is closely interested in Bektashi groups in this country (Bardos, 2013: 59–66), and carries out its activities through the Madrasa and Qur'an courses operating abroad under the Sadi Shirazi Cultural Foundation and al-Mustafa University. Shiism was introduced to Bosnia and Herzegovina, where approximately half of the population is Sunni Muslim, by Iranians during the 1992–1995 Bosnian War; Wahhabism was also introduced to Bosnia and Herzegovina through Arab influence at this time. Iran sees Bosnia and Herzegovina as its gateway to Europe and aims to increase its effectiveness and influence in the country (Berkolli, 2021: 9–12). Although Shia comprises a very small population in the country, occasional tensions between Shiites and Wahhabis nevertheless occur (Rose, 2016).

Iran also exercises and fosters activities in and toward Latin American countries. The first mosques in Argentina were opened by the Shiites in Buenos Aires with the support of Iran. With the aim of continuing its activities in Argentina through the use of mosques and embassies, Iran selects certain individuals via its cultural

centers and local mosques in Latin America. These individuals are brought to Iran for sightseeing, subsequently being returned to Latin America as Muslims following their training in Qom (Dvorakova, 2020).

4. CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to discuss Iran's foreign policy-making process and the impact of Shiism on Iranian foreign policy. Shiism, which has been closely related to the politics of all those states established in Iran since the time of the Safavids, has always been intertwined with politics. As a result of the 1979 Revolution, this began to assume a central role within the Iranian state and the ideal of the ulema came to dominate the state and social life as a whole. Within this process, the Shiite creed and Shiite political thought constituted the basis of thought for Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 Revolution. According to Khomeini, who argued that there should be no separation of religion and state in an Islamic state, modern state administration and social life should resemble the administration and life as they were during the initial years of Islam. Seeing the earth as a field of struggle, Khomeini argued that the right thing to strive for is a spiritual victory, even if this victory cannot be realized in the material realm.

"Shiite identity", which shapes not only Iran's domestic political behavior but also its foreign policy behavior, is more than just a foreign policy tool. Following the Revolution in 1979, which ended the Shah regime in Iran, "Shiite identity" gained prominence in the country's domestic and foreign policies. Shiism has always been closely associated with politics in Iranian history, dating back to the Safavid era and continuing through the various states established in Iran afterward. The theory of *velayat-i faqih*, which was developed by Khomeini, forms the basis of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Constitution and constitutional institutions. The acceptance of Jafarism, the largest branch of Shiism, as an official sect in Iran, the belief in Mahdi being included in the Constitution, the Parliament's inability to pass laws that conflict with Islam and Shiism, the existence of an institution called the Guardian Council, which functions as both a high election board and a constitutional court reveals how influential Shiism is in the internal politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

With the Revolution, Iran's understanding of foreign policy was carried out according to the "Shiite identity", which was largely influenced by Khomeini's views combined with Iranian nationalism. The principles that comprised this new understanding include different variables such as *velayet-i faqih*, anti-imperialism and anti-Westernism, Shiism and Iranian Nationalism, and Iran's geopolitics and history. The common aspect of all these identities is the understanding that Iran should exist wherever Muslims and Shiites are being oppressed, and this has allowed Iran to use both soft and hard power to carry out its foreign policy. For this reason, Iran and its revolutionary ideology are to be protected, and the Revolution and its ideology are to be spread to the Muslim world through the creation of a domino effect. Adopting the role of the protector of the oppressed in order to realize this ideal, which is referred to as the idea of exporting the Revolution, Iran pushed sectarian differences into the background during the initial years that followed the Revolution. In accordance with this approach, Iran focused on the universal aspect of Islam by emphasizing the brotherhood of Muslims and proffered a call for Muslim unity and cooperation.

Iran has also used the aforementioned identities to justify its strategic goals and connections in the region. Aiming to carry out the exportation of the Revolution and utilizing actions based on soft and hard power, Iran has also used Shiite groups in different regions and through different actions based on hard power. Benefiting from gains made by these groups in their respective regions, Iran maintains communication with them mostly through the Quds Force, which is affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards. On the other hand, Iran carries out its soft power-based activities through foundations and organizations that are either affiliated with or financed by the Iranian state. Since the 1990s, Iran's idea of exporting the Revolution has evolved into the discourse of the protection of holy places, and although the Revolution has not spread, Iran tries to achieve its foreign policy goals through Shiite groups or foundations in those areas with Shiite populations or that contain holy Shiite locations. Although the Islamic Republic of Iran, the third largest Shiite state in history, after the Fatimid and Safavid states, has set the goal of spreading Shiism, this approach causes sectarian tensions to increase globally and especially in the Middle East.

Today, Iran follows a wide-ranging active strategy, not only in Muslim-majority countries where Shiites live but also in many different regions, from Latin American countries to Europe, from Africa to the Far East. When there are no Shiite groups operating in countries in which state authority is weak, Iran carries out its activities through various foundations, and directs communities it has managed to bring closer to itself in the pursuit of its foreign policy objectives. Iran has expanded its sphere of influence since the Revolution, not only spreading its official sect of Jafari Shiism but also bringing together Shiite groups closer to itself in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, areas in which the Arab identity is dominant. Since the Revolution, Iran has taken steps to change the balance of power in the Middle East. In addition, Iran has engaged in a sectarian-based proxy war with Saudi Arabia across a wide area, including Yemen, Pakistan, and within certain countries in Africa. Shiite groups, to which Iran provides various kinds of support, try to shape the policies of those countries in which they operate. Comparatively, it is difficult to carry out Iran's constitutional mission of protecting the oppressed and its discourse of protecting holy places within stable regions where state authority is strong. For this reason, Iran is often seen as increasing its effectiveness in unstable regions where the state authority is weak.

Although there is a historical rivalry between Türkiye and Iran dating back to the Ottoman and Safavid eras, there has been no conflict between these two polities in recent times. In this sense, it is possible to summarize the relations between the two countries as one of non-conflicting tension. The real risk for the Middle East is the ongoing proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This situation brings the two countries closer to the risk of heated conflict and prevents problems in Syria and Yemen from being resolved through diplomatic means. The problems between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which follow a policy whereby each side tries to limit one another's mobility, not only affect their neighbors but also those countries in which people from different sects coexist, such as Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. This power struggle causes instability in Bahrain, Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan and forces the people of Yemen and Syria to live under more difficult conditions. In this sense, a positive development can be said to have transpired in March 2023 when, under the mediation of China, the two countries reached an agreement on the resumption of diplomatic relations after more than seven years.

Iran's support for Russia in the face of turmoil in Central Asia and the Caucasus regions, which Russia defined as the "near abroad" in 1993, provided an opportunity for Iran to improve its relations with Russia, a power able to prevent the intervention of Western powers. In this context, Iran supported Russia's peace plan instead of standing by Islamic movements during the 1992–1997 Civil War in Tajikistan. Iran also chose to stay in the background during the recent war between Armenia and Azerbaijan; this was due to concerns regarding the potential realization of the united goals of Azerbaijan and Turks living in Iran, and concerns regarding Iran's own territorial integrity. As can be seen by Iran's ignoring China's pressure and intervention regarding the Uighur population, Iran sometimes experiences conflicts of discourse and action. In this context, Iran can be said to have put Shiite politics, which is one of its constitutional missions, into the background. Accordingly, by not opposing China and Russia, which it sees as balancing elements against the USA, Iran can be seen as sometimes acting in terms of practical politics and realpolitik strategies in order to support its own national interests and security.

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