

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

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

### Religion and Iranian Behavior in the Middle East

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

### Conclusions

- Religious identity and beliefs influence Iran's approach to foreign relationships, but they do not dictate them. Religion matters little in Iran's state-to-state relationships, but it figures more prominently in Iran's relations with nonstate groups.
- Essentializing Iran's foreign policy as sectarian obscures more than it reveals about its behavior. However, as the Middle East has grown more sectarian since the fall of Saddam Hussein and the Arab Spring, so too has Iran's regional behavior.
- Iran's operations in Syria provide the most overt examples of its sectarian behavior. Iran has facilitated the involvement of thousands of non-Syrian Shia militants to help defend the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Even though Iranian leaders stress the legitimacy of the intervention in Syria, and deny any sectarian agenda, Iran's military and its affiliates frame their role in that war in distinctly confessional terms.
- Iran's regional activities cannot be divorced from the explosion of Sunni sectarianism across the Middle East. Iran accuses its Sunni neighbors of supporting the rise of Sunni extremism and feels compelled to counter that behavior by doubling down on support to Shia allies of its own.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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