

## Religion or *Realpolitik*: A Comparative Study of Iranian Foreign Policy Towards Azerbaijan and Pakistan

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### Abstract

Shi'a Islam, as the central pillar of the Iranian system of governance has been a significant factor in molding Tehran's attitudes towards states with significant Shi'a population such as Iraq and Lebanon. However, examining Iranian foreign policy purely in sectarian terms risks losing sight of the multiple inputs involved in developing a foreign policy towards other states. This paper seeks to examine and compare Tehran's relations with a secular Shi'a majority state (Azerbaijan) and an Islamic republic in which a large minority Shi'a population feels under threat (Pakistan) in order to understand the way in which Tehran's religious identity vies with pragmatic *realpolitik* and associated economic considerations to shape bilateral relations.

The reality is that Iran's relations with these states are determined more by secular political considerations than by any notion of religious affinity. Sectarian considerations are a powerful tool only when there are policy convergences between states, or powerful actors within those states. This requirement doesn't exist in the case of Azerbaijan or Pakistan, so bilateral relations are based on pragmatic rather than religious considerations. An examination of the complexity of Iran's bilateral relations with these neighbor states provides an insight into the policy challenges facing Iran in reconciling its religious foundations with its regional political realities.

Key words: Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Shi'a, secular, *realpolitik*.

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### Introduction

Iran's position as the country with the largest Shi'a population in the world, a Gross Domestic Product that is more than half as large again as any of its neighbors despite over a decade of sanctions and the only country that has successfully installed a Shi'a Islamic government has meant that Tehran considers itself, and has for many of its co-religionists served as an exemplar, in both political and spiritual terms, for regional Shi'a populations. But religious affiliation alone has never been enough to guarantee close political relations. There are many other factors that impinge on the bilateral relations that two countries enjoy. Historical circumstances, political alignments, systems of government and economic interests are all factors that either individually or collectively impinges on the manner in which states or even sectoral interests within those states choose to cooperate with each other.

Iran's relations with its near neighbors provide a valuable insight into the way in which sectarian considerations influence foreign policy. In the case of Iran, it borders countries with significant Shi'a populations; Iraq, Pakistan and Azerbaijan. It also sits within a region in which other, Arab Shi'a populations exist in significant numbers. They represent a majority of the population in Bahrain, the largest minority in Lebanon and significant minorities in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. For the purposes of this paper, the focus is not on the Arab Shi'a world but rather the emphasis is on Iran and the relations it has developed with its immediate neighbors, Azerbaijan and Pakistan.

Countries with common borders do not enjoy the benefits of physical separation. Artificial and sometimes undemarcated borders split people so that religious, ethnic and/or tribal loyalties often transcend national loyalties. The relative strength of such loyalties and the manner in which states deal with these issues is central to the bilateral relationships that develop between states. Both Azerbaijan and Pakistan have Shi'a communities, or elements thereof, that Iran has supported in the past. They also have security relationships with countries that put them on opposite sides of the fence. Pakistani and Iranian interests in Afghanistan for example, have often been diametrically opposed to each other. Azerbaijan has an adversarial relationship with Armenia, a country with whom Iran enjoys good relations. As the most influential Shi'a state, Iran has had to determine the degree to which its sectarian loyalties impact on its

foreign policy. By examining the development of Iranian foreign policy approaches towards Pakistan and Azerbaijan, this paper seeks to understand the relative influence that pragmatism and Shi'ism has had on the development of Iran's bilateral relations with two of its close regional neighbors.

### Azerbaijan

On the face of it, both states should share close relations based on the commonality of their religious affiliation. Iran's population is more than 90% Shi'a, Azerbaijan's over 65% (Pew, 2009: 10). The nature of religious observance differs significantly between the two states, however. Whereas Iran created the first Shi'a Islamic state of the modern era as a result of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Azerbaijan Shi'ism has been followed more within the private sphere. To a large degree historical circumstances define the way in which religious identity, and with it such things as methods of devotion and observance develop.

Azerbaijan's Shi'ism is ultimately a product of its history. Originally one of the khanates under the control of the Persian Safavids, it underwent the same conversion to Shi'ism that areas under Safavid control were required to do. The further away from the Safavid centre however, the poorer the ability of the empire to dictate its terms and the more influence that other imperial rivals had. For that reason, Shi'ism was always strongest in the southern half of modern-day Azerbaijan where Safavid control was strongest. With the advance of the Tsarist rulers and their successes in the Russo-Persian wars of the early nineteenth century, peace treaties signed in Gulistan and Turkmanchay meant that Azerbaijan was divided essentially along the Aras River so that the northern half became Azerbaijan proper and south of the river remained under Persian authority (Souleimanov, 2007: 102). As a consequence, modern Azerbaijan's Shi'a heartland is along its border with Iran and to the south of the capital Baku, particularly around the village of Nardaran which plays host to the tomb of the daughter of the seventh Imam and has become a pilgrimage site.

A majority Shi'a population though does not automatically guarantee a close relationship with Iran simply as a result of a common

religion. It requires some regular practical spiritual interaction with Iranian institutions or senior religious figures in order to develop a close religious affinity, as opposed to simply possessing a common religious identity. Many decades of Tsarist followed by Soviet rule meant that, while individuals could maintain some degree of individual observance of their faith, particularly through pilgrimages more so than mosque attendance (Atkin, 1986: 296), the ability to import ideas and knowledge from the great centers of Shi'a juristic learning in Qum and Najaf did not exist. Aspiring Shi'a clerics could only study Islam in informal study circles in Azerbaijan or officially in Uzbekistan, where Sunni *madhab* dominated. So parlous was the situation for Shi'a religious students under the Soviet system that by the middle of the 1980s it was estimated that the entire number of official clerics in Azerbaijan was somewhere between 50 and 70 (Motika, 2000: 287).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Muslim exemplar states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran sought to reach out to their respective communities in the Caucasus whom they believed to be ripe for re-acquaintance with their Islamic faith, and also for molding in accordance with the prevailing nation's interpretation of Islam. The Iranian Embassy's cultural centre was very active in promoting Iranian versions of Shi'ism, the Iranian government funded numerous clerics to travel to Azerbaijan to minister to the Shi'a community, offered scholarships to Azerbaijanis to train in the *hawza* in Qum and Mashhad and built *Qu'ranic* schools within Azerbaijan (Geybullayeva, 2007: 114). This period of Iranian activism amongst Azerbaijanis was however, relatively short-lived. President Heydar Aliyev expelled most Iranian clerics who were working in Azerbaijan on coming to power in 1993, with the exception of some working in refugee camps whose entire operation was funded by Iran (Motika, 2009: 209). All 22 Iranian-funded *madrassas* in Azerbaijan were closed in 2001 (ICG, 2008: 8).

The advancement of Iranian-supported Shi'ism was stymied for three reasons; President Aliyev's predilection for nationalism above religious identity, a deep-seated orientation amongst Azerbaijanis for political secularism and a determination on the part of the state and the Muslim religious 'establishment' to maintain control over the spiritual sphere. The rather Orwellian-sounding State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations (SCWRO) was established in 2001 to oversee religious observance in the country. Officially approved Islam is under the authority of the Caucasus Board of

Muslims (CBM) headed by a Shi'a cleric Hajji Allahshukur Pashazade, who has been its head since he was appointed to its Soviet-era predecessor in 1980. Such an extended period in office is indicative of his ideological view regarding the place of Islam within Azerbaijan society. With SCWRO having responsibility for registering and overseeing the activities of religious communities, and CBM's authority to educate, appoint and pay clerics and organize pilgrimages there is little room for non-state approved Shi'a activities to survive, let alone prosper. Shi'a students who do go to Iran to study without approval from the state for example, have great difficulty in obtaining a position on return. Many of these students remain in the Iranian *hawza* as a consequence (ICG, 2008: 17-18).

The relative isolation of Azerbaijani Shi'ism from Iran is exacerbated by the inability of any Shi'a *marja'* to establish an office in Azerbaijan. None have been able to obtain government permission to do so (Balci, 2010: 182); a rule that applies equally to those resident in Najaf as it does to those in Qum. This absence of a connection with the leading clerical thinkers of the global community serves to make Azerbaijani Shi'ism insular, and by design reinforces the internal control of religious thought by making the import of external ideas more difficult than it needs to be. That having been said, adherence to an external *marja'* is of relatively low importance to many Azerbaijani Shi'a as a result of their extended period of isolation from the wider regional Shi'a community. These factors all contribute to ensuring that the level of religio-political discourse within the community remains low.

Concern that secular Azerbaijan has regarding Iranian relations with its co-religionists is best illustrated by Baku's belief that Iran is directly funding, and actively providing ideological direction to the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA). The IPA was largely a construct of the Shi'a of Nardaran, the most avowedly Shi'a religious area of Azerbaijan and also one in which support for Iranian state-sponsored Shi'ism is the most pronounced. Created in 1991 and officially registered the IPA was nevertheless banned in 1995 for allegedly working against the state. The IPA, at least for Azerbaijan's political leaders, came to represent the public face of Iranian Shi'a interference in Azerbaijani affairs. In 2011, the chairman of the IPA Movsum Samadov was sentenced, along with six other party members to lengthy jail terms on charges of attempting to overthrow the state. In reality, the IPA was never a mass movement in

Azerbaijan and the actions taken by the Azerbaijani government were meant as a warning to both citizens and Iran regarding what it perceived to be continuing Iranian support for Shi'a groups. A leaked US Embassy cable in 2010 revealed the degree to which President Aliyev believed Iran was seeking to interfere in Azerbaijan through its religious connections (USEMB, 2010).

Iranian religious officials have on occasion expressed their opinions on domestic actions that the Azerbaijani government has taken that Tehran perceives not to be in accordance with Islamic precepts. Baku's ban on the wearing of veils by schoolgirls brought with it condemnation from the likes of senior cleric Sayyid Nasr al-Shirazi, who called for civil disobedience to overturn the ban. Baku's hosting of the Eurovision song contest brought criticism from a number of senior clerics in Iran and resulted in Iran recalling its ambassador to Azerbaijan all on the grounds that such a contest was incompatible with Islamic values. Criticisms such as these irk the secular Azerbaijani government (as evidenced by the rather caustic comments in reply to Tehran's anti-Eurovision comments), whereas Iranian clerics see their criticism as a valid defense of Islamic values in the face of western cultural and secular advances.

The common religious links between the two countries have done little to advance bilateral relations in other areas. Economically, although the two countries border each other their main exports, gas and oil make them potential competitors. For example, while Turkey and Iran looked to pursue a mutually beneficial policy of energy cooperation in the late 2000s, the initiative stalled both for political reasons, but also because of concerns that Iranian natural gas was more expensive than its competitors in Azerbaijan (USD 330 per thousand cubic meters) and Russia (USD 400). Iran by contrast charged USD 550 per thousand cubic meters (Zashtowt, 2012: 7). Both countries do, however, cooperate economically in areas where there is strategic benefit to be gained from doing so. Both countries import from each other with a small surplus in Azerbaijan's favor. Iranian gas is exported to the isolated Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, separated from Azerbaijan proper by its arch-rival Armenia. As a consequence the exclave is reliant on Iran for its energy needs, and more broadly its land access to Azerbaijan proper. In return for Tehran's cooperation on meeting Nakhchivan's energy needs, Azerbaijan exports gas to Iran's north (USEIA, 2012: 9).

The most damning indictment on the fractious relationship between the two Shi'a majority states is the fact that Iran accounts for less than one per cent of Baku's international trade (Mankoff, 2012: 14). This is partly due to the similarities in the two countries' main export commodities but also the occasionally fractious nature of the bilateral relationship in other areas, which has been reflected in the rather fitful trade relationship between the two states. Reliable trade statistics are difficult to definitively determine, although in 2007 bilateral trade was worth a little more than USD 250 million (USEMB, 2007). Publicly at least, the two countries sought to increase that figure to USD 1 billion (Novosti, 2009) although the degree to which this has been achieved and the range of commodities that have been traded is unknown at this stage.

Security issues continue to act as a brake on furthering bilateral relations. The degree to which sectarian affinity is subordinate to national interest is best illustrated in the way in which Shi'a Iran maintains friendly relations with Christian Armenia, a country that is still technically at war with Shi'a-majority Azerbaijan following the two countries' conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh that ended in 1994. Azerbaijan in turn has good relations with Israel, and bilateral trade between the two countries is well over USD 1.5 billion. Iran has accused Azerbaijan of allowing Israel use of its airbases to launch attacks against Iran, while Azerbaijan has accused Iran of planning attacks against Israeli targets on its soil. Both countries deny each others' charges.

Azerbaijan's ethnic makeup provides another element of friction between the two states. Azeris make up the largest ethnic minority in Iran and, although official figures are not available, estimates of their strength range between 12 and 18 million, approximately double the entire population of Azerbaijan. The issue of ethnicity is a delicate one for both countries. The Azeris' background as a Turkic-speaking people gives them a deal of affinity with their large neighbor to the west, and Ankara has used this ethnic bond to its advantage whenever possible. Azerbaijan has also used it as an irritant on occasion in its relations with Tehran. President Aliyev has at times championed himself as the leader of the Azeris, which by implication questions the legitimacy of Iranian rule over its Azeri minority. For its part, Baku complains that Tehran uses its Sahar TV, an Iranian-owned Azeri-language station that broadcasts into Azerbaijan (BBC,

2010) as an influence tool to criticize the Azerbaijani government and spread pro-Iranian messages.

### **Pakistan**

Pakistan has the second largest Shi'a population in the world after Iran. Numbers vary, although using the same measure as that for the Azerbaijani population, they total somewhere between 20 and 30 million (Pew: 2009: 10). For all its demographic strength though, the Pakistani Shi'a community has had a testy relationship with the central government and has regularly been targeted by radical Sunni groups.

As with Azerbaijan, Iran's bilateral relations with Pakistan veer between a pragmatic realism in many economic matters as well as a marked rivalry when its foreign policy aims are at odds with each other. In the case of Pakistan-Iranian relations those points of friction have often centered on the allegations of Pakistani support for the Sunni Pashtuns (implicitly including some degree of support for Taliban elements), and support or otherwise for Baluchi independence movements that straddle both Pakistani and Iranian territory. The memory of the 1998 sacking of the Iranian consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif and the death of nine Iranian diplomats still remains alive.

Unlike the case with Azerbaijan, secularism has not featured in the Pakistani historical discourse and it was founded, and has always been an avowedly Islamic state. That has meant that its citizens have defined themselves in sectarian terms and connections have been established through religious education and political connection, with like-minded Muslim states. In the case of the Pakistani Shi'a, the community's links in the modern era have oscillated between Iraq and Iran. Traditionally the community's religious leaders were schooled in Najaf and politically quiescent, if not co-opted by the Pakistani state. The emergence of activist scholars in Najaf in the late 1960s influenced 'Arif Husayn al-Husayni who during his time studying came into contact with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and, after the mass expulsion of foreign students from Iraq Al-Husayni spent four years studying in Qum (Zaman: 1998, 695).

The Iranian revolution and the rise to power of the Sunni General Zia ul-Haq in Pakistan introduced a period of great sectarian tension in Pakistan and served as a proxy battleground for Iranian regional influence. Iran's Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini and Pakistan's

Zia ul-Haq did not share a close relationship. The execution in 1979 of Pakistan's former prime minister, the Shi'a Zulfikar Ali Bhutto angered the Shi'a community and the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran emboldened segments of the Pakistani Shi'a population while at the same time concerning its Sunni majority. Ul-Haq's Islamization program for Pakistan came to be viewed as a Sunnification program and sectarian differences became more pronounced and increasingly radicalized (Nasr: 2006, 160).

The 1980s and early 1990s represented the darkest days for Pakistani-Iranian relations. As a non-Arab Shi'a majority state, Iran saw South Asia as a venue for exerting influence and fulfilling its self-appointed role as regional exemplar for the Shi'a community. Pakistan's weak central government, perceived Sunnification program and alliance with the West made it a logical starting point for practical Iranian support to its co-religionists. At the same time, Pakistan's Shi'a communal groups began to turn to Qum rather than Najaf for its religious guidance. The Imamia Students Organization, founded in 1972, accepted Ruhollah Khomeini as their *marja'* following the revolution in 1979.

The new Iranian government was quick to capitalize on the popularity of the political empowerment of the Shi'a community symbolized by its revolution. Iranian cultural centers were established in Pakistan and operated as centers for the distribution of literature and the identification of potential scholarship holders. Nearly four thousand Pakistanis received scholarships to spend between six months and a year in Iranian religious institutions with the intention of returning to Pakistan and preaching their new-found knowledge (Abou-Zahab: 2007, 101).

Iranian support for Pakistan's Shi'a community prompted a backlash from Sunni groups, who sought and received internal and external backing for an increasingly assertive anti-Shi'a stance. Such actions were both a reflection of the age-old tension between the two sects of Islam, but also of a broader regional competition for influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia, long the champion of Salafist thought in the Muslim world. The intensity of the conflict was evident in the assassination of 'Arif al-Husayni in 1988 and escalated markedly following the killing of the founder of the SSP, Haq Nawaz Jhangvi in 1990. In December of that year the Iranian Consul-General in Lahore was gunned down; in 1997 an Iranian cultural centre was burned in Lahore, an Iranian diplomat was killed in

Multan and five Iranian air force personnel in Rawalpindi (Hussain: 2007, 94).

Active Iranian governmental support for the Pakistani Shi'a community started to taper off in the late 1990s (ICG: 2005, 28). The reasons for this were pragmatic rather than ideological. Shi'a militancy bred further Sunni militancy and made the Pakistani Shi'a community (and Iranian cultural institutions and government officials in Pakistan) no more secure than they would have been without funding. Iran also remained vulnerable to possible Pakistani support for Baluchi separatist groups in Iran, as well as the fact that through its support for the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan Iran was already facing off against Pakistani interests as a result of Islamabad's support for the Taliban.

Greater efforts were made to forge a more cooperative relationship between Tehran and Islamabad. Iran still retains its self-appointed role as protector of the Shi'a community, but in a less activist manner than was the case more than a decade ago. Tehran takes care to avoid accusing the Pakistani government of any complicity in attacks carried out against the Shi'a community. Commenting on the bomb attack against Hazara Shi'a near Quetta in February 2013, the spokesman for the Iranian parliament's Commission on National Security and Foreign Policy blamed extremists doing the work of the West, without reference to the Pakistani government (Press TV: 2013). This new approach however, has not stopped members of the religious establishment calling for Tehran to take a more active role in protecting Pakistani Shi'a. Ayatollah Sa'fi Golpayegani has previously warned that if Iranians did not do as they should and help the Pakistani Shi'a, they would '...have to answer to God' (Vatanka: 2012).

The Shi'a community's relationship with Iran has also changed since the period following the Iranian revolution. Now that Najaf is, albeit slowly, returning to its earlier days of intellectual dynamism Pakistani Shi'a are looking more towards Iraq, rather than Iran for its religious guidance. Sayyid 'Ali al-Sistani is increasingly popular amongst South Asian Shi'a, and the presence of a senior Pakistani cleric Bashir Husayn al-Najafi, as a *marja'* reinforces loyalty to the Najafi *hawza* (Abbas: 2010, 46). At the same time, Iran has proven to be relatively popular amongst the Shi'a community, illustrating the power that geographic proximity and economic and demographic weight bring to a relationship.

Nowadays, Iran's more nuanced approach to Pakistan centers on economic diplomacy. On the face of it, the two countries appear to be natural trade partners. Pakistan is resource-starved while its neighbor has abundant oil and gas reserves. Politics however, has normally gotten in the way of expanding economic ties in any meaningful way. The impact of sanctions on Iran, and United States pressure on its regional ally Pakistan has meant that bilateral trade has remained at relatively low levels given the complimentary nature of their respective economies.

There has been a focus on energy in the recent relations between the two states. Bilateral trade between the two states was a relatively small USD 500 million (Pant, 2009) in 2009 but both countries have talked of more than doubling that figure. Energy trade has been the only commodity likely to achieve that kind of increase, and it has been noteworthy that recent announcements have focused on that sector. Iran is building a USD 4 billion oil refinery near the Pakistani port of Gwadar (Dawn, 2013) and, after more than two decades of negotiations, agreement was reached on the long-awaited Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline that links Iran's South Pars field with Pakistani consumers. The importance of this project for two countries that see themselves as the victims of external interference was highlighted by Pakistan's President Zardari remarks in Tehran that 'We deeply believe in boosting bilateral ties. The international and regional players have tried in vain to prevent expansion of Iran-Pakistan ties but the people have learnt how to act against the enemies of Islam.' (Dawn, 2013)

### Conclusion

Religious commonality is a poor indicator of the closeness of bilateral relations, and an even poorer justification for determining foreign policy. That is not to say that sectarian identity and a feeling of religious obligation are not factors that influence policy. In the case of Iran, its role as a regional exemplar for Shi'a communities and its status as a Shi'a Islamic republic mean that sectarian affinities inevitably play a role in its regional foreign policy. Shi'a communities are not all the same, however. Their history, position in the social, economic and political hierarchy of the countries in which they reside all dictate the extent to which they identify with their religion and in turn the way in which they view Iran. *Realpolitik* in turn, often serves to temper Tehran's desire to act as protectors of

regional Shi'a communities and to use the communities to further their on foreign policy goals.

In Azerbaijan for example, decades of Soviet rule secularized society to such an extent that the majority of the population, while they identified as Shi'a Muslims, were limited in their practices and their access to the centers of Shi'a learning. Except in small pockets, Iranian Shi'ism was and remains a foreign concept. Iran also faces an Azerbaijani government that is focused on maintaining control over religious observance, and with whom it has a fractious political and an underdeveloped economic relationship. The common religious identity it shares with Azerbaijan has not crossed over into other areas of the bilateral relationship, nor has it markedly influenced Tehran's policy towards Baku except for a brief period following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Pakistani Shi'a have been much more religiously observant than their Azerbaijani co-religionists and their position relative to the Sunni majority much more tenuous. Iran's desire for a close relationship with a neighboring Shi'a community as a way of providing protection to, and influence with Pakistani Shi'a saw Tehran pursue an activist foreign policy in supporting the community. The results were mixed; Iranian interests were targeted in Pakistan as the Sunni-Shi'a conflict became part of a wider proxy fight for influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but Qum became more influential in a devotional sense at the expense of Najaf during the 1980s and 1990s. More recently, Iran has taken a more pragmatic view of its relations with Pakistan. Najaf has reclaimed some of the ground it ceded to Qum in terms of religious attachment of the Pakistani Shi'a community, and the energy sector has recently become a means by which significant bilateral economic relations can tie the two states together without reference to religion. Both Azerbaijan and Pakistan illustrate the way in which Iranian foreign policy can be dynamic and developed with reference to much more than simply religious affiliation.

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