



# SEPAD

Sectarianism, Proxies &  
De-sectarianisation



**Iranian Identities in Motion: politics, protest and the  
international**

Edward Wastnidge (ed)

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*Cover photograph: Attendees at 22 Bahman/Revolution Day celebrations in Tehran, taken 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2007. Copyright, Edward Wastnidge.*

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## **Iranian identities in motion: an introduction**

*Edward Wastnidge*

In early 2024, Iran marked the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the revolution and the subsequent founding of the Islamic Republic. As with every year, large crowds gathered in central Tehran, coalescing around Azadi Square, displaying the usual symbols of fealty to the Islamic Republic. This included placards displaying the well-known slogans of ‘Down with the USA’, ‘Down with Israel’, along with pictures of the Islamic Republic’s founder Khomeini, current Supreme Leader Khamanei, and the late Qassem Soleimani, perhaps its most lauded martyr. Displays of Iranian military might were displayed at a time of increasing regional tension following Hamas’ al-Aqsa Flood Operation and Israel’s brutal response in Gaza. As such, expressions of support for Palestine were even more prominent than usual this year.

On the face of it, this was a demonstration of enduring continuities in Iran’s revolutionary identity, particularly in terms of the Islamic Republic worldview, chiming with the well-established themes of championing the causes of the oppressed (particularly the Palestinians) and rallying against the pernicious activities of the Islamic Republic’s enemies. However, rewind 18 months and Iran was convulsed by nationwide protests following the death in police custody of Mahsa Amini, and the subsequent founding of the ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ movement. If the international provides a space for a fairly consistent conceptualisation of what a national and political identity looks like from the perspective of the Islamic Republic, then the domestic picture is far more contested and subject to challenges to the legitimacy of the ruling system.

Current concerns in contemporary Iranian politics, including the response to calls for women’s rights and the debate on compulsory hijab, and the nature of its relationship with its neighbours and the wider world, have once again brought up questions about the ways in

which aspects of its political and social identity are contested and understood. The ‘idea’ of Iran has always had multiple meanings and representations. Both monarchical despots and Islamic ideologues have sought to shape and respond to ethnic, national and religious identities, as well as social concerns and gender issues, in their efforts at governance. In the sense of dealing with the competing demands and aspirations of its populace, Iran is not exceptional. However, its experience of a revolution which ushered in a form of theocratic governance in combination with a popular, participatory element remains unique in global politics. It is in the different ways and avenues through which this polity is experienced, articulated, and challenged that brings us to the focus of this report.

This collection of four short interventions by both established and up and coming scholars of Iranian politics and international relations explores a number of different issue areas pertaining to Iranian identities, focusing primarily on the domestic level, but also exploring how such identities translate into the international domain. Our contributors are based both in the West and in the Middle East, including Iran, and offer compelling insight into how Iranian social and political identities have been challenged and co-opted in the Islamic Republic in recent years. Indeed, such identities remain very much in motion. The following contributions therefore seek to engage with the interaction between Iran’s multifaceted identities, highlighting how the post-revolutionary Iranian state has sought to construct and respond to different identities through various policies.

The collection begins with Shabnam Holliday’s exploration of how different forms of civic national identity in Iran can be understood in the aftermath of the WLF protests, and how the movement’s ideals can be understood in a revolutionary context. In doing so, Holliday argues how progressive rights-based movements can form the basis of a more inclusive civic national identity for Iran. The relationship between domestic identity concerns and regional influences is the subject of Banafsheh Keynoush’s examination of what she terms as the ‘Iraqization’ of Iranian identity. Here, Keynoush reverses the dominant narrative in policy and academic circles of seeing the Iran-Iraq relationship as one in which the Iranian influence



is dominant. Mansour Anbarmoo's contribution returns us to the movement for women's rights in Iran, with a focus on one of its most critical elements - the issue of compulsory hijab. Anbarmoo highlights how the symbolic value of hijab has been used by the Islamic Republic both domestically and internationally. In our final intervention by Ahmet Özyakar offers a broader international perspective on how Iranian identity is articulated. Here, Özyakar explores how Iran's international educational outreach can be seen as a form of status-seeking in the international arena, demonstrating its efforts at soft power projection.



## **The ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ Movement, Revolution, and Ideas of Civic Iranian National Identity**

*Shabnam Holliday*

This intervention reflects on how ideas associated with the Woman, Life, Freedom protests and movement relate to ideas of civic Iranian national identity. My approach draws on debates in International Historical Sociology on revolution and particularly on Fred Halliday’s (1999) focus on the importance of the ideas of revolutionaries. Iran’s mass protests starting in September 2022 were triggered by the killing of the Kurdish-Iranian woman, Jina Mahsa Amini. This was after she was arrested by the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Morality Police for wearing what the Islamic Republic considers ‘improper’ hejab. These protests have come to be known as the Woman, Life, Freedom protests and/or movement because of the use of the Kurdish slogan ‘Jin, Jiyan, Azādi’ (Woman, Life, Freedom) at Amini’s funeral in Saqqez, Rojhelat/Kurdistan province. The slogan then spread across Iran being articulated in a number of Iran’s multiple languages and became the main slogan for these protests.

### ***Protest, revolution and civic identity***

What constitutes a ‘revolution’ is contested in both academic debates and among individuals involved in processes such as popular uprisings and mass protests. According to Jamie Allinson’s (2019) approach, these protests would be considered a revolution because they challenged the sovereignty of the government. This is evident in the extensive use of violence by the Islamic Republic’s security forces to quell the protests. According to Brecht de Smet’s (2016) approach, these protests would be considered a revolution because many of those involved considered themselves ‘revolutionaries’ and their aim was a ‘revolution’, that is the removal of the Islamic Republic. This is evident in the prevalence of the slogans such as ‘#Iran revolution’ and ‘#Irān\_Enqelāb’ across social media platforms as well as the explicit rejection of the Islamic Republic as a political system, including Reformism. Consequently, these dynamics challenge the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. This lack of legitimacy is also highlighted by the lowest voter turnout since 1979 for the March 2024 parliamentary elections





(Boroujerdi 2024). Thus, although the ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ protests did not remove the Islamic Republic as a political system, they have a complex relationship with the idea of revolution. Nevertheless, regardless of whether they are considered a ‘revolution’, the ideas articulated in situations such as this are worthy of attention.

I argue these protests demonstrate ideas of a civic Iranian national identity. However, it is essential to appreciate that multiple ideas of national identity co-exist and that they mean different things to different people. Ideas of national identity are important because they represent a type of political identity; that is ‘they involve relations to governments’ (Tilly 2005: 62) and are ‘always produced at least in part, through representation and through their multiple relationships with the institutions of the state and civil society’ (Jones 2006: 58). Consequently, ideas of national identity give an indication of the aspirations for a type of government especially during times and processes of political rupture or political change such as uprisings, protests, and revolutions (Holliday and Leech 2016). Drawing on Antony Smith (1991: 11) and Jürgen Habermas (1998: 112), I argue that a civic national identity can be understood in terms of ‘the idea of a common civic culture and human and civil rights’ (Holliday 2011: 17). In Iran’s case this suggests a rejection of the politicisation of Iran’s cultural heritages, *Irānīyat* and *Islāmiyat*, while not excluding these heritages or prioritising either over the other. Thus, the idea of a civic Iranian national identity is also the rejection of *Islāmi gerāyi* and *Irāni gerāyi* as represented by the Islamic Republic and the Pahlavi regimes respectively (Holliday 2011, 2007: 17-21). A civic national identity also suggests a rejection of what is considered as ‘Persian hegemony’ and/or ‘Persian colonialism’ in relation to Iran’s ‘non-Persian’ peoples (such as Azeris, Balochis, Arabs, and Kurds. It is also the rejection of gender-based and religion-based exclusive politics. Consequently, ideas of civic national identity are significant because they demonstrate an aspiration for inclusive secular rights-based politics and/or secular democracy.

### *Civic Iranian identities*

There is a long historical trajectory for ideas of civic Iranian national identity and/or desire for rights-based politics. This is evident in a number of ideas and political aspirations. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906 is widely considered as epitomising the beginning of Iran's struggle for democracy (see Azimi 1989; Gheissari and Nasr 2006). There are ideas associated with the rejection of the politicization of ethnicity employed by the Islamic Republic and the Pahlavi monarchy and their subsequent securitisation of Kurdish, Azeri, Baloch, Arab, and Turkmen peoples (see Saleh 2013). The desire for increased popular political participation, a rejection of Pahlavi authoritarianism, and democracy were among the many political aspirations leading up to the 1979 Revolution. In this environment, there was both a broad coalition of Persian and non-Persian speakers, as well as 'a range of political organizations' that championed minority rights (Elling 2013: 45). Finally, there is a long history of protest and political action focused on women's sovereignty over their bodies.

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, there have been ideas that can be associated with a civic Iranian national identity. The intellectual and political movement, Reformism, has debates regarding civil rights and their relationship with *vilāyat-e faqih* at its heart. Building on these ideas, former president Mohammad Khatami used the slogan 'Iran for all Iranians' in his election campaign. As president, in the 1997 speech to the Organisation of Islamic Conference, he stated that 'Our civil society is not a society where only Muslims are entitled to rights and are considered citizens. Rather, all individuals are entitled to rights, within the framework of law and order' (Khatami 2000). Similar ideas continued to be articulated after Khatami's presidency. During the 2009 election campaign and echoing Khatami (Holliday 2011), presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi (2010) used the phrase, 'We are all Iranian and Iran belongs to all of us'. Former president Hassan Rouhani issued his own version of a

civic Iranian national identity in his *Citizenship Rights Charter*. The opening article states: ‘All Iranian citizens, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, wealth, social class, race, etc. enjoy citizenship rights’ (Rouhani 2014). It should be noted, however, the Khatami and Rouhani administrations had human rights abuses. Rouhani was also critiqued for not implementing the charter. Existing alongside these state level ideas were the activism and ideas based on rights-based politics of Iran’s democracy movement, and later the Green Movement.

While Khatami was rejected by many because they felt that he did not go far enough, Khatami’s presidency, facilitated by his political ideas, had an important social and political impact. For instance, Iran’s higher education system contributed to Tehran becoming a place for ‘Azeris, Lors, Kurds, Baluchis, Armenians and Arabs, possessing religious and cultural diversity as well as various ethnic identities’, which influenced ‘an Iranian cosmopolitanism with greater potential for mutual understanding and a recognition of shared aspirations especially among the country’s youth’ (Honarbin-Holliday 2009). Khatami’s ideas of civil society, rule of law, and the freedom of expression also facilitated an ‘increasing diversity of voices’ (Nooshin 2005). This environment, in addition to the 2009/10 popular uprising and the activism of the Women’s movement and human rights activists, are important contexts for ideas articulated during the Woman, Life, Freedom protests.

### ***The WLF Movement***

Associated with the slogans ‘Woman, life, freedom’ and ‘Iran revolution’ were ideas and political aspirations that indicated civic national identity, secular liberal democracy, and/or political system based on civil and human rights. This suggests an inclusive political system that includes *all* of Iran’s peoples regardless of their other identities. Certainly, the intersectional nature of these protests can also be understood in terms of a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be Iranian and how a political system can allow that inclusivity. Furthermore, the solidarity evident on social media platforms for Kurdistan and Balochistan in the context of extreme violence against these populations on the part of the Islamic Republic’s security forces, also demonstrates an inclusive and/or civic Iranian identity.

Ideas associated with a civic national identity is also apparent in a charter issued by civil society organisations, *Woman, Life Freedom: Charter of the Minimum Demands of Iran's Independent Trade Unions and Civic Organisations*, which was published on the 44<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1979 Revolution. The introduction states:

The banner of the revolutionary protests today raised by women, university students, high school students, teachers, workers, justice seekers, artists, queer people, writers and all oppressed Iranians across the country, from Kurdistan to Sistan and Baluchestan, attracting unprecedented international support, is a protest against misogyny and gender discrimination, interminable economic insecurity, the bondage of the labour force, poverty and misery and class oppression, and persecution along national and religious dictatorship foisted upon us, the collective people of Iran, for over a century (Charter 2023).

Significantly, this demonstrates the rejection of both the Islamic Republic and the Pahlavi monarchy as legitimate political systems. It also indicates an idea of Iran and Iranian national identity that is inclusive and based on human and civil rights and is applicable to all those in Iran.

### ***Conclusion***

While the particular context of Iran is very specific, the broader dynamic of people articulating ideas related to progressive rights-based politics and more inclusive ideas of national identity in the context of mass protest is by no means unique. In Southwest Asia and North Africa, similar ideas were articulated during the Arab Revolts, Kurdish politics, and in Iraq's Tishreen movement, Lebanon's 2019 October Revolution, and Sudan's 2019 protests. Globally, there are several rights-based protests and political movements, such as Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and in states around the world. The 'Woman, Life, Freedom' protests and movement highlight the continued development of ideas associated with a civic understanding of Iranian national identity, and inclusive rights-based politics. Crucially, such ideas are not only contingent on

both historical intellectual and political ideas, developments, and aspirations, but also respond to specific circumstances. The Woman, Life, Freedom protests not only also highlights Iran's diversity to both internal and external audiences, but also Iranians' agency to construct and reconstruct political ideas.

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## The ‘Iraqization’ of Iran and Shifting National Identity

*Banafsheh Keynoush*

A recent surge in migration of Iraqis to Iran has exposed a shift in the predominantly hybrid Persianate-Shia identity of Iran toward a more distinct Iranian-Arab Shia culture. The migration trend arrived with the Iranian revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) in 1979. It enabled the IRI to manifest what I conceptualize and term an “Iraqization” project for Iran. This was not an officially-formulated government policy *per se*, but it manifested in the form of the religious reconceptualization of the Iranian identity by challenging its pre-Islamic Persianate cultural history. It entailed the gradual reconstruction of a new form of hybrid identity, combining one or several aspects of religious, cultural and other identifications with Iraq, as more Iranians interacted with larger groups of mainly Iraqi Shias moving across the increasingly fluid borders between two neighbouring countries.

The insights for this report are based on mainly primary sources, including this author’s field observations of Iranian society in motion over the last two decades. The insights help explore hybrid cultural identity constructs, and they lean on explaining the socio-economic, religious and political ramifications of such constructs, while also touching on concepts such as historical memory. This important and novel contribution to the study of Iran-Iraq relations reverses the dominant narrative and practice in policy and academic circles of seeing these ties as one in which the Iranian influence is dominant. The paper parts ways with the commonly studied area of the potential “Iranization” or more so the “Islamic Republic-ization” of Iraq, in reference to Iran’s growing influence in neighbouring Iraq and its clout and leverage in steering Iraqi politics, to encourage researchers to explore the multiple ramifications of the intersection of hybrid Iranian-Iraqi socio-cultural and political-economic identities, and perhaps more importantly, new forms of identity construct resulting from it inside Iran and its implications for the country’s sovereignty as an independent entity and nation from Iraq.



### *Historical Memories of Hybrid Identities Between Iran and Iraq*

The twentieth-century de-colonization history of the Persian Gulf region led to the establishment of a modern Iraqi state in territories that had been controlled by the Ottomans and Britain between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. This history influenced Persia (renamed “Iran” in 1935) because it lost control over territories that constituted modern Iraq when the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 demarcated the borders between Iran and Iraq (Keynoush, 2016, p. 40). The post-colonial history of Iraq and Iran was shaped by mutual efforts to create hybrid identities, through political representations as well as social and cultural narratives that aimed to unify the Shia communities across their borders. In 1919, Iranian and Iraqi Shia clerics revolted against the Anglo-Persian agreement that granted Britain monopoly on access to Iranian oilfields. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, calls to unify the Shias re-surfaced. Iran continued to maintain a sense of historical entitlement to the southern Persian Gulf region and parts of Iraq, by virtue of having ruled the area since the fifth century BCE. (Keynoush, 2023, pp. 5-7).

However, Mandatory Iraq under the British Administration (1920-1932), which had also led to the establishment of the Kingdom of Iraq by August 1921, constrained Iran’s clerical influence. Britain installed Faisal (son of Sharif Hussein, the Hashemite ruler of Hijaz and custodian of Islam’s two holy cities of Makkah and Madinah) as ruler of modern Iraq. Faisal forced the Persian Shia clerics out of Iraq in order to forge a new national Iraqi identity. Britain then helped install Reza Khan as the new leader of Iran (he crowned himself as king and established the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925), and encouraged the unification of the Arabian Peninsula under Abd al Aziz Al Saud, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia became an independent state in 1932). Iran’s Shia clerics now faced a dual challenge in their efforts to unite the Shias: the rise of a modern state in Iraq that could restrict transnational Shia networks, and the expansion of the Wahhabi-led Saudi realm (Keynoush, 2023, p. 8). Meanwhile, desperately in need of a new political identity in order to survive in an adversarial region, Reza

Shah embarked on a rapid modernization program for Iran by putting an end to Shia clerical influence over the country's education and judiciary systems. Iran subsequently became an influential regional player; however, it failed to influence Iraq. When the Pahlavi dynasty collapsed in 1979, the Iraqi Ba'ath regime led by President Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, leading to the eight-year Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988).

### ***Re-emerging Hybrid Identities Between Iran and Iraq***

Iran's confessional identity shifts re-emerged after its revolution, when the country proceeded to invite Iraqi Shias to live and work under the Iranian system of government, thereby inaugurating a perceived "Iraqization" of Iran, though not directly an official state policy, during the war years. Unpopular at home, the IRI turned its attention to welcoming foreigners with whom it shared religious affinities including mainly dissident Iraqi Shias and their families, who stayed in Iran to receive protection from persecution by Saddam Hussein and to help Tehran plan a post-Saddam future for Iraq. This migration trend by Iraqis led to new forms of state building and power consolidation in Iran, one through which the concept of the Iranian national unity could merge with a wider sense of communal unity with the Iraqi Shias. The IRI adopted affirmative action interactive sect-based policies to integrate Iraqi migrants by encouraging tourism, pilgrimage and intermarriages. Saddam meanwhile forced Iraqi men to divorce their Iranian wives who then returned to Iran.<sup>1</sup>

Through these multiple migration patterns, Tehran was able to use faith and familial bonds to influence Iraq after it was invaded by American forces in March 2003. Following the invasion, Iraqi Shia militia groups who had resided and trained in Iran returned to their country to build political parties and a new army. As Tehran-Baghdad ties improved, more Iraqis received special quotas to study in Iran's hard sought-after universities, and according to some accounts

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<sup>1</sup> Author's first-hand accounts observing divorced Iranian women returning to Iran after Saddam Hussein asked their Iraqi husbands to end the marriages, during the war in 1980-1988.

including interviews given to this author by Iranian protestors, Iraqi militias may have been hired to quell anti-government student or popular demonstrations inside Iran.<sup>2</sup>

The “Iraqization” project of Iran translated into economic clout by enabling Tehran to circumvent international sanctions imposed mainly by the United States of America, through Iraqi businesses and nationals and cross-border investment and financial transactions.<sup>3</sup> In addition, fluid borders helped Tehran encourage the formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in mid-2014, after Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a religious decree for Iraqis to fight the terrorist group known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In 2017, when the Trump administration promised to withdraw the U.S. from the Iran nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA that was concluded two years earlier, and punish Tehran over its nuclear program, the PMF called on the U.S. to relinquish its military bases in Iraq. In return, Tehran offered more special seats and scholarships to PMF members to receive higher degrees in Iranian universities.

When Tehran failed to integrate into the global economy in the post-JCPOA era, due to tight U.S. sanctions, it again invited Iraqis to invest in Iran.<sup>4</sup> Iranian and Iraqi identities, however, at times intersected. At other times, they collided as greater numbers of Iraqis came to Iran, and Iranian state institutions and non-state actors began to respond differently to this “Iraqization” project. Border towns in Iran remained more receptive to the idea of “Iraqization”, and preferred to use more hybrid identities when a thriving micro-level market economy emerged in different sectors of the Iranian economy bordering Iraq. According to eye-witness accounts, a growing number of people living on these borders no longer identified as being distinctly Iranian, and preferred to seek new representations by being viewed as Iraqis.<sup>5</sup> However, more

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<sup>2</sup> Author’s interviews with Iranian protestors who interacted with Iraqi militias quelling protests, 2003, 2004, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Author’s interview with an Iraqi businessman working in Iran, California, September 2011.

<sup>4</sup> “Improving Economic Relations Between Iran and Iraq Requires Joint Investments,” Iran-Iraq Chamber of Commerce, September 27, 2023, <https://ir-iqcc.com/?p=18107>.

<sup>5</sup> Author’s discussions with a social scientist who carried out field studies on the phenomenon of identity shifts on Iran’s borders with Iraq, Princeton, NJ, 2017-2018.

negative attitudes emerged among other groups of Iranians who did not seek a hyphenated identity with their neighbour, and resisted wealthier Iraqis who reportedly sought to invest in prime real estate in Iran including along the shores of the Caspian Sea,<sup>6</sup> followed by denials by Iranian state authorities that such properties were ever sold to foreigners.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Policies that encourage migration and migrant integration patterns always carry a political message because of their requirements for people and nations to assimilate with new groups. By exploring the fluid and constructed nature of new Iraqi identity formations in Iran, through migration patterns, this report reveals how the “Iraqization” contributes to a form of state building by Tehran in which the Iranian national identity is slowly supplanted by a wider sense of communal unity with the Shia Iraqis. On a broader geopolitical level, the ramifications of this “Iraqization” project are yet to be assessed, but suggesting not only new modern state building patterns emerging inside Iran, but also a shift in the nation-state contract between the increasingly unpopular Iranian state and the Iranian people.

Although Iran and Iraq have shared borders and joint security concerns, especially as multiple PMF factions help the IRI contain potential threats along those borders, an emerging hyphenated Iranian-Iraqi identity threatens Iran’s ability to maintain solidarity and cohesiveness as one self-contained unit. While not all PMF factions wholeheartedly pledge allegiance to Iran’s leaders, they fall under the umbrella of Iraqi Shia groups over which Tehran retains considerable influence. Consequently, Iran’s “Iraqization” exposes the country to communities of Iraqis that infiltrate all levels of the Iranian state security, and social and cultural life, while also leading to the emergence of new plural constructs for Iran along increasingly fluid identity fault-lines.

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<sup>6</sup> Author’s phone interviews with relatives and friends living in the Caspian Sea region of Iran and observing its properties and markets rapidly being taken over by Iraqis, 2018-2019.

<sup>7</sup> “Land Purchase by Iraqis Denied,” *Khabar Farsi*, Shahrivar 6, 1398, <https://khabarfarsi.com/u/75970832>.

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## **The Interplay of Hijab and Citizenship in Iran**

*Mansour Anbarmoo*

Iran's Women Life Freedom (WLF) movement has been one of the most influential social movements in recent years in terms of its highlighting of women's issues, its impact on social cohesion, and the sheer number of perspectives and participants engaged. A key issue to emerge from the WLF protests is how the question of mandatory hijab has redefined what citizenship looks like in the Islamic Republic, leading to the emergence of 'non-citizens', or what can be defined as a 'precariat' in Iran. A key contextual factor lies in the fact that since the mid-2000s, the Islamic Republic has been hampered by its inability to control the social-cultural currents within the country, and to respond adequately to changing international trends around women's rights. It has pursued a pattern of social engineering creating a class of 'precariat' women, stemming from the Islamic Republic's imposition of restrictions on citizenship rights, particularly in relation to the mandatory wearing of the hijab, which impacts on women's ability to engage in activities such as voting, using public transportation, and walking in public spaces. Borrowing from Marxist theory, this notion of a precariat therefore refers to Iranian women who, according to government criteria, lack the desirable standards of being a 'normal' citizen (Mojahedi, 2022). This is a process that the government has sought to institute through increasingly radical policies following the eruption of the protests in 2022, and which has been influenced by contradictory trends within Iranian political and social life.

### ***Contradiction of Hijab and Citizenship***

The contradiction between hijab and citizenship in Iran can be divided into two separate periods: the first from 1980-2000 and then from 2000 to the 2022 protests. In the initial period, which coincided with the principle of 'Islamic Republic as a proponent of Islamic hijab', the new government sought to present Iranian women as a symbol of a desired form of hijab amidst a mix of tolerance and social constraints surrounding women. This was done by

contrasting with the Pahlavi regime domestically, and internationally by distinguishing itself from Muslim countries including Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Although the 1997 reformist election victory offered hope for those desiring social liberalisation, the hijab had by this time become a symbol of the Islamic Republic's approach towards women, deemed as an essential and existential requirement for women in the country. As a result, only those who observe and believe in hijab can be considered as female citizens in the eyes of the ruling system. This situation has, for some, exacerbated the gap between government and society in modern Iran, creating a conditional state of citizenship.

The compulsory hijab law of 1980 was among the first attempts of the Islamic Republic to deal with Iranian society after the 1979 revolution and quickly became one of the pillars defining the Islamic Republic's governance and bureaucracy. Before regulations related to compulsory hijab were brought in, the status of hijab in Iranian society was a matter of personal choice, Reza Shah's kashf-e hijab policy of compulsory unveiling (1936-41) notwithstanding. The efforts, therefore, of the Islamic Republic in passing the law indicates the political system's attention to social control especially in relation to the body.

### ***Excluding citizenship alongside compulsory hijab: a process***

At the moment of its establishment, the new government of the Islamic Republic attempted to create a distinction between internal and international environments to legitimise its actions and the expansion of its governance (Abrahamian, 1982, pp. 260-269). Internally, although unveiled women did not inherently threaten the Islamic Republic, Iran's new rulers tried hard to distinguish themselves from the previous regime. Hence, in its shift from acting as a political symbol to one of law and social coercion, hijab transitioned from a moral issue to a legal matter. In addition, Iran aimed to define a specific type of woman by identifying regional and international comparisons. In addition to the obvious contrast with the West, among Islamic countries, Turkey, with relatively lenient views on women's dress, and Saudi Arabia and Iraq, considered geopolitical rivals of Iran, were highlighted (Pervin, 2019).



In this context, Iranian leaders sought to design a specific pattern of women's clothing and activities. As such, during the transitional period after the revolution and during the war with Iraq, one of the intellectual occupations of the Islamic Republic policymakers was determining the type, colour, and size of women's clothing for their presence in offices and streets (Khatam, 2022). These actions aimed to articulate the idea of the 'Islamic Republic as a proponent of hijab' in the domestic and international political arena, with the Islamic Republic symbolising exemplary hijab among Muslims and the modern world more broadly. From this perspective, the necessity of ensuring women's presence with the desired clothing/hijab in key events that garnered an international audience was key. This was seen in the emphasis placed on having correctly attired 'revolutionary women' prominent in events, that garnered significant international attention, such as Massoumeh Ebtekar's role in the US hostage crisis, and Marzieh Dabagh's role as part of the Islamic Republic's delegation sent to convey Khomeini's letter Gorbachev in 1989.

In contrast to the formative proposition of the 'Islamic Republic as a proponent of hijab', the later idea of 'hijab as a symbol of the Islamic Republic' refers to a situation where the allocation and distribution of resources and the social and economic opportunities provided by the government only benefits women who wear the hijab. In fact, the Islamic Republic attempted to distinguish part of the female population as desirable citizens based on clientelism, creating governmental roles, such as the Deputy for Women's Affairs and the Women's Basij Organisation, and even organizing national hijab celebrations. This deliberative neglect of Iranian women is also reflected in other social spheres, especially the media. Since the early 2000s, the question of hijab has started to intersect with debates on what it means to be a citizen in the eyes of the Islamic Republic. The desired citizen in this interpretation is someone who adheres to hijab: meaning either a woman wearing hijab or a man whose family wear hijab. The use of media tools, the denial of pluralistic views on the issue, the holding of 'hijab festivals', all point to a desire to equate hijab with a form of model citizen. The dichotomy of citizen/non-citizen based on dress imposed a new social

cleavage on a deeply divided Iranian society, whereby ‘government norms and society acts cleavage’ in and of itself (Bashiriyeh, 2001, p. 65). As a result, those not conforming to defined citizenship norms can be seen as forming a type of ‘precariat’ within Iranian society, excluded from the rights afforded to (accepted) citizens.

The citizen-precariat cleavage due to hijab in modern Iran was also influenced by developments linked to globalisation, namely increased communications, the endurance of Islamic trends in South Asia, and increased Muslim migration to the West. The government has constructed an ideal which strengthens the ‘preferred citizen’ concept in the legislative arena. However, myths such as the idea of the hijab as a symbol of immunity rather than restriction have also been debunked. The national identity and sense of belonging of women who wear hijabs has also been undermined, leading some to participate in the WLF movement, an aspect that has had little attention in coverage around the protests. Thus, a key outcome of the ‘hijab a symbol of the Islamic Republic’ ideal was the simultaneous exclusion of women from decision-making and administration procedures. A further consequence of this approach was the exacerbation of the cleavage between the idea of ‘Iran’ as a nation and the ‘Islamic Republic’ in Iranian public opinion. The political authorities intensified the divide between nationalism and Islamism through the question of hijab, creating the necessary content for the rupture between the government and society in Iran. From the more nationalist perspective, the government is portrayed as anti-Iranian, anti-people, and monopolistic in political processes, while from the more pro-government perspective, the government is acting to protect the sanctity of hijab while also safeguarding the Islamic Republic from perceived foreign-backed plots.

The transformations after the events of September 2022 in Iran showed that discontent with the current situation was a major concern of the precariat. The uprising, despite the prolonged protests and the escalation of violence, did not diminish the presence and agency of women, however (Tohidlou, 2023, p. 159). One of the most important reasons for the women's uprising in the WLF movement was their protest against oppression, and the suppression of

their identity as represented in their portrayal in the media and international space. The symbolism of protesting women's active presence on the streets, and their widespread reflections on personal social media platforms, was an effort by precariat women against what they perceived as an exclusionary and dismissive political system. By expanding its control and intervention, the political system in Iran gave rise to patterns of civil resistance by women, as seen in the publication of images from private companies where women were unveiled. In response to the demands of the WLF movement, Iran's parliament has sought to pass a 'hijab and chastity bill' containing harsh punishments for violations and has begun to deploy facial recognition technology as well as 'Hijab Enforcers' in metro stations and other public spaces.

### *Conclusion*

In assessing the future horizon of the Iranian government, the current situation naturally tends toward the densification of citizenship cleavages in Iran and the expansion of the government-society one. Considering the current conditions, it can be predicted that future social developments will play a significant role in the development of the process of producing non-citizens, whether women or men. The issue of hijab is not merely a gender trait but also influences all aspects of society in Iran and social events such as marriage, migration, employment, as well as personal and social occasions. A combination of factors has led to a change in the relationship between the government and society in Iran regarding the hijab issue. These include the ideological politicisation of the hijab (both within Iran and in the diaspora), the inability of the political system to formulate clear policies for women, and the lack of clear and diverse theoretical foundations covering women's desires and collective actions.

The deliberate neglect of indigenous demands and the insistence on a pernicious international project aimed at sedition and anti-revolutionary activities has been the main strategy of the political system in dealing with this movement and other previous rights-based movements. The effort to maintain the hijab remains a major strategic goal of the government, although

this has been directly challenged by a precariat who have created new norms around hijab following the protests, which can be seen today in many Iranian towns and cities where women are openly pushing the limits of hijab enforcement despite the impending hijab and chastity legislation.

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## **Bridging Identity and Diplomacy: Iran's Educational Outreach**

*Ahmet Furkan Özyakar*

Iran's educational diplomacy and its initiatives towards higher education could be considered among the most under researched areas in the examination of Iranian foreign policy. The purpose of this contribution is to discuss how Iran's overseas and domestic educational initiatives can be examined within the scope of instrumentalisation of Iran's cultural and religious identity and seeking status in the international educational environment. It should be underlined that Iran's approach of utilising education as a diplomatic tool to expand its cultural and ideological influence is not a new phenomenon. Iran places great importance on education as a fundamental aspect of its mission to promote the ideology of the Islamic Republic both domestically and internationally and has made significant investments in international university initiatives. The utilisation of education as a means of public and cultural diplomacy originated during the time of Khomeini, who believed that spreading the ideology of the Islamic Republic among the Muslim world could be achieved through the educational sector (Banikamal and Ra'ees, 2018).

### ***Understanding educational diplomacy***

In conceptual terms, educational diplomacy is considered as a sub-branch of public diplomacy or cultural diplomacy as well as a stand-alone type of diplomacy. Education diplomacy and its growth were initially associated with the use of soft power as a means of easing the tensions that existed on the world stage in the aftermath of the Second World War and has become increasingly effective especially in the 21st century. Vaxevanidou (2018) emphasizes that education diplomacy holds a significant position not only for nation states, but also for educational institutions and organisations. The practitioners of educational diplomacy, namely educational institutions, have the capacity to promote national interests by enhancing and establishing collaboration across countries. International education has therefore placed an emphasis on two-way contact and mutuality, which has made it possible for individuals and

institutions, networks, and eventually countries to engage in conversation, exchange information, and work together while simultaneously keeping up with the rapidly growing technological platforms of the globalized world (Byrne and Hall, 2014). From this viewpoint, education diplomacy is able to serve multi-dimensional purposes in service of the state, ranging from the acquisition of material gains to status seeking. In the field of higher education, scholarship programs are a common way for many nations to entice international students and researchers. As strong student mobility and cultural, economic, and social links can improve a country's reputation and ability to influence and engage with regional and global actors, internationalizing higher education helps to cultivate soft power (Byrne and Hall, 2014). Considering the number of international students and their direct contribution to the countries' economy, the most prominent countries in achieving material gains are the USA (Esaki-Smith, 2021), Canada (Government of Canada, 2022), the United Kingdom (Sally Weale, 2023). These three countries are able to use higher education effectively as a soft power tool as well as a material gain, attracting thousands of students over the years to study in their countries.

### *Iran's educational diplomacy*

It is important to underline here that reports on Iran's international educational initiatives revolve around discussion of its seminary schools in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, most recently by Edward Wastnidge (2020) in a policy brief for The Geopolitics of Religions of Soft Power project. By accentuating the role of Islamic Culture and Religious Organisation (ICRO) as the "religious outreach of the Iranian state [. . .] between Iran and the wider Muslim World," Wastnidge (2020) emphasises that educational missions, along with seminaries, comprise ICRO's activities. Based on the information provided on ICRO's official website, the organisation is currently active in 54 locations across Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia (Islamic Culture and Relations Organisation, 2024). In relation to Iran's transnational connection, these activities not only boost diplomatic relations but also amplify its affinity with the Shia-populated world. In fact, it could be said that Iran has been exerting a sustained effort to reach Muslims in different parts of the world by emphasising its Islamic national identity and bolstering this emphasis with the provision of financial support.

Although much of the research on Iran's educational diplomacy has primarily focused on the Muslim world, it is important to note that their diplomatic efforts extend beyond this region. In fact, Iran has also developed initiatives for the Western and non-Islamic world, and it broadens its higher education programmes to include a variety of countries. The structure and functions of these various initiatives suggest Iran's aspiration to solidify its position in both Muslim and Western societies, prioritising non-material interests over material ones. Therefore, this paper argues that instead of focusing on material gains, Iran employs educational diplomacy for status seeking purposes. To this aim, Iran utilises specific aspects of its Islamic and cultural identities.

#### *Status seeking through religious education*

During the initial years of the Islamic Republic, the religious leadership, led by Khomeini, aimed to spread “Shia core doctrinal values” to Sunni Muslim nations via academic channels (Banikamal and Ra’ees, 2018). This endeavour led to the establishment of the International Centre for Islamic Studies (ICIS) in 1986, followed by the Organisation for Overseas Seminaries and Schools (OOSS) in 1991. In 2007, both entities merged to form Al-Mustafa International University (MIU), consolidating efforts to promote the Islamic Republic's religious influence abroad (Bano and Sakuroi, 2015). MIU is fundamentally overseen by the Office of the Supreme Leader. Additionally, being situated in Qom necessitates that the university govern its operations in compliance with the standards of the Qom Seminary, which is anticipated to reflect Shia ideals and principles. The international hawza program within the seminary paves the way for scholars to potentially serve as valuable conduits for Iranian religious influence and soft power upon their return to their countries of origin.

MIU, boasting sixty branches worldwide, notably includes the Islamic College of London, Indonesia Islamic College, and Ghana Islamic College, strategically enhancing the Iran's academic prestige globally. Expanding on MIU's endeavours in Malaysia and Afghanistan, Banikamal and Ra’ess (2018) suggest that these overseas branches aim to recruit Sunni scholars sympathetic to Shiism. In Malaysia, MIU aims to establish a foothold in higher



education and engage with local and international scholars and students, focusing on “research and propaganda” through the Amin Research Centre (ARC) in Kuala Lumpur. ARC has actively cultivated relationships with esteemed Malaysian research institutions and academics (Banikamal and Ra’ess, 2018).

Another instance of Iran's educational internationalisation is the establishment of the Islamic College, initially known as Hawza Imam al-Husayn in 1997, as a UK branch of Al-Mustafa International University in London. Its mission was “to disseminate Islamic knowledge in an environment that accords with Islamic values and thus tries to emulate Islamic norms and values” (The Islamic College, 2023). Evolving into the Islamic College for Advanced Studies (ICAS) in 1998, it introduced a Distance Education Department and the Hawza program in 2001. Subsequently, ICAS forged an ongoing academic partnership with Middlesex University and gained accreditation from the British Accreditation Council (The Islamic College, 2023), reflecting its pursuit of status and potential for further expansion.

### *Persian language outreach*

Apart from relying on religious identity, Iran utilises the Persian language as a fundamental aspect of collaboration with other nations and educational institutions. Cultural institutes and language centres are such places that can be likened to the headquarters of countries’ cultural and educational diplomatic facilities. During the Khatami era, Persian language learning/teaching was a tool to create educational cooperation with selected agents in order to fit into the self-ascribed identity of a “bridge between the East and the West.” However, Iran's cultural reach was limited due to the fact that any university cooperation was dependent on this linguistic element of Iranian culture. Despite this, Iran was able to develop cooperation between universities in nations such as Senegal (Tehran Times, 1999), Australia (Tehran Times, 2002), and Azerbaijan (Tehran Times, 2007), amongst others.

Perhaps the most crucial domestic platform for Iranian educational diplomacy is The Dekhoda Lexicon Institute and International Centre for Persian Studies affiliated with Tehran University. It offers one of Iran's most significant and longest-running Persian language courses. Since its establishment in 1989, this institution has welcomed over 22,000 students from many countries to provide them with comprehensive education in Persian language proficiency, as well as Iranian literature and art. The institute promotes collaboration among numerous international colleges interested in sending their students to Iran. A notable feature of Dekhoda Institute is its appeal to students not only from Muslim-majority nations, but also from Europe and East Asia. The consistent inclusion of Persian language courses at the Institute might be interpreted as a means for Iranian officials to sustain their educational diplomacy amidst evolving political and foreign relations, given that Persian is a significant component of Iran's cultural heritage. The primary motivation behind the language course is not solely the financial benefits, but rather the emphasis is on the activities inside the course and the promotion of Iranian culture. Iran aims to compete with other countries in its neighbourhood in the cultural and educational domain, with the ultimate goal of attaining a higher standing.

The focus on educational and cultural diplomacy through teaching Persian language saw the need to establish a cultural centres abroad with a language teaching focus. In this regard, the Sa'adi (Shirazi) Foundation was approved in 2010 by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, through a merger of two state agencies working for spreading the Persian language. In its official website, the Saadi Foundation notes that it has more than 40 centres around the world to teach Persian language (Saadi Foundation, 2023).

### ***Conclusion***

Consequently, it could be argued that Iranian agents of educational diplomacy employ educational programs to entice foreign scholars and students to seek status in international academia through the establishment of educational institutions in Muslim nations and Western countries, aiming to advance their ideological and political agendas. It is crucial to examine these institutions within the context of Iran's educational diplomacy and its pursuit of status for

two main reasons. Domestically, institutions like the Qom Seminary and Dehkhoda Institute serve as significant platforms for showcasing Islamic teaching and Persian language initiatives of the Islamic Republic to an international audience. The sphere of educational influence must be achieved through more consistent and permanent solutions, such as the establishment of educational institutions abroad. Moreover, these institutions hold strategic importance due to their geographical locations and the academic networks they offer access to.

While scholarly work on Iran's educational diplomacy focuses on the Muslim world, its multifaceted diplomacy does not restrict itself to this terrain, and includes initiatives developed for the Western/non-Islamic world. The structure and functions of these various initiatives indicate Iran's desire to establish its status in both Muslim and Western worlds, rather than pursuing purely material concerns. Thus, Iranian authorities pay concerted attention to both religious and cultural identities in regard to educational diplomacy.

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