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Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, analysts and pundits started to explore the interaction of religion and politics in Iran. They examined the role of religion in mobilizing the masses, the guardianship of jurists, the components of theocracy in Iran, and its implications for policymaking. Despite these scholarly efforts, the relationship between religion and ideology has been relatively overlooked. This chapter aims to explain the origin of a Shia political ideology in Iran. It examines how a Shia political ideology emerged from traditional Shia thoughts by reviewing the ebbs of flows of this journey in Iran’s modern era. In answering this question, the chapter demonstrates the impact of ideas, factional interests, and transnational forces on the rise of Shia political ideology in modern Iran. It argues that in pre-revolutionary time, the ideas, particularly a leftist reading of the history of Islam, laid the ground for the rise of a Shia political ideology. In the post-revolutionary time, however, policymaking and factional competition contributed to the evolution of Shia ideology, and in a post-9/11 world, transnational and regional power struggles impacted the ideological choice of Iranian ruling elites.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, it briefly reviews the historical evolution of Shia thoughts in the modern history of Iran. Then, it illuminates the impact of intellectual thoughts on the development of Shia ideology in pre-revolutionary time. Afterwards, the chapter explains the evolution of Shia ideology in the post-revolutionary era. Finally, it demonstrates the ongoing impact of transnational and regional forces on the ideological choice of Iran’s ruling elites.

Religion and politics in Iran’s modern history

The dominant scholarly view considers the Safavid era in the 16th century as the origin of Shiism in Iran. This oversimplified view, however, discounts the elements of Persian culture that aligned with Shiism in “a land where substantial patronage awaited the Shi’ite ulema” (Algar, 2006). Shia Islam continued to lead Iran’s public life after the fall of the Safavid empire, namely from the Afsharid to the Qajar era (1789–1925). The Shia clerical establishment played a vital role in Iran’s constitutional revolution in the Qajar period. Although the secular intellectuals conceptualized the underlying ideas of this revolution, the Ulama (the Shia clerics), notably Ayatollah Naini and Tabatabai, joined the movement and were at the centre of theoretical efforts in the revolution and later mobilizing the masses in the constitutional era.
The Shia clerical establishment continued to enjoy pervasive influence in Iran’s public sphere until Reza Shah’s modernization programmes (1925–1941). Reza Shah substantially limited their influence. Yet his son, Mohammadreza Shah Pahlavi relaxed most of these restrictions. This relaxation provides an arena for Ulama to play an even greater role in Iran compared to the constitutional period that took place between 1905 and 1911. The clerical establishment expanded its influence through the mosques and religious organizations in Iran. Religious magazines and journals boomed in this period, and the proponents of political Islam seized the opportunity to publicize their ideas to the general audience.3

Iran’s intellectual discourse and the evolution of Shia ideology

The left discourse and Ali Shariati

The leftist intellectuals profoundly shaped public discourse in pre-revolutionary Iran. The left tradition, which was present since the inception of Iran’s constitutional era, dominated the entire intellectual discourse for decades, especially after the overthrow of Reza Shah Pahlavi by the Allied Power in 1945. Most of Iran’s intelligentsia had an affiliation with Iran’s communist parties, called Tudeh. The influence of the leftist discourse was not limited to secular authors and activists. Although religious groups actively opposed the communists in Iran, the leftist ideas gradually spread and influenced the religious groups in Iran. Specifically, after the 1953 coup, some religious organizations started to adopt some elements of Marxism and integrated them into Islam and Shia thoughts. This influence of the leftists’ view was perhaps the most significant episode in the construction of a revolutionary Shia ideology in Iran. A key figure in this transformation was Ali Shariati, a revolutionary sociologist whose lectures drew a large crowd of young, educated Iranians. Historians and pundits explore and examine his life, legacy, and teaching (Saffari, 2019). Despite debates about his influence and legacy, his impact on the 1979 Revolution is unquestionable, and some scholars even called him the ideologue of the 1979 Revolution.4 Despite a lack of academic credentials, Shariati’s lectures and writings transformed the conservative Shia thoughts into a revolutionary ideology that inspired a wide range of revolutionaries.

His ideas centred around a reformation project with the premise of returning a “true” Islam and Shia to rescue the masses from colonialism and exploitation of the despotic and corrupt ruling class. His writings can be summarized in three components: first, a critique of Islamic clergy, second a Marxist reading of society and history, and third an anti-colonial principle of the return to self and original Iranian culture.

Critique of clergy

Shariati utilized the political history of Shia as opposition and framed early martyrs in Islam and Shia as revolutionary leaders. In particular, Shariati emphasized Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad who refused to pledge allegiance to a corrupt caliph and was martyred in the Battle of Ashura in Iraq’s Karbala in October 680 AD. Shariati regarded Imam Hussain’s movement as a manifestation of a longstanding struggle between the upper class and oppressed and called for Muslims to imitate his uprising to overthrow the unjust and corrupt rulers of our time. Shariati’s reading of Imam Hussain, however, did not align with the leading view in Shia seminaries on this important episode in the history of Islam. Shia clerics, or Ulama, historically have been labelled as conservatives who do not intend to challenge the ruling power. Instead of political activities and opposition to corrupt rulers, the primary focus of Ulama as the guardians of the Prophet’s intellectual legacy was on producing scholarly materials in Shia jurisprudence and theology.
Imam Hussain’s movement has been at the centre of scholarly controversies for centuries in Shia seminaries. Historians, theologians, and jurists have debated his intention and the lessons of his uprising for Muslims. The common interpretation of Imam Hussain’s movement in the past two centuries of Shia Islam dates back to Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Hassan Najafi (known as Saheb-e Javaher), who argued that the Imam Hussain movement is not generalizable to other times. Saheb-e Javaher holds that Imam Hussain’s mission to sacrifice his life is one of the divine secrets that we cannot explicate (Soroush Mahalati, 2018). Therefore, we should not draw an analogy between our time and Imam Hussain’s era, and Shia Muslims cannot imitate his movement.

Instead of a revolutionary explanation, Ulama viewed Imam Hussain’s unique mission as an instance of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong as a principle in Islamic jurisprudence. Therefore, the Imam Hussain movement was an intellectual effort to rectify the deviances in the teachings of the Prophet, which was intensified by unjust Umayyad rulers, namely Muawiyyah and Yazid. In the same way, Ulama highlighted other episodes in the early history of Islam that Shia Imams rejected, such as the public calls for an uprising to overthrow the corrupt caliphs. For instance, Imam Jafar Sadeq, the founder of the Shia creed, neither endorsed nor denounced his uncle Zaid’s revolt against the Umayyad Caliphate in 740 AD. In that critical moment, the Umayyad dynasty faced a serious challenge from several contenders, including Abbasid. As a result, some followers of Shia Imams asked them to seize the opportunity and establish the Shia ruling. Nevertheless, Imam Sadeq rejected a request from one of the key political leaders in Iraq to be the new caliph after the fall of Umayyad. Rather, Imam Sadeq focused on establishing a school of thought and training students to disseminate the Shia doctrine.

Drawing on this tradition, Shia clerics who identify themselves as the followers of Imam Sadeq primarily focus on spreading his teachings and avoiding direct involvement in political infighting and activities. In the Twelver Shia tradition (unlike some other Shia branches, namely Zaidiyya), the clergy’s primary role is to protect the doctrines of the Prophet Muhammad from deviation. Instead of standing up against political corruption and oppression of tyrants, this tradition tries to rectify the deviations from the teaching of Prophet Muhammad, specifically in theology and jurisprudence, which is in line with Imam Sadeq’s role in Shia Islam. They interpret the key concept of Velayat or the Guardianship of Imams in Shia Islam as the guardian of Islamic society or Ummah from deviation. As a result, this dominant view in both Iran and Iraq’s Shia seminaries downplays the political activities and leadership, especially during the era of the occultation (which began in 869) of the hidden Imam Mahdi.

This interpretation of Shia tradition was one of the main barriers against the creation of political ideology in Shia Islamic tradition. Shariati, on the other hand, dismissed this long tradition in Shia seminaries as a scholastic and impractical approach that does not address the real needs of Islamic society. He highlighted the revolutionary potentials in Shia Islam as an opposition group to fight the corrupt shahs of Iran. He interpreted the concept of Velayat and Imammat in a fundamentally different fashion. He viewed Shia Imams as revolutionary leaders who stand up against oppressors and rescue the oppressed from corrupt rulers (Shariati, 1969). This critique of the Shia clerical establishment was not limited to contemporary religious settings in Iran. In his book, Alawi Shia versus Safavid Shia, he slammed Majlesi, an important figure in the Shia clergy, for cosying up to the Safavid Shahs (Shariati, 1971b).

**Shariati and Marxism**

A Marxist interpretation of society and history was another essential component of Shariati’s thought. However, his contradictory views on Marxism baffled many political activists and
commentators. Even the shah’s security apparatus confounded Shariati’s critique of Marxism with his Marxist reading of Shia Islam and erroneously decided to use Shariati’s popularity to undermine dominant Marxist views among educated Iranian youth. To clarify the complicated relationship between Shariati and Marxism, Abrahamian (1982) differentiates between three different interpretations of Marx in Shariati’s writings: first, the young Marx as a proponent of dialectical materialism in philosophy who denies God and the afterlife. According to Shariati, Marx’s atheist view has been exaggerated by communists who considered reactionary Churches as a barrier against their socialist agenda and consequently denounced religion. Second, the sociologist Marx who theorizes how the ruling elite and socioeconomic structures exploited the people. Finally, the elder Marx as a politician who established a party to lead a revolution in favour of the working class. Abrahamian argues that Shariati rejected the first and the third Marx yet embraced the second Marx to interpret the history of Islam and Iran.

This Marxist interpretation of the history of Islam was vital in the construction of Shariati’s Shia ideology. For Shariati, one cannot understand history and society without knowing Marxism. Shariati interpreted the history of Islam as part of a long-term class struggle between the oppressed and oppressors. He utilized Quranic terms such as “Mostazafin” (or oppressed) as an element in his theory. Shariati even interpreted the story of Cain and Abel as a part of this struggle in the history of human beings. However, a religious reformer like Shariati could not accept the materialist assumptions of Marxism. Thus, he merely used it as a theoretical framework to analyse history and society. In a long article called “Humankind, Islam, and Western Schools of Thoughts”, Shariati denounced Marxism and Liberalism as two forms of humanism that led mankind to futile materialism (Shariati, 1971a).

Despite the lack of consistency in Shariati’s work, it appears his fundamental assumption on the afterlife and God contradicts the Marxist one. Some recent assessments of Shariati’s work, such as that of Saffari (2019), considers Shariati’s use of Western theories as an instance of cosmopolitan localism. Despite these fundamental disagreements with Marxism, Shariati’s understanding of the history of Islam and Iran relies heavily upon a Marxist theoretical framework. As explained, Shariati viewed history as a class struggle between the oppressed and the upper class. In Shariati’s writings, Imam Hussain is central for being a religious revolutionary leader who sacrificed his life for justice in Islamic society. Instead of an intellectual movement to rectify deviances, Shariati defined Imam Hussain’s uprising as a class struggle between the lower class and the corrupt aristocracy of the Umayyad dynasty. In this view, Umayyad allied with the oppressive landlords to exploit the masses, and only (Shariati, 1971a) Shia Imams and a handful of true companions of the Prophet, like Abu Zarr, stood up against this setting. According to Shariati’s analysis, the ultimate goal of the Imam Hussain movement was to reach nezam towhidi, a classless society with no corruption, injustice, or oppression. Shariati argued that currently, Islamic societies suffer from the same oppression as in early Islam. Therefore, Muslims need to restore Imam Hussain’s movement. As explained, the Shia clerical establishment emphasized the intellectual aspects of Imam Hussain and considered it an effort to rectify deviances from the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad. They argue that even this revolutionary moment was ten days of an exception in more than 250 years of history of the twelve Shia Imams.

**Shariati and anti-colonial movement**

Finally, the last component of Shariati’s thinking was the anti-colonial discourse primarily influenced by Frantz Fanon. As a political philosopher, Fanon’s work shaped post-colonial studies and inspired several anti-colonial resistance movements in developing countries. Fanon was popular among Iran’s intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s, and his works were translated by
Iranian students and activists. Shariati, among some others, translated Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. Anti-colonial discourse profoundly impacted Shariati’s thinking on Iran’s intellectual history. In particular, it influenced Shariati’s use of religion to challenge secular intellectuals and political activists in Iran. The involvement of Western powers in the 1957 coup ignited a sense of anger against foreign powers. As explained, Shariati rejected the third Marx and institutionalized and bureaucratized the Marx who replaced revolutionary passion with mundane bureaucratic settings. Drawing on his reading of post-colonial themes, he denounced communist parties of “Europe of not helping national liberation movements in such places as Algeria, Tunisia, and Vietnam” (Abrahamian, 1982). Influenced by Fanon, Shariati directly criticized Tudeh, Iran’s communist party, for downplaying the important role of nationalism and return to Iran’s cultural roots. Shariati extended this criticism to a broader context of Iran’s intelligentsia for overlooking Iran’s national interests and even betraying Iran in favour of their interests or global causes.

In this context, Shariati admired Shia clergy for not signing even one treasonous colonial agreement. This admiration of Shia’s clergy in Shariati’s writings may look contradictory to Shariati’s critique of conservative views in Shia seminaries. However, Shariati candidly believed in the tremendous power of the clergy in mobilizing the masses. Based on the anti-colonial component of his thinking, Shariati viewed the Shia clergy as the last and the only rampart against the cultural offensive of colonial powers (Shariati, 1972). Thus, according to Shariati, the Shia clergy, as an institution, are a vital component of a revolutionary ideology, solidifying contemporary anti-colonial resistance in Iran.

In a nutshell, Shariati was an important figure in transforming Shia thoughts into a full-fledged revolutionary ideology. At the societal level, his Marxist reading of Shia history turned Shia into an opposition stream seeking to stand up against oppressive rulers in Iran and beyond. Additionally, Shariati portrayed the Shia clerical establishment as an instrument to counter colonial interventions in Iran. In the post-World-War-II era, mostly dominated by communist discourse, Shariati’s writings created a powerful alternative for political activists. Shariati’s writings had a profound influence on a wide range of activists, from Mujahedin-e Khalgh (Abrahamian, 1992) to religious nationalist groups and even some supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini. Shariati also faced strong criticism from traditionalist segments of Iranian society. In addition to Shia clergy, traditionalists like Seyyed Hossein Nasr strongly criticized Shariati. Even some secular intellectuals like Shayegan denounced the ideologization of tradition for failing to save its spiritual basis. According to Shayegan (1994), the ideologization of tradition sets out tradition in a modern framework to compete with alternative secular political ideologies, but without knowing the fundamental assumptions of the modern worldview. These critiques were part of Mohammadreza Shah’s broader cultural project to counter leftist views in Iran (Matin-Asgari, 2018).

**Other intellectuals and the evolution of Shia ideology**

In addition to Shariati, other intellectuals inspired the evolution of Shia ideology by stressing the enormous political potential of Shia clergy. They initiated a modernized reading of Shia history and situated this interpretation in the social and political debates of Iran and the Muslim world. One of the writers that influenced the emergence of Shia ideology was Jalal Al-e-Ahmad (1962). A former member of the Tudeh party who defected from communism and returned to his religious past, he published a book *Westoxification* (*Gharbzadegi* in Farsi), criticizing Iranian intellectuals’ reliance on the Western way of life and thinking. This book became popular in Iran, as it reflected the deep sense of disillusionment in Iranian society after the 1953 coup, which resulted from Western countries’ involvement in the overthrow of the democrati-
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Al-e-Ahmad further glorified Ayatollah Fazlollah Nouri, an anti-constitutional revolution cleric who advocated the despotic rule of the shah in Iran,\(^\text{12}\) which was later repeated by Ayatollah Khomeini. Although Al-e-Ahmad’s reading aligns well with the revolutionary ideology in Iran, his underlying motivation in promoting the clergy’s role in leading society is unclear. One may argue that Al-e-Ahmad intended to instrumentally use Shia clergy to advance his ideas. Exploring his motivation and ideas are beyond the scope of this chapter. Yet, the theme of “westoxification” became so dominant in Iran’s intellectual discourse that it has even been adopted and promoted by some of the state-sponsored intellectual organizations in the shah era (Mirsepassi, 2017).

Mahdi Bazargan

Another important thinker who highlighted the role of Shia clergy and contributed to the transformation of Shia thoughts to an ideology was Mahdi Bazargan. He was an engineer and the co-founder of Iran’s Liberation Movement (a pro-democracy nationalist group) who became the first prime minister of Iran after the 1979 Revolution. Before the Islamic revolution, he published several pieces arguing that religion and science are reconcilable. Additionally, he emphasized the role of Shia clergy in revitalizing Iranian society. In his book, *Resurrection and Ideology*, he advocated a greater ideological role for Islam and even proposed a council of clerics to lead society. However, soon after the revolution, he resigned and left the revolutionary camp in favour of a more pragmatist policy view.\(^\text{13}\) His book demonstrated the dominant view of the 1960s on the ideologization of Islam and a leading role for Shia clergy.

The Sunni Islamist and Muslim Brotherhood

Finally, Sunni Islamism also influenced the transformation of Shia Islam to a political ideology in Iran. Although the impact of the Muslim Brotherhood on Iran’s Islamic Revolution has been exaggerated by some Western commentators, Sunni Islam impacted some of the revolutionaries in Iran. The Muslim Brotherhood influenced some clerics and Islamist activists who later held important positions in Iran’s Islamic regime. Major books of the Muslim Brotherhood thinkers like Sayyid Qutb were translated into Farsi (Unal, 2016). Some activists, like Navab Safavi, met Muslim Brotherhood leaders in the 1950s. Navab Safavi and his group ardently advocated the Muslim Brotherhood’s solution for fixing Islamic societies.\(^\text{14}\) Additionally, the Palestinian cause was another significant point of attraction that drew Iranian political activists to the Muslim Brotherhood. However, the condemnation of Shia teaching by Sunni Islamists (Jafarian, 2008, pp. 501–509) was a major barrier in the relationship between Sunni Islamism and Shia political Islam. As a result, some Shia clerics stigmatized the translators of Qutb’s writings in Iran and labelled them as *Wahhabi*. Overall, Shia Islamists tried to keep a distance from the Muslim
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Brotherhood, which can be observed in the post-revolutionary Islamic order and the doctrine of *Velayt Faghih* in Iran’s constitution (Feirahi, 2015).

**The impact of ideas and interests on the evolution of the Shia Ideology in post-revolutionary Iran**

Such ideas paved the way for the rise of a revolutionary Shia ideology in the 1960s and 1970s in Iran. The writings of intellectuals like Shariati and Jalal Al-Ahmad worked in tandem with the revolutionary demands at the societal level and transformed Shia thoughts into a political ideology. The 1979 Revolution, however, profoundly influenced the evolution of Shia ideology in Iran. In addition to ideas, the interests of revolutionary factions, as well as regional and international environments, shaped this evolution in the post-revolutionary era. Conflict and competition between the revolutionaries and Islamists led the revolutionary factions to revise, adjust, or adopt new elements to Shia ideology.

Additionally, the nascent political structure was permeable to domestic and foreign interference. Islamist revolutionaries were devoid of any political party or unified organization. That is, in the chaotic days after the 1979 upheavals, the post-revolutionary government, with no established intelligence or security apparatus, was not able to manage conflicting forces, and consequently, well-organized parties such as Tudeh with close ties to the Soviet Union and its well-trained intelligence service were able to influence the political atmosphere. Moreover, the Islamists did not have any experience in framing political issues and setting the agenda, let alone running the administration and governmental agencies. In this environment, the left, with strong roots in Iran’s intelligentsia and media, set the agenda and shaped the post-revolutionary discourse. Organizations such as the Tudeh party, with several affiliates in Iran’s major newspapers and magazines, shaped the political discourse by solidifying anti-Americanism as a key element of Iran’s post-revolutionary discourse. In their public statements and writings, they framed liberalism as an instrument of Western powers to steal the revolution and dominate independent nations. This way of framing and agenda-setting was not merely limited to liberal ideology. They even labelled the pragmatist politicians as “liberals” to stigmatize the proponents of any diplomatic relationship with America, especially Prime Minister Mahdi Bazargan and his administration. The prime example of this phenomenon can be observed in the 1980 hostage crisis in Iran. The Islamist revolutionaries adopted this narrative to purge the competing factions in the post-revolutionary era (Tabaar, 2017), which continued until the elimination of opposition in May 1981.

**Religion and ideology in the post-May-1981 era**

The 22nd of May 1981 was a critical juncture in Iran’s post-revolutionary history. The coalition of Islamist revolutionary factions successfully purged the polity of opposition factions. They included the coalition of leftist and nationalist groups who originally helped the Islamists to overthrow the shah. The strategic use of a religious narrative was a significant element in this process. As Tabaar argues,

> Actors develop and deploy religious narratives to meet their factional and regime-level interests, depending on their locus in the system and their subsequent threat perceptions. Rather than the driving force behind the behavior, religious ideas are the constructs of actors seeking to meet the challenges of elite competition.

*(Tabaar, 2018: 3)*
The driving force behind the evolution of Shia ideology, however, was not limited to factional interests. As explained, a leftist organization such as Tudeh set the agenda by shaping the post-revolutionary discourse. In the post-May–1981 era, the impact of leftist organizations diminished. The 1981 (mini-) civil war in Iran securitized the political arena. Even non-militant groups such as the Liberation Movement faced serious restrictions. The security apparatus imprisoned their members, and consequently, their influence diminished.

Despite the elimination of opposition forces in Iran, political competition did not fade away. The heterogeneous nature of Iran’s ruling elites encouraged factional infighting. In the post-1981 era, factional competition shifted to loyal groups inside the ruling elite. The revolutionary understanding of Shia Islam and its implications in policymaking was at the heart of factional debates in the 1980s. This competition emerged out of two fundamentally different readings of Shia Islam: on economic policymaking and the role of government. On the one hand, a group of young and university-educated revolutionaries, supported by Ayatollah Khomeini and his office, planned to deliver distributive promises of the revolution through a welfare state and expand the size of the government. Inspired by Shariati and other leftist interpretations of Shia Islam, this group of revolutionaries (later called the Islamist left) established a fully-fledged welfare state intended to eradicate poverty, slums, and unemployment. The primary mechanism for implementing the welfare policies was government intervention and strengthening state capacity (Abrahamian, 2009). They also sought to provide a social safety net for the underclass through rationing and subsidizing bread, fuel, gas, heat, electricity, and health care for the urban poor as well as land and housing for people in slum areas (Salehi-Isfahani, 2009). Additionally, the post-revolutionary administration tried to eliminate the gap between urban and rural life by implementing rural development projects in the countryside, such as building medical clinics, schools, and piped water systems, as well as raising the price of agricultural goods.

On the other hand, a group of clerics and bazaari (traditional merchants) revolutionaries opposed the welfare state platform by demanding a larger role for traditional commerce and the private sector. This group, later called the traditional right (or traditional conservatives), argued that the Islamist left’s policy platform was inspired by communism and consequently contradicted Islamic law. This factional competition may look at first glance like a left versus right debate of the kind that frequently occurs in modern politics. However, there was an ideological battle over the role of Islam and Shia jurisprudence in policymaking. Instead of the socialist vision of the Islamist left, the traditional conservatives argued that the country should be run according to Shia practical treatise or catechism (Ressale Tözihol Masael in Farsi).17 Islamists had already attempted to change secular laws to Sharia laws in the judicial branch by introducing legislation such as the Bill of Qisas. Yet, traditional conservatives demanded a larger role for Shia jurisprudence to counter the Islamist left. This ideological battle was primarily manifested in economic policymaking. The traditional conservatives resorted to the Domination Principle in shariah, which upholds the right of individuals to control their properties, to criticize government intervention, and defend the private property rights of individuals. In the social policy domain, they rejected the introduction of modern labour law by framing employee and employer relations as the traditional hirer and he or she who is hired (or ajir and moujer) in Shia jurisprudence. As Raisi (2020) demonstrates, Iran’s parliamentary politics is influenced by factional infighting and national political debates. The second and third parliament after the revolution became the centre stage of this factional competition between the Islamist left and the traditional conservatives. Prime Minister Mousavi and his administration pursued the Islamist left agenda, and the traditional conservatives caucus in Iran’s parliament tried to undermine Mousavi’s “socialist” agenda and promote the use of traditional Shia jurisprudence in policymaking. This factional infighting temporarily went on hold when Ayatollah Khomeini
sided with the Islamist left faction over Mousavi’s vote of confidence in 1985. The underlying reason for this decision by Ayatollah Khomeini has not been sufficiently examined by historians and pundits. However, the debates around revolutionary versus conservative Islam, which was traditionally dominant in Shia seminaries, was at the centre of Khomeini’s thinking. In the late 1980s, Ayatollah Khomeini tried to frame a new ideological divide by differentiating between American Islam and pure Islam. This ideological divide had two important ramifications in Iran’s policymaking. In foreign policy, “pure” Islam denounced reconciliation with the superpowers, particularly the US. At the domestic (Khomeini, 1989) level, it highlighted the longstanding class conflict between upper and lower class (or mastazafin), explicitly calling for a battle between poverty and richness (Khomeini, 1989). The traditional conservative faction had ties with some of the opponents of this revolutionary view in Shia seminaries, and some traditional conservatives even cosied up to the Hojjatieh association, a conservative religious group that had a fundamental disagreement with Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolutionary statements against the shah before the 1979 Revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini publicly denounced Hojjatieh and ordered that Hojjatieh affiliates were disqualified from holding high-rank positions in post-revolutionary administrations (Sadr, 2014, pp. 476–478).

The evolution of political ideology in the post-Khomeini era

The post-Khomeini political setting triggered the demise of the Islamist left in Iran. The new supreme leader of Iran, an opponent of the Mousavi administration, created an alliance of the traditional conservatives and a group of technocrats led by President Hashemi-Rafsanjani. This group of technocrats in charge of key positions in the Hashemi-Rafsanjani administration pursued a neoliberal policy platform. Iran’s economic policies shifted from welfare and distribution to economic growth. Much destruction resulted from the eight-year war between Iraq and Iran, and the economic stagnation led succeeding administrations to embrace a quasi-neoliberal policy platform. These technocrats later transformed into a pragmatist faction (Kargozaran-e Sazandegi in Farsi), which was the main agent of the policy shift. This group of technocrats in the Hashemi-Rafsanjani administration initiated pro-market reform policies with the Second Five-Year Development Plan (1989–1994). The Islamist left slammed this quasi-neoliberal policy platform in the Islamic Republic’s third parliament. They highlighted the high cost of structural adjustment and market reform policies for the lower class by relying on their ideological reading of the revolution. However, they could not sell it to the Iranian public in the next parliamentary election. The traditional conservatives won the fourth parliamentary election in 1992 with the promise of supporting Hashemi-Rafsanjani’s administration. Although the traditional conservatives emphasized their agenda in the parliament, the technocrats’ policy platform paved the way for the rise of a liberal ideology within the Islamic Republic. The coalition of these strange bedfellows did not last even for one term in Iran’s parliament, and the conservatives did not endorse the technocrats’ candidates in the next parliamentary election and introduced a new coalition under the banner of Kargozaran Sazandegi. This liberal policy platform proposed international cooperation abroad in tandem with market reform policies at the domestic level to address the reconstruction of the country after the Iraq–Iran War. However, Hashemi-Rafsanjani concluded his term with an economic crisis.

In 1997, Mohammad Khatami, the liberal-minded former minister of culture, won the presidential election by a wide margin in an election with an 80 per cent turnout. Khatami’s reformist vision primarily consisted of a liberal renovation of the Islamic left plus the pragmatists’ views on development. The Islamist left was the main part of the winning coalition in the 1997 election. This coalition, later called the reformists, abandoned the welfare platform of the Islamist
left in favour of a more market-oriented policy vision. The reformists won three subsequent elections (parliamentary, city council, and Khatami’s second-term presidential election) by an overwhelming margin. The reformists used these victories to liberalize domestic politics. They pursued a liberalization agenda through the Iranian parliament by passing several reform bills. However, most of this reformist legislation was vetoed by the Guardian Council for violating Sharia and Iran’s constitution. In sum, Iran’s reformist policy platform was influenced by the fashionable yet tenuous assumption that free markets make free politics (Kamrava, 2008).

The reformists transformed the revolutionary ideology of the 1970s to a semi-liberal ideology that later made a significant contribution to the development of post-Islamism, to use Bayat’s (2013) term. Aside from the market-oriented policies and the above-mentioned factional interests, reformation theology was the bedrock of this transformation. In particular, Abdolkarim Soroush was a key figure in this reformation project. Soroush was an academic and a former member of Iran’s Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution who published articles criticizing the basic assumptions of the “ideological” reading of Islam (Soroush, 1996). Soroush’s reformation project had two important elements. First, an epistemological assessment of religious understanding by differentiating between religion and individuals’ understanding of Islam. This theoretical framework aimed, in particular, to undermine an ideological reading of Islam. The second component of Soroush’s thinking was defining citizens as rightful instead of the dutiful individuals of the pre-modern area. This critique directly challenged the way that traditional schools of thought and Islamic jurisprudence views human beings. (Soroush, 2002) Although Soroush later attacked neoliberalism,23 conservatives viewed Soroush’s writing as a serious challenge to the ideological reading of Islam and the rule of the Shia jurists (Velayat Faghih), and as a result, vigilante groups disrupted his public lectures in universities.

In sum, hardliners viewed reformism as a liberal regime-change plot in Iran.24 This threat perception had important ramifications for the evolution of Shia ideology in the country. Therefore, Iran’s hardliners introduced a novel revolutionary ideology and promoted it as an unchangeable component of the regime’s identity. Additionally, they revived the need for Islamic social science as the theoretical component of this identity. This ideational conflict between reformists and hardliners influenced the factional setting in Iran’s domestic and foreign policies. Additionally, the hardliners considered reformist liberal orientation as an alternative to mobilizing the masses. Finally, they began a campaign to eliminate the reformists from Iran’s factional politics.

The reformists could not maintain their electoral success. Conservatives won the municipal election of 2003, which was relatively free and fair. In the next parliamentary election in 2004, the Guardian Council barred more than 2,000 candidates – mostly from the reformist camp – paving the way for the victory of the conservatives in that election. Conservatives also won the 2005 presidential election, which was competitive and in which more than 62 per cent of the electorate participated. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won this election, promising to fight the corrupt ruling elite and bring the oil money to the people’s dinner tables. Additionally, ideology played a significant role in Ahmadinejad’s victory in the first round of the 2005 presidential election (Raisi, 2019).

The 2009 disputed presidential election was perhaps the most evident example of this struggle between hardliners and reformists. Key reformists were sentenced following a mass trial for a regime-change plot and actions against the regime’s national security, and the reformist leader was placed under house arrest. Although the hardliners successfully eliminated the reformists, this factional struggle over the revolutionary ideology continued. Competitive elections decreased the likelihood of protests (Raisi, 2021), and Iran’s ruling elite could not simply set aside factional competition in elections, and they allowed pragmatists to run in the 2013 presidential election. Hassan Rouhani and an offshoot technocrat faction won the 2013 presidential
election with the reformists’ support. Rouhani’s major achievement was reconciliation and cooperation with the international community, exemplified in Iran’s 2015 nuclear agreement. Hardliners later resumed their campaign against Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif for violating Iran’s revolutionary identity.25

### The impact of transnational forces and geopolitics on the evolution of Shia ideology

Thus far, this chapter has examined the role of ideas and factional interests in the construction of Shia ideology in the modern age. Additionally, transnational forces and regional shocks26 have impacted the ideological choice of Iranian leaders. Iranian experts and scholars have debated the role of ideology in Iran’s foreign policymaking since the 1979 Revolution. On the one hand, some contend that a revolutionary ideology drives Iran’s foreign policymaking. On the other hand, realist scholars and pundits argue that national interests and balance-of-power concerns shape Iran’s foreign policymaking. Others consider ideology as one determinant of foreign policymaking among many others. This chapter briefly reviews the reciprocal impact of transnational forces and international events on the evolution of ideology in Iran. The chapter concludes that transnational forces and regional shocks coupled with the above-mentioned threat perception of regime change at the domestic level influenced the ideological choice of the ruling elite in Iran after 2003. That is, external threats primarily resulted from the West’s invasion of Iraq in 2003 and domestic pressure to reform Iran’s political structure promoted a novel version of revolutionary ideology in Iran. A review of media outlets affiliated with the conservative ruling elites demonstrates a shift to resistance to a revolutionary identity. This resistance discourse considers the liberal reformist view as a threat to the Islamic regime. As a result, this resistance discourse fundamentally refutes the reformists’ assumptions about the role of Islam in domestic and international politics.

The Iran–US relationship is a manifestation of this struggle between conservatives and reformists. The pragmatist/reformist camp advocates a cooperative stance with Western powers. The hardliners, on the other hand, argue that US policies are an existential threat to the Islamic Republic of Iran and cannot be trusted (Mousavian, 2012). Mousavian argues the US response to reformists’ cooperative stance28 after 9/11, such as calling Iran an axis of evil by President George W. Bush, seriously undermined the reformist camp and made a case for the hardliners’ view of the Iran–US relationship. Additionally, Iran’s regional rivals utilized regional shocks such as the Arab Spring to pressurize Iran.29 This international and regional setting further contributed to Iran’s strategic isolation. Mesbahi’s study of Iran and the international system framed Iran’s post-Cold-War position as strategically alone. That is, “Iran’s potential for survival…depends on the sustainability of self-made, deliberate or inevitable, loneliness and self-sufficiency in its national defense capacity” (Mesbahi, 2011, p27). In this setting, the main reservoir of Iran’s national security is a culture rooted in Shi’ism, which combines the “physical domain of security with the metaphysical dimension of life” resulting in a willingness to risk the “normative and physical power of strategic systemic value”. (Mesbahi, 2011, p28)

The US response to Iran’s nuclear programme and regional policies promoted the strategic use of religion, particularly in framing the resistance discourse. The hardliners previously had framed the reformists’ cooperative nuclear policy as a sign of weakness and labelled Khatami’s negotiating team as spies and traitors (Raisi, 2013). The US withdrawal from Iran’s nuclear deal provided further ammunition to attack the proponents of rapprochement with the West. Instead of reformists, the Rouhani administration and Zarif have been the new target of the hardliners’ campaign. To convince the Iranian public, they used analogies from the early history of Shia Islam to discredit the cooperative approach to Western powers.30
Similarly, the US response to Iran’s regional policies enhanced the resistance discourse in Iran’s domestic policies. The Trump administration followed the pressure of US allies and withdrew from Iran’s nuclear deal because of Iran’s alleged “destabilized behaviour” in the region. The US allies constantly exaggerated the role of Iran after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by framing it as a “Shia Crescent” and the rise of a new Safavid empire. Shia Muslims, as a minority sect, have been under discrimination for centuries. The Sunnis consider Shia Muslim as a heretical sect, and some even have not recognized them as Muslim. This doctrine called Takfir has triggered bloody tension in the Middle East.31 In this environment, Shia rulers in Iran have held themselves responsible for protecting Shia minorities in the region (Chehabi and Abisaab, 2006). This longstanding historical relationship between Iranian rulers and Shia minorities led some assessments to view the Islamic Republic’s regional role in line with the shahs’ regional policies in protecting and supporting Shia Muslims in the Middle East and beyond (Ataie, 2019). Additionally, Sunni countermobilization (Wehrey, 2013) and the securitization of Shia by Salafis (Saleh and Kraetzschmar, 2015) has provided further evidence for mistrust in Western powers and consequently promoted a resistance discourse in Iran’s domestic politics. In sum, the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the dynamics of regional rivalry helped the Iranian ruling elite to sell a resistance discourse and the strategic use of Shia ideology to the Iranian public.

Conclusion

The complicated power structure and evolving factional politics clouded the role of ideology in Iran’s politics. On the one hand, some scholars and pundits tend to downplay the significance of ideology. On the other hand, right-wing analysts overstress the ideological calculations of Iranian leaders to frame the Iranian regime as irrational. The chapter demonstrates that religious ideology in Iran resulted from the interaction of ideas, rational calculation based on domestic interests, and transnational forces. Intellectuals constructed a revolutionary ideology to oppose the shahs’ despotic rule. This revolutionary ideology was later translated into a socialist policy platform to aid the underclass in the 1980s. Conservative clergy, however, considered this leftist reading of Shia Islam as deviant and eclectic and eradicated it in the post-Khomeini era. The conservative ruling elite also viewed the liberal reading of Islam as a component of a regime-change plot and resorted to a novel revolutionary identity to protect Iran’s Islamic regime in the 2000s. This revolutionary identity emphasizes a populist agenda at home and the resistance discourse abroad, which resulted in an ongoing battle between the conservatives and their opponents in Iran. In sum, religious ideology is at the centre of this uphill struggle, and the final outcome will dramatically impact Shia ideology in Iran and beyond.

Notes

2 The proponents of this view highlight the role of Shia Ulama who migrated from southern Lebanon, Bahrain, and Qatif in suffusing Shia Islam in Iran in the Safavid era.
3 Jafarian’s survey of religious groups in pre-revolutionary Iran demonstrates the role of these journals in disseminating political Islam (Jafarian, 2008).
5 This principle is called *Al-Amr Belmarouf va Alnahyeh Anel Monkar*.
6 The founder of Shia theology and jurisprudence in 702–765 AD.
7 Abou Salameh Al Khallal.
8 Shia Muslims commemorate the Imam Hussain movement in 10 days.
10 As a close friend of Ayatollah Khomeini, his writings directly influenced the leader of the Islamic Revolution.
11 Nouri identified the constitutional structure of power as heretical and was executed after revolutionaries liberated the capital city of Tehran from the despotic rule of Mohammad-Ali Shah Ghajar in 1909.
12 Bazargan had refuted Ayatollah Khomeini's stances on foreign and domestic policies and consequently was barred from candidacy in Iran’s 1985 presidential election. He was still popular among conservative clergy, and some of them like Grand Ayatollah Marashi Najafi objected the disqualification of Bazargan in that election.
13 It has been summarized in the slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood: Islam is the solution to our problems.
14 For example, Rahman Hatefi the chief editor of the *Kayhan* daily newspaper, and a member of the Tudeh party, was an important figure in disseminating revolutionary materials in a leading newspaper of Iran in 1979. “Rahman Hatefi and the Bitter Humor of History”, BBC Persian, 17 January 2012.
16 They have been labelled as the proponents of traditional jurisprudence (in contrast to dynamic jurisprudence) who believe the Quran and tradition are sufficient to govern Islamic society (Moslem, 2002, p. 49).
18 Also known as retributive justice or eye for an eye.
19 Called *Ghaedeh-e Tasalot* in Shia jurisprudence.
21 Kargozaran Sazandegi forged a strong minority with the remnants of the Islamist left.
22 Despite this crisis, these development programmes and welfare policies of the Mousavi administration improved the quality of life in Iran. By 2000, 97 per cent of youth were literate, 63 per cent of university students were women, and Iran had the lowest infant mortality rate in the Middle East.
23 In a lecture titled “Armed Neoliberalism”, Soroush criticized the fundamental assumption of neoliberalism. Soroush Abdolkarim, April 5, 2015, Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaGmg5EQZEl.
25 These critiques can be observed in the ninth parliament discussion on Iran's nuclear deal.
26 Regional shocks primarily refer to the 1979 Revolution, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the Arab Spring.
27 This resistance discourse comprises a triad of anti-Israeli stances, Iran’s nuclear program, and the support of Shia proxy groups in the region.
28 The Iran–US cooperation to overthrow the Taliban.
29 The US lacks commitment to any deal.
30 The Saudi-led block has actively lobbied against Iran.
31 For example, the Massacre of Shia Muslim in Karbala in 1802.

**References**

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