

IRAN'S CULTURAL FOREIGN POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA AND THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS SINCE 1991

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Although many foreign policy strategists put Iran's cultural policy on the forefront of its foreign policy agenda, in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus the Islamic Republic's emphasis on culture is diminished when compared with its security and economic foreign

policies.¹ Iran's foreign policy today is shaped more by pragmatism and *realpolitik* than it is by revolutionary Islam and a desire to export the revolution. Tehran's reasons for pursuing a foreign policy that relies more on pragmatism than ideology are many.

The Islamic Republic's current foreign policy objectives were molded significantly by its experiences with incorporating religious ideology into its foreign policy soon after the Islamic Revolution. A strong and coherent culturally-emphasized foreign policy based on Revolutionary Islam as a prime motivator for geopolitical decision making was emphasized by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The influence of the Islamic Revolution in Iran clearly had a profound impact on Iran's foreign policy objectives. As such, in its early days the Islamic Republic of Iran attempted to spread the Islamic Revolution beyond its borders into the Muslim countries of the Persian Gulf.² However, the Islamic Revolution was not accepted by Iran's Persian Gulf neighbors, who instead felt an existential threat on their security made by Tehran's brand of Islam. This threat was part of Saddam Hussein's reasoning for attacking the Islamic Republic in the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988. The war had a significant impact on Iran's domestic capabilities to provide both a sense of security as well as economic stability for its citizens. The impact of the conflict shifted Iranian thinking away from Islamic ideology and toward a foreign policy that focused on *realpolitik* and pragmatism. As Iran was isolated geopolitically and devoid of any influence outside the circles that supported Revolutionary Islam, the Islamic Republic was forced to reorient its foreign policy to meet its security and economic needs. Thus, when the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, a cultural foreign policy was not at the top of Iran's agenda in the new former Soviet south.

Nor was the environment ripe for an export of the Islamic Revolution in the former Soviet republics. Islam had developed quite differently under the tutelage of the Soviet Union than it had

developed in Iran. Soviet leaders emphasized nationalism and an overarching Soviet culture that naturally included use of the Russian language and state-sponsored atheism. Religion was not dismantled totally by the Soviets in the Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus, but it remained in place largely as a tool of nationalism rather than as a means of expression of piety.

The cultural impact of the Soviet Union on these countries was not limited to Islam, and the need for cultural influence came soon after independence. For the countries of Central Asia nationalism was only wrought under the watchful eye of the Supreme Soviet in Moscow, while it flourished in Georgia and Armenia centuries prior to Soviet occupation. It was the Central Asian countries, therefore, that subscribed the most to the Soviet-influenced nationalism; independence brought the overarching Soviet nationalism in these countries to an end, and opened the door to allow for cultural influence from countries like Iran.

Iran's lack of use of revolutionary Islam as a cultural policy in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus thus stems from these two historical precedents: the lack of success in exporting the Islamic Revolution to Persian Gulf countries, and the legacy of the development of Islam under the Soviet Union. Iran's non-pursuit of the export of the Revolution is *realpolitik* at its finest. Tehran now views promotion of revolutionary Islam outside its borders as potentially destabilizing for the Islamic Republic in terms of both security and economy. Furthermore, the former Soviet republics are wary of Revolutionary Islam due to the nature of the development of Islam under the Soviet Union. In addition, Iran must check its own foreign policy desires in the context of Russia's foreign policy needs. Iran's restraint in exporting the Islamic Revolution is best characterized in the example of Tajikistan, where the political atmosphere was the most likely to accept an export of radical Islam. Iran could have supported the Islamist Coalition that was in power in Tajikistan, but instead chose to support the Russian-backed ex-communists.

Tehran's tools for cultural foreign policy are not limited to revolutionary Islam and ideology,

¹ See: D. Byman *et al.*, *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era*, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, 2001, p. 7.

² See: *Ibid.*, p. 8.

but rather incorporate language, ethnicity, and moderate religious advances. These tools are all used in Iran's attempts to spread its influence through the concept of regionalism. Rather than support the U.S.-dominated unipolar world, Iran

has sought a multipolar world with itself as a point of power. Its use of cultural influence in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus, therefore, is to open the doors for potential regional cooperation and to spread its geopolitical authority.

The Failures of the Islamic Revolution

One of the most interesting aspects of the Islamic Revolution in Iran is that it developed not only as a political movement, nor solely as a cultural one. The Islamic Revolution existed as a response to political concerns of the Shah's dictatorship, as well as a signaling of the desire to return to a less corrupt government based on religious principles as well as social issues. Interestingly, the revolutionaries in Iran saw the movement not simply as a domestic issue, but as a movement that Muslims worldwide would join. The Islamic Republic promoted the export of the Islamic Revolution in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as it "supported Islamist revolutionary groups in Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait."³ One of the intended aims of the Iranian government was to bring about an end to the perceived corrupt rule of Muslim countries who allowed Western and secular interests to supersede the religious interests of its Muslim population. The leaders of Muslim countries, Iranian thinking supposed, had allowed corruption of government to take place; the people of these countries would support Islam rather than corruption for governance and guidance. Characterizing the global nature of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Noori, a professor of theology at the University of Tehran wrote in 1985: "It [the Islamic Revolution] has sprung forth from the very souls of those Muslim masses who were crushed by imperialism for centuries and whose Islamic character was severely repressed."⁴

The export of the Islamic revolution was a grassroots movement supported by the intelligentsia of Iran as a movement that would bring Muslim countries in the Persian Gulf region into alignment with Iran against Western and Communist interests in the region. Surrounding Persian Gulf countries, however, did not welcome the Islamic Revolution with open arms as Iran assumed they would. Conversely, many of these countries actually felt threatened by the Shi'ite dominated Iranian brand of Islam, and more importantly felt threatened by what they saw as a potentially violent overthrow of their respective governments.⁵ Rather than open direct lines of communication and extend Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf region, the rhetoric to export the Islamic Revolution instead isolated Iran in the Persian Gulf and precipitated a conflict with its secular neighbor Iraq.

The war with Iraq and the isolation on the part of Iran's Persian Gulf neighbors had a significant effect on Iran's foreign policy as it relates to matters of cultural and religious policy. Iran was no longer afforded the luxury of dealing with its neighbors strictly in Revolutionary terms, but had to use a more realistic political approach. Issues of economic and security concerns took precedence over religious and Revolutionary concerns, particularly as the immediacy of the Islamic Revolution drew to a close.⁶ When the Soviet Union finally disintegrated in 1991, the war with Iraq that had only just

³ D. Byman *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁴ Ayatollah Allama Yahya Noori, *Islamic Government and the Revolution in Iran*. Royston Limited, Glasgow, 1985, p. 36.

⁵ See: M. Mesbahi, "Iran and Tajikistan," in: *Regional Power Rivalries in the New Eurasia: Russia, Turkey, and Iran*, ed. by A. Rubinstein and O. Smolansky, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, New York, 1995, p. 115.

⁶ See: D. Byman *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

ended in 1988 was a far more recent memory for Iranians than the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Tehran had two choices of what to do in the former Soviet south: they could either continue to follow a policy centered on exporting revolutionary Islam as they had attempted in the Persian Gulf, or they could institute a policy based on pragmatism. The nation chose to approach relations with the former Soviet republics far more cautiously than its radical approach to Iran's Persian Gulf neighbors immediately following the Islamic Revolution.

Cultural Cautiousness

Cultural aspects of Iran's foreign policy, particularly religion, had dominated the international political scene under the guidance of Khomeini. Aggressive and unabashed use of religion in developing Iran's foreign policy had been the norm during the leadership of Khomeini. Hunter describes the change of Iran's foreign policy orientation under the Ayatollah Khomeini as enhancing "the ideological and universalist—as opposed to statist and nationalist—dimensions of its foreign policy" as Iran's primary foreign policy objective was "the spread of revolutionary Islam."⁷ Iran's foreign policy changed significantly after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, as is exemplified in Iran's dealings with the former Soviet states on its northern frontier. With the advent of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Iran approached its relations with its new neighbors to the north with relative caution that it did not exhibit toward its Persian Gulf neighbors in the decade following the Islamic Revolution.

There are a few reasons for this cautiousness, the most important of which is the need for geopolitical stability. The Iran-Iraq War, which began only a year after the Islamic Revolution, was in part the result of the threat perceived by Saddam Hussein of the call by Iran for the establishment of an Islamic state in Iraq. The war lasted eight years and wreaked havoc upon Iran's economy and its ability to provide for its own security. The absence of economic and physical security as a result of exporting the Islamic Revolution led to the belief that rather than establishing a multinational, multi-ethnic Islamic safe haven, the exportation of the Revolution was in fact a catalyst for conflict between Iran and the countries it sought to embrace through Islamic solidarity.⁸ The revolutionary leadership of Iran, including Ayatollah Khomeini, realized that Iran would have to change aspects of this revolutionary ideology in order to maintain its own economic and security guarantees; in the mid-1980s diplomatic relations were opened with all countries except the United States, Israel, and South Africa at the behest of Khomeini.⁹

Current Iranian foreign policy follows the transition made from the early stages of the Islamic Revolution to be more aware of the need for geopolitical stability. It is most interesting to note, therefore, that Iran's dealings with the independent former Soviet republics have not emphasized religion to the extent that one might expect from a revolutionary Islamic state. It is exceedingly more interesting as the majority of at least six former Soviet republics are predominantly Muslim,¹⁰ one of which (Azerbaijan) adheres to the same particular branch of Shi'ite Islam as Iran: Twelver Shi'ism. The restraint shown by Iran in its cultural dealings with the former Soviet republics reflects the shift of importance of revolutionary ideology in the Islamic Republic. The relations between Iran and the former Soviet republics are complex and necessarily involve the relations between Iran and Russia as well as the relations between Russia and the former Soviet republics. Iranian foreign policy with regard to culture has by and large shifted from a religiously dominated orientation to a secular policy that em-

⁷ Sh. Hunter, *Iran after Khomeini*, Praeger, New York, 1992, p. 106.

⁸ See: D. Byman *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

⁹ See: Sh. Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

¹⁰ Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan.

phasizes ethnic and linguistic ties while, to a large degree, it deemphasizes radical Islam as a focal point of relations.

The Soviet Cultural Legacy

Iran's positioning insofar as cultural policy in the former Soviet south is concerned must be taken into consideration along with an understanding of cultural experiments that took place in these republics under Soviet rule. When the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia, they quickly absorbed the territories of the Russian Empire, created borders on maps, and named them Soviet Socialist Republics. During its long rule over the Central Asian and South Caucasian nations, the Soviet Union exerted a significant amount of influence and sought to change the landscape of the cultural conditioning of these Soviet Socialist Republics. Josef Stalin's Nationalist Policy was most instrumental in changing the sociopolitical identity of Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus. Stalin's idea was that of "divide and rule." He created arbitrary borders that were not indicative of ethnic populations, and then he attempted to create an ethnic identity in that republic if one did not exist prior to the Soviet absorption of Russian Empirical territories.¹¹ Countries like Armenia and Georgia, however, had a well-established national identity that was created centuries prior to Russian and Soviet rule, and thus had no need of arbitrary nation creation by the Soviets. The attempt was to create a sense of nationalism in the new Soviet republics, and then supplant that nationalism with the idea of a superior all-encompassing Soviet identity. Lenin and Stalin strategically developed a system in which nationalism, they believed, could not grow unless it was the supra-nationalism of the Soviet state. This then, could consolidate Soviet (Russian) authority, power, and influence in the region to serve its own self-interests.¹² Russian was promoted as the national Soviet language, and many Russians immigrated to these new Soviet republics to provide good socialist leadership for the indigenous peoples. The Russian culture was promoted significantly, and the process of Russification began in the early years of the Soviet Union.

Another effect of the Soviet control over the Central Asian and South Caucasian Soviet Socialist Republics was that it changed the history of these countries. A great deal of Persian influence had been wielded in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus from pre-history until the Russian conquest in the 19th century. At one point in time or another, the Persian Empire extended from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea to Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula to the borders of China. The Soviet conquest erased this long chapter of cultural connections between Central Asia, the Southern Caucasus, and Iran. In order to attempt to create separate national identities, the Soviets chose different aspects of the common cultural identity of the peoples of the region, and attributed them to different republics they had created. Hunter mentions that "the heritage of the Iranian Samanids was attributed to the Uzbeks, while Iranian cultural heritage was attributed to the Tajiks," a process which did not reconcile the connection of both groups to a common Iranian culture.¹³ This historical revisionism was rather useful for the Soviets in creating a national identity for the Central Asian republics that did not have a solid foundation of a sense of "nationhood." However, what was a convenient tool for the Soviets in the creation of a Soviet identity ultimately became the undoing of the Soviet Union, as nationalism reached a fever pitch that reached its apex in the disintegration of the U.S.S.R. in 1991.

The Soviets left another cultural legacy for Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus in terms of the pursuit of religion. As the Soviets were ardent atheists, the cultural policy they instituted succeed-

¹¹ The Uzbeks, for example, were a creation of the Soviet State but became a separate cultural identity under Moscow's designs.

¹² See: Sh. Hunter, *Central Asia Since Independence*, Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 1996, p. 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

ed Christianity and Islam with atheism. Although atheism did not really take strong root in the Central Asian and South Caucasian Soviet Socialist Republics, they did to a large extent limit the ability of believers to worship freely. Religious movements were taken underground, and the influence of religious institutions paled in contrast to the influence of the Soviet apparatus.

Culture and Nationalism in the Former Soviet South

Independence can be characterized differently for the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia. The countries in the Southern Caucasus, particularly Georgia and Armenia, had a very solidified and institutionalized cultural self-identification. The conflict over administration rights between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the province of Nagorno-Karabakh during the waning moments of the Soviet Union had blossomed into a full-scale war that further nationalized the two states. Georgia, for its part, was busy fighting a civil war to assert Georgian nationalist control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. For these countries, independence from the Soviet Union meant the opportunity to extend regional autonomy and authority over culturally and historically significant areas. For Central Asia, however, independence came largely as a shock. As Atabaki mentions, the Central Asian Soviet Republics “were founded as territorial states and not as nation-states” and largely continued to be so after independence.¹⁴ The nationalistic tendencies of the Central Asian states were not as defined as they were in the Southern Caucasus, and the notion of a civil society was not strongly developed in Central Asia. The Soviet nationality thus appealed to those in Central Asia as a means of identification, and this identity was stripped after the advent of independence.

The ramifications for the notion of cultural identification are two-fold. Firstly, the newly independent nations that already have a strong sense of identity and culture are unlikely to seek new means of identification after independence. Instead, they will look to nationalistic figures from their well-established history as a means to further nationalistic agenda and to solidify their cultural identification. Secondly, the newly independent nations that do not have a strong sense of national identity, namely the Central Asian nations, will be forced to find a source for nationalism. Some would find nationalism in the revised history presented to the nation via the Soviet Union (i.e. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), while others would be more apt to cultural identification from a point in time further in the past. For Iran’s cultural policy, then, those countries without a significant civil society or cultural identity that was firmly established prior to the conquest by the Soviet Union would be more open to establish cultural ties with Iran in a search for national identity.

Islam in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus¹⁵

Although Communism had taken root in the Soviet Union as a whole, it was not able to replace religious ideology completely. In the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, for example, the

¹⁴ T. Atabaki, “The Impediments to the Development of Civil Societies in Central Asia,” in: *Post-Soviet Central Asia*, ed. by T. Atabaki and J. O’Kane, Tauris Academic Studies, London, 1999, p. 38.

¹⁵ As Armenians and Georgians would identify themselves primarily as Christians, discussions of Islam in the Southern Caucasus for the purposes of this paper are limited to Azerbaijan, as Iranian cultural inroads to Armenia and Georgia would not involve Islam.

Orthodox Church was not stamped out completely; the Communist Party did, however, put a great deal of pressure on the adherents of Orthodoxy and did not make it easy for them to practice their religion freely. Similarly, in Azerbaijan and the Central Asian Socialist Republics, the Communist Regime was unable to replace Islam completely with its ideology in a cultural context.¹⁶

The brand of Islam that was brought to the Central Asian countries was Sunni Sufism, which embraced a mystical understanding of one's relation to God.¹⁷ As such, there was not a need to attend a mosque or to even have a traditional infrastructure in place for the cultural Islamic character to remain within Central Asia. Islam as a system of beliefs that governed every day life and how the individual acted in society was not supplanted by Communism. The impact of Communism on Islam in Central Asia was more on the infrastructure of Islamic organizations, as religious organizations operated under the supervision of the Communist Party.¹⁸ Official religion was therefore largely a source of nationalism rather than spirituality,¹⁹ and was seen by the Communist Party as a tool of control rather than a threat to Party authority.

By contrast, Azerbaijan was influenced most by Twelver Shi'ite Islam, as it was heavily influenced by the Persian Empire until Russian and later Soviet occupation. This sect of Islam is the same type of Islam that is predominant in Iran, and its history is full of existence within the regimes of detractors. From the early days of the Shi'at 'Ali, or "Partisans of Ali," the Shi'a have been more or less opposed by the widespread and dominant Sunni Islam sect. Shi'ism accounts for this opposition, and "taqiyya," the act of concealing true faith for the purposes of prolonging the lives of family or self, is a long-standing tradition that is highly acceptable for adherents to the religion.²⁰

Islam in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus, therefore, was not removed by Communism although it was shaped and influenced by it. Communism did not provide a true alternative to Islam as a cultural means of self-identification and action within society. Conversely, it affected the structure of Islam and the ability of Muslims to practice Islam as they saw fit within the Soviet Union. The Islam that emerged out of the ashes of the Soviet Union in the newly independent republics of Central Asia and Azerbaijan was not the same type of Islam that developed in countries with regimes that supported Islam. It developed more as a means of which to promote nationalism (i.e. "all Turkmen are Muslims") and a cultural tool that gave the community a certain notion of ethos rather than regulating every aspect of life. In other words, that it emerged from Azerbaijan and Central Asia at all speaks of Islam's abilities in self-preservation; that it emerged in the form shaped by the Communist Party speaks of its practical and secular applications as a means of which to solidify Communist rule by promoting nationalism.

Why not Revolutionary Islam in the Former Soviet South?

With the advent of independence in the former Soviet republics, many political scientists theorized that the influence of Iran in the region would largely stem from its export of Revolutionary Islam

¹⁶ See: T. Pahlevan, "Iran and Central Asia," in: *Post-Soviet Central Asia*, pp. 81-82.

¹⁷ See: E. Walker, "Islam, Islamism, and Political Order in Central Asia," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 56, No. 2, 2003, p. 23.

¹⁸ See: T. Pahlevan, op. cit., p. 82.

¹⁹ See: M. Atkin, "Tajikistan: Reform, Reaction, and Civil War," in: *New States, New Politics: Building the Post-Soviet Nations*, ed. by I. Bremmer and R. Taras, University of Cambridge Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 618.

²⁰ For an excellent discourse of this and other Shi'a development issues, see: S.H.M. Jafri, *The Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000.

to Central Asia and Azerbaijan. However, Iran has shied away from using its brand of Revolutionary Islam as a means of which to bring cultural ties closer with these nations. Although religion does play a role in Iran's foreign policy, it has developed a more "secular" foreign policy in its dealings with Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus.²¹ When Turkmenistan's president was asked about the threat posed by the potential Iranian export of the Islamic Revolution, he responded that he "could see neither an exporter nor anybody who can use such exports."²² Tehran's emphasis for cultural ties in the region have been more focused on historical ties with Iran than any push to start an Islamic Revolution in these predominantly Muslim countries.

There are a few key reasons that leadership in Iran has decided not to pursue an aggressive policy of radical revolutionary Islam in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus. One of the biggest obstacles for an Iranian export of the Islamic Revolution to the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus is Iran's need for political and economic stability in the region.²³ Political stability is necessary because of the large numbers of minorities within Iran that have the potential ability to cause problems for the leadership of Tehran.²⁴ The Islamic Republic had a profoundly negative experience in its conflict with Iraq, and sees the potential for other conflicts just on the other side of the border or within its own borders. As Byman *et al.* poignantly remind us, in Iran "ethnic minority groups are concentrated mainly in border areas and have ties with ethnic groups or states across the border."²⁵ The Islamic Republic is multiethnic, and Iran fears that some of its citizens will identify more with their ethnic identity than with their national identity. Iran is most fearful of its Azeri minority in the northwest of the country, and the potential for that population to be disengaged and dissatisfied with Tehran's governance in lieu of its independent northern neighbor.²⁶ If Iran were to pursue a policy of export of the Islamic Revolution, they will likely run into opposition from leadership in these countries. Furthermore, there is a great probability that these countries would attempt to marginalize Iran's ability to export revolutionary Islam by attempting to mobilize ethnic minorities against Tehran. For its own security and to maintain stability in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus, it is within Iran's best interests not to pursue a cultural foreign policy designed around the export of the Islamic revolution as its keystone.

Regional stability is desired by Iran mostly, however, because of the economic repercussions of its war with Iraq. The Islamic Republic lost a great deal in terms of infrastructure, industry, and manpower during the Iran-Iraq War. Its economy was in shambles, and its economic relations with other countries proved to be rather weak and incapable of obtaining resources and money to repair the country's damage. Iran's efforts with regard to Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus, therefore, are "to improve bilateral relations with Iran's trading partners and neighbors in particular, and to avoid or minimize tension."²⁷ Revolutionary Islam is certainly a point of tension, and is capable of closing potential economic partners off from Iran. In terms of cultural policy, Iran places a greater emphasis on stability and ease of obtaining economic cooperation than on the export of the Islamic Revolution.

Iran has declined to pursue an aggressive promotion of revolutionary Islam in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus also because of the wariness and fear on the part of the newly independent republics of Islamic radicalism.²⁸ One of the results of the Soviet occupation and the Soviet control of

²¹ See: H. Peimani, *Regional Security and the Future of Central Asia: The Competition of Iran, Turkey, and Russia*, Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 1998, p. 32.

²² Sh. Hunter, "Iran's Pragmatic Regional Policy," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 56, No. 2, 2003, p. 140.

²³ See: H. Peimani, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

²⁴ See: D. Byman *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁶ See: G. Winrow, "Azerbaijan and Iran," in: *Regional Power Rivalries in the New Eurasia: Russia, Turkey, and Iran*, pp. 102-103.

²⁷ H. Peimani, *op. cit.*

²⁸ See: *Ibidem.*

religious groups and promotion of atheism was in some Central Asian countries a resurgence of religious political parties and movements. Many of these movements have been particularly Islamic in character, and some have been violent in their attempts to obtain their political goals. This is the case of the Russian North Caucasus just across the border from Georgia, particularly in the area of Chechnia. Radical Islam in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 led to a civil war that only ended when the Taliban took full control of the country in 2000. Radical Islam borders both the Southern Caucasus as well as Central Asia, and the result of such a form of Islam has resulted in conflict in both cases; opposition in the region to radical Islam runs high.

After the fall of the Soviet empire, Iran was seen largely as the bastion of Islamic involvement in political struggles in the region because of its past Islamic Revolution. However, as Byman *et al.* remind us, Iran's war with Iraq caused Tehran to be rather cautious, as it failed time and time again to spread the Islamic Revolution to its Persian Gulf neighbors.²⁹ Iran had to work hard, therefore, if it was to convince its neighbors, particularly those countries with Islamic opposition parties³⁰ that the sights it had set on those countries did not involve an export of the Islamic Revolution. As Iran's motivation for involvement in the region is largely economic, as mentioned above, export of the Revolution would be contrary to Tehran's realpolitik needs. Although revolutionary Islamic rhetoric in terms of both a cultural policy and a security policy would demand that Iran support Islamic parties in the former Soviet Union, Iran has instead actively pursued non-involvement with Islamic movements in the region.

Another reason for the restraint in seeking an export of the Islamic Revolution in the newly independent republics of Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus has to do with Iran's relations with Russia. The Russian Federation is the most important partner that the Islamic Republic has in the region: in addition to their cooperation on trade issues, Russia is also Iran's primary source of arms and technology. Moscow is also the most powerful country in the region, and it would not bode well for Iran's security interests to intentionally provoke its neighbor to the north. What this means for Iran's cultural policy is that it must check its interests in promoting Iranian cultural ties with Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus to ensure that its interests do not clash with those of Russia.³¹ Until recently Russian troops acting in the interest of the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) were stationed in almost all the Central Asian and South Caucasian republics, in order to protect the territorial integrity of the CIS members as well as to act swiftly against any perceived threat to Russia or the CIS. One of the perceived threats Russia is prepared to act against is the Islamic "threat from the south."³² If Iran were to export the Islamic Revolution to its new northern neighbors in an attempt to garner cultural influence, it would likely instead find itself faced, at the very least, with increased tension with Russia. The export of the Revolution to Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus would cause Iran to lose its most important trading partner and source of arms and technology, as well as turn that partner into an enemy.³³ Realpolitik interests in its relations with Russia mean that the export of the Islamic Revolution to the former Soviet south is simply not an option for the Islamic Republic in terms of its cultural policy.

The case of Tajikistan clearly characterizes both the former Soviet republics' opposition to radical Islam as well as Iran's restraint in supporting revolutionary Islam in the region. After the fall of the Soviet Union, a political power struggle emerged in Tajikistan between the former Communist leadership of the country and an alliance of various Islamic-oriented parties. The Islamic party coal-

²⁹ See: D. Byman *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³⁰ Namely, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

³¹ See: Sh. Chubin, *Iran's National Security Policy: Intentions, Capabilities & Impact*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, 1994, p. 7.

³² G. Winrow, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

³³ See: H. Peimani, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

tion was far from the revolutionary Islam characterized by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and it promoted democratic reform coupled with an Islamic sense of morality.³⁴ This, however, did not stop the characterization of the coalition by the former Communists as being “radical Islamists” that would employ tactics and rule similar to the Iranians in their Islamic Revolution.³⁵ The relatively moderate and modest aims of the Islamic-democratic coalition were seen regionally in light of the Islamists in neighboring Afghanistan or Chechnia on the other side of the Caspian Sea. This characterization was further solidified as the political conflict between the ex-Communists and the Islamists turned into a full-scale civil war that devastated the country.

Iran operated in the Tajikistani civil war with a great deal of restraint in terms of its potential to export the Islamic Revolution. The Islamic republic officially declared that it would remain uninvolved in the civil war, and that it had no desire to export the Islamic Revolution to Tajikistan.³⁶ Furthermore, Iran went so far as to show support for the secular ex-Communist Tajikistani leaders when they took over the Tajikistani capital of Dushanbe, and to deliver humanitarian aid to the civil war-ravaged country.³⁷ This restraint in Iran’s actions was coupled with Iran’s desires and attempts to broker a peace deal between the warring parties in Tajikistan. Tehran was attempting to send a clear signal to the rest of the former Soviet south in terms of how it would deal with the question of where Islam belonged in former Soviet politics. The signal sent by Iran seems to be that Islam is less important than the normalization of relations between the Islamic Republic and the former Soviet republics, a stable and productive former Soviet south, and strong economic relations between Iran and the former Soviet south.

If not Revolutionary Islam, then What?

Although Revolutionary Islam is the most visible aspect of Iranian culture, it is far from being the only viable cultural connection between Iran and the republics of the former Soviet Union. Linguistic and ethnic issues are at the forefront of Iran’s cultural foreign policy as Tehran seeks to build bridges of understanding and inroads of influence into its neighbors to the north. Persian language and culture has a history and had an impact in the Central Asian and South Caucasian states, Iranian logic surmises, and time spent under the domination of the Soviet Union severed those ties. Iran’s realpolitik interests hold that in order to garner influence in geopolitics, it must first start with re-establishing the cultural ties that were severed by the Soviet Union with the countries of Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus. Furthermore, religion does play a part in Iran’s foreign cultural policy, albeit a much more diminished role when compared to the aims of revolutionary Islam. Religion is used in Iran’s foreign policy only in terms of its cultural connection with the countries of Central Asia and Azerbaijan, and not in any sense of the export of revolutionary Islam characterized by the Islamic Republic’s early days of policymaking.

Languages are a key form of self-identity in a cultural context, and also can be used as a component of nationalism. In the case of Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus after 1991, linguistic ties help to establish a line of communication as well as orientation between the former Soviet republics and their more powerful neighbors. Prior to the establishment of the Soviet Union, the people of Central Asia and Azerbaijan used Arabic script for writing, and Persian was the “administrative and cul-

³⁴ See: M. Mesbahi, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

³⁵ *Ibidem.*

³⁶ See: H. Peimani, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

³⁷ See: *Ibidem.*

tural language” of the area.³⁸ Eventually, however, the Soviet Union introduced Cyrillic script for use in Central Asia as a means by which to solidify the created nationalism (Peimani notes that the republics each had a unique set of Cyrillic letters to differentiate nationalities)³⁹ as well as to pave the way for Russian to be used as the de facto administrative and supranational Soviet official language.

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, therefore, one of Iran’s policy objectives is to reunite Central Asia with its Iranian cultural roots, and language is the keystone with which Iran can make this connection. The only country in the region that speaks Farsi, the most widespread language used in Iran, is Tajikistan.⁴⁰ Therefore, although Tajikistan does not share a border with Iran, it is a country that is of utmost importance for Iran insofar as culture is concerned. Tehran actively supported the decision to replace Cyrillic script with the Arabic script in Tajikistan in order to make the written language mutually intelligible in both countries.⁴¹ The result of this change increased education opportunity and cooperation between the two countries, as Iran provided school textbooks and other media to Tajikistan.⁴² The Islamic Republic also provided scholarships for Tajik students to study in Iranian universities. Furthermore, this cleared a path for an increased cultural exchange of literary work, both Iranian and Tajik, as well as television broadcasts from Iran into Tajikistan.

All of these efforts to increase the language compatibility between Iran and Tajikistan should really be viewed as an Iranian attempt to gain influence in Tajikistan through cultural means. By promoting the use of Farsi and Arabic script, Iran was then able to promote prominent Iranian literary works. Additionally, the promotion of the use of Arabic script undeniably sought to attach the Tajik people historically to the Persian through the use of their common language. Most importantly, the promotion of the use of Arabic script was a harmless and non-intrusive means by which Iran could shift identification on the part of the Tajikistanis away from the Cyrillic script-using Russians toward the camp of the Arabic script-using Iranians. Iran could simply use the argument that the language is more easily expressed in written form through use of the Persian script without eliciting much argument from the Russians.

Religion has also been used in Iran’s foreign policy, although it has not been in the form of Revolutionary Islam that many expected. Although Rubinstein characterizes the Russians as unconcerned about Iran’s spread of the “Iranian revolution” in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus,⁴³ the reality is that the religious factors promoted in the region bear hardly any semblance of the Islamic Revolution that ousted the Shah in 1979. It is more accurate to characterize the Iranian spread of missionaries, teachers, and assistance in building mosques not as a spread of Revolutionary Islam, but rather as a counter to the strong Sunni presence in the region supported by countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt.⁴⁴ The Iranian use of religion is not an attempt to overthrow governments and spread the Islamic Revolution; it is simply an attempt to gain regional credibility and spread regional influence.

Regionalism and Iranian Culture

The cultural issues put forth by Iran’s foreign policy seek to reinforce a strong sense of regionalism in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus with Iran at the core. Regionalism is the tool that

³⁸ See: H. Peimani, op. cit., p. 45.

³⁹ See: Ibidem.

⁴⁰ See: M. Mesbahi, op. cit., p. 119.

⁴¹ See: Ibid., p. 123.

⁴² See: E. Herzig, *Iran and the former Soviet South*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 1995, p. 51.

⁴³ See: A. Rubinstein, “Moscow and Tehran,” in: *Regional Power Rivalries in the New Eurasia: Russia, Turkey, and Iran*, p. 52.

⁴⁴ See: H. Peimani, op. cit., pp. 57-58.

Iran can use to reorient the former Soviet nations away from dependency on Russia, and towards a more solidified relationship with the Islamic Republic. Iran's endeavors in regionalism are important not only to keep the country from being isolated geopolitically, but rather to reinforce the potential for Iranian influence and build the nation up in terms of geopolitical authority. Herzig recognizes the importance of culture in developing a regional policy, as "Iranian conceptions of regionalism generally attach importance to culture both as a defining feature and as a basis for cooperation."⁴⁵ In regional organizations promoted by Iran the influence of culture is inseparable from both the means in which cooperation is promoted as well as the reasons for cooperation to begin with.

Promotion of a clear cultural policy is for Iran a means by which it can promote its desire for regionalism. It is not globalism that Iran fears; rather, it is the American dominance in geopolitics and unipolarity that the Iranians wish to marginalize.⁴⁶ In this context, the nature of the Islamic Republic's cultural policy with regard to Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus becomes clearer. By promoting cultural understanding and linking Central Asian and South Caucasian cultural identity to Iran, Tehran is attempting to garner support for its regional capabilities and limit American unipolar influence in the region as a whole.

For example, within Iran's primary regional organization, the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Islamic Republic strongly touts shared cultural values between members of the organization. Although some critics, such as Pahlevan, see the ECO as ineffective as an economic organization and "only a framework for a minimum possible cooperation at the regional level,"⁴⁷ Iran sees the organization in terms of not only its economic effectiveness. Iran views the successes of the ECO with regard to its ability to connect member states culturally as well as economically, with the former eventually contributing to the success of the latter.⁴⁸ It has been the Islamic Republic of Iran that has emphasized the Islamic nature of the ECO, and that has attempted to use the organization to expand cooperation between the member nations beyond economics to include issues of language, culture, and religion.⁴⁹ Iran has used the ECO as a tool to promote regionalism and as a means of which to expand its regional power to the detriment of the United States and Russia; it has used cultural issues, such as religion, in order to attempt to forge strong relations between the member states of the ECO and Iran.

Conclusion

Iran's cultural foreign policy in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus was strongly influenced by its experiences in attempting to export the Islamic Revolution as well as the legacy left by Soviet occupation of the region. Its failures in its attempts to export the Islamic Revolution to countries of the Persian Gulf immediately after the ousting of the Shah in 1979 signaled Iran's shift toward more pragmatic and realpolitik orientation of its foreign policy in lieu of a culturally dominated policy. The impact of Soviet structure left Central Asian countries in particular in need of cultural influence, but the development of Islam within the region left it suspicious of any kind of radical Islam, particularly of the Shi'ite variety.

The Iranian choice to pursue an aggressive export of radical Islam in the region is notably absent from the Islamic Republic's foreign policy agenda. Iran chose not to pursue an export of Revolution-

⁴⁵ E. Herzig, "Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia," *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2004, p. 510.

⁴⁶ See: *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ T. Pahlevan, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁴⁸ See: E. Herzig, *Iran and the Former Soviet South*, p. 37.

⁴⁹ See: *Ibidem*.

ary Islam to Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus because it was not a pragmatic policy to follow. Revolutionary Islam could be a destabilizing factor in the region, as Iran's own experience in the war with Iraq showed. Tehran needs stability in the region in order to protect its own security and economic interests. Furthermore, the Soviet legacy left the countries of the former Soviet south convinced that radical Islam would supplant its unique national independence with domination by a foreign regime. Finally, Iran's relations with Russia are tenuous enough that Iran must defer its own foreign policy desires to Russia's. Russia is too important a trading partner and too great a power in the region for Iran to upset Russia in its attempts to gain influence.

Iran's cultural policy in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus has promoted linguistic, ethnic, and religious ties to Iran with the attempt at solidifying its position as a regional power. Its use of cultural policy as a tool of regionalism signals Tehran's pragmatic approach to a geopolitical response to American unipolarity. In contrast to its foreign policy approach immediately after the Islamic Revolution, Iran's foreign policy today does not rely heavily on cultural issues. When it does use cultural issues, however, it is as a tool to promote regionalism and a return on the part of Central Asian and South Caucasian countries to the Iranian sphere of influence.