

# The causal relationship between culture and foreign policy making in Muslim countries

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ALEX GRIFFITHS, SEP 6 2011

The role of Islamic culture in the pursuance of foreign policy in Muslim countries (particularly the Middle East) is a question which has taken on a renewed importance in recent times. Islamic culture, that is to say the identity, norms and values upon which Islam imparts its adherents doubtless occupies a prime role in the foreign policies of the many different states which exist on no less than three of the world's continents, the rigidity of this role however is weak.

Islamic culture exerts minimal influence upon the practise of foreign policy; it is secondary to political, strategic and economic concerns. It is however, a vital source for the legitimisation of state interests.

This will be demonstrated by an explanation of exactly why the role of Islam is relevant despite its apparently minimal function, what effect Islam has had on the foreign policy of the region. Two brief case studies on Iran and Saudi Arabia will aid the examination of what barriers exist to the expansion of Islam as a major influence on foreign policy. When this essay refers to "Islam" in relation to foreign policy, it is referring to foreign policy inspired by Islam; a more detailed framework for Islam is not possible, the five/seven pillars do not translate to state relations and differences within Islam make a broad generalisation impractical.

### **Why is Islam of relevance?**

With the eventual discrediting of secularisation theory[1] which had for so long dominated Western political theory and outlook both within academic and governmental circles, the violent burst of Islam as a modern revolutionary movement onto the world stage in 1979 and the increase in both the event and perception of Islamic terrorism post 2001[2] the role of religion in Muslim countries has become an issue of great importance. Some states have taken Islam as a basis for their political system, rejecting Western legal systems and Western conventions in favour of their Islamic counterparts and the states in question occupy immense importance economically, ideologically, politically and strategically. Islam has become a key identity in the Middle East in the same manner being Arab was in the 1950-70's. It has become clear that Islam poses at least a risk to the current order of the Middle Eastern political system[3] and its role as a tool for the legitimisation and organisation of opposition forces to current regimes is undeniable. It is necessary to study the role of Islam in the pursuance of foreign policy in these states not only in terms of self interest, but to fill the gulf of "incomprehension" that exists within the Western world[4].

### **What effect has Islam had on the foreign policy of the region?**

The exact role of Islam in foreign policy is predictably cloudy as it indeed differs greatly dependent upon the state in question. Broadly speaking however, where Islamists have taken power there has been little Islamisation of foreign policy[5], typically Muslim countries have pursued foreign policy due to pragmatic and self interested considerations. Islam has failed to promote any real "common" foreign policy between Muslim states[6] and Muslim states have proven more than willing to engage in both indirect and direct hostilities which will be covered in greater detail during the case studies.

Islam has in some respects, gained greater prominence because of its at least perceived successes where the great

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Arab nationalist project failed. Islam ousted an unpopular Western sponsored regime in Iran in 1979, Islamic movements forced an Israeli retreat from Lebanon in 1982 and again in 2006, Islamists also took control of the Gaza strip in 2007. This compared to a succession of unsuccessful wars and the humiliating peace made by Arab nationalisms leader Egypt.

Islam has formed the basis for the creation of several "Muslim" organisations, the OIC and IDB being perhaps the most significant. The OIC charter which declares prominently that member states "Be guided by the noble Islamic values of unity and fraternity... affirming the essentiality of promoting and consolidating... unity and solidarity amongst Member States in securing their common interests at the international level" demonstrates the sort of relationship Muslim states at least on paper, desire to have. The allocation of a permanent US envoy to the organisation June last year also denotes Islam's increasing importance in the international arena.

## Case Studies: a more detailed glance at the role of Islam in the pursuance of foreign policy in two Islamic states

A casual observer looking at the motivations for foreign policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran would be forgiven for assuming a significant role for Islam. Despite the initial rush to export the Islamic revolution[7] during the Iran-Iraq war, the numerous calls for Iraq's Shiite population to rise up and the existence of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution[8] Iran quickly modified its rhetoric and has been drifting between this dogmatic approach to foreign affairs and a pragmatic world view ever since. In spite of denouncing the US as the "great Satan", tacitly condoning the US embassy takeover in Tehran and more or less prompting the election defeat of Jimmy Carter Iranians under Khomeini displayed little reluctance to deal with both the US and Israel in the Iran Contra affair. Following the "re-orientation" (Ehteshami), the death of Khomeini and the succession of multiple reformist and pragmatic conservative Presidents, Rafsanjani and Khatami perhaps being the best examples, Iran has pursued foreign policy with an aim to "development of normal diplomatic relations with the outside world, improvement of access to Western technology and the integration of Iran into the global capitalist economy to enhance economic development"[9]. Despite the theoretical boundaries to engagement and integration with the West, such acts would "dilute the revolution"[10] Iran has not hesitated to do so in order to obtain Western technologies and support. However the accession of a radical "conviction principlist" President in 2005[11] has at least appeared to usher in an even greater relevance of Islam to foreign policy rather than the posturing and framing practised by previous administrations. In perhaps a telling interaction, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei met the new President Ahmadinejad at his inauguration: Ahmadinejad assured Khamenei that his rule would be short because the Third Imam was due presently. "What if he doesn't appear by then?" asked the amused Ayatollah. 'I assure you, I really believe this, he will come soon' returned Ahmadinejad"[12].

However, despite this clear belief in Islam as a guiding light there has been surprisingly little Islam in the pursuance of foreign policy beyond the framing of Iran's foreign policy in an Islamic discourse in much the same manner previous, reformist Iranian administrations have done so. Iran remains under the new President, as pragmatic and self interested as ever, its role in Iraq in sponsoring the SCIRI can be attributed to keeping America bogged down and ensuring an Iran friendly state to Iran's West. This sponsorship is strikingly similar to the sponsorship of Shiite and Sunni terrorist groups in Saudi Arabia during the 1980's[13] Iran has remained curiously silent on the status of their fellow Muslims in Russia and China, key support states for Iran and particularly for its nuclear program. Instead of Islam being the driving force behind foreign policy in Iran, it would appear in the current day that domestic politics are serving to drive it. The Ahmadinejad government is growingly unpopular within Iran thanks to Iran's faltering economy and perceptions of mismanagement and corruption and thus, the "enemy abroad" has become integral for the "reshaping" of domestic politics to better suit the administration[14].

Saudi Arabia is a state with Islam interwoven into its very being from its conception. Its founder, the tribal sheik Ibn Saud used the blades and passions of the Ikhwan, ferocious warriors fighting to expand their strict Wahabi interpretation of Islam. Tellingly, he would later crush them[15]. Saudi Arabia has always occupied a unique position in the Middle Eastern world order, one of the few states of the region to bring itself into being independent of European colonialism, birthplace of the prophet Mohammed and location of some of Islam's holiest places and later, home to the worlds largest oil reserves. Saudi Arabian foreign policy has thus typically been directed into defending

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its perceived position as the Islamic leader of the Middle East, protecting the hold the ruling Saud family has on power and ensuring Saudi Arabia's security from internal and external threats. The state has accordingly faced down Arab nationalism from Egypt, revolutionary Shiite Islam from Iran and the militaristic regime to its North, Iraq. Saudi Arabia has attacked these threats in much the same way, sponsoring the royalists in the North Yemeni civil war and trapping Egypt[16], in what has been called "Egypt's Vietnam", encouraging Iraq to invade Iran following its Islamic revolution[17] and permitting the stationing of primarily American troops on Saudi soil to defend Saudi Arabia and crush Iraq following the invasion of Kuwait[18], Saudi Arabia then lobbied strongly against a continuation of the war following Kuwait's liberation for fear of a democratic Shiite majority state emerging[19].

Saudi Arabia has also proven willing to encourage Islam as a system of governance, sponsoring Al Huq in Pakistan[20] as well as Islamic movements in the Afghan-Soviet war. The sponsoring of these two entities would, following the culmination of the war in 1998 leave thousands of radicalised and militant international volunteers purposeless[21]. It is logical to assume that Saudi Arabia's clear preference for deniable proxy conflicts against its enemies emanates from the theoretical issues that would arise should the leader of the Islamic world make war upon a fellow Muslim country[22]. Whilst all of these things would suggest that Islam occupies an integral part in the foreign policy making of Saudi Arabia, I would counter that in a state where the ruling class enjoys little legitimacy Islam has become that legitimising force. Saudi Arabia has proven more than willing to compromise Islamic ideals in the face of changing norms and pressure, integrating with the West, dropping the Taliban when it became clear they were disfavoured by Saudi Arabia's military protector, the US, allowing the stationing of "infidel" troops on Saudi land[23] and before this, "freeing" the slaves in the face of British and American pressure.

## **Islam is secondary to the real politick of individual states**

Islam has failed to bring the states of the Middle East together in any form of collective foreign policy for a number of reasons which we can learn from studying the failure of Arab nationalism. The Middle East enjoys massive linguistic diversity, and is torn between a multitude of loyalties to sub identities from that of a Muslim, to the state, family, clan, ideology and ethnicity. It should come as no surprise therefore, that collective conclusions on the role of Islam in foreign policy are difficult to come by. This difficulty is only exacerbated by there being no clear leader of Pan Islam in the region, Saudi Arabia and Iran, who I have both briefly covered enjoy little legitimacy in the eyes of the Islamic community in the Middle East principally because of their clear prioritisation of their own state interests over that of their Islamic identity. Iran has since 1979 framed its national interests Islamically and it is clear that its motivations and logic for its actions in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and its continuing silence on the fate of fellow Muslims in countries necessary for Iran's security and economic growth are grounded within real politick, not Islam. Saudi Arabia is clearly aligned with the US and also clearly frames its national interests in an Islamic manner, during the Iran-Iraq war Saddam Hussein was the "sword of Islam"[24] and yet during the Gulf War Saudi troops deployed alongside Christian troops to liberate Kuwait.

Islam enjoys an obvious role in the pursuance of foreign policy in both state's studied, however it is a role of substantiation, a tool for the framing of foreign policy, not the driving force. Both states have an interest in garnering legitimacy from Islam in order to more easily pursue their state interests. Both of the states analysed have been members of the OIC during times of conflict and both have agreed to the OIC charter which states,

"To safeguard the rights, dignity and religious and cultural identity of Muslim communities and minorities in non-Member States... to enhance and strengthen the bond of unity and solidarity among the Muslim peoples and Member States... to foster noble Islamic values concerning moderation, tolerance, respect for diversity, preservation of Islamic symbols and common heritage and to defend the universality of Islamic religion"[25]

Yet, Iran does not talk of the Chechens or Ughyrs. Saudi Arabia saw no problem with the Gulf war and continues to repress its Shiite minority[26]. Pragmatism rules the roost in Muslim states, yet the role of Islam must not be underestimated. The faith inspires, promotes and legitimises the actions of Muslim states and whilst it has little causal role in foreign policy, it nonetheless has an integral part in advancing it.

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