

Cultural Influence in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Challenges and Confrontations in the Thought of the Supreme Leader (1989–2018)

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Abstract

This article delves into the cultural invasion faced by Islamic society following the Islamic Revolution, focusing on how Western powers have strategically attempted to undermine indigenous cultures through materialism and cultural hegemony. The primary research question of this study is, what factors have contributed to the cultural penetration of Western values in Iran, and how can these influences be resisted in line with the perspectives of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei? The hypothesis suggests that cultural infiltration is not merely a historical issue but a modern tactic used by Western forces to weaken Islamic ideals and revolutionary movements, especially in the post-revolutionary context. Through a content analysis of Ayatollah Khamenei's speeches and writings, the study identifies the key components of cultural resistance, such as the need for a solid intellectual foundation, an in-depth understanding of the enemy's tactics, and an active presence in the digital and cyberspace spheres. The research highlights that these elements are essential for developing an effective strategy against cultural domination. Moreover, the study reveals that public participation and solidarity, while important, are less critical in countering cultural infiltration than a stronger ideological framework and intellectual empowerment. This suggests that the focus should shift towards strengthening the cultural and intellectual defenses of society, with particular attention to the role of education, media, and critical thinking in resisting foreign cultural pressure. The study concludes that in order to safeguard cultural security in Iran, it is imperative to activate public diplomacy, promote cultural assimilation based on resistance, and establish an Iranian-Islamic progress plan that emphasizes self-reliance and the preservation of indigenous cultural values. These strategies are not only crucial for maintaining cultural sovereignty but also for reinforcing the broader ideological and political independence of Iran.

Keywords: Cultural influence, Challenges, Solutions, Coping, Leadership.

Introduction

Following the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Western nations, faced with the loss of their strategic and economic interests in Iran, sought various means to undermine the revolution's ideals and weaken its revolutionary forces. These efforts ranged from imposing economic, political, and military sanctions to employing psychological tactics such as fearmongering and threats. When such measures failed to achieve their desired outcomes, Western strategies shifted toward cultural dimensions. In this context, Iran's Islamic and indigenous cultural values came under the influence of Western materialistic culture, aiming to alienate the Iranian populace from their native cultural roots and instill an illusion of Western superiority. Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, has repeatedly emphasized the West's strategy of cultural infiltration, warning that undermining cultural foundations is a key avenue for destabilizing revolutionary values. This article explores the drivers behind cultural infiltration and resistance strategies from the Supreme Leader's perspective, highlighting the importance of understanding this phenomenon in contemporary Iranian society.

Cultural infiltration, as a form of ideological and social incursion, is not a novel phenomenon. Historically, it has been a cornerstone of colonialist strategies to assert dominance over other nations. Colonial powers often used ostensibly altruistic activities—such as religious missionary work, technological development, language dissemination, charity, healthcare, and education—as vehicles to exert cultural, social, economic, and political influence. These efforts, though cloaked in humanitarian rhetoric, were frequently aimed at entrenching hegemony and subverting indigenous cultures (Ruh al-Amini, 1993, p. 101). Culture is central to the identity and vitality of any society. A nation devoid of its own culture is akin to a body without a soul. A dynamic culture must also possess the capacity to engage with others, assimilating positive attributes to facilitate growth and mutual progress. However, the capitalist-driven global order, particularly under U.S. leadership, has sought to homogenize global culture to align with its economic and political objectives. This imposition, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, represents an attempt to create a monolithic cultural framework that prioritizes Western values over diverse indigenous traditions.

Despite these efforts, many nations, particularly within the Islamic world, have resisted this cultural hegemony. Islamic culture, grounded in values of piety, altruism, justice, and solidarity, has

shown remarkable resilience against cultural invasions for over a century. For proponents of a "New World Order," the Islamic world represents a significant ideological and political counterweight to Western materialistic culture. Having witnessed the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the global decline of communism, these architects now view Islamic ideology as the primary challenge to their hegemonic ambitions. As articulated by Ayatollah Khamenei, cultural invasion entails a deliberate assault on a nation's cultural foundations to achieve dominance and subjugation. He explains, "Cultural invasion means that they attack the cultural foundations of a nation to achieve their goals and subjugate that nation" (Supreme Leader, 1994). This method has replaced direct confrontations with more subtle, insidious approaches to ideological warfare, targeting values, traditions, and social norms to erode national identity.

Despite extensive discussions on cultural infiltration, its nuanced manifestations remain underexplored, particularly among the younger generation. A lack of awareness about the depth and implications of cultural influence has contributed to its proliferation across various social spheres. Moreover, the absence of effective public education and policy responses has allowed this phenomenon to persist, making its impacts increasingly visible in domains such as media, education, and consumer behavior. This research seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing the Supreme Leader's insights on cultural infiltration. It aims to clarify the concept, explore its manifestations, and outline actionable strategies for resistance. By examining Ayatollah Khamenei's statements and contextualizing them within broader historical and contemporary frameworks, this study provides a roadmap for fostering awareness and collective resilience against cultural hegemony. Additionally, the article offers practical indicators for identifying and countering cultural infiltration in various societal sectors. The phenomenon of cultural infiltration reflects a complex interplay of external pressures and internal vulnerabilities, deeply rooted in historical and ideological struggles. In the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, cultural influence represents a strategic challenge, necessitating robust resistance mechanisms. Understanding the historical contexts and modern manifestations of cultural hegemony is essential for developing effective strategies to safeguard indigenous values and promote cultural self-reliance. By fostering collective awareness and determination, the Iranian society can effectively confront and mitigate the impacts of cultural invasion, preserving the ideals of the Islamic Revolution for future generations.

1. The Supreme Leader's View on Cultural Influence and Infiltration

The issue of influence from the perspective of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, is intricately linked to the era of colonialism and the continuation of this era in new forms. Over the past few centuries, imperialist powers have continually updated their methods in response to global conditions and the circumstances of individual nations. The initial phase of colonialism, often referred to as traditional colonialism, involved direct governance of wealthy colonies, such as India and Algeria, by foreign rulers (Farhadi, Ali, 2019, p. 5), who exploited the resources and populations of these territories. As awareness among colonized nations grew over time, colonial powers needed to adopt new strategies to maintain their dominance. In this modern era, they began placing individuals from within the colonized nations in positions of power. This allowed them to exploit these nations under the guise of local governance. The Pahlavi regime in Iran serves as an example of such puppet dictators installed in many so-called Third World countries, including Islamic nations. However, the awakening of these nations has presented challenges for imperialists, leading to a new era of colonialism, often referred to as neo-colonialism. The fundamental principle of this approach involves penetrating societies in such a way that, either through direct presence or indirectly via financial incentives, propaganda, and various forms of allure, a significant portion of the population is manipulated to desire what the imperialists want. Consequently, without the necessity of physical presence in a country, populations can unwittingly act in ways that serve imperial interests. This reflects the ongoing efforts of adversaries to exploit and plunder nations (Borouji, 2019, p. 7) In this context, the Islamic Revolution leader asserts, "The success of any nation in its progress is inversely proportional to the influence of foreign and enemy powers in that country. If imperialism and the ruling apparatus manage to dominate a country and exert influence, the interests of that nation will be disregarded" (Statements at a large gathering of the people of Arak, 1999). From his perspective, Khamenei identifies two types of influence: one that is individual and case-specific, and another that is systemic. He considers systemic influence to be the most significant. If a movement emerges in a country that operates contrary to the Islamic system and indirectly serves U.S. interests, this represents the most critical form of influence. Additionally, cultural influence is pivotal; for instance, if imperialists use their cultural penetration to alter the lifestyles, thoughts, and beliefs of the populace, this is viewed as a significant threat. Khamenei suggests that this form of

influence is evident through the enemy's dominance over the virtual space. Both virtual and non-virtual platforms, including satellite technologies, are largely controlled by adversaries. Personal and national data can easily fall into the hands of U.S. and Israeli intelligence services, allowing them to identify pathways for infiltration and tailor cultural programming for various societal segments. Most importantly, Khamenei emphasizes that political and cultural influences are paramount. The enemy aims to transform societal beliefs, undermining those principles that have historically upheld the community, creating disruption and interference. Substantial resources, including billions of dollars, are invested to achieve this goal of cultural infiltration (Supreme Leader's Statements, 1994). These reflections underline the necessity of vigilance against various forms of influence, particularly in the realms of politics and culture, which are seen as critical battlegrounds in the fight against imperialism.

2. Strategies and Tools to Counter Cultural Infiltration

The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran has consistently underscored the critical importance of resisting cultural infiltration due to its profound impact on the nation's religious, cultural, and national identity. In a statement on August 22, 2019, he explicitly noted that adversaries have recognized the ineffectiveness of conventional measures such as military aggression and economic sanctions in undermining the Islamic Republic. Consequently, these actors have openly declared that their primary strategy for overcoming the Islamic Republic and asserting dominance over its governance system relies on cultural infiltration aimed at transforming the cultural identity of Iranian society. The goal of these efforts is to alter the behavioral, intellectual, and cultural frameworks within Iran to serve external political and economic interests, rendering cultural infiltration a pivotal front in the broader struggle.

Earlier, on May 6, 2001, the Supreme Leader emphasized that cultural infiltration constitutes the principal gateway for subsequent political and economic infiltration. He warned that allowing cultural penetration would inevitably facilitate deeper incursions into political structures and economic resources, potentially resulting in the exploitation and control of national assets. This perspective highlights the strategic sequencing whereby cultural influence paves the way for broader systemic domination.

The role of media in counteracting this threat has also been a focal

point in the Supreme Leader's discourse. In his December 5, 1986 Friday sermon in Tehran, he identified the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) as a crucial instrument for elevating the cultural awareness of society by promoting the rich heritage of Islamic and Iranian culture. He maintained that a culturally informed populace is better equipped to resist foreign infiltration and that state-controlled media plays a vital role in preserving national and religious identity. Reaffirming the necessity of firm resistance, the Supreme Leader, during a meeting with government officials on August 17, 2015, declared that no form of infiltration—economic, political, or cultural—should be tolerated. He highlighted the diverse methods employed by adversaries, including media, social networks, consumer culture, and the mobilization of students and intellectuals, all aimed at eroding the Islamic and Iranian identity.

More recently, on September 25, 2024, he reiterated these concerns in a meeting with the Revolutionary Guards and Basij forces, emphasizing that Western cultural influences and lifestyles are penetrating multiple dimensions of Iranian social, economic, and political life. He called for heightened vigilance and robust countermeasures, stressing that such cultural infiltration poses a serious threat to the country's Islamic and national identity. Furthermore, the youth have been identified as a particularly vulnerable and crucial demographic in this cultural contest. On April 26, 1998, the Supreme Leader highlighted the importance of shielding younger generations from enemy cultural infiltration through deliberate planning and effective measures. He warned that failure to protect the youth could jeopardize the country's future by allowing adversaries to embed their influence within this critical segment of society.

3. Leadership Role and Crisis Management in Combating Cultural Influence

In the political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the position of the Supreme Leader represents the highest political and spiritual authority, encompassing vast responsibilities. As the central coordinator of the country's various forces, the Supreme Leader determines overarching policies and provides spiritual guidance to the populace. Furthermore, the leadership directs government institutions in implementing the constitution that emerged from the Islamic Revolution, ensuring alignment with its foundational principles.

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran has confronted numerous domestic and international challenges that have

threatened the stability and survival of the revolutionary regime. These challenges—ranging from military conflicts and economic sanctions to internal unrest and cultural pressures—have at times posed existential threats. Nevertheless, through decisive crisis management and steadfast leadership, the Supreme Leader and his administration have successfully navigated these adversities, ultimately contributing to the regime's stabilization and advancement.

Effective crisis management under the Supreme Leader has been identified by both internal and external analysts as a crucial factor in the enduring resilience of the Islamic Republic. The capacity to confront multifaceted political, economic, and cultural challenges and restore equilibrium during turbulent periods is a hallmark of this leadership. Beyond mere political survival, crisis management extends to safeguarding Iran's social and cultural domains, requiring profound insight, strategic wisdom, and a firm commitment to the values of the Islamic Revolution.

Several key aspects underscore the critical importance of the Supreme Leader's perspective in understanding Iran's approach to leadership and crisis management:

- **Central Authority in Decision-Making:** The Supreme Leader holds unparalleled authority within the Iranian political system. His decisions are not only crucial for the functioning of the government but also have profound implications on the social fabric and international standing of Iran. Referring to his opinion allows for an understanding of the ideological and practical framework that guides the country's policies in times of crisis.
- **Crisis Management Experience:** The Islamic Republic of Iran has faced significant internal and external challenges, from the Iran-Iraq War to economic sanctions and regional conflicts. The Supreme Leader's leadership during these turbulent times has been critical in safeguarding the sovereignty and stability of the country. His ability to guide the nation through crises has contributed significantly to the survival and advancement of the revolution. Therefore, his perspective on crisis management offers invaluable lessons on leadership during moments of national adversity.
- **Guarding National Identity and Values:** The leadership of the Islamic Republic is deeply intertwined with the preservation of national identity and Islamic values. In the face of external cultural pressures and internal political challenges, the Supreme Leader's vision serves as a safeguard for the nation's cultural integrity. Referring to his views on these issues provides clarity

on how Iran strives to maintain its distinct identity while engaging with the world.

- **Spiritual and Moral Guidance:** Beyond political matters, the Supreme Leader provides spiritual and moral leadership to the Iranian people. His role as the custodian of Islamic values in governance ensures that political decisions are aligned with the ethical principles of the Islamic Revolution. In times of crisis, his guidance helps to unite the people, offering them a sense of purpose and direction.
- **Strategic Long-Term Vision:** The Supreme Leader's opinion is also instrumental in understanding the long-term strategic vision of the Islamic Republic. His leadership is marked by foresight, where decisions are made not just in response to immediate threats but also with an eye on the future of the nation. This approach ensures that the policies implemented today will contribute to Iran's growth and stability in the years to come, particularly in the face of evolving geopolitical dynamics.
- **Navigating Complex Geopolitical Landscapes:** The political landscape in which Iran operates is highly complex, with shifting alliances and the influence of global powers. The Supreme Leader's insight into international relations and diplomacy is crucial for understanding Iran's strategies in managing its foreign policy, especially in the context of regional conflicts, nuclear negotiations, and economic sanctions.
- **Consistency in Leadership:** Throughout the history of the Islamic Republic, the leadership has remained consistent in its core principles, even as challenges have evolved. Referring to the Supreme Leader's opinion helps maintain continuity in national policies and ensures that the government remains focused on its long-term objectives, rather than being swayed by transient political trends.

In conclusion, the Supreme Leader's leadership is foundational to the Islamic Republic's resilience in the face of crisis. His extensive experience, strategic acumen, and spiritual authority collectively enable effective management of political, cultural, and social challenges. Examining his role offers a comprehensive understanding of how Iran has sustained its stability and why leadership remains pivotal to its continued survival and development.

4. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and descriptive research design, utilizing the documentary method and content analysis of the

Supreme Leader's statements. Additionally, expert opinions were incorporated through consultation with relevant elites. The sampling technique adopted is purposive sampling, whereby participants are deliberately selected based on their relevance to the research objectives (Bazaregan, 2017, p. 55). The research process involved a comprehensive content analysis of the Supreme Leader's statements concerning strategies to counter cultural influence. Components and categories were systematically extracted from the analyzed content and subsequently presented in tabular form to subject matter experts. Their feedback was solicited to assess agreement and the relative importance of the identified indicators, the results of which are summarized in Table 3 (see Conclusion section). The data corpus included all available written and audio statements by the Supreme Leader, sourced primarily from the official websites www.leader.ir and www.Khamenei.ir, spanning the period from June 15, 1989 (1368 in the Iranian calendar) to the present. The unit of analysis consisted of individual sentences and paragraphs directly related to the research topic, ensuring a thorough and nuanced examination of the content.

5. Findings

The following findings are based on the analysis of the content of the goals of influence, methods of influence, tools of influence, and results of the influence speech of the leadership of Islamic Iran.

Table (1)

Infiltration targets	Methods of penetration	Penetration tools	Infiltration results
Infiltration in the university and virtual space (25/7/85) and change of intellectual authority (4/9/94)	Interaction (statements on 12/5/196)	Audio, video and internet media (6/18/94)	Emptying the identity of the Islamic Revolution by promoting secularism 9/24/87)
Misguidance of the elites (2/6/91)	Creating doubt in internal values and beliefs: transformation from within (10/1/93)	Student and scientific exchanges (22/7/94)	Changing the mindset and creating doubt in some properties and elites regarding the necessity of continuing the enmity with the domination system (26/6/90)
Creating insecurity and chaos (12/8/80)	Inducing an atmosphere of despair and hopelessness;	Divisiveness (8/10/94)	Beliefs change parallel to generational changes

Infiltration targets	Methods of penetration	Penetration tools	Infiltration results
	removing the culture of self-belief		(6/25/94)
Inducing the ineffectiveness of religion (11/28/87)	Changing the Islamic lifestyle (2/9/68 and 14/2/1394)	Making the face of the devil (6/18/94)	Doubts in the literature and discourse of the revolution and revolutionary forces (6/20/74)
misleading people (10/10/95)	Finding tastes and creating culture (23/7/91)	Directing cultural collections (4/6/94)	Imposing miscalculations on people and officials (12/20/94)
		De-ideologicalization of politics and diplomacy (6/25/94)	Psychological saturation of the society in depicting the inefficiency of the Islamic system and retreat from the ideal of anti-arrogance (2/12/2014)
		Induction of going through the revolution, the necessity of joining the world community (6/25/94)	

A substantial number of statements by the Supreme Leader concerning cultural infiltration have been collected and synthesized. These have been systematically categorized into key strategic indicators, each accompanied by corresponding dates, and are presented comprehensively in Table 2 under the title "Strategies for Countering Cultural Infiltration."

Table (2)

Component	Strategy	Text of Statements by the Supreme Leader	Address
Strategies for Countering Cultural Infiltration	Proper understanding of the enemy	The issue is that we know the enemy; understand the enemy's tricks; know what we are saying and how the enemy might use	6/5/2010 and 6/22/2017

Component	Strategy	Text of Statements by the Supreme Leader	Address
		each of our words to become bold, encouraged, and find ways to interfere and infiltrate... Protecting the revolution requires understanding the intellectual and practical weaknesses of the enemy and educating those who do not yet have a proper understanding of the enemy.	
	Deepening intellectual and ideological foundations	The enemy, through experience, has understood that humans are vulnerable. They say every human can be corrupted, anyone can be corrupted. Of course, they are right with one exception: "except the pious." The pious cannot be corrupted. They do not understand the meaning of piety.	2/2/1999
	Developing an Iranian-Islamic progress plan	We must return to the Islamic-Iranian plan, which is itself a great success. We have this success today. Well, this is the path of progress. Unconditionally emulating Western theorists and following a translation-based approach is wrong and dangerous. We need to develop our own theories in the field of humanities.	5/1/2008
	Solidarity and public participation	Maintain your solidarity and unity. The enemy targets the unity of the	

Component	Strategy	Text of Statements by the Supreme Leader	Address
		<p>people. The enemy naively relies on its agents and mercenaries among the people; this is a foolish and delusional thought. Today, Americans openly state their goals; this is one of the misfortunes for the arrogant. They say we will financially support those in Iran who help American goals. They do not know our nation; hence, they openly talk about creating opposition within Iran with money.</p>	
	Ideological deterrence	<p>When our youth has strong intellectual and ideological foundations, he understands that they should not follow our youth. This ideological foundation is strengthened by attention, supplication, and recourse to the Almighty, as seen in the prayers of Sahifa Sajjad Nya.</p>	5/3/2008
	Feeling responsible for creating a new Islamic civilization	<p>They shape tastes and create cultures; once they change tastes, they will bring in dollars and military forces if needed. This is the method of the Westerners; we must be vigilant. Everyone must feel responsible for creating a new Islamic civilization, which involves confronting Western civilization to avoid imitation.</p>	10/15/2012

Component	Strategy	Text of Statements by the Supreme Leader	Address
	Understanding the necessities and obstacles of cultural activities in the country	We must answer this important question: What do we need to succeed in cultural activities? What obstacles must we overcome? And what pitfalls should we be wary of?	12/10/2013
	Strengthening the insight of the elite	Today, I believe the enemy's target is the elite. The enemy targets the elite. They sit and plan to change the minds of the elite to draw the people because the elite influence and have an impact on the general public. One of our main duties today is to strengthen our insight into various issues and increase the insight of our audiences and listeners.	9/24/2009
	Active presence in cyberspace	An active and influential presence in cyberspace requires "focus in decision-making," "seriousness in implementation without losing time," "coordination among institutions," and "avoiding redundancy and conflict."	9/9/2015
	Utilizing cultural and artistic methods and tools	There is still much to be done in this country in the cultural field. What I mean is relying on faithful forces in cultural environments.	8/8/1992

This table presents translated strategies for countering cultural infiltration, accompanied by the relevant statements and their corresponding dates.

Conclusion

In this study, following the presentation of the theoretical framework, components and categories were derived from the content analysis of the Supreme Leader's statements on methods to counter cultural infiltration. These findings were compiled and presented in tabular form to experts in the field for validation. Their level of agreement with the identified indicators and the significance of each were assessed, with the overall results summarized in Table 3. Based on the experts' feedback, two indicators—namely, “solidarity and public participation” and “ideological deterrence”—were removed. The justification provided indicated that the “solidarity and public participation” indicator was more appropriately addressed under other topics, while the “ideological deterrence” indicator was consolidated with the “deepening of intellectual and ideological foundations,” resulting in a combined single indicator.

Table (3)

No.	Indicator	Average
1	Deepening intellectual foundations and ideological deterrence	4.5
2	Proper understanding of the enemy	4.3
3	Active presence in cyberspace	4.3
4	Strengthening national culture and developing an Iranian-Islamic progress plan	4.2
5	Feeling responsible for creating a new Islamic civilization	4.2
6	Understanding the necessities and obstacles of cultural activities in the country	4.2

Aligned with these strategies, efforts such as activating and leveraging public diplomacy to counter Western cultural and social dominance, prioritizing cultural assimilation and political socialization that foster a culture of resistance and independence among the youth, and comprehensively understanding and communicating the implications of shifting cultural and social tastes to relevant officials and elites are crucial. Additionally, strengthening intellectual foundations and doctrinal teachings rooted in independence and resistance to foreign domination, engaging in cultural management initiatives, reinforcing cultural activities, promoting the nation's culture based on the Islamic-Iranian model, enhancing insight into the multifaceted nature of infiltration—particularly cultural dimensions—actively participating in cyberspace, utilizing cultural and artistic methods, and revitalizing

the pure Muhammadan culture all contribute significantly to cultural security in Islamic Iran.

In conclusion, cultural infiltration remains a persistent and complex challenge that demands multidimensional responses. Although this study centers on the Iranian context, its findings offer valuable perspectives that can inform broader strategies to resist cultural domination globally. Future research could further explore comparative analyses and investigate the influence of emerging technologies in shaping contemporary cultural paradigms.

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