


Strategic Patience or Strategic Shift? Analyzing Iran's Regional Diplomacy in the Post-Abraham Accords Era

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving trajectory of Iran's regional diplomacy in the aftermath of the Abraham Accords (2020), which marked a significant realignment in Middle Eastern geopolitics by normalizing relations between Israel and several Arab states. The core question explored is whether the Islamic Republic of Iran continues to adhere to its long-standing doctrine of "strategic patience" or is transitioning toward a more adaptive diplomatic posture in response to emerging regional alignments. Using a qualitative analysis of official policy statements, regional diplomatic developments, and doctrinal texts in Persian and Arabic, the study investigates Iran's evolving strategy through the dual lenses of geopolitical realism and Islamic theological frameworks, particularly the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist). The article argues that Iran's foreign policy exhibits a hybrid model: while ideological commitments to anti-Zionism and Islamic solidarity remain central, there are growing signs of pragmatic engagement, especially in Tehran's rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iraq. This pragmatic turn is articulated through Shiite concepts such as *maslahat* (public interest) and *hikmah* (strategic wisdom), which enable the Islamic Republic to recalibrate its diplomacy without compromising core ideological principles. The findings reveal a nuanced shift toward a dual-track strategy that balances deterrence with diplomacy and resistance with regional dialogue, allowing Iran to navigate its theological commitments amid rapidly shifting regional dynamics. Ultimately, the article contributes to the broader discourse on the intersection of religion and foreign policy in the Middle East, offering insights into how revolutionary states adapt to transformation within the international order.

Keywords: Iran, Abraham Accords, strategic patience, regional diplomacy, Islamic Republic, Velayat-e Faqih, Middle East, normalization, Iran-Saudi relations, foreign policy shift.

Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy has long been shaped by a unique synthesis of religious ideology and geopolitical strategy. Rooted in the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist), Iran's approach to regional diplomacy is not merely reactive to international developments, but rather informed by a distinct theological-political worldview. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Tehran has projected itself as a vanguard of resistance against Western hegemony and Zionism, emphasizing solidarity with Islamic nations and oppressed peoples (*mustaz'afin*).

However, the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab countries - formalized in the Abraham Accords of 2020 - has introduced a profound transformation in the regional order of the Middle East. These developments pose a direct challenge to Iran's longstanding narrative of pan-Islamic unity and anti-Zionist resistance. In this evolving context, a critical question arises: Is Iran persisting in its strategy of *sabr-e stratezhik* (strategic patience), or is it undergoing a strategic recalibration to adapt to the new regional architecture?

This article seeks to explore this question by examining Iran's regional diplomacy in the post-Abraham Accords era. It hypothesizes that, while Iran maintains its ideological posture, a pragmatic shift is evident in its diplomatic engagement, particularly through rapprochement with traditional rivals such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The study aims to investigate this apparent dualism - ideological rigidity paired with diplomatic flexibility - through the lens of Iran's theological foundations and *realpolitik* calculation.

Methodologically, this research employs a qualitative analysis of policy statements, regional developments, and doctrinal sources in both Persian and Arabic. It combines geopolitical examination with theological interpretation to assess whether the Islamic Republic is adjusting its foreign policy doctrine or merely employing tactical adaptation. The findings of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between religious doctrine and foreign policy pragmatism in the Islamic Republic, and provide insights into the potential trajectories of Iran's regional strategy.

1. Theological Foundations of Iran's Regional Strategy

The Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy is inextricably linked to its foundational religious principles, most notably the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist), which grants a senior

Islamic jurist ultimate authority in both political and spiritual affairs. This fusion of theology and statecraft is not merely symbolic - it shapes the very rationale behind Iran's regional behavior and diplomatic calculus.

1-1. The Principle of Ummah and Anti-Zionism

Central to Iran's worldview is the Qur'anic concept of the ummah (Islamic community), which transcends national borders and unites Muslims under a singular spiritual-political identity. The preservation of ummah solidarity, as articulated in the writings of Ayatollah Khomeini and later Ayatollah Khamenei, necessitates opposition to what are perceived as divisive and imperialist projects - chief among them Zionism and U.S. influence in the Middle East (Khomeini, 1981, p. 152). Consequently, Iran's opposition to Israel is not merely political; it is cast as a religious duty rooted in tawhid (oneness of God) and adl (justice).

This theological posture informs Tehran's criticism of the Abraham Accords, which it sees as an act of betrayal by Muslim states against the Palestinian cause and a rupture in Islamic unity (Khamenei, 2020: speech, September 1). The accords are thus framed not only as geopolitical realignments but as theological deviations that undermine divine justice.

1-2. Doctrine of Mustaz'afin and Foreign Policy

Another key theological tenet shaping Iran's regional strategy is its commitment to the oppressed (Mustaz'afin), derived from Qur'anic verses such as Surah al-Qasas (28:5). The Islamic Republic views itself as the defender of marginalized groups across the Muslim world - whether Palestinian, Lebanese, Yemeni, or Bahraini - thereby justifying its support for resistance movements like Hezbollah and the Houthis within a framework of religious obligation (Shayegan, 2006, p. 98). This framing permits Iran to blend theological legitimacy with geopolitical ambition. Support for non-state actors is not seen as interference in sovereign affairs but as the fulfillment of a divine mandate to resist tyranny and hegemony, a position deeply embedded in revolutionary Islamic discourse.

1-3. Velayat-e Faqih as a Framework for Diplomacy

The Velayat-e Faqih model does not merely legitimize domestic governance; it also informs Iran's strategic patience doctrine (sabr-e stratezhik). This principle allows for long-term endurance and calibrated resistance in the face of adversity, grounded in the jurisprudential reasoning of Shia Islam. Patience (sabr) is not

passive submission but a strategic virtue, exemplified in both Islamic history and revolutionary thought (Motahhari, 1975, p. 67). As such, the Supreme Leader's role in foreign affairs is not only supervisory but also directive. Iran's foreign ministry functions within boundaries defined by the Wali al-Faqih, ensuring that state diplomacy aligns with broader religious imperatives. This structure explains the continuity of core foreign policy themes across administrations - from Khatami to Raisi - despite differing temperaments and tactics.

2. Post-Abraham Accords Regional Order

The Abraham Accords, signed in 2020 between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain - later joined by Morocco and Sudan - represent a watershed in the modern diplomatic history of the Middle East. By formally normalizing relations between key Arab states and Israel, the Accords shattered the long-standing Arab consensus, anchored in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which held that normalization would only follow the resolution of the Palestinian question. This regional realignment has significantly altered the geopolitical and ideological landscape in which the Islamic Republic of Iran operates.

2-1. Mapping Geopolitical Changes

The most immediate effect of the Abraham Accords has been the formalization of a pro-U.S.; anti-Iranian bloc composed of Israel and several Sunni Arab states. This alignment reflects shared concerns over Iran's regional influence, ballistic missile program, and nuclear ambitions. In strategic terms, the Accords symbolize a convergence of security interests between Israel and Gulf monarchies - a development that Tehran perceives as a direct threat to both its ideological legitimacy and strategic depth.

Militarily, the Accords have paved the way for enhanced intelligence cooperation, joint military exercises, and increased U.S. arms sales to the Gulf, including advanced weaponry that was previously restricted due to Israeli security concerns (Watkins, 2021, p. 113). Iran views these developments as a potential precursor to an integrated missile defense system aimed at countering its deterrence capabilities. In Tehran's calculus, such arrangements diminish its strategic buffer zones and amplify the risk of encirclement.

Economically, the normalization agreements have fostered unprecedented levels of Israeli-Gulf trade, technological cooperation,

and investment partnerships. The potential establishment of logistical and intelligence outposts near the Strait of Hormuz and in the Red Sea is seen by Iranian strategists as a clear encroachment on its sphere of influence (Barzegar, 2022: 37). These shifts force Iran to re-evaluate its maritime strategy and the security of its southern coastline, particularly around Bandar Abbas and Chabahar.

Diplomatically, the Abraham Accords have redefined the regional narrative. Where Iran once positioned itself as the center of gravity for anti-Zionist resistance, it now faces a growing perception among Arab publics that economic development and political normalization offer a more viable path forward. This trend erodes Iran's ideological soft power and complicates its efforts to mobilize support through the traditional axis of resistance.

2-2. Israel-Gulf Alignments and Implications for Iran

The strategic alignment between Israel and Gulf states carries multiple implications for Iran. First, it undermines Tehran's attempt to present itself as a regional balancer against Israeli aggression. Iran has historically relied on the Palestinian cause to unify and influence public opinion in the Arab world; with key Arab capitals now openly embracing Israel, that narrative has lost potency (Taremi, 2021, p. 72).

Second, the growing military and intelligence cooperation between Tel Aviv, Abu Dhabi, and Manama poses a tactical challenge to Iran's deterrence structure. The possibility of Israeli surveillance infrastructure in close proximity to Iranian territory, including on Gulf islands or in the UAE, represents a red line in Tehran's strategic doctrine. Iranian officials have repeatedly warned that any Israeli presence in the Gulf region would provoke a strong response (Mehr News, 2021, October 10).

Third, these alignments incentivize Iran to accelerate its pivot toward non-Arab allies and extra-regional partnerships, especially with Russia, China, and other Eastern Bloc countries. The 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement with China and strategic ties with Moscow signal Tehran's effort to counterbalance regional isolation through global multipolarism (Fulton, 2021, p. 50).

Finally, the normalization wave has forced Iran to reconsider its regional diplomacy, particularly with neighbors like Qatar, Iraq, and even Saudi Arabia. While ideological rigidity persists in rhetoric, a new realism is discernible in Iran's tactical behavior, including a measured rapprochement with rivals and an increased emphasis on multilateral regional security initiatives that exclude foreign powers.

3. Iran's Strategic Responses

In the wake of the Abraham Accords and the shifting regional equilibrium, the Islamic Republic of Iran has not remained idle. Rather, it has initiated a calibrated and multifaceted strategic response. This response is neither wholly reactionary nor revolutionary; instead, it reflects a sophisticated synthesis of doctrinal consistency and geopolitical pragmatism. Tehran's strategic calculus can be understood across four main axes: diplomatic recalibration, ideological reassertion, regional deterrence, and global realignment.

3-1. Diplomatic Recalibration: From Confrontation to Controlled Engagement

One of the most visible adaptations in Iranian foreign policy has been its shift toward regional engagement - particularly with traditional adversaries. The resumption of diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia in 2023, mediated by China, marked a watershed moment in Tehran's regional diplomacy. This development, following years of proxy conflict from Yemen to Lebanon, was presented domestically not as a deviation from revolutionary principles but as a manifestation of hikmah (wisdom) in Islamic governance.

The foreign policy apparatus under President Ebrahim Raisi, guided by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, has framed these overtures as part of a broader strategy of "neighbor-centered diplomacy" (siasat-e hamsayegi), emphasizing regional security through intra-Islamic consultation rather than foreign intervention (Khamenei.ir, 2023). This approach aligns with the Shia jurisprudential emphasis on maslahat (expediency) in preserving the Islamic order, even in interactions with ideological rivals.

This recalibration also reflects a growing understanding in Tehran that regional isolation only serves to empower external alliances such as the Israel-Gulf-U.S. triangle. Thus, Iran has intensified bilateral talks with Qatar, Oman, Iraq, and the UAE to create diplomatic counterweights to the Abraham Accord states (Vakil, 2023, p. 61). These engagements are not aimed at full normalization but at de-escalation and trust-building, which advance Iran's longer-term strategic objectives.

3-2. Ideological Reassertion: Reinforcing the Axis of Resistance

Parallel to its diplomatic outreach, Iran has intensified its ideological messaging. The Axis of Resistance - comprising Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, Hashd al-Shaabi in

Iraq, and various Palestinian factions - continues to serve as a key vehicle for Iran's regional influence. Tehran presents this axis not merely as a network of proxies but as a theological alliance committed to *adl* (justice) and *muqawama* (resistance) against Zionism and imperialism (Alagha, 2011, p. 34).

This dual-track approach - engaging states while empowering non-state actors - underscores a recurring pattern in Iranian foreign policy: ideological inflexibility in its narrative, coupled with pragmatic flexibility in tactics. While Iran condemns normalization efforts by Arab states, it continues to fund, arm, and train resistance forces in Gaza and South Lebanon, signaling that its commitment to anti-Zionism remains doctrinally non-negotiable.

Public speeches by the Supreme Leader have increasingly referenced Qur'anic verses that emphasize divine retribution and the inevitability of justice for the oppressed (Surah al-Nisa', 4:75), framing the geopolitical struggle as a sacred duty. In doing so, Iran reasserts its role as the theological epicenter of the anti-normalization discourse, seeking to retain its moral leadership even as its regional clout is tested.

3-3. Regional Deterrence and Strategic Signaling

Military deterrence remains a central pillar of Iran's response strategy. Iran has conducted numerous ballistic missile tests, unveiled advanced drone systems (e.g., the Shahed-136), and carried out joint exercises with the IRGC Navy in the Strait of Hormuz, all intended as messages to both adversaries and allies alike (Cordesman, 2022, p. 112). These actions signal that, despite its diplomatic outreach, Iran retains both the capability and the will to escalate if its red lines are crossed.

Significantly, Tehran has also upgraded its missile and drone delivery capabilities through asymmetric warfare platforms, further strengthening its deterrent reach into Israel and against U.S. bases across the Gulf. In doctrinal terms, this capacity is framed within the jurisprudence of *defa'e moghadas* (sacred defense), a post-revolutionary reinterpretation of defensive jihad (*jihad al-daf'*) that justifies preemptive deterrence under threat conditions (Shayegan, 2006, p. 105).

Iran's naval doctrine, centered around the IRGC and its use of asymmetric tactics in the Persian Gulf, remains an additional layer of deterrence. The placement of fast attack craft and anti-ship missiles near the Strait of Hormuz continues to serve as a source of leverage, in both military and economic terms, particularly in negotiations with Western powers over sanctions and nuclear talks.

3-4. Global Realignment and Strategic Partnerships

Faced with the encirclement by U.S.-backed regional alliances, Iran has deepened its strategic engagement with non-Western powers, particularly China and Russia. The 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement with China, signed in 2021, includes multi-sector cooperation in energy, infrastructure, military training, and intelligence (Fulton, 2021, p. 57). Likewise, Iran's growing defense cooperation with Russia - including in Syria and potentially through Ukraine-related drone supplies - underscores Tehran's intent to position itself within the emerging multipolar world order.

These partnerships serve multiple purposes: they provide Iran with diplomatic shields in the UN Security Council, offer technological and military transfers, and facilitate sanctions circumvention. More importantly, they embody Tehran's ideological belief in resisting Western domination (*istakbar*), allowing Iran to frame its global posture within a divine mandate for independence and self-sufficiency (*khod-kafa'i*).

At the same time, Iran is attempting to leverage multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS as forums to challenge U.S. hegemony. Participation in these bodies not only enhances Iran's strategic depth but also validates its claim to be part of the emergent East-centric geopolitical order.

4. Tensions Between Ideological Doctrine and Pragmatic Adaptation

The Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy since 1979 has professed consistency in its ideological foundations - chiefly anti-Zionism, Islamic unity, and resistance to Western domination. However, the regional and global shifts induced by the Abraham Accords have increasingly forced Tehran to reconcile these doctrinal imperatives with the realities of a transforming international system. This reconciliation is neither seamless nor fully resolved. On the contrary, it exposes deep internal tensions within Iran's policymaking apparatus**,** between ideological rigidity and strategic pragmatism.

4-1. The Struggle Between Dogma and Diplomacy

One of the most persistent dilemmas in Iranian foreign policy is the contradiction between its theological self-definition and the exigencies of state behavior. The doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih*

bestows ultimate decision-making authority upon the Supreme Leader, who is expected to preserve both the revolutionary principles and the security of the state. In practice, however, these two objectives often conflict.

For example, while Iran continues to vocally condemn normalization with Israel, it has quietly restored relations with Qatar and the UAE - two countries that have engaged in discreet cooperation with Israel in security and technological domains (Guzansky, 2021: 81). This creates a perception gap: on the one hand, Tehran projects unyielding revolutionary resolve; on the other, it demonstrates tactical flexibility behind closed doors.

Such duality reflects a jurisprudential tension between *asl-ha* (immutable principles) and *zarurat-ha* (contingent necessities). Shiite political thought allows for *maslahat* (expedient interests) to override the rigid implementation of certain principles under exceptional circumstances - a tool often used by the Iranian state to justify engagement with ideologically suspect actors (Sachedina, 2001, p. 104). However, the use of *maslahat* as a policy instrument has limits; overreliance on it risks diluting the very ideological coherence the regime seeks to maintain.

4-2. Internal Political Contestation

The friction between ideology and pragmatism is not only theoretical but also institutional. Within the Iranian political system, different centers of power - namely the presidency, the foreign ministry, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the Supreme Leader's Office - often hold diverging views on foreign policy conduct.

While the IRGC typically advocates a maximalist and confrontational approach - especially in its regional operations and support for resistance forces - the foreign ministry may lean toward cautious diplomacy, as evidenced by the Raisi administration's relatively moderate tone toward the Gulf states (Ehteshami, 2023, p. 29). These institutional divides result in incoherent signaling, whereby Iran simultaneously calls for Islamic unity while funding sectarian militias, or condemns normalization while tolerating quiet Gulf-Israeli interactions.

Moreover, the generational divide within the Iranian elite adds complexity to this contestation. Younger technocrats and policymakers - often trained abroad or exposed to global norms - are more inclined to emphasize economic revitalization and multilateral diplomacy, whereas the older revolutionary Guard

faction remains anchored in 1980s revolutionary orthodoxy. This divergence has yet to erupt into open policy rupture, but it reflects the underlying strain of attempting to maintain theological absolutism in a rapidly modernizing region.

4-3. Revolutionary Identity vs. State Rationality

Iran's post-Accords regional positioning reveals the structural challenge of preserving a revolutionary identity while operating as a rational state actor. The Abraham Accords have exposed the limits of a resistance-based foreign policy in delivering material gains. Arab publics - once sympathetic to Iran's anti-Zionist message - are increasingly drawn to economic modernization, innovation, and connectivity. For these societies, normalization with Israel is seen not as a betrayal but as a pathway to prosperity.

Iran, by contrast, faces persistent economic hardship due to sanctions, isolation, and governance inefficiencies. Its continued insistence on ideological purity, while admirable to its internal constituencies, may be perceived externally as stagnation or intransigence. This gap between revolutionary discourse and diplomatic output raises the question of how long Tehran can sustain a resistance identity without undertaking substantial policy reform.

There are precedents in Islamic history for this transformation. The Treaty of Hudaibiyyah between the Prophet Muhammad and the Quraysh, often cited in Iranian theological discussions, is a canonical example of strategic compromise for long-term benefit. Contemporary Iranian scholars occasionally invoke this episode to justify pragmatic deals - such as the JCPOA nuclear agreement - as Islamically legitimate despite ideological concessions (Khosrokhavar, 2015, p. 87).

Yet such precedents have their limits. Unlike early Islam, the modern state is embedded in a global system of competition, media scrutiny, and popular accountability. The Islamic Republic's dual role - as both a revolutionary beacon and a modern nation-state - has become harder to balance in the face of the Accords' normalization logic.

4-4. Ideological Isolation and the Risk of Strategic Redundancy

Finally, the most profound tension lies in the risk that Iran's theological isolation could morph into strategic redundancy. With former adversaries of Israel turning into partners, and with younger Arab generations favoring innovation over confrontation, Iran risks

being sidelined as an anachronistic actor in a future-oriented region. This is not just a diplomatic setback - it is a theological crisis.

If Iran's revolutionary model fails to adapt to changing regional expectations, its narrative of justice and resistance may lose relevance. Conversely, if Iran over-adapts, it may lose its ideological uniqueness. This dialectic is the defining challenge of its foreign policy in the post-Abraham Accords era: how to evolve without eroding its essence

5. Case Studies of Iranian Response in Key Arenas

Iran's strategic response to the post-Abraham Accords regional order can best be understood through a close examination of key arenas where its influence is actively contested and negotiated. These theaters of engagement illustrate the complexity of Iran's balancing act between revolutionary ideology and pragmatic statecraft, revealing the nuanced ways in which Tehran adapts its theological and geopolitical frameworks to shifting on-the-ground realities.

Iraq remains a pivotal arena for Iran's regional influence, defined by the overlapping interests of Tehran and Washington. Following the U.S. military withdrawal in 2021, Iran deepened its political and security presence through proxy groups such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashd al-Shaabi), which have been formally incorporated into Iraq's national security structure (Alfoneh, 2022, p. 47). Despite its ideological alignment with Shia political factions in Baghdad, Tehran has simultaneously pursued pragmatic diplomacy with Iraq's Sunni and Kurdish leaders in order to prevent normalization with Israel and resist Western encroachment (Haddad, 2023: 58). This dual-track approach reflects the theological principle of *tawazon* (balance) in Iran's foreign relations - allowing it to leverage sectarian solidarity while maintaining Iraq's fragile political equilibrium. Furthermore, Iran's active mediation in intra-Iraqi conflicts and its efforts to forestall renewed American intervention underscore a strategic objective of securing a "land bridge" to Syria and Lebanon, thereby reinforcing the territorial and logistical continuity of the Axis of Resistance (Kadhim, 2023, p. 99). In Iraq, as elsewhere, Iran blends its ideological commitment to resistance with a calculated pursuit of strategic depth.

Syria epitomizes Iran's multidimensional strategy of ideological solidarity combined with state-building support. Since 2011, Tehran's backing of the Assad regime has been framed both as a theological duty - a jihad against Takfiri extremism - and as a

practical necessity to safeguard regional stability. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and allied militias have played central roles in sustaining Assad's rule (Phillips, 2018, p. 75). Over time, Iran's engagement in Syria has expanded from military assistance to encompass post-war reconstruction, infrastructure investment, and cultural diplomacy. This includes initiatives to promote pilgrimage tourism and the establishment of Shia religious seminaries, signaling Tehran's intent to embed theological influence alongside political and economic footholds (Lacroix, 2019, p. 112). However, these efforts face significant constraints due to international sanctions and local resistance to foreign interference. In response, Iranian officials have invoked the theological notion of *shura* (consultation) to portray their role as supportive rather than domineering, attempting to allay nationalist anxieties while preserving influence (Heydarian, 2021, p. 63).

In Yemen, Iran's long-standing support for the Houthi movement exemplifies its asymmetric approach to countering Saudi and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) influence. The Houthis' portrayal of their struggle as a defense of the oppressed resonates with Iran's doctrinal commitment to *muqawama* (resistance), reinforcing the Islamic Republic's regional narrative of standing against tyranny and foreign domination (Juneau, 2019, p. 44). Yet, the recent rapprochement between Tehran and Riyadh has prompted a recalibration of Iranian strategy. While signaling a willingness to scale back direct military assistance, Iran continues to provide diplomatic backing for the Houthis, applying the principle of *hikmah* (wisdom) to balance ideological loyalty with strategic restraint (Mabon, 2024, p. 88). This adaptive posture reflects Tehran's effort to maintain its influence in Yemen without undermining the broader *détente* with its Gulf rivals.

Lebanon and Palestine continue to occupy central places in Iran's regional ideology and geopolitical vision. In Lebanon, despite severe economic and political crises, Tehran remains committed to sustaining Hezbollah's dual role as both a military actor and a political force advocating armed resistance against Israel (Norton, 2021, p. 101). Similarly, in Palestine, Iran's enduring support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad is framed through the moral and theological imperatives of *adl* (justice) and *ijtihad* (interpretative effort) in confronting Zionist occupation (Mabon, 2017, p. 53). This unwavering stance serves simultaneously as a religious expression of solidarity and as a strategic tool to reinforce Iran's leadership within the broader Muslim resistance front. However, the expansion

of Arab-Israeli normalization and persistent intra-Palestinian divisions have eroded Tehran's traditional influence, pushing it to explore new avenues of diplomatic outreach and cultural engagement aimed at revitalizing its legitimacy among Arab publics (Al-Ali, 2023, p. 76).

Across these diverse fronts, Iran's regional behavior reveals a sophisticated synthesis of ideology and pragmatism. Whether through direct intervention, proxy networks, or diplomatic recalibration, Tehran continuously redefines its resistance doctrine to accommodate shifting regional dynamics - preserving its revolutionary narrative while adapting to the pragmatic necessities of statecraft in the evolving post-Abraham Accords order.

6. Role of Religious Soft Power in the Regional Equation

In the evolving landscape shaped by the Abraham Accords, Iran's reliance on religious soft power has become an increasingly vital component of its regional strategy. This form of influence, grounded in the propagation of Shiite theological education, clerical networks, and cultural diplomacy, serves as both a complement and a counterbalance to Tehran's more overt political and military initiatives. Understanding this dimension is essential to grasping how Iran attempts to maintain legitimacy, project power, and shape regional narratives despite geopolitical setbacks. Iran's investment in religious education, notably through institutions such as the Hawza of Qom and Al-Mustafa International University, represents a cornerstone of its soft power. These centers attract thousands of students from across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, fostering a transnational Shiite scholarly network that propagates Iran's theological interpretations and political outlook (Momen, 2015, p. 132). This educational export is not merely religious but also ideological, as graduates often return to their home countries as clerics or community leaders who espouse Iran's resistance narrative and advocate for political positions aligned with Tehran's interests (Nasr, 2006, p. 79). Theological discourses disseminated through these networks emphasize themes of justice (*adl*), resistance (*muqawama*), and the guardianship of the jurist (*Velayat-e Faqih*), creating a durable ideological substratum that supports Iran's foreign policy objectives. Beyond formal education, clerical diplomacy has emerged as a subtle yet powerful tool in Iran's regional engagement. Iranian religious leaders actively interact with Shia communities in Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, and elsewhere through visits, sermons, and symbolic gestures that reinforce collective identity and political

loyalty (Dehghanpisheh, 2022, p. 98). These activities are framed within Shiite concepts of ummah (community) and wilayat (guardianship), which legitimize Iran's role as a protector and leader of Shia Muslims worldwide. Clerical diplomacy also serves to counterbalance Sunni-dominated normalization efforts, offering an alternative narrative grounded in religious solidarity and opposition to perceived external aggression (Voll, 2020, p. 54). The mobilization of Shia identity through these networks has tangible political effects, as seen in the endurance of Shia political parties aligned with Tehran in Lebanon's parliamentary system and in Iraq's fragile coalition governments. The expansion of religious soft power plays a critical role in sustaining Iran's legitimacy in the aftermath of the Abraham Accords, which symbolize a broader regional realignment toward normalization with Israel. Tehran's theological narrative frames these agreements as betrayals of Islamic unity and justice, positioning Iran as the steadfast defender of the oppressed (mustad'afin) and the true Islamic cause (Sadjadpour, 2021, p. 75). This narrative is disseminated through sermons, state-affiliated media such as Press TV and Al-Alam, and cultural festivals commemorating resistance martyrs, creating a symbolic framework that reinforces both internal cohesion and external outreach (Keddie, 2020: 99). However, the effectiveness of this religious soft power faces growing challenges as popular attitudes in the Arab Gulf and beyond shift toward pragmatism and economic priorities, often at the expense of ideological solidarity. Despite these challenges, religious soft power remains a strategic asset for Iran - a means of maintaining ideological resilience and moral authority in a region undergoing rapid political transformation. Through its institutions, clerical diplomacy, and symbolic narratives, Iran continues to weave a web of influence that transcends borders and sustains its regional presence even in the face of diplomatic isolation and geopolitical realignment.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study has examined Iran's regional strategy in the wake of the Abraham Accords through a theological lens, revealing the complex interplay between ideological imperatives and pragmatic statecraft that shapes Tehran's foreign policy. The post-Accords order has confronted the Islamic Republic with unprecedented challenges, compelling it to adapt its revolutionary doctrine while striving to preserve its theological identity as the leader of the Muslim resistance. Iran's responses - ranging from recalibrated diplomacy in

Iraq and Syria to nuanced support in Yemen, Lebanon, and Palestine - demonstrate a strategic flexibility grounded in Shiite jurisprudential concepts such as *maslahat* (public interest) and *hikmah* (wisdom). At the same time, the tension between ideological purity and political pragmatism remains a defining feature of Tehran's policymaking, reflected in internal contestations among its political and religious elites. The critical role of religious soft power, exercised through educational institutions, clerical diplomacy, and cultural narratives, sustains Iran's regional legitimacy amidst shifting geopolitical alliances. However, the gradual normalization between Israel and key Arab states challenges the effectiveness of Iran's ideological resistance, risking growing isolation unless Tehran evolves its strategies. Tehran should continue leveraging its theological heritage to sustain ideological coherence while simultaneously increasing diplomatic engagement with regional actors, including Gulf states, to prevent strategic marginalization. Institutionalizing dialogue mechanisms that balance ideological commitments with pragmatic cooperation may help Iran navigate these emerging complexities. Regional actors, particularly the Gulf states and their partners, would benefit from recognizing the theological dimensions underpinning Iran's policies and seeking avenues for constructive engagement that respect Tehran's ideological concerns while promoting regional stability. Soft power exchanges, including religious and cultural diplomacy, could serve as confidence-building measures. For international stakeholders, understanding Iran's theological framework is essential for crafting policies that avoid escalation and encourage diplomatic solutions. Supporting regional multilateral platforms where theological and political dialogues intersect may facilitate more sustainable conflict resolution. In sum, Iran's post-Abraham Accords regional strategy exemplifies a dynamic fusion of theology and *realpolitik*. Its approach illustrates how ideological imperatives and pragmatic calculations coexist, shaping both its challenges and opportunities in the Middle East. Future research should continue to explore this nexus, particularly as new developments unfold within the region's complex geopolitical landscape.

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