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The sacred imagination of geographical spaces: The geopolitical spiritualization of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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ABSTRACT

The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), established after the 1979 Islamic Revolution under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (founder and Supreme Leader until 1989), blended Islamic theocracy with anti-imperialist ideology. Regionally, in the post-Khomeini era, it supported *Mehvar-e Moghāvehat* “Axis of Resistance”—a network including Shia-majority Iraq, Alawite-led Syria (under Assad until 2024), Lebanese Hezbollah, Sunni Hamas, and Yemen's Houthis—against American, Israeli, and Saudi influences, framed through anti-imperialistic Islamic solidarity. Using the lens of critical geopolitics, we examine geo-spiritual discourses in the IRI's geopolitical culture to contribute to the literature on religion and geopolitics. The analysis of religiously grounded geopolitical representations aims to disclose the IRI's territorial imaginations and orientations toward the rest of the world. Drawing on discourse analysis, four main operating axes of the IRI's spiritual geopolitics are identified: inclusion of diversity under the Islamic identity, extraterritorial expansion through the axis of resistance and the rhetoric of defense of the shrines, construction of dichotomous self/other boundaries, framed as opposition to the American order and its regional allies, and the imagined geography of Iran as the sacred center of the Islamic world, positioning other Muslim communities as peripheral satellites. The case of the IRI's territorial imagination shows how religion can be instrumentalized both to crystallize religious identity domestically and to justify power projection abroad, aiming at reordering world politics.

1. Introduction

It is known that sacred narratives and divine imaginaries can actively reorder territorial spaces and world orders (Agnew, 2006; Dijkink, 2006; Sturm, 2013). Beyond identity, extremism, or a pre-political force (Agnew, 2010; Dittmer & Sturm, 2010), religion can act as a spatial logic of power (Sturm, 2021) that mobilizes identities, justifies interventions, and reconstructs global binaries. Religious justice, the strategic mobilization of religious affinities, narratives, and transnational networks, operates through diverse modalities of persuasion, legitimacy, and transnational influence. The strategic operationalization of religion as a diplomatic resource across the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia exposes its systemic instrumentalization in advancing national interests, wherein the sacred is subordinated to geopolitical rationality (Mandaville, 2023). The IRI's deployment of Islamic-oriented narratives through the Axis of Resistance can be analyzed through the lens of religious soft power, emphasizing influence, legitimacy, and

transnational appeal (Wastnidge, 2023). Moving beyond soft power (which highlights persuasive and symbolic dimensions), the IRI's operationalization of religious themes is undergirded by a deeper spiritual-spatial logic of sacred territorial imaginations and center-periphery hierarchies. In this case, religion does not merely supplement statecraft but actively reorders geopolitical space through sacred imaginaries. The continuity of revolutionary ideals in Khomeini's worldview illustrates this spiritual-spatial logic where Islamic supremacy, anti-imperial resistance, and progress fuse religious and geopolitical rationales (Hovsepian-Bearce, 2015; Wastnidge, 2026). Consequently, religion not only drives politics but also enables elites to strategically deploy, adapt, and shape religious narratives that fluctuate with shifting rivalries (Hoffman, 2023). In this context, spiritual geopolitics can be conceptualized as an entwined rationality where religious genealogies reshape secular territoriality. Thus, we can consider the projection of divine authority onto geographical space as an analytical framework for studying the IRI's mechanisms of ideological

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governance and transnational influence.

Practically, the IRI projected divine authority onto space through discursive and material means. Iran was sanctified as *Umm al-Qurā* ‘mother of [Islamic] cities’ (repurposed from Mecca to position Iran as spiritual center). Simultaneously, metaphors like *Defā’ az Haram* ‘Defense of the [Shiite] Shrine(s)’ materialized transnational resistance networks. The divine projection involved media visualizations (the *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting*, IRIB, broadcasts), emotional mobilization (fear of hegemony, hope of liberation), and spatial interventions (proxy support in Syria), entangling sacred time (Mahdi[Shiite Hidden Imam]’s return) with geopolitical strategy. Rooted in Khomeini’s founding principles, the IRI’s geopolitical practices remained predominantly spiritual. While Khomeini’s revolutionary Islamic fervor was ideologically rigid and aggressive, the post-Khomeini era balanced this ideology with strategic pragmatism. Revolutionary Islamism, interwoven with nationalism and Shi’ism, informed foreign-policy choices that projected Iran as a counter-hegemonic force (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016). The IRI’s hybrid structure—combining constitutional facades, deep-state coercive apparatuses, factional bargaining, and rentier/clientelist networks—enabled it to survive legitimacy crises while preserving its revolutionary ideological core (Kamrava, 2023).

Through a critical geopolitical lens, the IRI’s religious representations of world order reveal a deliberate spiritual spatialization serving ideological ends. Symbolic religious interpretations juxtapose ideological and geographical analogies (Toal, 2017: 277, 363), reshaping material space and reproducing political imaginaries (Foster et al., 2017, p. 183; Ó Tuathail, 2000, p. 188). Religious ideology generates collective mental maps, constructing “superior” self-images while excluding others. This study focuses on the theo-sovereign character of IRI’s territorial imagination. The IRI’s sacred narratives and religious signifiers (e.g., *Ummah*, *Haram*, and *Umm al-Qurā*) reproduce space as both a site of divine responsibility and geopolitical ambition. Through this lens, this study reveals how spiritually grounded spatial imaginaries mobilize domestic populations, justify extraterritorial interventions, and construct geopolitical binaries of good and evil. The spiritualized geopolitics thus provides a transferable analytical tool for understanding other religious imaginary cartographies of fear, hope, and cosmic mission, from Christian apocalypticism (Dittmer & Sturm, 2010) to dissident religious resistances (Nyroos, 2001; West, 2006).

The study opens with a theoretical section, examining how geopolitical discourses emerge via the spatialization of religion, specifically through sacred spaces and territorial-spiritual expansionist imaginaries. We then introduce the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic before outlining the methodology. Accordingly, the core analysis of the IRI’s spiritual geopolitics proceeds across four aspects: inclusion/integration, diffusion, otherness, and mental mapping of central sacred spaces.

2. Geopolitics and spiritualized imaginary spaces

This section provides a geopolitical basis for analyzing the IRI’s imaginaries in the face of domestic, regional, and global order. It introduces spiritual geopolitics and examines the production of spiritualized imaginary spaces of resistance, power, and otherness that will be examined in the IRI’s geopolitical culture.

Territorial imaginations position the self in the larger spatial order (Toal, 2017). The production of an “imaginary spatial location” can conceive the territory as a religious or civilizational myth (Ó Tuathail, 2004). Positioning of divinity in the world order spiritualizes these imaginations through references to religious scriptures (Agnew, 2006; Dijkink, 2019). Likewise, manifestations of God’s intervention in the world order and numinous connections can produce geopolitical arguments (Dittmer, 2010, pp. 123–125). This geopolitical perspective transforms spiritual and identity concepts into geographic terms and symbols (Dijkink, 1996, p. 14). The good and evil dichotomy is spatially represented to distinguish between the self and external others (Dodds &

Atkinson, 2000, p. 10). The geographical cultivation of the idea of evil (Sturm, 2006: 236, 2013) enables the framing of conflict as a cosmic struggle between good and evil (Agnew, 2006, p. 183). To shape people’s geographical imaginations and spread them, visualization and emotion in the media can be enhanced with religious sentiments (Dittmer & Dodds, 2008, pp. 437–9; Bos, 2020). Consequently, the vertical sacred space is used to justify the horizontal territorial space (Ó Tuathail, 2000, p. 188) and to interweave geopolitical and religious traditions.

Critical geopolitical scholarship has shown how spiritual imaginaries produce sacred spaces to reconstruct world order. Sacred spaces can circulate and impose symbolic ideas to foster social cohesion domestically and project political power abroad, spatializing binary ideas of good and evil. They are furthermore used to justify the acquisition or consolidation of power, territorial integrity, and/or spiritual territorialization with transcendental mandates (Garbin, 2010). Hence, the protection or reclamation of sacred spaces is promoted as a divine imperative, generating fear (of the punishment for disobeying God or his earthly representatives) and hope (of spreading the pure religion), which necessitates resistance to the usurpers of these places (Agnew, 2006; Hassner, 2009). This deification can lead to the idea of centrality to control the surrounding satellite religious spaces in a spiritual center-periphery imagination. The sanctification of a specific place creates an image of spiritual centrality around that location, the protection and maintenance of which is a divine duty. Upon the sanctifications and exclusions of portions of space, an imaginary geographical duality is produced that spatializes the divine self-image and the evil image of the other (Ó Tuathail, 1996, pp. 11–12; Dalby, 1991, pp. 270–274).

In works on spiritual geopolitics, political geographers have studied the use of religion for legitimizing state power in a predicted apocalypse (Sturm, 2006), promoting territorial claims of religious movements (Yorgason & Robertson, 2006), fostering national identities (de Busser, 2006), enabling counter-hegemonic resistance (West, 2006), challenging territorial structures in favor of holy wars or alternative global narratives (Dijkink, 2006, 2019) or sanctifying transnational imperial ambitions (Sidorov, 2006). Theological constructs, particularly the notion of divine selection and sacred territoriality, have been historically appropriated to justify nationalistic and expansionist policies. Furthermore, religious geo-narratives can be deployed to transition from localized sacred spaces to extraterritorial religious identities (Wallace, 2006). The divine role of the United States in the apocalyptic battle with the axis of evil was used to legitimize and expand state power in the 2000s (Sturm, 2006). Likewise, the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church’s resurrection of the “Third Rome” metaphor, that positioned Russia as the spiritual successor to the Byzantine Empire, was used to reinforce its exceptionalism while contesting ideologically Western liberal hegemony (Sidorov, 2006). Furthermore, the Serbian Orthodox Church’s concept of Heavenly Serbia, portraying the loss of land as a spiritual rupture, reinforced the idea of divine nationhood (Savić, 2014). In other words, the overlap of religious and state ideas of protecting a sacred or civilized land produces a “grounded theology” (Tse, 2013), illustrating that religion can reinforce state ideology or transform its own narratives to align with shifting territorial configurations.

The production of power through religious narratives leverages moral authority, cultural influence, and global networks outside the statecraft tools (Haynes, 2014). The Georgian Orthodox Church’s reframing of territorial fragmentation as a spiritual crisis and invoking canonical territoriality diverge from secular anti-Russian national rhetoric, indicating a neutral force that subtly contests state-centric frameworks (Merabishvili & Metreveli, 2021). Similarly, American evangelical apocalypticism’s framing of global events through a spiritual lens opposes mainstream geopolitical narratives of secular globalism (Dittmer & Sturm, 2010). This spiritualized worldview operates orthogonally to secular temporalities, producing a politics of foreclosure that denies political agency and spatial continuity to the territorial subject. Such apocalyptic mappings represent a “sacred geography”

wherein land becomes not only disputed but theologically foreclosed. Through this lens, evangelical actors engage in a form of “orthogonal promise” that projects divine destiny onto territory, establishing a sacred core (e.g., Israel) while morally excluding peripheral others (e.g., Palestinians) from futurity itself (Sturm, 2021). Thus, sacred spatial imaginaries grounded in non-linear sacred time (orthogonal time) can legitimize fixed geopolitical orders and theologically foreclose alternative futures.

On the other hand, religious fundamentalism, contesting secular modernity, acts against the homogenizing global tendencies, advocating for a return to particularistic sacred values. This shift often emerges in contexts of crisis where religion fills a vacuum, offering alternative visions that defy the status quo. When religious beliefs and institutions challenge the dominant secular or state-centric territorial control or align with marginalized groups against dominant powers, they form dissident geopolitics that can manifest as resistance, contesting the legitimacy of existing power structures (Nyroos, 2001; West, 2006). Consequently, religious perspectives reject or subvert the established geopolitical order by prioritizing spiritual authority and extraterritorial loyalties (Agnew, 2010; Sturm, 2013; Öcal, 2022; Öcal & Gökarişel, 2022). Spiritual authority operates not only within doctrinal institutions but also through spatial relations of care, obedience, and salvation, particularly in postcolonial and subaltern contexts (Savić, 2023). Thus, religious rationalities can shape populations and resist dominant spatial orders.

While most of the prior studies focused on geopolitics inspired by different Christian creeds, this study aims to contribute to this literature in the realm of Islam by examining the IRI's case. Islam in Middle Eastern geopolitics is mostly countering secular state power and operates across borders, prioritizing the religious community. The Islamic Revolution in Iran directly confronted state-centric geopolitics by promoting divine political legitimacy and defying the secular international order (Haynes, 2014). Through justification, revolutionary governments, transnational movements, and concepts like the Holy Land, religion is used to reject the secular state-centric hegemony and redefine territory beyond Westphalian borders, challenging nationalistic narratives. While there is significant scholarship on the IRI's internal politics and foreign policy, the focus here is on the IRI's geo-imaginings of religion and religious geopolitical representations.

A more entangled understanding of spirituality and ideology in geopolitics can extend the conventional frameworks that treat them as discrete or epiphenomenal. Religion can function as a dynamic rationality (Haynes, 2014; Savić, 2023) that actively co-produces spatial power, shaping territorial claims, alliances, and imaginaries through its own strategic logics. Spirituality, by contrast, exceeds doctrinal confines via embodied practices—such as the collective defense of shrines—that generate affective geographies irreducible to formal theology. Theology itself, particularly in its Shia variant, is anchored in eschatological horizons that infuse political time and space with millenarian urgency (Amanat, 2009), while deification describes the deliberate infusion of divine authority into state institutions and leadership (Adib-Moghaddam, 2021). Ideology, in this matrix, operates as a hybrid discursive formation in which religious and political signifiers are articulated and re-articulated through chains of equivalence (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). The Islamic Republic of Iran stands as a paradigmatic case in which these religious rationalities are not adjuncts to sovereignty but constitutively baked into its very architecture, rendering any attempt to disentangle “faith” from “state” analytically untenable.

In the IRI, spiritual geopolitics is a recursive process where religious rationalities co-constitute sovereign space. Religious discourses are not grafted onto secular politics but emerge from Islamic (Shia) eschatology (e.g., Mahdi's return), intertwined with statecraft, creating hybrid the-sovereign imaginaries (cf. Tse's “grounded theologies”). Ayatollah Khomeini's invocation of the “Party of God” (Hizb-Allāh) as the revolutionary vanguard explicitly embedded divine sovereignty within the

concrete territorial defense of the homeland during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), recasting the conflict as a sacred jihad and the “Sacred Defense” (*Defā' e Moqaddas*). Martyrdom rituals, frontline shrines, and eschatological invocations of the Mahdi's return were not rhetorical overlays legitimizing political power; they were, we argue, the very mechanisms through which sovereignty was territorialized: borders became sites of divine trial, battlefields materialized millenarian time, and national survival fused with cosmic victory. In this grounded theological assemblage, religion did not serve geopolitics; it produced it, rendering the IRI's spatial practices inseparable from Shia eschatological rationality and demonstrating how theology actively co-constitutes the territorial state rather than merely aligning with its shifting configurations. Furthermore, the IRI's *Umm al-Qurā* narrative is a novel application, showing how it inverts center-periphery models in critical geopolitics (e.g., contrasting with Ó Tuathail's vertical/horizontal sacred spaces) by incorporating Islamic transnationalism as a rhizomatic network, drawing on Deleuze-inspired geopolitics for innovation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). The Axis of Resistance, refines the fusion of geopolitics and religion (Dijkink, 2006) by demonstrating “sectarian orthogonality” (cf. Sturm's 2021 “orthogonal time”), where Shia temporality (awaiting Mahdi) forecloses secular futures.

Concepts like sacred spaces, center-periphery imaginaries, and good/evil binaries recur in various religious geopolitical discourses such as the American “axis of evil”, the Russian “Third Rome” and Serbian “Heavenly Serbia.” These examples demonstrate that spiritual geopolitics is not exceptional to theocracies like the IRI but permeates ostensibly secular contexts, where religion reinforces state ideologies or contests them (Tse, 2013). By analyzing the IRI's use of sacred signifiers (e.g., Umm al-Qurā as a center of divine authority), this study provides transferable tools, such as discourse chains of inclusion/exclusion/diffusion and sacred mental mapping, for interrogating how religion spatializes power in diverse settings, from postcolonial subaltern resistances (Savić, 2023) to evangelical ‘orthogonal time’ (Sturm, 2021) in U.S.-Israel relations.

3. Methodology: Discourse analysis

To critically deconstruct the IRI's spiritual hegemonic discourses and discuss their religious covering and divine metaphors, discourse analysis is used (Sturm, 2022). This approach allows us to investigate the embedded geopolitical understandings in both linguistic expressions and material practices (Medby, 2021; Sharp, 2020), shaping macro-narratives, national and religious identities, territorial imaginaries, and geopolitical orientations (Flint, 2022; Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006).

The construction of meaning through the discourse is not a neutral or transparent process; rather, it is an act of articulation where different signs are positioned to a central structuring element, the Master-Signifier (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, pp. 134-7). This Master-Signifier operates as a privileged point of reference that stabilizes meaning within a discourse by selectively organizing and fixing the relationships between other signifiers (Müller, 2011, pp. 7-8; 2008: 324-6). However, this fixation remains contingent and open to contestation, allowing for discursive struggles over meaning (Mouffe, 1995, pp. 263-9). Our focus is on political discourses, hegemony, and the structuring of geopolitical narratives rather than psychoanalysis. Therefore, the concept of the Master-Signifier is invoked to explain how meaning is stabilized within political discourses. This approach resonates with recent discourse-oriented studies of Iran's regional self-positioning (Glombitza, 2025, pp. 159–189), though the current analysis centers more explicitly on the spiritual-sacred dimensions of territorial imagination rather than broader regional-order projections.

The employed discourse analysis type recognizes that geopolitical discourses function through chains of equivalence, linking certain signifiers (e.g., “territory,” “nation, and “civilization”) in ways that

reinforce particular ideological perspectives. These equivalences construct a structured vision of the world, legitimizing specific territorial imaginaries and geopolitical strategies (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; Kurečić, 2015). Importantly, within this discursive system, representations of space, identity, and power relations are continuously (re)produced through articulations and embedded in geopolitical practice (Taylor, 2004: 435–8). By examining the socio-political context in which these signifiers are articulated, our analysis uncovers how certain geopolitical imaginaries are sustained, challenged, or reconfigured, including the sacralization of land (Dijkink, 2006), the spatial exclusion of others (Dalby, 1991), the self-positioning of political entities in the world (Müller, 2011), and broader geopolitical representations of world order (Müller, 2008). Furthermore, we explore the dynamic interplay between geopolitical discourses and material practices (Toal, 2017; Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006; Flint & Noorali, 2024), illustrating how discourses legitimize real-world spatial interventions under cultural, national, or ideological guises. Ultimately, our methodology aims to expose geographical assumptions and power structures underpinning the IRI's narratives.

The primary sources for our discourse analysis are the speeches of the IRI's supreme leaders and its other officials. Two main authoritative Persian sources were used: "Sahifeh-ye Imām¹" (Ayatollah Khomeini's statements, 1979–1989) and "Khamenei.ir" (Ayatollah Khamenei's statements, 1989–2026). We searched these sources using 50 keywords related to geopolitics and foreign policy (e.g., ummah, enemy, America, Israel, resistance, shrine, Islam, Quds, Karbala, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, export of revolution, sacred defense). The most relevant 387 texts comprised 60 from Khomeini and 327 from Khamenei (1989–1999: 78, 2000–2009: 112, and 2010–2026: 137). Texts were first classified into three preliminary categories: geography-based, political, and religious speeches. Word frequency analysis complemented coding: the most frequently used "Islam" was deemed as the central signifier, while frequent use of "enemy," "America," and "Zionist Regime [Israel]" showed how discursive identity-building and demarcations rely on the religious exclusion of imagined enemies. Triangulation included official media, IRIB, in Persian, *Press TV* in English and *Al-Ālam* in Arabic, and secondary academic sources (in Persian and English) to provide a comprehensive understanding of the construction and dissemination of geopolitical narratives.²

The four dimensions, Inclusion, Diffusion, Otherness, and Imagined Centrality, emerged inductively from iterative qualitative content analysis. Initial open coding of 50 keywords revealed recurring themes: Chains of equivalence (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) linking signifiers to inclusion (n = 287, 23%): e.g., equality under Islam, unifying Shiites/Sunnis; diffusion (n = 356, 28.5%): e.g., exporting revolution; shrine defense; otherness (n = 412, 33%): e.g., demonizing *Ṣayfān-e bozorg* [Great Satan]; and imagined centrality (n = 192, 15.5%): e.g., centering Iran as Umm al-Qurā. These were refined deductively against the theoretical framework (e.g., aligning exclusion with Dalby's 1991 dissent; imagined geography with Ó Tuathail's 1996 sacred/profane duality). Thematic overlaps (e.g., inclusion-diffusion in Unity Week discourses) were mapped via pattern analysis, ensuring categories capture discursive stabilization around the master-signifier of Islamic Shia Identity. For instance, a statement such as "Iran is the nation of Imam Hussein" was categorized under "centrality," reflecting the spiritualization of the Iranian geography. Building on this methodological foundation, the following section analyzes how the IRI's spiritual geopolitics operates through four discursive axes.

4. Spiritualizing the Iranian geopolitics: Inclusion, diffusion, otherness, and imagined sacred centrality

Ayatollah Khomeini's charismatic leadership mobilized a revolutionary, anti-hegemonic geopolitical movement against the Pahlavi state, culminating in the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Noorali & Irannejad, 2026). His vision of a global Islamic order, grounded in the ideological justification for the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Dabashi, 1993), continues to underpin the IRI's geopolitical culture. Khomeini framed opposition to the late Pahlavi era's ill-posed (due to religious connotations in response to communism) secular modernity (Milani, 2012). This stance drew on leftist anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and militant rhetoric, deeming the Pahlavi state as a Western dependent (Cooper, 2016). Despite major global changes, the end of the Cold War, China's rise, and regional developments like the Abraham Accords (Guzansky & Marshall, 2020), the IRI remains anchored in Khomeini's ideology.

This *raison d'être* drove persistent conflict with the US and its allies, resulting in prolonged economic sanctions beginning with the 1979–1981 US hostage crisis, existential threats to Israel, support for groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, and disputes over Iran's nuclear program. Resource diversion to regional proxies further constrained domestic development, trade, foreign investment, and global market access (Maloney, 2015; Takeyh, 2009). The IRI's ideological policies exacerbated religious sensitivities with some Muslim countries, shifted the focus of foreign relations from regional neighbors to Russia and China (Nasr, 2006), and prioritized the construction of spiritual narratives over the diversity and pre-Islamic cultural heritage within the country (Ehteshami, 2017).

Blending theocracy with rejection of Western dominance, the IRI positioned itself as a counter-hegemonic force using regional influence. Its revolutionary Islamic ideology mandated support for the oppressed against the "arrogant" powers, while incorporating national elements for domestic inclusion (Axworthy, 2013). Enmity toward Israel was initially framed to gain geopolitical leverage across the Muslim World (Reda, 2016). The 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war and ensuing economic pressures shifted priorities toward national security and regional stability. Syria under Assad became a vital counter-Sunni corridor in the Arab world (Abedin, 2019). Simultaneously, opposition to Saudi Arabia challenged the Sunni-dominated regional order, layering sectarian rivalry (Ghattas, 2020). Merging ideological solidarity with pragmatic geopolitical aims, the IRI built a "resistance" network of non-state allies, centered on its strategic alliance with Assad's Syria, to counter American and Israeli influence. This indirect power projection targeted ideological adversaries, avoiding direct confrontation. Eventually, the IRI's geopolitical framework evolved as a reconciliation between its original revolutionary ideology and practical constraints of a theocracy within Westphalian territorial limits.

Loyalty to (Shia) Islam formed the IRI's core identity, drawing on Iran's historical Shia identity, entangling national and theocratic subjectivities. It extended its influence into both neighboring and distant societies through spatial and religious metaphors, while geopolitical exclusion targeted ideological adversaries, represented as manifestations of cosmic evil. Khomeini prioritized Islamic solidarity over patriotism, envisioning a unified Islamic ummah. Post-Khomeini IRI cast itself as the spiritual heart, Umm al-Qurā, of the Muslim world, retaining pan-Islamic rhetoric and anti-imperialism. While the IRI's regional outreach was predominantly rooted in Shia elements, it also incorporated Sunni actors, most notably Hamas, with the Palestinian cause as a cross-sectarian signifier. Limited reformist/pragmatist strands, such as Khatami's dialogue of civilizations (Wastnidge, 2016), Rouhani's diplomacy, and Ahmadinejad's nationalism-inflected populism (Fozi, 2016), have occasionally promoted dialogue. These initiatives, however, remained subordinate to the revolutionary core and the Supreme Leader's authority. Based on the master-signifier of Islamic (Shia) identity, the IRI's territorial discourse articulates four interrelated signified concepts: a) inclusion, b) diffusion, c) otherness and d)

¹ According to the Institute for the Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, the 22-vol *Sahifeh-ye Imām*, is the final authentic version of Ayatollah Khomeini's statements and written works.

² 145 news reports, 32 documentaries, 18 talk shows (2015–2026), and visual materials (65 posters, murals, and video clips, 2015–2026).

imagined centrality. We will focus on these signified concepts in the following sections, beginning with inclusion.

4.1. Inclusion: All are equal before God

The 1906–1911 Constitutional Movement mobilized historical Iranian identity and national consciousness, which crystallized into a modern nation-state as the Imperial State of Persia (*Kešvar-e Šāhanšāhi-ye Irān*) under Reza Shah Pahlavi (Litvak, 2017). Although deeply tied to Shia Islam, stemming from the Safavid-era conversion of most Iranians, this identity featured a secular core rooted in cultural norms and Persian literature, providing a unifying framework (Marashi, 2011). In contrast, the IRI mobilized Iranians' spiritual sentiments under an overarching Islamic identity (all Muslims, regardless of sect, ethnicity, or nationality, share a divinely mandated moral equality), using equivalence chains to downplay diversity. Being historically the only Shia majority country added a particularistic layer to the otherwise secular Iranian identity for Shia Iranians. The revolutionary turn toward politicized Islam highlighted the clergy's long-lasting political role, dating back to the 1789–1925 Qajar era (Kamali, 2018). The IRI's top-down geopolitical culture remained firmly anchored in the revolutionary Islamic ideology.

While this ideology resonated powerfully under Khomeini, its appeal steadily eroded amid Iran's accelerating societal modernization, partly expedited in reaction to the IRI's totalitarian Islamization (Shahi & Saleh, 2015). This ideology ultimately threatens Iran's territorial integrity by failing to accommodate the country's substantial religious and linguistic diversity (Saleh, 2013, pp. 153–66). The Pahlavis mitigated (though did not fully eliminate) centrifugal forces through an all-encompassing national identity. Evading this secular-national framework, the IRI sought to unite Sunnis and Shiites under a spiritual-communal Islamic umbrella to justify cross-sectarian inclusion. Symbolic initiatives such as Haft-e Vahdat "Unity Week" (Barzegar, 2008, p. 92) and representing Iran as a beacon of Islamic Unity (Khomeini, 2019b) upheld Khomeini's vision of a Muslim society, where all are equal before God (Khomeini, 2005, 107–9). Khomeini extended this vision into a systematic rejection of all identity-based divisions (Khomeini, 2012; invoking Qur'an 49:13, 'the most noble is the most righteous').

Even under Khomeini, however, nationalism was passively invoked during the "sacred defense" against Iraq. In post-Khomeini era, the IRI increasingly subordinated national discourse to its Islamic ideology, cultivating "religious nationalism" as a source of legitimacy (Saleh, 2017). Nonetheless, the IRI's Islamic discourse frequently clashes with—or directly opposes—Iranian national discourse. This tension manifests in the suppression of pre-Islamic symbols, the prioritization of the ummah over historical Iranian identity, and the alienation of segments of society that aspire to a modern, secular national vision.

Facing the challenges of governing a nation with deep-rooted national awareness, the post-Khomeini IRI increasingly incorporated national rhetoric infused with religious coloring. This approach is particularly evident in geopolitically sensitive and ethnically diverse border regions: Khuzestan province, home to Shia Arab residents, the primary theater of the Iran–Iraq war, was depicted as the emblem of Islamic Iran's endurance and pride (Khomeini, 1996). Likewise, the province of Ādārbāyjān, with its Shia Turkish-speaking majority and historical role in the Constitutional Revolution, is celebrated as the standard-bearer of Iran's unity, as well as its civilizational and cultural heartland (Khomeini, 2023). The pre-modern tribal nature of certain borderlands (Atabaki, 2005, pp. 23–28) is also used to affirm their unwavering loyalty to Iran's territorial integrity (Elling, 2013, p. 114): The people of Baluchistan were hailed as Iran's eternal border guards (Khomeini, 2002), with similar framing also applied to Kurdish and Azari-speaking communities.

Meanwhile, Vice President Rahim-Mashaei's "Iran-discourse" during

Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005–2013) promoted cultural nationalism that hardliners critiqued as diluting Shia centrality (Fozzi, 2016). Rather than grounding legitimacy in religious authority, this civilizational humanistic nationalism foregrounded Iran's cultural heritage and universalist ethical values. Representing an internal ideological divergence, it was ultimately marginalized in favor of revolutionary spiritual geopolitics. Still, official IRI media and leaders routinely invoke national identity instrumentally (Elling, 2013, pp. 114–5). For instance, the Kurdistan province is imagined as a model of national integration, where linguistic differences do not create divisions. Khomeini praised local Kurds as zealous patriots while dismissing Kurdish opposition as mercenary (Khomeini, 2019a). Likewise, amid the strong resonance of the nationwide 2022–2023 Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) movement (sparked by resistance to mandatory hijab) in Kurdish-speaking regions, he stressed that Kurds are devoted to the Iranian homeland, Islam, and the IRI (Khomeini, 2022a). Overall, while Khomeini prioritized an Islamic umbrella, the post-Khomeini IRI's rhetoric, despite its focus on supra-national Islamic identity, employed flexible, sometimes contradictory inclusion tactics.

Yet top-down attempts to spiritualize national belonging were met with sustained grassroots rejection. Recent movements have demonstrated demands for a return to the secular principles of Reza Shah's nation-state.³ The WLF movement fused secular feminist demands with national solidarity that recovered the Iranian collective historical memory, encompassing and recognizing unity in diversity to overturn the ruling spiritual discourse. This led to the slogan "We will get back Iran," that became prominent in December 2025–January 2026 protests, calling for a return to secular modernity (Maleki, 2026). The instrumental blending of Islamic and national rhetoric is strained by youth-led challenges to conservative Shia politicization, revealing fractures in the IRI's ability to sustain a unified spiritual-geopolitical identity amid external maneuvers (Koo, 2024). They signal a popular geographical imagination that re-centers the nation-state over the IRI's Islamic ummah.

The IRI's propagated sense of domestic spiritual belonging also generated external power by creating geo-spiritual geographies beyond borders. Through a geo-spiritual foreign policy, the IRI extended its territorialized Islamic discourse into an extraterritorial Islamic (mostly Shia) space to reinforce its geopolitical culture. Thus, regional resistance movements were infused with spiritual significance.

4.2. Diffusion: The defense of the divine vital space (the Shrine)

Khomeini's geopolitical culture emphasized a universal approach to all Muslims, centered on "exporting the revolution" to transcend territorial borders (Saleh & Worrall, 2015, pp. 87–88; Marschall, 2003, pp. 13–14). This vision positioned the ummah under the leadership of the supreme leader of the Islamic Revolution (Arjomand, 2009: 29). Nonetheless, the global scale of this ideology was implemented in Shiite-majority territories.⁴ Consequently, Shia-centric geopolitics largely overshadowed the ecumenical rhetoric, rendering the approach effectively regional despite its pan-Islamic overtone.

The IRI's posture remained cross/even anti-sectarian, though often deployed instrumentally to advance strategic goals. Key initiatives

³ Etezadosaltaneh, N. (2018). Why are Iranians Chanting "Reza Shah"? *International Foreign Policy Digest*, January 5, <https://intpolicydigest.org/why-iranians-chanting-reza-shah/> accessed on 29 July 2026.

"Iran's government offers dialogue as protests spread to universities," Reuters, December 30, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-government-offers-dialogue-protesters-2025-12-30/> accessed on 29 July 2026.

⁴ Shia-neighboring territories historically contiguous to the Iranian state, i.e., Iraq and Bahrain, and Lebanon, Kuwait, and Yemen where Shiites formed a significant minority.

included establishing the *Ahl-e Beyt*⁵ World Assembly and the society for “rapprochement between the Islamic sects.” Influential figures such as Ayatollahs Hāsemi-Šāhrūdi and Taskhiri targeted Iraqi Shia communities in post-Saddam Iraq, drawing them away from Najaf’s traditional clerics toward IRI alignment, while politicizing Najaf in line with Iranian models (Buchta, 2000, pp. 51, 168; Arjomand, 2009: 176-7; van den Bos, 2018: 35-6; Hendawi & Abdul-Zahra, 2012). On the other hand, the IRI’s strategic alliance with Ba’athist Syria, initiated in the early 1980s against Saddam’s Iraq, was bolstered by religious framing. The Assad family’s Alawi sect⁶ gained legitimacy through Ayatollah al-Shirazi’s 1972 fatwa recognizing Alawis as part of the broader Shia community. Pilgrimages to the Shia shrines and the construction of the second-largest Shia seminary in Damascus promoted the religious connotation (Pinto, 2007: 112). The alliance created a corridor against Sunni rivals (e.g., Saudi Arabia), enabled connections to Sunni groups like Hamas, and mediated IRI influence in Lebanon (where Syrian support aided Khomeini’s revolutionaries), leading to Hezbollah’s formation by Iranian fighters (Shapira, 2020, 2021). In contrast, the IRI’s focus on “liberation movements” for exporting the revolution in the Persian Gulf remained limited by the local, nationally oriented nature of Shia activism (Boroujerdi & Rahimkhani, 2018; Louër, 2008). Thus, the IRI pursued symbolic and practical efforts to blend ecumenical rhetoric with sectarian realities.

For Shia minority communities in unstable areas, shared narratives of suffering and injustice allowed the IRI to nurture resistance and ally with substate actors: Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, Afghan/Pakistani volunteers, and Yemen’s Houthis (Adib-Moghaddam, 2021; Aoudé, 2022; Hashemi-Rafsanjani, 2003). This approach extended IRI’s “vital space” through layered resistance territories (Giaccaria & Minca, 2016) and imaginary transparent borders. Mehdi Taeb, 2013⁷ explicitly imagined Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and especially Syria as virtual “provinces” of Iran, describing them as a protective shield against enemy plots. Likewise, former Vice President Yunesi (2015) portrayed Baghdad as a focal point of Iran’s Shia dominion, in a geo-spiritual embodiment likening it to historical imperial Iranian centers and stressing trans-territorial religious networks to counter Israeli and “Neo-Ottoman” penetration. Moreover, Khamenei (2019b) framed cross-border Shia networks as a bulwark against the expansion of the “Israeli-American order” in Southwest Asia. This ideological vision underpinned a “forward defense” strategy: establishing extra-territorial fronts and buffers to neutralize ideological adversaries (Israel, the U.S., Sunni rivals) without direct conflict (Azizi, 2021). Assuming strategic depth in southern Lebanon against Israel (IRGC Commander (Safavi, 2014) and defending Shia holy sites and valorizing martyrdom against ISIS blended ideological legitimacy with forward-defense goals (Yousuf & Azmi, 2023). Overall, religious justifications for sustaining transnational networks serve as instruments to advance the IRI’s ideological hegemony and regional power projection.

The IRI’s geopolitical culture diffused through the “Axis of Resistance” concept, activating core Shia notions of self-sacrifice and martyrdom (Adib-Moghaddam, 2021, p. 11). Rooted in fundamental enmity toward Israel, the axis incorporates Sunni Hamas as a key signifier, framing the Gaza-based movement within an anti-imperialist, anti-U.S., and anti-Israel regional discourse. In response, adversaries have promoted counter-narratives: (1) The “Shia Crescent” label

portrays IRI influence as a sectarian Shia arc across the Middle East, aiming to isolate Iran regionally (Barzegar, 2008; Helfont, 2009). (2) Following the Abraham Accords, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu envisioned a remapped Southwest Asia uniting prosperous Arab states and Israel against Iran (Tharoor, 2023). (3) After Hamas’s October 2023 attack, Israeli officials depicted Iran as a “snake” coiled across the region, strangling Israel, while highlighting IRI support for Hamas (Zimmt, 2024). (4) Arab-Israeli rapprochement materialized in Jordan’s overt and Saudi Arabia’s tacit assistance to Israel’s defense during the 2024 IRI’s direct attacks on Israel (Hyde, 2024). Ultimately, the Axis of Resistance constructed ideologically imagined geographies: a collective space of “good” (militarized resistance) confronting “evil” (U.S., Israel, and their allies), sustaining transnational ideological oppositions through territorialized narratives.

The IRI employed spiritual justifications and material investments to legitimize and extend its extraterritorial influence, framing symbolic sites as centers of resistance against ideological adversaries. Shrine reconstruction and expansion in Iraq (e.g., Karbala) and Syria (e.g., Damascus) materially symbolized and reinforced IRI’s extraterritorial reach (Parkes, 2023). Domestically, Iran’s own major shrines (Mashhad, Qom) served as transnational spiritual hubs, extended abroad through pilgrimages, media, and symbolic linkage. Ashura commemorations ritualized resistance to oppression, portraying Shia martyrdom as defiance against domineering powers and spreading an ideology of intransigence (Christia et al., 2016; Thual, 2002). The massive Arba’in pilgrimage from Iran to Karbala acted as a geo-spiritual enactment of the anti-hegemonic Shia movement. IRI’s intervention in the Syrian civil war was discursively framed as “defending the [Damascene] shrine” (Taherifard, 2022; Terrill, 2015). Hezbollah-sponsored sites—such as the open-air Mleeta museum in southern Lebanon and the Iranian Garden on the Israel-Lebanon border—functioned as “sites of resistance,” materially asserting presence in the regional geopolitical landscape (Wastnidge & Mabon, 2024). Collectively, these spiritually charged geographies created a counter-hegemonic spatial metaphor, embodying the transnational vision of the Axis of Resistance through symbolic and physical presence beyond Iran’s borders.

The IRI spread its spiritual geopolitical culture through international media controlled by the government, notably IRIB channels like *Press TV* (English) and *Al-Ālam* (Arabic), which propagated narratives of resistance and IRI’s role as a protector (Dodds, 2019, p. 147). Key examples included: (1) Mid-2010s coverage portraying the IRI as defender of Iraqis by highlighting its role in combating ISIS, such as airstrikes in Diyala (Pollack, 2014); (2) Reviving Khomeini’s slogan “the path to Quds [Jerusalem] through Karbala” (Khomeini, 2005, Vol. 7: 361) to spiritually justify creating resistance spaces from Iran to the Mediterranean; (3) *Al-Ālam*’s 2015 program “Lovers of Fighting with Israel,” mythologizing Qassem Soleimani as the agent of sacred defense, extending from Basra’s walls (Iran-Iraq War era) to Jerusalem’s,⁸ symbolically expanding IRI’s vital space⁹; (4) framing Iranian street celebrations of Hamas’ October 7, 2023 attack as nationwide support for Palestinians, honoring Soleimani’s legacy in building the resistance front¹⁰; (5) visual and media symbolism reinforcing the “Karbala to Quds” imagination, e.g., images of Iranian drones over Karbala’s shrines en route to Israel (April 2024), presented by outlets like *Mashregh News* as fulfilling this path¹¹; (6) *Al-Ālam* coverage of IRI’s April 2024

⁵ Literally “the people of the house”, referring to the family of prophet Mohammad who are saints in Shi’ism.

⁶ The Alawites (also known as Nusayris), believing in Ali’s divinity, follow a syncretic branch of Shia Islam with distinctive beliefs and practices that set them apart from mainstream Twelver Shia Muslims while Sunni Muslims denied their belonging to Islam.

⁷ Then the Chairman of the Council of Ammar Strategic Headquarters of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

⁸ <https://fa.alalam.ir/news/1718282>.

⁹ Hajj Hossein Yekta’s different description of Martyr Soleimani, *Mashregh News*, January 4, 2024. <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/1562235>. Accessed on 29 July 2026.

¹⁰ Iranians hold nationwide ceremonies, hail Palestinians’ large-scale operation against Israel. October 8, 2023. <https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2023/10/07/712269/Iran-celebrates-Palestinian-victory-al-Aqsa-storm-operation-Israel>.

¹¹ Iranian drones over Karbala en route to Israel, *Mashregh News*. May 1, 2024. <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/photo/1593055> Accessed on 14 May 2025.

missile/drone barrage against Israel featuring IRGC clips with slogans like “God’s honest promise,” “Freedom of Quds,” and “Destroy Israel,”¹² alongside reports of joyful reactions from Lebanese, Iraqis, Palestinians (e.g., West Bank),¹³ and even pro-Palestinian protests in France on International Quds Day—attributing global outcry to Khomeini’s/Quds Day legacy.¹⁴ These media representations constructed a geopolitical imagination of transnational alignment: extramural communities (Arab, Muslim, global) rallying around IRI’s spiritual “heartland” as the center of anti-hegemonic, anti-Israel resistance.

The decapitation of Hezbollah’s leadership and destruction of its arsenal, followed by the fall of Assad in Syria at the end of 2024 and the weakening of the Houthis, significantly limited the IRI’s regional outreach. The loss of Syria cut the main groundline connecting Iran via Iraq to Lebanon and Israel borders, forcing the IRI to prioritize its internal fortifications over supporting the fractured axis (Azizi, 2024). The 2025 Twelve-Day War and the escalation in the 2026 US-Israel war on the IRI shattered the “forward defense” and “defense of the shrines” rhetoric, forcing the IRI to pivot from extraterritorial spiritual expansion to internal survival. While Iran has the potential of a regional hegemon exerting influence in greater cultural Iran (Forough, 2022) in the face of rival myth-makings of Neo-Ottoman Turkish narrative and the Saudis’ regional influence, the IRI’s ideological nature did not allow the development of such a narrative in practical terms.¹⁵ Public reaction inside Iran has accelerated this narrative. Football stadium crowds refused to applaud the Palestinian flag after Hamas’s October 2023 attack,¹⁶ while nationwide demonstrations of December 2025–January 2026 emphasized the decade-long chant *Na Gāzeh, Na Lobnān, Jānam Fadāy-e Irān* “Not Gaza, not Lebanon, My life devoted to Iran.” (Talattof, 2026) Thus, the grass-roots movements assert a demand for a secular-national geography unencumbered by shrine defense or extraterritorial martyrdom.

Investigating the IRI’s geopolitical efforts shows the central role of politicized religious and anti-imperialist ideologies. These efforts generated dual imaginary geographies of good and evil sustaining a process of othering that defines ideological adversaries.

4.3. Otherness: Opposition to the American order (the evil order)

Shortly after the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini and his allies constructed a hierarchical worldview that positioned the United States as the Great Satan (*Sāytān-e bozorg*) at the global level, Israel as its puppet at the regional level, therefore the Little Satan (*Sāytān-e kūčak*), and domestic opponents as “Satan’s representatives” at the national level. The 1979–1981 US Embassy occupation in Tehran (the hostage crisis) cemented this cosmology, establishing a core narrative of resistance that continued to shape the IRI’s discourse toward the West. The United States is constructed as an existential adversary whose moral corruption and imperial ambitions define the negative pole of the IRI’s cosmic geopolitical binary. By invoking the “satanic other,” it sustained the revolutionary Islamic ideology, drawing clear boundaries around the American-led order.

The otherness was framed primarily as a spiritual struggle against

Western domination and Westernization (modernization), constructing imaginary geographies of good and evil (Fathollah-Nejad, 2021, pp. 162–5). The IRIB consistently depicted Israel as the Little Satan, using terms like “usurping regime,” “the most recent form of religious-racial apartheid,” and “cancerous tumor in the region,” serving the Great Satan and perpetually threatening *dār al-Islām*, “the realm of Islam.” Khamenei (2021) framed enmity toward Israel as a divine duty incumbent on all Muslims to awaken the ummah. In a 2024 IRIB geopolitical program, Israel’s surprise and supposed defeat in the face of Hamas’s October 2023 attack was likened to Hezbollah leader Nasrallah’s description of Israel as a fragile “spider’s nest,” reinforcing perceptions of weakness.¹⁷ After Israel’s strike on Iran’s consulate in Damascus, Khamenei portrayed Gaza’s walls as the frontline between the Islamic world and the “infidel” realm, spiritually excluding Israel and its supporters, especially the United States. Similarly, Nasrallah (2024) justified IRI’s response to Israel’s strike on IRI’s consulate in Damascus by emphasizing a spiritual bipolarity between the IRI and Israel. Thus, the IRI’s geopolitical reasoning constantly used the spiritual mechanism of otherness.

This otherness constituted a dual imaginary geography, dividing the world into bright and dark spaces. *Dār al-imān* “the land of the faith,” at the center of *dār al-Islām*, represented the IRI as the embodiment of true faith and goodness, rooted in Shia devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt. *Dār al-ḥarb*, “the realm of war/infidelity,” encompassed the West, Israel, and their allies as domains of evil and disbelief, with historical echoes of colonialism framing this othering (Khamenei, 2017a; Khomeini, 2005, Vol. 6: 181). This binary sustained a discursive border of spiritual othering, projecting colonialism and Western dominance as intrusions into the Islamic realm (Amanat, 2009, p. 199; Normand, 2016). Simultaneously, *dār al-imān* is distinguished from broader *dār al-Islām*, highlighting opposition to “misled” Islamic variants (van den Bos, 2022). Accordingly, the Arab Spring, as “Islamic Awakening,” was interpreted as an ecumenical triumph of truth over falsehood, influenced by Khomeini’s revolutionary export idea of triumph over geographies of disbelief (Khamenei, 2011a). Likewise, Saudi Arabia was labeled a “cancerous tumor” in *dār al-Islām*, serving non-belief and trapped by enemies (Raisi, 2016) (the then IRI’s attorney general). Consequently, Khamenei portrayed the IRI and its influence spheres as the “realm of the divine” (Khamenei, 2017b). Overall, the IRI’s spiritual otherness discourse imagines circles of evil penetration within *dār al-Islām*—acting as proxies for *dār al-ḥarb*, while positioning IRI as the defender of authentic Islam.

The othering discourse extended into the domestic sphere. Cultural invasion was invoked to counter rising secularization and cultural modernization (Shahi & Saleh, 2015, p. 501). The othering infiltrated even the political elite: Khamenei used wordplay on Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani’s first name (“greater”) to label him an internal “Great Satan”—a degenerate, unfit brother who, if empowered, would serve the external Great Satan and harm the Islamic Republic (Khamenei, 2015). Furthermore, Khamenei framed the WLF movement as part of a broader foreign conspiracy involving global/regional adversaries and “traitorous” Iranians abroad, aimed at undermining Iranian spirituality (Khamenei, 2022a). The WLF movement was fundamentally secular, demanding gender equality, individual rights, and national (rather than religious) sovereignty. Its fusion with national solidarity slogans was later emboldened in the December 2025–January 2026 demonstrations. By reclaiming a secular national identity, ordinary Iranians contested the IRI’s attempt to subsume Iranian selfhood under *dār al-imān* and resisted the spiritual othering that equated dissent with external evil. The spiritual exclusion presupposed the idea of a sacred geographical world, with the IRI as its sublime leader. The following section deals with this mental mapping.

¹² Special on *Al-Alam* program, coinciding with Iran’s crushing response to the occupiers, April, 14, 2024. <https://fa.alalam.ir/news/6845283> Accessed on 14 May 2025.

¹³ *Al-Alam*’s reports on the joy of Palestinians in the West Bank over Iran’s crushing response, April 14, 2024. <https://fa.alalam.ir/news/6845663> Accessed on 14 May 2025.

¹⁴ *Al-Alam* reports on the French march against the Zionist regime on International Quds Day. *Al-Alam*. April 8, 2024. <https://fa.alalam.ir/news/6841713>.

¹⁵ Still, the agreement between Tajikistan and Iran to abolish visas during the IRI’s president’s visit to Tajikistan in January 2025 could be the beginning of Iran’s spatial diversion from the IRI’s geo-spiritual imaginations by infusing historical geopolitical traditions into Iranian collective memory.

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/c88mpd54e3yo> accessed on 29 July 2026.

¹⁷ April 30, 2024. <https://www.aparat.com/v/z071098>, Accessed on 7/29/2026.

4.4. Sacred centrality: Imaginary heartland of the shiites and the ummah

The IRI imagined itself as the sanctified spiritual center of the Islamic world. Khomeini's portrayal of the IRI as the defender and refuge of all Muslims (Khomeini, 2007, pp. 43-47) created a de-territorialized Islamic geography with Iran as the sacred core and other Muslim societies as peripheral layers. The post-Khomeini IRI witnessed further developments of this holy centrality.

Following Khamenei's portrayal of Iran as *dār al-īmān*, Soleimani reimagined it as Imam Hossein's new base, displacing the traditional designation of Karbala (Soleimani, 2020, pp. 14-16). These ideas were amplified in the 2021 media propaganda,¹⁸ which depicted Iran as a sacred center, where the divine angels witness Iranian martyrs' sincere sacrifices in search of blessings (Khamenei, 2010a). Repurposing national symbols, e.g., altering the pre-revolutionary anthem "O Iran, the Precious Country" to "O Iran, the land of Sahib al-Zamān," and elevating Mashhad as Iran's spiritual heart,¹⁹ sought to fuse growing national sentiments with the IRI's geo-spiritual agenda. These framings cast Iran as a holy land radiating divine grace, justifying territorial defense and extending sacred centrality to extraterritorial operations.

The IRI pursued certain national interests by positioning itself as Umm al-Qurā (Larijani, 1989). In this doctrine, Iran's establishment of an Islamic Republic elevated it beyond territorial borders to become the spiritual and political core of the Islamic ummah. This vision cast the IRI as duty-bound to combat global tyranny and disbelief, intending to establish an Islamic world order (Ramazani, 2013, pp. 79-80). It reimagined Iranian geography as the "true Mecca" and the new center of the Islamic world, with the IRI's leadership ensuring ummah unity (Larijani, 1989, pp. 39-48). This sacralized centrality combined revolutionary Islamism, Shi'ism, and Iranian nationalism to position the IRI as both spiritual vanguard and regional hegemon (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016). Khamenei reinforced this imagination by describing Iran as "the helmsman to defend the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet and his household and the revival of the Islamic ummah" (Khamenei, 2011b, 2022a, b), positioning it as the authoritative reference for Muslims worldwide (Khamenei, 2010b), and declaring its preservation the foremost sacred duty (Khamenei, 1989). Qasem Soleimani's portrayal of IRI as a shrine meant to prioritize its protection to safeguard other holy sites—most notably Shiite shrines in Iraq and Syria, and ultimately Mecca and the Qur'an (Soleimani, 2020, pp. 14-16). Khamenei's sustained emphasis on Islamic supremacy and resistance further portrayed extraterritorial engagements as extensions of divine guardianship over peripheral Muslim spaces (Hovsepian-Bearce, 2015). Pragmatic justificatory arguments, e.g., "if we do not fight in Syria, we will have to fight at home in Iran,"²⁰ reinforced this centrality, blending religious ideology with strategic indispensability, necessitating extraterritorial engagements for defending the sacred Iranian core. These words created a dialectical relationship: Iran's role as *Umm al-Qurā* both served and was served by the Islamic world, blending national priorities with spiritual territoriality and enabling permeable boundaries that accommodate Iranian nationalism within a transnational framework.

This imagined sacred centrality also sanctified the IRI's leadership. The revolutionary Supreme Leader's titles, such as "Commander of the Faithful" and "Commander of the Affairs of the Muslims of the World," embodied this centrality (Fathollah-Nejad, 2021, p. 92). In this

framework, his orders were binding on all Muslims worldwide (Mesbah Yazdi, 1996). Khamenei was thus portrayed as Imam Khamenei, Seyyed Khorasani²¹ and guardian of the world's Muslims (Fathollah-Nejad, 2021; Arjomand, 2009). Accordingly, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah addressed him as "Imam Khamenei," spiritual leader of the Muslim world, defender of Islam and Muslims, and standard-bearer of resistance against US-led global domination (Nasrallah, 2015). This authority flowed directly from IRI's claimed role as the unifying center of the Islamic ummah.

While the dominant *Umm al-Qurā* narrative centered Iran under the Supreme Leader, other figures invoked sacred space differently: Ahmadiyyah's messianic discourse linked national progress to eschatological time (Ansari, 2017), Khatami referenced Madinat ul-Nabi as a model for Islamic civil society and dialogue (Wastnidge, 2016), and the Āstān-e Quds-e Razavi foundation projected the Imam Reza shrine as a transnational soft-power node (Akbar, 2025). These variations illustrate contested appropriations of sacred geography within the institutions of the Republic, though all remain subordinate to the revolutionary core. The sacralized leadership and transnational authority were institutionally reinforced by its resilient "deep-state" structures and factional mechanisms, which protected ideological orthodoxy and managed elite conflicts, allowing spiritual-geopolitical narratives to endure despite domestic challenges (Kamrava, 2023). Yet the sacred centrality failed to capture popular geographical imaginations. From 2022 onward, the recurrent chants "We will get back Iran" and "Not Gaza, Not Lebanon, I devote my life to Iran" reveal a non-irredentist counter-cartography that recenters Iran as a secular nation-state rather than a sacred heartland whose periphery requires defense.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined the Islamic Republic's religious imaginations of territorial and extraterritorial spaces. Theoretically, it was first demonstrated that religious discourses promote themselves through geopolitical representations of divine connections, the consecration of power spaces, and the imaginative production of a holy world order to present an image of God's intervention in the universe through spiritual authorities. This basis is then used for the analysis of the IRI's geopolitical culture and its territorial and extra-territorial imaginations. Consequently, we showed that the IRI's divinity is utilized to attract and mobilize followers towards changing power structures and the dominant imaginative orientation towards the world, mapping itself as a sacred system tasked with preserving other sacred places as an imaginary central land that portrays others in need of its grace.

Fig. 1 summarizes the four stages of the discourse we have observed. The discourse mobilizes the national population under an inclusive Islamic (Shia) identity, while excluding Others through divine boundaries between Good and Evil. It spreads the geopolitical culture externally, sanctifying the Iranian territory as a sacred center of the Islamic World, a shrine to be defended by the Axis of Resistance. In this regard, we showed how hegemonic narratives mask societal and religious differences via chains of equivalence. These narratives divide space into sacred/profane and good/evil, legitimizing territorial claims by appealing to religious emotions. Exclusion and inclusion operate simultaneously, circulating within ideologically aligned communities to justify military actions. Portraying the center as superior sustains a hierarchical world order, marginalizing other cultures as peripheral or evil.

The IRI hierarchically justifies its geopolitical culture in domestic, regional, and global orders with a spiritual cosmic dualism of good versus evil in territorial affairs. Through a chain of equivalence,

¹⁸ We are the nation of Imam Hussein. August 15, 2021. <https://www.aparat.com/v/c859q3u> Accessed on 29 July 2026.

¹⁹ These changes appeared in the official song for the presidential election campaign (released in 2019). <https://www.aparat.com/v/54xiZ> Accessed on 29 July 2026.

²⁰ <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=41853> (Published March 13, 2019).

²¹ Seyyed means the descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and the Shiite Imams. The Seyyed from Khorasan is an allusion to the place of Khamenei's upbringing in Khorasan province, in wordplay with a legendary eschatological Shiite figure for the era of the Mahdi's emergence.

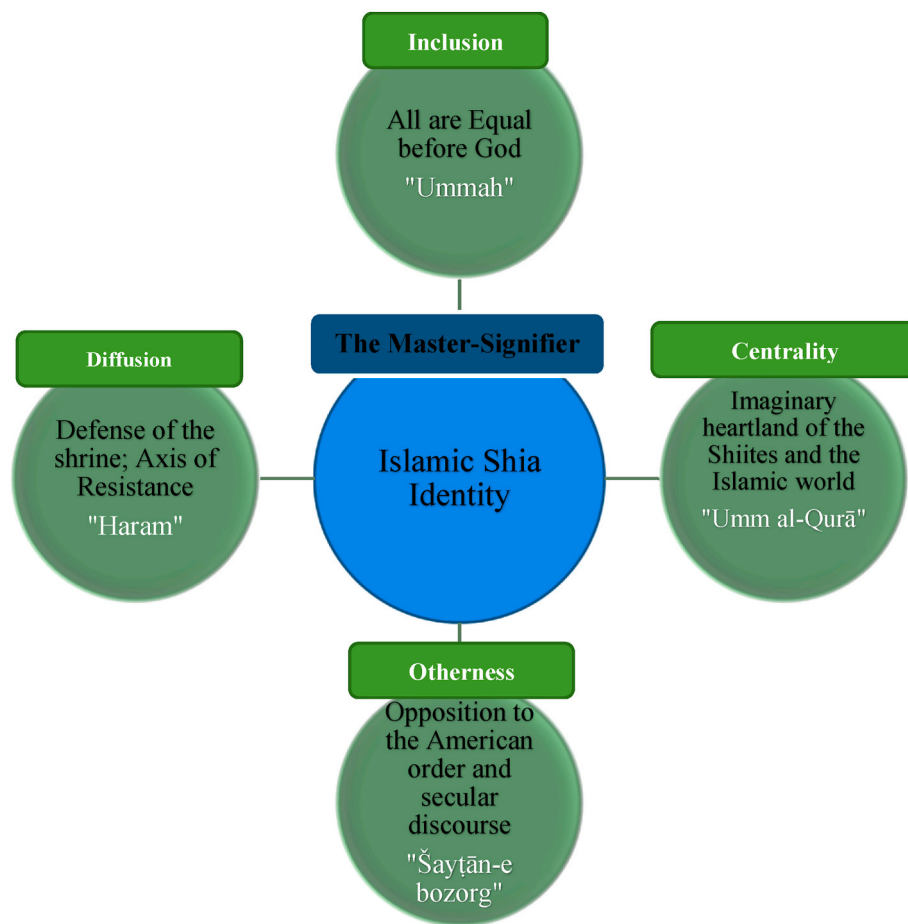


Fig. 1. Hegemonic Shia discourse and its articulation (the nodal point and the signified).

diversity is covered with an all-encompassing spiritual umbrella, seeing everyone as equal before God in an Islamic representation. Conflicting identities and discourses are marginalized through the demonization of the world order at domestic, regional, and global levels. Consequently, the spiritual atmosphere of Iran is imagined as covered by an aura of divine grace that lines up against the geographies of evil. Simultaneously, it reinterprets the Qur'an and Islamic-Shia traditions to disseminate its geopolitical culture. Ultimately, sanctifying the space of Iran as *Umm al-Qurā*, it circulates a center-periphery imagination with the rest of the Islamic world needing the grace of Iran as the holy center under the spiritual leader of the guardian jurist. The 2025 Twelve-Day War and the 2026 U.S.–Israel war on the IRI exposed the fragility of the *Umm al-Qurā* and sacred-center imaginary far more than proxy losses ever could. Post-12 Day War, the sacred imaginary hybridized with nationalist symbolism: While slogans like “Iran of Hussein is victorious forever,”²² government-sponsored murals in Tehran fused pre-Islamic heroes (Rostam fighting an American dragon; Arash firing missiles) and historical triumphs (Shapur I's victory over Romans) with Shi'i framing (Iran as Hussein's battlefield), creating vernacular theology that projected civilizational-spiritual resilience (Solomon & Mahoozi, 2025). However, this nationalist hybridization faded by January 2026 amid widespread protests, but it was it was remobilized by the IRI during the 2026 war, when the “Sacrifice your life for Iran” Movement was widely promoted to call on the people to defend Iran's territorial integrity, including “Iran's borders and islands,”²³ in the event of a ground war.

²² framing Iran as Hussein's new battlefield: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/other-report?id=60610>.

²³ *Pūyēš-e jān fadā-ye Īrān* <https://janfadaa.ir>.

Despite the IRI's propaganda, the people of Iran are increasingly alienated from spiritual geopolitics, and their geographical imaginations are evolving toward a secular national vision. This alienation is audible in the protests against the IRI in the past decade that demand a return to pre-revolutionary secular modernity. The iconic protest cry ‘Not Gaza, not Lebanon, I am devoted to Iran’ crystallizes the popular rejection of the IRI's extraterritorial spiritual mission in favor of a bounded, secular Iranian homeland. These counter-narratives suggest that the IRI's spiritual geopolitics may ultimately prove unsustainable as modern, nationally oriented cultural forces reclaim the geographical imagination of Iran. Future work is needed to explore the geopolitics of internal dissent, spanning political, minority-related, and socioeconomic grievances, and challenging the central clerical authority guarded by the IRGC and its spiritual geopolitical practices. Politically, dissent emerges from reformists and secularists criticizing the theocracy, demanding democratic reforms, social freedoms, and foreign relations based on national rather than on ideological and religious interests. In this process, modern and nationally oriented cultural forces of the normative structures of Iranian society move in the long term towards dissolution of the IRI's spiritualization.

Beyond this domestic contestation, this study demonstrates that religious discourses can actively shape territorial imaginations and structure power both within and beyond state borders. The IRI's use of spiritualized geography reveals broader patterns in which ideological governments construct imagined geographies to justify territorial claims, mobilize transnational networks, and sustain hegemonic narratives. Recognizing these mechanisms is crucial for countering such ideological territorializations or undermining expansionist spatial imaginaries that weaponize religion. Further studies on how dissenters reclaim space, whether through protests, cultural production, or

localized resistance, can capture the evolving contestations as well as how the projection of power beyond the state borders is received and contested abroad by the targeted populations, both by those inspired by alternative geo-spiritual imaginations and those advancing other geopolitical narratives.

Beyond the IRI, spiritual geopolitics offers a framework to de-exceptionalize religious influences in geopolitics. For instance, analogous center-periphery imaginaries appear in Russia's Orthodox 'Third Rome' rhetoric to contest Western hegemony (Sidorov, 2006), or in U.S. evangelical mappings that foreclose Palestinian futurity in favor of a sacred Israel (Sturm, 2021) or in Israeli Jewish geopolitics where tensions between "land" and "state" shape territorial claims and national identity (Cohen, 2007; Shilhav, 2007). Dissecting master-signifiers (e.g., divine election) and their spatial articulations can uncover how religion sustains hegemonic narratives across contexts not confined to theocratic systems. Simultaneously, the refined framework developed in this study could analyze other religious political movements in Islamic or non-Islamic contexts such as Saudi Wahhabism or Hindutva nationalism, positioning the current study as a theoretical bridge.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Hassan Noorali: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **A. Mani Irannejad:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Virginie Mamadouh:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The primary sources for this research are publicly available speeches of the IRI's supreme leaders on Iranian official websites.

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