
From Karbala to Karabakh: Shia Mythology and Iran's Strategic Narratives of the Fight Against Mercenaries

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When examining the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it's crucial to recognize the significant role that Shia mythology plays. While pragmatic policies and Realpolitik often guide its relations with other countries, the context of this policy and the national discourse is uniquely shaped by religious myths. In the political discourse related to Iran's Middle Eastern policy, the fight against so-called takfiri groups, deemed apostates for declaring fellow Muslims as infidels, holds a central place. This struggle formed the basis of Iran's Islamic-political justification for its involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts. Shia mythology plays a profound role in shaping this religious-political construct. During and after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, this mythology also penetrated Iran's South Caucasus political discourse, where the Syrian mercenaries used by Azerbaijan were labeled as takfiri groups. In both the Middle East and the South Caucasus, the presence and actions of mercenaries have been portrayed and interpreted through the lens of this powerful mythology, which emphasizes the themes of resistance, martyrdom, and the defense of the oppressed. This mythological framework informs Iran's domestic political discourse and

extends to its foreign policy narratives, allowing the Iranian state to construct a coherent ideological justification for its threat perception notions.

Keywords: Iran, Shia Islam, Shia mythology, martyrdom, *takfiri* forces, Nagorno-Karabakh war

От Кербелы до Карабаха: шиитская мифология и иранский стратегический нарратив борьбы с наемниками *такфири*

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Шиитская мифология играет важную роль во внешней политике Исламской Республики Иран. Хотя прагматика и Realpolitik часто лежат в основе отношений Ирана с другими странами, контекст этой политики и национальный дискурс в целом однозначно связаны с религиозной мифологией. В политическом дискурсе, связанном с ближневосточной политикой Ирана, центральное место занимает идея борьбы с группами такфири-вероотступников, которые считают собратьев-мусульман неверными. Эта борьба легла в основу исламско-политического оправдания Ираном своего участия в ближневосточных конфликтах. Во время и после войны в Нагорном Карабахе 2020 года эта мифология также проникла в политический дискурс Ирана на Южном Кавказе, где сирийские наемники, используемые Азербайджаном, были обозначены как группы такфири. Как на Ближнем Востоке, так и на Южном Кавказе присутствие и действия наемников изображались и интерпретировались через призму этой мифологии, которая пронизана темами сопротивления, мученичества и защиты угнетенных. Эта мифологическая структура формирует внутривнутриполитический дискурс Ирана и распространяется на его внешнеполитические нарративы, позволяя иранскому государству выстраивать последовательное идеологическое обоснование своих представлений о восприятии внешних угроз.

Ключевые слова: Иран, шиитская мифология, мученичество, силы Такфири, Нагорно-Карабахский конфликт

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The political mythology of martyrdom and resistance and the Iranian foreign policy

In international relations, *mythologemes* (narrative elements that define collective identity) and *ideologemes* (small units of ideological discourse) and ideology overall, are essential tools for understanding how nations construct and justify their foreign policy¹. These concepts, derived from constructivism in international relations theory, help explain how religious and political myths shape a state's perception of itself and others. In Iran's case, Shia mythology serves as the foundation for much of its political discourse, informing its foreign policy in the Middle East and beyond².

One of the major myths of the Shia doctrine that heavily influenced the Iranian foreign policy is the myth of Karbala³ and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, which symbolizes resistance against tyranny⁴. This doctrine positions Iran as the defender of Shia Islam and the oppressed, especially in the face of what is conceived as "Sunni extremism". The Iranian state has further developed this idea to frame its role and image as the protector of true Islamic values against forces like the United States ("the Great Satan") and Israel, seen as existential threats

¹ Leader Maynard, K., Haas, M. L. (2022) *The Routledge Handbook of Ideology and International Relations*, p. 11. London, Taylor & Francis.

² Osiewicz, P. (2021) *Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Between Ideology and Pragmatism*, p. 44. London: Routledge.

³ Karbala (Karbālā'), a city in Iraq, situated about 90 km southwest of Baghdad. It is one of the four Shi'ite shrine cities in Iraq (along with Najaf, Kāzemayn, and Sāmarrā') known in Shi'ite Islam as 'atabāt-e 'aliāt or 'atabāt-e moqaddasa (lit. sublime or sacred thresholds; see "ATABĀT", *Encyclopædia Iranica*, II, Fasc. 8, pp. 902–904 [https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/atabat, accessed on 16.06.2025]). The third Imam of the Shi'ites, Ḥosayn b. 'Alī, and his half brother 'Abbās are buried there. The plain of Karbala was the site of the battle on 10 Moḥarram 61 (10 October 680 CE) between Imam Ḥosayn and the Omayyad army. See: *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Vol. XV, Fasc. 5, pp. 550–556.

⁴ Booyesen, H. (2021) "Martyrs as a Conduit for Legitimacy — Explaining Iran's foreign policy towards Syria", *Third World Quarterly* 42 (10): 2469–2485.

to Islam. Iranian political discourse frequently invokes the martyrdom of figures like Imam Hussein to justify its policies and actions. This myth of martyrdom is not only a tool for internal cohesion but also serves to project Iran as a protector of the Shia community globally⁵. This narrative frame portrays the Islamic Republic as a bulwark against perceived threats, ideological, religious, or political, thereby justifying its domestic and foreign policies. Additionally, to emphasize the non-confessional but anti-Islamic nature of the groups Iran is fighting against, Shia clerics are using religious terms such as *fitnah* and *takfir* to describe the rebels fighting against the governments in Syria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon drawing a parallel between the events of the 21st century and the rebels who rose against the first Imam of Shia, Ali.

Central to Iran's ideological framework is the concept of *takfiri* — groups deemed apostates for declaring fellow Muslims as infidels. Islamic philosophy defines the term *takfir* as “accusing someone, especially a fellow Muslim in Kufr,... and can result in excommunication from the fold of Islam or even execution”⁶. At the same time, Iranian political Islam refers to Ayatollah Khomeini's definition, according to which *takfiri* groups are those that “carry out anti-Islamic actions against Muslim unity under the sponsorship of the West”⁷.

In Iran's political discourse, *takfiri* groups such as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria)⁸ are portrayed as modern-day enemies of Shia Islam, akin to historical foes like the *Kharijites* who opposed Imam Ali⁹. The fight against these forces is cast as a battle for the survival of Islam, with Iran leading the defense against those who seek to fragment and destabilize the Islamic world. This narrative of this fight thus becomes the central political myth of Iran's foreign policy.

Numerous studies by philosophers, political scientists, sociologists, and religious scholars on using myths in political ideologies—or, in other words, political myths—suggest that these are by no means unique or rare phenomena. As Christopher Flood

⁵ Salamey, I., Othman, Z. (2011) “Shia Revival and Welayat al-faqih in the Making of Iranian Foreign Policy”, *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 12 (2): 197–212.

⁶ Adang, C., et al. (eds) (2015) *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam: A Diachronic Perspective on Takfir*, Vol. 123, p. 1. Leiden: Brill.

⁷ Akbari, M., Naderi, M. (2021) “Shia Rationality and the Challenge of Takfirism in the Islamic Revolution Leaders' Discourse”, *Islamic Political Thought* 7(2).

⁸ Organisation is forbidden in Russian Federation.

⁹ Poonawala, I. K. (1982) “‘Ali B. Abī Ṭāleb I. Life”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica, Online Edition*. [<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ali-b-abi-taleb#pt1>, accessed on 22.06.2025].

states, “Mythmaking is a normal phenomenon of political life; there is nothing extraordinary about it”¹⁰. However, for an objective evaluation of political mythmaking and its outcome, it is crucial to clearly distinguish political myths from religious myths, the creation of which is often much more closely tied to the past¹¹.

“Political myths” are a phenomenon that can be placed between the sacred (religious) myths and political ideologies. In the contemporary context, political myths can be defined as a narrative about past, present, or future political events imbued with ideological emphasis¹². If we add to this the general definition of myth by the French scholar Georges Dumézil, which states that “myth is the personification of collective aspirations”¹³, we can say that political myths are also the embodiment of the political aspirations of communities united by a particular ideology¹⁴. The narratives born from the personification of these aspirations are always present in the political life of any society¹⁵.

The sacred myths “are always with us, hiding in some shadows waiting for their hour, and they emerge when all other forces that bind social life, for various reasons, lose their power and can no longer hold back the demonic mythological or divine forces”;¹⁶ in the same way, the political myths emerge when other ideological discourses fail to provide the necessary ideological explanations and tools for addressing various political threats or goals. Thus, mythmaking is inherent in every society and political power, and in times of crisis, these myths become primary, relevant, and important¹⁷.

Such a crisis and pivotal political period preceded the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, and myths created or invoked during this revolution became the basis of the future mythological architecture of the Islamic Republic. The ideology and policies adopted by the elite

¹⁰ Flood, C. (2002) *Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction*, p. 30. London: Routledge.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 42.

¹³ Dubuisson, D., Cunningham, M. (2014) *Twentieth Century Mythologies: Dumaezil, Laevi-Strauss, Eliade*. Routledge.

¹⁴ Cassirer, E. (1990) “The Technique of Modern Political Myths”, *Bulletin of Moscow State University. Series 7, Philosophy* 2: 60 (in Russian).

¹⁵ Ankersmit, F. R. (2006) “3. Presence and Myth”, *History and Theory* 45(3): 328–336.

¹⁶ Cassirer, E. “The Technique of Modern Political Myths”, p. 61.

¹⁷ Schöpflin, G. (2013) “The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths”, in G. Hosking, G. Schöpflin (eds) *Myths and Nationhood*, pp. 19–35. Routledge.

of Shah's Iran were increasingly deepening the divide between society and power, creating fertile ground not only for anti-regime sentiments but also for emerging new political mythology¹⁸. In the late Shah period, the social and ideological polarization of society dramatically increased, the role of the clergy in the state policies diminished, and the reprisals against several clerics made Islamic mythological narratives the axis of new, revolutionary political ideology¹⁹.

In these crisis conditions, Ayatollah Khomeini, exiled to Iraq, began a series of lectures in Najaf, which later became the core of his theory of "Velayat-e Faqih" (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists)²⁰. This religious-political theory, based on reinterpreting Shia jurists' role and place and giving their spiritual authority political significance, revived several traditional religious myths, transforming them into religious-political myths. Examples of such political myths are those about the just governance of the Messiah, martyrdom, and the unified Islamic world²¹.

Being one of the main mythological narratives of the Islamic Revolution's ideology, the narrative of Karbala and Hussein's martyrdom symbolizes the greatest injustice committed by the Umayyads against the family of the Prophet Muhammad²². Accordingly, in the Shia worldview of the universe what happened to Hussein thirteen centuries ago is repeated today, every time and everywhere where Shia Muslims live and feel oppressed²³. Hence the famous Shia slogan: "Every place is Karbala; every day is Ashura"²⁴.

It is not by chance that the anti-Shah protests began precisely during the Ashura ceremonies in the month of Muharram when in

¹⁸. Chehabi, H. (2013) "The Shah's Two Liberalizations: Re-Equilibration and Breakdown", in *Iran and the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century*, p. 29. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers.

¹⁹. Ram, H. (1996) "Mythology of Rage: Representations of the 'Self' and the 'Other' in Revolutionary Iran", *History and Memory* 8 (1): 67–87.

²⁰. Abrahamian, E. (1993) *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

²¹. Amjad, M. (1989) "Shi'ism and Revolution in Iran", *Journal of Church & State* 31–35.

²². Momen, M. (1985) *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, p. 159. New Haven: Yale University Press.

²³. Ram, H. "Mythology of Rage: Representations of the 'Self' and the 'Other' in Revolutionary Iran", p. 69.

²⁴. 'Āšūrā', tenth day of Moḥarram, the first month of the Islamic calendar; for Sunnis it is a day on which fasting is recommended, and for Shi'ites a day of mourning for the martyrdom of Imam Ḥosayn. "Āšūrā", *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Vol. II, Fasc. 8, pp. 874–876 [<https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ashura>, accessed on 16.06.2024].

1978 (December 1978) the masses that came out to the streets and self-flagellated in memory of Hussein decided to fight against the “modern Yazid”²⁵. The goal of their struggle was to restore the lost justice; their battle was against an unjust ruler.

The construction of revolutionary discourse inevitably led to the collective construction of the mythology of rebellion. The language of the myth underlying the political discourse of the Islamic Revolution of Iran is a language of discontent, which requires the “injured” SELF and the hostile OTHER²⁶. The fight against the so-called Western hostile OTHER was one of the main driving forces of the revolution. It continues to be so today; even though the current time period is called post-revolutionary, the revolutionary narrative of rebellion is still in force²⁷.

The language of rebellion against the OTHER is theological, with its mythical figures and mythological mindset. It can be argued that the myth of the victim, merging with religious fanaticism in helping the oppressed, has become the guiding principle of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy²⁸. The roots of this myth about the unambiguous mission of helping the victims stem from Shia Islam: as a minority, the Shias have always been persecuted and oppressed by the Sunnis. Although the Shias are the majority in Iran, and the Islamic Republic of Iran is a Shia state, the victimhood/oppression narrative continues to be woven into the official political discourse.

This myth about the victimhood, however, is dual—it includes the vision of Iran as a victim and, at the same time, the perception of Iran as a force obliged to help the victims. Iran’s reactions to events in the outside world are frequently constructed based on this myth. With each new event, the myth of Iran helping the victims is transformed and adapted through the creation of new myths or the re-evaluation of old ones.

A process of political mythmaking helps to explain, justify, and make Iran’s foreign policy understandable to the Iranian public,

²⁵ Parsa, M. (2009) “State, Class, and Ideology in the Iranian Revolution”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29 (1): 3–17.

²⁶ Ram, H. “Mythology of Rage: Representations of the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ in Revolutionary Iran”, pp. 67–87.

²⁷ Dabashi, H. (1993) *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, p. 5. New York: New York University Press.

²⁸ Ansari, A. M. (2008) “Chapter One: A Persian Tea Party,” *The National Interest* 94: 53–54.

adapting the dominant patterns to particular situations. Thus, Iranians fighting against the external enemy become “Husseins” and “Hasans”, while Iranian forces helping the “victims” of Muslim states become “Alis” who come to help the “Kufis”²⁹. Reviving archetypes and characterizing them in modern language also extends to the enemy, giving rise to new Moawiyahs³⁰, new Kharijites³¹, Kufis³², and the *takfiris*³³.

Ayatollah Khomeini also used this mythologeme of the victim when calling for fight in the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988). According to him, “This is not a war between two governments; this is a war of blasphemy and evil against Islam”³⁴. Due to this mythological approach to the war, Iranians saw no contradiction in standing by the Iraqis and helping them in 2014 and onwards, even though just three decades before they were fighting against them. The war and the essence of the “enemy” have not changed; as thirty years ago, for their perception, they were fighting against blasphemers and those who defile Islam. It is noteworthy that the commander of the Iranian units fighting in Iraq for Iraq’s protection during 2014–2020, was Qasem Soleimani, who was a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war, back then defending Iran from Iraq’s threats³⁵. In 2015, during the *Arbaeen* ceremonies³⁶, the mayor of Tehran, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, who

²⁹ Ali b. Abi Tāleb (r. 656–61; q. v.), chose Kufa, the base of the *qorrā*, his strong supporters, as his capital. Yet, most Kufan clan leaders (*ašrāf*) cared more for the preservation of the ‘‘*atā*’ system and wanted him to compromise with his rival Mo’āwia b. Abi Sofyān (r. 661–80). Concurrently, some of the intransigent *qorrā* abandoned ‘Ali following the battle of Šeffin (37/657) to become the Kharijites. Litvak, M. (2017) “Kufa”, *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition [http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kufa, accessed on 14.05.2024].

³⁰ Moawiyah was the founder and first caliph of the Umayyad Caliphate, who fought against First Shia Imam Ali b. Abi Tāleb (r. 656–661).

³¹ Kharijites, the sect of early Islam arose out of the conflict between and Moawiya b. Abi Sufyān and Ali b. Abi Tāleb. “Kharijites in Persia”, *Encyclopædia Iranica* [https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kharijites-in-persia, accessed on 18.07.2024].

³² Kufes, sinners of forsaking the son of Ali, Hosayn. Litvak, M. (2017) “KUFA”, *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition [http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kufa, accessed on 14.05.2024].

³³ Akbarzadeh, S., Barry, J. (2016) “State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43 (4): 613–629.

³⁴ Rieffer-Flanagan, B. A. (2009) “Islamic Realpolitik: Two-Level Iranian Foreign Policy”, *International Journal on World Peace* 26 (4): 12.

³⁵ Golkar, S., Aarabi, K. (2021) “The View From Tehran: Iran’s Militia Doctrine”, *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change* 11.

³⁶ Literally meaning ‘40’, the event signifies the end of a 40-day mourning period for the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson, Hussein ibn Ali, the third imam of the Shia tradition.

was also a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war, served as an important figure in supporting the ceremony³⁷. These facts show the importance of the myth of Iran as a protector of Shias against suppressors, be they states or groups threatening Shia identity.

Therefore, Iran's use of religious narratives frames these conflicts as battles between good and evil, thus reinforcing its role as the defender of Shia Islam, Islamic unity, and its own revolutionary political culture. As we will show below, these ideological patterns of legitimization of foreign policy — namely, the narrative of the *takfiri* is used both in the Middle East and, most recently, in the South Caucasus.

The mythological *takfiri* narrative as applied in the Iran's Middle East policy

In the Middle East, Iran has consistently portrayed its military and proxy engagements as a defense against *takfiri* groups — considered apostates within Shia mythology — who threaten the unity and purity of the Islamic world³⁸. In this context Iranian religious authorities name apostates those who name apostates others³⁹. The narrative of fighting against these *takfiri* groups has been a central element in Iran's justification for its involvement in conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon, where Iran and its proxies are positioned as protectors of Shia communities and Islam against these so-called heretical forces⁴⁰. As I will show in the next section, the same religious-political narrative has been extended to the South Caucasus, particularly in the context of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War.

Iran's involvement in conflicts in Middle Eastern countries through its proxy forces, as well as the involvement of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), have been explained by Iranian officials as a result of these conflicts being close to its borders. From Iran's perspective, if the Iranian armed forces do

³⁷. Mehr News Agency (2015) "Tehran's Mayor Meets Grand Shia Cleric in Najaf", December 2 [<https://en.mehrnews.com/news/112513/Tehran-s-mayor-meets-Grand-Shia-cleric-in-Najaf>, accessed on 14.05.2024].

³⁸. Abed, A. Q. (2017) "Counteracting the Challenges of Iran's Enemies: Ali Khamenei's Concept of Soft War," *Linguistics & Translation Studies* 28: 18.

³⁹. Akhlaq, S. H. (2015) "The Guise of the Sunni-Shiite Use of Excommunication (Takfir) in the Middle East," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 38 (4): 1.

⁴⁰. Smyth, P. (2015) *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects*, p. 8. Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

not help neutralize the developments occurring in Arab countries, they will spill over into the country's borders, posing a physical threat to Iranian citizens. This approach and formulation are present both in the speeches of Iran's Spiritual Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and in the speeches and addresses of former and current presidents and IRGC representatives.

In a pragmatic sense, the events in the Arab countries have always been the focus of Iran's attention because the developments in the region's countries have a direct impact on both Iran's regional and domestic politics. Syria and Iraq were Iran's main allies in the region, with their Shia Muslim-led governments before the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024. Moreover, for Iran, the Shia communities and the governments of Syria and Iraq were the main components of the "Shia Crescent", with Iran attributing to itself and successfully fulfilling the role of the defender of the one⁴¹. In this context, the actions of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS, or Daesh), and then the "Islamic Caliphate", struck at the levers of influence Iran had in Iraq and posed a serious threat to Iran's foreign and domestic policy⁴².

This apparently pragmatic policy is, however, enriched and legitimized with the mythological discourse and framed as a defense against *takfiri* groups. Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa related to the *takfiri* issue, warning Muslims not to be deceived by the delusions created by the West, particularly America, and not to contribute to separatism in the Islamic world⁴³. According to Iran's political discourse, *takfiri* groups, through their activities, undermine the credibility of Islam and the Islamic Revolution, disrupt the possibilities of unity in the Islamic world, and create new obstacles for Islam.

Iran's leadership and Shia clergy adopted this approach in their responses to the clashes in Syria and Bahrain during the Arab Spring in 2011. Although in both countries, the conflicts occurred on a religious basis, between Sunni and Shia Muslims, Iran's clerics considered the driving factor of these conflicts to be the division of societies into those who support a free country and those who are proxies of the United

⁴¹ Barzegar, K. (2008) "Iran and the Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities", *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 15: 87.

⁴² Esfandiary, D., Tabatabai, A. (2015) "Iran's ISIS Policy", *International Affairs* 91 (1): 1–15.

⁴³ Imam Khomeini. (n. d.) *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. 14, p. 157. *Prohibiting Takfir — Fatwas of Shi'i Scholars*, Al-Islam.org [https://www.al-islam.org, accessed on 14.05.2024].

States⁴⁴. To emphasize the non-confessional but anti-Islamic nature of these conflicts, Shia clerics used religious terms such as *fitnah* and *takfir* to describe the rebels, compared to the rebels against the first Imam of Shia, Ali.

The same political discourse was used towards the Islamic State since its emergence. Ironically, though the Islamic State explained and justified its actions exclusively from a religious standpoint, Iran's leadership and the country's clergy considered them to be agents of the United States and protectors of Western interests, the terrorist groups that have no connection to Islam. From the very beginning of the uprisings and conflicts in the Arab countries, Iran's official response emphasized two critical factors: that extra-regional forces support the instigators of the unrest and that these are *takfiri* groups with a philosophy and strategy that contradict Islam and Islamic law.

The Shia clerics in Iran and Iraq condemned the Islamic State and called to measures to stop them. Like in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad and a Shia-Alawite community were perceived as the main regional allies of Iran, in Iraq the Prime Minister al-Maliki was an Iran's ally, and there was a large Shia community as well as the Shia holy sites of Karbala and Najaf, the protection of which was always considered a responsibility of the Shia from all over the world, and especially from Iran.

When the Islamic State captured the second-largest city in Iraq, Mosul, Iran not only announced its readiness to help the Iraqi government but also noted that, if necessary, it was ready to provide direct military assistance to the Shia government of Iraq. Iran's military aid was mainly aimed at the protection of Shia holy sites, which are not only of paramount religious significance to Shia but also an inseparable part of Shia ideology and the history of Shia Islam. These sites symbolize the strength and unity of the global Shia network.

In the Iranian clergy's commentary on the actions of ISIS, we can also observe the actualization of the myth of the "evil forces" fighting against Ali. By comparing ISIS's actions to the transgressions committed against Ali, the ayatollahs aim to awaken and reinvigorate the unified spirit of Ali's followers — the Shia — and their readiness to fight against Ali's adversaries. It is no coincidence that Grand Ayatollah

⁴⁴. Vatanka, A. (2011) "The Islamic Republic's Cross-Sectarian Outreach", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 11: 25–40.

Hashemi Shahroudi, addressing the “Daesh” [ISIS], notes that they are the “Kharijites” [*Kharijites*] of our time⁴⁵. Considering that the Kharijites were followers of a religious sect who turned against Ali and subsequently killed him, by labeling “Daesh” as Kharijites, Ayatollah Shahroudi highlights their anti-Ali and anti-Shia nature, making them objects of Shia hatred and vengeance.

When responding to the events in Iraq, Shia clerics aimed to emphasize two important points: first, that the threat posed by ISIS should serve as a stimulus for all Shia to unite, and second, that ISIS is not a Sunni Islamic group but rather an anti-Islamic terrorist element supported by Zionist forces, though there are not sources to prove this. They argued that victory in the fight against ISIS, and against all forces that fight against Islam, requires the unity of all Muslims⁴⁶.

When the global community’s attention was focused on the brutal actions of ISIS in Iraq, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, during one of his meetings with members of the Assembly of Experts, delivered a speech that delved into the contemporary trends of changes in the “global order”, the influence and goals of Western powers about these trends, and the role of Iran and the Shia in this emerging new reality. In this speech, imbued with the common anti-American rhetoric, Ali Khamenei emphasized that the United States employs two tactics to achieve its goals of world domination: on the one hand, it seeks to impose its values and ideas and achieve its political ambitions through cultural expansionism; on the other hand, due to the failure of this first tactic, it resorts to political and military means. The actions taking place in Syria and Iraq during Arab spring uprisings of 2011, according to Iran’s Supreme Leader, were examples of the application of the second tactic by the United States⁴⁷.

For Ayatollah Khamenei, there was no doubt that ISIS was a terrorist organization sponsored by the United States and its ally, Saudi Arabia, through which the “Great Satan” is provoking sectarian clashes and brutal wars in a region where Islam predominates and

⁴⁵. IRNA (2014) “Hashemi Shahroudi: ISIS is the Same as Kharijites”, June 24 [<https://www.irna.ir/news/81235028>, accessed on 16.06.2025] (in Persian).

⁴⁶. Khamenei, A. (2016) “If Muslims Become United, No One Will Dare Massacre Them: Ayatollah Khamenei,” December 17 [<https://english.khamenei.ir/news/4475/>, accessed on 16.06.2025].

⁴⁷. Khamenei.ir (2011) “Leader Leads Tehran Friday Prayers”, February 5 [<https://english.khamenei.ir/news/1407/Leader-Leads-Tehran-Friday-Prayers>, accessed on 22.06.2025].

where “Sunni and Shia Muslims have lived side by side in peace and harmony for centuries”⁴⁸.

When discussing this new geopolitical situation, Ayatollah Khamenei traditionally compared the situation and role of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Shia with the role of the Prophet Muhammad in the war against the “Satan”. According to him, the moment was critical for the true Muslim; there was no alternative to uniting and fighting “the Satan” together⁴⁹.

For centuries, prominent Shia clerics from the key seminaries of Iran and Iraq have maintained close ties to the Shia faithful across the world. Many such clerics are regarded as *Marja al-Taqlid* [Sources of Emulation] meaning that they rank as the most learned juridical authorities of the global Shia community. Their rulings on religious, social and political matters are closely followed and carefully adhered to by their followers⁵⁰. The protection of Shia holy sites in Iraq and the organization of popular military forces for their defense has been one of the central themes of the messages delivered by Shia clerics during fight against *salafi-jihadi* terrorist groups such as “Jabhat al-Nusra” [The Support Front, JAN] and the Islamic State (ISIS). In 2013, a prominent Iranian cleric, Marja Ayatollah Haery, declared a fatwa on the necessity of all Shias to help Syrians and Iraqis to protect Shia holy shrines⁵¹.

In 2014, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani declared a jihad calling on “all Iraqis, if possible, to enlist to protect their country, their people, and their holy sites”⁵². Although some Western and Arab media portrayed this fatwa as a call for Shia to fight against Sunnis, it was a message containing a call for defensive action consistent with Shia doctrine.

⁴⁸. Abrahamian, E. (1993) *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, p. 121. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁴⁹. Khamenei, A. (2016) “If Muslims Become United, No One Will Dare Massacre Them: Ayatollah Khamenei”, *Khamenei.ir*, December 17 [<https://english.khamenei.ir/news/4475/>], accessed on 16.06.2025].

⁵⁰. Akbar, A., Isakhan, B. (2023) “The Islamic State, Shia Religious Clerics and the Mobilisation of Shia Militias in Iraq and Syria,” *Contemporary Politics* 29 (5): 535–552. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2023.2196875>

⁵¹. Serat News (2013) “Fatvā-ye Āyatollah Hā’erī darbāre-ye ezām be Sūriyyeh” [Ayatollah Haeri’s Fatwa About Deployment to Syria], December 3 [<https://b2n.ir/z51761>], accessed on 16.06.2025].

⁵². Al-Sistani, S. A. (2014) “al-Sayyid al-Sistani Yofti Bil Jihad Alkifae” [Sayyid al-Sistani Announces Jihad], *Karbala Satellite TV Channel*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7by5almGhA>, accessed on 16.06.2025]. Youtube — forbidden organization in Russian Federation.

It is directed not only to the Shia but to all of Iraq's population. To prevent misunderstandings, one of Sistani's representatives clarified the meaning and significance of the fatwa a few days after it was issued.

Fatwas that contained messages urging people to take up arms are often interpreted as calls for jihad. However, it is essential to note that Shia, unlike Sunnis, believe that only the Imam of the Time — Imam Mahdi — can issue a call for jihad. Until today, Mahdi has been in occultation for twelve centuries. In the absence of Mahdi, the ayatollahs who lead the Shia can only issue calls for *defensive* jihad, which is precisely what Ayatollah Sistani did in 2014. It is also noteworthy that although Iran's leadership did not particularly respond to Sistani's call, one of Iran's few opposition-minded ayatollahs, Grand Ayatollah Yousef Saanei, welcomed Sistani's initiative during one of his Friday prayers. At the same time, Ayatollah Saanei emphasized in his sermon that the actions of terrorist elements in Iraq are not only against Shia and Sunni, not only against a unified Iraq, but against all of humanity, and that everyone must fight against them without exception. Speaking of the ISIS he said:

I, who have turned gray studying the values and ideas of Islam, assure you that the actions of these people and those like them have nothing to do with Islam. Islam is merely a tool for them to achieve their goals⁵³.

In 2014 Iranian Shia Marja and religious leader Grand Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi also expressed the view that “the events in Iraq provided a “good opportunity” to form a militia to fight against terrorists alongside the Iraqi army”. Shirazi mainly focused on the fact that it was unacceptable to attach the term ‘Islamic’ to an organization that brings nothing but harm, fear, and death to Islam and Muslims. According to him, calling this terrorist organization the ‘Islamic State’ was also a part of the West’s anti-Islamic agenda. By doing so, the enemies of Islam are discrediting Islam and Muslims⁵⁴.

⁵³ Marja' Ma (n. d.) “Ayatollah Sanei's Support for Ayatollah Sistani's Positions Regarding the Developments in Iraq” [https://marjaema.com/index.php?p=30&id=1259, accessed on 22.06.2025] (in Persian).

⁵⁴ Baligh News (n. d.) “Dar e'telāf □ed-e Dā'eš jāy-e mojrem o qāzi 'avaz šode!” [In the Anti-ISIS Coalition, the Places of the Criminal and the Judge Have Changed!], [https://makarem.ir/news/fa/News/Details/326445, accessed on 22.06.25].

In August, 2016 after a terrorist attack on a church near Rouen in France, Ayatollah Shirazi addressed an open letter to Pope Francis, emphasizing the need to draw the attention of not only all Muslims but also the entire global community to the actions of terrorists and the necessity of fighting against them with joint efforts⁵⁵. In his letter, Shirazi emphasized that while the Vatican and various Christian organizations are appealing to the United Nations concerning the safety of Christians in Iraq and Syria, they should be aware that these terrorist organizations, which pose a threat not only to Christians but to the entire population of those countries, have no connection with Islam.

I clearly declare that, according to all Muslim Ulama (Scholars) as well as the vast majority of Muslim community, the Takfiri sects are non-Islamic and are considered as the world's worst crisis in the present era⁵⁶.

Thus, the reactions of Iran's leadership and Shia clergy to ISIS's actions had two key features. Firstly, they all emphasize in their speeches that ISIS has no connection to Islam or Muslims and highlight the role of the United States and Saudi Arabia, the main religious and regional rival of Iran, in the creation and development of ISIS. Secondly, they underscore Iran's central role in fighting terrorism of the "anti-Islamic structures" and their "inhumane activities". These messages are generally framed by the Iranians through comparisons with religious-mythological figures and events connected with *takfiris*, thereby making the anti-Islamic, anti-Shia, and anti-Iranian nature of ISIS more evident and symbolic.

In the same way, Iran explains the presence of its state and proxy forces in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon as a fight against these *takfiri* groups, which it identifies as terrorist organizations opposed to Islam. This idea became more prominent in the recent years. Predictably, it has also a strong anti-Israeli connotation: according to Iran's Spiritual Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, these *takfiri* groups

⁵⁵. BBC News (n. d.) "France Church Attack: Priest Killed by Two 'IS Militants'," [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36892785, accessed on 22.06.2025].

⁵⁶. Ijtihad Network (n. d.) "Ayatollah Makarem Writes to Pope Francis," [https://ijtihadnet.com/ayatollah-makarem-writes-to-pope-francis/, accessed on 22.06.2025].

were created and are used by the Zionist regime to fight against Muslims⁵⁷.

Using the *takfiri* narrative in relation to Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

During the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Iran extended its Middle Eastern discourse to the South Caucasus by labeling Syrian mercenaries fighting for Azerbaijan as *takfiri* forces. Although Azerbaijan is a Shia-majority country, Iran's concerns were heightened by Azerbaijan's alliance with Turkey and Israel, both viewed as adversaries. Analysis of Iran's responses to the war and its consequences shows that its statements about the presence of mercenaries in the South Caucasus can also be seen as part of the Shia mythological aspect of its foreign policy discourse. Iran's practice of attributing the same mythological names to the mercenaries used in the war is an important indicator of that. By framing the Syrian mercenaries as *takfiris*, Iran linked the South Caucasus conflict to its broader ideological battle against "Sunni extremism", justifying its rhetoric and positioning itself as a defender of Shia interests even in the Caucasus.

The Nagorno-Karabakh war presented Iran with a complex set of challenges, balancing its geopolitical interests with its ideological commitments. Iran's depiction of Syrian mercenaries fighting for Azerbaijan as *takfiri* terrorists offered a way to integrate this new conflict into its established narrative of defending Shia Islam. Iranian political discourse increasingly equated the Syrian mercenaries with the *takfiri* elements destabilizing Syria and Iraq. By framing these mercenaries as part of a larger anti-Islamic and anti-Shia conspiracy, Iran positioned itself as both a regional defender of Shia interests and a protector against external forces, notably Zionist and Western influences, that seek to undermine Islamic unity. This narrative allowed Iran to maintain consistency in its foreign policy rhetoric across two different regions while prioritizing its national security.

Iran's depiction of Syrian mercenaries in Azerbaijan as *takfiri* elements is not only consistent with its Middle Eastern discourse but

⁵⁷ Khamenei.ir (n. d.) "7 Questions Answered by Ayatollah Khamenei on ISIS: Who Created It? How Was It Defeated?" [<https://english.khamenei.ir/news/...>, accessed on 22.06.2025].

also serves to justify its stance in the South Caucasus by invoking familiar ideological themes. In this context, we see how Shia mythology — initially formulated to address Iran’s role in the Islamic world — has been recalibrated to address new geopolitical realities in the Caucasus. The geographical location of the South Caucasus and the Middle East speaks first and foremost to the interconnection of these regions⁵⁸. In fact, these regions have not always had close interaction in political, ideological, and economic terms; yet, the entangled energy infrastructure and the overall geopolitical logic often suggest that viewing these regions completely separately would be erroneous⁵⁹.

The fact itself of the participation of Syrian mercenaries has been reported during and after the war. The Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated:

According to our military personnel, besides the units of the Azerbaijani army, Syrian mercenaries and terrorists, as well as Turkish special forces, are involved in the attacks⁶⁰.

The National Security Service of Armenia, in its statement released on November 6, 2020, mentioned that undeniable evidence had been obtained about the presence of mercenaries, members of terrorist groups like Al-Nusra⁶¹, Sultan Murad, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham⁶², and others in Nagorno-Karabakh. A number of these mercenaries have been placed on the wanted list. During the war, the Armenian side captured two Syrian citizens, who were charged with several articles of the Armenian Criminal Code. The Public Relations and Information Center of the Armenian Prime Minister’s Office, specifically the Orbeli Information-Analytical Center, also prepared a documentary on the presence of Syrian

⁵⁸. Mitchell, L. (n. d.) *The Caucasus and the Middle East*. Middle East Institute. [<https://www.mei.edu/publications/caucasus-and-middle-east>, accessed on 22.06.2025].

⁵⁹. Chankvetadze, N., Murusidze, K. (n. d.) *The Ties That Bind: The South Caucasus and the Middle East*. Middle East Institute. [<https://www.mei.edu/publications/ties-bind-south-caucasus-and-middle-east>, accessed on 16.06.2025].

⁶⁰. Government of Armenia (n. d.) *Address to the Nation by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan*. Official Website of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia. [<https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages>, accessed on 16.06.2025].

⁶¹. Organisation is forbidden in Russian Federation.

⁶². Organisation is forbidden in Russian Federation.

mercenaries in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, presenting both factual data and analytical opinions on the topic⁶³.

Several organizations, such as the United Nations Working Group on the use of mercenaries⁶⁴, and the states including France⁶⁵, Russia⁶⁶, and Iran⁶⁷, highlighted the use of Syrian mercenaries by Azerbaijan during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, with reputable publications like *Foreign Policy*⁶⁸ and *Sky News Arabia*⁶⁹ confirming their presence. The UN Working Group stated that the recruitment and use of these mercenaries met international definitions and conveyed its concerns to the governments of Turkey and Azerbaijan. In response, both Azerbaijan and Turkey denied the allegations, with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev⁷⁰ and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan⁷¹ rejecting claims of mercenary involvement.

Iranian officials made the first statement about mercenaries in Nagorno-Karabakh when the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh emphasized that “Iran will not allow the

⁶³ Orbeli Center (2022) “44-Day War: Mercenaries”, *Orbeli Analytical Center*, February 16 (in Armenian).

⁶⁴ OHCHR (2020) *Mercenaries in and Around the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Zone Must Be Withdrawn – UN Experts* [https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/11/mercenaries-and-around-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-zone-must-be-withdrawn-un, accessed on 16.06.2025].

⁶⁵ France 24 (2020, October 2). “Macron Reprimands Turkey, Accuses Erdogan of Sending ‘Jihadists’ to Azerbaijan.” [https://www.france24.com/en/20201002-macron-reprimands-turkey-accuses-erdogan-of-sending-jihadists-to-azerbaijan, accessed on 16.06.2025].

⁶⁶ Kommersant (2020) “Russia Will Respect Any Choice of the American People”, November 3 [https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4562595, accessed on 16.06.2025] (in Russian).

⁶⁷ Tehran Times (2020) “Iran Won’t Tolerate Terrorists in Nagorno-Karabakh, Zarif Warns”, November 1 [https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/454170/Iran-won-t-tolerate-terrorists-in-Nagorno-Karabakh-Zarif-warns, accessed on 22.06.2025].

⁶⁸ Cookman, L. (2020) “Syrians Make up Turkey’s Proxy Army in Nagorno-Karabakh”, *Foreign Policy*, October 5 [https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/05/nagorno-karabakh-syrians-turkey-armenia-azerbaijan/, accessed on 22.06.2025].

⁶⁹ Sky News Arabia (2020) “The American Official Reveals the Truth About ‘Mercenary Trips’ Between Turkey and Azerbaijan”, October 1 [https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1376843, accessed on 22.06.2025] (in Arabic).

⁷⁰ France 24 (n. d.) “We Don’t Have Syrian Mercenaries: Ilham Aliyev Speaks to France 24.” [https://www.france24.com/en/video/20201005-we-don-t-have-syrian-mercenaries-ilham-aliyev-speaks-to-france-24, accessed on 22.06.2025].

⁷¹ TASS (2020) “President of Turkey Says the OSCE Minsk Group Must «Return Territories to Azerbaijan”, October 14 [https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9698707, accessed on 22.06.2025] (in Russian).

presence of *takfiri* terrorists in the region”⁷². Starting from this first statement, the distinct feature of Iran’s response to the presence of Syrian mercenaries in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been the way Iranian officials and the broader political discourse consistently referred to these forces as “*takfiri* groups”. By framing the Syrian mercenaries in Nagorno-Karabakh as *takfiri*, Iran linked the conflict to its broader ideological struggle against perceived anti-Islamic and sectarian forces, thereby justifying its opposition within a familiar religious and political framework.

Thus, on October 6, 2020, a detailed interview with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s advisor, Velayati, on the war that had erupted in the region appeared in the conservative Keyhan newspaper, associated with the office of Iran’s Supreme Leader. In the interview, the former foreign minister expressed hope that the facts about the *takfiri* terrorists would be denied; otherwise, “Iran will not allow the existence of terrorists used by America and Israel near its borders”⁷³.

Grand Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, in his address on the occasion of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, referred to Azerbaijan and urged the country to stop relying on forces who “consider shedding Muslims’ blood to be permissible, and incite people to sedition in Muslim countries”⁷⁴. This was another reference to *takfiri* groups.

The fact of the existence of *takfiri* groups was also emphasized by Ayatollah Khamenei himself when addressing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. He stated that *takfiri* terrorists who have appeared in the region should not be allowed to approach Iran’s borders, but if they attempt to do so, they will face a strong reaction⁷⁵. This was mentioned after the detailed explanation that terrorists across the region are *takfiri* groups created by western powers.

One of Iran’s former ambassadors to Azerbaijan emphasized that “it is clear that these *takfiri* forces are not in Nagorno-Karabakh to

⁷². Khabar Online (2020) “Khatibzadeh: Iran Does Not Allow Terrorists to Settle in the Areas Adjacent to Its Northern Borders”, September 30 [<https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1438346>, accessed on 22.06.2025] (in Persian).

⁷³. Kayhan (2024) “The Occupied Areas of Azerbaijan Must Be Evacuated, But the Solution Is Not Military”, October 10 [<https://kayhan.ir/fa/news/132930>, accessed on 22.06.2025] (in Persian).

⁷⁴. Baligh News (n.d.) “The Message of Grand Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi Following the Events in the Karabakh Region” [<https://makarem.ir/news/fa/News/Details/419940>, accessed on 22.06.2025] (in Persian).

⁷⁵. Khamenei.ir (n.d.) “The Solution to the End of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict” [<https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=46775>, accessed on 22.06.2025] (in Persian).

defend Azerbaijan but are here for a completely different purpose, particularly to be near Iran's borders"⁷⁶. During the Qom international conference on Nagorno-Karabakh, the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister repeated that the presence of *takfiri* terrorist groups in the Nagorno-Karabakh region is a serious concern of Iran⁷⁷.

The utilization of Shia-specific terminology, such as referring to mercenaries used by Turkey and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh as "*takfiri* groups", is a consistent feature across the political spectrum in Iran, appearing in the discourse of both Reformist and Conservative administrations and socio-political circles. This cross-factional usage underscores the deeply ingrained nature of these ideological constructs in Iranian political language, highlighting that Shia doctrinal narratives serve as a unifying framework for Iran's foreign policy rhetoric, irrespective of internal political differences on the one hand and unchanged importance of South Caucasus as a region for both factions of Iranian establishment.

One of the most conservative and hard-line Iranian newspapers "Kayhan" published an analytical article raising the question of which countries are most concerned by the presence of *takfiri* terrorists in Karabakh"⁷⁸. Prominent analytical website Irdiplomacy.ir published an article arguing that Iranian officials, when referring to the Nagorno Karabakh second war, were paying more attention on the presence of *takfiri* forces in the battlefield than on the geopolitical consequences of the war⁷⁹.

Another conservative website close to the security and intelligence organizations has published an article entitled "Where are the Takfiri terrorists supported by Türkiye settled in Karabakh?"⁸⁰ "Khabar online" news agency affiliated with moderate political circles referred

⁷⁶ Khamenei.ir (n. d.) "The Solution to the End of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict" [<https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=46775>, accessed on 22.06.2025] (in Persian).

⁷⁷ Iran Press (2021) "Takfiri Outfits in the Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran's Serious Concern", March 1 [<https://iranpress.com/takfiri-outfits-in-the-nagorno-karabakh-iran-s-serious-concern>, accessed on 22.06.2025] (in Persian).

⁷⁸ Kayhan.ir (n. d.) "What Countries Are Threatened by the Possible Presence of Takfiris in Karabakh? (Opinion)" [<https://kayhan.ir/fa/news/200656>, accessed on 22.06.2025] (in Persian).

⁷⁹ Diplomacy-e Irani (2021) "The Mystery of the Presence of Takfiris in Azerbaijan", December 12 [<http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/2008293>, accessed on 22.06.2025] (in Persian).

⁸⁰ Mashregh News (2020) "Where Are the Takfiri Terrorists Supported by Türkiye Settled in Karabakh?", October 9 [<https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/1127989>, accessed on 22.06.2025] (in Persian).

to the presence of “takfiri terrorists” when analyzing the main strategic concerns of Iran connected with a demand of Azerbaijan to create a so-called “Zangezur corridor”⁸¹.

During the meeting with the Ministry of Defence of Azerbaijan, Zaqir Hasanov, Ebrahim Raisi, then the president of Iran, stated:

The presence of Takfiri and ISIS forces is not in the interest of the people of the region anywhere. These groups are made by the Americans and the Zionists and have committed criminal acts wherever they are present.

Raisi also pointed out, that “the Zionist Regime is the enemy of humanity and cannot be a friend of the Muslim nations in any way, and the occupation and aggression of the Zionists in the region and against the Palestinian people is a proof of this fact”. The President expressed hope that with the conscious presence and planning of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces, takfiri currents and those who do not want to reconcile with Muslims will not be able to gain a foothold in the region⁸².

Ebrahim Raisi referred to the *takfiri* forces in the Caucasus also during his visit in Russia in 2022. During his speech in the Russian Duma he said:

There are now complex plans to send takfiri terrorists on new missions from the Caucasus to Central Asia. Experience has shown that it is pure Islamic thought that can prevent the formation of extremism and takfiri terrorism⁸³.

The same groups are frequently called also Zionist referring to the idea that they are created by Israel. A year after the war, while conducting military exercises near its northern borders, Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian stated that “Zionists were present

⁸¹. Khabar Online (2021) “In What Way Does the Zangzor Corridor Threaten Iran’s Interests?”, December 5 [https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1579150, accessed on 22.06.2025] (in Persian).

⁸². Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran (n. d.) “Tehran-Baku Ties Based on the Two Peoples’ Beliefs in Common Religious Principles” [https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newview/667932/Tehran-Baku-ties-based-on-the-two-peoples-beliefs-in-common-religious-principles, accessed on 22.06.2025].

⁸³. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran (n. d.) *Print News*. [https://en.mfa.ir, accessed on 22.06.2025].

in certain parts of Azerbaijan when some terrorist groups made a failed attempt to approach the Iran-Azerbaijan border”. During the same military exercises, IRGC Ground Forces General Kiomars Heydari stated that Iran has concerns about the presence of certain terrorist groups in the region. Referring to the Syrian militants brought in by Turkey during the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, Heydari emphasized that Iran is not sure if those forces have left the region.

Thus, with its responses to the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Iran’s political vocabulary brought the South Caucasus and Middle Eastern discourses closer together. This extension of the *takfiri* narrative allowed Iran to maintain ideological consistency across different geopolitical contexts. Iran’s political discourse during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict mirrored its rhetoric in the Middle East, reinforcing its identity as the protector of Shia Islam against external threats. Iran’s leaders, including Ayatollah Khamenei, explicitly connected the presence of mercenaries near Iran’s borders with broader security concerns, further tightening the discursive link between the Middle East and South Caucasus in Iranian foreign policy.

Conclusion

Shia mythology plays a critical role in shaping Iran’s foreign policy, particularly through the themes of martyrdom, resistance, and the defense of the oppressed. These myths not only provide ideological coherence to Iran’s interventions but also serve to justify and legitimize its actions in the eyes of both domestic and international audiences. One of such basic mythologemes is the narrative of martyrdom and resistance against *takfiri* groups threatening Shia identity and the entire Islamic world. This *takfiri* narrative, initially developed in response to Middle Eastern conflicts, has proven adaptable to new geopolitical challenges, such as the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war.

By invoking religious myths, Iran constructs a narrative that portrays itself as the protector of Islam against existential threats. These myths, deeply rooted in Shia doctrine, continue to inform Iran’s foreign policy strategy, motivating its actions and providing a framework for understanding its role in the broader Islamic world.

In this article, we delved into how these religious myths, particularly those surrounding martyrdom and the fight against *takfiri* forces, shape Iran’s perception of threats. The convergence of Middle Eastern and South Caucasus discourses on mercenaries

in Iranian political rhetoric was evident in the shared vocabulary and mythological references. As we have seen, the Iranian leaders and state-affiliated media framed the presence of Syrian mercenaries in Nagorno-Karabakh as a continuation of the fight against *takfiri* elements in the Middle East. This fight and martyrdom is deeply rooted in the Shia narrative of defending the oppressed against unjust and heretical forces⁸⁴. This framing allows Iran to maintain a consistent ideological stance across different theaters of conflict, reinforcing its position as a defender of Shia Islam and as a bulwark against what it perceives as Western and Zionist efforts to destabilize the Islamic world, in general, and Iran's neighborhood in particular⁸⁵.

In the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh war, I argue that Iran's response was influenced by its desire to maintain a balance between its regional interests and its ideological commitments⁸⁶. It is noteworthy that Azerbaijan, who associates itself with the Shia tradition, was criticized with the use of Shia myths of martyrdom and the fight against *takfiri* forces. It can be seen as a way for Iran to incorporate the response to these developments into its broader discourse on the fight against anti-Islamic movements and a way to legitimize Iran's pragmatic foreign policy in the region.

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⁸⁴. Momen, M. (1985) *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, p. 33. New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁸⁵. Katzman, K. (1993) *The Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, p. 83. Boulder: Westview Press.

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