

Religion, 'soft power' and foreign policy making in the USA, India and Iran

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Abstract

Governments may also use religious soft power in pursuit of national interests and objectives. This article focuses on the role of religious soft power in the foreign policy of three states – the United States of America, India and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The main concern is to assess religious actors' contribution to the foreign policy environment and agenda in each country.

The idea of religious soft power is that religious actors may seek to influence foreign policy and international relations by either (1) encouraging governments to pursue foreign policies and programmes most in tune with their values, norms and beliefs, and/or (2) seeking to build transnational networks to further their goals.

The USA, India and Iran represent comparatively significant cases. The USA represents a ‘deviant’ case: the world’s most powerful ‘modern’ society with a high proportion of apparently highly religious people (Norris and Inglehart 2004). Traditionally, while successive US governments have sought to justify foreign policy in terms of Christian morality, it is primarily associated with the secular-universalist rhetoric of democracy, liberty and prosperity. In recent years, however, evangelical Christians have significantly affected foreign policy making and execution, particularly in relation to: democratisation, human rights, and religious freedom (Haynes 2007a).

India is another officially secular state, also with a preponderantly religious society. There, two contrasting religious influences have over time influenced the worldviews of foreign policymakers, paralleling the division between conservative and liberal religious tendencies in the USA. On the one hand, there is the tradition emanating from Gandhian pacifism. On the other hand, a distinctly Hindu religious culture underpins a robust version of Indian nationalism. Over time, however, the impact of these two contrasting traditions on Indian foreign policy has been limited, due to the importance of the overarching tradition of secular Nehruvian nonalignment (Chiriyankandath 2004: 200).

The Iranian state is a revolutionary ‘theodemocracy’¹ with regional, sectarian, pan-Islamic and global ambitions. ‘Neither East, nor West’ was the key revolutionary rallying cry, aiming to transform the USA-dominated global order, through a foreign policy infused with Islamic ideals. Iran’s soft power portfolio was however both meagre and structurally limited, largely because of the primarily Shia scope of Iran’s soft power, which struggled to achieve resonance in a predominantly Sunni Arab Middle East. However, following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran’s ability to project its religious soft power increased.

Religious soft power and foreign policy

‘Soft power’ refers to the capability of an entity, usually but not necessarily a state, to influence what others do through attraction and persuasion. It covers attributes,

¹ The term ‘theodemocracy’ was coined by the founder of the Mormon church, Joseph Smith. For him, a theodemocracy implied a fusion of traditional republican democracy combined with theocratic elements, a system under which God and the people held the power to rule in righteousness.

including culture, values and ideas, collectively representing different forms of influence compared to ‘hard’ power, typically involving armed force and/or economic coercion or inducement. Although in the post-9/11 context analysts of international relations can scarcely disregard the international influence of religion, very few scholars (see Haynes 2007b: 31-62) have sought to consider soft power in the context of religion and international relations. Joseph Nye (1990), who coined the term nearly two decades ago, emphasises secular sources of soft power, only noting that ‘for centuries, organised religious movements have possessed soft power’ (2004: 94). Others who have examined the influence of soft power in international relation – for example, Melissen (2005) – barely give the issue a passing reference.

This article addresses this research lacuna in the following way. It analyses how selected religious organisations and movements, as well as political groups deriving their inspiration from religion, seek to influence the foreign policy agenda. The article has a comparative focus, examining three religious traditions – evangelical Christianity (USA), Hinduism (India) and Shia Islam (Iran). In each, the core concern is about how different ideological and institutional frameworks, both secular and religious, interact to seek to influence foreign policy formation and execution.

In each country, religious actors² seek to influence outcomes by encouraging foreign policy makers to adopt policies informed by their religious tenets and beliefs. This article expands use of the term ‘soft power’ beyond the common conception developed by Joseph Nye (1990; 2004) that considers soft power to be confined to specific kinds of influence that a government exercises over another government. The intended contribution of the article is to demonstrate that the concept of soft power should also include religious actors who pursue their own ‘foreign policies’, in part by seeking to influence official foreign policy.

But how might a religious actor exercise such influence, and why would they want to influence foreign policy? A starting point is the importance of norms and identity in international relations. Rejecting both neorealism and neoliberalism, Katzenstein (1996) suggests that an adequate explanation of apparently inconsistent or irrational

² A religious actor is an individual, group or organisation that seeks to influence domestic or international outcomes through application of religiously-derived ideas or ideology.

foreign and national security policies depends on factoring in norms, collective identities, and cultures of the relevant societies.

USA

While many authors attest to the significance of religion in international relations—with some observers noting a recent widespread global religious resurgence—there is less agreement about *how* religion affects foreign policy making and execution (See, for example, Fox and Sandler (2004), Thomas (2005) and Haynes 2007b).

Religion seems especially, perhaps even exceptionally, prominent in US foreign policy, which to the external observer appears somewhat ironic given that the US Constitution makes it clear that there should be no institutionalised links between religion and the State. This is articulated explicitly in the first amendment of the Constitution, ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof’, thereby restricting the State and religion to separate realms. In addition, unlike several European countries, including Germany, Italy and Sweden, where Christian Democratic parties have been influential for decades, the USA does not have a tradition of political parties with a religious focus.

Still, as James A. Reichley (1986) notes, religion has always played an important part in American politics. Certainly, the republic’s founders drew on religious values and rhetoric in forming the new nation, and churches were involved in various moral issues throughout the nation’s history, notably controversy about slavery and the resulting Civil War in the 1860s. Later, during the twentieth century, various Christian groups were participants in a number of moral and political campaigns, including: prohibition of the sale of alcohol, enactment of women’s right to vote, New Deal measures to increase social welfare in the 1930s, and the passage of laws covering civil rights in the 1960s (Wald 2003).

Today Christian-based social movements are again politically and morally significant in the USA. Evangelical Christians are often noted as especially important in this regard, not least because they significantly influenced the outcomes of the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, contests that led to the election and re-election of ‘one of their own’: George W. Bush. More widely, in recent years, evangelicals have been

important political and moral voices in relation to various foreign policy issues, especially concerned with human rights various human rights issues (Hertzke 2004; Hehir, Walzer, Richardson, Telhami, Krauthammer, and Lindsay 2004).

The attempt to translate moral and/or religious values into U.S. foreign policy is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, as Table 1 indicates, religion has had a strong and continuous influence on U.S. foreign policy over a long period.

Table 1: Religion and Foreign Policy in the United States

Period	Mission	Adversary	Means
Pre-revolutionary colonial America (1600-1776)	Millennium	‘Papal antichrist’	Example as ‘city on a hill’
Revolutionary and founding era (1776-1815)	Empire of liberty	Old world tyranny, ‘hellish fiends’ (Native Americans)	Example, continental expansion, without entangling alliances
Manifest Destiny (1815-1848)	Christian civilization	‘Savages’ or ‘children’ (Native Americans)	Example, continental expansion, without entangling alliances
Imperial America (1898-1913)	Christian civilization	‘Barbarians’ and ‘savages’ (Filipinos)	Overseas expansion, without entangling alliances
Wilsonian Internationalism (1914-1919)	Global democracy	Autocracy and imperialism	International organizations and alliances
Cold War liberalism (1946-1989)	Free world	Communism	International organizations and alliances
Bush and neo-conservatism (2001-)	Spread of religious freedom and human rights	International terrorism, often linked to extremist Islam; totalitarian states, such as North Korea	Unilateral action with ad hoc alliances

Source: Judis 2005: 3.

The contemporary prominence of evangelicals has its roots in the late 1970s when evangelicalism began a political resurgence, seeking to pressurise the US government to change policy in relation to certain domestic issues, all of which were concerned with moral and/or religious issues such as abortion, family values, and school curricula. As Wessner (2003) argued, from the movement’s origin until the present day, evangelicals have ‘politicked to take back the Supreme Court, the Congress, the

public schools, textbook publishing houses, foreign affairs, and the Executive branch. ... [T]heir crusade is as evident as anywhere in the words and deeds of the current Bush Administration'. Note that Wessner is not referring solely to domestic issues; he also avers that evangelicals have sought to be influential in relation to foreign policy.

This expansion of the agenda beyond domestic culture-wars issues to international affairs was encouraged by the accession to power of George W. Bush, who many evangelicals believe is a suitable individual to champion their preferred values in foreign policy. But the broadening of evangelicals' global horizons was established prior to the Bush administration, during the Clinton presidencies (1993-2001). Indeed, as Alan Hertzke details in his important book *Freeing God's Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights* (2004), since the mid-1990s evangelicals have been the most important part of a new human rights movement. This movement helped create a new architecture for human rights monitoring and advocacy in American foreign policy. The 'unlikely alliance' in Hertzke's subtitle refers to the fact that this movement has been one of strange bedfellows. To maximise influence it was essential to develop broad alliances with diverse religious groups (such as, the Jewish community and mainline Christian organisations) and with secular entities (including, student bodies on college campuses and traditional secular human rights organisations) (Green, Rozelle and Wilcox 2003). The willingness to build coalitions reflects a significant change in the activism of conservative evangelicals, as they leveraged increased lobbying power to mobilise support for an international agenda.

By usual social movement standards, the evangelical-led movement to put various human rights issues on the foreign policy agenda has had remarkable influence in a remarkably short time. Some of the highlights include:

- The International Religious Freedom Act (1998): By establishing an office and an annual international religious freedom report that grades countries on their religious rights, this law made freedom of religion and conscience a core objective of U.S. foreign policy. It was lobbied for by 'a coalition of conservative Christians, Jews, Catholics, mainline Protestants, Tibetan Buddhists and others' (Page 2005).

- The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000): The aim was to remove international crime syndicates that dispatch children and women from the developing world into prostitution and sweatshops.
- The Sudan Peace Act (2002): Evangelicals promoted this law, outraged by the Sudanese government's attacks on southern Sudanese Christians and animists. The law and its accompanying sanctions were influential in helping create the road map for Sudan's 2003 ceasefire and the peace treaty in 2004.
- The North Korea Human Rights Act (2004): Evangelicals and Korean Americans lobbied for this bill. The aim was not only to focus U.S. attempts to help North Korean defectors, but also to focus attention on the country's egregious human rights violations and nuclear weapons programme.

These kinds of causes do not conform to culture-war stereotypes of ideological polarisation, and the diverse coalition partners that evangelicals have worked with on these issues is testament to the fact that what is going on here is more than just conventional interest group politics salient only to narrow segments of the population. Furthermore, it is important to reiterate that this movement did not emerge only as a partisan echo chamber for the moralistic foreign policy rhetoric used by the George W. Bush administration. In fact, the movement developed first during the Clinton administration and has persisted through the George W. Bush administration—sometimes as its ally but sometimes as a critic.

The root of evangelicals' persuasiveness is found in a commonplace but crucial fact: Unlike all other Western countries, the USA is a highly religious nation (Norris and Inglehart 2004). And, because in America religion plays an important role in political life, there exists 'greater prominence of religious organizations in society and politics' (Telhami 2004: 71). Religions are not mere run-of-the-mill lobby groups, nor are they necessarily monolithic in views, beliefs, and expectations. Moreover, while the tangible resources of religious interest groups pales in comparison to corporate lobbies, religion can often wield indirect influence that can be instrumental in helping construct the mindset of policymakers, including in relation to international human rights in US foreign policy.

During the presidency of Jimmy Carter (1977–1981), himself a committed evangelical believer, a progressive evangelical politics became influential as it shared with Carter a focus on human rights and Christian humanitarian values. For some, however, Carter’s presidency was notable for a rising tide of pacifist sentiment that not only permeated American critical consciousness at the general level but also the upper levels of the Carter administration (Dorrien 1993: 170). By contrast, Ronald Reagan shared many of conservative evangelicalism’s ideals and goals, and encouraged it to develop into a significant lobby group (*ibid*). Then during the Clinton era the pendulum swung back toward left-leaning religious activists, who again enjoyed easy access to top administration officials. After George W. Bush’s accession to power in 2001, conservative evangelical leaders were once again able to play the part of White House insiders (Page 2005), putting their stamp on administration priorities, including in the area of foreign policy—a shift Howard LaFranchi (2006) refers to as the ‘evangelization’ of US foreign policy.

In conclusion, a key issue which has informed evangelicals’ involvement in foreign policy during the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations is a strong belief that the USA is involved in a continuing international struggle between good and evil. While in the 1980s this struggle was defined by the Cold War, from the mid-1990s evangelical concern focused centrally on various human rights issues—including religious freedom, protection of victims of sex and sweatshops trafficking, repression of non-Muslims in Sudan, and the government of North Korea’s egregious suppression of citizens’ civil liberties.

India

Hindu nationalism stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from Gandhian pacific universalism. As a non-missionary ‘ethnic’ religion, Hinduism does not exhibit the global ambitions of Christianity or Islam, although the Hindu nationalists’ civilisational compass extends far beyond the borders of India across the Middle East, Southeast Asia and the worldwide Indian diaspora. This section examines the influence of the Sangh Parivar (Hindu nationalist umbrella organisation) on India’s foreign policymaking environment, with particular attention to 1998-2004, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led the government.

Following independence from British colonial rule in 1947, India was ruled until 1975 by secular Congress Party governments. During that time, India's foreign policy developed according to certain ideological characteristics, especially: non-alignment and 'third worldism'. Demise of Congress party rule was followed by a period of flux with no one party able to gain ascendancy. It was not until the late 1980s that a new hegemon emerged: the BJP, a party ideologically motivated by *Hindutva* ('Hindu-ness'), an amalgam of nationalist and religious concerns. The case of India under BJP rule indicates both the possibilities and limitations of using religious soft power as an analytical variable in relation to the country's foreign policy: BJP rule was characterised by many continuities in relation to foreign policy when compared to foreign policy under Congress, yet, at the same time, as many observers have noted, the influence of *Hindutva* was to some extent apparent in foreign policy under BJP rule. This is because under BJP rule, India's foreign policy reflected both ideological and ideational empathy between the government and proponents of *Hindutva*. The relationship developed from the 1980s, when the ideas of *Hindutva* increased in significance in India, finding its chief political expression in the BJP. The BJP was and is closely linked with a variety of organisations and movements promoting *Hindutva*, collectively known as the Sangh Parivar ('family of associations'). The Rashtriya Swayamsevak (RSS), the Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) are the leading organisations in the Sangh Parivar; all are proponents of *Hindutva* that provide key sources of religious soft power, focused in recent years on three key issues: Pakistan, Kashmir, and the post 9/11 'war on terror'.

The rise to prominence of *Hindutva* in India is manifested in both domestic and foreign policy contexts, although here I shall refer only to external issues. After independence in 1947, India's foreign policy was for three decades dominated by a secular vision of nonalignment and 'third worldism'. During Congress rule, India's government sought:

- dialogue with Pakistan
- expansion of trade and investment relations with China
- strengthening of ties with Russia, Japan, Western Europe, and the United States,
- attempts to help construct a regional organisation, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Katalya 2004; Kamdar 2004).

Over time, these emphases gradually changed, reflecting four developments. Domestically, there was the political rise of *Hindutva* and the BJP. Internationally, the Cold War ended, globalisation became more prominent and, after 9/11, the continuing ‘war on terror’ began. Reflecting these developments, BJP foreign policy shifted focus. Now, the aim was to

- build closer relations with the USA and Israel on the basis of a shared ‘Islamophobia’ and anti-Arabism
- isolate Pakistan internationally
- develop a more aggressive and dynamic Indian nationalism (Bidwai 2003)

These goals were reflected in, first, a more abrasive stance towards India’s Muslim minority as well as towards Pakistan. The Indian government claimed that the government of Pakistan was the main sponsor of ‘anti-Indian’, Muslim terror groups fighting to wrest Muslim-majority Kashmir from Indian control. Second, the BJP government openly ‘criticized nonalignment and advocated a more vigorous use of India’s power to defend national interests from erosion at the hands of Pakistan and China’. Third, the BJP government ‘favored the overt acquisition of nuclear weapons’ (Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress 1995). Fourth, the new foreign policy focus also included a desire to ‘help create an “Axis of Virtue” against “global terrorism”’, linking India’s government with those of the USA and Israel (Bidwai 2003). To pursue this goal, India’s then National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra advanced the ‘Axis of Virtue’ proposal on May 8, 2003, in Washington, DC.

Addressing the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and a number of US Congressmen and women, Mishra emphasised his desire to help fashion an ‘alliance of free societies involved in combating’ the scourge of terrorism. Apart from the fact that the US, Israel and India were all ‘advanced democracies’, each had also ‘been a significant target of terrorism. They have to jointly face the same ugly face of modern-day terrorism’. The aim of the ‘Axis of Virtue’ would be to seek to ‘take on international terrorism in a holistic and focused manner... to ensure that the global campaign ... is pursued to its logical conclusion, and does not run out of steam because of other preoccupations. We owe this commitment to our future generations’ (Mishra quoted

in Embassy of India 2003). A month later, also in Washington, Lal Krishna Advani,³ then India's deputy prime minister, also spoke in glowing terms about the 'Axis of Virtue' proposal. Stressing democratic 'similarities' between India and the US, he praised the relationship developing between India and the USA. Obliquely referring to Pakistan, he stated that this relationship was not 'an alliance of convenience. It is a principled relationship ...' (Advani quoted in Bidwai 2003).

The closer relationship with Israel was reflective of 'the BJP's ideology [which] admires people like [the then Israeli prime minister, Ariel] Sharon for their machismo and ferocious jingoism. It sees Hindus and Jews (plus Christians) as "strategic allies" against Islam and Confucianism.... [T]his "clash-of-civilisations" idea has many takers on India's Hindu Right' (Bidwai 2003). But before the BJP government could cement its new triangular relationship with the USA and Israel, it lost power in a general election, held in May 2004.⁴ The new Congress Party prime minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, was urged by *Hindutva* supporters 'to follow a foreign policy as pragmatic as his past economic policies, that would better align India with the US policy in the war on terror. We wish him good sense and good luck in his new role' (<http://hindutva.org/>).

During an earlier period in power in the 1980s, Congress had embraced what Gatade calls 'the path of soft Hinduism', a policy that is said to have facilitated the subsequent rise of 'hard Hindutva' forces. In various ways, including the 'Meenakshipuram conversions in the early 80s or the genocide of Sikhs in 1984 or the opening of the gates of Babri Mosque supposedly to 'free' Ramlalla one could see the growing commonalities of views between the "secular" Congress and the Hindutva brigade' (Gatade 2006).

In conclusion, India's foreign policy under BJP reflected the growing influence of *Hindutva*, primarily emanating from the Sangh Paravar. It also facilitated a process that had actually begun earlier under Congress rule, a move away from core, traditional Indian principles – moderation, pragmatism, non-alignment and 'defence

³ Advani was President of the BJP until the end of 2005. He is now (mid-2007) leader of the opposition in the Indian parliament, the Lok Sabha.

⁴ The Congress Party and allies gained the largest number of seats in parliament (216, compared to the BJP's 186), although it did not gain enough seats to rule with an overall majority (273 seats would be needed). As a result, a coalition government, led by Congress, was formed.

of the poor – to increased acceptance of Hindu nationalist ideology and principles. It appears that such concerns, including the focus on ‘Islamic terrorism’ and ‘clash of civilisations’ concerns, were not expunged from India’s foreign policy after the fall from power of the BJP in May 2004. It is appropriate to conclude that over time there was a shift in Indian perceptions about what foreign policy goals were desirable, which to some extent transcended traditional ideological divisions between Hindu nationalists and the secular Congress Party. Certainly, the post-2004 Congress-led government continued with the broad thrust of the BJP’s foreign policy that it inherited, reflecting not only the prominence of *Hindutva* but also the changed international circumstances after 9/11.

Iran

Iran’s post-revolutionary foreign policy is best seen in the context of a changed global environment, one characterised by continuous volatility, largely the result of the end of the cold war and the singular position of the USA. Iran’s rulers believe that the country is a pioneering state struggling to find a place in a developing international system, currently dominated by the USA (Ansari 2006). Both countries wish to contain or undermine the other. In this context, we can note competing ‘soft power’ agendas of the Khatami (1997-2005) and Clinton (1993-2001) presidencies, followed by ‘hard power’ clashes between George W. Bush (2001-date) and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-date).

Since the revolution in 1979, Iran’s foreign policy has been ‘shaped, not mainly by international forces, but by a series of intense post-revolutionary debates inside Iran regarding religion, ideology, and the necessity of engagement with the West and specifically the United States’ (Sarioghalam 2001: 1; also see Ansari 2006 and Sohrabi 2006). When Iran’s material interests conflicted with proclaimed commitments to ‘Islamic solidarity’ and Islamic revolution, under Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, security and economic considerations came first. When appropriate, Iran employed religion as part of a strategy to contend with neighbouring regimes or to seek to force changes in their policies (Tisdall 2006).

Religious figures within the government lost ground following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in June 1989, a position that appeared to be consolidated following the

landslide election of a self-proclaimed reformer, President Mohammad Khatami, in 1997. Khatami was however caught between two forces. On the one hand, there were those in government who wanted increased social and political liberalisation. On the other hand, there were religious figures in the regime who did not. The result was a stalemate between reformers and conservatives. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad replaced Khatami as president, following a further election in July 2005. Since then, Iran's foreign policy has focused on three main issues: (1) regional interests, especially in Iraq (2) relations with the wider Muslim world, and (3) relations with the United States and Europe, notably regarding Iran's civil nuclear power programme (Barnes and Bigham 2006; Melman and Javedanfar 2007).

What was the role of religious soft power? The first point is that even though Iran is not a 'standard' democracy, it is by no means a closed society. Foreign policy debates fill the Iranian press and there are frequent deliberations in the Majlis (parliament) (Sarioghalam 2001). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is traditionally the main promoter of secular state interests, while religious 'hardliners' – that is, those who are uncompromising in support of the line that religion is the key factor linking people both domestically and internationally – champion various Islamic causes and expressions of Muslim solidarity with coreligionists beyond Iran's borders. Articles frequently appear attacking Foreign Ministry policies, especially in the pages of a daily newspaper *Jomhuri-ye Islami* (Afrasiabi and Maleki 2003).

Following Ahmadinejad's election, Khatami publicly criticised religious hardliners, including three prominent sets of Ahmadinejad supporters: (1) the Hojjatieh, a radically anti-Bahai⁵ and anti-Sunni semi-clandestine society (2) the Revolutionary Guards, centred on a two-million strong Islamic militia, the Basijis,⁶ and (3) followers of a radical Shi'ite cleric, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi, a key Ahmadinejad supporter and the Hojjatieh's chief ideologue (Freeman 2005; Barnes and Bigham 2006; McFaul and Milani 2006). Khatami's attack also included a reference to Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, another religious hardliner with close ties to the Haqqani theological school in Qom. He had issued a *fatwa* urging all members of the Basijis to

⁵ Bahai was founded in 1863 in Persia and emphasises the spiritual unity of all humankind.

⁶ The Basijis is a paramilitary force founded by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. It supplied volunteers for shock troop units during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). The Basijis are now a branch of the Revolutionary Guards, loyal to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

vote for Ahmadinejad in the presidential elections (Freeman 2005). Prominent supporters of Khatami included Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, head of the Expediency Council and former president of Iran (McFaul and Milani 2006).⁷

Overall, Ahmadinejad's accession to power led to a significant change in the power balance in Iran. Religious hardliners were an important focus and source of influence, including in relation to Iraq and Iran's nuclear programme. Iran is 90 per cent Shiite and Iraq is between 60-65% Shiite, while about one-third of Iraqis are Sunnis, including both Kurds and Arabs. Religious ties between Shi'ites in Iraq and Iran have been encouraged by, among others, Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi (Kemp 2005; Freeman 2005). Iran actively supported the position of the United States in advocating elections in Iraq, as the former hoped to see a Shi'ite dominated government in power which Iran would hope to influence, in part because of shared religious affiliation. As Kemp notes, 'current circumstances encourage Iran to use soft power to help create some sort of Islamic government in Iraq' (2005: 6).

Iran seeks to win hearts and minds in Iraq, a tactic encouraged by the fact that many Iraqis are Shi'ites. Iran continues to promote democratic structures and processes in Iraq – as a strategy to help consolidate a strong Iranian and Shiite voice in Iraq's government and thus help build Iran's influence. Note that this is not Western-style liberal democracy – but Islamic democracy. Hamidreza Taraghi, head of Iran's conservative Islamic Coalition Society, has stated that 'what Ahmadinejad believes is that we have to create a model state based on ... Islamic democracy – to be given to the world ... The ... government accepts this role for themselves' (Taraghi quoted in Peterson 2005). As Kemp notes, 'Iran's capacity, capability, and will to influence events in Iraq are high in terms of both hard power and soft power' (Kemp 2005: 7). Note, however, that Iran's foreign policy in relation to Iraq is not unusual: it is what any state, secular or religious, would likely do when a near neighbour and rival undergoes considerable political instability. There may be nothing particularly 'religious' in Iran seeking to encourage closer ties with Shi'ites in Iraq, as it also makes sense from a secular, strategic point of view. There is however a second key

⁷ The Expediency Council has the authority to mediate disputes between Parliament and the Council of Guardians. The latter comprises 12 jurists including six appointed by the Supreme Leader. The Council of Guardians serves as an advisory body to the latter, making it one of the most powerful governing bodies in the country.

foreign policy issue – that of Iran’s nuclear programme – which has a clear religious component.

The United States has tried hard to isolate Iran, branding it a rogue state. US officials have described the Iranian president as a threat to world peace and claim that he faces a popular insurrection at home (MacAskill and Tisdall 2006; Melman and Javedanfar 2007). Despite this, in 2006 Ahmadinejad enjoyed a 70% approval rating at home, as well as growing support abroad, both among Muslim countries (including Indonesia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Syria) and non-Muslim countries, such as China (Tisdall 2006).⁸

In addition to strategic reasons, there is also a religious factor to be noted in relation to Iran’s nuclear programme. Fuelled by an apocalyptic vision, Ahmadinejad and religious hardliners believe that Shiite Islam’s long-hidden 12th Imam, or *Mahdi*, will soon emerge – perhaps at the mosque of Jamkaran⁹ – to end the world (Melman and Javedanfar 2007). In September, 2005, Ahmadinejad spoke of an aura that wreathed him: ‘O mighty Lord, I pray to you to hasten the emergence of your last repository, the promised one, that perfect and pure human being, the one that will fill this world with justice and peace’ (Peterson 2005). To prepare the shrine, Ahmadinejad provided \$US20 million of state funds. He is said to have told his cabinet that he expects the Mahdi to arrive by mid-2008. In addition, according to Diehl (2006), a cleric, Mehdi Karrubi claimed ‘that Ahmadinejad ordered that his government’s platform be deposited in a well at Jamkaran where the faithful leave messages for the hidden imam’. The overall point is that religious soft power is influential in encouraging President Ahmadinejad to pursue a determined line on Iran’s nuclear programme. ‘From redressing the gulf between rich and poor in Iran, to challenging the United States and Israel and enhancing Iran’s power with nuclear programs, every issue is designed to lay the foundation for the Mahdi’s return’ (Peterson 2005).

Overall Conclusion

This article did not claim to be a systematic survey of the influence of selected religious actors in the USA, India and Iran and the associated projection of religious

⁸ Later, however, Ahmadinejad’s popularity declined, due to rising inflation, high unemployment and increasing petrol costs (Tait 2007).

⁹ Shi’te tradition holds that the Jamkaran mosque was ordered built by the Mahdi himself.

soft power; that would require far more research than has so far been undertaken. Instead, the main aim was to establish a research agenda to examine the concept of 'religious soft power' and provisionally ascertain how it is wielded in the USA, India and Iran.

Working from the premise that religious soft power is an important factor in the recent foreign policies of the USA, India and Iran, this article sought to develop a conceptual innovation. The aim was to extend the use of the term soft power from its original usage – that is, government A exercises influence over government B in order to achieve the former's secular objectives – to help explain how religious actors may influence foreign policy by encouraging policy makers to incorporate religious beliefs, norms and values into specific foreign policies, with the result that a country's foreign policy takes on religious characteristics. To achieve influence religious actors must 'get the ear of government', establishing and developing close relationships with key individuals who share their religious convictions: in the USA, President George W. Bush, in Iran, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and in India, former prime minister, Lal Krishna Advani. Religious actors do not simply project themselves as traditional pressure groups – but try to influence foreign policy by exploiting key policy makers' shared religious norms, values and beliefs; in short, by the wielding of religious soft power.

Finally, the article noted a significant problem associated with the concept of religious soft power. That is, how consistently to operationalise religious soft power's foreign policy influence? How can we tell where the dividing line is between 'soft' and 'hard' power? On the one hand, it appears in some cases reasonable to identify congruence of interests between foreign policy makers and religious actors, but, on the other hand, how can we be sure that this is any more than an opportunistic coming together of two sets of actors who identify common ground that happens to be informed by religious norms, values and precepts? In other words, how can we *know* when religious beliefs are the key factor in explaining the influence of religious actors in relation to foreign policy? While this article has sought to establish relevant research questions, to answer them thoroughly requires much more research.

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