SOFT POWER AND NATIONAL INTEREST:
EVALUATING THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN’S
PUBLIC DIPLOMACY STRATEGIES

BY

ABDOL MOGHSET BANI KAMAL

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International Islamic University Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of ‘public diplomacy’ as an instrument of soft power in the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy in pursuit of its interests. It focuses on three public diplomacy institutions of Iran: al-Mustafa International University (MIU), Ahl-ul-bayt World Assembly (ABWA), and Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC). Adopting ‘relational public diplomacy’ approach, the research specifically focuses on building relations with elites, authorities, academics, and common people in Afghanistan and Malaysia through these public diplomacy institutions. The data have been collected from official documents and publications of these organizations, textual analysis of the statements of shia religious authorities and the Iranian leaders, particularly the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, late Ayatollah Khomeini, and his successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and fieldwork such as purposive interview. The research among others found that Iran is an ‘ideological sectarian state’ promoting shia version of Islamic values in different parts of the world including Malaysia and Afghanistan. These values are originating from the core shia principle of *imamate*. The nature of the public diplomacy activities of Iran in Malaysian and Afghanistan suggests that Iran’s foreign policy promotes the late Ayatollah Khomeini’s doctrine of ‘exporting revolution’. Evidences from Malaysian and Afghanistan reveal that Iran through its public diplomacy has been able to find supporters and sympathizers in the Muslim world who have developed close affinity with Iran. This Study recommends that the Muslim countries including Malaysia and Afghanistan need a comprehensive action plan to secure their societies from a sectarian tension resulting from the Islamic Republic of Iran’s sectarian oriented public diplomacy.
خلاصة البحث

تسعى هذه الدراسة لفحص دور "الدبلوماسية العامة" كأداة قوة ناعمة في السياسة الخارجية للمجتمعية الإسلامية الإيرانية في سعيها لتحقيق مصالحها. يركز هذا البحث على ثلاث مؤسسات دبلوماسية إيرانية عامة وهي: جامعة المصطفى العالمية، ولجنة إغاثة الإمام الحسيني، وجمعية هاتف البيت العالمي، وللجنة إغاثة الإمام الحسيني. يركز هذا البحث على مواجهة علاقات مع النخبة، السلطات، الأكاديميين، وعامة الناس في كل من دولة أفغانستان وماليزيا، وذلك من خلال المؤسسات الدبلوماسية العامة سالفة الذكر. هذا وقد تم جمع المعلومات من ملفات رسمية ومنشورات خاصة بهذه المؤسسات بالإضافة إلى التحليل النصي للتصريحات الصادرة عن السلطات الشيعية الدينية والقيادة الإيرانية، وخاصة مؤسسة المجتمعية الإسلامية الإيرانية الراحل آية الله الحسيني وخلفته آية الله علي خامني. هذا البحث، من بين أبحاث أخرى، وجد أن إيران هي "دولة طائفية إيدولوجية" تتعزز القيم الإسلامية حسب الرواية أو المذهب الشيعي في أماكن مختلفة في العالم، بما فيها دولة ماليزيا وأفغانستان. أما أن هذه القيم نابعة من مبدأ الشيعة الأساسي المتمثل في الإمامية. لذلك، إن طبيعة نشاطات الدبلوماسية العامة في إيران هي دبلوماسية ناعمة ومدنية، وتجنباً لتضخيم شعوب آية الله الحسيني الراحل من حيث "تصدير الثورة الإسلامية" ومبادئها. وهناك أداة وبراهين من ماليزيا وأفغانستان تكشف أن إيران من خلال دبلوماسيتها الناعمة قادرة على اتخاذ مبادئ وتعاون معها في العالم الإسلامي والذين هم أكثر ولاء لإيران بدلاً من الولاء لديهم. وببناء عليه، توصي هذه الدراسة أن الدول الإسلامية بما فيها ماليزيا وأفغانستان تحتاج إلى تحركات عملية شاملة لتأمين مجتمعها من التوتر الطائفي الذي بنته طائفة المجتمعية الإسلامية الإيرانية اعتماداً أو من خلال الدبلوماسية الناعمة.
The thesis of Abdol Moghset Bani Kamal has been approved by the following:

__________________________
Wahabuddin Ra’ees
Supervisor

__________________________
Ishtiaq Hossain
Internal Examiner

__________________________
Timothy C. Niblock
External Examiner

__________________________
Mutahir Shaikh
External Examiner

__________________________
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own study, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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Signature…………………………… Date……………………
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.......................... ..........................
Signature Date
This research is dedicated to:

My beloved father, Mufti Muammad Qasem Qasemi,

a teacher, a role-model, and a committed religious person for

his profound and persistent refusal of using the religion of Islam for purposes other

than Allah’s Good Pleasure.

My beloved mother

for all her dedications and supports

and

the loving memory of my uncle Abdul Qader Badpa who

who would have been proud if he were alive.
Praise and gratitude to Allah (SWT) whose mercy and blessings on me have no bounds. Peace and blessings on Muhammad (SAW), His noble messenger. Conducting and compiling a research on a scale like this always involves the efforts of many people besides the researcher. In my case, this endeavor would not have been possible if not for the assistance and support of many wonderful people I have met along the way. I would like to start with my supervisor, Associate Professor Dr. Wahabuddin Ra’ees. He did a wonderful job in ensuring that I produce a defensible thesis. He read my multiple drafts despite his heavy administrative schedule. My relationship with Professor Ra’ees was not confined to this research. He was a friend, a mentor, and a counsellor as well. He even took care of my financial problems, helping me financially in both direct and indirect ways. Without his support, I would have probably returned home empty hands long ago. I am grateful to Dr. Tunku Mohar Tunku Mohd. Mokhtar, Head of Department of Political Science, IIUM, for his help and support in completing this study, particularly for his constructive comments on the earlier draft of this thesis. His feedback helped improve the final work a great deal. I appreciate the help of my internal examiner Assoc. Professor Dr. Ishtiaq Hossain for reading the draft of this thesis as well and his valuable suggestions. His help was indeed a source of inspiration. When Emeritus Professor Dr. Timothy C. Niblock from the University of Exeter, United Kingdom, and Professor Dr. Mutahir Shaikh from the University of Karachi, Pakistan, graciously accepted to be my external examiners, I was overjoyed. I am grateful to both of them. I am also indebted to Professor Dr. Najibah Mohd Zain for chairing my Doctoral Examination Committee. Professor Dr. Abdul Rashid Moten, Professor Dr. ElFatih Abdullahi Abdelsalam, Assoc. Professor Dr. Gharoot S. Eisa, Assoc. Professor Dr. Md. Muniruzzaman, Dr. S. M. Quddus, and Dr. Muhamad Fuzi Omar made various suggestions that were helpful in defining the boundaries of this research. I am grateful to Associate Professor Dr Naeem Ahmad and Associate Professor Ramzan Bamri in Karachi University for their valuable support. I also thank Dr. Aliyo Katsina, Abdul Hakeem Adejumo, Selva Raj, Eid Mustafa, Ahmad Zahir, Nawaz Brohi, Bilal Shobaki, Adedoyin Raihanat, Sajid Hussain Baloch, Dr. Mahmoud Khordoo, Hadi Gamshadzehifar, Yaser Hosseini, Ibrahim Ahrari, Shabir Ahamd, and Nasir Ahmad Yousefi for their support. I thank the staff of the IIUM library and the Center for Postgraduate Studies (CPS) IIUM for their assistance, and also to Sister Norasita Hj. Zainal at the Alumni and Career Service Division (ACSD) IIUM, for her help in arranging appointments with my supervisor. I am especially grateful to my respected father Mufti Muhammad Qasem Qasemi for his unlimited support and my beloved mother, Rabiyah, for her unconditional love to me. I am grateful to my wife Ayesha and my two little daughters Assma and Asimah who endured lots of pain and difficulties during the conduct of this research. My siblings, particularly Owes Badpa, despite fighting with chronic Thalassemia, gave me emotional support. Family members, especially my uncles Abdul Sattar, Abdul Wahid, Abdul Naser, Abdul Baqi, Khalil, Abdul Basit, and Dr. Ubaidullah were also very helpful in many ways.
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<td>ARC</td>
<td>Amin Research Center</td>
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<td>AISA</td>
<td>Afghanistan Investment Support Agency</td>
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<td>ABWA</td>
<td>Ahl-ul-bayt World Assembly</td>
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<td>ABWA News Agency</td>
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<td>MIU</td>
<td>al-Muṣṭafā International University</td>
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<td>CRH</td>
<td>Cultural Revolution Headquarters</td>
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<td>CD</td>
<td>Compact Disc</td>
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<td>GCIK</td>
<td>Global Center for Islamic Knowledge</td>
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<td>HS</td>
<td>Hijrī Shamsī (Persian Calendar)</td>
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<td>ICRO</td>
<td>Islamic Culture and Relations Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Islamic State in Iraq and Syria</td>
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<td>ISTAC</td>
<td>Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization</td>
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<td>ISESCO</td>
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<td>ICANA</td>
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<td>IUMS</td>
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<td>IAIS</td>
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<td>IRIB</td>
<td>Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting</td>
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<td>IIUM</td>
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<td>ICP</td>
<td>Islamic Coalition Party</td>
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<td>JAKIM</td>
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<td>JUST</td>
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<td>KCSS</td>
<td>Kabul Center for Strategic Studies</td>
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<td>MCIG</td>
<td>Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<td>NAM</td>
<td>Non Aligned Movement</td>
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<td>OORS</td>
<td>Organization of Overseas Religious Seminaries</td>
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<td>OIC</td>
<td>Organization of Islamic Conference</td>
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<td>PAS</td>
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<td>USIA</td>
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<td>VOA</td>
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<td>WAPIST</td>
<td>World Assembly for the Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought</td>
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Following the 1979 Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, came with the doctrine of ‘exporting the revolution’. Nonetheless, he is quoted that “the best advice that can implement the revolution in Iran and export it into other places is sound advertising.”¹ In line with Ayatollah Khomeini’s advice, the Islamic Republic of Iran has always tried to promote its values and revolutionary ideas through ‘public diplomacy’, which is defined in terms of direct ‘state to people’ contact, rather than ‘state to state’ contact. The Islamic Republic of Iran is conducting its public diplomacy in various ways. This country is sponsoring a host of cultural, educational, and developmental programmes across the world.² As a result, there are many real and virtual networks, and disenfranchised religious and ethnic groups in the region, to whom the messages from the Islamic Republic of Iran are appealing.³ It has, in turn, provided the Islamic Republic of Iran with a significant amount of soft power and influence in the region.

Given that the Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the few Shia majority countries in the wide pool of the Muslim World with overwhelming Sunni majority states, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s public diplomacy has created a perception of threat in many countries, particularly, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s neighbouring

states. To take one example, King Abdullah of Jordan in his interview with Washington Post in December 2004 for the first time talked about a ‘Shia Crescent’ emerging in the Middle East’s horizon which according to him would destabilize the geopolitical balance in the region. He explicitly mentioned the Islamic Republic of Iran as a country which was coaching this new trend. His idea was picked up by many scholars, journalists, and politicians in a way that the term was modified into ‘Shia Full Moon’.

Among the public diplomacy institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran involved in educational, cultural and developmental programs abroad are: (1) al-Mustafa International University (MIU), a sizable university with a number of overseas branches operating across the world. (2) Imam Khumaini Relief Committee (IKRC), a charity institution with a number of branches operating in countries such as Comoro Islands, Afghanistan and Lebanon. (3) Ahl-ul-bayt World Assembly (ABWA), an institution active in networking and coalition building among the shia and pro-shia groups across the Muslim World including Afghanistan and Malaysia. These entities are state-sponsored institutions operating independently at time in full coordination with each other, as well as with the Iranian establishment.

The activities of the MIU, IKRC, and ABWA fall into three categories. First, educational and exchange programs focused on students, educationists, intellectuals, and educational institutions in many countries including Afghanistan and Malaysia. Second, developmental and aid programs officially known as ‘support diplomacy’ in a number of countries including Afghanistan. These programs mostly concentrate on

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4 Ibid
different countries’ downtrodden layer of the society, and other social groupings. Third, networking activities mostly focused on like-minded groups, especially Shia communities in different countries including Malaysia and Afghanistan.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Public Diplomacy is an important part of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy. The Islamic Republic of Iran uses public diplomacy as an instrument of ‘soft power’ to enhance its influence over other countries. Institutions are used in this respect. These institutions are actively engaged in different forms of public diplomacy activities across the world. Three institutions namely al-Mustafa International University (MIU), Ahl-ul-bayt World Assembly (ABWA), and Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC), and their activities have gradually assumed a central place as tools through which the Islamic Republic of Iran promotes its national interests in other countries.

This research investigates both the relevance of public diplomacy as an important component of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy and the way Iran conducts it. It also explores the goals and objectives that the Islamic Republic of Iran pursues through its public diplomacy, and the types of institutions involved in the process. For this purpose, the study examines the public diplomacy initiatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran with particular reference to the activities of MIU, ABWA and IKRC in different parts of the world especially in Afghanistan and Malaysia. Specifically, the study answers the following questions:

1- What are the public diplomacy strategies of the Islamic Republic of Iran and how do they differ from each other across the time and space?
2- What objectives and goals does the Islamic Republic of Iran pursue through its public diplomacy?

3- In what way does the public diplomacy of institutions such as MIU, ABWA, and IKRC protect and promote Iran’s national interest?

4- How do the operational mechanisms of MIU, ABWA, and IKRC cope with the contextual reality to uphold the Islamic Republic of Iran’s national interest?

1.3 JUSTIFICATION

Many of the existing studies on the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran are carried out by thinks-tanks such as Rand Corporation. Scholars, Iranian expatriates and non-Iranians have also extensively contributed to understanding various dimensions of Iran’s external behaviour. Nevertheless, these studies mostly focus on Iran’s official foreign policy or state-to-state diplomacy, thus partly ignoring the Islamic Republic of Iran’s public diplomacy. To be more specific, despite the Islamic Republic of Iran’s emphasis on public diplomacy, this dimension of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy is overshadowed by this country’s controversial stands on the issues of global importance such as nuclear proliferation, terrorism, Middle peace process etc.

Moreover, there is no study on the role of al-Mustafa International University (MIU), Ahl-ul-bayt World Assembly (ABWA), and Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC) in the conduct of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s public diplomacy. This study, therefore, offers an empirical assessment of the importance of public diplomacy in the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy in the light of the activities of these three institutions. Given the huge size of these organizations and their wide
area of activities across the world, these institutions are believed to be the main vehicles of Iran’s public diplomacy.

So far, no study has been conducted regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran’s public diplomacy toward Afghanistan and Malaysia. Afghanistan is a country of great importance, which shares a long border with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The presence of NATO forces in Afghanistan has limited the Islamic Republic of Iran’s military and hard power options; as a result, the Islamic Republic of Iran is highly engaged to fill up this hard-power deficit with soft-power. Malaysia is a forerunning country in the Muslim World which is admired by many Muslims as a successful model for economic development and political stability. Consequently, it makes Malaysia a competitor for the Islamic Republic of Iran, given the latter’s claims for the leadership of the Muslim World. There is also a growing interest among the Malaysian scholars and authorities about the Islamic Republic of Iran’s public diplomacy toward Malaysia.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
The objectives of the study are to:

1. Discuss the importance of public diplomacy in the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy.

2. Examine the nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s public diplomacy and its strategies.

3. Explore the goals and objectives that the Islamic Republic of Iran is pursuing through its public diplomacy.
4. To analyze the activities of al-Mustafa International University (MIU), Ahl-ul-bayt World Assembly (ABWA), and Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC) and their operational mechanisms.

1.5 LITERATURE REVIEW

Systematic study on Iran’s foreign policy is associated with Ramzani’s work in the 1960s. Ramzani analyzed Iran’s foreign policy on the basis of factors such as geography, history, and great powers’ rivalry in the region. Building on Ramzani’s work, Heravi and Key, and Oslen, focused on Iran’s foreign policy from 1930 to 1950. During this period, Iran was a weak and unstable country. It had no modern institutions, and was caught in great powers’ rivalry.

Works by Carr, Parvin, Zabih and Chobin, Amirsadeghi, Candy, and Blake, focused on a different period of Iran’s foreign policy. They concentrated on Iran’s foreign policy between 1960 and 1979 during which Iran was a pro-Western emerging power in the region, and was engaged in enhancement of its economic and military capabilities. They argue that Iran was able to maintain good relations with superpowers while maintaining an “independent national policy” for regional
maneuvering.\textsuperscript{17} The only Achille’s Heel in Iran’s relations with the West in this period seemed to be the Iranian push for nationalization of its oil industries. However, Blake notes that the West was enduring Iran’s coquetry in order not to let it fall on the lap of communism.\textsuperscript{18}

These studies show that the foreign policy of Iran in this period was truly a reflection of realist approach. All these studies discuss the diplomatic history of Iran within the context of its geo-political significance in the Middle East and Persian Gulf and the rivalries of great powers in the region. It is important to note that the pre-1979 revolution literature does not pay much attention to the role of public diplomacy in Iran’s foreign policy. It is partly due to this fact that the time-frame of these studies coincided with Cold War era, during which countries would give emphasis on official diplomacy (state to state), and national interest was mainly defined in terms of ‘hard power’. However, some policies of Iran especially in its surrounding region implicitly show that Iran was aware of non-military dimensions of power. For instance, besides military build-up, Iran was providing its neighbors with subsidized oil, and was also championing some sort of regional cooperation.\textsuperscript{19} These studies reveal that the present approach to the public diplomacy among the Iranian leaders is mostly a post-revolution phenomenon, which started in 1979. Therefore, studies on the public policy of Iran are to be sought in the wide pool of literature on the foreign policy of this country.

Following the 1979 revolution, the religious nature of the political structure of Iran and its controversial foreign policy attracted more scholars to study Iran’s foreign policy. Yet, studies that specifically deal with the Iranian public diplomacy are few.

\textsuperscript{17} Shahram Chubin and et al, 76-78.
\textsuperscript{18} Kriseten, 57-59.
\textsuperscript{19} Talat, 83-84.
Therefore, one would need to look into different types of studies on the foreign policy of post-revolution Iran in order to find references about this country’s public diplomacy. These studies can be categorized into four types: the first category focuses on the sources and objectives of Iran’s foreign policy; the second category presents comparative analysis of Iran’s foreign policy under different presidents; the third category deals with Iran’s official diplomacy; and, the fourth category deals with Iran’s public diplomacy.

1.5.1 Studies on the Sources and Objectives of Iran’s Foreign Policy

Studies on the sources of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy are many. Some of these works are based on western theoretical approaches. Firouzabadi applies Frankfurt school of critical theory to Iran’s foreign policy and argues that the Islamic Republic of Iran is not acting on the basis of the ‘logic of consequentionality’, rather the ‘logic of responsibility’.20 Firoozabadi, in another study, uses Ontological Security theory, and contends that the Iranian foreign policy is formulated within the framework of wise-actor model and on cost-benefit analysis.21 Karimifard applies Constructivism theory and argues that the principal guides of Iranian foreign policy are founded on the claim of ‘ruling the world’.22 Mohammad Nia analyzes Iran’s foreign policy with Holistic Constructivism approach and notes that the revolutionary values and ideological perspectives such as shiaism, political Islam, Islamic revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini’s worldview constitute the prime source of Iranian foreign policy.

Sadri analyzes the trends in the Iranian foreign policy in line with Rosenau’s concept of ‘Linkage Politics’ and claims that the core objectives of Iran’s foreign policy are based on non-alignment principles. In order to fit these theories with various dimensions of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy, the authors have interpreted these theories loosely. There also exists an in-built caveat in these studies while attempting to apply these theories to the Islamic Republic of Iran’s external behaviour. They argue that these theories have their origin in western values and worldviews, and therefore, cannot be applied on the Islamic Republic of Iran’s external behavior.

Some studies on the sources and objectives of Iranian foreign policy are based on a set of ideational factors. Ramazani, Aslaghi, and Naghibzadeh argue that justice, freedom and peace are the principal guides of Iran’s foreign policy. Similarly, Dehshiri and Majidi, Sadri, Soltani and Amiri, and Ramzani examine the sources and objectives of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy with reference to its ideational, national, and historical sources. They analyze the Islamic Republic of

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Iran’s foreign policy with reference to Islamic and revolutionary principles, but in analyzing the actual behavior of Iran, they end up with pragmatism in one way or the other. Given that principles are usually rigid, while pragmatism is mostly understood in the context flexibility and compromise, these studies, in fact, desperately try to demonstrate coherence between Islamic and revolutionary principles and Iran’s pragmatic behavior. There are, however, some studies which discuss the importance of ideology and promoting it to the outside world through foreign policy. For instance, Mirbagheri, and Rakel, note that there are differences between shia and conventional western frameworks of foreign policy. They argue that the Iranian leaders accept rationality as long as it serves their doctrinal interests.

1.5.2 Comparative and Historical Studies on Iran’s Foreign Policy

The literature under this category includes historical and comparative studies. It divides Iran’s foreign policy into different phases, and then analyzes one period or makes an overall comparison. For instance, Shah Alam focuses on the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy during President Khatami (1997-2005). He notes a move from Khomeini’s principle of ‘exporting the revolution’ to Khatami’s bid for ‘dialogue of civilizations’. Shah Alam sees this move as major shift in Iran’s foreign policy from confrontation to reconciliation. Ayoozi takes the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy during Ahmadinejad’s government and in a rhetorical tune compares it with other foreign policy approaches in post-revolution Iran. He attributes