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# القوة الناعمة الدينية وسياسة الخارجية: رؤى حول الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية والهند وإيران

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**الملخص**

تقوم جميع الدول بصياغة سياسات خارجية تهدف ظاهريًا إلى تحقيق مجموعة محددة من المصالح الوطنية وأهداف معينة. يجب أن تظل استراتيجية الدولة الخارجية قابلة للتكيف بما يكفي للاستجابة للتغيرات الديناميكية في السياسة العالمية، مع حماية وتقدم المصالح الوطنية. تتشكل السياسات الخارجية لكل دولة، إلى حد ما، وتعتمد على مجموعة من مؤشرات القوة الشاملة (بما في ذلك الموقع الجيوستراتيجي؛ والازدهار الاقتصادي والاستقرار؛ والقدرة العسكرية؛ والتماسك السياسي الداخلي) بالإضافة إلى المناخ الدولي القائم. تمتلك عدد محدود من الحكومات سياسات خارجية تتأثر بشكل ظاهري أو كبير بالدين. تبحث هذه الورقة في السياسات الخارجية للولايات المتحدة الأمريكية والهند وإيران - الدول التي يُقال إن الدين يلعب دورًا في إنشاء وتنفيذ السياسة الخارجية. تستكشف كيف تهدف مؤسسات دينية معينة وحركات، بالإضافة إلى مجموعات سياسية مستوحاة من الدين، إلى التأثير على أجندات السياسة الخارجية. تتبنى الورقة نهجًا مقارنًا، تركز على ثلاث تقاليد دينية - المسيحية الإنجيلية (في الولايات المتحدة)، الهندوسية (في الهند)، والإسلام الشيعي (في إيران). في كل حالة، تتمحور القضية المركزية حول كيفية تفاعل الأطر الإيديولوجية والمؤسسية المختلفة، سواء كانت علمانية أو دينية، للتأثير على تطوير وتنفيذ السياسة الخارجية. لا تدعي هذه الورقة أن تكون مسحًا شاملاً لتأثير الفاعلين الدينيين المحددين في الولايات المتحدة والهند وإيران، أو الإسقاط المقابل للقوة الناعمة الدينية؛ يتطلب هذا الجهد بحثًا أكثر شمولاً. بدلاً من ذلك، الهدف الأساسي هو اقتراح أجندة بحث تهدف إلى دراسة مفهوم "القوة الناعمة الدينية" وتقييم كيفية تطبيقها في الولايات المتحدة والهند وإيران فيما يتعلق بسياساتها الخارجية. انطلاقًا من الاعتقاد بأن القوة الناعمة الدينية هي عنصر مهم في السياسات الخارجية للولايات المتحدة والهند وإيران، تهدف هذه الورقة إلى تحقيق تقدم مفاهيمي. الهدف هو توسيع تطبيق مصطلح القوة الناعمة بما يتجاوز سياقه الأولي - لتوضيح كيف يمكن أن يؤثر الفاعلون الدينيون على السياسة الخارجية من خلال دفع صانعي السياسات إلى دمج المعتقدات والمعايير والقيم الدينية في سياسات خارجية معينة. أخيرًا، تعترف هذه الورقة بمسألة ملحوظة مرتبطة بمفهوم القوة الناعمة الدينية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدين، السياسة، السياسة الخارجية، القوة الناعمة الدينية، التقاليد الدينية.

Religious Soft Power and Foreign Policy Politics:Insights on the United States of America, India and Iran

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**Abstract**

All nations craft foreign policies that are ostensibly aimed at achieving a defined set of national interests and specific objectives. A nation's foreign strategy must remain adaptable enough to respond to the shifting dynamics of global politics, all while safeguarding and advancing national interests. The foreign policies of each country are, to some extent, shaped by and dependent upon a combination of its overall power indicators (including geostrategic position; economic prosperity and stability; military capability; and domestic political cohesion) as well as the existing international climate. Only a limited number of governments possess foreign policies that are overtly or significantly influenced by religion. This paper examines the foreign policies of the United States of America (USA), India, and Iran – nations where religion is said to play a role in both the creation and implementation of foreign policy. It investigates how certain religious institutions and movements, along with political groups inspired by religion, aim to sway foreign policy agendas. The paper adopts a comparative approach, focusing on three religious traditions – evangelical Christianity (in the United States), Hinduism (in India), and Shia Islam (in Iran). In each case, the central concern is how various ideological and institutional frameworks, both secular and religious, interact to seek to affect the development and execution of foreign policy. This paper does not purport to be a comprehensive survey of the impact of specific religious actors in the USA, India, and Iran, nor the corresponding projection of religious soft power; such an endeavor would necessitate much more extensive research. Instead, its primary goal is to propose a research agenda aimed at examining the notion of 'religious soft power' and to tentatively assess how it is applied in the USA, India, and Iran concerning their foreign policies. Working from the belief that religious soft power is a significant element in the foreign policies of the USA, India, and Iran, this paper aims to create a conceptual advancement. The objective is to broaden the application of the term soft power beyond its initial context – to elucidate how religious actors may sway foreign policy by prompting policymakers

to integrate religious beliefs, norms, and values into particular foreign policies. Lastly, this paper recognizes a notable issue tied to the concept of religious soft power.

**Keywords**: Religion, Politics, Foreign Policy, Religious Soft Power, Religious Traditions

**Introduction**

Since the end of the Cold War and the later 'liberalization' of the global framework, the use of national interests through conventional hard power has faced considerable criticism. The deployment of military force in other countries, especially, has come under scrutiny; and notable instances such as Iraq and Afghanistan reinforce claims that this approach struggles with the complex challenges of nation-building and counterterrorism. In this context, the concept of 'soft' power has become more prominent as an alternative or complementary strategy. Joseph S. Nye put forward the idea of soft power in 1990 (Nye, 1990a). He argued that the United States was not only the strongest nation in military and economic terms but also possessed considerable soft power, which is the capacity to persuade other nations to embrace American interests as their own. In 2001, in *The Paradox of American Power*, he placed soft power within the broader dialogue on multilateralism (Nye, 2002). Then, in 2004, in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, he offered an in-depth exploration, defining the notion as 'the ability to achieve your objectives through attraction instead of coercion or financial inducements,' a capability that 'arises from the appeal of a nation's culture, political ideals, and policies' (Nye, 2004, p. 9). For Nye, soft power goes beyond mere image, public relations, and temporary popularity. It embodies true power: the capability to achieve objectives.

Nye's work on soft power has garnered significant authoritative recognition, notably influencing American foreign policy and that of other countries. His terminology and ideas are crucial for analyzing and discussing this subject. In his definition, at least two important aspects emerge: soft power is encompassed in traditional definitions of power; and culture emerges as a new source of strength. Nye categorizes the 'power' to realize desired ends into three broad types: coercive, which relies on threats; inducive, dependent on financial incentives; and cooptive. The information age has greatly increased the effectiveness of this third type while expanding the distribution of information and propaganda. Nye's main argument posits that soft power resources are becoming increasingly important in modern times, and it is profoundly unwise to disregard them or, through acts of hubris, squander them thoughtlessly.

Soft power sharply contrasts with hard power, which refers to using military and economic force to coerce others into changing their positions. Hard power is

understood to depend on threats or inducements, and it is not always necessary or the best approach. Sometimes, a Power can achieve its goals without resorting to military or economic intimidation or incentives by utilizing its ability to influence events through persuasion and attractiveness. Nye compares this to playing three-dimensional chess across three layered boards. On the upper military board, the United States is the only Power with international reach. Nevertheless, even at this level, there are regional and local Powers that possess enough military capability to complicate American military efforts in those regions; China and Russia are key examples. On the central board of economic interests, power is distributed among multiple actors. For significant issues like trade, anti-trust regulations, and financial oversight, the U.S. must secure agreement from the European Union (EU), Japan, and other economic Powers to achieve its various goals. The lowest board addresses a range of challenges such as terrorism, international crime, climate change, and the proliferation of infectious diseases. This bottom board clearly lacks a unipolar nature, demonstrating power that is dispersed and disorganized among both state and non-state entities (Nye, 2004).

In international relations, soft power arises from intangible yet crucial factors like prevailing values, domestic practices, policies, and methods of international interaction. States are more likely to garner and enhance soft power in the digital era if they possess diverse communication channels that shape perceptions; if their dominant cultural values align closely with current global norms (which presently stress liberalism, pluralism, and individual freedoms); and if their reputation is strengthened by their domestic and international principles and policies (Wilson, 2018). Many vital assets of soft power exist outside direct governmental influence (unlike hard power), and their effectiveness is significantly shaped by the openness of the audience. Furthermore, soft power resources generally function indirectly by moulding the policy environment and may take years to yield the intended impact, although there are cases where soft power has also resulted in quick outcomes.

Soft power often exists outside the control of governments, yet it is an aspect that must be recognized. In democratic nations like the United States, soft power is not governed by state authority. While Washington may not be able to censor the bold narratives and themes presented in Hollywood films that could offend Islamic countries, this very liberty is what makes American culture attractive. The fact that civil society shapes soft power does not lessen its significance for public diplomacy. Equally important is the appeal of the American political system, which is widely admired for its civil liberties and the opportunities available to immigrants. Domestic policies can affect soft power; initiatives aimed at promoting democracy and human rights have enhanced American influence, whereas issues like capital punishment and lenient gun control laws have weakened it, particularly

in Europe. The visible presence of military, economic, and soft power on the international stage can both strengthen and undermine soft power.

The character and method of foreign policy are critical elements. Policies based on widely accepted values are more likely to encourage cooperation. Federalism, democracy, and open markets were the common values that supported Western alliances during the Cold War. In the twenty-first century, shared values encompass promoting international order, managing weapons of mass destruction, fighting terrorism and drug trafficking, and supporting trade, economic growth, and environmental initiatives. The concept of 'soft versus hard power' presents a misleading dichotomy. From one angle, both proponents of soft power and advocates of hard power have not succeeded in merging their views into a unified framework to advance national interests (Wilson, 2018). Nonetheless, the accomplishments of soft power can be significant, varied, and occasionally unforeseen. While hard power remains essential in a turbulent environment filled with states and non-state actors (such as terrorist organizations willing to use mass and indiscriminate violence), soft power could increasingly play a vital role in deterring the recruitment of supporters by these groups and tackling transnational issues that require collaborative solutions.

The use of soft power by religion arose from a widespread agreement that its impact on political and social issues had not disappeared. In the early twentieth century, many scholars who supported the secularization thesis claimed that religion's influence would be eradicated from public and political life, confining it to the private domain (Hay, 1997, p. 711). They also proposed that this outcome would further advance the continuous secularization of politics and international relations, a trend that has been underway since the Westphalia Peace Treaties in 1648 (Hurd, 2019). Nevertheless, the latter part of the twentieth century demonstrated that religion did not diminish in public awareness; instead, it consistently shaped events in various areas worldwide (Hay, 2015; Petito & Hatzopoulos, 2013; Fox, 2011). A key example of this was the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Following this, the emergence of Christian parties in Europe (Kalyvas, 2018), the eruption of faith-based conflicts and cooperative initiatives in the Balkans (Oz, 2021a), and ultimately, the September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda attacks on the United States highlighted the significant role religion plays in global politics. This development resulted in a heightened emphasis on exploring the role of religion in both domestic and foreign policy, as well as in economics (McCleary & Barro, 2016), conflict resolution (Gurses, 2015), terrorism, and immigration policies (Warner, 1998). This relatively new and diverse field of study also sought to clarify how religion fits into politics, emerging as a key concern regarding the unfolding challenges the world faces (Sandal & Fox 2013). To understand the changes that have transpired, it is beneficial to start with the understanding that

religion's engagement in politics is 'ambivalent' (Philpott, 2017), resulting in varied outcomes.

One indisputable fact is that religion has re-emerged on the global scene, not only playing a crucial role in different contexts but also acting as an important tool for various actors, both state and non-state. For some individuals, religion translates to power. However, it is crucial to recognize that religion does not represent 'hard' power, like military strength or financial assets. Instead, religion exemplifies soft power, similar to culture, history, and other normative frameworks. The concept of soft power is not static; it undergoes changes and developments. The idea of religious soft power, which stems from the intersection of religion and (secular) soft power, is a concept that is difficult to articulate and has generated considerable debate. Nonetheless, it is widely acknowledged that the term 'soft power' was first associated with American foreign policy analysis by Joseph S. Nye in the early 1990s. However, as Yang and Li (2021) point out, it remains challenging to theorize definitively, as there are evidently multiple definitions, tools, and limitations regarding its analytical usage. To address this challenge, the chapter investigates various countries, religious groups, and events as case studies while exploring the 'ambivalent' nature of religious soft power.

Soft power is frequently cited in discussions of politics and international relations. This concept gained significant attention in the early 2000s, a time characterized by relative stability. So, how is soft power defined? Nye originally defined soft power as: ‘When one nation causes other nations to desire what it desires’ (Nye, 1990b, p. 167). In this context, Nye implies that countries can influence the views of politicians and the public in other nations through cultural, educational, linguistic, and other normative means without resorting to ‘hard’ power. Although Nye has refined the concept over the years, later scholars have often sought to expand its interpretation. Many scholars, including Nye, frequently equate soft power with public diplomacy. Furthermore, the analytical use of soft power is widespread, and its definition evolves with diverse illustrative examples. Before progressing beyond Nye’s definition, it is important to point out that the creator of the soft power concept largely overlooks the inclusion of ‘religion’ in his detailed writings on the topic, only briefly acknowledging that religion can exemplify soft power, capable of generating both positive and negative normative results. Thus, while the modern interpretation of religious soft power is shaped by Nye’s framework, he did not notably advance its analytical development. Henne (2022), focusing on Saudi Arabia and Russia, contends that when the notion of soft power is combined with material—or hard—power, it can transform into ‘smart’ power. Examples of this include China’s economic reach in the interior of Africa (Kurlantzick, 2019), Turkey’s historical and cultural influence in the Balkans (Oz, 2021b), and Qatar’s worldwide presence through significant sports sponsorships. All of these examples

expand the definition of soft power beyond Western-centric perspectives. Additionally, Great Britain continues to maintain its global influence through the English language, while Sweden bolsters its soft power through its focus on human rights discourse. However, with a few exceptions, the prevailing theory in political science and international relations tends to view soft power from a state-centric perspective, influenced either by a neo-realist stance or by an identity-oriented approach, such as that used by the so-called 'English school' of international relations and more generally the social constructivist viewpoint.

In today's world, which many view as notably complex, religion is commonly seen as one of humanity's oldest identities, uniting and dividing societies, and is broadly accepted as representing significant aspects of soft power. Both religious and secular nations, as well as non-state religious organizations, can act as agents of soft power. Moreover, global entities like the Vatican, along with various religious and cultural organizations, employ soft power as well.

The exploration of soft power in conjunction with religion has recently gained traction in scholarly debates. This shift is largely due to the concurrent existence of religion alongside other components of normative power, along with the somewhat unclear nature of the soft power concept itself. According to Steiner (2011), interfaith summits inherently represent instances of religious soft power, where attendees at such events are able to influence foreign policy through religious avenues. However, this explanation does not precisely clarify what encompasses religious soft power. Likewise, Sandal and Fox, in their 2013 examination of the impact of religion on foreign policy, do not provide a definitive explanation. They propose that while secular soft power utilizes religion, it does not supersede other forms of 'hard' power. Furthermore, they argue that religion can encourage international unity by fostering a sense of common purpose and solidarity among different groups (Sandal & Fox, 2013, pp. 96–98).

Jeff Hay was the first to transition the notion of religious soft power from a theoretical concept to practical application. Since the early 2000s, he has centered his research on this theme through various case studies, suggesting that both secular and religious foreign policy actors aim to harness religion to achieve particular goals. Hay (2018, p. 143) indicated that if religious figures manage to capture the attention of significant foreign policy decision-makers through shared beliefs, they may sway foreign policy outcomes using religious soft power. In his subsequent works, Hay argues that both state and non-state religious entities employ religion as a versatile power resource, providing an array of examples of different groups attempting to exert religious soft power. He points out instances involving a range of actors, including the Pope and the Holy See; the governments of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and the United States during Donald Trump's presidency (2017–2021); along with non-state groups like American Evangelicals, Roman Catholics, and

Sunni extremist factions such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Hay, 2016). Overall, Hay asserts that regardless of the setting or purposes behind its deployment, those looking to wield religious soft power prioritize gaining visibility by highlighting religious arguments and then endeavor to influence the targeted groups and other involved parties.

A second group of scholars has sought to refine the concepts articulated by the first cohort. At the forefront of these thinkers is Peter Mandaville, who in 2018 undertook a project entitled *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power* in partnership with the Brookings Institute and the Georgetown University Berkley Center. Together with Shadi Hamid, Mandaville aimed to clarify how different actors use religious soft power for geopolitical objectives in their work 'Islam as statecraft: How to use religion in foreign policy' (2018). However, before providing this clarification, they aimed to define the concept of religious soft power. It is emphasized that they attempted to define it because, akin to Haynes, they recognized the concept's inherent vagueness and its limitations. In this respect, they contend that religious soft power embodies a type of influence that nations sometimes utilize alongside sharp power within the current global order, initially targeting geographical structures and then specific groups. Within this framework, entities that leverage the same religion as an aspect of soft power across various geographical regions may encounter conflicts, a situation that has become more frequent in today's global landscape. Consequently, Mandaville and Hamid argue that the upsurge in both global conflicts and collaborations suggests that religious soft power can take on multiple forms. Viewed from this perspective, the revival of religion in global politics and the discourse surrounding religious soft power since the 1990s signify a shift toward something new.

Building on the discoveries of Mandaville and Hamid, Peter Henne's research in 2019 explores how religion is integrated into the foreign policies of the United States and Russia, suggesting that religious soft power often plays a role in contemporary foreign policy conflicts and acts as a mechanism for both governments and non-state actors to engage in competition. In this regard, Henne claims that typical foreign policy analysis falls short because it fails to consider the impact of religion, despite the fact that religious soft power can sometimes serve as part of 'traditional'—or secular—foreign policy. Furthermore, within the second generation of scholars examining religious soft power, Gregorio Bettiza (2020) offers a potentially groundbreaking change in viewpoint, arguing that religion independently influences foreign policy significantly, a notion he refers to as 'sacred capital,' which can be a potent tool in particular circumstances. Bettiza goes on to argue that certain nations effectively harness religion in their foreign policy strategies due to distinct traits, which aligns with the soft power concept.

After our concise review of different understandings of religious soft power, it is evident that we are now witnessing a second wave of scholars concentrating on this subject. However, it cannot be asserted that this generation significantly diverges from the first, aside from expanding the examples and amplifying the concept's prominence. While they offer insightful contributions and definitions, we have not moved far from what Haynes described concerning soft religious power two decades ago. When discussing religious soft power in a global context today, we can contend that it has developed into a resource leveraged by various regimes, encompassing both democratic and authoritarian states, all aiming to enhance their influence.

The notion that religion can affect a nation's behavior within the international arena is widely accepted. In some Muslim nations, like Iran and Saudi Arabia, Islam is frequently cited as a fundamental guiding principle. In contrast, several countries, including France, the United Kingdom, and Russia, are characterized by their secular foreign policies, where a clear distinction exists between religious and state matters.

Religion was a major source of international competitiveness and occasionally war in many parts of the world, particularly Europe, prior to the establishment of increasingly secular international relations. At the time of the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), such religious activity involving competing religious beliefs was a well-established feature of foreign affairs in Europe (both *intra-Christian*, including Protestant and Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic, and *Christianity* versus *Islam*). The rise of politically centralized, increasingly secular states—first in Western Europe and subsequently via colonialism—seemed to have a considerable negative impact on religion's importance for international relations over time.

Two interconnected processes—modernization and secularization—illustrated this. These related concepts shared a common assumption for the study of international relations: sovereign nations are the primary entities in international relations, defined by the essential principles of non-intervention and state sovereignty as key attributes. These notions gradually permeated global thought, resulting in what is known as the "four pillars" of the Westphalian system. According to Philpott, the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) established "a framework of political authority that was shaped centuries ago by a distinctly secularizing series of events and has remained in its secular form ever since" (Philpott, 2012, p. 79). Overall, it effectively eliminated religion as a rationale for warfare. It was widely accepted that the combination of two interconnected phenomena—secular modernization and the ascent of science and rational thought—would apply persistent pressure on religious belief, leading to its gradual decline and the rise—around the world—of

distinctly secular governments and societies, as the significance of religion in international relations diminished.

Nevertheless, this perspective has recently been revised, with some noting an almost worldwide resurgence of religion, with only Western Europe resisting this trend (Berger, 2019; Stark & Fink, 2018; Bankole, 2020; Aboaba, 2022). Consequently, the "secularization thesis," which has faced vigorous criticism, has regained prominence. Many contemporary political occurrences that indicate a resurgence of religiosity are interpreted by those attempting to uphold the secularization thesis, like Bruce (2012), as evidence of a fundamentalist, antimodernist reaction against science, industrialization, and liberal Western principles—often regarded as merely an isolated exception to ongoing secularization trends and infrequently recognized as part of a broader global phenomenon (Sahliyeh, 2010, p. 19). As demonstrated, advocates of the secularization thesis frequently regard the impact of religion on politics—and consequently, on international relations—as normatively "anti-modern," typically linked with the sometimes-pejorative label of "religious fundamentalism" (Marty & Appleby, 2013). However, if we constrain our comprehension of religious entities in international relations to this viewpoint, we risk overlooking critical issues that do not align with the fundamentalist and anti-modernist narrative. For example, the Israel-Palestinian conflict, which does not adhere to an anti-modernist or fundamentalist perspective, primarily centers on territorial disputes. Recently, this conflict has been explicitly associated with several religious and cultural matters, including the control of sacred sites important to both Judaism and Islam.

Moreover, the Iranian revolution of 1979 is sometimes interpreted as both anti-modernist and fundamentalist in nature. However, its implications for international relations reach far beyond a limited emphasis on the revolution's overtly religious fundamentalist aspects and encompass a broader consideration of Islam's role as a revolutionary force that influences Iran's foreign policy. A third instance is the Roman Catholic Church, which played a significant role in the democratic uprisings that occurred in various parts of the world during the 1980s and 1990s, including Southern Europe, Latin America, Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and East Asia. Its progress was neither defined by fundamentalism nor anti-modernity. Last but not least, consider the atrocities committed by various Islamist terrorists against the governments and people of the United States, Spain, and Britain on September 11, 2001 (also known as "9/11," the New York and Pentagon attacks), March 11, 2003 (also known as "3/11," the Madrid bombings), and July 7, 2005 (also known as "7/7," the London bombings). It would be incorrect to dismiss these events as solely an anti-modernist and fundamentalist backlash to secularization. Given that the majority of those killed, particularly on 9/11, were Muslims rather than Christians or Jews, the attacks together raise concerns about

the ideological presumptions and objectives of their murderers. What did the bombers want to accomplish? What were their ideological tenets and objectives? We are left with a limited focus that ignores other significant concerns, such as the influence of globalization and of Western, pro-Israel foreign policies, if we dismiss them as merely anti-modernist and proponents of Islamic extremism.

Additionally, a number of religious figures have adopted the stance that participating in politics is crucial to their ethics. For instance, a number of religious leaders have played major roles in human rights initiatives, such as Pope John Paul II (1920-2005), Archbishop Desmond Tutu (born 1931), and Cardinal Arnulfo Romeroy Galdámez (1917-1980). This is not a new phenomenon; for instance, religious players played a major role in the anti-slavery movement throughout the eighteenth century, the civil rights movement in the 1960s in the USA, and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa that resulted in democratization in 1994.

The main point is that there are now many religious actors in international affairs, and these actors have a variety of issues beyond just a narrow concentration on religious fundamentalism and anti-modernism. Some promote collaboration, "interreligious discussion," and "more religious participation around issues of global development and conflict resolution" (Banchoff, 2015). Others are more focused on rivalry and, on occasion, conflict with other secular as well as other religious actors. Finally, certain nations, like the United States, India, and Iran, increasingly allow religious figures to influence foreign policy.

All countries have foreign policies that are allegedly intended to further a certain set of interests and objectives. A state's foreign policy must be adaptable enough to keep up with the shifting dynamics and features of world politics while still safeguarding and advancing domestic interests. It is generally acknowledged that a nation's domestic circumstances play a significant effect in determining its foreign policy. According to Frankel (1963), a nation's domestic environment, including its requirements, priorities, strengths, and weaknesses, are largely reflected in that nation's foreign policy. This implies that certain 'objective' factors, such as history, geography, socioeconomic circumstances, and culture, interact with the shifting dynamics of international politics to affect a state's foreign policy.

The domestic and external aspects of a nation's foreign policy must be balanced for it to be successful. The overall power indices of a nation, such as its geographic location, its economic well-being, its military might, and its domestic political stability, as well as its engagement with the current international context, all influence its foreign policy to some extent. Few governments actually or significantly use religion as a driving force in their foreign policies or, more broadly, in international relations. Following, the foreign policies of the USA, India, and Iran will be examined. These are countries where it is alleged that religion influences both the formulation and implementation of foreign policy.

How and when could domestic religious actors have an impact on a state's foreign policy? Given that "religion plays a vital role in politics in certain regions of the world," it is possible that there will be "higher importance of religious groups in society and politics" in some nations compared to others when attempting to respond to this question (Telhami, 2014, p. 71). Second, religious actors' capacity to transfer prospective *influence* into actual effect on state foreign policies will in part depend on their ability to gain access to and potentially have an impact on those processes. Third, the capacity of religious players to affect foreign policy is likewise correlated with their capacity to affect policy in other contexts. For instance, the democratic system in the USA features open decision-making structures and procedures that may provide both secular and religious players with obvious chances to influence both domestic and international policy-making (Hudson, 2015, pp. 295–297). But it is a highly constrained and conventional conception of influence to assume that religious actors must 'reach the ear of government' directly. In general, interest groups can influence elected officials and members of the executive branch through lobbying, campaign contributions, voting in elections, and other means, as noted by Walt and Mearsheimer (Walt & Mearsheimer, 2016, p. 6).

Comparatively notable examples include the United States, India, and Iran. The USA stands out as a "deviant" example since it is the most powerful "modern" culture in the world with a sizable population of individuals who appear to be deeply religious (Norris & Inglehart, 2014; Dada, 2020; Folami, et al., 2022). While previous American administrations have attempted to defend foreign policy in terms of Christian morality, it is typically linked to the universalist, secular language of democracy, liberty, and wealth. Yet, in recent years, evangelical Christians have had a substantial impact on the formulation and implementation of foreign policy, particularly with regard to democratization, human rights, and religious freedom (Hay, 2018; Ajala, 2019).

India, another country that is ostensibly secular, has a largely religious populace. Consequently, the differences between conservative and liberal religious tendencies in the USA have shaped the worldviews of foreign policy decision-makers over time. There is the Gandhian tradition of nonviolence on the one hand. On the other hand, a strong kind of Indian nationalism is supported by a distinctively Hindu religious culture. Yet, because to the significance of the overarching history of secular Nehruvian nonalignment, the influence of these two divergent traditions on Indian foreign policy has been constrained throughout time (Chiriyankandath, 2014, p. 200; Bankole, 2020; Aboaba, 2022).

The Iranian state is a revolutionary "theodemocracy"[1] which has regional, sectarian, pan-Islamic, and international aspirations. The revolutionary catchphrase, "Neither East, nor West," was intended to change the USA-dominated international order

through an Islamic-inspired foreign policy. Yet, Iran's soft power portfolio was small and structurally constrained, mostly due to its Shia-centric focus, which found it difficult to resonate in a Sunni-dominated Arab Middle East. Nonetheless, Iran's capacity to project its religious soft power improved after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

This paper looks at the foreign policies of the United States of America (USA), India and Iran – countries where religion is said to play a role in both foreign policy formation and execution. It analyzes how selected religious organizations and movements, as well as political groups deriving their inspiration from religion, seek to influence foreign policy agendas. This paper has a comparative focus, examining three religious traditions – evangelical Christianity (United States), 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. This paper does 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 soft power; that would require far more research. Instead, its main aim is 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 in relation to foreign policy. Working from the premise that religious soft power is an important factor in the foreign policies of the USA, India and Iran, this paper sought to develop a conceptual innovation. The aim is to extend the use of the term soft power from its original usage – 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. Finally, this paper also notes a significant problem associated with the concept of religious soft power.

**Religious Soft Power and Foreign Policy**

'Soft power' refers to the ability of an entity, which is often a state but not exclusively, to influence and attract others in order to change their actions. It encompasses aspects like culture, values, and ideas that represent different forms of influence, contrasting with "hard" power, which usually involves the use of force and/or financial incentives. Despite the importance of religion in the context of international relations post-9/11, few scholars have addressed soft power in this area (see Haynes, 2017, pp. 31-62). Joseph Nye, who coined the term, highlights non-religious sources of soft power, briefly noting that "organized religious movements have held soft power for ages" (2004, p. 94). Other researchers who have explored the role of soft power in international relations – such as Melissen (2015) – give the subject merely a cursory mention.

This paper aims to address this research gap by investigating how specific religious movements and organizations, along with political movements inspired by religion,

attempt to influence foreign policy agendas. It takes a comparative approach, analyzing three religious traditions – evangelical Christianity (USA), Hinduism (India), and Shia Islam (Iran). The central question is how varying institutional and ideological frameworks, both secular and religious, coalesce to impact the creation and execution of foreign policy. In each country, religious actors strive to influence outcomes by urging decision-makers to adopt foreign policy positions aligned with their religious beliefs. This paper expands the concept of "soft power" beyond the conventional definition put forth by Joseph Nye (1990, 2004), which confines the term to specific types of influence one government may exert over another.

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate that religious actors who pursue their own "foreign policies," partly by trying to shape governmental foreign policy, should also be part of the conversation surrounding soft power. So, how might a religious leader exercise such power, and what motivates them to seek influence over foreign policy? A useful starting point is the role of norms and identity in international relations. Katzenstein (2016) argues against both neorealism and neoliberalism, asserting that norms, collective identities, and the cultures of relevant societies must be recognized to adequately explain foreign and national security policies that may seem inconsistent or irrational.

**Religious Tradition in the United States of America (USA)**

There is considerable agreement that religion plays an important role in international relations - with some observers noting a recent widespread global religious resurgence - but there is less consensus on how religion influences the formulation and implementation of foreign policy (see, for example, Fox & Sandler, 2014; Thomas, 2015; and Hay, 2017; Ajala, 2019).

Since that the US Constitution explicitly prohibits institutionalized connections between religion and the state, it seems odd to an outside observer that religion appears to be particularly, if not exceptionally, prominent in US foreign policy. The first amendment of the constitution expressly states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," which limits the relationship between the state and religion to two distinct spheres. In addition, the USA does not have a history of political parties with a religious bent, in contrast to some European nations like Germany, Italy, and Sweden, where Christian Democratic parties have been influential for decades.

Yet, religion has always had a significant influence on American politics, as James A. Reichley (1986) points out. Churches have been active in a variety of moral concerns throughout the history of the country, particularly the debate over slavery and the ensuing Civil War in the 1860s. It is undeniable that the republic's founders drew on religious principles and rhetoric in creating the new country. Later, in the twentieth century, a variety of Christian organizations took part in a number of moral and political campaigns, such as the prohibition of alcohol sales, the passage

of the vote for women, the New Deal policies to increase social welfare in the 1930s, and the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s (Wald, 2013; Bankole, 2020, p. 115).

Social movements that are based on Christianity are now politically and morally prominent in the USA. Evangelical Christians are sometimes cited as being particularly prominent in this regard, not least because they had a major impact on the results of the presidential elections in 2000 and 2004, which resulted in the election and reelection of "one of their own": George W. Bush. More broadly, evangelicals have recently been significant political and moral advocates in respect to a variety of foreign policy concerns, particularly those involving human rights (Hertzke, 2014; Hehir et al., 2014; Folami et al., 2022).

It is not novel to try to incorporate moral and/or religious ideals into US foreign policy. Nevertheless, religion has historically had a significant and enduring impact on US foreign policy. The political resurgence of evangelicalism, which sought to pressure the US government to change course on a number of domestic issues—all of which were concerned with moral and/or religious issues like abortion, family values, and school curricula—began in the late 1970s and laid the foundation for evangelicals' current prominence. From the beginning of the movement to the present, evangelicals have, according to Wessner (2013), '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 Bush Administration'. Wessner asserts that evangelicals have worked to influence foreign policy as well, so take note that he was not just talking about domestic matters at this point.

The election of George W. Bush, who many evangelicals believe is the ideal candidate to advance their favored principles in foreign policy, fostered this broadening of the agenda from domestic culture wars problems to international affairs. But the expansion of evangelicals' global perspectives was already in place throughout the Clinton and during the Bush administrations (1993–2001). Actually, since the mid-1990s, evangelicals have been the most significant component of a new human rights movement, as Alan Hertzke explains in his seminal book *Freeing God's Children: The Unexpected Partnership for Global Human Rights* (2014). This movement contributed to the development of a new framework for monitoring and promoting human rights in American foreign policy. The phrase "unlikely alliance" in Hertzke's subtitle alludes to how odd bedfellows have made up this movement. It was crucial to forge broad alliances with a variety of religious organizations, such as the Jewish community and mainline Christian organizations, as well as with secular organizations, such as student organizations on college campuses and traditional secular human rights organizations, in order to maximize influence (Green et al., 2013).

In order to mobilize support for a global agenda, conservative evangelicals used their enhanced lobbying power, which resulted in a fundamental shift in their activism that can be seen in their readiness to form coalitions. By the norms of most social movements, the evangelical-led campaign to include diverse human rights issues on the foreign policy agenda has made a significant impact in a very short period of time. Among the highlights are:

- *The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998*: This bill makes freedom of religion and conscience a key goal of US foreign policy by establishing an office and an annual worldwide religious freedom report that evaluates countries on their respect for religious liberties. "A coalition of conservative Christians, Jews, Catholics, mainline Protestants, Tibetan Buddhists, and others" lobbied in favor of it (Page, 2015).
- *The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000* sought to dismantle global criminal organizations that traffic girls and women from underdeveloped nations into prostitution and sweatshops.
- *The Sudan Peace Act of 2002* was supported by evangelicals who were horrified by the atrocities on Christians and animists in southern Sudan by the government of that country. The law and the penalties that went along with it had a significant impact on the development of the road map that led to the 2003 truce in Sudan and the 2004 peace deal.
- *The Human Rights Act of North Korea (2004)*: Korean Americans and Evangelicals advocated for this legislation. The goal was to draw attention to North Korea's horrific human rights abuses and nuclear weapons program as well as US efforts to assist North Korean defectors.

The diverse coalition partners that evangelicals have worked with on these issues are evidence that what is going on here is more than just conventional interest group politics, which are only salient to small segments of the population. These types of causes do not conform to culture-war stereotypes of ideological polarization. Reiterating that this movement did not merely arise as a partisan echo chamber for the moralistic foreign policy discourse deployed by the George W. Bush administration is also crucial. The movement actually began during the Clinton administration and has continued under the George W. Bush administration, occasionally as a friend and occasionally as a foe.

Unlike all other Western nations, the USA is a strongly religious nation, which is the basis for evangelicals' ability to persuade (Norris & Inglehart, 2014). Also, there is "higher prominence of religious organizations in society and politics" in America because religion plays a significant part in political life (Telhami, 2014, p. 71). Religions are not merely common lobby groups and do not always hold the same opinions, convictions, or standards. Religion can frequently exert indirect influence that can be useful in shaping the thinking of policy-makers, notably in

respect to international human rights in US foreign policy, even when its tangible resources are small compared to those of corporate lobbies.

Progressive evangelical politics gained traction during Jimmy Carter's administration (1977–1981) because of their shared commitment to human rights and Christian humanitarian principles. Carter was a devout evangelical. Nonetheless, for some, Carter's presidency was significant for a rising tide of pacifist sentiment that pervaded both the top echelons of the Carter administration as well as American critical consciousness as a whole (Dorrien, 2016, p. 170; Dada, 2020). Contrarily, Ronald Reagan supported the growth of conservative evangelicalism as a powerful lobbying force by sharing many of its principles and objectives (Dada, 2020, p. 220; Aboaba, 2022). But, during the Clinton administration, the tide swung back toward left-leaning religious activists, who once more had no trouble getting in touch with senior government figures. After George W. Bush's election in 2001, conservative evangelical leaders were once more able to play the role of insiders in the White House (Page, 2015), putting their mark on administration priorities, including in the area of foreign policy - Howard LaFranchi (2016) refers to this change as the "evangelization" of US foreign policy.

In conclusion, evangelicals' involvement in foreign policy throughout the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations had been largely influenced by their strong conviction that the USA is engaged in an ongoing global conflict between good and evil. While the Cold War defined this conflict in the 1980s, evangelical concern began to center on a number of human rights issues in the mid-1990s, including religious freedom, the protection of victims of sex and sweatshop trafficking, the oppression of non-Muslims in Sudan, and the North Korean government's flagrant violation of citizens' civil liberties.

**Religious Tradition in India**

The Gandhian pacific universalism is at one end of the spectrum, and Hindu nationalism is at the other. Hinduism, a non-missionary "ethnic" religion, lacks the global aspirations of Christianity or Islam, despite the fact that the civilisational compass of Hindu nationalists goes far beyond the boundaries of India to the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the global Indian diaspora. This section looks at the impact of the Sangh Parivar (an umbrella organization for Hindu nationalists) on India's foreign policy climate, with special focus to the years from 1998 to 2004 while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was in power.

India was governed by secular Congress Party governments from 1947 till 1975 after gaining independence from British colonial control. India's foreign policy during the time evolved in accordance with specific ideologies, particularly nonalignment and "third worldism". Once the Congress Party's rule ended, there was a time of political turbulence during which no party was able to seize power.

The BJP, a party ideologically driven by *Hindutva* ('Hindu-ness,' an amalgam of nationalist and religious issues), did not become the new hegemon until the late 1980s. Using religious soft power as an analytical variable in relation to a nation's foreign policy has both advantages and disadvantages, as shown by the case of India under BJP rule: When compared to foreign policy under Congress, BJP control was characterized by much continuity; yet, as many analysts have highlighted, Hindutva's impact was somewhat discernible in international policy under BJP rule. This is due to the fact that, while the BJP was in power, India's foreign policy mirrored both the government's and Hindutva supporters' shared ideologies and ideas. The relationship began in the 1980s, when Hindutva ideologies gained political clout in India and found their primary political embodiment in the BJP. The Sangh Parivar ('family of associations'), a group of organizations and activities that promote *Hindutva*, was and continues to be strongly associated with the BJP. The three largest organizations in the Sangh Parivar are the Rashtriya Swayamsevak (RSS), the Bajrang Dal, and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). They are all supporters of *Hindutva* and important sources of religious soft power, and have recently concentrated on three key issues: Pakistan, Kashmir, and the so-called "war on terror" following the 9/11 attacks.

Both domestic and foreign policy contexts exhibit the rise of *Hindutva* in India, but for the purposes of this paper, only external concerns will be discussed. Following gaining independence in 1947, a secular concept of non-alignment and "third worldism" governed India's foreign policy for three decades. 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, 2014; Kamdar, 2014).

These emphases steadily altered throughout time in response to four events. In India, the BJP and *Hindutva* have seen political success. Globalization gained prominence, the Cold War came to an end, and the ongoing "war on terror" started after 9/11. The focus of BJP foreign policy changed in response to these events. 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; and
- develop a more aggressive and dynamic Indian nationalism (Bidwai, 2013).

First, a more combative attitude toward Pakistan and India's Muslim minority reflected these aspirations. The Pakistani government, according to the Indian

government, is the main financier of "anti-Indian" Muslim terrorist organizations that seek to seize Kashmir from Indian rule. Kashmir is home to a majority of Muslims. Second, the BJP leadership openly 'criticized nonalignment and supported a more forceful deployment of India's power to safeguard national interests against erosion at the hands of Pakistan and China'. Finally, the BJP administration "supported the overt purchase of nuclear weapons" (Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, 1995). Fourth, the newly prioritized area of foreign policy also includes a goal to "help build an "Axis of Virtue" against "global terrorism," uniting India's government with that of the USA and Israel" (Bidwai, 2013). On May 8, 2003, in Washington, DC, India's then-National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra offered the "Axis of Virtue" concept to further this cause. Mishra stressed his intention to contribute to the formation of a "alliance of free societies involved in combatting" the scourge of terrorism in his remarks to the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and a number of US Congressmen and Congresswomen. The US, Israel, and India were all "advanced democracies," and each had also "been a substantial target of terrorism," in addition to being advanced democracies. The same terrible face of contemporary terrorism must be confronted by them both. The 'Axis of Virtue' would be created with the intention of 'taking on worldwide terrorism in a comprehensive and focused manner... to ensure that the global campaign is pursued to its logical end, and does not run out of steam due to other preoccupations. This commitment is one that we owe to coming generations (Mishra, cited in the 2003 Embassy of India). Lal Krishna Advani[3], then India's deputy prime minister, similarly praised the "Axis of Virtue" idea a month later, also in Washington. He lauded the growing friendship between India and the USA while highlighting the democratic "similarities" between India and the US. Obliquely referring to Pakistan, he stated that this relationship was not ‘an alliance of convenience’. It is a principled relationship (Advani, quoted in Bidwai, 2013).

The BJP's philosophy, which admires people like [the then Israeli prime minister, Ariel] Sharon for his macho and ferocious jingoism, is reflected in the stronger ties with Israel. It views Christians, Jews, and Hindus as "strategic allies" in the fight against Islam and Confucianism. … Several members of India's Hindu Right support this "clash of civilizations" theory (Bidwai, 2013). However, the BJP administration was ousted from office in a general election held in May 2004 before it could formally establish its new triangular alliance with the USA and Israel[4]. *Hindutva* supporters encouraged Dr. Manmohan Singh, the leader of the Congress Party, to adopt a foreign policy that was equally practical as his prior economic measures and that would better link India with American foreign policy in the fight against terrorism. We wish him good sense and good luck in his new role’ (Ajala, 2019)

Congress adopted what Gatade refers to as "the route of soft Hinduism" when it was in power in the 1980s, a move that is thought to have aided the later growth of "hard Hindutva" movements. In various ways, including the 'Meenakshipuram conversions in the early 1980s 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, 2016).

In conclusion, Hindutva's expanding influence, mostly coming from the Sangh Paravar, was mirrored in India's foreign policy during the BJP's rule. It also permitted a shift toward increased acceptance of Hindu nationalist ideology and ideals, which had already started under Congress leadership, away from fundamental, traditional Indian principles such as moderation, pragmatism, non-alignment, and defense of the poor. Once the BJP lost office in May 2004, it seems that such worries, such as the emphasis on "Islamic terrorism" and "clash of civilisations" concerns, were not eliminated from India's foreign policy. It is acceptable to draw the conclusion that over time, Indian attitudes about desired foreign policy objectives changed, in part overcoming long-standing ideological differences between Hindu nationalists and the secular Congress Party. The BJP's foreign policy, which the post-2004 Congress-led administration continued with mostly intact, reflected not just the prominence of Hindutva but also the altered geopolitical landscape following 9/11.

**Religious Tradition in Iran**

The simplest way to understand Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy is to place it in the perspective of a newly unstable world that was largely brought about by the conclusion of the Cold War and the US's hegemonic position. Iran's leaders think that their nation is a pioneering state trying to establish itself in a new international order that is currently dominated by the USA. Both nations want to restrain or destabilize the other. The conflicting "soft power" objectives of the Khatami (1997-2005) and Clinton (1993-2001) presidencies can be seen in this framework, followed by the conflicts between George W. Bush (2001-2009) and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2009).

Iran's foreign policy has been shaped since the revolution in 1979 "not primarily 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, 2011, p. 1; also see Ansari, 2016 and Sohrabi, 2016). Under Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, security and economic concerns were prioritized over declared commitments to "Islamic solidarity" and the Islamic revolution whenever they conflicted with Iran's material interests. Where necessary, Iran used religion as part of a plan to challenge neighboring regimes or attempt to modify their policies (Tisdall, 2016).

Following the passing of Ayatollah Khomeini in June 1989, religious elements in the government gained strength; however, this position looked to have been stabilized until the resounding victory of President Mohammad Khatami, a self-described reformer, in 1997. Khatami, however, was imprisoned by opposing troops. There were many in government who desired greater social and political liberalization on the one hand. Yet, some religious leaders inside the government did not. The outcome was a deadlock between conservatives and reformers. Khatami was succeeded as president by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad after a second election was held in July 2005. Iran's foreign policy has since concentrated on three primary issues: (1) relations with the United States and Europe, particularly in light of Iran's civil nuclear power program, (2) regional interests, particularly in Iraq, and (3) relations with the larger Muslim world (Barnes & Bigham, 2016; Melman & Javedanfar, 2017).

What function did religious soft power serve? The first is that Iran is by no means a closed society, despite the fact that it is not a "normal" democracy. The Iranian press is dominated by discussions about foreign policy, and the Majlis (parliament) holds frequent debates as well (Sarioghalam, 2011). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has historically been the main advocate for the interests of the secular state, while religious "hardliners"—those who are unyielding in their adherence to the thesis that religion is the primary factor uniting people both domestically and internationally—promote various Islamic causes and Muslim solidarity with fellow believers outside of Iran. Articles criticizing the Foreign Ministry's policy frequently appear, particularly in the columns of the daily newspaper *Jomhuri-ye Islami* (Afrasiabi & Maleki, 2013).

Khatami strongly criticized religious extremists after Ahmadinejad was elected, including three notable groups of Ahmadinejad supporters: (1) the Hojjatieh, a radically anti-Bahai[5] 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, 2015; Barnes & Bigham, 2016; McFaul & Milani, 2016). Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, another religious extremist with connections to the Haqqani theological school in Qom, was also mentioned in Khatami's attack. All Basijis were urged in a *fatwa* he had issued to support Ahmadinejad in the upcoming presidential elections (Freeman, 2015). Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, head of the Expediency Council and former president of Iran, was one of Khatami's most prominent backers (McFaul & Milani, 2016).[7]

Ultimately, Ahmadinejad's rise to power resulted in a substantial shift in Iran's power dynamics. Hardliners from the religious right were a significant focus and source of influence, especially in respect to the nuclear programs in Iran and Iraq.

Iraq is between 60% and 65% Shi'ite and Iran is 90% Shi'ite; the remaining one-third of Iraqis, comprising both Kurds and Arabs, are Sunnis. Among others, Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi has promoted religious links between Shi'ites in Iran and Iraq (Kemp, 2015; Freeman, 2015). Iran aggressively backed the United States' call for elections in Iraq because it wanted a Shi'ite-dominated administration there that Tehran would like to influence, in part due to a shared religious background. According to Kemp, "present conditions encourage Iran to employ soft power to support the establishment of some form of Islamic rule in Iraq" (2015, p. 6).

Iran is attempting to influence people in Iraq, a strategy made possible by the large number of Shi'ites living there. In order to strengthen the Iranian and Shi'ite voices in Iraq's government and so increase Iran's influence, Iran continues to support democratic structures and processes in Iraq. Be aware that this is Islamic democracy, not liberal democracy in the way of the West. 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, 2015). According to Kemp, Iran has a strong potential to influence events in Iraq using both hard power and soft power (2015, p. 7). Nonetheless, it should be noted that Iran's foreign policy toward Iraq is not unique: it is what any state, whether secular or religious, would probably do when a close neighbor and opponent experiences significant political turmoil. Since it also makes sense from a secular, geopolitical perspective, there may not be anything particularly "religious" motivating Iran to promote tighter connections with Shi'ites in Iraq. Yet, there is a second important foreign policy issue that has a definite religious component: Iran's nuclear program.

Iran has been branded a rogue state by the US, which has made great efforts to isolate it. According to American officials, the Iranian president poses a threat to international peace and is under attack from domestic uprisings (MacAskill & Tisdall, 2016; Melman & Javedanfar, 2017). Despite this, Ahmadinejad had a 70% approval rating at home in 2006 and was gaining support in both Muslim and non-Muslim nations, including China, Indonesia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Syria (Tisdall, 2016).[8]

Regarding Iran's nuclear program, there are other considerations besides strategic ones to be made, including religious considerations. Ahmadinejad and other religious hardliners are driven by an apocalyptic vision that the world will end when Shi'ite Islam's long-hidden 12th Imam, or *Mahdi*, appears, possibly in the mosque of Jamkaran[9] (Melman & Javedanfar, 2017; Folami et al., 2022). 'O mighty Lord, I appeal to you to speed the emergence of your last repository, the promised one, the perfect and pure human being, the one who will fill this planet with justice and peace,' Ahmadinejad said in September 2005, referring to an aura that

surrounded him (Peterson, 2015). Ahmadinejad provided $20 million in public cash to build the mausoleum. Moreover, a cleric, Mehdi Karrubi allegedly stated, "Ahmadinejad ordered that his government's platform be deposited in a well at Jamkaran where the faithful send messages for the hidden imam," according to Diehl (2016). The key takeaway is that President Ahmadinejad is influenced by religious soft power to pursue a firm stance on Iran's nuclear program. Every issue, from bridging Iran's wealth and poverty gap to opposing the US and Israel and strengthening Iran's power through its nuclear program, is intended to pave the way for the Mahdi's return (Peterson, 2015).

**Conclusion**

This paper does not claim to be a comprehensive analysis of the impact of particular religious players in the USA, India, and Iran and the resulting projection of religious soft power; such an analysis would call for a lot more investigation than has been done so far. The primary goal was to develop a research agenda to investigate the idea of "religious soft power" and to determine, at least in part, how it is used in the United States, India, and Iran in relation to foreign policy. This paper aimed to build a conceptual innovation by starting from the premise that religious soft power is a significant influence in the recent foreign policies of the USA, India, and Iran. To explain how religious actors may influence foreign policy by encouraging policy-makers to incorporate religious beliefs, norms, and values into specific foreign policies, a country's foreign policy was given religious characteristics. The term "soft power" was extended from its original usage, which is government A exerts influence over government B in order to achieve the former's secular goals. Religious actors must "get the ear of government" in order to exert influence. To do this, they must build strong bonds with influential leaders who share their religious convictions, such as former President George W. Bush in the USA, former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran, and former Indian Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani in India. Religious players aim to influence foreign policy by taking advantage of the shared religious norms, values, and beliefs of important decision-makers; in other words, by using religious soft power. Religious actors do not just portray themselves as traditional pressure organizations.

The paper also identified a serious issue with the idea of religious soft power. Specifically, how can the influence of religion on foreign policy be operationalized consistently? How can we determine the boundary between "soft" and "hard" power? However, how can we be certain that this is anything more than an opportunistic coming together of two sets of actors who identify common ground that just so happens to be informed by religious norms, values, and precepts? On the one hand, it seems reasonable to identify congruence of interests between foreign policy-makers and religious actors in some cases. In other words, how can

we determine when a religious actor's influence on foreign policy is primarily explained by their religious beliefs? While this paper has attempted to formulate pertinent research questions, much more study is necessary to fully answer them.

**Notes**

1. Theodemocracy is a phrase coined by Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon church. According to him, a theodemocracy was a combination of classic republican democracy with theocratic principles - a government where God and the people shared authority to rule in justice.
2. A religious actor is a person, group, or organization that uses religiously derived ideas or ideology to try to influence domestic or international outcomes.
3. Up till the end of 2005, Advani served as the BJP's president. He is now the opposition leader in the Lok Sabha, the Indian parliament.
4. In comparison to the BJP, the Congress Party and its allies obtained more seats in parliament (216 as opposed to 186) but not enough to form a majority government (273 seats would be needed). As a result, a coalition administration led by Congress was established.
5. Bahia was established in Persia in 1863 and emphasizes the spiritual oneness of all people.
6. Ayatollah Khomeini established the paramilitary Basijis in 1979. During the Iran-Iraq War, it supplied volunteers for shock troop groups (1980-1988). The Revolutionary Guards' Basiji division is devoted to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader.
7. Parliament and the Council of Guardians disagreements may be resolved through mediation by the Expediency Council. The latter is composed of 12 jurists, including six that the Supreme Leader has selected. One of the most potent governmental bodies in the nation, the Council of Guardians functions as an advisory council to the latter.
8. Subsequently, however, growing inflation, heavy unemployment, and rising gas prices caused Ahmadinejad's popularity to plummet.
9. According to Shiite belief, the Mahdi himself gave the order to build the mosque in Jamkaran.

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