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Abstract

The killing of the Iranian nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh and the Quds Force commander, Lt. General Qassem Soleimani, once again brought the culture of martyrdom in Iran to the limelight. Soleimani was named 'living martyr' by Iran's supreme leader while he was alive and is now regarded as 'Defender-Martyr of the Holy Shrines' who died while defending the holy shrines against ISIS. The grounds for the strategic caution from Iran to keep its atomic programme from becoming weaponized are closely related to the distinctive character of Islamic thought, which views nuclear weapons as fundamentally incompatible with Islam. Security-based realist models do not satisfactorily explain the Iranian behaviour of 'human wave' attacks during the Iran-Iraq War. It also cannot account for the Iranian decision not to counter the Iraqi chemical weapons attack in kind despite having the capability. This study argues that Iran's strategic behaviour, like the above decisions, can be better understood by looking at the strategic culture of Iran having a strong religious element in the post-1979 era.

Keeping the above context in view, this work analyses the strategic culture of Iran by taking Islam as a variable in strategic decision-making. It examines the socialisation of the Iranian policy elite in the strategic culture informed by Shi'a Islamic values and norms. The study selects three major challenges in the post-1979 period: the Iran-Iraq War, the nuclear crisis, and the rise of ISIS, to understand how the Iranian state behaved against these challenges. The work focuses on two actors of the Iranian policy elite as holders of Iranian strategic culture: IRGC (military) and clergy (non-military)—both inspired by Shi'a Islam—to analyse the extent of Islam's influence on strategic decision making in the above selected three cases.