

Between Faith and Power: The Intersection of Religion and Politics in the U.S.–Iran Conflict

Glenn L. Velmonte

Ph.D., J.D., Ed.D., Cebu Normal University

Email: velmonteg@cnu.edu.ph

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ABSTRACT:

The relationship between religion and politics continues to influence contemporary international conflicts, particularly in regions where ideology and state interests overlap. The ongoing tensions between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran demonstrate how religious narratives can shape political discourse, influence public perception, and affect diplomatic relations. Although the conflict is commonly analyzed through geopolitical factors such as nuclear development, military security, sanctions, and regional competition, religious rhetoric increasingly plays an important role in framing political decisions and legitimizing state actions. In the United States, elements of Christian nationalism and providential discourse have occasionally influenced public and political narratives regarding Iran. Meanwhile, Iran's political system institutionalizes Shi'a Islamic principles within governance through Velayat-e Faqih, making religion a central component of state identity and foreign policy. The conflict is found in both the New Testament of the Bible for Christians and the Surah of the Qur'an for Muslims. This paper investigates the interaction between religion and politics in the contemporary U.S.–Iran conflict by examining political rhetoric, ideological structures, and scholarly literature. The study argues that religion functions both as an authentic ideological influence and as a strategic instrument for mobilizing domestic support and reinforcing political legitimacy. Findings further suggest that the sacralization of geopolitical disputes complicates diplomatic negotiations and prolongs international tensions.

Keywords: religion, politics, U.S.–Iran conflict, foreign policy, Christian nationalism, Shi'a Islam, diplomacy

Introduction

The geopolitical environment of the twenty-first century is commonly interpreted through conventional indicators such as military capability, economic strength, strategic alliances, and territorial interests. International conflicts are frequently examined through realist perspectives emphasizing state security, regional influence, and competition for resources. However, the

continuing tensions between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran reveal dimensions that extend beyond material interests and traditional geopolitical explanations. The conflict increasingly demonstrates the influence of ideology, identity, and religious narratives in shaping political behavior and international relations.

Although issues involving nuclear development, maritime security, economic sanctions, and regional influence remain central to the U.S.–Iran rivalry, recent developments indicate that religion has become an important component of political discourse. Leaders and policymakers from both states increasingly employ religious language, sacred symbolism, and moral narratives to explain state actions and justify foreign policy decisions. Consequently, the conflict is no longer viewed solely as competition over strategic interests but has evolved into a broader ideological struggle involving competing visions of authority, legitimacy, and historical destiny.

Within the United States, political discussions regarding Iran have occasionally reflected themes associated with Christian nationalism and providential exceptionalism. Certain political actors and commentators portray geopolitical tensions through moral categories that distinguish forces of righteousness from perceived threats to civilization and religious values. Such narratives contribute to the moralization of foreign policy by presenting adversaries not merely as political opponents but as ideological and spiritual challenges. The incorporation of biblical references, prophetic language, and concepts of divine purpose has therefore influenced how certain segments of American political discourse interpret conflicts in the Middle East.

Scholars have argued that this framework reinforces the idea of American exceptionalism by presenting the United States as possessing a historical mission or moral responsibility in international affairs. Gorski and Perry (2022) describe this phenomenon as an intersection of religious identity and nationalism, in which political objectives become intertwined with theological meaning. Under such conditions, foreign policy decisions may acquire symbolic significance that exceeds ordinary strategic calculations.

A parallel development can be observed in Iran, where religion forms the institutional foundation of governance. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Iranian state adopted the

principle of *Velayat-e Faqih* or Guardianship of the Jurist, integrating religious authority into political leadership. Unlike secular political systems, Iran formally links state legitimacy with Shi'a Islamic doctrine, allowing theology to influence both domestic administration and foreign policy.

This religious-political framework significantly shapes Iran's response to external pressures and Western intervention. Resistance against foreign influence, especially from the United States, is frequently presented not merely as a protection of sovereignty but as a fulfillment of a religious obligation. Historical narratives associated with Ashura and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein provide ideological foundations emphasizing sacrifice, justice, and resistance against oppression. Consequently, state rhetoric often transforms political disputes into moral struggles between oppression and liberation.

The influence of religion within the U.S.–Iran conflict has generated considerable scholarly and media discussion. Some analysts argue that contemporary tensions resemble ideological confrontations in which faith-based narratives reinforce political divisions and intensify hostility. Others maintain that religion functions less as a direct cause and more as a mechanism for mobilizing populations and legitimizing political objectives.

Zagano (2026) observes that competing religious frameworks have increasingly appeared in public discussions concerning the conflict, comparing ideological divisions to broader historical struggles between rival worldviews. Meanwhile, Federman (2026) argues that political leaders risk transforming policy disputes into sacred conflicts when geopolitical issues are interpreted through prophetic narratives and theological symbolism. Similarly, Ramirez (2026) emphasizes that religion may not be the primary source of conflict but often serves as the vehicle through which political ideologies gain emotional and social support.

These perspectives raise important questions regarding the actual function of religion in international conflict. It remains unclear whether

religious narratives genuinely influence high-level policy formation or are strategically employed to strengthen legitimacy, consolidate domestic authority, and increase public support. The distinction between authentic belief and political instrumentalization, therefore, becomes central in understanding contemporary U.S.–Iran relations.

When geopolitical objectives are framed as expressions of divine mission or sacred responsibility, opportunities for diplomatic compromise become increasingly limited. Political concessions may be interpreted as ideological surrender, while negotiations become vulnerable to moral and religious opposition. Such developments complicate international peace efforts and prolong hostility.

This study, therefore, examines how religious narratives intersect with political decision-making in the contemporary U.S.–Iran conflict. Specifically, it explores the role of religious rhetoric in American policy discussions, analyzes Iran's religious-political structure, investigates whether faith-based narratives function as genuine ideological drivers or political tools, and evaluates their implications for diplomacy and international perception. Through this analysis, the study seeks to contribute to broader discussions concerning the role of religion in contemporary international relations.

Research Problem

This study investigates the relationship between religion and political decision-making within the contemporary U.S.–Iran conflict.

The central research question is:

How do religious narratives influence political decision-making in the contemporary U.S.–Iran conflict?

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways do policymakers in the United States use religious rhetoric to frame actions toward Iran?

2. How does Iran's religious-political structure influence foreign policy responses and state behavior?
3. To what extent do religious narratives function as genuine ideological influences compared with their role as instruments of political legitimacy?
4. How do religious-political dynamics affect diplomatic negotiations and international perceptions of the conflict?

Review of Related Literature

Existing scholarship recognizes religion as an influential factor in international relations and conflict studies. Rather than functioning solely as a cultural element, religious systems increasingly shape political identity, leadership behavior, and state interaction.

Haynes (2023) argues that religion continues to influence governance, public policy, and international affairs despite assumptions regarding secularization in modern politics. Religious institutions and belief systems shape decision-making processes and contribute to both conflict formation and peacebuilding.

Research examining Christian nationalism within American politics further demonstrates the interaction between faith and state policy. Gorski and Perry (2022) explain that Christian nationalism combines religious identity with national purpose, creating narratives that portray America as possessing a divine mission. This framework influences political discourse by encouraging moral interpretations of international conflicts.

Within the Iranian context, Mavani (2013) explains that Shi'a Islamic doctrine significantly shapes state legitimacy through the principle of *Velayat-e Faqih*. The integration of religion into governance allows theological narratives to influence policy decisions and foreign relations.

Studies concerning Iranian foreign policy also emphasize the role of historical memory and religious symbolism. Narratives of martyrdom, sacrifice, and resistance shape political messaging

and strengthen opposition to foreign intervention.

Other scholars propose that religion operates strategically within political systems. Religious language may be used to strengthen authority, mobilize supporters, and justify policy decisions. Consequently, religion serves dual functions: as an authentic ideological foundation and as a political instrument.

Despite extensive scholarship, relatively few studies simultaneously compare religious narratives within both American and Iranian political environments. Most analyses focus on either U.S. discourse or Iranian ideology independently. This study addresses this gap by providing a comparative examination of religious rhetoric and political decision-making across both states.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design using content analysis. Academic books, journal articles, policy documents, media reports, and diplomatic statements constituted the primary sources of data.

The study analyzed documents discussing religion, foreign policy, Christian nationalism, Shi'a political theology, and U.S.–Iran relations. Themes were identified through repeated examination of texts and grouped into categories including religious symbolism, political legitimacy, ideological framing, diplomatic implications, and public mobilization.

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns regarding the use of faith-based narratives in policy formation and political communication.

Results and Discussion

Findings indicate that religious narratives continue to influence political discourse in both the United States and Iran.

In the American context, religion functions largely as a rhetorical mechanism that supports moral framing. Political discussions occasionally employ language depicting international conflicts as struggles between competing values and

civilizations. Such narratives increase public support by simplifying complex geopolitical disputes into moral categories.

In Iran, religion serves a more institutional role because political authority is formally linked with religious doctrine. State responses to sanctions, military pressure, and diplomatic isolation are frequently framed in terms of resistance, sacrifice, and justice.

The analysis further suggests that religion operates both genuinely and strategically. Belief systems provide ideological foundations; however, political actors also use religious symbolism to reinforce legitimacy and maintain support. In general, the conflict is found in both the New Testament of the Bible for Christians and the Surah of the Qur'an for Muslims.

The conflict remains fundamentally geopolitical, driven by competition over regional influence, nuclear capabilities, security interests, and strategic positioning. Nevertheless, religious narratives intensify these disputes by attaching moral significance to political objectives.

As a result, diplomatic negotiations become increasingly difficult because compromise risks appearing inconsistent with sacred principles or ideological commitments.

Conclusion

The contemporary U.S.–Iran conflict demonstrates that religion remains an important factor within international politics. Although strategic interests continue to drive much of the confrontation, religious narratives significantly influence how policies are justified, how populations are mobilized, and how adversaries are perceived.

The United States illustrates how religious rhetoric may shape public discourse and moral interpretations of foreign policy, while Iran demonstrates how theology can become institutionalized within governance and diplomacy.

The findings indicate that religion operates simultaneously as an ideological influence and a political instrument. This dual function

complicates diplomatic engagement because political disputes become transformed into moral struggles involving identity, legitimacy, and sacred values.

Understanding the U.S.–Iran conflict, therefore, requires analysis beyond military capabilities and

economic interests. Scholars and policymakers must also consider the ongoing influence of belief systems on international behavior and conflict dynamics. Finally, the conflict is found in both the New Testament of the Bible for Christians and the Surah of the Qur'an for Muslims.

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