

God's State in the Modern Age: Wilāyat al-Faqīh, Mediated Divine Sovereignty, and Iran's Regional Islamic Gaze

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ABSTRACT

The Islamic Republic of Iran presents a distinctive political configuration in which religious authority and republican institutions operate within a single constitutional framework. This article examines the genealogy of political authority from the Imamate and the period of ghaybah to the institutionalization of Wilāyat al-Faqīh in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and further explores how this configuration shapes Iran's orientation toward regional Islamic politics. The study employs a qualitative approach based on library research and qualitative document analysis. The sources include classical and contemporary works on Shi'i political thought and Wilāyat al-Faqīh, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and scholarly literature on Iran's political system, transnational religious identity, and regional politics available up to 2024. The analysis combines genealogical reading, institutional analysis, and interpretive analysis to examine the relationship between religious authority, constitutional institutions, popular participation, and regional political orientation. The findings show that Wilāyat al-Faqīh represents a reinterpretation of the problem of political and religious authority during the period of ghaybah. Rather than replacing modern state institutions, this authority is constitutionally mediated through the Leader, representative institutions, electoral mechanisms, and religious oversight institutions. Based on this configuration, the article develops the analytical concept of mediated divine sovereignty, referring to the process through which religiously grounded claims of sovereignty are mediated through human authority and modern state institutions. The article further argues that this domestic configuration provides a basis for understanding Iran's regional Islamic gaze, in which Islamic identity, revolutionary ideals, transnational solidarity, national interests, and strategic considerations intersect in shaping the country's regional orientation. This perspective suggests that the Iranian political system cannot be fully explained through the categories of theocracy, theodemocracy, or hybrid regime alone, but requires attention to the institutional mechanisms that mediate religious legitimacy within a modern republican state.

KEYWORDS: Wilāyat al-Faqīh; Imamate; ghaybah; mediated divine sovereignty; Islamic Republic of Iran; Islamic politics; regional politics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Republic of Iran represents a distinctive case for understanding the relationship between religious authority and the modern state. The 1979 Islamic Revolution ended the Pahlavi monarchy and established a political order that combined Islamic principles with republican institutions. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran places belief in the sovereignty of God, divine revelation, justice, and the continuity of Imamate and leadership among the foundations of the political system, while simultaneously recognizing elections, referendums, the presidency, parliament, and other representative institutions as mechanisms for governing public affairs (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979). Iran therefore presents a political configuration in which religious legitimacy and popular political participation are not institutionally separated but incorporated into a common constitutional framework.

This configuration has generated continuing debates about how the Iranian political system should be conceptualized. Previous studies have described Iran using categories such as theocracy, theodemocracy, mullocracy, hybrid regime, and institutional duality. Chehabi (1991), for example, questioned the adequacy of describing Iran simply as a theocracy because religious authority and temporal political power operate through a distinctive institutional arrangement. Kamrava and Hassan-Yari (2004) emphasized the coexistence of multiple centers of power and the interaction between formal institutions and informal political networks. Abdolmohammadi and Cama (2015) subsequently characterized Iran as a peculiar hybrid regime in which constitutional arrangements combine clerical authority with electoral institutions. These perspectives demonstrate that the Iranian political system cannot be adequately understood by focusing on a single institution or by assuming a simple opposition between religion and democracy.

The central problem, therefore, is not merely how to classify the Iranian regime, but how to explain the mechanism through which religious authority becomes institutionalized within a modern state. The question is particularly important in relation to Wilāyat al-Faqīh, which occupies a central position in the political architecture of the Islamic Republic. Rather than treating Wilāyat al-Faqīh simply as a doctrinal concept or as a synonym for clerical rule, it is necessary to examine its genealogy, institutional transformation, and relationship with republican mechanisms. In this respect, the concept provides an analytical entry point for examining how a religiously grounded conception of leadership is translated into constitutional authority and political institutions.

The genealogy of Wilāyat al-Faqīh is closely connected to the Shi'i conception of Imamate and the problem of political and religious authority during the period of ghaybah. Within Twelver Shi'i thought, the Imam is understood not merely as a spiritual figure but also as a legitimate leader of the community. The occultation of the twelfth Imam subsequently generated a fundamental question concerning the continuity of religious authority and the management of communal affairs in the absence of the Imam. The Shi'i scholarly tradition developed different interpretations regarding the scope of authority that could be exercised by jurists during this period. Khomeini's formulation of Wilāyat al-Faqīh represented a significant development because it extended the authority of the qualified jurist from religious and legal functions toward comprehensive political governance. Mavani (2011) demonstrates that Khomeini's conception of governance was closely connected to classical Shi'i debates concerning the Imamate, sovereignty, public investiture, and the role of the jurist.

This genealogy is important because Wilāyat al-Faqīh should not be understood as identical to the doctrine of Imamate. The faqīh is not regarded as an Imam and does not possess the theological attributes attributed to the Imam in Twelver Shi'i doctrine. Rather, Wilāyat al-Faqīh represents an interpretation of the problem of authority under conditions of ghaybah. The conceptual relationship can therefore be expressed as a process in which Imamate provides the theological framework of legitimate leadership, ghaybah creates the problem of continuity of authority, and Wilāyat al-Faqīh provides an institutional and political response to that problem. The 1979 Revolution subsequently created the political conditions through which this conception could be incorporated into the structure of the modern state (Arjomand, 1992; Halim, 2012; Mavani, 2011).

The Iranian Constitution provides the clearest institutional expression of this transformation. Article 2 establishes the Islamic Republic on principles including divine sovereignty, divine revelation, justice, and the continuity of Imamate and leadership. Article 4 requires laws and regulations to conform to Islamic criteria, while Article 5 establishes the leadership of a qualified faqīh during the occultation of the twelfth Imam. At the same time, Article 6 recognizes the role of public opinion through elections and referendums (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979). The resulting arrangement is therefore neither a political system based exclusively on clerical authority nor a conventional representative democracy based solely on popular sovereignty. Instead, religious authority and popular participation are institutionally connected through constitutional rules.

This relationship becomes particularly visible in the distribution of political authority. The Supreme Leader occupies a position of strategic authority, including responsibility for general policies, command of the armed forces, and the appointment of several key officials. The President, by contrast, receives a direct electoral mandate and exercises executive authority within the constitutional framework. The Islamic Consultative Assembly is also established through popular elections, while the Guardian Council performs religious and constitutional oversight over legislation and elections (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979). The political system consequently contains different channels of legitimacy and authority that interact hierarchically rather than operating as fully independent centers. Existing research on Iran's hybrid institutional configuration

supports the importance of examining these relationships rather than reducing the system to a single regime category (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015; Kamrava & Hassan-Yari, 2004).

This institutional arrangement raises a broader question concerning the relationship between divine sovereignty and popular political participation. The Constitution attributes ultimate sovereignty to God while simultaneously recognizing the people's right to determine their social destiny through constitutional mechanisms. Popular participation is therefore not rejected, but is exercised within a normative and institutional order in which religious principles establish the boundaries of political authority. Rather than treating this relationship simply as a contradiction between theocracy and democracy, this article approaches it as a process of institutional mediation. The key analytical question is how a claim to religiously grounded sovereignty is translated into the practical institutions of a modern state.

Based on this perspective, the article develops the concept of mediated divine sovereignty as an analytical construct. The concept refers to a configuration in which divine sovereignty functions as the normative source of political legitimacy, while its exercise is mediated through human religious authority, constitutional institutions, administrative structures, and mechanisms of political participation. In the Iranian case, the faqih constitutes an important mediating authority, but this mediation does not occur outside the state. It is institutionalized through the Constitution and connected to the Leader, executive institutions, legislative institutions, electoral mechanisms, and religious oversight bodies. This approach allows the analysis to move beyond the binary categories of theocracy and democracy and instead examine the institutional mechanisms through which religious legitimacy is translated into political authority.

The domestic configuration of authority also has implications for understanding Iran's position beyond its territorial boundaries. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Islamic identity, revolutionary ideals, resistance to domination, and solidarity with Muslim communities have formed important elements of Iran's political discourse. The relationship between Shi'i identity and Iranian foreign policy has consequently received sustained scholarly attention. Caferoğlu and Ünal (2024) show that Shiism has been an important component in the formation and articulation of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, particularly through the relationship between the post-revolutionary domestic political structure, Khomeini's political thought, and Iran's external orientation. More recent research has likewise highlighted the interaction between the politicization of Shi'i identity within Iran and the country's projection of influence in the Middle East (Koo, 2024).

However, Iran's regional orientation cannot be reduced to the simple export of religious ideology. The relationship between transnational religious identity and state interests is more complex. Haynes (2014), for example, demonstrates that the influence of Iranian transnational Shi'i religious networks is constrained by national interests and statist considerations. Similarly, studies of Iran's regional strategy have emphasized the interaction between ideology, political identity, strategic interests, and the changing regional environment (Golmohammadi, 2019; Posch, 2017; Raouf, 2019). This suggests that religious identity and national interest should not be treated as mutually exclusive explanations. Instead, they may operate simultaneously and become articulated differently according to political and geopolitical circumstances.

This relationship provides the basis for introducing a second analytical construct in this article, namely the regional Islamic gaze. The term refers not to a single or uniform Iranian interpretation of the Middle East, but to a particular way of constructing the region through the intersection of Islamic categories, revolutionary experience, transnational religious identity, national interests, and strategic considerations. The concept is useful because it connects Iran's domestic political construction with its regional orientation without assuming that foreign policy is simply a direct consequence of Wilāyat al-Faqīh. The regional dimension must instead be understood as a field in which religious principles, political identity, national interests, and strategic calculations interact.

Existing scholarship has examined these dimensions separately. Studies of Shi'i political thought have addressed Imamate, ghaybah, and Wilāyat al-Faqīh; studies of Iranian political institutions have examined the relationship between clerical and republican institutions; and research on Iranian foreign policy has explored the relationship between ideology, Shi'i identity, and strategic interests. What remains insufficiently integrated is the relationship among these three dimensions: the genealogy of religious authority, its constitutional institutionalization, and its articulation in Iran's regional Islamic orientation. Connecting these dimensions is important because the domestic organization of authority provides part of the institutional and normative framework through which the Islamic Republic understands its political identity and position in the wider Islamic world.

This article therefore examines three interconnected dimensions. First, it traces the genealogy of authority from the Imamate and ghaybah to Wilāyat al-Faqīh. Second, it analyzes how Wilāyat al-Faqīh is institutionalized within the constitutional structure of the Islamic Republic through the relationship among the Supreme Leader, executive and legislative institutions, electoral mechanisms, and religious oversight. Third, it examines how this domestic configuration relates to Iran's regional Islamic orientation, particularly through the interaction of Islamic identity, transnational solidarity, revolutionary ideals, national interests, and strategic considerations. By connecting these dimensions, the article develops the concept of mediated divine sovereignty to explain the domestic institutionalization of religious legitimacy and uses regional Islamic gaze to interpret the relationship between this political construction and Iran's regional orientation.

The article contributes to the study of Islamic political thought and Iranian politics in two ways. First, it shifts the analysis of Wilāyat al-Faqīh from a question of regime classification toward the question of how religious legitimacy is institutionally mediated within a modern state. Second, it connects the domestic structure of religious authority with Iran's regional political orientation without assuming that ideology alone determines foreign policy. In this sense, the Islamic Republic of Iran can be understood as a form of Islamic political modernity in which religious authority is neither simply separated from nor completely fused with modern political institutions, but is continuously translated through constitutional, institutional, and political mechanisms.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach using library research and qualitative document analysis. The approach was selected because the study focuses on the development of political authority within Shi'i political thought, its institutionalization in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and its relationship with Iran's regional Islamic orientation. Rather than measuring political variables quantitatively, the study interprets texts as sources of concepts, arguments, institutional arrangements, and relationships of meaning (Bowen, 2009).

The study is designed as an interpretive analysis of three interconnected dimensions: (1) the genealogy of religious and political authority from the Imamate and ghaybah to Wilāyat al-Faqīh; (2) the institutionalization of Wilāyat al-Faqīh within the constitutional structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran; and (3) the articulation of Iran's Islamic political identity in its regional and transnational orientation. These dimensions are analyzed as interconnected processes rather than as separate objects of inquiry.

Data Sources and Document Selection

The documentary corpus consists of three categories of sources. First, the study uses scholarly works on Shi'i political thought, particularly literature addressing the Imamate, ghaybah, Wilāyat al-Faqīh, Islamic governance, political authority, sovereignty, and the relationship between religion and politics. These sources provide the conceptual and genealogical foundation for examining the transformation of religious authority from the Imamate to the political authority of the faqih.

Second, the study analyzes primary constitutional documents of the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Constitution is treated as a primary political document for identifying the formal relationship among divine sovereignty, Wilāyat al-Faqīh, the Supreme Leader, the presidency, parliament, the Guardian Council, elections, referendums, and the Islamic principles governing the state (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979).

Third, the study uses peer-reviewed academic literature addressing Iran's political system, Shi'i identity, transnational religious networks, Iranian foreign policy, and regional politics. These sources are used to examine how the domestic configuration of religious authority relates to Iran's regional orientation and its understanding of the wider Islamic political space.

Documents were selected purposively based on their relevance to the three analytical dimensions of the study. A document was included when it substantially addressed at least one of the following: (1) the genealogy and sources of political-religious authority, particularly the relationship among Imamate, ghaybah, and Wilāyat al-Faqīh; (2) the institutionalization of religious authority within the Iranian state; or (3) the relationship between Islamic identity, transnational orientation, national interests, and Iranian regional politics. The documentary

corpus was limited to scholarly publications and publicly available official documents available up to December 2024 in order to maintain consistency with the temporal scope of the study.

Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted through three complementary analytical procedures: genealogical reading, institutional analysis, and interpretive thematic analysis.

First, genealogical reading was used to trace the transformation of the problem of political and religious authority from the Imamate to the period of ghaybah and subsequently to Wilāyat al-Faqīh. The analysis focused on how the absence of the Imam generated questions concerning the continuity of authority and how the authority of the faqih was subsequently formulated as a response to these questions. This stage examined both continuity and transformation rather than assuming that Wilāyat al-Faqīh is identical to the classical doctrine of Imamate.

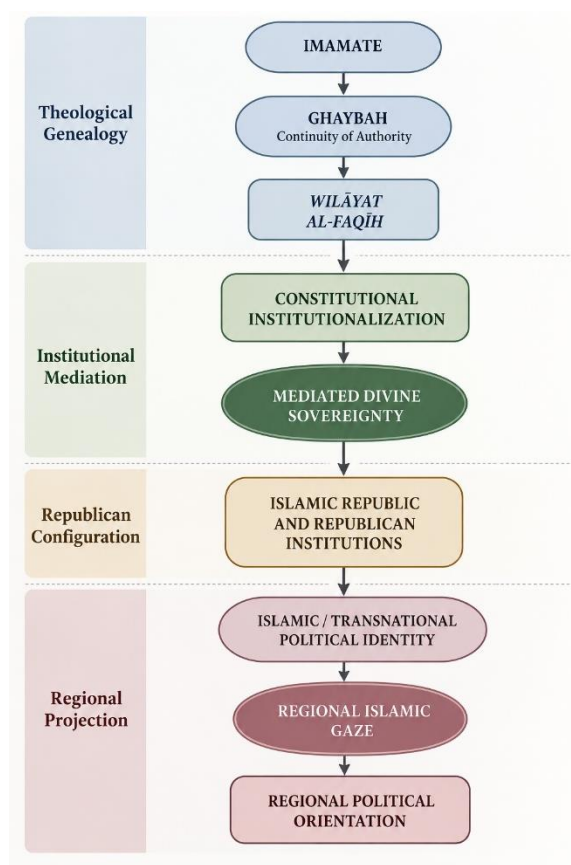
Second, institutional analysis was used to examine how the authority of the faqih was translated into the constitutional structure of the Islamic Republic. Particular attention was given to the relationships among the Supreme Leader, President, Islamic Consultative Assembly, Guardian Council, Assembly of Experts, elections, and other constitutional mechanisms. The analysis focused on how religious legitimacy and popular political participation are connected through formal institutional arrangements.

Third, interpretive thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes concerning divine sovereignty, popular participation, religious legitimacy, Islamic identity, transnational solidarity, national interest, and regional strategy. The themes were compared across the selected scholarly literature and constitutional documents to identify patterns and relationships between domestic political authority and regional orientation.

The three analytical procedures were then integrated through a process of conceptual synthesis. The first analytical dimension identifies the genealogical transformation of authority; the second examines its institutional mediation; and the third examines its regional articulation. The relationship among these dimensions provides the basis for developing the concept of mediated divine sovereignty and for using regional Islamic gaze as an analytical lens for understanding Iran's regional political orientation.

Analytical Framework

The analytical process can be summarized as follows:



3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Imāmah, Ghaybah, and Wilāyat al-Faqīh: Genealogy of Authority

The concept of Imāmah occupies a central position in the political-religious construction of Twelver Shia Islam. The authority of the Imam is not understood merely as a matter of personal piety or religious interpretation, but also concerns the leadership of the community and the regulation of collective life. Within this framework, the Imam's authority encompasses both spiritual and socio-political dimensions. The need for legitimate leadership after the Prophet Muhammad is therefore connected to the continuity of religious guidance and the ordering of communal affairs. In discussions of Imāmah, the leadership of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib is positioned within the concept of *wilāyah*, referring to an authority of leadership that connects religious guidance with the management of the community's affairs (Halim, 2012, pp. 61–107). This conception establishes an important foundation for understanding political authority in Twelver Shia thought: legitimate leadership is not regarded solely as the product of ordinary political choice but is connected to a religiously grounded conception of authority.

This understanding becomes more specific through the doctrine of the twelve Imams. The authority of the Imam is associated with characteristics that distinguish the Imam from ordinary political rulers, including divine designation, religious knowledge, and the capacity to serve as an authoritative reference for the community (Halim, 2012, pp. 54–92). Consequently, the question of Imāmah cannot be reduced to the problem of succession after the Prophet. It concerns the continuity of legitimate religious authority and the preservation of a normative reference for communal life. In this sense, Imāmah provides an important conceptual foundation for the relationship between religion, leadership, and political power that later became significant in the development of Shia political thought.

The problem becomes more complex during the period of *ghaybah*. In Twelver Shia doctrine, the twelfth Imam is in occultation and therefore does not exercise direct political leadership over the community. This situation creates a fundamental question: how can religious authority and the management of communal affairs continue in the absence of the Imam? Shia scholarly traditions developed different answers to this question, particularly concerning the scope of authority that could be exercised by religious jurists (*faqīh*) during the occultation. The historical development of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* must therefore be understood in relation to the older problem of continuity of authority during *ghaybah*. Before Khomeini, the authority of the *faqīh* generally developed in more

restricted areas of religious and legal affairs, while the extension of that authority to comprehensive political governance remained contested within Shia thought (Mavani, 2011).

A significant transformation occurred through Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's formulation of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh*. In *Hukūmat-i Islāmī*, Khomeini connected Islamic government with the authority of the jurist during the period of occultation and provided a systematic argument for the direct involvement of the *faqīh* in governance. The jurist was no longer understood merely as a religious scholar who provided legal guidance or moral supervision to rulers. Rather, the *faqīh* was positioned as an authority capable of implementing Islamic law and administering an Islamic government (Sabet, 2014, pp. 72–77).

Khomeini's formulation also developed over time. His later conception of *wilāyat-e muṭlaqah al-faqīh* expanded the scope of the jurist's authority beyond a limited supervisory role. Algar (2020) notes that Khomeini eventually regarded government as one of the important divine ordinances (*aḥkām-e ilāhī*) involved in the administration of the state. This development represents not simply a transfer of authority from one institution to another but a transformation in the relationship between religious authority and political power.

In this formulation, the *faqīh* becomes a holder of *wilāyah* over public affairs rather than merely a provider of religious advice. The authority of the jurist provides the normative foundation for governance, while administrative, legislative, executive, and constitutional institutions continue to perform the practical functions of the modern state (Halim, 2012, pp. 108–154). The significance of this arrangement lies precisely in the fact that Khomeini's political project did not seek to abolish the modern state. Instead, it sought to embed religiously grounded authority within a modern governmental structure.

The relationship between Imāmah and *Wilāyat al-Faqīh*, however, must be treated carefully. *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* is not identical to Imāmah because the *faqīh* is not an Imam and does not possess the theological attributes associated with the Imam in Twelver Shia doctrine. The connection is instead genealogical and interpretive. Khomeini's theory addresses the question of how authority can be exercised during the Imam's occultation by extending the jurist's political authority under particular theological and legal conditions. Mavani (2011) demonstrates that Khomeini's conception involved a significant reinterpretation of the classical doctrine rather than a simple reproduction of it.

This distinction is important because the emergence of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* should not be interpreted as an automatic political consequence of the doctrine of Imāmah. Rather, it emerged through a specific process of interpretation, political struggle, and institutionalization. The 1979 Revolution provided the political context through which an existing theological-jurisprudential argument could be transformed into a constitutional principle of state organization. In this process, the sequence Imāmah → *ghaybah* → *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* → constitutional institutionalization represents not merely conceptual continuity but a transformation of religious authority into a modern political form.

This genealogy provides the foundation for the analytical concept proposed in this article: mediated divine sovereignty. The term is not presented as a doctrinal term used by Khomeini or the Iranian Constitution. Rather, it is an analytical construct developed here to describe how divine legitimacy is translated into political authority through human agents, jurisprudential principles, and constitutional institutions. The concept therefore distinguishes between the claimed source of legitimacy and the institutional mechanisms through which political power is exercised.

Wilāyat al-Faqīh and the Republican State: Mediated Divine Sovereignty

The political significance of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* became concrete when the authority of the jurist was incorporated into the constitutional structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The resulting arrangement is significant because *wilāyah* remained a normative principle concerning legitimate leadership during *ghaybah*, while executive, legislative, judicial, and administrative functions were organized through modern state institutions (Halim, 2012, pp. 132–143).

The Constitution provides a direct basis for this arrangement. Article 2 identifies belief in divine sovereignty, divine revelation, justice, and the continuity of Imāmah and leadership as foundational principles of the Islamic Republic. Article 4 further establishes that all laws and regulations must conform to Islamic criteria. Article 5 then connects the period of occultation with the leadership of a qualified *faqīh*. Thus, a theological problem

concerning authority during *ghaybah* becomes constitutionally embedded in the organization of the modern state (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979).

At the same time, Article 6 states that the affairs of the state are to be administered through public opinion expressed through elections and referendums. Article 56 declares that absolute sovereignty over the world and human beings belongs to God while also recognizing the people's right to determine their social destiny. Article 57 places the legislative, executive, and judicial powers within the constitutional framework of leadership and supervision. Taken together, these provisions demonstrate that the Iranian constitutional order does not simply eliminate popular participation. Instead, popular participation is incorporated within a constitutional framework whose ultimate normative foundation is defined in religious terms (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979).

This relationship provides the empirical basis for the concept of mediated divine sovereignty. Divine sovereignty is not exercised through direct divine intervention in political administration. Rather, its claimed legitimacy is mediated through religious jurisprudence, the institution of the *faqīh*, constitutional provisions, and state institutions. At the same time, political participation is mediated through elections, representative bodies, and other republican mechanisms. Sovereignty is therefore not analytically reducible to either purely divine authority or purely popular sovereignty.

The position of the Supreme Leader represents the clearest institutional expression of this mediation. The Constitution establishes religious and political qualifications for the position, including jurisprudential competence, justice, piety, political and administrative capability (Article 109). Article 110 grants the Leader extensive authority, including determining general policies of the Islamic Republic, supervising their implementation, and exercising supreme command of the armed forces (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979). The institutional structure consequently combines religious qualifications with a constitutional procedure for the appointment of the Leader.

The Assembly of Experts is particularly important in demonstrating this dual character. The Leader is selected through an institutional mechanism involving an assembly whose members are elected by the people. Thus, the leadership institution possesses a representative dimension while remaining normatively defined by religious criteria. This illustrates the central feature of mediated divine sovereignty: religiously grounded authority does not eliminate representative mechanisms but structures the conditions under which those mechanisms operate.

A similar pattern can be observed in the presidency. Article 113 places the President as the highest official after the Leader, while Article 114 establishes direct popular election. The President exercises executive authority and administers the government within the constitutional framework. Article 60 further defines the relationship between presidential executive authority and the powers reserved to the Leader (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979). The presidency therefore represents a republican institution with a direct electoral mandate, but its authority remains embedded within the broader constitutional hierarchy.

The Islamic Consultative Assembly demonstrates another dimension of this institutional mediation. Members of the Assembly are directly elected by the people under Article 62. Yet Article 72 limits legislative authority by prohibiting legislation that contradicts the principles and provisions of the official religion or the Constitution. The Guardian Council then reviews legislation according to constitutional and Islamic criteria. The Council consists of six Islamic jurists and six legal experts, with the jurists appointed by the Leader and the legal experts selected through the constitutional procedure (Article 91) (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979).

The Guardian Council also mediates political representation through its constitutional role in supervising elections and referendums under Article 99. Consequently, the Iranian electoral system cannot be understood simply as an unrestricted mechanism of popular sovereignty. Elections remain central to the production of political authority, but electoral participation operates within institutional boundaries defined by constitutional and religious criteria. Abdolmohammadi and Cama (2015) therefore characterize Iran as a peculiar hybrid regime in which electoral and clerical components coexist within a single political system.

This configuration is better understood as a hierarchical inter-institutional arrangement than as a symmetrical distribution of power. Kamrava and Hassan-Yari (2004) demonstrate that Iran's political system involves multiple centers of authority and factional bargaining, meaning that formal constitutional positions alone cannot

explain the operation of political power. The Leader, President, parliament, Guardian Council, and other institutions operate through relationships of supervision, negotiation, competition, and institutional constraint.

Three forms of mediation can therefore be identified. First, jurisprudential mediation occurs through the authority of the *faqīh*, who translates the theological problem of leadership during *ghaybah* into a theory of political authority. Second, constitutional mediation occurs through institutions that translate this authority into formal relationships among the Leader, executive, legislature, judiciary, and oversight bodies. Third, representative mediation occurs through elections, referendums, and representative institutions through which popular participation is incorporated into the constitutional system.

The concept of mediated divine sovereignty thus captures a specific political mechanism rather than simply assigning Iran the label of theocracy. Theocracy emphasizes religious rule, while democratic or republican interpretations emphasize electoral participation. Iran's constitutional configuration contains elements of both but organizes them hierarchically within a framework in which divine sovereignty provides the ultimate normative reference. The analytical contribution of this article therefore lies not in replacing existing regime classifications, but in explaining the mechanism through which religiously grounded legitimacy and republican institutions are connected.

Iran and the Regional Islamic Gaze: From Domestic Authority to Regional Politics

The domestic institutionalization of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* also has implications for how the Islamic Republic understands its position beyond its territorial boundaries. This does not mean that Iranian foreign policy can be derived mechanically from *Wilāyat al-Faqīh*. Foreign policy is also shaped by security considerations, national interests, institutional competition, geopolitical conditions, and changes in the international environment. Nevertheless, the constitutional framework of the Islamic Republic explicitly connects its identity with the defense of Muslims, resistance to domination, and support for oppressed peoples.

Articles 152–154 of the Constitution are particularly important in this regard. Article 152 emphasizes rejection of domination, preservation of independence, defense of the rights of Muslims, and opposition to hegemonic powers. Article 154 extends the normative horizon by presenting independence, freedom, and justice as values that transcend Iran's territorial boundaries and by expressing support for the struggles of oppressed peoples (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979). Consequently, Iran's regional orientation cannot be interpreted solely through conventional national-interest calculations. Its foreign-policy discourse also contains a moral and religious vocabulary derived from revolutionary Islam.

This orientation is connected to the ideological formation of the Islamic Republic after the 1979 Revolution. Research on Iranian cultural policy shows that official representations have incorporated both national and transnational dimensions, including the idea of Iran's membership in the broader Islamic *ummah* (Attarzadeh & Seyfodini, 2023). Caferoğlu and Ünal (2024) likewise demonstrate that Shiism has played an important role in shaping Iran's foreign-policy orientation after the Revolution, particularly through the relationship between the domestic political structure of the Islamic Republic and its understanding of regional politics.

The relationship between Shiism and foreign policy, however, should not be interpreted as a simple export of religious doctrine. Koo (2024) shows that Iran's politicization of Shia identity is connected to both internal ideological tensions and efforts to expand Iranian influence in the Middle East. The regional projection of Shia identity therefore operates simultaneously as an ideological resource and as part of Iran's broader geopolitical strategy.

This relationship becomes visible in Iran's engagement with regional actors. The development of what is commonly described as the Axis of Resistance demonstrates how Iran's regional orientation operates through networks involving both state and non-state actors. Akbarzadeh (2024) identifies Iran's support for regional actors as a central element of its response to the Gaza conflict and its broader regional strategy. Celso (2024), meanwhile, examines the ideological and historical foundations of Iran's proxy-war strategy and connects the strategy to the country's conception of Shia political authority and regional competition.

The Palestinian issue provides a particularly significant example of this regional orientation. Support for Palestine has been integrated into the Islamic Republic's discourse of resistance, opposition to domination, and solidarity with oppressed peoples. Importantly, however, the persistence of this ideological orientation does not mean that policy is implemented in exactly the same manner under every administration. Iranian foreign policy

remains subject to strategic calculations and changing regional conditions. This distinction is important because it prevents the regional dimension of Iranian political Islam from being reduced to a simple causal sequence in which religious doctrine automatically produces a particular foreign-policy action.

It is within this context that this article introduces the term regional Islamic gaze. The term is used as an analytical concept, not as a doctrinal expression of the Iranian state. It refers to a particular way of constructing the regional environment through the interaction of Islamic categories, revolutionary history, transnational identity, national interests, and strategic considerations. The concept therefore shifts attention from the question of whether Iran's regional policy is "religious" or "strategic" toward the more productive question of how religious and strategic meanings are combined in the construction of Iran's regional political horizon.

The concept also helps explain the relationship between *ummah* and nation-state. Haynes (2014) shows that Iranian influence through transnational Shia religious networks is constrained by national interests and state considerations. This suggests that religious solidarity does not automatically replace national identity. Instead, transnational Islamic identity and Iranian national interests operate in a negotiated relationship. Attarzadeh and Seyfodini (2023) similarly demonstrate that Iranian cultural policy contains a significant transnational dimension while remaining produced through state institutions.

The regional Islamic gaze therefore should not be interpreted as a claim that Iran acts exclusively on religious grounds. Rather, it identifies the normative lens through which particular regional issues acquire political significance. Muslims, oppressed peoples, resistance, domination, Palestine, and opposition to hegemonic powers become categories through which regional developments are interpreted. At the same time, these categories are translated into concrete policies through state institutions and strategic calculations.

This also explains why the concept of regional hegemony should be used cautiously. Iran has developed significant regional influence through political, ideological, and security networks, but influence does not automatically constitute hegemony over the regional order. Raouf (2019) emphasizes that Iran's quest for regional influence is constrained by competing regional powers, domestic limitations, and the broader structure of Middle Eastern politics. The more analytically useful question for this article is therefore not whether Iran has achieved regional hegemony, but how its particular construction of Islamic political identity shapes the way it interprets regional problems and establishes relationships with actors beyond its borders.

From this perspective, domestic authority and regional orientation can be understood as parts of a single analytical continuum. *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* provides a framework for legitimizing political authority domestically; the Constitution translates that framework into institutions; and Revolutionary-Islamic principles provide a language through which Iran interprets its position in the wider Islamic and regional environment. The movement can therefore be represented as:

Imāmah → Ghaybah → Wilāyat al-Faqīh → Constitutional Institutionalization → Mediated Divine Sovereignty → Islamic Republic and Republican Institutions → Islamic/Transnational Political Identity → Regional Islamic Gaze → Regional Political Orientation.

This sequence does not imply a deterministic causal chain. Rather, it represents an analytical genealogy in which theological concepts are successively reinterpreted, institutionalized, and projected into the regional sphere. The regional Islamic gaze is therefore the final analytical extension of mediated divine sovereignty: authority that is mediated domestically through religious jurisprudence and constitutional institutions also contributes to the way the state constructs its political obligations, identities, solidarities, and strategic interests beyond its borders.

The resulting configuration demonstrates that the Islamic Republic cannot be adequately understood either as a purely theological state or as a conventional republic with religious symbolism. Its political structure represents an ongoing interaction between religious legitimacy, constitutional authority, popular participation, national identity, and regional strategy. The concept of mediated divine sovereignty explains the domestic institutional mechanism, while regional Islamic gaze explains how this configuration is extended into the interpretation of regional politics. Together, the two concepts provide an integrated framework for understanding the relationship among Shia political thought, the Iranian constitutional order, and Iran's regional political orientation.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the relationship between *Imāmah*, *ghaybah*, *Wilāyat al-Faqīh*, the constitutional structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Iran's regional political orientation. The analysis demonstrates that the emergence of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* should not be understood as a direct or automatic political continuation of the doctrine of *Imāmah*. Rather, it represents a reinterpretation of the problem of legitimate authority during the period of *ghaybah*. While the Imam remains the central theological reference in Twelver Shia thought, the *faqīh* becomes the political-legal authority through which the question of leadership can be addressed in the Imam's absence.

The study further shows that this reinterpretation acquired a concrete institutional form following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Through the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, the authority associated with *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* was incorporated into a political system that simultaneously retained republican institutions, including the presidency, parliament, elections, and referendums. The resulting configuration cannot therefore be adequately explained through a simple opposition between religious rule and popular rule. Religious authority and popular participation are incorporated into the same constitutional framework, although they do not occupy symmetrical positions within it.

On this basis, the study proposes mediated divine sovereignty as an analytical concept for explaining the Iranian configuration. The concept refers to a political arrangement in which divine sovereignty constitutes the ultimate normative source of legitimacy, while its political exercise is mediated through the *faqīh*, jurisprudential principles, constitutional provisions, and republican institutions. The concept does not suggest that divine sovereignty is exercised directly. Instead, it highlights the institutional mechanisms through which religiously grounded legitimacy is translated into concrete structures of political authority. This provides a more specific analytical perspective than simply categorizing Iran as a theocracy, theodemocracy, or hybrid regime.

The study also demonstrates that the implications of this configuration extend beyond Iran's domestic political structure. The Islamic Republic's constitutional principles, revolutionary identity, and transnational conception of Islamic solidarity contribute to a particular way of interpreting the regional environment. Iran's regional politics cannot, however, be reduced either to religious ideology or to strategic interest alone. Rather, Islamic identity, revolutionary principles, national interests, security considerations, and geopolitical conditions interact in shaping Iran's regional orientation.

To capture this dimension, the study introduces the concept of the regional Islamic gaze. This concept refers to the way the Iranian state constructs the regional political environment through the interaction of Islamic categories, revolutionary experience, transnational identity, national interests, and strategic considerations. It does not imply a single or uniform Iranian interpretation of the region, nor does it assume that Iranian foreign policy is determined exclusively by religious doctrine. Instead, it identifies a particular normative and political lens through which issues such as Muslim solidarity, resistance to domination, Palestine, and regional political alliances acquire significance.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the relationship between *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* and regional politics can be understood as part of a broader analytical continuum:

Imāmah → Ghaybah → Wilāyat al-Faqīh → Constitutional Institutionalization → Mediated Divine Sovereignty → Islamic Republic and Republican Institutions → Islamic/Transnational Political Identity → Regional Islamic Gaze → Regional Political Orientation.

This sequence should not be interpreted as a deterministic causal chain. Rather, it represents a process of reinterpretation and institutional mediation in which theological concepts are transformed into political institutions and subsequently become part of the normative framework through which the state understands its regional environment.

The principal contribution of this study is therefore twofold. First, it shifts the analysis of the Islamic Republic from the question of what type of regime Iran is toward the question of how religious legitimacy is institutionally mediated within a republican state. Second, it connects the domestic organization of religious authority with the regional construction of political identity, demonstrating that the relationship between religion

and politics in Iran cannot be fully understood by separating domestic constitutional arrangements from regional political orientation.

Nevertheless, the study is based primarily on qualitative analysis of scholarly literature and constitutional documents. It therefore provides an interpretive and conceptual account rather than an empirical assessment of the decision-making processes behind individual Iranian foreign-policy actions. Future research could examine how mediated divine sovereignty and the regional Islamic gaze operate in specific policy cases and across different political administrations. Such research would allow the conceptual framework developed here to be further tested against changes in Iran's domestic politics and regional environment.

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