Iran's New Cultural Nationalism: Iranian Cultural Diplomacy in Tajikistan

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Abstract

Iran's state identity is frequently described as Islamist, Shia, and anti-imperialist when discussing its behavior in the Middle East, but as pragmatic and even non-ideological in its approach to Central Asia. By parsing Iranian officials' speeches and purpose- written schoolbooks for ideology, this article documents the multiple identities that cultural diplomats present in Tajikistan and the functions they perform, including propagating normative Iranian identity among Iranian expats, lobbying Tajik officials, and influencing Tajik citizens. In contrast to the Middle East, Iranian cultural diplomacy in Tajikistan prioritizes a Persian identity as the basis for economic, scientific, cultural, and political integration in the region. Moreover, this identity is being discursively securitized as a strategic asset and an answer to threats from Salafism and globalization.

Keywords

Iran – Tajikistan – state identity – cultural diplomacy – nationalism

Introduction

State identity is assumed to play an outsized role in Iran's foreign policy— partly due to the country's claim to be a revolutionary theocratic republic and partly due to its intense ideological animosity toward the United States and its allies. In the extreme, some scholars and policymakers question whether Iran is a rational or suicidal actor. This topic is of acute importance at a time when states both to Iran's east and to its west are experiencing existential crises and

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often failure. Iran has not remained passive in the face of the resulting pressures. As one of the most powerful, stable states in the region, Iran's preferences for order may be decisive.

In foregrounding Tajikistan, this research seeks to explore the character of Iran's state identity through its behavior in a little-researched region and in connection to a facet of identity, Persian culture, that has largely been overlooked since the Iranian Revolution. Additionally, focusing on cultural diplomacy elevates a component of soft power seldom examined in qualitative research. This approach may bring to light a set of state preferences indicative of Iran's future behavior in the region to its east and elsewhere.

Iranian Identity

A state's identity determines how it "understands the meaning and purpose of regional and international organizations, the role the state should play in the world, and the kinds of interests worth pursuing."[1] Most scholars agree that despite its frequently ideological rhetoric, Iranian foreign policy balances multiple ideologies with pragmatic values. In explaining this behavior, scholars often refer to the plurality of identities competing for power within the Iranian regime. Hunter cites two elements of identity in the Islamic Republic that grate against the structural realities of the outside world: a "particular interpretation of Islam"—Twelver Shiism—and a "left-leaning Third-Worldism."[2] In addition to these two drivers, Maloney recognizes nationalism, but mostly as a vessel for self-interested pragmatism.[3] In 2014, Akbarzadeh and Barry interviewed 12 prominent Iranian international relations scholars and practitioners and came up with a trio of identities influencing the Islamic Republic's foreign policy: "Iranism," "Islam," and "Shiism."[4] Akbarzadeh and Barry insist that "Iranism" is not antithetical to or necessarily separate from Islam. It is a broad and inclusive concept that simultaneously evokes Iran's pre-Islamic history, the geographies of the Sasanian and Safavid empires, Iran's ethnic pluralism, and anti-imperialism.[5]

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1 M. Lynch, *State Interests and Public Spheres: The International Politics of Jordan's Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 22.

2 S. Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order* (Santa Barbara, ca: Praeger, 2010), 239.

3 S. Maloney, "Identity and Change in Iran's Foreign Policy," in S. Telhami and M. Barnett (eds.), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 94, 111–112.

4 S. Akbarzadeh and J. Barry, "State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 43, no. 4 (2016): 613–29.

5 Ibid., 615–616.

The literature on Iranian foreign policy tends to center on the Middle East. This is unsurprising given Iran's involvement in the Iran-Iraq War, conflicts in Lebanon, post-Saddam Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and its ongoing tensions with Israel and Saudi Arabia. In comparison to its regional policy in the Middle East, Iran's policy in Central Asia has received much less scholarly attention. Many Iran-related conflicts in the Middle East started during the turbulent decade of the 1980s, when the Islamic Republic was led by the revolutionary and charismatic Ruhollah Khomeini. By contrast, Iranian foreign policy in Central Asia and Afghanistan began during Iran's thermidor period in the 1990s, when the country's clerical leadership had passed to the far less charismatic Ali Khamenei and the president was preoccupied with postwar reconstruction and economic development rather than conflict.6

Scholars studying Iran's foreign policy in Central Asia detect a pragmatic bent to how the country pursues relations with regional states. Unlike its confrontational posturing in the Middle East, Hunter finds that "Iran's approach toward Central Asia and the Caucasus is remarkably free of ideological influences."7 Similarly, Mesbahi concludes that Iran's regional policy has moved away from revolutionary ideology and toward a realism based on state interests.8 In his study of how Iranian think tanks conceive of Central Asia, Wastnidge observes a preference for cooperative and constructive relations over any attempt to export the revolution.9 Milani notes the same tendencies, in contrast to Iran's approach to the Middle East.10 Pahlavi and Hojjati detect a "prudential-realist model" of behavior with regards to Central Asia.11

Some of the reasons for this pragmatism include Russia's sensitivity about other actors in its near abroad,12 the challenges facing Shiism in the

6 S. Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran under His Successors* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 52–64.

7 S. Hunter, "Iran's Pragmatic Regional Policy," *Journal of International Affairs,* 56, no. 2 (2003): 139.

8 M. Mesbahi, "Iran and Central Asia: Paradigm and Policy," *Central Asia Survey,* 23, no. 2 (2004): 109–39.

9 E. Wastnidge, "Central Asia in the Iranian Geopolitical Imagination," *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 1yrj04 (2017): 1–13.

10 M. Milani, *Iran in a Reconnecting Eurasia: Foreign Economic and Security Interests* (Lanham, md: Center for Strategic and International Studies/Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

11 P. Pahlavi and A. Hojjati, "Iran and Central Asia: The Smart Politics of Prudent Pragmatism," in E. Kavalski (ed.), *The New Central Asia: The Regional Impact of International Actors* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), 223.

12 Hunter, "Iran's Pragmatic Regional Policy," 141–2.

region,13 and, relatedly, the prevalence of a Salafist-inspired Islamism that is inimical to Iran.14 These adverse realities aside, the ideational aspect of Iranian foreign policy is not entirely absent from the Central Asian scene. Mesbahi notes that Islam has remained visible in Iran's approach, although "Iran has emphasized the cultural and civilizational, rather than the political aspect of its Islamic credentials."15 Pahlavi and Hojjati also trace the diminution of political Islamism relative to cultural connections.16 However, they interpret Iran's emphasis on culture cynically, claiming it is the soft power component alloyed onto Iran's hard power resources to create "smart power."17 Wastnidge, too, cautions that Iran's cultural foreign policy may be simply a means to mate-rial ends.18

Overall, scholars find little to recommend constructivist analyses of Iranian foreign policy in Central Asia. One exception is Clark's study of Iran-Tajikistan relations during the administration of Iranian president Mahmud Ahmadinejad.19 Clark sidesteps the more common ideational tropes of Islamism and anti-Americanism to examine what he terms the "rising salience of Persian national identity,"20 concluding that the Persianist content of Ahmadinejad's statements about relations between the three Persian-speaking states of Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan constituted an attempt by his administration to reframe trilateral relations away from religion and toward ethno-linguistic similarities.21 In a later study, Clark cross-checked his previous conclusion with a study of the material aspects of the Iran-Tajikistan relationship during the same period. Finding the material cooperation unimpressive, he argued that the invocations of a common culture were mostly a façade for "hard-edged political concerns" stemming from Iran's international isolation.22

13 S. Peyrouse and S. Ibraimov, "Iran's Central Asia Temptations," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology,* 10 (2010): 87–101.

14 Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy*, 171.

15 Mesbahi, "Iran and Central Asia," 117.

16 Pahlavi and Hojjati, "Iran and Central Asia."

17 Ibid., 219.

18 E. Wastnidge, "Pragmatic Politics: Iran, Central Asia and Cultural Foreign Policy," *Central Asia and the Caucasus,* 15, no. 4 (2014): 129.

19 B. Clark, "Iranian Foreign Policy Towards Tajikistan and Afghanistan During the Ahmadinejad Presidency: The Rising Salience of Persian National Identity," *Central Asia and Caucasus Studies,* 7, no. 13 (2012): 73–105.

20 Ibid., 73.

21 Ibid., 98.

22 Ibid., 272.

Iran's emphasis on its cultural commonalities with Central Asia has largely been treated as a convenient appeal to achieve pragmatic policy goals. There has been no scholarship that uses Iran's cultural diplomacy initiatives to study its state identity at work. As a result, neither the rhetorical content of Iranian cultural activities in Tajikistan nor its relationship to the bilateral agenda is known.

Identity and Cultural Diplomacy

Nye defines public diplomacy as the mobilization of a state's culture, policies, and political values—its identity—in pursuit of soft power.23 While some scholars promote altruistic uses of cultural diplomacy, Nye's soft power framework has become dominant in the literature.24 In their attempt to develop rigorous methods to study the conduct and effect of soft power tools, Miskimmon, O'Laughlin, and Roselle pioneered the concept of "strategic narratives"—the messages embedded in a country's public diplomacy programming in order to persuade international audiences. They identified three kinds of strategic narratives: 1) international system narratives—narratives that "describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how it works"; 2) national (or identity) narratives—narratives that define a state's story, values, and goals; and 3) issue narratives—narratives that present an issue and advocate a certain policy or action.25 When examined through "thick" studies like content and discourse analyses, these narratives can reveal a regime's fundamental and stable worldview.26 Some scholars have used this approach to study how state identity manifests itself in cultural diplomacy activities.27 Miskimmon et al. argue that not only are narratives a good site to study state identities, but their articulation is part of the reproduction of state identity.28

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23 J. Nye, "Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy." Adapted from a speech at Syracuse University Cultural Diplomacy Symposium, 2009, http://publicdiplomacymagazine.com/ soft-power-and-cultural-diplomacy/.

24 For an overview of the terminological and theoretical discussions concerning cultural diplomacy and similar practices, see S. Mark, *A Greater Role for Cultural Diplomacy* (Netherlands: Institute of International Relations "Clingendael," 2009).

25 A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin, and L. Roselle, "Strategic Narratives: A New Means to Understand Soft Power," *Media, War, and Conflict,* 7, no. 1 (2014): 76.

26 A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin, and L. Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 14–16.

27 Hartig uses this framework to study the strategic narratives China presents at its Confucius Institutes: F. Hartig, "Communicating China to the World: Confucius Institutes and China's Strategic Narratives," *Politics,* 35, no. 3–4 (2015): 245–258.

28 Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power*, 30–34.

Nye emphasizes that credibility is crucial for effective public diplomacy, and that in the highly competitive global media landscape of the information age, credibility is the scarcest resource.29 In the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the country's involvement in multiple world regions, each with its own particular history and pertinent issues, makes it likely that the regime projects different strategic narratives in different countries. Lob, studying Iran's development assistance in Africa, observed differentiation in the regime's messaging: religious ideology is emphasized to Muslim audiences, while non-Muslim audiences receive anti-imperialist narratives.30 According to Wastnidge, Iran disseminates different messages to particular sects and ethnicities within the Muslim world as well.31 Inconsistencies in messaging or emphasis are not necessarily indicators of irrationality or incoherence. This study finds that at varying times, Iranian cultural diplomats have appealed to Iranian expats as Shia co-religionists, anti-Zionists, and members of an ancient, pre-Islamic cultural community—all of which constitute normative Iranian identity. However, special attention must be paid to narratives which reveal contradictory world- views, as such contradictions might threaten the regime's credibility.

A comparative study of narratives offers several possible insights. Consistent dissemination of a single, global strategic narrative that is unpopular in Central Asia could be evidence of a stable and influential state identity. Conversely, a narrative consistently disseminated in Central Asia that contradicts narratives elsewhere could reveal that the regime lacks a single, coherent identity. A narrative that conflicts with Iran's regional agenda could reveal that identity is not important to Iranian foreign policy. Multiple contradictory narratives disseminated regionally could indicate that Iran either lacks a systematic messaging regime or is pursuing multiple audiences within the region. Such contradictions can only be ascertained through careful content and discourse analysis.

Findings

This study finds that the strategic narratives that Iran projected through its cultural diplomacy in Tajikistan represented multiple identities. Furthermore,

29 J. Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* 616, no. 1 (2008): 99–101.

30 E. Lob, "The Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy and Construction Jihad's Developmental Activities in Sub-Saharan Africa," *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* 48, no. 2 (2016): 313–38.

31 E. Wastnidge, "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War," *Politics*, 35, no. 3–4 (2015): 364–77.

several of these identities were being presented to the same demographic. Iranian strategic narratives in Syria and Tajikistan showed both significant over- lap (regarding Muslim identity) and significant gaps (regarding the importance of ethnic identity), which indicates a relatively flexible state identity willing to risk a moderate amount of credibility.

Taking Iran's cultural diplomacy activities out of the attraction-based theory of soft power and putting them into the identity production-based framework of cultural nationalism32 helps explain some of their irregularities. Cultural nationalism also explains what appears to be Iran's securitization of a particular culture in styles akin to colonial regimes and irredentist movements. Further research will have to study the extent of this policy in other locations within Iran's periphery.

Of the identities revealed by this study, only one both has significant political implications and reaches a nationwide audience. While this identity differs from the identities in the literature, it corresponds strongly to Iran's policy agenda in Tajikistan, which suggests that it is an important addition to the literature. Finally, this identity appears to have increasing political and institutional support within the Iranian government.

Methodology

This study applies Miskimmon et al.'s strategic narratives concept as a meth- odological tool to ascertain Iranian state identity: the messaging embedded in Iran's cultural diplomacy should indicate its worldview(s). I analyze the mes- saging contained in two kinds of cultural diplomacy products, namely speeches and textbooks. These sources offer two main advantages over an observation- based, ethnographic study of cultural diplomacy activities. First, while cultural diplomacy activities have been stopped and their venues closed, these sources have been preserved either physically or digitally. Second, the careful preparation involved in creating these products should encapsulate Iran's intended messages better than extemporaneous comments or participants' impressions of activities. My central object of research is intent, not execution.

The first set of sources is a collection of 13 speeches delivered by Iranian cultural diplomats between July 2012 and July 2016. I selected a sample that covers a broad range of venues, audiences, and occasions in order to show the breadth of contexts in which Iranian cultural diplomacy is conducted.

32 See G. Paschalidis, "Exporting National Culture: Histories of Cultural Institutes Abroad," *International Journal of Cultural Policy,* 15, no. 3 (2009): 275–89.

Juxtaposing speeches delivered to religious, secular, international, local, official, and civilian audiences should reveal potentially contradictory strategic narratives.

The second set of sources is four Persian alphabet textbooks created jointly by Iran and Tajikistan. Since Tajikistan's independence, Iran has helped produce and disseminate several textbooks for teaching its alphabet in Tajikistan. The Iranian cultural consulate has at various times published the books,33 attempted to train Tajik teachers to teach them,34 and provided material sup- port to classes teaching the books.35 The textbooks were produced for similarly aged children between the years 1992 and 2006, and should therefore demonstrate if and how the narratives have evolved over time.

For both sets of sources, I used a directed content analysis approach based on the three kinds of strategic narratives. I coded representations of ethnic, national, and religious characteristics, as well as values and aspirations, as "identity" narratives; I coded claims about problems and their solutions as "issue" narratives; and I coded claims about how the world is organized and managed by actors as "international system" narratives.36 Since the visual nature of textbooks allows for more than just verbal messaging, I examined text, symbols, and images for religiosity, representations of Tajikistan and Iran, and students' supposed relationship to the two countries. Rather than risk misinterpreting the symbolic importance of texts written in verse, I simply noted their subject. Subsequently, I combined each source's "identity," "issue," and "international system" narratives to generate an overall identity representing its perspective. Following that, I sought to determine whether the identity appears in Iran's policy advocacy in Tajikistan. Finally, I attempted to locate the identity within the relevant literature to gain insights into how it informs Iranian policy prefer-
ences in the larger region.

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33 See the details of books published by ICRO in Dushanbe on the Saadi Foundation website: http://saadifoundation.ir/fa/books/All/ListView/330//index.html.

34 Former cultural consul Qahraman Soleimani notes the political obstacles blocking these teacher-training programs. See F. Bunesh, "Challenges in Changing Script from Cyrillic to Persian in Tajikistan: Conversation with Qahraman Soleimani (Part One)," August 31, 2013, http://peace-ipsc.org/fa/چالش-های-نخبگی-خط-از-روس-یا-یک-به-فارس-در/.

35 Many alphabet class commencement ceremonies mention the support provided by the Iranian cultural attache. See "Commencement of Spring Term for Learning Alphabet of the Ancestors in Khojand, Tajikistan," last modified July 9, 2016, http://www.icro.ir/index.aspx?siteid=261&pageid=11751&newsview=655143.

36 For more information on directed content analysis, see H.-F. Hsieh and S. Shannon, "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis," *Qualitative Health Research,* 15, no. 9 (2005): 1277–88.

I also included data from interviews conducted with former staff of the Iranian mission in Dushanbe and a Tajik co-worker of theirs. The interviews were both informational and ethnographic in purpose.

Background

Case Studies

Von Maltzahn carried out what is, to date, the only in-depth study of Iranian cultural diplomacy in any country.37 She researched the activities of Iran's foremost cultural diplomacy institution, the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), in Syria. Due to Syria's location in a region where Iranian political discourse tends toward anti-imperialism, Islamic unity, and Shiism, her study is useful for comparing how Iran pursues cultural diplomacy in disparate conditions.

Von Maltzahn's analysis draws on Nye's framework of cultural diplomacy as an instrument of soft power.38 Putting the Iran-Syria bilateral relationship in historical context, Von Maltzahn points out that despite some ideological differences, the countries converged on issues of anti-Zionism, anti-imperialism, a common history, and Islamic unity in the face of spreading Western influence and culture.39 She notes that "since culture constitutes a nation's identity, Iran considers its cultural diplomacy work [in Syria] successful since it emphasised precisely the identity the Islamic Republic wanted to construct, regardless of it being one of many cultural identities actually present in Iran."40 The identity in question is strongly connected to Khomeinist ideology.41 The ICRO's activities were apparently brimming with ideology. One former Persian language professor from Syria lamented Iran's politicized involvement in education: "he said the universities were simply a tool for the Iranians to spread their propaganda in Syria, and had nothing to do with academia."42

As Syria and Tajikistan are in the two world regions with the highest potential for Iranian soft power43 but differ significantly in terms of their Islamic and

37 N. Von Maltzahn, *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

38 Ibid., 6–7.

39 Ibid., 82.

40 Ibid., 211.

41 Ibid., 62–68

42 Ibid., 153.

43 H. Harsij, L. Jaafari, and M. Toyserkani, "The Geopolitics of Iran's Soft Power" (in Persian), *Political Science,* 4 (2012): 262–263.

Persian identity, they present an opportunity to study the Islamic Republic's flexibility in defining itself. The greater the convergence of strategic narratives, the more singular and coherent Iran's state identity is; the more differentiation, the more plural and situationally contingent.

Iran and Tajikistan

In the thousands of years since ancient Iranian peoples first entered Central and Southwest Asia, the territories of Iran and Tajikistan have periodically been connected by trade, conquest, and cultural diffusion. Consequently, both countries speak a modern variant of New Persian and celebrate the ancient Iranian spring festival of Nowruz. Though both countries are majority Muslim, Iran's official sect is Twelver Shiism, whereas Tajikistan follows the Sunni- Hanafi theological school. Cultural and economic relations between the two regions declined when the territory of Tajikistan was incorporated into the Emirate of Bukhara in the late 18th century.44 The disconnection deepened following the Tsarist and then Soviet conquests of Central Asia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.45 Two lasting Soviet legacies in Tajikistan are the Cyrillic (rather than Persian) alphabet and a secular political regime.

Contemporary bilateral relations were established in 1992, when the Islamic Republic of Iran became the first country to open an embassy in newly independent Tajikistan.46 Within months of independence, Islamist, liberal, and regionalist armed factions were violently clashing with those remnants of the Communist Party-led regime who had retained power immediately after independence. The ensuing Tajik Civil War lasted for five years, ending when Russia and Iran facilitated a peace deal. Throughout this period, Iran's Rafsanjani government (1989–1997), though known for its sympathy and support for the Islamist opposition, maintained a constructive relationship with the Communists. Bilateral cooperation surged during Iran's Ahmadinejad administration (2005–2013). Clark contends that a key reason for this was the growing international isolation Iran faced due to its nuclear program and its need to circumvent sanctions.47 During this time, Iranian and Tajik leaders made numerous hyperbolic public pronouncements about the countries' cultural

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44 B. Clark, "The Islamic Republic Of Iran's Relations with the Republic of Tajikistan in the Post-Soviet Period" (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2015), 113–114.

45 M. Volodarsky, *The Soviet Union and Its Southern Neighbours, Iran and Afghanistan, 1917–1933* (Essex: Frank Cass, 1994), 15.

46 M. Atkin, "Iran, Russia, and Tajikistan's Civil War," in S. Cronin (ed.), *Iranian Russian Encounters: Empires and Revolutions Since 1800* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013).

47 Clark, "The Islamic Republic Of Iran's Relations with the Republic of Tajikistan," 237–250.

closeness and support for each other.48 Policymakers were willing to match their words with actions, resulting in numerous agreements signed and implemented, and record-high Iranian private investment.

When the administration of Hassan Rouhani (2013-) inherited the bilateral relationship, it appeared ready to continue its positive trajectory. However, in September 2015, the Tajik government declared (rather dubiously) that the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, the country's main opposition party and the only Islamist party in Central Asia, was a terrorist organization.49 Iran subsequently invited the Islamist party's leader, Muhiddin Kabiri, to its Conference on Islamic Unity in December, severely antagonizing the Tajik administration. Since then, the two governments have experienced a prolonged diplomatic cri- sis, with bilateral cooperation steadily worsening, increasing pressure on Iranian residents and businesses in Tajikistan, and other states—including Iran's Persian Gulf rivals—stepping in to meet Tajikistan's need for donors and investors. At the time of writing, bilateral relations are at a nadir and official Iranian cultural activities have stopped entirely.

Analysis

Cultural Diplomacy Identities: Speeches

None of the identities that can be elucidated from the speeches explicitly denied being Persian or Muslim, but the speakers formulated the importance of those identities in disparate ways. They by turns invited the audience to perform Muslimness by condemning Israel and supporting Islamic solidarity, praying and reading the Quran, believing a distinctly Shia ideology, appreciating Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamist ideas, and appreciating Persian poets who infused Islam with pre-Islamic traditions. Some identities were pan-sectarian. Others made no reference to sect. Still others made no reference to Islam. None advocated religious extremism. With regard to Persian identity, some speakers ignored it altogether; others referred to it as the proper vehicle for relating to Islam. Some treated Persian nationalism and respect for ancestors as fundamental to being patriotic, moral, and responsible citizens. Relatedly, others prescribed Persian identity as a cure for social and psychological problems. Five particular identities stand out in the speeches:

48 Clark, "Iranian Foreign Policy Towards Tajikistan."

49 E. Adine, "Tajikistan in the Past Year: Distance from Iran, Closeness with Uzbekistan," *BBC*, January 4, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/persian/world-38508748.

- *Devout Shia*: The speaker and audience observe Shia religious holidays andare concerned with doctrinal questions.50
- *Devout Non-Sectarian Muslim*: The speaker and audience seek to read and/or interpret the Quran.51
- *Non-Sectarian Political Islamist*: The speaker and audience are concerned with Islamic forms of government and leadership in the Muslim world.52
- *Transnational Persian Culturalist:*53 The speaker and audience seek to honor their ancestors by preserving culture.54
- *Pan-Sectarian Anti-Zionist Muslim*: The speaker and audience support solidarity among Muslims and condemn Israel.55

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50 "Birthday Celebration of Imam Hossein Mojtaba Held at Embassy of Islamic Republic of Iran in Tajikistan," June 26, 2016, http://fa.dushanbe.icro.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=185&pageid=11675&newsview=654233.

51 S.J. Tabatabaee, "Commencement Ceremony of Quranic Sciences and Persian Alpha- bet Education Courses in Tajikistan," *Ahle Beyt News Agency*, December 7, 2012, http://fa.abna24.com/service/asia-center/archive/2012/07/11/328305/story.html.

52 "Anniversary Ceremony of Imam Khomeini's Passing Held in More than 15 Locations around the World," *Tasnim News*, June 7, 2014, https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1393/03/17/392985/.

53 "Persian Culturalist" has been preferred over "Persianist" because speakers assert that non-ethnic Persians can participate in Persian culture. See Rouhani's speech, "President at Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan," September 3, 2014, http://fa.dushanbe.icro.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=185&pageid=11675&newsview=618188.

54 "75th Ceremony of Birth Anniversary of Shirali Layiq Attended by Ambassador and Cultural Consul of I.R. Iran in Tajikistan at Grave of this Beloved Tajik Poet," May 2, 2016, http://fa.dushanbe.icro.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=185&pageid=11675&newsview=651914; "Commemoration of Anniversary of Hakem Abu al-Qasem Ferdowsi in Tajikistan," May 15, 2016, http://saadifoundation.ir/fa/news/%7C1%7C,/bodyView/579/; "Commencement of 18th Term of Cultural Consulate Classes," March 9, 2015, http://dushanbe.icro.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=185&pageid=11675&newsview=627907; "Commencement of Persian Script Education Course in City of Istaravshan, Tajikistan," April 19, 2014, http://www.icro.ir/index.aspx?siteid=261&pageid=11751&newsview=610996; ICRO, "Commencement of Spring"; ICRO, "President at Academy of Sciences"; "Resident Iranians in Tajikistan Celebrated Nowruz of 1395 with Especial Pomp," March 24, 2016, http://dushanbe.icro.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=185&pageid=11675&newsview=648078; "Speech of Cultural Consul of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Tajikistan at the International Conference on the Status of the State Language of the Republic of Tajikistan in International Affairs," June 10, 2015, http://fa.dushanbe.icro.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=185&pageid=11675&newsview=653390; "Teaching the Persian Alphabet to Journalists of Tajikistan," December 7, 2015, http://saadifoundation.ir/fa/news/7/bodyView/366/0/.

55 "Commemoration of World Qods Day in Tajikistan + Images," *Fars News Agency*, July 2, 2016, http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13950411001230.

Three of the identities—Devout Shia, Pan-Sectarian Anti-Zionist Muslim, and Political Islamist—were directed at primarily Iranian audiences and received by dozens of people annually.56 The Devout Non-Sectarian Muslim identity was directed at Tajiks participating in the Iranian cultural center's Quran recitation and interpretation classes. Several hundred participants attended such classes yearly.57 The Transnational Persian Culturalist identity is apparent in poetry events, alphabet classes, a Nowruz event, speeches to academics, and speeches to Tajik officials. It was directed at Tajiks, Iranians, and Afghans. As of summer 2016, this identity was reaching thousands of people annually.58

Cultural Diplomacy Identities: Alphabet Books

The first image in *Alphabet* is that of a large Quran and a Basmallah.59 There are six texts on religious subjects in the back of the book: "God," "The Prophet," "The Quran," "Prayer," "Ramadan," and "The Sacrifice Feast." These texts assert the reader's Muslim identity and the importance of religious doctrine and rituals to that identity. Importantly, images of headscarved girls abound within the lessons. Limbert calls such idealized pictures "wish-images," as they represent the norms authors intend to generate.60 In addition to this religious content, the book also includes content of nationalist significance: there is a text in the back of the book on the pre-Islamic holiday of Nowruz and another identifying Tajikistan as the reader's homeland. One text instructs students to pledge their eternal friendship to the Iranian people and the Islamic Republic for gifting the

56 The cultural consulate's website shows just a handful of annual Shia holidays—most celebrated by resident Iranians within the Iranian embassy. Associated photographs show no more than a few dozen attendees at each. The Political Islamist identity is expressed even less frequently. Photographs evince less than 100 attendees per year. The only significant Pan-Sectarian Anti-Zionist Muslim identity in evidence is a yearly event that attracted no more than 100 attendees.

57 A former staffer at the cultural consulate claimed that 100 to 200 students enrolled in Quran classes every three-month term. An April 2014 news article affirms that 300 to 400 students enrolled in the center's Persian Alphabet and Quran classes every term and claims that 5,000 students had attended the classes to date: "Commencement Ceremony of 15th Quranic Sciences and Persian Script Education Term Held in Tajikistan," *Tasnim News*, April 12, 2014, https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1393/01/23/335653/.

58 In addition to the hundreds attending smaller events, the cultural consulate taught hundreds of alphabet students annually. Also, dozens of "affiliated" alphabet courses were held every quarter around the country—see Tasnim News, "Commencement Ceremony."

59 S. Amani and M. Lotf, *Alphabet* (n.p., 1992).

60 M. Limbert, "Oman: Cultivating Good Citizens and Religious Virtue," in E. Doumato and G. Starrett (eds.), *Teaching Islam: Textbooks and Religion in the Middle East* (Boulder, co: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007), 103–24.

book. Throughout, children in the book are frequently shown wearing the Central Asian *toqi* skullcap. The book's identity can be described as *Muslim Tajik*.

Candle was produced by the same publisher and much of the same editing team, yet contains no pictures of girls and almost no religious references.61 With the exception of the text about Nowruz, all the relevant texts from the back of the book were removed, replaced by a map of Tajikistan and several patriotic poems. The identity encapsulated by this content could be described as Tajik Nationalist.

The *Alphabet of the Ancestors and Text* series changes this formula again.62 The fourth-grade volume starts with an introductory text that mentions Is- lam, the prophet Muhammad, and the Quran, but it does not make claims about the religious identity of the reader. A text addressing teachers claims that returning to an authentic Tajik identity requires learning the Persian alphabet. Students are informed:

> All the works that our ancestors created over more than 12 centuries with the Arabic alphabet—this treasure was like an ocean set aside, and we've only benefitted a drop from it. Now that we are independent and have an independent state, we have good and friendly relations with other states that share our language and culture—Iran and Afghanistan—and we can access books, newspapers, and magazines from these countries. Moreover, in dear Tajikistan we also have newspapers, magazines, and books being printed in the script of the ancestors. Therefore, it's very necessary and important for us and you to know this alphabet in order to make use of all these works.

Between the two books, the only picture clearly of children is a photo of five girls performing a ceremonial Nowruz dance; three are wearing headscarves and two have had flower garlands digitally inserted over their bare heads. The Tajik national anthem, flag, and other state paraphernalia are pictured at the beginning and end of the book. The book is apparently torn between the Tajik Nationalist and Transnational Persian Culturalist identities, an interesting duality. The symbolic presence of a sovereign, independent Tajikistan is more pronounced, but the text instructs children to seek meaning in that independence by joining a larger civil society of co-ethnics.

61 M. Jamal and M. Lotf, *Candle* (Tehran: Offset Press, 1994).

62 A. Baizoev and S. Kabirov, *Alphabet of the Ancestors and Text* (Dushanbe: Offset Press, 2006).

Reconsidering Cultural Diplomacy

This cacophony of identities shows that Iranian cultural activities were delivering multiple identities to different audiences—and sometimes to the same audience. Making sense of the identities involved requires moving away from the concept of cultural diplomacy as merely a subset of public diplomacy where foreign officials attempt to influence a generalized public opinion, in- stead treating it as a collection of identity-building practices with their own specific goals. Some critical literature on cultural diplomacy helps to disaggregate these practices.

Kaya and Tecmen's study of Turkey's Yunus Emre Institutes in Europe reveals that the centers had a dual purpose.63 They were advertised as a way to facilitate acculturation between Turkish and European cultures during Turkey's eu accession process. Simultaneously, they were meant to stop Turkish expatriates from assimilating into their host culture by providing places where members of the Turkish community could gather to strengthen their Turkish identities. Similarly, Nguyen finds that China's Confucius Institutes in Thailand are concentrated near the country's sizable Chinese diaspora communities.64 As noted, the three Iranian identities of Devout Shia, Political Islamist, and Pan-Sectarian Anti-Zionist Muslim were targeted primarily at the local Iranian population. They are also the most recognizable identities from the literature, which suggests that those particular events are not meant to engage with Tajik civil society but, like the Yunus Emre Institutes and Confucius Centers, to act as a venue where Iranian expats can perform normative Iranian identity.

In Nye's telling, cultural diplomacy began when France created the Alliance Française to teach French and restore its national prestige after its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War.65 Germany and Italy created their own institutes soon thereafter. Public diplomacy then evolved out of those efforts. What Nye fails to examine is the intended audience of these activities. France established the Alliance Française to spread the French language and culture throughout its colonies and thus promote assimilation.66 For their part, Italy's Dante Alighieri Society and Germany's All-German School Association for the Preservation of Germanhood Abroad were founded among German and Italian-speaking

63 A. Kaya and A. Tecmen, "The Role of Yunus Emre Cultural Centers in Turkish Cultural Diplomacy," in S. Rodin and M. Topic (eds.), *Cultural Diplomacy and Cultural Imperialism: European Perspectives* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

64 V.C. Nguyen, "Confucius Institutes in the Mekong Region: China's Soft Power or Soft Border?" *Issues and Studies,* 50, no. 4 (2014): 85–117.

65 Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," 96.

66 Paschalidis, "Exporting National Culture," 278–9.

diaspora communities in Europe with the express purpose of developing and preserving the "cultural nation." According to Paschalidis, "the insistence on the cultural nation-building process even after the national integration had been achieved was symptomatic of the perceived incompleteness of the political nation-building project."67 Paschalidis argues that these two patterns, "assimilationist colonial" and "anti-assimilationist nationalist," were less forms of "cultural diplomacy" than "cultural nationalism." Though a more recognizable cultural diplomacy would appear decades later in the service of political propaganda and ideological competition, it too was only one iteration of the long-running practice of "external cultural policy."68

Comparing Iran's Tajik-oriented cultural diplomacy activities to the colonial assimilationist and anti-assimilationist nationalist politics above shows them to be an amalgam of styles. They are based on wide-scale integration into Tajikistan's educational infrastructure (colonial assimilationist). They are predicated on an alleged trans-border cultural nation that needs to be protected (anti-assimilationist nationalist). They express a desire for solidarity and integration (anti-assimilationist nationalist). Despite the seeming contradiction of these policies being both assimilationist and anti-assimilationist, they share a fundamental similarity: both seek to spread language and culture as a basis for sovereignty, not affinity.

Recognizing that the idea of a cultural nation is an iteration of the "imagined communities" trope, it is appropriate to view Iran's linguistic agenda in Tajikistan in the context of that body of literature.69 Indeed, Iran has been a persistent advocate of standardizing the modern Persian variants. Shortly after Tajikistan's independence, Iran began lobbying the Tajik government to change its official alphabet from Cyrillic to Persian.70 Iranian cultural diplomats lament that Persian literature, as a whole, has been damaged by the

67 Ibid., 277–8.

68 Ibid., 279–283. Zamorano also critiques the connection between soft power and cultural diplomacy as conceptually limiting: M. Zamorano, "Reframing Cultural Diplomacy: The Instrumentalization of Culture under the Soft Power Theory," *Culture Unbound,* 8 (2016): 166–86.

69 For more information on the "imagined communities" concept, see B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006). For a study of this nationalizing process in modern Iranian history, see A. Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870–1940* (Seattle: University of Washing- ton Press, 2008).

70 Clark, "The Islamic Republic Of Iran's Relations with the Republic of Tajikistan," 152.

multiple scripts.71 They also warn that continuing to use Cyrillic will prevent Tajik from developing.72 In addition, Iran has been tenacious in lobbying the Tajik government to help standardize the terminology used in Tajik and Iranian Persian. On several occasions, Iran's Academy of Persian Language and Literature has gifted dictionaries containing thousands of newly created Persian terms to Tajikistan's Committee on Language and Terminology.73 During a June 2016 conference on the Tajik language in Dushanbe, the head of the Academy and the Iranian cultural consul declared that state-led language planning was normal, that Iran was willing to help, and that a failure to do so would lead to the death of Persian as a literary language.74

Iranian officials are correct in arguing that political decisions can strongly affect the evolution of languages and their literatures.75 Such arguments are the inverse of Anderson's central insight—that the evolution of languages and literatures can *fundamentally* affect the shape of politics.76 To standardize the three Persian variants and place them under the supervision of the Academy is to give Iran extraordinary power to define a new, transnational civil society. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, Iran has systemically lobbied for linguistic integration through both its cultural diplomacy and direct government-to-government advocacy.77

While the attraction-based theory of soft power is unable to explain the alphabet book's multiple identities, the identity production-based framework

71 See meeting of cultural consul Mohammad Amir Hossein Ardush with Tajik educators and linguists: "Session Held on Weaknesses of Persian Language and Literature Education Activities," July 23, 2009, http://fa.dushanbe.icro.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=185&pageid=11675&newsview=537863.

72 See interview of former cultural consul Qahraman Soleimani (Bunesh, "Challenges in Changing Script"). Also see essay of former cultural consul Mohammad Hossein Amir Ardush, "Persian Language and Literature: Tajikistan," December 25, 2013, https://www.cgie.org.ir/fa/news/7879.

73 "Academy of Persian Language of Iran 'Presents' Tajikistan with 16,000 Words," *BBC*, July 29, 2015. http://www.bbc.com/persian/arts/2015/07/150729_l41_books_farhangestan_ tajikestan.

74 "Speech," 2016.

75 Anderson indicates that political decisions thoroughly divided a once relatively unified Turkish literary language (*Imagined Communities*, 45–46).

76 Ibid.

77 For another example of high-level advocacy, see the Academy head's public comments to the head of Tajikistan's Language and Terminology Committee: "16,000 Persian Words Presented by Iran to Tajikistan," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, July 28, 2015, http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/81698760.

of cultural nationalism provides compelling answers. The role of school textbooks as a mechanism for socializing youth and spreading hegemonic ideology is well known.78 In the Iranian context, Mehran demonstrates that following the Iranian Revolution, the content of Iranian textbooks changed dramatically to represent the new norms.79 Malekzadeh documents the subtler shifts in messaging that took place in the post-revolutionary period as textbook editors reacted to changes in Iranian politics and society.80

The alphabet books likewise reflect political changes in Tajikistan. The first book, *Alphabet,* was designed and published after Iran's Rafsanjani administration and Tajikistan's Government of National Reconciliation signed a cultural agreement in June 1992.81 At the time, Tajikistan's education ministry was under the control of the Islamist opposition.82 Thus, the joint Iranian-Tajik editing team was able to design a book based on shared Islamic sensibilities. In December 1992, the Government of National Reconciliation was dissolved and a new, one-party government was formed under the secular communist Emomali Rahmonov.83 As a result, when *Candle* was published in 1994, the joint editing team of Islamists from Iran and secular communists from Tajikistan was evidently unable to agree on how to represent girls.84 A similar situation arose in 2006, when the editors of *Alphabet of the Ancestors with Text* digitally concealed the hair of the dancing girls. This tension reveals that the textbooks themselves were a site of interstate competition to define Tajik identity.

Competition between the two governments has sometimes resulted in stalemate, as when discrepancies over how to portray women caused the plan

78 J. Anyon, "Ideology and United States History Textbooks," *Harvard Educational Review*, 49, no. 3 (1979): 361–86.

79 G. Mehran, "Socialization of Schoolchildren in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies,* 22, no. 1 (1989): 35–50.

80 S. Malekzadeh, "Children without Childhood, Adults without Adulthood: Changing Conceptions of the Iranian Child in Postrevolutionary Iranian Textbooks (1979–2008)," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 32, no. 2 (2012): 339–60.

81 Clark, "The Islamic Republic Of Iran's Relations with the Republic of Tajikistan," 166.

82 For the composition of Tajikistan's 1992 Government of National Reconciliation, see K. Abdullaev and S. Akbarzadeh, *Historical Dictionary of Tajikistan* (Lanham, md: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 148, 403.

83 Clark, "The Islamic Republic Of Iran's Relations with the Republic of Tajikistan,"163–164.

84 To see the contrast between the Islamic Republic's preferred images of chador-wearing girls and the Rahmonov government's preference for bareheaded girls, compare Iran's *Persian: Third Grade* (Ministry, 1990) with Tajikistan's *Alphabet: First Grade Lesson Book* (I. Abdulloev, Ibodullo, M. Lutfulloev, and F. Sharifov, *Alphabet: First Grade Lesson Book* [Dushanbe: Sarparast, 2007]).

for a joint television channel to founder,85 or in compromise, with Iran acquiescing to an identity the Tajik government can accept. When Iranian cultural diplomats spoke at public schools, they assiduously avoided any religious references. Instead, they emphasized the Transnational Persian Culturalist identity by encouraging students to read their ancestors' works and use Iranian media sources. In the case of *Alphabet of the Ancestors*, religious content was strictly disallowed, but the duality between the Tajik Nationalist and Transnational Persian Culturalist identity suggests that competition remained—albeit on terms acceptable to the Tajik government.

Perhaps the most thorough articulation of Iranian cultural policy in Ta- jikistan has been provided by Mohammad Hassan Sanaati, a former Iranian cultural consul in Tajikistan.86 In an essay that appeared on an Iranian news website, Sanaati explained that Iran's relationship to Tajikistan is different from its relationship to other countries, saying that despite their geographical separation, the two countries have "unity," not "relations." He went on to claim that Iranian cultural activities in Tajikistan are based on the familial relationship in which a person "strives to elevate himself and his family members in soul, thought, knowledge, and spirit." Sanaati also promised that Iran would fund cultural development in Tajikistan in the same way that it spends domestically. Sanaati's essay is of a piece with Iran's general messaging toward Tajikistan: he sees no difference between Tajik and Iranian identity and he stresses the importance of cultural integration. Overall, there is a remarkable convergence between the Transnational Persian Culturalist identity and Iran's bilateral agenda in Tajikistan—both in word and in practice.

What Does the Literature Say?

As demonstrated in the literature review, three of the five identities—Devout Shia, Political Islamist, and Pan-Sectarian Anti-Zionist Muslim—are well attested. The fourth, Non-Sectarian Devout Muslim, is not. However, this identity contained very few issue or international system narratives, making its foreign policy relevance minimal. The fifth identity, Transnational Persian Culturalist, warrants more attention due to its many issue and international system

85 "The Persian-Language tv Station Project was Unrealizable Initially, Say Tajik Experts," *asia-Plus*, December 8, 2016, https://www.asiaplus.tj/en/news/tajikistan/society/20161208/234115.

86 M. Sanaati, "Points about the Cultural Link Between Iran and Tajikistan: From Diplomatic Relations to Kinship Project," *Fars News*, February 16, 2014, http://www.farsnews.com/printable.php?nn=13921126001045.

narratives and the fact that it is implicated in large-scale cultural nationalism activities.

This researcher was unable to find the Transnational Persian Culturalist identity explicitly expressed in the literature on Iran's state identity. Within the Persian-language literature, Dehghani-Firouzabadi identifies the "Civilizational- Cultural Discourse" as an Iranian foreign policy discourse directed toward the dismantling of current Iran and its political reconstitution as a much larger, cultural "Iranian World."87 The proponents of this discourse see Iranian cultural identity as being shaped by "shared history and civilizational experience, followed by a shared religion, and then the Persian language."88 The tertiary importance given to language does not match the identity revealed in this study.

In the English-language literature, Akbarzadeh and Barry's recent study of Iranian foreign policy figures finds something similar in "Iranism," though their analysis differs in two ways. First, the authors claim that Iranism has a "distinct emphasis on [Iran's] territorial integrity," whereas the Transnational Persian Culturalist discourse has clear extra-territorial aspirations. Second, Iranism does not put the same emphasis on the importance of the Persian language.89 Holliday finds that former Iranian president Mohamed Khatami's "Dialogue Among Civilizations" diplomacy initiative promoted an "Islamist-Iranian" identity based on medieval Persian literature—much like the Transnational Persian Culturalist identity.90 However, Holliday sees the foreign policy relevance of Khatami's Islamist-Iranian identity only in distinguishing Iran from others: Iran is distinct from the West and unique in the Islamic world. Holliday does not report finding anything in Khatami's Islamist-Iranian civilizational identity that suggests the integration of the Persianate world.91 Wastnidge, studying how Khatami invoked Iran's civilizational identity with regards to the Economic Cooperation Organization (eco), did find an aspiration to promote Persian culture within the non-Arab Muslim countries of Southwest and Central Asia.92 However, Wastnidge treated this particular discourse as one of the

87 J. Dehghani-Firouzabadi, "Iran's Foreign Policy Discourses in Central Asia and the Caucasus," *Iran and Eurasia Studies Institute (IRAS) Semi-Annual Journal*, 1, no. 2 (2007): 124.

88 Ibid., 123–124.

89 Akbarzadeh and Barry, "State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy," 617–618.

90 S. Holliday, "The Politicisation of Culture and the Contestation of Iranian National Identity in Khatami's Iran," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 7, no. 1 (2007): 27–45.

91 S. Holliday, "Khatami's Islamist-Iranian Discourse of National Identity: A Discourse of Resistance," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 37, no. 1 (2010): 1–13

92 E. Wastnidge, *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).

many modes of identity Iran tactically adopted to pursue its pragmatic goals: in the case of eco, Iran was seeking to further economic integration in a region that shared a legacy of Persian literature. Thus, while Holliday and Wastnidge describe parts of the Transnational Persian Culturalist identity apparent in Khatami's discourse, neither sees it as connected to a stable, fully formed worldview with ambitions in Central Asia.

Through my interviews with former staff of the Iranian diplomatic mission, I found that the idea of Tajikistan and Iran sharing a culture was familiar to the point of cliché. Yet the exact content of this supposedly shared culture was surprisingly unclear. When pressed to describe this culture, no staff members could give an answer other than the Nowruz holiday. One former language teacher said that "culture" was really just a codeword for poetry.93 Another former staffer admitted that the talk of cultural commonalities was more slogan than reality.94 Instead, he used the term "culture-building" (*farhangsazy*) to describe Iran's activities in Tajikistan.

Mohammad Ardush, a former Iranian cultural counsel in Tajikistan, writes that the clearest indicator of a culture's "Iranianness" is the extent to which it has been influenced by the Persian language and literature.95 There is a possibility, as Wastnidge speculates, that Iranian diplomats in Tajikistan are being opportunistic when they emphasize the Persian language's significance.96 The Transnational Persian Culturalist identity may be how the Iranist identity or the similar Civilizational-Cultural Discourse is localized to appeal to Persian-speaking countries.

Credibility

As noted, the five identities being projected by Iran in Tajikistan prioritized values and subjectivities differently, but they did not explicitly repudiate each other. In some cases, Iran's strategic narratives were regulated by the venues in which they were expressed—religion was never mentioned in schools, for example. Yet even in open venues, Iranian officials were careful to appeal to the audience in attendance.97 When juxtaposed with Iranian cultural diplomacy in Syria, some of the nationalist and religious narratives clash more clearly.

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93 Interview with former Iranian cultural diplomacy staffer, April 14, 2017, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

94 Email correspondence with former Iranian cultural diplomacy staffer, June 2017.

95 Ardush, "Persian Language and Literature."

96 Wastnidge, *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran.*

97 Officials stressed Persian identity while commemorating a Persian nationalist poet (ICRO, "75th Ceremony of Birth Anniversary.")

For instance, there is a discrepancy in how ICRO officials characterized Arab-Iranian relations during the Abbasid period of Islamic history. Von Maltzahn finds that in Syria officials stressed the erstwhile cultural, religious, and intellectual unity between Iranian and Arab lands,98 whereas an ICRO official in Tajikistan claimed that the Arabs of the Abbasid era exploited Islam and were a civilizational threat to Iranians.99 Such narratives are not contradictory in a strictly literal sense, but the fact remains that they are unutterable to certain audiences. By projecting these disparate narratives, Iran is risking a moderate amount of credibility.

Despite overwhelmingly presenting the Transnational Persian Culturalist identity in its cultural diplomacy in Tajikistan, Iran still suffers from a credibility gap in the country. Dehghani-Firouzabadi argues that a main weakness of the Cultural-Civilizational Discourse is that Iranian identity is inextricably bound to Shia Islam, which leads Central Asian states to mistrust the discourse's foreign policy.100 Clark finds that the Tajik government's suspicions concerning Iran's Shia and political Islamist identity have derailed several cultural diplomacy projects.101 Iran is not vocal about its Shia identity in Tajikistan, but this identity is nonetheless known. In an interview, a Tajik coworker of former Iranian cultural diplomats both admired Iranian attentiveness to the Persian language and suspected the country's motives in Tajikistan: "Shiism is very important to them . . . I don't respect Shiism. There are many bad things in that sect . . . I haven't seen them try to spread Shiism here, but I think they want to."102 He also associated Iran with political Islamism. When asked about Iran's form of government, he said, "Their government and religion are intertwined. This is not right. Religion and government shouldn't be together."103 Arguably, the credibility gap widened decisively when Iran invited the leader of Tajikistan's outlawed Islamist party to the Conference on Islamic Unity, an Islamic identity-based cultural diplomacy event in Iran. The indignant Tajik government has since moved to close down all Iranian cultural diplomacy programs in the country.104

98 Von Maltzahn, *The Syria-Iran Axis,* 58, 75–77.

99 Saadi Foundation, "Commemoration of Anniversary."

100 Dehghani-Firouzabadi, "Iran's Foreign Policy Discourses in Central Asia and the Caucasus," 126.

101 Clark, "The Islamic Republic Of Iran's Relations with the Republic of Tajikistan," 270–271.

102 Interview with Tajik coworker of former Iranian cultural diplomats, May 20, 2017, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

103 Ibid.

104 "Cultural and Economic Offices of Iran Closed in Northern Tajikistan," *BBC*, June 30, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-40457808?ocid=socialflow_twitter.

Chronicling the breakdown of bilateral relations and determining which factors were decisive is beyond the scope of this study. Nor have I sought to ascertain whether most Tajik audiences found Iranian cultural diplomacy persuasive. It is worth noting that Iranian charities like the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation are another official vector of Iranian culture in Tajikistan; a study of their programming and Tajik responses may reveal additional reasons for a credibility gap.

Securitizing Language and Culture

Whether or not the Transnational Persian Culturalist identity is a product of unique pressures particular to Tajikistan, it seems that the general significance of the Persian language to Iranian foreign policy is growing. Since the beginning of the Rouhani administration, Gholamali Hadad-Adel, the head of Iran's Academy of Persian Language and Literature, has visited Tajikistan multiple times to lobby for standardizing the Persian variants. The Academy has a history of securitizing the Persian language as a tool of national integration.105 Asgharzadeh claims that the Academy has been "among the fiercest deniers of the right to education in the mother tongue for millions of non-Persian citizen[s]" in Iran.106 On a 2015 visit to Tajikistan, Hadad-Adel appeared to direct the securitization of the Persian language outward, calling the Persian language a pillar of national identity for both states, warning about the culture-eroding dangers of globalization, and cautioning Tajiks not to use insufficiently Persian words.107

In 2013, Hadad-Adel successfully petitioned to have two state agencies for spreading the Persian language—one from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the other from the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization—combined to form the Saadi Foundation.108 The Saadi Foundation, named after the poet Saadi Shirazi, is modeled on the Alliance Française,

105 For example, see the Academy members' suspicion that teaching minority languages in Iran was a foreign conspiracy: "Teaching Mother Languages in the Provinces Smells Like Conspiracy," *Mehr News*, January 27, 2014, http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2222873/.

106 A. Asgharzadeh, "Methodological Nationalism, Subalternity, and Critical Race Theory: Competing Narratives of National/Ethnic/Racial Identity in Iran," in F. Achankeng (ed.), *Nationalism and Intra-State Conflicts in the Postcolonial World* (Lanham, md: Lexington Books, 2015), 310.

107 Islamic Republic News Agency, "16,000 Persian Words."

108 "The Council for Spreading Farsi and the Center for Spreading Farsi Dissolved," *Mehr News Agency*, June 16, 2013, https://www.mehrnews.com/news/2077622/.

Dante Society, and Goethe Institute,109 and considers its work to be fighting a "soft war" for cultural influence around the world.110 In an interview with an Iranian news agency, Saadi Foundation secretary Rezamorad Sahrai revealed the motivation behind the organization's activities:

> Today, tanks and cannons don't get us anywhere; we have to use the Persian language . . . Wherever the Persian language goes, we go too. Really, my thinking is beyond the level of our own country ['s interests]. There is no violence in the Persian language. Write violence in Persian, see how it turns out. There is very little violence in our literature. Let the Persian language go to other countries—this is at least what we've tried to do— let the people of the world see the world through a window other than that of English . . . Teaching the Persian language is not just a service to Persian and to Iran, but to the world. If we have thoughts of civilization, our officials should be looking at the Persian language strategically.111

Sahrai's argument contains two separate logics: the Persian language is a tool of statecraft *and* it will inherently make the world more peaceful. Here, Sah- rai echoes Pennycook's description of the two kinds of ideological effects of language spread: the "structural power" afforded by a dominant language and the supposed "discursive effects" that a language produces in its users.112 Dehghani-Firouzabadi indicates a similar duality between the two schools of the Civilizational-Cultural Discourse: the "realist" school sees culture as a strategic asset for cynical power politics, whereas the "genetic" school sees culture as the underlying worldview which determines states' interests and policies.113 Ultimately, both arguments securitize the Persian language within Iranian foreign policy.

President Rouhani invoked both arguments when he appealed to the Supreme Council for the Cultural Revolution, Iran's premier body for deciding cultural policy, to better support the Saadi Foundation. He claimed that spreading the Persian language was a "national, revolutionary, and religious

109 Secretary Rezamorad Sahrai makes the comparison explicit (S. Dastaran and F. Gomar. "From the State of Persian in the World to the Presidency of Hadad-Adel," *Iranian Stu- dents News Agency*, January 23, 2017, http://www.isna.ir/news/95110302150/.

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.

112 A. Pennycook, "English, Politics, Ideology: From Colonial Celebration to Postcolonial Performativity," in T. Ricento (ed.), *Ideology, Politics, and Language Policies: Focus on English* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000), 107–108.

113 Dehghani-Firouzabadi, "Iran's Foreign Policy Discourses in Central Asia and the Caucasus," 124–125.

duty" in view of the language's relationship to Iranian nationality and Islam, and also due to Iran's expanding economic and scientific relations.114 While in Tajikistan, Rouhani presented Persian language and literature as being, by virtue of its inherent values, a tool against Salafism and extremism.115

This securitization of the Persian language stands in striking contrast to what Von Maltzahn observed in Syria during the Ahmadinejad administration. Compare the comments by an official of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to teachers at the Iranian cultural center in Syria—"Our goal is not to teach Persian, but to teach the values of the Islamic Republic"116—to those of Hadad-Adel speaking to Persian teachers of the Saadi Foundation during the Rouhani administration—"we have an intangible habitat; language is the habitat of every country or region, and it's connected to culture. Just as we strive to preserve nature and greenery, there is an effort to preserve and spread language.117

It is remarkable that multiple political movements in Iran support the Transnational Persian Culturalist identity. The reformist president (Khatami) began articulating the identity in Iranian politics; his fundamentalist successor (Ahmadinejad) invoked it continuously in Tajikistan and Afghanistan; a self-described "moderate" president (Rouhani) has strengthened the institu- tions spreading the identity; and another figure from the fundamentalist camp (Hadad-Adel) directs those institutions at home and abroad. Given this broad political support, one can imagine this identity outlasting the Islamic Republic and dominating the foreign policy of a more secular and democratic Iranian regime.

Conclusion

Iranian cultural diplomacy in Tajikistan deploys a variety of identities to ap- peal to multiple audiences, including three separate narratives targeted at the same community of Iranian expatriates. Each of the identities was formulated

114 "The Aim of ISIL Terrorists is to Create a Wave of Islamophobia/ Spreading the Persian Language is a National, Revolutionary, and Religious Duty," *Information Agency of the Presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, November 17, 2015, http://president.ir/fa/90516/printable.

115 "The President at the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan," *Cultural Consulate of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Dushanbe,* September 3, 2015, http://fa.dushanbe.icro.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=185&pageid=11675&newsview=618188.

116 Von Maltzahn, *The Syria-Iran Axis,* 153.

117 "Spreading Persian Makes Iran Bigger," *Saadi Foundation,* July 31, 2016, http://saadifoundation.ir/fa/news/10/bodyView/672/0/.

according to a different prioritization of values and subjectivities, though none explicitly contradicted the others. The greatest difference was between the Transnational Persian Culturalist identity foregrounded in this study and the de-nationalized Islamic identities projected into Syria. The clash between these identities suggests that Iran is willing to risk a moderate amount of credibility in reaching out to different audiences.

Perhaps most striking was that the strategic narratives in this study rarely demarcated Iranianness and Tajikness. All five of the identities catalogued were *shared* identities. Iran's projection of shared identities—including one at a national scale—along with its sustained effort to standardize the countries' languages, unify their civil societies, and generally integrate shows that Paschalidis' notion of cultural nationalism survives as a pattern of external cultural policy.

This research demonstrates that despite its absence from the literature, the Transnational Persian Culturalist identity is the one most implicated in Iranian policy toward Tajikistan. If Iran continues to securitize the Persian language, this identity will likely become more central to its policies in Tajikistan and elsewhere.