

SCTCMG 2019

International Scientific Conference «Social and Cultural Transformations in the Context of Modern Globalism»

CONCEPT OF “ISLAMIC AWAKENING” AS FOREIGN POLICY DOCTRINE OF IRAN

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Abstract

The article examines the essence and functioning of the concept of “Islamic awakening” in Iran which was updated by the Iranian political elite as a description of events related to the Arab spring and the foreign policy doctrine of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) in the 2010th years. This term appeared in Iranian sociopolitical discourse as early as in previous decades and has a similarity with the concept of “Islamic revival”, covering a huge number of diverse movements in the Islamic world in different historical periods. The authors of the article analyze the ideological roots of this concept, which go back to the ideas of the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who received the title “Export of the Islamic revolution”. The paper pays much attention to identifying the essence of this concept and its difference from IA, which was also revealed by the present study. This article also analyzes the basic principles of the concept of “Islamic awakening”, manifested both in the statements of the highest representatives of the Iranian political elite and in the school study on modern history of Iran. The authors also seek to look at the dynamics of the use of term “Islamic awakening” in the Iranian socio-political discourse, which is a strong increase in its mention in 2011 and has a gradual reduction in its use after 2013 associated with decrease in the impact of the Arab Spring events in the region of the Near and Middle East.

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Keywords: Iran, Islamic awakening, Export of the Islamic revolution, Arab spring, foreign policy.



1. Introduction

Interest in the study of Iranian foreign policy concept of the “Islamic awakening” came after 2011, when it became the basis of Iran’s ideology in describing the events of the “Arab spring” and its relationship with the countries of the region and the Middle East. The term “Islamic awakening” at that time was not new in Iranian religious-political discourse and correlated with the concept of “Islamic revival”, covering the Islamic world different historical periods “huge numbers of different movements, both radical and separate, and pluralistic; as located to the scientific picture of the world and anti-scientific; both primarily religious and mainly political; both democratic and dictatorial; both peace-loving and warlike” (Lapidus, 2014, p. 619).

In domestic and Western historiography, this concept is not of much attention. In Russia, Baranov (2013, 2014) deals the “Islamic awakening”. In the works he examines in detail the principles of this concept in the context of the events of the Arab spring. Among Western scholars, the works of Mohseni (2013) should be highlighted in which the authors give a complete analysis of the concept of IA in the context of Iranian foreign policy.

At the same time, in scientific discourse now there is a lack of a comprehensive study of the concept of “Islamic Awakening” in its relationship with the historical process as well as the reasons for enhancing its manifestation and attenuation in Iranian socio-political discourse.

Nevertheless, data from statistical surveys, for example data from the Information Agency (ISNA) show the urgency of the problem and its socio-political significance (Figure 01).

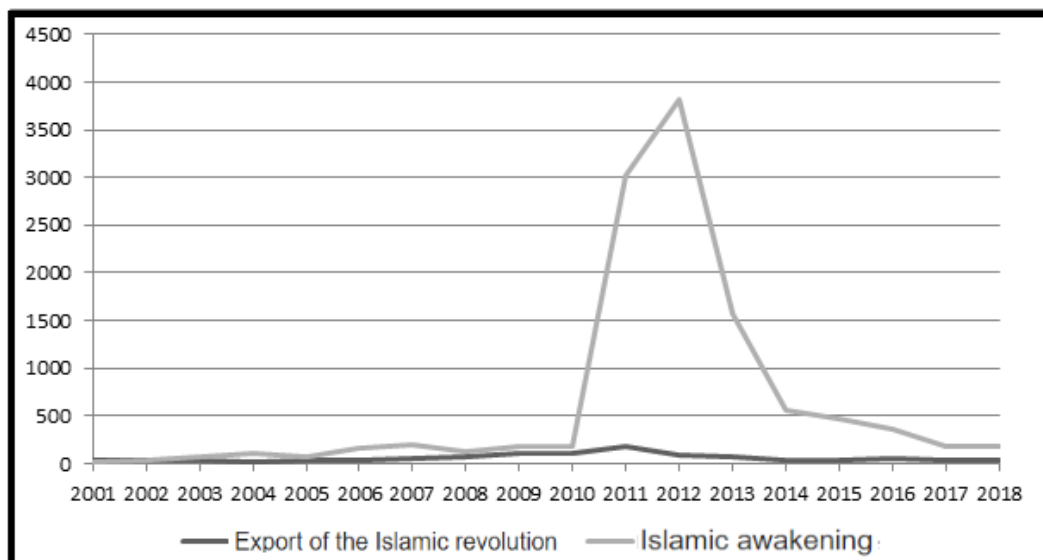


Figure 01. The frequency of mentioning the phrases “Export of the Islamic revolution” and “Islamic awakening” from 2000 to 2018 years in Iranian political discourse

2. Problem Statement

The concept of “Islamic awakening” is multifaceted and its interpretation is in the political and religious concepts of various Islamic states and organizations. Nevertheless, one of the key concepts of the model of “Islamic awakening” were in the Republic of Iran after the Islamic revolution. This concept was

one of the first and had a great influence on the rest of the Islamic world. Moreover, this influence persists. In this regard, the problem of research exists in two dimensions. Firstly, the terms of the “Islamic awakening” concept in Iran are ambiguous. Secondly, the problem is connected with the formulation of the real meaning of the concept, which has been transformed many times following changes in the national political and religious discourse.

3. Research Questions

The subject of this article, therefore, is the Iranian interpretation of the concept of “Islamic awakening” in the context of the evolution of its religious and political content. Expanding the general modern meaning of this concept it should be clarified that it means “the process of raising awareness in the Islamic mind, the revival of Islam in man and society ... The resurrection of Islamic values and a return to the Islamic self” (Velayati, 2016, p. 23).

In many ways, the formation and development of the concept of “Islamic awakening” gives rise to religious and political conflict, which is also associated with the problem of research. In particular, the modern, even school interpretation of the concept states the search for “real ... Islamic identity through a return to Islamic self” (Velayati, 2016, p. 23).

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this article is to present the results of the study of the concept of “Islamic awakening” considered, among other things, as the foreign policy doctrine of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. Achieving this goal within this approach involves 1) identifying the ideological roots and basic principles of the concept and 2) analyzing the evolutionary trends of this concept up to the present.

5. Research Methods

The study presented in this article required the use of a set of methods, summarized by an interdisciplinary approach. The key methods include the graphical method of analyzing statistical data, an example of which is shown in Figure 01, the comparative statistical method (data from the ISNA Information Agency) and the method of analyzing Iranian religious-political discourse made because of national sources - mainly religious and political speeches leaders. Discourse analysis in the study was in line with the conceptual analysis method. Its objects were concepts (meanings) transmitted by separate words, phrases, and whole texts, for example, appeals of the leader to the nation. Among the concepts, the first places were taken by “Islamic awakening”, “Islamic revival”, “Export of the Islamic revolution” and some others. For each concept, a series of specific characteristics were defined, on the one hand, to separate the concepts, and on the other, to clarify their meanings, often blurred by the politicized rhetoric of individual speakers. In addition to these methods, the authors use a chronological approach to study the texts of speeches by Iranian leaders.

6. Findings

According to the results of a multilateral analysis of the identified problem, the authors of this article found that the ideologues of “Islamic awakening” in Iran erect the origin of the term in the speeches and writings of the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran Ruhollah Khomeini (Baranov, 2014), who although used this term either by talking about the awakening of the Iranian nation or by Muslims, without using the word “Islamic” (Khomeini, 1999).

Fundamental foreign policy concept while Ruholla Khomeini was in power from 1979 to 1989 years was the “Export of the Islamic revolution” embodied his religious and political ideas. In his opinion, “Export” was an integral part of Iran’s policy (Khomeini, 1999). Among the important goals of the revolution are the followings: 1) the rejection of colonization and foreign domination; 2) support for Muslims and the oppressed all over the world; 3) the development of the convictions, ideas and culture of Islam, the support of Muslims all over the world; 4) the desire to strengthen the foundations of the unity of the Islamic Ummah throughout the world; 5) the desire for awakening and unity of the oppressed in the whole world; 6) the prevention and condemnation of violating the rights of people around the world (Rouhani, 2007).

However, the main feature of the fundamental concept of “Export of the Islamic revolution” was the view of Iran as the center of the “revolution”, and on the Iranian leader, as leader of all Muslims (Gasemi & Razzagipur, 2016). Despite Shiite orientation, the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran served as a powerful catalyst for the development of Islam in the Muslim world (Kepel, 2004).

However, the situation soon changed, because by “Export of the Islamic revolution” was meant the primacy of the Shiite version of Islam, and the ideas of Ayatollah Khomeini met a sharp rejection from the states with the prevailing Sunni population (Plastun, 2005).

After the death of Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989, the concept of “Export of the Islamic revolution” began to be relegated to the background, which was connected with the pragmatic foreign policy of the President of the country (1989–1997) Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani.

The next president, Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), put forward the foreign policy concept of a “Dialogue of Civilizations” implying the equality of peoples and states (Khatami, 2001).

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who replaced him (2005–2013), despite some radical foreign policy views (for example, on the destruction of Israel), in general, declared Iran’s striving for equal relations with the countries of the world community (Appeal, 2010).

The current president of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, in his speeches refused to radical foreign policy statements, insisting on a pragmatic policy of the country (Abedini, 2013).

At the same time, the mention in official speeches of the concept “Export of the Islamic revolution” did not completely disappear from the Iranian socio-political discourse but remained insignificant.

Another dynamic is the use of the expression “Islamic awakening”. In Figure 1, this term has begun to gain popularity since the early 2000s. In 2011, the term “Islamic awakening” gained extremely high popularity in the wake of Iranian political rhetoric, which has a clear connection with the interpretation of the events of the Arab spring by the Iranian political elite.

The evolution of the semantic content of the concept of “Islamic awakening” is indicative here.

The first known mention refers to August 15, 2000 and related to the statements of the authorized representative of the Leader of the country in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Khodzh ol-eslama Salek Kashani. He said: “... The spiritual leader [Ali Khamenei] considers the Islamic-spiritual awakening and unity of Muslims to be strategic factors for the creation of the great Islamic Ummah, and everyone should strive to create it... The first influence that Imam [Khomeini] had on the forces interested in the Islamic revolution all over the world was their striving for awakening and faith in themselves”.

During this period, the inseparability of the concepts “Export of the Islamic revolution” and “Islamic awakening” is observed. During this period, the concept of “Islamic awakening” referred mainly to Palestine. Then, in 2003, the speeches of Iranian political figures began to touch more and more countries, since during this period the US invaded Iraq (Rezai, 2003).

During this period, the ideological substantiation of this concept began to take shape. An example is the statement of one of the main ideologues of the “Islamic awakening” adviser to the Leader of the country, Velayati (2003): “... Iran and Islam are inextricably linked to each other. For the last two centuries without Islam and Islamic revival there would have been no possibility of preserving our people and there was a strong Islamic impetus behind the scenes of all the socio-political movements of the past years ” (p. 3) and “The awakening of the Muslims is in itself the most important weapon for their government” (Velayati, 2007, p. 34).

In a later period, on March 15, 2009, the future president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Rouhani (2009), was noted to support the ideas of the Islamic Awakening. He stated, “the Islamic revolution in Iran belongs not only to Shiites and not only to the people of Iran, but was a great eruption in the Islamic world, the first step towards which Iran made” (Rouhani, 2009, par. 9).

The study revealed that the events of the Arab spring gave a strong impetus to the development of the ideas of the “Islamic awakening” in Iran. It has been used as a platform for expanding Iran’s influence on regional events. The starting point for the actualization of this concept is Ali Khamenei’s speech on February 4, 2011 (Ayatollah, 2011).

In 2013, Ali Khamenei’s views received a more detailed interpretation. In his opinion, the root of “Islamic awakening” lies in “reviving human honor and dignity in the shadow of Islam” and the priority of the victorious (Arab) revolutions is to create “a system based on Islamic principles” and a “prosperous Islamic civilization” (Ayatollah, 2013).

However, Khamenei refuses to agree with the opinion that Iran seeks to export its own religious and political model to the countries of the region. “This is all a thirty-year lie that is spread to separate the people from each other and deprive them of helping each other and repeating it all the time ... we will not abandon the tasks that Islam has placed on our shoulders” (Ayatollah, 2013, p. 99).

As a result, the concept of “Islamic awakening” received not only an official interpretation, but also an official expression, including in the school system, which was evidence of its real internal political potential in the formation of national identity. When comparing different editions of this textbook, 2009 and 2016 years, additional information about “Islamic awakening” appears. For example, in the 2015 textbook version, it appears that the anti-tobacco movement of the 1890s “led to a greater consolidation of the Shiite clergy and believers, thereby showing that the Islamic awakening in Iran reached political and intellectual maturity” (Velayati, 2016, p. 22) and in 1940–1950s the Qum seminary “did not escape the

movement of Islamic awakening and played an important role in preserving the Muslim society of Iran from the political and social crises of the period” (Velayati, 2016, p. 28). Thus, the concept of “Islamic awakening” is gradually acquiring the characteristics of an ideological model that relies on historical facts to expand and strengthen its modern, thought-forming nation and content.

7. Conclusion

The main difference from the concept of “Export of the Islamic revolution” (where Iran seemed to be the centre of the Muslim world), the “Islamic awakening” was the idea of the polycentricity of this phenomenon, as well as the natural course of its development without reliance on Shiite Islam. It is supposed to save Iran from accusations of seeking to artificially revolutionize the Islamic world, as was the case with “Export of the Islamic revolution”. Promoting the ideas of “Islamic awakening” can be described as a policy of “soft power” (Mohseni, 2013), which Iran began to use in the 2000s to promote their foreign policy interests, but gradually, especially after the events of the Arab spring of 2011-2013s, extended it to the domestic political context, turning to a peculiar process of ideological integration of foreign and domestic policy, examples of which can be found today in most Islamic states in the region.

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