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## NATIONAL ROLE CONCEPTIONS AND REGIONAL RIVALRY: THE DYNAMICS OF IRAN-AZERBAIJAN ROLE CONFLICT IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS\*\*

**Abstract:** *This study utilizes role theory to analyze how contrasting National Role Conceptions (NRCs) shape the foreign policies of Iran and Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus. Iran's NRC as a "Defender of Islam" arises from its identity as a Shia Islamic republic committed to safeguarding Shia communities and promoting Islamic governance. In contrast, Azerbaijan's NRC as a "Secular Modernizer" is rooted in its post-Soviet emphasis on secular governance and alignment with Western institutions. The research explores how these divergent NRCs lead to role contestation, influencing each state's strategies.*

*By examining Iran's support for religious institutions, educational initiatives, media outreach, and cultural diplomacy, the study illustrates Iran's efforts to expand its ideological influence and challenge Azerbaijan's secular orientation. Azerbaijan counters with regulatory measures, state-controlled religious education, media management, and strategic alliances to reinforce its secular identity. This interplay highlights the crucial role of identity in shaping foreign policy beyond material considerations. The findings demonstrate the importance of NRCs in understanding state behavior in identity-driven conflicts, impacting regional dynamics and stability.*

**Keywords:** *Inter-state role conflict; National Role Conceptions (NRCs); Religious Protector; Secular Modernizer; Role theory.*

### Introduction

The behavior of states in international relations is often driven by a host of influences that stretch far beyond material analysis: historical narratives, domestic ideologies, and cultural self-conceptions. In regions like the South Caucasus, where these geopolitical rivalries are underscored by deep historical and ideological legacies, these elements are more influential in determining foreign policy strategies. From this viewpoint, role theory offers an efficient framework for explaining how states define their roles within the international system and how such defined roles influence their behaviors.

According to role theory, first introduced into International Relations by K. J. Holsti (1970), states assign roles to themselves reflective of their past experiences, cultural orientations, and political aspirations. These roles are neither rhetorical nor symbolic but frameworks from which a state acts

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outwardly and responds to challenges (Breuning, 2011). Iran's NRC as a "Defender of Islam," rooted in its revolutionary ideology and leadership in the Shia Muslim world, starkly contrasts with Azerbaijan's NRC as a "Secular Modernizer," grounded in its post-Soviet emphasis on secularism, modernization, and integration with Western-aligned institutions. The contrast between these roles creates tensions in the South Caucasus, a region where competing interests and ideologies are acutely contested.

This research is guided by the research question: How do the contrasting National Role Conceptions of Iran as a "Defender of Islam" and Azerbaijan as a "Secular Modernizer" shape their foreign policy behaviors and interactions in the South Caucasus? By addressing this question, the research contributes to understanding not only the drivers of these states' policies but also the broader implications for regional stability and international relations theory. While existing scholarship has extensively explored materialist explanations for state behavior, focusing on power politics, resources, and alliances, this paper emphasizes the importance of non-material factors, such as self-perception and ideological commitments. The novelty lies in applying role theory to the South Caucasus, a region often analyzed through the lens of great power competition or resource geopolitics, rather than the internal and external roles states assign to themselves.

Furthermore, the comparative focus on Iran and Azerbaijan adds an innovative dimension. Although the ideological rift between these states is well-documented, the ways in which their self-conceptions influence their strategies and generate friction remain underexplored. By dissecting the mechanisms through which NRCs shape foreign policy behaviors, this research aims to provide a richer understanding of the dynamics at play in the region.

These findings have their reverberations well beyond the South Caucasus, showing how the role contestation propelled by diverging self-conceptions may be escalatory in regions marked by overlapping spheres of influence. The NRCs of Iran and Azerbaijan place into perspective how those kinds of ideationally and historically embedded roles inform foreign policy decisions and challenge reductionist approaches for which material factors are given primacy. It would have relevance for policymakers or academics dealing with the resolution of identity-driven conflicts elsewhere, perhaps in the Middle East or Eastern Europe.

### **Theoretical framework**

Role theory explores the ways in which states perceive and enact their roles within the international system to shape foreign policy behaviors in ways that are not strongly congruent with material considerations. Born from the social sciences and then adopted into international relations by scholars such as K.J. Holsti, the theory postulates that states, like individuals, take on roles based on their experiences throughout history, cultural identity, and domestic context (1970). These roles, or National

Role Conceptions (NRCs), provide a cognitive framework through which states interpret their responsibilities, align their strategies, and define their interactions with others. Unlike pure interest-driven theories, the interplay of identity and self-perception is underlined in role theory to explain how such self-assigned roles influence state behavior in deep and often non-explicit ways (Breuning, 2011; Cantir & Kaarbo, 2016; Chafetz, Abramson & Grillot, 1996; Harnisch, Role theory: operationalization of key concepts, 2011; Krotz, 2002; Shih, 1988; Walker, 1978).

NRCs are not static; they evolve as states try to manage internal transformations and external pressures (Harnisch, Role theory: operationalization of key concepts, 2011; Cantir & Kaarbo, 2016; Kaarbo & Cantir, 2017). A state may project for itself a regional leader, a cultural bridge, a defender of ideological values, or even a protector of religious communities, and it is these modes of self-conceptualization that underpin its foreign policy choices. For example, a state that saw itself as a "mediator" would have an emphasis on diplomacy and conflict resolution, while a state viewing itself as a "guardian" of a religious or cultural identity would be concerned with the protection of cosigners abroad (Holsti, 1970). Often, such roles then express themselves in consistent behavior, in alliances, and in reinforcing narratives that inform a state's identity within the international system. Meanwhile, NRCs would prove to be dynamic, changing with domestic-level events like political or even economic crises (Kaarbo & Cantir, 2017), but also with outside influences such as international conflict or shifting alignments (Harnisch, Frank & Maull, 2011). The very tension between stability and adaptability underlines the very complex nature of NRCs and their impact on world politics.

Inter-state role conflict occurs when the NRCs of different states clash, particularly in regions where identities and interests overlap. In other words, it happens when state A's articulated foreign policy roles are not accepted by state B, and B, in return, attempts to pull state A in other role directions (Özdamar, 2024). Scholars have examined how role conflict can lead to role alter casting, a process where external factors, such as other states or institutions, assign specific roles to a state, encouraging behaviors aligned with those roles (Thies, 2010). Such contestation is not always overt; it can manifest in subtle forms of rivalry, ideological competition, or competing narratives about regional leadership. These conflicts arise not only from material power struggles but also from deeply rooted self-perceptions that drive states to act in ways that affirm their roles while challenging those of others (Thies, 2010). For example, a state that thinks of itself as a secular modernizer may see any efforts by others to exercise religious influence over its territory as a direct challenge to its identity, even though such an act is understood by another state as the fulfillment of its own NRC as a religious or cultural protector. These dynamics illustrate both that foreign policy is informed not just by pragmatic interests but also that it is a function of how states view themselves and would like to be viewed by others. Such interactions would

not only consider the recognition of material power but also an in-depth grasp of ideological and identity-driven dimensions to state behavior.

Contemporary role theory highlights the evolving, socially constructed nature of NRCs. Scholars like Harnisch (2011) and Thies (2010) argue that roles are continuously shaped through discourse, interaction, and adaptation to changing contexts. States define and legitimize their roles in relation to other actors, institutions, and non-state entities—demonstrating the interdependence of roles in the international system. A state's self-concept relies on external recognition; for example, regional leadership or mediation roles necessitate validation from others. Changes in global structures, domestic politics, or significant events often prompt states to reassess and adapt their roles.

NRCs are influenced by both internal factors (political culture, leadership, public opinion) and external pressures (responses from other states, geopolitical trends) (Grossman, Schortgen & Friedrichs, 2022). This duality ensures NRCs balance stability for policy continuity with flexibility to adapt to evolving realities. A traditionally neutral mediator, for instance, may adopt a more active role during regional instability, illustrating the fluidity of NRCs. These dynamics are particularly evident in identity-driven conflicts, where state roles are contested both internally and externally.

Role theory can make its most valuable contribution to understanding conflict and cooperation dynamics where diffuse and contested histories exist, like those in the South Caucasus. The intersection and clashes have been common features of states' NRCs in such a way as to spark competition and alliance formation. The complex entanglements of identity and policy evident from these regions point to the limits of any entirely material explanations and to how self-perception and ideological commitments may create drivers of foreign policy decisions. This is particularly useful in understanding the essential motives and bindings that drive state behaviors within contested regions and goes a long way toward offering a more inclusive framework to analyze regional dynamics and possible paths toward conflict resolution.

In other words, seen through the prism of the theory of role, identity is considered a critical driver in international relations because it affects how states act toward and look to others. This double process of self-perception and external validation of roles makes roles crucial in creating international order and disorder. The more important understanding of how states define their role for themselves and how these roles intersect or conflict with other roles is a way toward better analyses and more realistic strategies, especially in areas of hot contests where histories, ideologies, and interests continuously interact. Eventually, knowledge of these integrating aspects will help both scholars and policymakers make sense of the complexity in state behavior and the drivers of cooperation and conflict in the international system.

### **Iran's National Role Conception as the defender of Islam**

Their contrasting National Role Conceptions (NRCs) significantly shape the complex relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan. Iran, embracing its role as a "Defender of Islam," endeavors to promote its interpretation of Shia Islam and extend its ideological influence within Azerbaijani society. This effort directly challenges Azerbaijan's NRC as a "Secular Modernizer," leading to an interstate role conflict that influences foreign policy behaviors and regional dynamics in the South Caucasus.

Iran's NRC as a "Defender of Islam" is a fundamental pillar of its foreign policy, deeply rooted in its ideological identity as a Shia Islamic republic. This self-perception stems from Iran's historical and theological legacy as the epicenter of Shia Islam, positioning itself as the guardian and promoter of Shia communities worldwide (Wastnidge, 2020). The 1979 Islamic Revolution was a watershed moment that crystallized this role, as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini envisioned Iran not merely as a nation-state but as the vanguard of an Islamic resurgence (Bhagat, 1987). The revolution established a theocratic state grounded in Shia principles, with a mission to export the revolution's ideals and foster solidarity among Shia populations globally (Akhavi, 1983). This vision institutionalized Iran's NRC as both a spiritual leader and a political actor committed to reshaping regional and international orders in accordance with Islamic values.

The ideological underpinnings of Iran's Defender of Islam role are multifaceted, intertwining religious obligations with strategic objectives. Religiously, Iran perceives a spiritual and moral responsibility to safeguard Shia communities beyond its borders, reinforced by doctrines emphasizing the unity of the ummah (Islamic community) and the imperative to support oppressed Muslims worldwide (Vatanka, 2018). This sense of duty is not merely altruistic; it serves to bolster Iran's legitimacy and influence within the Islamic world (Vasilenko, 2021). Politically, the Defender of Islam role is a strategic tool to counter secularism, Western influence, and rival regional powers. By promoting Shia Islam, Iran seeks to expand its soft power, forge ideological alliances, and challenge the dominance of adversaries like Saudi Arabia and, to some extent, Turkey.

The South Caucasus holds particular significance for Iran's NRC due to its geographic proximity and historical ties to Shia Islam. Azerbaijan has a substantial Shia population—approximately 60-65%<sup>1</sup> of its citizens identify as Shia Muslims (Lindsey, 2024)—which provides a fertile ground for Iran's religious and cultural outreach. The historical legacy of Persian influence in the region, dating back to the Safavid Empire, reinforces Iran's interest and offers a conduit for reasserting its presence (Abisaab, 2004). The South Caucasus also serves as a strategic buffer zone, where Iran can assert influence to prevent the

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the Azerbaijan's population, approximately 95–98%, identifies as Muslim, with varying estimates of the division between Shia and Sunni Muslims. These figures are often debated due to the minimal distinction between Shia and Sunni identities in Azerbaijan, further complicated by Sufi influences. However, it is generally accepted that Shia Muslims form the majority.

encroachment of rival ideologies and powers that may threaten its security and regional aspirations. The collapse of the Soviet Union opened new avenues for Iran to engage with newly independent states, allowing it to promote its NRC in a region undergoing significant political and social transformation (Rocca, 2017).

Iran's engagement in Azerbaijan has been driven, among multiple factors, by an ideological imperative to promote Shia identity and counter secular models of governance that challenge its own theocratic paradigm (Wastnidge, 2020). To achieve this, Iran employs a multifaceted approach that includes religious and cultural diplomacy, educational initiatives, and strategic alliances (Constantin-Bercean, 2018). A key component is the funding and support of religious institutions. Iran provides financial assistance for the construction and renovation of mosques, such as the Imam Hussein Mosque in Nardaran, which serves as a hub for Shia religious activities and community gatherings. These institutions not only facilitate worship but also promote religious teachings aligned with Iranian interpretations of Shia Islam, thereby fostering pro-Iranian sentiments among local populations (Jödicke, 2017). By bolstering these religious centers, Iran enhances its soft power within Azerbaijan and reinforces its self-perception as the guardian of Shia communities. This approach leverages shared religious identity to cultivate solidarity and affinity toward Iran. However, the Azerbaijani government perceives these activities as potential avenues for foreign influence that threaten the nation's secular identity and social cohesion. In response, authorities have at times closed mosques associated with external funding and increased surveillance of religious activities to safeguard secularism and national security.

Educational programs are another avenue through which Iran extends its influence (Mozaffari & Akbar, 2022). Iranian seminaries in Qom and Mashhad offer scholarships to Azerbaijani students, immersing them in theological education that emphasizes Iran's revolutionary ideology and religious doctrines (Sakurai, 2015). Graduates often return to Azerbaijan as clerics or community leaders, potentially shaping religious discourse in ways that align with Iranian interests. For instance, the dissemination of concepts like Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), which underpins Iran's political system, introduces ideological elements that may challenge Azerbaijan's secular governance (Mahmudlu, 2020). Cultural exchanges further reinforce Iran's NRC as a defender of Islam. Iran organizes cultural festivals, art exhibitions, and academic conferences that highlight shared historical and cultural ties, promoting Persian language and literature (Məhəmmədi, 2017). Events like Nowruz and Ashura celebrations emphasize common heritage and foster a sense of cultural affinity<sup>1</sup>. Additionally,

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural diplomacy represents a nuanced yet strategic dimension of Iran's outreach, aiming to deepen emotional and ideological connections with Azerbaijani Shia communities. Iran facilitates pilgrimages to revered holy sites such as Qom and Mashhad, offering logistical support, streamlined visa processes, and sometimes subsidized travel arrangements to encourage participation. These religious journeys, particularly during significant observances like

Iran utilizes media outreach, broadcasting programs in Azerbaijani that disseminate religious narratives and perspectives on regional issues. Channels such as Sahar TV aim to shape public opinion by presenting Iran as a defender of Islamic values against Western secularism (Mozaffari & Akbar, 2022). Politically, Iran engages in diplomatic efforts to assert its role. It advocates for the rights of Shia minorities in international forums and expresses concern over policies in neighboring countries that it perceives as oppressive towards Shia practices<sup>1</sup>.

Additionally, Iran has expressed concerns over the treatment of Shia groups in Azerbaijan, such as the Muslim Unity Movement,<sup>2</sup> which the Azerbaijani government considers an illegal organization. This advocacy enhances Iran's image as a protector and legitimizes its involvement in regional affairs.

Iran's influence extends into the political sphere through alleged support for parties and movements advocating for greater incorporation of Islamic principles into Azerbaijani governance (Valiyev, 2017). The Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (AIP), established in 1991, was a prominent example. Accused of receiving financial and logistical backing from Iran, the AIP promoted the integration of Shia Islamic values into political and social life, openly criticizing the Azerbaijani government's secular orientation and strategic cooperation with Western powers (Rubin, 2014). Despite its illegal status, the party continued to operate clandestinely, with its leaders and members facing periodic arrests and imprisonment. In 2011, AIP leader Movsum Samadov was arrested and sentenced to 12 years in prison on charges related to terrorism and attempting to seize power (USCIRF, 2024). Even though Samadov was released from prison in January 2023,<sup>3</sup> the AIP remains banned, and its activities are heavily restricted by Azerbaijani authorities. The government continues to monitor and suppress Islamist movements, particularly those perceived to have ties with Iran, due to concerns over national security and the preservation of the country's secular governance (Valiyev, 2017).

Iran's multifaceted strategy to exert religious and ideological influence in Azerbaijan exemplifies how a state's NRC can drive foreign policy behaviors that extend beyond conventional diplomacy. By

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Arba'een and Ashura, expose Azerbaijani pilgrims to Iranian religious practices, cultural norms, and ideological narratives. Beyond religious tourism, Iran organizes cultural exchanges, artistic exhibitions, and academic conferences that celebrate shared heritage and historical ties. Initiatives like the Iran-Azerbaijan Friendship Society and joint cultural festivals highlight linguistic, artistic, and literary commonalities.

<sup>1</sup> For example, Iran has voiced opposition to restrictions on religious freedoms in Azerbaijan. In 2011, Iranian officials criticized Azerbaijan's ban on the hijab in schools, framing their stance as a defense of human rights and religious liberty.

<sup>2</sup> The Muslim Unity Movement (MUM) is an unregistered religious organization in Azerbaijan, established in 2015. Its members identify as non-violent, conservative Shiites advocating for a greater role of Islam in Azerbaijan's predominantly secular society. The movement's founder, Taleh Bagirzade, is an Iran-educated Azerbaijani Shiite scholar known for his vocal criticism of state religious bodies and government policies, including the ban on headscarves in schools.

<sup>3</sup> Given the ongoing governmental restrictions and the lack of official recognition, the AIP does not function as a legal political entity within Azerbaijan. Its influence and activities are significantly limited, operating, if at all, in a covert manner to avoid detection and suppression by state authorities.

leveraging support for religious institutions, educational initiatives, media outreach, political engagement, and cultural diplomacy, Iran endeavors to promote its interpretation of Shia Islam and expand its ideological footprint within Azerbaijani society.

However, Iran's Defender of Islam role faces significant challenges and backlash. Neighboring governments often perceive its actions as interference in their domestic affairs or attempts to export revolutionary ideology. Azerbaijan, committed to a secular national identity, views Iran's religious outreach with suspicion. The Azerbaijani government has taken measures to limit Iranian influence by regulating religious activities, restricting foreign-trained clerics, and promoting state-sanctioned interpretations of Islam<sup>1</sup>.

Turkey's growing influence in the South Caucasus, particularly its support for Azerbaijan during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, challenges Iran's traditional sphere of influence. Turkey's promotion of a secular yet culturally Islamic model presents an alternative that appeals to Azerbaijan, reinforcing its own NRC as a "Secular Modernizer." Moreover, Iran has always had to manage its relationships with, and, at times, confront Russia and Western powers, balancing its ideological pursuits with pragmatic considerations to avoid isolation or conflict. Economic constraints also limit Iran's ability to project power. International sanctions related to its nuclear program have strained the economy, reducing resources available for foreign initiatives. This limitation affects Iran's capacity to sustain long-term projects and diminishes its attractiveness as a partner compared to wealthier rivals.

In response to these challenges, Iran calibrates its actions to maintain influence without provoking severe backlash. It emphasizes cultural and religious commonalities while avoiding overt political intervention. This nuanced approach reflects an understanding of the delicate balance required to advance its NRC as a defender of Islam in a complex regional environment.

### **Azerbaijan's National Role Conception as a secular modernizer**

Azerbaijan's National Role Conception (NRC) as a secular modernizer is a foundational pillar of its post-Soviet identity and nation-building strategy. Rooted in a historical commitment to secularism and propelled by ambitious modernization efforts, this role emphasizes the establishment of a progressive state characterized by secular governance, economic development, and strategic global alignment. By embracing these principles, Azerbaijan seeks to assert itself as an autonomous and forward-looking nation capable of leading regional development in the South Caucasus. This NRC not only shapes domestic policies but also informs foreign engagements.

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<sup>1</sup> Tensions have occasionally escalated, such as the 2012 and 2023 arrests of individuals accused of spying for Iran and plotting to overthrow the government. Regional rivalries further complicate Iran's efforts.



The foundations of Azerbaijan's secular modernizer role are deeply entrenched in its experience under Soviet rule from 1920 to 1991 (Yunusov 2004, 89). During this period, the Soviet regime systematically promoted secularism as a state ideology, suppressing religious institutions and practices to establish atheism as the official doctrine (Ergun & Çitak, 2020). Islam, which had been a significant component of Azerbaijani cultural and social identity, was relegated to the private sphere. This systemic secularization ingrained secular values within Azerbaijani society and governance, creating a populace accustomed to secular public life and institutions. The Soviet legacy left an indelible mark on Azerbaijan's national identity, providing a foundation upon which to build a modern secular state after independence.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan faced the critical task of redefining its national identity amidst regional upheaval and newfound sovereignty (Cornell 2011, 60-61). Under the leadership of the former President Heydar Aliyev, the country prioritized maintaining secular governance as a unifying and stabilizing force in a diverse society comprising various ethnic and religious groups (Yunusov 2004, 104-108). Aliyev leveraged his extensive experience within the Communist Party and Soviet administrative structures to ensure continuity in secular policies (Cornell 2011, 81-84). By affirming secularism, Azerbaijan sought to distinguish itself from neighboring countries with theocratic or Islamist regimes, particularly Iran, and to assert its independence (Valiyev, 2017). This deliberate continuation of secular governance served both as a domestic strategy for unity and as a statement of Azerbaijan's commitment to modern statehood, forming an integral component of its NRC as a Secular Modernizer. Central to Azerbaijan's pursuit of modernization is the strategic utilization of its abundant energy resources to drive economic development and enhance geopolitical standing. Endowed with significant oil and natural gas reserves in the Caspian Sea basin, Azerbaijan recognized the potential to transform its economy and assert itself on the global stage (Shaffer, 2009; Cornell, Tsereteli, & Socor, 2005). The government designed a strategic agenda to attract foreign investment, modernize its energy sector, and integrate the national economy into global markets<sup>1</sup>.

Azerbaijan's secular nationalism extends beyond its domestic sphere, profoundly shaping its foreign policy and interactions with external actors. By positioning itself as a secular modernizer, Azerbaijan seeks to align with nations and institutions that reflect its values of secular governance, modernization, and national sovereignty. This strategic orientation guides its alliances and diplomatic efforts, reinforcing

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<sup>1</sup> A significant initiative was the development of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, completed in 2006, which facilitates the transport of oil from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean. This project symbolized Azerbaijan's strategic alignment with Western interests and its commitment to diversifying energy export routes, bypassing traditional regional powers like Russia and Iran. By collaborating with major international energy companies, Azerbaijan reinforced its image as a reliable and progressive energy partner. The BTC pipeline not only contributed significantly to the national economy but also elevated Azerbaijan's profile internationally, demonstrating its capacity to undertake complex, multinational projects.

its NRC and enhancing its standing in the international community. A cornerstone of Azerbaijan's foreign policy is its robust strategic alliance with Turkey, epitomizing the synergy of shared secular and nationalist values. Rooted in deep cultural and linguistic ties—both nations share Turkic heritage and a common language base—this partnership is often encapsulated by the phrase "One Nation, Two States." Turkey's model of secularism, established under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, has significantly influenced Azerbaijan's own secular trajectory (Soltanov, 2016). This strategic partnership manifests in extensive cooperation across political, economic, and military domains. Joint military exercises, defense agreements, and intelligence sharing enhance Azerbaijan's security capabilities and align its military practices with those of a fellow secular nation (Avatkov, 2022). The collaboration was particularly evident during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where Turkish support played a crucial role in Azerbaijan's military successes<sup>1</sup> (Hovsepyan & Tonoyan, 2024).

Economically, collaborative projects like the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) facilitate the export of Azerbaijani gas to European markets via Turkey, further integrating Azerbaijan into global energy networks and reducing dependence on routes controlled by regional competitors. Such initiatives bolster Azerbaijan's economy and solidify its role as a key energy provider, advancing its modernization agenda and reinforcing its NRC.

Central to Azerbaijan's foreign engagements is its strategic relationship with Western countries and Israel, reinforcing its National Role Conception (NRC) as a "secular modernizer." By cultivating ties with the United States, European nations, and particularly Israel, Azerbaijan aims to enhance its security, diversify foreign relations, and access advanced technology and investment. The partnership with Israel is especially significant; despite being a Muslim-majority country, Azerbaijan has developed cooperation with Israel in areas such as defense, intelligence sharing, and energy. According to different estimates, between 2016 and 2020, Israel supplied nearly 70% of Azerbaijan's military arsenal, providing advanced weaponry that significantly enhanced Azerbaijan's military capabilities. This collaboration has included the exchange of military technology and intelligence sharing, contributing to Azerbaijan's strategic defense initiatives. At the same time, Azerbaijan is a major supplier of oil to Israel, accounting for approximately 40% of Israel's oil imports. This energy partnership underscores the mutual economic benefits derived from their bilateral relations. This pragmatic approach reflects Azerbaijan's prioritization of secular modernization objectives over religious affiliations. However, these alliances have drawn criticism from neighboring Iran, which views Azerbaijan's ties with Israel with suspicion, perceiving them as a strategic threat (Cohen & Lev, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> During the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Turkey provided Azerbaijan with significant military support, including advanced weaponry such as drones, and facilitated the deployment of Syrian mercenaries to the conflict zone. This has helped Azerbaijan fully annex and gradually ethnically cleanse Nagorno-Karabakh.

The effectiveness of Iran's strategies to exert religious and ideological influence in Azerbaijan varies across different segments of Azerbaijani society. In rural areas and among conservative Shia communities—particularly on the Absheron Peninsula in the southern regions bordering Iran—there is a greater resonance with Iranian outreach (Valiyev, 2017). Economic hardships, historical ties, and socio-cultural affinities make these groups more receptive to Iranian support and messaging. For instance, in villages like Nardaran, heightened religious observance and occasional clashes with authorities over religious freedoms have been observed, reflecting the impact of Iranian ideological influence. These communities may view Iran as a protector of Shia Islam and a source of spiritual and material support, aligning with Iran's NRC as a Defender of Islam (Vatanka, 2018). Conversely, urban populations and younger generations tend to prioritize economic modernization, global integration, and the secular values promoted by the Azerbaijani government. Cities like Baku and Ganja exemplify the tangible benefits of Azerbaijan's secular modernization model, including improved infrastructure, educational opportunities, and international investment. These developments diminish the appeal of Iran's theocratic system for many Azerbaijanis, who associate progress and prosperity with secular governance and Western engagement. The government's proactive measures to promote secularism and regulate religious activities further constrain Iran's reach, reflecting Azerbaijan's commitment to its NRC as the secular modernizer.

Azerbaijan has implemented stringent laws and regulations to assert control over the religious sphere and limit foreign influence, thereby reinforcing its secular identity. The Law on Freedom of Religious Belief (Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Freedom of Religious Beliefs, 1992), first adopted in 1992 and amended multiple times, requires all religious communities to register with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations. This registration process grants the government oversight of religious institutions, enabling it to monitor activities, funding sources, and adherence to national laws. Unregistered religious activities are prohibited, and participation in such activities can result in administrative penalties or criminal charges. The government also restricts the involvement of foreign nationals in religious services and regulates the importation of religious literature<sup>1</sup>. Amendments in 2015 increased penalties for unauthorized religious activities and expanded the state's ability to suspend or dissolve organizations deemed a threat to national security. By controlling the establishment

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<sup>1</sup> To further curb foreign ideological influence, Azerbaijan restricts its citizens from pursuing religious education abroad without official permission. The government recognizes that foreign-trained clerics may introduce interpretations of Islam that challenge the state's secular policies. In response, it promotes domestic religious education through institutions like the Azerbaijan Institute of Theology, established in 2018 under the State Committee. This institution offers programs aligned with national values, emphasizing a moderate interpretation of Islam compatible with secular governance. By fostering a homegrown clergy educated within a state-supervised framework, Azerbaijan seeks to ensure that religious teachings support national unity and loyalty to the state. Scholarships and incentives encourage students to study locally, reducing the allure of foreign institutions that may propagate alternative ideologies. Additionally, the government oversees the content of religious literature and educational materials, requiring approval for imported texts and prohibiting publications that promote what the government considers extremism or undermine secularism.

and operation of religious entities, Azerbaijan aims to prevent the dissemination of teachings that conflict with its secular values or could incite social discord (Yunusov, 2004). These measures are enforced through regular inspections, surveillance, and collaboration with law enforcement agencies (Ergun & Çitak, 2020).

Understanding the influential role of media in shaping public opinion, Azerbaijan closely monitors foreign broadcasts and online content that could challenge its secular narrative. The National Television and Radio Council regulate media operations, and the government has blocked access to foreign websites and television channels deemed subversive or threatening to national security. For instance, Azerbaijani authorities have restricted Iranian state media content when it was perceived to promote religious extremism or interfere in domestic affairs. State-controlled media play a significant role in reinforcing Azerbaijan's NRC as the secular modernizer. Public broadcasting services emphasize themes of modernization, economic development, cultural heritage, and national unity. Programming often highlights the government's achievements, infrastructure projects, and international partnerships, projecting an image of progress and stability. By promoting secularism and discouraging religious radicalism, the media supports efforts to counteract Iran's ideological messaging.

## **Conclusion**

This study has analyzed contrasting National Role Conceptions (NRCs) of Iran and Azerbaijan—the "Defender of Islam" and the "Secular Modernizer," respectively—and examined how these self-perceptions shape their foreign policy behaviors and interactions in the South Caucasus. By employing role theory as the analytical framework, the research has illuminated the identity-driven dimensions of their interstate relations, moving beyond traditional materialist explanations. The findings reveal that the interstate role conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan is deeply rooted in their divergent identities, historical trajectories, and ideological commitments, which manifest in their foreign policies and regional strategies.

From a theoretical standpoint, role theory posits that states, akin to individuals, adopt roles based on their self-perceptions and the expectations of others, which in turn influence their behavior and interactions on the international stage. Iran's NRC as a "Defender of Islam" stems from its revolutionary ideology and commitment to safeguarding Shia communities and promoting Islamic governance. This role is deeply intertwined with its national identity, historical experiences, and ideological aspirations. Conversely, Azerbaijan's NRC as a "secular modernizer" emerges from its post-Soviet nation-building efforts, emphasizing secularism, economic development, and alignment with Western institutions. This role reflects Azerbaijan's desire to assert its sovereignty, modernize its society, and differentiate itself from neighboring states with theocratic systems.

The interstate role conflict unfolds as these NRCs clash in both ideological and practical arenas. Iran employs a multifaceted strategy to extend its ideological influence in Azerbaijan, supporting religious institutions, offering educational initiatives, engaging in media outreach, and conducting cultural diplomacy. These actions aim to promote its interpretation of Shia Islam and challenge Azerbaijan's secular orientation, aligning with Iran's self-assigned mission to protect and lead Shia communities. Azerbaijan, perceiving these efforts as threats to its sovereignty and secular identity, implements regulatory measures, promotes state-sanctioned religious education, manages media narratives, and strengthens strategic alliances with countries that support its modernization agenda.

The role conflict arises because the NRCs of Iran and Azerbaijan are inherently oppositional. Iran's pursuit of ideological influence aligns with its commitment to religious solidarity and regional influence, while Azerbaijan's resistance is driven by its dedication to secular governance and national sovereignty. The overlapping cultural and religious ties between the two countries amplify this conflict, as Iran's actions are perceived not merely as external interventions but as intrusions into Azerbaijan's internal affairs and identity. This tension is further exacerbated by historical legacies and the proximity of the two nations, which facilitate both interaction and friction.

Understanding why and how this interstate role conflict takes place requires an appreciation of the historical and ideological underpinnings of each state's NRC. Iran's identity as a "defender of Islam" is deeply rooted in the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which redefined its national identity and foreign policy objectives. The revolution established a theocratic state with a mission to export its revolutionary ideals and foster solidarity among Shia communities worldwide. This ideological foundation drives Iran's foreign policy behaviors and its efforts to influence Shia populations in neighboring countries.

Azerbaijan's identity as a "secular modernizer" is shaped by its experience under Soviet rule and its subsequent endeavors to build a modern, independent nation-state. The legacy of systemic secularization during the Soviet era ingrained secular values within Azerbaijani society and governance. Post-independence, Azerbaijan sought to maintain secularism as a unifying and stabilizing force, distinguishing itself from neighbors like Iran and asserting its sovereignty. This commitment to secularism is not merely a domestic policy but a core aspect of Azerbaijan's national identity and its approach to international relations.

The interstate role conflict unfolds through specific mechanisms. Iran's support for religious institutions and clerical training in Azerbaijan aims to build ideological affinity and expand its soft power. By investing in mosques, religious centers, and educational programs, Iran seeks to promote its theological perspectives and reinforce communal ties with Azerbaijani Shia communities. Media outreach and cultural diplomacy further enable Iran to shape narratives and promote shared heritage, positioning itself as a natural ally and protector.

Azerbaijan counters these efforts by regulating religious activities, promoting state-controlled religious education, and leveraging media to reinforce its secular identity. The government implements stringent laws to monitor and control religious institutions, restricts foreign-trained clerics, and oversees the importation of religious literature. Strategic alliances with countries like Turkey, Israel, and Western institutions strengthen Azerbaijan's position and provide additional means to resist Iran's influence. These alliances reflect Azerbaijan's pragmatic approach to foreign policy, prioritizing national interests and modernization objectives over religious or ideological considerations.

The geopolitical context of the South Caucasus, characterized by complex historical legacies and competing regional interests, further intensifies this role conflict. The region serves as a strategic buffer zone and a contested arena for influence among regional powers. Azerbaijan's energy resources and strategic location make it a significant player, while Iran's historical ties and regional ambitions drive its engagement. The clash of NRCs contributes to a complex mix of alliances, rivalries, and tensions that influence security, economic development, and cultural interactions in the region.

Theoretically, this case study illustrates how role theory enhances our understanding of interstate conflicts driven by identity and ideology. It demonstrates that when states adopt roles with conflicting goals and perceptions, role contestation becomes a central feature of their interactions. The conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan is not solely about power or resources but about the fundamental ways in which each state defines itself and perceives its place in the regional and international order. Role theory emphasizes the performative and adaptive nature of these roles, showing how states continuously reinterpret and enact their identities in response to domestic and external pressures.

The implications of this conflict are significant for regional dynamics and international relations. It affects not only the bilateral relations between Iran and Azerbaijan but also the broader stability of the South Caucasus. The identity-driven dimensions of the conflict underscore the limitations of approaches that focus solely on material interests or power dynamics. Addressing conflict requires a nuanced understanding of the historical, cultural, and ideological factors that shape state behaviors.

In conclusion, the interstate role conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan exemplifies how National Role Conceptions rooted in identity and ideology profoundly influence foreign policy and regional interactions. By applying role theory, this study provides a nuanced analysis of the factors driving the conflict, highlighting the centrality of self-perception and identity in international relations. The findings underscore the need for approaches that consider the complexity of identity, ideology, and geopolitical interests. For policymakers and scholars, recognizing the identity-driven aspects of such conflicts is essential for developing strategies that address underlying issues and contribute to regional stability.

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