



THE ROLE OF THE VILĀYAT-E FAQĪH DOCTRINE IN IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY: IDEOLOGICAL LEGITIMACY, INSTITUTIONAL MEDIATION AND REGIONAL STRATEGIC ADAPTATION

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Abstract. *This article examines how the doctrine of Vilāyat-e Faqīh (the guardianship of the Islamic jurist) relates to the regional policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain. Rather than treating ideological affinity as proof of Iranian command, it distinguishes three analytical stages: ideological legitimization, institutional-organizational mediation and strategic adaptation. The study uses a qualitative, structured-focused comparison of public legal texts, academic research, official organizational statements and international reports. It assesses five dimensions in each case: doctrinal affinity, institutional ties, strategic-interest alignment, local autonomy and the strength of causal evidence. The comparison suggests that the doctrine is most directly visible in Hezbollah's ideological self-understanding; that in Iraq relationships vary among political and armed actors; that in Yemen evidence of external support must be distinguished from proof that doctrine determines Houthi decisions; and that in Bahrain claims of Iranian direction require particular caution, because the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry did not establish a discernible link between specific events of February and March 2011 and Iran. The principal contribution of the article is a transparent framework for separating ideological connection from organizational influence and direct control. Its findings remain bounded by the availability and verifiability of open-source evidence.*

Keywords: *Vilāyat-e Faqīh, Iranian foreign policy, ideological legitimacy, institutional mediation, regional influence, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, process tracing.*

INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy is rarely explained by a single variable. Material capabilities, threat perceptions, domestic institutions, historical experience and political ideas all interact in shaping how states build partnerships and pursue influence abroad. In the Islamic Republic of Iran the doctrine of Vilāyat-e Faqīh occupies a distinctive place, because it links religious authority to the constitutional structure of the state. The Iranian Constitution identifies the guardianship of the jurist as a central component of the

political order, while the interpretation of the doctrine and its practical implications remain matters of political and scholarly debate (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989, art. 5; Khomeini, 1981).

The doctrine is relevant to foreign policy in at least two different ways. First, it informs the Islamic Republic's own account of political legitimacy and leadership. Second, it can provide an ideological reference point for certain movements and organizations outside Iran. These two dimensions should not be conflated: a movement may share religious-political concepts with Tehran, receive assistance from Iranian institutions, or coordinate with Iran on selected issues without being fully subordinate to Iranian decision-makers. Constructivist scholarship highlights the role of identities and ideas in political conduct, but it does not imply that material interests or local agency cease to matter (Wendt, 1999; Warnaar, 2013).

This article therefore asks through what mechanisms, and under what conditions, Vilāyat-e Faqīh contributes to Iran's regional influence. It compares Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain because they offer different combinations of ideological proximity, institutional ties, domestic political constraints and evidentiary uncertainty. The central argument is that the doctrine is best understood as a potentially influential legitimating framework whose practical effects depend on organizational channels and local strategic calculations, and that it is not by itself sufficient evidence of direct command or of causal responsibility for a particular political or military decision (Warnaar, 2013).

The article makes a limited analytical contribution rather than claiming to establish a wholly new theory. It operationalizes a three-stage framework consisting of ideological legitimation, institutional-organizational mediation and strategic adaptation, and applies common indicators to four cases. Its purpose is to make the reasoning behind comparative judgments explicit and to identify where the available evidence supports conclusions, where it only suggests them, and where it remains insufficient.

MAIN PART

The study uses a qualitative, structured-focused comparison. Each case is examined through the same questions and the same five indicators, which enables comparison without assuming that all four settings are equivalent. The cases are not intended to represent every Iranian relationship in the region; they are selected analytically in order to capture variation. Lebanon provides a case in which the role of the doctrine

in an organization's ideological self-description is comparatively well documented (Wimberly, 2015). Iraq presents a fragmented political and armed landscape in which relations with Iran vary by actor (Al-Marashi, 2023). Yemen tests the distinction between external assistance and doctrinal causation (United Nations Security Council, 2024). Bahrain provides a case in which prominent allegations of Iranian involvement must be evaluated against the findings of a commission of inquiry and against the limits of the available evidence (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011).

The source base combines constitutional and foundational ideological texts; peer-reviewed scholarship and academic books; official reports, including those of the United Nations Panel of Experts on Yemen and of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry; and public organizational documents where these are relevant. Sources are treated according to their evidentiary role. A legal text can establish a formal principle, an organization's statement can establish its declared position, and an international report can document what investigators reported; none of them automatically proves the full causal chain running from doctrine to an individual decision. The article does not claim access to classified records or to private decision-making communications.

The temporal scope is primarily historical-to-contemporary, with particular attention to post-2003 Iraq, to the ideological development of Hezbollah, to the post-2014 phase of the Yemen conflict, and to the Bahraini events of 2011, for which the cited commission report is directly relevant. Because the sources do not cover identical periods, the comparison is mechanism-focused rather than a synchronized time-series study.

The framework distinguishes three stages. Ideological legitimization concerns whether the doctrine is explicitly invoked in order to justify authority, political identity or action; this is the level at which the constitutional and foundational texts of the Islamic Republic operate (Khomeini, 1981; Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989, art. 5). Institutional-organizational mediation examines whether identifiable channels, such as leadership relationships, formal cooperation, funding, training, material assistance or consultation, connect ideological affinity to practical influence. Strategic adaptation considers how those relationships interact with local institutions, domestic political competition, security pressures and the independent objectives of local actors.

Five indicators are applied to each case: doctrinal affinity; institutional and organizational ties; alignment of strategic interests; local autonomy and constraints;

and strength of causal evidence. The qualitative labels «strong», «partial» and «limited or uncertain» refer to the evidence available in the sources reviewed, and not to numerical measurements of Iranian control. A claim of direct causation requires more than ideological similarity: ideally the evidence should establish a sequence, a plausible mechanism, and a connection between the mechanism and the observed outcome. Alternative explanations, including security concerns, local power struggles, historical networks and regional rivalry, are considered throughout. A limitation of this design is that open-source reporting cannot fully reveal covert relationships or internal deliberations; accordingly, the absence of publicly available evidence is not treated as proof that a relationship does not exist, but as a limit upon the strength of the conclusion that may responsibly be drawn.

The political landscape of Iraq after 2003 created opportunities for Iran to develop relationships with political parties and armed organizations, but the Iraqi Shi'a arena is not a unified bloc. Actors differ in their religious authorities, their electoral strategies, their attitudes towards state sovereignty and their calculations about relations with Tehran. Research on the Popular Mobilisation Units of Iraq likewise emphasizes internal diversity, competition and the interaction between armed structures and domestic institutions (Al-Marashi, 2023).

The case therefore supports a differentiated assessment. Ideological affinity is visible among some actors, and institutional or security relationships with Iran have been documented in scholarship and in policy reporting. These relationships should nevertheless be established actor by actor rather than generalized to all Iraqi Shi'a organizations. Strategic interests may overlap in limiting threats to Iran or in shaping the political environment of Iraq, while Iraqi actors also seek local legitimacy, access to state resources and influence in domestic politics; these motives may reinforce cooperation without demonstrating that every decision is directed by Tehran (Al-Marashi, 2023).

On the indicators of the framework, doctrinal affinity and institutional mediation are present for some organizations but vary across the wider field. Local autonomy is significant, and causal confidence depends upon the particular group, the particular decision and the particular source. Iraq thus illustrates why a state-level label such as «Iran-aligned» can obscure the differences between ideological affinity, cooperation and operational control.

Lebanon offers the clearest of the four cases for examining the ideological function of the doctrine. Academic research has traced the influence of the Iranian Revolution and of Vilāyat-e Faqīh within Hezbollah's ideological system, while also noting that the organization's political discourse has developed in response to changing Lebanese and regional circumstances (Wimberly, 2015). The foundational and later political texts of Hezbollah are relevant primary materials for establishing its declared ideological orientation.

This makes the first stage, that of ideological legitimation, comparatively well supported. The second stage involves the organizational and political relationship between Iran and Hezbollah, including the cooperation and assistance discussed in the academic and policy literature. The existence of a close relationship does not, however, independently establish the cause of every political or military decision; such claims require decision-specific evidence, including reliable accounts of the decision process, direct statements, or corroborated reporting (Wimberly, 2015).

The confessional political system of Lebanon, the organization's local constituency, the security environment and Hezbollah's own institutional interests also shape its choices. The case therefore supports a stronger conclusion about the role of the doctrine in ideological identity than about its role as the sole cause of particular outcomes, and it demonstrates the value of distinguishing a documented ideological commitment from a separate claim of external command (Warnaar, 2013).

The Houthi movement emerged from Yemen's own political, religious and historical setting, and its local roots and its conflict with the Yemeni state must be considered alongside its relationships with external actors. The final report of the United Nations Panel of Experts on Yemen (S/2024/731) states that the information gathered by the Panel indicated technical assistance, training, weapons and financial support provided to the Houthis by Iran, by Iraqi armed groups and by Hezbollah, and the report also discusses regional coordination in the context of the wider conflict (United Nations Security Council, 2024).

This evidence is relevant to institutional-organizational mediation, but it does not by itself establish that Vilāyat-e Faqīh determines Houthi ideology or directs all Houthi decisions. External support, operational coordination, ideological affinity and command are distinct propositions, and they require different kinds of evidence. A careful analysis

must identify what the report documents, attribute the findings to the Panel, and avoid extending them beyond their stated scope (United Nations Security Council, 2024).

The local political objectives of the Houthis, their domestic power base, the fragmentation of the Yemeni state and the evolution of the regional conflict provide important alternative explanations for their behaviour. The case therefore offers evidence of external assistance and of strategic convergence, while the independent causal effect of the doctrine remains less directly established in the sources used here.

Bahrain differs from the other cases because claims of Iranian involvement have often been connected to the protests of February and March 2011. The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry examined those events within a defined mandate, and its report stated that the material presented to the Commission did not establish a discernible link between specific incidents during those events and the Islamic Republic of Iran, and that some allegations could not be independently verified (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011).

This finding should be interpreted narrowly. It does not establish that no political or other relationship between any Bahraini actor and Iran has ever existed, since it concerns the incidents, the evidence and the mandate examined by the Commission; nor should the report be used as a blanket conclusion about later periods. It does, however, show why allegations of external direction must be tested against independently verifiable evidence (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011).

For Bahrain, ideological affinity must be assessed through the statements and the political positions of specific organizations. Institutional mediation requires separately corroborated evidence of financial, organizational or other assistance. Domestic political representation, state-society relations, social demands and regional rivalry are alternative explanations that cannot be replaced by an assumption of external control. On the evidence reviewed here, causal claims about the effect of the doctrine upon specific Bahraini outcomes should accordingly remain limited.

Table 1 summarizes the findings using the same indicators. The assessments are qualitative and provisional: they describe the strength of the evidence in the sources reviewed, not the absolute level of Iranian influence. «Partial» means that evidence exists but does not establish the full causal chain, while «limited or uncertain» means that the reviewed sources do not support a confident conclusion.

Table 1. Qualitative comparison of the four cases on the basis of the sources reviewed

Case	Doctrinal affinity	Institutional ties	Strategic alignment	Local autonomy	Causal evidence
Iraq	Partial; varies by actor	Documented for some actors	Often convergent, not uniform	High and politically consequential	Partial; actor-specific
Lebanon	Strongly documented in Hezbollah's ideology	Close ties documented; decisions need case-level evidence	Substantial but context-dependent	Present within Lebanese politics	Strong for ideology; partial for individual decisions
Yemen	Not established as a complete explanation	UN report documents external support claims	Convergence on some regional issues	Local origins and objectives remain central	Partial for assistance; limited for doctrinal causation
Bahrain	Requires organization-specific evidence	Not established here for the specific events of 2011	Contested and context-dependent	Domestic factors are essential	Limited for claims of Iranian direction in 2011

The comparison indicates that the visibility of the doctrine and its causal significance are not the same thing. Lebanon provides the clearest evidence of doctrinal articulation (Wimberly, 2015). Iraq shows heterogeneous relationships across actors (Al-Marashi, 2023). Yemen provides evidence relevant to external assistance but not sufficient grounds for reducing Houthi decisions to a single Iranian doctrine (United Nations Security Council, 2024). Bahrain illustrates the importance of respecting the scope of an inquiry and of distinguishing unverified allegations from established findings (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011). Across all four cases, institutional mechanisms and local agency must be analysed separately.

These findings support a conditional rather than a deterministic interpretation of Vilāyat-e Faqīh in Iranian foreign policy. The doctrine can provide a language of legitimacy, a shared political identity, or a reference point for relationships, yet its practical effect depends upon whether it is connected to institutions, resources, organizational ties or decision-making processes. This approach is compatible with scholarship that treats ideas as politically consequential while recognizing that they interact with material interests and historical circumstances (Wendt, 1999; Warnaar, 2013).

The three-stage framework helps to prevent three analytical errors. The first is to infer organizational subordination from ideological similarity. The second is to treat

evidence of external assistance as proof that a doctrine caused a particular outcome. The third is to assume that a relationship established in one period or for one organization applies equally to all actors in a country. Each of these inferences requires separate support.

The comparison also reveals an asymmetry in the evidence. The Lebanese case is strongest on ideological articulation, whereas Iraq requires more actor-specific analysis; the Yemeni case depends heavily upon the scope and the wording of international reporting; and Bahrain requires careful attention to the limits of the mandate and of the evidence of the 2011 Commission. These differences should not be hidden behind a single overall ranking; rather, they identify where further research is most needed.

The framework has its limitations. The study relies upon open sources and cannot fully assess covert communications or internal deliberations. The four cases differ in their political structures and in their conflict histories, which limits direct comparability. Qualitative labels do not measure influence numerically. Finally, the article does not claim that the doctrine can be isolated from all other ideological, institutional and strategic factors. Future research could strengthen causal inference by examining decision-level sequences, by comparing official statements with independently corroborated accounts, and by adding negative or contrasting cases in which religious affinity exists without close institutional ties.

CONCLUSION

Vilāyat-e Faqīh is an important element of the political identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran and can contribute to the ideological framing of its regional relationships (Khomeini, 1981; Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989, art. 5). Its effects, however, cannot be inferred from ideological similarity alone. A defensible analysis must establish how the doctrine is articulated, whether institutional mechanisms connect it to practical activity, and how local actors adapt cooperation to their own political and strategic objectives.

The comparison of Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain yields differentiated conclusions. In Lebanon the place of the doctrine in Hezbollah's ideological outlook is comparatively well documented, although the causes of individual decisions require separate evidence (Wimberly, 2015). In Iraq relationships with Iran vary among political and armed actors, and local competition remains important (Al-Marashi, 2023). In Yemen

the reporting of the United Nations provides evidence relevant to external support, but this should not be equated with proof that the doctrine controls Houthi decision-making (United Nations Security Council, 2024). In Bahrain the findings of the 2011 Commission place clear limits upon claims that Iranian direction was established for the specific events investigated (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011).

The contribution of the article is thus a transparent and evidence-sensitive framework that separates ideological legitimization, institutional-organizational mediation and strategic adaptation. Its principal conclusion is conditional: Vilāyat-e Faqīh may shape Iran's regional influence, but its causal weight varies by organization, by country and by decision, and strong claims should be reserved for cases in which independent evidence supports the full link between doctrine, mechanism and political outcome.

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