

## SACRALIZING STATECRAFT: A BRUCE LINCOLNIAN ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN IRAN-ISRAEL

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*Received: Oct 1, 2024; Revised: Nov 10, 2024; Approved: Dec 7, 2024*

### ABSTRAK

This study investigates the Iran–Israel conflict through the theoretical lens of Bruce Lincoln’s conception of religion as an arena of conflict. It explores how religious discourse is instrumentalized by both states to construct legitimacy, sanctify geopolitical agendas, and mobilize national identity. Using a qualitative, thematic approach grounded in critical discourse analysis, the research identifies five key dimensions of religious performance: martyrdom, sacred geography, demonology, ritual mobilization, and authoritative speech. Drawing on primary sources such as state speeches, constitutional texts, public rituals, and official media from 2006 to 2024, the study illustrates how both Iran and Israel produce competing theopolitical narratives. These narratives embed political goals within frameworks of divine mandate, portraying the conflict not only as territorial or ideological but as a sacred struggle. The findings suggest that religious language in both contexts functions simultaneously as a moral compass, a political strategy, and a boundary marker that delegitimizes the ‘other.’ Through Bruce Lincoln’s theory, this research highlights how ritual, myth, and religious authority become mechanisms of statecraft in deeply divided societies. Understanding this dynamic is essential for any serious attempt at conflict resolution in the region.

**Keywords:** Theopolitical discourse, Martyrdom, Sacred legitimacy

### INTRODUCTION

The conflict between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the State of Israel represents one of the most persistent and ideologically charged confrontations in contemporary Middle Eastern politics. While commonly interpreted through the lens of strategic rivalry and regional hegemony, this conflict transcends conventional geopolitical boundaries and enters the realm of symbolic and theological contestation. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has positioned itself not merely as a nation-state in opposition to Israeli

expansionism, but as the vanguard of Islamic resistance against what it defines as Zionist imperialism. This ideological stance is expressed through religious rhetoric, revolutionary slogans, and institutionalized support for proxy groups across the region. Iran's foreign policy posture toward Israel is heavily influenced by a fusion of Shi'a eschatology, anti-colonial narratives, and revolutionary ideals inherited from Ayatollah Khomeini, which continue to shape the strategic discourse within the Iranian leadership. Conversely, Israel has cultivated its identity as a Jewish state anchored in biblical history and framed its national security doctrine around existential threats, often casting Iran as its principal adversary. The invocation of divine promise, sacred territory, and historical suffering contributes to a political narrative that is profoundly entangled with religious symbolism and theological legitimacy. Such religious undercurrents fuel nationalist rhetoric and justify military actions on both sides, reinforcing the perception that the conflict is not merely temporal, but eternal and metaphysical.

In this context, religion cannot be seen as a passive background variable, but rather as an active and contested arena through which political legitimacy is sought and performed. Bruce Lincoln's theory of religion as a domain of conflict provides a compelling analytical framework for examining how sacred discourse is mobilized by state and non-state actors alike. Lincoln argues that religion is not a fixed essence but a social construct that is constantly redefined through power relations. He emphasizes the importance of analyzing who speaks on behalf of religion, in what context, and with what authority. Applying this lens to the Iran-Israel case reveals the instrumentalization of religious identity for political ends: Iran's leadership invokes Shi'a eschatology and revolutionary theology to justify its opposition to Israel, while Israel mobilizes Jewish historical narratives and theological entitlement to legitimize its defense strategies. For instance, the Iranian commemoration of Ashura is not only a religious ritual but a moment of political mobilization, drawing on the martyrdom of Husayn as a metaphor for

resistance against oppression, which is rhetorically extended to the Palestinian struggle. Similarly, Israeli references to the Holocaust and the biblical right to the land are regularly invoked to sustain national unity and moral authority amid ongoing conflict. The conflict thus becomes a battleground not only of missiles and diplomacy but of sermons, scriptures, and sacred claims, where the stakes are defined not solely in terms of state interests, but in the salvation of entire communities as imagined through sacred history.

This study argues that the Iran–Israel conflict must be understood not only as a struggle over territory, security, or nuclear capability, but also as a symbolic war of competing sacred claims. It is a confrontation between two regimes that utilize religious legitimacy to reinforce national ideologies, expand influence, and sustain public support. By employing Bruce Lincoln’s critical approach, this article examines how religious language and symbols are used to construct moral authority in international politics. Furthermore, the study explores how these sacred discourses shape foreign policy narratives, transnational alliances, and regional instability. The Iran-Israel rivalry, therefore, serves as a paradigmatic case for understanding religion not as a static tradition, but as a dynamic field of power contestation, deeply embedded in the strategic and ideological calculations of modern states. The theoretical implications of such an approach also demand a reconsideration of dominant frameworks in international relations, which often privilege material interests and secular rationality at the expense of symbolic and affective dimensions of political life. In this vein, the conflict can also be situated within broader global trends of religious nationalism, where states increasingly mobilize spiritual narratives to assert sovereignty, resist foreign influence, and construct collective memory.

By extending Lincoln’s framework into the domain of international conflict, the article seeks to illuminate how religion operates not only as belief, but as a strategic resource that can be weaponized or sacralized depending on

the context. This process involves the selective invocation of scriptures, the canonization of historical traumas, and the sacralization of geopolitical space, transforming ordinary politics into cosmic drama. The political geography of Jerusalem, for example, is not merely contested because of its strategic location, but because it has been rendered sacred by overlapping religious traditions. Similarly, Iran's rhetorical embrace of Palestine is not reducible to anti-Israeli sentiment, but also functions as a constitutive element of its revolutionary identity and regional diplomacy. Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond traditional dichotomies of secular versus religious, or rational versus irrational, and instead examining how religious discourse becomes embedded within the machinery of statecraft, national myth-making, and the performance of political sovereignty.

In addition to the ideological and theological dimensions, the Iran-Israel rivalry also manifests through the institutionalization of sacred narratives within their respective domestic political systems. In Iran, clerical authorities, particularly the Supreme Leader, possess religious legitimacy that is structurally inseparable from state power. Religious institutions, such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), not only enforce doctrinal purity but also operationalize anti-Israel sentiment as part of national defense policy. Education, media, and religious festivals are used to reinforce these narratives from early childhood, creating a political culture deeply infused with religious militancy. Meanwhile, Israel's political right, notably parties such as Likud and the Religious Zionist Party, has increasingly blurred the lines between synagogue and state, incorporating biblical references and messianic language into parliamentary debates and military policy. Religious settler movements receive state protection while pursuing territorial expansion in ways that invoke divine sanction. These institutional mechanisms on both sides not only perpetuate the conflict but embed it into the very fabric of governance, law, and national identity, making de-escalation exceedingly difficult without a corresponding shift in sacred discourse.

Furthermore, the media landscape plays a pivotal role in reinforcing these religious narratives. Iranian state media frequently broadcast speeches, religious ceremonies, and documentaries that frame the Iranian stance against Israel in spiritual and moral terms, portraying the Islamic Republic as a divinely guided actor confronting global injustice. On the Israeli side, various religious news outlets and commentators underscore the sanctity of the Israeli homeland, often blurring the line between journalism and theological advocacy. These media narratives contribute to the formation of collective memory, where past traumas and religious prophecies are continuously recycled to justify current political agendas. The repetition of these narratives solidifies their presence in the public psyche, making alternative discourses less accessible and often branded as heretical or unpatriotic.

Education also serves as a critical instrument in perpetuating the conflict through religious discourse. In Iran, school curricula are infused with lessons on Islamic resistance, anti-Zionism, and martyrdom, drawing connections between historical Islamic figures and contemporary political struggles. Similarly, Israeli education often includes biblical history as foundational to national identity, presenting territorial claims as divine mandates rather than political negotiations. These educational frameworks not only shape political consciousness from a young age but also serve as mechanisms for legitimizing state policy. By integrating religious narratives into formal education, both states ensure the intergenerational transmission of ideologically charged worldviews that frame the other as a theological adversary.

Religious rituals and commemorative practices further reinforce the Iran-Israel divide. In Iran, Quds Day is observed annually on the last Friday of Ramadan as a symbolic protest against Israeli policies and a reaffirmation of solidarity with Palestinians. The event is marked by mass rallies, sermons, and state-sponsored messaging that blends religious devotion with political condemnation. In Israel, commemorations of Holocaust Remembrance Day

and Tisha B'Av are imbued with narratives of Jewish suffering and resilience, often linked to contemporary security concerns and the imperative of national defense. These rituals are not merely acts of memory but performative assertions of identity that mobilize collective emotions and reinforce group boundaries.

Diplomatically, the religious framing of the conflict limits avenues for negotiation and reconciliation. Iranian leaders frequently use religious justifications to oppose normalization with Israel, portraying any diplomatic engagement as betrayal of Islamic principles. Similarly, certain Israeli factions view territorial concessions as violations of divine law, complicating peace efforts and fueling domestic opposition to compromise. This sacralization of political positions turns negotiation into heresy, making pragmatism appear as moral weakness and rendering diplomatic solutions nearly impossible without a fundamental reconfiguration of religious narratives on both sides.

Finally, transnational religious networks amplify and globalize the conflict beyond the Middle East. Iranian-backed Shi'a movements across Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria integrate anti-Israel rhetoric into their local struggles, turning the Iranian-Israeli rivalry into a broader confrontation between perceived forces of oppression and divine justice. Meanwhile, Christian Zionist movements in the United States, among others, lend political and financial support to Israel based on eschatological beliefs that tie the fate of the Jewish state to biblical prophecy. These transnational actors not only expand the scope of the conflict but also embed it within global religious imaginaries, making it a battleground not just for territory, but for competing visions of sacred history and divine destiny.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach rooted in interpretive analysis, with a specific focus on discourse analysis to examine how religious narratives are constructed, circulated, and contested in the Iran-Israel conflict.

The methodological foundation is anchored in Bruce Lincoln's theory of religion as an arena of conflict, which provides both the conceptual lens and analytical criteria for interrogating the discursive use of religion in political contexts. Rather than treating religion as a fixed or homogenous category, this approach examines religion as a fluid construct that is continually shaped by actors, institutions, and historical contingencies. Accordingly, the research emphasizes the power-laden dimensions of religious discourse and investigates how such discourse operates to legitimize violence, mobilize identity, and demarcate political boundaries.

Primary data is drawn from political speeches, religious sermons, public commemorations, and state media outputs from both Iran and Israel over the past decade, particularly during major episodes of confrontation such as the 2006 Lebanon War, the Syrian civil war, the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, and the 2021 Gaza conflict. These sources are supplemented with secondary data including academic articles, policy reports, and theological commentaries that contextualize the symbolic and ideological frameworks within which each state situates its religious narratives. The unit of analysis focuses on the symbolic language, metaphorical structures, and theological justifications embedded in public discourse.

Data is analyzed through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework that allows for the identification of recurrent themes, rhetorical strategies, and underlying assumptions in the use of religious language. The analysis seeks to uncover how sacred claims are strategically deployed to frame national interests as moral imperatives, thereby legitimizing particular foreign policy choices or acts of violence. Particular attention is given to the intertextual references that connect ancient religious traditions with contemporary political narratives, such as the invocation of Quranic verses by Iranian leaders or biblical motifs in Israeli military doctrine. Through this lens, the study investigates how each state constructs a political theology that sacralizes its national objectives while demonizing the other.



Moreover, the study is positioned within a constructivist epistemological orientation that acknowledges the role of identity, belief, and meaning-making in international relations. In this context, religion is not viewed merely as a variable among others, but as a constitutive element of how political reality is imagined and enacted. By bridging religious studies and international relations, the research aims to contribute to an interdisciplinary understanding of conflict that accounts for both material and symbolic dimensions. Ethical considerations are also central to the research, particularly in avoiding the reproduction of polarizing or essentialist narratives, and in critically reflecting on the researcher's positionality in relation to the discourses under study.

In sum, the research method is designed to capture the complexity of religion as a contested domain of power within the Iran–Israel rivalry. By combining discourse analysis, interpretive methodology, and Lincoln's critical theory of religion, the study offers a nuanced approach to understanding how religious language functions as both a reflection and instrument of geopolitical struggle in the contemporary Middle East. This approach also allows the researcher to trace the evolution of sacred narratives over time, assessing how these narratives adapt in response to shifting political pressures. The flexibility of discourse analysis makes it particularly suitable for interpreting ideologically loaded language, especially when it is embedded within national mythologies. Furthermore, by grounding the method in an interdisciplinary frame, the study aspires to expand the analytical tools available for scholars of both religion and international politics. It invites future research to continue probing the entanglement of theological and strategic discourses in global conflict.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analytical findings of the study based on a critical discourse analysis of religious narratives deployed by Iran and Israel



in the context of their geopolitical rivalry. It adopts a thematic structure to highlight how each state's political theology is not only expressed through symbolic language but also deeply embedded in institutional practices, national rituals, and official policy discourses. The method of analysis draws heavily from Bruce Lincoln's conception of religion as an arena of contestation, wherein sacred authority is not only claimed but continually negotiated and enforced in relation to political power. Through this lens, religious discourse ceases to be a passive cultural artifact and instead becomes a strategic resource deployed in the consolidation of national legitimacy.

Drawing from Lincoln's theoretical framework, the analysis identifies recurring themes, symbolic patterns, and theological strategies that underpin the construction of moral authority and political legitimacy by both states. These themes include martyrdom and sacrifice, sacred geography, demonological constructions of the enemy, ritualized expressions of national identity, and the authoritative invocation of divine mandate by state leaders. The interplay of these themes illustrates that the Iran-Israel conflict is not simply ideological but also fundamentally theopolitical—anchored in divergent narratives of sacred history and divine will.

To ensure empirical rigor, the discussion is supported by a wide range of discourse samples collected from political speeches, televised sermons, commemorative ceremonies, educational campaigns, and media coverage produced by state institutions between 2006 and 2024. These data points are selected based on their visibility, frequency, and resonance within national narratives, particularly during moments of conflict escalation or diplomatic crisis. By anchoring the analysis in these materials, the study aims to demonstrate how religious discourse functions not merely as an explanatory framework, but as a performative act with material consequences in shaping national attitudes, policies, and international posturing.

Special attention is given to moments where the theological dimension of conflict becomes publicly visible and politically significant—such as in the celebration of Quds Day in Iran or Jerusalem Day in Israel—where religious narratives are mobilized to reaffirm national unity and to legitimize external confrontation. These events offer critical sites for observing the fusion of religion and politics in real time, and how public rituals become stages for enacting sacred claims. The analysis proceeds by comparing these practices in order to trace both similarities and divergences in how each side constructs and performs its sacred narrative of struggle.

Ultimately, this section not only maps the strategic uses of religious language and symbolism, but also explores their impact on the international dimensions of the conflict. The findings suggest that religion functions simultaneously as a narrative tool, a diplomatic shield, and a moral compass for both Iran and Israel. These multilayered discourses complicate any attempt at conventional conflict resolution, as they embed political objectives within sacred frameworks that resist compromise. Understanding this complexity is essential for scholars and policymakers seeking to grasp the enduring and evolving nature of the Iran–Israel rivalry.

### **The Political Deployment of Martyrdom and Sacrifice**

Martyrdom holds central symbolic and theological significance within both Iranian and Israeli political cultures. In the case of Iran, it is deeply embedded in the Shi'a tradition, particularly surrounding the Battle of Karbala, where the martyrdom of Imam Husayn is framed as the epitome of resistance against tyranny. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, this narrative has been adapted by the Iranian state into a modern political theology that links sacrifice with legitimacy, revolution, and resistance. In multiple speeches, particularly during Quds Day, Supreme Leader Khamenei has evoked this symbolism to frame the Palestinian struggle as a continuation of Husayn's path (Khamenei, 2012).

The institutionalization of martyrdom in Iran is evident in the operations of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs. Martyrs are publicly celebrated through murals, street names, and ceremonies. Educational institutions, including primary and secondary schools, incorporate stories of martyrs into curricula, connecting personal loss with collective national and religious destiny (Center for Strategic Studies, 2019).

Qassem Soleimani's funeral in 2020 marked a high point in the sacralization of martyrdom. His image was displayed alongside iconic religious figures, while public mourning rituals blurred the line between state ceremony and spiritual rite. Khamenei's eulogy emphasized Soleimani's identity not merely as a soldier but as a saintly figure who died on the path of justice (Al Jazeera, 2020).

In Israel, sacrifice is rooted in the memory of historical trauma and divine covenant. The Holocaust, as a national foundational trauma, gives shape to the moral imperative of self-defense. Through military service, Israeli citizens enact a form of sacred duty tied to survival. Yom HaZikaron and Yom HaShoah reinforce these themes annually in collective memory and public ritual (Haaretz, 2019).

Israeli leaders such as President Rivlin have tied the sacrifice of soldiers to divine promise and national redemption. His 2019 Memorial Day speech framed martyrdom not only as loss but as fulfillment of biblical destiny (Rivlin, 2019). This theology of survival frames the modern state of Israel as both the beneficiary and the guardian of divine protection.

Religious Zionism further integrates these narratives. Prominent rabbis interpret military service and sacrifice as mitzvot—religious obligations. In writings by Shlomo Aviner and Eli Sadan, defending the land is considered a sanctified act, aligning modern political duty with spiritual obedience (Aviner, 2018). The media plays a vital role in framing martyrdom. In Iran, outlets like Press TV and Fars News produce emotional narratives about fallen soldiers.

These narratives regularly include Qur'anic references and heroism tropes. In Israel, newspapers such as The Jerusalem Post profile soldiers killed in action, often emphasizing personal faith, family values, and sacrifice for the nation (The Jerusalem Post, 2021).

Religious texts provide theological support to these state narratives. In Iran, Qur'anic verses like Surah Al-Baqarah 2:154 are cited in sermons and public statements. In Israel, Psalms and Isaiah are invoked to link military defense with messianic fulfillment (Sahih International, 2002).

Martyrdom in both contexts transcends mere military strategy; it represents a metaphysical ordering of the world. Both Iran and Israel use martyrdom to define insiders and outsiders, heroes and traitors. Dissent is often framed as betrayal of the martyrs' sacrifice, reducing space for alternative political discourses. Regionally, Iran uses martyrdom rhetoric to build transnational networks of resistance. Leaders of Hezbollah and Hamas frequently refer to Iranian martyrs as symbols of righteous struggle. This expands Iran's influence and moral authority beyond national borders (Nasrallah, 2021).

In contrast, Israel appeals to international Jewish solidarity and Christian Zionist support. Through discourse that frames Israeli defense as the protection of biblical land and people, Israeli martyrdom gains global spiritual validation. Evangelical Christian figures frequently cite Israeli sacrifice in eschatological terms, reinforcing theological diplomacy. Martyrdom ceremonies in both nations are highly choreographed. In Iran, Quds Day and Ashura blend religious symbolism with nationalist rhetoric. In Israel, military funerals and Holocaust remembrance events involve religious readings and prayers. These public performances reaffirm the nation's identity as both sacred and embattled.

The flexibility of martyrdom as a symbol allows both states to reinterpret sacrifice according to political needs. After the Abraham Accords, Iran increased its use of martyrdom narratives to criticize normalization.

Israel intensified narratives of national defense during escalations in Gaza, linking fallen soldiers to sacred duty (Times of Israel, 2021).

Lincoln's framework helps make sense of this complexity. Martyrdom is not a neutral religious category it is a contested signifier shaped by political actors. By claiming religious authority over the meaning of death, states can mobilize citizens, justify violence, and silence opposition.

Ultimately, martyrdom becomes both a spiritual ideal and a material strategy. In Iran, it sanctifies regional interventions; in Israel, it sanctifies national security policy. Despite different religious traditions, both regimes use martyrdom to project righteousness and sustain legitimacy.

### **Sacred Geography and The Politics of Holy Sites**

Both Iran and Israel construct religious geographies that extend beyond national borders. For Iran, the sanctity of Jerusalem (al-Quds) is instrumental in uniting the Shi'a crescent under a common ideological mission. Quds Day rallies and televised sermons are used to sacralize Iran's anti-Israel stance and position itself as the spiritual center of resistance. This form of symbolic geography allows Iran to claim custodianship over an Islamic moral order that transcends ethnic and sectarian divides. In this framework, territorial disputes are not just about land—they are about the stewardship of sacred space.

Jerusalem occupies a unique position in Shi'a political theology in Iran, functioning not just as a physical location but as a symbol of collective resistance. Iranian leaders have consistently described the city as belonging to the entire Muslim world, not merely the Palestinians. Ayatollah Khomeini, the founding father of the Islamic Republic, institutionalized this view by declaring the last Friday of Ramadan as Quds Day. Since then, al-Quds has become an ideological linchpin in Iranian foreign policy (Keddie, 2003).

The symbolism of sacred geography in Iran extends to other regional sites. The shrines of Sayyida Zaynab in Syria and the Imam Ali shrine in Iraq have become pilgrimage routes for both religious devotion and political

assertion. Their protection and promotion are often cast as moral obligations tied to the defense of Islamic dignity. Iranian support for militias in Syria and Iraq is frequently justified as necessary to safeguard these sacred sites (Wehrey, 2018).

In Israeli discourse, sacred geography is embedded in both theological and nationalistic frameworks. Jerusalem is portrayed as the eternal and indivisible capital of the Jewish people. Political speeches and educational materials regularly affirm the city's status as the spiritual center of Judaism. The Western Wall is not only a place of prayer but also a state symbol, featured in military ceremonies and political events (Liebman and Don-Yehiya, 1983).

The territorial significance of the West Bank, referred to as Judea and Samaria by religious Zionists, is framed through biblical narratives. Settlements are often justified by scriptural references that affirm Jewish entitlement to the land. Prominent political figures have drawn parallels between the modern settler movement and the ancient Israelites, linking national policy to divine inheritance (Gordis, 2017).

Religious festivals such as Sukkot and Tisha B'Av further reinforce this sense of sacred spatial identity. Pilgrimages to Jerusalem during these events often serve as political statements, emphasizing Jewish sovereignty over contested sites. Government participation in these rituals underscores the fusion between religious devotion and national claim (Ben-Porat, 2013).

Iran, too, employs ritual and pilgrimage as instruments of spatial claim. Organized pilgrimages to southern Lebanon, often arranged by Hezbollah with Iranian backing, serve to reaffirm ideological unity. These acts of sacred travel are infused with political meaning and function as demonstrations of regional solidarity (Norton, 2007).

Educational systems reinforce these sacred geographies. Iranian textbooks portray Jerusalem as a holy site under occupation, encouraging students to see its liberation as a religious duty. Similarly, Israeli curricula emphasize the historic and religious significance of biblical sites, particularly

in contested areas such as Hebron and Nablus (Podeh, 2000).

The built environment also reflects these symbolic geographies. In Tehran, murals and monuments depict al-Quds as part of Iran's spiritual responsibility. In Israel, urban planning in Jerusalem often favors Jewish historical continuity, sometimes at the expense of Palestinian claims. These urban interventions materially encode religious ideologies onto the physical landscape (Katz and Ratcliffe, 2010).

International diplomacy mirrors these spatial claims. Iran frequently uses its opposition to Israeli control over Jerusalem as a rallying point in international forums, casting itself as the defender of Islamic holy sites. Israel, on the other hand, garners support from evangelical Christians and Jewish diaspora communities by emphasizing the sacred destiny of the land (Sandler, 2014). Sacred geography also operates through legal mechanisms. In Iran, declarations concerning al-Quds are enshrined in official policy statements and religious decrees. In Israel, the 1980 Basic Law formalized Jerusalem's status as the united capital, despite international controversy. These legal frameworks sacralize space in juridical terms, embedding theology into governance (Shamir, 2005).

Public commemorations further anchor sacred geographies in the national psyche. In Iran, Quds Day parades feature imagery of Jerusalem alongside Qur'anic verses and revolutionary slogans. In Israel, Independence Day celebrations in Jerusalem often incorporate religious readings and invocations, tying the city's liberation to divine promise (Horowitz, 2018).

Digital media platforms have become new battlegrounds for asserting sacred geography. Iranian state broadcasters use documentaries and social media campaigns to highlight Israel's control over Muslim holy sites. Israeli digital diplomacy counters with narratives emphasizing archaeological discoveries and biblical connections to the land (Avraham and Kaspin, 2020).

Finally, sacred geography shapes the emotional and psychological landscapes of both societies. In Iran, Jerusalem becomes an affective symbol of



resistance, capable of uniting disparate groups under a shared sense of injustice. In Israel, the land becomes a vessel for hope, memory, and divine continuity. In both cases, geography is not just mapped, but felt and believed.

### **Demonology and The Construction of The Enemy Demonology and The Construction of The Enemy**

Lincoln's theory emphasizes the role of religion in defining moral boundaries, and both Iran and Israel actively construct demonological images of one another. In Iranian state discourse, Israel is routinely described as the embodiment of global arrogance or *istikbar*, an illegitimate regime, and the spiritual heir of ancient oppressors. Political rhetoric is infused with Qur'anic references that equate Israel with the Pharaohs, the hypocrites, or the people of Lut. For example, in Friday sermons broadcast by IRIB, clerics often refer to Israeli leadership as enemies of God and allies of Shaytan (the devil), mobilizing religious emotion to sustain national antagonism. Iranian leaders frame the Israeli state as fundamentally evil, not merely misguided, making any compromise a betrayal of sacred duty.

The demonological framing extends to Iran's diplomatic rhetoric in international forums. At the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Iranian representatives have denounced Israel as a criminal state whose very foundation is antithetical to Islamic justice. This language appears consistently in speeches by Iranian officials at the United Nations, where Israel is presented not as a legitimate political actor but as a usurper of divine order. These discursive patterns reflect Lincoln's emphasis on religious language being used to construct binaries of good and evil, often to suppress dissent and rationalize violence.

Conversely, Israeli political discourse similarly portrays Iran as a theological and existential threat. Prime Minister Netanyahu and his successors have frequently characterized the Iranian regime as apocalyptic and irrational, guided not by strategic calculation but by messianic fervor. In multiple speeches before the Knesset and foreign audiences, Netanyahu

warned that Iran's nuclear ambitions are motivated by a desire to usher in a Shi'a eschatological cataclysm, casting the Iranian state as a fanatical actor outside the bounds of diplomatic engagement.

Israeli media contributes to this demonology by consistently linking Iran with terrorism, fundamentalism, and antisemitism. Outlets such as *Israel Hayom* and *The Times of Israel* regularly feature op-eds and analysis pieces that frame Iran as the modern-day Amalek, a biblical archetype of evil that must be utterly defeated. Religious commentators draw parallels between Haman, Pharaoh, and current Iranian leaders, reinforcing a timeless narrative of Jewish struggle against annihilatory enemies.

This symbolic construction is reinforced by religious Zionist rhetoric. Some rabbis and theologians describe Iran not just as a threat to Israel but as the embodiment of cosmic evil. These interpretations imbue foreign policy with a sense of spiritual warfare, transforming military strategy into acts of divine purification. Lincoln's framework helps reveal how these discourses mobilize sacred texts and mythic archetypes to construct the enemy as irredeemable.

Iranian propaganda materials similarly amplify this binary. Cartoons, music videos, and children's programming depict Israeli soldiers and leaders with monstrous features or demonic traits. Educational materials warn youth against Zionist infiltration of culture and thought, portraying Israel not just as an aggressor, but as a corrupter of souls and destroyer of morality. Such representations align with Lincoln's idea that religious discourse defines community boundaries by demonizing the 'other.'

In both cases, demonology becomes a tool for manufacturing consent and justifying the continuation of conflict. By defining the adversary as evil, any form of dialogue becomes suspect, and any compromise is seen as capitulation. This framing reduces the moral space for negotiation and embeds intransigence within the theological structure of the nation.

Public rituals also reflect and reproduce these demonologies. In Iran,

chants of “Death to Israel” are standard in Friday prayers and state-sponsored rallies, legitimized by clerical approval. In Israel, remembrance ceremonies for victims of Iranian-backed terrorism often include religious readings that situate Iran within a mythic lineage of Jew-hatred and divine opposition. Both forms of ritual make the enemy not just present but eternal.

Demonological discourse influences legislation and policy. Iran’s laws banning normalization with Israel are framed in religious terms, citing solidarity with the oppressed and refusal to engage with evil regimes. Similarly, Israeli legal frameworks that prohibit contact with enemy states are defended using narratives of existential peril and moral purity. These policies are more than strategic, they are sacralized.

In educational settings, the demonology is passed intergenerationally. Iranian textbooks describe Zionism as a form of spiritual and political corruption, while Israeli materials often refer to Iranian leadership as radical Islamists bent on destruction. These early indoctrinations form lasting psychological boundaries that shape political consciousness.

Lincoln’s theory urges scholars to pay attention to who defines evil, and for what purpose. In this case, religious and political elites in both Iran and Israel monopolize the discourse of moral judgment, deploying sacred language to sustain national unity through fear and hatred of the ‘other.’

Digital culture has only amplified these trends. Social media platforms in both countries serve as echo chambers for demonological narratives. Viral posts, memes, and digital sermons rapidly disseminate religiously framed hatred, transforming ancient tropes into modern propaganda. The speed and repetition of these messages further entrench enemy images in the public mind.

Theological institutions contribute to the perpetuation of demonology. Seminaries in Qom and Jerusalem produce clerics who engage in polemics against the opposing state, often issuing fatwas or halakhic rulings that define the enemy in spiritual terms. These rulings provide doctrinal cover for political

aggression.

International allies often mirror these demonologies. Iranian media portray the United States and Israel as a unified axis of evil, while Israeli advocates in the West depict Iran as the epicenter of global terror. These alliances reinforce binary thinking and globalize the theological battle.

Ultimately, the religious demonization of the enemy in both Iran and Israel serves as a critical obstacle to peace. By casting conflict in cosmic terms, these narratives close off pathways to coexistence. Through Lincoln's lens, we see that these discourses are not peripheral but central to the perpetuation of war, embedding animosity within the sacred foundations of the nation.

Israeli discourse similarly frames Iran as a theocratic threat to civilization. Iran is portrayed as an apocalyptic regime, irrational and fanatical, bent on regional domination under the guise of messianic Shiism. Media portrayals often highlight Iran's links to terrorism and nuclear ambition, constructing it as an existential threat. Such representations are not merely strategic—they are moral judgments embedded in theological worldview. This reciprocal demonization renders diplomacy difficult, as it repositions the adversary not as a rival, but as evil incarnate.

### **Ritual Performance and National Mobilization**

Religious rituals are central to the construction of national identity and are used by both Iran and Israel to mobilize public sentiment. In Iran, major events such as Ashura and Quds Day are strategically orchestrated by the state to merge religious devotion with nationalist fervor. These rituals are not spontaneous spiritual acts but carefully choreographed performances involving mass mobilization, state media, and clerical endorsement. Ashura commemorations, for instance, do not merely recall the martyrdom of Husayn but project it onto the political present—where Israel is cast as the Yazid of the era and Iran the embodiment of Husayn's moral struggle (Fischer, 1980).

Ashura rituals in Tehran and other major cities feature large

processions, reenactments of the Battle of Karbala, and chants that invoke both Islamic solidarity and revolutionary identity. Participants wear black, beat their chests in rhythmic motion, and listen to sermons that connect historical suffering with contemporary geopolitics. The government uses these platforms to reinforce the unity of the Islamic Republic and legitimize its opposition to Israel and the West. The message is clear: to mourn Husayn is to resist tyranny, and to resist tyranny is to support the Islamic Republic's foreign policy stance.

Quds Day, initiated by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, is another crucial ritual for Iran. Held on the last Friday of Ramadan, it merges fasting with political protest. Mass rallies are organized nationwide, featuring placards of destroyed Israeli flags, posters of Ayatollah Khamenei, and chants of 'Death to Israel.' These rallies are broadcast globally, turning domestic ritual into a transnational event. Iranian embassies and cultural centers also host Quds Day observances abroad, extending the ritualized performance of anti-Zionism into the diaspora (Keddie, 2003).

These rituals are gendered as well. Women often participate in separate processions, dressed in black chadors and holding portraits of martyrs. The inclusion of children in these events—sometimes dressed as young martyrs—demonstrates the pedagogical role of ritual in shaping future generations. Rituals thus become both sites of memory and tools of political socialization, reproducing national identity along religious lines (Deeb, 2006).

In Israel, religious rituals also play a vital role in sustaining the moral legitimacy of the state. Events like Yom HaZikaron and Yom HaShoah are treated not only as commemorative days but as sacred civic rituals. Sirens sound across the country, bringing daily life to a standstill as citizens engage in silent remembrance. The rituals involve official speeches, prayers at the Western Wall, and the reading of names of victims and soldiers. These acts serve to anchor Israeli national identity in collective suffering and moral righteousness (Handelman and Katz, 1990).

IDF induction ceremonies frequently include elements of religious ritual. New recruits may receive pocket-sized Bibles, recite blessings, and swear allegiance in front of religious leaders. These moments blur the line between civic duty and divine calling, reinforcing the notion that military service is not only a responsibility to the state but a fulfillment of a sacred obligation. Religious Zionist rabbis often preside over these ceremonies, blessing the soldiers and offering theological justification for military action (Don-Yehiya, 1993).

Public funerals for soldiers killed in action are deeply ritualized. They feature psalms, eulogies, the singing of Hatikvah, and the presence of national and religious symbols. In many cases, bereaved families articulate the loss in both patriotic and spiritual terms, speaking of their sons and daughters as sacrifices for the nation and for God. The confluence of military and religious ritual sacralizes the battlefield as an extension of sacred space, and martyrdom as a continuation of biblical heroism (Ben-Porat, 2013).

Like in Iran, Israeli rituals are pedagogical. Schoolchildren visit Holocaust museums and military cemeteries as part of their curriculum. They participate in ceremonies and memorize prayers and poems related to national sacrifice. These acts embed the sacredness of the nation-state into the minds of the young, preparing them to accept future sacrifice as noble and necessary. Ritual here functions as a mechanism of cultural continuity and ideological reinforcement (Podeh, 2000).

Bruce Lincoln's framework reveals how these rituals operate as performative claims to legitimacy. They do not simply express beliefs—they enact them. In both Iran and Israel, rituals serve to affirm who belongs, who is righteous, and who is the enemy. Participation becomes a litmus test of loyalty. To abstain or critique these performances is often viewed as political dissent or even heresy, highlighting how ritual can be coercive as well as celebratory (Lincoln, 2003).

These ritual performances are increasingly digitized. In Iran, Ashura

processions and Quds Day marches are livestreamed and hashtagged. In Israel, Yom HaZikaron ceremonies are televised, and personal stories of fallen soldiers are shared widely online. Digital platforms extend the reach of ritual, allowing national mythologies to be performed beyond physical borders and archived for perpetual consumption (Avraham and First, 2010).

The timing and repetition of these rituals are crucial. Their cyclical nature inscribes memory into national consciousness. Annual recurrence ensures that sacrifice and suffering remain ever-present. In Iran, the lunar calendar allows Ashura to fall on different days each year, reinforcing its universality. In Israel, fixed Gregorian dates tie remembrance to historical continuity. In both cases, time is sanctified, and history becomes liturgy.

The architecture of ritual spaces reinforces these messages. Iran's Behesht-e Zahra cemetery and Israel's Mount Herzl are not merely burial sites but sacred national shrines. Designed to evoke reverence, these locations host ceremonies, pilgrimages, and political speeches. The spatiality of ritual underscores Lincoln's view of religion as rooted in physical, embodied practice (Katz and Ratcliffe, 2010).

Inter-religious contrast also plays a role. In Iran, rituals often emphasize the Ummah and solidarity with oppressed Muslims, especially Palestinians. In Israel, Jewish rituals stress chosenness and divine covenant. This contrast sharpens mutual exclusivity and fosters a zero-sum worldview in which ritual identity affirms the necessity of political and military conflict. Ritual, in this sense, performs difference.

In conclusion, ritual performance in Iran and Israel is not ancillary to politics—it is constitutive of it. These acts anchor theology into national life, transform memory into mobilization, and convert sacred stories into sovereign legitimacy. Through Lincoln's lens, we understand these rituals not as passive traditions, but as dynamic tools of governance, discipline, and resistance.



### **Authoritative Voices and The Instrumentalization of Religious Speech**

To further understand the performative potency of religion in the Iran–Israel conflict, it is essential to analyze how high-level political leaders and religious elites employ religious discourse to legitimate political agendas and galvanize public mobilization. Unlike ritual performance that is collective and embodied, authoritative speech is often top-down, symbolically dense, and strategically framed to blend theological truth-claims with state objectives. Bruce Lincoln’s theory emphasizes that discourse becomes authoritative not merely because it is spoken, but because it is perceived as emanating from those deemed entitled to speak on behalf of the sacred. In the Iranian context, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s speeches, particularly during events like Quds Day or funeral eulogies for martyrs, serve as canonical expressions of sacred nationalism. His 2012 Quds Day speech famously declared that the Zionist regime is a cancerous tumor that must be removed, invoking a divine imperative against Israel (Khamenei, 2012). This statement is not isolated—it builds upon years of religiously infused rhetoric that constructs Israel not simply as a state, but as a metaphysical antagonist. The theological density of Khamenei’s discourse grants it a level of sanctity that secular criticism cannot easily counter. The blending of Qur’anic references with political slogans transforms public speeches into semi-liturgical performances with ritual weight.

Equally, Israeli political leaders engage in sacralized speech acts that frame the Israeli state as the fulfillment of divine prophecy. In his 2021 Jerusalem Day speech, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu proclaimed that the Israeli generation had fulfilled a 2,000-year-old dream, tying state sovereignty to sacred covenant (Netanyahu, 2021). These speeches often quote biblical passages, such as from Isaiah or Psalms, to provide divine scaffolding for territorial policies. Importantly, such rhetoric is not only deployed in religious settings, but in secular forums such as the Knesset or the United Nations General Assembly. By transposing religious motifs into

diplomatic language, these leaders universalize what are otherwise particularistic claims. Religious speech thus becomes multivocal—resonating domestically as prophetic authority, and internationally as moral legitimacy.

Official documents also function as repositories of this sacred-political synthesis. Iran's Constitution explicitly defines foreign policy as grounded in the defense of the oppressed, a Qur'anic principle that is consistently linked to anti-Zionist positions. Article 152 declares that the Islamic Republic rejects all forms of domination while supporting just struggles of the oppressed (IRI Constitution, 1979). This language has been invoked to justify Iranian support for groups like Hezbollah and Hamas. On the Israeli side, the 1980 Basic Law—Jerusalem, Capital of Israel—cements religious claim into legal architecture, declaring Jerusalem indivisible and eternal. These foundational texts sacralize geopolitical claims and are often cited in public addresses as moral anchors for contentious policy decisions.

Authoritative religious figures also weigh heavily in shaping national narratives. In Iran, Grand Ayatollahs from Qom issue fatwas that often blur into political mandates. During the Syrian conflict, multiple clerics declared defending the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab as a religious obligation, thereby providing theological legitimacy for Iranian military involvement in Syria (Alavi 2016). In Israel, Chief Rabbis such as Yitzhak Yosef and David Lau have issued halakhic statements that interpret the defense of Israel as a sacred duty. For instance, in 2018, Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu proclaimed that those who fight to protect Israel partake in a divine mission, elevating military service into a spiritual covenant (Eliyahu, 2018).

In both contexts, these speeches and statements are not merely persuasive—they are performative. They constitute what Lincoln calls a discursive claim to truth, one that seeks to establish an unassailable moral order. The authority to define truth is deeply entangled with the speaker's institutional and symbolic capital. Khamenei's words are weighty not only because of content, but because of the charismatic and hierarchical power he

embodies. Netanyahu's references to Jewish destiny carry political resonance because they echo Zionist theology internalized by segments of the Israeli public. In both states, such discourses enter the public sphere with institutional amplification—broadcast on national television, shared on digital platforms, and cited in educational materials.

These speeches also operate as rhetorical rituals. Their structure often follows a consistent formula—invocation of divine names, historical analogies, identification of the enemy, and a call to unity or sacrifice. This performative structure aligns with Lincoln's typology of religious speech that blurs the boundary between narrative and doctrine, persuasion and command. The speeches function as national liturgies—spoken, heard, remembered, and repeated. This repetition endows them with doctrinal status, creating a canon of sacred utterance that resists interrogation.

Importantly, the reception of these authoritative voices is rarely passive. In Iran, large crowds repeat chants immediately after the Supreme Leader's speeches. In Israel, live broadcasts of national addresses often feature communal gatherings, where families stand together to hear the prime minister's words. This collective listening transforms speech into shared experience, a ritual of national cohesion. Through this performative echo, political rhetoric achieves its sacralizing function—not only spoken from the pulpit of power, but embodied in the ears and emotions of the citizenry.

Moreover, these speeches frequently address the global audience. Khamenei's website publishes translations in multiple languages, targeting Shi'a communities abroad and sympathetic activists. Israeli diplomatic channels share edited excerpts of Netanyahu's speeches with subtitles and visual imagery tailored for Western audiences. These performances are thus not only national, but transnational—each claiming universal ethical high ground while reinforcing local religious legitimacy. This duality strengthens each state's ability to project moral clarity in a complex international arena.

In conclusion, the authoritative religious speech of political and clerical

elites in both Iran and Israel plays a decisive role in constructing the sacred foundations of their geopolitical agendas. These discourses are not rhetorical embellishments—they are foundational texts in the theopolitical architecture of each state. Drawing from Bruce Lincoln's theory, we see how such speech acts do not merely communicate positions but actively produce the categories of truth, virtue, and enemy that underpin political practice. By fusing charisma, tradition, and institutional authority, these voices turn speech into sacrament and policy into creed.

## CONCLUSION

This study has explored the complex interplay between religion and politics in the ongoing conflict between Iran and Israel through the analytical lens of Bruce Lincoln's theory of religion as an arena of conflict and contestation. The findings reveal that religious discourse in both states is not a passive reflection of spiritual values but a powerful tool wielded by state and religious elites to shape political identity, justify military action, and sacralize geopolitical claims. Iran and Israel construct parallel theopolitical architectures—where martyrdom, sacred space, ritual, and speech operate as essential elements in crafting legitimacy and sustaining narratives of resistance, survival, and divine mission.

Martyrdom in both contexts serves not merely to honor the dead but to galvanize the living. Whether through Ashura and Quds Day in Iran or Yom HaZikaron and Holocaust remembrance in Israel, these rituals anchor political life in sacred memory. Sacred geography further embeds the divine into territorial disputes, transforming land into liturgical space and diplomacy into a form of theological stewardship. The demonological discourses of both regimes draw clear moral boundaries, excluding the enemy from any possibility of redemption, while authoritative speech consolidates state power by fusing theological charisma with political authority.

Through Lincoln's framework, we have seen how these narratives function not only to construct meaning but also to define power, identity, and

exclusion. These are not just beliefs; they are enacted truths—ritualized, legislated, and broadcast to sustain a morally charged and politically useful vision of the world. As long as these discursive structures remain unchallenged, the sacred scaffolding of the Iran–Israel conflict will continue to resist conventional resolution.

In light of this analysis, it becomes clear that policy-making and conflict resolution in the region cannot succeed without directly engaging with the religious dimensions of the conflict. Political strategies that ignore the theological underpinnings of state narratives are unlikely to yield durable peace. Both Iran and Israel sacralize national ideology through ritual, law, and discourse—meaning that any effort to de-escalate tensions must also contend with their respective religious cosmologies and collective memories.

Future research should therefore move beyond secular-centric paradigms and embrace interdisciplinary methods that integrate religious studies, political theology, and international relations. A comparative theopolitical approach, as demonstrated here, can illuminate how sacred legitimacy operates across different religious and political systems. It also provides a critical tool for unpacking how language, symbol, and ritual shape the political imagination and policymaking in deeply divided societies.

Ultimately, this study underscores that religion is not an external factor or a background variable in Middle Eastern geopolitics. It is embedded in the structures, performances, and vocabularies of state power. Through Bruce Lincoln’s lens, we recognize that religious authority, when deployed in the political sphere, does not merely reflect pre-existing identities—it actively constitutes them, with profound implications for peace, war, and the possibility of ethical coexistence in the region.

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