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The religious factor in foreign policy in the age of the postsecular turn

Abstract. The relevance of this study stems from the growing role of religion in international relations, particularly amid crises, armed conflicts, and struggles for hegemony in regions with predominantly Muslim populations. Religion has increasingly functioned not only as a cultural marker but also as a tool for political mobilisation, legitimisation of foreign policy, and the formation of strategic alliances. This study aimed to explore the mechanisms, forms, and consequences of the instrumentalisation of religion in the foreign policy strategies of two countries – Turkey and Syria – taking into account the political context, historical background, and geopolitical environment. The study was based on historical-genetic, comparative political, discourse-analytical methods, and a systems approach. It was found that between the 2000s and 2010s, Turkey gradually moved away from a secular political model, systematically incorporating religious discourse into its soft power instruments, public diplomacy, and humanitarian initiatives. The institutional restructuring of the Diyanet, religion-oriented educational and media projects, and Turkey's positioning as a leader of the Muslim world all indicated a systematic shift in policy. In contrast, Syria's instrumentalisation of religion was driven by internal crisis, armed conflict, and the need to consolidate loyalist groups. Religion served as a resource for forming a confessional alliance with Iran and Hezbollah and as a tool to counter Salafi extremism. The study confirmed that in both cases, religion played not only a rhetorical but also a structural role in foreign policy. The findings are of value for religious diplomacy and the assessment of the risks of confessional escalation

Keywords: globalisation; confessional mobilisation; cultural diplomacy; soft power; diplomacy

Introduction

Over recent decades, the role of religion as a factor of diplomatic, ideological, and strategic influence has grown significantly in international relations. This phenomenon, known as the postsecular turn, has been accompanied by the rehabilitation of religion in political discourse as a source of identity, legitimisation, and soft power. Postsecularism emerged as a conceptual response to the limitations of classical secularisation theory, which predicted the inevitable withdrawal of religion from the public sphere as societies modernised. By the late twentieth century, it had become clear that religion not only remained present in political life but had also acquired new forms of influence. This shift signalled changes in the functioning of state power, the transformation of

diplomatic strategies, and the formation of new global alliances based on confessional affinity.

In the European context, the issue of religion's presence in the political space gained prominence due to migration crises, intercultural tensions, and the growing influence of populist parties, which often appealed to Christian identity as the foundation of national policy. Despite its formal commitment to secular principles, the European Union began to actively support programmes promoting interreligious dialogue, the protection of religious minorities, and the advancement of freedom of religion or belief as part of its foreign policy. In the Ukrainian context, the study of the postsecular turn is especially relevant in light of the military aggression by the Russian

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federation, which has actively used religion as a tool of influence. Through the Russian Orthodox Church and affiliated structures, Moscow has attempted to construct an alternative source of legitimacy, discrediting autocephalous institutions and promoting the concept of the “Russian world”. These developments underscore the need to examine the mechanisms of political instrumentalisation of religion and the consequences of its geopolitical use.

A number of aspects of this phenomenon have been addressed in the academic literature. V.A. Dubinsky (2023) analysed Sunni-Shia confrontation as a factor in the foreign policy of Middle Eastern states. The author found that confessional polarisation served not only as a source of internal conflict but also as a tool of geopolitical competition. However, the study did not examine the institutional mechanisms of religious diplomacy, nor did it explore religion as a resource of soft power. A. Shulyak *et al.* (2022) focused on the threats associated with the radicalisation of Islamic narratives, which contribute to global security destabilisation. They proposed strengthening secular institutions and intercultural dialogue as means of resistance. At the same time, the authors highlighted how religion can be employed by governments not only as a destabilising factor but also as a tool for diplomatic legitimisation. H. Aswar & M. Rakhmat (2023) analysed Islamic foreign policy, emphasising its moral and ethical foundations – ummah, justice, and solidarity. Their study provided insight into the moral nature of foreign policy in Muslim countries, but did not address the internal institutionalisation of religion within foreign policy strategies.

The study by A.T. Bulut & N. Hacıoğlu (2021) focused on religious populism in Turkish politics. The authors demonstrated how Islamic discourse was integrated into the populist legitimisation of foreign policy decisions. P. Mandaville *et al.* (2023) presented an extensive study of religion as a form of soft power, examining examples from the USA, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, China, and India. The authors demonstrated that religion functioned as a resource for foreign policy mobilisation. A. Öztürk & B. Başer (2022) examined the role of the Presidency of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (Diyanet) as a tool of transnational influence. The researchers noted that Diyanet’s activities were directed not only towards religious education but also towards strengthening Turkey’s influence within Muslim diasporas.

A. Idrisov (2021) drew attention to religion as a factor in the formation of new identities in a globalised world, while I. Yilmaz *et al.* (2023) considered religion as a means of authoritarian delegitimisation of political opposition. These approaches contributed to the broader understanding of the topic, yet they did not address the hybrid interaction between the religious and the political in international relations. Despite the existing body of research, several gaps remain. In particular, there is a lack of comparative analysis of how religion is employed in foreign policy, both in the context of post-revolutionary transformation and within institutionally regulated religious frameworks. There has been insufficient exploration of how religious rhetoric is adapted for different regional audiences, as well as of the risks posed by excessive politicisation of religion for democratic governance and international stability. All of the aforementioned authors acknowledged the significance of

religion in contemporary international discourse, though their conclusions differed regarding the acceptable extent of its instrumentalisation. Some researchers highlighted its potential as a form of soft power, while others focused on the dangers of the political exploitation of sacred symbols. This divergence of views underscores the need for further investigation of postsecular diplomacy as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon.

For the purposes of further analysis, two countries – Turkey and Syria – were selected, representing two distinct models of the instrumentalisation of religion in foreign policy. Turkey exemplified a gradual shift towards religious soft power within the framework of authoritarian modernisation. Syria, by contrast, represented a case of reactive confessional mobilisation under the conditions of armed conflict. Both states influenced the regional balance of power in the Middle East and played a key role in the formation of religiously framed international alliances, with direct implications for global stability.

This study aimed to analyse the mechanisms of the postsecular turn in the foreign policies of Turkey and Syria, to identify the ways in which religion is institutionalised as a political resource, and to assess the impact of religious discourse on international legitimacy and regional stability. The objectives of the research included identifying the ideological, institutional, and geopolitical models through which religion is employed in the foreign policies of Turkey and Syria; analysing postrevolutionary transformations that contributed to the rise of the religious factor in diplomatic discourse; and assessing the consequences of the politicisation of religion for international security, inter-state relations, and the stability of political regimes.

Materials and Methods

Secularisation processes were interpreted through the framework proposed by C. Taylor (2007), whose concept of the postsecular age describes a period in which religious consciousness does not disappear but is transformed. This theoretical contribution made it possible to conceptualise the interaction between religion and politics in new forms, free from modernist dichotomies. Based on the findings of the study, J. Habermas & A. Ignatium (2002) analysed the principles of rational dialogue between the religious and the secular in the public sphere. The concept of translational interaction between religious traditions and secular institutions, proposed by J. Habermas & A. Ignatium (2002), enabled a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which religious discourse is integrated into modern diplomacy – particularly in the realms of political rhetoric, symbolic legitimisation, and intercivilisational dialogue. The theoretical model developed by J. Casanova (2009) served as a key framework for analysing the multidimensionality of secularism and its transformations in the context of globalisation. The distinction between secularisation, secularism, and postsecularism allowed for a critical reflection on the dynamics of change in the political strategies of states that, while nominally secular, actively employed religious narratives for foreign policy purposes. The comparative focus included the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic (1973) and the unofficial translation of the Turkish constitutional reform of 2017 (Turkey Unofficial Translation..., 2017). These documents provided

legal reference points for reconstructing the evolution of the religious component in foreign policy. The discursive corpus included interviews with Bashar al-Assad, particularly his conversation with *The Wall Street Journal* (Interview With Syrian..., 2011). The corpus also featured reports from SANA (President alAssad..., 2018), *Tehran Times* (Syrian president meets..., 2019), and *The Guardian* (Turkey's PM rallies..., 2011), covering key diplomatic events.

The historical-genetic method was employed to reconstruct the transformation of religious discourse from the early twentieth century, identifying the key stages of secularisation and the gradual reintroduction of religion into the political spheres of Turkey and Syria. This approach enabled the reconstruction of a chronology of paradigm shifts – from the dominance of radical secularism to the emergence of a conditional postsecularism shaped by both internal and external factors. The comparative political approach examined and contrasted the strategies used by both states to employ religious resources in their foreign policies. It revealed that appeals to Islam served as a tool of soft power in Ankara and a means of confessional mobilisation in Damascus. Moreover, the analysis of the relationship between religious discourse and the degree of centralisation of power helped explain its varying levels of effectiveness. The systems approach integrated historical background, political transformations, institutional changes, and religious bodies into a single analytical framework, demonstrating how religion interacted with state structures and international legitimisation. Geopolitical analysis assessed the role of religious solidarity in alliances, conflicts, and diplomatic initiatives, drawing in part on a 2011 interview with the President of Syria. Together, these methods provided an interdisciplinary overview of the mechanisms behind the postsecular transformation of foreign policy.

Results

The postsecular turn in Turkey: from secularism to religious diplomacy. The postsecular turn marked a conceptual and political shift that challenged the classical theory of secularisation, which had posited that modernisation would inevitably lead to a decline in the social and political influence of religion. At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, despite the dominance of secular rationalism in academic and political circles, religious factors began to re-emerge in public discourse, domestic politics, and foreign policy practice. This phenomenon became known as the postsecular turn, encompassing both a rise in religious activity and the rehabilitation of religious identity as a source of social legitimacy (Gillin, 2021).

In international relations, the postsecular turn was reflected in the growing role of religious organisations in shaping global narratives, the increasing symbolic capital of religion in diplomacy, cultural policy, and humanitarian work. Religion was no longer seen purely as a private matter but regained strategic significance. This shift was evident both in countries that had traditionally identified as secular (such as France or Turkey) and in states with deeply integrated religious institutions (including Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, and the USA). Postsecularism did not imply a return to clericalism or a rejection of modernity; rather, it raised questions about new forms of interaction between the religious and the secular (Petito, 2020). One

of the central ideas in this context was the concept of translational interaction between religious traditions and secular institutions, as proposed by J. Habermas & A. Ignatium (2002). This approach called for the symbolic translation of religious discourse into a language accessible within the secular domain, allowing for continued openness to religious meaning within the framework of democratic pluralism. The theoretical foundations of this process were provided by the studies of C. Taylor (2007) and J. Casanova (2009), who emphasised that in pluralistic societies, religious narratives do not disappear but instead adapt, continuing to influence the moral foundations of politics. Postsecular diplomacy increasingly turned to religion as a resource of soft power, foreign policy legitimisation, and cultural self-identification.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Republic of Turkey represented one of the most prominent models of state-led secularisation in the Islamic world. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the founding of the republic in 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk launched a sweeping reform programme aimed at radically separating religion from politics. Kemalist ideology promoted Westernstyle modernisation, a centralised bureaucracy, a unified national identity, and strict control over the religious sphere (Nagy, 2023). The institution of the caliphate was abolished, the activities of dervish orders were banned, and Islamic sharia law was replaced with civil law. The state assumed administrative oversight of religion through the establishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), tasked with ensuring the regulated functioning of religion in line with state ideology. For much of the twentieth century, Turkey remained a secular state in which religion was pushed to the background in both domestic and foreign policy.

However, since the 2000s, Turkey has shown clear signs of moving away from radical secularism towards a new model in which religion has played an increasingly prominent role. This process has often been described as a postsecular turn, referring to the return of religious narratives, institutions, and practices into the public sphere, including international politics. A key catalyst for this transformation was the 2002 parliamentary election, in which a significant portion of the population voted for the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The party's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, while formally upholding secular norms, in practice pursued a gradual reintegration of Islamic elements into public life. Over the following two decades, Turkey underwent profound changes in religious policy, reflected not only in domestic institutional reforms but also in its foreign policy strategies.

One of the most distinctive trends of the postsecular turn in Turkey was the shift in official discourse from secular statehood to the use of Islamic narratives as a source of legitimacy and identity. This shift was accompanied by the active politicisation of religion, where Islam was viewed not merely as part of cultural heritage but as the foundation of a renewed national mission. President Erdoğan's public speeches increasingly included references to religious symbols, verses from the Qur'an, and examples from the life of the Prophet Muhammad (IQNA, 2020). In official political discourse, the state was increasingly sacralised as the "protector of Muslim peoples" on a global scale (Turkey's

Erdogan calls..., 2024). In this way, Turkey sought to reclaim its status as a centre of the Islamic world, drawing on the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire (Barkey, 2018).

In this context, the institutional reconfiguration of the Diyanet played a significant role. Whereas in the Kemalist era the institution primarily fulfilled administrative functions, its status changed considerably in the twenty-first century. The Diyanet received substantial state funding, and its powers expanded in both domestic and foreign policy spheres. It came to serve as the state's "moral vanguard", promoting religiously conservative values – particularly through religious education,

media, international conferences, and cultural diplomacy. Through its network of imams, mosques, and educational programmes, the Diyanet extended Turkey's influence among Muslim communities in Europe, the Balkans, Central Asia, and Africa. In this way, religion became a tool of soft power, complementing official diplomacy and economic cooperation (Taş, 2022). Turkish foreign policy in the postsecular era increasingly relied on religious narratives. During the Arab Spring (Table 1), Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan actively sought to position itself as a regional leader and model for post-revolutionary transformations.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of Arab Spring protest movements (2010–2012): structural factors, religious rhetoric, and regime transformations

Country	Timeline of protests	Structural conditions	Forms of political activity	Role of religion in protest discourse	Outcomes for the political regime
Tunisia	December 2010 – January 2011	Economic stagnation, authoritarianism, political corruption	Mass demonstrations, strikes, digital mobilisation	Secular discourse, rising Islamist influence after regime collapse	Fall of Ben Ali, democratisation, new constitution
Egypt	January – February 2011	Authoritarianism, police state, social inequality	Protests in Tahrir Square, strikes, grassroots mobilisation	Combined secular-liberal and Islamist discourses (Muslim Brotherhood)	Fall of Mubarak, democratic elections, followed by a military coup
Libya	February – October 2011	Totalitarianism, a clan-based system, absence of political institutions	Armed uprising, guerrilla warfare, formation of the Transitional Council	Initially weak religious rhetoric, later growing influence of Islamist organisations	Fall of Gaddafi, state collapse, armed chaos
Syria	March 2011 – 2012 (beginning of civil war)	Authoritarianism, sectarian tension, secret service control	Initially peaceful protests, later armed resistance	Radicalisation of Sunni opposition, sectarian mobilisation by the regime (Alawites, Shiites)	Armed conflict, regime delegitimised among parts of the population
Yemen	January 2011 – February 2012	Tribal fragmentation, poverty, weak state institutions	Mass demonstrations, protests in Sana'a, armed clashes	Rise of Shiite religious discourse (Houthis)	Resignation of Saleh, outbreak of civil war
Bahrain	February – March 2011	Sunni minority dominance, discrimination against the Shiite majority	Protests in Pearl Square, strikes, petition campaigns	Clearly Shiite protest discourse, the Sunni monarchy's response	Suppression of protests, restoration of monarchical control

Source: developed by the author based on analytical research by Y. Katz (2025)

The Turkish leadership – represented by the government led by the Justice and Development Party (AK Parti), President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (parliament) – proposed a model of "Islamic democracy" (Ataman, 2023) as an alternative both to authoritarian secular regimes, such as Hosni Mubarak's in Egypt or Bashar al-Assad's in Syria, and to radical Islamist movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Ansar al-Sharia, and Jabhat al-Nusra. The core of this model lies in combining moderate Islamic values with democratic principles and political institutions, offering a third path distinct from both secular authoritarianism and religious extremism.

The model envisaged the integration of Islamic ethical and moral frameworks into the political sphere, without rejecting the principles of democracy, electoral governance, transparency, economic liberalism, and integration into the global community. The Turkish model of Islamic democracy placed political pluralism and regular elections at its centre, involving parties with Islamic orientations that accepted democratic norms, peaceful transitions of power, and open political competition. While Islamic values served as a source of political legitimacy, they did not contradict the secular organisation of the state. Rather, they provided a moral foundation for a political agenda focused on social justice, ethical conduct, and anti-corruption efforts (Ataman, 2023).

In addition, the Turkish model encompassed economic growth driven by liberal economic reforms, the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, the attraction of foreign investment, and the parallel application of Islamic economic principles such as zakat (mandatory charitable giving) and support for small and medium-sized enterprises. An important dimension of this model was also social stability, achieved through a synthesis of traditional Islamic values – particularly respect for family, community, and moral guidance – with the broader modernisation of Turkish society (Yağci, 2017).

The integration of Islam and democracy in the Turkish model was implemented through several mechanisms. The first was political institutionalisation, whereby the Justice and Development Party employed democratic procedures – such as regular parliamentary elections, referendums, and local elections – while drawing on Islamic values as a source of mobilisation and political support. Another mechanism involved the active use of Islamic symbolism, rhetoric, and moral principles by the president and government, while simultaneously emphasising the importance of maintaining the secular nature of state institutions and adhering to democratic procedures and constitutional norms. Education and culture also played a key role in this model, serving as channels for promoting

Islamic values without directly undermining the secular framework of state legislation. The role of religious educational institutions (imam-hatip schools) was notably strengthened, forming a new social base for the Justice and Development Party and fostering the convergence of Islamic ideals and democratic values among the younger generation. Another mechanism was foreign policy, in which the Turkish leadership actively employed the concept of “Islamic democracy” as a tool of soft power in its engagement with countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Gumuscu, 2023).

Following the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in 2011, Erdoğan visited Cairo, where he addressed students, politicians and civil society representatives, emphasising the importance of democracy, the rule of law, and religious freedom (Turkey’s PM rallies..., 2011). Turkey’s support for Egypt’s transitional government and later for the Islamist administration of Mohamed Morsi was perceived by both allies and adversaries as a strategic attempt by Ankara to expand its influence in the region. In particular, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – both of which viewed the Muslim Brotherhood with suspicion. After Morsi was deposed in 2013, these countries provided substantial financial assistance to the new Egyptian government, signalling their rejection of Turkey’s policy in Egypt. Furthermore, relations between the Egyptian and Turkish governments became increasingly strained following Morsi’s removal.

The Turkish government, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, openly criticised the actions of the Egyptian military, describing them as “anti-democratic” and as acts of “mass murder”. This led to diplomatic tensions, including the mutual withdrawal of ambassadors and a deterioration in bilateral relations (Mugurtay & Muftuler-Bac, 2023). In Libya, Tunisia and Syria, Turkey pursued an active regional policy aimed at enhancing its influence through diplomatic support, humanitarian engagement, and cooperation with opposition forces. In Libya, Turkey played an active role during the 2011 civil conflict. In April of that year, the Turkish government organised a large-scale humanitarian operation to evacuate wounded civilians from the besieged city of Misrata. A repurposed ferry equipped with medical personnel was deployed to transport the injured and their escorts. The operation was accompanied by twelve F-16 fighter jets and a military frigate, indicating a high level of coordination between humanitarian efforts and military presence. This action reflected not only Turkey’s commitment to humanitarian mediation but also its interest in shaping a new political order in Libya, in which it sought to play an influential role (Kachiar 2020).

In Tunisia, following the fall of the Ben Ali regime, Turkey emerged as one of the country’s key partners during its democratic transition. In September 2011, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid an official visit to Tunisia, expressing support for democratic reforms and pledging both financial and technical assistance. Turkey also supported the Ennahda Movement (an-Nahda), which shared ideological affinities with the Turkish Justice and Development Party (Yavuz, 2020).

In Syria, Ankara’s position was particularly pronounced. From the very outset of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the Turkish government adopted a firm stance against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Turkey called for

Assad’s resignation, provided support to the Syrian opposition, and hosted numerous opposition gatherings on its territory, including the June 2011 conference in Antalya, which contributed to the formation of the Syrian National Council. In addition, Turkey was one of the principal humanitarian donors for Syrian refugees, offering shelter, medical assistance, and infrastructural support. This policy reflected Turkey’s attempt not only to influence the course of the conflict but also to reinforce its position as a leading regional actor capable of shaping a new Middle Eastern order (Karaca & Köksal 2022).

As part of its soft power strategy, Turkey significantly transformed its education policy, particularly by expanding its religious component. This was especially evident in the rapid growth of imam-hatip schools after 2012 and the prioritised funding of these institutions. In 2024, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) received a substantial extension of its powers, enabling it to consolidate its role in both domestic and foreign policy. This expansion primarily concerned financial resources, which came to exceed the budgets of many other government agencies. Owing to this increased funding, Diyanet was able to significantly enlarge its workforce, including imams, religious advisers, and staff at educational institutions, thus allowing it to take an active role in regulating the country’s religious sphere. In addition to its domestic influence, the Diyanet was granted the authority to expand its international activities by establishing a network of religious attachés, imams, and cultural centres beyond Turkey’s borders. This network extended across Europe, North America, and the Middle East, serving not only as a provider of spiritual guidance to the Turkish diaspora but also as a tool of cultural diplomacy. In this way, the Diyanet contributed to the implementation of Turkey’s foreign policy strategy by promoting its model of Islam and strengthening the country’s soft power. At the same time, the Diyanet was empowered to influence Turkey’s educational policy. The organisation played a role in shaping the religious components of school curricula, particularly in imam-hatip schools, which had become a key part of the national education system. This allowed for the integration of Islamic moral principles into the educational process while maintaining the formally secular character of state institutions. The Diyanet also cooperated with government bodies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the intelligence services, overseeing the training and deployment of religious personnel engaged in tasks related to national security and foreign policy (Turkey century education..., 2024). Altogether, this reflects the growing role of Islam in Turkey’s educational and social life – an evolution closely linked to the ideological orientation of the ruling party and its ambition to shape a “pious generation” (Öztürk, 2023).

The instrumentalisation of religion in foreign policy was closely intertwined with domestic political processes. In Turkey, particularly following the 2017 constitutional amendments (Turkey Unofficial Translation... 2017), power became increasingly concentrated in the hands of the president, reinforcing the personalisation of the political regime. As a result of the April 2017 referendum, Turkey transitioned from a parliamentary to a presidential system of governance. The constitutional reform abolished

the position of prime minister and transferred executive authority to the president. The head of state was granted the right to unilaterally appoint ministers, senior officials, and vice-presidents without parliamentary approval. In addition, the president acquired the power to issue executive decrees with the force of law within the executive domain, as well as influence the judiciary through appointments to the Council of Judges and Prosecutors. The reform also allowed the president to retain political party affiliation, further merging executive authority with the ruling party. During the campaign for the 2017 constitutional reform, the Turkish government systematically employed religious narratives to consolidate support for the presidential system. Standardised Friday khutbahs were delivered in mosques across the country, in which imams described a “yes” vote as a moral obligation for Muslims and a guarantee of unity within the ummah. A group of Istanbul imams, dressed in official robes, recorded a video message urging support for the reform, thereby transforming spiritual authority into a direct political resource (Group of imams..., 2017). Pro-government media widely disseminated this fatwa alongside footage of joint prayers, sacralising the upcoming vote and equating political loyalty with piety. At rallies and on billboards, the slogan “Evet” was displayed alongside Islamic symbols and calls to “protect the faith from discord”, which heightened the emotional mobilisation of the conservative electorate. Collectively, these measures transformed religion into a structural tool of domestic mobilisation, reinforcing the legitimacy of the government while marginalising the secular opposition as a threat to both spiritual and national order (Yabancı, 2022).

At the same time, religious rhetoric in foreign policy was neither universal nor homogeneous. Its interpretation and application varied depending on geopolitical context, strategic interests, and the target audience. For instance, in relations with European Union countries, Turkish diplomacy emphasised the rights of Muslim minorities and the fight against Islamophobia, whereas in dealings with African states, the dominant discourse centred on a shared spiritual heritage (Onay, 2024). In Central Asia, where Islam has historically been associated with Sufism and ethno-cultural identity, Turkey consistently portrayed itself as the heir to a Turkic-Islamic civilisation, using this narrative as part of its soft power strategy. This approach was actively reflected in the rhetoric of political leaders, the activities of official institutions, cultural and religious initiatives, as well as in the media sphere. At the Samarkand Summit of Turkic States in 2022, the Turkish president stated: “The shared history, language, religion and culture of the Turkic peoples form the foundation of our unity from Anatolia to Central Asia” (Declaration of the 9th Summit..., 2022). Such declarations underscored Turkey’s historical role as the centre of Turkic-Islamic civilisation while simultaneously reinforcing its cultural influence in the region. Of particular importance was the activity of the Diyanet, which organised joint religious conferences, seminars, and training programmes with Central Asian countries (Kubicek, 2023).

Turkey’s postsecular policy was not without its risks. A growing reliance on religious discourse led to tensions with Western partners and neighbouring Muslim-majority states. Following the ousting of the Morsi government in

2013, Ankara recalled its ambassador from Cairo and described the coup as a violation of the will of the umma, which deepened the rift with Egypt. In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a blockade on Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorist organisations, interfering in the domestic affairs of neighbouring states, and maintaining close ties with Iran. In response, Turkey deployed a military contingent to Doha, invoking the defence of Muslim solidarity, which provoked a strong backlash from its regional allies (Miller 2024). On 2 October 2018, journalist Jamal Khashoggi was killed at the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul. In its Friday khutbahs, the Diyanet described the incident as a grave sin against Islamic principles, further intensifying tensions with Riyadh (Jasim & Hasan 2022). The active promotion of Islamic values also drew criticism from secular forces within Turkey, deepening internal political divisions (Baudner, 2021).

In conclusion, the case of Turkey clearly demonstrated that the postsecular turn in foreign policy was not merely about the return of religion, but reflected a deeper transformation in the role of the state, strategies of legitimisation, and conceptions of the international order. Religion became not only a symbolic resource, but also a material instrument of influence – channelled through institutions, diplomatic initiatives, cultural programmes, and economic projects. The Turkish experience revealed the potential of religion as a source of soft power, while also exposing its vulnerability to political instrumentalisation and its potential to fuel conflict. In this regard, a postsecular foreign policy required not only strategic flexibility but also ethical responsibility towards a global audience.

The postsecular transformation of Syria: from secular nationalism to sectarian authoritarianism.

The society of the Syrian Arab Republic in the 1970s was characterised by considerable sectarian diversity. By the late 1960s to early 1970s, Sunni Muslims made up approximately 70%-75% of Syria’s population (around 6.5-7 million people), Alawites 10%-12% (11.2 million), Christians (including Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant denominations) 8%-10% (0.8-0.9 million), Druze 3%-4% (0.3-0.4 million), Ismailis around 2% (0.15-0.2 million), and other minorities (such as Twelver Shi’ites, Samaritans, etc.) less than 1%. Sectarian settlement patterns displayed marked regional differentiation (notably in Hama, Idlib, Latakia, and Daraa), which intensified local inter-communal tensions – particularly during the agrarian reforms and political centralisation of the 1970s and 1980s. These demographic proportions shaped the country’s sociopolitical dynamics, where even minor shifts could provoke conflicts over trust and power (Collelo, 1988). Following the rise to power of Hafez al-Assad in 1970, a member of the Alawite minority, Alawite representation within state structures – especially the military and security services – grew significantly. This development provoked concern among the Sunni majority, which perceived it as a threat to its traditional position in society. In 1973, a new constitution (Constitution of Syrian Arab Republic, 1973), which did not require the president to be a Muslim, sparked mass protests, particularly in the cities of Hama, Homs, and Aleppo (Lakitsch, 2017). Protesters accused Assad of undermining the role of Islam in state governance and demanded amendments to the constitution.

In response, the government suppressed the demonstrations but ultimately agreed to include a provision requiring that the president be a Muslim. This period highlighted the tension between the regime's official secularism and the deep religious sentiments of a significant portion of the population, which later contributed to the rise of Islamist opposition and armed conflict in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Hafez al-Assad's son, Bashar, who assumed power in 2000, continued this approach, cultivating an image of a progressive, technocratic, and modernising leader committed to the principles of a secular state.

However, following the outbreak of mass protests in 2011, which escalated into a full-scale civil war, Bashar al-Assad began presenting himself as a defender of religious minorities – primarily the Alawites – and intensified cooperation with Shi'a allies, namely Iran and Hezbollah (Zavada, 2021). This sectarian mobilisation marked a shift in the basis of state legitimacy from a secular ideology to religious affiliations, fundamentally altering both political discourse and everyday sectarian dynamics. Over time, the state's discursive orientation moved from secular nationalism towards sectarian mobilisation centred on Shi'a religious identity. Within this transformation, religion was strategically employed as a tool of domestic mobilisation, international legitimisation, geopolitical alliance-building, and ideological struggle. This shift can be characterised as a postsecular turn, accompanied by the deep erosion of the traditional ideology of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party and the pragmatic instrumentalisation of religion in the context of hybrid conflict. The Ba'ath Party's ideology was historically founded on the principles of Arab nationalism (Jaber, 2024), secularism, and socialist reformism, with an emphasis on unifying the Arab world within a modern secular state. Within this framework, religion was regarded as a private matter, not to interfere with political governance or state policy. It was this secular foundation of statehood that gradually became devalued in response to an internal legitimacy crisis and external geopolitical challenges.

By 2011, the regime of Bashar al-Assad – like that of his predecessor and father, Hafez al-Assad – relied on a model of multi-confessional statehood, which formally declared the secular nature of authority, while simultaneously maintaining the effective monopoly of the Alawite minority over key positions of power. The Alawites, comprising approximately 10%-12% of Syria's population, had historically been a socially marginalised community. However, following the rise of the Ba'ath Party and the consolidation of control over military and security institutions, they gradually emerged as the regime's main pillar of support (Gilbert & Chiego, 2025).

The state deliberately shaped a secular public sphere in which religion was pushed to the periphery of political life. The education system was grounded in humanist and nationalist principles; religious subjects were taught in a formalised and carefully limited manner, and clerical involvement in governmental politics was minimised. Despite the preservation of the religious identity of the Muslim majority, particularly the Sunni population, their political activity was strictly limited within the framework of the Ba'athist model of statehood. The Syrian authorities exercised systematic control over the religious sphere through the Ministry of Awqaf, which centrally

appointed imams (AlKassir, 2018), regulated the content of sermons, and coordinated the activities of mosques. These institutions were subject to constant surveillance by the security services, and any attempt to use religious authority in a political context was regarded as a threat to the regime. A key example of this was the government's campaign in the 1980s, when, following the armed uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama, the authorities not only brutally suppressed the movement but also imposed additional restrictions on Islamic preaching. This included heightened censorship in mosques and expanded operational oversight of religious groups. Independent religious educational institutions were either closed down or integrated into the official system of supervision, while charitable foundations with potential for political mobilisation faced systematic pressure or were dissolved. Despite the formal presence of Islam in social life, the influence of religious communities on political processes was effectively neutralised by a repressive-bureaucratic apparatus. Sunni religious leaders, particularly among the ulema, were largely relegated to a symbolic role and maintained loyalty to the state (Ukenov, 2021).

The regime also maintained a delicate balance among confessional communities – Christians, Druze, Shi'a, and Sunnis – aiming to prevent religious polarisation. This represented a strategic element of Syria's secular model: the regime's legitimacy rested on preserving interconfessional equilibrium, with the state acting as a guarantor of peace and coexistence within a potentially volatile religious landscape. This model allowed Assad to position himself as a stabilising force in the region, particularly in contrast to sectarian tensions in neighbouring Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine (Hassan, 2020).

In its foreign policy, Syria actively promoted anti-imperialist rhetoric, consistently opposing Western hegemony – especially that of the USA and Israel – and supporting the Palestinian cause (Ajl, 2024). The religious dimension of diplomacy was marginalised. Syria projected an image of itself as a stronghold of "Arab dignity", a nation resisting Zionism, imperialism, and the West's neo-colonial ambitions. In international institutions, Syrian diplomats predominantly employed the language of national liberation, social justice, and Arab solidarity, deliberately avoiding confessional or religious rhetoric. This approach aligned with the ideological stance of the Ba'ath Party, which, since its founding in the 1940s, had advocated the creation of a united, secular, and progressive Arab world.

Thus, by the time the Syrian conflict erupted in 2011, the Assad regime had maintained a distinctly secular profile in both domestic and foreign policy, using religious neutrality as a tool of control, legitimisation, and stability within a complex confessional demographic. The postsecular transformation that unfolded following the outbreak of the war marked a radical departure from the previous model, reflecting not only a change in the regime's tools of governance but also a shift in the overall logic of its legitimisation strategy. In the early phase of the conflict (2011 to early 2012), peaceful protests against Assad's authoritarian rule gradually escalated into an active phase as a result of state repression. The first casualties, the flight of activists, and the growing public discontent laid the foundations for a protest identity primarily directed against

Alawite dominance within state institutions. At the same time, this period revealed that, despite the regime's formal secularism, confessional affiliation was beginning to play a significant role in the politicisation of society.

As the conflict progressed, the situation changed. The opposition movement, made up largely of Sunnis, quickly acquired a religious character – partly due to the Islamisation of protest discourse, and partly because of the influence of Islamist and jihadist groups. In response, the regime began mobilising the Alawite community, portraying itself as the protector of religious minorities and a bulwark against Sunni extremism. Within this context, religion acquired an ideological function, becoming the basis for a new legitimisation strategy that positioned the “moderate” state in opposition to religious radicalism.

Between 2012 and 2013, the conflict escalated dramatically. The opposition – by then no longer limited to peaceful movements but also represented by the Free Syrian Army and more radical factions – increasingly appealed to the Sunni majority. Sectarian polarisation deepened, and the mass migration of the population to neighbouring countries marked the first clear sign of a looming humanitarian catastrophe. At this stage, Iran began to provide more systematic support to Assad, signalling the emergence of early mechanisms of external Shia intervention in the Syrian conflict.

Although the Alawites had traditionally not identified with orthodox Shiism, their religious worldview – incorporating elements of Isma'ilism, Gnosticism, Sufism, and even pre-Christian traditions – remained marginal within mainstream Islamic theology. By the second half of the 2010s, the official discourse in Damascus increasingly echoed the semantics of Iran's Shia “Axis of Resistance”, indicating a gradual ideological convergence between Syria's Alawite elite and the dominant religio-political narratives promoted in Tehran. This process culminated in the unannounced visit of President Bashar al-Assad to Tehran on 25 February 2019, during which the Syrian leader publicly thanked Iran for its “sacrificial support” and described Iran and Syria as sharing a “mutual strategic depth”, essential for the forces of “resistance” in the Middle East (Syrian president meets..., 2019). At the parliamentary level, similar rhetoric was voiced on 30 April 2018, when the Speaker of the People's Council, Hammouda Sabbagh, during a meeting with Alaeddin Boroujerdi, the head of the Iranian Majlis Foreign Policy Committee, emphasised that “failure of the recent aggression underscores the solidity of the resistance axis and counterterrorism”, and that Syria and Iran remain “partners in achieving victories against terrorism” (President al-Assad..., 2018). The political alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran contributed not only to military cooperation but also to a doctrinal rethinking of the Syrian regime's religious identity. Geopolitically, the key element of Syria's postsecular turn was not limited to its military partnership with Iran but also encompassed the adoption of Iran's religio-political paradigm, which regarded religion as a tool of mobilisation, legitimisation, and strategic communication.

The subsequent period, 2014–2015, witnessed a critical weakening of central authority and the rapid rise of ISIS, which employed a radical Salafist ideology to seize territory in Syria and Iraq. The genocide of minorities

(notably the Yazidis) and the violence in Raqqa and Mosul perpetrated by ISIS underscored the extent to which the conflict had become rooted in the religious sphere. These events accelerated international intervention – namely, the formation of a US-led coalition against ISIS – and marked the globalisation of the Syrian war.

Iran gradually assumed an increasingly active role not only as Syria's military ally but also as its ideological patron, promoting a model of “revolutionary Shiism” as an ideology of resistance against the West and Sunni monarchies. After 2013, Iran expanded its support for Shia religious institutions in Syria by funding Ja'fari-oriented madrasas and mosques through organisations such as AlMustazafin and the Imam Khomeini Foundation. This facilitated the dissemination of Shia theology and the unification of religious rituals (Saeidi & Mohammadpour, 2024). Shia paramilitary groups, particularly Lebanon's Hezbollah, acted not only as military allies of the regime but also as carriers of spiritual and political solidarity. Their involvement in the conflict bolstered the government's military position and helped legitimise the regime among Shia communities across the region. Alongside other Shia militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, they contributed to framing Syria as a bastion of Shia geopolitics (Bagheri *et al.*, 2022). A decisive turning point came with Russia's intervention in 2015–2016, which provided aerial support to government forces, notably during the battles for Aleppo. This intervention helped shape the regime's propaganda narrative of a “holy war” against terrorism, with an emphasis on Shia symbols of resistance. As a result, the confessional dimension of the conflict deepened, while harsh military actions became more widely legitimised (Bagheri *et al.*, 2022; Saeidi & Mohammadpour, 2024).

In interviews, President Assad stressed Syria's role as the last stronghold of secularism in the Middle East, citing the Alawite community's religious tolerance and its protection of Christians, Jews, and Druze (Interview With Syrian..., 2011). Thus, religious rhetoric was paradoxically intertwined with a secular façade, producing a hybrid narrative in which religion functioned not as a doctrinal foundation but as a political resource. In 2017–2018, government forces, supported by Russia and Iran, regained control over major cities. This was accompanied by an increased role for Shia religious institutions in the reconstruction and “ideological rehabilitation” of the reclaimed regions. Amid the partial return of refugees, complaints emerged about worsening living conditions, while the country effectively became fragmented into several spheres of influence: government-controlled, Kurdish-administered, and opposition-Islamist (Idlib).

Thus, Syria's postsecular policy contributed to the transformation of the conflict from a political to a confessional one. The period from 2021 to 2023 was marked by the regime's gradual regional rehabilitation, including the normalisation of relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. At the same time, the institutionalisation of Shia influence indicated the consolidation of religious legitimisation of power, occurring alongside a deteriorating humanitarian situation (with over 13 million people in need of assistance). The regime attempted to re-engage in regional politics; however, the stagnation of reforms highlighted that core contradictions remained unresolved.

The post-secular transformation of Syrian foreign policy revealed both the potential and the risks of incorporating religion into international relations. On the one hand, it enabled the Assad regime to maintain strategic alliances, develop morally framed rhetoric, and strengthen its position in the information war. On the other hand, this approach complicated diplomatic settlement efforts, intensified internal polarisation, and turned religion into a tool of conflict rather than reconciliation. The Syrian experience demonstrated that employing religion as a political resource in a context of conflict has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond purely ideological boundaries.

In conclusion, post-2011 Syria became an example of profound postsecular transformation, in which religion shifted from a marginal element of politics to its central component. This transformation entailed a transition from secular nationalism to confessional authoritarianism, where religious discourse served as a tool for regime survival, mobilisation, and international positioning. The postsecular era in Syria demonstrated that, although religion was not the sole cause of the conflict, it became the core framework through which the war unfolded and the future of regional order was shaped.

Discussion

The study has found that the postsecular turn contributed to a transformation in the role of religion within states' foreign policy strategies. The findings revealed that religious discourse no longer served merely a symbolic function, but was integrated into political practice as a resource for legitimisation and mobilisation. In the case of Turkey, religion was employed to strengthen its international image through the concept of "Islamic democracy", to promote the values of the umma, and to revitalise cultural diplomacy. Notably, the role of the Diyanet was transformed from an administrative body into a strategic one, enabling the state to utilise religious institutions in support of its foreign policy objectives.

In the case of Syria, post-secular rhetoric emerged within the context of civil war and confessional mobilisation. The Bashar al-Assad regime gradually abandoned secular rhetoric in favour of a confessional Shia identity, shaped both by domestic political challenges and a strategic alliance with Iran. In this context, religion became a tool of survival rather than intercultural communication. The geopolitical discourse that accompanied this religious positioning allowed the regime to legitimise international alliances and to tighten its control over information flows.

A causal analysis indicated that the divergent outcomes of the postsecular turn in Turkey and Syria were shaped by differences in the nature of their political regimes, the degree of institutionalisation of religion, the confessional structure of society, and the character of foreign policy challenges. In Turkey, religion was integrated into foreign policy as a tool of cultural diplomacy and an element of international self-identification. This process was accompanied by the increased use of religious language in humanitarian initiatives, diaspora policy, and bilateral relations with Muslim-majority countries. Here, post-secular discourse took the form of an open, public articulation of religious symbols within the broader framework of global soft power. In contrast, in Syria, religious

rhetoric was adapted as a tool of domestic consolidation and foreign policy mobilisation in the context of a legitimacy crisis. Postsecularity assumed a confessional Shia dimension and became an integral part of the regime's survival strategy amid hybrid conflict.

L. Fraszka (2023) analysed the phenomenon of religious diplomacy in the Republic of Turkey, focusing on the evolving role of the Diyanet and the transformation of Turkey's foreign policy under the influence of religious factors. His study emphasised the institutional dimension of religious expansion, particularly through cultural, educational, and humanitarian projects implemented abroad. The present research expanded upon this aspect by incorporating a comparative analysis of the Syrian case, thereby enabling the consideration of a broader range of post-secular strategies and forms of religious engagement in foreign policy discourse. L. Fraszka (2023) focused primarily on the European context of Turkey's religious diplomacy, where instruments of soft power predominated. By contrast, the present study incorporated aspects of geopolitical competition, conflict, and transnational mobilisation, shifting the emphasis to crisis regions in the Middle East. Furthermore, Fraszka's analysis treated religion mainly as a means of cultural influence and narrative promotion within the European environment, whereas this research approached it as a multifaceted resource – not only of soft power but also as a tool for regime legitimisation, opposition suppression, and the construction of ideological identity under conditions of postsecular pressure and domestic political struggle.

Unlike the study by F. Huda (2023), which focused largely on the domestic dimension of Syria's confessional regime, the present study examined religion as a foreign policy factor shaping Syria's postsecular discourse in the international arena. F. Huda interpreted the religiosity of Bashar al-Assad's regime as an instrument of authoritarian internal control, aimed at preserving Alawite identity and maintaining the country's confessional balance. In contrast, this study presented religion as a dynamic diplomatic resource encompassing religious-cultural symbolism, confessional mobilisation, and the sacralisation of the state narrative in the external sphere – thus significantly broadening the analytical scope. While Huda's emphasis on the internal aspects of confessional authoritarianism allowed him to outline the mechanisms of political legitimisation through religious identity and confessional alliances, the present research concentrated on the foreign policy potential of religion and its geopolitical projections. This included a comparative analysis with the Turkish case, which made it possible to outline a broader range of post-secular strategies extending beyond the domestic dimension. In this context, typological models of the use of religion in foreign policy were proposed. These included: the confessional-defensive model, characteristic of Syria, in which religious discourse legitimised the government as a protector of religious minorities and traditional pluralism, thereby reinforcing strategic alliances with Shi'a-majority countries; the ideologised religious diplomacy, partially adopted by the Syrian leadership through cooperation with Hezbollah and Iran; and the mobilisational-integrative model, identified in the Turkish case, where religion functioned as a component of soft power and a tool for the external legitimisation of Islamist-oriented partners.

İ. Gözaydın (2021) analysed the role of religion in Turkey's international relations, focusing on the transformation of foreign policy following the shift in ideological priorities after the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party. His study highlighted how religious rhetoric became a diplomatic instrument, particularly in relations with Muslim-majority countries and in the context of diaspora policy. The present research devoted greater attention to the postsecular dimension of this process, particularly by analysing religion as a form of soft power, a symbolic resource, and a means of legitimisation in the context of a global shift towards rethinking the role of religion in politics. The typological distinctions revealed in comparison with İ. Gözaydın's study primarily concerned the orientation, scope, and institutional configuration of religious diplomacy within the foreign policies of the authoritarian Syrian and semi-authoritarian Turkish regimes. İ. Gözaydın (2021) demonstrates that, in Turkey, religion functioned as an integrative and expansive tool of soft power, aimed at strengthening influence among Muslim communities beyond the country's borders. In contrast, in Syria, religion served a defensive and confessional-mobilisational function, used to legitimise the regime through rhetoric centred on the protection of religious minorities (Alawites, Christians, and Druze) and the construction of alliances along the Shi'a geopolitical axis. Furthermore, while İ. Gözaydın primarily viewed religion as a component of Turkey's internal transformation of its foreign policy identity, the present study situates it within a postsecular context, framing it as a global condition influencing changes in the international order.

Compared with the findings of A.E. Ozturk (2021), this study identified differences not only in theoretical approaches but also in the empirical interpretation of religion as a foreign policy instrument in Turkey. Ozturk observed that religious soft power, particularly the activities of the Diyanet, exhibited a distinctly ambivalent nature: on the one hand, it operated as a channel of cultural influence; on the other, it acted as a mechanism of authoritarian mobilisation and ideological control, especially over the Turkish diaspora in European countries. In the present analysis, religious diplomacy was examined not merely through the activities of specific institutions but primarily as a component of a transnational political strategy in the context of the Arab Spring. This approach enabled a broader exploration of the functions of the religious factor, which emerged not only as a tool of cultural expansion but also as a means of forming strategic alliances with political forces ideologically aligned with the Justice and Development Party. While A.E. Ozturk (2021) focused on the conservative shift in religious diplomacy and its declining effectiveness due to Turkey's internal authoritarian drift, the present study found that, in the context of post-Arab regional turbulence, Ankara's religious rhetoric adopted new elements aimed at supporting Islamist political movements in Libya, Syria, and Tunisia. In this context, the Diyanet and its affiliated structures did not function merely as representatives of Turkish culture in the traditional sense, but rather as partners of political forces engaged in regional transformation processes. Whereas

Ozturk's (2021) analysis centred on institutionally driven authoritarian mobilisation, primarily targeting the European sphere and the Turkish diaspora, the present study positions Turkish religious diplomacy as a multi-vector mechanism fulfilling several roles: identity construction, foreign policy influence, ideological partnership, and adaptation to the confessional landscape of the Middle East within a postsecular order.

This study concludes that religious discourse in the foreign policies of both Turkey and Syria served as a tool for international legitimisation, the mobilisation of allies, and the cultivation of symbolic leadership within the framework of a postsecular global order. Turkey actively employed religious narratives to enhance its cultural influence in Muslim regions, relying on soft power, whereas Syria, invoking sectarian divisions, built its rhetoric around the protection of religious minorities. This approach secured support from Shia partners and constructed an image of Syria as a guarantor of religious pluralism. In both cases, religion was not excluded from the public sphere; rather, it was deliberately integrated into foreign policy practices, functioning not as a component of public dialogue but as a tool for strategic positioning on the international stage. In this respect, the findings diverged significantly from the conclusions drawn by U. Parmaksız (2021), who viewed religious language as a challenge of normative adaptation to the public sphere within a post-secular democratic context. His research focused on the need for a falsifiability approach – that is, the capacity for religious expressions to be subjected to rational critique and debate within a framework of democratic pluralism. Religion, in this context, was understood as a communicative challenge for democratic societies, requiring a linguistic and philosophical method of analysis. The difference in research focus shaped the nature of the results obtained. While in U. Parmaksız's (2021) study, religion was conceptualised within the liberal-democratic tradition as a component of public discourse that must be rationalised and open to criticism, the present study regarded religion as an element of foreign policy strategy operating within a transnational space beyond the bounds of democratic communication standards. This approach made it possible to focus on the functional role of religious discourse in practices of international legitimisation, ally mobilisation, and confessional influence, providing Turkey and Syria with additional resources for strategic positioning within the postsecular order.

Thus, the postsecular turn contributed to a radical shift in the functions of religion within the foreign policy strategies of Turkey and Syria. In Turkey, religion became institutionalised as a tool of soft power, diplomatic influence, and cultural expansion, whereas in Syria, it was transformed into a mechanism of confessional mobilisation, regime legitimisation, and geopolitical positioning amid internal conflict. The typological models identified and the comparative analysis conducted confirmed that religion had ceased to function solely as a symbolic resource and had instead evolved into a multi-functional component of foreign policy. Depending on the political regime, international environment, and nature of identity, religious discourse assumed different forms – from the universalism of the ummah to instrumentalised sectarianism.

Conclusions

This study carried out a comprehensive analysis of the religious factor in foreign policy under conditions of the postsecular turn, allowing for the identification of fundamental changes in the interaction between religion and international relations. The novelty of the research lies in its integrated approach to studying religion, not merely as a symbolic asset but as a fully-fledged instrument of foreign policy strategy within the global arena. Particular attention was given to the cases of Turkey and Syria, which illustrated different types of institutionalisation of religion in international politics. The study identified politico-religious hybrids of legitimisation, sectarian mobilisation, and cultural diplomacy.

As part of the analysis of the Republic of Turkey, it was found that religion had been transformed into a strategic instrument of soft power and had become an integral element of foreign policy strategy. A state that had previously upheld a consistent secular model shifted its approach during the 2000s and 2010s in favour of the gradual reintegration of religion into both the public and international spheres. This was manifested through the institutional reconfiguration of the Diyanet, which was granted expanded authority in the field of cultural diplomacy, as well as through the politicisation of religious discourse, which was employed to construct a new national narrative. It was established that, through a network of humanitarian missions, educational initiatives, media platforms, and intergovernmental partnerships, Turkey sought to project the image of a state acting as the guardian of Muslim values and traditions. This foreign policy orientation was adapted to the regional context: in the Balkans, it emphasised a shared historical legacy; in Central Asia, Turkic-Islamic culture; and the Middle East, the solidarity of the ummah. In this context, religion fulfilled not only a rhetorical function but also a material and institutional one – through state programmes, cultural centres, educational institutions, and the funding of diaspora structures.

Regarding the Syrian Arab Republic, the study revealed a profound transformation of the role of religion under the conditions of protracted internal conflict and multilayered external pressure. Prior to 2011, the Syrian political model was based on secular nationalism, which ensured confessional balance and marginalised religious discourse in diplomacy. However, following the outbreak of civil war, religion became a critically important tool for maintaining power. As the secular ideology of the Ba'ath Party eroded, the regime of Bashar al-Assad shifted towards religious rhetoric, particularly of a Shi'a orientation, which enabled the formation of an ideological alliance with Iran and Hezbollah. This facilitated the mobilisation of supporters in government-controlled areas, the legitimisation of external intervention, and the establishment of a new, loyal religious infrastructure. At the same time, this policy direction deepened sectarian divisions, contributed to the radicalisation of the opposition, polarised society, and transformed the conflict from a political struggle into one defined by confessional and identity-based fault lines. In this context, religion functioned not as an instrument of dialogue but as a mechanism for the regime's self-preservation amid the loss of political legitimacy. Promising directions for further research include comparative analyses of religious diplomacy in democratic and authoritarian regimes, as well as the study of the influence of transnational religious actors on states' foreign policy strategies.

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