



KADİR HAS UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES DISCIPLINE AREA

**IRAN'S POLICY ON SYRIA IN THE POST-REVOLUTION  
ERA WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF DEFENSIVE REALISM**

BERKAN ÖZYER

SUPERVISOR: ASSOC. PROF. DR. A. SALİH BIÇAKÇI

MASTER'S THESIS

ISTANBUL, MARCH, 2019

**IRAN'S POLICY ON SYRIA IN THE POST-  
REVOLUTION ERA WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF  
DEFENSIVE REALISM**

BERKAN ÖZYER

SUPERVISOR: ASSOC. PROF. DR. A. SALİH BIÇAKÇI

MASTER'S THESIS


Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies of Kadir Has University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master's in the Discipline Area of Social Sciences and Humanities and under the Department of International Relations.

ISTANBUL, MARCH, 2019

I, BERKAN ÖZYER;

Hereby declare that this Master's Thesis is my own original work and that due references have been appropriately provided on all supporting literature and resources.

BERKAN ÖZYER



---

22.03.2019

## ACCEPTANCE AND APPROVAL

This work entitled **IRAN'S POLICY ON SYRIA IN THE POST-REVOLUTION ERA WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF DEFENSIVE REALISM** prepared by **BERKAN ÖZYER** has been judged to be successful at the defense exam held on **22.03.2019** and accepted by our jury as **MASTER'S THESIS**.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. A. Salih Bıçakçı (Advisor) Kadir Has University

Prof. Dr. Serhat Güvenç Kadir Has University

Assist. Prof. Dr. İbrahim Mazlum Marmara University

I certify that the above signatures belong to the faculty members named above.

Prof. Dr. Sinem Akgül Açıkmeşe

Dean

School of Graduate Studies

DATE OF APPROVAL: \_\_/\_\_/\_\_

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>ÖZET</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK</b> .....	<b>10</b>
1.1. Classical Realism .....	<b>11</b>
1.2. Structural Realism (Neorealism) .....	<b>13</b>
1.3. Offensive-Defensive Realism Distinction .....	<b>15</b>
1.4. Alliance .....	<b>22</b>
1.5. Alliance Theories .....	<b>23</b>
1.5.1. Balance of power .....	<b>23</b>
1.5.2. Balance of threat .....	<b>23</b>
1.5.3. Balance of interest .....	<b>25</b>
1.6 Brief Analysis of Iran's Syria Policy from Defensive Realism Perspective.....	<b>25</b>
<b>2. MAKING OF IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT AFTER THE REVOLUTION</b> .....	<b>34</b>
2.1. Brief Introduction on Agent-Structure Debate .....	<b>34</b>
2.2. Institutions and Structure in Iran's Foreign Policy Making.....	<b>36</b>
2.2.1. The Supreme Leader and the Office of Supreme Leader.....	<b>40</b>
2.2.2. The President.....	<b>41</b>
2.2.3. The Minister of Foreign Affairs .....	<b>42</b>
2.2.4. Supreme National Security Council.....	<b>43</b>
2.2.5. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps .....	<b>44</b>
2.3. The Prominent Actors in the Policy Making Process of Iranian Decision Makers and Effects on Policy Making Processes .....	<b>46</b>
2.3.1. The Supreme Leader .....	<b>47</b>
2.3.2. The Presidents .....	<b>49</b>
2.3.3. The IRGC And the Quds Force .....	<b>54</b>
<b>3. IRAN'S SYRIA POLICY</b> .....	<b>56</b>
3.1. Historical Background with Periodization.....	<b>56</b>
3.1.1. 1979-1982 The emergence of the Syrian-Iranian Axis .....	<b>58</b>
3.1.2. 1982-1985 The zenith and limits of Syrian-Iranian power .....	<b>61</b>
3.1.3. 1985-1988 Intra-alliance tensions and the consolidation of the Syrian-Iranian Axis .....	<b>64</b>
3.1.4. 1988-1997 Ups and Downs in the Alliance .....	<b>67</b>
3.1.5. 1997-2001 Return to the alliance .....	<b>71</b>
3.1.6. 2001-2011 Reinvigoration in the "Axis of Evil" World .....	<b>73</b>
<b>4. A CASE FOR DEFENSIVE REALISM: IRAN IN SYRIAN CIVIL WAR</b> .....	<b>77</b>
4.1. 2011-2014 Iran as the Invisible Hand in the War .....	<b>77</b>
4.2. 2014 Daesh Comes into Play .....	<b>85</b>
4.3. 2015 Russian Involvement and Open Engagement of IRGC .....	<b>91</b>
4.4. 2015-2017 Astana Talks and Daesh Attack in Tehran .....	<b>94</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>100</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>105</b>
<b>CURRICULUM VITAE (CV)</b> .....	<b>115</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table 1. Security decision-makers in Iran .....</b>	<b>39</b>
--	-----------



## ABSTRACT

ÖZYER, BERKAN. *IRAN'S POLICY ON SYRIA IN THE POST-REVOLUTION ERA WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF DEFENSIVE REALISM*, MASTER'S THESIS, Istanbul, 2019.

Since 1979, Iran and Syria have succeeded to maintain a very long-lasting alliance despite many changes in the regional and international order. For many, it was common religion and shared belief systems which provided a safe infrastructure to sustain this alliance. But instead this study argues that it was not assumingly-common belief system, but calculations of national interest and understanding of survival what helped this alliance to last until today. This study questions the basics and motivations behind Iranian foreign policy making and uses the defensive realism theory to explain such questions.

**Keywords:** Iran, Syria, Balance of Power, Defensive Realism, Iraq, Alliance

## ÖZET

ÖZYER, BERKAN. *DEFANSİF REALİZM BAĞLAMINDA İRAN'IN DEVRİM SONRASI DÖNEMDEKİ SURİYE POLİTİKASI*, YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ, İstanbul, 2019.

1979'dan bu yana, İran ve Suriye bölgesel ve uluslararası düzendeki pek çok değişikliğe rağmen uzun süreli bir ittifakı korumayı başardı. Birçoğu için ortam din ve inanç sistemleri bu ittifakın korunması için güvenli bir altyapı oluşturdu. Ama bunun yerine bu çalışma ortak sayılan inanç sistemleri değil ulusal çıkar hesaplamaları ve hayatta kalma anlayışlarının, bu ittifakın günümüze kadar ayakta kalmasını sağladığını öne sürüyor. Bu çalışma İran'ın dış politika yapımındaki temel noktaları ve motivasyonları sorguluyor ve defansif realizm teorisi ile bu soruları açıklamaya çalışıyor.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** İran, Suriye, Güç Dengesi, Defansif Realizm, Irak, İttifak, Çıkar



## INTRODUCTION

*“Na Ghaze na Lobnan, janam fedaye Iran”* (Neither Gaza nor Lebanon, My Life for Iran!). When protestors took the streets in various cities of Iran in late 2017, thousands were shouting this slogan. It was reminiscent of 2009 protests following the allegedly-fraudulent presidential election. And it alone proves on the one hand how domestic and foreign issues are intertwined with each other; on the other hand how misleading it can be when one comments on Iran without taking internal perceptions into account.

In December 2017, sudden protests erupted in the second-largest city of Iran, Mashhad, then each day new ones started in new cities. World was so surprised seeing those protests and critical slogans and was quick to declare a possible end of the regime. Actually, those protests were neither first nor new. Amid the events BBC Persia (2018) prepared a special article and showed the cities where protests were taking place, actually have been witnessing varying kinds of protests in the last six months. They were just seemed unrelated with each other. It was a clear reflection of people’s struggle with unemployment, infrastructure, environmental issues, corruption, mismanagement etc. and protestors were echoing and reflecting their daily struggles in a context which Iran was mostly mentioned in the world, i.e. its Middle East and Israel policies.

This slogan is also important because looking from outside of the country one can easily think that Iranians were showing a striking discontent with the foreign policy of Iran and can expect for a change in the foreign policy, even in the decision-making process of the country. Actually in January 2018, this was the case in the international media. But to give an idea, a poll conducted after the protests in mid 2018 (by The Center of International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland) showed that “Clear majorities also reject other complaints voiced by some protestors—that the military should spend much less on developing missiles, and that Iran’s current level of involvement in Iraq and Syria is not in Iran’s national interests” (Mohseni, Gallagher & Ramsay 2018: 24). Surely this does not mean the same acceptance also valid for the regime’s economic and internal policies. Conversely this is how the regime presents itself as capable and efficient and creates a balance between discontent on internal management

and satisfaction on foreign policies. Because the opposition on the public level is hard to miss when one has an eye within the country. For example, during my stay in Iran between July 2017 and February 2018 for language education, the criticism towards the management and the government was impossible to ignore. My direct conversation with people from different socio-economic background showed me a surprisingly clear and widespread opposition. I had the chance to meet with people and talk with them in Persian on their perceptions and comments for Iran's foreign policies and people's level of satisfaction in cities like Tehran, Kermanshah, Urmia, Tabriz, Sanandaj, Ahvaz, Qom, Yazd, Kashan, Dezful and more. Most of those cities have different ethnic majority and varying degrees of religiousness. Almost without exception those ordinary Iranians I talked with were so unhappy and disappointed with the way the country is being ruled, by the administration, corruption, unemployment etc. But on the other hand when it comes to foreign policy it was very common that people commented that they see their country as largely acceptable and preferable in comparison with the neighbors of Iran. Secondly they were seemed largely agreed that once Iran wouldn't fight with the threats abroad, they would have to fight with them within the country. Surely those personal observations alone don't mean anything scientifically. But it does give an idea how internal and external policies effect each other and with which perceptions the regime sustains its legitimacy or at least it tries to do so.

#### *Understanding the Syro-Iranian Alliance*

And since 2011 at the heart of the foreign policy of the country lies Syria. Since then Iran's uncompromising and continuous support for Damascus in the worst humanitarian crisis of the 21st century has been very controversial. This alliance, as Iranians call it "Axis of Resistance", has been explained on the basis of one single factor: common religion of ruling elites i.e. Shia, one of the two main schools of Islam. But actually, this over-simplification is far from explaining the rationale behind. Because despite over-simplifications on religion; historically, culturally, economically and politically these two countries have limited in common, even the religion itself. Iran where major population is Jafari Shia, Syria's ruling elite (and minority around 8-10 percent) believes in Nusayri Islam which was not even considered as part of Islam by Jafaris. Therefore once it is

accepted that common religion alone cannot explain the roots of this “axis”, another question arises, what is left then? To answer, one needs to go back to the year of 1979.

“*Imam amad!*” (The Imam has come) The oldest newspaper of Iran announced the return of Imam Khomeini on 1 February 1979 after 15 years in exile (Ettelaat 1979) with this headline in the front page. It was “a clear reference to the almost messianic reputation that Khomeini had assumed (and did little to discourage)” (Clawson & Rubin 2005: 93). Imam Ruhollah Khomeini, the most prominent figure of opposition to by then Iranian Shah regime, reached millions of Iranians with tapes of his sermons and speeches during his years in exile and at the end arrived to a completely new Iran ending the Shah regime in the country existed since 1925. After months of strikes and protests, Shah Reza left the country two weeks before “the Imam has come” and never returned.

The revolution became official with the referendum of constitution in December 1979. There Khomeini’s main political concept was accepted as the founding principle of Islamic Republic of Iran, i.e. *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist). This concept is founded on the religious belief of Twelve Imam Shia Islam which says the last Imam, *Mahdi* would return before the Day of Judgment. And as reflected in the constitution, “the sovereignty of the command [of God] and religious leadership of the community [of believers] in the Islamic Republic of Iran is the responsibility of the *faqih* who is just, pious, knowledgeable about his era, courageous, and a capable and efficient administrator” (IRI Cons. art. 5). This would guarantee him both a political and religious power in the new Iranian system.

The change in the political system in Iran quickly shocked the world. The former regime had friendly relations with the US and Israel. Even the Shah’s relation had deteriorated with the US following Shah’s decision to decrease oil supply due to the 1973 Arab–Israeli War and to support Arab front, the regime itself has never prioritized a threat to Israel. But with the Islamic Revolution, ideology and priorities quickly changed. Khomeini presented the new republic as the defender of the all Muslims and declared ambitions to spread the revolution to other Middle East countries. Now the republic was saying it was “neither West nor East” that they were looking to engage. And the break with the US

came when Iranian university students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in November 1979 and held American staff hostage. This was a response to American's decision to host Shah Reza who was suffering from disease. This directly reminded Iranians the times when the Americans supported 1953 Coup which toppled down the democratic prime minister of Iran after he nationalized oil revenues. At that time the Shah had left the country and he returned after the MI6-CIA orchestrated the coup. Stephen Kinzer in his work, *All the Shah's Men* (2003), gives a detailed account of the events and shows how fresh the memories of the coup are in Iranians' eyes.

It is important to highlight the year of 1979 was witnessing striking events in a striking speed. Arch enemies of the Middle East, Egypt and Israel signed a peace deal on 26 March. In November the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, Islam's holiest shrine was invaded by Islamic radicals as a direct threat to ruling Saudi family which saw the event as an Iranian Revolution related one. Lastly in December Iran's neighbor Afghanistan was invaded by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. All the events led to recalculation in the balance of power in the region. And in the following year Iran was invaded by its irredentist neighbor, Iraq who was aiming to take benefit from its weak position to annex oil rich regions of Iran. Unlike what was expected, Iran managed to show a surprising resistance to the invasion and in 1982 forced Iraqi forces to withdraw and started a counterattack. Meanwhile continuation of the war helped the new regime to consolidate itself internally and harshly eliminate opponents from different ideologies and fractions.

#### *Transformation of the Syrian political scene*

On the other hand, Syria was going through a completely different existential crisis. Internally the President Hafez Assad, leader of ruling Syrian Baath Party since 1970 failed to satisfy different fractions of the country. Opponents gradually took arms and did hit and run terror attacks to government officials. The armed opposition ended with a brutal fighting in the city of Hama but left many cities devastated. Syrian novelist Khaled Khalifa, in his book *In Praise of Hatred* (2008), writes how the life in the biggest city of Syria, Aleppo was turned upside down in this era: "Thus did the city that was once a twin of Vienna become a desolate place, peopled by frightened ghosts. The sons of the old

families had lost their influence and now grieved for the old world. They were forced to become in-laws of the sons of the countryside, joining them at backgammon, overlooking their crude ways.”

On external affairs, after Egypt reached a peace deal with Israel; Syria’s great power patron, the Soviets gradually distanced themselves from Damascus and Assad regime’s main ideological opponent in the region Iraqi Baath Party led by Saddam Hussein attacked Iran with the support of other Arab countries, Assad regime faced with a hard decision: either to bandwagon the Iraqi side (that is, join the stronger side against the threat) or support Iran to form a new alliance and thus a new balance of power. Assad chose the latter.

In 1988, eight year of the devastating war Khomeini was finally convinced to sign a ceasefire agreement with Iraq and he died in the following year. After him the second most important figure of the regime, Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, became the president and the Supreme Leader position was left to Ali Khamenei. The following era was the years of reconstruction and consolidation of the country, consequently some calls the era as the “Second Islamic Republic” (Clawson & Rubin 2005: 115) or “Iranian Thermidor” (Abrahamian 2008: 182).

#### *Iran and Syria in accordance with the changing global order*

In this era on international arena the bipolar system came to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union officially in 1991. Iraq, after its invasion of Kuwait in 1990, was defeated heavily by the US army in 1991 and was no longer a threatening power as much as before for Iranians. Rapid changes in both international and regional arena gave Syria and Iran options to maneuver. On the one hand Syria tried to create a new relation with the US participating a peace process with Israel and on the other hand Iran tried to set new diplomatic and economic relations with other countries. Subsequent presidents of Iran after Khomeini’s death, Hashemi Rafsanjani and his successor Mohammad Khatami were after *détente* policies but they both achieved limited success.

Consequently the Syrian-Iranian relations experienced many ups and downs throughout the 1990s but the course of events rapidly changed on 11 September 2011 with the multiple terror attacks in the US. This was followed by the US invasion of Afghanistan as part of its “war on terror”. Even Iran provided intelligence and strategic support to the US, it was shocked when Tehran regime was declared as a member of “Axis of Evil” by the President of the US George W. Bush. Syria was also added to this “axis” afterwards. But the changing tone on Syria surprised many since the son Assad became president in 2000 following his father’s death. Bashar Assad came to power with the promise of change and reforms in the country but quickly it was understood that he would fail to do so. Moreover, he would fail to form strong and lasting relation with any state in the region other than Iran.

Meanwhile Iranian public was disappointed when neither Rafsanjani nor Khatemi’s *détente* bear any economic fruit. This disappointment was partially the reason of the electoral win of the hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the presidential elections of 2005. He came to power in a very troubled era because Iran’s secret nuclear program was leaked to international media in 2002 and it was quickly followed by economic sanctions. The pressure and the dose of sanctions gradually increased and harmed the Iranian economy badly. Worsening situation needed a “reformist” face of the regime who could create a new tune in the relations with the West. This was provided by Hassan Rouhani who was selected president in 2013. He came to power with the promise of a nuclear deal to abolish economic sanctions. Presenting Rouhani as the leader of reformist wing can be seen as a successful diplomatic maneuver. Because Rouhani has been an important figure since the very early days of the Revolution and he was the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council from 1989 to 2005. Hence his ideology cannot be seen as very different than that of the Supreme Leader. But this presentation served Iran as a means to negotiate with the West because now the latter had to choose between reformist Rouhani and hardliner and uncompromising military wing.

#### *Civil war in Syria and changing positions*

On the other side of the Axis of Resistance, an opposition movement inspired by the so-called Arab Spring took the streets in March 2011 gradually turned into a brutal civil war

and a proxy war for both regional and global powers. Assad regime was caught isolated in the balance of power. Iraq turned into a failed state after the US invasion, a recent close ally Turkey turned its back to Assad and supported opposition in every possible way together with the Gulf countries, also taking the support of Europe and the US. On the ground Assad's only state ally was Iran while Russia and China were blocking sanction proposals in the United Nations Security Council.

Iran's position on Syrian Civil War also reflected the alleged bipolar structure in the internal politics. In the first years of the war Ahmadinejad openly asked for political reforms from Assad while the Iranian military wing saw the crisis as a direct threat to Iran's existence. When Rouhani became president, it was understood that the crisis would not be solved by political reforms anymore. Then Tehran positioned the political wings as the Rouhani government trying to achieve peace in diplomacy table and military wing which wouldn't take a step back from the idea of defeating opposition in the war arena. And at the end both tactics turned out to be working in harmony. Iran managed to provide Russia's first diplomatic and military support, to push Assad government's one of the main opponents in the region, Turkey, to change its policy on Syria. Moreover militarily Iran took benefit from its non-governmental armed actors such as Hizballah from Lebanon and Shia militias from Pakistan and Afghanistan. At the end after eight years of devastation Iran has the upper hand in the field and secured a position in diplomacy table where it was excluded in the first place. And Assad is still in power of his country, or at least what is left of it. But one has to ask, how can this long process of alliance be explained theoretically? Is there any chance to make a theoretical evolution and a generalization?

#### *Scope of the study and research questions*

This research intends to answer these questions by using one of major hypothesis of defensive realism: States are satisfied with *status quo* until their security is challenged. Then they concentrate on providing balance of threat. My main argument and focus is to analyze the decisions of foreign policy makers of Iran in the balance of power within the context of defensive realism. To look long-lasting policies I take Iran's policies specifically on Syria. The two countries have an exceptional alliance since the very first

days of the Iran Islamic Revolution in 1979. To highlight the historical roots of the alliance, turning points in the history of the alliance after the revolution is explained. But era-wise the main focus is on Iran's policies on Syria during the Syrian civil war which started in 2011.

The main reason I selected this era is that in both mainstream international media and academia the alliance is explained mainly on the basis of religion with over-simplified arguments. The shared religious belief between Iranian society and Syrian political elite is being used to explain the alliance. But as a person who visited both countries and lived for months in Iran, had connections with people from different parts of the countries, I found the focus on religion as insufficient to explain the alliance. Hence a theoretical context is used to understand the relation between two countries in the research.

As research questions those are asked: on which basis had this alliance been formed, what are the historical roots? And for this work more importantly how can the uncompromising support of Iran for the Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War be explained? Who are the key decision makers amid the civil war, how was the perception threat for Iranian regime evolved and how was this in relation with the internal affairs?

### *Hypotheses*

Mainly using Jeffrey W. Taliaferro's four auxiliary assumptions (which are explained in related section) as reference I propose three hypotheses to explain Iran's policies on Syria:

- Iranian decision makers saw the Syrian civil war and other powers' positions as an attempt to change the regional balance of power and status quo, only then they undertook the risk of conflict.
- Iran pursued expansionist strategies to protect security.
- Internal affairs limited and shaped the tactics Iran would practice to protect balance of power and status quo.

### *Methodology*

In this research I apply a qualitative research strategy and use theory of defensive realism to explain a case study. As research design case study design, more specifically "critical



case study” is used and detailed and intensive analysis of a single case is presented. Data collection is mainly focused on secondary resources mostly in English and partly in Persian such as news media and academic studies, articles, historical analyses which are mostly accessible via internet and e-databases. But also I use primary resources such as the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and speeches of political leaders which are documented in internet via official Iranian state websites. Among those, the speeches of Supreme Leader Khomeini are rather important because those speeches laid very foundations of the ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Moreover I had two face to face interview in Tehran with leading international affairs experts. One is Kayhan Barzegar who the director of the Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies (IMESS) in Tehran and a former research fellow at Harvard University. He had many articles published both in Persian and English languages about Iran’s regional policies, relationships with neighboring countries and discourse analysis of Supreme Leaders of Iran. The interview had taken place in his office at IMESS on 21 January 2018. Second interview is with Hassan Ahmadian who is assistant professor of Middle East and North Africa Studies at the University of Tehran. this interview was realized on 3 October 2017. Apart from those two, I had meetings and discussions especially with Iranian journalists with different backgrounds including critical ones of current policies. Those meetings are not mentioned in this research but my personal examination and observations from those meetings had become a very important tool.

All in all it can be said there is not much numeric data and value in this research and main focus lies towards qualitative data. As a result qualitative data collection techniques such as observation and document analysis are mostly used in this thesis. Additionally, I implemented those techniques to understand and reveal information from various sources and conflicting ideologies to give a holistic view on the realities and perceptions on the ground.

## CHAPTER 1

### THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Anarchy, as a built-in feature of a state system, generates “profound insecurity and a pervasive struggle for power” writes Raymond Hinnebusch and argues “The Middle East is one of the regional subsystems where this anarchy appears most in evidence.” Because “it holds two of the world’s most durable and intense conflict centers, the Arab-Israeli and the Gulf arenas; its states are still contesting borders and rank among themselves; and there is not a single one that does not feel threatened by one or more of its neighbors” (2002: 1). At the center of those two different conflict arenas, there lay two countries which since 1979 have one of the long-lasting alliances in the modern world: Iran and Syria. To understand this alliance one of the leading theories to explain international relations lays at the heart of this research, i.e. the school of realism.

Realism focuses on states behaviors which are shaped and implemented to guarantee survival. And states as rational actors, look after their interests which are defined in terms of power. This school has been one of the main tools to explain Middle East politics where alliances and short-term policies might change rapidly and values, together with ideology might play very limited role. Especially when it comes to explain the alliance between Syria and Iran, realism answers many of the questions. Because the founding fathers of each state have set the basic rationale of their foreign policy in the way that national interest comes before the ideology. After all, the President of Syria Hafez Assad was seen as “a cold and calculating realist, the Bismarck of the Middle East” (Shlaim 1994: 37). And in his "most momentous and highly controversial statement" regarding the Iranian state (Moslem 2002: 74) the Supreme Leader of Iran Khomeini said on 6 January 1988 that "The state ... takes precedence over all the precepts of sharia... The ruler can shut down mosques when necessary" (farsi.rouhollah.ir 2019).

Decision makers might prioritize national interest but don't values or ideologies play any role even on the discourse level? To answer this question, after decades of long

discussions a branch of the realist political scientists came to a new conclusion, called defensive realism. Below the brief history of this academic quest is given and followed by a brief evaluation of Iran's policy on Syria during the civil war.

## **1.1. CLASSICAL REALISM**

The major theorist of classical realism Hans Morgenthau (1948) discussed that states seek gaining power, when necessary, by force with the final goal of creating dominance. He drew parallel lines for the relations between humans and that of states, and argued that basic instinct for all states comes from the very human nature, since every human, by nature, looks to maximize their power and interest. Morgenthau also defined international politics as "a struggle for power." And he argued in this struggle actually it is possible to understand and foresee state behaviors. To put his ideas in a context he created the theory of "political realism" and listed six "fundamental principles" to explain that theory (1978: 4-15):

1. Politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature.
2. Political realism analyses the world through the concept of interest defined in terms of power.
3. On the one hand definition of interest as power is universally valid, but on the other hand its meaning is not fixed once and for all.
4. Political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action.
5. Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe.
6. The difference between political realism and other schools of thought is real, and it is profound.

In this context states are more than one single actor who act alone but rather they position themselves in an international arena. Later John Mearsheimer added that this international arena as a self-help system is a "brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other, and therefore have little reason to trust each other" (1994-95: 9). While states are stuck in "struggle for power" in this brutal arena, they position themselves according to other actors around them which at the end shape their community. For realist school of thought, this can also be dangerous. Echoing the ideas of the Greek historian from 5th century BC, Thucydides and Morgenthau on community, "classical realists understand great powers to be their own worst enemies when success and the hubris it engenders encourage them to see themselves outside of and above their community" (Lebow 2013: 60). But as it always does, being a member of a community

sets limits on goals and means of great powers, hence it helps them to impose self-restraint. At the end this relationship forces actors to set new relations with others which turns into something called “alliance”.

In best case scenarios those alliances provide a balance against aggressors in order to stop collision, which is called as a balance of power. Morgenthau defines it as “a general social phenomenon to be found on all levels of social interaction” (1960: 50). But actually for realists balance of power is a never ending quest and cannot be fully realized. Because “Thucydides, and classical realists more generally, recognize that military power and alliances are double-edged swords; they are as likely to provoke as to prevent conflict” (Lebow 2013: 62). But the latter scenario has been valid as well. When there are common interests which “keeps in check the limitless desire for power”, balance of power fulfills its functions for international stability, writes Morgenthau, and underlines in Europe “such a consensus prevailed from 1648 to 1772 and 1815 to 1933” (1948: 164-165).

To make it more lasting, Morgenthau set another criteria: Because “a degree of moral consensus among nations is a prerequisite for a well-functioning international order,” he argues that “the balance of power arose not only out of the clash of competing self-interests but out of a common culture, respect for others rights, and agreement on basic moral principles” (Jervis 1994: 869).

All in all ultimate causation argued by Morgenthau is that he sees the *animus dominandi* (desire for power) is “the constitutive principle of politics as a distinct sphere of human activity” and “politics is a struggle for power over men and whatever its ultimate aim may be, power is its immediate goal” (1947: 167). And the search for maximizing power is a never-ending game. For classical realists international politics is (1) necessarily conflictual and (2) “a zero-sum game where the gains of one state equal the losses of another” (Neack 2008: 15). But the idea of defining the international politics as a zero-sum game had been increasingly criticized. And it falls short on explaining how the US signed a deal on Iran’s nuclear program in 2015. This came after years of the US sanctions on Iran’s crippling economy. The Foreign Minister of Iran Javad Zarif, in an article highlighted this:

As an inevitable consequence of globalization and the ensuing rise of collective action and cooperative approaches, the idea of seeking or imposing zero-sum games has lost its luster. Still, some actors cling to their old habits and habitually pursue their own interests at the expense of others. The insistence of some major powers on playing zero-sum games with win-lose outcomes has usually led to lose-lose outcomes for all the players involved (2014: 51).

Both Iran and the US are competing for power in a world of anarchy. But the deal showed there are times when actors are not playing a zero-sum game. Hence one needs to look for other arguments to explain some changes in the foreign policy of Iran.

## **1.2. STRUCTURAL REALISM (NEOREALISM)**

In classical realism the “constitutive principle” of *animus dominandi* is taken for granted but an explanation on how to test scientifically this hypothetical prerequisite is not offered. Consequently “the result was that the theory lacked, and still lacks, a scientifically describable ultimate cause” (Johnson, Phil and Thayer 2016:3).

Echoing the result conclusion about unreplaceable position of power in international politics, Kenneth Waltz offers another way of causation in his *Theory of International Politics* (1979) and he points to international anarchy as the root cause of states’ behaviors. In parallel with classical realism, he believes in the self-help system and the importance of power, but unlike Morgenthau, who roots his ideas on human nature, for Waltz it is the anarchic structure of international politics which shapes behaviors. Since, in this anarchic structure, there is no single authority, the only solution to “the relationship between war and international anarchy was the abolition of anarchy through the creation of a supreme authority – a global Leviathan.” Though this “may be unassailable in logic”, it was ‘unattainable in practice’ (Wheeler 2009: 430). States have to look out for themselves. They have to protect themselves via arms and alliances.

Unlike classical realism what enables Waltz’s ideas to be tested scientifically is his use of structuralism as a method of analysis and him to study the relationship between units of a system, whether individual, state or system levels. This makes him different from classical realism, since the latter “centered on two core elements: the capabilities and interests of the great powers.” In terms of interest, the key distinction is between “satisfied defenders of the status quo and dissatisfied revisionist powers”. In summary, “Waltzian

neorealism treats all great powers as 'like units' in terms of their capabilities and interests. By eliminating this variation, Waltz constructs a new, more elegant and parsimonious version of realism that yields powerful insights about system dynamics and regularities in state behavior" (Schweller 1998).

Waltz uses his theory not to "explain the state behavior but instead international outcomes" (Mearsheimer 2011: 426). He explains "properties of the international system, such as the recurrence of war and the recurrent formation of balances of power." However, to make predictions at foreign policy level "His ultra parsimonious theory must be cross-fertilized with other theories" (Christensen and Snyder 1990: 138).

Waltz maintains this "ultra parsimony" on alliances as well, since he doesn't focus on state behaviors. At the system level he argues that the balance of the powers is the unchangeable fact of the international arena, and when faced with a revisionist state or threat, alliances are easily and quickly formed by themselves and thus the balance of power would be protected. This is also an important point with regards to how his neorealism is differentiated from classical realism. The latter believes states would make an alliance to protect the balance of power, but the first suggests that the balance of power is something that is shaped in the system automatically.

Waltz himself gave a very controversial explanation on Iran's nuclear policy. He wrote nuclear capability of Israel has created an instability in the Middle East and now "power begs to be balanced". And this can only be possible when Iran gets the nuclear bomb. He argues Iran wants this not to increase offensive capabilities but to strengthen its security (2012: 2-4). In Waltzian neorealism a nuclear balance supposed to be founded years ago. But there is no explanation why it did not happen. Waltz explain this only by defining the lack of balance as "surprising". The reason is the lack of explanation for phenomena like culture, ideology, economy etc. Neorealism emerged during the Cold War and it was focusing on security. Due to the circumstances in international arena, security was defined only in military terms. And it sees states as black-boxes and as units. Hence the internal dynamics is no point of care for neorealism (Fox and Sandal 2013: 63-64). But gradually neorealism evolved into sub theories which look at internal dynamics as well. Among

them the distinction of offensive-defensive realism is much striking. The first focuses on hegemony while the latter argues it is the survival and security what states are constantly looking for.

### **1.3. OFFENSIVE-DEFENSIVE REALISM**

Many political theorists have “cross-fertilized” Waltzian ideas to create theories on foreign policy behaviors of states. One of the most well-known discussions is created with the offensive-defensive distinction: “As early as 1991, Jack Snyder in his *Myths of Empire* differentiated between aggressive and defensive realism, which became the dividing line between the two distinct branches of thought that eventually emerged within neorealism: offensive and defensive realism” (Feng and Ruizhuang 2006: 123). There Snyder used the term “aggressive” for “offensive” and wrote “One variant, which might be called ‘aggressive Realism,’ asserts that offensive action often contributes to security; another, ‘defensive Realism,’ contends that it does not” (1991: 12).

Stephen G. Brooks uses the term "neorealist" for "offensive," and "postclassical" for "defensive", and writes that between them there are similarities, as “both have a systemic focus; state-centric; view international politics as inherently competitive; emphasize material factors rather than nonmaterial factors such as ideas and institutions; assume states are egoistic actors that pursue self-help” (Brooks 1997: 446).

Regarding the differences, offensive realists start from the same structural explanation as Waltz, but argue that:

Offensive realism is predicated on the assumption that given the inescapable uncertainty about the motives and intentions of others, states have no choice but to behave aggressively. Rationality demands it. This is not because others are assumed to be predatory or malevolent in intent, but because in a condition of anarchy major states can only be secure if they maximize their power. (Wheeler 2009: 438).

Mearsheimer is developing the theory of “offensive realism”, suggests that because of this rationality great powers are forced to maximize their power. This, in return, creates

a security dilemma<sup>1</sup> as they fear that other states may get in a power maximization race which would cause a war. Thus it creates a vicious circle and becomes the tragedy of deadlock for great powers while increasing their power. Relating to this, Mearsheimer lists five “bedrock assumptions” (2001: 30-31):

1. the international system is anarchic,
2. great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability,
3. states can never be certain about other states' intentions,
4. survival is the primary goal of great powers,
5. great powers are rational actors.

Above all, he writes, “when the five assumptions are married together, they create powerful incentives for great powers to think and act offensively with regard to each other. In particular, three general patterns of behavior result: fear, self-help, and power maximization” (Mearsheimer 2001: 32).

On alliances “offensive realism accepts that states occasionally cooperate together, but such arrangements cannot endure as they represent the pursuit of narrowly defined interests, and are frequently aimed at third parties as part of the balancing process” (Wheeler 2009: 438). And unlike neorealists, who argue that states mostly choose balancing behaviors, the founding father of offensive realism, Mearsheimer, writes that “it is very difficult to find a status-quo state in international politics, as the anarchical nature of the international system has left most states with a security deficit. In this view, then, the more common type of state behavior is ‘buck passing’” (Feng and Ruizhuang 2006: 124), which is essentially passing the responsibility of dealing with the aggressor to someone else.

On the other hand, defensive realism reaches a completely different conclusion on the reasons which would worth disrupting the status quo. Accordingly, states are generally satisfied with the status quo because security is, unlike what offensive realists argue, not scarce: “Defensive realism, assumes that international anarchy is often more benign - that is, that security is often plentiful rather than scarce - and that normal states can understand this or learn it over time from experience” (Rose 1998: 149). When their own security is

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Jervis defines the security dilemma with proposing the argument that “many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security and decrease the security of others” see: “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma”, *World Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2, p. 169.



not threatened, states focus on sustaining the balance of power. Within offensive realism “a rational state never lets down its guard and adopts a worst-case perspective,” and “states are conditioned by the mere possibility of conflict.” But for defensive realists states have to see some tangible signs, i.e. the “probability” of conflict. Only after that, they can react accordingly and take the risk of disrupting the balance (Brooks 1997: 448).

Mearsheimer, leading the offensive realism school of thought, in his reference book for offensive realism, *the Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, very often makes references to the era of the Concert of Europe which lasted from the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815 until 1914. Matthew Rendall (2006) later challenges Mearsheimer’s accounts and argues it is not offensive realism but defensive realism which explains states’ behaviors in that era by giving four different crises between 1814 and 1840. Moreover he argues that those cases highlights the differences between schools of offensive and defensive realism:

Offensive realists are right that states face incentives for expansion, and are often constrained by the international system. Defensive realists already recognize this, however, while acknowledging that unit-level factors sometimes make states act in ways not predicted by structure. Domestic factors just will not go away. Defensive realists err not in combining structural and unit-level theories, but in insisting on calling the whole amalgam ‘realist’. Snyder’s theory of over-expansion, for example, uses realism to determine how states should behave, and a theory of domestic politics to explain why they don’t.

Moreover as Acharya summarizes, “structural conditions such as anarchy do not invariably lead to expansionism; but the fear of triggering a security dilemma, calculations of the balance of power, and domestic politics induce states to abstain from pre-emptive war and engage in reassurance policies” (2014: 161). But when facing with an aggressor, “states are likely to intervene when the potential target of intervention poses a direct or potential threat to their national interest (defined as territorial integrity or citizens), their economy or a natural resource of major economic or security significance” (Davidson 2013: 312).

Facing with a threat makes similarities between two schools of thought much more apparent. As Jervis points out, “when dealing with aggressors, increasing cooperation is beyond reach, and the analysis and preferred policies of defensive realists differ little from those of offensive realists” (1999: 52). To flesh out this theory, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro

lists four auxiliary assumptions that specify how structural variables translate into international outcomes and states' foreign policies (2000: 131):

1. The security dilemma is an intractable feature of anarchy.
2. Structural modifiers - such as the offense-defense balance, geographic proximity, and access to raw materials - influence the severity of the security dilemma between particular states.
3. Material power drives states' foreign policies through the medium of leaders' calculations and perceptions.
4. Domestic politics can limit the efficiency of a state's response to the external environment.

What makes defensive realism unique, as discussed by Taliaferro, is its emphasis on perception. Within the structure of a security dilemma, it is argued that when a state increases its power, others will be sucked into the security dilemma and thus, out of fear and uncertainty about others' intentions, they will also increase power. As Copeland puts it, "Offensive realists emphasize state uncertainty regarding future intentions, contending that states must always be ready to grab opportunities to increase their power as a hedge against future threats," but

defensive realists are not quite as pessimistic. They focus on the problem of uncertain present intentions and the risk that, within the security dilemma, hard-line policies will be countered by others' balancing actions and may even lead to an escalation into war. More cooperative policies are thus generally the most rational means to security maximization (Copeland 2003: 435).

The attempt on maximizing security and following cooperative policies accordingly also takes its shape on changing realities on the ground. Perceptions and opportunities may change in the short term. Otherwise it would be impossible to explain how Iran could make arm deals during the war with Iraq from the US "the Great Satan" and Israel, "the lesser Satan" as described by Khomeini. Thus perception of decision makers about whether they see the other aggressor or not, matters. Feng, in his study to analyze the *Operational Code of Mao Zedong*, argues that such perceptions are shaped within the "grand strategy" of the states:

Grand strategy does not include simply the use of military force, but rather a combination of different means—economic, political, and psychological, etc.—for political goals... The determinants of a state's grand strategy are not limited to material capabilities, as many realists argue. A state's grand strategy also reflects how the state's leaders look at the world through the cultural and historical prism they represent (2005: 640).

Defensive realists argue that "a great deal depends on whether the state (assumed to be willing to live with the status quo) is facing a like-minded partner or an expansionist" (Jervis 1999: 50). Thus "diagnosis of the situation and the other's objectives" (Jervis

1999: 52) is the important stage<sup>2</sup>. But when facing a like-minded country, states believe that:

cooperation is more likely or can be made so if large transactions can be divided up into a series of smaller ones, if transparency can be increased, if both the gains from cheating and the costs of being cheated on are relatively low, if mutual cooperation is or can be made much more advantageous than mutual defection, and if each side employs strategies of reciprocity and believes that the interactions will continue over a long period of time (Jervis 1999: 52).

This was exactly how Iran has been analyzing the alliance with Syria since the very early days of the revolution. For Iran's decision makers, Syria has been a like-minded country. And when the Syrian crisis started in 2011, Iran acted not to expand its area of influence but to secure what has been already formed. The status quo and the alliance with Syria had to be secured. Because as described by the senior foreign policy advisor of Khamenei, Ali Akbar Velayeti puts it, "Syria is the golden ring of the chain of resistance against Israel." Consequently when the protests against Assad started and it was backed by Iran's regional opponents such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, Iran saw this as an threatening attempt to change the power balance in the region and analyzed this as a "tangible sign" of a newly erupting conflict in the region. Hence to understand this perception of threat, defensive steps, the rationale of Iranian decision makers, the theory defensive realism is the needed tool.

### *Three main hypotheses of this research*

Under the light of above explained theoretical background and mainly using Jeffrey W. Taliaferro's four auxiliary assumptions on defensive realism as reference I propose three different hypotheses to explain Iran's policies on Syria.

### *First hypothesis*

"Iranian decision makers saw the Syrian civil war and other powers' positions as an attempt to change the regional balance of power and status quo, only then they undertook the risk of conflict." The first hypothesis of this study is based on the very core argument of the school defensive realism. As explained above in detail, for defensive realists states first seek to protect status quo because they believe that offensive and expansionist

---

<sup>2</sup> Because defensive realists take state preferences, beliefs and perceptions into account they are criticized by "undermining the realism" and "smuggling liberalism in through the back door." See: Legro and Moravcsik, 1999.

policies disrupt the balance of power and force other states to react accordingly. States can be satisfied with the status quo and unless their own security has become a target of threats, they would sustain the balance of power. But once tangible probabilities of conflict become obvious then states look for ways of reacting against the threats. Here I also argue clear threats against the Syro-Iranian alliance by the political and armed opposition against the Assad regime and their external proteges caused Iran to see the actions on the ground as direct attempts to disrupt regional balance of power and status quo.

### *Second hypothesis*

“Iran pursued expansionist strategies to protect security.” Iran’s operations in various countries have been analyzed by an expansionist policy and Iran has been criticized for following an aggressive and for spreading the revolutionary ideas and thus create a “Shia Crescent.” Explaining expansionist policies within the school of defensive realism is a controversial issue both among non-realist and realist political scientists. Offensive realists accuse defensive realism with not being able to explain expansion. For example one of the leading thinkers of offensive realism, Fareed Zakaria, on his review of Snyder’s *Myths of Empire*, writes that for defensive realists “the international system provides incentives only for moderate, reasonable behavior.” And “expansion could not be explained by systemic causes,” hence defensive realists “drop the systemic factors out of their analysis and move to a domestic explanation” (1992: 15-16). But there are ways how systemic causes and structural variables effect the states’ foreign policies and can explain the expansion.

Taliaferro writes there are material factors which he refers as “structural modifiers”, effect the severity of conflict. “These include the offense-defense balance in military technology, geographic proximity, access to raw materials, international economic pressure, regional or dyadic military balances, and the ease with which states can extract resources from conquered territory” (2000: 136-137). In relation with those structural modifiers “the international system provides incentives for expansion only under certain conditions,” he argues. To sum up, two things come together in this context to explain expansionist policies: Firstly, for

defensive realists, states look to guarantee security. Secondly states pursue expansionist policies to protect security only when structural modifiers enable such a behavior.

Above all, one has to keep in mind that when there is a chance to increase power, none of the states would miss such a possibility. “To claim that states would pass up cost-free opportunities for power and influence is alien to any form of realism, which emphasizes self-help in an anarchic world. Nothing in the logic of defensive realism precludes limited opportunistic expansion, particularly into power vacuums.” (Rendall 2006: 525). This is specifically important since it perfectly explains Iran’s policies on Iraq after the withdrawal of US forces. It gave Iran a “cost-free opportunity” to increase its power in power vacuum of Iraq.

### *Third hypothesis*

“Internal affairs limited and shaped the tactics Iran would practice to protect balance of power and status quo.” As mentioned above, defensive realism believes neorealism should be “cross-fertilized” with unit-level theories and assumptions, hence looks at the ways foreign policies are decided. Internal politics play role on the shaping of a state’s foreign policy. Gideon Rose writes for defensive realists there are “two sets of independent variables”. One is systemic incentives and the second one is internal factors such as “political and economic ideology, national character, partisan politics, or socioeconomic structure.” He writes that “to understand why a particular country is behaving in a particular way, therefore, one should peer inside the black box and examine the preferences and configurations of key domestic actors” (1998: 148-154). To elaborate more on this Thomas J. Christensen introduced the domestic mobilization theory in his work about Sino-American conflict in the Cold War (1996). There he wrote both the US and China had looked for policies to balance against the Soviet Union. But since this primary concern was unpopular, leader exaggerated and inflated the threats to mobilize domestic resources. Hence it can be said decision makers’ answers to the changing balance of power can be limited by their ability to mobilize people internally. Waltz defines this as “internal balancing” and writes it is “more reliable and precise than external balancing” (1979: 168). In the same vein I argue Iran’s policies on Syria during the Civil War has also been affected by the so-called “domestic pathologies” and leaders’

had to take internal factors into account in order to face external environment and to do internal balancing.

#### **1.4. ALLIANCE**

Alliances has a remarkable place in the International Relations literature. Indeed “It is impossible to speak of international relations without referring to alliances; the two often merge in all but name” (Liska 1968: 3). In other words, “alliances are apparently a universal component of relations between political units” (Holsti, Hopmann and Sullivan 1985: 2). Fedder describes an alliance as “a process or a technique of statecraft or a type of international organization” (1968: 68). To Wolfers it is “a promise of mutual military assistance between two or more sovereign states” (1968: 268). For Morgenthau, alliances are typically formed “through a process of haggling and horse-trading among suspicious temporary associates looking already for more advantageous associations elsewhere” (1960: 181).

Moreover, about the function of alliances, Wright argues that “Alliances and regional coalitions among the weak to defend themselves from the strong have been the typical method for preserving the balance of power” (1942: 773). Realists from different theoretical backgrounds give various explanations for the reasons behind setting an alliance in accordance with realist views. For example, Morgenthau emphasizes the term “balance of power” and writes that “the historically most important manifestation of the balance of power, however, is to be found not in the equilibrium of two isolated nations but in the relations between one nation or alliance of nations and another alliance” (1948: 137). For Walt, “States join alliances to protect themselves from states or coalitions whose superior resources could pose a threat” (1985: 5).

When it comes to behaviors and goals of states in setting an alliance, the most well-known theory is balance of power which is best explained by Waltz. He argues that states choose to balance against power. Following his footsteps, Walt argues that it is not power but *threat* that states balance against. Moreover, in a relatively recent theory, Schweller suggests that it is neither threat nor power but interests perceived by states that give

direction to the decisions of states on balancing. Below, these three theories are briefly discussed for a better understanding of a state's rationale when forming a long-lasting alliance.

## **1.5. ALLIANCE THEORIES**

### **1.5.1. Balance of Power**

Waltz proposes that states, when facing with an aggressor state, would create an alliance to balance the power of the aggressive adversary. In his *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz writes that balance would be created by itself automatically because it is the natural condition of world politics. Thus he argues that a theory of international politics, by its very nature, has to be a theory of balance of power (Feng and Ruizhuang 2006: 130).

In fact, classical realists such as Morgenthau also define balancing against an aggressor as the main behavior of threatened states, but he argues that this is a conscious strategy by actors: "The aspiration for power on the part of several nations, each trying either to maintain or overthrow the status quo, leads of necessity, to a configuration that is called the balance of power and to policies that aim at preserving it" (1948: 125). But what distinguishes Waltz from classical realists is that he sees balance of power as a "law of nature": "As nature abhors a vacuum, so international politics abhors unbalanced power" (Waltz 2000: 28). Schweller summarizes the difference:

Structural realists describe an "automatic version" of the theory, whereby system balance is a spontaneously generated, self-regulating, and entirely unintended outcome of states pursuing their narrow self-interests. Earlier versions of balance of power were more consistent with a "semi-automatic" version of the theory, which requires a "balancer" state throwing its weight on one side of the scale or the other, depending on which is lighter, to regulate the system (2016: 1).

Secondly, unlike classical realists, structural realists argue that the first concern for states is not to maximize power, but rather to protect their position in the power hierarchy and thus security. In this respect power is a means to sustain status quo:

In anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit, and power. Because power is a means and not an end, states prefer to join the weaker of two coalitions.... If states wished to maximize power, they would join the stronger side.... [t]his does not happen because balancing, not bandwagoning, is the behavior induced by the system. The first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their positions in the system (Waltz 1979: 126).

Waltz argues that states mostly position themselves against an aggressor, and thus do the “balancing” behavior naturally and very rarely put themselves on the side of biggest power, which would be “bandwagoning”. Bandwagoning rarely happens because, if it did, the biggest power may become the world hegemon, which the anarchic structure of international relations works against.

### **1.5.2. Balance of Threat**

In his famous book, *The Origins of Alliances*, Stephen Walt clarifies ideas of Waltz and converts them into the “balance of threat” theory. He agrees with Waltz that, while aligning, states have two choices - balancing and bandwagoning - and that they mostly choose to balance. But he also argues that states align not according to the power distribution in the system, but to the threats perceived by decision makers. He defines balancing as “allying with others against the prevailing threat,” and gives two reasons for a state choose balancing: “First, they place their survival at risk if they fail to curb a potential hegemon before it becomes too strong... Second, joining the weaker side increases the new member's influence within the alliance, because the weaker side has greater need for assistance.”

On the other hand, for Walt (1987: 17-22) “bandwagoning refers to alignment with the source of danger.” He, again, gives two motives for this behavior: “First, bandwagoning may be a form of appeasement. By aligning with an ascendant state or coalition, the bandwagoner may hope to avoid an attack by diverting it elsewhere. Second, a state may align with the dominant side in wartime in order to share the spoils of victory.” For Walt, those decisions are made as a “response to threats”, and there are four factors that affect the level of threat: aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions.

While Waltz solely focuses on great powers and his theory is only suitable for them, Walt also analyzes smaller powers, discussing aligning behaviors of Middle Eastern powers between the years 1955-1979. He also lists five hypotheses on the conditions favoring balancing or bandwagoning (1987: 33):



1. Balancing is more common than bandwagoning.
2. The stronger the state, the greater its tendency to balance. Weak states will balance against other weak states but may bandwagon when threatened by great powers.
3. The greater the probability of allied support, the greater the tendency to balance. When adequate allied support is certain, however, the tendency for free-riding or buck-passing increases.
4. The more unalterably aggressive a state is perceived to be, the greater the tendency for others to balance against it.
5. In wartime, the closer one side is to victory, the greater the tendency for others to bandwagon with it.

### **1.5.3. Balance of Interest**

What makes Walt and Waltz common in term of aggressive behavior is that both believe there is no profit in aggression because, in the anarchic international system, balancing efforts will be put into practice very easily and be formed against the expansionist state and thus the status quo will be maintained at the end. But Schweller calls this “status quo bias” since “it views the world solely through the lens of a satisfied established state” (1998). He argues that there are other ways and motives as well. In his book *Deadly Imbalances*, he first writes that states do not only have two options to response to threats. In addition to balancing and bandwagoning, he lists the other options as “binding, distancing, buckpassing, engagement”.

What makes his ideas different is that he does not believe that alliances are formed only to protect security or to respond to threats, but also to make gains and to respond to opportunities. He writes that this motivation is “not primarily determined by systemic factors but rather by domestic political processes” (2016: 12). Moreover, he argues that when states look for profits they mostly bandwagon, therefore for revisionist states it is more common to bandwagon instead of balance. He also lists five different ways of bandwagoning: jackal bandwagoning, piling on, wave of the future, the contagion or domino effect, and, lastly, holding the balance.

## **1.6. BRIEF ANALYSIS OF IRAN’S SYRIA POLICY FROM DEFENSIVE REALISM PERSPECTIVE**

Following the Revolution of 1979, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic experienced many changing tactical cooperation, tune in the discourses. But once one looks from a

more, it can be seen that actually the main rationale embraces a striking continuity. Below I try to outline the Iranian foreign policy from a theoretical point of view and summarize whether it fits into the assumptions of defensive realism.

As explained above from the perspective of defensive realism together with material power, perceptions of leaders define the grand strategy of a state. And in Iran constitutionally the Supreme Leader has the final word in foreign policy. And having the very same leader, Khamenei since 1989 who has been following his predecessor and the first leader of the state, Khomeini, creates the circumstances for Iran to provide continuity in foreign policy making process. Warnaar writes on overall foreign policy decisions “there has indeed been a high level of consistency in Iranian foreign policy behavior since its birth in 1979, even when comparing the Ahmadinejad and Khatami presidencies” (2013: 3). The Supreme Leader Khamenei has been following some basic principles.

On discourse level, to understand the mindset of the decision makers of Iran foreign policy, it is critical to understand two Persian terms: *maslahat* (expediency) and *aberu* (honor). While the first means or ‘self-interest’, the latter is ‘to save face’. “In the nearly 34 years since the Islamic revolution in Iran, expediency has been a pillar of decision making, but within a framework that has allowed Iranian leaders to save face” (Mousavian and Shabani 2013).

Since the early days of the revolution, Khomeini’s, thus the regime’s, foreign policy viewpoints are “inscribed into the *Maslahat* on non-reliance on the global powers, subservience to domination, preservation of the existence and territorial integrity of the country, and negation of isolationism” (Adiong 2008: 3). This is a highly critical point in order to understand Iranian foreign policy correctly, because, while works on Iranian foreign policy mostly describe the regime as “revolutionary idealist” and focus on “export of revolution”, protecting the expediency of Islamic Republic which more or less equals to national interest, has been the main principle of Khomeini. It was even accepted as an official principle in 1988 (Sari 2015: 116). This emphasis on *maslahat*, i.e. national interest, is the main source of continuity, as realist tradition would foresee, which is also proven to be true with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or better known as Iran

Deal, on Iran's nuclear program reached with five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (the US, UK, France, China, Russia) and Germany in 2015.

This context fits very well with the realist assumption that national interest precedes ideology. Looking from a historical point of view as one prominent expert on Iran emphasized, "Its foreign policy is far more pragmatic than many in the West comprehend. As Iran's willingness to engage with the United States over its nuclear program showed, it is driven by hardheaded calculations of national interest, not a desire to spread its Islamic Revolution abroad" (Nasr 2018:109). Sari suggests that to make an analysis on Iranian foreign policy, instead of discourse or the constitution, one should focus on actions. As many analysts agree, discussions on "export of revolution" or "Islamic world order" which are seen as reflections of idealist foreign policy, were merely efforts of finding solutions of an isolated regime facing security threats, thus it was not ideological but strategic. This is actually a struggle for autonomy to act independently against the great powers. The roots of this struggle can be found even in the Shah's era, when not Islamism but modernism was the main ideology, but the target was the same (2015: 120). Thus, religion is not the main motive behind foreign policy but an instrument. As mentioned above "Since the 1979 revolution, religion has served the Iranian state, not the other way around" (Ganji 2008: 50). As realists would agree, the main reason behind this fact was to obtain national security. A retired CIA officer Pillar underlines:

The Iranians have repeatedly demonstrated that they respond to foreign challenges and opportunities with the same considerations of costs and benefits, and of the impact on the interests of their regime, as other leaders do. Khomeini's successors have given every indication of being motivated, as are other leaders, by an interest in maintaining their regime and their power—in this life, not some afterlife. They are subject to the same principles of deterrence as anyone else (2016: 367).

For the perception of threat, "US imperialism and Israel are regarded as the principal and most immediate threats to Iran. Other countries supported by the United States such as Saudi Arabia<sup>3</sup> are also considered to be threats, though of considerably lesser significance" (Hadian 2015: 1). Iranian fears of foreign intrusion have historical roots as well. After all Iran was carved twice in both of the World War by British and Russian armies. In addition to that trauma the first time the country experienced a democratically

---

<sup>3</sup> For details on Saudi-Iranian rivalry with a specific focus on Bahrain see Downs, 2012.

elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq, they had to face with a foreign intervention. With a MI6-CIA orchestrated coup Mosaddeq was toppled down after he nationalized country' oil revenues in 1953.<sup>4</sup> Additionally US support to Saddam during Iran's traumatic war<sup>5</sup> and then being put into the same category with Iraq by the US president Bush as "axis of evil," shaped and harmed the Iranian perception of the US (Pillar 2016: 377). Increasing US military presence in the Persian Gulf and other neighboring countries also increased Iranian security concerns.

Moreover Nasr writes that since Iran's military spending is very low compared to regional powers, in order to balance them Iran theorizes a policy of "forward defense" which "involves supporting friendly militias and insurgent groups across the Middle East" (2018: 111). For example the relation with Hizballah should be seen as a part of balance of threat perspective since, "If Iran perceives Israel to be its greatest threat, then it requires the strategic depth that Hizballah provides, especially in order to counterattack should Israel strike first. This assumption has defined a large component of Iran's foreign policy" (Hadian 2015: 4).

On the other hand it is significant to remember that when Iran's national interests clashed with ideology, "territorial integrity and attempts to enhance Iran's status within the international community have often played a far more influential role than ideology in informing and molding Iran's security and defense policies" (Hadian 2015: 2). There are various examples which fit this analysis throughout the history of the Islamic Republic. Buying weapons from the US via Israel during the Iran-Iraq War, which was later called Iran-Contra affair in the US (Pillar 2016: 375); the recent treaty of the JCPOA which, "strengthens Iran's national interests as opposed to its ideological priorities" (Hadian 2015: 2); intentions to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is composed of secular states unlike the Islamic Republic (Akbarzadeh 2014); not supporting militarily the Shia uprising in Iraq in 1991 (Ramazani 1992: 398); instead of promoting religion

---

<sup>4</sup> Marcel noted that the Mosaddeq incident revived the nationalism and fear of renewed imperialism which are more present than elsewhere in the region. For its effects on Iran's oil industry, see Marcel 2006: 42.

<sup>5</sup> Another legacy of Iran-Iraq war on national security practices of Iran is also important to understand. Chubin writes "Iran places much emphasis on deterrence, which it sees as having three pillars: preparedness, the ability to retaliate and defense. After being surprised by Iraq in 1980, Tehran now leaves nothing to chance" (2014: 78).

and ideology focusing on commercial benefits with investments in Africa implemented by the Iranian rural development organization, Construction Jihad (Lob 2016) or siding with Armenia during Nagorno-Karabakh War in 1992 instead of Shia Azeri Turks (Brenda 2006: 229-234). Those all proves that for the Iranian decision makers it is not ideology but national interests which define the framework and practices of foreign policy.

Among the historical examples listed above one is exceptionally striking: Iranians' support behind Armenia against Azerbaijan where majority is adherents Shia Muslim as in Iran. This policy deeply contradicts with the so-called "Shia Crescent" policy attributed to Iran. In 2004 King Abdullah of Jordan first described the Shia Crescent as a master plan of Iran creating a bridge from Beirut to the Persian Gulf and forming proxy states. This is the main perception of threat in the eyes of the Gulf countries whose Sunni elites see Iranian policy three folded: "First to engage in masses in the region; secondly, to build an ideological belt of sympathetic Shiite governments and political factions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf region and, thirdly, to expand its regional role and power" (Barzegar 2008: 87).

To begin with engaging the masses is clearly not easy to implement. Hadian describes Shia sectarianism as one of the myths about Iran and writes "Shiites comprise about 10-13 percent of the global Muslim population. It would certainly be unwise for Iranian policymakers to foster a sectarian civil war against a numerically superior enemy" (2015: 3). Secondly looking at

Sunni Hamas in Palestine, or on Hamid Karzai's Sunni based government in Afghanistan one can see attempts to create alliances are pragmatic, not ideological. Lastly looking at the political and economic atmosphere in the surrounding region of Iran it can be seen Tehran is primarily focused on building a secure environment around itself.

Consequently, we can see the fears of Iran's policy on creating a Shia Crescent is not based on reality. And on par with defensive realism assumptions the main motivation behind Iran's foreign policy has been maximizing security and sustain the *status quo* until then. This was best seen in the events unfolded with the Syrian crisis. Following other

protests in various Arab countries, protests also started in March 2011 in Syria. Within six months this gradually turned into an armed conflict especially after an attack on government forces in the Syrian city of Jisr ash-Shugur in June 2011. In Iran, two analyzes occurred, the wing of President Ahmadinejad suggested political reforms and a gradual transition, meanwhile a more sceptic wing led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which is one of the two branches of the Iran's Armed Forces, saw the protests as a direct threat to the interest of Iran in the region. At that time due to internal crisis (which is explained below) the president had been lost a great amount of power on foreign policies and thus the wing of the IRGC prevailed. Iran had built this alliance with Syria right after the Revolution, faced with many crises but overcome all. In 32 years, this alliance had turned into a reality in the status quo of the region. It was easily understood from the speeches of Iranian top decision makers, such as top advisor to the Leader, Ali Akbar Velayati said Syria is “the golden ring of the resistance chain in the region” against Israel or the Leader himself said “If Iran did not fight in Syria against the enemy, it would have had to face it on its own soil.” Hence when the Arab Spring first started Iran showed support for opposition movements in different countries but this was limited with the discourse level and did not launch any political or military campaign. But when the protests broke out in Syria, for Iran it was an attempt to sabotage the status quo in region. Its own security was challenged and under threat from the perception of Iranian political elite. Hence what they have started doing is to balance the threat they have been facing and restore the former status quo in the region.

As the conflict expanded and Iran increased its significant military and economic attempts to secure the golden ring of the resistance, it had to be dependent on protecting the future of Bashar Assad himself. Because Iran was faced with a bloc of countries which asked the change of the regime, was against to see Iran as an actor and preventing Tehran from participating in the diplomatic negotiations. In this bloc, Iran was faced with regional opponents like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Countries and international powers like the USA and the EU. Hence Iran found itself isolated in this new balance of power in the region.

In the field Syrian army lost control of most of its borders with Turkey, Jordan and Iraq. First two had become the main routes for arm supply for the opposition. The more arms opposition got the weaker Syrian army had become. As a result Iran had to do military balancing. But this was also problematic because under harsh sanctions, economy of Iran was badly damaged and the public opinion would not easily tolerate an expensive foreign operation. Hence the solution was to mobilize non-state proxies whom Iran has been investing to form for decades. Shia militants from Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and more than all Hizballah started to fight in the battleground.

But these foreign operations could not become successful enough to secure the Syria's territorial integrity. And the backing the Syrian regime came at the expense of Iran's soft power it had gained especially after the 2006 Israeli-Hizballah war. Hence between 2011-2014 Iran was not only isolated in the power structure in the region but also badly damaged by the US sanctions and was gradually losing its perceptual support in the Arab streets. But on the other hand with the presidency of Hassan Rouhani who came to power in 2013 with the promise of nuclear deal with the US, its image was getting better in the international arena.

But a sudden power shift in the immediate neighbor of Iran, Iraq had shocked not only the region but also the whole world. A radical terrorist organization with Sunni background named the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (shortly in Arabic, *Daesh*) started to spread from Iraq and to get stronger. It was an offshoot of Al Qaeda but denounced it afterwards and gained the control of a vast area in a very short span of time starting from June 2014. Its religions and radical Sunni discourse exposed the biggest fear of Iran: separatist movements. Almost all of Iran's border cities have different ethnic and religious majority. And Tehran fears any separatist organization might open the Pandora's box and trigger a centrifugal domino effect. Consequently a Sunni "organization" claiming to create its own "state" and worsen the already highly damaged status quo of the region had become the face of all the worst case scenarios for Iranian decision makers. And it had to find another way balance and stop the new reality on the ground.

And Iran had to open space for another power to join their side and created an urgent military cooperation with Russia. Iran even let Russia to use its bases on its own soil for a very short time in a clear violation of its own constitution. This was a clear sign that pragmatism would prevail any ideological border. Afterwards there was a military cooperation formed in Syria, Russia would operate in the air and Iranian forces would fight on the ground. This new tactic of military balancing had succeeded even at the expense of devastation of most of the country.

On the other hand, the other actors' perception of threat towards Daesh has varied. For example for Turkey, the biggest threat is the possibility of a Kurdish state led by "PYD", an offshoot of the separatist terrorist group PKK. Hence even when Daesh attacked the Kurdish region in Syria, Turkey saw Daesh as a temporary threat and focused on preventing PYD from gaining more power. For most of the Gulf countries, led by Saudi Arabia, the important thing was to keep radical Sunni organizations away from its own soil and hence was not against the idea of Daesh to fight in Syria and Iraq. While Daesh made terrorist attacks in different parts of the world, an international alliance led by the US was formed to fight with Daesh, but a foot on the ground was needed and Ankara who might be seen as an ambitious actor in the region was against the idea to be alone in the ground. Hence the US found support from Kurdish militias which worsened the fears of Turkey even more. This forced Turkey to reformulate its sharp anti-Assad stance and alliance with the US especially after the 2016 coup attempt. This helped Iran to create a parallel diplomacy table which comprises Iran, Russia and Turkey.

Also this new process was led by not the president or the foreign minister of Iran but rather direct aides of the Leader, i.e. by foreign policy advisor Velayati on diplomacy and by the Commander of Quds Force Soleimani in the battle grounds. They all share the same vision which is to eliminate threat before it comes into their own soil.

This was the logic behind the military alliance with Russia. It had no moral background and commonality and is expected to be short lived once the military crisis in Syria would be over. Because the objectives in the long run between Iran and Russia is highly differentiated. Iran wants to keep the route to support Hizballah in Lebanon open



meanwhile Russia wants a base in warm waters. And their conflicting position on Israel would not let them provide a long running alliance in the region unlike Syria and Iran.

Today we see Iran had been securing its alliance and hence status quo, created a new balance of power in the region and eliminate immediate threats to its own interests. And the end it became an important actor on the political negotiations which it helped to be formed.



## CHAPTER 2

### MAKING OF IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT AFTER THE REVOLUTION

What makes defensive realism different than other forms of realism is that it combines structural and unit-level theories. For example when Snyder explains over-expansion of state he “uses realism to determine how states should behave, and a theory of domestic politics to explain why they don’t” (Rendall 2006: 540). Another example can be given on how defensive realism and offensive realism is differentiated when they face with the scarcity of security. While the former puts more emphasis on balancing, the latter argues bandwagoning is more prevalent. But actually “there is nothing about the material environment or the nature of the system states face that explains” the differentiation because such a distinction would “have to rely on different assumptions about how leaders make decisions... and generally rest not on structure but agency” (Hamilton & Rathbun 2013: 445). Waltz answers the criticism that neorealism as a systemic theory should only focus on system and argues that “any theory of international politics requires also a theory of domestic politics, since states affect the system's structure even as it affects them” and saying “just as market theory at times requires a theory of the firm, so international-political theory at times needs a theory of the state” (Waltz 1986: 331). Hence to understand defensive realism’s focus on agency, the main debate around agency-structure is first needed to be explained.

#### 2.1. BRIEF INTRODUCTION ON AGENT-STRUCTURE DEBATE

Ontological discussion about whether the narratives of state or structure comes first constitutes the backbone of the so-called fourth debate of international relations starting from late 1980s. This debate took its base from Marx’s iconic words in the beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, “Men make history, but they do not make

it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (Carlsnaes 1992: 255). Within this debate, while it was discussed whether the state or the structure ontologically<sup>6</sup> has the upper-hand, Alexander Wendt came up with a third answer and created a new balance<sup>7</sup>. For him, the state, i.e. the agent, and the structure are mutually constituted and "social structures have an inherently discursive dimension in the sense that they are inseparable from the reasons and self-understandings that agents bring to their actions" (Wendt 1987: 359). In other words, his theory asks the question of "how an action does or does not reproduce both the actor and the structure" (Hopf 1998: 172). In his article, while defining neorealism as ontologically individualist and world-system theory as ontologically holistic, Wendt proposed constructivism.

Wendt writes that his new approach was adapted from the structuration theory, and that this approach requires a foundation in scientific realism (1987: 336). Anthony Giddens, who proposed the Structuration theory, writes that it "substitutes the central notion of the duality of structure," which is defined as "the essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and 'exists' in the generating moments of this constitution" (1979: 5).

Secondly Wendt writes "scientific realism can, in principle, call an ontology 'scientific' even if it includes unobservable generative structures." He disagrees with empiricists who tend to "equate the real with the experientially knowable" (1987: 351). In this perspective Wendt argues that states are also purposive actors with a sense of 'Self' and hence for him "states are people too" (Wendt 1999: 194). Therefore "states are the kinds of entities to which we can attribute identities and interests" (Wendt 1999: 224).

First he writes that "Identities are constituted by both internal and external structures," which means that ideas held by the Self and ideas held by the Other can enter into identity.

---

<sup>6</sup> Dessler defines ontology as "the concrete referents of an explanatory discourse". (1989: 445)

<sup>7</sup> In other words, his ideas are seen as a "middle ground between realist (positivist) and interpretive (relativist or post-positivist) approaches middle ground". (Adler 1997: 322)

Because “The character of this internal-external relationship varies”, Wendt says that there are several “kinds” of identity, and discusses four: (1) personal or corporate, (2) type, (3) role, and (4) collective (Wendt 1999: 224). On constructivism literature, “Identities are necessary, in international politics and domestic society alike, in order to ensure at least some minimal level of predictability and order” (Hopf 1998: 174). Defensive realism also pays attention to unit-level factors. Rendall first quotes Waltz words “Just as market theory at times requires a theory of the firm, so international-political theory at times needs a theory of the state” and adds “Structure matters, but so does agency” (2006: 540).

## **2.2. INSTITUTIONS AND STRUCTURE IN IRAN’S FOREIGN POLICY MAKING**

The key institution for Iranian foreign policy decision-making process is the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC - *Shurāye Āliye Amniyate Mellī*). In the Iranian constitution, its duties are clarified as: “determining the defense and security policies of the country within the boundaries defined by the leadership; coordinating political, social, informational, cultural, and economical activities in relation to general defense and security concerns; benefiting from the country’s material and spiritual resources in confronting domestic and foreign threats.” (IRI Cons. art.176) It comprises the heads of the three powers (legislation, execution and judiciary); the commander-in-chief of the armed forces; the administrative officer of the budget and programming; two representatives elected by the leadership; the ministers of state, foreign affairs, and intelligence; the highest designated minister and the highest authority of the army and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.” The armed forces had gained an important voice gradually on external affairs. But the armed forces of Iran have also a complex structure. Basically it has two pillars one is the official army (*Artesh*) and the other is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Sepah*). The latter has been formed as a reliable armed force right after the revolution. Because the new regime saw the official army as a remedy from the former regime, it has created a new force. As explained below, it has gained a strong voice not only on defense policies but also on economy and foreign operations especially through its assets abroad. As a result it has a strong voice over the decisions taken in the

SNSC. However no matter how powerful any member of the council would be, its decisions can be executed only after the approval of the Supreme Leader who has the final word on all policies within the regime. Because, as described in the constitution through the *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists) system, the Supreme Leader is responsible for the leadership of Muslims.

The complexity of foreign policy making processes and both formal and informal institutions in Iran makes it hard to understand the checks and balances system within the country. This complex system has been described as “a unique hybrid regime with bifurcated institutions in which the division of labor and decision making is divided between elective institutions and a parallel set of more powerful, non-elective institutions” (Lob 2016: 317).

The explicitly defined position of the Supreme Leader as having the final words on foreign policy has convinced many analysts that he is the sole authority and answers to no one but himself. For example a former Iranian intelligence officer and exiled reformist Akbar Ganji defines the Supreme leader as the “latter-day sultan” and the Iranian system as a “neosultanate” (Ganji, 2008).

Actually, much deeper analysis would help one to reach a completely different conclusion. Because “foreign policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran results from complex, multifaceted interactions among numerous governmental and non-governmental participants” (Maleki 2002: 6), it is not a “one-man dictatorship. Rather, it is ruled by an oligarchy composed of fundamentalist clerics and laypersons” and this “is not, and has never been, very cohesive. It is divided by social class, policy preferences, and individual ambition for power” (Kazemzade 2017: 200). Hence it is important to understand the complex structure of the decision-making process of Iran. Because “The constitution does not grant the monopoly of decision-making to the leader, and often obscures who makes the decisions and how” (Roshandel 2000: 108).

The roles of different decision-making processes and the power structures were defined in the constitution, first written in 1979, and ten years later underwent some important

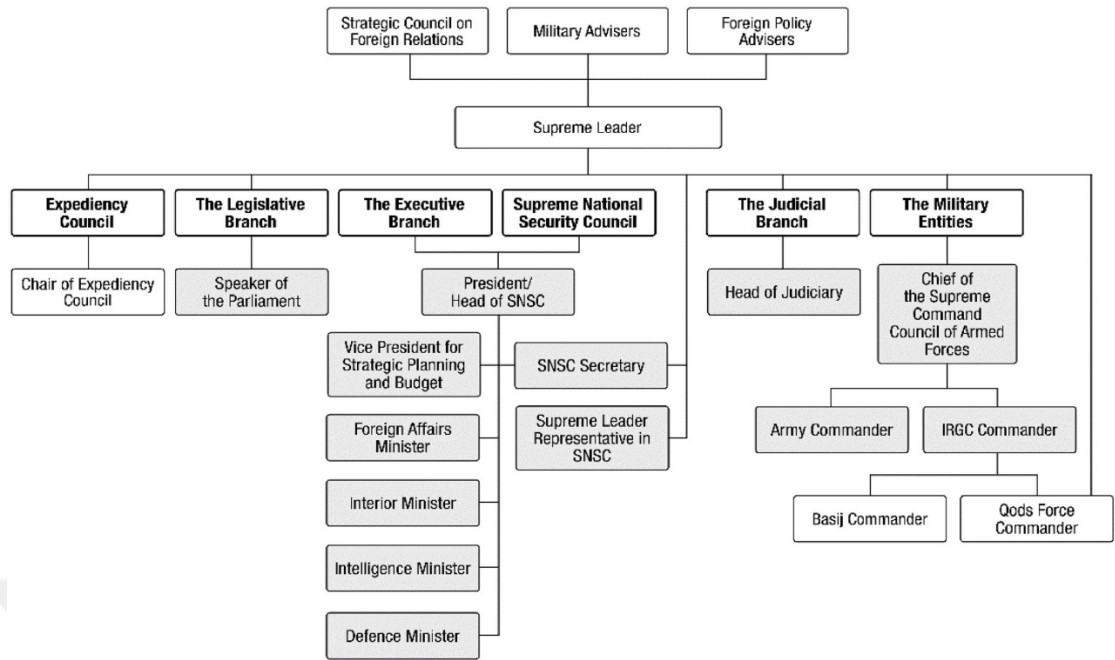
revisions. The first version of the constitution included both prime ministry and presidency and their duties and responsibilities were not clearly defined, which resulted in struggles between the elites. But at the end of a decade “the Constitutional Reform Committee, which Khomeini convened in late April 1989, finally brought an end to dualism in the executive branch. The office of the prime minister was abolished, and his responsibilities were assumed by the president, who alone would hold executive authority” (Buchta 2000: 22-23). The amendment was approved in a referendum on 28 July 1989. Additionally two new bodies were added to the constitution: The Council for the Expediency of the System (*Majma' Taškhīs Maslahat Nezām*) and the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC)<sup>8</sup>.

The first one was first created in 1988 with the responsibility of “resolving the differences between the *Majles* (parliament) and the Council of Guardians (a twelve-member body that, among other powers, can review the decisions of the *Majles* for compatibility with Sharia and the constitution and decides who can or cannot, run for elected offices) on domestic issues” and a year later it was added to the revised constitution that it “was to also provide the consensus of the elites on major issues to the supreme leader, especially regarding long-term grand strategies on economic and foreign policies.”

On the other hand the SNSC was designed to create unity on specific short-term issues on the areas of domestic security, defense the national security and foreign policy. It is important and a useful mechanism to show reflex in the face of an unexpected event. Hence “the SNSC appears to have become increasingly agile in devising tactical responses to regional developments, be it supporting Iraqi Kurds when they were threatened by the Islamic State’s onslaught in 2014 or condemning the 2016 coup attempt against the Turkish government” (ICG 2018: ii).

---

<sup>8</sup> For further information on how and why those two institutions were formed see: Shakibi, Z. 2010, *Khatami and Gorbachev: Politics of Change in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the USSR*. I.B. Tauris, London. pp. 112-142.



Shaded background: Member of SNSC

Table 1: Security decision-makers in Iran (ICG 2018: 36).

Whether a specific issue would be discussed in the SNSC or not depends on what the issue is about. As Maleki writes

Foreign Minister is empowered to act on some cases within the broad parameters of Iranian national policy and interests. However, for major events, the Foreign Minister reports directly to the President, who decides whether the case warrants action by the Cabinet of Ministers or by the High Council on National Security (HCNS). When a case has different economic, cultural, political, and social dimensions, the President sends the report to the Cabinet to ascertain the views of different Ministers, with the exception that the purely diplomatic, security and defence cases are sent to the HCNS Secretariat. For the latter types of cases, the Secretary of HCNS would present them in the main session after preparing the background of the cases. After the Council decides on a course of action, then the Iranian President, who is also the head of the HCNS, would send the report to the Iranian Supreme Leader. If the Leader confirms the action, then it would be operationalized and sent to military sections, and to the Foreign Ministry (2002: 7).

Hence on which grounds an issue is being discussed is very important. Because “on issues where Iran employs hard power, the military has a strong voice in SNSC meetings. When diplomacy is the focus, the foreign ministry leads the debate” (ICG 2018: 12).

Taking all into account, the Supreme Leadership, the Presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the SNSC and the IRGC can be seen as the key institutions within the Iranian foreign policy making structure. Those are explained below most within the framework of the constitution.

### 2.2.1. The Supreme Leader and the Office of Supreme Leader

The supreme leader (*Rahbar*) is the most powerful person in the power structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The leader's power is based on the concept of *velayat-e faqih*<sup>9</sup>, which was theorized by the founding father of the revolution, Khomeini, within the imamate context and taking inspiration from Shia paradigms. (Kaan 2011: 24). This concept integrates political powers into religious background and provides the needed infrastructure to institutionalize the ideas of the Islamic Revolution. Within this context the constitution gives the leader a very broad powers almost all sphere of life in Iran. Among the responsibilities of the leader the first one is “determining the overall politics of the Islamic Republic system of Iran after consultation with the Expediency Council” (IRI Cons. art. 110). This gives the leader to have the final saying on issues including foreign policy, defense, national security, war, and peace etc.

He is the commander-in-chief and appoints head of the judiciary power, the president of the mass media, the chief of the general staff, the commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the supreme commanders-in-chief of the security and armed forces. His dominance over foreign policy making is highlighted by a former deputy foreign minister under Khatami rule, when in 2007 he told a *Newsweek* reporter who had asked him who really ran Iran that

The Americans should not try to get around the [supreme] leader by speaking to other officials. Talking to the Iranian state means talking to the leader. He knows about every word that is exchanged in negotiations. Iran's domestic policy may be dispersed, but its foreign policy is extremely centralized (Ganji 2008: 59).

Hence, to put it in US President Harry Truman's words, “the buck stops” at the supreme leader's desk. The Office also employs ten special advisers who are “more powerful than ministers and other government functionaries, and they have the authority to intervene in

---

<sup>9</sup> The concept of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the supreme jurist) means the supreme jurist will be responsible of the temporal rule until the return of Mahdi (who will appear on the Day of Judgment as believed in the official religion of Iran Islam and the Twelver Jafari school). This concept was to legitimize “temporal rule in the absence of the twelfth imam by creating a surrogate for the Mahdi in the form of the supreme jurist” This was a fundamental deviation from Shia theological doctrines which “characterize all temporal rule as illegitimate until the return of the Mahdi” and ask a clear distance between clerics and earthly rule. Consequently since the revolution there is an obvious clash of religious interpretation between traditional clerics and “regime clerics”.



any matter of state” (Buchta 2000: 48). On foreign policy front the post is run by Ali Akbar Velayati since was appointed by the leader in 1997 after serving as the minister of foreign affairs for sixteen years. On the relation with Syria, he is accepted as the “mouthpiece of Khamenei’s foreign policy” due to the fact that his “relationship with the Assad regime in Syria is substantial, dating back to the early years of the revolution and extending to the present day” (Fulton 2011: 4-9). This should be seen in the context that in practice the implementations may vary according to the choices of the leaders. “Both Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini, the regime’s founder, and the current Supreme Leader have used personal envoys and trusted agents to conduct a parallel foreign policy outside the confines of the foreign ministry and beyond the oversight of the executive branch” (Fulton 2011: 2).

Moreover realities on the ground show that the Supreme Leader has been shaping the grand strategy and giving the final approval on Syria related decisions. A very recent case proves that also. In late February 2019, Syrian President Bashar al Assad made his first visit to Iran since the outbreak of Syrian War in 2011. He met in Tehran with the Supreme Leader and in the meeting neither the president nor the minister of foreign affairs was present. This later allegedly caused the minister to resign as a protest which was later taken back.

### **2.2.2. The President**

The post of presidency is defined as the head of the executive branch in the constitution. The president’s effects on foreign policy making depends on the power relation with the supreme leader and his ability to convince the leader on shaping the implementation since the leader is also granted a great responsibility on executive power. But also because “the president implements the country’s foreign policy” it gives him a “certain latitude in determining tone and tactics. But can also shape the system’s grand strategies through the SNSC, at least half of whose members are his appointees” (ICG 2018: 7). Consequently the ideological choices and perception of the president are highly important in terms of framing the foreign policy. One of the most striking turn in the rationale of Iranian foreign policy making might give an idea in this context. During his presidency (1997-2005)

Khatami presented a new, positive impression, hence created a relaxed atmosphere and improved relations especially with the EU. The popular reaction and disappointment caused by his unrealized economical promises opened way a hardliner figure, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to become president and serve for two terms between 2005 and 2013. Ehteshami writes Ahmadinejad decided to “pursue with more vigour the Eastern shift and the Third World-first policies originally articulated in the 1980s” and “revived the fiery rhetoric against Israel”. This was a clear rejection of Khatami’s positive tune and on rhetoric he declared his stance very often. But in practice how far he could go was decided by the system, i.e. the leadership. Because “although president has executive authority to pursue Iran’s relations with the rest of the world, that authority is still limited” (Ehteshami 2008: XV).

### **2.2.3. The Minister of Foreign Affairs**

According to the constitution (IRI Cons. art. 133), the minister is appointed by the president, is confirmed by the parliament and also can be dismissed by the president. The ministry is, in practice, responsible for implementing routine issues of foreign policy. Because the constitution emphasizes the supreme leader has the final words on the foreign policy, whether the minister answers to the president or the leader depends on the practical power balances within the existing situation (Kazemzadeh 2017: 201).

And such struggles over power balances are repeatedly seen among Iranian political elite due to specific traditions in the policy making structure. Warnaar writes “with the supreme leader as the head of the executive branch, the power of the president is limited” because “there is an unwritten rule that the leader chooses the ministers for the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Petroleum, and Intelligence and Security” and consequently those ministers mostly follow the leader’s instruction. When this is challenged by the president, the leader tries all the possible ways to show the limits of power of president. When Ali Akbar Velayati after sixteen years serving as the minister of foreign affairs was replaced by then President Khatami in 1997, in an open challenge to the president, Khamenei granted him the post of special advisor on international leader to the leader. In another case, although a different ministry, Ahmadinejad dismissed Heydar Moslehi, the

influential minister of intelligence and a close ally of Supreme Leader Khamenei in April 2011. In almost 30 minutes the leader had reinstated the minister and asked Ahmadinejad to either accept the decision or quit. After eleven days of staying his resident as a protest, he had to accept the decision (Alfoneh 2013: 36). These two cases show critical ministry posts had to follow the leader's domain.

Moreover regarding ambassadorial positions, "the ambassadors to foreign countries are selected upon the recommendation of the minister of foreign affairs" and they need the approval of the president (IRI Cons. art. 128). One of the most important sources of information on international affairs is those ambassadors and Iranian embassies. Since "the ambassadorial analysis comes via Iran's Foreign Ministry", the ministry sustains an important level of duty as well (Maleki 2002: 7). The Foreign Minister is also a member of the SNSC.

#### **2.2.4. The Supreme National Security Council**

According to the Article 176 of the Constitution of Iran, the SNSC has the duties of:

- (1) determining the defense and security policies of the country within the boundaries defined by the leadership;
- (2) coordinating political, social, informational, cultural, and economical activities in relation to general defense and security concerns, and
- (3) benefiting from the country's material and spiritual resources in confronting domestic and foreign threats.

Members are "the heads of the three powers; the commander-in-chief of the armed forces; the administrative officer of the budget and programming; two representatives elected by the leadership; the ministers of state, foreign affairs, and intelligence; the highest designated minister and the highest authority of the army and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps." Though the president is the head of the Council, the secretary has greater power. So far all the secretaries<sup>10</sup> have been selected from one of the two representatives of the leader. Thus, even though the president elects the secretary, it is believed that the consent of the leader is required.

---

<sup>10</sup> Hassan Rouhani (October 1989 to August 2005), Ali Larijani (August 2005 to October 2007), Saeed Jalili (October 2007 to September 2013), and IRGC Admiral Ali Shamkhani (September 2013 to present)

Furthermore, the constitution explicitly writes that the decision of the council can be implemented only after the approval of the leadership. Decisions taken in the Council are mostly also accepted by the Leader but not always. The best-known example is “when the SNSC decided to invade Afghanistan in 1998 in retaliation for the Taliban’s assassination of eight Iranian diplomats” and the leader rejected the idea (ICG 2018: 6).

### **2.2.5. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)**

After the revolution of 1979, despite requests from the Iranian revolutionaries and left-wing groups to disband the armed forces, Khomeini not only reconstituted the army but also formed “a parallel military force, the Revolutionary Guards, to protect the revolution and ordered the creation of the *Basij* which is an all-volunteer paramilitary organization to help with law enforcement, the policing of moral issues, and the provision of social services” (Ganji 2008: 56). During the Iraq-Iran War, the performance of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami* or *Sepah* for short) proved its capabilities and, benefiting from this prestige, gained a political position. After the war it was institutionalized and gradually came to supersede the official army (the Islamic Republic of Iran Army), as the “nation’s premier standing armed forces.” In addition to ground, navy and air forces, Revolutionary Guards has two distinct units: one is *Basij* and the other is *Quds* Force.

*Basij* is a voluntary organization, acting as the supervisors of enforcements of law and social services. Secondly *Quds* Force focuses solely on extraterritorial operations. And “Iran’s operations in support of its allies -which generally include arms shipments, provision of advisers, training, and funding- are carried out by the *Quds* Force” (Katzman 2016: 4). The organization is currently commanded by Major General Qasem Soleimani who is the main face of Iran’s armed interventions and strategy in the Syrian Crisis.

Especially after the war with Iraq, the power of *Sepah* extended due to practical needs: “The authorities made control of the streets a priority, and devoted considerable resources to this effort. But the price of being dependent on the guardians of the revolution for regime survival is that they cannot be kept out of politics” (Chubin 2014: 64-67).

Khomeini's charisma and unquestionable power helped him to create limits for the Guards. But this did not last long after his death. Because "lacking Khomeini's charisma, Khamenei is more dependent upon the IRGC's informal power to maintain his significance" (Negahban 2017: 37) and it has transformed from a palace guard to a multifaceted military force with political and economic interests of its own" (Sherill 2012: 42).

Especially the era of Ahmadinejad was a breaking point for the organization. Because many *Sepah* officers gained key posts in the government and involved in politics. Economy wise this was also important because this increasing political power "mirrors the IRGC's increased role in Iran's economy, where it has progressed from black marketeering to open, large-scale commercial participation, benefiting from government contracts provided by the Ahmadinejad administration" (*ibid*). But the support for the president was not an uncompromising one. After the crisis between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei as in the Moslehi case, "the IRGC has generally supported the line of the Supreme Leader against Ahmadinejad in the conflict between the civilian leaders" (Alfone 2013: 36).

The IRGC shows its power on foreign policy making with both legal and illegal ways. For legal interventions "blocking the reduction of IRGC privileges, placing Hossein Abdollahian, a powerful IRGC representative, in Rouhani's Foreign Ministry" can be seen as examples (Negahban 2017: 38). This showed decisions in the administration cannot be taken against *Sepah's* will.

On the illegal front, traditionally being seen as a hardliner, the Guards prove its "secret hand" especially during eras of rapprochement. Arjomand, defining the Guards as "the military-intelligence cartel" argues that this it is "able to sabotage the official pragmatic foreign policy with impunity" and gives the assassination of the Shah's last prime minister, Shahpur Bakhtiar, during a *détente* with the US as an example. Moreover he writes that while President Rafsanjani was taking steps to improve relations with the European Union, "the assassination of a Kurdish opposition group in Germany in September 1992, the shooting of Rushdie's Norwegian translator in October 1993, and

the explosion at the Jewish center in Buenos Aires that killed 80 people in July 1994” can be seen as works of this cartel (Arjomand 2009: 194).<sup>11</sup> This proves with its vast area of mobilization and operation, *Sepah* can project power and interfere at the diplomatic negotiations.

### **2.3. THE PROMINENT ACTORS IN THE POLICY MAKING PROCESS (OF IRANIAN DECISION MAKERS AND EFFECTS ON POLICY MAKING PROCESS)**

The Post-revolutionary Iranian political elites are generally defined in two camps: reformists, pragmatists and moderates on side, and conservatives, traditionalists and extremists on the other (Menashri 2007: 155)<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand none of them are against the very foundation of the Islamic Republic and are not critical of the roots of the regime. “Hardliners such as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, pragmatists such as former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and reformists such as the 2009 presidential candidate Mir Hussein Moussavi, all support the Islamist regime” (Sherill 2012: 41).

But this categorization is valid only for domestic politics. On foreign affairs, Hadian describes two major groups with the first being by far the official and more dominant position: “pro-stabilization” and “pro-minimal engagement” (2015: 2). The first one argues that “there is a tremendous amount of insecurity surrounding Iran,” thus the country “cannot be an island of stability surrounded by unpredictable states and ongoing conflict.” As a result, “Iran must act strongly to try to reestablish security and stability throughout the region. If a prerequisite for this security is cooperation with the Saudi government, or even with the United States, that is fine.”

The second, “pro-minimal engagement,” argues that the country is already overstretched in other countries, taking part in fights which are not Iran’s fights. Thus “Iranian engagement in the region should be reduced to a bare minimum.” As mentioned, the first

---

<sup>11</sup> For roles and powers in different areas such as economy, education, media etc. and for a list of “business organizations affiliated with the IRGC or influenced by IRGC personnel” see Wehrey et al, 2009. And for a recent analysis on quantitative military and economic capabilities of the IRGC, see Katzman 2016: 20.

<sup>12</sup> Raket defines the main political factions in three groups as the Conservative faction, the Pragmatist faction and the Reformist faction. On different views among them see Raket 2008: 51-81.

view has always been the dominant orientation in the minds of foreign policy makers. Consequently while the key decision makers during the Syrian crisis explained below it should be kept in mind that behind their logic, the idea of “pro-stabilization” has always been prevailing. Thus, this is in parallel with the view that Islamic Republic’s foreign policy is based on the “policy of continuity” and the only changes are on discourse and the means of implementation.

When it comes to analyzing the actors in Iranian foreign policy among the institutions which listed in the previous section, understanding the positioning of the supreme leaders and presidents who hold those posts since the early days of the Syrian crisis would be beneficial.

### **2.3.1. The Supreme Leader**

#### ***Ali Khamenei (1989-...)***

Islamic Republic of Iran starting from very foundation witnessed only two supreme leaders: Ruhollah Khomeini (1979-1989) and upon his death Ali Khamenei who’s replaced Khomeini.

Before going into details for the perceptions and calculations of Khamenei, a short account for those of Khomeini is needed here since his ideas and actions set a clear path for others to follow. He emphasized two basic principles: “Neither East, Nor West, only the Islamic Republic” (*nah sharq, nah gharb, faqat jumhuri-islami*) and “Export of the Revolution” (*sodur-e enqelāb*) (Rakel 2007: 167). The first was referring to “both political and ideological struggle against the superpowers in order to prevent Islam to be contained by all foreign ideas” because of the suspicion against the great powers’ intentions which resulted in “the principle of non-alignment and non-participation in great power conflicts” (Ekşi and Uzun 2017: 207). He “divided the world into two broad categories of ‘oppressors’ and ‘oppressed’, equated Iran’s national interests with those of dispossessed nations and portrayed Islam as the source of revolution and liberation for all Muslim and exploited masses” (Colleau 2015: 18).

However, Raket writes “the principle of ‘Export of the Revolution’ has never really been an ideological or revolutionary pursuit, but rather a survival strategy in the war with Iraq and later an approach to the IRI’s political and economic problems at home” (2012: 126). Furthermore, despite the general opinion otherwise, as Ganji writes, “Since the 1979 revolution, religion has served the Iranian state, not the other way around” (2008: 50). He quotes Khomeini to highlight his thesis that national interest was preceding in the Supreme Leader’s mind: "The state ... takes precedence over all the precepts of sharia," he wrote in 1988. "The ruler can destroy a mosque or a house if it impedes the construction of a road .... The state can temporarily prevent the hajj [the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, an important religious duty] when it considers it to be contrary to the interests of the Islamic state.”

For the first principle dominance of the national interest in Khomeini’s mind was realized occasionally. As “perhaps the most striking example of dominance of pragmatic factors over ideological influences in Iran's foreign policy during Khomeini 's lifetime” Ramazani highlights “the secret purchase of arms from the United States, "the Great Satan" and Israel, "the lesser Satan" (2004: 556) during the Iran-Iraq War. Khomeini set the post-revolution era’s main discourse on the sharp and uncompromising struggle against the United States and Israel. But this secret cooperation alone proves how pragmatic can the new leadership be when it comes to guarantee the survival of new regime.

Upon the death of Khomeini in 1989, Ali Khamenei became the supreme leader and is holding this position still today. An article on his strategic thinking argues that security concerns always prevail and for him, the Israel and Saudi Arabia axis intends to “provide necessary grounds for running a new conflict between Iran and the US.” Because of those threats, the Leader believes that “Iran should have high military preparedness.” Thus, as a strategy of foreign policy and national security, instead of a regional hegemony strategy, Iranian policy makers, led by Khomeini “have adopted protection of territorial integrity and political consolidation, as well as neutralizing the U.S. and its regional allies’ threats.” (Barzegar and Rezai 2017: 32). On the other hand Ganji says that Khomeini is not categorically against creating relations with the USA:



Breaking off ties with the United States is among our fundamental policies. Of course, we have never said that this breaking off of ties is forever. But the U.S. administration's conditions are such that establishing ties is currently detrimental to the nation, and naturally we will not pursue them.... The day when ties are advantageous, I will be the first to say that you should establish ties (Ganji 2008, 61).

Khamenei's decisions for foreign policy are based on realist principles which can be explained in the context of "balance of power, balance of threat, interconnected security and offense-defense strategy." (Barzegar and Rezai 2017: 34). For the first, the leader focuses on both internal and external balancing. Because in terms of balance of military power Iran feels highly threatened by its traditional rivals in the region. A comparison on military budgets show the reason. According to calculations of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in 2016, the military budget of Saudi Arabia was more than 87 billion dollars, the United Arab Emirates was 22.8 billion dollars, Israel was 16.1 billion dollars, while Iran's budget was 10.3 billion dollars. Khomeini tries to overcome this imbalance by regarding "the ideal option for active deterrence to be ballistic missiles".

Khomeini also repeatedly mentions a "threat against threat" strategy, which can be seen in his speeches such as

We never want to attack any nation or state. We never seek bloody war. The Iranian nation can prove it. However, we are a nation that will react decisively and powerfully to any threat. We are not a nation to see and watch those materialist powers threaten Iran... We threaten against any threat (Khamenei.ir, 2011).

### **2.3.2. The Presidents:<sup>13</sup>**

#### ***Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013)***

After Khomeini and Khamenei, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) Rafsanjani has been described as the most important figure in the post revolution political history of Iran. He was the speaker of the Majles (1980–1989), acting commander of the armed forces during the Iran–Iraq war (Khomeini had transferred his powers to him), president (1989–

---

<sup>13</sup> The first two presidents in the post-revolution period, Abolhassan Banisadr (1980–1981) Mohammad-Ali Rajai (1981) were not able to implement their own policies. And third president Ali Khamenei (1981–1989) was also more of a right hand for the Supreme Leader Khomeini. Thus this section focuses mainly on two presidents since the civil war in Syria broke out in 2011 but shortly mention two previous presidents who came to power Khomeini's death.

1997), and chairman of the Assembly of Experts. Until his death in 2017 he had been the head of the Expediency Council since its establishment in 1989 and a member of the Assembly of Experts (Kazemzadeh 2017: 203). To rebuke him, Iranians used to call him “*kooseh*,” which in Farsi, this means “both a person who has no beard, and a shark (which is an icon of brilliance and brutality)” (Eshraghi and Baji 2012).

Rafsanjani became president in 1989 when, after Khomeini’s death in 1989, then president Khamenei took his role. He served for two terms until 1997. When he got the post, the eight-year-long war with Iraq had just finished, infrastructure was collapsed, cities very heavily bombed and society was going through a serious trauma. Thus his main focus was on the “reconstruction” of the country undertaking important construction projects, which would later give him the nickname *sardar-e sazan-degi* (commander of construction) (IRNA 2018). On foreign policy his focus was twofold: (1) the restoration of stability to the Persian Gulf region and (2) “faster reintegration into the world capitalist system” (Ehteshami 1995: 146).

The winds of opening up to the international arena which was started by Rafsanjani was continued by his successor Mohammad Khatami as well: “To the pragmatic consideration of the national interest in Iran’s foreign policy calculation President Mohammad Khatami tried to add a democratic dimension” (Ramazani 2004: 557). His main foreign policy motto was dialogue between civilizations. He repeatedly emphasized policy of detente, mutual respect and a request for dialogue between civilizations. The principles of Khatami’s detente policy were:

promoting of Iran relations with European countries; promoting stability of Middle East region; active participation of Iran in international organizations; reconstructing of Iran’s relations with other countries; protecting of national identity and values; providing peaceful environment in the world; strengthening dialogue among civilizations; strengthening of Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Non-Aligned Movement, and cooperation of North-South (Amiri and Soltani 2010: 203).

These principles, Menashri, quoting an Iranian academic, wrote, “bore fruit almost immediately” (2007: 159) and “a real process of rapprochement soon began to develop in Iran’s relations with the outside world, particularly with its Arab neighbors.”

But on the other hand Khatami was “balanced by his rivals’ hard-line attitudes” which “dictated Iran’s foreign (as well as domestic) outlook, preventing real detente in Iran’s

foreign policy” (Menashri 2007: 159). Overall, despite the fact that many were not satisfied with domestic reforms, “his foreign policy has enjoyed relative success” (Ramazani 2004: 558). But it was the failure with domestic reforms which led to a sharp change in the leading ideology in the post of presidency.

Former mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, replacing Khatami, became president in 2005. This repeated anti-Israel rhetoric became a basic characteristic of his foreign policy. According to Menashri, such statements were tolerated by the system because “First, by his extremism, Ahmadinejad has made Iranian radicals appear more pragmatic. Second, Ahmadinejad has raised the bar of Iranian extremism to new heights; other figures - if and when they find it appropriate - can step into negotiations with comfortable bargaining space” (2007: 159). Meanwhile, major diplomatic institutions in the policy making structure “acted as a check-and-balance mechanism, preventing the country from implementing adventurous policies at the regional and global levels” (Barzegar and Divsallar 2017: 43-44).

In fact, Ahmadinejad’s rationale was somehow a continuation for Iranian foreign policy system. Barzegar writes in foreign policy of Iran there are two “complementary elements” which are firstly “a policy of ‘alliance building,’ and secondly, an ‘accommodating’ approach.” “Both elements have always featured prominently in the conduct of Iranian foreign policy” (2010: 181). During Rafsanjani and Khatami eras, accommodating the foreign policy within the context of *détente* took the lead. What Ahmadinejad did was to reverse the priorities and to highlight the importance of Iran’s regional allies while putting accommodating approach in the second row. Even more “through its foreign policy of resistance and its efforts to increase South–South cooperation, the Iranian regime tried to use its marginalization at the hands of the West to its advantage among the non-West” (Warnaar 2013: 169). This was sloganized as the “look to the East” policy. But as a hardliner he also had the full support of the IRGC, especially in his first term.

On the other hand in the domestic arena there was a huge power struggle. Mostly because of its economic expansion in this era thanks to Ahmadinejad, “the IRGC’s power has grown to rival Khamenei’s.” and now “The Guard can co-opt politically moderate elites

into its business network and mobilize support amongst the underclasses by offering, through the *Basij*, job training, scholarships, rural projects, and other financial incentives” (Negahban 2017: 37). However, in 2011 Khamenei denied Ahmadinejad’s decision on removing the Intelligence Minister Heidar Moslehi. The president, as a sign protest did not leave his house for eleven days until he publicly accepted the Leader’s wish. “Consequently, after April 2011 Ahmadinejad did not have much power, even that granted to the presidency by the constitution. Ahmadinejad’s role in foreign policy was then eclipsed by foreign minister Ali Akbar Salehi (a pragmatic hard-liner) and the secretary of the SNSC, Saeed Jalili (an ultra-hard-liner close to the supreme leader)” (Kazemzadeh 2017: 202). And the presidency lost most of its leverage over foreign policy making. This was the case until the end of term in 2013 when he was replaced by a moderate leader, Hassan Rouhani.

#### ***Hassan Rouhani (2013-...)***

Coming from the clergy, Rouhani had served as the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council from 1989 to 2005 as one of the representatives of Khamenei and was also the chief nuclear negotiator between 2003-2005. He was selected as the member of the reformists. He won the presidential election in 2013 with a landslide victory in the first round. From day one he showed a great separation from the rhetoric of Ahmadinejad. During the campaign he had been repeating a win-win slogan: “centrifuges should spin, but so should people’s lives.” He reflected a search for balance in foreign policy discourse. Moreover this softening in tone and look for pragmatism received support from the Iranian society. Internal and external dynamics were highly crucial in this change.

This is partially due to rapid demographic changes, new developmental demands, and widespread global communication networks shaping a new national character. At the same time, the global environment is changing, and security threats against Iran in the Middle East, including extremism and instability along with regional rivalry, are growing (Barzegar and Divsallar 2017: 40).

Rouhani came to power with a promise of signing the nuclear deal. He quickly moved away from Ahmadinejad’s legacy and did not directly mention the “look to the East” policy (Akbarzadeh 2014: 97). He argued that the country should not have “permanent enemies.”

The most striking outcome of his foreign policy was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which came as a result of years of negotiations including secret meetings: “The first undisclosed meeting took place in Oman in March 2013 and was followed by several more encounters until the November 2013 interim nuclear deal” (Colleau 2015: 280). The deal was finalized on July 2015.<sup>14</sup>

With signing the deal, his pragmatic foreign policy has resulted “in easing of international sanctions under the JCPOA, increased worldwide attention to Iran’s views, and consideration of new projects that could position Iran as a trade and transportation hub in the region” (Katzman 2016: 3). Despite being his representative in the SNSC for more than 15 years, at least on discourse level he succeeded in differentiating himself from hardliners, and underlined that the JCPOA is “a beginning for creating an atmosphere of friendship and co-operation with various countries” (Katzman 2016: 4).

The second most influential phenomenon of Rouhani presidency in terms of foreign affairs was the Arab Spring. (This is further discussed in Section ‘2011-2017: Syrian Crisis.’) But in terms of foreign policy rationale it is important to highlight that civil war in Syria has resulted in a strategic alliance with Russia. “This idea was to back cooperation with Russia while working proactively to prevent it from gaining the upper hand in influencing the Assad regime,” and it has “gradually turned into a strategic partnership on issues beyond Syria: from intelligence sharing and cooperation in Afghanistan to Russia vetoing Western-led resolutions against Iran in the UN Security Council” (ICG 2018: 18).

In the shadow of partnership with Russia and the JCPOA, the Rouhani administration was in constant power struggle with the hardliners, i.e. the Revolutionary Guards. Firstly

---

<sup>14</sup> “P5+1-Iran negotiations on a comprehensive settlement began in February 2014 but missed several self-imposed deadlines. On April 2, 2015, the parties reached a framework for a JCPOA, and the JCPOA was finalized on July 14, 2015. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231 of July 20, 2015, endorsed the JCPOA and contains restrictions (less stringent than in Resolution 1929) on Iran’s importation or exportation of conventional arms (for up to five years), and on development and testing of ballistic missiles capable of delivering a nuclear weapon (for up to eight years). On January 16, 2016, the IAEA certified that Iran completed the work required for sanctions relief and ‘Implementation Day’ was declared. U.S. officials, including Ambassador Stephen Mull, who directs U.S. implementation of the JCPOA, have testified on several occasions since Implementation Day that Iran is complying with the JCPOA” (Katzman 2016: 17).

he received a tacit agreement with Khamenei. The latter's retreat (in his words "heroic flexibility") on nuclear agreements provided Rouhani with a strong base to make concessions to get sanctions lifted (Kazemzadeh 2017: 207). But this was far from a clear victory. Each side repeatedly blamed them: Rouhani for undermining the deal, the IRGC with "opening the door for foreign intrusion into the Islamic Republic" (Negahban 2017: 35).<sup>15</sup> Actually most of Rouhani's foreign policy activism was limited with the nuclear deal. At least this was the idea hardliners and the IRGC were trying to highlight and to prove they have the upperhand in foreign policy. This was most obvious when General Soleimani, head of the Quds Force, with an indirect message to the President declared for the minister of foreign affairs "Dr. [Muhammad Javad] Zarif, had a clear mission, and it was a nuclear deal and was not given to him for another matter" (Fars News 2016).

### **2.3.3. The IRGC And the Quds Force**

In early 2008 the commander of American forces in Iraq, General David Petraeus was given a cell phone by the Iraqi President Jalal Talabani. There was a text message which read "Dear General Petraeus, you should know that I, Qasem Soleimani, control the policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan. And indeed, the ambassador in Baghdad is a Quds Force member. The individual who's going to replace him is a Quds Force member" (Filkins 2013).

As explained above Quds Force is the branch of the IRGC which is responsible for operations out of Iran. And Soleimani heading the force since 1998 has a unique role in its increasing role in Iranian foreign policy making and implementation. The main power of the Quds Force comes from the fact that it can be used as tool to face the threats out of the country. For example when the American war plans against were leaked during the

---

<sup>15</sup> Kazemzadeh lists steps taken by the Guards to restrain Rouhani while not undermining the JCPOA: "testing a ballistic missile (with the slogan 'Israel must be wiped off the face of the earth' in Hebrew and Persian on the missile), broadcasting films of underground missile cities and silos, shooting rockets around 1,500 yards from an American aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf by the IRGC Navy, broadcasting the humiliating treatment of American Navy personnel who were detained after they had veered into Iranian territorial waters, clandestinely shipping large amounts of weapons to Yemen, arresting Iranian-American dual citizens, dramatically increasing executions, jailing of Rafsanjani's son on corruption charges, and continuing to keep Moussavi and Karrubi under house arrest (their release was among Rouhani's campaign promises)" (2017: 208).

so-called War on Terror, a *Sepah* officer declared: “If the Americans show madness and attack us we will not defend ourselves only within our borders. We have a long and powerful arm, and we can threaten American interests anywhere” (Negahban 2017: 38). It goes without saying that this “arm” was the Quds Force.

The Soleimani leadership gained reputation first in the post-Saddam Iraq against American invasion. Soleimani formed a Shiite militant network and targeted American forces through it. “Through its work with these clients, Quds has emerged as Iran’s primary mechanism of coercive influence outside its borders and a pillar of its defense strategy” (Ostovar 2016: 2). Increasing experience in the Iraqi front made the Quds Force under Soleimani leadership a perfect asset during the Syrian crisis for Tehran. And both in Iraq and Syria the aim was to protect allies of Iran but the discourse was religion oriented. “In Syria, the IRGC was defending the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab—a mosque built near Damascus that Shiites believe houses the remains of Zaynab bint Ali, a sister of the Imam Husayn and revered hero in Shiism—and in Iraq, it was safeguarding the holy shrines of the imams and the Shia population” (*ibid*: 205). This was also seen in the way Soleimani formed its militant network for operations in Syria. With Shia forces from Afghan origin Fatemiyoun brigade and from Pakistani origin Zeinabiyoun brigade were formed and fought in Syria against the armed opposition under the Quds Force leadership.

And also it was the Syrian War which gave Soleimani a global publicity. Before that he was shadow figure and was not well-known. But with the war he had photos from front lines, celebration, praying etc. Moreover, from time to time he also participated in international meetings. For example, in 2015, he went to Russia to talk about and plan the involvement of Russian forces in the Syrian crisis. He takes such steps under the clear directives of the leader. Because he directly answers to the leader, and as a hardliner member of the IRGC since the very early days he has been seeing the crisis unfolded in Syria as a direct and existential threat to Iran and its interest in the region.

## CHAPTER 3

### IRAN'S SYRIA POLICY

#### 3.1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND WITH PERIODIZATION

In this work the periodization for Iran's Syria policy after the 1979 Revolution is made mostly according to Jubin M. Goodarzi's works. He defines the years between 1979 and 1988 as "formation years" and argues that "if one understands the period between 1979 and 1988, particularly the phase between 1985 and 1988, one can then easily comprehend and decipher how the partnership has evolved since, in spite of the radical changes and transformations that have occurred on the regional and international level" (2013: 10).

But first a brief background on pre-revolution relations is much needed. Iran was under the Pahlavi dynasty since 1925, founded by Reza Shah (1925-1941)<sup>16</sup> who was replaced by his son Mohammad Reza Shah in 1941. Meanwhile Syria was suffering from unstable political atmosphere since its independence in 1946 with repeated military coups or attempts. The relation between two countries was rather tense. Especially in 1965 when Ba'athist government in Syria defined Iranian Arab province of Khuzestan as a part of 'Arabistan', Iran withdrew its ambassador. But political changes in both countries and even more importantly in the region, pushed both states to improve relations.

In the years of 1970-71, Syria experienced a rapid transformation from a "revisionist state into more 'realistic' behavior" with Hafez Assad becoming president of Syria in 1971. Hinnebusch summarizes that in Syria

a weak regime's reckless policies toward Israel— partly followed for reasons of domestic legitimation—led to the 1967 military defeat, the rise of new realist leaders, and considerable state building, which gave leaders the internal autonomy of domestic pressures and the military

---

<sup>16</sup> Reza Shah was the face of a nation building era in Iran. He aimed changing the decentralized entity of Iran inherited from corrupt dynasties into a modern nation. For policies on culture to women, foreign policy to military please see Cronin, S. 2003, *The Making of Modern Iran: State and society under Riza Shah, 1921–1941*, Routledge Curzon, London. Reza Shah was also in a good cooperation with his Turkish counterpart, Ataturk who became much successful in modernization policies due to various reasons. For this see Atabaki, T. and Zürcher E.J. 2003, *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Atatürk and Reza Shah*, I.B. Tauris, London.



capabilities to effectively balance external threats. This turned Syria from a victim of regional politics into a formidable actor. (2002: 21)

For Ehteshami and Hinnebusch (1997: 68), Assad as a realist, “consistently sought to build up Syria’s military power, aiming at ‘strategic parity’ with Israel” and “his diplomacy was conditioned by the belief that a stable peace with Israel could only be built on a balance of power with it.” In this balance of power against Israel, Assad wanted to create “a power block in the Arab Levant with Damascus at its center” (Seale 1988: 493). His rationale was based on not “ideological abhorrence of Zionism” but on “the fear of the Jewish state’s military capabilities and the threat that Israel poses to Syrian influence” (Sadowski 2002: 151)<sup>17</sup>. The driving factors of Assad’s fears were “outstanding Syrian claims to the Golan Heights, concerns regarding Israeli ambitions in Lebanon, and Israeli economic hegemony” (Zerden 2007: 18).

In the first half of 1970s, Iran under (Mohammad) Reza Shah was repositioning itself according to the new circumstances in the region. Maltzahn writes at first, differences between Syria and Iran were very obvious since “ideologically, the two countries had not much in common. Syria was Arab nationalist, pro-Soviet and did not recognize Israel. Pahlavi Iran was an Iranian nationalist, pro-Western and – while never officially recognizing it – maintained close relations with Israel” (2013: 18). But the fact that Syria was becoming a more realist actor “coincided with Iran’s decision to play a more active role in the region following British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971 and its new-found economic power after the oil price revolution of 1973, which drastically improved its financial situation” (ibid: 20). Hence it was no surprise bilateral relations were improved and returned to ambassadorial level in 1973.

In addition to Israel, from Syria’s perceptive another regional source of threat was coming from neighboring Iraq. And this was something Syria had in common with Iran. Assad tried to form an anti-Iraq bloc with Iran. This was the reason behind Assad’s visit of Iran in 1975. Shah was also looking forward to gain support from Arab countries in the regional balance (Asl 2009: 231). But this attempt failed due to essential differences on

both states' policies on Israel. Shah "continued to maintain clandestine ties with Israel" and hence "relations cooled down after the visit" (Maltzahn 2013: 21).

But Assad, the so-called "Bismarck of the Middle East" (Marlowe 2000), in addition to "state-to-state level" relations, was also running the state-to-opposition level relations with oppositional Iranian figures of the Shah. Assad opened his doors to anti-shah names and even offered Khomeini asylum when the latter was forced to leave his political shelter in Iraq in October 1978. He rejected the invite and went to France instead, but this offer "left a good impression on Khomeini" (Maltzhan 2013: 25-27).

While state-to-state level relations wasn't going fruitful after 1975 visit and Assad was more focusing on the opposition, he made another attempt to create a coalition with Iraq against Israel but because of both mutual distrust and an alleged Syria-supported coup attempt against Hussein in 1979 tensions increased between two countries.<sup>18</sup>

After all, when Khomeini, the Imam, landed on Iran on 1 February 1979, two weeks after the Shah left the country following a year of demonstrations, Syria was left alone in its fight against Israel after the latter set peace with Egypt in 1978 in Camp David with the support of the Gulf countries. And Iran as a revisionist and revolutionist state was looking for an ally to establish legitimacy on international arena.

### **3.1.1. 1979-1982 The Emergence of the Syrian–Iranian Axis**

Following the revolution, "Syrian-Iranian relations were developed as a result of the commonality of their worldviews, positions on the Palestinian question, and on many other international issues" (Hunter 2010: 206). Assad's analysis on the revolution was that:

The Ayatollah's Iran should be seen in a totally new light - no longer the Shah's Iran, the friend of Israel, the agent of America, but an Iran committed to anti-Zionism and anti-imperialism... From this standpoint he welcomed the change which Iran made in the regional balance of power, sensing that, at a time when Israel was more dangerous than ever, he could find strength in this new dynamic force. Iran, he argued, was a natural counterweight to Egypt; Israel had gained Egypt by the peace treaty, but lost Iran to the revolution. (Seale1988: 353)

---

<sup>18</sup> For further detail on this alleged coup attempt against Hussein see. Ganji 2006: 126-127.

As a result on 12 February Syria was the first Arab country and third in general (after the USSR and Pakistan) to recognize the new provisional revolutionary government after the Shah left the country (Wright 2010: 231).

This was a massive earthquake for the balance of power in the region, the revolution in Iran was followed by Egypt-Israel Peace Treat in March, Saddam Hussein's seizing the power and becoming president of Iraq in July, insurgents against the House of Saud in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia seized Masjid al-Haram in Mecca for nearly two weeks in November-December and finally Afghanistan was invaded by the USSR.

While Iran was looking for an ally to provide legitimacy, Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980. For Saddam Hussein there was an obvious opportunity to attack Iran since:

Saddam Hussein believed the fall of the Shah created a power vacuum that he could fill as well as an opportunity to assume the Shah's role by offering the Gulf states protection from the Islamic revolution. He also aimed to reverse the humiliating 1975 Iranian imposition of joint control over the Shatt al-Arab<sup>19</sup> with which he was personally identified. (Hinnebusch 2003: 196)

Hence on the basis of concrete and direct threat of Iraq, Iran and Syria increased the relation between them. For each of these two countries there were two different reasons. For Iran: "first as a means to deflect the perception that its war with Iraq was a war against all Arabs and... to ease its regional and international isolation" (Hunter 2010: 207).

And for Syria "First, Iraq was a larger and more powerful neighbor vying with Syria for a leadership role in the Arab world. Second Iraq's invasion of Iran diverted attention and resources away from Syria's struggle in the Israeli- Arab conflict" (Zerden 2007: 19). Assad from the very beginning condemned Saddam Hussein's war as "as the wrong war against the wrong enemy at the wrong time. To fight Iran was folly: it would exhaust the Arabs, fragment their ranks and divert them from 'the holy battle in Palestine'" (Seale 1988: 357).

---

<sup>19</sup> The *Shatt al-Arab* (or the *Arvand Rud* in Persian) is the river where rivers of Tigris and Euphrates confluence, then it joins the Persian Gulf. This has been the major source of conflict between Iran and Iraq since it formed the only way to reach open waters for the latter. And also Iranian side of the river has Arab majority and oil rich regions. In 1975 with the Algiers Agreement, also dealing with a Kurdish uprising in the north Saddam Hussein had to give up his demands and accept agreement. For further information see: Halliday, F. 2005, *The Middle East in International Relations Power, Politics and Ideology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 179-180.

Hence this alliance let Iran to “leap over” wall around it and set foot in Lebanon and for Syria instead of bandwagoning the Arab front against Iran and it gave an opportunity to promote a new balance in the region (Ehteshami and Hinnebusch 1997: 102). And especially starting from April 1981 when Syria opened its airspace for Iranian warplanes for their raid against an Iraqi base the two countries supported each other in many different occasions (Maltzahn 2013: 31).

And in terms of regional balance of power disruptive changes had happened. Before the revolution Iran’s main competitors in the Middle East were Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. And the relations with Syria were already slowly showing progress, meanwhile the relations with Iraq was also in good condition especially after the 1975 Algiers Agreement which settled the border disputes between Iraq and Iran. Moreover during the presidency of Anwar Sadat, Iranian-Egyptian relations were also improved. But “in the 1970s, Saudi Arabia undermined the Shah in order to make itself the favored U.S. ally” (Hunter 2010: 189).

With the revolution many things had changed very rapidly. Firstly Iran was in war with Iraq. On the one hand the relation with Egypt was worsening, on the other hand Syria was becoming the most important ally. Hunter lists the reasons (2010: 202) behind the worsening relations with Egypt as:

Egypt’s fear of revolutionary contagion, especially in light of the growing appeal of Islamist groups in Egypt; Iran’s opposition to the Camp David agreement and the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty; Egypt’s close relations with the United States; Sadat’s decision to offer refuge to the Shah; Iran’s naming of a street after Sadat’s assassin, Khalid Al Islambuli; Egypt’s all-out support to Iraq during its war with Iran.

And for the reasons paved the way for the alliance between Syria and Iran he says:

A shared view on Iraq and Syria’s support for Iran in the Iran-Iraq War; similar worldviews: Syria had close relations with the USSR and strained ties to the United States; similar positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict, as Syria was part of the Arab rejectionist front opposed to peace with Israel; similarity of faith between Iran’s Shias and Syria’s ruling Alawites, and Iran’s help in getting them acceptance as mainstream Shias; Iran’s pragmatic approach toward Syria’s Islamist movement, illustrated by its silence in the face of their massacre in Hama in.

The fall of an US-ally also hit the balance of power between the superpowers. An alliance between Syria and Iran, and the support of the Soviet Union behind them was seen as an alarm for others. For the US “the fall of the Shah had created a power vacuum, which the

US had to fill in order to prevent Soviet expansion into the region” (Ganji 2006: 121). Especially safeguarding the flow of oil was the top concern for the US. This was later provided by the Saudi support. Because Saudis were feeling under the threat of Iran-Syrian alliance and more than that of Soviet encirclement, the kingdom moved closer to the American line. And even before the Iran-Iraq war, so-called hostage crises where the Iranian university students raided the American embassy and hold the diplomats as hostages for more than a year, created a total break between the two countries.

Moreover for Israel the revolution was seen as an opportunity since “it dramatically increased its strategic significance to the US and significantly reduced, at least for a while, the Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) administration’s pressure on it to agree to a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.” (*ibid*)

### **3.1.2. 1982-1985 The Zenith and Limits of Syrian–Iranian Power**

The year of 1982 was a breaking point for the Syrian-Iranian alliance. Chronically it started in February when the Assad government “showed the extremes to which it would go to protect the regime in its 1982 bombardment of an Islamic uprising in Hama” (Hinnebusch 2003: 104). This uprising had its roots since Assad's intervention in the summer of 1976 in Lebanon what was the scene of an ongoing civil war started from 1975. After that, hit-and-run terrorism had become a part of Syrian city life, mostly targeting prominent regime personalities. But the terrorist attack which killed large numbers of officer cadets at the Aleppo Artillery School on 16 June 1979 brought the crises to another level. This was a clear declaration of war for the regime which used the term “the Muslim Brothers”<sup>20</sup> (a Sunni organization which was founded in Egypt in 1928) as a blanket phrase to identify the terrorist. Violence rapidly increased in many cities, Assad himself was targeted in an assassination attempt in 1980 and at the end the final stage was taken place in Hama, a traditionally conservative city. On the night of 2

---

<sup>20</sup> The organization had left its marks in a vast area from Algeria to Saudi Arabia. For its ideological roots and role in international arena see: Tibi, B. 2014, *Political Islam, World Politics and Europe: From Jihadist to Institutional Islamism*, Routledge, New York. For the movement’s struggle for power in Egypt, see: Wickham C. R. 2013, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement*, Princeton University Press, Oxford.

February 1982, local guerilla commander declared a general uprising, and targeted regime soldiers which followed by rapid answer from the regime. For three weeks the city witnessed the “last-ditch battle which one side or the other had to win and which, one way or the other, would decide the fate of the country” (Seale 1998: 333). At the end of three grim weeks, regime put a bloody end to the insurgency. Iran’s answer to this proved the pragmatic limits of Islamic Republic in terms of spreading the revolution and caused disappointment especially for the Muslim Brothers organized in various countries. “Khomeini mildly condemned the massacre without changing Iran’s policy towards Syria. He simply did not wish to antagonize Assad” (Milani 2013: 80). This proved that actually Iran had a pragmatic side which enabled it to “place geopolitical realities above ideology, and chose to support a secular-pan-Arabism dictatorship” (Nasur 2014: 81).

Right after the uprising the alliance between two countries gained a much more formal shape when a high level Syrian delegation visited Tehran and signed bilateral agreements on various topics. This was followed by shutting off the flow of Iraqi oil to the Mediterranean in April 1982 depriving Iraq of about 40 per cent of its oil revenue (Maltzahn 2013: 31).

In following months Lebanon became the home for a transformation in the regional balance of power. The civil war started in 1975 entered a new stage when the Israeli army launched an offensive in Lebanon in June 1982 “ostensibly to rid southern Lebanon of Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) guerrillas” and to push Syrian forces to retreat from Beirut (Zerden 2007: 21). Immediate response of Iran to the Israeli aggression was the “assistance of around one thousand Revolutionary Guards that Iran dispatched to the Beqa’a Valley in eastern Lebanon, with Syrian consent” (Maltzahn 2013: 34). Those Revolutionary Guards trained and helped establish Hizballah a militia directly supported and funded by the Islamic Republic.<sup>21</sup>

At that time in Lebanon another large Shia organization, the *Afwaj al Muqawamah al Lubnaniya* (Amal Movement) had been already existed. It was the main Shia organization in Lebanon and was supported by Syria. But after the PLO members were forced to

---

<sup>21</sup> For more detail for the formation of Hizballah, see: Milani 2013, p. 81.

evacuate Lebanon, a need for replacement was born and Amal and Hizballah turned into two different assets that could be used to fill the vacuum in Lebanon. “Syria did not object to a controllable Hizballah presence in the south to play off against Amal and to use against Israel. Thus, the Iranian alliance allowed Syria to balance and mediate between the two wings of the Shia movement, which it had itself helped to divide, making both beholden to it” (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch 1997: 134). Iran, too, used Hizballah for its interest since “Through Hizballah, Iran established a foothold in Lebanon and began to develop retaliatory capability against Israel, and also became entangled in the Arab–Israeli conflict” (Milani 2013: 81). This stage of war came to an end in 1985 when Israeli forces withdrew to the “security-zone” in southern Lebanon.

This was a huge blow to the calculations of Israel and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, architect of war. For Itamar Rabinovich (2004: 28), Israel’s ambassador to the United States and the chief negotiator with Syria and professor emeritus of Middle Eastern history, more permanent target for Israel was to “transform its regional position by inflicting serious blows on Syria and the PLO and by installing a friendly regime in Lebanon.” But this has failed. Rabinovich (*ibid*) summarizes the results as:

- Israel’s regional position was not transformed, and the general challenge of the Lebanese problems has only continued.
- The confrontation with the PLO has been replaced by a confrontation with the Shiite community and two Shiite militias—Amal and, subsequently, Hizballah.
- During and after the conflict with Israel and the United States in 1982–84, Syria consolidated and further institutionalized its hegemony in Lebanon;
- As part of its strategic alliance with Iran, Syria affords it access to the Shiite community in Lebanon and acquiesces in its control of Hizballah.

Meanwhile the war between Iraq and Iran took a surprising shape in that era. It became clear “Iraq was biting off more than it could chew” and despite Saddam’s expectations “wartime ideological mobilization consolidated Iran’s fragmented revolutionary regime” (Hinnebusch 2003: 196) and in two years’ time Iraq was forced back from Iran without even controlling the border oil town of Abadan. The year of 1982 was also highly important for this war. On 13 July 1982 Iranian forces started a series of offensives by crossing the border which resulted with heavy losses and lack of succeeding the main objectives for the Iranians. But these offensives were enough to alarm other actors.

In the Gulf region eyes were quickly turned into the Iran-Iraq War instead of Lebanon conflict. Iraq also looked for regionalizing and internationalizing the crisis, so they could get the support from the Gulf countries and the US. At the second Fez Summit in September 1982, most of Arab states supported Iraqi regime including Syria which was seeking for support against Israeli aggression. Also when the war was threatening the flow of oil, the US increased its involvement in the Gulf which was also in parallel with the Iraqi ambition to internationalize the war. Iranian aggression quickly challenged the existing balance of power and forced actors to take new positions. Hinnebusch writes the reason Iraq was saved the status quo states created a bloc against a revolutionary threat and summarizes the new positions and tactics of the states as

Saudi and Gulf aid poured in, alternative Saudi and Turkish routes for Iraqi oil were established, and military equipment and workers arrived from Egypt. Iran was subject to Western arms embargoes while Saddam Hussein's regime was deliberately built up by the West; Western arms dealers made lucrative deals for Iraqi oil which put Iraq deeply in debt and would be a factor in its later invasion of Kuwait. France, in particular, supplied high-tech arms while US intelligence allowed Iraq to pinpoint and counter Iranian offensive build-ups. The Soviet Union also began to supply Iraq with arms once Iraqi territory was at risk. Iran, by contrast, had to resort to the international black market and seek supplies from other 'pariah' states like North Korea and its only close ally, Syria. The war continued far longer than it might otherwise have done owing to this 'borrowed capacity' (2003: 197).

### **3.1.3. 1985-1988 Intra-Alliance Tensions and the Consolidation of the Syrian-Iranian Axis**

The third era experienced some crises between two countries which at the end showed what those two actors had was a strategic alliance more than a war-time cooperation. There were conflicting agendas in regions where until that year a well-functioning alliance has been taking place, i.e. the Levant and the Persian Gulf.

On Iraq, Syria was against an Iraqi victory but instead looking for replacing Hussein with a pro-Syrian regime. And Assad was aware "had Iran succeeded in removing Saddam Hussein, most likely the Syrian-Iranian alliance would have degenerated into a fierce competition over Iraq's political future" (Hunter 2010: 207). As a result at the expense of irritating Iran, Syria attended the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) meeting in 1986 in Kuwait and in the following year the Amman Summit with declared an Arab alliance against Iran (*ibid*). This was to prevent Iran from becoming the sole triumph against Iraq and to balance the power in the region.



Throughout these three years there were also many other Gulf War related reasons which could have caused the end of the alliance. Syria's material benefit from an alliance with Iran was to get cheap oil. But because of Iraq's bombings of Iran's oil facilities starting from August 1985 and the crash in global oil prices in 1986 caused a striking hit for Iranian economy and hence the latter could no longer satisfy the needs of Syria.

What was even more troubling for these two countries was increasing pressure on Hafez Assad to leave Iran's side. Syria was highly alienated by Arab countries. And King Hussein of Jordan, acting as a mediator, was trying to resolve the differences between Syria and Iraq. Those attempts to convince two Ba'athist regimes were surely supported by other Arab countries, Saudi Arabia and also the US. But what was more striking for Syria was its superpower patron, the Soviet Union was also pushing for rapprochement especially during Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership in the Soviet Union while he distanced himself from Hafez Assad, who in return visited Moscow in 1987 press Gorbachev not to waver in his support of Syria (Seale 1988: 278). On the Gulf front, decreasing Soviet support which alarmed Assad to not to count on superpower support anymore and in addition to that the USA was intervening in the Gulf War on Iraqi side, stopped Syria from giving up the alliance with Iran since the fear of being forced to bandwagon other Arab powers prevailed.

But the main source for tensions was Lebanon. These tensions were taking place in two arenas; one was the political arena where Syria and Iran had conflicting desires and ideas for the future of Lebanon. And the second was through the proxies. While Israel was an actor in the country, Syria could gain time and play off two Shia organizations against each other and act as a mediator between them in case of an international crises such a taking the US soldiers as hostage etc. But when Israel withdrew to the security zone, a competition to fill the vacuum created another turn in the relation between Iran and Syria. Goodarzi summarizes the conflicting agendas as

On almost every issue in Lebanon, the two allies stood on opposite sides. The two allies had differing visions of the political future of Lebanon. Syria wanted to reform the political system and establish a stable, secular state within its sphere of influence, while Iran seemed to favor the creation of a theocratic system mirroring its own model. The rapid rise of the fundamentalist, pro-Iranian Hizballah movement at the expense of the secular, pro-Syrian Amal militia led to tensions and recurrent clashes between the two groups. In addition, during the Amal—led siege of

Palestinian refugee camps between 1985 and 1987, Syria steadfastly supported its proxy much to Iran's dismay which tried to mediate and end confrontation peacefully (2013: 44).

After the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon to the security zone, Syria fell short from forming its military hegemony, hence what Assad aimed was to play off each group against each other and when the anarchy occurs present itself as an indispensable peacekeeper in the country. There was already a challenge between Amal and Hizballah and also Arafat's PLO was trying to reestablish itself after being forced out of the country during the Israeli invasion. The PLO was becoming more and more active in the Beirut Palestinian camps. Amal was in desire to prevent this and but it failed in its aggression in May-June 1985 but other pro-Syrian Palestinians gained control of the camps. In the second round of the "war of the camps", Amal failed again since this time Hizballah also supported the PLO in the camps and at the end the clashes came to a point where there were no champion left at all.

Another crises was in the city of Tripoli of Lebanon. There a fundamentalist movement named *Tawheed* led by Sheikh Shaban was highly against Assad regime but had close relations with Iran. Sheikh Shaban declared an Islamic regime against the pro-Syrian groups. *Tawheed* also had Hizballah's backings. But at the end Iran chose to support Syria not Hizballah leaders. Afterwards Syria managed to get a ceasefire and what was more important is that Syria managed to get approval for deploying peacekeeping mission in Tripoli. This move was defined as a "classic example of how Syria used divisions among Lebanese forces, and Iranian mediation, to extend its control in Lebanon" (Norton 1990:118).

In early 1987 another crises took place in West Beirut while the clashes between Amal and Hizballah increased. Syria used those clashes as an excuse to expand its "peacekeeping" mission and to enter West Beirut. It came to a point where Syrian troops clashed with Hizballah fighters directly and killed 20 of them. This created an anger in Iran and war of words started between two countries.

Additionally starting from mid-1987 to 1988 there was a crises over Western hostages. Especially when American journalist Charles Glass was taken hostage "7,500 Syrian

troops encircled the southern suburbs and Syrian road-blocks confiscated Hizballah arms, inspected Iranian diplomatic cars and tightened the flow of arms to the Revolutionary Guards in Bekaa; Syria was showing that Iran's proxies in Lebanon operated at its sufferance" (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch 1997: 133).

At the end Iran and Syria reached a deal and saw the alliance between them in long run would much of an asset and it wouldn't worth to waste the alliance for local fighting between proxies. Syria needed Iran support to realize its own policies on Lebanon and Iran saw Syrian approval would be needed to act in that country. That realization was an important cornerstone for the Iranian-Syrian alliance because "in essence, the Amal-Hizballah crisis of May 1988 demonstrated beyond doubt that the Syrian-Iranian relationship had matured, and had evolved into a stable, durable, regional axis. It represented a major milestone, signifying the consolidation of the Tehran-Damascus nexus" (Goodarzi 2006: 271).

In the spring and summer of 1988, the War was still going on within Iraq. But with the offensives of the latter, Iran lost all the gains it had and the war reached a dead end. And in July, Khomeini declared he took a decision "more deadly than drinking poison" and accepted the UN Security Council Resolution 598 which called for an immediate ceasefire and the release of prisoners of war. So at the end of this era the war was over, and after many crises in Lebanon and Iraq the alliance between Iran and Syria was more consolidated than ever.

#### **3.1.4. 1988-1997 Ups and Downs in the Alliance**

In July 1988 Khomeini accepted a truce mediated by the United Nations putting an end to the eight yearlong devastating war and died 11 months after. Those two events rapidly forced Syria and Iran to evaluate the by-then balance of power and to reconsider their positions. The war left Iran weak and Syria isolated but Iraq was in completely opposite situation:

Not only had the Iraqi Ba'thist regime survived the eight-year war, but its massive foreign-assisted military expansion program had enabled it to repulse Iranian offensives for six consecutive years and to regain the upper hand in the closing months of the conflict, thereby bolstering its power

and prestige in the Arab world. By 1988, Iraq's well-equipped and battle-hardened army had become one of the five largest military establishments in the world (Goodarzi 2006: 287).

Taking advantage from this power, Iraq committed itself to gain a pivotal role in the Arab world and in various challenges from Mauritania to Yemen and from Sudan to the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>22</sup> One direct threat to Syria from Iraq came via Lebanon where the political crises about the succession of the President Amine Gemayel and armed forces commander General Michel Aoun's attempt to challenge Syrian hegemony was taking place. Aoun received indirect weaponry support from Iraq. But with Hizballah and Amal support, Syria managed to gain the upper hand in the crises in a year.

Meanwhile in domestic politics, Iran was going through an important transformation. After the death of Khomeini, Khamenei became the Supreme Leader but the politics of Islamic Republic by and large was decided by President Rafsanjani. He focused more on consolidation of the revolution within the country and reconstructing the highly damaged infrastructure of the country. Many analysts use the term Iranian Thermidor, named after the coup in 1794 in France which aimed stabilizing the revolutionary-Jacobin government with conservative policies. This was the era when Rafsanjani

subordinated ideology to post-war reconstruction, not only reviving the private sector but even seeking foreign loans and investment. Gradually, the economic self-sufficiency at which the revolution had aimed was abandoned. Each step Iran took in seeking reintegration into the world economy spilled over in the moderation of its foreign policy without which economic relations to the outside could not be repaired. An increasingly 'realist' foreign policy re-established relations with Iran's Gulf neighbors and economic links to the West. Export of revolution was replaced with a more conventional attempt to create spheres of influence in Iran's immediate neighborhood (Hinnebusch 2003: 199).

But these attempts were not easy at all because even Iran did not have diplomatic relations with other Arab countries in the region at the end of 1980s since most of them had decreased their connection with Iran.

In completely opposite direction, Syria was focusing on restoring its relations with regional powers. The most striking step was taken by Assad in December 1989 when he did his first visit to Egypt after years of hostility. Rabinovich writes "the message and the

---

<sup>22</sup> For further information on Iraq's moves on international diplomacy see Stork, J. and Lesch, A. M. 1990, "Background to the Crisis: Why War?", *Middle East Report*, vol: 176, pp. 11-18.

symbolism could not have been clearer. After twelve years of leading the campaign against Sadat and his policies, Assad was laying down his arms” (2008: 279).

But not only for both Syria and Iran but also for the whole region what happened exactly two years after the ceasefire of 1988 had changed the power calculations in the region overnight: Iraqi army invaded another Arab country Kuwait, who was supposed to be just another Iraqi state not another country in Saddam Hussein’s eyes. This aggression quickly gave Damascus and Tehran to take benefit from the situation and reposition themselves.

Syria, alarmed by the scenario of Iraqi success, joined the international coalition against Iraq, without participating the actual fighting. Also Syria used this as a foreign policy investment which paid off handsomely due to “providing a new relation with the US, three billion dollars financial support from Saudi Arabia”. And also “when Syria tightened its grip on Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the US were willing to look the other way” (Rabinovich 2008: 280).

For Iran, having its reconstruction era, it was better to remain neutral. But this was not meaning simply staying idle. “Far from it, Tehran believed that by mediating between the two sides, it could gain leverage over them and exploit subsequent events” (Goodarzi 2006: 289). Syria was to a certain extent supportive of neutrality of Iran in the war but also alarmed by the peace negotiations between Iran and Iraq. Hence “Syria was anxious to secure Iran’s participation in the anti-Iraq coalition or at least its neutrality in the conflict, leading Hafez Al Assad to pay his first visit to Tehran in 1990” (Hunter 2010: 208). This visit resulted with the creation of a Syrian-Iranian Higher Cooperation Committee which formalized the relation between them.

All those were taking place under the shadow of a systemic change international arena: the collapse of the USSR. In the region Syria was the actor which was hit most by this change since:

Syria is the most notable Arab loser from the changing regional picture. As if Syria's domestic problems, economic difficulties, Lebanese imbroglio and regional political isolation were not bad enough, it is also the Arab state most dependent on Soviet support. Egypt's potential power comes from its size, high degree of internal integration and U.S. patronage; Iraq, on the other hand, has oil wealth. But Damascus ' main strategic asset was its status as the leading Soviet client in the Middle East (Rubin 1990: 137).

And actually Syria was in a process of preparing itself for the lack of Soviet support. Rabinovich writes from mid-1987 Syria's superpower patron, the USSR was improving relations with Israel, distancing itself from Syria by ceasing the arm supplies and on Arab-Israeli issues avoiding confrontations with the US. The Soviet doctrine of "strategic parity" was being replaced by a more realist doctrine of "defensive sufficiency" (2008: 278). This was the motive behind Syria's rapprochement with Egypt and their participation in the international coalition led by the US. As a result, "Post-Gulf War realignments served to diverge Syrian interests from those of Iran. The 1992 Damascus Declaration realigned Syria in a security arrangement with other Arab Gulf States and Egypt. US pressure brought Syria back to peace talks with Israel that had halted after the 1974 Disengagement Agreement" (Zerden 2007: 24).

For Iran, the end of Soviet era, meant the US was the only international actor both in the Gulf and the Arab-Israeli issues and couldn't be challenged by any other super power. "In the Gulf, it was free to establish a *Pax Americana* by isolating Iraq and Iran, maintaining large numbers of troops in the area and transferring billions of dollars' worth of military equipment to the GCC states" (Goodarzi 2006: 290). This was most obvious with the so-called dual-containment policy of the US during the presidency of Bill Clinton which aimed at containing Iraq and Iran in order to provide peace in the Levant. For the US one way of implementing containment was to set Iran and Syria apart. Hence the secretary of state Warren Christopher visited Damascus more than 20 times between 1993 and 1997 to convince Assad for an agreement with Israel.

This era was striking in terms of Syrian-Israeli process and Iran was also very alarmed by each update and news in the talks between Syria and Israel. Right after the end of the Gulf War, starting from the Madrid Conference the US was looking forward to put Israeli and Syrian diplomats in the same table. Rabinovich (2008: 255-261) writes there was no specific success in Madrid but it was an important first step for a change and the peace and it was followed by years of secret diplomacy between two countries. For Clinton himself the peace talks in Syrian-Israeli track had more priority even the Israeli-Palestinian track gained more publicity worldwide. And once the 1993 Oslo Peace

Accords between Palestinians and Israel were signed Washington was planning to provide another agreement between Syrian and Israel and make the most out of peace negotiations. But with the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Prime Minister of Israel and advocate of the peace process in 1995 and the success of Benjamin Netanyahu in the 1996 Israeli general election, gave an halt to peace negotiations between Israel and Syria without any success most importantly in Golan Height under Israeli occupation where was the main source of problem for two countries.

To summarize it can be said that in 1990s both Iran and Syria looked at the ways of redefining their role in the international arena. But in the second half of the decade it became clear that despite the crises between them and changes in the balance of power, the Syrian-Iranian alliance has been settled. The ups-and-downs brought two countries where, for their rationale, it was obvious that best way of protecting their position in the region was securing and continuing their alliance.

### **3.1.5. 1997-2001 Return to the Alliance**

Regional developments again redefined the alliance which has been loosened since the early 1990s. The new formation found its most tangible outcome in 1997 with the second visit of Assad to Iran, followed by then-president of Iran Khatami's visit to Syria in 1999. For Goodarzi the reasons were: "Washington's pro-Israeli stance in the Arab-Israeli negotiations; its support for the emergence of a Turkish-Israeli alliance after 1996 to isolate Iran and cow Syria into submission; and its willingness to exploit Iran-Gulf Arab differences to justify its military presence and huge arms sales to its regional allies" (2006: 290).

Especially with the stagnation of the peace process "in particular after Netanyahu's rise to power in Israel in 1996 and Israel's security alliance with Turkey" (Maltzahn 2013: 43), the ties between Iran and Syria gained more importance. Two military agreements and another two economical agreement in 1996-1997 between Israel and Turkey manifested "the classic checkerboard pattern of realpolitik power balancing wherein the

enemy of my enemy is my friend” and was to “encircle and pressure Syria” (Hinnebusch 2003: 145-146) and hence pushed for more cooperation between Iran and Syria.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile during the eight years of presidency of Mohammad Khatami starting from 1997 domestic politics in Iran was rapidly changing or at least there was a striking attempt for a change especially in terms of foreign policies of the Islamic Republic. His main foreign policy motivation was to break the isolation around Iran and to tear down “the wall of mutual distrust,” in his words. He started many diplomatic maneuvers with various countries from the Gulf to Pakistan, Turkey to Russia and China to the EU. His main motto was “dialogue among civilizations” and this reached top when upon his suggestions the UN declared 2001 as the year of “Dialogue among Civilizations.” But gradually his many foreign policy initiatives proved to be short-lived (Amuzegar 2006: 68). But anyhow he rapidly changed the image of his country from a friendless nation to an active player in the international community.

Within this context in early years of his presidency, Khatami as an agent also took steps in order to cement relations with the US. And also Washington also “opened a small window for informal contacts” when “in June 1998, both President Clinton and Secretary of State Albright delivered encouraging statements” and “in March 2000, Secretary Albright went as far as deploring Washington's role in the 1953 Anglo-American coup against Mossadeq's elected government” lived (Amuzegar 2006: 69). But those attempts did not bear any fruit because “the reformist president demonstrated his lack of resolve and courage to take on the more hardline elements within the regime which were opposed to any rapprochement with the US” (Goodarzi 2013: 47).

---

<sup>23</sup> On the alliance between Turkey and Israel Hinnebusch writes “The Turkish establishment’s view of the Kurdish threat to national security led it into a policy watershed – alliance with Israel – which sharply underlined the supremacy of geopolitics over domestic politics in the policy process. This axis is by no means an ideologically inspired alliance of democracies: it has no popular constituencies in either country, is unpopular among Turkey’s Islamist forces, and was largely imposed by the military. Its roots are exclusively geo-political: Turkey and Israel perceive a common threat from the Syro-Iranian axis: while Turkey felt threatened by Syrian support for the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) guerrillas (who have had training bases in the Lebanese Bekaa valley), Israel felt aggrieved by Syrian and Iranian support for the Lebanese Hizballah. Their co-operation in anti-terrorist measures and their alliance was meant to encircle and pressure Syria” (2003: 146).



One reason for lack of improvements in relationship between Iran and the US was the lack of progress in terms of reaching peace in the Levant. After 1996, there were two efforts for a breakthrough between Syria and Israel. One is Ronald Lauder's mediation mission on behalf of Benjamin Netanyahu in late 1998 and Ehud Barak's sustained effort in 1999-2000. And both attempts of two consecutive prime ministers were failed (Rabinovich 2008: 259). And the fighting in Lebanon gave Syrian-Iranian axis an upper hand at least on propaganda base.

Goodarzi writes (2006: 291) starting from 1992 "by toning down its Islamist rhetoric and recognizing the sectarian diversity of the country" Hizballah managed to operate in Lebanon and with Syrian and Iranian backing it became a very active guerilla force in the fight against Israel in the security zone. And at the end Israeli army had withdrawn from the self-declared security zone by 24 May 2000. This was very important because "After many years of Syrian-Iranian cooperation, Lebanese resistance had finally bore fruit. It was the first time that Israel had given up territory and withdrawn to its international frontiers without any prior political agreement."

In the following months Assad has died and his son Bashar Assad became the president of the Syrian Arab Republic. His first two years were called as the "Damascus Spring" in 2000-2001, "a brief period of substantive reform in Syria." But afterwards analyst seemed to observe that he was planning to "continue the autocratic, realpolitik legacy of his father" (Zerden 2007: 26).

### **3.1.6. 2001-2011 Reinvigoration in the "Axis of Evil" World**

The events unfolded in the US in 2001 rapidly changed the power structure in the world and more directly in the Middle East. Republican George W. Bush took the seat of the US presidency following Democrat Clinton. And after the attacks of 9 September 2001, which generally referred as 9/11, the level of projecting power upgraded to another scale. September 11 were quickly followed by "the U.S. war on terror, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the U.S. policy of regime change in Syria and Iran, plus Syria's leadership transition, further cemented their relations" (Hunter 2010: 209).

The change in the tone of the US presidency was most obvious in the State of the Union on 29 January 2002 where Bush declared Iran as a member of axis of evil (with Iraq and North Korea). Soon after Syria was added to the list. Despite this, Iran helped the American forces in Afghanistan in their war against Taliban. But the invasion of Iraq changed the course. The invasion started in March 2003 and the capital fell less than a month. On 1 May, Bush was declaring “major combat operations in Iraq have ended.” This rapid changes in their neighbors alarmed both Syria and Iran because the fear of being the next target in the US’s war on terror seemed very realistic after witnessing the speed of the fall of Baghdad. Even the following quagmire proved the US army would be bogged down, the fear of encirclement for Syria and Iran grew. Because “Iran has to contend not only with the US fifth fleet in the Persian Gulf and the presence of US troops in Afghanistan, but now also with US forces in Iraq. Similarly, Syria sees itself in a pincer between Israel and a US occupied Iraq” (Goodarzi 2006: 293). But actually Assad could have chosen another side to rely on in Iraq but domestic politics limited Assad’s choices since Assad had to gain legitimacy against the “old guards of his regime”.

There were strong incentives for Assad to bandwagon with the United States in the Iraq war: his desire to reintegrate Syria into the international market, for which the U.S. hegemon was gatekeeper; the protection of Syria’s economic interests in Iraq; and the chance of a share of postwar spoils. However, Syrian public opinion was so inflamed against the invasion that the regime would have had to sacrifice nationalist legitimacy if it bandwagoned, and defiance of the United States was made possible by Syria’s persisting relative economic and security self-sufficiency (Ehteshami et. al. 2013: 227).

On the other side, from Iran’s point of view there were opportunities: “The American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq opened up the political arena in two of Iran’s neighbors, one of which had a majority Shiite population. United States policy created two new political vacuums into which Iranian influence could flow” (Gause 2014: 12). And Iran did fill this vacuum with direct and indirect control over Iraq’s internal politics especially during Nouri al Maliki was the prime minister of Iraq from 2006 to 2014.

Lebanon was also an arena where the Bush administration was trying to increase pressure on Iranian-Syrian axis. In addition to the economic sanctions against Syria declared in 2003, the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005 became reason for an enormous pressure to be put on Syria which at the end caused

withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. But the challenges also forced two countries act more in line and to be look like more allied than ever. This was obvious when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became president of Iran in August 2005, Assad was the first foreign leader who visited him.

The alliance between Assad and Ahmadinejad went to another level following year. The war of 2006 between Hizballah and Israel was a decisive action in the region. When the former abducted two Israeli soldiers, the latter gave harsh response. The war started on mid-July and ended with a ceasefire almost in a month which was articulated as a win for Hizballah and a failure for Israel. “This was the first time in the tortured history of the Arab–Israeli conflict that an Arab force had not decisively and quickly lost to Israel” (Milani 2013: 83). Nasrallah (the leader of Hizballah), Assad and President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad were the champions of Arab streets after the war.

But at the same time, new attempts were being made in the regional scene in order to create cracks in the Syro-Iranian axis. Bayram Sinkaya (2011: 43) writes once Saddam Hussein, one of the main reasons behind the alliance was eliminated from power, some had expected the alliance to lose significance. Syria was looking to gain the Golan Height which was lost to Israel in the War of 1967 and break the international isolation. Hence it was expected that a concession from Israeli side to give up Golan would equally convince Syria to break from Iran. For this, policy of engagement was put into practice by the medium of Turkey. Indirect talks continued between Israel and Syria, but this failed massively while the peace negotiations were going on, Israel attacked Gaza in late 2008. The policy of engagement did not give concrete results. What was left end of this decade as follows:

Bilateral relations since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 have picked up on all levels, political, military, economic and cultural. International pressure on both Syria and Iran – the former following Hariri’s assassination in Lebanon, the latter largely over its nuclear program, and both countries over their support for Hizballah and Hamas – have only brought them closer together. Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine/Israel have continued to be high up on the list of issues of mutual concern. (Maltzahn 2013: 57)

Hence one of the most striking reasons behind the empowerment of this alliance was basically the never-ending international pressure within the context of “Axis of Evil” on both countries. Both regional powers and more importantly the US preferred imposing

international sanctions to create leverage over Iran and Syria. This in return brought them together. When asked about having friendly relations with Iran and North Korea, Bashar Assad allegedly said "Well, I have no choice. I have to have some friends" (Tabaar 2006). As a result it was clear that when any of those two countries face with an existential threat, the other one would provide needed help to secure the survival of the alliance. And this would be the case when massive protest movements started in 2011.



## CHAPTER 4

### A CASE FOR DEFENSIVE REALISM: IRAN IN SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

Starting in late 2010, a wave which was to be called as Arab Spring spread from Tunisia and reached many countries in the region. After sweeping the Tunisian and Egyptian leaders, Arab Spring also started taking place in Syria. Iran was at first satisfied with the developments since pro-Western leaders were falling and hence called the movement as “Islamic Awakening”.

When the Arab Spring began, Iran had been on a winning streak in the Middle East cold war and was looking for more victories. The swift fall of (somewhat) secularist, American-allied regimes in Tunisia and Egypt contributed to a triumphalist attitude in Tehran. The government portrayed these events as part of an Islamic, not an Arab, movement that began with Iran’s own revolution in 1979. (Gause 2014: 14)

#### 4.1. 2011-2014 – IRAN AS THE INVISIBLE HAND IN THE WAR

The waves of Arab Spring reached Syria in March 2011 with unarmed protests in the city of Daraa and gradually evolved into a full-scale civil war. In Iran the perception towards what was going on in Syria was mixed, the president of Iran, Ahmadinejad and the ruling elite were differentiated about how to view the developments in the field.

Since his early days president Ahmadinejad was basically following two trends — resistance to the West and cooperation among the “rest”— and hence he “watched the Arab Spring with both high expectations and uncertainty, and tried to improve regional ties in the aftermath of regime change, particularly with Egypt” (Warnaar 2013: 170). And when the protests started in Syria, Tehran “advised Assad against resorting to excessive violence, only to soon realize that he knew no other way” (ICG 2017: 15). The Iranian President even called Assad to sit down with the opposition in August 2011 and two months later directly demanded Assad implement reforms (Spencer 2011).

But while “President Ahmadinejad and his supporters reportedly saw the uprising as a genuine popular revolt, akin to what had happened in Tunisia and Egypt, against Assad’s authoritarianism,” the IRGC perceived it as “a plot by Iran’s regional rivals to oust a key Iranian ally” (ICG 2017, 16).

The understanding of IRGC was very clear from the beginning and was relying on two arguments:

1. Syria was plotted against because it was Iran’s ally. According to this assumption, the Syrian crisis illustrates an anti-Iran struggle carried out by its rivals that hijacked a reformist movement and turned it into an armed strife against the Syrian government, and therefore, Syria fell a victim of its alliance with Iran and the ‘resistance axis’ referring to a regional anti-Israeli coalition including Syria and Iran
2. Syria, had it fallen, would have turned into the first launching ground against Iran, thus, to be followed by an anti-Iran campaign in Iraq and Lebanon and even Iran itself. (Ahmadian 2016: 7)

In combination two leading understanding, from Iranian decision makers’ eyes, Syrian opposition was consisted of three main sides. First one was a sincere public movement demanding more reform, freedom, democracy. Tehran believed their demands should be satisfied to some extent. Secondly there was foreign-backed Salafi movement together with Muslim Brotherhood who was trying to infiltrate into the Syrian opposition and overthrow the Assad regime. Thirdly there is anti-regime opposition which is “armed by foreign states and they are provoking foreign powers to intervene in the Syrian crises” (Sinkaya 2011: 45).

Within this context IRGC saw the crisis as a foreign- backed attempt to challenge the status quo in the region and believed the third part of the above-mentioned opposition would become powerful. For them existing balance of power and the alliance between Iran and Syria was under threat by revisionist states and they had to take a position according to the changing realities on the ground. From the eyes of Iranian decision-makers a strong defensive policy was needed to secure the survival of Assad regime and the Axis of Resistance. What they proposed was on par with defensive realists who see themselves “as status quo oriented, with the primary objective of survival or security and not power maximization” (Miller 2010: 143).

In time it would be clearly understood that the perception of the IRGC prevailed. Also because the opposition movement turned into an armed conflict and “Assad must go” discourse could be heard from leaders of the regional powers as well most vocally from Turkey. Hence if one highlights what Stephen Brooks contends by writing “defensive realism expects states and actors to make decision according to probability of conflict” (1997: 457), from the perspective of Tehran, the signs for a direct threat was clear enough to act accordingly. The rationale behind this was most obvious when in 2016 the Iranian Supreme Leader declared “If Iran did not fight in Syria against the enemy, it would have had to face it on its own soil”.

For the elite in Tehran the threats coming from Israel and the USA were sincere and obvious. Hence its main leverage against such threats were its proxies, mainly Hizballah in Lebanon, and the main route to access the latter was going through Syria. Hence it was “strategic interests” which had been continuing to “drive Iran’s involvement in the Syrian conflict as well. They include the preservation of an ally, retention of supply lines to Hizballah through maintenance of Syria’s territorial integrity, and degradation of jihadi groups” (Farhi 2017: 13).

But this was not to say that the main element in Iran’s calculations is Assad himself. Milani writes that what Tehran is trying protect is not Assad but Assadism, i.e. “the structure and composition of the security and armed forces would more or less remain intact” (2015: 85).

Iran’s relationship with Syria is based in many ways on a realist analysis. Iranian decision-makers are not in love with Assad, but many believe that his removal would entail the collapse of the Syrian government. By the Iranian government’s account, the disintegration of the Assad regime would simply result in more chaos and bloodshed. Iran supports Assad because, in the short term, it views this as the best available option to manage the situation and maintain a modicum of strategic presence. However, no one in Iran is under the illusion that Assad will ever be able to rule over a unified Syria again. Rather, Syria is valued instrumentally as a way for Iran to maintain its “resistance access” to Hizballah in Southern Lebanon (Hadian 2015: 3).

To support the regime in Syria, Iran came up with the solution which Barzegar defines as asymmetric and low-cost engagement model “where it has created a network of foreign fighters, military advisers, local regime irregulars, and Syrian minority communities under Iranian advisory commands”. With this model Hizballah gained a new role by engaging in the Syrian war, moreover this role was “part of a greater Iranian strategy in

which its sub-state allies are given enough maneuverability and flexibility to engage in various theaters, which reduces Iran's risk of direct engagements" (2017b: 47).

This model has been constructed on some basic reasonings. One is economic since this way of fighting requires much more limited financial investments. And second reason was experience. Chubin writes Iran experienced the decisive superiority of the US army in conventional warfare in both 1991 Gulf War and 2003 Invasion of Iraq. But they also saw the inefficiency of the US army in asymmetric guerilla fighting. And in addition to its importance as a forward base for Iran against Israel, Hizballah gained another importance within this context: the Hizballah–Israel conflict turned into a “laboratory for the ‘resistance model’ and, more generally, the efficacy of insurgency as a strategy” (2014: 71). And this model gained the upper hand in Iran's way of balancing the armed opposition in Syria.

Within this perspective the IRGC did not openly declare their activities in Syria. But on the one hand they directly deployed members of Quds Force branch of the IRGC by calling them as “advisors”.<sup>24</sup> And on the other hand Iran deployed other militiamen from Shia communities from other countries. “Iran subsequently oversaw the deployment of Iraqi (2012), Afghan (2013), and Pakistani (2014) Shiite militiamen to Syria” (Alfoneh and Eisenstadt, 2016).

Diplomatic efforts were very far from being fruitful. Because from the perspective of the opposition Iran was not a reliable actor in negotiations and they were very skeptical about the special relation between those two countries. The Syrian opposition declared very early that once Assad falls such a close relation would no longer stay reality when Burhan

---

<sup>24</sup> Ansari and Tabrizi summarize the evolution of the involvement of the IRGC: “In the early stages of the conflict, Iran limited its involvement to providing technical and financial support to the Syrian regime, mainly delivered via the Quds Force. In late 2012, the force played a crucial role in creating the National Defence Forces (NDF), a Syrian paramilitary organization assisting the regular army and mustering some 100,000 fighters from various religious sects. Its funding is allegedly supervised by Iran. Between 2011 and early 2013, as conditions on the ground deteriorated, Iran sent members of its Law Enforcement Force and IRGC Ground Forces to advise Assad and to provide training and logistical support to the Syrian army. By late 2013, Russia had gradually taken over this role, while Iran had increased its presence on the ground. Until April 2016, the total number of IRGC and Iranian paramilitary personnel operating in Syria was estimated at between 6,500 and 9,200.” For more detail see: Ansari, A., and Tabrizi, A.B. 2016, “The View From Tehran”, in A. B. Tabrizi and R. Pantucci (ed.), *Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict*, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, London, pp. 3-11.



Ghalioun, head of the main Syrian opposition group in December 2011 declared “the current relationship between Syria and Iran is abnormal. There will be no special relationship with Iran. Breaking the exceptional relationship means breaking the strategic military alliance” (Hokayem 2012: 8).

Even after the opposition set clear distance from involvement of Iran, the latter pushed for a couple of times to convince both sides sit around the same table. Iran also tried to stay on the political discussions and in December 2012 Iran proposed a six-point plan where it was suggested:

1. Government and all armed groups [to] immediately end all their military activities;
2. Provision of humanitarian aid with all sanctions against Syria lifted;
3. A committee for national reconciliation;
4. Free and competitive elections for the formation of a new Parliament, the formation of an Assembly of Experts for the formulation of a Constitution and the holding of presidential elections;
5. All political prisoners from all sides should be released;
6. A committee estimating the cost of damages and reconstruction must be formed, (Hurriyet Daily News, 2012)

This plan was quickly rejected because it was answering opposition’s main demand that is the removal of Assad from presidency. Also this was a demand which already had an international approval in Geneva talks in June 2012 where Iran was not invited and the bloc led by the US and the main Syrian opposition declared Assad should step down. And another attempt came in September 2013 when Iran volunteered to mediate between Assad government and opposition. “Its offer was rejected by the National Coalition, which claimed, ‘The Iranian initiative is not serious and lacks political credibility’, referring to Iran as ‘part of the problem’” (Akpınar 2015:10).

And a year later for the Geneva II Conference in January 2014, Iran was first invited but upon the pressure of opposition, the invitation was cancelled. This was a huge blow for Tehran. Because in the meantime after the election of 2013, Ahmadinejad was replaced by Rouhani who came to power with the promise of rapprochement with the international community with the concept of “heroic flexibility”. Hence being excluded from the January 2014 conference forced Rouhani to “save face and recover from the humiliation

of Geneva II, so his speech contained a major shift in his language. Not only did Rouhani seek to discredit the Geneva II talks, he also defined terrorism as the number one problem in Syria” and hence “the line advocated by the IRGC was effectively the only policy perspective available for Rouhani’s government” (Akbarzadeh & Conduit 2016: 144-146). This was the time when domestic politics were causing a shift in implication of power projection.

In the regional balance of power and positions of states in the crises, the most unexpected change was coming from Syria’s very neighbor, Turkey. After years of reconciliation between Syria and Turkey, two countries reached a point where they have even formed “High Level Strategic Cooperation Council” and had joint cabinet meetings. But since starting from the very beginning of the rebellion Turkey was demanding political reforms from Assad. But meanwhile as early as June 2011, Turkey hosted the very first conference of political opposition. At the end in September 2011 Turkey declared they cut the relations with Syria and would implement international sanctions. Moreover on military front main change came when a Turkish war jet was downed by Syria on 22 June 2012. Turkey’s answer to this was changing the rules of engagement and declaring if any Syrian regime force would come close to Turkish border, Turkish army would open fire. This would later cause armed opposition to fulfill the vacuum created in the areas close to Turkish border within Syria (Caglar 2017: 158-161).

On the other hand, another non-Arab actor in the region, Israel was also making its own power calculations. Israelis have been favoring a divided Arab world and hence “Israel’s mood can best be described as self-assurant, born in the knowledge that the Arabs cannot fight simultaneously with Israel and with each other” (Dilek 2014: 69). Consequently seeing regions major actors preoccupied with proxy wars and hence not in a position to form a unified front would only satisfy Israel’s security concerns.

In terms of balance Syrian war turned into a power projection arena for regional actors. The US was following a strategy, as described by an advisor of the President Obama, named “leading from behind” (Lizza 2011). That doctrine was encouraging “regional partners to assume more of the security burden” and so that it would require “a smaller

military presence in the Middle East" and let the US "facilitate the rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region" (Cook 2015).

On the other front, Syria and hence Iran's allies in the UN Security Council was Russian and China. But both were also far from being actors in the field. While being very helpful for both Syria and Iran, their support was limited on the political arena and worked to block any approval for sanctions in the UNSC. Also Russia's role had become very important in the middle of 2013, when the Syrian regime was accused in East Ghouta of using chemical weapons which had been defined as "red line" previously by President Obama. While Obama was showing reluctance to take decision of military intervention, Russian proposed an agreement for Syria to dismantle its chemical weapons. The deal was reached which gave another lease.

This era witnessed the transformation of Iran's reaction to the crisis. In this context, it would be useful to highlight the first hypothesis of this study: "Iranian decision makers saw the Syrian civil war and other powers' positions as an attempt to change the regional balance of power and status quo, only then they undertook the risk of conflict." For this one needs to elaborate what the status quo in the minds of Iranian decision is. In the post-2003 era, Iran took benefit from the power vacuum in the region and materialized cost-free opportunities in the region. Consequently in the year of 2011 the political scene in the region was that "Iraq became a key ally, Hizballah's position in Lebanon was increased, ties in Yemen and Palestine were strengthened, and its stature on the street as a regional anti-Western leader grew" (Phillips 2016: 151). And Iran was seeking to defend this status quo and consolidate its assets in the region. Hence when the protests started in Syria, Tehran analyzed the course of events mainly through a defensive lens and viewed its regional competitors as having an expansionist agenda and promoting change. Because it had already intertwined the alliance with the Syrian regime with its national interests. As a prominent cleric Mehdi Taeb would declare later "Syria is (Iran's) 35th province, and it is a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and wants to take Syria or Khuzestan, our top priority will be to preserve Syria. By preserving Syria, we will be able to retake Khuzestan – but if we lose Syria, we will not be able to preserve Tehran" (Mansharof 2013).

There were reasons for Iran to view the conflict in such a fashion. The leaders of the opposition openly rejected the continuation of the alliance once the regime toppled. Hence Iran was naturally worried about any potential replacement of the regime in Syria since this would easily put Iran in isolation in the region. Also the leading sections in the opposition had the backing of Saudi Arabia, opponent of Iran in the regional balance of power. Especially starting from the summer of 2011, in addition to the US and the EU, many regional powers started to openly condemn Damascus regime and asked Assad to step down. In a clear breaking point the Arab League suspended Syria's membership in November 2011. In August 2011 Turkey also took back its support from the Assad regime. It was when in a six hours long meeting with Assad, Turkish minister of foreign affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu demanded a clear set of reforms. The fact that they were not accepted by Assad, caused Turkey to switch into disengagement against Syria. One of the reasons the demands were not met was that Syria had suspicion against Turkey's motives. "A leaked 2009 diplomatic cable revealed that the administration believed that Erdoğan offered "the best hope of luring Syria out of Tehran's orbit." Pulling Syria away from Iran by jump-starting the Arab-Israeli peace process, the thinking went, Turkey would weaken Iran's influence in the Middle East" (Badran 2011).

Therefore from Tehran's point of view, Iran's international rivals aimed at not only pressuring Assad but also ending Iran's interest in Syria. Together with Western countries and other Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia targeted taking back Syria from the "Axis of Resistance" and create a new friendly regime in Damascus. Hence for Iranian decision makers foreign back opposition in Syria was nothing more than an attack against the Axis of Resistance. Consequently to answer this aggressive behavior against the status quo, Iran had to support Assad regime (Sinkaya 2011: 45). As one Iranian diplomat declared in August 2011 for Tehran "US was trying to split off Syria from the Axis of Resistance" (Mehrnews 2011). As a result seeing the very likely scenario of the fall of a critical ally in the region, Iran mobilized material, technical, political and later military assistance. And it can be suggested that as the hypothesis suggests, Iran reacted against the attempts to distort the status quo and acted to secure and sustain the existing regional balance of power.

All in all, at the end of three years, despite Iran's military support and Russia's diplomatic and political cover, Syrian regime was losing ground in the country. But the attempts to find a new leader around whom the opposition gather did not bear fruit. The unresolvable gaps between the demands of various fractions of opposition especially between armed opposition and political opposition and the confusion resulted from this among powers supporting the anti-Assad movements actually turned into a life line support for Assad. Lack of alternative could only provide him more time in power. Plus the armed Syrian opposition was gradually replaced by foreign professional fighters coming from different parts of the world and this became an important argument for Assad in his claim that they are fighting against not Syrian opposition but a global conspiracy. And when the power vacuum in both Syria and Iraq gave an unexpected development, this gave Iran-Syrian axis a legitimacy.

#### **4.2. 2014 – DAESH COMES INTO PLAY**

In June 2014 a military aggression in the heart of Iraq shook the world. An armed radical organization, Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (Daesh) attacked Iraqi city of Mosul and in a week took control of it. The organization had its roots in Al Qaeda but previously split from the latter and was based in Syrian city of Raqqa since mid 2013.<sup>25</sup> Following the fall of Mosul, Daesh very quickly gained vast areas both in Syria and Iraq under control and declared the end of Sykes-Picot era, referring a secret agreement signed by the UK, France and the Russian Empire to define the borders of Iraq and Syria during the First World War, and found the so-called Islamic State. This fundamentalist Sunni Salafi organization and its denunciation of Iranian Shia directly alarmed Iran and Syria.

This massive shock disrupted first the military balance and then power projection in the region and forced actors to create new blocs, especially when the Daesh militants did a military parade in Raqqa in June 2014 with the ammunition they got from Iraqi and Syrian

---

<sup>25</sup> For more detailed journalistic research on the evolution of Daesh see: Cockburn, P. 2015, *The Rise of Islamic State ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*, Verso, London.

armies and declared a proper “state” in the vast area they controlled. After the first shock, Iranian power apparatus acted quickly for the Iraqi front.

The immediate confusion was overcome in a couple of days, and a consensus was reached regarding robust and complementary diplomatic and military responses. These entailed on-the-ground leadership by the Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, as well as the Foreign Affairs Ministry’s coordination with both the Kurdish Regional Government and the Iraqi central government; both military and political sides of the response were overseen by the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) secretary Ali Shamkhani (Farhi 2017: 13-14).

In order to answer the imminent Daesh threat, Iraq-Shia militias had to be reallocated from Syria to Iraq. This showed Iran’s capability to continue using proxy powers since what Iran did was with the leadership of Quds Force to mobilize thousands of mostly Afghan fighters to Syria (Bucala 2017: 3). And also Hizballah “quickly expanded its combat operations to compensate for the departure of Iraqi Shi’a militias from the battlefield” (Kozak 2015: 17). However the additional man power coming from Iran proxies and Hizballah forces were not enough to reverse the tide of the war and in the first half of 2015 the Syrian regime suffered considerable both in terms of manpower and territory.

While Iran was suffering and looking for new answers and precautions militarily, on diplomacy front it was going through an exceptional era in its relations with the West on two fronts: the fight against Daesh terror and the nuclear deal with five permanent members of the UNSC and Germany which are shortly called as P5+1. The election of Barack Obama who took the office with the ambition of engaging “hostile nations” took positive attention in Tehran.

Daesh terror, its rapid expansion and the terror wave triggered worldwide forced international actors to take urgent steps in September 2014 and an international coalition was formed to fight Daesh. Iran was not an official member of this US-led coalition but on the ground it was getting into tacit cooperation with the coalition forces. “The United States and Iran also pursued somewhat complementary strategies: an air campaign for the former, boots on the ground for the latter. Despite public denials of cooperation or intelligence sharing, signs of tacit coordination and noninterference have emerged; an implicit recognition that ISIS has created new webs of strategic dependence between them” (Colleau 2016: 47).

Secondly the diplomatic negotiations started in 2005 to reach a deal on Iran's nuclear activities gained momentum with the presidency of Rouhani in 2013. The administrations both in Washington and Tehran had taken unprecedented steps towards each other. For example "In September 2013, an Iranian and an American President had a telephone conversation for the first time since the late 1970s. Equally symbolic was the April 27, 2015, meeting between Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Zarif at the New York residence of the Iranian Ambassador to the UN. The first time in over two decades that the United States' top diplomat is known to have entered Iran[ian] diplomatic property" (Colleau 2016: 47). Additionally the fight on Daesh gave Iran the chance of denying accusations of having expansionists policies and create a discourse on the fight against radical terror and maintaining the status quo.

This major shift in the US-Iranian relation and Obama's new strategy ringed the alarm bells in the other side of balance of power in the region. The more Iran formed good relations with the West the more the especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey came closer. This was best seen when "by pumping weapons to Syrian rebels across the Turkish border, the three countries have forged a new opposition coalition known as the Army of Conquest" which has made significant gains over the spring of 2015 (Ignatius 2015). This new opposition was formed quickly after "Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud have agreed on the need to increase support for the opposition in Syria" (AA 2015). These moves were basically resulting from changing threat perception in the region amid the negotiations between Iran and the US.

In fact, it appeared that for many of Iran's Sunni neighbors, the combination of Iran's pariah status and the international sanctions regime had helped keep Iran in its box for the past decade. With the easing of economic sanctions, Iran would be able to exercise an increasingly assertive foreign policy, as had already been seen in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. This was a major factor behind Saudi Arabia's decision to amass a Sunni coalition to repel the Houthi insurgency in Yemen. Although President Obama's meeting with GCC member states at Camp David in May 2015 seemed to assuage many of these concerns, it emerged that Saudi Arabia will increase defense spending by 27 percent by 2020 to become the world's fifth largest military spender, despite low oil prices (Akbarzadeh & Conduit 2016: 179).

On the other end the rapid expansion of Daesh increased the power and position of two different Kurdish political powers. In Iraq, Daesh was stopped in Kirkuk at the hands of *peshmerga* militias of the Kurdish Democratic Party. And in Syria a Syrian offshoot of

PKK (a terrorist organization which had been fighting with the Turkish army since 1984), the Kurdish Party of Democratic Unity (PYD) declared their federate-like autonomous administration and self-protection units, The People's Protection Units (YPG). The headquarter of PYD was based in Kobani, a city right next to the Turkish border. Starting from September 2014, the city was sieged by Daesh. YPG showed an unexpected resistance to the attack, and with the support from US-led airstrikes, Kurdish *peshmergas* from Iraqi Kurdistan and Syrian Free Syrian Army members who went to Kobani through Turkey with Ankara's special permission. At the end of six months Daesh was finally defeated in Kobani. "The position of the region's Kurds has been strengthened immensely, especially after the success of containing the ISIS attack against the Kurdish town of Kobane near the Syrian-Turkish border. The victory obtained a symbolism of epic proportions, highlighting the elevated role of the Kurdish factor in the region" (Laoutides 2016: 105).

This was signaling the end of political investments of Turkey in Kurdish political competition. For Turkey, PYD had direct links with PKK. Hence since the beginning of the crises "Turkey have taken its precautions by providing support to the Kurdish National Council in Syria (KNC or ENKS) which was formed on October 26, 2011, in Erbil, Iraq, under the sponsorship of Masoud Barzani. Turkey's backing of the KNC, a coalition of twelve small Syrian Kurdish parties, came as a counterweight to the PYD" (Ahmadian 2016: 77). Turkey was seeing Daesh as a temporary threat and priority for Turkish threat perception was stopping PKK-related organizations to gain power. But "Turkey's partners in the Anti-Assad campaign had nothing to do with Ankara's 'Kurdish threat' perception. Even worse, the United States turned out to be the main international supporter of the Syrian Kurds. Despite Turkish objections, U.S. and other NATO member-state coordination with the Kurds has proceeded nonetheless" (*ibid*).

From the point of view of the regime Kurdish areas were safe, but new machinery supplies changed the momentum in favor of opposition. On 26 July Assad unexpectedly declared Syrian army was facing a shortage of manpower, and the territories under Assad control was at the weakest point. This declaration came amid ringing of alarm bells in both Damascus and Tehran. Consequently especially after March-April, "there has been a



flurry of diplomatic activity with senior officials from both countries visiting each other's capitals for consultations" (Goodarzi 2015: 2)<sup>26</sup>.

And domestically Daesh expansion gave much more space for hardliners to act in Syria affairs. Quds Force and its commander who until then was a shady figure, Qassem Soleimani took the stage internationally. Moreover with the fight against Daesh and tacit cooperation with the international coalition gave Iran's military operations abroad a sense of legitimacy, also the perception of external threat helped government to create an internal legitimacy for their Syrian policies (Ebrahimi 2016: 7). While some analysts write security apparatus gained favor over diplomacy, in a private interview in Tehran with the writer of this thesis, Barzegar told it was more like for both sides to reach common point and security and diplomacy concerns finally met in equilibrium, hence both started to work for the common objective: "Iran could manage to connect its national security to its foreign policy principles and regional policy at the top with the Syrian crises" (2018).

Second hypothesis argues that Iran pursued expansionist strategies to protect security. As mentioned above, Iran's one of the biggest fears was the attack of a radical religious organization. And when militant Sunni groups started to operate in Syria and Iraq, and when Daesh conquered territories in a striking speed, the "defensive mindset that typifies the Iran- Syria alliance" was enhanced. In parallel Khamenei said, "If they were not stopped, we would have to fight them in Kermanshah and Hamedan" (Wastnidge 2017: 156).

---

<sup>26</sup> Goodarzi lists whose diplomatic contacts between April and June as: "In late April, Syrian Defense Minister Fahd Jassem al-Frej visited Tehran and met with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Dehghan and other high-ranking officials to discuss the deteriorating military situation on the ground and other related issues. This was followed in quick succession in May by a series of visits by Iranian officials to Damascus, most notably, those of Ali Akbar Velayati, Foreign Affairs Advisor to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei; Alaeddin Boroujerdi, Head of the Majlis (Parliament) Foreign Policy and National Security Committee; and an Iranian economic delegation. More recently, in June, the Speaker of the Syrian People's Council, Mohammad Jihad al-Laham, and the Syrian Interior Minister, Major General Mohammad Ibrahim al-Sha'ar, traveled to Iran, while the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) elite Quds Force, Major General Qassem Soleimani, arrived in Syria and toured the front lines in the Latakia region" (2015: 2).

The more Iranian political elite felt their security is in danger, the more Iran expanded its forces over the region and increased its activities. Tehran started its activities in Syria by advising Assad about how to overcome the protests. And as it turned into an armed conflict, Iran on the one hand pushed Hizballah to intervene more deeply into the battles and on the other hand dispatched members of Quds Force as advisors. Also Iran formed a paramilitary group from Syrians, named the Syrian National Defense Forces (NDF) and also sent Shia militants from various countries. With the expansion of Daesh, Iranian forces became much more visible in the field led by Qassem Soleimani. The expansion of Iranian armed forces was most visible in a speech of member of parliament from Tehran, Ali Reza Zakani, who said in reference to Damascus, Baghdad and Beirut “Three Arab capitals have today ended up in the hands of Iran and belong to the Islamic Iranian revolution.” He also said capital of Yemen, Sanaa where was the scene of fights between Iranian supported Houthis and Saudi Arabia, “has now become the fourth Arab capital that is on its way to joining the Iranian revolution.” In the same speech Zakani also openly declared the activities of Quds Force in the region:

“Had General Qasim Soleimani not intervened in the last hours in Iraq Baghdad would have fallen into the hands of ISIS, and this intervention applies to Syria. Had we hesitated in taking decisive decisions vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis and had we now intervened militarily, the Syrian regime would have fallen right at the start of the onset of the revolution” (Middle East Monitor 2014).

Hence Iranians view it that the political situation and power vacuum in Syria and Iraq, and imminent threat of Daesh expansion, forced Iran to expand their military forces in both countries and both fighting directly and setting up new paramilitary forces. As one prominent expert in the Middle East Amin Tarzi argued “Iran’s foreign policy in Syria is now beyond a proxy war. Rather, it aims at securing the power bases in order to project power in the future events of the region” (Berni 2018: 132). All in all it is seen that Iran indeed started and gradually increased its expansion especially in military meaning, with the increase of their perceived threat in the regions.

On the one hand the elite in Tehran came to the conclusion that “the pre-March 2011 political *status quo ante* can’t be restored” and “Assad doesn’t have a long-term future in Syria” writes Goodarzi, but because of four important factors supporting Assad turned into a zero-sum game for Iranians: Firstly, Syrian crises had become a proxy war between Saudis and Iranians who had concerns about radicalization of its own Sunni population.

Secondly they believe if Iran was to give up its support, an extremist Sunni organization like Daesh will come to power in Syria which would be a direct threat to Iran. Thirdly because Iran had been excluded from the UN-sponsored peace talks, they thought in order to be invited to the table again they had to be an actor in the field. Lastly there wasn't any viable alternative to Assad government in Syria (2015: 3-4). This rationale could be best seen when Rouhani declared in June 2015 that "Iran will back Syria until the end of the road" (Reuters 2015).

Increasing the attempts to find a solution to military backlash, in July 2015 Soleimani finalized the military plans for Russian army's direct involvement in the crises in a private meeting in Moscow (Perry, Tom 2015). In the very same month again, P5+1 countries and Iran reached an agreement for the nuclear deal. This was reached not despite the Supreme Leader but with his approval. He called the negotiators as "children of the revolution," repeatedly called for "heroic flexibility" and did not oppose direct talks between Iran and the United States. And "He also clarified that he would not interfere in the details of the negotiations, since his personal involvement was limited to setting broad policy guidelines and red lines" (Colleau 2016: 49-50).

Securing international support with the nuclear deal, Iran was pushing for one last option to give support to Assad regime. That support would come from Russia and would shape the regional order very deeply.

#### **4.3. 2015 – RUSSIAN INVOLVEMENT AND OPEN ENGAGEMENT OF IRGC**

On 30 September 2015, Russian army started its first air strikes in Syria. Gradually Russia would extend its actions in Syria but would keep their operations limited with air cover. At least that would be official position of Russia. Hence the Moscow-Tehran strategy was combining "Russian air superiority and Iranian ground capabilities" to "meet a common objective in Syria" (Barzegar & Divsallar 2017: 51). Actually their common objective was to protect their areas of influence in the post-war Syria. They were differentiated in many other areas. Katzman writes "the two countries' interests do not align precisely in

Syria. Iranian leaders express far greater concern about protecting Hizballah in any post-Assad regime than do leaders of Russia, whose interests appear to center on Russia's overall presence in the Middle East and retention of naval and other bases in Syria" (2016: 48).

Anyhow their common objective was enough for Iranians to focus on sustaining this cooperation. For Iranian policy makers, this cooperation was a striking shift in foundational principles of the revolution. "Iran's revolutionary foreign policy, in its popular "Neither East, Nor West" policy, dismissed any major alliance with global powers (i.e. the United States and Russia) because they considered non-Islamic Imperialist states as opposing peoples' right and justice." But facing the limits of its power in Syria, Tehran saw the only viable solution was to form the very first political-security partnership with a world power in the history of Islamic Republic. "The case of Russian-Iranian cooperation shows that Iran is ready to redefine its ideological objectives if necessary, and is flexible enough to take pragmatic positions to meet its objectives" (Barzegar & Divsallar 2017: 51).

This was not an easy decision to come up with. A report by International Crises Group observes that "The solicitation of Russian airpower caused a fissure within the SNSC between those who remained highly skeptical of Russian intentions, given a long history of mistrust, and those who saw an opportunity to operate alongside a global power" and quotes a former Quds force "the choice was clear: either cooperate with Russia or forget about Syria" (2018: 17-18).

Even more striking, in August 2016, in a clear demonstration of power with Iran's approval Russian bomber jets used the Iranian airbase near the city of Hamedan for the strikes in Syria. this raised too much criticism domestically because "the staging appeared to run counter to Iran's constitution, which bans foreign use of Iran's military facilities, and Iran said it had revoked permission to use the base because Russia had publicized the access" (Katzman 2016: 48). Hassan Ahmadian, assistant Professor of Middle East and North Africa studies at the University of Tehran, said in an interview with the writer of this thesis, this was hard to swallow for Iranians as well: "There was an agreement, this

would stay secret between Iran and Russia. But Russians declared it. It was a sign of more of a strategic cooperation between the two countries. So it was a sign actually but Iran wasn't so happy with Russia going to media... Iranians gave this decisions as a gesture, but they stopped it" (2018).

The alliance between Iran and Russia was based on military means and it could be easily said both sides kept their skepticism over the future of this alliance, especially the Iranians. "Iranian officials seem particularly concerned that Russia might be using Syria as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the US on other issues, such as Ukraine, and is therefore not as committed as Tehran to keeping Assad in power nor to preserving the integrity of the country" (Tabrizi & Pantucci 2016: 6). Hence it can be suggested that the Russo-Iranian cooperation in Syria would not last long as Stephen Walt proposed in one of hypothesis on balancing that "alliances formed during wartime will disintegrate when the enemy is defeated" (1990: 32).

Anyhow, whether it will last long or not, this military-oriented cooperation is an existing phenomenon in Syria. With this new strategic and military cooperation, the power vacuum in the absence of a world power, i.e. the US was being filled by Russia which was gradually turning into an actor whom every actor in the region could negotiate with. This was actually what Russian decision makers were attempting to do. "Russia has pursued its own objectives vis-à-vis Iran and the wider Middle East as a means of improving its regional and global standing" and it has been seen as "architect of international relations" and "the key power broker" in the Syrian conflict, surely in concert with Iran (Wastnidge 2017: 153).

Prominent expert on Middle East, Vali Nasr explains the US logic as "in a clear break with past U.S. policy, it refused to intervene in Syria's civil war and moved beyond the old strategy of containment to forge a nuclear deal with Iran. That deal angered the Arab world and aggravated regional tensions, but it also reduced the threat that would have continued to tether the United States to the Middle East just when it was trying to break free" (2018: 114)

Also in the regional base, another strong anti-Assad actor had come to reconsider its position. Right from the beginning of Russian air campaign, Ankara protested repeated violations of Turkish airspace. Finally on 24 November 2015 a Russian fighter jet was shot down by a Turkish fighter jet. President Putin described the event as “a stab in the back” and the response was sanctions on various areas from economy to tourism and to international relations. The net result of the event was “the defeat of Turkey’s plans in Syria and a setback in its strategic ambition of acting as a regional power that determines the course of events in the Middle East” (Özel 2016:5). This crisis played a huge role for Ankara to change its definition of interest in the region and at the end “Russia’s military role in Syria and its stance against Turkey after the fighter jet incident on November 2015, along with the insecurity caused by the Syrian crisis and its spilled over into Turkey, brought Ankara to go beyond its anti-Assad zero-sum-game” (Ahmadian 2016: 71).

Hence while the US was absent, the Gulf countries couldn’t organize a viable alternative for post-Assad era, Turkey was alarmed with the rise of Kurdish movement in Northern Syria, clashes at its border and terror attacks by Daesh within the country and dispute with the Russians, it was started to seem like Iran and Russia were forming a new bloc in the field and were gaining the upper hand in the war.

#### **4.4. 2015 - 2017 – ASTANA TALKS AND DAESH ATTACK IN TEHRAN**

Russian air campaign together with important developments related with almost each actor changed the balance of power in the region and hence the course of crises which end up getting Iran into to diplomacy table to secure its strategic objectives.

First, the most vocal opponent of Assad since early days the war, Turkey was both externally and internally in a hard position to continue its policy. With the Russian sanctions, imports and tourism income was hit hardly, security nationwide was suffering from both PKK and Daesh attacks, politically repeated elections together with more than 3 million Syrian refugees raised many questions on administration. “Turkish strategic choices in the Syrian crisis opened a Pandora box of insecurity and instability that spilled over to its own territory” (Ahmadian 2016: 79). Then on 15 July 2016 a military coup was

attempted and failed. “Following a failed Turkish military coup in July, and mutual concerns over the empowerment of Syrian Kurdish forces, Turkey and Iran have narrowed their differences over Syria” (Katzman 2016:39-40). And more importantly Ankara accepted that their years-old no-fly zone demand from the US was not going to meet with approval at any point and pushed for being a military actor in the field to raise its hand on diplomacy table. Consequently following the coup in August 2016, Turkey started Euphrates Shield Operation within Syria for the last stronghold of Daesh, between two PYD cantons. This operation also got Russian approval who opened Syrian air space for Turkish jets. All in all direct and imminent threats and to its own security forced Turkey to revise its strategy on Syria and get in more active collaboration with Iranians.

On the Gulf front already existing cracks between Saudi Arabia and Qatar came to an irrevocable point. Both countries were competing for the leadership of Arab cause and differentiated on their relation with the Muslim Brotherhood, while Qatar was in favor and Saudis were historically opposing the organization. This competition halted the temporary cooperation of both countries on Syria. In June 2017 Saudi Arabia would create a coalition of Arab countries to impose an economic and diplomatic boycott for Qatar. This failed attempt of Saudi Arabia would push Qatar closer to Iran and alienate Turkey which had good relations with both Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The US since the very first days of the crises mainly focusing on a policy of not putting American boots on the ground. The result of that during the fight against Daesh was direct support for PYD and its armed fractions. This direct and open support met with fierce opposition from Turkey and Ankara at the end took the decision of military operations. The crises between PYD and Ankara was far from being solved, at least this was not on the US’s agenda. Because the US looking for more ways of finding ways to cut its military engagement in Syria. At the end “the United States’ position in the Middle East reflects its broader retreat from global leadership. The United States lacks the capacity to roll back Iranian gains and fill the vacuum that doing so would leave behind” (Nasr 2018: 115).

Moreover on domestic front, because of the money spent and increasing numbers of deaths of Iranians in Syria raised questions and criticism in Iranian audience. Iran's operation abroad has been an issue among within the Iranian public who first demand solution to the worsening economic situation in the country. Especially when massive protests took place in 2009 after the allegedly a fraudulent election, one of main slogans of protesters was "Neither Gaza nor Lebanon, My Life for Iran!" (*na Ghaze na Lobnan, janam fedaye Iran*). Since then criticizing expenditure on foreign operations turned into a symptom of people's dissatisfaction for internal economic and administration problems. But the terrifying methods of Daesh and Iranian policy makers' argument that if they don't eliminate extremism abroad they'll have to fight with in inside the country mobilized Iranian public behind the idea that Iranian troops have to be on the ground for the sake of the security of the homeland. This mobilization would reach its zenith when on 7 June 2017, after Arab, Turkish, Western cities, Iran was the recent target for terrorist attacks of Daesh. Gunmen and suicide bombers attacked the national parliament and the mausoleum of Khomeini in Tehran and killed 18 people. Twin attacks targeting highly symbolic points of the Islamic Republic would later quickly decrease the questions among those who were against operations abroad. "The sense of danger from the threats swirling around the country has led many Iranians to accept the logic of forward defense. During the early years of the Syrian civil war, Iran's rulers went to great lengths to downplay Iranian involvement and hid Iranian casualties. Now, they publicly celebrate them as martyrs" (Nasr 2018: 113-114). A poll conducted by The Center of International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland in the following week of Daesh attacks showed that General Qassem Soleimani had the most favorable ratings among Iranian public and "his popularity, which was already high, increased substantially after the terrorist attacks in Iran. He has the least negative rating among all figures evaluated" (Mohseni, Gallagher & Ramsay 2017: 31).

Third hypothesis argues that Iran internal affairs limited and shaped the tactics Iran would practice to protect balance of power and status quo. This hypothesis can be discussed on two levels about the effect of public opinion in Iran. One is how it is reflected in the state's electoral system which can reflect the fashion comes from below. And second is how state tries to shape the public opinion and which arguments it uses.



Firstly, Güneş Murat Tezcür in his work on authoritarian resilience in the Iranian democracy, argues on the one hand “ultimate power is concentrated in the hands of a single individual, the supreme leader, who is not popularly elected, practically has life tenure, and controls a loyal security apparatus with a mission to repress internal dissent.” But on the other hand Iran “regularly holds elections that introduce a degree of uncertainty and competitiveness that is unprecedented in other Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes” (Tezcür 2013: 200). And he proposes one might argue that as long as authoritarian institutions stay in place, elections wouldn’t make sense. But, he argues, “these events may also trigger changes beyond the replacement of one set of elites with another and contribute to increasing democratic performance” (Tezcür 2013: 221). And he gives examples of gradual changes in well-being of rights activists, lawyers, minorities. From this point of view it can be argued that the spirit that voted for moderate Rouhani in the 2013 elections, that demanded international cooperation and opening, end for sanctions and less conflicts was one of the reasons why Iranian military was very slowly increased its engagement in Syrian conflict. For years Iran rejected the accusations of fighting in Syria on behalf of Assad regime and allegedly huge economic spending.

At the same time, political elite from top looked for ways to mobilize the people since the very early days of the republic. Ewan Stein writes the Islamic Republic of Iran was founded as a populist state with two core tenets: “a commitment to the liberation of ‘the people’ from corrupt elites kept in place by imperialism and Zionism; and a conception of ‘the people’ that transcends the borders of the nation-state” (2017: 678). And it is that “people” the regime has to mobilize and shape in order to sustain its very existence because “power is measured not only by a regime’s ability to suppress opposition but also by its ability to mobilize support and ensure compliance” (Ehteshami et. al. 2013: 223). For this the regime has been trying to exploit and ward off the external threats. Tehran used “political variety” of “external resources” and had the ability to use foreign policy to “acquire nationalist legitimacy from external threat”. Taking benefit from regime change threats coming from the US, the post-2003 era has been a great example how both Syrian and Iranian regimes exploited the situation in war-torn Iraq.

Authoritarianism resilience cannot be understood in isolation from external factors. To stay in power, authoritarian regimes need to ward off external and internal threats but also need to access

resources to do so, including external ones. Both the Syrian and Iranian regimes faced participatory demands within that coincided with the U.S. reach for hegemony in the region through the export of neoliberal democratization, including coercive regime change in Iraq. To counter this grave national security threat, both regimes engaged in a reverse sort of omnibalancing<sup>27</sup>, namely defying America's hegemonic project in the region to get the nationalist legitimacy (political capital) to contain or appease domestic opposition" (Ehteshami et. al. 2013: 240).

In the Syrian civil war, regime had implemented the very same policy and promoted the crises as an existential threat to the interests of the country. But it can be suggested that the election results of 2013, increasing public protests on economy and corruption, limited the maneuvers of the Iranian regime in Syria. Consequently to secure legitimacy for its actions in Syria, "Iran has added a religious overlay to justify its involvement in the conflict" and "Making use of its transnational religious networks, Iran has facilitated the insertion of volunteers into the conflict from Shia communities in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Lebanon" (Wastnidge 2017: 155). But with the sudden expansion of Daesh, the regime become not only public but also proud with the operations in Iraq and Syria.

At that point political and military calculation would show Iran's power projection was finally bearing fruit.

Iran has come out of the fight against ISIS stronger than before. The IRGC has trained and organized Iraqi Shiites who confronted ISIS in Iraq, Shiite volunteers who traveled from as far away as Afghanistan to fight in Syria, and Houthi forces battling the pro-Saudi government in Yemen. Together with Hizballah, these Shiite groups form a force to be reckoned with. After the fighting ends, they will continue to shape their home countries as they enter local politics, entrenching Iran's influence in the Arab world. As a result, Sunni Arab states will no longer be able to manage the region on their own.

But among Iranian policy makers, the discussions whether the right time for diplomacy has arrived or not was problematic since it seemed that the military wing had gained the upper hand. The discussion was obvious in 2016 when the IRGC was resisting the idea of a ceasefire which could Syrian army from consolidating its control over key areas while the foreign ministry was willing to look for diplomatic options. And the decision came in the SNSC which "decided to advance the military option while participating in parallel diplomatic efforts to bring about ceasefires and create de-escalation zones largely favorable to the Assad regime" (ICG 2018: 19). Then the result was the so-called Astana

---

<sup>27</sup> Omnibalancing means, as proposed firstly by Steven R. David, third world countries had done their alliance with super power on the basis of which one would help more to keep the regim in power, in addition to realist assumptions. For further information, please see: David, S. R. 1991. 'Explaining Third World Alignment', *World Politics*, vol. 43, no. 2. pp. 233-256.

process. This was a series of meetings in the capital of Kazakhstan, organized with the guarantorship of Iran, Russia and Turkey. With this, being largely excluded from Geneva process Iran could create a parallel peace process in Astana; legitimize its military power in the field and gain a much bigger space; force Turkey to take a clear step back in its anti-Assad campaign.

Late December 2016 news coming from both military and diplomatic arenas showing the SNSC decision was on track. Within the same day on 20 December on the one hand after 4,5 years the biggest city of the country Aleppo was completely fallen into government control and on the other hand the foreign ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey met in Moscow, the Russian capital. The decision was to continue talks in Astana. On 29<sup>th</sup> a ceasefire was declared with the guarantorship of Turkey and Russia. And the Astana meeting was declared to sustain this ceasefire.

The first Astana meeting had taken place on 23-24 January and it signaled a new era for the balance of power and proof for Iran's capabilities. This meeting from many aspects was exceptional. The main aim was to progress ceasefire talks between the opposing sides. Unlike Geneva was that this time not political leaders but leaders of armed opposition groups were on the table. Also for the first time Syrian government and opposition figures were on the same table. Although the talks continued indirectly between them, they in the same room during the opening speech, this alone was a striking breakthrough. Thirdly, equally symbolic, representatives from governments of Ankara and Damascus were for first time on the same table.

Consequently, Iran early 2017 came to a point where he strengthened its decades long alliance with Damascus against all odds, had more and wider proxies on the ground than ever before and the opposition bloc were divided and weaker than before.

## CONCLUSION

In 2015, the former British ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iraq, Syria and Burma, John Jenkins in *New Statesman* wrote that “the essential truth about Syria is that no one apart from Iran knows what they are doing”. Indeed the way the Syrian crisis evolved proved anti-Assad bloc didn’t have a realizable roadmap for the future of Syria. The very first conference for political opposition groups was organized as early as June 2011 in Turkey, but this was later followed by dozens of different attempts on restructuring opposition in various countries of the world. None was successful due to conflicting agendas and projections of pro-opposition countries on the future of Syrian regime. Meanwhile, Iran, after initial days of hesitation, had openly declared its side and supported the Syrian regime and hence the status quo in the region which both Iran and Syria had spent decades to construct.

The first protests started in March 2011 in Syria and gradually evolved into an armed conflict. Decision makers in Tehran and Damascus declared at very early stage that they see the conflict as an aggression towards the balance of power in the region and hence they took a “defensive” stance to secure the status quo. In this work I tried to analyze this stance from a theoretical point of view and to understand how a rational actor, Iran in this case, behave against a threat to its interest. For this aim asked the questions of a branch of realist thought, i.e. defensive realism since it uses not only structural theories to understand and foresee a state’s behavior in international arena but also domestic and unit-level theories to understand “why” they are doing so.

Especially for Syro-Iranian alliance asking the question of “why” is highly important. In the last decade, together with the Syrian crisis, most analyses have been focusing on generalizations and facile answers. They are limited with religious arguments and easily come up with a final judgment by saying those two states are supporting each other as Shia powers against Sunni states. But without looking at the historical background of the alliance and taking many practical and immediate needs into account it would be highly

challenging to understand the rationale behind this “axis”. For this in this work a history of the relation between two counties has been explained in a chronological context. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the triggering effect and a urgent need for balancing hit the surface when Iraqi forces invaded Iranian soil in 1980. It was when Iranians planned that to create a hole in any possible Arab-front against them, Syria would have vital importance. Such a scenario was also valid against a cooperation among the Gulf countries. Hence the perception of threat on regional context was a united Arab bloc which would prioritize balancing Iran’s power. Second threat has been coming from Israel and the USA. As a result to create a balance against Israel, a regional power with a nuclear arsenal, Iran felt it had to rely on unconventional warfare. Hence to provide such a leverage over Israel, Iran needed a proxy in Lebanon. And the only route to reach there was going through Syria.

As a result, Iran saw both threats could be solved or at least stagnated only with direct support of Syria. Putting all the similarities or differences aside, this has been the calculations of Iranians elite. That was most obvious when Ali Akbar Velayati, Senior Advisor for Foreign Affairs to Iran's Supreme Leader, said on 6 January 2012 that “Syria is the golden ring of the chain of resistance against Israel.” As a result understanding what makes Syria “golden ring”, and asking questions about why those two countries have been willing to secure and sustain an alliance for almost 40 years is highly important. Iran had started cultivating seeds for this alliance with the beginning of Iran-Iraqi war. It was not because a Shia country was under attack of a Sunni power and was desperately in need of a support from the Shia country in the region. Instead facing with an aggressive bloc, Iran focused on forming another bloc to face the threat and create a balance in the region. This work also shows that during almost 40 years, no matter what has changed in region and world politics, this alliance between Syria and Iran has been protected because their understanding of threat and interest has been very similar.

This work attempts to elaborate more on the understanding of threat and interest between Iran and Syria and tests some arguments of defensive realism. For this a framework and history of defensive realism had been explained. The basic argument of it is that states are “generally satisfied with the status quo because security is, unlike what offensive

realists argue, not scarce.” And at times of explaining and foreseeing any possible armed conflict and threat, a defensive realism actor has to see tangible signs, it should not act only relying on its perception of threat. To elaborate more on the cooperation between to states, models and theories on alliance were explained. After that an analysis on the Iran’s policy since the Islamic Revolution was analyzed from the defensive realist point of view. For this, it was first better to analyze the structure of the alliance. This almost-40-year-long partnership was at its heart a defensive alliance, because “Defensive alliances are less fragile than offensive ones. Offensive alliances quite often fall apart once the opponent has been attacked and vanquished. The rationale for maintaining the alliance consequently ceases to exist for the members, and they frequently fall out and squabble over the fruits of their victory” (Goodarzi 2013: 35). Here we see having different ideologies, state structures also helps to sustain an alliance because as defensive realists would argue when the actors have a common ideology they compete for leadership. But as we see in Syro-Iranian axis, what helped them to continue alliance is not ideological but self-defined interests and threats. This is exactly why this alliance should be seen as a marriage of convenience. The historical evolution is explained in the third chapter of the research. There it can be seen it has survived because they had common understanding of threat, shortly disrupting Iraqi and Israeli power and blocking the increase of US involvement in the region. "Iran, Syria and Hizballah see themselves as constituting an Axis of Resistance against Israeli and, by extension, U.S. aims in the region. Until the current conflict, Israel and the United States had also been the two existential threats to both Syria and Iran; a common front against them naturally reinforced their defensive alliance” (Wastnidge 2017: 152).

As a result gradually Syria has become a “like-minded” country and this made Syria a perfect partner for a long-lasting alliance to secure the survival of both the Islamic regime and the regional balance of power. There were crises and ups and downs in the relation between them. And there were attempts of other powers to break this alliance throughout the last three decades. Sinkaya writes the bloc led by US and Israel followed three main policies: containment of Iran, containment of Hizballah and engagement with Syria (2011: 42). But the realities on the ground and lack of finding the common ground with any other state in the region made Syria and Iran come together. Once the power was

balanced and the alliance became the “normal” of the region, Iran’s focus was on protecting the alliance and status quo. In this context Iran has been formulating its both diplomatic and military policies in the international arena as defensive. This has its reflection on the discourse level as well. Chubin writes

country’s military posture is largely defensive. Its forces are configured for defense and its doctrine, repeatedly declared, is defensive. Iran defines success in similar terms: as thwarting the enemy’s goals... Iran places much emphasis on deterrence, which it sees as having three pillars: preparedness, the ability to retaliate and defense. After being surprised by Iraq in 1980, Tehran now leaves nothing to chance (2014: 78).

Hence when the waves of the Arab Spring hit the doors of Syria in March 2011, the alliance had a history of more than 30 years which had many crises and overcoming most of them and resulted with the institutionalizing of the alliance. As a result the armed decision makers in the Iranian elite led by the IRGC saw the opposition movement as an existential threat not only for Syrian regime but for indispensable interests of Iran in the region.

The way Iran calculated its policies about the civil war, and the way Iran handled unexpected crises in the region had been very fruitful for Tehran. Starting the civil war as Syria’s only ally in the region, Iran was seen as an obvious loser of the war. In two years, Assad lost most of the control of the country and even Assad himself openly declared the Syrian army was suffering from manpower. But the changing realities in the ground e.g. lack of finding an alternative figure to replace Assad, radicalization of the opposition and sudden expansion of Daesh, Turkey’s internal problems and also the US’s focus on leading from behind policy and resisting against American boots on the ground gave Iran a broad area where it can make much more maneuvers. This process went hand in hand with Iran’s attempts to protect its security and create opportunities to participate and shape regional and international politics together with the country’s interest. As a result in early 2017, Iran finally came back to the diplomacy table with a powerful foot and leverage within Syria and being very close the maintain the status quo in the worst humanitarian crisis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I believe what has been experienced since 2011 shows how status quo powers react the revisionist attempts within the context of defensive realism. But there are certain limitations in this research on explaining the perceptions of decision makers in both

countries. I had the chance to meet Iranian academics and have face to face conversations and interviews, some of which I quoted in this work. But due to my limited skills in Persian, I could not take benefit from the vast works in Iranian academia and officials in the Iranian bureaucracy. Also I have talked with many ordinary Iranians with different religious and ethnic orientations but my comments about their views are simply based on my personal observations. Hence a much more deeper and academic research is also needed to explain how Iranian public opinion shape foreign policy making. Also due to condition in the ground prevented me to do field researches in Syria. This is another missing point in this research. But all in all, what I aimed doing is propose some ideas and make a humble contribution to the newly growing Turkish literature on the alliance between Iran and Syria. So far two recent works distinguish themselves and both are master of science thesis. One is by Cristin Cappelletti from the Middle East Technical University (*Dynamics of the Iranian Role in the Syrian War*, 2018) and the other is by Yusuf Salih Korkmaz from Marmara University (*Syrian-Iranian Regional Alliance and Its Reflection on Arab Spring*, 2015). The Syrian War proved this alliance will last longer than many political experts had foreseen. Hence there will be a dire need of more researches to prevent facile arguments to gain higher ground. This becomes more important once it is understood that countries in question here are not just two regional powers of the neighbors of Turkish Republic.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aa.com.tr. 2015. *Turkey, Saudi Arabia to boost support for Syrian opposition*. [online] Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkey-saudi-arabia-to-boost-support-for-syrian-opposition/70529> [Accessed 16 Jan. 2019].
- Abrahamian, E. 2008, *A History of Modern Iran*, Cambridge, New York.
- Acharya, A. 2014, 'Power Shift or Paradigm Shift? China's Rise and Asia's Emerging Security Order', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 1, pp. 158-173.
- Adiong, N. 2008, 'The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran Towards the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries', *GRIN Publishing GmbH*, pp. 1-7..
- Adler, E. 1997, 'Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 319–363.
- Ahmadian, H. Interviewed by: Ozyer, B. (3rd October 2017, Tehran)
- Ahmadian, H. 2016, 'Reasoning Turkey's Syrian Shift: A New Track with Iran?', *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 69-89.
- Akbarzadeh, S. 2014, 'Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Ideology and Realpolitik in Iranian Foreign Policy', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 69, no. 1, pp. 88-103.
- Akpınar, P. 2015, 'Mediation as a Foreign Policy Tool in the Arab Spring Turkey, Qatar and Iran', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 252–268.
- Alfoneh, A. and Eisenstadt, M. 2016. *Iranian Casualties in Syria and the Strategic Logic of Intervention*. [online] Washingtoninstitute.org. Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-casualties-in-syria-and-the-strategic-logic-of-intervention> [Accessed 06 Oct. 2018].
- Arjomand, S. 2009, *After Khomeini*. Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford.
- Asl, N. K. 2009, 1979 Sonrası İran'ın Orta Doğu Politikası ve Bölge Ülkeleri ile İlişkileri, PhD Thesis, Gazi Üniversitesi.
- Badran, T. 2011. *Obama's Options in Damascus*. [online] Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2011-08-16/obamas-options-damascus> [Accessed 14 Marc. 2019].
- Barzegar, K. 2008, 'Iran and The Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 15, no.1, pp. 87-99.

- Barzegar, K. 2010, 'Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy after Saddam', *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 173-189.
- Barzegar, K. & Rezai, M. 2017, 'Ayatollah Khamenei's Strategic Thinking', *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp.27-54.
- Barzegar, K. & Divsallar, A. 2017, 'Political Rationality in Iranian Foreign Policy', *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 39-53.
- Barzegar, K. Interviewed by: Ozyer, B. (21st January 2018, Tehran)
- BBC News Persian. 2018. *Aya hech neshaney az tajma'haei etezazy pish az in vojod nadasht (Have not there occurred any signs of protests before?)*. [online] Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-42541340> [Accessed 14 Jan. 2019].
- Berni, HM. 2018. 'Iran's Security Dilemma in The Middle East: A Neorealist Approach to Iran's Foreign Policy in Syria', *İran Çalışmaları Dergisi*, vol.1, no. 2, pp. 115-139.
- Brenda, S. 2006. 'The Islamic Republic of Iran: Is It Really?' in S. Brenda (ed.), *The Limits of culture: Islam and foreign policy*. MIT Press, Cambridge, pp. 219-239.
- Brooks, S. G. 1997, 'Dueling Realisms', *International Organization*, vol. 51, no. 3, pp. 445-77.
- Buchta, W. 2000. *Who rules Iran?*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington DC.
- Carlsnaes, W. 1992, 'The Agency-Structure Problem in Foreign Policy Analysis', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 245-270.
- Christensen, T.J. & Snyder, J. 1990, 'Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity', *International Organization*, vol. 44, no. 2, pp. 137-168.
- Chubin, S. 2014, 'Is Iran a Military Threat?', *Survival*, vol. 56, no. 2, pp.65-88.
- Clawson, P. 1998, 'The Khatami Paradox', in P. Clawson, E. Eisenstad, E. Kanovsky & D. Menashri (ed.), *Iran Under Khatami*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington DC, pp. 1-12.
- Clawson, P. & Rubin, M. 2005, *Eternal Iran*, Palgrave, New York.
- Colleau, M. 2015, 'Iran's Status-Seeking Foreign Policy through the Prism of the Nuclear Issue: the Ahmadinejad Presidency, 2005-2013' PhD thesis, University of Exeter.
- Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*. [online] Available at: [https://publicofficialsfinancialdisclosure.worldbank.org/sites/fdl/files/assets/law-library-files/Iran\\_Constitution\\_en.pdf](https://publicofficialsfinancialdisclosure.worldbank.org/sites/fdl/files/assets/law-library-files/Iran_Constitution_en.pdf) [Accessed 18 Feb. 2019].

- Cook, J. (2015). *Why 'Leading from Behind' in the Middle East Is Not Enough*. [online] The National Interest. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-leading-behind-the-middle-east-not-enough-12729> [Accessed 21 Jan. 2019].
- Copeland, D. C. 2003, 'A Realist Critique of the English School', *Review of International Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 427-441.
- Davidson, J. W. 2013, 'France, Britain and the intervention in Libya: An integrated analysis', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 310–329.
- Dessler, D. 1989, 'What's at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?', *International Organization*, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 441-473.
- Dilek, K. 2011, 'İran'ın Orta Asya Politikaları' Ahmet Yesevi Üniversitesi, İnceleme-Araştırma Dizisi No: 07.
- Downs, K. 2012, 'A Theoretical Analysis of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain', *Journal of Politics & International Studies*, vol. 8, pp. 203-237.
- Ebrahimi, H. 2016, *Bir İç Politika Meselesi Olarak İran'da Suriye Sorunu*, İran Araştırmaları Merkezi, Ankara.
- Ehteshami, A. 1995, *After Khomeini The Iranian Second Republic*, Routledge, London.
- Ehteshami, A. & Hinnebusch, R. 1997, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, Routledge, London.
- Ehteshami, A., Hinnebusch, R., Huuhtanen, H., Raunio, P., Warnaar, M. and Zintl, T. 2013. 'Authoritarian Resilience and International Linkages in Iran and Syria'. In: S. Heydemann and R. Leenders, ed., *Middle East Authoritarianisms*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 222-243.
- Ekşi, M. & Uzun, Ö. S. 2017, 'Continuities and Changes in Iran's Foreign Policy: Analysis Of Syrian Case', *Bölgesel Araştırmalar Dergisi*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 205-228.
- Eshraghi, A. & Baji, Y. 2012, *Debunking the Rafsanjani myth*, Aljazeera.com. viewed 9 December 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/02/2012215164958644116.html>.
- Farhi, F. 2017. 'Iranian Power Projection Strategy and Goals' in K. H. Hicks & M. G. Dalton (ed.), *Deterring Iran After the Nuclear Deal*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, pp. 8-25.
- Farsi.rouhollah.ir.. [online] Available at: <https://farsi.rouhollah.ir/library/sahifeh-imam-khomeini/vol/20/page/452> [Accessed 16 Dec. 2018].

- Feng, H. 2005, 'The Operational Code of Mao Zedong: Defensive or Offensive Realist?', *Security Studies*, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 637–662.
- Feng, L. & Ruizhuang, Z. 2006, 'The Typologies of Realism', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 1, pp. 109–134.
- Fox, J. & Sandal, N. A. 2013, *Religion in International Relations Theory*, Routledge, New York.
- Fulton, W. 2011, 'A Window into the Foreign Policy of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei', AEI Critical Threats Project. American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.
- Ganji, B. 2006, *Politics of Confrontation: The Foreign Policy of the USA and Revolutionary Iran*, Tauris, London.
- Ganji, A. 2008, 'The Latter-Day Sultan: Power and Politics in Iran', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 6, pp. 45-62, 64-66.
- Gause, F. G. 2014, *Beyond Sectarianism*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, Qatar.
- Giddens, A. 1979, *Central Problems in Social Theory Action, structure and contradiction in social analysis*, Macmillan, London.
- Goodarzi, J. 2006, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*, Tauris, London.
- Goodarzi, J. 2013. 'Syria and Iran Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment', *Ortadoğu Etütler*, vol. 4, no.2, pp. 31-54.
- Hadian, N. 2015, *Iran Debates Its Regional Role*, Atlantic Council's South Asia Center.
- Hamilton, E. J. & Rathbun, B. C. 2013, 'Scarce Differences: Toward a Material and Systemic Foundation for Offensive and Defensive Realism', *Security Studies*, vol.22, no.3, pp. 436-465.
- Hinnebusch, R. 2002, Introduction, in R. Hinnebusch & A. Ehteshami (ed.), *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder.
- Hinnebusch, R. 2003, *The International Politics of the Middle East*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- Hokayem, E. 2012, 'Syria and its Neighbours', *Survival*, vol. 54, no. 2, pp. 7-14.
- Holsti, O., Hopmann, P. & Sullivan, J. 1985, *Unity and disintegration in international alliances*, University Press of America, Lanham.

- Hopf, T. 1998, 'The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory', *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 171-200.
- Hürriyet Daily News. (2012). *Iran unveils six-point peace plan for Syria - World News*. [online] Available at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/iran-unveils-six-point-peace-plan-for-syria-37171> [Accessed 16 Apr. 2018].
- Hunter, S. T. 2010, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order*, Praeger, California.
- Ignatius, D. (2015). *A New Cooperation on Syria*. [online] The Washington Post. Available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-new-cooperation-on-syria/2015/05/12/bdb48a68-f8ed-11e4-9030-b4732caefe81\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-new-cooperation-on-syria/2015/05/12/bdb48a68-f8ed-11e4-9030-b4732caefe81_story.html) [Accessed 21 Feb. 2019].
- 'Imam amad', 1979, *Ettelaat*, 1 February, p. 1.
- Jenkins, J. (2015). *No one knows what they're doing in Syria - but standing back is not an option*. [online] Newstatesman.com. Available at: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2015/12/no-one-knows-what-theyre-doing-syria-standing-back-not-option> [Accessed 27 Feb. 2019].
- Jervis, R. 1978, 'Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma', *World Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 167-214.
- Jervis, R. 1994, 'Hans Morgenthau, Realism, and the Scientific Study of International Politics', *Social Research*, vol. 61, no. 4, pp. 853-876.
- Jervis, R. 1999, 'Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation', *International Security*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 42-63.
- Johnson D., Phil D. & Thayer B. 2016, 'The Evolution of Offensive Realism', *Politics and the Life Sciences*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp.1-26.
- Katzman, K. 2016, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, Congressional Research Service.
- Kazemzadeh, M. 2017, 'Foreign Policy Decision Making in Iran and the Nuclear Program', *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 198-214.
- Khalifa, K. 2008, *In Praise of Hatred*, Thomas Dunne Books, New York.
- Kinzer, S. 2003, *All the Shah's Men*, Wiley, New Jersey.
- Kozak, C. 2015, *Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War, Washington.
- Lebow, R. N. 2013, 'Classical Realism', in T. Dunne, M. Kurki, S. Smith (ed.), *International Relations Theories*, Oxford, Oxford, pp. 59-76.

- Liska, G. 1968, *Nations in Alliance*, The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore.
- Lizza, R. (2011). *An American President Abroad*. [online] The New Yorker. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist> [Accessed 21 Dec. 2018].
- Lob, E. 2016, 'The Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy and. Developmental Activities in Sub-Saharan Africa', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 48, no. 02, pp.313-338.
- Maleki, A. *Decision Making in Iran's Foreign Policy: A Heuristic Approach*, International Institute for Caspian Studies, Tehran.
- Maltzahn, N. V. 2013, *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*, Tauris, London.
- Marcel, V. & Mitchell, J. 2006, *Oil titans*, Brookings Institution, Washington D.C.
- Marlowe, L. 2000, *Middle East's future lies with the son of the Damascus Lion*, the Irish Times, viewed 12 December 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/middle-east-s-future-lies-with-the-son-of-the-damascus-lion-1.281135>
- Mearsheimer, J. J. 1994-5, 'The False Promise of International Institutions', *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 5-49.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. 2001, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W. W. Nanon & Company, New York.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. 2011, 'Realists as Idealists', *Security Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 424-430.
- Mehrnews. 2011. *Amerika, Suriye'yi direnç ekseninden koparmaya çalışıyor*. [online] Available at: <https://tr.mehrnews.com/news/1388799/Amerika-Suriye-yi-direnç-ekseninden-koparmaya-çalışıyor> [Accessed 14 Jan. 2019].
- Menashri, D. 2007, 'Iran's Regional Policy: Between Radicalism and Pragmatism', *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 2, pp. 153-167.
- Middle East Monitor. 2014. *Sanaa is the fourth Arab capital to join the Iranian revolution*. [online] Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140927-sanaa-is-the-fourth-arab-capital-to-join-the-iranian-revolution/> [Accessed 11 Feb. 2019].
- Middle East Report N°184: Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East*, 2018, International Crisis Group.
- Milani, M. 2013, 'Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)', *the Washington Quarterly*, vol. 36, no.4, pp. 79-83.

- Miller, B. 2010, *Contrasting Explanations for Peace: Realism vs. Liberalism in Europe and the Middle East*, *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol.31, no.1, pp. 134-164.
- Mohseni, E., Gallagher, N. & Ramsay, C. 2017, *The Ramifications of Rouhani's Re-election*, The Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland. Available at: <http://www.cissm.umd.edu/sites/default/files/CISSM%20full%20Iran%20PO%20report%20-%2020072717-Final2.pdf> [Accessed 09 Mar. 2019].
- Morgenthau, H. 1947, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, Latimer House Limited, London.
- Morgenthau, H. 1948, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Alfred A. Knopf. New York.
- Morgenthau, H. 1960, *The Purpose of American Politics*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York.
- Morgenthau, H. 1978, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th Ed. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.
- Mousavian, S. and Shabani, M. (2013). *Opinion | How to Talk to Iran*. [online] NY Times. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/04/opinion/how-to-talk-to-iran.html> [Accessed 11 Mar. 2019].
- Moslem, M. 2002, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*, Syracuse University Press, New York.
- Mousavian, S. H. & Shabani, M. A. 2013, *How to Talk to Iran*, the New York Times, viewed 9 December 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/04/opinion/how-to-talk-to-iran.html>
- Neack, L. 2008, *The New Foreign Policy: Power Seeking in a Globalized Era*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham.
- Nasr, V. 2018, 'Iran Among the Ruins: Tehran's Advantage in a Turbulent Middle East', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 97, no. 2, pp. 108-118.
- Nasur, N. 2014, 'Syria-Iran Relations 2000-2014', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 4, no. 12, pp. 80-88.
- Negahban, B. 2017, 'Who Makes Iran's Foreign Policy?', *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 33-45.
- Özel, S. (2016). *The Crisis in Turkish-Russian Relations - Center for American Progress*. [online] Center for American Progress. Available at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2016/05/10/137131/the-crisis-in-turkish-russian-relations/> [Accessed 07 Mar. 2018].
- Perry, T. and Bassam, L. (2015). *How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow*. [online] Reuters. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria->

soleimani-insigh/how-iranian-general-plotted-out-syrian-assault-in-moscow-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006 [Accessed 12 May. 2018].

- Phillips, C. 2016, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale University Press, London.
- Pillar, P. 2016, 'The Role of Villain: Iran and U.S. Foreign Policy', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 131, no. 2, pp. 365-385.
- Rakel, E. P. 2007, 'Iranian Foreign Policy since the Iranian Islamic Revolution: 1979-2006', *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 159-187.
- Rakel, E. P. 2008, *The Iranian Political Elite, State and Society Relations and Foreign Relations Since the Islamic Revolution*, PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam.
- Rakel, E. P. 2012, 'Elite change and Foreign Policy in Iran Since the Presidency of Ahmadinejad: Relations with the US, the EU and China', in M. P. Amineh & G. Yang (ed.), *Secure Oil and Alternative Energy*, Brill, Leiden, pp. 115-141.
- Ramazani, R. K. 1992, 'Iran's Foreign Policy: Both North and South', *Middle East Journal*, vol. 46, no. 3, pp. 393-412.
- Ramazani, R. K. 2004, 'Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy', *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 58, no. 4, pp. 549-559.
- Rendall, M. 2006 'Defensive realism and the Concert of Europe', *Review of International Studies*, vol.32, no.3, pp. 523-540.
- Reuters. (2015). *Iran's Rouhani vows to back Syria 'until the end of the road'*. [online] Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iran/irans-rouhani-vows-to-back-syria-until-the-end-of-the-road-idUSKBN0OI0UF20150602> [Accessed 11 Apr. 2018].
- Rose, G. 1998, 'Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy', *World Politics*, vol. 51, no.1, pp. 144-172.
- Rubin, B. 1990, 'Reshaping the Middle East', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 69, no. 3, pp. 131-146.
- Sadowski, Y. M. 2002, 'The Evolution of Political Identity in Syria,' in S. Telhami & M. Barnett, (ed.), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Cornell, Ithaca.
- Sarı, İ. 2015, '1979 Devrimi Sonrası İran'ın Rejim Paradigması ve Dış Politika Yönelimleri', *Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 95-135.
- Schweller, R. 1998, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest*, Columbia University Press, New York.



- Schweller, R. 2016, 'The Balance of Power in World Politics', in W. R. Thompson (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, viewed 9 December 2018, Oxford Research Encyclopedias.
- Seale, P. 1988, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Shlaim, A. 1994, 'the Oslo Accord', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 24-40.
- Sinkaya, B. 2011, 'İran-Suriye İlişkileri ve Suriye'de Halk İsyanı', *Ortadoğu Analiz*, vol.3, no.33, pp. 38-48.
- Snyder, J. 1991, *Myths of Empire*, Cornell Studies, Ithaca.
- Spencer, R. (2011). *Iranian officials meet with Syrian opposition*. [online] Telegraph.co.uk. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8889824/Iranian-officials-meet-with-Syrian-opposition.html> [Accessed 13 Feb. 2019].
- Soltani, F. and Reza E. A. 2010, 'Foreign Policy Of Iran After Islamic Revolution', *Journal Of Politics And Law*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 199-206.
- Stein, E. (2017). 'Ideological Codependency and Regional Order: Iran, Syria, and the Axis of Refusal'. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 676-680.
- Tabaar, M. 2006. *Analysis: Breaking the Syria-Iran alliance*. *BBC NEWS*, Available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/5263800.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5263800.stm) [Accessed 16 Feb. 2019].
- Tezcür, G. M. 2013. 'Democratic Struggles and Authoritarian Responses in Iran in Comparative Perspective'. In: S. Heydemann and R. Leenders, ed., *Middle East Authoritarianisms*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 200-221.
- Mansharof, Y. 2013. *Iranian Official: The Loss Of Syria Will Lead To The Loss Of Tehran Itself; Syria Is An Iranian Province; Iran Has Formed A 60,000-Strong Syrian Basij; Israel Is Our Only Threat*". [online] The Middle East Media Research Institute. Available at: [https://www.memri.org/reports/iranian-official-loss-syria-will-lead-loss-tehran-itself-syria-iranian-province-iran-has#\\_ednref1](https://www.memri.org/reports/iranian-official-loss-syria-will-lead-loss-tehran-itself-syria-iranian-province-iran-has#_ednref1) [Accessed 16 Mar. 2019].
- Taliaferro, J. W. 2000, 'Security Seeking under Anarchy', *International Security*, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 128–161.
- Walt, S. M. 1985, 'Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power', *International Security*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 3-43.
- Walt, S. M. 1987, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.
- Waltz, K. 1979, *Theory of International Politics*, Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., Michigan.

- Waltz, K. 2000, 'Structural Realism after the Cold War', *International Security*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 5-41.
- Warnaar, M. 2013, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad Ideology and Actions*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Wastnidge, E. 2017, 'Iran and Syria: An Enduring Axis', *Middle East Policy*, vol.24, no.2, pp. 148-159.
- Wendt, A. 1987, 'The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory', *International Organization*, vol. 41, no. 3, pp. 335-370.
- Wendt, A. 1999, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Wheeler, N. J. 2009, 'Beyond Waltz's Nuclear World: More Trust May be Better', *International Relations*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 428-445.
- Wolfers, A. 1968, 'Alliances', in D. L. Sills (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Macmillan, New York.
- Wright, Q. 1942, *A Study of War: Vol. II*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Zakaria, F. 1992, "Realism and Domestic Politics: A Review Essay," *International Security*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 177-198.
- Zarif, M. J. 2014, 'What Iran Really Wants: Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no.3, pp. 49-59.
- Zerdm, A. B. 2007, 'Syrian Foreign Policy Toward Iran: A Strategic Relationship or Tactical Convergence?', *NIMEP Insights*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 17-29.

## CURRICULUM VITAE (CV)

### Personal Information

Name Surname : Berkan ÖZYER  
Date and place of birth : 03.01.1988, İstanbul

### Education

Bachelor : Istanbul Bilgi University  
Political Science and History (Double Major)

Master of Arts : Kadir Has University  
International Relations  
Language : English (Advanced)  
Persian (Intermediate)

### Work Experience

- 07.05.2018 – ...: Greenpeace Akdeniz  
Food and Agriculture Campaigner
- 01.09.2015 – 01.08.2017: Sealife magazine  
Editor (part time)
- 01.03.2015 – 01.09.2016: EKOİQ magazine  
Editor
- 01.04.2014 – 01.02.2015: #tarih magazine  
Editor
- 01.01.2014 – 01.04.2014: Optimist magazine  
Editor
- 01.09.2012 – 01.09.2013: NTV Tarih magazine  
Editor
- 01.10.2011 – 01.09.2012: Akşam newspaper  
Foreign news editor
- 09 – 10.2011: Haberturk TV  
Foreign news editor
- 06 – 09.2011: Galeri Artist Çukurcuma  
Art gallery manager
- 10.2009 – 12.2010: Newsweek Türkiye  
Correspondent
- 09 – 10.2009: Newsweek Türkiye  
Intern
- 09.2006 – 06.2009: İstanbul Bilgi University, student affairs office  
Working student program

### Communication

Phone : 0090 532 552 77 07  
E-mail : berkanozyer@gmail.com