

CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES IN IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY: ANALYSIS OF SYRIAN CASE*

İran Dış Politikasında Süreklilik ve Değişim: Suriye Analizi

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Abstract

In the post-1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran conducted isolationist foreign policy with an anti-imperial discourse. By the Iran-Iraq War, Iran transformed its isolationist foreign policy to a multilateral one. Changes in the balance of power, due to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, re-triggered ideology-oriented foreign policy in Iran. It seems that the conflictual discourse in Iran's foreign policy has been decreasing during the President Rouhani era, however, the ideology- and identity-oriented foreign policy has been continuing. Iran's foreign policy towards Syria has been shaped by the following dynamics, such as national security, Shia Crescent, geopolitics and regional balance of power, and also demonstrated the dynamics beyond the materialist components in Iran's foreign policy.

Keywords: Iran, Iran's foreign policy, Syria, Shia Crescent, Hezbollah.

Özet

1979 İslam Devriminden sonra emperyalizm karşısında, ideoloji eksenli bir dış politika güdülmüş, İran-İrak savaşı sonrasındaki değişimlerle Tahran yalnızlaşma politikasını çok yönlü bir dış politikaya dönüştürmüştür. 11 Eylül terör saldırılarıyla değişen güç dengesi de ideoloji eksenli dış politikayı yeniden tetiklemiştir. 11 Eylül öncesi İran dış politikasında hâkim olan diyalog söylemleri, yerini ideoloji ve kimlik eksenli çatışmacı bir dış politikaya bırakmıştır. Bu çatışmacı söylem Ruhani döneminde azalsa da ideoloji ve kimlik eksenli dış politika devam etmektedir. İran'ın Suriye politikası, ulusal güvenlik, Şii Hilali, jeopolitik ve bölgesel güç dinamikleriyle şekillenmekte, İran dış politikasındaki materyalist unsurlardan farklı dinamikleri de göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran, İran dış politikası, Suriye, Şii Hilali, Hizbullah.

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Introduction

The principles of Islamic Revolution are still significant determinants of Iran's foreign policy. However, in the last almost 40 years, the internal and external factors have prioritized some specific concerns of Iran over the others because of the changes in the social structures. As constructivists argue, the world is socially constructed, which underlines the importance of ideational factors besides the material capabilities. In addition, while analyzing Iran's foreign policy, it should be kept in mind the ultimate role of Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamanei, and the role of President in the decision-making process of Iran's foreign policy. Supreme Leader, who is the actual head of state and commander-in-chief of the country's armed forces, is the ultimate authority over the national security and foreign policy issues. Regarding the foreign policy decision-making process, Supreme National Security Council appears as the significant body in shaping Iran's foreign policy. The President, who appoints the Secretary, heads the Council. However, the Supreme Leader must approve the Council's decisions in order to go into effect. The duality in Iran's foreign policy is not limited by the role of Supreme Leader and President. Involvement of other actors, specifically Revolutionary Guard Corps, to the decision-making and implementation process of Iran's foreign policy complicates to understand the cause and effect relations between the actor and foreign policy outcome.

Keeping in mind the efforts to continue revolutionary principles and the ultimate role of Supreme Leader, this article will analyze Iran's foreign policy towards Syria in order to understand the impact of the social structure of international politics on Iran's foreign policy. Therefore, the first part will briefly analyze the changes in the orientation of Iran's foreign policy from isolationism to multilateralism between 1979 and 2005. The second part will examine another turning point, which represents the return of identity- and ideology-oriented foreign policy that underscores the discourse on conflicting interests. The last part will discuss Iran's foreign policy over Syrian crisis, regarding the following dynamics; national security, Shia Crescent and geopolitics, balance of power and regional power/hegemony.

From Isolationism to Multilateralism

Demonstrations against the Shah regime gained momentum as a result of discontents among the various segments of Iranian society, including the clergy, workers, students, middle class merchants and technocrats, over the Shah's policies during the 1970s. As a result, the Shah had to leave the country in mid-January 1979. Two weeks later, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran, and on 1 April, the establishment of an Islamic Republic was officially proclaimed.

Islamic Revolution in 1979 definitely led Iranian politics to enter a new phase. In this regard, the question of whether this new phase means a rupture from the past has been answered differently. Even though the revolutionary decision-makers commonly argue that Islamic Republic constitute a break from the Shah period, there is no consensus among the scholars on this evaluation. While Hunter, for instance, argues that Iranian foreign policy did not constitute a break from the past due to the continuity in geopolitical, historical and economic arenas¹, Sadri argues that the difference between the imperial and an Islamic republican regime before and after the revolution constituted a substantive difference.² One of the main differences was the change of Iranian decision-makers about its perspectives on the Western world. During the Shah period, Iran had maintained close relations in a broad ideological spectrum, including with the Western world, namely United States. In contrast to Shah's foreign policy, Islamic Revolution declared the principle of "Neither West nor East," which refers to both political and ideological struggle against the superpowers in order to prevent Islam to be contained by all foreign ideas.³ Hence, suspicious against the great powers' intentions had been one of the reasons for the principle of non-alignment and non-participation in great power conflicts in revolutionary Iranian foreign policy.

1 Shirin T. Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1990.

2 Houman A. Sadri, "Trends in the Foreign Policy of Revolutionary Iran," *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol: XV, No: 1, 1998, p. 14.

3 "Khomeini: 'We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology'", *MERIP*, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer88/khomeini-we-shall-confront-world-our-ideology>, (Accessed on 16.06.2017).

By the Revolution, religious discourse became dominant in Iran's foreign policy and was the source of a distinction drawn between the "arrogant powers" and oppressed countries. Ayatollah Khomeini stated:

*"The will of almighty God, may He be praised, decreed the release of th is oppressed nation from the yoke of the tyranny and crimes of the satanical regime and from the yoke of the domination of oppressive powers, especially the government of the world-devouring America, and to unfurl the banner of Islamic justice over our beloved country. It is our duty to stand up to the superpowers and we have the ability to stand up against them, provided that our intellectuals give up their fascination with Westernization or Easternization and follow the straight path of Islam and nationalism."*⁴

In fact, exporting Revolutionary principles to the Muslim world was one of the goals of new regime, based on the idea that "*Islam does not regard various Islamic countries differently.*"⁵

Internal and external developments, such as the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, the emergence of dual leadership of Ayatollah Khamanei and Hashemi Rafsanjani, end of the Cold War and 1991 Gulf War created new opportunities and challenges for Iran's foreign policy. Within that framework, Iran recognized that it would not be able to function effectively outside the interdependent structure of the international system. Therefore, it ended the policy of isolationism and started to implement a pragmatic foreign policy, which added economic concerns of the Islamic regime to the ideological concerns in its foreign policy. Former President Hashemi Rafsanjani repeatedly stressed that if the Islamic regime of Iran failed in its economic development strategy, it would soon lose its ideological credibility as well. It is thus economic necessities led Iran to conduct a less-ideologically oriented foreign policy in the 1990s.⁶ Therefore, "neither East nor West" principle

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 Mohammad Mahallati, "The Middle East: In Search of an Equilibrium between Transcendent Idealism and Practicality," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol: 50, Issue: 1, Summer 1996.

of the Revolutionary foreign policy was superseded by “Both North and South.”⁷ In this regard, the attempts of Iran to improve bilateral relations with the Gulf countries were partly the result of the inclusion of its economic concerns to foreign policy. Besides the economic concerns, security issues were unsurprisingly important parameters of Iran’s foreign policy during the 1990s. For instance, Iran immediately rejected invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, as mentioned by Rafsanjani, who stated that Iran would not tolerate any changes in political geography of the region.⁸

By the late 1990s, another new phase started in Iran’s foreign policy by the victory of Mohammad Khatami as President in 1997. In contrast to his predecessors’ views on foreign policy, he supports the idea of “dialogue of civilizations.” Therefore, the détente policy was initiated in order to re-integrate Iran to the world, taking more pro-active foreign policy. Khatami stated,

*“We have taken some positive steps in relation to the policy of detente—steps which must be sustained. We must progress from the stage of detente to that of building trust and subsequently to the establishment of lasting regional cooperation.”*⁹

Khatami also mentioned,

“During my presidential campaign in early 1997, I proposed as one of the key points of my plans that we can promote dialogue -instead of war- among civilizations. This was a principle of our diplomacy during my presidency. In 1998, the idea was submitted to UN which resulted in naming 2001 as The Year of Dialogue among Civilizations (...) We can have three types of verbal-intellectual relations with others: negotiation, debate and dialogue. (...) While negotiation and debate focus on

7 R. K. Ramazani, “Iran’s Foreign Policy: Both North and South,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol: 46, No: 3, Summer 1992, p. 393.

8 Ramazani, *op cit.*, p. 400.

9 Shah Alam, “The Changing Paradigm of Iranian Foreign Policy Under Khatami,” *Strategic Analysis*, Vol: 24, No: 9, 2000, p. 1631.

differences, dialogue is based on commonalities. The goal is to reach for mutual knowledge and coexistence, and peace (and perhaps political achievements) can be gained from dialogue.”¹⁰

During Khatami's eight-year rule, multilateralism became one of the principles of Iran's foreign policy. President Khatami focused on improving Iran's relations with the Arab countries, Central Asian and Caucasian countries, and the Western countries, which was a consequence of the “both North and South” principle of foreign policy.¹¹ However, the changes in the domestic, regional and international levels led Iranian foreign policy to trigger another phase, which could be defined as a return of identity- and ideology-oriented foreign policy.

Return of Ideology- and Identity-Oriented Foreign Policy: From Dialogue to Conflicting Interests

The turning point for the revival of the impact of ideology and identity on Iran's foreign policy was triggered by the 9/11 terrorist attacks against United States. The unilateral counter-terrorism strategies became the apparent principle of US foreign policy immediately after the attacks, conducting “with us or against us” policy. The inclusion of Iran to the *axis of evil* by US President George W. Bush in his 2002 “State of the Union” speech revived the Revolutionary discourse in Iran's foreign policy. Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, criticized the statement of the US President, stating

“The United States president is threatening and accusing other countries of evil involvement while America has opposed popular movements, supported undemocratic regimes, sold lethal weapons and looted the wealth of other nations more than any other country. These are evil acts and so America is the most evil country. The Islamic Republic is proud to be the target of the hate and anger of

10 “Khatami Speaks of Dialogue Among Civilizations,” *Iranian Diplomacy*, 2 October 2000, <http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/en/page/8798/Khatami+Speaks+of+Dialogue+among+Civilizations.html>, (Accessed on 19.06.2017).

11 R. K. Ramazani, “Iran's Foreign Policy: Both North and South,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol: 46, No: 3, Summer 1992.

the world's greatest evil, we never seek to be praised by American officials."¹²

While Iran's image in world politics was deteriorating because of the tense relations with Western countries, Iran started to make efforts to improve bilateral relations with its neighboring states in order to minimize the side effects of isolationism. According to Afrasiabi and Maleki,

*"in the post-11 September regional realities, the Iranian government has initiated a number of foreign policy adjustments aimed at enhancing national security and optimizing its gains from solidarities and alliances. These include (...) stabilizing relations with Turkey, Pakistan and Iraq; enhancing regional cooperation; exploring new security arrangements; and simultaneously, upgrading its military preparedness."*¹³

However, Iranian attempts to stabilize bilateral relations with neighboring countries did not last long because of the increasing of mutual concerns on the other's identity- and ideology-oriented foreign policy. The collapse of the Saddam regime as a result of Iraqi War of 2003 was another significant incident that encouraged Iran to pursue a goal of expanding its regional power, which is named by the term of *Shia revival*, "anchoring Shia interests in national identities."¹⁴ The term *Shia crescent* also became popular as a geopolitical term used to describe a contiguous zone within the Middle East with a majority or strong minority Shia population. Since Iran is the only Shia country in the region, the *Shia revival* is perceived both as a product of and contributor to Iran's influence. Therefore, it became a concern of Sunni Arab states, Turkey¹⁵, Israel and the United States, which perceive the increase of Iranian power as a threat to regional security and stability.

12 Nazila Fathi, "A Nation Challenged: The Rogue List; Bush's 'Evil' Label Rejected by Angry Iranian Leaders," *New York Times*, 1 February 2002.

13 Kaveh Afrasiabi-Abbas Maleki, "Iran's Foreign Policy After 11 September," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol: IX, Issue: 2, Winter/Spring 2003, p. 256.

14 Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future*, W.W. Norton Company, 2006, New York & London, p. 234.

15 Mehmet Seyfettin Erol, "11 Eylül Sonrası Türk Dış Politikasında Vizyon Arayışları ve 'Dört Taz-ı Siyaset'", *Gazi Akademik Bakış*, Cilt: 1, Sayı: 1, Kış 2007, s. 39.

Since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was firstly elected President of Iran in 2005, then reelected in 2009, Iran's foreign policy had been in an another state of change, in which Iran's foreign policy to be perceived as aggressive, offensive, expansionist, belligerent and ideological.¹⁶ According to Naji, this perception of international community was directly affected by the 9/11 and the threat perception of international community from Iran because of the discovery of Iran's some clandestine nuclear activities. Due to the fact that in 2001, for instance, the statement of Supreme Leader, who argued that erasing Israel from the map of the region was the mission of Islamic Republic of Iran, did not cause such international alarming perception as did when the statement of Ahmadinejad was wrongly translated to English as "Israel must be wiped off the map."¹⁷ Therefore, Iran's foreign policy strongly affected by the economic sanctions and became more ideology-oriented.

In an attempt to reduce the negative impact of its isolation, Iran mainly focused on expanding its regional relations. Facing serious challenges resulting from its isolation, Iran's first aim had been to deter US or Israeli military attacks on its nuclear program. Ahmadinejad, thus, emphasized the formation of regional alliances with friendly states, such as Syria and Turkey, and political movements, such as Hezbollah or Iraqi Shias.¹⁸ In addition, Minister of Foreign Affairs Ali Akbar Salehi described the priority of Iran's foreign policy as "expanding international ties of the Islamic Republic of Iran particularly with the countries of the Islamic world (...)."¹⁹ However, the return of identity- and ideology-oriented discourse in foreign policy created new challenges, which put new impediments to improve bilateral relations

16 Mark Gasiorowski, "The New Aggressiveness in Iran's Foreign Policy," *Middle East Policy*, Vol: XIV, No: 2, Summer 2007; Kayhan Barzegar "Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy After Saddam," *The Washington Quarterly*, January 2010.; as cited in Özümlü Sezin Uzun, *Turkish-Iranian Relations in the 2000s: Rapprochement or Beyond?*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Middle East Technical University, February 2012, p. 72; "Who Determines Iran's Foreign Policy," *Al Monitor*, 26 March 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/iran-khamenei-decisions-snc.html> (Accessed on 15.06.2017).

17 President Ahmadinejad stated "Een rejimeh eshghalhareh Quds bayad az safeyeh rouzegar mahv shavad" could be translated as "This Jerusalem-occupying regime must vanish from the pages of time." For more information see: Kasra Naji, *Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2009, p. 140-144.

18 Barzegar, *op cit.*, p. 181.

19 "Iran's Foreign Policy Aims in 1390 Outlined", *Khabar Online*, 26 April 2011.

of Iran with regional countries of Middle East.

The changes in the regional balance of power as a result of the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North African countries since 2010, consolidated Iran's identity- and ideology-oriented foreign policy. Even the Iranian perspective about these uprisings demonstrates this orientation. Iran views these uprisings as an extension of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, making the recent developments on Arab streets were the outcome of an "Arab Islamic Awakening" led by the values of the Iranian Islamic Revolution.²⁰ For Iran, the 1979 Islamic Revolution appeared to have been successfully exported. Iran claimed that the protests are rooted in the 1979 revolution as if to assume responsibility for their rise and development, advocating "this Islamic awakening (...) was created by the victory of the great Revolution of the Iranian nation."²¹ According to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, "Islam has become the guiding principle of [the] popular movements."²² Supreme Leader Khamenei also stated

*"During the last decades, arrogant powers, led by the United States, had reduced regional states to a state of subjugation through their political and security ploys (...) But now, they are the primary target of disgust and hatred of the region's nations."*²³

In addition to frame the popular uprisings in Islamic terms, Iran has defined it as a movement against the US and Israel. The Supreme Leader stated, "the essence of the Islamic awakening in the countries of the region is an anti-Zionist and anti-US movement."²⁴ Khamenei also added

20 "Hassan-Khani: Iran and Turkey Can Adopt a Cooperative Competition," in an interview with ORSAM Middle East Advisor Pinar Arıkan, *ORSAM*, 19 December 2011,

<http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/showOrsamGuest.aspx?ID=263>, (Accessed on 11.01.2012).

21 "Iranians' voice echoed in Muslim world", *Press TV*, February 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/163526.html>, (Accessed on 01.01.2013).

22 "Leader calls for 'Islamic power bloc'", *Press TV*, November 5, 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/208487.html>, (Accessed on 20.08.2012).

23 *Ibid.*

24 "Leader: Regional revolts anti-US in core" *Press TV*, 1 July 2011 <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/186935.html>, (Accessed on 20.08.2012).

“The Islamic awakening of the regional nations is a movement on the path of the prophets; and through vigilance, Muslim nations and Iran’s great nation will not allow the Americans and the Zionists to derail or hijack this magnificent movement by sowing discord and other plots.”²⁵

Regarding these statements, it is possible to track the return of identity- and ideology-oriented concerns in Iran’s foreign policy. When President Rouhani was firstly elected in 2013 and then re-elected in 2017 was perceived as starting a new phase, which would revitalize the discourse about dialogue in Iran’s foreign policy. Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran, Mohammad Javad Zarif, for instance, argues that

“Rouhani also called for a discourse of ‘prudent moderation.’ This vision aims to move Iran away from confrontation and toward dialogue, constructive interaction, and understanding, all with an eye to safeguarding national security, elevating the stature of Iran, and achieving long-term comprehensive development. (...) Rouhani’s commitment to constructive engagement requires dialogue and interaction with other nations on an equal footing, with mutual respect, and in the service of shared interests. It requires that all participants make serious efforts to reduce tensions, build confidence, and achieve détente.”²⁶

Regarding the success of Rouhani government to finalize a comprehensive nuclear deal with the United States, it is still uncertain whether the aggressive discourse was replaced by the dialogue discourse in the foreign policy. According to Marwan Bishara, for instance, “Under Rouhani’s presidency, Iran has been more aggressive and indeed more cynical in pursuing its interests in the Middle East than it was under Ahmadinejad - at times trampling over its neighbours’

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Mohammad Javad Zarif, “What Iran Really Wants: Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014, p. 7-8.

stability to attain greater strategic and political leverage.”²⁷ In fact, it can be said that the identity- and ideology-oriented foreign policy still continues in Iran’s foreign policy, in contrast to the emphases of the importance of dialogue.

Iran’s Foreign Policy towards Syria:

The Main dynamics of Iran’s Syria Policy

After the fundamental dynamics affecting the foreign policy of Iran, we will now analyse the main qualities determining the Syria policy of Iran. The Syria policy of Iran is determined by the preeminent quality of the relations of both countries. In this context, the starting point of the analysis of the Syria policy of Iran was the assumption that the critical quality of the relations of both countries was determinant. Four leading dynamics were argued to be determining the essential quality of the Iran-Syria relations: national security, Shia Crescent and geopolitics, balance of power and regional power/hegemony. These dynamics are the geopolitics and geo-cultural factors determining the relations of both countries.

First of all, we need to emphasize that Iran considers Syria not as a foreign policy and external matter but as an internal matter within the framework of the national security dynamics. The fact that Hussein Talip, the deputy Commander of the Iran Revolutionary Guards, defines Syria to be the “35th state” of Iran is a clear proof that Syria is perceived to be an internal matter of Iran.²⁸ Based on the statement of the said commander, which reads “We can defend Iran if we keep hold of Syria”, it is understood that Iran regards Syria to a line of resistance on the ground of providing its national security. Therefore, Syria has a vital importance for Iran and it is a matter of survival.

27 Marwan Bishara, “How Will May 19 Election Shape Iran’s Foreign Policy?” *Al-Jazeera*, 15 May 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/19-election-shape-iran-foreign-policy-170515074230085.html>, (Accessed on 20.06.2017).

28 “Khomeini: ‘We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology’”, *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer88/khomeini-we-shall-confront-world-our-ideology>, (Accessed on 16.06.2017).

Secondly, with respect to Shia Crescent and geopolitics, Syria completes the Shia triangle with the Lebanon of Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia government.²⁹ Therefore, overthrowing the Esad regime in Syria would be the failure of the Shia geopolitics beyond being a geopolitical loss for Iran. In addition, the ideological foundation of the Iran-Syria relations is based upon Shia-oriented Nusayrism. In this sense, Shia serves to be a major glue of the Iran-Syria connections as the sectarian common ground.

Thirdly, within the framework of balance of power, Syria's position is to a country that provides balance of power of Iran against the Saudi-led Sunni block. In fact balance of power is the fundamental driver of rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.³⁰ Iran follows a policy of establishing ties with the Shia people under the Sunni administrations and influencing the politics of the Sunni countries over these Shia people against the siege syndrome by the Sunni countries in the Middle East. On the other hand, Iran follows a policy of maintaining balance of power against the Sunni block by supporting the Nusayri Esad administration, which is Shia minority in Syria.³¹

Fourthly, Syria holds an indispensable importance for Iran to be a regional and hegemonic power. Iran becomes a regional power ensuring a command on the Shia Crescent geopolitics with Syria. Ensuring the support of Syria in addition to Iraq and Hezbollah Lebanon makes Iran a regional power as one of biggest and strongest countries of the Middle East. Therefore, one can claim that it would be through Syria for Iran to establish a regional hegemony in Syria.³² On the other hand, loss of Syria by Iran would mean the failure of the Shia Crescent project. Furthermore, it is a development that would weaken the national security of Iran beyond blocking it to become a regional power. Therefore, several connected parameters reveal the

29 Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran and The Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities", *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Fall/Winter, Volume: XV, Issue: 1, 2008, p. 90.

30 Ariel Jahner, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle for Power and Influence in the Gulf", *International Affairs Review*, Volume: XX, No: 3, Spring 2012, p. 44.

31 Geneive Abdo, "The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and The Rebirth of the Shia's Sunni Divide", *The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, Analysis Paper*, No:29, April 2013, p. 4.

32 Asher Sussler, "Iran and the Arabs: The Historical Shift in the Balance of Power", *Strategic Assessment*, Volume: 18, No: 3, October 2015, p. 16.

undisputable importance of Syria for Iran. In the final analysis, the basic quality of the Iran-Syria relations is the alliance relations within the framework of these basic dynamics.

Historical Backgrounds

The historical foundation of the Iran-Syria alliance relations is actually based on the period before revolution. The first strategic tie between Hafez el-Assad and Khomeini was set before the revolution.³³ Hafez el-Assad supported Khomeini when he was in exile and the rapprochement of the two countries started after the revolution based upon this historical context. Likewise, when the Shah regime was overthrown in 1979, Syria was one of the first countries recognizing Iran.³⁴ Syria also supported Iran in the Iran-Iraqi war in between 1980 and 1988.³⁵ Therefore, the relations of the two countries reached to a strategic dimension during that war. In this sense, we can call the relations of both countries to be an alliance.

After that, these strategic relations between the two countries were built within the Middle Eastern geopolitics. First of all, both states needed each other strategically to maintain their existence against the Sunni states and to ensure the balance of power. In addition, Syria is a strategic key point of the Middle East policy of Iran. That is to say that Iran has an influence on Lebanon over Syria. Furthermore, Syria enabled Iran to build Hezbollah in Lebanon. On the other hand, Iran intervenes to the Palestine issue over Syria and establishes a link with Hamas over Syria.³⁶ Therefore, Iran uses the potentialities of the Syrian geopolitics to create an area of influence in Lebanon and to achieve the position of a strategic player in the Palestine-Israel issue. Thus, Iran creates a line of resistance over Syria against the US and Israel. In this sense, Syria is just in the middle of the Middle Eastern policy equation of Iran. Therefore, Iran provides the Esad regime with strategic supports in the civil war of Syria so that it can survive.

33 Nader Ibrahim M. Bani Nasur, "Syria-Iran Relations (2000-2014)", *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol: 4, No: 12, October 2014, p. 80.

34 Syria was the 3rd country to recognize Iran after SSCB and Pakistan.

35 Nasur, *op cit.*, p. 81.

36 Nasur, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

Strategic Supports

The supports of Iran to Syria can be classified in the fields of politics, diplomacy, economics and military (security). First of all, the political and diplomatic support of Iran to Syria started with its attitude changing against the civil war in Syria during the Arab Spring process. Iran evaluated the Arab Spring process as an Islamic awakening movement and it followed a position supporting the collapse of Sunni regimes until the riots spread to Syria.³⁷ Within this framework, it also followed an intentional uprising policy for the Shia people under Sunni regimes taking advantage of the Arab Spring. Likewise, it was argued that Iran had an influence in the Shia uprising in Bahrain.

However, when the Arab Spring reached to Syria and a civil war erupted, Iran changed its policy immediately and regarded the uprisings in Syria as a Western instigation.³⁸ In other words, Iran started to introduce the leap of the Arab Spring to Syria as an instigation supported by the West who intends to divide Islam.³⁹ Iran changed its policy when the process started to become a threat for itself, although it supported the collapse of the Sunni administration with the Arab Spring and followed a policy to increase regional position having these administrations overthrown. After that, Iran defined the Syria crisis to be its internal matter. This definition naturally reveals the nature of the strategic support of Iran to Syria. In addition, this definition brought in its train the fact that Iran became the most active party of the Syrian civil war.

The most strategic supports of Iran to Syria were the economic and military supports enabling the Esad regime to survive in addition to the political and diplomatic supports. With regards to economic and military supports, Iran followed a policy of increasing its foreign trade volume with Syria. Within this framework, Iran increased its foreign

37 Firas Abu Hilal, "Iran and the Arab Revolutions: Positions and Repercussions", *Doha Institute*, Doha, September 2011, p.8.

38 Mohammad-Reza Djalili et. al., "Iran's Syria policy in the wake of the 'Arab Springs'," *Turkish Review*, Vol: 4, No: 4, 2014, p. 396.

39 Özüm Sezin Uzun, "The 'Arab Spring' and Its Effect on Turkish-Iranian Relations," *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Cilt: 4, Sayı: 2, Ocak 2013, p. 152.

trade volume with Syria to Euro 800 million as of 2010.⁴⁰ After that, a memorandum of understanding for a natural gas trade amounting to USD 10 billion was signed in 2011. Again, a free trade agreement was signed between the two countries in the same year.⁴¹ In 2012, the Iranian company MEPNA signed a contract of Euro 400 million to build a new power plant in Syria after Turkey cut off the power in 2012. In addition, a separate agreement was signed between Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon on power transmission. These economic and trade supports of Iran to the Esad regime had a vital and survival importance for Syria.

Moreover, the military and security supports of Iran to Syria were the most critical ones. Essentially, Iran provides the Esad regime with weapon, ammunition, technical equipment, intelligence, military advisor and troop supports. Iran brings its Shia militia to Syria from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan on one hand and it urges Hezbollah in Lebanon to fight on the other hand. The Hezbollah arms fighting in Syria are known to be Kuteyb Hezbollah and Asayib Ehl-i Hak.⁴² According to the recent findings, it is claimed that Iran brought around 18 thousand people of Shia militia to Syria from various countries mentioned above.⁴³ Furthermore, the army of Iran revolutionary guards continues to fight along with Esad in the Syrian civil war. The Special Brigade of Jerusalem under the revolutionary guards became the most important actor of the Syrian civil war. On the other hand, as claimed by the Western resources, Iran provides Syria with heavy weapon and military ammunition delivery.⁴⁴ Likewise, in March 2011, Turkey forced two airplanes from Tehran to Aleppo to crash-land. After searching these two airplanes, some amount of weapon was found in one of them.⁴⁵ In addition, a truck allegedly transferring weapon from

40 Bayram Sinkaya, "Arap Baharı Sürecinde İran'ın Suriye Politikası", *SETA Analiz*, Sayı: 53, Nisan 2012, p. 13.

41 *Ibid.*

42 Erman Yüksel, "İran'ın Suriye savaşı", *Aljazeera*, 23 February 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber-analiz/iranin-suriye-savasi>, (Accessed on 02.01.2016).

43 Nerina Azad, "İran'ın Suriye'ye gönderdiği şii milis sayısı açıklandı", *Nerinaazad.net*, 12 May 2016, <http://www.nerinaazad.net/news/regions/iran/iranin-suriyeye-gonderdigi-sii-milis-sayisi-aciklandi>, (Accessed on 20.12.2016).

44 Yüksel, *op. cit.*

45 Fatih Çekirge, "2 İran uçağına 'in' emri", *Hürriyet*, 17 Ağustos 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/2-iran-ucagina-in-emri-4933877>, (Accessed on 10.12.2016).

Iran to Syria to be delivered to Hezbollah was stopped in Kilis in April 2011.⁴⁶ All these indicate that Iran continues to provide Syria with intense military and security support.

Syria with respect to Iran and Saudi rivalry: Proxy War

Together with the start of the Syria civil war in 2011, the Iran-Saudi soft power rivalry turned to a proxy war. As stated by Anoushiravan Ehteshami, the rivalry between the two countries is based on the policy of Iran to export the Shia regime to the Middle East since the 1979 revolution.⁴⁷ In addition, the Syria case turned the rivalry between the two countries from soft war to hard war in the way of a proxy war.⁴⁸ On the other hand, both countries consider Syria as a geopolitical settlement. Therefore, the loss of Syria would be a huge geopolitical loss for the losing country within the framework of zero-sum game. In this context, the position of Iran in the Syria civil war emerged to be a new area of the rivalry with Saudi Arabia. Both countries are engaged in a battle of influence in Syria. Initially, Saudi Arabia supported the Free Syrian Army and various groups fighting against the Esad regime while Iran both directly fought by Esad and supported the Shia groups. The reason of relatively more engagement of Iran in the civil war of Syria is the fact that Iran considers Syria to be a survival matter as mentioned above.

While the rivalry between the two countries in Syria continues on a geopolitical plane, the Sunni-Shia sectarian rhetoric is the other field of rivalry.⁴⁹ Both countries play for the leadership of the Middle East particularly for the Muslim World. This rivalry caused an expansion policy of both countries by establishing a patronage relation with the Sunni and Shia groups after the start of the civil war in Syria. The fact that Syria is ruled by a 13% Shia oriented Nusayri minority despite the

46 "Hatay'da mühimmat yüklü TIR şoku", *CNN TÜRK*, 02 Ocak 2014, <http://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/hatayda-muhimmat-yuklu-tir-soku>, (Accessed on 04.05.2015).

47 Athina Tzemprin et al., "The Middle East Cold War: Iran-Saudi Arabia and the Way Ahead", *Croatian Political Science Review*, Vol: 52, No: 4-5, 2015, p. 188.

48 Mohamed Bin Huwaidin, "The Security Dilemma in Saudi-Iranian Relations", *Review of History and Political Science*, Vol: 3, No: 2, December 2015, p. 75.

49 Mari Luomi, "Sectarian Identities or Geopolitics? The Regional Shia-Sunni Divide in the Middle East", *Working Papers 56, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs*, 2008, p.5.

Sunni majority of 74% escalates the Iran-Saudi rivalry.⁵⁰ Particularly, Saudi Arabia regards the addition of Syria to the Shia Crescent after Iraq to be a threat towards its existence. Similarly, Iran acts on the assumption that it will be the next one after the loss of Syria. After the time past in the Syria civil war, it is noticed that the Syria state was lost in fact and only Esad was left to Iran. Therefore, Iran has already lost in Syria. Iran has an intensive effort at least to keep Esad. In addition, losing Esad would mean for Iran both the failure of Shia Crescent and the cut of the ties with both the Lebanon Hezbollah and Hamas.⁵¹ Thus, Iran would lose its weight in the Gulf region. Therefore, the future of the Esad regime is a variable determining the Iran influence in the region and the result of its Shia based foreign policy. In this context, Syria is the new epicentre of the geo-political and geopolitical rivalry between the two countries. Apart from Syria, the proxy war of the two countries continues in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel and Gaza.

In conclusion, those who argue that Iran's Syria policies are a result of Iran's perception of the Syrian matters as "an internal issue" underline the fact that Iran should protect its national security particularly in the lands of Syria. At the same time, the anti-Israel policy of Iran is affected directly proportionally with its area influence in the lands of Syria and with its relation with Hezbollah in Lebanon over Syria. In other words, losing the influence in Syria is perceived to be a threat to national security. Therefore, the continuation of the Esad regime in Syria is related to Iran's national security as well as its claim of being a regional power. Likewise, the serious political and military problems faced by the Esad regime in the summer of 2012 changed the balance of power in favour of the regime and of course in favour of Iran with the active involvement of Iran. Tehran parliamentarian Ali Rıza Zekai said in September 2014 "if we were late in taking critical decisions against the Syria crisis and not had a military intervention, Syria regime would collapse" which indicates that the extent of Iran's involvement in the Syria issue for the continuation of the Esad regime by perceiving the Syria crisis to be an internal issue.

50 Tzemprin, et al., *op. cit.* p. 193.

51 Mariano V. Ospina et al., "Syria, Iran, and Hizballah: A Strategic Alliance", *Global Security Studies*, Volume: 5, Issue: 1, Winter 2014, p. 27.

From a geopolitical perspective, Iran perceives Syria at a strategic position for its resistance against the enemies of Iran and its allies. Said Calili, the Head of the Iran's National Security Council highlights this geopolitical perspective by saying "What is experienced in Syria is not an internal matter but a conflict with the region's and world's resistance axis and the enemies of it. Iran would not tolerate in any way to the breaking of the resistance axis where Syria is an essential part". This point of view explains the difference between Iran's approach to the public uprising in the Middle East and North Africa in 2010 and its approach to the riots in Syria. Iran defines the Arab uprising ending the dictator regimes in the region to be an "Islamic awakening" and argued that the 1979 Islam Revolution was successfully exported against the imperialist powers including the US and Israel.

However, Syria has a different position in Iran's perception of the Arab Spring. Iran defined the uprisings in the other countries in the region to be an "Islamic Awakening" and considered it to be a natural result of the local dynamics and the reactions of the people of the region against the regimes who were puppets of the US.⁵² It interpreted then public riots in Syria as the instigation movements supported by the West who wanted to destroy the Esad regime. This perception is the result of the fact that Iran defines Syria to be an area where it fights against its enemies. In the final analysis, it could be argued that Iran's efforts to protect its national security are affected by its perception of the rise of the extreme Sunni groups and terror organizations as a threat to its regional area of influence within the framework of an identity issue and its perception of Syria to be an area of struggle between itself and its allies and the enemies. In this context, it is understood that Iran sometimes maintained the uncertainty areas in its Syria policy and mostly arranged its relations with different players depending on the regional developments.

Conclusion

Iran's foreign policy is very significant not only for regional, but also for international security and stability because of its geo-political and

52 Mehmet Seyfettin Erol-Şafak Oğuz, "Hybrid Warfare Studies and Russia's Example in Crimea", *Gazi Akademik Bakış*, Cilt: 9, Sayı: 17, Kış 2015, s. 263.

geo-cultural assets. Its foreign policy towards Syria, which now became the homeland of serious challenges against regional and international security, would change the regional balance of power. Regarding Iran's influence, power and capability throughout the Middle East, the social and non-material factors are seen as crucial as the material capability in Iran's foreign policy. As seen in its foreign policy towards Syria, concerns of Iran are not limited by security. Beyond that, the concerns over identity and ideology were revived. Therefore, the perception of Iran about the Syrian crisis reflects the continuities in Iran's foreign policy, which can be generalized under the following themes: anti-imperialism, suspicious about the policies of non-regional actors and the affect of Revolutionary principles beyond the Iranian borders. In fact, ideology- and identity-oriented discourse re-emerged in Iran's foreign policy.

Besides the continuities in Iran's foreign policy, there are some changes as well. Keeping in mind the ultimate authority of Supreme Leader in foreign policy decision-making and the struggle among different political fractions, the role of Presidents in creating some changes is unquestionable. In this respect, the call for a dialogue among civilizations, underscoring the needs for the establishment of fair and mutually respectful relations with the Western world and the attempts to reconstruct bilateral relations with all countries have been some different discourses in Iran's foreign policy since the late 1990s, based on the different stances of Presidents. In fact, Iran's foreign policy towards Syria also reflects the changes in foreign policy discourse, which recently more emphasized the conflicting interests of Iran with the other countries that had actively involved in Syrian crisis.

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