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## The Shiism Dimension in Iran's Relations with Europe: The Example of Germany-France-United Kingdom

*İran'ın Avrupa ile İlişkilerinde Şiîlik Boyutu: Almanya-Fransa-İngiltere Örneği*

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**Abstract**

The phenomenon of religion appears as a multidimensional element in terms of individual, society and state. It has effects on people individually as well as in the context of social and international relations. In terms of states, religion appears as a phenomenon that affects and determines the domestic and foreign policies of states. Especially in the 21st century, we see that religion has begun to affect international relations in various areas. Another area where International Relations has begun to establish relations in recent years has been religion. Especially when foreign policy decision-making processes are examined, it is seen that religious beliefs, religion-based organizations and non-governmental organizations are effective in the decision-making processes of state administrators. The issue of Islamic Sects, and Shi'ism in particular, has been a much-discussed phenomenon in recent years due to its global and regional effects. Along with the Persian perspective inherited from the Persian Empire, Shi'ism has significantly influenced and continues to influence the geopolitical and geocultural education of today's Iran. With its politicization, Shiism has become one of the factors that play an important role in the creation and preservation of Iran's national identity, perhaps the most important. In this context, Iranian Shiism, which creates a socio-cultural system different from other civilizations around it, has become the main determinant on the security and foreign policy of today's Iran by intertwining with Persian nationalism since the reign of Shah Ismail. Iran has influenced Shiite communities in various regions - the Middle East, Africa - Central Asia - through its Shiite proxies, or has worked to Shiite the promising masses in the political field. Iran also has an influence on Shiite Muslims in Europe. Its relationship with the Shiite communities here appears as an important element in Iran's relations with European countries in the context of foreign policy. Shiite activities in Germany are carried out through an association in Hamburg, where Iranian business people have been living for many years. The Islamic Center of Hamburg describes itself as the "case representative" of the Shiites in Europe, especially in Germany. The concentration of Shiites and organizations in Germany in a single center is entirely in line with Iran's aim of "uniting the Shiites of the world under its rule and spreading Shiism (the belief in velayat-e faqih) from a single center". Approximately 200,000 Shiites live in France. Ten associations and cultural centers, which have been identified as carrying out religious activities on the basis of Shiism, are active in the country on behalf of Iran. Shiites currently constitute 10% of the total number of Muslims in the UK. Persian community centers have been established in the UK since the 1980s. Iranian individuals have established associations in the UK in many fields such as trade, health, culture and religion. It is estimated that these associations aim to spread Shiism among Muslim communities in the UK. Iran is trying to be active in Europe through these groups and Shiism is an important element in its relations with Europe.

**Keywords:** Iran, Shiism, Germany, France, UK

**Öz**

Din olgusu birey, toplum ve devlet bakımından çok boyutlu bir unsur olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Bireysel olarak insana etkileri olduğu gibi toplumsal ve uluslararası ilişkiler bağlamında da etkileri mevcuttur. Devletler bakımından ise din, devletlerin iç ve dış politikasına etkileri olan bir fenomen olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Özellikle 21. yüzyılda dinin uluslararası ilişkileri çeşitli alanlarda etkilemeye başladığını görmekteyiz. Son yıllarda Uluslararası İlişkiler disiplini ile ilişki kurmaya başladığı bir diğer alan da din olmuştur. Bilhassa dış politika karar alma süreçleri incelendiğinde dinî inançların, din temelli örgütlerin devlet yöneticilerinin karar alma süreçlerinde etkili olduğu görülmektedir. İslam Mezhepleri ve özelinde Şîlik, son yıllarda küresel ve bölgesel boyuttaki etkileri sebebiyle çok tartışılan bir olgu olmuştur. Pers İmparatorluğu'ndan miras alınan Fars milliyetçiliğinin etkilediği bakış açısının yanı sıra Şîlik, günümüz İran'ının jeopolitik ve jeokültürel eğilimlerini önemli derecede etkilemiş ve etkilemeye devam etmektedir. Siyasallaşmasıyla birlikte Şîlik, İran'ın milli kimliğinin oluşmasında ve korunmasında önemli rol oynayan faktörlerden biri belki de en önemlisi haline gelmiştir. Bu bağlamda etrafındaki diğer medeniyetlerden farklı sosyo-kültürel bir sistem oluşturan İran Şîliği, Şah İsmail döneminden itibaren Fars milliyetçiliği ile iç içe geçerek günümüz İran'ının güvenlik ve dış politikası üzerindeki temel belirleyici unsur haline gelmiştir. İran çeşitli bölgelerde Ortadoğu, Afrika, Orta Asya- Şiî vekilleri aracılığıyla Şiî toplulukları etkilemiş ya da siyasi alanda gelecek vaat eden kitleleri Şiîleştirme çalışmaları yapmıştır. Avrupa'da da İran'ın Şiî Müslümanlar üzerinde etkileri bulunmaktadır. Buradaki Şiî topluluklarla olan ilişkisi İran'ın dış politika bağlamında Avrupa ülkeleriyle olan ilişkilerinde önemli bir unsur olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Almanya'da Şîlik faaliyetleri İranlı iş insanlarının uzun yıllardır yaşadığı Hamburg'da bir dernek üzerinden yürütülmektedir. Hamburg İslam Merkezi, kendisini Almanya başta olmak üzere Avrupa'daki Şiîlerin "dava vekili" olarak nitelendirmektedir. Almanya'daki Şiîleri ve örgütlenmelerin tek bir merkezde yoğunlaşması tamamen İran'ın "dünyadaki Şiîleri kendi yönetimi altında birleştirme ve Şiîliği (Velâyet-i fakîhinancını) tek merkezden yayma" amacı ile örtüşmektedir. Fransa'da yaklaşık 200.000 Şiî yaşamaktadır. Şiîlik temelinde Dinî faaliyetlerde bulunduğu belirlenen 10 dernek ve kültür merkezi ülkede İran adına faaliyetlerde bulunmaktadır. Şiîler ise hâlihazırda İngiltere'deki toplam Müslüman oranının %10'unu oluşturmaktadır. 1980'lerden itibaren İngiltere'de Fars toplum merkezleri kurulmaya başlanmıştır. İranlı şahıslar, İngiltere'de ticaret, sağlık, kültür, din gibi birçok alanda dernek kurmuşlardır. Bu dernekler üzerinden Şiîliğin İngiltere'deki Müslüman toplulukları ile yayılması amaçlanmakta olduğu tahmin edilmektedir. İran bu grupları eliyle Avrupa'da aktif olmaya çalışmaktadır ve İran'ın Avrupa ile ilişkilerinde Şiîlik önemli bir unsur olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kur'an, gulûv, abartı, doğüstü yetenekler, tanrılaştırma.

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## Introduction

The phenomenon of religion emerges as a multidimensional element in terms of the individual, society and the state. It has effects on people individually as well as in the context of social and international relations. Concepts such as values, belief, culture, ideology, and gender are effective in the construction of an individual's identity. In particular, religion and worldview are one of the most fundamental elements in how individuals and societies define their identities.

In terms of states, religion appears as a phenomenon that affects and determines the domestic and foreign policies of states. Especially in the 21st century, we see that religion has started to affect international relations in various fields. In recent years, another field that International Relations has begun to establish a relationship with has been religion. Especially when foreign policy decision-making processes are examined, it is seen that religious beliefs, religion-based organizations, and non-governmental organizations are effective in the decision-making processes of state administrators. Especially the analysis of the Individual-State-System, while the behavior of the "Individual" (i.e. state leaders), is analyzed, the world view of the leaders, as well as their past; psychology and religious beliefs are also emerging as paradigms that need to be analyzed. The topic of Islamic Sects, and Shiism in particular, has been a highly debated phenomenon in recent years due to its global and regional effects. In addition to the Persian perspective inherited from the Persian Empire, Shiism has significantly influenced and continues to influence the geopolitical and geocultural education of today's Iran. With its politicization, Shiism has become one of the factors, perhaps most important one, that plays an important role in the creation and preservation of Iran's national identity. In this context, Iranian Shiism, which constitutes a socio-cultural system different from other civilizations around it, has been intertwined with Persian nationalism since the Shah Ismail period and has become the main determinant of the security and foreign policy of today's Iran. Iran has influenced Shiite communities through Shiite proxies in various regions - the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia - or has attempted to Shiify politically promising masses. In this article, Iran's Shiite activities in Europe will be discussed. Understanding Iran properly is a subject that transcends the discipline of international relations. It is not possible to fully analyze Iran's social, political, cultural, economic, religious, sectarian, etc. structures and policies with the discipline of international relations and theories. Shiism is a sect that has left a great political and intellectual mark in the history of Islamic thought. It continues to leave its mark today.

With the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, Shiism in Iran emerged as an element affecting the domestic and foreign policies of the state. It is seen that Iran's Shiite activities have increased within the possibilities in various regions, especially in the Middle East, in the regional and global arena, especially with the

increasing emphasis of Shiism in the foreign policy of the "Mahdism and the Defence of the Holy Places Discourse". Therefore, it is important to know the effects of Shiism on Iranian foreign policy in terms of both realpolitik and geopolitics as well as theopolitics.

The highest political authority in the Islamic Republic of Iran is the Office of the Supreme Leader of Iran. This office, which was created within the framework of Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of velayat-i faqih, attracts attention as both a political and religious leadership institution. According to Article 110 of the Constitution, the Guide is considered as the leader of the Islamic revolution and the leader of the Islamic Ummah. Under the supervision of the Guide, the main organs of the State, including the legislative, executive and the judiciary, carry out their activities. The Guide is authorized to determine the overall policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, including domestic and foreign policy. The Guide, who is also the commander of the armed forces, has the authority to decide on war and peace and to declare general mobilization.

Nowadays, countries that want to increase their influence in the field of international relations prefer to use soft power and perception management strategies to avoid the costs of military and economic initiatives and to persuade the public by using the power of communication. Religion and sect a multidimensional elements in terms of the individual, society, and the state. Values, religion, belief, culture, ideology, and gender are effective in the identity construction of individuals. In particular, religion and sect are one of the most basic elements for individuals and societies to define their own identities. Religion has important effects not only in the individual and social spheres but also in terms of the policies of states. Shiism has an important place in Iran's regional stance and expansion of its sphere of influence through perception management.

### 1. Iran's Religious-Sectarian and Cultural Instruments

The Velayat-e faqih authority, which is the institutionalized form of Iranian Shiism (Imamiyya Shia), is an important soft power element for Shiites both in Iran and other countries.<sup>1</sup> Iran's Shiite activities primarily focus on the Arabian Peninsula and Africa. It tries to transform the historical city of Qom on its territory into a center of attraction for Shiites in the countries in the region.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, it carries out education and tourism activities. In particular, after the events that

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Posch, "Ideology and Strategy in the Middle East: The Case Of Iran", *Global Politics and Strategy* 59/5 (2017), 84.

<sup>2</sup> See for more information: Orhan Karaoğlu, *Teopower Olarak Şiilik ve İran Dış Politikası* (Istanbul: Kitabevi Yayınları, 2021).

followed the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Lebanese Shiites shifted their center of gravity from the city of Najaf in Iraq to Qom in Iran. Furthermore, Iran undertakes efforts to unite followers of various branches of Shiism in the Middle East with Imamiyya-Twelve (Ithna'ashari) Shiism<sup>3</sup>

One of the primary organizations responsible for managing Iran's religious and cultural assets is the Culture and Islamic Relations Institution of Iran, formed in 1995. Departments such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Culture and Guidance conduct activities related to promoting Shia ideology and enhancing cultural understanding internationally and are governed by this institute.<sup>4</sup>

The institutions at the forefront of Shiiteization activities include the World Ahl al-Bayt Congress, the Islamic Tabligh Organization, the Institution for Convergence of Sects, the Foreign Representatives of the Iranian Guide, the Religious Basins Outside Iran, and the Imam Khomeini Aid Committee. These institutions engage in sectarian activities across various countries.<sup>5</sup>

Persian culture and Persian language are among the most important elements that ensure social harmony in Iran, which has an imperial past. In this context, projects named "Greater Iran" or "Iranian Civilization Basin" are of great importance in Iranian foreign policy. According to Muhsin Rızai, commander of the Revolutionary Guards Army and Secretary General of the Expediency Discernment Council of the System, this project covers China in the east, the Indian Ocean in the south, the Gulf in the west, the Caucasus and the Mediterranean in the north. According to the "Greater Iran" and "Iranian Civilization Basin" projects, this basin, which covers the ancient Persian Empire, holds great significance for Persian culture.<sup>6</sup>

Within the scope of this project, Iran allocates large amounts of money to cultural promotion activities. In particular, Persian language education centers, Iranian cultural undersecretaries, and Iranian schools abroad are the elements operating within the scope of this project. In particular, Iran utilizes its indigenous language, Persian, to disseminate its cultural and political messaging via language courses. Furthermore, it cultivates intimate ties with Persian-speaking

<sup>3</sup> Barış Adıbelli, *İran Jeopolitiği* (İstanbul: IQ Kültür Sanat Yayınları, 2017), 74-75.

<sup>4</sup> Abdurrıza Ferici-Rad vd., "Jeopolitik-i Şie ve Siyaset-i Harici-ye Cumhuri-ye İslami; "Berresi-yi Moredi-yi Tesir-i Du Ceng-i İsrail Ba Hizbullah ve Hamas, Ber Revabit-ı İnan ve Cumhuri-yi Azerbaycan", *Cultural Geography of The Islamic World 2* (2012), 12-30.

<sup>5</sup> Ferici-Rad vd., "Jeopolitik-i Şia ve Siyaset-i Harici-yi Cumhuri-yi İslami; "Berresi-yi Moredi-yi Tesir-i Du Ceng-i İsrail Ba Hizbullah ve Hamas, Ber Revabit-ı İnan ve Cumhuri-yi Azerbaycan", 24.

<sup>6</sup> See for more information: Karaoğlu, *Teopower Olarak Şiilik ve İnan Dış Politikası*.

communities and uses the language to form advocacy groups that support Iran within these countries.<sup>7</sup>

Although not as much as the Arab World and Africa, Iran's Shiism activities are also seen among Muslims in Europe. The Iranian state, which makes use of soft power and religious diplomacy in order to legitimize its policies, maintains this approach on Muslims in Europe and their states. Iran maintains diplomatic relations with 31 European countries at the embassy level and has cultural representations and friendship/cooperation organizations in 12 European countries. Additionally, Iran officially operates with 28 Iranology centers in 21 European countries.<sup>8</sup>

Newspapers such as Iran News, Iran Daily, Tehran Times, and Keyhan English, which are published in English and Arabic, are primarily geared towards readers in Europe, North America, and Asia. Cam-ı Cem, one of the international channels of the Iranian Radio and Television Corporation (IRIB), broadcasts continuously for 24 hours a day across Europe, America, and Asia. Sahar TV, a subsidiary of IRIB, broadcasts in English and Bosnian, Press TV in English and Hispan TV in Spanish.<sup>9</sup>

Iran operates most intensively in Germany, France and England compared to other European countries.

### 1.1. Germany

Iran, which has left political, social and cultural traces on three continents with the empires it has established throughout history, has always aroused interest in the eyes of the Germans. In the meantime, Iranian nationalists and some Germans have adopted the view that their origins are based on the "Aryan Race" and have a common heritage.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Robert Langer - Benjamin Weineck, "Shiite Communities of Practice" in Germany: Researching Multi-Local, Heterogeneous Actors in Transnational Space", *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 6/2 (2017), 216-240.

<sup>8</sup> Yafa Shanneik, Chris Heinhold, Zahra Ali. "Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe: Local and Transnational Dimensions: An Introduction to the Special Issue", *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 6/2 (2017), 145-157.

<sup>9</sup> Shanneik, vd. "Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe: Local and Transnational Dimensions: An Introduction to the Special Issue", 145-157.

<sup>10</sup> According to this thesis, it is claimed that Persians and Germans actually came from the Aryan Race (superior pure race) in Asia, and that their roots later branched out and spread to India, Iran and Europe. However, Iranians interpret Aryanism as a culture, while Germans consider it as an idea based on racial superiority. See for more information: David, Motadel, *Iran and the Aryan myth*. Ali Ansari (Ed.), *Perceptions Of Iran: History, Myths And Nationalism from Medieval Persia to the Islamic Republic.*, (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2014) 119-145.

Iran has historically viewed the Germans as an ideal ally candidate to maintain its hegemony. Iran, which did not join the anti-German alliance during the First and Second World Wars, was significantly influenced by the National Socialists who rose to power in Germany. Increasing cooperation between Iran and Germany during this period led to the resurgence of Iranian nationalism.<sup>11</sup>

Germany, which played a leading role in establishing the Iranian industry and signed an agreement to establish economic relations in 1952, initiated diplomatic relations with Iran in 1953. Over time, Germany became Iran's largest trading partner, and bilateral relations continued after the 1979 revolution, unlike other Western countries.<sup>12</sup>

German-Iranian political and economic relations have increasingly developed until sanctions were imposed due to Iran's nuclear activities. Oil plays a vital role in the trade relations between the two countries, and Iran is a significant market for German companies. Around 100 German companies (such as Mercedes, Linde, Siemens, Krupp, Volkswagen, BASF, Lurgi, and Man) are currently operating in Iran. Germany, Iran's biggest exporter, also supplies the majority of Iran's imports.<sup>13</sup>

Germany, which does not want Iran to be politically excluded from the international system in order to protect the interests of German companies in the region, and which acts as a mediator between Washington and Tehran, has taken an active stance in the nuclear negotiations with Iran. As a matter of fact, the agreement between the parties is crucial for Germany. Berlin believes that it provides an opportunity to deepen the long-standing cooperation with Tehran.<sup>14</sup>

It is also important that Germany's relations with Iran are influenced not only historical processes but also by the geopolitical pursuit of getting rid of itself from dependence on Russian natural gas, being active in the Middle East, balancing the USA in the region and increasing volume of the trade.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ahmad Fazli NejadAbdol Rasul Kheir AndishAbed Akbari "Cultural Relations between Germany and Iran and its Impacts on Intellectual Movement in Iran", *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 6/6 (2017), 62-72.

<sup>12</sup> Nejad Ali Fathollah, "German-Iranian Relations after the Nuclear Deal: Geopolitical and Economic Dimensions", *Insight Turkey* 18/1 (2016), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Volker Perthes, "German Economic Interest and Economic Cooperation With the Mena Countries, Germany and the Middle East. Interests and Options", *Heinrich Böll Foundation* (2003), 187-203.

<sup>14</sup> Perthes, "German Economic Interest and Economic Cooperation With the Mena Countries, Germany and the Middle East. Interests and Options", 187-203.

<sup>15</sup> David Ramin Jalilvand, *EU-Iran Relations: Iranian Perceptions and European Policy* (Istanbul, PODEM, 2018).



## 1.2. The / Shi'ite Population and The Activities of The Shiism in Germany

It is reported that approximately 500,000-600,000 Shi'ite reside in Germany, amounting to 10% of the overall Muslim population. Shiism activities in the country are organized through an association in Hamburg, which has been home to Iranian businessmen for many years. Over time, the number of comparable religious institutions has grown across Germany, including the Islamic Centre of Salman-ı Farisi Mosque, the Islamic Centre of Münster, and the Islamic Way in Delmenhorst.<sup>16</sup>

The responsibility of the mosque built in Hamburg (Imam Ali Mosque) was transferred to the Hamburg Islamic Center (Islamisches Zentrum Hamburg-IZH) in 1962. Imam Ali Mosque is considered the religious center of Shiites. Religious events are regularly organized by this centre. "Fecr Magazine" is published, and children receive religious lessons in German and Persian. Additionally, a periodical titled "Hello Children" is published.<sup>17</sup>

The Hamburg Islamic Center describes itself as the "attorney" of the Shiites in Europe, Germany being in the first place. The concentration of Shiites and their organizations in Germany in a single centre completely aligns with Iran's goal of "unifying the world's Shiites under its rule and disseminating Shi'ism (velayat-i faqih) from a centralized base." In this context, it is important to monitor closely the attempts to unite Shiite organizations in Germany around the Hamburg Islamic Centre. This centre has become a propaganda centre and Europe-wide connection point for the spread of Shi'ism and velayet-i faqih belief.<sup>18</sup>

Shia organizations in Germany have maintained close relations with Shia intellectuals in Iran since their establishment. It is worth noting that some religious officials and high-ranking authorities who serve in Iran have previously held positions as presidents or imams affiliated with the Hamburg Islamic Centre. In addition to this, there are accusations that The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) dispatched some of its militias to European nations, particularly Germany, France, and Sweden. These individuals purportedly traveled to Europe under the guise of asylum seekers and were tasked with conducting intelligence operations and identifying Iranian dissidents. It has been claimed that Lebanese Hezbollah, who offer weapons, logistics materials and military instruction to Shiite

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<sup>16</sup> Langer - Weineck, "Shiite "Communities of Practice" in Germany: Researching Multi-Local, Heterogeneous Actors in Transnational Space", 216-240.

<sup>17</sup> Das "Islamische Zentrum Hamburg" und radikale schiitische Netzwerke in Deutschland" *AJC Berlin Reports*, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Leemhuis, Remko, *Hezbollah in Germany and Europe* (Berlin: The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy, 2019)

militia structures, obtain aid and donations via certain Shiite mosque associations in Germany.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. France

France was one of the countries that gave refuge to Khomeini, who was exiled for his opposition to the Shah regime during the 1960s. Notably, the French government also welcomed dissidents who fled the country after the 1979 revolution. Furthermore, France's support of Iraq during the Iraq-Iran War had an adverse impact on the bilateral relationship between the two nations.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1990s, France re-established bilateral relations through the initiatives of President Jacques Chirac. Despite objections from the USA, France maintained open channels of dialogue with Iran. After Sarkozy's presidency win in 2007, France altered its Iran strategy to enhance its economical standing in the Middle East. Focusing on cooperation with the Gulf countries during this period, France emphasized the importance of implementing sanctions to isolate Iran from the international community.<sup>21</sup>

France views Iran as a potential threat to regional security due to its human rights record and nuclear program, and approaches the issue via P5+1 dialogue and a policy of firmness. It is believed that France's alliances with Sunni groups and arms sales in the Middle East contribute to the effectiveness of this policy.<sup>22</sup>

President Hollande, who took office in 2012, has an attitude in favor of conducting bilateral relations on the basis of dialogue. Following the agreement between Iran and P5+1, high-level political officials from Paris and Tehran reciprocated visits and signed multiple agreements to enhance bilateral relations. Given Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war amid terrorist attacks against France, France also sought to maintain a balanced relationship with Iran.<sup>23</sup>

### 2.1. The Activities of The Shiism in France

It is reported that around 200,000 Shia Muslims reside in France. The ten organizations and cultural centres dedicated to the practice and teaching of Shiism

<sup>19</sup> Leemhuis, *Hezbollah in Germany and Europe*.

<sup>20</sup> Clement Therme, *French-Iranian Relations: Between Ideological Confrontation and Realpolitik, Iran and the International Arena: Challenges and Opportunities* (Ed.Sima Shine) (Tel Aviv: INSS, 2021), 45-51.

<sup>21</sup> Foad Pourarian, Payam Nikpour Badr, "Ontology of Iranian-French Cultural Relations: With an Emphasis on Contemporary Iranian History Prior to the Islamic Revolution", *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 6/6 (2017), 19-31.

<sup>22</sup> Clement Therme, *French-Iranian Relations: Between Ideological Confrontation and Realpolitik, Iran and the International Arena: Challenges and Opportunities*, 45-51

<sup>23</sup> Pourarian, - Badr, *Ontology of Iranian-French Cultural Relations: With an Emphasis on Contemporary Iranian History Prior to the Islamic Revolution*, 19-31.

do not appear to have extensive public engagement. Shiite formations such as the Zehra Center (Center Zahra) and the Anti-Zionist Party (Parti Anti Zioniste) are organized under the umbrella of the French Shiite Federation (Federation Chi'ite France). This federation, which adopts Khomeini's religious approach and velayat-i faqih belief, carries out pro-Iran and anti-Zionist propaganda activities using all kinds of communication channels, including social media.<sup>24</sup>

The Anti-Zionist Party, established by Yahia Gouasmi, the head of the French Shiite Federation and the Zahra Center, and whose operations receive funding from Iran, was launched in France in February 2009 following Israel's commencement of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. The aforementioned party participated in the European Parliament elections in the same year and in the French parliamentary elections in 2012, but was unsuccessful. It has been accused of collaborating with French far-right parties and individuals, motivated by a shared anti-Israel stance. As a matter of fact, National Front Leader Marie Le Pen gave an interview to Zahra Center's online television channel on the 30th anniversary of the Iranian revolution in 2009.<sup>25</sup>

Zahra Center organizes political meetings, talks, demonstrations and religious/cultural events to promote Shiism. The center mediates anti-Zionist circles in France to visit Iran on various occasions such as festivals and conferences. Sahar TV and IRIB radio, which broadcasts in French, carry out activities for the Shiite population in France. Pro-Iran, Lebanon and Assad Regime speeches of Shiite clerics in the country are published on the internet.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, the headquarters of National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), the political wing of the People's Mojahedin Organization (PMOI), an opponent of the Iranian regime, is located in France. Maryam Rajavi, who chairs the council, also resides in Paris.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. United Kingdom

Relations between the UK and Iran have followed a fluctuating course. Since the overthrow of former Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953

<sup>24</sup> Shanneik - Heinhold, *Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe: Local and Transnational Dimensions: An Introduction to the Special Issue*, 145-157.

<sup>25</sup> Shanneik - Heinhold, *Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe: Local and Transnational Dimensions: An Introduction to the Special Issue*, 145-157.

<sup>26</sup> France Raids, *Freezes Assets Of Pro-Iran Pro-Hizbullah Zahra Center In Northern France*; MEMRI Drew Attention To Center Beginning In 2010 (MEMRI, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Pourarian, - Badr, *Ontology of Iranian-French Cultural Relations: With an Emphasis on Contemporary Iranian History Prior to the Islamic Revolution*, 19-31.

by the US and Iran, who abolished the oil concessions given to Britain by the Shah and nationalized oil, there have been problems in London-Tehran relations.<sup>28</sup>

The British Embassy in Tehran was closed in 1980 after the Iranian Revolution. Diplomatic relations between Iran and the UK resumed in 1988, the year the Iran-Iraq war ended. Diplomatic relations between Iran and the UK were severed again in 1989 when Khomeini issued a fatwa for the death of Salman Rushdie, a British writer of Indian origin, for his book "The Satanic Verses".<sup>29</sup>

London announced in 1994 that Iran had been in relations with the Irish Republican Army (IRA) for a while. This allegation was denied by the Tehran administration and the ambassadors of the two countries were deported mutually. On the other hand, Iran raised the level of diplomatic relations with the UK in 1999.<sup>30</sup>

Jack Straw, then British Foreign Secretary, visited Iran after the September 11 attacks to cooperate in the fight against terrorism. This visit was significant as it was the first visit of a British Foreign Secretary to Iran since the revolution in 1979. Khatami, then President of Iran, aimed to establish close relations with the West. David Reddaway, appointed as the British Ambassador to Tehran, was rejected by the Iranian government in February 2002 on the grounds that he was a spy. In June 2004, Iran arrested 8 British soldiers on the grounds that they had entered its territorial waters. After 3 days of detention, the soldiers were released. Iran was also blamed for the attacks on British soldiers in Iraq.<sup>31</sup>

The Revolutionary Guard Army detained 15 British soldiers for 13 days in March 2007 on the grounds that they had violated the border. Two months later, Salman Rushdie was awarded the "knighthood" in England, which led to a harsh reaction from the Tehran administration. The British Embassy was targeted after the demonstrations in Tehran following the Presidential elections in June 2007. The Tehran administration arrested two British diplomats and deported a BBC reporter on the grounds that they were provoking demonstrations. At the time, Khamenei also described Britain as "the most evil of enemies".<sup>32</sup>

In 2010, the British Ambassador to Tehran, Simon Gass, accused the Tarhan administration of violating the most basic freedoms of the people. In November 2011, the UK announced new sanctions against Iran because of its nuclear program. All British companies trading other than oil are banned from doing business with Iranian companies and the Central Bank of Iran. Following this

<sup>28</sup> Mohammed Javad Bakhtiari - Fariba Hossein Nia Salimi, "UK and EU-Iran Relations", *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 4 (2013), 135-164.

<sup>29</sup> Shanneik, - Heinhold, *Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe: Local and Transnational Dimensions: An Introduction to the Special Issue*, 145-157.

<sup>30</sup> Bakhtiari - Salimi, *UK and EU-Iran Relations*, 135-164.

<sup>31</sup> Bakhtiari - Salimi, *UK and EU-Iran Relations*, 135-164.

<sup>32</sup> Reuters staff, *Eight local British embassy staff held in Iran*, Reuters (28 June 2009).

development, the British Ambassador left Iran and bilateral relations reached their worst level again when a group of Iranian demonstrators attacked the British Embassy in Tehran.<sup>33</sup>

Tehran-London relations resumed in February 2015 due to the more moderate approach of then President Hassan Rouhani. The British Embassy in Tehran was reactivated with the participation of the British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond.

### 3.1 Iranians in the United Kingdom

In the 1950s, children from middle and upper class families in Iran went to the UK to study. Afterwards, with the effect of the 1979 Revolution, migration to UK started. Iranian citizens in the UK have different political, socio-economic, religious and ethnic backgrounds. The first Iranians who came to the UK did not aim to settle, but this approach started to change as a result of the changes in the country. Additionally, England has become a transit point for Iranians who want to go to the USA.<sup>34</sup>

Shiites currently constitute 10% of the total Muslim population in the UK. Persian community centres have been established in the UK since the 1980s. Iranian individuals have established associations in many fields such as trade, health, culture and religion in England. It is estimated that the aim was to spread Shiism with Muslim communities in England through these associations. It is stated that, similar to other European countries, individuals who are supporting the Iranian state carry out activities against the Muslim communities in there.<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion

Iran claims to be the safeguard of Shiites in particular and all Muslims in general. Some regulations that support these goals are included in the Iranian Constitution. In this context, it is projected in Iran's foreign policy (Article 3, Paragraph 16) that aims to protect all the oppresseds, support their independence and territorial integrity (Article 152), safeguard the rights of Muslims, and establish peaceful relations. In this way, Iran aims to harness its potential to provide a source of gravitational power, particularly for Muslim nations as well as those opposed to the West and the US.

<sup>33</sup> BBC, *Iranian politicians call for UK ambassador recall*, BBC, (13 December 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Shanneik - Heinhold, *Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe: Local and Transnational Dimensions: An Introduction to the Special Issue*, 145-157.

<sup>35</sup> David Ramin Jalilvand, *EU-Iran Relations: Iranian Perceptions and European Policy*.

After the Islamic Revolution, Iran based its foreign policy on the idea of "exporting the revolution". Iran aimed to spread its revolution to countries where it felt connected to the communities, particularly in the early years following the Revolution. As a matter of fact, Ayatollah Khomeini, as the leader of the Revolution, emphasized the significance of this matter for Iran when he stated, "Restricting the Islamic Revolution to the borders of Iran is like reciting the Fatihah of the regime." In addition to policies based on regime expulsion, Iran's foreign policy is founded on principles of acting as an important player through engagement with Shiite groups and factions residing in the region, ensuring Iran's security beyond its borders by forming self-sufficient militias, establishing relations with regional and global actors on an anti-imperialist and anti-Westernism axis, as well as entering energy market relations with regional and global actors.

The Tehran government prioritizes religious, cultural, political, and social values as soft power tools to implement its sectarian policies. In this context, areas such as Shiism as a sectarian identity, Iranian literature, art, education and language courses are among the soft power elements used by Iran. Likewise, approximately 6 million Iranians (diaspora) reside outside Iran's borders and actively contribute to the dissemination and preservation of Persian culture and Shiism. Of this populace, around 1.5 million were born outside Iran. Additionally, individuals of various religious denominations, including Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews, can be found within the Iranian diaspora. Iran naturally aims to benefit from this situation by using compatriots from various faiths to soften perceptions of the country.

When it comes to discussing Iran, analyzes and studies on purely political science and international relations or theology discipline are incomplete and prevent us from seeing the big picture. It will not be enough to understand and give meaning to Shiism, which is evaluated and instrumentalized only as a instrument of foreign policy. Likewise, it is not possible to completely understand Iran and Shiism only through the History of Islamic Sects without considering the paradigms of the International Relations discipline.

Its relationship with the Shiite communities here appears as an important element in Iran's relations with European countries in the context of foreign policy. Shiite activities in Germany are carried out through an association in Hamburg, where Iranian business people have been living for many years. The Islamic Center of Hamburg describes itself as the "case representative" of the Shiites in Europe, especially in Germany. The concentration of Shiites and organizations in Germany in a single center is entirely in line with Iran's aim of "uniting the Shiites of the world under its rule and spreading Shiism (the belief in velayat-e faqih) from a single center". Approximately 200,000 Shiites live in France. Ten associations and cultural centers, which have been identified as

carrying out religious activities on the basis of Shiism, are active in the country on behalf of Iran. Shiites currently constitute 10% of the total number of Muslims in the UK. Persian community centers have been established in the UK since the 1980s. Iranian individuals have established associations in the UK in many fields such as trade, health, culture and religion. It is estimated that these associations aim to spread Shiism among Muslim communities in the UK. Iran is trying to be active in Europe through these groups and Shiism is an important element in its relations with Europe.

In brief, within the context of foreign policy, the Iranian state utilizes both soft and hard power elements to advance their interests, and also implements the "theo-power" element as a sectarian measure.

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