Iran's Security Dilemma in The Middle East: A Neorealist Approach to Iran's Foreign Policy in Syria
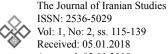
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Abstract

Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East has often been analyzed through the lenses of religion which seen as an inseparable component of state identity of Iran. Iran's foreign policy actions in the region have often been interpreted as suspicious as well as posing ideological and sectarian threat by the other Middle East countries that have Shia minorities/majorities in their territories. At that point, Syria war constitutes a relevant example to analyze the determinants of Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East. This study attempts at applying neorealism to analyze the motivations of Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East. It argues that Iran's foreign policy in Syria needs to be seen beyond the discourse of proxy war; rather it aims at securing Iran's regional power bases as well as projecting Iranian power to Syria and across the region.

Keywords: Syria War, Iran's Foreign Policy, Neorealism, Security Dilemma, Sectarianism

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Iran'ın Ortadoğu Güvenlik İkilemi: Yeni Gerçekçilik Kuramına Göre İran'ın Suriye Dış Politikası

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Öz

İran'ın Ortadoğu dış politikası genellikle İran'ın devlet kimliğinin ayrılmaz bir parçası olarak görülen din anlayışı çerçevesinde değerlendirilmiştir. İran'ın dış politika kararları ve eylemlerine, sınırlarında Şii nüfus - azınlık veya çoğunluk-barındıran Ortadoğu devletleri tarafından şüpheli yaklaşılmış, hatta bölge için ideolojik ve mezhepsel tehlike olarak yorumlanmıştır. Bu anlamda Suriye savaşı, İran Ortadoğu dış politikasının belirleyici unsurlarını analiz edebilmemiz için önemli bir örnektir. Bu çalışma, İran'ın Suriye dış politikasının belirleyici motivasyonlarını yeni gerçekçilik yaklaşımıyla anlamaya çalışıp, mezhepsel gerilimlerin mi yoksa jeopolitik hesaplamaların mı belirleyici olduğunu tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye Savaşı, Neorealizm, İran Dış Politikası, Güvenlik İkilemi, Mezhepçilik

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Introduction

Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East has often been analyzed through the lenses of religion which seen as a significant component of state identity. Iran's foreign policy actions in the region have often been interpreted as suspicious as well as posing ideological and sectarian threat by the other Middle East countries that have Shia minorities/majorities in their territories. Today, in the minds of states and societies of the Middle East, Shia identity is the major component of the Islamic Republic of Iran in shaping the foreign policy directions of the state. On the other hand, some others argue that it is not the Shia identity but the strategic and geopolitical calculations of Iran that directs the foreign policy making.

Syria war constitutes a relevant example to illustrate the motivations of Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East. According to some, Iran as an Islamic Republic aims to dominate the Muslim world and spread the Shia ideology to the Sunni countries under the name of exportation of the revolution, and the current Syria war is serving for Iran to implement its religious targets in the Middle East. On the other hand, some others indicate that Iran's stress on religious credentials in Syria war is just a rhetoric, rather Iran has strategic calculations in Syria war to ensure the regime survival and secure its alliances in the region. This study aims to analyze the motivations of Iran's foreign policy in Syria war; whether it is because of the sectarian tensions prevalent in the region or Iran aims to defend its strategic interests and project its power to Syria and across the region. It adopts a neorealist approach with a focus on Iran's security dilemma in the region to explain Iran's foreign policy dynamics in Syria war.

Maintaining Security or Searching for Hegemony

Sectarian tensions in Syria present themselves as the manifestations of the conflict rather than the causes of it. Gregory Gause attributes the weakening of state authority as the major reason for the crisis appeared in the Middle East in recent years.[1] From the 1970s up to the advent of the Arab Uprisings, there was a strengthening of state authority which resulted in

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[1]   F. Gregory Gause III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War", (Panel Discussion, The Brookings Institute, Doha, October 21, 2014).

the development of strong authoritarian regimes. The weakening of Iraqi state in 2003 with the destruction of government instruments can be portrayed as the beginning of the emerging of a political vacuum in the Middle East. To fill the political vacuum left in Iraq, regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, and external powers such as the US and Russia, began to raise their influence in shaping the outcomes of regional conflicts. According to Gause, those regional and external powers have been invited by weak governments of the Middle East because those weak states started to look outside to have support in their side which would help to overcome their inability to control their borders and societies.[2] Hence, one can describe this situation as a war of counter politics among the regional and external powers in shaping the domestic politics of weakened Arab governments.

In the case of Syria, it can be argued that the Syria-Iran alliance has survived because it had been defensive in nature which aimed at neutralizing Iraqi and Israeli capabilities and preventing US involvement in the Middle East.[3] Additionally, Iran and Syria do not compete ideologically rather they have ideological differences that helped them to establish long term strategical relationship and none of them tried to get superiority over the other even though in the post-2011 upheavals, Syria become dependent on Iran and its allies due to manpower shortage, lack of resources, and increasing pressure from opposition groups.

The Syria war has been identified as a war which combines the complexities of Lebanon, Somalia, Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya as the tools that have been used in the war were obtained from all these experiences.[4] When we examine the regional and external powers, one can argue that both are there to support their allies who serve for their future interests in the region. When one investigates the positioning of those powers in the Syria conflict, the picture does not give notion of a purely sectarian war. If so, all Sunni groups might be expected to be on the same side but in reality,

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[2]   Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism,".

[3]   Jubin Goodarzi, "Iran and Syria," *United States Institute for Peace: The Iran Primer,* August 2015, access date March 10, 2016, http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-syria.

[4]   Khaldoun Khashanah, "The Syrian Crisis: A Systematic Framework," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 7, no. 1 (2014): 18.

one can clearly see that they are not. Rather, they are competing against each other for gaining political power and reinforcement in the region.[5] According to some, these developments illustrate the dynamics or characteristics of the Cold War, hence it can be called as a Middle East Cold War which started with the weakening of the Iraqi state in 2003.[6]

The failure of the Iraqi state has also been portrayed as a process that deepened the Saudi-Iran geopolitical rivalry in the region. According to those interpretations, Saudi –Iran rivalry is an old Arab-Persian enmity which was revoked by the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, followed by the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, geopolitically deepened by the failure of the Iraqi state in 2003 and advanced in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings. Hassan Rouhani, the President of Iran, who was portrayed as reformist, does not seem to be able to change Iran's foreign policy if one takes the superiority of the Supreme Leader to the decision-making process of Iran political life into account.[7] At the end, the complex nature of Iranian foreign policy making and factionalism among the Iranian political actors could not prevent Iran from forming proxy wars in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon.

Is Syrian Crisis a New Chapter in Iran-Syria Relations?

Iran has often presented itself as a regional actor supporting dialogue in Syria crisis. To illustrate, Iran was favour of Kofi Annan's "six-point peace plan" for Syria if the plan did not ask for the removal of Assad from power.[8] On the other hand, some incidents can be underlined here to exemplify the opposite argument. In order to make sure that Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) cannot attack Hezbollah, Iran deployed 1,300-1,800 personnel belonging to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Cops (IRGC) and Quds Forces, operating in foreign countries, to serve in ground combats in Syr-

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5   Khashanah*, ibid.,* 8-11.

6   Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism,".

7   Majid Rafizadeh, "How Has Iran's Role in the Five-Year Syria Conflict Evolved," *Al Arabiya English*, March 20, 2016, access date April 2, 2016, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2016/03/20/How-has-Iran-s-role-evolved-in-the-five-year-Syria-conflict-.html.

8   Maltzahn, *"The Syria-Iran,"* 55.

ia.[9] However, both sides, Syria and Iran, have supported each other in the times of crisis against the Western influence in regional affairs. As it was discussed earlier, foundation of their alliance lies in 1970s when Syria involved in cooperation with Iranian opposition movement against the Reza Shah as well as oppositional movements in Syria and Lebanon. Additionally, the establishment of personal relationship between the official leaders of Syria and Iran in the early times of revolutionary regime need to be considered in analysing the nature of the Syria-Iran alliance in Syria war.

When one looks at the attitude of Iran in the beginning of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, it can be argued that Iran preferred to ignore the upheavals because it viewed them as natural given the fact that countries had been supported by the US were prone to the 'Islamic Awakening'.[10] Afterwards, it became inevitable to take a position against the revolts in neighbouring Arab countries and Iran started using same rhetoric with Syrian government which has been based on blaming armed groups and opposition movements for the instability of the country. Iran accused the US of intervening in Syria's domestic issues and helped to quell the protests on Syria. Moreover, it presented itself as a country that views the events in Bahrain as real as well as respecting people's demands for economic reform and democracy. On the other hand, Iran interpreted the 2011 revolts in Syria as artificial events which were initiated by the external powers to weaken a 'resistant' state.[11] In turn, the US accused Iran of helping Syria government and technically assist the government to monitor online communications. Iran rejected this accusation by underlying Syria's capability to solve its internal problems by itself. Moreover, Iran emphasized the US's 'double standard policies' towards the Arab countries; while the US was supporting the revolts against the Tunisian or Egypt government, it preferred to stay silent in the case of Bahrain.

One needs to consider Iran's political, cultural and geopolitical characteristics without focusing on any superior factor.[12] One needs to include Iran's foreign policy demands on Iranian society from the region and the world

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[9]   Katzman, "Iran's Foreign Policy," 12.

[10]   Maltzahn, "The Syria-Iran," 54.

[11]   Maltzahn, "The Syria-Iran," 54.

[12]   Bargezar, "Iran's Foreign Policy", 2.

along with the expectations of the government. This understanding of the cultural, political and security demands of Iranian society will help our interpretation of Iranian foreign policy dynamics. On the other hand, with the presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013-) Iran has been portrayed as a country ready to deal seriously with the West. Rouhani's cabinet is full of ministers with advanced degrees and PhDs from the Western universities, more than Obama Administration's Cabinet Members.[13] This does not mean that Rouhani's cabinet is a proponent of the West and the US but have a better understanding of the perceptions of Iran than the previous Presidents despite some degree of continuity. At this point, one can argue that both Rouhani and Ahmadinejad aimed at maximizing Iran's influence in the region, thus the IRGC have remained important actor in Iran's foreign policy during Rouhani's presidency. Rouhani, like Khatami and Rafsanjani, believes that Iran's role in the region can be increased with empowering the economy.[14] Improving Iran's economy will maintain the domestic support for the government and it will be a key to increase Iran's influence in regional and international affairs. Mohammad Javad Zarif, current Foreign Minister of Iran, emphasizes that globalized nature of security does not allow nations to live in a secured world while the others are not secured.[15] Under the presidency of Rouhani and Zarif's Foreign Ministry, Iran seems to believe that states cannot gain at the expense of others.[16]

In contrast to Rouhani, Ayatollah Khamenei believes that the US has never accepted the existence of Iranian Revolution, therefore any improvement in relations with the West will result in the influence of cultural and social behaviour of the US on Iran which cannot be compatible with the Islamic values.[17] Rouhani argues that Iran should not have permanent enemies, rather it should pursue a pragmatic foreign policy for easing sanctions and improving Iran's image in the world. On the other hand, instruments of Iran foreign policy ranges from financially and militarily support of allied re-

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[13] Rodger Shanahan, "Iranian Foreign Policy under Rouhani," *Analysis: Lowy Institute for International Policy* (February 2015): 3.

[14] Shanahan, *ibid.*, 3.

[15] "Zarif: No Islands of Security Anymore," *Kayhan News,* March 11, 2016, access date April 10, 2016, http://presstv.com/Detail/2016/03/12/455308/Iran-Lebanon-Syria-Hezbollah-Velayati/.

[16] "Zarif: No Islands," *ibid.*

[17] Katzman, "Iran's Foreign Policy," 1.

gimes and groups in the region to the political action and funding potential candidates in Iraq, Afghanistan to build allies. Iran's financial, media and humanitarian support to Syria as well as providing arms and equipment through the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and air base settled in Hama need to be emphasized as a part of the instruments of Iranian foreign policy.[18] Additionally, education and training programs to bring young Muslims to Iran and direct payments to the leaders of neighbours such as Afghanistan's leader, Hamid Karzai, in 2010.[19] In terms of diplomacy, Iran's involve in multilateral institutions; for instance it is a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and Chemical Weapons Convention, participated for the resolution of the Syria crisis via the Vienna Process in 2015.

Before the Arab Uprisings, the fragmented nature of the Iraqi politics was the main tension area between Iran and Saudi Arabia that was accusing Iran of getting advantage of the US corrosion of state institutions and the army of Iraq. With the advent of the Arab Uprisings, new motives were created for the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. While Saudi Arabia adopted an attitude against the upheavals, Iran backed Tunisian, Egyptian opposition movements that were Islamic awakenings in Khomeini's words and Bahrain that was considered as the extension of Islamic awakening started with the Iranian Revolution.[20] At that point, one can explain this situation with Iran's regional hegemonic ambitions that made Iran to assume itself as the representative of the Shia communities around the world. It has been argued that Iran's behaviour which showed differences towards each Arab state in the Arab Uprisings revealed the sectarian discourse of Iran. On the other hand, one can also argue that following the Arab Uprisings, Iran recognized that the forces of the Arab Uprisings did not behave like the revolutionaries in Iran.[21] This recognition made the Supreme leader Khamenei to distance the issue from the Shia rhetoric and compare the Syrian conflict

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[18]   Katzman, "Iran's Foreign Policy", 3.

[19]   Katzman, "Iran's Foreign Policy", 23.

[20]   "Saudi-Iranian Tension: Roots and Implications for the Gulf," Assessment Report, *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies* (January 21, 2016), 2.

[21]   Mahjoob Zweiri, "Revolutionary Iran and Arab Revolts: Observations on Iranian Foreign Policy and Its Approaches," Case Analysis, *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies* (September 2012): 5.

with the opposition against Ahmadinejad during the Presidential elections of Iran in 2009.[22]

In the case of Syria, Iran is obviously acting in accordance with its regional interests and seeking for a political presence in any new aspect of political life in the emerging Syria which might help to decrease its losses in a post-Baathist Syria.[23] The fact that Syria and Iran have had common pragmatic concerns and goals paves the way for Iran to implement its plans in the current picture of Syrian politics. Iran's main concern has been to maintain its military and intelligence cooperation with Syria, hence in the case of the fall of Assad, it would be a strategic setback for Iran as Syria is a strategic way for Iran in its access to Lebanon.[24] It is obvious for Iran that supporting the trusted elements within Syrian political elite which would be sided with Iran if Assad steps aside has become crucial.[25] Additionally, according to Mehr News Agency, Assad's fall will bring Syria under the Takfiri rule and increase the influence of Israel on regional issues.[26] During the Arab Uprisings, Iran had two choices to follow; whether to stand against rebellions in Syria against the Assad regime or hope that new political elites will choose to maintain the existing alliance with Iran. It seems like that Iran has chosen the first option. Nevertheless, in the Syria crisis, Iran is accompanying uncertainty given the fact that it is not certain of the new power elites will preserve Iranian strategic interests. Moreover, Russia's intervention in Syria can be emphasized as a challenge to the balance of power and may serve for the clash of interests and competition between two.[27] When one compares the Iran's political aims with Russia's, they are broader than Russia's interests which are not shaped by helping Iran to spread its politi-

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[22] Zweiri, *ibid.,* 5.

[23] Zweiri, *ibid.,* 12.

[24] "Syria, Turkey and Iran: Regional Dynamics of the Syrian Conflict," *Chantam House Meeting Summary* (December, 2012): 2.

[25] "Syria, Turkey and Iran", *ibid.,* 4.

[26] "Saudi Dictated by Zionists to Insist on Assad's Removal," *Mehr News Agency*, March 15, 2016, accessed date March 21, 2016, http://en.mehrnews.com/news/115238/Saudi-dictated-by-Zionists-to-insist-on-Assad-s-removal.

[27] Rod Thornton, "Russia and Iran in Syria: An Alliance or Competition," Case Analysis, *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies* (November 19, 2015): 6.

cal, religious influence in Syria or strengthen its position against Israel.[28] As Peters underlines, Putin recognized that Russia's air campaign would benefit an emerging Iranian empire instead of expanding Russia's influence in the region, Putin decided to leave Syria.[29]

The Quds Force has been supporting Assad's regime from the very beginning. With the intervention of Russia, the Syria war entered a new phase which was the offensive jointly planned war by Russia and Quds Force. Additionally, Iran has been sending IRGC troops from Hezbollah to Syria at the same time rejecting to intervene the war by claiming that its forces are in Syria to advise the government. Even though Iran accepted that the IRGC members died in Syria but it denied having a large military presence in Syria and IRGC's participation in combats.[30] In addition to that, it has been revealed that a lot of senior officers are making travels between Syria-Iran to organize people's movement for the survival of Assad's regime.[31]

Iran has always positioned itself against any foreign intervention in Syria war which may result in the fall of Assad and Iran's strategic goals in Syria and in the region. Khamenei's words illustrate the importance that Iran gives to the survival of Syrian government: "We believe it doesn't make sense that other countries get together and decide about a governing system and the head of that state…This is a dangerous initiative which no country in the world would accept to be done for itself".[32] Likewise, Iran's Parliament Speaker Ali Larjani underlines the resistant nature of Syria and Syrian society: "Syrian nation is a resistant nation which has, through

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[28]   J. Matthews Mcinnis, "What Iran Expects to Gain from the Syrian Civil War," *Newsweek* (November 14, 2015).

[29]   Ralp Peters, "The Syria War Just Taught Putin to Worry about Iran," *New York Post*, March 15, 2016, access date March 20, 2016, http://nypost.com/2016/03/15/the-syrian-war-just-taught-putin-to-worry-about-iran/.

[30]   Paul Taylor, "Exclusive: Saudi-Iranian proxy war over Syria spreads to Davos," *Reuters*, January 23, 2016, access date March 30, 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-davos-exclusive-idUSKCN0V10BO.

[31]   Adam Rawnsley, "Inside Iran's Secret War," *The Daily Beast*, November 13, 2015, access date March 10, 2016, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/11/13/inside-iran-s-secret-war-in-syria.html.

[32]   Asa Fitch and Aresu Eqbali, "Iran's Khamenei Warns Countries against Dictating Syria's Political Future," *The Wall Street Journal,* November 1, 2015, accessed March 10, 2016, http://www.wsj.com/articles/irans-khamenei-warns-countries-against-dictating-syrias-political-future-1446388677.

perseverance and resistance, managed to leave behind critical and sensitive conditions".[33] Ali Akbar Velayati, representative of Iranian Supreme Leader and former Foreign Minister, draws attention to the 'success' of the Syrian government in maintaining the regime: "Although a lot of damage has been inflicted on Syria, this country stood up against these serious acts of aggression which constitute a mini-world war and emerged victorious." Additionally, Hezbollah has been continuously described as the 'honour of Muslim and Arab world by Iran.[34] Those interpretations of Iranian political actors on Syria war strengthen the arguments that emphasize Iran's major threat to the region coming from its asymmetric capabilities controlled by the IRGC and the Quds Force.

Erasing the Security Dilemma? Pragmatic Discourse of Iran's Foreign Policy in Syria

The security dilemma is defined by Robert Jervis: "Many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security and decrease the security of others."[35] According to John Herz, under the conditions of the security dilemma, groups, leaders and individuals are concerned of being attacked or dominated by others and this makes them to acquire more power to avoid the influence of the power of other groups or individuals.[36] In turn, this situation enables the others more insecure and force them to be prepared for the worst. Iran's foreign policy under Rouhani's presidency seems to challenge the zero-sum game theory of the international relations as official figures of Iran present the country closer to the non-zero-sum game theory through underlying the possibility of existing together without creating security challenges to each other. To illustrate, Javad Zarif defines extremism as a common worry and world fate as a common norm of states, hence

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[33]   "Larjani: Iran to Stand by Syria in Anti-Terror Campaign," *Iran Daily*, March 16, 2016, accessed date March 25, 2016, http://www.iran-daily.com/News/138280.html.

[34]   "Hegemonic Powers behind Labelling Hezbollah Body: Iran," *Press Tv,* March 12, 2016, access date April 20, 2016, http://presstv.com/Detail/2016/03/12/455308/Iran-Lebanon-Syria-Hezbollah-Velayati/.

[35]   Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, 2(1978): 169.

[36]   John H. Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 2, 2(1950): 157.

according to him, a collective reaction and wisdom for rational and joint response is urgently required in Syria war.[37] In accordance with Zarif's argument, Rouhani often draws attention to the norm of morality in Syria conflict: "Tehran has not forgotten its moral obligations to Syria and will continue to provide help and support on its own terms to the government and nation of Syria".[38] Additionally, Zarif argues that some countries that have been supporting the opposition groups miscalculated the outcomes of the conflict and they will be punished by the terrorism that was promoted by their helps. On the other hand, it seems that Iran's endeavour to create a common norm of security is not convincing for some as it can be illustrated in the words of Benjamin Netanyahu who stresses that Iran is much more dangerous than the ISIS due to its combination of Shia Islamist revolutionary branch with traditional Persian imperialism to strengthen its dominance in the region.[39] Likewise, Henry Kissinger believed that Iran desires to extend its Shia linkages from Tehran through Baghdad to Beirut and reconstruct the ancient Persian Empire under the label of Shia ideology.[40]

It is worthy to note that the sectarian nature of the Syria war has fuelled a regional proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Hamas, a Sunni opposition movement in Palestine, has support of the Syrian government and close relations of Iran with Hamas allowed Iran to claim the non-sectarian credentials of its support to the Syrian government until 2012.[41] With the end of Hamas support to the Syrian government in recent years, Iran's claims require more reasonable credentials to underline the non-sectarian attitude of Iran in Syria conflict. Phillips believes that the sectarian identity of Syria cannot be understood in the light of ancient animosities among

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[37] Simon Tisdall, "Iran Calls for Concerted International Effort to Beat ISIS and End Syrian War," *The Guardian*, December 18, 2015, access date March 14, 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/18/iran-mohammad-zarif-concerted-international-effort-beat-isis-end-syrian-war.

[38] "Iran's Rouhani vows to back Syria 'until the end of the road'," *Reuters*, June 2, 2015, access date March 15, 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iran-idUSKBN0OI0UF20150602.

[39] "Nuclear Iran 1,000 times more dangerous than ISIS – Netanyahu," *Reuters*, May 27, 2015, access date April 10, 2016, https://www.rt.com/news/262309-netanyahu-isis-iran-nuclear/.

[40] Michael Wahid Hannan and Dalia Dassa Kaye, "The Limits of Iranian Power," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 57, no. 5 (2015).

[41] Hannah and Kaye, *ibid.*

the ethno-religious groups.[42] Rather, it can be viewed as the result of long and short term structural, economic, political and socio-cultural factors. He argues that studies that tend to view the sectarian identity of Syria as an artificial one created by France and Britain at the end of the WW1 and created hatred between the Sunni and Shia communities are right but not enough to see the whole picture. This hatred was revived by 2003 and illustrated in the violence between the Sunni and Alawi communities in Syria.

Short term structural changes and elite reactions towards the multi-layered identities of Syrian society have to be emphasized here as determinant for the extent of sectarian violence while long term factors such as economic competition and elite manipulation had kept the sectarian ties silent. With the advent of Syria war, due to the description of Syria as central to a rapidly changing Middle East order, regional actors started to invest on Syria to secure an outcome aligned with their political and security interests. Each country has been observed to shape their involvement as a part of regional ambition which lead to friction but none of them could achieve a quick and certain victory.[43] For instance, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have understood that their sectarian partners are the most reliable tools for projecting power. Thus, local and transnational actors remain as major drivers and growth of actors with transnational agendas and resources have fragmented both the regime and the opposition groups while each regional and local actor have lost coherence in the development of the crisis.

As part of its pragmatist outlook to the region, Iran portrays itself as the victim of sectarianism which has long been provoked by the Salafi groups against the Iranian influence in the region.[44] In the cases of Iraq, Bahrain and Syria, it can be seen that Iran did not start sectarian violence but exploited the Shia minorities to secure the Iranian interest in those countries. In that sense, Iran's motivation has been much more strategic rather than a religious affiliation despite the exploitation of Shia communities. Fear of losing power has been the major cause that directs Iran to exploit concerns of Shia communities regarding the sectarianism across the region. In that

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[42]   Christopher Phillips, Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2015): 357.

[43]   Emile Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War," *Survival,* 56(2014): 60.

[44]   Daniel Byman, "Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East," *Survival* 56(2014): 89.

sense, Sunni Arab regimes, are majority, have been identified as actors undermining Iran's goals and serving for the interest of the Salafists.

Iran's foreign policy has been affected by the ideology, Iranian leaders' perception of threat to the regime and country, long standing Iranian national interest and interaction of various factions and constituencies.[45] In the case of Syria, Iran's foreign policy appears to be more practical; protect Iran from the US intervention, enhance Iran's international prestige and reconstruct the ancient Persian Empire combined with its religious credentials. The Syria war is a complex issue which cannot be understood by looking at present sectarian identities or Sunni-Shia divide, which paves the way for an understanding of pragmatic foreign policy of Iran. According to some, the 2011 revolutions in Syria were the result of inflation, a decline in oil prices, shrinking subsidies, decreased living conditions and corruption. According to some others, the Syria war is the extension of the Saudi-Iran regional Cold war which has strategic significance to both sides. However, there are also some scholars who views the Syria war as a Sunni awakening that began in Tunisia and ended in two Sunni regional camps: anti-Muslim Brotherhood status quo and pro-Muslim Brotherhood revolutionary movement.[46] All these different interpretations show the fact that understanding the sectarianism without geopolitics remains insufficient to explain the Syria war.

To conclude, sectarianism has a toxic effect on the ending and resolution of Syria war as the geopolitical and domestic interests have increased the stakes of the conflict both for Assad and opposition movement.[47] A war against the Syrian regime has obviously become a war between the communities of the regime. This makes us to view the Syrian picture through a mixture of sectarianism, geopolitics and fragmentation. Hence, Iran's pragmatic foreign policy in Syria cannot be understood under the light of sectarianism and religious credentials alone but through an understanding of pragmatism that aims to achieve strategic goals of the country in Syria and across the region.

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[45]   Katzman, "Iran's Foreign Policy," 1.

[46]   Benedetta Berti and Jonathan Paris, "Beyond Sectarianism: Geopolitics, Fragmentation and, the Syrian Civil War," Strategic Assessment 16, no. 4(2014): 27.

[47]   Berti and Paris, *ibid.,* 29.

Syria War, Nuclear Deal and Trump Administration: Iran's Neorealist Foreign Policy

As it is discussed throughout this study, Iran's foreign policy has been in accordance with the neorealist approach since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Major goal of the Iranian regime has been to prioritize survival in the anarchic nature of international system. Maximizing its power for self-help through strategically calculating the opportunities and restraints of each issue towards Iran's interests and role in regional politics as well as its position in international system have been observed as the foreign policy behavior of Iran. Iran-Iraq war, Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, 9/11 event, US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Arab Uprisings have all effected Iran's relative power and its role in regional issues. Those events were also the major ones that helped Iran to test its capacity. When it comes to the sectarian tensions in the region, Naber Habibi's argument on the fact that Sunni-Shia conflict has become an excuse in the face of Syria war to measure the strategic calculations of each sides can be considered in accordance with the analyses of this study.[48]

The major discussions on Iran's foreign policy have been evolving around the question whether it is driven by ideology/religion or it is the result of neorealist outlook of the domestic actors of the country. While some argues that ideology has become more visible in foreign policy of Iran in the period of post-Iraq's invasion, others believe that strategic instruments are better to define the Iran's foreign policy dynamics. This study sided itself with the latter argument which underlines that Iran's foreign policy is highly shaped by strategic calculations and pragmatic decisions which have been shaped by the international developments. It views the Iraq's invasion as an event strengthened Iran's alliance with Hezbollah, Hamas and Syria government. Since the Iraq's invasion, Iran started to follow a foreign policy which is based on filling the power vacuum in the region. Iran's foreign policy has been based on creating strategic and strong allies rather than dictating its hegemony over the region. In that sense, Iran's foreign policy has been portrayed as in accordance with neorealism with an offensive outlook towards the other states in the region. To illustrate, one can remember Ali Reza Zakani's, a close adviser to Khamenei, comments

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[48]   Nader Habibi, *Skype Interview* by Hazal Muslu El Berni, May 10, 2016.

on Iran's growing influence in the Arab world. Zakani argues that Iran now is controlling four Arab capitals and lately Yemeni revolution as the natural extension of Iranian Revolution.[49]

Amin Tarzi explains Iran's foreign policy in Syria with a reference to Syria's foreign policy towards Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. According to Tarzi, Iran has never forgotten Syria government's support for itself as the only Arab ally during the war, hence this memory of Iran has still influence on Iran's supportive attitude towards Assad.[50] Likewise, Habibi stresses that Iran-Iraq war created a sense of nationalistic defense in Iranian side and shaped its foreign policy decisions in the aftermath of the war.[51] In addition to that, benefits from a Shia empowerment can be stated as an important layer of Iranian foreign policy to enhance its role in the balance of power of Arab leaders who often accuse Iran of creating a Shia crescent and strengthen it from Iran to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon by fueling a sectarian war.[52] However, this study found it more reasonable to define Iran's foreign policy under the framework of neorealism due to Iran's attempts to benefit from a newly emerged factors in its favor such as Iraq's invasion in 2003, Houthi Movement in Yemen and Syria war since 2011.

Iran's altered attitude in the process of nuclear agreement in 2015 can also be viewed as an indicator of its neorealist outlook to the events in the region and the world. It has come out of the realization about the fact that sanctions have harmed Iranian economy and wealth of Iranian citizens and the country as well as threatened it security. Due to the different approaches observed around Rouhani, who believes that nuclear agreement will increase the prosperity of Iran and contribute Iran's influence in the region, and Khamenei who strictly emphasizes that nuclear deal must not change Iran's foreign policy towards other issues in the region, Rouhani as a pragmatic President of Iran has found himself giving concessions to

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49   "Sanaa is the fourth Arab capital to join the Iranian revolution," *Middle East Monitor*, September 27, 2014, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140927-sanaa-is-the-fourth-arab-capital-to-join-the-iranian-revolution/.

50   Amin Tarzi, *Phone interview* by Hazal Muslu El Berni, May 10, 2016.

51   Nader Habibi, *Skype Interview* by Hazal Muslu El Berni, May 10, 2016.

52   Gursel Firat Gedikli, "Iranian Foreign Policy in the 2000s: A Neo-Realist Perspective," Master Thesis, *The Graduate School of Social Sciences of Middle East Technical University* (2014): 93.

Khamenei in foreign policy issues such as in Syria in order to continue the negotiations over the nuclear issue.[53] One can recognize the non-ideological outlook of Iran's official leaders towards the regional issues at that point even though Iran's pragmatic look on the sectarian tensions cannot be ignored in Syria war as well as in Yemeni conflict.

With the advent of Donald Trump administration since 2016, Iran has been portrayed as the biggest supporter for terrorism in the region, which has undermined the implementation of nuclear deal agreement. Trump often accused previous US President Barack Obama of paving the way for the advancement of terrorism by Iran.[54] While Trump administration decided to support anti-Iranian allies in the region such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt, demonstrations which started in the last days of 2017 strengthen the US's hands to disclaim the legitimacy of the Iranian government and system. Trump expressed his ideas through tweeting that "The people of Iran are finally acting against the brutal and corrupt Iranian regime. All of the money that President Obama so foolishly gave them went into terrorism and into their 'pockets" and "The people have little food, big inflation and no human rights. The U.S. is watching!"[55] On the other hand, Khamenei outlined the enemies of Iran and stated that "In recent days, enemies of Iran used different tools including cash, weapons, politics and intelligence apparatus to create troubles for the Islamic Republic."[56]

It's also been argued that Iran's foreign policy in Syria is highly related to its rivalry with Saudi Arabia. Even though proxy war is a reality between Saudi Arabia and Iran over their allies across the region, major aim of Iran has been to create alliances and friendly regimes rather than to dominate the regional dynamics.[57] Syria war has been associated with the survival of

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[53]   Amin Tarzi, *Phone Interview* by Hazal Muslu El Berni, May 10, 2016.

[54]   Louis Nelson, "As Protestors Rage in Iran, Trump Backs Demonstrators, Blames Obama," *Politico*, January 2, 2018, https://www.politico.com/story/2018/01/02/trump-iran-tweet-protests-obama-319919.

[55]   Nelson, *ibid.*

[56]   Samuel Osborne, "Donald Trump claims Iran used cash given by Barack Obama for terrorism and corruption," *Independent*, January 2, 2018, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-barack-obama-terrorism-fund-iran-twitter-us-president-protests-a8137851.html.

[57]   Nader Habibi, *Skype Interview* by Hazal Muslu El Berni, May 10, 2016.

Iran and security of the regime by the Iranian officials. Iran appeared to be a rational actor that is considering what is beneficial for the interests of the country. Even though strategic calculations have always been there, Tarzi believes that 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.[58] The reason that make people to portray Iran's foreign policy ideological in Syria is Iran's attempts to push the ideology in order to reveal the two sons, Iran and Syria, of Iranian revolution.[59] Iran is a strategic actor that is always looking ahead and long term national interests are shaping its foreign policy behavior not a Shia ideology.[60]

Conclusion

This study aimed at analyzing the security dilemma of Iran in the region and motivations of Iran's foreign policy in Syria war. Iran and Syria have been portrayed as two states that do not compete ideologically with each other, rather they have ideological differences that helped them to establish long term strategical relationship and none of them tried to get superiority over the other even though in the post-2011 upheavals, Syria become dependent on Iran and its allies due to manpower shortage, lack of resources, and increasing pressure from opposition groups. In that sense, neorealism has been found as the most compatible international relations theory to discuss the foreign policy dynamics of Iran in the context of Syria war.

The Islamic Revolution of Iran has been described as a movement that brought an Islamist dimension to the Iranian nationalism and a historical sense of greatness over the others. Moreover, the revolution added a transnational dimension to the post-revolutionary Iran by dividing the world into oppressed and the oppressors. In terms of the foreign policy decision making, Hassan Rouhani does not seem to be able to change Iran's foreign policy if one takes the superiority of the Supreme Leader to the decision-making process of Iran political life into account.[61] At the end, the complex nature of Iranian foreign policy making and factionalism among the

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[58]   Amin Tarzi, *Phone Interview* by Hazal Muslu El Berni, May 10, 2016.

[59]   Amin Tarzi, *Phone Interview* by Hazal Muslu El Berni, May 10, 2016.

[60]   Amin Tarzi, *Phone Interview* by Hazal Muslu El Berni, May 10, 2016.

[61]   Rafizadeh, "How has Iran's role,"

domestic political actors could not prevent Iran from forming proxy wars in the region.

The 1980s were the years when both countries invested in a strong alliance due to the several of crisis and threats in the region. In the 1990s, relations followed an up-down trend which was tested with the Kuwait war, the Arab-Israeli Peace Process, mutual concern to regional security in Lebanon, Iraq and the Turkish-Israeli alliance.[62] Even though Iran abandoned its goal of exporting the revolution in the late 1990s, Iran continued to believe that the Middle East societies, predominantly referring to the Shia Muslims and Palestinian issue, are oppressed in favour of the US and Israel. Iran has often presented itself as a regional actor supporting the dialogue in Syria crisis. On the other hand, the study underlined some incidents to exemplify the opposite argument by referring to Iran's 1,300-1,800 personnel deployment to Syria belonging to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and Quds Forces.

Iran's foreign policy has been viewed as pragmatic and neorealist in Syria in accordance with the geopolitical and cultural realities of the region in the aftermath of 2003. It seeks to strengthen its security and create opportunities to shape international political realities in accordance with the national interests of the country. Shia culture does not significantly influence the closeness of the relations with Syria, but it can be argued that a combined hostility of Sunni Arab countries reinforced the religious bonds of two country. Therefore, a successful approach needs to consider Iran's political, cultural and geopolitical realities without focusing on any superior factor. Iran's foreign policy under Rouhani's presidency seems to challenge the zero-sum game theory of the international relations as official figures of Iran present the country closer to the non-zero-sum game theory through underlying the possibility of existing together without creating security challenges to each other. To illustrate, Javad Zarif defines extremism as a common worry and world fate as a common norm of states, hence according to him, a collective reaction and wisdom for rational and joint response is urgently required in Syria war.

Sectarianism has been understood as a toxic effect on the ending and resolution of Syria war as the geopolitical and domestic interests have increased

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[62]   Maltzahn, "The Syria-Iran," 57.

the stakes of the conflict both for Assad and opposition movement.[63] A war against the Syrian regime has obviously become a war between the communities of the regime. This enables one to view the Syrian picture through a mixture of sectarianism, geopolitics and fragmentation. Hence, Iran's foreign policy in Syria cannot be understood under the light of sectarianism and religious credentials alone but through an understanding of pragmatism that aims to achieve strategic goals of the country in Syria and across the region. This study conducted interviews with Naber Habibi and Amin Tarzi, and throughout the interviews it's been revealed that Iran's foreign policy in Syria should be seen beyond the discourse of proxy war; rather it aims at securing Iran's power bases as well as projecting Iranian power to other Arab states in the region such as in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq.

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[63]   Berti and Paris, "Beyond Sectarianism," 29.

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Interviews

Amin Tarzi, *phone interview* by Hazal Muslu El Berni, May 10, 2016.

Nader Habibi, *skype interview* by Hazal Muslu El Berni, May 10, 2016.

ANNEX 1: INTERVEIW QUESTIONS

1. How do you interpret the dynamics of Syria war? Some tends to view it in the context of the Arab Uprisings, people's demand for democracy and equal distribution of resources while others believe that it is the result of ancient hostility among the different sects of the country and emerged as a sectarian conflict at the end.

2. How should we analyse the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in recent years? Do historical-ideological perspective or a neorealist approach serve better for our understanding of it?

3. Is there an epistemological break from Shah's period to the Iranian Revolution? Shall we start our understanding of Iran with the Iranian Revolution?

4. Do you think Syria war is one of the proxy wars of Iran? If so, what are the motivations of Iran's foreign policy in Syria?

5. As Javad Zarif underlines in his speeches, is Iran really trying to erase the security dilemma of the region?

6. Does Iranian nuclear deal go hand in hand with Iran's foreign policy in Syria? Or are they separate issues for the domestic foreign policy makers of Iran?