

**IRAN IN THE GEOPOLITICAL POWER STRUCTURE
OF THE MIDDLE EAST:
FUNDAMENTAL INTERESTS AND PERSPECTIVES**

ORTADOĞU'NUN JEOPOLİTİK GÜÇ YAPISINDA İRAN:
TEMEL ÇIKARLAR ve PERSPEKTİFLER

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the multilevel geopolitical structure of the Middle East and Iran's role in the regional system. It provides an analytical framework to understand the complex Iranian foreign policy. The article consists of three major sections: the first section deals with the general features and peculiarities of Iran's foreign policy, as well as with its discrepancies; the second section examines the power structure and inter-state relations in the Middle East and specifically investigates Iran's Middle Eastern policy; and the last section envisions perspectives of Middle East political dynamics and Iran's role in the regional power relations after Arab Spring. Iranian fundamental interests in the Middle East are analyzed in the article and three objectives of Tehran are highlighted: to grow strong in Iraq, Syria and Egypt; to reduce Turkish, Israeli and Saudi Arabian influence in the region; maintain Arabic states' hostile position against Israel and isolate Israel from regional relationship system. The article argues that Iran, herself isolated by the USA led Western countries tries to undertake isolation policy towards Israel.

Key Words: *Geopolitical Power Structure, Iran's Interests, Multilevel Structure, Isolation Policy, Political Islam, Nuclear Policy*

ÖZET

Ortadoğu'nun çok katlı jeopolitik yapısını ve bölgesel sistemde İran'ın rolünü araştıran makale komplike İran dış politikasını anlamak için analitik bir çerçeve sunuyor. Makale üç ana bölümden oluşmaktadır: birinci bölüm, İran'ın dış politikasının genel hatları ve özelliklerinin incelenmesinin yanı sıra tutarsızlıklarını da ele alıyor; ikinci bölüm, Ortadoğu'da güç yapılanmasını ve devletlerarası ilişkileri, özellikle İran'ın Ortadoğu politikasını inceliyor; ve

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nihayet son bölümde Arap Baharı sonrasında OrtaDoğu'nun siyasi dinamikleri ve bölgesel güç ilişkilerinde İran'ın rolünün perspektifleri öngörülüyor. Bu çalışmada Ortadoğu'da İran'ın temel çıkarları analiz ediliyor ve Tahranın siyasi maksatları aşağıdaki gibi tanımlanıyor: Irak, Suriye ve Mısır'da güçlenmek; bölgede Türkiye'nin, İsrail'in ve Suudi Arabistan'ın etkisini azaltmak; İsrail'e karşı Arap devletlerinin düşmanca konumunu korumak ve İsrail'i bölgesel sistemden izole etmek. Kendisi ABD liderliğinde Batılı ülkeler tarafından izole edilen İran, İsrail'e yönelik izolasyon politikası yürütme çabası içindedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Jeopolitik Güç Yapısı, İran'ın Çıkarları, Çok Düzeyli Yapı, İzolasyon Politikası, Siyasal İslam, Nükleer Politikası*

Introduction

“Wherever I see a Muslim, I am scared” – the author of these satirical words, the great Azerbaijani poet Mirza Alekber Sabir would not ever imagine that a day will come, these words will gain “validity” in the major part of the world. A number of Eastern states, and almost all of the Western states, particularly the USA define political Islam as one of the primary threats in their national security strategy. In this context, Iran -the driving force of the political Islam is one of the actors of special importance in the structure of the modern international system.

Modern Iran was known as Persia until 1935, and became an Islamic republic in 1979 after the ruling monarchy was overthrown and Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was forced into exile. Conservative clerical forces led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established a theocratic system of government. US-Iranian relations became strained after “hostage crisis”³, when a group of Iranian students seized the US Embassy in Tehran in November 1979 and held embassy personnel hostages until mid-January 1981. The United States cut off diplomatic relations with Iran in April 1980. During Khomeini's moderate, Rafsanjani's pragmatic and Khatami's relatively liberal presidency tenure Iranian relations with the United States and West in general were fairly stable, although far from good. Tenure of president Ahmadinejad seemed like a departure from the past. In foreign policy, Ahmadinejad adopted an assertive, if not aggressive posture towards the Western community. He called for the eradication of Israel and denied the Holocaust. He explicitly challenged America's international dominance

³For details of the “hostage crisis” see “Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam” by David Farber, Princeton University press, 2006

and called for a new world order. His government pushed ahead with its nuclear fuel enrichment program, despite U.N. and U.S. sanctions between 2006 and 2010 (Bakhash). However much of this aggressiveness was in rhetoric rather than in actual foreign policy decisions. Hasan Rouhani who took office as the seventh president of Iran in 2013 promised to rehabilitate Iran's relations with the world, its international standing and restore international trust to Tehran. In the meantime the sanctions against Iran on the one hand and talks to resolve Iranian nuclear issue on the other hand continue.

The Arab Spring that covers much of the Middle East and sparkles unrest across the region have specific impact on the general regional system and in particular on Iran's foreign policy. On the other hand there are certain characteristics of Iranian political system and political milieu which effectively shape the foreign policy in the modern period.

Peculiarities of Iranian Foreign Policy

Iran carries out very complex and controversial foreign policy. There is a plain discrepancy between political rhetoric of Tehran and its actual policy. This discrepancy shows itself up when the theocratic regime, usually portraying itself as the protector of all Muslims, does not treat all Muslim states and/or Muslims under oppression the same way. While deprecating Israel's oppression of Palestinians Tehran does not show the same sensitivity towards Azerbaijanis who suffered genocide and occupation of their motherland by Armenia. Iran's close relations with Armenia undermines Azerbaijani and Turkish efforts to economically blockade Armenia thus to urge on Yerevan to take a constructive position in the settlement of Karabakh conflict. As Claude Moniquet and William Racimora recognize, there is two-fold negative impact of Iran-Armenia relations, "...Their hidden agenda could indeed undermine the efforts undertaken under the authority of the OSCE Minsk Group on the peaceful settlement of Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Similarly, Armenia could offer Iran a way out to evade international sanction, hence delaying the solving of Iran's nuclear issue (Racimora)" Hence Iran-Armenian relations at first glance may seem paradoxical since Tehran is the most inveterate Islamic state of the world and Armenia is one of the pioneers in adoption of the Christianity, but a closer examination reveals the strategic nature of this alliance.

It may also worth to note that the only mosque in Armenia is Persian Mosque, while the Armenian minority of 100 000 people in Iran enjoy more freedom in lifestyle than all other ethnicities, including Azerbaijanis who

comprise around 20 mln. of Iran's population. Armenians are allowed to practice their religion, educate their children in their mother tongue, own a few media bodies, and are represented by two seats in the Majlis, Iranian Parliament.

There are definitely multiply voices in Iranian political establishment and society in general which at times may become quite opposite. As Muhittin Ataman points out, Islamists/Conservatives and Neoislamists/Reformists comprise two distinct groups in Iranian political establishment whose attitude to various issues radically differ (Ataman, 2010: 76). As his study suggests, the academicians and students who belong to various ethnic groups, such as Persians, Kurds and Azerbaijanis have totally different perspectives on the one single issue which illustrate the conflicting views of their respective groups. Thus, existence of sharp-cut fractions brings additional complexity to Iran's foreign policy.

The complicity of Iran's foreign policy also emerges from the fact that there is no any single person or centre in political issues that enjoys uttermost reputation. The clergy, the military and bureaucrats of various positions make as sharp foreign policy statements as they wish. For instance, on March 16, 2011 Iranian officials announced that a visit by Jordan's King Abdullah II during Iranian Nowruz celebrations had been cancelled. "This trip has been called off due to intense popular opposition and the opposition of decision-making institutions," said a member of the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission of Iran's Parliament, Mahmoud AhmadiBighash. He added, "Malik Abdullah's trip [to Iran], which...has been cancelled, could delay the downfall of Jordan's dictatorial regime (Fulton, 2011)." In another case, on March 22, 2015 the commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC Quds Force) Major General QassemSuleimani was reported as saying that he believed Tehran had the ability to control events in Jordan, as it does in Iraq and Lebanon. Only a day later Iranian Embassy in Jordan released a statement to deny the alleged statements attributed to General Souleimani (Middle East Monitor, April 2015).

Other than domestic factors, the contradiction and complicity in Iran's foreign policy is generated primarily by its place in the structure of international system, and secondarily by its geopolitical position. As Mesbahi points out "...Strategic loneliness of Iran in the international system and regional sub-system (Mesbahi, 2004: 110)..." has definite implications on its foreign policy. Iran, not integrating into the unipolar international system that emerged in the intersection of 1980-1990s, pursued the policy of contra-centralization in relation to that unipolarity. This policy of Iran,

expanding and deepening in the XXI century, gradually crosses the borders and assumes global parameters.

On the regional level, Iran exerts serious pressure on the key allies and representatives of the USA and Western interests, posing a serious threat to their national security; and thus weakens or seriously affects the uni-polarity in the Middle East as one of the regional pillars of the international system. In this regard we may emphasize Iranian policies towards Saudi Arabia, gulf sheikdoms, as well as Lebanon and Jordan to weaken American geostrategic dominance in the region.

On the international level, Iran menaces the unipolar system in three directions:

First and foremost, Tehran jeopardizes the regime of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, thus causing an urgent international problem. Iran's nuclear program, with its obvious military elements along with peaceful purposes, demonstrates Iran's intention to acquire nuclear weapons and has become a serious global threat. The threat is not limited to the intention of Iran to possess nuclear weapons. The danger that emerges in the Middle East can spread rapidly to the other regions of the globe due to the specific strategic and geopolitical position of the region. Recognizing the significance of settling Iranian nuclear problem peacefully, the USA and major world powers – Russia, China, Britain, France, and Germany initiated long-term negotiation process with Iran since 2006. There were many backs and forwards since the start of nuclear talks, but nowadays we witness the unprecedented success in these negotiations. In March-April of 2015 P5+1 (permanent members of UN Security Council plus Germany) and Iran reached an outline agreement regarding Iran's nuclear program. The deal has been defined as "very innovative" by Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif, while US President Obama said a "historical understanding" with Iran is achieved (Usher, 2015). However it is not a formal agreement, but rather an unwritten understanding, tentative framework to move forward into the final settlement. The world powers and Iran now aim to draft a comprehensive nuclear accord by 30 June, 2015. By that time tough talks await the sides of negotiations, because Barack Obama is criticized by hardliners in Congress for moving away from original policy on Iran's nuclear program, while in Iran just two weeks before the mentioned framework agreement Khamenei warned against Washington's "devilish" intentions. The principal differences are related to the sanctions against Iran. While US administration terms the lifting of sanctions "limited, temporary, targeted and reversible", Tehran claimed that Iran will not sign the agreement until all the sanctions are totally lifted (Deghan, 2015). Alongside

the opposition in both Iran and the US, obviously these discrepant interpretations of the deal make regional Arab countries, as well as Israel very perturbed. Therefore tensions around Iranian nuclear program and the danger that it poses for the international system still remain high.

Secondly, Iran supports the countries aspiring to change the unipolar system of international relations to a multipolar one, such as China and Russia, amplifying their geopolitical and geo-strategic potential. In the recent years Iran has become particularly dynamic and influential player in this regard.

Thirdly, Iran presents the Islamic order as an alternative to the ideological basis of the unipolar system, which carries far greater sense than counter-centralization. In this regard it should be mentioned that Islam is the utmost component of self-perception and identity-construction in Iran. On the other hand, as Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri argue "...the national identity of Iran is the context within which its foreign policy is constituted" (Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2011: 160). Since the ultimate goal of the Iranian revolution has been to "export" the Islamic revolution and consequent political-social order to the rest of the world Tehran's foreign policy has certain implications for the entire region in other words, the international Islamic order that Iran intends to establish is considered to be a hazard not only in the Christian West, but also in a number of Islamic countries.

In addition to the above mentioned factors, the geopolitical position of Iran should be seriously analyzed. The peculiarity of the geographical location of Iran lies on the base of its geopolitical significance. Having access to the Indian Ocean through the Gulf on one hand and to the Caspian Sea on the other hand, bordering with the Middle East and Central Asia – the regions where different geopolitical processes are going on, Iran is bound to carry out a complex and contradictory policy.

Accordingly, the political processes developing in the Gulf region, Indian Ocean and in the Caspian Sea, as well as the current geopolitical situation in the Central Asia and the Middle East, differ radically in terms of essence, development patterns and intensity. A hundred years, or fifty years ago, and even till the end of the bipolar system, the geopolitical situation and processes in the aforementioned geopolitical areas bordering Iran, did not differ from each other drastically. Islamic Republic of Iran was not ready to pursue a policy in such a complicated geopolitical situation; the government lacked experience and scientific-theoretical bases. These factors directly

influenced Iran, and stipulated the complexity and contradictions of its foreign policy. That is why maximalism, radicalism and inconsistency often occur in the foreign policy of Iran.

The other factor contributing to the geopolitical complexity to Iran's position and consequently to the contradictions of its foreign policy is **geopolitical sensitivity of its borders**. These borders, inherited from the entangled history of Iran renders the Islamic Republic the state that causes the largest problem of the divided nations. The Iranian borders dividing Azerbaijanis in the North, Kurds in the West, Beluchs in the South-East, as well as the Turkmens and Arabs carry special geopolitical burden. These non-demarcated borders are potential sources of conflict.

Another important factor that should be taken into account in the analysis of the geopolitical situation of Iran is the fact that it is one of the major countries with the vast oil and gas reserves. This factor creates a great opportunity of maneuver and perspectives for development in the modern period of a large demand for energy. The last two factors which complete the description of geopolitical situation of Iran are its internal ethnic landscape and ideology.

Power Structure in the Middle East and Zigzags of Iran's Regional Policy

The Middle East, located in the geopolitical center of the world has always been in the focus of the great powers and nowadays the situation remains much the same. Generally, examination of political history of the world proves that the nations who wanted to establish the great states and succeeded in that should have the sway and sphere of influence in the Middle East. The reason, as we have already noted, is directly linked to the geopolitical location of the region.

The region, along with its location on the strategic transport routes connecting the three continents, is also the cradle of the great civilizations which has now turned into a spot of their confrontation.

A **three-level structure** of relations based on the balance of power has been formed in the Middle East:

First – **external level**;

Second - **regional non-Arabic level**;

Third - **Arabic level**.

The external level comprises the great powers that are interested in the Middle East and are notable for their dynamic foreign policy towards the

region. The USA, Western European states, Russia and China are the main countries involved into this level. All of these countries are situated outside the region, but they are the actors which shape the processes developing in the region and usually take an active part in these processes.

Second, i.e. **non-Arab regional level** includes three states - Turkey, Iran and Israel. As the regional power centers, these countries have decisive influence and significance being in a close interaction both with the external level and the regional Arab level. It is the character of relations between Turkey, Iran and Israel that defines the ratio of cooperation and conflict in the Middle East. The present political and geopolitical situation in the Middle East is, to a significant extent, the natural continuation of the cooperation, contradictions and tensions in the relations among Turkey, Iran, and Israel.

These countries' relations with the global powers are more likely "relationship of equals" and they are not subjected to political manipulation, pressure and influence by these powers; or when subjected they are able to give an adequate response to them. All three countries have a complicated history and contradictory relationships. They all have strong ideologies, national self-awareness and global ambitions. Both Turkey and Israel support modern unipolar system and do not seriously hinder the policy of the USA in the region, even in cases when they do not endorse it. Although sometimes the Middle Eastern policies of both Turkey and Israel do not coincide with the interests and recommendations of the US, there does not occur any confrontation between these countries and the United States.

Iran, on the contrary, being in a state of confrontation with the United States manages to adjust its policy with Russia and China. Although the relations of Turkey and Israel with Russia and China are far from confrontation- in fact there is a fairly deep cooperation among them - both permanent members of the Security Council provide more backing to Iran. **Thus, the global competition propensities have priority on the regional layer, regardless of the character of the local relationships.**

Third, is the level which has a complex structure consisting of the **Arabic countries and** non-state actors. On the basis of this four-level structure lays the character of relations of these Arab states with the higher non-Arab regional level and the external level, alongside with their own hard power capacities.

The first sublevel consists of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria.

The second sublevel includes Jordan, Iraq and Libya.

The third sublevel covers Palestine, Hamas and Hezbollah.

Finally, the fourth sublevel consists of the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

The main competition is in the level of Arabic countries, particularly in the second, third and fourth sublevels of this level. Iran, in fact, is in the state of confrontation and/or rivalry with all of the international and regional powers at all levels. Of Iran's 13 immediate neighbors, seven are Arab countries. This fact alone may explain Iran's extreme cautiousness towards Arab states of the Middle East. On the other hand, the relationship of these Arab countries with Iran is directly linked to the increase and decrease of their influence in the region.

As mentioned, the first Arabic trio includes Saudi Arabia, Syria and Egypt. Iran and Egypt have had decidedly difficult relations since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, mirroring the suspicion with which the Iranian regime has been treated across the region. Sadat's Egypt was willing to grant asylum to the deposed shah Pahlavi, and the Islamic Republic of Iran honored Sadat's assassin Khaled Istambouliby naming a street in Tehran after him in 1981 (Zephyr, 2014: 135). Recently Iran's foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, has announced Iran's agreement to change the street's name to Al Shuhada Avenue (Martyrs' Avenue), in honour of Egypt's January 25 revolution. This move has been regarded as a sign of Tehran's willingness to worm relations with Cairo. However the core differences between strategic goals of both states remain.

Saudi Arabia and Iran have also experienced tense relationship and multi dimensional rivalry fueled with must rust since the Islamic Revolution. Iran regards Saudi regime as the US fulcrum in the Middle East, while Riyadh cautions Iran's ideological expansion and fuelling Shia unrest in its Eastern Province. At present, the most important areas of rivalry and difference between Tehran and Riyadh range from the crises in Syria, Bahrain and Egypt to developments in Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen and Iraq; from issues of the Islamic world and religious differences to Iran's nuclear programme. The conflict in Yemen is one of the current hot spots where Iran and Saudi Arabian competition is taking place. Saudi Arabia and Gulf monarchies are supporting the government of Yemen, while Iran is backing Houthi movement. The Houthis, founded as a revivalist movement for the Zaydi form of Shia Islam that is largely unique to northern Yemen, have transformed themselves over the past decade into a formidable militia, and their military takeover in January 2015 has plunged the country into uncertainty (Salisbury, 2015). Iran's stance in this conflict is regarded by Arab States as part of Tehran's efforts to expand the network of proxies across the region – Hizbullah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine and now

Houthis in Yemen. Regional Sunni-Shia split in the Middle East became more acute after the fall of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime in Iraq. This sectarian divide is reinforced by geopolitical considerations and national security interests of the states. In countries ruled by Sunni regimes Shia people have been regarded as enemies of the state ideology and a threat to domestic stability. Therefore in most Sunni states Shia population, either minority like in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, small Gulf States and Yemen, or majority like in Iraq and Bahrain, is perceived as a potential threat to the country's national security. In recent decades Shia population became more explicit and assertive in their demand for power-sharing in the Sunni ruled states. Iran taking this fact as an opportunity and may be contributing to this trend, challenges the regional power prevalence of Sunni states. Hence Iran's support for Houthis in Yemen is perceived by Sunni states as part of Iranian "Shiite Crescent" – an ideological belt of sympathetic Shiite governments and political factions in the Middle East (Wright and Bake, 2004). Through Yemeni Houthis, it is argued, Iran tries to reach out to the Gulf of Aden and Bab-el-Mandeb, a strategic strait which links the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. Iran's geopolitical ambitions, therefore is understood as an imminent Shia threat by Saudi Arabia and Gulf monarchies while increase of Iranian influence in the region is perceived as zero-sum game.

But with Syria Iran has qualitatively different relationship. In recent decades, the governments of Iran and Syria formed a strategic alliance, overcoming divisions in the Middle East (especially Persian–Arab and Shia–Sunni hostilities). Former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad was the first Arab leader to recognize the new regime in Iran after the 1979 revolution. Iran's theocratic government also recognized the Alawis of Syria as one of the strands of Shiism, although it was rejected by the most respected ayatollahs in Lebanon and Iraq. Military cooperation of Iran and Syria which started in early 1980's laid the foundations for a close alliance, initially intended to reduce the influence of Israel in Lebanon and to deter Iraq. However this alliance survived the geopolitical changes after the Cold War and rapprochement of the two states continued. In fact the loss of Soviet aid and the economic problems of Syria increased its dependence on Iran, which is one of the few foreign investors in the country. It should be noted that during Hafez Al-Asad's tenure Iran-Syria relationship were that of equal partners and allies, whereas after his death Syria's dependence from Tehran grew increasingly. The reason behind this shift was on the one hand Bashar Al-Asad's (succeeded his father as president in 2000) lack of political support in the Syrian power layout and consequent dependence from Tehran for backing his regime and on the other hand Iran's renewed proactive foreign policy towards the Arab world.

Being the strongest Arab states in the region at present, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria have decisive impact on the countries from the other levels. Furthermore, these countries, in comparison to other Arab countries, have greater determination and capacity to pursue an independent policy, as well as to affect other actors in the region. Syria is able to exert an influence on Lebanon, Hamas and Hezbollah, while Saudi Arabia on the Gulf States, Egypt on Jordan, and all three (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria) on Iraq. To sum up, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria are exactly the factors that constitute the main resistance to the influences of international and regional forces in the Middle East. In this context, good relations with this Arabic trio are the warranty of successful foreign policy in the region. In this regard, Iran's good relations with only Syria out of the three states of the first Arabic trio, enables Tehran to lean on Hamas, Hezbollah and Lebanon.

However, Iran also has the power to influence Iraq, the Gulf States and other Arabic countries. But this influence, is not "legitimate", that is to say, it is carried out against the will of the given state, and is accompanied by her resistance. On the contrary, Iranian influence on Lebanon and Hezbollah is not encountered with resistance by them.

Without the support of regional powers - Turkey, Iran and Israel, it is difficult to make changes on other levels of the regional structure. The support of at least one of these states is necessary to make changes in the structure of the level composed of the Arabic countries. The move of the Arab states up or down by the levels of the structure depends not only on the inter-Arab relationship, but to the more extent it depends on the non-Arab regional powers and the international poles. The alterations in the international poles immediately affect regional relations and the balance of power. If during bipolar system, such countries as Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria had the dominant status in the region, after the collapse of the system initially Iraq, and later on Libya lost their previous status. At the moment, Syria is in the process of losing its status. The great powers and regional states are competing with each other by trying to change the position and role of the Arab states in the regional structure.

The inter-Arab system of balance based on the intra-regional relations has now transformed into the structure based on the extra-regional balance. Today the value of intra-regional relations has decreased. One of the principal reasons of this shift is the loss of power by some of the power centers, such as Iraq, Egypt and Syria as a result of internal political crisis and consequent weakening of their external influences. Eventually, the balance of power in the regional structure has switched from the Arab states to the non-Arab regional powers.

In this context, we can define Iran's main objectives and interests in the Middle East as follows.

First, is **making maximum use of the USA and Israel factors to exert pressure on the Arab states and force them to reckon with Iran.** As the consequence of Israeli conquest, and military operations of the USA in the region, as well as the overthrow of dictators and the "Arab Spring" the significance of religion in the region has increased. Tehran's religious radicalism further expanded the scale of the Israeli – Palestinian/Israeli – Arab conflict, dragging it into the context of the Islamic-Jewish or even Islamic-Christian confrontation. Strong propaganda of Iran, forces the neutral and peace willing Arab states, to continue resistance to Israel, even if reluctantly. Iran, adding religious trait to the Arab-Israeli conflict, tries to ascribe it an inter-religious character, increases the number of the conflict parties and thus complicates its solution. On the other hand, the increasing role of the religion in the region has strengthened the intra-religious sects. **Although it may seem paradoxical, the amplification of religion in the region strengthened the position of Western countries and Israel. Politicized Islam impedes close alliance of the regional states and hinders the development of common approach by exaggerating the sect differences among them.** This factor manifests itself clearly on the second level (see above) between Turkey and Israel, and on the third level between Saudi Arabia and Syria, as well as in other circles. The main reason of the preponderance of political dissociation, discords and contradictions prevailing in the region is the politicized religion, promoted to the level of government policy. Tehran, "armed" with the religion, not only failed to unite Islamic countries against Israel, but rather encountered with the reverse effect. On the other hand, secular Zionist organization initially opposed the secular Arab nationalist movement. Nowadays the role of those, who take the orthodox position, has increased on both sides, which complicates the rapprochement of their positions (Misakyan, ?: 326). Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Jordan, and Bahrain are the main Arab countries that Iran exerts influence and pressure.

Second, to increase its military capabilities by **considering a threat from the USA and Israel as a main criterion.** The major objective of the Iranian nuclear project is the implementation of this goal. Despite the fact that Iran has not officially acknowledged the plan of preparation of nuclear weapons, it is obvious that such weapons serve the interests of the regime (not the people), in many aspects.

The possession of nuclear weapons is the warranty of invulnerability of the regime. The developments taking place in the region since the beginning of the XXI century, especially recent events in Libya demonstrated that the most reliable protection against foreign intervention is the nuclear weapon. Although the nuclear weapon cannot stop the internal fragmentation, it certainly impedes foreign intervention. At the same time, nuclear weapon is a symbol of the regional superpower status, and in that sense is the nucleus of national solidarity. ***Thereby, Iranian intentions to acquire nuclear weapons include both defensive and offensive, as well as non-military purposes.*** Nuclear weapon is a great support to achieve the objectives of the offensive nature, specified below, in the third paragraph. As it was mentioned before, nuclear weapon is necessary for preserving and protecting the existing regime from the pressure of USA and the West. Finally, nuclear weapon will increase the authority of the regime and will provide national support.

One of the important factors increasing the power capacity of Iran is its close relations with the Eastern countries. Economic ties with China and Southeast Asian countries, including tourist visits to Iran from these countries considerably contribute to Iran's economy. Also, Iran is China's third largest oil supplier. Moreover, there are approximately 55 million Moslems in China (Misakyan, ?: 167). Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia play an important role in terms of material and moral support to Uyghurs in China's Uyghur issue. On the other hand, China is an additional open door for Iran to the Central Asia and the Caspian Sea regions, which is closed for the United States and the West.

Third, is to stitch its ideology and order to other countries of the region by deepening the conflict and creating chaos in the Middle East. For this purpose, Iran supports the Shiite groups in the Arab countries, as well as expands the activities of the organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas.

Hezbollah and Hamas play important role in Iran's struggle against Israel. Along with a status of a for post in opposition to Israel, Hezbollah is also a tool for spreading the influence of Iran all over the Muslim world and spreading the Islamic revolution. Iran has got the opportunity to expand its influence in the vast area, from the borders of Central Asia up to the Mediterranean Sea through Hezbollah.

Despite being an Islamic state Iran has a number of serious obstacles on its way to the leadership in the Middle East. The first and foremost of them is that Iran is a Persian state. The fact that Middle East consists mostly of

Arabic countries hampers the leadership of a non-Arabic state, and any attempt in this direction is met with suspicions and hesitations. Another factor is a difference in religious faiths. In order to overcome the differences and unify, the states of the region need a common enemy; and this role is played by Israel. Rigidity in relation to Israel is the main pillar of Iranian policy of becoming a regional leader. In this context, Hezbollah has a special importance. Successes and failures of Iranian policy of becoming a leader of the Islamic world, significantly depends on the successes and failures of Hezbollah (Яшлавский, 2007: 13). The activities of Hezbollah against Israel are supported by the majority of the Lebanese population, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. This also signifies the strengthening of Iran's position in Lebanon.

Fourth, is to spread its influence to other regions of the world, including the Mediterranean and Africa using the Middle East as a foothold. The significance of the Middle East is not limited to its advantageous geographical characteristics. This region is a lucrative investment market for Western countries, China and India. It is also important for export of the advanced high-tech fabrics, including military products. In addition, some states of the region are also financial donors of the US and Western Europe. Increasing role of Islam in Europe and around the world, as well as the risk of accumulation and spread of nuclear weapons reinforces the strategic importance of the Middle East.

On the other hand, the Middle East is the ideological center of the Muslim world. Representing less than 1/5 of the Muslim population of the world, Arabs succeeded in being an important political player.

Tehran's plan to build a military base in Syrian province Latakia, alongside the reinforcement of Shiite unity, will contribute to the strengthening of Iran's power in the Mediterranean and expand its strategic potential. The gas agreement of 2011 signed by Iran, Iraq and Syria (10bn \$) further consolidates the Shiite unity (Fulton, 2015).

Fifth, is to avoid regional isolation of Iran on the one hand, and to strengthen Israel's isolation, on the other. The pressure that Iran exerted to the Arab countries for this purpose rendered it just as dangerous as Israel (see above).

Thus, Iran and Israel basically pose the same threat for the majority of Arab states. And Israel, in the worst scenario, can occupy a certain area. But Iran can change the essence. That is to say, Iran tries to change the religious identity and the political essence of the Arab countries. While the Israeli issue mainly unites the Arabs, the Iranian splits them. *Although*

paradoxical, the fact is that, the Arab states are more afraid of Iran - the state on the way of preparation of nuclear weapon, rather than of Israel that already possesses this weapon.

Sixth, Iran claims for the regional spiritual leadership on the grounds of its governance and structure based on the Islamic values. The Iranian political elite try to appear as the representative of the positive, superior moral values and the political justice in the region. The main factor that causes stress in Iran's political elite and stimulates it to pursue an aggressive policy towards its neighbors is the discrepancy between the actual and alleged roles of Iran in the region. In the last ten years, Iran's obvious demonstration of its anti-Western and anti-Israeli position, its support and financing of Hezbollah and Hamas, put it in the front lines of the Arabic resistance movement, despite the fact that Iran is neither an Arab nor a Sunni country.

At this point it worth to examine Iran's reaction and policies towards the developments that the so-called Arab Spring brought to the region. Initially, Iran greeted the uprisings with increasing optimism. Because these revolutions appeared to fulfill cherished dreams of the Islamic Republic; the regimes that were toppled across the region were mainly anti-Iranian, furthermore Islamic political parties appeared to be successful in many countries. Overall, the US influence in the Middle East seemed to abate. The Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Khamenei called the uprisings "the natural enlargement of Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979". But as the time passed it became more and more obvious that the Arab Spring did not meet Tehran's expectations and the region is not moving in Iran's favor. In fact, the trend seems to be going in the opposite direction. Thus, over the course of the Arab Spring to date, emotions in Iran changed from initial optimism, to growing concern, to utter worry. There are two major reasons for this.

Firstly, while attempting to champion the cause of 'resistance' and democracy across the region, Iran once more demonstrated discrepancy, if not hypocrisy. It became increasingly obvious that Tehran greets uprisings elsewhere in the Middle East but not in Iran and in Syria. It portrayed Iran as the vanguard of the "Islamic awakening" in the world and in the region. But in the domestic realm the challenge to the regime's interpretation of the Arab revolutions came from the opposition. The opposition Green Movement, which had faced relentless persecution since the disputed presidential elections of 2009, applied a completely different interpretation to what was taking place in the Arab world. At the end of January 2011, one of the movement's most prominent leaders, Mir Hossein Mousavi, declared that the events in Tunis, Sana, Cairo and Alexandria could be traced back to

the second half of June 2009 when millions of Iranian protesters demanded that their democratic rights be respected (Kurzman, 2012: 162).

As for the Syrian case it would be emphasized that the challenge to Assad's rule in Syria has significant regional implications. The Syrian regime is Iran's key strategic partner in the Middle East, serving as Tehran's link to Hamas and Hezbollah, both of which threaten Israel's security and regional stability. Iranian leaders, who seek to preserve the Assad regime, have publicly downplayed the significance of the Syrian protest movement while reportedly assisting Assad in his violent repression of the opposition. The loss of a key strategic partner in Assad would represent a significant setback for the Iranian regime. Iran outlaid a lot of energy, material support, financial and social resources to back up Bashar Al-Asad's regime against the domestic Syrian opposition and international isolation.

This controversial policy of Iran – ambivalent approach to Arab Spring led to the distrust of the Arabic countries who do not believe in “sincerity” of Iran. Thus Iran's social and political influence has been seriously weakened and this may be a greater loss for Iran.

Secondly, while political Islam is making gains across the region, for now at least, Islamic parties are not looking to Tehran for leadership and inspiration. Initial hopes for rapprochement with Egypt filed out soon. And this as mentioned above has happened partly due to Iran's response to the Syrian uprising, and partly because the kind of political Islam that is emerging in many Arab countries could turn out to be quite different to what is practiced in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Religion and religiously-oriented groups have definitely played a part throughout the course of the Arab Spring, but how that will translate over the course of political transitions remains yet unclear. Moreover, even if Islamist parties consolidate themselves in positions of power, there are certainly no warranties that the model of the Islamic Republic will serve as blueprint or idealized form for their mode of governance. On the other hand shared commitment to religion in political life might not necessarily entail a closer strategic relationship to Tehran. On the contrary, it seems, thus far anyway, that political Islam in the Arab world is emerging in a way which will maintain, and perhaps even accentuate, both Arab nationalism and confessional politics; the old Persian-Arab and Sunni-Shia animosities are not fading away.

The opportunities and challenges that the Arab Spring has brought for Iran's leadership are complex and multifaceted. While the Islamic Republic

seeks to overcome its isolation from regional events and successor regimes eventually emerge in the Arab states such as Egypt and Libya, their specific entangled relationships with Iran will undoubtedly undergo varying degrees of revision based on perceptions of interests and ideological compatibility.

Conclusion

Iran's Middle East interests are laid among the Mediterranean, Red Sea and Persian Gulf. If Iran succeeds in strengthening its positions in this area, this will enable Tehran to influence the Europe and Africa more easily. It would also empower Iran to penetrate into America located on the west shore of the Atlantic Ocean. Hence concrete targets of Iran for strengthening in the Middle East are:

- Strengthen positions in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt
- Support Shia people in their struggle for political power-sharing and strengthen its own positions in the countries with Shia population
- Reduce the influence of Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia in the region
- Preserve the Arab States' hostile position against Israel and to isolate Israel from the system of regional relations. So, Iran is trying to undertake the policy of isolation against Israel, which is used by Western states against Iran itself.

Serious sanctions are imposed against Iran nowadays. If we take into account the fact that 90% of Iran's foreign trade income is derived from the export of oil, we can assume that after a while it will be seriously weakened. The main target of the West is to develop peaceful relations with Iran through sanctions and wait for its relative weakness. In case sanctions are totally removed and Iran succeeds in good economic governance the country may rise to a major power status and enter the Group of Twenty (G-20).

In fact, the study of the world history demonstrates that the way of competition with the West passes through isolation. The Soviet Russia, Communist China (and even Fidel Castro's Cuba) have lived the same fate. After this stage begins the real great statehood history. Will Iran be able to pass this phase?

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