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Iran's Defensive Policy in Assad's Syria: Proxy War¹

Esad'ın Suriyesi'nde İran'ın Savunmacı Politikası: Vekalet Savaşı

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Abstract

After the Arab Spring that started in the Middle East in 2011, a civil war broke out in Syria. Syria has become a proxy war zone due to many global and regional actors intervened in the crisis. The most important regional actor supporting the Bashar al-Assad regime against the opposition in Syria was Iran. Syria, ruled by Bashar al-Assad was Iran's only ally in the region. For this reason, the most important router of the proxy war in Syria has been Iran. The purpose of this article is to explain the reasons why Iran, which supports the reflections of the Arab Spring and changes of authority in other countries, changed its stance after the protests spread to Syria and implemented a proxy war policy in order to protect the Bashar al-Assad regime. The dynamics that enabled Iran-Syria relations to continue at an almost smooth level from 1979 until the end of the Assad regime in December 2024 are included in the article. In this regard, the proxy war implemented by Iran in Syria has been explained. Iran's proxy war policy in Syria has been analyzed based on the arguments of defensive realism.

Keywords: Iran, Syria, Axis of Resistance, Proxy War, Defensive Realism.

Öz

Ortadoğu'da 2011'de başlayan Arap Baharı'nın ardından Suriye'de bir iç savaş ortaya çıkmış, küresel ve bölgesel pek çok aktörün krize müdahil olmasıyla ülke bir vekalet savaşı sahası haline gelmiştir. Suriye'de muhaliflere karşı Esad rejimini destekleyen en önemli bölgesel aktör İran olmuştur. Beşar Esad yönetimindeki Suriye İran'ın bölgedeki tek müttefiki idi. Bu nedenle Suriye'deki vekalet savaşının en önemli yönlendiricisi İran olmuştur. Bu makalenin amacı, 2011'de başlayan Arap Baharı hareketlerinin bölgede diğer ülkelerdeki yansımalarını ve iktidar değişikliklerini destekleyen



İran'ın, protestoların Suriye'ye sığraması üzerine tutum değiştirerek Suriye'deki Beşar Esad rejimini korumak amacıyla vekalet savaşı politikası uygulamasının nedenlerini açıklamaktır. Bu doğrultuda çalışmada öncelikle İran'ın güvenlik politikasında Suriye'nin önemi açıklanmıştır. Ardından, Arap Baharı'ndan önce Suriye-İran stratejik ilişkisinin temellerine değinilmiştir. Arap Baharı'ndan sonra İran'ın Suriye politikasını etkileyen temel endişeleri ve motivasyonları açıklanmıştır. 1979'dan Esad rejiminin sona erdiği Aralık 2024 tarihine kadar, İran-Suriye ilişkilerinin pürüzsüz denilebilecek düzeyde devam etmesini sağlayan dinamiklere yer verilmiştir. Bu doğrultuda İran'ın Esad yönetimindeki Suriye'de yürüttüğü vekalet savaşı açıklanmıştır. İran'ın Suriye'de uyguladığı vekalet savaşı politikası defansif realizmin argümanları esas alınarak analiz edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran, Suriye, Direniş Ekseni, Vekalet Savaşı, Savunmacı Realizm.

Introduction

Syria, which was one of the important actors of Middle East politics before 2011, has become the playground of power struggles of global and regional actors since the beginning of the crisis. The fact that global and regional actors support the al-Assad regime or the Syrian opposition, sometimes directly, but mostly indirectly through non-state armed actors, has caused the conflicts in Syria to prolong and deepen, and Syria has become a proxy war zone.

The most important regional actor that supports the al-Assad regime in political, economic and security dimensions was Iran before the al-Assad regime fell down. When the Arab Spring movements began, Iran described the protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain as "Islamic Awakening" movements inspired by the Islamic Revolution and was pleased the overthrow of Arab regimes that cooperated with Western countries. After the public protests spreaded to Syria, Iran's only ally in the region, Iran perceived a possible change of authority in Syria as a threat to own geopolitical interests and the "Axis of Resistance", which was of critical importance in Iran's defense strategy. Because weakening the "Axis of Resistance" might mean the loss of Iran's forward defense line, which was a factor of deterrence, and the destruction of the bridge between Hezbollah and Palestinian resistance organizations. For this

reason, Iranian officials emphasized many times that the most important link in the “Axis of Resistance” chain is Syria.

The main purpose of this article is to explain the reasons why Iran, which supported public protests and changes of authority in other countries in the Middle East, took the opposite stance and supported Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria after the Arab Spring uprisings spread to Syria. In this regard, the article includes the reasons why Iran implemented proxy war policy in Syria and which proxy groups Iran cooperated with in Syria and for what reasons. The most important router of the proxy wars that have continued in Syria since 2011 was Iran. In order to minimize security threats, to protect Iran's existent gains and to maintain its influence over the states and non-state actors; Iran had been implementing neo-realist security principles in foreign policy and pursues defensive policies in Syria through proxies. For this reason, in this article, Iran's approach to proxy war policy and foreign policy in Syria through proxy fighters are analyzed based on the arguments of defensive realism.

The Importance of Syria in Iran's Security Policy

Syria, ruled by al-Assad, was Iran's most important strategic ally in the Middle East and the supporter of Iran's strategic depth. Syria is one of the most important states that plays a decisive role in Iran's national interests and the future of the region. After the Arab Spring movements began in Syria, Iran claimed that the rebellions were conspiracy attempts supported by the USA, Western states and Israel. Iranian officials have stated many times that they will not hesitate to respond to any possible intervention in Syria's internal affairs and territorial integrity, perceiving it as their own security issue. Iran wants the crisis in Syria to be resolved by internal consensus in line with the demands of the people, without external intervention.

The overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria and the establishment of a pro-Western administration that is hostile or rival to Iran could mean the loss of Iran's influence in Syria and breaking Iran's ties with its allies in Lebanon (such as Shiites and Hezbollah) and Palestine (such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad). A possible change of authority in Syria may negatively effect to Iran's entry into the Arab world, investments in the Mediterranean and access to hydrocarbon resources, and it may cause a damage to Iran's strategic bridge with the Near East, which refers to the southwestern Asian countries between India and the Mediterranean. Therefore, the presence of a pro-Iranian authority in Syria is vital for the

continuity of Iran's regional influence and interests. It should be noted that, what is important for Iran is not Assad himself, but the existence of an ally that will protect Iran's interests and support in achieving Iran's regional goals.

The common interests and threat perceptions that have influenced the continuation of cooperation between Iran and Syria since 1979 have made this relationship an obligation rather than a choice (Sinkaya, 2015, pp. 153-154). In the Syrian crisis that has continued since 2011, the most important actor supporting the Assad regime against global and regional opponents despite all political, military and economic costs was Iran. In order to understand the reasons why the Iran-Syria strategic cooperation continues to be long-term and strong, the historical, ideological and strategic ties between them need to be examined.

Iran-Syria Strategic Relationship Before 2011

The foundations of Iran-Syria friendship started even before the 1979 Revolution, and some Islamist revolutionaries such as Imam Musa Sadr went to Lebanon to help the Shiites who were victims of the Lebanese Civil War. They were trying to fight against Israel, and received support from Syria led by Hafez al-Assad (Sinkaya, 2012, p. 5). Before the 1979 Revolution, Hafez al-Assad supported Khomeini, who was in exile, and opponents of the Shah regime (Polat, 2016, p. 480). After the 1979 Revolution, the relationship between Hafez al-Assad and Khomeini strengthened. After the Camp-David Peace Agreement in 1978, Egypt and some Arab states put an end to their anti-Israel sentiments and Syria's tense relations with Iraq. But as known, Syria was left alone against the Arab-Israeli balance of power. During the same period, the establishment of a new anti-American and anti-Israeli regime in Iran brought Iran and Syria closer together (Uygur, 2012, p. 9). Syria was the first Arab country to recognize the new regime in Iran (Köroğlu, 2012, p. 45).

Despite the many differences between Persian, theocratic and Shiite Iran and Syria which is Arab, secular and the majority of people are Sunni; their common interests, not violating each other's areas of interest, common threat perceptions, anti-Western sentiment, and Iran's avoidance of exporting its revolutionary policy to Syria was effective in keeping their relationship going smoothly (Sinkaya, 2012, pp. 5-6).

After the 1979 Revolution, there were some milestones that transformed Iran-Syria relations into a strategic alliance. The only Arab country that supported Iran in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War was Syria. Despite Iraq's

use of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the fact that international powers and institutions did not react to Iraq and imposed harsh sanctions against Iran was effective in preserving Iran's relationship with Syria. Between 1979 and 1982, Iran supported the left-nationalist Baath regime in Syria against the uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. This choice shows that Iran cares about real interests, not just ideological and religious identities. Similarly, during the Iran-Iraq War, Syria supported Iran, not the Iraqi Baath, which is Syria's ideological brother. As a matter of fact, according to defensive realism; As seen in the Iran-Syria cooperation, if the fronts are satisfied with the balance, they may choose to continue cooperation, provided that the actors do not interfere with each other's untouchable interests, in order to maintain the *balance of power* and avoid the emergence of a *security dilemma* (Jervis, 1999, pp. 42-63) (Glaser, 1994-1995, pp. 50-90) (Jervis, 1978, pp. 167-214).

In 1982, when Israel occupied the south of Lebanon and neutralized the Syrian forces there, Hafez al-Assad asked for help from Iran to get rid of Israeli influence. In return for this, Syria ignored to Iran gaining influence over the Lebanese Shiites. Thanks to this agreement, a small unit affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) entered Lebanon and organized Hezbollah, thus Iran's and Syria's influence in Lebanon has been strengthened (Sinkaya, 2012, pp. 6-7). In return, Iran supported Hafez al-Assad in the Hama Massacre, which was carried out by the Syrian Army to capture members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in 1982 (Polat, 2016, p. 479). Cooperation between Iran and Syria became official in March 1982, when they signed agreements in the fields of oil, trade and military. At the end of the 1980s, there was a problematic period in their relations as Iran and Syria took different political positions regarding the political future of Lebanon, but due to reasons such as Iraq's recovery of power and assertive policies, the USSR withdrew its aid from Syria, and increasing influence of the US in the Middle East, Iran and Syria agreed on basic issues and realized that they needed to strengthen their relations again (Kazdal, 2018, p. 4).

With the establishment of the Arab Cooperation Council in 1989, an anti-Syrian rebellion was organized by the Lebanese army led by Michel Aoun and Saddam Hussein's support for this rebellion were compelling factors for the continuation of Iran-Syria cooperation. After the dissolution of the USSR and withdrawal from the Middle East, the USA has come to dominant position by filling the power vacuum in the region is one of the reasons for the continuation of Iran-Syria alliance.

As a result of the US-led operation in 2003, Iran and Syria were pleased with the end of Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq and the establishment of a Shiite government, thus adding Iraq to the Iran-Syria-Lebanon axis (Goodarzi, 2013, pp. 45-47). But they worried about being the next target under the US's "preventive war on terror" policy. Therefore, they continued to develop cooperation between them. Syria was subjected to international pressure as Syria was held responsible for the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. During the same period, Iran's relations with Western countries were strained and exposed to international pressure due to Ahmadinejad's anti-Zionist rhetoric and nuclear program (Kazdal, 2018, p. 5). Since there was no authority to protect their security and interests against international sanctions, Iran and Syria continued to cooperate by relying on their own forces in line with the *self help* principle of defensive realism.

Main Concerns and Motivations Effective in Iran's Syria Policy After the Arab Spring

In addition to the reasons that improved Iran-Syria Relations before 2011, the perceptions of Iranian decision-makers have guided Iran's security concerns and have been influential in Iran's Syria policy. According to defensive realism; the perceptions of decision makers are effective in shaping the policies of states. In foreign policy and military planning processes in the international anarchic system, where intentions and the relative distribution of power are often uncertain in the short term; decision makers' belief systems, perceptions of the enmities or rivals' image, intelligence levels, evaluations and cognitive biases play a some important roles. Although it is difficult to determine exactly what the opposing actor's intentions are, thanks to the history of relations and the discourses of decision makers; predictions can be made about that actor's intentions, offensive and revisionist policies.

Concern about Weakening the "Axis of Resistance": After the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States described Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil" and in the category of countries that support terrorism and possess weapons of mass destruction. It is known that, against this concept, Libyan journalist ez-Zaf al-Ahdar used the term "Axis of Resistance" for the first time (Akgül, 2016, p. 136). The global and regional opponents of the "Axis of Resistance" described this formation as the "Shiite Axis / Shiite Crescent". It is known that the first person to use this concept in 2004 was King Abdullah II of Jordan (Sinkaya, 2007, pp. 37-38, 48). It is accepted that the central country of the Shiite Crescent, which

is based on the ideal of surrounding Sunni countries and cutting off their connections, is Iran due to the influence of Shiite population and administrative power factors. The "Axis of Resistance" policy aimed to have countries where Shiite governments were in power or in the majority, where they had a strong stance, who have strong ties with Iran, and who would act as deterrent agents against the USA, Israel and their "collaborators" in the Middle East (Bilgetürk, 2018, pp. 400,403). In 2006, when Ahmadinejad visited Damascus, "Axis of Resistance" was declared between Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian resistance organizations (Polat, 2016, p. 480). As can be understood from the presence of Sunni actors among them, it represents a political formation, not a sectarian unity.

According to the *balance of power* theory; other actors can unite and create a balance of power against a rising power. In accordance with this assumption, an anti-Shiite bloc consisting of Egypt, Jordan and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries was formed with the support of the USA against the rise of the "Axis of Resistance". Although the influence of sectarian concerns was not ignored in this confrontation, the competition for the regional balance of power was the determining factor (Sinkaya, 2007, pp. 50-51). Therefore, in such a political environment, it has become vital for Iran to protect the "Axis of Resistance". Otherwise, Iran's deprivation of this strategic depth might mean that it would encounter Iran's enemies on its own borders.

In the words of Ali Akbar Velayati, the international relations advisor of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Syria is the golden link of the "Axis of Resistance" chain (Goodarzi, 2013, p. 33). In order to maintain the relationships Iran has developed with the actors of the "Axis of Resistance" and Iran's regional influence, there must be a conciliatory regime in Syria. If a Sunni-dominated government is established after Assad in Syria, the stability of the Shiite-dominated government in Iraq might be in danger (Sinkaya, 2015, pp. 153-154). For this reason, Iran perceived a possible change of power in Syria as a threat to Iran's geopolitical interests and the "Axis of Resistance", which was of critical importance in Iran's defense strategy. Weakening of the "Axis of Resistance" could mean losing Iran's forward defense line, which is an ingredient of deterrence. Because Iranian officials had claimed that the main goal was to destroy the "Axis of Resistance" and ultimately weaken Iran. According to Iranian officials; if the "Axis of Resistance" chain is broken, there would be violent foreign interventions in the region and thus the Iranian regime would be weakened.

Concern about the Disruption of Regional Order by Foreign Interventions:

The first anti-government armed group in Syria emerged when a group of soldiers who were included in the regime army but were dissatisfied with Assad's policies and attitudes towards the people, left the army and founded the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in 2011. In course of time, many armed opposition groups has been emerged by who left the FSA and civilians, and the conflicts quickly turned into civil war. Syria has become a proxy war zone due to the interventions of regional and global actors arising from their desire to play a role in the new order to be established. The "Group of Friends of the Syrian People", consisting of more than 90 countries, containing the USA, England, France, Germany, Italy and regional actors with Sunni-dominated populations such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, UAE, Jordan, supported the Syrian opposition. The exclusion of Iran from the meetings organized by this organization has caused concern that Iran would not be given a role in the redesign of the Middle East. Since regional and global actors supported different fronts in Syria, Iran was concerned about the disruption of the regional order by foreign interventions. However, the mentioned countries could not take an active role due to their different plans on Syria, incompatibility and lack of synchronization between them (Kazdal, 2018, p. 7).

Concern That "Iran Will Be The Next" : First of all, it should be noted that, Iran was the field of military and ideological battlefield of great powers such as England and Russia during the 19th and 20th centuries, and the USA and the USSR during the Cold War, caused an "occupational syndrome" in the political-psychological memory of Iran's foreign policy decision-makers (Sandıklı & Emeklier, 2012, p. 45). Due to all of Iran's experiences before 2011 and the presence of US military bases geographically around Iran, Iran has felt constant threat to its existence. After Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani was killed in a US-led operation in Baghdad in 2020, the perception of threat to Iran's security was reshaped.

Additionally, there is ethnic, sectarian and social diversity in Iran, consisting of Persians (51%), Turkmens and Azerbaijani Turks (24%), Arabs (3%), Armenians (2%). This diversity or division from another perspective, has caused skepticism in the minds of some Iranian decision-makers that it could be used by foreign powers to disintegrate Iran. As a matter of fact, Azerbaijani President Ebulfeyz Elchibey called the region in Iran where Azerbaijani Turks live as "Southern Azerbaijan" in the 1990s and put forward a thesis that he predicted the disintegration of Iran so that Northern and Southern Azerbaijan could one day be united.

Similarly, for a while, US academics also brought up a policy based on the disintegration of Iran due to ethnic origins (Efeğil, 2012, p. 56). Such reasons required Iran to maintain strong relations with Syria in order to protect Iran's own security.

Sectarian Motivation: The sectarian aspect of the relationship between Iran and Syria began when Hafez al-Assad, of the Nusayri faith, who came to power in Syria with a military coup, encountered the problem of legitimacy in Syria, where the majority of the population is Sunni. While the Nusayri faith was viewed as un-Islamic and an extreme branch of Shiism, Hafez al-Assad's authority gained legitimacy in Syria thanks to the fatwa of Shiite cleric Musa Sadr, who was born in Iran and Lebanese origin. After this supporting step, Syria became the first country among the Arab states to recognize the Khomeini administration established in Iran in 1979.

The fact that the main part of the ruling class in Syria was from the Nusayri faith, which is quite close to the Shiite sect, facilitated the relations and communication between Iran and Syria. It would be incomplete to evaluate the relations between the "Shiite Islamist-Persian theocracy" Iran and the "left nationalist Arab" Baath regime, solely in terms of ideological, religious or ethnic identities (Özdemir, 2018a, p. 449). Geopolitical and strategic factors are still priority for Iran's foreign policy. Religious and sectarian solidarity required them all supports these (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, 1997, p. 99). It cannot be said that Iran follows a foreign policy entirely centered on the Shiite sect, but it is also a fact that Iran always cares about religious and political partnerships. As seen in many examples, Iran mostly implements pragmatic foreign policies according to the conditions of the time.

There are many sacred places, shrines and cultural centers in Syria that are considered sacred for Shiites and create cultural connection between Iran and Syria. Every year, nearly 1 million Iranians visit these shrines and thus they become pilgrims. This religious-cultural connection was another important factor that was effective in protection of Syria for Iran (Karaoğlu, 2021, pp. 184-199) (Sinkaya, 2015, pp. 152-153).

Regional Leadership Motivation: After the September 11, 2001 attacks, with the removal of Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003, two of Iran's regional rivals were eliminated. Subsequently, Iran perceived Israel and Saudi Arabia as the most important regional rivals and the biggest threat to itself and its sphere of influence.

Iran has always perceived the aggressive and expansionist policies that Israel has implemented since its establishment as a threat. Israel is in a struggle for influence with Iran in Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Bahrain. When the conflicts in Syria spread to the Golan Heights after 2012, Israel began to respond and targeted Iranian bases in Syria. Israel also asked the USA to stop Iran's nuclear works. Despite all, Iran avoided a direct offensive stance against Israel. Because, as a result of a direct attack by one of the two states, it is possible that the other will respond to this move in the same proportion and so the tension will escalate.

After 1979, there was a regional leadership rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia based on power and sectarian principles. However, it should be noted that sectarian competition has not been come to the fore after Mohammed bin Selman became Prime Minister in Saudia Arabia. After 2011, Iran wanted to keep its gains in Syria, and Saudi Arabia willed to achieve new beginnings and new gains by establishing a new government in Syria (Kazdal, 2018, pp. 8-9).

Iran's anti-US and anti-Israeli rhetoric in foreign policy, in this respect, its embrace of the Palestinian issue, and support for actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas in this regard have increased Iran's popularity among some Arab communities. Iran endeavored to protect both its popularity and security against threats, influence and interests in Syria and the "Axis of Resistance", which was a balancing instrument against rivals and enemies.

Motivation to Redesign the Demographic Structure: Bashar al-Assad used the concept of "Useful Syria" for the first time, in 2015. This concept has symbolized the region reaching Qalamoun, Homs and Hama in the south of Syria and Tartus and Latakia in the north. In this context, it is aimed to create a corridor that will surround Damascus (Bedewi, 2017, p. 31). It was a vision of Syria in which, the Assad regime with its current capacity, ruled not all of Syria but strategically important major cities and most of the remaining population in the country (Özdemir, 2018b).

In recent years, Iran had been talking about a highway project called "Iran cordon / land crossing from Iran to the Mediterranean", starting from Tehran and extending to the Mediterranean through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. It has been claimed that the main aim was to settle ally Shiites, to reach other Shiite groups and ally minorities, and to create a line on this road through which manpower and equipment could be quickly transferred (Bakeer, 2017, pp. 38-41).

Although their goals and justifications were different, Iran and Syria had aimed to create areas where the Shiite population is concentrated, thus establishing a strong demographic sphere of influence. For this reason, Iran and Syria evacuated Sunnis from many areas of the Damascus and Homs. They have replaced the Sunnis with local Shiites in Syria, Shiite militias fighting on the side of the Assad regime and their families (Özdemir, 2018a, p. 456). In this demographic structure change, not the whole of Syria, but especially the areas of strategic importance for Iran were highlighted. For example, settling Shiites who were really allies with Iran in the Homs and the Damascus, which have borders Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, could make it possible for Iran to influence the politics of border countries (Bakeer, 2017, pp. 38-40). As a matter of fact, this project was effective in increasing Iran's influence in Syria.

Economic Motivation: Although economic expectations were not the main reason for Iran's support to the Assad regime, Iran might hope to gain some economic privileges in Syria, as a response to Iran's efforts that had been going on for more than a decade. Iran was looking for alternative economic partners due to international sanctions and economic embargoes imposed on Iran. For this reason, Iranian officials might want to turn Syria into an economically important partner. Although the "Useful Syria" and "land crossing from Iran to the Mediterranean" projects were not designed for economic purposes, they could be expected to be used for commercial purposes in the process (Badewi, 2017, p. 31). Iran's ability to maintain its sphere of influence in Syria was possible by ensuring both a society that would not oppose Iran's social policies and the security of Iran's economic influence, investments and projects.

Composition of Iran's Support to Syria: Political, Economic, Military

It is well known that due to the civil war, Iran's support to the Syrian regime initially has consisted of consultancy for the suppression of protests and technical services for monitoring the opposition groups (Entous & Rosenberg, 2011). In the second stage, Iran's support for Syria continued in political-diplomatic and economic dimensions.

Since Syria's oil production was hit during the civil war, Iran has supplied petroleum products to Syria, some at a discount and some free of charge. Iran's economic support to Syria has also included providing credit, payments to militias and financial aid and supply of major food products. In addition, Iran has built new power plants in Syria and undertaken the operation of some power plants in order to satisfy Syria's electricity needs (Sinkaya, 2015, pp. 145-146).

Iran's political and diplomatic support for resolving the Syrian crisis was as follows that: reaching a compromise between the Syrian government and opposition through political dialogue; establishing of ceasefire, peace and stability in Syria; holding elections through constitutional reforms and under international supervision; so that the Syrian people could decide their own future; supporting diplomatic initiatives that did not require regime change and include Iran in negotiations on resolving the Syrian crisis. However, Iran had been excluded from diplomatic initiatives such as the Geneva Conferences I and II (Sinkaya, 2015, p. 137). The first meeting to which Iran was invited to the diplomatic talks on resolving the Syrian crisis was held in Vienna in 2015 and Iran had become a member of the "International Syria Support Group". Iran was one of the official interlocutors of the Astana process by becoming a part of the Moscow Declaration in 2016 (Sinkaya, 2017, pp. 54-55).

Since Iran could not receive sufficient response to the diplomatic steps and was excluded from various regional and international initiatives, the only valid alternative was the military option for Iran (Goodarzi, 2015, pp. 3-4). As global and regional powers began to intervene in the Syrian crisis, Iran's support for the Syrian government has continued to increase in military dimension. First, senior commanders of the IRGC and the Quds Force provided consultancy and training support to Syrian soldiers and pro-regime proxy organizations. The extent of Iran's military support to the Syrian government continued over time: including the supply of weapons and ammunition; the presence of Iranian soldiers in the field to support the regime's troops; and playing an important role in the organization of pro-regime paramilitary and militia forces. As from 2013, Iran's military presence in Syria began to be talked about more clearly.

Iran's Syria Policy Turning into a Proxy War

Iran's national security strategy had been focused on domestic politics until the mid-1960s. After the 1979 revolution, Iran had started an existential war with the theme of "resistance" against the Shah's administration, the bipolar order of the period, the USA and its rivals in the Middle East in line with the "non-connection" policy, with the slogan "neither East nor West". A state structure based on a strong army emerged in Iran in order to deter internal instability and external pressures. As the possibility of separatist threat within the country disappears, began to focus on potential external threats (Roshandel, 2008, pp. 257-258).

One of the fundamentals of Iran's reshaped national security policy was

the “deterrence” factor, which was based on eliminating the threat outside the country’s borders. In order to cope with unpredictable multifaceted threats, Iran began to use preventive and unconventional warfare techniques, including hybrid, proxy, psychological and asymmetric warfare methods (Tamer, 2018, pp. 186-191). Under the influence of the experience gained from the Iran-Iraq War and in line with the concept of “strategic patience” even for a long time, Iran focused on taking action through proxy actors (Avcı, 2021, pp. 635-648). Iran’s alliance relations with states were not sufficient to maintain a balance of power in the region. The fact that some border countries to Iran are “collaborators” hosting US bases has caused a feeling of being surrounded in Iran. These reasons have been effective in Iran’s preference for cooperation with non-state armed actors instead of states.

In an anarchic environment where there is no higher authority regulating the international system, states rely on the principle of *self-help*, one of the most important concepts of neorealism (Gilpin, 2001, pp. 18-19). Iran has been subject to international isolation, sanctions and discrimination. For this reason, Iran has tried to find its own solutions by relying on its own power and resources to maintain its existence, protect its security and combat threats. In this regard, one of the military-political choices of Iran in order to maintain its cultural, political and military influence and allies in the Middle East, against current and potential threats at global and regional level, has been proxy war.

According to the assumption of defensive realism; since states are unsure of each other’s intentions and power capacities, the security strategies they implemented in accordance with the *self-help* principle, may cause them to be misperceived as revisionist and offensive, and may cause *security dilemmas*. For this reason, mutual hostility and conflicts may arise (Taliaferro, 2000-2001, p. 129). The precautions taken by Iran to protect its security in the anarchic international system, also caused Iran to be perceived as a revisionist threat by its rivals. A “security dilemma” cycle occurred as a result of other states increasing their precautions against Iran due to feelings of insecurity. However, Iran often takes defensive measures against threats to keep the escalation of tension at a limited level and to ensure and maintain the balance of power.

According to defensive realism; the best way to protect the security of the states against potential threats or to prevent a rising power from establishing hegemony is to engage in balancing behavior with defensive intentions. This balancing motivation can manifest itself in three ways:

hard, soft or asymmetrical. Hard balancing generally refers to the realist and neorealist form of balancing. It is a form of balancing in which alliances are formed and military capacities are updated against the rival's capabilities, is not seen today as much as in the past. Soft balancing; It refers to unofficial implicit alliances through institutional collaborations, temporary security agreements, drills, etc. At the present time, it is possible to see it in varying degrees. In periods of increased threat, soft balancing may turn into hard balancing. Asymmetric balancing, which also includes proxy wars; it refers to efforts to balance competitors and potential threats through asymmetric subnational actors (Paul, 2004, pp. 2-5). In accordance with this assumption of defensive realism; Iran's proxy war in Syria was an asymmetric balancing exercise implemented for defensive purposes against the emergence of a hegemon that would dominate Iran, against power combinations, enemies and rivals that pose a threat.

The possibility of rivals had become dominant in Syria would cause an imbalance of power in the Middle East and pose a threat to Iran and the "Axis of Resistance". If some states and groups that want to relieve their anxiety and strengthen their situation decide to position themselves on the dominant side, this dominant coalition may tend to impose its will on others and engage in offensive behavior. In such a possibility, it was difficult for Iran, which was worried about being destroyed or dominated, to protect Iran's security alone and with traditional conventional methods. For this reason, Iran has tended to cooperate with some states and non-state armed actors. In this way, the balance of power may deter potential aggressor states from resorting to offensive policies.

In addition, Iran's focus on maximizing power and against rivals and threats pursuing offensive policies through intense military alliances and armament in the conflict zone in Syria, might lead to the establishment of alliances against Iran and might be costly in many aspects such as political, economic and military. For this reason, Iran preferred proxy war which is asymmetric balancing method, was less costly, deniable and unlikely to be revenged, but could create deterrence.

According to Glaser; the standard neo-realist idea that states can compete to avoid loss of capabilities and gain military advantages may sometimes be valid. However, as much as the advantages of expanding military power and capacity, the possibility of a war with an uncertain outcome or losing the arms competition and the dangers that may be exposed should not be ignored. For this reason, Glaser, a defense-offense balance

theorist, emphasized that cooperative policies are a kind of *self-help*. He argued that states could ensure their security by cooperating under various conditions and highlighted the benefits of cooperation (Glaser, 1994-1995, pp. 51, 57-60). In this context, in Iran-Syria relations, which had been going on for more than 40 years, the benefits of cooperation against rivals and enemies were emphasized rather than a competition arising from common interests and goals.

In the context of Iran's Syria policy, one of the most important functions of proxy fighters, actors with whom Iran cooperates, was to protect the current government, territorial integrity and status quo in Syria. The main purpose of Iran's use of proxy fighters in Syria was; to maximize Iran's security as well as Iran's power. For Iran, a direct conventional war against local rivals, global and regional actors who had some troops in Syria, might be a last resort. Therefore, while Iran was trying to contain threats in Syria, in order not to submit to oppression, cooperated with proxy actors as a form of balancing that did not risk Iran's own existence and security.

Iran's expectations from proxy fighters was to preserve Iran's influence, interests and security in Syria at the least cost. Therefore, the current regime in Syria must have been protected. Because Syria was the most important link in the "Axis of Resistance" chain. It was vitally important for Iran to have a government that protects Iran's interests in Syria.

According to the assumption of defensive realism; a state may align itself with a weaker front that needs help, thereby increasing its influence within the coalition (Walt, 1985, pp. 5-7). Confirming this assumption, Iran's support to Syria, which was weaker and in need of Iran's help, was an opportunity for Iran to increase its influence in Syria.

According to Stephan Walt; foreign aid is a special form of balancing behavior. The effect of foreign aid on the formation of an alliance or the maintenance of an existing alliance is directly proportional. The greater the amount of aid and the greater the donor's monopoly over the aid element, the greater its influence over the actor receiving the aid (Walt, 1990, pp. 32-33, 46). The fact that almost all of the proxy fighters fighting alongside the regime in Syria were under Iran's control increased Iran's influence in Syria. Iran had an influence and communication network on Shiite communities around the world, especially on Shiite militias in the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus and Europe. This situation caused the Syrian regime to depend on Iran for proxy fighters.

In response to this need, one of the reasons why Iran supported the Assad regime through proxy groups was that Iran wished to increase its influence in Syria after the civil war would end in favor of the Assad regime. As a matter of fact, even while the civil war was ongoing, Iran had been able to send more military personnel and advisors to Syria than ever before, thanks to the proxy war policy implemented in Syria. Iran had some what reached a greater area of influence in Syria at a lower cost than it could have achieved with conventional force.

It was claimed that Iran has aimed to make its military and political presence in Syria permanent through proxy fighters, similar to the influence Iran has established through Hezbollah in Lebanon (Karaoğlu, 2021, pp. 120-130). Iran offered many motivational elements to proxies, such as financial support, the right to reside in Iran, military training, consultancy, weapons and ammunition, in return for protecting Iran's interests and security in Syria.

Iran's Proxy Groups in Syria

Iran's experience in using proxy fighters dates back to the Iran-Iraq war, and Iran's first proxies were the Badr Brigade and Lebanese Hezbollah (Alaca, 2019). Iran's policy regarding proxies in the Syrian civil war was determined by the Supreme Leader, IRGC and Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani (Kazdal, 2018, pp. 6-11). The IRGC and the Quds Force played a leading role in the organization and training of Iranian-backed proxy groups. These fighters have been more effective in the conflict than Syria's regular armed forces (Chulov, Dehghan and Wintour, 2016).

Iran was clearly reluctant to send its own official armed forces to the conflict area (Neriah, 2017). Iran had given some tasks for official armed forces mainly with the training and organization of militias. The proxy actors supported by Iran in the Syrian civil war were generally divided into four categories: Iran-based, Syria-based, Lebanon-based and Iraq-based groups.

It is known that the number of proxy groups supported by Iran in Syria is approximately 80, and around 20 of these groups were based in Iraq. Among the Iranian-backed proxies, those based in Iraq stood out in terms of number and effectiveness. It had been estimated that the total number of Iranian-backed proxy fighters was more than 120 thousand (savunmasanayiidergilik, 2020).

It was known that the Basij Forces, Iran's volunteer militia and Quds

Force, Iran's paramilitary forces that conducted deportation operations have helped train and organize the militias fighting on the side of the Assad regime since 2011. Among the non-Arab Iranian-backed proxies, the highest participation has made up of Shiite Afghan fighters who formed the Fatimiyyun Brigade. Pakistani Shiite fighters, who announced that they were in Syria to defend the Shiite sacred places in Syria, formed the Zeynebiyyun Brigade.

One of the Syria-based unit fighting alongside the regime troops in Syria was the paramilitary group Jaish al-Shaabi (People's Army) (Holliday, 2013, pp. 16,18). In 2013, Bashar al-Assad tried to formalize and professionalize Jaish al-Shaabi under the name of "National Defense Forces". Iran also supported this initiative (Fulton & Holliday & Wyer, 2013, pp. 19-21). Because in the future, Iranian-backed Syria-based proxies becoming active in Syria's military and political arena might enable Iran to be effective in shaping Syria's military and political strategies. The 5th Corps which was formed by gathering some militia groups in Syria under an upper group with the support of Iran since 2012, and the Syrian Hezbollah, the Syrian extension of the Lebanese Hezbollah, had also been supporting the regime troops in Syria. Shabiha, Syria's local power, was also one of the structures that supported the regime and were supported by Iran.

The most important and first non-state armed organization supported by Iran was the Lebanese Hezbollah. It was an example for other militia organizations. Lebanese Hezbollah cooperated with DMO for the training of militia and paramilitary groups, based on its urban and guerrilla warfare experience.

Among the proxy groups with which Iran had cooperated in Syria, the most prominent in terms of number and function were those Iraq-based. Among the Iranian-backed Iraq-based proxies, the first group known to be involved in the Syrian civil war was the Muemmel Brigade. Badr Brigade had declared its involvement in the war in Syria in June 2013. Some Iraqi groups with few fighters united under the Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, which was established as an upper group with the support of Hezbollah. Zulfikar Brigade, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah (Iraqi Hezbollah), Kataib Seyyid al-Shuheda, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Ammar Ibn Yasir Brigade were Iranian-backed Iraq-based groups that supported the regime in Syria. Asadullah al-Ghalib, Kafil Zainab Brigade, Kataib al-Imam Ali, Kataib al-Imam Hussein, Imam Hasan al-Mujtaba, Ansarul al-Aqida Unions, Saraya

Talia al-Khurasani, Saraya al-Dafa al-Shabi, Kataib Imam Muhammad Baqir es-Sadr, Feylak *Vaad es-Sadiq*, Nasr al-Haq, al-Hamad Brigade, Seyyide Rukiye Brigade, Sheddu Shuheda, Haddamul Akile, Quwwat er-Rida, al-Galibiyyun had relationships with each other and with upper groups. However, these groups are organisations with less information about them and fewer members than others.

Due to the rise of ISIS's influence in Iraq in 2014, upon the call of Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the most important Shiite sect leader in Iraq, many Shiite militia groups and civilian fighters united under an upper group and formed Hashd al-Shaabi (Alaca, 2020). Hashd al-Shaabi became part of the official Iraqi army in 2018. Pro-Iranian groups within Hashd al-Shaabi support Iran's interests in the military and political arena in Iraq. Hashd al-Shaabi, like Hezbollah, has transformed from an armed militant organization into a political actor. Strengthening Iran's influence in Iraq, one of the parts of the "Axis of Resistance", would contribute to increase Iran's influence in Syria. Hashd al-Shaabi supporting Iran's interests in Iraq's military and political arena would alleviate Iran's regional concerns and make it easier for Iran to achieve its goals, just as Hezbollah serves Iran's interests in Lebanon.

Other than these groups, it was known that militias affiliated with the Hejaz Hezbollah founded by Saudi Arabian Shiites; Zaydis (Ansarullah) affiliated with Yemen Houthis; Shiite warriors from India and African countries; Shiites of Arab origin who are citizens of USA and Canadian were also fighting on the side of the Syrian regime (Al Jazeera Türk, 2015).

Conclusion

The decision-making mechanism in Iran is based on the principle of "neither East nor West", but could be pragmatically adaptable when necessary. Iran's foreign policy focused on reasonable interests where political options would not be excluded in Syria.

Iran had avoided pursuing offensive policies and confronting threats directly with conventional methods unless necessary. Iran has implemented cautious strategies such as promoting defensive realism. Iran's revisionist practices in the first years after the 1979 Revolution often resulted from internal factors rather than systemic conditions.

Regional and global threats against Iran still continue. In the anarchic system, there is no supranational guarantor mechanism that can ensure Iran's international security. By failing to take serious action to enforce

rules and norms against international aggression, international institutions and great powers have remained unreliable guardians. For this reason, Iranian officials, based on their experience, evaluated the concept of “international security” inadequate. It is known that Stephan Walt also made an assessment that Iran’s security threats were high.

Iran’s main desire regarding the Syrian civil war; confirming the assumptions of defensive realism; was to achieve an outcome that would protect Iran’s security, influence, interests and goals in Syria. In this regard, Iran followed defensive policies because it hesitated that revisionist and aggressive initiatives would turn into a union of forces against Iran, and the damage of revisionism would exceed its benefits. Because, avoiding an attitude that would change the balance of power in the Middle East region, where dynamics change frequently, might be advantageous for Iran to maintain its security and relative stability. For this reason, while Iran had desired to achieve its political goals in Syria, Iran used proxy wars as a method that would both compose balancing and deterring and keep the escalation of tension at a limited level. It should be added that proxy wars are a foreign policy instrument that has been used in Iran not only today but also by many leaders of Iran with different characteristics.

The military dimension of relations between Iran and Syria supported the assumptions of defensive realism. According to defensive realism; it is possible for others to perceive threats from states that have a history of exploitation and offensive policies. For this reason, actors who feel threatened may seek to balance or armament against the source of the threat. In this regard, Iran followed a “balancing” strategy through some “ally” countries and non-state armed groups in order to protect its security, power and influence against regional and global actors that Iran perceived as a high threat.

The reason for the bond between Iran and Syria that had lasted for more than 40 years was that their relations are generally based on defense. Because offensive alliances, which are established against the common enemy and tend to disintegrate after reaching the goal, are more fragile, while defensive alliances are more solid.

In conclusion; although the impact of domestic factors on foreign policy cannot be ignored, the anarchic international system encourages states to act reasonably and cautiously. The cooperation between Iran and Syria, which had continued for nearly half a century, caused Iran to adopted a defensive/protective approach towards Syria in line with the

“Axis of Resistance” ideal. Therefore, Iran’s proxy war policy in order to protect its influence, interests and security in Syria; it can be explained by defensive realism, which encourages balancing, cooperation, moderate and status quo policies as the best way to ensure security.

Declaration

In all processes of the article, TESAM’s research and publication ethics principles were followed.

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