



Article Info/Makale Bilgisi

Received/Geliş: 04.04.2016 ✓ Accepted/Kabul: 12.12.2016

DOI: 10.5505/pausbed.2017.52207

## IRAN'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY

İbrahim ARSLAN\*

### Abstract

The analysis of foreign policies of the Middle Eastern countries on the axis of sectarian differences and the tendency to show that the political polarity among countries in the region as a sectarian tension might make it difficult to comprehend real reasons of their policies. Although economic, historical and social data are used to mobilize the masses through sectarian approach, the relation between interests and power still keeps its value in foreign policies of the countries in the region. In this study it is propounded that how Iran, as a significant country of the region, uses the sectarian differences in its Middle East policy aimed at being the leader of the Islamic World. Developments in the Middle East are, in essence, seen as revenge-driven energy geopolitics. But it is belied through the Sunni-Shia opposition on Shiite ground conducted by Iran.

**Keywords:** *Iran, Middle East, Realism, Shia, Sunni, Sect.*

## İRAN'IN ORTADOĞU POLİTİKASI

### Özet

Ortadoğu ülkelerinin dış politikalarının mezhep farklılığı ekseninde analizi ve bölge ülkeleri arasındaki siyasi kutuplaşmayı mezhepsel bir gerilim olarak gösterme eğilimi, bu ülkelerin politikalarının gerçek nedenlerinin anlaşılmasını güçleştirmektedir. Tarihsel, sosyal ve ekonomik veriler mezhepçi yaklaşımla kitleleri harekete geçirme amacıyla kullanılsa da çıkar ve güç ilişkisi, bölgedeki ülkelerin dış politikalarında önemini hala korumaktadır. Bu çalışmada bölgenin önemli bir ülkesi olan İran'ın, İslam dünyasının lider ülkesi olmaya yönelik Ortadoğu politikasında mezhepsel farklılığı nasıl kullandığı ortaya konulmaktadır. Ortadoğu'da yaşanan gelişmeler, özünde jeopolitik enerji odaklı bir hesaplaşma olarak görülmelidir. Sünni-Şii karşıtlığı üzerinden maskelenen bu hamle, İran eliyle Şii zeminde gerçekleştirilmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *İran, Ortadoğu, Realizm, Şii, Sünni, Mezhep.*

\* Yrd. Doç. Dr., Üsküdar Üniversitesi, İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Fakültesi, Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü, İstanbul.  
e-posta: ibrahim.arslan@uskudar.edu.tr

## 1.INTRODUCTION

Analysts try to explain foreign policies of the Middle Eastern countries on the axis of sectarian differences especially in the last decades. In order to strengthen their views, some argue that sectarian-centric conflicts among states in the region have occurred throughout the history. However, historical confrontations among powers of the Middle East do not confirm this approach. Even the Ottoman-Safavid conflict - which is one of the claimed examples presented as originated by “sects” and defined as a conflict between Sunni Ottomans and Shia<sup>1</sup> Safavids (Persian emperors adopted the sect of Shiism since 1500 (Goldschmidt JR and Davidson, 2007: 99) was actually a fight of land, power and economic benefits (Majed, 2013). Similarly, because the regime of Baath presented itself as an Arabic nationalist instead of Sunni, the Iran-Iraq war in the recent history of the Middle East was not perceived as a war of sects. Prevailed in the late 1980s, in Pakistan and Afghanistan, so called “the Sunni-Shia conflict” emerged in the Arab world after the Iraq War in 2003. The overthrown of Sunni leadership in Baghdad left its place to a Shia dominated coalition, which has had strong ties with Iran for a while (Bahgat, 2006: 364). Intended for the analysis of conflicts, the discourse of “Sunni-Shia dichotomy” is fairly adopted since 1980 in international relations. The starting point of this issue is pertinent with the invasion of Afghanistan by USSR. USA provided financial and arms aid to Islamist groups to fight the Soviet Union after this invasion. This development led to precipitate the advancement of armed Sunni groups (Majed, 2013).

The tendency to show that the political polarity among the countries of the Middle East as a sectarian tension might make it difficult to comprehend the real reasons of their policies. Of course, it is possible to mobilize the masses by exploiting economic, historical and social data through a sectarian approach, but the relation between interests and power still keeps its value in foreign policies of the countries in the region, as it is valid in the rest of the world. In this context, this study concentrates on how Iran, as a significant country of the region, acts rational and uses the sectarian differences in its Middle East policy aimed at being the leader of the Islamic World. In accordance with the defined framework of the article, efficient factors to maintain Iran’s foreign policy and decision system will be examined under the title of “The State Structure of Iran”. Later on, I will try to summarize the predictions of the Realism and interpret Iran’s implementations from the Revolution of Islam until today with Realism’s assumptions under the title of “The Middle East Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran on the Axis of the Realism Theory”. Possible influences of Iran’s policy to the

<sup>1</sup> Sunnism: The sects such as Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi and Hanbali assume that acting in accordance with the Quran and the Prophet’s behavior is the only and most accurate way. Sunni: A person who believes in Sunnism.

Shiism, Shia: A sect founded by some Muslims separated from Sunni. Those claim that after the death of Prophet Muhammad the first caliph should have been Ali, the groom of Prophet Muhammad. They also claim that Imamate can only belong to descendants of Muhammad. Shiite: A person who believes in Shiism.

(“Türkçe Sözlük”, Türk Dil Kurumu. Available at:

[http://tdk.gov.tr/index.php?option=com\\_gts&arama=gts&guid=TDK.GTS.5698bbdc77dd00.20578516](http://tdk.gov.tr/index.php?option=com_gts&arama=gts&guid=TDK.GTS.5698bbdc77dd00.20578516) (accessed 3 Jan 2016).

The main features of Shiism are described in Ibn Khaldun’s Muqaddimah as follows: "Imamate is not a general matter referred to the ummah's views. Therefore, people will assume the imamate is not elected by the ummah. Imamate is the pillar of religion and the rule of Islam. It is not permissible for any prophet to neglect this issue and transfer it to the ummah. Prophet is required to appoint imam to the ummah. The Imam must be free from major and minor sins." All the Shiites believe that Ali bin Abi Talib was the most virtuous companion of Prophet Muhammad and selected by him as caliph (Ebu Zehra, M. (1993). **İslam’da Siyasi, İtikadi ve Fikhi Mezhepler Tarihi**. (Tr: S. Kaya), Şura yayınları, İstanbul, p.41.)

peace and security of the region will be defined under the title of “Conclusion” and at the end of the study, the tendency of Iran’s Middle East policy will be explained by using acquired data and evidence.

## **2.THE STATE STUCTURE OF IRAN**

Iran is ruled by an idiosyncratic presidential system. According to the constitution of Iran dated 1990, the presidency regime is defined as a regime which will represent and protect the Theocracy and the Republic. Theocracy means the Sharia of Islam. Sharia means that the religious orders become law and superior in the country. The Shia Islam Sharia, with the ability of adaptation to today’s time and place conditions, is in force in Iran (Abdi, 2014: 200). The belief of Shiism is arbiter in the Iran’s national identity and State structure.

Founded on April 1979, in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is stated that the sovereignty, legislative, executive and judiciary bodies are run under the authority of the Religious Leader. The spiritual Leader, representing the foundation of Velayat-e faqih, (Velayat means government, authority; faqih means Law interpreter) titled vali-ye faghih who has the religious power and is the ultimate authority in Iran (Doster, 2013: 55). 88 Islamic theologians are elected as members of Assembly of Experts (Majles-e Khobregan) for the period of 8 years. This organ elects and inspects the Supreme Leader (Abdi, 2014: 200). Defining the priorities of the domestic and foreign policy or the management of armed and security forces are responsibilities of the Religious Leader (Iran Chamber Society, 2016: Article 110).

According to the constitution, the president of the republic is the head of the execution. The president of the republic is elected by the Iranian people in every four years from the members, whom received the consent of the Council of Guardians of Constitution. If none of the members can get at least 50% of the votes in the first elections, two of the highest voted members compete in the second round. Elected president appoints 22 ministers; the council is obligated to approve these ministers.

Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majles-e Showra-ye Eslami), fundamental juridical branch of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is founded by 290 elected members (Lim, 2015: 150). Term of office of a deputy is four years. The foundation of laws and validation of international documents are Assembly’s responsibilities. The accepted resolutions are presented to the Council of Guardians of Constitution for approval and after this stage, the resolution becomes the law. In Iran, there is not any political party. In the political life, instead of political parties, there are groups that can be called as benefit/pressure groups in charge, these groups form alliances during elections and after the election periods disperse again (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2016).

The National Security High Council was founded in 1988. The president of the republic is the head of this council. Two of the members of this foundation are assigned by the Supreme Leader. The people in charge of legislation, execution and jurisdiction, the minister of foreign affairs, minister of domestic affairs, minister of defense and the commanders of Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution are other members of this foundation. All policies determined here are approved by the Supreme leader.

There are two different identity groups in the foreign policy of Iran. The first is Shia Islam revolutionaries. This group tries to render the Shia Islam rules supreme in the foreign and domestic affairs policies, believes that it is required to stay away from

USA who humiliates Muslims. The other group consists of Nationalists. This group sees Iran as a nation state and wishes Iran to be more active in foreign policy. According to this group the developed trade relations and political ties may contribute to the interests of Iran more than other approaches. The differences of approaches between these groups may cause uncertainty in the foreign policy.

### **3.THE MIDDLE EAST POLICY OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN ON THE AXIS OF THE REALISM THEORY**

Political Realism, Real politics or the policy of power is the oldest theory of international relations (Donnelly, 2013: 53). Realists point out the egoism of man and the limitations executed by the lack of international government (anarchy) that entails the priority of security and power on the politics. In 1950s, Wight described realists as emphasizing the anarchy, power policy and the war in international relations (Chiaruzzi, 2012: 37).

Although the foundation of the Realism depends on a reaction against Idealism because of the insufficiency of the collective safety system that originated after the World War I, some of the important figures of the history and political philosophy such as Thucydides of Athens, a historian and General (c.460-406 BC), Italian writer and diplomat Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) and British philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) became pioneers of this theory.

In the history of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides tried to understand the causes and the logic behind the political events of the war between Athens and Sparta and pointed out the uncertainty of the future during the war (Cohen, 2006: 270). In the Prince, Machiavelli emphasized that the war has its own rules, it can't be limited with moral or legal doctrines and it has to respond to the essentialness (Chiaruzzi, 2012: 37). In Leviathan (1651), Hobbes states that before the existence of the state people lived in the nature without a power that keeps them together. According to Hobbes, only the existence of a ruling government can set the security and order for the society (Devetak, 2012: 139).

With the explanations mentioned above, it is possible to say that the six principles of Morgenthau draw the framework of political Realism. These are (Morgenthau, 1973: 3-13):

-Political realism believes that politics is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature.

-The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power.

-Realism assumes that its key concept of interest defined as power in an objective category that is universally valid, but it does not endow that a concept with a meaning that is fixed once and for all. The idea of interest is indeed of the essence of politics and is unaffected by the circumstances of time and place.

-Political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action. It is also aware of the ineluctable tension between the moral command and the requirements of successful political action.

-Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe.

-The political realist maintains the autonomy of the political sphere as the economist, the lawyer, the moralist maintain theirs.

Emphasizing the anarchical structure of the international system like other realists, Mearsheimer underlines the fact that a government has military capacity to defeat any threat created by any other country, the basic motivation of states which rationally act is to survive. In the context of rationality hypothesis, Keohane underlines that states should be taken as rational actors like rational individuals trying to maximize their expectations and with the assumption of the power, states will look for power and estimate their benefits in the context of power (Donnelly, 2000: 7).

“The Republic of Shia Islam” was proclaimed in 1979 when the Islamic revolution was carried out by Iranian people. Due to the peoples of Iran’s neighboring countries and/or the fact that their administrations are Sunni, the new leadership of Iran had a concern about being overthrown by them. This suspicion affected the domestic, foreign and defense policies of Iran very deeply in the following years of the revolution. Aside from the daily, historical, regional, global politics, economic and military events, the ideological, religious and especially technological improvements in the field of the nuclear in the recent years, have a great impact on the formation of Iran’s foreign policy. The Iran-Iraq war in 1980-1988 that caused the death of one million, the Gulf War on 1991, the long run deployment of US Military in the region, invasion of Iraq were significant developments (Doster, 2012: 45). Outlines of the Middle East policy of USA can be explained in terms of preventing an emergence of any local or global power in the region, protecting the security of Israel, securing the transportation of the petroleum and sustaining the existing status in the region (Akdemir, 2011: 330). While building its new policy on the protection of the Islamic revolution as a response to USA’s well known policy, Iran pointed out two targets: “USA, the big Evil’ and “Israel, the little Evil”. USA was accused with an attempt to take down Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who nationalized the national petroleum and natural gas sources, and exploit the country with the Shah before the revolution<sup>2</sup>; as to Israel was accused with invasion of the Palestinian land by harming the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and thus, the people of Palestine (BİLGESAM, 2015).

After the revolution in 1979, there was a great disengagement in the foreign policy perception of Iran. It is possible to list the foreign policy principles of Khomeini that caused this disengagement (Çetinsaya, 2002: 296-297):

- Absolute neutrality,
- To keep away from the international power blocks,
- To establish good political and economic relations especially with the third world countries,
- To become the most powerful and leading country of the Islamic world by forming the new regional order with the religion centric foreign politics through export of Islam revolution.

Right after the revolution, while Iran started to give priority to efforts related to the exportation of the revolution, Iraq took action with the aim of controlling the

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<sup>2</sup> Speaking in Cairo on 28.05.2015 addressed to the Islamic world, Obama said "During the cold war the United States had played a role in the overthrow of the Iranian government which came to the power by the democratic way." Similarly In 2000, Madeleine Albright, the former foreign minister of the United States had admitted their role in the coup against Mossadegh. ("Obama'dan tarihi darbe itirafı", **Haber 10**, 28 May 2015. Available at: [http://www.haber10.com/dunya/obamadan\\_tarihi\\_darbe\\_itirafi-284499](http://www.haber10.com/dunya/obamadan_tarihi_darbe_itirafi-284499) (accessed 5 Jan. 2016).

waterway of Shatt al-Arab. In this period, USA was supporting Iraq to weaken the new government in Iran and trying to preclude Iran's attempt to integrate the Islamic world (Semiz and Akgün: 165). Following the death of Khomeini, in 1989, aside from the ideological/revolutionary politics, Iran started to follow a strategy that can be perceived rather pragmatic and pacific in order to eliminate the isolative state. In this context, respectively the president Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Khatami (1997-2005) tended towards foreign policy based on "moderation" and "dialogue" thus tried to ameliorate the relations with the border neighbors. But it was obvious that all of those practices of a positive image were inversed in the period of Ahmadinejad (2005-2013).

The reformist foreign policy perception after Khomeini includes the expansion of trade, the development of cooperation including the collective security precautions and advancement of the diplomatic dialogue with the countries in the region, especially with the Gulf countries. The foreign policy of Rafsanjani can be summed up as overcoming the hardship caused by war and re-establishing the diplomatic relations with the world coming to a full stop due to isolation. After the occupation of Kuwait by Iraq, Iran concentrated its energy on the foreign policy. During this period, the new international structure taken place by the dissolution of U.S.S.R and the containment policy of USA forced Rafsanjani to prioritize the foreign policy. The national benefits became more important than the Islamic doctrine in this period. The revolution strengthened and stabilized in the period of the Rafsanjani administration. This continuum was a transitional period between Khomeini and Khatami (Tamer, 2013). After the Khomeini's death, the leadership of Iran can be defined as flexible in foreign policy with the adaptation to the radical changes in the international environment.

After Rafsanjani, the president Khatami was seen as the symbol of the changes, the reform and the opening in Iran. Right before 9/11 attacks, the president Khatami was invited to the Harvard University to give a speech. He spoke at the National Cathedral and described the United States as a country with a great people, capacity and potential (Türkiye, 2006). The foreign policy conception of Khatami can be explained under some headlines such as (Tamer, 2013):

- Protection of the territorial integrity and the independence of Iran,
- Amelioration of the inter-state relations in the frame of mutual respect and trust,
- Defending the rights of the Muslims around the world,
- Warfare against the Zionism,
- Re-establishing Iran as a part of international system.

Just as it was before, in the period of Khatami, Iran opposed the outsider military existence in the Middle East and pursued an independent -from west and east-foreign policy. Khatami defended the rights of the Palestinian people in every platform and expressed the necessity of cooperation and interaction among Muslims. Khatami's support to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Palestinian insurgents in Gaza against the oppression of Israel provided him sympathy within the Arabic world (YDH, 2009).

The last presidential election carried out on 14 June 2014 in Iran, of which the winner was the head of the Expediency Council's Center for Strategic Studies, Hassan Rouhani and his government imposed priorities to the lifting of international sanctions due to Iran's nuclear program and took important steps in the field of economy. Rouhani, supported by the reformers in the country, is a lawyer with diplomatic experience. "Moderation" is essential in his discourses and he opposites

fundamentalism and extremism of all kinds. Rouhani in favor of dialogue with the West believes that this method can save the country from sanctions and social exclusion. The key subject in his foreign policy agenda is the nuclear issue. President Rouhani's special attention to Europe may be interpreted as the reverse of Ahmadinejad's foreign policy understanding headed towards the East. Development of relations with European countries will help the resolution of the Iranian economic problems as well as the increasing of the maneuverability capability of the Iranian foreign policy. Rouhani, as happened in the period of Mohammed Khatami's presidency, tries to use good relations with European countries as a tool to break the impact of international pressure led by the United States (Tamer, 2013).

In this part of the study, it is important to focus on the Iranian nuclear program. For many years, this program has taken place of the top of the agenda of the Iranian foreign policy that has a direct impact capacity on security and stability in the Middle East. The beginning of nuclear activities in Iran may be evaluated as a product of the Cold War. USA which succeeded to remove the Soviet Army from Azerbaijan in Iran (Southern Azerbaijan) in 1945, overthrow Mohammad Mossadegh by a coup d'état in 1953, so that it binds the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi regime to itself. USA, concerned about the spread of communism and the re-entry of the Soviet Union into Iran, tried to strengthen Iran's military capability. In this context, the first nuclear activity has been launched with the support of USA in Iran in 1957 (TASAM, 2011).

As a Shiite country, Iran wishes to extend its religious identity in the region and does not hesitate to keep up close cooperation with some groups called by USA terrorist. This situation attributes a different meaning to Iran's nuclear efforts in the Middle East. Iran signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1970, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1974, supported the decision of the United Nations General Assembly in 1974 related to the Middle East to be a region without nuclear weapons (BİLGESAM, 2015).

Nuclear activities in Iran were stopped in the year 1979 shortly after the Islamic Revolution until 1986. There were two reasons of this decision. The first one was Khomeini's and his supporters' approaches. According to them, the nuclear policy of Reza Pahlavi was objectionable in terms of religion. The second one was related to the high cost of those activities. Iran has resumed its nuclear activities again after 1986 having entered into cooperation with Argentina and China. Iraq war has been effective in changing Iran's nuclear policy. Iran has begun to strengthen its military power since 1989. Iran's nuclear efforts after 1989 may be evaluated in this context. After signing a cooperation agreement with the USSR in the fields of the technology, trade, economy and science on 22 January 1989, Iran has engaged in the significant collaboration with Russia. As a continuation of this agreement, nuclear cooperation agreement was signed between Iran and Russia in 1992. In this process, the rebuilding of the Busehr nuclear power plant, which has been initiated by the Germans, was given to Russia in 1995. Iran, developing nuclear relations, established cooperation with, Germany, Argentina, Spain, China, North Korea, Pakistan and Belgium. The result of this collaboration is more than twenty nuclear facilities that Iran had (TASAM, 2011).

Iran, in the context of its recent efforts, claimed that uranium enrichment is a right recognized by the NPT, by having this right enriched uranium to use for peaceful purposes. The main reason why Iran wants to produce nuclear weapons is to maintain

a balance of nuclear power in its favor (Birdiřli, 2012: 36). According to the agreement signed between Iran and permanent members of the Security Council + Germany (P5 + 1) in April 2015 (Taniř, 2015):

-Iran will reduce the centrifuge available by 2/3, so that the figure of 19,000 decreases to 6104 and only 5060 of them is in enrichment activities in 10 years.

-Iran will not enrich uranium stocks more than 3.67% across 15 years.

-Iran will reduce 10,000 kg low-enriched uranium available and it will keep 300 kg uranium enriched by only 3.67 % in 15-year.

-Iran will not establish a new enrichment plant throughout 15 years.

-Iran's time to acquire material for nuclear weapon will be extended for a period of 1 year and it will be valid for at least 10 years.

-Iran will not enrich uranium in Fordon uranium enrichment plant for at least 15 years. Fordon will be transformed by Iran to a plant that will be performed in the fields of research center, physics or technology.

-Iran may continue enrichment activities only in Natanz and remove 1000 second generation centrifuges at Natanz and they will be under the monitoring of IAEA for 10 years.

-IAEA will have regular access to all nuclear facilities in Iran included Natanz and Fordon. The auditors will have access to the supply chain that supports Iran's nuclear program. Iran, having been declared or not, has adopted to implement the Additional Protocol which gives broad supervisory authorization to the IAEA.

-Iran has agreed to build and redesign the heavy water reactor in Arak according to the demands of P5+1. This reactor produces plutonium that can be used for making of nuclear weapon.

-If Iran comply her obligations, the sanctions will be softened. USA and the EU sanctions associated with the nuclear program will be suspended after the verification of IAEA. In case violation, sanctions will be reactivated.

After the announcement of the reconciliation, comment differences between the statements of the parties emerged about the lifting of sanctions. The P5 + 1, especially USA expressed that after the signing of the agreement of 30 June sanctions will be suspended, in case of violation they will be introduced again; on the other hand if Iran complies to its obligations totally the lifting of sanctions will be in question and it may take between 6 months to a year. Iran insisted on its thesis that by signing the agreement the sanctions against Iran will be lifted. Upon some news on American media about some hesitation of the Senate on reconciliation, Rouhani remarked that Iran negotiated with not only USA but also six countries and at the end of these negotiations parties reached a consensus (BİLGESAM, 2015).

In his statement related to the lifting of sanctions, the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif stressed that "the day when the agreement will enter into force all economic and financial sanctions will be removed. States should adhere to agreements. USA domestic law does not interest us. This responsibility belongs to USA. Because, USA will be responsible and incumbent for the removal of sanctions in accordance with international law, If anybody mentions that the sanctions will be removed gradual, should be noted that it is reverse what approved by all" (Taniř, 2015).

Although the negotiations are anticipated to be completed on June 30 according to framework agreement dated 2.4.2015, the parties could have reached a consensus on 14.7.2015. After the agreement Iranian President Rouhani expressed his feelings to

say "God accepts prayers of the Nation" and he stated that "the date when the Agreement enters into force, including weapons and missiles all sanctions will be removed. Banking and financial sanctions, insurance and transport sanctions, sanctions related to petrochemical and precious metals and the whole economic sanctions will not be suspended, completely be removed." Rouhani added that "Iran does not want to make atomic bomb. The whole world should know that according to our leader's fatwa 'to-make the atomic bomb is ill gotten.' Regardless of whether this agreement would enter into force or not, whether this agreement would apply or not, Iran has not pursued nuclear weapons and will never pursue." The sanctions were clarified in the agreement which will enter into force in 90 days after approval of the UNSC. Accordingly, after the entry into force of this Agreement 7 UNSC decisions form basis for sanctions against Iran, shall be repealed; the arms embargo will remain in force for 5 years, missiles embargo will remain in force 8 years; If Iran violates the agreement sanctions, it will be re-established within 65 days (Hürriyet, 2015).

USA policy on Iran has hinged on two issues for forty years: The first one was surrounding Iran and the second one was not to cooperate with Iran on any subject. After deal, some news took place on media related to changing of USA policy. There were some comments comparing this agreement with the agreement between the Soviet Union and USA, which ended the Cold War. The agreement was welcomed in Ankara, Tehran, Washington and EU countries and celebrated by the people of Tehran very enthusiastically. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states have met the agreement with concern. Israel expressed that this agreement cannot prevent Iran from producing bombs in any way. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states highlighted that in case Iran would be a nuclear power, this capacity causes to increase Iran's efficiency in the region and Iran can attempt the hegemonic action. (BİLGESAM, 2015).

It is known that the Middle East, described as a cultural region on and off and, is a geopolitical imaginary product (Bozarlsan, 2013: 41). Hence, differences in geographical areas covered by the studies related to the region are remarkable. Although we will not analyze the concept of the Middle East here, the necessity to define countries that will be included in the analysis in this study is clear. The countries in the region Egypt, Iraq, Syria, the Gulf States, Lebanon, Turkey and Israel will be included in this study in the context of their relations with Iran.

In order to improve its regional power, Iran is aware of the need to be more effective both in the Arab and in the Islamic world. In this context, Egypt is a country with an important role in Iranian politics in the Middle East. Close and friendly relation between Iran and Egypt broke with the Islamic revolution in 1979. The Egyptian President Anwar Sadat enabled Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, toppled by the followers of Khomeini, to remain in Egypt. Shah, after having travelled in Mexico, the Bahamas, USA and Morocco for months, went to Egypt and lived there until his death. Khomeini's hostility towards Israel and opposition to Camp David agreements signed by Israel and Egypt were main obstacles to develop relations between Iran and Egypt. The critics of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, on the Syrian government in his speech at the opening of the Non-Aligned Movement summit in June 2012 bothered the government in Tehran, Iran. In addition, concerning to the controversial three islands in the Gulf Basra, Morsi's standing in favor of the United Arab Emirates against Iran, for those willing to open a new page with Cairo,

created an obstacle to realize Tehran's expectations in Morsi's term of office (Jafari, 2015).

Not having an important Shiite minority in Egypt and the need of economic assistance of the country to pay external debt, reduces the alternatives in foreign policy of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi who seized power after a military coup against Morsi. The diminishing support in the country after jailing the leaders of Muslim Brotherhood forced Sisi to seek the foreign support. USA's low interest to establish close cooperation with Egypt at the present time renders the Saudi Arabia a reasonable choice for Egypt. Because Egypt has to make a choice between the Saudi Arabia which provides more economic profit and Iran which provides less economic profit.

Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq, has been toppled by USA in 2003. This development bested to Iran strategically. Because Saddam Hussein was an enemy for Iran and after him the political situation in Iraq ended up with the establishment of a Shiite administration which has close relationship with Iran. The impact capacity of the Tehran administration on the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine as well as on Shiite groups in Iraq (Sandıklı and Emeklier, 2012: 16) are known. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, the leader of the Iraqi government, established in 2006, visited Iran many times during his tour of duty, and Iran stood behind Maliki during political conflicts between the Sunni and the Kurdish leaders in Iraq. Maliki has supported regional ambitions of Iran by providing assistance to stay in power for Bashar al-Assad. Apart from relations with Maliki and his government agencies, Iran has continued to expand its influence in Iraq by Shiite groups (Katzman, 2013: 41). Haider al-Abadi came to power of Iraq after Maliki, and is not expected to create major changes in foreign policy.

Iran is trying to get the Shiite groups in the Gulf States under the influence and aims to penetrate the region by sect. The countries of the region feel surrounded by Iranian threat. Iran reached to Lebanon and Syria by Hezbollah; Yemen, Bahrain and some Gulf states by the sect (Tamer, 2013). There are some claims on support of Iran for radical groups which use violence, not only in the neighbors in the Persian Gulf, but also in Lebanon, Palestine, Bosnia, the Philippines region and everywhere (Byman, 2008: 169). Lebanon is seen as an indispensable strategic region for Iran. Iran can reach Israel by Hezbollah through Lebanon. It is also able to provide support for Assad in Syria through Hezbollah. Hezbollah call Syrian rebels not freedom fighters trying to overthrow the dictator Assad, on the contrary, it sees them as excessive Sunnis making efforts to extinguish Assad for being Alawite (which is a branch of Shiism). Moreover, Hezbollah has a reason to intervene in Syria in terms of logistics. The group sees Syria as a bridge to be used to transfer money and troops from Iran. In case this support line breaks, Hezbollah can no longer challenge Israel (Iran Press News, 2013).

In the context of interest and influence area, Saudi Arabia and Iran represent opposite poles in the region. Saudi leaders intimidate by the discourse of possessing nuclear weapon, if Iran has. Saudi Arabia sees itself as the leader of the Sunni Arab world and the Shiites as non-religious (Tamer, 2013). The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran proceeds on OPEC. Having only 3 million barrels production a day bothers Iran while Saudi Arabia's daily production is 10 million barrels. Iran which will open up the western markets after the nuclear agreement, demands to increase daily oil production gradually and if possible reach to the production level of Saudi Arabia. The strained

relations between these two countries have been thoroughly destroyed by Riyadh executing of the Shiite cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr (Hacısalihoğlu, 2016).

The instability in the poorest country of the region, Yemen, is about to turn into a security issue which can create influence on the global scale. If the alleged support provided by Iran to insurgent Shiite Houthis would be successful, the efficiency of Iran may be also mentioned in Bab-el Mandeb Strait after the Strait of Hormuz. It means that oil supply by tankers from the Gulf to Western countries is under threat. The minority governs the majority in Bahrain, one of Gulf States, and this structure causes some problems in the country. The Bahrain Population consists of nearly 60% Shiites. Many of them are from Iranian origin, but the Sunni Al Khalifa dynasty governs the country. Bahrain has accused Iran of supporting Shiite opposition that aimed to overthrow Al Khalifa dynasty in 1981 and 1996 (Katzman, 2013: 40). Although Shiites consist of the majority in Bahrain, Sunni minority is in power, while in Syria Nusairis, seen as a further understanding of the Alawite, minority is in power. Unlike Bahrain, Shia groups in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates consist of minority; therefore, the Iranian threat is less obvious in these countries. The relation between Qatar and Iran was effected negatively due to the Syrian crisis (Tamer, 2013). Generally, compared to other Arab countries, Qatar which tries to establish good relations in the meaning of economy with Iran, decided to recall his ambassador in Tehran where the Saudi Arabia embassy was attacked after the execution of Shiite cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr (Timeturk, 2016). Oman, one of members of Gulf Cooperation Council, is close to Iran and does not criticize Iran's policy directly. Iran, in the period of Shah, sent troops to Sultan of Oman to suppress the rebellion in Dhofar. Sultan Qaboos participated in Ahmadinejad's inauguration due to re-election in 2009, at a time when the reaction took place (Katzman, 2013: 40).

Iran has a rival and an enemy in the region. Turkey is the rival and Israel is the enemy for Iran. Besides the historic rivalry; geopolitical, strategic, economic, political and actual competition and even antagonism are not unknown between Turkey and Iran (Strategic Comments, 2006: 2). There are significant differences between Turkey and Iran related to the attitude towards USA, policy towards Syria, relations with Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia (Doster, 2012: 49). Although not in view, the main subject which causes friction in practice in the relation between Turkey and Iran is the Kurdish issue. Iran is the homeland of the Kurds. Majority of Kurdish people live in Turkey. Having been established of the first Kurdish Republic on Iranian soil disturbs Tehran. The main purpose of Iran is trying to keep "burning ball" away from itself (BİLGESAM, 2015). Turkey, allegedly, opposes Iran's nuclear power. But on the other hand Turkey is not worrying about Iran's nuclear capability; even it thinks that if Iran would go nuclear, it legitimizes Turkey's nuclear case. Moreover, Turkey is concerned about Iran becoming a significant power in the region and assuming leadership for a Shiite belt. Two events in recent years stretched the relation between Turkey and Iran: Deployment of missile shield radar in the province Kurecik of Malatya and pressure policy of USA and Western world towards Syria (Doster, 2012: 49). With the aim of defense, deployment of patriot missiles in Turkey against missile attacks and radar stations provide direction to radars seems to create sensitivity for Iran (BİLGESAM, 2015). Iran declared several times that this radar station deployed against him, aims at protection of Israel and in the event of an attack Iran will hit it. Iran has accused Turkey of being in collaboration with USA imperialism on the subject of Syria. According to

Tehran, Ankara with the support of USA and Arab countries close to it is playing to the leadership in the Islamic world (Doster, 2012: 49).

The Iraqi government supports Shiite Arab Peoples Force (al-Hasdh al-Shaabi) set by Iran. Shiite Arab Peoples Force, the sword of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards of Iran in the Middle East (Pastaria), depends on Jerusalem brigade commander Qasem Soleimani. This structure can completely destroy the state structure in Iraq. Iran controls the region instead of direct action through terrorist organizations and wants to benefit from developments in Syria to open a Shiite route uninterrupted to reach the Mediterranean. If it would be successful, Turkey will be completely besieged by Iran from Mediterranean to Central Asia. This would be called "Green Belt of Iran" (Seyhanlioğlu, 2015).

Iran sees Israel as the enemy, defined it as the devil that should be wiped off the map. The conflict that Iran encounters with USA, the biggest power behind Israel, is the main issue which effects the relation between Iran and Israel. (Doster, 2012: 49). Iran-USA relations since the Islamic Revolution may be defined with violence, mutual mistrust and misperceptions related to the purposes of both parties in general (Kauss and Newkirk, 2012: 349). For several years, Iran's foreign policy has faced four problems brought by United States. Those are: support for terrorist activities, prevention of the Middle East peace process, human rights violations, producing weapons of mass destruction and working for nuclear program (TASAM, 2011). Contrary to USA accusations, Iran demands USA to recognize Islamic Revolution of Iran, not to interfere in domestic affairs of Iran, to terminate sanctions, to release the Iranian assets frozen in USA and to withdraw USA military forces from the countries in Gulf region such as Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar (BİLGESAM, 2015).

The contribution of Iran to the struggle with IS fight, the lack of alternative means to Assad in Syria, the diversity of perspectives in the alliance on the issue of Syria in the Middle East caused the United States to see Iran more positively (Özdağ and Akbal, 2015). But it is unclear that how long this situation will last. Some developments experienced in the Strait of Hormuz confirmed these concerns. USA and Iran come across in the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic water line in order to transport the oil from the Middle East to the world market, at certain times. An example of this occurred on 13.01.2016. Elements of Iran navy precluded a vessel registered to the 5<sup>th</sup> fleet of the United States in the Gulf region by claiming the violations Iranian territorial sea. Some images of USA soldiers kneeled and put their hands on their heads were seen in the world press. Iranian foreign minister Zarif said that USA should apologize due to the violation of territorial sea. Instead of official statement of USA, Iran was contented with an enunciation of a USA soldier of that ship apologizing for the mistake. As a result, a one-day detention of the ship was ended and USA soldiers on board were freed. The secretary of state John Kerry made a statement and thanked the Iranian authorities for their cooperation. This example should be taken into consideration as an approach of Iran who saw himself as the dominant actor in the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, the announcement of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Hussein Khamenei should be highlighted as a serious warning to understand the importance of the Strait of Hormuz in Iran's foreign affairs. Khamenei stressed in his announcement that if Iran is attacked, energy transportation from the region will suffer seriously (Pham, 2010: 64).

#### **4.CONCLUSION**

Since the Islamic Revolution, in the last 36 years no substantial shift occurred in Iran's foreign policy prioritizing its interests. Despite the sanctions, Iran has become an important actor in the region. Iran's decision-makers had capability to meet radical changes, required flexibility in the international environment.

Sectarianism is a term used to mobilize the historical, economic factors and the masses with policy. In particular, the use of sectarian discourse in times of increased violence and instability causes to crystallize sectarian identity of people more and they tend to participate in political struggles defined with the religious concepts (Majed, 2013). Developments in the Middle East are, in essence, seen as revenge-driven energy geopolitics. It moves through the masked Sunni and Shia opposition on Shiite ground conducted by Iran. Iran has been using Shiism, the product of sectarian perspective, for their own advantage based on a combined strategy which consists of using of Shiism in accordance with the interests of the country and creating a sphere of influence in the countries of the region. This is also the basic point of conflict in the relations of the countries in the region.

Iran increased its weight and influence in the region with its nuclear program signed with the P5 + 1 countries. Its efforts in the area of nuclear capability have the distinction of being the most important issue of the region. As a country having nuclear technology, now freed from all kinds of sanctions and embargo, Iran emerges as a significant player in the international society. Iran's fight against IS in Syrian crisis seems to create a positive impact in public opinion of USA and the West. Development of relations between Iran and the West will have versatile results on the international stage. After the lifting of the embargo and sanctions, it is expected that Iran will export more oil, and EU's dependence on Russian natural gas and oil will decrease (Bahgat, 2010: 347). The EU imports 30% of its gas need and 35% of its oil from Russia (BİLGESAM, 2015). Although Russia and Iran seem as rival countries with regards to exportation gas and oil, they act together in the Syrian crisis. The aim of reducing the influence of western countries and western-backed Sunni bloc is the main motivation element that brings Russia and Iran together. However, the lifting of sanctions and the decline of oil prices in the world due to the increasing of Iranian oil production may cost Russia and this situation affect Russian economy seriously.

Achieved data and evidence in this study and assumptions of Realism theory impose us to highlight some issues as follows:

-Iran, with its self-confidence, has become an important regional power. It is at the beginning of a period where it can increase its competitiveness capability.

-In order to protect its interest in Persian Gulf, Iran does not hesitate to increase tension against USA, although it signed an agreement related to nuclear issue with P5 + 1 countries in a short time ago.

-While the government of Iran strengthens Shiism in the country, at the same time, it mobilizes Shiite population in other countries of the Middle East by benefiting from the Sunni-Shiite conflict.

-Keeping the Sunni-Shiite antagonism fueled by Iran causes Middle Eastern countries to form a bloc on the axis of Sunni-Shia dichotomy. According to those countries they have been surrounded by the Shiite Iran and its allies composed of Iraq

(the new Shiite government), Syria and Lebanon (Hezbollah activity) and Yemen (the Shiite Houthis rebellion). This situation makes the security in the region more vulnerable. The strength of the Shiite crescent composed of those aforementioned countries could affect the security of energy transportation adversely not only in the Persian Gulf but also on the waterway; the Gulf of Aden-Bab al-Mandeb Strait and Red Sea.

-Iran does not hesitate to benefit from terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah in favor of its interests and this approach leads to destabilize the countries of the region.

-Development of Iran's nuclear capability may drive Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey to acquire nuclear weapons. Military spending of Saudi Arabia (as 10.4% of GDP in 2014) in the region is to attract attention (SIPRI Milex data 1988-2014, 2015).

-Iran, by fighting against terror of IS in Syria and Iraq, received sympathy of the West. This could be the beginning of the development of good relations between Iran and the West. Political attitude of Iran that will be pursued in the coming period has the potential to lead the shift of balance in the Middle East.

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