

DYNAMICS OF THE IRANIAN ROLE IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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ABSTRACT

DYNAMICS OF THE IRANIAN ROLE IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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This thesis aims to analyze the dynamics of Iranian role in the Syrian civil war, by assessing the impact of pragmatism and ideology over Iran's foreign policy in the conflict. This work will analyze the Islamic Republic's military involvement discussing whether Iran is shifting its defensive military doctrine towards a more offensive and aggressive policy. The thesis argues that during the first stage of Iran involvement in Syria, due to its historical alliance with Syria the reasons behind its involvement have been driven by a defensive stance. However, due to the deterioration of Assad position on the ground, Iran's actions have consistently turned more assertive, thus representing a substantial shifting in Iran's asymmetrical warfare. Finally, this study asserts that Iran's actual policy in Syria, due to its high military involvement, has increased Iran's power projection capacity, giving Iran consistent ability to waging conventional and symmetrical wars.

KeyWords: Iran, Syria, Syrian war, Foreign policy

ÖZ

SURİYE İÇ SAVAŞINDA İRANIN ROLÜ

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Bu tez, İran'ın Suriye'deki dış politikasında pragmatizmin ve ideolojinin etkisini değerlendirerek, Suriye iç savaşında İran rolünün dinamiklerini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca, bu çalışma, İran'ın tarihsel savunmacı askeri doktrinini daha saldırgan ve agresif bir politika haline dönüşüp dönüşmediğini tartışarak İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin stratejik doktrinini analiz etmektedir. Tez, İran'ın Suriye'deki varlığının ilk safhasında Suriye ile olan tarihsel ittifakı nedeniyle bu politikanın arkasındaki nedenleri savunmacı bir tutuma dayandırdığını iddia etmektedir. Buna rağmen, çatışmalarda Esad'ın konumunun zayıflaması nedeniyle, İran'ın eylemleri sürekli olarak daha iddialı hale gelmiş ve böylece İran'ın asimetrik savaşında kayda değer bir değişim olmuştur. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma, İran'ın Suriye'deki askeri varlığının artması nedeniyle İran'ın güç tahmini kapasitesini artırdığına ve İran'ın konvansiyonel ve simetrik savaşlara devam edebilme kabiliyetine sahip olduğuna işaret etmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: İran, Suriye, Suriye Savaşı, dış politika

To my Father

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Completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the support of my beloved family. I would also like to deeply thank my friends, Ahmad, Ahmad Shahab, Hamid, Hamzeh, Ramish for their encouragement. A very special thanks also goes to my Italian friends, Alessandro, Claudia, Fabio, Marco, Nadine, Silvia and Peri, who with their special friendship have helped me to complete my master.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PLAGIARISM.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
ÖZ.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vi
DEDICATION.....	vii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	viii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	x
CHAPTER	
1.INTRODUCTION	
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Theoretical Framework	3
1.3 Preliminary research.....	4
1.3.1 Iran's Foreign Policy during the Pahlavi Dynasty.....	5
1.3.2 Foreign Policy in post – revolutionary Iran.....	6
1.3.3 Iran's Foreign Policy after September 11	9
THE SYRIAN - IRANIAN ALLIANCE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW	12
2.1 Introduction.....	12
2.2 A conceptual framework to understand the “axis of resistance”: the alliance formation system	13
2.3 The emergence of the Syrian - Iranian Axis (1979 - 82)	17
2.4 The achievements and limits of Syrian - Iranian Power (1982 - 1985).....	20
2.5 From Intra - Alliance Tensions and to the Consolidation of the Syrian - Iranian Axis (1985-1988)	24
2.6 The containment of Saddam in Iraq and the Gulf (1988 - 1991).....	28
2.7 Phase Five – Alliance Cooperation in the Post-Cold War Era (1991-2003)	31
2.8 Phase Six – The Reinvigoration of Alliance Cooperation since the 2003 Iraq War	34
2.9 Chapter Conclusions.....	36
IRAN’S POLITICAL FRAMING ON SYRIA: A STRUGGLE FOR PREROGATIVES	39
3.1 Introduction.....	39
3.3 Iran’s discourse on Syria: a struggle for prerogatives	41
3.4 The Syrian war: a foreign inspired sedition.....	43
3.5 The terrorism and Sunni extremism narrative	46
3.6 Mahdism and the protection of Shi’a sites in Syria.....	49
3.7 From Ahmadinejad to Rouhani: finding cohesiveness in Iran’s policy over Syria.....	53

3.9 Chapter conclusions.....	58
UNDERSTANDING IRAN’S MILITARY STRATEGY IN SYRIA: TOWARDS A MORE OFFENSIVE MILITARY DOCTRINE?	60
4.1 Introduction	60
4.2 A brief outlook at Iran’s defensive military doctrine: historical determinants	61
4.3 The role of the IRGC in the Syrian war.....	64
4.3.1 2011 - June 2014: Limited advisory role	65
4.3.2 June 2014 - September 2015: TAA (Train , Advise, Assist)	66
4.3.3 September 2015 - January 2017: Russia intervention and the siege of Aleppo... ..	67
4.4 Iran - Russia relationship in the Syrian war	68
4.4.1 Military cooperation	68
4.4.2 Convergences.....	69
4.4.3 Divergences.....	70
4.4.4 Iran and Russia in Syria: a relationship of pragmatism.....	72
4.5 Iran - Hezbollah relationship in the Syrian war.....	73
4.5.1 Why is Hezbollah's role in Syria so important for Iran?.....	75
4.5.2 How Hezbollah has been improving Iran's military capacities?.....	77
4.6. Iran’s Shia militias in Syria: the military scope of Shiite proxies.....	77
4.7 The rise of the Islamic State: a blessing or a threat to Iran’s strategy in Syria?	81
4.7.1 Understanding the origin of the Islamic State	81
4.7.2 How did Iran respond to ISIS’ ascendancy?	85
4.8 Chapter conclusions.....	87
CONCLUSIONS.....	89
REFERENCES.....	94
Appendix A: Turkish Summary/Türkçe özet	102
<i>Appendix B: TEZ FOTOKOPİSİ İZİN FORMU</i>	109

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAH Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq

AQI Al Qaeda in Iraq

FP Foreign Policy

HAMAS The Movement of Islamic Resistance (Harakah al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah)

IRI Islamic Republic of Iran

IRGC Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

IRGC - GF - IRGC Ground Forces

IRGC - N - IRGC Naval Forces

IRGC - AF - IRGC Air Forces

IS Islamic State

ISIS Islamic State of Iraq and Sham or Syria

ISIL Islamic State of Iraq and Levant

KH Kata'ib Hezbollah

NDF National Defence Force

UN United Nations

US United States

TAA Train, Advis

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Since the outbreak of Syria's war, the fragmented environment which emerged from the conflict has challenged the analysts. The multi-faceted regional and international dynamics have turned Syria into a proxy war that has attracted competing actors across the Middle East and beyond. Among these, Iran has been acting as a front line player providing a fundamental military support to the Assad's government, shaping significantly the current outcomes of the conflict, helping the regime to stay in power over the last six years.

However, the reasons underlying Iran's involvement in Syria are puzzling. The Iranian government has put consistent efforts in maintaining a low profile about its involvement in the conflict. During the early stages of the war, the Islamic Republic of Iran vehemently refused any allegations about its military presence in Syria, claiming to have just a limited advisory and consulting role. Framing Iran's actions as well its actual policy constitute a non-indifferent challenge. The reasons behind Iran's interests in the conflict have been addressed by many writers and academicians, however, due to the lack of a transparent position by the Iranian government, assessing the overall strategy is difficult and has often resulted in a fragmented approach. Therefore, this research aims to link the historical debate about Iran's foreign policy oscillation between pragmatism and ideology to the present Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) underlying factors of engagement in Syria.

Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran's foreign policy drivers have been at the center of a contested debate. Although its evident Islamic rhetoric acquired after the 1979

revolution, Iran has always tried to engage with Middle Eastern actors on different levels, establishing alliances and friendly relationships also with opposite ideological countries. For instance, Khatami “has built on his own long-standing ties with Saudi Arabia and the Shiite community in Lebanon to improve Iran's relations with a number of Arab states”¹ During the Iran – Iraq war, Iran proved to rely more on a defensive realism approach; “Iran's strategy towards Iraq war assumes the contours of a dual strategy meant, first, to displace the threat posed by the immediate US presence in the region and second, to put a permanent end to the historic Iran-Iraq rivalry by helping to engender the formation of a sympathetic government in Baghdad.”²

This thesis will analyze Iran’s behavior in Syria through the lens of Realism. In particular my claim is that the framing of Iran’s intervention in Syria can be recognized through two different stages. The first one, which is linked to its long historical alliance with Syria, and the limited advisory role in the early stages of the war, will show how Iran has adopted a defensive behaviour in its endeavour in Syria’s war. The second stage, after Hezbollah and Russia intervention, in particular starting from September 2015, will analyze how The Islamic Republic military strategy has turned increasingly sectarian and offensive. Finally, this research focuses on the drivers of Iran’s foreign policy towards the Syrian civil conflict, by contextualizing its intervention through three different levels. Since the Islamic revolution, Syria has been Iran’s most valuable and strategic ally, consequently the first level will take into account the historical determinants of Iran - Syria’s partnership coupled with the strategic significance of Syrian alliance for the Islamic Republic over the last 40 years.

Secondly, my study will analyze Iran’s attempt to find a cohesiveness in the framing of its involvement in Syria, which will demonstrate the precedence given to

¹ Fred Halliday (2001). Iran and the Middle East: Foreign Policy and Domestic. *Middle East Report* , No. 220 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 42-47 Published by: Middle East Research and Information Project, Inc. (MERIP); p. 44

² Strakes, J. E. (2011). The 'Omnibalancing' Proposition and Baghdad's Foreign Policy: Reinterpreting Contemporary Iraq-Iran-US Relations. *Mediterranean Quarterly*, (3), 95; p.101

pragmatism over ideology. My claim will be that Iranian establishment in the early phases of the conflict, relying on the view of its internal actors as well as its external allies, had adopted a defensive stance towards Syria, in order to maintain the status quo, rather than acting as a hegemonic power.

The third chapter will analyze the extent of Iranian military intervention in the conflict, answering three main questions: 1) What is Iran's alliance with regional and international actors in the conflict? 2) Is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) shifting its conventional role? 3) Is Iran moving toward a more offensive warfare in the region?

In the conclusions I will try to understand whether the Syrian scenario has proved Iran with improved military capabilities which may shift Iran to adopt a more offensive posture in the region, turning its military defensive doctrine into a more assertive one.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

For many years, Realism has represented one of the dominant approaches in analyzing state's decisions and behaviors. Realists consider states as rational actors that are part of an anarchic system and actors that seek to maximize their interests. The existing literature on the Islamic Republic's foreign policy behaviour also reflect the prioritizing of the Realist approach. My thesis as well will rely on this theoretical framework to analyze the framing of Iran's policy and its actions in Syria. In addition, the research will focus on the developments of IRI's involvement in the country by assessing the shifting in Iran's engagement alongside Bashar al Assad, namely whether Iran is turning its historical defensive military policy into a more offensive one.

Further, I will assert that Iran's strategy in Syria has reacted to the developments on the ground. So while in the beginning the reasons compelling Iran to intervene in Syria fit a defensive behaviour, as Iran was trying to preserve the current status quo, the latest unfolding of events has turned Iran into a more offensive country.

The Iran – Syria axis type of alliance provides the theoretical basis for my first chapter's argument, defined by IR theories of balance of power and defensive alliance. Both theories assume that “states join alliances to protect themselves from states or coalitions whose superior resources could pose a threat.”³ Moreover states form alliances for other two reasons. Firstly, to preserve their security and survival against the expansion of hegemonic power. Secondly, the “balancing” with weaker states may result more advantageous since the new member's alliance within the system will be stronger.⁴ Indeed, since the Islamic Revolution Iran's alliance with Syria has been mainly due to both counterbalance the rising of Israel as a regional threat as well as Iraq increasing influence in the Middle East, and the latter threat posed by the US invasion of Iraq which has destabilized both countries. Therefore, preserving the regime of Bashar Al Assad would benefit Iran a lot. On the other hand, the toppling of Assad and the vacuum of power which would be left in Syria may again isolate Iran in the region. On the other hand, following the developments on the ground Iran's actions in Syria have turned increasingly offensive and assertive. It is thus under these assumptions of security and maintenance of the status - quo that I will approach Iran's intervention in Syria.

1.3 Preliminary research

Due to its strategic position as a country at cross roads between Middle East and eastern Asia, having access to the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea, and the Caucasian route, Iran has always attracted the interests of its closest neighbors as well as the Great Powers. Since the Qajar time many Countries have put their eyes on Iran's richness. The complex interplay of regional, domestic and international forces, has therefore shaped the ground of Iran's foreign policy. Although a large literature exists on IRI's foreign policy decisions, scholars haven't still reached a comprehensive opinion as well as a defined common path about IRI's foreign policy decision making process. Furthermore “The multiplicity of power centers and vigorous debate among the factions means that foreign policy is not formulated in one clear manner, as it

³ Walt, S. M. (1990). *The origins of alliances*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press; p.110

⁴ Ibid.

would be in a dictatorial regime. Nor is implementation of foreign policies always clear”.⁵

When analyzing Iran’s foreign policy, the existing literature mainly relies on two International Relations theories: Realism and Constructivism. The first theory implies that all countries act as rational actors in “seeking to maximize their advantages within a competitive, or ‘anarchical’, system, pursuing power politics”.⁶ On the other hand, Constructivism heavily looks at the impact of ideas, beliefs, culture and tradition, arguing that “state behavior, in the international domain, is based on cultures in the sense of shared ideas, norms and experiences. The supposedly ‘real’ categories of states, economies and interests need to be analyzed in terms of their meaning for social actors”.⁷

Hence, the aim of this chapter is to try to review the existing literature about Iran's Foreign policy, through both a chronological and IR's theory analysis. The following literature will be divided in three chronological parts: 1) Pahlavi era; 2) Post – revolutionary era 3) After September 11. Since Iran's foreign policy keeps oscillating between pragmatic and constructivist perspectives, with none clearly prevailing over the other, each of this part will contextualize Iran's foreign policy through both a Realism and ideological approach.

1.3.1 Iran's Foreign Policy during the Pahlavi Dynasty

Ramazani has recognized “four ideal types of interest as guides to foreign policy in Iran's modern history: Sultanic, Ideological – Islamic, Pragmatic-Islamic, and Democratic – Islamic.” The rule of Mohammad Reza Shah, represents modernizing sultanism. Iran's interests were largely defined in terms of his self – interest. He and

⁵ Halliday, F. (2001). Iran and the Middle East: Foreign Policy and Domestic Change. *Middle East Report*, (220), 42-47. doi:1. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1559410> doi; p.43

⁶ Halliday, F. (2005). *The Middle East in international relations: Power, politics and ideology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge; p.25

⁷ Ibid; p.46

his father as Safavid kings modeled their rule after the Sassanians.”⁸ Through this subdivided analysis the Pahlavi dynasty was therefore seen through the lens of Realism, assessing its foreign policy under the basic concepts of security and maximization of interests.

Abbas Milani, one of the most prominent Iranian historian, assess the foreign policies choices also through a realist perspective. In *The Shah* Milani looks at the history of Pahlevi’s dynasty in detail, giving a deep accounting of the many international and domestic actors involved in the Iranian game. For instance, according to Milani, during the second world war with the increasing threatening of Germany and the Nazi ideology, Reza Shah sought to protect Iranian national interest by engaging in a strategic relation with Hitler. In order to do so the most emblematic example of such policy can be traced to “forfeit the name Persia for Iran, evoking not the grandeur of the Persian past but consanguinity with the Aryan myth”.⁹

1.3.2 Foreign Policy in post – revolutionary Iran

The 1979's Islamic Revolution shook not only Iran, but the Middle East as a whole. All the world remained surprised by the events that toppled the Shah's regime and saw the installation of an Islamic republic. After this unexpected radical change in the Iranian political system a new element started to play a significant role in the making of Iranian foreign policy: the ideology of the Islamic revolution.

In some works, we can find an account of Iran's recourse to an ideological discourse, contingent to its isolation after the Islamic revolution. In Jalil Roshandel's *Foreign policy strategic thinking in the twenty first century* paper, the construction of a foreign policy decision process is contextualized within the nation's strategic culture theory. According to Roshandel, citing the work of Lantnis and Howlett,¹⁰ Iranian

⁸ Ramazani, R. K. (2013). *Independence without freedom : Iran's foreign policy*. Charlottesville : University of Virginia Press; p. 162

⁹ Milani, A. (2011). *The Shah*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; p.68

¹⁰ Lantis and Howlett, “Strategic culture”; p.100

foreign policy has been shaped by dramatic events who created a shock “that challenges existing beliefs or policies”.¹¹

Maryam Panah in *The Islamic Republic and The world: global dimensions of the Iranian revolution*, assesses the changes of IRI's foreign policy defining the new process as “revolutionary foreign policy”. Panah asserts that the anti – western, anti – imperialist rhetoric largely broadcasted by Khomeini during the first year of the post – revolutionary period had its roots neither in religious nor in culture beliefs, but in the social inequality that gained ground before the Revolution. Indeed, “state – led and imperially supported capitalist development were at the root of the changes that shaped the social basis of the revolutionary forces”.¹² Yet, despite appealing to an ideological concept for the accounting of the years following the revolution, the anti – system ideas of Khomeini had to be understood within years of foreign invasion.

In relation to Iran's revolutionary foreign policy K. Ramazani individuates seven guiding principles which represent a clear watershed with Shah's foreign policy: 1) rejection of dependency on either the West or the East: 2) identification of the United States as the principal enemy of the Islamic Revolution: 3) struggle against superpowers and the Zionist power; 4) close relations with all oppressed peoples, especially those in Muslim countries; 5) liberation of Jerusalem and opposition to pro-Israel states; 6) anti – imperialism; 7) support everywhere for oppressed people.¹³

To assess the impact of ideological paradigm on Iran's foreign policy decisions, Imad Salamey & Zanoobia Othman in *Shia Revival and Welayat Al-Faqih in the Making of*

¹¹ Iranian Foreign Policy since 2001. *Alone in the World*, Thomas Juneau et Sam Razavi, 2013, New York, NY, Routledge, 232; p. 41

¹² Panah, M. (2007). *The Islamic republic and the world : global dimensions of the Iranian revolution*. London and Ann Arbor, MI : Pluto Press, 2007.

¹³ Ramazani, R. K. (2013). *Independence without freedom : Iran's foreign policy*. Charlottesville : University of Virginia Press. p. 83

*Iranian Foreign Policy*¹⁴ relies on the concept of offensive realism, which asserts that “countries as rational actors, seek to maximize their share of power at the expense of their rivals”.⁹ According to the authors the main question that has to be answered in order to understand Iranian foreign policy is “Why has Iran primarily concentrated on expanding its influence throughout the Middle East instead of focusing its efforts on its own state-building and international integration? To answer this apparent ambiguous dilemma, the essay proposes a balance between pragmatic and ideological views. The authors claim that while, on the one hand, Iranian foreign policy may have failed to export the revolution as wanted by Khomeini, on the other hand, the revolutionary foreign policy has created a Shi'a revival throughout the region. Moreover, in order to counterbalance the forces of the bipolar world during the cold war, “Iran’s foreign policy gravitated to incorporate some hybrid elements of ideological considerations (to appeal to the domestic scene) and pragmatic considerations (in order to better secure its prospects for survival in the context of a turbulent neighborhood)”.¹⁵

Talking about the the rising of an Islamic Shia revival in the region, a work that needs to be cited as an important piece in understanding Iran's foreign policy is Vali Nasr's *The Shia Revival*.¹⁶ Despite being a realist, Nasr relies mainly on the Shia tradition features to explain Iranian foreign policy especially after the revolution. According to Nasr, since its establishment as state - religion in 1501 by Shah Ismail, Shiism has carried with itself lot of rituals and traditions related to the commemoration of the martyrdom of the Imam Husayin. The same spirit of martyrdom which has for centuries accompanied the publicly display of a passion play of the Karbala event had been grabbed by Khomeini and the ulama to correlate the revolution moments of 1979 to those of Karbala. After 1979, the cult of

¹⁴ Imad Salamey & Zanoobia Othman (2011) *Shia Revival and Welayat AlFaqih in the Making of Iranian Foreign Policy, Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 12:2, 197-212, DOI: 10.1080/21567689.2011.591983. p.198

¹⁵ Imad Salamey & Zanoobia Othman (2011) *Shia Revival and Welayat AlFaqih in the Making of Iranian Foreign Policy, Politics, Religion & Ideology*; p.203

¹⁶ Nasr, S. V. (2006). *The Shia revival: How conflicts within Islam will shape the future*. New York: Norton.

martyrdom was misused by Khomeini to provide support to shia armed group across the region. Moreover, with the beginning of the war with Iraq this reliance on the battle of Najaf and Karbala started to represent a mobilization instrument to call people to defend the Islamic republic from foreigner invasion.

During the Iraq – Iran war, however, despite the evident ideological discourse behind the mobilization of high numbers of young people for the purpose of the war, the long and exhausting war with Iraq had also to be seen through a realistic perspective. In Jason E. Strakes' *"Omnibalancing" Proposition and Baghdad's Foreign Policy: Reinterpreting Contemporary Iraq-Iran-US Relations*¹⁷ Iran's strategy towards Iraq war assumes the contours of a dual strategy which meant to, first displaces the threat posed by the immediate US presence in the region and, second, to put a permanent end to the historic Iran-Iraq rivalry by helping to engender the formation of a sympathetic government in Baghdad.

1.3.3 Iran's Foreign Policy after September 11

The election of Mohammad Khatami as the fifth president of Iran in 1995 saw the beginning of a new era in the Iranian foreign decision making process. Khatami's presidency was characterized by a so called “dialogue of civilization”, a clear breakthrough compared to the “clash of civilization” idea imposed by the post - revolutionary ideology of opposing the west. According to Halliday, Khatami presidency has made some clear innovations in foreign policy. He has built on his own long-standing ties with Saudi Arabia and the Shi'ite community in Lebanon to improve Iran's relations with a number of Arab states.¹⁸

In Mehran Kamrava's *Iran and its Persian Gulf Neighbors* the events post-September 11 are described as given rise to an even harsher relation among the two historical rivals. In the author's words “A new insecurity began to grip Iran's foreign and national security policy elites as they witnessed the country's “complete encirclement

¹⁷ Strakes, J. E. (2011). *The 'Omnibalancing' Proposition and Baghdad's Foreign Policy*

¹⁸ Fred Halliday (2001). *Iran and the Middle East: Foreign Policy and Domestic Change*. Middle East Report (MERIP), No. 220 (Autumn, 2001), p. 44.

by a pro – US security belt comprised of Kuwait, Turkey, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Iraq.”¹⁹

Ali Ansari in his *chapter on Ahmadinejad presidency, image and foreign policy*, gives a well resonate description of Ahmadinejad's foreign policy direction. According to Ansari the heavy emphasis on an anti – western ideology was due to the need of offering “an apparently reasonable justification for establishing the faction's hegemony throughout the country”. Therefore, once again, despite the appearance of a reliance on ideological and uprooted antagonistic discourses, the foreign policy making process under Ahmadinejad's policy was driven by realistic interests in terms of constructing a solid favorable domestic policy.

Therefore, as we have noticed so far the scholars' account of Iranian foreign policy has vacillated between the evident remarks placed on ideological elements by its actors and the actual realist intents behind it. A great reminder of this omnipresent tendency in the Iran's foreign policy literature has been given by the accounts of the Arab Spring and Iranian response to it. The upheavals who have characterized the Arab Spring movement across the Middle East have challenged Iranian foreign policy decisions.

In Henner Furtig's *Iran and the Arab Spring: Between Expectations and Disillusion* the Arab Spring events are presented as an opportunity for Khamenei who relied on the Islamic revolutionary ideology in terms of grabbing the spirit of the uprisings to reclaim Iran's hegemonic role in the region. Iran openly showed support to all the people who were turning their backs to their regime. However, despite the revolutionary rhetoric, the contradictions of this approach became immediate evident in Iran's support to Assad's regime.

As a consequence, the entire construction of the Iranian interpretation of the Arab Spring as an Islamic awakening have risked to be undermined by its actions in Syria. To address this contradiction, Iranian propaganda began to allege that the events in

¹⁹Thomas Juneau and Sam Razavi *Iranian Foreign Policy since 2001. Alone in the World*, (2013). New York, NY, Routledge; p.106.

Syria could not be compared to those in Egypt and Tunisia, because the former were not part of a real revolution as they lacked certain requirements.²⁰ An event that demonstrated once more Iran's tendency to overcome ideologies for pragmatic interests.

This literature review does not expect to be exhaustive. It addresses the main features and approaches to the understanding of Iran's foreign policy. Further, it proves how a unified and widely accepted view over Iran's foreign policy decision making process does not exist. My research will thus try to fill the gap of the historical context of the Syrian civil war, assessing the impact of the Syrian conflict on the IRI's foreign policy.

²⁰ Furtig, H. (2013) *Iran and the Arab spring: Between expectations and disillusion* p. 15

CHAPTER 2

THE SYRIAN - IRANIAN ALLIANCE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The Syrian - Iranian alliance has constituted one of the most enduring and surprising alliances in the Middle East. Apparently divided by opposite ideologies, the axis of resistance has proved to resist for over forty years. Although tested by numerous tumultuous events who have repeatedly upset the status quo of the region as well as strategic setbacks, Syria and Iran have continued to cooperate to fulfil complementary interests.

Often described by some analysts as a mere “marriage of convenience” without any long term prospective, destined to sunk as soon as common interests had been achieved, the persistence of the alliance has compelled many observers to further investigate the factors at the base of the alliance. The outbreak of the Syrian war has further added a new layer of understanding to the Syrian - Iranian axis. The scope of this chapter is thus that of offering an in - depth analysis of the historical events who led to the forge of the long friendship between Syria and Iran as well as that of providing a theoretical framework through which to analyze the determining factors of one of the most durable tie in the whole Middle East. In order to do so different periods will be taken into consideration in order to fully address the historical events who helped creating the alliance. The following chapter will thus follow Jubin M. Goodarzi²¹'s phases, by subdividing the historical analysis into six different periods:

- I. The emergence of the Syrian - Iranian Axis (1979 - 82)
- II. The achievements and limits of Syrian - Iranian Power (1982 - 85)

²¹ Goodarzi, J. M. (2009). *Syria and Iran : Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*. London: I.B.Tauris.

- III. Intra-Alliance Tensions and the Consolidation of the Syrian - Iranian Axis (1985- 88)
- IV. The containment of Saddam's in Iraq and the Gulf (1988 - 91)
- V. Alliance cooperation in the post-cold war era (1991 - 03)
- VI. The reinvigorating of the alliance after the Iraq war (2003 - 11)

2.2 A conceptual framework to understand the “axis of resistance”: the alliance formation system

The balance of power theory of alliance has constituted one of the most used pattern to assess and inform the state's choices when forging an alliance. The Middle East, the external arena in which decision - makers operate, is exceptionally unstable, owing to the precarious legitimacy, pervasive insecurity and exceptional penetration by hegemonic global powers. Syrian and Iranian foreign policy, is, in great part, a reaction to this environment.²² Therefore, correctly addressing the framework within which Syria and Iran have been operating is imprescindible for a full understanding of their alliance.

At the very core heart of the alliance formation making process, states forge alliances in order to protect themselves from stronger power. The balance of power theory²³ therefore implies that states seek to ally themselves with weaker states in order to balance against the state power perceived as a bigger threat. Bandwagoning, which would bring states to rather seek cooperation with stronger states is rarer in the global context and the Middle East as well does not constitute an exception. The balance of power theory argues that states with similar characteristics are more likely to form an alliance, however, as it is the case of The Syrian - Iran axis, states with opposite ideologies might actually forge a much more enduring partnership.

²² Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997). *Syria and Iran : middle powers in a penetrated regional system*. London ; New York : Routledge, 1997; p. 9

²³ For more about the balance of power vs Bandwagoning see: Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Reading, Mass. : Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., c1979.

According to Hans Morgenthau's "Ideological solidarity"²⁴ states sharing the same ideology would ally more easily. However, as proved by many observers, the ideological rhetoric may be used only in the background of the decision making apparatus. Syria, a secular pan - Arab country, and Iran, an Islamic Republic, could not be more ideologically distant. However, the proximity of common threats has made the formation of the alliance more than stable.

During the Iran - Iraq war (1980 - 1988) Syria has promptly provided military assistance and intelligence assistant to Tehran, thus opposing an Arab regime and the Iraqi Ba'th party counterpart. Therefore, despite Baghdad shared cultural and political ideologies with Syria, Iraq was perceived by both states as a dangerous threat.

Syria and Iran are indeed mistakenly being portrayed as driven by hegemonic aspirations, due in large part to the authoritarian nature of the Syrian and Iranian regimes and their unpopularity in many quarters. However, the alliance has been primarily defensive in nature,²⁵ aimed at neutralizing Iraqi and Israeli offensive capabilities in the region, and preventing American encroachment in the Middle East.²⁶ As the Pan Arabism case has widely shown throughout the last century's Middle East history, leaderships who share common goals are likely to end up obstructing themselves, searching for a total and solo influence in the region. Iraq and Syria for instance, despite sharing the same party root, have been widely "enemy", both looking to establish an influence over the region at each other expenses.

To this respect another element which has thus considerably contributed to the longevity of the alliance is the sharing of different interests. While the common threat perception has led Syria and Iran to counterbalance a perceived strong threat,

²⁴ Walt, S. M. (1987). *The Origins of Alliance*; p.33

²⁵ For Defensive realism theory see: Waltz, Kenneth N. (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. New York: McGraw Hill

²⁶ Goodarzi, J. (2013). *Syria and Iran: Alliance cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment*; p.35

their long term goals have been diametrically opposed. In this way, both Syria and Iran avoided any direct confrontations in the pursuing of their interests, working on opposite but complementary objectives. Syria has tried to extend its influence in the Levant, while Iran's main concern has been that of having, to some extent, a form of ascendancy on the Gulf region. Although shaken by period of conflicting interests, such as in Lebanon during the civil war, Syria and Iran have always found ways to adjust their reciprocal interests to maintain their alliance intact. The ultimate goal to counterbalance the growing United States penetration in the region and Israel influence has acted as a catalyst to draw Damascus and Tehran closer, rather than turning them into antagonists.

However, balancing of power alone does not constitute a comprehensive theory as it lacks of investigating each state's peculiar characteristics, as the case of Syria and Iran, which have been crucial in bringing the two nations closer. In order to overcome this liability Walt's theory relies on the concept of "threat" rather than power, as the level of threat appears to be more comprehensive and affected by other notable elements: geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions.²⁷

Syria's geopolitical realm has been of great importance in shaping the country's foreign policy decisions. Aware of the limited natural resources and highly vulnerable to external pressure, since the former Hafez al - Assad, Syria's foreign policy decision making process has adopted a realist approach. In fact, Syria's decision makers could not escape the reality that the country's limited natural and economic resources were too slim to support their FP ambitions without external assistance.²⁸ Likewise, post - revolutionary Iran found its relation with the west compromised by the 1979 events. Formally isolated in the region with a growing pressure from the Gulf Arab states who perceived Iran as a threat, the Islamic Republic warmly welcomed the formation of an alliance with Syria. Moreover, due

²⁷ Walt, S. M. (1987). *The Origins of Alliances*; p.7

²⁸ Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997). *Syria and Iran : middle powers in a penetrated regional system*; p. 58

to the increasingly jeopardized relationship with Israel, Damascus acted as a vital channel for empowering Hezbollah and keep Israeli power in check.

However, following David's omnibalancing theory,²⁹ a question arises concerning the axis of resistance. While external threats are fundamental in the formation of alliances, do domestic factors as well can better explain the Syria - Iran alliance? Domestic factors, namely intra - elite conflict, economic interests, public opinion - provide very limited explanatory power compared to systemic ones in understanding the Syrian - Iranian alliance. Domestic politics was never more than a secondary factor in Syria's calculations.³⁰ While, on the one hand, Saddam was many times successful in appealing to sunni groups disillusioned with the alawi rule, on the other, religious solidarity had never represented a valuable determinant in Assad's decisions.

Further, many have claimed that the strong economic ties had constituted the main base on which the alliance had been built. While receiving significant economic aids from Iran, Syria, due to its alliance with Tehran, lost approximately 160 million dollar a year following the closing of the trans - syrian pipeline during the Iran-Iraq war.³¹ For Iran's part the alliance with Syria did not represent, in any way, a valuable tool to preserve the internal state structure. Indeed, the relation was circumscribed to the ruling class level.

An additional significant feature which brought Iran and Syria to engage in a lasting alliance is constituted by the changes the Middle East regional system went through during 1980s as well as in the post-cold war era. During the 20 years that projected Middle East into the 21st century (1980 - 2000), the region turned into a highly fragmented environment, where the idea of a Pan- Arabism unity as well as the hope to act independently from the influence of foreign powers dramatically collapsed.

²⁹ David, S. R. (1991). Explaining Third World Alignment. *World Politics*, 43(02), 233-256.

³⁰ Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997). *Syria and Iran : middle powers in a penetrated regional system*; p. 97

³¹ Ibid; p. 95

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, unexpected by many as Iraq had just ended 8 years war with Iran, took the shape of an act of inter-state war that divided the region itself and drew external forces into regional conflict more directly than at any time since 1918.³² It is, therefore, in this new context that Syria and Iran found a common ground to consolidate their partnership and adjust meanwhile their interests to the new changing global and regional order. The end of the Cold War with the departure of Russia from the Middle Eastern realm changed the balance of power in the region, by leaving many states exposed to the increasingly American influence in the region. Thus, after the Cold War the Syrian - Iranian alliance default “approach seems to be neither balancing nor bandwagoning, but rather forging closer ties with other regional actors in order to achieve maximum diplomatic flexibility by avoiding both dependence on and confrontation with the world’s greatest superpower”.³³

Finally the Iranian-Syrian alliance must be understood, as we have seen so far, as a defensive response to both the changes undergoing in the region and the perception of common threats. In the following part I will thus analyze the historical episodes behind Iranian - Syrian collaboration in the region and how they have produced the most permanent alliance in the Middle Eastern arena.

2.3 The emergence of the Syrian - Iranian Axis (1979 - 82)

“The wrong world at the wrong time”. With these words former Syrian president Hafiz al - Assad commented the Iraqi invasion of Iran on 22 September 1980, and the outbreak of the First Gulf War. The Iran - Iraq war was far most one of the key factors in cementing the political alliance between Syria and Iran.

In the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution which brought the Shah’s overthrown and the ascent to power of the former spiritual supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini, Syria was the first Arab State, and the third one in order after Russia and Pakistan, to

³² Halliday, F. (2005). *The Middle East in international relations : power, politics and ideology*. Cambridge, UK ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2005. p. 130

³³ Walsh, D. (2013). *Syrian Alliance Strategy in the Post Cold War Era: The Impact of Unipolarity*. The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs Vol. 37:2; p.108

publicly congratulate to Khomeini for the success of the revolution.³⁴ But, whereas Syria was looking with great interest at the events who were unfolding in Tehran, the rest of the Arab world looked suspiciously at the new political order that was emerging in Iran. Indeed, the Islamic revolution was one of those historical and political events that drastically changed the region and its strategic alliances.

On September 1978 the Camp David Accords were signed by Egyptian president Anwar El Sadat and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, leading to the Egypt - Israel peace treaty which was formally ratified in 1979. The treaty was seen by Damascus as a stab in the back. The Arab front against Israel lost one of its most valuable ally, and Syria found itself highly isolated in its long standing confrontation with Tel Aviv. Similarly, Iraq had become extremely antagonistic to Syria as the two wings of the Ba'th party increasingly started to recognized in each other a strong opponent rather than a valuable allied. To begin with the Ba'th party in Syria developed into a rival wing of the party in Iraq. In addition, the Syrian leadership was concerned that many members of the Ba'th party in Syria were secretly supporters of the regime in Iraq.³⁵ It is therefore in this new context that Syria warmly welcomed the political changes in Tehran looking at Iran as a valuable alternative to counterforce Israel military force and Iraq's pan-Arab hegemonic aspirations in the region. On the other hand, the stressed Shiite Islamic character of the revolution alarmed the sheikhdoms and the other Arab countries. Above all, as one of Iran's neighbouring country, Baghdad feared that the revolution could spread also in Iraq, fomenting the uprising of the Shi'a majority population who had being oppressed for a long time by a Sunni extremist government.

In november 1979 after Baghdad's claims of a Syrian involvement in an attempted coup d'etat to overthrow the Iraqi regime, Saddam and Assad formally suspended

³⁴ Goodarzi, J. (2013). Syria and Iran: Alliance cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment; p.18

³⁵ Swaminathan, Satya (Spring 2007). "Syria's Diplomatic History with Iran". *Global Forum Journal*. 3: 28.

any ties between the two countries.³⁶ With the definitive break of Iraqi-Syrian relations, Syrian foreign minister Abd al Halim Khaddam was sent to Iran as part of a major diplomatic initiatives to expand relations between the two states. Besides holding talks with Iranian foreign minister Ebrahim Yazdi and prime minister Bazargan, Khaddam visited Khomeini in Qom where “he declared that Iran’s Islamic revolution was “the most important event in our contemporary history”.³⁷

Likewise, while Syria was strengthening its relation with Iran, this coincided with a deterioration of Iran-Iraq relations. Moreover, also Saudi Arabia’s hostility towards the newly formed Islamic republic rapidly grew. In early 1980 Both Iraq and Saudi Arabia were getting closer and their attacks against Iran were significantly increasing. Saddam started to portray the revolution as “un-Islamic and present the rivalry between Iran and Iraq as an extension of the age - old conflict between Persian and Arabs.³⁸

These exchanges of mediatic attacks between Tehran and Baghdad were just the prelude of the storm that would shake the region. On 22 September 1980 Saddam Hussein invaded Iran declaring war to the archi Islamic enemy. After an Initial refusal of publicly offering a military aid to Tehran fearing a political repercussion it would have on the regime, Syria promptly backed the shi’a allied. In the first week of October, when it became clear that Iran had absorbed the initial blow and was rolling with the punches, Damascus finally broke out the silence condemning Saddam for the declaration of war.³⁹

The role that Syria played was not only fundamental from a military perspective, most importantly the diplomatic position Syria assumed allowed Damascus to act as an intermediary to prevent the formation of an Arab coalition against Iran and the

³⁶ Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997). *Syria and Iran : middle powers in a penetrated regional system*; p. 92

³⁷ Goodarzi, J. M. (2009). *Syria and Iran : Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*; p.23

³⁸ Ibid; p.28

³⁹ Ibid; p.35

idea that it was an Arab - Persian struggle. Moreover, in order to weaken Saddam's position Hafez al- Assad shut down Iraqi oil pipelines that went through Syria, precipitating substantial reductions in Iraq's revenues.⁴⁰

Despite the consistent help received from Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United States the conjunct efforts of Syria, along with the Soviet Union, who was refuelling Iran with weapons from the Eastern Bloc, and Iraq's underestimation of Iran's military capacity, prevented Baghdad from successfully destroy the Islamic Republic. After two years from the beginning of the hostility the situation seemed to have reach an impasse and the Middle East became increasingly polarized. The Iran - Iraq war accentuated the already existing rivalry in the region, leaving behind any hope for an Arab unity in the region. Two distinct axis emerged during the war: Iraq - Saudi Arabia - Jordan and Iran - Syria - Libya. Therefore, the war further divided the Middle Eastern arena and a new era of alliance was about to begin.

The newly born "Axis of Resistance", despite the common perception of a temporary friendship that would evaporate once the common Iraqi enemy would be eventually neutralized, was based on a false assumption. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 proved to be another battleground in which Syria and Iran would have further operated as allies. However, the Lebanese Civil War proved to be a challenging test for the durability of the Syrian - Iranian partnership.

2.4 The achievements and limits of Syrian - Iranian Power (1982 - 1985)

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the years that followed were a major turning point in the history of modern Middle East. The Syrian - Iranian alliance as well was challenged by the events which unfolded in the Lebanese quagmire. For the first time the Axis of Resistance found itself at odds on different fronts experiencing the prospectus of a break in the alliance. The years between 1982 and 1985 assumed a relevant importance in shaping the future of the alliance; most importantly Syria and

⁴⁰ Milani, M. "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)," *The Washington Quarterly* 36:4 (Fall 2013): 79 p.80

Iran after forging a closer cooperation at the outbreak of the Gulf War, found themselves close partners in Lebanon as well.

With the appointment of general Ariel Sharon as Minister of Defence of Begin's government, Israel took a decisive stance in the Lebanese Civil War. Prime minister Menachem Begin began to plan a military invasion of Lebanon to expel the PLO, inflict humiliating defeat to the only remaining major Arab confrontation State, Syria, and create a new political order in Lebanon that would be willing to establish political links with Israel.⁴¹

The opportunity and pretext presented to Israel on 3rd June after an attempt to the life of Israeli ambassador to Britain, Shlomo Argov. The attack resulted to be masterminded by Iraqi intelligence, which hoped to provoke a reaction in Tel Aviv to trigger a military response in Lebanon. According to Saddam Hussein's calculation an Israeli military operation in Lebanon would challenge Syria, diminishing consequently its support to Iran in the confrontation with Iraq in the Gulf War.⁴²

On 7 June, in the aftermath of the beginning of the operation Peace in Galilee, Iran showed its unconditional support to the Syrian ally in Lebanon by sending a consistent number of armed forces to fight in the Arab - Israeli confront. Although demanding for a major involvement in the war, Assad repeatedly rejected Iranian proposal. Damascus seemed to have underestimated the scale and the real objectives behind Israeli presence in Lebanon. During the first three days since Israeli invasion Syria engaged in a bloody and violent confrontation with Israeli troops which caused Syria great losses. Though facing a larger, better equipped force, and lacking air cover, the Syrian troops put up stiff resistance and made the Israelis pay dearly as they advanced towards Beirut.⁴³ Moreover, despite repetitive requests from Tehran to come in help of Damascus, Assad once again refused the Islamic republic proposal.

⁴¹ Goodarzi, J. M. (2009). *Syria and Iran : Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*; p.61

⁴² Ibid; p.62

⁴³ Ibid; p.65

Seemingly, Assad, aware of Israeli military capacity, understood that an Iranian involvement would have not been sufficient to push back Israel advancement. Similarly, Assad, aware of an imminent Iranian invasion of Iraq calculated that the “even if the invasion would not result in the overthrow of his Ba’thist rival in Baghdad, at the very least the Iraqi military machine would be pinned down by his Iranian allies, preventing Saddam from focusing on his western flank.”⁴⁴

While the Israeli invasion of Lebanon clearly provoked important military setbacks, on the other hand it helped strengthen the cooperation with Iran and most importantly fostered the creation of Hezbollah. Syria made repeated use of Hezbollah to boost its interests in Lebanon and weaken Israel political and military position in the Civil War. Likewise, Iran saw in Hezbollah a crucial tool to export the Islamic revolution in the Levant and gain leverage over Syria’s backyard.

However, the relationship between Syria and the Iranian backed Shia group was not an easy one and it went through many tests. Iran contributed to the creation of Hezbollah at the expenses of Syrian-backed Amal was indeed a clear point of irritation for Syrians.⁴⁵ Moreover, while Iran patronized Hezbollah, Syria, seeing it as both a threat and an opportunity, had a much more ambivalent and sometimes quite hostile relation with it.⁴⁶ Furthermore, any full scale engagement of Iran in Lebanon with the proxy war sustained by its main Shi’a ally, Hezbollah, would not be possible without the Syrian blessing as Damascus had precedence over any matter concerning Lebanon political future. Therefore, on the Lebanese front evident frictions existed between Iran and Syria, the Gulf war constituted another testing ground for the alliance.

On 13th July 1982 Iran launched operation Ramadan which consisted of three separate attacks at Iraqi defenses around Basra. Iran’s formal invasion of Iraq

⁴⁴ Ibid; p.66

⁴⁵ Von Maltzahn, N. (2013). *The Syria-Iran Axis : cultural diplomacy and international relations in the Middle East*. London ; New York : I.B. Tauris; p. 35

⁴⁶ Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997). *Syria and Iran : middle powers in a penetrated regional system*; p. 124

marked a critical stage in the relation among Iran, Syria and the Arab sheikhdoms. Indeed, Iran suffered significantly higher losses than the Iraqis.⁴⁷ The operation resulted to be a great unsuccess, putting Iraq back in the Gulf war game, and increasing animosity among Arab states towards Iran and pressure over Syrian role in supporting the Islamic Republic.

Consequently, the failure of the operation and the aggressivity shown by Tehran forced the United States and France to throw their weight behind Iraq, thus enhancing Iraq favourable position in the war. These events thus forced Syria to attend The Fez II Summit on 8th September along with Saddam Hussein, King Hussein, King Fahd, King Hassan of Morocco and the Emir of Kuwait. Highly isolated in the region Syria accepted the summit's resolution,⁴⁸ showing how much political clout and room for manoeuvre it had lost since the defeat in Lebanon.⁴⁹

However, its weakened position in the Arab World as well in the region meant that Assad needed Iran more than before in order to both counterbalance Tel Aviv's advance in Lebanon and Iraq restored force in the Gulf. From now on, Hafez Al Assad decided to implement a dual policy: the sword and shield strategy.⁵⁰ The offensive element, Iran, would serve Assad's goals in Lebanon by exploiting the Islamic Republic's influence among the Lebanese shi'a to wage a campaign of subversion, terror and guerrilla warfare against their mutual opponents, the Gemayel government, the israelis and the US and French contingents of the Multinational Force in Lebanon.⁵¹ On the other hand in order to recover the military equipment lost

⁴⁷ Gibson, B. R. (2010). *Covert relationship : American foreign policy, intelligence, and the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988*. Santa Barbara, Calif. : Praeger, 2010; p. 86

⁴⁸ Goodarzi, J. M. (2009). *Syria and Iran : Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*. London: I.B.Tauris; p.74. The resolution stated that "the conference has decided to declare its commitment to defend all the Arab territories and to consider any aggression on any Arab country as an aggression on all the Arab countries".

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid; p.75

⁵¹ Goodarzi, J.M (2013), "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment," *Ortadoğu Etütleri* Vol. 4, No 2; p. 43

during the confrontation with Israel, Damascus turned to its superpower ally, the Soviet Union.

However, despite the renewed cooperation with Iran, the two countries opposite views over the Lebanese arena started to threaten the alliance. Syria's relationship with Iran began to pay dividends when the need to unsheathe the Lebanese Shiite sword overlapped with Tehran's mission to export the Islamic revolution and deal a decisive blow to Zionism and American imperialism".⁵²

Moreover between 1984 and 1985 the growing influence of Hezbollah in Lebanon at Amal's expenses resulted more a liability rather than an asset. Furthermore, Iran's Stubbornness in refusing any talk with Iraq brought to the emergence of the Iraqi - Jordanian - Egyptian axis backed by the US and the consequent decline of Syrian - Iranian alliance in the region. The Syrian - Iranian resistance after reaching its Zenith in the aftermath of Israeli invasion of Lebanon was now going through a challenging period. In the following years the events following the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon and the divergent about Lebanese future political outlook became a major factor of clash between the two middle eastern countries.

2.5 From Intra - Alliance Tensions and to the Consolidation of the Syrian - Iranian Axis (1985-1988)

The years between 1985- 1988 have constituted without a doubt the most turbulent era of the Syrian - Iranian alliance. The events unfolding in Lebanon following the Israeli withdrawal and, concurrently, the scenario in the Gulf, put at serious risk the continuity of the partnership between Tehran and Damascus.

The 1985 Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon left a political vacuum in which Syria's and Iran's and conflicting agenda became evident. While Iran sought to play the Lebanese card as a way to export the Islamic revolution, Syria was determined to stabilize the situation in its backyard by bringing the entire country into its sphere of

⁵² Goodarzi, J. M. (2009). *Syria and Iran : Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*; pp.76 - 77

influence.⁵³ Similarly, while the retreat of Israel presented Syria with many opportunities to finally secure its Western borders, it also fostered the rising of Hezbollah⁵⁴ as a major actor in the struggle for southern Lebanon. Indeed, Syria in its attempt to bring about stability in the war torn country and unwilling or unable to impose its hegemony on an increasingly fragmented Lebanon, sought to use various Lebanese factions against each other and to exploit the anarchy they created to make its peacekeeping rule indispensable.⁵⁵

However, the struggle for Lebanon led to increasing tensions between Tehran and Damascus. The main area of confrontation between the two allies revolved around the continued rivalry between Amal and Hezbollah. The war of camps erupted on 20 May 1985 opposing the shi'a syrian backed group Amal against the PLO militias for the control of the Palestinian refugees camps of Sabra, Shatila and Burj el-Barajneh in Beirut. After five weeks of heavy fightings the war eventually came to an end. Pro - Syrian Palestinians, not Amal, were left in control of the camps. However, the brief confrontation highlighted the ideological divergences between Assad and Khomeini. While Syria strongly supported Amal at the PLO expenses, Tehran needed the palestinian card to embrace the anti imperialist struggle and portray Iran as a valid allied of the Arab cause against Israel. Consequently, Syria increasingly came to see resurgent Islamic militancy as another obstacle to its drive for hegemony in Lebanon⁵⁶, thus jeopardizing its relation with Iran. To this respect, two events drastically endangered the relation between Iran and Syria: the massacre of Hezbollah and the growing rivalry between Amal and Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon.

⁵³ Goodarzi, J. M. (2009). *Syria and Iran : Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*; p. 144

⁵⁴ For more information about Hezbollah's origin and ideology see: Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997). *Syria and Iran : middle powers in a penetrated regional system*; p. 138

⁵⁵ Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997). *Syria and Iran : middle powers in a penetrated regional system*; p. 129

⁵⁶ Ibid; p. 131

Between September and October 1987 the kidnapping of three americans deeply concerned Damascus, thus putting at risk the stability Assad was trying to achieve in Lebanon. Hezbollah was found clearly responsible for the event, however no evidence was provided to support a clear Iranian role in the issue.⁵⁷ Hezbollah growing guerrilla and terrorist activities were upsetting Syria which was very much determined to put an end to the chaos created by the Iran supported movement.

On 24th February the situation came to a head when syrian troops entered the Basta district of West Beirut risking an opening confrontation with Hezbollah militias. The situation further deteriorated when Syrian troops stormed a three storey building that housed the local Hezbollah headquarters. Alleged 20 Hezbollah were killed, however, further clarifications brought to the surface that Syrian troops after Hezbollah personnel peacefully handed over the Fathallah barracks to the syrians, twenty - three Hezbollah militiamen and five women were rounded up, had their hands tied, were lined up against a wall and shot. ⁵⁸ Iran's reactions to the killing of its proxy men in Lebanon was cautious and calibrated. Although condemning the accident, Iranian officials were very aware Assad deemed it necessary. Moreover, Iran revolutionaries knew their main concern was the prosecution of the gulf war and Lebanon did not constitute their primary interest.⁵⁹

The situation between Syria and Hezbollah further came to a head when the dispute between Amal and Hezbollah for the control over Southern Lebanon resurged. The continued attacks from Hezbollah in the self - proclaimed Israeli security zone were threatening Assad's plans for a stable military security in the country and Amal's presence as well. By spring 1988 the fightings between the two Shi'a groups had reached their climax. Syria and Iran stood behind their respective allied and the alliance seemed ready to collapse.

⁵⁷ Goodarzi, J. M. (2009). *Syria and Iran : Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*; p. 147

⁵⁸ Ibid; pp. 201 - 202

⁵⁹ Ibid; p. 203

However, on 26 May the crisis was finally resolved. Damascus and Tehran eventually understood that a compromise would have to be reached. The crisis between Amal and Hezbollah demonstrated how the alliance was not a mere marriage of convenience dictated by temporary convergent interests and had matured into a stable partnership driven by long term goals.

The Gulf parterre as well resulted to be a testing environment for the durability of the axis. As Iran was not leaning towards any concessions to Iraq and due to its increasing aggressivity, Washington formally entered the war supporting Saddam Hussein.

With the 1987 Amman summit, mainstream Arab states elevated Iran at the main threat in the region, thus channeling consistent financial aid to Baghdad to advance the war with the Islamic Republic and relegating the Palestinian struggle to a secondary position.⁶⁰ Moreover, the proposal of Egypt's reintroduction in the Arab League hugely upset Assad. However, despite the growing isolation, Hafiz al-Assad still supported its Iranian ally at a time it was losing the initiative in the Gulf and the Arab world was waging war against Tehran.⁶¹ In particular, Hafiz al-Assad's role was pivotal in the prevention of hostile Arab Unity and the ability of Tehran to play one Arab state against the other.⁶² In both the Amman and Algiers summit the anti-Iran bloc asked Syria to leave its position pro Iran. However, Hafiz al - Assad, despite pressure from Arab opinion and Sunni establishments, especially in the Gulf states, saw no reason to depart from its view that evolutionary Iran must be embraced as an ally.⁶³ Moreover, another factor which helped consolidating the alliance was Tehran's acknowledgment of Damascus' precedence over Syria. Iran recognized that Hafiz al

⁶⁰ *International Herald Tribune*, 11 November 1987; *The Guardian*, 13 November 1987.

⁶¹ Goodarzi, J. M. (2009). *Syria and Iran : Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*; p. 284

⁶² Maoz, M., & Yaniv, A. (2015). *Syria under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*. New York : Routledge, 2015; p.109

⁶³ Seale, P., & McConville, M. (1989). *Asad of Syria : the struggle for the Middle East*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1990; p. 364

- Assad was the final arbiter in Lebanon and that it would not serve Iran's long term interests to challenge him in Beirut.⁶⁴

Finally, on 20 August 1988 with the acceptance by both parts of UN's security council resolution 598 the Gulf War between Iran and Iraq finally came to an end. The end of the war along with the axis' cooperation in Lebanon finally consolidated the alliance showing how the two countries were able to delineate the parameters of their cooperation and identify their vital interests. In particular, Syria and Iran were able to consolidate their alliance through a thorough process of consultation which helped to overcome divergent interests and reach mutually agreeable arrangements.⁶⁵ The years to come would further advance the consolidation of the Syrian - Iranian partnership, thus dismissing any consideration about the versatility of their tie.

2.6 The containment of Saddam in Iraq and the Gulf (1988 - 1991)

The end of the eight years long war in the Gulf between Iran and Iraq prepared the ground for the emergence of a new political order. The bipolar world which constituted the main distinctiveness of the Cold War era, and the long rivalry between Washington and Moscow, been replaced by a Unipolar system. In this new global order many predicted the demise of the Syrian - Iranian alliance. However, the events which unfolded in the early 1990s, despite a few divergences, acted as a catalyst for the fortification of the axis.

In the aftermath of the cessation of hostilities in the Gulf, Saddam championed the war as a victory for Iraq. Iran's weakness and Syria's isolation further magnified Baghdad's political power and made it the prime contender for leadership in the Arab world.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Goodarzi, J. M. (2009). *Syria and Iran : Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*; p.285

⁶⁵ Ibid; p. 284

⁶⁶ Goodarzi, J. M. (2009). *Syria and Iran : Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*; p.287

Saddam Hussein's boosted confidence was not unfounded. Iraq possessed the fifth largest army in the world; additionally, Baghdad had full support of Washington, which saw in the Arab leader a valuable ally "capable of containing the revolutionary Islamic tide rising from Tehran, threatening to undermine the gulf monarchies, possessing nearly half of the world's petroleum reserves".⁶⁷

Further, the upcoming collapse of the Soviet Union, and the loss, for Damascus, of its main weapons provider, along with Moscow's shifting strategy in the region from a "strategic partnership" to "defensive sufficiency"⁶⁸, encouraged Syria to search a deeper cooperation with the Islamic Republic.

Iran, for its part, continued to perceive Baghdad as the main threat in the region, and the renewed collaboration in Lebanon through the backing of Hezbollah, made of Syria still an indispensable ally for Tehran. On the Lebanese front, Syrian deadlock over Amin Gemayel's successor prompted General Michel Aoun to exploit the political vacuum to challenge Syrian hegemony. Thus the confrontation that erupted between Syrian and Christian - Lebanese troops presented Baghdad with the perfect opportunity to punish Damascus for its continued backing of Iran. In autumn 1988 Saddam started to deliver weapons to Aoun in order to weaken Syrian position in Lebanon.⁶⁹

However, another unexpected storm was about to shake the Middle East, thus putting once more the axis of resistance collaboration at risk. On August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait.⁷⁰ An event, which, in Halliday's words was "an act of

⁶⁷ Hiro, D. (2001). *Neighbors, not friends : Iraq and Iran after the Gulf wars*. London ; New York : Routledge, 2001.p.29

⁶⁸ Rabinovich, I. (2008). *The view from Damascus : state, political community and foreign relations in twentieth-century Syria*. London ; Portland, Or. : Vallentine Mitchell, 2008; p.278

⁶⁹ Goodarzi, J. M. (2009). *Syria and Iran : Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*;p. 287

⁷⁰ To understand why Iraq invaded Kuwait see: Halliday, F. (2005). *The Middle East in international relations : power, politics and ideology*. Cambridge, UK ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2005; pp.145-147

inter-state war that divided the region itself and drew external forces into regional conflict more directly than at any time since 1918".⁷¹

The highly unpredictable Iraq's decision to invade the neighbouring Kuwait, after the 8 years of war with Iran, brought on the surface Iranian and Syrian differences over the best strategy to adopt in this issue. While Syria, alarmed by the prospect of an Iraqi success, decided to support the Arab - US coalition by sending troops to Saudi Arabia⁷², though not participating in the actual fighting, Iran decided to remain neutral in the issue, condemning Washington presence in the Gulf. This clash of opinions prompted many to, once again, declare the end of the cooperation between Damascus and Tehran. However, the stand the alliance took against Iraq was a watershed in overcoming the distrust of the GCC States and fostering the acceptance of Iran as a valuable partner to ensure the security of the Gulf.⁷³

Likewise, in 1990 the Damascus - Tehran axis further institutionalized and consolidated its alliance by establishing the joint higher Syrian - Iranian Cooperation committee, chaired by their respective Vice presidents and Foreign ministers,⁷⁴ aimed at boosting reciprocal economical and political cooperation.

The years marking the containment of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the first Gulf proved that Tehran and Damascus had reached the ultimate maturity in dealing with conflicting interests. The "bandwagoning" position adopted by Syria in its alignment with the US in the struggle with Iraq in Kuwait was wrongly understood by many as the break of Assad cooperation with the IRI. Instead,

⁷¹ Halliday, F. (2005). *The Middle East in international relations : power, politics and ideology*; p.130

⁷² Rabinovich, I. (2008). *The view from Damascus : state, political community and foreign relations in twentieth-century Syria*. London ; Portland, Or. : Vallentine Mitchell, 2008; p.280

⁷³ Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997). *Syria and Iran : middle powers in a penetrated regional system*; p. 107

⁷⁴ Goodarzi, J.(2013) "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment," Ortadoğu Etütleri Vol. 4, No 2; p.46

with this move, the former Syrian president masterfully managed the relation between both the Arab states and Iran, thus acting as a political mediator.⁷⁵

Finally, despite these difficulties, the Iran–Syria relationship remained strong. During Hafez al - Assad’s rule, Iran managed to establish viable foothold against Israel at the heart of the Arab world and empower Lebanese Shias.⁷⁶

2.7 Phase Five – Alliance Cooperation in the Post-Cold War Era (1991-2003)

The end of the Cold War along with the American intervention in Kuwait represented a watershed in the history of the region. The bipolar system which had accompanied the unfolding of the events in the Middle East over nearly forty years had come to an end. As a result, the Syrian Iranian axis was affected as well from the emerging of a new world order. However, despite many observations over the upcoming collapse of the Tehran - Damascus tie, the two countries had several reasons to continue their cooperation.

Firstly, enhanced US military presence in the region following the dismantling of the Soviet Union, left both Iran and Syria with no super power patron to rely on in order to counter American influence. Thus, the alliance became increasingly vital in order to diminish United States impact on Middle East. Secondly, Syria needed Iran to advocate its interest in the Arab Israeli conflict and peace talks.⁷⁷ Indeed, both were better able to cope with the peace process together than they would have been apart.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Milani, M. “Why Tehran Won’t Abandon Assad(ism)”; p. 82

⁷⁷ Goodarzi, J.(2013) “Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment,” *Ortadoğu Etütleri* Vol. 4, No 2; p.46

⁷⁸ Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997). *Syria and Iran : middle powers in a penetrated regional system*; p.191

The United States and Soviet Union's sponsored Madrid conference in 1991, laid the foundations for the prospect of a peace settlement among Israel, Palestine, as well as Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. However, Assad was firmly trying to avoid any bilateral negotiation which would have excluded a comprehensive settlement over the Palestinian Issue and a broader Peace with Syria and the rest of the Arab countries. Syria was aiming to a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, according to UN Resolution 242.

Iran, for its part, represented a key element for Syria's chances of negotiations, indeed Damascus benefited from the alliance a lot. It could swing between Iran and the moderate pro-Western camp as a way of winning concessions in the negotiations for both the United States and Israel considered Iran the main threat in the region.⁷⁹ A peace with Syria would allow the US to end Iranian influence in the Levant by ceasing the support to Hezbollah and other Islamist groups.

At the end of Madrid's negotiations, a complete peace treaty between Syria and Israel was not reached, and Damascus-Tehran partnership remained valuable to both as a way of balancing Israeli post-peace penetration of the Middle East.⁸⁰

The cooperation between Iran and Syria was further cemented due to the continued perception that Iraq constituted a threat. Even though Iraq had suffered a heavy defeat after the failure of the Kuwait's invasion, as long as the Ba'hist leader remained in power, Iran considered Syria strategically essential to keep Iraqi power in check. Additionally, Syria and Iran embarked upon a joint program to acquire the capability to manufacture ballistic missiles domestically with the support of Russia, China and North Korea. Indeed, "given the Israeli nuclear monopoly in the region and perceived American threats to Tehran, Syrian and Iranian attempts at acquisitions of arms, including weapons of mass destruction, are perfectly compatible with balance of power strategies and, in themselves, demonstrate no

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid; p.193

offensive intent”.⁸¹ Fourthly, Washington’s dual containment policy⁸² further hardened the relation between the new Clinton administration and Iran, thus making Syria’s partnership indispensable to Tehran’s survival in the region.

Perhaps the most detrimental aspect of the Syrian - Iranian relation during 1990s was their support to Islamist movements like Hamas and Islamic jihad.⁸³ However, the election of moderate reformist Muhammad Khatami as president of the Islamic Republic of Iran sparked hope over the possibility of a rapprochement with the United States. Notwithstanding, Iran had made wide use of terrorism for political ends till 1997, after Khatami election “Iran began to distance itself from terrorist, though without renouncing it completely”.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, despite evident shifting in Iran’s foreign policy towards neighbours and the West, the US still accused Iran of being, in 2000, the most active state sponsor of terrorism⁸⁵, thus further alienating the prospect of a peace with the Islamic Republic.

In the early 2000 the Syrian-Iranian axis was hit by an unexpected chain of dramatic events that after ten years of relative calm threatened the security as well as the future stability of both countries. The voluntary Israeli withdrew from Lebanon, despite representing a great victory for Hezbollah, Syria and Iran threatened to undermine Syrian military presence in the country which was justified under the guise of defending Lebanon from Israeli expansionism⁸⁶. Second, the death of Hafiz al Assad on June 10, 2000, along with the succession of his son Bashar al-Assad

⁸¹ Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997). *Syria and Iran : middle powers in a penetrated regional system*. London ; New York : Routledge, 1997; p.111

⁸² To understand United State’s dual containment policy see Litwak, R. (2000). *Rogue states and U.S. foreign policy: containment after the Cold War*. [Washington, D.C.] : WoodrowLitwak, R. (2000). *Rogue states and U.S. foreign policy : containment after the Cold War*. [Washington, D.C.] : Woodrow Wilson Center Press ; [Baltimore] : Distributed by the Johns Hopkins University Press, c2000.

⁸³ Goodarzi, “Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment” p. 47

⁸⁴ Chubin, S. (2002). *Wither Iran? : reform, domestic politics and national security*. Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press for the International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2002. P.89

⁸⁵ Ibid; p. 96; The State Department’s annual report Patterns of Global Terrorism (Washington DC: Department of State; Office of the Coordinator for Counter - terrorism, April 2001)

⁸⁶ David Walsh, (2013) “Syrian Alliance Strategy in the Post Cold War Era: The Impact of Unipolarity” p.115

closed a significant political history for Syria. Moreover, the election of George W. Bush Jr ended the liberalism period which had characterized the Clinton administration. Most importantly, after only one year after Bush's election, the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, paved the way for a new era of conflicts in the Middle East, increasing the level of polarization between the East and West, and Syria's and Iran's perception of American threat in the region.

2.8 Phase Six – The Reinvigoration of Alliance Cooperation since the 2003 Iraq War

Following the dramatic events of September 11 the world was divided into two by the Bush administration among those who would support US “War on Terror” and those that would not.⁸⁷ Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the Twin Towers attack and the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan, both Syria and Iran supported United States counter-terrorism operations. In Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic had provided widely economic and military support in order to fight Taliban.⁸⁸ Likewise, by early 2002 Syria had emerged as one of the CIA's most effective intelligence allies in the fight against al-Qaeda, providing an outpouring of information that came to an end only with the invasion of Iraq.⁸⁹

However, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq dramatically shifted the alliance's strategy. While on the one hand Hussein's defeat was seen by both Damascus and Tehran as a positive outcome, as the longtime rivalry would be finally removed, the speed of US military victory caused major concerns for the two allies. In 2002, Bush's “axis of evil”⁹⁰ speech, where the former American president accused Iraq, Iran and North Korea of being the major terrorism - sponsoring states, represented a stab in the back to Iran's efforts. After fighting alongside, us forces in Afghanistan, Tehran was out

⁸⁷ Ibid; pp .115 - 116

⁸⁸ Kayhan Barzegar (2010) Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy after Saddam, *The Washington Quarterly*, 33:1, 173-189; p.177

⁸⁹ Seymour Hersh, “The Syrian Bet,” *The New Yorker*, July 28, 2003

⁹⁰ State of the Union Address (January 29, 2002), The White House. Retrieved from:<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

of a sudden in the orbit of Bush's war on terror. Concurrently, one of the chief ideologists behind the war, Richard Perle, warned that Syria would be next on American War on Terror's list. Washington intelligence accused Damascus of owning Weapons of Mass Destruction shipped to Syria from Iraq before the arrival of UN's inspector.⁹¹ Thus, these claims further compelled Syria and Iran to cooperate and coordinate operations in Iraq in order to thwart the increasing common threats arising from the US presence in the region.

Assad started to cut intelligence resources to CIA and adopting a more hostile attitude towards Washington.⁹² Syria allowed the passage of Sunni fighters into Iraq to challenge the US invasion, while Iran tried to cultivate and maintain ties with all the major Iraqi political parties, particularly the Shia ones, in order to ensure that the new government in Baghdad would not assume a hostility stance towards Tehran.⁹³ However, both Syria and Iran had been very careful not to push the country into a civil war. On the other hand, as long as the American presence remained stable, they were both decided to take all the necessary measures to prevent Washington's military ascendancy in Iraq.

Western attacks on Syria and Iran appeared even more evident on the Lebanese front. In 2005 the killing of former Lebanese president Hariri presented both Saudi Arabia, utterly upset for the growing Iranian influence in Iraq, as well as United States with the opportunity to inflict a major blow to Tehran's allies Syria and Hezbollah. The terrorist attack was used by the West to force Syria out of Lebanon.⁹⁴ However, this event proved to be a major game changer. Utterly humiliated by the forced

⁹¹ Ed Vulliamy, "Syria Could Be Next, Warns Washington," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2003 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/apr/13/syria.iraq1>.

⁹² David Walsh, "Syrian Alliance Strategy in the Post Cold War Era: The Impact of Unipolarity"; p.116

⁹³ Goodarzi, J.(2013) "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment," *Ortadoğu Etütleri* Vol. 4, No 2; p. 48

⁹⁴ Hinnebusch, R. (2007). *The US Invasion of Iraq: Explanations and Implications. Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 16(3), 209-228. doi:10.1080/10669920701616443; p. 21

withdrawal of its 18000 troops and due to its growing isolation in the region, Assad moved even closer to Hezbollah and Tehran.⁹⁵

On 12 July 2006, Hezbollah initiated a war with Israel by kidnapping two of its soldiers and killing another eight in a cross-border raid.⁹⁶ Despite the continued denial by both Damascus and Tehran of the US accusations of both countries involvement in the conflict, evidence showed that the axis of resistance had fully supported the historical Shi'a allies. The war lasted six weeks and represented a major military breakthrough in the history of Arab - Israeli conflict.

In fact, Hezbollah claimed victory, a claim supported by some pundits as well.⁹⁷ The Israeli failure and the heavy moral defeat made of Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, one of the most popular figures in the Middle East. The victory boosted both Syria and Iran position in the region, and most importantly the triple alliance had given Iran strategic depth at the heart of the Arab world, with limited retaliatory capability against Israel.⁹⁸

Finally, also under the government of Bashar al Assad Iran proved to be Syria's most valuable ally. Tehran as well, especially after 2003, despite some early disagreements over Iraq, tightened its friendly partnership with Damascus.

2.9 Chapter Conclusions

The Syrian - Iranian alliance has represented a constant in the last forty years of Middle East history. While since the 1979 Islamic revolution the region has gone through great changes, Damascus and Tehran have continued to cooperate to varying degrees on many issues, consolidating their partnership and emerging as the most enduring alliance in the region. In a region where alliances are generally temporary.

⁹⁵ Milani, M. (2013) "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)";p. 83

⁹⁶ Samii, A. (2008). A Stable Structure on Shifting Sands: Assessing the Hizbollah-Iran-Syria Relationship. *Middle East Journal*, 62(1), 32-53. P.50

⁹⁷ Milani, M. (2013) "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)"; p. 83

⁹⁸ Ibid.

The alliance, despite international concerns, has proved to be defensive in nature; it was cemented by the need to counter common external threats, notably the pro-Iraq coalition during the Iran-Iraq war and the Israeli-American coalition in Lebanon after the 1982 Israeli invasion.⁹⁹ Moreover, although often observers have recalled to the religious vicinity of the Shi'a Islamic republic and the Alawite sect of Assad's family, the religious affinity has never had a significant impact on the forging of the alliance. On contrary, especially during the Iran - Iraq war, Syria's Pan- Arabism ideology had been vital in downplaying the portraying of the war as a struggle between Persians and Arabs, thus avoiding the misleading equation of a Shi'a attempt to win over the Sunni regional majority.

The defensive nature of the alliance has become even more evident after the 2003 US - led invasion of Iraq. While Syria and Iran had initially shown a bandwagoning choice by providing full support to the United States, channeling efforts in the region to fight terrorism, the 2003 events drew Tehran and Damascus further together in an attempt to counter the growing US influence in the region. In 2005, Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Naji al-Utri publicly announced that Syria and Iran presented a "united front" against regional threats, and the two countries signed a defense agreement in June 2006,¹⁰⁰ thus underlining the defensive stance of the alliance.

Finally, the historical overview proves how much the two countries initiatives and interests have been strongly intertwined over the last 40 years, cementing an alliance which has been vital for the regional survival of both countries. Most importantly Tehran sees Syria as the bedrock of the 1,600-mile "Corridor of Resistance"—which stretches from Herat in Afghanistan to Iraq to Lebanon to Syria —that it has built against the United States and Israel.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997). *Syria and Iran : middle powers in a penetrated regional system*; p. 202

¹⁰⁰ David Walsh, "Syrian Alliance Strategy in the Post Cold War Era: The Impact of Unipolarity"; p. 114

¹⁰¹ Milani, M. (2013) "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism); p. 88

However, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 constitutes a major challenge for the future of the alliance, threatening the survival of Iran's most important ally in the region. The future outcomes of the future may have a larger impact on Iran than any other country in the Middle East. The next chapters will thus analyze Iran's stance in the war and the degree of Tehran's involvement in the conflict.

CHAPTER 3

IRAN'S POLITICAL FRAMING ON SYRIA: A STRUGGLE FOR PREROGATIVES

3.1 Introduction

After six years of war in Syria, Iran keeps playing a key role in maintaining Bashar al Assad in power. Along with Russia, Iran has thrown its weight behind the Syrian regime, joining the anti-rebel coalition. Iran's stakes in Syria are high and its military involvement has provided Assad with a great asset to fight back the insurgency.

Iran's strategy has gone through different degrees of intensity, shifting its narrative to find a broad consensus within its domestic political environment. Indeed, Iran's security decision-making process is a complex machine which does not work straightforward. The Islamic Republic's multi-layered and multi-faceted system could be best described as a "consensual process among the key political and military leaders".¹⁰² Iran's policy in Syria is, therefore, influenced by different actors. Domestic politics thus plays a big role in shaping Iran's National security policy and most importantly the current Iranian strategy in Syria. To this respect, the aim of this chapter is to offer an account of Iran's involvement in the Syrian war through the lens of its Domestic politics, framing Tehran's intervention through a pragmatic stance.

¹⁰² J. Matthew McInnis (2015) *Iran's strategic thinking: origin and evolution* p.7

3.2 Iran's shifting narratives about the Arab Spring

In 2011 Iran welcomed with enthusiasm the wave of protests sparking throughout the Arab World. The Arab Spring opened a realm of new possibilities for the Islamic Republic which sought to enhance its strategic power in the region. However, the narratives adopted to frame the Arab uprisings lacked a coherent understanding as in each Arab country events unfolded in different ways.

When an uprising erupted in both Egypt and Tunisia, Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei was quick to label the unrest as an "Islamic awakening" creating a bridge of affinity between the 1979 Islamic revolution and today's Arab countries struggle. Moreover, in a rare public appearance during Tehran's Friday prayer, Khamenei stated "this is a war between two willpowers: the willpower of the people and the willpower of their enemies. The Israelis and the United States are more concerned about what would happen to their interests in a post-Mubarak regime."¹⁰³ The revival of the Islamic Revolution as an appealing paradigm for the framing of the Arab uprisings was thus reinforced with the "divine empathy" which must 'fully end the dominance of key enemies: the Zionists and the Americans'.¹⁰⁴

In Bahrain, Iran was presented with a chance to expand its Islamic rhetoric to the Gulf region. While the Iranian officials had been careful in dealing with the uprising in the Arab World, avoiding any sectarian interpretation of the discourse, the protest in Bahrain compelled Iran to openly "show sympathy for the protesters". Khamenei, during a Friday sermon, expressly showed the Republic support for the agitations "Bahrain's revolution will be victorious with the help of God...and to accuse us of interfering is a downright lie...If we intervened, the situation would have been different".¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Lutz, M (2011, February 04). Iran's supreme leader calls uprisings an "Islamic Awakening". *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com>

¹⁰⁴ Fatima Al-Smadi (2017) *Iran and the Arab Revolutions: Narratives Establishing Iran's Monopolism*; p.3

¹⁰⁵ Ibid; p.9

Iranian media highlighted how the protests in Bahrain posed a major threat to Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf Monarchies, who immediately deployed armed forces in Bahrain's capital to stop the unrest. The Al Saud and other Gulf rulers, however, did not only fear the knock- on effect of a popular uprising, but also an imminent Iranian victory. The presence of a Shiite majority in Bahrain gave rise to their suspicions that an insurgent victory would, in fact, constitute a success for Tehran.¹⁰⁶

Libya posed another major problem for a unified narrative about the Arab Spring. Since the outbreak of the protests, the Islamic Republic had strongly opted for an Islamic awakening discourse thus supporting the toppling of authoritarian regimes. However, after NATO intervention against the Gaddafi regime, Iran shifted to an anti-West rhetoric, "Tehran condemned the operation as the continuation of a series of incidents where the West, driven by its barely concealed interest in gaining control over Libyan oil, disregarded international law".¹⁰⁷

3.3 Iran's discourse on Syria: a struggle for prerogatives

In March 2011 the wave of protests who had shaped the Arab Spring culminated in Syria. The peaceful demonstrations in the city of Daraa, Southern Syria, later referred to as the "Cradle of the revolution", turned into a violent crackdown by the Assad's forces. On 6 March 2012, the incarceration and torture of 15 teenagers,¹⁰⁸ charged with having painted anti-Assad graffiti asking for "the fall of the regime", sparked numerous protests across Syria. A few days later, the 18th of March marked the beginning of the Syrian Revolution, when the government decided to suppress the unrest, after initially using cannons and tear gas against the protesters, opening live fire, killing at least four.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Henner Fürtig (2013) *Iran and the Arab spring: Between expectations and disillusion* p.14

¹⁰⁷ Ibid; p.13

¹⁰⁸ Fahim.K, Saad.H, "A Faceless Teenage Refugee Who Helped Ignite Syria's War". *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/09/world/middleeast/a-faceless-teenage-refugee-who-helped-ignite-syrias-war.html>

¹⁰⁹ "We have never seen such horror": *Crimes against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces*, Human Rights Watch (2011)

Surprisingly, Iran was caught off guard when the unrests reached Syria. Bashar al - Assad was a popular leader (especially in comparison with his counterparts in other Arab countries) and one whose government and army included all faiths and classes.¹¹⁰

The Iranian leadership was thus presented with a huge dilemma. Failing to frame the Syrian revolt as an Islamic awakening supporting the overthrow of the Assad regime, as it had been the case for the other Arab uprisings, would cost Iran the support of the Arab Countries as well as its popularity in Middle East; on the other hand, the hypothetical toppling of the Assad regime, the only true Arab ally in the region, would deprive Iran of its most strategic asset in its endeavor to project power in the Levant through its support to Hezbollah. Finally, Iran convened that the latter option overweighs the benefits of leaving the “Alawite regime” behind.

Therefore, with the outset of the Syrian war, the discourse which Iran had tried to promote during the Arab Spring presenting itself as the champion of oppressed, far from any sectarian derivation, showed all of its flaws and incoherence. The Iranian regime was very aware of the gambling the Syrian narrative put forward to Iran’s foreign policy strategy in the region.

The Syrian faith would likely have major repercussions in Iran’s neighboring countries, and those where the IRI has direct interests. As the Syrian war has been growing increasingly sectarian, Lebanon, long under Syrian influence, and itself burdened by confessional cleavages, is directly interested in the fate of the Alawite (a Shi’a offshoot) regime and the character of its possible replacement.¹¹¹ Likewise, Iraq, which since the 2003 US-led invasion has been suffering a continuous armed struggle between Sunni and Shi’a groups may turn even more sectarian in case of a victory by the Sunni opposition Syrian groups which would eventually undermine Iranian influence in the country.

¹¹⁰ RUSI (2016) *Understanding Iranian Role in the Syrian Conflict*; p.11

¹¹¹ Chubin. S (2012) *Iran and The Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated*; p.30

Consequently, Iran finds itself reacting to external threats and events in a defensive manner rather than shaping the regional balance with an offensive posture. As for Morgenthau's *Balance of power*¹¹² theory, which constitutes the primary approach for the study of alliances, “Whenever the equilibrium is disturbed either by an outside force or by a change in one or the other elements composing the system, the system shows a tendency to re-establish either the original or a new equilibrium”¹¹³ Iran perfectly fits this assumption. Indeed the out of a sudden shock provoked by the Syrian revolt constitutes a great threat to Iranian ideal status quo, thus forcing the IRI to engage in a proactive manner to restore the situation ante. It is thus no surprise that seen the high stakes in Syria, Iran’ s domestic discourse about the Syrian uprisings throughout 2011 was one of confusion and inconsistency.¹¹⁴

3.4 The Syrian war: a foreign inspired sedition

At the outset of the Syrian uprising, the struggle to interpret the Syrian crisis within the Iranian political elite emerged predominantly. The conservative government led by president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad immediately embraced the Supreme leader’s narrative by emphasizing the foreign character of the Syrian war.

Notably, The Syrian unrest was informed with an anti-Zionist rhetoric underlining the historical Syria’s stance with respect to Israel as well as the United States’ attempt to undermine the “resistance front”. While trying to show a coherent narrative, conservative media played a crucial role in boosting the Hardliners discourse drawing, for instance, a line of similarity with the 2009 post-election protests in Iran.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Morgenthau, H. J. (1954). *Politics among nations; the struggle for power and peace*. New York, Knopf, 1954.

¹¹³ Ibid; p.162

¹¹⁴ Chubin. S (2012) *Iran and The Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated*; p.18

¹¹⁵ Firas Abu Hilal (2011) *Iran and the Arab Revolutions: Positions and Repercussions* p.11

However, the reformist opposition strongly criticized the mainstream interpretation accusing the government of double standards.¹¹⁶ Whereas at the beginning of the Arab Spring Iran immediately embraced the revolutionary character of the uprisings calling upon the falling of long - time lasting dictators, in the case of Syria the Iranian government stands beside the Ba'athist regime. Further, the more Iranian support for Assad became obvious, the more regime opponents inside and outside of Iran began to sardonically ask whether Iran only supported the “people’s will” in countries whose governments had alliances with the West, and not in those allied with Iran.¹¹⁷

Clearly, the entire “Islamic-revolutionary” narrative built by the Islamic Republic to have a “say” in the Arab Spring was being undermined by its position in Syria. In 2009 post-election protests in Iran, the slogan “neither Gaza nor Lebanon I’ll give my life for Iran” was severely condemned by the government who labeled the motto as anti-Islamic and blasphemous. In Syria, Iran failed to address the secularism and atheist character of the slogan "God, Syria, Bashar" raising further harsh criticisms from within Iran. In particular, Reformist news outlets significantly contributed to show Iran’s incoherence over the Syrian uprising. One of the critics arrived from the former deputy foreign minister Sayyed Mohammed Sadr who wrote that Iran should have put its efforts in counseling Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in a bid to persuade him to listen to his own people and implement true reforms in his country.¹¹⁸ To tackle the objections coming from within the Iranian opposition and the broader society, Iran’s political elites, whose main voice of legitimate narrative was ultimately the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, enforced the narrative who sought to frame the Syrian uprising as both a proxy war and a foreign-inspired sedition.

At the end of 2011, Iran hosted an Islamic awakening conference in an attempt to boost its position as a “protector of Muslim rights and Democratic governments”.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Henner Fürtig (2013) *Iran and the Arab spring: Between expectations and disillusion* p.17

¹¹⁸ Firas Abu Hilal (2011) *Iran and the Arab Revolutions: Positions and Repercussions*; p.12

During the conference, the former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad reaffirmed the foreign character of the Syrian war:” We must be vigilant: The West is trying to foment sectarian conflict in our societies, as part of their goal of keeping Israel alive,” he said. “Today Syria, tomorrow your country.”¹¹⁹

In a speech delivered at the Islamic awakening and Ulama Conference Khamenei further reinvigorated the foreign penetration discourse claiming that the Syrian war was falsely portrayed as a conflict between Shia and Sunni from Western propaganda in order to undermine the true character of the struggle: “the two sides of the conflict in Syria are not Shia and Sunni, rather they are the supporters and opponents of anti-Zionist resistance. Neither the Syrian government is a Shia government, nor is the secular and anti-Islam opposition a Sunni group”.¹²⁰ This latter Khamenei’s statement clearly emphasized once more the realist realm of Iran’s foreign policy. Although the Supreme Leader is the beholder of Iran’s foreign policy decision-making process, and even though it is not possible to ignore the distinguishing religious marks of the Iranian society, the Supreme Leader has often demonstrated a degree of realism which is compatible with the many theories of “realpolitik”¹²¹ thus showing Iran’s inclination to apply, also in Syria, a pragmatic approach.

The Western negative propaganda discourse which was trying to depict, according to the IRI, Bashar al - Assad as a bloody dictator, was broadened by adding a geopolitical and structural struggle to Iran’s intervention in Syria. The war was transformed by the Iranian elite as a proxy war which included regional and international actors as stated by Khamenei’s representative in Syria, Mojtaba Hosseini, which defined the ongoing crisis as “ a proxy war by America and the regime occupying Jerusalem [Israel] and some seditious Arab countries for revenge

¹¹⁹ Worth,R (2012) *Efforts to Rebrand the Arab Spring backfires in Iran*, New York Times; Retrieved from:<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/03/world/middleeast/effort-to-rebrand-arab-spring-backfires-in-iran.html>

¹²⁰ Speech delivered on April 29, 2013 by Ayatollah Khamenei the Leader of the Islamic Revolution in a meeting at Inauguration of Islamic Awakening and Ulama Conference. **Available from:** <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1772/Leader-s-Speech-at-Inauguration-of-Islamic-Awakening-and-Ulama>

¹²¹ For a general overview of the concept of realpolitik see: John Bew: "The Real Origins of Realpolitik", The National Interest, 2014

for Syria's resistance [to Israel]."¹²² It is thus clear that conservative media have played a vital role in helping the Iranian government to reach a broad degree of consensus among domestic policy makers by unifying the narrative about Syria.

Further, after having paved the way for addressing the crisis as a consequence of foreign interventionism, the struggle for Syria was transformed into a geopolitical struggle accusing Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries involved in the war to sponsor terrorism and foster the rising of extremist Islamic groups.

3.5 The terrorism and Sunni extremism narrative

The single most important event which helped both Bashar al Assad and Iran to justify for the former its harsh military campaign and for the latter its involvement in Syria, was the rising of ISIS. The power vacuum left by the bloody civil war paved the way for the appearance on the scene of a new Sunni - inspired extremist group which destabilized Syria furthermore with an unexpected new wave of terror. Though a deep account of the origin of the Islamic State and its significance for Iran's foreign policy will be accurately investigated in the next chapter, a brief description of the key events which shaped the rise of ISI in Syria will be given below to have a better understanding of its implications for Iran's narrative.

The Islamic State was already operative in Iraq before crossing the border in mid-2011 to establish a presence in Syria as well. Abu Bakr Baghdadi after having become the leader of IS in April 2010 in Iraq,¹²³ was presented with a great opportunity at the outbreak of the Syrian conflict: to expand the ISI into the neighboring Syria. Therefore, as the uprising spread and became more violent, Baghdadi allowed nine Syrian members of the group, headed by Abu Mohammed al

¹²² Sabet, F (2013) *The islamic republic's political elite & syria: understanding what they think through iranian media narratives*: p.11. *The Battles and Insecurity in Syria Is a Proxy War* (Namayandeh-yeRahbar-e Moazam Enghelab Dar Surieh: Dargiri Va Na Amnihaye Surieh Jang-e Niabati Ast) Islamic Republic News Agency. 7 Jan. 2013. p.11

¹²³ CNN (2017), *Isis Fast Facts*. Retrieved from: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/08/world/isis-fast-facts/>

Golani, to set up in Northern Syria in mid-2011.¹²⁴ Very quickly al Golani “established himself as leader of a group that came to be known as Jabhat al Nusra”.¹²⁵

Whilst on the one hand the Islamic State's ascendancy in Iraq significantly threatened Iran's security and the safety of a country which Iran had worked carefully to bring under its sphere of influence, in Syria, the appearance of both ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra, labelled as terrorist groups, constituted the perfect excuse to justify its fighting alongside Bashar al - Assad.

Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, took the chance to reinforce the claim that the war in Syria was nothing but a proxy war among western powers by holding the West responsible for the birth of the Islamic State: “ISIS is the product of two things. First is the US invasion of Iraq, and the foreign presence that creates a dynamic of resistance. Second is the feeling of disequilibrium, which has prevailed in some countries in the region since the fall of Saddam. They are trying to change the status quo.”¹²⁶ However, while Iran was fully aware of the threat posed by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, two Countries in which the IR had high stakes, in order to control the public opinion's concern over the extremist threat arising near their borders, the Iranian national media played a very calculated game in downplaying ISIS success. Indeed in July 2014 when ISIS made important territorial gains in both Syria and Iraq, the media downplayed the degree of their success minimizing the ISI's success and reporting that “the Iraqi army had successfully pushed ISIS back, and that the group's fighters were confined to a small area in Iraq”.¹²⁷

To this respect as had been the case for the previous narratives, the ISIS one suffered many flaws and contradictions. Firstly, the discourse about ISIS excluded the two

¹²⁴ Mortada, R (2014) *Al - Qaeda(s) in Syria: from foundation to fracture*. English al - akhbar Retrieved from: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/print/20017>

¹²⁵ Stern, J, Berger, J.M (2015). *ISIS: the State of Terror*. London: William Collins, 2015; p.41

¹²⁶ Esfandiary, D., & Tabatabai, A. (n.d). Iran's ISIS policy. *International Affairs*, 91(1),p. 6

¹²⁷ Ibid.

years in which it was not present on the Syrian scene as well as the six months of peaceful protests, therefore, undermining the official reasons driving Iran's intervention in Syria¹²⁸. Secondly, the terrorism narrative simplified the war by transforming it into a two blocks dispute between the Assad regime and its Iranian and Russian allies on one side and IS and the rest of the Syrian rebels on the other. This latter approach clearly avoided mentioning that ISIS encountered many confrontations with the so-called "Syrian rebels" and that consequently, its expansion came at the expenses of these opposition groups.¹²⁹ Nonetheless, the development of the situation in Iraq and the rise of ISIL provided opportunities for Iran to prove its claims as a major force in the Middle East, which should be recognized as a key player in resolving regional dilemmas.¹³⁰

Besides propping up the Islamic State's path narrative, Iran took also the chance to frame the uprising as a fertile ground for the spreading of Sunni extremism. In particular the Islamic Republic, in an attempt to find a comprehensive and cohesive approach to its public discourse about Syria, accused the West of supporting radical Islamism to trigger a sectarian reaction in the region between Sunni and Shi'a and destabilize the Middle East.¹³¹ For instance, Iran recalled about the support of Taliban in Afghanistan to thwart the enhancing of the former Soviet Union power in the region. Accordingly, in an interview on 30 August, 2012, of Syrian Prime Minister Wader Nader al - Halghi addressed the Syrian crisis emphasizing the terrorism aspect of the issue: "It has become clear that foreign-backed terrorist groups have abused this crisis

¹²⁸ Fatima Al-Smadi (2017) *Iran and the Arab Revolutions: Narratives Establishing Iran's Monopolism* p.20

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid; p.21

¹³¹ Sabet. F (2013) *the islamic republic's political elite & syria: understanding what they think through iranian media narratives*: p.12. "Heydarpour in a Conversation with Mehr: Salafs in the Region/Turkey and Qatar Play in NATO's Puzzle (Heydarpour Dar Goftogu Ba Mehr: Salafha Dar Mantagheh / Turkieh Va Qatar Dar Puzzle-e Nato Bazi Mikonand)." Mehr News Agency. 27 Jan. 2013. Online. Accessed 03 June 2013.

and are killing innocent people. Between these groups, there are Salaf and Takfiri al-Qaeda individuals.¹³²

Though IRGC has tried to subvert any sectarian connotation of Iran's role in Syria, the Islamic Republic has nonetheless sent harsh criticisms straight to Saudi Arabia for its support to terrorists and takfiris, a term widely used to describe the ideology of jihadist groups, such as the Nusra Front and the self-proclaimed Islamic State.¹³³ Syria has therefore turned into a new stage of confrontation of the long dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia hence polarizing the war between Iranian and Saudi supporters and emphasizing the Shia - Sunni cleavage. Although accused of promoting sectarianism, Ideology does not seem to represent the primary force behind Iran's actions in Syria, rather Sectarianism has become a way for Iran and its Sunni rivals to defend their interests and equities in the region's conflicts showing a consistent degree of pragmatism.¹³⁴

However, it is undeniable that as much as Iran's foreign policy remains pragmatic and realist, the involvement of Hezbollah, an Iranian - backed Shia group, has increased the feeling that the Syrian war is a dispute between Shia and Sunni actors for regional hegemony. Likewise, its narrative about the protection of Shia holy sites in Syria has reinforced the general perception which sees Iran's presence in Syria as driven by its Shia identity, rather than by strategic and rational reasons.

3.6 Mahdism and the protection of Shi'a sites in Syria

As the largest Shia country, over the years Iran has been extremely careful in using the Shia card to pursue national and regional interests. During the Islamic revolution, Iran's Shia roots were widely showcased from the leader of the uprisings, Ayatollah

¹³² Sabet, F (2013) *the islamic republic's political elite & syria: understanding what they think through iranian media narratives*: p.12. "Wael Al-Halghi, Syrian Prime Minister at the Tehran [NAM] Summit: Some Countries Are Causing a Crisis in Syria/Salafists and Al-Qaeda Are Killing People (Wael Al-Halghi Nakhost Vazir-e Surieh Dar Ejlas-e Tehran: Barkhi Keshvarha Amel-e Bohran Dar Surieh Hastand / Salafha Va Al-Ghaedeh MardomRa Mikoshand)."Fars News Agency. 30 Aug. 2012.

¹³³ Ostovar, R (2016) *Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide*

¹³⁴ Ibid.

Khomeini. However, in the following years, Iran's pragmatism took over ideological forces; the Shi'a branding of the revolution was replaced with a more inclusive Islamic discourse, "Iran's leaders have stressed their commitment to Islamic unity. They downplay the Shia character of the Islamic Republic when speaking on foreign policy issues and continue to express the pan-Islamic, as opposed to Shia-centric, tenets of the revolution's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini".¹³⁵

Though Iran acts in a highly pragmatic way in its state to state relationship as well as in its pursuing of state's survival, its religious matters result to have a significant role in its relations with non-state groups.¹³⁶ In Syria, Iran's has been pursuing a foreign policy which follows its national anti - symmetric warfare policy through the empowerment of proxy groups rather than a direct involvement in regional conflicts. Consequently, Iran's presence in Syria has been very much related to the creation and training of Shia militias for the fighting against the opposition.

Though Iran has tried to deny any sectarian position in the war, its public discourses have made large use of the Shi'a rhetoric in order to justify the Islamic Republic presence on the Syrian territory.

Syria is indeed home to about fifty sites considered holy for the Shia Islam. In particular, Sayyidah Zaynab Mosque, the gold-domed shrine, located near Damascus, is one of the holiest sites in Shiite Islam outside of Iraq and Saudi Arabia. It houses the remains of Zaynab, granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammed and daughter of Ali — the fourth leader of the early Islamic empire and one of the most revered figures in Shiism.¹³⁷

The defense of the Zaynab Shrine in the early days of the war became a prominent denotation of Iran's narrative and was well justified by the position which Zaynab

¹³⁵ Ostovar, R (2016) *Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide*

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Garrett, N (2013) *Part II: Shiite Holy Sites in Syria*, The Iran Primer

mosque occupies in the Shia world, especially in Iran. Indeed Sayyeda Zainab is a regional focal point for Iran's attempt to extend its religious and political influence among Shiites; some 202,000 Iranian tourists reportedly visited the shrine in 2003.¹³⁸

In the context of the Syrian war the calling upon the defence of Zaynab's Mosque from Tehran not only has increasingly turned the conflict more sectarian, but it has also attracted, as a result, Shi'a fighters throughout the region to fight in Syria. Many Shiite fighters have reportedly traveled to Syria to join their fellow religious affiliates in the protection of their holy sites.¹³⁹

If on the one hand, the Shiism discourse has helped reinforce the lines of fighters behind Iran and consequently Bashar al Assad, on the other, it has further raised questions on the real implications of Iran's foreign policy.

Already back in 2003, after the US invasion of Iraq, thanks to a vast network of Shia factions Iran had been able to use the anti - American sentiment to forge an alliance with different Iraqi militias, enhancing its political grip over Iraq. However, this has been done relying on the Shi'a majority groups, thus overlooking concerns from regional powers over the transformation of Iran into a sectarian actor. Nevertheless, Iran's growing support for its Shia religious affiliates remains instrumental to the fulfillment of its pragmatic foreign policy aims: the security of the Islamic revolution and the protection of the borders. Accordingly, "after 2003 the presence of hundreds of thousands of US troops right across the border in Iraq, not to mention also in nearby Afghanistan, was threatening to Iran. In response, the IRGC began a covert effort to organize and train small Iraqi Shia militias and use them to target U.S. forces."¹⁴⁰ Moreover, Iran's relations with extreme Shia groups, the Sadrist group, exist for the particular time of insecurity and to defuse U.S. attempts to minimize

¹³⁸ Smyth, P (2015) *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and its Regional Effects* p.5; Sindawi, K (2009) "The Shiite Turn in Syria" *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* p.8

¹³⁹ Karouny, M (2013) *Shi'ite fighters rally to defend Damascus shrine* Reuters. Retrieved from: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-shiites-idUSBRE92202X20130303>

¹⁴⁰ Ostovar, R (2016) *Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide*

Iran's role in its own security environment. In the long term, Iran's main strategy is to build close relations with moderate Shia factions that believe in establishing strategic relations with Iran."¹⁴¹

In the Syrian war, Iran seems to be using the same tactic adopted in Iraq, to guarantee itself a broader support and more chances to win the war and leave Assad in power. The religious discourse applied to Syria is not merely confined to the defence of the Shiite shrines. Iran, for its part, has put lot of emphasis on the Mahdism eschatology as well. "The Mahdi, or "well-oriented" Imam, is a central figure within Shiism and its various branches. Today, the overwhelming majority of Shiites follow what outsiders describe as "Twelver Shiism," which is a reference to the dynasty of twelve imams initiated at the very dawn of Islam by Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. Within Twelver Shiite belief, the twelfth imam, whose first name is Mohammed, is still alive, although he is said to have gone into occultation after disappearing from human sight in 941 CE. It is further believed that this Mahdi or "Hidden Imam" will reappear at the end of time in order to restore justice and peace on earth before the Day of Judgment".¹⁴² Especially during the former Iranian president Ahmadinejad mandate, Mahdism had assumed political contours, serving Ahmadinejad attempt to enhance its popularity among Iranian clerics.¹⁴³

In Syria, the resort to Shia Islamic Messiah is strongly intertwined with the need to justify and elevate the status of the IRGC on the Syrian territory. The IRGC constitutes the primary military force in the hands of Iran for its fight beside Bashar al - Assad. In the course of the war, the funerals of its members have become a religious expedient to enhance their deaths to the status of martyrdom and glorify their sacrifice. To do so, the revolutionary guards have assumed the role of preparing the Middle East for the coming of Imam Al Zaman, paving the way for his return. Further, according to Iran the Quds brigades have the most prominent to this respect

¹⁴¹ Barzegar, K (2008) *Iran's Foreign Policy in Post - Invasion Iraq* p. 56

¹⁴² Sindawi, K (2009) "The Shiite Turn in Syria" *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* volume 8. p. 29

¹⁴³ To read more about Ahmadinejad's political Mahdism see: *Current trends in islamic ideology*, volume 8. p. 32

along with the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei and the Iranian people.¹⁴⁴ Therefore, the Revolutionary Guards military forces presence in Syria represents, in Iran's words, an indispensable condition to clear the way for the reign of the Hidden Imam, hence sanctifying their efforts in the fighting against terrorism. Moreover, even the commander of the Quds Brigades, the general Qassem Soleimani has been labeled as a soldier of the Imam al Mahdi in order to enforce his position and freedom of action as the leading officer at the top of Iran's military forces ranks.

These narratives have been seen by Iran's regional rivalries in Syria and outside, such as Saudi Arabia and the umbrella organization which represents the thousands of groups fighting Assad, as a clear sign of a sectarian characterization of the war from Iran. On contrary, they perfectly fit Iran's foreign policy scheme which misuses ideological sentiments as a tool to pursue realistic interests.

3.7 From Ahmadinejad to Rouhani: finding cohesiveness in Iran's policy over Syria

Since the onset of the Syrian war, the Iranian elite has tried to find a cohesive discourse to frame Iran's engagement. In 2013 the election of the reformist candidate Hassan Rouhani following the eight years of the much more radical mandate of the former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad posed a significant challenge for a unified interpretation of the Syrian uprising.

In 2009 when Khamenei decided to throw its weight behind Ahmadinejad once it was clear that the elections had been rigged, and after the brutal crackdown on the Green Movement when opposition forces firmly protested against the undemocratic result, Ahmadinejad made some fatal miscalculations. He thought "he could exploit his position to appoint his loyalists to key political posts - while dismissing others he deemed to be his foes".¹⁴⁵ After the green revolution, Khamenei certainly needed

¹⁴⁴ Fatima Al-Smadi (2017) *Iran and the Arab Revolutions: Narratives Establishing Iran's Monopolism* p.22

¹⁴⁵ Abdo, G (2011) *Iran: Ahmadinejad vs Khamenei Does Ahmadinejad's fall empower or hurt the West in its troubled relationship with the Islamic Republic?* Al Jazeera.
Retrieved from: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/06/201162994514399969.html>

Ahmadinejad to tackle the growing popularity of the Greens, though not as much as Ahmadinejad predicted. Ahmadinejad thought he could strip off the Supreme Leader of his total power by challenging the Shia theology and the role of the clerics. The two had opposed ideas about the role of the Islamic Republic: “the Supreme Leader's vision, in which the ideal is nothing more than the preservation of the status quo, and Ahmadinejad's vision, in which clerical rule is marginalized in favor of nationalism and populist religious fervor”.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, Ahmadinejad’s bold claims about the role of the Islamic Republic was tantamount to blasphemy and constituted a significant threat to the survival as well as the security of the complex theological system of the post-revolutionary Iran.

In 2011 at the outset of the Syrian uprising, this cleavage within the Iranian domestic politics risked becoming even more evident. Many different voices raised from Tehran. In early 2011 Ahmadinejad seemed to have adopted the regime’s main line, accusing the West of maneuvering the events in Syria for its own interest. Indeed, in June 2011 the Supreme Leader had commented on Syria by affirming that: “The essence of the Islamic Awakening in the region is anti-Zionist and anti-U.S. But in the case of Syria, U.S. and Israeli hands are evidently at work”.¹⁴⁷ However, at the end of the same year, the former Iran’s president’s complete shift in the Syrian policy came unexpectedly. Ahmadinejad urged Assad to end the violent crackdown on the Syrian population and find a compromise with the opposition in order to reach a peaceful solution to the uprisings.¹⁴⁸ The same thought came some months later from Ayatollah Khamenei who, although he didn’t refrain from emphasizing the role of the US and the west, adopted a more temperate approach over the Syrian case: “The Islamic Republic of Iran's stance toward Syria is to support any kind of reform that would benefit the country's people and oppose the interference of the United States and its allies in Syria's internal affairs”.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Nada, G (2012) *Iran's Evolving Policy on Syria*, The Iran Primer

¹⁴⁸ Al Jazeera (2011), *Ahmadinejad urges Syria to end crackdown: Iranian president makes surprise appeal to Syria to end violence and open dialogue with opposition*. Retrieved from: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/09/20119814058609374.html>

¹⁴⁹ Nada, G (2012) *Iran's Evolving Policy on Syria*, The Iran Primer

Many speculations saw Ahmadinejad's shift as a further attempt to minimizing the authority of Khamenei. However, despite being at odds with the Supreme Leader Ahmadinejad had no choice but to subscribe to the line imposed by Khamenei. In particular, this move shows not only the great power of the Leader but the relatively little space of free maneuver which the president holds. Moreover, Iran's shift during the last months of 2011 and in early 2012 showed how pragmatism ruled over ideologism. When the uprisings grew increasingly violent, Iran saw its fortunes fading on two fronts: its image as a guardian of Arab resistance, its most important regional strategic ally was in danger of being ousted.¹⁵⁰ Accordingly, Iran's policy shift represented a strategic calculation to protect the Islamic Republic's interests and the survival of one of its most valuable regional ally.

In June 2013 presidential elections Iranian hardliners had to abdicate in favor of the reformists led by Hassan Rouhani. A few months earlier during October 2012 many protests spread across Iran to condemn the government's engagement in Syria alongside the brutal dictatorship of Bashar al - Assad. The reformists and the moderates, who were backed by the former Iran's president Mohammad Reza Khatami and Ali Shakouri - Rad,¹⁵¹ raised their voices against the hardliners' policy in Syria. Consequently, the radical shift in power which brought the reformist among the leading political elite seemed to open a new chapter for Iran and its foreign policy, especially in Syria.

However, since the post-election period, reformists policy over Syria have changed dramatically. While at the outset of the Syrian crisis, reformists embraced the Syrian struggle by providing political support to the oppressed people of Syria, calling upon the Iranian government to stop its support to Bashar al - Assad, after Rouhani's election the moderates aligned themselves with the Supreme Leader and the IRGC

¹⁵⁰ Macfarquhar, N (2011) *In shift, Iran's president calls for end to syrian crackdown*, The New York Times Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/09/world/middleeast/09iran.html>

¹⁵¹ Pargoo, M (2015) *Why did Iran's Reformists shift on support for Syria?* Al Monitor. Retrieved from <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2015/06/iran-reformists-syria-islamic-state.html#ixzz4q5qvhyx6>

proposition by abandoning any criticism to the IRI's policy in Syria. Indeed, the leader of the reformists and Iran's president Hassan Rouhani has repeatedly pledged its unconditional support to Syria and its Alawite president.¹⁵²

Many are the reasons behind this political shift. Firstly, when Hassan Rouhani became president in 2013 the reformist party was no longer the opposition force but instead, it represented the ruling elite.¹⁵³ As ruling elite reformists as much as principlists pursue the ultimate survival and safety of the country, meeting realistic objectives rather than ideologically - driven ones. Therefore, the Syrian war was approached within the framework of a broader geopolitical issue at the light of National interests. On the one hand, reformists have been very much aware that the falling of the Assad regime would regionally empower Saudi Arabia, thus breaking the Iran - Saudi regional balance in favor of the latter. On the other hand, the ISIS's threat embodied the perfect argument to regain international support in the fight against the much more threatening and brutal Islamic State. In this sense, Reformists had domestically committed themselves to the resolution of the Nuclear issue to relieve the country from the economic sanctions imposed by the United States. Consequently, Syria served Iran's chances to find a compromising agreement over its nuclear programme as much as a positive outcome in the nuclear talks would give Iran more freedom in Syria having re-acquired the trust of the international community.

Another factor which strongly influences and ultimately dictates the Reformists' stance over Syria is the voice of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Indeed, no political party dares to question the red line imposed by Khamenei concerning Syria. Conversely, authorities have arrested or threatened many ordinary Iranians who have questioned the regime's costly military adventurism abroad at the expense

¹⁵² ParsToday (2017) *Iran to stand by Syria until ultimate victory: president Rouhani* ParsToday. Retrieved from: http://parstoday.com/en/news/iran-i46126-iran_to_stand_by_syria_until_ultimate_victory_president_rouhani

¹⁵³ Pargoo, M (2015) *Why did Iran's Reformists shift on support for Syria?* Al Monitor. Retrieved from <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2015/06/iran-reformists-syria-islamic-state.html#ixzz4q5qvhyx6>

of domestic priorities.¹⁵⁴ Yet, reformists and moderates have found non-explicit ways to express their opposition though not supported from the reformists in power. For instance, the former president Rafsanjani who has during his mandate represented the perfect embodiment of pragmatism in September 2013 had sent clear signals to the Iranian government: “The Syrian people have suffered much during the past two years. More than 100,000 have been killed [to date] and seven to eight million have been displaced. Prisons are overflowing with people and they [the Syrian government] have even turned stadiums into prisons”.¹⁵⁵ Likewise, given that Russia is the main Iranian military ally in Syria, “reformists and moderates harshly criticize Russia and Putin as a way of demonstrating their opposition to the hard-liners’ policy toward Assad”.¹⁵⁶

Further, in June 2016 Majid Ansari, Rouhani’s vice president for parliamentary affairs, openly and explicitly criticized the Hardliners. After they had been harshly condemning Rouhani behavior for not being revolutionary enough, “Ansari called on the hardliners to demonstrate their own revolutionary zeal by going to Syria and fighting for the Assad regime because “the martyrdom table is available there,” a reference to the IRGC and Quds Force casualties in Syria, and implying implicitly that the reformists and moderates are not willing to do the same”.¹⁵⁷

Finally, since the beginning of the conflict and especially in its early phase Iran has tried to present a united political vision over the Syrian case. Although two different presidents have come to deal with the Syrian issue, no significant changes seem to have taken place within Iran.

¹⁵⁴ Majidyar, A (2017) *Reformist Politician Who Questioned Iran’s Syria Policy Barred from Campaigning*, Middle East Institute

¹⁵⁵ Cole, J (2013) *Former Iranian President Slams Syria for Gassing own People: Sign of deep Divisions in Tehran*, Retrieved from: <https://www.juancole.com/2013/09/president-gassing-divisions.html>

¹⁵⁶ Sahimi, M (2016) *Iran’s Leaders Disagree on Propping Up Syria’s Assad*, The National Interest

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

Ahmadinejad, though at odds with the Supreme Leader was inevitably bound to the line imposed by the former. Rouhani's predecessor after having lost much of the political and clerical support in the aftermath of the Green Revolution could not do anything but to remain attached to the line of Khamenei. Rouhani, for his part, during the first two years of his mandate had been very much busy in finding a positive solution to the Nuclear talks, hence the Iranian president could not afford to anger the Ayatollah in a so delicate phase for the future of Iranian people which were carrying a heavy economic burden. However, even after the Nuclear agreement, Rouhani appears not to have deviated from the policy of the Supreme Leader which keeps having the final word in Foreign policies matters. Despite some clear differences among Iran's politicians over the role of Iran in Syria, the line of the Supreme Leader along with the role of the IRGC keep remaining the driving one subjecting all the other voices to his Supreme will.

3.9 Chapter conclusions

Iran's domestic and regional politics are highly intertwined. In the early stages of the war, Iran's attempt to find a popular legitimization to its intervention abroad risked being undermined by its divided political voices. Indeed, the above analysis has shown how opposition parties and reformist leaders within Iran could have seriously undermined Iran's discourse about Syria.

Many criticized the Islamic Republic for having supported the violent crackdown of Bashar al-Assad by justifying the protests as conducted by the West rather than being a genuine bottom-up process. In particular, the internal dynamics among actors, parties and the Supreme Leader have demonstrated how the reformists, those who appeared as the main voice of opposition, after becoming the ruling party, have aligned themselves with the policy dictated by Khamenei. Despite these many internal challenges, the Islamic Republic has always maintained a high level of pragmatism. Surely, Tehran has had to face many incoherences in its public narrative on Syria, yet the voice of the Supreme Leader has had the precedence over every other decision maker.

This chapter has shown, finally, how the beholder of the message of the Islamic Republic, the most important Shiite theologian, has put forward realist interests over ideological ones. Although Ali Khamenei in his public speeches tried to embrace the anti-western rhetoric, on the other hand, He avoided calling upon the Shiite character of the Iranian state to antagonize Sunni Muslims in the conflict. Moreover, when ISIS appeared on the Syrian stage the fight against terrorism and the consequent cooperation with the west, namely the United States, has displayed Iran's great willingness to put aside ideological reasons. However, on the other hand, the Shiite discourse framing Syrian war as a battle to protect Shiite holy sites in Damascus, has enforced the perception of Iran as an offensive and sectarian actor. As we will see in the next chapter, this latter narrative rather than actually constituting a shifting toward a more ideologically driven foreign policy, has been the perfect tool to advance Iran's military strategy in Iran. Even though sometimes substituted by ideological reasons, Iran's primary FP drivers remain pragmatic.

CHAPTER 4

UNDERSTANDING IRAN'S MILITARY STRATEGY IN SYRIA: TOWARDS A MORE OFFENSIVE MILITARY DOCTRINE?

4.1 Introduction

As seen above, Syria is vital to preserve Iran's interests in the region. The fall of the Assad regime would constitute the most strategic setback since the Iran – Iraq war. Therefore, it is not surprising that since the start of the Syrian uprisings in 2011 the Islamic Republic has devoted economic resources to maintain its Alawite ally in power by providing extent support to the regime military operations. Iran has tried many times to minimize its intervention, describing it as an advisory mission. However, despite Iran's deniability, there is a lot of evidence that Iran's military engagement in Syria is strategically much more consistent.

Throughout the war, Iran's strategy in Syria has evolved in accordance with the developments on the ground. New actors have appeared on the scenes, compelling Tehran to change its policy and re-adjust the initial ambitions.

At the light of the purpose of this thesis, this chapter results fundamental in understanding whether Iran is moving toward a more offensive posture in the region. The different faces of its military operations and the shifting role of the IRGC represent the pre-assumption from which conduct an analysis on Iran's final interests in Syria as well in the Middle East. The aim of this chapter is to analyze the different military phases along with developments on the ground which have shaped Iran's armed operations in its battle alongside Bashar al Assad. Further, it will be assessed how Russia's intervention, as well as the rise of ISIS, have had a striking impact in reshaping IRI's military operations. Conversely, the role of shia proxy groups and that of Hezbollah, Iran's historical proxy Lebanese group will be investigated in order

to understand the broader implications of their presence in Syria for Iran's short and long-term strategy.

As it has been widely discussed in the second chapter, the Islamic Republic has concentrated its efforts in finding a comprehensive public justification about its military intervention in Syria. After six years of war, Iran's real operations in Syria remain widely hidden as the government has not offered any official declaration. Therefore, the data and the strategy presented in this chapter will mainly draw from findings of second-hand resources and the Iranian casualties recorded in media news outlets.

4.2 A brief outlook at Iran's defensive military doctrine: historical determinants

Before assessing the impact of Syrian war developments on Iran's policy in the conflict, a quick overview of Iran's military doctrine appears necessary in order to fully understand Iran's stance in the war and whether Iran is shifting towards a more offensive Realism.

Iran's military doctrine has largely been characterized by a defensive posture. After the Iran - Iraq war which left the country highly traumatized by the number of casualties Iran started to develop its national defensive security strategy. Iranian military strategists began to pay more attention to the principles of modern maneuver warfare, such as combined and joint operations.¹⁵⁸ "Self-reliance" and the defense from external threats became the core of Iran's security policy. After the end of the war with Iraq and during all the 90s Iran started to rebuild its national military apparatus. Iran initiated its own ballistic missile program to deter Iraq from attacking its population centers back in the 1980s, and now, Iran's strategic missile forces are now key to its deterrence strategy.¹⁵⁹ Further, Iran's military doctrine must be understood as a reaction to perceived threats in the region.

¹⁵⁸ Connell, M (2010). *Iran's military doctrine*, The Iran Primer

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

The Iran - Iraq war showed Tehran that the newly formed Islamic Republic had not allies in the Middle East but Syria. The outside powers as well showed a great level of animosity towards the rise of the ayatollahs, thus providing a great support to Saddam's cause, fueling him with weapons and hard artillery. The United States and Israel above all became Islamic Republic's primary threats.

In 2001 and 2003, following the American led - campaign to defeat once and for all the Taliban's regime coupled with the military operation in Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein "convinced Iran's leaders that they were next in the line of fire".¹⁶⁰ Consequently, Iran promptly redefined its security strategy; the IRGC developed defense concepts, such as the Mosaic Doctrine, to survive invasion and eventually expel the invader through guerilla warfare.

The success of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq and IRGC proxy war against the United States alleviated Iran's concerns about an imminent regime threatening attack.¹⁶¹ Therefore, Iran's military strategy has largely tried to avoid any direct confrontation and prevent an escalation of violence, consequently contradicting those who had framed Iran as an offensive State. In its "twenty years vision plan" drafted during Khatami's presidency and published in 2005 Iran reasserted its defensive goals; the document asserts that: "Iran will become secure, independent, and powerful with a defense system based on all-fronts deterrence [or full-scale deterrence] and alliance between the government and the population."¹⁶² This latter element reflects the IRI's fear of external interferences in undermining internal security; therefore the document places emphasis on the security efforts to defend against foreign subversion, or the so-called soft war, and prevent the potentially destabilizing effects of foreign economic investment.¹⁶³ The creation of proxies, in particular, has become central to Iran's deterrence - defensive doctrine. The limitations of the IRGC and the

¹⁶⁰ Nuruzzaman, M (2016) *What Comes Next for Iran's defense Doctrine*, The National Interest

¹⁶¹ McInnis, J (2015) *Iran's strategic thinking: origin and evolution* p.15

¹⁶² McInnis, J (2015) *Iranian concept of warfare: Understanding Tehran's evolving military doctrine* p.4

¹⁶³ Ibid; p.5

Artesh's ability to project military power drove the IRGC's need for proxies to conduct unconventional warfare abroad.¹⁶⁴

In 2011 the Syrian uprising has constituted another major test for Iran's national security decision-making process. The loss of Syria would represent a great threat to Iran's security, as the eventual fall of its historical ally could bring "all of Iran's opponents to its doorstep."¹⁶⁵ To this respect, since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, Iran has channeled a lot of military efforts to keep Assad in power, thus reacting to an external threat and framing its interventions as a mean to maintain the status quo and preserve Iran's interests. However, following the developments on the ground, Iran's initial defensive approach may be shifting towards a more offensive posture.

To date, Iran's military strategies and doctrines have reacted to the regional conventional military dominance of the United States and its allies. Since Tehran perceives the need to deter the United States and its allies it has built its force posture—ballistic missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, swarming armed small boats, mines, and cyber capabilities—in response."¹⁶⁶

However, the Syrian war as we will see in this chapter may represent a historical shifting in Iran's military doctrine. Iran's foreign policy has been largely based on "threat in response to threat" doctrine.¹⁶⁷ This chapter aims to understand to which extent Iran has militarily intervened in Syria through a defensive doctrine, and whether the IRI, due to the military dynamics of its involvement is turning into a more offensive actor in the region.

¹⁶⁴ McInnis, J (2016) *Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies* p.2

¹⁶⁵ Ibid p.17

¹⁶⁶ J. Matthew McInnis (2015) *Iran's strategic thinking: origin and evolution* p.20

¹⁶⁷ Asghar Eftekhari, Fatallah Kalantari, "Evaluating and Defining the 'Threat in Response to Threat' Strategy in Iran's Defense Policy," *Journal of Defense Policy* 22, no. 88 (Fall 2014).

4.3 The role of the IRGC in the Syrian war

Founded by a decree from Ayatollah Khomeini shortly after the victory of the 1978–1979 Islamic Revolution, the IRGC has evolved well beyond its original foundations as an ideological guard for the nascent revolutionary regime.¹⁶⁸ The IRGC has been historically responsible for protecting the country from external and internal threats. The Quds Force are also part of the IRGC, though a subordinate body they act as an independent organization.¹⁶⁹ Indeed the Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds, reports directly to the Supreme Leader, bypassing his nominal superior, IRGC Commander Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari.¹⁷⁰ Moreover, the IRGC is composed by a naval (IRGC-N), air force (IRGC-AF), and ground force (IRGC-GF)¹⁷¹ components and all of these divisions have historically been tasked with the defense of Iranian borders.

Today, the IRGC forms the main military manpower of Iranian activities in Syria. Understanding their role in Syria, therefore, may help shed light over Iran's final scopes in the war and its evolving military doctrine. The IRGC, or Pasdaran (Guards), has since the beginning of the war been in charge of all the operations conducted from Iran on the Syrian soil. The IRGC operates in Syria through its subordinate divisions:

- Ground Forces
- Quds Forces
- Intelligence Service
- Law enforcement

Generally speaking, Iran is operating in Syria on two fronts. Firstly, the Advisory and Assistance Mission has the main objective of keeping Assad in power by

¹⁶⁸ Rand (2009) *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* p.11

¹⁶⁹ Bucala, P and Kagan.W.F (2016) *Iran's evolving way of war: How the IRGC fights in Syria* p.9

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

supporting its regime forces. Secondly, the Complementary Mission entails “the assistance to pro-government militia, namely proxies that may survive the eventual fall of the Alawite regime”.¹⁷² This strategy appears to be in line with Iran’s asymmetric warfare, which relies on the training and formation of proxy groups outside its borders to avoid direct combat operations, hence emphasizing the defensive character of Iran’s military policy in Syria as well. However, Iran’s strategy in Syria has not remained the same. Changes on the Syrian battlefield have driven Iran to intensify its military activities in the country and to remodel its combative tactics.¹⁷³

4.3.1 2011 - June 2014: Limited advisory role

In the early stages of the war, the IRGC role in Syria was limited to an advisory one. TAA (Train, Advise, Assist) was the acronym used to define the tasks of the Revolutionary Guards in support to Assad. The initial advisory mission was characterized by the presence of IRGC high-ranking officers which were supporting Assad operations. Of particular importance during this first phase was the conceivment of the National Defence Force, NDF, which was formed with the help of the Quds Forces after the summer of 2012. The NDF gathers together existing neighborhood militias into a functioning hierarchy and provides them with better equipment and training.¹⁷⁴ Moreover, the role of Iran was not relegated only to its formation. The Islamic Republic along with its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, has been providing formal training to the NDF members and military advise. This group has so far proved to Critical for Assad to maintain his grip over central and southern Syria.¹⁷⁵

The number of IRGC personnel until 2014, according to what claimed by Iranian sources, was limited to volunteers, consequently not part of a concerned deliberated

¹⁷² Fulton. W, Holliday. J, Wyer. S (2013) *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, p.9

¹⁷³ Bucala, P (2017) *Iran’s New Way of War in Syria*, p. 7

¹⁷⁴ Fulton. W, Holliday. J, Wyer. S (2013) *Iranian Strategy in Syria* p.20

¹⁷⁵ Bucala, P and Kagan.W.F (2016) *Iran’s Evolving Way of War: How the Irgc Fights in Syria* p.13

effort. However, this claim appears to be just a way for the Iranian government to downplay its role in the war, keeping a low-key involvement. Indeed, this term “allowed the regime to maintain greater plausible deniability about its support to Assad than would have been possible with the deployment of regular IRGC forces”.¹⁷⁶

Iran, further, for the first time in history has decided to deploy IRGC GF. Their deployment of IRGC GF represents a notable shifting in Iran conventional military operations which might be a first hint of the changing nature of the Islamic Republic methods of warfare.

4.3.2 June 2014 - September 2015: TAA (Train , Advise, Assist)

When the position of Assad started to deteriorate Iran became more assertive in its military operations. The developments on the ground were turning in favor of the opposition and Assad was losing significant territories. Moreover, the size of Mosul in June 2014 from ISIS threatened even more to nullify Iran’s efforts in Syria. After the capture of Mosul in Iraq, Iran had to send a consistent number of its Iraqi Shia militias, who were fighting Syria, to contain ISIS in Iraq. Consequently, in order to reinforce Iranian lines, Hezbollah sent 1000 fighters to Syria, and Shia Afghans started to prop up pro-regime forces. By mid - 2015 Assad’s position resulted further weakened, however, Iran kept providing the classical TAA advisory mission. Iran kept relying on its senior IRGC officers who had the skills and credibility to advise local unit commanders who had already been fighting for some time. Iran took some casualties, but not too many, because since their job was not to fight or lead troops directly in combat, but rather it was more logistical and of operations planning.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Bucala, P and Kagan.W.F (2016) *Iran’s evolving way of war: How the IRGC fights in Syria* p.14

4.3.3 September 2015 - January 2017: Russia intervention and the siege of Aleppo

In September 2015 the Assad regime appeared to be doomed to fall. With Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, and the main economic hub of the Country, in the hands of the rebels, Assad had lost an important Urban center. One important and almost unexpected event completely changed the faith of Assad and the future outcomes of the war: On 30 September 2015 Russia entered the Syrian conflict. Russia's intervention in the war changed not only the course of the events but Iran's military strategy as well. Iran started to deploy a greater number of IRGC GF to the frontlines, providing top-level advisory officers and sending combat elements on the ground. This move emphasizes once more the transformation of the IRGC GF, an organization which was initially structured for defending the regime from ground invasion and domestic unrest, is now being deployed to direct conventional combat operations.¹⁷⁸

Within two weeks from Russia's intervention, the Aleppo operations began. The IRGC was actively involved in the military operations. During this period ground troops played a critical role in operations to relieve the besieged towns of al Zahra and Nubl in February that also severed a major opposition supply line into Aleppo City from Turkey.¹⁷⁹ Moreover, Iranian troops and proxy forces played a direct role in supplying intelligence for Russian air strikes. During the battle for Aleppo Iran adopted a new combat model as pro-regime forces were tightening their grip on the city. Iranian military planners appear to have used IRGC officers to reinforce and serve as command elements for proxy forces. These officer cadres were not commanding their own enlisted soldiers in Syria but rather served as an integrating element among Iran's diverse set of proxies operating on the ground in Syria. This

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ "Iran News Round Up, February 5, 2016," AEI's Critical Threats Project, February 5, 2016.

model turned out the most cost-effective one by minimizing the potential number of Iranian losses while also improving the combat effectiveness of local partners.¹⁸⁰

Finally, this whole of Iran's military strategy shows Iran's growing capacity to project military power abroad and engage in seemingly conventional warfare. The deployment of IRGC GF will, in the long term, consent Iran to deploy young cadets abroad having therefore experienced soldiers for future wars of the same kind. However, none of this evidence indicates that Iran is confident about its military power. The country may have simply inserted itself into a messy civil war because it has the strategic imperative to do so and apart from the Quds Forces its military is focused on defence and deterrence, not power projection.¹⁸¹

4.4 Iran - Russia relationship in the Syrian war

Since Russia intervened in Syria in late September 2015, Moscow and Tehran have joined forces to keep the al - Assad regime in power. However, despite the obvious evidence of their cooperation, the relationship between the two countries in the Syrian conflict has been wrongly portrayed as the birth of a new long friendship in the region, rather than a marriage of convenience dictated by the circumstances. The aim of this paragraph is that to analyze the basis of the relationships between Iran and Russia in a bid to understand how in its cooperation with the Kremlin, Tehran has been displaying a degree of pragmatism and realism which draws from domestic needs, thus demonstrating how the Islamic Republic, even in its relationship with Russia, has been driven by security issues and realist interests.

4.4.1 Military cooperation

Iran and Russia are each other's natural allies in Syria. It is though a bold claim to talk about a joint planned military cooperation. While there is some degree of

¹⁸⁰ Bucala, P (2017) *Iran's new way of war in Syria* p.7

¹⁸¹ Chubin, S (2014) *Iran's Military Pragmatism*

strategic cooperation, Iranian and Russian operations in Syria are as two independent movements towards a common objective.¹⁸²

The two actors have mainly cooperated on intelligence sharing and military strategy. However, military speaking they appear to be highly dependent, as pursuing complementary strategies. Russia has not deployed ground forces in Syria, limiting, therefore, the extent of its involvement in the conflict to air operations. On the other hand, Iran, which has deployed the IRGC GF is in need of Russian Airstrikes to conduct its ground operations. Moreover, Iran has allowed Russia to use its Hamadan base to conduct airstrikes in Syria. However, besides the shared intelligence Iran and Russia don't appear to have planned a long and joint operation, raising, therefore, questions on the longevity of their partnership.

4.4.2 Convergences

Iran and Russia's shared goal in Syria is, at least until now, to maintain Assad in power and avoid the total collapse of state Institutions. Moreover, one of the main drivers of their cooperation is the shared fear of the growing US hegemony in the region. In particular, the Kremlin aims to avoid the same scenario which occurred in both Libya and Iraq, where western and US-led interventionism brought to the collapse of the local state institutions opening a theater of a long and still not resolved instability. Likewise, following the rising of the Islamic State and of others Islamic Sunni extremist groups, like Jabhat al Nusra, both countries fear the spillover effect and the spread of Islamic terrorism in their own territories. Ultimately, according to either constitution, they legally reject foreign interventions in another country affair. For these reasons, and because of Iran's capability in cracking down the 2009 Green Revolution protests, Russia sees Tehran as an attractive and stable actor, a functioning state that can advance Russian interests on the ground in Syria.¹⁸³

¹⁸² Eastoe. S, Phillips. J, Scarano.M, Sajekaite.M (2017) *Dynamics of Russo-Iranian collaboration in Syria and its impact on their wider relationship* p.4

¹⁸³ Geranmayeh.E, Liik.K (2016) *The new power couple: Russia and Iran in the Middle East*; p.3

4.4.3 Divergences

Although both countries share the same final goals for the future of Syria, the interests and their long-term view behind their actions in Syria are slightly different. Iran views Syria as its major territorial hub for providing weapons to Hezbollah, Iran's stronghold against the Israeli threat. Consequently, only the preservation of the Alawite state institutions and Assad in power would guarantee Iran the continuation of its axis of resistance and its relationship with Hezbollah. Russia also does not see Hezbollah as a terrorist group and has often reiterated how it sees the group as a legitimate player in Lebanese politics.¹⁸⁴

However, the triumvirate composed of Iran - Russia - Hezbollah as the backbone of Syrian military operations might undermine Moscow's relations with Israel. The latter fears that the arms deal brokered between Russia and Iran¹⁸⁵ could inadvertently give Iran a chance to supply the Lebanese group with new arms to be used against Israel. In this sense, Russia must take Israel's security concerns into account, and the Kremlin has assured Tel Aviv that it has not given weapons to Hezbollah.¹⁸⁶

On the other hand, Russia's interests in Syria are not directly linked to the faith of Bashar al Assad himself. Russia is using Syria to reacquire its status of influential global power in light of the decreasing American leverage in the region and ultimately to maintain its only naval base in the Mediterranean near the Tartus coasts. Yet, so far Assad appears to be the perfect partner due to his opposition to US

¹⁸⁴ RUSI (2016), *Understanding Iranian role in the Syrian conflict* p.23

¹⁸⁵ (2015) *Russia and Iran sign deal to widen military cooperation Tehran says agreement will 'solve' held-up sale of S-300 air defense system, without elaborating*, The Times of Israel. Retrieved from: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/russia-and-iran-sign-military-cooperation-deal/>

¹⁸⁶ RUSI (2016), *Understanding Iranian role in the Syrian conflict* p.23

and Western influences in the governance of Syria and the wider Middle East, making him an ideal prospect around which to build Syria's future.¹⁸⁷

The future of Assad is another area which has caused significant divergences between Iran and Russia and may provoke others in the future. While Iran considered, at least until 2015, the remaining of Bashar al Assad as its red line, Russia has been more flexible about who should politically succeed the current Alawite leader. Russia has been more keen to find a political settlement for Assad's departure so long as it occurs on its own terms and preserves a regime that is fit to govern and ready to respect Russia's interests.¹⁸⁸ However, even Iran as early as 2017 seems to have abandoned its radical position about the future of Assad for a more diplomatic solution which would not damage Iran's interests.

Further, the relationships which Russia has established with GCC countries and especially Saudi Arabia might constitute a cause of friction with Iran. The Saudi Kingdom is the historical political rival of Iran in the region and in the Syrian war, the Saudis have been supporting the opposition providing arms and military equipment. Therefore, Russia is being cautious in entering into a too close partnership with Iran, risking to be portrayed as part of the Shiite crescent, and antagonizing its Arab allies.

On the other hand, Iran is aware that Russia needs to prioritize its economic interests and that its partnership with Tehran is contingent to the events in Syria rather than the beginning of a strong alliance which may substitute the one Iran had with the Syria's Assads. Finally, in March 2016, Russia had announced its withdrawal from Syria, seemingly without consulting but just by informing Iran. A decision which underlines how Iran and Russia paths in Syria are not as intertwined and dependent on each other as it appears.

¹⁸⁷ Eastoe. S, Phillips. J, Scarano.M, Sajekaite.M (2017) *Dynamics of Russo-Iranian collaboration in Syria and its impact on their wider relationship* p.5

¹⁸⁸ Geranmayeh.E, Liik.K (2016) *The new power couple: Russia and Iran in the Middle East*; p.4

4.4.4 Iran and Russia in Syria: a relationship of pragmatism

Therefore, what defines the relationship between Iran and Russia is a high degree of pragmatism. Both countries are aware of the other's different interests and that their partnership may not have the prospects for a long sustained duration. For what concerns the developments in Syria, Iran is well aware that without the military aid provided by Russia it wouldn't be able to prolong the outcomes of the war, maintaining Assad in power. On the other hand, Iran's historical and political presence is much stronger and influential than the Russian one. The Kremlin does recognize that maintaining a friendly relationship with Iran, as Iran has sufficient grassroots influence across much of Syrian civil society, would guarantee a final scenario in favor of Moscow as well.¹⁸⁹

Iran - Russia partnership has not been limited to Syria, and the final results of the war do not seem to jeopardize the future of their relationship. In fact, Iran and Russia have been collaborating for long time mainly in the economic arena. Already during the 5+1 negotiations on the Iran's nuclear program, Russia had acted as a mediator between the West and Iran to convince Iran to give away some concessions in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions, hence gaining leverage in its relations with Europe and the United States. In part, this has led to Russia assuming a role of protector of Iran, but also as a guarantor of Iranian compliance.¹⁹⁰ From Iran's point of view, the nuclear deal has opened new opportunities for economic cooperation, prioritizing economic considerations over ideological consideration. To this respect, why would Iran decide to ally itself with a country which has long opposed Islamic parties and groups? The answer lies in the high pragmatism which Iran has displayed in its foreign policy decisions, despite the superficial assumptions who have often portrayed Iran as driven by ideological religious considerations in Syria and in the rest of its foreign affairs. Indeed, the economic cooperation with Russia even before

¹⁸⁹ Eastoe. S, Phillips. J, Scarano.M, Sajekaitė.M (2017) *Dynamics of Russian-Iranian collaboration in Syria and its impact on their wider relationship* p.10

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

the nuclear deal has been of vital importance for Iran for the acquisition of arms and defense system equipment.

Moreover, another important element to be taken into consideration in Iran's relations with Russia is the unity of its politicians. Many voices have raised over Iran's engagement with Moscow, all of which have more or less leaning toward a positive response toward Russia. Though, as explained above, Rafsanjani had expressed his concern over Iran's operations in Syria and consequently with Russia, however, the final word on all sensitive issues belongs not to the president, but to the Supreme Leader and his associates. In other words, Hashemi Rafsanjani could express an opinion that differs from the country leadership's, yet Iran will do as Khamenei says.¹⁹¹ The Supreme Leader de-facto greenlighted interaction with Russia and reiterated it during his meeting with Putin in November 2015.¹⁹² A move which increasingly emphasizes how the Supreme Leader has put ideologies aside to put forward pragmatism in his foreign policy and to guarantee the country's economic and military security.

Finally, Iran's cooperation dynamics with Russia have been characterized by a fine degree of balancing between Iran's interests and the West requests. Iran is well aware it needs Russia as much as it needs the West to open its economic market and lead the country out from a harsh economic crisis.

4.5 Iran - Hezbollah relationship in the Syrian war

Born out of the Lebanese Civil war to protect Southern - Lebanon's Shia majority population, Hezbollah has been since then the most powerful Iran's inspired proxy militia, and the Islamic Republic most reliable and effective proxy group in the region. Since its creation, Hezbollah has been receiving funding and arms supplies from Iran through Syria and has played an important role as part of the axis of resistance against Israel and to a lesser extent against the United States. Throughout the years Hezbollah has gained a lot of popularity across the whole Middle Eastern

¹⁹¹ Khozanov, N (2016) *Marriage of Convenience*, Global Affairs

¹⁹² Ibid.

region, especially during the 2000s, when in 2000 It finally forced Israel out of Lebanon after almost twenty years of occupation and in 2006 during the war with Israel.

The Shiite group's objectives are directly connected to those of Tehran, namely safeguarding the Syrian conduit for the passage of arms to its organization, and preventing Sunni - Jihadi organizations to spread their foothold across Syria. Moreover, as the same Hezbollah's leader has declared, Syria constitutes the backbone of Hezbollah's resistance against Israel also at the light of the fact that Assad has repeatedly provided a safe haven¹⁹³ to many Hezbollah fighters.

Hezbollah has been operating in Syria since 2012 and as much as Iran, it has shifted its military operations in accordance with the war's developments. Initially, the Lebanese group role in Syria entailed Advice and support tasks to Assad and his forces. The limited nature of Hezbollah's early involvement was due to the situation of Assad, whose army seemed still in control. However, as the forces loyal to the regime started to lose ground and have significant setbacks, Hezbollah's role rapidly progressed. In 2013 Hezbollah's role shifted dramatically assuming a direct combat role, operating in larger numbers alongside Syrian military and paramilitary forces. It also expanded its efforts to train a reorganized pro-Assad militias.¹⁹⁴ The complete shift arrived in April 2013 when Hezbollah successfully led the Ground operations to retake the rebel held town of al Qusayr, a primarily Sunni town in Homs province not far from the border with Lebanon.¹⁹⁵ The retake of the city was was not only a military priority for the Assad regime but for Hezbollah as well, because a rebel presence, besides threatening Assad's line of communications with cost, was also a threat to Lebanese Shiite villages on both sides of the border and near al-Qusayr¹⁹⁶.

¹⁹³Sullivan, M (2014) *Hezbollah in Syria*, Middle East Security Report 19, p.10

¹⁹⁴Ibid; p.13

¹⁹⁵Ibid p.14

¹⁹⁶Ibid; p.15

Besides combat operations, Hezbollah's presence in Syria has been pivotal in training and financing local militia groups. In particular, Quwat al-Ridha one of the group operating under Hezbollah command appears to be the core nucleus for Hezbollah in Syria. Quwat al-Ridha includes Shia and Sunni hailing from countryside areas around cities such as Homs, Aleppo, Daraa and Damascus.¹⁹⁷ Nevertheless, Hezbollah presence in Syria has not come without costs. Due to its activities in support of an authoritarian regime and against fellow Sunni Muslims, Hezbollah has lost the reputation gained in the region in the previous decade. The relation with Hamas, its Palestinian counterpart in the fight against Israel, has been seriously damaged by Hezbollah operations in the Syrian war.

4.5.1 Why is Hezbollah's role in Syria so important for Iran?

After 2013 Hezbollah has consistently widened its operations in Syria, assuming along with Iran and Russia a leading role in shoring up Assad and his military against the opposition insurgency. In fact, Hezbollah is one of the most militarily experienced groups in the war and the single most effective Ground Force in Syria in proportion to its size.¹⁹⁸

Militarily, besides its long tight partnership with Iran, and its geographical proximity with Syria, Hezbollah is well positioned to operate in Syria because it's an Arabic speaking group and its combat operations experience with light infantry. The Syrian army is primarily a heavy, mechanized force that lacks the light infantry capability necessary for sustained conflict against lightly armed insurgents, compared to Hezbollah's experience fighting in low-intensity conflict.¹⁹⁹ Further, the consolidated experience in counter-insurgency activities gained in the long confrontation with Israel has facilitated Hezbollah's tasks in training Iraqi Shia militias and other paramilitary groups. Therefore, they are better suited to work

¹⁹⁷ Alami, M (2017) *Analysis: Hezbollah's Highly Versatile And Embedded Role in Syria*, News Deeply. Retrieved from: <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/03/06/analysis-hezbollahs-highly-versatile-and-embedded-role-in-syria>

¹⁹⁸ RUSI (2016) *Understanding Iranian role in the Syrian conflict*; p.27

¹⁹⁹ Fulton, W, Holliday, J, Wyer, S (2013) *Iranian Strategy in Syria* p.22

closely with Syrian counterparts than Iranian Revolutionary Guards, providing to the latter an invaluable tool to advance their interests.

Hezbollah does not act independently from Iran in the war, rather it operates under the IRGC command and constantly communicates with Tehran to plan missions on the ground. However, even though Hezbollah's efforts are primarily directed in enforcing Assad's position and preserving the Syrian conduit as a supply line for their weapons, over the years Hezbollah has increasingly become a major party in Lebanese political arena. Consequently, its dependence on Iran's financial aid has been reducing as the group has been trying to rely on other sources. Conversely, the pragmatic government of President Hassan Rouhani has allegedly devoted more resources to domestic economic recovery, delaying the provision of 10 percent – \$100 million – of its annual funding to Hezbollah.²⁰⁰

Many accused Iran of having fomented a growing sectarian tension in Syria by supporting Shi'a groups, such as Hezbollah. On the one hand, although it is true that Iran has been training Shia militias to fight the opposition, on the other Iran as well as Hezbollah's strategy in Syria encompasses the sectarian policy. Indeed, Hezbollah has been reshaping its historical set of alliances. After ISIS was joined by the Al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front in an incursion into the northern Bekaa Valley town of Arsal in August 2014, Hezbollah began building alliances with Christian communities near the border, supporting them with arms and helping them to form local militias to defend their towns.²⁰¹

From this perspective, Iran's defensive military doctrine does not appear to have had a dramatic turn. The empowering of proxies and the training of paramilitary organizations falls within Iran's line of asymmetric warfare. However, three years of Hezbollah intervention in Syria might have facilitated Iran's ability to shift towards a more offensive doctrine.

²⁰⁰ RUSI (2016) Understanding Iranian role in the Syrian conflict; p.28

²⁰¹ Rosenfeld, J (2017) *How the Syrian Civil War Has Transformed Hezbollah*, The Nation. Retrieved from:<https://www.thenation.com/article/how-the-syrian-civil-war-has-transformed-hezbollah/>

4.5.2 How Hezbollah has been improving Iran's military capacities?

The Syrian war has not only forced different religious and ethnic groups to fight together but has also increasingly improved each group's capacity to operate in such guerrilla environment. Indeed, Hezbollah, the IRGC-QF, and the Syrian army have become more experienced not only in joint training and planning but have also learned how to better operate alongside each other as a unified fighting force. Iran has also gained valuable lessons in guerilla warfare that it can integrate into its own doctrine and training.

The ability for Iranian, Hezbollah and Iraqi fighters to be deployed across borders to conduct sustained operations in varied terrain has proved Iran's new capacities to conduct semi-conventional warfare abroad, thus reshaping its defensive doctrine into a semi-offensive one, capable of intervening out of Iranian borders.²⁰²

Finally, Hezbollah's engagement in Syria is extremely important for a variety of reasons. Firstly, Iran can rely on an invaluable ally with consistent and efficient military ability that other partner groups do not have. Secondly, the convergence of Iran and Hezbollah objectives in the war has made easier for Iran to advance its own. Thirdly, and most importantly, Hezbollah's role has notably improved Iran's ability to project power abroad, hence putting the basis for what may be a significant transformation of Iran's military into a conventional force capable of confronting actors in a more conventional warfare.

4.6. Iran's Shia militias in Syria: the military scope of Shiite proxies

The single most important Iran's strategy in the Syrian war has been both the creation and the expansion of Shia proxies. Shia militant groups have come to constitute the core of Iran's short term and long term strategy in the ongoing conflict. However, the proliferation of Iran - backed Shia groups in Syria is not a new tactics

²⁰² Sullivan, M (2014) *Hezbollah in Syria*, Middle East Security Report 19, p.29

rather a prolongation of Iran long strategy of non-conventional warfare. Yet, the war in Syria has notably increased the size and the complexity of Iran's proxies. This includes not only the growth of the primary groups that form the axis of resistance such as Lebanese Hezbollah, Badr Corps, KH, and AAH, but also the establishment of new Shia militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan and the mobilization of Iraqi and Syrian civilians into the PMF and NDF respectively.²⁰³ Although this paragraph will not analyze in detail each proxy's tasks, here's a short list of the main Iranian proxies operating in Syria:

- **Lebanese Hezbollah:** 45,000 fighters, of which 21,000 are full-time, and 6,000 to 8,000 are currently deployed to Syria²⁰⁴
- **Badr Corps Brigades (Iraq):** between 10,000 and 20,000 fighters²⁰⁵
- **Kata'ib Hezbollah:** likely a core group of around 1,000 fighters, with 10,000 or more mobilized through its main subsidiary Saraya al-Difaa al-Shaabi and 1,000 to 3,000 likely deployed to Syria²⁰⁶
- **Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq:** approximately 10,000 fighters, and 1,000 to 3,000 deployed to Syria²⁰⁷
- **Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade:** 2,000 to 3,000 thousand fighters deployed to Syria, total number of the group allegedly estimated around 20,000²⁰⁸
- **Pakistani Zainabiyoun Brigade:** up to 1,000 fighters deployed to Syria, but total numbers for the group are unknown²⁰⁹

The most well trained and efficient group in the fighting in Syria appears to be a spin-off of Iran's proxy groups operating in Iraq. In fact, in the immediate aftermath

²⁰³ McInnis, J (2016) *Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies*; p.3

²⁰⁴ Ibid; p.4

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ McInnis, J (2016) *Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies*; p.4

²⁰⁸ Moslih, H (2016) *Iran 'foreign legion' leans on Afghan Shia in Syria war, Al Jazeera. Retrieved from: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/iran-foreign-legion-leans-afghan-shia-syria-war-160122130355206.html>*

²⁰⁹ McInnis, J (2016) *Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies* p.4

of the 2003 US-led invasion Iran's has been training and creating paramilitary groups able of operating in Baghdad semi-independently, though under the Quds force supervision. Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA), a Damascus based organization, represents the umbrella organization under which many Iraqi fighters are being organized and directed by the QF commander, General Qassem Suleimani. These fighters mainly originated from three Iraqi groups. Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH), which in turn splintered from Muqtada al-Sadr's movement in 2006 with support from the IRGC Qods Force and Lebanese Hezbollah. Kataib Hezbollah (KH), and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS).²¹⁰

All of these groups along with Hezbollah have played a pivotal role in training and expand the LAFA brigade.²¹¹ The second main block of Shia groups combating in Syria under Iran's aegis is composed of fighters hailing from Pakistan, Afghanistan. In particular, the latter has provided the largest support of non-Arab fighters. The Afghans fighting in Syria have predominantly three origins. Firstly, some of them were already residing in Syria and living around the area of the Zeynab mosque, thus their fighting has been embedded within the rhetoric of Shia sites protection. A second contingent of Afghan soldiers hails from Iran where they were naturalized. Many of these recruits were originally Hazaras refugees in Iran, which is home to around half a million Hazaras,²¹² Afghanistan's largest Shia minority which has been suffered tremendous persecution, especially under the Taliban rule. The origin of the rest of the Afghans enrolled in Syria results unclear. Some reports claim that they have been sent directly from Afghanistan to Syria, although the government has repeatedly denied having given Iran such concession of recruiting soldiers on Afghan soil.

²¹⁰ Knights, M (2013) *Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Syria*, The Washington Institute

²¹¹ Smyth, P (2015) *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and its Regional Effects*. P.41

²¹² Ibid.

Finally, Iran's call to Shia fighters across the region is not limited to the Middle East. Reportedly, upward of 30,000 Shiites in India signed up to join the jihad in Iraq,²¹³ as well as some fighters from Pakistan, are reportedly being recruited to fight in Syria.

Militarily, the Shia militias have been giving Iran's IRGC and Artesh soldiers a much-needed respite. In fact, Afghan soldiers result to be very well trained and experienced in counter-insurgency operations due to their prolonged confrontation with the Taliban. Most importantly, the use of Shiite proxies is of valuable importance rather than for the present of Syria, for the future of Iran and its military. Indeed, from 2013 to 2016 due to the deteriorating position of Assad, Iran has significantly expanded the number of groups operating in Syria. Further, since the outset of the war, the IRGC has made advancing their proxies' deployability, interoperability, and capacity to conduct unconventional warfare. The corps has effectively moved its Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani proxies into and out of the Syrian theater as requirements demand.²¹⁴

This growing capacity marks a serious shift in Iran's ability to project power abroad, particularly in its military structure. The Artesh, the IRGC, as well as the Basji have learned to work closely and coordinate a large number of intertwined groups and operations.²¹⁵

Finally, the increasingly ability to deploy loyal Shiite groups abroad constitutes a further sign of Iran's shifting capabilities. Though on a formal level, the defensive doctrine remains the primary guide of Iran's military operations, Iran's acknowledged capacity to perform highly efficient non-conventional operations may push Iran to widen its proxy network, increasing its deterrence capacity against what the IRI perceived as threatening States.

²¹³ Taroor, I. (2014) "Shiites in India Want to Join the Fight against the Islamic State in Iraq," The Washington Post Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/08/06/shiites-in-india-want-to-join-the-fight-against-the-islamic-state-in-iraq/>

²¹⁴ McInnis, J (2016) *Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies*; p.4

²¹⁵ Bucala, P (2017) *Iran's new way of war in Syria*, p. 12

4.7 The rise of the Islamic State: a blessing or a threat to Iran's strategy in Syria?

Emerged from the post US-led invasion of Iraq and later expanded into Syria, the spread of a new Sunni - inspired jihadist group has fostered the intervention of outside powers, such as the United States and Russia, and internal actors such as Iran. Indeed, ISIS' violent, brutal and indiscriminate carnage in Iraq has posed a big threat to Iran's backyard, a country which is in Iran's highest interests to maintain stable and under its control. Further, the Islamic State's expansion into Syria in 2014 has brought significant challenges and concerns to the IRI military operations in the Country. This chapter attempts to analyze the most important events which led to the rising of ISIS and the consequences for Iran's overall policy in Syria

4.7.1 Understanding the origin of the Islamic State

The 2003 US – led invasion of Iraq with the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime created the perfect environment for the establishment of an Al Qaeda's branch in Iraq, AQI, leaded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi was a Jordanian born terrorist who, after his father died when he was seventeen, started to embrace a life of drugs and alcohol. While in jail after being charged with drug – possession he “was introduced to radical Islam and left Jordan within a year of his release to participate in the Soviet-Afghan conflict.

Zarqawi's Islamism idea was deeply rooted in the Jihadi - Salafism and the fight against all the infidels, Shi'a as well. In 1996 Bin Laden issued a fatwa entitled:”Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites”,²¹⁶Mecca and Medina, seen Saudi Arabia as an enduring western ally. However, Al Zarwaqi saw the Jihad as directed towards the “near enemy”, defining the “unbelievers” including all the Shia and any fellow Sunnis as those who did not

²¹⁶ Weiss. M, Hassan. H. (2015) *ISIS:Inside the Army of Terror*. New York, NY: Regan Arts; p.15

abide strict Salafist covenant²¹⁷. However, despite the evident disagreement with Bin Laden, in 2004 Zarqawi pledged oath to the leader of Al Qaeda. Following the formal declaration of loyalty, Zarwaqi announced the creation of a new jihadist movement named “al Qaeda in the Land of the two Rivers, who became later commonly known as simply Al Qaeda in Iraq.”²¹⁸

The birth of an Al-Qaeda's formal branch in Iraq gave full powers to Zarqawi which turned the country into a state of terror. The US-led invasion of Iraq, as well as the de-baathification of the society, left the country without any institutionalized armed forces. The sectarian divisions which had been fueled during the Saddam's regime with a Sunni political oppression over the Shia's groups suddenly erupted across the country, turning the Iraqi scenario in a bloody battlefield among religious cleavages. “Zarqawi's coming reign of terror in Iraq was distinguished by its focus on killing or tormenting the country's Shia – majority population, creating, in his opinion, a state of civil war that would force Sunnis into reclaiming their lost power and prestige in Baghdad”.⁴ Zarqawi's bloody indiscriminate actions against Shia, Kurds and Christians angered Zawahiri and threatened the very idea at the base of al Qaeda's global jihad's project. “His assaults against civilians and his hundreds of car bombs and martyrdom operations targeting Shiite civil and religious institutions and festivals repulsed Muslims and eroded AQI's popular legitimacy. Zarqawi's campaign angered Zawahiri, who rebuked his anti- Shiite strategy in a 2005 letter. A frustrated Zawahiri urged Zarqawi to refocus his attacks against US and Iraqi forces”.²¹⁹ In more than one occasion Al Zawahiri stressed the need to stop the attacks on The Shias as they were damaging the image of the whole movement.

In a letter intercepted by the US intelligence forwarded from Al Zawahiri to Zarqawi, the former leader of Al Qaeda “outlined a four-stage strategy for AQI, telling Zarqawi to expel the Americans, establish an Islamic state, expand the jihad to Iraq's

²¹⁷ Ibid; p.16

²¹⁸ Ibid: p.21

²¹⁹ Celso, A.N. “Zarqawi's Legacy: Al Qaeda's ISIS “Renegade”. *Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 26 no. 2, 2015, pp. 21-41. Project MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/article/5842. P.25

neighbors, and ultimately confront Israel”.²²⁰ On January 15th 2006, Zarqawi formed the Mujahidin Shura Council, which united al-Qaeda in Iraq with five other jihadi organizations operating in the area.²²¹

After Zarqawi's death on 7 June, 2006, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir became Zarqawi's successor as the formal leader of AQI. On 12 October, 2006, Muhajir and the Mujahidin Shura Council announced an alliance of several more jihadi factions and Sunni tribal leaders known as the Alliance of the Scented Ones, which three days later announced the establishment of “the Islamic State of Iraq.” Moreover, the newly self-proclaimed spokesman of the Islamic State Muharib al-Juburi identified in a public statement the state’s leader as “Commander of the Faithful” Abu ‘Umar al-Baghdadi.²²² Despite Zarqawi's death, few changed in the Islamic State's strategy. His successor, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, kept directing AQI attacks towards civilians as well as the Iraqi Shi'a community. ISI's stubbornness ended up in the intervention of several American troops into controlled jihadists neighborhood.

In order to protect themselves from the enduring indiscriminate attacks, the local population started to cooperate with the US troops. Likewise, General Petraeus decided to recruit Sunni Arabs “to join the fight against AQI²²³ reassuring they would have been safe. This latter strategy brought consistent results. “By 2008 al Qaeda and other violent militants no longer overran the country and the situation stabilized”.²²⁴ On April 18, 2010 the United States reportedly reached another important strategic victory. Both leaders of IS, Abu ‘Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir were killed in a US airstrike.

²²⁰ Bunzel, C. (2015) *From Paper State to Caliphate: The ideology of the Islamic State*. States News Service (2015); p.15

²²¹ Ibid; p.16

²²² Bunzel, C. (2015) *From Paper State to Caliphate: The ideology of the Islamic State*. States News Service (2015); p.17

²²³ Stern, J, Berger, J.M (2015). *ISIS: the State of Terror*. London: William Collins, 2015; p.27

²²⁴ Ibid; p.28

Within one month of their death the Shura council appointed a new leader of the ISI: Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Baghdadi's first priority was to rebuild the IS with trust fellows companion who had shared with him the period of imprisonment at Camp Bucca, an American detention facility in Iraq. In the following years with “between 800 and 1000 fighters in his ranks, Baghdadi would lead Iraq into its deadliest years”.²²⁵

During 2012 Baghdadi increased the ranks of ISI fighters by freeing hundreds of jihadists from Iraqi prisons. Despite the apparent victory reached by Us thanks to a joint cooperation with local tribes, AQI never ended its activities. After US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 AQI re-surfed, causing the deaths “of nearly 8000 civilian in 2013 alone”.²²⁶ The outbreak of the Syrian civil war presented Baghdadi with a great opportunity: to expand the ISI into the neighboring Syria. In order to fully establish a prolongation of ISI in Syria, Baghdadi sent one of his most trustworthy man into Syrian territory. Abu Mohammed al Jawlani, who had spent time with Baghdadi at Camp Bucca, “quickly established himself as leader of a group that came to be known as Jabhat al Nusra”.²²⁷

Almost unilaterally, on April 9, 2013 “Baghdadi announced a merge of ISI and al Nusra, calling the new group the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). This announcement coincided with the conquest of Rakka by al Nusra and subsequent Islamic State's seizure of the city, stealing it from Al Nusra's control.

After Baghdadi's statement, Al Jolani promptly declared that “he did not approve of the merger, or indeed even know about it beforehand”. Al Jolani thus clearly reinforced his pledge of oath to Al Zawahiri and Al Qaeda, detaching himself from the Islamic State. The debate of loyalty among the two leaders reached Zawahiri that scolded both for their behavior.

²²⁵ Ibid; p.38

²²⁶ Turner, J (2015) Strategic differences: Al Qaeda's Split with the Islamic State of Iraq and al - Sham, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 26:2, 208-225; p.211

²²⁷ Stern, J, Berger, J.M (2015). *ISIS: the State of Terror*. London: William Collins, 2015; p.41

However, despite Zawahiri's continuous recalls to Baghdadi to communicate with Al Qaeda and maintain operations within AQ's approval, the leader of the Islamic state "publicly rejected Zawahiri's ruling. "I have chosen the command of my Lord over the command in the message that contradicts it".²²⁸ Al-Qaeda itself clarified its relationship with the Islamic State; On February 2, 2014, al-Qaeda issued a statement officially dissociating itself from the Islamic State. The statement asserted that al-Qaeda was "not responsible for [the Islamic State's] actions".²²⁹

4.7.2 How did Iran respond to ISIS' ascendancy?

ISIS constitutes the biggest threat to Iraq's security since the 2003 US-led invasion and to Iran as well. Throughout the last decade, The Islamic Republic has worked restlessly to bring Iraq under its sphere of influence, empowering local Shia militias and installing a favorable Shia presidency represented by the former prime minister Nouri al Maliki. Unlike other conflicts in the Middle East, the territorial integrity and stability of Iraq are not optional for Iran.²³⁰ Consequently, Tehran is a key stakeholder in the crisis .The Islamic State's ideology embodies everything that the IRI does not represent, making of Iran one of ISIS' biggest enemy.

On the Iraqi front, the conquest of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, in June 2014 from the Islamic State, raised many concerns within Iran on the potential spillover effect of the rising of a Sunni extremist group, and the broader consequences for Iraqi security, compelling Iran to intervene through its proxy militias, led by the Quds forces. Conversely, the seizure of Rakka in Syria in 2014 and the escalating sectarian tension in the war presented Iran with a big opportunity: to legitimize its presence in the Syrian arena.

²²⁸ McCants, W. (2015), *ISIS apocalypse*. (n.d). : Palgrave Macmillan; p. 92

²²⁹ Bunzel, C. (2015) *From Paper State to Caliphate: The ideology of the Islamic State*. *States News Service* (2015); p.29

²³⁰ Esfandiary, D., & Tabatabai, A. (n.d). Iran's ISIS policy. *International Affairs*, 91(1) p.14

One year prior to the nuclear agreement, Tehran had been offered a great chance of cooperating with the west and gain leverage on the international arena at the light of the growing isis violence in Middle East. Due to Iran's proximity to Iraq and its long efforts to stabilize the country with friendly groups, Iran's already established military presence in Baghdad was the perfect tool through which advance American interests in the fight against the Islamic State.

On the other hand, Iran's position on two fronts could have been a great blow to Iran's hitherto efforts to maintain Assad in power. Indeed, until 2014 Iran had already injected a notable amount of economic, militarily and logistic resources in Syria, at a time when the international sanctions constituted a heavy burden on Iran's national expenditure budget.²³¹ Indeed, after ISIS seized control of Mosul and other territories in Iraq, Iran was forced to reallocate some of its Iraqi militias fighting in Syria back to Iraq, decreasing its military manpower in Damascus.

Therefore, ISIS constituted a great deal to Iran's strategy in Syria. The loss of Bashar al Assad would signify losing its single most important ally since the Iran - Iraq war, reducing its influence in the levant. On the other hand, leaving Iraq in the hands of radical extremists would jeopardize and destabilize the favourable political situation which Iran had built over the years. Moreover, the 7 June, 2017, ISIS attack in Tehran, which left 18 people dead, was another wake-up call for Iran of the great risk ISIS posed to Iran's internal security as well.²³²

At that point Iran had two choices: to reduce its costly engagement in Syria, to respond to a much bigger threat along its border, or to fight on both fronts risking a significant escalation of the danger in Baghdad. On June 19 2017 for the first time Iran engaged directly with the Islamic State: six ballistic missiles were launched by the IRGC from western Iran, into Syria's eastern governorate of Deir Ezzor to crash down ISIS's targets.²³³

²³¹ Esfandiary, D., & Tabatabai, A. (n.d). Iran's ISIS policy. *International Affairs*, 91(1) p.15

²³² Vatanka, A (2017) *Iran's Islamic State problem isn't going anywhere*, Foreign Policy

²³³ Ibid.

Finally, with the recapture of Mosul in July 2017 from the International coalition of Iraqi national forces, the peshmerga, and US and Iranian advisers, has deprived ISIS of its main stronghold. The convergence of Iranian and Western interests in the fight against ISIS has been of great advantage to Iran, which has so far thwarted the possibility of a further engagement along the Iraqi border, allowing the IRI to refocused on the military operations in Syria. Moreover, the stance assumed by Iran at the forefront of the battle against the Islamic State has served Iranian interests by legitimizing Iranian intervention in Syria as aimed in the fighting radical terrorism.

Ultimately, the spreading of ISIS's terrorism could have been a great strategic blow to Iran, which could have had to choose among two countries in which it has placed great efforts and interests. If on the the one hand the Islamic State activities have legitimized Iran's operations as invaluable to the international community to counter the brutal violence of the AQI's branch, on the other hand it has made Iran aware of the likely spillover effect of its sectarian policy in Syria as well as within Iran, where the sunni communities have been suffering from underrepresentation and discriminations.

4.8 Chapter conclusions

Through its relation with proxies, Iran appears to have maintained its military doctrine within a defensive stance. However, the deployment of IRGC and the conventional army, the Artesh on the ground may represent a shifting strategy in Tehran's combat doctrine. Unlike Iraq, which shares a long border with Iran and which has constituted one of the main threat to Iran's security for decades, Iran's military presence appears a great hazard. While in Iraq, Iran has worked to empower Iraqi Shiite militias, avoiding direct combat fightings, in Syria the consistent military efforts are a surprising symptom of Iran's changing military pattern.

Iran seems to have acquired the upper hand in the conflict. Even the rise of ISIS hasn't had any significant impact on Iran's efforts on the Syrian territory which in turn keeps being consistent.

So far Iran's military efforts seem to have paid off, not only by prolonging the resistance of Assad against the opposition but by empowering Iran's operational capacities in foreign lands.

Finally, there is no doubt that Iran has gained invaluable lessons from its engagement in Syria, likely turning Tehran into a more offensive power in the region.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Iran is not a rogue state. As the debate around Iran's foreign policy drivers keeps being open, this thesis has tried to display how Iran's foreign policy in Syria has been driven by pragmatism and defensive stance.

Iran keeps being at the center of a long, yet not solved, historical debate about the Islamic Republic's oscillation between Pragmatism and Ideology in its foreign policy decision making process. In particular, the Islamic revolution and the following isolation Iran was forced into in the region, compelled the newly form Islamic Republic to emphasize its Shiite ideology. Therefore, mantras like the anti-zionism and anti-western narratives started to play a significant role in Iran's foreign policy. It is in this turbulent period, in the aftermath of the 1979's revolution, that Iran, searching for new allies in the region, found in Syria the perfect partner. Due to the precarious conditions of the environment in which they both operated, characterized by a high level of foreign penetration, the alliance formed by Syria and Iran was meant to balance against external threats.

To this respect, the first chapter has shown how the two countries have found a ground of cooperation based on the fulfillment of complementary interests. Most importantly, the perception of a common threat has been at the base of their defensive alliance. The need to counter United States influence in the region, as well as Israel and Iran's neighbour Iraq, has driven Iran and Syria closer despite evident opposite ideologies. Syria, a pan - Arab State, and Iran, an Islamic Shiite Republic, could not have been ideologically farther. However, the pressing need for the Islamic Republic to find a valuable ally has had the precedence over a constructivist reasoning, thus showing the pragmatic drivers of Iran's foreign policy.

Though their interests have not always been aligned, as it was the case for Syria's bandwagoning with United States during the latter invasion of Kuwait, as well as during the clashes between Amal and Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran has managed to play a prudent game of balancing among not convergent interests, in order to preserve the security of the Republic. Indeed, after the Iran - Iraq war, due to Tehran's high isolation in the region, Iran has further strengthen its relationship with Damascus to answer to the challenges of a changing balance of power in the region. In this period Iran's economic reconstruction during the pragmatism mandate of Rafsanjani has had the precedence over any other matter, such as the Khomeini's dictate of exporting the Revolution. Significant resources have been channeled to the reconstruction of the Iran's military according to Iran's defensive military doctrine. Tehran, aware of the technological superiority of its perceived enemies, the United States and Israel, started building a military structure which would have answered the challenges coming from external threats, rather than focusing on an armament to jeopardize other countries' security. Therefore, Tehran has always been focused on responding to outside attackers, avoiding any direct confrontations abroad.

The outbreak of the Syrian conflict has posed significantly to Iran's security in the region, for the toppling of the Assad regime would constitute one of the most strategic setbacks since the Iran - Iraq war. Indeed, Iran was driven to operate in Syria alongside Bashar al - Assad to preserve its bulwark against Israel as well as the provision of arms to Hezbollah which guarantees Tehran's influence in the Levant.

Therefore, since the beginning of the war Iran has struggled to find a unified and coherent interpretations about the Syrian uprising. Indeed, throughout the Arab Spring Tehran had vehemently referred to the Islamic character of the protests to build a bridge with the 1979's Islamic revolution, in a bid to regain the prestige lost during the 2009's post - election uprisings. Clearly, the ideological reasons over the Arab Spring's narrative seemed to prevail over a realistic portrait of the political situation in which the manifestations unfolded. Moreover, during the Arab uprisings across the Middle East, Tehran had supported democratic reforms against dictators and authoritarian regimes. However, when the the protests erupted in Syria, Iran

threw its weight behind the “Alawite regime”. Therefore, in order to both justify its support to the authoritarian government of Bashar al - Assad and deviate the international community from its engagement, Tehran tried to exploit developments in Syria at its advantage. Nevertheless, Iran has displayed different and often contradicting narratives about its involvement.

Initially, the violent regime’s crackdown on the uprisings was labelled by Iran as foreign interventionism, more specifically, the Islamic Republic accused both Israel and the United States of having organised the protests for their hegemonic aspirations in the Middle East.

Secondly, the Syrian civil war took the form of a battle against the spread of Sunni extremism fueled by the rising of ISIS. Thirdly, the recourse to ideological motives, namely the defence of the Zeynep’s Shrine and the Shia eschatology in reference to Mahdism, became predominant narratives in Tehran’s discourse on the Syrian conflict. Though, Iran has carefully tried, throughout the conflict, to avoid any sectarian characterization of the conflict, the recurrent religious discourse about the protection of Shi’a holy sites along with the enrollment of Shi’a troops, has increased the perception that Iran may be driven in its FP by ideological reasons.

Nevertheless, even the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who is the beholder of the Shia message, and the protector of the Islamic character of the Republic, has offered a high degree of pragmatism in dealing with the uprisings, prioritizing the cooperation with the United States when ISIS appeared on the Syrian map over anti - western ideology. Finally, even though sometimes substituted by ideological reasons, Iran’s primary FP drivers remain pragmatic. Moreover, another aspect which reinforces the view of Iran’s FP as led by pragmatism is the coherence within Iran’s domestic politics actors. Both during Ahmadinejad and Rouhani’s first presidential mandate, the line followed was the one imposed by the Supreme Leader. As ruling elite reformists as much as principlists pursued the ultimate survival and safety of the country, meeting realistic objectives rather than ideologically - driven ones.

Therefore, the Syrian war was approached within the framework of a broader geopolitical issue at the light of National interests. To this respect, Reformists had domestically committed themselves to the resolution of the Nuclear issue to relieve the country from the economic sanctions imposed by the United States. Consequently, as discussed above, Syria served Iran's chances to find a compromising agreement over its nuclear programme as much as a positive outcome in the nuclear talks would have given Iran more freedom in Syria having re-acquired the trust of the international community.

Ultimately, Iran's framework of the war was mostly inspired by realist reasons, who took the precedence over ideological discourses. However, while on the one hand Tehran clearly displayed a high level of pragmatism in dealing with the crisis, on the other the historical defensive doctrine characterising the Islamic Republic may have witnessed a significant shift.

Indeed, although driven by what Iran perceives as defensive reasons, namely establishing a secure environment both at east in Iraq, and preserving the status quo in Syria, Iran's military strategy has seen an increasing use of conventional forces.

For the first time, since the Iran - Iraq war, Iran has deployed IRGC GF in a combat area, turning its manpower into a more conventional force. While on the one hand Tehran continues operating through and advisory training mission by enforcing the Syrian Army, on the other it has reinforced and created a growing number of proxies. This latter strategy though resulting in line with Iran's doctrine of asymmetric warfare, it has turned the war into an increasingly sectarian conflict, destabilizing further the already bloody Syrian conflict. Moreover, the improved interoperability of the conventional military, the Artesh, along with the IRGC and the Basiji as well as the increased number of ground operations of members of the IRGC have given Tehran a significant capacity in pursuing conventional military strategies.

Finally, Tehran's whole of military doctrine remains defensive, because it has not still acquired the necessary technology and capability to wage conventional wars. However, Tehran's intervention in the Syrian conflict has consistently jeopardized

Syrian environment, a radical shift for a doctrine which had hitherto avoided direct operations abroad. Syria has been so far an important testbed for Iran's military capabilities. The war has given Tehran more trust and assertiveness in conducting operations abroad. However, It is difficult to predict whether Iran will decide to put in efforts in the development of a more conventional warfare to project its power even farther. What it is sure is that the Islamic Republic has consistently acquired capacities that no other State in the Middle East possesses.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Turkish Summary/Türkçe özet

SURİYE İÇ SAVAŞINDA İRANIN ROLÜ

Bu tez, çatışma durumunda İran'ın dış politikası üzerinden pragmatizm ve ideoloji etkisinin değerlendirilmesiyle Suriye iç savaşında İran'ın rolünün dinamiklerini incelemeyi amaçlamıştır. Bu çalışma, İran'ın savunma askeri doktrinini daha saldırgan ve agresif bir politikaya doğru kaydırıp kaydırmadığını tartışan İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin askeri müdahalesini incelemiştir. Bu tez, İran'ın Suriye'ye müdahalesinin ilk aşaması boyunca, Suriye ile tarihi ittifakından dolayı bu müdahalenin ardındaki nedenlerin savunma amaçlı bir duruş tarafından yürütüldüğünü tartışmıştır. Ancak, olay yerinde Esad'ın kötüye gitmesi nedeniyle, İran'ın eylemleri mütemadiyen daha iddialı bir hale dönmüştür, bu sayede İran'ın asimetrik savaşında önemli bir kaymayı göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma, Suriye'de İran'ın fiili politikasını açıklamıştır, yüksek askeri müdahalesinden dolayı İran'a istikrarlı bir şekilde geleneksel ve simetrik savaşları devam ettirme kabiliyeti vererek İran'ın kuvvet aktarımı kapasitesini arttırmıştır.

Suriye savaşı patlak verdikten sonra, çatışmadan doğan parçalanmış çevre, araştırmacıları zorlu bir göreve davet etmiştir. Çok yönlü bölgesel ve uluslararası dinamikler, Suriye'yi, Orta Doğu ve ötesindeki rakip aktörleri etkilemiş temsili bir savaşa döndürmüştür. Bunlar arasında İran, çatışmanın mevcut sonuçlarını önemli şekilde şekillendiren, son altı yılda rejimin güçlü kalmasına yardım eden ve Esad hükümetine temel askeri desteği sağlayan cephe hattı olarak hareket etmiştir. Fakat, İran'ın Suriye müdahalesinin altında yatan nedenler karmaşıktır. İran hükümeti çatışmaya müdahalesi hakkında göze batmamaya çalışarak devamlı bir çaba

göstermiştir. Savaşın ilk safhaları boyunca, İran İslam Cumhuriyeti, sınırlı öneri ve danışman rolüne sahip olduğunu öne sürerek Suriye'deki askeri varlığı hakkındaki herhangi bir suçlamayı da şiddetli bir şekilde reddetmiştir. İran'ın eylemleri ve hatta fiili politikasının şekillenmesi çıkar amacı güden zorlu bir görevi oluşturur. Çatışmada İran'ın menfaatinin arkasındaki nedenler bir çok yazar ve akademisyen tarafından ortaya konmuştur, ancak İran hükümeti tarafından şeffaf bir konumun eksikliğinden dolayı tüm strateji zor olarak değerlendirilerek parçalanmış bir yaklaşım ile sonuçlanmıştır. Bu yüzden, bu araştırma, pragmatizm ve ideoloji arasında İran'ın dış politikası hareketi hakkında tarihi bir tartışma ve Suriye'deki müdahalenin mevcut UCE'nin altında yatan faktörleri arasında bağlantı kurmayı amaçlamıştır.

İslam Devrimi'nden sonra, İran'ın dış politika etmenleri, anlaşmazlığı olan bir tartışmanın merkezi haline gelmiştir. 1979 devriminden sonra kanıtı İslam söz sanatının kazanılması olmasına rağmen, İran, karşıt ideolojiye sahip ülkelerle dostça ilişkiler ve ittifaklar kurarak farklı seviyelerde Orta Doğu aktörleri ile her zaman ilişki içinde olmaya çalışmıştır. Örneğin; Katami bir çok Arap ülkesi ile İran'ın ilişkilerini güçlendirmek için Lübnan'da Şii topluluğu ve Suudi Arabistan ile uzun süredir devam eden bağ kurmuştur. Irak-İran savaşı süresince, İran daha savunmacı bir gerçekçilik yaklaşımına güvendiğini ispat etmiştir; "İran'ın Irak savaşı üzerindeki stratejisi, ikili stratejinin sınırlarını belirlemeyi içeriyordu, bu ikili strateji ilk olarak bölgede hazır bulunan ABD varlığı tarafından ortaya konan tehdidi yok etmek ve Bağdad'da ortak bir hükümet oluşumunu sağlamaya yardım ederek tarihi İran-İrak rekabetini daimi olarak sonlandırmaktı.

Bu tez, Suriye'de İran'ın tavrını Gerçekçilik objektifinden incelemiştir. Özellikle, benim savım Suriye'ye İran müdahalesinin şekillenmesinin iki farklı aşama ile tanınmasıdır. Bunlardan ilki, Suriye ile uzun tarihi ittifakı ile bağlantılıdır ve savaşın erken aşamalarında İran'ın sınırlı tavsiye edici rolü, Suriye savaşında İran'ın kendi çabasıyla savunmacı bir davranışı nasıl benimsediğini göstermiştir. İkinci aşama, özellikle 2015 Eylül ayından başlayarak Hizbullah ve Rusya müdahalesinden sonra, İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin askeri stratejisinin nasıl gittikçe artarak tutucu ve saldırgan hale geldiği incelemiştir. Son olarak, bu araştırma üç farklı seviye aracılığıyla

müdahaleyi kavramsallaştırarak Suriye iç savaşında İran'ın dış politikasının etmenlerine odaklanmıştır. İslam devriminden sonra, Suriye İran'ın en değerli ve stratejik müttefiki olmuştur, bunun sonucu olarak birinci seviye son 40 yıl üzerinden İslam Cumhuriyeti için Suriye ittifakının stratejik önemi ile birleşmiş İran-Suriye ilişkisinin tarihi belirleyici faktörleri gözönüne alınacaktır.

İkinci olarak, benim çalışmam ideoloji üzerinden pragmatizme verilen üstünlüğü gösterecek Suriye'de müdahalenin şekillenmesinde bir bağlayıcılık bulmaya çalışan İran'ı da analiz etmiştir. Benim savım çatışmanın erken aşamalarında İran kurumunun iç etmenlerin hatta dış müttefiklerin görüşüne güvenerek bir hegomonya gücü olarak hareket etmesinden ziyade statükoyu sürdürmek için Suriye'de savunmacı bir konum benimsemiştir.

Üçüncü bölüm üç ana soruya cevap vererek çatışmada İran askeri müdahalesinin boyutunu incelemiştir: 1) Çatışmada bölgesel ve uluslararası etmenler ile İran'ın ittifakı nedir? 2) İran Devrim Muhafızları Ordusu (İDMO) geleneksel rolünden kayıyor mu? 3) İran, bölgede daha saldırgan bir savaş haline doğru gider mi?

Teorik bir bakış açısından, Gerçekçilik, devletin karar ve tutumlarını inceleyen baskın bir yaklaşım ortaya koymuştur. Gerçekçiler, menfaatlerini maksimuma çıkartan aktörler ve bir anarşi sisteminin parçaları olan mantıklı etmenler olarak düşünürler. İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin dış politikası hakkındaki mevcut literatür ayrıca Gerçekçi yaklaşıma öncelik verilmesini yansıtır. Benim tezim, aynı zamanda İran politikasının şekillenmesinin ve Suriye'deki eylemlerinin analiz edilmesi için bu teorik çerçeveye dayanmaktadır. Ayrıca, araştırma Beşar Esad'ın yanısıra İran'ın müdahalesinin değişmesini değerlendirerek ülkede UCE müdahalesinin gelişimlerine, özellikle de İran'ın tarihi savunmacı askeri politikasını daha saldırgan bir tutuma çevirip çevirmediğine odaklanmıştır.

Ayrıca, Suriye'deki İran stratejisinin olay yerindeki gelişmelere tepki gösterdiğini ileri sürmekteyim. Bu yüzden, Suriye'ye İran'ı müdahale için zorlayan nedenlerin başında savunmacı bir tutum gelmektedir, yani İran mevcut statüko durumunu

korumaya çalışmıştır ve olayların en son gelişimi İran'ı daha saldırgan bir ülke haline dönüştürmüştür.

İran-Suriye müttefik eksenini ilk bölümdeki argümanım için teorik bir temel sunmaktadır, bu bölüm, gücün ve savunmacı müttefikin Uluslararası İlişkiler denge teorileri tarafından tanımlanmıştır. İki teori de “devletlerin, sahip oldukları üstün kaynakların bir tehdit yarattığı devletler ve koalisyonlardan kendilerini korumak için müttefiklerine katılma durumunu” varsaymaktadır. Bundan başka, iki diğer neden için devletler müttefik oluşturabilirler. Bunlardan ilki, güvenliği korumak ve hegemonyacı gücün büyümesine karşı var olmaktır. İkincisi ise, daha zayıf devletler ile “dengeleme” durumunun daha avantajlı sonuçlanabilmesidir, çünkü sistemdeki yeni üyelerin ittifakları daha güçlü olacaktır. Aslında, İslam Devriminden sonra, Suriye ile İran ittifakı, İsrail'in bölgesel bir tehdit olarak iki taraf için de denk olması ve hatta Irak'ın Orta Doğu'da artan etkisi ve son olarak da iki ülkeyi dengesiz hale getiren Irak'ın ABD tarafından işgali ile ortaya çıkan tehdit nedeniyle oluşmuştur. Bu yüzden, Beşar Esad'ın rejimini korumak İran'ın faydasına olacaktır. Diğer bir yandan, Esad'ın düşüşü ve Suriye'de kalan gücün temizlenmesi bölgede İran'ı tekrar yalnız bırakabilir. Ayrıca, olay yerinde gelişmelerin takip edilmesi ile Suriye'de İran eylemleri artarak daha saldırgan ve iddialı bir hale gelmiştir. Bu durum, Suriye'de İran müdahalesine yaklaşımın olan statükonun sürdürülmesi ve güvenlik varsayımları altındadır.

Suriye-İran ittifakı Orta Doğu'daki en devamlı ve süpriz şeklindeki müttefikliklerden birini oluşturmuştur. Açık bir şekilde, karşıt ideolojilerle bölünen direnç eksenini kırk yılı aşkın bir süredir buna karşı olduğunu kanıtlamıştır. Bölgenin statükosunun devamlı bir şekilde bozulması ve hatta stratejik yenilgiler olan çeşitli düzensiz olaylar tarafından test edilmesine rağmen, Suriye ve İran birbirini tamamlayıcı çıkarlarını yerine getirmek için birlikte çalışmaya devam etmişlerdir.

Uzun dönemli prospektif olmadan mutlak “mantık evliliği” olarak bazı analistler tarafından tarif edilmiş, ortak amaçlara ulaşana kadar yerle bir olan alın yazısı, ittifakın sürmesi ittifak temelindeki faktörleri incelemek için bir çok gözlemciyi zorlamıştır. Suriye savaşının başlaması, Suriye-İran eksenine yeni bir anlam

katmıştır. Bu bölüm, Suriye ve İran arasındaki uzun dostluğun ilerlemesini sağlayan tarihi olayların derinlemesine bir analizini hatta Orta Doğu’da en dayanıklı bağlardan biri olan belirleyici faktörleri incelemek için teorik bir çerçeve sunmasını kapsamaktadır. Bunu yapmak için, farklı periyotlar, ittifakı oluşturmaya yardım eden tarihi olayları tamamen ortaya koymak için gözönünde bulundurulacaktır.

İttifakın güç teorisi dengesi, bir ittifak ilerlemesinde devletin seçimlerini değerlendirmek ve bilgilendirmek için en çok kullanılan modellerden birini oluşturmuştur. Karar vericilerin işlettiği dış alan Orta Doğu, hegemonyalı küresel güçler tarafından istikrarsız meşruiyet, yayılmış güvensizlik ve sıradışı nüfuzdan ötürü istisnai olarak değişkendir. Suriye ve İran dış politikası büyük ölçüde bu çevreye bir tepkidir.

Bu yüzden, Suriye ile İran’ın idare edildiği bir çerçevenin doğru bir şekilde ortaya konması, ittifaklarının tamamen anlaşılması için daimidir.

Süreci yaratan ittifak oluşumunun en derininde, devletler kendilerini daha kuvvetli bir güçten korumak için ittifaklarını ilerletirler. Bu yüzden güç teorisinin dengesi, daha büyük bir tehdit olarak algılanmış devlet gücüne karşı denge oluşturmak için daha zayıf devletlerle müttefik olan devletleri belirtmektedir. Küresel kavramda ve Orta Doğu’da güçlü devletlere işbirliği getiren Bandwagon etkisi nadirdir ve bir istisna oluşturmaz. Güç teorisinin dengesi bir ittifak oluşturmaya meyilli benzer özellikli devletleri tartışmaktadır, ancak, Suriye-İran ekseninde olduğu gibi karşıt ideolojilere sahip devletler gerçekte daha uzun süren dostluklar kurabilirler. Suriye’de altı yıllık savaştan sonra, İran, Beşar Esad’ın gücünü sürdürmede anahtar bir rol oynamayı sürdürmektedir. Rusya’nın yanısıra, İran ayaklanma karşıtı koalisyona katılan Suriye rejimi ardından ağırlığını üzerinden atmıştır. Suriye’de İran’ın paydaşları çoktur ve askeri müdahalesi isyanın geri gelmesinde savaşmak için Esad’a büyük bir kazanç sağlamıştır.

İran’ın stratejisi, iç politik çevrede geniş bir fikir birliği bulmak için anlatımını değiştirerek farklı yoğunluk derecelerine girmiştir. Aslında, İran’ın güvenli karar verme süreci düzgün çalışmayan karmaşık bir araçtır. İslam Cumhuriyeti’nin çok katmanlı ve çok yönlü sistemi en iyi “anahtar politik ve askeri liderler arasında

karşılıklı mutabakata dayalı süreç” olarak tarif edilebilir, Bu yüzden, Suriye’de İran politikası farklı faktörler tarafından etkilenmiştir. Bu yüzden iç politika, İran Ulusal güvenlik politikasını ve daha da önemlisi Suriye’deki mevcut İran stratejisini şekillendiren önemli bir göreve sahiptir. Bu çerçevede, bu bölümün amacı, Gerçekçi bir durum ile Tahran müdahalesini şekillendiren İç politikalarının etmenleri vasıtasıyla Suriye savaşında İran müdahalesinin bir tanımını sunmaktır.

Yukarıda görüldüğü üzere, Suriye, bölgede İran’ın amaçlarını korumak açısından çok önemlidir. Esad rejiminin düşüşü, İran-Irak savaşından sonra en stratejik yenilgiyi oluşturacaktır. Bu yüzden, 2011’de Suriye ayaklanmalarının başlamasından sonra, İslam Cumhuriyeti rejim askeri operasyonlarını geniş ölçüde destekleyerek Alevi müttefiğini korumak için ekonomik kaynaklarını feda etmiştir. İran, bunu istisari bir görev olarak tanımlayarak müdahalesini azaltmayı çok kez denemiştir. Ancak, İran’ın reddedilebilirliğine rağmen, Suriye’deki İran askeri müdahalesinin stratejik olarak daha tutarlı olduğu bir çok kanıt vardır. Savaş süresince, Suriye’de İran stratejisi olay yerindeki gelişmelerle uyumlu bir şekilde meydana gelmiştir. Yeni aktörler ortaya çıkmış, bu da Tahran’ın kendi politikasını değiştirmeye ve ilk amaçlarını yeniden düzenlemeye zorlamıştır.

Bu tezin amacı ışığında, bu bölüm İran’ın bölgede daha saldırgan bir tutum sergileyip sergilemediğini anlatarak sonuçlanır. Askeri süreçlerin farklı yönleri ve UCE’nin değişen rolü, Suriye ve hatta Orta Doğu’da İran’ın son menfaatleri üzerinde bir inceleme yürüten erken bir olasılığı göstermektedir. Bu bölümün amacı, Beşar Esad ile birlikte savaş alanında İran’ın silahlı güçlerini şekillendirmiş olan olay yerindeki gelişmelerle birlikte farklı askeri safhaları analiz etmektir. Ayrıca, IŞİD’in yükselişi ve Rusya’nın müdahalesi de UCE’nin askeri operasyonlarını tekrar şekillendiren güçlü bir etken olmuştur. Bunun zıttı olarak, Şii gruplarının ve Hizbullah’ın rolü, İran’ın tarihi temsilci Lübnan grubu, İran’ın kısa ve uzun dönemli stratejisi için Suriye’deki varlığının daha geniş göstergelerini anlatmak için incelenecektir.

İkinci bölümde geniş bir şekilde tartışılmasına rağmen, İslam Cumhuriyeti, Suriye’de askeri müdahale hakkında kapsamlı bir gerekçe bulma çabası sarfetmiştir. Savaştan

altı yıl sonra, Suriye’de İran’ın gerçek operasyonları, hükümet hiç bir resmi açıklama yapmadığından gizlenmeye devam etmektedir. Bu yüzden, bu bölümde sunulan veri ve strateji ikinci el kaynak bulgulardan ve medya haberlerindeki İran yetkililerinden elde edilecektir.

İran’ın askeri stratejisinin savunmacı nedenleri, özellikle Irak’ın doğusunda güvenli bir ortamın oluşturulmasıyla ve Suriye’de statükonun korunmasıyla yürütülmesine rağmen, üçüncü bölümde incelendiği gibi İran askeri prensibinin artan bir şekilde saldırgan bir tutumda olduğunu göstermiştir.

İlk defa, İran-Irak savaşından sonra, İran insan gücünü daha geleneksel bir güce dönüştürerek savaş alanında İran Devrim Muhafızları Ordusu’nu etkin bir şekilde kullanmıştır. Bir tarafta Tahran, Suriye ordusunu dayatarak danışman eğitici görevini sürdürürken, diğer tarafta çoğalan sayıda temsilci takviye etmiş ve güçlendirmiştir. Asimetrik savaşın İran doktrini ile aynı çizgide sonuçlanan son stratejisi ile, savaş, kanlı Suriye çatışmasının dengesini bozarak artan bir şekilde tutucu bir çatışmaya dönmüştür. Ayrıca, geleneksel askeriyenin gelişmiş müşterek çalışması, İDMO ve Basij hatta İDMO’nun artan sayıda operasyon üyesi ile birlikte Tahran’a geleneksel askeri stratejileri uygulayan önemli bir kapasite verilmiştir.

Sonuç olarak, Tahran’ın tüm askeri doktrinleri savunmacı kalmaktadır, çünkü geleneksel savaşları başlatmak için gerekli teknoloji ve yeterlilik henüz oluşmamıştır. Ancak, Suriye çatışmasında Tahran müdahalesi, yakınlarda direk operasyonlardan şimdiye kadar kaçınan bir doktrin için radikal bir değişime uğrayan Suriye çevresini sabit bir şekilde riske atmıştır.

Suriye, şu zamana kadar İran askeri yeterlilikleri için önemli bir test alanı olmuştur. Savaş, yakınlarda yürütülen operasyonlarda Tahran’a daha fazla güven ve iddia kazandırmıştır. Ancak, gücünü ortaya koyması için daha geleneksel bir savaşın gelişiminde çaba sarfetmeye İran’ın karar verip vermemesini tahmin etmek zordur. Emin olunan şey, İslam Cumhuriyeti’nin, Orta Doğu hakimiyetinde diğer hiç bir devletin olmadığı kadar sürekli iktidar elde etmesidir.

Appendix B: TEZ FOTOKOPİSİ İZİN FORMU

ENSTİTÜ

Fen Bilimleri Enstitüsü

Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü

Uygulamalı Matematik Enstitüsü

Enformatik Enstitüsü

Deniz Bilimleri Enstitüsü

YAZARIN

Soyadı : Cappelletti

Adı : Cristin

Bölümü : Orta Doğu Araştırmaları

TEZİN ADI (İngilizce) : DYNAMICS OF THE IRANIAN ROLE IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

TEZİN TÜRÜ : Yüksek Lisans

1. Tezimin tamamından kaynak gösterilmek şartıyla fotokopi alınabilir.
2. Tezimin içindekiler sayfası, özet, indeks sayfalarından ve/veya bir bölümünden kaynak gösterilmek şartıyla fotokopi alınabilir.
3. Tezimden bir bir (1) yıl süreyle fotokopi alınamaz.

TEZİN KÜTÜPHANEYE TESLİM TARİHİ: