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## SECTARIANISM IN IRAN FOREIGN POLICY

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This is to certify that we have read this thesis and that in our opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Science.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **SECTARIANISM IN IRAN FOREIGN POLICY**

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This thesis aims to understand the explanatory power of sectarianism regarding the international politics of the Middle East, with a specific focus on Iran's foreign policy. The findings of this study are as follows: Iran as a main "Shia power", uses any kind of identities beside Shi'ism if it fits into its agenda, however, it does not pursue a sectarian foreign policy. It has been following pragmatic policies according to its national interests largely free from religion. Iranian foreign policies that support other Shia groups or communities in the Middle East like Hezbollah or Iraqi Shias are not implicitly influenced by religious norms and affinities. Accordingly, the study addresses those policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which confute the sectarian explanations in international relations. Another aim of this work is to question the idea of Shia Crescent, whether such a religious coalition is trying to be created by Iran; why, and for whom it is "created". For this aim, the thesis analyzes the discourse through a critical approach and sees it as a securitization discourse as framed by the Copenhagen School. To have a deeper understanding of sectarianist explanations on Iran's foreign policy, in the last part of the work, Iran's foreign policy towards the Syrian Civil War is studied as a critical case.

**Keywords:** Sectarianism, Shia Crescent, Iranian Foreign Policy, Iran

## ÖZ

### İRAN DIŞ POLİTİKASINDA MEZHEPÇİLİK

Deniz, Nazlı Gül

Yüksek Lisans, Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü

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Bu tez, Orta Doğu politikasını açıklamada, İran dış politikası ve Şii Hilali söylemlerinde mezhepçi yaklaşımın yeterliliğini, İran dış politikası özelinde sorgulamaktadır. Çalışmanın iddiası, “Şii gücü” olarak görülen İran’ın dış politikasında mezhep odaklı olmasının aksine ulusal çıkarlarına göre faydacı bir dış politika sergilediği; bölge Şiiilerinin vatandaşı oldukları ülkelerdeki devlete karşı değil, aksine ülkelerindeki otoriter yönetimlere karşı mücadele ettikleri ve bunlara karşı doğal haklarını savunduklarıdır. Hizbullah veya Irak Şiiileri gibi Orta Doğu'daki diğer Şii gruplarını veya topluluklarını destekleyen İran, dış politikasında iddia edildiği gibi zımni bir şekilde Şii norm ve yakınlıklardan etkilenmez. Bu doğrultuda tez İran’ın farklı dönemlerdeki dış politikalarını inceleyerek mezhepçi yaklaşımın uluslararası ilişkilerde açıklayıcı olamayacağını iddia etmektedir. Çalışmanın bir diğer amacı, Şii Hilali söylemini incelemek, İran’ın böyle bir gruplaşma oluşturup oluşturmadığını ve bu düşüncenin neden ve kimler tarafından ortaya atılmış olabileceğini sorgulamaktır. Bu minvalde, çalışmada bu gibi söylemler eleştirel biçimde analiz edilmiş ve Kopenhag Ekolü’nün Uluslararası İlişkilere kattığı güvenlikleştirme kavramı ile açıklanmıştır. İran’ın bölgedeki gerçek rolünü anlamak için, açıklayıcı bir vaka olarak İran’ın yıllardır süregelen ve uluslararasılaştırılmış Suriye İç Savaşı’ndaki rolü incelenmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Mezhepçilik, Şii Hilali, İran Dış Politikası, İran

To my dear family...



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AMAL	: Afuaj al Muqawama al Lubaniya
CIA	: Central Intelligence Agency
FIS	: Islamic Salvation Front
FSA	: Free Syrian Army
GCC	: Gulf Cooperation Council
GIA	: Algerian Islamic Group
HAMAS	: Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-’Islāmiyyah
IRI	: Islamic Republic of Iran
IRG	: Islamic Republican Party
IRGC	: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	: Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
ISSG	: International Syria Support Group
JCPOA	: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
KDP	: Kurdistan Democratic Party
KSS	: Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada
MENA	: Middle East and North Africa
PIJ	: Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine
SAIRI	: Supreme Assembly for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SCIRI	: Supreme Council for Islamic Revoluion in Iraq
UAE	: United Arab Emirates
UIA	: United Iraqi Alliance
UN	: United Nations
US	: United States of America

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, not many people were aware of a separate sect of Islam, Shi'ism. It was a darkfield before the Islamic Revolution, and even if it was known in name, the knowledge about it and its adherents were quite limited concerning their traditions, beliefs, and jurisprudences. Sunni Islam was the visible face of the Middle East and believed to shape the social and political culture of the Middle East.

This condition has changed, starting with the Islamic Revolution in 1979. It did not only attract attention on Iran but also brought Shi'ism as a phenomenon to international relations agenda. Even though it cannot be said that it has been illuminated in a flash, within the post-revolution period, Shi'ism has become apparent as a new political power tool in the international political realm. Its familiarity and academic researches about it in academia have increased.

Especially, since the Islamic Revolution, there have been significant events that changed the political equilibrium of the Middle East that have brought to minds the importance of sectarian divergences. Taliban's fall in Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and overthrowing of the Ba'athist regime, the sequent Iraqi Shi'as gaining the dominant power in Iraq, Hezbollah's success in 2006 Lebanon War, the Arab Uprisings and the current civil wars in Syria and Yemen should be included among these milestone events.

Here, sectarianism has come into the picture as one of these hotly-debated approaches; which explains the international politics and especially the conflicts in the Middle East with the Sunni-Shia rivalry. Sectarianism has been increasingly used to explain today's politics in the Middle East, especially after the political and social developments that took place following the Islamic Revolution and the US invasion of Iraq, as a means of explaining conflicts in Middle Eastern societies and states, suggesting that the most

determinant factor of turmoil and tension in the Middle East is the difference between religious sects of Sunnism and Shi'ism. Debates on the importance of the sectarian identities, conflicts and cooperations have been conducted on some pivotal discourses, such as the Axis of Resistance and the Shia Crescent.

Even though sectarian identities are undeniable elements within the social and political fabric of the Middle East, its importance as an explanatory tool is still hotly debated in academia, especially as it relates to societal and regional conflicts.

Accordingly, the first part of the study will examine sectarianism discussions in academia and explore how the various approaches observe state-sectarian identity relationship. In this section, which is the literature review of sectarianism, the term itself will be questioned first, and how useful and robust it is to analyze the events and the policies of states in the region. Then, a broad spectrum of approaches from primordialism to instrumentalism and their viewpoints on sectarianism and foreign policy be examined.

There are different approaches to sectarianism. According to some, sectarianism may play a role in intra-religious dynamics within divided societies. Yet beyond discussions of its appearances within societies, sectarianism has also become increasingly considered as a factor in regional politics after the Iranian Islamic Revolution<sup>1</sup>, and it has even come to take center stage within debates among opposing approaches. These debates on the role of sectarian identity have their place on a wide range from primordialism to instrumentalism.

Briefly, while primordialists stress the historical roots of sectarian identities, instrumentalists focus on the role of agencies and modernists on the other side, contemporary structural contexts.<sup>2</sup> The primordialist approach bases the reasons

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<sup>1</sup> Darwich, M., & Fakhoury, T. (2016). Casting the Other as an existential threat: The securitisation of sectarianism in the international relations of the Syria crisis. *Global Discourse*, 6(4), p.717.

<sup>2</sup> Hinnebusch, R. (2016). The sectarian revolution in the Middle East. *Revolutions: global trends and regional issues.*, p.122.

behind the actions of actors performing in domestic, regional, and international arenas, based on the historical origins of these actors' identities, notably the sectarian identities. In this sense, it emphasizes that Iran's Shia identity has an important place in its foreign policy-making process. On the other side, modernism argues that political identities and sectarian identities are modern formations and they are used by political circles for their own purposes. In line with this idea, instrumentalists also focus on the agency's role on mobilizing these sectarian identities. Among these approaches, special emphasis is placed on securitization theory and sectarianization idea as they help in understanding the relationship between sectarian identity and state foreign policy in more useful way.

The most important feature of these approaches is that each of them looks at a different part of the relationship between sectarian identity and politics. However, focusing on only one aspect of sectarian identities can lead to the wrong results of the political analysis to be made. Therefore, in order to understand the relationship between sectarian identity and foreign policy, each approach has been used to some extent in this study.

While laying out the theoretical framework for this research, it is necessary to start with the definition of sectarianism. The lack of definition and the miscellaneous and incoherent usage of the term make the meaning of sectarianism itself quite distortive. It may be used as the discrimination of a state based on one sect or it may be a social or religious issue; it may give a reference to a governmental system based on sects like in Lebanon; it may be a state policy or be used as a stigmatizing tool by regimes to distract attention from the real reasons of domestic turmoils within the state to religious identity.<sup>3</sup> This ambiguity, in the end, as Haddad rightly says, leaves too much room for subjective interpretation to be useful as a scholar category.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Haddad, F. (2017). 'Sectarianism' and Its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East. *The Middle East Journal*, 71(3), p. 364.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 365.

In this study, sectarianism, in internal politics, is used as a combination of attitudes, behaviours and contradictions that result in the exclusion and discrimination of another sect within a religion.<sup>5</sup> This might encompass structural or direct violence, or both, and is mostly related to the politics of societies. *In international politics, the term will be used as a directive and formative motive of the state's foreign policy.* That is to say; sectarianism can often be read as an ambiguous construct lacking clear definitions and terms. Furthermore, also the terms employed by the approach are sometimes contradictory, distortive, and even illogical. Sectarianism might be seen as a loose, inadequate, and weak approach in understanding the actual driving forces and motives of people.

By acknowledging the ambiguousness of the concept, in academic literature, sectarianism in the above-mentioned meaning has been an explanatory lens used to understand “conflict”, a definition of a narrative, by emphasising sectarian identities and differences, thereby giving immense weight to the intra-Muslim and religious dimension of said conflicts. These sectarian or primordial identities are placed at the center of accounts of the historical evolution of the Middle East, while other influences or identities are downplayed or marginalized.

On the other hand, whether and to what extent sectarianism is helpful to explain the Middle East politics is a very broad question. This study tries to answer only one facet of this extensive debate. It will try to answer the question of to what extent the sectarian identity of the agency is explanatory to understand its foreign policy, Iran in particular. Since Iran has a unique position in these discussions due to its role as the claimed architect of the “Shia awakening” and the leader of the “Shia crescent”, Iran's foreign policy will be examined to find an answer to the question of the role of sectarianism in foreign policy.

The study will proceed on the basis of the major events that have changed the equilibrium in Iran and the Middle East which have an important place in the

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<sup>5</sup> Haddad, F. (2011). *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic visions of unity*. Oxford University Press, USA. p.31.



exacerbation of sectarianism discussions. Within this context, the examination of Iran's foreign policy will be initiated from the late Pahlavi period, the period in which the Shi'ism gradually began to emerge in Iranian political life to the current politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In the historical analysis of the foreign policy of Iran is started from questioning the place of Shi'ism both in the ideology of the Islamic revolution, which overthrew the secular, West-oriented Pahlavi dynasty and in the Islamic state established afterwards. Iran foreign policy will be tried to be explained based on certain milestones, the Khomeini period and the presidency periodical phases of the moderate / conservative leaders that took over, since these changes are strongly linked to and affect foreign policy stances in the international arena.

As important milestones on sectarianism discussions and on the views that Iran is conducting a sectarian foreign policy; As important milestones on sectarianism discussions and on the views that Iran is conducting a sectarian foreign policy, in addition to the Iran Islamic Revolution of 1979, the fall of the Baath regime in Iraq through the US in 2003, and the Shia and minorities that were under pressure until that time began to strengthen in the state administration; Hezbollah, which Iran provided with all kinds of military, economic and political support in 2006 and 2009, started to be seen as an alternative to the status-quo Arab states; and in 2011 the Arab uprisings against authoritarian states are given specific importance in this research.

Linked to these essential events in the region, in the third chapter, the hegemonical rivalries among the states, the threat perceptions of the Arab monarchies coming from these changes in the regional status quo will be explained. Together with the security threat perceived by the status-quo states, it will be tried to examine the securitization process of these sectarian identities in the hands of these autocratic, if not monarchic ruling elites. Explaining the phenomena in the region with sectarianization will be useful to explain the foreign policies of these states. In line with this possibility of change, the sectarian discourses, the Shia Crescent ideas, their foundations, usage, when and by whom they are taken advantage will illuminate the fact that how "reality".

Besides, it should be admitted that after 2003, Iran started to strengthen its influence especially with the IRGC Quds force, on the Shia actors in the region. In this study, it is suggested that Iran, like every other state, is trying to instrumentalise and benefit from all kinds of events and actors that will benefit itself if they fit into its agenda, as it happened in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It was not the policy that Iran drew up, but it used the situation better than the US.

Therefore, in this study, it is believed that Iran does not systematically implement a Shia foreign policy. Otherwise, it is not possible to explain Iran's political and economic support to Sunni Palestine against Israel since the establishment of the Islamic republic, and its close relationship with the Sunni non-state actors through sectarianism.

Quite the contrary, it makes sense for Iran's foreign policy, which wants to increase its power in Islamic geopolitics, to keep its Shia identity in the background and to highlight its Islamic communitarianism in order to advance in the Middle East, which is mostly Sunni. Iran follows this rational foreign policy.

Lastly, the Iran's foreign policy toward the current Syria conflict will be analyzed to have a deeper understanding of sectarianism and Iran's role in it. First, the real reasons of the conflict in Syria and how it got sectarianized will be revealed. What we have seen in Arab Uprisings and Syria as sectarian conflicts is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Democratic demands of people were shown as sectarian and as interference of antagonist states by the ruling elites to cover the real reasons of the demonstrations and uprisings. Many non-state and state actors got involved and internationalized the conflicts which in the end, have started to turn to sectarian hatred and sectarian war. Then, the reasons for Iran to support al-Assad regime, their historical alliance and their common security threats and interests from each other's existences will be exposed.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF SECTARIANISM

Before discussing the role of sectarianism in Iranian foreign policy, it is important to examine the place of sectarianism claims in the academia and how scholars approach sectarianism in international relations literature. In this part of the study, the concept of sectarianism, its various interpretations, and its criticisms in the academic literature will be discussed.

#### 2.1. Primordialist approach

The primordialist approach stresses identity and culture as the main determinants of conflict and cooperation among states and other international actors.<sup>6</sup> It analyses sectarian identities in the Middle East (i.e., Sunnism and Shi'ism) as the primary catalyst for the actions of regional and international actors. The approach goes well beyond the modern-day reasons for rivalry in the Middle East; it delves back to the seventh century, taking the spread of Islam as the definitive basis for current dynamics in Middle Eastern socio-economic and political life.

Sectarianization also can be classified as a primordial understanding of the conflict. It attempts to explain conflicts as based on ancient hatred or contest of sects. When applied to the case of the Middle East, it emphasizes disagreement between Sunni and Shia Muslims over the successor to the prophet Mohammad in the seventh century. It sees this disagreement as forming the basis for almost all civil wars like in Iraq after the US invasion, the insurgency in Yemen, and the current civil war in Syria. While the approach has gained more importance after the US invasion of Iraq and the regime change in favor of the Shias, proponents of this approach argue that the struggle

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<sup>6</sup> Wehrey, F. M. (Ed.). (2017). *Beyond Sunni and Shia: the roots of sectarianism in a changing middle east*. Oxford University Press., p.46.

between sects will not be limited to Iraq but will spread to regions where Shia populations are widespread in the Middle East.

Vali Nasr is the pioneer of the sectarianist approach that seeks to make sense of the Middle East on the axis of the sect. While he acknowledges the contemporary reasons of sectarian conflict, he emphasizes historical roots dated back in the 7th century.<sup>7</sup> He employs the archaic Shia-Sunni struggle throughout Islamic history to make sense of the politics and future of the Middle East. He claims that a Shia awakening emerged among Shias, who had lived under the rule of Sunni regimes for centuries, after the Iranian Revolution and particularly after the US intervention in Iraq and subsequent overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime. According to Nasr, this "Shia awakening" will profoundly affect political developments in the Middle East, from the Mediterranean region to Pakistan, where Shias constitute a significant part of the population. For him, the struggle between Shias and Sunnis will be the most decisive factor in future developments in the Middle East. "In the coming years, [Shias] and Sunnis will compete over power, first in Iraq but ultimately across the entire region. The overall conflict will play a large role in defining the Middle East."<sup>8</sup>

Nasr posits that conflict and cooperation between Sunnis and Shias are based on faith and identity, which is shaped by the interpretation of the sacred history of Islam and Islamic theology. In his book, he stresses the current clashes in the Middle East is dating back to the early history of Islam. He believes that the political uprisings coming from the Shia population are a reaction to the marginalization which dates back to Sunni-Shia clash that started after the death of the prophet Muhammad. He says that "the [Shias] learned the harsh lesson that secular regimes and ideologies may come and go, but Sunni biases endure."<sup>9</sup> He emphasizes that even though the Shia population is the minority in Muslim society, they are located in strategically essential places. This exacerbates the tensions and conflicts between the two sects, which will define

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<sup>7</sup> Nasr, V. (2007). *The Shia revival: How conflicts within Islam will shape the future*. WW norton & Company., p.20 & 30.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.24.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.90.

the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, as primordialist scholars note, the conflicts between Sunni and Shias in the Middle East are not conflicts that began in the modern age, but instead represent an "age-old scourge" that has flared up from time to time to mould Islamic history, theology, law, and politics. Based on this reasoning, many conflicts in the Middle East can be read as old and archaic, not resultant of current events. In this way, the conflict revolves around faith and identity, although there is also coexistence from time to time, and in turn, this atmosphere of tension and conflict continues to the present day.<sup>11</sup>

Nasr speculates that a Shia political revival is apter in explaining the modern Middle East than are definitions such as Arab nationalism or national administration, and in this way, emerging Middle Eastern politics will be shaped around Sunni reactions to these developments.<sup>12</sup> He also acknowledges that there is not a wholly pan-Shia movement. For him, the Shia awakening is not to be confused with a Shia political project, despite the suspicions of Sunni Arab monarchies in this regard. Instead, it is a result of current political conjunctures. Nonetheless, he is criticised by many scholars for deflecting attention away from the more relevant and explanatory reasons for ongoing conflicts in the region.

Beside Nasr, also Juan Cole posits similar ideas revolving around the importance of sectarian identity. He describes the history of Shias in the Middle East and their minority status in the Sunni Arab world. He agrees with the thesis that Shi'ism has emerged as a regional political factor and that the result of the Shia-Sunni struggle will determine the future of the Middle East. He considers such developments to be the second stage of the Iranian Revolution.<sup>13</sup> His thesis declares, "outside Iran, [Shia] politics have been a politics of finding ways to assert [Shia] interests in developing

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.24.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.22 & 250.

<sup>13</sup> Cole, J. (2006). A " Shia Crescent"? The Regional Impact of the Iraq War. *Current History*, 105(687), 20.

nation-states that had non-[Shia] elites at their helm.”<sup>14</sup> He adds that their political activism and militancy is in an attempt to have representation within the state.<sup>15</sup>

Cole counts the struggles of Shias for political representation in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq, and Pakistan as contextual examples of this thesis. Nevertheless, while his work concerns itself with the history and theological development of Shias, it does not sufficiently illuminate the current actions of political Shi’ism and the extent to which this sectarian identity shapes the political movements of societies and states. For example, he stresses the deep-rooted and ongoing Wahhabi theological conflict within Shi’ism and the debates over Usuli-Akhbari jurisprudence in Shi’ism.<sup>16</sup> Yet, he is unable to go beyond how these archaic disputes might be related to current conflicts in the Middle East.

Moreover, Yitzhak Nakash agrees with Vali Nasr in claiming that the primary motive for Arab Shia mobilization is the unchanging, longstanding Sunni-Shia conflict, which has dominated Middle Eastern politics for centuries.<sup>17</sup> This perspective is apparent from the outset of his book, whose first chapter, entitled “The Burden of the Past”, elaborates on the plight of Shias as an oppressed group under the Ottoman Empire.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, he does note that Shia preponderance in regional politics appeared recently, while before, ethnic and national belonging had more importance than sectarianism. In this vein, he uses historical examples of Shia and Sunni collaboration as witnessed in their resistance to British occupation in 1920 as well as in their cooperation in defending Iraq against Iran, in part thanks to Iraqi Shias participation in Arab nationalism, even though, some scholars believe that it was by force of the Saddam regime.

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<sup>14</sup> Cole, J. (2002). *Sacred Space and Holy War. The Politics, Culture and History of Shiite Islam*, London, New York, IB Tauris., p.173.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.121.

<sup>17</sup> Nakash, Y. (2007). *Reaching for power: The Shi'a in the modern Arab world*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>18</sup> Nakash, Y. (2007)., p.23.

Both Nakash and Nasr argue that sectarian politics are an outward reaction to shifts in the balances of marginalization and discrimination that entered a new phase as Shias ascended to power during the US War with Iraq. Moreover, these authors claim that Shia groups are democratic actors and, therefore, the most suitable allies for Western actors in the Middle East.

Geneive Abdo also prioritises sectarianism as the most critical lens through which we can best understand current conflicts in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup> Abdo even suggested that the Sunni-Shia divergence might replace the Arab-Israeli conflict and become the most important conflict of the region.<sup>20</sup> For her, the violence deeply rooted in religious differences between Sunnis and Shias plays a notable role. She acknowledges that violence in Arab Uprisings is unleashed by rivalries over access to political power, lands, and resources. Specifically, she shows how both extremist and moderate leaders exploit sectarian identities to further their own interests, while nonetheless focussing on their distinct identities that are influenced by religious difference.

Fanar Haddad roots sectarianism in the pre-modern era; believes that in line with ethno-symbolist approach, the myth of the hatred between two sects grounded in history.<sup>21</sup> This hatred has been reinvented and passed through generations, reawakened and revised for the needs of crises. He stresses to the bottom-up essence of identity construction and sees this myth-symbol complex as the most critical dynamic in sectarian identity.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Abdo, G. (2017). *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>20</sup> Abdo, G. (2013). *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Sunni-Shi'a Divide*. *Analysis Paper*, (29).

<sup>21</sup> Haddad, F. (2011). , p .17-20.

<sup>22</sup> Phillips, C. (2015). Sectarianism and conflict in Syria. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(2), p.361.

One of the best responses to primordialist statements on sectarian identity has been given under “Sectarianization” thesis with Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel.<sup>23</sup> They have crafted historical and geopolitical analyses on how regional and international actors have sectarianized Shia-Sunni relations to develop their selfish interests and goals.<sup>24</sup> They explain sectarianization as “a process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization around particular (religious) identity markers.”<sup>25</sup> They criticize this sectarian essentialism that explains the politics with old-rage hatred and makes conflicts inevitable as a new kind of Orientalism.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, they criticize the politicians like Obama, academics and media for using this Orientalist narrative and re-creating “the Middle East exceptionalism”.<sup>27</sup>

To conclude, this approach fails to explain why sectarian identities remain peaceful at particular moments and become a source of conflict at others. Moreover, it is difficult to identify distinct Sunni and Shia identities that are incompatible with each other, whether in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, or elsewhere in the region. The terms Sunni and Shia are insufficient in and of themselves in explaining the plethora of social and political phenomena in the Middle East. Sectarian and primordial perspectives are deterministic. They lead us to normalize conflict and hatred by deeming religious identities immutable and deeply rooted in history and collective belief. They ignore plurality and difference within groups, and emphasize a fixed view of conflict as purported in Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations." Domestic and external

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<sup>23</sup> Hashemi, N., & Postel, D. (2017). *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (1 edition). Oxford University Press, USA.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.2.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



political elites attempt to manipulate societies, underscoring the sectarian dimensions of specific dynamics in the region.<sup>28</sup>

In any given society, devotion to any subculture, religion, or sect varies from person to person and from time to time. It is debatable whether one who defines him or herself as a Shia Muslim will be committed to Shi'ism and prioritize his or her actions based on Shia political or religious dogma. Therefore, the question arises as to how dominant the Shia or artificial identities are in general and to what extent they play a role in the decision-making process. Perhaps the most significant deficiency in popular analyses of Middle Eastern societies is their inability to explain the flexibility of sectarian sentiments. This may be because, as a religious assignment, the identity of denominations is seen as fixed or ascribed.

## **2.2. Rationalist / instrumentalist approach**

Another approach that examines sectarian conflicts and cooperation is rationalism, which follows instrumentalism. It is a materialist, top-down approach that combines elements of neo-realism and Marxist structuralism in international relations theory.<sup>29</sup> As the structure is comprised of relative power distributions, identities are merely instruments manipulated to legitimize actors' material interests.<sup>30</sup>

According to this approach, sectarian identities are the results of a materialist power struggle between actors. Ruling elites, states, and other regional actors cultivate ideas of sectarianism and then spread them through modes of misgovernance. Whether this is deliberate or not, sectarian identities are exploited in domestic and regional politics.

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<sup>28</sup> Hinnebusch, R. (2018). From Westphalian Failure to Heterarchic Governance in MENA: The Case of Syria. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 29(3), p.395.

<sup>29</sup> Ehteshami, A., & Zweiri, M. (Eds.). (2012). *Iran's foreign policy: from Khatami to Ahmadinejad*. Sussex Academic Press., p.17.

<sup>30</sup> Kedourie, E. (1992). *Politics in the Middle East*. Oxford University Press, USA., p.45.

Additionally, many academics claim that such influential actors have used sectarian identities and discourses to legitimize their regimes in the face of the Arab uprisings.<sup>31</sup>

Gregory Gause sees the best way to understand Middle Eastern policy dynamics by interpreting them as illustrative of a new type of cold war led by Iran and Saudi Arabia. Although this reading of regional occurrences as a new cold war utilizes sectarian elements, it is inadequate in explaining regional confrontation and conflict. It distorts analytical examination of the subject as well as the actions of regional actors, especially Iran and Saudi Arabia. Gause notes that even though they exhibit sectarian tendencies, Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in power struggle revolving around the balance of power. While he admits that both actors use sectarianism as a tool in this struggle, he also notes that they dismiss notions of sectarian fault lines when it suits them in winning alliances with regional actors.<sup>32</sup> For him, the realist interests of the involved actors are paramount. In this sense, his regional "cold war" can only be understood by recognising the links between domestic conflicts, transnational affinities, and regional state ambitions.<sup>33</sup> In this way, conflicts and violence in the region are not the results of mere sectarianism but rather the weakening of Arab states and state failure throughout the area. He notes that "[t]he particularities of current politics, not 'centuries-long hatreds,' have sparked this latest round of Sunni-Shia tensions, and these particularities are subject to change."<sup>34</sup> According to him, classical realist power perceptions that focus on the military power of a state are not of primary importance in this Middle Eastern "cold war". On the contrary, the key to change is realized through active support of non-state actors in their domestic political battles within the weak states of the Arab world. For this reason, countries try to foster contact and ally themselves with non-state actors as much as possible, regardless of their sectarian identities.

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<sup>31</sup> Matthiesen, T. (2013). *Sectarian gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that wasn't*. Stanford University Press.

<sup>32</sup> Gause III, F. G. (2014). Beyond sectarianism: The new Middle East cold war. *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, 11*, p.13.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.5.

For him, axes of conflict in the recent history of the Middle East did not develop along Sunni-Shia lines. He stresses that Arab societies are now grappling with deep divisions within their ethnic, religious, and sectarian components that have coexisted throughout much of these societies' history. Despite this, Arab societies seem to be experiencing disintegration today. This is not due to the nature or structure of these components, but rather it is due to the exposure of these divisions resultant of the collapsed foundations of modern Arab states and failed Arab Spring transitions. Mahmood Sariothalam claims that the links between Shia communities are only at the level of the "ulama".<sup>35</sup> In other words, ethnic and national tendencies outweigh the concerns of ordinary Arab Shias and other local peoples.

Another criticism of the sectarianism comes from Paul Dixon. He weighs in on the subject, notes that the failure of the authoritarian regimes created the sectarian narratives.<sup>36</sup> He critiques modern decision-makers and external powers for claiming that any regional conflict should be solved by drawing up political frameworks, including definite sect lines. For him, the result of such practices is a sectarian cleansing that aims to produce "homogeneous" sectarian states in a "stable" region.

According to Dixon, such applications of primordial narratives in analysing developments and conflicts in the Middle East result in the creation of self-fulfilling prophecies. Seeing that political and social interests lie behind such sectarian narratives, these ways of thinking can be viewed as modes of knowledge production. For Dixon, sectarian narratives often portray an apocalyptic vision of the world that emphasizes eternal competition while also seeking to create environments of fear and security concern. Dixon refers to this as "primordial pessimism" as simplistic and reductionist terms come to take precedence in explaining events.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Sariothalam, M. (2007). The Shia Revival: A Threat or an Opportunity? *Journal of International Affairs*, 60(2), p.202.

<sup>36</sup> Wehrey, F. M. (Ed.). (2017)., p.12.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.5.

On the other side of the coin, he sees "instrumental optimism" as equally problematic and misleading. He criticises this approach for neglecting individual choices and agency as well as collective memory and belief while also exhibiting a naïveté about the power of outside actors, top-down reform, civil society, and even modernity itself to mediate religious differences.

In response to this, Dixon crafted an approach that he calls "constructivist realism", which he believes allows us to better understand identity politics by following the developments of the opposing schools of both primordialism and instrumentalism. This approach draws attention to the competing political interests behind the production of knowledge and the power of particular narratives at certain moments in time. He emphasizes that sectarian narrative is not an unbiased representation that reflects the actual world; on the contrary, it is a narrative construct that world in a particular way.<sup>38</sup>

Also, Matthiesen, Potter, and Wehrey demonstrate the intersections between sectarianism and politics in the region and specifically within the Gulf Arab states. Matthiesen, in his book, illustrates a compelling explanation of how the Sunni ruling elites in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia use sectarian forces to promote their politics, and how they justify repression and violence against the Shia population within their countries.<sup>39</sup> Lawrence Potter, another scholar on the region, surveys the rise of sectarianism in the Gulf states from different perspectives by demonstrating how the Arab Uprisings have gained a sectarian face, become increasingly violent, and exerted an effect on the entire region.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.3.

<sup>39</sup> Matthiesen, T. (2013). *Sectarian gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that wasn't*. Stanford University Press.

<sup>40</sup> Potter, L. G. (Ed.). (2014). *Sectarian politics in the Persian Gulf*. Oxford University Press, USA.

In his book, "Beyond Sunni and Shia", Frederic Wehrey argues that it is a fallacy to ascribe modern conflicts to specific events in ancient history.<sup>41</sup> For him, neither the death of the prophet Mohammed, the Iranian Revolution, Iran itself, nor the collapse of regimes in the Middle East spurred the emergence of ancient identities, ambitions, or passions. He argues that these approaches are reductionist and misleading, considering the complex and multi-dimensional politics in the region. While he acknowledges the importance of religion, Wehrey stresses that at many times throughout the early and modern history of Islam, these sectarian differences either coexisted or encapsulated other identification affinities like national, regional, tribal, ethnic, class, generational, urban versus rural, centre versus periphery, and so on.<sup>42</sup>

In essence, Wehrey questions why sectarian identities surface and why they become violent and political. In this regard, he identifies three significant sectarian waves. Far from being primordial and archaic, the first wave is marked by the emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a regional power, in addition to that threatening the Sunni-dominated status quo. In response to this local development, Sunni authoritarian regimes, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states resorted to radical Sunni Islam to create a counter-balance to this perceived threat. These Sunni regimes "featured the proliferation of anti-Shi'ism through sermons, audio recordings, and books to delegitimize the Khomeini regime, to paint it as an aberration from the Sunni world",<sup>43</sup> thereby deliberately promoting sectarianism. The second wave of sectarianism occurred under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, which coincided with a deterioration in relations with Saudi Arabia and a proliferation of non-state actors. This era has been described by Wehrey as a "new cold war" as indicated by the prevalence of proxy wars between the two countries. The third wave encompasses the Arab Uprisings in 2011 and is characterised by widespread social and political unrest. While the core reason for the Arab Uprisings was a popular desire for a change in governance, the outcome took on a more sectarian appearance. For Wehrey, elites invoked

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<sup>41</sup> Wehrey, F. M. (Ed.). (2017)., p.34.

<sup>42</sup> Wehrey, F. M. (Ed.). (2017)., p.2.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.12.

sectarianism during the Arab Uprisings in order to bolster domestic support, divide the opposition, and to mobilize the Sunni population against those who were otherized.

Therefore, for Wehrey, while the main reasons for modern conflict in the Middle East are geopolitical rivalries and corrupt governments, they are nonetheless framed within sectarian narratives. Geopolitical rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Iran have instrumentalized sectarian identities in their foreign policies and in their relations with non-state actors throughout the region. With his reading on the subject, Wehrey offers profound insight into contemporary religious politics and their effects on Sunni-Shia relations.

Anousharivan Ehteshami supports that Iran, as the other actors in the international system, is rational in its foreign policy. It is a rational actor in realist terms whose foreign policies try to correspond with the changing regional and international environment.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Fred Halliday challenges assumptions of inherent sectarian conflict, writing that "actual and direct conflict between Sunni and Shi'a – as distinct from suspicion and communal difference – has until recently been remarkable by its absence."<sup>45</sup>

To conclude, this approach frames sectarianism as a tool used by rational actors in the region, that can be picked up or dropped as the regional and domestic events unfold. It locates sectarianism mostly in the international relations of the region. There is a clear distinction made between states and regimes and as states may have certain identities, it is the regime interest that chooses to instrumentalise sect in foreign policy.

### **2.3. Modernist approach**

Modernist approaches purport that identities revolving around nationality, ethnicity and/or sects are constructed. More specifically, almost all of the traditions of these

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<sup>44</sup> Bahgat, G., Ehteshami, A., & Quilliam, N. (2017). Security and Bilateral Issues Between Iran and Its Arab Neighbours. In *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and its Arab Neighbours* (pp. 1-10). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham., p.3.

<sup>45</sup> Halliday, F. (2012). *Political journeys: the openDemocracy essays*. Yale University Press., p.156.

identical groups are "invented" and their communities are "imagined".<sup>46</sup> This does not mean that the categories of identity are somehow fictitious or that the discourses of historical origin and tradition are temporary. However, the emergence and solidification of these categories must be understood by referring to the requirements of modern nationalism that a labour force be literate in the "national" language<sup>47</sup> and moulded by the nation-state.<sup>48</sup>

Modernist approaches see that political identities are imagined ties. Including sectarian identities, their political meanings are given by elites of states and the socio-economical alterations determined by the development of the modern state.<sup>49</sup> Toby Dodge acknowledges the importance of a pre-existing sub-national elite in mobilising sectarianism but roots this firmly in the modern era. Sectarian identities, therefore, are modern constructs which are used for legitimization. Sami Zubaida also stresses that '*while sectarian divisions have always existed, their present forms of politicisation have to be understood in terms of political manoeuvring by state actors and sectarian entrepreneurs*'.<sup>50</sup>

Under modernist umbrella, we can also mention political economy approach. According to the political-economy approach, sectarianism is grounded in a highly inequitable political economy marked by the concentration of wealth and resources within the hands of the top echelons of society. At the same time, the majority of the population remains dependant on resources controlled by politicians who redistribute capital through a system of sectarian clientelism. Here, inequality and economic dependency are vital to understanding regional dynamics. While underdogs protest for a more regular distribution of income, such efforts can be distorted by sectarian ways

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<sup>46</sup> Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (Eds.). (1992). *The Invention of Tradition: Past and present publications*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>47</sup> Gellner, E., (1983). *Nations and nationalism* (Vol. 1). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

<sup>48</sup> Breuilly, J. (1993). *Nationalism and the State* (2Rev Ed edition). Manchester University Press.

<sup>49</sup> Halliday, F. (2000). *Nation and religion in the Middle East*. Saqi books; and Dodge, T. (2003). *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>50</sup> Zubaida, S. (2014). Sectarian dimensions. *The Middle East Journal*, 68(2), p.321.

of thinking. People can be politicized on a sectarian as opposed to socio-economic basis as false consciousness metastasizes.<sup>51</sup> Even though the political-economy approach exhibits deficiencies in its inability to aptly explain the effects of identity on individuals and regional actors, it still provides a noteworthy reading on the underlying causes of conflict and cooperation.

## **2.4. Securitization theory**

Securitization theory is another example of an approach to conflict that is useful in examining sectarian discourses and the practices of regional actors. The Copenhagen School, which developed rapidly in the 1990s and made significant contributions to the security approach following the end of the Cold War, described securitization as the exclusion of an issue from established rules of policy and framing, and as a special political or supra-political situation.<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, it emphasises the discursive importance of security. In other words, this approach argues that issues can be presented as security problems through “speech-acts”, thereby resulting in their “securitization”. Thus, the Copenhagen School not only moved security away from the narrow purview of a military political approach but also embedded consistency within its theoretical framework.<sup>53</sup> After the concept of securitization was first introduced into the international relations lexicon in the mid-1990s, Ole Waever set out to promptly outline the framework in 1995.<sup>54</sup> He described security as a series of speech-acts and described the concept of securitization as a verbal presentation of a phenomenon as a threat.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Gengler, J. (2016). *The political economy of sectarianism in the Gulf*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace., p.143.

<sup>52</sup> Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & De Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A new framework for analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers., p.28.

<sup>53</sup> Huysmans, J. (1998). Revisiting Copenhagen: Or, on the creative development of a security studies agenda in Europe. *European journal of international relations*, 4(4), p.492.

<sup>54</sup> Ole, W., & Ronnie, L. (1995). Securitization and Desecuritization. *On Security*, p.55.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.55.



“What then is security? With the help of language theory, we can regard ‘security’ as a *speech act*. In this usage, security is not of interest as a sign that refers to something more real; the utterance *itself* is the act. By saying it, something is done (as in betting, giving a promise, naming a ship). By uttering 'security', a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific arena, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it.<sup>56</sup>

The theory of securitization, which sees security as speech-acts, therefore comprises a largely constructivist theoretical basis. According to the theory, security issues are constructed and only deemed as security threats by means of speech-acts.<sup>57</sup> In this way, once a speech-act is uttered, the issue at hand moves into the realm of security, therefore necessitating and legitimatising extraordinary remedies against these identified security threats, real or imagined.

The process of securitization gives priority to an issue operating in the larger arena of general threats and prompts the application of exceptional measures. For example, rulers, decision-makers, or other actors can choose to legitimize sanctions they would impose by framing and presenting the issue as a threat to national security. Thus, security, which is capable of suspending the usual political processes, takes over the form of excessive politicization<sup>58</sup> and gives broader powers to the implementing actors. The solutions proposed by the Copenhagen School and New Security Studies for this process include the "desecuritization" of these political processes by taking these issues off of the security agenda and the creation of awareness around the politics of security.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.55.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (1997)., p.241.

<sup>59</sup> Bilgin, P. (2011). The politics of studying securitization? The Copenhagen School in Turkey. *Security Dialogue*, 42(4-5), p.410.

Contrary to realist views, which are largely based on deterrence and advocate that balance of power will be achieved by establishing security dilemmas among decision-makers in matters of international relations, the New Security Studies perspective emphasizes the “intersubjectivity” of the concept of security, while also seeking to answer the question of “for whom” security should be provided. In the words of Barry Buzan, “security can be explained by neither subjects nor objects; security rather exists among subjects.”<sup>60</sup>

In line with securitization theory, also Helle Malmvig argues that the increasing identity policy in the Middle East, especially with the 2011 Arab Uprisings, created insecurity in the states in this region.<sup>61</sup> She criticizes the explanations of the realist paradigm over the Arab Uprisings which suggest the power distribution and balance has not changed and suggest to broaden the understanding of power.<sup>62</sup> Malmvig finds the disadvantages of both primordialism and instrumentalism, and promotes Copenhagen School to explain religious, thus sectarian identities are produced and securitized with threat perceptions.<sup>63</sup> Sectarian narratives are instrumentalized to promote political actors that are in power. It is also used to legitimize the use of extraordinary means by constructing a sense of heightened insecurity as it can be seen in current conflicts in the region, notably in Syria.<sup>64</sup>

In line with Malmvig, Nathan Gonzales also focuses on the sectarianization of politics and how geopolitical rivalries for power shape politics in sectarian and religious terms,

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<sup>60</sup> Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & De Wilde, J. (1998)., p.31.

<sup>61</sup> Malmvig, H. (2014). Power, identity and securitization in Middle East: Regional order after the Arab uprisings. *Mediterranean Politics*, 19(1), 145.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p.147.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

which in turn results in people being forced to fall into ethnic, sectarian or tribal camps.<sup>65</sup>

As Malmvig rightly stresses, securitization theory gives a better understanding of the post-Arab Uprisings situation and so-called sectarian conflicts than primordialist and instrumentalist approaches.

Considering the emergence of this school of thought, the securitization of sectarian identities by states has also come to be a topic of exploration. A method of desecuritizing sectarian identity can be seen in the act of criticizing those who employ primordial sectarian identity as the primary explanatory factor for conflict within and among Middle Eastern societies. An example of this can be observed in the collaborative project launched by Lancaster University's Richardson Institute. "The Sectarianism, Proxies and De-sectarianisation" (SEPAD) project aimed at understanding the conditions that give rise to sectarian violence and proxy conflicts along religious lines to create space for a 'de-sectarianisation' of socio-political life.<sup>66</sup>

The theory of securitization still faces criticism for its excessive emphasis on speech-acts, its inadequacies in identifying the conditions under which securitization occurs, and its inability to distinguish the target audiences who are to receive these speech-acts and accept the securitization of the indicated security threat. Nonetheless, the Copenhagen School has widened the horizons for those intending to understand regional politics.

As the question of "for whom security works" is crucial in securitization theory, it is also necessary to ask the question of "for whom *sectarianism* works". External factors are thus crucial in the construction and reproduction of sectarianism. When it is

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<sup>65</sup> Gonzalez, N. (2009). *The Sunni-Shia Conflict: Understanding Sectarian Violence in the Middle East*. Nortia Press.

<sup>66</sup> SEPAD › *The Official Website of The Sectarianism, Proxies and De-sectarianisation (SEPAD) project*. Lancaster University, Lancaster, Lancashire. (n.d.). Retrieved 22 February 2019, from <https://www.sepad.org.uk/>

considered that some subscribe to the idea that conflicts in the Middle East are the result of the absence of a power such as the US that might act to restrain sectarian conflict,<sup>67</sup> narratives of sectarianism can rightly be seen as instruments in facilitating the divide and conquer strategies of Western powers in the region. This line of reasoning can go even one step further, giving way to claims that “artificial” states like Iraq and Syria need to be re-engineered.

To sum up, sectarian narratives present current Middle Eastern politics in a way that emphasizes identities and archaic contentions while simultaneously ignoring other indispensable factors in a complex, multi-faceted region. For this reason, this work does not adopt strict approaches of primordialism or rationalism as explanations for the dynamics of identity politics. Yet, it should be noted that this research will seek to identify the modes of knowledge production and securitization throughout the region while also questioning why sectarian identities matter at certain times and not at others. It also aims to understand why the notion of sectarianism shifted from initially being an explanation of divided societies in the Middle East to becoming an all-encompassing factor in regional politics after the Iranian Revolution. Why has the threat perception of Shias become more visible during certain historical upheavals and not at others, and how have sectarian identities been instrumentalized by states under processes of securitization? Notwithstanding religious trajectories throughout history, Sunni-Shia conflict is mainly a development of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Therefore, explanations of conflict in the Middle East should abstain from employing superficial primordial determinism and instead focus on the differences between Sunnis and Shias as they relate to specific issues. In the end, real and more sophisticated drivers should be explored to build a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding sectarianism in international relations.

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<sup>67</sup> Robert F. Worth, (2013, December 13) “Jihadist Groups Gain in Turmoil Across the Middle East,” *New York Times*, Retrieved 12.01.2019, from <http://www.nytimes.com/images/2013/12/04/nytfrofrontpage/scannat.pdf>

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **SHI'ISM AS A FOREIGN POLICY TOOL IN IRAN**

With the creation of the Safavid Dynasty in Iran by Shah Ismail, Shi'ism, for the first time, became a state's religion and started to be politicised. Safavids extended their power through Shi'ism and Qizilbash groups at the expense of the Ottoman Empire. Even though, this Shia emergence in the sixteenth century had vanished with the defeat of Safavids by Ottomans; Iran has reserved its Shia identity up until the advent of the Islamic Republic. The changes in the regional politics from the overthrow of the Sunni Saddam regime and the Iraqi Shias empowerment to Hezbollah's victory against Israel led to both the advocates of the sectarian approach and the Sunni-conservative governments to deploy a sectarian discourse, portray the rise of Iran's regional power and other phenomena as Shia Iran's interference and to the equation of Shi'ism with Iran. In this respect, to have a deeper understanding of sectarianist assertions and its role in Iranian foreign policy, this chapter will provide an examination of the main foreign policy eras of Iran.

Iran's foreign policy, like all other countries, is determined with a combination of factors such as its geopolitical situation, its resources, its history, ethnicity and religion, its political system and elites. Besides these elements, the international and regional systems that it lives within have shaped it. Any change within these variables of its internal economic and political system or the regional and global politics is likely to reshape Iran's foreign policy. Next to the changes in its foreign policy, on the other hand, it can also be argued that some settled elements give a reason for continuity in its foreign policy and its imperatives are strictly linked to its geopolitical location and its historical, cultural and religious composition.

Iran, therefore, serves well enough as a signpost for epitomising the entire Middle Eastern region, which is not only as colourful as a rainbow but also embodies many societal and regional conflicts. With its vast area stretching from the Caspian Sea to

the Persian Gulf, Iran is located in a highly crucial geopolitical place. While its proximity of Russia, the Arab world, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent makes Iran a place where people from different traditions, ethnicities, and cultures live and migrate within one geographic space, which also makes Iran very sensitive to any conflicts and changes in the regional and international system. Because of this geopolitical location, Iran has been an important interest and intervention area for the outside powers. As Shireen Hunter says, "Iran's geography continues to affect its political destiny."<sup>68</sup>

### **3.1. Towards the collapse of a dynasty: The Pahlavi period**

The last periods of the Pahlavi dynasty are essential to understand the Islamic Revolution. With the discovery of oil in Iran at the beginning of the 20th century, the strategic value of the country and the competition in the region increased.<sup>69</sup> In the period of Muhammad Reza Shah, the conditions of the Cold War were dominant in the international realm, and the world was divided between the East and the West Blocks. In a bipolar international system which was dominated by the Cold War, having the continuities and changes in its foreign policy within this geostrategic location, Iran, during the Muhammad Reza Shah's era, was a country far from being a powerful state that establish and/or shape the rules in the international system; but rather was a sustaining part of the status quo.

This bipolar division also made it mandatory for the countries in the Middle East to choose between two blocks due to some reasons such as national interest, security, and status quo. The Shah of Iran had made his choice in the pro-Western capitalist bloc with the US's efforts to consolidate his position. As a result of this choice, there was substantial foreign interference in Iran's internal and external affairs, along with the efforts to undermine Iran's political and economic development.

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<sup>68</sup> Hunter, S. (2010). *Iran's foreign policy in the post-Soviet era: resisting the new international order*. ABC-CLIO., p.19.

<sup>69</sup> Hunter, S. T. (1990). Iran and the Arab World. *Iran at the Crossroads, Global Relations in a Turbulent Decade*, p. 99.

In 1941, when Mohammad Reza Pahlavi came to the throne as the new king after Allied forces exiled his father Reza Shah because of his tendencies to Germany, the country was under British and Soviet occupations. The king had no reliable power since the sovereignty of the country stayed mainly on paper and there was no possibility of doing much for the king. The geopolitical position of Iran as a neighbor of the USSR has included it in the Cold War between the USSR and the US, regardless of its will. The US, which tried to prevent the spread of communism in the Cold War era, wanted the neighbors around the USSR to be able to stand firm against communism threat in the political, economic, and military terms. With this unrest, Iran, therefore, been involved in the Cold War at the side of the United States, being as the counter-balancing power to the USSR and has accepted the economic and political assistance of it.

For this era, in foreign policy, far from having sectarian sentiments, political and economic instability and foreign intervention were major problems. The last shah not only followed an authoritarian modernization but also was pro-Western. The Allies had been trying to influence Iranian politics according to their advantages, and the country had become a power struggle mostly between the UK, the USSR, and the US. Especially during the 1940s, these three states supported various political groups in the country's domestic politics.<sup>70</sup> The shah, fearing of being overthrown by the Allies, established very close relations with them. It adhered to the Baghdad Pact, supported the Eisenhower doctrine of the US, signed a bilateral executive agreement with it on economic and military assistance. Yet, the allied powers did not respect the independence of Iran by not withdrawing their troops from the country, even though they promised to do so after the end of the war. On the contrary, USSR supported the movements in the Azeri and Kurdish populated regions. This lack of dysfunction and inconsistency of Mohammad Reza Shah on the foreign domination of the country had been leading the country to a weaker point both in and out.

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<sup>70</sup> Abrahamian, E. (2011). *Modern İran Tarihi*, çev. *Dilek Şendil*, Türkiye İşbankası Yay., İstanbul., p.87.

In domestic politics, the masses wishing to return to their old status removed by his father in 1925, and the demands for social reform were pushing the shah's power. The politically conscious groups who wanted to get rid of the foreign dependency of the country gathered around Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq. The democrats, republicans, and nationalists in the country united against the shah and called themselves as the National Front. The National Front, which has an essential place in Iranian political history, took crucial steps in the nationalization of oil from the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, under the leadership of Mohammad Mossadeq.

Unfortunately, this front was severely weakened on 19 August 1953 as a result of a military coup, also called operation Ajax, with the exceptional operational support of the intelligence services of the US and the UK, CIA and MI6. After overcoming this dangerous event, to eliminate any threats against him, shah tried to consolidate his power and founded an active internal security service called SAVAK. Again, the CIA and MI6 gave military assistance and helped SAVAK to improve itself. These events undermined the legitimacy of the monarchy. They showed again how the shah had been neglecting and overlooking the wishes of his people, following pro-core western policy and was dependent on foreign powers. The overthrow of Mossadeq with the help of the US, creating a pro-Western intelligence service and the presence of military advisors from the United States led to an increase in anti-Americanism in the country, but the opponent groups were intensely destroyed. Their organizations were removed; most of the leaders were executed.

However, this political destruction, as Abrahamian says, paved the way for the ultimate evolution of a religious movement. In other words, the coup helped displace nationalism, socialism, and liberalism with Islamic "fundamentalism."<sup>71</sup> In an age of republicanism, nationalism, neutralism, and socialism, the Pahlavi monarchy had become inseparably identified with imperialism, corporate capitalism, and close alignment with the West. For this reason, it is possible to say that the roots of the Iranian revolution and political Shi'ism go back to the 1950s.

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<sup>71</sup> Abrahamian, E. (2011), p.90.



Even though Iran was economically dependent on the US, in the 1970s, Reza Pahlavi desired a more balanced and independent foreign policy with the relaxation in the relations between the East and the West blocs.<sup>72</sup> Thus, it tried to establish and improve relationships also with the USSR. Iran's foreign policy towards the Soviet Union was one of "resistance if necessary, reconciliation if possible."<sup>73</sup> Iran assured Moscow that it would not allow Iran to become a base against the USSR. They made series of agreements on different topics from trade, military, technical assistance, to shipments of Iranian natural sources.<sup>74</sup> Shah also strengthened his relations with Israel, since he perceived the same threat from surrounding countries, spreading Arab socialist nationalism.<sup>75</sup> With the same threat perception, he offered aid to people in Lebanon like Maronites for them not to be interested in pro-Nasser ideologies.

To increase its independence in foreign policy, shah diversified arms trade to France, Britain, and the Soviets.<sup>76</sup> Iran joined an organization, Regional Cooperation for Development, on economic and cultural aspects, also trying to diminish the importance of CENTO.<sup>77</sup> Besides this, it paid more attention to its role in the Persian Gulf. Iran was supporting the royalists in the Yemen Civil War (1962-70) and assisted the sultan of Oman to suppress the nationalist rebellion in Dhofar in 1972. Iran was supporting Iraqi Kurds against Bagdad and continued on his claims of the three islands in the Persian Gulf. It seized two strategic islands, the two Tunbs by force. It imposed control on Abu Musa, which in the end resulted in a break the diplomatic relations with Iraq until the 1975 Algiers Agreement, which demarcated the border along the thalweg and stopped Iran assisting the rebellious Kurds. But besides these, the Arab Gulf

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<sup>72</sup> Ramazani, R. K. (2013). *Independence without freedom: Iran's foreign policy*. University of Virginia Press., p.290.

<sup>73</sup> Ramazani, R. K. (2013)., p.291.

<sup>74</sup> Curtis, G. E., & Hooglund, E. (2008). *Iran: A Country Study: A Country Study*. Government Printing Office., p.42.

<sup>75</sup> Pollack, K. (2004). *The Persian Puzzle: Deciphering the Twenty-five-Year Conflict Between the United States and Iran*. Random House., p.79.

<sup>76</sup> Pollack, K. (2004)., p.97.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p.42.

monarchies continued to have good relations with Iran throughout the 1970s. Therefore, it can be said that Shah tried to protect Iran's interests and to spread its regional influence, regardless of the country's Shi'i identity.

Before the Islamic revolution, Iran put apart from trying to influence the Shia population in the Middle East, was deprived of developing relations with even Sunni Muslim countries. While having intensely close ties with the West, Iran had quite weak relationships with the other Muslim countries, except the Saudi princes, Hussein of Jordan and Hassan II of Morocco. Iran sustained generally good relations with them by signing agreements with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states delimiting frontiers along the continental shelf in the Gulf. It began cooperation and information sharing on security matters with Saudi Arabia and encouraged closer collaboration between the newly independent Gulf sheikhdoms.<sup>78</sup> Iran also had good relations with Israel, is one of the first Muslim countries to recognize Israel as a sovereign state, and at this aspect, it was at variance with the rest of the Muslim countries. According to Kamrava, after some issues were solved between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 1968, from that time to the point until Islamic Revolution happened, Iran-Saudi relations improved and driven by mutual interests to contain the spread of common threats, like Baathist regime in Iraq, radical policies of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and the spread of Soviet influence in the region.<sup>79</sup> This alliance further improved with Iran and Saudi Arabia, forming "two solid pillars supporting the building of conservative and pro-Western policy in the region."<sup>80</sup>

During the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, when oil-producing OPEC states imposed a boycott to the Western suppliers of Israel, Iran made more significant oil revenues from its overpriced petroleum exports. It was also showing the importance of a reliable pro-American regime of Iran to the West. While in the whole decade from 1964 to 1974,

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<sup>78</sup> Curtis, G. E., & Hooglund, E. (2008)., p.44.

<sup>79</sup> Kamrava, M. (2011). *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf*. Syracuse University Press., p.195.

<sup>80</sup> Fürtig, H. (2006). *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia Between the Gulf Wars*. Ithaca Press., p.6.

the total oil revenue of Iran was \$13 billion; in the year 1975 alone, it was \$20 billion. The United States encouraged the shah to use Iran's oil wealth to acquire advanced weapons and technology from the US to enhance Iran's role in the Persian Gulf. According to Ansari, the shah's apparent dependence on the United States vanished his legitimacy in people's eyes, but also his pivotal role in keeping the oil price hike of 1973 lost him public support in the West as well.<sup>81</sup> But on the other hand, as Keddie says, while it is true that the US criticized the shah after he pioneered the OPEC price rise, major US business interests became more closely tied to and even independent on the shah's regime than ever, especially the sectors on armaments, oil, banking and producers of high technology of equipments and goods.<sup>82</sup>

Iran was playing a primary role in the Gulf security after the British withdrawal and was supported by the Nixon Doctrine in 1969. The doctrine, which defended the US allies, should have greater responsibility for the regional security, cemented the military alliance between Iran and the US. In 1972, the Nixon administration removed all barriers to the shah's purchase of advanced weapons and announced the US dependence on the Twin Pillars of Iran and Saudi Arabia to maintain Persian Gulf security.<sup>83</sup> Shah was allowed to purchase virtually any non-nuclear US weapons system he desired. After expenditures of more than \$10 billion on arms between 1972 and 1976, Iran had the fifth largest military force in the world.<sup>84</sup> According to Keddie, the reason for the Western eagerness to sell expensive military equipment to Iran was reinforced by the economic drain on the West caused by the OPEC price rise. Selling arms was an excellent way to recycle petrodollars. Keddie says after the British pullout from the Gulf, the UK, and the US contended of the fact that Iran has become the gendarme of the region. It was intervening the internal conflicts in the region, fighting leftist rebels in the Dhofar region in Oman, having close relationships with the

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<sup>81</sup> Ansari, A. M. (2019). *Iran, Islam and democracy: The politics of managing change*. Gingko Library., p.35.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p.35.

<sup>83</sup> Rezun, M. (1990). *Iran At The Crossroads: Global Relations In A Turbulent Decade* (1 edition). Westview Press., p.67.

<sup>84</sup> Cleveland, W. L. (2018). *A history of the modern Middle East*. Routledge., p.294.

autocracies in the Middle East and North Africa, and threatening the potential disturbers of the status quo.<sup>85</sup>

Therefore, in terms of Saudi-Iran relations, this was the period that both Iran and Saudi Arabia were allies of the United States. From 1970 onwards, within the framework of the Nixon Doctrine, these two countries were the "two pillars" of the US policy towards that shaped the Middle East. With the 1979 Iranian revolution, this doctrine was no longer valid, but this time the two countries remained an essential part of the US Middle East policy as two opposing poles.

In domestic politics, shah spent most of his energy to chase the policies to make a welfare state but by affirming the shah's unchallenged rulership. He decided to go for a reform process modeled on the West to gain its increasingly weakening power and lost legitimacy and to centralize the monarchy's state power. In 1963, the so-called White Revolution, which was seen as an alternative to the threatening Red one, the 12-item reform bill was announced. Various issues such as the increase of literacy, land reform, economic, industrial, and social development programs, were created. The US, under the Johnson administration, supported shah's efforts for reform and gave 200 million dollars to Iran's military acquisition plan. However, despite these efforts, neither the desired results were reached, nor there was a concrete development in the name of democracy. The insurmountable economic crises, unequal distribution of wealth, forced westernization, focusing on the pre-Islamic past by ignoring the Islamic values of people, and the political repression of the growing opposition alienated people from the shah and the regime even more.

These suppressed opponent groups started to express themselves with violence as a last resort because of the closed political system and the ferocious effectiveness of SAVAK.<sup>86</sup> The guerrilla groups, which began to grow in the late 1960s and 1970s in

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<sup>85</sup> Keddie, N. R., & Richard, Y. (2006). *Modern Iran: Roots and results of revolution*. Yale University Press.p.163.

<sup>86</sup> Cleveland, W. L. (2018)., p.298.

cities, criticized the shah's foreign policy, which ignored Islam and the fraternity of religion, in particular, its relationship with the United States.

Besides, the US government personnel working in Iran had vast extra-territorial rights, and they were not subject to the internal Iranian judicial process. They could be tried in American courts for crimes committed in Iran.<sup>87</sup> The foreign presence, by 1978 (there were 60,000 foreigners in Iran— 45,000 of them Americans engaged in business or military training and advisory missions) intensify the perception that the shah's modernization program was threatening the society's Islamic and Iranian values and identity.<sup>88</sup>

Shah's pro-West foreign policy, his White Revolution, and his character paved the way for the creation of the hallmarks of the revolutionary movement in Iran.<sup>89</sup> He oversaw the small period of dramatic economic growth deriving from the oil revenues. He was not satisfied with the traditional kingship and tried to transform the monarchy into a revolutionary dictatorship. He tended to alienate the very social groups that supporters of the monarchy. Another reason was that the failure of the National Front and ideology of secular nationalism pushed people towards a more religiously defined nationalism characteristic of writers such as Ali Shariati. Alongside Shariati, Khomeini's ideas on Shia Islam that being politically active and against tyranny captured many people's supports who were against the shah and the extra-territorial rights of the US nationals. Khomeini's outspokenness, even more, encouraged the ulema that was interested in seizing the political initiative. Ansari stresses that it is crucial to recognize that the Islamic Revolution was, to a great extent, the reaction of a neglected traditional society.<sup>90</sup> Within such conditions, it was inevitable for someone like Khomeini, who criticizing shah's pro-western politics to be supported by people.

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<sup>87</sup> Ansari, A. M. (2019)., p.37.

<sup>88</sup> *Iran—The Coming of the Revolution*. (n.d.). Retrieved 11 January 2019, from <http://countrystudies.us/iran/21.htm>

<sup>89</sup> Ansari, A. M. (2019)., p.37.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

Yet, Khomeini, in his public speeches, criticized the regime in its social, political and economic aspects but carefully avoided from the public address of his vilayet-i Fakihi ideas on the public. He criticized the shah for the support of Israel, allying with the West and the US in the Cold War, and spreading *gharbzadegi* (plague from the West) by spreading the Western lifestyle out of the country.<sup>91</sup>

Nevertheless, because of Iran's importance for the West, the US representatives in Iran predominantly went along with the shah's desire that they do not contact with the opposition and see it as small Marxist and religious fanatic groups.<sup>92</sup> Even if the Carter administration influenced shah in a way to reduce human rights violations, the US could not come to the change in Iran towards nonalignment and a more independent economy and preferred the shah to any truly popular alternative, which would alter Iran's pro-American foreign policy.<sup>93</sup>

Because of the escalation in the country, the shah abolished the two-party system in 1975. Even though these two parties existed for cosmetic aims, the shah wanted to consolidate its power even more and replaced it with a one-party system. He created a party known as the National Resurgence (*Rastakhiz*) Party and insisted people join to it.

There was a conflict between the shah and the Shi'i clergy. Shah attempted to gain control of the groups in society via the Resurgence Party, especially the more autonomous ones, the bazaar merchants, and the ulama. The government intervened with the relations of these groups and tried to decrease the role of Islam in all aspects for the sake of the monarchy.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Abrahamian, E. (2011), P.147.

<sup>92</sup> Keddie, N. R., & Richard, Y. (2006), p.165.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Cleveland, W. L. (2018), p.424.

The shah tried to eliminate the autonomy of Shi'i clergy; change the religious madrasah system, particularly ones in Qom, with secular schools that were to be managed by the central government. He wanted religion to be modernized but also ayatollahs, and religious institutions to be under state control. Yet, as Keddie says, the Shi'i ulema in Iran had more institutional and monetary independence than any Sunni clergy<sup>95</sup>, and this attack was a very risky one, which was never speculated in this large scale before.

Besides the threat that the shah's regime posed to the economic status of the ulama, the autocracy of the monarch and the corruption that permeated his regime, which contravened Islamic concepts of social justice constituted in the ulama's opposition.<sup>96</sup> The Shia ulama was against the shah and denounced his total reliance on Western models of development and his encouragement of Western patterns of consumption and living, practices that in the ulama's view, promoted inequality and impropriety.

Within this politically repressed milieu, economic recession, suppressed classes, massive income gaps, even though after then there were some endeavors by the government, Iranians who were alienated from the shah and the government demanded more than a monarchy.<sup>97</sup>

At the dawn of the revolution, in 1978, the shah was celebrating the new year's eve with the US president Carter, sharing a toast with him and Carter was glorifying Iran by describing it as "an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world."

During the Mohammed Reza Shah period, it cannot be seen in literature any sentiments of sectarianism in Iranian foreign policy. Yet, Vali Nasr correlates the rise of sectarianism and political Shi'ism with Ruhollah Khomeini, the future leader of the Iranian revolution. Even though he does not say Iran should necessarily be the leader of political Shi'ism, on the contrary, he adds, "the state that Khomeini built would be

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<sup>95</sup> Keddie, N. (1995). *Iran and the Muslim world: resistance and revolution*. Springer., p.64.

<sup>96</sup> Cleveland, W. L. (2018)., p.424.

<sup>97</sup> Curtis, G. E., & Hooglund, E. (2008)., p.47.

an intolerant theocracy in which Islamic law was narrowly interpreted and implemented to limit individual and minority rights and erase all Western influences on society and culture."<sup>98</sup>

### **3.2. From subject to object: Islamic revolution and Khomeini period**

Islamic Revolution in 1979 had an enormous impact in terms of studying Iran since it was one of the first revolutions that came from the bottom-up movement and the first theocratic revolution<sup>99</sup>, which could successfully achieve its aim in toppling down the regime. In that sense, it attracted different scholars' attention, even those who were not that interested in the Middle East.

Many academics emphasize that the Islamic revolution in Iran and the subsequent developments have a substantial place in redefining political Shi'ism and are effective in the political mobilization of Shias. Whereas some scholars argued that its ideology and its revolutionary foreign policies such as the export of the revolution have been very important in understanding Iranian foreign policy; some others have been arguing that Iran is like other states in the region, whose foreign policies are determined by national interests and therefore, it is not different from any other states. In a sense, there is a big debate among these two schools of thought, one of which emphasizes the importance of ideology in Iran's foreign policy decision-making and the other is approaching Iran as just another realist actor in the region.

The revolution in Iran has not only abolished the centuries-old tradition of the monarchy but has also radically changed Iran's domestic and foreign policies. After the revolution, Iran, which was once one of the most important allies of the US and Israel in the region during the Shah, became a fierce enemy of these two countries. Revolution transformed Iran from an ardent ally into one of the most intractable opponents of the US in the region.

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<sup>98</sup> Nasr, V. (2007)., p.134.

<sup>99</sup> Ghamari-Tabrizi, B. (2016). *Foucault in Iran: Islamic revolution after the enlightenment*. U of Minnesota Press., p.67.



Alongside this political change, Iran has become an influential regional player. It is true that even under the Shah regime, Iran had already been transformed into a significant power after the oil crisis in 1973, but still, its power was limited because of acting as a surrogate for Western interests.<sup>100</sup> Whilst Iran was the area of intervention of external powers pre-revolutionary period, with the Islamic Revolution, it started to become the subject rather than an object in world politics. As Ehteshami says, the Islamic Revolution disrupted the regional order and also ended the slowly emerging alliance of moderate forces in the Middle East.<sup>101</sup> It even affected the internal policies of superpowers and was almost a considerable *foreign policy-making apparatus*, as in the US created big trouble to the Carter and the Reagan administrators and in the Soviets.<sup>102</sup>

However, the Islamic state, from the beginning of the revolution until the recent politics, has downplayed its Shi'a identity and neglected from using a sectarian discourse in both its constitution and its revolutionary politics.<sup>103</sup>

### **3.2.1. Revolutionary ideas of the Islamic Republic**

The advocates of the Islamic revolution in Iran displayed a policy full of extremes with the enthusiasm of achieving rapid success. However, this is not unique to the Iranian revolution. As Hunter fairly pointed out, since the French Revolution in 1789, all revolutions have followed expansionist policies, acting with the enthusiasm of spreading a new belief or ideology to the world and faced a defensive reflex of other forces that felt threatened.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Ehteshami, A., & Zweiri, M. (Eds.). (2012)., p.27.

<sup>101</sup> Hinnebusch, R. A., & Ehteshami, A. (Eds.). (2002). *The foreign policies of Middle East states*. Lynne Rienner Publishers., p.283

<sup>102</sup> Halliday, F. (1991). *Iran and the International Community* (A. Ehteshami & M. Varasteh, Eds.). Routledge. ,p.3.

<sup>103</sup> Gause III, F. G. (2014)., p.6.

<sup>104</sup> Hunter, S. (1990)., p.185.

So after such a momentous revolution that demolished the previous worn-out regime, it was normal for Iran to adopt and use social justice and heroism based on particular identities, myths and symbols like in Shia narratives by politicians and the intelligentsia such as Ali Shariati, Jalal al-e Ahmad and Khomeini.<sup>105</sup>

Like most revolutions in history, the revolutionary elite in Iran thought they could change the world with their internally effective momentum. However, the revolutionaries would have to come out of a strenuous struggle against the status-quo to understand the power of deeply established institutions and traditions of the international system. Therefore, the events that took place during the establishment and strengthening of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its Shia narrative cannot represent all Iranian foreign policy and its current orientation. It can be thought that revolutions started with modest claims, eventually leading to extremes and finally entering the period of tranquility by becoming Termidor.<sup>106</sup>

In the beginning of the revolution, as Halliday narrates a talk between him and the first foreign minister of Islamic Republic, Ibrahim Yazdi, saying that he was identifying themselves as the ‘Trotskyists of Islam’.<sup>107</sup> Like how Russians had the idea of permanent revolution that could spread the idea of communism to all around the world, Iran also wanted to spread its radical anti-imperialist understanding of Islam. However, after these vigorous ideas, Iran eventually came to the moderate line, as soon as the regime encountered with the realities of the international system. Moreover, the events before and during the Islamic revolution was a rejection of imperialism and

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<sup>105</sup> Adib-Moghaddam, A. (2009). Discourse and violence: the friend–enemy conjunction in contemporary Iranian–American relations. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 2(3), p.515.

<sup>106</sup> The denomination of “Termidorization” comes from here the calendar of the French revolutionaries. In the month of Termidor, when the Jacobin leader Maximilien Robespierre was executed with a guillotine, the ‘period of terror’ ended and the administration passed into the hands of the moderates. Milani, M. M. (1996). Iran’s gulf policy: From idealism and confrontation to pragmatism and moderation. *Iran and the Gulf: A search for stability*, p.84.

<sup>107</sup> Halliday, F. (2012), p.156.

foreign dominion over Iran<sup>108</sup>. Shi'ism and the events in Shia history, especially injustices against Ali and his son Hussein, have become the symbols for resisting against the dictators and imperialists who have usurped their rights in Iran for Khomeinists. Yet, they still followed a robust pan-Islamic agenda.<sup>109</sup> Starting from the revolution, Iran downplayed its Islamist revolutionary politics' Shia nature. It stressed the Islamic unity; while still having good relationships and alliances with Arab Shia.<sup>110</sup>

In the period from right after the revolution and up until 1981, there was a power struggle between the liberals and radical cleric forces, which ended up with the domination of radicals/Maktabis in foreign policy. This was at a point a consolidation period.<sup>111</sup> Different pressure groups in the country were in a power struggle, and it was suspicious what form the newly born regime would take. Every section of the revolutionary coalition tried to influence the course of events to the extent of its power. However, after a while, the essence of the consolidation phase has become to develop an alternative Islamic foreign policy that would change the regional balance of power.<sup>112</sup>

Iran, with these ideas, was against the status quo in the international realm and influenced the masses with the claim of bringing a new order to the earth. It opposed the claim of an Islamic rule by satellite states in the Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The revolutionary regime declared its foreign policy with slogans of *Esteqlal, Azadi: Jomhouri Eslami* (Independence, Freedom : Islamic Republic) and *Khod kafaye* (Self-Sufficiency).<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Wehrey, F. M. (Ed.). (2017)., p.93.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Gause III, F. G. (2014)., p.6.

<sup>111</sup> Hinnebusch, R. A., & Ehteshami, A. (Eds.). (2002)., p.297.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

The main elements that shaped the Iran foreign policy after the revolution were security and export of the regime, anti-Westernism, non-alignment and fully independence. Therefore, In the post-revolution era, the foreign policy was designated under three main headings; first one was anti-imperialist discourse- being against the "the great Satan" (the US) and the Soviets; second is non-alignment- rejection of Western and Communist blocs in the Middle East and third, export of the revolutionary ideas to all oppressed people in the world. Khomeini's aim was to be utterly independent of superpowers and proxies and purify the region from them. These proxies were Iraq and the Gulf monarchies and called as *shaitanhaye-kuchek*, the little devils.<sup>114</sup>

Khomeini and his followers believed that the world was divided into *mostakbaran* (oppressor) and *mostazafan* (oppressed) and Iran should support the mostazaf ones in its foreign policy.<sup>115</sup> However, the concept of mostazaf included not only Shias or Muslims who were oppressed by the infidels but all the oppressed nations of the world. So the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic was formulated on the fraternity of all Muslims and as a requirement of this fraternity, the protection of the rights of all Muslims in the world was accepted as fundamental objectives.

The Islamic Republic aimed to support the righteous struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors in every corner of the globe, while diligently refusing to intervene in the internal affairs of other nations.<sup>116</sup> However, with the idea of *mostakbir*, Iran criticized some Muslim countries for being puppets of Western imperialism and illegitimate administrations of Muslim people.

Another element placed by Khomeini among the foreign policy priorities of the country is the claim to stay out of segregation, which became the modality of global

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<sup>114</sup> Cole, J. R., & Keddie, N. R. (Eds.). (1986). *Shi'ism and social protest*. Yale University Press., p.34.

<sup>115</sup> *Islamic Parliament of Iran—Constitution*. (n.d.). Retrieved 20 April 2019, from <https://en.parliran.ir/eng/en/Constitution>, Article 3.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. Article. 152.

relations during the Cold War, expressed by the slogan "neither East nor West" (*na sharghi na gharbi*).<sup>117</sup> Since the past interferences of the West and the East into the country and disrespect to its territorial integrity, Iran had a mistrust against them and followed this third-worldist foreign policy.

However, the efforts of the ulama in Tehran to disregard the current structure of the international system with the slogans of "neither east nor west", and putting the US at the center of revolutionary hatred by calling it as the Great Satan, and Iran's ideas on exporting the revolution to other Muslim countries were met with suspicion and uneasiness by regional and global actors. Iran has endangered Arab conservative governments and Israeli strategic interests, which are fed by the status quo in the region and made Iran, in the end, to be alone in the international realm.

### **3.2.2. Reactions to the Islamic revolution**

The revolution was met with diverse responses all over the world. Some have based this rejectionist attitude of Iran on the Shia interpretation of Islam. Since the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Shi'ism has started to be known as a radical and dangerous sect. Khomeini's radical Third Worldist Islamist rhetoric accused the West and its imperialism and those who worked for Western and imperialist benefits which made Shi'ism as inherently militant.<sup>118</sup>

Since the revolution, Islamic problems have begun to influence Iran's regional profile and policies towards many of its neighbors. Iran's post-revolutionary stance was also influenced by what Ehteshami calls "the geopolitics of Islam".<sup>119</sup> Iran's understanding of the Shia Islam in the 1980s was perceived as a direct challenge to the regional status

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<sup>117</sup> Adib-Moghaddam, A. (2014). Iran in world politics after Rouhani. *Iran-US Rapprochement Iran's Future Role*, p. 8.

<sup>118</sup> Halliday, F. (2012)., p.45.

<sup>119</sup> Hinnebusch, R. A., & Ehteshami, A. (Eds.). (2002)., p.287.

quo and the political unity of Iran's Arab neighbors. and began efforts to control Iran's influence in the region.<sup>120</sup>

This period has been described by some as the first phase of the Shia awakening.<sup>121</sup> There were claims that Ayatollah Khomeini and the revolutionary governments gave priority to the Shias in their foreign policies, declaring Iran as the protector of Shias in all the region after the revolution.

Therefore, after having good relations before the revolution, with the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Sunni Arab monarchies and the “moderates” became ideologically the other to each other and the two opposing forces that shaped the regional balances. Iran's foundation of the doctrine of the state on Islamism, as the whole of Islam, perceived as the use of Shi'ism as a means of expansion and the policy of turning the Shia population in the region into a wave of influence has become the primary threat perception of all Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia.

However, the reactions coming from the moderate Sunni monarchies was not because of the sectarian divergence, but because of the fact that the new Islamic Republic created a new Islamist trend and challenged the old, the West-allied Islamist leadership of the Gulf countries, notably Saudi Arabia. The establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981, which encompasses all Gulf countries, is directly related to this perception of threat, which is explicit in the discourse of "export of revolution". GCC, working to balance the increasing Iranian influence, has endeavored to develop strategic relations with regional and international actors. This formation, as a matter, of course, was not considered by Iran as a well-intentioned initiative.

### **3.2.3. Post-revolution events in Iran's politics**

The newly created republic, therefore, had to tackle with some hardships that affected its foreign policy. One of them was the Hostage Crisis. On 4 November 1979, Iranian

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Nasr, V. (2007)., p.78.

students who supported Khomeini surrounded the US embassy in Tehran, where Americans were held hostage for 444 days until 20 January 1981. The storming of the embassy was the outset of the hostility between Iran and the US. The new regime of Iran encountered with diplomatic and economic sanctions, and the neighbouring countries against Iran were helped in direct and indirect ways by the US.

But the objective of the US was also protection of the interests in the Gulf and securing the private properties from expropriation wave in the country. Besides this, because of the effects of the Vietnam War in the US internal politics, the possible economic repercussions and the possible effects on superpower relations, the US did not resort to direct military operation. Beyond these, the US did not want to give an opportunity to the Soviet Union to protect any Muslim country, while it gained an Islamic hatred because of the invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>122</sup>

On such an environment, the US, instead, tried to find a way to negotiate with the new regime's moderate facet and tried to negotiate a deal for the release of the hostages. In line with this understanding, on 23 January 1980, Carter expressed his concerns about the Soviet approaching to the Persian Gulf and initiated a foreign policy, known as the Carter Doctrine, stating that 'An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.'

On the other hand, to gain regional support against Iran, the US went for a rapprochement with Iraq. Even though the relations between the US and Iraq were tense before Iraq's strategic position and the Baath regimes some policies were useful for long-term goals of the successive US administrations on the region and against Iran, which in the end encouraged Iraq to invade its neighbour. The seizure of the American embassy as the first significant act of revolutionaries had two remarkable results. It paralyzed the power of Bazargan and made him resign; therefore was a

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<sup>122</sup> Panah, M. (2007). *The Islamic republic and the world: global dimensions of the Iranian revolution*. Pluto Press (UK), p.77.

complete break from the past and radicalization of Iranian foreign policy and the war with Iraq begun.<sup>123</sup>

In these conditions, the other hardship that the new republic encountered was the Iran-Iraq war. Iran, which was pushed away in the international arena during the Khomeini period, suffered from this problem in the war with Iraq. Even though there was a not specific casus belli, from the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq in 1958 until the Iran revolution, the Iraq-Iran relations had been already tense. Shatt al-Arab waterway was another matter of an interest clash. The coastline was not large enough to allow Iraq to make enough facilities to export its oil to the world. So it wanted to expand its dominance on the shore. Another reason for the war was the fear that the Shia population in Iraq would be affected by the Iranian religious revolution. The Shia population constituted approximately 55% - 65% of the Iraqi people. Iraqi Shias, since the formation of the modern state, had perceived themselves as an oppressed majority in the country. Karbala and Najaf (the place where Khomeini lived in Iraq from 1963-78 after his deportation from Iran), was one of the most important sanctuaries of the Shia. Because of this transnational connection of the Shia ulama, the Iraqi mullahs' kinship relations with Iran were strong. Iraq was, therefore, worried to be affected by the revolution in Iran and the emergence of any anti-regime sentiments amongst Iraqi Shias. Also, there was a significant difference in understanding between the secular Ba'th regime in Iraq and the Islamist regime in Iran. According to Karsh, as Sadegh Khalkhali, one of the essential figures of the new regime, pointed out, Saddam was considered one of the most critical obstacles to the development of Islamist thought in the region.<sup>124</sup>

Iran-Iraq War lasted for eight years; probably up to one million people were killed or injured – with 60 percent of those casualties sustained by Iran. By the end of the war,

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<sup>123</sup> Rajaei, F. (Ed.). (1997). *Iranian Perspectives on the Iran-Iraq War* (1st edition). University Press of Florida., p.134.

<sup>124</sup> Karsh, E. (1990). Geopolitical determinism: The origins of the Iran-Iraq war. *Middle East Journal*, 44(2), p.265.



each side had more than 1.3 million people under arms.<sup>125</sup> Legally, Iran was the loser of this war for being the first to ask for a ceasefire and was weakened as a result of this war, both economically and militarily. Yet, Riyadh was one of the most important supporters of Iraq in the war with Iran. According to the statements made during the Kuwait crisis, Saudi Arabia's aid to Iraq during the 8-year war amounted to \$ 27.5 billion. Likewise, Kuwait provided \$ 14 billion in financial assistance and \$ 30 billion in debt to Iraq.<sup>126</sup> Unlike Iraq, Iran was based on its own resources and with its nuclear capabilities. Thus, in the long run, Iran was able to recover itself more strongly.

Iran-Iraq War has been analyzed from different points of view. According to Nasr, one of the crucial features of the Iran-Iraq War between 1980-88 was the establishment of a Sunni Arab bloc against the Shia and the revolutionary Iran. Khomeini, in order to find support in the region against the Sunni Arab bloc, became close to the Hafez al-Assad regime in Syria and accepted that Nussayri was a Shia sect of the Assyrian group, which was described by many groups as non-Islamic. He also remained silent in the 1982 Hama massacre, even though Hama was the stronghold of the Muslim Brotherhood, which defends an Islamic state like Iran and against the secular regime in Syria. Khomeini saw the alliance between Iran and Syria as a stabilizing factor against the Sunni Arab coalition. But revolutionary Iran was unable to change the Shia-Sunni balance in the region and finally abandoned it.<sup>127</sup>

However, taking the war between Iran and Iraq as a historical enmity and religious and political struggle between Sunni and Shia is misleading and incomplete. It was a modern inter-state war for thoroughly modern reasons of national interest and regional hegemony in which ideology, ethnic rivalries, and religious fervor played their parts but were not central to the main issues.<sup>128</sup> Worries about the effect of hostilities

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<sup>125</sup> Milton-Edwards, B., & Hinchcliffe, P. (2008). *Conflicts in the Middle East since 1945*. Taylor & Francis., p.87.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Nasr, V. (2004). Regional implications of Shi'a revival in Iraq. *The Washington Quarterly*, 27(3), p. 9-10.

<sup>128</sup> Milton-Edwards, B., & Hinchcliffe, P. (2008)., p.78.

(attacks on shipping and mining) on the flow of oil and other trade through and from the Gulf (from where one-sixth of the West's oil imports originated) made external involvement inevitable. As did fears that Iranian were intent on 'exporting' their revolution via subversion of minority Shi'a communities in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries, in addition to other considerations to do with maintaining stability and security of the region.

During the Iran-Iraq war, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq was established in Iran as a coalition of Iraqi Shia organizations opposing the Baathist government. Tehran supported this formation; however, Iran tended to help all organizations fighting the Saddam regime during the war regardless of their sects. The enmity between Iran and Iraq was compounded by rival ambitions for political and economic hegemony in the region.<sup>129</sup>

It was Iraq's fear that Iran's Shia sentiments would affect Iraq, instead of Iran's sectarian policies. The Islamic Revolution coincided with the emergence of Saddam Hussein as President of Iraq and chairman of the ruling Baath Party's Revolutionary Command Council. He distanced the country from the Soviet Union and condemned the invasion of Afghanistan... and relations between Iran and Iraq deteriorated. The Iraqi Sunni leadership of a predominantly secular state was concerned that the appeal of Shia revolutionary Iran might inflame anti-regime sentiments amongst Iraq's Shia majority estimated at 55 percent of the population.<sup>130</sup> Besides that, Afshon Ostovar indicates that during the Iran-Iraq War, Iran had engaged in arms deals with the United States and Israel, had a limited relationship with al-Qaeda and Russia. These relations showed how the Islamic Republic had been fueled by its own realpolitik inclinations.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>131</sup> Wehrey, F. M. (Ed.). (2017)., p.93.

However, according to Nasr, The Iranian Revolution led the Shia identity to come into prominence in the Middle East and made Shias claim their political rights throughout the region. The Iranian Revolution showed the Shias the path to political power and provided strong financial, spiritual and organizational support for the Shia political movements.

During the 1960s and 1970s, most of the Shias especially in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq were inclined towards Arab nationalism and leftist ideologies with integration with national policies in their countries. To Nasr, the silence and conservatism of the traditional Shia ulama played an important role in this way of behavior of the Shias in the Middle East. For this reason, Shia political movements such as al-Amal in Lebanon, Da'wa in Iraq, Tariq-Jafari in Pakistan, Hizbi Vahdet in Afghanistan, emerged only in the late 1970s and 1980s<sup>132</sup>. However; it can be said that up until recent times, Shias were not grouping in line with their sectarian identities for other reasons. The Shias were actually politically active before the Iranian revolution, but they did not act by emphasizing their Shia identity. In the 1960s, for example, the Saudi Shias played an active role in the Ba'ath party.<sup>133</sup> Also it is not true that some of these groupings had Shi'ism or sectarianism as the main feature of their foundation. For example, al-Amal was founded with communist sentiments to change the socio-economic inequality and support social a political uplifting of long-marginalized Shias in Lebanon.<sup>134</sup>

Moreover, the revolutionary regime avoided the sectarian Shia narrative particularly and emphasized the Islamic aspect of the revolution. When the afterglow of the revolution has faded, Iran started to understand the connections between Tehran's ambitions in foreign policy and the nature of international relations and the country's hard and soft power potential. Consequently, Khomeini underlined that Tehran could

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<sup>132</sup> Sinkaya, B. (2007). Şii Ekseni Tartışmaları ve İran. *Avrasya Dosyası*, 13(3), p.42.

<sup>133</sup> El Marashi, İ. (2007). Şii Hilali Mitini İnşa Etmek: İran Devrimi'nden 2003 Irak Savaşı'na. *Avrasya Dosyası (Şii Jeopolitiği)*, 13(3), p.12.

<sup>134</sup> Wehrey, F. M. (Ed.). (2017)., p.97.

improve its relations with any country - except the US, Israel and the Republic of South Africa. As a matter of fact, from 1984 through 1988, a diplomatic initiative involving all senior executives was realized and Japan, China, East Asia, Africa, East, and southwest European countries were visited.<sup>135</sup>

The Islamist movements in the Middle East were supported by Iran regardless of their sectarian tendencies. The radical factions and centers of powers within the clerical establishment were in constant search of the vehicles for exporting the Islamic revolution and concluding alliances with Islamist movements in the region. To this end, in the early 1980s, the radical groups cultivated such movements in Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Lebanon.<sup>136</sup>

In parallel with these developments, Saudi Wahhabism became the basis of ideological opposition. As Nasr indicates, the Iranian Revolution and the Shia militancy triggered an increase in Sunni militancy. Increasing Sunni consciousness after the revolution was also an important factor in the restriction of a threat that roots from Shi'ism and essence of the Revolution in Iran. The Sunni conservative Arab regimes have emerged as defenders of real Islam, instead of deviant Shi'ism, against the rising Shia threat.

Saudi Arabia introduced Wahhabism as a balancing ideology, not only in the Middle East but also throughout the Islamic world and even in the Balkans. It also supported the establishment of a Sunni bloc in the west of Iran on Iraq to eliminate the Shia threat, and Salafist movements in the east of Iran to fight against Shi'ism. However, this Salafist approach has turned itself into a problem rather than balancing Shi'ism or Iran. The fact that this ideology has a place in the minds of ordinary Muslims as Saud ideology rather than a part of Islam or Sunnism has been an important indicator of this situation. Under these circumstances, Wahhabism could not go beyond a project that is constantly supported with oil money.

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<sup>135</sup> Hunter, S. (1992). *Iran after Khomeini* (Vol. 156). Praeger Publishers., p.115.

<sup>136</sup> Hinnebusch, R. A., & Ehteshami, A. (Eds.). (2002)., p., 291.

The relations between Iran and other Sunni authoritarian countries in the Middle East deteriorated after the revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini, blamed King Hussein of Jordan, King Hassan of Morocco and Egyptian President Mubarak as being the servants of the US and Israel; He blamed Saudi Arabia's rulers as the guardians of the Kaaba and the US' representatives there. Throughout the 1980s, Saudi Arabia supported Iraq financially and diplomatically, regardless of their good relations with Iran before. In the rejectionist phase, Iran was against many countries in the region: Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, North Yemen and Afghanistan. It had friendly relationships only with Syria, South Yemen and Libya, and normal relations with Algeria, Pakistan and Turkey.

Yet, as Kamrava rightly lays emphasis on the instrumentalist purposes of the regional states, especially in the mutual interactions of Iran and Saudi Arabia; saying that their relations are not on the religious basis but on securing their own interests not to be threatened.<sup>137</sup>

#### **3.2.4. Ideology in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

It seemed that the Islamic Republic explained its foreign policy in the introduction of its Constitution, expressing as adherence to Islamic measures and brotherhood commitments to all Muslims and safeguard the all the oppressed in the world. Yet, according to Gregory Gause "In the Persian Gulf, states worry about conventional power threats and neighbours interfering in their domestic politics. Outside analysts tend to concentrate too much on the former kinds of threats and ignore the importance of the latter in regional foreign policies."<sup>138</sup> But on the other hand, according to Rakel, shortly after the revolution, Iran began to support and finance Shia groups and played a great role in their anti-regime uprisings in countries that have Shia population such

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<sup>137</sup> Kamrava, M. (2011)., p. 195.

<sup>138</sup> Gause III, F. G. (2007). Threats and threat perceptions in the Persian Gulf region. *Middle East Policy*, 14(2), p.122.

as Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Lebanon to reach "true Islam" in their own countries by providing them a guidance.<sup>139</sup>

Ideologically, the Iranian constitution commits to support "the just struggle of the oppressed against oppressors in any part of the world" (Article 154) It will come "to the defense of all Muslims whenever necessary (Article 152) "in accordance with... the Qur'an, all Muslims form a single notion, and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has the duty of formulating its general politics with a view to cultivating the friendship and unity of all Muslim peoples, and it must constantly strive to bring about the political, economic, and cultural unity of the Islamic world" (Article 11)."<sup>140</sup>

Iran showed no Shia identity on its foreign policy discourses in its constitution and revolutionary ideas. It claimed that it had the right to defend all Muslims without stressing any sectarian identity, all around the world. Its anti-American, anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist worldview was to eliminate any foreign domination is not only Muslim but other third-world countries. Its political stance against Israel and supporting Sunni Palestinians was proof that in foreign policy, it was overlooking sectarian differences. The Islamic Republic was one of the few counties that still consider Zionism as specific racism directed against Palestinian Arabs.<sup>141</sup> Also Nasr, even though he stresses that Khomeini's ambitions for power were another Shia challenge for leadership of the Islamic world, he acknowledges its global Islamic views.<sup>142</sup>

However, Iranian foreign policy, in relation both to Iran's immediate neighborhood and to the broader global arena, are influenced far more by a pragmatic, balance of

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<sup>139</sup> Rakel, E. P. (2007). Iranian foreign policy since the Iranian Islamic Revolution: 1979-2006. *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, 6(1-3), p.160-164.

<sup>140</sup> Constitution of Iran, Article 152.

<sup>141</sup> Hooglund, E. J. (2012). *Land and revolution in Iran, 1960–1980* (Vol. 7). University of Texas Press., p.198.

<sup>142</sup> Nasr, V. (2007)., p.226.

power considerations than by ideological or supposedly "revolutionary" pursuits.<sup>143</sup> So, contrary to what it appears as inconsistent and discrepancy in Iranian foreign policy, there are specific consistent themes. Iran's regional security policy is largely determined by the role and the position of Saudi Arabia (as Iran naming it as "the Saudi factor") and the United States. For Mehran Kamrava, one of the most prominent features of Iran's regional posture is the securitization of its foreign policy over the last three decades so it is a direct product of the militarization of the country's immediate environment. So mainly its foreign policy analysis can be made by security and strategic calculations.<sup>144</sup>

In the 1980s, Iran followed a strategy in the Persian Gulf, cultivating a constituency for itself among the Gulf Arab peoples, particularly the Shi'a population.<sup>145</sup> However, it followed a pragmatist policies where neither Shi'ism nor Islamism fits into its dynamics with some countries. Like Pakistan and Turkey, Iran had not tried to have a relationship on an Islamic basis. Iran obviously followed Islamist policies and even got along with Shia population in the region where it fits into its political agenda. However, as Ehteshami says "*revolutionary Iran has always been a "rational actor" in the classic realist mold.*"<sup>146</sup> Therefore, this blockage really only began clearing toward the end of the 1980s, thanks to several developments: the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the rise of a more pragmatic leadership in Iran, the growing importance of oil politics, the Kuwait crisis, and Iran's post-Cold War bridge-building regional strategy.<sup>147</sup>

Indeed, between July 1988 to July 1989, Iran redirected its concerns away from exporting the Islamic revolution to ending the war with Iraq. In the eyes of most of the scholars, the everlasting Iran-Iraq War and regressing economic conditions pushed

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<sup>143</sup> Kamrava, M. (2011). , p.184.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p.186.

<sup>145</sup> Hinnebusch, R. A., & Ehteshami, A. (Eds.). (2002)., p.298.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 288.

Iran to follow more pragmatic policies and made pragmatists come to power in Iran. Iran's unconditional acceptance of SCR 598 resolution, ending the war between Iraq was a reorientation period through pragmatist period in Iran foreign policy.<sup>148</sup>

In general, Iranian foreign policy in the first phase of the revolution was rejectionist towards the world order, rather than sectarian. The revolutionary regime has declared its foreign policy of export of revolution to all the oppressed people / Muslim peoples of the world; to pursue an anti-imperialist discourse, and to pursue an independent foreign policy with the slogans of "neither east nor west". It questioned the legitimacy of the existing international system and supported the formation of Islamic governments by criticizing the status quo states in the region. Khomeini believed that the Islamic Revolution was not only for and belong to Iranian people or Shias, but all Muslims.<sup>149</sup> However, beyond his affinity to religious identity, his priority was the state itself. His ideas that "the protection of the Islamic Republic is a duty above all the sacred duties"<sup>150</sup>, or as he expressed in 1988, "some rules including the five conditions of religion may be postponed for the protection of Islamic order and Islamic state"; show that the principle of *raison d'État* was at the basis of the administration even during the Khomeini period.

Another proof that Iran does not pursue a sectarian or even in general identity-based foreign policy is that, while Iran proposed an Islamic regime to Muslims and aimed export of revolution, it was not interested in the Central Asian and Caucasian Muslim people in the post-Soviet lands and followed the status quo towards those lands.<sup>151</sup> While the Islamic regime executed many members of the communist Tudeh party inside, by accusing them of cooperating with the Soviets and planning to abolish the regime, it did not follow a harsh attitude towards the communist Soviets in its

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Adib-Moghaddam, A. (2008). *Iran in world politics: the question of the Islamic Republic*. Hurst & Co., New York: Columbia University Press., p.32.

<sup>150</sup> Afrasiabi, K. L. (1994). *After Khomeini: new directions in Iran's foreign policy*. Westview Pr., p.16-17.

<sup>151</sup> Akdevelioğlu, A. (2004). İran İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin Orta Asya ve Azerbaycan Politikaları. *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi*, 1(2), p.131.



international policy. According to Akdevelioğlu; some reasons for this realist foreign policy were the fact that Iran was already facing the entire West and it could not come across with other strong powers like Russia and China. Such an attitude could have led Iran to be completely alone in the international system. Moreover, the Iran-Iraq war and other heavy internal problems had already made the country exhausted.<sup>152</sup>

Therefore, it does not appear that it pursued a policy that aims at Shi'ism in the foreign policy, more precisely, excludes Sunni Muslims, but mostly it believed to the universalist notion of Islam. On the contrary, the revolutionary regime, which was excluded from regional and international realms, and faced many problems, as a result, put aside the export of the revolution and the advocacy of the Islamic people by the 1990s, and the eastern and western slogans lost their meaning. As Gilles Kepel describe this conflict, it can be seen as a power struggle between the Saudi monarch and revolutionary Iran, just like how the USSR tried to expand its revolution and the US tried to contain the Soviet threat.<sup>153</sup>

However, Iranian foreign policy entered a new era in 1989 after the the death of Khomeini in July 1989. It marked a shift towards a revision from an ambitious one in its foreign policy.

### **3.3. The president Rafsanjani period**

Two important developments in domestic politics have significantly changed the foreign policy of Iran in this era; the end of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War in July 1988 and the death of the leader of the revolution in June 1989. The leader of the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini's death on 3 June 1989 is perhaps the most important turning point in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The regime, which had a revolutionary nature in the 1980s, tried to become a harmonious and status quo state after the death of Khomeini. After the rejectionist period, Iran had to leave its revolutionary ideas which were related to international system and became moderate in need of having some partners in the region to protect and secure itself.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Kepel, G. (2002). *Jihad: The trail of political Islam*. Harvard University Press., p.7.

Ali Khamanei succeeded Khomeini who has been in power ever since. The following spiritual leader has been also an advocate of Muslim unity like Khomeini. For him, the divisions among Muslim societies are not normal, the division is a product of the US and its allies.<sup>154</sup> He reprehended the exaggerated Sunni-Shia division. In one of his speeches in Qom in 2007, he criticized it;

Ever since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the arrogant powers have been trying to portray our revolution as a Shi'i revolution . . . [but] if our revolution had been a Shi'i revolution, we would have become separated from the Islamic world and had nothing to do with it. . . . They would have expressed no hostility to our revolution. But they have noticed that our revolution is an Islamic revolution.<sup>155</sup>

Yet the one who left its mark on this period was not Khamanei as the new spiritual leader, but Rafsanjani, who became the most powerful second man of the regime; and became the most popular politician of Iran at that time with his charisma. As a pragmatist politician, Hojjatoleslam Hashemi Rafsanjani was elected as president of Iran by winning the election in July 1989. He again won the election in 1993 and served another term until 1997. This was an important historical event, because his presidency was seen as a break with 1980's Iranian foreign policy. It was even called by some scholars as the beginning of Iran's "Second Republic".<sup>156</sup>

Starting from late 1980s, there were two main difficulties in foreign policy that Rafsanjani had to solve; one is overcoming the economic crisis stemming from the Iran-Iraq War, and the second is putting Iran a compatible place in international community.

The internal conditions were already leading the way of politics through more pragmatist policies and for reasons such as the end of the Iran-Iraq War, more

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<sup>154</sup> Wehrey, F. M. (Ed.). (2017). , p.99.

<sup>155</sup> Sadjadpour, K. (2008). *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader* (pp. 1-35). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace., p.26.

<sup>156</sup> Ehteshami, A. (2002). *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic*. Routledge., p.114-115.

pragmatist leaders coming into power in Iran, the growing importance of oil policy, the invasion of Iraq by Kuwait, and the desire of Iran to reinforce its relations with the regional states in the post-Cold War period, Iranian rulers changed their foreign policy understanding. Therefore, the new pragmatic regime gave a way to normalization with all of the Gulf Arab states, re-established relations with Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Also Iran showed it was open to international and regional collaboration about security.

It was called as the pragmatist phase of Iranian foreign policy which had started after the reorientation phase, after transition from radicalism to accommodation, which lasted until August 1990.<sup>157</sup> Many scholars called it as the "termidorisation of the revolution"<sup>158</sup> As it is argued above, like every post-revolutionary state, Iran had ceased to defend its extremist ideas with fire, became moderate regarding its relationships with the regional and international actors.

The period in which the revolutionary regime began to change as a result of strong internal and external pressures, pragmatist line was gaining power which they even gave the decision to end the eight-year war with Iraq. Although this foreign policy has changed, it does not contradict the discourses of the revolution.

In the transition period, different actors and different interests in the decision-making process, the conflicts between conservatives and liberals led to inconsistencies in Iran's foreign policy. The competition of reformist / pragmatist and conservative / idealists in domestic politics is reflected in the decision-making processes in foreign policy. Reformist presidents were leaning to more liberal economy and democratization but conservative/idealist part tried to stop it. So there was an instability and counterbalance in the foreign policy in the beginning, yet an emergence of a triple alliance between

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<sup>157</sup> Hinnebusch, R. A., & Ehteshami, A. (Eds.). (2002)., p.299.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

Ayatollah Khamanei and Mohammad Yazdi (the head of the judiciary at the time) and President Rafsanjani, the radical/populist factions declined.<sup>159</sup>

Therefore, Rafsanjani gave priority to the consolidation of the regime, he attached importance to reconciliation between the core group that supported the regime, while trying to expand the technocratic basis of the regime and restructure the Iranian economy.<sup>160</sup> According to Ali Ansari, Rafsanjani, tried to fill the political vacuum that made by the absence of Khomeini's charismatic authority, by developing a sustainable political structure founded on the commercial power of traditional merchants, bazaar and created a "mercantile bourgeois republic".<sup>161</sup>

Although Khamanei and Rafsanjani had different views on foreign policy, they have refrained from reflecting this difference to the public.<sup>162</sup> While Khamanei was defending traditional Shia Iranian values, Rafsanjani created an effort to develop Iranian nationalism and its 3,000-year-old Persian identity.<sup>163</sup>

These personalities, trying to balance the two fractions in the politics, opposing the foreign investment in Iran, Westernization of the society and cultural invasion of the West but were not dislodging the pragmatic foreign-policy orientation that Rafsanjani espoused.<sup>164</sup>

Beside the switches in Iran, there were also significant changes in the international system. On 25 December 1991, Gorbachov resigned from duty in the Soviet Union, which led to post-Cold War order. With the resolution of the Soviet Union and the end

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p.292.

<sup>160</sup> Cottam, R. W. (1991). Charting Iran's New Course. *Current History*, 90(552), 21., p.22.

<sup>161</sup> Ansari, A. M. (2019). p.52.

<sup>162</sup> Şen, G. (2013). Post-revolutionary Iran's foreign policy toward the United states: a historical sociological analysis of state transformation and foreign policy. *PhD, Middle East Technical University*, p.45.

<sup>163</sup> Shirley, E. G. (1994). The Iran policy trap. *Foreign Policy*, (96), p.88.

<sup>164</sup> Ehteshami, A., & Zweiri, M. (Eds.). (2012). p.32.

of the Cold War, the international system has dramatically changed from bipolarity to unipolarity and the US hegemony. This event created a new geopolitical milieu around Iran. Through the 1990s it can be seen the evolution of regional politics in 1990s and this had important ramifications for the Middle East. The end of the Cold War and disintegration of the Soviet Union coincided with the Gulf Crisis through 1990 – 1991.

Therefore, in Rafsanjani's era one of the other most prominent events was the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 2 August 1990, which lasted for seven months. Iraq intended to compensate for the destruction arose from the Iran-Iraq War by adding the historically claimed Kuwait to its lands. However, the occupation of Kuwait attracted a great deal of reaction in the regional and international arena. This event, which was the first crisis of the post-Cold War era, was an opportunity for the US to show dominance in the region. After the collapse of bipolar system, the US was believing that the liberal system and democracy as the winning system of the Cold War, had to be defended by an international norm of collective security which was upheld by the United Nations . If there any countries that attack the world peace and security that would be punished by international community. Therefore, the UN authorized intervention by coalition forces led by the US. The US led forces got Iraq out of Kuwait and ceasefire agreement was signed.

Iran's attitude to the crisis, known as the first Gulf War, was condemning the invasion of Kuwait but staying neutral during the war. This stance is an indication that Iran has evolved in a different direction in foreign policy. By not participating to the coalition, Iran had the chance to have a fruitful results with Iraq after the war. This sedate behaviour was a token that Islamic Republic was following a realist policy. According to Parsi, Iran has made significant contributions to the preservation of Iraq's integrity during military intervention by avoiding any incitement of the Shia population living in Iraq.<sup>165</sup>

However, it should be acknowledged here that Iran also did not wanted any attempt in the region, especially with the Gulf War, to harm its national interests. In Najaf,

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<sup>165</sup> Şen, G. (2013)., p.142.

Ayatollah al-Qasim al-Khoei who was a Shia leader in Iraq, built up a committee to govern the city.<sup>166</sup> However, these supports cannot show that Iran followed a sectarian foreign policy because beside these supports, Iran also had good relations with Sunni Islamic groups, like the Islamic *Jihad* and *Gama'a Islamiyya* in Egypt.<sup>167</sup> Supporting such groups were again for Iran's national interests, since its aim was to overthrow the government and create an Islamic one in Egypt. It also had good relations with HAMAS and Hezbollah and aimed to broaden its regional influence. Since the Islamic Republic supports the Palestinians against Israel, it supported Sunni HAMAS, the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (PIJ), the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and other Fatahfactions.<sup>168</sup>

The Islamic Republic protected its national interests and avoided security threat in the changing regional dynamics. The Kuwait crisis raised Iran's profile and highlighted its significance as a regional player because it helped to open the frozen channels of communications with Arab neighbors, but on the other hand, it paved the way for the Western powers to interfere with the events in the Gulf; therefore, weakening the influence ability of Iran towards GCC and Gulf sheikhoms. So, Iran's attitude towards the crisis was opposite to the revolution period's interventionist and adventurist foreign policy.<sup>169</sup>

Another important issue during the Rafsanjani period was the protracted Arab-Israeli Conflict. With the Arab-Israeli peace process, Iran was left out of the post Gulf crisis regional order. Madrid Process involved the Gulf Arab neighbours. Thus, Iran was losing the influence over them; Especially after 1993, when GCC states started to direct talks with Israel and by showing their willingness for the process. Iran's stance toward this process was non-intervention.

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<sup>166</sup> Allawi, A. A. (2008). *The occupation of Iraq: Winning the war, losing the peace*. Yale University Press., p.30.

<sup>167</sup> Mandaville, P. (2010). *Global political islam*. Routledge., p.5.

<sup>168</sup> Levitt, M. A. (2002). The political economy of Middle East terrorism. *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 6(4), p.64-66.

<sup>169</sup> Ehteshami, A., & Zweiri, M. (Eds.). (2012)., p.301.

Also, although many Western observers believe that Iran's foreign policy in the 1990s is a continuation of rejectionist 1980s, many signs show a delinking with it. Some events such as participating in the Casablanca Summit in 1994, which was about economic matters related to Arab-Israeli peace talks, normalization endeavours between Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia despite its support to UAE on the issue of three islands and demonstrated patience toward UAE by insisting on a diplomatic resolution to problems. So, as some scholars rightly believe that, after the catastrophic experiences in international area such as hostage crisis and the war with Iraq; Iran has matured and advanced its perspective of the world in a new stage Iran has showed evidence of rational thinking.<sup>170</sup>

Iran's actions in foreign policy, like moving along with the UN during the Gulf Crisis, its willingness to reestablish and develop relations with the countries of the region such as Saudi Arabia, and initiating a dialogue with the European Community are the indications that it wanted to be integrated into the international system. In this era, despite the fact that officials still appeared to be ideological, economic and political concerns superseded the Iranian political policy; rather than religion, Shi'ism or anti-Westernist sentiments.<sup>171</sup>

### **3.4. The president Khatami period**

In 1997 Reformist Sayid Mohammed Khatami won the presidential election and served as the fifth president until 2005. His winning of the elections was an indication of an urge to change in Iran. Khatami promised reforms in domestic politics. Different from Rafsanjani, Khatami saw political reforms as a necessity and prerequisite for economic reforms.<sup>172</sup> Efforts towards the development of democracy and civil society within the country were also reflected in foreign policy. In foreign policy, Khatami, in his inaugural speech to his duty in 1997, said that Iran is ready to establish relations with any state that respects its independence and called for "Dialogue among

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<sup>170</sup> Rajaei, F. (Ed.). (1997), p.135.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Şen, G. (2013), p. 204.

Civilizations” to international society including the US.<sup>173</sup> Khatami argued that the country should be reintroduced into the international system by establishing a dialogue with countries within the framework of mutual respect and equity.<sup>174</sup> Unlike Khomeini, he accepted interdependence between societies and economies. This was a serious break from radical policies.

Muhammad Khatami’s foreign policy, therefore, had two seminal goals, improving Iran’s relations with the other regional and international actors through a policy of mutual respect and detente, and constituting powerful bonds between domestic issues and foreign policy. Iran’s foreign policy priorities were redefined as reconciliation with the outside world, stability in the Gulf, integration into the global economy, and more active participation in international and regional organizations.

It was the fifth phase in Iran’s foreign policy that emerged with the rise of the Second Khordad movement, according to Ehteshami<sup>175</sup>. Khatami’s foreign policy reinforced the non-ideological aspects of Rafsanjani’s foreign policy, but also went further, preaching compromise, improving civil society and the rule of law, and moderation. Like Rafsanjani, he also worked on opening Iran to a relatively liberal economy and democratization, with the resistance of the conservative wing. In the 1990s, he also supported the sense of Iranianism with rising nationalism.

Naturally, Khatami had a confrontation with the conservatives. Even though, Khatami government wanted to overcome the distrust with the US; it was confronted with criticism by conservatives and spiritual leader Khamanei. This made two divergent camps on one side supporters of the president and his democratization process; and on the

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<sup>173</sup> Gheissari, A., & Nasr, V. (2006). Asia Times Online:: Middle East News, Iraq, Iran current affairs. *Asia Times Online*, 23., p.132-134.

<sup>174</sup> Hooglund, E. (1999). Khatami’s Iran. *Current History*, 98(625), 59., p.63.

<sup>175</sup> Hinnebusch, R. A., & Ehteshami, A. (Eds.). (2002), p.302.



other side second supreme leader, Khamanei and his followers who try to consolidate authoritarianism and see these developments as a break from the revolution.<sup>176</sup>

Khatemi tried to get closer to the US in foreign policy. Instead of Ali Akbar Velayeti as foreign minister, he appointed Kamal Kharrazi, who was more moderate towards the relations with the US.<sup>177</sup> In his speech to CNN in 1998, he said that Iranians respect the American nation and that the relations between the two states deteriorated because of the wrong foreign policies of the US<sup>178</sup>.

Normalization and diminished tensions with the US were thought to be important for softening Iran's relations with US allies in the region, besides Iran-US relations. Khatami developed good relations with the Gulf Arab countries. Diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, which started during the Rafsanjani period, continued to increase during this period<sup>179</sup>. He took on constructive roles in the Caucasus and Central Asia. He corrected and developed relations with the European Union and collaborated with international organizations. He adopted economic reforms and liberal economic programmes. While the EU approached the call for dialogue positively and Khatami's detente policy was giving its fruits in the international realm, the United States was still confrontational<sup>180</sup>; which prevented the normalization of the Iranian foreign policy.

The Clinton administration favored Iran's call for good relations; the US secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, even apologizing for the US role in the 1953 coup and its

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<sup>176</sup> Arjomand, S. A. (2009). *After Khomeini: Iran under his successors*. Oxford University Press., p.91.

<sup>177</sup> Şen, G. (2013)., p.210.

<sup>178</sup> *Transcript of interview with Iranian President Mohammad Khatami*. (1998, January 7). CNN., Retrieved on 15 December 2018, from <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9801/07/iran/interview.html>

<sup>179</sup> Şen, G. (2013)., p.215.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

impertinent policy in the Iran-Iraq war .<sup>181</sup> However, with the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the success of the George W. Bush administration and the strengthening of neo-conservatives in the United States; the US strategy against Iran has changed from containment policy to regime change. This stiffening in the US policy would provide the legitimacy of a conservative and aggressive foreign policy in Iran for the sake of defending the regime and the country.<sup>182</sup>

Thus, Khatami's second term, which began in 2001, coincided with an international conjuncture reshaped by a number of events that directly affected Iran's policies at the beginning of the 2000s. The September 11 attacks of 2001, when the twin towers in New York were destroyed by Al Qaeda, and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the invasion of Iraq by the US as a response to these attacks were at the head of events that deeply affected the Middle East.

These terrorist attacks brought radical Islam, Salafism and Wahhabism to the agenda all over the world from the media to the academy. The responsible of the attacks, Al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden had good relations with the Taliban regime. Taliban regime had Salafist Sunni ideology fed by Saudi Arabia. An international military campaign, “Global War on Terrorism” has been launched by the US. With the conspiracy that Iraq was the supporter of Islamist terrorism and allegedly had weapons of mass destruction, Iraq was invaded by the coalition led by the US.

Iranian politicians hoped that with the changing conjuncture, the importance of the country would be understood and the terrorist stamp would be lifted.<sup>183</sup> But on the other hand, these campaigns also consequently helped to decline of the powers that were against Iran, which led the Shia to gain the political power in the region. In other

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<sup>181</sup> Ansari, A. M. (2006). *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Roots of Mistrust*. C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd., p.177.

<sup>182</sup> Şen, G. (2013), p.216.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 218.

words, as many scholars like Nasr, Cole and Ehteshami have suggested, there seemed to be a Shia revival or rise in the region.

Oppressed identities and personalities like Muqtada al-Sadr, as a Shia cleric and whose father was killed by Saddam, gained popularity in Iraq.<sup>184</sup> However, it was a rise of all oppressed identities, both Shias, Kurds and others. The Shia organizations like SCIRI, the Sadrist, the Dawa Party; and Kurdish parties of Barzani and Talabani, KDP and PUK grew stronger and overlooked their differences in the elections. In the subsequent elections, the Shia took 51% of the vote and half of the seats in the Constituent Assembly.<sup>185</sup> Iran supported most of these opponent parties, including Muqtada al-Sadr's al-Mahdi army and SCIRI (Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq).

Iran's response in foreign policy is to try to maintain its current state. He tried to smooth a supportive policy toward the United States, have established close relations with Russia, have tried to continue to soften from with Europe, have developed their relations with the Gulf countries, Turkey, Iraq, and increased regional cooperation with the actors in the region, including countries like Pakistan. Apart from Dawa and SCIRI, with whom he had good relations in Iraq, he also interacted with Muqtada-el Sadr's Mahdi Army and improved his relationship with the Talabani-led Kurds. All of this is an indication that he is acting rationally in the new international environment, which includes many threats and opportunities together. He played an "preventive" and "active" role in his foreign policy.

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<sup>184</sup> Gause III, F. G. (2009). *The international relations of the Persian Gulf*. Cambridge University Press., p.161.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p.162.

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The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was also a new period in terms of Iran-Saud relations. The rapid growth of Iran in the region with Shia population and militias were the most concrete results of this occupation in the eyes of Sunni rulers, Israel and the US. They perceived a threat by thinking that Iran quickly filled the power gap created by the US withdrawal.

In this period, Iran increased its relations with Russia and China created strategic partnerships with them. In his speech in 2002, Bush commemorated Iran Iraq and North Korea as the Ser Axis and argued that these countries threaten world peace. In addition to this statement, he stated in his National Security Strategy, which he announced in 2002, that he would implement a preventive war pre-shooting strategy against states that helped this terrorism.<sup>187</sup> Thus, the developments in foreign policy outside Iran affected deeply the internal policy of Iran. Iran has been hampered by rebuilding, reform, development, democracy and efforts, internal and external crises.<sup>188</sup> Although Iran accused the US with warmongering, it was unable to prevent the war-goers and hawks who were ruled inside.

With the disclosure of the nuclear facility in Natanz in 2002, a nuclear crisis occurred in the international environment. Although Iran claims that these efforts are peaceful and indispensable, these developments have encouraged the aggressive policy of neoconservatives in the USA against Iran. With the nuclear program, the political

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<sup>186</sup> Şen, G. (2013), p.225.

<sup>187</sup> V. *Prevent Our Enemies from Threatening Us, Our Allies, and Our Friends with Weapons of Mass Destruction*. (n.d.). Retrieved 21 February 2019, from <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/nss5.html>

<sup>188</sup> Şen, G. (2013), p.226.

pressures on Iran have become the main factor shaping Iran's regional and international politics.<sup>189</sup>

### **3.5. The president Ahmedinejad period**

The conservatives, who were disturbed by the reformist policies of Khamenei, strengthened with the change of the regional conjuncture and opened the way for militarization and authoritarianism in the country. Reform was perceived as a threat to the country's regime and its democracy agenda was combined with the discourse of the USA to bring democracy to the middle east, it was secured by conservatives in Iran and was shown as something to be struggled with. The rhetoric and politics of the Bush administration exposed Iran's fear of foreign intervention and imperialism. It was inevitable that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who represents the conservatives, took power in the 2005 elections, instead of reformers whose movement was restricted in such an environment where power struggles in domestic politics and geopolitical crises in foreign politics were experienced.

In fact, unlike the victors of other elections, Ahmadinejad is not a clergyman but a former Revolutionary Guard<sup>190</sup>. According to Nasr; “The Iranian presidential election of 2005 also brought to power a leadership that is more keenly aware of the Shia-Sunni divide”<sup>191</sup> However, there were many factors in selecting Ahmadinejad; beside the militarization of politics and the events mentioned above, the belief on the failure of the reformist Khatami administration to take concrete steps to fulfill the promises he gave was very disappointing to the public. As a result of this hopelessness in the electorate, 20 million out of 47 million voters registered in the 2005 elections did not go to the polls despite the pressure exerted.<sup>192</sup> In the face of rising inflation and

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p.232..

<sup>190</sup> 3 Mohammad - Reza Djalili Thiery Kellner “İran’ ın Son İki Yüzyıllık Tarihi” , Bilge Kùltür Sanat, İstanbul, 2011, p.155.

<sup>191</sup> Nasr, V. (2007)., p.225.

<sup>192</sup> Djalili, M. R., Kellner, T., & Uzmen, R. (2011). *İran’ın son iki yüzyıllık tarihi*. Bilge Kùltür Sanat., p.132.

unemployment, Ahmadinejad's populist social justice policies, which foresee the distribution of revenues from oil sales among all Iranians, were effective.

Political developments in the process that started with the decision to continue nuclear activities with the power of Ahmadinejad, where the wind of change was felt in Iranian foreign policy. During the Ahmadinejad period, the world was again classified between “oppressors” and “oppressed” ones and seemed to have an antagonist approach to the West.<sup>193</sup> It was Ahmadinejad's main goal to revolutionize politics, which he thought deviated from the principles of the revolution. The state has turned into an authoritative device that has secured many facts while defending its fight against internal and external enemies. During the reign of Ahmadinejad, soldiers, IRGC and Basij were strengthened in domestic and foreign policy in the country. These emerging new generation politicians, especially thinkers like Ehteshami and Zweiri in the academic environment, have been called neo-conservatives because they are similar to neo-conservatives that have been on the rise in the USA in the same period.<sup>194</sup>

In the period facing the USA, Iran denounced the view of President Bush of “axis of evil”, and which was corrected as “axis of resistance” against the oppressors. The effect of the deepening crisis between the two countries has also included the actors in the region and has affected the regional politics. After September 11, the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, after the strengthening of the United States in the region, called Iran as a threat and opened the way for Iran to become a national security state.<sup>195</sup>

Ahmadinejad government used its soft power. It is believed that Iran affected Shias in Iraq through charities, social and health services which led Iraq to be named as Iran's

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<sup>193</sup> Şen, G. (2013), p.254.

<sup>194</sup> Ehteshami, A., & Zweiri, M. (Eds.). (2012), p.167.

<sup>195</sup> Şen, G. (2013), p.259.

satellite.<sup>196</sup> However, like any other countries, Iran also wanted to fill the political vacuum, created in the absence of Saddam; and strengthen its political presence in the region. Iran gave importance to Muslim identities; signed a formal defence pact with Syria in 2006.<sup>197</sup> and said that it is a key partner on Palestinian issue. In the 2006 Lebanon War, Ahmedinejad supported Nasrallah. However, in internal politics there was a strong opponents to Ahmadinejad. In 2007, when the government announced that the government would distribute fuel with a report card, demonstrations were organized throughout the country.

In 2009 Ahmadinejad defeated former prime minister Mousavi, former deputy Khatami and former Commander of the Revolutionary Guards Muhsin Rezaei in elections and took the second presidential seat. Candidates who were defeated in the race claimed that cheating was done. People who involved in the protests and street demonstrations against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's re-election and for the suspicion of cheating in the results, met with the regime's harsh intervention. A great crisis has occurred between the administration and society.<sup>198</sup>

The opposing Green Movement has initiated the greatest struggle since the revolution against theocracy, which put millions of people in streets for two weeks with this suspicion. A dissident student Neda Agha Soltani who became an important symbol of the Green Movement in the sequel, was and this killing spread a great outrage. Meanwhile, the government continued to be involved in the events in the region. In September of the same year, Ayatollah Khamenei declared that Jerusalem Day, which was considered holy by the Jews was coinciding on the last Friday of Ramadan, was representing solidarity with the Palestinians. However, tens of thousands of people supported the opposition candidate Mousavi during the demonstrations on Jerusalem Day. Activists protested the government's support for the militants in these two regions

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<sup>196</sup> Louër, L. (2008). *Chiisme et politique au moyen-orient: Iran, Irak, Liban, monarchies du Golfe*. Autrement., p.244.

<sup>197</sup> Saab, B. Y. (2006). Syria and Iran revive an old ghost with defense pact. *Brookings*, July, 4.

<sup>198</sup> Ansari, A. M. (2010). *Crisis of authority: Iran's 2009 presidential election*. Chatham House.

by shouting "I will give my life not for Gaza and Lebanon, but for Iran."<sup>199</sup> Moreover, people gathered in various cities of Iran on the anniversary of the US Embassy siege on 4 November, with the motto "Death to the US" instead of "Death to the dictator". The events were harshly repressed by the Ahmadinejad administration, resulting in the suppression of the Green Movement and their leaders under house arrest and the exclusion of reformist parties and politicians from the system. These events also revealed the fights and disputes between the political elites in Iran.<sup>200</sup>

When the Arab Uprisings started to emerge, Iran supported the popular upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya which were ruled by the rulers against Iran. These events were supported for the hope that they will increase the regional power in the Middle East, until the flame spread to its long-standing ally, Syria. While the uprisings were described by Iran as being against Western-backed regimes, it became wordless on the uprisings in Syria. Instead of leaving its ally, Iran, this time, alleged that uprisings were Western-backed. With the fear of losing such an important ally in the line of defense in the region, it supported Assad's regime as far as possible.

Although periods and political actors change in Iran, main elements, such as the national security principles for the Islamic Republic of Iran has not changed. The best example of this is its foreign policy during the presidency of Mahmood Ahmadinejad. Even though the presidents changed from a reformist leader to a conservative one; and their policy seemed to change, Iran kept its foreign policy constant. Unlike reformers, Ahmedinejad prioritized the Islamist ideology. However, he did not use sectarian discourse in his foreign policy and developed his relations with Sunni non-state and state actors, especially with the Sunni-populated HAMAS and Islamic Jihad organizations. The change in foreign policy in this period should be explained not by sectarian basis, but by the change in the state itself and the developments in the international arena.

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<sup>199</sup> *Kronoloji: Devrimden günümüze İran | Al Jazeera Türk—Ortadoğu, Kafkasya, Balkanlar, Türkiye ve çevresindeki bölgeden son dakika haberleri ve analizler.* (n.d.). Retrieved 21 February 2019, from <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/kronoloji/kronoloji-devrimden-gunumuze-iran>

<sup>200</sup> Ansari, A. M. (2010). *Crisis of authority: Iran's 2009 presidential election*. Chatham House.



### 3.6. The president Rouhani period and the current politics

The presidential elections held in Iran in 2013 were won by Hasan Ruhani, who defended moderation, prudence and moderation in both domestic and foreign politics. While he came to power, Syrian crisis was ongoing for two years.

Hasan Rouhani was coming from the pragmatic school; which gained strength in Iranian politics starting in the 1990s, learned lessons from the devastating war in the 1980s and from the failing politics of the export of revolution, and adopted a rational and modest foreign policy for the reconstruction of the country's economy. The support of the former moderate Presidents Rafsanjani and Muhammad Khatami played a major role in Rouhani's success.<sup>201</sup>

The motto of Hassan Rouhani's period in foreign policy was to be in constructive interaction with the world. Both Rouhani and Iran's experienced diplomat who served in the United Nations for many years and the new Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, stressed that Iran would seek “constructive engagement” in its relations with the West and neighboring countries in the new era.<sup>202</sup> This constructive engagement was explained as by the fact that states treat their counterparts in the framework of mutual respect and equality and work together to eliminate common concerns and work together to achieve common goals.<sup>203</sup> Therefore, Iran was ready to cooperate on all kinds of issues from Syria to relations with the US on the basis of mutual benefit and understanding. The political change gave hope for a cease on Syrian civil war. Rouhani's advisers told Al-Monitor that he was working on bringing Assad and opposition parties together for a negotiation.<sup>204</sup> So far, so little has changed since

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<sup>201</sup> Şen. G. (2017). Ruhani Döneminde İran-ABD İlişkileri, IRAM Iran Araştırmaları merkezi, p.6.

<sup>202</sup> Zarif, M. J. (2014). What Iran really wants: Iranian foreign policy in the Rouhani era. *Foreign Affairs*, 93(3), 49-59.

<sup>203</sup> *President of Iran Hassan Rouhani: Time to engage—The Washington Post*. (n.d.). Retrieved 21 February 2019, from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/president-of-iran-hassan-rouhani-time-to-engage/2013/09/19/4d2da564-213e-11e3-966c-9c4293c47ebe\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/president-of-iran-hassan-rouhani-time-to-engage/2013/09/19/4d2da564-213e-11e3-966c-9c4293c47ebe_story.html)

<sup>204</sup> *Rouhani Considers New Approach To Syria*. (n.d.). Retrieved 21 February 2019, from <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/iran-rouhani-support-syria-diplomatic-initiative-opposition.html>

Rouhani is also aware of the threat of losing its ally Assad regime in the region, especially on the Levant. However, the reason for Iran to soften its standing on Syria was so as to have a negotiating power for its own nuclear talks with the Western powers.

The resolution of the nuclear crisis through diplomatic negotiations and the abolition of the heavy sanctions imposed on Iran were the priority issues of Rouhani's foreign policy agenda<sup>205</sup>. Iran's nuclear energy activities have been one of the issues that have occupied the international community for many years. Especially from the beginning of the 2000s until 2015, allegations regarding Iran's nuclear program have always been on the agenda. An agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the so-called nuclear agreement, was signed in July 2015 after nearly three years of negotiations between the Iranian government, which was affected by the sanctions, and the permanent members of the UN Security Council, the P5 + 1 countries, the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France, and Germany, as well as the European Union. Considering Iran-US relations, the agreement was a historical crossroads in terms of relations with crises and tensions since 1979.

Although the nuclear agreement provided a positive basis for the normalization of relations; deep mistrust in bilateral relations, despite the removal of multilateral sanctions on the nuclear program, unilateral sanctions imposed by the US on the integration of Iran into the global system, the unresolved bilateral issues and regional problems could not normalize relations. At the last stage, the short-term hopeful process between 2013 and 2017 was replaced abruptly by the presidency of Donald Trump with the traditional element of relations and crisis, which eventually came to a halt with the unilateral withdrawal of Trump from the agreement. Decisions taken by the Trump administration not only withdraw from the nuclear agreement signed in 2015, but also brought new economic embargoes for Iran.

The nuclear deal, which the Obama administration signed in 2015 but withdrawn by Trump, was one of the most negotiated issues in recent years. The historic nuclear

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<sup>205</sup> Şen, G. (2013)., p.234.

reconciliation of the Hassan Rouhani government with the international community has led to a general consensus that the Iranian regime has evolved increasingly into a more moderate and pragmatist foreign policy. Nuclear deal showed that Iran is able to have interest-driven cooperation with Western states. With the nuclear agreement, Iran has been seen as a regional partner by Western states in resolving issues in the Middle East. One proof of this was the fact that it was called to international meetings on the future of Syria.

In July 2019, President Rouhani said they are ready to negotiate with the United States if the sanctions were lifted; "We have always been in favor of negotiation ... If they put an end to sanctions and economic pressures, and return to the agreement; we are ready to meet with America today, right now and wherever they want." <sup>206</sup> he said. This attitude of Iran shows that it is not ideology-oriented and acts according to its own interests in its foreign policy. As a matter of fact, Iran performs a pragmatist and rational policy to adapt itself to the status quo and secure its powerful presence in the region.

This softening of US-Iran relations has worried Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries with Sunni governments. Since they believe that Iran is the country that makes the maximum use of unstable areas in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria, these countries became anxious that it is expanding its influence with the nuclear agreement. Israel, which is described as the only country in the region to have nuclear weapons, was also dissatisfied with the agreement. Prime Minister Netanyahu called the compromise "a bad mistake with historical dimensions". The basic dynamics of Gulf security are actually based on regime security, national security in the context of internal and external threats, and energy security due to the presence of rentier economy system, as the Gulf states are built on the monarchy of state governments.

Gulf countries, which are inadequate in terms of military personnel, are fully dependent on the defense sector and have many gaps in security structuring, perceive

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<sup>206</sup> *İran Cumhurbaşkanı Ruhani: Yaptırımlar kalkarsa ABD ile müzakereye hazırız | Euronews.* (n.d.). Retrieved 2 February 2019, from <https://tr.euronews.com/2019/07/14/iran-cumhurbaskan-ruhani-yaptirimlar-kalkarsa-abd-ile-muzakereye-haziriz>

serious threats to their national security as a result of recent developments in the Middle East. These security concerns (riots, Iran's nuclear treaty, and proxy wars in the region) have led the Gulf countries to seek new security policies. The nuclear agreement and the escalating political tension and regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, made the six member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman) centralize securitization approach in their domestic and foreign policies. In this context, as seen in Bahrain and Yemen, the Gulf countries react harshly without hesitation when the possibility of internal political instability creates an area of influence in favor of Iran. It is important here that the UAE and Saudi Arabia send soldiers and policemen in 2011 with the Arab Spring wave have been seen in Bahrain.<sup>207</sup>

Some scholars, when Iran's foreign policy has contradictory actions of realism and constructivism, believe that it is pragmatist, like Ramazani stresses that "the balance of ideology and pragmatism in the making of its foreign policy decisions has been one of the most persistent, intricate and difficult issues in all Iranian history, from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, when the Iranian state was born, to the present time."<sup>208</sup> Some others like Ansari, explain that the national identity is dependent on its religious cultures where Islamic culture has a seminal role in shaping foreign policy of Iran.

### 3.7. Conclusion

Taken all the eras of Iranian foreign policies together, it can be said that Iran does not follow a sectarian, ideological foreign policy; neither it creates a Shia crescent. It follows a pragmatist foreign policy that found on strategic rationale. Its geopolitical location shapes its foreign policies with regional and international actors. Its close relations with both Sunni or Shia state and non-state actors depend on its security threats which emerge from this geopolitically important location.

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<sup>207</sup> *Saudi Arabian troops sent to Bahrain as protests escalate—Telegraph.* (n.d.). Retrieved 21 February 2019, from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/bahrain/8381034/Saudi-Arabian-troops-sent-to-Bahrain-as-protests-escalate.html>

<sup>208</sup> Ramazani, R. K. (2004). Ideology and pragmatism in Iran's foreign policy. *The Middle East Journal*, 58(4), 1-11.

Even though Iran has strong links with religious and non-state actors, it keeps close relations with states that do not follow religious policies. Its closeness to India than Muslim Pakistan, its support on Armenia than Shia Azerbaijan, its close ties with atheist regimes like China, North Korea and Venezuela show that Iran overlooks ideological and religious affinities in foreign policy; it is rather combined by many rational factors and it follows its national security and strategic interests like other states.<sup>209</sup>

Iran in its foreign policy had not been sectarian, since the current issues in the Middle East, like toppling down of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and then the Arab Uprisings. According to Ostovar, Shi'ism has never been the main factor in the foreign policy but its foreign policy is shaped by its own interests.<sup>210</sup> Because of the circumstances like the war with Iraq and its ideas about exporting the revolution alienated Iran from its neighbors. This forced Iran to have close relations with non-state actors in the Middle East which are both Sunni and Shia. Yet, since most of its alignments are Shia inclined, Iran's foreign policy has a sectarian guise. Therefore, its foreign policy cannot be called as sectarian, but it is just a result of its realpolitik.

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<sup>209</sup> Wehrey, F. M. (Ed.). (2017)., p.99.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., p.101.

## CHAPTER 4

### GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA

In order to understand that neither the developments in the Middle East nor the Iranian foreign policy is based on sectarian identity, it would be appropriate to examine the geopolitical competition developed in the axis of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East.

With the developments in the Middle East, especially with the occupation of Iraq and after the Shiites took a dominant place in the Iraqi government and political power and Hezbollah's success in the war with Israel in 2006 and in 2009 and its increasing importance in the non-Shia Arab world.<sup>211</sup> Its fight against Israel created the possibility to be the leader of Palestinian case, Islamic identity and resisting the US imperialism, which created a threat to status-quo Arab states.<sup>212</sup> Iran started to take advantage of its Shia identity and improve its relations with state and non-state actors in the region also through its Shia identity. Arab monarchies and anti-Iranian actors such as Israel and the US worried about Iran's influence in the region and started to securitize Iran's relations with the regional actors in the sectarian basis and blamed it for creating a "Shia crescent" from the Levant to the Arabian Peninsula.

In this chapter, the sectarianism arguments and sectarian discourses, particularly Shia crescent ideas will be explained as geopolitical rivalry in the region. Another aim of this chapter is illuminating how sectarian identities (notably the Shia identity) are securitized and the political discourses are shown as "realities" by states, academia and the media for the benefit of some specific states.

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<sup>211</sup> Valbjørn, M., & Bank, A. (2012). The new Arab Cold War: rediscovering the Arab dimension of Middle East regional politics. *Review of International Studies*, 38(1), p.4.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p.6.

Moreover, this chapter, while acknowledging that Iran uses sectarian identities if it helps in its political agenda as an instrument, stresses that Iran's foreign policy motives neither be explained with sectarianism nor it can achieve such a Shia crescent objective even if it has such an aim.

#### **4.1. Shia crescent discourse**

Even though it is believed that the role of religion has diminished after the Westphalian order; some states in the Middle East still use religion as geopolitical mean. The three most important powers in the Middle East has generally used religion as a basis for self-consciousness; Iran with its messianic narrative, Saudi Arabia with its defender status of the holy Islamic cities and Israel with its idea of Zionism.

Since the region is home of the holy places such as the Dome of the Rock, the Western Wall and the site of Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem, the Masjid al-Haram in the city of Mecca, the shrine of the Prophet in Medina, and the shrines of Ali and Hussein in the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala; it can be seen that these places and cities are far beyond of being just important holy places, but also used for geopolitical acquisitions by the states and some other non-state actors, like many current Islamic movements of Hezbollah, HAMAS, Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Iran is believed one of the states that tends to use this geopolitically important places by supporting Shia-led governments in Syria and Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. These places and cities in and outside of Iran which are mostly populated by Shias have a great importance geographically, religiously and thus, politically together.

Shia Arab population in the Middle East is stretching from the Hormoz strait (UAE 6%) to head of the Persian Gulf (Iraq 60%, Bahrain 70%, Kuwait 30%, Qatar 20% and Saudi Arabia 13%) to Levantine region (Syria 15% and Lebanon 40%).<sup>213</sup> The Shia population of Persian Gulf states of Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia and UAE constitutes approximately 60% of the total Gulf population.

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<sup>213</sup> Uzi, R. (n.d.). *The Shi'i Crescent—Iranian Dream or Arab Nightmare?* Retrieved 21 February 2019, from [https://en-humanities.tau.ac.il/iranian/publications/irans\\_pulse/2006-7](https://en-humanities.tau.ac.il/iranian/publications/irans_pulse/2006-7)

Moreover, the five major oil-producing countries that have Shia populations hold 58% of world oil reserves.<sup>214</sup> Therefore despite the low proportion of Shias, about 10% of Muslims worldwide, their strong presence in the oil-producing area of the Persian Gulf has a great significance. The fact that they are widespread in such a large geography and, more importantly, that they are located in the strategic regions of the Middle East, make them the center of attention of regional and international powers.

With this geopolitically important location of Shia population, sectarian divisions comprise many threats for the current status quo of the Middle East politics. In recent years, especially due to conflicts in Iraq and crisis in Syria, sectarian-oriented approach developed in explaining Middle East politics. This sectarian approach has also allowed many to produce conspiracy theories, such as the danger of a possible Shia Crescent headed by Iran.

Although, the term “Shia Crescent” has been used by academic circles (in German, Schiitischer Halbmond and in French as Croissant chiite), it was not well-known in the international public opinion until status-quo Arab leaders have added this item to the Middle East agenda.

In December 2004, when United Nations Security Council began to deal with Iranian nuclear crisis and Iraq was on the brink of civil war, King Abdullah II of Jordan gave an interview in relation to Iranian role in Iraqi election to the *Washington Post*.<sup>215</sup> He expressed to the international press his worries of the rise of a "Shia crescent" that could destabilize the Middle East, by claiming that, “If pro-Iran parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government; a new "crescent" of dominant Shia movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria and Lebanon could emerge, they can alter the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects and they can

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<sup>214</sup> Leigh, J. (2008, December 23). *Shia Islam and oil geopolitics*. Resilience., retrieved on 15 April 2018 from <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2008-12-23/shia-islam-and-oil-geopolitics/>

<sup>215</sup> *Iraq, Jordan See Threat To Election From Iran—The Washington Post*. (n.d.). Retrieved 21 February 2019, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2004/12/08/iraq-jordan-see-threat-to-election-from-iran/7e0cc1bc-aeb3-447a-bc9e-cfa5499699bc/>



pose new challenges to U.S. interests and allies”.<sup>216</sup> Right after his speech, the idea became a hotly-debated concept in geopolitics analyses on the Middle East.

In this sense, the expression of “Shia crescent” is a recent discourse. It is firstly used by the King Abdallah II in the interview by expressing his concerns and stressing on an increasing Shia power and axis that might led and used by Iran. The claim of King Abdallah II of Jordan widely presented in the media and academia. Both criticisms and approvals followed the Shia Crescent invention of the King. Not only Iran but also many Arab figures blamed these claims in ground that they would encourage sectarian tendencies in the Middle East<sup>217</sup>, and criticized by some academics that these statements of conservative Arab regimes about the rise of the “Shia Crescent and seeing the Shia minorities in their countries as a threat is being a material for sectarian analyses like Vali Nasr’s.<sup>218</sup>

In response to these criticisms, King Abdullah did not retract from his main claim and only moved the highlighting<sup>219</sup> and he took the head of the Jordanian secret service from office for show. However, approvals came from King Abdullah’s allies like Hosni Mubarak, former dictator of Egypt. He argued that Shias living in the Middle East showed loyalty to Iran, not to their own country. In an interview with Saudi financed al-Arabia channel Mubarak echoed King Abdullah’s claims. “Definitely Iran has influence on Shias. Shias are 65% of the Iraqis... Most of the Shias are loyal to Iran, and not to the countries they are living in.”<sup>220</sup> Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Saud al-Faisal, also treated the Shia crescent as a real fact and criticized Iran and the Shias in the region.

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<sup>216</sup> Walker, M. (2006). The revenge of the Shia. *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-), 30(4), p.16.

<sup>217</sup> Bröning, M. (2008). Don’t Fear the Shiites: The Idea of Teheran-Controlled “Shiite Crescent” over the Greater Middle East Is at Odds with Reality. *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft*, p.61.

<sup>218</sup> Sinkaya, B. (2007)., p.42.

<sup>219</sup> Bröning, M. (2008)., p.62.

<sup>220</sup> “Mubarak’s Shia remarks stir anger. (n.d.). Retrieved 29 February 2019, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2006/04/200849132414562804.html>.

After claims of a Shia Crescent and following criticisms a more amended versions were added to the agenda. Dividing Middle East along sectarian fault lines and underlining a nuclear-armed Iranian threat to the oil fields constituted two main elements of this argument. King Abdullah and President Mubarak suggested that sectarian war in Iraq battlefield would expand to the oil-producing regions of the Persian Gulf and even Caspian basin.<sup>221</sup> In these amended versions, the Shia crescent was defined as a geopolitical axis of Shia power stretched and extended from, Pakistan and Afghanistan to the Persian Gulf and Caucasus and Azerbaijan.<sup>222</sup>

Other versions and scenarios were propagated. One remarkable representation that was showed is “emergence of a new Islamic great power”. According to this version, Tehran could secure control of the Persian Gulf and Caspian oil and gas endowed areas using its nuclear capabilities and this could lead to establishment of “the first Islamic state to achieve great-power status since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918.”<sup>223</sup>

#### **4.2. Sunni Arab discourse: preservation of the Sunni status quo**

The fall of Saddam Hussein and Sunni Arab nationalism in Iraq in 2003 and rise of Shia Arabs as a major political force led to upset of traditional Sunni Arab supremacy over Shia Arabs in Iraq. Sunnis were worried about new developments and they perceived a danger of strengthening Shia front against their traditional ruling position. After centuries of suppression, Shia Arabs were now using their numerical majority to dominate Iraqi politics and Sunnis, who used to be rulers have lost their domination in political scene of Iraq.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Walker, M. (2006)., p.17.

<sup>222</sup> Bröning, M. (2008)., p.64.

<sup>223</sup> Walker, M. (2006)., p.17.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

As the result of the emergence of Shias as a powerful political element in Iraq, in spite of the differences among the Iraqi Shia political movements, the Shia politics, culture and religious values began to be more effective than Sunnis and Kurds in the determination of Iraq's policies. The emergence of Shias as an effective force in Iraqi politics and their cooperation with the United States has as a result, made them also the target of Sunni Salafist movements. Yet, according to sectarianist approach, the current anti-Shia violence in Iraq is not the result of recent developments in Iraq, but a result of the deep historical competition and struggle between the Shias and Sunnis in the region.<sup>225</sup>

Chain of Sunni Arab reactions started against the Shia triumph in Iraq, which was coming to the extents of a full-fledged civil war. Hosni Mubarak, King Abdullah and Saudi officials have made similar statements against increasing Shia influence in the region.<sup>226</sup> These statements showed Sunni Arab states concern of strengthening Iran's position in the region and growing Iranian influence on the Shia communities in the Arab world.<sup>227</sup>

The Lebanon Crisis of 2006 and military capabilities of Hezbollah intensified these concerns. During the war in 2006, most of the Sunni Arabs showed support for Hezbollah and carried Hassan Nasrallah's pictures.<sup>228</sup> Hezbollah al Hejaz, which is operating in mainly in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, also used this situation to return to the front with publication of declaration, which called Saudi officials traitors to Islam.<sup>229</sup> Sunni groups from HAMAS, Muslim Brotherhood to even Zarqawi, who was accused of sectarianism by giving anti-Shia statements gave their support to Hezbollah in the 2006 war.

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<sup>225</sup> Nasr, V. (2007).

<sup>226</sup> Walker, M. (2006).18.

<sup>227</sup> Rabi, Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Terhalle, Maximilian. "Are the Shia Rising?" Middle East Policy 14.2 (2007): 69-83. p. 69.

<sup>229</sup> Moniquet, Claude; Dombret, Dimitri. "Is Iranian Shia Expansionism a Threat to the Arab Countries?." ESISC Analysis 13 (2009): 07-47. p. 41.

However, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab rulers criticized this attack by calling Hezbollah's actions as reckless adventurism<sup>230</sup>, putting the situation into a troublesome point. It was for the first time in the Middle East history, a powerful Arab state and the defender of Mecca and Medina criticized an Islamic group in a conflict with Israel. Moreover, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt in response to Iran's accusations of supporting Israel, accused Iran of intervention in internal affairs of Lebanon.<sup>231</sup>

Sunni Arab forces have extended their discourse beyond the political level and they have expanded political arguments to the religious stage. Qatar-based Egyptian legal scholar Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who is an influential figure in the Sunni Arab world accused Iran of campaigning to spread Twelver Shi'ism in Sunni communities.<sup>232</sup> Sheikh al-Qaradawi, discussing the doctrinal separations between Shia and Sunni Islam, indeed showed a reaction to the expansion of Shia geopolitics. In fact, these accusations reflect the new geopolitical situation in the Middle East, in which Iran's growing influence challenge the diminishing Sunni Arab power in which accelerated with the emergence of Shia Arab geopolitics and Iran's efforts to call and lead the Arab streets.

Sunni Arab states, with all their forces, have resisted against any change of the status quo in the region. The Middle East's shifting equilibria have narrowed Sunni geopolitics. Once formidable-looking Sunni order with its Baathist Iraq, Lebanon and Sunni monarchies of the GCC and Jordan challenged by missing its Iraqi pillar. Baathist Iraq functioned as a buttress that isolated Iran and resisted its revolution export aspirations, took a reverse direction and services as a Shia Arab base, which gave an impulse to Shia populations under the Sunni rule. This situation could permit Iran to end its isolation and start a second phase of the Islamic Revolution that not only limits Sunni Arab influence in the region, but also would question legitimacy of oil-

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<sup>230</sup> "Public Challenges Arab Leaders on Lebanon Conflict" NPR (28 Jul 2006).

<sup>231</sup> "Timeline: Arab-Iranian relations" AlJazeera Channel (13 Apr 2009)

<sup>232</sup> *Iran And The Arabs: The Shi'itization Controversy Between Al-Qaradawi And Iran*. (n.d.). Retrieved 21 February 2029, from [https://en-humanities.tau.ac.il/iranian/publications/irans\\_pulse/2008-2](https://en-humanities.tau.ac.il/iranian/publications/irans_pulse/2008-2)

rich monarchies of the Gulf.<sup>233</sup>

Pro-American Arab states' fear of losing legitimacy and stability has intensified after Israel withdrew from Lebanon and Lebanon crisis of 2006. Opposition forces and Arab street in these states, influenced by Iran-backed Hezbollah's success, criticize the government on the ground of their passivity in defending Islamic lands.<sup>234</sup> The accusation of Hezbollah and Iran in Lebanese front worked conversely and not only did not break the legitimacy of Shia block but also led to a negative representation of Sunni monarchs in Arab street's eye as collaborators of Israel.

Another threat for the Sunni Arab status quo in the region has appeared to be the Houthi movement in Yemen. The political and economical unrest, corruption and sectarian discrimination of the state was resulted with the upheaval in the country. Yet, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab rulers have perceived Iran had a finger in this political tumult and suspected Houthi movement of being an Iranian proxy. With this suspicion and threat perception, Saudi Arabia decisively mobilized a regional force in 2015 against the Houthi movement to reinstate President Mansur Hadi who was ousted by Houthi rebels. This military coalition, Operation Decisive Storm, consisted of nine Middle Eastern and African countries by the call of the president Hadi.<sup>235</sup>

Besides the military operations, the Saudi-led coalition propelled a political incentive called Operation Restoring Hope.<sup>236</sup> The military and political interventions intended to fight against the Houthi movement, which mostly consists of a Shia population of the country, and to suppress the internal upheaval in Yemen. However, the establishment of such a coalition was mainly because of the threat perception of the Sunni monarchies that is rooted in Iran's increasing power in the region. As its main aim to prevent Iran from taking control of Yemen and hedging the Iranian influence

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<sup>233</sup> Cole, J. (2006), p.21.

<sup>234</sup> Rabi, *ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> *Operation Restoring Hope—Archive*. (n.d.). Yemen Peace Project. Retrieved 21 February 2019, from <https://www.yemenpeaceproject.org/blog-x/tag/Operation+Restoring+Hope>.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

within the country, the coalition has achieved its objective to a large extent.

While Iran and Saudi Arabia are leaning to the conflicts such as in Syria, Iraq and Yemen and additionally to these susceptibilities to this shattering status-quo, Riyadh's attitude against Tahran has turned out to be more assaultive after the death of King Abdullah in January 2015 and with the new King Salmane ben Abdelaziz Al-Saoud. Saudi Arabia has launched a new military alliance and coalition of Muslim countries in the name of counter-terrorism. Namely Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition that firstly announced on December 2015 has been supported by most of the countries, yet also criticized because of having Sunni Muslim majority and consisting solely Sunni-led states. Even though more than thirty Muslim countries have joined to the group, the absence of countries such as Iran and Iraq in this coalition against terrorism raised suspicions that the coalition was a sectarian structure more than a international counter-terrorism alliance. A member of the Security and Defence Commission in the Iraqi parliament, Hakeem Azameli denounced it as a sectarian coalition.<sup>237</sup> The head of the Russian Senate Committee on International Affairs Konstantin Kosachev also expressed his worries that the fate of the coalition is heavily dependent on its capacity to reconcile Sunni and Shia states and a coalition excluding Iran and Iraq could not be successful but instead, it could be used to attain other objectives. Iran has also perceived this Saudi initiative as a new instrument of opposition against itself; notwithstanding, within the Saudi narrative of extremism, Iran is also a terrorist and supportive of terrorism.

While it demonizes the Islamic Republic of Iran as the main sponsor of terrorism, on the other hand, Saudi Arabia is itself criticized by many countries by financing terrorist groups especially in the war in Syria, and by its Wahhabi ideology that ultimately giving a birth to violent extremist groups like al-Qaeda. Within this context, this alliance, let alone being a counter-terrorism alliance, seems to helping Saudi Arabia to be in the leadership position of Muslim world in the region in the rivalry between Iran.

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<sup>237</sup> *What do Russia and Iran think about Saudi Arabia's coalition initiative?* (2015, December 15). Euronews., Retrieved on 19 April 2019, from <https://www.euronews.com/2015/12/15/what-do-russia-and-iran-think-about-saudi-arabia-s-coalition-initiative>

In the eyes of the Sunni Arab states, the Islamic Republic of Iran supports the Shia groups and parties as its main allies in the region, mostly in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Beside the ones in these states, even if it supports some Sunni non-state actors like Palestinian Islamic Jihad, HAMAS; Iran is thought to be supportive of Shia organizations. In Sunni-led states eyes, this divide, which makes Iran even more disconnected and sometimes puts on the opposite side from its neighbours, far beyond just being strategic but mainly sectarian. The Sunni Arab opponents of Iran see its foreign policy as sectarian and expansionist. They criticize Iran by taking advantage of the crises in the Middle East to gain power and amplifying the Shia groups, forming a Shia unit and thus undermining the Sunni-led status quo.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia as the main supporter of Shia crescent discourse has aimed to take advantage of sectarian prejudices in order to silent domestic pressure.<sup>238</sup> Saudis want to mobilize Sunni Arabs in their rivalry game with Iran. They also provoke an international concern in regard to destabilizing effect of Iran's ambitions and through this preventing United States from withdrawing its forces from the Middle East.<sup>239</sup>

#### **4.3. Counter-discourse: is Iran a sectarian actor?**

Claims of Sunni Arab leaders in regard to Iran's ambitions to shape a new Shia geopolitics and using this ideological block to expand its influence have been criticized by majority of Iranian academics. One criticism of the Shia crescent claim is that it is not a Shia concept. Neither the Shias nor the Shia population, the majority of Iran, describes itself as such. Moreover, elements of Shia crescent discourse are inadequate and in odds with the reality of the region and Iran's capabilities and its foreign policy priorities. Although after Iranian Islamic Revolution Tehran has aimed to expand its regional influence and export Islamic Revolution, except hardliner minority, Tehran is well aware of limits of its own capabilities.

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<sup>238</sup> Terhalle, M. (2007). Are the Shia rising?. *Middle East Policy*, 14(2), p.80.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

Iranian politicians and intellectuals mention two main hypothesis in response to the Shia crescent discourse. Firstly there are serious obstacles for realization of a consistent Shia geopolitical block. Second hypothesis explains that Shia threat discourse is a mean for pro-status quo Sunni Arab states in order to fill their gap of legitimacy and lack of stability. The second argument is mentioned in previous part, and in the following part of the study will focus on the first criticism.

#### **4.3.1. The divergence within the Shia**

Possibility of realization of a unified Shia geopolitics is under question because of differences and distinctions between Shia branches. The Shia Crescent discourse tries to manipulate this fact by overemphasizing Iranian branch of Shi'ism. Most Sunni intellectuals and clerics tend to disregard existing differences between distinctive branches of Shi'ism and they refer to the Iranian Shias as a uniform faction.

Representation of Shia populated regions, as a geopolitical belt seems simplistic and misleading. It can be considered a proximity between Shias in the Middle East and Iran thank to their population majority and their religious bonds, i.e. belonging to the Twelver branch of Shi'ism. However, these factors do not imply a political alliance under Iran's control.

##### **4.3.1.1. Historical background**

After the death of the prophet, the strife had become as Umayyad-Hashemite conflict and as an extension of this conflict, Muawiyah launched a campaign to detract Ali and his supporters in public and mosques. Within this campaign, most of the opposition to Umayyad power, including a large coalition that destroyed the Umayyad and carried the Abbasids to power have also been evaluated in line with Shi'ism.<sup>240</sup> On the other hand, Shias started to curse the caliphates and denounced them for usurpation.

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<sup>240</sup> Onat, H. (1993). *Emevîler devri Şîî hareketleri ve günümüz Şiîliği*. Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı., p.29.



No matter how some date Sunni-Shia conflict back to the ancient times, some begin it with the death of Mohammed, some others with the death of Ali; the first disagreement within Islam between these factions was, to a great extent, political. And regardless of the emergence of sects, there were always contests and sometimes cooperations among these tribes; besides this relatively peaceful time which, if existed, endured only for the twenty two years of the prophecy of Muhammed.

For some, sectarian conflict was because of European imperial/colonial penetration to the Middle East that separated the peoples of the region by artificial borders with the First World War; and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This understanding also lead some to think that sectarianism has been the principal legacy of European colonialism in the Middle East in the twentieth century. Although it is true that the artificial borders created in the Middle East cause conflicts, seeing the cause of today's conflicts as external forces is taking the easy way out and escaping from responsibility. Moreover, although Ottoman millet system is believed it tolerated the ethnic, religious and cultural differences of population and therefore was described as a tolerant and peaceful system; the Ottoman tolerance was strongly linked to the survival of the state. When the system was in danger, it was the ruthless to its own population. When Turkoman-Qizilbash revolts in the Ottoman Empire are examined, it might appear superficially as the Sunni-Shia struggle between the Ottoman and Safavid reigns, but in fact there is a power struggle lies behind this conflict for domination in the region. Beside, although the importance of identity on individuals should not be ignored, the main reason for the Ottoman Qizilbash to stand beside Ismail and to revolt against Ottoman state was the criticism of the Ottoman mismanagement and injustice. Such small Shia communities, which rebelled for non-religious reasons, therefore lived in mountainous areas that were geographically isolated and far from the state's reach. The reason for the fact that the Qizilbash-Alevis are concentrated in the mountainous areas of the Anatolian highlands, Zaidis in the northern mountainous region of Yemen and Shias in Lebanon in the mountainous areas and the southern borders, is not because of the beauty of the mountainous areas, but because of the desire to live away from the pressure exerted on them by the administration.

In other words, the idea that there was a peaceful, idyllic milieu in the Middle East before the external powers of Europe and that any rivalry or riot was based on a Sunni-Shia sectarian dispute is incomplete and misleading. The reasons of conflicts should be searched within current social, political and economical contexts.

#### **4.3.1.2. Differences within the Shia culture**

The traditional view of the Shias was that this society was ethnically homogeneous, historically passive and radicalized by the Iranian revolution. With the fluctuations of the Iranian Revolution, Shi'ism has been seen as a fanatic and aggressive phenomenon; Iran and Arab Shi'ism and the differences between them have been ignored.<sup>241</sup> However, there are so deep differences between the Shias that cannot form a Shia crescent.

One of the main points of separation is the different branches of Shi'ism that spread all around the world. Even though the Shia community has certain cultural, religious, and historical homogeneity, as in the Ahl Sunnah, there is no unity in Shi'ism. It is divided into various branches. This separation shows itself both in the interpretation of Shi'ism and Islam and in their points of view of politics. From the beginning to the present, many groups have emerged in Shia thought, and all of these have been shaped by unique geographical, cultural, and political phenomena. Even though the Twelvers constitute the vast majority of the Shia, other most essential sub-groups formed under the name of Shia; Zaidiyya, Ismailiyya, Imamiyya, Druzes, Nusayris, Alevis, and Bahais significantly differ from each other in varying countries. These sub-groups have persevered to the present day by revealing their own ideas in different systematic ways. They differ from each other so much that sometimes they do not count one another in Islam, like in the case of how Bahai people were called an apostate and tortured in Iran.

Apart from this, there is a division especially in the Gulf between the Arabian and Iranian originated Shias. For example, the so-called Shia in Bahrain calls themselves

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<sup>241</sup> Fuller, G. E., & Francke, R. R. (1999). *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*. Macmillan.p.19.

*bahirnah* because they engage in maritime activities.<sup>242</sup> Then there are other Shias in Bahrain who came from Iran about 300 years ago, and they see themselves as separate from the *bahirnah*.<sup>243</sup> Not all of the Shias in Saudi Arabia are twelvers; Ismailis and Zaidis live in the provinces on the border of Yemen.<sup>244</sup> The Shias in the Gulf are not only referred to as sectarian identities in terms of their identity, but they consider themselves to be the true inhabitants of the Gulf and call the Gulf as their complementary identity<sup>245</sup>. Therefore, it is not possible for them to come under the direction of Iran with a sectarian identity.

#### **4.3.1.3. Usuli – Akhbari difference**

Second main point of separation is the different understanding of jurisprudences within Shi'ism.. With the disappearance of the twelfth imam, two important schools of thought developed in Shi'a Imamiyyah, Usuli and Akhbari schools, about how the Shia community should find solutions to the fiqh and faith. While Akhbari school is opposed to the concept of *ijtihad* and its implications for religious and social functions of the *ulama*, believing even if the last imam disappeared the problems on fiqh and faith can be solved by the *akhbar* of the tradition, the Usuli school supports the understanding of *ijtihad*, rationalism and the right of the *ulama* to make new decisions on Shi'ism in the changing world and diversified social and political life.<sup>246</sup>

#### **4.3.1.4. Divisions on the role of the Shia ulema**

Linked to this discord, there are differences in the understanding of the role of Shia *ulema* also in politics. Divisions on the role of Shia *ulama* on political life come out in different schools of Najaf and Qum.

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<sup>242</sup> El Marashi, I. (2007), p.11.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., p.23.

<sup>246</sup> Nasr, S. H., Dabashi, H., & Nasr, S. V. R. (Eds.). (1989). *Expectation of the Millennium: Shi'ism in History*. SUNY Press., p.280.

Throughout history, Iraq has been the most prominent religious place for Shias, while Najaf was its center where Shia clergy lived. It is a sacred and important place for Shias since it accommodates the shrine of the first imam, Ali, which gives it a strategically political and religious power. Besides, Najaf has embodied a tradition of Shia scholarship over a thousand years. Before making acquaintance with the modern state in the twentieth century, it was the most favored school by Shia clerics. It also had a semiautonomous status and perceived itself as the principal center of the Shia world.<sup>247</sup>

However, even though its powerful standing, its welfare and autonomy had vanished with the creation of modern Iraqi state under Sunni rule in 1921 and the focus point had started to change towards the city of Qum in Iran. With the Islamic Revolution, this upgrowth of Qum has accelerated. Moreover, as a result of the reservations made by the Ba'ath administration against the Iraqi Shias due to the Iran-Iraq War, the possibilities of Najaf decreased more and the importance of the city of Qum as a madrasa increased even more. Yet, Najaf regained its power after the US invasion and empowered Shia political movement in Iraq. As such, the leading Shi'i cleric Fadlallah in Lebanon had expressed his wishes for Arab Shi'is and revival of Najaf as another Shia center as powerful religious city as Qum that is independent from Iranian dominion and creation of more resilient interpretation of faith.<sup>248</sup>

The main distinction between these two centers, where Shia clergy are trained, is on the political role of the Imam and Shia clerics. The city of Najaf remained unchanged to the traditional idea and argued that clergy did not have a political role. According to Najaf, clergy only deal with spiritual matters and control society in terms of moral values.

On the other hand, the city of Qum follows the custody of Ayatollah Khomeini, Velayet-i Fakih. In other words, the city of Qum claims that clergy have a political

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<sup>247</sup> Nakash, Y. (2007)., p.10.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., p.1.

role in society.<sup>249</sup> After Khomeini, the city of Qum was developed as the education center of Shi'ism, new libraries and training centers were established in the city and electronic resources were utilized. In parallel with these developments, the number of students who came to the city of Qum increased gradually compared to the city of Najaf, and the number of students in Qum for education reached 70 thousand.<sup>250</sup> The next generation of clergy and politicians of the Shia community in the world received education in the city of Qia It provides a great advantage in terms of effective use.

This divergency has led to another discussion on the theory of *Vilayat-e Faqih*(Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist). Majority of top Shia clerics like Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei and his student Ayatollah Ali Sistani do not share the same views with Iranian clerics in regard to political philosophy and theory of *Vilayat-e Faqih*. They do not support the involvement of clergy in political events. such an opinion is opposed to a form of government in which Khomeini advocates the synthesis of politics and religion.<sup>251</sup>

Moreover, The religious authority and influence of Sistani is greater than the influence of Khomeini or his successors on Iraqi Shias. With the turmoil that the US invasion created and in the absence of a unifying leader in Iraq, Grand Ayatollah 'Ali Sistani has emerged as the most revered leader of Iraqi Shi'is. Along with the anti-American leader Ayatollah Khomeini, Sistani's power is also worrisome for current status-quo in the Middle East. Yet, he is against the idea of vilayat-e faqih and he has been reluctant to get directly involved in worldly affairs. He represents the quietist school of thought within Shi'ism. Contrary to Khomeini and modern Iranian Shia understanding of politics, Sistani has accepted the political reality of a modern nation-state led by lay politicians like his mentor, Abu al-Qasim Khoei and he sees Iran's theocracy as a departure from centuries of Shi'i thought and does not advocate that clerics should be the final arbiters of state affairs.<sup>252</sup> Beside Sistani, The other three senior Shi'i clerics

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<sup>249</sup> Rizvi, S. M. (2000). *Shi'ism: Imāmate & Wilāyat*. Al-Ma 'ārif Publications., p.110-111.

<sup>250</sup> Nasr, V. (2007)., p.214-217.

<sup>251</sup> El Marashi, I. (2007)., p.27.

<sup>252</sup> Nakash, Y. (2007)., p.8.

in Najaf—Muhammad Sa‘id al-Hakim, Muhammad Ishaq Fayyad, and Bashir Najafi—have all advocated a similar line.<sup>253</sup>

Sistani has also followed pragmatism in coping with the U.S. presence in Iraq. He insisted on not to take up arms and fight against the U.S. troops. Different from Muqtada Al Sadr and Khomeini, he abstained from insulting the U.S. It may also be a potential danger for Iran that Sistani has an influence on the future role of Iraq and Najaf may be a rival religious center to the one in Qom, Iran.

Muqtada al-Sadr supports of Shia religious leadership that is into political and earthly matters beside mentoring his followers. Fadlallah who died in 2010 also upheld the idea that today’s religious leaders should interfere in the earthly affairs and should be able to answer the daily questions of the Shia.

Moreover, not only the most of the Iranians, also the rest of the Shias do not wish to fall in line behind a supreme leader namely Khamenei and do not recognize him as the preeminent religious leader. The Iranian regime’s current force to encourage Shias to follow Khamenei after the death of Khomeini boosted divisions within the Shia clergy and alienated the secular Shia people throughout the Shia world. This nonrecognition currently militates in favor of Sistani and the clerics around him in Najaf.<sup>254</sup> Furthermore, different social identities between Shias in Iraq and factor of Iraqi nationalism make it impossible for Tehran to export its version of theological government to Iraq.

Perceiving Shia presence in Syria as a part of Shia geopolitics seems even more illusionary than Iraq case. Alawis only constitute 13% of the population in Syria and their minority status and sectarian factionalism between Alawis, Druzes and Twelver Shi’ism limit Iran’s influence. Overwhelming Sunni majority in Syria has showed its resistance in ongoing sectarian civil war of Syria. Moreover, many Shias do not perceive Alawis as a branch of Shi’ism and alliance between Iran and al-Assad administration in Syria is a result of political considerations.

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid, p.7.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p.10.

Situation of Iran's most reliable ally, Hezbollah, also should be analyzed as a minority Shia group in Lebanese multi-ethnic society. Similar to Iraq and Syria cases, Shias in Lebanon are divided to different forces. There are controversies and conflicts between two main Shia groups in Lebanon, the Amal Movement and Hezbollah. Furthermore, trans-regional powers like France have strong influence on Lebanese government structure.

Political, sectarian and ethnic divergences between Shias in Syria and Iraq with Iran and even controversies among Shias in Iraq and in Lebanon show that the Shia crescent as a geopolitical belt cannot be materialized. In other words, although Iran and Shias in Iraq and Lebanon have common interests but this are not overlap with the Shia crescent's interests.

#### **4.3.1.5. Nationalism**

Different from Iranian population that are mostly adherent to Persian language and culture, the Shias in the other parts of the Middle East and especially in the Gulf they share strong kinships in terms of ethnicity and language with the Arab Sunni population. Let alone the modern Shia Islamist ideologies that emerged in the late 1970s, the Shia were strongly affected by Nasserism, Pan-Arabism, third-worldism and socialism, regardless of their sectarian divisions.

Therefore, in the wider Middle East regional system, it can be seen that even if the Shia communities share some resemblances among one another, are also highly divided along a set of two-ringed identity relations of ethno-linguistic differences of Arab and non-Arab, political and ideological differences of secular and religious, social and economic differences of being in the political power and thus rentier classes versus pauperised masses and being minorities within state. For example, Nakash was one of the first researchers to suggest that Shi'ism in Iraq is historically and culturally different from that in Iran.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Nakash, Y. (2003). *The Shi'is of Iraq*. Princeton University Press., p.53.

Moreover, there have also been incidents proving that nationalism and loyalty to the state are more important than adherence to sects. In the aftermath of the Islamic revolution, the Shias in Iraq did not revolt as expected. During the Iran-Iraq War, Iraqi Shias formed the majority of Iraqi infantry. During the war in Basra, an Iraqi Shia general was responsible for the defense of the city.<sup>256</sup>

Another indicator shows Iran follows a realist foreign policy in its relations with Azerbaijan. With the nationalist movements that increased towards the collapse of the Soviets, the groups defending Azerbaijani nationalism gained strength in the newly established Azerbaijan with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Following the events with Armenia, Ebulfeyz Elchibey from Azerbaijani nationalists was elected president in 1992.<sup>257</sup> Elchibey, who defended the idea of a “United Azerbaijan” which consists of Nagorno-Karabakh, South and North Azerbaijan as a whole; tried to disseminate these ideas during Soviet times and even convicted and imprisoned in 1975 with the accusation of nationalism.<sup>258</sup> He was a secular and following an idea to reviving the country’s relations with Turkic countries especially with Turkey; changed the Cyrillic alphabet and tried to end the Russian influence by closing its bases in Azerbaijan.

Therefore, Azerbaijan has become a security threat for regional countries like Iran and Russia. Especially for Iran, a secular, nationalist Azerbaijan was a threat also for its internal politics; especially when Elchibey insisted that Iran will be fragmented considering Iran's multi-ethnic population; and a united Azerbaijan will be created which also includes the Azeris within Iran.<sup>259</sup>

Within the fluctuating relationship between the two states, Iran, which thinks that Azerbaijan will not abandon Azerbaijani nationalism and exhibit irredentist policies has resorted to various foreign policies in order not to be affected by this wave of nationalism.

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<sup>256</sup> El Marashi, İ. (2007)., p.26.

<sup>257</sup> Türkeş, M., & Uzgel, İ. (2002). Türkiye’nin komşuları. *İmge Kitapevi, Ankara.*, p.309-313.

<sup>258</sup> Akdevelioğlu, A. (2004)., p.148.

<sup>259</sup> Cafersoy, N. (2001). *Elçibey dönemi Azerbaycan dış politikası (Haziran 1992-Haziran 1993): bir bağımsızlık mücadelesinin diplomatik öyküsü*. ASAM, Avrasya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi Yayınları., p.114-115.



They supported Armenia underhand in the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia; but in rhetoric, they stated that they condemn Armenian aggressive actions and support Azerbaijan. On the other hand, Iran wanted to eliminate Elchibey and other nationalists by supporting the opponents of the Popular Front with Elchibey together with Russia.<sup>260</sup> They also supported the Speaker of the Parliament of the Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan Heydar Aliyev and other possible competitors<sup>261</sup>; which in the end led Aliyev became president and Elchibey to resign and fled to Nakhchivan.

However, Iran thought that this problem would emerge in the future again and tried to hinder a permanent solution to the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, thinking that Azerbaijan would get distracted from Azeris in Iran and could concentrate on Armenian issue. Iran also thought that it could have influence over this problem in both countries due to its important geopolitical position.<sup>262</sup>

Iran also had problems with Azerbaijan regarding the sharing and use of the Caspian Sea. Iran has taken a stance of preventing a solution on the status of the Caspian and on transporting Azerbaijani oil to the West.<sup>263</sup>

As it can be seen, in the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict, Iran has pursued realist policies regardless of religious affinities. Instead of supporting Azerbaijan, whose population is mostly Shia, Iran helped Armenia and still having good relations with it. It is an indication that Iran can overlook religious, sectarian identities as soon as its national interests are in danger. From time to time, Iran use regional Shias in their own interests, but it may overlook Shi'ism when an event contradicts with its interests.

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<sup>260</sup> Akdevelioğlu, A. (2004)., p.149.

<sup>261</sup> Cafersoy, N. (2001)., p.116.

<sup>262</sup> Aras, B. (1999). Amerika-Orta Asya İlişkileri ve İran'ın Konumu. *Avrasya Dosyası*, 5(3), 238., p.173.

<sup>263</sup> Akdevelioğlu, A. (2004)., p.150.

#### 4.3.2. The realistic interests of Iran

Beside these divergences, the activities of the Islamic Republic cannot be decontextualized from the Sunni sectarianist extremism in the Middle East. Iran, as a counter-discourse, believes that its Sunni neighbours have been promoting the rise of Sunni extremism. Withing this sectarian regional politics, Iran believes it is compelled to support the opposition groups which are mostly Shia.

Apart from this, the biggest opposition to the Shia crescent discourse is that this concept is not a Shia one, and the Shias do not define themselves in this way. To give an example, it is true that Hezbollah is a political entity including Syria and Iran, however, this represents the anti-Israeli front rather than a Shia alliance and includes the Sunni HAMAS. These alliances can be defined as radicals against moderate Arab states that accept having good relationship with the US and Israel, more than being Shia axis.<sup>264</sup>

Within this context, some scholars like Martin Kramer<sup>265</sup>, think that with the July 2006 War as the third stage in the fight against Israel, the Arab-Israeli conflict started to have Islamist fundamentals.<sup>266</sup> Even though Islamism has always existed in the anti-Israel struggle, its role in this struggle was mostly a supportive buttress. While Israel was on the way of making peace talks with Palestinians and other Arab states in the 1990s, Islamists were also gaining new strength. Iran's Islamist and anti-Israel policy, HAMAS's majority in the elections held in Palestine in 2006 made Islamists seat at the leadership in the fight against Israel. This Islamist coalition brought together different segments such as HAMAS, Hezbollah and Iran. Yet, since the majority of this coalition is Shia, some Sunni Arab states see this coalition as a threat to themselves as well as to Israel. According to Martin Kramer, what is seen as this Shia axis is in fact

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<sup>264</sup> Sinkaya, B. (2007)., p. 49

<sup>265</sup> Kramer, M. (2007). Israel vs. The New Islamist Axis'. *The Middle East Review of International Relations*, 11., p. 13-16.

<sup>266</sup> In the first phase (1948-73), there was Arab nationalism against Israel and the Arab countries were attacking Israel together. In the second phase (1973-2004), the Arab-Israeli problem turned into the Israeli-Palestinian problem and the Palestinian militant groups carried out the anti-Israel struggle. In the third stage, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict turned into an Israeli-Islamist conflict.

a result of the Islamist alliance and coalition that emerged as a result of anti-Israel in the Middle East. This coalition brought together different segments such as HAMAS, Hizbullah and Iran.<sup>267</sup>

Moreover, Iran is far from being sectarian since it does not want to create powerful Shia communities around itself. As Ray Takeyh points out, in the long term Iranian leaders are not interested in seeing another replica of the Islamic Republic in Iraq. Nor do they seek to turn Iraq's two main Shia political organizations, SCIRI and the Dawa, into surrogates of Iran. Instead, they hope that the promotion of Shia parties will provide them with a suitable interlocutor and will result in the emergence of voices who are willing to engage with Iran. This pragmatic policy is most evident between the relations Iran and Sistani. Unlike Iran's ruling clerics, Sistani rejects the notion of direct clerical involvement in politics.<sup>268</sup> So there is a pragmatic alliance with Iraqi Shias. By that, Iran can transform its traditional rivalry with Iraq into a relationship on balance of interests. For Kamrava its policy with Iraq is a stable Iraq that not being used by the US as a base for attacking Iran.<sup>269</sup>

#### **4.3.3. Democratic wishes of the Shia societies**

Contrary to Iran that over eighty percent of its population consists of Shi'is and having Shi'ism as the state religion, in the rest of the Middle East the Shia have been suppressed and dominated by mainly Sunni governments and sometimes even Christians like in Lebanon until the mid-1970s. Shias have been the underdogs from Pakistan to Lebanon, a voiceless minority in Muslim societies except Iran. When the balance of power is not fair and need to be adjusted social and political unrests emerge with a reproach to ruling elites.

The Gulf states, consisting of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and Yemen, are composed of autocratic regimes with Sunni

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<sup>267</sup> Kramer, M. (2007), p.13-16.

<sup>268</sup> Kamrava, M. (2011), p.202.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

governments and Shias in these countries have been ignored for many years.<sup>270</sup> The most important Shia population in terms of density is in Bahrain with 70%. Zaydis, a branch of Shi'ism, has a population ratio of 35% in Yemen. In Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE there are between 15% and 30% Shia population. Although there is a 5-10% low rate in Saudi Arabia, Shias live in regions with significant oil resources. As Nakash demonstrates, Shias have raised concern about their citizenship concerns.<sup>271</sup> In the Persian Gulf, especially Bahraini Shias even though they live in Bahrain for centuries, they are known as *bidun* (those who are lack of citizenship), their rights are denied and they are placed in the bottom of the social scale.<sup>272</sup>

Shias in countries such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain were excluded from the military from the bureaucracy, and although they lived in places where the oil was dense, they could not benefit equally from the oil revenues.<sup>273</sup> After the agelong repression and being maltreated, the political upheavals and changes like the Iranian Revolution, Iraqi invasion of the US and finally the Arab upheavals, reenergized the Shias in the whole region. They have gained self-awareness for their rights and started to call for reforms within their own countries. In many middle eastern countries like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Lebanon and Iraq, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century up until now, even though Shias share mostly the same language and history, they have not shared the same opportunities that Sunni citizens obtained within their own state and therefore criticized the legitimacy of the Sunni-led governments.

The main problem for the Saudi Shia minority, which constitutes around eight percent of the country's population in Saudi Arabia, is the religiously discriminatory administration implemented by Sunni rulers and state clergy. Saudi Shias generally

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<sup>270</sup> Ze'evi, D. (2007). The Present Shia-Sunna Divide: Remaking Historical Memory. *Crown Center For Middle East Studies*, April., p.3.

<sup>271</sup> Nakash, Y. (2007)., p.69.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Assiri, A.-R. (2019). *Kuwait's Foreign Policy: City-state In World Politics* (1 edition). Routledge., p.67.

live in Hasa, the eastern province of the country, and it is of strategic importance for Sunni rulers, as it is an oil-intensive region.

In the 18th century, the Saudi rulers adopted the Salafi, Wahhabi branch of Sunnism as the identity of the state. The Sunni conservative monarchy, religiously and politically, imposed strict restrictions on the movement of Shias within the country from religious practices. Moreover, in accordance with Wahhabi thought, Shi'ism and thus the Shia citizen are labeled infidel and extremist, All of this has caused Shias living in the country to feel excluded and second-class citizens in their own countries.

Likewise, in Bahrain, the Shias remain as second citizens under a Sunni ruling family, al-Khalifa, despite they constitute about 70 percent of the country's population. They are fighting for legal reforms and the parliamentary system. Apart from this, a large part of Bahrain workforce is composed of foreign employers, which causes the Shia population to become unemployed and become impoverished, resulting in economic and political tensions. In many protests for the amendment of the constitution and democratic rights, they walked side by side with the Sunnis.<sup>274</sup> However, the Sunni ruling al Khalifa family in Bahrain consulted sectarianism to divide the opposition and injected hatred between people. Gulf monarchies exaggerated the influence of Iran in the current upheavals and conflicts and tried to mobilized Sunni people.

Discomfort of Shia population has made a challenge in the Middle East and mostly in the Persian Gulf monarchies beside Shia dominated Bahrain and the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia like Hasa. In Yemen the Houthi movement evolved because of the state corruption and discrimination. The Houthi movement expressed its main political goals as more democratic and non-sectarian rule, combating poverty and economic under-development, and political marginalization in the country.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> El Marashi, I. (2007).

<sup>275</sup> Juneau, T. (2016). Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: a limited return on a modest investment. *International Affairs*, 92(3), p.647-663.

In order to suppress these reasonable protests and to justify the pressure on the people, the Sunni Gulf monarchies created a conspiracies and interpreted what was happening as Iran's provocation of the Shias. They went even further, using the clergy in his country to denounce Shi'ism and Iran.<sup>276</sup>

Likewise, Saudi Arabia has brought sectarian identity difference to the fore and provoked people, by asserting that Iran used sectarian identity in the Middle East. Anti-Shia propaganda has been made in the media. For example, a Shia cleric, who is important in Saudi Arabia like Nimr al-Nimr, was executed by state, many anti-Shia TV channels are located in the country and Shia people and clerics are tried to be intimidated.<sup>277</sup> Thus, the social and political unrest is securitized under a Shia/Iran threat and Saudi Arabia tried to establish itself as the main defender of the Sunnis in the Gulf and throughout the Middle East. While Saudi Arabia supports the uprisings in Iraq and Syria, it not only opposes the uprisings in Bahrain and Yemen, but rather intervened militarily.

Moreover, Shias also found their power to revolt on Qur'an, the history of the prophet and especially Hussein's fight against injustice.<sup>278</sup> The Shias see themselves as persecuted and whose rights are seized by dictators. This current right of usurpation and unjust administration are likened to the war in Karbala and the subsequent unfortunate events. Similar to the thoughts of Ali Shariati's revolutionary Shi'ism in the Islamic Revolution, The Shias as either mariginal minority or ignored and underdogged majority in countries like Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, or Kuwait; their identity became powerful with the political experience, social isolation, cultural heritage and communal grievance against injustice and political and religious marginalization.<sup>279</sup> This is the reason why Nasr blames the Salafi Sunni movements which make the

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<sup>276</sup> Ismail, R. (2016). *Saudi Clerics and Shi'a Islam*. Oxford University Press., p.45.

<sup>277</sup> *Sectarianism after the Saudi mosque bombings—The Washington Post*. (n.d.). Retrieved 21 March 2019, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/29/sectarianism-after-the-saudi-mosque-bombings/>

<sup>278</sup> Fuller, G. E., & Francke, R. R. (1999)., p.27.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31.

region “Sunnified” and showing Shi’ism as a defiant, heretic sect<sup>280</sup>, and he sees this strife of Shias is benign and sees political Shi’ism as a counter-balance for Sunni extremism and jihadist activism in the Middle East.<sup>281</sup>

In this context, it can be said that Shias do not pursue anti-system aims in the region. After Iranian Revolution of 1979, Shias generally has been perceived as uncompromising anti-systemic forces in the Middle East. However, Shias are minorities struggling for their rights in states rather than against the state<sup>5</sup>. Despite the idea that the Shia crescent was attempted to be created, there is no evidence that the Shias in the Gulf and the Middle East have a similar ambition to create this crescent. It can be seen that the Shias demand democratic rights from the state, they are not against the state. Juan Cole suggested that, “on closer examination... it seems obvious that Shia activism in the late twentieth century had the practical effect of integrating Shias more closely into the post-colonial nations in which they found themselves”<sup>282</sup>. When all these facts are analyzed, it is seen that sectarianism is used as a ruling strategy, as a political tool for securitization. Actually, Gregory Gause’s idea of New Middle East Cold War is right; the sectarianist narrative is used from time to time by Saudi Arabia and Iran for their interest against the other; which stresses it is emerging as proxy war and regional rivalry has taken an artificial form of Sunni-Shiite conflict.

#### **4.3.4. Securitization of sectarian identities via discourses**

To understand what exactly the Shia crescent discourse is, it should be questioned that why it would be coined and for whom the idea could be a useful political tool.

The Iraq War in 2003 has profoundly changed the regional balances and politics in the Middle East. By overthrowing Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Arab Nationalist, and ostensibly giving power to Iraq's Shia majority, the US helped to launch a broad Shia revival that was thought to overturn the sectarian balance in Iraq. This upset of power

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<sup>280</sup> Nasr, V. (2007)., p.107.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., p.179.

<sup>282</sup> Cole, J. (2002)., p.186, and Dijkink, G. (2006). When geopolitics and religion fuse: a historical perspective. *Geopolitics*, 11(2), p.200.

balance in Iraq created a possibility to change in pro status-quo sectarian equilibrium in the region. Vali Nasr's predictions of a new Middle East, which would emerge from the Iraq War will be more Shia, if not democratic, have reflected these fears.<sup>283</sup>

The monarch spoke just on the eve of the first parliamentary elections in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, paraphrasing British journalist David Hirst, the Arab world was trembling at the prospect of seeing Shias inherit the rule Iraq.<sup>284</sup> Like other Sunni Arab leaders, in the mind of King Abdullah, the problem was not that Iraq falls into the hands of Shias, but that it could strengthen a sect they perceive, above all, as the official ideology of Islamic Republic of Iran and the privileged instrument by which it establishes its regional influence. In this context, any Shia is potentially an Iranian agent, a Shia government in Baghdad means a satelliteization of Iraq by Iran, and any form of Shia strengthening on the political or religious level is equivalent to an increase of Iranian influence. Indeed, the "Shia crescent" was used in an interview centered on the question of Iran's influence in Iraq in which the King Abdullah denounced Iran's interference in the Iraqi electoral process and declared himself convinced that the Iran was doing everything possible to establish a Shia-led Islamic republic in Baghdad.

Within this context, the Shia crescent discourse is intended to capture how Iran exerts its influence in the Middle East. However, it is also the most useful for an analysis, in that it reveals the mental frameworks of the Sunni Arab leaders on comprehension of Iran and Shi'ism, more than how it says Iran's increasing influence in the Middle East. The Shia crescent discourse is generally suggested by a certain mass. Arab Sunni Elites, Israel and the US, which oppose Iran's growing power in the region, are leading this environment.

First of all, the US perceives a security threat to its national interests in the region, with the suspicion that the political power that will fill the political vacuum emptied

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<sup>283</sup> Nasr, V. (2006). When the Shiites Rise. *Foreign Affairs*, 85(4), p.59.

<sup>284</sup> *As Shiites inherit Iraq, the Arab world trembles* / Opinion , Commentary / *THE DAILY STAR*. (n.d.). Retrieved 21 February 2019, from <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/2005/Jan-27/96200-as-shiites-inherit-iraq-the-arab-world-trembles.ashx>



by the collapse of Saddam's regime in Iraq will be affected by Iranian influence and that Iran will increase its power in the region in this way. The US does not want any power in the region to create regional supremacy to maintain the balance of power in the Middle East, Persian Gulf and the Levant.

At the same time, the strengthening of Iran in the region means that it will have a more weighted and powerful role in decision-making on the region's politics and future. For example, a possible balance of power change in favor of Iran means that Iran's hand will be stronger in agreements on critical issues such as international energy security, oil prices, or Iran's nuclear program.<sup>285</sup>

For Israel as one of the ancient allies of the US in the Middle East, is worried that Iran, which is strongly opposed to itself, will be strengthened in the region, especially because of its influence in Lebanon, and after the war against Hezbollah in 2006, and would provoke Islamist organizations and boost and increase their actions even more against it.

The other part that perceives the development of Iran's regional power as a threat is Sunni Arab Elites, which govern many countries in the Middle East such as al-Khalifa, al Saud and al-Sabah families. The fact that Shias, especially those in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain, where they are in the majority or in strategic locations, is a concern that the Shia population will affect the internal security of GCC countries. The Al-Khalifa family in Bahrain is suspected of Shias in Bahrain developing relations with Iran.<sup>286</sup> One third of the eastern province of Saudi Arabia is Shi'a, and the largest oil well is in the al-Hasa province, where the Shias live in this region.<sup>287</sup>

As Ramazani says the world's oil center has also become a Shia center.<sup>288</sup> The fact that more than two-thirds of the world's oil lives by Shias, that the Gulf is almost a Shia

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<sup>285</sup> Barzegar, K. (2008). Iran and the Shiite crescent: Myths and realities. *Brown J. World Aff.*, 15, p.91.

<sup>286</sup> Momen, M. (1985). *An introduction to Shi'i Islam: The history and doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*. Yale University Press., p.452.

<sup>287</sup> Cole, J. R., & Keddie, N. R. (Eds.). (1986). , p.230.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., p.30.

Gulf, not only makes the Shia crescent idea the internal problem of these countries, but also this is also of great importance for the future of regional oil supply. For this reason, it attracts international actors, especially us, to regional politics.

All of these are perceived by the above actors as a development that threatens the regional and international status quo and security. But the most important point here is that none of the above perceptions of threats are ideological threats. Traditionally these actors are in line with each other and cooperate together in the region. So any damage on one of means a weakening of this security ring.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

The regional and international actors in the Middle East, like the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia and other conservative Arab regimes seem to be concerned about the increase of Iran's power and therefore its influence in the region. The spread of revolutionary or "Khomeinist" ideas and particularly, as Cole says, "they are concerned about Khomeini's claim that "Islam is incompatible with the monarchy" have been making the monarchies under security threat. Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said in his speech to the Foreign Relations Commission that he accused Iran of interfering with Iraqi affairs: "Washington and Riyadh fought together to keep Iran out of Iraq after Iraq was expelled from Kuwait. Now we give the whole country to Iran for no reason."<sup>289</sup> What actually happened is the use of Sunni radical Islam to counterbalancing Iran's power by the Sunni authoritarian regimes with a perceived threat. They have been resorting to sectarianism against their own security threat perceptions.

To sum, politics is made sectarianized by regional and international actors like the Gulf Arab monarchs, Iran and Israel to consolidate their regimes, and for geopolitical competitions for power by creating an image of protector of one specific sect. It can be seen that this rivalry is not an ideological and sectarian contest. On the contrary it is a power sharing conflict by contesting states within both low and high politics, in which

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<sup>289</sup> Cole, J. (2006), p.24.

sectarian relations are used from time to time just like many other factors but not more important than them.

In the next chapter, Iranian foreign policy will be examined through one case; Syrian Civil war to understand to what extent the idea of sectarianism help to explain Iranian foreign policy and the conflict.

## CHAPTER 5

### SECTARIANISM IN SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

Since its beginning, the Syrian crisis has been an existential crisis for Iran, equivalent to the regime's survival for Iran's elite.<sup>290</sup> This brings the question to mind; why has Assad's regime been so crucial for Iran, and why it contributes so much on the ground to support the al-Assad regime. Answering this question may shed light on the extent to which sectarianism affects Iran's foreign policy.

Even though Iran foreign policy and support for the al-Assad regime is explained by some sectarian discourses like Shia Crescent or Axis of Resistance, many factors influence Iranian foreign policy towards the Syrian crisis. To shed light on sectarianism arguments, this chapter will explain first, the non-sectarian context of the Syrian war and then the Iran-Syria relations. Sectarian discourses to explain the reasons for the conflicts and the role of the Islamic Republic have helped both authoritarianism and external involvements to survive in these multi-ethnic, cross-sectarian countries. In this section, Iran-Syria relations are examined to have a better understanding of Iran's Syria policy, and the scope and reasons of Iran's support to the Syrian administration will be analysed.

#### 5.1. Background of the Syrian civil war

The Arab Uprisings quickly spread all over the Middle East with a domino effect. Partly in response to rising prices on essential food items, but more deeply to a combination of economic desperation, stagnation, corruption, unemployment, authoritarianism, official abuse, and a blocked political order and nepotism; these uprisings set in motion some transformative hopes. In general, these upheavals derived from the need for a legitimate rule in the Middle East. However, over time with the

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<sup>290</sup> Şen, G. (2014). Ruhani Döneminde İran'ın 'Suriye Savaşı' ve Diplomatik Çözüm Arayışları. *Ortadoğu Analiz*, 6(63), 66–69.

external interference hope gave its place to bloody conflicts, the spread of radical Islamist terrorism, human rights abuses, injustice, and excessive use of force by regimes and not the least to sectarian violence.

While in some countries like Tunisia and Egypt, upheavals left their places to a struggle between religious and secular forces; in other countries like Syria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, the battle took a sectarian character. The interventions of both state and non-state actors in the Syria crisis and the sectarian narrative of the conflict are considered to be representative of a wider Sunni-Shia conflict by some academic circles and make the current crisis as a revelatory case for this study.

Nusayris, one of the sub-branches of Shi'ism, constitute about 12% of the population in Syria and the most populous group after the Sunnis.<sup>291</sup> The Nusayri population, generally living in the vicinity of Latakia, has seemingly gained significant social, economic and political strength following Hafez al-Assad's accession to power in 1970 and followed by his son, Bashar al-Assad. This system led to disputes on sectarianism in Syria as the main reason for the conflict.

However, the reasons cannot be explained purely with the sectarian policies of the regime. The conflict in Syria should be understood by examining state formation and agency-structure relations in Syria.<sup>292</sup> With the Western imperial imposition of the regional states system helped to the creation of "artificial" states, which were later going to be challenged by trans-state identities, disrupted the organic structure of the societies.<sup>293</sup> To maintain and strengthen his power in the newly established weak state, Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, placed people of Nusayri origin at essential levels of the administration, especially in places such as intelligence, army, and security.

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<sup>291</sup> Phillips, C. (2015)., p.357.

<sup>292</sup> Hinnebusch, R. (2019). What Went Wrong: Understanding the Trajectory of Syria's Conflict. In Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War (pp. 29-52). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham., p.30.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., p.31.

Therefore, the regime relied on the neo-patrimonial ruling, in which some Alawite tribes were used to create a safe core around a patrimonial leader.<sup>294</sup> Moreover, resources were not shared with all Alawites<sup>295</sup> and the governmental organizations and economic initiatives were based on an extensive mechanism that was compromised of cross-sectarian alliances, which was the reason why some Sunnis did not attend protests.<sup>296</sup> The most salient economic reason was Bashar al-Assad's number of political and economic liberal reforms. Just like in other countries, social welfare programs of the Baath party failed and only exacerbated the struggle on reaching public resources, increased social injustice, and tensions in society.<sup>297</sup>

Alongside these non-sectarian reasons, the opposition was non-sectarian, decentralized, local, and motivated by national goals.<sup>298</sup> It was composed of different segments of the society from a disenfranchised middle class, deprived countryside, liberals, intellectuals to the pro-change youth.<sup>299</sup>

Therefore, the conflict and its reasons should not be reduced to a simple sectarian hatred and discrimination between two people. It originates from a deep-rooted, multi-faceted environment that includes many socio-economic and political causes, and also from the state structure made in good part by Western powers and the state-building of the Ba'athist regime.

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., p.32.

<sup>295</sup> Phillips, C. (2015)., p.364.

<sup>296</sup> Hinnebusch, R. (2019)., p.32 and Phillips, C. (2015)., p.361.

<sup>297</sup> Hinnebusch, R. (2019)., p.30.

<sup>298</sup> Wehrey, F. M. (Ed.). (2017)., p.62.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p.61-62.

## **5.2. Iran's foreign policy towards the Syrian civil war**

Initially, Iran had supported the Arab Uprisings by calling them an "Islamic awakening", and tried to find possible opportunities of developing relations with these countries, such as with Egypt or insurgent groups in Bahrain and Yemen. However, when the domino effect spread unrest into Syria, beginning with peaceful demonstrations in March 2011, the subsequent degeneration into an atrocious civil, and ultimately proxy, war with the involvement of regional and international forces, Iran's attitude reversed. Iran has not strayed from supporting Assad and has even played a highly active role in the conflict by utilising all political, military, and economical means available.<sup>300</sup> It criticised the external interference, opposed the internationalization of this insurgency, and argued that the problems of the region should be solved within the area. It has not seen the anti-regime demonstrations in Syria as the demand for democratization, but as the desire of the Gulf States, the US and Israel to isolate Iran by removing the Assad regime and replacing it with puppet governments.

By some specific scholars and media commentators, especially the US and Sunni Arab world's mainstream or state-funded institutions, have created an image that the shared Shia identity makes Iran and Syria allies.<sup>301</sup> However, Iran's close relationship with the Assad regime is not a sectarian but a strategic one based on common interests.

### **5.2.1. Reasons for Iran standing behind the al-Assad regime**

Firstly, Iran's geopolitical position plays a fundamental role in shaping its relations with Syria. Syria is an essential part of Iran's defense strategy as well as an ally in the Middle East. This alliance evolved and consolidated through mutual defensive interests.<sup>302</sup> They see each other as vital political partners in the region. Syria shares its borders with Lebanon, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, and Turkey, which have no good

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<sup>300</sup> Sinkaya, B. (2017). İran'ın Suriye Stratejisi. *Akademik Orta Doğu*, 11(2), p.51.

<sup>301</sup> Akbarzadeh, S. (2016). Why does Iran need Hizbullah?. *The Muslim World*, 106(1), p.135.

<sup>302</sup> Goodarzi, J. M. (2009). *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic alliance and power politics in the Middle East*. IB Tauris. p.216.

relations with Iran, and any change of power will directly affect the Middle East policies of these countries. In particular, Iran perceives a threat from the possible future of Syria. Any possibility of an opponent group's accession to power might threaten the interests of Iran. The fact that the opposition parties to the Assad administration in Syria are quite distant from Iran but close to its rivals makes Iran think that its efforts will be wasted on any change of power. Any damage to the al-Assad ally of Iran would harm its defense strategy. In this context, the importance Iran attaches to Syria in its foreign policy is too great to be ignored.

Beside this geopolitical alliance, the good relations between two regimes dates back to the Islamic Revolution. There have been close relations between Tehran and Damascus since the inception of the Islamic Republic that has continued and evolved steadily, constituted a strong alliance over the years. This alliance evolved as a response to a series of events and developments, notably the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the US involvement in the region.

When the Iranian revolution happened in 1979 and the regime has changed, the Syrian regime was almost alone on opposing Israel since, at those times, Egypt made a peace agreement with Israel.<sup>303</sup> The joint security threat of these two countries against Israel strengthened their alliance.<sup>304</sup> The new regime's anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist political stance gave hope to Syria. Therefore, Syria was contented by the overthrow of Shah's regime, which had good relations with the US and Israel, and the creation of the opposite regime in Iran. Additionally, both shared antagonisms toward Zionism, imperialism and US policy in the region, which aligned them closely ideologically.<sup>305</sup> Therefore, it was the common political stances on these issues rather than the Alawi/Shia orientation of Syrian elites.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Sinkaya, B. (2011). İran-Suriye İlişkileri ve Suriye’de Halk İsyanı. *Ortadoğu Analiz*, 3(33), p.39.

<sup>304</sup> Alavi, S. A. (2019). *Iran and Palestine: past, present, future*. Routledge., p.128.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., p.128.

<sup>306</sup> Sariolghalam, M. (2007)., p.202.



Moreover, Syria became one of the few countries that supported Iran in the Iran-Iraq war. It was a crucial decision for Syria considering that the rest of the Arab states were behind Iraq. It closed the trans-Syrian pipelines that help to export the oil of Iraq, which was highly crucial for Iraq.<sup>307</sup> Beside that Syria also contributed to the transfers of the Eastern Bloc's weapons to Iran.<sup>308</sup> However, the reason for Syria's support for Iran during the Iraq-Iran War was not the fact that Iran had Shia population or ideology, but because of the tension with the Iraqi Baath regime. Both states got isolated in the region. Behind the support of Iran, there is concern that a victorious Iraq against Iran will threaten Syria as well. Moreover, in return to the help that Syria gave, Iran gave subsidized oil from Iran, which continues still today.<sup>309</sup>

Yet here it is worth to consider that "Assad's pro-Iranian policy grew partly out of strategic calculations regarding the balance of power with Israel, not just a personal animosity against Saddam"<sup>310</sup> Their strategic interests in the region made them an ally. Increase on the power of Israel and pro-Western Arab monarchies, their backing of Sunni Islamist insurgency, their political standing against the US hegemony and disproportional status-quo in the region boosted both Iran and Syria to become a regional ally to balance the power in the Middle East. The vital common interests of the Syrian-Iranian alliance were "common opposition to Iraq, Israel and Western hegemony in the region, but also the elite ideology and the general utility of the alliance in the regional power balance are additional factors broadly supportive of it."<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Akbarzadeh, S., & Conduit, D. (Eds.). (2016). *Iran in the World: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy*. Springer., p.134.

<sup>308</sup> Sinkaya, B. (2011)., p.34.

<sup>309</sup> Sadjadpour, K. (2013, August 27). *Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace., Retrieved on 3 April 2019, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/08/27/iran-s-unwavering-support-to-assad-s-syria-pub-52779>

<sup>310</sup> Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997). Syria and Iran. Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System. *London and New York: Routledge.*, p.95.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid. , p.88.

Another incident that made Iran and Syria closer was the occupation of Lebanon by Israel in 1982 and the emergence of Hezbollah. Syria and Iran both supported Palestinian groups like Hezbollah. Syria led IRGC to pass over its lands to Lebanon to give training to militants against Israel, which helped to the creation of Hezbollah.<sup>312</sup> Syria has also become a route for Iran to support resistance organizations and other non-state actors that affect regional politics deeply.<sup>313</sup> An element of rivalry between Iran and Syria overshadowed the alliance in Lebanon. However, Syria still found the Iranian alliance essential to maintain pressure on the "security zone" in the South of Lebanon.<sup>314</sup> "The dramatic effectiveness of the Iranian-sponsored Islamic resistance in Lebanon and the shared support for Hizbullah and Palestine resistance movements empowered Iran-Syria ties."<sup>315</sup>

Both Iran and Syria are able to wield power and influence in the region, particularly in the Levant. Syria is, therefore, a crucial ally along the Israeli border and a bridge to Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon. Any shift in the political power of these countries is of strategic importance for Iran. Iran knows well that Assad's Syria, a historically reliable ally, plays a crucial role in this policy. Any damage to Assad's regime would affect Iran's defense strategy adversely. As Alavi rightly states, "...it was against such a background of anti-Zionism that the Iranian leadership pursued a supportive policy towards the Syrian regime and backed Damascus during the Syria crisis."<sup>316</sup>

This strategic importance of Syria for Iran as a pathway to support Palestinians might present Iran's foreign policy motivations as primarily being support for Islamist movements in the region, its Islamist ideology, its fight for Palestine and its support for Islamist resistance movements and non-state actors on military, economic and political bases. However, first, even though, Iran's assertive anti-zionist policy was not

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<sup>312</sup> Alavi, S. A. (2019), p.129.

<sup>313</sup> Sinkaya, B. (2011), p.40.

<sup>314</sup> Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997), p.90.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid. P.129.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid. p.131.

rational, but due to its Islamist ideology, it is explicit that Iran did not follow a sectarian policy. It has always supported Sunni Palestinians and related Sunni-populated non-state actors like Islamic Jihad and HAMAS. Second, even the Palestinian issue is a gate for Iran to access to the Islamic world to introduce itself to Islamic communitarianism. Iran sees that to prove to the Islamic community that it is non-sectarian and to be accepted in the Sunni world, it should support Palestinians. Iran cannot ignore the most critical issue for the Muslim world because it gives legitimacy to the existence of the Islamic regime, and its another gate to expend its hegemony in the region.<sup>317</sup> This policy shows that Iran, regardless of sectarian identity, is open to cooperation with any kind of state and non-state actors in the region.

Therefore, linked to this hegemonic policy, another reason of Iran's interference in Syria can be explained with "Iran's historical egoism" in which Iran's strong sense of identity leading to this leadership idea in the regional issues.<sup>318</sup> The understanding of regional leadership as a tendency of the Iranian elite's view of the Middle East is a fact that is influential in Iran's Middle East policy. Seeing Iran as the continuation of ancient civilizations, being in the place that connects the continents, Iran's strong position in the Persian Gulf forces Iran to trust itself in this matter.<sup>319</sup> Iran also asserts that it could lead the countries in the region by being a model for other Middle Eastern peoples with its religious democracy model. However, the same idea was put forward for Turkey as it can be a role model for other Middle Eastern countries in terms of having both Islam and democracy. Iran's regional policy stems from its desire to become a regional power, which can defend any realist policy and its desire to become a regional power goes back to ancient history, it is not related to Shi'ism.

The strategic partnership of Iran and Syria with their political standing against the US, Israel, and Arab monarchies strengthened their political and military alliance. They

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<sup>317</sup> Alavi, S. A. (2019).,p.129.

<sup>318</sup> Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997)., p.78.

<sup>319</sup> Chubin, S. (2000). Iran's Strategic Predicament. *Middle East Journal*, 54(1), p.15.

positioned themselves as the "Axis of Resistance".<sup>320</sup> This axis was believed to be an Iran-led alliance and encompassed the state and non-state actors that were against of status-quo by the ones who think they are against the Western, the US, and Israel's interests; Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and other resistant Shia groups. Therefore, as Supreme leader Khamanei proclaimed in 2012 that "Iran supports the Syrian regime because Syria is a crucial component of the 'axis of resistance' against Israel. Iran is against any kind of interference in Syria by western forces." <sup>321</sup>

Apart from that, Iranian elites never highlight its Shia identity in interference in the Syria war. The reason for taking side with the Assad administration in the war is explained with the fight against terrorism. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif stated that in its exquisite foreign relations, especially in its relations with the Western powers, there should be a coordinated effort on Syria, and that there should be a joint struggle against extremist Islamist groups such as ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, at the time Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, or Ahrar al-Sham another Salafi group that emerged with the chaos in the Middle East. Also Amir-Abdollahian, the Iranian Foreign Minister's former deputy in charge of the Arab countries, said that the biggest issue of the Syrian issue is terrorism and that the international community should have the fight against terrorism in Syria.<sup>322</sup>

In this respect, Iran has made many attempts with the countries that it opposes on the civil war in Syria. In September 2012, a quad-dialogue group was formed by Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. However, Saudi Arabia soon left the group and the group became meaningless.

When a nuclear agreement was reached with Iran in July 2015, and Western countries started to consider Iran as a regional power, they were invited to an international

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<sup>320</sup> Akbarzadeh, S., & Conduit, D. (Eds.). (2016)., p.134.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid. , p.136.

<sup>322</sup> Abdollahian, H.-A. (2014, March 5). *Iran's four-part plan for a political solution in Syria*. Al-Monitor. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/iran-four-part-plan-political-solution-syria.html>

meeting in Vienna in October 2015 in the hope of finding a solution to the Syrian crisis. As a result, he became a member of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), to restore the ceasefire in Syria and accelerate the political transition process. Besides, in December 2016, it was party to the Moscow Declaration, together with Russia and Turkey, and taken its place in Astana Peace Process.

### **5.2.2. Securitization of the conflict**

The hegemonic rivalry among other states, especially with Saudi Arabia is another reason for the partnership with Syria. Current developments in favor of Iran, such as the governance of Iraq by Shia groups, the nuclear agreement with the Western powers, the consolidation of Hezbollah's position in Lebanese politics, have disturbed the regional states governed by monarchies. With this threat, a counter-alliance led by Saudi Arabia has been formed, which states a “cold war” in the Middle East, mainly led by Iran and Saudi Arabia. In this polarisation environment, the attitude towards the Arab Uprisings and the anti-regime rebellions in Syria was shaped accordingly. These different stances towards the conflict within Muslim countries can partially be explained by their geopolitical rivalry and “the New Middle East Cold War,” as Gause asserts, since it shares some structural similarities with the Arab Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>323324</sup>

Truly, with the state failure in Syria, Muslim regional powers have attempted to direct the country's future by supporting non-state actors, including terrorist organizations. Even though radicalisation had domestic roots, it mainly stemmed from geopolitical rivalry. The Syrian conflict has become the most important element in the hegemonic rivalry among the regional states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, since both know that the end of the war will determine the winner of the contest for the regional influence.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Gause III, F. G. (2014)., p.5.

<sup>324</sup> Kerr, M. H. (1971). *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970* (3rd edition). Oxford University Press.

<sup>325</sup> Gause III, F. G. (2014). P.3.

The states that adopt the Shia crescent discourse against Iran perceive Iran as a threat. Notably the Arab countries ruled by monarchy, have not listened to the public unrests in their domestic politics, even suspected of external foreign factors and suppressed the uprisings. In this context, explaining the internal unrest with sectarianism became a tool for the ruling elites to dismiss and silence dissent, quench these perceived threats to sustain the current status quo.<sup>326</sup> States that see the balance of power in the Middle East would deteriorate at the expense themselves have supported and funded radical Sunni Islamist groups like Jaysh al-Islam, in Syrian civil war. By some circles, these groups thought to be sectarian, the useful allies of these states on broadcasting Sunni-Wahhabi supremacism, and lead minorities to be alienated in Syria.<sup>327</sup>

Iran's brand of revolutionary Islam created tensions with other influential Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iraq, and led them to attempt to contain this Iranian Islamic influence in the region.<sup>328</sup> Sunni Gulf monarchies perceive a threat against their own existence and their understanding of Islamism. On the other hand, A secular democratic states such as Turkey desires to be a role model for Muslims with its own understanding of democracy and so-called post-Islamism, to take the helm of the Islamic world and to expand its sphere of influence in the region.<sup>329330</sup>

On the other side, even Sunni Islamism has divergences on the Syrian conflict, which also fails the sectarianist explanations. While some countries, like Qatar and Turkey support the Muslim Brotherhood; Saudi Arabia has supported the counter-powers like Sisi in Egypt. Their ties get closer by supporting the same Islamist groups as it can be

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<sup>326</sup> Haddad, F. (2017)., p. 365.

<sup>327</sup> Lund, A. (2016, December 21). *Into the Tunnels*. The Century Foundation., retrieved on 15 April 2018, from <https://tcf.org/content/report/into-the-tunnels/>

<sup>328</sup> Hinnebusch, R. A., & Ehteshami, A. (Eds.). (2002). p.287.

<sup>329</sup> Yeşilyurt, N., & Akdevelioğlu, A. (2009). Turkey's Middle East Policy under the JDP Rule. *Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, 40., p.2.

<sup>330</sup> More information on Post-Islamism; Post-Islamism; Bayat, A. (Ed.). (2013). *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces Of Political Islam*. Oxford University Press, USA.

seen in the relations between Qatar and Turkey.<sup>331</sup> Similar to Iran's attitude, the other Middle Eastern states opposed to Iran like Saudi Arabia have not created their foreign policies on a sectarian basis either. As Gause says, there is an "intra-Sunni Islamist dispute" when it conflicts with national interests and survival of the regime.<sup>332</sup>

Because it opposed the Muslim Brotherhood when the Muslim Brotherhood took power in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia. The reason for this was it was afraid of democratic Islamic movements and their possible effects on their own countries.<sup>333</sup> Saudi regime has not limited itself to Sunni allies as the opposition parties in Syria. For example it supported some Shia groups like Iraqia party in Iraq, or less sectarian Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other organizations in Syria that are distant to Muslim Brotherhood and not backed some Sunni Salafi groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>334</sup>

The Syrian conflict also shows that Iran follows a state centric rationality towards the non-state actors. The relations with Palestinian non-state actors has been shaped according to its support of Assad. For instance, Palestinian Islamic Jihad has not changed its posture towards its traditional allies and kept a neutral stance, HAMAS supported Islamist factions in Syria Conflict.<sup>335</sup> HAMAS was welcomed in Assad's Syria since 1999 and through this, it was obtaining financial and logistical support from Iran and Hizbullah as well as Syria.<sup>336</sup> However, when the uprisings started, it supported the anti-Assad factions<sup>337</sup>. As Alavi says, HAMAS started to prioritize its links with the Muslim Brotherhood and got support from Qatar which has tried to

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<sup>331</sup> <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-gulf/turkey-qatar-alliance-temporary-marriage-necessity>, accessed 23 November 2019.

<sup>332</sup> Gause III, F. G. (2014)., p.2.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>335</sup> Alavi, S. A. (2019)., p.135.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., p.134.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

influence the Middle East politics with the Arab Uprisings and it still tries to strengthen its ties with a wide branch of Islamist groups and states today to expand its maneuver space from Turkey, Malaysia, Kuwait to Mauritania.<sup>338</sup> Yet, Iranian ruling elites, regardless of the divergence on Syria keep supporting HAMAS.

Another event showing that the Syrian crisis is a proxy war is the Warsaw Summit in February 2019, where the latest developments in the Middle East and Syria and Yemen were discussed. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo described this summit as “an anti-Iranian meeting” during his visit to Egypt. Whereas, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Jawad Zarif said that “Poland was hosting a desperate anti-Iran circus”<sup>339</sup> and said the country could not clear this shame.

This shows it is worried that pro-Iranian militia groups will fill the gap in the country due to the withdrawal of the US from Syria and wants to eliminate this possibility. Washington is demanding that these actors take the initiative against Iran in support of some Sunni Arab states, which he describes as moderate. Within the context of the US and Israel's role in security structures in the region, GCC countries have great importance. Moreover, with a Middle East-themed summit organized in a European country like Poland, Washington is not only interested in Iran; It also sends messages to European countries and Russia.

The US anti-Iranian strategy is the product of a policy that has been built on for years. Such summits indicate an attempt to create a bloc through anti-Iranianism. This perceived threat is embodied in Pompeo's words : "Peace and security in the Middle East cannot be achieved without confronting Iran. This is not possible. It has a negative influence in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. They support Houthis, HAMAS, and

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<sup>338</sup> Rasgon, A. (2019, December 8). *In first trip beyond Egypt since 2017, HAMAS chief Haniyeh arrives in Turkey*. The Times of Israel., retrieved on 4 April 2019, from <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-first-trip-beyond-egypt-since-2017-HAMAS-chief-haniyeh-arrives-in-turkey/>

<sup>339</sup> Hafezi, P. (n.d.). *Iran's Zarif calls Iran-focused summit in Poland a 'desperate circus*. Reuters. Retrieved 26 February 2019, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-summit-zarif/irans-zarif-calls-iran-focused-summit-in-poland-a-desperate-circus-idUSKCN1P528A>



Hezbollah. These are real threats. It is not possible to reach peace in the Middle East without regressing Iran."<sup>340</sup>

### 5.2.3. The Role of media

Sectarianism is shown as the major reason for the societal and political conflicts through media outlets in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen, and other countries relatively less disordered. Local media organizations, from Hezbollah's al-Manar television station to Sunni jihadi websites to Saudi-owned newspapers and television stations like Al-Arabiya, al-Hayat, al-Awsat and al-Sharq, they all stress the sectarian nature of these struggles.<sup>341</sup>

However, this period of turmoils, unlike the previous ones, has people's access to the media. Mainly social media and the ease of data sharing has complicated things. This also worked for the states. State-sponsored publications became almost a denigration tool. So state-sponsored media also became an instrument to shape sectarian discourse.

Moreover, the proximity between Iran and Syria cannot be explained by sectarian explanations and the Shia identity, because both regimes have different ideologies for state administration and distinct understanding of Shi'ism. Whereas Iran is a theocratic republic, the Assad regime mainly favored secular rule and did not bring religion to the forefront in its foreign policy. Although the Assad family is a member of the Nusayri (Alawite) sect of Shi'ism, and some holy Shia places like shrines of Sayyida Zainab and Roqayya which attract many Iranian pilgrims are in Syria; Shi'ism has never been the basis for Iran-Syria relations. There is also the fact that while the state religion of Iran is Twelver Shi'a Islam, Nusayrism is often not considered real Shi'ism by some Shias in Iran. The Alawite sect was recognized within Shi'ism only in

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<sup>340</sup> *Pompeo: İran'la yüzleşmeden Orta Doğu'da barış ve güvenlik sağlanamaz.* (n.d.). [BirGün]. Retrieved 21 February 2019, from <https://www.birgun.net/haber/pompeo-iran-la-yuzlesmeden-orta-dogu-da-baris-ve-guvenlik-saglanamaz-247041>

<sup>341</sup> Darwich, M., & Fakhoury, T. (2016), p.722.

1973.<sup>342</sup> It would be misleading to evaluate Iranian-Syrian relations on the axis of the sect because of the Baath regime's distant stance against the political Islam that Iran is thought to be the flag-bearer and the fundamental differences between the Jafarism that prevail in Iran and Nusayrism in Syria.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Matthiesen, T. (2013, June 12). *Syria: Inventing a Religious War*. The New York Review of Books., retrieved on 15 March 2018, from <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2013/06/12/syria-inventing-religious-war/>

<sup>343</sup> Friedman, Y. (2009). *The Nusayri-Alawis: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria*. Brill Academic Publishers., p.237.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

This thesis has tried to explain the role of sectarianism in explaining Iran's foreign policy. It aimed to show that the strategic preferences of Iran's foreign policy are mostly shaped by material reasons. Acknowledging the ideological reasons, notably Islamism, are the *raison d'être* of the Islamic regime, thus, indispensable not at least in discourse; sectarianism and Iran's Shi'a identity cannot explain its foreign policymaking processes in depth.

The theoretical literature review on sectarianism analyzed the different perspectives over sectarianism arguments. Primordial approach that sees the current conflicts and cooperations through the centuries-old division between Sunnis and Shias, instrumentalist approach that sees the role of agency, regimes, ruling elites, and other social elements in creating sectarianism and modernist approach that think sectarianism in a modern structural context have been critically explained.

One of the findings in the literature review is that the term of sectarianism has been used ambiguously in the literature and is value-laden and too politicized. The lack of definition and its linguistic incoherence make the term contradictory and distortive in academic studies. Another finding is that each approach to explaining the role of sectarian identity in international relations overlooks some other essential aspects of the issue. Therefore, all the aforementioned approaches should be taken into consideration to have a functional analysis of the regional phenomena.

Among these approaches, the primordial sectarian explanations oversimplify the dynamics of regional conflicts and are mostly used by political elites to divert attention from real reasons. Primordialism highlights the political, sectarian identities and their archaic hatred to each other in political analysis, whereas neglecting many other indispensable and complex factors in the political events and foreign policy analysis.

Today, many identities; religious, ethnic, tribal, class, regional, national, core versus periphery, have overlain by other affinities. Picturing these local upheavals and all the conflicts as Sunni versus Shia remain superficial and distortive. More than these identities and their longlasting characteristics; it can be seen how geopolitics, political economy, the relations between the states and non-state groups affect the understanding of sectarian identities and create clashed between them. Regimes and some conservative components, therefore, misuse these primordial explanations as a tool to counterbalance the internal dissatisfaction and dissent against the current government and the status quo, discrediting the rightful demonstrations of people as the Shia uprising or Iran's influence on the Shia minority. In other words, it is misused to silence the dissent for any perceived threat to the status quo. Even though, instrumentalist approach explain the Middle East politics better than primordialism, it might overlook the importance of sectarian identities and reduce them to materialist power politics. Securitization theory therefore gives a third explanation to the politics of the region.

The history of Iran's foreign policies starting from the late Pahlavi Dynasty period to the present period of the Islamic Republic. It suggested that while during the Pahlavi Period, the foreign policy of Iran was Western-oriented and omitted the Islamic identity of the country, with the revolution in 1979, Islamic communitarianism has become one of the most pre-eminent pillars of Iran's foreign policy. Like all revolutions, the Iranian Revolution also ambitiously aimed to expand its ideas and revolution all around the world. However, after the protracted Iran-Iraq War and the death of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, the Iranian state has evolved into a more moderate and pragmatist foreign policy. Although the values of the Islamic revolution in Iran have played an important role and institutionalized in the establishment of the state, Iran acts according to its national interests in its foreign policy. Therefore, it can be said that the political preferences that the Islamic Republic pursues are enduring regardless of the domestic political shifts, and these preferences are the combinations of both realist and ideological aims.

It is important to acknowledge that there are occasional changes in Iranian foreign policy, in more conservative trajectory, as in the Ahmedinejad period. However, these political shifts are not inherent to Iran. As many other state actors, as it can be seen the dramatic difference between the Obama and Trump administrations, Iran's policies and governments also change not because of ideological aims but in accordance with its internal political changes and its political and economic relations with the outside world. Still, Iran generally exhibits a realistic foreign policy. It avoids utopian steps for the sake of its existence in the international system. Moreover, even in the periods when conservatives were in power, Iran abstained from any sectarian policies and discourses in these ideological aims. Iran has also been supporting the Sunni non-state actors in military, economic, and political aspects. It has been sometimes criticized for being more Palestinian than Palestinians who are mostly the Sunni Muslims.

Using a sectarian language may diminish its influence in the Middle East. Moreover, Iran, like any other state in the international system, would not renounce from its national interests. Iran, who wants to expand its influence in the Middle East, should avoid sectarian discourses and sectarian foreign policy to influence the Muslim population in the region, who are dominantly composed of the Sunnis.

Moreover, in contrast to Iran's ideological motives in its foreign policy, it abstains from harsh criticisms on China, Russia, and Armenia about the state oppression on the Muslim populations, so as not to deteriorate the relations with these states which are the supporters in regional and international realms. Therefore, the change in foreign policy in this period should be explained not by sectarian basis, but by the change in the state itself and the developments in the international arena.

Furthermore, the fourth chapter looked into the geopolitical rivalries between the Sunni-ruled status quo states, notably Saudi Arabia and Iran, to understand how sectarianism and sectarian discourses are used in these rivalries. Status quo states in the region securitize the sectarian identities via the obscure sectarianism ideas and Shia crescent discourse. The threat perception of the states in the Middle East Iran and Saudi Arabia as two rivals, seemingly for either Islamic or regional leadership, funding and

arming to the ones who are on their parts cannot be reduced to an endemic everlasting sectarian conflict, especially when in history there have also been cooperations and coexistence of identities.

While geopolitical rivalry has gained a new sectarian aspect in the modern era, to explain the foreign policies of the status-quo states and Iran, securitization theory is widely used in this work. Alongside with this rivalry, in conflicts, sectarianism has been used as a tool to dismiss and silence the opposition, divide the united insurgent population against them and demolish the perceived threats to the status quo mostly by the ruling elites by stigmatizing legitimate manifestations and religious identities in internal politics.<sup>344</sup> Sectarian discourses like the Shia Crescent is widely used and sectarian fear-mongering are purposely escalated by politics, social media, in regional satellite channels and in daily life to have the upper hand in this rivalry.

The regional developments have progressed in favor of Iran, and the softening West-Iran relations with JCPOA have worried Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other Gulf countries with Sunni governments. This perceived threat has made these status quo countries securitize the Shia identity under the discourse of Shia crescent through press releases, media, academic researches, think-tanks, and many other ways. At the regional level, authoritarian/moderate Arab ruling elites and their international allies suspect that Iran would expand its influence with the insurgencies, especially in Syria, which had already increased with the US invasion of Iraq. This perceived threat led them to deploy a sectarian discourse to explain Iran's growing influence.

However, actors such as Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran are mainly political alliances that prioritize their own interests. Within such partnerships, anti-Israel includes a formation against the US and other foreign interventions in regional politics. It is not a Shia alliance or Shia project, because it can consist of actors from other sects such as Sunni populated HAMAS, which shows that Iran is open to all kinds of cooperation.

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<sup>344</sup> Haddad, F. (2017)., p. 367.

Sectarianist ideas cannot explain these complex and multi-faceted inter-connections of Iran and other actors in the region.

The fifth chapter explained Iran's foreign policy towards the ongoing Syrian war and the so-called Shia pact between Iran and Syria to shed light on sectarianist explanations on Iran's motives on this conflict. Despite the emergence of Shi'ism as an essential factor in Middle Eastern politics after the US intervention in Iraq, the sectarian analysis of the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War is inadequate and misleading in explaining regional politics.

It is important to understand that it is the arc of state weakness and state failure running from Lebanon through Syria and Iraq that explains the recent salience of sectarianism. Sectarianism occupies very little in explaining the causes of the conflict, the motives of both the regime and its opponents. Even though there was already nepotism and favoritism in the Syrian government and other state institutions before the insurgency, conflict in Syria has been sectarianized by the hands of both Assad's regime and other countries.

Notwithstanding the denomination of the partnership as a resistance alliance, the close collaboration of Syria and Iran, which has endured for forty years now, is based on these two states' geopolitical interests. They have the historical alliance coming from mutual security threats. Syria's geostrategically important position, the possibility and the danger of a rival group coming to power after al-Assad rule, shared antagonisms towards Zionism and the US policy in the region which also have made them ideologically closer, being Syria as the terrestrial pathway for other non-state actors in the region, make al-Assad's Syria important for Iran's defense strategy. Moreover, Nusayri population in Syria is a secular, offshoot branch of Shi'ism that is mostly not even accepted as Shia by Iranian Shia authorities.

The countries where sectarian-seen conflicts exist, like in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Bahrain are the arenas where the power struggle happens between regional and international actors. State weakness in Syria paved the way for an increase in non-state

sectarian and religious actors from both Shia and Sunni sides. As many academics assert, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have used sectarian identities in their foreign policy in the Syrian civil war and their relations with these non-state and substate actors.<sup>345</sup> There is not an ideological partnership between Iran and Syria, which is another indicator that Iran is not sectarian in its foreign policy. This alliance can be traced back to their mutual common interests, balancing the pro-Western status-quo in the Middle East. Through pragmatic foreign policy, they try to protect their national interests, even if they have different ideologies.<sup>346</sup> In other words, Shi'ism has never been the basis for Iran-Syria relations. On the other side, sectarianism cannot explain also the intra-Sunni Islamist disaccords and differences within these conflicts and cooperations. When the national interest and the regime's survival are at stake, Sunni-ruled states can also become distinct, as it happens at the stance over the Muslim Brotherhood.

Conflicts and cooperations are the outcomes of complex social, economic, political, and historical factors. The sectarian lens might misguide us to understand the dynamics of the Middle East politics. Shias cannot be portrayed as a monolithic entity, ignoring essential differences within each countries in the Middle East. 'The Shia revival/awakening' and 'the Shia crescent' ideas focus only on religious identities, yet things like religion sect are only part of individuals and, therefore, communities. The importance of such things as nationality, language, and culture in the formation of the identity of societies as a whole cannot be denied. Sectarian hatred and conflict in society is created by domestic, regional and international actors like a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Makdisi says, the notion of "sectarian" puts the cart before the horse, which overshadows the domestic and international actors motives, confuses reasons and the results.

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<sup>345</sup> Wehrey, F. (2011). Uprisings jolt the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. *Current History*, 110(740), p.352; Gause III, F. G. (2014).; Hinnebusch, R. (2016).

<sup>346</sup> Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. A. (1997)., p.87.



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## APPENDICES

### A. TURKISH SUMMARY/ TRKE ZET

#### 1. Tezin amacı ve araştırma konusu

İran İslam Devrimi'nden önce pek çok insan İslamda ayrı bir mezhep olan Şiiiliğin farkında değildi. Özellikle Batı için karanlık bir alan olan Şiiilik, ismi bilinse bile, inanç sistemi ve takipçileri hakkındaki bilgi, gelenekleri, inançları ve yargıları ile ilgili olarak sahip olunan bilgi oldukça sınırlıydı ve karşılığında Sünni İslam, Ortadoğu'nun görünür yüzü ve bölgenin sosyal ve politik kültürünü şekillendirdiğine inanılan mezhebiydi.

Bu durum, 1979 İslam Devrimi'nden başlayarak değışti. Sadece İran'a dikkat çekmekle kalmadı, aynı zamanda Şiiiliği uluslararası ilişkiler gündemine bir olgu olarak getirdi. Bu karanlık alan birden bire aydınlatıldığı söylenemese de, Şiiilik uluslararası siyasi alanda yeni bir siyasi güç aracı olarak ortaya çıktı, akademideki yeri gün geçtikçe artmaya başlamıştır.

Bunun dışında İslam Devrimi'nden bu yana, Orta Doğu'nun siyasi dengesini değıştiren, mezhepsel ayrışmanın önemini akla getiren önemli olaylar olmuştur. Taliban'ın Afganistan'daki düşüşü, 2003'te Irak'ın işgali ve Baas rejiminin devrilmesi, Irak'ta Şii çoğunluğun yönetimde güçlü pozisyona gelmesi ve İran'la iyi ilişkiler kurması, Hizbullah'ın 2006'da İsrail'e karşı kazandığı savaş ve ardından Arap sokaklarında popülaritesinin artması, 2011'de başlayan Arap Baharı ve ardında yaşanan iç savaşlar Şiiilik ve mezhepçilik tartışmalarının artmasına neden olan önemli dönüm noktaları olarak önümüze çıkmaktadır.

Bu çalışmada, Ortadoğu'daki olayları, devlet ve devlet dışı aktörlerin hareketlerini Sunni-Şii çatışması olarak, mezhepçilik temelli açıklayan yaklaşım incelenmiştir. Mezhepçilik, Ortadoğu'da bugünün siyasetini, özellikle de İslami Devrim ve ABD'nin

Irak'ı işgalinden sonra meydana gelen siyasi ve sosyal gelişmelerden sonra, Ortadoğu toplumlarında ve devletlerindeki çatışmaları açıklamanın bir yolu olarak, giderek daha fazla kullanılmaktadır. Orta Doğu'daki kargaşa ve gerginliğin en belirleyici faktörü, Sünnilik ve Şiilik arasındaki belirgin fark ve bu mezhep taraftarları arasındaki güç mücadelesi olarak açıklamaktadır.

Çalışma, araştırma alanı olarak mezhepçiliğin Orta Doğu politikasını açıklamada ne kadar açıklayıcı olduğunu belirlemeye çalışır. İran mezhepçilik iddialarında Şii Hilali ve Direniş Ekseni'nin mimarı olarak görüldüğünden, İran'ın dış politikasının gerçekten mezhep temelli olup olmadığı açıklanmaya çalışılmıştır.

Bu amaçla, İran dış politikası tarihsel süreçler içerisinde incelenmiş, diğer bölgesel ve uluslararası aktörlerle olan ilişkileri, çatışma ve işbirliklerinin ana nedenleri incelenmeye çalışılmıştır. Sonrasında orta Doğu'da yaşanan jeopolitik mücadeleler, özellikle Suudi Arabistan ve İran arasında geçen ve literatürde pek çok akademisyenin bir nevi soğuk savaş olarak gördüğü rekabet incelenmiş, ve bu minvalde Direniş Ekseni ve Şii Hilali gibi bazı önemli söylemlerde mezhepsel kimliklerin, çatışmaların ve işbirliklerinin nasıl güvenlikleştirildiği üzerine tartışmalar yürütülmüştür. Son olarak, İran dış politikasında önemli bir yer tutan, ve bir mezhepsel çatışma olarak görülen Suriye iç savaşı ve İran'ın buradaki dış politikası, mezhepçilik tartışmalarını daha iyi açıklayabilmek için, derinlemesine incelenmiştir.

## **2. Literatür taraması**

Uluslararası ilişkiler literatüründe mezhepçiliğe çeşitli yaklaşımlardan bakılmıştır. Mezhepçilik, İran İslam Devrimi'nden sonra bölgesel siyasette giderek artan bir etken haline geldi ve hatta karşıt yaklaşımlar arasındaki tartışmalarda merkezileşmeye başladı. Siyasette ve özellikle uluslararası ilişkilerde mezhepsel kimliğin rolü hakkındaki bu tartışmalar, primordiyalizmden enstrümentalizme kadar geniş bir yelpazede incelenip açıklanmaya çalışılır.

Primordiyalist düşünürler, mezhepsel kimliklerin tarihsel kökenlerini vurgularken, enstrümantalistler devletlerin ve siyasi elitlerin bu kimlikleri kullanmadaki rolüne ve

modernistler ise modern yapısal bağlamların rolüne odaklanırlar. Primordialist yaklaşım, yerel, bölgesel ve uluslararası alanlarda hareket eden aktörlerin eylemlerinin ardındaki nedenleri, bu aktörlerin tarihsel kimliklerinin, özellikle mezhepsel kimliklerin tarihsel kökenlerini temel alarak açıklamaya çalışır. Bu anlamda İran'ın Şii kimliğinin dış politika yapım sürecinde önemli bir yeri olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Ancak, bu yaklaşım mezhepsel kimliklerin neden belirli anlarda barış içinde kaldığını ve başkalarında bir çatışma kaynağı haline geldiğini açıklayamamaktadır. Dahası, ister Irak'ta, Suriye'de, Yemen'de, ister bölgedeki başka yerlerde, birbiriyle uyumsuz olan farklı Sünni ve Şii kimliklerini tanımlamak zordur. Sünni ve Şii terimleri, Orta Doğu'daki sosyal ve politik olguların bolluğunu açıklamada tek başına yetersizdir. Mezhepsel ve ilkel perspektifler belirleyicidir. Tarihin ve kolektif inancın değişmez ve köklü olduğunu düşünerek çatışmayı ve nefreti normalleştirmemize yol açıyorlar. Gruplar içindeki çoğulluğu ve farklılığı görmezden gelirler ve Huntington'un çokça eleştirilen "Medeniyetler Çatışması" nda iddia edildiği gibi değişmez bir çatışma görüşünü vurgularlar. İç ve dış politik elitler, bölgedeki belirli dinamiklerin mezhepsel boyutlarının altını çizerek toplumları manipüle etmeye çalışırlar.

Orta Doğu'daki mezhep çatışmalarını ve işbirliğini inceleyen bir diğer yaklaşım, enstrümantalizm ve rasyonalizmdir. Bu yaklaşım uluslararası ilişkiler teorisinde neo-realizm ve Marksist yapısalcı unsurları birleştiren materyalist bir yaklaşımdır. Yapı göreceli güç dağılımlarından oluştuğu için kimlikler yalnızca aktörlerin maddi çıkarlarını meşrulaştırmak için manipüle edilen araçlardır. Bu yaklaşıma göre mezhepsel kimlikler, aktörler arasındaki materyalist güç mücadelesinin sonuçlarıdır. Egemen seçkinler, devletler ve diğer bölgesel aktörler, mezhepçilik fikirlerini geliştirir ve daha sonra onları kötü yönetim biçimleriyle yayarlar. Bu kasıtlı olsun ya da olmasın, mezhep kimlikleri iç ve bölgesel siyasette kullanılır. Buna ek olarak, birçok akademisyen bu tür etkili aktörlerin Arap ayaklanmaları karşısında rejimlerini meşrulaştırmak için mezhepsel kimlikler ve söylemler kullandığını iddia eder.

Öte yandan modernizm, siyasi kimliklerin ve mezhepsel kimliklerin modern oluşumlar olduğunu ve siyasi çevreler tarafından kendi amaçları için kullanıldığını savunur. Bu fikir doğrultusunda, enstrümantalistler de devletlerin bu mezhepsel kimlikleri harekete



geçirmedeki rolüne odaklanırlar. Bu yaklaşımlar arasında mezhep kuramına ve mezhepçilik fikrine, mezhep kimliği ve devlet dış politikası arasındaki ilişkinin daha yararlı bir şekilde anlaşılmasına yardımcı oldukları için özel önem verilmektedir. Modernist yaklaşımlar milliyet, etnik köken ve / veya mezhepler etrafında dönen kimliklerin inşa edildiğini iddia eder. Daha spesifik olarak, bu özdeş grupların neredeyse tüm gelenekleri "icat edilmiştir" ve toplulukları "hayal edilir". Bu, kimlik kategorilerinin bir şekilde kurgusal olduğu veya tarihsel köken ve geleneğin söylemlerinin geçici olduğu anlamına gelmez. Ancak, bu kategorilerin ortaya çıkışı ve sağlamlaşması, modern milliyetçiliğin bir işgücünün "ulusal" dilde okur-yazar olması ve ulus-devlet tarafından şekillendirilmesi gerekliliklerine atıfta bulunarak anlaşılmalıdır. Modernist yaklaşımlar, siyasi kimliklerin hayali bağlar olduğunu görür. Mezhep kimlikleri de dahil olmak üzere, siyasi anlamları devletin seçkinleri ve modern devletin gelişimi tarafından belirlenen sosyo-ekonomik değişimler tarafından verilir. Modernistler mezhepçiliği harekete geçirmede önceden var olan bir alt-ulusal elitin önemini kabul eder, ancak bunun köklerini modern çağ ile açıklamaktadır. Bu nedenle mezhepsel kimlikler, bölgesel ve uluslararası güçler tarafından meşrulaştırma için kullanılan modern yapılardır.

Güvenliği *speech-act* olarak gören Güvenlikleştirme teorisi, mezhepçilik tartışmalarını ve Şii Hilali gibi söylemleri, neden, nasıl ve hangi çıkar uğruna ortaya çıkarılıp kullanıldığını açıklamak için çalışmada önemli yer teşkil etmektedir. Teoriye göre, güvenlik konuları gerçek tehditler olmaktan ziyade, aktörler tarafından inşa edilir ve *speech-act* yoluyla güvenlik tehditleri olarak oluşturulurlar. Bu şekilde, devletin veya devlet dışı aktörün önündeki sorun, tehdit olarak siyasette, medyada, akademik çalışmalarda, çeşitli düşünce kuruluşlarının ürettiği bilgilerde önemli bir tehdit olarak ortaya atılarak konu güvenlikleştirilir. Bu da, gerçek veya hayal edilen bu tanımlanmış güvenlik tehditlerine karşı olağanüstü çözümler gerektirdiği için, aktörlerin bu tehditlere karşı aldığı aşırı önlemler meşrulaştırır.

Güvenlikleştirme teorisi bu anlamda, Ortadoğu'daki artan kimlik politikasının, özellikle 2011 Arap Ayaklanmaları ile, bu bölgedeki eyaletlerde güvensizlik yarattığını savunur. Realist paradigmanın, Arap Ayaklanmaları'nın Orta Doğu'daki

güç dağılımı ve dengenin değişmediğini eleştirerek güç kavramının anlamını genişletmeyi önerir. Mezhepsel kimliklerinin tehdit algılamaları ürettiğini ve güvenlik alanına sokulduğunu, mezhep söylemlerin iktidardaki siyasi aktörleri teşvik etmek için araçsallaştırıldığını savunur.

Bu yaklaşımların en önemli özelliği, her birinin mezhep kimliği ile siyaset arasındaki ilişkinin farklı bir kısmına bakmasıdır. Bununla birlikte, mezhepsel kimliklerin yalnızca bir yönüne odaklanmak, yapılacak siyasi analizin yanlış sonuçlarına yol açabilir. Dolayısıyla mezhep kimliği ve dış politika arasındaki ilişkiyi anlamak için bu yaklaşımda her yaklaşım bir ölçüde kullanılmıştır.

Bu araştırma için teorik çerçeveyi ortaya koyarken, mezhepçiliğin tanımının eksikliği ve terimin çeşitli ve tutarsız kullanımı, mezhepçiliğin anlamını oldukça çarpıtmakta olduğu açıklanmıştır. Mezhepçilik/sectarianism, bir mezhebe dayalı devletin ayrımcılığı olarak da kullanılabilir, Lübnan'daki gibi mezheplere dayalı bir hükümet sistemine de referans verebilir; bir devlet politikası da olabilir ya da devlet içindeki iç karışıklıkların gerçek nedenlerinden dini kimliğe dikkat çekmek için rejimler tarafından damgalayıcı bir araç olarak kullanılabilir. Bu nedenle, mezhepçilik genellikle net tanım ve terimlerden yoksun belirsiz bir yapı olarak okunabilir. Bu belirsizlik ve öznel yorumlamalar, “sectarianism” teriminin bir bilimsel bir kategori olarak yararlı olmasını engeller niteliktedir.

Kavramın belirsizliğini kabul ederek, akademik literatürde, yukarıda belirtilen anlamdaki mezhepçilik, bir anlatı tanımı olan “çatışmayı” anlamak için kullanılan mezhepsel kimlikleri ve farklılıkları vurgulayarak açıklayıcı bir merceğe olmuştur. Söz konusu çatışmaların Müslüman içi ve dini boyutu. Bu mezhepsel ya da ilkel kimlikler, Orta Doğu'nun tarihsel evriminin hesaplarının merkezine yerleştirilirken, diğer etkiler ya da kimlikler önemsiz ya da marjinalleştirilir.

Bu çalışmada, iç politikada mezhepçilik, bir dinde başka bir mezhebin dışlanması ve ayrımcılığına yol açan tutumların, davranışların ve çelişkilerin bir kombinasyonu olarak kullanılmıştır. Bu, yapısal ya da doğrudan şiddeti ya da her ikisini de

kapsayabilir ve çoğunlukla toplumların siyaseti ile ilgilidir. Uluslararası siyasette açıklanırken ise, terim, devletin dış politikasının yönlendirici ve biçimlendirici bir güdüsü olarak kullanılmıştır.

### **3. Tezin bulgusu**

Çalışmada, İran'ın dış politikasında stratejik tercihlerinin çoğunlukla maddi nedenlerle şekillendiğini bulguladı. İdeolojik nedenleri, özellikle İslamcılığı kabul etmek, İslami rejimin varlık nedenlerinden biridir. Dolayısıyla en azından söylemsel olarak İslami değerler vazgeçilmezdir; ancak İran'ın bu İslami kimliği içerisinde Şii kimliği dış politika yapım süreçlerini derinlemesine açıklayamaz.

Dahası, İran'ın dış politikasındaki ideolojik güdülerinin aksine, Çin, Rusya ve Ermenistan'a, Müslüman nüfus üzerindeki devlet baskısı konusunda, bölgedeki destekçiler olan bu devletlerle ilişkileri bozmamak için sert eleştirilerden kaçınıyor. ve uluslararası âlemler. Bu nedenle, bu dönemde dış politikadaki değişim mezhepsel temelde değil devletin kendisindeki değişim ve uluslararası arenadaki gelişmelerle açıklanmalıdır. Mezhepçi açıklamalar İran'ın bu çatışmalardaki dış politikasını açıklamada yetersiz kalmaktadır.

Literatür derlemesindeki bulgulardan biri, mezhepçilik kavramının literatürde belirsiz bir şekilde kullanıldığı ve değer yüklü ve çok siyasallaştırılmış olmasıdır. Tanım eksikliği ve dilsel tutarsızlık, akademik çalışmalarda terimi çelişkili ve çarpıtıcı hale getirir. Diğer bir bulgu, mezhepsel kimliğin uluslararası ilişkilerdeki rolünü açıklamaya yönelik her yaklaşımın, konunun diğer bazı önemli yönlerini gözden kaçırmasıdır. Bu nedenle, bölgesel fenomenlerin işlevsel bir analizini yapmak için yukarıda belirtilen tüm yaklaşımlar dikkate alınmalıdır.

İran'daki İslam Devrimi'nin değerleri önemli bir rol oynamış ve devletin kurulmasında kurumsallaşmış olmasına rağmen, İran dış politikasındaki ulusal çıkarlarına göre hareket etmektedir. Bu nedenle, İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin izlediği siyasi tercihlerin iç siyasi değişimlerden bağımsız olarak sürdüğü söylenebilir ve bu tercihler hem gerçekçi hem de ideolojik amaçların birleşimidir.

Genel olarak, devrimin ilk aşamasında İran dış politikası mezhepçilikten ziyade dünya düzenine karşı reddiyeci bir İslamist tavır takındı. Devrimci rejim, sadece dünyadaki Müslümanlara değil dünyanın tüm ezilen insanlarına sesleniyordu. Dış politikasında, bilhassa Müslüman halklar başta olmak üzere tüm ezilen halklara devrim ihracı temelli bir politika izledi. Bu doğrultuda, antiemperyalist bir söylem izleyerek "ne Doğu ne de Batı" sloganlarıyla Soğuk Savaş'ın emperyalist ve komünist bloklara bölündüğü ortama karşı çıkıp bağımsız bir dış politika izlediğini vurguladı. Mevcut uluslararası sistemin meşruiyetini sorguladı ve bölgedeki statüko devletlerini eleştirerek demokratik İslam hükümetlerinin oluşumunu destekledi. Şiilik, yeni kurulan İslami cumhuriyetin söylemlerinde yer almıyordu. Tam tersine Humeyni, İslam Devrimi'nin yalnızca İran halkı veya Şiiler için değil, tüm Müslümanlar için olduğuna inanıyordu. Ancak, bunun da ötesinde dini kimliğe olan yakınlığının ötesinde, önceliği devletin kendisiydi. "İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin korunmasının tüm kutsal görevlerin üstünde bir görev olduğunu" veya 1988'de ifade ettiği gibi "beş dinin koşullarını içeren bazı kurallar İslam düzeninin ve İslam devletinin korunması için ertelenebilir" sözü; *raison d'État* ilkesinin Humeyni döneminde bile yönetimin temelinde olduğunu gösterir niteliktedir.

İran'ın mezhepsel hatta genel olarak kimlik temelli bir dış politika izlemediğine dair bir başka kanıt, İran'ın dünyadaki Müslümanlara İslami bir rejim önermesi ve devrim ihracını hedeflemesine karşın, Sovyet sonrası topraklarda, Orta Asya ve Kafkas Müslümanlarıyla ilgilenmemesi ve bu topraklara karşı statükoyu takip etmesidir. İslami rejim komünist Tudeh partisinin birçok üyesini içeride şiddetle bastırırken, dış politikada komünist Sovyetlere karşı sert bir tutum izlememiştir. Bu gerçekçi dış politikanın bazı nedenleri İran'ın zaten tüm Batı ile karşı karşıya kalması ve Rusya ve Çin gibi diğer güçlü devletlerle karşılaşmayı göze almamasıydı. Böyle bir tutum İran'ın uluslararası sistemde tamamen yalnız kalmasına yol açabilirdi. Dahası, İran-Irak savaşı ve diğer ağır iç sorunlar ülkeyi çoktan bitirmişti.

Bu nedenle, İran dış politikasında Şiilik temelli bir politika izlediği ya da Sunni Müslümanları dışladığı görülmemektedir. Aksine İslam'ın evrenselci fikrine

yoğunlaşmaktadır. Bölgesel ve uluslararası alemlerden dışlanan ve birçok sorunla karşı karşıya kalan devrimci rejim, sonuç olarak, devrimin ihracatı ve 1990'larda İslam halkının savunuculuğunu ve doğu ve batı sloganlarını bir kenara bıraktı ve anlamını yitirdi.

Burada, Ahmedinejad döneminde olduğu gibi İran dış politikasında, daha muhafazakar bir yörüngede, zaman zaman meydana gelen değişimlerin olduğunu kabul edilmiştir. Ancak bu siyasi değişimler İran'a özgü değildir. Diğer birçok devlet aktörü gibi, Obama ve Trump yönetimleri arasındaki dramatik fark görülebileceği gibi, İran'ın politikaları ve hükümetleri de ideolojik amaçlardan dolayı değil, iç siyasi değişimleri ve dış dünya ile siyasi ve ekonomik ilişkileri nedeniyle değişmektedir. . İran yine de gerçekçi bir dış politika sergiliyor. Uluslararası sistemdeki varlığı uğruna ütopyacı adımlardan kaçınır. Dahası, muhafazakarların iktidarda olduğu dönemlerde bile İran, bu ideolojik amaçlardaki herhangi bir mezhepçi politika ve söylemden kaçındı. İran ayrıca Sünni devlet dışı aktörleri askeri, ekonomik ve politik açıdan da destekliyor. Bazen çoğunlukla Sünni Müslümanlar olan Filistinlilerden daha fazla Filistinli olduğu için eleştirilmektedir.

Mezhepçilik tartışmaları ve İran'ın mezhepsel bir dış politika yürüttüğü görüşlerinde önemli kilometre taşları olarak, 1979 İran İslam Devrimi'nin yanı sıra 2003 yılında ABD'nin Irak işgali ve Baas rejiminin düşmesi ve ardından o zamana kadar baskı altında Iraklı Şiiilerin devlet idaresinde güçlenmeye başlaması; İran'ın her türlü askeri, ekonomik ve politik desteği sağladığı Hizbullah'ın, 2006 ve 2009 yıllarında İsrail'e karşı kazandığı zaferler ile statükocu Arap devletlerine karşı alternatif olarak görülmeye başlaması ve 2011'de bu araştırmada otoriter devletlere karşı yapılan Arap ayaklanmaları mezhepçilik tartışmalarında önemli yer işgal eder. Çalışmanın bir diğer bulgusu, özellikle 2003'ten itibaren artan bir şekilde, İran'ın özellikle İran Devrim Muhafızları Ordusu'nun Kudüs Gücü ile bölgedeki Şii aktörleri üzerindeki etkisini güçlendirmeye başladığı incelenmiştir. Bu çalışmada İran'ın, diğer tüm devletler gibi, 2003 Irak işgalinde olduğu gibi gündemine uyması halinde kendi yararına olacak her türlü olay ve aktörü enstrümentalist bir şekilde kullanmaya ve faydalanmaya çalıştığı öne sürülmüştür. Ancak bu İran'ın bölge üzerine derinlemesine çizdiği stratejik bir

politikadan ziyade, ABD gibi uluslararası aktörlerin ortaya çıkardığı durumdan İran'ın daha iyi bir şekilde yararlanmasından kaynaklanmaktadır.

Orta Doğu'daki mezhepsel kimlikler, bilhassa Şii kimliği Sunni Arap monarşileri, İsrail ve otoriter rejimler tarafından güvenlikleştirilmiş, bu doğrultuda Şii hilali söylemi ise bu devletlerin yanı sıra akademi ve medya tarafından bazı belirli devletlerin yararına “gerçek” olarak gösterilmektedir. Şii hilali gibi tehdit oluşturan söylemlerin, Sünni Arap ülkelerinin meşruiyet ve istikrar eksikliğini doldurmak için statü yanlısı bir ülke için bir araç olarak kullanılıyor.

Şii hilali iddiası Şiilerin kendileri tarafından tanımlanan bir konsept olmadığı gibi, söylemin çoğu unsuru da yetersiz ve bölgenin gerçekliği ve İran'ın bölgedeki yeterlilikleri ve dış politika öncelikleri ile çelişmektedir. İslam Devrimi'nden sonra Tahran, bölgesel etkisini genişletmeyi ve daha sıkı azınlık hariç İslam Devrimi'ni ihraç etmeyi hedeflemesine rağmen, Tahran kendi yeteneklerinin sınırlarının farkındadır. Bunun yanı sıra, başarılı ve tutarlı bir Şii jeopolitik bloğunun gerçekleştirilmesi için ciddi engeller vardır. Şii gruplar arasındaki milli, kültürel ve dinsel hukuki farklılıklar nedeniyle birleşik bir Şia jeopolitiğinin gerçekleştirilmesi olasılığı söz konusu değildir. Şii Hilal söylemi, İran Şiiliğini gereğinden fazla vurgulayarak bu gerçeği değiştirmeye çalışmaktadır. Çoğunlukla Şiiliğin farklı dalları arasındaki mevcut farklılıklar göz ardı edilme eğilimindedir ve İran Şiileri tek bir grup olarak adlandırmaktadır. Bu nedenle, Şii nüfuslu bölgelerin temsili, jeopolitik bir kemer olarak basit ve yanıltıcı görünmektedir. Nüfus çoğunluğu ve dini bağları, Şiiliğin On iki imamlara ait olması nedeniyle Ortadoğu'daki Şiiler ile İran arasındaki yakınlık olarak düşünülebilir, ancak, bu faktörler İran'ın kontrolü altında siyasi bir ittifak anlamına gelmemektedir.

İran'ın Suriye iç savaşında Esad hükümetini desteklemesinin temel nedeni ise iki gücün de mezhepsel olarak Şiiliğe bağlı olduğundan değil tamamen, jeopolitik güç ve tehdit algısından kaynaklanmaktadır. İran ve Suriye'nin ABD, İsrail ve Arap monarşilere karşı siyasi tutumlarıyla stratejik ortaklığı siyasi ve askeri ittifaklarını güçlendirmiştir. İran'ın Esad müttefikine vereceği herhangi bir hasar, savunma

stratejisine zarar verecektir. Suriye’de iktidara gelebilecek herhangi bir rakip grup İran’ın çıkarlarını tehdit edebilir. Suriye’deki Esad yönetimine muhalefet partilerinin İran’dan oldukça uzak ve rakiplerine yakın olması İran’ı her türlü güç değişikliği için çabalarının boşa harcanacağı düşüncesini yaratmaktadır. Bu bağlamda İran’ın dış politikasında Suriye’ye verdiği önem göz ardı edilemeyecek kadar büyüktür.

#### **4. Tezin Bölümleri**

Bu tez, giriş ve sonuç ile birlikte altı bölümden oluşmaktadır. Tezin amacı, sınırları ve metodolojisine ilişkin bilgilerin yer aldığı girişten sonra literatürdeki mezhepçilik tartışmaları ve farklı yaklaşımlar incelenmiştir. Sonraki bölümde, İran dış politikası, Pehlevi döneminin son dönemlerinden başlayarak güncel İran dış politikasına kadar olan süreç, bu dönemlerdeki dış politikalarda Şiiliğin dış politika yapım sürecinde etkili olup olmadığını analiz ederek, İran dış politikasının tarihsel bir özetini sunmuştur. Dördüncü bölümde, mezhepçilik tartışalarında önemli yer alan Şii Hilali iddiaları ve bu iddialar çerçevesinde söylemler güvenlikleştirme teorisi çerçevesinde inceleneye çalışılmıştır. Bu bölümde, sünni hükümlü statüko devletleri, özellikle Suudi Arabistan ve İran arasındaki jeopolitik rekabetler, bu rekabetlerde mezhepçiliğin ve mezhep söylemlerinin nasıl kullanıldığını anlamak için incelendi. Bölgedeki statüko devletleri, belirsiz mezhepçilik fikirleri ve Şii hileli söylem yoluyla mezhep kimlikleri güvenlikleştiriyor. Orta Doğu İran ve Suudi Arabistan’daki devletlerin, görünüşte İslami veya bölgesel liderlik, görünüşe göre kendi bölgelerinde olanlara fon sağlama ve silahlandırma için iki rakip olarak tehdit algısı, özellikle de tarih aynı zamanda işbirlikleri ve kimliklerin bir arada bulunması olmuştur. Son olarak, İran dış politikası bir vaka üzerinden incelenmiş; Suriye iç savaşının, mezhepçilik iddialarında İran dış politikasını ve çatışmasını açıklamada ne kadar yardımcı olduğunu anlamak için araştırmada özel bir yer verilmiştir.

#### **5. Sonuç**

Bu tez, mezhepçiliğin İran’ın dış politikasını açıklamadaki rolünü açıklamaya çalışmıştır. Her ne kadar mezhep kimlikleri Orta Doğu’nun sosyal ve politik dokusu içinde yadsınamaz öğeler olsa da, açıklayıcı bir araç olarak önemi, özellikle toplumsal ve bölgesel çatışmalarla ilgili olduğu için, akademide hala sıcak bir şekilde

tartışılmaktadır. Çatışmalar ve işbirlikleri karmaşık sosyal, ekonomik, politik ve tarihsel faktörlerin sonuçlarıdır. Suriye, Yemen, Lübnan, Bahreyn'de olduğu gibi mezhepsel çatışmaların olduğu ülkeler, bölgesel ve uluslararası aktörler arasında güç mücadelesinin yaşandığı arenalardır. Suriye'deki devlet zayıflığı, hem Şii hem de Sünni taraflarından devlet dışı mezhepsel ve dini aktörlerin artmasına yol açtı. Birçok akademisyenin öne sürdüğü gibi, hem Suudi Arabistan hem de İran, Suriye iç savaşındaki dış politikalarında ve bu devlet dışı ve alt düzey aktörlerle ilişkilerinde mezhepsel kimlikler kullandılar. İran ile Suriye arasında ideolojik bir ortaklık yoktur, bu da İran'ın dış politikasında mezhepçi olmadığının bir başka göstergesidir. Bu ittifak, Orta Doğu'daki Batı yanlısı statükoyu dengeleyerek karşılıklı ortak çıkarlarına kadar uzanabilir. Pragmatik dış politika yoluyla, farklı ideolojileri olsa bile ulusal çıkarlarını korumaya çalışırlar. Başka bir deyişle, Şiilik hiçbir zaman İran-Suriye ilişkilerinin temeli olmamıştır. Öte yandan, mezhepçilik, Sünni içi İslamcı anlaşmazlıkları ve bu çatışma ve işbirliklerindeki farklılıkları da açıklayamaz. Ulusal çıkarlar ve rejimin hayatta kalması söz konusu olduğunda, Sünni hüküm süren devletler Müslüman Kardeşler karşısındaki duruşunda olduğu gibi belirginleşebilir.

Mezhepsel mercek bizi Orta Doğu siyasetinin dinamiklerini anlamak için yanlış yönlendirebilir. Şiiler, Orta Doğu'daki her ülkede temel farklılıkları görmezden gelerek monolitik bir varlık olarak tasvir edilemez. 'Şii'nin yeniden doğuşu / uyanışı' ve 'Şii Hilali' fikirleri sadece dini kimliklere odaklanır, ancak din mezhebi gibi şeyler sadece bireylerin ve dolayısıyla toplulukların bir parçasıdır. Bir bütün olarak toplumların kimliğinin oluşumunda milliyet, dil ve kültür gibi şeylerin önemi yadsınamaz. Toplumda mezhepsel nefret ve çatışma, kendi kendini gerçekleştiren bir kehanet gibi yerel, bölgesel ve uluslararası aktörler tarafından yaratılır. “Mezhepçilik” kavramı, bölgesel ve uluslararası aktörlerin güdülerini gölgede bırakan, Orta Doğu'daki siyasi gelişmelerin nedenlerini ve sonuçlarını birbirine karıştırmaya neden olduğu için açıklayıcı niteliğe sahip değildir.



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