






# The Resistance Axis and the Islamic Republic of Iran's Regional Policy: Challenges and Opportunities

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## **Abstract**

With the victory of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, revolutionary socio-political movements emerged throughout the region that facilitated the formation of resistance groups against imperialism. The purpose of this research is to understand the process of the formation and evolution of resistance groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran's regional policy. The main question of the study is, "What is the place of resistance groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran's regional political strategy?". The hypothesis of the study is that "the Islamic Republic of Iran plays a stabilizing role in the region through collaboration with resistance groups against imperialism and intervention, a reality that serves the national interests of the region's Islamic countries." Based on the findings of the study, sponsoring the regional resistance groups provides stability and fosters the resistance discourse against US and Israeli intervention, leading to the stabilization of security for both Iran and other countries in the region. The method of the study is descriptive-analytical, and the theoretical framework is neo-classical realism.

**Keywords:** Islamic Republic of Iran, Islamic Revolution of 1979, Resistance groups, Regional policy, National security.

## Introduction

The triumph of the 1979 Islamic Revolution ushered in the formation of an Islamic awakening in the Middle East and the world of Islam. The Islamic Republic's inherent attachment to these politico-religious movements and its inspirational role as their prototype, in addition to its ideological beliefs aligned with the interests of the region's countries, have pushed Iran towards sponsoring these resistance movements. Political parties and organizations emerged from these movements that have found increasing significance in Iran's foreign policy due to their very ideological proximity.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the expansion of US and Israeli intervention in the Middle East, the collaboration between the Islamic Republic and resistance groups doubled in size and importance, giving way to the central place of these groups in Iran's foreign policy, which is assessed to be serving the interests of both sides. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to understand the process of the formation and role-taking of resistance groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran's regional policy. The main question of the study is, "What is the place of resistance groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran's regional political strategy?". The hypothesis of the study is that "the Islamic Republic of Iran plays a stabilizing role in the region thanks to its collaborations with regional resistance groups against imperialism and intervention, a reality that serves the national interests of the region's countries."

The organization of the current study is structured by first going to the theoretical framework, then introducing internal and external factors involved in the formation and increasing importance of resistance groups in Iran's regional strategy, and eventually overviewing the challenges and opportunities the alliance has brought about to both Iran and the resistance groups.

۱. چالش‌ها و فرصت‌ها: همکاری‌های منطقه‌ای (تهدید و

### Threat)

Neoclassical realism is a combination of classical realism and neorealism that interprets realities based on the study of countries' internal, international, and interactive mechanisms (Salimi and Ebrahimi, 2014/1393: 19). Neoclassical realism does not ignore how the world is organized in shaping how countries behave politically. Instead, it tries to improve upon neorealism by pointing out where it falls short and showing how a country's own internal politics also

matter. Therefore, neoclassical realism takes both systemic variables and state agency for granted (Dehghani Firouzabadi, *Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign Policy*, 2011/1390: 277).

Neoclassical realism deprecates the generic outlook of systemic theories to recognize internal processes through which behaviors and events evolve (Kitchen, 2010: 118). Unlike neorealism, which highlights the role of the international system's structural restrictions on the formation of state behaviors, neoclassical realism pays attention to the occasions at which states no longer abide by structural limitations and eventually deconstruct them (Rathbun, 2008: 296-۲۹۷). *در این دیدگاه، ساختار بین‌المللی به تنهایی تعیین‌کننده رفتار دولت‌ها نیست، بلکه عوامل داخلی نیز نقش مهمی در شکل‌دهی به رفتارها دارد. بنابراین، دولت‌ها می‌توانند با تغییر در ساختار داخلی، محدودیت‌های ساختاری بین‌المللی را دور بزنند.* the international system is anarchic, and thereby, state politics are defined by self-help and self-preservation. The anarchic nature of international relations as part of the international structure pushes states towards seeking power and security (Griffiths, 2007: 13).

As a result, neoclassical realism informs both the internal and international underpinnings of foreign policy and is of two types: offensive and defensive. States' power-seeking is an offensive manifestation of their devotion to neoclassical realism. John Mearsheimer (2003: 13) attributes states' power-seeking to the anarchic international structure and their distrust in their enemies' intentions. The collection of these factors creates conditions in which countries not only pursue balancing each other's threats but also strongly seek to maximize power. In such an approach, survival is the ultimate purpose of states.

On the other hand, the defensive front holds that the aim of states is to maximize security. Inasmuch as power-seeking states favor hegemony and maximize power, the security-seeking ones are simply after "threat elimination" and "maintaining relative security" (Barzegar, 2009/1388: 15-16). States struggle for survival by guaranteeing security and undergoing "collaboration" with other actors. In defensive realism, states do not adopt offensive behavior unless in reaction to cases of threat in which they suffice to preserve balance and contain the bullying agent. Reactions escalate only under conditions where security is gravely under threat (Moshirzadeh, ۲۰۰۹/۱۳۸۸: ۱۲۱). *در این دیدگاه، امنیت برای دولت‌ها اولویت دارد و آنها برای حفظ امنیت خود، ممکن است با سایر کشورها همکاری کنند.* asymmetric distribution of power, scholars posed the question of how other countries should react to the US unilateral hegemony.

Theorists such as Stephen M. Walt and Robert Pape have sought to adapt neorealism to contemporary world realities and improve the explanatory power of the balance of power theory by giving it a

broader definition. They did so by introducing the theories of “balance of threat” and “soft balancing”. In their view, post-Cold War states pursue a different sort of power balance that is no longer founded on hardware capabilities.

Walt is of the idea that states dread not the most powerful but the most threatening enemies against whom they dare to balance power. He maintained that threat is a combination of the states' offensive power, military might, geographic proximity, and probable intrusive intentions. In his view, states do not vie for power balancing in reaction to the increasing power of other states; what pushes them towards it is rather the degree of threat they feel. The core of Walt's theory is that states react to threats rather than powers. According to Walt, states' reaction to threats is twofold: they either balance power against the threatening state or coordinate themselves with the hegemon. In other terms, they form alliances for the purpose of safeguarding their survival and security (Mousavi Dehmourdi, Malakoutian and Ghafouri, 2016/1395: 52).

Following the legacy of the Cold War, many countries avoided the costs of balancing power against the US as the single world superpower. For various reasons, including the US military's might and national and international organizations' economic dependence on it, states avoid hard power balancing against global power. In the meantime, the US's expansive involvement policy forces a few states to replace methods for balancing Washington's power. Therefore, though Balance of Threat does not directly challenge the hegemon's military supremacy, it seeks to increase the costs of hard power for it (Simbor and Salehian, 2012/1391: 38-39). Balance of threat is a strategy built on making coalitions that, in the absence of bilateral or multilateral military alliances, is meant to increase the costs of direct conflict for the hegemon or the threatening power (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2005: 86-88).

According to Pape, in the new stage of power balance, direct confrontation with the US is highly costly for individual states. As a result, independent states prefer “soft balancing” measures to limit the US's unilateral, offensive military options. Although these measures do not challenge the US military's upper hand in the short run, in the long term they increase the costs of constant reliance on this upper hand and depreciate the number of states that are likely to endorse such a policy (Pape, 2005: 23).

With the end of the Cold War, Iran has been one of the countries that has replaced the policy of subservience with that of confrontation. Due to the Islamic Republic's belief system, defined

by its opposition to global imperialism and animosity toward the US, Iran has preferred to present a different definition of itself to the rewards of backing the hegemon. Consequently, over the past decades, the West has used various methods like sanctioning, direct military presence in the region, instrumental use of the region's reactionary states, and proxy wars to pressure Iran and underrate its power and geopolitical position.

Meanwhile, Iran's major foreign policy objective is to guarantee survival in an anarchic and self-help context. Anarchy forces Iran to pursue power and influence for the sake of survival and security (Pape, 2005: 23). In this way, and to realize its ideological goals, the Islamic Republic has looked for non-state allies. Concludingly, many of Iran's foreign policy stances must be understood in terms of internal and external balancing with the aim of subverting foreign threats and preserving internal security. The Islamic Republic's foreign policy in creating and empowering the resistance axis and favoring groups against "the ruling system and the imperial front" can be interpreted as external balancing, while its attempts at integrating its regional role following the Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon transformations are instances of enhancing regional influence (Pape, 2005: 26).

In conclusion, the most important element in the expansion of resistance groups after the collapse of the Soviet Union is the relationship between needs and costs. Iran's regional strategy must be understood in terms of its attempt to balance against the unilateral hegemon's threats. In fact, Iran's foreign policy strategy conveys a clear message that is not outside of the realistic discourse: the necessity of balancing power against the hegemon. Besides realism, ideologic beliefs have been involved in the role-taking of resistance groups in Iran's foreign policy.

## ۲. **مقاومت در برابر هژمون و تأثیر آن بر سیاست خارجی ایران**

With the end of the Iran-Iraq War as a testament to Iran's central role in the world of Islam (the Umm al-Qura theory), Iran's transnational ambitions became secondary to its national objectives. Although Iran's transnational goals are integral to the Constitution, they got peripheral due to the emerging preference for internal considerations post-war (Yaghoubi, 2008/1387: 233). In this era, the Iranian leaders were more than anything else preoccupied with reconstruction and economic development. As a result, Iran's

foreign policy leaned towards realism; modernization and economic development in the scope that the Iranian leaders pursued required trust-making, something that was dented by the radical revolutionary slogans a decade ago (Bagheri and Ebrahimi, ۲۰۱۶/۱۳۹۵: ۱۶۰).

Thereupon, the internal conditions confirmed the importance of redefining Iran's foreign policy priorities. Hashemi Rafsanjani's government prioritized reconstructing the war debris and pursued economic development in the Five-Year National Development Plan. Realism succeeded revolutionary idealism in the reconstruction era, replacing economic statism and the government's control of banks that characterized the first decade of the Revolution. The new economic policies abandoned the mass mechanisms of the 1980s and expanded ties with the global capitalist economy. Reconstruction was dependent on increased oil prices. It was also in need of improving relationships with oil-producing countries and cooperation with all countries for the purpose of guaranteeing foreign exchange resources. Hashemi indicated that we need a strong and dynamic economy to export the revolution; exporting ideology depends on turning into an economic role model in the region. In his belief, the survival of the revolution, let alone its exporting, is not possible without promising financial resources (Aghaei, 2008/1387: 12).

Compared to the previous decade, the policy of exporting the revolution was totally transformed during the reconstruction and was followed rather indirectly and in silence. The Islamic Republic embraced the notion that, with the realization of freedom and independence, Iran will naturally turn into a role model for the rest of the nations; all third nations and Islamic countries will inevitably turn to the model the Islamic Republic provides without the need for a special method or instrument of exporting the revolution. In this way, the internal conditions transformed the orientation of Iran's foreign policy, and the war ruins led the Iranian leaders to welcome a pragmatic approach that could balance transnational foreign policy as highlighted by the Constitution with promoting national development.

On the “neither East nor West” slogan that was deemed part and parcel of Iran's foreign policy post-Revolution, Hashemi Rafsanjani believed that the slogan does, by no means, convey an isolation message but a “totally defensive and national” one, implying “the pursuit of absolute independence from aliens and the superpowers in all political, economic, and military respects.” He promoted the

expansion of relations with all states based on mutual respect and shared interests, the de-escalation of relationships with neighboring countries, and the advancement of unity in the world of Islam (Hashemi Rafsanjani, 2015/1395).

Sponsoring the liberation movements was another part of Iran's foreign policy. Considering that Hashemi was equally engaged with internal affairs, he had to take into account potential threats by countries that might have complained about Iran's breach of non-intervention (Aghaei, 2008/1387). Overall, the pragmatic, conservative front came to power in the reconstruction era and found hegemony in defining Iran's foreign policy. The central element in this discourse is realism based on an Islamic foundation. This discourse sought to both preserve Islamic ideals in foreign policy and take notice of national limitations and specifications (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2012/1391).

This discourse, however, brought about contradictions between state policies and strategies and the Constitution, indicating a brotherly commitment to world Muslims and the defense of the oppressed by challenging the unbalanced global status quo. In other words, the reconstruction government of Hashemi was unable to meet these transnational commitments due to internal restraints. In fact, as an ideological state, Iran could not survive without transnational purposes but equally needed to strike a balance between purposes and instruments.

For example, Palestine has been a major concern of Iranian foreign policy for decades. The Islamic Republic also introduced itself as the patron of Lebanon Shiites, who fought in the first-line anti-Zionism front. The very Middle East concern of Iran brought about a kind of paradox in its regional and international politics. On one hand, Iran frontlines foreign policy sought close relationships with Arab and Muslim nations in the region while also improving relations with the West, and on the other, revolutionary and ideological responsibility obliged confrontation with the existing global order.

The solution to this paradox was concentrating on the creation of Shiite and Islamic "resistance cores" on the frontlines and establishing a kind of "negative balance" with world powers by employing these cores. This method simultaneously took Iran's "national" and "Islamic" interests into account and was considered Hashemi's strategic approach. In fact, the motivation to resort to resistance groups arose from legitimation, deniability, benefits, and financial and life casualties in the internal affairs of Iran. With the

commencement of the reconstruction era, the role of “power balancing” of the Shiite resistance groups and its implications for Iran's political-security approaches were undeniable in all regional and international foreign projects, turning the resistance front into Iran's foreign policy bargaining chip (Akbari, 2016/1395).

### ۳. چگونگی تبدیل شدن جبهه مقاومت شیعی به یک ابزار در سیاست خارجی ایران

Countries with strategic purposes related to changing the status quo, especially those against the world powers, are prone to security threats. The Islamic Republic is among the countries under geopolitical threat with non-complying security and strategic aims. This way, great powers seek to restrain Iran's security milieus, and regional actors like Saudi Arabia and Israel make great efforts to confront Iran's security approaches (Mottaghi, 2010: 13).

The geopolitical situation, oil and gas reserves, preoccupation with Muslim world problems, and animosity with western imperialism have convinced the West, especially the US, to widely pose threats, from war to sanctions, against Iran. From the western viewpoint, the Islamic regime is the US and Israel's most stubborn enemy, who has interrupted the westward flow of energy, stalled the Middle East peace talks, demoralized Israel and denied its totality by financially and spiritually supporting jihad groups, and promulgated political Islam in defiance of American values (Adami and Keshavarz Moghaddam, 2015/1394: 16). In response, the US has widely applied sanctions against Iran, threatened it with preemptive attacks, and repeatedly talked of regime change. All these have motivated Iran to optimize its preventative power (Fars News Agency, 2011/1390).

In advancing its foreign policy and condemning the conservative region states, who are criticized as the agents of “American Islam” and traitors to the Palestine cause, Iran did not rely on conventional instruments of international relations. Animosity with both superpowers led Iran to pursue confrontation and aggressive policy, in stark contrast to the mechanisms of the bipolar world system that required an alliance with one power against the other, which Walt highlights as structurally essential to the bipolar world order (Ramezani, 2013/1392: 55-56). The radical policy of exporting the revolution and defending Muslims and liberation movements created as much anxiety among the undemocratic Arab states of the region as pessimism among the superpowers, giving way to Iran's

isolation. In practice, Iran had confronted the international system relying on its limited resources; during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, not only the Arab states but also the West backed Saddam. One of the most important consequences of the war was that the Iranian leaders learned from their disability to fight on many fronts (Navazani, 2005/1384: 63-70).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the bipolar structure of the international system ceased, and the US remained the sole global superpower. Many countries of the eastern bloc had no way other than upholding American liberal democracy. The situation for Iran which which opposed the US superpower got complicated; based on its belief system, Iran could not endorse the unipolar status of the former collaborator in the bipolar system.

Then, the defining factor in Iran's foreign policy became the antagonism against the US. Iran found that for fighting its main antagonist and its regional ally Israel, there is a need to build a coalition. The end of the Iraq war in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 paved the way for such a coalition-building project (Hajiyousefi, 2002/1381: 10).

The end of the bipolar system created a new security environment in the region and catalyzed the shift in Iran's foreign policy from idealism to coalition-building (Hajiyousefi, 2005/1384: 6). In other words, the aims of the Islamic Republic changed due to the transformations in the international system and its internal demands. For instance, Iran adopted a pragmatic approach to the transformations in Central Asia and the Caucasus that took into account Russia's place and later had a determining impact on Tajikistan's internal war as well as the Chechnya and Karabagh crises.

On the other hand, with the end of the Cold War, the revolutionary countries needed to expand their methods to resist international pressures and influence the regional environment. Due to their restrictions, such countries naturally face trouble expanding their methods. Among others, such a country could not hope to make regional defense treaties. A country with revisionist views could only influence substate and social forces using its political, defense, and security might. Therefore, states with liberatory inclinations have a hard time carving out strategies and audiences (Mosallanejad, 2011/1390: 119-120).

This way, Iran tried to promote its hostile foreign policy strategy by investing in regional anti-imperialist and anti-Israel groups and movements. In its pragmatic approach, Iran turned to the

conventional coalition-building policy and balance-creation for confronting the US with the broader aim of escaping the post-Cold War demand for endorsing the American global power. In other words, acting based on the theory of the Islamic government and the antagonism against global imperialism and Zionism and improving self-help and containment against the US and its regional allies who militarily hold the upper hand, the Islamic Republic turned to the strategy of creating resistance groups as its asymmetric instrument for ensuring interests and deterring threats.

In other words, the mobilization of overseas groups who favor Iran's ideology was developed as a foreign policy strategy that enabled Iran to withstand US offensive stances. The advent of resistance groups in Iran-West opposition turned into a long story that has lasted from the end of the Cold War onwards.

In fact, the defensive and security mission of the Islamic Republic as a symbol of the "critical power" against the imperial powers represents the opposition against the hegemon's intervention in international politics, while resistance groups and wars have made up the main element in Iran's strategic policy-making in the Middle East. Iran enjoys extensive borderlines with threatening neighbors, leaving it in serious need of power balancing (Mosallanejad and Samadi, ۲۰۱۸/۱۳۹۷: ۲۰۷). در شرایطی که ایران در منطقه، با کشورهای قدرتمند و قدرتی-بزرگ روبرو است، به عنوان یک قدرت منطقه‌ای، نیاز دارد تا با همکاری گروه‌های غیردولتی، امنیت و منافع خود را در برابر فشارهای گسترده ایالات متحده آمریکا حفظ کند.

Overall, the collapse of the bipolar system and the end of the imposed war against Saddam convinced Iran to pull another direct confrontation down to the bottom of its defensive-security priorities list and further appreciate the strategy of coalition with resisting non-state groups and ideologies. In other words, the new self-help conditions that had emerged as a result of the multipolar/unipolar structure, in addition to the internal affairs following the Iraq War, resulted in a behavior change in Iran's foreign policy. In consequence, the major reason behind Iran's concentration on resistance groups, based on a strategic logic, comes from the nascent self-help circumstances post-Cold War rather than the formation of the so-called Shiite crescent or the Persianate empire.

۴. **Defensive Policy**

### Defensive Policy

In recent years, Iran has managed to add pressure on its opponents without entering into direct conflict (Farhadi and Nassirzadeh, ۲۰۱۸/۱۳۹۷: ۳۴). **Defensive Policy** policies and rearrange the regional order. In this way, Tehran made the most of the post-9/11 regional turmoil and gained major hits by increasing Washington's security expenses. In fact, low-intensity military and security battles are reflections of Iran's US approach (Mottaghi, 2010: 9-10).

Today, the Islamic Republic has demonstrated the art of gradual occupation without replacing its flags, from Lebanon to Iraq to Yemen. Tehran's invisible hegemony reaches farther than Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Sana'a. Iran's flag does not hang above the national flags in these capital cities, nor do the Iranian military forces march in their streets, but the reach of Iran's influence has rapidly expanded throughout western Asia, and this victory has been recognized by pro-Iran groups throughout the region (Daoud, 2015). After effectively planning and executing its regional strategy, Iran has adapted its military and security apparatus to the realities of the region, enhancing a pragmatic approach to maintaining its security with a satisfactory success rate (Mohamadi, 2018/1397). For instance, in recent years, Iran has relied on its resistance group allies to restrict Israel within its northern borders and contain its maneuvering power, considering its limited geography. In Yemen too, Iran has sponsored Houthis and changed the regional power balance by geopolitically restricting Saudi Arabia in the strategic Bab el-Mandeb and the Red Sea with the least possible expenditure. Some of the potential and achievements of Iran's resistance group allies are as follows:

- Iran's ideology of the “resistance axis” and its propensity for executing asymmetric wars have made possible the weakening of the US's regional presence. The doctrine of asymmetric war and Tehran's reliance on unconventional military methods are two of the US's major challenges, as American analysts maintain that Washington's high military power has preempted Russia and China, a fact that is not still true about Iran (Robinson & et al., ۲۰۱۸: ۱۲۵-۱۲۹).
- London based International Institute for Strategic Studies has evaluated Iran's regional military upper hand as the achievement

of its resistance group allies. It reports Iran's major weapon to be its reliance on “third-party capacities,” or the Shiite militias. Based on this evaluation, the US and its allies in the region might be supreme in their “conventional military power,” but Iran's network of influence made up of its proxies is of rather greater influence in comparison to its ballistic missiles, nuclear program, or military forces. This has skewed the balance of “effective forces” involved in the Middle East struggles in favor of Iran. The Institute's analysts believe that in modern times, no government has been as influential in regional struggles as Iran. Iran's network of influence that works variably from one country to another is Tehran's most important tool for pressuring rivals, regional or international. “Externally, the doctrine aims to raise the risk to adversaries without increasing the risks and costs to Iranian forces” (IISS, 2019). Iran avoids direct confrontation with the US and is aware that such a war takes much more military power than Iran could afford; instead, it pursues asymmetric war through its nonstate allies.

- Iran's advisory involvement in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen has transformed the power and reach of the “resistance axis.” Tehran affords promised military bases, dedicated allies, and sustained influence in these areas. Rather than a “sponsor/proxy” relationship, the resistance axis is today more akin to an alliance under the leadership of Iran and centered on the communal security and widespread preemption that is generated from Iran to its allies, thanks to the borderless dispatch of forces. The Atlantic Council describes Iran as having guaranteed its footprint in key Middle Eastern areas. The emergence of the resistance axis is, thus, understood as a tough test of the US Middle East strategy, a direct threat to Washington's regional allies, and a key challenge for the politicians in the White House (Katzman, 2019).
- Idealists highly emphasize the role of ideology in the formation of alliances and coalitions. The reality is, however, that in cases of confronting a grave threat, countries do not overemphasize shared ideologies. For instance, Iran's policy of empowering non-Shiite groups such as Hamas and the Islamic Jihad is justified considering their anti-Zionist stances. In other words, they are ideological aliens whose shared enemy has given them proximity to Iran and are recognized by Iran as members of the resistance axis. Evidently, ideology better strengthens alliances when mixed with shared interests (Ghavami and Imani, ۲۰۱۲/۱۳۹۱: ۵۱). *مجله مطالعات راهبردی، دوره ۱۳، شماره ۲، زمستان ۱۳۹۶، صفحات ۵۱۱-۵۳۲*

theory, Iran's regional influence and coalition-making are far from constructing the Shiite crescent against the Arab and Sunni countries, but rather a response to threats that Tehran receives from the US and its allies.

- Although groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba' in Iraq manifestly follow theory of Jurist Guardianship-an indicator of their ties with the Islamic Republic-the success of this theory is not the sole cause behind their coalition. Beyond the theory of Jurist Guardianship, Iran highlights ideology and symbolism to foster the loyalty of regional advocates. Tehran relied on the ideology of "resistance against US political objectives" and incorporated even Sunni groups such as Hamas, which do not sponsor the Jurist Guardianship doctrine. Another motivation behind the Iran and resistance groups coalition is made up of symbolic figures like the charisma that these groups identify Imam Khomeini, Ayatollah Khamenei, Sayed Hassan Nasrullah, and Ghassem Soleimani, the former Quds Militia leader, with (Smyth, Michetti and Daniels, 2017).
- Prior to the US attack on Iraq and the occurrence of the Islamic Awakening,<sup>1</sup> the power balance favored the Arab conservative countries of the region, something Shiites later managed to change. More importantly, with the advancement of the Shiite culture as a result of regional transformations like the promotion of a Shiite government in Iraq, the situation was ripe for Iran to both add to its preemptive might and revive the Shiite culture, in addition to forming close relationships with various areas and underpinning an integrated civilization (Adami and Keshavarz Moghaddam, 2015/1394).

Overall, the expansion of links throughout the resistance front and the geopolitical connection from Tehran to Beirut to Baghdad and Damascus have upgraded the strategic status of this front even more. In these situations, the risk of integration to an inaccessible point has turned into a serious threat to the oppressor regime. Henry Kissinger, former US foreign minister, deemed Iran the most potential country in the region for making a hegemon vis-à-vis the ISIS and reminded that the former is, as a result, a much more threatening enemy for the US than the latter (Sohrabi, 2017/1396: 44).

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<sup>1</sup>The "Arab spring" in western literature

In the viewpoint of the American analysts at the Washington Institute, vast regional influence and reliance on resistance groups are Iran's main power levers against the US, which threatens the latter's interests in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen (Knights, 2017).

The outcome of these transformations in the regional power balance favors Iran. The formation of the unified transnational army of resistance is one of the most important achievements of Iran's regional program: a borderless army with strategic depth that is able to define defense in farther spots than Iran's real territorial borders. The "global mobilization of Islam" under the leadership of Iran and of multi-national layers can promote Tehran's anti-US interests in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and other strategic points without the need for considerable field presence by Iran (Clarke and Smyth, 2017).

۵. **سیاست دفاعی ایران در منطقه خاور میانه**

### **Defensive Policy**

Resorting to the strategy of resistance groups in the region can entail limitations and harm to Iran. Some of the probable harms are as follows:

- Basically, proxy wars are suitable for purposes like frustrating the rival's military, political, economic, social, and ideological resources. Involving the rival in a multi-layer front is the erosive strategy of proxy wars (Shirazi, 2015/1394). Thereupon, involving Iran in proxy wars to diminish its regional influence is among the strategies that the US and its allies have adopted in recent years (Ghiasvandi and Tarkashvand, 2017/1396). Also, the adversaries of Iran have attempted to build coalitions and take up strategies to prevent its increasing influence and geopolitical upper hand in the region (Ghiasvandi and Tarkashvand, 2017/1396: 197). The reality is that Iran has not managed to reach a turning point through these wars. Therefore, Iran needs to take into account the economic and political obstacles in its way of evolving into a regional power (Pankratenko, 2014).
- With the passage of time, the US and its allies, including Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, have made a key strategic move in reproducing the takfiri, Salafi movement of Al-Nusrah and the ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Ahrar al-Sunnah in Lebanon, Bukuharam in Nigeria, and al-Shabab in Somalia as the antidotes to the Islamic Awakening. This is done with the purpose of containing, controlling, and deviating from the Islamic Awakening

movement and dissolving the geopolitical chain of resistance. These groups rely on aggressive behavior and psychological tactics to confront their Shiite counterparts (Mahmoudi Raja, ۲۰۱۵/۱۳۹۴).

- The West and regional allies have led the proxy wars by indoctrinating Iranophobia, Shiite phobia, and securitization of Iran's regional role in order to push the other states of the region into direct and indirect confrontation with Iran. Relying on the proxy, terrorist groups such as the Taliban, Al-Nusrah, and ISIS, which maintain ideologic divergence with Iran, and attempts to manipulate Iran's civil society by sponsoring the opposition like the MEK, Pazhak, and Jundallah are other efforts of Iran's enemies (Mardaneh, 2015/1394).
- In the US strategy, the expenses of confronting Shiite empowerment and the ideas of the Islamic Republic in the region should not be paid out of the US's pocket but that of the takfiri groups. The US has come to the conclusion that the real Middle East does not afford the US's maximum interests. Therefore, foisting internal wars, changing powerful states into weak semi-states in the resistance axis, and their probable dissolution could better fulfill the US's interests (Adami and Keshavarz Moghaddam, 2015/1394).
- At the regional level, Saudi Arabia has multiplied the geopolitical balancing and Shiite/Sunni polarization project by sponsoring the takfiri groups in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria in the western environment of Iran and lowering the security of Iran's borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan on the eastern side. At the international level, the most important element influential on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy against takfiri terrorism is the role of this country in the proxy strategy of the US's foreign policy. In fact, Saudi Arabia takes advantage of its geopolitical potential as the origin of takfiri terrorism and acts as the US agent in the anti-Iran proxy war (Hedayati and Moradi, 2014/1393: 25).
- The West uses imperialist rhetoric in judging Iran's regional popularity and projects such an imperialist nature to Iran's regional influence in order to indoctrinate the idea, that rivaling the US, Iran seeks its own hegemon place; the "Shiite crescent" idea that proposes this allegation is in line with this propaganda policy. This is while, from the ideological viewpoint of the Islamic Republic, such hegemony is outlawed regardless of who takes the place.
- Restricting Iran's defense of resistance groups is part of the US

policy of maximum pressure on the Islamic Republic. The US has used information operations and diplomatic measures to drive a wedge between Tehran and its proxies, thereby reducing Iran's regional support. In its proxy wars against Iran, the US has always appeared as a supporter of Iran's regional rivals instead of entering direct confrontation with Iran's proxies like the resistance axis-this was true at least before Trump's administration (Fisher, 2016).

- Iran's financial and spiritual support of Hezbollah, Hamas, Hashd al-Sha'abi, and Ansarollah-elemental to the security calculations of their countries of origin-has bought Tehran the accusation of building its own military army in these countries. These countries ask themselves, "What if Iran intends to replicate this successful experience by establishing militia branches there one day?" Since most of such militias are made up of Shiite forces, Iran is prone to another accusation, that of sectarianism. Such a conclusion has converged anti-Iran regional forces and motivated them to support Sunni militias in return while, at the same time, persecuting the Shiite population in their countries under the conviction of being Iran's fifth column (Hosseini, ۲۰۱۸/۱۳۹۷).
- One of Iran's strategic weaknesses in supporting its proxies is the inevitability of taking responsibility for every action they take. Even if some of these actions are against Iran's interests, Iran might need to pay for things that could have been avoided. Iran's presence in other countries justifies the accusation of involvement in certain creepy actions (Hosseini, 2018/1397).

Overall, protecting the resistance axis has become an indispensable part of Iran's security doctrine and the mutual security dependence of Iran, and this axis is of major importance in Iran's foreign policy. It is for this reason that the downfall of Bashar Assad and the Shiite government of Iraq has led to the downturn of the resistance axis and Shiite discourse, Iran's isolation, losses in Syria and access to Hezbollah and Hamas, the dominance of Saudi Arabia and anti-Iran states, and the eventual decrease in Iran's security rate (Adami and Keshavarz Moghaddam, 2015/1394).

In the meantime, although Iran has earned much self-confidence and courage as a result of adopting a counter-proxy strategy, the deep geopolitical and sectarian rivalries in western Asia have never let any state in the region reach stability and peace. The formation of a coalition of Sunni states under the leadership of Saudi Arabia pushes Iran towards reciprocity. Considering the revolutionary

government in power in Iran and its opposition to the Salafi governments of the region on the one hand and the intervention of transregional powers on the other hand, Iran's national security is facing challenges. As a result, the Iranian leaders need to avoid overestimating their regional and international capabilities. The Islamic Republic is advised to adopt a more conventional solution to turn all these militia groups into legal political groups and parties in their countries of origin (as demonstrated by the relative success of Hezbollah in Lebanon). The incorporation of these groups into their own legal and civil structures and/or integrating their military branches into their national army can create the possibility of supporting them in rather formal, international legal procedures in addition to their integration into the political context of their countries (Fisher, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

Understandably, for the Islamic Republic, nothing is more important than preserving national security and territorial totality. The imposed war with Iraq and the alignment of most western and Arab states with Saddam demonstrated that Iran suffers from “strategic solitude.” Defensive realists indicate concepts such as security and power to evaluate Iran's strategy of foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union as the manifestation of the Iranian leaders' perception of the US threat and the resulting preference for striking a power balance against it. Iran's regional plan ideally terminates its strategic solitude and puts it at the epicenter of a geopolitical unit called the Shiite crescent in the language of the West and the Middle East Arab states.

Iran seeks to confront the US's unilateralism and threats with a degree of regional balance and relies on resistance groups to contain its increasing regional presence. In other terms, Iran's strategic approach to the US is a balance of threat with emphasis on expanding regional influence and reliance on resistance groups; every regional interaction by Iran must be understood based on this logic. In fact, due to economic and military limitations in confronting the US and the alignment of all regional states with US politics, Iran has defined its regional strategy based on asymmetric tactics and cooperation with non-state actors.

In this way, the resistance axis serves Iran's balance of threat against Israel, the US, and Saudi Arabia. The members of this coalition commit to communal security, and Iran acts as the underwriter of this coalition. In return, these allies widely provide







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