

Iran's foreign policy in the Syrian crisis with emphasis on the theory of defensive realism

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Abstract

Syria, which is considered as a strategic ally of Iran in the region after the victory of the Islamic Revolution and always supported Iran during the imposed war, since 2011, it has been in crisis and civil war on the one side and pressure from Western countries on the other. Following the escalation of these tensions, it's seemed necessary for Iran to support this strategic ally. Because apart from this alliance, Syria was also considered as a link between Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon and the loss of this strategic ally means the loss of Iran's revenue in the region and even the confrontation with Israel. All of these factors led Iran to establish a military presence in Syria to protect these interests to pay the least cost in the face of this crisis. But Iran's military presence in Syria showed the flaws of Iran's power to the countries of the region, even some politicians inside the country. This led us to examine the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the face of the Syrian crisis, as well as its military presence in the country in the context of defensive realism. To prove that this policy is in line with the defense of internal security and the protection of foreign interests along with maintaining order in the Middle East. The present study uses descriptive-analytical method and based on the theory of defensive realism to examine Iran's positions and views on the Syrian crisis.

Keywords: Crisis, Syria, Foreign Policy, Iran, Defensive Realism

Introduction

After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, contrary to what existed in the Pahlavi era, Iran's foreign policy has always been based on defending internal security, countering terrorism and non-aggression against countries in the region. This policy was well reflected in the Iran-Iraq war, when they did not allow the continuation of the war and accepted UN Resolution 598, after expelling the Iraqi troops from the country. But what illustrates Iran's defense policy in the international arena is that the non-aggression against the countries of the region and at the same time military and civilian assistance to establish order and security in the region and counter terrorism. Because Iran's internal security depends on security in the entire Middle East region and any tensions and conflicts at the farthest point can have a significant impact on regional and international order. The important point that can be clearly seen in the Syrian crisis.

What is evident in the Syrian crisis and Iran's military intervention in this country That is, both Iran and its allies in the region seek to prevent the spread of terrorism and any tensions in the region. But to achieve this, they do not seek to increase their power, Rather maintaining existing order is a form of gaining power Thus, the internal security of each of these countries will be ensured. This article tries to discuss Iran's foreign policy That is the same defense policy and maintaining the existing order that is Away from any tensions and conflicts in the area Examine in the context of defensive realism and to prove this hypothesis That any Iranian military intervention in Syria to maintain security inside the country It is also the fight against terrorism. But the main question that arises in this regard is how Iran seeks to defend internal security with a military presence in a third country? This article, after examining defensive realism and adapting Iran's foreign policy to this theoretical framework, will also answer the following questions: Why is Iran seeking the survival of the current government in Syria? What are Iran's interests in Syria? How can Iran's foreign policy in Syria be considered defensive?

First of all, we need to get acquainted with the theory of defensive realism so that we can examine Iran's foreign policy in the Syrian crisis in

this context. After this acquaintance, we will deal with the history of relations between the two countries and we will examine the grounds for the formation of these relations. And then we will examine Iran's current interests in this country and in the region, as well as Iran's approach to military intervention in Syria in the context of defensive realism.

Theoretical topics

Defensive realism

To understand the concept of defensive realism, we must first look at the source of this theory, which is realism. Realist thinkers believe that any competition for national interests by countries and for power in the international arena is within the framework of realism. In fact, in this context, the world is in an anarchy in which each country seeks to gain more power and maintain and develop its own interests. Therefore, in this theory, the world has never been in a state of stability, and from time to time we will see disorder and insecurity in a corner of the world. Throughout history, this school has always had pessimistic views about the possibility of peace between the superpowers, but today it has become more or less optimistic. According to this school, although the intensity of competition between the great powers fluctuates, they are always afraid of each other. According to this theory, the main goal of all countries is to maximize their share of world power and gain power to the detriment of other countries. In fact, only the hegemonic country supports the maintenance of order in the world and other countries are trying to upset the balance of power in their favor (Mearsheimer, 1393: 19-22).

Now the question arises, what is the main reason for governments' fear of each other? In *The Tragedy of the Great Powers*, Mearsheimer cites a variety of reasons for this fear. Among other things, the lack of a central body to head governments and be able to protect them from each other has led them to seek power to protect their own interests. Of course, the development of other interests is a reason that has always caused countries to have a series of offensive capabilities to expand their interests (Mearsheimer, 1393: 19-22). Realism believes that governments are the main players in international politics and there is no distinction between good and bad government and that countries, regardless of

culture, political system behave according to the same logic, which is the acquisition of power. According to realists, power defines national interests, which means that as long as the government does not have sufficient capacity and power, it cannot provide its interests (Ghavam, 1393: 79-84).

But the theories of this school do not end here and it has always undergone change and development, which has caused thoughts to branch out from this school. Neoclassical realism is one of the divisions formed in the direction of these books, with more emphasis on the fact that the military power of a country can determine its ambition in foreign policy. This school, like other branches of realism, has divisions. Jack Snyder divides neoclassical realism into offensive and defensive. Although in this classification, both categories of countries are measured based on the degree of power and security, but each has a specific view of the standard of power in the international arena and how to use it. A view that is the fundamental difference between offensive realism and defensive realism. First, a short definition of offensive realism is presented so that the exact concept of defensive realism can be better understood (Moshirzadeh, 2008: 129).

Aggressive realists believe that disorder in the international arena causes countries to take action to establish their desired order in the world. Such a discipline requires the attainment of maximum power. All of these approaches are aimed at increasing the security and survival of the state in the international system. Scholars of this school of thought believe that governments, after gaining wealth, seek to increase military power to maximize their power in the international arena. The sole purpose of this policy is to maximize influence and domination over neighboring countries or even to gain world power. Influence and intervention in other countries to achieve their goals and prevent other countries from gaining power are other goals of aggressive realism. John Mearsheimer defines the goal of aggressive realism as follows: "The main goal of any state is to maximize its share of world power, which means gaining power to the detriment of others" (Moshirzadeh, 2008: 130-132). With this general definition, we go to the theoretical framework of this article, namely the same defensive realism.

Despite the similarities between defensive and offensive realism, the two behavioral patterns of

realism are quite different. In the school of realism, the government plays a fundamental role and the effort to maintain order in the international system to maintain or increase security is one of the goals of governments, an issue that is quite different in the behavioral patterns of offensive and defensive realism. Basically spread. In defensive realism, unlike offensive realism, which sought to increase power and influence as much as possible in different countries, the effort is to maintain security and maintain existing order. In a way, Waltz considers the first and most vital goal of any government to maintain its position in the system and not to achieve maximum power (Ghasemi, 2009: 104).

Defensive realism believes that the policy of countries has always been to maintain and increase internal security. In this regard, there is no need to increase power or influence in other countries. Increasing power in countries means when the security of these countries is endangered or threatened by other countries. In this case, too, the power of these countries increases as long as the existing international order and internal security are maintained (Barzegar, 2009, p. 125). Therefore, the main difference between the two models is only in the amount of power they use. A component that in standard realism is used to distinguish between two patterns of behavior. Now that we are a little familiar with the intellectual framework of realism and defensive realism, we want to examine Iran's foreign policy towards the Syrian crisis in this intellectual framework.

Iran has always been considered by many superpowers due to its strategic position and location in the Middle East geopolitical region. Of course, the existence of underground resources and the exploitation of oil and gas reserves have doubled the importance of this country, so that countries such as the United States, Britain and Russia have always sought to infiltrate and exploit Iran's resources. An issue that has been repeatedly observed throughout history. Prior to the victory of the Islamic Revolution, due to the alignment of the Pahlavi government's foreign policy with the interests of the superpowers, these countries simply obtained their own interests and dictated their policies to influence the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran and the Middle East. Shahriari et al., 2016: 127). After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, all these policies were changed in such a way that Iran's past friends were on the opposite side and sought to exert influence in Iran and increase

power and influence in the region. Numerous failures have led these superpowers to seek to shape various crises in the strategic Middle East region.

There can be only one reason for the crisis in different countries in the region, which causes insecurity in all countries, and that is the influence of countries such as the United States and Britain in the region to increase power and influence in the region and also to achieve benefits such as cheap oil. And other underground resources. The crisis that occurred in the neighborhood of Iran and Iraq in the past few years with the invisible presence of Iranians left the country and moved to Syria to move the military front against terrorism and superpowers away from the borders of Iran. In recent years, this crisis has taken shape in Syria, a country that, despite cultural, racial and ethnic differences and even domestic political structure, has had a friendly relationship with Iran in the past (Shahriari et al., 2016: 127). Now, Iran's military presence in this country and helping to suppress any crisis and maintain the government based in this country has led some to accuse Iran of military intervention and consider the Islamic Republic as a hostile and belligerent country. But the opposite is also tangible, and that is helping a war-torn country in a terrorist crisis, as well as maintaining regional security and, ultimately, maintaining Iran's internal security.

Iran's military presence in Syria is more than a show of strength and influence in the countries of the region in Iran's foreign policy, it is a kind of protection of interests and not disturbing the existing order in the region. With this issue raised, the question arises as to how Iran seeks to defend internal security with a military presence in a third country? And basically, what does help to resolve the Syrian crisis have to do with the security and interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran? To better understand this issue, we want to examine the relations between the two countries, a relationship that changed from hostile to friendly after the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the change in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic.

Mutual union

To gain a correct understanding of Iran's military presence in Syria in recent years, we need to examine the history of relations between the two countries. Basically, if we want to study the relations

between these two countries, we must divide it into two general periods before and after the victory of the Islamic Revolution. Different periods in which in each period a group of countries as friends and another group in the opposite point of Iran.

- Iran's alliance with Syria: In 1946, when Syria officially declared its independence, its relations with Iran were completely hostile. An anti-Zionist and anti-American country could never establish relations with a country that was supported by the West and the United States. So much so that the Syrians considered Iran an undisputed servant of the West and the United States, and this led to enmity between the two countries. With the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the change of Iran's foreign policy from being under the protection of an independent country, the paper turned towards establishing friendly relations with Syria and even paved the way for the strategic union of the two countries (Niakoei et al., 2013: 125). Over time, Syria became one of Iran's most important allies and the only Arab ally in the eight-year imposed war, to the point that the Syrians condemned any invasion of the Islamic Republic. But this is just the beginning of the work of the two countries, so that later important bilateral relations were formed between the two countries, from trade exchanges and the construction of machine-building factories to cooperation in the ports sector and the implementation of economic projects (Naji et al., 2015: 57).

- The importance of Syria for Iran: After the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the formation of the alliance between Iran and Syria, this country became an ally in order to advance Iran's goals. So that after the escalation of tensions between Iran and Israel, Syria was considered a kind of front of conflict with Israel. Syria, on the other hand, was the link between Iran and Iraq to Lebanon, which was already on the resistance front, and also the only way to transfer Iranian and Iraqi oil and gas to Europe. Therefore, any conflict and tension in this country was to the detriment of three countries influencing trade and regional order, especially Iran, which is itself a strategic country (Fatemi Nasab et al., 2011: 179).

- The crisis in Syria: The crisis in Syria has two internal and external roots. The internal root of the crisis is the political stagnation, which is the illegitimacy of the country's political system among the majority of society. This means that only 13% of the total population of the country are Shiites and supporters of Bashar al-Assad, and the rest want a change in the

government cabinet. But the other internal root of the crisis in Syria is the recession, which has not been unaffected by the global economic crisis. Despite the failure of Bashar al-Assad to deliver on his promises to change the country's economy and perpetuate poverty and unemployment, popular discontent has sparked protests against the ruling regime. Recent movements in the Arab world or the Arab Spring that toppled governments similar to those in Syria, as well as foreign interventions such as arming protesters and waiting for a weak Syria to form in the neighborhood of the Zionist regime, are the two external roots of the crisis in Syria. They go (Sharifian et al., 2012: 150-153).

An overview of the roots of the crisis in Syria suggests that the ruling regime, led by Bashar al-Assad's Alawite Shiite regime, has legitimacy among only 13 percent of the local population and among several Shiite countries, with Western and Arab countries and 87 percent of Sunnis. Religion inside the country wants a change in the ruling system. Despite this unacceptability, in which category does Iran fall? Considering what has happened between Iran and Syria after the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the friendly relations that have been established between the two countries, as well as Syria's position in Iran's allied neighbor, Lebanon, and the arrival of Iran, Iraq and Lebanon to each other. A friendly government will bring many strategic benefits to Iran. Despite these interests, what will be Iran's foreign policy to maintain the ruling political system in Syria? A policy in the direction of aggressive realism that seeks to increase Iran's power in the region and also increase its influence in the countries of the region, or a policy in line with defensive realism that seeks to maintain order in the region and prevent other countries from infiltrating and losing internal interests and security?

Defensive policy

After the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the change in the domestic and foreign policies of this country, the Islamic Republic was placed in front of the western countries and its allies in the region. This political confrontation is well evident in the eight years of holy defense and even the subsequent sanctions against Iran. Iran's policies in all these events have clearly shown that Iran has never sought and will not seek to increase its power in the region, and will never take military action until there is no threat or aggression against this country.

In the imposed war, Iran took military action until it expelled the Iraqi military from its territory, after which it adopted UN Resolution 598. This policy is tangible even against the actions of other countries in the region. The cooperation of the Arab countries with the superpowers and the design of various programs to reduce Iran's power and popularity in the region, which never caused Iran to take a hostile position towards these countries and seek influence in these countries.

But the main topic of this article is the study of Iran's foreign policy in the Syrian crisis. Where Iran's interests and even its internal security depend. Syria is of geostrategic importance to Iran because both politically, the strong ties between the two countries could strengthen Hezbollah support in Lebanon, and its strategic position could be Iran's superior position in a region where Arab countries and governments are evolving. Strengthen the alliance with the West have fallen one by one. Apart from the above, Syria can be considered as a front against the Zionist regime and Western countries, which have always sought to infiltrate Iran's neighboring countries through Israel. On the other hand, the proximity of Syria and Lebanon has caused Iran to seek more and more alliance with Syria, because the loss of Syria means the only remaining ally of Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon on the counter-terrorism front (Shahriari et al., 2016: 134-136).

Iran's military presence in Syria is not only an aid to the survival of the ruling regime in this country, but also a defense of the security of the strategic allies of the Islamic Republic. Syria, as an ally of Iran in the region, is considered a supporter of Hezbollah on the front line against the Zionist regime and a supporter of Palestine. With the loss of this geostrategic ally in the region, Iran's connection with other allies will be practically cut off, which means the loss of the confrontation with Western countries and Israel, which seek to isolate Iran in the region. On the other hand, the loss of this alliance will practically bring the shadow of war and security crisis closer to Iran's borders. Therefore, maintaining the ruling regime in Syria in order to maintain the counter-terrorism front to keep insecurity away from the country's borders and even internal insecurity will be cost-effective (Naji et al., 1394: 61).

Maintaining the alliance between Iran, Syria and Lebanon has another dimension, and that is the lack of access of the United States and its Arab allies

to the geostrategic regions of the region and the implementation of policies of pressure against the Islamic Republic. The alliance has somehow reduced US influence in the Middle East, effectively jeopardizing its energy security. As the United States moves away from the Middle East, other conservative countries in the region will virtually withdraw from US support and pursue policies of regional order away from tensions. On the other hand, Iran's alliance with Syria and Lebanon in Israel's neighborhood to support Palestine has created insecurity on Israel's borders (Shirazi, 2014: 91-109). All these reasons clearly show that Iran seeks to maintain the existing order and the ruling system in its allied countries, rather than to increase its power in the region, in order to maintain the security of its interests in these countries and in the region.

What is in line with the school of defense realism in Iran's foreign policy is a policy aimed at maintaining the existing order and away from any desire to increase the country's power in order to reach out to other countries or expand its influence in the region. What drives Iran to a military presence in the Iraq crisis is to maintain the ruling political system in the country to protect Iran's interests in the region. Interests that are in line with Iran's internal security. Therefore, maintaining these interests can be a defense of the country's internal security and does not violate Iran's defense policy. Another point in this regard is the fight against terrorism in Islamic countries, in which Iran is still on the defensive of the security of Islamic countries. Contrary to what Western countries call Iran a sponsor of terrorism, Iran seeks to ensure the security of Islamic countries. An example of this can be seen in the Iraq crisis and the attack by ISIS terrorist groups and the threat to the security of this country.

Iran has always shown that it has no desire to increase its power and all its domestic, foreign and military policies are in line with defending the internal security and international interests of the Islamic Republic. What Iran seeks from alliances with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon is to prevent Western countries from entering the region and exploiting the Middle East and amassing wealth. A policy that has always been at the forefront of politicians' work after the victory of the Islamic Revolution. As Iran could easily take advantage of what happened in Iraq during the presence of ISIL in Iraq by adopting an aggressive policy, and after ousting ISIL, it completely under the influence and support of Iraq

and its power Increase in the region. But what happened in this country was the opposite. Not only did Iran not exert influence in Iraq, but it also helped to establish a people's government with the legitimacy of the people in Iraq, thereby only securing its borders.

Iran's military presence in Syria also shows well that Iran is present in this country with three goals:

The **first goal** is to maintain the link between Iran, Iraq and Lebanon so that the least pressure is put on Hezbollah by the Zionist regime and the ally of Iran is not lost.

The **second goal** is for Iran to maintain a confrontation with Western countries, led by the United States and Israel near the Israeli border, in order to maintain the pressure on the region to maintain the support of Islamic countries to Palestine.

The **third goal** is to keep the counter-terrorism front away from the country's borders, which means that Iran is in a safe place despite the crisis in various countries in the region, and the farther this front is from the country's borders, the more secure the Islamic Republic will be.

But if the Islamic Republic refuses to have a military presence in Syria at the moment, it will endanger its internal security in the first place, and this will put a lot of costs on the Islamic Republic. Because the fight against terrorism on the country's borders requires extra energy to prevent the penetration of terrorism into the country, and in this case, instead of pressure on Israel and allied countries, pressure will be on Iran's borders, and in fact the shadow of war will cause insecurity inside. The country will too.

Conclusion

Regarding Iran's position on the Syrian crisis, the following can be said:

1. The Islamic Republic of Iran, as a major regional player, has sought to achieve a regional superior position and expand its influence in the region by playing a role in the Syrian crisis. In other words, Iran is trying to introduce itself as a regional hegemon and advance the crisis in line with its regional goals and interests.

2. Iran seeks to establish a government in line with its policies in Syria. Because of the establishment of the Islamic

Revolution, the Islamic Republic is trying to bring to power governments at the regional level that can become reliable allies for it, and through this, it can expand its sphere of influence at the regional level.

3. One of the differences between Iran's approach and other countries in the Syrian crisis is related to their positions towards the Syrian opposition. In other words, Iran wants to fight terrorist groups, while countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia have taken a stand to support them and have supported the opposition in various ways.

4. Iran's approach to resolving the Syrian crisis must also be considered. In fact, Iran believes that the Syrian crisis must be resolved politically and through reforms by the government.

Examining the above-mentioned issues, we find that the main axis of Iran's stances in the developments in the region and the unrest in Syria has been based on the principle of national interests. The Syrian crisis, which is a threat to the security of all Islamic countries, was a turning point in the emergence of Iran's defense policy in the region. With its military presence in Syria and its support for the ruling regime, Iran has shown that it does not seek to increase power but to maintain order and security in the region. On the other hand, Iran seeks to protect its interests in the region and defend the interests of its interests and those of its allies against terrorists and Western countries, so that the least influence in these countries occurs from the superpowers. Maintaining the link between Iran, Iraq and Lebanon will greatly help maintain order in the region. On the other hand, maintaining the confrontation with the Zionist regime near the borders of occupied Palestine can be considered as a lever of pressure for Israel and shows Iran's support for Islamic countries, especially Palestine.

What the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran showed us was a defensive policy in line with the school of defense realism. The ideological model of defense realism, which not only does not seek to increase its power and influence in other countries, but also seeks to maintain the existing order and prevent the superpowers from encroaching on their own interests and those of other countries. Iran's military presence in Syria clearly showed that Iran's goal is primarily to maintain the security of Islamic countries and the region and the Middle East in general, and then to defend the internal security and interests of the Islamic Republic in other countries and in general in the area.

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