Iran's Strategic Depth in Post-ISIS Syria

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Abstract

With waves of anti-government protests across Syria in 2011, and then the emergence of terrorist groups like the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS), the current order in the Middle East has faced serious challenges; therefore, many regional and transregional actors entered the regional campaign to have a role in the creation of the new order. Due to strategic importance of Iran, this country is one of those actors that the regional developments, especially in Syria, have had great impacts on its short and long-term interests. Tehran did not hesitate to try and maintain its strategic depth through its soft and hard power after the crisis began in Syria, and has always been a supporter of keeping Bashar al-Assad in power. Since the terrorist challenge is gradually diminishing and the attempts for political regime change in Syria being seemingly blocked, Iran has advanced new strategies, such as consolidating the Axis of Resistance, preventing balkanization and participating in the reconstruction of Syria in order to stabilize its strategic depth.

Keywords: Strategic depth, Iran, Syria, Axis of Resistance, Balkanization.

Introduction:

The Middle East has a unique position among the geopolitical regions of the world; developments in this region are shaped by the interplay of national, regional, and international variables. An important feature of the Middle East is its permeability, which means that, at least since the eighteenth century, it has been the place of competition, intervention, and the rise of the great powers of the world.

Better to say, the Middle East is the "most international" region of the world, and is, in principle, a mirror of international relations. At the regional level, various conceptual factors and different identity sources have been influential in the Middle East developments. On the one hand, transnational forces and ideologies such as Pan-Arabism have been the source of influence, and on the other hand, Islamic movements play a role. Therefore, it is very difficult to understand the developments in this region, regardless of the variable of Islamic movements. The national governments policies are no longer the only effective variable in the Middle East developments; of course, there is a solid relationship between all these levels and actors. In some historical periods, there are special circumstances where geopolitics transforms power in the Middle East.

The developments that took place in Tunisia in late 2010 and its spread to other countries in North Africa and the Middle East in early 2011, and of course the subsequent events, including the emergence of terrorist groups, in particular the ISIS which controlled vast areas in Syria and Iraq were a turning point in the collapse of the order in the Middle East and thus shaped a very controversial competition for the establishment of a new order in the area. In line with these developments, and given the end of ISIS's threat in Syria, (Deeb, 2017) this country still plays an important role in the collapse of order in the Middle East, and it seems that without a peaceful end to the Syrian crisis, there will be no order for the Middle East.

With the formation of a political crisis in Syria, influential regional and international actors and beneficiaries, based on their interests and concerns, have adopted different orientations towards this country with geopolitical and geostrategic importance in the region.

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The pursuit of these interests for some is regime change and for others is to keep Assad in power. In general, active actors in the Syrian crisis can be divided into two categories. The first group is the states that support Assad and oppose any foreign interference. In this group, there are a range of powerful countries and global players such as Russia and China, as well as regional actors including Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iraq. In the second group, there are countries like the United States, European members of the Security Council, Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, along with the Arab League, basically demanding that Assad should play no role in the future of Syria.

While geopolitical conflicts in Syria are being intensified, in this new environment of action, each forces, including Iran as one of the leading actors, are playing a role in the regional scale. Therefore, the Syrian crisis and its future prospects affect various aspects of the interests and national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran, so it is imperative that Tehran's policy be thoroughly investigated in this regard. This paper analyses the situation and conceptualizes the strategic depth of the Iran in Syria in such situation, with asking this question that: What strategies does Iran use to deepen its strategic depth in post-ISIS Syria? In response to the research question, we also examine the smart power (both soft and hard power) of Iran in Syria, as a significant factor in deepening its influence in this country.

1.   The Main Concepts of Strategic Depth.

1.1. Transforming Chaos into Order Through Smart Power

Strategic depth, like many other concepts, has been developed gradually. The publication of Ahmet Davutoğlu's famous book in2001 was very influential in this regard. The book depicts Turkey's foreign policy paradigms (Kirişci, 2009, p. 22-56).Davutoğlu draws his doctrine on the basis of historical depth and geostrategic conditions, both showing the value and credibility of each state in the international system, believing that the strategic depth of each country is based on its geo-economic, geostrategic, geo-cultural and strategic awareness of time and space of that country, that is, historical and traditional ties as foreign policy capacities plus political institutions, mediation, and the management of regional crises.

In developing his theory, Davutoğlu divides communities of dynamic international system into three groups. First, he refers to communities that place static behavior on their agenda and keep themselves away from the dynamics of the international system. Second group are those societies that consider themselves ordinary actors, and their future is tied to the event of positive developments in the dynamics of the international system. The third type of community is a kind that can transform its potential dynamics into an influential variable in the dynamics of the international system.

Davutoğlu goes on to emphasize that while the first and second types of societies are struggling with identity problems, the third type of communities will be able to balance the dynamics of the international order through their self-esteem and pride achieved through their historical and geographic accomplishments. In fact, according to Davutoğlu, the communities of the first type try to keep themselves away from chaos; the second group shows a green light to the chaos, but the third group are those actors who try to turn chaos into order.

To stabilize a tense situation, especially when there is a conflict of interest between actors, the third type of societies needs other components such as "power." In the 21st century, the world has faced critical changes, and nation-states are testing themselves against the political, economic and social challenges. Actually, the challenges are epidemic and today they are affecting almost all countries. Today the concern of nation-states in the world is about exercising power and influencing the challenges that their form and dynamics in the international system of different actors are becoming more and more complex.

Smart power is a complex notion, especially when explaining geopolitical issues. But before discussing any evidence, we first need to look at some of the essential concepts:

Power: There are many definitions of power among thinkers. Arendt believes that power does not belong to an individual, but it does to a group, and remains as long as the nature of the group is preserved (Arendt, 1970, p. 44). Parsons argued that power is the ability to guarantee the fulfillment of binding obligations by units of a collective organization system (Parsons, 1967, p. 208).

Nye defines power as the ability of a person to influence others in order to achieve the desired results (Nye, 1990, p. 154). Weber also explains power to the possible status of an actor in a social relationship, who despite resistance is in the pursuit of his own will (Weber, 1947, p. 152).

Hard power: This kind of power implies the strategy of using force through military power against an opposing country, the result of which would be negative perception between the statesmen, elites and people of the other country. Therefore, the adoption of policies of the powerful country by the other country is done through coercion and dislike (Hafeznia, 2006, p. 285). In this regard, it can be said that military intervention and coercive diplomacy are tangible instances of hard power that are used to change the position of others and to achieve national interests (Cooper, p. 167-180).Therefore, hard power is based on encouragement (carrot) and threat -(sticks).

Soft Power: in Nye's point of view, soft power is the ability to obtain "desirable" results, not through compulsion or enticement, but through attraction deriving entirely from the attractiveness of culture, political ideals, and policies of a country. This kind of power involves the use of the strategy of persuasion, acceptance and voluntary admission, and in a word, spiritual and social influence in the target society, so that the authority of power could extend its spheres of spatial and geopolitical influence (Hafeznia, 2010, p. 65).

Smart Power: The power of a national government reaches its maximum with a combination of soft and hard powers. The ability to combine hard and soft powers to develop comprehensive strategies is called smart power (Nye and Armitage, 2007, p. 7). In other words, smart power is the ability of an actor to combine hard power and soft power elements in a manner in which the goals of the actor can be effectively and efficiently advanced (Wilson, 2008, p. 115).It should also be noted that due to the conceptual, institutional, political and cultural complexities of issues, smart power cannot be achieved in the short term (Ibid, Wilson, p. 122).

According to these divisions, the analysis of the Syrian policy of Iran indicates that the Islamic Republic can be considered as part of the third type of the societies, which through smart use of soft and hard power is due to strengthen its strategic depth in this country to plays a role in the dynamics of the regional and international system.

2. Syria: The Most Unsettled Crisis in The Middle East

Syrian developments followed a series of massive protests in the Arab world in 2010, leading to major changes in the countries of Western Asia and North Africa. There are differences between the scholars about whether regional developments have arisen from the wave of Islamic awakening or from the context of the Arab Spring, but in general, the protests came about as a result of the lack of democracy, violation of human rights and lack of economic justice. Power structure in Syria and the conditions that existed for decades about political freedoms and the activity of political parties, along with dissatisfaction with the political weight of various ethnic groups in the division of power, have led to a widespread context for dissatisfaction with Syrian government.

Anyway, the Syrian crisis began in 2011. Initially, the protests were limited to certain border areas such as Idlib, but over the time, the scope of the protests was extended to Damascus. As conflict was becoming more intensified, radicals and Salafists also entered the campaign, and shaped one of the deadliest global crises with hundreds of thousands dead and millions displaced.

Unlike the other Arab countries involved in the Arab Spring, Syria has different characteristics. In this country, there are countless influential and beneficiary groups categorized in the religious, ethnic, and political frameworks. Religiously Syria is a heterogeneous country; 11% of the population are Alevites, 75% are Sunnis, and a fewer percentage are Christian minorities. Ethnically, Syria is the homeland of the Kurds, Turks, Arabs and Charkas. Accordingly, ethnic and religious diversity is only part of the complexities of Syria (Fisher, 2013).

The diversity of ethnic and minority groups has complicated the Syrian crisis in this regard, which involves not only local groups but also regional and foreign participants. The ethnic and religious diversity involves political groups as well. In the northeast of Syria, there is the autonomous Kurdistan, which has increased its geographical area after the withdrawal of Syrian forces, and today has a vast area under its control.

The Free Syrian Army was formed during protests, with some of the former and prominent members of the Syrian army in it, many of whom are from the Sunni population. On the other hand, radical groups were also organized in the wake of the crisis. Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra Front) is a typical example of these groups that attracts people from around the world. There are also two opposition groups in Syria, one from the Syrian National Council and the other from the National Coordination Council. The diversity within the opposition groups and their supporters weakens the nature of political reconciliation. All these groups pursue independent interests, and they seek to gain a share of power.

Now After seven years, and as the ISIS threat has been diminished, the Syrian crisis has entered a new phase, which can be called the beginning of a new strategic period, during which, the terrorist threat has virtually lost its character, and countless regional and transnational actors such as Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United States and Russia, either directly or in the form of proxy forces, are seeking to maximize their interests in this chaotic country.

Iran, with the help of Hezbollah, the Syrian army and the Syrian Popular Forces all forming the Axis of Resistance has made great progress alongside the Russian air and ground forces and has introduced itself as a strategic actor in Syria. Israel is directly involved in the Syrian war and strikes Iranian targets, the Syrian Army and Hezbollah. Turkey, which sees the expansion of the territory of the Kurds in northern Syria as a security threat against itself, has advanced widespread military action with the help of the Free Syrian Army against the Syrian Democratic Forces including the US-backed People's Protection Units.

The study and analysis of the role of each of these actors needs separate research. This paper studies the strategic depth of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Syria through examining the case study of Iran's soft and hard power.

3. Iran's Soft Power and Its Impacts On Syria

Given the nature of the Islamic Revolution and how it was realized, this revolution was based on soft power. The Islamic Revolution occurred in 1979, during bipolarity in international relations. Given the nature and structure of the international system, in which every development was only possible with the help of one of the two blocs of the West or the East, the occurrence of the Islamic Revolution was considered to be a great exception, only could be possible by transformation of power or the creation of a new kind of it. This new kind of power, indeed, was soft power. The common point in all analyses about the Islamic Revolution is its soft power. Among Western scholars, Michel Foucault, based on his experience of the Islamic Revolution, presented a new definition of power. He believed that power was not simply a top-down message, but a network of interconnected relationships, rooted in different discourse and social layers. He draws a line of two definitions and two figures of power, in which the Shah and the Army symbolize naked power and pure violence against the general will of the people and their integrated power, considered as the soft aspect of power. He argues:

"What surprised me in Iran is that there is no struggle between different elements. What gives all of these, beauty and at the same time attention, is that there is only one confrontation: the confrontation between all people and the power that threatens people with weapons and police (Foucault, 1998, p. 42-58).*"*

Iran's soft power is not just limited to its internal borders and not just to the period of the Islamic Revolution, yet the country's strategic depth has been transformed by the spread of soft power across the borders. From this perspective, the strategic depth of Iran has been shaped by the onset of Islamic revolution across the national borders of Iran. The soft power of Iran has a close relationship with the reflection of the revolution. The reflection of the revolution is "the effect of any revolution outside the borders of the realm in which the revolution took place, in other words, the reflection of the revolution relates to the results and effects of the revolution that are seen outside the borders of the land of revolution (Khoramshad, 2011, p. 18)."

From this perspective, there should be a difference between the "reflection" and the "export of the revolution." Great revolutions, including the Islamic Revolution of Iran, are being reflected naturally and automatically, and they are not limited to their borders. Their nature, the type of formation, their ideology and leadership makes it possible for the storms that have been set up within the country to cross the borders.

But export of revolutions is a voluntary situation in which actors and leaders of the revolutions consider it as a strategy and occurs with the will of the leaders of the revolution (Ibid, 2011, p. 29). Due to the nature of the revolutions, the revolutionary countries, instead of having relations with the states, put relations with the nations at the top of their work. Since the great revolutions call for a reconsideration of the international order, the settlers of the world order are seeking to eliminate, control, contain and eradicate that revolution. In this situation, the revolutionary states conclude that they must draw boundaries of self-defense in areas beyond their geographical borders, and the export of a revolution is considered to be a deterrent (Ibid, 2011, p. 30-31).

The Islamic Revolution became an influential phenomenon in the Muslim world due to its attraction in slogans, goals, methods, content and results of movements, and the history of religious and historical participation and regional and international environmental conditions.

In recent years, following the start of the Arab Spring in the region, Iran has been able to put together a coherent program to promote its strategic depth in the area, in particular, in Syria. The Iranian leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had stated in this regard:

"We should prepare ourselves for playing our part in creating the new order. We should prepare the country for playing its part. … We should pay attention that our capacities and capabilities are not confined to what we have inside the country. We have important capacities outside the country as well. We have certain supporters. We enjoy a strategic depth in the region and in the country. This is partly because of Islam, the Persian language and Shia denomination. These things constitute the strategic depth of our country. These are among our capabilities. So, we should benefit from all of them.(Khamenei, 2014)"

Syria is of great importance in creating this new order. The significance and political, military and strategic influence of Iran's participation in the Syrian war is clear to everyone. Even if we look at this regional and global event with the most conservative attitudes, we cannot easily deny that after more than 7 years since its beginning, Iran's support for the Syrian government is an important factor, if not the most important one, for its survival and continuity.

The especial position of Syria in the strategic depth of the Islamic Republic is due to the overlap of the ideologies of the two countries in certain aspects; such as the opposition to imperialism and Zionism, and their identical approach to the conflict between Palestine and Israel and cooperation in the form of the Resistance Axis which has enjoyed 38 years of strategic stability. The beginning of the Syrian Crisis made Tehran-Damascus relations as more strategic and highlighted the Iranian soft power in the region.

Syria was one of the countries that since the outbreak of the protests and its becoming widespread, Iran used the potential of its soft power to maintain strategic depth in that country. The crisis in Syria has created an opportunity for the Islamic Republic to take advantage of the situation to promote revolutionary foundations with its soft power. To many Iranian elites, especially the religious authorities, soft power is more effective than military power. Representative of Iran's Supreme Leader in Syria, Seyyed Abolfazl Tabataba'i, acknowledged that "today, the presence of Iran in Syria is not limited to military presence, since the cultural strength of the Islamic Republic of Iran in this country is stronger than the military power.(Tnews, 2017)"

Through its soft power and its public diplomacy capacities, Iran has been able to turn parts of the threats posed by the Syrian crisis into opportunity. Many factors shape or reinforce public diplomacy, the most important of which are: promoting language and literature, promoting ideals and transcendental values, ideological position, proper and extensive diplomatic ties, cultural relations and exchanges, providing the desired image of themselves, appropriate use of information and culture for diplomatic purposes, designing and adopting accepted strategies and policies, eliminating negative historical mentality, achieving advanced academic positions and technologies, high economic ability, power of shaping and controlling public opinion, the power to influence beliefs and attitudes, having worldwide news networks, and the power to produce and distribute diverse media products and influencing the international media (Nye, 2003, p. 29-45). Potentially, Iran has many of these tools. Among the most important public diplomacy opportunities for Iran in Syria are the followings: cultural, historical and religious commonalities; geographical proximity; the presence of Iranians and Shiites; Iran's cultural capacities and capabilities; the development of cultural trade; and prioritizing cultural development in these countries (Dadandish and Ahadi, 2011, p. 153-155).

Holding celebrations in many Syrian cities (including Damascus, Aleppo and Lattakia) on the occasion of the anniversary of the victory of the Iranian Revolution financed by governmental institutions and religious and cultural organizations of the Islamic Republic (Majidyar, 2017) is an examples of how Tehran used the tool of its soft power to expand its ideological, cultural and political influence in this country as the crisis was beginning.

On the other hand, Iran could also transfer its soft power to Syria in the fields of education and training. In addition to trying to set up Islamic Azad University branches in Lebanon, Iran has also been able to implement this strategy in Syria as well. "In a letter to Bashar al-Assad, I announced the readiness of the Islamic Azad University to establish a branch, and he issued an ordered to establish Islamic Azad Universities in all the Syrian cities.

Bashar al-Assad admitted at the highest level, to have branches of the Islamic Azad University in Syria "said Ali Akbar Velayati, senior adviser to the Supreme Leader in International Affairs (Tasnim, 2018).

Due to the Syrian geopolitical importance in supporting the Axis of Resistance, it seems that Iran is not only not willing to abandon its strategic depth through its soft power during post-ISIS period in Syria, but it also does not hesitate to strengthen its religious and ideological discourse in that country.

Iranian officials have repeatedly acknowledged that they will not hesitate to support the administration of Assad until peace and security returns to Syria. One of these supports is via military and advisory help in the form of hard power.

4. Iran's Hard Power and Its Influence on Syria

Given the key importance of the Islamic Republic's participation and the considerable scale of its human and financial costs, Iran has used two main discourses to explain its role in the war in Syria: 1) the religious and ideological discourse of the "Holy Shrine's Defense"[2] and 2) Secular and operational discourse to defend "national security." Both discourses can be analyzed in the framework of hard power.

The most important symbol of Iran's hard power in Syria has been the advisory help. This incredible power was a new strategy that led to the gradual containment of the crisis in Syria. Contrary to the direct military presence that was very costly, this strategy had fewer costs, only limited to the presence of Iranians who, following the religious and ideological discourse of "defense of Zaynab[3]'s shrine", were deployed to Syria on their personal desires. This discourse was proven before and was largely predictable and not difficult to understand. However, despite the fact that Iran's foreign policy behavior was pragmatic in its history of forty years, the Islamic Republic is essentially a religious-ideological government based on Shiite jurisprudence and the principle of Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, and as the greatest Shiite power in the Islamic world, has sought to protect Shiite interests and principles in the Middle East against enemies. Iran's attempt to protect Shiite shrines and sacred places in Syria and Iraq and calling those who were killed in this way as "martyrs" can be partly analyzed in the direction of the ideological approach.

"Holy Shrine Defenders" have created a new phenomenon in the history of the Islamic Republic, linking national and regional hard and soft factors and pushing regional forces, such as Zainebiyoun and Fatemiyoun, from Afghanistan and Iraq to Syria. On the other hand, by incorporating its regional trans-national allied forces such as Hezbollah and organizing the masses of the Syrian people in the form of paramilitary groups, Iran could defeat the strategy of heavy-handed intervention of many of its regional and even international rivals in Syria. Hezbollah modeled its close ties with the Iranian military forces and trained and mobilized militant groups in Syria, including Popular Mobilization Forces, the Brigade of Abolfazl Al-Abbas, the Syed al-Shūhada Brigade, the Zūlfiqar Brigade, and the Amar bin Yasser Brigade, to fight in defense of Syria to their last drop of blood (Modarres, 2015, p. 283-284).

The second discourse (defense of "national security") is multi-layered and complex, and requires a clearer understanding and needs further examination. In any case, it can be said that participation in the Syrian war was the first example of Iran's systematic or widespread political-military intervention in a foreign country since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution.

One of the main common statements by senior Iranian officials since the start of the war in Syria has been the argument that "if we don't fight in Syria, we will have to fight inside Iran." During a visit in January 2017 with some families of the commandos who were killed in Syria, Ayatollah Khamenei confirmed the argument. According to him, "Had the ill-wishers and plotters, who are agents for hostility of the U.S. and Zionism, not been prevented there (in Syria), we should have prevented them in the Iranian provinces of Tehran, Fars, Khorasan and Isfahan. These brought the enemy into its knees (Fars, 2015)."Naturally, as much as countering foreign threats through military and security measures takes place beyond the borders of a country, it will be as much easier, less vulnerable and more effective to ensure national and domestic security, which itself reflects the strategic importance of Syria to Iran. But now that ISIS has lost its power in the region, including in Syria, and now that Iran does not see the threat of terrorism at the top of its priorities, then on what parameters the Islamic Republic of Iran defines its national security? The Islamic Republic seems to continue its military cooperation and military consultancy in Syria after ISIS.

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[2]As known in Persian *Defa-az-Haram* is phrase that Iran uses to refer to its military operations in Syria.
[3]Zaynab was one of the daughters of Ali, the first Shia imam in Islam.

On October 2017, Maj. Gen. Bagheri Mohammad Bagheri, Chief of General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, attended operations areas of the Syrian city of Aleppo, and met some Holy Shrine Defenders. According to him, the coordination and cooperation between the Shrine Defenders and the Syrian Army was the key for winning war and this coordination should be continued for "a long time". The day before, Bagheri had delivered Ayatollah Khamenei's message to Assad in Damascus. In this meeting, he also emphasized the development of a joint strategy (with Syria) on the continuation of military coordination and cooperation after the eradication of terrorism (Isna, 2017).

As perceived from the words of the Iranian political and military officials, as well as the regional and field developments affecting the Syrian crisis, the Tehran pursues a multi-layered strategy in post-ISIS Syria, one of which is the consolidation of long-standing military relations with Damascus. We will examine the different dimensions of this multi-layered strategy, which seems to be aimed at consolidating regional stability in the post-terrorism era.

5. Stabilization of the Axis of Resistance

From the point of view of the national interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the pattern of development cooperation between Tehran and Damascus over the past decades has followed logic of realism; it means that:

1. Iran, from the very beginning of its political life, although under regional and international pressure did not have much opportunities to create regional alliances based on geopolitical and geostrategic interests, but has never retreated from this path, and perhaps one of the key successes of Iran to overcome geopolitical determinism is its cooperation and a strategic alliance with the Syrian state. In other words, the development of strategic cooperation with Syria is undoubtedly one of the most important factors contributing to Iran's political and security attitude in the region, and it seems that the pattern followed by Iran and Syria in this regard are in line with strategic realities and needs of the two countries.

2. On the other hand, Iran's ideological view of the question of Palestine as a central issue for the Islamic *Ummah* required Iran to choose an alliance to reduce its geographic distance with the occupied Palestinian territories. In other words, the land of Syria was intended to translate the practical ideological look of Iran towards the Palestinian question by reducing its geographical distance.

3. The Islamic Republic of Iran needed a relationship with Syria to pursue the interests of the Shi'ites in Lebanon because Syria at that time had a superior role in the geography of Lebanon, and Iran needed to use this power (Momenzadeh, 2017).

Under such circumstances, one of the scenarios that have been raised since the beginning of the unrest in Syria, and is being pursued in an executive manner, is an attempt by the West, Israel and some Arab countries to provide the ground for change in Syria. The main purpose of this scenario seems to be to separate Syria from the loop of the Resistance and create a gap in the "Shia Crescent." Even US officials have repeatedly stated that their goal of trying to establish any kind of relationship with Syria is to isolate the country from Iran (Times of Israel, 2018).

Some of the components and characteristics of the Syrian developments can be considered strong reasons for the rise of the Syrian crisis by the provocation of foreign agents and based on the rational choice to bring Assad to the knee in adjusting his regional position, because any change in Syrian regional positions could have serious effects on the current trends in the region and the weakening of the Resistance belt.

For this reason, the external factor employed many of its existing instruments, including arms transfers (Cohen, 2015), the provision of media warfare and destabilizing activities through opposition movements and armed insurgents. So what is happening in Syria, directly and indirectly affects the interests of Iran, because Syria is the bridge between Iran and the Resistance Front, and the weakening of Syria can reduce the maneuverability of the Resistance Front and Iran in the region, especially against its "number one enemy", Israel.

Given the risk of terrorism being diminished, in order to deepen its strategic depth, it seems that Tehran has strengthened the position of the Resistance in the region and pointed its presence in Syria towards Israel. On the other hand, it seems that in the context of military cooperation between Damascus and Tehran, the Iran is looking for a military footprint and a coordinated support in the southwest of Syria, near the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel in 1967. Such a move, which the Iranian authorities have neither approved nor rejected it, if realized, enables Iran to open a new front of resistance against Israel in the northeast; and relying on Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, a vast region from the north of the occupied lands would be surrounded. This progress has become a nightmare for Israeli officials.

From the Israeli point of view, in post-ISIS period, Israel has faced the worst outcomes of the war which is Hezbollah, which is stronger and more courageous now and has the support of Tehran and Assad simultaneously. A stronger Hezbollah was the main concern of the Israeli authorities since the outbreak of the crisis in Syria.

Yaakov Amidror, a former National Security Advisor of Israel between 2011 to 2013, said that since the first days of the war in Syria, Tel Aviv authorities have put two decisions on their agenda: first, Israel will not benefit from direct intervention in sectarian conflict, and secondly, it should not allow Hezbollah to use this war to strengthen itself in the face of any confrontation with Israel in the future (Paton, 2017). In this regard, according to some reports, there are nearly 10,000 Hezbollah fighters deployed near Golan Heights, which works as an alarm for Israel. "Hezbollah has over 10,000 fighters deployed in southern Syria. Hezbollah is an army of infantry, rockets, tanks, elite forces. We are operating as we do in south Lebanon, but of course in a veiled manner," said a Hezbollah commander (Alami, 2017).

On the other hand, from the point of view of the Resistance Front and Iran on its top, Israel is one of the main causes of regional crises (Alalam, 2017), including the crisis in Syria. Today, the possibility of a direct military conflict between Iran and Israel in Syria is felt more than ever. In unprecedented actions, Israel has repeatedly struck Iranian forces and killed a number of them (McDowall, 2018) and Tehran has emphasized on the need for retaliation. Syria can be likened to a "boxing ring", which for the first time gave Tehran the opportunity since the victory of the Islamic Revolution, to call, as an ideologically strong fighter in Syria, its number one enemy, directly and extensively to enter the battle in the ring, an entrance that may lead to a regional war, which includes the Resistance Front on the one hand and on Israel and the West on the other side.

6. Preventing the Formation of a Kurdish State in Northern Syria

The history and background of Syria and the Middle East region have affected the perception and background of the Syrian government towards the Kurdish community. In the words of constructivists, ideas, subjectivities, conceptions and semantic structures play an important role in how governments define themselves. Therefore, for understanding the policy of the government towards the Kurds and their desires and activities in Syria, understanding the different dimensions of the Kurdish issue can better clarify the subject. Among theses, the population, the area of residence, and religion, cover several important dimensions of the Kurdish issue in Syria, which we will continue to examine.

The size of the Kurds is estimated to range from 5.8 to 10 percent of the total Syrian population, or about 1.5 to 2 million people (McDowall, 2000, p. 56). The Kurdish regions are extended across the main regions of the country, including Kurdistan, Kobani, Hasakah and Damascus. Many Kurds moved from Turkey to Syria to escape the oppression and outbursts of Atatürk's forces in the 1920s and 1930s, and settled mainly in Hasakah. The Syrian government, using this fact, argues that all the Syrian Kurds are Turks who migrated to Syria, while before the late nineteenth century, many tribal Kurds had settled and engaged in agriculture in this area. As Assad's government looks at the Kurds as immigrants and not the indigenous citizens of the country, it refuses to grant autonomy to this group or to define a new identity for them. This different definition of the identity of the Kurds is precisely the point that confronts them with the state and identifies them with distinct interests.

On the other hand, the vast majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, although a number of Syrian Kurds have recently rejected Sunnis' traditional beliefs of Kurds as being Muslims and have turned to their ancient religion of Zoroastrianism. The distinction in religion with that of the official structure of the country is another point that encourages the Kurds to define a distinct identity from other Syrian citizens. This issue is more serious, especially among Yazidis, who are considered by others as a kind of self-made and confused sect.

Prior to the outbreak of the recent Middle East crises in Syria, the Syrian Kurdistan issue was known as an ethnic crisis. Although the crisis was initially within the framework of the Syrian borders and between the two main actors, with the outbreak of the crisis in Syria, it quickly took an international dimension. The foreign actors, including the neighboring countries and the great powers, each had their own influence on the identity and autonomy of the Syrian Kurds and had provoked their independence demands through armed struggle.

During the post-ISIS period, the main struggle has been transferred to the diplomatic field in order to turn security gains to political achievements. Military clearing of ISIS was just one stage in the whole Syrian crisis, but this does not mean that the country has been completely cleared of opposition groups. Kurdish forces are an example of these armed groups that have become stronger by the collapse of ISIS.

In recent years, Kurds have been organized in military formations. The Syrian Kurds were formed in 2015 by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), whose main body was the People's Protection Units (YPG). The Kurds, which have become the levers of US pressure in Syria, has brought vast areas of Syria in the northeast including Afrin, Raqqa, Qamishli and Hasakah, as well as part of the Deir ez-Zor, which holds huge oil wells, under their control.

The seizure of Raqqa and the eastern suburbs of Deir ez-Zor by the Kurds has made it easier for the Kurds to connect Afrin and Kobani cantons and to integrate the Kurdish regions and access to the Mediterranean Sea in the upcoming political developments, in particular through the negotiations on the future of Syria. At the same time there will be many challenges for these forces. One of these challenges is regional challenges that are being pursued by actors such as Iran.

Since the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity is one of the strategic goals of Iran (Isna, 2018), Tehran has rejected any autonomy and separatism on its territory. One of the main pillars of Iran's vast strategy in Syria after ISIS's defeat is to prevent the emergence of independent states inside Syria, especially the Kurdish state in the north and northeast. But this does not mean the violation of the rights of the Syrian Kurds, since Tehran has always called for the Kurds to play a role in the future Syrian government through peaceful means and reforms. But it should be noted that Iran's position does not reduce the complexity of the Kurdish issue because it is beyond the reach of only one actor.

In line with Iran's stance, it seems that the Syrian government and its allies will undoubtedly take steps to regain the control of the Kurdish regions, since they believe that these regions were "occupied". "Syria still considers Raqqa to be an occupied city, and it can only be considered liberated when the Syrian Arab Army enters it," says the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SANA, 2017).

Based on Damascus's stance, despite the disappearance of ISIS, military conflicts will be continued until complete liberation of Syria, and the issue of the Kurds lies in this puzzle. But, of course, this has its own complexities, because Kurdish troops are in training and in coordination with US forces in the area. On the other hand, Syrian armed forces with the support of Iran and Russia on the other side of the conflict, and any military confrontation with the Kurdish forces is likely to lead to a reaction from the Washington, which in some cases has led to the bombing of the Syrian Army (Barnard, 2018), and in the shadow of this, the situation in Syria is a little complicated. For this reason, the region is now pushing for new solutions, such as multilateral meetings on restricting conflicts, rather than exacerbating them.

7. An Active Role in the Reconstruction of Syria

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, we have witnessed intense military conflicts in the country. With the rise of these clashes, the Syrian crisis became regional and even transnational, as the rise of the clashes led to the rise of ISIS, which during the nearly 7 years of the war led to the destruction of many infrastructures and homes.

This huge devastation requires extensive reconstruction. Gerd Müller, German Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development, has suggested the drafting a new "Marshall Plan" for Syria. According to his calculations, stability and security of the region can be restored at a cost of 10 billion euros (Müller, 2016). Unlike the Marshall Planwhich has been the United States initiative in post-World War II, only supporting governments of Bashar al-Assad are involved in and western countries have no place in it.

Iran, along with Russia and China, has a clear desire to rebuild Syria. This position can be clearly seen among the Iranian authorities in the past years, especially after liberation of Aleppo. "The Islamic republic of Iran is ready to participate actively in the reconstruction process in Syria," emphasized Iran's President, Hassan Rouhani, in a telephone conversation with his Syrian counterpart (Tehran Times, 2017).

Also, steps have been taken from Tehran and Damascus. For example, during the visit of Syria's Prime Minister, Imad Khamis, from Tehran, five MOUs were signed on phosphate extraction, the construction of oil and gas terminals, and the provision of telecommunication services (Tasnim News Agency, 2017). Contracts which reinforce Iran's strategic depth in Syria and somewhat guarantee the presence of the Islamic Republic in the country's post-terrorism economic scene.

Conclusion

Certainly, there has been no other incident in recent years in terms of creating political polarization, which is somewhat reminiscent of the Cold War era, which can be compared to the developments in Syria. Meanwhile, the positions and policies of regional and international actors have given a new impetus to political equilibrium, in a way that old allies are confronting each other while on the other side, strategic rivals are brought together in the Syrian issue.

Unlike other crises, the Syrian crisis has enjoyed significant regional support, including from Iran. At the international level, Russia and China have also resisted Western plans in the Security Council. For many years, Syria has been the gateway to Iran's entry into the Arab world and Iran's strategic ties to the Mediterranean and the Near East. Hence, the weakening of Syria and the downfall of Assad will weaken the Axis of Resistance and will reduce and contain Iran's regional influence. As a result, Tehran has introduced Assad as its red line in the Syrian equations and has adopted various strategies in this regard.

The Islamic Republic, which over the past four decades has emphasized the involvement of all regional actors and the security order in the region, has, on the other hand, been able to develop a strategic depth through smart power, the organization of popular forces and the military consultancy. The collapse of Islamic State and the entry of Syria into its post-ISIS period confirm this allegation.

It is clear that Tehran's grand strategy, after collapse of ISIS, is an all-embracing presence in the country and maintaining it within the axis of its allies through consolidation of the Axis of Resistance, preventing the creation of a Kurdish state in northern Syria and contributing to the reconstruction of this country. An axis which its stability ensures the strategic depth of the Islamic Republic and may have significant economic benefits along with military and intelligence ones in the region.

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