Iran`s Policy in the Syrian Civil War

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August 2017

This paper is prepared to be presented at the European Consortium for Political Research General Conference, Oslo, Norway September 6-9, 2017

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Abstract

The Syrian civil war which broke out in March 2011 further destabilized the Middle East in general and the Levant in particular. From among many implications of this conflict such as the deaths of more than 400,000 civilians and the refugee crisis, it caused the heavy involvement of regional (such as Iran, the GCC states, Jordan, and Turkey) and trans-regional (the United States, Russia, and many European countries) actors. Iran has been one of the main players in the Syrian conflict theater. This article seeks to explain Iran`s policy towards the violent events in Syria and analyze its evolution during 2011-2017. Our main argument is that Iran`s policy in the Syrian civil war has evolved from support for the self-determination right of the Syrian people through diplomatic means (liberal pacifism) to support for the Russian military intervention (liberal interventionism). We further try to analyze why this shift in Iran`s policy towards the Syrian crisis occurred.

1- Introduction

Although the Arab uprisings of 2011, especially the overthrow of Ben Ali and Mubarak in Tunisia and Egypt respectively, sent shockwaves throughout the Middle East capitals, it was welcomed by

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Tehran. The Iranian leaders sought to take over the uprisings ideologically by presenting them as the results of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and called them an “Islamic Awakening” wave. The spill-over of the uprising to Syria, however, was received very cautiously. The Assad regime was the sole Tehran’s strategic ally in the Middle East and it was very evident that Iran’s strategy towards the uprising in Syria would be different. In other words, Iran’s strategy towards the uprisings in different Arab countries was influenced by its own normative, ideological and geopolitical interests: Iran backed almost all movements opposing the authoritarian Sunni regimes in the Arab countries except Syria.

This article seeks to explain Iran’s policy towards the violent events in Syria and analyze its evolution during 2011-2017. Our main argument is that Iran’s policy in the Syrian civil war has evolved from support for the self-determination right of the Syrian people through diplomatic means (liberal pacifism) to support for the Russian military intervention (liberal interventionism). We further try to analyze why this shift in Iran’s policy towards the Syrian crisis occurred. To this end, we first lay out our theoretical framework focusing on the liberal theory of foreign policy. Then we survey briefly the roots of Iranian-Syrian alliance since 1979. The third section will lay out Iran’s interests relative to the civil war in Syria. Finally, an assessment of Iran’s policy towards the Syrian civil war and its implications for the Middle East will be put forward.

2- **Theoretical Framework**

Liberal theory of foreign policy considers the direct effects of individuals (including their ideas and ideals), social forces and political institutions on foreign relations of states. In contrast to realist theory, liberals open the box of state action and highlights how ideas,
interests, and institutions, affects foreign policy\(^2\). The main characteristic of liberalism is its incorporation of modern conceptions of ethical foreign policy\(^3\). Accordingly, in an ethical foreign policy, protection of life, liberty, and property through maintenance of peace and peaceful resolution of disputes, should be considered as the main duties of a liberal foreign policy.

Thus, in an anarchic international system states have to preserve as well as expand democracy, protect human rights, and respect international law. The main controversy, however, is whether a liberal foreign policy should take a defensive or an offensive strategy to achieve these values. Liberal pacifists rule out offensive state strategy and seek to promote democracy and human rights through peaceful means. They choose a foreign policy of nonintervention and respect the sovereignty of the state and the rights of individuals to establish their own way of life free from foreign intervention. Liberal pacifists do not support use of force in international relations except as a last resort. Should intervention in the internal affairs of other states be considered necessary, especially if it is for humanitarian purposes, they insist that it be done through the United Nations or other international organizations\(^4\).

Liberal interventionists, on the contrary, lean towards a more active and interventionist foreign policy, including by military means. They believe that a liberal state should attempt to rescue majorities suffering severe oppression or individuals suffering massive and systematic violations of human rights either by their own governments or in a civil war. They, however, differ with respect to the goals they are looking for or the means they are employing.

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Liberal internationalists who are more idealistic put more emphasis on humanitarian goals and regard multilateralism as both a means and an end. Liberal neoconservatives see multilateralism only as a means and their American variant consider the national interests besides promotion of liberal values. Compared to the liberal internationalists, they are more prone to use force in order to achieve their goals.

3- Syria as a Strategic Ally for Iran: Historical Background

Since the eruption of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran and Syria developed a relationship which has been characterized by many observers as a strategic alliance. Based on a loose definition of alliance, an alliance is a “formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states”\(^5\). Therefore we can say alliances are bilateral or multilateral cooperation between two or more states in order to provide some element of security to them. With respect to the main causes of alliance formation, there is no consensus in the International Relations literature. The Realist tradition contends that alliances are about capability aggregation and form either to counter-balance powerful states (Waltz theory of balance of power as a main cause of alliance formation) or to counter-balance states perceived as threatening adversaries (Walt theory of balance of threat as a main cause of alliance formation). The Liberal school, on the contrary, focuses on ideological similarities of the states involved in alliance formation and argues that more similar states are prone to ally.

Our position here is that alliance making is a kind of foreign policy behavior which can be shaped by three factors, namely stimulus, permissive and motivating factors. Whereas traditional models of causality have been limited to stimulus and response, foreign policy behavior including alliance formation is also shaped by motivating factors.

factors (goals and values) as well as permissive factors (opportunities and constraints)\(^6\).

Stimulus factors act as a trigger for alliance formation. As for the stimulus factor which triggered the Iranian-Syrian alliance during 1979-1982, most observers refer to Tehran and Damascus threat perceptions especially the immediate threat of Iraq\(^7\). Indeed the Islamic Republic of Iran faced various sources of threat since its establishment in 1979 from among which the Iraqi threat was more immediate. The toppling of the pro-West monarchy in Iran and coming to power of an Islamic regime resulted in different perceptions as well as reactions in the Middle East. The anti-American, anti-Zionist, anti-monarchical and Shia nature of the revolution produced a perception of Iran as a source of existential threat in the region particularly by the Sunni, pro-Western Arab countries\(^8\). Simultaneously the Islamic regime in Tehran felt threatened particularly by the United States and to some extent even the Soviet Union. The American threat was felt increasingly by the Islamic government after the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran in November 1979. It was believed that the United States would sooner or later invade Iran in order to rescue the hostages\(^9\). The Soviet threat to the government in Tehran increased after the Red army invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. The Iranian leaders expected that the occupation of Afghanistan would be followed by the occupation of the Iranian province of Baluchistan\(^10\).


\(^{7}\)Jubin Goodarzi, “Iran and Syria”, http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-syria,


\(^{8}\)Shireen Hunter, (2010), Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era, Praeger, pp. 191-2.


\(^{10}\)Shireen Hunter (1990), Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 84.
The Islamic government in Tehran was also confronted with a strong domestic opposition especially in two provinces of Khuzestan and Kurdistan which were adjacent to Iraq. It was believed in Tehran that the Iraqi government intended to deploy the Sunni Arabs and Kurds against the newly established Islamic Shia and predominantly Fars regime. There were many reports of infiltrations by the Iraqi mercenaries in these two provinces in order to wage a civil war.

The American failure to rescue the hostages in April 1980 as well as the Soviet quagmire in Afghanistan reduced the probability of their immediate military invasion of Iran. However, the invasion of Iran by the Iraqi forces in September 1980 led to a total war which lasted for 8 years. This also exacerbated the domestic instability inside the country. Not only unrests in some provinces with the minority ethnic groups in particular Kurdistan escalated but the wave of terrorism was initiated by guerrilla groups such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq-e Iran Organization during which many government leaders were assassinated.

As for the Syrian government there were three sources of threat perception during 1979 to 1982. The first was the Syrian leaders’ threat perception emanating from the United States and Israel. The Camp David Accord of 1977 put Hafiz al-Assad in a very shaky situation. As a result of this agreement Egypt was no longer considered Syria`s partner in its conflict with Israel. The Syrian leader not only was concerned over the occupied Golan Heights but also the future of Arab-Israeli conflict was uncertain. Damascus believed that without Egypt it was unable to confront Israel. In fact, Syria rejected the Camp David Accord not because it did not want a negotiated agreement with Israel but because it wanted a peace treaty in which

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11Middle East International, 23 November 1979, p. 5.
13C. Legum et al., (1982), Middle East Contemporary Survey (MECS), Vol. 5, p. 554.
all the Arab countries participated as one entity. President Hafiz al-Assad worried that other Arab countries such as Jordan would follow the Egyptian route and concludes separate peace deals with Israel which would leave his regime isolated in the conflict with Israel.

Syria had a very uncertain situation in Lebanon too. The Camp David Accord led the Syrian leaders to try to consolidate their power in Lebanon. This could facilitate their control of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), challenge the Camp David Accord and preserve the Syrian government’s regional and international status. Notwithstanding the Syrian presence in Lebanon was precarious since it was confronted on the one hand with the Lebanese Falangist and on the other with the Israeli air strikes. In the summer of 1979, a number of Syrian fighters were downed by the Israeli forces. During the Lebanese missile crisis in April 1981, the war between the Syrian Army and the Lebanese Falangist escalated to a very dangerous level. In December of the same year the Golan Heights were annexed to Israel. And finally the Israeli army invaded Lebanon in June 1982 which had a big impact on the Syrian policy in Lebanon.

The other source of threat perceived by the Baathist regime in Syria was its counterpart in Iraq. Both governments were at odds for the most of the period since their establishment except during 1978-79. The warming of their relations in this short period was the result of the Camp David Accords which united them to spoil it. Assad and Hassan-al-Bakr met each other in Baghdad in a historic moment to end the 13 years of enmity. However this rapprochement was very short-lived. Iraq accused the Assad regime of supporting behind the scenes the attempt to assassinate Saddam Hussein in July 26, 1979.

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The Syrian regime`s efforts to deny its involvement in the event failed and the enmity of the two countries soared.

In addition to external threat perception, the Syrian government was confronted with a strong internal opposition, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood. The economic difficulties, the ethnoreligious nature of the Assad regime, the Syrian involvement in Lebanon which caused troubles for the Palestinian refugees there, were the main factors led to the popular uprisings especially in Aleppo and Hama during which thousands of ordinary people were killed\textsuperscript{20}.

The security threats perceived by both Iran and Syria particularly their common threat perception of Iraq, was the main stimulus cause of their alliance formation. In addition to this factor, we can mention some permissive factors which shaped their alliance behavior. Permissive factors involve opportunities and constraints on state behavior. The alliance with Syria offered the newly established regime in Tehran some opportunities. The leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran sought to export the ideals of their revolution to the Third World countries especially the Muslim societies. According to Ayatollah Khomeini, the revolution in Iran was considered as the first stage of the global Islamic revolution which would continue until the Islamic World is united. The support of the Islamic Revolution by Muslim societies throughout the world especially the Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa, emboldened this belief. Countries with Shia population such as Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait and Lebanon were more affected by the Islamic Revolution in Iran. An alliance with Syria could facilitate not only the influence of Iran in the region but also its presence in Lebanon\textsuperscript{21}. Lebanon was considered very important in the strategic culture of new leaders in Tehran at least for three reasons, namely the personal attachment of the Iranian leaders.

\textsuperscript{21} R.K. Ramazani (1986), Revolutionary Iran; Challenge and Response in the Middle East, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, p. 182.
with Imam Musa Al-Sadr, the missing leader of the Shia community in Lebanon, the huge support of the Islamic Revolution of Iran by the Lebanese Shia, and common border of Lebanon with Israel which was considered by the Iranian government as illegitimate occupying entity.

The strategic relationship with Iran offered Syria some opportunities too. By siding with the Anti-Israeli regime in Tehran, Damascus` weakening position in the Arab-Israeli conflict because of the Camp David Accord could be remedied. As Seal has aptly said, “Syria saw Iran as the natural counterweight to Egypt as much as King Faisal had done in the 1960s.” Iran`s presence in Lebanon especially its military involvement came to the Syrian assistance in its confrontation with Israel. As we said before, Assad`s failure in helping the PLO in the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was one of the main drives of domestic opposition to his regime. The alliance with Iran could bolster the legitimacy of Alevite regime as well as cause friction among its opposition. In addition, Iran`s economic assistance to Syria was attractive too. Iran and Syria came to a 10 year economic agreement in 1982. Based on this lucrative agreement for Syria, the Islamic Republic agreed to export 1 million tons of crude oil annually to that country free of charge and around 5-7 million tons of crude oil with discount.

Motivating factors involve the goals and priorities of decision makers. The main priority for both Iran in its war with Iraq and Syria because of its loneliness in front of Israel, were their security and survival. In other words, the security situation in which both Iran and Syria were entangled informed their goals and priorities. Their

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strategic partnership could to some extent reduce the pressure they felt during this period.

In sum, based on our analysis, we can conclude that the formation of the Iranian-Syrian alliance since 1979 was the product of multiple factors, acting in concert. In addition to similar worldviews i. e., Syria`s close relations with the USSR and strained ties to the United States and Iran`s anti-American position as well as similarity of faith between Iran`s Shias and Syria`s ruling Alawites, the most important factor which caused them grow closer was their common threat perceptions (shared view on Iraq and similar positions in the Arab-Israeli conflict).

4- Iran`s Interests Relative to the Syrian Civil War

The Iranian-Syrian relations since their alliance formation in the late 1970s remained enduring and stable though it has not been free of tension and competition27. This alliance which is one of the oldest one in the Middle East “has been primarily defensive in nature, aimed at neutralizing Iraqi and Israeli offensive capabilities in the region, and preventing American encroachment in the Middle East”28. In this period, their relations were mostly dominated by external factors including the dynamics of the Iran-Iraq war, the developments in Lebanon after the Israeli invasion in 1982, the Arab-Israeli relations (particularly the peace negotiations and agreements in the 1990s and afterwards) and the intra-Arab balance of power. The Arab Spring in Syria in early 2011 which turned into a civil war by the end of that year, however, highlighted the importance of internal factors in shaping the course of Iran-Syria alliance. Iran decided to help sustain

the rule of the Bashar al-Assad regime as its sole strategic ally in the Middle East. Generally speaking, the Arab Spring in Tehran’s perception was a popular Muslim uprising aimed at toppling Western-friendly, authoritarian regimes in the region. By framing it as an “Islamic Awakening”, Iranian leaders assumed that finally the export of the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 is being realized and thus its goals and ideals including anti-authoritarianism, anti-Western dominance, and anti-Zionist expansionism, would be fulfilled in the Middle East very soon. Although Tehran supported the ideals of the Arab Spring, its adherence was mainly rhetorical. In the case of the Syrian internal developments which led to a full-blown civil war, however, Tehran chose a somehow different stance. In the beginning phase of the crisis, Iran supported the Baathist regime mostly with technical and security means. As the crisis continued especially by the end of 2011 when it assumed regional and international dimension, Iran not only boosted Assad with financial, security, intelligence and advisory assistance, but firmly stood with his regime by military assistance through presence of Iran’s military troops and commanders inside Syria.

What are Iran`s vital interests- its security and prosperity- relative to the Syrian civil war which perceived threatened? First and foremost was the emergence of the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) since 2014. Iran as a Shia country was threatened existentially by the rise of the Salafi groups (often referred to as the Wahhabs) in the Middle East especially in Afghanistan and Iraq. One of the main goals of these groups, particularly the ISIS, is to wipe the Shiite community off the map, focusing on the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This is why the Shia government in Tehran felt threatened by the rise of Taliban in Afghanistan in 1996 and later on the appearance of their offshoot, Al-Qaida, in Iraq in 2004. No one deny that these groups are violent extremist threat wherever they operate. They consider Shia Muslims to be apostates and, thus, have tried to blow up their mosques or slaughter the Shia people around the region. The power vacuum in Iraq as well as Shia-biased policies of Nouri al-Maliki, the Prime Minister of Iraq, facilitated the rise and expansion of Salafi Sunni affiliated groups including Al-Qaida in that country and their spill-over to neighboring Syria. This was perceived in Tehran as an existential threat and the Iranian government utilized all its influence in Baghdad to allay this security concern. The announcement of the establishment of the ISIS in 2014 could have dire security implications for Iran and thus caused much fear in Tehran.

Secondly, a main interest of Iran concerns Syrian strategic position in the “axis of resistance” against Israel. Strategically Iran and Syria`s shared enmity toward Israel and the United States, pushed them closer and this, one can argue, was the main cause for the longevity of their alliance. As Chubin puts it properly, “Confronting the US and the US-sponsored regional order” as well as US regional clients, especially Israel, “has been a core interest of the IRI since its inception.

Not only Syria was the only Arab country in the Arab-Israeli conflict which did not make a peace agreement with Israel and so continued its enmity toward it, but also it was the conduit for Iran to help Hizbullah against the Israeli violations of the Lebanese sovereignty. Syria was considered the linchpin of the axis of resistance and the toppling of the Assad regime would weaken the axis in the Middle East and “limit Iran`s retaliatory options in case

there is an American or Israeli attack on its nuclear cites which Arab and Western nations suspect are part of a weapons program\textsuperscript{34}. Further, Iran could keep its active presence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Thirdly, Assad is considered as a strategic asset for Iran in its relations with the neighboring Arab states especially Saudi Arabia. If the regime of Assad is overthrown, the alternative will more likely be a majority Sunni government with more inclination towards the other Arab states. As a result, the balance of power in the region will tip against Iran and in favor of Iran`s Arab rivals, particularly in the Persian Gulf. Because of this significance of Syria strategically and geopolitically for Iran, the Iranian Defense Minister said: “Iran considers Syria`s security its own security”\textsuperscript{35}.

Finally, Syria has been the only Arab country which explicitly stood by Iran during its 8-year war with Iraq (1980-88), which was critical for the latter`s survival. This was a very significant decision, as the Arab world rallied behind Iraq. In fact, Syria stood between Iran and Arab/Persian polarization, during the Iran-Iraq war and continued this role afterwards\textsuperscript{36}. When the Syrian regime faced the unrest in March 2011, Iran, unsurprisingly, decided to reciprocate by throwing its weight behind the Syrian regime. If Iran abandoned the Syrian government, it would undermine a great deal of its credibility as a revolutionary power and potentially cost Tehran its only unwavering ally in the Arab world\textsuperscript{37}.

5- Iran`s Policy Evolution in the Syrian Civil War

Why did Iran decide to intervene in the Syrian civil war? How and why Iran`s policy in the Syrian civil war evolved from a low-level

\textsuperscript{35}Will Fulton (2010), Syria-Iran Foreign Relations, July 15, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/syria-iran-foreign-relations.
\textsuperscript{37}W. Andrew Terrill (2015), “Iran`s Strategy for Saving Assad”, p. 235
hidden involvement in the conflict to an explicit military support for the Syrian regime? These are very important questions that have caused scholarly debates, especially inside Iran. As a result, two major interpretations have emerged to explain the motivation behind Iran’s military support of the Assad regime: a geopolitical interpretation and a religious one.

Many analysis of Iran’s policy with respect to the developments in Syria during this period are built around a realist logic of reasoning. Notably power and security dynamics among Iran and other regional actors e. g. Saudi Arabia and their respective relationships with the United States and Russia have been described as important factors shaping Iran’s policy towards the Syrian civil war. Even some have bluntly described the war in Syria as a proxy war, especially of Iran and Saudi Arabia: while the former supports the Assad regime, the latter supports Syrian opposition groups to challenge him. This interpretation has given prominence to Iran’s desire to preserve the “axis of resistance” against Israel. Iran and Syria, in addition to Hizbullah and Hamas, shared a common position regarding Israel and the United States which brought them together. The geopolitical camp has numerated Iran’s main objectives as follows: keeping the axis of resistance against Israel and the US through saving the friendly regime of Assad, preserving access to Lebanon through Syrian border to provide support for Hizbullah, and projecting power and influence in the Arab world in general and the Levant in particular.

The religious interpretation of Iran’s policy relative to the Syrian civil war has highlighted its promotion of the defense of Shi’i shrines. Iran as a dominant Shia state and society attaches so much importance

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to Shia holy sites in Iraq and Syria, including the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab in outskirts of Damascus. Zeinab was daughter of Ali, the first Imam of Shia, and sister of Hussein, the third Imam of Shia, who was one of the only surviving adult members of Prophet Muhammad’s progeny, after the martyrdom of Imam Hussein who was killed by a tyrannical ruler of Iraq and Syria named Yazid, in the 7th century. This incident is a theme in Shia belief which is based on the fight by oppressed against oppressors on the one hand and Islam against disbelievers on the other. According to this interpretation, thousands of Iranians are fighting in Syria besides the Baathist regime against the anti-Shia ISIS.

Although the geopolitical and religious interpretations of Iran’s policy in the Middle East in general and relative to the Syrian civil war in particular, contain some elements of truth, we assert that they neglect liberal and normative bases of Iran’s foreign policy. In other words, this paper contends that under the dominant Realist framing of developments and events in the Middle East, a liberal analysis of Iran’s foreign policy has been ignored. Therefore, this paper seeks to offer an alternative reading of Iran’s involvement in the Syrian conflict by focusing on Iranian government’s endeavor, especially since President Rouhani came to power in 2013, to depict Iran as a normative power in the global system, particularly in the Middle East.

This normative liberal interpretation of Iran’s involvement in the Syrian conflict can best be understood in reference to the principles of Iran’s foreign policy on one hand and the foreign policy of president Ahmadinejad from 2005 to 2013, on the other. Iran’s foreign policy principles as well as behaviors changed as the result of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. As it was expected from the revolutionaries, they

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highlighted the new principles of Iran’s foreign policy in the new Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These principles are as follows: 1) hedging against the external powers’ domination over Iran, 2) following a non-aligned foreign policy, 3) establishing strong ties with peace-friendly states, 4) not purporting to domineering and hegemonic behavior with respect to other countries, 5) preserving of Iran’s independence in all aspects, 6) adhering to an Islamic-Worldist orientation and 7) supporting a Third-Worldist view. As it is clear, four principles out of seven attest to the fact that Iranians are extremely concerned with their independence and territorial integrity.

Despite of these same principles, Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy behavior has oscillated between confrontationist and accommodationist orientations. Although presidents Hashemi and Khatami chose a pragmatic, accommodative foreign policy behavior (1989-2005), president Ahmadinejad leaned toward a more ideological and thus assertive foreign policy. It can be said that the classification of the world into the oppressors and the oppressed and adoption of a confrontational-assertive strategy were the main guide for Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy. He “criticized his predecessor for being excessively reactive and defensive, for not taking the battle to the enemy camp”\(^4^2\). By means of 1) “Looking to the East” policy, focused on joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and aimed at balancing the United States with the help of Russia and China; 2) active presence in the United States backyard, i. e., Latin America; and 3) more assertive policy in the Levant to deter Israel through intensified contacts with Hizuollah, Islamic Jihad and Hamas, president Ahmadinejad tried to widen Iran’s `security perimeter` to these regions.

Though Iran was given an observer status in the SCO and welcomed to extend economic relations with some Latin American

\(^{41}\) A. Haji-Yousefi (2010), Iran’s Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad: From Confrontation to Accommodation, Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, 9,2, Summer.  
\(^{42}\) Chubin, Iran and the Arab Spring, p. 9
countries, president Ahmadinejad`s confrontationist foreign policy had negative consequences for the country. At the international level, the crippling sanctions extended to cover the banking and oil sectors of Iran. At the regional level, the main Arab states, especially the neighboring GCC countries, replaced Israel with Iran as the main source of security concern.

In sum, Iran`s foreign policy principle of preserving its independence and territorial integrity amalgamated with confrontationist behavior of president Ahmadinejad portrayed Iran as a rouge state aiming at destabilizing the Middle East. Since coming to power of president Rouhani in 2013, however, the main goal of the Iranian government has been to reverse this trend and bring Iran back to a normal actor status at both regional and global levels. This was mainly sought by starting the negotiations with the P5+1 countries (France, UK, China, Russia, US and Germany) to settle the nuclear issue and remove the sanctions.

Accordingly, Iran`s policy in the Syrian conflict since 2011 can best be understood by pinpointing Iran`s sensitivity to its independence and territorial integrity on one hand and the confrontationist-accommodationist orientations of its presidents, on the other. The uprising in Syria since 2011 which rapidly turned to a civil war was perceived in Iran as a main ploy to topple the Assad regime and deprive Iran of its deterring force in the Levant. On the one hand because of crippling international economic sanctions, Iran had limited resources to engage in Syria and on the other, president Rouhani destined himself to bring Iran back to the normal state status. This is why Iran`s main reaction to the Arab Spring including the Syrian uprising was mainly rhetorical. The difference between Ahmadinejad and Rouhani was just their orientation in their foreign policy; the former adhered to more radical and revolutionary tone while the latter put forward more moderate and pragmatic stance.

44 Akbarzadeh, “Iran`s Syrian Foreign Policy, p. 132
The government of Ahmadinejad viewed the situation in Syria as a zero-sum game. His dominant understanding of the uprising in Syria was that the American and Israeli as well as some Arab states especially Saudi Arabia sought to use the opportunity to get rid of Assad and dismantle the axis of resistance. Accordingly, this would eventually pose a serious security threat to Iran. However, there were some differences among the political elites in Iran regarding the Syrian developments. While the late Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, the head of the Expediency Council, reportedly supported the popular uprising in Syria, the government of Ahmadinejad insisted on supporting the Baathist regime in Damascus.

It can be stated that because of the lack of consensus among Iranian decision-makers, Iran`s stance in the beginning of the Syrian conflict was uncertain and somehow confusing. Although Iran decided to support the legitimate government in Damascus, it also sympathized with the uprising by advising Assad of initiating reforms. The statement issued by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in late August 2011 included the Syrian government in the list of states were urged to “answer to the demands of its people.” In a meeting with the Turkish Prime Minister, the spiritual leader of Iran reiterated Iran`s position that, "we have always supported reforms in Syria and it is necessary to continue the reforms that have started in Syria." Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, the supreme leader of Iran in different occasions reiterated that: "The position of the Islamic Republic regarding Syria is to support any kind of reforms that would benefit the Syrian people and to oppose the interference of America and its followers in the internal affairs of Syria." However, Iran`s support of Bashar Al-Assad did not translate to its explicit

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approval of the Assad regime`s violent crackdown of the uprising. It is reported that Ayatollah Khamenei was disappointed with the way the uprising in Syria was dealt with in its initial phase\textsuperscript{50}.

This ambivalence can be traced to Iran`s liberal desire to help sustain the current government in Syria which according to international law was considered the legitimate government of Syria while using its influence to press for reforms. As a result of this liberal pacifist foreign policy, besides providing technical support and expertise as well as advice and equipment to the Syrian regime during the beginning of the uprising in the hope that it would be able to quickly ride out it, Iran also supported the existing diplomatic moves led by the UN and the Arab League. In 2012 when the UN and the Arab league appointed Kofi Annan and later his successor Lakhdar Brahimi, as especial envoys to mediate and resolve the Syrian conflict, Iran welcomed the move. Further Iran proposed on December 16, 2012 a six-point peace plan to end the crisis in Syria. This plan called for an immediate end to all military activities, the lifting of sanctions, formation of a national committee for reconciliation, release of all political prisoners, the formation of a transitional government, and elections\textsuperscript{51}.

When president Rouhani took office in 2013, the Syrian uprising has already turned into a full-fledged civil war in which the regional and extra-regional actors were involved. Although it might be argued that all foreign policy issues except for the settlement of Iran`s nuclear crisis and the ending of the international sanctions (including Iran`s policy in the Syrian conflict) were regarded as distraction by the Rouhani administration, its government was forced to increase Iran`s involvement in Syria. However, contrary to the view that Iran`s policy in the Syrian crisis witnessed no major change since Rouhani`s

presidency\textsuperscript{52}, this paper stipulates that the new government adopted a policy of adjusting Iran more properly to the factual developments in the Syrian conflict. Therefore, not only Iran almost for the first time officially recognized popular Syrian opposition groups (of course not terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra) but also condemned any use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime or any other actor in the conflict\textsuperscript{53}. President Rouhani like the late Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani was not as committed to the fate of Bashar Al-Assad as his fellow conservatives. In a press conference held in August 2013, president Rouhani indicated that Iran accept the participation of all Syrian groups besides the government, except for the foreign-backed terrorist ones, in a nationwide settlement process\textsuperscript{54}.

It seemed that under Rouhani Iran tried to diversify its means and intensify its diplomatic endeavors besides its heavier military engagement in Syria. Iran increasingly came to view the situation in Syria as a non-zero-sum game, hoping that all sides in the conflict including regional and extra-regional actors would increase diplomatic efforts to settle the conflict. The diplomatic efforts could be continued under the UN peace negotiations in Geneva or if required other channels might be followed.

The escalation of the Syrian conflict especially by the substantial presence of foreign Salafi groups including the ISIS since 2014, however, made Iran increase its military involvement in Syria. Notwithstanding, this military strategy mostly had defensive component. The deteriorating situation in the Syrian conflict theater and then the military intervention in Syria by Russia in 2015 paved the ground for Iran to strengthen its involvement. The policy of liberal pacifism changed to a policy of liberal interventionism. Notwithstanding, Iran repeatedly urged the international community

\textsuperscript{52}Akbarzadeh (2016), “Iran’s Syrian Foreign Policy Objectives”, p. 134
\textsuperscript{54}“New Iran president ‘not pessimistic’ over talks with US” (2013), Tehran: BBC Monitoring Middle East, Islamic Republic of Iran News Network, August 6.
through the United Nations, to address the Syrian crisis through dialogue and a peaceful political solution.

This military involvement though was perceived as Iran`s realistic way of securing its national material interests in the Syrian conflict, we argue, was mainly aimed at using the opportunity provided by the Russian military intervention to end the civil war. Iran openly stated his desire to find a diplomatic solution to the Syrian crisis. This, however, did not cause less Iranian presence on the ground. Adjusting to new facts in the Syrian crisis, president Rouhani adopted a double-pronged policy. On the one hand Iran maintained its heavy presence in Syria with the coordination of its main partners, i. e., Russia and Hizbollah. On the other, Iran intensified its diplomatic efforts for the settlement of the crisis. Since 2014, Iran has been insisting on a political settlement to the civil war in Syria based on four points which was updated in August 2015. This settlement formula called for 1) an immediate ceasefire, (2 constitutional reform in order to safeguard Syrian minorities, 3) free and internationally monitored elections, and 4) the formation of a national unity government based on new constitutional institutions55. This new updated peace plan though implicitly recognized the legitimacy of the Assad regime in the transitional period but clearly called for major reforms in the Syrian political system. Considering the strong opposition by the conservatives including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to any change in Iran`s policy relative to the Syrian crisis, president Rouhani could not only change the tone but also the orientation of Iran`s policy in Syria. Iran`s military presence in Syria along the Russian military involvement was justified as a joint Iran-Russia war on terrorism. At the same time, Iran intensified its diplomatic endeavors to end the crisis in Syria. The military retreat of the opposition rebel groups especially the ISIS at the hand of the Assad regime and its backers including Russia, Iran and Hizbullah on

the ground during 2015-2017 and the agreement by Russia, Turkey and Iran on December 28, 2016 to begin the Astana peace talks in Kazakhstan, brought new hopes for the solution of the 6 year crisis in Syria.

6- Concluding Remarks

Iran`s foreign policy in general and its involvement in the Syrian civil war in particular demonstrate calculated pragmatism aimed at maximizing its security along with its revolutionary ideology (including both religious ethos and normative values)\(^{56}\). This paper highlighted a normative reading of Iran`s policy relative to the crisis in Syria during 2011 to 2017. We argued that though the geopolitical as well as religious readings of Iran`s policy in the Syrian conflict contain elements of truth but ignore the normative motivations the Iranian government has had to depict Iran as a normal state especially after president Rouhani came to office in 2013.