IRAN, THE SHIA CRESCENT AND THE ARAB SPRING

translated by:
HACER ŞARTEPE

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FOREWORD

Making predictions for the future by closely following developments at home and abroad, conducting scientific research on bilateral and multilateral relations and the security strategies of Turkey, as well as on domestic problems in political, economic, technological, environmental and socio-cultural areas, providing also decision-makers with practical recommendations, policy options, and proposals in line with the national interests are all included in the founding purposes of the Wise Man Center for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM). BILGESAM is preparing reports to fulfill the purposes quoted above.

With the Arab Spring, the nature of the ruling parties has changed and the authoritarian regimes have started to be dethroned in the Middle East. These have resulted in a transformation process in the political geography of the region. The ruling parties in the Middle East that had been at the hands of a small elite or a certain sectarian groups for a long period of time have changed hands as a result of people’s movements or they have been forced to make reforms in the direction of democratization. The Shia Crescent, which has prospered with the rise of the Shia factor and become more apparent, has come to be a crucial dynamic for Iran’s clout in the region.

The report “Iran, the Shia Crescent and the Arab Spring” mainly focuses on these issues: Iran’s foreign policy line as of 1979, the Shia factors in Middle Eastern countries, Iran’s influence on these factors, and Tehran’s attitudes and the movements in the face of the rebel movements in the Arab world. Moreover, the report assesses Iran’s reactions to the people’s movements in the Arab countries along with its aims in the direction of the Shia Crescent. Within this scope, it analyses Tehran’s different stance towards the rebellion that has erupted against the Syria’s ruling party, the Nusayris [Alawis], and how Tehran has supported the current regime in Damascus.

I hope the report will provide Turkish decision-makers with the chance of reading a substantial analysis on Iran’s steps in the Middle East within the scope of the Shia geopolitics. It will also serve for taking the right decisions in line with Turkey’s national interests in the reshaped politics of the region. I also extend my thanks to Emin Salihi who participated in the preparation of the report and the BILGESAM personnel who contributed to the publication process of the report.

Assoc. Prof. Atilla Sandıklı
BILGESAM President
IRAN, THE SHIA CRESCENT AND THE ARAB SPRING

The Arab Spring has led to many changes in the Middle East. The repercussions of the changes have given birth to different opportunities and risks for the states in the Middle East. While some countries have been drifted with the winds of change, some others have made remarkable moves in line with their foreign policy targets on the altered chessboard of the Middle East. Moves coming from the important regional powers have influenced the developments in the region as much as the ones coming from the global powers have done. Turkey has exerted great efforts with the purpose of reducing the probable losses of the winds blowing with the Arab Spring and contributing to the regional and global peace and stability. How does Iran, another important player in the region, assess the developments? How does it move on that chessboard of the Middle East? How do these moves influence the developments in the region? These questions are the ones that are wondered by everyone who is interested in the region. The report aims at finding answers to these questions under the analyses of the following topics: Iran’s foreign policy, the Shia crescent, the Arab Spring, and Iran’s moves.
IRAN’S FOREIGN POLICY

The ups and downs between the axes of East and West and the searches for strategic directions could be related to the world’s political setup, that has undergone a change and transformation post-1990. The new international system, which has appeared with the end of the Cold War and the removal of the static structure of the bipolar system, has come to be rather dynamic. This multidimensional and multilateral dynamism has, along with the other states, urged Iran to look for new strategies and tactics in its foreign policy. Hence, different foreign policy concepts formed during the times of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Rafsanjani, Mohammed Khatami and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad arise from external factors that are directly related to the system change.

In addition to these factors, in such authoritarian-totalitarian regimes as Iran, foreign policy approaches may change much easier compared to the democratic regimes because of the different characteristics of individuals (such as the head of the state, president and supreme leader). Thus, the searches for tactics and strategies have been reshaped according to the political views of the presidents that come to power in Iran. Regardless of structural-systemic variables, the implications of this could be seen in the examples of Khomeini, Rafsanjani, Khatami and Ahmedinejad. In this regard, since 1979, given the elements of “continuity,” “differentiation,” and “rupture,” there have not been any changes that could be regarded as a “rupture” in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, except for the rupture from the approach of the Iranian Shah. Nevertheless, as of that date, there have been many differentiations. As an example, the differentiation in Iran’s foreign policy during the periods of (moderate-liberal conservative) Rafsanjani and Khatami compared to the period of (the traditionally conservative) Khomeini could be shown. Likewise, the Iranian foreign policy approach during the period of (radical-revolutionist conservative) Ahmedinejad differs from the periods of Rafsanjani and Khatami, and despite some differences, it has gotten closer to the Khomeini’s line. Thus, changes-transformations and searches into Iranian foreign policy during the years of 1979-2010 have evolved depending on the differences between the individuals.

It should also be noted that, apart from this change and differentiation in the Iranian foreign policy, there are certain factors that show continuity independent of individual differences. It is because of the fact that differentiations and ruptures manifest themselves in foreign policy strategies and tactics while continuities are seen in medium and long-term state policies that are based on foreign policy goals. Thus, the paradoxical state of Khatami (who
supported the compromise and peace process with the West within the framework of the thesis ‘Inter-
Civilizational Dialogue;’ Khatami could be considered as the most liberal president of Iran with his moderate attitudes and discourse both in internal and external foreign policy), which derives from the fact that he has been the Iranian president who’s spent more money on military expenditures than those leaders from previous periods,\(^1\) could only be explained by the elements that show continuity in Iran’s foreign policy. Likewise, among the main elements that show continuity in Iran’s foreign policy mentality are the nuclear energy program that has been maintained since the Shah period regardless of the Iranian supreme leaders and anti-Israel policy that has been seen during the period of Khomeini.

Another constituent that shows continuity in the Iranian state policies, and perhaps the most important one, is its aim of being “a regional player and a leader.” Supreme leaders and presidents ranging from Khomeini to Rafsanjani, and from Khatami to Ahmedinejad, have primarily aimed at rendering Iran the leading state within the Middle East. The developments that have been seen in today’s Middle East and are referred to as the Arab Spring provide Iran with enough geopolitical room for maneuvering the use of ethno-religious identity (Shia) in its foreign policy.

Iran has certain institutions thanks to which it can make use of the Shia geopolitics. One of these institutions is the city of Qum, which aims at achieving moral unity and consensus. Qum, where the Shia religious functionaries receive training, has come more into prominence in the recent period, compared to the city of Najaf. Another instrument of Iran, in this sense, is the Iranian Revolutionary Guards which enable Iran to protect some groups in the region. The Revolutionary Guards provide the other Shia and Islamic groups (which have joint interests) with arms supply and armed training.

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While Iraq has been seen as a Shia safe heaven, Najaf has been the city where the Shia religious functionaries have lived and grown up.\(^2\) As for the city of Qum in Iran, it was founded by the Iranian religious functionaries who received training in Najaf, and had been under the influence of Najaf’s authorities until the Iranian Islamic Revolution. With the Islamic Revolution, the importance attached to the city of Qum increased. However, at this time, the Baath regime posed some drawbacks for the Iraqi Shias due to the Iraq-Iran war. As a result, the means and sources of Najaf have decreased while the importance of the city Qum, as a city that is known with its madrasa, has increased even more.

The main difference between these two centers, where religious functionaries receive training, is related to the political role of the imam. The city of Najaf has been loyal to the Shia traditional thought and rejected the political role of the religious functionaries. According to Najaf’s authorities, the religious functionaries deal with only spiritual matters and control the moral values of the society. On the contrary, the city of Qum has adopted the doctrine “Velayet-i Fakih”\(^3\) coined by Ayatollah Khomeini. In other words, the city Qum claims that the religious functionaries have a political role in the society.\(^4\)

After Khomeini, unlike the city of Najaf, the city of Qum evolved into becoming the training center of the Shi’ism. To this end, new libraries and training centers were established in the city and electronic sources were used. In parallel to these developments, the number of students coming to Qum considerably increased compared to those coming to Najaf, and in some periods, the number of students in Qum reached 70,000.\(^5\) The fact that, worldwide, the next generation of religious functionaries and politicians of the Shia society will likely to receive their training in the city of Qum, provides Iran with a big advantage in effectively using the Shia geopolitics.

In order to strengthen its sphere of influence in the region, Iran, along with its ethno-religious identity, makes use of the Revolutionary Guards. The militia that are dependent on the Shia groups in Lebanon, Iraq and Pakistan are organized and trained by Iran, with Iran providing them with arms supply.\(^6\) Thus, the role of the Revolutionary Guards in establishing a clientele list of networks with the other groups in the region is of crucial importance.


\(^3\) The institution in Iran that controls the compliance of the laws with religion.


\(^6\) Nasr, ibid, p. 222-223.
THE SHIA CRESCENT

The phrase ‘the Shia Crescent’ was first stated by Jordan’s King Abdullah II, in one of his statements in December 2004, said that the Sunni Arab countries had been surrounded by the Shia Crescent. According to the King, the Shia Crescent originates from Iran, includes Iraq (which has been dominated by the Shia in the recent period) extends towards Syria (which is governed by the Alevi elite), and Lebanon (where the Shia population is increasing). After the US intervention in Iraq, the Shia in Iraq have appeared as the strongest political formation. Likewise, in Lebanon, the Shia-dominated militant group Hezbollah has earned respect and come to be an important group in the region after the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel. As a result of the increasing Shia clout, many academic works have been conducted that emphasize the Shia-Sunni discrimination and the danger of such discrimination. The book, *Shia Crescent: Emergence of World War 3* by Jamai Haquani, could be given as an example for such academic works. Moreover, many articles about Sunni-Shia conflicts under the leadership of Iran have been published during this period. After the Jordan’s King Abdullah’s statement, then Egyptian President Hosni Mobarak made a similar explanation in the same direction. Mobarak, in a 2006 speech he delivered on a television channel, said that he felt more of a commitment to Iran rather than the countries dominated by the Shia in the Middle East, criticizing this political attitude. Apart from these two leaders, Saud bin Faisal, the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, delivered similar explanations in the same tone.

States conduct their foreign policies in congruence with their national interests. Hence, Iran’s Shia factor in its foreign policy

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8 Helle Malmvig, The US and the Middle East from the War in Iraq to the War in Gaza, Royal Danish Defence College, Mırac 2009, p. 20.  
9 Dore Gold, Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Global Jihad, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2007, p.8
should be explained through the philosophy of instrumentalism. According to the instrumentalists, the sense of belonging and the relations within groups in the ethnic and religious groups develop in direct proportion to the expected interest. In other words, Iran makes use of the Shia factor as an instrument for its own interest in its foreign politics. Similarly, the Shia groups in the other countries of the Middle East reveal their Shia identities for their own interests and use this identity in the development of relations with Iran.

**The Shia Groups in the Middle East**

Studies conducted show that 10-13% of the Muslim population is Shia. In numbers, this rate corresponds to approximately 154-200 million people. The Shia population is most densely seen in the countries such as Iran, India, Pakistan, and Iraq. In Iran, there are at least 70 million Shia people, while this number reaches at least 16 million in each of the aforementioned countries. However, the Shia population that could be within Iran’s sphere of influence are seen in the Middle East countries, mainly being Iraq.

Iran is followed by Iraq in having the highest rate of Shia followers. The total Shia population in Iraq comprises 60-65% of their total population. The Shia rate is nearly 70% in Bahrain, 35% in Yemen (Zeyni), 35% in Lebanon, 30% in Kuwait, 20% in Qatar, 16% in the United Arab Emirates, 10-12% in Syria (Nusayri) and 5% in Saudi Arabia.

**Iraqi Shias**

With a rate of 60-65%, the Iraqi Shias are the most populous group in Iraq. The Shias in Iraq do not consist of only Arabs. There are also Shia Turkish (Turkmens) and Kurdish people in Iraq, although not as much as the presence of the Arabs. The history of Iraq shows that although the Shias make up of the vast majority of the population, they have always been in a minority position, politically-wise. In order to put an end to such a structure, two big Shia rebellions occurred in 1920 and 1991, yet no achievement was attained. As of 2003, the Shias have been able to come to power by use of their population through the elections. The Shias have been able to make a good use of their advantageous population rate after the 2003 US intervention in Iraq. It has been especially in this sense that Shia-based parties have come to power.

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12 Mehmet Şahin. “Şii Geopolitis: fırsatlar ve engelleri.” Akademik Oratdoğu, Cilt 1, Sayı1, 2006, s.40. (Mehmet Şahin, “Şii jeopolitiği: İran İçin Fırsatlar ve Engeller”, Akademik Oratdoğu, Cilt 1, Sayı1, 2006, s.40)
Events throughout the Shia groups in Iraq differ according to the conjuncture, with all of them having established positive ties with Iran. In particular, the Hekim group took shelter in Iran as of the 1980s as a result of Saddam Hussein’s pressures. The militia Badr Brigade, which depends on this group, is supported by Iran. The Badr Brigade is educated by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and it receives its arms supply from the Revolutionary Guards. Just like the Hekim group, there is another group that has close ties with Iran. It is the Nouri al-Maliki’s group that originates from the tradition of Dawa Party. Maliki has improved its relations with Tehran, especially with his demand that the US withdraw its troops from Iraq and with his determination in ensuring joint interests with Iran. Furthermore, the opposition groups that were against the Iranian administration in Iraq during the prime ministry of Maliki were ousted from Iraq. The Sadr group under the leadership of Muqtada Al-Sadr has common points with Iran when it comes to anti-Americanism. The fact that Sadr maintains its religious education at Qum headquarters is an indicator of good relations.

**Syrian Shias (Nusayris)**

Shi’ism has some sub-branches in itself. The most important of these sub-branches are Imaamiyyah, Ismailiyyah, Zaidiyyah and Naseeriyyah. The Shias in Syria are called Nusayris. The Nusayris come after the Sunnis in Syria as the second largest group with a rate of 12%. The Nusayris are densely populated around Lazkiye in Syria. The Nusayris have come to power with Hafez al-Assad. In 1970, Assad became the first president who was of Nusayri roots. In order to enhance and sustain its power, Assad appointed people of Nusayri identity to crucial political positions of the state. During the presidency of Assad, the Nusayris worked at various ranks of the state ranging from the private security forces, intelligence services and special

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forces, and similarly they controlled the command echelon of the army. However, talking about the Nusayrian identity in the internal and external politics of Syria has become a taboo.\textsuperscript{14}

Even though Hafez al-Assad had often used the discourse of Arab nationalism, he had pursued a pragmatism-based foreign policy. This tradition has also been maintained by his son, current Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. In this sense, because of its common interests on Iraq and Israel, Syria has pursued a close foreign policy with Iran for thirty years. Syria, during the eight year Iran-Iraq war, had supported Iran due to Iraq’s enmity towards the Ba’ath government. During this war in which both the West and the Arab world had been against Iran, Syria had supported Iran, showing the two countries’ dealings as strategic partners.

After the Iraq-Iran war, Syria has also maintained its good relations with Iran. Such friendly relations are mainly because of the fact that Iran regards both the US and Israel as enemies in addition to other common interests between the two countries.\textsuperscript{15} Syria, which has similar interests with Iran on these particular issues, has adopted a similar policy with Iran, especially with the case of Israel. These two countries have been later influenced by the Lebanese Shias, who have been against Israel.

**Lebanese Shias**

In Lebanon today, there are 18 religious groups that are recognized by the state. Population rates of these groups are not exactly known within the general population. The state conducted the last official census in 1932. The detailed outcome of this census is not known. Nevertheless, it was accepted that the Christian population was higher than the Muslim population. It can be said that the population structure in Lebanon has changed today. The birth rates in the country have changed as a result of the civil war in the country, emigration due to that war and other economic and cultural factors. The exact population rates of the religious groups are not officially known.


because of this change in the birth rates. However, the Shias, mainly being Lebanon’s Hezbollah leader Nasrallah, claim that they are the largest group in Lebanon.\(^\text{16}\)

The Shias in Lebanon are densely populated in the Bekaa Valley region in the northeast of Lebanon, in the south of the capital Beirut and in the Southern Lebanon. As it was stated earlier, although there is no official outcome indicating Lebanon’s population rate, studies conducted estimate the Shia population rate in Lebanon as 25%-35%.\(^\text{17}\) Today’s overall population Lebanon is supposed to be more than four million and the Shias constitute the poorest group in Lebanon in terms of the level of income.

\begin{quote}
It can be said that in recent period as a result of Israel’s attacks, a remarkable emotional tie has been established between the two countries, especially between the Southern Lebanon and Iran, apart from the clientalism deriving from their common interests.
\end{quote}

When Lebanon declared its independence, the Shias could not establish the political formation that could represent themselves and hold the Shias together. It was Musa al-Sadr who had first politically organized the Shias at the end of the 1960s. In 1969, Sadr founded the High Shi’ā Council which would represent the Shias before the state.\(^\text{18}\) Later, in 1975 during the Lebanese Civil War, the Amal Movement was founded. Hezbollah separated from the Amal Movement and emerged as a new formation in 1985. In its foundation process, Hezbollah said that it took the Iranian revolution as an example. The event that drove Hezbollah forward was the Taif Agreement that was signed in 1989. This agreement empowered Hezbollah to be the sole movement to officially carry armed forces. This privilege was granted to Hezbollah with the expectation that it combats against Israel.\(^\text{19}\) During this process, Hezbollah has found great support from Syria and Iran in its combat against Israel.

Iran attaches importance to Lebanon, which is Israel’s northern neighbor. Thus, Iran for many years has provided Hezbollah with both military and economic support. It can be said that, in recent periods as a result of Israel’s attacks, a remarkable emotional affiliation has been established between the two countries, especially between Southern Lebanon and Iran, apart from the clientalism deriving from their common interests.

\(^{16}\) Dror Ze’evi, The Present Shia-Sunna Divide: Remaking Historical Memory, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, April 2007, p. 3.


During his visit to Lebanon on October 2010, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad was welcomed by pro-Hezbollah groups carrying Iranian flags.\(^20\) It is important to note that the place where Ahmedinejad delivered a speech in the Southern Lebanon (Bint Jbeil) is only 5 km away from the Israel’s border. This demonstration (abundant with Iranian flags) show Iran’s sphere of influence broadens in parallel with anti-Israelism.

**Shias in the Gulf Countries**

The Gulf countries (including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Yemen) comprise of the autocratic regimes governed by the Sunni ruling parties. The Shias living in these countries have long been ignored.\(^21\) The highest rate of the Shia population (70%) is seen in Bahrain. The Zaydis’ population, one of the branches of Shi’ism, is nearly 35%. The rate of Shia population in Kuwait is 30%, 20% in Qatar, 16% in the United Arab Emirates and 5% in Saudi Arabia. Despite their small rate of 5% in Saudi Arabia, the Shias live in the areas teeming with petrol in this country.

The Shias in the Gulf countries have come to the fore as a consequence of the events taking place within the scope of democratization and the Arab Spring in the Middle East. With the increase of Iran’s sphere of influence in the region, the importance of the relations between the Shias in the Gulf and Iran have remarkably increased.

**THE ARAB SPRING AND IRAN’S MOVES**

The Arab Spring first began in Tunisia with fruit seller Mohammed Bouazizi setting himself on fire as a result of the compilation of many problems such as unemployment, food inflation, political corruption, freedom of speech, infraction of rules and rough living conditions. Then, in a domino effect, it swept the Arab world that has been suffering from the similar problems. The Arab Spring, commencing with meetings, protests and people’s movements has, on a large scale, influenced such countries as Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Jordan, Yemen and Syria. On a small scale, it has affected Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Iraq, Lebanon and Morocco. These uprisings have resulted in success in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. These people’s movements have resulted in the overthrow of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (who had governed Tunisia for 23 years), Hosni Mubarak (who governed Egypt for 30 years) and lastly Ali Abdullah Saleh (who ruled Yemen for 33 years). The revolts are still continuing in Libya and Syria. In line with the UN resolutions, NATO intervened in the developments in Libya. Currently, the NATO forces are continuing to perform operations in support of the opposition groups that have rebelled against the Qaddafi administration. Developments in Syria have started to pose a threat for international security as well. In the upcoming period,

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\(^{21}\) Ze’evi, ibid, p. 3.
there may be an increase in the effectiveness of the international sanctions imposed upon the Assad administration.

Iran has closely watched the developments within the scope of the Arab Spring and intervened in the region when it has deemed necessary. Given the Shia Crescent, it is plausible to say that developments in the region will enhance the regional efficiency of Iran and expand its sphere of influence. Iran, under the atmosphere in which the US plans to withdraw its troops from Iraq, is content in watching the pro-US administrations falling one-by-one. Likewise, in Egypt, one of the strongest countries of the region, the overthrow of the Mubarak administration, which was pro-Israel and acted in tandem with the US, has become of importance for Tehran. Additionally, Iran has given aid to the success of the people’s movements in the Gulf countries, which are dominated by the Shia population. It is because of the fact that most of the governments within the Gulf region see Iran as a threat in addition to their close ties with the US. The US Fifth Fleet (Naval Force) is situated in Bahrain, and similarly in the other Gulf countries, there is a remarkable US military presence. Furthermore, the Gulf Cooperation Council, which operates with the purpose of counter-balancing Iran’s increasing clout in the region, has established strategic relations with the countries both within and outside of the region. Iran is highly disturbed by this situation. Hence, Tehran has harshly criticized Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for sending troops to suppress the people’s movements in Bahrain. Iran has also reacted to the attitude of the Saudi Arabia towards its own people with Shia roots and made threatening explanations.

Regarding the developments in Syria, Iran has adopted a rather different attitude. The reason for this attitude underlies the fact that it is the Nusayris with rate 12% in Syria (one of the branches of the Shia sect) that took the power and they have established close ties with Iran.

Regarding the developments in Syria, Iran has adopted a rather different attitude. Under such a scene in which the Assad administration has surrounded its own provinces, performing military operations against its own people, opening fire and killing many people, Iran has concurrently done nothing. But instead, Iran has reacted to countries like Turkey which have opposed to such inhuman operations. Besides Tehran does not want anyone to intervene in Syria’s domestic issues. The reason for this
attitude underlies the fact that it is the Nusayris (one of the branches of the Shia sect) with a population rate of 12% in Syria that ultimately took power and they have established close ties with Iran. Iran’s support to Syria, despite the humanitarian violence in the country, have escalated the Shia-Sunni tension in the region.

Iran’s Political Objective

With its own distinctive policy, Iran aims at increasing its power and influence in the region. The state of Iran has pursued a sectarian and religious-based foreign policy. Thus, it could be said that Iran’s foreign policy has been established on the basis of the Shi’ism. The main goal of Iran in the region is to maintain the domain of Shi’ism which has strengthened with the addition of Iraq (just as it happened in Syria and Lebanon), where the Shia groups and parties have gained strength after the invasion of the US. Tehran, at the same time, is seeking ways of being influential over the Shia population in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In this way, Iran will be able to establish a political clout over a wide geography through the sectarian bond, thereby having a voice in the internal affairs of many of their neighboring countries. The Iranian influence over the Shia factors in Iraq are of utmost importance in this sense.

Iran’s leaders’ anti-Israel and anti-American discourses and policies get credit within the Muslim geographies. However, Tehran’s steps to maintain and strengthen the Shia axis in the region serve for Israel’s probable long-term Shia-Sunni conflict in the Middle East. Likewise, Iran’s approach towards the people’s movements that aim at the overthrow of the Nusayris of Syria could be explained on the basis of Iran’s target of maintaining the Shia axis. The current ruling party in Syria has developed relations with Iran at an alliance level. With the overthrow of this ruling party, it is anticipated to see a Syrian administration in which the Shia are less influential. This will, in turn, impair the Iran’s clout in Syria, with which Iran has the closest ties, and the contact established with the Lebanese Shias will (to a large extent) weaken. Furthermore, Iran’s support towards the Assad administration for the maintenance of the Shia axis may both inhibit the democratic representativeness of the Syrian people and lead to the escalation of the Shia-Sunni tension in the region.

**THE MAIN GOAL OF IRAN IN THE REGION IS TO MAINTAIN THE SHIA AXIS.**
Iran’s Support Towards Syria

The protests that started in the south of Syria, in the city of Dera’a, in March 2011 against the Ba’ath regime has spread to the whole country in a short period of time and people have showed an obvious determination in seeing a change of the administration. The Assad administration has taken some steps to meet the reform expectations of the Syrian people. However, these reforms have been restricted to the decisions, such as the appointment of the new administration and the removal of the state of emergency. Additionally, the party in power preferred to oppress the opposition by force. The Syrian army has entered into the towns and cities, which have been crippled with protests, with tanks and armored vehicles, intervening in the protest demonstrations. It is known that the cost of this intervention has been the deaths of nearly 2,000 civilians and thousands of injured civilians. Likewise, the Syrian army and police forces have performed large scale operations against the opposing protestors in the cities Dera’a, Hama, Homs, Deir ez-Zor and Idlib, bombing settlements where those demonstrations broke out. The Syrian state executed collective arrests in order to rule out the opposition movement and it has imprisoned almost 15,000 people on the basis of demonstrating against the regime, aiding the injured demonstrators and releasing information to the foreign media.

While Iran has supported the people’s movements against the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, it has adopted a different stance towards the rebellion in Syria. Iran’s supreme leader Ali Khamenei stated that the uprisings in Syria were different than those in Arab countries and developed with the support of the US-Israel alliance.22 The Iranian Ministry of the Exterior has claimed that the groups rebelling against the Assad administration in Syria are the “terrorist groups” that have been provoked by the US and Israel.23 The state of Iran, which regards the uprising in Syria different from the Arab Spring, tries to inhibit the overthrow of the Assad rule and the change of the Nusayri management group. In the last weeks, Iran has started to provide Syria with arms, equipments and experts, along with the verbal support. The fact that Tehran has distributed arms to the Nusayri families and supplied the Assad administration with monitoring devices so that it can follow and locate

the opposing groups has been much emphasized by the press. Likewise, it has been reflected by the news that Syria, thanks to these monitoring device systems, has designated and arrested many opposing groups.

According to the internet website ‘Green Voice of Freedom,’ a security committee that has been sent by Iran has provided the Syrian security forces with specialization training and technical support. Furthermore, the Washington Post claimed on the 28th of May (2011) that Iran has supported the Assad administration with military, logistical and technical aids so that the Assad government could suppress the opposing demonstrations. It claimed that Iran had sent helmets, clubs and other intervention tools to Syria so that the Syrian security forces could control the demonstrators. Basing on the American officials, the newspaper also argued that Tehran sent its expert staff, which worked for the suppression of the protests in Iran in 2009, to Syria for the training of the Syrian security forces. Likewise, in the last weeks, the media has given much room for the news, saying that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards sent personnel to Damascus and provided the personnel there with the tactical training in their combat against the collective rebellion movements.

The Western countries, in this process, made explanations directly referring to the Iranian security specialists who played a role in the suppression of the insurgency in Syria, eventually deciding to impose sanctions upon Syria. The US decided to freeze the assets of the Jerusalem Force commander, accusing him of helping the Syrian uprising. The European Union declared the Iranian police organization responsible for the arbitrary arrestment and the murder of the protestors in Syria, and they also decided to impose sanctions on certain Iranian figures. The EU, with the justification that they supported the suppression of the protestors by force in Syria, froze the assets of the Commander-in-Chief of Revolutionary Guards, Commander of the Jerusalem Forces, Head of the Revolutionary Guards Intelligence. These military leaders were also prohibited from travelling to the EU. The Board of Experts, which was assigned by the UN with the task of examining the sanctions against Iran’s, stated that most of the illegal arms transfer of Tehran had been to Syria.

The fact that Iran has supported the Assad administration has driven the other players within the Shia Crescent to pursue a policy that is in line with that of Tehran. Iraq has declared that it will be with the Assad government during the uprisings in Syria and, through the contacts that have been held at different levels, it transferred messages of support for Syria. Iraq’s Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, has not criticized the Assad regime for the military intervention in the Syrian protests and for the increase in the number of the civilian

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26 http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/19/world/middleeast/19syria.html, 18.05.2011  
losses. However, the same Iraqi regime has suggested that the demonstrators have sabotaged the integrity of the state. Some Iraqi officials have proclaimed that the Syrian demonstrators are the members of the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization and are supported by the Gulf countries and Israel alike. The Lebanon-based Hezbollah organization has adopted a similar attitude regarding the developments in Syria. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has called his people to support the Assad administration and claimed that protest demonstrations are a Saudi Arabia plan which is supported by Israel.

**CONCLUSION**

Iran has further increased its clout in Iraq as a result of the Shia groups coming to power in Iraq after the US invasion of this country. The US will have withdrawn from Iraq by the end of 2011, although the US will maintain its influence in Iraq after the pullout. As a result of the US withdrawal from Iraq, Iran may include Iraq in its playground as well. Given the developments within the scope of the Arab Spring and the change in Iraq, it is anticipated that Iran will increase its clout over the Gulf countries and extend its playground to include the Gulf countries. Iran’s steps taken with the purpose of being a leader country in the Middle East within the scope of the Shia axis show Iran’s inclination towards this goal. Tehran can back up this target of itself through the development of its capacity in nuclear technology and the long-range missiles. For Iran, Syria poses the biggest risk. The blow of the Arab Spring may have negative repercussions on Iran’s influence over this country. Thus, the developments in Syria may take rather concerning dimensions. They may even evolve into sectarian tension and spread throughout the whole region.
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