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SOCIAL SCIENCES UNIVERSITY OF ANKARA

INSTITUTE OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

FOREIGN POLICY OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN TOWARDS TURKEY DURING THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR (2011-24) A NEO-CLASSICAL REALIST FRAMEWORK

PhD. Dissertation

Mehmet Akif KOÇ

Middle East Studies

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ABSTRACT

Carrying out the unveiled investigation into the foreign policy of Iran vis-à-vis Turkey during the Syrian Civil War (2011-2024) through the prism of Neo-Classical Realism (NCR), it specifically references the interaction of systemic pressures and intervening domestic variables. Traditional NCR models emphasize leadership characteristics, strategic culture, domestic institutions, and state-society relations; however, this investigation proposes the inclusion of sectarian identity as a fifth independent intervening variable, a factor of prime importance given the ideologically charged and identity-driven political order of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This dissertation places the Iran-Turkey rivalry within a larger historical, ideological, and geopolitical framework, establishing how the post-1979 Iranian revolutionary ethos and Shia identity groomed its regional behavior concerning Sunni-majority Turkey. The Syrian Civil War (2011-24) became the testbed for this relationship, laying bare the sectarian predication of Tehran's strategic decisions, including the nexus of transnational Shia militias and religious rationales. In contrast, Turkey and some principal Sunni Arab players such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE stood with the Syrian opposition, thus accelerating the larger sectarian polarization and geopolitical fragmentation of the region.

Using a qualitative process tracing methodology triangulated with Persian, Turkish, and English primary and secondary sources, the study demonstrates the workings of ideological and institutionalized sectarianism upon the implementation of Iranian foreign policy. It argues that one should not consider sectarian identity as merely a subcategory of strategic culture but as a separate frame of analysis.

Ultimately, this study extends the Neo-Classical Realism framework theoretically to accommodate identity-driven regional settings and to furnish a working hypothesis in outlining the sectarianized and ideologically filtered foreign policy underpinnings of Iran in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Neo-Classical Realism, Iranian Foreign Policy, Sectarianism, Iran–Turkey Relations, Syrian Civil War

ÖZET

Bu doktora tezi, İran'ın 2011–2024 yılları arasında Suriye İç Savaşı bağlamında Türkiye'ye yönelik dış politikasını Neoklasik Realizm kuramı çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Çalışma, Neoklasik Realist teorinin geniş ölçekte kullanılan dört ara/içsel değişkenine (liderlik özellikleri, stratejik kültür, kurumlar/devlet yapısı ve devlet-toplum ilişkileri) ek olarak, mezhepsel kimlik parametresini beşinci ve bağımsız bir değişken olarak kuramsal modele dâhil etmektedir. Bu yaklaşım, özellikle İran gibi ideolojik temelli devletlerin dış politika davranışlarını daha derinlemesine anlamayı hedeflemektedir.

Tez, İran'ın Şii kimliğini ve devrimci ideolojisini, dış politikasının temel belirleyicileri olarak ele almakta; bu çerçevede, İran'ın bölgesel ölçekte ve Suriye'de Şii milisleri destekleme, dini söylemleri iç/dış kitlesel mobilizasyonda aktif olarak kullanma ve "Direniş Ekseni" söylemini kurumsallaştırma gibi politikalarını analiz etmektedir. Ayrıca, Türkiye, Suudi Arabistan, Katar ve Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri gibi Sünni aktörlerin Suriye'deki muhalefete verdikleri desteğin neticesinde, bölgedeki mezhepsel gerilim ve kutuplaşmanın derinleştiğini savunmaktadır.

Bu çalışma, İran'ın dış politikasının, 1979 Devrimi sonrasındaki çatışmacı atmosferde ideolojik mirası, kurumsal yapıları (örneğin, Devrim Muhafızları ve Ulusal Güvenlik Yüksek Konseyi) ve tarihsel/kolektif hafızası tarafından şekillendirildiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bağlamda, İran-Türkiye rekabetinin, sadece jeopolitik husumet ve bölgesel liderlik eksenli olarak gelişmediğini, aynı zamanda mezhepsel ve ideolojik yönü de kuvvetli olan bir mücadele alanı ortaya çıkardığını savunmaktadır.

Niteliksel yöntemlerle (süreç izleme, söylem analizi ve tarihsel mukayese) yürütülen bu araştırma, Farsça, Türkçe ve İngilizce kaynakları kullanarak, İran'ın dış politikasının mezhepsel ve ideolojik dinamiklerini derinlemesine incelemektedir. Nihayetinde bu tez, Neoklasik Realizm kuramını, mezhepsel kimliği ve ideoloji temelli yaklaşımı bağımsız bir değişken olarak analize dâhil ederek genişletmekte ve bu kuramın kimlik temelli dış politika analizlerinde daha etkili şekilde kullanılabileceğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Neoklasik Realizm, İran Dış Politikası, Mezhepsel Kimlik, İran-Türkiye İlişkileri, Suriye İç Savaşı

ABBREVIATIONS

AMAL	Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniyya (The Brigades of the Lebanese Resistance)
AQI	al-Qaeda in Iraq
EU	European Union
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HAMAS	Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya (Islamic Resistance Movement)
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - Qods Force
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham
NCR	Neo-Classical Realism
NSAA	Non-State Armed Actor
NSAG	Non-State Armed Group
PIJ	Palestinian Islamic Jihad
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
SNSC	Supreme National Security Council

INTRODUCTION

Two powerful regional powers and two great armies in the Middle East, two neighbors in constant competition, two powerful empire remnants seeking to establish hegemony in the region since the age of empires, two important states where the two major sects of Islam constitute the majority of their populations... Turkey-Iran relations have been structured within a framework that has created conflict and cooperation over similar parameters for centuries.

Although the regional competition and struggle for influence that the Safavid and Kajar empires engaged in with the Ottoman Empire gave way to friendship during the Ataturk-Reza Shah period in 1920s-30s, and Turkey and Iran were under the US/Western security umbrella and in the same camps during the Cold War, the dynamics of the relations changed significantly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The perceptions on the Tehran-Ankara axis after the 1979 Revolution can be summarized in the following few points: Mutual regime threats perceived by the two countries from each other, the perception of security risks created by the alliances formed by the other side, the cautiousness that religious/sectarian differences created, even if not a hot conflict, caused anxiety.

Despite this, relations between Turkey and Iran never broke off, and even in 1989 and 1997, when ambassadors withdrew reciprocally from each other and relations became increasingly tense, diplomatic ties between the two countries were somehow kept balanced and on track, and in this, pragmatic leaders and institutions played a major role, rather than ideologically oriented large masses. Although the strategic culture and perspective of both countries on geopolitical balances brought about a constant competition in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East, both countries carefully avoided engaging in direct hot conflict. The idea of fighting in an eventful manner through proxies was not a method that either side resorted to. These careful and challenging balances were largely maintained, albeit with difficulty, until the Syrian Civil War starting as of 2011. In this context, the Syrian Civil War constituted a major test for Turkey-Iran relations, which have been going through various wars, peace, power struggles and continuous tensions for centuries.

Setting the Stage: Iran, Turkey and the Middle East in the 21th Century

Iran, which has been consolidating its power with a continuous upward trend since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, has continued to create a regional dynamic against Sunni powers, with the backbone of Shiism and opposition to the US/Israel, with various countries and communities in the Middle East through the alliance system it calls the "Axis of Resistance". The aim of this alliance may not have been to intimidate Sunni countries and communities in the region and weaken their power, but this is exactly what emerged as a result of the actions of Iran and its allies on the ground between 2003 and 2024. This situation has created significant antagonism both in Iran's traditional rival Turkey and in the Sunni countries and communities in the region. As a result, sectarian politics, both in its Sunni and Shia versions, have increased at an unprecedented rate in the history of the modern Middle East and have affected almost all countries. Iran and Turkey are no exception to this dangerous phenomenon.

This research took shape and emerged as a project emerging in the 2020-21 period, when the intense conflict phase of the Syrian Civil War, which began with peaceful demonstrations in March 2011, was over, but the effects of the bloody sectarian conflicts in both post-2003 invasion Iraq and civil war Syria were still quite fresh in the collective memory. The sectarian conflicts in Iraq had just calmed down: the conflicts between the Shia who formed the government after the elections and the armed groups of the Sunni Arab minority and later took on a Sunni sectarian tone with structures such as al-Qaeda in Iraq and later ISIS, while the Shia, in turn, armed themselves under the instigation of their religious and political leaders and launched retaliation attacks with slogans of revenge for the Baath period and sectarian discourse.

Following these bloody conflicts, the process that some call the "Arab Spring", which I will call as the "Arab Uprisings" during this dissertation thesis, began. In countries with Sunni Arab majorities such as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, leaders who had ruled their societies with authoritarian iron fists for decades were being overthrown one by one. In the following months, Shia minorities in the Gulf Arab countries such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia also attempted to rebel against the Sunni monarchies, but were harshly suppressed. And when the upheaval finally spread to Syria, probably no one could have predicted under the conditions of March 2011 that the events would turn into a bloody civil war that would last following fourteen years.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework: Why Neo-Classical Realism for This Case?

In most countries of the Arab Uprisings, events came to a conclusion within a few months or years, in most of them the demands of the people were not met and it is possible to say that a waiting period has started at the time being for the next major uprising. However, the events that turned into a civil war in Syria quickly followed a bloody course in which regional and global actors were also involved in armed conflicts, millions of people were displaced and forced to migrate, and hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives or were injured. The tendency to explain the participation of regional actors in the Syrian Civil War mostly within the Realist framework and with the offensive and defensive versions of Neo-Realism is more common. Likewise, the efforts to explain the involvement of Iran and the Gulf Arab monarchies in the war in different camps solely through identity differences are striking.

However, in this study, I tried to reconcile these two approaches to some extent, and to establish a framework in which I could include the arguments of *Innenpolitik* theories regarding state behavior in the analysis, accepting the strong and explanatory aspects of the Realist tradition as the basis. In this respect, for example, the central role of leaders and institutions in decision-making mechanisms in Iran since Ayatollah Khomeini, and for example, the critical role of Ayatollah Khamenei as the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) loyal to him during the military intervention in Syria, influenced the direction of my research in favor of domestic factors. Likewise, the strategic culture of Iran, which has gained much more significance after the 1979 Revolution, the extraordinary importance and priority given to historical and religious references, and the use of mobilization dynamics in state-society relations more intensely than in any other country, further reflected why domestic factors are more important in decision-making mechanisms than in other cases.

Therefore, in this thesis, I found it appropriate to appeal to the flexibility and inclusiveness that Neo-Classical Realism provides to researchers and analysts within the Realist tradition, from which it originated and to which it has made great contributions. Neo-Classical Realism argues that the interaction between systemic pressures and domestic factors and that two explanatory sets, namely the external/systemic framework and internal/sociological dynamics, interact with each other and together; that is, not only domestic factors or only systemic dynamics, but two sets of concepts affect each other and shape the decisions taken. When determining Iran's foreign policy and making decisions on critical security issues, the

interaction of these internal-external-systemic factors makes Neo-Classical Realism the most suitable theory and conceptual toolkit.

Although it emerged relatively late in the 1990s compared to other variants within Realism, Neo-Classical Realism has become a frequently referred to and widely used theory in foreign policy analyzes. In this doctoral thesis, I will utilize the version of Neo-Classical Realism known as the Type - III variant, which examines the impact of domestic factors on decision-making mechanisms in terms of four main intervening variables: strategic culture, leadership characteristics, domestic institutions, and state-society relations. The Iran case offers a very rich material and background in terms of all four variables.

On the other hand, domestic factors play a major role both in explaining Iran-Turkey relations and Iran's approach to Syria and the Middle East, especially after the 1979 Revolution. For example, we had the opportunity to observe the theo-political revolution that the concept of *Velayat-i Faqih* formulated by Khomeini made within Shiism and the tremendous mobilization power it provided based on the Shiite tradition within state-society relations during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) and the Syrian Civil War (2011-24). Similarly, the geopolitical character of the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry, ornamented with sectarianism, as an important component of Iranian strategic culture, was reproduced and put into circulation with reciprocal steps in the course of Turkish foreign policy after the 1979 Revolution, especially after 2002. These dynamics observed in Iran's foreign policy towards Turkey during the Syrian Civil War are undoubtedly not only related to the systemic environment and cannot be explained without examining the effects of domestic factors on decision-making mechanisms within Iran.

Theoretical Debate: Elevating Sectarian Identity as a Fifth Intervening Variable in Neo-Classical Realism

As employed in this dissertation, Neo-Classical Realism (NCR) represents a strong, albeit imperfect, framework to analyzing Iran’s foreign policy with its bridging systemic pressures and intervening variables at the domestic level. The study adopts the Type-III variant of NCR that generally focuses on four intervening variables that are assumed to mediate systemic pressures to yield foreign policy results: (1) leadership images, (2) strategic culture, (3) domestic institutions, and (4) state-society relations.

These intervening variables provide a way for scholars to go beyond the structural determinism of Neo-Realism and the focus on human nature emphasized by Classical Realism to look in more detail at how domestic factors filter external pressures. But in the study of Iran’s

foreign policy during the Syrian Civil War, particularly with regard to its interactions with Turkey and Syria, the scope of the four variables alone proves insufficient to explain the complexities of Iran's behavior.

Within the context of Shiism and Islamic Republic of Iran's policy-making mechanisms, the foundational character of Shiism is an important factor in understanding the dynamic of Iran's foreign policy. Between two extraordinary episodes in Iran's history, sectarianism in Shiism grew to become a deeply dominant force, imposing an entirely reshaping effect on the state, state-society relations, and policy priorities at home and abroad. The first set of breakthroughs came at a historic moment in which Twelver Shiism first canoed to an uplift as a great signifier of Iranian identity with the founding of the Safavid dynasty. Subsequently, the 1979 Revolution was catalyzed into its most powerful modern resurgence that would attribute Shiite sectarianism as the very basis of the political landscape of the Islamic Republic. Before 1979, it may be argued that Shiite sectarianism was not foundational; the Revolution, however, transformed it into one of the few enduringly central facets shaping Iranian foreign policy orientation. This foundation has made an explicit and direct impact on Iran's orientation on foreign policy matters in such key terrains as the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the onset of civil war in Syria in 2011, providing another crucial aspect to analyzing the imbrication of ideological identity with strategic choice-making.

Based on this significant periodization and sectarian priorities affecting Iranian domestic and foreign policy orientation, this dissertation contends that sectarian identity —Shiite Islamism, to be precise— must be recognized as a fifth, different level of intervening variable in order to adequately capture the nature of Iran's foreign policy.

Why the Four Variables Are Insufficient

The four traditional NCR variables —images of leadership, strategic culture, domestic institutions, and state-society relations— have produced many powerful explanations in different foreign policy contexts. However, in the narrow case of Iran's foreign policy vis-à-vis Turkey and Syria during the Syrian Civil War, they fall short for the following reasons:

Leadership Images: While the perceptions and ideological orientations of revolutionary leaders such as Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei have their importance, the decisions of these leaders sit deep within a sectarian worldview that supersedes individual agency. For instance, Khamenei's depiction of the Syrian conflict as an offence against the "Axis of Resistance" is not just his personal rendition; rather, it is a Shiite ideological mission

channel. To those on the sectarian level, these perceptions of leadership are shaped differently, a process which the leadership images variable cannot fully account for, as it functions from within a theological and collective identity framework.

Strategic Culture: Iran's strategic culture, based upon Persian historical narratives of anti-colonial resistance and upon the post-1979 revolutionary ideology, provides an excellent insight into how Iran approaches its foreign policy. Yet, merging identity into the sector of strategic culture may dilute its analytical prominence. The invocation of Shiite martyrdom narratives, for instance, in defense of Sayyida Zaynab's shrine in Damascus, serves to animate both domestic and transnational actors in ways that outrun the boundaries of any broader cultural or historical narrative. Treating sectarianism as a branch of strategic culture paints it as something to be circumvented by policy formulation, which in the case of the Syrian conflict, is unjustifiable. Therefore, to better highlight its significance and transformative role in Iranian policy-making mechanism, the sectarian dynamic should be assessed independently from strategic culture.

Domestic Institutions: The institutions such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) are the depots for foreign policy decisions made in Iran. Yet, these bureaus are not just blatantly this or that; they are impregnated with Shiite revolutionary ideology. The IRGC's Quds Force operates as a sectarian actor, coordinating transnational Shiite militias with a theological mandate. To reduce this sectarian dimension to mere institutional behavior means overlooking its independent role in crafting alliances, threat perceptions, and policy priorities.

State-Society Relations: Essentially, state-society relations describe how the Iranian regime garners public support and sustains legitimacy. However, the mobilization of the Shiite communities of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan during the Syrian Civil War goes beyond the domestic state-society considerations. The transnational sectarian strategy, motivated by theological imperatives such as the protection of Shia sanctities, operates beyond national boundaries and cannot be explained solely by state-society relations within Iran.

The limitations set by these four variables prove that a fifth intervening variable —sectarian identity— is needed to account fully for the dynamics of Iran's foreign policy. In the context of Iran, sectarian identity undergoes a transformation: It is no longer an artefact of strategic culture or a tool of state-society mobilization; it becomes a root driver that interacts with others while

concurrently amplifying threat perceptions, alliance formations, and intervention strategies in a manner unique to its irreducibility.

The Case for Sectarian Identity as a Fifth Variable

Since the four traditional variables listed above are insufficient to explain the decision-making mechanisms in Iran, this dissertation proposes that sectarian identity, particularly Shiite Islamism, should be given the status of a fifth intervening variable in NCR for the following reasons:

Initially the institutionalization and ideological centrality necessitates this revision: In the Islamic Republic of Iran, sectarian identity is not a peripheral or instrumental factor but is deeply embedded in the state's constitutional framework, has been operationalized through an assemblage of institutions, namely the IRGC, religious seminaries, and the Supreme Leader's Office, and is even expressed in official rhetoric. Through the principle of Velayat-e-Faqih, the Supreme Leader is provided not only with political authority but also with religious clout, thus affording Shiite identity utmost importance in state legitimacy and foreign policy choice.

Secondly, the transplanted mobilization of Shiite networks emphasizes sectarianism. Iran's ability to mobilize foreign Shiite militias such as those of Liwa Fatemiyoun (Afghan Hazaras) and Liwa Zaynabiyoun (Pakistani Shia) under a sectarian banner is a clear indicator that this dynamic extends well beyond mere state-society relations within the domestic sphere. The theological narrative of defending sacred sites such as the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab in Syria is a mobilizing rationale that cannot be fairly reduced to strategic culture or institutional behavior.

Realist understanding of threats and threat perceptions also point out sectarian dynamic. Sectarian identity provides Iran with a lens through which to view threats and allies in ways distinct from those of leadership images or strategic culture. For example, Turkey's backing of Sunni factions in Syria was perceived, not only in the framework of geopolitical rivalry, but also as a sectarian threat to the Shia-led “Axis of Resistance,” affectionately embodied in the antagonisms of the Safavid-Ottoman and present-day Sunni-Shia divisions.

Fourth, the empirical analysis in Chapter V maintains that Iran’s foreign policy in Syria cannot be fully understood unless sectarian identity is treated as a separate variable. The mobilization of Shiite narratives, coordination of sectarian militias, and framing of the conflict as a defense of Shia Islam underscore an interaction that interacts but is not subsumed under

the other four variables. This implies that NCR must be theoretically expanded to accommodate the singular role of sectarianism and identity approach in ideologically driven states.

By suggesting sectarian identity as a fifth intervening variable, this dissertation fills an important gap in the application of NCR to ideologically driven states like Iran. This theoretical innovation prevents the unique role of sectarianism from being subsumed within the broader cluster of strategic culture and offers a precise and holistic framework for assessing Iran's behavior amidst the Syrian Civil War and its engagements with Turkey.

The Framework and Main Orientation of the Research

The first research question I seek to answer in this thesis is whether it is possible to explain Iran's foreign policy by focusing on domestic political and sociological factors, and whether this provides a productive framework for analysis without breaking the connection with the framework of Realism on a macro scale. In order to do this, it is necessary to closely focus on the decision-making mechanisms in Iran, to examine the stages through which leadership characteristics, domestic institutions, strategic culture and the forms of relations between the state and society have evolved to their current state, and to examine through which mechanisms and how decisions on current foreign policy and security issues are made. In the thesis, I have tried to include various case studies on this subject and detailed analyzes of the factors that are effective in these processes, as well as the views of various Iranian political, religious and military leaders and their reactions to these processes.

A second research question is whether the sectarian perspective is a strong driving factor affecting the relations between states and their ties with the non-state armed actors across the Middle East. For example, does sectarianism provide a powerful motivation in Iran and Saudi Arabia's relations with Shia and Sunni armed or unarmed non-state actors in the region, just like the dynamics based on Realist power arguments; or is this sectarian dynamic a simple element that can be mentioned and passed over within the strategic culture and personal tendencies of leaders, as has always been the case? In order to see this, it is necessary to focus on the domestic factors that were effective in Iran's foreign policy after the 1979 Revolution, and to show that Realist power dynamics are important, but among the domestic factors, sectarianism is a dynamic in its own right, and it affects decision-making processes together with and deeply affecting the other four intervening variables. Therefore, in this doctoral thesis, through various case studies I examined whether sectarianism is an independent intervening variable or not.

As a third research question, I investigated whether sectarianism is a factor in the formation of Iran's foreign policy towards Turkey, particularly during the Syrian Civil War. While doing this, I examined the place of sectarianism in Iranian strategic culture, whether the sectarian factor has a weight in the personal characters of the leaders and institutional structures; finally, the effect of sectarianism in Iran's foreign policy starting from the Iran-Ira War and after the 2003 Iraq Invasion and during the Syrian Civil War. Then, I focused on whether sectarian behavior was seen both in terms of regional balances and competition and through proxies while determining policies towards Syria at the Turkey-Iran bilateral level. This effort also aims to reveal whether the sectarian dynamic is a powerful and determining variable in the formation of Iran's general foreign policy and its approach towards Turkey, along with the other four intervening variables of Neo-Classical Realism.

Research Methodology, Processing Data and Analytical Approach

While preparing this doctoral thesis, I specifically scanned primary and secondary sources in three languages; I examined printed and digital sources in Persian, English, and Turkish. While writing this thesis, in order to contribute to Turkish and English literature, I translated about twenty books in the fields of history, sociology and international relations, which are relevant to the content of this thesis, into Turkish. I also prepared and published about thirty academic articles in these fields published in Turkish and English, in the field of Turkey-Iran relations and modern Middle East studies as research articles and book reviews, along with more than a hundred analysis articles published on various research platforms.

During the years for authoring this thesis, I benefited from my experiences in the Middle East, where I have been working diplomatically and academically for more than fifteen years. During this process, I also benefited from my experience in Iran, where I lived and worked for two years during the early Arab Uprisings years and studied Persian language and Middle East Studies PhD program at Tehran University, as well as my professional and academic experience in Middle East studies and Russian foreign/security policy in Moscow, where I lived and worked for three years afterwards. Throughout all these experiences, I have tried to reflect the experiences I have gained from my meetings and observations with many politicians, academics, experts, journalists and diplomats from almost every corner of the Middle East, including Iranians, Syrians, Turks, Russians and the Middle East, to a large extent.

However, in order to guard against potential criticisms that personal experience or access to sources do not make for a methodology, the dissertation proposes a rigorous multi-method

approach within qualitative research, integrating established research methods and employing their own modifications in the context of the Iran-Turkey-Syria case study. It is designed to ensure scientific rigor, replicability, and the deep analytical treatment of the subject using rich empirical data gathered from primary and secondary sources. To provide clarity, the following section outlines the methodological framework employed in the study.

For tracing causal mechanisms from systemic pressures or domestic factors all the way to Iran's foreign policy decisions, this method has been utilized. Process tracing at key historical junctures—namely the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88, and the Syrian Civil War from 2011 to 2014—uncovers how sectarian identity interacts with leadership perceptions, strategic culture, domestic institutions, and state-society relations to produce policy outcomes. It is therefore equipped for diachronic analyzes that look for continuity and discontinuity through time, thus the bias of presentism is avoided, and a sturdy and rich causal framework emerges.

Discourse Analysis: Sectarian identity is considered as one of the topics of interest, and discourse analysis is applied to official speeches (by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei), IRGC statements, state media, and militia narratives. This analysis looks at how sectarian rhetoric-the mention of Sayyida Zaynab, Karbala, and the dichotomy of *haq* (truth) versus *batil* (falsehood)-constructs threat perceptions and mobilizes support both domestically and transnationally. The analysis of texts in Persian, English, and Turkish aims at grasping the ideological and theological framing of Iran's foreign policy so as to ensure a very fine conception of ideational drivers.

Comparative Case Studies: The thesis is being developed with a comparative approach by comparing Iran and Turkey, especially in light of the Syrian Civil War. This will unravel the differential effects of sectarian identity between regimes with dissimilar ideational foundations (Shiite theocracy vs. Sunni republicanism). By contrasting the mechanisms employed by each state in interpreting systemic pressures through domestic lenses, the research isolates the unique role of sectarianism as a behavior of Iran, thereby allowing an extrapolation of the result to other ideologically driven states.

Triangulation of Data from Multiple Sources: To ensure robustness and circumvent biases, the work triangulates sources coming from primary sources (e.g., speeches by Iranian leaders, IRGC communiqués, militia propaganda) and secondary sources (e.g., academic literature, policy reports) in Persian, English, and Turkish. This multilingual setting enhances the validity

of the findings by cross-verifying narratives and perspectives across different contexts, thus making sure that the analysis rests on empirical grounds and cannot succumb to the dominance of any single narrative.

Within this frame of methodological setup, data source and analytical process stand distinct. Experiences from Iran and the Middle East further enrich the contextual understanding. But the methodology uses systematic, replicable procedures, in accordance with the standard procedures followed in international relations (IR) research. Reference points are found in similar studies, such as Hinnebusch's (2001) tracing of Syrian foreign policy, which uses process tracing to study domestic-systemic interactions, and Gause's (2014) examination of sectarianism in the Gulf, which uses discourse analysis to investigate identity dynamics. However, this study customizes those approaches to the actual sectoral mechanics of Iran's sectarian-driven foreign policy to ensure their relevance to the case. The result is a richly empirical and theoretically grounded methodology capable of accommodating the complex Iran-Turkey-Syria case while also promoting broader IR theory.

In addition to this theoretical layer and a comparative layer, the research undertakes the qualitative content analysis of formal and semi-formal Iranian discourse, with sources being classified in a systematic way according to suggestive neoclassical realist variables. The entire array of documents analyzed and coded includes speeches, policy papers, and media material from Iran, with respect to the themes of threat perception, ideological framing, institutional constraints, and foreign policy behavior. Henceforth, the coding process unnerves both deductive patterns from the theoretical framework, along with the inductive recognition of emergent patterns within the linguistics and strategic narrative.

Such a methodological approach renders the study capable of unveiling how Iranian elites domestically interpret systemic challenges and translate them into policy. The subject-research logic, as present throughout the analysis, ponders on both ideational constructs as well as material interests. Through the diachronic nature of the analysis, one could approach continuity and change in phases concerning Iran-Turkey relations vis-a-vis the Syrian conflict, while discourse analysis brings foreign policy shifts and elite rhetoric and narrative construction into correlated focus in a very structured and replicative manner.

The study's methodology is premised on an emphasis on transparency and empirical testability. In brief, the procedural steps of data collection, source selection, thematic coding, and interpretive inference are included so as to allow for any researcher to walk through the

steps taken by the analyst in moving from the raw empirical material(s) to the theoretical conclusions. The coding framework derived from Neo-Classical Realism and applied consistently throughout the coding is explicitly defined; variables such as elite perception, strategic culture, and institutional mediation are explicated. Furthermore, the textual sources used for analysis are either publicly accessible or cited explicitly so that independent verification and reassessment could be undertaken under the study itself or some alternative theoretical perspective. Hence, in this way, the empirical findings of the study become open to hard evidence, critical review, and repetition.

The research is indeed set in a very specific context: Iran-Turkey relations during the Syrian Civil War. However, the methodological tool set of this research design advances the transferability of tools to comparable cases of politically motivated foreign policies that concern the mutual interaction of domestic structures and systemic pressures. The variables identified, and the process tracing logic employed, can be transferred to analyze other state behaviors under such conditions—such as Saudi interventions in the region and Pakistani strategic alignments—making the study replicable even away from its immediate case. Thus, by articulating clearly how causal mechanisms are inferred and how they are tested, the present study contributes to the empirical study of Iran's foreign policy and to an account of practice in methodology of international relations, furnishing a pattern for future case-based inquiries that rest on theoretical rigor and empirical lucidity.

While all these factors enrich the thesis, the fact that the process in Syria has not yet ended is undoubtedly a significant limitation of the study. In my opinion, the seizure of Damascus by the coalition of Syrian armed opposition with the active support of Turkey in December 2024 and the collapse of the 61-year-old Baath regime may not reflect a moment when the curtain of the civil war has just closed. We will closely examine whether the waters will calm down in Syria in the coming period. However, although the results have not yet fully emerged, I believe we have enough material to evaluate whether sectarianism is an effective dynamic in Iran's foreign policy and approach to Turkey, which is one of the fundamental questions of this thesis.

Replicability and Broader Applicability of Sectarian Identity as a Fifth Variable within the Neo-Classical Realist Theory

The insertion of sectarian identity as a fifth intervening variable in Neo-Classical Realism is not just the theoretical cornerstone of the Iran-Turkey-Syria case; rather, it stands as a reproducible framework for state behavior in any ideologically driven systems, primarily in the

Middle East but also elsewhere. The rationale behind the originality, validity, and applicability of this addition may be grounded as follows.

Originality: Putting sectarian identity as an independent intervening variable fills a very significant gap in NCR that has traditionally neglected ideational elements such as religion and sectarianism or looked vague-eyed at them under the umbrella of "strategic culture." Constructivist approaches do speak-to identity-but against the backdrop of Realism, they would either lack a structural intervention. This dissertation breaks down this dichotomy, integrating sectarian identity into a Realist framework and allowing that paradigm to grasp fully how ideology and power interact when religion is part of the state apparatus through states like Iran, Saudi Arabia, or the Houthis of Yemen. It adds to the richness of NCR by providing a more operational model for states in which identity is a fundamental foreign policy driver.

Validity: The fifth variable's validity, the sectarian identity, is attributed to the very hard empirical analyzes performed by Chapter V, showing how Shiite identity evokes Iranian threat perceptions and alliance formations and intervention strategies in the Syrian Civil War. Theories that engage discourse analysis and process tracing supply hard evidence of sectarianism affecting causality, thereby differentiating it from the effect of the remainder of the four variables and upholding the analytical rigor that the study demands. The multi-source triangulation of the study further strengthens the findings, counter-checking the data from primary and secondary sources, making certain that the prominence of sectarian identity in this respect is neither exaggerated nor wrongly evaluated.

Applicability: This framework is replicable in other Middle Eastern cases in which sectarian or religious identity may be central to the foreign policy considerations involved, such as Saudi-Iran rivalry, Iraqi sectarian politics after 2003, or Lebanese domestic and foreign policy inclination under Hezbollah domination. Beyond the Middle East, it can operate in ideologically embedded settings in a structural sense, such as Sunni-Shia dynamics in Pakistan or Israel's religious-nationalist policies, or even non-Middle Eastern contexts, such as the Taliban governance in Afghanistan. The framework enjoys maximum flexibility, allowing scholars to tweak it for various regimes while retaining NCR-produced assumptions about the interaction of systemic and domestic factors, making it a truly comparative foreign policy analytic tool.

Without making sectarian identity into a variable of its own, all analyzes of ideologically driven states risk oversimplifying elaborate motivations or reducing them to material interests

or strategic culture. In the Middle East, religion and identity are not cultural artefacts but constitutive elements of state legitimacy and strategy; as such, the four conventional variables of the NCR theoretical framework are insufficient. This framework used in the dissertation is a more accurate and contextually sensitive model with potential for application in the region to understand the dynamics informing identity-driven conflicts and thus, to inform policy responses. Establishing sectarian identity as a fifth variable, this dissertation, thus, advances such understanding in an ideologically charged realm, setting the stage for future efforts to empirically test and refine this framework in a variety of settings.

Structure and Content of the Chapters

This dissertation is not a straightforward reading of the Arab Uprisings and the Syrian Civil War, nor is it a year-by-year chronology of Turkey-Iran political ties, nor is it a detailed study of the economic, cultural, energy, etc. dimensions of relations. It is not a chronology of Ottoman-Safavid relations or a detailed history of Iran-Syria relations. Essentially, each of these comprehensive titles could be a doctoral thesis on its own, but in this thesis, I will provide a significant amount of detail on each of these titles in the following chapters to provide a sufficient background and infrastructure for the final assessment.

Chapter I will provide a theoretical and conceptual framework, and in this section, I will explain to the reader the theoretical tools I will use to better understand the historical, sociological and international political issues that I will cover in detail in the following chapters. As I will explain in more detail in relevant part, starting from the idea that Neo-Classical Realism under the umbrella of Realism is the most appropriate conceptual framework to examine whether sectarian dynamics have been effective in Turkey-Iran relations in the recent period, this theory and its basic propositions will be elaborated in Chapter I. Again, in this chapter, I will discuss why Neo-Classical Realism provides a more effective framework in explaining this title, in which aspects it is more explanatory, and I will emphasize the harmony and connection between the case and theory based on the effect of domestic factors on decision-making processes in Iran.

Chapter II, which examines Iran-Turkey relations until the 1979 Revolution, begins with the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry and the 1514 Battle of Chaldiran, and extends to the twentieth century. The course of Iran's rivalry with the Ottoman Empire and tense neighborhood relations during the Safavids and Kajars periods contributed greatly to the formation of strategic culture on both sides and the sharpening of religious/sectarian differences, deeply affecting the way

that leaders and society perceive each other, thus forming today's perception patterns. These centuries, during which Shiism deeply penetrated Iran's social genetics and strategic culture, also prepared the ground for the last half century, when Khomeini formulated and structured *Velayat-Faqih* and placed it at the center of the Iranian theo-political system. This chapter also examines the friendship established between Reza Shah and Ataturk during the early Turkish Republic period and the strategy of minimizing problems by locating under the same security umbrella during the Cold War, the internal political and social conditions leading up to the 1979 Revolution, and the domestic parameters that contributed to the formation of the strategic culture in Iran.

The third chapter takes a picture of Iran's foreign policy before and after the 1979 Revolution and examines the dynamics of continuity and change in terms of domestic and external factors affecting foreign policy. Compared to the pre-1979 Revolution, there is a great deal of continuity between the two periods in areas such as centralized authority, political repression by dissidents, economic nationalism, use of state apparatus to control over society, leadership styles of the top leaders, and institutional characteristics determining state-society relations. On the other hand, the 1979 Revolution brought its own dynamics and significantly changed both domestic balances and foreign policy, thus making Iran a powerful and effective regional power. Chapter III focuses on the international balances and the concept of "system" from the Cold War to the 2000s, and aims to address the change and transformation of Iran's position in this international system in accordance with the basic parameters of Neo-Classical Realism.

Chapter IV examines the Turkey-Syria-Iran trilateral nexus with a direct Syria-centerd examination and examines the dynamics of Turkey and Iran's relations with Syria, the trilateral conflict and cooperation framework that has taken shape since the Cold War. Especially in the first years of Turkey-Iran relations after the 1979 Revolution, leadership characteristics and strategic culture played a primary role, while the institutional structures and mobilization of society in both countries had a serious impact on the relations. The Iran-Iraq War both established and strengthened the strategic and existential foundations of Syria-Iran relations, while paving the way for cautious neighborhood relations in the 1990s by opening up space for economic rapprochement and political pragmatism between Turkey and Iran. Arab Uprisings has been a test bed for Turkey and Iran's conflicting visions and alliance structures regarding the region. This chapter also examines the reflections of the two countries' differing visions, especially during the Syrian Civil War, on their relations with the Syrian regime with concrete examples and processes.

Chapter V is a comprehensive discussion section where Neo-Classical Realism is applied to this case, examining in detail the conflicting course of Turkey-Iran relations during the Syrian Civil War and the rapidly sectarian dimension of the war. The Shia-Sunni division that intensified after the 1979 Revolution across the Middle East and adapted to the modern era, solidified and led to polarization in the Iran-Iraq War, and then the Arab Uprisings divided the peoples of the region into hostile camps after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. The Syrian dossier, which is shaped by the Supreme Leader and the IRGC in Iran, mobilizes Shia communities in the country and in the Middle Eastern communities such as, Afghanistan, Pakistan (even Turkey) for the sacred purpose of "protecting the Revolution and the gains of Shia Islam", and the nature of this that feeds and strengthens each other with Sunni sectarianism is examined. Likewise, it focuses on how the relations between Turkey and Iran, which appear in two separate and rival camps of different sectarian escalation in Syria, are affected by this dangerous and instability-producing sectarian dynamic.

CHAPTER – 1

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Realism, Neo-Realism, and Neo-Classical Realism

1.1. Introduction: What do the Realist Theories Say in International Relations?

Theories, which are the result of the effort to explain the abstract political field by modelling it with some concrete variables and parameters, aim to bring together the practical and the conceptual framework. A basic and explanatory definition that explains the functionality of theory is the view that describes it as "systematic thinking aimed at showing that facts are related to each other in an understandable order" (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 1997, s. 12). Therefore, in international politics, we use theories to understand the basic dynamics of the relations of states with each other, which elements are effective while making decisions and constructing policies, and how and why states behave in the way they do under which conditions.

What theories basically aim is to provide simplifying levers and tools that will make it easier to understand issues in an abstract field shaped by a complex world of facts and sophisticated balances, and to provide a general framework that will guide. While doing this, it is undoubtedly possible that a reductionist framework arises from oversimplification, and thus some nuances are neglected and overlooked. International relations theories, like theories in all other disciplines, are criticized for not being able to fully explain international politics. In order to fill this gap, sub-theories and some sub-conceptual frameworks that are far from being grand theories are put forward, thus contributing to the main goal of gaining knowledge and explaining concrete facts.

International relations theories aim to provide an explanatory perspective on political developments in the international arena and to present arguments that can facilitate predictions and future projections. Within the discipline of international relations, especially in the last half

century, many explanatory theoretical and conceptual frameworks have been put forward, each aiming to explain a different aspect of international politics, state behavior, and policy-making. Among international relations theories, Realism still stands as the most comprehensive and influential theoretical paradigm in international politics, and with its explanatory plane that prioritizes the phenomenon of power, survival, and the anarchic nature of the international system, it is still the most frequently referenced conceptual ground and main source of other theories. Rooted in the ideas and works of leading figures of classical thought such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, Realism offers a revealing and comprehensive perspective for understanding global politics and the balance of international powers, with a particular emphasis on the often conflictual and competitive nature of relations between states.

The realist tradition is not a monolithic school in itself, but has evolved over time, paving the way for the emergence of numerous sub-theories and conceptual frameworks based on Realism. The Classical Realist tradition, based on thinkers such as Morgenthanu, which focuses on the determining aspect of human nature and the innate driver parameters that reveal behaviors, has emerged new types of Realist sub-theories over time. Neo-Realism or Structural Realism, introduced by Kenneth Watz, has moved the behavioral plane of states to a more macro level and focused on the international system, which argues that the anarchic nature of the system compels states to make decisions by prioritizing security and survival. The Defensive and Offensive versions that emerged later refined Neo-Realism by developing more explanatory perspectives based on basic requirement for survival and security, with their differing approaches on how states will behave against these systemic pressures.

And finally, Neo-Classical Realism included an important and not to be neglected analysis dimension that was missing in the Realist theory; by closing the gap felt between systemic level and unit level analyzes, it incorporated domestic variables into state behavior analysis. Basically, Realism provided a quiet efficient and realistic level of explanation in analyzing international relations, but with the emergence of Neo-Realism and especially Neo-Classical Realism, the Realist school became a much more effective and enduring theory, and gained a more explanatory ground by adding the effect of domestic factors on decision-making processes to the analysis.

1.1.1. Realism

Before moving on to how to "Neo-Classical Realist theory" can be used to understand and explain the "foreign policy behaviors" of states, it is useful to examine the relationship between the Realist theory and foreign policy analysis, its contributions to foreign policy analysis and its development in line with the emerging theoretical inadequacies (Burchill, Linklater, & Buzar, 2015). First, Realism has provided a solid foundation for the practice of "foreign policy" practice for decades. This is because it creates general, robust theories that help to simplify the international environment in which foreign policy emerges. More precisely, the Realist school is the main school of thought around which other approaches to international politics are shaped, and it is a set of theories and arguments derived from the very few basic assumptions held about how things work in the world (Schieder & Spindler, 2014). Theoretical schools within Realism can be listed as Classical [Realist, Neo-Realist (Defensive and Offensive sub-Realist schools], and Neo-Classical Realist schools.

Realism emerged in the first half of the twentieth century as a counter-movement to the pre-eminence of Kantian liberalism in politics and science and to the emergence of Marxism and Wilsonianism in their idealistic forms. In addition, the Realist paradigm generally finds its foundations in the works of the ancient Greek Historian Thucydides' (460 BC-395) *The History of the Peloponnesian Wars*, Niccollo Machiavelli's (1469-1527) *The Prince*[1], and Thomas Hobbes's (1588-1689) *Leviathan*[2].

Classical Realism is not a single/unified theory. Under this label, coexist authors who differ from each other in objectives and methodologies. The Realist tradition, which began with Hans Morgenthau[3] and Edward Hallet Carr, later became a robust mainstream in the field of international relations with many prominent figures such as Kenneth Waltz, Robert Gilpin, Reinhold Niebuhr, Edward Hallett Carr[4], Herbert Butterfield, Robert E. Osgood, Arnold Wolfers, and George Kennan.

With the end of the First World War, the theory of Idealism was put forward. Although the picture painted by Idealism was positive, this school of thought was unable to prevent the

[1] According to this work, he claimed that the state should have power in order to preserve and maintain its existence. The work, called *The Prince*, also brought to light concepts such as power, army, balance and sovereignty.
[2] He stated that international relations were in fact similar to the relationship between nature and human.
[3] *Politics Among Nations The Struggle for Power and Peace* was Morgenthau's key work and formed the basis of the Realist theory in international relations called "contemporary realism".
[4] As one of the pioneers of Realist paradigms, he claimed that all his work in the field of international relations was weak. One exception is *Twenty Years' Crisis*, which is considered the classic textbook on international relations. In *Twenty Years' Crisis*, Carr argues that the main problem in international relations is the conflict between Utopianism and Realism (Carr, 1946).

outbreak of the Second World War. With the Second World War, the Realist trend gradually replaced the Idealist view. The international system faced two major problems during the 1930s. The economic crisis that occurred in 1929, known as "The Great Depression," and the attempts by Germany and Japan to change the current status quo of the international system (Havercroft & Prichard, 2017). In the context of these two critical events, the international system was disintegrated, polarization among nations emerged owing to the sense of nationalism that arose with revisionist initiatives, and economic dissolution was experienced with the crisis. In this environment, which was suitable for the emergence of Realism, the element of power came to the fore (Viotti & Kauppi, 2013).

Realism, which defines state interests and power struggles as a universal criterion for analyzing the events in the international arena, has remained a dominant theory explaining the behavior of states for many years. The theory of Realism states that the international system is anarchic (Burchill, Linklater, & Buzar, 2015). Since power is essential in relations between states as a precondition of the international system, international relations therefore focuses on the distribution of power between states. Realists generally emphasize the quest for power of states, the centrality of the existing military power, and the conflicts this creates in the world of multiple sovereignties. For this reason, the dilemma of Realism, interest, and power attracts attention (Weber, 2021).

The relevant works authored between the two great wars, in which the foundations of Realism were laid, especially in the early years of the Cold War, are the essential works of Classical Realism. These works examine the relations between states from the point of view of statesmen, emphasizing the continuity of the power struggles due to the anarchic international environment with their critiques of the "Idealistic" approach (Griffiths, 2021).

The application of the Realist perspective to the analysis of international politics stems primarily from Edward Hallett Carr's famous and thought provoking book, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939*, published in the same year as the Second World War began. E. H. Carr emphasizes that international politics consists of both Realist and Utopian elements, that these elements have complementary qualities, and that both elements should be taken into account in political analysis (Crawford, 2016)

E. H. Carr criticized the Idealism that prevailed in the academic field during the interwar period. In his opinion, it was a normative perspective (as it should be) that did not take into account the objective determinants (what it is) of political practice (Lišanin, 2020). Thus, a gap

was created between the theoretical presuppositions of the intellectual and the reality that the professional politician had to face. In other words, the Realist theory within the discipline of International Relations was born as a reaction to the alleged "Idealism" of the postulates typical of the liberal current, such as the harmony of interests or Internationalism, which are the starting point of more elaborate theories, such as democratic peace, commercial peace or liberal institutionalism (Lomia, 2020).

E. H. Carr (2016: 62-63) suggests that the foundations of the realist approach are based on Machiavelli's three principles: 1) history is a sequence of causes and effects whose logic can be rationally understood, 2) theory is derived from the facts and not the other way around, and 3) ethics is not sufficient to condition policy. Neither Carr nor Machiavelli deny the importance of morality, but they doubt that it is effective in the absence of an authority to watch over its fulfilment (Joseph & Kurki, 2018).

Accordingly, all Realist scholars have central assumptions about the character of international politics. Politics takes place within and between states. Their actions are essentially driven by their interests. The key to understanding politics (whether domestic, foreign, or international) is the interaction of social and material power. This interaction always takes place against the background of the possible use of material power for coercive purposes. Ultimately, the American political scientist Hans Morgenthau set out the main foundations of Realism in his famous work *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, published in 1948 (Delfiner, 2008).

On the other hand, Realist theory has been further associated with the work of Professor Hans J. Morgenthau of the University of Chicago in the US. Morgenthau was the first academic to systematically articulate Realism, which is regarded as the founding theory of the discipline of international relations, succeeding E. H. Carr in Realist theory. At the end of the Second World War, his *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* contains a "critique of liberal Idealism" that complements Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis*.

Although Morgenthau conceived his Realism as the antithesis of Idealism, he nevertheless shared with Idealism a primary interest in knowledge How to prevent war between states be prevented, especially since in the age of nuclear weapons, the war is "no longer, as it once was, a rational instrument of foreign policy" but "an instrument of universal destruction" (Morgenthau 1962: 192). Because of the prospect of destruction, the preservation of peace

between states is the primary interest of states and, at the same time, the starting point for Morgenthau's considerations.

Morgenthau claims to have produced a political philosophy that reveals the basic driving forces of politics, which would guide and help politicians in making their political decisions. From this perspective, Morgenthau's Realism can be aptly characterized as a "counter-movement to a political interpretation of existence" that "understood history as the progressive process of a redemptive event (Williams, 2004). A process in which man would inevitably find himself on the path to liberation from his limitations (Jacobs 2010: 41).

Hans Morgenthau's book shaped the classical theory of Realism. According to Morgenthau, all varieties of Idealism share the optimistic assumption that through education, morality, laws, and state reform, war as an instrument of politics between states could be outlawed. The on disagreement concerns the specific prerequisites for achieving this status. For Morgenthau, "power" is a distinguishing feature inherent in human nature and states are prone to conflict. In other words, Morgenthau's first assumption is that human beings are self-centered. Whatever people do, their actions and the intentions that lead to their actions originate in themselves, primarily serve themselves, and are attributable to themselves. Therefore, for Morgenthau, egoism is the main basis and an unchanging determinant of human existence. This insatiable power is a universal and perennial characteristic of human nature and explains why wars continue. The drive for power represents the essence of politics. In his book, *Politics Among Nations*, he explained political Realism in six points.

Morgenthau, like E. H. Carr, argued that state administration could be managed not by scientific formulae but by the pressure of material and moral forces that the statesman can create and maintain through using the art of politics. For Realists, power is the domination of man over man, and it has a psychological quality in its essence. Moreover, Realism proposes the combined use of military force and the use of material (military, economic, technological) and spiritual or non-material (cultural warfare, propaganda, public diplomacy) elements. Moreover, Morgenthau shifts the individual hunger for power to the collective "nation" because the hunger for power can be excessively pursued in international relations since "there are no structural limits to the satisfaction of national power in the anarchic international system." Furthermore, for Morgenthau, nation and state are abstract concepts that can only be grasped empirically by analyzing the power of leaders and their foreign policy actions of the leaders. Individuals thus become representatives of the state, and the state becomes a "quasi-personality."

For Morgenthau, the balance of power is the "chief mechanism" (Smith 1986: 144), and good diplomacy is accordingly characterized by the ability to manage, maintain, or create the balance of power. In Morgenthau's power-centric approach, establishing and maintaining a balance of power is inevitable and the stabilizing factor in a society of sovereign states. Interstate politics does not occur in the absence of moral principles or principles of international law but in the absence of their constraining effect on state action Sovereign states are guided in their actions by their national interests (or what they perceive them to be) "rather than by the allegiance to a common good which, as a common standard of justice, does not exist in a society of nations" (Morgenthau 1948: 460). Under these conditions, a foreign policy aimed at establishing and maintaining the balance of power is more likely to guarantee stability and curb the hunger for power than international law or international morality.

Morgenthau's work laid the foundation for an intense discussion and research in IR, which set itself the task of developing a realistic theory of international politics. However, Kenneth Waltz's Neo-Realism, with its ontological rupture, definitively ended the dominance of Classical Realism (Bessner & Guilhot, 2015).

Kenneth N. Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (published in 1979) is one of the most influential works in the academic discipline of IR until the appearance of Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999-published). The debates on the development of IR theories since the 1980s, but especially since the end of the East-West conflict, have mostly unfolded against the background of a critical examination of the Neo-Realist theory laid down by Waltz in 1979. Neo-Realism was used as a foundation to develop competing theories and theorems (Meibauer, 2021).

1.1.2. Neo-Realism and its Basic Features

After the criticisms directed toward Classical Realism, studies have started to reconstruct the position and the role of the states in international relations. It is precisely at this point that Neo-Realism, also known as "Structural Realism", has emerged because of its intense emphasis on determining the attitudes of states (Guzzini, 2020). In this context, Neo-Realism was put forward by Waltz in his significant study, *Theory of International Politics*. Neo-Realism was introduced in the international relations community following the decline of the US hegemony

after the 1970s. Kenneth Waltz systematized the Realism of Hans J. Morgenthau, who provided important but unsystematic insights, mostly gained by induction.

As explained before, Classical Realism portrays the negative features of human nature as selfish, confrontational, and power-oriented and places them as the core of its explanations. It reverberates on the basis of international problems, conflicts, and even wars (Lišanin, 2020). On the other hand, Structural Realism goes far beyond human nature and focuses on the systemic level to explain the relations between states in the anarchic structure of the international system. Accordingly, Waltz emphasized that the current system is hierarchical and anarchic. In addition, he stated that existing institutions are founded on authority (Mladić, 2020).

In Waltz's view, the best international relations theory focuses on the structure of the central system, the interaction between units, and the continuity of systemic changes (Ovali & Özdikmenli, 2019). In Classical Realism, the focus is on state leaders and international decision-making (Burchill, Linklater, & Buzar, 2015). In Neo-Realism, by contrast, actors are considered external factors (Kocs, 1994); (Lekakis, 2021). In addition, states limit the people who have the power to enforce the law. It is argued in the absence of hierarchy, a vacuum of authority would arise, and this gap in the international system provides an environment of conflict and competition. Accordingly, the anarchic nature of the international system shapes the policies and attitudes of states (Havercroft & Prichard, 2017).

In this theory, intrastate actors are excluded from the level of analysis. While the Neo-Realist theory talks about the possibility of cooperation between states, it argues that the possible cooperation will be limited and the cooperation between the states may take place within the framework of security issues (Joseph & Kurki, 2018). Therefore, it follows that it is not possible to talk about a long-term permanent peace or a structure without power struggle. Neo-Realist theory classifies states as large, medium, and small. The most crucial factor in the classification of states is the distribution of military and economic power within the international system (Meibauer, 2021).

Moreover, the states maintain their place as the most critical actors who are rational and seek to achieve their goals with their resources in the international arena (Schweller, 2009). They try to survive in the anarchic nature that imposes limits on their actions. Waltz consciously follows the Realist tradition for the first three assumptions. However, Waltz's Neo-Realism ignores important variables in international relations, including geography and technology. This

omission has led to quite different results regarding the dynamics of interstate politics, depending on how the researcher conceptualizes these factors. This has led to the emergence of two new sub-schools, each based on the overall views of Neo-Realism: Defensive and Offensive Realists (Lobell, 2017).

1.1.3. Defensive Realism and Offensive Realism

The disintegration of international relations has led to divergences in the balance of power. This situation has led to creation of the approaches of defensive Realism and offensive version of Realism. The concepts of power and the state, which form the basis of Realism, have caused particular problems in determining what kind of policies states follow to ensure their security. According to the defensive Realism, the state, the leading actor in anarchic international relations, has become dependent on power to ensure its security. However, the political activities carried out between the states display an optimistic and explicit attitude. Accordingly, it does not expect states to increase their power in the international system but to relatively increase the security of the international system. Likewise, the fact that one of the most important goals of the states is to provide security leads them to follow minimal policies (Kirshner, 2019). When the states choose to follow an aggressive policy, they cannot predict the consequences that will affect their parties.

On the other hand, according to the Offensive Realism, the more power the states have, the better they can position themselves in the anarchic international system. In this way, they can put an end to existing security concerns. Within the framework of this logic, Offensive Realism argues that anarchy dominates the international system (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016), which can cause states to act in political expansion and geographical direction. Accordingly, anarchy encourages all states in the international system to pursue policies to increase their power. Offensive Realism emphasizes that the states in the system should ensure their security, as the anarchic structure that exists in the international system does not have a supra-state structure (Pashakhanlou, 2014). According to John Mearsheimer, the founder of Offensive Realism, the system that best balances the international system in the short and medium term is the bipolar system since a multipolar structure is a process that highlights the element of conflict (Kirshner, 2019).

In view of the foregoing, the "Neo-Classical Realist" theory has emerged in order to address the shortcomings of Realist and Neo-Realist schools in explaining state behavior. It developed an approach that combined analyzes of the structures and internal characteristics of states and focused on how the domestic characteristics of states interact with international structural systemic environment to shape and produce state behaviors.

1.1.4. Neo-Classical Realism

Neo-Classical Realism (NCR) has been used in the literature under various names. Randall L. Schweller, for example, used the term 'Neo-Traditional Realism', while Stephen G. Brooks preferred the nomenclature as 'Post-Classical Realism'. The term 'Neo-Classical Realism' is most commonly used in the literature after introduced by Gideon Rose in his *Neo-Classical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*, published in 1998. In his famous book, Rose argues that the debate in IR has been dominated by the Neo-Realism of Kenneth Waltz and his critics (Rose, 1998, s. 144).

Neo-Classical Realism criticizes the Structural Realism on a range of issues from various perspectives. Contrary to the Structural Realists, the proponents of the Neo-Classical Realism rejected the notion that state intentions and state behavior could be understood through systemic explanations such as offensive-defense balance, anarchy, and relative power distribution that operated beyond the control of the states and statesmen (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016). The problem is that Waltz did not intend or imagine the development of a Realist theory of foreign policy. Nevertheless, Schweller (2003, p. 313) contends that Neo-Realism has nothing to offer that was not settled by Waltz. With this objection, Neo-Classical Realism has neither completely reject Structural Realism nor did it completely embrace Classical Realism. Instead, the theory was influenced by its classical and Structuralist predecessors and added some unknown and strange concepts to the Realist family, such as perception, strategic culture, etc. (Meibauer, 2021).

From this theoretical impasse, Rose offers four schools to explain foreign policy: *Inennpolitik,* Offensive Realism, Defensive Realism, and Neo-Classical Realism. The *Innenpolitik* assumes that foreign policy is determined by the actions of domestic actors and has several variables (interest groups, party structure, institutions). The problem of *Innenpolitik* arises when similar states act differently, and different states act in similar ways (Rose, 1998).

As mentioned above, both Offensive Realism and Defensive Realism start from the structure of the international system to explain the behavior of states, while the former claims that anarchy forces states to expand and the latter argues that they tend to balance.

Gideon Rose argues that Neo-Classical Realism emerged as an alternative school to explain foreign policy and differs from the three schools mentioned above (Rose, 1998, s. 152-154). In Neo-Classical Realism, there is only one independent variable, namely the relative distribution of material capabilities between states (Schweller, 2009), filtered by intervening variables at the domestic level. Neo-Classical Realism helps analyze the systemic and domestic factors that affect the behavior of states in the international system (Meibauer, 2021)**.** This aspect goes beyond the Classical Realism and Structural Realism and has been used in different cases to explain the importance of various domestic factors —persuasive and influential— that shape foreign policy, such as the ideology to extract resources; the national interest in intervening in the military and the role of social forces in guiding states' foreign action (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016)**.** In other words, the context of the effect of the intermediate variables of the Neo-Classical Realist theory is mainly used to determine how much an experienced event affects foreign policy and how local factors are influential in this regard (Meibauer, 2021).

Indeed, foreign policy practitioners who adopted the Realist intellectual tradition shared the Realist tendency to emphasize the objective analysis of the relative power situations of groups in an anarchic environment and the validity of power politics (Sperling, 2016). They relied on knowledge of the history, culture, and typical mentality of each country and its actors (the balance between the theory and reality). Together with the international system, which is considered an independent variable, the factors arising from the internal structure of the state are accepted as meaningful data after the effects of the system are filtered through the intermediate variables, directing the foreign policy as intermediate variables. Neo-Classical Realism argues that it would be much better to deal with international conditions and, accordingly, the political order and possibilities with restrictions (Sperling, 2016). While Rose argues that the effects of power capabilities on foreign policy are indirect and complex, he states that systemic pressures should be translated to the unit level through intermediate variables, and therefore he claims that the theory is 'Neo-Classical' (Ratti, 2006).

According to this logic, Neo-Classical Realism is a theory of foreign policy. This seems obvious when referring to any theory of international relations since, as the Classical Realists aspired, Realism must be a guide to action in the framework of international politics. In the

opposite sense, it was Structural Realism or Neo-Realism, which distanced itself from the former on the basis of the rigor of the methods it contained with regard to the concepts of anarchy and international structure, since its objective was less ambitious and less interested in serving to politicians, at least in the first place (Sperling, 2016).

Neo-Realism is concerned with understanding the logic of international political dynamics rather than the foreign policy of individual states. The specific feature of Neo-Classical Realism is that it takes into account structural and local factors in determining the foreign policy of states (Shpakovskaya, Ivkina, & Gavrilă, 2019). Both factors are intertwined in the Neo-Classical Realist approach. Until the introduction of the Neo-Classical Realist theory, political theories emphasized the influence of local factors on foreign policy in the international system (Ovali & Özdikmenli, 2019).

The main reason for the birth of Neo-Classical Realism theory was the desire to uncover some of the political sensitivities behind classical approaches and to integrate them into the intellectual architecture of a progressive social science theory.[5] Neo-Classical Realism is an approach that combines the elements of the international system, domestic politics, and material and intellectual factors to analyze international relations from a pluralist perspective (Nygren, 2012). Fareed Zakaria, one of the most important representatives of Neo-Classical Realism, stated that "statesmen, not states, are the main actors in international relations (Oliaei et al., 2013)."

Thus, it can be said that the sub-actors of the state are considered the more critical unit of analysis in international relations rather than the state. A new path has been taken from Classical Realist thought, updating some ideas, and making the existing ones more systematic (Nygren, 2012). In a precise sense, the proponents of Neo-Classical Realism do not deviate from the Realist line by stating that the foreign policy of a state is primarily guided by its place in the

[5] When Rose coined the term Neo-Classical Realism, he was referring to the works of Thomas J. Christensen, Randal Schweller, William Wohlforth, and Fareed Zakaria. These political scientists seek to explain the grand strategy of a particular modern great power in a particular time. Christensen explains the confrontation between China and the US in the early stages of the Cold War as the unexpected result of the foreign policies of the governments in Beijing and Washington to obtain resources from the society. Wohlforth states that the basic Soviet strategy during the Cold War was the struggle for influence over Europe with the Washington and Kremlin governments assessing the capabilities of the rival coalition. Schweller argues that in 1930-40 period, the revisionist poles in the international system (the United States of America, the Soviet Union and Germany) facilitated Hitler's pursuit of an expansionist foreign policy. Zakaria, on the other hand, examines the relationship between the economic enrichment of the US and its position in the international system. According to him, the US has been undergoing a rapid industrialization process since the 1800s. However, it was not until the First World War that the US's began to play an active role in the international system. According to Zakaria, this is related to the autonomy of the US governments from society and their ability to transfer resources from the society.

international system and, in particular, by its material power. In addition, the Neo-Classical line of Realism was created by arguing that the effect of such power on foreign policy is indirect and complex because the actors in domestic politics are also an effective tool (Lomia, 2020).

Neo-Classical Realists, following the line of Classical Realists argue that the nature of the international system is anarchic and that states must project power and security in order to exist in this anarchic structure (Sperling, 2016). This branch of the Realist paradigm rejects the determinism of anarchy as advocated by Structural Realism. According to Structural Realists, anarchy is an accidental phenomenon with a decisive role in the behavior of states (Onea, 2012). However, the Neo-Classical Realism rejects this assumption and defines anarchy as a permissive condition. Neo-Classical Realists argue that anarchy offers states comfort in terms of security, or considerable latitude in defining their interests in this sense (Meibauer, 2021). In this context, anarchy is the state that allows states to behave in this way and, in a sense represents a return to the Classical Realist reading of anarchy.

Put simply, in Structural Realism, the anarchic structure is seen as the factor that determines state behavior (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016). In the Neo-Classical Realism, by contrast, anarchy is the condition that allows states to behave in the night watch system. In other words, it adopts the uncertainty approach.

This is because the Neo-Classical Realism, which also maintains its adherence to the Realist tradition, argues that systemic pressures are dominant. Neo-Classical Realism also distinguishes foreign policy from domestic policy approaches by arguing that the influence of the international system on foreign policy is dominant. It is possible to see the trace of Neo-Realism in Neo-Classical Realism and its will to salvage the best of Classical Realism (Schweller, 2009).

When Morgenthau spoke of being able to see over the shoulder of the statesman and come close to understanding his foreign actions, he was suggesting a theory of foreign policy and proposing of a theory of international relations (Delfiner, 2008). There seemed to be no problem distinguishing one from the other in Classical Realism. As a theory of international relations, Realism would be as capable of explaining the international system as the actions of states within it. There was no room for discussion as long as it was understood that there should be a rational foreign policy, that is, a realist foreign policy. This prescriptive feature, which is presented in Morgenthau in a way analogous to how it was presented in Clausewitz with the phenomenon of limited war, haunted Neo-Realism until the clarifications of Waltz (Bessner &

Guilhot, 2015). With the Waltz boom, Neo-Realism remains an explanation of international politics that is unable to delve into the actions of politicians. Unlike this, Neo-Classical Realism distinguishes between international politics and foreign policy as variables of study (Ovali & Özdikmenli, 2019).

Moreover, this current Neo-Classical framework is above all, a theory of foreign policy. It does not abandon Structuralist explanations, but incorporates elements of Classical Realism and the forays of psychology into the study of international reality. Neo-Classical Realism once again look over the shoulder of the statesman.[6] Domestic factors such as elite consensus, the vulnerability of governments and regimes, and social and elite cohesion reinforce the necessary attention of the statesman to the internal political affairs of each national system (Sperling, 2016).

This theory differs from Neo-Realism in that it identifies the influence of domestic actors on foreign policy decisions, rather than stereotypical actors in international politics. Therefore, Neo-Classical Realism includes internal level variables in its analysis. Neo-Classical Realism has emerged as a different theory of Realism combining the analysis of Neo-Realism with variables at the systemic level and the attention of Classical Realism to the influence of domestic politics, diplomacy, political leaders, and the type of government (Ratti, 2006). Moreover, although democratic and non-democratic governments differ in the way that they interact with local actors, even non-democratic states may have to heed the demands of military, economic elites, and sometimes even powerful political actors (Simão, 2012).

In addition, many intrastate actors such as the head of government, ministers, those responsible for making foreign security policy, the legislature, political allies, and opposition parties play a role in shaping foreign policy decisions. Neo-Classical Realism states that domestic politics and domestic actors have a role in international politics (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016). When dealing with domestic political actors, Neo-Classical Realism assumes that they are a whole and that their common aspects should be shared, rather than of seen separately, such as the public opinion, the legislature and the executive. It assumes that they do.

[6] In his book *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau identified six principles of Realism, one of which was the leader factor. In addition, Morgenthau argued that, contrary to what Waltz later claimed, the balance of power was not the result of the coercion of the system, but that was created by the power of diplomacy and the wisdom of the political leader. In this context, it would not be wrong to argue that Morgenthau's references to internal factors and especially his views on the leader provide a starting point for Neo-Classical Realism.

The theory accepts that these decision-makers sit at the intersection of local and international political systems (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016).

When leaders make foreign policy decisions, it is also important to ensure that the potential threat is analyzed beforehand. State leaders occupy a critical position and are primarily responsible for national security and the formation of long-term grand strategies (Schweller, 2009). Neo-Classical Realists are willing to examine domestic political issues in their ideas about domestic politics, government, opposition, decision-making processes, perceptions of leaders, and how states will respond to the international environment. They believe that the effects of socialization are of high importance (Lomia, 2020).

At the same time, however, this theory lacks a system that can explain which of the local factors that are effective in the foreign policy-making process are prioritized and how important they are. It claims that they react in different ways. However, these variables in the international system vary with the relative power of states. This theory shares the assumption that the effectiveness of a state's foreign policy is primarily influenced by the distribution of power within the international system (Nygren, 2012). When Neo-Classical Realism considers the international system at the level of analysis, it emphasizes the primacy of the variables involved, and like other realist theories, believes that power should be the primary consideration and should take the first place in foreign policy-making (Sperling, 2016). Neo-Classical Realism argues that international competition has a significant impact on domestic competition and that this logic of competition should not be analytically isolated from each other.

For this reason, the theory prefers not to limit itself to material variables. However, it still sees "identity and ideology" as an auxiliary part of its analysis. A secondary intervention variable emphasized by the Neo-Classical Realists -especially Zakaria and Christensen- views the power of a country's state apparatus and its relationship with the surrounding society very important (Schmitt, 2018). Domestic actors can make policy choices to achieve political success, not by changing anything of value, but by shaping the interpretation of international conditions and helping to determine national interests. In this sense, they can act as epistemic communities that shape the mind-set of politicians who shape national security policy (Schweller, 2009).

For this reason, in countries where democratic governance is dominant, a legislature that can direct the policy agenda of the government, an opposition party that can achieve electoral success, a well-organized community, and a consistent and vote-rich parliament can be

expected to play an active role in the foreign policy-making process. In principle, domestic actors can exert the most remarkable political influence when the state is vulnerable. Therefore, the circles and the government wing that make the national security policy in democratic countries may be willing to negotiate with domestic interest groups when forming their policies and they feel powerless or believe they will lose power (Shpakovskaya, Ivkina, & Gavrilă, 2019).

In Neo-Classical Realism, the position that a state occupies with respect to the hierarchy of capacities of the system relevant to it is a fundamental variable of analysis, since capacities are not an end in themselves, nor can all interests be satisfied. It is impossible to have an analytical tool that considers only hegemony as an objective (Braun, 2015). Neo-Classical Realists, who argue that the most important factor shaping the foreign policy of the states is their positon in the international system, touch on the issue of systemic constraints and obstacles that rupture and limit the goals and foreign policy objectives of states (Sperling, 2016). By improving its position of power through capabilities, a state responds to (i) the conditions offered by the international system and (ii) the threats as it can perceive them. Despite systemic pressures that encourage the state to act as a unitary actor and objectively assess its position, this situation is not stable enough to eliminate domestic politics and the perception of domestic actors and institutions (Ratti, 2006).

Neo-Classical Realism also emphasizes the importance of the international system in shaping the parameters of external behavior states. It can be said that the preferences of the political and social actors of the states are influential in the different behaviors that states respond to similar events in the international system. Again, it does not expect states without security problems to adopt liberal and decentralized local actors (Kelly, 2022).

Neo-Classical Realism assumes that all types of states limit or facilitate their ability to respond to the demands of the system. The distribution of power within the system may limit grand strategy (Weber, 2021). However, it cannot simply be interpreted as leaving it to the highest level for foreign policymakers, which is associated with threat assessment, risk, and mobilization of internal resources, to implement this strategy through their decisions.

Neo-Classical Realists also take into account the specific features of a given situation in order to provide more detailed explanations of foreign policy. They seek to capture key points in the finer details of foreign policy by drawing upon the careful theory-building efforts that represent Neo-Realism (Bessner & Guilhot, 2015).

Neo-Classical Realism theory is viewed as a foreign policy theory because it claims to understand and explain the foreign policy of countries in international relations. This theory explains the foreign and security policies of the great powers. Thus, it can be said that Neo-Classical Realism is willing to analyze the behavior of states in foreign policy and, therefore, draws a broad framework (Schmitt, 2018). Among the main variables at the state-level that Neo-Classical Realism deals with are: the dynamics of the relations between the state and society, the impact of social actors and interest groups on foreign policy, -the political capacities of the political and military institutions of the state, - he consensus and harmony among the country's elites, the politicians' assessments of opportunities and threats in domestic and international politics (Kelly, 2022) ; (Lišanin, 2020) ; (Lomia, 2020).

Another point is that Neo-Classical Realists, like other Realist theories, do not hesitate to place power at the center of political life. The main theme of all great Neo-Classical Realist works is the effect of relative power on foreign policy. Simply put, Neo-Classical Realism claims that power is foreign policy (Simão, 2012); (Shpakovskaya, Ivkina, & Gavrilă, 2019). Therefore, Neo-Classical Realism believes that an increase in relative power will lead to an expansion of a country's foreign policy activities and sanctioning power will expand, while opposite will lead to a contraction in the scope of a country's foreign policy activities and sanctioning power (Burchill, Linklater, & Buzar, 2015); (Ratti, 2006); (Schweller, 2009).

Neo-Classical Realists emphasize the importance of the historical circumstances and how foreign policy works. They also believe that it is necessary to understand the links between power and foreign policy and to formulate and scrutinize foreign policy (Schweller, 2009); (Sperling, 2016). Other Neo-Classical Realists advocate investigating the impact of additional intervention variables on foreign policy. Furthermore, this theory helps explain any consistent or inconsistent behaviors of a state in its foreign policy. Neo-Classical Realism explains why the same states engage in similar foreign policy actions at different times (Burchill, Linklater, & Buzar, 2015); (Ratti, 2006); (Schweller, 2009).

Neo-Classical Realists also prefer to focus on explaining why different states respond differently to similar external constraints. Considering all this, the government and the internal actors that influence it to play an essential role in determining foreign policy (Schweller, 2009). Therefore, it would be appropriate to examine and analyze the relationship between the state or governments and national actors in order to prove the claim made by the Neo-Classical Realism theory. Neo-Classical Realists return to some Classical Realist ideas about power and politics

to explain a more complex catalogue of determinants that shape foreign policy of states (Foulon, 2017); (Şahin, 2020). Neo-Classical Realism proposes a specific synthesis of concepts from both the classical and structural strands of the Realist paradigm.

The most important feature that distinguishes Neo-Classical Realism from rationalist approaches, which explain the foreign policy in terms of states' responses to external stimuli, is that the theory pays attention to domestic politics. Neo-Classical Realists prefer to start from a systemic level when analyzing events intellectually (Firoozabadi & Ashkezari, 2016). They then pay attention to how relative power in real situations influences the behavior of state and non-state actors, and how they translate this behavior into action. However, as a general theoretical framework, Neo-Classical Realists aim to analyze the domestic political structure of countries and the influence of decision-makers on foreign policy, especially explaining how leaders' beliefs affect their behavior, how they can be measured, and what local factors influence leaders' foreign policy evaluations (Kirshner, 2019); (Lomia, 2020). Therefore, in contrast to Structural Realist theories, they focus on political elites' perceptions to explain the events taking place in the international system. Furthermore, Ripsman and Schweller emphasize the potential influence of local interest groups on the foreign activities of the state and especially the most powerful and privileged role of states in foreign and security policies (Onea, 2012).

Christensen, Zakaria, Schweller, and Taliaferro underscore the ability of political elites to mobilize social support for foreign policy goals. Contemporary states may differ in their success in social mobilization, and it is possible to say that their effectiveness depends on the quality of political leaders, state institutions, and the strength of the ideology behind their foreign policy. According to Neo-Classical Realist thinkers, the distribution of power in the international system is one factor that determines the policies and behaviors of countries in a given- situation. For this reason, the ability of a country's foreign policy makers' to analyze the situation, attitudes, and responses against events becomes increasingly important (Rose, 1998); (Schweller, 2009); (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016).

To better explain the changes taking place in today's world, the Neo-Classical Realism introduces some concepts alien to Realism into its foreign policy analysis.

Unifying Approach

Neo-Classical Realism disagrees with Waltz's argument that when examining international policy, separating domestic and foreign policies will prove more successful, developed a unifying approach, believing that internal and external factors should be examined together to

understand state behavior (Meibauer, 2021); (Sperling, 2016). The Neo-Classical Realism accepted the approach to the importance of the state that has been influential in other versions of the Realist tradition. Although it is accepted that there is no universal definition of the state, Weber's definition of the state is considered close. As explained, the Neo-Classical Realism argues that perceptions of the leader rather than the state take precedence because the political elite directly shape and determines the foreign policy of state (Sperling, 2016); (Şahin, 2020).

Neo-Realism focuses on the structure of the international system and considered the state, which is abstracted from its internal characteristics, as a 'black box'. However, such an approach does not take into account that "the ability to control the political agenda, choose political options, and mobilize resources to respond to systemic agitation may vary from state to state." Therefore, it ignores that states can exhibit different behaviors against similar cases. In other words, while maintaining the systemic and structural tradition of Structural Realism, Neo-Classical Realism also focuses on internal factors and rejects the idea that states' responses to external developments are predetermined (Firoozabadi & Ashkezari, 2016); (Ovali & Özdikmenli, 2019).

Intermediate variables

While conducting research in the discipline of international relations, it is common to try to identify dependent and independent variables. Neo-Classical Realism, on the other hand, structures its explanations on three variables and adds the concept of the intermediate variable to the analysis. Neo-Classical Realism examines how the system affects foreign policy through intervening variables (Donelli, 2020). Accordingly, intervening variables should be grouped into four main categories: leadership characteristics and leaders' perceptions, strategic culture, state-society relations, and organization of internal institutions (Rahman, 2021). Intermediate variables, which play essential role in determining foreign policy, are not categorized completely independently of each other. In other words, the intervening variables also influence each other and determine the decision-making process in close interaction.

Neo-Classical Realism aims to explain the sudden changes in the foreign policies of the states and the decision-making processes in times of crisis. As explained by Rose, Neo-Classical Realism examines the unit-level effects of systemic coercion through intervening variables and tries to identify which of these variables cause sudden changes in foreign policy (Götz, 2021); (Rahman, 2021).

a) Leadership

The first intervening variable that Neo-Classical Realists examine is decision makers' perceptions of systemic pressures. Purely systemic explanations of foreign policy provide the correct perceptions of power-deploying authorities, leading to a reasonable direct translation of these concerns into the national policy (Nolte & Schenoni, 2021). Most systems theorists believe in the rationality of the link between system structure and actor behavior. Thus, the way that leaders respond to events can be predicted by taking into account the incentives and constraints imposed by the country's domestic political environment (Dyson, 2013).

Leaders, like other people, have personal values, beliefs, and perceptions of the world and international politics. These perceptions and images guide their interactions with and understanding of outside world. These images are shaped through a person's past experiences and values and do not change easily as they represent core beliefs (Dyson, 2013). As a result, leaders naturally respond differently to international issues, depending on their experiences, perceptions and the content of images —perceptions of politicians, the country's decision-making mechanism, and the policy implementation process.

Leaders' perceptions of decision-making and policy implementation are influenced by the leaders' worldview and belief system, the strategic culture of the country, the relationship between the state and society, and the characteristics of political institutions (Dyson, 2013); (Götz, 2021). In this context, the age and experience of leaders may also influence their willingness to initiate a crisis. Therefore, in order to understand the foreign policy behaviors of the actors, it is inevitable to examine the personality and psychological structure of their political leaders (Simão, 2012). This factor is considered an important intrusive variable that can shape how they respond to systemic pressures (Nolte & Schenoni, 2021).

b) Strategic Culture

Neo-Classical Realism argues that strategic culture directly influences state behavior. Strategic culture determines the perspective of nations towards the world, international system and regional developments. Although the political behavior of actors has undergone some slight changes over time, its main lines are largely preserved (Doeser & Frantzen, 2020); (Dyson, 2013). When planning for foreign policy, the actors act with the founding effect of cultural preferences that have been embedded in their mental background for years. These cultural components reveal the states' preferences in the medium term and pave the way for the emergence of the strategic cultures of the states over time (Donelli, 2020); (Dueck, 2011).

In other words, strategic culture is the result of the interaction of identity, values, norms, and vision that a country's citizens acquire through education and socialization in addition to historical realities and collective memory and experiences. Put simply, strategic culture is the set of factors that help leaders understand the reasons for their choices (Foulon, 2017); (Schweller, 2009). Its source is the state's geography, history, sociological characteristics, resources, political structure, defense organizations, myths, and symbols. Because of its effects, strategic culture can restrain a state when the conditions are right for it to pursue aggressive policies, and it can also cause it to pursue an aggressive policy when it is more appropriate to follow defensive policies (Doeser & Frantzen, 2020); (Firoozabadi & Ashkezari, 2016).

These elements provide important clues about how society and foreign policymakers view other countries and the international system. There are five main lines that link a state's overall -foreign policy strategy to its strategic culture (Onea, 2012); (Nygren, 2012). First, the strategic culture provides politicians and strategists with an ideological and normative pretext or background. Second, it determines the way in which the politicians and decision-makers perceive the outside world and what is going on in the international system. Third, it helps politicians and strategists to choose appropriate actions. Fourth, strategic culture allows for the mobilization of national resources towards goals predetermined by the strategy. The fifth line provides a lens and a medium for the public to discuss national security issues (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016); (Doeser & Frantzen, 2020); (Foulon, 2017).

c) State-Society Relations

The state-society relations is a significant intermediate variable that expresses the interaction between the central government institutions of the state and various economic and social groups. Factors such as the degree of harmony between the state and society, the degree of society's opposition to the foreign policy decisions of the state's leaders, the level of political or social cohesion within the state, and whether there is public support for achieving of foreign policy and national security goals shape and determine the state-society relations (Firoozabadi & Ashkezari, 2016); (Nolte & Schenoni, 2021).

According to the Neo-Classical Realist theory and the impulses coming from the international system, the groups that are effective in the decision-making process at the national level shape the foreign policy behaviors of states (Alana, 2021). In addition to historical and geographical factors, the level of development of domestic politics, the political understanding of the population and the elites, the level of development of political culture, social processes,

the economic ties of the state with the public, and the importance that the leaders attach to the public also determine the degree of proximity and distance between the state and the society. For Neo-Classical Realism theorists, the power of the state is not only military and economic, and the relationship between government and society determines its effectiveness. If the state cannot effectively use and mobilize its population, it will not be able to use its resources as a result, and thus the power of such actors will be limited.

The first of these dynamics are coalition actors and policies with specific positions within the state. Actors such as socio-economic interest groups are among the coalition partners that strongly influence the decision-making process. The re-election anxiety of leaders, especially in democratic countries, makes these groups to wield more significant influence on the foreign policy decision-making process. Leaders maintain their power by meeting the demands of these coalition partners and the groups that support them. Therefore, rather than face the risk of losing their power, leaders take into account the interests of the groups that support them when making their foreign policy choices. The second factor, the state-military relationship, defines the interaction between civil society, political elites, and the military. State-military relations, which are a manifestation of state-society relations, influence the state's foreign policy strategies

d) Domestic Institutions and Internal Dynamics

The fourth intermediate variable for the Neo-Classical Realist approach, which claims that the factors arising from the internal dynamics of the states should be taken into account while creating foreign policy, is domestic institutions. These internal structures are legal institutions established within the state through constitutional provisions organizational routines and procedures, and bureaucratic oversight. In addition to official institutions, informal institutions, decision-making processes, and political practices also influence the policy practices of foreign policy implementers. Informal or less formal institutions often consist of unwritten or informal elements such as habitual interactions, traditional practices, and unwritten rules that influence the behavior of actors.

In general, domestic institutions include which actors can be influential in policy formation, at what stages, and which can use veto power in policy initiatives. The institutional structures of states effectively determine the political behaviors in the face of systemic warnings. Institutional arrangements in democratic states have the effect of constraining the decisions of leaders. Liberal norms such as checks and balances, separation of powers, and the rule of law

in democratic governments limit the decisions and behaviors of leaders. This makes it more difficult for democratic leaders to make war decisions. In addition, variables such as the density of power in the hands of the executive branch, the link between the legislative and executive organs, political parties, and electoral systems affect the response of democratic states to changes in the international arena and the degree of adaptation. As a result, from a Neo-Classical Realist perspective, when analyzing a state's foreign policy, its domestic policies and local institutions are critical and primary determinants in the formation of foreign policy along with the international system and external factors (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016).

1.2. Why Neo-Classical Realism for Explaining Iranian Foreign Policy towards Turkey during the Syrian Civil War?

According to Prof. Hamit Bozarslan's categorization of revolutions, Iran is one of the three most eschatological and influential revolutions in the modern era, along with the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 (Bozarslan, 2019, s. 13-14). The fact that it has deeply transformed a country that is the remnant of an empire like Iran, that it has been able to maintain this order for nearly half a century after the revolution, the nature of the revolution that transcends borders and has a passion for exporting itself, that it has been able to turn Iran into a regional power, that it has found significant response among the conservative/religious Sunni and Shia masses in the region despite being a faith-based revolution, its unique institutions and mobilization models, and that it has been able to create a historical transformation and change within Shiism, have transformed the 1979 Iranian Revolution into an interesting phenomenon that has attracted the attention of researchers for decades.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 marked a profound shift in Iran's foreign policy, transforming it from a pro-Western monarchy to an anti-Western theocracy. This transformation was driven by a potent mix of ideological commitments, strategic imperatives, and pragmatic adjustments. Ideologically, the revolution aimed to dismantle perceived Western hegemony and establish an Islamic republic based on revolutionary principles. This ideological stance not only shaped domestic politics but also guided Iran's international interactions, fostering support for anti-imperialist movements globally and challenging Western influence across the Middle East.

Strategically, Iran pursued a dual approach: promoting revolutionary solidarity with groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, which aligned with its anti-Western stance, while at the same time engaging pragmatically with non-Western powers such as Russia and China to counterbalance Western pressure. Regionally, Iran sought to assert itself as a dominant force, navigating conflicts and alliances in the Persian Gulf and beyond to increase its geopolitical influence. These regional ambitions were tempered by pragmatic engagements aimed at securing economic partnerships and diplomatic alliances to mitigate international isolation and circumvent sanctions.

The 1979 Revolution reflected a tectonic shift in Iran's political and social trajectory, yet many dynamics of continuity persisted. Centralized authority, political repression, economic nationalism, and the use of state institutions for control remained integral parts of Iranian governance both before and after the revolution. Leadership styles remained autocratic, institutional features evolved while maintaining central control and state-society relations continued to reflect a tension between modernization and traditional values. These continuities highlight the enduring elements of Iran's political culture and governance practices, even as the ideological and structural frameworks underwent profound transformations.

Following this unique revolution, Iranian foreign policy was also restructured and redesigned from the beginning according to the pre-1979 period in order to both preserve and strengthen the gains of the revolution and to gain influence in the regional and international arena. A charismatic leader like Ayatollah Khomeini, a revolutionary religious/sectarian institution within Shiism such as *Velayat-e Faqih* that draws strength from protest stance and dramatic history, an ideological/military structure like the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that has no peer, a political culture and ideological discourse that can easily mobilize millions of people, a foreign policy that blends ideological perspective with rationality in different doses, etc. elements carry Iran to a position that deserves to be examined more closely.

Its leadership characteristics, unique institutions, mobilization dynamics in state-society relations that are rarely seen both in the Middle East and in other regions, its pursuit of becoming a regional superpower as a country that is the remnant of an empire, and its skilful combination of a nationalist/Islamist rhetoric that is at peace with its imperial history, provide a thought provoking image and case study towards the formation of strategic decision-making mechanisms in Iran.

This radical transformation had far-reaching consequences, extending beyond domestic politics and the economy to reshape regional dynamics, international politics, and foreign policy priorities. Various theories of international relations have been applied to analyze these consequences. While Realism has been the primary theoretical perspective, it is worth noting that Constructivist, Liberal, and Neo-Classical Realist approaches have also been used in some analyzes to elucidate Iranian foreign policy in the post-Revolutionary era.

Realism is the most common theoretical approaches for analyzing Iranian foreign policy because it postulates the importance of power, security, and the state in defining the work relations with each other. In the case of Iran, realist policies address the strategic interests of the country, its geopolitical position, and the relations it holds with other states in the system. While we examine the main contributions of Realism for understanding Iranian foreign policy, we can categorize the most powerful aspects of the Realist studies within this context as follows:

Power, Politics, and Security: Realism powerfully speaks to the tendency of this to manifest in Iran's foreign policy. For example, Iran's geopolitical advantages as a country in the Middle East with rich natural resources and strategic location have turned it into a major player both as a region and as a capable nation within global politics. Realist advocates are trying to assert that foreign affairs for Iran are simply policies that are supposed to assure national interest protection, sovereignty, and regional influence through establishment and maintenance of its boundaries. (Hadzikadunic, 2014) highlights the connection between power, security and politics to explain Iran’s negotiation strategies, security concerns and the profound influence of the Supreme Leader Khamenei on foreign policy-making mechanisms. (Diamond, 2012) focuses on Iranian nuclear program using a mix of realist and Constructivist elements with a special emphasis on national identity, historical context and domestic politics shaping Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

Balance of Power: Realist theory also contributes to the logic of Iran's regional power balancing efforts. Notably, Iran's support for organizations like Hezbollah in Lebanon and active involvement in the Syrian civil war, according to realist theory, show such balancing acts against the influence of other major global and regional power players like Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United States. Hinnebusch & Ehteshami points out the complex Realist parameters in Iran’s regional policy focusing on power-based arguments and also revealing level of dependency on the US, processes of democratization, and the role of leadership (Hinnebusch

& Ehteshami, Foreign Policymaking in the Middle East: Complex Realism, 2016). Bayar argues that Iran's main motivation in supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon and Baath regime in Syria is a result of balance of power approach (Bayar, 2018).

Rational Decision-Maker: This approach believes in rational action by states in the pursuit of their interests. Mediating the nature of Iran's rationality is the nuclear program, which is designed to provide the country with increased security and bargaining capability outside its borders. The studies of (Hadzikadunic, 2014) and (Diamond, 2012) reflect this tendency based on Realist rational decision-making mechanism. Barzegar points out that the systemic impulse has led to regionalism, and factors global in nature, such as 9/11 and its aftereffects, have added their own share of momentum to the process. (Barzegar, Regionalism in Iran's Foreign Policy, 2010).

On the other hand, Constructivist theories focus on role of identity, norms, and social structures in shaping foreign policy. In this regard, as one of the most referred theoretical frameworks in Iranian foreign policy research, Constructivism serves as a window through which issues related to ideological and identity aspects of Iran's international relations can be understood. The revolutionary identity is rooted in internal as well as external boundaries of the Iranian revolutionary foreign policy which emerged post-1979 Islamic Revolution. Constructivist scholars have thus defined this identity, of such an Shiite ideology along with anti-imperial discourse, as an "othering" of West in ideological terms (Mousavi Shafaee, 2011); (Nia, 2011); while some others highlights the influential role of Iranism, Islam and Shiism along with a broader national identity (Akbarzadeh & Barry, State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy, 2016); (Karimifard, 2012).

Holistic Constructivism would take domestic and systemic norms equally into account in conditions that shape the Iranian foreign policy. According to Constructivist researchers, despite the systemic pressures that the rest of the world imposes, Iran's change to such norms as counter-hegemonism and anti-Americanism reflects its relatively unchanged resilience of normative structures. As an additional dynamic, discourse and socialization are indeed constructs particularly in post-revolutionary Iran's foreign policy (Moshirzadeh, International Relations in Iran and its Discursive Dynamics, 2016). Hence, the Iranian foreign policy discourse has been, especially during the time of the Ahmadinejad government, dominated by a rhetoric of resistance and justice-seeking rhetoric which resonates in the interior of the country and reinforces the Iranian identity (Warnaar, 2013).

Critical Geopolitics involves complementing the geopolitical analytical categories with an application of constructivist insights. It presents power, identity, and discourse at the center of its critical analysis of foreign policy. In the case of Iran, such a theoretical approach suggests that foreign relations are formed by Iran's geopolitical location and its historical experiences. The countering of Western influence is believed to be a geopolitical strategy of Iran that finds expression in Iran's interaction with great powers through its state relationships with Russia and China (Fathollah-Nejad, 2021). Since Liberalism concerns international cooperation and institutions to maintain world order, it is less applicable to the understanding of Iran's foreign policy. However, some identified themes such as economic interdependence are relevant. Iran's efforts to break the sanctions, getting engaged in regional economic initiatives and partnerships with Turkey and Iraq also show how economic diplomacy can be used in its foreign policy.

Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy, essentially as predicted by Realism in its various varieties, has led to a more assertive and power-oriented approach. However, the manifestation of this phenomenon cannot be solely explicable by Realism's focus on "power" and the "international system." To truly understand the genesis and evolution of this foreign policy, it is imperative to explore internal variables and processes. This examination is particularly crucial in identifying decision-making processes and forecasting potential developments in the foreseeable future. Consequently, this research argues that framework of the Neo-Classical Realism provides a more comprehensive, meaningful, and adaptable lens through which to examine the foreign policy-making processes of Islamic Iran and the domestic factors that influence them.

On the one hand, Offensive Realism mainly operates on five main assumptions: the importance of anarchy in the international system, the rationality of states, the ambiguity of states' intentions, the primary goal of states in survival, and the need for large military capabilities. This theory posits that the anarchic nature of the international system profoundly influences the behavior of actors within it. Furthermore, it contends that major powers tend to pursue revisionist and self-serving policies, and are willing to wage war against rivals when such actions are in line with their strategic interests.

According to Offensive Realism, major powers aspire to establish regional hegemony within their own geographical spheres while simultaneously endeavoring to achieve the highest possible power status within the broader international system. While Offensive Realism effectively examines states' endeavors to maximize power and offers insights into Iran's quest

for empowerment, it falls short of providing comprehensive explanations for specific decisions that guide this quest. Consequently, the theory leaves certain aspects of Iran's pursuit of power and other dimensions of the broader quest for power maximization relatively unexplored.

Conversely, Defensive Realism, a distinct branch of Neo-Realism, argues that states primarily seek to maximize their power with a focus on ensuring security. In the conceptual framework of the Defensive Realism, in contrast to Offensive Realism, the goal of power maximization is focused on ensuring survival in an anarchic system rather than the mere pursuit of power. Defensive Realism places particular emphasis on the balancing motive, leading states to actively seek the objective of maximizing their security through the adoption of defensive measures.

In explaining Iranian foreign policy through these two variants of Neo-Realism, the lens of Defensive Realism, when compared to Offensive Realism, offers several advantages:

i) *Security Focus*: Defensive Realism focuses more on maximizing security compared to Offensive Realism and offers a more fertile ground for explaining Iran's foreign policy, which focuses more on preserving its sovereignty and protecting itself against perceived regional / international threats.

ii) *Balancing Factor*: The defensive approach emphasizes the balancing motive, which argues that states aim to counterbalance power within the international system. This often resonates Iran's strategic approach, which seeks to counter potential adversaries by engaging in alliances and partnerships, and prioritizes regional stability in various regions, especially Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and the Caucasus.

iii) *Risk Aversion*: Risk aversion is particularly evident in the defensive version. Faced with regional complexities and historical tensions, Iran is more inclined to adopt defensive measures to cope with risks and ensure stability, with a Defensive Realist perspective.

iv) *Avoiding Aggressive Policies*: The defensive variant argues that states are less likely to engage in aggressive or expansionist policies in their approach aimed at ensuring their own security. This proposition is also consistent with Iran's foreign policy approach, which often emphasizes a defensive stance aimed at protecting its own territorial integrity.

v) *Preventive Diplomacy*: Defensive Realism points to the importance of preventive diplomacy as an effective way to ensure security. Iran, which frequently faces security-based problems in the region and in its relations with the international community, is a reasonable

way to engage in diplomatic negotiations with a Defensive Realist approach. Negotiations on the nuclear program, Iran's participation in regional consultative mechanisms for unstable regions such as Iraq, Syria, Karabakh, and Afghanistan are some clear examples of this diplomatic initiative approach.

vi) *Regional Hegemony as a Defensive Measure*: Neo-Realism's Defensive version argues that regional hegemony can be utilized as a defensive measure in a state's immediate environment. In this respect, Iran's efforts to establish regional hegemony in its own geography can also be interpreted as a defensive strategy.

vii) *Adaptability to Changes in the International System*: Defensive Realism is more adaptable to changes in the international system. As the global landscape changes, Iran's foreign policy allows for a flexible approach to emerging challenges in accordance with the Defensive Realism framework.

viii) *Less Emphasis on Aggressive Military Posture*: The Defensive Realist context recommends and prioritizes reducing the weight of aggressive military policies. Iran's foreign policy prioritizes being more defensive and deterrent by keeping military policy more limited and avoiding direct and major wars in accordance with Defensive Realism.

Among the Neo-Realism versions, Defensive Realism, with its strong emphasis on security concerns, preventive diplomacy, risk aversion, and defensive measures, offers a more nuanced perspective in explaining Iran's foreign policy after the 1979 Revolution. Therefore, Iran's strategic choices and regional alliances and partnerships can be better explained within the framework of Defensive Realism, compared to the more assertive and power-driven approach of Offensive Realism.

However, although Defensive Realism can explain regional engagements, alliances and partnerships quite well, especially in the context of Iran's foreign policy, it largely ignores domestic factors and is significantly unable to explain how domestic decision-making mechanisms work. In this respect, among Realist theories, both Classical Realism and Neo-Realism have difficulty in explaining the conditions under which political decision-making mechanisms are shaped, and this research argues that Neo-Classical Realism offers a more appropriate and comprehensive framework for explaining Iran's foreign policy after the 1979 Revolution by also taking domestic factors into account.

Neo-Classical Realism not only incorporates and recognizes the above-mentioned advantages of Defensive Realism in explaining the Iranian case; its ability to introduce a distinct analytical framework also adds significant analytical flexibility, which expands the explanatory scope in this context. As Rose (1998) clearly highlights, Neo-Classical Realism explicitly integrates both external and internal variables, refining and organizing certain observations derived from Classical Realist principles. Proponents of this approach assert that a nation's foreign policy objectives are primarily shaped by its position in the international system as the Realist tradition also argues, and specifically influenced by its relative material power capabilities. This approach thus reflects their Realist orientation. Nevertheless, they express that the influence of such power capabilities on foreign policy is complicated and indirect, requiring translation through intervening variables at the unit level; thereby establishing their own so-called Neo-Classical stance.

Conversely, while Neo-Realist interpretations within the Realist tradition strongly stress the deterministic nature of the international system, *Innenpolitik* theories stand in opposition to this perspective. In contrast to the Neo-Realists, the *Innenpolitik* approach argues that autonomous domestic variables play a more decisive role in explaining the foreign policies of the state (Rose, 1998, s. 149-150).

By delving into the intricacies of domestic politics, *Innenpolitik* theories offer a comprehensive understanding of the factors that drive state behavior on the global stage. By providing insights into the domestic sources of foreign policy decisions, *Innenpolitik* approach offers a nuanced perspective that complements broader international relations theories.

The *Innenpolitik* approach presents an alternative mechanism for crafting foreign policy and a distinctive explanatory framework, particularly with regard to key concepts and events within domestic politics. It underscores the importance of understanding domestic influences, the formulation of policies within an interactive domestic policy-making structure, the role of public opinion and democratic principles, bureaucratic politics, the attitudes of governmental actors, the impact of regime type, economic policies and variables, considerations of identity and nationalism, and the survival choices of leaders and regimes.

The Neo-Classical Realist framework emerged as a creative addition to the analytical landscape, bridging the gap between Realism, which underscores the international system, and *Innenpolitik* theories, which prioritize independent domestic variables, albeit from contrasting perspectives. Neo-Classical Realism strategically combines the strengths and explanatory

elements of both conceptual frameworks to provide a robust explanatory foundation. It skilfully addresses the limitations of both by identifying the aspects that each fails to adequately explain (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, s. 7-9). In this regard, Neo-Classical Realism can be characterized as an approach that reconciles two divergent perspectives, seeking to forge a new synthesis by leveraging the strengths inherent in both.

While Neo-Classical Realism draws heavily from Structural Realism, it seeks to establish its own theoretical framework by criticising this tradition and addressing its limitations in practical applications. In this context, Neo-Classical Realism theorists articulate several key critiques of Neo-Realism, including:

i) Imperfect Perception of Systemic Imperatives: Neo-classical Realists contend that leaders may not accurately perceive and comprehend systemic imperatives, even when these imperatives are obvious.

ii) Ambiguity in signals from the International System: They argue that the international system itself may not consistently convey unequivocal signals about threats and opportunities, creating an element of uncertainty.

iii) Irrational responses to systemic imperatives: Theorists of Neo-Classical Realism propose that decision-makers may not consistently respond rationally to systemic imperatives, even when they correctly understand those imperatives.

iv) Inefficiency in resource mobilization: Another criticism is that states do not always mobilize their available resources efficiently and effectively, challenging the assumption of optimal resource use. (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, s. 11-12)

When discussing Neo-Classical Realism as a most suitable theoretical framework for explaining Iranian foreign policy, this research will refer specifically to Type III, which was designed as a practical guide for Neo-Classical Realist researchers, as opposed to Type I or Type II. In the most widely recognized reference book on Neo-Classical Realism, the authors describe Type I of this approach as primarily aimed at correcting Structural Realism by incorporating domestic-level intervening variables to explain empirical anomalies for Structural Realist theories. Gideon Rose is also representative of Type I, with his seminal and well-known article published in1998 (Rose, 1998), which first coined the term “Neo-Classical Realism” within the international relations community.

Conversely, Type II Neo-Classical Realism employs systemic stimuli, moderated by domestic-level intervening variables, to inform a more comprehensive approach to foreign policy, as Structural Realism alone does not provide sufficient information to predict national strategic choices in most cases. (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, s. 12).

In Chapters III, IV and V of this dissertation thesis, the primary methodological approach will be in line with Type III of the Neo-Classical Realist perspective. In order to elucidate the fundamental characteristics of Iranian foreign policy in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, this research will employ four overarching categories of intervening variables:

1. leadership images
2. strategic culture
3. domestic institutions
4. state-society relations

The aim is then to elucidate how each of these clusters of intervening variables influences processes at the intervening-level:

1. perceptions of the international system
2. decision making
3. resource mobilization or policy implementation.

Within the context examined in this dissertation, I believe that Neo-Classical Realism is the theory that can most comprehensively explain the decision-making processes and the effects of domestic factors on the foreign policy pursued by the Islamic Republic of Iran after the 1979 Revolution and the formation of its foreign policy towards Turkey during the Syrian Civil War. The effects of Shiite Islamism and the unique historical and cultural characteristics of Iranian society on the policy-making process before the 1979 Revolution will be discussed in Chapter II, especially in the context of the Safavid-Ottoman rivalry; these sociological factors had a significant impact. However, the 1979 Revolution created fundamental and profound changes and transformations on the nature of the political system and social characteristics of the population in Iran.

In a system where a cleric is positioned at the center as *Vali-ye Faqih* (Supreme Leader) and is made the ultimate arbiter of almost every political, military, economic, cultural, etc. issue, domestic factors have become much more prominent in all decisions taken and have begun to completely dominate domestic and foreign policy. In addition to the religious leadership formulated by a truly charismatic leader described by Weberian terminology from the beginning of the 1970s and the guidance of the ulama, the theo-political institutions established to Islamize the system after the revolution (especially the Office of the Supreme Leadership, Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), the Expediency Council, etc.) deserve a closer examination of the functioning of decision-making mechanisms in the Islamic Republic.

In addition, as observed during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), a new and revolutionary understanding of Shiism, which can mobilize nationalist and religious feelings in a way that is quite different from previous centuries, religious and sectarian rhetoric that can mobilize millions of people, public participation in politics through elections, has the potential to closely influence domestic and foreign political decisions. As an important unifying element and the basis for internal and external threat perceptions, the imperial heritage that has shaped Iran for centuries and the strategic culture and *Iranianness* identity based on the goal of being a regional leader have also been primarily effective in the decision-making processes of the leaders and political elites of the Islamic Republic.

As a special combination of all these factors, the examination of the extent to which four basic domestic factors (leadership characteristics, strategic culture, domestic institutions, state-society relations) have been effective in the decision-making processes of the Islamic Republic of Iran within the framework of Neo-Classical Realism constitutes the basic theoretical and conceptual framework of this dissertation thesis. In Chapter V, I will discuss a period that I think this conceptual framework is inadequate to explain, and the impact of a unique dynamic affecting the relationship framework as a fifth variable, in addition to these four intervening variables: the domestic factors that shape the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran after the 1979 Revolution, and the impact of religious/sectarian approach on Iran's policy towards Turkey during the Syrian Civil War (2011-24).

CHAPTER – II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF TURKEY-IRAN RELATIONS

From the Ottoman-Safavid Competition to the 1979 Revolution

2. 1. Introduction

In explaining the relationship between the Republic of Turkey and the Islamic Republic of Iran, scholars generally disagree on setting out the initial and correct background of bilateral relations. Some scholars take the establishment of modern nation-states (Pahlavid Iran in 1925-26 and Kemalist Turkey in 1923) at the end of first quarter of the twentieth century as the starting point, while the others take the Ottoman-Kajar relations as the appropriate starting point for explaining the modern era relations.[7]

However, this research prefers to take the Ottoman-Safavid period (especially the first quarter of the 16th century) as a more appropriate starting point for discussing the historical, social and diplomatic background of Turkey-Iran bilateral relations in the modern era. This would also present a comprehensive framework, as the relationship itself and the mutual perceptions of both countries towards each other are largely shaped by centuries of conflict and border disputes.)

In setting out the historical background with a particular emphasis on the Ottoman-Safavid era as the main framework of the contemporary Turkish-Iranian relationship, three significant parameters emerge that determining the nature of the bilateral relations and the regional alliances:

[7] For a discussion on the more proper starting point of Turkish-Iranian relations see: Elik, Süleyman (2013), Iran-Turkey Relations, 1979-2011: Conceptualising the Dynamics of Politics, Religion and Security in Middle-Power States. London: Routledge; Saray, M. (2006). *Türk-İran İlişkileri.* Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Yayınları; Olson, R. (2004) Turkey-Iran Relations 1979-2004: Revolution, Ideology, War, Coups and Geopolitics, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers; Soofizadeh, A. (2020). Kaçar Hanedanlığı Döneminde Osmanlı-İran Siyasi İlişkileri (1795-1925). Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınevi.

- Political/regional competition and geopolitical rivalry

- Economic interests

- Religious/sectarian disputes

Ottoman-Safavid relations have been generally characterized within the context of religious/sectarian rivalry. Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, in particular, the Shiite-Sunni dichotomy of Turkish-Iranian relations has been epitomized and grounded in the "identity" conflict and the sectarian dimension of the early sixteenth-century rivalry. However, this approach based primarily on identity politics[8] and sectarian/religious parameters would fail to present a thorough analysis of the multidimensional aspects of the bilateral/regional framework of the relationship, as it ignores the geopolitical competition, political economy and the regional aspirations of the two powerful empires.

Following the collapse of the Safavid Empire in the mid-eighteenth century, these three sets of determinants (political, economic and religious parameters) continued to profoundly influence the bilateral relations during the Nader Shah Afshar, Kajar dynasty and Pahlavid eras. In addition to these three sets, the ethnic dimension (the Turkish and Kurdish communities populating the borderland and border regions) yet again emerged as a significant determinant of the relationship.

Examining and understanding Iranian foreign policy and its relations with the Ottomans during the Safavid period more closely is important for this dissertation in two respects. First, the *Isnaashariyah* (Twelver Shia Islam) Shiism, which was institutionalized during the Safavid period, shaped the religion-state-society relations within the framework of the Shiite theology. The Shiite state structure and the institution of *ulama*, the foundations of which were laid during the Safavid period, had a great impact on the Iranian state-society perception that took shape after the 1979 Revolution. The prestige and political influence that the *ulama* would gain from this period would largely maintain its existence during the Kajar and Pahlavi periods and eventually take over the administration directly by making the 1979 Revolution. Therefore, issues such as the founding philosophy during the Safavid period, the institutionalization of Shiism, the leadership characteristics and the unity of the shah and sheikh in the establishment,

[8] For a brief discussion on identity politics and its implications see: Heyes, Cressida, "Identity Politics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/identity-politics/>.

the ethnic origin of the dynasty and its impact on the Turkomans of Iran and Anatolia gain importance.

Secondly, in terms of the basic dynamics of the formation of Iranian foreign policy after 1979 Revolution in the context of neo-classical Realist theory, the Safavid period has a critical importance in terms of geopolitical culture, leadership characteristics and religious/political charisma attributed to leaders, shaping the mind-set of political elites, etc. In terms of the main framework of the thesis, namely the effect of domestic political, sociological and cultural dynamics on the formation of foreign policy towards Turkey in Iran, the parameters that were effective in the Ottoman-Safavid period shape the current dynamics in a historical and sociological framework. In this respect, in order to prepare this thesis, we have to use and refer to the Safavid period both for the institutionalization of Shiism in Iran and to explain the roots of the basic dynamics of Ottoman-Iranian relations and centuries-long rivalry.

After the 1979 Iran Revolution, from time to time and during the term of President Ahmadinejad, when historical references are made to the increasing Iranian sphere of influence in the Middle East, the frequent references to the Safavid period are also made by some Iranian politicians and academics who argue that the Ottoman-Safavid conflicts have been carried over to modern times and that the Turkish-Iranian rivalry has actually occurred in the past, and that the Islamic Republic of Iran is, in a way, continuing the path of Shah Ismail and is a state with a neo-Safavid character, necessitating a closer examination of the Safavid period and the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry.

In this chapter, based on these sets of parameters, main determinants of the historical background of the current Turkish-Iranian relations and their reflection on the modern era politics are elaborated. In explaining the background, the sectarian dimension is discussed in interaction with the geopolitical rivalry and political economy of the relevant periods.

2.2. Safavid Empire and its Relations with the Ottoman Turks

The Safavid state was established in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in the north-western borderland of Iran (historically called *Azerbaijan* and populated by Turks), but its roots date back to the regional religious Safavid order (*Safaviyya* in Persian) founded by the followers of a Shafi'i-Sunni sufî Safi al-Din Ardabili (1252–1334).

Scholars and historians disagree on the ethnic and religious/sectarian origins of the order and the establishment of the Safavid state, which has a strong bearing on current disputes over Turkish identity in Iran.

The first and, in my view, one of the most important disagreements arises from the divergent approaches on the ethnic origins of the Safavid family. The origins of the Safavids have been a subject of historical debate and instrumentalized by various theories and interpretations. Some historians argue that the Safavids were of Turkish origin, claiming that they were descended from a Turkic sufî leader named Safi al-Din who founded the Safavid order in the thirteenth century. Others, however, argue that the Safavids were of Kurdish origin, and that they emerged from a Sufi religious order in the region of present-day Iran and Iraq.[9]

Another view is that the Safavids were of Persian origin, with roots in the ancient Persian Empire and a long history of cultural and political influence in the region. This theory has gained a foothold among the Iranian scholars –including prominent Iranian historians Ahmad Kasravi (Tabrizi), Nasrollah Falsafi, Saeed Nafisi and others- based on the fact that the Safavids were primarily based in Iran and that they were instrumental in reviving the Persian language and culture during their reign[10] However this approach generally ignores similar non-Persian rulers (the Seljuks, the Kajars, Nader Shah Afshar and other dynasties and leaders of mostly

[9] In Safavid literature, the ethnic roots of the Safavids are usually discussed in terms of their Turkish or Kurdish origins. On the other hand, the controversial thesis of the Tabrizi-Azerbaijani historian and thinker Ahmad Kasravi, which links all the people of Azarbaijan to a "later Turkified Persian community", is seriously criticized with historical and literary evidence and arguments. For Kasravi's arguments originally published in 1925, see Kasravi, Aḥmad (1925), *Shaykh Safī va tabarash*, Tehran. Another article compares on Kasravi and Ziya Gokalp manner and discusses their roles in establishing Turkish nationalism in Turkey and Iranian nationalism in Pahlavid Iran in the 1920s, see also: Koç, Mehmet Akif (2019), "Modernleşme Sürecinde 'İran Milliyetçiliği' Yanlısı Tebrizli Bir Aydin: Ahmed Kesrevî – Hayatı, Şahsiyeti, Dünya Görüşü, Mücadelesi ve Eserleri". *Kadim Akademi SBD* , 3 (2) , 115-155

On the arguments in favor of defending the Turkish origin of the Safavids: Abbaslı, Mirza (1976), "Safevilerin Kökenine Dair", Belleten, TTK, Ankara, XL/158, 287-329; Düzgün, Hüseyin (2014). "Şeyh Safiyüddin Erdebilî'nin Kara Mecmuası". VIII. Milletlerarası Türkoloji Kongresi. İstanbul, 30 Eylül - 04 Ekim 2013. Kongre Bildiriler Kitabı, Cilt II, 339-368. İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Yayınları.

For a detailed dicussion on the arguments of some other scholars in favor of the Kurdish or Persian origin of Safavids, see: Abbaslı (1976), Safevilerin Kökenine Dair; Efendiyev, Oktay (1993), Azerbaycan Safeviler Devleti, Bakü: Azerbaycan Devlet Neşriyatı, 33-35; Sümer, Faruk (2021), Safevî Devleti'nin Kuruluşu ve Gelişmesinde Anadolu Türklerinin Rolü, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1-3

[10] The ethnic origins of the Safavids are discussed in various sources. To support their arguments, most of the contending parties refer to *Safvat al-Safa*, a famous hagiography of the shaykh Safi ad-din Ardabili written in 1358 by Ibn Bezzaz, a disciple of Safi ad-Din's son and successor, Sadr al-din. However, since there are so many differences and additions or subtractions between the manuscripts of the oldest version of the book, all three approaches could base their arguments on this text. Therefore, the arguments originally referring to Safvat al-Safa should be carefully examined when discussing the ethnic origins of the Safavids.

Turkic origin) in Iran who mobilized the Persian language and ancient narratives to legitimize their political sovereignty over the Iranian people.[11]

Regardless of their ethnic origins, the Safavids are generally regarded as a Persian dynasty and are closely associated with the cultural and political history of Iran. They played a key role in the development of the modern Iranian nation. They are remembered and praised for their contributions to Iran's rich political, cultural and artistic heritage and their legacy continues to shape the regional geography to this day. On the other hand, it is important to note that the question of the ethnic origins of the Safavids is a complex and multifaceted one, and many historians and scholars have proposed a wide range of theories and interpretations. In the end, the truth may be that the Safavids had a complex and diverse ancestry, including elements of Turkish, Kurdish, and Persian heritage. [In addition to these alternatives, the eminent scholar Newman (Newman, 2006, s. 13-20) puts forward another thesis, suggesting that the Safavid state was a joint Turkic-Tajik project and highlights Tajik ethnicity as a fourth argument].

However, in examining the context of Ottoman-Safavid relations during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Turkic lineage of the Safavids was of profound importance to both the Ottoman Empire and the Turkoman population of Anatolia, since it served as a focal point of attraction for the latter for a very long time. As a result, the Safavids were able to attract large numbers of Turkomans from various regions such as Anatolia, Azerbaijan, and modern-day Iraq. This attraction was not only due to their status as a Shiite/Alavid power, but also because they were seen as a powerful Turkish dynasty and a refuge for the oppressed. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Turkomans (living in the towns, villages or as nomads) were drawn to the Safavid Empire.[12]

Rather than the actual ethnic origin of the Safavids, what they were perceived to be by the Ottomans and Turkmens is more important in the historical context and in terms of Ottoman-Iranian relations, their Turkish identity constitutes a dynamic that should be emphasized in terms of the geopolitical nature of the competition in the 16th and 17th centuries.

[11] In addition to Persian dynasties, non-Persian rulers of Iran also generally referred to ancient Iranian motives, see further on; Strootman, Rolf (2013). "The Seleukid Empire between Orientalism and Hellenocentrism: Writing the history of Iran in the third and second centuries BCE." *Iranian Studies* 11.1-2: 17-35; Hyland, John, and Khodadad Rezakhani (2024). *War and Peace in Ancient Iran: Ideologies, Structures, and Practice*. Brill's Companion to War in the Ancient Iranian Empires 9. Leiden: Brill. (Hyland & Rezakhani, 2024)

[12] For a detailed discussion on the Anatolian Turkmans and Safavid state, based on the contemporary Safavid and Ottoman chronicles, see Sümer, Faruk (2021), *Safevî Devleti'nin Kuruluşu ve Gelişmesinde Anadolu Türklerinin Rolü*, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları.

One of the pivotal and historically significant events in Ottoman-Safavid relations was the Battle of Chaldiran, fought in 1514, a watershed event that also highlighted the contentious rivalry between the Ottoman Sultan Selim I and the Safavid Shah Ismail I.

In early fourteenth century, the Safavids had initially emerged as a Sunni sect (*tariqa*) in Ardebil under the spiritual authority of Sheikh Safi ad-Din Ardabili, and it must be noted that the main religious character of Iran during these centuries was shaped around the Sunni school. However, under the leadership of Hodja Ali (1391-1429), it began to lean towards Shiism, which spread among the Turkomans in the region. It was during the reign of Sheikh Jonayd (1447-1460) (Kazvinî, 2011, s. 23-26)[13] and his son Sheikh Haydar (1469-1488) that the Safavids acquired a religious-political identity rooted in Shiism (Hinz, 1992) and in this new era Shiism replaced Sunnism among the Safavids and their affiliated tribes (mostly Turkomans). In addition to its existing social and religious formation, the Safavid sect (*tariqa*) was continuously transformed into a political organization during the reign of Sheikh Haydar's youngest son, Ismail I. (Taşğın, 2014)

After departing from the Sunni tradition, the newly emerging and politically motivated Safavid *tariqa* (Sufi order) embraced a political form of Shiism; and over time, they began to suppress Sunni religious circles, particularly the powerful *Naqshbandi*s, in regions such as Azerbaijan, eastern Anatolia, and Iran during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (Algar, 2003). The emergence and establishment of the Safavid order as a state was not only religious in nature, but it was also based on a political and military framework to the detriment of neighboring Sunni empires and states in the wider region, in particular.

However, Shah Ismail and the Safavids were pragmatic in their relations with the religious and sectarian traditions. For instance, their Shiite character did not prevent them from cooperating with Sunni and Naqshbandi circles (for example, Hatifi, the leader of the Naqshbandi tariqa who had served until Bayqara in Herat, accepted a commission from Ismail), and Ismail did not refuse to cooperate with local Sunni rulers on the condition of subservience to his rule. Yet again, contrary to the assumption that the Safavids' dominant Shiite identity encompassed all heterodox communities, it is important to note that the Safavids' religious policies did not uniformly accommodate them all and certain groups within these communities

[13] The 16th century Safavid historian Abdellatif (Mir Yahya) Qazvini give as detailed account of this political transition around Sheikh Junayd and Sheikh Haydar in a detailed manner in his contemporary chronicle of *Lübbü't-tevârîḫ.*

faced persecution and oppression and were either expelled or forced to leave the territory under Safavid rule (Newman, 2006, s. 20).[14]

In examining the Ottoman-Safavid relations and the ethnic/sectarian dynamics of their geopolitical rivalry, it is also crucial to undertake a thorough analysis of the political geography and power structure of the late fifteenth century. Understanding the context of this period is essential to a comprehensive assessment of the dynamics between the two empires that shaped the region for centuries to come.

One of the most important political parties in the Safavid Empire was a Turkoman dynasty that founded the Aqquyunlu state (1340-1514). Uzun Hasan Beg, the powerful ruler of the Aqquyunlu Empire, was defeated in a battle with the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II at Otlukbeli in 1473. The defeat in Otlukbeli was a severe blow to the Aqquyunlu state, which accelerated its demise (Sümer, "Akkoyunlular", 1989). While Ismail Safavi was still in the northern Iranian town of Lahijan (before he conquered Tabriz), the followers of the Safavid order were conscripted and mobilized for war against its rivals by the Aqquyunlu state, which held western Iran and eastern Anatolia. With the death of the Aqquyunlu ruler Rüstem Beg in 1498, Iran was plunged into a new state of turmoil and political chaos.

As the Aqquyunlu state was continually y weakened by the power struggles of the various tribes that formed the backbone of the state, the ensuing chaos would mostly serve the interests of Ismail and the Safavid order in order to seize the power and shape the region. As a final step, the Safavid Shah Ismail gradually defeated the remaining but weakened Aqquyunlu *emir*s and held on to power until the critical encounter with the Ottomans at Chaldiran in 1514. The Aqquyunlu Turkomans, on the other hand, settled in various regions in Iran, eastern and south-eastern Anatolia, constituting a significant part of the Turkish population there, and for the most part continued their existence either Safavid or Ottoman subjects (Mitchell, 2009, s. 20-29).

By the end of the 15th century, the political landscape in the region witnessed various divisions and shifts of power. The Aqquyunlu Empire, for instance, was split into two: Elvend Sultan controlled Azerbaijan and Armenia, while Sultan Murad rules Iraq-i Acem. Other Aqquyunlu princes ruled over Fars, Yazd, Kerman, Irak-i Arab, and Diyarbekir. In Khuzestan, Shiite/Arab al-Mushasha'ins acted as local rulers while Abarkuh, Semnan and Sistan were governed by their respective local administrators. Mazandaran, on the other hand, has

[14] The flight of the thirty-first Imam of the Muhammad-Shahi branch of the historically important and deeply rooted Nizari İsmailis to India in 1520 after the execution of Shah Tahir stands out as a striking example.

experienced a fragmented political sovereignty throughout its history, with many sultans ruling over the region. Two separate emirates existed along the Caspian Sea coast and in Gilan, while the regions of Lahijan, Rasht, and Talesh were administered by independent khans. In eastern Khorasan, present-day Afghanistan, southern Turkestan, and Herat, the authority of the Timurid Huseyin Bayqara prevailed. However, Balh and Qandahar were under the rule of local administrators who had gained independence from the authority of Herat (Gülten, 2022, s. 38-39).

One of the significant military achievements of Shah Ismail was the successful campaign against the Uzbek tribes in Mawaraunnahr (Transoxiana). After overthrowing Huseyin Bayqara (1469-1506), the Uzbeks had gained control of the Timurid empire, and cities such as Herat, Bukhara, and Samarqand fell under the rule of their leader, Muhammad Shibani Khan. By 1508, the Uzbek and Safavid states were on a collision course, and in 1510, Shah Ismail Safavid managed to capture the entire Khorasan region from Shibani Khan and the Uzbeks. During this conquest, Sunni emirs and notables in Khorasan cities were massacred by the Safavids, including Shibani Khan himself. This military victory consolidated Shah Ismail's power and control over the region while dealing a significant blow to the Uzbek invaders (Mitchell, 2009, s. 26-30).

It is important to note that the Safavids did not engage in the massacre of all Sunni notables. In fact, they adopted a more inclusive approach by recruiting some Sunni notables and incorporating them into their political system. This strategy allowed the Safavids to integrate individuals from various religious and ethnic backgrounds into their administration, fostering a more diverse and inclusive ruling structure. After conquering the Timurid-Uzbek, Aqquyunlu states, and other former emirates and khanates, the Safavids adopted a similar approach. Indeed, while the ruling structure of the Safavids can be considered primarily sectarian, with their adherence to Shiism playing a central role it is important to recognize that their approach was also pragmatic in nature.

Throughout their rise, the Safavids consistently expanded their territories by engaging in conflict and competition with mostly Sunni dynasties and states. Indeed, the Safavids certainly engaged in conflict also with some local Shiite emirates and khanates, yet these clashes were not as vital and significant as their conflicts with major Sunni powers such as the Mamluks, Uzbeks or the Ottomans. This led to interpretations arguing that Shiism was seen as a disruptive presence within the predominantly Sunni world. Notably, the Safavids came to power in

conflict and competition with states such as the Aqquyunlus, Timurid Uzbeks, Mamluks, and Ottoman Turks.

It is important to note, however, that the region in which the Safavids emerged as rulers was already surrounded by the Sunni communities and states, with the exception of handful local emirates. Moreover Shiites were always a minority within the Islamic world since the emergence of Islam as a religion and often lacked the resources and opportunities to establish their own rule. In this context, the rise of the Safavids to power represented a notable exception to the prevailing Sunni dominance in the region.

An essential aspect to consider regarding the Safavids and their legitimacy is that they possessed three crucial characteristics that greatly influenced the state-society structure in Safavid Iran and shaped the course of Iranian history and political philosophy (Kazvinî, 2011, s. 10-11):

1. The Safavids transformed the divine power of the ancient Iranian sultans, known as *Fer-i Yezdanî* (Koç M. A., 2021, s. 131-132)[15] into the concept of "*zıllullah-ı fi-l'arz*" (the shadow of God on earth). In this way, they associated their rule with the pre-Islamic ancient Iranian theological-political tradition and established an unquestionable and sacred power in both Shiite and Iranian perspectives.

2. The Safavid Shahs positioned themselves as the regents of the Imam-e Zaman (Mahdi) and sought to legitimize their lineage by tracing it back to the seventh Imam of the Twelver Shiites, Musa al-Kazim. This bestowed upon them a unique and divine legitimacy, making it a sin to oppose their rule, as they were considered closer to the truth than anyone else was. This granted them absolute and inviolable legitimacy, elevating them to a political-divine position.

3. From the time of their ancestor Shaikh Safi (late thirteenth – early fourteenth century), the Safavids held the position of *Murshid-i Kamil*[16] of the Safavid Sufi tariqa. This relationship established a bond of complete obedience between the followers and the Safavid rulers, mirroring the relationship between a master and a disciple. The followers expected spiritual protection from the Murshid, while the Murshid had the right to demand unswerving obedience.

[15] For a comparative perspective on the elaboration of traditional Arab, Persian and Turkish state models, see; Koç, M. A. (2021), 99 Kavram, 129-134.

[16] The term "*Murshid-i Kamil*" is widely used in the Sufi tradition and represents a fully enlightened spiritual guide within the Sufi tradition, who serves as a beacon of light for seekers on the path of spiritual awakening and facilitates their journey towards spiritual realization and union with the Divine. For further discussion of the concept and its elaboration in the case of Ayatollah Khomeini and Shiite political philosophy, see Lloyd Ridgeon's comprehensive piece (Ridgeon, 2014).

Disobedience in this relationship was considered a grave sin, and in some cases, it was punishable by death.

These three features were exclusive to the Iranian geography and the Shiite doctrine and tradition. None of the rival states, including the Ottoman Empire with Sunni rulers, were able to claim or possess a similar corresponding political-divine authority. As a result, the Shah of the Safavid Empire held absolute power and unlimited authority, which set them apart from their counterparts in other states. The Safavids masterfully exploited the extensive advantages of this state-society structure and divine authority during the establishment of their state and the early decades of the empire.

2. 2. 1. The Chaldiran War (1514) and Deteriorating Relations

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of contemporary Turkish-Iranian relations, it is crucial to grasp the significance of the "Turkish and Shiite" characteristics within the historical context of the Safavid-Ottoman rivalry. However, it is important to make this analysis objectively by relying on factual information instead of ideological perspectives. Purely Shiite, pan-Iranian, pan-Turkist, and/or Shiite and Sunni sectarian viewpoints often tend to overshadow objective facts, leading to a distorted understanding of historical events. . One of the main arguments of this research is that the prejudiced ethno-sectarian approaches to the historical facts continue to further complicate the contemporary nature of the Turkish-Iranian relationship and contribute to an overemphasis on mutual security concerns and perceptions.

Therefore, in order to make a more accurate assessment of the Turkish-Iranian relationship, it is essential to examine historical events, actions, and policies on the basis of verifiable evidence. By adopting an objective and factual perspective, one can navigate through the complexities of Turkish-Iranian relations and develop a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play. This approach will help mitigate prejudices, promote dialogue, and foster healthier bilateral ties between the two countries. At this point, it is crucial to delve into the intricate dynamics of the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry and to carefully analyze the significant factors that emerged during this period. Within this context, the Chaldiran War of 1514 marks

a landmark event that profoundly influenced and shaped the nature of Turkish-Iranian relationship in the following centuries[17]

The accession of Anatolian Turkic nomadic tribes to the Safavid Empire before and after the Chaldiran War posed a security challenge to the Ottoman Empire and profoundly affected Turkish-Iranian relations in terms of mistrust and cautious attitudes. The involvement of these tribes intensified the rivalry and added an ethnic and cultural dimension to the conflict, further complicating the political and military dynamics between the two powers. This development heightened tensions and securitized the relationship between the Ottomans and the Safavids. However, it is essential to carefully examine the available data and narratives of the period in question in order to gain an accurate understanding of what actually transpired.

Within this framework, a crucial question revolves around the number of tribes that migrated from Anatolia to Iran and the proportion of Anatolian tribes and Iranian subjects. In addition, it is important to thoroughly examine the underlying factors that prompted these migrations, taking into account the specific circumstances of the Ottoman Empire and Anatolia. By carefully analyzing these aspects, it would be possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of the scale and motivations behind the movements and their implications for both Anatolia and Iran.

The prevailing perspective on the Turkoman migrations to Iran revolves primarily around the thesis that the Anatolian Turkomans were responsible for the establishment and development of the Safavid state, but there are variations in the details and motivations underlying these mass movements. While scholars largely agree on acknowledging the role and the involvement of the Anatolian Turkomans in shaping the Safavid state, they also tend to present different perspectives on the specific reasons and driving factors for their migration to Iran. Exploring these nuances is significant for a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics that contributed to the rise of the Safavid Empire and its eventual clash with the Ottomans.

For example, Faruk Sümer argues that the dominant demographic structure in Iran and Azerbaijan, where the Safavid state was established in 1501, was largely shaped by the migration of Turkoman tribes from Anatolia. He stresses that during the Aqquyunlu period,

[17] For a noteworthy article that conceptualized the emergence of Shah Ismail and the statehood of the Safavid tekke as the "Eastern Question of the Ottoman Empire", see: Emecen, Feridun (2002), "Osmanlı Devleti'nin 'Şark Meselesi'nin Ortaya Çıkışı, İlk Münasebetler ve İç Yansımalar", Tarihten Günümüze Türk-İran İlişkileri Sempozyumu, 16-17 Aralık 2002, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, pp. 33-43.

other tribes such as the Pürnek, Musullu, Koca Hacılu, Avşar (Afşar), and Bayat migrated from Anatolia to Iran. The period of transition from the Aqquyunlu to the Safavid rule, particularly in 1501, witnessed a significant influx of migrants from Anatolia to Iran. According to Sümer, the Avshars and Kajars, who came to power in Iran after the Safavids, were also founded by Turkoman tribes who served under the Safavids (Sümer, Safevî Devleti'nin Kuruluşu ve Gelişmesinde Anadolu Türklerinin Rolü, 2021).

Sümer emphasizes the influential role of Anatolian Turkoman migrations in shaping the political and social landscape of Iran during this period. Sümer's arguments have gained wide acceptance among Turkish historians to be a credible and insightful explanatory framework.[18] The Turkish historians generally refer to Sümer's perspective in their research and analysis of the historical dynamics between Anatolia and Iran during the Safavid period.[19]

Some Persian historians also partially share Sümer's main proposition about the significant contribution of Anatolian Turkoman tribes to the formation of the Safavid state. This view is supported by some Safavid-era chronicles, which express concern about the growing influence and the role of Turkoman tribes in areas such as state administration, the military, trade, and the judiciary.[20] Sümer also argues that the Turkomans who migrated from Anatolia to Iran were not exclusively Shiite. He points out that some Sunni Turkomans also migrated to Iran with the intention of serving under the Safavid state (Sümer, Safevî Devleti'nin Kuruluşu ve Gelişmesinde Anadolu Türklerinin Rolü, 2021, s. 73-84) including certain *şehzade*s (princes) from the Ottoman dynasty.

Prof. İnalcık draws attention to an important issue at this point and argues that the Qizilbash belief had a political meaning as well as a religious one, and that it became a political representation of the Turkmen opposition in the East against the Ottoman rule, especially after the 15th century. The Turkomans, who were subjects of the Karamanli and Aqquyunlu states,

[18] In the relevant literature, Adel Allouche (Allouche, 1983) and Walter Hinz also makes arguments similar to those of Sümer. (Hinz, Irans Aufstieg zum Nationalstaat im fünf-zehnten Jahrhundert (Turkish translation: Uzun Hasan ve Şeyh Cüneyd, XV. Yüzyılda İran'ın Milli bir Devlet Haline Yükselişi (Çev. Tevfik Bıyıklıoğlu), 1992)

[19] For some examples of the works of Turkish historians who were widely influenced by Sumer's arguments, see: Aka, İsmail (2002), "Anadolu'dan İran'a Göçler", Tarihten Günümüze Türk-İran İlişkileri Sempozyumu, 16-17 Aralık 2002, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, pp. 57-63; Saray, Mehmet (2006), Türk-İran İlişkileri, Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Yayınları, pp. 20-23; Gündüz, Tufan (2014), Son Kızılbaş Şah İsmail, İstanbul: Yeditepe Yayınevi; Çetinkaya, Nihat (2012), Kızılbaş Türkler: Tarihi, Oluşumu ve Gelişimi, Ankara: Kripto Kitap, pp. 437-442; Dağlar, Mehmet (2019), İran'da Kızılbaşlıktan Şiiliğe Geçiş, İstanbul: Önsöz Yayıncılık, pp. 20-49.

[20] For some examples, see Yıldırım, Rıza (2008), Turkomans Between Two Empires: The Origins of the Qizilbash Identity in Anatolia (1447-1514), Ph.D. dissertation, University of Bilkent, 588-605; Sümer (2021), Safevi Devletinin Kuruluşu ve Gelişmesinde Anadolu Türklerinin Rolü

which still preserved their tribal structure in the 15th century, entered into a fierce struggle because of the centralized policy of the Ottomans, which contradicted their own way of life, and Shah Ismail's Turkish propaganda established a great influence among these tribes (İnalcık, 2007, s. 202).

Lindner and Yıldırım provide significant support, albeit with some criticism, for Sümer's thesis by explaining the mass participation of Anatolian Turkomans in the Safavid state as a response to the repressive policies of the Ottoman state towards the nomadic Turkic tribes of Anatolia. Lindner severely criticizes the Ottoman administration for its policies towards the nomadic Turkomans and praises their decision to flee Anatolia and to join the Safavid state as a remedy to the challenges they faced under Ottoman rule: "*The nomads, who have been present as partners at the creation of the Ottoman enterprise, became its unwilling and unwanted subjects. Ultimately, they sought for a leader and a dream of their own… Harassed by their sultan, they created a shah… how the Ottoman vision in Anatolia became the Safavid nightmare."* (Lindner, 1997, s. 37-38)

Like Lindner's perspective, Yıldırım also criticizes the Ottoman state's treatment of the Turkoman nomads and argues, "*As the Ottoman state moved from a tribal chieftaincy to a bureaucratic empire, tensions arose between the Turkoman subjects of the Ottomans and the central administration. The divergence of the Turkomans from the Ottoman state and the recruitment of disciples among the Anatolian Turkomans by Shaykh Junayd were closely interconnected; the regions visited by Shaykh Junayd in Anatolia soon became important "qizilbash zones" and served as the primary source of qizilbash tribal fighters who formed the core of Shah Ismail's victorious army*" (Yıldırım, 2008, s. 625-628).

However, the Turkish historian Gülten provides a different perspective and skilfully criticises Sümer, Lindner, Yıldırım, and the others in their afore-mentioned approach and makes the following arguments in this context (Gülten, 2022, s. 17-18):

-Despite the assertions made by Sumer, Hinz, and Allouche, from the time of Sheikh Junayd onwards the Ottomans kept a close watch on the actions of Safavid sheikhs in Anatolia and the surrounding region. The Ottoman sultans, Murad II refused Sheikh Junayd's entry to Ottoman territory. His grandson Bayezid II supported the elimination of Sheikh Haydar and during Shah

Ismail's expedition, bolstered border surveillance, and ordered the arrest and execution of individuals who crossed the Ottoman-Iranian borders.[21]

-When Ismail arrived in Erzincan in 1500, he was quite optimistic for the participation of Anatolian Turkomans in his cause. However, only about 7,000 people gathered around him, indicating that those who joined him from Ottoman territories were predominantly individuals with independent tendencies, such as *sipahi*s (cavalry troops) and *musellem*s (some local leaders), rather than the mass population..

-In addition, the arguments put forth by researchers who claim that the Ottomans exerted pressure on nomadic groups, citing problems with certain communities such as the Karamanlı, Turgutlu, Bayburtlu, and Varsaks, fail to recognize the fundamental role of nomads within the Ottoman Empire system. They overlook the fact that measures were implemented to preserve the nomadic lifestyle and that special laws were enacted to protect them. Nomads were considered an essential component of the empire, and the Ottoman authorities recognized their importance.

Gülten presents a contrasting thesis to that of Sumer, emphasizing the crucial role of nomadic tribes within the larger confederations such as the Karaquyunlu, Aqquyunlu, Mamluk, Dulkadirli, Karamanlı, and Ramazanlı, which inhabited vast areas of Anatolia, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Syria. Gülten suggests that a full understanding of the emergence and development of the Qizilbash movement is not possible without taking into account these influential actors in a broader context (Gülten, 2022, s. 15-16).

A vital yet generally unrecognized aspect is that the migration phenomenon of the nomadic tribes is often approached from a one-sided perspective. However, it is important to recognize that not only did certain Turkoman tribes seek refuge in the Safavid territories, but that there were also migrations from Iran to the Ottoman territories during the same period (Bitlisî, 2001, s. 121). Particularly after the conquest of Tabriz by Shah Ismail and his followers in 1501, there was a noticeable increase in escapes to Ottoman territory, with sectarian motives also playing a role. Even in the Republican period, during the 1930s when land swap agreements were made

[21] Also, see Gündüz, Tufan (2014), Son Kızılbaş Şah İsmail, İstanbul: Yeditepe Yayınevi, 51-59.

along the border, similar migrations took place, with certain Sunni Turkoman tribes moving from Iran (particularly Iranian Azerbaijan) to Anatolia.[22]

An important piece of information about the migration of Turkoman tribes from Anatolia to Iran, which is relevant to the subsequent centuries of Ottoman-Safavid relations, lies in the demographic composition of the Safavid army during the Battle of Chaldiran (1514). Historical sources from this period indicate that the Safavid army consisted of 52,700 soldiers who fought in the battle, alongside 5,100 guards who were part of the Shah's retinue and were paid directly by him. The Turkoman tribes that made up this army were distributed as follows: Afshars (7,400), Ustaclu (6,100), Ereslu and Talishlu (6,500), Tekelu (5,000), Bayatlu (1,500), Turkoman (6,700), Shamlu (5,100), Dulkadirlu (6,300), Kavar (3,300), Karadaglu (1,000), Arapkirlu (1,000), Garipler (350), and Bayburtlu (375) (Yıldırım, 2008, s. 284-285)

In his analysis of this composition, Gülten highlights that almost all of these tribes lived in different regions both within Anatolia under Ottoman rule and outside Anatolia in territories such as Iran, Azerbaijan, Iraq, and Syria. This observation challenges and further debunks the basic thesis of Sümer. Gülten goes on to identify key regions from which Turkomans left Anatolia and migrated to Iran, including the Teke region, Bozok and its environs, the Cepnis of the Black Sea region, and the Turkoman tribes of the Tekeli, Karamanli, Turgutlu, Bayburtlu, Varsak, and others (Gülten, 2022, s. 56-57).

The events that led to the Chaldiran War were triggered by the military advance of the Ottoman Sultan, Selim I towards Iran who aimed at preventing the political networks between Safavid Iran and Anatolia Turkomans. Upon receiving the news, Shah Ismail then located in Isfahan swiftly made his way towards the capital, Tabriz. During this time, Shah Ismail and Selim I exchanged a number of letters, the content of which generally consisted of mutual threats, insults, challenges, and attempts to provoke each other by referring to positive or negative past events. In 1514, the two armies confronted each other on the plains of Chaldiran, near the present-day Iranian city of Hoy. Before the battle, Ismail gathered the Qizilbash *emir*s (notables and commanders), who formed the core of his army, and held a war council. During the council, some of his emirs argued that the Ottoman army was too formidable and suggested to avoid a pitched battle.

[22] For a detailed account of the migration of the Sunni Turkoman Küresinli tribe from the towns of Hoy and Salmas in Iranian Azerbaijan to Van region of Turkey in the 1930s, see: Koç, Mehmet Akif (2021), Mikail Bayram'ın Aynasında 99 Kavram, Ankara: Elips Yayınları, pp. 210-211

However, Ismail, who had been successful in all the wars he had fought up until that time and was seen as a divine sheikh/shah in the eyes of his disciples/followers, would have lost prestige in avoiding such a symbolically significant sectarian challenge. In the decision to fight shaped by this thought, a result emerged that the Safavid Turkoman army, which had previously been successful in infantry wars but lacked sufficient fire support, would face the Ottoman army, which had extremely high firepower. The Ottoman and Safavid sources record that Ismail and his army's preparation for and conduct of this war were shaped by a somewhat mystical belief. At this point, it also becomes clear how strong the personal animosities and ideological/sectarian references between the leaders are.

The Battle of Chaldiran began in the early hours of 25 August 1514, when the Safavid army launched the first attack. However, they gradually succumbed to the superior firepower of the Ottoman army. Over the course of the day-long battle, Ismail's forces disintegrated, forcing Ismail himself to leave the battlefield. The prominent Qizilbash emirs, who formed the core of the Safavid army, were among those killed in action (Kazvinî, 2011, s. 57-58) (Hasan, 2004, s. 177-178).[23]

The next day, Selim held a war council and decided to march on Tabriz. On reaching the city, Selim was greeted by its inhabitants and strict measures were taken to prevent looting by the victorious Ottoman army. Historical sources indicate that the Sunni population of Tabriz, who had suffered oppression and massacres under Shah Ismail and the Qizilbash, were jubilant at the outcome. Although Selim stayed in Tabriz for a week, he decided not to spend the winter in the city due to logistical difficulties and the lingering uncertainty of Ismail's capture. Consequently, the Ottoman forces withdrew to Amasya. Historians agree that the complete conquest of Iran was not the primary goal of the Ottoman army, given its extensive territory and they did not pursue it (Gündüz, 2014, s. 141-143).

As a result of the Battle of Chaldiran, the prevailing myth about the invincibility of Ismail was shattered, and the victorious Ottoman forces ensured the stability of the frontier by

[23] First-hand accounts of the Battle of Chaldiran can be found in the Safavid sources of the time, providing vivid descriptions of the events. It should be noted, however, that these accounts tend to skip over the actual day of the battle and focus more on the bitter defeat and its aftermath.
*_Ahsenü't Tevârih_, written by Hasan Rumlu, the grandson of Emir Sultan Rumlu, a renowned commander in the Shah Ismail and Shah Tahmasb eras, is an important source of that period that provide detailed information about the Battle of Chaldiran and the subsequent triumphs of the Ottoman Sultan Selim (pages 177-206).
*Another important Safavid chronicle is _Lübbü't Tevârih_ by Abdullatif Qazvini (1481-1555), a historian of the Shah Tahmasb period. Qazvini's work focuses primarily on the era of Shah Ismail and the establishment of the Safavid Empire, with a particular emphasis on the struggles between the Qizilbash emirs in the later period rather than the Chaldiran day (pages 58-63).

preventing Tabriz from becoming a focal point for the Anatolian Turkomans, thus achieving the war's intended purpose. It is recorded that Ismail who had previously emerged victorious in all four major battles before his final defeat at Chaldiran, returned to Tabriz after the withdrawal of the Ottoman army, having suffered a significant loss of power and prestige,

A significant outcome of the Battle of Chaldiran in the power struggle between the Ottomans and the Safavids in Anatolia was the shifting of loyalties among the Kurdish local leaders, *mir*s and *bey*s. Following Selim's instructions, Idris el-Bitlisî, acting as a representative of the Ottoman authority, informed the Kurdish *bey*s regarding the outcome of the battle and urged them to demonstrate their allegiance. As a result, these regions came under Ottoman rule without any further military confrontation. Consequently, the Ottoman borders expanded southwards from Kars to include areas such as Erzincan, Bayburt, Kemah, Bitlis, and Diyarbakir (Gündüz, 2014, s. 145).

Notwithstanding that, the northern parts of the Iranian eastern frontier came under Ottoman control after the Battle of Chaldiran, the strategic city of Diyarbekir, which had served as the former capital of the Aqquyunlu State, remained under Safavid rule. Within two years, however, the Ottoman forces managed to capture Diyarbekir in 1516 through negotiations and discussions held within the city and the reactions elicited from the local population in response to Safavid rule, an outcome that further consolidated Ottoman control in the region.

2. 2. 2. Aftermath of Chaldiran War to the Fall of the Safavids

The aftermath of the Chaldiran War witnessed a series of events that led to the eventual downfall of the Safavid Empire. Following the war, the empire faced a period of territorial losses, internal conflicts, and a steady decline in power. These challenges posed significant problems to the Safavids and ultimately contributed to their downfall and the subsequent fragmentation of their territories in all directions to neighboring powers.

A close examination of the parameters of this period can provide a deeper understanding of the historical context, the political landscape, and the unfolding consequences. The Chaldiran War, which pitted the Ottoman Empire against the Safavid Empire, had far-reaching implications for both powers and left a lasting impact on their relations. Exploring the causes, strategies, and outcomes of the Chaldiran War allows to understand the wider dynamics at play

between the Ottomans and the Safavids. This conflict represents a critical turning point in their rivalry, shaping subsequent political, military, and diplomatic interactions between the two empires. A meticulous examination of this historical period unravels the complexities of the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry and provides valuable insights into the factors that have influenced their relationship for centuries. This analysis is essential for understanding the historical context and enduring implications that continue to resonate today.

In about fifteen years, Shah Ismail conquered much of western and central Iran and established himself as a fearless leader whose fame extended far beyond the borders of his empire. However, following the defeat in the Chaldiran War and the death of Shah Ismail in 1524, his son Tahmasb ascended to the throne. Shah Tahmasb I (1524-1576) initially faced a formidable challenge to his authority from tribal factions, which posed a serious threat that nearly overwhelmed him. Nevertheless, he emerged triumphant from this power struggle and went on to rule for over fifty years. Throughout his reign, Shah Tahmasb successfully consolidated and strengthened the dynasty's legitimacy and territorial claims, thereby consolidating his position (Matthee, 2003, s. 104)

The Chaldiran War had a significant impact over the networks of communication and interaction between the Qizilbash communities in the Ottoman Empire and Iran, with notable consequences. The war led to increased security concerns on the part of the Ottomans, resulting in a greater emphasis on border security. This, in turn, limited the opportunities for contact and engagement between the Ottoman state and the Qizilbash tribes. Furthermore, the banning of the Safavid caliphs, who played a role in promoting and rejuvenating the Qizilbash awakening and tradition in Anatolia, further isolated the Anatolian Qizilbash community. Consequently, the Qizilbash households increasingly relied on oral tradition as their primary source of information and knowledge.

As a result, the communication between the nomadic and sedentary Qizilbash groups was severed due to limited means of transportation and strict monitoring, surveillance, and persecution of their activities. Consequently, different rituals and practices developed in various parts of Anatolia. However, the most significant divergence occurred between those Qizilbashs who migrated to Iran during this period and those who remained in Anatolia. The Qizilbash tribes, who played a fundamental role in the establishment of the Safavid State, underwent a transformation under Shah Ismail’s Shiite policies and rapidly embraced Shiism. In contrast,

the Qizilbash Turkomans living in Anatolia remained inward-looking and preserved their beliefs through more traditional methods (Gündüz, 2014, s. 146-147).

This divergence widened the existing gap between the two groups and contributed to their distinct religious and cultural practices. A significant factor contributing to the divergence in beliefs, rituals, and worldviews between the present-day Alawi/Qizilbash community in Turkey and the dominant Shi'ism in Iran is enduring divide that emerged after the Battle of Chaldiran. The security concerns arising during this period have had a lasting impact on the region, creating a divide that has proved difficult to bridge. As a result, the Alawis/Qizilbash and Shi'ite communities have developed distinct religious and cultural identities, shaped by their respective historical experiences and local contexts. This gap, driven by security considerations, has played a crucial role in shaping the differentiation between the two communities, leading to a divergence in their religious practices and worldviews.

At this stage, it is essential to look closely at the dynamics between religion, society, and the specific circumstances faced by the Qizilbash community in Iran during the more than fifty-years of Tahmasb's reign. This period had a profound impact on the post-Shah Ismail era and significantly influenced the relations between the Ottoman and the Safavid empires. By examining the religious landscape, the complex relationship between religious beliefs and social structures, and the experiences of the Qizilbash under Tahmasb's rule, a valuable perspective can be gained on the broader context of Ottoman-Safavid relations.

According to the historical records, after the Chaldiran War Shah Ismail largely withdrew from active involvement in state affairs. Despite significant territorial losses both in the east and the west, he did not undertake military campaigns to regain these territories. However, the efforts of the loyal Qizilbash emirs played a crucial role in preventing further disintegration of the Safavid state and suppressing the domestic rebellions during this period. Although large provinces in eastern Anatolia were lost to the Ottoman Empire, the Safavids still dispatched diplomatic envoys to negotiate peace. However the Ottomans repeatedly imprisoned these envoys and rejected the offers for peace. Consequently, the Safavids initiated the search for cooperation with the European powers against the Ottomans.

Shah Ismail held the dual role of being the religious leader and overseer of the Sufis associated with the lodge. He exerted considerable efforts to strengthen the administrative and military structure of the state he had established. The cosmopolitan nature of Iran made this a challenging task, as it required the reconciliation of the Turkomans, the *ulama* who provided

intellectual and religious guidance to the people, and the Iranian bureaucrats who held positions of fighting. Nevertheless, Shah Ismail succeeded in this task (Savory, 1980, s. 48-49). However, it was necessary to reorganize the state to deal with internal and external threats, and it was not until the long reign of Tahmasb that this goal would be achieved.

Under Shah Ismail's rule, Shiite scholars were brought in from Iraq and Lebanon, and a campaign was launched against the Qizilbashs, accusing them of "mulhid" (heresy) in order to marginalize them from government positions and strengthen central authority. In this effort, Sheikh al-Kareki played a pivotal role by fiercely fighting not only the Qizilbash faith but also other sects (*tariqa*), using the authority vested in him (Daftary, 2013, s. 107-111). Two significant factors facilitated this transition during this period. First, the power struggles among the Qizilbash emirs after the Battle of Chaldiran, coupled with violent confrontations, accelerated the process of purging and marginalizing the Qizilbashs. Second, the intensive implementation of Shi'aization in society, led by Shi'a Arab *ulama* (religious scholars), curbed decentralization tendencies and promoted the centralization and institutionalization of the state (Dağlar, 2019).[24]

Ismail, who was considered religiously invincible until the Chaldiran War and was attributed divine powers, could no longer ensure the unquestioned obedience of the Qizilbash emirs and the people after the war. The Ottoman-Safavid wars that continued after Chaldiran deepened the separation between the two countries and geography, and in addition, the phenomenon of religious/sectarian schism. Tabriz, Baghdad and the holy places of the Shiites in Iraq changed hands between the parties many times. The Ottomans persecuted the Shiites loyal to the Safavids both in this geography and in Anatolia, and the Safavids, in the meantime, began to homogenize Iran and make it the predominantly Shia state it is today, and they began to apply increasing pressure and violence to the Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews. This period in history is reminiscent of the religious massacres committed on both sides of the Roman-Persian border during the reign of Shah Shapur II of Iran in the 4th century, after Christianity was declared the official religion of Rome during the reign of Emperor Constantine (Axworthy, 2008, s. 133-134).

[24] Mehmet Dağlar's PhD dissertation skilfully delves into the Shah Tahmasb period, specifically examining the theo-political grand strategy employed to eliminate the Qizilbash beliefs/communities and establish Twelver Shiism as the institutionalized faith. This strategic approach was adopted in the aftermath of the significant defeat suffered in the Chaldiran War, with the aim of reorganizing the Safavid state. For further details, see (Dağlar, 2019).

Following Shah Ismail's death, Tahmasb's reign witnessed a significant transformation, marked by the gradual but substantial elimination of the Qizilbash tradition, which had been deeply entrenched during the reign of his father, Shah Ismail, and had a profound impact on Ottoman-Safavid relations. From 1524, the Safavid state actively sought to replace the Qizilbash faith, which was rooted in tradition, folklore, and legend, with a more institutionalized and moderate form of Twelver Shiism. Thus, the policy of integrating the Qizilbash into the system through institutional Shiism and reducing their influence on the army/politics, which began towards the end of Shah Ismail's period, was put into practice as a state strategy.

During the Tahmasb's reign, the Ottoman-Safavid relations remained tense and uncertain. While the Ottoman Empire experienced a period of strength under Sultan Süleyman (1520-1566), insecurity and tensions persisted for years after the Battle of Chaldiran. Sultan Süleyman undertook three military campaigns into Iran, twice reaching Baghdad. Although he captured Nakhchivan during the third campaign, he did not follow example of his father, Selim I, in advancing further into Iran. Meanwhile, Tahmasb's envoys visited Sultan Süleyman in Amasya with a peace offer. After negotiations, a peaceful atmosphere was established, breaking the cycle of continuous warfare between 1533 and 1555. However, in the centuries that followed, border and territorial disputes arose that fueled new tensions. The reign of Tahmasb's successor, Ismail II was short-lived, and under the rule of his successor, Muhammad Khudabanda, border disputes and wars resurfaced. In 1578, two battles were fought over the city of Shamakhi (capital of the Shirvan region) in Azerbaijan, with the Ottomans winning the first, but the Safavids regaining control of Shamakhi in the second conflict (Soofizadeh, 2020, s. 22-25).

Tahmasb's reign was followed by that of Shah Abbas I, regarded as the most significant ruler in Safavid history, assumed the throne in 1587 and ruled Iran until his death in 1629. During Shah Ismail's reign, a delicate political equilibrium had been established,[25] but then the prominence of the Qizilbash Turkoman communities gradually increased, leading to a chaotic environment within the state.

In a clever move during the time of Shah Abbas I, these Qizilbash tribes (in addition to some Kurdish communities on the western border) were sent to the vast territories of Khorasan,

[25] Shah Ismail's role and leadership among the Qizilbashs and his institutionalization of these groups under a state had such a great impact and its legacy lasted for centuries that it requires a brief comparison with the Ismail period in almost every period of Safavid history. The Ottoman-Safavid relations that took shape in the context of **leadership characteristics, institutional culture** and **geopolitical competition** during Ismail's period would also deeply shape the Safavid administration and anti-Ottoman foreign policy during the next two centuries.

northeast region of the Safavids. Thus, these Qizilbash beys, who sometimes caused trouble by disobedience, were kept away from the capital, and the borders of Iran on the Khorasan side were protected by these powerful tribes, and the state authority was further strengthened by settling this region (Axworthy, 2008, s. 135-137). In fact, the leader of the Afshars, Nader Shah, who was among these Qizilbash tribes settled on the Khorasan side, would later emerge during the collapse of the Safavids and become the ruler of Iran. The Kajars, who would rule Iran from 1796 onwards after Nader Shah and his successors, were also among the Qizilbash tribes exiled to the Khorasan side by the Safavids during this period. They eliminated their rivals in the chaos during the second half of the 18th century and established a state that would rule Iran for 130 years.

In order to restore balance and mitigate the influence of the Qizilbash *bey*s, who could sometimes rise above the dynasty and had difficulty in gaining obedience, the Safavids recognized the need to make peace with the Ottomans, the primary external threat. Before that peace initiative, following the 1555 Amasya Agreement, the Volga-Caspian route became an important trade artery, and the Ottomans' attacks on the Caucasus and Iran and their demands to control these regions increased. Ottoman troops entered Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan and controlled these regions. Although the Safavids showed temporary resistance in the ongoing wars, the Ottomans captured Shirvan, Karadag and Azerbaijan between 1585 and 1588 (Ivanov, 2021, s. 201) Upon the request of the Safavids, who were also dealing with internal problems, in March 1590, a peace treaty known as the Treaty of Istanbul or Ferhat Pasha agreement was concluded. The treaty accepted the existing borders as the current Ottoman-Safavid frontier and guaranteed the safety of Shiite pilgrims in Ottoman territories.

However, the Safavids found it challenging to abide by the terms of the peace treaty due to ongoing internal conflicts in Iran and the continued threat posed by the Uzbeks on the Khorasan front (Quinn, 2015, s. 49). It was only when they resolved the internal conflicts and the Ottomans were preoccupied with European campaigns that the Safavids disregarded the terms of the peace agreements and took military actions without hesitation (Saray, 2006, s. 44-46).[26]

[26] There are some notable figures within the Shiite tradition who have strongly criticized the Safavids, not only from a religious point of view but also from a political one. One such individual is Ali Shariati, a prominent religious intellectual during the Pahlavi era before the 1979 Revolution. In his book titled *The Alawite Shiism and the Safavid Shiism*, Shariati offers a severe criticism that sparked considerable controversy in Iran. Shariati exalts what he considers to be the true and fundamental tradition, which he calls Muhammadî Sunnism and Alavî (Ali) Shiism. He criticizes the Safavids in the context of misguided practices and power struggles, referring to them as "Safavid Shias". Similarly, he refers to the Ottomans as embodying "Umayyad Sunnism", accusing both of deviating from the essence of Islamic brotherhood, corrupting Islam, and making it vulnerable to external influences and attacks. Shariati's main criticism is directed at the Safavids, claiming that they misled Shiism and

In fact, the Safavid-Ottoman war cycles, characterized by the Safavid capital's policy of "escalating war outside – peace treaty - strengthening inside - breaking the peace outside – escalating war…" continued. Shah Abbas, having consolidated his power internally, launched a counterattack in 1603 and regained the territories previously lost to the Ottomans. Although the two states reached a peace agreement in 1612, this period of calm was short-lived, and the Safavid-Ottoman war resumed a few years later. The peace treaty brokered by Nasuh Pasha (then Ottoman Grand Vizier) in 1612 was of much shorter duration than previous ones. The Ottoman Empire's decision to go to war this time was driven by strategic considerations. The growing influence of the Safavids under Shah Abbas provided them with an opportunity to extend their reach towards the Black Sea coast, thus disrupting the Ottoman Empire's connections with the Caucasus and the Caspian basin (Küpeli, 2014, s. 281-283).

The war, which lasted until 1618, was largely a power struggle over Azerbaijan and Georgia. This temporary peace allowed the Safavids with a chance to address other challenges from their eastern borders, while the Ottomans dealt with their western borders. However, this cycle of temporary success through warfare did not address the underlying dynamics that continued to create potential problems in the medium and long term.

The war was reignited in 1624 when Shah Abbas took Baghdad. The Ottomans attached great importance to Baghdad and Iraq, and sent three grand viziers between 1625 and 1630 to retake the city. During this period, the Ottomans sought alliances with the Mughals (Babur Empire) and the Uzbeks against the Safavids, while the Safavids sought cooperation with European powers to weaken the Ottomans. Finally, in 1638, the Ottoman Sultan Murad IV personally besieged Baghdad, employing all the resources of the state, and captured the city after a 40-day siege, (Küpeli, 2014, s. 285-287). This victory allowed the Ottomans to consolidate their claim over Iraq and significantly push back the Safavids. Consequently, the Treaty of Zuhab (Qasr-e Shirin) of 1639 revised the Treaty of Amasya of 1555, largely

reduced it to a tool for the whims of the sultans. In essence, Shariati criticizes the Safavids for their perceived betrayal of the true essence of Shiism and their role in hindering the Ottoman Empire's progress in the face of European powers.
Regarding the power struggle between the Safavids and the Ottomans, Shariati describes the situation as follows (as summarized by the author): "Shiism suddenly achieved a victory that resulted in bankruptcy during the 16th and 17th centuries. Iran occupied a unique position at the intersection of the world's military and political axes during this period. The Ottoman Empire represented the Islamic pole in opposition to the Christian pole. The Ottomans were making inrods into Europe, and winning significant victories against the Christians, and even threatening important regions such as Vienna and Italy. However, it was at this time that a vicious anti-Ottoman propaganda machine emerged in Iran. As the Ottomans advanced westwards West and intensified their conflict with the Europeans, a force of aggressive intent and hostility appeared on their eastern borders. This force was the Safavids, the descendants of Sheikh Safi". (Shariati A. , 2015, pp. 55-57)

establishing the Ottoman-Safavid borders and ushering in centuries of preserved borders and status quo, with some positional changes. Thus, in the end Azerbaijan and Revan (corresponding to modern-day Yerevan and Armenia) remained under the Safavid control, while Baghdad fell into the Ottoman hands (Soofizadeh, 2020, s. 30-31).

These consecutive developments ended 155 years of war between neighboring empires. Importantly, the Safavids prospered from the silk trade and commerce with the British and Dutch, which provided an important base for European mercantilism in the region. Meanwhile, the Ottomans, preoccupied with the conflict against the Safavids, failed to take advantage of the favorable circumstances in Europe, disrupted by the Thirty Years' War, to their advantage, both politically and militarily (Küpeli, 2014, s. 288).

The Treaty of Zuhab (Qasr-e Shirin) of 1639 established a balance that remained undisturbed for more than seventy-five years (until the fall of the Safavid Empire). Peace prevailed, but no concerted effort was made to address the broader question of developing a formal, legal relationship between the two countries beyond the mere demarcation of borders. As the Safavid dynasty neared its end and its power waned considerably, the language used in the letters exchanged between the Ottoman and Safavid sultans changed significantly. This shift in tone became evident after the signing of the Passarowitz Treaty in 1718 (Tucker, 2006, s. 21-22). A letter from the Safavid Shah Husayn (1694-1722) to the Ottoman Sultan Ahmed III in 1721 made statements that would have been unthinkable in the era of wars and conflicts in the 16th and 17th centuries:

"*...The firm affection between the exalted Ottoman state and this Safavid state, which has been growing stronger day by day for a long time, has now reached the level of perfect union, unity and brotherhood, and all cause for separation has been removed*" (OsmanliArşivi).

The early 18th century marked the beginning of a challenging period for the Safavid dynasty, one that presented greater difficulties than the previous two centuries. As the state weakened and territorial losses mounted, Iran faced a delicate balance in international trade and rising palace expenses, which contributed to domestic unrest. In 1698, the Balujis in the eastern part of the country revolted, which forced Sultan Hussein Shah to seek the aid of the Georgians for to suppress the uprising. These events further consolidated the Georgian influence within the palace (Morgan, 1988, s. 150-151).

During this period, as the struggle for influence within the Safavid palace intensified, particularly between the Georgians and the Qizilbash leaders, the Afghan rebellion in the east began to spiral out of control. In November 1722, the Afghans, led by Mir Mahmud Khan, laid siege to Isfahan, finally ending the Safavid dynasty that had endured for 221 years. Consequently, the Afghans assumed official rule over Iran (Savory, 1980, s. 115-116). Meanwhile, the Ottomans were not remain indifferent to the developments in Iran and launched a campaign against the Afghans with the intention of restoring a Safavid ruler to the throne. However, Ashraf Khan, the leader of the Afghans, refused to engage in warfare and instead opted for peace, ceding certain western and north-western territories of Iran to the Ottomans as part of the agreement (Soofizadeh, 2020, s. 33-34).

2. 3. The Nader Shah Era and the Transition from Safavids to Kajar Dynasty

After the Afghan invasion and the establishment of their rule in Iran, the Safavids, although weakened, maintained their claim to legitimacy. Many of the dynasty's princes were imprisoned and killed, while others fled and continued to assert right to the throne. Among them was Tahmasb II, who sought the support of the Ottomans in his bid to regain power. However, Ottoman support was conditional and did not materialize. During this period, Iran's north-western territories in the Caucasus faced the threat of invasion from both the Russians and the Ottomans.

The Kajars and Afshars, two prominent Qizilbash tribes, which had supported the Safavids and led by their leaders Fath Ali Shah and Nader Khan respectively, rallied behind Tahmasb II. Meanwhile, the Afghans suffered losses due to resistance from Iranian tribes and khans, as well as internal power struggles within their own ranks. Mahmud Khan was overthrown by his brother Ashraf Khan, who, in turn, was killed by soldiers from his own tribe. The Afghan control over parts of Iran lasted only seven years. The key factor here was internal unity: the Afghans were able to achieve it and establish their rule, while the Safavids failed to do so and eventually both the Afghan rule and Safavid Empire collapsed (Morgan, 1988, s. 150-151).

When Nader Khan defeated the Afghans and entered Isfahan in 1729, he initially crowned Tahmasb II as the rightful ruler. After some time, however, he placed Tahmasb's own younger son (even less than a year old), named Abbas III, on the throne, as the Safavid dynasty still held

political legitimacy. Eventually, in 1736, Nader Khan disposed this puppet ruler and declared himself the Shah; thus, the Safavid State, de facto over since 1722 completely disappeared. Nevertheless, rebellions in the name of various Safavid princes continued to break out in different parts of Iran throughout the 18th century.

Nader Shah drew his strength from the Turkoman Afshar tribe of northern Khorasan, which had enjoyed political and military influence during the Safavid era. Nader represented the last vestiges of the Turko-Mongolian conqueror (*jahangir*) tradition of the steppes. He possessed the tactical and strategic military acumen necessary to seize power, as well as political acumen. Although he lacked the legitimacy of the Safavids, Nader was able to establish his own legitimacy as a universal ruler. Initially serving as a commander under Tahmasb II with the title *Tahmasb-qoli* (servant of Ṭahmasb), Nader gradually gained control over the vast provinces of Khorasan, Mazandaran, Sistan, and Kerman. The rich resources of these regions allowed him to consolidate his power and eventually deprive Tahmasb and the Safavids of their legitimacy (Garthwaite, 2005, s. 183-184).

Nader's most notable achievements were in the military realm. In 1730, he drove the Ottomans out of western Iran and Azerbaijan, and then turned his armies towards the Caucasus. Although he was unable to defeat the Ottomans when they clashed in Baghdad two years later, he succeeded in managed to restore the Ottoman-Iranian border to the lines established by the Treaty of Zuhab (Qasr-e Shirin) in 1639. He forced the Ottomans to retreat from the territorial gains they had made during the late Safavid period. Furthermore, he successfully compelled the Russians to evacuate the territories they had occupied in the northern regions of Iran (Ivanov, 2021, s. 227-229). These military successes consolidated his legitimacy among the Iranian bureaucracy and masses, and led him to declare himself Shah directly in 1736.

Although he lacked the religious and political legitimacy associated with the Safavids, Nader Shah was able to establish his own political legitimacy through the Congress (*qurultay*) of Dasht-e Mogan in 1736. This congress drew on the Turko-Mongol tradition and evoked a sense of historical continuity. By convening this congress, Nader sought to consolidate his rule and gain the acceptance and support of various regional power brokers and influential figures. Nader Khan received immense admiration and recognition from the Iran’s religious, political, and military elites at the Congress of Dasht-e Mogan. He was hailed as the “saviour of Iran” for his remarkable military triumphs and dedicated efforts to rebuild the country (Ivanov, 2021, s. 226). Through his demonstrated prowess on the battlefields and years of hard work, Nader

had truly earned this title. After being crowned Shah, Nader quickly recaptured Qandahar in 1738, brought the Afghans under his subordination, and extended his influence as far as Delhi. By 1740, he had pushed the Iran's borders to the Jayhun River (Âmu Dâryâ), marking the easternmost frontier in Iranian history. He also effectively eliminated the Uzbek threat to Iran, which had been a major concern during the Safavid era (Garthwaite, 2005, s. 169).

During Nader Shah's reign, a new dynamic of trilateral balance emerged between the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and Russia that differed from previous periods. Historical documents in the Iranian archives reveal a fascinating correspondence between the Russian Tsarina Anna Ivanovna and Nader Shah in 1736. In her letter of friendship, the Tsarina stressed the importance of Nader's declaration of war on the Ottomans for the future of Russian-Iranian relations. The Tsarina's message included the expectation that Nader would engage in conflict with the Ottoman Empire, as the Tsardom had previously done for the security of Iran. This document signifies Russia's active involvement in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the region and its keen interest in supporting Nader Shah's military ambitions against the Ottomans, a demonstration of the delicate balance and alliance relationship between these most powerful states in the region. The Russian court in Petersburg continued to send envoys and letters, encouraging Nader Shah to wage war against the Ottomans. These statements and encouragements continued in subsequent correspondence throughout 1737 (Soofizadeh, 2020, s. 36-37).

The Russian Tsarina's strong encouragement of Nader Shah to wage war against the Ottomans reflects Russia's strategic calculations and interests in the region. By supporting Iran against their common enemy, Russia sought to strengthen its own influence and extend its reach in the region. This correspondence also sheds light on the complex dynamics of power and diplomacy among these three major powers during Nader Shah's reign. During the Nader Shah period, there was a policy-making mechanism stemming from the strong personality and leadership charisma of the ruler, which was important for the formation of neo-classical foreign policy. Likewise, Nader Shah's key position in Ottoman-Iranian relations was important in terms of the continuation of the strategic culture and geopolitical rivalry inherited from the Safavid period and influencing the nature of the relations.

Nader Shah's unconventional approach to the Sunni-Shia divide in post-Safavid Iran stands out as a significant aspect of his rule. His policy of trying to establish *Isnaashariyah* (Twelver Shia Islam) as a fifth sect on a par with the four recognized Sunni sects caused concern among

the Shiite religious scholars (*ulama*). Nader aimed to balance the influence of the Sunni Ottoman Empire by promoting a revival of Sunnism in Iran and reducing the prominent role of the Shiite clergy in the state. However, Nader Shah's efforts in this regard were unsuccessful. The Shiite *ulama* responded by leaving Iran and settling in Iraq, which was then under Ottoman rule (Gronke, 2023, s. 84).

In his analysis, Ivanov interprets Nader Shah's rather unconventional approach to Sunnism within the framework of state administration. According to Ivanov, Nader Shah, who was indifferent to the Shiite-Sunni conflict and held no extremist views, sought to alleviate the grievances of the Sunnis who had experienced unrest in regions such as Dagestan, Kurdistan, and Afghanistan due to repressions of the Safavid era (Ivanov, 2021, s. 229). However, this initiative of the Ja'fari school (*Isnaashariyah*- was strongly criticised by both Sunni and Shiite extremists, and powerful Sunni neighbors such as the Ottomans and Uzbeks did not take it seriously or accept the Ja'fari fiqh school as the true (*haq*) sect. Moreover, Nader's proposal met with skepticism and uncertainty by the Ottomans and did not receive the support he expected.

Compared to the Safavid and later Kajar periods, Nader Shah's relations with the Ottomans had some distinctive features worth to highlight. Turkish historians Hakyemez (Hakyemez, 2014, s. 60-77) and Saray (Saray, Türk-İran İlişkileri, 2006, s. 71-79) point out that there was a positive change in the Ottoman perception towards Iran under Nader Shah compared to the previous troubled Safavid period. The Ottomans appreciated Nader Shah's military achievements and his reputation for keeping his word. Hakyemez, however, also emphasizes that the Ottoman perspective was influenced by sectarian considerations, with Sunnism (*Ahl al-Sunnah*) being equated with Islam, and other non-Sunni movements seen as superstitious. The Ottomans, whose ruling sultans followed the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam and in practice ignored other Sunni fiqh schools, were reluctant to accept Nader Shah's demand to recognize *Isnaashariyah* as the fifth legitimate sect (Hakyemez, 2014, s. 72)

The negative reaction to Nader Shah's sectarian demand on the part of the Ottomans had two dimensions. First, the Ottomans were concerned about the potential damage to their own charismatic authority if they were to accept this demand from Nader Shah, who had earned a reputation as a victorious military commander, and that would have challenged their "imperial pride". Second, given the historical context of armed conflicts and border disputes between Nader and the Ottomans, as well as their relationship with the Safavids after the Battle of

Chaldiran in 1514, it is noteworthy that no genuine religious and ideological reconciliation was achieved in Ottoman-Iranian relations while they avoided directing religious/ideological accusations against each other. The absence of a genuine popular or religious need for reconciliation, coupled with security concerns at the level of the Ottoman sultans, precluded the possibility of religious or sectarian reconciliation. Despite the armed conflicts and disagreements, both sides managed to maintain a certain level of mutual respect and avoided escalating earlier dangerous sectarian accusations against each other and the Ottomans showed respect for Nader Shah in their treatment of his ambassadors.

However, in the end, the Ottomans evaluated Nader Shah's significant offer on a pure sectarian ground and did not accept, hence a historical opportunity to converge the political representations of Sunnism and Shiism and establish a religious peace between two empires was missed for both sides.

In considering the basic dynamics of Ottoman-Iranian relations, the following statement by Nader Shah about the Ottoman sultan is of particular importance in terms of, religious/ideological references, Sunni-Shiite rivalry and the problematic nature of the relations. Nader Shah had told the Ottoman envoy Nazif Mustafa Efendi about the Ottoman sultan to recognize him, as “my great and holy brother is Khalifatullah [the shadow of God] and the Sultan of Mecca and Medina... If we do not know him as great, it means that we do not know the Shari'ah and the Prophet” and expressed his respect and friendship (Halaçoğlu, 2001, s. 154).

It can be said that Nader Shah's basic strategy in the geopolitical context and in relations with the Ottomans was shaped as follows (Ateş, 2012, s. 288-290):

(i) to establish the legitimacy of the *Isnaashariyah* within the Islamic world by using the Ottomans and by curbing the excesses of Shi'ism, seeking to transform it into a stabilizing factor within Iran

(ii) to assert superiority over the Ottomans through territorial gains in the east and thereby to strengthening his military claims

(iii)to develop mutual trade, to strengthen trade between the interior Asia and Europe through the Tabriz-Eastern Anatolia-Iraq route and to control the holy Shiite pilgrimage sites in Iraq

(iv) to penetrate the Caucasus and the Caspian basin like the Russians and the Ottomans, thus ensuring the security of the state and preserving its geopolitical integrity

Following the assassination of Nader Shah in 1747, various disturbances erupted at home and abroad, with opposition emerging from different factions within the country and even within his own inner circle. The Afshars and Kajars, Qizilbash tribes loyal to the Safavids, were responsible for his assassination. In the aftermath, his children maintained control only over Khorasan until 1796, while Iran was in danger of disintegrating, and Khorasan came under Afghan rule (Morgan, 1988, s. 155).

During this tumultuous period, several individuals attempted to succeed Nader Shah, both in Khorasan and throughout Iran. A fascinating document from the period reflects the exchange between the ruling Afghans in Khorasan and the Ottoman imperial court. In a letter dated 1762, the Afghan Khan Ahmed Shah Durrani (1748-1772) wrote to the Ottoman Sultan Mustafa III (1757-1774), expressing his grievances over Iranian claims to Khorasan and asking for support from Istanbul against the Iranians (Saray, Türk-Afgan Münasebetleri, 1984, s. 7-8). In response, the Ottoman court affirmed the validity of the peace treaty signed during the reign of Nader Shah and considered it inappropriate to send troops against the Iranians at a time of their weakness (Nâme-i_Humâyûn_Defteri, 2014, s. 241-254).[27]

Given that the Ottomans had previously intervened in Iran during the decline of the Safavid dynasty only four decades earlier, it is plausible to suggest that Sultan Mustafa III's response to Ahmed Shah Durrani's request for assistance was not solely motivated by magnanimity. The geopolitical context, the prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty, and the ongoing developments on the European front probably played a crucial role in shaping the Ottoman response.

After the death of Nader Shah, the center of power in Iran shifted back to the inner plateau, away from Khorasan. Two prominent leaders emerged during this period: Karim Khan of the Zand tribe and Ali Mardan Khan of the Bakhtiari tribe. These tribal leaders, who had influence over the regions around the Zagros Mountains, established joint rule in central and western Iran

[27] A comprehensive study published by the General Directorate of Turkish State Archives provides a detailed insight into the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Nadir Shah through original correspondence from the Ottoman period. The study includes a total of 71 letters, with the majority of the 31 letters sent by the Ottomans to Iran, while 22 letters were sent from Iran and Nadir Shah. The letters were mainly written by Sultan Mahmud I and the Grand Vizier, reflecting the intense bilateral agenda of the time. The content of the letters covers a variety of topics, including Nadir Shah's demands regarding Ja'fari fiqh school (*Isnaashariyah*), border disputes, peace negotiations, and the trilateral relations between Iran, Russia, and the Ottomans. The correspondence sheds light on the multifaceted nature of the relations between the two powers during this period and provides valuable historical information on the diplomatic interactions and challenges they faced (3 Numaralı Nâme-i Humâyûn_Defteri (Osmanlı Devleti) , 2014).

amid the turmoil following the death of Nader Shah. They installed a Safavid prince, Ismail III, as the Shah, demonstrating their commitment to the Safavid legacy even after the fall of the Shah. An important aspect to highlight the Zand dynasty's rule is that it was the first time in 700 years that Iran was ruled by a dynasty of Iranian origin, breaking the pattern of Turkish and Mongol domination. During the Zand period from 1751 to 1794, there was a resurgence of *Isnaashari* Shiism, in contrast to the previous era under Nader Shah. The Zand rule also witnessed an increase in economic prosperity in Iran (Gronke, 2023, s. 84-85).

Much as Nader Shah used the title "Tahmasb-qoli" in reference to the Safavid Shah Tahmasb before ascending the throne, the Zand leaders Karim Khan and Ali Mardan Khan adopted the title "Vakil-e Ismail", meaning the deputy to this puppet Safavid Shah to act with a more legitimate manner. However, the dual rule and uncertainty ended when Karim Khan deposed Ali Mardan Khan and expelled the commanders affiliated with Nader Shah in Mazandaran and Azerbaijan. Karim Khan deposed Ismail III in 1759, became the sole ruler of Iran and yet continued to use the title of Khan rather than of Shah (Garthwaite, 2005, s. 170-171).

During this period, Karim Khan Zand achieved political unity in Iran and fought two wars against the Ottomans between 1774 and 1779, mainly due to border conflicts in Baghdad and Iraq (Soofizadeh, 2020, s. 43-44). In this period, the issue of Kurdish tribes along the border in the Iraqi territory began to play a role (mostly negative) in Ottoman-Iranian relations, perhaps for the first time in history.[28] Exploiting the war between the Ottomans and the Russians, Karim Khan also captured Baghdad; however, Baghdad, which was captured in 17762, was returned to the Ottomans after the death of Karim Khan in 1779 (Şâbâni, 2003, s. 86). Despite their dominance over Iran, the rule of the Zand dynasty did not last long as the Kajars, their arch-rivals, rose to power and established a new dynasty based in Tehran towards the end of the 18th century, eventually gaining dominance over entire Iranian territory (Shahijani, 2009, s. 157).

[28] The Kurdish population living in the border regions often engaged in activities that led to border disputes and strained relations between the two countries. These movements and tensions were the result of various factors, including tribal affiliations, territorial claims, and competing interests. The Kurdish tribes, with their semi-nomadic lifestyle and independence, frequently crossed the borders, posing a challenge to both the Ottomans and the Kajars in maintaining border security and control. The movements of the tribes sometimes resulted in conflicts with local authorities or neighbouring tribes, leading to disputes and border incursions. These incidents further complicated the already sensitive relations between the Ottomans and the Kajars. On the Kurdish movements along the Ottoman-Iranian borders and the tensions they caused, which played a significant role in Ottoman-Kajar relations see McDowall, David (2021), A Modern History of the Kurds, London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 45-130; Ateş, Sabri (2013), The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary (1843-1914), New York: Cambdridge University Press, pp. 31-85.

2. 4. The Rise of the Kajar Turkomans in Iran and the Ottoman-Kajar Relations

After the fall of the Safavid dynasty in the early 18th century, Iran faced a prolonged period of instability and lacked a stable dynastic rule for almost a century. Following the assassination of the short-lived Nader Shah, various tribes such as the Kajars, Bakhtiaris, Zands, and Afshars engaged in power struggles, resulting in fragmented control over different parts of the country. Eventually, the Kajars emerged victorious and managed to unite Iran under their confederal administration.[29]

Agha Muhammed Khan, the leader of the Kajars, belonged to the Turkoman/Qizilbash tribes loyal to the Safavids. He had endured 16 years of captivity under the Zand rule in Shiraz before escaping in 1779. He initially established his headquarters in the northern region of Mazandaran and later moved to Tehran, a village situated near the Elbrus Mountains and the historic city of Shahr-e Ray, the capital of the Seljuk Turks. Over the next decade, the Kajars steadily expanded their influence, eventually conquering the central region of Iran in 1794 and overthrowing the last Zand ruler (Foltz, 2015, s. 83-84).

Agha Mohammad Khan declared himself Shah in 1796, but his rule was marked by ruthlessness and brutality. He was assassinated by his own soldiers only a year later to be succeeded by his nephew and the governor of Fars province, Fath Ali Shah (also known as Baba Khan) in 1797. Fath Ali Shah ruled as the Shah of Iran until 1834. The early years of Fath Ali Shah were marked by feudal strife and tribal feuds, but by 1800 he was able to establish his authority (Ivanov, 2021, s. 239-240).

During the reign of Fath Ali Shah in the first quarter of the 19th century, Iran attracted increasing interest from European powers, leading to foreign involvement in the country's affairs. One of the Shah's most important endeavors was to reclaim the old Safavid borders in the west and north. In pursuit of this goal, he fought a war with the Ottomans in the 1820s and two wars with the Russians. As the Russians expanded their influence and showed a demonstrably growing interest in the Caucasus region, France and Russia entered into

[29] Although not as intense a debate as the Safavids, the question of the ethnic origins of the Qajars is a controversial topic in the relevant literature; Soofizadeh, who examines the Iranian chronicles of the mentioned period, believes that the Anatolian-Turkish origins of the Qajars predominate (Soofizadeh, 2020, pp. 48-52). Moazami argues that their origin is "a blend of Tatar and Turkish tribes, tracing their own descent from the Tatar Tamerlane, and through him to the Mongols" (Moazami, 2013, s. 16).

cooperation to respond to the British control of India during the Napoleonic era. When political instability in Iran provided an opportunity for the Russian invasion of Georgia, it sparked a series of conflicts known as the Russo-Kajar Wars, which lasted from 1804 to 1813. During this period, Iran sought military assistance from Britain and France, but its requests went unanswered (Keddie, 1999, s. 21-22).

During this period, the Russian Tsardom posed a common threat to both Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Recognizing the danger, Napoleon initially urged both states to put aside their rivalry and unite against Russia. However, the agreements Napoleon made with the Russian Tsar Alexander I in 1807 and 1808 to balance the British control of India left Iran and the Ottomans vulnerable and without support in their struggle against the Russians. As a result, both Iran and the Ottomans turned to Britain for cooperation as a means of countering the Russian threat. This alliance with the British provided temporary relief, although the dynamic would evolve and change in the years to come. Throughout the 19th century, both Iran and the Ottomans continued to seek alliances and cooperation with various European powers in order to counter the continuing Russian threat on their doorstep (Soofizadeh, 2020, s. 66-67).

It is important to note that the specific parameters of these alliances and cooperative efforts would change over time, but the overarching objective of countering Russian influence remained a constant concern for both Iran and the Ottoman Empire throughout the 19th century. For an example, when faced with the Russian threat, both Kajar Iran and the Ottomans chose to maintain harassment and mutual tension along the border rather than resolving their conflicts.

In contrast to previous centuries, the early years of the Kajar dynasty were marked by considerable difficulties in controlling the tribes and nomadic groups that made up the country and recruiting soldiers for national defense. The consequences of the war with Russia proved to be a true disaster for Iran. As the Russian forces advanced and invaded the Caucasus, reaching as far as Tabriz, the Kajars, in search for, were forced to cede most of their Caucasian provinces to the Russian Tsardom by the Treaty of Gulistan in 1813. Their attempt in 1826 to regain these regions achieved no success and they suffered further territorial losses in the Caucasus with the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828 (Foltz, 2015, s. 88). This loss had a lasting impact on the political and cultural life of Iran, causing a traumatic experience comparable to the significant territorial losses and tragic migrations suffered by the Ottomans in the Balkans during the 19th century.

Looking at the territorial losses of the Kajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, it can be argued that global politics and the international situation at the time took a different course, and these two states struggled to keep up with global trends. The industrialization efforts of major empires such as Britain, France, and Russia, and their need for weak colonies to gain access to large markets and secure raw materials, made Iran and the Ottoman Empire attractive targets (Soofizadeh, 2020, s. 65). Within this international political and economic context, both countries faced constant external interference in their internal affairs, frequent invasions, and constant military threats throughout this period.

During the same period, both the Egyptian and Ottoman states successfully implemented centralist policies and military reforms in response to internal challenges and external threats from Europe. Mahmud II (1808-1839) and Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805-1848) effectively countered the European threat in Egypt through these measures. On the other hand, although Iran, under the reign of Fath Ali Shah, made some attempts to establish contacts for understanding with Europe, but failed to take the necessary steps in this direction. Consequently, the country suffered successive defeats at the hands of the European powers.

The primary challenge facing the Kajars in the 19th century was their powerful northern neighbor, the Russian Tsardom. Unlike the Ottomans, the Kajar political elites were unable to implement the necessary centralist reforms and modernize their army, resulting in continued territorial losses to the Russians. Abbas Mirza, the son of Fath Ali Shah and the designated heir to the throne, attempted to modernize the army under his control and introduce local reforms in Azerbaijan (Keddie, Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution, 2003, s. 43-44) However, Mirza dies shortly before his father's death, depriving the country of the opportunity to implement these reforms on a wider scale within Iran (Garthwaite, 2005, s. 195).

During the Kajar period, in addition to geopolitical rivalries and economic conflicts, Iranian-Ottoman relations were also marked by disputes based on religious and sectarian divide. A significant event in this regard was the “Karbala Raid” at the beginning of Fath Ali Shah's reign in 1802, when some 12,000 Wahhabis from Najd attacked the holy Shiite shrines in Karbala, resulting in the massacre of hundreds of Shiites. Fath Ali Shah accused the Ottoman administration of allowing the attackers to enter Karbala through the Ottoman territory and demanded that those responsible be punished. He even threatened to march against the Wahhabis if his demands were unmet. The Ottoman administration offered compensation for

the damage and sought to appease the Kajar administration in order to maintain bilateral relations (Soofizadeh, 2020, s. 65-66).[30]

Another event that strained bilateral relations in Iraq during this period was the arrival of Abdurrahman Pasha (a Kurdish leader in Ottoman Iraq), who had fled the Ottoman Empire to seek refuge in Iran. This caused a rift between the two states. The crisis further escalated when Ali Pasha, the governor of Baghdad, entered Iranian territory with his troops. In response, Fath Ali Shah sent his son Muhammad Mirza to the Ottoman border, threatening war. In the Battle of Merivan in 1806, the Ottoman forces suffered heavy losses and were expelled from the Iranian territory (Uluerler, 2021, s. 15-16). These incidents further contributed to the tensions and conflicts between the two powers during the Kajar period.

According to Iranian historians Bahrami & Mozafari, the major problems in Ottoman-Iranian relations during the Kajar period can be divided into four main areas (Bahrami & Mozafari, 2010, s. 3-4):

-Firstly, there were constant border incursions by frontier tribes and nomads, which led to border disputes between the two states

-Secondly, there were sectarian disputes and intolerance towards Iranian Shiites visiting the Shiite holy sites (Iraqi cities such as Najaf, Karbala and Samarra) under Ottoman control, which remained a source of tension between the rulers of Iran and the Ottomans.

-Thirdly, even though the Treaty of Zuhab (Qasr-e Shirin) of 1639 had defined the Iranian-Ottoman borders, these borders were subject to criticism and gave rise to new border disputes in subsequent years.

-Finally, there was frequent interference by the Iranian state in the internal affairs of the Kurdish Emirate of Baban in the Shahrizor-Sulaymaniyah region,[31] located on the border with

[30] Like the conflicts arising from the movements of the Iraqi Kurds along the borders, the presence of the Shiite holy cities and the Iraqi Shiite community in Iraq had the capacity to create a long-lasting RİFT between the two centralizing empires from the late 18th century onwards. To understand the development of Shiism in Iraq, its complex positions, and the emerging issues between the Iranian and Ottoman states, see Naderi-Doost, Ali (2007), Shiiyan-e Iraq, Tehran: Entesharat-e Ashyaaneh-ye Mehr; Uyar, Mazlum (2022), Arap-Fars Şiiliği Bağlamında Irak Şiiliği: tarihi, Sosyo-Politik Analiz, İstanbul: İyidüşün Yayınları, pp. 28-65.

[31] The nomadic and sedentary Kurdish tribes along the border, a major point of tension in Ottoman-Kajar relations, essentially continued to exist under the rule of the two emirates: Ardalan and Baban Emirates. *Siyeru'l Ekrad*, written and published in Tehran in 1870 by Abdulkadir bin Rustam al-Babani, himself a Baban Kurd, provides a detailed account of the position of the Kurds of Iraq, Iran and south-eastern Anatolia between the two states from the Safavid period to the mid-19th century. The work, which has recently been translated into Turkish, provides information and assessments of the period in question, see: al-Babani, Abdulkadir bin Rustam (1870), Siyeru'l Ekrad, Tehran.

the Ottomans and subordinate to the Ottoman governor of Baghdad (this interference was a significant factor in the limited conflicts that occurred in 1806).

An important historical detail regarding the Shiite population in Iraq, which later caused several complications in the Ottoman-Kajar ties, is the migration of the *ulama*, religious scholars, from Iran to Iraq in the 18th-century. The mass exodus of Iranian Shiite *ulama* to Iraq's sacred sites between 1722 and 1763, particularly during the decline of the Safavids, the rule of Nader Shah, and the ensuing chaos, set the stage for the growth of Persian influence in Iraq in the years that followed (Nakash, 2003, s. 15-16). They capitalized on the failures of the Mamluk and Ottoman governance and exploited their influence over educational institutions and religious revenues. These Persian scholars of Iranian descent gradually managed to displace the existing Arab scholars in the region. As the dominance of the Iranian Shiite *ulama* in Iraq expanded, partly due to the weakness of Ottoman political supervision in the area, the Kajars, although less powerful than the Ottomans, were able to increase their influence over the Iraqi Shiite community (Uyar, 2022, s. 56-65).

The profoundly transformative period of the 19th century saw not only the emergence of Shiism in Iraq, but also significant political and sociological shifts within the Kajar Iran. Unlike the Safavids, who claimed legitimacy through their connection to the lineage of the Twelve Imams and drew power from the Ardabil/Safaviyya religious order, the Kajar shahs attempted to associate themselves with the ancient Iranian emperors (*shahenshahi*). However, their religious legitimacy remained inadequate. The Shiite *ulama* were able to capitalize on this weakness of the political authority. In addition, the significant influence of the powerful Iran-born *ulama* living in Iraq on Iranian society, together their considerable financial resources, gave this influence a political dimension.

As the influence of the European superpowers in Iran grew, the Shiite *ulama* began to take on a “national” role, opposing the Kajar Shahs who were perceived as collaborating with the Europeans. From this period, through the Pahlavi era and up to the 1979 Revolution, the *ulama* were able to portray themselves in a nationalist light, claiming that they were acting in the best interests of Iran and Islam against Western interests. Consequently, they were successful in promoting conservatism within Iranian society (Gronke, 2023, s. 95-96).

In the framework of Marxist thought, the tumultuous 19th century in Iran marked a transition from capitalism to imperialism, with foreign powers seeking to turn Iran and the Ottoman Empire into their semi-colonies. Seeking new markets, raw materials, and

opportunities to export capital, the country's northern neighbor Russia competed with Britain for colonial control of Iran,[32] a competition later partly joined by the US and Germany in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This rivalry led to the establishment of foreign concessions, substantial foreign loans, and foreign-owned banks in Iran, mirroring the similar developments in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire almost the same years. Foreign interests took control not only of Iran's agriculture and valuable commodities, but also of its transportation, insurance, and banking sectors (Ivanov, 2021, s. 280-281).

Russia's most influential means of exerting control over Iran was the Iranian Cossack Brigade, formed in 1879. This well-trained and disciplined force swiftly became Iran's only combat-ready military unit and served as the Shah's personal guard (Keddie, Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan (1796-1925), 1999, s. 41). Britain, on the other hand, did not hesitate to use military force in its colonial ambitions to the point of going beyond economic and political colonization to the militarily occupation of territories such as the Persian Gulf (Basra region), Baluchistan, and Sistan. In addition, Britain fomented revolts among various ethnic groups against the Kajar rule, which contributed to political instability in the country (Ivanov, 2021, s. 281-283).

The Kajar court's reckless concessions to foreign entities provoked widespread protests when the Imperial Tobacco Corporation of Persia, a British consortium, was granted a 50-year monopoly on all tobacco-related activities in Iran. The years 1890-92 saw a power struggle between the royal palace and the Shia religious scholars, or *ulama*, led by Ayatollah Mirza Hassan Shirazi. This confrontation, known as the "Tobacco Rebellion" or "Tobacco Protests", heightened the political influence of the *ulama* at the expense of the court's collaboration with foreigners and its inept governance (Katouzian, 2006, s. 26). This event was an important historical moment demonstrating that the clergy, whose influence lasted until the 1979 Revolution, could effectively lead and steer modern mass movements (Moazami, 2013, s. 80) particularly in collaboration with the urban bourgeoisie and progressive intellectuals.

Nasser al-Din Shah (1848-1896), as one of the most influential leaders of the Kajar dynasty ruled for an impressive 48 years, but despite his lavish and pandering policies he faced

[32] For a detailed and skilfully prepared monograph authored by an Iranian historian on the field of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Asia during the 19th and first quarter of the 20th century on Qajar Iran, see: Kazemzadeh, Firuz (1968), Russia and Britain in Persia: Imperial Ambitions in Qajar Iran, New York: Yale University Press. For further recommended research on Russian and British influence in Iran based on the archival documents of the European powers, see: Nazem, Hossein (2001), *Rus va İngilis der İran*, Tehran: Entesharat-e Markaz-e Asnad-e Enghelab-e Islami.

opposition from Shia clerics and European-educated bureaucrats, as well as intellectuals from diverse backgrounds. This cohort included individuals such as Mirza Malkum Khan, an Armenian Muslim, and Jamaluddin Afghani, a highly influential 19th century Islamic activist. Afghani's anti-imperialist and Islamic unity-centerd beliefs had a profound impact on intellectuals in Iran, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire, where he was also active. However, Afghani had serious problems with all three monarchies, for instance one of his staunch followers assassinated Nasir al-Din Shah in 1896, and Afghani died in Istanbul, where he was held under house arrest by Abdulhamid II.

Despite these complexities, the reign of Muzaffar al-Din Shah (1896-1907), Nasser al-Din's son and successor, did not bring in significant change. Faced with the inherited economic troubles of Kajar Iran, Muzaffar al-Din Shah sought more loans from Russia and Britain, further compromising the country's political and economic independence. Yet, two key events occurred during his reign that would shape Iran's future: The Constitutional Revolution of 1905-09 and the discovery of oil in south-west Iran in 1908.

The alliance formed among the reformist intellectuals, bazaar merchants, and politicized clerics during the Tobacco Protests of 1890-92, an event that effectively challenged the Kajar court, was revitalized during the Constitutional Revolution. This diverse coalition supported by the Iranian people proved successful. It established Iran's first elected parliament in 1906 and created a constitution that limited the absolute power of Shah.[33]

After the death of Muzaffar al-Din Shah, his son Mohammad Ali (1907-1909) assumed the throne. Unlike his father, he was not a proponent of the parliament (*Majlis*) or constitutionalism and tried to suspend them both. The struggle between constitutionalists and the absolutists led by Ali raged on, leading to a civil war that lasted until the end of World War I. However, Ahmad Shah (1909-1925), installed on the throne in 1909 after the exile of his father Mohammad Ali, supported the *Majlis* and the constitutional monarchy continued, albeit gradually.[34]

[33] Edward Browne's seminal work on the Constitutional Revolution of 1905 (first published in 1910) is the authoritative source for understanding this pivotal period in Iranian history. Browne's comprehensive approach provides a snapshot of the political, social, and international dynamics of the time, detailing each moment with scholarly precision. For this work, which has recently been translated into Turkish by the author of this doctoral dissertation and will soon be published, see: Browne, Edward G. (1910), *The Persian Revolution of 1905-1909*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[34] Ahmad Kasravi (1890-1946), a famous Iranian historian and one of the founding thinkers of modern Iranian nationalism, is one of the most important primary sources on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution in the relevant literature. Kasravi, who was actively involved in the constitutionalist movement in his youth, became one of the closest names to Sheikh Muhammad Khiyabani, the leader of the Tabriz-based resistance, when the constitutional monarchy was shelved in the following period. Tarikh-e Hijdahsâle-ye Âzarbâyjan (The 18 Year History of

One group that benefited from the Constitutional Revolution was the *ulama*, or Islamic scholars, and political Shiite Islamist thought. Their influence grew as the power of the monarchy weakened, and a constitutional amendment in 1907 gave them the power to ensure that parliamentary decisions complied with Sharia law (Soofizadeh, 2020, s. 150-151). This not only allowed the scholars to influence legislation in their favor, but also set a historical precedent that they could use to challenge political power in the later Pahlavid era.

Indeed, the Constitutional Revolution in Iran did not take place in isolation, but was part of a broader international trend of constitutionalist movements at the time. Around the globe, societies were experiencing similar calls for reform, motivated by a desire for more democratic governance and limits on absolute power. During these decades, constitutionalist and pro-constitutionalist movements emerged around the same time in countries such as Japan (1874), Russia (1905), Mexico (1910) and China (1911), and following the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, a similar movement emerged in the neighboring Ottoman Empire (Gelvin, 2016, s. 160-161). Just two years after the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 established the second constitutional era in the Ottoman Empire.[35]

These movements, much like Iran's Constitutional Revolution, were shaped by their unique national contexts, but they were also interconnected on a global scale, influenced by the spread of ideas and shifts in political thought around the world. This was a transformative period in the history of governance, as nations grappled with the challenge of reconciling traditional structures with emerging democratic principles.

The termination of the Constitutional Monarchy's in 1911 was marked by a series of political crises. Despite employing an American financial advisor, Morgan Shuster, to deal with the ongoing financial problems, the Kajar court was unable to overcome Russia's influence and military power. Consequently, Shuster had to resign, the parliament was dissolved (Ivanov, 2021, s. 311-312), and Russian and British military occupation continued, ending the

Azerbaijan, Tehran: 1934) and Tarikh-e Mashruteh-e Iran (History of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, Tehran: 1942), in which Kasravi authored his memoirs of this turbulent period from the perspective of a historian, present an extremely vivid, documented and detailed account of those years.

[35] The constitutional movements that unfolded in Iran and Ottoman Turkey in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were closely interlinked and significantly influenced by the exchange of ideas between prominent intellectuals and ideological currents of the time. For a comparative study of the first constitutional movements in the Middle East [namely Tunisia (1861), Ottoman Turkey (1876 and 1908), Egypt (1881), and Iran (1905)] see: Karakuş, Muhammed & Koç, Mehmet Akif (2022), "Social and Political Foundations of Constitutionalism in the Middle East: The First Constitutional Movements in Tunisia, Ottoman Turkey, Egypt, and Iran", International Journal of Kurdish Studies; 8 (2), pp. 150-174.

constitutionalist era. Despite Iran's declared neutrality in World War I, the battles between Russia, Britain, and the Ottoman Empire were partly fought on Iranian territories.

When Europe plunged into war in August 1914, Ahmad Shah promptly declared Iran's neutrality. However, the subsequent occupation of Iran by British and Russian forces limited Iran's ability to maintain its neutral stance. By November 1914, Ottoman forces had begun to advance from the west, eventually occupying Iranian Azerbaijan until the armistice of 1918. In parallel, Germany consolidated a significant military presence inside Iran in alliance with the country's tribal factions, such as the Tangsir, Kashqai, Khamse, Boyar-Ahmadi, Kurd, Bakhtiari, and Baluch. By 1915, they controlled major cities in central and southern Iran. Initially, the Iranian people harboured resentment against the British and Russians due to previous occupations, which led to sympathy for the Ottomans and Germans. However, the implementation of certain policies gradually eroded this sentiment, and by 1916, public opinion began to turn against the German-Ottoman alliance (Djalili & Kellner, 2011, s. 51-52).

Abrahamian, an Iranian-American historian, describes the demographic and sectarian legacy of the first quarter of the 20th century, from the last representatives of the imperial era in Iran, the Kajars, to the modern period:

The Iranian population --estimated at about eight million at the end of the nineteenth century- was divided into a Shi'i majority; a significant Sunni minority of tribal Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis and Turkmans; and small urban concentrations of non-Muslims, such as Armenians, Assyrians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahayis, and Azalis. Moreover, the Shi'i majority itself was fragmented into smaller groups, especially in the Ni'mati and Haydari factions and into the Mutashari, Shaykhi, and Karimkhani sects." (Abrahamian, 1973, s. 272)

In the challenging circumstances characterized by a fragmented population, foreign occupation, and a weakened state structure, Iran was drawn into World War I. The occupation by foreign powers intensified during this period, with the Ottoman Empire, in alliance with Germany, launching attacks on the Caucasus and Baku from the outbreak of war in November 1914. They first occupied Urmia, where they armed the Kurdish chief Ismail Khan Simko and pitted him against Iranian officials and the local Armenian and Assyrian communities. The Ottomans then declared control over Azerbaijan, claiming it as part of the Turkish world. In January 1915, they briefly occupied Tabriz and expelled Sheikh Muhammad Khiyabani, a popular Turkish leader of the Democrats and an influential figure in the Constitutionalist

movement. Concurrently, the Ottomans supported Mirza Kuchek Khan's guerrilla units, known as the *Jangali*s, who revolted against Tehran and British forces in the northern countryside of Gilan. Meanwhile, the Russians increased their military presence in Iran to counter the Ottomans, particularly on the southern front, in Azerbaijan, and in the Caucasus (Abrahamian, Tarikh-e İran-e Modern, 2010, s. 115-118). Consequently, Iranian lands were engulfed in the ravages of war and destruction.

Although the Ottomans made gains by capturing Iranian cities in the east, including Hamadan and Kermanshah, their advance was halted at Qazvin. However, when Russia withdrew from the war following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Ottomans seized the opportunity and quickly captured Kurdistan and Tabriz, maintaining control of these regions until the end of the war. The Ottomans established the state of Azerbaijan after taking Baku in September 1918, but its existence was short-lived. With the signing of the Mudros Treaty on 30 October 1918 by the Ottomans, and their subsequent withdrawal from the war, their territorial gains in Iran and Azerbaijan proved inconclusive (Soofizadeh, 2020, s. 210-211).

The First World War marked the end of both the Kajar Dynasty in Iran and the Ottoman Empire, and the fate of these nations was now largely determined by the Allies, with Britain playing a leading role. This difficult process would shape the first half of the 1920s, when both traditional empires would collapse, and two new nation-states would be established in their place.

An examination of the relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Kajar Empires over a period of almost 130 years [1796-1920] clearly shows that the disputes were not limited to political and military disagreements and territorial competition, but also included religious and ideological schisms as well as economic preferences. This intricate tapestry of conflicts played out between these neighboring, conflict-tired and war-weary empires.[36]

[36] In this regard, a snapshot of the titles of correspondences, reports, and exchanges from the early 19th century, as documented in the Ottoman archives, would provide a rich illustration and provides a vivid historical snapshot of the key issues that marked Ottoman-Iranian interactions during this era not only covering political topics but also extending to cultural, economic and legal areas:
All the titles mentioned in this correspondence part constitute the subject of a separate (sometimes several) official documents and are excerpts from a collection of official documents representing the Ottoman-Qajar Iran relations published in a selection by the State Archives Directorate of the Prime Ministry of the Republic of Turkey. For other official documents in this collection, see: Arşiv Belgelerinde Osmanlı-İran İlişkileri (2010), Ankara: TC. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü (Arşiv Belgelerinde Osmanlı-İran İlişkileri, 2010):
-Report that the forces of Shahzada (Abbas Mirza) were defeated by the Turkoman Mehemmed Chepni, and that the Shah made an offer of peace to the Russians through the British; nevertheless, the Iranians repaired the Hoy fortress across the Van border and acted against the Ottomans with deceit and trickery (1811).

-Correspondence stating that the extradition request of the Iranian ambassador in Istanbul regarding the Iranian princes who fled from the castle of Ardabil to take refuge in Tbilisi, Georgia, and then went to Trabzon could not be accepted as it was against the bilateral treaties (1838).
-The request of Mirza Jafar Khan, the Iranian ambassador in Istanbul, that the Iranians should not be charged for the funerals of Shiite religious elders to be buried in their tombs in Baghdad (1841).
-Declaration to the Russian and British embassies to correct the ambiguous expressions regarding the city of Muhammara and the Shatt al-Arab rapids in the agreement to be concluded between the Ottoman and Iranian states in order to settle the disputed issues (1847).
-The British Ambassador's recommendation to the Ottoman authorities to ensure order and security on the roads that are the transit points of trade relations between Europe and Iran, in response to Russia's coldness towards the conduct of inter-state trade through Georgia (1850).
-The letter from Mohammad Khan, the Iranian Chargé d'Affaires in Istanbul, requesting that the lands and buildings used by Iranian nationals and merchants in certain cities in Iraq (Baghdad, Karbala, Najaf, Qadhimiyah) not be prevented from being sold to the locals and that they be assisted in the process of repairing and selling them (1852).
-Upon the letter of the ambassador in Tehran during the Crimean War, the Sultan's will to ensure the continuation of Iran's attitude towards the Russians (1854).
-Correspondence concerning the necessary notification to the Iranian, French and British embassies to prevent the Iranians from attempting to build fortifications against the British on the coast of the Gulf of Basra (1856).
-Letter from the members of the Trabzon Provincial Council regarding the removal of insecurity caused by the massacre of some Iranians on the roads from the Iranian border to Trabzon (mostly in the area under the jurisdiction of the Erzurum Governorate) (1857).
-On the Sultan's authorization to repair the tomb of Imam Musa Kazim and the minarets in Baghdad with the financial assistance of the Shah of Iran (1862).
-The order that those who settled in Baghdad, among the fugitive members of a superstitious sect that emerged in Iran under the name of Babi and assassinated the Shah, should not be returned to Iran, and should be sent to Istanbul for their compulsory residence in a place far from the region such as Bursa and Edirne (1863).
-Decree that the copies of the Quran that were secretly printed in the Ottoman Empire, or that were brought into the country after being printed in Iran, should not be allowed to pass through customs after being sealed with a special seal (1874).
-The letter expressing the satisfaction of Sultan Abdulhamid II in response to the letters of the Sunni people living in Bandar Abbas and other regions of the Persian Gulf coast in Iran, declaring their loyalty to the Caliphate in Istanbul (1877).
-The report of the Ottoman ambassador in Tehran (1878) that invitations have been extended to the high-level Iranian state officials for the month of Ramadan in order to consolidate the Ottoman-Iranian friendship, and that the invitation of the Iranian ambassador to some religious ceremonies in Istanbul would be beneficial for the development of friendship (1878).
-Internal correspondence on the Trabzon-Hoy road to be operated to facilitate trade relations between European countries and Iran (1878).
-Correspondence stating that the Iranian Consul General in Jeddah was notified to remove the coat of arms from the tent pole he erected in Arafat Square during the Hajj season, as it might serve as an example for other Muslim communities coming to the Holy Land for Hajj (1880).
-Request for permission and approval by the Emir of Mecca, Avnurrefik, to the Grand Vizier's office in Istanbul to raise the grade of the medal awarded to him by the Iranian state (1886).
-Meeting and accommodation expenses of some members of the family of the Iranian Shah [Nasir al-Din] on their way to the Hejaz via Aleppo and Syria, from the Ottoman treasury, and granting permission to the Iranian soldiers accompanying them to pass through the Ottoman lands (1889).
-Administrative report on the dispersal of more than two thousand Iranians who performed the mourning ceremony on the tenth day of Muharram in Üsküdar and prayed to the Ottoman Sultan in front of the district police stations after the ceremonies that continued throughout the day (1890).
-The order of the Grand Vizier to conduct an investigation after the Ottoman soldiers opened fire on the mourning Shiites in Najaf and the death of the deceased (1890).
-The Will of the Sultan, which ordered that the asylum requests of the people of the Hanafi sect living in the town of Talish on the Russian border of Iran should be settled in the Ottoman state in a way that would not give rise to any complaints from Iran (1894).
-Order for the allocation of Mirza Ali Akbar Khan’s house of as a school for the children of Iranian families living in Erzurum (1896).
-A report that the Shah of Iran was assassinated in Paris (and survived) by an anarchist of Italian or French origin with a gun and a knife, and that the Sultan’s congratulatory message was conveyed (1900).

2. 5. The Pahlavid Era and the Road to the 1979 Revolution

In the first quarter of the 20th century, changes in the Iranian state system brought transformation to a country occupied by the British and Russians in World War I, and because of domestic and foreign interventions, the 130-year-old Kajar dynasty disappeared. The new era created changes and transformations in Iran's domestic politics and state structure, as well as in its foreign policy. After the disappearance of the Kajar dynasty in 1925, the Pahlavid dynasty ruled Iran until the 1979 Revolution. This new era differs from both the previous Kajar rule and the subsequent Islamic Republic periods in terms of leadership characteristics and the role of the political elites, as well as the shaping of strategic culture in both regional environment and global systemic balances.

In analyzing the history of modern Iran in the 20th century before the 1979 Revolution, I find it appropriate to follow the periodization of Iranian-American historian Prof. Abrahamian (Abrahamian, Tarikh-e İran-e Modern, 2010). Accordingly, I will examine this period by dividing it into three, with the authoritarian rule of Reza Shah between 1925-41 continuing with the "nationalist interlude" and the White Revolution years initiated by Mohammad Reza Shah after the Ajax Operation in 1953, which prepared the ground for the 1979 Revolution.

2. 5. 1. The Rise of Pahlavids and Reza Shah – Kemal Pasha Friendship in 1920s-30s

The Kajar dynasty, which ruled Iran from the 1790s to 1925, was marked more by internal political and social disharmony, foreign interventions and lack of central authority. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, Kajar Iran had already become a semi-colonial state of the Russians on the one hand and the British on the other, with the political, military and economic structures of the country completely under the control of these two colonial powers (Keddie, Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan (1796-1925), 1999, s. 62-64). The Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11 was a chance to modernize Iran's state and social system and limit external interference, but it failed to achieve its goals due to internal divisions and external pressure.

In addition to this troubled backdrop, WWI turned Iran into a theatre of global warfare and a battleground for foreign powers. In the midst of this chaos, Reza Shah, a general in the Russian-controlled Cossack Brigade, quickly rose to prominence and, with the help of foreign powers, became a powerful figure. After years of effectively suppressing tribal rebellions and civil unrest in the country, he orchestrated a coup d'état in 1921, thanks to the Cossack brigade he commanded, which effectively ended Kajar rule. First as Minister of War, then as Prime Minister, he used his power to eliminate his political rivals and successfully suppress rebellions within Iran, and finally, in 1925, the Majlis (Iranian parliament) under effective control of Reza Shah deposed Ahmad Shah, the last ruler of the Kajars, who had previously been forced into exile in Europe, and Reza Shah was declared as the new Shah (Abrahamian, Iran bayn-e do Enghelab, 2012, s. 148-168). The Pahlavid dynasty, which would last until the 1979 Revolution, officially began to rule.

Reza Shah, as an ambitious military officer and general, had grown up in war conditions, decentralization in most parts of the country, and had seized power by suppressing rebellions. His rule brought with it a centralized state structure and an authoritarian concentration of power. His period of rule was characterized with a strong emphasis on modernization, secularization and nationalism. Once on the throne, he was inspired by the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Pasha, the new leader of neighboring the Republic of Turkey, and sought to transform Iran into a modern nation-state (Abrahamian, Iran bayn-e do Enghelab, 2012, s. 179-185). The key political developments of Reza Shah's reign within Iran include the establishment of a strong central government, the creation of a modern bureaucracy, and sweeping reforms in various critical areas (notably education, law and infrastructure).

One of Reza Shah's most important actions was to create a powerful and strictly acting within the chain-of-command army that was able to suppress tribal rebellions and centralize state authority throughout Iran. Achieving this was crucial for internal stability and reducing the influence of regional elites (Dudoignon, 2017, s. 96-97). However, this did not come without various problems; it led to the marginalization of traditional power centers, such as tribal leaders and religious authorities (*ulama*), which had gained strength and influence over the court and dynasty during the Safavid and Kajar era.

Reza Shah's modernization efforts included the legal and educational system, and in these two areas, he introduced more secular laws, increased schooling, and replaced Islamic sharia law with the European model in the civil code. The aim of such radical transformations,

especially in the fields of education and law, was clear: to establish a more unified national identity and notion of citizenship, following the path of reforms that Kemal Pasha had advanced in Turkey (Keddie, Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution, 2003, s. 85), and to break the centuries-long dominance of the clergy and its strong influence over state-society relations.

However, in a geography with strong centrifugal dynamics, such as Iran, it was only through authoritarianism and repression that both these top-down reforms and the establishment of centralized state authority were possible, resulting in a political climate in which political dissent was suppressed, press freedom curtailed, and opposition factions eliminated. Reza Shah's reliance on the military and bureaucracy to implement these reforms created narrow political elite with little popular support but loyalty to the ruler himself (Atabaki & Zürcher, Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization Under Atatürk and Reza Shah, 2004, s. 7-9). This top-down approach alienated many segments of Iranian society, including intellectuals, religious leaders and tribal groups.[37]

Iranian foreign policy during the Reza Shah era was shaped by the intention of asserting national sovereignty, which had been damaged by foreign occupation and influence during the last decades of the Kajars, and reducing foreign influence. At this point, relations with Turkey were of critical importance for Pahlavid Iran. While European-style modernization and a nationalist foreign policy were pursued in the 1920s-30s, Kemal Pasha's Turkey was taken as a role model (Vekili, 2003, s. 93-94). The two leaders, who were friends with each other, shared a commitment to secularism, nationalism and state-led development, and this vision provided

[37] Reza Khan's self-proclamation as shah was not achieved with the full consensus of all Iranian society and political elites. Some of them supported Reza Khan in the instability of the country, insecurity caused by foreign occupations and local rebellions. Some figures from the aristocracy and Qajar elites opposed Reza Khan for personal reasons and because they were uncomfortable with his authoritarian attitudes; one of these was Muhammad Mossadegh, who would serve as prime minister between 1951 and 1953 and came from the Qajar political elite. In a parliamentary session in October 1925, when it was considered certain that Reza Khan would be declared shah, Mossadegh made the following clear warning, but because of this oppositional stance, he could not enter politics again until Reza Shah abdicated and went into exile: "*Today you Deputies of the Majles wish to make Sardar-eSepah, Reza Khan, a King. The honourable gentleman is now not only Prime Minster, but Minster of War and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces as well. Today our country, after twenty years of widespread bloodshed, is about to enter a phase of retrogression. One and the same person as king, aa Prime Minster, as Minister of War, as Commander-in-Chief? Even in Zanzibar no such state of affairs exists!*" (Atabaki & Zürcher, Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization Under Atatürk and Reza Shah, 2004, p. 7).
Atabaki and Zürcher note that such opposition among the elites was extremely exceptional and highlight as an interesting example Mossadegh's opposition to Reza Shah, similar to Hüseyin Cahit's (Yalçın) earlier opposition to the authoritarian rule of the Unionists' powerful leader Enver Pasha, also opposing Mustafa Kemal Pasha's increasingly authoritarian rule in the mid-1920s.

closeness in the relations between the two countries and created a productive area for bilateral cooperation.[38]

In order to strengthen the bilateral ties, one of the founding texts of Turkish-Iranian relations in the modern period is the 1926 Treaty of Friendship and Security. In these years, Turkey largely resolved its problems with Western countries with the Treaty of Lausanne, and in 1925, Kemal Pasha's government signed a twenty-five-year friendship and cooperation treaty with the USSR, but this treaty, signed with its northern neighbor with whom Iran had constant problems during the last century, caused anxieties in Iran. Iran's request to make a similar treaty was met with a positive response in Ankara, and the Treaty of Friendship and Trust/Security in 1926 was born under these conditions. The Soviets were informed of the treaty after its signing and the negotiations were carried out in secrecy due to the Iranians' reservations about the Soviets. With the treaty, Turkey and Iran undertook to prevent hostile acts originating from within the country that could threaten each other's security, while also undertaking to refrain from acts that could harm each other in their border regions. In addition, it was decided to take steps in other areas of bilateral relations such as trade, consulate, customs, communication, residence and extradition of criminals, and both countries would be able to act with complete freedom in their foreign relations (Metin, 2023).

This agreement provided an institutional framework for relations that had developed on the basis of the personal friendship between Reza Shah and Kemal Pasha, and the political elites of both countries showed each other becoming confident in each other's intentions and goals and leaving behind the harmful dynamics of sectarian/religious hostility experienced during the age of empires in the past. This step also confirming the existing border between the two neighbors and outlined the framework of political and economic cooperation, also reflected the common

[38] Memduh Şevket (Esendal), who was Kemal Pasha's ambassador in Baku in 1920-24 and Tehran in 1925-30, vividly describes the friendship and communication between Kemal Pasha and Reza Khan (later Shah) in his Tehran memoirs. While Reza Khan rose as the sole power in the turbulent post-war conditions of 1925 and the atmosphere of Iran that was constantly boiling with domestic political and social troubles, his friend and companion Kemal Pasha and his friends right next to him declared the republican regime and abolished the monarchy. Kemal Pasha, through his ambassador, also asks Reza Khan to say that he did a good thing by abolishing the Kajar monarchy, but not to replace it with his own dynasty and to declare a republic. He calculated that in this way, Russia-Iran-Turkey will be three powerful neighbours who have replaced old monarchies with republics and thus they will be able to stand stronger against the West. However, Reza Khan replied, "Iran is used to being a shah, it cannot be governed by any other regime, therefore I will declare my authority as the new shah." Kemal Pasha and the ambassador in Tehran attempted to ensure that the one-man regime would be valid for life and would not turn into a dynasty. Although Reza Khan gave evasive answers, he probably transformed his dictatorship into a dynasty due to similar motives, fearing that his country could be torn apart – or reflecting the situation in this way. For more details regarding Reza Khan (later Shah) and Kemal Pasha' relations during the 1920s, see: Esendal, Memduh Şevket (1999), *Tahran Anıları ve Düşsel Yazılar*, İstanbul: Bilgi Yayınevi

will to establish stability in the region and balance the influence of European powers particularly in post-WWI Middle East.

However, it is not possible to say that Turkish-Iranian relations progressed smoothly during this period. The most important of these problems was the situation of the Kurdish communities on both sides of the border and their occasional armed rebellions against the central governments of both countries. Both Reza Shah and Kemal Atatürk suppressed the nationalist and separatist tendencies of the Kurds under their rule, which they saw as obstacles to their own nation-building projects. This situation occasionally led to armed conflicts, endangering security on both sides of the border.

Another source of tension was Turkey and Iran's relations with European powers (especially Britain), which at times became tense and strengthened. For example, while Iran's close relations with the British in the early 1920s caused concern in Turkey, the opposite occurred in the following period, and this time the Iranian side approached Turkey's close relations with European powers with apprehension. During this period, Reza Shah tried to balance Turkey's influence in the Middle East, as a regional power that was a remnant of the Ottoman Empire, with other regional actors. Despite all these challenges, Turkish-Iranian relations remained largely stable and close throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and while both countries attached importance to international and regional stability, the regional competition element, which was historically quite important and often caused problems, was largely relegated to the lower ranks of the agenda.

The friendship between Reza Shah and Kemal Atatürk,[39] as can be seen in Reza Shah's approximately one-month visit to Turkey in the summer of 1934, initiated a warm closeness and formed the basic framework of Turkish-Iranian relations in the modern period. However, in the second half of the 1930s, when the imperialist sharing crises in Europe dragged the entire world into World War II, peace and security in the Middle East, one of the main battlefields of World War I, showed signs of deterioration again. The friendship and closeness between Ankara and Tehran also emerged in the establishment of regional security through pacts. Iraq, which gained its independence in 1932, wanted to balance its relations with its former mandate, Britain, and to develop relations with its neighbors in the region; for this purpose, the Hashemite

[39] Atatürk's death had a great impact on the Iranian public and a period of mourning was declared in the palace. The Iranian Parliament also held a special commemoration session. Iran, which attended Atatürk's funeral with a high-level delegation, has always expressed the importance it attaches to Atatürk and Turkish-Iranian friendship (Metin, 2023).

Kingdom in Baghdad proposed a non-aggression agreement to Iran, with which it occasionally had problems due to the Kurds and Shiite communities, and to its northern neighbor, Turkey.

During these years, Turkey pioneered the Balkan Pact and signed a defense and cooperation agreement with Yugoslavia, Greece and Romania. Turkey, thinking that a similar experience could be made in the Middle East, also took initiatives in this process and proposed a regional pact. As a result, following the negotiations that started in 1933, the Sadabad Pact was signed in Tehran in 1937 with the participation of Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Afghanistan. Britain and the USSR, who were informed of the pact during the preparatory negotiations, did not directly oppose this initiative and supported the project without signing (Metin, 2023). These regional pacts can also be read as initiatives in the nature of preparation for the upcoming Great War, in which Turkey and Iran were on the same front in the 1930s and acted with the same threat perceptions. For Turkey, Turkish-Iranian relations in the pre-WWII period were an extension of its desire to establish good relations with regional countries, while for Iran, included efforts to overcome isolation and establish friendship and cooperation with regional countries.

An important point that draws attention in the Reza Shah - Atatürk relations is that although both leaders wanted to establish a nation-state form in the post-imperial period, both of them were the most powerful and monopolistic figures in the foreign policy-making processes of their countries during inter-war period as authoritarian single-man administrations in a global and regional environment far from democracy. From this perspective, in the neo-classical realist sense of foreign policy-making processes, the 1920s and 1930s were a period in which leadership characteristics rather than elite consensus were at the forefront in both countries. Despite their authoritarian administrations, both leaders acted pragmatically and prioritized the modernization of their countries, thus adapting to changing global and regional conditions.

Within the context of strategic culture, the priorities of the Iranian foreign policy during the Reza Shah period were to reduce foreign domination in the country and strengthen national sovereignty. This was also Ataturk's aim in Turkey during the same period, and thanks to this, Turkish-Iranian relations were able to provide a framework where nationalist tendencies were strong on both sides, but cooperation was possible against the Anglo-French influence in the region. In order to reduce foreign influence on the country's economy and to ensure economic independence, Reza Shah took steps to reduce the Anglo-Persian Oil Company's concession in 1932 (Keddie, Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution, 2003, s. 83-84). However, in the late 1930s, his rapprochement with Nazi Germany in order to balance foreign powers frightened

his powerful neighbor to the north, the USSR, and the British settled in the south and east. Just as during WWI, Iran was invaded by the Russians and British during WWII, and Reza Shah was dethroned and exiled abroad in 1941. From the 1920s to 1941, Reza Shah had rapidly diminishing political legitimacy and a weak popular base because of his oppressive rule and the large segments of society his autocracy liquidated (Katouzian & Shahidi, Politics, Economics & Conflicts, 2008, s. 2).

2. 5. 2. WWII and pre-Cold War: Nationalization and Mossadegh Era

With the dethronement of Reza Shah, who could be described as the founder of a modern nation-state in Iran, by the British and Soviets, and the country being invaded once again by these two powers, as it had been 25 years earlier during the WWI, Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Shah, was crowned and a new era began that would last until February 1979. Reza Shah's cultural and political rapprochement with the Germans in the late 1930s and his country's geographical importance as a supply route to Britain's ally, the Soviets, paved the way for the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in August 1941. Iran's sovereignty was eliminated during the war, as the country was divided into British and Soviet spheres of influence. The Tehran Conference held in 1943 with the participation of Joseph Stalin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill also underlined this strategic importance of Iran (Mahdavi A. R., 2010, s. 84-87).

Mohammad Reza, who succeeded his father to the throne in 1941 and had difficulty in taking power due to both the conditions of occupation and the shadow of experienced state officials, had his early years marked by political instability and power struggles between court, parliament and different factions in domestic politics. Unlike his father, who was an experienced military general and an authoritarian and harsh leader (Afkhami, 2009, s. 42), the young shah took a more conciliatory approach in his early term, allowing political reforms that paved the way for new political movements to emerge and grow stronger. However, as his own authority and the influence of the court waned, he faced significant challenges from nationalist, socialist and religious groups. The most important of these groups was the pro-Marxist Tudeh party, which was organized on the legacy of the Communist Party of Iran, founded in the 1920s, and emerged as a powerful Leninist organization in 1941 (Abrahamian, Tarikh-e İran-e Modern, 2010, s. 198). The Tudeh, which gained strength during the Soviet occupation of Iran

and became popular among workers, intellectuals, and urban segments of the middle class, voiced demands for social justice, land reform, and an end to foreign occupation. The Tudeh's rapidly growing power and popularity alarmed conservative political elites, who saw its growing social power as a threat to the existing order, and the Shah himself (Afkhami, 2009, s. 98-100).

In this period, when the Tudeh Party, gained power and popularity in leftist/socialist circles also with the contribution of global sympathy felt for the Soviets after the victory of the Second World War, nationalism and religious tendencies were also on the rise. These three movements, which were suppressed or taken under state control during the time of Reza Shah, flourished and developed in the relative freedom environment of the 1940s (Cleveland, 2004, s. 288-289). In the 1940s, when the direct occupation administrations of the European global colonial powers that had lasted for centuries ended, nationalism also rose along with anti-imperialist movements, and especially the enthusiasm brought by the Asian and African countries that gained their independence brought an end to the French and British influence in the Middle East. Nationalist steps such as the anti-British coup in Egypt in 1952 and the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956 would be repeated in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen in the following years (Gelvin, 2016, s. 263).

Within this context, a nationalist wave that was not under state control grew and rose in Iran and brought Muhammad Mossadegh, who came from an aristocratic background of the Kajar era and was one of the last ministers of justice and foreign affairs of the Ahmed Shah era, to the prime ministry with the support of the parliament in 1951 (De Bellaigue, 2013, s. 46-47). Mossadegh's basic discourse was the independence of Iran and Iran's control over its own natural resources, and the determination of a fair sharing ratio instead of the sharing ratios that belittled Iran in technical cooperation with foreigners. Under these conditions, the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) was realized in 1951 despite the vehement opposition of the Shah and his court (Ansari, 2012, s. 130-133). Mossadegh came to power with this discourse and during his short term as prime minister, he put this discourse into practice and made it official. AIOC had completely controlled the oil industry of Iran, one of the countries with the largest oil reserves in the world, and was seen as a symbol of British imperialism and economic exploitation.

The Mossadegh government made this decision, but this time it faced a serious embargo and economic crisis due to sanctions. With the British initiative, the US intervened and first

tried to find a diplomatic solution during the Truman period. However, the Dwight Eisenhower administration, which took office in 1952, feared that Iran would rapidly shift to the leftist camp and enter into Soviet influence. Consequently in August 1953, a joint coup d'état was staged in cooperation with the CIA and the British Intelligence Service (Mousavian, Iran and the United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace, 2014, s. 24), overthrowing Mossadegh and reinstating Shah, who had briefly fled the country due to the failure of the first British intervention (Kinzer, 2008, s. 167-192).

The Mossadegh era was a watershed moment in modern Iranian history. While it reflected rising nationalism in domestic politics and sociology, and an independent foreign policy zeal it also created a crisis that was evaluated in the context of great power rivalry in the international system. However, this coup, called Operation Ajax, would have long-term consequences. Although the Shah consolidated his power in the short term and ruled the country in a full authoritarian manner, it would question the legitimacy of the Shah's regime for decades to come and fuel anti-Western sentiments that would later contribute to the 1979 revolution with the partition of both nationalist and conservative segments of the society as well as leftists/socialists and religious opposition.[40]

While Turkey-Iran relations, which had been cut off from 1941 when Iran was occupied by the Allies until the end of 1947, generally progressed without any serious crises and without turning existing problems into conflicts in the post-WWII period, a little-known "ethnic" problem came to the agenda for a short time in the new period. It was Ankara's reaction to the pressure exerted by the British and the Iranian state under its control on the Qashqai Turks, who lived in the southern part of Iran towards the Gulf, centered in Shiraz, on the grounds that they had cooperated with the Germans during the war. Since the issue of "Turks abroad" had not been a priority in Turkish foreign policy since the beginning of the Republican era, this move under war conditions was important in the 1940s, but this agenda item also disappeared when the Germans lost the war and withdrew completely from the region. However, Turkey did not show any reaction to the abolition of the autonomous Turkish republic centered in Tabriz, which

[40] One of the most organized groups that supported the 1979 Revolution was the National Front and its various components, which continued Mossadegh's political legacy. Khomeini's inner circle also initially included politicians who were Mossadegh's political heirs. The first prime minister of the transitional government appointed by Khomeini, Mahdi Bazargan, was an engineer manager whom Mossadegh personally sent to put the refinery in Abadan, which had been evacuated by the British in 1951, into operation. Ibrahim Yazdi, who served as deputy prime minister and foreign minister in the transitional government, headed a small nationalist party, The Freedom Movement of Iran (*Nahzat-e Azade-ye Iran*), that continued Mossadegh's political legacy. Another Mossadegh admirer, Abolhasan Ban-Sadr, was elected to the presidency through Khomeini's personal guidance (Kinzer, 2008, p. 197).

was established by the Soviets during the occupation of Iran, by the Shah after the war (Akdevelioğlu & Kürkçüoğlu, 2001, s. 648-649). Therefore, the sensitivity towards the Qashgais during the war and the different attitude towards the Azerbaijani Turks after the war were contradictory.

While relations between the two countries, which adopted a stance close to the Western Bloc after the war, were positive, Turkey was dissatisfied with the nationalization of oil and the strengthening of the anti-Western nationalist movement during Mossadegh's premiership. Turkey, which was also concerned about the strengthening of the pro-Marxist Tudeh Party in Iran in the 1950s, was concerned that the Mossadegh government would create chaos in Iran and turn into a Moscow-controlled regime. Therefore, during the 1951-53 period when Mossadegh overshadowed the Shah and became the sole power in Iran, Turkish-Iranian relations entered a temporary crisis, and Turkey even supported Britain, which imposed an embargo on Mossadegh's Iran, and was harshly criticized by nationalist and anti-imperialist circles in Iran for this.

During the Mossadegh era, Turkish politicians were concerned that Iran would drift along the same lines as Egypt after the 1952 coup and leave the Western Bloc, and they conducted active diplomacy to prevent this unexpected move. However, the political crisis between Mossadegh and Ayatollah Kashani and the possibility of the communist movement gaining strength with the “third-way” rhetoric brought Turkey, which had just joined NATO, closer to British (and the US, which had changed after 1952) politics (Özkan, 2024). After Mossadegh was overthrown by a coup in August 1953, relations quickly found their own course in an anti-Soviet and pro-US direction. Even a rapprochement environment emerged with the Shah, who had regained his throne, leading to the signing of the 1955 Baghdad Pact.

During the pre-Cold War period (with a short exception and cautious period of Mossadegh government), Turkish-Iranian relations were shaped under the influence of parameters such as historical ties, geopolitical interests and common concerns about regional security. Both countries lacked the military and economic means to become regional superpowers, and in this context, they witnessed the emergence of two global superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union, and their influence on the international system, and had to take positions according to their competition in regional policies.

For both countries, which were defeated and occupied by their powerful Russian neighbors in the north during the weakening and disintegration of their imperial pasts, the rapid Soviet

influence in the region and international politics was a concern. Likewise, the Soviets' pattern of establishing and support for separatist autonomous republics in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan during WWII (Ansari, 2012, s. 119-124) was a common challenge for Ankara and Tehran. Likewise, in the post-war environment, Turkish diplomats and politicians' perception of similar threats from the Soviets and the perception that the USSR demanded territorial concessions from Ankara also fed these risks and threats (Deringil, 1994, s. 259-266).

These historical and geopolitical realities led both Turkey and Iran to become key recipients of the US's generous economic and military aid, and both countries preferred to participate in the Western Bloc. The Truman Doctrine, declared by the US in 1947, also revealed Washington's commitment to containing Soviet expansionism (Sever, 1998). In the regional cooperation atmosphere created by the Sadabad Pact in the late 1930s,[41] Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan came together with Britain in 1955 and signed the Baghdad Pact, further solidifying this alignment (Akdevelioğlu & Kürkçüoğlu, 2001, s. 651-652).[42] This pact aimed to establish regional defense against the perceived threat and aggressive foreign policy from the Soviets, but some circles in the region described this step Western imperialism and evaluated all similar developments from this perspective.

2. 5. 3. Authoritarian Rule of Muhammad Reza Shah and the Emergence of 1979 Revolution

The culmination of the nationalist revival in post - World War II, the Mossadegh coup (1951-53), both unsettled former imperial powers such as Britain and weakened Mohammad Reza, who had been enthroned by the British-Soviet duo in 1941. The 1953 Ajax Operation, which led to the overthrow of nationalist Prime Minister Mossadegh, marked the beginning of a controversial period in modern Iranian history. This coup also dealt a blow to the Shah's popular legitimacy and prestige in terms of pursuing an independent foreign policy, and in fact, the opposition would frequently use the theme of the Shah's lack of legitimacy and his accession to the throne with foreign support in the process leading up to the 1979 Revolution. With this

[41] Contrary to what its name suggests, this pact was not a military alliance, but a treaty of neutrality and non-aggression.
[42] When Iraq withdrew from the Baghdad Pact following the coup in Iraq in July 1958, the name of the Pact was changed to CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) on 18 August 1959 and its headquarters were moved from former Baghdad to Ankara (the capital of the most “active” member).

coup, the Shah's authority in Iran was re-established, Soviet influence in the country was also eliminated, and an unrivalled sphere of influence emerged for the United States, making Iran the most important ally of the United States in the region.

In domestic politics, the Shah's recapture of power resulted in a harsh crackdown on the opposition, and during this period, in coordination with the United States, nationalists, the socialist front, and the pro-Marxist Tudeh Party were particularly targeted (Cleveland, 2004, s. 292-293). This cleansing of the political sphere from ideological opposition and the resulting political vacuum created a new space for Islamist forces and groups to organize and grow stronger at the grassroots level. The importance of these ideological purges in the process leading up to the 1979 Revolution can also be seen in the political orientations of the masses filling the streets. While the left, liberal and nationalist opposition suffered heavy losses and were eliminated from the political scene during this period, the main reason why religious circles in Iran were not so severely pruned was largely because of the long history of clerical quietism and passive cooperation with the state (Mahdavi M. , The Rise of Khomeinism: Problematizing the Politics of Resistance in Pre-Revolutionary Iran, 2014, s. 52-53).

A similar purge to that carried out by the Shah regime with the US support in Iran after the 1953 Coup and the preparation of the political stage for religious/conservative forces was also witnessed in Turkey after the 1980 Coup, and conservative politics gained strength and ground in society during the post-Coup period when the nationalist and left/socialist camps were purged.

Following the 1953 coup, the Shah embarked on a campaign to consolidate his power, primarily by mobilizing the secret police, SAVAK, and the military. In stark contrast to the relative freedoms of the period before 1951, the Shah's authoritarian rule allowed limited political freedoms and focused on modernization from above. The Shah positioned himself as a bulwark against communism in the region, forming a close alliance with the United States and receiving significant American military and economic aid (Mahdavi M. , The Rise of Khomeinism: Problematizing the Politics of Resistance in Pre-Revolutionary Iran, 2014, s. 53). This alliance was part of a broader US strategy aimed at containing Soviet influence in the Middle East. However, the Shah's harsh and uncompromising authoritarian rule alienated large segments of Iranian society, including workers, intellectuals, scholars, etc. Again, during this period, the suppression of nationalist and socialist/Marxist movements that had openly carried out opposition activities through legal parties and various platforms in previous years was

actively strengthened, and the role of religious leaders and clerics, who had become the primary opposition to the Shah's regime, was significantly strengthened

In the early 1960s, the Shah launched a series of reforms aimed at modernizing Iran's economy and society, known as the White Revolution. These reforms included land redistribution, literacy campaigns, women's suffrage and political participation. These measures aimed to limit the power of the traditional landowning elite and create a more equitable society, but also frequently disregarded local customs, traditions and popular patterns (Kamrava, 2014, s. 154). The White Revolution also sought to undermine religious establishments, who saw such reform attempts as a threat to both their traditional authority over the masses and to the Islamic values.

By the 1970s, although the White Revolution had produced limited economic development and modernization, it failed to address widespread corruption, inequality and political repression. The reforms abolished both the traditional religious scholars (*ulama*) and the rural population, further fueling opposition to the Shah's regime (Mahdavi M. , The Rise of Khomeinism: Problematizing the Politics of Resistance in Pre-Revolutionary Iran, 2014, s. 51). Add to this the inflationary pressures created by the 1973 oil crisis and the masses of poor crowding the outskirts of cities, existing values based on Iranian sociology was significantly disrupted, and traditional structures and institutions were eroded and could not be replaced.

The path to the 1979 Revolution was actually paved by decades of political repression, economic inequality and social discontent. The Shah's reliance on the United States and his perceived subservience to the Western interests both domestically and internationally made him a target of nationalist, socialist and religious criticism; in other words, the Shah managed to unite all segments of society against his own authoritarian regime. Ayatollah Khomeini, a cleric who was rapidly gaining power from the early 1960s, began to gain prestige in society by openly opposing the Shah, but the political environment was not yet available for a revolution. Exiled abroad in 1964, Khomeini formulated a system he called *Hukumat-i Islami* (Islamic government) from the early 1970s onwards based on his famous thesis on the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*, theorizing both concepts on religious foundations within Shiite political philosophy (Rahimi, 2014, s. 297).

Khomeini's exile to Turkey in 1964 for about a year, then to Najaf (Iraq) for 13 years, did not diminish his popular support. On the contrary, Khomeini's message and anti-Shah political statements smuggled into Iran, inspiring a revolutionary movement. There was now a system

of government embraced by Iranian religious/conservatives as a concrete alternative to the Shah's secular authoritarianism, and this alternative would gain strength over time and dominate the streets, leading to the Shah's departure from the country in January 1979 (Zibakalam, 2014, s. 257). Over time, the Shah's regime, despite its entire military, intelligence and economic power, became increasingly isolated, and a coalition of opposition groups, including religious leaders, students, workers and intellectuals, rose up to overthrow the authoritarian regime. All these social tensions and polarization, and divisions, coalesced into a groundswell, resulting in the establishment of an Islamic Republic under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini (Mahdavi M. , The Rise of Khomeinism: Problematizing the Politics of Resistance in Pre-Revolutionary Iran, 2014, s. 67).

Ayatollah Khomeini's brief but significant exile in Bursa in the early 1960s also constitutes an interesting period in terms of Turkish-Iranian relations under the conditions of the Cold War. Accused by the Shah's regime of organizing political opposition among the *ulama* and madrasah students in Qum, and previously arrested and released, Khomeini was arrested in the fall of 1964 and exiled abroad this time (Azimi, 2014, s. 36-41). This was the first time Khomeini had spent such a long time in a Sunni country and among a Sunni community during this exile, which lasted approximately 11 months. With the joint coordination of the Turkish and Iranian intelligence services, Khomeini was hosted by a Turkish intelligence officer at his home, and the people of Bursa and religious circles showed him kindness. Turkish authorities, both out of secular concerns and in order not to scare neighboring Iran, kept Khomeini's activities under tight control and prevented him from appearing in public wearing religious attire, and made efforts to prevent him from engaging in open political activities (Moin, 1999, s. 129-139).[43]

While Khomeini was in Turkey, his relations with his followers and political circles in Iran had diminished considerably, but towards the end of 1965, Turkey and Iran came to an agreement and ended his exile in Turkey; thereupon, Khomeini went to Najaf, where he increased his political activities even more and was able to organize the great revolution of 1979 through his students and followers who visited him by road through the Iraq-Iran border (Rahimi, 2014, s. 297-298). Khomeini's exile in Turkey was also an important period in terms of the formation of the ideas of this influential revolutionary, who directly shaped the half-

[43] The section in Baqer Moin's biography of Khomeini stands out as one of the most comprehensive accounts of the Ayatollah's life in exile in Turkey. For a detailed book review of this book and Khomeini's exile in Bursa by the author of this dissertation, see: Koç, Mehmet Akif. (2019) "Son Devrimci Ayetullah Humeyni". Turkish Journal of Shiite Studies 1/1 (June 2019), 164-175. (Koç M. A., Son Devrimci Ayetullah Humeyni, 2019)
Also, for a video recording of a program made by the author of this dissertation about Ayatollah Khomeini's exile in Bursa, see: (Bursa Tahtakale Buluşmaları: Mehmet Akif Koç - Humeyni'nin Bursa Sürgünü, 2023)

century period after 1979 with his ideas and theory, and with his students and followers, about the neighboring country Turkey and the Sunnis. In the context of Khomeini's leadership characteristics, the positive impressions he had during this exile period and the relatively soft official control and public favor shown to him played an important role in the fact that his view of secular Turkey after the 1979 Revolution was not as harsh as that of the Arab monarchies and nationalist regimes.

The increasingly important role of religious scholars and *ulama* in Iranian politics was largely a direct consequence of the suppression on the secular nationalist and left/socialist segments since 1953 coup. The clerics had had a religious and political influence on Iranian society for centuries and were already a significant force capable of mobilizing the masses, but under these political conditions, they had no difficulty in becoming the primary opposition to the Shah's regime (Azimi, 2014, s. 41-42). The religious establishment roundly condemned the White Revolution and modernization policies, but the wide social and economic changes struck a chord with many Iranians who were disillusioned with the clergy. However, the ability of the clerics to couch opposition in Islamic terms and their position as guardians of Islamic values against Western imperialism provided them with a potent ideological weapon—a one that was not available to secular movements (Kamrava, 2014, s. 154). This unique confluence of religious authority and opposition to alien influence allowed the religious leaders to speak so eloquently to a citizenry that desired both cultural identity and social justice.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Iran-US relations were characterized by close economic and military ties, but growing tensions in various areas. The Shah was heavily dependent on the US military support, receiving billions of dollars in military aid and technology. This form of relationship was driven by the Cold War dynamics and the active assistance policy of the US, which needed Iran against the Soviets (Mahdavi M. , The Rise of Khomeinism: Problematizing the Politics of Resistance in Pre-Revolutionary Iran, 2014, s. 52-53) and did not want to lose this ally in a Middle East surrounded by anti-American rhetoric and nationalism. However, this form of relationship also had some costs for the US, especially the Shah's harsh and heavy repression against political dissent through SAVAK, making the regime in Iran increasingly fragile and eroding the US's influence in this country and the region, and this situation further alienated the Iranian public. As can be clearly seen from Khomeini's messages and declarations, by the end of the 1970s, the US-Iran relationship had become a major source of discontent, contributing to the revolutionary fervor that culminated in the 1979 revolution (Kamrava, 2014, s. 154-159).

During this authoritarian period of Muhammad Reza Shah after 1953, Turkish-Iranian relations were also largely shaped and determined by the axis of the Cold War conditions. Both countries were under the US security umbrella and could provide internal and external security thanks to this alignment; Turkey was a NATO member, while Iran was a key ally of the US in the Middle East (Akdevelioğlu & Kürkçüoğlu, 2001, s. 801). In this context, the superpower competition in the region posed similar risks and threats for both Turkey and Iran: Soviet expansionism in the northern borders and the rise of Soviet-allied governments in the region.

In this era, an important parameter in Turkish-Iranian relations, which was also fed by the geopolitical culture and historical baggage, was the aggressive policies of the northern neighbor, which showed its influence in this period in the form of historical Russian threat and Soviet expansionism. The great support given by the Soviets to the Middle Eastern countries which were military land forces such as Iraq, Syria and Egypt, and also their policy of sometimes being close to Kurdish separatism, increased the concerns in Ankara and Tehran. During this period, Turkey and Iran (and to some extent Israel) were together under the US security umbrella against the strengthening of the Soviet-supported Arab nationalism in the region.

While Turkish-Iranian relations were generally positive during the last period of the Cold War, some negative points occasionally caused tensions in relations. Akdevelioğlu & Kürkçüoğlu evaluate these dynamics from the perspective of Turkish foreign policy as follows (Akdevelioğlu & Kürkçüoğlu, 2001, s. 801-804):

a) While Turkey's approach to Arab countries was progressing positively in the 1960s, Iran's relations with Iraq deteriorated, especially after the 1958 military coup. Muhammad Reza Shah openly supported the Iraqi Kurds' desire to establish an autonomous structure in this new equation. Although Turkey expressed its discomfort with this to the Shah on various occasions, Iran continued to use the Kurdish card against Iraq (and indirectly Turkey) from time to time due to geopolitical concerns. During this period, high-level visits were made frequently; Turkish President Cevdet Sunay went to Iran in 1966, and Prime Minister Demirel in 1967. The Shah came to Turkey in 1973, when the Northern Iraq problem was at its most heated, and President Korutürk visited Iran in 1975. The Algiers Agreement of 1975 played an important role in improving not only Iraq-Iran relations but also Turkey-Iran relations.

b) From the beginning of the 1960s onwards, the Shah's main goal in the region was to undertake the regional gendarmerie under the US security umbrella, and with the economic

prosperity he achieved after the 1973 oil crisis, he took steps towards this, especially in the Gulf region. The spring atmosphere in relations after the Algiers Agreement of 1975 was temporary, and while there were problems in Turkey-US relations in the process leading up to the 1979 Revolution, Iran-US relations became even closer. However, the exact opposite of this pattern would be experienced in relations with the US in the 1980s.

c) The Baghdad Pact was transformed into CENTO after Iraq seceded following the 1958 coup and its center was moved to Ankara. However, the Shah thought that Turkey was focusing on NATO in the early 1960s and that it was not giving enough importance to CENTO and was weakening the pact's military wing. However, when both Turkey and Iran started to develop economic relations with the Soviets in the second half of the 1960s, the issue of the military deterrent of CENTO fell off the agenda and the economic and cultural dimensions of the organization began to come to the fore.

d) In the positive atmosphere that prevailed in Turkey after the 1960 military coup, the Shah's White Revolution practices in Iran and his use of violence against the opposition (Khomeini was also in exile in Turkey during this period) caused a reaction in the Turkish public opinion against Iran's authoritarianism and a kind of democracy-monarchy confrontation emerged. The Shah's policy of violence lies behind the sympathy and positive perception of almost everyone in Turkey towards the 1979 Revolution (especially during its first months).

e) The three CENTO member states, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, established the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) organization in Istanbul in July 1964, with its headquarter in Tehran. The aim of the new organization was to create an economic and cultural structure that would not need countries outside the region upon Pakistan's request. This structure was replaced by ECO in 1985 and its center remained in Tehran. However, neither RCD nor ECO could provide the expected economic revival. Especially after the 1973 Oil Crisis, Turkey's trade deficit with Iran increased due to its oil imports, and Turkey could not get the share it wanted from Iran's large tenders and investments abroad. The public and politicians in Turkey interpreted this as "Turkey-Iran friendship remaining in words and not reflected in economic relations" and this criticism increased rapidly.

2.6. Conclusion: Interpretation of the Historical Background of Turkey-Iran Relations according to Neo-Classical Realist Theory

The period between the 16th and 19th centuries, (when the Safavids, Nader Shah and the Kajars were in power in Iran), which saw the institutionalization of Ottoman-Iranian relations, provides a foundational context for understanding the main elements of conflict and cooperation in contemporary Turkish-Iranian relations. Many analyzes interpret the generally tense and problematic relationship through the lens of Sunni-Shiite identities or the dichotomy between Turkish and Iranian nationalities. Such a perspective, however, is one-dimensional, limited and insufficient to grasp the multi-dimensional and multifaceted aspects of the relationship.

While sectarian differences appear to have been the primary influence in the run-up to the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514 and in the decades that followed, the underpinnings of the relationship reveal a range of distinct and complex dynamics. This suggests that the issues go beyond mere sectarian discord. A comprehensive analysis of the internal dynamics on both the Ottoman and Iranian fronts, the regional and international situations, and the positions of the neighboring states and alliances is therefore critical. The conflicting political and economic interests of these two nations (including the subsequent Nader Shah era and the Kajar rule) in regions such as Anatolia, the Caucasus, Azerbaijan, and Iraq, as well as their ambitions for mutual domination, are intertwined with the prevailing sectarian and ideological disputes (Küpeli, 2014, s. 33).

In this context, it is worth noting that the Safavids, who were vying with the Ottomans for control of the Turkoman and Qizilbash tribes in Anatolia at the beginning of the 16th century, simultaneously sought friendly relations with the Mamluks, another Sunni state in the region. They sought an alliance against the Ottomans while fighting the Uzbeks for supremacy in the eastern Khorasan region, knowing that they could not wage war against three formidable (and Sunni) neighbors at the same time. Conversely, the Ottoman approach to the Safavids could be described as “cautious control”.

Initially, during the reign of Bayazid II, the Ottomans preferred a policy of remote monitoring of Shah Ismail and his activities, largely influenced by the conflict on the European front. However, this cautious surveillance escalated into intense combat under Selim I. The Battle of Chaldiran in 1514 not only consolidated Ottoman control over eastern and south-eastern Anatolia, but also catapulted the Ottomans into regional prominence, thereby preventing any potential alliance between the Safavids and the Mamluks. Concurrently, Shah Ismail's

attempts to secure European allies (notably the Pope, Poland and Muscovy) against the Ottomans bore no fruit. On the other hand, there are several historical narratives and documents reflecting that the Western powers provoked the Iranian Shahs to wage war against the Ottomans in order to neutralize the Ottoman threat East-Central Europe and stop their rapid expansion.

During the reign of the Safavid Shah Tahmasb, the Ottoman geopolitical objective in the region was to fortify Anatolia against Safavid incursions and to demarcate the Euphrates River in Iraq as the boundary with the Safavids. The death of Shah Ismail and the subsequent period of transition on the Iranian throne, characterized by inexperience, also contributed to these campaigns. (It will be noted later that at certain times, the Ottomans adhered to a principle of pact fidelity to refrain from interfering in Iran during these transitional periods).

The wars and conflicts, particularly in the early decades of the Safavid rule, underlined to the Ottomans the impossibility of destroying the Safavid state and the need to keep the Alawi-Shiite Turkoman population of Anatolia under control. Meanwhile, the Safavids demonstrated their perpetual confrontation with the Ottomans in their quest for regional influence but acknowledged their inability to exercise political and military control over Anatolia. Conversely, wars and territorial shifts continued in the Caucasus and the Iraqi regions for centuries to come.

On the other hand, Iranian historian Hasani, who studies the records and narratives of the period (15^{th} – 18^{th} centuries), sheds light on the reasons for the turmoil in Ottoman-Iranian relationship based on Iranian resources as follows: (i) covetous intentions of the outsiders (in this context, the Ottomans) towards Iran; (ii) internal turmoil and structural issues within Iran; (iii) acts of defiance and dissent from states, emirates, and tribes under Iran's dominion; (iv) rebellions by Iranian Qizilbash emirs and government officials who pledged their loyalty to Anatolia; (v) Western influence on decision-making processes; (vi) inner conflicts within the Ottoman realm; (vii) divine intervention (*takdir va masheat-e elahi*[44]) (Hasani, 2002, s. 26-27).

[44] The use of concepts such as "divine intervention (*takdir-i elahi*)" to explain social calamities, including wars, expulsions, displacements, migrations, and mass killings, is a common method employed by Muslim historians and chroniclers of yesteryears. This method also serves as a means of avoiding discussion of the shortcomings and failures of the authorities. For a notable example (Safavid court official and secretary during the reign of Shah Abbas I, Iskandar Beg Munshi) of how the deterioration and losses incurred against the Ottomans, especially after the Battle of Chaldiran, are depicted in the Safavid chronicles, see: Iskandar Beg Munshī (1629), Tarikh-e Alam-ara-ye Abbasi, Esfahan.

It is important to understand that the mechanics of the conflict are not one-sided, as both parties employ similar tactics. For instance, just as the Iranians sheltered tribal or local leaders and dynastic members who were in conflict with the Ottoman state, the Ottomans also reciprocated by offering shelter and asylum to those fleeing Iran and protecting them from Iranian retaliation. This was not just a feature of the Safavid era, but continued in the centuries that followed, driven by regional geopolitics and power rivalries rather than sectarian or ideological concerns.

During the Safavid period, a number of political, military, economic, and geopolitical factors shaped the relations between the Ottoman Empire and Iran. These dynamics continued to profoundly influence the bilateral relations during the reigns of Nader Shah (1736-1747) and the Kajar Dynasty (1796-1925). While the borders established by the Treaty of Zohab (Qasr-e Shirin) of 1639 were generally maintained, conflicts between the Ottoman and Kajar states persisted, particularly over control of Azerbaijan, the Caucasus, and the Kurdish tribes in Iraq. Complicating matters were the pilgrimage sites in the Shiite holy cities of Iraq, which were under Ottoman rule, and the challenges posed by the Shiite worshippers visiting these sites.

On the other hand, the religious/sectarian and political links between the Turkoman Qizilbash tribes in Anatolia and the Iranian state, which had created an existential crisis between the two empires during the Safavid period, gradually weakened by the end of the 17th century and these ties were no longer perceived as a significant security threat on the part of the Ottomans.

Both the Ottoman and Kajar states experienced periods of decline and disintegration, yet they were exhausted empires facing the reality of fragmentation in the early 20th century. The First World War further exacerbated their common challenges and the joint defeat at the hands of the Western powers, particularly Britain and Russia. This acceleration of disintegration led to the emergence of two new nation-states in Iran and Turkey at the end of the first quarter of the 20th century.

The period of General Reza Shah, who assumed to the throne in 1925 after ending the Kajar dynasty, was marked by gestures of rapprochement due to his personal friendship with Mustafa Kemal Pasha and the efforts of the leaders of both countries to balance the French-British hegemony in the region. These relations, which were culminated with Reza Shah's visit to Turkey in 1934, were so close that Kemal Pasha asked Reza Khan not to crown as Shah in 1925 and to support republicanism in the region. The Sadabad Pact, signed in the 1930s and including

Turkey and Iran as well as Afghanistan and Iraq, was an important indicator of the two countries' approach to regional security issues. However, relations were not completely smooth and perfect, and the border problems in the 1930s and the rebellions of the Kurdish tribes on both sides of the border occasionally brought the two countries face to face, but these were resolved in a way that did not lead to conflict.

This period is recorded in Turkish-Iranian relations as the years when the dynamics of sectarian conflicts from the Safavids and geopolitical competition elements in the region were relegated to the lower ranks of the agenda, secular nation-states were established on both sides, power was consolidated domestically and regional cooperation steps were taken against the imperial influence of foreigners in the region. However, the irredentist tendencies and war atmosphere gaining momentum in Europe during the late 1930s were the footsteps of the approaching war in the Middle East as well. Although Turkey managed to stay out of the war, Iran was once again invaded by the Russians from the north and the British from the south, just like 25 years ago. In the meantime, Reza Shah, who had become close to Nazi Germany, was dethroned and Soviet-British spheres of influence were declared in the country; but this situation would be temporary and a completely different international system would emerge after the war, and the regional balance and bilateral relations would also be affected by this bipolar system.

Post-WWII Turkish-Iranian relations have generally been smooth sailing, as regional security concerns, such as the Baghdad Pact of 1955, have forced both countries to act together. In addition to the reminders of Soviet expansionism and the Russian invasions of the 19th and early 20th centuries, which were still vivid in the collective memories of both countries, the drive to act together against Kurdish separatism has also been decisive in bilateral relations. In addition, Turkey and Iran, which have come under the security umbrella of the US, have maintained a relatively problem-free neighborly relationship in line with US regional policies, except for brief periods when they were able to act autonomously in the region; such as Mossadegh era and nationalization during 1951-53 period and Muhammad Reza Shah’s temporary support to Iraqi Kurds’ autonomy demand before 1975 Algiers Treaty.

During the Cold War years, when Soviet-backed Arab nationalism (in its both Nasserist and Baathist versions) was on the rise and non-Arab countries acted together with the US, Turkey and Iran managed to act in cooperation and coordination as secular nation-states. As an interesting example of close relations during this period, when Ayatollah Khomeini, who had

emerged as an important religious/political figure in Qom during the early 1960s with his harsh criticism and opposition against the Shah regime, was arrested and a decision was made to exile him abroad, the Muhammad Reza Shah administration chose Turkey, with which the intelligence services maintained close relations, as the place of exile. Khomeini, who lived in exile in Bursa for about eleven months, was later exiled to Najaf at the end of 1965 and managed to organize the revolution in Iran in this holy city of Shia where he stayed for thirteen years through his students, followers and agenda-setting messages and statements.

Finally, the Shah, who had controlled domestic politics with a complete authoritarian rule since 1953 coup, acted completely dependent on the US in foreign policy during this quarter century, alienated nationalists, left/socialist structures and religious institutions and leaders from himself and when these social divisions were combined with economic crises, the 1979 Revolution appeared. Post-revolutionary Iran would follow a very different domestic and foreign policy line than before; under the guidance of Ayatollah Khomeini and his close disciple and appointed president Ayatollah Khamenei (during 1982-89 period), relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey would return to their pre-Pahlavi identity/sect based structure to some extent; regional rivalry and conflict dynamics that were shelved during the Cold War would revive and become the main dynamics of relations especially after 2002. And finally, as observed during the Syrian Civil War between 2011-24, these parameters would develop within a full-fledged conflict-competition-hostility dynamic.

CHAPTER – III

FOREIGN POLICY OF A REVOLUTIONARY STATE: ISLAMIC IRAN AND REGIONAL/INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

3.1. Introduction

Following the 1979 Revolution, Iran underwent a profound transformation in its regional standing and global engagement, reflecting a remarkable departure from its pre-1979 political position. It is important to note that this statement does not suggest an absolute overhaul of Iran's political, military, strategic, and geopolitical balance, nor does it imply a completely divergent trajectory. Undoubtedly, there is a natural continuity with the Kajar and Pahlavi eras in terms of the opportunities and threats posed by Iran's geopolitical location and certain identifiable political, military, and security priorities.

The socio-economic events of 1978-79 were not simply a transition from one monarchy to another, as could happen in any country. Rather, it marked a pivotal moment where Islamist politics took direct control of the religious authority that had long influenced and significantly controlled Iranian society and politics, now embodied in the theo-political system of *Velayat-e Faqih*."

It is clear that Iran, under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, has taken a completely different path in domestic and foreign policy by a deep transforming even within the Shiite tradition. Both the consolidation of power in domestic politics, a spiritual orientation in which religious discourse and religious leadership are positioned at the center and the reorganization of state-society relations on this basis; and the dominance of an Islamist discourse in foreign policy under the motto of "neither East nor West" and the establishment of a completely rejectionist pattern have drawn the Islamic Republic's own path. The extraordinary atmosphere and mobilization created by the Iran-Iraq war allowed the revolution to take root even more and to liquidate different opposing segments by becoming Islamized. Although the Islamic Republic has shaped its domestic and foreign policy in a completely different framework, there

is also a significant degree of continuity in the geopolitical culture and the basic nature of state-society relations inherited from the Safavids, Kajars and Pahlavis (Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah), geopolitical and ideological rivalry with main regional powers and perceived threats from regional and international environments.

In this chapter, the elements of continuity and change in Iran's domestic and foreign policy before and after the 1979 Revolution will be discussed, and the basic trends in Iran's foreign policy and threats and responses will be examined from a Neo-Classical realist perspective.

3.2. Main Features of Iranian Foreign Policy before the 1979 Revolution

Examining Iran's foreign policy prior to the 1979 Revolution and highlighting its directional axes of orientation with fundamental parameters is critical to understanding the ruptures and profound changes that occurred during the Revolutionary era. In this regard, it would be fruitful to examine the key parameters of the foreign policy orientation during the interwar and the Cold War periods under the Pahlavi regime, as well as the domestic factors that contributed to them.

In 1925, Reza Khan [later will be "Shah" following his coronation in 1926] seized power, overthrowing the 130-year-old Kajar monarchy and taking the throne in Tehran. He inherited a geographically unified Iran, yet one riven by ethnic, religious, and sectarian divisions, with a noticeable absence of a strong state structure and a powerful army. This period unfolded against the backdrop of heightened colonialism and the escalation of inter-state rivalries, particularly in the aftermath of World War I.[45]

After becoming the Shah of Iran in 1925, Reza Pahlavi faced intricate struggles and conflicting interests. Eager to modernize the Iran he inherited from the Kajars, Reza Shah adopted a leadership style characterized by authoritarian practices that, while effective in quelling internal unrest, also generated considerable resistance. Despite the internal challenges, Reza Pahlavi successfully navigated through them and sought to bring Iran onto the global stage. He began to formulate foreign policy principles based on the country's strategic positioning.

[45] For a detailed analysis of World War I battles and Iran's position during the war, see: Atabaki, Touraj (2006), *Iran and the First World War: Battleground of the Great Powers*, London: I.B. Tauris.

a) An authoritarian approach in domestic affairs and a quest for a fresh direction in foreign policy

During the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi from 1925 to 1941, Iran embarked on an ambitious path of modernization and secularization. The primary objective of Reza Shah's rule was to reduce foreign influence and increase Iran's independence. This era witnessed a comprehensive transformation marked by significant developments in infrastructure. Reza Shah implemented extensive administrative reforms aimed at streamlining and modernizing the government structure. The emergence of the more centralized state is one of the interesting possible outcomes, with the consolidation of authority and governance. The entire period thus becomes an era where Iran was purposely being brought into the modern era through the application of progressive policies and initiatives aimed at halting external influence and strengthening the internal capabilities of the country.

b) The attempt to establish a balance between the former imperialist occupiers (the Soviet Union and the Western powers)

During World War I, Iran was militarily occupied by both Britain and Tsarist Russia. By 1918, Russia's withdrawal in the wake of to the Bolshevik Revolution left the country largely under the British influence. In particular, as the Kajar dynasty faced collapse and lost its sovereignty, Britain emerged as the dominant (or preponderant) power, even controlling the Cossack Brigade, the most formidable military unit in Iran.

One important event that happened during this period was the signing of the Iran-Britain Agreement in Tehran on 9 August 1919. The effects of this treaty extended into Iran's internal policies and foreign orientation, far beyond the fall of the Kajars and the rise of Reza Khan (later Shah). With this treaty, the British gained considerable influence in Iran while concurrently occupying Istanbul. (Ivanov, 2021, s. 333-334).

With the end of the Civil War in 1920, the new Soviet government was trying to lay claims to Iran as an area that had previously come under its occupation and regenerate restore its influence, albeit not at the preferred magnitude that she had in mind-Britain. Yet, world politics notwithstanding, the interwar years and the Reza Shah period (1925-1941) are characterized by a foreign policy that was relatively balanced on paper but in practice well aligned to Britain and European powers. Strategic choices made in Iran during this period represented a very complex situation of that country in the international arena and the pressure of great powers in formulating its foreign policy.

As Reza Shah consolidated authoritarian rule and began sweeping social reforms in the 1930s, he also embarked on a more assertive foreign policy. An important divergence in that period was that the balance of the West against the Soviet Russia to the north that had been traditionally experienced was suddenly abandoned in contrast to the policy of the 1920s. Thus, the trade treaty with the Soviet Union, which constituted 38% of Iran's foreign trade at that time was left aside with this change (Ivanov, 2021, s. 368). This represented a shift in the foreign policy landscape significantly as the Soviets were no longer to be treated as a balancing factor.

The geopolitical position of Iran during this period can be seen through the Sadabad Pact agreement hosted by Reza Shah in Tehran in 1937. The pact unified Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Afghanistan in a security zone strategically encircling the Soviet Union. The presence of representatives from the US and the UK at the signing ceremony, and their coordinated diplomatic preparations (Mahdavi A. R., 2009, s. 392-393), underlined the determination to contain the Soviet Union and indicated a geopolitical alignment with the major Western powers.[46]

c) Seeking a trilateral balance and German factor during the Second World War

Another significant feature of Iranian foreign policy throughout the Reza Shah period was some deliberate measures towards rapprochement with Nazi Germany. This represented a trend pursued as a regional approach including Turkey, which moved towards closeness with Germany, keeping its balance with respect to both the Soviets and the European great powers. Particularly, influences of Germany upon Iran from political, military, and economic aspects began to demonstrate rapid ascendancy during this period of the 1930s (Türkay & Açıkses, 2021).

For instance, in the period of 1937-38, when the Soviet Union led Iran's foreign trade, Germany overtook Britain to become Iran's second-largest trading partner with a 27% share. In the following years, German economic influence continued to surge, reaching 41.5% in 1939 and peaking at 45.5% in 1940-41, securing the top position. Germany complemented its economic influence with political, military, and cultural initiatives aimed at establishing Iran as a crucial logistics base in the region during the war (Ivanov, 2021, s. 369)

[46] Moazami describes the importance of Iran to Britain during this period as "British policy in Iran was focused on encircling the Bolshevik expansion in the East" and describes such regional and international cooperation pacts that brought countries like Iran together as "reliance upon the buffer states." (Moazami, 2013, s. 41).

However, such a risky maneuver on the part of Reza Shah with the Nazis resulted in adverse consequences in the tensions generated by the war. After the first Allied attack, on 15 September 1941, Reza Shah was forced to step down just three weeks later, making way for his twenty-year-old son and heir apparent, Prince Muhammad Reza. Then Reza Shah was then sent into exile in British-controlled Mauritius and South Africa, where he remained until his death in 1944 (Abrahamian, Tarikh-e İran-e Modern, 2010, s. 121-122). This marked the beginning of a period, starting from 1941 when Muhammad Reza assumed the throne, until the 1979 Revolution, in which every development contributed to the strengthening of Western influence in Iran –initially British and later, more permanently, American.

d) Post-war balancing and quick alignment with Western powers

In the immediate post-World War II situation of the 1940s, Iran was placed in a complicated geopolitics emerging as a consequence of war on political and economic fronts. While exposing a post-war balancing act, Tehran shall sieve its way through the evolving dynamics of the international system and self-safeguard against the threats of major powers, specifically from the United States, and two long-term occupying states –Britain and Russia (Soviet Union).

The Iranian post-war strategy included an important undertaking: trying to realign relations with the Allied powers, particularly modifying American-British-Soviet relations that had occupied the country during the war. After the war, Iran wanted to assert its independence and maintain a difficult balance between the competing interests of the United States and the Soviet Union. The endeavor required skillful diplomacy to enforce the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iranian territory.

The Tehran Conference of 1943 became fundamental to shaping Iran's approach after the war. The conference concerned Iran's concerns and interests; therefore, it included leaders from the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom. The resultant Tehran Declaration began a foundation reaffirming Iran's territorial integrity and declared its ability to maintain neutrality in the global conflict. This diplomatic success, to some extent, gave Iran some leeway in conducting relations with the major powers.[47]

Nevertheless, the Tehran Declaration certainly put great pressure on Iran to maintain this delicate balance, and the soon-to-follow tensions were due to the withdrawal of the Allied

[47] For a significant contemporary assessment of the Iranian foreign policy during the Second World War and the role of the Tehran Conference, see Hamzavi, A. H. (1944), Iran and the Tehran Conference, International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-) Vol. 20, No. 2 (Apr., 1944), pp. 192-203.

forces out of Iran after the war, followed by the Soviet unwillingness to exit from Iran. The process saw a climax with the Azerbaijan crisis of 1946 when those fully backed by the USSR attempted to set up an autonomous republic in northern Iran. Strategically speaking, Iran took its case to the UN and international pressure forced the Soviets to withdraw their backing for the separatists. Thus, Iran got an opportunity to reassert its power over the region (Mahdavi A. R., 2010, s. 116-118).

In sum, foiling the post-war national-political aspirations of the other major powers, Iran skillfully walked the tightrope of diplomacy between these powers to protect its own sovereignty while remaining neutral. The Tehran Declaration (1943) and the settling of the Azerbaijan crisis represented Iran's successful achievements in working the diplomacy of a burgeoning post-war world to ensure its independence against the irrigated landscape of power.

In the preliminary phase of the Muhammad Reza Pahlavi era (1941-1979), so, from 1941 until 1953, two major events became major influences on Iran's foreign and internal policy. First, the dissolution of the Azerbaijani and Mahabad People's Republics, which had been established within Iran by the Soviet Union influence after the last days of World War II was the beginning of Iran's new era of close relations with the West and the subsequent formation of alliances during the Cold War. The second crucial period was during the rule of Mohammad Mossadegh when nationalism awoke and the oil industry was nationalized. This period ended when Mossadegh was ousted from power through a coup that was primarily run by the US and the British through Operation Ajax.[48]

As a consequence of the elimination of the USSR-controlled republics by Tehran, the repression of nationalist movements, and the consolidation under the Shah of the power figure over parliament, it can thus be said that the US-British alliance was well-positioned as the key foreign policy determinants of Iran during that period. After this time the American influence would start rising unstoppably onto Iran's domestic and foreign affairs.

e) The Cold War context in the Middle East in the period after the Second World War

The Cold War Vista gave geopolitical context to the very heart of the Middle East in which Iran was strategically situated in the 1950s to the 1970s. Iran's location with such vast oil reserves was a prime area for the interest of the two superpowers in the Cold War-Iran had

[48] For a detailed analysis of Operation Ajax and the Anglo-American intervention/orchestration see: Kinzer, Stephen (2008), *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, New Jersey: John Wiley&Sons Inc.

therefore become the focus both for interest and intervention by the superpowers which would profoundly influence Iran's foreign policy and regional relations during this era.

The confrontation of the Western powers with the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry by Premier Mossadegh in the early 1950s was, of course, a strong concern for especially Britain and the United States. They saw this action, as well as political activities and agitation of Mossadegh, as a precursor to the impending Soviet influence in the country. Thus, in 1953, CIA and MI6 worked together to carry out Operation Ajax, which led to the fall of Mossadegh and the reinstatement of the pro-Western Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The incident showed the Cold War will strikingly intervene in the political landscape of Iran and the West have more claims to maintain Iran within its area of influence.[49]

Iran's foreign policy from the 1960s to the 1970s was largely synonymous with American foreign policy in that era. The Shah's regime was bent upon modernizing Iran and making it stronger through the White Revolution, a program of social, economic, and political reforms that neutered Soviet influence in favor of a robust, Western-oriented state. These reforms were largely aimed at undermining any internal communist opposition. U.S. military and economic aid, in the form of advanced weapons systems and support of Iran's nascent nuclear program, surely exemplified the famous Iran-U.S. relationship.

Iran's strategic role related to regional security further magnified the geopolitical significance of its oil supply. During the Arab-Israeli wars, especially in 1967 (Six-Day War) and 1973 (Yom Kippur War), oil as well as geopolitical position of Iran became critical. While Iran was officially neutral during these wars, it ensured that oil flowed from Iran to the west to counteract the damaging effects of Arab oil embargoes. This deepened Iran's relations with the western powers and increased Iran's leverage among regional states.[50]

The Iranian engagement in regional alliances indicated a Cold War dynamic. Iran was indeed a founding member of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), an initiative of the United States in 1955 intended to create a containment belt against Soviet expansion. Made up

[49] For an article that explores Mossadegh opposition to the Shah's administration, the nationalization of oil, and the British and US opposition to this move in the context of the Cold War and Iranian domestic politics, see: Koc, Mehmet Akif (2024), "Orta Doğu'da Soğuk Savaş ve İran'da Petrolün Millileştirilmesi", *Fokus+,* retrieved from https://www.fokusplus.com/dosya/orta-doguda-soguk-savas-ve-iranda-petrolun-millilestirilmesi (accessed on 23 June 2024). (Koç M. A., Orta Doğu'da Soğuk Savaş ve İran'da Petrolün Millileştirilmesi, 2024)

[50] For a detailed account of the discussions between American officials and Shah Pahlavi in the midst of the 1973-74 oil embargo and economic crisis as well as the regional political rivalry, see: Cooper, Andrew Scott (2011), *The Oil Kings: How the US, Iran, and Saudi Arabia Changed the Balance of Power in the Middle East*, London: Oneworld Publications, pp. 137-190.

of Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom, CENTO aimed to stop Soviet encroachment in the Middle East and South Asia. Whereas NATO was much more effective than CENTO, nevertheless, CENTO represented Iranian allegiance to the Western bloc.

Iran sought to bolster its hegemony in the Persian Gulf, sometimes with tacit backing from the United States. This was particularly evident during Iran's stance on the Dhofar Rebellion in Oman in the early 1970s. Forces were sent by Tehran against Marxist insurgents, thereby assisting the Omani government, and this was in keeping with the larger US strategy aimed at countering Soviet-backed efforts in the region. The intervention further cemented Iran's claim to regional leadership while also ensuring its role as the protector of Western interests in the Middle East (Alvandi, 2014, s. 36).

Most importantly, Iran and Iraq's ties during this time spoke of the realities in the Cold War. The former contentious ties were replaced by an agreement in 1975 known as the Algiers Agreement, between Iran and Iraq, an event made possible through US pressure, to stabilize the region, resolve border disputes, and contain Kurdish insurgencies that both countries viewed as future Soviet pawns.

While Iran was closely located and in dealings with the Soviet Union, that engagement was more cautious and tentative (Chubin, The Soviet Union and Iran, 1983). Iran was firmly in the camp of West but at the same time maintained diplomatic and economic links with Russia to balance its foreign policy goals and also leverage its geographical position. The Soviet Union was wary that extending US influence towards their southern borders would undermine Western alliances by having ties to the Russians. However, the major seeds of mutual distrust and conflicts of interest actually prevented closer cooperation between Tehran and Moscow. Their relationship had both ideological differences and geopolitical rivalries, but there was also pragmatic economics, like Soviet assistance in building infrastructure projects in Iran.

Iran's foreign policy from the 1950s to the 1970s was heavily determined by the Cold War context. Such was the strategic location of the country and such its resources that it attracted superpower competition, affecting its political decisions, regional interventions, and alliances. By siding with the West, especially with the USA, Iran did much to shape broader geopolitical patterns in the Middle East to contain Soviet influence and domination in a region whose master was heavily defined by conflicting Cold War interests while managing Moscow's relationship delicately so that it found a way out of the complex international sphere.

f) 1960s and beyond: establishment of direct and multilateral collaboration with the United States

The 1953 coup again saved the Pahlavi regime and preserved the monarchy; however, the impact of this coup on the Iranian people in the years to come was far-reaching and complex. The Shah, in Iranian opinion, became an invincible proxy of the US-British alliance, and the coup-sustaining military was perceived as an agency working for the interests of the West. Formerly viewed favorably by the Iranian public as a counterweight to British and Russian occupation and intervention through the pre-War years, the USA underwent a sea-change in perception to be considered a direct conspirator and interventionist.

The emergence of the clergy and Islamist politics constitutes one of the very important socio-political consequences. With the exclusion of left-wing and socialist elements, including the Tudeh Party, on account of the perceived Soviet threat and Western orientation, the influence of these forces was considerably reduced. Once again, the 1953 coup served to remove Mossadegh and his nationalist faction from political and bureaucratic life. Power cleansings and transformations created necessary conditions for Islamist politics to rise, with increasing influence of the clergy over Iranian society.

Abrahamian aptly notes that the 1953 coup played a key role in replacing nationalism, socialism, and liberalism with Islamic "fundamentalism." In this respect, the roots of the 1979 Revolution and its Islamic transformation can be traced back to the dense and multi-layered developments of the 1953 coup (Abrahamian, Tarikh-e İran-e Modern, 2010, s. 224).

In the 1960s and 1970s, Iran, under the leadership of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, pursued a policy of advancing ties with the United States, which signified a clear shift from previous policies and a tendency to align with a great power of the West. This cooperation with the United States went beyond bilateral cooperation and included regional and international multi-alliance channels for strengthening Iran's international position. One of such organizations to which Iran was admitted included CENTO (Central Treaty Organization), whereby the United States was a key player in these multilateral forums (Ivanov, 2021, s. 473-477).

The cooperation with the United States, during those days, possessed economic, military, and political issues. The United States regarded Iran as a primary ally in the region, while the Shah's regime wanted U.S. support for its modernization and development programs. In return, this cooperation yielded economic benefits, military assistance, and political leverage for Iran.

Indeed, a State Department memo from that period attests that Nixon and Kissinger backed the Shah's hope to convert Iran into a dominant regional military power (Cooper, 2011, s. 162-163).

If the merits of this period of cooperation existed, the discontent it set in motion among Iran's conservative masses could not be overlooked. Perceptions of excessive proximity to the West, especially to the United States, stirred oppositional sentiments among the populace. The very discontentment with the Shah's regime, and with his foreign policy choices, would become a linchpin to the tectonic events of 1979, which thrust into being an Islamic Republic and an entirely new direction of Iran's foreign policy.

g) Regional circumstances and rivalry with the neighbors

Iran's foreign policy towards its neighbors for the years between the close of the Second World War and the late 1940s and the 1979 Revolution was shaped by many forces, which all portrayed efforts to impose themselves through influence and to manage regional dynamics.

Before the revolution, Iran had rather intricate ties with the neighbors. There was cooperation and rivalry with Saudi Arabia and Turkey and resulted from the geopolitical ambitions and different interpretations of Islam. Whereas, during the Islamic Republic era, the religious dynamics did not turn out to be that much determinant, the Iranian Shiites' relations with Riyadh and Ankara were subjected to a certain extent to the Shiite-Sunni rivalries. Tension has also characterized Iran's relations with Iraq, most of the time keeping in the background border disputes and rivalry over regional influence. For example, the conflict of the Shatt al-Arab waterway would take place at intervals until the 1975 Algiers Agreement brought about the de facto border demarcation easing some tensions.

Iran's relations with the other Arab Gulf states like Kuwait and Qatar were not any different. To really establish a pronounced identity, Iran had to contend with these states in the Persian Gulf while putting forward claims for the future in the area of oil resource control. Iran's relations also extended to Syria and Lebanon as far as Iran was concerned by supporting the Shiite groups such as that of the Amal movement and those of the followers of [Imam] Musa Sadr towards propping its political agenda in that region, that much more as pertaining to its overall scheme of extending the influence through proxy groups and alliances before the Islamic Revolution (Samii, 1997).

Relations between Iran and Egypt have experienced ups and downs throughout this period of time because of ideological divergences and territorial rivalries. While, at times, they were

improved under leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose nationalist policies enjoyed some backing in Iran, other larger regional dynamics and the Cold War alignments tended to undermine any improvements in bilateral ties. The Suez Crisis of 1956, along with periods of engagement from Egypt with the Soviet Union, added other layers of complexities to Iranian-Egyptian interaction.

The Cold War era was an important factor in influencing Iran's foreign policy, being in alliance with American mainstream interests. American engagement saw Iran as a regional partner against Soviet encroachments, giving military assistance and economic support. Their partnership, as in military cooperation and economic investment in support of programs such as the White Revolution reforms initiated by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi with American support, cemented the US-Iranian alliance that determined Iran's foreign policies and orientations in the region and its strategic calculations with neighboring states.

Consequently, Iran's foreign policy with respect to its neighbors from the 1940s until the 1979 revolution would thus represent a complex interplay of regional rivalries, contestations for influence, and alignments influenced by Cold War dynamics. Together, these provided the prime determinants guiding Iran's strategic choices and her relations in the Middle East throughout this particularly transformative period.

3.3. The 1979 Revolution, Changing Dynamics in Iran and International Politics

Hamit Bozarslan, a political scientist and scholar of modern Middle Eastern history, offers a tripartite classification of modern revolutions in his book “Political Sociology of the Middle East”, He argues that there are three different types of genuine revolutions in modern history: (Bozarslan, 2019, s. 13-14)

i) *Eschatological revolutions*: these universal revolutions serve as a model for mobilizing the masses, possess a zeal for self-exportation, and have a cross-border impact (e.g., the French Revolution of 1789, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the Iranian Revolution of 1979).

ii) *Revolutions based on historical rupture*: These social transformations are led by a specific elite administration, have a top-down nature, and impose certain values (e.g., the Turkish Revolution of 1923 and the Chinese Revolution of 1949).

iii) *A series of radical democratic revolutions*: peaceful revolutions influence their surroundings with a domino effect (e.g., the European revolutions of 1848 and the Arab Spring revolutions of 2010-11, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia).

An extraordinarily eventful and eschatological revolution of modern times, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 plunged Iranian society and its political landscape into profound changes, just as it generally altered regional and international politics. The establishment of the Islamic Republic is the most logical development that emerged in the wake of the alleged revolution, in which the monarchy was replaced with a theocracy under Ayatollah Khomeini. The whole operational scenario of governance and social life in Iran underwent radical change.

Thus, regionally, the revolutionary upsurge aggravated sectarian tensions mostly with respect to the rival Sunni and Shiite communities as well as mobilizing various Shiite movements all across the Middle East. The foreign policy overtures made after 1979 would now drift to a far-reaching extent from establishing any sort of amicable working relationships with the US, thereby starting a long geopolitical history of realignments in international politics, including the reshaping of alliances during the Cold War.

A cursory glance at the domestic and overseas issues confronted by the revolution reveals broad patterns pertaining to change:

Domestic Dynamics [political and institutional structure, social changes, economic transformation and internal security].

-The revolution led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic, replacing the monarchy with a theocratic regime. Ayatollah Khomeini became the Supreme Leader, representing the religious and political authority of İmam Mahdi (12th Imam of the Imamiyya Shiites, and the new government implemented a political system based on Islamic principles. The results of the revolution on the domestic political landscape can be summarized as follows:

-The Islamic Republic (*Jomhouri-e Eslāmi*) was established; the revolution replaced the monarchy with a carefully crafted theocratic regime, with the founder of the republic Ayatollah Khomeini as the Supreme Leader (*Vali-ye Faqih*), placing religious leadership at the center of political power.

-The revolutionary elites created new institutions such as the Guardian Council (*Shourā-ye Negahbān*), the Assembly of Experts (*Majles-e Khobregân-e Rahbari*), and the Expediency Discernment Council (*Majma'-e Taškhīs-e Maslahat-e Nezām*), which were established under

the new Islamicized constitution to oversee the implementation of Shiite-Islamic laws and principles.

-The position of the Supreme Leader (*Rahbar-e Moazam-e Enqelâb-e Eslâmi*) was established as the highest authority in Iran, with unquestioned control over all branches of entire society, the government, the military, the judiciary, and the media.

-The political system became heavily dominated by Islamic ideology, with Sharia law being integrated into all aspects of the legal framework.

-The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Sepāh-e Pāsdārān-e Enqelâb-e Eslâmī* - IRGC) was created to protect the Islamic system and has since become a powerful political, military, and economic force within Iran. This momentous decision and powerful institution (also including *Basic* Militia Forces) increased the state's control over society and political opposition.

-The new regime systematically suppressed and purged political dissent, targeting groups and individuals opposed to theocratic rule, namely leftists/socialists, secularists, former allies of the Shah, as well as some segments of Islamic groups including certain influential ayatollahs.[51]

-Revolutionary norms took the shape of rigid social and cultural imposition relying on interpretation of religion, thus limiting women's rights along with freedom of expression and behavior in public.

-Most sectors-particularly oil and strategic ones-were nationalized completely, resulting in decreased foreign control but not so much economic difficulty due to mismanagement and good international sanctions led by the West.

-The new Islamic Republic adopted populist measures that would assist it in mobilizing lower and middle classes, including land reform, incentives/subsidies, and social welfare programs.

[51] Ayatollah al-Uzmā Muhammad Kazem Shariatmadari (1905–1986), a prominent Turkish scholar from Tabriz, initially clashed with Supreme Leader Khomeini over the concept of *velayat-i faqih* at the onset of the revolution. Similarly, Ayatollah al-Uzmā Hussein Montazeri, despite being declared Khomeini's successor, came into conflict with his mentor during the political purges, resulting in his dismissal from his position as deputy and the stripping of his political/religious ranks. Both figures are particularly significant among influential ayatollahs in this context.

International Relations [relations with the West and the U.S., regional rivalries, Iraq conflict, support for revolutionary movements, international isolation, nuclear and armament program]

-The Revolution completely changed the pattern of relations that Iran had with the United States. The holding captive of 52 American diplomats/officials for 444 days during the crisis cut the diplomatic ties and brought economic sanctions by the United States. (The existence of a nuclear program as well as missile armament only adds to the burden of sanctions).

-The relations between Iran and its neighboring countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Iraq, took a poorer turn. There was escalation of sectarian tension between Sunnis and Shiites because of the act, which considerably increased regional instability.

-The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) is itself a product of the revolution-it was initiated by Iraq, then headed by Saddam Hussein, to stymie Iran's revolutionary ideology. The war had catastrophic effects for both countries and recast the politics of the region. The second round of Iran-Iraq clashes came to an end when the US invaded in 2003, after which time Iran largely realized its goals.

-Iran had started supporting different Shiite and anti-Western movements all over the Middle East such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shiite groups across Iraq, Yemen, and Bahrain, as part of the greater strategy of exporting that revolution and combating Western and Israeli influence. As another form of saying, the revolution idolized the export of the revolution and thereby helped influence political groupings and skirmishes in the entire Middle East with arguments both religious and Shiite political in character.

-The Iranian strategy of active engagement with proxy forces such as an armed eerie-strategic outdoor component quite often employed against neighboring countries adopted heavily organized and mobilized those groups to carry out a do-or-die fight to protect the revolution during the Islamic Republic era.

-During the last decade of the Cold War, Iran posed itself as a non-aligned state criticizing the United States and the Soviet Union. However, analysts believe that Tehran's most often anti-American interests led to tactical alignments with Soviet ones not withstanding the ideological difference both held against communism.

-The anti-Western rhetoric and policies of the revolutionary government led to the isolation of Iran from many Western countries. Such sanctions and diplomatic isolation would not leave the economy of Iran unaffected, nor its international commercial or political networks.

In sum, the 1979 Revolution, did however, bring signs of a major watershed in Iran's domestic landscape as the installation of a theocratic regime among deep societal changes, including comprehensive Islamic law and the regulation of civil liberties. On the other hand, there was always the pushing of revolutions into the outside world that marred the relations between this country with other Western countries, particularly the United States, accentuated the rivalries in the region, and put more stress on the exporting revolutionary ideals to even Shiite groups across the Middle East. Such transformed Iran's role in global and regional politics fundamentally and has left lasting effects still shaping its domestic policies and international relations.

3.4. Continuity Dynamics in Iranian Domestic Politics and State-Society Relations before and after the 1979 Revolution

The 1979 Revolution might have changed the course of history, but certain continuities had survived in the local politics and society-state relations of Iran. Some of these dynamics are: i) centralization of authority, ii) political repression, iii) economic nationalism, and iv) the application of state institutions for control and governance. Other continuous dynamics such as leadership styles, institutional characteristics, and economic parameters complement the above.

i) Centralized authority

The Kajar dynasty (1796-1925) drowned into great catastrophes caused by their own internal political upheaval and other centrifugal forces that weakened the central administration. Thus, these forces always led to regional claim and ultimately weak central authority-ng governance difficult and contributing to periods of instability. The absence of a strong centralized government resulted in inefficiencies in decision-making and governance, making the country incapable of responding effectively to internal and external challenges.

During the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), and under his rule, Iran moved towards centralized governance. The Shah exercised enormous executive powers, restricting the presence of the parliament (Majlis) and other political institutions in

exercising their authority. He took military and security forces under his control to consolidate power and repress political dissent and opposition. It was this highly centralized arena that made matters spin up fluffily to consider modernization in Iran quite quickly while at the same time fuelling cries for authoritarianism and a lack of political pluralism. And it was this that made the regime seek centralization due to its belief in weakness during the Kajar era; hence it sought to fortify national unity and assert the Iranian position regionally and globally.

The Islamic Republic has, as an intrinsic development from Iranian centrality, partially localized the associated central democratic political framework to power mainly among religious and revolutionary authorities. The Supreme Leader, originally Ayatollah Khomeini, wielded supreme and unquestioned authority over all branches of government, the military, and critical state institutions. This centralization was institutionalized through bodies such as the Guardian Council (*Shourā-ye Negahbān*) and the Expediency Discernment Council (*Majles-e Khobregân-e Rahbari*), which further consolidated the dominance of the Supreme Leader (*Vali-ye Faqih*).

Furthermore, the expansion of authority by the Revolutionary Guards (*Sepāh-e Pāsdārān-e Enqelâb-e Eslâmī*) and other security forces to even the remotest regions of the country, coupled with mobilization efforts during the Iran-Iraq War, strengthened amplified state control and centralized governance over society.

ii) Political repression against dissidents

Mohammad Reza Shah ruled over Iran for a time characterized by harsh political repression intended to suffocate dissent and maintain order. At the very heart of this repression was SAVAK (Intelligence Service), which was instrumental in monitoring, interrogating, and suppressing any perceived threat to the regime. All political parties and movements that were contrary to the Shah, such as the Tudeh Party and other nationalists demanding democratic reforms or independence from foreign domination, were set to systematic target. Such systematic persecution involved arbitrary arrests, torture, and imprisonment of dissenting agents, all in an attempt to eliminate any challenge to the Shah's authority.

Widespread were press censorship and restrictions on political freedoms. The news were into tight embrace of the Shah's government with the prohibition of independent and sensitive voices that would challenge such narratives. Out there were arrests and imprisonments of journalists, intellectuals, and activists who lived to challenge or expose the fallings of the regime. All these were part of a larger scheme meant to consolidate power and silence

oppositions to ensure the continued stability of the Shah's authoritarian rule, which, while always favoring modernization with alignment to Western interests, always suppressed dissent and political pluralism.

By the current Republic date, Iran remained under the rule of the state, controlling its subjects and political repression of any dissent, including dissident religious groups and ayatollahs. After the 1979 Revolution that set Islamic government under Ayatollah Khomeini, the new authorities consolidated power under the Supreme Leader and such institutions like the Guardian Council and Revolutionary Guards. Their centralization also intended to implement ideological discipline in all matters concerning dissent against the regime's interpretation of anything Islamic in governance. Those ayatollahs and religious figures opposing, or even offering their interpretations of Islam contrary to that of the regime, underwent censorship, harassment, and imprisonment-falling in the same fashion as done during the Shah's reign to dissent.

There is political repression for the secular dissidents too, such as the critical intellectuals, journalists, and activists in front of the regime; political repression, therefore, extends to these secular dissidents. In preventing dissent, the regime has always employed methods such as surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and show trials. Freedom of expression and assembly are severely curtailed, with very stringent control registered on the media and public demonstrations, particularly during the years of the Iran-Iraq War. This is a continuation of repression much in the same vein as the authoritarian practices of the Pahlavi era, although with a different ideological banner. While promising justice and other Islamic tenets, the Islamic Republic has furthered the same evil legacy of state control and repression, still meant for consolidation of power and retention of social order-irony crises directly comparing to the authoritarian tactics of the Shah's regime before the revolution.

iii) Economic nationalism

Adopting the grandest economic policy, Iran, during the Pahlavi, vexed herself the most into modernization and industrialization. More than oil nationalization of 1952-53 were such major development undertakings of the Shah Government activities as banking, their transport, and heavy industry. Such initiatives were undertaken to promote state control over strategic sectors and accelerate economic growth through state-led initiatives. In addition, the Shah regime fostered general economic liberalization and foreign investment for the diversification of their economy from an oily dependence. Constructing the overhead highways with dams and

projects of urban expansions in themselves weighed rather greatly on the Shah's economic agenda. The overwhelming burden of these initiatives was worsened by criticism of being elite-favoring and their foreign interests, beside the phenomena of wealth being skewed in its distribution and social inequality.

The Iranian economy has always been characterized by a blend of economic nationalism with state control over key industries, before and after the 1979 Revolution (Amuzegar, 1992). Under the Pahlavi dynasty, the Shah's government was nationalizing, if not beyond oil, sectors such as banking, transport, and heavy industry. This trend continued increasingly into the Islamic Republic, where for the most part major industries, especially oil and gas, still remained strictly government-managed. Nationalization policies were expanded under this regime to minimize foreign economic influence and strive for self-sufficiency in strategic sectors.[52]

For the first forty years or so following the revolution, the essential features of Iran's domestic and foreign economic policies were bent in the direction of international pressures. Among these, international sanctions and economic isolation were the most influential. After the revolution, the Islamic Republic found its way to survival from grave economic challenges propelled by sanctions in the West, embodying restrictions in Iran's access to global markets and financial systems. As a countermeasure against the potential of international isolation made realistic by the sanctions, these restrictions prompted the government toward boosting domestic production and industrial self-sufficiency.

Ever since, statistics show that the undeniable trend in Iran's economy has been the post-revolution dependence on oil revenues alongside attempts at its diversification. Prior to the revolution, oil revenues accounted for a significant share of GDP and government revenues. This dependency continued post-revolution, albeit under much more constrained circumstances owing to sanctions. Oil and gas have remained important ever since most importantly for securing Iran's economic continuity and geopolitical weight on the global arena- in spite of

[52] Iran's strategy of seeking self-sufficiency and increasing domestic production across various strategic sectors is particularly evident in its nuclear activities, defence industry, and missile-weapons production. This approach reflects a broader national policy aimed at reducing dependence on foreign technology and bolstering national security. In particular, the recollections of Mohsen Rafighdoost, a prominent commander of the Revolutionary Guards and former minister, provide valuable insights into the implementation of this policy, especially during the tumultuous first decade of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. Rafighdoost's accounts detail the challenges and achievements of the early revolutionary period, highlighting the concerted effort to develop indigenous capabilities in response to external threats and international isolation. These narratives are crucial for understanding the motivations and outcomes of Iran's quest for self-reliance in critical technological and military domains. Allamiyan, Saeed (2012), *Barâye Tarikh Mi-gooyam – Khaterat-e Mokhsen Rafighdost*, Tehran: Enstesharat-e Soore Mehr (Allamiyan, 2012)

active diversifications into agriculture, manufacturing, and services. Both sides of the political spectrum recognize economic nationalism-white interventionism and state-led development strategies-thing in continuity with Iran's predominant approach to economic policies, one juggling between self-sufficiency and constraints exerted by external economic parameters throughout the course of its contemporary history (Bulut & Kırmızıoğlu, 2011).

iv) Use of state institutions to control over society

In fact, the Iranian state used a number of institutions during Mohammad Reza Shah to consolidate and enforce control over the whole of the nation. The military primarily served the Shah as a powerful weapon because it was given significant investment to make sure it was dedicated and capable of maintaining the regime. The bureaucratic apparatus was expanded further and centralized to assure effective implementation of policies and maintenance of order. But while this centralization facilitated the Shah in modernizing, it also entrenched autocracy by putting decision-making power in the hands of a few.

To deny political dissent and opposition in the reputed roles was used SAVAK-the secret police of the Shah. It was here that his political schemes were enforced by using extensive surveillance, censorship, and intimidation campaigns to deaden any threat to the monarchy (Lorenz, 2010, s. 291-293). Besides that, the activities of that bureau constructed an ambience of fear and compliance have effectively stifled political activism and would have made sure that the decisions made by the Shah would go unchallenged (Abrahamian, Tarikh-e İran-e Modern, 2010, s. 166-167). Collectively these institutions would strengthen the power of the Shah bringing up opposition on a minimal scale and help in implementing his vision for modernization in Iran in synchronization with Western interests.

After Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran constructed new institutions of the state for enforcing its theocratic and ideological agenda, drastically restructuring mechanisms of control over the whole Iranian population. Among them, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Basij forces became one of the main tools. The IRGC was supposed to protect the revolution, and it has evolved into such a powerful leviathan of Iran internal security that it ensures ideological enforcement in the country and repression of political opposition. The space is still functional under the early 1980s umbrella IRGC; the result is a crucial paramilitary

volunteer militia within the Basij in mobilizing civilians on behalf of the regime, monitoring civilian activity, and suppressing civil unrest.[53]

Apart from these security forces and institutional instruments, the Islamic Republic made a comprehensive restructuring of the judiciary and other state organs to make them entirely conform with Islamic-and then only Shiite-understandings of principles as expressed in the constitution. The reorganization sought to vest the legal system with the sacred doctrine in order to legitimize the regime's authority so that laws and policies reflected ideological commitments. The judiciary reformed according to Islamic law becomes a device for the regime to control legally and socially sanctionable norms for actions with heavy deterrents against those accused of breaching the regime's set values or policies.

These institutions conglutinated further the Islamic Republic's hold on power by fusing the religious ideology with the governance of the state. Such a structure, where Revolutionary Guards and Basij enforce ideological conformity among persons, with judiciary established on the principles of Islam, would keep theocratic rule of the regime and oppose it. This complicated state structure would enable the Islamic Republic to impose complete control over the Iranian society and subsequently the regime's power and stability: thereby ensuring continued political domination and stability.

v) Leadership styles of the top leaders

Two of the 20th century Pahlavi monarchs, Reza Shah and his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, differed tremendously in their styles of ruling and domestically and internationally in how they governed, related to society, and made decisions. Reza Shah, 1925 Pahlavi dynasty founder, ruled through an authoritarian and centralized mode emphasizing modernization and secularization. According to him, policies were reformist with the view of reducing the power of tribal leaders and the clergy while centralizing state authority. It was completely a top-down decision-making process. Very little room or opportunity was there for dissent or debate. He believed that the creation of a strong and centralized state was essential to modernizing Iran and quickly eliminating foreign influences. With the military, he maintained strong ties, as they

[53] The Basij Forces [*Niru-ye Moghāvemat-e Basij*, full name *Sâzmân-e Basij-e Mostaz'afîn* (the Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed)] was established in 1979 by a direct order of Ayatollah Khomeini as an autonomous paramilitary volunteer militia organization, and its members were mobilized during the Iran-Iraq War in order to resist against Iraqi invasion. Rafighdoost, then Minister of the Revolutionary Guards in the 1980s, explains in detail the subsequent incorporation of the Basic Forces into this security structure and their integration into the IRGC (Allamiyan, 2012, pp. 113-115).

were the ones who supported him in his policies and controlling order, and the clerics adopted an entirely antagonistic relationship with him on matters of secularization.[54]

In contrast to his father, although autocratic, to include political liberalization as far as early years of his reign, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi launched several policies in a way meant to modernize and reform Iranian society by land reform, women's suffrage, and shifting industrialization with the White Revolution. He imposed these policies in much the same way: provision without adequate consultation and participation of the wider society and resulting in fierce opposition. Mohammad Reza Shah made it increasingly possible for advisory councils and the security apparatus to make most of their decisions based on SAVAK (the regime's secret police and intelligence service). His conception of the world was largely related to positioning Iran as a regional power within the orbit of Western interests, especially the interests of the United States, (Mahdavi A. R., 2010, s. 401), leading to a complex relationship with the clerical establishment that oscillated between cooperation and conflict.[55]

Both leaders held close relationships with the armed forces, an important part of their strategies to maintain control and enforce policy. However, their relationships with the bureaucracy and the clerical establishment differed. For instance, Reza Shah attempted to modernize the bureaucracy to reduce the influence of the clergy, whereas Mohammad Reza Shah attempted to co-opt elements of the clerical establishment for support of his reforms, albeit limited success. This effort on the latter's part to have a balance between modernization and

[54] During the weakened period of the Kajar dynasty and the chaotic aftermath of World War I, Reza Shah declared himself first as the commander of the armed forces and then as the minister of war, effectively suppressing his regime's opponents. When the leader of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, realized Reza Khan's intention to proclaim himself Shah, he advised through an ambassador to declare a republic instead. Reza Khan replied that Iran was accustomed to a Shah and could not be ruled by another regime, and proceeded to declare himself Shah as planned. Atatürk and the young Turkish Republic's ambassador to Tehran in 1925-1930, Memduh Şevket (Esendal), conveyed Atatürk's request for Reza Shah to declare a republic instead of a monarchy –requested by Atatürk taken into consideration the regional policies concerning the British and Soviets in the Middle East and Caucasus- during their meeting at Reza Shah's palace in Tehran on November 29, 1925, which Memduh Şevket describes in his memoirs (Esendal, 1999, pp. 52-58). Reza Shah Pahlavi closely followed the newly established Republic of Turkey and the reforms of Mustafa Kemal, taking Atatürk as a model. Upon consolidating power, Reza Pahlavi established a strong army, restructured the legal system, and enacted laws similar to those in Europe, such as the Penal Code in 1926 and the Civil Code in 1928 (this was also the path previously followed by Atatürk's Turkey). He also promoted industrial and technological reforms, with particular emphasis on the construction of railways linking Turkey and Iran.

[55] It is important to underscore that during the reigns of both Shahs, not all of the Qom and Mashhad-based ulama opposed the monarchy and the palace. Despite the vigorous opposition initiated by Ayatollah Khomeini and the young clerics around him in 1963, the more Quietist ulama maintained an implicit compromise with the regime. In fact, it can even be argued that they occasionally formed an alliance with the Shah's administration against the revolutionary and combative clerics led by Khomeini (Azimi, 2014). For a better understand of the conflict within the Shiite clergy during this period in Qom and Mashhad, see the memoirs of Ayatollah Khamenei, a student of Ayatollah Khomeini and one of his prominent followers at the time, see: Ghakrengin, Ali (2019), *Zandaginâmeh va Khaterat-e Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamanei* [İmam Seyyid Ali Hamaney: Hayatı, Kişiliği ve Mücadelesi), İstanbul: Feta Yayınları (Ghakrengin, 2019, pp. 131-140).

holding onto traditional structures often produced contradictions with amplified responses by discontented groups (Afkhami, 2009, s. 58, 365-371). The path to modernization was indeed an objective both of these rulers –Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi- but their methods and, by extension, their relationship with important social and institutional actors differed. These differences, in turn, reflected their modes of leadership and the respective political contexts that defined their reigns.

Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei were the leaders of post-revolution Iran, and they developed their own styles of leadership where the centrality of the clergy within the political system became paramount. The founder of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, proposed the principle of *Velayat-e-Faqih*, placing the supreme religious leader at the summit of state authority. This system, thus, ensured that the clergy enjoyed paramount control over the government while also ensuring the fusion of religious authority with political power. While charismatic and authoritative in approach, Khomeini's leadership style was dedicated to the consolidation of revolutionary ideals and the protection of the Islamic Republic from internal and external dangers. His focus on a theocratic mode of governance basically changed the terms of the relationship between state and society in a way that put clerical oversight at the center of political and social life in Iran.

Ayatollah Khamenei, Khomeini's successor and since the early sixties in Qom and Mashhad, according to his explanation, a loyal and devoted follower/disciple (Ghakrengin, 2019, s. 116-129) has picked up the torch and built on Khomeini's legacy while adapting it to the changing political landscape. Khamenei's leadership style combines pragmatism with consolidation of power within the clerical establishment. He flourished the clergy as the final decision maker in state affairs and made sure that some important state institutions and decision-making bodies were held accountable under religious principles. Khamenei orientated the IRGC and the state's security apparatus toward becoming agents who implement regime policy and eliminate opposition. Such a policy has augmented the state's power over Iranian society and underlined the role of religious doctrine in the actual governance and policy-making processes.[56]

[56] The Revolutionary Guards played a pivotal role in the institutionalization of the revolution, especially during its first decade. This organization was crucial in consolidating the power of the new regime, enforcing its policies, and maintaining internal security. Both Khomeini and Khamenei prioritized the development and empowerment of the Revolutionary Guards, recognizing their importance in safeguarding the achievements of the revolution and ensuring the stability of the regime. For a detailed examination of the significance and priority given to this structure by both leaders, see the memoirs of Rafighdoost, then minister appointed by Khomeini in charge of the Guards- (Allamiyan, 2012, pp. 34-35, 53-56, 287, 297)

In terms of decision-making mechanisms, both Khomeini and Khamenei have placed significant emphasis on the role of consultative councils and religious bodies. Khomeini established some new important institutions in the constitution such as the Guardian Council (*Shourā-ye Negahbān*) and the Assembly of Experts (*Majles-e Khobregân-e Rahbari*), which are composed of clerics tasked with vetting legislation and overseeing the activities of elected officials to ensure conformity with Islamic law. Khamenei has continued to use these institutions, along with the Expediency Discernment Council (*Majma'-e Taškhīs-e Maslahat-e Nezām*),[57] to mediate competing factions within the political system and resolve conflicts arising between the legislative and executive branches. This centralized decision-making process extended by the Supreme Leader has allowed the clergy to control vital aspects of governance and policy formation.

Both leaders, the first two Supreme Leaders of the Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei, have strategically positioned themselves within the political system to exert considerable influence on the domestic and foreign policies. Rhetoric and decisive acts were the means by which Khomeini presented himself as the sovereign authority, often disregarding conventional governmental structures in order to enforce his own vision for the Islamic Republic. While claiming the sovereign authority, Khamenei has nonetheless managed to cut through the knot of modern Iranian politics by settling the interests of varying political factions: reformists versus hardliners. He exerts cautious pragmatism to act regarding the policy, aimed at the survival of the regime while responding to the socio-economic needs of the populace.[58] In this way, both Khomeini and Khamenei have ensured that the clergy's role in Iran's political and social order is ever central.

[57] The Expediency Discernment Council was created in the constitutional amendment of 6 February 1988, just one year before Khomeini's death. As an observer, I believe there are two major reasons why Ayatollah Khomeini insisted on both the constitutional amendment and the establishment of this council a few months before his death: First, to protect a relatively "young" figure like Ali Khamenei by both amending the constitution and sending direct messages of support; second, to address concerns about Khamenei's young age and perceived lack of religious experience compared to Khomeini. By creating a consultative structure that included other senior ayatollahs in a council, Khomeini aimed to ensure Khamenei's political space and authority after his own death.

[58] The political pragmatism of Khomeini and especially Khamenei among different factions can also be observed through the varying ideologies of the governments they supported during their tendencies:

Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani	- Moderate Conservative	- 1989-1997
Muhammad Khatami	- Reformist	- 1997-2005
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	- Hardliner Conservative	- 2005-2013
Hassan Rouhani	- Moderate Conservative	- 2013-2021
Ebrahim Raisi	- Hardliner Conservative	- 2021-2024

The political traditional background of the presidents who have headed the governments during Khamenei's tenure as Supreme Leader, coming from both the reformist camp and the conservative camp with their moderate and radical versions, demonstrates not only the flexibility of Iran's political system but also Khamenei's strategic use

vi) Institutional characteristics and state-society relations

The Pahlavi era in Iran, especially under Mohammad Reza Shah, was about a highly centralized bureaucracy that played an inefficient role in managing and implementing the state policy. The Shah first set up a bureaucratic system modelled on Western institutions as an end to the modernizing and streamlined governance. This specialized establishment was purposely founded at the Shah's direction to implement extensive infrastructure development; educational reforms; and economic projects that formed part of the Shah's modernization programs (Foltz, 2015, s. 108). In other words, the bureaucracy was central in carrying out the vision of modern, secular state affairs.

The army, as well as forces like the secret police SAVAK, became powerful custodians of the state, shaping the regime during the Pahlavi age. Besides defense purposes, it was primarily important to make sure of internal order and enforce the Shah's rule. SAVAK used the weapon of enforcing loyalty to the monarchy, suppressing political dissent. They operated in great autonomy, free from traditional political checks and balances, so that the Shah could realize his policy objectives without much resistance. With these kinds of institutions under his direct control, what the Shah effectively did was strand them away from his opposition and tighten the control over power (Afkhami, 2009, s. 382-384).

Within this context of policy-making, these powerful institutions were the most important means by which the regime direction was determined. The judiciary and parliament (Majlis) were effectively side-tracked; real decisions were made by Shah and his close circle. Military and SAVAK domination meant that the Shah sidestepped "normal" political structures, thus centralizing still further his reign. Hence, the governance and political denominator that characterized the Pahlavi period in Iran revolved around this model of centralized power and dominance of military and SAVAK in centers of influence. Ultimately, these would serve to lay the basis for the rupture that historical transformation would see in the 1979 revolution.

However, as Moazami also notes, in relational terms, the bureaucratic, centralized, and militarized state required a unified, bureaucratic, and standardized religion to serve as its moral foundation. Conversely, this repressive regime fostered a volatile political environment that allowed the Islamic interpretation of morality to evolve into a powerful ideological discourse capable of challenging state authority. The leading ulama took advantage of the opportunities

of this political configuration. This approach highlights how he has sought to maintain the legitimacy of the revolution among the masses by addressing different internal and external needs at different times.

presented by state's modernization and centralization efforts to expand the influence of Shiism (Moazami, 2013, s. 94).

Although some scholars on Iran scholars such as Hunter argue otherwise, the post-revolutionary era in Iran has witnessed both continuity and transformation within its institutional framework (Hunter S. , 2023). The newly established mechanisms did incorporate some aspects that had been typical of the bureaucratic machinery in the Pahlavi era. However, they represented such continuity and stability in administration with multidimensionality and a drastic ideological shift. The new regime had a centralized bureaucratic structure, but it was reoriented to the principles of the Islamic Republic. Such pivotal posts within the administration were filled by members who faithfully followed revolutionary ideals, ensuring that the state machinery is in harmony with a new theocratic foundation. Thus, the continuity among these enabled the steamrolling of the Islamic Republic in governing and instituting effective policies while dominating society with a soundly established and functional bureaucracy.

In fact, administrative institutions were securitized to consolidate state control over society. The IRGC and the militias of Basij became the powerful New security institutions of the Islamic Republic, and these powerful components would be playing a key role then in upholding the ideological and political objectives of the regime. Such organizations were assigned the task of presiding over the protection of revolution and silencing any voice against it that extended not simply into society but deep into civil society. The particularity of the IRGC would evolve into that capable military force exercising exceptional economics and politics with Iran and beyond, thus consolidating further the power of the state to adhere to revolutionary principles (Moazami, 2013, s. 135-137). Administratively, the revolutionary republic continued the same model that had characterized the previous regime of the state in maintaining its power over society, except for religious justifications for the disreputable exercise.

Asides from mobilization, the post-revolutionary period has also seen the creation of new institutions designed to add on and manage the Islamic characteristics of government. There follow institutions such as the Guardian Council, Assembly of Experts, and Expediency Discernment Council, whose functions permit them to monitor legislative and executive measures with respect to Islamic law. The restructuring of the judiciary also took place with the Shiite-sharia principles of evidence, thus moving religion even further into the governing arrangement of the state. Enhanced with these newly established institutions and continuous centralization of powers around the Supreme Leader, the theocratic character of the republic

became thicker. Unlike previous times when monarchy with republic were at…" fighting as enemies, this new regime is to face ideological opposition, which is to be mostly imagined from within dominantly requiring a very strong security apparatus to keep stability and security over internal dissent. This institutionalized framework rendered secularity maintaining centralized government and governance/politics highly securitized while infusing deeply embedded principles of theocracy-free-the-state application."

Such is how Islamization would draw the Islamic state to real and practical state policy on behalf of Islamic values, targeting a segment of population still holding on to traditions. However, this move immediately estranged the secular and liberal groups, producing the pattern of domination-state-society tensions. And just like the Shah, the regime emphasized ideological and religious conformity to hold society, along with modernization rhetoric.

3.5. The 1979 Revolution and New Dynamics in Iranian Foreign Policy

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was a watershed event in the foreign policy of the country, giving rise to sweeping changes in its regional and global relations. Before the revolution, the Shah's Iran was pro-Western, closely aligning itself with the United States and presenting itself as the regional policeman/gendarmerie in the Persian Gulf. This allegiance was driven by economic interest, Cold War security considerations, and the desire to modernize Iran in the Western way. The Shah's regime was heavily influenced by Western ideologies and policies, and Iran was an important actor in maintaining regional stability under the US security umbrella. A clear sign of this relationship was the formal restructuring of the Iranian armed forces along US lines in August 1955 (Afkhami, 2009, s. 288).[59]

After the revolution, Iran’s foreign policy underwent a major upheaval and came to be influenced by ideological, political, and strategic factors. The Ayatollah Khomeini-led Islamic

[59] Although the period of Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979) is largely characterized by close cooperation with the United States and is referred to in the region with phrases such as “American gendarme”, there were close relations between Tehran and its northern neighbour, the Soviet Union, throughout the 1950s. In fact, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi made an official visit to Moscow in the summer of 1956 at the invitation of the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Marshal Voroshilov, (Afkhami, 2009, pp. 289-290). Despite the tensions created by the establishment of the Baghdad Pact and CENTO, and Iran's pivotal role in these alliances, the Shah subsequently visited the Soviet Union again in 1965 and 1970. These visits became more problematic as Iran's relations with the United States grew closer, but Tehran could not ignore its powerful northern neighbour in the Cold War circumstances.

Republic was set to build an anti-Western and anti-imperialist campaign that rejected alignment with the U.S. in favor of an independent and revolutionary foreign policy. Since then, it seems that the guiding principle of this new foreign policy would become the exportation of its revolutionary ideals (Menashri, 1990, s. 96-97) while seeking to promote Islamic governance and oppose Western dominance.[60]

The US indeed had a particular turn in the foreign policy of ruling Iran after the revolution. It defined the new regime's attitude toward the United States, the "Great Satan" as well as a phenomenal oppressor in global politics (Kamrava, Khomeini and the West, 2014, s. 167). This hostility was quickly manifested through taking hostage the US Embassy in Tehran and later a host of people, an enduring tenor that could live on for decades. Such impact from the hostage situation could not have been anticipated by any, which marked the dawn of a new era in the affairs of both countries, its characterizations defined by deep, long-standing, and often bitter hostilities, uncontrollable mistrust, and enduring geopolitical tensions (Mousavian, Iran and the United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace, 2014, s. 32). The revolutionaries considered the US the embodiment of *estekbar* or arrogance and its ideology of imperialism as well as a supporter of the dethroned Shah, and this induced ruptured diplomatic relations.[61]

The anti-Western drift has also afflicted Iran's relations with Western countries. Former European partners, who were quite significant in terms of economic and political collaborations in the past, were not seen as trustworthy and were more often seen with hostility. This had a critical point where the relationships with Britain and France were particularly deteriorating as well. This reorientation forced Iran to seek new allies and partnerships, particularly those that will provide opposition to Western hegemony, and in this direction, Iran strengthened its ties

[60] While some argue that, the agenda of exporting the revolution is exaggerated and a propagandist argument, this intention is explicitly stated in the revolutionary leaders' own declarations. For instance, there is even an independent 173-page book in Persian and English, containing Ayatollah Khomeini's speeches, statements, and messages on this subject, published by his followers: Khomeini, Ayatollah Ruhollah (2001), *Imam Khomeini on Exportation of Revolution*, Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of the Works of Imam Khomeini (Khomeini, 2001). In these statements, Khomeini makes a clear distinction between "friends" and "enemies" of the exportation of the Islamic Revolution. To examine Ayatollah Khamenei's statements on this issue, which are somewhat more nuanced and diplomatic than those of his predecessor Khomeini, see his official website: https://english.khamenei.ir/news/5413/What-does-exporting-the-Islamic-revolution-mean-in-Ayatollah (accessed on June 28th, 2024).

[61] For a narrative focusing on the Shah and the initial phase of the diplomatic crisis triggered by the seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran, which lasted for 444 days, and its implications on Tehran-Washington relations, see (Afkhami, 2009, pp. 564-592).

with countries such as Syria, Libya, China, and North Korea, as well as many revolutionary and liberation movements in the world (Allamiyan, 2012).[62]

The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) further shaped the foreign policy of Iran. The war took place based on regional power struggles, where Iraq feared the political consequences of Iran's revolutionary ideology spreading all over the region. Throughout the war, Iran was evidently concerned with foreign policy that defended its sovereignty and exporting revolutionary ideals, incorporating its support for Shiite groups and opposition movements in Iraq and other neighboring countries. The war thus entrenched Iran's antagonistic relationship with many of his Arab neighbors who largely sided with Iraq (Menashri, 1990, s. 207-210).

Another point at which Iranian foreign policy in the post-revolutionary era instituted new parameters was the centrality of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), especially its foreign operations service the Quds Force, in formulation and implementation of foreign policy (Divsallar, 2023, s. 239-240). The IRGC came to have a role in supporting proxy groups and conducting asymmetric warfare so extending Iranian influence throughout the region (Eshraghi & Mahdavi, 2023, s. 220). This is an increasingly significant move from the Shah's generation in which reliance was primarily on traditional diplomacy and military means.

Khomeini created the concept of "*Velayat-e Faqih*" or Guardianship of the Jurist which has since come to characterize Iran's foreign policy. It emphasizes that the Islamic state must necessarily be governed by a senior Shiite cleric and indicates how it interacts with other countries especially within the Muslim world. Under this thinking, Iran was to place itself as the leader of the Islamic world and counter the dominance of Sunni powers such as Saudi Arabia while painting a global picture; and promote Shiite interests everywhere in the world.[63]

[62] Due to Iran's ideological conflicts with Western countries and the sanctions it faced, Iran's dependence on Eastern and Non-Aligned countries for its defence industry and arms procurement increased significantly during the 1980s. During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran imported arms from countries such as China, North Korea, Syria, Libya, Bulgaria, East Germany and Switzerland, while also managing its oil exports under challenging conditions. For significant notes on these topics, recorded by General Mohsen Rafighdoost, one of the founders of the Revolutionary Guards and a minister responsible for this institution in the cabinet in the 1980s, see (Allamiyan, 2012, pp. 216-217, 220, 131-132). In the same context, Hashemi Rafsanjani, an influential aide to the Supreme Leader Khomeini, acting on the latter's behalf during the Iran-Iraq War as a coordinator between the armed forces, revolutionary institutions and the cabinet as , who later held the presidency from 1989 to 1997, provides similar accounts in his memoirs that corroborate Rafighdoost's testimony. For these corroborating statements in Rafsanjani's memoirs, see (Rafsanjani, 2006, pp. 249-256, 363, 413).

[63] For a thorough understanding of the concept of "*Velayat-e Faqih*" and the surrounding debates, which provide in-depth insights into the theoretical underpinnings and practical implications of this central concept in the political framework of the Islamic Republic's, see (Mahdavi M. , The Velayat-e Faqih: Basis, Power and Longevity, 2023) and (Sabet, 2014).

Another unique dimension in Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy became its attitude toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Shah had relatively quiet ties to Israel. The Islamic Republic, as compared to that, takes a strongly anti-Israeli stance. It became a mainstay supporter of such Palestinian groups as Hamas and Islamic Jihad and of Hezbollah in Lebanon, taking on the role of a champion of the Palestinian cause and of a leading opponent of Israeli policies (Takeyh, 2011, s. 61).

As a result of the ideological confrontation with the West and the ensuing political and military issues it raised, the economic sanctions imposed by the US and its allies had a significant impact on Iran's foreign policy. The sanctions, aimed at curbing Iran's nuclear program and its support for "terrorism",[64] forced Iran to develop self-sufficiency and to seek alternative trading partners. In the process of establishing routes to confront this pressure, Iran redirected its trade to countries such as China, Russia, and India in order to secure its vital economic and military partnerships (Warnaar, 2013, s. 73-79). These have turned out to be some of the fundamental relationships that were constructed in Iran's foreign policy strategy in the post-revolutionary period.

The Iranian post-revolution foreign policy has been pragmatic toward the regional alliances balancing ideology with strategic interests. The revolutionary government initially defined its foreign dealings ideologically, calling for Islamic unity and anti-West attitude in relations. However, it became a reality that pragmatism made most of the actual policy decisions. A major aspect of this pragmatic attitude by Iran is shown in its relations with countries like Turkey and Qatar. Because of the significant ideological distinctions, (Turkey is a secular state while Qatar has quite different political dynamics), India has created economic and geopolitical relations with these nations (Riggs, 2021).

Economic cooperation between Iran and Turkey in areas such as trade and energy has often been described as troubled by almost irreconcilable differences regarding different regional conflicts such as the Syrian civil war (Oktav, The Syrian Civil War and Turkey-Syria-Iran Relations, 2015). Iran has shared interests with Qatar concerning countering Saudis' influence in the region and jointly managing the exploitation of the South Pars/North Dome Gas-

[64] I will not enter the debate on what constitutes "terrorism"; however, it is essential to note that there is no universally accepted definition of "terrorism." For instance, actions considered "terrorist activities" by the United States are not necessarily labelled as such by Iran, leading to ambiguities. Thus, while I use the term "terrorism" to conform to Western literature, I prefer to place it in quotation marks to acknowledge these definitional discrepancies. This lack of consensus highlights the complexities in international discourse, as different states and cultures label actions according to their political and ideological frameworks.

Condensate field (Safavi & Jafarzadeh, 2019). All these point to the ability of Iran to put strategic interests ahead of ideological purity, thereby turning economic relations and geopolitical imperatives into instruments of successfully manoeuvring through a complex regional landscape.

The internal power restructuring of Iran has also been worked on to bring changes in its foreign policy. A sometimes very complicated foreign policy machinery is the result of the duality of power between the elected government and the entirely unelected religious authorities. Though the Supreme Leader took the ultimate call in bringing strategic direction to Iran's foreign policy, often it was to be along the lines of the President and the Foreign Ministry dealing with what might be everything from diplomacy to day-to-day routine affairs in the department. This dual structure sometimes led to conflicting signals and policies, reflecting the internal power struggles within the Iranian political system (Divsallar, 2023, s. 255-257).

Regional hegemony was yet another feature of Iran's foreign policy since the revolution. Iran embarked on expanding its influence in the Middle East by providing assistance to governments and non-state actors that were friendly to it. Assistance to the Assad regime in Syria since the early 1980s, establishing strong political and military networks with almost all Iraqi Shiite communities, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, and strong relations with Hezbollah in Lebanon are part and parcel of Iran's efforts to shore up its position within the region against such forces as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, and Israel that Iran considers to be rivals.

In addition to its regional aspirations, Iran, however, also had an eastward look, trying to create strong ties with Asian powerhouses. Thus, it went about strengthening political and economic relations with China and India, regarded as prime partners in counteracting the Western sanctions. Iran's strategic partnership with China benefited, especially within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, by attracting much-needed Chinese investment and economic opportunities; while on the other hand, India provided Iran a big market for energy trade and infrastructure development (Pant, 2013).

The nuclear program has been a principal question in Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy, standing for its quest for technological progress, as well as the deep animosity prevailing between Iran and the international community. For one thing, the Iranian argument was predicated on their sovereign right to develop peaceful nuclear energy; on the other hand, any sinister appearance associated with the Iranian nuclear ambition raised suspicion of the said program possibly being weaponized, hence leading to ever-increasing scrutiny and sanctions.

This tension led to a rather long, complex, and often bitter negotiation process concerning the P5+1 countries (the US, the UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany), as they were then referred to. These tensions were finally calmed with the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015, a significant step in diplomatic overtures.[65] The JCPOA demonstrated Iran's willingness to make concessions and to accept rigorous monitoring in return for the lifting of crippling economic sanctions.

The eventual unilateral withdrawal of the US from the accord in 2018 under the Trump administration devastated the agreement, rekindled hostilities, and created an environment for enhanced uranium enrichment by Iran. This incident demonstrates the convoluted character of the Iranian nuclear saga wherein the pursuit of scientific and economic advancement stands at odds with geopolitical maneuvering and international diplomacy. When it comes to negotiating a final settlement with Iran, which everybody considers to have been very gracious for offering proposals to resolve the issues raised, the talks have dragged on for too long so that today the interests and priority-setting of the other two sides, the US and Israel, run very differently from Iran, thus making any interim solutions appear to have a dim chance of evolution (Roshandel, 2011, s. 94-95). Therefore, the nuclear program provides a vital avenue for appreciating the plight and dynamics of Iran's foreign policy amid an intricate mix of strategic considerations and international efforts to contain nuclear proliferation.[66]

Iran's foreign policy since the revolution has been dictated by the search for legitimacy and recognition throughout the world. With almost all Western and a segment of regional powers imposing isolation and suspicion upon it, Iran adopted a defensive posture and an occasionally hostile one (Warnaar, 2013, s. 64-66). This included countering Western influence, through media and cultural diplomacy, forging alliances with non-aligned and third-world nations.

[65] For the joint statement by then EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed on 14 July 2015, which declared that the two sides (the Islamic Republic of Iran and P5+1 countries) had reached a preliminary agreement on certain issues after years of extensive negotiations on Iran's nuclear program, see Zarif, J. & Mogherini, F., (2015, July 14). Joint Statement on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). European Union External Action. Retrieved from https://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/150714_01_en (Joint statement of Javad Zarif and Federica Mogherini on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), 2015).

[66] One of the most important sources for a detailed examination of the significance of the nuclear program for Iran and its revolutionary ideals, as well as the Iranian perspective on negotiations with the representatives of the international community is the comprehensive work of Hassan Rouhani, known as the "diplomat sheikh," who served as Iran's president from 2013 to 2021. In his study, Rouhani discusses various aspects in detail, including the differing views of Iran's political elites on the issue, the Western approach to the negotiations, and the prospects for a solution. He also provides insight into the domestic political dynamics and the strategic considerations that have shaped Iran's stance, highlighting the complex interplay between ideology and pragmatism in Iran's foreign policy. See Rouhani, Hassan (2012), *Amneyat-e Melli va Diplomasi-ye Hasteyî*, Tehran: Majma'-e Taškhīs-e Maslahat-e Nezām, Markaz-e Tahqeqat-e Estratajik. (Rouhani, 2012)

Accordingly, Iran has sought to strengthen its sovereignty in advancing its own ideological narrative while endeavoring to find its way through the interplay of international relations with respect to sanctions and diplomatic pressure. Iran's conduct illustrates its determination in pursuing its revolutionary principles while adjusting to the real world with an increasing emphasis on political realities.

Hence, Iran's foreign policy on the one hand, and energy as a significant factor throughout, are shaped by energy in general, especially by oil and gas. Being one of the countries in the export of energy in the world, Iran makes uses of its energy resources as a means of pursuing closer diplomatic and economic relations with East Asian nations. Emerging economies of the East, namely China, India, South Korea, and Japan, view Iran as an important energy supplier, creating strong interlinkages in economic terms. By keeping an active engagement with East Asian countries, Iran is not only assured of crucial energy market access but also gains weight in geopolitical leverage; this underlines its dual agenda of developmental economic progress through energy exports and strategic foothold in regional and global affairs amidst the shifting international dynamics and geopolitical pressure. Iran has used all possible ingenious and clandestine means to circumvent the sanctions, enhance, or at least maintain energy export, making energy one of its instruments of economic diplomacy (Vakhshouri, 2015).

Geopolitical shifts have influenced Iranian foreign policy into the post-Cold War period. The most dramatic change, however, evolved after the breakup of the Soviet bloc: new independent states emerging from the heart of Asia and the Caucasus. For Iran, such developments appear to be both threats and opportunities; thus, it has been heavily engaged in culture, economy, and politics to strengthen its foothold in these areas. By employing statecraft via diplomacy, bilateral trade, and cultural exchange, Iran has actually cemented itself as one of the major powers influencing the emerging geography of its eastern and northern neighbors concerning the new regional order (Mirfakhraei & Firouzmandi, 2017). This illustrates Iran's strategy of extending itself through international structures while also attempting to unravel the intricacies of regional geopolitics.

A strong ideological dimension of Iran's foreign policy has characterized it under Ayatollah Khomeini and later Ayatollah Khamenei. It has seen the active exportation of revolutionary principles and worldwide support for Islamic movements. In forging foreign relations since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has stressed, in its revolutionary ideology, the need for solidarity with oppressed Muslim communities all around the world (Khomeini, 2001, s. 72-

78). This foreign policy, therefore, applies to other Islamic groups aside from Shiites, Sunni Islamist movements that share an anti-Western and anti-imperialist position, seeing these as collaborates in the struggle against what they perceive to be hegemonic advances from the West.[67] Such alliances include strategic partnerships Hezbollah in Lebanon and different Palestinian factions. This has placed Iran in direct opposition to the Sunni-majority states, particularly in the Arab world and in some African communities such as Nigeria (Keynoush, 2021).

Moreover, Iran has been having extensive outreach in cultural and religious terms with Shiite communities across the globe and propagating its version of Islam and developing chains of influences as part of its strategy. This has also caused many sectarian tensions at times with some souring incidences of regional conflicts like Syria or Iraq, where Iran has reportedly supported Shiite militias, further intensifying sectarian divides. Challenges notwithstanding, Iran proudly continues to flaunt itself as a voice for Islamic causes in opposition to Western interests and influence across the Middle East and beyond, further emphasizing the weight of ideological conditions under which it pursues foreign policy.

3.6. Conclusion: Setting the Stage for Neo-Classical Realist Interpretation of Islamic Republic's Foreign Policy Dynamics

Neo-Classical Realism attempts to bridge classical Realism's emphasis on human nature and the behavior of states with structural Realism's emphasis on international systems. Its proponents consider the internal and external factors influencing state behavior. Neo-Classical Realism avers that while the anarchic international system affects state behavior, it is also the internal factors, such as leadership perception, state structure, strategic culture, state-society relations, and national identity, that are important to foreign policy-making. The latter is particularly relevant in examining the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy, for which both

[67] Of particular note are, Ayatollah Khomeini's views on the awakening of Islamic consciousness among Sunni communities in non-Shiite regions during the 1970s, as reflected in his speeches. For example, on 10 January 10(when Khomeini was still in exile in Paris and preparing to return to Tehran during the final stages of the revolution), he responded to a question about Turkey as follows (quoted from Sahifeh-ye Nour, vol. 4, p. 192 (Khomeini, 2001, p. 73):
"Question: Do you think that the struggle and the movement that you have started will lead to jihad in Iran and in other countries such as Turkey?
Khomeini: This does not concern us. Our nation influences all Islamic countries and inspires nations to throw off the eastern and western shackles".

internal revolutionary ideologies and external pressures have become important engines of policy-making since the 1979 Revolution.

Up until the 1979 Revolution, Iranian foreign relations under the Pahlavi dynasty had been characterized by pro-Western inclinations, especially under the reign of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, who sought to modernize Iran while keeping it closely aligned with the United States, regional allies of the U.S., and other Western powers. Between 1950s and 1970s, apart from adopting a policy of containment against Soviet influence, it joined the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and strengthened its military and economic ties with Western countries. The Shah's regime, acting as a regional policeman/gendarmerie for Western interests, argued for regional stability, economic development and maintaining the balance of power in the Persian Gulf.

Nonetheless, the 1979 Islamic Revolution represented a tectonic change in domestic and international affairs in Iran. The overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini signified the coming into being of a revolutionary-theocratic regime that sought fervently to export its model of revolutionary governance to the farthest corners of the globe. This was when the Iranian foreign policy radically realigned itself towards extreme anti-Westernness, especially against the United States, termed the “Great Satan” in Iranian revolutionary discourse. The revolution also changed Iran's relations with neighboring countries, as the country moved from a pro-Western monarchy with a strong professional establishment to an anti-imperialist and "Third-World-oriented" republic, thereby altering the regional balance of power and eliciting reactions both regionally and globally.

Despite the dramatic changes in all areas of politics and society brought about by the 1979 Revolution, certain continuities persisted in Iranian domestic politics and in the society-state relations. The centralization of power and the importance of a strong state remained constant. Authoritarianism and significant state control over social and economic life were characteristics of pre-revolutionary Iran under the Shah, and these features continued into the life of the Islamic Republic but with a different set of ideological justifications. The Revolution dismantled only some parts of the state machinery and altered the remaining institutions of control and security to suit its own ideological ends. This basic continuity of state power and control allows us to understand the continued consistency of Iran's domestic and foreign policy.

The Islamic Revolution marked the beginning of a new phase for Iranian foreign policy paradigms that were heavily propped by ideological commitments. An endless string of foreign

policy decisions hinged upon the principle of “nah Sharq, nah Gharb (neither East nor West),” signifying the desire of Iran to articulate its existence away from the two superpowers above all during the Cold War era. Revolutionary Iran's foreign policy correlated expeditiously with attempts to export the Islamic revolution, provide support for Islamic movements and ideologies abroad ranging from jihadism to anti-imperialism. The causes heavily played by ideology led to some of Iran's strained relations with many Western and regional states while inducing a period of isolation and conflict ranging from some examples of the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 being both a case of a test and a stimulus for Iran's revolutionary foreign policy.

Relatively, therefore, the relations between Turkey and Iran have since the 1979 revolution seemed very complex and multi-dimensional. Besides cooperation, it is tinged with competition. During the first years of the revolution, Turkey suspected the rise of an Islamist government in Iran and was worried by the possibility that it would engulf their borders with revolutionary fervor. However, pragmatic considerations and common economic interests have checked ideological differences-especially during the Iran-Iraq War. Over the years, both countries have had important mantras regarding the opposition of Kurdish separatism, while also of closer economic ties. In spite of recurrent clashes due to differing alliances and regional conflicts, such as Iran's support to Russia and Syria, Turkey's membership in NATO, both nations continue to maintain working relationships.

Economic considerations have had a remarkable effect on shaping Iranian foreign policy with regard to the need to alleviate international sanctions, diversify the economy, and attract foreign investment-or as others see it, as a way of getting out of sanctions. Thus, for instance, sanctions on Iran were the driving motive behind the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Other economic relations with neighboring countries such as Turkey and some Arab Gulf states have been vigorously pursued with the aim of reinforcing economic stability. Oil and gas exports remain the focal point of Iran's economic strategy, thereby dictating relations with its major consumers and competitors in the global energy market. Along the other side, economic considerations that drive foreign policy also compel the formulation and direction of the foreign-policy options of the Islamic Republic under sanctions by the West.

According to the neo-classical theory, security concerns are of supreme importance within the context of the foreign policy of Iran. The Iran-Iraq War became a consequential event for shaping Iran's security strategy, which consequently had tremendous implications for military capacity building and development of asymmetric warfare strategies. Support for proxy groups

in Lebanon and Iraq, Syria, and Yemen falls into a broader strategy of power projection and countering threats from regional adversaries and Western powers. The strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz and Iran's focus on maintaining control over this critical chokepoint are further examples of how security drives its foreign policy.

In the foreign policy environment of Iran, ideology and identity are also pervasively intertwined. The commitment of the Islamic Republic to the precepts governing Shia Islam and that of *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) has affected significantly in carrying out its interaction with Shia and Sunni states and communities alike. Iran's ideological orientation also finds expression in its claim to being the leader of the Islamic world and its support for Shia communities and movements across the Middle East. In many situations, ideologically, Iran's position is also at odds with Sunni-majority states-especially with Saudi Arabia-which creates a rivalry that influences a substantial part of the geopolitics of the region.

Iranian foreign policy is very much contextualized by domestic political dynamics, including within the ever-elusive balance of power between reformists and conservatives. For instance, the periods of reformist ascendancy, such as during President Khatami's term (1997-2005), have been marked with attempts at rapprochement with the West and regional neighbors. The period of Ahmadinejad presidency (2005-2013), on the other hand, showcased a return to confrontation. However, one may not be able to insist that the above relationship has been very constant. For example, during the term of moderate-conservative President Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021), Iran converted all its military and intelligence efforts toward dominating Syria and getting access to maximum influence in Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. Thus, domestic politicized facets, public opinion, and economics set a dynamic context under which the decisions affecting foreign policy are made.

As a systemic dynamic, the structure of the international system and the actions of the great powers have a profound influence on the formulation and implementation of Iran's foreign policy. The Cold War atmosphere, at first, provided a context for Iran's nonalignment, leading to a slight degree of respite; in contrast, following the end of the Cold War and in the age of unipolarity, superimposed with the US, tensions and confrontations became widespread, especially in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The multipolarity induction with emerging China and Russia has created new opportunities for Iran to develop alliances and economic partnerships. To enter into such partnerships, Iran internally negotiates the complexities of the international system in a manner that preserves the revolutionary identity;

this is where the Neo-Classical Realist notion of the external and internal pressures arising from autocracy get invoked.

Iran's foreign policy must also be understood in conjunction with the rivalries and alliances in the region. The rivalry with Saudi Arabia –now extended to include the United Arab Emirates– is perhaps the single most important, based on doctrinal opposition and competing for regional power. Iran's alliance with Syria and support for Hezbollah in Lebanon are central to its strategy to create a corridor of influence to the Mediterranean Sea. The interplay between these relationships, instead, is largely a function of strategic interest and ideological commitment, mainly with a view to counteract regional adversaries.

Iran's foreign policy has been heavily influenced by religious and cultural factors. While support for Shia minorities and movements worldwide is a key impetus behind Iran's international activities, the Islamic Republic's commitment to Shia Islam also plays an important part. Indeed, the religious dimension interacts with geopolitical considerations, as constituted by Iran's support for the Houthis in Yemen and its involvement in the Syrian Civil War. The Iranian leadership's claim to religious legitimacy impacts both the rhetoric and actions of its foreign policy, which seeks to portray Iran as a protector of oppressed Muslims everywhere.

A significant element of Iran's foreign policy conduct is an alleged use of proxy forces to achieve its objectives. Funding groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine, and Houthis in Yemen, the Ayatollah Khamenei's regime intends to enhance its influence and create a balance against the competing interests of regional adversaries and Western powers. By adopting this strategy, Iran gets asymmetric deterrence offsetting the deficiency in large-scale conventional military confrontation. Many with reasons from ideological solidarity to political expediency demonstrate an amalgam of internal and external factors in the Neo-Classical Realist sense.

The image of leadership plays a very strong role in neo-classical Realist theory. It is quite clear in the Iranian foreign policy. Before the revolution of 1979, the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was regarded as a modernizing autocrat who sought to orient Iran within the orbit of Western powers and create regional stability. His image as a leader was built around a pro-West and modernization agenda for Iran's military and economy, which would highly influence foreign policy decisions. After the Revolution, another image introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini is completely different: religious leadership that supports an Islamic government but

is anti-any possible form of Western influences of the previous times. Dominant in Khomeini's ideological and revolutionary fervor in declaring foreign policy is an emphasis on anti-imperialism, export of the Islamic Revolution, and support of Islamist movements worldwide. Ayatollah Khamenei, the devoted disciple and successor of Khomeini, is keeping up his mentor's absolutely stern ideological position as the supreme and most authoritative decision-maker in the Iranian religious and political system, albeit with the occasional pragmatic movements, adapting to changing circumstances.

Khomeini's revolutionary perspective therefore set the tone for Iran's early post-revolutionary foreign direction. Since then, these several elected political leaders-Rafsanjani, Khatami, Ahmadinejad, Rouhani, and Raisi-have subsequently pursued their own foreign policy visions as caught between ideological commitment and pragmatic exigencies. The challenge of dealings between the Supreme Leader and the President, along with the involvement of other key institutions like the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), draws the importance of domestic leadership dynamics in forging Iran's foreign policy. The contrast between revolutionary and post-revolution leaders serves as an apt illustration of how very different leadership styles and their ideological commitments can drastically alter the course of foreign policy.

Strategic culture is yet another Neo-Classical Realist paradigm that aims to explain the working mentality of Iranian foreign policy through the historical background, traditions, and grand national identity that influence a state's strategic preference. Pre-1979 Iran's strategic culture under the Shah was characterized by deep-rooted ancient Persian heritages and his paradigm of a regional power in close accordance with Western interests. The Shah's policies under his strategic culture targeted the containment of Soviet influence and the promotion of regional order through a balancing act of the great powers, therefore ensuring Iran's regional leadership. After the revolution, the strategic culture conformed to the ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic whereby Islamic unity, resistance to Western domination, and support for Muslims under oppression became major themes. Emerging from the fires of revolutionary zeal, this new strategic culture drove Iranian decisions to aid proxy groups and attempt to further sway regional political winds, thereby demonstrating just how embedded in history and culture strategic preferences and behaviors can be.

In order to understand the peculiar dynamics of Iranian foreign policy, one must give importance to the structure and influence of domestic institutions. The pre-revolutionary

Pahlavi regime had centralized power at the top of the monarchy with little within the scope of checks and balances from other institutions. The Shah was free to pursue a foreign policy that was closely tied to his interpretation of modernization and Westernization, because he kept in his hold the military and intelligence services. The 1979 Islamic Republic started with a complicated political structure having several power centers, including the Supreme Leader, the President, the *Majlis* (Parliament), as well as powerful bodies such as the Revolutionary Guards and some councils (*Shura*s) regulating political, military, and judicial spheres of the state. All these institutional interactions, which differ in power, have impacted the shape and extent of the foreign policy of the country. The Revolutionary Guards have turned out to be an important actor in both shaping and implementing foreign policy, particularly regarding the support of proxy groups and interventions across the Middle East, even into Turkey. The reality of complexity in this case is various power centers working together to shape the conclusions referred to as foreign policy decisions.

State-society relations, which denote the connection between the government and its citizenry, have also helped develop Iranian foreign policy. Under the Shah, the state-society relations were characterized by a top-down approach, one with minimal political participation and maximum repression of dissent. Leadership was charismatic one-day, and the next-day political oppression-policies and actions of the Shah-modernization and pro-Western-polices were in direct conflict with the traditional and religious values of Iranian society, thereby raising the level of discontent with the monarchy, contributing towards the revolution. After 1979, while the Islamic Republic was trying to bring together state-society relations and Islamic principles, it sought to incorporate many elements of public participation through institutions like the *Majlis* but with massive control maintained by religious and revolutionary organizations. The politicization of the masses was central to the regime's foreign policy particularly through appeals to nationalism or religious sentiments –be it during the Iran-Iraq War or Iran's religiously motivated intervention in the civil war in Syria. Conversely, external economic problems and internal political repression have led to massive civilian uprisings and therefore a reassessment of the introduction and priority of certain foreign policies. This back-and-forth relationship therefore reinforces the idea that legitimacy at home and public support form an important determinant of foreign policy making.

CHAPTER – IV

SYRIA IN CRISIS: TRILATERAL NEXUS BETWEEN SYRIA, IRAN AND TURKEY BEFORE AND DURING THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR (2011-2024)

4.1. Introduction

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 marked a major turning point in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, and has had a profound impact on Turkish-Iranian relation. With the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Turkey, despite its close alliance with the United States and NATO membership, was one of the first countries to recognize the new regime. This pragmatic move set the stage for a complex relationship characterized by cautious engagement and mutual suspicion. The early years saw diplomatic overtures such as Foreign Minister Gündüz Ökçün's visit to Tehran, but these were tempered by the ideological and security concerns that emerged following the 1980 military coup in Turkey. This chapter examines the evolution of this bilateral relationship, highlighting key diplomatic engagements and strategic shifts in the 1990s and 2000s that would shape the Iranian foreign policy and its approach to Turkey’s growing role in the Middle East before and during the Arab uprisings that began in December 2010.

The 1990s and especially the 2000s witnessed a dynamic shift in the foreign policies of both Iran and Turkey as they sought to expand their influence in the Middle East. Iran, under the leadership of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, adopted a more assertive stance, using its nuclear program and support for regional proxies to project power. Conversely, Turkey, led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, pursued a policy of “zero problems with neighbors,” emphasizing economic integration and diplomatic engagement. This chapter also compares these divergent approaches and analyzes how each country's strategy reflects its geopolitical ambitions and domestic political considerations. The

contrasting policies of Iran and Turkey set the stage for both cooperation and competition in the region.

The Arab uprisings of 2010-2011 were a seismic event that reshaped the political landscape of the Middle East. Initially driven by popular demands for democracy and economic reform, these uprisings quickly evolved into complex conflicts that drew on historical conflicts and had far-reaching implications. In particular, the Syrian Civil War has become a flashpoint for regional and international tensions. It is therefore worth examining the conditions that led to the uprisings, the rapid escalation of violence in Syria, and the resulting power vacuum that regional and global powers sought to fill. Understanding this context is crucial for analyzing the subsequent policies and interactions of key players, including Iran and Turkey, in the Syrian conflict.

Iran's relationship with Syria has been a cornerstone of its regional strategy since the 1980s. The alliance, forged during the Iran-Iraq War, has been characterized by strong military and economic cooperation. With the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, Iran's support for the Assad regime intensified, involving substantial financial aid, military advisors, and support for allied militias across the Middle Eastern and Asian Shia communities. In this context, it is important to trace the evolution of Syrian-Iranian relations, examine how the civil war has reinforced their strategic partnership and explore the implications of Iran's involvement in Syria for its broader regional ambitions and the responses of other regional actors, particularly Turkey, in order to understand the background and possible future of the Syrian crisis.

On the other hand, Turkish-Syrian relations have been shaped by a long and turbulent history, dating back to the Ottoman era. Following Syria's independence, relations were often strained over territorial disputes, water rights, and ideological differences during the Cold War. However, the 2000s saw a rapprochement under the AK Party government, marked by increased economic ties and diplomatic exchanges. This period of thaw came to an abrupt end with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, when Turkey turned against the Assad regime. However, it is still necessary to explore the historical trajectory of Turkish-Syrian relations, highlighting key moments of cooperation and conflict, as well as the profound impact of the Syrian conflict on bilateral relations, in order to understand the true nature of the developments since 2011-12 period.

The Syrian Civil War posed significant challenges to Turkish-Iranian relations, as both countries found themselves on opposing sides of the conflict. While Iran provided unwavering

support to the Assad regime, Turkey became a staunch supporter of the Syrian opposition. This policy divergence led to heightened tensions and a strategic rivalry in Syria. Despite these differences, both countries have also recognized the need to maintain diplomatic channels to manage their broader bilateral relationship. This chapter also examines the impact of the Syrian Civil War on Turkish-Iranian relations, analyzing how each country's actions in Syria have affected their bilateral interactions and regional strategies.

The involvement of international actors has played a significant role in shaping Turkish-Iranian relations, particularly in the context of the Syrian Civil War. The United States, Russia, and various European countries have each pursued their own agendas in the region, influencing the policies of both Turkey and Iran. The US-Iranian rivalry, Russian support for the Assad regime, and European diplomatic efforts have all had direct and indirect effects on Turkish-Iranian interactions. Therefore, in order to analyze the Turkish-Iranian-Syrian nexus during the Syrian Civil War, it is essential to understand the influence of these international actors and assess how their interventions have affected the strategic calculations of both Turkey and Iran, as well as the broader implications for regional stability.

In this chapter, I will employ a Neo-Classical Realist framework to analyze these issues and provide a comprehensive understanding of Iran's position on the matter. This approach will help elucidate the underlying causes of the Syrian uprising and its subsequent transformation into a civil war, taking into account the role played by both regional and international actors. By integrating historical context, leadership dynamics, and institutional influences, it is possible to gain deeper insights into the strategic calculations that have shaped Iran's policies and actions throughout the conflict. In addition, this analysis will explore how the interplay of domestic and external factors has contributed to the complexity and persistence of the Syrian crisis.

4.2. Turkish-Iranian Relations since the 1979 Revolution

The relationship between Turkey and Iran following the 1979 Iranian Revolution has been characterized by a mixture of competition, cooperation, and strategic balancing. The revolution drastically transformed Iran's political landscape, establishing a theocratic regime in stark contrast to Turkey's secular republic. Despite these ideological differences, the two countries have managed their bilateral ties through periods of mutual interest and regional rivalry. Their

relationship has been shaped by various factors, including geopolitical changes, economic interests, and regional security concerns. Over the years, Turkey and Iran have engaged in pragmatic cooperation in areas such as trade and energy while also facing conflicting policies on regional conflicts and political alliances. This intricate relationship highlights the significance of both nations in the Middle East context and their ability to balance rivalry with cooperation.

The 1979 Revolution, the first encounter of the national attitudes and the beginning of the crisis

The relationship between Turkey and Iran has long been characterized by a cautious and watchful dynamic, shaped by centuries of neighborly interactions often intertwined with outright hostility and rivalry. These two powerful regional actors have historically maintained a cautious coexistence, each keeping a watchful eye on the other. This cautious relationship became particularly pronounced following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which ushered in significant ideological and political shifts (Koç M. A., Rekabetten Geleceğe: Türkiye-İran İlişkilerinin Güvenlik Boyutu, 2012, s. 7). Since the revolution, the relationship has evolved into a complex interplay of mutual suspicion and strategic competition, with both countries seeking to assert their influence in the region while preserving their distinct political and ideological identities. This intricate balance of power and ideology continues to define the nature of Turkish-Iranian relations, reflecting a blend of cooperation and contention driven by both historical legacies and contemporary geopolitical realities.

Historical Context and Pre-Revolution Relations

In the final years of Muhammad Reza Shah’s reign, Turkish-Iranian relations were relatively stable, characterized by mutual cooperation within the framework of CENTO, (which included the UK, Pakistan, and Iraq, aimed at countering Soviet influence in the region (Mahdavi A. R., 2010, s. 233-237). Both Turkey and Iran, under secular and pro-Western leadership, found common ground in their geopolitical strategies, economic interests, and security concerns and maintained a cordial relationship despite occasional differences. Although, like Turkey, Iran's close cooperation with the United States since the 1960s has disturbed both socialists and nationalists as well as Khomeini and the Islamic revolutionary forces surrounding him, the Shah's regime continued this authoritarian trend despite all its social costs (Mahdavi M. , The Rise of Khomeinism: Problematizing the Politics of Resistance in Pre-Revolutionary Iran, 2014, s. 55).

Impact of the 1979 Iranian Revolution

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 dramatically altered the geopolitical landscape, fundamentally transforming Iran from a pro-Western monarchy to an anti-Western theocracy under Ayatollah Khomeini. This ideological shift was in stark contrast to Turkey's secular, Western-aligned stance. The revolutionary fervor in Iran sought to export its Islamic ideology, challenging the secularism that had been deeply embedded in Turkey's political framework since the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The success of the revolution thus marked a significant departure from the policies of Shah, emphasizing a rejection of Western influence and an embrace of Islamic governance. This new ideological trajectory not only sought to reshape Iran's internal dynamics but also posed a direct ideological challenge to neighboring Turkey, which had firmly established its secular identity through Atatürk's sweeping reforms (Elik, 2012, s. 40-41). Consequently, the post-revolutionary period was characterized by a complex interplay of ideological confrontation and strategic recalibration, as both nations navigated the profound implications of Iran's transformation on regional stability and their bilateral relations.

Initial Diplomatic Encounters

In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, the initial diplomatic interactions between the new Iranian regime and Turkey were characterized by cautious diplomacy tempered with ideological apprehension. Ankara did not take a negative view of the regime change in Iran y and was one of the first countries to recognize the new government immediately after the revolution.[68] However, under the leadership of President Fahri Korutürk and Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit, Turkey was concerned about the potential influence of Iran's revolutionary ideology on its own secular and predominantly Sunni Muslim population. While efforts were made to maintain normal in bilateral relations in 1979 and the early 1980s, underlying tensions were unmistakable, reflecting Turkey's concerns about the ideological shift in Iran and its possible regional implications (Hale, 2000, s. 180).

Early Crisis Signals and Reciprocal Regime Anxieties

[68] The Ecevit government reacted swiftly to the Iranian Revolution by sending Foreign Minister Gündüz Ökçün to Iran. Within twenty-four hours, on 13 February 1979, Turkey recognized the legitimacy of the new Iranian regime. The Turkish government declared a policy of developing relations with Iran and respecting its internal affairs, signalling a commitment to diplomatic engagement and non-interference. This approach aimed to stabilize bilateral relations amidst the significant ideological changes brought about by the revolution. (Elik, 2012, p. 36)

Although the Turkish government officially recognized the revolution in Iran, the ideological chasm between the two nations was wide and unlikely to bebridged easily. This gap created a volatile situation in which any spark could ignite a major. The ideological differences, pitting Iran's theocratic anti-Western stance clashing against Turkey's secular pro-Western orientation, set the stage for inevitable tensions. Turkey's initial diplomatic gestures of recognition and non-interference did little to alleviate the underlying friction, as both countries remained wary of each other's ideological influences and potential impact on their domestic and regional stability. This precarious balance reflected deeper issues that would continue to challenge bilateral relations in the years following the revolution. In particular, calls for revolution directed at regional Muslim communities by some lower-level officials and revolutionaries from Iran, as well as statements critical of Turkey's relations with the West, gradually began to cause growing discomfort on the Turkish side.[69] This mutual suspicion created a fragile and cautious diplomatic relationship, characterized by underlying tensions and strategic maneuvering.

Regime Exportation Efforts

Iran's efforts to export its revolutionary ideology have severely strained its relations with Turkey. The Iranian government actively supported Islamist groups across the Middle East, including those in Turkey, and promoted governance based on Islamic principles. Turkey perceived this as a subversive attempt to undermine its secular foundations (Barkey, 2016). Specific statements from Ayatollah Khomeini and later by Ayatollah Khamenei emphasized the incompatibility of secularism with true Islamic governance, further heightening Turkish concerns. Khomeini's rhetoric, such as his call for Muslims to rise up against secular regimes, and Khamenei's continued support for Islamist movements, further exacerbated tensions. In the 1980s Turkey's secular leaders, wary of Iranian influence, saw these actions as direct threat to the secular, pro-Western orientation established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Saray, Türk-İran İlişkileri, 2006, s. 163-169). This ideological clash created a persistent undercurrent of mistrust

[69] The memoirs of Yakup Aslan –a pious young man of Kurdish and Shafi'i-origin from Turkey's south-eastern Hakkari region- provide extensive insider information and observations on how the 1979 Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini's calls resonated in Turkey during the early months of the revolution. He describes in detail l how the excitement of the Islamic Revolution led some Turkish revolutionaries to leave their jobs and surroundings in Turkey to go to Iran. Aslan, who went to Iran during this period and stayed for years, also fought on the Khorramshahr front during the Iran-Iraq War that began in 1980. His memoirs include details about Turkey's changing official stance towards Iran during the coup of 12 September 1980, and the subsequent persecution and legal proceedings faced by groups labelled as "İrancılar" (Iranists) in Turkey. Aslan, Yakup (2014), *Bir Rüyanın Arkasından Gerçekleşen Sessiz Devrim*, İstanbul: Ozan Yayıncılık (Aslan Y. , 2014).

and antagonism between the two nations that influenced their diplomatic and regional interactions for decades.

Turkey's Western Orientation and Iranian Reactions

Turkey's historical alignment with the West, epitomized by its NATO membership and close relationship with the United States, stands in stark contrast to Iran's adversarial stance towards Western powers. Throughout the Shah era, Iran maintained complex relations with the West, exploiting its strategic position and oil resources while often balancing Western cooperation with nationalist rhetoric. However, the 1979 Islamic Revolution radically transformed Iran into an Islamic Republic under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, marking a decisive shift towards anti-Western sentiment (Kamrava, 2014, s. 158). Khomeini's regime denounced what it perceived as Western imperialism and interference in Islamic affairs, and advocated a fundamental restructuring of global power dynamics. In response, Turkey, under the leadership of secular governments, reaffirmed its commitment to secularism and Western alliances. Turkish leaders publicly emphasized the importance of secular values and democratic governance, seeing them as safeguards against the ideological influence emanating from Iran's revolutionary fervor (Elik, 2012, s. 35-36). Khomeini's accusations that Turkey was colluding with the West to undermine Islamic unity further strained bilateral relations, heightening tensions between Ankara and Tehran in the early years of the Islamic Republic.[70]

Impact of the 1980 Turkish Coup and Secular Positions

The 1980 military coup in Turkey, led by General Kenan Evren, further entrenched the country's secular and anti-Islamist position, while also emphasizing cooperation with the United States against Iran in the broader Cold War context (Elik, 2012, s. 37). The new military regime stepped up efforts to suppress Islamist movements and reaffirmed Turkey's secular identity, viewing Iran's Islamic regime with increasing suspicion. In collaboration with the US, the coup leaders saw the preservation of secularism as crucial to national stability and security, leading to a more rigid stance against any perceived Iranian influence. This period solidified the ideological divide between the two countries, with Turkey's secular military government,

[70] Another development that escalated tensions in Ankara-Tehran relations at this time was the US-led efforts in the region to counter Iran, including projects to support anti-Iranian actions. Consequently, since the early days of Khomeini's rule, Turkey's relations with the Islamic Republic have been significantly strained by the presence of U.S. military bases and intelligence/military operations on Turkish soil, as well as by American activities against Iran in the region. For an understanding of the revolutionaries' approach to Turkey-U. anti-revolutionary cooperation, see: Hussain, Asaf (1985), *Islamic Iran: Revolution and Counter-revolution*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan (Hussain, 1985, pp. 303-305). These factors have permeated virtually every phase of Turkey's relations with the Islamic Republic, contributing to the ongoing challenges and disputes between the two nations.

bolstered by its alliance with the US, and Iran's theocratic regime representing two fundamentally opposed visions for governance in the region (Kösebalaban, 2011, s. 111-112). This alignment with US anti-Iranian policies further exacerbated tensions, embedding the geopolitical struggle within the larger Cold War rivalry.

1980-88 Iran-Iraq War and Economic Relations

During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Turkish-Iranian relations were marked by a complex interplay of regional geopolitics, economic necessity, and ideological differences. Turkey played a crucial role in Iran's regional isolation, which was exacerbated by the hostile attitude of the Arab Gulf states. Iran's revolutionary rhetoric and support for Shiite movements in the Gulf caused considerable alarm among Sunni-majority Arab states, leading them to align themselves with Iraq. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), formed in 1981, openly supported Iraq financially and diplomatically, further isolating Iran. During this period, Iran faced not only military challenges but also severe diplomatic and economic pressure from its Arab neighbors and the wider international community (Menashri, 1990, s. 208-210).[71]

Iran's isolation extended beyond the Arab world to include significant alienation from Western countries. The United States and its allies imposed strict economic sanctions on Iran, designed to cripple its war effort and undermine its revolutionary regime. By 1984, U.S. sanctions had cut off over $5 billion in Iranian assets, and European countries, in line with US policy, also reduced their economic interactions with Tehran (Menashri, 1990, s. 329-330). These measures severely affected Iran's ability to sustain its war effort and maintain its economy, forcing it to seek alternative economic partners and supply routes.[72] Iran's strategy included diversifying its trading partners to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions and economic pressure. This approach was crucial to Iran's economic resilience during a period of intense regional conflict and international isolation.

[71] During this period and in the early 1980s, the main issue in the relations between Iran and the Arab Gulf states was Iran's overt attempts to export its revolution, encouraging representatives of Shiite Arab communities visiting Qom and Tehran to speak out against their own countries. Additionally, Iran sought to build strong networks, particularly in Iraq and the Arab Gulf states. Another factor that brought these issues to the forefront of international law and further fuelled geopolitical competition was the dispute over the name of the Gulf. As in the era of Mohammad Reza Shah, the Islamic Republic of Iran continued to refer to the area as the "Persian Gulf," while the communities on the opposite shore insisted on calling it the "Arabian Gulf." Both sides defended their claims by citing old maps and the practices of international organizations that suited their respective arguments.

[72] For more information on the efforts of Iranian officials during the war period to establish alternative trade networks outside the West, especially with some Asian countries and Eastern Bloc states, in order to seek alternative energy markets and procure necessary materials, see (Allamiyan, 2012), (Rafsanjani, 2006).

In the midst of this isolation, Turkey emerged as a crucial economic partner for Iran. Despite ideological differences, Turkey maintained a pragmatic approach, focusing on economic benefits. Trade between Turkey and Iran increased significantly during the war, with bilateral trade volume reaching around $1 billion annually by the mid-1980s. Between April 1981 and March 1982, Turkey and Iran entered into commercial exchange agreements, whereby Turkey supplied Iran with manufactured goods and food products in exchange for the purchase of oil, cementing its position as Iran's foremost trading partner by 1983 (Jenkins, 2012, s. 17). Turkey provided a vital lifeline for Iran, supplying essential goods and facilitating the transit of Iranian oil to international markets.[73] Turkish exports to Iran included food, industrial goods, and machinery, which were vital to for Iran's war-stricken economy. Furthermore, Turkey allowed Iranian oil to pass through its territory, helping Tehran circumvent international embargoes (Hale, 2000, s. 180).

Statistical figures highlight Turkey's pivotal role in Iran's economic survival during the war. By 1987, Iran was exporting some 250,000 barrels of oil per day through Turkish pipelines, generating vital income amid the economic turmoil cause by the war. Additionally, Iran's imports from Turkey accounted for nearly 40% of its total imports during some periods of the conflict. These economic interactions underscored Turkey's significance in Iran's strategy to mitigate the effects of regional and international isolation (Elik, 2012, s. 163). Turkey's balanced approach allowed it to maintain beneficial relations with both Iran and Iraq, positioning itself as a key mediator and economic conduit in a deeply polarized region.

During this period, it can be stated that two dynamics directly influenced Turkey's trade relations with Iran: Turkey's need for oil and its simultaneous trade with Iraq. According to official Turkish statistics, imports from Iraq exceeded those from Iran in the early stages of the war, underscoring the importance of mutual caution. Trade with Iran peaked in 1983-84, but the cancellation of the barter agreement in 1985 led to a decline in commercial momentum between Ankara and Tehran. In general, Turkey's political and economic relations with Iraq were considerably more dominant throughout the war than its relations with Iran.[74] During this

[73] It should be noted that Turkey not only provided vital support to Iran during the war but also emerged as a crucial trading partner for Iraq. Turkey's significant advantage at this point undoubtedly stemmed from the prolonged duration of the conflict, which prevented either side from delivering a decisive blow to the other. Additionally, Turkey capitalized on the Iran-Iraq war to strengthen its economic relations with Baghdad. By the mid-1980s, Iran and Iraq together accounted for about a quarter of Turkey's total foreign trade. See (Menashri, 1990, s. 367-368) and (Jenkins, 2012, pp. 16-17) for the details of Turkish economic and commercial advantages during the war.

[74] One of the most concrete indicators of the momentum and high-level rapprochement in Turkish-Iranian relations during this period was the visit of Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi t to Turkey in January 1985, which was

period, Iran's greatest advantage was its ability to keep Turkey in a neutral position by establishing trade relations and slowing down or changing the regime's own regime export policies towards its Sunni neighbor, (Elik, 2012, s. 164-165). Thus, Turkey pursued an active policy of neutrality among its Arabian and Persian neighbors during the war of 1980-88. Nevertheless, in the immediate aftermath of the war, new crises emerged in relations, revolving around issue of identity and ideology.

4.2.1. Turkish-Iranian Relations in the 1990s

During the Gulf War of 1990-91, Turkey and Iran found themselves in a complex geopolitical landscape. Turkey, under President Turgut Özal, aligned itself closely with the United States and NATO, allowing coalition forces to use its Incirlik Air Base. This stance was driven by Turkey's desire to strengthen its strategic partnership with the West and to mitigate the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's Iraq (Hale, 2000, s. 237-241). In contrast, Iran, still recovering from the devastating Iran-Iraq War, adopted a more neutral position which facilitated the restoration of the relations with several Arab states that had been severed during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s (Keddie, Modern Iran: Roots and results of revolution, 2006, s. 266). While Tehran condemned Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, it was careful not to overtly support the US-led intervention.. This divergence in their positions on the Iraq War highlighted the divergent strategic priorities and alliances of Turkey and Iran in the early 1990s. This profound difference between the two regional powers' differing approach to the Gulf War is closely related to the leadership characteristics and strategic culture of both sides, which are reflected in their attitudes and rivalry.

Throughout the 1990s, both Turkey and Iran harbored mutual suspicions about each other's political systems and regional ambitions. Turkey, with its secular, Kemalist foundations and strong military influence that dominated the political field during the 1980s and 1990s, viewed the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideology and support for Islamist movements with concern, fearing the potential spread of political Islam within its borders (Elik, 2012, s. 44-48). Conversely, Iran was wary of Turkey's close ties with the West and its secularism, seeing it as

reciprocated by the visit of Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal to Tehran in January 1986. These high-level visits were followed by reciprocal visits at the ministerial level, and the mutual fears of the early years of the Revolution were to some extent normalized on the Turkish side through Özal's personal efforts.

a potential threat to its own ideological and political stability (Koç M. A., Rekabetten Geleceğe: Türkiye-İran İlişkilerinin Güvenlik Boyutu, 2012, s. 18-38). These mutual fears often led to cautious diplomatic engagement, with both countries seeking to avoid direct confrontation while remaining wary of the other's influence in regional politics.

Diplomatic tensions occasionally flared up in the form of persona non grata incidents, where diplomats or officials from one country were expelled by the other. These incidents usually arose from accusations of espionage, interference in internal affairs, or support for opposition groups. For instance, in the late 1980s and in the mid-1990s, Turkey declared several Iranian diplomats persona non grata over allegations of involvement with Turkish Islamist groups. Similarly, Iran responded with reciprocal expulsions, reflecting the deep-seated mistrust between the two nations.[75] These incidents underscored the fragility of Turkish-Iranian

[75] In 1989, Iranian Ambassador Manouchehr Mottaqi –who was appointed as minister of foreign affairs by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during 2005-2010 and visited Turkey several times- was on the verge of being declared persona non grata by Turkey for his alleged involvement in activities that were perceived as attempts to export Iran's revolutionary ideology to Turkey. This incident took place against a background of heightened sensitivity in Turkey to any foreign influence that might encourage Islamist movements within its borders. The Turkish military, which wielded considerable power in Turkish politics and a staunch defender of the secular state, saw Mottaqi's actions as a direct threat to national security. Mottaqi was reportedly involved in organizing Qods Day rallies in Turkey, which were seen as a platform for promoting Iranian revolutionary ideals. This move by the Turkish government underscored its commitment to maintaining secularism and preventing the spread of Iran's political and religious ideology (Ehteshami & Elik, Turkey's Growing Relations with Iran and Arab Middle East, 2011).

In 1997, two Iranian diplomats, Ambassador Muhammad Reza Bagheri and Muhammad Reza Rashid, head of the Iranian consulate in Istanbul were declared *persona non grata* and expelled by Turkey for allegations of supporting armed networks and radical Islamist groups in the country following their participation in the Qods Day organized by Refah (Welfare) Party's Sincan Municipality on 4 February 1997.* This was a period of considerable political tension in Turkey, where the influence of the military remained strong, and there were persistent concerns about internal security and the rise of Islamist movements. Bagheri was accused of orchestrating activities that included supporting militant groups and facilitating the flow of arms and resources to these networks. The Turkish authorities viewed these actions as part of a broader Iranian strategy to destabilize the region and promote its revolutionary agenda. The expulsions led to a diplomatic crisis between Ankara and Tehran, reflecting the deep-rooted fears and mutual suspicions that characterized their bilateral relations in the 1990s. These incidents highlighted the delicate balance Turkey sought to maintain between its internal security imperatives and its complex relationship with neighbouring Iran (Koç M. A., Rekabetten Geleceğe: Türkiye-İran İlişkilerinin Güvenlik Boyutu, 2012, p. 21).

Iran responded to Turkey's expulsions of Iranian diplomats, such as Manouchehr Mottaqi in 1989 and Muhammad Reza Bagheri and Muhammad Reza Rashid in 1997, with reciprocal diplomatic measures and denials of involvement in destabilizing activities. In each case, Iran vehemently denied accusations of supporting militant groups or attempting to export its revolutionary ideology to Turkey. These expulsions have strained diplomatic relations between the two countries and led Iran to protest Turkey's actions as unjust and politically motivated. Following the expulsions, Iran typically responded by reciprocating by expelling Turkish diplomats and issuing strong diplomatic protests. This tit-for-tat approach was aimed at asserting Iran's position and challenging Turkey's accusations (Elik, 2012, pp. 47-48). Furthermore, Iran used its media and diplomatic platforms to criticize Turkey's handling of the incidents and portrayed them as part of a broader strategy to undermine Iran's influence and stability in the region.

* During my diplomatic tenure in Iran, I had the opportunity to meet Muhammad Reza Bagheri, who served as Iran's ambassador to Ankara from 1990 to 1997 and was the central figure in the Jerusalem Night (Qods Day) events that caused a diplomatic crisis in February1997 and made him a target of Turkish politicians and media organizations at the time. When I spoke to Bagheri in late 2010, during his tenure as Deputy Head of the Hajj and

relations and the persistent challenges of achieving sustained diplomatic harmony. Although revolutionary and ideological outbursts on both sides led to strained relations, the foreign ministries played a crucial role in maintaining relations and preventing a complete derailment of the relationship during these challenging times.[76] It is worth noting that the approach of the foreign ministries to repairing and maintaining relations, particularly on the Iranian side, underscores the role of domestic institutional structures in formulating and sustaining foreign policy as a neo-classical realist parameter.

As an outcome of geopolitical calculations and strategic culture on both sides, the Kurdish issue was a major point of contention in Turkish-Iranian relations in the 1990s. Both countries faced Kurdish separatist movements within their borders: Turkey with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Iran with various Kurdish factions, such as KOMALA and PJAK. The two nations often accused each other of harboring and supporting these groups, which strained their bilateral relations. Despite these tensions, there were instances of pragmatic cooperation, such as intelligence sharing and coordinated military operations to contain Kurdish insurgencies. The Kurdish question remained a sensitive and complex issue that influenced the dynamics of Turkish-Iranian interactions throughout the decade. The Kurdish separatism has posed a significant problem for both Turkey and Iran. Although the two countries have occasionally approached each other with caution on this issue, they have mostly engaged in overt or covert cooperation. The issue has continued to influence bilateral relations, serving as a card that has been periodically played in their interactions with the United States, Israel, and Iraq (Olson, 2000).

An additional factor, that has further complicated an already sensitive and problematic relations, was the significant increase in US influence in the Middle East during the 1990s, especially after the Gulf War. This shift in regional power dynamics had a profound impact on Turkish-Iranian relations. As a key NATO ally, Turkey benefited from closer ties with the US, receiving economic and military support. However, this alignment also made Turkey a focal point for Iranian apprehensions about American hegemony. Isolated by its adversarial

Pilgrimage Organization in Tehran under the authority of Supreme Leader Khamenei, he seemed reluctant to discuss the specific events of those days when asked for his reflections on the February 1997 period in Turkey and how he viewed them in retrospect from 2010. He did, however, express regret for the incidents and conveyed a sense that a process had been set in motion during that period that went beyond the bilateral intentions of Turkey and Iran and could not be reversed.

[76] For example, during the ambassador crisis in 1997, Iranian Foreign Minister Kemal Harrazi, who attended the UN General Assembly meetings in New York, announced on September 22 that they had reached an agreement with Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem to send the ambassadors of the two countries to their places of duty. This crisis was resolved seven months later and relations were put back on track thanks to the foreign ministries.

relationship with the US, Iran viewed Turkey's growing strategic cooperation with Washington with suspicion (Larrabee & Nader, 2013). This growing US presence in the region thus became a source of tension, with Ankara and Tehran often finding themselves on opposing sides of American policies and initiatives.

Despite political and strategic differences, economic relations between Turkey and Iran gradually improved during the 1990s. Trade between the two countries expanded, driven by mutual interests in energy, particularly natural gas and oil. Turkey's growing economy needed Iranian energy resources, while Iran sought reliable markets for its exports in the face of international sanctions and economic isolation. Bilateral agreements and joint ventures in the energy sector reflected a pragmatic approach to economic cooperation that served as a counterbalance to the political and strategic discord (Eruysal, 2011, s. 80-83). The economic interdependence established during this period laid the foundations for deeper commercial ties in the following decades.

Cultural and political interactions between Turkey and Iran in the 1990s were marked by both cooperation and contention. On the one hand, there was a shared cultural heritage and historical ties that facilitated exchanges in areas such as academia, tourism, and the arts. On the other hand, the ideological divide between Turkey's secularism and Iran's theocracy often led to political friction. Diplomatic efforts to bridge this divide included high-level visits and dialogues aimed at promoting mutual understanding. However, these efforts were often overshadowed by underlying geopolitical rivalries and domestic political pressures in both countries.[77]

The establishment of the Developing-8 (D-8) in the 1990s was a key initiative to promote regional and international cooperation among Muslim states, and played a significant role in the cautious relationship between Turkey and Iran during that decade. Led by Turkey under

[77] I would like to share two interesting anecdotes from the 2011-12 period, when the Arab uprisings were just beginning and it became clear that Iran would openly support Assad in Syria, to illustrate how the political and geopolitical competition between Turkey and Iran affected cultural and educational relations. In Turkey, there were numerous departments of Persian language and literature, and new ones were opened with ease. In Iran, however, there was only one Turkish language and literature department at Allameh Tabataba'i University, and Turkish language was offered as an elective course at Tehran University. Despite numerous diplomatic discussions and requests for reciprocity, Turkey's insistence on opening a second Turkish department in Iran was unsuccessful. Similarly, while Iran had several cultural and language training centres in Turkey, it was not until 2012 that Turkey's first cultural centre in Iran was established, thanks to the efforts of then Ambassador Ümit Yardım and myself, that. Despite positive responses from the Iranian Foreign Ministry, practical obstacles remained due to security concerns and the reluctance of various Iranian institutions towards Turkey. Discussions with Turkish diplomats and officials in Iran revealed that these problems still persist in 2024-25, when this thesis was being prepared.

Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, the D-8 aimed to strengthen economic ties, promote peace, and support development among its members, including Iran. This platform provided a structured environment for cooperation, allowing both nations to work together despite their geopolitical tensions. Through the D-8, Turkey and Iran were able to engage in dialogue, share technological advances, and strengthen r economic cooperation, which contributed to regional stability and mutual interests. In addition, the D-8 helped these neighboring states to navigate their complex relationship by focusing on common goals and fostering a sense of unity among the participating Muslim countries. The platform's emphasis on economic development and cooperation allowed Turkey and Iran to mitigate their differences and collaborate on projects that benefited both nations, ultimately improving their bilateral relations during a period of cautious engagement (Aral, 2005). This organization represented a regional and international initiative by the Turkish side that also reflected the differing approaches of the political elites towards Iran.

In summary, the 1990s were a period of complex and multifaceted relations between Turkey and Iran. While strategic and ideological differences often led to tensions and mutual suspicion, there were also significant efforts to foster economic cooperation and jointly address regional security concerns. The decade highlighted the dual nature of Turkish-Iranian relations, characterized by both rivalry and pragmatism. Understanding this period requires acknowledging the interplay of internal political dynamics, regional ambitions, and external influences, particularly the role of the United States.

4.2.2. Post 9/11 Chaos, the US Invasion of Iraq and Turkish-Iranian Relations in the New Middle East

The 2000s witnessed a sophisticated and dynamic evolution in Turkish-Iranian relations, largely framed by major regional and international events. From the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks to the onset of the Arab Uprisings, the interactions between these two regional powers were influenced by a myriad of factors, including the invasion of Iraq invasion, the Kurdish question, the Iranian nuclear dossier, and the changing dynamics of Turkish foreign policy under the AK Party. Reflecting a neo-classical realist perspective from the Iranian side, this analysis examines how internal and external pressures shaped Tehran's approach to Ankara during this period.

The 2000s marked a departure from the dynamics that characterized Turkish-Iranian relations in the 1980s and 1990s. The end of the Cold War and the emergence of new regional challenges necessitated a recalibration of strategies. In the 1980s, relations were heavily influenced by the Iran-Iraq War and ideological differences stemming from the Islamic Revolution. The 1990s saw a cautious rapprochement driven by pragmatic considerations, such as economic cooperation and the management of Kurdish separatism. In the 2000s, Turkey's interaction with Iran became more multifaceted, influenced by a wider range of factors, including the global war on terror, the invasion of Iraq invasion, and the changing geopolitical landscape. The neo-classical realist perspective underscores how both countries have adapted their foreign policies to the shifting balance of power, using the bilateral relationship to navigate regional complexities.

Turkish-Iranian relations in the 2000s were heavily influenced by the changing ideological stance and regionally focused vision of the Turkish leadership. The rise of the AK Party in Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan marked a significant shift in Turkish foreign policy. Often described as "Neo-Ottomanism", the AK Party's approach emphasized Turkey's role as a regional leader and sought to expand its influence in the Middle East. This shift presented both opportunities and challenges for Turkish-Iranian relations. Iran viewed the AK Party's policies with a mixture of cautious optimism and skepticism.[78]

On the one hand, the AK Party's emphasis on Islamic solidarity and regional cooperation aligned with Iran's own aspirations for a multipolar Middle East less dominated by Western powers. On the other hand, Turkey's ambitions for regional leadership and its deepening ties with the United States and Israel posed potential threat to Iran's influence. From a neo-classical realist perspective, Iran's response to Turkey's changing foreign policy was characterized by strategic hedging. Tehran engaged with Ankara on issues of mutual interest, such as economic

[78] In the realm of Iranian academia and intellectual discourse, there has been a significant accumulation of literature, especially over the past 15 years, defining Turkish foreign policy during the AK Party era as neo-Ottomanism. This perspective has gained consensus, highlighting the noticeable role of the Turkish government's increased focus and activity in the region. For some examples of this use, see: Ebrahimi, Nabiollah (2012), Iran, Turkey and the Arab Revolutions. *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 65-87; Akbarzadeh, Shahram., & Barry, James (2016). Iran and Turkey: not quite enemies but less than friends. *Third World Quarterly*, 38(4), 980–995; Yousefi, Mohsen & Hajimineh, Rahmat (2022), Explaining the Effect of Neo-Ottomanism on Turkish-Saudi Relations from 2011-2019 Emphasis on Qatar. *Faslname Motaleat Beinalmelali* (International Studies Journal), Vol.19, 157-176.
This narrative underlines the significant l influence of Turkey's proactive regional policies. However, my personal observation is that Iranian security elites and politicians use such rhetoric to create a confrontational framework and intimidate Ankara. By emphasizing the historically competitive Safavid-Ottoman rivalry, they imply that if Turkey becomes more involved in the region and deploys military elements like Iran, the risk of regional conflict could increase. This suggests a strategic use of historical analogies to warn against potential escalations and to highlight the delicate balance of power in the region.

cooperation and regional stability, while remaining vigilant of Turkey's expanding influence and its potential to undermine Iranian interests.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, marked a turning point in global politics, with profound implications for the Middle East. The subsequent US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq created new strategic landscapes. Iran viewed these developments with a mixture of concern and opportunity. After the U.S. toppled the Taliban in 2001 and Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran suddenly found itself with the US as a quasi-neighbor both to its east and west, creating new security threats. Despite having fought a war for survival with Iraq from 1980 to 1988, the fact that the majority of the Iraqi population was Shia and the post-election government was largely under Shia control created significant opportunities for Iran (Warnaar, 2013, s. 118-119). The 2000s saw both a competition for influence and opportunities for strategic cooperation between Turkey and Iran, particularly with regard to Iraq.

For Iran, maintaining a cautious but strategic relationship with Turkey became imperative. Ankara's role as a NATO member and its strategic partnership with Washington positioned it as both a potential ally and a rival. The neo-classical realist perspective highlights Iran's pragmatic approach: Tehran sought to use its relationship with Turkey to counterbalance American influence in the region while avoiding direct confrontation. It is particularly noteworthy that since the 1979 Revolution, Iran and Turkey have avoided direct-armed conflict even during periods of high tension in their relations.

The influence of Washington and Israel on Turkish-Iranian relations in the 2000s cannot be underestimated. The United States' strategic partnership with Turkey and its antagonistic stance towards Iran created a complex dynamic. Israel's concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions and its growing influence in the region further complicated the situation. From Iran's perspective, Turkey's alliance with the United States and its cooperation with Israel were viewed with suspicion. Tehran was particularly wary of any Turkish actions that could be perceived as aligning too closely aligned with American and Israeli interests, which could undermine Iran's regional position. However, Iran also recognized the importance of engaging with Turkey to counterbalance American and Israeli influence. The neo-classical realist approach emphasizes the importance of strategic flexibility, and Iran's interactions with Turkey reflected this principle. Tehran sought to use its relationship with Ankara to create a buffer against external pressures while carefully managing the risks associated with Turkey's Western alliances.

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 had far-reaching consequences for Iranian foreign policy. Iran moved quickly to fill the power vacuum and gained significant influence over Iraq's new political landscape. This period saw increased cooperation between Turkey and Iran, as both countries shared concerns about the fragmentation of Iraq and the rise of Kurdish separatism. From neo-classical realist standpoint, the Kurdish question was a pivotal issue for Iran's domestic configuration and foreign policy. The possibility of an independent Kurdish state posed a direct threat to Iran's territorial integrity, given its sizable Kurdish population. Tehran's strategy was to work with Ankara to manage this threat, despite the underlying historical tensions[79]. Cooperation between Turkey and Iran on Kurdish issues was driven by mutual security concerns, reflecting the realist principle of balancing power to mitigate threats.

The Kurdish question remained a persistent and significant challenge throughout the 2000s. Both Turkey and Iran faced internal Kurdish separatist movements and were wary of external actors exploiting the issue to destabilize their respective countries. For Iran, cooperation with Turkey on the Kurdish issue was a strategic necessity, especially after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Elik, 2012, s. 72). Tehran's realist security approach involved balancing its relations with various Kurdish groups to prevent any one faction from becoming too powerful. This strategy involved supporting Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria that could counterbalance Turkish influence, while simultaneously working with Ankara to suppress Kurdish separatism within their own borders.[80]

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[79] In the 2000s, Iran's main concern regarding the Iraqi Kurds was the potential for the US and Israel to gain additional influence in northern Iraq through Turkey, and the possibility of action against Iran. Iran feared that the growing presence and influence of the US and Israel in the region could lead to coordinated efforts to destabilize Iran or undermine its regional influence. The presence of these powers in northern Iraq was seen as a direct threat to Iran's national security, given its proximity to its borders and the historical tensions between these countries. Consequently, Iran was wary of any moves that might strengthen the US and Israeli foothold in the region, which could be used as a launching pad for operations against Iran.
For Iran, the main issue was to ensure that the Iraqi Kurds were more tightly controlled under the Baghdad administration and to limit the influence of the US, Israel, and Turkey in the region. This meant supporting a strong central government in Iraq that could effectively manage and contain Kurdish aspirations for greater autonomy or independence, which Iran feared could inspire similar sentiments among its own Kurdish population. Therefore, viewing Turkey's relationship with the Kurds only within the Ankara-Tehran axis overlooks the international dimension and the security concerns involved. The involvement of external powers such as the US and Israel adds another layer of complexity, making the situation not just a bilateral issue between Turkey and Iran but also a multifaceted geopolitical challenge. For detailed information on Iran's security concerns on this issue, see Haghpanah, Jafar (2009), *Kordha va Seyaset-e Kharijeh-ye Jumhouri-ye Eslami-ye İran*, Tehran: Entesharat-e Muassasah-ye Farhangi Motalaat va Tahqeqat-e Baynalmelali Abrar-e Moaser-e Tehran (Haghpanah, 2009, pp. 178-206)

[80] One of the statements that I observe still resonates with the security elites in Turkey and explains Iran's general security stance on the Kurdish issue comes from well-known Turkey and regional experts Graham Fuller and Henri Barkey: "Tehran is also concerned about Turkey's increasing political power among Iraqi Kurds and the possibility that Turkey might support the establishment of a union between the Azerbaijanis in northern Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan in Baku. Therefore, Ankara occasionally uses the PKK card to remind Tehran of its own vulnerable and fragile points… In response, Ankara is also disturbed by Iran's continually increasing influence not only in the

The delicate balance of cooperation and competition on the Kurdish question illustrates the pragmatic nature of Iranian foreign policy. Tehran's objective was to maintain regional stability and prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdish state, which required a nuanced approach to its relations with Turkey. Olson, a Middle East scholar with a focus on Kurdish political movements and regional politics, notes that the containment of Kurdish nationalism and the maintenance of energy policies required the close cooperation of both Turkey and Iran, and overlapped with the US invasion of Iraq since 2003 (Olson, Turkey's Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council from 2003 to 2007: New Paradigms?, 2008).

The early 2000s also saw increased international scrutiny of Iran's nuclear program. The Iranian leadership, under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, adopted a defiant stance, insisting on Iran's right to nuclear enrichment. Using its unique geopolitical position and alliances, Turkey has often acted as a mediator, facilitating negotiations and advocating for a peaceful solution to the nuclear issue. In particular, Turkey's active diplomatic initiative that resulted in the Tehran Declaration of May 2010 reflects Ankara's balanced policy on the Iranian nuclear dossier. This approach underscores Turkey's desire to maintain a delicate balance: addressing its own security concerns while promoting a stable and cooperative regional environment.[81]

Turkey, under the leadership of the AK Party, attempted to mediate the nuclear dispute by positioning itself as a bridge between Iran and the West. For Iran, Turkey's diplomatic efforts were seen as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Turkey's involvement provided Tehran with a potential ally within NATO that could push for a diplomatic solution. On the other hand, Turkey's growing ties with the West and its NATO commitments raised suspicions in Tehran about Ankara's true intentions. From a neo-classical realist perspective, Iran's engagement with Turkey on the nuclear issue was driven by the need to secure its strategic interests while navigating the complex interplay of regional and global pressures. Tehran's strategy involved a

central government of Iraq but also in the Kurdish regional administration in Northern Iraq." (Barkey & Fuller, Turkey's Kurdish Question, 1998, pp. 173-174). For another research confirming Barkey and Fuller's analysis, see (Larrabee & Nader, 2013, s. 11-12).

[81] Turkey's position on Iran's nuclear program is a complex balance of security concerns, regional stability, and diplomatic strategy. Turkey is wary of the potential security implications of a nuclear-armed Iran, which could disrupt the balance of power in the Middle East and trigger a regional arms race. There is also concern about the possibility of increased tensions and conflict, which could have spill over effects on Turkey's own security and economy. Despite these concerns, Turkey has often adopted a more supportive stance towards Iran in international forums, advocating for dialogue and a diplomatic solution rather than sanctions and isolation. This support is partly rooted in Turkey's broader foreign policy strategy of maintaining regional stability and avoiding further escalation of conflicts on its borders. Moreover, Iran, seeking to mitigate the pressure from the US and other Western nations, has often sought to strengthen its relations with Turkey, hoping to gain a regional ally that can help counterbalance Western opposition.

mix of diplomacy and defiance, using Turkey's mediation as a means of buying time and easing international pressure without making significant concessions.

From a neo-classical realist perspective on the Iranian nuclear issue, the Ahmadinejad era (2005-2013) marked a period of intensified political dynamics. In addition to Ahmadinejad's personal interest, the overarching control of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme National Security Council, and the Revolutionary Guards is the main determinant on this topic (Naji, 2008, s. 124-125). Iran's nuclear endeavors accelerated amid heightened security concerns following the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and Israel's expanding regional influence. This approach emphasizes how leadership traits and domestic institutions, as articulated within Neo-Classical Realism, influence Iran's strategic decisions. Leaders such as Ahmadinejad sought to strengthen Iran's regional posture through assertive policies, reflecting a dynamic interplay between leadership traits and institutional imperatives. This period underscores the complex relationship between external security threats and internal institutional dynamics that shaped Iran's nuclear policies under Ahmadinejad's tenure.

Economic relations between Turkey and Iran flourished in the 2000s, driven by mutual interests in trade and energy cooperation. Turkey's growing economy created a demand for energy resources, and Iran's vast oil and gas reserves made for a natural partnership. The two countries signed numerous agreements to increase trade, energy cooperation, and infrastructure development. Politically, the relationship was more complex. While economic ties grew stronger, conflicting interests and external pressures often strained political relations, such as the international sanctions designed and implemented mainly by the US and other Western countries. In this context, the AK Party's policy of increasing Turkey's regional influence sometimes clashed with Iran's strategic goals. However, both countries managed to compartmentalize their economic and political interactions in order to maintain a functional relationship (Eruysal, 2011, s. 172-174).

The 2000s were thus a transformative period for Turkish-Iranian relations, shaped by major regional and global developments. As the 2000s drew to a close, the region began to experience significant game-changing developments. The onset of the Arab Spring in 2010-11 marked a turning point in Turkish-Iranian relations. The uprisings across the Arab world created new uncertainties and opportunities for regional powers. Iran and Turkey found themselves on opposite sides of several key conflicts, most notably in Syria.

High-Level Diplomatic Visits between Iran and Turkey since 1979

This section will examine the development dynamics of Turkey-Iran relations after the 1979 Revolution, focusing on the bilateral, regional, and international parameters that have shaped these interactions. The presentation of a table of reciprocal visits at the level of Prime Minister and President will serve as a valuable reference for researchers. This table is crucial for understanding whether various regional and international developments have affected the relationship and whether high-level contacts and visits have continued despite the challenges faced. The data will provide insights into the continuity and resilience of diplomatic engagement, offering a comprehensive view of how external factors and internal dynamics have influenced Turkey-Iran bilateral relations over the years. This analysis underscores the importance of high-level diplomatic exchanges in maintaining and shaping bilateral relations amidst changing geopolitical landscapes.

One notable development highlighted in the table is the prompt recognition of the new Iranian regime and the Islamic Republic by the left-wing Turkish government under Bülent Ecevit. Despite Turkey's close alliance with the US and its NATO membership, Foreign Minister Gündüz Ökçün visited Tehran just weeks after the 1979 Revolution, where Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini received him. Following the military coup in Turkey in 1980, a more securitized view of Iran took hold, leading to a pause in high-level visits. Prime Minister Turgut Özal, known for his conservative stance, broke this cycle when he visited Tehran in January 1986. Iranian Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi's visits to Turkey in 1982 and 1985 were also significant, underlining Tehran's prioritization of relations with Turkey during the Iran-Iraq War.

Another key event in this more than four-decade period was the establishment of the Turkish-Iranian High-Level Cooperation Council (HLCC) in 2014, despite the severe strain on Ankara-Tehran relations caused by the Syrian Civil War. This council, co-chaired by the presidents of both countries, represents a remarkable commitment to regular meetings and efforts to strengthen economic, cultural, and political ties. The persistence of HLCC in the midst of the destruction and bilateral tensions of the Syrian conflict demonstrates a significant determination to maintain and enhance cooperation between Turkey and Iran. A detailed examination of these developments provides a comprehensive understanding of the evolving dynamics of Turkey-Iran relations, which are shaped by both regional conflicts and strategic diplomatic engagements.

Table -1: High-Level Diplomatic Visits between Iran and Turkey since 1979[82]

Date	**Iranian Leaders**	**Turkish Leaders**
Jun. 1979		Foreign Minister Gündüz Ökçün visits İran and is received by the Supreme Leader Khomeini
Nov. 1982	Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi visits Turkey	
Jan. 1985	Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi visits Turkey	
Jan. 1986		Prime Minister Turgut Ozal visits Iran
Feb. 1988		Prime Minister Turgut Ozal visits Iran
Feb. 1989	Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi visits Turkey	
Jul. 1994		Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel visits Iran
Aug. 1996		Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan visits Iran and signs a $23 billion natural gas deal
Dec. 1996	President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani visits Turkey	
Jul. 2002		President Ahmet Necdet Sezer visits Iran. [He becomes the first Turkish president to visit the Azerbaijan province].

[82] In preparing this table, I used a summary chart included from a report by Prof. Nader Habibi. However, Habibi's chart (Habibi, 2012) presented incomplete data, covering only some of the visits up to 2012. In tabulating the reciprocal visits, I have focused only on those at the highest levels, specifically visits by prime ministers (note that the position was abolished in Iran's constitutional system in 1989) and presidents. It is important to note that neither Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini nor Ayatollah Khamenei visited Turkey during their terms in office. This count excludes numerous visits by foreign ministers and other cabinet ministers during this period. The table includes only two visits at the ministerial level because of their symbolic importance. The first was Foreign Minister Ökçün's visit to Iran after the 1979 Revolution, which was the first visit from Turkey and was marked by a meeting with Leader Khomeini. The second visit was Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's critical trip to Tehran in January 2012 at the height of the Syrian crisis. This visit, which I also attended as a young diplomat, marked the beginning of a rapid decline in Turkish-Iranian relations due to the Syrian conflict. During this trip, Davutoğlu met with his Iranian counterpart, Ali Akbar Salehi, and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This table thus provides a comprehensive overview of high-level diplomatic engagements, illustrating the complexity and volatility of Turkey-Iran relations over the decades. By highlighting these key visits, the table underscores the interplay between domestic political changes and broader geopolitical dynamics. It also serves as a valuable resource for scholars examining the impact of regional crises on bilateral relations and the strategic calculations behind diplomatic interactions.

Jul. 2004		Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visits Iran
Aug. 2008	President Ahmadinejad visits Turkey	
Jan. 2009	Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani visits Turkey and meets with President Abdullah Gul	
Nov. 2009	President Ahmadinejad visits Turkey for a one-day summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. He meets with Prime Minister Erdogan.	
May. 2010		The presidents of Turkey and Brazil, who attended the Group 15 summit in Tehran, announce an agreement with the leaders of Iran regarding its nuclear program; it is subsequently rejected by the United States
May. 2010		Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu visits Iran
Dec. 2010	President Ahmadinejad attends the ECO summit in Turkey and meets with Turkish leaders	
Feb. 2011		President Abdullah Gul visits Iran
May. 2011	President Ahmadinejad meets with President Gul in Istanbul during a UN conference on Least Developed Countries	
Jan. 2012	Speaker of Parliament Larijani visits Turkey to discuss the Syrian uprising and Iran's nuclear program	
Jan. 2012		Foreign Minister Davutoğlu visits Iran to discuss Syria and Iran's nuclear program
Mar. 2012		President Recep Tayyip Erdogan visits Iran to discuss nuclear talks
Jun. 2014	President Hassan Rouhani visits Turkey and attends the first meeting of the	

	Turkish-Iranian High Level Cooperation Council (HLCC) with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan	
Apr. 2015		President Recep Tayyip Erdogan visits Iran and attends the second meeting of the HLCC
Apr. 2016	President Hassan Rouhani visits Turkey and attends the third meeting of the HLCC	
Oct. 2017		President Recep Tayyip Erdogan visits Iran and attends the fourth meeting of the HLCC
Dec. 2018	President Hassan Rouhani visits Turkey and attends the fifth meeting of the HLCC	
Jul. 2022		President Recep Tayyip Erdogan visits Iran and attends the seventh meeting of the HLCC (the sixth session of the HLCC was held via video conference due to pandemic in Sep. 2020
Jan. 2024	President Ebrahim Raisi visits Turkey and attends the eighth meeting of the HLCC	

4.2.3. Comparison of Iran and Turkey's Approaches to the Middle East in the 2000s

The 2000s were transformative years for the Middle East, characterized by significant geopolitical shifts and heightened regional conflicts. Turkey and Iran, as two pivotal actors in the region, navigated these developments with distinct strategies influenced by their unique historical legacies, political systems, and strategic priorities. While discussing the divergent and convergent policies of Turkey and Iran in a comparative context, the major developments of the 2000s in the Middle East region can be categorized as follows:

a) The impact of the 9/11 attacks, the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan

b) The formation of the new Iraqi state and Sunni-Shia relations

c) The rise of Kurdish nationalism and separatism in Iraq and Syria

d) Syria's transformation under Bashar al-Assad

e) Iran's expanding regional influence and the fear of "Shiite Crescent"

f) The Saudi-Iran Rivalry: a regional power struggle

g) The rise of Sunni extremism and the threat of al-Qaeda

h) Israel's regional hegemony and pressure on the Palestinian nation and groups

i) Iran's nuclear program and ballistic missile activities: regional and international reactions

j) Changing energy geopolitics and hydrocarbon routes

k) The growing presence of Russia and China's in the region

a) The impact of the 9/11 attacks and the US Invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan

The events of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing United States invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan significantly altered the geopolitical framework of the Middle East. As a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Turkey endorsed the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, seeing it as a crucial measure in the fight against global terrorism. Nevertheless, Turkey took a more cautious approach to the invasion of Iraq. However, Ankara feared that the destabilization of Iraq would embolden Kurdish separatist movements and create security threats along its southern border (Bal, 2008, s. 63-76). Turkey's opposition to the Iraq war was also based on concerns about the humanitarian impact and the potential for increased sectarian violence.

Iran, on the other hand, saw the US invasions as both a threat and opportunity. While the presence of US forces on its borders in Afghanistan and Iraq was perceived as a significant security threat, Iran also saw the removal of hostile regimes —the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq- as a strategic gain.[83] Iran adopted a pragmatic approach, supporting

[83] Since the launch of the US invasion in 2003, Iran has consistently voiced strong objections to the presence of foreign military forces in Iraq, particularly those of the United States,. Iran's strategic calculations since the early 1980s have viewed the Sunni minority's control over Iraq's Shia majority, which constitutes about two-thirds of

Shia militias and political groups in Iraq to expand its influence while simultaneously opposing the US military presence in the region (Roshandel, 2011, s. 24, 71-72). This dual strategy allowed Iran to consolidate power within the newly formed Iraqi state and counterbalance American influence.[84]

b) The formation of the new Iraqi state and Sunni-Shia relations

The establishment of a new political order in Iraq following the 2003 US-led invasion significantly changed the Sunni-Shia dynamics in the region. Turkey adopted a cautious approach, prioritizing the territorial integrity of Iraq and advocating for the inclusive participation of Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and other minorities in the political process. Ankara's policy was characterized by a delicate balancing act, as it sought to maintain positive relations with various Iraqi factions, including Shia leaders aligned and not aligned with Iran, as well as leaders of Sunni political groups and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). This strategic positioning aimed to support the stability and unity of Iraq, while simultaneously safeguarding Turkey's own security interests and addressing concerns about Kurdish separatism (Özcan, 2010). Turkey's engagement was marked by diplomatic efforts to promote reconciliation and cooperation among Iraq's diverse ethnic and sectarian groups, reflecting its broader regional policy of promoting stability and mitigating conflict.

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the country, as an anomaly. Tehran anticipated that Iraq's Shia population, inspired by the fervour of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, would eventually overthrow Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athist regime. Although some retrospective and anachronistic analyzes suggest a covert cooperation between Tehran and Washington, leading to the conclusion that Iran emerged as the primary beneficiary of the US invasion of Iraq, I believe this perspective is inaccurate. Nevertheless, it is evident that Iran strategically capitalized on the US-led removal of two existential enemies: the Taliban in the east—not the Taliban of 2022, but the Taliban of the late 1990s—and the Ba'athist regime in the west. Iran has astutely assessed the resulting opportunities and used them to its advantage.

[84] At this point, I would like to highlight three notable anecdotes from the "short-lived honeymoon" period in US-Iranian relations during President Mohammad Khatami's first term of (1997-2001), as described by former Iranian diplomat Seyyed Houssein Mousavian. These anecdotes are also significant through a neo-classical realist lens, particularly in the context of leadership traits in Iranian policymaking (Mousavian, 2014, s. 169):

- Following President George W. Bush's infamous speech on 29 January 2002, in which he included Iran in the "axis of evil" along with Iraq and North Korea, President Khatami remarked to his foreign policy advisor Mousavian, "I am confident that Bush has put the final nail in the coffin of Iran-US relations." Khatami believed that any positive outcome in Iran-US relations was impossible for at least another decade.
- After the September 11 attacks, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, in response to the US overtures for cooperation against terrorism, told Hassan Rouhani, then Secretary-General of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), "The Americans' invitation for cooperation is entirely tactical. They will treat us well until they cross the bridge, then everything will return to the old order."
- Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force and a key military advisor to the Northern Alliance and one of the architects of the attack on Kabul against the Taliban in Afghanistan, told during an SNSC meeting, "The US words about cooperating against terrorism and valuing Iran's contributions are purely tactical and deceptive. They have no intention of a long-term partnership."

These anecdotes illustrate the deep-seated entrenched scepticism of the Iranian leadership about US intentions, shaped by historical grievances and strategic calculations.

Conversely, Iran played a more assertive and direct role in shaping the new Iraqi state, taking advantage of the power vacuum to expand its influence. Tehran provided extensive support to Shia political parties and militias, aiming to ensure Shia dominance in the emerging political landscape. The support included financial assistance, military training, and robust political backing, reflecting Iran's strategic objective of cultivating a friendly government in Baghdad (Barzegar, 2013). Iran's involvement was driven by the dual goals of counterbalancing US influence in Iraq and establishing a bulwark against Sunni extremism. The empowerment of Shia groups in Iraq, facilitated by Iranian support, deepened the broader Sunni-Shia sectarian divide, exacerbated regional tensions and contributed to a polarized geopolitical environment in the Middle East (Nasr, 2006). Iran's strategy in Iraq exemplified its broader regional ambitions and its efforts to project power through the cultivation of allied Shia movements, further complicating the intricate web of Middle Eastern politics.

c) The rise of Kurdish nationalism and separatism in Iraq and Syria

Rising Kurdish nationalism and separatism have posed substantial challenges for both Turkey and Iran, primarily due to their significant Kurdish populations and concerns about potential territorial fragmentation (Larrabee & Nader, 2013, s. 11-12). In Iraq, the formation of the semi-autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in the northern regions became a focus of concern for Turkey. Ankara feared that the success of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq could stimulate similar aspirations among Turkey’s Kurds, potentially destabilizing its own national unity. Despite these concerns, Turkey adopted a pragmatic approach towards the KRG, cultivating robust economic relations and working with the Kurdish authorities to mitigate the threat posed by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a designated terrorist organization under Turkish legislation and international law (Özcan, From distance to engagement: Turkish policy towards the Middle East, Iraq and Iraqi Kurds, 2011).

By contrast, Iran confronted similar challenges stemming from Kurdish nationalism but adopted a decidedly repressive strategy. Tehran implemented strict measures to suppress Kurdish separatist movements within its borders, viewing any hint of secessionist sentiment as a direct threat to its territorial integrity (Akbarzadeh, Ahmed, & Gourlay, The Kurds in Iran: balancing national and ethnic identity in a securitised environment, 2019). Furthermore, in Iraq, Iran strategically supported Shia militias to counterbalance Kurdish influence and ensure that Shia interests predominated in the country’s political landscape (Wilgenburg, 2013). This approach reflected Iran's overarching goal of maintaining centralized control and stability,

prioritizing the preservation of its national unity amid ethnically diverse and potentially fractious regions. Similarly, in Syria, Iran aligned itself with the Assad regime's efforts to suppress Kurdish autonomy, aligning its policies with broader strategic imperatives aimed at safeguarding the Syrian state under Assad's rule and thwarting any potential challenges to central authority (Gharedaghi, 2018, s. 29-30).

d) Syria's transformation process under Bashar al-Assad in the 2000s

The 2000s witnessed remarkable changes in Syria under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad, characterized by tentative steps towards economic liberalization and controlled political reforms. These changes were aimed at modernizing the Syrian economy and appeasing a young and increasingly discontented population. During this period, Turkey cultivated a friendly relationship with Assad's Syria, marked by enhanced bilateral trade, visa-free travel, and high-level diplomatic engagement (Kösebalaban, Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy Toward Syria: The Return of Securitization, 2020). This rapprochement was an integral part of Turkey's broader "zero problems with neighbors" policy, which sought to foster regional stability and economic integration. Ankara's strategic intent was to build a network of cooperative relationships across the Middle East using economic interdependence to mitigate conflicts and enhance Turkey's regional influence (Hinnebusch, 2013). Turkish-Syrian relations during this period exemplified this approach, as the two nations moved from a history of hostility to a period of constructive engagement.[85]

In contrast, Iran's long-standing alliance with the Assad regime remained steadfast, underpinned by deep-rooted strategic interests and ideological solidarity. For Tehran, Syria was a vital ally in the region, essential for maintaining its influence and counterbalancing the Israeli

[85] In order to understand the general framework of Turkey's relations with Syria and the broad outlines of its approach to the Middle East in the context of the "zero problems with neighbours" policy that was introduced during the AK Party period after 2002, it is essential to refer to the statements of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the principal theoretician of this policy. This policy aimed to mitigate conflicts and enhance cooperation with neighbouring countries, reflecting a strategic shift in Turkey's foreign policy. For an in-depth analysis of this approach and its theoretical underpinnings, particularly in the broader context of Middle East and Syria, see: Davutoğlu, Ahmet (2001), *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*, İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, pp. 410-416, 424-426; Davutoğlu, Ahmet (2001), *Teoriden Pratiğe: Türk Dış Politikası Üzerine Konuşmalar,* İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, pp. 196-198, 352-354. Following the fall of Assad and Baath regime on 8 December 2024, this time as a leader of an opposite political group (Future Party), Prof. Davutoğlu also authored an updated analysis evaluating the success of Syrian opposition and its reflections on the future of the Turkey-Syria relations in accordance with his theory and its practical dimension in Syrian area. See Davutoğlu, Ahmet (2025), "Stratejik Derinlik tezinin uygulama alanı olarak Türkiye-Suriye ilişkileri: Ne yaptık, ne yapmalıyız?" (Türkiye-Syria relations as an area of application of the Strategic Depth thesis: What have we done, what should we do?), *Serbestiyet*, retrieved from https://serbestiyet.com/featured/ahmet-davutoglu-serbestiyet-icin-yazdi-stratejik-derinlik-tezinin-uygulama-alani-olarak-turkiye-suriye-iliskileri-194203/ (accessed on 19 January 2025). (Davutoğlu, Stratejik Derinlik tezinin uygulama alanı olarak Türkiye-Suriye ilişkileri: Ne yaptık, ne yapmalıyız?, 2025)

and Western presence in the Middle East. Iran's support for Syria included extensive military, economic, and political aid, reinforcing an alliance that was central to the so-called "Axis of Resistance." This coalition, which included various Shiite military and political groups in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon, aimed to present a united front against Israeli and US policies in the region. Iran's support for Assad was not just tactical but strategic, aimed at preserving a friendly regime that would facilitate Iran's regional ambitions and secure a corridor of influence stretching from Tehran to the Mediterranean (Razavi, 2013). The symbiotic relationship between Iran and Syria thus played a crucial role in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East during the 2000s, with both nations using their alliance to fortify their positions against common adversaries.

e) Iran's expanding regional influence and the fear of the "Shiite Crescent"

Iran's influence in the Middle East grew significantly in the 2000s, often framed by the concept of the "Shiite Crescent" —an arc of Shia-dominated or allied states, political groups and communities stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon.[86] This strategic approach was designed to create a contiguous bloc of Shia influence that would enhance Iran's regional power and provide a buffer against hostile Sunni-majority countries and Western intervention.[87] Iran's influence was particularly pronounced in Iraq, where it supported Shia political parties and militias to ensure a friendly government in Baghdad after the 2003 invasion. In Syria, Iran's steadfast alliance with the Assad regime, backed by substantial military and economic support, was aimed at maintaining a critical ally in the Levant. Moreover, Iran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon cemented its influence on Israel's northern border and ensured that Tehran had a powerful proxy capable of shaping regional dynamics.

[86] For a calm and analytical examination of the Shiite Crescent discussions from an Iran-centered perspective, emphasizing its defensive and pragmatic aspects, see Barzegar, Kayhan (2008), Iran and The Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities, *Brown Journal of World Affairs* (Volume XV, Issue 1), 87-99. In this article, Barzegar explains the defensive and pragmatic importance of the concept of a Shiite Crescent from Iran's viewpoint in three dimensions: (i) it is an attempt by Iran to mobilize the masses, (ii) it is an effort to establish an ideological belt of friendly Shiite governments, and (iii) it is a strategy to expand its regional power (Barzegar, Iran and The Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities, 2008, pp. 96-97).

[87] Although Iranian officials justify their presence in Syria and other parts of the region on the basis of various religious and geopolitical responsibilities and maintain a pragmatic official discourse, the perception of the Shiite Crescent among Sunni communities in the region resonates largely with a sectarian and Persian nationalist tone. This perception fuels mistrust and heightens sectarian tensions, and has a significant impact on regional dynamics. In Turkey, discussions on the Iran's activities and Shia geopolitics often take a sectarian-based approach, framed within the Shia-Sunni dichotomy. This perspective highlights the complexities and challenges in Turkish-Iranian relations, as well as the broader implications for Middle Eastern politics. For an analysis of Iran's regional activities and Shia geopolitics from a sectarian-based perspective and within the framework of the Shia-Sunni dichotomy in Turkey, see Şen, Abdülkadir (2016), *Tüm Yönleriyle Suriye Devrimi: Suriye Devriminin Motivasyonları, Direniş Gruplarının Haritası ve Aktörlerin Stratejileri*, İstanbul: Yapı-BozumYayınları, pp. 540-580.

These actions underscored Iran's broader strategy of exploiting sectarian affiliation and supporting allied groups to project power and counterbalance Sunni rivals and Western influence (Fuller, 2007).[88]

Turkey viewed Iran's growing influence with great concern, particularly as it threatened to shift the balance of power in the region in Tehran's favor. Ankara's foreign policy sought to counterbalance this influence by strengthening ties with Sunni-majority states and supporting Sunni factions in regional conflicts (Larrabee & Nader, 2013, s. 8-9). This included backing the Syrian opposition against the Assad regime, which was closely allied with Iran (Jenkins, 2012, s. 42-43). Turkey's involvement in regional alliances, such as its strategic partnership with Qatar, was also aimed at containing Iranian dominance (Altunışık, 2022). By aligning itself with Sunni-majority states and participating in coalitions that opposed to Iran's regional ambitions, Turkey sought to assert its own influence and protect its interests in the Middle East. This geopolitical rivalry between Turkey and Iran shaped much of the regional politics in the 2000s, as both countries vied for leadership and influence in an increasingly polarized landscape.

f) The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry: A regional power struggle or an Islamic cold war"?

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is often described as the "Cold War of the Islamic World", intensified in the 2000s –and significantly shaped the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.[89] This sectarian and strategic competition manifested itself in various proxy conflicts, such as those in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. Iran's support for Shia groups and militias across the region has been countered by Saudi efforts to bolster Sunni regimes and limit Iranian influence (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, Foreign Policymaking in the Middle East: Complex Realism, 2016, s. 249). The rivalry was not only sectarian but also a struggle for regional dominance, with both nations vying to be the preeminent power in the

[88] Although it is believed to have begun during the period of the Arab uprisings, Iran's activities towards Shias in the region were not limited to these states, groups or communities; its interest in Shia communities in regional countries particularly in Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Azerbaijan began in the early 1980s.

[89] Much of the Middle East studies literature highlights how this Saudi-Iranian geopolitical rivalry is deeply driven by sectarian dynamics. Scholars often analyze how the Sunni-Shia divide underpins the broader strategic competition between these two regional powers, influencing their policies and actions throughout the Middle East. For some of these studies, see; Hiro, Dilip. (2019). *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the struggle for supremacy*. London: Oxford University Press; Hinnebusch, Raymond (2019). The Arab uprising and regional power struggle. In *Routledge handbook of international relations in the Middle East* (pp. 110-124). London: Routledge; Panaite, A. (2017). *Cold War in the Middle East: Iran and Saudi Arabia* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Miami).

Muslim world.[90] This competition exacerbated existing conflicts and fuelled new ones, leading to widespread instability and shifting alliances in the region.[91]

Turkey's position in this rivalry was complex and often fluctuated. While maintaining a pragmatic relationship with Iran, Turkey also sought to strengthen ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Ankara's approach was to balance its relations with both sides, using economic ties and diplomatic initiatives to manage the regional rivalry (Barzegar, Balance of power in the Persian Gulf: An Iranian view 74-87., 2010). However, Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups sometimes put it at odds with Saudi Arabia, reflecting the nuanced and multifaceted nature of its regional strategy (Kural & Erdem, 2022). This balancing act allowed Turkey to position itself as a mediator and a key player in Middle Eastern politics, although it also exposed Ankara to criticism and challenges from both sides of the sectarian divide (Ekşi, 2017). Turkey's regional strategy, therefore, required careful navigation of the complex and often contradictory alliances and rivalries that defined the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East in the 2000s.

g) The rise of the Sunni extremism and the threat of Al-Qaeda

The rise of Sunni extremism, particularly the activities of al-Qaeda and its offshoots, posed a significant security challenge for both Turkey and Iran in the 2000s. Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, groups such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) exploited the ensuing chaos to gain a foothold, targeting both Western interests and Shia populations (Calculli & Legrenzi, 2016, s. 227-228).[92] The deliberate incitement of sectarian violence by AQI and similar groups

[90] During these years and their aftermath, the Saudis perceived their political presence in Sunni-governed countries such as Iraq and Lebanon to be under threat and witnessed Iran's growing influence. In response, they began to articulate the rhetoric of the "Persian threat" more vocally, thereby emphasizing Iran's sectarian identity. Saudi newspapers even began describing Iran as "more dangerous than Israel" and frequently featured statements such as "the Iranian revolution has come to renew the Persian presence in the region" (Warnaar, 2013, p. 117). It is important to emphasize that this rhetoric resonated primarily with Sunni states and communities in the region, including Turkey, and added further pressure on sectarian tensions alongside Iran's sectarian approach.

[91] For a detailed study on the historical, religious, and sectarian roots of the Saudi-Iranian geopolitical rivalry and how these dynamics have manifested in modern conflicts, written by the author of this thesis, see; Koç, Mehmet Akif (2019). Tarihi İhtilafların Gölgesinde İran-Suudi Arabistan Rekabeti: Şii-Vahhabi İlişkilerinin Dünü ve Bugünü. *İran Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 3(1), 91-120. This paper explores the complex interplay between historical grievances, religious ideologies, and sectarian affiliations that have fuelled tensions between these two regional powers. It also examines the contemporary implications of this rivalry, highlighting how these deep-seated dynamics continue to shape and exacerbate ongoing conflicts in the Middle East.

[92] Iranian officials have long maintained that the phenomenon of Sunni extremism is rooted in the plans and "games" orchestrated in the region by the United States and Israel. They often reject or overlook the idea that sociological, political or economic dynamics could be driving armed struggle, suggesting that Sunni Arab communities, like Shia groups, could be aggrieved by certain issues. This rhetoric is widely accepted even among the more globally integrated Iranian politicians. For instance, the then Iranian President Mohammad Khatami [1997-2005] held the following view about the Sunni radical organizations and their actions: They [the United States and Israel] created al-Qaeda and Daesh to sow seeds of discord among Muslims and oppose the Islamic

led to a cycle of attacks and reprisals, significantly exacerbating the Sunni-Shia divide in the region. Iran, which perceived Sunni extremism as a direct threat, responded by supporting Shia militias and deploying its Quds Force to counter these groups, with the aim of protecting Shia communities and expanding its influence in Iraq (Beeman, 2013, s. 204-205). Tehran's strategy included providing financial and logistical support to Shia groups, thereby reinforcing its role as a defender of Shia interests in a volatile environment.

Turkey, meanwhile, faced direct threats from al-Qaeda during the 2000s, including a series of bombings in Istanbul in 2003 that targeted British and Jewish institutions. These attacks underscored the global reach of Sunni extremist networks and their ability to strike within Turkish borders (Aras & Toktaş, 2007). In response, Ankara implemented stringent security measures, increased intelligence cooperation with Western allies, and conducted operations to dismantle extremist cells (Laçiner, 2007). While the Turkish government viewed Sunni extremism as a destabilizing force, its policies were also influenced by the need to maintain domestic stability and protect economic interests. Both Turkey's and Iran's approaches to combating Sunni extremism[93] in the 2000s were shaped by their distinct political landscapes and regional strategies (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2014), highlighting the multifaceted nature of their security concerns and responses.

h) Israel's regional hegemony and pressure on the Palestinian nation and groups

Israel's regional hegemony and its conflict with Palestinian groups remained a central issue in Middle East politics. Both Turkey and Iran positioned themselves as supporters of Palestinian rights, albeit with different approaches and motivations. Turkey, under the AK Party, increasingly vocalized its support for the Palestinian cause and its approach in this area seems

Republic, but now they too are suffering the consequences." (Akbarzadeh, Iran and Daesh: The Case of a Reluctant Shia Power, 2015, s. 46). Iranian officials also do not hesitate to label the sociological grievances and violent actions of Sunni minorities in their own country as part of an American game and Israeli conspiracy as well, see (Hoshang, 2015).

[93] The fundamental dynamics of Turkish foreign policy and its approach to international political, military, economic, cultural, environmental, security, and other issues are summarized in a concise ten-language document known as the "Synopsis" which serves as a key roadmap. This document, which is available and regularly updated on the official website of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, acts as a long-term policy guide. Regarding extremism and terrorist activities, the official document includes the following statements:
"*Turkish Foreign Policy, which constitutes a part and parcel of our national security system, prioritizes strengthening regional peace and security through combating terrorism and extremism, conflict prevention, peaceful resolution and mediation, and regional ownership.*
Terrorism and extremist tendencies have reached a dangerous intensity with regional and global dimensions. Terrorist groups threaten international peace and security. Terrorism is a crime against humanity that cannot be associated with any race, ethnicity, faith, or geography. It is a global scourge demanding global response and solidarity. Türkiye has been actively countering terrorism unleashed by whichever organization under whatever pretext." (National Foreign Policy in the "Century of Türkiye": A Synopsis, 2024)

to have largely converged with that of Iran (Sinkaya, 2012, s. 144), especially after the Gaza War of 2008-2009 and the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010 (Bozorgmehri & Hosseini, 2020). Ankara's criticism of Israeli policies and its support for Hamas reflected a broader reorientation of Turkish foreign policy towards greater engagement with Muslim-majority countries. Despite its support for Hamas, Turkey also maintained relations with Fatah and endorsed the two-state solution as the basis for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This balanced approach is aimed at advocating for Palestinian statehood while remaining engaged in diplomatic efforts to achieve a peaceful solution.[94] Turkey maintained its support for Palestinian groups and this stance throughout the 2000s, even as it engaged in indirect mediation in peace talks between Israel and its Arab neighbors in the 2007-08 and maintained political and trade relations with Israel at a good level (Bölme, 2007).

In contrast, Iran's support for Palestinian groups, particularly Hamas and Islamic Jihad, was a cornerstone of its anti-Israel stance (Masuodnia & Tazekandi, 2017). This support was part of Iran's broader strategy to position itself as a leader of the "Axis of Resistance" against Israeli and Western influence. Iran's financial and military support for these groups aimed to challenge Israeli hegemony and project Iranian influence in the Palestinian territories (Soltaninejad, 2019). Iranian rhetoric often included calls for the eradication of Israel and framed its support for Palestinian groups as part of a broader struggle against Zionist and Western oppression (Warnaar, 2013, s. 106). This uncompromising stance on Israel generally contrasts with Turkey's more diplomatic approach, highlighting the divergent strategies of the two regional powers in addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

[94] For a comprehensive understanding of Turkey's stance on Israel and its support for the Palestinian people, which favors pragmatic and diplomatic initiatives over direct force, see Yeşiltaş, Murat & Pirinççi Ferhat (2020), *Küresel Dönüşüm Sürecinde Türkiye'nin Büyük Stratejisi*, Ankara: SETA Kitapları. He advocates for a realistic approach that, although sometimes perceived as passive and inactive, aims for sustainable outcomes rather than useless rhetoric. Regarding Israel's policies toward Palestine, Yeşiltaş argues that Turkey should continue to highlight the instability these policies create through diplomatic channels and public diplomacy on international platforms. He also stresses the importance of maintaining aid to the Palestinians and taking the initiative in regional efforts to address Palestinian grievances. Turkey's greatest capability in this regard is ensure that the legitimacy of Israel's policies in Palestine is challenged (Yeşiltaş & Pirinççi, Küresel Dönüşüm Sürecinde Türkiye'nin Büyük Stratejisi, 2020, p. 120).
This perspective is closely aligned with Turkey's foreign policy during Israel's Gaza offensive, which began on October 7, 2023. Throughout this period, Turkey focused on diplomatic engagement, advocating for Palestinian rights in international forums and working to provide humanitarian aid to the affected population in Gaza. This approach underscores Turkey's commitment to using its diplomatic influence to challenge Israeli actions and support the Palestinian cause, and highlights its ability to navigate complex regional dynamics through measured and strategic interventions. This approach undoubtedly differs significantly from Iran's strategy of providing arms and logistical support to armed groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad and the armed resistance against Israel.

i) Iran's nuclear program and ballistic missile activities: regional and international reactions

Iran's nuclear program and ballistic missile activities were among the most contentious issues in the Middle East in the 2000s. Under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran's nuclear ambitions were pursued with increasing vigor, attracting considerable international attention.[95] According to the statements by Iranian officials, Iran's approach to nuclear energy was officially for peaceful purposes, such as energy production (Mousavian, The Iran Nuclear Dilemma: The Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy and the NPT's Main Objectives, 2016). However, the clandestine nature of some activities and the involvement of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) raised suspicions about possible military dimensions of these nuclear activities and also the ballistic missile program (Ghasseminejad, Ottolenghi, Fixler, & Toumaj, 2016). Israel, in particular, viewed Iran's nuclear program as an existential threat, lobbying vigorously for international action, including through the United States and the United Nations, to impose stringent sanctions and prevent Iran from achieving nuclear weapons capability (Roshandel, 2011, s. 84). These efforts highlighted the deep regional anxieties about the potential for a nuclear arms race.[96]

[95] The stance of Iranian senior officials on nuclear weapons is largely determined by religious prohibition, with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei issuing a fatwa declaring the production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons to be forbidden. In various international forums, Iranian negotiators have invoked this religious decree, emphasizing their commitment to it and asserting that they could not pursue nuclear weapons even if they wanted to (Sirjani, 2013); (Sabouri, 2016). However, the reception of this argument in the international community has been sceptical due to the variable nature of Islamic legal rulings (fatwas), the historical adaptation of both Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei's decrees to changing circumstances, and the prevalence of similar cases in Iranian Islamic jurisprudence over time. Despite attempts to codify this stance in international legal frameworks during negotiations with the P5+1 states, Iranian officials gradually reduced its prominence as they realized it did not effectively sway their counterparts. Critics argue that religious decrees are subject to interpretation and adaptation, especially over time and in changing political contexts. This perspective challenges the static interpretation of religious edicts and underscores the evolving nature of religious discourse within the Iranian leadership. For further critical insights on this issue see; (Khalaji & Eisenstadt, Iran's Flexible Fatwa: How "Expediency" Shapes Nuclear Decisionmaking, 2021) and (Rubin, 2006).

[96] When analysing why Iran insists on its strategic initiative regarding the nuclear and ballistic missile program and elevates them to a matter of national honour, several key factors emerge. First, Iranians have historically developed a strong notion of resistance to invaders within their **strategic cultural** codes, primarily viewing these actions primarily as **defensive realist measures**. Second, the Iranian people's pride in their national identity and aspirations for a strong country influence the state's decisions, as evidenced by public surveys showing that 68% of the population supports energy initiatives based on nuclear power, reflecting a broad consensus. Third, in the context of **leadership characteristics** and **strategic culture**, Iranian leaders perceive conceding ground in negotiations with foreign powers as a negative step that could lead to more demands and concessions, so they view retreating from their nuclear program initiatives as problematic under sanctions or pressure from Western countries and prefer to stay the course (Mousavian, Iran and the United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace, 2014, s. 180-181). Finally, the comments attributed to Akbar Etemad, former head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, regarding the ambitions of Muhammad Reza Shah ["*the Shah's plan was to build a nuclear bomb*"] raise questions about what is not permissible for Iranian leaders today that was permissible for past regimes, which is an important consideration in the context of **leadership characteristics** and **threat perceptions**.

Turkey's position on Iran's nuclear activities has been multifaceted, reflecting its broader security concerns and regional ambitions. Turkey recognized Iran's right to possess and utilize peaceful nuclear energy under strict IAEA monitoring and control measures (Sinkaya, 2012). However, Turkey was concerned about the destabilizing effects of a nuclear-armed Iran on the security architecture of the Middle East, particularly by triggering similar initiatives in the Arab Gulf states (Elik, 2012, s. 191-192). This led to proactive diplomatic efforts, such as the Tehran Declaration of 2010, in which Turkey, together with Brazil, attempted to broker a deal to swap Iran's low-enriched uranium for nuclear fuel. Turkey's diplomatic initiatives underscored its commitment to preventing a nuclear arms race and maintaining regional stability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release Regarding the UN Security Council Vote on Additional Sanctions against Iran, 2010). Ankara's approach was also driven by the desire to balance its relations with both Iran and the Western powers, advocating for peaceful resolutions while ensuring that its own security concerns were addressed (Celalifer Ekinci, 2009, s. 126-127). Turkey's involvement in the negotiations highlighted its role as a key regional player striving to defuse tensions through dialogue and diplomacy.

j) Changing energy geopolitics and hydrocarbon routes

The 2000s witnessed major shifts in energy geopolitics, with substantial implications for both Turkey and Iran. The discovery of new hydrocarbon reserves, changes in global energy demand, and the development of new energy transport routes reshaped the regional landscape. Turkey, lacking significant energy resources of its own, sought to position itself as a critical energy transit hub between the energy-rich Middle East and the energy-hungry European markets (Kardaş, 2014). Projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) were critical components of Turkey's energy strategy, enhancing its geopolitical importance and economic prospects (Jabrayılzade, 2021). These initiatives aimed not only to secure Turkey's stable energy supply, but also to increase its influence in regional energy politics and to strengthen its economy through transit fees and strategic partnerships.

Iran, on the other hand, possesses vast oil and gas reserves and aimed to use its energy wealth to bolster its regional influence and economic stability (Morady, 2011). However, international sanctions related to its nuclear program hampered its ability to fully capitalize on these resources during the 2000s. Despite these challenges, Iran pursued bilateral energy agreements with neighboring countries and sought to integrate itself into regional energy

networks.[97] For example, Iran worked on energy partnerships with countries such as Turkey and Pakistan to establish gas pipeline projects, such as the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, with the aim of enhancing regional energy cooperation (Mazhar & Goraya, 2014). Iran's strategic energy initiatives in this period were part of a broader effort to maintain and expand its influence in the Middle East, using its energy resources as a tool for economic development and geopolitical leverage, despite the significant constraints imposed by international sanctions.

k) The growing presence of Russia and China's in the region

During the 2000s, the growing role of Russia and China in the Middle East had significant implications for regional dynamics, particularly in the economic and energy sectors. Turkey, historically aligned with the West, began to diversify its foreign relations by strengthening ties with both Russia and China, driven by pragmatic considerations such as energy needs, trade opportunities, and a desire to balance Western influence (Özcan & Usul, Understanding the 'New' Turkish foreign policy: Changes within continuity, is Turkey departing from the west?, 2011). The relationship between Turkey and Russia, especially under the leadership of Putin and Erdoğan, have seen notable developments, including Turkey's controversial purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system, which marked a significant shift in Turkey's defense policy and strained its relations with NATO allies (Katz, 2022, s. 52).[98] Simultaneously, Turkey's participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) highlighted its strategic interest in improving economic and infrastructural connectivity with Asia and leveraging China's investment to support its own economic growth.

Under the pressure of international sanctions and seeking to counter US influence, Iran also deepened its strategic partnerships with Russia and China. Lacking alternatives due to its isolation from Western markets, Iran relied heavily on these relationships to sustain its economy and bolster its regional influence (Tazmini, 2022, s. 138-139). Russia's support was particularly

[97] Despite various sanctions, Iran has continued to engage in trade with neighbouring countries, including Turkey, and other states. For a detailed monitoring report prepared within the US legislative system outlining the extent of this trade and the enforcement of sanctions, see Katzman, Kenneth (2017), Iran Sanctions, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service (Katzman, 2017). This report provides an in-depth analysis of Iran's economic activities, highlighting how the country has navigated, and sometimes circumvented, the imposed restrictions. It also sheds light on the complex dynamics between Iran's economic strategies and international efforts to curb its economic capabilities.

[98] Despite the Turkish Foreign Ministry's assertion that its relations with leading military and economic powers such as Russia and China provide "the opportunity to lay the foundations of a holistic and comprehensive policy towards Asia and the Pacific" and reflect a multi-dimensional foreign policy, Russian experts link Ankara's move to purchase the S-400 missile defence system from Russia in the 2000s directly to the growing tensions between the Erdoğan government and its Western allies. For details, see, Morozov, Viacheslav. (2022). The Middle East in Russia's Foreign Policy, 1990-2020. In Nikolay Kozhanov (Ed.), Russian Foreign Policy towards the Middle East: New Trends, Old Traditions, London: Oxford University Press, 15-36. (Morozov, 2022, p. 24)

crucial in the Syrian conflict, where its military support for the Assad regime aligned with Iran's interests in maintaining a friendly government in Damascus. China's role was equally vital, as it remained a major buyer of Iranian oil despite sanctions and invested heavily in Iranian infrastructure projects (Solhdoost, 2021). These strategic partnerships allowed Iran to mitigate some of the economic pressures from Western sanctions, strengthen its regional posture and maintain economic stability in a challenging international environment.[99]

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In summary, during the 2000s, the Middle East witnessed significant geopolitical transformations and regional conflicts, with Turkey and Iran adopting distinct but occasionally converging strategies to navigate these turbulent waters. Turkey pursued a pragmatic and balanced foreign policy, using its strategic geographic location and robust economic ties to promote regional stability and counterbalance Iran's growing influence. In contrast, Iran adopted a more assertive and ideologically driven approach, using sectarian affiliations and strategic partnerships to expand its sphere of influence and counter the dominance of the United States and Saudi Arabia.

Both nations faced common challenges, including the rise of extremism, evolving energy dynamics, and the increasing involvement of global powers such as Russia and China. Despite these common pressures, their responses have been shaped by unique historical trajectories, internal political dynamics, and strategic imperatives. The complex interplay of cooperation and rivalry between Turkey and Iran continues to exert a profound impact on the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, underscoring their enduring role amid persistent and emerging regional complexities.

4.3. Setting the Stage: the Context of the Arab Uprisings and the Syrian Civil War

[99] Tazmini highlights that Iran's foreign policy is based on realism and a pragmatic understanding of power, rather than idealism. He sheds light on the nature of Iran's relations with Russia as being devoid of idealism and instead driven by power-centred dynamics. During the two Chechen wars in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, Tehran played a role in defusing criticism from the Islamic world over Russia's perceived excessive use of force against Muslims. Despite this criticism, and with Iranian assistance, Russia was granted observer status in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). In the mid-1990s, Tehran facilitated the resolution of a bloody civil war in favour of the Moscow-backed secular government in Dushanbe. At the turn of the century, Russia and Iran cooperated closely in supporting the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan against Islamist Taliban militias, long before they emerged as a major opponent of the US-led coalition in the country (Tazmini, 2022, pp. 132-133). In essence, the dynamics of Tehran's relations with China resemble those with Russia, which are entirely **realist** and pragmatic, in line with its **strategic culture**.

The Arab Uprisings [100], which started at the end of 2010, were the product of a multi-layered set of economic, political, social, and ideological factors. The root of this unrest was deep-seated dissatisfaction with entrenched autocratic regimes that were marked by corruption, political repression, and the lack of democratic freedoms. Besides, this discontent was fuelled by economic hardship with high unemployment rates in many countries of the region, especially among the youth, and a rise in the cost of living with inadequate public services. The oppressive political environment, with very limited avenues for political participation and expression, further fostered frustration and a sense of hopelessness among the population. These various conditions have created a powder keg of accumulated grievances that wait to be ignited after decades.

It finds expression in the immediate catalyst-the self-immolation by a Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, for the people's protests against police corruption and ill-treatment. An act of desperation from Bouazizi shook a powerful chord among an uprising crowd all over the Middle East and North Africa as the people shared with his plight against entrenched systemic injustices. This incident triggered large-scale protests because people who had suffered from such economic and political oppression for many years came to the streets to protest (Hammami, 2011). These protests eventually spilled over into other countries from Tunisia, and each uprising presented a unique blend of local grievances and broader regional discontent. Shared experience of autocratic rule and economic struggles, combined with the powerful symbolism of Bouazizi's protest, underlined how deeply rooted and widespread the discontents driving the Arab Uprisings truly were.

a) State-society relations as a trigger for the uprisings

In addition to its long history, the relationship between the state and society in the Middle East in the modern times, and especially in the 20th century, has been fundamentally based on the use of power and control, with state mechanisms employing sophisticated security

[100] Referring the events of 2010-2011 as the “Arab Uprisings” rather than the “Arab Spring” lends an air of objectivity and nuance to these movements. The term “Arab Spring” evokes a season of renewal and positive change-a concept that is somewhat misleading, considering the varied and tumultuous outcome in different countries. It describes the term as multidimensional toward change, from protests establishing fragile democracies to the suppression through brutal crackdown and protracted conflict. The "Arab Uprising" usage nullifies the undue optimism and implicit bias brought about by the word "spring," enabling thus the most possible neutral and wide analysis of such a socio-political dynamic. It allows a deeper effort at understanding the causes and consequences of the movements better, setting in clear view natural grievances and aspirations of the people concerned, rather than setting events prematurely within some narrative of inevitable progress.

apparatuses to maintain their grip on power and suppress dissenting voices. Such a relationship inevitably leads to widespread human rights violations, arbitrary detention, torture, and severe restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly.[101] The authoritarian methods used by these regimes shape public discourse and influence the level of political participation and representation, ultimately creating a climate of fear and compliance. As a result, significant barriers to political engagement are created for large segments of society, alienating the masses from the system and negatively affecting their ability to have a say in the process of change.

In essence, the Arab Uprisings process can be read as the result of a process in which these large masses, who were excluded from the political scene, lost their hopes for change and expressed their dissatisfaction with the field of political representation into which they could not enter. The fact that the masses raised the discourse of greater political transparency, fair governance and accountability during the Arab Uprisings is a direct reflection of this demand, and also a clear reflection of the change in this longstanding dynamic. The process, triggered by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, who earned his living – indeed, was forced to do so - as a street vendor in Tunisia, as a rebellion against widespread corruption and unfair local controls, made a huge impact throughout the country and ignited a wave of protests across borders. The first wave of the uprising in Tunisia, which led to the ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from power, also inspired similar movements in the societies across the region. Although each society has its own set of problems, grievances and motivations, ultimately their common discourse was the demand for justice, living conditions worthy of human dignity and political representation (Gabra, 2021, s. 109).

In Libya, the uprising that began in early 2011 culminated a few months later with the lynching of Gaddafi, who had ruled the country for 42 years. However, what followed was an intense civil war between the tribes, regions and warlords backed by foreign powers. The power struggle between the parties supported by regional countries and international powers plunged

[101] In the countries of the Middle East and North Africa deeply shaken by the Arab Uprisings, arbitrary arrests, torture, ill-treatment, and other human rights violations were extensively reported, generating a substantial literature prior to 2010-11 period. These reports, books of observations and testimonies delve into the systemic factors that perpetuated these violations, exploring the structural deficiencies in governance, the role of security apparatuses, and the societal impact of prolonged authoritarian rule in the region. For some of these reports and studies from various countries across the Middle East and North Africa on an annual basis, see Amnesty International (2024), Reports for the Countries in the Middle East and North Africa, https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/middle-east/, 12.07.2024; Human Rights Watch (2001), Egypt: Human Rights Background – October 2001, https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/mena/egypt-bck-1001.htm , 12.07.2024; Monshipouri, Mahmoud (2011), *Human Rights in the Middle East: Frameworks, Goals, and Strategies*, London: Palgrave MacMillan; Middle East Watch (1991), *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime*, London: Yale University Press

the country into a long spiral of instability (Mezran, 2014), which is still ongoing. These conflicts also include the pains of the transition from decades of authoritarian rule to a more participatory model of governance in Libya, a country with many sophisticated sociological dynamics and political balances.[102]

Yemen has followed a similarly troubled course to Libya. At roughly the same time, the decades-long rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh was overthrown by mass protests, and a sectarian civil war between tribes/regional powers backed by regional/international countries began and continues to this day (Bruck, Alwazir, & Wiacek, 2014). The uprisings against central government in both Yemen and Libya have evolved into regional conflicts, bloody civil wars and instability in which the old authoritarian regimes, where state-society relations were based on unilateral obedience, have been overthrown but not replaced by a new form of governance. Both countries have inherited shattered societies, with state institutions in ruins, state-society relations in tatters, devastated economies and millions of refugees.

Another example of the existing structure and problematic nature of state-society relations in the Middle East was the Egyptian mass protests that began in late 2010. The overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak was initially seen as a victory and a development that strengthened the belief in the possibility of democratic reform in the country. However, the subsequent takeover by the Muslim Brotherhood and its immediate removal from power in a coup d'état in the summer of 2013 (Rougier & Lacroix, 2016), a year later, severely shattered the "spring" mood and optimistic expectations in the region. These developments were a clear indication that political transitions might not be as easy as expected, and that the military and state structures would not tolerate change and would welcome attempts to seize power with obvious Islamic overtones. A similar situation can be observed in the Tunisian "spring" experience, albeit on a different scale and dimension a few years after the coup in Egypt (Marzouki, 2021).[103]

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[102] Some Western politicians and scholars argue that what is being done in Libya, Syria and Yemen is "arming fanatics and tribesmen", similar to the mistake once made in Afghanistan, and that it is inevitable that this will inevitably lead to the fatal outcome of "turning against their paymaster" (Bradley, 2012, pp. 120-126). Although there is an error of rote categorization and collective blame here, the overall point is not unjustified and points to major miscalculations that were made at the time, thirteen years later. Indeed, the title of the book supports this political error and thesis: "How Islamists Hijacked the Middle East Revolts".

[103] At this point, I would like to discuss a reading that reflects the perspective of the secular sectors and the traditional bureaucracy in the region and that has been widely adopted in the Western literature. The claim that the Muslim Brotherhood did not carry out the late 2010 revolution that toppled Mubarak alone, but with the cooperation of leftists, liberals, trade unions and many secular sectors, is true and points to the multi-component nature of the uprising process. However, in the new era, while the claim that the Muslim Brotherhood purged all other structures and excluded them from power is true to a certain extent, I think there is a categorical problem in

In the remaining Arab societies, including Syria and some Gulf states such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, demonstrations have been suppressed by harsh security and military measures. These different outcomes in different countries reflect the entrenched mechanisms of state control and the enormous challenges faced by societies seeking to reshape the existing relationships with their states towards more inclusive and accountable governance structures. From this perspective, the Arab Uprisings represent a critical juncture between the aspirations of state structures for greater control over society and the demands of societies for greater rights and freedoms and broader political representation.

b) Political-economic perspective on the roots of Arab Uprisings

One of the most important dynamics influencing the Arab Uprisings was the widespread economic hardship that deeply affected the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa, especially the lower and middle classes. In many Arab societies, including Syria, Tunisia and Egypt, the marginalized masses suffered from chronic unemployment, inflation and ever-decreasing living standards due to economic hardship, and this socio-economic backdrop was a constant source of serious unrest. Corruption, crony capitalism and inefficient governance were added to these economic difficulties, fostering despair and intense anxiety about the future among the masses. Moreover, these economic grievances faced by the people only generated problems within a poverty-based framework, but factors such as perceived injustice and lack of opportunities for upward mobility also fueled the revolutionary fervor of the desperate masses who "had nothing to lose but their chains."[104]

The economic difficulties that existed in the countries that experienced major popular revolts during the Arab Uprisings (notably Syria, Egypt and Tunisia) were exacerbated and deepened by systemic inequalities and the tight control of some political/military elites over economic resources. In Egypt, the neo-liberal policies implemented during the presidency of

questioning the legitimacy of the 2012 presidential elections that brought the Brotherhood to power. In this analysis, there is a danger that the claim that the secular sectors of society, who were dissatisfied with the Brotherhood welcomed General al-Sisi, who carried out the coup, like de Gaulle and blessed him as a hero, is completely whitewashed in the anti-Brotherhood campaign and the process of punishment carried out by the coup regime. For a book, containing various readings and assessments by mostly Egyptian observers on the ground, see (Rougier & Lacroix, Egypt's Revolutions: Politics, Religion, and Social Movements, 2016).

[104] In his analysis of the political-economy dimension of the Arab Uprisings, Middle East researcher Ali Kadri makes the following striking observation: Until 1977, real per capita income in the Arab world as a whole increased at the same rate as in East Asia. However, after 1977, per capita income in East Asia tripled in 1996, while per capita income in the Arab world stagnated on average (as of the early 1980s). Successive Arab war defeats, comprador ruling elites, and imperialist oil grabs together constitute the underlying cause of Arab decline and economic underdevelopment, together with the context and effects of development. For further details, see (Kadri, 2014).

Anwar Sadat, and subsequently during the 30-year rule of his deputy, Mubarak, period led to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small political elite and the neglect of the needs of the broad masses of people. Similarly, the economic model implemented by the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia was based on foreign investment and tourism revenues creating an economic imbalance that affected large masses of people in the interior regions except for the coastal cities (Sürek, 2011, s. 29).[105]

In Syria, which has similar characteristics to Egypt and Tunisia, Bashar Assad's policy of economic opening and liberalization[106] in the 2000s led to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small group, which in turn resulted in the deterioration of the living conditions for the large poor masses who were relegated to live in rural areas and suburbs. These problematic dynamics began to accumulate widespread dissatisfaction, creating a perpetual cycle that severely disadvantaged the lower and middle classes. Moreover, the situation in Yemen was one of the worst among other Arab Uprisings societies (Juneau, 2013). The failure of the Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime to address the economic challenges and the increase in nepotism and corruption further deepened the existing crisis. For this reason, the demands of the protesters in Yemen were not only for political reform and social regulation, but also for improved economic conditions.

On the other hand, unlike the Arab nationalist republics, the Gulf Arab kingdoms such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait, which witnessed various demonstrations, managed to overcome the turmoil of the same period in a relatively more stable manner, thanks to the different economic programs they implemented, the distribution of wealth and the methods of generating consent (Ataman, 2020). Faced with a potential risk of wave of demonstrations from other segments of the population, as well as the protests of the Shiite minority, the Saudi Arabian administration, has decided to increase the employment rate in the public sector by announcing large-scale welfare programs with the help of its large oil reserves. The royal family's ability to distribute this vast wealth among different segments of society was a major

[105] Tunisia published spectacular economic data until Bouazizi's iconic action and the removal of the president in December 2010. However, the problem in Tunisia was not the economic data, but the distribution of national production and income were distributed. For example, all investments were made in the settlements along the country's 15-20 km wide Mediterranean coastline.. On the other hand, the central, western and even southern parts of the country were completely neglected when it came to sharing in economic prosperity. The city of Sidi Bou Said, where Bouazizi lived, and where he set himself on fire, was a settlement with a 40% emigration rate due to unemployment. In fact, out of a total population of 11 million, 600.000 were living in France as migrants due to unemployment and economic reasons (Sürek, 2011, p. 29).

[106] For further details on this so-called "social market economy" policy, see: Abboud, Samer N., (2015), Locating the "Social" in the Social Market Economy, in *Syria: from Reform to Revolt, vol.1: Political Economy and International Relations*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 45-65.

factor in the protests losing momentum before they spread widely. While the Bahraini government implemented a similar welfare distribution policy to the Saudi government, it also took harsh security measures against the demonstrators. The demonstrations in Oman and Kuwait in the Gulf, which did not flare up much, were extinguished by some administrative regulations and partial welfare distribution programs. The economic levers of the Gulf Arab kingdoms enabled them to overcome the process in a more stable and balanced way compared to the Arab republics in this period of social turmoil (Farha, 2015).

c) Fulfilment of Economic Needs in Arab Republics vs. Kingdoms

The Arab uprisings of 2010-2011 underlined the pivotal role that economic grievances play in political unrest across the Middle East and North Africa. One of the main factors deciding the fate of the uprisings in the republics was that, in the case of the kingdoms, the regimes were more competent to tackle the economic needs of the people thanks to vast economic resources and energy revenues. In sharp contrast, Arab republics such as Syria and Egypt failed to offer a degree of inclusive economic growth, leading to mass discontent among their people and greater despair among the peoples. In contrast, many Arab kingdoms, buoyed by oil wealth, were able to mitigate economic pressures through social welfare programs, though this approach has its limitations ((Levins, 2012). This disparity in economic governance helps explain why uprisings were more effective in Arab republics than in monarchies.

In Arab republics, economic policies were often characterized by liberalization efforts that benefited a narrow elite while neglecting the broader population. In Egypt, for example: under Hosni Mubarak, economic reforms favored crony capitalism, with well-connected businessmen enriching themselves while unemployment and poverty rates surged (Chekir & Diwan, 2014). In Syria, Bashar al-Assad's regime adopted economic policies that reinforced inequality at all levels of society, in ways that marginalized rural areas and low-income groups. The inability to address the economic disparities thus helped provide fertile ground for unrest (Goulden, 2011). When protests did occur, they were driven by widespread anger at corruption, unemployment, and the lack of economic opportunities. The inability of these republics to meet their citizens' basic economic expectations during for decades undermined their legitimacy and made them extremely vulnerable to mass protests.

Arab monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and Morocco, by contrast, had greater capacities to address economic grievances, at least in the short term. These monarchies used oil wealth to pursue pervasive social welfare programs, subsidies, and employment in the public sector as

ways of appeasing their populations. Indeed, once protests did begin to spread, Saudi Arabia announced a $130 billion social-spending package only in 2011 (and continued this program during the following years); economic reforms and an increase in subsidies were promised in Morocco; Bahrain had also provided direct cash payments to households as preventive measures (Smith, 2011, s. 31-32). These measures have only cushioned the countries from unrest in the short run, since citizens were more reluctant to destabilize a system from which they saw tangible economic benefits. However, as Levins also points out, dependence on oil revenues and subsidies is unsustainable for the long term (Levins, 2012, s. 388), since these are not remedies which could fix deeper structural issues of economic diversification, unemployment, and inequality.

The differing abilities of the Arab republics and kingdoms to satisfy the economic needs of citizens explain much about the outcome of the uprisings. Republics, which failed to deliver on equality and inclusive growth, instead faced the reactions of their own people who thought they had lost their cultural values, had to fight against more effective and widespread protests (Ataman, Arap Dünyasında Değişim Talebi Devam Ediyor, 2019). Kingdoms had used their economic resources to purchase social peace, although there is nothing permanent in such an approach. By underlining the divergences in responses between Egypt and Syria, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain and Morocco, on the other, economic governance becomes pivotal with regard to the different vulnerabilities experienced among political systems toward crisis periods.

d) The Social and Economic Implications of Political Repression and Regime in Syria

In Syria and Egypt, decades-long political repression has had significant economic implications. The Syrian war, began in 2011, has had extensive economic implications, entwined with political oppression and structural governance issues which further complicated the political economy of the Syrian state and society. Both Hafez and Bashar Assad's more than half a century-long authoritarian regime, based on pervasive political oppression, generated an environment of economic marginalization and inequality among the urban and rural masses that further motivated the rural areas against the Assad regime especially under the lack of state support and rapidly decreasing subsidies in agriculture (Zurayk & Gough, 2013).[107]

[107] According to the data supplied by Zurayk & Gough, the active employment rate in agricultural sector slowly decreased to 20 percent in 2010 than its previous 24 percent level in 2001, despite the slow but gradual increase in the rural population. As a result, rural cities like Deraa, once a stronghold of the Syrian regime, became the starting grounds for the popular uprising in Syria in 2011 and provided strong support for the anti-Assad rebellion.

The oppression stifled dissent, marginalized broad segments of the population from economic activity, and centralized power and wealth in the hands of a privileged elite, thus aggravating socio-economic grievances and further antagonizing the current polarization within the society. Its neoliberal economic reforms launched in the 2000s further expanded income disparities, dismantled social security networks, and increased unemployment levels, especially among young people. As a total result, these economic reforms only deepened the existing gaps and helped strengthening the ruling elites (Donati, 2013, s. 36-37). Heydemann clearly summarizes the general outcome of the political and economic "reforms" during the 2000s resulting only in regime survivability and reproduction of ruling elite hegemony continued more than half a century under Baath regime instead increasing social welfare of the masses: "Regime elites and their allies used their political privileges to capture the resources generated by economic openings" (Donati, 2013, s. 37). These economic stresses, coupled with a devastating drought from 2006 to 2010, devastated the rural community, triggering indignation.

Questions of identity and exclusion were also foundational. The Alawite-dominated regime systematically excluded Sunni majorities, as well as other minorities, from political and economic life, engendering feelings of injustice and alienation. Exclusion, along with sectarian discrimination in the distribution of resources, deepened social cleavages.

It should be noted, however, that although the Baath regime privileged Alawites and other minorities, Sunnis were also widely included in this regime. In fact, the majority of the last Baath government that fell in December 2024, such as Baath's last Prime Minister Mohammad Ghazi al-Jalali, were Sunnis, not Alawites. Nevertheless, two things are important at this point: The Sunnis who supported Assad and the Baath regime were not from the religious and conservative parts of this community but from the secular and anti-religious parts. Secondly, the highest security and intelligence positions and the positions which were considered to be most crucial to regime security were all filled by "trusted" Sunnis, very close to Assad, and mostly from the Alawites (Van Dam, 2013, s. 142-143).

These significant features reveal that the regime has not, especially within the context of human resources and population dynamics, completely excluded the Sunnis, who constitute approximately 70% of Syria. However, the Baath regime consciously attempted to keep the

Another remarkable data reflects the distribution of poverty within the Syrian poverty, which states that 62 percent of the total poverty was sheltered by rural areas. Moreover, an additional data highlighting the deteriorating socio-economic conditions in rural areas: landless peasants constituted 77 percent of rural poverty ((Zurayk & Gough, 2013, pp. 112-113).

conservative/religious masses outside the administrative apparatus and has otherwise maintained key security/intelligence organs in the sole control of Alawites.

In the course of the process that turned into a civil war following the events that began in March 2011, a catastrophic economic fate emerged. The country's infrastructure was completely destroyed in all fields and sectors, GDP plummeted to the bottom, and the currency lost a great deal of value. In these conditions where a complete war economy emerged, the sanctions imposed by the international community on critical sectors further deepened this crisis. On the other hand, due to the displacement of millions of people due to war and conflicts, neighboring countries faced a massive wave of migration, and the financial impact of this irregular migration created a burden of hundreds of billions of dollars, and neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan were the primary affected countries, the effects of which are still ongoing. Although a heavy economic burden and unequal conditions emerged at the end of the war, these economic inequalities that were already deep before the war and identity-based problems directly led to the war and prepared the conditions for a full-scale civil war.

While Bashar Assad was saved from losing his grip on power between 2013-2016 thanks to the advent of powerful foreign regime friends such as Iran and Russia, the following years with relatively less conflict were like the calm before the storm. Indeed, the armed opposition, having left Idlib at the beginning of December 2024 and occupied Aleppo and subsequently Damascus through Hama and Homs, seemed to have brought an end to the 14-year civil war.

While the Assad regime was toppled militarily in front of the armed forces, Syria was already on the brink of collapse for a very long time due to catastrophic economic and systemic crises. Decades of constant war and strife, international sanctions, poor governance, hyperinflation, devaluation of the currency and extensive poverty, have joined with the reality of war and continuous conflicts, to push the economy to the edge of total collapse. The foreign patrons such as Russia and Iran that the Assad regime has come to depend upon and the political and economic stand-off and difficulties that the two major countries are experiencing under the 2024 circumstances have caused the three countries to affect one another negatively (Maddox, 2024).

The Baath regime's misallocation of economic resources, which were to be utilized for the people during war, on defense and military spending has contributed to the already widespread unemployment and has resulted in catastrophic conditions such as hunger and not being able to

get their salaries even in the army in recent months. The security forces, unable to receive their pay and in the depths of despair, have now given up fighting and dispersed, the army has finally fallen apart and failed to resist the new troops streaming in from the north. While the fall of the Assad regime has drawn a thick veil over the three wars, decades will elapse before the country is stabilized and rebuilt. The civil war may not have ended but can be said to have reached a new phase. The repression of the central state, the conditions of war and the legacy of economic collapse will characterize the post-Baath condition of Syria, a state with extremely limited economic resources and many social fault lines.

4.4. Syrian Arab Republic - Islamic Republic of Iran Relations: before and during the Civil War

During the Syrian Civil War, the indispensable nature of the relations between Damascus and Tehran undoubtedly have been remarkable and game-changer. This framework has also formed a process that has shown the fundamental dynamics of regional balances in terms of the serious testing of strategic cooperation under war conditions. Syrian-Iranian relations, which are also surprising for decision-makers in Turkey and have forced them to fundamentally renew their approach to Syria, certainly did not start in 2011 and did not reach this level in such a short time. In this section, I will discuss the new dynamics of Damascus-Tehran relations that emerged after the 1979 Revolution and their nature that has been reinforced with great solidarity during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 and has continued more than four decades, till the abrupt fall of Assad dynasty and Baath regime in December 2024.

a) Relations before the 1979 Revolution

In the modern period, until the Iranian Revolution in 1979, relations between Iran and Syria were significantly shaped in a cultural framework rather than a political one. This cultural framework was largely formed between various Shia clerics (*ulama*) and the new political structure in Syria and the political leaders of the Shiite/Alawite community. In fact, religious and sectarian connections between Syria (the former Greater Syria or Levant, including today's Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan) and Iran date back to the early 16th century, when Ottoman-Safavid regional competition was intense. During this period, Shiism was attempted to be institutionalized in Iran with the help of traditional Twelver Shia *ulama* brought from the Shia

communities in Amil Mountain and Lebanon, and the foundations of today's Iranian Shiism were laid during this period with the contributions of Syrian-Lebanese *ulama* (Hourani, 2006). These religious/sectarian relations established by the Safavids in the 16th and 17th centuries, and this Iranian/Shiite orientation towards the Syria-Lebanon region, which was considered the "backyard" of the Ottoman Empire,[108] are also of particular importance in terms of the strategic culture and institutional capacity of Iranian state and leaders. This period highlighted a neo-classical realist approach to foreign policy, where strategic imperatives often trumped ideological differences.

Another dimension of Syria-Iran relations dating back to before 1979 is the Tehran-Syria relations, which were formed as a reflection of the regional geopolitics that took shape under the conditions of the Cold War. During this period, although Iran sided with the US in terms of macro political orientations, and Syria developed strategic relations with the USSR, various pragmatic orientations created a suitable environment for Iran and Syria to get closer. Recognizing Syria, which gained its independence from France in 1946, and appointing a chargé d'affaires to Damascus, Iran raised this status to the level of ambassador in 1949 and took diplomatic relations with the newly established Syrian state to a higher level. In fact, a friendship and cooperation agreement was signed between Iran, led by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and Syria, which had not yet achieved stability, in 1953.[109]

However, in the harsh conflict environment of the Cold War, these ideological differences soon began to cause serious problems. In these years when Arab nationalism gained strength in the post-colonial independence processes, Syrian politics also began to fall rapidly under the influence of Egypt and Gamal Abdul Nasser. Arab nationalists had no sympathy for the Shah of Iran, who was seen as an agent of Western imperialism in the region. Indeed, Syria had refused to join the Baghdad Pact signed in 1955, which included Turkey along with

[108] Although the Arabic-speaking Shia scholars invited by the Safavids to institutionalize Twelver Shiism in Iran, especially among the nomadic Turkmens, are mostly mentioned as Lebanese/Syrian Shia and scholars brought from Amil Mountain, Shia scholars from regions such as Iraq and Bahrain were also invited during the same period. For more information regarding these cultural/sectarian interactions see; Kadhem, Fouad Jabir (2012). *The Sacred and the Secular: The 'ulama of Najaf in Iraqi politics between 1950 and 1980*. University of Exeter (United Kingdom). (Kadhem, 2012, pp. 19-44)

[109] After Syria gained independence in 1946, the first Iranian chargé d'affaires appointed to Syria was Masoud Moazed. When relations were raised to the level of ambassadorship in 1949, the first ambassador appointed by Mohammad Reza Shah to Damascus was the writer and diplomat Morteza Moshfegh Kazemi, one of the important figures of modern Iranian literature and one of the first examples of the Iranian novel *Tehrān-e Maḵuf* (Horrible Tehran, 1922). Kazemi later served as ambassador to Egypt and some European countries (Mirʿābedini, 2011).

Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, and had begun to adopt a harsh ideological position against the US and Britain, along with Egypt.

Rising Arab nationalism also began to turn its back on the Shah's strategy of finding allies among Arabs, particularly in Syria: Syria reacted strongly to the decision of the Iranian cabinet to recognize Bahrain as the 14th province of Iran in November 1957, and officially said that they saw Bahrain as part of the "Arab Nation". Indeed, in 1965, the Syrian Baath government declared that the Arab-populated Khuzestan province in south-western Iran was also part of the Arab homeland, and referred to this region as "Arabistan" instead Khuzestan. The Iranian monarchy remained silent about the long-standing Arab nationalist Syrian attitude toward Iran, and relations were kept at a low level until the 1967 Arab-Israel war when medical and humanitarian assistance supplied by Iranian Red Lion and Sun Society to war-torn Syria (Goodarzi, 2009, s. 14-15).

Although temporary rapprochement steps were taken from time to time, Iran-Syria relations in the 1970s had to proceed under the influence of rather sophisticated regional balances. The most important of these were the Arab-Israeli wars and the tensions created in Arab countries by Israel's strategic and vital cooperation with the US, and the need to approach the USSR in response. Of course, even though the Arab world did not have a leader after Nasser, the problematic relations of Arab states with Israel were decisive in each country's own circumstances. Syria-Iran relations were also closely affected by Tehran's position as the US's gendarmerie and its closest ally in the region.

In the years leading up to the 1979 Revolution, Syria's approach to Iran was generally shaped by Arab nationalism, anti-Israeli sentiment, and suspicion of Shah's alliance with the US. Following Nasser's death and the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the Saudi-Egyptian-Iranian axis that emerged in the region after the Camp David Accords and was in close cooperation with the US-Israel alliance posed a serious security threat to Syria. This axis would later be followed by the Saudi-Jordanian-Iraqi rapprochement. Under the Baath administration and the Alawite leader Hafez Asad, Syria found itself surrounded and isolated in the region by its Sunni Arab neighbors as well as its US-Israeli allies (Von Maltzahn, 2013, s. 22).

When the threat posed by the opposing ideological brothers of the Baath Party, which held power in Syria and Iraq, was added to these balances, the regional conditions of the late 1970s

were quite challenging and threatening for Syria.[110] Although there were periodic rapprochements in relations between Syria and Iran originating from Iraq during this period, this channel also lost its effectiveness when the border conflicts and problems between Tehran and Baghdad were resolved with the 1975 Algiers Accord (Von Maltzahn, 2013, s. 22). Damascus saw Iran as a balancing regional partner against Iraq, but these balances entered a new phase with the 1975 agreement.

In the 1970s, efforts to accelerate relations between the two countries through official visits at various levels are also noticeable. As part of these visits, which increased from 1974 onwards, Syrian Minister of Economics and Finance Mohammed Imadi visited Iran, followed by the Iranian Foreign Minister visiting Damascus in the same year. Syrian Foreign Minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam also went to Tehran and in addition to an agreement in the field of economy, a tourism cooperation agreement was signed, and in 1975, a cultural cooperation agreement was signed. The highest level of these visits was Hafez Asad's official visit to Tehran in December 1975. However, the regional conjuncture did not allow Syrian-Iranian relations to develop and strengthen further despite this visit at the highest level.

Another development in Syria-Iran relations before the 1979 Revolution, which was different from the state level but would be quite decisive for the following period, was the Baath regime's relations with religious Shiite opponents and clergymen who opposed the Shah. While the Assad administration tried to develop relations with Shah Pahlavi during this period, it also entered into rapprochement with the Shah's Shiite opponents who supported Ayatollah Khomeini in Syria and Lebanon. Although these relations remained at an individual level, the contacts established with these influential figures constituted one of the basic dynamics of Tehran-Damascus relations after the 1979 Revolution.

The most important figure that Asad and the Syrian state institutions were in contact with was the leader of the Lebanese Shiites, [Imam] Musa Sadr, who was rapidly becoming an important political-religious leader in the Middle East. Sadr's visit to Asad was important for both sides to find allies due to the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. These contacts not only led to the establishment of close relations between the Lebanese Shiites and the occupying Baath regime, but also provided the legitimacy for the Syrian Alawites, who had been excluded for

[110] In the 1970s, the reciprocal accusations and threats that had become a propaganda war between the rival brothers in Syria and Iraq were on the rise. Asad's Radio Damascus described the Iraqi Baath as the "tribal Tikriti fascist clique", referring to the city from which their leaders were based. In contrast, Baath officials in Baghdad described the regime in Syria as "the al-Asad family regime" and attacked their opponents from the same point (Van Dam, 2013, s. 72).

centuries in the Shiite world and were considered non-Shiite, to be accepted as an essential/authentic part within Shiism again.

In fact, in the 1972-73 period, Sadr and some Shiite scholars he was in contact with issued a religious fatwa declaring that Alawism was within Shiism (Reisinezhad, 2019) and this support strengthened the ideological/religious position of Alawite within the Syrian society and the Middle East politics.[111] For Assad, who made a move to save his legitimacy within the Alawite-Sunni framework by promoting some reliable Sunni leaders within the Baath and giving them ministerial positions, the problem of sectarian legitimacy was thus largely resolved.

In the late 1970s, it is observed that relations between Asad and Lebanese Shiites, Palestinian groups, and Iranian opposition Shiites who support Khomeini became closer and more intense. During these years, the presence of Iranian opposition members who received military training in the Shiite Amal and Palestinian Fatah camps in Lebanon is recorded. In addition to Khomeini's two sons, very influential figures such as Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, who would serve as Iranian foreign minister after revolution, Ibrahim Yazdi, who would serve as deputy prime minister and foreign minister, and Mustafa Chamran, who would serve as defense minister, took place in these camps. These important figures received training in the Fatah camps and also obtained Syrian diplomatic passports. The establishment and active functioning of these networks was undoubtedly made possible by Musa Sadr's personal ties with the Baath regime. In practice, Sadr's nephew Sadegh Tabataba'i, who had close ties to Iranian revolutionaries, and Ali Akbar Mohtashemipur, who was close to them and later served as ambassador to Syria and the Iranian minister of interior, also took active part in these networks. The most critical and symbolic support the Baath government has supplied to the Iranian opposition is that Syria was among the few states that offered asylum to the exiled cleric Ayatollah Khomeini in Najaf, when he forced to leave Iraq by Saddam Hussein’s decision in October 1978. (Von Maltzahn, 2013, s. 24-25).

This network of relations that emerged in the late 1970s, before the revolution even took place, and the Iranian Shia – Syrian government - Lebanese Shia - Palestinian groups line and cooperation would later form the oldest and strongest foundation of the “Axis of Resistance”

[111] The efforts of Hafez al-Assad and the Nusayris to be accepted within Shiism yielded concrete results right at the beginning of the 1970s when Assad came to power. A fatwa issued by Ayatollah Hasan Shirazi in 1972 was an important source of religious legitimacy that accepted the Syrian Alawites, like the Shiites, within the Ahl al-Bayt. The appointment of a Lebanese Alawite-Nusayri as the Shiite Mufti of Tripoli and Northern Lebanon by Musa Sadr, the Chairman of the Supreme Islamic Shiite Council in Lebanon, in 1973, just one year after this fatwa, also provided a critically important legitimacy.

that gained momentum and strength in the 2010s. Ayatollah Khomeini and other Iranian revolutionary Shia elites will always remember these early connections in terms of their leadership characteristics and strategic orientations for the future, and the impact of these networks and relations will be observed as significant dynamics during the war with Iraq in 1980-88 and the Civil War that began in Syria in 2011.

b) Early Revolutionary Era and Assad – Khomeini Ties

Immediately after the overthrow of the monarchy in Iran, Hafez Assad sent an official message to Khomeini on February 12, 1979, in which he "congratulated the Iranian people on their victory" and declared that Syria would "support the new regime that will be created by the revolution in Iran" (Goodarzi, 2009, s. 18). The significance of this message from Assad was that it was the first Arab country to give such open, early and large-scale support, while all the Arab states in the region approached Iran with trepidation and even hostility. Later, Libya, Algeria, South Yemen and the Palestine Liberation Organization would also declare their support for the revolution, but Damascus's official stance was critical and decisive. Against Iraq, which was concerned about the repercussions of the revolution on its own Shia community, Syria, previously having problematic relations with the Iraqi Baath, found a powerful ally in the person of Khomeini.

Following this congratulatory message from Hafez Assad, Syrian Minister of Information Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad visited Qom in March 1979 to meet with the Leader of the Revolution Ayatollah Khomeini and presented a copy of the Quran as a gift from Assad. Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam also visited Tehran in August of the same year, describing the revolution led by Khomeini as the "most important event in contemporary history" and declaring that his country supported the Iranian revolutionaries "before, during and after the victory of the revolution." These gestures by the Syrian side were important in terms of the regional legitimacy of the Iranian Revolution; indeed, when the US Embassy was raided in November 1979, Damascus was the first capital that Iranian Foreign Minister Bani Sadr visited in search of support (Goodarzi, 2009, s. 29-30).

In the wake of the 1979 Revolution, Iranian politics rapidly became Islamized, and Ayatollah Khomeini and his revolutionary cadres faced isolation, embargo and loneliness abroad. During this process, Iranian leaders tried to use the divisions and separations within the Arab world to their advantage. During this process, Syria, Libya and Palestinian leader Arafat stood out as potential allies within the Arab world for Tehran. Under the conditions of 1979,

this potential alliance between Tehran and Damascus was not simply a "unity of Shiites against the Sunni majority in the region". For Iranian leaders, this orientation also meant finding a vital partner in the region against Israel and the US/Western hegemony. At this point, it is noteworthy that Khomeini and the Islamic revolutionary leaders prioritized strategic alliance relations rather than ideological foreign policy. At this point, within the neo-classical realist understanding, the influence and priority of leadership characteristics on strategic culture and ideological prioritization parameters come to the fore.[112]

This mutual strategic orientation is also reflected in the frequency of official delegations between Iran and Syria. The fact that delegations from Iran are more numerous than Syrian delegations is clear evidence that the Islamic revolutionaries in Tehran need the immediate outputs of this alliance more. The official delegations at the ministerial level witnessed in Damascus and Tehran in the early 1980s were not limited to foreign ministers but also included economic, defense and energy delegations. This shows that relations were not only in the political arena and extended to a multi-layered manner to deepen and develop. While the Syrians' needs are both political and economic, the Iranians are more likely to request immediate aid and request military support and equipment for their war with Iraq and proxy groups in Lebanon (Von Maltzahn, 2013, s. 29-30).

c) Iran-Iraq War and Syrian Support to Islamic Republic

The 1979 Revolution had brought about new conditions not only in Iran but also in the Middle East, where most of the old balances and regional alliances had changed. In the 1970s, when Britain's former colonies in the Gulf gained independence and London lost power in the region, Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi Baath Party, who had assumed the leadership of Arab nationalism after Nasser, were seeking to impose their own sovereignty in the Gulf. When the excitement that the 1979 Revolution had created among the Shiite Islamists and the rhetoric of regime export by Iranian revolutionary leaders were added to this, the Islamic Iranian state became the primary threat in the region for Iraq. When the old disagreements and ideological differences between Iraq and Syria were added to these regional balances, it did not take long

[112] One of the most obvious examples of the revolutionizing and ideological drift of Iranian foreign policy in this period, parallel to the **ideological orientations of the leaders**, is the deterioration seen in Iran-Egypt relations. For example, as early as May 1979, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini instructed the Iranian Foreign Ministry to severe relations with Egypt "Because of the Egyptian government's absolute obedience to the US and Zionism and its treasonous agreement it signed with Israel" (Goodarzi, 2009, p. 19). With this move, Khomeini aimed to support the Palestinian cause with Islamic consciousness and to isolate Egypt in the region due to the Camp David agreement it signed with Israel and to create an ideological reaction.

for an “alliance of the lonely” to be established between Iran and Syria and for this axis to be positioned against Iraq.

During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Syria was among Iran's limited number of Arab allies, extending vital political and military assistance against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Syria allowed Iranian oil exports via its territory, enabling Iran to bypass the Western-imposed blockade. Assad also utilized his regional and international influence to diplomatically isolate Iraq within the Arab League. Under the war circumstances and regional rivalry, this was a tactical alliance fuelled by common opposition to Iraq and illustrated how external pressure can forge alliances among ideological adversaries. Syrian vital support kept Iran's war effort afloat, illustrating the strength of the Iran-Syria alliance and its salience in regional geopolitics.

During the Iran-Iraq War, Hafez al-Assad and the Syrian government played a central role in providing Iran with missiles, military ammunition and necessary war equipment. During the war, the Iran-Syria alliance went beyond mere arms and material supply, and reached the level of intelligence sharing and strategic coordination against a common enemy. While some Arab countries in the region remained neutral, almost all of them provided political and military support to Iraq and supported Baghdad, Syria's strategic alliance with Iran despite “Arabian solidarity” is important in terms of the depth of Syria-Iran relations in the new era. This cooperation also demonstrates the strategic and pragmatic nature of the Middle Eastern alliances above rhetoric and ideologies.

The contractual document that formed the basis of the Syrian-Iranian alliance under war conditions was the ten-year pact signed in March 1982. This pact aimed to further develop, deepen and institutionalize the relations between the two countries. One of the articles of the agreement was that Iran would provide Syria with the crude oil it needed, and in return, Damascus would provide phosphates, textiles, glass, barley and other foodstuffs; in addition, Syria would provide services to Iranian visitors to the holy shrines visiting its own country (Von Maltzahn, 2013, s. 30). These relations would develop further and continue in different areas in the following years.

Immediately after the revolution, after Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, which was worried that there might be a revolution influenced by Khomeini in its country where two-thirds of the population was Shiite, was incited by regional and international powers to attack Iran, Iran began a rapid and covert arms mobilization in order to maintain its existence. Iran, which was subject to an arms embargo by Western countries, primarily the US, turned to its supporting countries and

the Eastern Bloc states in this regard. General Mohsen Rafighdoost, the founder of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the minister responsible for the IRGC between 1982-88 upon the instructions of Ayatollah Khomeini, describes Iran's difficulty in this process with the following words in his memoirs: (Allamiyan, 2012, s. 135)

"*We were under both an economic embargo and a complete military blockade. On my second or third visit to Syria after the war, I met with Hafez al-Assad and asked for his help. I told him that we could not get the weapons we needed, that we had difficulty bringing the ones we did get to Iran, and that we had serious problems especially with air transportation. With Hafez al-Assad's approval, we set up a large warehouse hangar in Damascus airport. We were buying whatever was needed, from spare parts to whatever was needed in the war, from different parts of the world and putting them in these warehouse hangars. Then we were sending a plane from Tehran and carrying the materials to Iran."*[113]

Similarly, Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of the figures close to Khomeini since the 1960s and one of his close advisors, who also served as Commander-in-Chief on behalf of Khomeini during the Iran-Iraq War, draws attention to the strategic relations between Iran and Syria in his memoirs, similar to what Rafighdoost narrated, and relates that Assad provided vital assistance during critical periods. Among these, it is noteworthy that critical information coming from Syrian news sources inside Iraq, reporting the plans of Iranian opposition, especially the Mujahideen-e Khalq, against Tehran, various assassination preparations etc. was conveyed to Iran via Syrian government and Baath officials (Rafsanjani, 2006).

[113] General Rafighdoost explains the emergence of Syria as the main supplier for Iran among the countries that were enemies of Saddam in the region, within the framework of the conjuncture of the period, as follows. Among Rafikdust's statements, the relationship of trust that developed between Assad and the Iranian revolutionaries and the issue of Assad's Shia identity –or its being portrayed as such– are particularly interesting:
"*Syria has supported us since the beginning of the war. In fact, on October 13, 1980 [just a few days after the Iraq attack], it requested the Arab League to investigate the crimes committed by Saddam. At that time, Assad's relations with the Iraqi Baath Party were problematic, so it supported us, and this was one reason why it stood by us. The second reason was Assad's character. Whenever I went to Damascus, I would visit Hafez Assad, and he was most likely not an Alawite but a Shia, because he believed that the Alawites in Syria were Shia. He knew a lot about Shiism, and when I went there, he would constantly ask me questions about it. When he passed away, he requested that a Shiite cleric perform his funeral… He was very interested in Iran and the Islamic Revolution and did not refrain from providing any assistance he could… He was a harmless man, I had seen him pray many times, and he would fast during Ramadan. Unlike the Shah of Iran and Saddam, his own people loved Assad very much*"
(Allamiyan, 2012, pp. 102-104).
Although it is necessary to evaluate the words in this context by filtering the diplomatic courtesy and exaggerated sentences in such official meetings, the motivation to expand and strengthen the anti-US front in the region during and after the Cold War is obvious and evident in these and similar words of Assad in the past and during the war.

On the other hand, Syria was not completely passive in this relationship. In Damascus' own strategic planning, Iran's success against Iraq, the weakening of the Iraqi Baath and the strengthening of Islamic Iran were necessary for Syria's regional position. As Goodarzi also stated, after Egypt's elimination from the anti-Israeli front during and after the Camp David process, the existence of a strong and integrated Islamic Iran would strengthen Syria's hand in the Arab-Israeli conflict and against the "Zionist enemy" (Goodarzi, 2009, s. 23). This alliance also had a reasonable basis in terms of energy geopolitics and Syria's oil needs. Because Syria, which closed the pipeline that allowed Iraq to export oil via Mediterranean ports, caused Baghdad's daily oil shipment of several million barrels to drop to 600 thousand barrels under war conditions, making it difficult for Iraq to finance the war (Pelletiere & Johnson, 1991, s. 74). Moreover, in return for the military and logistical support it provided to Iran, Syria also received cheap oil and significant financial aid from Tehran, some of which was free of charge (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System, 1997, s. 100).

d) Iran-Syria cooperation through Hezbollah in the 1980s-90s

After the end of the war in 1988, Iraq faced with the severe economic and political consequences of the war, turned to an expansionist line in the region, while Syria-Iran cooperation developed further. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Hezbollah's presence was a testing ground for the rapprochement in Syria-Iran relations that began in the 1980s and the strategic cooperation in the Iran-Iraq War. One of the concrete parameters of this alliance was the pro-Velayat-e Faqih political and military formation Hezbollah, which was established by Iran and within the Lebanese Shiites in the early 1980s. In the early 1980s, Hezbollah, which was founded by Iranian political, military, and religious leaders, adopted Ayatollah Khomeini as its political and spiritual leader, a position that continues today in the form of full allegiance to Ayatollah Khamenei. Although Iran was the main force in the group's founding, Hezbollah has evolved over time into a more locally rooted and autonomous entity (Razavi, 2013, s. 125).[114] The revolutionary Iranian influence in Lebanon, which began immediately after the

[114] Razavi gives the following example of Hezbollah pursuing its own local and intra-Lebanese agenda in an article authored in the beginning of the Syrian Civil War: Despite the fact that an Iranian official is included in Hezbollah's 17-member executive committee (*majles al-shura*), Tehran does not have a directive position in the organization's decision-making mechanism. Even when Hezbollah's own agenda conflicts with Tehran's, the organization is autonomous enough to pursue its own agenda. For example, during a Lebanese crisis in 2008, despite Iran's arguments to the contrary, Hezbollah decided to leave the government it was in and was able to implement this decision; Iran could not reverse this decision and was forced to comply with Hezbollah's move (Razavi, 2013, p. 129). However, while Hezbollah was able to act relatively autonomously in its domestic politics,

1979 Revolution, found further development ground following the Israeli occupation of the southern cities of the country in 1982.

It is particularly important to note that Syria and Iran initially took different positions on the political leadership of the Lebanese Shiites and supported different groups. While Damascus backed the Amal movement led by Nabih Barri, which had been the mainstream since Musa Sadr, Iran supported the Hezbollah group, which is established by the order of Ayatollah Khomeini, adopted *Velayat-e Faqih* line, and had separated from Amal. The separation between Amal and Hezbollah, which sometimes led to armed conflict, as in May 1988, also led to a strained relationship between Iran and Syria, which occupied Lebanon militarily (Goodarzi, 2009, s. 255-277). However, the dictates of regional conditions and the dynamics of the Tehran-Damascus alliance allowed them to overcome these conjectural problems, and over time, Hezbollah not only defeated Amal, but also became the most important political and military group in Lebanon, a result that Iran and Syria achieved together.

While the Israeli occupation squeezed Syria even further into siege, Iran gained the opportunity to further mobilize the Shiites in the region on the anti-Zionist front. During the time of Hafez al-Assad and his son Bashar al-Assad, Syria played a critical and vital role in this conjuncture by both mobilizing political and social groups close to itself in Lebanon against Israeli occupation and by delivering Iran's military and logistic support to Lebanese Hezbollah via Damascus (Sinkaya, Arap Baharı Sürecinde İran'ın Suriye Politikası, 2012, s. 6).

One of the significant turning points of this alliance on the ground was Israel's military operation "Grapes of Wrath" against Hezbollah in 1996. Syria and Iran condemned this operation, and Damascus ensured Iranian supplies' continuously transfer to Hezbollah during this attack, contributing to the increase of Hezbollah's resistance capacity. This cooperation developed further in the 2000s, and particularly in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War, Syria's support, allowing the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) advisors to operate on its soil and keeping the logistics/ammunition corridor active, played a vital role in the Lebanese group's success against Israel. This cooperation during critical periods not only brought these

it can be observed that the Hezbollah-Iran cooperation and overlap in decision-making mechanisms has been more intense in the Syrian Civil War and military actions in the anti-Israel camp, especially during the last 15 years. However, one of the most realistic and comprehensive interpretation of Hezbollah in terms of its starting point, ideology and the point it has reached is the following statement by Lina Khatib: "Hezbollah is not an Iranian tool, it is the product of the Iranian revolution that has taken a life, identity, and autonomy of its own, albeit with Iran's continued funding and support" (Khatib, 2011).

three actors together strongly on the anti-Israeli front, but also laid the groundwork for a military/security alliance that would face greater challenges in the years to come.

In the formation and strengthening of this rapprochement, there was a common goal of limiting Israel's presence and its strategy of establishing hegemony in the region. Syria played a critical role in Hezbollah's development and strengthening in Lebanon and its transformation into an effective military/political force. In this way, Iran transformed Hezbollah into an effective ground force against Israel and managed to keep both Hezbollah and Syria on its side and on the same front in this cooperation, by providing arms and logistical support through Syria. This vital cooperation in the 1980s, the 1990s and also during the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli war would produce important results that we could see on the ground in the Syrian Civil War in the 2010s, and would reveal the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis in a powerful way also extending Iranian influence in the Levant region through these two significant partners.

Although Hezbollah is the third most important component of the anti-Israel and anti-US alliance, which is the main glue in Iran-Syria relations, political/military groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad also should not be neglected. Palestinian groups, which are financed and logistically supported by both Syria and Iran through Damascus, are relatively small but important actors in the vanguard against Israel, together with Hezbollah (Mansharof, 2017). Indeed, the relations between Hezbollah and Hamas and the increasing importance of Hamas after the attacks of October 7, 2023 are also remarkable in terms of the reflections of this alliance on the field.

e) Regional cooperation dynamics and Iraq-Kurdish parameter during the 1990s

An additional factor that was effective in Syria-Iran relations in the 1990s was Turkey's orientations during this period. In terms of the Syria-Iran axis, which defined itself on the anti-Israel front and constructed the strategic orientation of cooperation after 19792 on this dynamic, the Turkey-Israel rapprochement and partnership that increased significantly in the 1990s constituted a new strengthening element in the relations of the two countries.

Another important dynamic related to Turkey during this period was the rise of Kurdish nationalism after the US military intervention in January 1991 and the perception of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, which was on the path to statehood, as a threat to Turkey, Iran and Syria, which had a significant Kurdish population. Tripartite ministerial meetings were held between these three countries in the 1990s for coordination and consultation purposes, and a decision was made to jointly combat the Kurdish nationalist dynamic, especially the one

originating from the PKK threat (Olson, Turkey– Iran relations, 1997 to 2000: the Kurdish and Islamist questions, 2000, s. 68-72). However, starting from the second half of the 1990s, the balances began to reverse; this time, Ankara accused Syria and Iraq of supporting the PKK against it. Due to both the improvement in Turkish-Israeli relations and the issue of support for the PKK, Ankara's relations with Syria and Iran began to deteriorate, which was an additional factor in the strengthening of the Damascus-Tehran axis. During his visit to Tehran in 1997, Assad openly touched on these balances and put special emphasis on the need to strengthen Syrian-Iranian relations in the face of cooperation between the US-backed Israel and regional countries (Von Maltzahn, 2013, s. 45-46).

The mutual visits during this period also indicate the nature of the relations. Hafez Assad, who made his first state visit to Iran in September 1990, signed the agreement to establish the Syria-Iran Higher Cooperation Committee together with his counterpart Rafsanjani. In 1997, Assad made two separate visits to Iran; after his official visit in August 1997, he visited Tehran for the Islamic Conference Organization Summit in December of the same year. On Iranian side, Rafsanjani's successor, Mohammad Khatami, visited Damascus in his capacity as President of Iran in 1999. Hafez al-Assad's son, Bashar al-Assad, visited Iran in January 2001 after being elected president in July 2000 and confirmed that he would maintain the close relationship with Iran inheriting from his father's time.

The increase in the influence of the US in the Middle East after the Gulf War in the early 1990s and the rapprochement of Arab countries that were weakened against Israel to the US created an attractive cooperation area for Syria. During this process, Damascus, which was looking for opportunities to get closer to the US through Cairo and Riyadh and to regulate relations, aimed to normalize this without complicating its long standing ties with Iran. Another dynamic in Syria's relations with Iran in the 1990s was its contribution, albeit limited, to the reduction of tensions between Iran and the Gulf Arabs. Following Leader Khomeini's pass away in 1989, during Rafsanjani's presidency, Iran decided to pursue a more pragmatic foreign policy and sought ways to normalize relations with the Arabs. Hafez al-Assad mediated in Tehran's efforts in normalization of relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member Gulf Arab monarchies, with which Iran had problematic relations since 1979, and following the reciprocal diplomatic steps relations began to soften considerably (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System, 1997, s. 107).

f) Post-9/11 Dynamics and the "Axis of Evil"

However, the post-9/11 environment and George W. Bush's approach that blended neo-conservative policies with adventurism in the Middle East made things even more complicated for Syria. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein, who had been in the category of enemy for both Syria and Iran for many years, by the US in 2003 increased concerns in Damascus and Tehran that it might be their turn in the US's "fight against terrorism". However, after the initial rapid and decisive victory, the US rapidly falling into chaos in Iraq and the increasing instability on the ground allowed Syria and Iran to have a strategic respite (Goodarzi, 2009, s. 292-293). However, eventually, Iran, faced with the heavy US military presence in the Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the US military superiority in the east and Israel in the west of Syria, created a significant security risk for both countries.

Following the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 following the events of 9/11, the visit of Iranian President Khatami to Damascus in May 2003 reflects the concerns of the two countries regarding the new period. The visit of Syrian Prime Minister Naji al-Atri to Tehran in February 2005 and the meeting of President Ahmadinejad with Bashar al-Assad in Damascus in October 2006 were all aimed at strengthening the Damascus-Tehran axis in the face of the new balances created by the US in the region (Goodarzi, 2009, s. 293). These efforts, in part in response to the calls and steps taken by the US to divide the alliance between Iran and Syria, reflected the common message of the two countries, and as a result, relations were strengthened even more than before 2003 and deepened in different areas.

During this period, the US occupation and the increasing US-Israeli hegemony in the region were not the only issues on the agenda of the two countries. Iran strongly supported its ally against the UN investigation into Syria, which was under great pressure from the international community due to the assassination of Lebanese Sunni Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. By providing political support to the Iranian nuclear program and uranium enrichment activities that gained momentum during the term of President Ahmadinejad, who took office in 2005, Syria was also providing its partner with the support needed (Von Maltzahn, 2013, s. 49-50).

Under these conditions, in February 2005, an important agreement was signed between the two countries as a preparation for the chain of regional developments that would directly shape the next 20 years. The leaders of the two countries, Iranian First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref and Syrian Prime Minister Naji al-Atri, signed a bilateral security and defense agreement, which they described with the words "At this sensitive point, two countries require a united front due to numerous challenges." While Israel and the US reacted strongly to this

agreement, the Western media, such as *the Guardian*, headlined this agreement as "Iran and Syria confront US with defense pact" and drew attention to the fact that this step was directly against the US (MacAskill & Campbell, 2005).

Security cooperation between Syria and Iran had progressed to such an extent that when indirect talks between Syria and Israel, mediated by Turkey in the spring of 2008, worried Iran, Bashar Assad visited Tehran in August 2008 and pledged that relations between Damascus and Tehran would not be affected by this. In fact, the Syrian ambassador in Tehran gave a clear message to the Iranian press with the words "We won't sell Iran to Israel", and Iranian officials strongly emphasized during their visits to Damascus during the same period that Iran and Syria were strong pillars of resistance (Von Maltzahn, 2013, s. 51).

g) Arab Uprisings and Syria-Iran Relations during the 2011-2025 Civil War

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 is comparable to the 1789 French Revolution of and 1917 the Russian Revolution in terms of its capacity, transnational ideology and transformativeness.[115] The success of 1979 Revolution is particularly significant and unique revealing the Islamist discourse's strength and revolutionary characteristics in mobilization of the masses in terms of its ability to overthrow powerful regimes particularly during the modern times. This issue, which Iranian political and religious leaders frequently emphasize, has led them to perceive both their own revolution and almost every demand and uprising within the Sunni or Shiite communities that emerged in the Middle East in the following years with the label of "Islamic Awakening" and to say that they emerged under the influence of the 1979 Revolution.

Iranian political, military and religious leaders state that the Iranian Revolution of 1979 deeply influenced all subsequent Islamic movements and aspirations. In fact, the leader of the Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, in a speech during the early days of the revolution, stated that the revolution was not specific to the Shiites or Iran alone, but that it was an example for all oppressed people on earth: "We shall export our revolution to the entire world because it is an Islamic revolution. […] As long as people on this earth are being oppressed, our struggle shall continue."[116] In addition to this, sections 1, 152 and 154 of the Iranian Constitution, which are

[115] For further discussion regarding this categorization and revolutions, see: Bozarslan (2019), 13-14; Skocpol, Theda (1988), "Social revolutions and mass military mobilization" *World Politics* 40.2: 147-168.

[116] Ayatollah Khomeini in various occasions emphasizes the Arab and Gulf countries' desire to block the exportation of revolution, for example, one his messages delivered in September 1983: "... And you, the governments in the [Persian] Gulf or outside of the [Persian] Gulf, try to keep this Islam contained with Iran, even

still in force, emphasize this export of revolution (*sudur-e enqelab*) as a direct reference (Fürtig, 2013). Iranian leaders refer to this exemplary phenomenon in addition to their anti-Israeli stance when discussing their decades-long relations with Shiite communities in Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, as well as their collaboration with Sunni armed groups in Palestine.

As a result of this perspective, the Iranian leadership evaluated the uprisings and demands that spread in Arab societies starting from Tunisia and Egypt at the end of 2010 within this scope. In order to emphasize this interaction, a comprehensive meeting called "Islamic Awakening Conference" was organized in Tehran in September 2011 with the participation of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei himself, and it was announced that around 500 Muslim scholars and politicians from 80 countries attended the conference (MehrNewsAgency, 2011). This conference took place immediately after the fall of Arab leaders who had been in power for decades in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt; and in Syria, the demonstrations had not yet lost their peaceful character, and the armed phase had not yet been reached after the harsh response of the Assad regime.

However, from Iran's perspective, not all demands were "equally legitimate and equal." For example, in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Libya, the demands of the people were seen as legitimate and justified, and the demonstrations in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, where the masses who took to the streets were mostly Shia, were strongly supported by Iranian authorities (Ramadan, 2012, s. 64). However, when the discussion came to the masses in Syria who took to the streets and voiced their objections with similar rhetoric to other countries, Iran did not find these demands "legitimate and justified." While most analysts and observers viewed the events in Syria as a continuation of the unrest and uprisings in countries such as Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt in 2010-11 period, Iran accused the demonstrators of supporting Assad and the Baath regime, which had been its allies in difficult times in the past, and of being "pawns and stooges of Zionism and the interests of the United States."

The most concrete statement reflecting this attitude of Iran was the following statement made by Ayatollah Khamenei as early as June 30, 2011, that is, right after the slogans were written on the walls of the city of Daraa in southern Syria and the security forces intervened harshly in March-April 2011: "The essence of the Islamic Awakening in the region is anti-Zionist and anti-U.S. But in the case of Syria, U.S. and Israeli hands are clearly at work"

though despite your desire, Islam has moved on, and will move on, to outside of Iran." (Khomeini, 2001, pp. 86-87).

(ZamanehMedya, 2011). Iran, which viewed all popular movements in the region positively, did not find the popular movements in Syria sufficiently "legitimate and Islamic." Indeed, approximately 13 years after this first statement, he continued this stance in a statement he made three days after Bashar al-Assad left Syria and fled to Moscow on December 8, 2024: "There should be no doubt that what happened in Syria was the result of a joint American-Zionist plot" (Aljazeera, 2024).

Although Iran welcomed the overthrow of laic and secular regimes in the Arab Uprisings countries and applauded the popular movements with labelling them as the "Islamic Awakening", it preferred to act pragmatically and in a realpolitik direction rather than acting ideologically and in a principled manner in Syria, which was more secular in character than the regimes that were overthrown before. Islamic Republic of Iran based this behavior on the argument that if Assad were to fall in Syria, this would serve to increase US-Israeli influence in the region. In addition, there were not many dissenting and opposing voices within Iran and the Supreme Leader's stance was adopted almost as a consensus.[117] At this point, consensus among elites, the effect of ideological stance on foreign policy, the consolidated effect of strategic culture and leadership characteristics on decision-making processes are observed in Iran's policy regarding Arab Uprisings and Syria in particular.

It was anticipated in the first weeks of the events that the widespread social unrest that emerged in Tunisia and Egypt at the end of 2010 could spread to Syria. Because, similar to the authoritarian regimes and dictatorial tendencies in these two countries, there was also a long-standing authoritarianism, intelligence state characteristics and extensive socio-economic crises in Syria. In addition, the ethnic and sectarian divisions in Syria were making the country more fragile. In fact, Syria had experienced the popular movements that began in 2011 about 30 years ago, and the power struggle between the conservative-religious Sunni masses in the country and the Baath regime, which had accelerated since the 1970s, turned into a major armed uprising in Sunni Arab cities such as Hama and Homs in 1982. During these incidents, in which tens of thousands of people died, Iran, which supported the Baath regime greatly in its war with Iraq, became the main actor that enabled Bashar al-Assad to maintain his power by providing direct military support, together with Russia, in the incidents that began in 2011.

[117] For a documentary source on the course of statements made by the president, ministers, national security officials and ambassadors of regional countries, who constitute the upper part of the political elite in Iran, in the early stages of the developments in Syria, see: Garrett Nada (2012), "Iran's Evolving Policy on Syria", *Iran Primer*, July 30, 2012.

The street protests in Syria and the policy of suppressing them with force have begun to create a cycle of violence that has escalated over the months. It is a reality accepted by all parties that Iran is "assisting" Syrian security forces on the ground with its own Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and armed units consisting of Hezbollah and other Shiite militias. In return, the Iranian side accused the Gulf Arab monarchies, which supported the demands of the opposition who took to the streets demanding democracy, of exploiting the demonstrations despite not having democracy themselves and of covering up the truth with extensive media propaganda. The main accusation of the Iranian and Syrian sides to the countries in the region –especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Turkey- was that they were arming the Syrian opposition and causing an endless spiral of violence and civil war in the country (Marandi, 2012, s. 89-90).

Ultimately, Syria, which witnessed a bloody civil war in which millions of people became refugees both inside their own country and in neighboring states in the region and hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives, fell into a vortex of complete destruction and crisis for 14 years. In this process, in which major powers such as the United States and Russia intervened militarily, different regions of Syria were divided into areas of control dominated by the Assad government and other armed groups. At the end of this process, the groups led by HTS and Ahmed al-Shara, who had been involved in the armed struggle since the beginning of the war and controlled Idlib territory on the Turkish border, took over Syria on December 8, 2024, at a time when Assad fled the country to Moscow.

4.5. Turkish – Syrian Relations: Ottoman Era, Independence, Cold War and the 2010s

The most important period in Iran-Syria relations is the relations that developed after the 1979 Revolution and the regional alliance that was established on mutual threat perceptions and anti-Israeli and anti-US framework. The bilateral relations before 1979 Revolution reflect the distant positioning of these two countries, not neighbors by land, that took shape under the harsh and conflicting conditions of the Cold War.

On the other hand In Turkey-Syria relations, there are more sophisticated balances; the four centuries before WWI when Syria was governed from Istanbul, the 910 km long border line making two countries close neighbors, the kinship and ethnic/sectarian ties between the peoples

on both sides of the border (namely Turks, Kurds and the Arabs) require a close examination of Turkey-Syria relations. In this respect, without going into the Ottoman period in depth, starting from the situation in the region before World War I, periodizing the French mandate period, the years of independence that followed, the successive military coups and the years of the Baath Party's rule, and addressing the dynamics of rapprochement and divergence in relations between Ankara and Damascus from the 1990s until the Arab Uprisings will provide a comprehensive historical background to discuss the trilateral relations during the Syrian Civil War.

4.5.1. Ottoman Era and last decades in Syria (19th century to WWI)

Although there have been many foreign occupations, long military interventions, external influences, empires, states established and collapsed, etc. in Syria's long history, few have been as effective in shaping modern times as the Ottoman period. Under Ottoman rule, which lasted approximately four centuries until the end of World War I, Syria experienced profound changes and transformations; in fact, it can be said that almost all of the internal and external dynamics that shaped Syria in the last century directly shaped Syrian society and politics in this four-century period of rule, in a positive or negative sense.

Ottoman rule in Syria emerged as a result of the hot wars in the early 16th century, when Istanbul was engaged in a power struggle and geopolitical competition with the two regional powers in the Middle East and the Turkish empires, the Safavids of Iran and the Mamluks of Egypt.

Selim I and the Ottoman administration did not completely eliminate the political structures established by the Mamluks in these vast Arab lands; in fact, they largely allowed these institutional structures and even local leaders (Mamluks) to survive. In the 1520s, the Damascus Beylerbeyliği was in the form of a “Greater Syria” structure covering a wide area extending from Adana and Aleppo to Gaza. Later, these large lands were divided into three as the provinces of Damascus (the central and the southern areas), Aleppo (the north region) and Tripoli (Douwes, 2000, s. 7), and later in the 17th century, the province of Saida was established in this region. During the rise of the Ottoman Empire, Damascus became the most important commercial, political and scientific center in the region, while Tripoli became a busy port city and Aleppo became an important commercial center. During this period, Syria was a valuable property in the eyes of the Ottoman capital, both as a source of commercial and economic income and in terms of the security of the Hajj route. Although there were occasional rebellions

and armed uprisings of the governors during these centuries, the Ottoman Empire continued to dominate Syria thanks to its power without any major security weaknesses.

However, with Napoleon Bonaparte's landing in Alexandria in July 1798 and his invasion of Egypt and then his attempt to invade Syria, the stability and order of several centuries in the region began to undergo a rapid transformation process. Britain, opposing the French for geopolitical and economic reasons, intervened militarily together with the Ottoman Empire and completely expelled the French from Egypt and Syria in 1802 (Akçura, 2023, s. 85-86). However, the weakening of Istanbul's authority in the region and the local dynamics that emerged during this process would directly shape the following century. Kavalali Mehmed Ali Pasha, who controlled Egypt and suppressed anti-Ottoman rebellions in the region under the orders of the palace as a result of Istanbul's weakening, quickly grew stronger and controlled Syria directly through his son Ibrahim Pasha in the period 1832-41 (Buzpınar, 2009).

During the second quarter of the 19th century, The Tanzimat reforms in the Ottoman Empire and the increase in the power of the central government in the provinces created some complex dynamics in the geography of Syria (including Lebanon and Palestine). The interventions of the European great powers, started with Napoleon and then the British, continued to increase in the following decades. The cultural and political contacts of the powers such as Britain, France and Russia with the local groups in the region, combined with the increasing influence of the consulates, religious schools and missionary activities, made Syria a great area of competition in the second half of the 19th century (Buzpınar, 2009). In addition to the weakening political and military power of the Ottoman center, the interest of the European powers in the region and the competition among the local religious, ethnic and sectarian groups presented a prototype on a micro scale of almost all the conflicts that Syria (Lebanon and Palestine) would experience during the following century.

The revival in the literary and cultural fields as a result of the intervention of European powers in the region and the increasing contacts with local communities reinforced the emphasis on Arabic, Arab history and Arab culture. Because of the rapid development of the field of education and educational opportunities, the modern nationalist consciousness that spread on a global scale from 1789 onwards found an important ground for itself in Syria-Lebanon. The development of printing and publishing opportunities also accelerated this revival. The first and greatest result of this new trend was the nationalist awakening known as the Arab Renaissance or *Nahda*. Although it emerged under the pressure and support of external

factors, this revival and awakening would yield concrete results in the following decades, and in the gradual process that culminated in the separation from the Ottoman Empire, it would lead to the strengthening of autonomy and decentralization tendencies. Initially developing in literary and cultural circles through language studies and translations, this nationalism did not take long to transform into a strong political tendency over time.[118]

After the Reform Edict of 1856 (Islahat Fermanı), one of the most important reform movements in the Ottoman Empire, the increasing agitation and provocations between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities of the empire led to violent incidents between communities in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860 (Ortaylı, 2020, s. 51-53) in addition to the events in Mecca and Jeddah in 1850s (Abū Mannah, 1971, s. 124-147). At the end of the process in which European powers also intervened, the incidents were suppressed by Ottoman government and eventually, in the 1870s, Syria became a province more closely connected to the center and more closely following the developments in Istanbul (Buzpınar, 2009).

In the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, Syria experienced serious changes and transformations, as in almost every region of the weakening empire. In addition to the intense Jewish migration to the Palestinian region and the rise of political *Zionism*, the exceptionalism and *Phoenicianism* movements led by Christians in Lebanon, and the demand for autonomy led by Syrian and Lebanese Arabs were the main trends at the beginning of the 20th century. In the last period of the Empire, especially during the Second Constitutional Monarchy period of the Ottoman Empire (1908-1918), it is observed that Syrian-Arab political movements took an active position towards decentralization and the *Nahda* cultural movement rapidly became politicized and voiced the demand for autonomy (*adem-i merkeziyet*) in the Arab provinces. The main locomotives of Arab decentralization demands and separatism in the Ottoman Empire were Syrian and some Egyptian intellectuals, who came from various cultural segments such

[118] One of the important first-hand sources regarding the reflections of the Egyptian occupation of Syria in the 19th century and the process called the Arab Renaissance or *Nahda* that began thereafter is the 1938-published book "The Awakening & the Story of the Arab National Movement" authored by George Antonius, a Lebanese Christian Arab nationalist himself, also translated into Turkish by the author of this thesis. Antonius, one of the first sources in relevant literature, emphasizes that Arab nationalist revolution in Syria-Lebanon was the direct result of the Egyptian occupation and the ideal of the Kavalali Mehmed Ali (and his son Ibrahim) to establish an Arab Empire. Antonius, who specifically touches upon *Nahda* and its literary/cultural pioneers, the Christian Arab nationalists of the region such as Butrus Bustani, Nasif Yazici, Ibrahim Yazici, argues that these nationalist activities had a direct impact on the process leading to the 1916 Arab Revolt, and connects the developments in the two centuries. For further discussion, see: Antonius, George (1938). *The Arab Awakening: The story of the Arab national movement*. London: Cambridge University Press (reprinted in 1939, Philadelphia: Lippincott Company), 21-60.

as Christian and Muslim journalists, historians, lawyers and members of the women's movement (Sezer, 2024, s. 8-9).

In the era of polarization and politicization of nationalist consciousness at the beginning of the 20th century, while Egypt was advancing on a more territorial and local nationalism line under the control of the British who occupied the country since 1882, it was Syrian intellectuals who advocated a more holistic Arab nationalism and came to the forefront in Istanbul by making propaganda for it. In the 1890s, Syria, which became an important opposition center under the reign of Abdulhamid II, both Arab nationalism was strengthening and relations with the opposition Young Turks were increasing.

During this period, Cairo and Beirut/Damascus emerged as two separate poles of the Arab awakening. Although there were some Arab members in the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) that overthrew the reign of Abdulhamid II during this period, Young Turks were in the majority and this led to Arab nationalists reacting and accelerating their own nationalist organizations under the leadership of Syrians. In this optimistic period after July 1908, which was described as the "Turco-Arab honeymoon" in Antonius' words, CUP officials also appeared in Arab meetings and messages of mutual support and unity were given. Two important developments during this honeymoon period had a profound impact on Turkish-Arab relations in the following period: the official opening of the Hejaz Railway to Medina and the appointment of Sharif Hussein bin Ali, who had been under house arrest in Istanbul for a long time during the reign of Abdulhamid II, as the Grand Sharif of Mecca (Antonius, 1938, s. 101-103).

A striking trend in the new political debate environment after 1908 was the hostile level reached within some Arab elites of the period by the nationalist revival cantered on the superiority and uniqueness of the Arabic language and history that had spread among the Arabs in the mid-19th century. American scholar Stephen P. Duggan, also known as the "apostle of internationalism" and actively writing on regional and international politics in the 1910s and 1920s, also drew attention to the following points as early as 1921: Syrian cities did not participate in the revolt against Abdulhamid II, but the new and revolutionary discourses such as equality and representative government that gained momentum after the declaration of the Constitutional Monarchy created hope and expectations among the Arabs. However, those Arab elites had always regarded their Turkish masters who had governed them for a long time with disdain and considered their language as a barbarous dialect. The Arabs were proud of their

ancient culture and civilization and were also enthused over the revival of Arab influence on the Muslim world. In the period of 1908-09, the expectation and hope of Arab intellectuals in Syria and Lebanon was that Arabic would be used as the official language and that they would be allowed to govern their own regions. However, it did not take long for them to learn the Young Turks' own Turkist program and see their formula dictating one race, one language, one administration and move away. In Syria, as in Albania, reactions to the exclusionary nature of this new period arose and they turned to different pursuits (Duggan, 1921, s. 573-574).

As an independent observer, the first-hand opinions of American Duggan and Lebanese Arab nationalist Antonius confirm each other and it is clear that the Turkism-centerd Ottomanism approach that emerged under the leadership of the CUP after 1908 caused disappointment within the provinces, especially among Syrian Arabs.

4.5.2. Syria during WWI and the Arab Revolt (1916–1918)

Despite the initial hopeful expectations, opposition to Abdulhamid II was not enough to keep Turkish and Arab nationalists together for a long time under four centuries-long Ottoman Empire umbrella. In the parliamentary elections held immediately after the declaration of the Second Constitutional Era in 1908, 147 Turks and 60 Arabs were elected out of 288 deputies. After these disappointing results for Arab nationalists, it is observed that the first emotional break began and the ideals of transforming the empire into a Turkish-Arab federation weakened. It appears that the inclusion of only 3 Arabs among the 40 representatives directly elected by the sultan to the Senate was yet another source of disappointment. It is recorded that this picture in the 1908 elections, held under conditions controlled by the CUP, was the first negative motivation for the rebellion a few years later. Later, the Unionists' desire to transform the state into a more centralized structure in order to prevent disintegration instead of a decentralized government also made this picture in the parliamentary elections even more negative for Arab nationalists (Antonius, 1938, s. 103-108).

In the process leading up to WWI, the Ottoman Empire's search for alliances and the British ambitions for the region and the Arab peoples in the Middle East seem to have created a dynamic that would ignite this spiral of expectation and disappointment in domestic politics. If interpreted from an Arab nationalist point of view, the Young Turk Revolution (1908) alienated Arab elites further because Ottoman policies became more Turkish nationalist in orientation. By WWI, Arab disillusionment with the Ottomans had reached a boiling point, paving the way for the Arab Revolt.

While negotiations were being held between the ruling CUP leadership and the dissatisfied Arab opposition to reach a compromise, an important Arab congress was held in Paris in 1913. The majority of the participants, such as Abdulhamid al-Zarqawi, who was the president of the congress, in which Arab nationalist structures organized in Cairo actively participated, were Syrians. However, the CUP leadership in Istanbul, especially Cemal Pasha, and the Ottoman government did not look favorably on the Arabs' insistence on their demands for decentralization, and the gap that had opened between the arguments of the two sides seemed unlikely to close in the short term (Al-Yoosef, 1954, s. 18-20). Hence, no concrete results came out of this process, and Syria, which had been the center of Arab nationalism since the early 1800s, became one of the most important fronts of the Ottoman Empire during the war, as World War I began in these months.

During the war, the Ottoman armies faced a two-way and coordinated attack under the British general command. At the beginning of the war, Cemal Pasha, one of the triumvirate of the CUP, who was appointed as the commander of the Fourth Army centerd in Syria in addition to his capacity as Minister of War, organized an operation to capture the Suez Canal, which was the gateway to Egypt, the center of the British army, while at the same time taking harsh measures against Arab nationalist separatists behind the lines in Syria and Lebanon. The consensus of historians is that the harsh measures taken by Cemal Pasha and the trial and execution of 32 prominent Arab nationalist leaders by military courts in 1915-16 on charges of conducting anti-state treasonous activities in collaboration with the French consulates played an important role in the alienation of the Syrian people from the Ottomans during the war.

However, Cemal Pasha's attitude during the war and the claims that the relations between the CUP leadership and the Arabs became strained because of this need to be questioned to some extent. Because, the interpretation of the fact that centuries-old Turkish-Arab relations suddenly and completely got out of control and deteriorated with the execution of some Arab nationalist leaders during this period when communication opportunities were limited is open to question. Indeed, the reality that there were no major problems in the early periods of Cemal Pasha's administration, that the power struggle did not cover all the societal segments and included a struggle with a certain political elite,[119] and that the Pasha fought with the same

[119] It is interesting to note that Sharif Hussain's revolt was not Arab nationalist, but rather "Islamic against the pious CUP leadership". This religious motivation, which narrowed the base of support among Syrians and turned the revolt into a politically motivated uprising, was also met with significant opposition, with the vast majority of Syrian *ulama* remaining loyal to the Ottoman Empire. For example, in September 1916, a few weeks after the start of the rebellion, fourteen muftis in Syria issued a fatwa against Sharif Hussain, who had collaborated with the

tenacity against the “Lebanese exceptionalists” and Zionist leaders who aimed at weakening the central Ottoman control under war conditions also justifies this questioning (Sezer, Levant'ta Dönüşüm Çağı, 2023, s. 122). Nevertheless, in the following years of nationalism, propaganda and perceptions would portray the events as more agitating than they actually were and would create historical baggage and barrier between the peoples on both sides.

Cemal Pasha's arrival at the Suez Canal in 1914-15 and his attempt to seize it by military action were met with fierce British resistance and failed. However, the British thought it necessary to organize a counter-campaign behind the Turkish lines in order to stop subsequent attacks on the Canal. In this way, the forces of the Turkish army could be divided and occupied, and a British-controlled structure could be established in Southern Syria and Palestine. In southern Syria was the Hejaz, which was under the control of Sharif Hussein, who was not on good terms with the nationalist Turkish administration in Istanbul. At this time, the Sharif had seen and experienced that the Hejaz Railway could be used against him for military purposes, and he objected to the extension of the last station of the line from Medina to Mecca (Duggan, 1921, s. 575).

During the Arab Revolt, starting at Mecca in June 1916, Sharif Hussein and his son Emir Feisal played an important role, both because of the theo-political prestige of being the grandson of the Prophet and their previously established connections with the Bedouin tribes in the region. The main aim of the revolt was to liberate the Arabs and end Ottoman rule over the Arabs. For this purpose, months of correspondence and confirmations were realised with the British General McMahon in Cairo, and an Arab kingdom would be established under the rule of Sharif Hussein over a large area of land, including the entire Arabian Peninsula, extending the Adana-Mardin line in northern borders (Palmer, 1992). This revolt, which was supported financially, and also technically and logistically by British officers such as T.E. Lawrence[120] and in which the British army occasionally bombarded Ottoman fortifications, began in Mecca as of June 1916 and succeeded in capturing Damascus in October 1918.

Passing through Jeddah-Medina-Yanbu-Rabegh-Aqaba route, the Bedouin army under the command of Emir Feisal advanced in the Syrian geography, especially with the militarily and

enemies against the Caliph and caused the Muslims to be divided and misled, stating that it was obligatory to fight until Hussain repented (Çiçek, 2020, pp. 118-119).

[120] T.E. Lawrence authored his memoirs in 1927 explaining his role in the Arab Revolt and his relations with the Arabs, which critics recommend should be read with caution and cross-checking. See; Lawrence, Thomas Edward (1927), Revolt in the Desert, New York: George H. Doran Company. Also see another source discussing the role of Lawrence as “a great commander” and translated to Turkish by author of this dissertation; Murphy, David (2011), Lawrence of Arabia & Leadership, Strategy, Conflict. London: Osprey Publishing.

logistical support of local tribes. In this advance, a combination of guerrilla tactics, tribal alliances and vast British support in all terms automatically paved the way for Arab control over much of the Levant. When the Ottoman army withdrew from Jerusalem at the end of 1917 and from Damascus at the end of September 1918, Emir Feisal's Arab Revolt army, which moved parallel to the British army advancing from Egypt, reached the gates of Damascus together (Palmer, Victory & 1918, 2018). Although the people of Damascus became restless when the British army acted early and entered the city, peace was restored with the entry of Feisal into the city. Damascus was occupied by British-Arab troops in October 1918. Although the Ottoman Empire tried to keep the Arab provinces by granting them autonomy in their internal affairs, the Ottoman rule that began in 1516 was ended with the Mudros Armistice signed in 1918.

Although the British politicians had promised the entire region to the Arabs, the Sykes-Picot Agreement signed in 1916, which envisaged the region being shared by the French-British forces, thwarted all the plans of Sharif Hussein and Faisal (Sander, 1993, s. 307-308). According to this plan, Palestine would remain with the British, but Syria and Lebanon would be given to the French, while only Jordan would be left to the Hashemite family. Although the Arab Revolt took over Damascus, the Paris Conference in 1919 approved this sharing between London and Paris. In March 1920, at the Damascus congress of Arab notables, Faisal was declared the king of Syria, including Palestine, but at the San Remo Conference in April 1920 the previous decision that Syria-Lebanon would be given to the French was confirmed once again.[121]

However, after the promises made by the British to the French with Sykes-Picot and to the Jews with the Balfour Declaration, the promises made to the Arabs came third in the ranking; this was particularly disappointing for the Arabs in Syria and the Sharif family (Kent, 1984, s. 194-195). Thereupon, conflicts began between the disappointed Arabs and the occupying French troops, but in July 1920, the French occupiers, who won the final battle in Khan Maysalun, expelled Faisal and the Hashemite clan, who led the Arab Revolt, from Syria.[122]

[121] Britain was able to make contradictory promises to its different allies throughout WWII, both to maintain the political and financial support networks that could sustain the war and to keep its allies in the war. Historian Prof. Anscombe touches on this issue and summarises London's predicament by commenting that "Britain struggled to reconcile this package of commitments without harming its own imperial interests, but ultimately could not satisfy any of its wartime counterparts." (Anscombe, 2014, p. 204).

[122] The Hashemites later learned that a Jewish state would be established in Palestine as a result of the Balfour Declaration of 1917 (Antonius, The Arab Awakening: The story of the Arab national movement, 1938, pp. 256-260), and had to be content with only an emirate in Jordan. Then, the British crowned Faisal, who had been expelled

Cemal Pasha's harsh measures and the rebellion led by Sharif Hussein and his sons that broke out immediately afterwards were so effective that they directly shaped the social imagination of both the Arab and Turkish peoples for the next century and generated decades of mistrust (Hinnebusch & Tür, Turkey-Syria Relations & Between Enmity and Amity, 2016, s. 205). These two bloody processes and separations (Cemal Pasha's harsh measures in Syria and 1916 Arab Revolt) that emerged consecutively in the last years of the Ottoman Empire's rule in Syria negatively affected the perceptions between the Turkish and Syrian peoples in the subsequent nationalist periods.

While the Syrian side saw this four-century period, which was called Turkification (*tatrîk*), as the main element for the backwardness (*takhalluf*) of the region; on the other hand, Turkish side considered this period and activities as Arab betrayal and treason, thinking that the Syrians were unreliable neighbors. These stereotypes determined the mainstream sentiment on both the Turkish and Syrian sides and were reproduced in textbooks, media and popular culture during nationalist decades and passed on to the next generations (Jörum, 2016, s. 113-114).

4.5.3. French Mandate Era (1920–1946)

In April 1920, at the San Remo Conference, the Allies finalized the partition among themselves and Syria and Lebanon were placed under the French mandate, while Palestine and Iraq were under the British mandate. On the other hand, Syrian notables and notables gathered under the name of the Syrian General Congress and declared an independent Syrian state on March 8, 1920, but this state was abolished by the French army before five months had elapsed, and Faisal, who was crowned "King of Syria", was sent into exile in Europe (Duggan, 1921, s. 585-586).

The first thing the French realized under the occupation was to create a separate state for the Lebanese Christians, with whom they had had relations since the mid-19th century. Thus, they began to expand the borders of Lebanon against Syria, centering on Beirut, which had historically been part of Syria. Damascus and Aleppo, both Sunni-dominated areas, were also turned into separate administrative units. In 1922, the Alawite areas centered on Latakia, and

from Damascus, declared him King of Iraq in 1921. The Hashemite presence in the Hejaz was ended by the Saud family, who took over the region in 1925 (Rogan, 2016, pp. 50-51). The Hashemite dynasty in Iraq was overthrown by a bloody coup d'état by Arab nationalists in 1958. From the 1916 Arab Revolt and the Hashemite dream of a Great Arab Kingdom in the Middle East to the present day, only the Kingdom of Jordan remains. For a brief historical background explaining the political career of the Hashemite rulers and *emir*s following the Arab Revolt, see Koc, Mehmet Akif (2024), "1915 Arap İsyanı, Haşimiler ve Orta Doğu'daki Politik Varlıkları", *Yeni Arayış*, retrieved from https://www.yeniarayis.com/yazi/1915-arap-isyani-hasimiler-ve-orta-dogudaki-politik-varliklari-3871 (accessed on 6 February 2025).

the areas where the Durzis lived centered on Havran were turned into separate administrative units. In 1924, with further adjustments, the Sunni-dominated regions and the Alawite and Durzi towns were turned into separate administrative units and Syria was divided into four regions (Ouahes, 2018, s. 16-17). France's these administrative arrangements had a simple purpose; although it had undertaken the mission of preparing Syria and Lebanon for independence on behalf of the League of Nations, Paris saw this as mere window dressing and approached Syria and Lebanon with an annexationist mentality (Fromkin, 2009, s. 413)

This fragmented structure of the post-Ottoman Syria lasted until the official end of the mandate in 1936, and French rule in Syria, which was reunified in 1936, continued until the end of WWII. On this date, forced by the British, France, emerging from the war in ruins and in crisis, were forced to recognize the independence of Syria and Lebanon and to withdraw their troops. The French rule of Syria, especially in its first years, was characterized by massive popular revolts and the Syrian Arabs did not accept the occupation. During WWII, popular protests because of hunger and economic crisis led the French to leave behind a troubled occupation. After the Napoleonic invasion of 1798, the French were once again forced to withdraw their troops from the Middle East; the British forced the French out of Egypt and Syria in 1801-1802, and the British forced the French out of Syria in 1946.

In the period between 1919 and 1923, when the Ottoman Empire had collapsed and a new republic was being established in Ankara, Turkey's relations with the new Syria were built on the bitter memories of the Arab Revolt and mutual distrust. But even though Mustafa Kemal Pasha had failed to hold out against the British-backed Arab Revolt army in Syria and had withdrawn in 1917-18, and even though the Arabs and the Turks had fallen into rebellion and distrust, there was an important dynamic that brought Ankara and Emir Faisal, the ruler of Damascus, closer: The British and French occupation administration and the need for rapprochement. For this purpose, it is recorded that there were various intermediaries between Kemal Pasha and Faisal, and that Arab political and military officials who were former Ottoman officers in Faisal's entourage played a role in this rapprochement. In fact, in the records of the secret sessions of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Kemal Pasha records that he received various calls from the Syrian people, that they asked for financial and material support for the struggle against the occupation, and that the contact with the Syrian people was the basis of the relations (Polat, 2019, s. 240).

During this period (1919-20), there were two different tendencies among the Syrian Arabs: a) the supporters of Emir Faisal, who established the Damascus-based Arab government, and b) those who favored alliance with the Ottoman Empire and cooperation with the resistance in Anatolia (*Kuva-yı Milliye*) in order to drive away the European invaders (Polat, 2019, s. 242). Although the existence of two separate governments in Ankara and Istanbul during this period added various negativities to the process, the efforts of Turks and Arabs to cooperate in the face of the occupation in Syria were evident and concrete.

It is noteworthy that especially the British closely monitored the local conditions in the region during this period. For instance, in a British intelligence report written in late 1919, it was reported that the majority of the Muslim population of Aleppo Province and some of the population of Damascus Province were pro-Turkish. The Syrian Arab press during this period was critical of the rapprochement between Faisal and the Turks, and various sources also noted that Sharif Hussain, Faisal's father and the leader of the Arab Revolt, did not like this cooperation and did not approve of going down this path again after his liberation from the "Turkish yoke" (Polat, 2019, s. 241). However, this rapprochement was in the rational interests of both sides, both Arabs and Turks were aware of the devastating effects of the French occupation in the region and sought a rapprochement, albeit limited, despite past problematic relations. Indeed, this correspondence and rapprochement between Faisal and Kemal Pasha would continue even after Faisal was expelled from Syria by the French and became the King of Iraq in 1921, and Turkish-Iraqi relations would improve day by day in the regional conjuncture of the 1920s and 1930s.

Provence, based on the memories of Syrian soldiers and resistance leaders of the period, conveys that the resistance and armed uprising given in Anatolia against the French and the occupying forces just a few years earlier was an important model and example, as an inspiring source of motivation in the rebellion of the local people against the French in the 1920s Syria under French mandate (al-Taqi & Hinnebusch, 2013, s. 97). For example, Ramadan Shallash, who had learned to read and write at the Ottoman Tribal School (*Osmanlı Aşiret Mektebi*) and wrote letters to the nearby notables to contribute to the "national struggle" and was one of the leaders of the local rebellions, with the title of "General", called on the villagers to engage in armed rebellion, declaring that they were engaged in a struggle like Kemal Pasha's and that their villages were like Ankara in 1920. The expressions and appeals in Shallash's letters are very similar to the letters Kemal Pasha sent to the interior towns of Anatolia a few years ago (Provence, 2017, s. 167).

When Sharif Hussain started his rebellion in 1916, one of the arguments he used was to "get rid of the oppression of the irreligious Unionists", and the religious element was an important unifying dynamic between the Arabs and the Ottomans. Indeed, not surprisingly, the abolition of the Sultanate on November 1, 1922, and the Caliphate on March 3, 1924 by the new Republican administration in Ankara were not welcomed in Syria as well as in the entire Islamic world (Çakmak, 2024), and traces of this attitude can be found especially in the Syrian press. However, instead of the religious unity and Caliphate dynamic of the past, the motivation to struggle and resist together against the French and British occupation in the region formed the geopolitical framework of the later relations between the peoples of Syria and the Arabs and Turkey.

After the WWI, when the borders in the south of Anatolia were to be determined in accordance with the National Oath (*Misak-ı Milli*), negotiations were carried out with the France for Syria and with the Britain for the Iraqi border. In this context, it was decided that the Turkish-Syrian border would be determined by the treaty signed with the French on October 20, 1921 (Davison, 1990, s. 226). Article 7 of this Treaty was organized as follows: "A special administration will be established for the Iskenderun region. The people of Turkish descent in this region will benefit from all kinds of facilities for the development of their culture. The Turkish language will have an official character there" (Çakmak, 2024). Thus, a special administrative structure was accepted for the Iskenderun region, and although the Arab nationalists in Syria were very uncomfortable with this, the diplomatic relations established between Ankara and France made this temporary solution possible. Likewise, during this period, it is observed that the Mosul issue and Ankara's view of the occupation administration in Syria were intertwined, and the two policies were tried to be carried out together and subtly.

Although it was included in Syria under French occupation, Hatay's annexation to Turkey in 1939 turned into a Cold War conflict that Syrian Arab nationalists still find disturbing and some Syrians claim that it will one day return to Syria, indicating it as their own country on maps. Hatay, which has a population largely consisting of Turks, was annexed to Turkey thanks to France's stepping back, which did not want to clash with Turkey under the conditions of the global war of the 1930s and the threat of Nazi occupation, the Syrian Arab nationalists' failure to prevent the process, and Kemal Pasha's determined stance in line with the Hatay people and assembly's demand for annexation to Turkey. In this process, when the Sanjak of Alexandretta was to be transferred to Syrian administration with the end of the mandate in 1936, Turkey's intervention and demanding that the autonomy granted to Syria and Lebanon be granted to the

Sanjak of Alexandretta, and the French acceptance of this (it should be noted that the British also supported this demand), were decisive. Thus, this conflict was brought to the League of Nations in 1937 and became international; as a result of the agreement made in July 1938 for the joint defense of Hatay by Turkish-French troops and the annexation decision of the Hatay Assembly, the majority of which was made up of Turks, Hatay was annexed to Turkey in 1939 (Yamaç, 2015).

On the Syrian side, in the occupation conditions of the 1930s and in the struggle with the French administration for independence, it was preferable not to have a problem with a powerful neighbor like Turkey. For this reason, although the Syrian administration did not officially recognize and approve this annexation decision, it preferred not to make it a priority issue in the war and occupation atmosphere of the 1930s-40s. Although this issue occasionally came up during the Baath period after the 1960s, it did not cause a significant crisis, and it largely fell off the agenda with Bashar Asad's gradual recognition attitude during the normalization period between Ankara and Damascus in the 2000s (Jörum, 2016, s. 113-117).

4.5.4. Independence Era and Consecutive Military Coups (1946–1970)

In the aftermath of the French mandate’s end and the independence of Syria in 1946 following the World War II, the country fell into a spiral of significant political instability and crises. This years, roughly between 1946 and 1963 till the Baath Party era, was a period of crisis in which Arab nationalism was on the rise, the sphere of influence of Britain and France in the Middle East gradually began to diminish, the Cold War period began with the emergence of the US-Soviet Union rivalry, and regional crises and the Arab-Israeli wars confined Syria within the security framework. During this period, the following issues were of primary importance in relations between Turkey and Syria:

a) Turkey's rapprochement with the West and the strengthening of military relations with the US by joining NATO in 1952

b) The increasing influence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East and the US-Soviet rivalry determining the framework of Ankara-Damascus relations

c) The rise of Arab nationalism and the perception and accusation of Turkey in some Arab circles as the heir to the old colonial past

d) Problems arising from certain neighborly relations between Turkey and Syria (annexation of Hatay, use of transboundary waters, etc.)

These parameters will continue to determine the main framework of Turkey-Syria relations in the next chapter, the Baath Party period and the end of the Cold War, also the issue of transboundary waters and the impact of the PKK-Kurdish problem will be added to complete the general framework of the bilateral relations until the rapprochement of the 2000s.

Although Turkey's post-WWII preference towards the West has been widely commented on and criticized in various circles, the underlying historical framework that led to this preference needs to be analyzed. In the 1950s, when various alliances could be formed before WWI, the multipolar system was left behind, and a bipolar aspiration of the US vs the Soviet Union balance emerged, Turkey's options were much less than before. For the countries of Central Asia and Central/Eastern Europe, the risks of being neighbor with the USSR, such as direct or indirect invasion and the danger of losing independence, were always present. The option of staying out of the Cold War and remaining neutral was not an option as Ankara lacked the economic, technical and military resources to protect itself. Turkey's alignment with the Western alliance was not based on its commitment to liberal values, but on the concrete threat, it perceived from the USSR, and this is where the existence of a propaganda / counter-propaganda process in which perception of threat exceeded concrete threats is crucial. As Hale argues, while the Western alliance respected the independence of small or medium-sized states, Soviet communism, on the contrary, prioritized occupation and direct/indirect military control (Hale, 2000, s. 78-79). Old wars and historical baggage between Turks and Russians also played a primary role in this preference.

Turkey's will to take part in the Western alliance after WWII and its accession to NATO brought about some new regional rapprochements as well as various dynamics of hostility within the framework of newly forming relations in the region. For Syria, which had just gained its independence in the 1940s and was in a constant spiral of military conflicts, it was a worrying situation that it had become increasingly aligned with the West/U.S. axis with the Truman Doctrine of 1947, Marshall Plan and accession to the NATO in 1952. The existence of a Turkey so close to the West/U.S. in the anti-colonial and anti-Western nationalist atmosphere of the post-war environment, when considered together with the establishment of Israel in 1948 and Iran's complete shift to the US orbit, was alarming among Arabs.

While there were obvious concerns among Arab elites about Turkey's new political direction, Turkey's participation in the Baghdad Pact, established in 1955 with the coordination

of Britain and the USA in order to contain the Soviets,[123] together with Iraq and Iran, brought Turkey into the center of suspicion among Arab nationalists and was criticized in the context of "Western imperial designs" (Süer, 2013, s. 18). Because the Baghdad Pact provided a framework in which the newly rising Nasser and Arab nationalism emphasized that, it aimed to divide the Arabs in their struggle against colonialism and Zionism. The first concrete response of Arab nationalism, led by Syria and Egypt, to the participation of Turkey with British-controlled Iraq and Iran in the Baghdad Pact was mutual defense agreement in 1955 and consequently the declaration of the United Arab Republic in 1958 (Karpat, 1975). While Turkey found this step hostile and alarming, Syria was also hosting anti-Turkish Kurdish opposition of this importance.

As the Baghdad Pact was being formed in the mid-1950s, it was heavily criticized in the Arab world; especially Iraq's powerful Prime Minister Nouri Said (who, along with members of the British-backed Hashemite dynasty, would be lynched by angry mobs during the nationalist military coup of 1958) was at the center of Arab nationalist criticism. In Jordan, a potential pact member, popular protests were so violent that King Hussein was about to be deposed. Turkey, on the other hand, tried to convince Syria and Lebanon in particular, but without success. Despite all this, the four signatory states (Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Afghanistan) met in Tehran during the Suez Canal Crisis in November 1956, excluding the other signatory, Britain, and condemned Britain, France and Israel for their military aggression in the Canal against Egypt and called for immediate withdrawal. Turkish Prime Minister Menderes tried to convince the other three countries not to expel Britain from the pact, and finally the Baghdad Pact was dissolved when Iraq was ousted because of the 1958 military coup (Hale, 2000).

Since the beginning of the Cold War, including the Baath Party era, Syria and Turkey have contributed to each other's security dilemma on three levels: global, regional, and domestic. On a global scale, both countries were fearful and anxious about their own security, and this anxiety deepened as Syria and Turkey were in different camps. In response to Turkey's accession to NATO in 1952, Syria became the USSR's one of the closest allies in the region. Consequently, in addition to the problematic dynamics that already existed at the bilateral and regional levels, Ankara-Damascus relations were also burdened by the power struggle of the global

[123] The United States was never an official signatory to the Baghdad Pact in order to avoid open confrontation and conflict with non-member Arab states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia and to preserve the possibility of working together, while at the same time not provoking Israel. However, from the very beginning, it was clear and known to all parties that the United States was the main organizer and trustee of this project. On the other hand, the party that needed this pact the most was Britain, which wanted to preserve its mandate-era influence and military presence in Iraq (Hale, Turkish Foreign Policy (1774 - 2000), 2000, p. 100).

superpowers in the region. As will be seen in the following decades, while Turkey established a military alliance with Israel, Syria's enemy, and became closer to Jordan, Syria established relations with Iran, Armenia, Russia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Cyprus, with which Turkey had troublesome relations, and became closer to them (Kabalan, 2016, s. 27-28). However, although these relationships create distrust and anxiety on both sides towards the other, they never engage in a military confrontation.

In the post-WWII period, despite being in different camps and having two structural problems such as transboundary waters and the Hatay issue, bilateral relations generally remained distant and cautious, but there were also a few exceptions in the period between 1946 and 1970. The first post-war exception was Husni al-Zaim;[124] after coming to power in Syria in 1949, he was a leader who believed in the importance of both preserving his country's independence and establishing good relations with its northern neighbor. The second exception was the People's Party administration that came to power in Syria in 1954-55, which believed in the necessity of establishing good relations with the West (also supporting closer ties with Hashemite-ruled Iraq and Jordan) and relations with Turkey followed a positive course during its rule. Another exception was the period in the mid-1960s when relations with Syria were developed and revitalized within the scope of Turkey's rapprochement policy towards the Middle East and Arab countries (Orhan & Teke, 2024, s. 154).

4.5.5. Hafez Asad and Baath Regime (1970–2000)

The Syrian Baath Party was originally founded in 1943 and its founders were more socialist and anti-imperialist than the pure Arab nationalist line the party would later evolve into, and unlike the later orientation, they were not Alawite/Nusayri.[125] The Syrian Baathists operated during the independence period when the country was tossed around in a chaotic atmosphere

[124] An Ottoman officer and WWI veteran, Hasan Husni al-Zaim was from a Syrian family of Arab origin on his father's side and a family from Erzurum (Turkey) on his mother's side. Despite Syria being under French mandate, he did not leave his country and became the Syrian Chief of Staff in 1946 with the support of Turkey. When he became the President of Syria in 1949, the Turkish press ran headlines saying 'Husni al-Zaim becomes the President of Syria' and supported his administration. Lacking popular support, Zaim was overthrown and executed by his colleagues al-Shishekli and al-Hinnavi after just four and a half months. Known as a figure close to the West, Zaim's coup in March 1949 was Syria's first military coup in the modern era and there would be many military coups, with Hafez Asad ending this tradition following his final military coup in 1970.

[125] The Baath Party was founded in 1943 primarily as a cultural movement. Its founders were the Syrian Christian intellectual Michel Aflak and the Syrian Sunni Muslim Salahuddin Bitar. The Baath Party gained strength with the participation of the "Arab Revival Party" (*al-Ihya al-Arabi*), which was formed after the separation of the Nationalist Action Union (*Usbat al-Amal al-Qawmi*) led by Zaki al-Arsuzi. In 1953, under the conditions of the Cold War, the Baath changed its name to the "Arab Baath Socialist Party" after merging with the Arab Socialist Party of Akram Hourani. Over time, the Baath expanded its activities beyond Syria and began to operate in neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon (Ovacıklı, 2019, p. 242).

of military coups and political instability, and came to power in 1963. However, the factionalism between the "progressives" and "nationalists" within the party continued violently until 1970. In the conjuncture of the 1950s, Syria and Egypt, which had become closer against Iraq to form the United Arab Republic, but this experience between 1958 and 1961 was unsuccessful and a military coup in Syria ended this integration project (Sluglett, 2005, s. 72). The Baath Party, which was closed by Nasser during the United Arab Republic experience, opened the door to military coups again when it failed in the elections following the end of the Nasserist era. After three small-scale failed military coups in 1962, the independents' rule was ended with the March 1963 coup and the Baath Party took power.[126] Thus began the 61-year Baath rule that would shape the future of Syria after 1963.

Syria, one of the Arab nationalist countries defeated in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, was deeply affected by this defeat in domestic politics after the war. In the struggle that emerged between the Alawite military leadership within the Baath, Defense Minister Hafez Assad, who was aimed to be purged by Salah Jadid, purged Jadid in a military coup organized by himself in November 1970 and took over the government on his own.[127] Thus, the single-party government in Syria turned into a one-man rule, with Hafez al-Assad taking on the duties of general secretary of the Baath Party and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, in addition to his presidency (Mercan, 2017, s. 268-269).

Following the Ottoman era and during the French mandate, the urban bourgeoisie expanded, and the people in the countryside became even poorer. The poor peasants in Syria, who could not form a homogeneous nation on ethnic and religious grounds, sent their children to military schools in large numbers for a better future. Thus, the children of the minorities (Alawites, Druzes, Circassians, and Kurds), who were demographically disadvantaged against the Sunni Arab majority, were concentrated in military schools beyond their demographic representation. This military group formed by the minorities and the Baath government, which relied on military support, played a decisive role in Syrian politics. The strength of the coalition that

[126] The United Arab Republic experiment in the 1958-61 period was a poorly prepared project and quickly collapsed after being implemented. The civilian wing of the Syrian Baath wanted this union more, and after 1961 they voiced their demands and made Syria open to Nasser's influence again. However, after the 1963 Coup, a new period began in which the military wing gained weight within the Baath. Thus, from 1947 onwards, when the Baath Party made its political activities public and recorded officially, it seized power through a military coup for the first time, beyond the ideal of coming to power through democratic means that it initially advocated, and did not relinquish power until December 2024 (Mercan, 2017, pp. 263-264).

[127] The de facto leader of the Baath and general of Alawite origin, Salah Jadid, was arrested immediately after the coup, remained in prison until 1983, and was prevented from engaging in political activity until his death in 1993. The processes by which Gamal Abdel Nasser and Saddam Hussein seized power and their behavior towards senior generals before them in the coup hierarchy were similar with Assad's attitude.

tightened over time between the Baath and the army affected the Baath's rise to power and directly contributed to its retention of power. Indeed, when the Baath came to power through military coups in the 1960s, the party's Military Committee was largely composed of Alawite officers. The continuity and mobilization of the Baath regime depended largely on this direct relationship it established with the military forces in its early years (Ovacıklı, 2019, s. 247-249) and later with the intelligence/police apparatus.

Turkish-Syrian relations were largely shaped within the Cold War context from 1970, when Hafez al-Assad came to power, until the early 2000s; the parameters of this period and the barriers between Ankara and Damascus were so strong that it was not easy to overcome even after the Cold War ended in the early 1990s. Even during the relative softening period in the 2000s, it cannot be said that historical baggage and distance in relations were completely left behind. In the context of the Cold War, when Turkey was getting closer to the West and Syria to the USSR, the Arab-Israeli conflict was a serious challenge for Syria. Turkey, which was able to find room for maneuver in foreign policy from the mid-1960s onwards, acted more closely to Arab theses and aimed to correct its old negative image among Arabs. With the end of the Cold War, it aimed to establish the sphere of influence it wanted to establish in the Balkans and Central Asia/Caucasus region in the 1990s, in the economic, cultural and political fields in the Middle East as well. Although the problems were not completely resolved in the 1990s, when there was a relative softening in relations with Baath Syria, there was an improvement in diplomatic relations in the new period when there was no US-USSR conflict.

The threats perceived from its neighbors (especially from Iraq and Turkey) played a major role in Syria's rapid drift toward Arab nationalism after 1945 and its subsequent political and military rapprochement with Egypt, which led to the establishment and deepening of the Baath Party within Syrian politics. The comment made by one of the Atatürk era ambassadors, Aptülahat Akşin, on these threat perceptions and Turkish-Syrian relations in the early Cold War is noteworthy: "*The mistakes we have made in our foreign policy since 1945 and the lack of understanding we have shown towards the Arabs also have a big share in Syria's desire to unite with Egypt. The fact that they suspected that there was an alliance or agreement between Turkey and Israel against Syria, considering some unnecessary displays of friendship we showed towards Israel, gave the Syrians the impression that they were surrounded by a wall of hostility on all sides, and as a result, the Syrians turned their eyes to Cairo on one side and Moscow on the other. A Syrian diplomat stated the following in 1957: 'You are constantly building up military forces on our borders under a different pretext, and you have broken the Arab Union*

by forming the Baghdad Pact together with the Iraqi leadership.' The Hatay issue also played an important role in Syria's rapprochement with Cairo and Moscow against us (Akşin, 2021, s. 133-135).[128] These dynamics emerged during the Cold War era largely remained in place during the Baath Party and Hafez al-Assad era, continuing to form the framework of Turkish-Syrian relations.

Ambassador Akşin's evaluation is also shared by Prof. Karpat, who notes that the concentration of some Turkish troops on the Syrian border and the subsequent entry into Syria by air and land several times, and the small clashes, made Syria more open to the Soviet influence. During this process, the Kremlin emerged as the sole defender of Syria and initiated military actions by sending threatening notes to Turkey, thus delaying the Turkish-Soviet détente that was still in its infancy. On the other hand, the actual domestic political environment in Syria was different from what Turkish leaders portrayed and did not pose a major threat to Turkey. However, the Baath Party was rapidly gaining ground and deepening its strength by relying on the Soviets, and Syria was becoming a center of armed revolution aiming to overthrow the existing regimes in the region (Karpat, 1975).

On the other hand, Provence, who assessed the formation of state structures in Iraq and Syria, which were governed under British and French mandates until roughly the end of WWII, notes that both states were subject to various military coups d'état almost from the moment they declared their independence. Each of these military regimes built on the structures and habits instilled by the mandate regimes, and all maintained dictatorial executive structures through security organizations free from oversight and control. The post-life politicians of both Syria and Iraq were obsessed with escaping the influence of powerful neighbors and establishing dominance over weaker ones. These tendencies were embedded in the structure of the colonial state, with its peculiar state borders and pervasive security concerns, and were directly inherited by the post-colonial state (Provence, 2017, s. 272). The Baath Party's dominance in Syria since

[128] As of February 2025, when this chapter was authored, the 61-year Baath regime in Syria has ended and a government supported by Turkey has seized power. The following lines written 75-80 years ago by Ambassador Akşin, who also served in the region, can be considered as an important example of Realist foreign policy: "… *After all these considerations, it can be said that entering into long-term commitments with the Arabs will lead to disappointment. It is doubtful that an agreement made today will be accepted by the newcomers in the transition of a regime or even a government change. For this reason, what we can make with Arab governments, especially our neighbours, are not general and comprehensive agreements for today. For now, we can make local agreements, establish good neighbourly relations and resolve some pending issues in the meantime. We can support the Arabs in the UN in matters concerning them, or at least remain abstaining. By minimizing our relations with Israel, we could provide trust to the Arabs and prevent them from taking sides against us*" (Akşin, 2021, p. 143).

the mid-1960s, its tools of oppression on society, and its approach towards Turkey can be better understood from this perspective.

As a technical issue added to the tense atmosphere in Turkish-Syrian relations during the Baath period, the use of the transboundary waters of the Euphrates, Tigris and Orontes[129] rivers occasionally brought the two countries into political tension. Syria's arguments were based particularly on the argument that it did not receive enough water due to the large dams and hydroelectric plants Turkey had built on the Euphrates River, which flows largely through its territory, within the scope of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP). Syria noted that it was facing injustice due to the use of these two rivers and had problems in terms of agricultural water use and domestic use, and perceived Turkey's steps in this regard as a threat to its national security.

After the end of the Cold War, Syria, deprived of the Soviet Union's encouraging support, had difficulty continuing the dispute over water with its powerful neighbor to the north on its own, and this time tried to gain a regional support mechanism behind its demands. Hafez Assad's Syria, which tried to transform the issue from a simple border neighbor and water problem to an Arab-Turkish conflict, brought the issue to the agenda within the Arab League starting in 1992. The Arab League, which adopted a draft resolution in 1996, called on Turkey to share water with Syria and Iraq (Fırat & Kürkçüoğlu, 2001). Thus, Syria, which also received the support of Iraq and Saudi Arabia, launched a campaign to freeze credits to the World Bank, which provided financial support for Turkey's dam projects, and this issue was continued by Syria until Turkey reached an agreement with the riparian states (Altunışık, Explaining the transformation of Turkish-Syrian relations: a regionalist approach, 2016, s. 181).

Although this issue and the rhetoric becoming harsher from time to time provided grounds for the acceleration of diplomatic relations and the establishment of dialogue, they often overshadowed other areas of potential cooperation in bilateral relations. The allocation of rivers and limited water resources is of vital interest to both countries, but as the issue is not agreed upon and is allowed to continue as a problematic dossier, it has become a securitized issue.

[129] In fact, the Orontes (Asi) River, like the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, was a problematic water source between the two countries. However, during the process of reconciliation in Ankara-Damascus relations, a ground for cooperation emerged in 2010-11 regarding the use of the Orontes River waters (irrigation of 20,000 hectares of Turkish agricultural lands and 10,000 hectares of Syrian agricultural lands). The two countries signed a framework agreement determining the use of the Orontes River waters with the project called the "Friendship Dam" (Daoudy, 2013, p. 142). The dam, whose foundation was laid in 2011, was expected to be completed in 2012, but due to the armed conflicts and instability that accelerated in the second half of 2011, this dam project has not been implemented to date.

Water issues continue to overshadow other controversial areas of political relations and negatively affect relations under their shadow, and both countries continue to keep the issue on their agendas within both legal and realpolitik struggles (Daoudy, 2013, s. 143). While the transboundary waters issue is being discussed in the public opinion of both countries, technical details and the technical dimension of the issue are frequently referred to, a more cooperative approach will only be possible if political will at the highest level can be achieved on this issue, which has been a part of the macro-political disagreement since the Cold War (Kibaroğlu, 2013, s. 157).

The Kurdish issue has increasingly become a trouble in Turkish-Syrian relations, especially towards the end of the Cold War and in the 1990s. Although the presence of Kurdish tribes on the border and Kurdish opposition groups fleeing Turkey and taking refuge in Syria occasionally caused problems in the 1920s and later, these did not turn into a major conflict. However, in the 1990s, Turkey claimed that it had received support from Syria for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which was carrying out separatist activities against it, and directly accused Syria, stating that the organization's leader, Abdullah Öcalan, resided in Damascus and that PKK militants were operating in Syrian territory (and in Lebanese camps that Syrian authorities controlled). Although Syria resisted these accusations for a long time, it backed down in its support for the PKK in the late 1990s, due to its diminishing power and weakened regional and economic position. In 1998, as a result of intense pressure and threats of war from Turkey, Syria forced Öcalan to leave the country and Syrian Baath regime was forced to sign the Adana Agreement, which envisaged cooperation with Turkey against terrorism (Hinnebusch & Tür, Turkey-Syria Relations & Between Enmity and Amity, 2016, s. 207-209).[130]

[130] The Adana Agreement, which has been frequently referred to within the context of Turkish-Syrian relations since its negotiation process, was signed by the official authorities of the two sides who came together in Adana on October 19-20, two days after Öcalan left Syria on October 17, 1998, and its main points were as follows:
1) Öcalan is not in Syria as of now and he will definitely not be allowed to enter Syria. PKK elements will not be allowed to enter Syria either
2) PKK camps are not active as of now and they will not be allowed to become active. Many PKK members have been arrested and brought to justice. Syria has forwarded these lists to the Turkish side
3) Syria will not allow any activity originating from its territory and aimed at disrupting Turkey's security and stability within the framework of the principle of reciprocity. Syria will not allow the PKK to provide weapons, logistic materials and financial support and to conduct propaganda on its territory
4) Syria has accepted that the PKK is a terrorist organization. It has banned all activities of the PKK and all its affiliates, among other terrorist organizations, in its country.
5) Syria will not allow the PKK to establish camps and other facilities for training and sheltering purposes and to conduct commercial activities in its country. It will not allow PKK members to use its country to cross to a third country.
6) Syria will take all measures to prevent the leader of the PKK terrorist organization from entering Syrian territory and will instruct the border gates in this regard.

During this period, the "PKK card" went beyond being an element used by Syria against Turkey, and became an instrument to control the Kurds living within its borders through the PKK (Altunışık, Explaining the transformation of Turkish-Syrian relations: a regionalist approach, 2016, s. 181). On the other hand, Syria was using the Kurdish card not only to receive by negotiating more water resources from the Euphrates-Tigris rivers, but also because it understood that the general nationalist Kurdish movement, which goes beyond the PKK, was the most fundamental problem Turkey was facing (Olson, Turkey– Iran relations, 1997 to 2000: the Kurdish and Islamist questions, 2000). The issue of Kurdish separatism, which had essentially created a crisis in relations during the 1990s, turned into a potential for cooperation during the rapprochement period in the 2000s.

4.5.6. New Era of AK Party Years and Rapprochement (2002–2011)

Turkish-Syrian relations, which had been generally tense and problematic since 1946, when Syria gained independence, until Hafez Assad's death in 2000, entered a period of rapprochement and cooperation with Bashar Assad coming to power in Syria and the beginning of the AK Party years in Turkey. It can be argued that three parameters primarily brought about rapprochement in relations during this period. First, the death of Hafez Assad, who had governed Syria for 30 years, received military training in the Soviet Union and had been evaluating the regional circumstances under the conditions of the Cold War; the replacement of a young leader who had been educated in the West with Syria, created expectations that a new page would be opened in relations. Bashar Assad's coming to power as his father's successor created new hope not only in relations with Turkey, but also in terms of cooperation opportunities with the US and Western countries and in terms of resolving old, unsolved socio-political problems inside Syria.

The second important parameter that emerged in the 2000s was that relations with the Middle East and Eastern countries entered the agenda of Turkish foreign policy as a significant priority with the AK Party coming to power in Turkey. With the increasing involvement of political and bureaucratic cadres who know the region and show interest in the peoples of the region in Turkish decision-making mechanisms, relations with regional countries such as Syria,

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The agreement text also included a consensus to establish various communication and coordination mechanisms and technical cooperation teams to implement this agreement and to include Lebanon, where PKK camps were located, in this framework (Fırat & Kürkçüoğlu, Arap Ülkeleriyle İlişkiler, 2001, pp. 566-567). After the Adana Agreement, Turkish-Syrian relations began to develop slowly but steadily, and this text and its implementation formed the reassuring framework for subsequent cooperation and rapprochement.

Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the frequency of mutual visits increased. This approach of Turkey, which can be characterized as the “zero problem with neighbors” formula, also brought about the strengthening of economic and cultural relations and foresaw the reinforcement of political rapprochements with relations developing in other areas. The problems left over from the Cold War (the issue of transboundary waters, Hatay's annexation to Turkey, the situation of the Kurdish community on the border and the PKK problem) were largely left behind and there were increasing hopes that they would be increasingly left behind as the bilateral dialogue progressed.

In bilateral relations, apart from the change of leaders and the parameters originating from the bilateral level, another vital dynamic was the rapid change of the regional conjuncture and the fact that the two countries needed each other more in this new period when the alliances after the Cold War were rapidly changing. The most important regional parameter that brought relations closer in the early 2000s was the occupation of Iraq by the US and its allied coalition in March 2003. Syria, which had become a land neighbor of the US along a long border in the east of the country, found it more in its interest to reduce old tensions with Turkey during this regional chaos and also Damascus decided to deepen military and security cooperation with Iran.

Both Turkey and Syria had opposed terrorism originating from radical extremism and the 9/11 events; however, in this new period that closely concerns both countries, both Ankara and Damascus jointly opposed the occupation of Iraq, considering that the dissolution of Iraq and the instability that would arise would create problems for the entire region. The conjuncture that once caused problems between Syria and Turkey, with Turkey accusing the Baath regime of supporting PKK terrorism, has now changed, and the two countries were now concerned that their own Kurdish problems may be negatively affected at a time when separatist demands of the Iraqi Kurds were increasing.

In addition to these three vital parameters, three additional dynamics on the Syrian side required the normalization of relations with Turkey and the easing of tensions (Kabalan, 2016, s. 32-35):

-First, the rapprochement between Hafez Assad and Saddam Hussein that began in 1997 and the subsequent rapprochement in commercial and political relations had been disrupted by the US intervention in 2003. For this reason, Syria sought to compensate the Iraq's political and economic loss by deepening relations with Iran and Turkey.

-Secondly, US had been pressuring Syria due to its oil trade and economic relations with Iraq, which was seen as part of the "Axis of Evil" by the US in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, and its military occupation of Lebanon that had continued since the Cold War. Following the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, caused to Syria's withdrawal and end this occupation, Damascus was under intense US pressure to both withdraw from Lebanon and freeze relations with Iran-Hezbollah. The cooperation to be developed in the region with Turkey, an ally of the US, was seen as a way out for Syria that would reduce political and diplomatic isolation and ease the effects of sanctions.

-A third parameter was that Turkey calibrated its relations with Israel after the government change in 2002, although not to the extent of a strategic partnership as it was during the second half of the 1990s, at a certain level, and prioritized its relations with Arab countries during this period.[131] The close relations that Turkey established with all actors in the region in the 2000s gave Syria hope for establishing a dialogue with Israel and returning its occupied territories lost in 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Indeed, critical negotiations were carried out between Israel and Syria in the 2007-2008 Turkish-sponsored direct talks process following the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war, but no concrete results were achieved.

The first positive step of the new era in Turkish-Syrian relations was the participation of the Turkish President in the funeral ceremony of Hafez Assad, who had ruled Syria for 30 years, in June 2000. In the process of rapprochement and mutual gestures that began with this first visit at the level of a head of state by Ahmet Necdet Sezer after many years, Turkey gave a clear message to its neighbor that it wanted to take relations on a new course. The Syrian side did not remain indifferent to this step either; after the mutual visits at the technical level, the new President of Syria, Bashar Assad, paid the first visit at this level after Syrian independence and visited Turkey in January 2004. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Syria in the same year, and President Ahmet Necdet Sezer continued this positive momentum by visiting Syria in 2005.

This period when Turkey entered into rapprochement and cooperation with Syria was taking place at a time when the US was exerting intense pressure on Damascus and Ankara was taking

[131] Prof. Altunisik summarizes Turkey and Iran's positions while aiming at filling the vacuum left by the US's decreasing credibility in 2000s as follows: "*The power vacuum, coupled with an ideological one, created by a decrease in the US power and credibility in the region, was filled again by regional powers like Iran and Turkey. Unlike Iran however, Turkey emerged as an "independent, credible, and respectable" third party due to its ability to talk to all parties in the region. The perception of Turkey as a fair interlocutor strengthened Ankara's position."* (Altunişik, 2010, p. 10).

significant political risks as a result of tense regional environment following the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. The steps taken during this period were in the mid-2000s when relations were advancing in almost every field, and in 2006 a free trade agreement was signed between the two countries. Both countries decided to grant mutual visa exemptions to each other's citizens. In 2009, during Assad's visit to Turkey, an agreement was signed to establish a High Level Cooperation Council, and the two countries deepened their relations to the point where they now hold joint cabinet meetings at least twice a year. Cooperation between Turkey and Syria progressed to the point of becoming a role model for the region, and finally, in June 2010, a High Level Cooperation Council was established between Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, establishing a quadripartite alliance (Orhan & Teke, 2024, s. 155-156).

This rapprochement period, which lasted until the armed conflicts in Syria began in 2011 and the uprisings, was a win-win relationship for both sides. Turkish leaders, who entered into a new opening towards the Middle East as in the Ottoman period, particularly stayed away from the "neo-Ottomanism" discourse voiced by third parties and aimed to undermine relations, and avoided rhetoric that would create antipathy in Syria. Although there were perceptions among some nationalist segments of Arabs that reached the level of hatred towards the Ottoman image, the economic prosperity and relative freedom brought by the Turkey-Syria rapprochement, especially among Syrian Sunni Arabs and in the developed cities in the north of the country, were observed. In this period when Turkey's holiday resorts, universities and TV series were quite popular. As a result of mutual friendship, TV series were made in Syria-Turkey partnership and Abdulhamid II, a controversial figure of the period, was played by a well-known Syrian actor Abbas al-Nouri, and the Ottoman period was emphasized with a positive image (Moubayed, 2013, s. 74).

Turkey's Middle East policies in the 2000s were highly positively regarded in the Arab world and, together with Saudi Arabia, it was the country receiving the most favorable views in the region. In a public opinion poll published in 2010, it was the most admired and appreciated country in Syria in particular, and there were also large Arab populations in countries such as Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon that expressed a favorable view of Turkey. Similarly, Syria was at the top of the list of countries that supported the view that Turkey should "play a bigger role in the Arab world" the most. The Arab world, where Turkey was largely perceived as a fair interlocutor in the Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine issues and was seen as a "constructive actor", showed that the course of Turkish foreign policy in the 2000s found a response among the broad masses in the Middle East (Altunişik, 2010).

In this rapprochement period, within the context of neo-classical Realist theory, the leadership characteristics represented in the personal profile of Erdoğan and Assad and the will to establish personal communication played a major role. In addition, despite the existence of historical baggage and geopolitical competition dynamics, threat perceptions originating from the international system and regional challenges were also effective in the rapprochement of the two countries. As a reflection of these dynamics, the personal friendship between Assad and Erdoğan was effective in solving problems during the periods when relations were strained due to various bilateral and regional factors. Likewise, during these years when Turkey did not directly criticize Syria due to its Baath regime, it contributed to Bashar Assad's efforts to reduce state pressure on society to some extent by making reforms and to save his country from political and economic isolation. The progress in Turkey-Syria relations also contributed to the development of Syria's relations with neighboring countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Lebanon, and served Syria's integration and legitimacy towards both the regional system, the Arab system and the international community (Orhan & Teke, 2024, s. 156).

4.6. Conclusion: Turkish-Iranian-Syrian Trilateral Nexus and the Road to the Chaos of the 2010s

The Turkish-Iranian-Syrian trilateral nexus and its role in the course of the chaos in the 2010s reflect a sophisticated framework influenced and shaped by many historical, sociological and geopolitical parameters. The relations between the three countries transformed into a more complex effort to establish a sphere of influence with the involvement of regional and international powers and non-state armed actors in 2011, when the Syrian Civil War began. Since Iran and Turkey’s visions of the Middle East differed significantly from each other and were often shaped by the parameters of competition rather than cooperation, the Syrian field also presented a new competitive ground and a challenging environment. While Turkey supported Sunni opposition groups in this process with the expectation of a friendly administration that could come after Assad and the Baath regime, Iran exerted great effort in all terms to keep the Assad regime in place as a key ally in its Shia axis of resistance in the region. This historical and geopolitical rivalry between Turkey and Iran has not only plunged Syria into a bloody civil war but also triggered a radical transformation that would deeply affect

the balances in the entire region and perhaps open the door to a regional war in the not-so-distant future.

In order to understand how Syria became a geopolitical competition area between Turkey and Iran in the 2010s, it is necessary to analyze the historical background of bilateral rivalry and examine the dynamics of competition there. Iran, which has been involved in a geopolitical competition with the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East since the Safavids and Kajars, did not hesitate to use sectarian differences and the mobilizing effect of religion in the conduct of this competition in areas such as Anatolia, the Caucasus and Iraq-Syria. Similarly, for the Ottoman Empire, the Shia-Sunni conflict and the regional competition hidden behind it constituted the framework of Ottoman-Iranian relations. An important exception to this sectarian competition framework was the secular-nationalist Pahlavi nation-state era during the 1925-1979 period. In this period when sectarian differences were not a clear and concrete parameter in foreign policy, especially during the Cold War years, between Turkey and Iran, which were under the same security umbrella and global camp, there was a period when problems were minimized and common security risks gained greater importance with the secular governments both in Iranian and Turkish side.

However, with the 1979 Revolution, Iran came under Shiite Islamist rule of *Velayat-e Fakih*, which has deeply affected Iranian foreign policy towards an Islamised trend for about half a century after the revolution. The sectarian rule and foreign policy that were institutionalized in Iran's eight-year war with Iraq during 1980s prepared the ground for a Sunni-Shia based separation with both Arabs and Turks in the region. At this point, it is observed that sectarian foreign policy does not only originate from Iranian attitude, but also the Sunni-majority states in the Middle East contribute to this separation and sectarian power struggle. Particularly after the 9/11 attacks, the US and Western occupation of Afghanistan starting in 2001 and Iraq starting in 2003 opened up a wide area of manoeuvre for Iran, which got rid of its two major enemies to the east and west.

Iran’s foreign policy, which was particularly gained strength following the 2003 Iraq invasion and gained a sectarian aspect over time, aimed to bring together Shia state and non-state actors in the region under one roof with the “axis of resistance” strategy, especially during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) and the years when the influence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) rapidly increased in foreign policy. In this way, an uninterrupted land supply and logistics line emerged between Iran-Iraq-Syria-Hezbollah, and

over time, Palestinian armed groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad became components of this axis, in addition to the Zaydi/Shia groups in Yemen. Syria became a very important logistics hub in this axis, and it also constituted the geographical and logistics backbone of the resistance axis surrounding Israel. For this reason, it was of vital importance for Iran and the Shiite "axis of resistance" (although Sunni politicians and strategists called this alliance as "Shiite crescent" and perceived a security threat) that Syria should not be lost and that it should not fall into the hands of a Sunni administration that could cause problems with Iran.

On the other hand, there was a quite different scenario for Turkey. Syria coming back under Turkey's control as a wide gate opening to the Middle East, which Ankara saw as its natural and historical sphere of influence in the period after 2002, would not only be a political asset, but would also be considered a great gain in terms of its economic and cultural sphere of influence regaining power in this neighboring geography and increasing its influence among the Arabs. Turkey had actually started this strategy to establish control during the Bashar Assad period and had made significant progress on this path.

However, the Syrian leadership took the path of strategic balancing and, from the second half of the 2000s onwards, it aimed to balance Turkey's ever-increasing influence with Iran, while signing a free trade agreement with Turkey and mutually lifting visas, Syrian Baath also simultaneously allowed Iran to establish an Iraq-Syria-Lebanon line in terms of military and logistics, and even found it necessary. It should be noted as an interesting dual orientation that while the free trade agreement signed between Turkey and Syria in 2004 entered into force at the beginning of 2007, Syria was deepening its military and security relations with Iran in the same months, and the joint defense agreement signed in 2006 and the military cooperation agreement concluded in 2007 were further strengthening the bilateral strategic partnership. Indeed, the free trade agreement signed with Turkey was suspended on December 6, 2011 due to ongoing armed conflicts, however, the vitality of the joint defense and military cooperation agreements signed with Iran would be clearly observed during the armed conflicts and civil war beginning in 2011.

Throughout the Syrian Civil War, triggered in 2011 and ended –for now- in December 2024, Turkey-Syria relations have experienced numerous crises, the two countries have come to the brink of war many times, and armed groups openly supported by Turkey have fought on the ground against the Syrian regime and its ally, the Iranian IRGC, Hezbollah and the Shiite militias under the command of Iranian generals. Turkey has even taken control of areas ruled

by the PYD/YPG in northern Syria by using military force. Although Iran has been sending military advisors and armed elements to the field since 2011, its ally in Syria, Russia, has been heavily involved in the civil war by controlling the airspace since 2015. From 2016 onwards, the balance had shifted against the armed opposition and in favor of the Syrian regime, and this has continued until 2024, but it was commented that this low-intensity phase of the civil war would not last long.

However, the new balances that emerged in the field against Iran, Hezbollah and the "axis of resistance" following Hamas's attacks on October 7, 2023 have created a different situation: Hezbollah has lost top leadership and a significant amount of its power in the Israeli attacks. Moreover, Israel, establishing control over the airspace of the Syria-Beirut logistics line, has directly intervened and blockaded it, the Iranian and Hezbollah cadres have retreated, weakened by the attacks and the Israeli factor in the Syrian field. In these new balances, the armed groups backed by Turkey left Idlib, which they had controlled since 2017-18, in the last days of November 2024 and seized Aleppo, Hama, Homs and finally Damascus within a few days. The Baath regime that had ruled Syria for 61 years was thus overthrown, and Bashar Assad, ruling the country for 24 years, flew to Moscow from the military base of his close ally during the war in Tartus on December 8, 2024. Thus, the ongoing civil war since 2011 ended in favor of the armed opposition, the Iranian influence in the country that had been ongoing since 1979 ended, and the first foreigners visiting Damascus, which was governed now by Turkish-backed armed groups, were Turkish officials. After the Baath regime, Iranian and Russian leaders and former officials close to Bashar Assad blamed each other and transferred the responsibility for losing Syria to each other.

CHAPTER – V

TURKISH – IRANIAN RIVALRY AT SYRIAN CRISIS:

A SECTARIAN DYNAMIC STORMING?

5.1. Introduction

The Syrian crisis and subsequent civil war, although it began as part of the Arab Uprisings (or "Spring"), has rapidly turned into the most complex regional and international crisis and a devastating conflict of the 21st century. What began in March 2011 with slogans written on southern Syrian city of Deraa walls by a few children and then as a domestic struggle for political reform and human rights, has rapidly evolved into a multifaceted proxy war, drawing in regional and global powers with competing and conflicting interests. Among the regional actors involved in this civil war, Turkey and Iran stand out as the most important parties, adding a sectarian dimension to the geopolitical rivalry and competition that has already existed for centuries, further complicating the already volatile situation. This chapter of the thesis explores Turkish-Iranian rivalry within the context of Syria crisis, examining whether their rivalry and competition has fuelled a sectarian dynamic that exacerbates the conflict further or whether it is completely a geopolitical conflict without any sectarian emphasis or dynamic.

Despite having long diplomatic, political, economic and cultural ties, Turkey and Iran have often found themselves on opposing sides in political crises in the region. The competitive dynamics of the two countries have profound roots consisting a combination of historical, ideological and geopolitical parameters. Turkey, especially after 2002 domestic elections, as a predominantly Sunni Muslim country with a secular political system, has positioned itself as a key player in the Middle East, advocating for a moderate Islamist approach supporting Sunni political groups (armed or purely political). On the other hand, Iran, a Shia-majority theocracy and a self-styled religious state, has sought to expand its influence across the region and beyond, with a strategy that frequently supports Shiite political groups and militias. Especially in the

Middle East, such as Syria, where armed conflicts are pitted against each other, this sectarian divide has frequently manifested in these two countries' foreign policies.

The events during the Syrian Civil War and the crisis itself were a focal point where Turkish-Iranian rivalry crystallized, and both countries sought to shape the outcome of the conflict in line with their own interests during more than thirteen years. For Turkey, overthrowing Bashar Assad and the Baath regime became an initial priority, driven by concerns over regional stability, the refugee crisis, and the desire to curb Iranian influence over its more than 900 km long southern border. Turkey's open support for the Free Syrian Army (FSA), *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), and other Sunni Islamist armed groups reveals that it prioritizes cooperation with Sunni communities and their armed representatives in order to implement its own strategic priorities in the region.

On the other hand, Iran has been a staunch supporter of the Baath and Assad regime, and Syria has been a key component in Iran's "axis of resistance" in the country for years as it resisted the US and Israeli dominance in the region. This coalition building did not begin with internal rebellion in 2011, but has its origins in a close cooperation since the 1979 Revolution. Iran's intervention of and backing to Assad's Syria with military, financial, and logistical support, and mobilization of Shia militias such as Hezbollah, has secured its status as a key player in the conflict.

In addition to the Sunni Arab countries in the Gulf, the involvement of Turkey and Iran in the unrest and civil war in Syria has not only intensified the sectarian dimensions of the conflict but has also led to the emergence of a dynamic that has become a driving force behind the perpetuation of violence. The religious/sectarian dynamics that already exist both in the region and within the Syrian society, which have previously pitted the Shiite/Alawite communities against the Sunni majority and have been frequently exploited by both sides, have continuously fueled cycles of retaliation and mistrust throughout the civil war.

However, at this point, there is undoubtedly a great need to ask the following question scientifically: Is sectarianism the root cause of the conflict and rivalry between Turkey and Iran, or are sectarian dynamics convenient tools used to advance their strategic interests? While sectarian discourse certainly plays a catalytic role in mobilizing support and justifying interventions, the underlying motivations of Turkey and Iran are revealed to be more closely tied to their geopolitical ambitions and regional power struggles.

This chapter seeks to analyze the Turkish-Iranian rivalry during the Syrian crisis and civil war from a sectarian perspective, and to explore how sectarian dynamics are instrumentalized in achieving further political and strategic goals. For this purpose, in the light of neo-classical Realist theory, the effects of historical and geopolitical dynamics in Iran's foreign policy towards Turkey and the effects of these sectarian dynamics on the foreign policy-making process during the Syrian crisis are examined. Considering this regional background, leader images of Iranian top policy makers, strategic culture and geopolitical/historical dynamics, Iranian domestic institutions affecting foreign policy and state-society relations will be explored, and the relationship between sectarian dynamics and this domestic political framework and its effects on the foreign policy-making process will be examined within the context of the Syrian Civil War.

5.2. Foreign Policy-making in Islamic Republic of Iran: Basic Principles, Actors and Institutions

Since its establishment following 1979 Revolution, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been shaped by a complex and dynamic process that reflects and is shaped by a unique combination of revolutionary ideology, geopolitical imperatives, and institutional dynamics of the political system. In other states in the region and more generally internationally, foreign policy-making is primarily the domain of the executive branch, but Iranian foreign policy and policy-making processes have been influenced by the interaction and sometimes conflicting interests of numerous actors and institutions, each with its own interests, agendas, and interpretations of the revolutionary ethos.

Among these actors, the Supreme Leader (and his office including foreign council of senior advisers), the President, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Parliament (*Majlis*), and the Supreme National Security Council stand out. According to Neo-classical Realist theory, the foreign policy-making process in Iran is shaped by the interaction between systemic dynamics (international structure) and domestic factors (state institutions and actors).

Neo-Classical Realism provides a particularly useful framework for understanding the policy-making process in Iranian foreign policy. This theory contends that while the international system identifies the overall parameters of state action, domestic variables such as state institutions, leadership, and ideology insert themselves into the manner in which states respond to systemic pressures. In the case of Iran, there is a plane in which the revolutionary ideology of the Islamic Republic, combined with its unique institutional structure, shapes foreign policy. Within the *Hukumat-e Islami* (Islamic government) system formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader (*Vali-ye Faqih*) holds the ultimate authority in almost every religious, political, military, cultural, and other areas of the Iranian political system, embodying the ideological orientation and principles of the revolution, including anti-imperialism, resistance to Western dominance, and exportation of the Islamic revolution. However, the President, the IRGC, and other powerful constitutional institutions often interpret and implement these principles in ways that reflect their own priorities and interests. This interplay between ideology and pragmatism and competition between various actors ensures that the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran can be both ideologically driven and strategically pragmatic and adaptive to changing and transforming regional/international circumstances.

A general framework for policy-making: political culture and Iranian exceptionalism

In studies of Iran's foreign policy, one-dimensional frameworks such as Realism, rationality and pragmatism, and conjectural changes in attitudes towards regional/international developments are often highlighted. However, when examining Iran's foreign policy, an important dynamic that needs to be focused on before examining the basic principles, actors and institutions is how the "political culture" leading to this policy and can be described as transcendent is being shaped and what its components are.

Political culture, which determines the basic framework in which Iran's foreign policy is formed, which also includes and determines actors and institutions, and is the main driving factor in decision-making processes, is rooted in the country's historical experiences, strategic imperatives and sociological characteristics. Historically, the political culture of the Iranians has been shaped by the experiences of foreign interventions, wars, occupations, colonization, and imperialism of the once-dominant empire (with its Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanid versions of the "Persian Empire") and its historical successors (post-Umayyad states, especially the Safavids, the Kajars and the Pahlavids).

Historical traumas and various developments coded as “injustice” in collective memory, such as the Anglo-Russian invasion (similar to previous invasions by Alexander, Arabs, Turks, Mongols, and Afghans etc.), the CIA-backed coup of 1953, the Iran-Iraq War, have fostered a collective sense of vulnerability and a fervent desire for self-reliance and sovereignty. These interventions and the deep crisis of confidence that emerged led to the development of a tough stance against foreign powers, especially the Western nations, and brought about a more frequent emphasis on the concept of “independence” in foreign policy-making processes. Therefore, historically, foreign occupation and emphasis on independence are the first and primary dynamics of Iranian political culture.

Strategically, Iranian political culture is driven by its geopolitical position in a volatile region and is characterized by a Realist approach to international relations. Located at the crossroads where the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Gulf and South Asia intersect, Iran views itself as a regional power center and evaluates influencing its neighborhood as a natural right. This strategic outlook is reinforced by its rich energy resources and provides both leverage and vulnerability in interactions with the global community.

A reflection of the strategic perspective on the ideological level is Iran's revolutionary rhetoric and its efforts to shape foreign policy with this approach. The Islamic Republic seeks to export its model of governance (*Hukumat-e Islami*) and support non-state actors, Shia and Sunni communities and states that are close to its own worldview. This dual focus, based on pragmatic geopolitics and ideological expansion, creates a unique framework of Realism and Idealism, shaping Iran's foreign policy on this realistic-idealist plane.

Sociologically, the prominent element in Iranian political culture is the Shiite identity that became the dominant colour of the country from the Safavids and its system of governance formed by the *Velayat-e Faqih* concept formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini with a revolutionary understanding even within Shiism. The Shiite Islamist understanding provides both a constitutionally accepted legitimacy for the Islamic Republic and a unifying force among the Shia conservative broad masses that constitute more than 85% of the Iranian population. Thus, the Supreme Leader, who is the political and religious representative of Imam Mahdi, and Shiite political principles provide a consensus among the elites, while at the same time, the Shiite identity provides a unifying roof for large communities from different ethnic backgrounds such as Turks, Arabs, Persians and Kurds. Although it is the Achilles heel of the system for the Sunni population and non-Muslim minorities (the concept of unity / *vahdat* aims to discursively

appease Sunnis formulating an identity of Islam above Shiism), the representation of Shiism through such a sophisticated political system also provides a unique experience for modern state structures.

Indeed, the 1979 Revolution, which established the current theocratic political system, embedded religion as a central pillar of Iran's political and cultural identity. The religious dimension is frequently encountered in the country's foreign policy, for example, Iranian religious and political leaders often frame their actions in moral and theological terms, such as supporting those who are oppressed (*mustaz'afin*) against arrogant (*mustakbirin*) powers. In addition, ethnic minorities such as Turks, Kurds, and Baluchs in the country and Iran's diverse ethnic and linguistic makeup also create internal conflicts from time to time in determining and conducting foreign policy based on identity politics. It is noteworthy that the Iranian government adopted a cautious approach in foreign policy, especially in the early periods of the Revolution, in order to ensure internal stability and suppress separatist tendencies.

Geographically, Iran's rugged and diverse geography plays a crucial role in the formation of a unified Iranian identity by transcending the ethnic, religious and sectarian divisions of the country. The vast Iranian plateau, surrounded by mountains such as the Zagros and Alborz, seas to the north and south and desert/rocky areas to the east, creates a historically protected geography and keeps communities of different ethnicities, nationalities and sects living within this protected area in a common geographical sense of belonging and destiny. On the other hand, the central role and position of Persian (at times with the influence of Turkish) in this vast geography, historically and culturally, creates a natural glue that can hold different communities such as Persian, Turk, Kurd and Baluch together and bridge the gaps between them.

Within this protected geography, the unity of a common destiny such as occupations and historical experiences creates a collective memory based on endurance and pride and solidifies the shared national identity. This common cultural and political consciousness created by the framework of *Iranianness*, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, as well as Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian components are also important in terms of the formation of a relatively cohesive national narrative. Dynamics such as national sovereignty, resistance to external dominance and regional influence, which are frequently emphasized in the formation of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic, allow for the creation of a new common narrative for almost all Iranians under the roof of this created national identity and *Iranianness*. After the 1979 Revolution, Iran successfully blended this understanding of national pride and geographical common destiny

with revolutionist and anti-imperialist rhetoric and was able to place its foreign policy area within a framework that can be largely agreed upon.

These historical, strategic, sociological and geographical factors have produced a political culture that prioritizes resilience and adaptability. Iranian foreign policy is often described as a combination of assertiveness and pragmatism, evidence of which can be found in nuclear program negotiations, regional alliances, and support for proxy groups abroad. The country's deeply ideologically oriented leaders are skilled at navigating international dynamics to advance their interests through pragmatic policy moves. This adaptability is evident in negotiations with the United States, relations with global powers such as Russia, the EU, and China, and engagements with non-state actors in the Middle East.

Another concept that crystallizes as a concise summary of historical, strategic, sociological and geographical characteristics constituting Iranian political culture and expresses the reflection of political culture in decision-making mechanisms is "Iranian exceptionalism." This concept of exceptionalism, which is used in the literature to explain different historical periods in the cases of American, Chinese, and Lebanese etc.[132] is also used by various Iranian leaders and researchers in the context of the uniqueness of historical and strategic depth reflected in Iran's domestic and foreign policy after the 1979 Revolution.[133] This usage, which is sometimes an extension of belittling other cultures and excessive reference to one's own culture, and is used to explain some unusual situations, presents a positive and legitimizing usage framework in the context of Iranian exceptionalism, rather evoking historical depth and sphere of influence, multiculturalism and uniqueness.[134]

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[132] For American Exceptionalism, see: Walt, Stephen M. "The myth of American exceptionalism." *Foreign Policy* 189 (2011): 72-75; Madsen, Deborah L. (1998), *American Exceptionalism*. Univ. Press of Mississippi. For Chinese Exceptionalism, see: Zhang, Feng (201). "The rise of Chinese exceptionalism in international relations." *European Journal of International Relations* 19.2: 305-328; Callahan, William A. (2012), "Sino-speak: Chinese exceptionalism and the politics of history." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71.1: 33-55. For Lebanese Exceptionalism, see: Moussawi, Ghassan (2018). "Queer exceptionalism and exclusion: Cosmopolitanism and inequalities in 'gay-friendly 'Beirut." *The Sociological Review* 66.1: 174-190.

[133] The five points that Stephen M. Walt, one of the leading figures of the Realist school, described as the myths of American Exceptionalism in Foreign Policy in 2011 essentially have great parallels with the rhetoric of Iranian leaders and policymakers on the Islamic Revolution and Iranian exceptionalism: i) there is something exceptional about American exceptionalism, ii) the United States behaves better than other Nations do, iii) America's success is due to its special genius, iv) the United States is responsible for most of the good in the world, v) God is on our side (Walt, 2011).

[134] For further details on Iranian exceptionalism concept and studies, see: Moshirzadeh, Homeira, and Ali Nazifpour (2020), "Iranian Exceptionalism and Iran-US Relations: From 1979 to 2021." *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 11.32: 333-357; Nafissi M. (2016), Iranian Exceptionalism and Twelver Shi'ism. *Iranian Studies*; 49(5):753-789; Tezcur, Gunes Murat, Taghi Azadarmaki, and Mehri Bahar (2006). "Religious participation among Muslims: Iranian exceptionalism." *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 15.3: 217-232.

Indeed, Javad Zarif, who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs during the term of President Hasan Rouhani (2013-2021) and is known as an important diplomat/politician in Iran and the international community in relations with the West/US, also follows this understanding in a 2014-published article in *Foreign Affairs* (Zarif M. J., 2014). Iranian political scientist Prof. Zibakalam, while describing the concept of Iranian exceptionalism, notes that Iranian leaders, who perceive the current global order and system as completely unjust and Western-dominated, see themselves in a position of waging a crusade with an anti-Western history, and that even Muhammad Reza Shah viewed the West with this perspective, seeing himself as the heir of a vast historical heritage. According to Zibakalam, Iranian exceptionalism, which is emphasized by the attitude of Iranian leaders who see themselves as challengers to the existing world order and who argue that they propose a different/alternative system, has two main pillars: i) the negation of the existing political structures and order in the global system, ii) "the uniqueness and exclusive character" of their own formulas that represent the historical heritage of the unique Iranian civilization (Zibakalam, Iranian "Exceptionalism", 2009).

Another dimension of Iranian exceptionalism is the "arrogance of not bowing down" of the Iranian people, who fought a resistance struggle against the colonial powers that occupied the country, especially during the 20th century. As Sinkaya emphasizes, this exceptionalism and superiority understanding brings with it the illusion of "superiority" of the country and the people themselves in terms of Iran's language, culture, demographic structure, land area, geopolitical position, economic capacity, political regime, etc. For this reason, almost every issue in the region, whether it directly concerns Iran or not, is seen and interpreted by the Iranians as directly Iran-centered. Likewise, as a result of this understanding, the illusion that Iran is superior to other countries and peoples in the region leads to the assumption that Iran is a natural potential country that should be a leader in its region, and even to this turning into open arrogance towards other countries in the region (Sinkaya, İslam Cumhuriyeti'nde Dış Politika: Çelişkiler ve İkilemler, 2022, s. 391-392). As a result of all this, one of the fundamental characteristics of Iranian foreign policy is the search for leadership in the region, which seems to Iranian decision-makers as a natural consequence of so-called Iranian exceptionalism.

In the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been shaped within a framework where sometimes revolutionary rhetoric and harsh messages were prominent, sometimes pragmatism and dialogue were used, and hard power elements and pragmatism were mobilized according to leaders' attitude and regional/international developments. Although many parameters are used to classify the

revolutionary era, I prefer to categorize the basic principles and dynamics to explain Iranian foreign policy based on five parameters reflecting political, military, cultural and economic dimension:

a). Revolutionary ideology and anti-imperialism

The 1979 Iranian Revolution developed an anti-imperialist perspective that completely rejected the military occupation and foreign influences, and in this respect, Islamic Republic stands out as a cornerstone in Iranian history, breaking the two-century cycle of foreign occupation and influence that preceded it. The principle that the leader of the revolution, the charismatic cleric Ayatollah Khomeini, clearly expressed in the early days of the revolution and turned into a slogan was "Neither Eastern, nor Western" and insist on Iran's "independence" from both superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union (Khomeini, 2001, s. 59). However, no matter what Khomeini himself meant by the independence discourse, this discourse almost always prioritized independence from the West and especially the United States. The ideological orientation that Khomeini emphasized in this regard, which is based on not accepting and rejecting anything coming from neither the East nor the West, defended, encouraged and made a clear Islamic orientation mandatory with the words "our foreign policy will be based on national interest as consistent with the values of Islam" (Kamrava, 2014, s. 158).

Undoubtedly, this strong anti-US rhetoric reflected a clear anger towards the increasing US influence in Iran, especially during the Cold War and since the 1960s, and stemmed from the belief that the Shah and all the values he represented were possible thanks to the US support, and that the Shah and his regime were puppets of Western/US imperialism. Indeed, the raid on the US embassy in Tehran a few months after the Revolution and the hostage crisis that continued with Khomeini's positive view and clear encourage symbolized revolutionary Iran's rejection towards the US in the new era (Reda, 2014, s. 126-127).

Islamic Iran's anti-imperialist rhetoric and stance has gone beyond rhetoric and has evolved to include active support for countries and groups that threaten Western interests in the region. For example, Hezbollah, resisting both the US and its close regional ally Israel in Lebanon, was founded under the explicit orders of Khomeini himself (Chehabi, 2006), and Hassan Nasrallah (along with the assistance of prominent Lebanese Shiite and Iranian revolutionaries), as Khomeini's authorized representative, established and organized the pro-*Velayat-e Faqih* political, military and economic organization in Lebanon from the early 1980s. Similarly, Iran,

which supports the armed resistance against Israel in Palestine, initially supported Arafat and the Fatah organization, while it has not hesitated to provide military and economic support to Hamas and Islamic Jihad since their establishment in the 1980s (Ahmadi, 2008).

Likewise, following the death of Khomeini, the Houthi-Zaidi community in Yemen was brought closer to Iran politically and religiously (the establishment and strengthening of the *Ansarullah* organization) (Kerimlu, 2022, s. 425-432), the formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (*al-Hashd al-Shaabi*) in Iraq, and the establishment and strengthening of the Axis of Resistance line, all of which show that this discourse was not limited to Khomeini and continued to increase during the reign of his successor as the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. However, it should also be highlighted that this discourse did not arise from a religious and ideological point alone, but that Iran's influence within the realist paradigm spanned the entire Middle East with this strategy.

Iran's development of its ballistic missile and nuclear program despite all sanction threats and political pressures and its inclusion as a component of its defense doctrine can also be evaluated within the same anti-imperialist discourse (Marandi, 2012, s. 86). As Supreme Leader Khamenei and other high ranking Iranian leaders have repeatedly framed, the scientific achievement in the field of nuclear energy is viewed within the framework of Iran's national sovereignty and pride (Warnaar, 2013, s. 140-143). Khamenei's characterization of the nuclear program as the “right of the Iranian nation” and his accusation of the West trying to prevent Iran from taking its place among the advanced nations is also a product of this understanding (Samii A. W., 2006). Despite the weak reactions that occasionally occur within the country and the heavy impact of sanctions on the economy, Iran's insistence on continuing its nuclear and ballistic missile programs stems from seeing them as essential for its own independence and resistance to Western coercion.

However, it is also clear that Iran's anti-imperialism discourse is not entirely rejectionist, but at times flexes and follows economic-political requirements. For example, the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed after years of negotiations with the US and the Western countries, which Iran describes as imperialist, has shown that the Islamic Republic can sit down and bargain with imperialist powers when its interests require, that it can act realistically in this regard (Mozaffari, 2022, s. 6-7), and that pragmatism can overshadow ideology in strategic processes such as lifting sanctions.

b). Regional leadership, self-reliance and mobilizing Shiite/sectarian networks

A comprehensive study of Iran's foreign policy after the 1979 Revolution shows that the Islamic Republic prioritized positioning itself as a regional hegemon, especially with the confidence of resisting the occupation and not being defeated in the war with Iraq, and mobilized its geopolitical position, resources and Shiite Islamic identity to increase its influence. The basis of this strategy is the network established between Shia-majority or Shia-influenced regions, which some Sunni circles call “Shia crescent” and Iran and its allies define as “Axis of Resistance” (Guzansky & Lindenstrauss, 2013), and which started from Iran and established a land corridor, after the overthrow of Saddam by the US in 2003, extending from Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and Palestine. During this period, which lasted until the fall of the Bashar Assad and the Baath regime in Syria in December 2024, Iran built a sphere of influence in the region by supporting Shia communities and allied governments, where it could counter Sunni-dominated powers such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Iran's strategy during this period was largely based on proxy networks and included alliances with non-state armed actors. For example, Iran used Hezbollah in Lebanon, various Shia formations in the Iraq, and the Assad regime in Syria (since Hafez Assad) by continuing to provide military, financial and ideological support. Similarly, it has been able to keep the Houthi-Zaidi communities in Yemen and Palestinian armed groups on the same line by adding them to this axis. This alliance mainly served two purposes: It extended Iran’s influence throughout the region and allowed it to be deterrent against its rivals in the region (in addition to the US). In this respect, the continuation of the Assad regime in Syria after 2011 uprising ensured that Iran could be effective in the Levant and provide uninterrupted logistical transfers to Hezbollah via the land corridor.

Iran's consolidation of power among Shia communities in the region during this period, and also its influence on Saudi Arabian Shiite community during the Arab Uprisings and on Shiite population in regions such as Bahrain and Yemen that could be considered Riyadh's “backyard”, made the sectarian dimension of this strategic alliance more visible and provocative for Sunni sectarian powers. During this period, Sunni-Shia conflicts and power struggles in almost every part of the Middle East, together with the devastating historical baggage and the hostilities in collective memory, brought Iran's sectarian foreign policy to the forefront (Koç M. A., Tarihi İhtilafların Gölgesinde İran-Suudi Arabistan Rekabeti: Şii-Vahhabi İlişkilerinin Dünü ve Bugünü, 2019). Despite all these tensions, Iran occasionally sought to project an image of Islamic unity, especially during its confrontations with the US

and Israel. However, such outbursts and calls for religious solidarity were undermined by deep-seated sectarian divides, which Iran often contributed to.

c). Pragmatism, adaptability and diplomatic engagement

Although revolutionary ideology is a defining feature of Iranian foreign policy, in practice, during the confrontational regional and international crises, pragmatism has almost always guided its actions. Iranian leaders have shown a willingness to engage in diplomacy and compromise when it serves their own interests, even with open enemies and rivals such as the United States. Although this pragmatism is not a fundamental element of foreign policy, it has been frequently employed in times when ideological rigidity can be counterproductive in complex and volatile geopolitical environments.

A prime example of Iran's ability to use pragmatic diplomacy to its fullest extent is the nuclear deal (JCPOA) signed with the P5+1 countries (the United States, Russia, China, France, Britain, and Germany) in 2015. President Hassan Rouhani, known for his moderate conservative approach, who has always acted together with the pragmatist leader Hashemi Rafsanjani in Iran's political and security strategies and decision-making processes (Randjbar-Daemi, 2017, s. 244-245), found such an agreement necessary to lift the international sanctions imposed on Iran, which were putting serious pressure on the economy, and to improve his country's international standing.

Rouhani, while explaining this agreement to his domestic audience as president, noted that it was a win-win solution for both parties and that while safeguarding Iran's nuclear rights, it also addressed international concerns (Release & Iran, 2015). As previously seen in the processes of ending the war with Iraq in 1988 and normalizing relations with the Saudi Arabia and Gulf Arab monarchies in the 1990s, the JCPOA presented an example of pragmatism in Iran's foreign policy, reflecting its ability to balance ideological commitments with practical considerations.

The pragmatism that Iran has implemented in foreign policy, especially, can be observed in its relations with major global powers such as China and Russia (Katz, Iran and Russia, 2013). Although the anti-imperialist discourse that has been strongly pursued since Ayatollah Khomeini has been largely decisive in relations with the US, it has given way to a soft pragmatism in relations with countries that are defended by various circles as pursuing imperialist policies, such as China and Russia. Iran considers China and Russia as strategic partners in order to balance the US influence regionally and internationally. The 25-year

strategic partnership agreement signed with China in March 2021[135] is a testament to this approach and reflects Iran's efforts to overcome the diplomatic, political and economic isolation imposed by the West by cooperating with major powers in the international arena (Fathabadi & Kamali, 2023).

Similarly, Iran, in order to keep Assad and the Baath regime in Syria alive during the civil war that began in 2011, openly cooperated with another major power, Russia in a pragmatic ground for both sides (Noori & Masoudi, 2021), and did not directly evaluate and harshly criticize Russia's military moves in the Caucasus, Eastern Europe and the Middle East as "imperialist actions" and mainly developed a cautious and strategic pragmatism (Mandelbaum, 2019).

However, pragmatism undoubtedly has its limits. The US's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA nuclear deal and re-impose sanctions during Donald Trump's presidency beginning in late 2016 was a period that tested Iran's willingness to engage in diplomatic engagement. Iran responded to the US's decision to withdraw from the deal with an increasingly confrontational approach, directly or indirectly through its own proxies harming the US military presence in the region on various occasions, such as by attacking oil tankers in the Gulf (Phillips, 2019). Iran's increasingly harsh course of action and attacks reflects the tension between pragmatism and ideological resistance in its foreign policy, which also reflects the divisions between hardliners and diplomatic engagement advocates in Iranian decision-making processes (Warnaar, 2013, s. 30).

Pragmatic approaches in Iranian foreign policy and the existence of numerous cases clearly contradict the revolutionary/anti-imperialist discourse during almost last half century or so have brought about the sanctification of the aim of preserving the existence of the Islamic Republic and the relegation of the revolutionary discourse to the background in cases where the idealist discourse conflicts with realistic interests. These *realpolitik* difficulties and challenges that emerge in the form of deviation from revolutionary values are legitimized under the guise of expediency (*maslahat*) and show that the only and most sublime aim is the existence of the

[135] Iranian Foreign Ministry in a statement expressing the sign of the 25-year strategic cooperation agreement put a special emphasis on bilateral cooperation without mentioning any other parties. However, the negotiations of this agreement conducted under the confrontational circumstances of Trump presidency during the era of January 2017 - January 2021 and reflect the bilateral need of Iranian and Chinese officials' seek to overcome the isolation attempts of the USA towards both countries: "*The document focuses on the capacities and perspectives for bilateral cooperation between the two countries in various areas including economic and cultural fields, among others. We believe this document will further contribute to the continued development and comprehensive partnership of Iran and China, and will bring about prosperity for the two nations.*" (Statement on 'Document of Comprehensive Cooperation between Iran and China', 2021)

Islamic Republic and that all other values can be instrumentalized to the extent that they serve this ultimate goal (Sinkaya, İslam Cumhuriyeti'nde Dış Politika: Çelişkiler ve İkilemler, 2022, s. 398-400).

d). Defensive Realism and military/strategic deterrence

Iran's defense doctrine and foreign policy reflects and is shaped by the sensitive emphasis on deterrence and vulnerability to a significant extent. Since the 1979 Revolution, Iran, surrounded by Sunni-majority states and hostile/rival Arab communities in the region, and engaged in a power struggle with two existential adversaries, the US and Israel, has developed an asymmetric warfare strategy to combat foreign threats and challenges. This sophisticated strategy includes a ballistic missile program, drone technology, cyber capabilities, naval power capacity, as well as the cultivation of proxy networks across the region (Shariati & Nematpour, 2023).[136]

The Quds Force, structured as the external operations unit of the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), plays a central role in this strategy. Under the leadership of General Qassem Soleimani and management/execution of a core high command council that has been fighting together since the Iran-Iraq war, the Quds Force has been significantly expanding Iran’s hard power sphere of influence throughout the Middle East, especially after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The military security and cooperation agreement with Syria in 2006 and Iran’s active intervention in the civil war that began in 2011, the organization and structuring of Hezbollah since the early 1980s and the strengthening of this organization in the region and in Lebanon each passing year after the war with Israel in 2006, the establishment of their own political/military structures similar to Hezbollah under the leadership of Ansarullah by the Houthis in Yemen, the increase in the military capacity of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the establishment of Popular Mobilization Units (PMU - *Hashd al-Shaabi* in Iraq and its transformation into the most effective military structure in the country, were all carried out under the leadership of Soleimani and the Quds Force (Jahanbani, 2020).

Soleimani, who was killed in Iraq in January 2020 along with the Commander of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) Abu Mahdi Al-Mohandes, was known as a master of asymmetric warfare, a quite significant military figure across the Middle East who was able to direct Iran's limited resources to achieve outsized strategic gains. Although his death is a great

[136] For a brief report regarding the naval deterrence of Iran, see; Fariborz Haghshenass (2008), *Iran’s Asymmetric Naval Warfare*, Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

loss for Iranian security doctrine, the IRGC and Quds Force continue to be active and key instruments of Iranian power in the field under the command of Soleimani's close friend and deputy, General Esmail Qaani (Tabatabai, 2020).[137]

Iran's ballistic missile program and, although it has been declared not to have military purposes and that stage has not yet been reached, its nuclear program is another critical component in terms of Iran's deterrence capability.[138] As Ayatollah Khamenei and Iranian leaders have frequently emphasized, missile technology offers an important deterrent mechanism for Iran to defend itself against external aggression (Eslami & Vieira, 2020). Iran, which has faced significant threats and challenges since the revolution, has allocated a separate unit and budget for importing, copying and adapting missile technology since the Iran-Iraq war (Bahgat, 2019, s. 33-35).[139] For a country and nation, that feels surrounded and besieged by countries and structures perceived as enemies from all sides, defense industry investments and missile technology offer a defensible argument to the Iranian leadership from a Defensive Realist perspective.

On the other hand, in terms of Iran's defense doctrine and counter-attacks, the attacks carried out in recent years, especially by the Houthi/Zaidi networks in Yemen, reveal that Iran is capable of carrying out offensive attacks through its own military capacity and proxy groups (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020), even though the Iranian side rejects a clear directional link as in the case of Hezbollah in the 1990s. Attacks on Saudi oil facilities in 2019 and Israeli targets during the Gaza war in 2024 show that Iranian-allied structures in Yemen can move from defensive to offensive (Weissenburger, 2024), and targeting Iran's adversaries, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, is a situation that should be emphasized in terms of regional competition.

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[137] For a detailed biography regarding Esmail Qaani, authored in 2012 and depicting Qaani as General Soleimani's successor, his ties to IRGC leaders and Soleimani, close networks to Ayatollah Kahameni from Mashhad years even before the Revolution, see; Ali Alfoneh (2012*), Esmail Qaani: The Next Revolutionary Guards Quds Force Commander?*, The American Enterprise Institute (available at: https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/esmail-qaani-the-next-revolutionary-guards-quds-force-commander/).

[138] Although Iranian officials claim that the Iranian nuclear program is for peaceful purposes and find the argument that its military use is not allowed because it is religiously forbidden (*haram*) to be very convincing, the international community does not seem to take this argument very seriously. For a fourteen-argument manifesto on why nuclear weapons are haram, based on the statements of Ayatollah Khamenei, see (Shariati & Nematpour, 2023, p. 104).

[139] General Mohsen Rafighdoost, the founder of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the minister responsible for the IRGC between 1982-88 upon the instructions of Ayatollah Khomeini, explains that during the Iran-Iraq war, they purchased missiles and rockets from Eastern Bloc as well as anti-Western countries such as Libya, Syria, China and North Korea in order to respond to the missiles launched by Iraq and causing great damage to cities. However, when they started to have difficulties in obtaining these missiles, they started to copy these missiles and rockets with the efforts of Iranian engineers within the IRGC. They improved these locally produced missiles and rockets in terms of efficiency over time during the war, and that these initiatives were the beginning of the Iranian missile program (Allamiyan, 2012, pp. 227-231)

e) Economic survival and resistance economy

An important and determining dynamic in the balance of Idealism vs pragmatism in Iran's foreign policy is the economic motives and political-economic dimension. The economic policy described by Supreme Leader Khamenei with the notion of "resistance economy" (*eqtesad-e moqavemati*)[140] aims at self-sufficiency and the structural transformation of the country's economy, which is overly dependent on oil exports (Batmanghelidj, 2024). The "resistance economy" discourse, which was put into circulation approximately 30 years after the revolution and when sanctions stemming from the nuclear program began to strain the Iranian economy, showed that the regime's survivability had gained importance and that the economy needed to achieve a sustainable structure in order to achieve its foreign policy goals. However, the heavy embargo and sanction conditions severely restrict Iran's areas of application of these policies.

In Iran, where 60% of budget revenues and 80% of exports depend on oil revenues (Aslan & Ertan, 2022), sanctions targeting especially oil exports and the financial sector have created a crisis similar to the one experienced by the economy during the war. To overcome this deadlock, Iranian authorities have sought to develop economic relations with global powers such as Russia, India and China (Kozhanov, 2022, s. 128-129), which are less affected by US sanctions.

During President Rouhani's first term (2013-2017), economic growth exceeded 13% in 2016 and inflation fell below 10% after many years. However, in the environment created by the US's withdrawal from the JCPOA together with Trump presidency, the economy returned to its previous poor performance after 2017 and all economic indicators deteriorated, and the economy shrank by 7.4% in 2019 (Aslan & Ertan, 2022, s. 376). With the decline in oil revenues, budget deficits began to increase, and the government, which tried to close budget deficits by increasing emissions and applying a fixed exchange rate, caused inflation to intensify (Kozhanov, 2022).

Main influential actors and institutions in Iranian foreign policy-making

[140] The concept of "resistance economy" (*eqtesad-e moqavemati*) is frequently used in the discourse and speeches of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and is a framework that the Leader has repeatedly explained and encouraged in his meetings with both state and government officials and different segments of society. For examples of the relevant sections of Ayatollah Khamenei's numerous speeches on the theme of "resistance economy", which he has included in his speeches since 2010, on the official website of the leadership office, see: Khamenei.ir. (2024). بخش مطبوعات [Press section]. Retrieved [February 24, 2025], from https://farsi.khamenei.ir/newspart-index?tid=1932 (Press Statement, 2025).

It is important to closely examine the actors and institutions that are effective in the foreign policy-making process in Iran in order to understand both the structure of these institutions and their place in the system, as well as the relationships between institutions and their roles in decision-making processes. The roles of these actors and institutions in the formation of foreign policy regarding Turkey and their attitudes during the Syrian Civil War will be discussed in more detail and with examples in the following parts. But under this specific topic, their more technical dimensions within the context of the general foreign policy-making process in Iran will be depicted.

1. The Supreme Leader (Magham-e Mo'azam-e Rahbari)

The highest religious, political, military authority in the Islamic Republic of Iran is the Supreme Leader, and its position and areas of authority are specified in the *Velayat-e Faqih* system formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini and described in the first constitution adopted after the Revolution. The Leadership (*rahbari*), which is not only a constitutional but also a religious and political institution, is a unique position that combines religious tradition and a modern political phenomenon within itself and has no equivalent in other systems. The Leadership authority, which has extremely broad powers, is theoretically considered as the leader of the revolution and the leader of the Islamic Ummah both within Iran and abroad, and its areas of authority are formulated accordingly in the constitution.

Its powers, which are defined quite broadly in the Iranian constitution, are listed in the 8th chapter of the constitution,[141] apart from the numerous references made to it, in articles 107-112 (Rahnema, 2014, s. 95-96). His position and authority is defined in the relevant parts and summarized in Article 110 as follows: To determine the general policy (and therefore domestic and foreign policy) of the Islamic Republic; to ensure that the basic constitutional organs of the country such as the legislative, executive and judicial bodies operate under its monitoring and supervision and to resolve any disagreements that may arise between these organs; to decide on elections and referendums; to command the armed forces (with all their formations); to make decisions on war and peace and, when necessary, to make decisions on military mobilization; to approve the president elected by popular vote, to finally confirm the candidates who will

[141] Although there is only one Persian text of the Iranian constitution, there are many translations in English and Turkish. In this thesis and especially while authoring this section, I will mainly refer to the English translation of the Iranian constitution from an Iranian official version of an institution, the Constitutional Council (*Shura-ye Negahban*) which defines itself as "one of the most important and powerful bodies within the Islamic Republic of Iran's fabric of governance" on its official website (About Us: The Constitutional Council, 2025), and is one of the most influential institutions and in practice. For the full text of the Iranian constitution, see: (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2021).

compete in the elections, to dismiss the elected president when necessary; to appoint and dismiss the heads and senior officials of the high-level boards and bodies within the system (including the judiciary, the constitutional guardian council, the broadcasting body, the armed forces and the Revolutionary Guards, and the police forces) (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran , 2021).

Therefore, within Iran's unique political/religious system, elections are held by popular vote and some officials (the president, the expediency council, the parliament, etc.) are elected by population (*mellat*). However, just as these elections' results are "confirmed" by the Supreme Leader, the candidates who can compete in the election are also directly or indirectly approved by the Leadership and can be removed from office.[142] The *Velayat-e Faqih* system grants The Supreme Leader powers that cannot be encountered in any democracy or republic, and in this respect, it puts the Leader in the most critical position in determining all kinds of policies. These powers, designed for Ayatollah Khomeini (Ehteshami, After Khomeini: the Iranian second republic, 1995, s. 25) during his lifetime and used by Khomeini between 1979-89 until his death, have been used by his former disciple since the 1960s and president from 1981-89, Ali Khamenei, since 1989 till today.

The process of foreign policy-making is pursued by the constitutional institutions of the government, parliament and national security council, but the clear direction and instructions of the Leader are taken both before and during decisions are made.[143] The councils around the Leader, which include close foreign policy advisors and former senior officials, also have a practical effect on the shaping of the Leader's decisions.[144] For example, during the leadership

[142] Ali Rahnema briefly explains the religiously legitimization of this superior authority with the "need for guidance" concept as follows: "People in general are considered by Khomeini to need guidance in the same way that a minor needs to follow the instructions of the legal authority that has custody over him or her. Khomeini thus argues that leadership and rule belong to the *fuqaha* or legal experts of Islamic law, who are considered just (*'adl*)." (Rahnema, 2014, p. 93).

[143] There are numerous examples of Ayatollah Khomeini, especially during his era as the Supreme Leader, outlining policy in decision-making processes and leaving specific and concrete decisions to be made to senior officials and advisors whom he knew to be loyal to him. For examples of such decision-making processes (For example, the crises leading to Bani-Sadr's dismissal from the presidency, measures to be taken against embargoes requiring the purchase of arms from abroad, Khomeini's approach during the process of ending the war with Iraq, etc.), see the memoirs of Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was Speaker of the Parliament from 1980 to 1989 and a close advisor to Khomeini who appointed him as acting Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces in 1988, and General Mohsen Rafiqdoost, who was a member of the military staff that led the war with Iraq from 1982 to 1988 as the minister responsible for the IRGC. (Rafsanjani, 2006, pp. 41, 98, 132-133), (Allamiyan, 2012, pp. 279-280).

[144] A semi-official advisory board (later formalized) was also created to closely inform the Leader on foreign policy issues and to report directly to the Leader, working as a kind of parallel council. The *shura*, established in 2006 under the name of the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, is chaired by Kamal Harrazi, the former foreign minister of the period of reformist President Muhammed Khatami (1997-2005). Harrazi, who is related to the Leader by marriage, is one of the few influential figures within the Office of the Leader who is not strictly conservative and is close to the moderate/reformist wing.

of Ayatollah Khomeini, prominent figures such as President Khamenei, leader's close aid Hashemi Rafsanjani, Revolutionary Guards commanders (such as Mohsin Rafiqdoost, Mohsin Rezai), and Prime Minister Mousavi were influential in the shaping of Khomeini's foreign policy decisions on various issues. During the leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei, in addition to presidents such as Rafsanjani, Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani, former foreign ministers and close foreign policy advisors such as Ali Akbar Velayati, Kamal Harrazi, (Azizi, 2024, s. 2) and senior Revolutionary Guards commanders such as Qasem Soleimani stand out as influential figures in the decision-making processes.

2. Presidency (Riyasat-e Jumhuri)

In Iran, which was ruled by a monarchy and shahs until 1979, the presidency was established with the 1979 Constitution. The prime minister's office existed before the revolution, but was removed from the constitution in 1989 during the process of Khamenei's accession to the Supreme Leadership, and its powers were distributed between the president and the first vice-president.[145] Although it can be said that the presidency's powers have increased somewhat with this transfer of power compared to before 1989, in practice this use of power is realized depending on the relations with the leader.

After The Supreme Leader, the highest official authority in the country is the presidency. The duties and powers of the president and the executive branch are determined in the 9th chapter of the constitution and between articles 113-142. The Constitution defines the President in Article 113 as follows: "After the Leader, the President is the highest-ranking official in the country and has the responsibility of implementing the Constitution and acting as the head of the Executive Branch, except in matters directly related to the Leadership" (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran , 2021).

According to this definition, the President presides over the executive in matters not directly within the jurisdiction of the Supreme Leader and carries out the duties specified in the Constitution. Presidents who were elected to this office by popular vote through a four-year election period, Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-97), Muhammad Khatami (1997-2005), Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) and Hasan Rouhani (2013-2021) displayed an active and prominent profile in domestic and foreign policy during their terms.

[145] Although the first vice-president is considered equal to foreign prime ministers in protocol arrangements with foreign delegations, this issue is still politically controversial.

However, the fact that the Leader has quiet extensive authority in the Iranian political system and his unquestionable position, even if elected, puts the president and the government in a weaker position, and this power relationship is reflected in the decision-making processes. As Brzezinsky truly highlights, in Iran, presidents are constitutionally also on a strong public authority, but their capacity to exercise this power depends on their informal relations with other authorities, especially the Leader. Therefore, when making decisions on important domestic and foreign policy issues, the president and the government must be careful to reach a consensus in the National Security Council and to obtain the Leader's direct or indirect approval (Brzezinski, Maloney, & Gates, 2004, s. 74-75). Otherwise, political power-sharing crises such as the Constitutional Council's rejection of Mohammad Hatami's bill in 2002 to increase the powers of the presidency (Arjomand, 2009, s. 265-266), or political crises between institutions and leaders such as those experienced during Ahmadinejad's second term as president (Warnaar, 2013, s. 46-47), would appear, and the Leader – the President incompatibility can create problems in decision-making and execution processes.

3. Supreme National Security Council (SNSC – Shura-ye Ali-ye Amniyat-e Melli)

The most critical constitutional institution in terms of foreign policy and security issues within the Iranian system based on political structures and councils, consultation and joint decision-making mechanisms is the Supreme National Security Council (Kazemzadeh M. , 2017). The council, whose duties and formation are described in Article 176 of the Constitution, is authorized to determine the country's defense and national strategies within the general framework established by the Leader; to coordinate political, intelligence, social, cultural and economic activities to ensure the implementation of these strategies and to use all kinds of resources to combat internal and external threats that the country may face (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran , 2021).

The Council legally meets under the chair of the president and makes its decisions on this platform without the Leader. However, as noted in the previous section where the president's authority and position with the Leader were explained, the clear instructions of the Leader are primarily decisive before and after these decisions are made (Lim, 2015, s. 156). The council consists of the heads of the legislative, executive and judicial branches, as well as the chief of general staff of the armed forces, the head of the planning and budget affairs institution, two representatives appointed by the Leader, the commanders of the armed forces and the Revolutionary Guard Corps, as well as the ministers of interior, foreign affairs and intelligence

(Kamrava & Dorzadeh, Back to the Future in Iran: Political and Policy Implications of the 2021 Presidential Elections, 2023).

Although the president chairs the council, one of the Leader's representatives also serves as the general secretary of the council, and in practice, the council primarily shapes decisions under the guidance of this influential secretary. The council's decisions must be approved by the Leader and then enter into force (Bazoobandi, Heibach, & Richter, 2024). Although all internal and external security-related issues of Iran fall within the scope of this council's authority, in recent years, all the thorny issues keeping Iran at the top of the international agenda, such as international negotiations on the nuclear program, security and foreign policy issues related to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, relations with proxy groups across the Middle East, relations with the United States and Israel, are under the control of the SNSC, and this institution is primarily effective in the field of foreign policy-making.

The SNSC council includes both clerics, lay politicians and military commanders, which in fact reflects the Islamic Republic's view of religion-state-security relations. The Lebanese Hezbollah, founded under Khomeini's directive in the early 1980s, had a similar cleric-lay politician-commander structure and *shura*, and Nasrallah, who served as the organization's secretary-general for decades, was a cleric of the rank of Hojjat al-Islam. The influential general secretary of the Iranian SNSC was also another Hojjat al-Islam and politician, Hassan Rouhani from 1989 to 2005. Ali Larijani, an influential conservative politician and former presidential candidate, served as SNSC secretary during 2005-07, and Saeed Jalili served as SNSC secretary during the tense nuclear negotiations of Ahmadinejad. Admiral Ali Shamkhani, known for his moderate identity and of ethnic Arab origin, became the SNSC secretary general when Rouhani became president and served in this position for ten years from 2013 to 2023 (Moniquet, 2019, s. 10), during which the JCPOA agreement signed in the nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 countries was negotiated during his term as secretary general and accepted within Iran. In May 2023, Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian, of IRGC origin, became the secretary of the council.

The international negotiations regarding the Iranian nuclear program file, which was normally handled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was taken over by the SNSC and monitored by this council as of 2003, when it came to the agenda of the international community and became an existential security issue for Iran. On the other hand, just before Rouhani, who is known as “diplomat-sheikh” in Iran and previously served as the general secretary of the SNSC for sixteen years, was elected president in 2013, the nuclear negotiations file was taken

from the SNSC and started to be monitored by a technical team under the leadership of Javad Zarif as the minister within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Sinkaya, İslam Cumhuriyeti'nde Dış Politika: Çelişkiler ve İkilemler, 2022, s. 395). Similar to nuclear file's process, as Foreign Minister Zarif stated in 2017, "I have limited authorities in Syria" (al-Salmi, 2017),[146] since the developments in Syria and the armed rebellion process were in a quiet significant dossier for Iran, this issue began to be handled as a sensitive security issue within the SNSC and at the highest level, starting in 2011.[147]

4. Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majlis-e Shura-ye Islami)

The parliament (*majlis*), which has played an influential role in Iranian politics from time to time since the constitutional period of the late Kajar era in 1905-11, became a key institution in the new system after the 1979 Revolution. The parliament, which has been referred with great perceptions because it confirms the "republican" dimension of the *Velayat-e Faqih* system (Rahnema, 2014, s. 96), is an effective legislative body in Iran, especially in domestic politics. The parliament is also an important institution within the system where the government is responsible to the parliament, thanks to the determination of the cabinets and with the mechanisms of confidence vote and removal from office.

The parliament, whose duties and powers are regulated by articles 62-99 in the 6th chapter of the constitution titled Legislative Branch, is involved in the making and execution of foreign policy in several ways. According to articles 77 and 125 of the constitution, the agreements, protocols and decrees signed by the government with international organizations and foreign governments must be approved by the parliament (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran , 2021). The fact that the president and ministers are accountable to the parliament both oversees the government's foreign policy and places the parliament in a position of monitoring the

[146] Javad Zarif, one of the most internationally recognized figures among Iran's foreign ministers after the revolution, who continuously served as foreign minister in Rouhani's government for eight years, resigned from his post after he was not allowed into the closed-door meeting Bashar al-Assad had with Khamenei and Rouhani in February 2019, during a critical period of the Syrian civil war. Zarif, who resigned via social media in a manner uncommon in Iranian political culture, was not accepted by President Rouhani (Sinkaya, İslam Cumhuriyeti'nde Dış Politika: Çelişkiler ve İkilemler, 2022, p. 396), and Assad tried to please him by inviting to Damascus. After this decision to resign, Zarif returned to his post, but when it became clear that he would not be appointed as foreign minister during Masoud Pezeshkian's presidency in 2024 due to the reactions, his appointment as vice president for strategic affairs was on the agenda. This time, Zarif wanted to withdraw due to the threat of a veto of the cabinet from the Conservative-dominated Parliament, and this problem was overcome when President Pezeshkian met with the Supreme Leader Khamenei. Zarif's term in office and his subsequent fate are a striking example in the context of the differences of opinion among the political elites in Iran and the Hardline Conservative vs. Moderate conflict (Tabatabai, Behind the 'Surprise' Resignation of Iran's Foreign Minister, 2019).

[147] For a compilation and assessment of the various problems Javad Zarif, who has been widely criticized by Iran's conservative political elite, has had with the IRGC leadership and influential figures within the system which also emerges as an example of the intra-elites conflict in Iranian security apparatus, see; (Boroujerdi, 2019).

government regarding the cases of specific foreign policy developments, and places the parliament in an important position regarding the implementation of foreign policy.

The National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, one of the specialized committees within the parliament, closely monitors and oversees Iran's foreign policy, and works closely with both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the SNSC. In cases where the parliament speaker and the relevant foreign policy committee chair are influential figures within the system, the parliament's participation in the foreign policy-making process can be more effective. However, the parliament's role in the policy-making process has several limitations, the most important of which is the obligation of the Constitutional Council to review all decisions and laws passed by the parliament.

The Iranian Parliament consists of 290 members (there are five quotas for Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews and other non-Muslim minorities) and is elected by popular vote for a four-year term. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani served as the most influential post-revolutionary parliament speaker from 1980 to 1989, followed by Mehdi Karroubi, who served as speaker for two separate terms (1989–1992 and 2000–2004), while Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri (1992–2000), Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel (2004–2008), and Ali Larijani (2008–2020) were other politicians served as speakers of the parliament as powerful figures in Iranian domestic politics and the system. Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, who has occasionally run for presidential elections, has been the speaker of the parliament since 2020. The Iranian parliament has been under the control of the conservative wing since the 2004 elections during the second term of Reformist President Muhammad Khatami even during the moderate or reformist presidential periods (Ghandeharion & Yazdanjoo, 2017).

5. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Quds Force (Sepāh-e Pāsdārān-e Enqelāb-e Eslāmī and Niru-ye Qods)

The Iranian political and foreign policy agenda began to take shape in a rapidly securitized environment and on a conflictual level with the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88. After the revolution and consequential internal conflicts, revolutionary groups, fearing a military coup from the army, took action both to break the army's power and prevent it from carrying out a coup (Golkar, 2019) (the legacy of the coup against nationalist leader Mossadegh government in 1953 was still fresh in Iranian collective memory), and to establish an elite military force that was completely loyal to Leader Ayatollah Khomeini (Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, 2024).

The IRGC was established with this logical arguments and was organized as a second (or rather parallel) army during the war with Iraq and actively participated in the conflicts, even more actively than the regular Iranian army (*Artash*) in particular fronts against Iraqi forces, despite heavy losses, discoordination and command conflicts with the regular army (Takeyh, 2011, s. 90-91). Over time, the Basij institution was established and its paramilitary side was strengthened (Zahedi, 2000, s. 162-163), and the IRGC played an important role in all kinds of mobilization of the people during the war under religious and nationalist discourse of Ayatollah Khomeini. In the Preamble chapter of the Iranian Constitution, under the "Creedal Armed Forces" section, the founding philosophy of the IRGC is theorized as follows, with reference to the verses of the Qur'an (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran , 2021):

"*The main consideration in establishing and equipping the country's defense forces is that faith and creed must be the basis and criteria. Therefore, the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) shall be organized in accordance with the above-mentioned goal, and they shall be responsible not only for securing and protecting the country's borders, but also for fulfilling the ideological mission of Jihad in the path of God and fighting to expand the sovereignty of God's law in the world (in accordance with the verse of the Holy Quran: "Mobilize against them whatever you can of power and war-horses, awing thereby the enemy of Allah and your enemy and others after them" [8:60])"*

The IRGC today reports directly to The Supreme Leader Khamenei and its political, military and economic influence has also expanded immensely. Since the Ahmadinejad era, IRGC veteran generals and officers, whose loyalty to the regime and the Leader is beyond doubt, have increasingly taken on roles in the management of strategic institutions and companies in the country (Axworthy, 2008, s. 301), and have been assigned to the cabinet, parliament and administration of the provinces. The IRGC, which manages billions of dollars of funds and directly controls the country's strategic economic and energy activities (Rizvi, 2012) (Forozan & Shahi, 2017), also manages illegal commercial and financial networks according to some reports published by Western political institutions and media outlets (Levitt, 2023). Due to these activities carried out to evade the influence of the Western sanctions related to the nuclear program, IRGC senior commanders and IRGC veteran bureaucrats are frequently included in the US and Western sanctions lists (Pay & Omond, 2023). The IRGC, which is organized as a regular army and has ground, navy, aerospace forces and paramilitary wings of hundreds of

thousands of people such as the *Basij*, has currently become the most important political, military and economic power center in Iran (Esraghi & Mahdavi, 2023, s. 216-220).

In addition to its numerous domestic and foreign military missions, Iran's ballistic missile program and nuclear enrichment program are also completely monitored by the IRGC and its affiliated institutions. Similarly, Iran's entire sensitive and vital military activities abroad, including fighting armed opposition groups on the ground during the Syrian Civil War of 2011-2024, supporting and organizing Hezbollah in Lebanon and fighting against Israel, training and logistical assistance to armed Palestinian groups in Gaza and the West Bank, organizing armed Shiite groups in Iraq and sending them to the war fronts in Iraq and Syria under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU - *Hashd al-Shaabi*), providing military training to armed units recruited from Shia communities in Afghanistan and Pakistan and sending them to the fronts in Syria and Iraq, establishing Ansarullah in Yemen and providing military and ideological indoctrination, and Iran's almost all military and intelligence activities in the field across the Middle East are largely carried out by the IRGC (Jahanbani, Reviewing Iran's Proxies by Region: A Look Toward the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, 2020).

Within the IRGC, Quds Force, established under the leadership of the charismatic General Qasem Soleimani, who was assassinated by the US forces in Iraq in January 2020, plays an active role in the military and intelligence fields as an external operations unit that coordinates the activities of the IRGC in the Middle East.[148] In many cases, the Quds Force even carries out strategic activities in the diplomatic field that are so effective and mostly overshadowing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ((Divsallar, 2023, s. 239-240). Active with proxy networks, asymmetric warfare and direct military operations, Quds Force had ensured that Iran had an effective military power in the entire region, in particular following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 with its sophisticated operation (Scott, 2025, s. 58-81).

The IRGC's late reformist period (2003–2005) under Khatami's presidency began to enter the political sphere strongly, especially after the controversial elections in 2009 that saw Ahmadinejad elected to a second term as president, effectively transformed the Islamic republic into a military-theocratic structure (Eshraghi & Mahdavi, 2023, s. 200-201). As Rahimi points

[148] David Petraeus, the commander of the US forces in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, claimed that Soleimani, the former commander of the Quds Force, sent him a message in early 2008 in which he said "I, Soleimani, control Iran's policies with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan." An interesting point in the message is that Soleimani stated that Iran's ambassador in Baghdad at the time was also a Quds Force member and that the next one will be a Quds Force member as well. (Chulov, Qassem Suleimani: the Iranian general 'secretly running' Iraq, 2011). This message both emphasizes the place of Soleimani and Quds Force in Iran's policy implementation on the ground and points to the close relationship between diplomacy and foreign operations

out, this new military-religious-political order can in fact be attributed to Khomeini's militarism since the years of the war with Iraq. The concept of a powerful state, which Khomeini first emphasized in his book *Kashf-e Asrar*, facilitated the IRGC's access to vast political, military and economic resources over time, and through the legacy of the founding leader, it legitimized access to this power (Rahimi, 2014, s. 301).

Within the Iranian political elite (at times reflected in the criticisms of moderate politicians such as Javad Zarif), the IRGC is quite effective and active both in domestic politics thanks to its power in the parliament (*Majlis*), where a former IRGC commander Muhammad Bagher Qalibaf is the speaker, and in the process of making foreign policy thanks to its military and political power and its closeness to the Leader. Under these conditions, its powerful existence in the field and undoubted influence within the system, the IRGC is influential within the SNSC, where foreign policy and security decisions are made (Lim, 2015), and is also influential over the Supreme Leader with the former IRGC commander and military advisors around him as close aids, and frequently engages in power struggles with institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

6. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Vezarat-e Omur-e Kharije)

The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a critical institution that fulfils the government's foreign policy executive responsibilities, as indicated in Articles 125 and 128 of the Constitution and Chapter 10, titled "Foreign Policy" (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran , 2021). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is involved in the foreign policy-making process through the reports it prepares on specific issues, technical negotiations it conducts, and briefings it provides to state institutions, but it is in a relatively weaker and more limited position compared to more powerful institutions.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is authorized and organized accordingly for technical processes such as the credentials presentation of foreign ambassadors following the arrival to the country, the determination and appointment of Iranian ambassadors to be served abroad, the conduct of consular procedures for citizens and relations with international organizations, the signing of agreements and memorandums with foreign countries, and technical issues related to execution that "do not directly concern security and sensitive state issues".

According to the Law regarding the Establishment and Duties of Iran's Foreign Ministry, the ministry is officially authorized to determine and implement Iran's foreign policy and national interests. Within the case of some major international developments, the ministry does

not make decisions on its own and refers the issue to the Cabinet of Ministers and the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), prepares background notes and carries out preparations for decisions to be taken. Vital decisions are made by these two important bodies, but in most major security and foreign policy issues, the SNSC is more authoritative and prominent than the cabinet. Technical reports from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that come to the cabinet are forwarded to the relevant ministry by the President for their views and necessary actions, according to the area of interest (economic, cultural, political, social etc.). However security-related issues are sent directly to the SNSC Secretariat and technical preparations are carried out for discussion on the council's agenda. A topic discussed and decided in the SNSC is presented to the Supreme Leader for final approval through the President, who also chairs the council. Decisions deemed appropriate by the Leader are sent to the relevant military or intelligence institutions to be carried out and operationalize, while decisions on other technical and political/diplomatic issues are forwarded to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Maleki, 2002).

Since Iran has occupied the high priority of the global agenda with numerous regional and international crises since the 1979 Revolution, Iran's foreign policy and relations with other countries have always been in an important agenda item inside Iranian political system. However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is organized at a relatively more protocol level and within an institutional structure, was able to find a place for itself in a more technical and sterile area within Iran's unique councils, *shura*s and parallel decision-making mechanisms. For this reason, the Ministry has been able to show itself during the periods of powerful foreign ministers such as Ali Akbar Valayati (1981-1997), Javad Zarif (2013-2021), and Hossein Amir-Abdollahian (2021-2024) thanks to their informal network of relations within the system. On the other hand, even during these periods, the personal positions and networks of the ministers rather than the institutional structure of the ministry were decisive.[149]

7. Other institutions, networks, actors and influential circles

Although the Supreme Leadership is quiet powerful and monopolizes power within the *Velayat-e Faqih* system and Iran's unique theo-political structure, this monopoly does not mean that all domestic and foreign policies are determined by this authority. Institutions such as the Presidency, the Cabinet of Ministers, the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Quds Force, the Parliament and its relevant specialized committees, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

[149] For a gripping and though-provoking article on the surprising and problematic end-of-office fates of those officials appointed as foreign ministers since the beginning of the Revolution, such as exile, execution, dismissal, compulsion and isolation, see: (Davar, 2019).

come together around a central and strategic council such as the SNSC to make these decisions, and ultimately, with the approval of the Leader, these decisions turn into policy. However, in addition to the institutions and authorities mentioned in the formation of the Leader's final decision, information and suggestions received from some informal networks (family, circle of friends, school, madrasah, factional relations, etc.) also play a role in the formation of the details of the decision (Lim, 2015, s. 151-152).

In addition, in this system centralized around the Leader, the leaders, politicians and networks influential on the decisions of Ayatollah Khomeini and Khamenei naturally change over time and as the ties of those in power with the Leader change, their influence on the decisions fluctuates. For example, Khomeini's relations with Bani Sadr as President and Bazargan as Prime Minister ended after these people lost their offices, marginalized or even went into exile abroad. Similarly, names such as Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad, who were influential on Khamenei for a period, lost their influence on the Leader after their presidential tenure finished and they continuously started to experience problems with the newcomers around the Leader's inner circle. In this respect, there is a dynamic decision-making mechanism and official / unofficial networks that need to be examined case-by-case.[150]

Apart from these state bodies, various other official institutions, networks and structures can also be influential in some particular foreign policy files. At this point, for example, the Expediency Council (*Majma-ye Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam*), established in 1988 upon Khomeini's instruction to resolve the conflict of powers between the Parliament (*Majlis*) and the Constitutional Council (Brzezinski, Maloney, & Gates, 2004, s. 76), stands out as an effective structure within the political system and is a council in which experienced former politicians, presidents, parliament speakers and ministers predominate. The Strategic Research Center (*Markaz-e Tahqheghat-e Estratejik*), which operates within the Expediency Council, is one of the most influential think tanks in the country (Rouhani was the head of this center for a long time before becoming president). The 2025 National Perspective Document, prepared by this institution in 2005 upon the order of The Supreme Leader, revealed Iran's general political goals and perspectives on politics, economy and foreign policy (Sajjadpour & Nourian, 2011).

[150] Mohammad Kalantari analyzes the Shiite unofficial networks across the Middle East and offers a perspective by mapping the interconnected world of the Shiite clergy using quantitative network analysis. For details of this perspective and an example mapping the networks around Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran and the region, see Mohammad R. Kalantari (2024), Mapping the network of Shiʿi clerical relations in the Middle East: an analytical approach. *Religion, State and Society* Vol. 52, No. 1, 43–64.

In addition, although more backward, some official and semi-official institutions and organizations can also come to the fore in various files related to foreign countries. These organizations are particularly powerful among the clerics and their management is mostly subject to high-level clerical administration and guidance. Such structures, which operate in line with Iran's geopolitical interests, have been able to establish both stability and a strong bureaucratic structure thanks to the financial and political support provided by these influential clerics who can reach the Leader through informal networks (Divsallar, 2023, s. 226).

In this context, for example, the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (*Sazman-e Farhang va Ertebatat-e Eslami*) and the Bureau of Islamic Advertisement (*Daftar-e Tablighat-e Eslami*) operate under the supervision of The Leader, and carry out various cultural and Islamic propaganda activities by opening cultural centers abroad called Iran Culture House (Sinkaya, İslam Cumhuriyeti'nde Dış Politika: Çelişkiler ve İkilemler, 2022, s. 397). The World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools (*Majma-ye Jahani-ye Taghrib-e Mazaheb*) works to establish and develop relations with other Islamic schools and non-Shia communities, and reaches out to other Sunni communities that are close to the Islamic Republic through the unity (*vahdat*) conferences organizing annually. Al-Mustafa International University (*Jame-atol Mostafa*) specializes in various fields of religious education and social sciences, with branches it has opened abroad, and carries out cultural activities by accepting students abroad to Iran (Dai, 2018).

In addition, various foundations (*bonyad*) and quasi-private entities run by influential figures who are close to and have access to the Leader (Khalaji, The Iranian Clergy's Silence, 2010), also operate within the interests of the Islamic Republic in certain specific foreign policy files and overseas activities. The most prominent religious foundations among these are the Executive Headquarters of Imam's Directive (*Setad-e Ejrayi-ye Farman-e Emam*), the Imam Reza Foundation (*Astan-e Qods-e Razavi*), the IRGC Cooperative Foundation and the Foundation for the Dispossessed (*Bonyad-e Mostaz'afin*) (Divsallar, 2023, s. 231).

5.3. Sectarian Tendencies in post-Revolutionary Iranian Political Sphere

There are undoubtedly various root causes creating the catastrophic developments, wars, destructions, rebirths and upheavals of the Middle East, particularly during the last two

centuries. Obviously, it is not possible for culture and values related to culture to explain everything that is happening in the region among these parameters, but it may be the most important factor and driving motivation (Wiarda, 2013, s. 73). Iran is one of the countries where cultural and religious values have the greatest impact on society and politics.

In the 1970s, during the exile days in Najaf and Paris, Ayatollah Khomeini, especially after theorizing and explaining the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*, was able to transform the cultural factors that had dominated Iranian state and society for centuries, the transformative power of religion and the protest dynamics of Shiism into a successful revolution. However, the 1979 Revolution was undoubtedly not only an "Islamic" revolution and included large segments of society with different ideological and political background.

Although the revolution later rapidly Islamized, Khomeini's greatest achievement in the lead-up to the revolution in 1978 was his ability to formulate a religious, nationalist, and philosophical rationale against the increasingly authoritarian Shah's regime. Khomeini's ability and charismatic leadership were able to unite under his guidance the Communists, left/socialists, nationalists, liberals, anarchists, Islamists of various factions, students, workers, and other broad segments of society (Patterson, 2011, s. 36), as an old leader who had gone into exile and "paid the price" for his harsh criticism and fight against dictatorship.

It is undoubtedly not possible to analyze the domestic and foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran only through cultural values, religion and Shiism, and this would be insufficient to explain the entire system and politics. However, in this dissertation, I argue that within the framework of Realist international relations, religious discourse and sectarianism has dominated and closely affected political decisions and the policy-making process, which may sometimes seem irrational from the perspective of the Realist paradigm. In this section, I will examine how the framework of Shiism and sectarianism was reflected in and shaped the domestic and foreign policy in the discourses and actions of the Islamic Republic leaders, focusing on Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei as the Supreme Leaders, in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution and until the Arab Uprisings and the Syrian Civil War, through various examples.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution was gradually Islamized day-by-day after February 1, 1979, when Ayatollah Khomeini returned to his country from exile in Paris, and this Islamization largely consolidated the popular support for the revolution and towards the leadership during the mass mobilization process beginning with the dawn of the war against Saddam Hussein's

Iraq, thus enabling the revolution to take root. The fact that Islamic discourse and Shiism came to the forefront during this period, and that the leaders of the Revolution completely excluded other political/cultural discourses and the dominant rhetoric before the 1979 Revolution and monopolized the field of discourse is also of great importance. In this respect, the excessive emphasis on Persian nationalism and Iran's pre-Islamic history, which was frequently mobilised during the Pahlavid Shahs but discharged by the revolutionary leaders, made Islamization more visible in terms of image and discourse (Elhan, 2022, s. 508).

The revolution was not only a political upheaval, but also a religious reawakening, and emphasized the centrality of Shiism as an integrative, vital and comprehensive component in Iran's identity. In this sense, first of all, Ayatollah Khomeini, as an jurisprudence (*ijtihad*) authority that has been accepted as *marja-e taqlid* ('source of emulation for the faithful') in the Shiite world for decades, conceptualized and explained *Velayat-e Faqih* since the early 1970s, which made a theo-political revolution within the Shiite *Usuli* school of jurisprudence,[151] and for this reason, he was harshly criticized by the more senior and well-known *marja*s (*taqlid* authorities) than Khomeini (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2014, s. 225-226); (Azimi, 2014).

Therefore, within the concepts of Shiism, *Velayat-e Faqih* created a political form that envisaging the Shiite clerics at the center of the system and handing over the guardianship of the society to a cleric (*Vali-ye Faqih*) who represented the political and religious tradition of the Shiite Imams in the form of an absolute authority.[152] Hence, "The Supreme Leader, under Velayat-e Faqih, does not represent himself, but rather God and so anyone who contradicts the Supreme Leader is in fact contradicting the Imams, the Prophet and God Himself" (al-Rasheed, 2022, s. 76). In this respect, it is quite clear that this system granting an unquestionable authority to the Shiite clergy in a way that does not exist within the Sunni tradition or any other

[151] The word *Ahbariyya* is a reference to the plural form of the word news, *Ahbar*, and it means to rely on narrations and narrations in religious matters. According to the Shiite Imami thought, Ahbariyya is the name given to those within the Shiite Imamiyya who take the *Ahbar* of the Imams as basis in religious matters and oppose reason and ijtihad, or who rely on other sources as long as they are confirmed by the *Ahbar* of the Imams. The *Usuli* thought, which is the opposite of the Ahbari thought, is the name given to the rational thought system that acts in accordance with the needs of time and conditions and is formed by taking reason as basis in jurisprudence and theology and making use of the method of deduction (Cohen R. A., 2013, pp. 22-24). The *Usuli*s resorted to *ijtihad* over time, and the revolutionary thought of Ayatollah Khomeini and his *Velayat-e Faqih* concept emerged from the *Usuli* school rather than the more static tradition of the *Ahbariyya* (Sabet, 2014, p. 73).

[152] In Ayatollah Khomeini's own words, the approach to the guardianship connection between the society and the cleric, the heir of the Imams, is summarized in the following two statements, which also provide insight into the kind of "republic" in which the notion of election-popular vote and the system of *Velayat-e Faqih* can coexist: "*There is no difference between the guardianship of a nation and the guardianship of the immature... [The guardianship of the people is] just as the shepherd leads his sheep, just as the shepherd wants this sheep to graze in a good place*." (Mahdavi M. , The Velayat-e Faqih: Basis, Power and Longevity, 2023, p. 89)

mainstream Islamic school (Sabet, 2014, s. 74-75), and the political structure it envisages, is a clear "Shiite revival" based on *Usuli ijtihad* ground.

The *Velayat-e Faqih* system is a unique formulation in which the Supreme Leader (*Vali-ye Faqih*) is at the center and the authority he exercises as a representative of the Shiite Imams encompasses the state and society in all aspects, political, military, economic, etc. In the case of Iran, following the 1979 Revolution, Khomeini's leadership was pivotal both in determining the identity of the revolution and in the formation of the state's / government's official tendency and ideology. Khomeini's personal charisma and indisputable theological authority enabled him to consolidate all power and establish a unique political system that fused religion with statecraft.

The inclusion of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist (*Velayat-e Faqih*) concept in the constitution at the end of 1979, granting the Supreme Leader unparalleled authority over all organs of government and administration (Rahnema, 2014, s. 95-96). This structure allowed Ayatollah Khomeini and the revolutionary clerics he represented as a powerful class, to consolidate power around the Leader, and since the Leader was also a cleric of the highest rank (*marjaiyyat*), it elevated the *Vali-ye Faqih* to a unique religious/political position within Shiite Islam. This Islamization of the regime and its subsequent Shiiteization allowed Iran to re-establish its internal and external political balances, and provided an unprecedented level of manoeuvre and zone of influence in Iranian foreign policy, surpassing the use of Shiite sectarianism even during the imperial Safavid and Kajar periods.

The 1979 Constitution of the Islamic Republic enshrines Shiite Islam as the official religion of the state and as the basis of the entire legal and political system. Article 4 states that all laws, rules and legislation must be based on Islam. The "Islamic" order referred to here be described in Article 5 as follows: "*In the Islamic Republic of Iran during the time of occultation of Hazrat Vali-e Asr (aj), Velayat-ul Amr and Imamate of the Ummah is the responsibility of the just and pious faqih...*" (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran , 2021).[153]

[153] Among the concepts of Shiism that are clearly included in the 1979 Constitution, the subject of "*Imamate*" is particularly important. Because *Imamate* is a historical/religious/political concept that does not exist in Sunnism, but on which Shiism largely bases its political motivation. Reda's following statement is explanatory regarding the meaning of Imamate in the Twelfth Imam and his absence: "*Khomeini's conception of the politically active faqih is rooted in the Shi'i view of leadership, or Imamat, reformed by the Shi'i endorsement of ijtihad (exegesis) of the "sources of divine knowledge." For all Muslim sects, the leadership of the umma belonged first and foremost to the Prophet Mohammed. Following his death, the Shi'i doctrine held that authority over the umma was bestowed to Ali and his descendants. The canon states that the eleven successors to Ali – the Imams – were entitled to lead the umma. In Shi'i Islam, "The Imams are also the guardians (vali) of the people." With the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam, the succession of legitimate guardianship of Islamic jurisprudence came to an end. According to*

All the concepts and religious statements clearly referred here are valid only within the framework of Shiite Islam and clearly indicate the Shiite Muslim identity of the highest-ranking religious official of the state in all matters. Indeed, a few articles below this article, in article 12, the official religion of the state is directly defined: "The official religion of Iran is Islam and the *Isnaashari Ja'farī* madhhab (sect) and this principle is forever unchangeable." Again, in the same article, the right to practice their own rituals is granted to other sects with the expression "*including Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanbali and Zaydi*" (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran , 2021).

It is also necessary to include in the analysis the domestic and external climate that enabled the establishment of revolutionary religious ideology and theocracy in the early periods of the post-revolutionary Iran and, beyond that, the institutionalization of Shiism. The Iran-Iraq war, which began months after the Revolution in September 1980 and lasted for eight years, was a period of great transformation for the Islamic Republic, in which the Shiite identity found the opportunity to be deeply institutionalized within the political, social and military fabric of the newly established state. This war, described by the Leader Khomeini himself as the Sacred Defense (*Defa-e Moqaddas*), was portrayed as a defense not only against Saddam Hussein's Iraq but also against Sunni aggression and Western-backed imperialism (Reda, 2014, s. 133).[154]

It is a fact that the war began in response to Saddam Hussein's aggression and the threat he perceived from the revolution, in order to stifle the revolution at an early stage and before it could become strong and institutional, thus preventing it from inciting similar revolutionary ideals in its own country, Iraq, which was pre-dominantly Shia. However, the desire of Khomeini and other revolutionary leaders to mobilize a revolution in neighboring countries and to create a transformation in the Shia communities based on the *Velayat-e Faqih*, and to export revolution,[155] was quite evident and a source of concern for Sunni governments. Ayatollah Montazeri, who officially served as the "second man or right-hand person" as the official heir

majority Shi'i doctrine, the Twelfth Imam's return will lead to the establishment of legitimate Islamic rule on earth." (Reda, 2014, p. 121).

[154] Saddam Hussein and the Gulf Arab monarchies supporting him, their only cultural and sectarian motivation in invading Iran in September 1980 was undoubtedly not only "fighting the Shiites". Saddam's war was to start a war on behalf of the messianic Arab nationalism against the "Persians" and defeat them, his dream of becoming the second conqueror of Qadisiyyah after Qadisiyyah, when the Arab-Islamic armies defeated the Sassanids in 636, and his ambitions in the magnanimous dimension also played a major role in this historical reproduction process. For this purpose, Saddam even had the Egyptian director Salah Abouseif make a propaganda film called Qadisiyyah in 1982 (Dabashi, 2011, p. 304).

[155] For a comprehensive account of Ayatollah Khomeini's calls for the export of the revolution, the establishment of pro-Iranian governments in neighbouring Sunni Arab countries and across the region, and his messages and speeches in which legitimizing and substantiating these calls within the framework of Islamic discourse and Shiism, see (Khomeini, 2001).

apparent to Ayatollah Khomeini as the next supreme leader for a long period, but was later dismissed from his post in the last months of Khomeini due to disagreements in domestic political issues, draws attention to this "incitement phenomenon" in his memoirs, which should be carefully filtered because they were written with some resentment. "*Our harsh slogans against them and messages of exporting the revolution provoked them to act against us and these slogans became the basis for provoking Iraq and causing eight years of war*." (Montazeri, 2001, s. 244).

This defense and mobilization was often rooted in religious motifs, and in this respect, it was centerd around the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in Karbala. The new regime presented the Islamic republic and its Shiite values as a divine duty, made extensive use of religious symbolism, such as the concept of *shahadat* (maryrdom),[156] and frequently resorted to these concepts in mobilizing soldiers and civilians materially and spiritually towards the war effort (Allamiyan, 2012, s. 142-146). A concrete example of the deepening and institutionalization of Shiism within society and revolutionary structures was the Basij Resistance Forces (*Niru-ye Moghavemat-e Basij*), a volunteer militia that relied heavily on Shia rituals and fervour to recruit and motivate its members. The Basij, often composed of young and devoted Shia (Kian, 2014, s. 187), became a tangible symbol of the regime's and Khomeini's charismatic imamate's ability to harness religious identity for national defense. Indeed, in addition to Khomeini's statements during the war, Parliament Speaker Rafsanjani explained this faith-based mobilization by saying "*We depend on ourselves, our faith, and the strength of our people*", while Prime Minister of the time, Mousavi, referred to these religious values with the words "*The power of faith can outmanoeuvre a complicated war machine*" (Takeyh, 2011, s. 90).

The conditions of the war also solidified the role of the Shia clergy and religious institutions in Iran's governance system and military strategy. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was established months after Khomeini arrived in Tehran to bring together separate revolutionary armed groups and to play a key role in the war effort, with its leadership deeply intertwined with the Shiite clerical establishment and its organizational structure and command level being guided and monitored by the mullahs representing the Supreme Leader Khomeini. The IRGC's operations were often justified and defended by pious rhetoric, with its

[156] Khomeini gave a central role to the treatment of Imam Hussein in Kufa and his martyrdom in Karbala in his own worldview and in his perception and evaluation of religion, society and enemies. In this respect, Khomeini viewed Shia Islam as "a revolutionary school and the continuation of true Islam" and believed that the Shia Islamic Republic, which was attacked by oppressors and colonialists, should be defended by all means, including martyrdom (*shahadat*). (Reda, 2014, pp. 118-120).

commanders either clerics or deeply religious figures, who conferred spiritual rewards and paradise on martyrdom. The deep penetration of Shiism was made possible in the chaotic conditions of the war, from the names of the IRGC's operations against the Iraqi army to the symbols used and the rhetoric used to mobilize the population. Symbols such as *Ashura* commemorations among soldiers and the distribution of pamphlets containing the prayers and *dhikr* of the Shiite religious figures and *Imam*s to soldiers on the front lines also fed this deepening (Yılmaz, 2021).[157]

This intensive use of religious symbols in wartime was certainly not unique to the Iranian army, and many examples can be found in every period, but this multi-dimensional use intensively embodied the idea that the defense of Shia Islam was a kind of holy *jihad*, and along with this jihadist sentiment, Shia revolutionism also took root in the Iranian people. In this respect, the war served as an effective tool for embedding Shia identity in state institutions and society, as the regime relied heavily on religious narratives in order to legitimize its policies and to consolidate and sustain public support. In the minds of Shiite clerics and revolutionaries, revolution and war were intertwined and complementary; even the war itself was considered a dimension of the divine mission that Khomeini had launched in 1979 (Takeyh, 2011, s. 81).

The Iran-Iraq war further accelerated the process of Shiization of the political, legal and social systems in the Islamic Republic, as the regime sought to consolidate the entire nation under its authority around a shared religious identity. Centuries after Karbala, the establishment of Shiism as a state and the nationalization of the Shia cause was seen as so important that any dissenting voices from within were seen as subversion and treason and were harshly suppressed and sometimes marginalized under the label of terrorism. Of the groups that participated in the 1979 Revolution, *the Mujahedin-e Khalq* (MEK), a left-wing religious opposition organization, was accused by the Islamic regime of collaborating with the enemy Iraq and was harshly suppressed and driven underground (Ansari, 2012, s. 213-214).

Similarly, the liquidation of Ayatollah Montazeri, who was once declared the heir of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1985 (Zahedi, 2000, s. 179-180), and Ayatollah Shariatmadari, who had millions of followers among the Azerbaijani Turks (Keddie, Modern Iran: Roots and results of revolution, 2006, s. 249), the pro-Marxist Tudeh Party, and liberal, nationalist, secular, etc.

[157] For vivid examples and details of the active use of Shiite symbols in the mobilization of the Iranian army and IRGC/Basij forces throughout the war and the situation on the fronts, which are described in this section, there are many examples in the memoirs of General Rafiqdoost, the minister in charge of the IRGC, who closely coordinated Iran's war efforts on the fronts with Ayatollah Khomeini, President Khamenei and Parliament Speaker Rafsanjani throughout the war. For further examples and explanations see (Allamiyan, 2012).

structures, and their expulsion from the system were made possible by the state of emergency regime during the war years of 1980-88 (Axworthy, 2008, s. 266-267) and by the personal charisma of Khomeini. During this initial decades, the training of a large number of clerics who openly supported the ideological orientation of the Islamic Republic and the *Velayat-e Faqih* in the seminaries of Qom was an effective factor in the production of trained cadres in the bureaucracy and Shiite seminaries in the following years. In summary, during the Iran-Iraq War, the Shia identity of the regime became more apparent and clear, opposition structures and political, religious and economic centers of power were liquidated, and the Islamic/Shia identity rose irreversibly as the prevailing trend of the state and began to dominate the entire political, economic, social and cultural sphere.

On the other hand, the increasing dose and prevalence of Shia Islamist rhetoric in Iran's domestic and foreign policy was perceived together with Shiism and revolutionary conflict in Sunni Arab countries and other Sunni-majority societies in the region, such as Turkey. The perception in Turkey, which was in alliance with the West, governed by a military coup regime and had a secular identity, was that Revolutionary Iran had a more Islamic tone, Shiism was overshadowed by Islamism in this threat ranking, and the perception that Iran was establishing and financing revolutionary structures close to itself among Islamist groups in Turkey and targeting the secular Turkish regime was strong in the viewpoint of the state and society (Elik, 2012, s. 39-42).

While Turkey felt this sectarian pressure relatively less than the regional countries during the 1980s, in the Arab monarchies, where Islamist tendencies were already strong but anti-Iran historical baggage was influential, the 1979 revolution and the Shiite/Persian identity of the Khomeini line were brought to the forefront, and a hostility was developed along sectarian and ethnic lines. Iran's discourse of exporting the revolution and the confrontational discourse accusing Arab governments of US/Israeli collaboration and treason against Muslim ummah strengthened these perceptions. Not only in the Gulf Arabs but also in the vast Sunni Arab world in general, the threat of a Shia/Persian Iranian expansionism financed by Gulf capital began to be rapidly processed and new hostilities triggered to reproduce (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, pp. 10-11).

The backbone of this hostility was based on the Iranian-Saudi rivalry, which was competing to establish an area of ideological influence in the region and across the Islamic world based on their own religious understanding. Saudi Arabia and Gulf Arab capital, which supported

Saddam's Iraq during the war, began to put their own Shia minorities under more intense pressure. The killing of about 400 pilgrims (275 of them was Iranian) by Saudi security forces in Mecca at a politically/religiously motivated protest march during the 1987 Hajj further strained relations. In response Saudi embassy in Tehran was attacked by angry Iranian crowds and some of the Saudi officials injured (including one death) which caused to further severing the relations (Rizwan, Arshid, Waqar, & Iram, 2014, s. 96).

Although a partial recovery was observed during the presidential terms of Rafsanjani and Khatami after Khomeini's death, the Iranian influence that began to increase in the region after the 2003 invasion of Iraq ushered in a period in which Iran's Shia identity was emphasized more and "Shia crescent" discussions dominated the geopolitics of the region, and with the Syrian Civil War, this conflictual climate became even more sharp and catastrophic. In this respect, three turning points stand out in particular in the sectarian conflict conditions that the Iranian-Saudi rivalry has caused in the region: the 1979 Revolution, the 2003 US Invasion of Iraq, and the sectarian divisions triggered during the Arab Uprisings as of 2011.

The invasion of Iraq by the US and its allies in 2003 was a watershed moment in the modern Middle East by reigniting the sectarian conflicts that had been on the back burner for decades. The Sunni Arab minority that had ruled Iraq since the end of the Ottoman Empire, and which had become more sectarian during the Baathist era, and the country's Shiite majority, which had long been subjected to Baathist repression, took over the government in elections after Saddam Hussein was ousted. This new situation opened up a wide field of action and influence for Tehran in Iraq, which has historically had close ties with the Iraqi Shi'ite community, and where large Shi'ite communities, which have been committed to *Velayat-e Faqih* since Khomeini's years of exile in Najaf, have been organized.

Iran has used this strategic opportunity wisely and has been able to further increase its influence on both the Shiite communities and the central Iraqi government through structures such as the Dawa Party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Badr Organization, which it has been supporting since the Saddam era. Iran, which has historical and cultural ties with the Kurds living in the north of Iraq and Turkoman Shiite communities, and which at times acted as a protector of these Kurdish groups during the Baathist era, has suddenly become the most influential regional power in Iraq (Barzegar, The shifting nature of Iranian influence in Iraq, 2013). However, this Iranian-backed Shiite resurgence alarmed the majority Sunni states and communities in the Middle East, who were frightened by this Shiite geopolitics starting

from Iran and went through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to the Mediterranean Sea, which King Abdullah II of Jordan first described in 2006 as the "Shia Crescent" (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, pp. 11-12). Therefore, the US invasion of Iraq not only destabilized the country and the region, but also set the broader stage for a regional sectarian struggle in which Iran saw itself as the protector of the Shiite communities and interests in the region; soon Iraq was plunged into full-time civil war and sectarian chaos from which many Sunni sectarian entities such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the ISIS and the HTS would emerge (Salloukh, 2017, s. 48).

Against the backdrop of the vast opportunities that opened up in the Middle East after 2003, Iran's regional ambitions became more evident in support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthi/Zaydi movement in Yemen. Since the early 1980s, Hezbollah in Lebanon has been a key proxy for Iran as a political party organized around *Velayat-e Faqih* and with a military wing, receiving financial, military and ideological support from Tehran through Syria (Reda, 2014, s. 133-135). The increasing power of Hezbollah in Lebanese sociology and politics, and its establishment of a military force capable of resisting the war with Israel in 2006, have further increased Iran's presence in the Levant.

Similarly, Iran's support for the Houthi community of the Zaydi branch of Shiism in Yemen has further accelerated Yemen's already fragmented national structure and the armed struggle and hostility between the communities, and has led to further strained Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia. These and similar strategic steps taken by Iran during Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013), which increased in parallel with the growing IRGC influence within the Iranian domestic and foreign policy, were perceived by the Sunni states in the region as a broader strategy that encircled them and challenged their dominance in the region (Warnaar, 2013, s. 118-120). In this respect, this fear and threat described as "Shia Crescent" became a rallying cry especially for the monarchies in the Gulf and the Sunni leaders in the region, who perceived Iran's actions as a threat to their security and regional influence.

The Syrian civil war that started in 2011 further underscored Iran's commitment to the strategy of increasing its influence through Shiite networks in the region. As will be discussed in detail in the following sections of this dissertation, Iran provided critical support to the Baath regime in Syria, which has been the most key ally in the region for decades, including military advisors, all kinds of weapons and financial support, and the Assad regime was saved from being overthrown thanks to this support. Iran's support for Assad and the Baath regime was not limited to this, the Quds Force led by General Soleimani within the Revolutionary Guard Corps

(IRGC) against the armed opposition supported militarily and financially by the Sunni countries in the region (Salloukh, 2017, s. 47-48), brought from the Shiite communities in the countries of the region (Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran) The Shia militia fought against these Sunni armed fighters under the command of the IRGC (Karataş, 2021, s. 37-38).

Iran continued to keep in power the Baath regime in Syria and the Alawite/Nusayri minority, a sub-branch of Shiism[158] and established an uninterrupted land corridor to the Mediterranean, thus further strengthening its position as a regional power. However, this situation brought a dangerous sectarian rivalry to a battlefield with a military dimension; Iran's strategy of supporting the Shiites in the region and becoming a regional power with this, created a strong Sunni bloc against it and further fed the sectarian divisions in the region, leading to the overthrow of the Shia sectarian Iranian-backed Alawite Baath regime in Syria by the Sunni sectarian armed group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its allies in December 2024.

The concept of the “Shia Crescent” has long been a subject of debate among scholars and politicians. Iran’s support for Shia groups in the region is an obvious reality, but seeing all Shia in the region as a single entity and talking about a unified Shia bloc is also a clear oversimplification (Lewis, 1987). Shia communities in the Middle East are structured in a way that includes many differences, can be divided even on the basis of national interests and religious practices, and sometimes even within the same country they compete with each other and cannot form an entire bloc. For example, Iraqi and Bahraini Shiite communities have significant diversion, there are large communities that struggle for power among themselves, sometimes there is a strong sense of nationalism even in groups acting together with Iran, a large part of them are openly against the *Velayat-e Faqih* system and represent Arab Shia tradition, and even some of the groups that receive support from Iran sometimes oppose and resist Iranian interference (Eisenstadt, 2015).

[158] In the previous sections of this dissertation, it was mentioned that Nusayrism was historically and theologically under the broad umbrella of Shiism and that it separated from mainstream Shiism during the early centuries. The relations of Iranian and Lebanese Shiite scholars with Syria since the 1970s and the fatwa that legitimized this sect on a religious level during the period of the Lebanese Shiite scholar and politician Musa Sadr, regarding Nusayrism as a branch of Shiism, established a bridge between Nusayris and *Isnaashariyya* Shiism. For the Syrian Sunni segments with strong ideological tendencies and the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, the fact that the Iranians did not react to Hafez Asad's 1982 Hama massacre during the period of Ayatollah Khomeini, moreover ignored and overlooked it under the conditions of the Iraq-Iraq war, created a major rupture. They saw Iran's assistance to the Assad family in the uprising of the armed opposition, representing the Syrian Sunni masses, against the Baath regime in 2011, again in this historical context and as a repetition of 1982 within the sectarian reproduction process (Pinto, 2017, pp. 130-136).

Similarly, the policies of Hezbollah, which has become the most influential political and military actor in Lebanon, are often driven by Iranian directives, behaves at times autonomously within the limits of the Lebanese political and sociological dynamics. Despite this, the Shia Crescent discussions are perceived as a serious threat to Sunni-majority states, at which point perceptions can be more decisive than reality in the region, and this leads to further escalation of sectarian tensions (al-Rasheed, 2022, s. 75-76). The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has become the main determinant in the region, and countries and communities, which both sides are allied with; do not hesitate to use Sunni or Shiite sectarianism as a tool to mobilize support.

During the 2010-11 Arab Uprisings, Iran's regional influence had reached new heights, but it also faced significant challenges. The uprisings that turned the Middle East and North Africa upside down created both opportunities and risks for Iran. While Western-backed Sunni autocrats lost power in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, Sunni extremist armed groups gained power in the vacuum that emerged, further intensifying sectarian conflicts in the region. For example, Iran’s support for Shia communities who took to the streets in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to protest against the Sunni monarchies further fueled tensions between Iran and the Saudi and Gulf monarchies in the region.

The Arab Uprisings also revealed the limits of Iran’s power in the region, for example, despite all of Iran’s material support and guidance, the armed rebels backed by Gulf Sunnis who were able to get within a few tens of kilometers of the presidential palace in Damascus came close to overthrowing the Baath regime several times, but were forced to back down each time till the end of 2024.

5.4. The Dynamics Affecting Iranian Policy towards Turkey during the Syrian Civil War

While examining Iran's foreign policy towards Turkey during the Syrian Civil War from a Neo-Classical Realist perspective, I will focus on establishing a bridge through this theoretical framework between systemic pressures and domestic variables in determining the foreign policies of states in international relations and examining how foreign policy is shaped by this bridge. In this context, I will examine the impact of conceptual frameworks such as strategic

culture, leadership characteristics, institutional dynamics and state-society relations, which have been structured and shaped in a unique theo-political system in the Islamic Republic of Iran after the 1979 Revolution, on decision-making mechanisms and their place in policy formation with various examples.

5.4.1. Strategic Culture: the Legacy of Historical Background, Geopolitical Parameters

The Syrian Civil War (2011–24) served as a critical arena for regional and international power dynamics, with Iran and Turkey as key players. From a Neo-Classical Realist perspective, Iran's foreign policy during this period was mainly shaped by its strategic culture, deeply rooted in historical experiences, ideological impetus, sociological characteristics of society, and geopolitical realities. Iran's strategic culture was in fact crystallized into an unlikely combination of a harsh revolutionary orientation and pragmatic Realism, and it profoundly influenced Iranian approach to Turkey and its allied countries and groups during the war.

This strategic culture, which gave vital importance to ideals such as resistance to foreign occupation, regional leadership, and preserving the Shiite sphere of influence in the Middle East, largely determined Iran's ideological and operational framework in Syria. At the same time, global international systemic pressures, such as the involvement of major powers such as the US and Russia, and the changing balance of power in the Middle East, have both constrained and shaped Iran's policy options. The interplay of systemic pressures with Iran's strategic culture offers a nuanced understanding of Tehran's approach to Turkey and its policy framework during the Syrian Civil War.

Iran's strategic culture has been deeply influenced by historical experiences of constant intervention and military occupation by external powers, which have created a collective sense of vulnerability and self-reliance (Eisenstadt, The strategic culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Operational and policy implications, 2011). This strategic culture includes the Anglo-Russian occupation in the two world wars, the CIA-backed military coup of 1953, and an existential encounter such as the Iran-Iraq war, which has made the Iranian people and decision-makers feel closely the perception that the international system is an unjust structure dominated

by Western powers. These perceptions, throughout the Syrian Civil War, brought about Iran's perception of almost every development happening in Syria after 2011 as Western-backed efforts to destabilize the Assad regime in Syria, a key ally within the "Axis of Resistance",[159] and its positioning accordingly (Marandi, 2012). Iran evaluated Turkey's support for armed opposition groups as part of a broader Western strategy aimed at undermining and breaking its regional influence through these structures supported by the West and the Gulf states. As a result of all these perceptions and calculations, Iran's strategic culture, with its strong emphasis on resistance and independence, made balancing Turkish influence in Syria and bolstering the Assad regime a fundamental policy, but while doing so, it also tried to avoid a direct or indirect confrontation with Turkey in the Syrian field (Oktav, Suriye Krizi Sürecinde Türkiye ve İran & Değişen Roller, Çatışan Çıkarlar, Küresel Güçlerle İlişkiler, 2016, s. 214-216).

The ideological dimension, which is a vital integral part of the strategic culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran and rooted in the concept of Shia Islam and *Velayat-e Faqih*, has played a significant role in the formation of foreign policy towards Turkey. The revolutionary rhetoric, which is widely used in the discourses of Iranian political leaders, experts and intellectuals and is believed to constitute the moral and theological dimension of foreign policy, has perceived the Syrian crisis to a significant extent as the duty to defend an oppressed (*mustaz'afin*) people and government that are under attack by an arrogant (*mustaqbirin*) powers (Raisi, 2022). Although the broad Sunni masses claim that they are the ones who are oppressed and they have been persecuted under the Baath regime for decades, the Iranian leadership did not accept this and described Bashar al-Assad as an oppressed who is subject to arrogant attacks by the West and its allies in the region and presented him to its own domestic public opinion and the international scene in this way.

Iranian decision-makers, who believe that this discourse provides religious and moral superiority, have tried to legitimize all kinds of operations in Syria and, at times, mass killings with this argument. Iran's intervention in the field with Shiite militias and its ambition to export its own governance style can also be evaluated as part of a broader strategy aimed at combating Western hegemony and Sunni dominance in the region. Turkey, which is in opposition to this strategy where religious/sectarian values are used as leverage for geopolitical interests and in

[159] Making a noteworthy observation on the importance of Syria for Iran, Ahmadian & Mohseni state "*Syria gives Tehran a vital strategic depth in the Arab world, allowing it to be manoeuvrability throughout the Levant, and provides it with a way to Hezbollah, enhancing Iranian deterrence of Israel*" (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2019). Iran's efforts to establish "strategic depth", especially within the Arab world, is its main motivation in establishing close relations with the Shiite communities in the Gulf, especially in Iraq and Bahrain, and is therefore one of the main reasons for the geopolitical problems it has with Saudi Arabia.

competition with Iran on the path to establishing regional leadership and sphere of influence, has further exacerbated sectarian tensions, especially with the AK Party governments, with its Sunni identity becoming evident after 2002 and its support for Sunni armed actors in Syria, thus leading Iran to perceive Turkey as a regional rival on a sectarian level and its policies as pursuing so called “neo-Ottomanist” tendencies (Marandi, 2012, s. 93).

The balance of power that has been shifting and changing in the Middle East as an effective factor in determining Iran's foreign policy towards Turkey in the post-2011 period among systemic pressures. The collapse of state structures in Syria, which were already weak in capacity and whose comprehensiveness was debatable, and the emergence of ISIS, al-Qaeda affiliates and Kurdish militias in regions far from the capital have created an extremely volatile security climate that Iran has sought to assert its influence against such a field. In such a problematic insecure environment, Turkey's military operations in northern Syria and the expansion of its field control, although aimed at restraining the Kurdish autonomy and opening up space for the armed groups it supports against Assad, were a direct challenge to Iran's strategic interests (Azizi & Çevik, Turkish and Iranian involvement in Iraq and Syria: competing strategies, rising threat perceptions, and potentials for conflict, 2022).

However, Iran's strategic culture, with its sometimes increasing dose of pragmatism and adaptability, did not object greatly to the change in the balances on the field caused by these systemic pressure reflections. Iran leveraged its alliance with Russia to balance Turkey’s influence in Syria and reduce the impact of its moves, while also increasing the dose of diplomatic engagement with Turkey to reduce tensions (Oktav, The Syrian Civil War and Turkey-Syria-Iran Relations, 2015, s. 12). This dual policy, which is essentially an outcome of Iran’s strategic culture being combined with pragmatism in modern times, has enabled it to use hard power elements in Syria, while at the same time avoiding direct conflict with a Sunni regional power like Turkey, which shares a long land border with both itself and Syria.

As a mechanism to further illustrate the relationship between strategic culture and foreign policy-making, the functioning of critical institutions in Iran, especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its elite foreign operations unit the Quds Force, as well as the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which coordinates foreign policy and security issues, is important. The IRGC, with its dual structure as an ideological and military structure, played a central role in shaping Iran’s policy in Syria. Former Quds Force commander General Qasem Soleimani, who was killed in Baghdad as a result of the US attack in 2020,

embodied the fusion of ideological commitment and pragmatic Realism that characterizes Iranian strategic culture. Under Soleimani's command, Quds Force coordinated Shiite militia forces in Syria and IRGC advisors and officers participating in special operations, the target of which was Turkish-backed armed opposition groups, and frequently engaged in armed conflict with these groups. The SNSC, on the other hand, established the ideological and political/diplomatic infrastructure of military policy towards Syria, with the concentration of Revolutionary Guard generals within the council and the direct influence of the Leader Khamenei. These institutional dynamics reinforced Iran's strategic culture of resistance and regional leadership, while also highlighting the tensions between ideological and pragmatic considerations in foreign policy towards Turkey.[160]

Iran's perception of regional and international balances of power and its level of perception directly shaped its approach to Turkey on the Syrian issue. In the analysis of the balance of power in the Middle East, the evaluation of the Islamic Republic as a "regional middle power", whose foreign policy is shaped within the context of the systemic insecurity of a regional system penetrated by hegemonic Great Powers, provides a more explanatory framework (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System, 1997). Russia's involvement in the conflicts in Syria as a key player with its military intervention since the fall of 2015 provided Iran with a strong ally against Western hegemony that it could balance on the ground (Therme, 2022, s. 20). In terms of Iran's strategic culture, which prioritizes multi-polarity and resistance against Western dominance in the international arena, it provided a strategic gain to enter into close cooperation with this powerful actor (Wastnidge, 2024, s. 56). This powerful alliance provided Iran with a multi-speed framework in which it could balance Turkey's presence and interests on the ground, but also manage its relations with Ankara. In this context, for example, Iran, which sat in the Astana Process meetings in a trilateral format with Turkey and Russia, also demonstrated its ability to blend its ideological commitments with pragmatic diplomacy. This approach was a process that also revealed the adaptability and ability to navigate sophisticated regional dynamics inherent in Iran's strategic culture.

[160] Some Iranian experts attribute one of the most important reasons why Iran has not escalated and severed its relations with Turkey despite accusations of collaborating with the US in the Syrian crisis to the fact that Turkey has taken on the world and voted negatively in the UN Security Council meeting to prevent sanctions imposed on Iran since 2010, which Iranians still remember (Oktav, Suriye Krizi Sürecinde Türkiye ve İran & Değişen Roller, Çatışan Çıkarlar, Küresel Güçlerle İlişkiler, 2016, p. 214). According to my observations during my tenure in Iran during this sanction process and nuclear negotiations, although this emotional factor had a limited effect as early as 2015, I should state that this understanding was not shared by the entire Iranian politicians, experts and public opinion, and when one considers Iran's hard power tactics in the region together with its military moves, I find this approach extremely naive and emotional.

As an important component of Iranian strategic culture, “Iranian exceptionalism” is a parameter that is felt in determining foreign policy towards Turkey in the context of the Syrian Civil War. The traumatic occupations and interventions that Iran has experienced in the past and its desire to position itself as a regional leader after the 1979 Revolution reinforced its determination to assert its influence in Syria (Sinkaya, İslam Cumhuriyeti'nde Dış Politika: Çelişkiler ve İkilemler, 2022, s. 392). Iranian leaders frequently frame their military presence and political engagements in Syria as part of a broader strategy against Western dominance and their search for leadership in the region reflect the ideological and cultural dimensions of their strategic culture. This exclusionary dimension of exceptionalism and this Iran-centerd approach, which can be described as a kind of “manifest destiny”, have led to the perception of Turkey as a regional rival in Syria and across the Middle East, further complicating their interactions during the conflict.

5.4.2. Leader Images: Ayatollah Khomeini’s legacy and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, Presidents (Ahmadinejad, Rouhani and Raisi) and General Soleimani / IRGC leadership

Neo-Classical Realism offers a robust framework in terms of explaining the effects of leadership characteristics within domestic factors on the foreign policy-making process. The importance of this perspective is particularly evident in the formation of Iranian foreign policy towards Turkey during the Syrian Civil War (2011-24). In Iran, the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*, theorized by Ayatollah Khomeini, is the most important and superior authority in determining and implementing foreign policy and security priorities, both in the constitutional framework and thus in practice. If we particularly want to draw attention to a parallelism in terms of the historical continuity of the *Velayat-e Faqih* and the revolutionary charismatic leadership within the *Isnaashariyah* (Twelver Shia Islam) Shiism; the parallel between Shah Ismail declaring himself as the “Representative of the Hidden Imam” and Khomeini's *Vali-ye Faqih* theory, which was also included in the Constitution, giving himself the title of “Deputy of the Hidden Imam” is significant as a more powerful and influential authority (Sabet, 2014, s. 70-74).

In this respect, in addition to a historical continuity and the politicization and mobilization of Shiism, as discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation, similar to the way the Qizilbash Turkomans in the surrounding regions (mostly Anatolia) were drawn to Iranian

Shiism with this sacred theo-political conceptualization during the time of Shah Ismail; after the 1979 Revolution, with the *Velayat-e Faqih* conceptualization, the Hidden Imam's Deputy is now trying to attract Shiite communities in the Middle East to revolutionary Shiism, which is also being mobilized by the Iranian state (the establishment and organization of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Ansarullah in Yemen, and pro-*Velayat-e Faqih* Shiite groups in Iraq). In this respect, in terms of charismatic leadership and politicizing this leadership with a revolutionary approach, there are great similarities and parallels between Shah Ismail and Ayatollah Khomeini.[161]

Khomeini used this authority extensively during his lifetime, and mobilized all Iranian leaders and institutions in this direction, using his capacity as *Vali-ye Faqih* (Supreme Leader), especially during the war with Iraq in the 1980s and hostility with the USA. Khomeini's leadership provided a strong framework, especially in terms of resistance to Western imperialism, self-reliance and the determination of policies by Islamic (mostly Shiite Islamist) discourse. Khomeini's charismatic leadership and the political line that emerged during his lifetime, described as the *Khatt-e Imam* (Imam Khomeini's line) (Reda, 2014), were so decisive among his followers and the revolutionary military/political leadership that even decades after his death, many issues in Iran's domestic and foreign policy are legitimized with direct or indirect references to Khomeini and his era.

During Ayatollah Khomeini's term as Supreme Leader in 1979-89, his attitude toward Turkey was shaped and developed within a complex interplay of ideological convictions, pragmatic considerations, and historical concerns, all of which were influenced by his personal experiences in addition to the broader geopolitical context in the Middle East. Khomeini's ideological stance was rooted within the revolutionary vision of the Islamic state embodied by the *Velayat-e Faqih*, which emphasized complete resistance to Western imperialism at all costs and the establishment of a unified Islamic Ummah. However, Khomeini's view regarding Turkey was complicated by its secular and nationalist identity, NATO membership, and close

[161] Although there are similarities between Shah Ismail and Ayatollah Khomeini in terms of leadership characteristics, Khomeini, with the self-confidence emanating from being a cleric (*alim*) and *mujtahid* who was an expert in jurisprudence (*fiqh*), undertook a task with much greater courage than his predecessor Ismail. As Ghamari-Tabrizi truly emphasizes, during the Safavids (151-1722), although *velayat* was a central concern among Shiite scholars, for example, Mohaqqiq al-Karaki (b. 1630) never envisioned the jurist as the ruler. Likewise, Mullah Ahmad Karaki (b. 1829), a scholar of the Kajar period whom Khomeini considered to be a great advocate of *Velayat-e Faqih*, never stressed the significance and necessity of the rule of the jurist (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2014, p. 225). However, Khomeini's revolutionist character and leadership did not only lie in the political field; he also carried out a revolutionary transformation in the field of religious *ijtihad*, and created a transformative theory that the scholars before him, who were timid in the face of the government, were reluctant to put forward even in their books: the jurist (*faqih*) as a powerful ruler with unparalleled authority over entire government and officials.

relations with the US/West, all of which were in clear contrast to Khomeini's anti-Western vision of an Islamic order. At this point, an interesting verbal duel that shows Khomeini's view of Turkish administration took place during the revolutionaries' raid on the US embassy in Tehran in November 1979. While Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel described the embassy occupation as “a rare inhuman event in history”, Khomeini replying with emphasizing “the Ankara government, just like the overthrown Shah of Iran, is able to stay in power with the help of bayonets” (Akdevelioğlu & Kürkçüoğlu, 2001, s. 806). With this attitude, Khomeini had clearly reflected how he perceived the Turkish political system on an ideological level.

Khomeini's brief exile in Bursa in 1964-65, after being arrested by the Shah, further shaped his perception of Turkey, particularly in his contacts with Turkish intelligence and security officials and his observations of society. Although Khomeini was pleased with Turkey's initial hospitality, the Kemalist model of strict secularism and secular governance he witnessed in Ankara and Bursa was completely antithetical and contrary to the *Hukumat-e Islami* (Islamic government) model he would formulate after 1970-71. During his exile in Bursa and Najaf, Turkey's role in the Middle East, especially its close alliance with the United States and the Western powers, and his observations as an Islamist about the country's Islamic identity deepened his anxieties on Turkish policies and inclinations (Saray, Türk-İran İlişkileri, 2006, s. 163-166).

Despite all these ideological reservations, Khomeini, after assuming the highest political authority of state, demonstrated a degree of pragmatism in making decisions concerning Turkey, recognizing the importance of maintaining diplomatic and economic relations with a major neighboring state. For example, during the Iran-Iraq Sacrament (1980-88), Iran's priority with respect to Turkey under Khomeini’s leadership was to secure its neutrality and cooperation in order to circumvent international sanctions (Elik, 2012, s. 162-165). This required a pragmatic balancing act between the ideological priorities of the Islamic unity and practical necessities, which the Iranian government, with Khamenei as president and Mousavi as prime minister, endeavored to ensure. On the other hand, Khomeini remained wary of Turkey's secular model and regional ambitions, and viewed Ankara's policies in the region as obstacles to his own regime-exporting approach (Saray, Türk-İran İlişkileri, 2006, s. 167). Therefore, Khomeini's approach to Turkey, reflecting his concern about Turkey's secularism and its existence as a Western ally in the Middle East, took shape and developed between his personal ideological commitment to Islamic unity and the tension over the need to engage with a strategically important neighbor in times of war.

Despite repeatedly accusing the Arabs directly, Ayatollah Khomeini and the new Iranian leadership had not launched an open and harsh ideological attack on Turkey for a long time. However, Khomeini's speech on August 24, 1986, accusing the Turkish clerics of bowing to Atatürk and being puppets of the Paranoiac forces, and on the other hand, accusing Atatürk of destroying the rule of Islam, had caused the first major diplomatic crisis in relations. Similarly, Prime Minister Mousavi had also drawn a reaction from the Turkish public opinion during his visit to Turkey in the summer of 1987 by publicly criticizing Atatürk's reforms and not visiting his mausoleum, which was a diplomatic practice (Elik, 2012, s. 41). These developments began to make the ideological differences that had been contained until then more visible.

There are many examples that can be given of Turkey-Iran relations entering a crisis due to Khomeini's strict ideological orientation while he was alive. The most important of these is that Khomeini's frequent rhetoric of regime exportation and harsh critics towards regional countries that suppressed the Muslims created sensitivity in Turkey, the harsh words and insults about Atatürk created polemics, and even the moderate Iranian leaders had to approach relations with Turkey without crossing certain ideological lines despite Khomeini. However, after Khomeini's death in June 1989, with a pragmatic figure like Rafsanjani becoming president, this ideological rigidity was also relaxed to some extent. Flags were lowered to half-staff in Turkey upon Khomeini's death, and on Rafsanjani's instructions, the Iranian flag was lowered to half-staff on the occasion of Atatürk's death anniversary at the Iranian embassy in Ankara on November 10, 1990, as a respectful gesture, and such an attitude had never been witnessed before. Likewise, the newly appointed ambassador to Ankara, Bagheri, started his duty by first visiting Anıtkabir Mausoleum, and for the first time (Akdevelioğlu & Kürkçüoğlu, İran'la İlişkiler (1980-2001), 2001), the protocol arrangements and secular sensitivities of the Turkish side were respected to this extent by the authorities of the Islamic Republic.

One of the greatest reflections of Khomeini's *Velayat-e Faqih* line in Iran in the period after him was the centralization of decision-making mechanisms in domestic / foreign policy and the political/military leadership clustered around the Supreme Leader, combining Khomeini's resistance and Shiite Islamist dynamics with Iranian political culture and geopolitical realities. In June 1989, after the death of the founding leader of the Revolution, Khomeini, the Assembly of Experts (*Majlis-e Hobregan-e Rahbari*), authorized to elect the Speaker and Leader, reached an elite consensus, with the guidance of Speaker Rafsanjani, and noting that Khomeini had indicated himself as his successor, and ensured that Hojjat al-Islam Ali Khamenei, who had served as President from 1981 to 1989 and was the strongest candidate, was elected as Supreme

Leader.[162] Although Khamenei, who was far behind his predecessor in terms of religious seniority and age, did not have the charismatic leadership and unquestionable authority of Khomeini, he did not hesitate to use the powers granted to him by the constitution as *Vali-ye Faqih* (Keddie, Modern Iran: Roots and results of revolution, 2006, s. 261-262), and as he grew older, his authority became sharper and more encompassing.[163]

In the strategic thinking set of the Supreme Leader Khamenei, the discourse of relations with the US and resistance against the Western hegemony was shaped mainly under the influence of Khomeini and in the years of the Iran-Iraq War, during which he was the president as a leader from the founding cadre of the revolution. Just a few months before the war, as early as April 1980, Khamenei had expressed his concrete stance towards the US in his Friday prayers sermon, which he did not change in the following decades. *"Today the world of blasphemy and dictatorship (US and USSR) helplessly confesses that it takes a serious view of the power of Islam and it feels quite threatened by the vigilance and awareness of the nations spreading in every corner of the world after the victory of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. They are hatching plots to destroy our Islamic revolution and most of their conspiracies will be against Islam, the clergy and the revolutionary organs*" (Reda, 2014, s. 132). These statements of Khamenei are also important in terms of revealing the early reflections of the resistance and Iran-centricity concepts within the Iranian strategic culture on the founding leader of the Revolution and his loyal successor, and both Khomeini and Khamenei perceived and managed Iran's relations with Syria based on these primary parameters.

When the Syrian Crisis began, Khamenei had completed 22 years as the Supreme Leader, the reactions and criticisms he received from religious and political circles in his early years had largely subsided, and he now had complete authority as the undisputed supreme decision-maker of Iran, having the final say on all political, military, economic and cultural and other major fields as his predecessor. Khamenei, who has been a close student and follower of

[162] In this elite consensus, it is also worth noting the role of the powerful cleric Ayatollah Ali Meshkini, who was the chair of the Assembly of Experts from its founding in 1983 until his death in 2007. Meshkini had directly involved in the process of electing a new supreme leader after Khomeini's death, and as the chairman of the Assembly, he dismissed criticisms directed at Khamenei due to his seniority and age, saying that senior and older clerics had insufficient understanding of "the political, social and cultural issues facing Muslims" to become the new Leader. Again, during this process, the senior prosecutor and cleric within the judiciary, Abu al-Qasem Khaz'ali, directly narrated from Khomeini repeatedly calling on Khamenei to succeed himself as Leader before his death, strengthened the hands of the Rafsanjani-Khamenei duo in the succession process (Takeyh, 2011, pp. 117-118).

[163] For a technical and thought provoking discussion regarding the longevity of the *Velayat-e Faqih*, the scholarly qualifications of Khamenei and the critics within the ulama for his insufficient qualifications, see; (Mahdavi M. , The Velayat-e Faqih: Basis, Power and Longevity, 2023, pp. 117-118).

Ayatollah Khomeini since the 1960s (Ghakrengin, 2019, s. 127-144) and effectively gaining political legitimacy thanks to this close relationship, sometimes listened to more moderate presidents such as Rafsanjani, Khatami and Rouhani for pragmatic reasons in the field of foreign policy, but generally continued Khomeini's domestic and foreign policy line, which was crystallized in three aspects: Islamic discourse (strong emphasis on the modern interpretation of Shiism), anti-Western/anti-US stance, geopolitical competition for regional leadership, and intensive cooperation with allied states and non-state actors in the region of Shiite geopolitics.

In this context, the Syrian Crisis during the Khamenei era was seen as a regime change move by predominantly Sunni regional powers (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, and Turkey) in a country close to Iran and an important component of the "Axis of Resistance", with the support of the US/NATO. Ayatollah Khamenei's statements were that Syria was a frontline in the fight against the United States (and Israeli) influence in the region and that it should be kept standing at all costs for preserving the resistance, identity, and national pride (Mousavian, Iranian Perceptions of US Policy Toward Iran: Ayatollah Khamenei's Mind Set, 2014). The active deployment of the IRGC in Syria and the selfless defense of the Baath regime by bringing in Shiite militias despite hundreds of losses and financial burdens were an outcome of this understanding of Khamenei and the leadership. While pursuing these vital operations, the frequent references in the Iranian public opinion to Iran-Syria relations during the Khomeini era also reflect the founder leader's enduring legacy.

A significant point needs to be addressed in policy-making process in Iran is the crisis of authority and responsibility distribution between the Supreme Leader and the presidency. In the formulation of the Islamic Republic and *Velayat-e Faqih* as a unique divine/human political system, significant political crises can occasionally emerge between the *Vali-ye Faqih*, who is not elected by the people, and the executive branch and presidency, directly elected by popular vote. Even during the period of Khomeini's charismatic leadership, there were tensions between the 1979-81 era President Bani Sadr, and Khomeini and the revolutionary leaders/clerics; eventually Bani Sadr was forced to flee the country. Although their master-disciple relationship since the 1960s significantly reduced the political crises with Khomeini during Khamenei's presidency (1981-89), under Khamenei's Supreme Leadership period, almost all presidents and governments experienced conflicts with the Supreme Leader, the tone of which became harsher from time to time (Rahimi, 2014, s. 291-292). However, the unconditional authority of the Supreme Leader (*Vali-ye Faqih*) emanating from a constitutional and religious/political legitimacy caused presidents and governments to step back every time, so the Leader almost

always had the final say in foreign policy and security issues; but this impasse of the system still continues.

The presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), who was closer to the hard-line conservative wing within the Iranian system, significantly affected Iran's approach to this conflict, as he was involved with the early years of the Syrian Civil War with his hard-line stance in regional and international politics. Unlike his reformist and moderate predecessors and successors, Ahmadinejad's harsh anti-Western stance and his emphasis on Iran's regional leadership aligned him closely with Khamenei's vision. Ahmadinejad viewed the growing influence of Turkey under Erdoğan in the Middle East as a direct threat to Iran's regional ambitions. In this context, for example, he criticized Ankara's support for Muslim Brotherhood-based organizations in Syria as destabilizing the region and serving as a proxy on behalf of the Western interests (Warnaar, 2013, s. 125-126). The 2006 mutual defense pact and an additional military cooperation agreement in March 2007 between Iran and Syria, signed during Ahmadinejad's time in office and the rise of the IRGC in Iranian domestic and foreign politics (Sun, 2009), which formed the basis for the subsequent Iranian military intervention during the civil war. Ahmadinejad-era Iranian leaders framed their country's support for Assad as part of a broader struggle against Sunni-led powers, reflecting the sectarian dimension of the conflict. Ahmadinejad's hard-line policies, combined with his populist rhetoric, made Iran's commitment to preserving its influence in Syria a fundamental policy, despite growing regional and international backlash against the Assad regime (Khalaji, Iran and Syria, 2011).[164]

The presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013-21), who had been a part of Hashemi Rafsanjani's inner circle since the Iran-Iraq war, was a period when Iran's foreign policy was dominated by a more moderate tone emphasizing diplomacy and engagement over conflict, in contrast to Ahmadinejad's harsh and confrontational rhetoric. However, while Iran was able to adopt a more moderate stance and sign the JCPOA on a subject Rouhani had long specialized in nuclear negotiations (Azizi, Iran's Evolving Foreign Policy Structure: Implications on Foreign Relations, 2024, s. 5), during his term Tehran's approach to the Syrian Civil War did not differ from that of his predecessor Ahmadinejad, and even a more interventionist policy was pursued

[164] Ahmadinejad's nationalist emphasis on Iranian exceptionalism, which was uncommon and extraordinary among Iranian leaders after the Revolution (his statements that the Iranian school was superior to the Arab and Turkish schools in contribution to Islamic history, etc.), was frequently criticized inside Iran, and also damaged the perception outside the country and in the region that the Islamic Republic was a pan-Islamic government supporting Muslims worldwide (Khalaji, Iran and Syria, 2011). This nationalist and populist side of Ahmadinejad, which also reflects his view of Iranian strategic culture, is also important in terms of showing the interaction between leadership characteristics and strategic culture in decision-making mechanisms and its reflection on foreign policy.

in accordance with Iran's strategic interests. This intervention, which was justified by helping the Iran-allied governments in Damascus and Baghdad against the ISIS threat, was mostly organized by the IRGC and the Quds Force under command of General Soleimani in close coordination with the Leader Khamenei, while Rouhani government and the Foreign Ministry led by Javad Zarif, as Zarif would later complain, remained in the background in this case (Çoban, 2020, s. 68-69).

During this period, Rouhani worked closely with Turkey and Russia during the Astana peace talks process that started in 2017 and made attempts to de-escalate the conflict and establish de-escalation zones (Cengiz, 2020). These initiatives, driven by the diplomatic identities and moderate personalities of Rouhani and Zarif, can also be seen as a tactical shielding at the diplomatic level, which also shows its ability to pursue different strategies, while also following harsh military methods in the conflict area. These diplomatic steps include legitimizing the interventions and field control by placing them within the framework of the fight against ISIS, and thus evaluating all armed groups in Syria (even those hostile to the ISIS) under the umbrella of "terrorism" and presenting them as part of a broader counter-terrorism strategy (Oktav, Suriye Krizi Sürecinde Türkiye ve İran & Değişen Roller, Çatışan Çıkarlar, Küresel Güçlerle İlişkiler, 2016, s. 207-210). Iran's tactical cooperation with the PYD/YPG, a Kurdish armed group in Syria, against the ISIS threat during Rouhani's term drew Turkey's reaction but had a positive impact on US-Iran relations and therefore on nuclear negotiations (Spindle, 2014). Therefore in e broader framework, Rouhani's policies were shaped within Khamenei's broader ideological framework and ensuring continuity of Iran's security-oriented Syria strategy (Yazdani, 2019).

The presidency (2021-24) of Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi, who was a disciple of Ayatollah Khamenei in Mashhad and owes his judicial and political career to Khamenei to a great extent (Gerecht & Takeyh, 2021), meant a return to hard-line conservatism after Rouhani's moderate line. Raisi, who shared Khamenei's regional vision, reinforced Iran's commitment to supporting Assad. During Raisi's term, Turkey's Syria policy continued to receive criticism from the Iranian leadership and was accused of exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in Syria (Sarı, 2024). Raisi also turned to further developing relations with Syria and Russia, which he saw as essential to counterbalance Turkish and Western influence in the region.

Raisi's diplomatic efforts to develop close relations with neighbors, especially Turkey, in the region also found support from Ayatollah Khamenei and the IRGC leadership. However,

during this period when Hossein Amirabdollahian, who had close relations with the IRGC, was the foreign minister, a significant transformation took place in Iran's foreign policy compared to previous years, and the process of making foreign policy witnessed increasing centrism, anti-Westernism, militarization and stronger authoritarian grip within its ruling elite (Azizi, Iran's Evolving Foreign Policy Structure: Implications on Foreign Relations, 2024). Raisi, who ensured that the IRGC continued its influence in Syria and the Middle East without receiving criticism from the moderate administrators who had previously held office, maintained Iran's hard-line foreign and security policy was pursued along the Khomeini-Khamenei ideological lines until his sudden death in a helicopter crash in May 2024.

The commander of the Quds Force, the elite foreign operations unit of the IRGC, General Qasem Soleimani, has been among the leaders who actively participate in the foreign policy-making process in Iran and carry out executive activities on the ground, especially through his role in the Syrian Civil War and his political and military activities across the Middle East on behalf of Iran (Akbarzadeh, Iran and Daesh: The Case of a Reluctant Shia Power, 2015). While there are many commanders in the Middle East operations within the IRGC, Soleimani was a critical figure beyond his military duties as a decision-maker and strategist at the intersection of diplomacy, intelligence and military operations. His closeness to the Supreme Leader Khamenei gave him unparalleled authority and autonomy, allowing him to execute Iran's regional agenda with remarkable efficiency.

A veteran of the Iran-Iraq War, Soleimani played an active role in the establishment of the "Axis of Resistance" and the creation of an anti-US and anti-Israeli ground control in the region, thanks to his military experience and profound knowledge of the Arab world. Through his connections and the IRGC's decades-long ties, Soleimani organized a network of Shia militias, including Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and the Afghan Fatemiyoun and Pakistani Zainabiyoun Brigades, and was instrumental in establishing ground control in Syria in favor of the Iran and Assad regime (Azizi & Vazirian, The role of armed non-state actors in Iran's Syria strategy: A case study of fatemiyoun and zainabiyoun brigades, 2023), through his personal command of the fronts and his ability to negotiate at the diplomatic table.

Soleimani and the Quds Force's influence in Syria has been felt since the beginning of the war in 2011, and was particularly effective in the recapturing of Aleppo in 2016 and Dair ez-Zor in 2017, following effective Russian airstrikes in the fall of 2015. He made a difference on

the battlefield by coordinating attacks with the Syrian army against the ISIS, the Nusra Front, al-Qaeda affiliated actors and other armed opposition groups. Soleimani and the IRGC's field operations not only ensured Assad's survival, but also became the primary actor in Iran's establishment of an uninterrupted land corridor stretching from Tehran to the Mediterranean and the "Axis of Resistance". His activities were not limited to Syria and Hezbollah, and played a central role in the training of Iraqi Shia militia groups and their unification under the PMF (*al-Hashd al-Shaabi*) umbrella into a powerful military unit, thus ensuring Iraqi forces' success against the ISIS (Rasouli & Shariati, 2022, s. 60-61). His ability to navigate tribal and sectarian dynamics in Syria and Iraq, and to form alliances mobilizing local actors in line with Iran's (and Shiite geopolitical) interests, significantly altered the balance on the ground. The US assassination of Soleimani in Baghdad in January 2020 was a significant blow to Iran's foreign policy apparatus, but its legacy has continued to shape Iran's regional strategy.

Ahmet Davutoğlu, the then Turkish foreign minister (2009-14) and prime minister (2014-16), whom I interviewed for another book project while also writing this dissertation, noted that during his visits to Tehran, he met with officials such as the Leader, the President, and the Foreign Minister during the day, and then met with General Soleimani at IRGC bases night hours to discuss developments in Iraq and Syria. Davutoğlu's statements confirm both Zarif's complaints that the Syrian and Iraqi files were being handled by IRGC / Quds Force and Soleimani instead Foreign Ministry ((Reuters, 2021), and the words of General Petraeus, the commander of the US forces in Iraq at the time, who said that "I, Soleimani, control Iran's policies with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan" (Chulov, 2011) which shows that Soleimani was not only an ordinary military commander but also a decision-maker. Thanks to the space Khamenei opened up for him, he was an effective executor of Iran's asymmetric warfare strategies, and with his diplomatic skills, he took very resounding actions both in decision-making processes and military operations.

5.4.3. Domestic Institutions: Leader's Office, Presidency, Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), Councils, Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), Foreign Ministry

Within the Iranian political system, the Supreme Leadership (*Vali-ye Faqih*) is the ultimate decision-making authority, and after the 1979 Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini and his loyal disciple Ayatollah Khamenei both extensively used the constitutional powers granted to them

as the supreme leader, and profoundly shaped Iran's domestic and foreign policy and strategic orientation. The strategic decisions that directly shaped Iran and its sphere of influence in the Middle East over the last two decades were also made by Ayatollah Khamenei; he was persuaded to make some of these decisions, he made some of them despite objections, and he had to make some of them out of necessity, but all of them bear his signature as the Supreme Leader. All strategic decisions related to the Syrian Civil War and the "Axis of Resistance" were made by Khamenei as the ultimate authority in this way, and these decisions were implemented by authorized government institutions.

When the Supreme Leader makes a strategic decision, he consults with his closest political and military advisors, the president (depending on his personal loyalty and influence) and the IRGC commanders, the heads of various councils and assemblies within the system, and these positions (apart from his official advisors in his office) are members of the highly critical and influential *shura*, Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). In the strategic decisions made by the Leader regarding the Syrian Civil War, former foreign ministers such as Ali Aqbar Velayati and Kamal Harrazi, who are members of the foreign policy council within the Leader's Office (*Bayt-e Rahbari*), and former IRGC commander-in-chief and current military advisor Yahya Rahim Safavi have an influence on the shaping of the decisions (Sinkaya, İslam Cumhuriyeti'nde Dış Politika: Çelişkiler ve İkilemler, 2022, s. 396). In addition to these figures, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Hassan Rouhani, Ebrahim Raisi, Masoud Pezeshkian, who have held the presidential office since 2011, and foreign ministers whose loyalty the Leader can be sure of, such as Manouchehr Mottaqi and Hussein Amirabdollahian, had also been influential in these policy-making processes (Khalaji, How Khamenei Makes Decisions & Tightening the Reins, 2014, s. VI-IX).

In this respect, for example, in the early months of the Syrian Civil War, President Ahmadinejad's statements advising not to use extensive force against protesters did not have an impact on the Leader and the IRGC, and he did not continue this stance afterwards (MacFarquhar, 2011). Ahmadinejad did not insist on this statement and later adopted a harsher stance, which is an example of how the comprehensiveness and finality of the Leader's statements suppressed any dissenting voices among the authorities. However, both in terms of their position within the system and their closeness to the Supreme Leader, military high-level officials who closely monitor the field operations, such as Quds Force Commander General Soleimani and IRGC senior commanders, have been particularly prominent in shaping decisions (Khalaji, How Khamenei Makes Decisions & Tightening the Reins, 2014).

As former Foreign Minister (2013-21) Javad Zarif has emphasized, the main decision-making mechanism in crisis areas in Syria and across the Middle East has been the SNSC (Çoban, 2020, s. 68-69), which acts under the direct instructions of the Leader. Although this mechanism meets under the chair of the president, the IRGC members at the high-command level, who serve as its general secretary, are both the official representatives of the Leader and are in a critical position in shaping decisions and presenting them to the Leader for finalization. In this respect, the frequent statements of IRGC commanders on foreign policy issues such as the regional priorities in Syria, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon and Yemen also provide insight into the decisions to be taken within the SNSC. Issues such as Iran's strategy in Syria, coordination of IRGC and Quds Force activities and mobilization of Shiite militias are decided upon and turned into policy in the SNSC (Azizi, Iran's Evolving Foreign Policy Structure: Implications on Foreign Relations, 2024, s. 3-4). Following the final approval of the Supreme Leader Khamenei, the IRGC/Quds Force is instructed to execute military decisions and the government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for execution of the other relevant decisions.

On the diplomatic level, presidents and foreign ministers soften these harsh military decisions taken in the SNSC and convey them to their interlocutors, preventing relations with regional countries from breaking down. In this respect, there is a dual strategy, highlighting a distinction for military measures and diplomatic presentation in the transmission of discourses (Divsallar, 2023, s. 221; 242-243).[165] Although presidents have various constitutional powers, critical official bodies (the SNSC) and hard-line conservative institutions such as the IRGC are more effective and come to the fore, and both the presidency and the ministry of foreign affairs descend to a protocol level in strategic security and foreign policy issues.

Perhaps the only recent exception to this reality is that the nuclear file was taken from the Foreign Ministry during the Ahmadinejad era and monitored within the SNSC, but was re-delivered to the Foreign Ministry headed by Javad Zarif during the Rouhani era (2013-21), whose expertise in this matter is well-known. The nuclear deal, abbreviated as JCPOA, mainly negotiated by Zarif with the P5+1 countries after lengthy talks, is also considered a success for the Foreign Ministry (Khalaji, How Khamenei Makes Decisions & Tightening the Reins, 2014, s. 50), but continues to draw great criticism from hard-line conservatives because it involves an agreement with the US which clearly contradicts Ayatollah Khomeini's anti-US stance.[166]

[165] A leaked tape of Foreign Minister Zarif describes this controversial duality with his own words as "I have sacrificed diplomacy for the military field rather than the field servicing diplomacy" (Divsallar, 2023, p. 221).
[166] An interesting statement reflecting the power struggles in the decision-making mechanisms between the institutions, especially the hard-line conservative establishment institutions whose heads are appointed by the

However, strategic security issues in the Middle East, and the Syrian file in this context, are still monitored entirely within the SNSC. Similarly, official security institutions are directly under the Leader's control and supervision, and the presidents has a very limited role over these structures despite the constitutional references.

The IRGC and especially the Quds Force, which was established as its foreign operations unit, are influential structures in Iran's political decision-making mechanisms, especially in matters related to security and military strategy. During the Leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, the IRGC, which created as a precaution against the possibility of a military coup in the army and a parallel structure to the conventional military, was organized to directly protect the Revolution and to project Iran's influence abroad (Esraghi & Mahdavi, 2023, s. 193-194). The Quds Force, which established within the IRGC, became the primary instrument of Iran's regional strategy, especially in countries with Shiite communities such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, which are within the "Axis of Resistance", under the command of Qasem Soleimani (Golkar & Aarabi, 2021). Starting from President Khatami's second term (2001-05), the IRGC began to gain power over Iran's domestic politics and economy, and during the Ahmadinejad era (2005-13), transformed into an asymmetrical power monopoly (Warnaar, 2013, s. 54-55), rapidly becoming one of the main decision-making actors in foreign policy , a process that accelerated with the Syrian Civil War and overshadowed the foreign ministry. This process also led to an increase in the militarization of Iranian foreign policy, and the IRGC became the dominant actor, especially in the Middle East agenda.

In addition to the SNSC, various councils that are influential within the theo-political system in Iran can also sometimes show their influence in the process of foreign policy making. Among these councils, the Expediency Discernment Council and the Assembly of Experts can come to the fore in some critical processes and provide a platform for discussion and debate within the constraints set by the Supreme Leader. The Expediency Discernment Council, which was

Leader, and the reformist or moderate politicians elected by popular vote, belongs to the former foreign minister Zarif, who was outspoken in those issues and was often forced to resign from his post because of that attitude. Zarif expressed the conflict between the foreign ministry and other institutions in the field of foreign policy during his eight-year term in office with the following words: "*Every ministry [in Iran] has its own ministry of foreign affairs.*" He also claimed that "*The country has two foreign policies: one that belongs to the foreign ministry and another that belongs to the armed forces."* In March 2025, Zarif announced that due to this direct and critical stance he had to leave his post as vice-president for strategic affairs, to which he was appointed in August 2024 during the Pezeshkian presidency, since he was instructed to do so by a senior official whose name he did not want to give (Wintour, 2025). Zarif could not take on an active ministerial position in the Pezeshkian government due to the reaction of the conservative-dominated Parliament and the anxiety that he would veto it. He had considered to resign a few days after he was appointed to this post due to the harsh criticism he received, but was persuaded to turn it down.

established during the Khomeini period to resolve conflicts between the parliament and the Constitutional Council and was composed of former presidents, parliamentary presidents and ministers, can sometimes be influential in political conflicts that arise between institutions (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2014, s. 235-236), although its recommendations are non-binding and are subject to the final approval of the Supreme Leader.

This council, which was active in many processes while Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of the founding leaders of the revolution and who served as the president and speaker of the parliament for many years, was alive, lost its influence in the policy making process during Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-13) partially and to a great extent after Rafsanjani's death (Divsallar, 2023, s. 229). Similarly, the Assembly of Experts has the authority to appoint and oversee the Supreme Leader, but since its elected members are indirectly approved by the Leader, opposition or distant figures are prevented from entering this assembly. However, all of these councils are formal structures within the system, and their effectiveness in the process of making both domestic and foreign policy is overshadowed by the domination of the Supreme Leader and the security institutions of the IRGC (Khalaji, How Khamenei Makes Decisions & Tightening the Reins, 2014, s. V).

Despite the hierarchical nature of the Iranian political system and the conflicts of interest between institutions and elites, there is a large elite consensus on critical issues such as national security and the promotion of the "Axis of Resistance", driven by the priority of the continuity of the regime and the preservation of the revolution. However, this consensus often masks the differences in approach and tactics between hard-line conservatives and moderate factions. For example, on the issue of nuclear activities, moderate figures such as Rouhani and Zarif advocate that activities should continue but that this should be done by focusing on international engagement and diplomacy, while more conservative elites advocate that this program should be carried out at all costs and by force if necessary, citing direct national pride and elf-reliance (Khalaji, How Khamenei Makes Decisions & Tightening the Reins, 2014, s. 55-58). Similarly, on the issue of Iran's presence in Syria, while moderate factions advocate that this should be legitimized through a kind of compromise and diplomacy with regional countries, hardliners, especially while the IRGC prioritizes military measures.

These conflicts and power struggles between factions can become so tense that they lead to disagreements, resignations, purges, and punishments during the process of determining Iran's foreign policy. However, with both age and seniority, as well as the experience of his previous

presidency, the Supreme Leader intervenes in disputes between these factions, acts as an arbitrator, and makes the final decision, and hard-line perspectives prevail in most cases (Khalaji, The Regent of Allah: Ali Khamenei's Political Evolution in Iran, 2023). This situation often draws a strong reaction from moderate elites, who argue that the militarization of foreign policy undermines Iran's diplomatic effects and international standing. A recent notable example of power struggles among elites was when the moderate President Pezeshkian, known for his closeness to the Leader, defended the Minister of Economy, who was dismissed from his post by the Parliament in March 2025 due to a vote of no confidence, and attributed the poor state of the economy to international sanctions and the consequent failure to implement the nuclear deal, directly to the Supreme Leader and hardliner circles (Fassihi, 2025).

5.4.4. State-Society Relations: Iranian Nation, Social Mobilization, Ethnic and Sectarian Policies

In Neo-Classical Realist theory, one of the main domestic factors affecting the decision-making processes of a state is state-society relations, which is an important parameter that leaders and elites must take into account when making policies against systemic pressures and perceptions. Since the 1979 Revolution, the relationship between the state and society in Iran has been deeply influenced by its ethnic and sociological composition, economic variables and macroeconomic balances, and interest groups within society. The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic, especially during the Syrian Civil War, reflects the interplay between the ideological goals of the state and the expectations of society. Iran's multi-ethnic structure creates challenges in terms of the country's capacity, as well as opportunities in terms of mobilizing resources and maintaining cohesion.

In this respect, for example, for Shiites from all ethnic groups, who constitute the overwhelming majority of the society, Shiism is a superordinate identity, and the consent of the Shiites can be obtained in the form of *Velayat-e Faqih*. However, the same is not valid for Sunnis (generally Kurdish, Baluch, Turkoman, etc. ethnic groups), and these groups often feel themselves out of the common identity due to the references to Shiism as an establishing factor of the post-revolutionary Iranian identity expressed in the constitution and the problems in its implementation (Abrahamian, Tarikh-e İran-e Modern, 2010, s. 338), leading to tensions that complicate foreign policy decisions. The priorities that have changed due to the economic

conditions shaped by the effects of sanctions and the segments of society such as IRGC-affiliated organizations, Shiite clerics, religious foundations, and associations are also important in shaping policies, albeit with different weights (Divsallar, 2023, s. 241-247).

Iran's ethnic and sociological diversity, especially in the context of foreign policy, has historically posed challenges to state-society cohesion. During the transition period beginning immediately after the 1979 Revolution, due to the Shiite Islamist identity of Khomeini and the revolutionaries, different ethnic groups such as Turkomans, Kurds, Arabs, Baluch, and even Azerbaijani Shiite Turks organized demonstrations demanding autonomy and representation, and these demonstrations later turned into armed conflicts in many regions and lasted for months (Zibakalam, To Rule, or Not to Rule? An Alternative Look at the Political Life of Ayatollah Khomeini, 2014, s. 273). The concern of these communities was that the secular tyranny of the previous period would evolve into an Islamist tyranny in the new period,[167] so their demands for autonomy rose, but these demands were crushed by the central authority (Menashri, 1990, s. 198-202); (Bradost, 2024). Ultimately, with the emergency administration opportunities provided by the Iran-Iraq War, a Shia supremacist structure with a completely strong central administration was formed around the charismatic leadership of Khomeini (Rahimi, 2014, s. 296), with constitutional guarantees.

The segments that were distant from the *Velayat-e Faqih* administration and some Iranian Sunni communities did not welcome Iran's military intervention in the field on behalf of a Shia "Axis of Resistance" during the Syrian Civil War, and some of them even declared support for the Sunni armed opposition in Syria. It has been reflected in various reports that there were hundreds of Iranian Sunnis among the foreign fighters in Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the ISIS, and other Islamist armed groups (Hawramy, 2020). Although such dissenting voices are occasionally heard within Iran, in addition to authoritarian measures and intimidation of minorities (Bradost, 2024), the religious legitimacy and unquestionable personality of the *Vali-ye Faqih* among the Shia masses, who constitute the vast majority of the population, have been the main determinants of Iran's policy-making process. However, such foreign policy steps of the state have the potential to negatively affect its relations with its own minorities and deepen the divide between the state and society, as well as to damage relations with the Sunni-majority communities in the region.

[167] "*Most Sunnis (Kurds, Baluch and other Sunni frontier populations) evaluated the 'Islamic Republic' as a 'government for the Shias'*"; see (Dudoignon, 2017, p. 173).

Another domestic factor influencing Iran's foreign policy orientations during the Syrian Civil War has been the economic conditions and macroeconomic indicators. A significant part of the Iranian public has long expected the state to prioritize domestic economic development over costly foreign strategic and military interventions. However, the Iranian state has preferred to sacrifice its military and logistical support for the Assad regime in Syria (and its proxies in regions such as Lebanon, Yemen, and Iran) and economic resources to a large extent for nearly 14 years, and has instilled patience and endurance in its own people, which it calls the "resistance economy" (Zamiri, 2024, s. 46, 72). When we add to this the aggravating effects of Western sanctions imposed on Iran due to its nuclear activities, and even the effective restrictions on its most important budget and export item, oil, Iran's already problematic economic situation has been profoundly deteriorated over the last decade (Aslan & Ertan, 2022, s. 366, 384).

This poor economic performance led to demonstrations in 2017, which reflected the public's frustration with the state priorities, with the slogans "Leave Syria, think about us" and "Not Gaza, not Lebanon, my life for Iran" (Tzogopoulos, 2018). Crises caused by foreign policy decisions such as the impact of sanctions, the use of resources for military purposes, and the cost of foreign operations further exacerbated state-society relations which causes radicalization of political climate in Iran (Shahi & Abdoh-Tabrizi, 2020), forcing the regime to balance ideological orientations with the need to maintain domestic stability. However, despite all the reactions and internal problems, Ayatollah Khamenei and the military/security elites have continued to prioritize foreign policy goals at the expense of public welfare, but the sustainability of this is also a subject of debate within Iran.

Among the interest groups and the unofficial elites within the system, the clerics who influence public opinion on foreign policy issues have considerable influence. The clerics, as the custodians of Shia Islam, have generally supported the state's domestic and foreign policy decisions since the 1979 Revolution, when Khomeini established the state with his undisputed authority, with the exception of some weak opposition voices that did not reach the mass base. The hardliner perspective and active military intervention in the Syrian Civil War, with Khamenei at the center, have also been generally accepted among the clerics. However, the clerics as a whole do not form a monolithic whole (House, 2013), and some clerics have criticized the regime's prioritization of foreign policy over domestic welfare.

For example, the prominent cleric and a protégé of Ayatollah Khomeini who served as the head of the powerful Constitutional Council in the early 1980s, Ayatollah al-Uzma Yusuf Saanei, who is respected by mostly moderate and opposition groups, has publicly criticized the logic of spending billions of dollars on wars and operations abroad while millions of Iranians live in poverty, a view that has a broad social base in Iranian society (Bar'el, 2012) ; (Gosh, 2015). The recent influence that the IRGC has gained in Iranian politics and economy has led to organizations close to this circle gaining influence in directing public opinion. In addition, the IRGC's excessive prominence, especially in the energy and construction sectors, has led to the use of the income earned from these sectors (as well as the revenues created by underground activities) in financing foreign operations rather than domestic development projects (Esraghi & Mahdavi, 2023, s. 206-216). This competition for resources has led vulnerable social groups such as the middle classes and ethnic minorities to question the IRGC's dominant role in the economy and politics and to press for a more balanced distribution of resources, and these dynamics have ultimately further strained state-society relations.

A quiet important parameter that needs to be included in the analysis of state-society relations in Iran is the tradition of mobilization, and the dynamics that ensured the mobilization of the masses during the decades from the Kajars to the Pahlavis and the 1979 Revolution provide a decisive framework for the modern period. Especially during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88, thanks to the hundreds of thousands of young people who rushed to the fronts with the motto of protecting the revolution and who were able to mobilized by Khomeini and the revolutionary leadership through religious and sectarian discourse (Reda, 2014, s. 125-127), Iran managed not to lose the war despite being weak in terms of weapons and ammunition and was able to resist the occupation (Alibabalu, 2020, s. 98-100).

During the Syrian Civil War, the state and leaders constantly invoked memories of the Iran-Iraq War, which discourse and arguments are still instrumental in mass mobilization, legitimized military intervention in Syria with religious discourse (Alibabalu, 2020, s. 90) and made the argument that they had to be on the ground to defend the revolution against Western imperialism and Sunni extremism. However, it is difficult to say that the mobilization that institutionalized the revolution in the 1980s could provide the same vitality in society in the 2010s; while some segments of society supported this mobilization, other large segments have grown weary of the economic and human costs. This divergence also reveals the complex dynamics of state-society relations in Iran, where a historical tradition of mobilization and a growing public skepticism coexist. However, Iran's ability to maintain this balance has been

increasingly challenged by the economic strain of sanctions and the human cost of the Syrian conflict, which highlights the limitations of the mobilization strategy.

At this point, another complementary view on Iran's mass mobilization dynamics is that Iran, as a country with large population, does not lack the manpower to fight in Syria, but by sending Shiite militias from different countries and communities in the region to Syria in form of troops, Iranian leadership turned this conflict into a defense of Shiism and shows that Iran is not the only one behind the defense of Syria (Kam, 2017, s. 14-15). Although the difficulties experienced by state-society relations in Iran during recent years and there is a sufficient social base to drive the masses to the battlefield in Syria, the strategy of mobilizing Shiites abroad also aimed to ward off any criticism that may arise domestically and the thesis that Iran was directly involved in the war, at least on a mass level.

The Iranian public's opinion on the outcomes of state actions is fundamentally shaped by expectations. In the early years of the civil war, especially in the 2014–17 period, many Iranians supported their state's active intervention in Syria (and Iraq) as a means of countering the threat of ISIS and defending Shia interests. However, as these operations dragged on and economic costs mounted, public support waned, and the state, in particular, prioritized allocation of resources to official foreign and security policies instead of domestic needs. In the process, increasing Iranian losses and further deterioration of economic balances due to sanctions, the unexpected results of the war have further eroded public trust in the regime's ability to deliver on its promises. In this respect, as observed in the case of General Qasem Soleimani assassination, an important figure in Iranian support for foreign operations, in a US bombing in January 2020 increased support in some segments in terms of public mobilization with the culture of *shahada* (martyrdom) (Alibabalu, 2020, s. 104-105), while it had a negative impact on some segments due to demoralization and the feeling of increasing losses (Kam, 2017, s. 10).

Another dynamic of note in state-society relations is the level of political and social cohesion, and in particular, the specific conditions of domestic politics and the state's control over society are decisive in this respect. In the Syrian Civil War, Iranian state structures tried to legitimize this military intervention in the eyes of the public by explaining it with the defense of Shia interests, placing it in the religious/sectarian dynamic, which is one of the most influential factors on society and also forms the basis of the *Velayat-e Faqih* system. However, since the early 2000s, the increasing divide between the state and the less conservative segments

of society, exacerbated by economic hardship and political repression, has undermined the cohesion. For example, the protests of the Syrian Civil War in 2019–20, which were sparked by economic grievances, highlighted the fragility of state-society relations, and challenges of maintaining public support for costly foreign operations (Golkar & Aarabi, 2021).

The state's response to the mass demonstrations in 2019–20 following the 2009 protests in the aftermath of the presidential elections, including the use of lethal force and mass arrests, further eroded trust in the state's ability to do things that benefit society, especially economically (Jones & Newlee, 2019). The active mobilization of the Basij forces within the IRGC in suppressing these mass demonstrations and the use of brutal force by these units, while suppressing dissent (Mahdavi M. , The Velayat-e Faqih: Basis, Power and Longevity, 2023, s. 120), also negatively affected the popular support base for the military interventions in the Middle East conducted under the control of the IRGC. This perverse dynamic negatively affects the popular support base on which the state needs to mobilize society and make critical foreign policy decisions.

5.5. Are the Existing Neo-Classical Realist Arguments Sufficient to Explain the Formation of Iran's Foreign Policy towards Turkey?

The existing framework within the Neo-Classical Realist paradigm undoubtedly provides a robust framework for explaining the factors that shaped Iran's foreign policy towards Turkey during the Syrian Civil War by focusing on the interplay between systemic pressures and domestic dynamics. Neo-Classical Realism focuses on four dynamics when analyzing the domestic factors that affect a country's foreign policy: leadership characteristics, strategic culture, domestic institutions, and state-society relations (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, s. 9). However, I personally believe that these four dynamics are not sufficient, especially when it comes to two historical rivals and regional powers such as Turkey and Iran, which behave within different religious backgrounds and whose identity elements are significantly influential in the shaping of their policies.

I believe that this religious/sectarian parameter should be included in the analysis as a fifth pillar, along with the other four dynamics, in shaping the policies of both countries towards each other. I observe that especially during the Syrian Civil War (2011-24), the sectarianism

dynamic has also been of great importance in the formation of Iran's policy and perceptions towards Turkey, and that it has affected the other four factors together and separately, thus influencing policy-making. Contrary to the opinion of most researchers and observers, Iran's foreign policy during this period was not shaped merely by geopolitical calculations, but also by a deep-rooted religious and ideological commitment to Shia Islam. This sectarian-cantered ideological perspective has profoundly affected Iran's perception of Turkey, which believes that Turkey, as a Sunni-majority state, pursues neo-Ottomanist and Islamist (Sunni) policies, thus threatening Iran's Shia-centric regional order. In this context, I believe that carefully including these five dynamics together in the analysis would provide a better understanding of why Iran's approach to Syrian Civil War and thus Turkey throughout the conflict has been deeply sectarian-motivated.

Iran's leadership, particularly under Ayatollah Khamenei, has been deeply shaped by the Shia mentality that has consistently influenced the country's foreign policy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The concept of *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), centralized in the constitution, positions Shia Islam as a revolutionary departure from the centuries-old quietist tradition from which it emerged, as the cornerstone of Iran's political and religious identity (Mahdavi M. , The Rise of Khomeinism: Problematizing the Politics of Resistance in Pre-Revolutionary Iran, 2014), that also guides the country's regional actions. Along with Khamenei, who became *Vali-ye Faqih* (Supreme Leader) after Khomeini, President Ahmadinejad, IRGC commanders such as General Qasem Soleimani and other military/political leaders framed their support for the Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War as a religious duty to defend Shia Islam against Sunni extremism (Salloukh, 2017, s. 47-48).

In this respect, Ayatollah Khamenei marketed the war in Syria as the legitimate struggle of "Resistance and Defiance Front" under the so-called "axis of resistance" (led by Shia Iran and consisting mainly of Shia states and actors) and the forces of "arrogance" (led by Sunni majority states and the West / Israel) (The Resistance is Syria's prominent character & this important feature must be protected, 2024). This sectarian rhetoric was not merely symbolic, reflecting a genuine belief among Iranian leadership that Assad's survival was essential to preserve Shiite Iranian influence in the region (Alabbasi, 2015). This ideologically dominant understanding puts Iran at odds with Turkey, which supports Sunni opposition groups, including extremists in the field, and aims to counter Iranian influence in Syria (Salloukh, 2017, s. 43-44).

Iran's strategic culture, which shaped its regional security understanding, was deeply intertwined with its Shiite identity particularly during the conflicting years such as the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), in addition to its anti-US and anti-Israeli context. Iran's strategic goals were not only motivated by territorial or political considerations, but its sectarian dimension also heavily influenced this strategic culture since Khomeini's *Velayat-e Faqih* concept was centralized in the constitutional and institutional framework of the Islamic Republic. Iran's strategic culture viewed the alliance established with Syria during the Iran-Iraq War as an existential priority; indeed, during this period, it received significant contributions from Baath Syria for arms needs and political/diplomatic support. Similarly, during the Syrian Civil War, it was a strategic priority for Iran to keep the Syrian regime alive together with Russia, but this time this cooperation also had a sectarian dimension.

Since the early 2000s, Iran has seen the survival of the Assad regime, which has been a source of reaction in the region and is perceived as an existential priority within the "Axis of Resistance", which also includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, powerful Shia organizations in Iraq and other Shia communities in the region. Syria was not only a political ally for Iran, but also a crucial party in terms of the sectarian network, providing an uninterrupted land corridor from Tehran to Beirut, as Ali Shamkhani, former secretary of the influential Supreme National Security Council of Iran also confirmed (Rafizadeh, 2015), allowing military aid and fighters to transit. Support for the Assad regime made Syria a key component of the Shia Crescent that stretches from Iran to the Mediterranean, framed by Iranian decision-makers in the context of protecting Shia interests. Systemic pressures in the region also required Iran to balance US influence with Russia and other allies in the region after the 2003 invasion of Iraq; In order to balance the Sunni weight that was effective until 2003, it was also essential in terms of Iranian strategic culture to create a Shiite counter-bloc through Syria and affiliated networks (Sadeghi-Borujerdi, 2017).

When it comes to Turkey and Syria, Iran's foreign policy is largely securitized within the framework of regional competition and security concerns, in which the IRGC and Quds Force are primarily effective. The fact that the IRGC leaders are in absolute obedience to the Supreme Leader due to the nature of the system and receive their instructions directly from the Leader since Ayatollah Khomeini who transformed the Guard from a military force to a religious, political, economic, and cultural complex controlling almost all strategic areas of the country ((Khalaji, How Khamenei Makes Decisions & Tightening the Reins, 2014, s. VIII). Their crucial role on influential decision-making councils such as the SNSC, made the IRGC and Quds Force

the main guides and executors, especially in the Syrian case. The IRGC, which was organized during the time of Khomeini, was established to protect the revolution and its ideals, as well as to protect Shiite Islam from enemies both domestically and internationally. Therefore, there is a heavy IRGC influence on both the Iranian security apparatus and ideological bodies.

The Shia sectarianism, which was effectively mobilized by Khomeini and revolutionary leaders during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), both mobilized the masses with the ideals of martyrdom and protection in the war against Iraq and transformed the IRGC, the carrier and guide of this mobilization (Kian, 2014, s. 187-188), into the key political, ideological and military institution of the system. Thus, from the 1980s onwards, a military culture dominated the defense of Shiism and this tradition was frequently repeated in subsequent periods (Alibabalu, 2020, p. 105). The IRGC's role in Syria was a direct continuation of this military/ideological tradition in the 1980s, which aimed to solidify Iran's influence through networks established with Shia communities in Lebanon, Iraq and other regions through the Quds Force within the IRGC.

Iran's intervention in Syria was not only an operation to keep the Assad regime alive, but also aimed to create a united front mobilized with a sectarian dynamic against the Sunni opposition forces. It was estimated that the success to be achieved in Syria would also contribute positively to the Shia presence in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, and indeed, as the intervention was successful, the Shia influence in the region was constantly strengthening. To this end, Quds Force, led by General Qasem Soleimani, recruited and mobilized Shia fighters from countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Lebanon (Azizi, Integration of Iran-backed armed groups into the Iraqi and Syrian armed forces: implications for stability in Iraq and Syria, 2022), and similar to the mobilization carried out in Iran under the leadership of the IRGC in the 1980s, this time embarked on a regional Shia mobilization. The basic goal in both processes was the same; to protect the revolution and its ideals, to undertake the defense of the Shia Islam in the region and to form a defensive bloc based on the preservation of Shiism. These deeply sectarian efforts resulted in Iranian political and military elites and institutions positioning their actions as a religious obligation and framing the operations as defense of Shiism (Golkar & Aarabi, 2021, s. 12-16).

Within the existing parameters of the state-society relations, the Iranian official institutions have long used religious discourse in foreign policy to mobilize domestic support, and the Syrian Civil War was no exception. During the Iran–Iraq War, the culture of martyrdom became

a central narrative, setting the stage for the state to use Shiite religious symbols to galvanize national solidarity. In the Syrian context, Iran utilized the rhetoric of Shiite resistance (via the Syria–Lebanon connection) against armed Sunni extremism and defending Shiite holy sites in Damascus to justify its own intervention. Iranian public opinion, often shaped and directed through state-controlled media and social media outlets, was marshalled through narratives that framed support for the Assad regime not only as a political ally's survival but also as the preservation of Shiite Islam (Yılmaz, Meddahlar: İran'ın Suriye'deki Propaganda Ordusu, 2023, s. 121-135). This discourse and mobilization power established a framework that resonated with the religious sentiments of the broad masses, enabling Iran to legitimize its foreign policy on this ideological basis. This strategy has provided the basis for this sectarian dimension of foreign policy, both among Iranian decision-making elites and the political/military bureaucracy, as well as among ordinary citizens.

Therefore, beyond the four domestic dynamics mentioned above, Neo-Classical Realism requires the inclusion of a fifth and powerful dynamic in the analysis. I observe that sectarian politics, which has a central role in Iranian domestic and foreign policy due to its unique structural characteristics, imposes itself as an independent dynamic together with and in strong interaction with the other four dynamics. Leadership characteristics, strategic culture, domestic institutions, and state-society relations offer valuable insights into Iran's behavior, on the other hand sectarianism captures the ideological and religious dimensions that shape Iran's policies. For example, without understanding the logic of Iran's field operations in Syria, in which it mobilizes and carries out with tens of thousands of international Shia fighters, and using the discourse of defending Shiism, the sectarian motivation behind its support for the Assad regime cannot be fully understood and analyzed.

This sectarian dynamic also explains Iran's view of the adversarial relationship between Turkey as a regional power allied with the Western powers and the Gulf Arabs promoting a Sunni Islamist agenda that Tehran evaluates as a threat to its own Shia-centric regional influence. I believe that the framework of Neo-Classical Realist theory, which ignores the sectarian perspective and places cultural identity elements in the background as a component of strategic culture or leadership/institutional characteristics, is far from being explanatory in the case of Iran, and that an independent sectarian dynamic, especially in the case of the Syrian Civil War, would add more depth to the theory. The inclusion of sectarian dynamics in the analysis will provide a more robust and comprehensive framework for understanding Iran's foreign policy during the Syrian Civil War and its approach to Turkey's Middle East policies.

5.6. An Additional Dynamic: Fifth Pillar as "Sectarian Identity" Affecting Turkish-Iranian Relations?

Iran's religiously motivated foreign policy is mostly observed in the statements and actions of its political, military and religious leaders. Leaders such as Ayatollah Khamenei, General Soleimani, President Ahmadinejad, especially in domestic politics and in their speeches and messages to their own audiences, have been presenting foreign policy through an Islamic and more specifically Shia sectarian lens, presenting Iran's regional actions as a part of a broader defense of Shia Muslims and their allies. Soleimani was a strong military figure who coordinated Iran's military and political operations in the region, especially in his relations with local networks and leaders under the Quds Force umbrella, and in the coordination of recruitment and mobilization activities of Shia fighters from different countries (Golkar & Aarabi, 2021); (Akbarzadeh, Gourlay, & Ehteshami, Iranian proxies in the Syrian conflict: Tehran's 'forward-defence' in action, 2022).

The personal attitude of Khamenei, who has determined and guided Iran's domestic and foreign policy as president and later as Supreme Leader since 1981, the power of Shiite Islamist rhetoric and its use during the Syrian Civil War, present us with various explanatory examples in terms of the determinant power of sectarian discourse. Ayatollah Khamenei had been displaying his harsh anti-Western stance and deeply skeptical approach towards Turkey in Syria since 2011, when the Arab Uprisings began. Initially, he saw the uprisings of Arab societies against their own despots as a reflection of the 1979 Revolution, and called them as the "Islamic Awakening", personally ordering conferences to be held in Tehran with high-level participation from the Arab countries (even Egyptian President Morsi, who had a Muslim Brotherhood background, attended) under this ideological brand (Supreme Leader's Speech at Inauguration of Islamic Awakening and Ulama Conference, 2013).[168]

[168] In his opening speech at this conference, Ayatollah Khamenei addressed the audience, which was mostly composed of Sunni and Arab representatives, by stating that they rejected the Shiite-Sunni conflict, did not see the events in Syria (in the conditions of April 2013) as a sectarian conflict, and welcomed the "revolutions" in the Middle East and North Africa as Iran, and referred to the relationship between these revolutions and the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In this speech, Khamenei greeted Ayatollah Khomeini as well as prominent figures in the modern era of the Sunni Islamist tradition such as Sayyid Jamal ad-Din, Muhammad Abduh, Muhammad Ali, Abul A'la Maududi, Hassan al-Banna and Iqbal Lahori (Supreme Leader's Speech at Inauguration of Islamic Awakening and Ulama Conference, 2013).

During this period, Khamenei distinguished the events in Syria from these domino-effect Arab uprisings and evaluated them as legitimate actions against Western-backed authoritarian regimes and a resurgence of Islamic identity. However, Khamenei's selective rhetoric was only valid for uprisings that Iran's interests found appropriate, and depending on the direction in which the regimes in these countries' relations with Iran were moving, they were either "Islamic resurgence" or "US/Israeli conspiracy" (Chubin, Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated, 2012, s. 16-19). In this respect, for example, the protests in Bahrain and Egypt were legitimate, and Khamenei promoted them as Islamic resurgence because they were against Western-aligned dictatorships (Leader's Speech to People of Fars Province, 2011). However, Khamenei did not evaluate the protests in Syria as anti-Western and sufficiently "Islamic resurgence", describing the Syrian opposition as a foreign-backed conspiracy aiming at destabilizing a key ally of Iran in the "Axes of Resistance" (Sadeghi-Borujerdi, 2017, s. 163). This dual approach clearly showed that Khamenei adopted a stance in the region according to the interests of Iran and the Shiites, and did not recognize the principled legitimacy of popular movements and the right of the anti-dictatorship masses to protest.

Khamenei's rhetoric throughout the Syrian Civil War has often taken on a Shiite Islamic tone, often accusing Sunni-majority countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia of supporting armed Sunni extremist groups like ISIS and al-Nusra, which seek to undermine Shia influence in the region. For example, Khamenei and various Iranian leaders directly accused Turkey of allowing those actors to wage a proxy war and supply arms to the ISIS and other extremist groups (Sinkaya, Turkey-Iran relations after the JDP, 2019, s. 42), which occupies vast areas of eastern Syria and western Iraq and is based near Baghdad, and thus infiltrating the region from the Turkish-Syrian border. Khamenei and the Iranian leadership have often indirectly characterized Turkey's actions as a broader Sunni conspiracy against Shia influence.

This rhetoric was not only aimed at discrediting Turkey's role, but was also deployed to rally domestic and regional Shia support for Iran's military intervention in Syria. Iran's statements that its moves in Syria were made to protect Shia communities and to protect the shrines in Damascus considered sacred and holy for Shiite sect also served this purpose (Akbarzadeh, Iran and Daesh: The Case of a Reluctant Shia Power, 2015). There are striking parallels between the Islamic Republic of Iran's statements that it was engaged in a sacred defense (*defa-ye muqaddas*) to protect Shia Islam in the region and the revolution in the name of the Hidden Imam during the 1980-88 war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the justifications for Iran's intervention in the Syrian Civil War (Islam fighting disbelief in Syria:

Iran's Khamenei, 2016). By invoking these historical and essentially sectarian narratives, Khamenei also aimed to legitimize Iran's support for Assad towards a broader regional agenda.

Khamenei's criticisms of Turkey during the Syrian Civil War were largely due to the Iranian public's concern about potential Turkish expansionism, known as neo-Ottomanism, and deep-rooted distrust of Turkey's alliance with the US/NATO. The excessive emphasis of Khamenei and the Iranian leadership on the so-called neo-Ottoman discourse is actually a reflection of the strategic culture brought by historical baggage, as well as a reference to the sectarian emphasis in the Safavid-Ottoman rivalry (Akbarzadeh & Barry, Iran and Turkey: not quite enemies but less than friends, 2016, pp. 7-8). Iran viewed Turkey's military operations in northern Syria, such as Operation Euphrates Shield (2016) and Operation Olive Branch (2018), as attempts to revive the Ottoman penetration that began in the Middle East at the beginning of the 16th century (Jafari & Musavi, 2019)as is discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation. Iranian policymakers and experts consider these moves as steps to reassert Turkish influence in the regions (such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon) that were historically under the influence of Shiite communities in the region that the Ottomans ruled for four centuries. Khamenei's frequent references to the Ottoman Empire in his speeches and the references to the Ottoman struggles with Shiite Iran contain sectarian references as much as they contain geopolitical rivalry.

Khamenei and his security officials, who increased criticism of Turkey based on NATO membership with the radar base opened in Malatya / Kürecik region, 700 kilometers from the Turco-Iranian border, within the scope of the NATO Missile Shield Project in 2012, consider that Turkey is destabilizing the region together with the US/NATO (Sinkaya, Turkey-Iran relations after the JDP, 2019, s. 23). Based on this understanding, Iranian leaders accused Turkey of hypocrisy by trying to mediate between the parties while supporting Sunni extremists in Syria. Khamenei and the Iranian public, for example, think that Turkey is contributing to this destabilization by allowing foreign Sunni radical fighters to enter Syria (Golkar & Aarabi, 2021, s. 34-35). The same circles believe that Turkey's participation in the peace talks in the Astana process and its presence at the diplomatic table is an attempt to mask true intentions. Iranian officials' criticisms of Turkey are not limited to Syria, but also criticizes Turkey for undermining Shiite and Iranian interests in the region in Iraq and Yemen. Assessing Turkey's regional role within a sectarian and anti-imperialist framework, Khamenei presents this discourse as delegating Ankara's policies and Iran's position as a defender of Shiite Islam and the "Axis of Resistance". This approach played a crucial role in shaping Iran's strategic responses to Turkey's increasing influence in the region during the Syrian Civil War.

On the other hand, the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has been continuing in Turkey since the transformative 2002 elections, is largely evaluated in Iran with his religious (mostly indirectly referred to his Sunnism ideology) identity, ethnocentrism and religiosity, his references to the Ottoman period and his neo-Ottomanist line in foreign policy, hence trying to limit Iranian influence across the region ((MEMRI), 2020). Leadership characteristics within Neo-Classical Realism are largely shaped by how leaders perceive the system, foreign policy and the interests of their nation, and the mutual interaction of these factors between Turkish and Iranian leaders during the Syrian Civil War provides a largely determining framework. In this context, the interplay of leadership characteristics in the face of systemic pressures, for example in the balance of power situation, provides a rich framework for understanding the experiences in the Syrian case. For example, while Iran frames its support for Bashar Assad's regime in Syria based on the approach of defending the "Axis of Resistance", Turkey's support for Sunni armed opposition groups was seen and evaluated as countering Iranian influence and reassert Turkish regional dominance (Eslami R. , 2021). Similar to Iranian leaders accusing Turkey of sectarianism, at a Middle East peace conference held in Istanbul in 2012, at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, President Erdoğan criticized Shiism on theological foundations, accusing Iran and Syria of fueling a religious schism to that of Karbala massacre (PM Erdoğan likens Syrian crisis to Karbala Massacre, 2012) in the early Islamic history which laid the groundwork for almost all subsequent sectarian conflicts.

It would be appropriate to take this opportunity to review two extremely interesting statements from Iranian officials regarding the "Shia Crescent" discussions during the Syrian Civil War. Muhammad Ali Jafari, former commander-in-chief of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from 2007 to 2019 directly appointed by the Supreme Leader Khamenei, stated that "*The Shia Crescent is in the process of formation*", indicating the strategic orientation within the military leadership and the IRGC.[169] In contrast, Hojjat al-Islam Hassan Rouhani, who is referred to as a diplomat-sheikh in reference to his role in the Iranian nuclear negotiations and served as president during the most intense period of the Syrian crisis (2013-2021), emphasized that the use of such discourses is not in line with Iran's political goals by saying "We don't have a Shia Crescent" (Sadeghi-Borujerdi, 2017, s. 159). However, it can be said that both discourses point to the hard power - soft power aspect of Iran's strategic culture and that it is normal for what is done on the field to be different from what is said at the

[169] Jafari's statement, which also drew criticism from Iranian government officials, was later rejected by the IRGC Public Relations Department.. (IRGC rejects quotes from its chief on formation of Shia Crescent, 2015).

diplomatic table particularly while considering the Iranian duality in regional politics and pragmatism.

Iran's relations with militias and armed organizations in Iraq and Lebanon have also been a factor in shaping its foreign policy toward Syria. Iran has long supported groups in Iraq whose leadership shares Iran's commitment to *Velayat-e Faqih*, such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) with its armed wing Badr Organization and the Sadr Movement. Although these groups were repressed during the time of Saddam Hussein and kept under constant surveillance because of their relations with Iran, Iran's relations with these organizations have deepened and developed since the overthrow of the Baath regime by the United States in 2003, resulting in Iran's influence spreading throughout all Shia communities in Iraq (Knights, Smith, & Malik, 2021). Established in Lebanon in the early 1980s under the leadership of the *Velayat-e Faqih* and on Khomeini's orders, Hezbollah has served Iran as a crucial ally, further cementing Iran's status as the leader of the Shia resistance across the Middle East. Iran viewed Syria as a vital link to its Shia Crescent (with its own description, the "Axis of Resistance"), ensuring that Shiite groups in Lebanon, Iraq, and beyond had a secure supply line and operational base (Djalili & Kellner, Iran's Syria policy in the wake of the 'Arab Springs', 2014). This sectarian network, built with great care and patience over decades, allowed Iran to project influence across the region, with Syria being a key nexus in this strategy.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) was a critical moment in Iran's sectarian foreign policy strategy. During the war, Iran produced a new language of war mobilization, particularly through Shiite symbols such as the Karbala massacre and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, which also served to inspire its conservative Shiite population and justify its military actions including sending hundreds of thousands of soldiers to the military fronts with the motivation to defend Shiism and the revolutionary ideals (Elhan, 2022, s. 512-513). The establishment of the IRGC and the emergence of the Basij forces further institutionalized this mobilization, and these institutions became the central apparatus during the war in ensuring that Shiism penetrated deeper into Iran's national identity and in promoting Shia Islam and protecting the revolution. The symbolic impact of this war with Shia rituals and the unifying effect around the defense of Shiism (*defa-ye muqaddas*) reverberated throughout the Iranian foreign policy in the following decades, especially during its military intervention in Syria. The rhetoric used by Khamenei and Iranian leaders during the intervention in Syria is largely similar to the legitimating framework used during the Iran-Iraq War in terms of Shiism-referenced arguments (Sadeghi-Borujerdi, 2017, s. 167).

The violence produced by the ISIS, al-Nusra Front and other al-Qaeda-affiliated and Islamist organizations, which have a significant presence on the ground in Syria and once controlled vast territories in northeastern Syria and northwestern Iraq, and the direct and indirect threats they have posed to the Shiites in the region, have accelerated the sharpening of the sectarian tone in Iran's foreign policy. Undoubtedly, while the Arab upheaval morphed into a full-fledged sectarian warfare, the field was profoundly shaped and the conflict was championed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria ("Daesh" in Arabic and Persian) (Akbarzadeh, Iran and Daesh: The Case of a Reluctant Shia Power, 2015, s. 44). Iran has tended to legitimize its military actions in Syria (and Iraq) with the argument of combating ISIS and other organizations.

Sunni extremism has shown a strong presence on the ground during the chaotic 2010s, when the regime suppressed the initially peaceful public demonstrations with military measures and bombed the cities, when armed groups that separated from the Syrian army emerged after a while, when ideologically motivated jihadist organizations intervened in this conflict environment, and when regional countries facilitated and accelerated the transfer of weapons and fighters to Syria. The raids and massacres of these extremist groups on the settlements of Alawi/Nusayri, Shia and Druze paved the way for harsher measures from the Baath regime and military intervention by Iran-allied Shia groups on the ground as the conflicts internationalized. In this process, both the Sunni extremist groups of the armed opposition and the Iranian and other Shia militias that came to Syria from regional countries to support the regime influenced, provoked and escalated the conflict, further deepening sectarian hatred and division. Iran's sectarian politics was both strengthened by this escalation and itself strengthened by increasing the conflict and retaliatory massacres on the ground.

The sectarian rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia (and other Sunni Arab monarchies in the Gulf) is a defining feature of Middle Eastern geopolitics, stretching from the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) to the ongoing conflicts in Yemen and Syria. This rivalry is deeply rooted in a complex framework of religious, political and strategic factors, with both sides leveraging sectarianism to advance their expanding regional ambitions. During the Iran-Iraq War, the Saudis and the Gulf states, fearful of the influence and regime expulsion of their own Shia minorities and Iraq's Shia majority following the 1979 revolution, provided significant financial and logistical support to the Sunni-dominated Baath regime of Saddam Hussein (Legrenzi & Gause, 2016, s. 312). This support was largely sectarian in addition to its ethnic dismissive rhetoric, as was evident in the anti-Persian and anti-Shiite rhetoric in the Arab media of the war

years, and in the particular references to the seventh century Sassanid-Arabic wars (Dabashi, 2011, p. 304).

The Gulf Arab leaders presented this reproduction and instrumentalization of history as a defense of Sunni Islam against the alleged complaints regarding the expansionist ambitions of Shiite Islamic Republic. During this period, Khomeini's uncompromising calls for regime exportation and various concrete indicators of Iran's relations with Shia communities in the region strengthened fears that the revolutionary ideology would find a response and take root among the Shiite Muslims of the region (and even among some radical and marginal Sunni communities). In return, throughout the Iran-Iraq war, Iran did not hesitate to utilize the Shiite metaphors of Karbala, Imam Hussein and martyrdom at every level, frequently in order to both root the revolution domestically and increase popular support, and to mobilize the masses for the military fronts. Both Tehran and Riyadh lay claim to leadership of the Islamic world (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p. 11), thus this sectarian reciprocal rivalry and hostility continued to be maintained by reinforcing and reproducing each other, and sectarianism also mobilized as a domestic factor that served and strengthened the geopolitical goals of both sides.

This sectarian rivalry replaced by a political pragmatism following the death of Khomeini and under strong presidency of Rafsanjani (1989-97), in the 1990s and early 2000s (during Muhammad Khatami's presidency) brief periods of detente took place, and Iran pursued a policy of rapprochement towards the Gulf kingdoms. Rafsanjani's policy of strengthening economic cooperation and reducing the sectarian tone, and Khatami's international conciliatory line sought to reduce tensions (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p. 11). However, the regional geopolitics that emerged after the events of 9/11, combined with the destabilizing influence of the United States, led to intense sectarian conflict and chaos in Iraq, and thus the Iranian-Saudi rivalry began to redefine the balance in the shadow of the conflict seeking dominance over Iraq. The Shia Crescent discourse, which was first put forward by the Saudis' close ally, King Abdullah II of Jordan, in 2004 and extended from Tehran to Beirut, also emphasized these sectarian hostilities. The 2011 Arab Uprisings were initiated under these conditions, and Syria became a new battleground of sectarian rivalry.

After the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Iran was capitulated on the power vacuum created in Iraq by bolstering its influence among Iraqi Shia communities and political, religious, and armed actors. Iran's growing influence in Iraqi politics and security was rooted in a shared commitment to Shia Islam, as evidenced by its open support for Shia Islamist figures and armed

structures dominated by the Shia Islamist character, such as Nouri al-Maliki and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) (Mansour & al-Jabbār, 2017).[170] Iran's ability to penetrate Iraq so deeply and successfully organize the Shia communities on the ground, combined with Hezbollah's successful presence in Lebanon against Israel and rival power groups, restored Tehran's confidence and increased its motivation to expand its sphere of influence and implement military measures when the Syrian Civil War began. The strategic cooperation between Iraq and Syria, cemented by Iran's bold military steps throughout the Civil War, resulted in Iran's growing influence in the Middle East.

Iran tried to legitimize its involvement in the Syrian Civil War through a narrative based on the Shiite historical and religious motifs. Thus, by presenting the war as a religious struggle on historical grounds, it aimed to ensure the participation, support and political unity of both the Iranian Shiite masses and other Shiite communities in the region. In this respect, the first stage was the demonization of the masses presented as enemies; with a wholesale approach, all Sunni Arabs who rebelled against Assad and the Baath regime (regardless of their differing motivation and purpose of revolt) were directly labelled as *takfiri* movements. However, only a part of the armed opposition, including the Salafi-Wahhabi segment, fell into this definition; it was not possible to define the broad masses in this way and to talk about such a *takfiri* movement of millions, but since this demonization was also important in terms of mobilizing its own masses (Akbarzadeh, Iran and Daesh: The Case of a Reluctant Shia Power, 2015, s. 46-47), these definitions were persistently used even after the civil war ended in December 2024.

At this point, an interesting example extending from history to the present day is the narrative built around Imam Hussein's sister Zaynab, who survived Karbala massacre and was brought to Damascus by Yazid and continued his anti-Yazid struggle in Damascus. Essentially, the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, which was also greatly respected by the Sunnis, was in a central position in this narrative. The argument that, based on the small number of Salafi extremists who attacked during the civil war, Sayyida Zaynab, who was not protected in time and was left alone and defenseless in Karbala with her brother, was taken to Damascus as a captive. Therefore, her holy shrine would not be left alone and defenseless this time by the Shiites, who went to Damascus to protect this shrine and other Shiite holy sites in the country. In this case,

[170] The PMF is not a monolithic bloc but reflects Shia-centred ideology and behavior containing three distinct factions, based on various subgroups' respective allegiances to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and Muqtada al-Sadr. The Quds Force and General Qasem Soleimani's active involvement in the Iraqi politics and military organisation strengthened the Iran-backed factions and made the most powerful military wing within the PMF during and after the struggle against the ISIS (Mansour & al-Jabbār, 2017, pp. 13-14).

the Karbala and Hussein-Zaynab-Yazid metaphor is adapted to the modern era, and the Shiite militants are praised as supporters of Hussein and potential martyrs. On the other hand, the Syrian opposition (with all its colours and even secular factions) and the Western powers and the regional states supporting the opposition such as Turkey and the Gulf Arabs are identified as Yazid and his supporters. This analogy is even continued with the flags and symbols; the defense of the holy sites of the Shiites in Syria is also defined as "sacred defense (*defa-ye muqaddas*)", and the slogans "Labbayk ya Hussein / Zaynab / Mahdi" are used in the language and uniforms of the Shiite militias. In return, the ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups label the Iranian soldiers and the Shiite militias as "Majusi" or "Safavid", thus further escalating the historical hatred and sectarian tone (Elhan, 2022, s. 515-516). The interpretation of historical metaphors in the modern era thus turns the Syrian Civil War into a sectarian conflict.

During the Syrian Civil War, a significant dynamic that emphasized both the mobilization of the Iranian Shiite masses and the sectarian dimension of the war and was unique to Iran was the *maddah* tradition,[171] which appealed to the emotions of the community by retelling and narrating the historical sufferings of the Shiites. It was a practice that Ayatollah Khomeini himself gave importance to both in the mobilization of the faithful masses while organizing the anti-Shah protests before the Revolution and in the ceremonies held in his presence. In this respect, *maddah*s played an important role, for example, with poems that identified Khomeini with Imam Hussein and the Shah with Yazid.[172] During the Iran-Iraq War, maddahs were actively used both in the mobilization of soldiers to be sent to the front, militias to participate in the mobilization, and the wealthy who would provide the mobilization with financial support, and in motivating soldiers on the front and preparing them for martyrdom and attacks in the name of religion. (Golkar & Aarabi, Iran's Revolutionary Guard and the Rising Cult of Mahdism: Missiles and Militias for the Apocalypse, 2022, s. 10). During the war, while the "Imam Hussein" of the time was still presented as Khomeini, Yazid had changed and become Saddam Hussein.

[171] The Shiite religious and cultural tradition of *maddah*, which is sometimes called "eulogist, panegyrist, religious singer, ideological preacher and mourner" in English, is an important institution in the living of Shiism within society and in controlling the emotional tension of the masses, which the state also frequently uses. They are the religious singers performing religious narratives and stories who sadden and grieve the audience by reading poems during the mourning ceremonies organized with great enthusiasm in contemporary Iranian society. Traditional background of reading poetry in terms of *maddah* style goes back to the Karbala days within various Shia rumours and accounts (Yılmaz, İmam Hüseyin'in Yasçıları: Gelenekten Günümüze İran'daki Şiî Matem Merasimlerinde Meddahlar, 2021, p. 304).

[172] Yazid ibn Muawiya was the second caliph of the Umayyad dynasty, ruling from 680 to 683 CE. He is a hated figure in Islamic history, in both the Shiite and Sunni traditions, best known for having the Prophet's grandson Hussein brutally murdered in Karbala to consolidate his political power.

As a continuation of this sectarian tradition for mass mobilization, during the Syrian War, *maddah*s played a significant role both on the front and in the mobilization of the Shia people (mainly among the Shias of Iran and Iraq). In the process of religious/ideological legitimization of military intervention in Syria, they were effective in mobilizing the society by using arguments such as reflecting the intervention as a necessary and legitimate policy, also expressing that the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus should be saved from attacks by extremist terrorists, and that Iran's national interests and borders could be defended through this intervention. They also played an active role in motivating Shia fighters among soldiers on the front lines in Syria, in mosques and holy shrines. The themes that *maddah*s used during their performances also show how the war was being waged along sectarian lines in terms of the Iranian leadership and society, and on what basis it was perceived. Taking revenge for the Karbala massacre where the Prophet's grandson Imam Hussein was killed by a cruel group, portraying pro-Iran groups as supporters of Imam Hussein and the other side as supporters of Yazid, emphasizing that the Syrian War paved the way for the return of Imam Mahdi (Twelfth Shi'i Imam), who is very important in Shiite theology; in short, instilling feelings of sadness, anger and revenge through Karbala; and hope and expectation through the Mahdi narrative, and legitimizing the sectarian war in Syria by sanctifying it in every case. A noteworthy aspect of the Shiite sectarianism in Syria is that the mobilization and organization of these Maddahs on the ground was realized by the Quds Force within the IRGC propaganda activities. (Yılmaz, Meddahlar: İran'ın Suriye'deki Propaganda Ordusu, 2023, s. 191-195).

An often neglected but important component of Iran's theo-political system and foreign policy is the religious salvationist ideology or Mahdism, founded on the return of Imam Mahdi. With the revolution carried out by Khomeini within the centuries-long quietist tradition, Mahdism and the doctrine of the *Vali-ye Faqih* to govern the Ummah in the absence (occultation) of Mahdi became even more central to foreign policy during Khamenei's leadership. The salvationist religious ideology was further institutionalized during the presidency of Ahmadinejad (2005-13), who came from a more radical community[173] and was originally from the Basij, and the state and policies began to take shape around the motto "We

[173] For one of the most prominent studies in the literature on President Ahmadinejad's deep commitment to messianic ideas and the Hojjatiyeh Society from which he allegedly came, see Cohen, Ronen (2013). *The Hojjatiyeh Society in Iran: Ideology and Practice from the 1950s to the present*. Springer (Cohen R. , 2013). Ahmadinejad and the Mahdism/Hojjatiyeh debates were among the most popular domestic political agenda items in Iran during the 2000s. Ahmadinejad received intense reactions and attacks in this conflict not only from reformist circles such as former president Muhammad Khatami, but also from conservative circles around the Supreme Leader Khamenei. For discussions on this subject, see: (Cohen R. , 2013, s. 131-144) ; (Naji, 2008, s. 15).

have a mission –to turn Iran into a country of the Hidden Imam." Even the Jamkaran Mosque near the city of Qom, where the 12th Imam Mahdi is believed to return, was given special attention and millions of dollars were invested in campus arrangements for visitors (Golkar & Aarabi, Iran's Revolutionary Guard and the Rising Cult of Mahdism: Missiles and Militias for the Apocalypse, 2022, s. 9).

The period when the IRGC and Basij gained power and began to dominate the Iranian political and economic system was also the tenure of Ahmadinejad as the president. This period when the cult of Mahdi phenomenon emerged was also the period when the Syrian Civil War began and the IRGC and Mahdism movement, which gained strength domestically, began to influence foreign policy and accelerated their activities in the field to determine Iranian security and foreign policy in the Middle East (Sadeghi, 2023). In 2012, the official representative of the Supreme Leader in the IRGC and the cleric responsible for ideological indoctrination in the army, Hujjat al-Islam Ali Saeedi, said, The IRGC is one of the tools for paving the way for the emergence of the Imam of the Age (Mahdi) in the field of regional and international awakening, and the IRGC Quds Force plays the primary role in this regard." (Golkar & Aarabi, Iran's Revolutionary Guard and the Rising Cult of Mahdism: Missiles and Militias for the Apocalypse, 2022, s. 11). The words of a high-level figure close to and loyal to Khamenei, such as Saeedi, are also a guide in terms of the military dimension of the Mahdism phenomenon and its reflection on the executive field through the IRGC.

The 2011 Syrian uprising and the emergence of the Sunni extremist structures and the ISIS were also evaluated through the prism of Mahdism within the IRGC and active interventionist circles. In particular, the apocalyptic war (*jang-e akhar al-zaman*) and the narrations about the return of the 12th Imam of Shiism, which are included in the Shiite and Sunni narrations, provide a perspective that complements the whole picture that the intervention in Syria was actually done to prepare the ground for the return of the "Imam of the Age" (Golkar & Aarabi, Iran's Revolutionary Guard and the Rising Cult of Mahdism: Missiles and Militias for the Apocalypse, 2022, s. 11).

Similarly, the spread of the *Isnaashariyah* (Twelver Shiite School) in Yemen and the establishment of the armed structures (Ansarullah) supporting *Velayat-e Faqih* among the Zaydis, another Shiite tradition, have Mahdism-centered motivations based on Shiite religious narrations. The "eradication of Israel" discourse frequently used by Ahmadinejad also has its counterpart in Shiite narrations and salvation theology (Sadeghi, 2023). Although Iran's foreign

policy is not entirely determined by these narratives and Shiite salvationist rhetoric, as a deeply significant complementary dynamic to geopolitical and realist elements, Iran's activities and behavior on the ground, especially in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, are largely shaped by this Mahdist rhetoric and the leadership's strictly pious behavior patterns. Similar sectarian interpretations and religious references are also frequently encountered among Sunni extremists, and these two sectarian movements reinforce each other and escalate the hostilities.

It is true that the sectarian perspective is one of the main determinants of Iran's foreign policy, especially when it comes to closely affiliated regions such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, but Iran's entire foreign policy and approach to all topics is not shaped by Islamic or sectarian discourse. For example, in the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, sectarian discourse is relegated to lower ranks (Deniz, 2020, s. 91-93); (Sadeghi-Borujerdi, 2017, s. 160), and pragmatic requirements can sometimes push sectarian discourse back, as President Rafsanjani (and also President Khatami) did in the 1990s during their normalization steps with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab countries (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p. 11). Similarly, in the case of Syria, one of the important dynamics that has revealed and sharpened Iran's sectarian perspective is the armed threat of the Baath order and the armed Sunni extremist activities on the ground. In this respect, this dynamic, which facilitated Iran's mobilization of Shiites in the field, together with the reaction it produced, created a reaction both in the Sunni states and non-state actors in the region and in extremist organizations in the field, and led to the escalation of sectarian violence, as in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, and in Syria during the civil war.

The violence produced by the ISIS, al-Nusra Front and other originally al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations that have a significant presence in the battlefield of Syrian Civil War and the direct or indirect threats they posed to the Shiites in the region accelerated the sharpening of the sectarian tone in Iran's foreign policy. Iran has tended to legitimize its military actions in Syria (and Iraq) with the argument of fighting against the ISIS and other extremist organizations as a struggle to prevent their attacks on Shia holy sites (Akbarzadeh, Iran and Daesh: The Case of a Reluctant Shia Power, 2015, s. 49-51); (Hunter S. T., 2015, s. 154-155).

The tense relations between Turkey and Iran during the Syrian Civil War had regional parameters, other than Syria and the sectarian agenda; among these, growing path of the Turkey-Azerbaijan relations and the problems experienced between the Nouri al-Maliki government in Iraq and Ankara were more significant for Iranian decision-makers than others. In the 1990s, Iran, which put aside religious and sectarian politics and acted more closely to

Armenian arguments in the conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan, whose population is predominantly Shiite and of the same ethnic origin as its compatriots in Iran (Larrabee & Nader, 2013, s. 18), continued this policy during the Second Karabakh War in 2020, and drew reactions from both Turkey and Azerbaijan for this political preference. The peace agreement signed in November 2020 after Azerbaijan recaptured Karabakh by military means and ended the war was not welcomed in Tehran, as it strengthened Turkey's influence in the Caucasus and reduced Iran's maneuver sphere. Likewise, Iran, which was concerned about the military and economic strengthening of the Azerbaijan Republic in the region and its influence on both irredentist Turkist tendencies and its own Azerbaijani population, watched the rise of the Baku-Ankara axis with anxiety as seen in the discussions regarding the Zangezur Corridor, which is of strategic importance to Turkey. (Sarı, 2000'li Yıllarda Türkiye-İran İlişkileri, 2024, s. 146-147); (Cafiero, 2025).

The primary area of competition between Turkey and Iran in the region before the Arab uprisings was Iraq. Maliki, who lived in exile in Iran during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, was active in the pro-Khomeini Iraqi Dawa Party and involved in assassination attempts against Saddam Hussein (Chulov, Exile returned to sign death order of man who tried to kill him, 2009), served as prime minister in Iraq with the active support of Iran between 2006 and 2014. During this period, Iran-Iraq relations were at their peak, while Maliki's strict sectarianism and opposition to Turkey both strained Baghdad-Ankara relations and accelerated the competition between Iran and Turkey for influence over Iraq. In particular, in the power vacuum that emerged after the withdrawal of the majority of the US troops from the country in 2011, the Shia bloc led by Maliki sought closer cooperation with Iran in order to eliminate extremist organizations and ensure security in the resulting vacuum (Sarı, 2000'li Yıllarda Türkiye-İran İlişkileri, 2024, s. 143-144).[174]

While Turkish-Iranian relations were largely affected by this competition in the Caucasus and Iraq prior to the Arab Uprisings, the sectarian dimension was also heavily involved in this rivalry in Iraq, and Turkey tightened its relations with Sunni Arabs, Turkomans and Kurds in order to balance Iran, which contributed the creation of an area consisting intense sectarian tension in Iraq. The sectarian dimension that would gain momentum in Syria was tested on a large scale in the field of Iraq and later transferred to Syria on the Iraqi side with the help of the

[174] The words of the IRGC's Quds Force commander General Soleimani to General Petraeus, commander of the US troops in Iraq, "I, Soleimani, control Iran's policies with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan" (Chulov, Qassem Suleimani: the Iranian general 'secretly running' Iraq, 2011) also reflects the balance of power and Iran's strength against the US and Turkey in Iraq during those conflicting and sectarian years.

Maliki government, and Turkey's relations with Sunni armed groups also strengthened this dimension.

Within this general sectarianization climate in the Middle East politics, Turkish-Iranian relations have also been shaped by a complex blend of sectarian dynamics, geopolitical rivalry and systemic pressures throughout the Syrian Civil War. Despite centuries of common interests in certain regional matters, both countries have found themselves on opposing sides of the conflict in Syria, primarily due to differing sectarian affiliations and their respective visions for regional dominance (Djalili & Kellner, Iran's Syria policy in the wake of the 'Arab Springs', 2014, s. 398-400). The sectarian nature of the conflict in Syria, with its Sunni majority versus a ruling Alawite/Shia minority, has added an extra layer to the already competitive relations between the two regional powers. With its Shiite-centric foreign policy, Iran has supported the Assad regime, which is largely composed of Alawites as an offshoot of Shi'ism. In contrast, Turkey, whose population is largely Sunni, has supported various Sunni rebel forces that have taken up arms to overthrow the Assad regime (Salloukh, 2017, s. 43-44). This sectarian divide has exacerbated their geopolitical rivalry, complicating their interactions and positioning within the broader Middle Eastern panorama. Additionally, as the power struggle in the Caucasus and the open conflict in Syria have shown, the course of Turkey-US relations, as well as Iran's relations with Russia, have been decisive in terms of the direction and course of this regional competition (Yeşiltaş, Complex dynamics of Türkiye-Iran relations, 2024).

The Shiite Crescent, which Iran created with an uninterrupted land corridor extending from Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea, served as a buffer zone to counterbalance the Sunni influence led by actors such as Turkey and the Gulf Arab countries. Iran's Shiite-centric foreign policy was undoubtedly motivated not only by religious solidarity but also by strategic implications. The Assad regime was essential to maintain this strategic logistics line, in which Iran supported Palestinian groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as well as Hezbollah (Kam, 2017, s. 17-19). Thus, Iran's actions in Syria were underpinned by a desire to extend Shiite political and military influence, presenting a direct challenge to Sunni-dominated powers like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab states to counterweight their actions and support to Sunni rebels (Marandi, 2012, s. 89-93).

Turkey's approach to the Syrian conflict was a reflection of geopolitical calculations as well as its own Sunni identity and its policy of seeing a Sunni government instead of an Iranian-backed Alawi/Shiite government in Syria, where it shares a land border of over 900 km and

where approximately 70% of the population is consisted of the Sunni Arabs. Under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey was seeking to limit Iran's rapidly expanding influence in the region, and viewed the Assad regime as an extension of Iran's regional ambitions (Azizi & Çevik, Turkish and Iranian involvement in Iraq and Syria: competing strategies, rising threat perceptions, and potentials for conflict, 2022, pp. 4-6). This military alliance between Syria and Iran was not only against Turkey's strategic interests, but also against Turkey's geographical access to the Arab World, as Iran's strong presence in both Iraq and Syria, which lie between Sunni Arabs and Turkey, was perceived as a threat from a geopolitical perspective and as a threat to the vision of cooperation between Sunni-majority countries in the region (Davutoğlu, Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu, 2001, s. 435-436).

Thus, Turkey supported Sunni rebel groups for these strategic and cultural reasons, including those with Islamist affiliations, in a bid to overthrow Assad and curtail Iranian influence in its southern neighborhood. Considering Iran's vast sphere of influence in Iraq and Lebanon, Turkey's support for the anti-Assad religious opposition in Syria not only bore the marks of a sectarian perspective, but also aimed to break Iran's decades-long sphere of influence in the Levant. Although Turkey does not adopt a strict Sunni sectarian and anti-Iran stance as vehemently as the Gulf Arab monarchies since its close economic relations and diplomatic engagement with Tehran, it finds cooperation and unity with Sunni powers more preferable due to the historical animosities with Iran, which are also fueled by sectarian differences, and the regional rivalry struggle.

Turkey's harsh response to what it perceives as Iran's strategy of supporting proxy forces in Syria and creating instability is noteworthy in terms of showing the geopolitical dimension of the power struggle between the two countries in Syria. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan was publicly asked in March 2025, three months after the Iranian-backed Assad regime in Syria was overthrown, "Will Iran accept losing Syria so easily?" The answer given by Fidan to the question can be read as a very clear expression of the security perceptions of Turkey caused by the groups that Iran militarily supports in Syria and the region. Foreign Minister Fidan's answer to the question regarding Iran's SDF, the backbone of which is formed by the YPG, which has ties to the PKK, is actually a direct expression of the uneasiness in this area: "*If you want to create instability by supporting a group in another country, another country also tends to create instability by supporting another group in your country. In other words, nothing can be hidden in the world anymore. Others have the same abilities that you have. Therefore, if you do not*

want stones thrown at your window, you will not throw stones at someone else's window." Fidan also criticized Iranian approach to establish influence zones across the regions through proxy groups: "*Iran's foreign policy through militias in regional countries is a policy that Iran has been managing with great risk for a long time. It has gained some benefits, but the cost of maintaining these benefits is greater. In order to maintain the benefits it has in Iraq and Syria, Iran has had to sacrifice much more than those benefits*." (Fidan: Türkiye için tehdit oluşturan PKK'yı destekleme yönündeki mecburiyetten Amerika'nın çıkması gerekiyor, 2025).

In response to Fidan, Ali Aqbar Velayati, the chief advisor for strategic and foreign relations to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and one of the influential strategists within the system as a former foreign minister, warned that Turkish officials were violating the rules of diplomatic protocol and said that if this continued, it would have a negative impact on bilateral relations (Briefing: Senior Iran adviser warns Turkey against 'bluster', 2025). The Iranian Government spokeswoman, Fatemeh Mohajerani, also criticized Fidan's remarks as "unconstructive" and added: "*We hope not to witness a repeat of them*" (Soylu, 2025). Many similar verbal duels had taken place throughout the Syrian Civil War reflecting the tension of rivalry over Syria between the two powerful regional countries.

The US and Russia have played a crucial role in shaping the geopolitical dynamics of the Syrian Civil War which served as an additional further complicating Turkish-Iranian relations. Historically a close ally of Turkey, the US's political and military support for the YPG, a Kurdish separatist organization in Syria, largely comprised of militants from the PKK, which Ankara considers a terrorist organization, has disappointed Turkish decision-makers. This cooperation strained Turkish-American relations and pushed Turkey to closer ties with Russia, despite the two countries' conflicting interests in Syria and bitter experiences such as the downing of a Russian jet in 2015 and the subsequent bombing of a Turkish military unit by Russian aircraft (Hale, Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War, 2019). On the other hand, Russia, with its intense military and political support to the Assad regime throughout the war, has provided an important basis of support both for the Baath regime's 60-year rule in the country and for the establishment and strengthening of the Shiite sphere of influence against the US-Israeli bloc in the region. Russian-Iranian military cooperation in the Syrian land and air space was the most important factor in shaping the balance in favor of the Baath regime in the civil war. From Turkey's perspective, Russian-Iranian cooperation and the crushing of armed rebels thanks to this alliance were perceived as a strategic loss; in order to neutralize this new alliance in Syria, intensive support was provided to Sunni armed opposition together with

the USA and the Gulf Arab countries, further entrenching Sunni-Shia geopolitical rivalry (Salloukh, 2017, s. 46).

Although Israel was not directly involved in the Syrian Civil War, it played an indirect but deeply significant role in shaping the balance of power in the region. Israel perceived the increasing Iranian presence in Syria and the Iranian military infrastructure growing day by day on its own borders as a major threat. Thus, it continuously operated behind the scenes to undermine the influence of Iran and its affiliated networks and proxies in Syria, conducting airstrikes against Iranian-backed targets (including embassy buildings, military bases, senior commanders, supply lines, etc.) in the country (Musa & Karacaoglu, 2024). These attacks and the new balance that emerged further deepened the Sunni-Shia polarization in the region, with both sides accusing each other of dividing the Islamic Ummah in cooperation with foreign powers. While the increasing power of Iran and its proxies in the region posed a direct security threat to Israel, Turkey increasingly sought to balance these pressures by engaging in a series of practical alliances with various regional and international actors. This convergence of interests created a web of external influences shaping Turkey's strategic calculus within the context of the Syrian conflict.

Saud Arabia also played a pivotal role in the sectarian dimension of the Syrian crisis. As Sunni powers, the Gulf monarchies saw the rise of Iranian influence as a direct threat to the Sunni-dominated balance of power in the region, which also suggested that after Syria, the Gulf might be next destination for Iranian regional ambitions. The Gulf countries, primarily Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have supported the Sunni rebel factions in Syria, a significant portion of which have ideological and financial ties to the Gulf through Salafi networks, in order to curb broader Iranian hegemony in the region. The competition between the Gulf Sunni states and Iran's Shiite axis has further deepened the sectarian fault lines in Syria, with the two powers militarily backing opposing sides in a proxy war aligned with their broader ideological and sectarian interests. While Turkey provided logistical support to certain groups, the open support given by the Gulf countries to the Sunni armed rebels brought these two sides together in the aim of reducing Iran's ineffectiveness in the region and produced fruitful results in terms of Turkey's broader attractive objectives in Syria (Salloukh, 2017, s. 43-48). As a result, the civil war in Syria has gone far beyond being a domestic conflict and has become internationalized, activating geopolitical fault lines in the entire region and deepening sectarian divisions, and sectarian rivalry in the region has become more visible.

5.7. Conclusion

Throughout the Syrian Civil War, Iran and Turkey's foreign policies and approaches towards each other have been largely shaped by an ideological, geopolitical and sectarian framework. However, although Sunni-majority Turkey and Shia-majority Iran confront each other in Syria, the two countries demonstrated significant pragmatism in their relations, compartmentalizing areas of cooperation from their points of contention. Despite their starkly differing positions regarding the Syrian Baath regime, Turkey's support for armed Sunni opposition groups and Iran's staunch backing for Bashar al-Assad with Shia militias gathered across the Middle East and Afghanistan-Pakistan, Turkey and Iran's bilateral relations remained characterized by pragmatic cooperation in key areas such as energy security and trade despite the pressure emanating from the US sanctions. This compartmentalization, despite the competition and sectarianized conflict areas they experienced in Syria (as well as in Lebanon and Iraq), allowed both nations to continue engaging diplomatically, and avoid direct confrontation in a region marked by instability and competition for influence.

In this study and exclusively in this chapter, I examined the domestic factors shaping Iran's foreign policy towards Turkey during the Syrian Civil War, using a Neo-Classical Realist framework. As this theoretical paradigm argues, foreign policy is shaped by the interplay between systemic pressures and international balances, and domestic variables. The theory groups these domestic factors under four main headings: leader images, strategic culture, domestic institutions and state-society relations. However, when it comes to a unique Islamic republic and theocratic system like Iran, and a dynamic that has been able to easily mobilize the masses for centuries, such as Shiism, I observed that this theoretical framework is inadequate and falls short of explaining the depth and nature of historical and periodic relations, tensions and continuous conflictual environment between Iran and Turkey. The addition of the "sectarian identity" factor as an independent variable to the theory and the explanatory framework of the relations, provides a more nuanced and comprehensive account in understanding the complex decision-making processes of Iran.

In the context of Iranian policy-making towards Turkey, a multitude of factors influenced the dynamics of their relationship. The domestic political structure and leadership that shape Iran's view of Turkey are structured around the views of prominent figures such as the Supreme

Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani, the IRGC command and General Qassem Soleimani on the Syrian Civil War and regional issues. It is observed that these figures, in parallel with Iran's rising political and military power in the region following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, used their anti-American and anti-Israeli approaches during the Iran-Iraq war and the subsequent Arab Uprisings and their effectiveness in policy-making mechanisms during the Syrian Civil War in the direction of sectarianization. While previous studies have said a lot about the religious and sectarian orientations of the Islamic Republic's political, religious and military leaders; this chapter discusses how their perspective regarding the international system and regional security environment, as well as their views on regional issues and policy formations towards Turkey were also significantly shaped within a sectarian framework during the Syrian Civil War.

Iran's strategic culture and perception of the international system further influenced its approach to Turkey during the Syrian Civil War. Iran and Turkey, as heirs of the Safavid and Ottoman imperial traditions, have been in competition in the Middle East for centuries and have tried to weaken each other in order to gain spheres of influence in the region. However, the Syrian Civil War has reshaped this competition on a sectarian level, adding a new factor to the strategic cultural framework after the Safavid-Ottoman rivalry. Rooted in a blend of Iranian nationalism, Shiite identity and revolutionary ethos, Iran's strategic outlook prioritizes the preservation of the Shia Crescent (or Shia geopolitics) that runs deep in the Levant and the resistance to the hegemony established by NATO/the US and its allies in the region.

Describing Turkey's support for Sunni armed rebels and its alliance with NATO as a geopolitical threat, Tehran considered this new situation endangering Iran's regional influence and its lifeline to the Lebanese Hezbollah. Perception of Turkey as both a geopolitical rival and a potential partner —given shared economic interests and border security concerns- required a more nuanced approach to Ankara, and unlike the crises with Saudi Arabia, diplomatic relations were not severed despite all the tensions during the Syrian Civil War. Iran, which wants to establish a multipolar balance in the region against the US hegemony and the Saudi influence, has refrained from directly and openly confronting Turkey on this issue. These geopolitical calculations drove Iran's maneuvers in Syria, often placing it at odds with Turkey's objectives.

Neo-Classical Realism identifies domestic institutions and institutional dynamics as key intermediaries between state behavior and systemic pressures. In the Iranian context, the Supreme Leadership (*Vali-ye Faqih*) is the ultimate decision-maker, policy-maker in entire

strategic fields, and final arbiter over all other institutions and structures, and the whole institutional framework is constitutionally and practically dependent on the decisions of the Leader. In critical foreign policy files in the Middle East and strategic areas such as nuclear and ballistic missile programs, the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), where the IRGC profoundly shapes the policies, are the primary decision-making bodies, and these structures operate under the instructions of the Supreme Leader.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has remained largely in the background due to the securitized nature of the Syria file during and after the civil war. In addition to the constitutional councils within the system, various religious and cultural institutions and organizations, as well as some foundations and religious figures, have also played a role in the Syria file from time to time, depending on the extent of their relationship with the Supreme Leader. However, the religious/sectarian structure of state institutions, especially the IRGC and Basij forces that were structured during the Khomeini era, led to the formation of sectarian reflexes during the Syrian crisis. In particular, the Quds Force led by General Soleimani, which recruited sectarian-motivated fighters and financial support from Shiite communities across the Middle East and directed them towards the defense of the Baath regime in Syria, provides a concrete example of the role of these sectarian institutional dynamics.

State-society relations is another core element within the Neo-Classical Realist paradigm and has a significant impact on the orientations of Iran's foreign policy. *Vali-ye Faqih*, which governs the state and society in the name of the 12th Imam of Shiism, Mahdi, by the supreme leaders Khomeini and Khamenei since the Iran-Iraq War, has the mobilization power to ensure that hundreds of thousands of people are recruited and sent to the front lines during wartime. During the Syrian Civil War, the *maddah* tradition within Shiism, the active manipulation of media and social media tools, and ultimately the application of historical references of Shiism (Karbala, Imam Hussein, martyrdom, Yazid, defense of Sayyida Zaynab etc.) to the modern era and their transformation into political language, influenced Iranian foreign policy in the context of state-society relations.

On the other hand, global developments, especially the US-Russia rivalry that has been ongoing since the Cold War in the Middle East, and their ability to maintain alliances established through countries and groups close to them in the region, were reflected in the Syrian Civil War as systemic pressures. In addition to the instability and chaos experienced

during the civil war, in which Israel entered the picture together with the US and shaped the developments on the ground with the alliances it established and concrete military interventions, the Shiite-Sunni rivalry in the region and the continuous increase in sectarian conflicts since the 2003 invasion of Iraq also determined and sharpened the regional and international conditions during the Syrian crisis. Issues such as the concerns Iran feels from the US and Israel, living under economic embargo and political pressure for nearly half a century, led Tehran to establish its defense and security doctrine on the basis of hard power elements, to close its relations with allied countries and non-state armed actors in regional developments and to establish military blocs. The "Axis of Resistance", frequently referred to by Iranian leaders and their regional allies during the Syrian Civil War, emerged and took shape with this understanding of alliances and the motivation to protect the Revolution and the gains of Shiite Islam. Hence, in the final analysis, the basic framework of Iran's Middle East policy was shaped with this perspective.

Therefore, within this framework, the conflicting and insecure environment in the Middle East became the basic ground that determined Iran's approach to regional actors and Turkey during the Syrian Civil War. Although Iran's relations with Turkey were compartmentalized and attempts were made to separate trade volume and economic relations from the security compartment as separate sectors. Despite this, the reality of being on different fronts during the war and resorting to proxy forces and direct military measures to undermine each other's influence continued to be a continuous source of tension that could turn into a hot conflict at any moment. As of December 2024, although the Assad regime in Syria fell, a Sunni Islamist structure friendly to Turkey came to power, and Hezbollah and Hamas have been greatly weakened, Iran's centuries-old sphere of influence in the Middle East has not disappeared, and it is possible to talk about the dynamics of power struggle that will revive in the next competitive area with Turkey.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation is dedicated to applying the Neo-Classical Realism (NCR) approach, its analytical and theoretical focus that seeks to understand Iran's foreign policy, with regard to Turkey, in the context of the Syrian Civil War (2011-2024) with its many facets and complications. Neo-Classical Realism developed in the late 1990s and early 2000s as an offshoot of both Classical Realism and Neo-Realism, is a combination of a more concrete and flexible framework that allows the researcher to combine systemic-level dynamics with domestic-level intervening variables. This extends foreign policy analysis beyond states like Iran driven by ideologies and revolutions.

While the focus of Neo-Realism lies on the constraints of the anarchic international system, Classical Realism centers on human nature and the will to power. Meanwhile, Neo-Classical Realism wisely integrates both approaches by stating that systemic pressures are filtered through unit-level variables before affecting foreign policy. In light of this, it stands to reason that the Neo-Classical Realism approach functions ideally in studying a state like Iran because that foreign policy is far from being a mere product of systemic stimuli but rather is, far more substantively, a product of leadership characteristics, historical memory, ideological commitments, domestic institutional configurations, and deeply entrenched socio-political identities, including Shiism.

The dissertation states that a Type-III Neo-Classical Realist model will be adopted in the research context, which contains four main intervening variables: (1) leadership images, (2) strategic culture, (3) domestic institutions, and (4) state-society relations. However, during the course of the study, it was becoming increasingly clear that these four variables, though analytically rich, were insufficient in totally explaining the Iranian case. A somewhat fifth critical variable came into play, but interacted with the other four: the unique role of sectarian identity, especially in terms of the Syrian Civil War.

The theoretical innovation envisaged here is the treating of sectarian identity-in this case, Shiite Islamism-as an autonomous intervening variable. In the Islamic Republic, sectarian identity is not simply an artifact of strategic culture or state-society relations; it is at the same

time an ideological compass and a means of legitimizing military interventions, political alliances, and transnational mobilization. Therefore, sectarian identity must be examined as an independent analytical perspective, particularly for revolutionary states where religious doctrine is embedded deep into constitutional and institutional structures.

This very theory, however, gets more relevant by the actions of Iran in Syria. It takes not only recourse to using Shiite religious narratives and the mobilizing of transnational Shiite militias for protecting sacred sites but also justifies military interventions as a religious duty. All these indicate a foreign policy apparatus that cannot be fully interpreted with systemic pressures or rational sort of cost benefit analyzes. The same systemic pressure-say, the U.S. regional hegemony threat-would not lead to a similar policy in a secular nationalist regime. It is ideology-culture-sectarian filtering mechanism that translates pressure into a specific response to foreign policy.

Indeed, Neo-Classical Realism was more than a conceptual touchstone in this dissertation; it became an inspirational framework informing case study selection, chapter construction, and the interpretation of empirical data. The research demonstrates that Iran's foreign policy toward Turkey with regard to the Syrian Civil War can best be understood as resulting from both systemic imperatives and ingrained domestic logics. The reasoning model just discussed was imperative for addressing the research questions and revealing the complicated nature of Iranian foreign policy behavior.

This approach and polity go beyond traditional Neo-Classical Realism analyzes that usually examine leadership perceptions and institutional behavior in rationalist terms by showing that these internal dynamics become not merely background influences but act as active drivers of foreign policy: revolutionary ideology, sectarian mobilization, and historical narratives. More often than not in the Iranian case, such dynamics will overrule the model's explanations related to systemic pressures or reshape their understanding. Of these situations, this phenomenon is most clearly seen in the Syrian conflict, where the Iranian himself was guided more by divine mission and ideological obligation than by geopolitical calculations.

Revolutionary doctrine is contained in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, pronounced in leaders' speeches, and institutionalized in bodies such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), and various religious/political councils such as the Assembly of Experts. That means they are not only execution institutions for strategy, but ideological enforcers of ideas. This leads to a foreign policy that resists

accommodation or compromise unless it can be framed within the regime's ideological worldview.

The NCR makes it especially ideal for the study of the Iranian case. In contrast to the other theoretical frameworks that simply dismiss domestic variables as being incidental or reduce them to a reflection of ideology and psychology, Neo-Classical Realism gives room for serious consideration of ideas, institutions, and cultural factors without dissolving them into system-level considerations. This is precisely the balance that allows the researcher to explain the enduring rivalry and tactical cooperation itself between Iran and Turkey regarding Syria.

Turkey, for its part, was also affected by domestic political calculation and ideological commitment into its neo-Ottoman strategic culture. Unlike Iran, however, it suffered from a deep institutionalization of sectarianism characterizing its very governmental regime. Thus, whereas Ankara portrayed Syria as subject in the context of strategic extension and regime change, Tehran framed it within an existential defense of the "Axis of Resistance." This divergence accounts for the often paradoxical combination of diplomatic pragmatism and ground confrontation between the two states.

By treating sectarian identity as a fifth intervening variable, the dissertation opens the door for more refinements in Neo-Classical Realism applications to the Middle East. It proposes that in contexts in which religion and ideology are not cultural setting but form the basis for identity and legitimacy of the state, then their analytical weight must be increased. Hence, scholars might develop more closely to accurate and contextual models of foreign policy behavior.

Ultimately, this first chapter as the theoretical section has reaffirmed the theoretical argument of this dissertation. It contended that it is important to use an expanded form of Neo-Classical Realism, particularly in dealing with ideologically driven states working within identity-charged regional contexts. It outlined the theoretical premise for the following empirical chapters that will present the manifestations of changes in Iranian foreign policy and the contextual realities of the specifics of the Iranian-Turkish rivalry in the Syrian Civil War. The following sections will also demonstrate how the theory that is enriched with the fifth variable of sectarian identity provides superior explanatory value for understanding Iranian foreign policy behavior in one of the most extremely complex geopolitical crises in the 21st century.

Iranian Foreign Policy Before and After the 1979 Revolution: Continuities and Transformations

Far from the immediate analytical approach of examining the foreign policy behavior of Iran, one must delve into the historical and ideological transitions, forming the base of the foreign policy behavior of Iran that took place before and after the 1979 Revolution. Chapter III of this dissertation attempts to lay the groundwork for this analysis by outlining how Iranian internal dynamics, particularly its strategic culture, institutional architecture, leadership orientation, and state-society interactions, have molded Iranian foreign relations with neighboring Turkey. In the face of some evident ruptures in ideological discourse and institutional structure, one may point to significant continuities after the Islamic Revolution that can be traced back to Iran's historical strategic culture and geopolitical identity.

Under the late Pahlavi monarchy, Iranian foreign policy was Western-orientated. The Shah maintained that Iran was a pillar for the American-led containment of the Soviets. Iran participated in alliances like CENTO and kept very close ties with the USA and Britain. Iranian foreign policies have always been driven by a realistic concern for survival and those measures that put a premium on modernization and prestige in the region. However, even in this pro-Western orientation some element of Iranian nationalism and vestiges of Persian imperial pride could be observed. The Shah's foreign policy was never merely a reflex of environmental pressures; it was also the projection of Iran's historical claim to regional hegemony. The pre-revolutionary strategic culture was thus already imbued with thinking of autonomy, grandeur, and regional leadership, such themes of continuity, which would remain alive after 1979 in radically different forms.

With the 1979 Iranian Revolution, a new ideological scaffolding came into being: that of *Velayat-e-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) as conceived by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. This theocratic structure placed an all-powerful senior Shiite cleric as supreme authority over all matters of the state, rendering Iran's political system unique in the modern international system. The revolution was not just about a regime change; it was a radical ontological shift that redefined the very identity of Iran on the inside and the outside. Iran was now a revolutionary state, claiming to defend the oppressed (*mostaz'afin*), export the revolution, and challenge global hegemony of the West, especially that of the US and Israel.

Despite this ideological rupture, some things remained unchanged in Iranian domestic and foreign policy patterns. One of these is a continuously centralist political arrangement. The Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic exercised significant executive control, eliminated political pluralism, and used security institutions to maintain internal order. The project for

regional leadership remained as it had been originally conceived but was dressed in revolutionary garb. Where the Shah had called Iran the “gendarme of the Gulf,” the Islamic Republic would speak in terms of defending Islamic movements from Western imperialisms. In this way, while the means and rhetoric changed, the one constant was the desire to exert influence.

Chapter III reflects how historical memory and national identity shape Iranian foreign policy to this day. Ancient Persia's legacy, colonial humiliation, and the need to assert sovereignty against foreign intervention are pivotal for Iran's strategic culture. These historical narratives provide a backdrop against which both Pahlavi and post-revolutionary elites rationalized their foreign policy decisions. One cannot say that the revolution cut off this cultural memory; rather, it incorporated and reinterpreted it within the framework of Islamic revolutionary ideology. Thus, the Iranian concept of resistance (*moqavemat*) draws on Shia martyrdom narratives as well as anti-colonial struggles, both of which allow for a very powerful justification model for foreign interventions.

Institutions of foreign policy began to move actors into this post-revolutionary arena, notably the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Supreme Leader's Office. While the Shah relied upon the military and Foreign Ministry in making strategic decisions, the Islamic Republic put a parallel military-diplomatic structure into place. The IRGC and especially its Quds Force became one of the main tools to implement the country's foreign policy largely unconcerned with coordination from the traditional diplomatic channels, particularly during the conflictual areas that vitally significant to Iranian security outlook. This militarization of diplomacy represents the securitized and ideological character of the Islamic Republic's worldview.

For foreign policy perceptions, the chapter discusses continuity and change dynamics for leadership images. The Shah pictured himself as the modernizing monarch and guardian of Persian civilization; however, Khomeini's leadership was charismatic, theocratic, and populist. The leadership of both, however, was authoritarian in their nature and sought unification in the making of foreign policy decisions. Successor of Khomeini, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, moved forward with this legacy by broadening the powers available for the office of the Supreme Leader and institutionalizing an ideological control over foreign policy.

Another such emergence-after the revolution-has been that of an extremely cloggy architecture in post-revolution decision making, including SNSC, Expediency Council,

Assembly of Experts, and other religious bodies, each of which serves to ensure that the US' foreign policy is naturally congruent with the ideological vision of the Islamic Republic. The apparent pluralism of these approaches hides the actual real decision making concentrated in the hands of the Supreme Leader and that of his close affiliates, but most often works through informal networks rather than formal institutions. This fits with the Neo-Classical Realist emphasis on filtering mechanisms in the domestic sphere.

Beside the other dimensions of continuity and change between state and society, the Shah's reign presented a highly depoliticized and top-down mobilizing society through a strictly applied modernization program, while the Islamic Republic was to develop ideological citizens after 1979. The activities of the Basij militia, martyrdom culture, and revolutionary education would create a new public sphere. Yet, as the dissertation demonstrates, much ideological engagement has exposed significant societal divisions, especially among ethnic minorities, youth, and the urban middle class.

Such divisions, in turn, informed extraterritorial behavior in that the regime would have to pay for its loss of legitimacy at home by being bold outside. Chapter III also deals with the international environment within which Iran's behavior during this period was molded, but not determined by external factors. Iran was a pendulum between superpower alliances and non-alignment during the Cold War. Following the revolution, Iran adopted a "neither East nor West" operational posture, allowing Iran to survive in a multipolar world while remaining ideologically pure. It was largely tested during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). This definitely added Iranian disillusionment concerning Western powers and laid the foundation of support to opposing forces in the region.

The war further established a sense of self-reliance and asymmetric warfare. This trauma of the 1980s also led to the development of missile capabilities, the establishment of transnational networks between groups like Hezbollah, and the establishment of a "forward defense" doctrine. These strategies were applied in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria with little interest given to competing interests from Turkey. The revolution and the war psychology still shadow Iran's regional policies.

The post-revolutionary conduct of Iran towards Turkey is composed of oscillating pragmatism and ideological rivalry. Iran has kept its cool relations with Turkey by seeming cooperation in areas such as Kurdish separatism, when their mutual economic interest or shared security are at stake. Yet the two involve competing visions of regional order: secular Sunni

republicanism against Shiite theo-craft. The rivalry culminated in the euphoric atmosphere during the Syrian Civil War, where the backing of Bashar al-Assad by Iran was countered by that of the opposition forces by Turkey.

The Iran post-1979 foreign policy cannot be seen merely as a reaction to external threats; it seeks to maintain the identity of the regime in active projection, imbued with an ideology. This identity has been constructed from revolutionary theology, historical memory, and strategic culture, all of which run through institutional structures concerned primarily with the security of the regime and ideological conformity. The Iranian foreign policy continues to be mostly animated by the revolution, including its ongoing rivalry with Turkey, through an unusual blend of realism and religious idealism.

Trilateral Dynamics of Iran–Syria–Turkey Relations and the Rise of Strategic Competition

This complex geopolitical triangle among Iran, Syria, and Turkey during the Syrian Civil War provides the quintessential case for understanding how strategic rivalries, historical animosities, and ideologically infused foreign policy paradigms interact amidst a changing international system. This triangular dynamic has been elaborated on in Chapter IV in relation to the pattern of the interests shared but contradictory in terms of Iran and Turkey in their foreign policy towards Syria within an unstable regional environment. With this, the thesis presents the complete narrative of the interactions from a Neo-Classical Realist viewpoint which explains the domestic filtering of systemic pressures and transformation of strategic calculations into actions.

Iran's alliance with Syria started before the 2011 civil war, particularly during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Through the Syrian Baathist regime of Hafez al-Assad and later his son Bashar al-Assad, Iran received invaluable political support when largely isolated from the Arab milieu. The intense partnership steeled by shared enmity towards Saddam Hussein's Iraq later found salience in mutual opposition to the US and Israeli influence toward the region. Strategically, Syria acted as Iran's main logistics corridor to Hezbollah in Lebanon and as a linchpin in the so-called “Axis of Resistance.”

The Syrian Civil War threw a grave dilemma before Tehran. The Assad regime was no longer just some regional ally; it became a mark for the survival of Iran's regional influence. This thinking turned Syria into a red line for Tehran's foreign policy establishment. Iranian leaders, especially Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and the IRGC commanders,

understood Syrian conflict not as an unruly riot but as a Western-linked conspiracy to dismantle the “Axis of Resistance” and isolate Iran, in coordination with the regional Sunni powers. Iran embarked upon multi-layered intervention: ideological justification, logistical coordination, and sectarian mobilization during the war.

By contrast, Turkey swung greatly in favor of the opposition after 2011, having entered an era of relatively warm relations with Syria during the early 2000s. This shift in Turkey's policy was influenced by a variety of factors, both domestic and foreign: the country's ambition to emerge as the leader of the Sunni Muslim world; the ideological affinity of its ruling AK Party with the Muslim Brotherhood, and its neo-Ottoman strategic imagination envisaging a greater Turkish influence in the former Ottoman provinces. Initially, Turkey thought it could affect a quick transition in Syria by supporting moderate opposition groups. As the conflict dragged on, however, Ankara's involvement deepened, and it began to provide support to a broader range of Sunni Islamist factions.

Then it became possible for both states to engage in a direct competition through proxies. The mobilization efforts of Iran, with the help of Hezbollah and other Shia militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, were made to wage jihad defense in favor of the Assad regime. These groups were generally recruited under the religious call to defend the Sayyida Zaynab shrine and the legacy of Imam Hussein, invoking potent Shia symbols of martyrdom and resistance. This ideological mobilization was essential in justifying the Iranian intervention at home and transnationally. For Iran, it sufficed to say that defending Syria was tantamount to defending the Revolution itself.

In reality, Turkey emphasized its presence as a humanitarian security necessity, which was directed towards protection of Syrian civilians and the prevention of Kurdish militancy along the southern border. Within the rhetoric was also the ambition to change the political future of Syria to Turkish interests. That was why, after failing to unseat Assad, Ankara turned to securing zones of influence in northern Syria and often clashed with Kurdish forces and allies of Assad.

The competition over these parameters, then, as explained in Chapter IV because this battle for influence would mark the reshaping of regional order. Who else, then, besides Syria, became the main theatre in which Iran and Turkey tested their power projection capacities through local and transnational armed actors? From a Neo-Classical Realist perspective, both nations acted

under systemic pressure-e.g. the US withdrawal, Russian intervention, shifting alliances-but interpreted and responded to those pressures through different domestic lenses.

The sectarian character of the Syrian conflict made ever more salient the Shiite identity and revolutionary strategic culture in Iran. Especially decisive in their actions was the Iranian leadership's perception that the Assads fall would give an impetus to Sunni rivals- Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE and Qatar. Its historical legacies with the Ottomans and the accompanying Shiite theological imperatives fueled this interpretation steeped in strategic culture. Iranian domestic institutions such as the IRGC with the Supreme Leader's Office and the Foreign Ministry were all on the same page in their perception of Syria as an existential front. Hence, the operational commander was the IRGC' Quds Force, which executed logistics, training, and coordination of battlefield activities across Syrian provinces.

In the eyes of Turkish political elite, the conception of the Syrian conflict would be directly related to the tool of politics and public commitment to political Islam for a mission of historical restoration of Turkey's historical institutional leadership in the Muslim world including chaotic Middle East. Besides that, the powerful cultural and political memory left by the Ottoman Empire and its Sunni legacy formed the basis of Turkey's assertive regional posture. Moreover, domestically, the Syrian crisis was touted as a moral cause and a source of insecurity in order to take weight in Turkish leaders' argument about protecting Muslims from Western hypocrisy.

The confrontation between these two discourses—irritation of Iranian Shiite revolutionary expansionism and Turkish Sunni political Islamism-has developed into a fierce contest for regional hegemony. However, the real issue at stake here is seeing that there is still no military confrontation between the two countries, although they have been strongly involved on opposite sides within the civil war. It also goes to show the compartmentalization strategies that each pursued. Even at the height of the Syrian conflict, economic cooperation and diplomatic channels remained functional, indicating the complicated interdependence between rivalry and pragmatism.

Chapter IV thinks of these developments in a global context. The cycle began with U.S. support; followed by Russian military intervention on the side of Assad, with alliances among the Gulf States shifting; throwing the entire international landscape into disarray with uncertain winds. In tandem, both Iran and Turkey were obliged to revisit the drawing board. Iran consolidated its alliance with Russia; Turkey struck a balance between the two blocs, chiefly after the failed coup attempt in Turkey in 2016 and its resettlement with Moscow.

The conflict's military dimension became further entrenched because of the failure of both Geneva and Astana processes to provide for a sustainable settlement. Iran and Turkey became co-sponsors of the Astana process together with Russia, even though they were supporting opposing sides. Such cooperation thus shows the limitations of ideological rivalry under geopolitical necessity. It also provides Neo-Classical Realism with the theoretical juices on which to explain such contradictions-where structural pressures would suggest cooperation while domestic political logic would favor rivalry.

Chapter IV thus shows that during the Syrian conflict, the triangle involving Iran, Syria, and Turkey, constituted greater than a regional dispute. It represents the crossing of divergent strategic cultures, filtered perceptions, ideological constructs, and institutional preferences. This affirms the key argument of this dissertation that foreign policy lives in the national atmosphere, where domestic political and ideological edifice exerts considerable influence. The case of Syria remains an excellent demonstration that shows how competing beliefs, historical experiences, and domestic interests common to both Iran and Syria interact to bring about regional outcomes as we embark upon the next chapter, which focuses on the sectarian logic and identity-driven dynamics at work in Iranian behavior.

Conceiving Sectarian Identity as the Fifth Pillar of Neo-Classical Realism: The Case of the Syrian Civil War

Sectarian identity, as a driving force of foreign policy affecting Iran especially in the case of Syria, is largely one of the strongest cases demonstrating how ideology and belief system act as engines in strategic decision-making. Chapter V of this dissertation thus engages deeply in considering whether, for Eurocentric Realism, sectarianism is viewed not as a sub-variable of strategic culture or ideology but rather a fifth independent intervening variable altogether. On the premise of the presented and critically examined evidence, this section strongly argues that the sectarian identity, when institutionally enmeshed, discursively mobilized, and strategically operationalized, stands as a core pillar in the formulation of foreign policy by the revolutionary regimes such as the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In terms of the Syrian Civil War, sectarianism was, instead, the very operable through which Tehran articulated its security concerns: constructed threat perceptions identified its allies and enemies, and mobilized both state and non-state actors across the Shiite transnational network. This section shows how Iran's decision to intervene in Syria with military means and ideological purposes was deeply enmeshed in the regime's self-ascribed role as protector of Shiism and

leader of the global “Resistance Axis” (*mehvar-e moqavemat*). Hence, sectarian identity operated as both a mobilizational resource and the structure of policy-making.

In early phases of the uprising, Iranian official statements incessantly put the slogans in sectarian terms. Iranian state media, clerics, and political leaders emphasized the lofty duty of safeguarding the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, a revered granddaughter of Prophet Muhammad in Shia Islam, in its southern suburb of Damascus. The battle for the protection of Shia sanctities threatened by Sunni extremists legitimized the military aid of the Islamic Republic for Assad and also enabled the mobilization of transnational Shiite militias.

There were various groups called to arms alongside *Liwa Fatemiyoun*, which comprises most of the Afghan Hazara Shite fighters; there was the *Liwa Zaynabiyoun*, which comprised poorly organized Pakistani Shia; *Kata'ib Hezbollah* from Iraq and *Harakat al-Nujaba*, among several others. The IRGC-Quds Force trained, funded, and directed them. What sets them apart from the traditional proxy warfare is the highly sectarian-theological framing of their mission. Fighters had been portrayed as religious warriors who had defended the faith, and stories of martyrdom circulated extensively to recruit and boost the morale. This discursive construction changed Syria into a holy battlefield: a modern-day Karbala, where martyrdom for the Shia cause turned into an existential form of resistance.

Such sacralisation of war has profound roots in the three decades of Iranian revolutionary discourse-from the Iran-Iraq War-and the new revolutionary state used Ashura iconography, martyrdom culture, and the *haq* (truth) versus *batil* (falsehood) dichotomy to frame its strategic challenges metaphysically. However, this has not been the case for the Syrian civil war; that is when the initiation moved to a new level of intensity and institutionalization. It only turned out to be believed that that was the pretext of all religious seminaries in Qom, the IRGC's media outlets, and official Friday sermons whatsoever-in furtherance of the eschatological struggle narrative of Shia Islam against *takfiri* elements, a broad label adopted by Iranian officials for Sunni jihadists, but one that implicitly (sometimes explicitly) also encompassed such states as Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Sectarian identity, as explained in Chapter V, had an operational personality and not just a rhetorical one. Sectarian relations were always part of Iran calculations on whether to intervene, which groups to support for what purposes, and how much military involvement to allow. More Iranian aid, for example, would catalyze support to the Shia factions while Sunni players stood strategically on the same page. This process has transnationalized the idea of the *Velayat-e*

Faqih, whereby the leaders of the Shia militias from all over the region pledge allegiance to Ayatollah Khamenei as a *marja-e taqlid*. This type of institutionalization of sectarian loyalty provided for an unusual high level of command and control among proxy networks.

Additionally, this sectarian lens altered Iran's perception of other regional actors. Turkey was more and more seen as a Sunni counter-axis partner, having sided with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and extremist Sunni forces regardless of their mutual economic interest-friendship. This notion is prompted not only by a realist assessment of threats but also by a deep ideological reading of history and identity. The memory of the Ottoman-Safavid conflicts as discussed in detail during Chap II, the Sunni-Shia divisions, and current contention over leadership of the Muslim World all coalesced into a sectarian geopolitical worldview. Through this prism, Iran believed to be dealing not just for its friend but also for the integrity of the Shia world and its unique revolution against a Sunni resurgence.

The institutional apparatus of the Islamic Republic created the environment that would reinforce this worldview, while the IRGC, the Supreme Leader's Office, the SNSC, various religious foundations (*bonyad*) and the Organization of Islamic Propaganda operationalized this sectarian narrative. Textbooks, mosques, and the IRGC training curriculum reflected the ideological imperative of defending the Shia cause. This coherence of purpose across institutions and legitimate, consistent policy choices; sustained military engagement and received significant degree of domestic legitimacy for the war effort despite some reactions due to economic cost of the military interventions.

Notably, there were domestic consequences to the sectarian framing. In Iran, Sunni minorities expressed concern over the regime's regional policies and the possible domestic spillovers of a foreign policy perceived as sectarian. Nevertheless, the regime effectively managed these tensions through ideological messaging and coercive control. The regime also depicted the fighting in Syria as a defensive war aimed at thwarting potential terrorism from entering Iranian territory, which appealed to a lot of Iranian nationals particularly after the high-profile attacks in Tehran in 2017, and also in Kerman during a memorial for General Soleimani, that were claimed by the ISIS. Such events legitimized the regime's connection that defending Assad was equal to defending national security.

In the concept of NCR, sectarian identity is analytically different from the other variables due to the fact that it uniquely binds together the four traditional intervening variables. Leadership perceptions (through religious training and ideological socialization) are formed by

the sectarian identity, which informs the strategic culture (through sacred history and revolutionary theology), penetrates into the domestic institutions (through clerical authority, formation of the constitution and the IRGC networks), and organizes state-society relations (through identity-based mobilization). In the case of Iran, it gains exposure as a standalone lens by which threat perceptions, policy preferences, alliance formations, and legitimacy assertions are formed.

This section substantiates the claim that within Neo-Classical Realism the sectarian identity must theoretically be elevated through an empirical analysis detailed in Chapter V. In revolutionary states under ideological regimes, where everything is woven regarding identity and legitimacy, the sectarian identity is a core driver of foreign policy instead of just one more intervening variable. This paradigm has implications for the wider study of Middle Eastern international relations in which sectarian identities are often conceptualized as being epiphenomenal or cynically instrumented. The Iranian case proves that, when institutionalized and internalized, sectarian identity becomes an effective and durable catalyst for strategic behavior.

The next section will distill these allegations and respond to the main research questions posed by the dissertation, thereby demonstrating that the Neo-Classical Realist framework-augmented by the fifth variable, sectarian identity-can properly explain the complexity and contradictions of Iran's foreign policy separating from the influence of the Syrian Civil War.

These three questions provide the heart of a direct answer to the research questions laid down at the beginning of the dissertation. Using evidence from Chapters III, IV, and V grounded in the broader Neo-Classical Realist space presented in this work, the section draws a comprehensive and synthesized picture that binds theoretical and empirical components. The treatment of each question is interspersed with discussions of their interrelating nature and their operational significance in understanding Iranian foreign policy concerning the Syrian Civil War.

Research Question 1: To what extent can Iranian foreign policy be understood in terms of domestic political and sociological factors without breaking the connection with the framework of Realism on a macro scale?

Chapter III and indeed all the empirical chapters have provided a strong affirmation of this question. Iranian foreign policy is tied with the internal political structure and ideological background of the Islamic Republic. Neo-Classical Realism, rather than reading its concepts

through external threats and examples of systemic constraints, examines the internal variables that lead to the perception and application of foreign policy goals.

Once the Iranian regime controls foreign policy under the Supreme Leader's authority and will, it puts the IRGC simultaneously front and center as a military and ideological actor. The Iran-Iraq War legacy that did further embed this siege mentality and reinforced the resistance strategic culture has illustrated how the evolution of Iran's institutional arrangements, especially the role of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and the IRGC-Quds Force, illustrates the mediation of state behavior through an ideologically pitched and institutionally distinct domestic prism.

In strong relation to concerns of domestic legitimacy, as discussed in Chapter V, the narrative of sectarian identity and martyrdom served Iran to justify a slew of its foreign policy decisions but equally allow garnering of domestic support. The regime's ability to frame the Syrian Civil War as one of religious and national defense dulled internal dissent and proved beneficial for regime cohesion. In addition, the mobilization of public support with the ideologues protecting Shia shrines against *takfiri* terrorism refracts the point that foreign policy is as much about domestic control and ideological reproduction as it is about strategic calculation.

Research Question 2. Sectarian identity: an independent variable in state-to-state and state-non-state actor relations across the Middle East?

Generally, the empirical bases for affirmative answer to this question are found in Chapters IV and, most especially, Chapter V. Whereas sectarian identity has often been treated in international relations scholarship as just another tool of "*realpolitik*" to be instrumentalized by states for strategic advantage, during this dissertation I continuously argue that, in the case of Iran, sectarian identity has not merely been a tactic but remains one of the core guiding principles of foreign policy.

Through Chapter V, the relationships forged by Iran in the Syrian arena are depicted as having emerged from, but were never divorced from sectarian narratives, which drew heavily upon Shia theology, historical grievances, and eschatological discourse. The invocation of Sayyida Zaynab, imagery of Karbala, and martyrdom language were not just rhetorical flourishes. They became mobilisable instruments for recruitment, alliances and battlefield strategies. The militias such as Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zainebiyoun were proudly sectarian with pledges of loyalty to the Supreme Leader Khamenei as political and religious authority.

To add to this, sectarian identities were also held accountable by Iran on the scope and nature of allies and adversaries. In accordance with their view of the position held by each state and actor in the admittedly highly polarized Sunni-Shia axis, the country was viewed as an ally or an enemy. Therefore, Turkey is not as openly hostile as Saudi Arabia. However, it was listed as one of the participants of a larger Sunni counter-axis. This formation of actualities governed Tehran's risk assessment, diplomatic approach, and military priorities.

Research Question 3: To what extent does sectarianism lie at the heart of the interaction of Iran's foreign policy with that of Turkey?

From Chapters IV and V it appears that sectarianism is a major and important factor in Iranian foreign policy toward Turkey, although not the only one. The relationship between both countries has been beset by moments of cooperation and rivalry. Economic and security cooperation, notably regarding Kurdish separatism, has remained intact, while the Syrian Civil War demonstrated the enormity of the ideological and sectarian cleavage between the two countries.

Iran believed Turkey's support of Sunni Islamist factions in Syria, including those ideologically related to the Muslim Brotherhood along with various al-Qaeda affiliated armed groups, as a direct and immediate threat to the Shia-led "Axis of Resistance". This was a worldview not solely strategic, but sectarian, in that these Turkish-backed groups were seen as participating in a broader Sunni offensive to dismantle Iran's regional prestige. The historical memory of Safavid-Ottoman rivalry and the conflicting theological differences between Shia theocracy and Sunni republicanism only added to this feeling.

Even when Ankara was pursuing a more balanced strategy, the Iranian media and political discourse have, since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, depicted Turkey's role in the rise of extremist Sunni groups. The extent to which Iranian strategic culture has reduced Turkish foreign policy to a Sunni agenda underscores how significant sectarian filtering is in Tehran's foreign policymaking process. The filtering also affected the calculation for engaging non-state actors, as Tehran favored Shia-aligned groups over similar ones even when Sunni factions shared overlapping security concerns against Western intervention or Kurdish separatism.

Synthesis: Neo-Classical Realism Enhanced by an Additional Constructivist Element, Sectarian Identity

This question is best apprised within a Neo-Classical Realist framework enlarged by sectarian identity as the fifth intervening variable. Traditional Neo-Classical Realism already accounts for the systemic pressure and domestic filtering through leadership images, strategic culture, domestic institutions, and state-society relations. However, with regard to Iran, sectarian identity goes beyond these categories. It is embedded in strategic culture, codified in institutions, invoked in leadership discourse, and instrumental in shaping public mobilization- and thus meriting an independent analytical status.

Such major conceptual contribution of this dissertation is the suggestion that in such fiery ideologically driven governments, the religiously founded ones, sectarian identity can and must stand up as a principal intervening variable in foreign policy studies. This insight applies not only to the Iranian case but also to others such as Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan (particularly Taliban era), Pakistan, or Israel, where within the state structures, religion stands so deeply embedded.

Empirically this research argues that Iranian foreign policy cannot be analyzed without reference to ideological and revolutionary rhetoric based on sectarian identity in defining threats, forming alliances, and taking part in conflicts. The Syrian Civil War served as a test case on which the dynamics displayed themselves. Tehran's interventions, alliances, and narratives were guided not only by geopolitical imperatives but also an all-encompassing sense of religious mission. The achievements of this approach with respect to military command, domestic cohesion, and transnational influence only serve to reinforce the significance of this equation.

In these final sections of conclusion, some comments will be offered about the wider theoretical-methodological contribution of the dissertation as well as what the results mean for future scholarship on foreign policy and international relations in the Middle East.

This dissertation has theoretical and methodological contributions to the field of International Relations (IR) and particularly about Middle East foreign policy analysis. It aims at closing interesting holes in the literature and offering new conceptual and analytical instruments for the scholars of regional politics by extending the Neo-Classical Realist framework to include sectarian identity as a fifth intervening variable and applying this enriched model to a rigorous case study of Iranian foreign policy during the Syrian Civil War. This section thus presents the innovative core of the dissertation and assesses its methodological tactics.

Theoretical Innovation: Neo-Classical Realism plus Overwhelming Identity and Ideological/Revolutionary Values

Neo-Classical Realism (NCR) has long aspired to do what was other purposes: namely, make connections with systemic theories in the field of international relations and thereby delve into complexities of domestic processes that confer individuality and dynamism to state behavior. However, such endeavors are largely unsuccessful through the ordinary Neo-Classical Realism model with its typical intervening variables: leadership images, strategic culture, domestic institutions, and state-society relations. Indeed, the ideational and, even more so, religious dimensions are poorly addressed by the standard Neo-Classical Realism model and are crucial determinants of the foreign policy of ideologically and religiously driven states. This study, therefore, identifies such limitation and proposes the addition of sectarian identity as analytically independent intervening variable in Neo-Classical Realism.

There are a host of reasons why this hypothetical act is important. One, by way of this, it is officially accepted that religion and sectarian identities play roles not only as forms of strategic culture or domestic mobilization, but also as core components of state identity and legitimacy in many of the parts of the Global South, especially the Middle East. In Iran, there is a quiet strong provision for sectarian identity within the constitution, which is built into the structure of the Supreme Leadership, and operationalized by institutions such as the IRGC, various theo-political councils and religious seminaries.

Then, in including sectarianism, Neo-Classical Realism speaks on power relations by which states constitute perceptions of friends and enemies, explaining patterns of alliances, intervention tactics, and ideological discourses that cannot all be reduced to material interests. In this sense, it fulfils the analysis between Constructivist visions about identity and power-based assumptions of Realism. This integration thus combines to produce thick Realist frameworks: a parsimonious and empirically rich model.

In a context like the Middle East, one where conflict is paramount and ideology is polarized, a sectarian identity would furnish a more accurate model. In states where history and religion compound or even modify political calculus, decisions may be dictated as much by memory as by considerations of balance of power or deeply embedded identity narratives. This framework will permit scholars to predict behavior better in cases such as that of Iran, wherein theology stands not outside but squarely at the center of its policymaking.

Methodological Contributions: Bridging Depths and Breadth

What does this study entail? It mainly surveys foreign policy dynamics of Islamic Republic of Iran through Neo-Classical Realism in international relations. The methodology is process tracing, and it does not end there as the research is qualitative. By process tracing, we can sequence-wise reconstruct those junctures and cause-effect chains that underlie all the decisions, ultimately giving the most appropriate methodical approach to analyzing historical happenings and their consecutive impacts.

The methodology includes rigorous and systematic collection and categorization of data in relation to the above, involving careful compilation of primary source materials: official documents, archival records, field research, and oral history interviews, in resource to the original context of events. At the same time, secondary sources such as academic journals and books, literature reviews, and already established analyzes are collected. The meticulous separation and classifying of the two sources make the research result into both direct evidence and established scholarship interpretations. Here, the triangulation approach works to cross-check finding from different sources for better reliability and validity. This nuanced approach is even more important in examining identity-based dynamics such as Iran and Shiism, as the religious dimension and its monitoring within the delicate balances on the field are at the forefront.

The analytical phase of the research aims at interrogating the ways in which systemic pressures interact with local dynamics. Within the Neo-Classical Realist framework, the analysis of especially intermediate variables such as strategic culture, leadership characteristics, state-society relations, and the organization of domestic institutions has been done in independent status. Process tracing is the method used in this analytical phase to identify the critical turning points in the historical narrative and analyze how such domestic factors mediate and shape the influence external pressures on foreign policy decisions.

Within this analytical framework, the key methodological steps in this study include:

-First, mapping events' chronological progression and decision making processes by relying on [preferably] original data on primary sources.

-Second, interpreting and contextualizing data through secondary sources, thus strengthening the theoretical framework provided by Neo-Classical Realism.

-Thirdly, methodological triangulation thus implies that data and results from both primary and secondary sources have to be compared and contrasted to determine the object's analysis and depth of the analysis.

-Finally, the process tracing method will establish the causal relationships as well as critical junctures behind these events in the subject, with a focus on the interplay between systemic influence and local dynamics.

This methodological scheme not only brings together theories derived from Classical Realism, Neo-Realism, and Neo-Classical Realism but also links them to their empirical counterpart through an exhaustive qualitative examination of historical processes and interactions of actors. Thus it gives a clearer understanding of the interaction between internal and external factors in shaping state behavior and foreign policy.

Therefore, the research methodology is predicated upon the synthesis between qualitative methods, process tracing, systematic source classification, and triangulation. The integration of these components provides a robust basis for disaggregating the interaction between systemic pressures and domestic variables in foreign policy formation. This framework will be developed in subsequent sections through case studies and comparative analysis to contribute to a better understanding of international relations dynamics.

In this dissertation, Neo-Classical Realism was articulated as the primary theory explaining Iran's foreign policy, especially in its dealings with Turkey during the Syrian Civil War. This theoretical framework generally includes four intervening variables: leadership characteristics, strategic culture, domestic institutions, and state-society relations.

While these have worked well in many cases, I felt that in the case of Iran they were unable to furnish an exhaustive explanation of the foreign policy influences. Specifically, the effect of the unique ideological and sectarian dimensions of the Islamic Republic –not simply traditional power or institutional variables- was not sufficiently accounted for. To remedy this, I advanced a fifth variable, to be described as identity-based ideological approach. This emphasizes sectarian identity, revolutionary theology, and deeply entrenched symbolic narratives that inform both domestic legitimacy and foreign policy action.

It is essential to say why this ideological approach should be set up as an independent category, rather than be put under one other of the normative variables:

-*Not merely one aspect of strategic culture*: While strategic culture does indeed encompass past memory and cultural norms, this identity-related variable is much fluid and quite explicitly related to ideological mobilization. In Iran, the sectarian identities not merely patronage but continue as politically-evolving instruments of justifying foreign interventions by the government.

-*Beyond leadership perceptions*: Leadership images are how policymakers perceive threats. Yet not every perception of threat is determined by the lens of religion or a sect. The identity-based approach deals with the nature of the ideological environment which produced those images.

-*Separate from institutional configurations*: So every domestic organization, such as the IRGC and the Supreme National Security Council, is contained in a well-defined bureaucratic structure. However, the institutional search of sectarian ideology through religious councils, curricula, and even the constitution requires an independent level of analysis that explicitly captures ideological legitimacy and its role in policy-making.

-*Aside from the interaction of state with society*: The state-society relationship does include the mobilization of the public and provides solidarity to the society, but the value of identity is how sectarian discourses can be turned into an actionable policy. It includes understanding how religious identity can be construed as a source of legitimacy at home and an entity at odds with external strategy, the latter particularly in conflict zones like Syria.

In making sectarian identity transformation in Iran and Shiism into active agency and institutionalization within the political system, then further propelling and consolidating the integration of the sectarianism parameter as the fifth independent variable in the theoretical framework.

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This work has thus proceeded from a methodological standpoint on the multi-method qualitative approach, incorporating the complementary research techniques of process tracing, discourse analysis, and comparative case studies. In Chapter III, a historical-institutional analysis of Iranian foreign policy is applied throughout the Pahlavi era and the Islamic Republic. Chapter IV reconnoiters the triangular strategic dynamics through the lens of Iranian, Syrian, and Turkish rivalries, marking strategic turning points and changes in priorities with

process tracing. Chapter V conducts discourse and content analysis to decode the instances of sectarian identity mobilization in official speeches, media, and militia narratives.

This methodological design has several strengths. First, it serves for diachronic understanding about continuity and change in Iranian foreign policy. The dissertation thus avoids presentism while tracing how revolutionary ideology, institutional evolution, and strategic narratives have developed over time, situating the Syrian Civil War within a larger arc of history.

Second, by using primary sources in Persian, Turkish, and English, the research is empirically rich. Official speeches by Supreme Leader Khamenei, statements of IRGC commanders, and public communications of militia-associated Iran were analyzed to construct an understanding of strategic rationale and ideological framing. Such a multi-lingual, multi-source approach minimizes bias and triangulates data.

Thirdly, this regional comparison with Turkey adds an important dimension to the study. It highlights how the sectarian identity affects foreign policy decisions differently by comparing the two regional powers at opposing ideological foundations. Despite the heavy military interference of both countries into Syria, their ideological motives and mobilization mechanisms have been fundamentally different. The comparison highlights the asymmetric role of sectarian identity across regimes.

Moreover, the dissertation makes a methodological contribution to the debates on ideational variables in IR. Often understood to be epiphenomenal, sectarian identity is subjected to an analytical scrutiny usually conducted in the case of the material and institutional factors. Thus, the empirical parts illustrate how identity could be measured by discourse, operationalize it by means of policy and judge it for its outcome. This proves to be a model for prospective researchers, who want to bring ideas in realistic frameworks without having to lose analytical clarity.

To operationalize an identity-based ideological variable within the Neo-Classical Realist intervening variables (with “sectarianism” in this particular Iranian case), I would like to present some additional points that relate to the methodological aspect of this research within the operationalization of the identity-based ideological variable:

-Variable Definition: I conceptualized the variable constructs as how ideological narratives-sectarian, revolutionary-doctrines directly shape state action. This is not to be confused with

strategic culture (where histories and cultures are understood broadly) or state-society relations (where structures of interaction between government and public are understood) because the existing variables isolate the specific agency of ideological discourse and its institutional embedding which is boldly reflected in Iranian constitution and unique theo-political set-up.

-Data Collection and Source: The operationalization involved exhaustive discourse analysis, which surveyed official speeches by the Supreme Leader, influential politicians and senior IRGC commanders, analyzed state media outputs, and reviewed Islamic texts and doctrinal statements. By this, the metric was also quantifiable in terms of how often and how intensely sectarian themes (e.g. martyrdom narratives, sacred symbolism, and divine mission rhetoric) occur in policy discussions.

-Methodological Tools: This dissertation uses process tracing to connect the dots between ideological cues and actual policy decisions. For example, during my tracing of instances in which the defense of sacred sites –translating into concrete military support in Syria- was evoked. In addition, comparative content analysis across multiple sources (Persian, Turkish, and English documents) ensured triangulation and increased validity.

Emphasizing methodological innovation in giving this independent identity-based ideological variable opens up the following possibilities for the future:

i) Replication in similar cases: This methodological framework could then be applied by other researchers working in ideologically driven societies, such as in the Islamic governments or Levantine contexts. Through process tracing, discourse analysis, and triangulated data sourced from multiple languages, scholars could investigate the independent influence of ideological identity on foreign policy.

ii) Mixed-method framework: This argument presents the need for mixed-method research in IR. It shows how qualitative methods like content and discourse analysis can enrich process tracing with a more complex set of relations between ideology and materialism particularly during the conflictual cases.

iii) Theoretical integration: Raising sectarian or identity-based ideology to the status of an independent variable, the enriched Neo-Classical Realist framework connects Constructivist insights on identity with the material core of Realist theories. Such a synthesis enhances prediction but more importantly, erects stronger foundations for the theory and also enriches

the explanation power of the Realist theories particularly for the ideological/revolutionary states and identity-based decision-making mechanisms.

Contributions to Middle East Studies in Foreign Policy

The dissertation provides region-specific contributions. First, it provides insights into Iranian foreign policy beyond binary divisions such as pragmatic vs ideological or strategic vs religious, showing how these interweave in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy and security behavior: Iran does not oscillate between pragmatism and ideology; it practices ideological pragmatism, wherein revolutionary goals and strategic interests reinforce rather than contradict each other.

Second, it contributes to literature on sectarianism in the Middle East. It does not treat sectarianism as just political top-down strategies or grassroots phenomenon but places it within the complete political and institutional context. The dissertation argues that, in the Iranian case, sectarianism is not just deployed-it is lived, institutionalized, and operationalized. This complicates existing narratives, which treat sectarian identity purely in instrumental terms.

Third, this research contributes a new prism for understanding the Syrian Civil War, framing it not merely in the dimension of great power rivalry or a theatre of battle for aiding or impeaching authoritarian regimes but as an arena for idealism fight. It constructs Syria that has become a scene where Iran's view of a regional order reformulated in Shiite revivalism with resistance is countered by Turkish so-called neo-Ottomanism, Gulf-funded Salafism, and Western liberal interventionism. Adding to the academic understanding of the conflict, this has made more colorful and multidimensional Middle East geopolitical narratives.

This thesis represents substantive theoretical as well as methodological contributions. The larger Neo-Classical Realism framework captures the foreign policy practices of ideologically driven states better. The methodological avenue shows how qualitative tools can also be put to use in the Realist analysis of identity. Finally, the regional angle deepens knowledge about all intersections between religion, identity, and power in one of the incredibly volatile regions of the earth. The section will conclude with reflections on the larger implications of these findings for international relations and the future of Iranian-Turkish dynamics.

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Such a summation in this dissertation is a position for deeper thinking, a positioning or even an invitation to a positional thinking. Brainstorming strategic, ideological, and self-patterns as

they define what is Iranian foreign policy and its convoluted relation with Turkey are primarily attempts to unravel what this disquisition is all about. Previous chapters have convincingly shown that the Iranian behavior in the Syrian Civil War cannot adequately be understood as purely pragmatic or even as merely ideological purism, but rather as a combination of strategic pragmatism and sectarian ideology. This duality-"encompassing both logic," so ranked as that they are almost completely "mutually exclusive" in IR literature-comes together in the case of Iran to build a form of foreign policy most aptly described as Realism filtered through ideology.

This last segment anticipates an assessment into the future of what these remarks mean for the study of Iranian-Turkish relations, for that broader application of Neo-Classical Realism (NCR), and for the changing geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East. It is divided into three thematic reflections:

(1) institutionalizing sectarian strategic culture in Iranian foreign policy

(2) durability versus fragility in the Iranian-Turkish relationship

(3) the normative and scholarly implications for IR theory and policy-making.

Institutionalization of Sectarian Strategic Culture

One of the main propositions of this thesis concerns the reality of sectarian identity in Iran. The influence of sectarian identity is not only felt in elite rhetoric, but also in military doctrine, structures of alliances, educational systems, and bureaucracies of foreign policy. The emergence of the IRGC-Quds Force as a transnational ideological military force, the religious framing of military action, and the theological credentials for intervention all point toward a strategic culture that actively cultivates sectarian identity.

The systemic character of this institutionalization offers a durable structure for filtering Iranian foreign policy. The implications of this account are double-edged. First, it means that, once there is a change of leadership, the change of foreign policy is not going to be dramatic unless there is a corresponding change in the system. Second, sectarian narratives will remain influential in shaping Iran's threat perceptions, choices for allies, and future foreign engagement—especially considering Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria –even after the fall of Iran-backed Baath regime in December 2024.

Durability and Fragility in Iranian-Turkish Relations

This dissertation showed Iranian-Turkish relations as profoundly competitive yet relatively pragmatic. Strategic differences surfaced sharply in the Syrian conflict, speaking most intensely around sectarian lineages and ambitions for regional dominance, yet both countries have maintained economic relations and diplomatic dialogue termed shared security interests (most notably Kurdish separatism).

Rivalry in cooperation thereby implies that Iranian-Turkish relations can be best understood as dynamic equilibrium constituted both by convergence and divergence. The continued durability of the bilateral relationship thus rests on mutual recognition of red lines coupled with the capacity to compartmentalize conflicts. On the other hand, it shows fragility resulting from the violent swings of regional crises, internal political transformations, and emergence of sectarian frames at moments of heightened tension.

The case of Syria showed how both regimes framed the conflict in ideological terms: while Iran emphasized a Shiite revolutionary context, Turkey alluded to a Sunni-leaning, so-called neo-Ottomanist setting. Such lenses were not only discourses but also action blueprints for mobilization, intervention, and alliance-building. As long as these lenses hold, the Iranian-Turkish rivalry is likely to continue in indirect and asymmetrical forms.

Normative and Theoretical Implications

The dissertation makes a normative challenge to mainstream assumptions in IR theory, especially those that uphold a rigid separation of materialist and ideational factors in explaining international statecraft. The Iranian case demonstrates that, far from being an instrumental variable, religious identity is an axial factor in strategic behavior. Neo-Classical Realism, now equipped with sectarian identity as an intervening variable, is therefore far better suited to engaging the analytical complexities of ideologically grounded regimes.

This opens up avenues for further theorization in other areas where identity and ideology are structurally embedded; namely: South Asia (India-Pakistan), East Asia (North Korea), and Latin America (Bolivarian regimes). It also suggests some new methodological tools for bringing religious and ideological content into the evaluation of policy processes, thus further broadening the epistemological frontiers of IR.

Policy-makers are cautioned by this paper not to interpret Iranian foreign policy in their readings only in terms of rational deterrent or cost-benefit analyzes, which introduce diplomatic engagements that require a measure of culturally and ideologically educated insight. The

insights into how Iranian elites interpret their actions in terms of theology and history can help fine-tune intelligibility in the said policy, diminish the chances of misconception, and sometimes assist in engaging in a much more constructive manner, even with all the structural competition.

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Iranian foreign policy will likely remain a hybrid strategy, rooted in the resistance theory but articulated through sectarian identity, and thus subjected to calibration through pragmatic adaptation to the very extent that regional and global orders continue to undergo transformations. Turkey will remain both a rival and a necessary interlocutor. Even when the Syrian theatre has been momentarily de-escalated, it will continue to be a strategic and symbolic pivot in their bilateral engagement.

This dissertation, by grounding its analysis within a theoretically enriched and empirically grounded Neo-Classical Realist framework, provides scholars and practitioners with a new lens through which to view not only Iranian behavior but also the broader logics of identity-driven foreign policy in the 21st century. Any attempt to integrate sectarian identity into the core of Neo-Classical Realist theory is not, therefore, merely a refinement but a necessary evolution if complexities surrounding international politics in ideologically saturated environments are to be grasped.

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