

## IRAN'S NUCLEAR AMBITIONS: A NEOREALIST FRAMEWORK

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***Abstract:** The ideological foundation of Iran got revisited by its own people after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 that not only ousted a pro-US President, but had him replaced by a conservative figure i.e. Grand Ayatollah Imam Khomeini. Officially, secularism was replaced with Islam; Western orientations vis-à-vis culture and dress codes were replaced with the orthodox Islamic customs and costumes. However, Shiaism was practiced in Iran for centuries, but the attitude towards religion changed after the 1979 revolution. After decades of international isolation, Tehran under the reformist Presidency of Hassan Rouhani brokered a nuclear deal with the P5+1 States in 2015. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps was not satisfied with such advances towards the Western world; Donald Trump's abrogation of the JCPOA's deal in 2018 strengthened the clergy's revisionist point of view. This paper analyzes Iran's needs, attempts and tactics to get nuclear using different versions of structural (neo) realism i.e. offensive, defensive and neoclassical realism. Kenneth Waltz's theory of deterrence is taken as a benchmark for creating stability in the Middle East. A nuclear Iran means a stable Middle East since Israel and Iran would become two nuclear neighbors like Pakistan and India; even conventional wars are halted with nuclear deterrence.*

**Keywords:** deterrence, revolution, clergy, proliferation, neorealism and nuclear deal

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## **Introduction**

Since the dawn of the Arab Spring, the regions of Levant and Gulf have become vulnerable to schism, deceit, sabotage, massive protests, suicidal attacks and proxy warfare. Politics of Middle East in general and Syria in particular has divided the world into two major groups. The supporters of the Ba'athist government in Syria are led by Russia with the countries of Iran, Iraq, Syria (government) and Lebanon (Hezbollah) forming the 'axis of resistance'. United States has headed the Syrian secular opposition group named Free Syrian Army (FSA) along with the countries of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and Israel. But as the things unfolded and other major developments took place in the region, these alliances have started showing political fracturing. Four years into the war, Iran signed the historic nuclear treaty in 2015 with the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council in addition to Germany (to be discussed later in detail). Different modes of structural realism are applied to the Iranian nuclear ambitions, but Kenneth Waltz's theoretical framework of defensive realism connecting peace with Iran's acquisition of nuclear capability seems to be a viable option. He endorses regional bipolarity and claims that history has never witnessed two nuclear neighbors waging war at each other. Deterrence of the enemy halts such a policy framework. But history has only seen two instances of nuclear bombings, so drawing such a conclusion could be time constrained, but Waltz Levant's analysis endorses the Iranian right to enriched uranium. Israel will not be able to disrupt polarity in the Middle East. Validity of Waltz's hypothesis has become a part of the Middle-Eastern debate since most of the countries neighboring Israel and Iran have succumbed to the proxy warfare with the non-state actors plundering the cities and killing the common people and military men at will. Massive military defections in Iraq and Libya strengthened these violent groups. Amidst all this chaos, Iran till day remains the most powerful Muslim Army in the Middle-East (Turkey isn't counted in Levant) capable of resisting a future Israeli aggression. However, it would only be possible in a bipolar (binuclear) Middle East.

## **Waltz's Defensive Realism; a Yes for Iran**

Kenneth Waltz is known as the father of structural realism in general and defensive realism in particular. After the Second World War, international relations started forgetting the theory of realism in the American context considering it a dark European prose unfit for the

liberal institutionalist USA, but three major works (Man, the state and war in 1959; Theory of international politics in 1979; The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: more may be better in 1981) in neorealism are credited to Kenneth Waltz saving realism in a structural adjustment<sup>1</sup>. A year before his death, Waltz wrote an astonishing article in the journal of Foreign Affairs in 2012 amidst talks of sanctions on Iran to deter the threat of a nuclear capability. This article titled “why Iran should get the bomb” was a masterpiece vis-à-vis balance of power in the Middle-East i.e. Iran getting nuclear would only ensure stability to the hostile land of the Middle-East<sup>2</sup>. Waltz was concerned over the longevity of Israel’s monopoly of nuclear weapons. Tel-Aviv got nuclear in 1960 and has ensured, in connivance with Washington, not to allow any other member of Levant and Gulf to acquire the technology; Israel attacked Iraq’s nuclear sites in 1981 and the alleged Syrian ones in 2007. Since it considers Iran’s government as an existential threat to Israel, it plans to do the same with it. Waltz suggests that history has never seen two neighbors or the same region’s countries with the nuclear arsenal to fight a massive war; Pakistan and India signed an agreement in 1991 not to attack the nuclear sites of each other and they have respected the document ever since. Nuclear weapons are modes of deterrence not of offensive capabilities. Defensive realism in the Iranian context creates rifts in the relationship among the allies i.e. European Union and Israel with EU trying hard to save the deal<sup>3</sup>. USA has had different approaches towards Iran under different Presidents with Obama going for a major breakthrough with the signing of P5+1 agreement with Iran on nuclear weapons; Trump’s administration revoked the deal unilaterally assuaging Netanyahu’s Israel. But the European Union would agree to an Iran that: neither acquires nor openly tests nuclear weapons, but it acquires the breakout capability i.e. the vast civilian nuclear infrastructure to make a bomb in a short span of time like Japan. This energy capability is acquired by various developed countries in the world, but Iran is considered a threat courtesy of its hostile relationship with Israel in addition to the hostile remarks given by the religiously affiliated people in charge of Tehran. Israel, contrary to EU, would not accept an Iran with such threshold nuclear capabilities; Netanyahu compares Iran to the pre-WWII Nazi Germany and calls the states of Europe to stop appeasing a country whose

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Hall, “Kenneth Waltz: The Man Who Saved Realism,” *E-International Relations* (June 2013), <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/06/24/kenneth-waltz-the-man-who-saved-realism>.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2012, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Norman, “Europe Rallies to Save Iran Nuclear Deal,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2019.

missiles could land on the European soil <sup>4</sup> after getting nuclear. Waltz also answers critics calling for a nuclear arms race in Middle East if Tehran gets nuclear: Arab countries have been beaten and defeated by Israel, not by Iran. Therefore, they should not worry if their historical enemy gets challenged by their much lesser enemy i.e. Iran. The proliferation of nuclear weapons in the hands of non-states' actors has never been done in the history of the technology courtesy of strong US surveillance on the movement of fissile material. Nevertheless, most importantly, the leadership of any country (Iran is this case) is not naïve and mindless to involve their respective proxies in the handling of such weapons risking millions of lives and world's future. Even a small number of nuclear weapons would stabilize the Israel's monopolistic region of the Middle East<sup>5</sup>.

### **Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism: Iran, a Stabilizing Force**

Waltz and Mearsheimer representing defensive and offensive realism respectively have argumentative agreement on the impact of US sanctions on Iran. If a nation is pushed into international isolation, it becomes more resurgent to achieve what it has been declined; capitulation in an extreme pressure of sanctions is not a viable option since it leads to further concessions to the powerful. The 1990's UN sanctions on Iraq over the alleged sites of biological weapons took lives of over 100,000 people, but Saddam Hussain remained in power. Mearsheimer argues that the policies of President Trump have made the supporters of the Iranian nuclear deal hopeful for a Democrat's win in the US Presidential elections of 2020. Tehran missed a golden opportunity to achieve the nuclear capability it was so closed to in the early 2000's according to the available circumstantial evidence <sup>6</sup>. Modern day scenario has made the process much tougher. Since Israel considers the clerical ruled state as an existential threat to the Jewish survival, US and Israel could attack the Iranian installations. Had Iran been nuclear, such a preemptive strike even with conventional weapons, would not have been possible since the threshold even of a limited war could never be set especially when the receiving country possesses a second strike capability. However, he argues that if Iran has planned to abrogate the

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<sup>4</sup> Norman, "Europe Rallies to Save Iran Nuclear Deal."

<sup>5</sup> Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability."

<sup>6</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Iran Is Rushing to Build a Nuclear Weapon — and Trump Can't Stop It," *The New York Times*, July 01, 2019.

2015 nuclear deal and increase the process of enrichment as declared by its news agency, then United States is left with no options since: it cannot bomb Iran's nuclear facilities each year delaying the process by a few years, and it cannot stay in Iran forever provided it intervenes. Diplomacy and peace talks have been superseded by the US policy. If Iran gets nuclear, the US-Israel nexus allowing functioning in a Middle East with stability than ever before will not disturb it. Mearsheimer advises Iran not to rely upon the US Presidential and their respective parties' manifestos for their cooperation with Iran. It would be wise to develop the bomb and then negotiate like a responsible nuclear state. The Middle-Eastern balance of power would be maintained perfectly if Iran gets the weapons<sup>7</sup>.

### **A Nuclear Iran is a Deterrent Iran**

Waltz believes in quantity i.e. the number of nuclear weapons; higher the number, safer is the levels of deterrence and stability. Deterrence is referred to uncertainty<sup>8</sup>; a slight chance of nuclear retaliation means deterrence i.e. safety for both the sides. During the cold war, United States developed a whopping 70,000 nuclear warheads. It was done to instill fear of a second strike capability in the mind of the only other super power of the time i.e. Soviet Union. After the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, not a single incident of a nuclear attack has occurred during and after the cold war. Neorealists correlate these blank statistics to the theory of deterrence that leads to states acting as billiard balls on a table of interaction. This interaction could be either international or domestic in nature. Whatever may be the interaction, the neorealism has sponsored result in a comfortable or an anxious peace; nuclear arms states do not cross the threshold and ensure stability via deterrence. Iran is no different to France or Israel: Middle East would finally experience stability with two rivals having nuclear capabilities i.e. Israel and Iran<sup>9</sup>. But for this to happen, world leaders will have to listen to the neorealists. In 2015, just after three years from Waltz's advice for Iran to achieve 'peace through strength', the

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<sup>7</sup> Mearsheimer. "Iran Is Rushing to Build a Nuclear Weapon".

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory" *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, (1988): 626.

<sup>9</sup> Shakiba Fadaie, "Contending Theories: Realism and Liberalism in the Nuclear Twenty-First Century International Relations Theory," *International Relations Theory* (December 2018), <https://blogs.ubc.ca/shakiba/>.

world powers brokered a nuclear deal with Iran under Obama administration. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) arranged a multilateral treaty with Iran; five members of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and Germany (P5+1) brokered this deal with Tehran. In exchange for IAEA's (International Atomic Energy Agency) inspections of the Iranian nuclear sites and a de jure reduction in uranium enrichment, Iran got its assets unfrozen along with the assurances of legally exporting oil via its giant reserves. Along with partial lifting of sanctions<sup>10</sup> on Tehran by the international community, these assurances in the deal gave the Iranians a blow of fresh air of stability and interaction with the outside world; US-Iran relations started restoring after the 1979 Revolution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. But the neorealists proved right once again in 2018; President Trump revoked the deal that was in its nascent stages as far as stability for Tehran was concerned. Two different US political parties and Presidents dealt differently with Iran i.e. the Democratic Party under President Obama brokered and allowed the deal to flourish; Republican's President Trump not only rescinded the deal but also criticized the preceding government of allowing Iran such an economic incentive. Whether intentionally or without giving Waltz a thought, Iran has reacted strongly and started enriching weapon grade uranium to a level it signed not to reach in the JCPOA's deal. According to neorealism, Iran instead of relying on the US election results should ensure an unconditional continual process to turn nuclear. These hopeful rather doubtful policy subtleties won't let Tehran stabilize the land of Middle-East. This experiment of JCPOA's deal by President Rouhani had him on the ladder of criticism by the powerful clergy at home (well-wishers from outside Iran also criticized Rouhani) labelling him to be a puppet of the liberal West and a person misfit to judge the bias world entails against Iran and its nuclear program.

### **Morgenthau's Balance of Power; Iran, the Balancer**

United States has miscalculated its foreign policy measures. Neglecting the core values of realism, US seek a different non-theoretical approach in Middle East. It does not allow a balance of power i.e. allying with the countries like Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia; US only intensifies the fire of terrorism and sectarianism. If a government supports the countries that fund and back the Jihadist elements, then the upcoming fall out of such a policy would only affect the US and

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<sup>10</sup> "The Iran Nuclear Deal," *The Express Tribune*, July 14, 2017.

its Western allies. Morgenthau's advice of balancing (Middle East in this case) refers to creating a bridge of connectivity between the two states vis-à-vis power distribution controlled by a bigger power i.e. USA. Iran after the 1979 Revolution has adopted a revisionist policy<sup>11</sup>: President Rouhani tried to connect with the world through his open policy contradicting the past trends of revisionism. Such a bold move should have been appreciated, but the current US administration lacks the aesthetic sense of pluralism. Pluralism is a term that extends the limits of secularism. Iran and USA if not in the same continent are in the same world, a world that demands respect for each other's rights to coexist. Pluralism whether religious or cultural demands tolerance, acceptability and time; three qualities that USA had gained in the second term of President Obama only to be lost three years later. Donald Trump's hasty decision-making has not been limited to Iran only; he did the same to the US allied YPG in Syria leaving the Kurd dominated fighting group at the mercy of Turkey and Syria<sup>12</sup>.

Under Morgenthau's scheme of things, USA could have balanced the trio of Tel-Aviv-Riyadh-Cairo with Tehran by continuing supplying weapons to the former and leveraging economic sanctions on the latter. This harsh clueless behavior has made United States miss an excellent opportunity to enter the Iranian hearts and challenge their clergy with tactics of balancing. Since Iran's history and populace discerns the country from the diametrically opposite block, i.e. Wahhabism under the lead of Riyadh, US could have taken it as an opportunity, bargained, and bartered with Iran under the persuasive leadership of President Rouhani. US would have lifted economic sanctions coupled with a restoration of diplomatic relations and acceptance of Iran as a normal country; Iran would have shown practical steps to withdraw its proxies from Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. US could also have conditioned the weapons' assistance to Saudi-Israel-Egypt trio to a normalization of relations with Iran; Iran could have been persuaded to formally recognize Israel. This bargain of the Iranian acceptance of Israel as an independent country would have sparked controversies and hardcore marches inside Iran provided Iran had signed such a document. These sort of opportunities discern great governments from the average, myopic ones. Washington by such a diplomatic effort would have restored

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Pampinella, "Morgenthau's Realism and Today's Middle East," *The National Interest*, July 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Jenna Krajeski, "What the World Loses If Turkey Destroys the Syrian Kurds," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2019.

stability in the Middle East, because Tehran accepting Tel-Aviv in exchange for an open market oil trade and commerce meant a Tehran distancing itself from the Palestinian cause safeguarding the interests of Israel<sup>13</sup>.

## Neoclassical Realism and the Islamic Cold War

In defining the systemic approach of a country, neoclassical realist framework adds first and second image variables to the finality of foreign policy of that country. Neorealism suggests that the combination of international anarchical system of 'self-help' and the 'capability of relative material power' of a state limit the actions and choices of that state in the international system. Neoclassical approach adds factors like ideology, domestic circumstances and other cognitive approaches and personality traits to the systemic level of states' interaction. Foreign policies as a result get dictated by these patterns of perceptions and misperceptions. Still, neoclassical realism maintains that the mediating variables at the individual and state level don't super cede the core of neorealism i.e. the systemic level of analysis. Individual and state level variables may impact the foreign policy traits of a country under a specific leader for a specific period of time, but the strategic positioning of a state in the world refers to its systemic presence<sup>14</sup>. Applying the former traits on the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, we could infer the role played by the cognitive traits in: the de facto ruler of Riyadh (Muhammad Bin Salman i.e. MBS); the reformist President of Iran (Hassan Rouhani) and the Supreme Leader's defense of Iran's revisionist policies (Ayatollah Khamenei). MBS tried to bring political and economic reforms at home and abroad. Arab Spring brought two major challenges to the future of the Saudi Kingdom i.e. political and economic. The post-2011 Middle East witnessed a US administration not keen to defend its long term allies especially Hosni Mubarak of Egypt; in fact, he was asked to step down shortly after the start of protests. US didn't even second the seasoned diplomat Frank Wisner's suggestion of Mubarak remaining in office during the Egyptian political transition to democracy after his Obama sponsored meeting with the troubled President

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<sup>13</sup> Pampinella, "Morgenthau's Realism and Today's Middle East."

<sup>14</sup> Gustav S. Dahl, "Understanding the Islamic Cold War," *SciencesPo Kuwait Program*, (October 2018), <https://www.sciencespo.fr/kuwait-program/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Gustav-Skjold-Bang-Dahl-Essay-International-Relations-in-the-Middle-East.pdf>.

of Cairo<sup>15</sup>. Syrian crisis saw a reluctant US to send ground forces leaving a power vacuum that was quickly filled up by Russia. Complete withdrawal of troops from Iraq in 2011 and a sizable withdrawal from Afghanistan ensured not only a lack of US interest in the regions of Middle East and East Asia, but to a weakening of polarity. Saudis were amazed by their de facto US insurance policy. This US indifference to regime changes brought Riyadh to the table of massive weapons' import spending around 64 billion US dollars on its 2016 defense budget. MBS started vexing his muscles in the region. Since Saudis were living comfortably in a tax free country, the 97 billion dollars' budget deficit in 2017 enforced a 5 percent levy on specific goods under the banner of austerity measures<sup>16</sup>. MBS knew that more economic stringent measures could cause the common Saudis to follow the examples of the Arab Spring. In order to assuage the public, he arrested and confiscated billions of dollars from the high ranked Saudi officials and executives including many people from the Royal family.

### **Iran-Saudi Rivalry through the Discourse Analysis of Cognitive Perceptions**

At the political front, he targeted Lebanon and Syria in an attempt to balance the enhancing Iranian strategic power. MBS cognition allowed him to forcefully convince Saad Hariri, the Lebanese Prime Minister to abdicate his post when he was on a visit to the Kingdom. He rescinded his declaration when he returned home. This cognitive blunder shamed the pro-Saudi Sunni Lebanese opposition. MBS alliance with UAE to attack Yemen in surge for a quick victory that could later be used as a selling scheme in the Kingdom's foreign policy misfired. The dispersed Houthis of Yemen emerged as a hardcore fighting force shaming the Saudis once again. This futile exercise not only killed Yemen's children but also gave Iran an opportunity to further flex its muscles in Riyadh's neighborhood. A senior, experienced and less ardent Saudi leadership might have done otherwise. But the neorealist framework does indicate the fact that when an adversary gets militarily stronger, the other country is bound to feel insecure; the only way to respond is by getting stronger itself. Riyadh has historically bandwogoned with the US

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<sup>15</sup> "US Distances Itself from Wisner's Remarks on Mubarak," *SBS News*, accessed August 10, 2019, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/us-distances-itself-from-wisner-s-remarks-on-mubarak>.

<sup>16</sup> Dahl, "Understanding the Islamic Cold War."

for its security; MBS tried making alliances including the controversial alliance with Israel to counter Iran's influence<sup>17</sup>.

Iran since the revolution of 1979 has been trapped in the debate of the revisionist policies under the Guardian Council headed by the Grand Ayatollah Khamenei (Imam Khomeini preceded him) and the reformist agenda of Presidents that come to the seat of Presidency again and again in a public attempt to provide them relief from the economic sanctions and the orthodox freedom curtailed clerical rule imposed from the days of revolution. Iranians brought President Khatami to the office in 1997 after the departure of the controversial reformist cum incompetent President Rafsanjani. Khatami like his predecessor was given another term in 2001: he gave a light of reformist hope to the Iranians, but due to the political turmoil in the neighboring Iraq and the region courtesy of another US intervention, he couldn't deliver according to the expectations. The 2005 controversial elections brought Ahmadinejad, a right-winger, to the seat of Presidency. The cognitive idea behind his selection with votes even from the modern city of Tehran (he was previously a mayor of) reflected upon the need for a revisionist policy that could enable Iran to remain anti-US in its foreign policy and fight a Muslim case against the Western interventions. Reformists did not stand a chance in such a hostile atmosphere: 2005 elections had controversies attached to it, but still the results were a reflection of the acceptability of the hardliners discourse on the US by the majority of Iranians. After the two tenures of President Ahmadinejad, the reformist educationist Hassan Rouhani came to the scene in 2013<sup>18</sup>. Strengthening his stance on opening up of the Iranian economy and the subsequent restoration of its image throughout the world as a friendly normal country, he successfully concluded the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA). Conservatives in the Parliament and the Guardian Council seemed to be hesitant if not amused by Rouhani's plans. His perception among the scheme of things contradicted the cognitive tendencies of the pro-clergy leadership. The way the leadership of the two countries perceive and interpret each-others' public speeches, foreign policy moves, alignments etc matters in their mutual relationship: the most powerful cognitive discourse on the Saudi-Iran rivalry stands as an ideological-ethnic-dynastic fight between the Salafi-Wahhabi-Arabic-Saudi nexus versus the Shia-Persian-Imamate combination.

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<sup>17</sup> Dahl.

<sup>18</sup> Dahl.

## **Nuclear Capability versus Nuclear Technology: Drawing the Red Line**

Many countries in the world possess nuclear capability i.e. they have highly enriched uranium isotopes available for medical, energy and scientific research. If they decide to go an extra mile and cross the threshold red line, they can turn nuclear in a few months-time. But most of the developed states choose not to since they don't fear the desire for deterrence e.g. Canada is a US ally and neighbor; similarly, most of the EU states are NATO members. In the case study of Iran, the October, 2012 reports claimed that Iran would take around 12 to 14 months to get nuclear. IAEA claims that the process is a two-step breakdown: 2 to 4 months are spent in amassing a certain quantity of enriched uranium followed by the 8 to 10 months' process to weaponize it<sup>19</sup>. If Tehran decided to shift enough quantities of uranium to the weaponization's process, such an activity could not remain unnoticed. Iran delayed the start of the process by a few months after shifting sizable quantities of uranium to its medical sites. Israel has had plans to attack the Iranian nuclear sites in stage one if the latter started the process repeating the Iraqi episode of 1981 and of Syria in 2007. Such an aerial attack could create panic and chaos not only in Iran but also in the region. Fareed Zakaria argues that Tel-Aviv has tried hard in persuading Washington to draw a red line vis-a-vis the Iranian nuclear process; United States hasn't toed the Israeli line of defense in this case. US foreign policy is reluctant to set a red line against Iran by not allowing it to have a nuclear capability<sup>20</sup>.

The timeline between having a nuclear capability and a nuclear weapon is enough time for the world to intervene and halt Iran diplomatically or by aggression from making of a bomb. After Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with the P5+1 states followed by the cancellation from President Donald Trump in 2018, the transitional period between the two described processes becomes longer and prone to sabotage. Rouhani's reformist agenda much to the delight of the Guardian Council and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is ended in no man's land thanks to Trump's unilateral abrogation of a nuclear deal a deal that could have ensured stability and peace in the Middle East making it the deal of the century. IRGC is the backbone of protecting the

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<sup>19</sup> Rusty Treviño, "Is Iran an Offensives Realist or a Defensive Realist?," *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 5 (2013): 382–92.

<sup>20</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "Netanyahu Pushes for a War That the U.S. Doesn't Want," *The Daily Star Lebanon*, September 15, 2012.

roots of the Islamic Revolution i.e. the Grand Ayatollah and his unchallenged obedience, the conservative norms of the Iranian society and ensuring a backseat for the reformist agenda<sup>21</sup> and its proponents both in the Iranian Parliament (Majles) and in the Iranian hearts. Israel has always been susceptible of the Iranian motives and it even does not believe in the IAEA's reports of a nuclear compliance by Iran. Israel has tried to play as a buck-passer and involve USA into the conflict by persuading it to draw a red line on Iran and attack it if needed by the Israeli authorities<sup>22</sup>. Striking Iran means an unprecedented chaos and revenge in the region: Israel knows about the connections between Hamas in Palestine and the Iranian clergy; Tel-Aviv has successfully neutralized all Arab states especially the ex-defiant Egypt (Camp David Accords of 1978); Hezbollah from Lebanon fought a 34 days' war with Israel in 2006 that ended in utter Israeli humiliation considering the difference between the two powers and the time lapse. Israeli Army dropped leaflets via planes in Lebanon cursing and threatening the annihilation of Hezbollah and asking the people of Lebanon to distance themselves from the militant group. Tel-Aviv's Parliament endorsing the resolution of ceasefire sponsored by UNSC with the former Aerial Sharon's era Defense Minister and Army Chief of Staff, Shaul Mofaz (Transport Minister at the time of war) not participating in the voting reflected upon his contempt and shame that government brought to the land of the chosen people<sup>23</sup>. Israeli authorities link all these insulting encounters to the Iranian Grand Ayatollah. If USA had agreed to the Israeli demand and drawn a red line or attacked Iran, the answer could had been devastating not only to the US interests in the Middle-East<sup>24</sup> but also to the survival of the small country of Israel. Iran's proxies and the Shia influence of the followers of Imam Khamenei (Jurisprudence' following) entail<sup>25</sup> Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and Palestine (Hamas is a pro-Iran Sunni organization controlling the Palestinian side of the Gaza Strip). The newly Western banned Palestinian militant group by the name of Islamic Jihad is in its nascent days of training under Hezbollah and Iran; it was merged with Hamas strengthening the resources of the latter and

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<sup>21</sup> Afshon Ostovar, "Soldiers of the Revolution," *Foreign Affairs*, September 2016, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Treviño, "Is Iran an Offensives Realist or a Defensive Realist?"

<sup>23</sup> Steven Erlanger, "Cease-Fire Begins After a Day of Fierce Attacks," *The New York Times*, August 14, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Treviño, "Is Iran an Offensives Realist or a Defensive Realist?"

<sup>25</sup> These are countries with sizable Shia population.

stronger group<sup>26</sup>. Commentators are divided on the concept of Vilayet-e-Faqih in Shia Islam. Just like the Iranian Revolution, a large part of the Shia community throughout the world follow the rulings of the Vilayet-e-Faqih i.e. the Grand Ayatollah Imam Khamenei as an obligation whether these are the affairs of daily lives or call for Jihad in a land foreign to them. People against the deduction of conclusion from the concept claim that only a negligible number of unsettled poor people say yes to such emotional calls. A call for the holy war i.e. Jihad in the Shia Islam could be compared to the Sunni Mujahedeen and militias that fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan. However, there remains a difference between the two ideologies. Taliban in Kabul did not fight on behalf of the government; they were a group of fighters that were fighting against an infidel state and didn't believe in the geographical limitations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century nation-states. Iran's Grand Ayatollah's call for Jihad means a call from a nation-state to defend it from a Jewish power adamant to denuclearize/annihilate the Muslim country. The Jihadist rhetoric of fighting against the infidel has less charisma than fighting against the Jews in the Islamic world. The post-war climate in Kabul, Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus and Sana gave rise to different factions of militant groups bent on destroying each other in a war for dominance, resources and an implementation of their version of Islamic values. These movements usually end up becoming the proxies of the outside countries causing a never ending chaos and the carnage of a civil war always floats around the corner. A post-war Iran could suffer the same fate, but its military and missile capability and the Shia regional influence discern it from the likes of Iraq and Syria whose nuclear sites were successfully attacked by Israel. Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine have stockpiles of rockets rumored to be transferred by Iran's IRGC. Such a strategic depth makes Tehran much more confident of not allowing the US-Israel nexus to target its nuclear sites.

### **Post Arab Spring: non-Sectarian Alliances**

The new Middle-Eastern cold war isn't ideological rather is bent upon furthering the influence especially to the weaker states. This struggle reminds us of the early years of the infamous 'Arab Cold War' that was fought by the Pan-Arab rhetoric, not by force. The era of

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<sup>26</sup> Simon Tisdall, "Sudden US Threat against Iran Adds to Middle East Volatility \_ US News," *The Guardian*, May 06, 2019.

1950's and 1960's witnessed the Arab world's countries desiring for influence across the region. Since there was no major power at the time, maneuvering was slightly easier. Gamal Nasser of Egypt suffered humiliation at the hands of Israel and Yemen during the period of Arab renaissance; both were military failures. But he was considered a master in championing the rights and identity of the Arabs <sup>27</sup>. The contemporary renewal of the Arab cold war is normally seen through the eyes of sectarian rifts, but this is only a part of the story, not the complete story itself. Ideological cum sectarian tools play as important a part in the spread of regional influence as the material power of a state. Israel lacks this luxury: Iran spreads its interests via alliances influenced by the revolutionary Shia rhetoric; Saudi Arabia does the same spearheading the Sunni school. In maintaining alliances and fomenting rebellions, Iran tactfully used the sectarian card in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

Nevertheless, Iran's ambitions are not limited to the spread of revolution to the neighboring countries; it plans for much more. Tehran has dealt with non-Shia and non-Muslim states like a normal country. Riyadh for an odd reason shares a page of regional influence framework with Iran. Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, a Salafi anti-modernistic political party whose Syrian branch suffered the <sup>28</sup>brutalities of the '1982 Hama Clan' at the hands of President Hafiz Al-Assad, succeeded Hosni Mubarak after the Arab Spring. Its ideological fascinations were in line with the Saudis, but the military takeover by General Sisi ousting the orthodox Morsi was fully supported by the Saudis. Qatar, an ideological supporter of MB, had to face the Saudi heat and hatred; a strong Saudi diplomatic boycott became the fate of the Qatari government <sup>29</sup>. The rhetoric of 'defender of the Sunni world' didn't sell here neither did the Saudis had any intentions to sell such a narrative, at least in this case. The Syrian crisis has furthered the nascent-grounded theory of influence over sectarian alliances. During the Lebanese civil war, Christians fought against the Shia-Sunni nexus. Iran-Iraq war had the historical Arab-Persian conflicting color to it apart from the sectarian rifts. Riyadh supported Iyad Allawi, a Shia Iraqi politician in 2005 and 2010 elections; he was representing a non-sectarian party. The

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<sup>27</sup> F. Gregory Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," *Brookings Doha Institute* 11, (2014): 19.

<sup>28</sup> Raphael Lefevre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), 40.

<sup>29</sup> Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War."

Kingdom also corroborated with the secular Free Syrian Army (FSA) of Syria since they distanced themselves from the conservative Muslim Brotherhood. Saudis official statements don't endorse the tactics and brutalities of the Islamic State (IS) in either Iraq or Syria. Similarly, Iran does not defend atrocities committed by uncontrolled Shia militias operating in the two countries<sup>30</sup>.

### **Tehran's Non-States' Alliances and Complications**

The political tussle between Iran and USA led to an action by the latter's ally UK; it declared the political wing of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization adding fuel to the Iranian fire. Iran responded with discontent saying that such a move by UK means "deliberately ignoring a large part of the Lebanese people and the legitimacy and the legal position of Hezbollah in Lebanon's administrative and political structure". Iran deeply values Hezbollah and its military and political structure. The organization holds three ministries and in an alliance with other parties, holds 70 out of the 128 seats in the Lebanese Parliament. Protecting Iranian interests in Syria, Hezbollah has not responded to over 1,000 bombings by Israel causing utter carnage and infrastructure damage to the Iranian sites in the Syrian cities of Homs and Damascus. Hezbollah's hands are tied to the stakes in the Lebanese Parliament and government; responding to Israel means friction among the alliance parties, which Iran and Hezbollah cannot afford. But Hezbollah is emerging as a regional force unlike Muslim Brotherhood since its military and political wings are active and influential, at least in Syria and Lebanon<sup>31</sup>. Although Iran is considered a constant cause of disagreement vis-à-vis Israel's conflicts with Hamas, still the non-state actor has been in an ideological cum political flux when it comes to its policy statement on the Syrian crisis and President Assad. 2012 saw a rift between the two allies; a rift that proved to be a bubble. Since Iran is thought to be supporting the Shia organizations fighting in the Middle East (Hezbollah being the prime example), Hamas is seen as an exception; there are strategic interests in not accepting Israel and supporting Hamas rather than the export of sectarian

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<sup>30</sup> Gause.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Chulov, "Censured by Britain, Hezbollah Is Bigger than Ever in Beirut," *The Guardian*, March 02, 2019.

revolutions. Since Hamas is not a country, it can treat Tehran like other Arab capitals<sup>32</sup>. Neutrality in the Syrian conflict is not an option for the organization since such a stance could deprive it from the Iranian funding; Arab neighbors neither openly support a proxy fighting Tel-Aviv nor do they trust the Iranian intentions in financing Hamas. Hamas does deduce a pro-Iran argument in the Middle-Eastern inferno. In 2015, Houthis removed the pro-Saudi government in Sana, the capital of Yemen. Although Houthis are considered the most independent non-state group operating in the Middle East and North Africa by most of the scholars, still the Iranian stance and its supposed supply of finances and military equipment to Houthis spark controversies in the Sunni Arab world. Saudi creation of the Islamic alliance fighting the Yemenis has taken an international direction: US Congressmen have divided over the sale of US weapons to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi since the two Gulf States are accused of using these weapons in committing heinous crimes in Yemen that include the killing of children, cholera and famine<sup>33</sup>. Though Houthis are not Shias (they have Shia inclinations only); supporting them means another master stroke of influence by Iran in the region. The latest missile strike on a Saudi airport injuring a few people is considered retaliation to the coalition strikes. Iran and its proxies are not going to sit quietly in the future of the Middle-Eastern conflicts ensuring an ever enhanced Iranian influence in the region.

### **Russian Unabated Support to Tehran in Regional Conflicts**

Since the revolution, Russia has always been a breath of fresh air for the sanctioned Iranian economy and defense. Even the Soviet disintegration did not stop the communist regime from strengthening the alliance between the two countries. The recent US sanctions on Iran preceded by the abrogation of the JCPOA agreement by the US enforced President Putin to openly side by Iran and its right to fend off its enemies' intentions. The two countries have collaborated extensively in Syria bringing down Assad's rival forces including the likes of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. Though Moscow could benefit from Tehran's international isolation

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<sup>32</sup> Mohammad Ayesh, "Why Hamas Needs Iran," *Middle East Monitor*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181128-why-hamas-needs-iran/>.

<sup>33</sup> Vivian Yee, "Houthis Strike Saudi Airport, Escalating Yemen Conflict," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> coupled with economic sanctions vis-à-vis energy pipelines' competition in the region, but on the larger frame, the picture of Russian resurgence in the Middle East seems gloomy without a powerful Iran in Syria. The Russian Maritime Doctrine of 2020 in an extension to its presence in the Mediterranean via Port of Tartus in Syria. The advent of Arab Spring saw immediate results in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, but the Russo-Iranian nexus made Assad's defense and tactics discern him from Mubarak, Abideen and Gaddafi. Such resilience from Putin and Ahmadinejad (Rouhani replaced him in 2013) to favor Syria over all odds including the eight rounds of talks in Geneva (Geneva Talks; 2013-2017) proved vital in the defeat of the opposition proxies and militant groups. Contrary to the above mentioned magnanimous claims of triumph, Syrians have suffered at the hands of government forces trained and equipped by the Russians and the Irani Revolutionary Guards <sup>35</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

The 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran started the process of conservatism. The last king of the Pahlavi dynasty exiled; people accepted Grand Ayatollah as the supreme leader. Things were seemingly on track amidst the trials and killings of SAVAK's former members, but the country started to feel the toll of revolution when multiple factors jumped in to haunt the Iranian regime. They included the Iraq-Iran war (1980-88), freezing of the Iranian assets placed outside Iran, international sanctions and isolation. Internal resistance to the strict Islamic codes of life was also seen. Iran after the revolution could be termed as a theocratic democracy where participation in the Presidential elections is the Majles' discretion whereas the people are allowed to vote for or against a candidate showing their approval or avenging their displeasure at the regime. This right to vote selected presidents on the agenda of reforms. The biggest name to this list is of Hassan Rouhani who currently is in his second tenure as the president of Iran. He had earlier replaced the hardliner Ahmadinejad. Rouhani's biggest political breakthrough was the international acceptance of JCPOA nuclear deal with the P5+1 states. A sizable chunk of Iran's frozen assets was released in exchange for cooperation to the IAEA rules and inspections. This

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<sup>34</sup> Pyotr Kortunov and Abdolrasool Divsallar, "Russia Unlikely to Stay Neutral If U.S. and Iran Go to War," *The Moscow Times*, May 28, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Kortunov and Divsallar. "Russia Unlikely to Stay Neutral If U.S. and Iran Go to War,"

2015 deal brought with it a new ray of economic hope for the Iranians. Lifting of international sanctions succeeded these measures. However, Iran needed time to develop its oil and gas sites to an international level profit maximization. It was on the way to reap economic fruits when things started to change once again. Israel did not accept this deal and blamed President Obama of allowing Iran ample time to deceive the world and develop the bomb. Tel-Aviv's policy demands strict economic sanctions on Iran to enforce an Iranian budget deficit that has no room or money to be spent on the nuclear program. Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza and Palestine have been Iran backed and Israel's history with the two groups does not give space to the possibility of a dialogue. Kenneth Waltz's theory of deterrence allows a nation to build its defensive capabilities for national security. He backed Iran to get nuclear since two nuclear neighbors do not even dare wage a conventional war against each other. The presence of nuclear warheads draws a line of deterrence disabling the nation states to control the outcome of a nuclear war.

A bipolar Middle East with two nuclear powers i.e. Israel and Iran would ensure deterrence and peace instead of an asymmetric balance of power in favor of the former. Just after three years into the deal, United States decided to withdraw from it in 2018. Other members of the joint comprehensive plan of action are still busy in safeguarding the deal, but with the US exit, sanctions on Iran have been re-imposed. Although the fallouts of the Arab Spring and the Syrian Crisis had placed the United States and Iran in the opposite camps, still JCPOA was a fresh breather. But things have gone back to the square one. Amidst all these developments, we have seen: A Russian resurgence in the Middle-East (and Near Abroad), German stance of the Norm Stream II Russian Gazprom's pipeline project after the US sanctions, a political rift between USA and the European States and a reshuffling of alliances in the Middle-East. China planning to invest huge sums of money in the Iranian oil and transport sectors and the impeachment of President Trump by the US Congress are signs for a renewal of JCPOA deal, may be, after a successful impeachment or after a change of US government in 2020 elections. Until then, Iran's diplomatic efforts have to be spot on. Its naval drills with Russia and China also answer the allegations of Iran's international isolation. The Islamic regime could only survive if it allows its people economic opportunities. For that to happen, it needs non-US companies to invest in Iran. Tehran has to its credit military successes as reflected by the performance of its proxy forces fighting in the Arab world, but it has to be economically strong

to even cater to its military needs. Russia has helped the country militarily, but only China could help it in foreign direct investments either in the US dollars or in the Chinese Yuan.