Syrian Crisis: An Analysis of Political and Security Strategies of Involved Actors

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Abstract:

In one of the bloodiest developments in the Middle East, a severe crisis has gripped Syria and the region since 2011. In the meantime, each of the regional actors or supra-regional powers, according to their weight and position and based on their interests and considerations, have intervened, played a role or at least taken a stance in this crisis. This article seeks to identify the reasons and factors affecting these policies by examining the political and security strategies of regional and supra-regional actors vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis and study the approaches and tactics adopted by these actors. To this end, three theories of "structuralism", "Copenhagen School" and "defensive realism" have been used as the theoretical framework. Moreover, by using filing tools, library and internet documents and existing writings, this hypothesis has been substantiated that due to the existence of three types of parallel, mutual and overlapping interests, the behavioral pattern of the actors involved in the Syrian crisis shows three levels of cooperation, competition and confrontation in the Syrian political and military scenes. In this respect, each of the parties involved attempts to have the upper hand by increasing their power and influence, while maintaining and promoting their national interests and controlling and limiting the influence and presence of the other parties.

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Introduction

With the domino effect fall of the Arab au-thoritarian regimes in the wake of the "Arab Spring", Syria was also affected by the wave of uprisings. Nevertheless, sporadic popular protests in some provinces rapidly turned into some of the bloodiest events in the history of Syria, sweeping through the entire country and then across the region, but later taking on a supra-regional dimension with the interven-tion of international powers. In the face of this crisis, regional and international actors have sought to define their priorities and pur-sue their short or long-term goals in and after the crisis, according to their own interests as well as their own positions. They soon begun to split into pro- and anti-Syrian regime camps, a division that has sometimes led to proxy wars between regional actors or inter-national powers. In this study, we will ex-amine the positions, views, strategies, and tactics of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the United States, and Israel that are directly or indirectly involved in this crisis.

Theoretical Framework

Given the multiplicity of regional and inter-national actors in the face of the Syrian crisis, three theories and approaches were used to assess the hypothesis and better understand the subject and theorize the strategy of those actors. The constructivist approach was used to theorize the political and security behavior of regional countries such as Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. In this context, what influ-ences the partiality and foreign policy and practice of these countries are norms, identi-ties and interests and these variables are giv-en priority. In this approach, the relations of governments with each other are formed based on their definition of each other, and interests are defined based on identity.

In the Syrian crisis, each side is trying to gain the upper hand by increasing its power and influence. This is clearly evident in the de-clared policies and actions of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia views the internal Syrian conflict as a power struggle between Shia and Sunni factions, thus a his-toric opportunity to eliminate the rival ideol-ogy (Shia) in Syria and weaken the Axis of Resistance and control and limit the power and influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region. Turkey's approach has histori-cal and cultural elements. With neo-Ottomanism at the core of the Ankara's for-eign policy behavior, today Turkey seeks to be recognized as a regional power. Turkey's reminiscence of the memorable past identity in the form of neo-Ottomanism, promoting secular Islam and geopolitical rivalries with other regional powers are among this coun-try's goals that can be theorized in the framework of the constructivist approach.

The Islamic Republic of Iran also pursues its goals and interests in Syria. The religious affinity of the Syrian regime with the Iranian political system, Tehran's serious support for the Palestinians, the founding of Hezbollah and the history of the strategic alliance of the two countries during the Iraq-Iran war are among the identity and normative factors that regulate the foreign policy of the Islamic Re-public of Iran with respect to the Syrian cri-sis. Therefore, these countries have formed their foreign policy in this crisis based on their values and interests and have shown a behavioral pattern based on competition.

The Copenhagen School's securitization theory can be used to theorize the US beha-vior towards the Syrian crisis. This approach focuses only on security studies but does not have a narrow view of security and does not reduce security issues to military and war and

peace dimensions (Adami, 2012, p.134). The securitization theory is one of the most prominent concepts of the Copenhagen School. Securitization means moving a phenomenon away from the realm of "ordinary politics" or "public politics" into an area of security concerns (Abdollah khani, 2006, p. 491). Barry Buzan considers the existence of a pattern of friendship and enmity between governments as a feature of a regional security complex. Within the framework of security complexes, the major regional powers may make one of the followings impacts:

- They may have little involvement;
- They may stop or reverse the behavior of other regional powers;
- Superpowers outside the region can also directly change the security order.
(Frazier et. al, 2010, p. 734)

The US Administration, especially under Trump, has viewed Syria as a security issue. Although the US pursues a wide range of political, economic, and security objectives in Syria, the continued process of its interventions in various fields shapes the overall US foreign policy in the region. The US is trying to control the behavior of Iran as a regional power and contain its influence. Also, as a major supra-regional superpower, it seeks to change the security order of the region in order to ensure the survival and security of Israel and to continue and advance the Middle East peace process.

To theorize Israeli foreign policy behavior, the defensive realism theory was used. Among the schools of thought and theoretical traditions of international relations, realism is one of the most important theories that explain the behavior of governments in international relations. This theory, has key assumptions and concepts for analyzing international relations, including: state-centered, rationality, balance of power, self-help, survival and anarchical structure. Defensive realism, with its assumption of the pursuit of power by governments, is concerned with security. This makes security dilemma the dominant view of defensive realism. Governments achieve security by maintaining their position within the system. Therefore, they seek to achieve an appropriate level of balance of power with other governments (Ghavam, 2014, p. 311).

The anarchic nature of the international system also limits expansionism and the rise of power among nations. In the context of defensive realism and under the guise of the security conundrum, theorists believe that governments are not inherently aggressive and only use military power when confronted with aggression and when their security is compromised. Meanwhile, the great world powers or the regional powers that have partly achieved their desired status, will seek to maintain the status quo. This means that they will show a conservative nature. Major global or regional powers also use a policy of power equations to prevent their interests from being jeopardized. From the point of view of defensive realism, counterbalanced behavior stimulates the aggressor to confront the defender and the resistance movement. Defensive realists believe that any attempt to achieve a hegemonic and dominant position can be a form of self-harm because it reduces the level of security of the state and incites others.

Today, governments seek to maintain their position within the system, and the acquisition of unlimited power will not guarantee their security Therefore, aggressive behavior in such situations can fail. This has led governments to consider and choose the theory of defensive realism, all to provide and protect and improve their security. When the countries of a region feel threatened by

each other, they are naturally drawn to balancing. In this long-standing regional crisis, regional and international actors, according to their interests and also according to their positions, have sought to define their priorities and pursue their short-term or long-term goals in the aftermath of the crisis. In this regard, they are split into pro- and anti-Syrian regime camps, a division that has sometimes led to proxy wars between regional actors or international powers.

The emergence of proxy wars, the emergence of a New Cold War between East and West, as well as the proximity of two powerful but distant enemies, i.e., the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Zionist regime (of Israel) as close as possible, which has changed the shadow war between the two into direct and overt confrontations in some cases, are all other effects of the Syrian internal crisis. The scene of the Syrian crisis has become the scene of a New Cold War between East and West, and proxy wars and regional rivalries. For example, one can observe the conflict of interests between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as the rivalry between Iran and Turkey and the New Cold War between Russia and the United States. Under these circumstances, it is natural that Iran's military and advisory presence in Syria and in the vicinity of the Israeli border will cause a wave of concern among the leaders of the Zionist regime. In this context, various Israeli officials have explicitly expressed their concern and opposition to the presence of Quds Force and other allies in Syria.

Main discussion

The Syrian conflict and internal crisis have taken on complex dimensions due to regional and supra-regional interventions, besides internal factors and imposed historical contexts. This has led to the emergence of new

classifications between regional and international countries. In this article, we examine the role and positions of countries and major regional and international actors, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the United States and Israel, in response to the Syrian crisis, aiming to analyze the various dimensions of this crisis.

Saudi Arabia

Throughout Syria's history, relations with Saudi Arabia have experienced many ups and downs. Historically, relations between Saudi Arabia and Syria have never been so warm. (Talebi Arani and Zarrin Narges, 2018, p. 60). Especially with the rise of Bashar al-Assad, Saudi Arabia did not have a favorable view of Syria because Bashar tended to act more independently of regional policies (Karami, 2011, p. 4). Among the thorny issues between Saudi Arabia and Bashar al-Assad's Syria are the warm relations of Damascus with Tehran, Palestine and Lebanon. By the time civil unrest erupted in 2011, however, Saudi Arabia had pursued the policy of maintaining sensible relations with Syria in order to pursue its regional interests (Blanga, 2017).

While Syria and Saudi Arabia experienced improved relations between 2008 to 2011, the honeymoon between the two countries came to an end immediately after the initial sparks of popular protests in Syria. Saudi Arabia has traditionally been a conservative player in the region, seeking to eliminate threats and maintain its own security (Blanga, 2017). In early August 2011, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia condemned what it called "unacceptable violence" in Syria and summoned its ambassador from Damascus to protest the repression of the Syrian people (Jansiz et al., 2014, p. 80). Since then, Riyadh has become a major player in the Sy-

rian crisis, having formally declared its support for the armed struggle against the Syrian government in August 2011 (Madadi, 2013, p. 70). In June 2012, Saudi Arabia's first shipment of weapons reached the opposition groups in the Turkish border with Syria (Philips, 2015, p. 4).

The Saudi government has pursued the goal of regime change in Syria by providing huge financial support and weapons to anti-Assad militias (Wagner, 2013). In practice, Saudi Arabia has been providing financial support to any group that opposes the Syrian regime, hence stirring sectarian strife in Syria (Reese, 2013). Saudi clerics have relied on sectarian debates to motivate Saudi youth to travel to Syria and wage jihad against the Shiite / Alawite political system (Wagner, 2013). Saudi Arabia has tried to show the conflict in Syria as a confrontation between Shiites and Sunnis (Goodarzi, 2015), and by following a regime change policy in Syria, it seeks to undermine the power of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a regional rival.

The goal of Saudi Arabia, which is in line with the goals of the Zionist regime and the West, is to limit the power of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region (Giovechi, 2012, p. 22) Undoubtedly, Saudi Arabia views regional developments, especially the Syrian crisis, through regional rivalries with Iran. One of the basic strategies of Saudi Arabia to contain the increasing power and influence of Iran in the region is to unite and form alliances with regional and supra-regional powers (Dorj and Emamjomeazadeh, 2018, p. 98) Saudi Arabia's main goal is to create a regional balance, and the path to reach this goal, in its view, is to overthrow the Assad regime and to bring a Sunni and conservative government to power.

The prospect of peace in the region and the settlement of the most long-standing conflict in the history of the region, namely the Arab-Israeli conflict, is also one of the issues that the Saudi foreign policy apparatus is pursuing with uneven momentum, and in this process, it views Syria not as part of the "solution" but as a "problem". The Wahhabi and Salafi discourse preached and promoted by Saudi Arabia is not accepted in the secular society of Syria, contrary to the expectations of the Saudi leaders. The majority of Syrians, whether pro-Assad or anti-Assad, are secular moderates, Therefore, the soft power of Riyadh will not have much influence in the Syrian people (Wagner, 2013). Even the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, having always opposed the Syrian regime by essence, is not supported by Saudi Arabia, despite having the support of Turkey and Qatar.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, as the most important and largest country in the Axis of Resistance, is not willing to give up its support of its Arab ally easily. Iran is well aware of Syria's strategic position on the Axis of Resistance and in close proximity to the Israeli regime and it will not allow the balance in the region to be upset in favor of the conservative Arab regimes. Tehran, in full coordination with the Damascus government, has increased its field power in Syria by strengthening the presence of its advisors and with the full support of Bashar al-Assad, it has so far prevented the success of the plans and programs of the governments opposed to the Syrian regime, especially Saudi Arabia.

Turkey

Although a century has passed since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the leaders of Turkey have never lost sight of the dream of reviving the empire, along with the sweet and nostalgic memories of the superpower era of the 16th and 17th centuries. Today Turkey seeks to be recognized as a regional power

and leader. Turkey's foreign policy is moving in its geopolitical sphere and the country is trying to be a key regional power in the future. (Grigoryan, 2011) The new Turkey has named its strategic foreign policy doctrine as Neo-Ottomanism. Playing a leadership role in relation to regional and international crises is one of the principles of this doctrine. The first step in realizing Turkey's neo-Ottoman doctrine is to resolve problems with neighbors. Therefore, the same strategy was applied to the neighboring country, Syria. The process of improving relations between the two countries fluctuated until 2010.

With the onset of the popular uprising and protests in Syria, which gradually expanded in scope, Turkish leaders' initial reaction was to urge benevolence and toleration towards the protesters. But the policy of guiding and inviting the two sides to peace and restraint in Syria did not last long and it soon gave way to political and even military intervention. Turkey's foreign policy has undergone several changes during this period, from calling for restraint to mediation, then arming the opposition and ultimately launching direct military strikes on the Syrian border. Turkey has abandoned the "zero problem with neighbors" strategy towards Syria, because Erdogan views the war in Syria as a unique opportunity to dominate the region (Wagner, 2011). The Turkish government soon concluded that there was no serious will to reform Syria (Philips, 2015, p. 5); thus, its motivation to overthrow Assad was strengthened and it spared no efforts to achieve this goal, even by threatening a military attack (Niakouie and Behmanesh, 2012, p. 127). Turkey's new offensive approach is largely due to several important components. First, to take the lead in the Islamic world and become an important regional player. Second, promoting secular Islam after the Arab upris-

ing in the region. Third, geopolitical rivalries with other regional powers, especially Iran, and the weakening of this country. Fourth, resolving the historical territorial dispute over the region of Hatan or İskenderun (Alexandretta).

Fifth, controlling the challenge posed by the Kurdish insurrection. Sixth, strategic depth development. In addition, Turkey considers the Syrian crisis as a good opportunity to promote Turkish-style democracy and seeks it in the absence of Bashar al-Assad's government. Moreover, Turkey views the Alawite regime in Syria as (followers of) "other religion". Although the Turkish government is secular, it is inclined to the thoughts of the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, the rise of Sunnis in Syria can be effective in changing regional equations in favor of Turkey. Since the outbreak of the Syrian war, Turkey has been a major supporter of the Syrian opposition (Pearson, 2019).

From the beginning of the crisis until 2016, humanitarian norms governed Turkey's policy towards Syria. After 2016, however, these norms became secondary priorities and power-based politics replaced them. In other words, Turkey's foreign policy approach has shifted from a liberal and humanitarian position to a more realistic one in 2016 (Ataman & Ozdemir, 2018). Turkey's interest has been in limiting the geopolitical expansion of the Islamic Republic of Iran in order to change the balance of power in the region. Iran's position in Syria challenges the ideological and geopolitical identities of Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Therefore, limiting Iran's influence is the shared motive (and interests) of Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the Syrian crisis (Yazdani et al., 2017, p. 187). Another sign of Turkey's balancing approach is its role in regional conflicts and unrest. In other words, Turkish policy has moved away from supporting

Salafi and Takfiri groups and has gradually moved towards regional stability and balance. The attacks of Turkish military forces and fighters against ISIL militants in Syria is viewed as another indicator of Turkey's strategic and operational balance (Mottaqi and Nekoo Lale Azad, 2014, p. 297). On the other hand, Turkey's attacks on northern Syria, aimed at countering Kurdish independence-seeking, have also impacted Israeli interests in the region. In the early years of the Syrian crisis, Turkey and Israel had common interests in the fall of Assad. With the beginning of US support to the Syrian Kurds, apparently for their independence but, in fact, for the disintegration of Syria and completing the US new Middle East map, the Zionist regime also supported and welcomed this policy, which caused a conflict of interests between Turkey and Israel in Syria.

Islamic Republic of Iran
Relations between the government of Iran and the Syrian Arab Republic before the Islamic Revolution were at a low level, which seems natural given the differences in government systems and the camp to which each country belonged. The roots of the Iran-Syria alliance go back to the 1970s. Following the 1978 Islamic Revolution 1978 Islamic in Iran, the Syrian government expanded its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran and supported it in the eight-year Iraqi-imposed war against Iran, in the context of its enmity with the Ba'ath party of Iraq and to fill the power vacuum caused by Egypt's withdrawal from the Palestinian equation (Ismaili et al., 2012, pp. 247 - 275). The establishment of Hezbollah and Iran's close cooperation with it to support the Palestinians against Israel, made it possible for Iran to strategically expand to the borders of Israel and form a strategic alliance with Hezbollah

of Lebanon and Syria (Sajedi, 2013, pp. 75 - 76). Iran's support for Lebanon's Hezbollah in cooperation with Syria has added a new equation to the region's existing equations in the form of Iran, Syria and Lebanese Shiites. The communication route between Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon through Syria has made Syria the most important channel of communication and transfer of Iranian aid to Hezbollah (Torabi, 2011, p. 39). Iran and Syria also worked closely together during the 33-day and 22-day wars between Hezbollah of Lebanon and Israel, which further deepened the strategic ties between the two countries. Therefore, the two countries' shared tactical and strategic interests in the region have led to the unification of the two countries and has caused the Islamic Republic of Iran to support the Syrian government from the first days of the Syrian popular protests in 2011. The Iranian government defined the uprising of the Syrian people as a sedition instigated from outside (Worth, 2012). Iran has pursued its policies based on maintaining its strategic interests in the region. The Islamic Republic of Iran, along with Hezbollah in Lebanon, seeks to maintain the existing structure in Syria and to continue its regional role as a central element of the Axis of Resistance (Sajedi, 2013, p. 76). Maintaining the Axis of Resistance, which is an anti-Israeli/anti-American front, with Syria also playing a central role, is of strategic importance for the Islamic Republic of Iran (Azizi and Najafi, 2015, p. 80). Iran's main goal is to maintain security in areas that allow the Islamic Republic to provide greater protection to Shiite forces. This is part of Iran's broader strategy called the "Axis of Resistance," which Iranian leaders say is the country's strategic depth. Iran's forward defense strategy aims to challenge the West and undermine US and Israeli interests in the re-

gion. Therefore, the strong presence of Iran is considered as a serious threat to the interests of a number of regional actors (Zangiabadi, 2019).

By strengthening its ties with its Shiite allies in Iraq and Lebanon, Iran has trained and equipped its forces to build a united front against Israel (Chan, 2018). Iran's bigger goal is to create a "land corridor" that spans Iraq and Syria up through Lebanon and the Mediterranean (Pearson & Sanders, 2019). The political alliance between Syria and Iran has been sustained through a shared understanding of the threats, the convergence of interests in Lebanon and Iraq, and a shared vision for Palestine, Israel, and the United States. This strategic partnership has continued through mutual political, diplomatic, economic and military assistance (Risseeuw, 2018). In the political arena, in October 2015, the Islamic Republic of Iran presented its four-point plan to help resolve the ongoing crisis in Syria. According to this plan, the government of national unity will be created by forming a constitution and reforming new government structures based on the changes made in the constitution, with the ultimate goal of confronting the ongoing terrorism.

The Syrian crisis, especially from the point of view that the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran as two parties involved in this crisis, have entered into a complex equation with each other and are facing each other in a full-fledged proxy war, has a completely security and geopolitical nature for Iran. It should be noted that the US role in the Syrian crisis and its close presence in all aspects of the crisis is part of the national security strategy and regional goals of US foreign policy. In the meantime, Iran is one of the US targets in the region, which Washington seeks to control through the Syrian crisis (Karimkhani, 2016, p. 98). It is natural

that Iran wants to maintain the status quo and oppose the expansion of US political, economic and military influence in the surrounding areas. The Islamic Republic of Iran pursues a number of key goals including maintaining its position and strengthening the Axis of Resistance, increasing its security level in the region and proximity to Israel's borders and presence in post-war reconstruction of Syria through keeping Bashar al-Assad and the Alawites at the helm of the Syrian government. To this end, Iran presents proposals based on holding free elections, reforming the political structure and non-intervention of supra-regional powers.

United States of America

Relations between the United States and Syria have experienced many ups and downs throughout the history of relations between the two countries. US foreign policy during the Cold War in the Middle East was based on the support of Israel (a strategic ally of the United States in the region) and authoritarian anti-communist regimes in the region, as well as ensuring uninterrupted flow of the region's oil through open waters (Sajedi, 2013, p. 146). The United States, due to the nature of its foreign policy in the region, is known as an interventionist country with many behavioral contradictions with regard to the people of the region and Syria. During the Cold War era, the US support for the occupation of the Golan Heights as well as the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon clearly showed the US policy of full support for Israel in the bipolar system that governed that period. To better understand the relationship between the United States and Syria, it is necessary to recognize the most important US goals in the region. In general, US strategic goals in the Middle East include:

1- Ensuring secure flow of the region's energy to the west;

2- Advancing the Middle East peace process;

3- Securing and guaranteeing the interests of Israel;

4- Fighting against political Islam under the title of fighting terrorism and fundamentalism;

5 - Countering or at least controlling countries that oppose the US interests;

6 – Promoting the American culture in the guise of democracy, free markets and secularism in the region. (Javadi Fatah, 2005, pp. 27 - 28).

Moreover, ensuring the survival and security of Israel is among the US global geopolitical codes. The geopolitical code is the operational agenda of a country's foreign policy that assesses geographical locations beyond its borders (Hafeznia, 2011, p. 144.¬(. Syria, due to its special geopolitical position and the stubborn ideology of its leaders, is considered a threat to Israel's security (Niakouie and Behmanesh, 2012, p. 111), and is therefore fundamentally considered an obstacle on the road to the Middle East peace process and to the US long-term goals in the region. The ruling Ba'ath party in Syria, and basically the Syrian government, has a secular approach in politics, and in practice, does not compromise with Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, considering the fact that it has shown the greatest tolerance in dealing with its occupying southern neighbor, Israel. Therefore, it must potentially have the safest and most stable border with Israel. However, due to its strategic alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran, it has come under pressure by the United States and its international and regions allies.

The Syrian crisis in particular, and the Middle East in general, has created a rift in the international arena and it has pitted the two major powers, led by Russia and the United States, against each other (Ghasemyan et al., 2018, p. 168). In fact, the confrontation between the East and the West in the Syrian political arena has given shape and meaning to a New Cold War. For the United States, its old commitment and concern for security and interests of Israel remain important. It is no secret that the United States, by presenting various and controversial plans such as the "deal of the century", or by weakening and sidelining countries such as Iran and its allies in the context of the Syrian crisis, seeks to ensure lasting security for Israel. With the onset of the crisis in Syria, the US foreign policy was based on non-military intervention and support for opposition groups. The Obama administration repeatedly called on the government of Bashar al-Assad to leave power in the greater interests of Syrian people (Sajedi, 2013, p. 82). Washington provided weapons and military training to moderate insurgents fighting the forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad (Pearson & Sanders, 2019) and through this tactic, sought to balance the military power between the two sides. The use of chemical weapons on April 7, 2017 in Khan Sheikhoun, Idlib, however, prompted the US Administration to change its tactics in the Syrian crisis (Beavchamp, 2017).

Subsequently, it responded militarily with a missile attack on a Syrian air base on the outskirts of the city of Homs. Trump's move marks the beginning of a new era in regional equations because, the direct military action exposed the United States to various reactions and turned this country into a direct party to the crisis. The attack, which was carried out without the Security Council authorization and even without informing the Congress, strained Russian-American relations.

The Trump administration sent conflicting signals about Syria and the position of Bashar al-Assad. The reality of US foreign policy in the face of the Syrian crisis indicates a kind of contradiction and behavioral paradox. The result of this confusion has been the spread and prolongation of the crisis at various levels, domestic, regional and international. The United States has pursued a variety of multifaceted goals throughout the Syrian crisis, which can be summarized as below:

- Maintaining its influence and activism in regional developments;

-Limiting the negative effects of third party interventions on regional and international power equations;

-Weakening the Axis of Resistance and strategic isolation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in order to maintain and promote the security and interests of the Israeli regime.

The US goal of reducing its military presence in Syria does not mean reducing its influence and interference in the region, but rather shifting its strategy from direct to remote balancing. In remote balancing, the United States is also reducing its political, military, security and economic spending in the region and by strengthening the political and security of its allies, it continues to maintain its level of involvement in the region. However, US officials seem to have come to believe that by reducing their forces in Syria, they have effectively reduced the level of US involvement in the Syrian case, and they no longer have a trump card in political and security bargaining, which is hard to accept for the US as a hegemonic power.The United States is currently facing major challenges on the Syrian stage including Russia's position, the role and presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the achievements of the Assad government on the battlefield against terrorists. Having failed to manage the crisis and

the threats it poses, and with their bargaining power declining dramatically in the future developments in Syria, the US made a reckless decision on resorting to state terrorism and physically eliminating one of the most successful anti-terrorism figures and one of Iran's most senior military commanders, General Qasem Soleimani.

Israel

Israel suffers from vulnerability and high levels of risks and threats, owing to its geographical location and proximity to Arab countries that refuse to recognize it at least openly. Israel is under siege by the Arab countries from three directions and because of the small size of the land, it does not have strategic depth, hence having a low security factor. Considering all the factors that limit and threaten the Israeli regime, it can be said that the foreign policy strategy of this regime, both towards the countries of the region and regarding the Syrian crisis, is based on "defensive realism" and "balance of threat" theory of Stephen Walt. Accordingly, the threatening variables that shape the balance of threat, namely ability and power, proximity, offensive capability, and offensive intentions, are all applicable in the context of Israel. Since the founding of Israel, the regime's foreign policy has undergone various plans, strategies and doctrines. The common denominator has always been the constant and unsolvable problem of being surrounded by Arab and Muslim countries, as well as the small size of the land and the lack of strategic depth. Maintaining deep and extensive ties with the West, integration in the Middle East, and peripheral unity have been among Israel's most tried and tested foreign policy strategies over the past few decades.

Following the developments in the region and the interactions that occurred after the

Syrian crisis, along with the strengthening of the Axis of Resistance and the nuclear program of the Islamic Republic of Iran, all of which can be considered threats to the existence or interests of Israel, a new strategic foreign policy document was reviewed and published in Israel in 2018. The Mitvim Institute, a foreign policy think tank focusing on regional policy and aiming to shape Israel's relations in the Middle East, Europe and the Mediterranean by promoting new models of foreign policy, has been responsible for studying the developments in the region and providing suggestions in this regard. The gist, and a turning point, of this research is that it is not possible to advance a desirable foreign policy without resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 2015, for the first time since the announcement of the existence of the Israeli government in the occupied Palestinian territories, the head of the regime's Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Gadi Eizenkot released a high-security document entitled "The Israeli Army Mission," which became known as the Eizenkot Doctrine. An interesting point in Israeli army's strategic document that is a turning point in the nature of the Zionist army, is the emphasis on the fact that the Israeli regime will never initiate a war to gain land or achieve strategic goals, but if a war is imposed on Israel, the army will respond by "attacking", rather than "defending". However, seven decades of Israeli history show the nature of the aggression and occupation of the regime's army. This confirms that the foreign and military policy of this regime is based on defensive realism. The revised 2018 version of the Eizenkot Doctrine also emphasizes security cooperation with pro-Israel groups that are either openly or secretly linked to Israel. According to the new document, Israel should strengthen its cooperation with moderate Arab states in coordination with the world powers.

"Campaign between Wars" strategy (Mabam)

This strategy is aimed at fighting forces that threaten Israeli interests. According to this strategy, the scope of these attacks is such that the parties are not drawn into a war. In the current context of the region, the culmination of this strategy is to target Iran's military positions and arms convoys for Hezbollah. Israel is implementing a strategy of defensive realism and by launching limited and focused attacks in desired times and places, while destroying Iran's positions in Syria, prevents Hezbollah from gaining a greater foothold in Syria and Lebanon. What is important in this strategy is to focus on the "weak footprint" tactic and keep the battle in the gray areas, that is, areas where attacks occur quickly, secretly and surprisingly, and no one takes responsibility for any incidents or operations. Strengthening Israel's deterrence, delaying the waging of full-blown conflicts and creating a sense of vulnerability on the other side, are among the goals of Israel in adopting the "Mabam" strategy (Lappin, 2018).

Every Israeli air strike in Syria has three major threats: potentially increasing uncontrolled tension on the northern front, increasing danger of damaging the already strained relations of Israel with Russia, and increasing the risk for Israeli Air Force (Yadlin & Heistein, 2019). Nevertheless, in line with its Mabam strategy, Israel is determined not to allow Iran to establish offensive drone bases in Syria, and also aims to destroy the land corridor that connects Iraq to Syria in a bid to block the transfer of weapons and ammunition to Iranian-backed militants (Lappin, 2019, p. 1250). Israel believes there will be no serious response to the bombings and can therefore rebuild its military credibility and field violence (Alaei, 2019). By reason of its

occupation of the Golan Heights since 1967, Israel is viewed an occupying enemy for both the Syrian people and the internal opposition. In fact, Israel's occupation of parts of Syrian land is a matter of nationalism for all Syrians that goes beyond political party affiliations and religious beliefs. Of course, there are other reasons for Israel to adopt a policy of tolerance and non-interference in the Syrian crisis. However, given the occupation of Syrian territory, Israel is reluctant to turn the crisis into an Arab-Israeli tension and to provoke Arab nationalist sentiments, which would put the regime under public opinion pressure and disrupt its relations with some Arab countries.

Israel wants neighboring countries with "neutral" policies along its borders, because implementing such goals as weakening the Axis of Resistance, de-Palestinianization policies, continued settlement expansion, etc., would be possible only with neighboring countries that are either in agreement with or at least neutral about the realization of those goals. Syria, despite all enmities with Israel, has never pursued a policy of elimination of the Israeli political system, at least not in the short term. In addition, Syria has in the past sat directly at a table with Israel, mediated by Turkey, to discuss the issue of evacuating the Golan Heights, meaning that it has recognized the Israeli system of government (Madani, 2011). Israel is well aware that if Bashar al-Assad is ousted from power, most likely the only political groups that are capable of gaining power in Syria are Islamist groups affiliated with the Salafis and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (Gholami, 2012). Given the extremist nature of Salafi groups, their domination of Syria could lead them to gain access to the remnants of Syria's secret weapons arsenal or to advance into Israel's strategic areas.

Israel seems to prefer Assad to stay in power instead of facing the unknown consequences of regime change because, according to Lieberman, the then Israeli Defense Minister, Damascus control of the shared borders reduces the likelihood of a conflict with Israel because Assad is a responsible person (Wermenbol, 2019). Israeli politicians believe that in an atmosphere of chaos, forces such as Hezbollah or al-Qaeda and their affiliates might use the lack of state control to attack the Israeli interests and territory. This will make the defense difficult for the Israeli army, because it will be difficult to find responsible groups and individuals, and the Israeli government will not be able to react accurately to the punishment of the same group. Therefore, the Israeli army will have limited military attack options on the table. Controlling Iran, as the most important and prominent enemy and threat to Israel's security, has been at the top of the regime's goals. The establishment of Iranian military infrastructures in Syria would provide military means to Assad, the Shiite militias, and Hezbollah. These would imply greater potential for escalation in the northern arena and on the Syrian front, and possible spillover to the Lebanese front (Benshitrit, 2017).

Currently, Israel's latest red line is Iran's permanent presence in Syria. At this stage of the Syrian crisis, the "shadow war or cold war" between Iran and Israel has turned into "direct and open confrontation". Israeli officials have explicitly stated that they will not allow Syria to become an operational base against Tel Aviv interests. After many years of hesitancy, Israel has recently intensified its attacks on the Syrian soil. This change of policy of publicly waging attacks on Iranian positions reflect a new geopolitical reality of the region. The change in Israel's military tactics coincided with the gradual acceptance

that Assad will stay in power and the US president's decision to withdraw American troops from Syria. Israel's intensified strategy toward Syria is also indicative of a change in regional geopolitics. Israel's main focus is on preventing the direct presence of its most serious enemy, the Islamic Republic of Iran, near its northern borders. Therefore, Israel's main goals towards Syria may include the following:

1. Minimizing Iran's presence and influence in Syria;

2. Preventing the transfer of new and advanced weapons to Hezbollah, Iran's number one ally in the region;

3. Undermining the legitimacy of Syria's claims to the Golan Heights;

4. Turning Syria into a country with a neutral policy, in order to better advance the policies of de-Palestinianization, the continuation of settlement expansion and the weakening of the Axis of Resistance.

To achieve these goals, Israel has adopted strategies and tactics that are summarized as follows:

1. Providing overt and covert support for the rebels to weaken the Syrian central government.

2. Alliance with Western countries such as France to strengthen the war machine of the opposition as well as playing an advisory role for the European Union and the United States.

3. Supporting direct political and military involvement of the United States in the Syrian crisis.

4. Welcoming separatist plans for Syria and strengthening the expansion of relations with minority or non-Arab groups, especially the Kurds in northern Syria.

5. The strategy of creating a regional alliance against Iran by thawing relations with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states in the region, despite deep ideological differences.

6. The strategy of desensitization and gradual recognition of Israel's role in the region by adopting a "good neighbor" policy aimed at penetrating the minds and hearts of Syrians inhabiting along the common border.

7. Dialogue and interaction with Russia, with the aim of withdrawal of Iranian and its allied forces or minimizing their presence in Syria.

8. Changing the strategy and tactic of "land occupation" into creating "buffer zones" with the aim of reducing the political and military costs.

9. Limited response and bombing of concentration sites of Iranian and Hezbollah forces, equipment and positions with prior notice to Russia so that it does not lead to confrontation with Russia, and within the framework of defensive realism strategy.

10. The Campaign between Wars strategy (Mabam), meaning attacks that do not end in full-scale war, by adopting the tactic of "weak footprint"

11. Supporting economic sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran in order to weaken the Axis of Resistance economically.

12. Supporting regional and international security consensus against the Islamic Republic of Iran in the context of the failure of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the political weakening of the Axis of Resistance.

In the current context, and for the above reasons, Israel is reluctant to highlight its role

in the Syrian crisis, as it prefers to avoid excessive political and military costs. The current situation in Syria has eroded the power of the parties to the conflict, including the Syrian government, Iran and Hezbollah on the one hand, as well as the opposition forces in Damascus on the other. Therefore, Israel has gained the most profit and maintained the security of its government and citizens without spending heavily and only by creating buffer zones, implementing the "good neighbor" policy and weak footprint tactics, and limited response based on the theory of defensive realism, hence playing the role of a neutral government in world public opinion. If the Assad regime survives as before, Israel will have the safest border with Syria. If the Assad government weakens, it will be a strategic opportunity for Israel to weaken the Axis of Resistance, and if Bashar al-Assad falls, Israel has two options: either a secular, pro-Western government will come to power, which is Israel's preferred option, or Sunni extremists will come to power. In this case, Israel can control them to some extent through interaction with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey. Therefore, Israel will naturally and rationally continue its policy of patience and waiting and it will avoid any action that turns Syria into a strategic or asymmetric threat.

Conclusion

Syria, due to its geopolitical and geostrategic position in the heart of the Middle East, as well as its involvement in the Axis of Resistance and special relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, has been the subject of overt and covert enmity of the Arab, Western, Hebrew and Turkish quadrilateral. The interventions of regional actors and supra-regional powers have compounded the crisis in Syria in recent years, such that the interests of the above actors have frequently become parallel, mutual and overlapping. The Syrian crisis has become the scene of a New Cold War between East and West, as well as proxy wars and regional rivalries. One can clearly see the conflict of interests between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the rivalry between Iran and Turkey and the New Cold War between Russia and the United States.

Saudi Arabia, being a regional conservative actor, considers Iran as a source of threat and instability in the region, and has taken the approach of weakening the Axis of Resistance, building alliances with regional actors such as Israel and supra-regional powers. Thus, Saudi Arabia views Syria as a "problem", rather than a "solution", in the process of peacemaking or achievement of a relative agreement between Arab states and Israel. Saudi Arabia has very limited influence and discourse / field power in Syria.

Turkey's foreign policy towards the Syrian crisis has also undergone several changes, from urging restraint to offering mediation, then arming the opposition and ultimately launching direct military strikes on Syria. Turkey, in addition to striving to become a major regional power in the future, pursues the policy of limiting the geopolitical expansion of the Islamic Republic of Iran in order to change the balance of power in the region in its favor. It is also crucial for Turkey to limit and block Kurdish territorial gains as well as controlling sensitive areas in the future.

Iran is determined to use Syria as a base to create a balance against Israel, as well as to create a new layer of deterrence in its asymmetric regional security structure. This is what is known as Iran's "strategic depth" policy, that is, to take the struggle as close to the enemy's territory as possible.

From Washington's point of view, Syria is a disrupting element in the Middle East peace process and the long-term goals of the United States in the region. With the start of the crisis in Syria, the US foreign policy was based on non-military intervention and supporting the opposition groups. The Trump administration, as the successor to the Obama administration, also sent conflicting signals about developments in Syria and the situation of Bashar al-Assad. The reality of US foreign policy in the face of the Syrian crisis indicates a kind of contradiction and behavioral paradox. The United States pursues several goals in the Syrian crisis, including: maintaining its influence and activism in regional developments; limiting the negative effects of third-party interventions on regional and international power equations; and weakening the Axis of Resistance and strategic isolation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in order to maintain and promote the security and interests of the Israeli regime.

Since the establishment of the Israeli regime in 1948, its foreign policy has been based on security issues and perceptions of peripheral threats. From the Israeli government's point of view, Iran is the number one threat to Israel's national security, the center of Islamic fundamentalism and a destabilizing factor in the regional order, which must be controlled or destroyed if possible. The Israeli Army's strategic document, or Eizenkot Doctrine, unveiled in 2015, states the IDF's objectives are based on deterrence, rapid warning, decisive victory, and defense. An interesting point in Eizenkot Doctrine is the emphasis on the fact that the Israeli regime will never initiate a war to gain land or achieve strategic goals, but if a war is imposed on Israel, the army will respond by "attacking", rather than "defending". This confirms that the regime's foreign and military policy is based on "defensive realism." In the context of the theory of defensive realism, Israel is well aware that the era of expansionism and occupying interventions in its neighboring countries is long gone, and for the same reason it has failed to influence the devastating and erosive crisis of its neighbor. Israel is not a player in the current Syrian conflict, it does not have a direct role and it plays the role of a spectator. By adopting a realistic approach of limited intervention, Israel satisfies the public opinion in terms of national prestige, and avoids falling into the abyss of a full-scale war.

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