The Behavioral Pattern and Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic Of Iran in the Syrian Crisis (2011-2019)

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Abstract: *The Syrian crisis is one of the most complex regional and international issues and despite the different interests, the actors in the Syrian crisis are: opponents of the Assad regime led by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, and Turkey and Assad supporters led by Russia, Iran and militant groups such as Hezbollah. Considering the role and active participation of Iran in the Syrian crisis, this question has been examined what is the foreign policy and behavioral pattern of the Islamic Republic of Iran in response to the Syrian crisis (2011-2019)? The hypothesis based on the theory of defensive realism is that, Syria plays a key role in Iran's regional policies and Iran's policies are a preemptive action based on the defense of national interest and other interests in the Middle East. The research results indicate that due to the deepening of political and security cooperation and the strategic alliance between Iran and Syria in recent decades, Syria has been a linkage between Iran and its allies and the behavior pattern of Iran and allies is to prevent the fall of the Assad regime.*

Keywords: *Middle East, Syrian crisis, Islamic Republic of Iran, Russia, United States.*

I.   Introduction

Iran's policy in the Middle East tries to prevent the collapse of the existing security complex, which is causing structural change to its detriment. It tries to change the security structure of the complex in its favor. Meanwhile, structural changes in the security complex can be of great importance for Iran's national security, and change the direction of Iran's foreign policy. (Simbar, Ghasemiyan, 2014: 149). [In this region], the rule of the game is the principle of zero-sum, that is, the profit of the resistance axis equals the loss of the axis of compromise, and vice versa. Therefore, Iran and Syria have always pursued a comprehensive strategy in various economic, political, security, and cultural dimensions within the framework of resistance. (Sun, 2010: 67).

As undoubtedly one of the most important developments, the Syrian crisis has intensified the rivalry between the various regional and international powers. A decade after the crisis, peace efforts have failed miserably, and competition has become more complex and unpredictable. With the partial withdrawal of the United States, and Russia's entry into the crisis, the scales have shifted in favor of the Assad government. However, actors such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia still have strong allies to influence that equation. In this regard, one of the most critical players in the Syrian crisis is Iran, which has seriously defended the Assad government with its military, advisory, financial, and arms support. Iran handed over its military bases in Hamedan to the Russians to eliminate the opponents of the Assad government.

The Iran-Syria alliance is both crucial and strategic in the Middle East, and the two need each other to achieve their interests. With the victory and establishment of the Islamic Revolution, the military, political, and security relations between the two changed, and strong strategic relations were established between them. The Iran-Syria alliance began with Hafez al-Assad, who forged a strong alliance with Imam Khomeini. It kicked off Iran's significant influence in the Arab Middle East, and gave it a strategic position in the Mediterranean. This strong alliance continued despite differences in sectarian and fundamental ideological conditions. They identified common interests and opponents in the Middle East and worked closely with them. With the start of the crisis in 2011, Iran said they would do everything necessary to prevent opponents of Assad's government from gaining power. They have long used the term "strategic partner" about each other, and the leaders of the two countries have always emphasized good and strategic relations. Syrian officials acknowledge Iran's role in the crisis, and the presence of numerous Iranian military advisers indicates their deep ties. This support for the Assad regime and maintaining the status quo in Syria was evident in the Syrian unrest that began in 2011.

According to the Iranian elite, Syria is Iran's strategic depth. In the event of the fall of Assad, Iran will lose its vital interests. It is unclear whether subsequent governments, which will mainly be opponents of the Assad government, will be willing to cooperate with Iran. Therefore, by trying to stand by the Assad government while eliminating the opposition, Iran has tried to establish common ground between some moderate opposition

groups and the Syrian government by holding joint meetings. Units at odds with Iran's pattern of behavior argue that Iran's growing geopolitical influence in Iraq and Syria poses several threats, among them the expansion of Iran's influence on the Middle East geopolitical highway ; the tightening of security links between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel so increasing the risks of instability and reducing security to Saudi Arabia's internal borders; the strengthening and increasing of the strength of Islamic resistance groups and their danger to Tel Aviv ; and the emergence of political and security risks for the Middle East given Iran's missile and naval capabilities.

Accordingly, since Iran is a crucial player in the Syrian crisis and other Middle East issues, such as Iraq, the Palestinian issue, Persian Gulf issues, and other critical regional issues, this article examines the Islamic republic's foreign policy in this crisis. This study is significant because the Syrian crisis is one of the most important issues to have involved regional order and security. Given the role and influence of Iran, an analysis and evaluation of its policies are necessary. By knowing the behavioral pattern of this actor, one might better predict the future of this crisis.

II.   Research background

Numerous studies have been conducted on Iran's foreign policy and its goals, interests, strategies, and approaches in the Syrian crisis, and some of them are:

Venetis (2011) and Yousefi (2016) emphasize the complexity of the Syrian crisis. The findings of these studies indicate the competition of regional powers and the multiplicity of influential variables. The findings also indicate that the interactions of actors largely determine its future. Soltani Nejad et al. (2016) believe that the three regional powers of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey pursue their conflicting goals and interests based on the three Shiite, Salafi and Brotherhood order models. Their similarity is maintaining an optimal pattern of order and increasing regional influence, and their difference is in their role in this crisis.

Sadeghi and Lotfi (2015) believe that the coincidence of the Syrian crisis with the advent of the Arab Spring led some analysts to consider it as another kind of revolutionary movement in the region. However, the formation of terrorist groups and takfiri- Salafi fundamentalists, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and ISIS, opposed the interests of the Syrian people, making this crisis stand out from other examples in the region. Since the beginning of the crisis, Iran has had a critical presence and has defended the Assad government, based on a realistic understanding of its geopolitical and strategic interests.

Mosalinejad (2017) believes that understanding the realities of the Syrian crisis is not possible without considering security policy models. Therefore, the three fundamental components that have led to the continuation of security conflicts and the spread of violence are: the structure of the authoritarian government in Syria, mechanisms of action of political elites, and the evolution of discourse components. The results show that the Syrian government has used the iron fist model in the past, especially in 1982, to achieve its own political goals in Hama and that the ruling elites of the Assad government have preferred to maintain their political position, leading to increased social repression.Further, the critical discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood has resorted to an armed war strategy against the government.

In examining the role of Iran and Turkey in Syria, MacGillivray (2020) believes that there are many contradictions and riddles regarding the interactions and rivalries between Iran and Turkey in the crisis. The findings show that the two countries cooperate on common issues, but due to the different nature of their support for different groups, some contradictions prevent them from cooperating and finding a solution for the crisis.

Some studies have explicitly focused on the strategic importance of Syria to Iran and the need for Iran to defend its vital interests. In this field, researches such as Yolcu (2016), Ibrahim and Bani Nasur (2014), Simbar and Ghasemiyan (2014), Moradi and Shahramonia (2015), Nezamipour et al. (2015), Rabiee et al. (2015), Hamidi and Ghasemi (2016) and Shahin and Hassanvand (2018) emphasize the influential components for Iran's role in Syria and suggest that the fall of the Assad regime as an ally of Iran in the heart of the Middle East will be a loss of strategic interests. They focus on issues such as Syria as a major obstacle to US policy in the region, its proximity to Israel, Turkey, Lebanon, its importance in the Mediterranean, and its role in ideologies of powers. Accordingly, they believe that the fall of the Assad government will weaken the axis of resistance, intensify sectarian and religious tensions, upset the balance of power, and intensify the arms race in the region. Therefore, Iran has acted in full support of the Assad government.

Various studies have been conducted on the role of Iran's foreign policy in the Syrian crisis. However, in most of these studies, there are two general approaches, either supporting or opposing Iran's role in the Syrian crisis. However, the present study is different from the mentioned works due to its considering the combination of two theoretical and experimental levels in the analysis of the subject; its aiming to remain removed from bias and not to impose personal opinions and logical analysis, its consideration of new developments and issues in the Syrian crisis and providing a comprehensive picture of the Syrian crisis.

III.   Theoretical framework

Foreign policy is the policy and approach that governments adopt in dealing with foreign affairs to maintain sovereignty and defend the existence of their interests. The foreign policy of all countries interacts with the domestic and foreign environment. The goals, capabilities, strategies, tools, tactics, structure, and organization of foreign policy, as well as foreign policy decisions, actions, and consequences, all play a role in this process. (Sajjadpour, 2001: 50-52). Foreign policy is also defined as the initiative of one state or its reaction to other states' actions. (Nezamipour et al., 2016: 5).

National interest is one of the widely used concepts in analyzing and explaining the foreign policy of countries. National interests are the justification for making international demands so that whenever governments seek to make specific decisions and policies, they try to consider them in the context of national interests. (Qawam, 2009: 308). There is a profound connection between national interests and foreign policy, and the two are generally complementary. The relationship between national interests and foreign policy is a public-private relationship, but there is no consensus on the generality of each. However, that objective and operational national interest appear as the goals and foundation of foreign policy.

In the field of security studies and international relations, realists believe that the international system is completely disordered, lawless, and anarchic; because there is no supreme power or world government. In other words, the government is the leading player in this field, and other international actors such as international organizations, non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations, and even the United Nations are of little importance. In the meantime, the most important foreign policy goal is to plan and defend the national interests of governments in the world of politics. Given the degree of power, governments are unequal, and the hierarchy of power is decisive in the international system. Ultimately, international relations inherently involve a struggle between the great powers for dominance and security.

For realist theory, the foreign policy of countries is defined based on their level of power. Waltz argues that it is not the power and interests of governments that determine their behavior, but the anarchy and distribution of capabilities at the level of the system structure that determines their behavior and foreign policy. According to the realist theory, the international system is a world of conflicting interests. Therefore, moral principles cannot be achieved in a real way. Achieving interests and goals can be done by creating a balance of power and resolving conflicts. Undoubtedly, the most important goal will be to increase power and pay attention to national interests. Realists believe that the analysis of actors' foreign policy should pay attention to the balance of power and threats. Threat balance theory includes power, geography, offensive capabilities, and goals to explain the balanced behavior of governments in the international system.

In realist theory, the main goal of governments is to defend the country, and the issue of survival is a priority. The importance of survival is such that without it, the field of action in foreign policy will not make sense, and the country will become vulnerable. Thus, increasing national threats provide the basis for increasing power to protect political survival. (Walt, 1987: 18-21). In the division of realist theory, we can point to two currents of offensive and defensive realism. Defensive theorists put forward by Waltz argue that given the violent nature of the international system, actors should use aggressive patterns moderately. The balance of power is the best way to determine the position of actors in international politics.

Waltz's balance of power theory has been challenged by Stephen M. Walt's balance of threat theory, which postulates that 'power' alone cannot explain state's balancing behavior, and proposes 'threat' and 'proximity' as additional factors that need to be taken into consideration. Therefore, balance-of-threat theory incorporates power, geography, offensive capabilities, and intentions to explain the balancing behavior of states in the international system. (Boke, 2016: 18)

The concept of power is at the heart of the balance of power theory. Any increase in power by a country is met with a reaction from different countries, and forces them to form an alliance against a powerful government. (Kaufman & al Al, 2007: 15). The theory of "balance of threat" by Stephen Walt argues that countries do not respond to threats: They react to their perception of the threat. The level of threat that a country poses depends not only on its overall strength, but also on its geographical proximity, strength, and offensive intentions. According to the theory of balance of threat, countries create a balance not against power but against countries that seem particularly dangerous. This theory tries to generalize the theory of balance of power by considering other factors. (Nezamipour et al., 2016: 7). Walt believes that what drives actors to create a balance depends on how they perceive each other as a threat, not just the existence of a measure of power for each actor. Accordingly, governments choose the balance for two reasons: first, before a potential power jeopardizes their survival, the actor is encouraged to create a balance. Second, creating a link with the weaker party within the alliance will influence the new member. (Walt, 1986: 110 - 111).

The theorists of the theory of aggressive realism are John Mearsheimer, Fareed Zakaria, Robert Jervis, Jack Snyder, and William Wolfort, who presented themselves with the book "The tragedy of great power politics" written by Mersheimer.

They place the starting point of their discourse on the aggressive tendencies, the revisionist intentions of the powers, especially the great powers at the level of the international system, and by emphasizing the conditions of anarchy in the international environment, they believe that anarchy will witness constant power rivalry between the great powers. They also believe that anarchy has a Hobbesian situation in which security is very scarce. (Zakaria, 1999). Emphasizing relative power, they believe that goals must be achieved through war and aggression, and war has always been at the heart of the international system.

Due to its emphasis on objective issues, the theory of realism is one of the most appropriate theories to analyze the foreign policy approach of governments and their reaction to developments. In particular, this theory attaches great importance to the protection of governments' national interests in their relations with each other. Therefore, the Islamic Republic of Iran's behavior concerning regional developments in some Middle Eastern countries, such as the crisis in Syria, follows the theoretical logic of realism, because the preservation of the Syrian government has helped preserve Iran's national interests and regions. More importantly, the presence of different actors in this crisis and the confrontation of their conflicting interests against each other has led to the formation of a geopolitical game in which the victory of one is considered equal to the loss of the other. (Sadeghi, Lotfi, 2015: 127). Looking at the Islamic Republic of Iran's strategy and goals in the face of the Syrian crisis, it can be said that its approach and pattern of behavior are in line with the theory of defensive realism. Some of the most important aspects of this pattern of behavior are: attention to the issue of balance of power, the relative discredit of international institutions, explicit military support for Bashar al-Assad's government, prejudice and lack of conservatism, behavior appropriate to the anarchic environment, prioritized militarism variable on other elements and variables, creating patterns of friendship and enmity based on national interests, distrust of informal actors and attention to government actors, distrust of international organizations, etc.

IV.   Findings and Results

The Syrian crisis and the intervention of the actors

The Syrian crisis pushed the Middle East into a new order. In one crisis group, Russia, Iran, and Iraq, to some extent Lebanon, and some actors such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, support the Syrian government and Bashar al-Assad. Europe and regional actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and currents such as the Muslim Brotherhood, stand against the Assad government. (Eivazian, 2012: 46 - 47). The support of the regional countries and the great powers of extremist armed groups should be considered as a ground for the spread of violence and sectarianism in Syria. Salafi groups want to confront the government of Bashar al-Assad. Majority groups engage in confrontational action when structural, regional, and international conditions are prepared. All evidence shows that sectarianism has created a strong tendency in Syrian domestic politics. (Buzan, 1999: 45).

Saudi financial and moral support for the Syrian opposition is now accepted, while Saudi Arabia sees a new and active role for itself in overthrowing the regime of Bashar al-Assad. By supporting and arming terrorist groups, Saudi Arabia has closed the horizon of dialogue and peaceful resolution of the crisis and caused material damage and human losses to the Syrian people (Nejat, 2014: 638). "There is no doubt that the support of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE, is the main source of funding for ISIS," said Gunter Meyer, director of the Center for Arab World Studies at the University of Mainz in Germany. Meyer believes that these countries provide financial support to ISIS in order to oppose Bashar al-Assad in Syria. (Shahin, Hassanvand, 2018: 77-78).

In the early years of the Arab Spring, with the cooperation of some countries in the region, the West and the United States, Bandar bin Sultan strengthened extremist groups and sent them to the regional countries with financial support, weapons, and military training. Since March 2011, which coincided with the Syrian crisis, Bandar bin Sultan has summoned more than 20,000 terrorists in the form of 70 groups from 80 different countries and sent these groups to Syria. Over the next four years and with Qatar's help, Bandar bin Sultan provided a total of $ 36 billion in financial and weapons assistance to ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Free Army.

In order to advance its politics, Saudi Arabia seeks to overthrow Bashar al-Assad by sending money and weapons to armed opposition groups. The country's motives for supporting these opposition groups are numerous, the most important of which are:

- Tightening the security circle and reducing Tehran's role in Baghdad after the fall of Saddam's government;
- Imposing huge costs on the Iranian economy;
- Iran's support for Bashar al-Assad's government and the role of Iranian proxy forces in Shamat;
- Tarnishing the image of Islam and uniting extremist Muslims in one center;
- Stimulating the conflicting components of the Middle East, such as the differences between Sunnis and Shiites;
- Overshadowing the issue of Gaza and the Islamic awakening in the Middle East;
- Creating a crisis in the Middle East turmoil system, managing it and finally moving towards changing the geopolitical face.

In an article titled "Where did ISIL get its weapons from?", Jeffrey Smith stated that an independent weapons monitoring group had collected evidence showing that ISIL had weapons and ammunition made in 21 countries, including China, Russia, and the United States.

The support given to the Assad government's opponents has been varied, with different countries providing them with financial resources and weapons in different ways. For example, since the advent of the crisis, the European Union downgraded its relationship with the Assad government and suspended € 129 million in bilateral aid to the Syrian government along with financing and loans in 2011. The EU recognized opposition forces to the Assad regime in December 2010 and provided € 626 million in humanitarian aid to refugees and survivors in Syria. European countries also provided significant military assistance to the Syrian armed rebels. In April 2013, the EU eased its restrictions to allow the import of crude oil to strengthen the Syrian opposition forces' finances. Despite knowing that arms exports to the opposition could be abused, it lifted several sanctions to provide aid to the Syrian opposition and allowed member states to continue their oil-related deals and investments with the opposition coalition. (Archick, Mix, 2013). Other measures taken by regional and transregional actors to deepen violence in Syria include training the rebels. At the same time, by establishing the refugee camps for the opposition along its borders with Syria, and the holding of six meetings for the leaders of the Syrian countries on its territory (Istanbul), under the title of the Syrian Liberation Council, Turkey has become the most important center for training these groups. After a military agreement with the United States to arm and train the Syrian opposition, which has an estimated 15,000 troops, the Turkish government has been operating at the US Air Force base in Incirlik since July, 2015.Further, in the Idlib region of Syria, a new command center has been established by the Turks, which is organizing the Syrian opposition Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham (Bagheri Choukami, Ghorbani, 2016, 38-39).

The positions of regional and trans-regional actors in the face of the Syrian crisis have been varied, according to their goals and interests, capabilities and limitations. The table below examines the positions of each of these countries toward the Syrian crisis separately.

Table 1. Positions of regional and trans-regional countries toward the Syrian crisis

Actor	Capabilities	Limitations	Goals in the region	Optimal situation
US	Multidimensional superpower and a permanent member of the Security Council	Lack of credibility in the Middle East and involved in two wars in the region	Maintaining the hegemony and peace between Arab-Israel and fighting political and fundamentalist Islam	Syria's exit from the resistance axis, a pro-Western government
Saudi Arabia	Financial power and centrality of the Islamic world because of Mecca and Medina	Traditional management and lack of dynamism in decision making	Maintaining the conservative present and limiting Iran's role	Syria's withdrawal from the Iranian front and coming into line with the conservative present
Israel	Security and military power	Lack of legitimacy, and hostility of public opinion in the region	Gaining legitimacy and security, and eliminating resistance	The weakening of Syria and the emergence of a pro-Western government
Russia	Industrial and military power, years of experience in the region, and a permanent member of the Security Council	Colonial mental history	Reviving its historical role and becoming an active element in politics, economics and culture	Maintaining the status quo in Syria

(Shahin, Hassanvand, 2018: 139)

The Construct of foreign policy of the Republic of Iran

In general, Iran's foreign policy reflects the dual composition of the republic with Islam. Being a republic government means the government's legitimacy comes due to the will of the people, which is expressed through elections. According to Islam, legitimacy comes due to Islam's principles, religion and leadership (Velayat-e-Faqih). According to Article 2 of the Constitution, the nature of the Iranian political system is Islamic and is based on monotheism, unique sovereignty, and the right to legislate and submit to God. Accordingly, other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic standards (Hunter, 2010: 23-22). In the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Islamic values and norms have been idealized and operationalized, and national goals and interests are formed based on such principles as being neither Eastern nor Western, non-alignment with the dominating powers, unity and coalition of Islamic nations, support for the oppressed everywhere in the world, the denial of tyranny, oppression and domination, the prevention of foreign influence, the denial of dependence and the struggle against arrogance. Due to its kinetic and supranational approach in opposition to the international system's realistic environment, and differing internal foreign policy discourses, as well as the idealism-realism challenge, the Islamic Republic of Iran turned to oscillating and sinusoidal policies hovering between pragmatism and idealism. (Ghavam, Javadani Moghaddam, 2007: 102-101). The Islamic Republic of Iran has based its policy on neither Eastern nor Western principles and has sought to demonstrate its independence and commitment to each of the superpowers. Therefore it is not included in any of the regional categories affected by the bipolar structure of the Middle East (Haji Yousefi, 2008: 63).

The most important patterns of behavior in Iran's foreign policy are:
- Fighting arrogance through confrontation or resistance to dominating powers, led by the United States;
- Fighting against Zionism and non-recognition of Israel by supporting the forces of Islamic resistance;
- Appealing, i.e., trying to change or reform the established international order (Firoozabadi, 2009: 59);
- Opposition to the veto system in the United Nations;
- Belief in the separation of foreign economic relations from foreign political relations;
- Emphasizing the importance of political justice in relations between states (Sari al-Qalam, 2009: 28-27);
- The dual Islamic worldview towards the nature of relationships between states. According to Islam's view of the world, there is a dual dimension, which divides it into Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb.

"The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on the defense of Muslims' rights, the maintenance of neutrality with the hegemonic superpowers, and the maintenance of peaceful multilateral relations with all non-hostile states." The constitution emphasizes the need to move toward a unified international community and liberate disadvantaged and oppressed states worldwide. The Supreme Leader of Iran, Imam Khomeini, has stated that "supporting the people of Palestine and Lebanon is one of our most important tasks," which is why the United States is exerting widespread pressure on Iran to cut off aid (Mohammad Nia, 2011: 285).

Iran and the Syrian issue; the balance of power and regional power
Iran and Syria; the reason for the alliance

Relations between Iran and Arab countries have deep roots in the history of Islam. (Azghandi, 2005: 383). Iran-Syria relations are among of the most exceptionally friendly relations in the world. The two countries do not have the same language, a common culture, or ethnicity, and the forms of government of the two countries are legally entirely contradictory. The religion of most of their citizens is Shiite and Sunni, respectively. However, the two nations today have the strongest and most important alliances in the entire Middle East. From 1946 to 1979, relations between Syria and Iran were hostile, but after the Islamic Revolution of Iran, hostile relations changed to friendly (Gelbart, 2010: 37).

The Iran-Syria alliance, formed in March 1982, was more than a tactical alliance. There is no doubt that many factors were commensurate. Both Syria and Iran were deeply hostile to Baghdad, and naturally cooperated against it. Syria needed oil, and Tehran wanted to supply the country with a special discount because Syria was trying to block Iraqi oil pipelines on its territory. Damascus did not view Iraq's invasion of Iran as an Arab-Iranian confrontation, as Saddam Hussein sought to induce (Fuller, 2011: 147). The formation of the Iran-Syria alliance between 1979 and 1982 was due to the confrontation with internal and external threats that the two countries faced. Both used the alliance as an opportunity to advance their interests, and the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war led to strategic cooperation between Syria and Iran. (Rezazadeh, Najafi, 2016: 157). One of the most important reasons for the strengthening of Iran-Syria relations lies in Syria's role during the war with Iraq. During the war with Iraq, Iran bought weapons from the Eastern Bloc countries through Syria. In April 1982, Syria reportedly sent several shipments of heavy weapons to Iran through its northern ports. Other published reports confirm that Syria also delivered several shipments of lighter weapons to Iran. The shipments included 130mm field artillery pieces, 32 ZSU anti-aircraft guns, and ammunition and tank engines. The relationship with Iran was so important to Syria that it even lined up many of its forces on its border with Iraq, thus threatening

the country with a war on two fronts. Syria's move prompted Iraq to withdraw troops from the war front with Iran to repel threats from its western borders. (Hunter, 1990). Furthermore, in practice, Syria turned to the political and logistical support of the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance groups and paved the way for the presence of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in the Lebanese shrines, attracting and training Shiite youth through political and cultural mobilization, those who later pioneered the formation of Hezbollah and the military resistance. (Shapira, 1988: 122).

Iran and Syria signed a strategic cooperation agreement in 2004 and a bilateral defense agreement in 2006. The Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 2006 and Gaza in 2008 highlighted Israel's aggressive intentions in the region and strengthened the strategic alliance between Iran, Syria, and Lebanon's Hezbollah. (Nezamipour et al., 2016: 9). What makes the Assad regime so important to Iran? This question can be explained in the broader context of the Middle East. In a sense, Iran's primary concern is not even the collapse of the Assad regime ,but its replacement with a moderate or extremist Sunni regime allied with Saudi Arabia, which will strongly oppose Iran and its Shiite policies. At the heart of this concern is the loss of its main channel to send material support for Lebanon's Hezbollah, which has been strengthened since 2006 with continued support from Syria and Iran. (Goodarzi, 2013).

Following 9/11, the US strategy to fight terrorism and include the Islamic resistance groups on the terrorism list, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria, was effectively accused and threatened by the United States for supporting the movement. However, they did not diminish their support for the Islamic Resistance, but more explicitly supported the Islamic Resistance during Israel's 33-day war with Hezbollah, Israel's 22-day war with Hamas in Gaza, and the 51-day war with Hezbollah. Bashar al-Assad believes that supporting the Islamic resistance is one of the most important reasons for the strategic relations between Iran and Syria.He says:

"The importance of these strategic relationships may not have been very clear in recent decades, but in recent years, the real results of these relationships have emerged; That is, the victory of the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon, the stability of the resistance in Palestine after the intifada that began in 2000, and the failure of the plans that began against the region in the 1980s. If there was no strategic cooperation between Iran and Syria, the situation in the region would be worse now." (Rezazadeh, Najafi, 2016: 168).

V.   The behavioral pattern Iran; Requirements and rules of strategic depth

Syria is far more important to Iran than merely its being a strategic partner, so much so,that if the Assad government is reluctant, Iranians will keep him in power. This is due to five basic and combined factors:

1.   After the US invasion of Iraq, and especially after the developments of the Arab Spring in 2011, the Iranians concluded that the main goal of the US and its allies in the Middle East was to prepare the ground for the Balkanization of the region and to bring elites to power in line with West's interests. Above all, the Syrian crisis is rooted in the actions and strategies of the United States and of its allies. Gelbart believes that the alliance between Iran and Syria is a combination of strategic goals and considerations, common security threats, ideological alliances, and a reliable political partner. An important factor is the common security threats of Israel and Saudi Arabia, as the two major security threats, both of which have high offensive capabilities. Their offensive intentions can be seen and followed in the declared policies of both countries. (Gelbart, 2010: 41).

2.   The Iranians believe that the pattern of behavior of their opponents and supporters shows that Western governments and some allied countries have armed these groups. Iran also believes that their ultimate goal is to counter Iran's revolutionary power in the heart of the Middle East. Therefore, they target Iran's strategic depth and ultimately want to eliminate Iran and its ties with Hezbollah and the fundamental issues of the Middle East. According to Harriet, Saudi Arabia sees Syria as one of the main reasons for its declining influence in Lebanon. Hence, it sees the current Syrian crisis as an excellent opportunity to harm Syria and later Iran. Therefore, by trying to change the regime in Syria, changing its strategy towards the region and its rivalry with Iran, Saudi Arabia started a full-fledged proxy war in Syria. (Harriet, 2012: 8). Guzansky believes that Saudi Arabia is deeply concerned with the rise of Shiites under Iran's leadership and is trying to improve its position in Syria by supporting the Syrian opposition and playing an active role in controlling the Syrian crisis. (Guzansky, 2011: 5).

3.   Iranians believe that due to the behavior of the United States and Western allies in some border areas, such as Sistan-Baluchestan, Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Azerbaijan, and their encouraging some ethnic and religious groups to secede, they will seek to overthrow Iran after the Assad government. Therefore, such actions and strategies must be prevented in advance. The US strategy to use the capacity of the countries of the West Asian region to deal with regional crises within US interests, in addition to increasing tensions between countries in the region and strengthening the scope of proxy wars, has led regional countries to use different strategies than the United States to strike at countries on the opposite front. One of these strategies is the use, by US-allied countries, of the opposition and separatist groups in the region on the eastern, western, and southwestern borders of Iran including Saudi Arabia and Israel (Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 2019: 2).

4.   Ruhollah Ramezani, a well-known expert on Iran's foreign policy, believes that the Islamic State's ideological construct also includes supporting the oppressed and fighting the arrogant. Hence, Iran's foreign policy is based on the denial of dominance and non-alignment with the dominant powers. Such an aspect of foreign policy shows that the Islamic Republic's view toward the international system is highly revisionist and anti-hegemonic, and it strives to confront the centers and poles of power. (Ramezani, 2001). The Iranians believe that the loss of Syria will call into question some of the Islamic Revolution's ideals, and will remain as slogans alone. Ideals, such as defending the Palestinian people and fighting Israel will only stand if the lines of communication between Tehran-Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut are maintained. The fall of the Assad government will be the practical end of this ideal.

5.   One of the main reasons Iran participates in crises is the balance of power in the Middle East. Any balance of power changes in a limited time. In other words, it can be emphasized that the balance of power is part of the reality of world politics in the era of international competition. Every actor in the years after the Cold War has tried to make the regional and sub-regional balance the main axis of the security policy. (Mosalinejad, 2017: 129). In this regard, the patterns of friendship and enmity in the Middle East have led to various alliances. Iran does not want to lose one of its most important allies or to lose regional balance in favor of the enemies.

Aladdin Boroujerdi, the former head of the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, said that we have two choices regarding the Syrian crisis, to leave Syria alone with an enemy like the United States, or to work together to end the crisis in Syria. The former Ambassador of Iran to Syria, Ahmad Mousavi, also made it clear that the current crisis in Syria, like the 2009 riots in Iran, was designed by a foreign actor. Mohammad Javad Larijani, the former Speaker of Parliament, also sees the fall of Bashar al-Assad and his successor government by the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to the Alawite dynasty in Syria, which sees itself as part of the Shiites. This is a big challenge for Iran, which introduces itself as a supporter of the world's Shiites. The regional impact of Bashar's fall on Iran is the damage to Hezbollah as Iran's closest international friend and one of the pillars of the resistance (Clawson, 2012: 5-7).

One of Iran's main security problems in the Middle East is the lack of a strategic ally (other than Syria) at the regional level and beyond. In this situation, as the only strategic ally of Iran, Syria can play a significant role in Iran's security policies. On the other hand, the Middle East's chaotic environment does not have the structure and security arrangements upon which the countries of the region can agree. In the absence of such mechanisms, different and sometimes conflicting arrangements have been formed. Therefore, the security situation in the Middle East in the current situation, and possible future situations, poses various threats to Iran. (Simbar, Ghasemiyan, 2014: 150).

As such, as a significant regional power, the Islamic Republic fears that after changing the Syrian political regime, the alternative government will dismantle the Islamic resistance. From another point of view, it can be argued that the Islamic Republic of Iran considers Damascus the first embankment of the Islamic Resistance Front. For this reason, during the Syrian crisis, Iran never sought military solutions or intervention from other countries, neither regional nor international. On the contrary, the officials of the Iranian diplomatic apparatus say they always believe that there is only one way to resolve the Syrian crisis, and that is a political solution. Iran sees Syria as a security shield in the region, which could pose a significant security challenge to Iran if it collapses. (Moradi, Shahramonia, 2015: 139).

Based on its defensive foreign policy, Iran seeks to increase its relative security at the regional and international levels. While achieving some vital and geopolitical goals, Iran aims to establish a government with direct views of the Syrian people, without the intervention of Western and Arab powers. Therefore, Iran recognizes only opponents of the Assad government who have not been armed by Western-Arab allies, and seeks democratic solutions.

In general, Iran's support for the Syrian government should include several important issues: 1. Oil and financial assistance; 2- Information support; 3- Arms aid and provision of military equipment; 4- Sending specialists and technical officers to Syria to train the army forces of this country;5- Presence of the Quds Force unit in Syria and directing the operations of the Syrian army against the opposition; 6- Forming and training militias such as Jaish al-Shabiya according to its defense-military strategy in Syria. (The Clario Project, 2014: 11). One of the most critical ways for Iran to help its forces (Assad government) in the current crisis is the advisory forces. To balance the threat, Iranian military officials have divided the role of Iranian advisory forces in Syria into four levels:

Table 2. Four levels of Iranian advisory forces' roles in Syria

Levels	Characteristics
Strategic	As an advisor, Iran is transferring its combat experience to high-ranking commanders of the Syrian army and enabling them to carry out their military and defense plans. At present, the Syrian regime, in addition to its powerful army, also has a capable civilian force; two complementary defenses based on Iran's strategic advice.

Operational	At this level, the commanders of the Syrian operational levels are assisted. This level of military advice is useful in finding logistics plans for proper support of operational units and middle-level commander training. This type of advice helps commanders to design operational strategies to overcome enemies.
Tactical	Directly related to the warfare, and the commanders of the Syrian army battalions are no exception to Iranian commanders' advisory services.
Technical	Preparation, equipment repair, maintenance and repair training, rescue, and the like, based on Iran's formal requests and interactions with the Syrian government.

(Nezamipour et al., 2016: 15-15)

VI.   Saudi Arabia; Efforts to establish Saudi order in Syria

Many analysts attribute the continuing Syrian crisis to sectarian rivalries and tensions stemming from both Shiite and Salafi discourses and patterns. On the one hand, Iran seeks to maintain the Syrian political system and expand its desired model with the discourse of resistance based on the Shiite model. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia wants to disrupt the Syrian political system, overthrow Bashar al-Assad's regime, and replace its intended model to counter Iran's regional influence and expand its Salafi model (Soltani Nejad et al., 2016: 121). Many theorists believe that the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Syria has led to the formation of a new Cold War environment in the Middle East. Gary Goss III suggests that Iran and Saudi Arabia, as the two top powers in the Middle East, have turned to competing within the region's weak states' domestic political systems instead of direct military confrontation. The political and military strengthening of internal groups of governments for internal conflicts will be much more important than the military balance of power between Riyadh and Tehran. (Rabiee et al., 2017: 71)

-Iran and Saudi Arabia should be considered as two actors that will continue their influence in Syria. The Geneva talks and the arrangement of regional actors are considered part of the Syrian crisis management issue. Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic of Iran will continue to support the Syrian political system, which is Tehran's closest ally in the region and the gateway for Iran to join its representatives in Hamas and Hezbollah. (Mosalinejad, 2017: 127).

Saudi Arabia's role in Syria has been based on three pillars: First, supporting traditional and non-democratic groups; second, supporting the Sunnis against the Shiites; and third, limiting Tehran's regional influence. Saudi Arabia has sought to support Sunni Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis. The country has always had significant ties with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Further, some reports mention Saudi Arabia's role in sending weapons to Syria and providing financial support to militant groups. (Niakui, 2012: 166-167).

After 2008, Saudi Arabia abandoned its policy of isolating Syria, and from then on, made every effort to create discord and a rift in relations between Tehran and Damascus. Relations and the process of reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Syria began. Accordingly, during the Israeli "Operation Cast Lead" (December 2008 to January 2009), relations between the two countries became much more prominent than ever before. With the historic visit of King Abdullah, The King of Saudi Arabia, this relationship reached its peak in October 2009.Yet, relations between Saudi Arabia and Syria never progressed to the point of establishing a full-fledged political alliance. Since then, relations between Syria and Saudi Arabia have gradually cooled, and the Syrian protests have worsened this. In fact, with the spread of unrest in Syria, Saudi Arabia rapidly shifted its cautious stance (Soltani Nejad et al., 2016: 112-113). Since 2011, Saudi Arabia has sought to balance its strategic challenges in the region with the capture of crucial parts of Iraq and Syria by ISIS. This Saudi balancing is emphasized more than ever by the new Saudi elite under King Salman, who feared Yemen's loss and the shaky position of Bahrain and the rise of Hamas and Hezbollah.

The intense conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia must be attributed to the policies of the great powers in the region, especially the United States. The United States was concerned about Iran's political, ideological, and ideological influence in the region because the people of the region had the potential to accept the ideology of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. On the other hand, the ideological accusations of the Iranian elite against the regional regimes, namely their abandoning Islamic affairs and being manipulated by the superpowers, have caused the Saudi leaders to come to distrust Iran's intentions. (Hafeznia, Romina: 71-73).

The beginning of Saudi Arabia's involvement in Syria's developments dates back to King Abdullah's statement on August 7, 2012. In the statement issued to the Syrian government, he called on them to end the killing of the Syrian people, while being rational in decision-making. This statement proposed some reforms to Bashar al-Assad. As such, Saudi Arabia is the first Arab country to explicitly criticize the Assad government (Koohkan, Tajari, 2014: 118). Saudi Arabia's aggressive stance toward overthrowing Syria can be attributed to its failure in Lebanon's intervention plans: Saudi Arabia has participated in the plan to overthrow Bashar al-Assad and attack Bahrain to compensate for this failure. Saudi Arabia's goals include funding and allocating Saudi dollars to provide weapons, arms smuggling into Syria, providing operational strategies to prominent figures among the

protesters, linking them to the international media, and creating media pressure through its media Al-Arabiya, Al-Hayat, and Al-Sharq Al-Awsat TV channels. Israel and the United States need allies inside the region to carry out counter-resistance plans that would severely damage the resistance. Hence, the Saudi and Qatari dollars and interviews and media reports by the two countries with the opposition could be of great help for Western allies (Karami, 2011: 93-94).

Saudi Arabia and some Arab allies in Syria have chosen to change the status quo to shift the balance in their favor. At a joint meeting of members of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council and representatives of the European Union in June 2013, in Manama, the Saudi Foreign Minister called for the lifting of the arms embargo on the Syrian opposition. Full support for the Syrian opposition was on the Gulf Cooperation Council's agenda, especially from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. However, the method and strategy of helping the opponents of the Assad government differ between these two actors: Saudi Arabia wants to help secular groups and indirectly Jabhat al-Nusra, but Qatar wants to arm groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and other affiliates.

Saudi moves to exacerbate the Syrian crisis and overthrow the ruling regime in Syria include several important factors: 1. Activation of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League to put pressure on Bashar al-Assad and pave the way for the repetition of the Libya scenario in Syria. 2. Financial, weapons and logistical assistance to the Syrian opposition inside and outside the country. 3. Cooperation and coordination of Riyadh with the Turkey-Qatar-Israel regional axis and the international axis of the United States, France and Britain, to overthrow the current system and government of Syria. 4. Efforts to strengthen the Salafi and Wahhabi currents in Syria. 5. Activating its mass media, such as the Al-Arabiya network, and publications such as Asharq al-Awsat and Al-Arab, and all Salafi and Wahhabi policies, to incite the public opinion of the Western world and Islam against the Syrian government and to tarnish its image in the public mind. (Soltani Nejad et al., 2016: 114-115).

Saudi Arabia seeks to regain its regional role following the developments in the Middle East region known as the Arab Spring (Awakening). Saudi leaders are well aware that Assad's fall can restore the balance of regional power in their favor. Therefore, this country has problems even with Turkey and Qatar, which support the Transitional Council, and prefers to support groups outside the Transitional Council, such as the Salafis (Ajurlu: 2012). According to Saudi officials, Syria is the most critical channel for transferring Iran's material and moral support to Hezbollah and Hamas. Also, Syria's cooperation and alliance with Iran threaten severe damage to the Arab countries' joint positions against the Islamic Republic of Iran (Torabi: 2011). As such, this country is openly interfering in Syrian affairs and does not withhold any material, military, or media assistance to the armed rebels working against Assad.

VII.   Behavioral model of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the mechanisms of achieving peace

In this process [the Syrian crisis], we are witnessing several meetings in support of Syrian opposition groups, although the process, despite hope, has yet to yield results. The Istanbul meeting failed to link the opposition in exile with the demands of the Syrian protesters,despite the fact that, during the meeting, the credibility of opposition figures inside Syria remained strong (Musalinejad, 2017: 119).

The fact is that [some] regional countries and major powers are reluctant to allow Bashar al-Assad to remain in power in Syria for strategic and geopolitical reasons. In November 2013, Bashar al-Assad explicitly stated that he was ready to attend the Geneva II conference, which meant playing a role based on the balance of power and international rules. Such an attitude leads to a new process of shifting strategic power between rival actors in the Syrian political security equation. (Wiess, Stuart, 2011: 7). The United States interprets Iran's participation in the Geneva Summit and its contribution to the stabilization and security of Syria as Iran's empowerment in international politics. Hence, the United States believes that the international community can achieve the desired results in Syria without Iran. This is while Russia emphasized Iran's inalienable right to resolve the Syrian crisis. Former US diplomat Gary Sick discusses the important role of Iran in resolving the Syrian crisis in a memo titled "Middle East Peace starts with talking to Iran- " where he claims that Iran is seeking to devise a strategy to end the crisis in Syria, but Saudi Arabia and Qatar are giving weapons and money to the Syrian opposition, and their only goal is to break the Tehran-Damascus alliance. (Nejat, Valdani, 2013: 39).

The Geneva II Conference was influenced by international issues until November 2013, making it impossible to change the great powers' strategic orientation. Washington also wanted to hold a conference, with the participation of Turkey and France, to create a stable and beneficial environment for a "mediating group"in order to prevent a power vacuum. This has not achieved the desired result due to the conflict between takfiri and other opposition groups (Mosalinejad, 2017: 128). As the crisis in Syria continued and intensified, Western and Arab countries adopted Resolution 2139 on February 22, 2014. Russia opposed the draft resolution because of the one-sided views of the United States and its allies in supporting terrorist armed groups and the condemnation of Bashar al-Assad's government as the main culprit in the country's crisis. As a result, the views of the Russians received more attention, and with the implementation of amendments, the resolution was adopted unanimously.

Since the beginning of the crisis, some countries, such as the United States and its Western allies, which are also permanent members of the Security Council, have tried to put more pressure on the Assad government through serious activities in the Security Council, including drafting resolutions by the Arab and Western countries on October 4, 2010, and February and July 2010, vetoed by Russia and China. In 2019, the Secretary-General of the United Nations issued a letter to the President of the Security Council on the criteria and conditions of the Committee for Drafting the Constitution of Syria and the work program of this committee. One month later, the committee's first meeting was held consisting of 50 members of the Syrian government, 50 members of the opposition, and 50 members of Syrian civil society and independent groups. However, the parties' differences were so significant that in the second meeting, the representatives of the Syrian government left the meeting in protest against the opposition's behavior.

The Astana meetings and talks were among the most important political developments in the Syrian crisis in 2019 and 2020. Although the Astana process achieved some predetermined goals, it cannot be a strong point of reference for the crisis, and it seems unlikely that the actors will be able to reach an agreement on that basis. In this regard, Erdogan claimed that the Astana agreement would be destroyed after Damascus and Moscow ignored Ankara's demands to end the military operation in Idlib. Although Iran was a participant in the Astana talks, the country did not express explicit reactions, and has mainly been a bystander of subsequent developments due to events and issues such as Russia's agreement with the Syrian Kurds, efforts to persuade all opponents to negotiate, and Iran's non-participation in the Syrian military operation in Idlib. Contrary to the stances of the Russian and Syrian sides, Iran preferred to remain silent. Of course, in general, Iran's position at the Astana meeting has been in relative coordination with the positions of Syria and Russia. Given its human dimension, Iran's non-participation in the Syrian army's military operation in Idlib could prevent some criticism of the Islamic Republic. However, it seems that drafting a constitution and consolidating Tehran's influence in the future of Syria has a higher priority for Iran than the developments in Idlib or east of the Euphrates.

Former US Secretary of State John Kerry stated the conditions for Tehran's presence at the talks: "Tehran can participate in the talks if it accepts the principles accepted in the Geneva 1 talks, one of which is the establishment of a transitional government in Syria." Iran has repeatedly stated that it will not accept any preconditions for attending the talks, but that, in the event of a formal invitation to help resolve the crisis, it is ready to attend the talks. Many analysts believe that Washington's opposition to Iran's participation in the Syrian talks and setting of preconditions for it - while explicitly emphasizing its important and influential role in Syria's future – is due to the pressure of some parties like Saudi Arabia to prevent Iran's regional influence. (Ahmad Khanbeigi, 2013: 1024).

Along with talks, Russia persuaded the Assad government to make a temporary ceasefire to attract the attention of the group, which considers itself an enemy of Russia, Iran, and the Assad government. Alexander Lavrentiev, head of the Russian delegation, welcomed Damascus' decision to impose a temporary ceasefire. However, a few hours later, the ceasefire was broken, and both accused each other of violating it. These issues have made it clear that the talks will not end unless all groups want it. Russia and Iran must somehow reach an agreement with the Tahrir al-Sham group. On the other hand, meeting the demands of the Turkish-backed National Coalition of Opposition is complicated because they will consider Turkey's interests. This has given Turkey two strengths in the negotiation process, one for itself and one for its opponents.

We can understand Iran's position in regional developments after the failure of the Geneva talks, the ambiguity in the achievable results of talks such as Astana, and asking Tehran's participation by many countries to resolve the Syrian crisis, without Tehran changing its behavior in support of the Syrian government or people. On the other hand, major regional activists have realized that there is no other way to solve regional problems but accepting Tehran's opinions following Tehran's constructive behavior in dealing with ISIS due to the inability of the American coalition (Shahin, Hassanvand, 2018: 136). Iran's behavior pattern can be considered a curve of "absolute defense of the Assad government, with no negotiations with the opposition" to "maintaining the Assad government with a view toward negotiations." What caused this softening in Iran's foreign policy is four important factors:

First, many Iranians believe that negotiations are very likely to have positive results in the long run, in which case the opposition will also be present in the power structure. Iran does not want to turn them into its enemies. Second, Iran is Russia's main ally, and they know that the war in Syria is mainly between them and the Western and Arab forces led by the United States and Saudi Arabia. They know that the war in Syria will ultimately lead to nothing but the weakening of power and enormous expenses. Therefore, negotiations should also be considered as a way out. Third, Iran can advance its goals through negotiations and dialogue. Its non-acceptance will damage Iran's international image and ultimately show the world a belligerent image of Iran. Fourth, in the early years of the crisis, Iran did not have an ally like Russia. Therefore, it was not invited to the talks and did not have the power to impose influence on the issue. With the continuation of the crisis, Russia's presence, and the recapture of many areas by the Assad government, Iran, being one of the leading players in the negotiations, can have the upper hand and its allies. Thus, after about a decade, Iran has shown more flexibility in supporting

the government of Bashar al-Assad. While supporting the Assad government and condemning foreign interference, Iran has emphasized the need for a national dialogue between the government and the opposition and democratic political reforms in this country.

In general, the Iranians believe that the Islamic Republic of Iran has never supported military solutions and other countries' intervention, including regional and Western countries, to resolve the Syrian crisis. On the contrary, Iranian officials and decision-makers have always believed that there is only one way to resolve the Syrian crisis, and that is a political solution. The Islamic Republic of Iran emphasized the Syrian people's right to find a solution for their internal crisis. Therefore, any result that is achieved in this regard should be at the discretion of the people of this country. Given this, the Islamic Republic of Iran's supportive view towards resolving the Syrian crisis is important in three components: 1. Stopping violence and killing of people in Syria, 2. No foreign political and military intervention, 3. Preserving the government of Bashar Assad, in addition to emphasizing the need for internal reforms. (Sadeghi, Lotfi, 2015: 140).

VIII. Conclusion

With the beginning of the Arab upheavals and revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, the crisis spread to Syria. Despite the passage of a decade, the crisis continues and intensifies in the rivalry between regional and international powers. There are two general views on the Syrian crisis. First, some believe that this crisis, like the crisis of Egypt or Tunisia, has an internal nature and is due to the revolution of the Syrian people against the authoritarian nature of the ruling regime. Nevertheless, this revolution deviated after the intervention of Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the U.S and other actors. Second, others believe that despite some internal problems in Syria, the real root of the crisis lies in the intervention of other countries aiming to change the ruling regime and bring allied elites to power. Their complementary goal is to eliminate Iran's strategic ally in the region, which is against the interests and power of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This study has investigated the foreign policy and behavioral pattern of the Islamic Republic of Iran in response to the Syrian crisis between 2011 and 2019. Based on the theory of defensive realism, the results of the research show that the regional and international powers have tried to achieve their interests and goals in Syria since the beginning of the crisis. Also, it has been found that each of the actors has supported domestic activists, so exacerbating the crisis.

On the other hand, Iran and Syria are two important allies in the Middle East that have strengthened their relations against international and regional rivals over the decades. Thus, Iran's policies and strategies in the Syrian crisis are precautionary measures to defend its national interests and support its strategic ally. Given Syria's geopolitical position in the Middle East and its role as a link between Iran and militant groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, the Iranians have made every effort to confront the opposition, preserve Syria's territorial integrity and hinder the implementation of the goals and interests of their regional and international competitors. While widely supporting the Assad government at various levels, Iranian leaders have implicitly supported peace talks and negotiations. However, at the same time, they believe that financial and military support to the opposition neutralizes these efforts, and therefore emphasize talks, based on the interests of all domestic actors, as a final solution.

Iran's support for the Assad regime stems more from geopolitical factors than anything else. The geopolitical, strategic, and, most importantly, identity implications of the Syrian crisis have also influenced Iran's stance. The Islamic Republic of Iran has tried to maintain Bashar al-Assad, the only pro-Iranian Arab government in the Middle East. They believe that the fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria will mean the collapse of Iran's strategic base in the Middle East and the Arab world. Thus, the fall of the Assad government's domino effect will lead to the collapse of Iran's interests, making Iran the next target. Further, given that Iran is exerting pressure on Israel through allied groups in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine, maintaining the Assad regime has created a significant opportunity for Iran to support them. Changes in Syria will lead to the collapse of the Shiite axis between Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. As a result, Iran's influence in the region will plummet, and the regional balance of power will change in favor of Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey. That is why Iranian leaders are doing their best to ensure the survival of the Assad regime in Syria.

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