

Emerging Role of Iran in the Middle East

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Abstract

In the contemporary situation of the Middle East, Iran trying to upgrade its status to dominate Region. On the other side, major power America is frustrated by Iran behavior. The changing geopolitical environment has intensified the traditional military threats of the U.S for Iran national security. The research will explain the up going conflict in the Middle East and how Iran is playing its part in the disputes. Iran counterpart Saudi Arabia wants to dominate the region so the conflict emerges to become hegemonic power. Both states are fighting proxies in the Middle East. The research will comparatively analyze the position of Iran in conflicts. The contemporary clashes which include Syrian civil war, Yemen crises, Iraqi insurgency (up going Iraq protests), Iran-Saudi Arabia proxy and the future position of Iran. The research will also explain about the role of Iran supporting Hezbollah, Hamas against Israel. Iran has starting close ties with Russia and China. China has increased its interest in building infrastructure. The research will analyze the future aspects and common interest of both states. Iran nuclear deal is also important in the region. Further, it explores the reason why Iran behave likes that in the Middle East. The research will base on details which will be linked with past events and established new views.

Introduction

Iran officially the Islamic Republic of Iran is a country located in western Asia commonly known as the Middle East. It consists of nearly 80 million populations according to the preliminary data from the decennial census conducted in 2016 approximately one-third is rural and two-thirds urban, located in the heart of the Persian Gulf region.¹ It occurs nearly 1.65 million square kilometers between Iraq and Turkey on the west and Pakistan and Afghanistan on the east. This country has a unique culture, a strong identity. Iran has a rugged mountain chains

¹ Unescap, "Iran's Population and Housing Census-2016" Statistical Centre of Iran (SCI),2016
https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Session6_Iran_Population_and_Housing_Census2016_Census_WS_2_4-26Jan2018.pdf

surrounding by several basins inside. In East of the Central Plateau, there are two large desert regions. Lowland areas are located along the Caspian coast, in Khuzestan Province at the head of the Persian Gulf, and at several dispersed locations along the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman coasts. Iran has no major rivers. The only River in Iran for the navigable process is the Karun River.

Ali Khomeini is the supreme leader and Hassan Rouhani is the current president of Iran. According to the constitution of Iran, Shia Islam declares to be the official religion of Iran.² Around 90 per cent of Iranians are Shia Muslims and about 8 per cent are Sunni Muslims. Other religions present in Iran are Christianity, the Baha'i, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism. The constitution recognizes Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism, but not the Baha'i faith, as legitimate minority religions.

Iran is ethnically and culturally different from most other countries in the Middle East. The majority of its population is Persian. It is the only Shia state in the region that does not have diplomatic relations with the U.S.

Iran has a large amount of oil and natural gas resources. Oil reserves are estimated at more than a 130 billion and natural gas reserves at more than 32 trillion cubic meters (second in the world behind Russia).³ Mineral resources currently exploited include bauxite, chromium, coal, copper, gold, iron ore, limestone, strontium, red oxide, salt, sulfur, turquoise, and uranium. About 11 per cent of Iran's land surface is capable of growing crops and other fertilizers. The most productive agricultural land, bordering the Caspian Sea, makes up about 5.5 per cent of the country's total land.

Iran's economy is dominated by the oil industry, which is part of the state sector. In the early 2000s, more than 80 per cent of export earnings came from oil and gas. Iran has a number of large industries. Iran had an estimated Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2017 of US\$447.7 billion.

² Glenn E. Curtis, Eric Hooglund, "Iran a country study" U.S Library of congress, pg27, 2008

http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/cs/pdf/CS_Iran.pdf

³ Glenn E. Curtis, Eric Hooglund, "Iran a country study" U.S Library of congress, pg26, 2008

http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/cs/pdf/CS_Iran.pdf

In the contemporary world, Iran has become a major regional player in the Middle East. Iran is trying to upgrade its status to dominate the region. Majority of the regional issues have included due to the Iran involvement to some degree in the Middle East conflict. Following back to the past in 3200 BC, Iran became the object of repeated interferences by outside tribes and powers, especially in the 20th century. This has strongly affected Iranian perceptions of the outside world as unfriendly and hostile. In 1979, Iran political structure changes. The Iranians deposed the Western-backed Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and later fought an eight-year war against Iraq that ended in a military stalemate and essentially pushed the Islamic Republic towards a defensive posture to prevent future foreign interventions. After the Islamic Revolution, Iran has attempted to increase its role and influence in the larger Middle East.

After the overthrow of Shah of Iran, Iran has been ruled by the religious leaders which are called theocracy and hardliners on the basis of the revolutionary idea of velayat-e-faqih (It is a Shia Islamist system of governance that justifies the rule of clergy over the state).⁴ Iran's animosity and distrust toward the United States and the West at large have been displayed through public statements by the Iranian leadership as well as official policies that challenge America's strategic interests especially in the Middle East, such as ensuring the security of Israel and U.S. regional allies, protecting the access to regional resources and preventing Iran from militarily dominating the region.

The Islamic revolution brought a sudden end to the role of Pahlavi dynasty which rule from the last 50 years had been identified with the attempt to modernize and westernize Iran. The Revolution replaced the monarchy with an Islamic republic, vesting ultimate power in the hands of a clerical leader and the clerical class as a whole. Theocracy rule started in Iran.

In the recent years, political tensions in the Middle East have been reached in heights over the intersecting crises stemming from the Syrian civil war, the unravelling of the Iran nuclear agreement, the war in Yemen, Iraq protest, the Israel conflict, Iran-Saudi Arabia proxy and the future position of Iran. The common state participation in the conflict is the direct or indirect involvement of Iran. Iran dominates its hegemony regime. Since 2012 intervention in Syria has

⁴ Glenn E. Curtis, Eric Hooglund, "Iran a country study" U.S Library of congress, pg33, 2008

http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/cs/pdf/CS_Iran.pdf

stoked anger and anxiety in the Gulf States, which fear Iran's regional hegemonic ambitions, as the main element in increasing the tension is due to the hegemonic war between the two major power of Middle East Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Gulf States felt abandoned by the US under the Obama administration, which they believed prioritized the nuclear agreement ahead of pressuring Iran over its regional policies. From the perspective of the Gulf States, this has led to Iran's destabilizing influence spreading as which is the evidenced by its support for Bashar al-Assad the president of Syria in the civil war, as its military support for the Houthis in the Yemen civil war as well as the ongoing relationship with Lebanon's Hezbollah.⁵ Iran has also repeatedly been accused of promoting unrest in the region and supporting the principally Shia opposition in Bahrain. Middle East politics is very complicated. The major two powers which include Iran and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia always counter each other. Both have different religious sect as Saudi Arabia have a population of Sunni majority whereas Iran consists of Shia majority state. Both states have different alliance as Saudi Arabia receive support and being a long term ally of the United state of America. The USA has a national interest in the Middle East region. Whereas Iran received support from the Eastern side.

Hypothesis

The structure of the Middle East forcing Iran to maximize its security followed by the maximization of power.

Questions

Q: Why Iran is challenging the status quo?

Q: How Iran is countering existing structure?

Theoretical Framework:

In this contemporary world, a state goes for the maximization of power so this research uses structural realism to scrutinize data regarding Iran intension in the Middle East. Now it is

⁵ Sanam Vakil, "Iran and the GCC Hedging, Pragmatism and Opportunism", chathamhouse,2018
<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-09-13-iran-gcc-vakil.pdf>

essential to develop proper conversance with basic assumptions of structural realism. Structural realism usually begins with the following assumptions:

- International system is anarchic; that is, there is no credible power above the states that compromise the system.
- States cannot be certain of the intentions of other states
- At least some states have offensive capabilities
- That states have preferences which they seek to realize, and that survival is a prerequisite for realizing such a preference

From the above defined premises, structural realism guides us towards the following aspects. The structural theory composes of offensive and defensive realism. Offensive going for power maximization and defensive going toward the security maximization. As first of all a state requires survival in order to seek its preferences in a global world which a state seeks to survive. It is because of equivocal aura prevailing in the international environment. States are deeply concerned about the balance of power and compete among themselves either to gain power at the expense of others or at least to make sure they do not lose power.⁶

Iran challenging the status quo

After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the first supreme leader of Iran in 1989 marked the beginning of the transformation of Iran from a revolutionary into a status quo power. Instead of exporting revolution, Iran main focused on the reconstruction at home and regional stability. A number of factors contributed to this transformation.

The tension between the Iran and Gulf states is not new but throughout the recent history, disagreements have arisen due to internal political developments, ethnical and sectarian differences, and also the strategic and territorial rivalries. Iran is challenging the status quo as to maintain its regional position and especially fact cannot forget the role of Alliances in the Middle East so for the possibility of survival, Iran has/have to play its game in the region.

⁶ John Mearsheimer , “the tragedy of great power politics”W.W.norton \$ Company,2001
<https://samuelbhfauredotcom.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/s2-mearsheimer-2001.pdf>

Arab spring also plays an important role in destabilizing the region.⁷ The Arab Spring was a series of pro-democracy uprisings that enveloped several Muslim countries, including Tunisia, Iraq Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Bahrain. The events in these nations generally began in the spring of 2011. However, the political and social impact of these popular uprisings remains significant until today.

Iran Proxies in the Middle East

Due to the political struggle of Iran in the Global world Iran making proxies to maintain its position in this map. Historical fact Iran has not been a significant factor in Yemen crises.⁸ It has long maintained a diplomatic presence in Sanaa, but it has influence during the two decades before the war was marginal. During the six Saadah wars between 2004 and 2010, former President of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh gives a statement that Iran supporting the Houthis, but U.S. analysts found little evidence to support his claims. Ties between the Yemeni governments which are backed by Saudi Arabia in Aden have been damaged in the recent years by Iran's support for the rival in Sanaa linked to the Houthi movement.

In 2011 and 2012, Iran's role began to change during the Arab Spring uprising. Tehran's support for the Houthis increased in that period, although Iran was not a player in negotiations that led to Saleh's resignation from government. In the regional backdrop to the war in Yemen Iran is an important actor. Saudi Arabia has made its position clear to support the official government.

In Saudi Arabia views the Houthis takeover in Sanaa represents a disruption of normalcy. From Iran's point of view, it is the natural consequence of the Yemeni government's repression and external relations. Saudi Arabia justifies its military operation by as President 'Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi's call help from Saudi Arabia for the protection of Yemen and Yemeni people. As Iran believes this intervention as illegal and unjust.⁹ On the other side, Saudi Arabia sees Houthis a proxy of Iran, as religious fact Houthis consist of Shia identity so due to the common sect Iran helped. Despite the Iran official government denying the support for Houthis rebel but in reality,

⁷ history.com.editors, "Arab spring", history.com, 2019

<https://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/arab-spring>

⁸ Gerald M. Feierstein, "Iran's role in Yemen and prospects for peace", Middle east institution, 2018

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-role-yemen-and-prospects-peace>

⁹ "Yemen crises: why is there a war?", bbc, 2019

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>

Iran has a large influence. According to the reports of the UN, Yemen considers being the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with almost 15 million people at risk of starvation and repeated outbreaks of deadly diseases such as cholera etc. In this conflict, Iran is challenging its counterpart Saudi Arabia to maintain the regional hegemony. In a recent year, drone attack was done by Houthis toward Saudi oil refinery. Iran has been widely blamed by Saudi Arabia and western power regarding the attack but Iran officially denies. This attack also shows how much Houthis are influence by Iran.

Another important conflict in the Middle East is the Syrian civil war which started after the Arab spring and still now it's ongoing. The Islamic Republic of Iran has done amazing efforts to keep the president Bashar al- Assad in power. Iran has provided significant support for the Syrian government in the civil war which includes financial, technical, and logistical as well as the training of the troops. As the main reason for supporting the Assad regime by Iran is to counter the US and Saudi Arabia.

In Syrian crises there are domestic as well as foreign factors involves. Mainly four main groups are fighting first the Syrian armed forces and its allies which include Iran, Russia and especially the Lebanese Hezbollah secondly Kurds then ISIS and the four groups is Syrian rebel which is supported by the US, Gulf states, Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia.¹⁰ According to the reports, the CIA trained nearly 10,000 rebels. As in the crises, the main conflict is regarding sectarian Shia and Sunni. Assad regimes get support from Shia states as well as a Shia militant organization but on the other side Al-Qaida the Sunni militarized organization backed by the Sunni Gulf States.

It is also a fact that Iran and Syrian relations don't depend on religious as Syria consist of secular state while Iran has a system of religious rule. Instead, their bilateral relations came through political and strategic points. Even Iran economy crumble and faced a lot of sanctions but Iran financially helps Syria.

In a new development, Iran has to start a new relationship with China. China has increased its interest in building infrastructure.¹¹ The new silk road which also boosts the economy of Iran as

¹⁰ Esther pan, "Syria,iran and the Mideast conflict", council on foreign relations,2006

<https://www.cfr.org/background/syria-iran-and-mideast-conflict>

¹¹ Massoumeh torfeh, "the promise of Chinese investment brings Iran in from the cold",trtworld,2019

<https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/the-promise-of-chinese-investment-brings-iran-in-from-the-cold-29686>

well as in geopolitical structure china is rival of the USA as the proverb your enemy, enemy is your friend. China and Iran have developed a broad and deep partnership. Increase their economic ties, arms sales and defence cooperation against the United States. This partnership also threatens the US interest and object in the Middle East. In a previous day china Russia along with Iran doing naval exercise in the northern part of the Indian Ocean. The three states appear to have primary objectives the protection of the security of their shipping route and countering the influence of the United States in the region. The main security threat exists in the Middle East at present the ongoing efforts by the United States to destabilize the nations that refuse to cooperate with the US in the global system of hegemony and Iran along with its alliances challenging the status quo and force of US domination. A greater level of cooperation by Russia, China and Iran increases the level of stability and security in the region. However, there is also a greater risk for a potential confrontation between the Western and Eastern powers in the region.

Hamas and Hezbollah organization are also influenced by Iran. Hezbollah is the Shia Islamic militant and political organization based in Lebanon. Hezbollah act as a proxy of Iran in Israel-Iran conflict. Hamas is the Sunni Islamic organization working in Gaza strip. As the official claims, the group was founded and supported by Iran. Both groups are working for the interest of Iran against Israel in the region.

In the contemporary situation of the Middle East Iraq also play a key role. After the thrown of Saddam Hussain the president of Iraq and during Arab spring the Iraq influence increased toward Iran. In early 2014 when the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or Daesh) started to intervene in Iraq major cities; Iran tries to help in the situation. Before 2004 Iran role was so minimum in Iraq due to the Sunni regime but later on after the regime changed the situation also come in the hand of Iran. Iran backed militia helped save Iraq from ISIS. Not only in the military but financially and logical support Iran was forward. Iran makes proxies to make sure their influence. In the current situation after the death of General Qasem Soleimani who was an Iranian Major general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from 1998 until his death, commander of its Quds Force, a division primarily responsible for extraterritorial military both Iran and Iraq come close to each other. One of the highest rank officers who was killed in Iraq soil in a drone attack by the US its open threat and challenge to Iran but this action also promotes the future war in the Middle East. As the response, Iran cannot go for convention

warfare but it can attack the national interest or fight a proxy war. After the attack, it is expected that Iraq is now the palace where future war can be pretended or it will be the sandwich between the US and Iran. A day-by-day escalation also increases the chance of war in the region and this war will directly affect the Middle East and Asian region.

Iran Nuclear Deal

Iran nuclear deal also plays a significant role in Middle East politics. The deal was named as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal is an agreement on the Iranian nuclear program. The deal was finalized in Vienna, the city of Austria on July 14, 2015. This deal happens between Iran and the P5+1 state. This includes the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Russia, France, China, United Kingdom, United States and plus is Germany along with the European Union. The deal was successfully adopted by both parties.¹² The deal took almost 20 months for finalizing. Iran ready to enriched uranium eliminate stockpile. For the next 15 years, Iran will only enrich uranium up to 3.67%. To monitor and verify Iran's compliance with the agreement, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will have regular access to all Iranian nuclear facilities. In return, Iran will receive relief from related sanctions. But now this deal is in deadlock.¹³ On May 8, 2018, President Donald J Trump announced the United States' withdrawal from the international nuclear pact with Iran. As he stated that the deal was one-sided it did not bring peace but the other member stays in the deal. The US administration putting maximum pressure and due to economic sanctions, Iran faces huge crises. As a response Iran also playing its game through a proxy as in the recent attack in an oil refinery in Saudi Arabia by the Houthis Iran gives the message that if we cannot sell oil and gain the proceeds, we will try to ensure others can't either. In present time Iran also announced to end the Commitment to nuclear deal after the killing of General Solemani. The statement said by Iran officials that the Iranian government would no longer limit the enrichment of uranium so the new era of conflict will emerge. Iran also said it

¹² Sanam Vakil, "Iran and the GCC: Hedging, Pragmatism and Opportunism", chathamhouse, 2018
<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-09-13-iran-gcc-vakil.pdf>

¹³ "Iran nuclear deal: Key details", bbc, 2019
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33521655>

would still cooperate with the International Atomic Agency and reenter the nuclear deal if the sanctions are removed.

The proxy's war between Saudi Arabia and Iran is challenging the world to participate others in their event. There alliance also participate and support both state to show their presence and support toward their alliance

In the current situation, Iran is going toward maximization of power through influencing others by hook or by crook. The main objective of Iran is the maximization of power in the region as offensive realism and then come toward maximization of security through defensive realism. Through this process, Iran can ensure its presence in the global system.

Iran is challenging the state quo to maintain its presence in the global map and through fighting and participating in different events Iran put its value especially in the Middle East conflicts the main conflict such as Yemen, Iraq, Syrian moves toward Iran so Iran is countering the status quo through its hard as well as soft power.

Conclusion:

In the contemporary world, there is a paradox myth that Iran is going toward Maximization of power. According to Richard N Hass, the world is having the age of non-polarity.¹⁴ It is important to maintain that state actor in their own interest as the world is anarchic in nature so every state has to make sure their presence in this world. Iran the core state of the Middle East has a large number of conflicts in the region. Saudi Arabia, the core state of the region has also a vast number of conflicts which is already going on. The US treated Iran as the major threat to the US Interest and as the Trump administration proves it's by putting sanctions, announcing pull out from Iran Nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) that indirectly threat the US intension on the other side Iran also announced to Ends commitment to nuclear deal after Soleimani killing. Iran further announced to take the revenge of Soleimani. As per realist tradition when the status quo being challenged the conflict emerges. Iran challenges the

¹⁴ Richard N Hass, "the age of non polarity", foreign affairs, 2008
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2008-05-03/age-nonpolarity>

superpower US. In the response the US trying to de-stable Iran position in the region with its Alliance such as Saudi Arabia and Gulf state. The US has close ties with its alliances.

It is also the fact that Iran is not in a better position in conventional warfare but in proxies Iran dominates the region. Iran will try not to participate in the conventional war but it can go for the proxy war. After the death of General, the escalation between both states has been increased and there will be the possibility of war. The agreement between UAE and Israel known as “Abraham Accord” will also escalate the conflict in the Middle East. As we cannot ignore the importance of the US in the region as the US is the superpower in the world and threading a superpower will always have a big

In the upcoming era, the new war will be started most properly the proxy that will define the position and future aspect of Iran and it will also reshape the Middle East map.

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