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Iran's Policy in the Syrian Civil War: From Liberal Pacifism to Liberal Interventionism

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ABSTRACT

The Syrian civil war which broke out in March 2011 further destabilized the Middle East in general and the Levant in particular. From among many implications of this conflict such as the deaths of more than 400,000 civilians and the refugee crisis, it caused the heavy involvement of regional (such as Islamic Republic of Iran, the GCC states, Jordan, and Turkey) and trans-regional (the United States, Russia, and many European countries) actors. Iran has been one of the main players in the Syrian conflict theater. This article seeks to explain Iran`s policy towards the violent events in Syria and analyze its evolution during 2011-2018. By underestimating the role of geopolitics in contrast to the dominant literature, our main argument is that Iran`s policy in the Syrian civil war has evolved from support for the self-determination right of the Syrian people through diplomatic means (liberal pacifism) to support for the Russian military intervention (liberal interventionism). We further try to analyze why this shift in Iran`s policy towards the Syrian crisis occurred.

1. Introduction

*A*lthough the Arab uprisings of 2011, especially the overthrow of Ben Ali and Mubarak in Tunisia and Egypt respectively, sent shockwaves throughout the Middle East capitals, it was welcomed by Tehran. The Iranian leaders sought to take over the uprisings ideologically by presenting them as the

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results of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and called them an "Islamic Awakening" (*Bidari-e Eslami*) wave (Haji-Yousefi, 2012). Ayatollah Khamenei, the spiritual leader of Iran, in the first International Islamic Awakening Conference held in Tehran on September 2011, reiterated the Islamic nature of the uprisings in the Arab countries and stated that these uprisings were rooted in the Islamic Revolution in Iran (https://english.khamenei.ir/news/1726/Leader-s-Speech-to-Participants-of-International-Conference-on). The spill-over of the uprising to Syria, however, was received very cautiously. The Assad regime was the sole Tehran`s strategic ally in the Middle East and it was very evident that Iran`s strategy towards the uprising in Syria would be different than its policy of supporting the Arab Spring in general. In other words, Iran`s strategy towards the uprisings in different Arab countries was influenced by its own normative, ideological and geopolitical interests: Iran backed almost all movements opposing the authoritarian Sunni regimes in the Arab countries except Syria[1].

This article seeks to explain Iran`s policy towards the violent events in Syria and analyze its evolution during 2011-2019. Our main argument is that contrary to the dominant literature which considers Iran`s geopolitical considerations as the main factor influencing Iran`s Syrian policy, Iran`s policy in the Syrian civil war has evolved from support for the self-determination right of the Syrian people through diplomatic means (liberal pacifism) to support for the Russian military intervention (liberal interventionism). We further try to analyze why this shift in Iran`s policy towards the Syrian crisis occurred. To this end, we first lay out our theoretical

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1. Many scholars as well as policy-makers in Iran believe that the uprising in Syria was induced by external forces especially Saudi Arabia (Interview with Mohammad Reza Dehshiri, Associate professor of International Relations, Faculty of International Relations, Iran`s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tehran, Iran, on January 16, 2018).

framework focusing on the liberal theory of foreign policy. Then we survey briefly the roots of Iranian-Syrian alliance since 1979. The third section will lay out Iran`s interests relative to the civil war in Syria. Finally, an assessment of Iran`s policy towards the Syrian civil war and its implications for the Middle East will be put forward.

2. Methodology

Methodology consists of two issues namely the method of doing research as well as the sources of data. In this article, we try to apply a liberal theory of foreign policy and argue that despite the importance of geopolitical considerations, Iran`s main drive in the Syrian civil war of 2011-2020 has been evolved from support for the self-determination right of the Syrian people through diplomatic means to support for the Russian military intervention. In other words, theory is guiding us to analyze why Iran intervened military in the Syrian civil war. In contrast to the main literature on Iran`s foreign policy which apply a realist theory of International Relations, we argue that a liberal theory can best explain the motives and goals of Iranian foreign policy makers. To support our analysis, in addition to many written documents, we have interviewed several Iranian scholars and academics.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Liberal theory of foreign policy considers the direct effects of individuals (including their ideas and ideals), social forces and political institutions on foreign relations of states. In contrast to realist theory, liberals open the box of state action and highlights how ideas, interests, and institutions, affects foreign policy (Doyle, 2008: 50). The main characteristic of liberalism is its incorporation of modern conceptions of ethical foreign policy (Doyle, 1997). Accordingly, in an ethical foreign policy, protection of life, liberty, and property through maintenance of peace and peaceful resolution of disputes, should be considered as the main duties of a liberal foreign policy.

Thus, in an anarchic international system states have to preserve as well as expand democracy, protect human rights, and respect international law. The main controversy, however, is whether a liberal foreign policy should take a defensive or an offensive strategy to achieve these values. Liberal pacifists

rule out offensive state strategy and seek to promote democracy and human rights through peaceful means. They choose a foreign policy of nonintervention and respect the sovereignty of the state and the rights of individuals to establish their own way of life free from foreign intervention. Liberal pacifists do not support use of force in international relations except as a last resort. Should intervention in the internal affairs of other states be considered necessary, especially if it is for humanitarian purposes, they insist that it be done through the United Nations or other international organizations (Doyle, 1986).

Liberal interventionists, on the contrary, lean towards a more active and interventionist foreign policy, including by military means. They believe that a liberal state should attempt to rescue majorities suffering severe oppression or individuals suffering massive and systematic violations of human rights either by their own governments or in a civil war. They, however, differ with respect to the goals they are looking for or the means they are employing. Liberal internationalists who are more idealistic put more emphasis on humanitarian goals and regard multilateralism as both a means and an end. Liberal neoconservatives see multilateralism only as a means and their American variant consider the national interests besides promotion of liberal values. Compared to the liberal internationalists, they are more prone to use force in order to achieve their goals.

3. Syria as a Strategic Ally for Iran: Historical Background

Since the eruption of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran and Syria developed a relationship which has been characterized by many observers as a strategic alliance (Hirschfeld, 1986; Lawson, 2007; Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, 1997). Based on a loose definition of alliance, an alliance is a "formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states" (Walt, 1987: 1). Alliance making is a kind of foreign policy behavior which can be shaped by three factors, namely stimulus, permissive and motivating factors. Whereas traditional models of causality have been limited to stimulus and response, foreign policy behavior including alliance formation is also shaped by motivating factors (goals and values) as well as permissive factors (opportunities and constraints) (Noble, 2004: 35).

Stimulus factors act as a trigger for alliance formation. As for the stimulus factor which triggered the Iranian-Syrian alliance during 1979-1982, most observers refer to Tehran and Damascus threat perceptions especially the immediate threat of Iraq (Goodarzi, 2006). Indeed the Islamic Republic of Iran faced various sources of threat since its establishment in 1979 from among which the Iraqi threat was more immediate. The invasion of Iran by the Iraqi forces in September 1980 led to a total war which lasted for 8 years. This also exacerbated the domestic instability inside the country. Not only unrests in some provinces with the minority ethnic groups in particular Kurdistan escalated but the wave of terrorism was initiated by guerrilla groups such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq-e Iran Organization during which many government leaders were assassinated (Legum, 1982: 554).

As for the Syrian government there were three sources of threat perception during 1979 to 1982. The first was the Syrian leaders` threat perception emanating from the United States and Israel. The Camp David Accord of 1978 put Hafiz al-Assad in a very shaky situation (Rabinovich, 1982: 177). In fact, Syria rejected the Camp David Accord not because it did not want a negotiated agreement with Israel but because it wanted a peace treaty in which all the Arab countries participated as one entity (Legum, 1980: 812).

Syria had a very uncertain situation in Lebanon too. The Camp David Accord led the Syrian leaders to try to consolidate their power in Lebanon. This could facilitate their control of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), challenge the Camp David Accord and preserve the Syrian government`s regional and international status. Notwithstanding the Syrian presence in Lebanon was precarious since it was confronted on the one hand with the Lebanese Falangist and on the other with the Israeli air strikes (Korn, 1986). The other source of threat perceived by the Baathist regime in Syria was its counterpart in Iraq. Both governments were at odds for the most of the period since their establishment except during 1978-79 (EIU, 1979).

In addition to external threat perception, the Syrian government was confronted with a strong internal opposition, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood. The economic difficulties, the ethnoreligious nature of the Assad regime, the Syrian involvement in Lebanon which caused troubles for the Palestinian refugees there, were the main factors led to the popular uprisings especially in Aleppo and Hama during which thousands of ordinary people were killed (Drysdale, 1982: 8).

The security threats perceived by both Iran and Syria particularly their common threat perception of Iraq, was the main stimulus cause of their alliance formation. In addition to this factor, we can mention some permissive factors which shaped their alliance behavior. Permissive factors involve opportunities and constraints on state behavior. The alliance with Syria offered the newly established government in Tehran some opportunities. The leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran sought to export the ideals of their revolution to the Third World countries especially the Muslim societies[1]. An alliance with Syria could facilitate not only the influence of Iran in the region but also its presence in Lebanon (Ramazani, 1986: 182). Lebanon was considered very important in the strategic culture of new leaders in Tehran at least for three reasons, namely the personal attachment of the Iranian leaders with Imam Musa Al-Sadr, the missing leader of the Shia community in Lebanon, the huge support of the Islamic Revolution of Iran by the Lebanese Shia, and common border of Lebanon with Israel which was considered by the Iranian government as illegitimate occupying entity (Hirschfeld, 1986: 111).

The strategic relationship with Iran offered Syria some opportunities too. By siding with the Anti-Israeli regime in Tehran, Damascus` weakening position in the Arab-Israeli conflict because of the Camp David Accord could be remedied. As Seal has aptly said, "Syria saw Iran as the natural counterweight to Egypt as much as King Faisal had done in the 1960s" (Seale, 1988: 353).Iran`s presence in Lebanon especially its military involvement came to the Syrian assistance in its confrontation with Israel (Dickey, 1988: 66). Assad`s failure in helping the PLO in the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was one of the main drives of domestic opposition to his regime. The alliance with Iran could bolster the legitimacy of Alevite regime as well as cause friction among its opposition (Hunter, 1990: 221, fn. 79). In addition,

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1. It seems there has been and still is two schools of thought with respect to Iran`s presence in the Levant particularly its alliance with Syria. One adheres to Iran`s presence in the Levant while the other opposes it. Usually the IRGC and the hardliners believe in the former while Iran`s Ministry of Foreign Affairs in general as well as the Reformists believe in the latter. Both schools resort to realistic as well as identity based justifications. Interview with Jafar. Haghpanah, assistant professor of International Relations, Research Institute of Strategic Studies, Tehran, Iran, on 26 September 2017.

Iran`s economic assistance to Syria was attractive too (Chubin and Tripp, 1988: 183).

Motivating factors involve the goals and priorities of decision makers. The main priority for both Iran in its war with Iraq and Syria because of its loneliness in front of Israel, were their security and survival. In other words, the security situation in which both Iran and Syria were entangled informed their goals and priorities. Their strategic partnership could to some extent reduce the pressure they felt during this period.

In sum, based on our analysis, we can conclude that the formation of the Iranian-Syrian alliance since 1979 was the product of multiple factors, acting in concert. In addition to similar worldviews i. e., Syria`s close relations with the USSR and strained ties to the United States and Iran`s anti-American position as well as similarity of faith between Iran`s Shias and Syria`s ruling Alawites, the most important factor which caused them grow closer was their common threat perceptions (shared view on Iraq and similar positions in the Arab-Israeli conflict).

4. Debate and Findings
4-1. Iran`s Interests Relative to the Syrian Civil War

The Iranian-Syrian relations since their alliance formation in the late 1970s remained enduring and stable though it has not been free of tension and competition (Byman, 2006). This alliance which is one of the oldest one in the Middle East "has been primarily defensive in nature, aimed at neutralizing Iraqi and Israeli offensive capabilities in the region, and preventing American encroachment in the Middle East" (Goodarzi, 2013a: 35)[1]. Since the establishment of Iranian Syrian alliance till 2011, their relations were mostly dominated by external factors including the dynamics of the Iran-Iraq war, the developments in Lebanon after the Israeli invasion in 1982, the Arab-Israeli relations and the intra-Arab balance of power. The Arab Spring in Syria in early 2011 which turned into a civil war by the end of that year, however, highlighted the importance of internal factors in shaping the course of Iran-Syria alliance. Iran decided to help sustain the rule of the Bashar al-Assad regime as its sole strategic ally in the Middle East.

1.This is also confirmed by M. R. Dehshiri, associate professor of International Relations, Faculty of International Relations, Iran`s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (interview was conducted on January 16, 2018).

Although Tehran supported the ideals of the Arab Spring, its adherence was mainly rhetorical. In the case of the Syrian internal developments which led to a full-blown civil war, however, Tehran chose a somehow different stance. In the beginning phase of the crisis, Iran supported the Baathist regime mostly with technical and security means. As the crisis continued especially by the end of 2011 when it assumed regional and international dimension, Iran not only boosted Assad with financial, security, intelligence and advisory assistance, but firmly stood with his regime by military assistance through presence of Iran`s military troops and commanders inside Syria (Abdo, 2011; Kamali Dehghan, 2012).

What are Iran`s vital interests- its security and prosperity- relative to the Syrian civil war which perceived threatened? First and foremost was the emergence of the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) since 2014. Iran as a Shia country was threatened existentially by the rise of the Salafi groups in the Middle East especially in Afghanistan and Iraq. One of the main goals of these groups, particularly the ISIS, was to wipe the Shiite community off the map, focusing on the Islamic Republic of Iran (Barnard, 2014). This was perceived in Tehran as an existential threat and the Iranian government utilized all its influence in Baghdad to allay this security concern[1].

Secondly, a main interest of Iran concerns Syrian strategic position in the "axis of resistance" against Israel[2]. Strategically Iran and Syria`s shared enmity toward Israel and the United States, pushed them closer and this, one can argue, was the main cause for the longevity of their alliance (Gelbart, 2010). Syria was considered the linchpin of the axis of resistance and the toppling of the Assad regime would weaken the axis in the Middle East and

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1. Almost all Iranian officials, including Iran`s spiritual leader, have insisted that if Iran had not intervened in Syria (and of course Iraq), the ISIS would bring the conflict to the Iranian cities. See, for instance, Ayatollah Khamenei at:http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=22406, accessed December 11, 2017; general Rahim Safavi, former commander of IRGC at: http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/82724273, accessed November 9, 2017; and Amir-Abdollahian, former deputy foreign ministry of Iran at: https://www.jamaran.ir/fa/tiny/news-756390 accessed November 29, 2017.

2. Interview with Roohollah. Talebi Arani, assistant professor of International Relations at Shahid Behehsti University, Tehran, Iran, on October 9, 2017.

"limit Iran`s retaliatory options in case there is an American or Israeli attack on its nuclear cites which Arab and Western nations suspect are part of a weapons program" (Ottens, 2012).

Thirdly, Assad is considered as a strategic asset for Iran in its relations with the neighboring Arab states especially Saudi Arabia. If the regime of Assad is overthrown, the alternative will more likely be a majority Sunni government with more inclination towards the other Arab states. As a result, the balance of power in the region will tip against Iran and in favor of Iran`s Arab rivals, particularly in the Persian Gulf (Fulton, 2010).

Finally, Syria has been the only Arab country which explicitly stood by Iran during its 8-year war with Iraq (1980-88), which was critical for the latter`s survival (Terrill, 2015). When the Syrian regime faced the unrest in March 2011, Iran, unsurprisingly, decided to reciprocate by throwing its weight behind the Syrian regime[1].

4-2. Iran`s Policy Evolution in the Syrian Civil War

Why did Iran decide to intervene in the Syrian civil war? How and why Iran`s policy in the Syrian civil war evolved from a low-level hidden involvement in the conflict to an explicit military support for the Syrian regime? These are very important questions that have caused scholarly debates, especially inside Iran. As a result, two major interpretations have emerged to explain the motivation behind Iran`s military support of the Assad regime: a geopolitical interpretation and a religious one.

Many analysis of Iran`s policy with respect to the developments in Syria during this period are built around a realist logic of reasoning. Notably power and security dynamics among Iran and other regional actors e. g. Saudi Arabia

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1. This has been mentioned as very important factor in Iran`s decision to stand with the Assad regime in Syria. Interview with J. Haghpanah, assistant professor of International Relations at the Research Institute for Strategic Studies, Tehran, Iran, September 26, 2017. See also General Soleimani`s acknowledgement that the main reason for standing with Syria is because they sided with Iran during its eight year war with Iraq, http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/498024, Accessed on December 13, 2017.

and their respective relationships with the United States and Russia have been described as important factors shaping Iran`s policy towards the Syrian civil war (Lawson, 2014; Carpenter, 2013; Chubin, 2012; Moradi and Shahramnia, 2016; Nejat and Jafari, 2013; Ahmadipour et al., 2019; Mirzaei, 2017). Even some have bluntly described the war in Syria as a proxy war, especially of Iran and Saudi Arabia (Hughes, 2014). This interpretation has given prominence to Iran`s desire to preserve the "axis of resistance" against Israel[1].

The religious interpretation of Iran`s policy relative to the Syrian civil war has highlighted its promotion of the defense of Shi'i shrines (Behravesh, 2017; Kernalli, 2016). Many Iranian leaders have pinpointed the importance of this religious justification for Iran`s presence in Syria, even some has stated that the defense of Shi'i shrines is one of four Iran`s red lines in Syria[2].

Although the geopolitical and religious interpretations of Iran`s policy in the Middle East in general and relative to the Syrian civil war in particular, contain some elements of truth, we argue that they neglect liberal and normative bases of Iran`s foreign policy. In other words, under the dominant Realist framing of developments and events in the Middle East, a liberal analysis of Iran`s foreign policy has been ignored. Therefore, we offer an alternative reading of Iran`s involvement in the Syrian conflict by focusing on Iranian government`s endeavor, especially since President Rouhani came to power in 2013, to depict Iran as a normative power in the global system, particularly in the Middle East.

This normative liberal interpretation of Iran`s involvement in the Syrian conflict can best be understood in reference to the principles of Iran`s foreign policy on one hand and the foreign policy of president Ahmadinejad from

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1. A. Velayati, the former Iran`s foreign minister and current advisor to Ayatollah Khamenei confirms the realistic goals of Iran in Syria. See his statement at: http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/82723349. Accessed November 9, 2017.

2. Hojjatoleslam Ali Saeedi, representative of Iran`s spiritual leader in the IRGC, has stated that Iran has four red lines in Syria including defense of Shi'I shrines. See his remarks at:
 http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/560105, Accessed November 1, 2017. G. Haddad-Aadel, a former Iran`s parliamentarian and a very pivotal member of Iran`s hardliners believes that defense of Shi'I holy shrines is the most important drive for Iran`s presence in the Syrian civil war. See his remarks at: http://www.isna.ir/news/96072715407/, Accessed November 7, 2017.

2005 to 2013, on the other. Iran`s foreign policy principle of preserving its independence and territorial integrity amalgamated with confrontationist behavior of Ahmadinejad portrayed Iran as a rouge state aiming at destabilizing the Middle East (Haji-Yousefi, 2010).

Since coming to power of president Rouhani in 2013, however, the main goal of the Iranian government has been to reverse this trend and bring Iran back to a normal actor status at both global and regional levels. Accordingly, Rouhani`s foreign policy oriented towards moderation by seeking to reduce Iran`s global and regional threats as well achieving economic gains (Rezaei and Torabi, 2013: 146-7). This was mainly sought by starting the negotiations with the P5+1countries to settle the nuclear issue and remove the sanctions. This realistic idealism in in Iran`s foreign policy orientation is also manifested in Iran`s later decision to keep the Iranian Syrian alliance intact.

The uprising in Syria since 2011 which rapidly turned to a civil war was initially perceived in Iran as a main ploy to topple the Assad regime and deprive Iran of its deterring force in the Levant (Akbarzadeh, 2016: 132; Simbar and Ghasemian, 2014)[1]. On the one hand because of crippling international economic sanctions, Iran had limited resources to engage in Syria and on the other, president Rouhani destined himself to bring Iran back to the normal state status. This is why Iran`s main reaction to the beginning phases of the Syrian uprising was uncertain and somehow confusing (Haji-Yousefi: 2012)[2]. Although Iran decided to support the legitimate government in Damascus, it also sympathized with the uprising by advising Assad of initiating reforms. The statement issued by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in late August 2011 included the Syrian government in the list of states were urged to "answer to the demands of its people" (Bakri, 2011). In a meeting with the Turkish Prime Minister, Erdogan, the spiritual leader of Iran reiterated Iran`s position that, "we have always supported reforms in Syria"

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1. Interview with M. R. Dehshiri, associate professor of International Relations, Faculty of International Relations, Iran`s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on January 16, 2018
2. Interview with J. Haghpanah, assistant professor of International Relations at the Research Institute of Strategic Studies, Tehran, Iran, on September 26, 2017. For different conceptions of the developments in the Arab World since 2001 among the Iranian leaders see, Haji-Yousefi (2012).

(Leeder Meets …, 2012). However, Iran`s support of Bashar Al-Assad did not translate to its explicit approval of the Assad regime`s violent crackdown of the uprising. It is reported that Ayatollah Khamenei was disappointed with the way the uprising in Syria was dealt with in its initial phase (Goodarzi, 2013b)[1].

This ambivalence can be traced to Iran`s liberal desire to help sustain the current government in Syria which according to international law was considered the legitimate government of Syria while using its influence to press for reforms. As a result of this liberal pacifist foreign policy, besides providing technical support and expertise as well as advice and equipment to the Syrian regime during the beginning of the uprising in the hope that it would be able to quickly ride out it[2], Iran also supported the existing diplomatic moves led by the UN and the Arab League. In 2012 when the UN and the Arab league appointed Kofi Annan and later his successor Lakhdar Brahimi, as especial envoys to mediate and resolve the Syrian conflict, Iran welcomed the move. Further Iran proposed on December 16, 2012 a six-point peace plan to end the crisis in Syria (Hurriyat Daily News, 2012).

When president Rouhani took office in 2013, the Syrian uprising has already turned into a full-fledged civil war in which the regional and extra-regional actors were involved. Although it might be argued that all foreign policy issues except for the settlement of Iran`s nuclear crisis and the ending of the international sanctions were regarded as distraction by the Rouhani administration, its government was forced to increase Iran`s involvement in Syria. However, contrary to the view that Iran`s policy in the Syrian crisis witnessed no major change since Rouhani`s presidency (Akbarzadeh, 2016: 134), this paper stipulates that the new government adopted a policy of

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1. Interview with an Iranian official who preferred to be anonymous, conducted on Saturday 19, August, 2017; Interview with Davoud. Gharayagh. Zandi, assistant professor of Political Science at Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran on October 31, 2017.
2. General Hamadani, a high-ranking IRGC member, was the first Iranian commander who was missioned to Syria in January, 5, 2012. In his bibliography, *Peygham-e Mahiha* (The Fishes Message), Hamadani asserts that he was sent to Syria in order to help de-escalate the tension between the Assad regime and its opponents. He says that Ayatollah Khamenei believed that the situation in Syria was an American, Israeli, and Saudi Arabian plot against Assad and thus he has to do his best in order to prevent blood-shedding. See G. Babaie, *Peygham-e Mahiha* (The Fishes Message), (2015), (in Persian), Tehran: Twenty Seven, Parts 3 and 4.

adjusting Iran more properly to the factual developments in the Syrian conflict. Therefore, not only Iran almost for the first time officially recognized popular Syrian opposition groups (of course not terrorist groups) but also condemned any use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime or any other actor in the conflict (Moghtader, 2014). In his first year in office, President Rouhani was not as committed to the fate of Bashar Al-Assad as his fellow conservatives[1]. In a press conference held in August 2013, president Rouhani indicated that Iran accept the participation of all Syrian groups besides the government, except for the foreign-backed terrorist ones, in a nationwide settlement process (BBC Monitoring ME, 2013).

It seemed that under Rouhani Iran tried to diversify its means and intensify its diplomatic endeavors besides its heavier military engagement in Syria. Iran increasingly came to view the situation in Syria as a non-zero-sum game, hoping that all sides in the conflict including regional and extra-regional actors would increase diplomatic efforts to settle the conflict[2].

The escalation of the Syrian conflict especially by the substantial presence of foreign Salafi groups including the ISIS since 2014, however, made Iran increase its military involvement in Syria. Notwithstanding, this military strategy mostly had defensive component. Indeed, Iran did not have neither the means nor the desire to intervene militarily in the Syrian internal crisis. Alongside diplomatic endeavors to save Assad, Iran came to an internal consensus to encourage Russia to intervene militarily in Syria. General Soleimani`s visit to Moscow in July 2015 is regarded as having convinced Russian defense and security officials to militarily support the regime in Damascus (Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, 2015; Robyn Dixon, 2020; Bahman, 2017). This, however, was interpreted in Iran as last resort under the international law in order to save the lives of millions of Syrians[3]. The deteriorating situation in the Syrian conflict theater and then the military intervention in Syria by Russia in 2015 paved the ground for Iran to strengthen its involvement. The policy of liberal pacifism changed to a policy of liberal

1. Interview with M.R. Dehshiri, associate professor of International Relations, Faculty of International Relations, Iran`s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on January 16, 2018.
2. Interview with D. G. Zandi, assistant professor of Political Science at Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran on October 31, 2017.
3. Interview with M.R. Dehshiri, associate professor of International Relations, Faculty of International Relations, Iran`s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on January 16, 2018.

interventionism. Notwithstanding, Iran repeatedly urged the international community through the United Nations, to address the Syrian crisis through dialogue and a peaceful political solution.

This military involvement though was perceived as Iran`s realistic way of securing its national material interests in the Syrian conflict, we argue, was mainly aimed at using the opportunity provided by the Russian military intervention to end the civil war. Ayatollah Khamenei`s statement that Iran is not in Syria for expansionist or hegemonic goals but to defend the Syrian people`s resistance against oppression, is the strongest evidence for Iran`s normative foreign policy (Khamenei, October 23, 2019). Therefore, alongside Iran`s liberal intervention in Syria, its main efforts aimed at finding a diplomatic solution to the Syrian crisis. The major guidelines for Iran`s diplomatic moves have been mentioned in Rouhani`s open letter to Putin and Erdogan, the president of Russia and the Turkish Prime Minister respectively, on April 2018: non-military solution to the crisis in Syria, Syria`s future has only be decided by its people and through the ballot boxes, the international community is obliged to offer humanitarian aids to Syria, the military operations have to be continued to uproot the terrorist groups, and the reconstruction of Syria has to be given high priority (President Rouhani`s Letter to Putin and Erdogan, 2018). This, however, did not cause less Iranian presence on the ground. Adjusting to new facts in the Syrian crisis, president Rouhani adopted a double-pronged policy. On the one hand, Iran maintained its presence in Syria with the coordination of its main partners, i.e., Russia and Hizbollah. On the other, Iran intensified its diplomatic efforts for the settlement of the crisis.

Considering the strong opposition by the conservatives including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to any change in Iran`s policy relative to the Syrian crisis, president Rouhani could neither change the tone nor the orientation of Iran`s policy in Syria[1]. Iran`s military presence in Syria along the Russian military involvement was justified as a joint Iran-Russia war on terrorism. At the same time, Iran intensified its diplomatic endeavors to end the crisis in Syria. The military retreat of the opposition rebel groups especially the ISIS at the hand of the Assad regime and its backers including

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[1]. Interview with Roohollah. Talebi Arani, Assistant Professor of International Relations at Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran, on October, 9, 2017.

Russia, Iran and Hizbullah on the ground during 2015-2017 and the agreement by Russia, Turkey and Iran on December 28, 2016 to begin the Astana peace talks in Kazakhstan, brought new hopes for the solution of the 6 year crisis in Syria.

5. Conclusion

Iran`s foreign policy in general, and its involvement in the Syrian civil war in particular, demonstrate calculated pragmatism aimed at maximizing its security along with its revolutionary ideology (including both religious ethos and normative values) (Ramazani, 1992: 394; Shaffer, 2006, Haji-Yousefi, 2018). This paper highlighted a normative reading of Iran`s policy relative to the crisis in Syria during 2011 to 2018. We argued that though the geopolitical as well as religious readings of Iran`s policy in the Syrian conflict contain elements of truth but ignore the normative motivations the Iranian government has had to depict Iran as a normal state especially after president Rouhani came to office in 2013. The 5+1 nuclear agreement with Iran facilitated this depiction and provided opportunity for Iran to strengthen its presence in the Middle East. According to this normative reading, the main priority of Iran`s policy in the region in general, and in the Syrian civil war in particular, is to enhance stability in the region through cooperation with other international actors. Iran`s efforts to combat terrorism including ISIS in Syria and Iraq, to protect the structure of the sovereign state in Syria, and to help international efforts for peace-building in Syria including democratic transition of power as well as economic reconstruction, can be viewed in this context.

6. Acknowledgement

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