A Realistic Approach to Iran's Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East and Its Relation to the Emergence of Sectarian-based Conflict in the Arab Spring Period: Syria and Yemen

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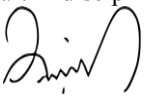
Signed: 
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To My Spiritual Leaders and My Beloved Family

Abstract

This study aims to focus on the exploration of the relationship between Iranian national interests and sectarian discourse, and the reasons for why Iran has used the sectarianism as a tool in its foreign policy to achieve its realist goals in the Middle East during the Arab Spring. Despite the arguments stating that the Islamic motives and idealistic values are the main drivers of Iran's foreign policy towards the Middle East, this dissertation maintains that Iran's foreign policy towards the neighbouring states has mostly based on the realist, self-interested and pragmatic principles. Therefore, it cannot be denied that thanks to its multidimensional, religious-based as well as realist foreign policy strategies towards the countries, which have been affected by the uprisings, Iran has reinforced its influence over the region. Particularly, despite Iranian leaders' Shiite-camouflaged self-interested discourse has increased the sectarian tension in Syria and Yemen during the demonstrations, it has provided with opportunity Iran to mobilise the Shia population in the region. As a result, it could be said that with a realist and self-interested foreign policy which decorated with a sectarian discourse, Iran has realised its ambitions towards the Middle East via supporting the Shiite-based proxy groups in the Arab Spring.

Key words: *Iran, Realist Foreign Policy, Arab Spring, Sectarian Conflicts, Syria, Yemen*

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Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

The role of states' interests, unlike the role of religion, has been often either ignored or underestimated in the studies conducted about Iran's foreign policy. In particular, after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, with the increased role of the sectarian differences such as the Shia and the Sunni, it could be argued that the number of analyses focused on Iran's sectarian expansionist thought throughout the Middle East has increased. At first glance, it could be thought that Iran's foreign policy towards neighbouring countries and the region has been built on the Islamic values that give it an idealistic appearance since the Islamic Revolution. Sarmadi and Badri (2017) argue that the main reason for the idealistic appearance of Iranian foreign policy towards other countries in the region or around the world is that it has developed under the influence of ideological and idealistic leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, who was the leader of the Islamic Revolution took place in Iran in 1979. Khomeini aimed at exporting this Islamic ideology and the Islamic Revolution to the neighbouring countries with which Iran has sectarian bonds in order to reshape the whole region with the Islamic values. He, therefore, aimed to create some channels with Islamist (especially Shiite) groups in neighbouring and regional countries such as Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen to find allies that would adopt the Islamic revolution ideology. These Islamist groups have been consistently backed politically, financially and militarily by Iranian decision makers to strengthen them to fight against secular and authoritarian regimes in their countries (Ehteshami, 2002). Even today, most of the studies and analyses conducted about the Iranian foreign policy have prioritised the religious side of the medallion rather than the realistic side of the state interests and needs; and the general acceptance is that influence of the religious discourse on the Iranian internal and international relations has increased leading to a deep change in the Middle East's political arena.

On the other hand, the foreign policy, which have been followed by Iranian decision-makers from the revolution in 1979 to today, have always prioritised national interests such as national security and sovereignty rather than the Islamic values (Katzman, 2018). If we need to take this assertion a step further, it could be said that they have considered the national security and independence over other interests such as economic and political benefits. From this angle, reflections of Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East and international arena could be put into a realist foreign policy category. Firstly, in terms of geographical location, Maleki (2002)

argues that Iran has been surrounded by the energy-rich Middle Eastern countries and the countries located in central Asia-Caucasus, where their geopolitical importance has increased in the international arena. Iran's foreign policy towards these two regions, as a result, have merely based on the national security and economic interests. The increased prestige of these regions in the international relations and the competition stemmed from the desire of extending their ability to control the energy sources among hegemon powers (the Western actors) have been perceived as a threat to Iran's sovereignty and independence by Iran decision makers (Basaran, 2017). To eliminate this potential threat, Iran has always been cautious when it designed its foreign strategies. Thus, it would not be wrong to claim that the desire of Iran to meet its security needs and establish a self-sufficient economy has led it to make realist foreign policy. Secondly, Iran's Islamic ideology was seen as a threat by neighbouring Sunni states and authoritarian regimes, and most of these states and regimes have not hesitated to display their hostilities against Iran. As for their relations with Iran, they have always developed quite realistic and pragmatic relations. The Iran-Iraq War, for instance, could be seen as a result of the tension increased after the Iranian revolution ideology had been seen as a risk against Sunni and authoritarian regimes by the countries in the region. These pieces of evidence indicate that due to security perception and regional rivalry, Iran's foreign policy has always been based on a realistic perception.

The same rational state attitudes could be analysed in Iran's foreign strategies towards the whole region during the Arab Spring period. Especially, Iran's foreign policy which is followed in Syria and Yemen during the Arab Spring cannot be explained without the realist theory perspective. At the beginning of the Arab Spring, which started in Tunisia in 2010 and spread through the Middle East in a short time to overthrow secular authoritarian regimes. According to the official statements of Iran, these protests were articulations of an Islamic awakening, and they would succeed against the dictators. It could be argued that the first official statements of Iran about the Arab Spring demonstrations had similarities with the Khomeini's and Iran's idealist policies. However, the policies followed in Syria and Yemen by Iranian policy-makers indicate that Iran changed its opinion about the Arab Spring. This change also reflects the realist and pragmatist face of Iran's foreign policy. Although Iran supported the demonstrations to destroy the authoritarian rulers in the region in the beginning of the Arab Spring, its policies differed from country to country (Sadjadpour and Taleblu, 2015). For instance, while Iran effectively supported the Houthis group with which they have religious bonds in Yemen in order to overthrow the authoritarian Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was a secular

ruler (Milani, 2015), and to bring the Shia group to power, the same Iranian policy-makers' approach to the case of Syria was completely different. Iran has not hesitated to show its support actively as its real politics requires, to keep the Bashar Assad government in power, which is an Alevite regime known as a heterodox Shia sect (Khalaji, 2013; Abdo et al., 2014). Based on the abovementioned issues, the main problem of the most contemporary studies is that although Iranian foreign policy is mostly realist and pragmatic, these studies are prioritising the role of Islam, which is an idealistic approach. Therefore, this study will argue that Iranian foreign policy cannot be understood with such a reductionist perspective that prioritises the religion; and at the same time, it will provide some pieces of evidence displays the realistic and pragmatic side of Iran's foreign policy towards its neighbouring countries and international order. By doing so, it will be seen that there is an artificial relation between Iran's foreign policy attitudes and its religious position (Shi'ism).

In this study, basically, I will claim that the Iranian decision-makers have not hesitated to use its sectarian bonds with the other Middle Eastern countries to achieve their national goals. My first argument will be that the overthrow of authoritarian Arab rulers allowed Iran to pursue a more decisive foreign policy in the Middle East, and the Arab Spring helped Iran to strengthen its position in the Middle East. Secondly, I will assert that the instability created by the Arab Spring in the Middle East did not only provide Iran to find a suitable floor for realising its realistic and pragmatic policies in the Middle East, it also increased the sectarian-based conflicts in the region due to Iran's support for the Shia sectarian line in the neighbouring countries. This study is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, the aims of this study will be explained, and the theoretical framework of the study will be discussed. After that, the scope and methodology of the study will be presented, and some previous studies about the topic will be analysed. In the second chapter, the priorities in Iranian foreign policy will be discussed in regard to the structural features of the decision-making process, and then, the importance of Syria and Yemen in Iranian foreign policy will be scrutinised. In the last chapter, I will focus on the reactions of the Islamic Republic of Iran in its foreign policy towards the mobility in the Middle East by analysing sectarian-based conflicts in Syria and Yemen during the Arab Spring. The official statements made by Iran's foreign policymakers such as the Supreme Leader, the heads of the Supreme National Security Council, the high-ranking representatives of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the President and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to state Iran's attitude towards the conflicts occurred in Syria and Yemen will be analysed and discussed. The aim of this debate is to prove that Iranian foreign

policy is realist and pragmatist, while decorated with a religious (Shiite) discourse to achieve its realist goals in the Middle East during the Arab Spring

1.2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the realistic theories that emphasise the restraints dictated on politics by the egoistic nature of humankind and the absence of an international government. In the discipline of International Relation, the realist theory, which is one of the oldest political approaches, has always focused on the competitive and conflictual side of the international system. However, in the idealist theory perspective, which aims to answer how an ideal world can be established in the anarchic international environment (Fernandes, 2016). Absence of an international government does not mean that a peace system and international cooperation cannot be built between states, because, they argue that international institutions and international law system have played a significant role to promote international coherence, and to build a world of peaceful coexistence based on the values and aspirations shared by humans (Fernandes, 2016). Basically, it could be said that idealism mostly suggests the priority of ideals, values, principles and goals over objective realities. Similarly, liberal theory of foreign policy assumes that social forces, individuals (their ideals and ideas) and political organisations have direct effects on the relations between states. It incorporates the modern conceptions of ethical foreign policy, and it tries to highlight how interest, ideas and institution directly affect states' relationship with each other. Liberals believe that liberty, protection of human life, property, and diplomatic solution for conflicts should be the main obligation of the ethical foreign policy (Doyle, 2008). On the other hand, realist theory thinkers severely criticise these idealistic and utopian assumptions. The starting point of the realism is human nature which is defined as inherently egoistic and self-centred, self-interested, power-seeking, selfishness and rationalist (Crawford, 2009). Similarly, Gilpin (1986) argues that the struggle for power among competing groups has always played a central role in the human history, and it is a fundamental and endemic character of human life. The point made by Gilpin (1986) was built on the "*Homo Homini Lupus*"[1] principle which is considered as the nature of

[1] Homo Homini Lupus, man is a wolf to another man, is one of the most well-known terms in Thomas Hobbes' book called the "Epistle Dedicatory of De Cive", and it has often been used by political theorists to define the human being nature in the natural conditions of anarchical and brutish environment (Rossello, 2012).

human life by all realist thinkers. From this perspective, it could be claimed that self-interested human nature is a cause for the transformation of the world into an anarchic place, since there is no law to control usage of power and violence. Therefore, each individual needs to preserve his or her security and existence, and each human has to seek his or her interest in an anarchic society. In this conception of the world, individual interests, selfishness, survival and power-lust have always overcome moral principles.

According to thinkers associated with realist theory, therefore, the role of states in international relations arena is the same as the position of a self-interested human in society. According to Hobbesian school international relations perception, states are the key actors of the conflict-based and anarchic model of international relations system, in which its security and power issues are prioritised by each state, in which morality and ethical rules have a small place (Malcolm, 2003). Another crucial point highlighted by realist thinkers is that in an anarchic international system, due to the absence of formal and informal institutions that rule over this anarchic environment, disorder or chaos, horizontal relation and nominally equal status between sovereign states; each state should guarantee its own security and interests (Mowle, 2003; Grieco, 1988). Due to the anarchic nature of the international system and the competition between states to enhance their material richness and to maximise their security, the cooperation between states is harshly limited in this uncertain environment. Thus, in an international self-help system, a state, as the principal actor in an anarchic environment, has to act in pursuit of its own national and international interests and struggle for guarantying its existence and try to increase its power.

As mentioned above, the anarchic and chaotic structure of international arena and self-interested and power-seeking tendencies of each state leads to the prioritising of national profits and security issues become the main problem in states' foreign policy. Briefly, foreign policy could be defined as the bilateral and multilateral relations between states or actors in the international arena. Likewise, Hill (2003) defines that foreign policy is all the intentional acts of official external relations carried out by a single political community or state for the maximisation of the interests of that state. Idealist theory thinkers assume that there are some universal moral laws and international institutions, which could make some regulations in the anarchic international system to enhance international cooperation tendency between states when a state designs its foreign policy with other states in the international area (Fernandes, 2016). Similarly, constructivism, as another important theory in international relation

discipline, challenges realism on the several significant points such as how the international system works. According to this international relation theory, the relations between states cannot be explained merely as a relation of the national interests because most of these relations have been shaped by actors' social, and cultural identities. Constructivists claim that international relation system is based on social, intellectual, cultural and normative constituents rather than material instruments. Briefly, constructivist thinkers believe that national interests could not completely design foreign policy, and the social identities of policymakers and states have an essential impact on their foreign policy (Flockhart, 2012).

On the other hand, realists severely criticise these idealistic and social values-based assumptions made by idealists and constructivist scholar. They claim that there is no universal law, and international institution that could regulate an anarchic international system because states would not be willing to accept any power to restrict their actions in international relations. According to Hans Morgenthau (1978), a well-known realist thinker, the international politics is a struggle for power between states. Morgenthau's realist approach could be systematised in a few principles. Firstly, to develop realism as a theory of international relations and a practical tool of foreign policy, Morgenthau claims that realism is based on the objective rules that come from unchanging human nature. Namely, moral or any other relatively idealistic law should not lead or control a state's foreign policy (Morgenthau, 1978). Secondly, he believes that a state's foreign policymakers should think and act in terms of interests defined as power, and foreign policy should not build on the different purposes, choices, intellectual and moral features of individual politicians (Ibid). Lastly, he states that a state should not make its foreign policy towards ethics or moral values because there are no universal ethical law. These ethical and moral laws are subjective and changeable traditional rules according to the circumstances of a place and time. Furthermore, ethics and morality could be a reason for the failure of the state's foreign policy goals. Briefly, it could be said that the government or decision-makers, as representative of society, should direct the state's foreign policy to maximise power and national interests. Similarly, another important realist doctrine to explain states' foreign policy tendencies is Machiavellism, which is called by the name of its creator, Niccolo Machiavelli, the adviser on foreign affairs in Florence in 1498, historian, statesman, and philosopher. His book entitled “The Prince” was published in 1532 and accepted as the signpost of realist foreign policy and realpolitik by realists. According to Machiavellian realist foreign policy, maximisation of national interests and power is the main aim of making a foreign policy, and therefore, a state should use all the ways including moral and immoral to achieve its goals. With

justification of using moral and immoral ways to achieve success in foreign policy, Machiavelli did not only reduce the influence of theology on states' politics, but he also legitimised the use of religion as a tool to reach national goals (Maina, 2012). Basically, the pieces of evidence provided above do not only indicate that the approach of realist theory to foreign policy is based on "power" or " interests defined in term of power" centred perspective, but they also display that national interests are more important than all other idealistic values such as ethics and morality.

In the realist theory context, it could be claimed that Iran, as a rational actor, always aims at maximising its interests by using its power and all the instruments it has (Arslan, 2016). To the contrary to those who believe that the post-revolutionary era Iran's foreign policy towards the region has been based on idealist and ideological instruments because of its anti-Western nation-state system, in this study, it will be claimed that Iran has always developed a realist and pragmatist foreign policy to achieve its national goals. Moreover, we believe that Iran's foreign policy has been a product of its national interests, and maximising its national profits in the Middle East. To achieve that, Iran has not hesitated to use its religious influence on the region in its foreign policy. As it is specified in the Machiavelli's assumption, a state should use all the instruments including moral and immoral tools for achieving its goals, by following this strategy, thanks to its religious message in Iran's foreign policy towards the region, Iran has easily created links with some Shiite-based groups in the region. This kind of foreign policy attitude has provided Iran with many opportunities to become a dominant power in the Middle East during the Arab Spring. By using its religious (Shiite) ties with the groups in the region, firstly, Iran has guaranteed its national interests such as national security in the Middle East by dominating its weak neighbours' domestic affairs. Secondly, Iran has disqualified all potential threats to its existence. Lastly, with this realist foreign policy, Iran has reinforced its position in the domination of the Middle East against other competitor countries such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

1.3 Scope

The analysis will concentrate on Iran's realist foreign policy attitudes, which are camouflaged with a sectarian discourse towards the Middle Eastern countries, especially Syria and Yemen during the Arab Spring. With the concept of national interests, we are referring to Iran's priorities such as security, economics and political profits in its foreign policy. Particularly, security issues, survival, and full sovereignty, and also the rivalry in the region

with Saudi Arabia are the main factors that affect Iran's foreign policy. This study, therefore, focuses on the exploration of the relationship between Iranian national interests and sectarian discourse, and the reasons for why Iran has used the sectarianism as a tool in its foreign policy to achieve its realist goals in the Middle East during the Arab Spring. Syria and Yemen have been chosen as the cases because Iran's influence has come to light in these two countries as a result of its effective support towards its allies in these states. The main purpose of this work is to examine Iran's foreign policy, which is shown to be self-interested, power-seeking, pragmatic, and at the same time dressed in a religious (Shiite) discourse, from a realist approach. In so doing, it may also illuminate the real factors for the escalated sectarian tension in the region and especially in Syria and Yemen during the Arab Spring.

1.4 Methodology

This study is meant to bring a depth-understanding of the relation between Iran's foreign policy and sectarianism by analysing sectarian-based conflicts risen in the Middle East during the Arab Spring. By so doing, realist, pragmatic and self-seeking side of Iran's foreign policy towards its neighbours will be highlighted. The time period for this work will be limited to the first four years of Arab Spring. During this time period, the Arab Spring has triggered broad social, political, and economic transformations throughout the Middle East, and as result of an active foreign policy dressed in religious (Shiite) discourse, Iran has found many opportunities to maximise its national interests and extend its influence over the region. All these analyses mentioned above will be discussed in the light of the realist theory. With using the cases study approach, this work primarily adopts qualitative methodology. Although there are several disadvantages like the difficulty of making a generalising conclusion on one or two cases and being inadequate to provide reliable data for scientific generalisation, by preferring to use case study research method, we have aimed at conducting comprehensive research in the topic via the analysis and comparison techniques. Data will be provided by evaluating primary and secondary sources. Journal articles, government documents and academic books will be the primary sources of this study. The majority of the crucial information has been drawn from think tanks, media tools such as Press TV, Mehr News Agency, Fars News Agency, Iranian Student News Agency (ISNA), Al Jazeera, and a range of books and articles by prominent experts in Iran foreign policy and the Middle East studies.

1.5 Previous Studies

The previous studies done in this field have not generally met in a middle ground because of the complexity of the issue. While most of these works have focused on the religious side of Iran's foreign policy, some studies have prioritised the role of national interest in Iran's decision-making process. Those who exaggerates the role of religion (Islamic values or Shiite) in Iran's foreign policy, believe that Iran's foreign policy is a mirror image of its domestic policy, of which Islamic values are the main orientations. The reason for increasing of Iran's influence in the region was considered as an outcome of the organic relation between Iran's foreign policy and its Shia discourse. By saying organic relation, I mean that the Shia discourse is not a political instrument used by Iran's foreign policymakers, but rather it is the main factor that the Iranian identity has been built on. For example, Zandi (2007) states that Iran's foreign policy is completely idealistic and optimistic because it was built on the Islamic values. Furthermore, Zandi also claims that since the revolution took place, Iran has always aimed to export its revolutionary ideology to other Muslim countries by an active and religious-based foreign policy to promote the genuine and pure Islamic principles. Similarly, Ricotta (2016) pointed out the organic relation between Iran's foreign policy and Iran's religious identity by focusing on the Shia elites that lead Iran's foreign policy. According to Ricotta, increasing of the Shia influence in Iran's political sphere has started with the coming of religious elites to the power as a result of the revolution. Therefore, she argued, it might be claimed that the relation between Iran's foreign policy and sectarianism has not been an artificial construct, and the foreign policy led by the Shia clerics found its way into neighbouring countries' domestic issues by assisting with the Shia factors. It might be seen that Zandi and Ricotta's studies have been merely prioritising the effects of the Islamic values on Iran's foreign policy, and have been ignoring the realist and self-interested sides of it. However, there is no doubt to say that all strategies followed in the Middle East by Iranian leaders cannot be explained by such as idealist and constructivist approaches.

In the article of Dehshiri and Majidi, called "Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Revolution Era: A Holistic Approach", they grounded Iran's foreign policy on ideological and non-ideological dynamics such as Islamic values, culture, national interests, geopolitics and economic issues (Dehshiri and Majidi, 2008). According to Dehshiri and Majidi, since 1979, Iran, as a state, was established upon the domination of supreme religious jurisprudent, and therefore, Islamic principles and values have been the main pillars of Iran's foreign policy.

Furthermore, by conducting a foreign policy based on Islamic doctrine, Iran has aimed to achieve unity with other Muslim countries to establish an Islamic world based on solidarity as an alternative order to the current international order based on the principles of nation-state system. It is meant that the micro level identity and analysis known as nation-state level has been replaced with a macro level identity, namely the Islamic Ummah level by Iranian foreign policymakers. From this perspective, they claim that the experience of the last decades of Iran's foreign policy should be interpreted as a factor of the emergence of a new independent course in international relations and seen as a new order without the dominance of imperialist states (Ibid).

Similarly, Barzergar and Divsallar (2017) emphasise that Islamic principles and ideology have played a central role in Iran's foreign policy in the early revolutionary era because decision-makers have believed that Iran had a worldwide responsibility towards Muslims. Despite the fact that prioritising of Islamic values and ideology, which were two significant and necessary principles for Iranian leaders to follow in their policies, and which have been seen as two main pillars of Iran's foreign policy to lead an Islamic awakening throughout the Middle East, these two revolutionary principles have led Iran to isolation from the other states. In other words, this idealistic and ideological stance in foreign policy has not really matched with Iran's national interest and has not helped it to reinforce its influence over the region. Iran's foreign policymakers, therefore, had to shift their idealistic perspective to a more realistic and pragmatic strategy that could answer international realities (Barzegar, and Divsallar, 2017). As a result, Iran’s foreign policy has gained more hybrid appearance that on the one hand, Islamic values and discourse have played a vital role in the relationships with the neighbouring states, on the other hand, national interests have always prioritised rather than Islamic discourse.

On the other hand, other scholars like Chubin (2014) believe that although there is a close relationship between Iran's religious identity and its foreign policy. Iranian foreign policymakers have always developed realist and pragmatist strategies. According to Emad Khalil's study entitled "The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran", Iran's foreign policy after the revolution could be divided into two historical periods. He argued that during the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, Islamic values and revolutionary ideology were predominantly played critical roles in Iran's foreign policy, however, in the second period which has started with the death of Khomeini, rational, pragmatic, self-interested and power-seeking foreign policy has been followed by Iranian

leaders (Khalili, 2016). He claims that even after the neoconservatives like Ahmadinejad came to the power in Iran, the degree of rationality and pragmatism in Iranian foreign policy has not changed. These neoconservatives have aimed to display that strategic national interests' priorities of Iran's foreign policy appear to coincide with ideological ones. Likewise, Chubin (2014) argues that in the Khatami period, the realist and pragmatist policies, which have started in the Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani presidency soon after the death of Khomeini, were at peak. Unlike Khomeini, Khatami was not an idealist leader. In his foreign policy, he preferred the national interests such as economic, political, social and security and aimed to build good relations with neighbouring countries. In spite of the fact that Iranian policies turned back to its radical form with the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran's political strategies did not lose their realistic and pragmatic appearance. For example, while Iran has severely criticised Israel due to its attitudes against the rights of Palestinian Muslims, its foreign policy towards Russia and China that have gasped the rights of Muslims in Chechnya and Xinjiang provinces, respectively, was interestingly quiet (Khalili, 2016). By so doing, although Iran's relations were damaged with Israel and its ally the US, it has developed strong economic and strategic relations with Russia, and China by ignoring the Muslims' rights in those provinces. This foreign policy attitude could be seen as evidence that when Iran's significant strategic and economic relations are at stake, Iran's foreign policy could diverge from the Islamic values.

In addition, Abedin's study entitled "The Domestic Determinants of Iranian Foreign Policy: Challenges to Consensus" is one of the most important works in which lay out how much complexity of formulation and implementation Iranian foreign policy involves. He argues that despite many experts who see the ideology of Iranian revolution and Islamic values as the main motivators of Iran's foreign policy, Iranian policymakers act in a pragmatic and realist way in international relations to achieve national goals and maximise their national interests. The reason why those experts refuse to accept that Iran's foreign policy has been developed from a realist perspective is that they have less concern for analysing the actual policy than focusing on the ideological, cultural and political determinants of Iran's foreign policy. He also claims that ideological arguments used by Iranian leaders as a convenient smokescreen to hide the wild side of their realist and pragmatist foreign policy (Abedin, 2011).

To narrow down the content of the topic, we assert that the influence of the Shia sect in Iran's foreign policy is not the main determinant of the decision-making process; rather, it is used as a political instrument to justify Iran's position and actions in the region. Many experts

argue that Iran's foreign policy towards the Shia factions in the region is based on pragmatic aims and national interests. By following a religious-based foreign policy, Iran has created close relations with these Shia groups, and it has reached the ability to mobilise them according to its realist aims in the Middle East (Barzeger, 2008, Billini, 2018). They also believe that the pre-revolutionary era Iranian foreign policy did not benefit enough from the Shia factor to dominate the region, but, after the revolution succeeded, religious factors became the main instruments in Iran's foreign policy. Likewise, Yolchiev (2016) argues that Iran does not hesitate to use its foreign policy tools such as the military power, culture, religion, social aid, and finance, but all of these political instruments are implemented according to the geopolitical and strategic positions of its Shia allies in the region. For example, while Iran is using religious education as a foreign policy instrument to affect the Shia population in Kuwait, Turkey, and Azerbaijan, its foreign policy towards Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria is quite different and the hard power instruments are playing a central role. The foreign policy developed on the religious discourse, particularly Shiite bonds with the other groups in the region, have provided Iran the opportunity to extend its influence over the region and to strengthen its position against Sunni states with which it is in the rivalry.

The previous studies have focused on the close engagement between Iran's foreign policy and its religious identity, and therefore, most of these works have ignored that its realist approach in foreign policy. Although the Islamic values have played a central role in redesign of Iran after the revolution, the analysis of its foreign policy in the international system and towards its neighbouring countries indicates that Iran has acted as a nation-state which established on the Westphalian principles. Furthermore, it could be argued that even though the religious elites have been in the power in Iranian political arena, all of the strategies made by these decision-makers have been developed on the realist theory assumptions which prioritise security issues, sovereignty, threat perception, and maximising national interests. Hence, in my opinion, there is no organic relation between Iran' foreign policy and its religious values besides using them as a political instrument. Moreover, use of religious bonds to reinforce its position in the region by Iranian political actors could be taken as an indicator for asserting that Iran's foreign policy has been established on the Machiavellian realist angle because this rational attitude is the main argument of Machiavelli who believes that a state should not hesitate to resort any moral and immoral tools to maximise its national interests or to achieve its national goals. Therefore, in this dissertation, I have aimed to analyse Iran's foreign policy in Yemen and Syria during the Arab Spring from the perspective of Machiavellian realist theory.

Chapter 2

2.1 The Priorities of Iranian Foreign Policy

There is no doubt that Iran is one of the most important regional actors in the Middle East. Hence, security priorities, geopolitical construct, the desire of guaranteeing territorial integrity, rivalry with other regional and international powers, intervention of western states into its domestic issues, ethnic diversity, religious differences with its neighbouring countries and economic factors have a deep influence on Iran's foreign policy-making process. Additionally, after the revolution, the increase of the importance of Islamic values and revolutionary ideology in Iranian political arena has made Iran's foreign policy more complex than it ever was. Iran's relations towards other states have been structurally and ideologically redesigned by new religious elites who came to the power as a result of the revolution in 1979. To analyse Iran's foreign policy as a whole, we need a comprehensive look at the structural and general motivators.

2.1.1 The Structure of Iran’s Foreign Policy Decision-Making Process

There are many actors in the decision-making process of Iranian foreign policy. Although it has a democratic appearance because of the institutions like presidency and the ministry of foreign affairs, which are headed by politicians elected by the public, the most important actor in state executive is the Supreme Leader, who is chosen by the Assembly of Experts. According to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Supreme Leader is responsible for the general framework of policies of the country, which includes all aspects of domestic and foreign policy (Jones, 2009). Similarly, Negahban (2017) argues that the Supreme Leader, as the head of state, is the prime actor in Iran's foreign policy and all elected representatives and presidency had to act under the Supreme Leader's sovereignty. In the Article 110 of the 1979 constitution provides with the authority to proclaim war and peace, and to command the military. In other words, today, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, is ruling the country much like a CEO (Beehner, 2006). The Supreme Leader takes its power from the Islamic values and principles, and he supervises all political decisions to check whether they comply with Islamic traditions. Hence, it could be said that the Supreme Leader is the most formal authority in Iran. The second most important actor in Iran's foreign policy decision-

making arena is The Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which is the main institution to coordinate Iran's foreign policy-making process in potential crisis situations, currently headed by Ali Shamkhani, who was appointed by Hassan Rouhani. The SNSC includes top officers from the ministries of foreign affairs, interior, intelligence, army, and the Revolutionary Guards (Ibid). This council provides the president with the opportunity to coordinate foreign policy and security strategies with the Supreme Leader. According to the Article 177, the responsibilities of the SNSC are to preserve Iran's national interests, territorial integrity, and national sovereignty. It is also the institution to determine the convenience of the national security and foreign policy's strategies within the general directions of government policies made by the Supreme Leader. Third important institution in terms of foreign policy of Iran is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It is a paramilitary organisation, and functions directly under the Supreme Leader, and currently headed by Mohammad Ali Jafari (Negahban, 2017). The IRGC, as an ideological guardian, was established in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution to defend the Islamic Republic against all potential internal and external threats, but it could be said that it has expanded its mandate far beyond to be a security institution. Besides its active role in security issues, it is also a significant economic actor in strategic industries and commercial services (Bruno et al., 2013). Since the IRGC was founded, it has developed close relations with the Shiite groups in the region such as Hezbollah in Lebanon through its external branch called the Quds Force, to reinforce Iran's influence in the Middle East. By so doing, it has expanded Iran's operational capacity beyond its boundaries. Therefore, it should be seen as one of the main actors in Iran's foreign policy. Lastly, besides the limitation put forward by the Supreme Leader and other security institutions on the executive branches like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Presidency in Iran's foreign policy decision-making processes, it could be said that there are other important actors as well in implementing the strategies of Iran's foreign policy (Nourbakhsh, 2005). As it could be seen above, prioritisation of national security and elimination of threats has led to the emergence of institutions such as the SNSC and the IRGC in Iran and has granted them a key role in the foreign decision-making process. Moreover, the veto right of these institutions on a decision of the parliament has weakened the status of the Presidency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Iran's foreign policy making arena.

One could argue that the dominant role of the religious leaders and several significant institutions such as the SNSC and the IRGC in Iran's foreign policy decision-making process leads Iran to develop idealistic or ideological strategies towards other states. As known, the universal message of the Islamic revolution towards the whole Muslim countries to advocate

their rights, to support those under pressures and torturing of imperial powers around the world, and the emphasis on anti-arrogance policies, negation of domination, and peaceful coexistence could be the indicators for proving that Iran's foreign policy is based on idealist ambitions. Prioritisation of national interests by Iran's foreign policymakers has increased the debate that Iran should not ignore the Islamic values which are the main principles of the revolution to pursue national goals (Ehteshami, 2002). On the other hand, because of its radical rhetoric and its ideological attitudes, it is thought that Iran's foreign policy is purely based on the Islamic principles; however, it should be emphasised that Iranian diplomacy and foreign affairs are quite realist and pragmatist (Doster, 2012; Ostovar, 2016). Many political science experts on Iran's foreign policy believe that the '*maslahah*' or public interest emphasises observing national interest, and regimes in Iran's foreign policy follow this principle that makes it possible for Iranian foreign policy to adapt to changing conditions (Sinkaya, 2017). Likewise, Bar (2002) argues that while its religious-ideological nature of Iran's foreign policy decision-making structure, the 'm*aslahah*' principle allows for religious compliance in line with national interests. In other words, this principle justifies Iran's foreign policy to be more realist and pragmatist towards the outside world. Therefore, similar to other states' foreign policy, the priorities in Iranian foreign policy could be aligned as follows: the protection and maximisation of national interests; the territorial integrity of the country, developing a durable political structure; supporting national security, contributing to the development of the economy; being influential in the regional and international arena.

2.1.2 The Motivators of Iran's Foreign Policy

Key motivations in Iran's foreign policy towards the Middle East could be divided into three main categories as follows: threat perception, national interests and regional rivalry. It could be argued that because of its geopolitical and resources-rich position, and its political and ideological differences, Iran has always developed its foreign policy decisions under the pressure of several possible threats directly targeting its national existence. The presence of the US and its allies such as Israel in the region and the Arab regimes which see Iran as a monster that desires to overthrow their regimes and dominate the region have always constructed the main threat perception of Iran's foreign policy (Pollack, 2017). Hence, it might be said that like all nations, first and foremost purpose of the Iranian leadership is to guarantee the existence of the Iranian nation, and therefore, they have always aimed to eliminate all potential internal or external threats. Westerners, especially the US and their allies such as Israel in the Middle East,

have always been considered as the dangerous enemies by Iranian leaders (Eisenstadt 2015). The Supreme Leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has repeatedly declared the US as the state which has never accepted political and ideological values obtained in the post-revolution era by Iran, and seeks to overturn Iran's Islamic regime by imposing economic sanctions and by supporting Iran's regional adversaries such as Israel and other Sunni Arab regimes. More importantly, the US military presence in the Persian Gulf region has been perceived by Iranian leaders as a vital threat to Iran's existence (Katzman, 2018). Under this vital threat circumstances, Iran's foreign policy decision-makers have to make realist-based strategies to maintain national existence instead of following idealistic and unobtrusive policies.

Secondly, the ambition of maximising the national interests is another significant motivator of Iran's foreign policy as all nation states. Although, prioritisation of national interests has sometimes contradicted with Iran's ideological identity shaped by Islamic values, the struggle for Iran's national interests has been always justified by the '*maslahah*' principle as mentioned earlier. By highlighting well-developed civilisation and historic independence of Iran, Iranian leaders have believed that Iran should be recognised as the major and dominant power by other states most of which gained their independence in the second half of 20th century in the Middle East (Ibid). Despite the religious rhetoric in the post-revolution era, Iran's foreign policy has been built on the prioritisation of economic, political and other national interests. Many scholars have, therefore, seen the post-revolution Iran's foreign affairs as the maintenance of the pre-revolution era foreign attitudes. For example, the reason for Iranian leaders' support towards Christian-inhabited Armenia rather than Shiite-inhabited Azerbaijan is to minimise the nationalist influence of Azerbaijan on the large Azeri minority in Iran (Monique and Racimora, 2013). Similarly, the relation between Hamas, which is basically known as a Sunni group fighting against Israel in Palestine, and Iran should be interpreted from a realistic perspective. Since the revolution, despite religious differences, Shiite Iranian leaders have explicitly shown their support to Hamas group to strengthen its fight capability against Israel (Muslih, 1999). One might claim that such an attitude of Iran's foreign policy is properly derived from Islamic and ideological identity. However, it might also be thought that support for Hamas by Iran is a political strategy aimed to destroy the influence of Israel in the Middle East. Another common belief is that by backing Hamas, Iran has aimed to legitimate its revolutionary ideology, to reinforce its position and presence in the Sunni world by using the suffer of Palestinian people as a tool (Al-Smadi, 2015). Both of the views highlight that national interests, as a motivator, are how much significant in Iran's foreign policy.

Another noteworthy motivator that has a huge influence on Iran's foreign policy-making process is the regional rivalry. While Iran is a significant regional power, there are other states like Saudi Arabia and Turkey which are in a competition to take a stronger position and lead the region in the Middle East (Katzman, 2018). Basically, two main reasons should be highlighted for the escalation of regional rivalry. First and foremost, the ambition of states like Iran and Saudi Arabia to dominate the whole Middle East as a hegemonic power to maximise its national interests could be seen as the main cause for the regional competition. Another important cause for appearing rivalry in the Middle East is religious differences between sides. Indeed, it could be argued that the first reason mentioned above was based on the second one. Furthermore, due to religious differences, the rivalry in the region has dramatically increased and has turned into sectarian conflicts through the Middle East. Particularly, it is explicitly known that the sides of sectarian-based rivalry are Shiite Iran and the Sunni Saudi Arabia. With the rising of Shiite Iran as an influential factor into the regional and international level, the Sunni Saudi Arabia and other smaller Gulf countries have concerned about the changing power balance in the Middle East, and they have developed the hedging strategies against expansionist Iran's foreign policy actions (Byrne-Diakun, 2016). The cause of the Iran-Saudi Arabia competition is the concern about their national security and the desire of achieving national goals by dominating the region. However, the sectarian discourses used by both Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia to influence the other states with which they share the same religious bonds have fuelled the sectarian-based tension. The sectarian-based conflicts occurring in Yemen, for instance, could be seen as a proxy war directly controlled by Iran and Saudi Arabia (Lackner, 2018). Although the tendency of Iran's foreign policy to be analysed on the axis of sectarian tension makes it difficult to understand, its realist and national interest-centred side of Iran's foreign policy has never properly disappeared. Therefore, it might be thought that the regional rivalry as a motivator between Iran and Saudi Arabia has always pushed Iranian leaders to make realist and pragmatic foreign policy decisions.

2.2 Geopolitical Importance of Syria and Yemen in Iran’s Foreign Policy

Syria and Yemen both have a strategic and crucial position in Iran's foreign policy towards the Middle East. At first glance, it would be thought that the religious bonds, the Shi'ism in particular, have played a key role in mutual relationships; however, these close relations have been based on political interests, as shown below. In the Syria case, since Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979, even though religious discourse and bonds have played a key role

in developing the bilateral relations between Iran and Syria, Iran has always prioritised its national expectations in its foreign policy towards Syria. Iranian leaders have always seen Syria as a satellite state, which has vital importance for protecting Iran's national security, implementing the Shia Crescent plan, and engaging with the balance of power in the region (Uzun and Eksi, 2017). The first goal was to find a reliable ally in the Middle East to decrease the effect of being alienated by the Sunni Arab regimes. Because of the Islamic revolutionary ideology, which was seen as a threat by Sunni Arab regimes, Iran has been left to solidarity by its neighbouring countries. From this angle, Syria, as a state ruling by the Alawite regime, would be a correct choice because they were sharing several common views on an array of crucial foreign-policy issues such as the feeling of Israel threat and the opposition to the military presence of the US in the region (Wastnidge, 2017).

Secondly, it should also be stated that this alliance has a vital importance for Iran's geopolitical and ideological purposes. On the one hand, ideologically, Syrian territory is one of most important foot of the north the '*Shiite Crescent*'[2] plan of Iran, on the other hand, geopolitically, it is a gate in which Iran can militarily support its proxy forces such as Hezbollah and Hamas, which are balancing Israel threat (Azodi, 2017). Iranian leaders believe that the best way to penetrate Lebanon is to develop a close and strong relation with Syria. Lastly, Iran constitutes its defence and security strategies on the principle of deterrence, in which the enemy is welcomed outside the national borders. In this angle, Syria is on the resistance line, which is drawn against the US and Israel threats by Iranian national security institutions (Unal, 2012). When violent uprisings occurred in the Syrian streets against the Assad regimes in the Arab Spring, Mehdi Taeb, a commander of the IRGC intelligence branch and also a close advisor to the Supreme Leader Khamenei said that *"Syria is the 35th province and a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and seeks to take over Syria or (Iran's) Khuzestan, the priority lies in maintaining Syria because if we maintain Syria, we can take back Khuzestan. However, if we lose Syria, we won't be able to hold Tehran,"* (Official Website of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Council of Resistance of Iran., 2013). Similarly, Saeed Jalili, former head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, stated that *"What is happening in Syria is not an internal issue, but a conflict between the axis of resistance and its enemies in the region*

[2] The Shiite Crescent is the term to emphasise the land bridge, which is formed by Iranian leaders, and aims to connect Iran through Iraq to Syria and through Lebanon to the Israel border at Golan Hills (Clawson et al., 2018). It was first used by Jordan's King Abdullah II in 2004. According to Barzegar (2008), Iran has three expectations by realising the Shiite Crescent plan; engaging with the crowd in the region; to establish an ideological tie of sympathetic Shiite government and political factions in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf countries; to reinforce its regional power and role.

and the world. Iran will not tolerate, in any form, the breaking of the axis of resistance, of which Syria is an intrinsic part." (Goodarzi, 2013). In the statements above, Iranian leaders briefly laid out that how much Syria is important for Iran's foreign policy. Therefore, Iran has never ignored to develop a multifaceted relation with Syria, and it has not hesitated to support Syria in international relations.

Likewise, there is no doubt that Iran's foreign policy towards Yemen could not be understood without a geopolitical reading alongside the ideological and religious approaching. It could be claimed that the desire to be a dominant actor in this geostrategic country is the main reason for Iran's historical support to the Houthi group in Yemen. In the post-revolution era, Iran has increased its influence on Houthi group, which belongs the Zaydi branch of Shiism. To widen the Houthi groups' political capability in the government, many Yemeni students, especially Houthis, have been educated in the religious studies in Qum, where is known as the capital of Shiism by Iranian education institutions, and could be defined as the heart of Shiite Muslims world (Zweiri, 2016). Most of these students graduated from Iranian education institutions have played an active role in the establishing Iran's influence in Yemen. From this perspective, it could be assumed that Iran has used its soft power instruments such as education, culture and religion to increase its influence over the Yemen territory. On the other hand, Al-Qadhi (2017) argues that the foreign policy of Iran towards Yemen is not different from other countries such as Iraq, Bahrain, Syria and Lebanon in the region. He also claims that Iran's foreign policy in Yemen has been based on its ambition to expand its authority over the Middle East as a hegemonic power to achieve its national goals. On the contrary to the common thought that the reason for prioritisation of Yemen in Iran's foreign policy is the religious and ideological identity they shared, Iran's national interests and ambitions have played a central role in the mutual relations with Yemen. Economically and politically, there are several reasons for Iran's involvement in Yemen. First and foremost, Yemen has a crucial geopolitical position for Iran to reach Africa continent and to control the Bab Al-Mandeb, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea. The 70 per cent of goods that travel on sea routes pass through the Suez Canal, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Aydintepe and Artokca, 2013). Iran, hence, has aimed to reinforce its position in the world trade by increasing its influence on one of the most important sea trade route by pulling Yemen into its axis. Secondly, Yemen is considered by Iran as a policy of containment of Saudi Arabia. To deploy its influence on the Arabian Peninsula by supporting its proxy allies like Houthis, Iran has aimed to get a strong position in its rivalry with Saudi Arabia. Thirdly, Yemen's strategic position on the Arabian Peninsula takes an

important location in Iran's geopolitical plans, and in the long-term period, by backing Shia-based Houthis, Iran intends to form the southern foot of the *'Shiite Crescent'* in Yemen (Tamer, 2017). By so doing, Iran has aimed to reinforce its position in the region and international arena, and it has also aimed to decrease the competitive capacity of Saudi Arabia. It could be claimed that geopolitically, Yemen has a significant place in Iran's foreign policy, and therefore, Iran did not hesitate to provide financial, political and military support to its ally (Houthis) during the Arab Spring exploded in Yemen.

Chapter 3

3.1 The Arab Spring

It could be claimed that the Arab Spring, which is a term used to emphasise the demonstrations exploded in Tunisia as a result of the self-immolation of a street vendor, Muhammed Bouazizi, in the protest of poor economic conditions and ill-treatment for years, is the most significant event of the first quarter of the 21st century. The protests against economic condition have turned into a form of demonstrations to demand to overthrow the authoritarian Arab regimes. Although there is no consensus between social scientists on the definition of the Arab Spring term, generally, the Arab Spring concept is used to express the popular movements of different scales that have recently come to the fore against the oppressive and authoritarian administrations in the Arab world and to positively define them as a process of democratisation. At the beginning of this demonstrations that spread throughout the Middle East in a short time, most of scholars like Rosiny (2012) has preferred to use several concepts such as the "Arab Spring", the "Arab Awakening" and the "Arab Uprising" for calling the protests occurred against authoritarian regimes in the Arab countries. As a term, the Arab Spring which was first used by political scientist Marc Lynch in Foreign Policy in 2011 (Abusharif, 2014), is quite problematic because of the outcomes of these demonstrations in Yemen, Syria and Egypt. Most of the experts argued that this demonstration period should not be called by the "Spring" word. They claimed that from the beginning of the demonstrations until today, social, economic and political instability has existed in the Middle East; besides millions of people have displaced, thousands of people lost their lives. Despite exploding demonstrations in the hopes to build more democratic systems in the Middle Eastern countries, because of transformation of these protests into a civil war and instability in a short time, it should be defined as the "Arab Winter" (Malmvig and Markus Lassen, 2013).

On the other hand, there is no consensus among social scientists on why these mass demonstrations occurred in the Middle Eastern countries exploded. At the beginning of the Arab Spring, even though there is no ideology behind the demonstrations, all the protests triggered each other due to the same common problems as poor economic conditions, political repression, corruption, unemployed urban youth, unaccountable and ineffective governments (Ibid). Likewise, according to Hardt and Negri (2011), who has focused on the demonstrations

occurred in Tunisia, claimed that the main trigger of the exploded demonstrations is the high unemployment rates and poverty. Similarly, many political scientists believe that although an ideological factor did not trigger the protests, but the lengthening of the Arab Spring and the factions that saw this transition term as an opportunity to gain more power in the political arena, transformed these demonstrations into an ideological and sectarian conflict in many countries like Yemen and Syria. However, others like Henley (2016) argue that even at the beginning of the Arab Spring demonstrations, due to identity and religious diversity of the Middle East, it was received differently by different factions. For instance, while due to their security concerns, the Christians and other small groups remained loyal to dictatorial rulers in many countries like Syria and Egypt, the Arab Spring protests presented new anticipations of political participation for Shi'is in Yemen, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia; and the Sunnis in Syria.

3.2 The Iran's Approach to the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring or "Islamic Awakening", a term preferred by official authorities in Iran, has been intensively discussed in Iran as it has attracted the attention of the whole world. While the Iranian government has not hesitated to show its great pleasure of the developments in Tunisia and Egypt, it expressed various concerns about Libya and Syria. Such expressions led to the allegations that Iran has been playing a role as a provoker by supporting the demonstrations held in the Middle Eastern countries as Iranian leaders thought that the demonstrations took place in the Tunisia, Egypt and other Arab countries to overthrow authoritarian regimes were the continuation of the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979. In his Friday speech at Tehran University on 4 February 2011, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that *"Today's events in North of Africa, Egypt, Tunisia and certain other countries have another sense for the Iranian nation. They have special meaning for the Iranian nation. This is the same as `Islamic Awakening', which is the result of the victory of the big revolution of the Iranian nation."* (Khamenei, 2011). Even more, he claimed that the demonstrations exploded in the other parts of the Islamic world was a result of endeavours and efforts of the Iranian nation (Ibid). Therefore, Iranian foreign policymakers have explicitly and pleasurably shown their support to the demonstrators to continue protests until reaching a victory similar to the Islamic Republic of Iran achieved in 1979. Iranian leaders claimed that with the fall of the dictators, which have made their countries a tool in the hand of the US and other imperialist powers, the US and Israel would lose their allies in the region and the Middle Eastern countries could seize the chance of redesigning the countries according to the Islamic

values. The Supreme Leader blamed the authoritarian regimes such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia for becoming the ally with the US and Israel, and he called the armies of these countries to join the masses against their dictatorial systems. In his speech, he also said: *"Today more than the fleeing Tunisian and Egyptian officials, Israelis and the Zionist enemies are the most worried about these events as they know if Egypt stops being their ally and take its rightful place, it would be a great event in the region"* and therefore *"the Egyptian army should join the masses and will line up against the enemy."* (Khamenei, 2011). It could be claimed that by making the call for the armies to join the masses, Iranian leaders have aimed to accelerate the Arab Spring transition period. Because these transformations in the region were seen as a historic chance for Iranian politicians to develop robust relationships with the new leaders who replace the dictators. Hence, the Supreme Leader urged the Iranian representatives, officials and diplomats, to take responsibility in the supporting of the uprising of the Muslims against tyrants, oppressors and authoritarians in the other part of the Islamic world.

Similarly, other Iranian diplomats did not hide their supportive approachments towards the Arab Spring demonstrators. In his speech in Qum on 8 April 2011, Iran Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani clearly highlighted Iran's support towards the demonstrations in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen streets, and emphasised that *"Iran looks at the issues from the humanitarian point of view,"* (Mehr News Agency, 2011a). He stated that "*the Arab people who are seeking a change in their governments, want to see their legitimate demands acknowledged, and this is the main reason why the Islamic Republic is baking them."* (Ibid). He also added that *"Iran's expression of support for the uprisings in the Arab world has nothing to do with Shiism or Sunnism."* (Ibid). By doing so, he aimed at showing that Iran indiscriminately supported all the protests to gain more political rights against authoritarian regimes.

Expediency Council Chairman Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani also indicated his full support to the protestors flowed to the streets in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen to overthrow the authoritarian regimes. He noted that *"the uprisings in Muslim countries take place as Muslim nations are becoming aware of the developments in the world."*, and furthermore, he added that *"the Egyptian uprising can inspire the people of African and Arab countries to rid themselves of the oppression by the hegemonic powers"* (Mehr News Agency, 2011c). The Rafsanjani hoped that the protests spread over other Arab countries and African countries. Lastly, the approach of the president Ahmadinejad to the Arab Spring demonstrations was not much

different from the other leaders, but he was preferring to underline its supports through the western opposition and the US antagonism. In his statement, he said that *"Despite all the (West's) complicated and satanic plots… the new Middle East will take shape soon without the Zionist regime and the United States. And there will be no room for the arrogant in that Middle East",* and he added that "*You (the U.S.) are an accomplice to crimes committed by the Zionist regime and the oppression which is being inflicted on regional nations. If you indeed want to modify your behaviour and gain nations' trust, first of all, do not interfere in the affairs of (other) countries and regional nations, including Egypt and Tunisia… let them make their own decisions."* Mehr News Agency, 2011b).

One might argue that Iranian leaders' approaches to the Arab Spring have not merely based on the realist and self-interested principles. They have always prioritised the human rights, dignity and humanitarian demands in their speech about the demonstrations. In the statements declared by Iranian leaders, two main approaches to the Arab Spring appeared. First one is that Iranian policymakers alleged that the Arab Spring had been triggered by Iran's Islamic revolution, and therefore, they believed that Iranian revolution could be a role model for the events occurring in the region. Secondly, they thought that overthrowing the US-allied regimes like Hosni Mubarak would weaken the western states' influence in the region. Both of the scenarios could reinforce Iran's position in the regional power order.

However, the discourses used by Iranian leaders to emphasise the Arab Spring was rejected by the activists and the leaders of the movements in the demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt. An activist speaker in the Tahrir Square responded to Khamenei's allegation that the Arab Spring is a continuation of the Iranian revolution and said that *"Egypt will not be another Iran. We will not be governed by a religious dictatorship, as in Iran.",* and accused him of provoking the minority groups like Coptics in the demonstrations to undermine the protests (Kurzman, 2012). Similarly, the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and Ghannoushi, as the leader of the Nahda Islamic movement in Tunisia, clearly stated that they would not accept the revolution style highlighted by Iranian leaders (Mir-Hosseini, 2012). Therefore, it could be claimed that Iranian leaders' target becoming a model country to increase its penetration in the region has failed as a result of the rejection by the leaders of the movements in the protests. Secondly, the transformation of the Arab Spring into a civil war in some countries like Syria, Libya, and Yemen led to the involvement of the western countries into Arab Spring. Increasing of western states' entity in the region has been received as a threat by

Iranian leaders. Briefly, the scenarios mentioned above that have been followed by Iranian leaders at the beginning of the Arab Spring to increase Iran's penetration into the region by supporting the protests held in the Middle Eastern countries have failed. It could be claimed that Iran's policies towards the Arab Spring have been based on realist and pragmatist principles since it exploded but they aimed at achieving their goals by using the Iranian revolution's universal messages such as the unity of Muslim world and western imperialist states opposition.

On the other hand, with the spread of the Arab Spring protests to Syria, Iran's foreign policy towards the period has completely changed. Even more, it could be claimed that strategies and policies followed by Iranian leaders after the Arab Spring demonstrations had started in Syria are the indicators of how much Iran's foreign policy is realist and pragmatic. Although Iranian leaders declared their full support to the protestors revolted against authoritarian and oppressor regimes in Egypt, Yemen, and other Sunni countries, the same political stance has not been taken for Syrian demonstrators. At the beginning of the demonstrations held in Syria to overthrow the authoritarian Assad regime, Iranian leaders and media tools did not break their silence, however, with the increase of the uprisings, they took a stance in the Assad regime's line (Goodarzi, 2013). By this choice, Iranian leaders have shown that the Islamic rhetoric they used since the Islamic revolution in 1979 is a veil covered Iran's realist and self-interested foreign policy towards the region. In other words, from this point on, Machiavellian foreign policy has been revealed. As an articulation of this strategy, Iranian leaders have not hesitated to use all ways including moral and immoral tools to maximise the national interests and power. For instance, while Iranian leaders explicitly highlighted their supports by religious rhetoric toward the demonstrations took place in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, where were ruled by the Sunni authoritarian regimes, they backed the Assad regime to remain in power against the demonstrators. Furthermore, the Supreme Leader Khamenei made a contradictory statement for Bahrain and Syrian cases in terms of the importance of the ratio of ruled and ruler population which has religious differences, and said that *"the issue of Bahrain is not [the issue of] war between Shia and Sunni [Muslims], [but] is the issue of oppressive [and] foolish rule of an arrogant [and] selfish minority on a large majority. A small minority is ruling 70 per cent [or] 80 per cent of the people of Bahrain."* (Khamenei, 2016). However, the majority of Syria population is the Sunni Muslim, and they are ruled by a Shia minority. Interestingly, the Supreme Leader could not continue the same stance, as in the Bahrain case, for the demonstrations in Syria. According to Mir-Hosseini (2012) and Abdo et al. (2014), the outset of the Arab Spring demonstration in Syria was the end of hiding the blatant double

standard in Iran's foreign policy towards the region. From this point of view, it could be argued that the main ambition of Iranian leaders is to prevent negative impact of the Arab Spring on the political dynamics which have helped Iran to increase its regional influence and to maximise its geopolitics interests.

3.3 Sectarian Effects of the Arab Spring

It is not important whether the Arab Spring has arisen due to the ideological or sectarian factors. However, its outcomes that changed all political structure of the region are vitally important to understand the current sectarian conflicts occurring in the Middle East. First and foremost, it might be claimed that the Arab Spring has deeply influenced the regional power balance between the Shiites and the Sunnis (Korolkov, 2016). One might claim that the Saudi Arabia-led Sunni block and its proxy forces in the region still have a hegemonic influence on the Middle East. However, it could be claimed that since the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the Saddam regime, which was a dominant actor in the Sunni Muslims world, by the US, the resistance of the Sunni countries has started to lose its power day by day, while Shiite Iran has elevated as a regional power. Furthermore, the overthrow of the Sunni-based authoritarian regimes, and the emergence of a civil disorder, as a result of the Arab Spring demonstrations, in the regional countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, have deeply affected the regional power balance and relatively left Saudi Arabia alone in its competition with Iran. Most of these countries have explicitly shown concerns against Shiite Iran and its ideological expansionists policies since the Iraq-Iran war between 1980-1988 by supporting the Sunni Saddam regime (Cakmak, 2015). In particular, Egypt was one of the most important Sunni countries in the regional power balance thanks to its organised army. The political turmoil and civil disorder emerged at the beginning of the Arab Spring, however, have caused Egypt lose its regional position. Therefore, it could be argued that the destructive effects of the Arab Spring on the Sunni leaders and the Sunni countries led to deep changes in the regional power balance between Shiite Iran and the Sunni block. Moreover, Iran, as a rational and realist state, has quickly reacted to the deteriorated regional power balance to maximise its national interests. By using its religious identity and discourse, Iranian leaders have aimed to reinforce their relations with its proxy allies in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Bahrain.

Another significant outcome of the Arab Spring was the strengthening of radical Sunni groups, which also legitimised Iran's policies towards the region. With increasing number of

violent conflicts and civil wars in some countries like Syria, Yemen, and Libya have debilitated the political structures of the states; and therefore, radical groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which is an extremist Sunni group, have found political vacuum in the region to emerge. Blossoming of radical Sunni groups in the Shia majority territories like Iraq and quickly spread in Syria pushed Iran to take some military measures to prevent these groups to erode Iran entity in this region. Since sectarian conflicts exploded between the ISIS and the Shia groups, Iran's foreign policy towards the region during the Arab Spring events has undergone an acute transformation. As it is known, all Shi'i communities have been perceived as the natural allies by Iranian leaders to create opportunities to advance Iran's national goals. Therefore, although Iranian leaders have hesitated to develop a Shiism-based discourse to put forward Iran as the protector of the Shia population in the world, with the implementations and strategies followed, it could be said that they actively supported the Shia communities to defend themselves against extremist Sunni groups (Ricotta, 2016). For instance, on his journey in Lebanon, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif indirectly emphasised the radical groups like the ISIS and Al Qaida and said that *"No country will benefit the rise of extremist and violent thoughts. The damage of this type of viewpoint will even include all regional states and their supporters."* (Iranian Student News Agency (ISNA), 2014). By saying *"the extremist and violent thoughts"*, he was emphasising the ISIS and Al Qaida organisations, which adopted the radical Sunni ideology, and which has always resorted to violence to spread their beliefs (Caner, 2014).

On the other hand, the escalation of these radical groups in the Middle East, especially in Iran's neighbouring countries, has provided Iran with the opportunity to extend its military actions and its operational area in the region. Furthermore, the Shiite-dominated regions like Baghdad and Damascus governments have increasingly needed Iran's support in their struggles against the threat posed by the ISIS and other extreme Sunni groups. In particular, the ISIS has been seen as a threat to the Shiite followers by Iran. Hence, Iranian security advisers and intelligence staffs were sent to Iraq and Syria to build a strong defence line against the ISIS's expansion. A high-ranking Iranian security leader, Qassem Soleimani, as the commander of the Quds Forces, played a key role in establishing the Shia-based armed forces called the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), also known Al- Hashd Al- Sha'abi, in order to organise local Shia population to actively fight against the extremist Sunni groups (Duman, 2015). Iran has aimed at creating a permanent military existence in neighbouring countries, and therefore, it financially and militarily supported the Shiites population in the battlefield. It could be argued

that Iranian leaders have always used the escalation of the extremist groups and the necessity to struggle with these groups to justify Iran's military entity in the Middle East since 2014 when the radical organisation started to surface (Fathollah-Nejad, 2018). Indeed, this military support to Shia population led Iran to extend its operational capability in Syria and Iraq, and also the northern branch of the Shiite Crescent, which includes Iraq, Syria and Lebanon territories. From this perspective, it might be thought that Iran's struggle with the radical Sunni groups in the Shia-dominated territories has served its national goal which all Iranian leaders have been aiming at reinforcing Iran's influence in the region. When Iran's president Hassan Rouhani announced victory over the ISIS in October 2017, he said that *"Without Iran ... no fateful step can be taken in Iraq, Syria, North Africa, and the Persian Gulf."* (Peterson, 2017). This statement indicates that how much Iran benefitted from the struggle with the extremist Sunni groups' uprising and its Shia-based sectarian discourse to strengthen its penetration over the Middle East during the Arab Spring.

3.4 The Role of Iran in the Emergence of Sectarian-based Conflicts: Syria and Yemen

The statements and revolutionary messages declared by Iranian leaders at the beginning of the Arab Spring to indicate their supports and incentives towards the demonstrations have not been completely adopted by the activists and the protestors. Many reasons can be posited for why Iranian revolution has not been accepted as a model or guide for the demonstrations, but the most important one is that the political activists such as the leaders of the Muslims Brotherhood in Egypt and Ghannoushi in Tunisia have detected Iran's ambition to extend its influence over the region by using its soft power instruments like Islamic Ideology (Kurzman, 2012). Especially, the double standard and Shiite-based strategies followed by Iranian decision-makers in Yemen and Syria have been the signs that Iranian leaders have aimed at increasing Iran's penetration over the Middle East to achieve their national goals (Abdo et al., 2014). Therefore, it might be thought that Iran's backing policies towards the Shiites in the region have caused the escalation of sectarian tension in Syria and Yemen during the Arab Spring.

3.4.1 Syria

There are some contradictions among political scientists about whether a sectarian conflict led to the Arab Spring in Syria in 2011. According to Osseiran (2018), although the Syrian crisis is not a clear-cut sectarian-based fight, some indicators could be interpreted as

sectarian disputes. For instance, when the Sunni-dominated regions like Daraa province have turned into hotbeds for the protests against the Alawite Assad regime, there were not any serious demonstrations in the Alawite-dominated areas such as Homs and Latakia. This illustrates that the demonstrations erupted in Syria have different causes beyond the protesting against an authoritarian regime. Similarly, Balanche (2018) argues that the Arab Spring in Syria should not be read from a sectarian-based point because the Syrian civil war has not arisen exclusively by sectarian differences. He claims that these demonstrations have been erupted due to the struggle between marginalised communities and wealthy ruling elites. However, other Middle East experts like Hamrah (2014) believe that the events in Syria are a reflection of a historical antagonism between the Shi'a and the Sunni communities. The evidence presented by these experts for proving their assertions is that to increase both their, and their proxy groups' sphere of power, influence, penetration and prestige, the Shi'a and the Sunni leaders developed a discourse on the religious differences in the Syrian conflicts. For example, while Shiite Iran has actively supported the Assad regime, the Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the Gulf States have decisively desired the end of the authoritarian Assad regime.

There is no doubt that after the events had occurred in Syria, the Iranian government's policies supporting the Assad regime have a vast influence on the emergence of sectarian-based conflicts in the Arab Spring. Its support for the Assad regime in Syria contrary to its reaction to the events took place in Egypt and Tunisia could be interpreted as a verification for Iran's perception of the Arab Spring as an opportunity to widen its penetration over the Middle East. From this realist approach towards Syria and the Arab Spring events, to keep the Assad regime in the power, it could be argued that Iran has used its religious discourse to justify its operations and actions in Syria. Hence, when the Arab Spring events continued on Syria's territory, Iranian leaders have always felt the concern that *"If we lose Syria we won't be able to hold Tehran."* (Official Website of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Council of Resistance of Iran., 2013). In realist perspective, it could be claimed that Iran's political, military and financial support to maintain the Assad regime alive in Syrian political arena has caused for increasing sectarian-based conflicts in the Arab Spring.

At the beginning of the Arab Spring in Syria, the Supreme Leader Khamenei and other high-level government leaders have aimed at attracting attention of other Muslim countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States about why the Assad should stay in the power; and therefore, they have tried to present the Assad regimes' struggle against rebels as a defence of

the whole Islam world (Al-Moussawi, 2017). The Supreme Leader Khamenei on his speech in his meeting with Prime Minister of Syria in 2012 said that *"there is no doubt that the United States and the Zionist regime of Israel are very much involved behind-the-scenes in the deplorable and painful events taking place in Syria today"* (Khamenei, 2012). By so doing, he aimed at showing that the uprisings hold in Syria have been backed by imperialist states and their allies in the regions. However, Turkey has decisively opposed to the Assad regime, and Turkish government leaders have always called for the end of the Assad regime; and Saudi Arabia has financed the Sunni groups to continue their protests. By providing substantial support for the Syrian opposition, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have desired to bring the Sunni majority in power in the political arena (Hokayem, (2012).

On the other hand, to mobilise the Shiite population in the geography, Iranian governments have developed a Shiite-based propaganda campaign in the Middle East. As the result of Iranian leaders' calls, which invited the Shia militants to Syria to fight against rebels and to defend the holy sites, many Shiite groups came to the Syria to fight alongside the Assad regime (Smyth, 2013). Another benefit of these statements for Iran is that the Iranian governments have legalised the involvement of the foreign warriors in Syria. According to Kozak (2017), at least 7,000 Iranian fighters including intelligence staffs and the Quds Forces' crews have been deployed to Syria. He also claims that a coalition of around 20,000 foreign Shi'a fighters from Afghanistan, Lebanon and Iraq has led by Iranian high-ranking commanders. Moreover, Iran has worked with many Shi'a groups such as Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iraq's Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq, the Liwa Dhulfiqar, the Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas and the Liwa Fatemiyoun etc. in Syria to operate against the Sunni rebels for maintaining the Assad regime in the power. On the one hand, flowing of the Shi'a fighters into Syria and Iranian Shiite-based strategies have fuelled the sectarian conflicts. On the other hand, leading these Shi'a groups helped Iranian leaders to expand Iran's influence and penetration over the region (Smyth, 2013).

Ultimately, from the outset of the Arab Spring in Syria until today, despite the fact that the Syrian crisis has worsened or become more complicated because of the intervention of foreign states such as the US, Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, the Assad regime has managed to survive thanks to Iran's political, economic and military support. All of these indicators highlight that unlike an idealistic country based on religious and ideological values, Iran, as a nation-state, has developed realist reflexes in its foreign policy towards Syria during the Arab Spring. According to Solomon and Bozorgmehr (2018), Iran has often looked out for an

opportunity to expand its influence over the Middle East by creating networks of religiously and ideologically linked groups. Hence, it could be argued that to guarantee its national and regional interests, Iran did not hesitate to develop a Shiite-based discourse for mobilising the Shi'a population to fight alongside the Bashar Assad's regime against the Sunni groups which upraised to overthrow the Assad regime. Also, Iranian armed forces and intelligence have actively involved in Syria to train and equip the Assad regime's troops and other Shi'a foreign fighters. By so doing, there are many advantages Iran obtained from the deploying its proxy groups in the region. First and foremost, Iran has prevented the shattering of its so-called the axis of resistance. Secondly, the northern branch of the Shi'a Crescent plan has almost completed. Thirdly, the security of the corridor, which starts from Iraq to Lebanon, for providing support for its proxies like Hezbollah has been taken under control (Barzegar, 2011). Lastly, Iran has gained a strong position in the regional rivalry against Saudi-led Sunni block by dominating Syrian territory (Jahner, 2012; Abdo, 2012). Briefly, thanks to its Shiite-based strategies followed in Syria during the Arab Spring, it has reached a position that no crucial step can be taken in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon without Iran.

3.4.2 Yemen

Even though the dynamics and the form of Iran's involvement to Yemen's protests in the Arab Spring were completely different from the Syrian case, the anticipations of Iranian leaders from Yemen's events were the same as their expectations in Syrian conflicts. There are many debates on Iran's role in the Yemen crisis. Those, who have ignored Iran's influence on the escalation of the conflicts, believe that Yemen's civil war was not rose on the sectarian-based differences. Juneau (2016) highlights that on the contrary the allegation of Saudi Arabia, the Houthis is not a proxy power of Iran in Yemen. Furthermore, he also argues that the civil war in Yemen is neither a sectarian conflict nor an international proxy war, and has been driven by local political actors. He also believes that Yemen, where Iran has limited benefits, is not a priority in Iran's foreign policy in compare with Saudi Arabia. Likewise, Milani (2015) and Transfeld (2017) believe that Iran's role should not be exaggerated in the Yemen crisis because Iran has no vital interest in Yemen. The point made by Milani is that by creating a potential threat like expansionist Iran in Yemen, Saudi Arabia has aimed at justifying its military intervention in the crisis to lead establishing a friendly Sunni regime in Yemen after the overthrowing of Saleh regime by the Arab Spring events. Because, from its creation in 1932 to today, Yemen has been considered as a private backyard of Riyadh by Saudi Arabian leaders,

and therefore, Yemen's internal affairs have been continuously influenced by Saudi Arabia. In this angle, it could be claimed that Iran did not have an effective role in the conflicts erupted in Yemen than Saudi Arabia

On the other hand, others argue that from the outset of the Arab Spring until today, Iran has regularly provided military, political, and financial support to the Houthi groups for strengthening their position in Yemen's political sphere by using a Shiite-based sectarian discourse. According to Perteghella (2018), although Yemen has always suffered from the civil conflicts since its independence, after the Arab Spring, the political conflicts have transformed into a sectarian-based civil war as a result of the intervention of the Shiite Iran and the Saudi-led Sunni coalition. The rise of a Shiite-based group in Yemen's political circle would create a chance for Iran to fulfil its national ambitions in Yemen. The priorities of Iranian leaders in their foreign policies towards Yemen could be counted as guaranteeing national security by realising the Shiite Crescent plan, strengthen its position in regional power balance by constraining Saudi Arabia, taking control of international trade route like the Aden Strait and expanding its influence circle over Africa continent. The accomplishing of this target would be possible if Iran finds a loyal proxy ally on the Arabian Peninsula. Therefore, at the beginning of the Arab Spring events for overthrowing the authoritarian Ali Abdullah Saleh regime in Yemen, Iranian leaders have often declared the promotive messages towards the Houthi demonstrators with whom Iran has religious bonds.

At the outset of the Arab Spring events in Yemen, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei stressed his supports towards the uprising against the authoritarian Saleh regime, as he did for the demonstrations in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain. He believed that with these demonstrations all big enemies such as the US and the Zionists would lose their allies that oppress the Muslims in the Middle East (Khamenei, 2011). Likewise, Ali Akbar Velayati, as a senior advisor of the Supreme Leader, said that "Iran supports the rightful struggles of Ansarullah in Yemen and considers this movement as part of the successful Islamic Awakening movements." (Glenn, 2018). The initial statements made by Iranian officials have just emphasised their political and spiritual support to the Houthis; they have completely denied the accusations made by the western and Arab states which believe that Iran is funding the Houthis' military operations in Yemen. However, after the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen to defeat Houthi groups and protect the Sunni government in the political sphere, Iran has changed its strategy and actively backed the Houthi groups. According to Zvi Bar'el, who

is an Israelis academician at the Truman Institute at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and also at the Center for Iranian Studies, Iran has been equipping the Houthi with quite hi-tech weapons including long-range missiles and has been creating an armed force in Yemen similar to its proxy power Hezbollah in Lebanon. He also claimed that Hezbollah fighters have been training the Houthis in battle methods and providing them with arms and fighting alongside them (Bar'el, 2018). One of the deputy commanders of the IRGC Esmail Ghani stated that *"the defenders of Yemen have been trained under the banner of the Islamic Republic, and the enemies cannot deal with Yemeni fighter."* (Stille, 2015). Similarly, a high ranking IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaee praised the Houthis and said that *"the Iran-led 'resistance front' is fighting with the 'invasion front' of Israelis and Saudis in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, and now in Yemen."* (Reisinezhad, 2015). By these statements, the western states' assertion, which the Houthi groups have been backed by Iran, has been confirmed. Therefore, in the light of the evidence mentioned above, it could be argued that Iran has actively supported the Houthi groups in the Yemen crisis. As a result of backing this Shiite groups by Iran, the sectarian conflicts have increased and transformed into a civil war.

Ultimately, by using its sectarian bonds with the Houthis, Iran has aimed at reinforcing its influence over the region by controlling one of the most geostrategic countries on the Arabian Peninsula. From this point, it might be thought that Iran, as a rational state, always prioritises its national interests and goals in its foreign policy towards Yemen. Being involved in the Yemen crisis has provided Iran many opportunities during the Arab Spring period. First and foremost, Iran has had the chance of testing its military and technological capacity against its regional rival Saudi Arabia. Secondly, Iran is targeting a legitimate Yemen government under the leadership of Houthi in the medium term and expects to get involved to the Saudi-Gulf competition by its influence on Yemen. Thirdly, the uprising of the Houthis against authoritarian and secular Saleh regime has been seen by Iranian leaders a chance to realise the south branch of the Shiite Crescent Plan because Yemen has a geostrategic position in the Shia geopolitics. By so doing, Iran has aimed at being a dominant actor, which has influence over important sea trade routes such as the Bab Al-Mandeb, the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea in which the 70 per cent of goods are transported in the Middle East (Tamer, 2017). Therefore, it might be claimed that Iran has realised its self-interested and realist foreign policy in Yemen, by backing the Houthi with which it has religious bonds in order to maximise its national goals towards the region during the Arab Spring events.

3.5 A Brief Evaluation

The pieces of evidence provided above indicate that although it has been ruled by the religious leaders since the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran has never abandoned its realist and self-interested foreign policy towards the Middle East in order to be a regional power. Particularly, the political instability and power vacuum stemmed from the Arab Spring events in the region have been perceived as an opportunity by Iranian leaders to expand Iran's penetration. Iran has taken a stance to advocate the oppressed Muslim societies when the Arab Spring events erupted in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain, however, with increasing of the demonstrations in Syria, Iran has revised its policies, and it has started to support the Assad regime with which Iran has similar sectarian bonds. Iran's supportive stance towards the Arab Spring protests in the Sunni-dominate countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, and the Shiite-dominate countries like Bahrain and Yemen also includes some realists aims. By supporting the demonstrations in Egypt and Tunisia, Iran has aimed at weakening the Sunni axis influence in the Middle East by throwing them in a political instability and demolishing the authoritarian and secular regimes which were loyal allies of the western states. On the other hand, with its support for the Assad regime and the Shia groups in Yemen and Bahrain, Iran has aimed to maintain the Shiites actors into the political sphere. Even though this political approach has led to an increase the sectarian conflicts, by so doing, Iran could reinforce its penetration over the whole region. Consequently, Alireza Zakani, a member of the Iranian member and also an Iranian politician close to the Supreme Leader Khamenei said that "*three Arab capitals [Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad] have already fallen into Iran's hands and belong to the Iranian Islamic Revolution." The Yemeni capital of Sana'a, he added, would be the fourth.*" (Shihabi, 2017). This statement could be an indicator for how much Iran's foreign policy towards the Middle East in the Arab Spring is realist and self-interested. At the same time, using their religious features to reach national goals proves that Iranian leaders have not hesitated to use all instruments they have in its foreign policy.

Conclusion

In this study, I have aimed to analyse the Iranian influence in the Middle East and its relation to the emergence of the sectarian-based conflicts in Syria and Yemen during the Arab Spring period with a realistic approach. Those, who believe that Iran has always developed an Islamic values-based foreign policy attitude, claim that the Islam-centred Iranian political behaviours have built an alternative international system differed from the Westphalia order's

nation-state system defined as an anarchic, power-seeking, self-interested, and pragmatic relations environment by the realist theory's thinkers. On the other hand, others claim that international arena has a chaotic and anarchic structure, and each state should desire to maximise its interests because they believe that each state is a wolf for another one. In the view of realist theory, it could be claimed that despite it has been governed by religious leaders since 1979, Iran, as a realist actor, has always developed realist and self-interested relations with other states. Specifically, the analysing of Iran's foreign policy towards the Middle East in the Arab Spring highlight that Iran did not hesitate to use all moral and immoral tools to achieve its goals. On the one hand, as a result of the Arab Spring demonstrations, the overthrowing of authoritarian Arab rulers allowed Iran to pursue a more certain foreign policy in the Middle East and led Iran to strengthen its position in the region. On the other hand, the instability created by the Arab Spring in the Middle East has increased sectarian-based conflicts in the region due to Iran's support for the Shia sectarian line in the neighbouring countries. For instance, Iranian leaders' double standard approach to the Arab Spring events in Syria and Yemen has not only increased sectarian-based conflicts in the region, but it has also displayed how much Iranian foreign policy is based on the realist principles. While they disclosed their support towards the Shiite-based Houthis upraised against the Saleh regime in Yemen, they did not hesitate to back the authoritarian Assad regime in Syria to protect Iran's interests. As a result of Iran's foreign policy tendency towards dominating the Shiite population to expand its penetration over the region, the sectarian-based conflicts have increased during the Arab Spring. Therefore, it could be argued that although still Iran, with its Islamic discourse, has called itself as the advocator of oppressed Muslims and liberty groups against western imperial powers and the authoritarian regimes in the region, it has always acted as a realist state which looks at maximising its national interests and guarantee its existence.

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