

# REGIONALISM CHALLENGES OF ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN IN WESTERN ASIA

## DESAFIOS DO REGIONALISMO DA REPÚBLICA ISLÂMICA DO IRÃ NA ÁSIA OCIDENTAL

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### Abstract:

*In terms of regionalism, West Asia seems to be an exceptional case of the world's regional situations. That is because the region's countries are predominantly acting in a self-centered manner. Moreover, due to their dependency on foreign countries, they lack the required competency for positive role-playing in the convergence process. But, the Islamic Republic of Iran that is pursuing the transformation to a regional power after the Islamic Revolution, especially after 2001, has paid a greater deal of attention to regionalism. However, there are challenges to Iran's regionalism in western Asia. According to the study findings, regionalism's challenges can be investigated in three levels: national level (opposite attitudes towards regionalism), regional level (divergence of the region's countries and competitiveness of Saudi Arabia) and trans-regional level (the influence of the western liberal-democratic discourse and its conflict with Islamic Republic of Iran's discourse and Shiism phobia and Iran phobia).*

**Keywords:** Regionalism. West Asia. Divergence. Iran Phobia. Liberal-Democratic.

### Resumo:

*Em termos de regionalismo, o oeste da Ásia parece ser um caso excepcional das situações regionais do mundo. Isso ocorre porque os países da região atuam predominantemente de maneira autocentrada. Além disso, devido à dependência de países estrangeiros, eles não possuem a competência necessária para desempenhar papéis positivos no processo de convergência. Mas a República Islâmica do Irã, que está buscando a transformação em uma potência regional após a Revolução Islâmica, especialmente após 2001, prestou mais atenção ao regionalismo. No entanto, existem desafios ao regionalismo do Irã no oeste da Ásia. De acordo com as conclusões do estudo, os desafios do regionalismo podem ser investigados em três níveis: nível nacional (atitudes opostas em relação ao regionalismo), nível regional (divergência dos países da região e competitividade da Arábia Saudita) e nível transregional (influência do liberal ocidental) - discurso democrático e seu conflito com o discurso da República Islâmica do Irã e a fobia xiísta e a fobia iraniana).*

**Palavras-chave:** Regionalismo. Ásia Ocidental. Divergência. Fobia do Irã. Liberal-Democrata.

## **Introduction and Statement of the Problem:**

West Asian region that is still mistakenly and based on the misconceptions of the colonialism era called Middle East (Abedi Gonabad, 2017, p.17) is in a transition to a new political-security order wherein all of the important regional players are competing for the stabilization of their own new roles in the region in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> followed by post-2003 changes, Arabs' uprising in 2010 and 2011 and, finally, the commencement of ISIS's activities in 2014 and its gradual decline at least in its field dimension in Syria and Iraq since 2016.

Iran has multiple interests in Central Asia that shape its foreign policy towards the region, from economic integration to cooperation in fields as diverse as security and culture. Iran has multiple interests in Central Asia that shape its foreign policy towards the region, from economic integration to cooperation in fields as diverse as security and culture (Wastnidge, 2017). As a newly emerging regional and global power, Iran needs corroboration of its regional cooperation and expansion of its exchanges, interaction with nations and the creation of a new coalition in states' level. In other words, meanwhile stabilizing its political-security and economic roles in western Asia, Iran's active presence in regional issues increases its strategic importance on the scene of the international system. Concentration on regionalism and expansion of the interactions within the format of the unifications and political-security, cultural and economic coalitions with the region's nations and states can provide Iran with grounds of making opportunities for playing role and deepening its economic and political-security influence in the region thereby to prevent the contingent dangers of the future time and, in the end, heighten its role-playing power in the level of relations with superpowers, particularly the US (Barzegar, 2009, pp.24-25).

In the twenty-year vision plan, Iran is a developed country holding the first rank in economic, scientific and technological matters at the regional level with an Islamic and revolutionary identity and inspiring the other states in the Islam World and enjoying constructive and effective interaction in the international relations. (Nasri, 2012, p.305).

The Islamic Republic of Iran that, as considered by some analysts, was previously a semi-isolated country in the regional affairs, has now been transformed into one of the main actors in the Middle East. Having accommodated a population of about 80 million individuals, the Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the large, highly populated and influential countries in western Asian region. Such indicators as the national power and geopolitical and ideological position have provided Iran with a prominent role in the regional issues (Talebi and Zakerian, 2015, p.67). Thus, some of the experts of the international relations believe that Iran possesses this potential ability to become the most influential state in the western Asia in the future. For example, Barry Robin realizes Iran as the only power in the Middle East and has written that "no Arabic state can claim such a title" (Abedi Gonabad, 2017, p.253). Interestingly, this is why after an agreement known as joint comprehensive plan of action in 2015, some of the powers competing with Iran like the US and even Europe are seeking for moderating Iran's regional role and influence, especially in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Palestine, and what they call a threat to the interests of their own selves and their allies like Saudi Arabia and Zionist Regime. It has to be noted that the Islamic Republic of Iran's efforts serve a pervasive Islamic identification and convergence of the region's countries parallel to the establishment of security in the region. Thus, the main question in the present study is that "what are the challenges and barriers with which the Islamic Republic of Iran's regionalism is faced?" The current research paper uses a descriptive-analytical method based on library research to explore these hindrances and challenges.

## **Conceptual Framework: Regionalism**

Regionalism is a general concept that encompasses all forms and types of inter-regional collaborations, including between countries, infra-national players or more extended geographical entities like ultra- and infra-national institutions.

Some others define the regionalism as the social construction or regional formation between and amongst states-nations for the attainment of certain interests as well as a product of membership therein. These interests and objectives might be related to the economy, society, politics, and defense-security. Thus, regional cooperation is the focal point of regionalism's concept

that is actualized in various forms. This cooperation, as well, comes about based on the common threats or commitments in regard to certain interests and goals (Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2008, pp.58-59).

Based on some researchers' ideas, regionalism can be a solution for preventing the marginalization of the developing countries in the globalization era. It is very much important to pay attention to this point because, as interpreted by Buzan, some of the world's regions are suffering from negligence to the extent that they are willing to be again colonized by the superpowers (Asgari, 2013, p.54).

Regionalism was begun as a manifestation of the international cooperation after WWII in Europe. An integrated formation of the European states came about since the early years after the world war with the establishment of Benelux Union and, after that, with the founding of the European coal and steel society in a more serious manner in 1952 followed by the formation of an economic society and a common market in Europe in 1957 (Vasegh and Ahmadi, 2014, p.10). This process was gradually expanded to other geographical areas like Latin America and southeastern Asia. Of course, although regionalism is known by some as an alternative or even antithesis to globalization (Karimipour and Kamran, 2002, p.39), it was definitely since the 1980s that a considerable inclination can be seen to the re-interpretation of regionalism (Simbor, 2006, p.20). Before the termination of the bipolar system with the collapse of one of the two poles, the convergence pattern in Europe had drawn the attention from many of the global regions and various regional formations had come about in every corner of the world (Naghizadeh, 2009, p.140).

The history of the regional inclinations' formation signifies, on the one hand, that the political goals have been an effective factor in the creation of them and that the expansion of the regional trade is deemed as a guarantee to peace and security in the region and within national borders, on the other hand. Furthermore, the objective and real needs of the nations and states in a region that stem from the reality of their being situated in the adjacency or vicinity or inside a shared geographical, political, cultural and economic area cause issues, problems and/or interests and, of course, the states are seeking for common profits and benefits by resolving them and cooperating with one another in taking advantage of them. In addition, the establishment of communications in bilateral and/or multilateral levels and creation of mechanisms make the existence of common organizations and structures necessary for these countries. Naturally, if the issue is strengthened by a group of common factors like shared history and culture, elites and decision-makers' volition in a political system and the non-conflicting political tendencies, the collaborations can be transformed within a complementary process to economic and political convergence.

Various levels of convergence are seen within the framework of regionalization or regionalism. Put it another way, regionalism or regional convergence possesses various levels and ranks in such a way that some of the regions are found in the preliminary and primitive stages of regionalism and regionalization whereas some of the other regions are being transformed to a united and single political actor in the international level. Thus, various levels of regionalism can live a symbiotic life together (Dehghani Firoozabadi and Nouri, 2012).

Modern regionalism is defined as a multidimensional form of convergence embracing economic, political, social and cultural aspects. It appears that the enthusiasm for creating regional coherence and identity is of great importance in the modern regionalism. The modern regionalism is conceptualized as a process of sociability and signifying the transition from a given region with relative incongruence towards an increasing congruence in some of the most aspects, the most important of which are culture, security and economic policies and political regimes. Modern regionalism signals the return of politics, i.e. intervention in favor of the determinative values the most fundamental of which are development, security and peace and environmental stability (Hetne, 2012, p.78). Within the framework of the modern regionalism, efforts for the creation of a relationship between peace and regionalism are diverse in terms of a wide view horizon and methodology (Simbor, 2006, p.21). Many of the real issues of the international system are more global. Therefore, modern regionalism can be a strategy for the regional improvement and management of the global matters (Hetne, 2012, p.26).

### **The Status of the Regional Cooperation in Western Asia:**

West Asian region is one of the most unstable parts of the world (Hafezian, 2009, p.61). In regional terms, the Middle East is an exceptional case amongst the regional situations worldwide. The Middle East has always been not coordinated with the history's evolution trends and it has remained immune to the attitudes that have influenced the other parts of the world (Artes, 2000, p.88). Thus, considering this presumption, Middle-Eastern countries are very much retarded in terms of perfection in the convergent trends. The countries' behaviors are classic and determined based on the Westphalia scales. Every country in this set seeks safeguarding of its own national interests and chases the enhancement of its own security. Essentially, the region's countries are still not so much coordinated with the modern conditions of the international community and globalization trend and prefer more to make use of the same classic style in the Westphalian system.

This is while the countries practicing modern methods endeavor to attain convergence so as to not limit themselves to the classic style and accelerate convergence process for they know it well that the prerequisite to the speeding of the convergence process is rehearsal and agreement on the common interests and temporary overlooking of some of the national interests. In this region, two barriers, in contrast to others, are more seriously barring the formation of convergence. One is the inter-state problems or disputes and the other is intrastate confrontations each of which per se needs a lot of energy to be resolved. It is evident that in order to achieve convergence, this set of crises has to be seminally managed and the actualization of the tiniest stages of convergence would be even impossible with the existence of such issues.

Put it differently, the existent barriers to the achievement of regional cooperation should be firstly overcome so that the negative peace can be established; then, plans can be made for a positive peace. Considering the above-mentioned issues, the region lacks the political and security stability required for the creation of powerful structures. The trust levels between many of the region's countries are very low and even hostile in some cases. The role of the transregional actors in this region is very much accentuated; Russia, the US, Europe, and China are each playing a role in this arena and the orbiting countries obey their ideas in the majority of the cases. Hence, the majority of these countries do not have the required ability to play a positive role in the convergence process for two reasons: firstly, for their dependency on the foreign countries and secondly due to their national and internal problems. These countries are predominantly so confused in their internal problems that they will not have much of a vigor left for them to be spent on the regional matters. Now, planning for the regional convergence is very difficult for this set of countries and it seems that they need to deal a little more with the resolving of the aforementioned crises at the national level. Another point that has to be taken into account is the role played by Islam. It can be stated that Islam has been more a factor of separation and divergence than a factor of unification and convergence in this set because the Islamic sects are differently perceived at least from governmental perspectives and, additionally, there is a conflict between the religious and secular attitudes. The majority of the region's political regimes have chosen the secular method for their governments (Simbor, 2009, pp.120-123).

This important consideration has practically made them stand against non-secular and Islamist attitudes. Even if the majority of the region's countries successfully and essentially implement a policy for moderating economy in a macro-level, the only necessary not the sufficient condition for the actualization of it would be regional convergence though such measures are envisioned suitable for the acceptance of convergence-related policies (Artes, 2000, p.97). However, the results of some of the studies have shown that the participation of the social groups, national movements and regional institutions alongside with the governments in regional cooperation in Middle-East can lead to the formation of social capital, collective identity and regionalism's growth in the West Asia (Mahpishanian, 2011, p.42).

It appears that extremism and modern terrorism are the most important events in the west Asian region under the current conditions that pave the way for the development of modern regionalism in this region because the region's countries feel more responsibility for administrating and resolving the disputes (Talebi and Zakerian, 2015, pp.65-66).

In an investigation of the regional crises, it can be noted that they have been more effectively curbed in case that there have been regional collaborations for managing them. Thus, the scope

is more limited in the crises for the controlling and managing of which regional cooperation has been designed and they have been more simply controlled and, in cases that these crises are found having caused regional conflict, the curbing of the crisis could have not been brought about except through the exertion of power via an intervention by an effective foreign power.

In other words, neglecting the resolution of the regional crisis through regionalism causes the presence of foreign forces in the region and this issue can per se widen the scope of the regional crises in a more complicated manner. So, it seems reasonable if it is said that regionalism plays an effective role in controlling and managing regional crisis and negligence of the issue and making efforts for driving a regional force (like Iran) away from the components considered for the curbing and managing of a regional crisis not only makes no contribution to the crisis control but it also adds to the complexity and presence of foreign forces in the region (Musavi, 1996, p.58).

Therefore, in regard to the role played by the Islamic Republic of Iran in West Asia, the following viewpoint by Abrahamian seems notable that "Iran (despite all the pressures, embargos, economic problems and inequalities in income distribution) cannot be considered as a failed state. Unlike many of the countries in the region, Iran is not the product of imperialist plots in the past century" (Abrahamian, 2010, p.237-238).

Moreover, Iran possesses the power and the will required for the corroboration of the regional cooperation and security-building more than any other country in this region and it has also taken measures in line with regional cooperation more than the other countries and the primary objective of increasing Iran's presence in the region's political-security issues is somehow a more expanded definition of its security loops and binding of its security to the region's security, increasing its power of bargaining and, finally, removal of some security threats in the immediate security environment of this country meaning that Iran equals security in the region and insecurity in Iran equals insecurity for the region (Barzegar, 2015, p.74 cited by Talebi and Zakerian, 2015, p.80). But, the identification of the challenges and making efforts for removing these barriers are the prerequisites to the effectiveness of Iran's measures for regionalism and security-building in west Asia. The forthcoming sections explore the challenges encountered by Iran in this regard.

### **Islamic Republic of Iran's Regionalism Challenges in West Asia: Internal and National Challenges:**

After the Islamic Revolution, Iran pursued its transformation to hegemonic power in the region (Moradian, 2008, p.149). However, there are perspectives for and against the position and function of regionalism. Two cases of the internal challenges in regard to Iran's regionalism in West Asia have been introduced below.

### **Attitudes and Notions Opposing Islamic Republic of Iran's Regionalism in West Asia:**

The dominant perspectives in Iran essentially hold that it is essentially useless to concentrate on regionalism, especially in Arabian Middle-East, and that is due to the existence of a different power and political structure as well as the structural sociocultural differences between Iran and the other countries in the region. Thus, this group is of the belief that reinforcing of such a mindset renders, Iran's foreign policy inactive following which the country's regional and global stance would be weakened in the long run (Barzegar, 2009, p.23).

West Asian region consists of regimes that are not willing to cooperate with Iran for three reasons. One is Arabs' nationalism; the second is the Sunnism and, in the meanwhile, secularism exercised by the majority of them and the third one is the extensive presence of the international powers and their interests' conflict with Iran's presence (Jalali and Najafi, 2008, p.97).

Some others believe that the ideological nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its foreign policy goals that have been explicitly stated in its constitution such as defending the rights of all Muslims and helping the wronged individuals' fight for taking back their rights, on the one hand, and the properties of the power structure in the Arab world, on the other hand, render impossible any coalition and cooperation in regional level (Talebi and Zakerian, 2015, p.78). Also three theories can be pointed out in opposing regionalism and convergence practiced by Iran in West Asia:

1. The theory of “coalition impossibility” believes that the power and political structure of Iran alike the ideological nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s system and foreign policy goals, on the one hand, and the nature and properties of the power and political structure in the region and the Arab world, on the other hand, are essentially in such a way that it is practically impossible to set the ground for cooperation and coalition in regional and global level. (Sari’e Al-Qalam, 2005, p.56).
2. “Globalism” theory believes that Iran, in the globalization and development process, needs expansion and improvement in its relationships, in the first place, with the world’s centers of science and wealth generation, i.e. western countries. In this regard, regional coalition and Iran’s entry into the region’s political-security areas and the sensitive Middle-East matters, including the issue of Arabs and Israel, makes Iran’s relationships with the west be characterized
3. by certain complexities that would eventually trouble the development process in Iran.
4. The theory of “social-cultural gap” believes in the existence of wide gaps in the sociocultural and historical structures in Iran’s relations with its neighboring Arab countries that render it difficult to set the ground for any development and continuation of the collaborations in the political-security and economic domains(Niakou’ei and Asgarian, 2015, pp.88-89).

### **Proposition of an Idea for a Powerful Region Instead of Regional Power:**

In opposite to this perspective that supports regionalism, there has come about a serious challenge that, though not denying regionalism, emphasizes the idea of the powerful region in lieu of the regional power. In certain terms, some senior advisors in Ayatollah Hasan Rohani’s government as well as the west-oriented and reformist media claim that moves should be made towards a “powerful region” instead of “regional power” through negotiation with some countries, including Saudi Arabia, based on the mutual interests and refraining from some of the national interests. Since ideas should be based on the historical realities so that they can be put into practical use and also because the presumptions of the notion “strong region” instead of “strong country” are prone to flaws, the existential philosophy of such ideation is also questioned. Regionally, this idea ends on an increase in the interventions by the foreigners and transregional decision-makers and empowerment of the Zionist regime and this would instigate the internal conflicts as a result of which not only the governments are prevented from becoming more efficient but also the international system would be encouraged to practices more intense anarchism (Hanizadeh, 2017).

More interestingly, the idea “powerful region” was previously sought by such countries as Jordan and Egypt and this resulted in the creation of a marginal and secondary role in west Asia’s equations for them.

### **Regional Challenges:**

In the regional level, the most important challenges with which the Islamic Republic of Iran is faced concerning regionalism and convergence can be summarized within two general problems: the first one pertains to the grounds and reasons of the divergence amongst the region’s countries and the second one is pertinent to the intensive competitiveness between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

### **Divergence and Factors Involved in it:**

There are numerous factors that can expose the relations to crisis and pave the way for the divergence amongst them considering the types of goals, abilities and/or the perceptions of the countries with respect to one another. The issue holds true more than anything else in the relations between the neighbors or the countries in a region (Azghandi and Agha Alikhani, 2013, p.227). As for the countries in West Asia, one of the most important factors involved in the divergence can be sought in the incongruence of these

countries in ideological, political, military, economic and cultural terms. Shiite groups in the country members of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council and Kurds from Iraq and Iran play the roles of the incongruent groups. These groups are found performing activities based on the bigotry. The existence of an important opinionated political minority, even with a very low population, changes the ethnic and political experience of participation in a region. These sectarian factors have proved an active presence repeatedly in the unrests and commotions in the region (Brecher and Wilkenfeld, 2004, p.216). Additionally, three essential and current challenges in the face of the region that have caused more divergence amongst the countries and made it difficult to build security therein are the collapse of the authoritative powers in the region's countries and segregation of them into localities under the influence of ethnic and religious groups, especially in Iraq and Syria; expansion of terroristic groups like local Al-Qaida branches and ISIS and inter-regional competition as well as extra-regional actors in Iraq and Syria to all of which appropriate political reactions have to be exhibited (Pandi and Behboudinejad, 2015, p.70).

Nationalism, as well, works in some of these countries in such a way that the regionalism process is hindered. It has to be noted that, despite the things currently being imagined by some individuals, the Islamic Republic of Iran is not looking for nationalism rather it is in the pursue of a form of political Islam. The attention paid by the majority of countries and the nations' public thoughts in the Middle-East towards nationalism during the years after the Islamic Revolution led to the introducing of this revolution and its values by the media dependent on the region's rulers and the west as a revolution seeking for the revitalization of the Persian identity and hegemony in the region (Abedi Gonabad, 2017, p.1703).

### **Saudi Arabia's Extreme Competitiveness:**

Saudi Arabia is an uncommon power. This country is militarily weaker than its regional neighbors and its population, one-fourth of which consisted of foreign laborers, is a lot lower than Egypt, Turkey or Iran. Thus, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy at the regional level is continuous playing of games parallel to power balance between its larger and more powerful neighbors (Hinebush and Ehteshami, 2011, pp.351-352). However, Saudi Arabia is an influential and important and determinant country in the changes of West Asia and the realities related to its power elements and its behavioral consequences like producing of oil for 10 to 12 million barrels a day as well as its religious position due to its being the birth-place of Islam and the existence of sacred Islamic places in this country cannot be ignored in the regional level and even beyond it. The competitions between Iran and Saudi Arabia feature historical and strategic nature and they even date back to before the victory of the Islamic Revolution in such a way that there have constantly been signs of geopolitical and security signs in the regional space of the west Asia between these two countries. In the course of such competitions, especially after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in February 1979, Iran and Saudi Arabia are found in a strategic conflict situation and they mostly try to enhance their positions through strategic balancing and reproducing the cultural regulations and norms. These competitions have somewhat been transformed into a challenge for security-building at the regional level. (Mosallanejad, 2016, pp.1068).

On the other hand, after the Islamic Revolution, Shiism's political and revolutionary ideology rapidly confronted the Wahhabi ideology led by Saudi Arabia in such a way that these two ideologies questioned the legitimacy of one another. The ideologies governing the two countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia along with the interventions by superpowers are considerable as the fundamental factors of "revolutionary Shiite" and "Wahhabi Sunni" that influenced the trend of the two countries' interrelationships (Musavi and Bakhshi Talya'ei, 2012, pp.63-64). Based thereon, the ideological conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be enumerated amongst the most important barriers to the building of security in the region.

In addition, Saudi Arabia has formed a different pattern of Islamism against Iran. Islamism with Salafi approaches is considered as the foundation of Saudi Arabia's strategic mindset for fighting Iran's ideological role. (Mosallanejad, 2016, pp.1070-1071). Supporting such groups as ISIS and Al-Nusra is amongst the markers of Saudi Arabia's geopolitical and ideological strategies in respect to Iran. Besides the aforementioned groups, there is a vast spectrum of promotional forces and

blasphemers that have organized their measures in opposition to Iran's geopolitical strategy in the Middle East. The mechanisms applied by them can be exemplified within the format of such signs as controversy-oriented strategy in Bahrain, instigating fight against Bashar Asad, destabilization of the political structure in Lebanon through terror, bombing and/or committing suicide missions (Pollack, 2015, p.5).

Moreover, Saudi Arabia realizes Iran's achievement of nuclear energy as well as its military capabilities as a threat against itself. Based thereupon, Saudi Arabia's special military purchases are increasing in an ascending trend during the recent years and a lot of budgets have been allocated to them. Annually, Saudi Arabia dedicates between 7% and 12% of its GDP to the purchase of arms (Dehghani Firuzabadi and Nouri, 2012, p.31).

More interestingly, more convergence was witnessed during the negotiations for the joint comprehensive plan of action and after that between some of the regional forces and creation of a new front consisted of Saudi Arabia and Zionist regime for the creation of more divergence and putting more pressure on Iran with the objective of preventing Iran from being transformed into an active regional power. Efforts made by Riyadh for competing with Islamic Republic of Iran were continued to the extent that the reduction in the oil price and the expenditures incurred by Saudi Arabia's army during its military invasion of Yemen and its hegemonic adventures in Syria caused it to face an 87-billion-dollar budget deficit during 2017 (Abedi Gonabad, 2017, p.1074).

Philippe Dauba Pantanacce, a global analyst and strategist, is of the belief that Saudi Arabia has become domineering and intrusive in the Middle East considering the US's getting distant from its traditional role in the region. This has transformed Saudi Arabia to an unreasonable and illogical actor in the Middle East (Turak, 2017). In this period, Saudi Arabia describes the political game between itself and Iran as a win-lose game (Aram, 2016, p.85).

Riyadh finds itself in a cold war against Tehran. From the perspective of Saudi Arabia, the situation appears so that Iran with a population thrice as much that of Saudi Arabia wants to be the superior power in west Asia. This is while the US is exiting the region. Therefore, the revitalization of power balance in the region depends on Saudi Arabia (Koelbl et al, 2016).

Saudi Arabia's concerns about the expansion of the Islamic Republic of Iran's influence and power have instigated the deployment of the countries known as the "moderation axis" against it. Many of the international spectators remind of the hasty trend of the region's changes as a Middle Eastern cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia by means of vicegerent elements. Having adopted intensive anti-Iranian policies during Malek Salman's kingship, Riyadh seeks compensation for past losses. Gradually, Riyadh feels that Tehran is moving towards increasing its influence and creating a single regional power. For the same reason, it attempted to become the main balancer itself.

### **Transregional Challenges:**

In the west Asian region, a larger number of regimes governing the region are entering a network of coalitions and bonds to the west, especially the US, and that is due to the more extended striving of the authoritative political systems with western inclinations (Mosallanejad, 2016, p.1071). And, the intervening measures taken by the superpowers have always been one of the factors giving rise to the expansion of crisis in the security environment of west Asia. This process has had a structural and organized nature during the cold war whereas it has gained a social nature during the years after the cold war (Sadeghi and Ahmadian, 2010, p.231). The following section investigates the transregional challenges with which the Islamic Republic of Iran is confronted parallel to the regionalism in West Asia.

### **Influence of the Western Liberal-Democratic Discourse and its Conflict with the Islamic Republic of Iran's Discourse:**

Liberal democracy is the most common political system in the West. In this type of democracy, freedom is given priority in comparison to all of the political values. Such a pattern of democracy does not impose any ideology and framework for the free will of the individuals and it seriously thinks about the distribution of power and separation of the governmental branches (Labibi, 2008, pp.35-36). Liberal democracy safeguards the meritocratic interests of the elite by allowing them to



set the political agenda and the agenda-building process (Heise and Serfraz Khan, 2018) It is with the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran that the conflict between the American liberal democracy's discourse and the discourse stemming from the Islamic Revolution is witnessed. Liberal democracy's discourse seeks liberalization, accumulation of wealth and governance of a human-centered and completely materialistic pattern and lifestyle in the global breadth (Abedi Gonabad, 2017, p.1705).

As a prominent discourse after WWII, the western US-centered liberal democracy's discourse has been clearly and pervasively looking for infirming hegemony in the thoughts of the general public, elites and rulers of the countries in the west Asian region. After WWII and the formation of a bipolar system, this discourse found itself against the leftism close to the Soviet Union. Of course, the situation was changed with the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran in February 1979, and the gradual decline of socialism during the late 1980s. In this new space, Americans and the West gradually introduce themselves as the enemy of revolutionary Islam. It was the type of Islam that like the model intended by the Islamic Republic of Iran and its leaders challenged the western liberal democracy's requirements and sought issuance of its values in a trans-territorial scale.

A sort of paradigmatic or discourse shift was witnessed in Iran following the victory of the Islamic Revolution. Having taken the place of Pahlavi's system, the Islamic Republic of Iran's system practically posited and represented another behavior and function in its foreign policy level besides its own domestic policies that were completely different from its past counterpart in the west Asian region. Some analysts are of the belief that four indicators and indices, namely anti-imperialist Islamism, unification-oriented Shiism (formation of a unified Islamic nation), independence orientation (seeking for independence) and fighting the order based on the support of the resistance axis against the compromise axis, are enumerated amongst the indicators of the Islamic Republic of Iran's discourse in the region (Abedi Gonbabad et al, 2017, p.105).

Meanwhile, the most important point in the regional dimension of West Asia is that the victory of Islamic Revolution and worries about Iran's presence and influence in the region's countries caused the intensification of the US's fear of the Islamic Republic of Iran's transformation to a strong power and a rival discourse in Middle Eastern region. Resultantly, Washington tested various coping strategies in different governments, including democratic and republican, for controlling and changing the behaviors or overthrowing of the Islamic Republic's system. Of course, a gradual decline of the hegemony of the US as a symbol of liberal democracy is witnessed, especially in economic aspects, at the global level during the recent decades.

### **Shiite Phobia and Iran Phobia:**

The thing that is termed Iran phobia and Shiite phobia has been formed on the grounds of some realities and depicting an inverted image of some others so that, in its light, Iran's acquiring of power becomes so costly that power transfer can become practically impossible. Iran's abilities in traditional and modern areas of power in the regional scale are so that it can be proposed as a potential regional choice. Thus, the first factor adding to the worries about Iran or, in its acute form, instigating Iran phobia is Iran's power (Barzegar and Ghasemi, 2013, p.176).

Shiite-phobia and Iran-phobia point to the emotions originating from disagreement or enmity with Iran's policies, culture, society, economy or the international role. The occurrence of Islamic Revolution in Iran that caused the rotation in the foreign policy of this country as well as the disagreement between the Islamic system in Iran and the objectives of countries like the US and Israel caused these countries to make efforts for preventing Iran's achievement of its revolutionary goals through expanding Iran-phobia and Shiite-Phobia amongst the predominantly Arab countries and Sunnis in the west Asian region and worldwide. Accusations against Iran are largely centered on the issues of nuclear ambitions, sponsoring terrorism and violating the sovereignty of its neighbors (Guha, 2019). The enhancement of the Shiites and Iranians' position in Iraq caused the term "Shiite Crescent" to be again posited after 2003 within the framework of Shiite-Phobia during the recent years. The application of this expression was coincident with the empowerment of Shiites in Iraq's elections after the US's attacks in 2003 to this country. Based thereon, the Shiites' power overtake in Iraq supplemented a crescent of Shiism influence areas that encompassed such countries as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan meaning that Shiites gained a determinant position not only within the format of the Islamic Republic in Iran and within the format of an

advancing and powerful movement in Lebanon but also in Iraq and Syria, as well, that have their own governments. Shiite Crescent features a more objective and geographical aspect. The Shiites' enemies are afraid of the religious-geographical connection of Shiites in the Arabic countries; however, its important human aspects, including its abilities for making role-models and becoming an index, are less frequently discussed (Abedi Gonabad, 2017, p.1107).

The repetition of the Iran-phobia and Shiite-phobia literature is observed regarding Iran's nuclear case and the joint comprehensive plan of action amongst the Arab countries, especially the Persian Gulf region's Arabs. Of course, these were not the last of such measures since, after Donald Trump's winning of the election in 2016, we are now confronted with a treaty wherein goals are to be accomplished that are demanded by an Arabic-Islamic NATO the establishment of which is requested by Saudi Arabia's leaders from the US. As believed by Abd Al-Bari Atwan, such a conspiracy is even seeking war with Iran and Hezbollah and flaming the fire of war against Shiites in the region and the Islam World (Atwan, 2017). In the continuation of this same trend, Trump, the merchant president of the US, selected Saudi Arabia as its first foreign destination and entered a 110-billion-dollar military contract with it. Such agreements were indeed reached for promoting the Shiite-phobic and Iran-phobic images by the assistance of the west, the US and Israel for increasing segregation amongst the Islamic countries and sects and, finally, plundering of the wealth in such countries as Saudi Arabia.

Since the US, Israel and some of the Arab states aimed at counteracting the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran parallel to the controlling of crisis in Syria and Iraq, the aforesaid countries made efforts through positing such a hallucination as Shiite Crescent and launching fight amongst Shiites and Sunnis to neutralize the regional power of Iran and its allies. In other words, anti-Shiite and anti-Iranian identification in the region has been most beneficial to the transregional actors and has provided for the negligence in the west Asian countries of the critical situation of the region, especially in Palestine.

It has to be also taken into consideration that the Islamic Republic of Iran and its intended regional discourse is not looking for converting Sunnis to Shiism and/or promoting Iranian nationalism because transformation of Iran to a regional hegemony and what is called movement towards modern Islamic civilization and fighting the West's despotic policies in the western Asia cannot be attained through resorting to Iranianism and Shiite-oriented attitudes.

## Conclusion:

West Asia forms a security set based on the identity and ethnic engagements and disputes. On the other hand, geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic positions are envisioned as the independent geographical variables that have made Iran appear as an international country and an important player in the region in its immediate periphery. The US leaders have always been looking for overthrowing and/or, at least, weakening and limiting the power of the Islamic Republic in the internal, regional and global environments. However, several great incidents like the downfall of Saddam Hussein, 33-day war between Lebanon's Hezbollah and Israel, Arabs' uprising after 2011 and ISIS and terrorism crises in Iraq and Syria in 2014 as well as Iran's role in curbing these phenomena and supporting its allies in Baghdad and Damascus against them have caused a lot of changes in the region's geopolitics following which Iran's role has become very much accentuated in the equations in this region and in the Middle East's geopolitical vista; the geopolitics of the Islam World and Shiism have become extremely iranized in such a way that it can be claimed that the power balance in the region is somewhat being rotated towards Iran and its allies.

Based thereon, some claim that the Islamic civilization has become a serious rival for the US with Iran's pivotal role. However, the Islamic Republic of Iran is confronted with serious challenges for advancing its goals in west Asia. These challenges were investigated in the present writing in three levels. In domestic level, on the one hand, some disagree to the regionalism in essence and know it useless and, on the other hand, some have posited the idea of "powerful region" so as to come up with another substitute for this strategy. In regional level, the unwillingness of the west Asian region's countries for regional cooperation and convergence was explored and, of course, it was found either stemming from the internal problems of these countries or their competitiveness. In this section, Saudi Arabia's extreme competitiveness with the Islamic Republic of Iran was

pinpointed as one of these barriers. In the transregional level, as well, the main challenge is the US's interventions and the influence of the liberal democratic discourse and prevalence of Shiism Phobia and Iran-phobia.

The following suggestions can be finally made for removing Iran's regionalism challenges: introducing the accomplishments by the resistance axis and the Islamic Republic of Iran's discourse, especially in scientific and military aspects, vast advertisement in Arab World and amongst Sunnis as well as emphasis on the dishonesty of such discourses as the liberal-secular Islam and Wahhabi model of Islam, corroboration of the regional cooperation for curbing the detrimental activities by liberal democratic discourse, increasing the coalitions and unions against the rival discourses and countries by the assistance of some Arab and Sunni countries that are at odds with the existent hegemony of the regional system and making more use of the capacity of such newly emerging powers as China, Russia, Brazil and India in the future equations of the region, staying away from extremist Shiism tendencies the accentuation of which is being currently in progress by some streams inside Iran and inside Shiism, increasing the scientific and intercultural communications between the scientific, academic and touristic centers, especially with Arab countries for reducing the clichés and negative prejudgments, the necessity for metamorphosing the effective status, production, employment, export and, in sum, wealth generation in the regional economy and an array of some others.

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