Raouf, Huda

Article

Iranian quest for regional hegemony: Motivations, strategies and constrains

Review of Economics and Political Science (REPS)

Provided in Cooperation with:
Cairo University, Cairo

Suggested Citation: Raouf, Huda (2019) : Iranian quest for regional hegemony: Motivations, strategies and constrains, Review of Economics and Political Science (REPS), ISSN 2631-3561, Emerald, Bingley, Vol. 4, Iss. 3, pp. 242-256, https://doi.org/10.1108/REPS-02-2019-0017

This Version is available at:
https://hdl.handle.net/10419/316007

Iranian quest for regional hegemony: motivations, strategies and constrains

Huda Raouf
Political Researcher, International Relations, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt

Received 10 February 2019
Revised 3 April 2019
Accepted 23 April 2019

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to study and specify to what extent Iran will succeed in being a regional hegemon. The paper is devoted to clarification of the constitutive elements for regional hegemony. These elements will be related to an actor's perception of its role and regional perception, and how these hegemons exert power, do these work for the public good in the region (provision) and how this regional power projects power and exerts power to influence others' preferences and values without reference to violence (projection). For the Middle East, Iran emerged as a key player in most regional conflicts and it tried to increase its sphere of influence as a regional hegemon. Therefore the question here would be: To what extend could Iran succeed in being a regional hegemon and what are the circumstances that could enhance or constrain this Iranian ambition? So the aim of the paper is to look at three dimensions in general and see whether Iran makes a plausible candidate for regional hegemony. The paper outlines the essential traits of a regional hegemon, and the main elements that constitute a regional hegemony such as perception, provision and projection, and then analyze how Iran follows those elements by analyzing internal perceptions of the Iranian elite about Iranian regional role, regional acceptance, provision of public good, projection and finally impact of the relation with external great powers. Through analyzing its regional strategy in Syria and Iraq since 2003, the year of invasion of Iraq, since ever a political vacuum was created, that enabled Iran to extend its regional influence, after the fall of its historical regional rival, Saddam Hussein baathi regime.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts an analytical framework of analyzing a regional hegemony strategy which is approached by Miriam Prys in her study "Hegemony, domination, detachment: differences in regional powerhood" to study and analyze Iran's regional behavior as one of regional power that is seeking regional hegemony. This analytical framework is one of the most significant analytical tools that interests in the study of the behavior of regional power and identify the constitutive dimensions for regional hegemony such as self-perception, regional perception, provision and power projection.

Findings – The study concludes that there are obstacles completely in front of achieving the Iranian quest to regional hegemony over the Middle East. These are the continuing US involvement in the Middle East and the consequent tense relationship between Iran and the USA. It is most unlikely that Iran will be hegemonic state over the Middle East as long as there are refusal and resistance from other regional states for Iranian regional role; as each of regional powers has tools to contain the influence of the other. The Iranian regional behavior that is sectarianism-based, whether to protect Shiite shrines and holy places or to protect Shiites in the region, such policies deepen the ideological and sectarian conflicts. It also has not provided an attractive cultural model for the peoples of the region.

The author would like to thank Professor Ali Eldean Hilal and Professor Soad Mahmoud for their remarks on the paper.

Review of Economics and Political Science
Vol. 4 No. 3, 2019
pp. 242-256
Emerald Publishing Limited
2631-3561
DOI 10.1108/REPS-02-2019-0017

Research limitations/implications – This paper enhances the deep analysis of the Middle East dynamics through the prospective of regional power. Also, the paper focuses on the analysis of the relation between great power and aspiring regional power and the impact on its strategies.

Practical implications – This study enhances the understanding of how Iranian decision-makers perceive their regional Iranian and the threats. Moreover, the tools that Iran uses its hard power and ideational one to create regional followers and change its allies' normative and value systems to come in line with its national interests. Moreover, the study tries to measure the actual Iranian influence, its weakness and strength so that the Arab states and the West could behave in a fruitful way.

Originality/value – In the final analysis, the paper offers an insight into the regional behavior and the importance of external power in regional dynamics and to what extent the regional hegemon is applicable to Iran.

Keywords Iran, USA, Hegemony, Regional hegemony, Regional power

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Recently, Iran's role has clearly emerged as influencing in the Middle East and it has a significant impact on region affairs. Simultaneously, there has been controversy over the characterization of this role, as well as Iranian interests. As, Iran's political discourse includes visions and perceptions implying claims of regional hegemony, and this hegemony guides and determines the conduct of Iranian foreign policy. Thus, this study seeks to analyze the regional strategy adopted by Iran within the context of its regional aspirations. In this vein, the study examines the tools of Iranian influence within the region and their interaction with state and non- state actors to demonstrate the effectiveness of those tools in achieving the Iranian course of action as a regional hegemony, factors that allow or limit such hegemony and the difference of the effectiveness of these tools when facing various regional actors.

Accordingly, this paper deals with the theoretical study of the regional hegemony concept as a sub-concept of global hegemony to understand Iran's foreign policy deeply. In addition, the study explores the constrains of establishing a regional hegemony by focusing on analyzing the internal and subjective factors of regional power itself and its perception of its role, and then the regional and international responses of this role; that is, the responses of regional neighbors toward such a role, the influence of external powers on both the regional dynamics and the role of the regional hegemonic power.

2. Definition of hegemony

The subject of this study comes from within the theoretical framework concerning the uneven power relations between states in a regional system. IR approaches such as long cycle theory, power transition, hegemonic stability theory and hegemonic war, defined and dealt with hegemony through the way they approached the concept of power. These theories also dealt with the power relations and interactions between the dominant state and the less powerful states in the international system. Several theoretical trends can be distinguished as Realism, recognize power through the control over material capabilities, liberalism focused more on non-material or soft power. New Gramscian focus on normative values to influence preferences of others.

There is no general consensus on the definition or the use of the term because there is no single coherent conceptual framework for it. Hegemony means exercising a form of domination or control owing to the predominance of the capabilities of a state. Gilpin defines it as "a single powerful state controls or dominates the lesser states in the system."

According to David Rapkin, the concept has various denotations, as Oxford Dictionary defines the concept as: "the leadership especially by one country"; the concept means, according to Third New International Webster Dictionary, "preponderant influence or authority, as of a government or state; leadership, dominance" (Craddock, 1995, p. 18). According to the power transition theory, the hegemonic power is:

> [. . .] a satisfied power, especially in the absence of any conflict or challenge to its hegemony. Therefore, the hegemonic state defends and supports the status quo. Such state creates and maintains the international or regional system in order to achieve its interests (Mustafa and Seinger, 2009).

Sandra Destradi defines it as: "a form of exercising power through strategies that are more subtle than those are used by imperialist powers." This means practice pressure to provide material incentives and prevail the values of the hegemonic state to achieve its interests. While Heinrich Triple considered hegemony as "a form of intermediate level of power that extends from mere influencing to achieving domination. It is characterized by highly self-restrain by the hegemonic state and not to resort to the use of coercive power." There are also those who define it as: "a political system, whether regional or global, in which the way of thinking of the hegemonic state prevails without resorting to the use of coercive" (Prys, 2010, p. 484).

Joseph Nye argues that: "The term hegemony is applied to a variety of situations in which one state appears to have considerably more power than others". According to Nay, hegemony is the various situations in which a state has more power than other states (Nye, 1990, pp. 177-192).

The study will adopt the definition of hegemony, which includes the predominance of a state in terms of the aspects of power and influence on others by setting its rules and regulations.

Accordingly, the various definitions of world hegemony show that hegemony comes form the uneven distribution of power resources, which could be economic and military capabilities; however, some scholars emphasize the importance of the normative aspects of hegemony that is not built on the material power only, as it aims to achieve a degree of consent in the system established by the hegemonic state/power. In other words, the secondary states accept the policies of hegemonic state when they believe these aim at achieving public interest of the system not the private hegemonic power interests. Consequently, the hegemonic power policies become global. So hegemony does not mean just fulfill the interests of the states in the system, but also include their acceptance of this system. Therefore, the importance of the other's perception of the hegemonic power illustrates the relation between the practice of power or influence and the legitimacy, and eventually achievement of the interests and benefits of all parties of the hegemonic system.

2.1 Regional hegemony

It should be pointed out that tackling the concept of the regional hegemony pays attention to the study of regions, and regional powers. Therefore, the study will begin defining both the concepts of region and regional powers.

Four trends can be distinguished on the criterion of identifying the regional system. The first trend focuses on the importance of geographical proximity. The second focuses on interdependence and regulation at the regional level, including political and economic interactions. The third, in contrast, stresses the importance of social construction. Regions should not be determined through geographical communication, but through socio-political culture and economic interaction between countries that often exist in the same geographical

region (Acharya, 2007, pp. 629-652). The fourth focuses on security interdependence in identifying regions within the context of "the regional security complex theory." This theory defines the region as "a set of units, whose security operations are generally linked to one another, making it difficult to deal with any security dilemma separately from others".

The distribution of power is a significant factor in determining the structure of the regional system, and the pattern of its interaction. It determines the possibility of a regional power emerging within the system and then the existence of hegemonic power. Most of the studies have agreed that the regional power is part of a geographically defined area and has the will to take responsibility of the regional affairs, through projecting its material and normative power capabilities which are necessary to project its regional power and influence over regional affairs (Flemes, 2010, p. 7).

In some cases, the regional power could follow a strategy that aims at achieving regional hegemony. Then the question would be here: Is the concept of hegemony applicable at the regional level of analysis as it is at the international one? Many studies have described regional hegemony as a form of world hegemony. Other studies have distinguished between regional hegemony and world hegemony. Prys (2010) considered that any definition of hegemony lacks indicators that are applicable for clarifying what makes regional power a regional hegemony, so she identifies constitutive elements from the IR literature dealt with the phenomenon of hegemony. Prys uses an analytical framework for analyzing hegemony based on a constitutive dimension, which are self-perception, perception by others, provision of public goods, and (projection) of power, through tools and relations with lesser states or actors.

These dimensions are necessary conditions for establishing a hegemonic regional system (Prys, 2010, p. 490) taking into account the importance of the impact of the external factor – the external involvement – when analyzing regional systems. The external role has an impact on strategies of regional power; it could enhance its course of action or put limitations on strategies it follows. Holsti has already stressed that the external factor that represents one of the external pressures that may arise, whether from regional neighbors or from outside the regional system. Therefore, the study will rely on the analytical framework presented by Miriam Pyrs to apply it to Iran's regional strategies, to explore if Iran follow similar strategies, and the constitutive elements of regional hegemony and what are the constrains on it.

Perception means that decision-makers in states seeking hegemony have perception and awareness of this leading role. This concept is close to the concepts of the national role and how decision-makers define policies, decisions and rules and the position of their country at the regional and international levels. Put differently, tackling of the political will is essential when analyzing the regional hegemon. This is called the internal/self-perception. As there is also external perception which means, other countries' perception of regional hegemon role, and to what extent they accept or resist such role.

While, the provision of public goods means that the hegemonic power provides all forms of public goods. In this regard, traditional hegemonic theories assume specific public goods such as establishing an open trade system, preserving the exchange rate system, providing loans and coordinating macroeconomic policies. These benefits reflect the biased perception of the role of American hegemony globally that prevailed after the Second World War. In this context, the hegemonic stability theory (HST) has been used in the context of dealing with the role of the hegemonic state in the international system from a functional approach. The theory has appeared in the context of justifying the system of a preponderant state in the international system in term of material capabilities, as well as ensuring the benevolent nature of the concept. It is based on an idea that the world needs a state for controlling the

resources of the material power and setting the rules of free trade among the members of the system. And this would lead to stabilizing the world economic system, as this hegemon would move from egoistic imperative to the creation of a stable environment. Accordingly, the hegemonic state uses its resources for the stability of the system and maintaining system. The efforts of stability link to the provision of public goods to the secondary states in the system. Hence the secondary states should benefit from the advantages of such stability and system created by the hegemonic state, which means the free riders (Prys, 2010, p. 490). The provision of public goods, by the hegemonic state is a deliberate act to enhance its influence in the region (Prys, p. 16).

The types of public or collective goods that are provided by the hegemon would be different when talking at the regional level than the global one. And this would be result of the scale of fields the regional hegemon could fulfill its requirements, or the limited capabilities of the regional hegemon compared with the global one. In this context, the public goods at the regional level could range from providing regional stability and security through enhanced military capacity, or identity, or common mechanism for conflict resolution or infrastructure.

Projection is related more to the relation between the hegemonic power and secondary states in the region. It shows how the regional hegemony exercises power and alters other preferences and values through incentives as well as subtle tools such as socializations and persuasion without resorting to the use of coercion (Prys, p. 496). Here the regional hegemon affects the interests of regional neighbors and tries to bring their interests in line with its private interests. Projection was evaluated with regard to the mechanisms used to affect states. For example, how the regional hegemony could persuade regional neighbors to enter the free trade agreement proposed by the hegemn, or how it mediated during conflict resolutions and negotiations, or has the ability for setting the agenda of regional organizations, intervening in states of conflicts and constructing a similar political system, training of administrative and officers mainly after wars. So, projection demonstrates how the substantive beliefs of lesser states could be changed through the hegemon intervention (Prys, p. 495/494).

So all the aforementioned dimensions are required for constituting regional hegemony; however, before any claims for hegemony, a regional power must be preponderant in terms of material capabilities in advance.

3. Iran's regional role

The study has analyzed Iran's quest to establish regional hegemony by tackling the constitutive elements of regional hegemony as proposed by Miriam Prys, which are, perception, provision of public good and projection of values and interests of the hegemonic power. The paper will address these conditions in the following section.

3.1 Elements of Iran's material power

Iran has comprehensive power that enables it to play an influential regional role, and not full domination. Regarding the military, Iran has succeeded in creating one of the most powerful armies in the region. The Iranian army consists of 523,000 personnel. It has conventional arms such as tanks, ships, submarines, fighter aircrafts and helicopters and it has developed nonconventional military capabilities such as ballistic missiles (Middle East Report, 2018). Economically, Iran has many advantages as a result of its geographical location, which provides it with oil and natural gas reserves. Globally, the Iranian oil market ranks fifth where its productive capacity is four million barrels per day. In addition, Iran's natural gas reserves are estimated at 17.5 per cent of the total gas reserves. Iran's gross domestic

product is estimated at $1.63tn. The share of per-capita GDP is estimated at $20,000 (Itzchakov, 2018). Iran's crude oil production is about 4,068 million barrels a day (2016/2017) to reach the fifth rank globally, while its crude oil exports reached 1,342 million barrels a day (2014) to reach twelfth rank globally. These figures show the difference before and after signing the nuclear agreement and lifting the international sanctions imposed on it. However, on January 1, 2017, Iran's crude oil reserves reached 1,584 billion barrels and ranked the fourth globally. In 2015, Iran's natural gas production was about 1,488 billion cubic meters, ranking the third globally. While natural gas reserves were 335 trillion cubic meters in 2017, ranking second globally (The World Fact Book, 2018).

What is mentioned above could provide material capabilities to enable a certain regional power to claim a leading or hegemonic regional role, but as long as power is relative, so when it comes to other regional power capabilities, it is clear that other regional poles outweigh Iran's capabilities in many aspects. For example, according to estimates by SIPRI Institute, Saudi Arabia's estimated budget of $63.7bn in 2016 has made the kingdom the largest military surplus in the region and the fourth largest arms supplier in the world. Saudi Arabia was one of the top 15 military spenders in 2016. This is in the same time there were structural constraints on Iran's military expenses. But it was obvious that Iran's military spending declined by 7.3 per cent between 2007 and 2016, but rose by 17 per cent between 2015 and 2016 which only enhanced the positive impact of the lifting of international sanctions as the Iranian economy improved and the government had the freedom to increase military spending. UAE was the second largest military spender in the region in 2014. Israel was the 15th largest military spender in the world in 2016, and 18th largest military spender globally.

The figures in Table I show the comparison of Iranian economic capabilities with regional neighbors' economic capabilities.

Iran suffers from major problems in economic indicators that put it at a lower rank among other regional powers: high increase in inflation, youth unemployment, low income from oil due to sanctions imposed on energy sector and low oil prices in the international market. So Iran tried to depend on local manufacturing to overcome its economic problems and sanctions imposed on it since 30 years. Iran also tried to deepen its economic relation with partners outside the region, such as China, India and Russia.

Country	Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (national estimate) 2017	Current account balance (BoP, current US$) 2017	GDP (current US$) 2017	Inflation, consumer prices (annual %) 2017
Iran	12.1	–	4.54	9.9
Egypt	11.7373	−8.9	2.35	29.5
Bahrain	–	−1.6	3.53	1.3
Saudi Arabia	5.89	1.52	6.87	−0.83
Qatar	0.14	6.43	1.67	0.40
Kuwait	–	7.76	1.2	2.17
Oman	–	−1.1	7.26	1.59
Turkey	10.8192	−4.7	8.52	11.14
Israel	4.215	9.97	3.51	0.24
United Arab Emirates	2.463	–	3.83	1.96

Source: Data Bank: World Development Indicators; https://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators#

Table I.

Hence, Iran tried to compensate the status of not being preponderant in material capabilities by depending on soft power tools such as ideology, and intervening in intra-state conflicts. Hence, Iran developed its military capabilities as a result of its security concerns, so it is developed its arsenal of asymmetric weapons and nuclear energy program. Moreover, it used to perform provocative naval activity in the Gulf and threaten every now and then to close the Hurmuz striate; such Iranian behavior was to project and display power in the Gulf and to put pressure on Arab and Gulf states and their alliances.

3.1.1 Perception

3.1.1.1 Internal perception. The sense of regional exceptionalism and distinction in Iran dates back to the beginning of the Safavid state in the sixteenth century (1501-1732). Iran feels distinguished from the Arabs. This made the Iranian elite present the Islamic Republic as a revolutionary model that can be followed. It used to export its model through a value and normative system. It used material and non- material tools to achieve goals such as exporting the revolution to its surrounding neighbors. Also, Iranian perception depends on presenting the image of the responsible toward regional affairs, through ideas such as supporting vulnerable people, resisting global arrogance and colonialism representing in USA and Israel, establishing a global Islamic awakening and representing itself as the center and protector of Shiites minorities in the Middle East (Warnaar, 2013, p. 101). The Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said before that:

> [. . .] the Islamic Republic of Iran has been established on the basis of the principles of promoting religious and spiritual values, enhancing global justice, and fighting against the imperial, colonial powers (Warnaar, 2013, p. 109).

3.1.1.2 Perception of other regional states. The regional response to Iran's regional strategy in the Middle East stems mainly from the nature and attributes of the Middle East as a regional system. The Middle East is characterized by: first, the Middle East region is conflictual not cooperative environment; second, the intensive use of hard power rather than soft power; third, the Middle Eastern states neither cooperate nor employ the regional resources for regional development goals; fourth, the USA penetrates the Middle East as an extra-regional power (Beck, 2014, p. 5). Thus, consequently as an aspiring regional influence, Iran has relied on its military capabilities with regard to the unstable regional environment, the absence of regional cooperation and resistance and the weak relations with its neighbors. In essence, Iran's role and influence in the Middle East region have significantly increased after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime. On the institutional and organizational cooperation side, Iran is not a member of any regional security or economic middle eastern institutions; it is not a member neither in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nor any security arrangements set by the USA in the Gulf region. This regional isolation could be a result of many reasons; first, its penetrative foreign policy in other states' affairs, which led to conflicts and lack of bilateral and multilateral cooperation; second, the different perceptions of threats and differing interests. However, at different times, Iran also sought to rebuild its relation with the GCC countries that did not trust Iran's regional interest.

There are many indications of regional resistance to Iranian increasing influence. The most significant indicator of the regional refuse to Iranian regional behavior is that Arab countries and Iran have different views on the conflicts of the region. Most conflicts of the region after 2011 were on geopolitical, sectarian and ethnic bases; this led to regional polarization between regional and international key players. As for its regional strategy toward the regional conflicts, Iran has sided with Assad's regime and Russia in the Syrian war, but it has fought alongside the US-led forces in Iraq against ISIS. While the Arab Gulf

countries took a different stance in Syria and supported other military groups, Iran did not engage in any action in Iraq. Iran has given priority to its national interests on regional security and stability. This was oblivious in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Another indication of regional resistance is the increasing regional fear from Shiite groups, and the spread of the Shiite Crescent. Since the emergence of the Islamic Republic political system, Iran claimed that it is a protector and representative of Shiite in the region and the world. Concerns have been increased with the rise of Shiites in the period from 2003 until now. Furthermore, the Gulf countries were concerned about the nuclear agreement. Iran has signed agreement with (p5 + 1) on its nuclear program, raising concerns of Saudi Arabia and Israel. Although tension prevailed in the region owing to the development of Iranian nuclear capabilities, reaching agreement with the West was another factor of regional tension. The regional situation about the agreement differed; it ranged from welcoming and rejection, according to the bilateral relation with Iran, as The United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait and Oman welcomed the agreement, whereas Saudi Arabia supported the agreement after receiving assurances from US President Barack Obama. The Gulf countries and Israel show concerns with Iran's announcement of its nuclear program. Israel considered the Iranian nuclear program as an existential threat, and it threatened several times to bomb Iranian nuclear facilities. Israel's extreme stance against Iran was aimed to impose sanctions and deepen its isolation. Therefore, relations between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President Barack Obama were tense. Israel has rejected the Geneva Preparatory Agreement between Iran and the West in 2013 and the Framework Agreement of April 2015, and then the final agreement too. Netanyahu believes that the agreement has negative implications on Israel's security and that it allows Iran to have a nuclear arsenal. Thus, Israel launched anti-agreement propaganda campaigns. Netanyahu also announced that he will persuade two-thirds of the US Senate to reject the agreement (The Arab Center for Research and Policies Studies, Policies Analysis Unit, 2015).

3.1.2 Provision of public good. The fall of Mosul at the hands of ISIS was a strategic opportunity for Iran, where Iran's role in Iraq shifted from being hidden to a very clear one in fighting against ISIS in Iraq. Arguably, Iran's influence in Iraq before 2011 is more different than that after 2011. Iran employed the presence of ISIS in Iraq and its role there to enhance its international and regional image as a provider of security in Iraq and that it fights a regional threat. This would help reinforce its international position and importance as a key player in the region's affaires in front of the international powers. That is to say, fighting against ISIS led to the accepted presence and international recognition of Iran's role. Some see Iran's presence in Iraq with its tense relations with the USA, would provide Iran with significant influence in dealing with Western powers (Takeyh, 2008, pp. 13-30).

Therefore, Iran acts as a provider of regional security and stability. For example, during the war against ISIS, Iran provided the Iraqi Government and the Peshmerga forces of the Kurdistan territory with advisers from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards corps – the Quds Force, and it provided surveillance weapons, drones, arms and other direct military assistance as well. Owing to the weak capabilities of the Iraqi army, the Iraqi Government relied on Shiite militias affiliated to Iran to fight ISIS in Iraqi cities. Iran supports three Shiite militias, which became the most powerful military forces in Iraq since the collapse of the national army (Katzman, 2016, p. 32). This would allow Iran to play a key role in Iraq as a provider of stability and security. Consequently, it gets regional and international gains, and it appears to be the last resort and the regional protector against terrorism, especially in light of the US and the Sunni Arab countries' slow response to face the danger of ISIS in Iraq. Thus, Iran gives impression that it is fighting terrorism which is a priority on the global security agenda.

3.1.3 Power projection through values and ideas. Iran is trying to show power through projection of norms and values. For example, its vision on the Gulf security issue focuses on establishing a Gulf security arrangements depending on participation of all countries that lie on the Gulf coastline and excluding any presence of foreign forces from any security arrangements in the Gulf region. As Admiral Ali Shamkhani (1979- 2005), Iranian Defense Minister, expressed Iran's vision on Gulf security:

> The regional context requires specific security arrangements and a new defense system, which need the deep military cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran has also sought to convince the Gulf countries to establish a broader regional defense organization. Iranian President Khatami insisted on expanding relations with the GCC countries and considered this issue as a top priority on Iran's foreign policy agenda.

In this context, a security agreement has been signed between Iran and Saudi Arabia on 17 April, 2001, which aims to combat terrorism, organized crime and drug trafficking (Lotian, 2018).

Recently, Mohamed Javad Zarif, Iranian Foreign Minister, expressed Iran's perceptions for the Gulf Security:

> The Gulf Security should encompass three points: First, the need to build a trust building measures and cooperation in this strategic region; second, the necessity of excluding mistrust, tensions and crises in the future, and the limitation of the regional security arrangements to the eight Gulf countries. Zarif has stressed that Iran will seek to provide further security in the region to achieve the interests of all countries. Iran has a great understanding of the diverse interests of the region; third, Iran has considered that the foreign actors are the source of instability in the region due to the different of interests of the foreign powers (Zarif, 2018).

In Iraq, since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, Iran has strengthened its political influence through two mechanisms. The first is to shape and control the political process in Iraq. The second is to support militias and Shiite groups. Iran main interests in Iraq are to be sure about a central unified Iraqi Government and not to allow the emergence of a strong rival Iraq, such that it can pose a threat to Iran similar to what happened in the 1980s. Therefore, Iran has relied on the actors that fled to Iran during the era of Saddam Hussein. These parties have returned to Iraq after the fall of Saddam's regime, making their relations with Iran institutional, ideological and emotional. These parties are the main foundation stones of the Iranian role in Iraq, whether through the political process or the formation of militias and Shiite armed groups. The Supreme Council for the Iraqi Revolution and the Islamic Call (El-Dawa) party are examples of these entities.

To achieve its interests and deepen its influence, Iran adopted specific tools to confront any potential threats. For example, it has supported its Shiite allies in Iraq and strengthened its relationship with Iraqi Kurds. In same time, Iran depended deeply to achieve its strategic interests on soft power such as ideology and trade. In fact, Iran was able to employ the ideology toward Iraq. This dimension includes also Iran's attempts to compete with the religious schools (Hawza) in Najaf and to promote their rivalry in Qom, and increase the flow of Iranians and Iraqis to the holy sites. In fact, Iran has sought to enhance the affiliation and loyalty of Iraq's Shiite to Iran and adopted religious policies to attract Iraqi's Shiite away from clerics in Najaf.

In Syria, it could be argued that the important reason in deepen the relationship between Syria and Iran was Syria's bias toward Iran during the Iranian–Iraqi war. However, Syrian–Iranian relations in the past 30 years were not free of tension and competition. There were controversial issues between them, but both sides soon managed to contain them. As for the role of Iran in the Syrian war, Iran has intervened completely in the Syrian civil war since its

inception and has supported the regime of Bashar Al-Assad strongly. In essence, Syria is the cornerstone of Iran's regional strategy, which aimed at ensuring the axis of resistance in the region in the face of its regional neighbors and international powers. Hence, Iran has sought to preserve its interests in Syria by keeping Al-Assad regime in power. This is due to the fact that Syria is Iran's strategic ally, and Iran's cooperation with Syria is necessary to arm and protect Iran's regional allies like Hezbollah, not to mention the fact that Iran fears that any Sunni groups, which are hostile to Iran, will come to power after Al-Assad regime. Therefore, Iran has provided the Syrian regime with the military and field support. When Al-Assad's force began to lose its grip on some Syria's lands, Iran intensified its operations in an attempt to restore the control of the state over these lands. When Al-Assad began losing its grip on Eastern and Northern Syria in 2012, Iranian operations continued to strengthen the grip of the Syrian regime geographically in Central and Southern Syria (Fulton *et al.*, 2013, p. 9). Iran has directly provided Syria with credit lines, weapons and the advisers of Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Also, it has recruited Hezbollah and other non-Syrian Shiite militias from Pakistan and Afghanistan to fight in Syria. Iran is located inside Syria through its revolutionary Guard-Quds forces. According to estimations, Iran is deploying the members of the Quds Force and the Revolutionary Guard inside Syria, estimated at 1,300 to 1,800, in addition to the presence of some members of the Iranian regular army (Katzman, 2018, p. 33). Estimates also indicate that the Quds Force has recruited some 50,000 Shiite militia elements fighting in Syria. For instance, there are the bridges of Al-Naqaba movement (an Iraqi Shiite militia), and Baathist bridges (a militia that is loyal to the Baath Party). Iran trains these militias and para-military groups to achieve two goals. The first is to enhance Al-Assad military forces with additional forces. The second is to ensure the continuity of an Iranian military presence in Syria in the event of the fall of the Al-Assad regime. These militias moved east toward to the point where Iran could create a safe passage for supplies from Iran to Lebanon.

In June 2015, UN special envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura said that Iranian aid to Syria, including military and economic aid, totaled about $6bn a year. It has also allocated, over the past five years, about $100bn for the war, most of which was sent to Syria. According to estimates, Iran spends $20bn a year to aid Al-Assad. Some studies of the US Congress indicate that it is difficult to measure Iran's aid to Syria accurately, in part because it includes a range of economic aid. In fact, there are processes to transport subsidized oil and goods, in addition to military aid. Syria's Government has received $6.6bn in the form of credit since 2013. Also, Syria receives Iranian imports, including crude oil and food such as wheat and canned goods. Syria also has approved new Iranian investments in telecommunication, agriculture and mining (Katzman, 2018, p. 34). Furthermore, Iran has provided economic, political and diplomatic support to the Syrian regime to enable the Al-Assad regime to survive. Iran has increased its foreign trade with Syria, as in 2010, it has increased its foreign trade with Syria to reach €800m. In 2011, it has signed a memorandum of understanding with Syria for the exchange of natural gas estimated about $10bn. In 2012, a free trade agreement has been signed between both sides, and also an Iranian company has signed a contract at €400m for the construction of a new power station in Syria after Turkey has cut off electricity. In addition, a separate agreement has been signed between Iran, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon to connect electricity (Uzun and Eksi, 2017).

In contrast to Iran's deep involvement in the Syrian war and seeking the survival of Al-Assad, Saudi Arabia has sought the fall of Al-Assad. As a result, both regional rivalries have involved in the Syrian War, which greatly affected Syria's war dynamics. In general, the Iranian military and financial support for the Al-Assad regime and the support of the GCC countries for the other fighting parties complicated and prolonged the duration of the

war, besides the external actors that have become involved in the conflict in Syria, which was an obstacle to the political solution in Syria.

In fact, resisting Iran's regional influence and different regional stands on regional issues can be attributed to the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The rivalry between the two regional powers such as reflected on complicating the pattern of conflicts and increasing regional proxy wars, for example, tensions between Saudi Arabia and the USA on the Iranian role or Saudi Arabia's stance on the war in Yemen and Syria. For example, in Yemen, Iran is accused of supporting the Houthi group; consequently, Saudi Arabia formed the Arab coalition forces in 2015 to fight the affiliated Iranian ally. Iran for its part has been involved in the Yemeni issue just to increase causalities in Saudi Arabia and worsen its position. Saudi Arabia has interest in containing Iran's influence in Yemen and stop the smuggling of arms to the Houthi movement. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has waged air strikes against the Iranian-backed Houthi movement. This military campaign raises debate on Saudi Arabia's military capabilities, which ranks the third among the arms purchases.

4. Impact of external actors on regional dynamics

The external impact on regional dynamics forms the regional policies of the Middle East. Regional powers in the Middle East have made strong relations with the USA. During the Cold War, the USA has sought to strengthen its relationship with the regional powers in the Middle East. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran no longer allied with the USA, although the USA is the main external player in the regional security dynamics of the Middle East. The Iranian Islamic regime has long regarded the USA as one of the most important factors of instability in the Middle East. Therefore, Iran has sought to challenge the American influence in the region and rearrange the regional security structures by depending on the regional powers without intervention of foreign powers. Iran's relations with the USA is under tension, although there are attempts to reduce tensions between both parties at different time periods. For instance, Iranian President Khatami has called for a dialogue of civilizations rather than a clash of civilizations. In 2009, President Obama delivered speeches on the Iranian–US dialogue, which were rejected by Iran. When Obama came to power, he adopted a new policy, which is based on reducing the US military involvement in the Middle East and putting an end to the global war on terrorism, pivot to Asia, and focusing more on geo-economic relations. Obama was attempting to handle the complex issues in the Middle East, such as terrorism, the fragility of states following the Arab uprisings, the vacuum of power and the fragile alliances. That is why Obama focused on two tracks, the first is the fight against terrorism and the second is to reach a nuclear agreement with Iran. Therefore, the USA formed an international coalition to fight ISIS. As for negotiations with Iran, Obama focused on finishing negotiations as a way to integrate Iran rather than confront it. The US administration believed that the agreement on the nuclear issue could facilitate negotiations on other regional issues such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Obama aimed to normalize relations with Iran and reintegrate it into the international community to contain its behavior. This strategy is an exception to the policies of previous American administrations. He wanted to create a balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Obama's policy toward Iran could be divided into two periods. The first is characterized by pressure and economic sanctions. The second is characterized by being open to Iran to accomplish the nuclear deal, which coincided with the arrival of the reformist President Hassan Rouhani to power. As Iran's nuclear program has also gained the great attention of Obama's foreign policy toward Iran and the Middle East. According to Obama, there was a chance to convince Iran to curb its nuclear program by reviving the diplomatic relations between the two sides after decades of conflict and hostility. The American

Rapprochement with Iran resulted in an undisclosed cooperation between them concerning the threats of ISIS in Iraq, as the emergence of ISIS posed a major threat to Iran's security interests. In fact, Iran was worried about the fall of its ally, the Iraqi Government, the threat of territorial disintegration of Iraq and the threat against the Syrian regime. Hence, The USA for its part has turned a blind eye to Iran's military and logistical support for Iraq to fight against ISIS in Mosul. And Iran tried to image itself as providing security to the region and fighting terrorism.

Arguably, the undeclared US approval is a part of implicit consent for Iranian influence in Iraq. Both sides have the same interests, which are: the support of a stable Iraqi Government and the unity of Iraq territory. However, it is possible to note that understanding between the two sides was not as possible in Syria as it is in Iraq. The West and the United states have interests and goals in Syria that completely different from Iran's interests. While Iran aims for the survival of Al-Assad regime, the USA and its regional allies aim for the overthrow of Al-Assad (Westermayr, 2018, p. 149). The nuclear agreement played a vital role in improving relations between the two sides. However, there is no agreement between them on the regional issues, and then relations have worsened. In addition, in October and November 2015, Iran has tested ballistic missiles, which violates the UN resolutions.

Obama's motives for *rapprochement* with Iran stem from the fact that Obama supposes that the containment of Iran would prevent it from provoking the USA and its allies or act against their interests. Iran is seeking to avoid re-imposing international sanctions against it to achieve its interests. The US administration thought that the agreement between Iran and the West would strengthen the position of reformist wing in front of hardliners, as they are seeking to improve Iran's international position. In addition, further cooperation between Iran and USA to address the other regional issues might be occurred. According to the US approach, Iran would change its strategy in the region after the agreement accomplished. Lifting most of sanctions related to nuclear materials under the joint action plan in 2016 resulted in oil extraction and increase in its revenues that led to rapid GDP growth. Sanctions imposed against Iran has had a major passive impact on Iran's economy. Then, relief sanctions have contributed to the recovery of Iran's economy to some extent. In May 2017, the re-election of President Hassan Rouhani has generated broad public Iranian expectations that the economic benefits of the joint comprehensive action plan would prevail to all levels of Iranian society. Rouhani will need to fix business and improve the banking sector in order to attract foreign investment and encourage private sector. Sanctions, which not related to Iran's nuclear program, are still present and will continue but this would prevent foreign investors from dealing with Iran, in addition to concerns about a possible re-imposition of the nuclear sanctions against Iran again.

The withdrawal of the USA from the nuclear agreement in May 2018, under the Trump administration, is the most important obstacle to the Iranian regional strategy. The US withdrawal of the agreement has led to the return of US sanctions, which mainly targets economic pressure on Iran and hinders its integration into the world economy. As a result, European investors have become hesitant to enter the Iranian market afraid of US sanctions. They have compared the advantages of investing in Iran with the disadvantages that could be caused by US sanctions. Consequently, these companies refrained from making new investments in Iran due to Trump's threat to re-impose the sanctions that have been lifted. And some foreign companies cancelled their economic agreements with Iran. Therefore, the Iranian currency has deteriorated and protests have been fueled several times in Iran in 2017 and 2018 due to the economic troubles. As a result to this economic trouble, Rouhani Government tried to make some internal limited

reforms to absorb the public unrest, such as the appointment of the president of the central bank and finance minister to ease the anger on Iranian street. The hardliner effects and voices have increased against the reformists. Now, it is difficult to predict the future of successive waves of sanctions and their implications on the Iranian economy, or the effect on Iranian regional strategy. But there is one fact, that is, Iran foreign policy is driven by the perception of the political elite not by the economic circumstances.

5. Constrains on Iran's regional strategy

We can find that there are many constrains and limitations on Iranian regional strategy, that do not enhance Iran claims or pretention as a regional hegemon. Those constrains comes from the regional perception and the impact of external powers on regional dynamics. Those limit the options and strategies of Iran regional behavior. We can say for instance:

- *Dispersion of power in the Middle East*: As the Middle East has many actors that claim leadership and influence and seek domination in some cases. This is either by pretention or self-perception. There are Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and Israel. Even small states like Qatar claim regional influence. All of those states have their own tools that could be said to be counter-influence/hegemony of the other regional powers.
- *High degree of reginal rivalry between all mentioned actors*: None of those regional powers recognize other states' interests. They compete in the same sphere of influence, such as the Iranian and Turkish role in Syria, Iranian and Saudi rivalry in most of Middle East and the Egyptian and Saudi rivalry.
- None of those regional powers offer or project a definition of a regional security structure for the region of regional economic order, or even act as a representative for the region in international forum. And Iran is as like those states. It has material capabilities that qualify it to be a regional power influence in some fields but couldn't prevail or be uncontested regional hegemonic power that has recognition regionally and internationally.
- The rise and escalation of regional conflicts on sectarian basis. This widens the gap between Sunni and Shia Muslims and lead to the weakness of Iran's model appeal among the peoples of the region.

It could be said that, tackling Iranian course of action in the Middle East has implications on both research and practice. As it enhances our understanding of how Iranian decision-makers perceive their role in the region and threats. Moreover, Iran employs tools to achieve its strategic goals based on hard power and ideational means to change its allies normative and value systems. It refutes the Iranian claim of hegemony and full control on region affaires. So the paper tries to determine the actual Iranian influence, and the weakness and strength of its foreign policy so that the Arab states and the West could behave in a fruitful way. On the other hand, the paper enhances the deep analysis of the Middle East dynamics through the prospective of regional power. Also, the focuses on the analysis of the relation between great power and aspiring regional power and the impact on its strategies.

6. Conclusions

The strategy of hegemony is reflected in the perception of Iran and its relation with neighboring countries. The Iranian discourse, concerning various developments in the region, indicates that Iran does not deal with other countries as an ordinary state or on equal bases. Iran always asserts that it is a pivotal and model state. It raises the idea that it is responsible for the region affaires and it has the capabilities that make it qualified for this role and that the

regional affairs are Iran's business. Iran's regional policies and alliances before 2011 have shaped what was then called the axis of resistance which was opposite to the axis of moderation. However, after the Arab uprising in 2011, and the disintegration and the fragility of many Arab states in the Middle East, Iran has been involved in many conflicts, which are based on sectarian basis. Iran's alliances have formed what could be called a Shiite axis in front of the Sunni one led by Saudi Arabia. It employed various tools to achieve its interests. For instance, it uses the ideological tool in polarizing Shiite groups in the rest of the region. Since 2003 up till now, there has been a political empowerment of the Shiite minorities in the region was enhanced by USA. Iran contributed in constructing the post-Saddam political system and controlled the political process, and it tried to control the political process in Syria beside Russia to control the fate of the Al-Assad regime. Iran has benefited from this, although there has been significant disagreement within the Shiite camp. But the Shiite umbrella is the source of Iran's influence, while at the same time it is a source of concern among Arab regimes. Furthermore, Iran's regional strategy has employed a number of different material and non-material tools, to implement its foreign policy, including financial and military aid for its allied regimes and factions. Iran has sought to employ all regional developments from the period of US invasion of Iraq in 2003 to the period of the political turbulence in 2011 get recognition as a hegemonic regional power, and not to be ignored in any regional arrangements. Hence, Iran provided its regional alliances whether they are state actors or non-state actors with private goods. But it didn't provide collective goods to the regions. On the contrary, Iran's active foreign policy was provocative and was not welcomed from other regional neighbors, and this reflected in prevailing reginal instability and rivalry.

Iran has sought to benefit from expanding its influence. However, Middle East's regional dynamics are an outcome of interaction of regional factors and external factors stemming from the degree of external penetration/intrusion system, and the US involvement in the affairs of the region.

As a result, it is unlikely that Iran will succeed in achieving its quest of being a hegemonic power in the Middle East for many reasons; first, the characteristics of Middle East as a regional system, as it is the multi power system where regional rivalry is witnessed among its main regional powers; each of them has a countermeasure that hinders other actors' quest for influence. Second, Iran's quest for influence and hegemony led both international recognition and regional acceptance for its attempts to act as a regional power. Third, the cost of pursuing hegemony strategies due to reimposing economic sanctions and pressure through the great power, the USA.

As for the Iranian role in Arab countries' situation, it has differed from time to time. They have moved from the stage of adjustment and non-confrontation with Iran before 2011 to the stage of confrontation and escalation against its influence after 2011. No Arab Gulf state is willing to give up the security role of the USA in the Gulf or to accept any security arrangements based on cooperation with Iran. In addition, the tense relation between Iran and the USA will an obstacle to Iran's hegemony ambition. Therefore, the study concludes that Iran will not manage in achieving its quest for regional hegemony.

References

Acharya, A. (2007), "The emerging regional architecture of world politics", *World Politics*, Vol. 59 No. 4, pp. 629-652.

Beck, M. (2014), "The concept of regional power as applied to the Middle East", in Furtig, H. (Ed.), *Regional Powers in the Middle East: New Constellations after the Arab Revolts*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY.

Craddock, A.W. (1995), "The heavy hand of hegemony: hegemonic governance through the use of force", Unpublished doctorate dissertation, Ohio State University, OH.

Flemes, D. (2010), *Regional Leadership in the Global System: Ideas, Interests and Strategies of Regional Powers*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Farnham, p. 7.

Fulton, W., Holliday, J. and Wyre, S. (2013), *Iranian Strategy in Syria, Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project*.

Itzchakov, D. (2018), "Iran faces economic challenges as its currency plunges", available at: https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/iran-currency-decline/ (accessed 1 June 2018).

Katzman, K. (2016), "Iran's foreign policy", Beck, L. (Ed.), *Iranian Foreign Policy Context, Regional Analysis and US Interests*, Nova Science Publisher.

Katzman, K. (2018), "Iran's foreign and defense policies, congressional research services", available at: https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44017.pdf (accessed 15 August 2018).

Lotian, S. (2018), "Regional security system in the Persian Gulf", available at: https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1057%2F9780230108189_5.pdf (accessed 15 March 2018).

Middle East Report (2018), "Iran's priorities in a turbulent Middle East, international crises group", No. 184, 13 April.

Mustafa, M.M. and Seinger, A. (2009), *The Theory of Power Transformation: A New Vision for the World in 21st Century*, Dar Al-Alem, Cairo.

Nye, J.S. (1990), "The changing nature of world power", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 105 No. 2.

Prys, M. (2010), *Hegemony, Domination, Detachment: Differences in Regional Powerhood*, German Institute of Global Area Studies.

Takeyh, R. (2008), "Iran's new Iraq", *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 62 No. 1, pp. 13-30.

The Arab Center for Research and Policies Studies, Policies Analysis Unit (2015), *The Israeli Position on the Iranian Nuclear Agreement: The Estimation of a Position*, The Arab Center for Research and Policies Studies, Doha.

The world fact book (2018), "The world fact book, central intelligence agency", available at: www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html (accessed 3 July 2018).

Uzun, Ö.S. and Eksi, M. (2017), "Continuities and changes in Iran's foreign policy: analysis of Syrian case", available at: http://dergipark.gov.tr/download/article-file/391708 (accessed 24 May 2018).

Warnaar, M. (2013), *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad: Ideology and Actions*, Palgrave Macmillan.

Westermayr, J. (2018), "Realpolitik in Iran, opportunities and challenges", *Political Science Journal*, Vol. 28, pp. 138-160, available at: https://iapss.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/138_pdfsam_Politikon-Volume-28-December-2015.pdf (accessed 12 December 2018).

Zarif, M.J. (2018), "Our neighbors are our priority", available at: www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Our-Neighbors-Are-Our-Priority.htm (accessed 3 March 2018).

Further reading

Parys, M. (2015), "What makes a regional hegemony?", available at: https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/c46390f8-2be2-410b-afd3-210df3b305b9.pdf (accessed 11 November 2015).

Corresponding author
Huda Raouf can be contacted at: hudaraouf_83@yahoo.com