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Contextualization of the Sunni Crescent; Iran's Strategy to Balance Religious Unilateralism in the Shiite Crescent

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Abstract

Arab countries always accuse Iran of trying to weaken Sunni groups in favor of strengthening Shiites. This research is an attempt to challenge the existing opinions regarding Iran's exclusive reliance on the Shiite Crescent and investigate the evolution of Iran's approach towards the Sunni groups in the framework of understanding its belongings. Iran's foreign strategies have always been defined by emphasizing Shiite/Islamic concepts, yet developments of the Arab Spring, showed Iran that unilateralism and excessive emphasis on Shiite groups could not provide maximum interests. The religious divide of Iran's Shiite government has never been an obstacle to communication with foreign Sunni groups in the way of expanding Iran's regional influence; However, Iran's relationship with Sunni groups in Palestine, Egypt, Pakistan and Afghanistan has a longer history in the Middle East. In last decade Iran has tried to create a Sunni crescent in South and Central Asia centered on the countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The Sunni crescent plays a complementary and balancing role to the Shiite crescent. The formation of Sunni Crescent naturally leads to consequences for Iran in the regional and domestic level, such as regional competitions as well as the rivalry of the Iranian Sunnis with the Sunni groups supported by Iran in the Sunni Crescent. As much as Iran requests foreign Sunni groups to develop their political activities; it depoliticized the Sunnis inside Iran. To answer the research questions, Qualitative methods will be conducted to discover all the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of Sunni Crescent also in particular in which context Sunni crescent can change the content of belonging and bring about new ideas regarding regional identities.

Keywords: Iran, Arab Uprising, Sunni Crescent, Shiite Identity, Middle East.

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Introduction

Arab countries always accuse Iran of trying to weaken Sunni groups in favor of strengthening Shiites. This article is an attempt to challenge the existing opinions regarding Iran's exclusive reliance on the Shiite Crescent (in Iranian political literature, the Resistance Front) and investigate the evolution of Iran's approach towards the Middle East region's Sunni groups in the framework of understanding its relationships, gaps and consequences. From the geopolitical point of view, Iran has traditionally had religious and political ties with some Shia groups in Sunni countries due to its placement in Sunni geography. However, Iran's relationship with Sunni religious groups such as PLO (Fatah and Hamas in Palestine), Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hezb-e-Islami Rached Ghannouchi in Tunisia, Sunni Islamist groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan has a longer history than Shiite groups in the Middle East region. In order to balance it, Iran has tried to create a kind of Sunni crescent in South Asia and Central Asia centered on the countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Iran's foreign political strategies have always been defined by emphasizing Shiite/Islamic concepts; even though the recent developments in the Middle East region, especially after the Arab Spring, showed Iran that unilateralism and excessive emphasis on a religious group could not provide the maximum interests of Iran. The reason why despite the existence of a significant Shia population in Pakistan (50 million), Afghanistan (7 million) and Tajikistan (400 thousand people), Iran does not take any action to communicate with them is the question of this research. The research is to find out the basis of attributing the Sunni Crescent to the Islamic Republic of Iran. What changes will the communication with Sunni groups make in Iran's attitude to regional developments at the domestic and international levels.

1. Research Background

In Iran, research on Shia Crescent and related issues has been conducted using quantitative and qualitative methods; However, no comprehensive research has been conducted on the issue of Sunni Crescent and their impacts on Pakistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Historical Background of Iran's Relationship with Middle East Sunni Groups

Common religious grounds such as Hajj, Palestine-Israel conflict, regional cooperation and rivalry and the residence of Iranians in Arab countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain – part of Iran 50 years ago regarded as the fourteenth province of Iran – were of the most important factors of Iran's interaction with Sunni Arabs. The first sparks of communication between Iran and Arab Sunni Islamists also date back to the period before the 1979 revolution and the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-1978).

In order to fulfill his regional role based on the friendly doctrine of Richard Nixon (President of the United States), Mohammad Reza Shah tried to improve relations with the Sunni governments of the region such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Oman including signing the Algiers Agreement with Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq in 1974, cooperating with the Sultanate of Oman in suppressing the left-wing Dhofar Rebellion (1974-1975), and supporting Palestinian groups in spite of preserving relationship with Israel. In this section, we specifically go through the fields of Iran's relationship with Sunni groups in Egypt and Palestine.

A) Egypt

Egypt was one of the first Sunni Arab countries with which Iran established close political, cultural, and religious relations. Incidents such as the marriage of the Shiite King of Iran (Mohammed Reza Shah) with Princess Fawzia, the Sunni daughter of the King of Egypt (Malek Fuad) in 1938 and the establishment of the Inter-Religious Interfaith Organization (1948) in order to deepen the relationship between the Sunni scholars of Al-Azhar and the Shiite scholars of Qom Seminary and activities of the Muslim Brotherhood organization were of the turning points of the relationship between two countries.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's motto "الاسلام هو الحل" meaning "Islam is the Solution" was very attractive to Iranian Islamists at the level of religious intellectuals and currents and some Iranian Shia groups and students, such as Fadā'iyān-e Islam, Sayyid Mojtaba Mir-Lohi (known as Navvab Safavi), and Sheikh

Abdul Karim Zanjani who tried to invent similar organizations in Iran by expanding their relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood and translated Sayyid Qutb's books into Persian while -turning into institutionalization.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei translated one of the most important books of Sayyid Qutb named "Ma'ālimfiatṬarīq¹", (Milestones) into Persian in 1967 and he has never hidden his interest in the Muslim Brotherhood and Sayyid Qutb. With this background, after the Arab Spring developments in Egypt (2011), after 30 years of breaking political relations with Egypt, Iran tried to establish political relations with this country, and Mohamed Morsi's visit to Iran for the summit of the Non-Alignment Movement (2012) and the visit of the former president of Iran (Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad) to Egypt (2013) was one of the most important efforts of the two countries to expand bilateral relations.

B) Palestine

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as a confederation of Palestinian parties is one of the other Sunni groups. Although Iran's limited relationship with Palestinian groups had started in the period before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The political, financial and military interactions between Iran and the Palestinians took on new dimensions and structures with the revolution and Yasser Arafat's trip to meet the revolutionaries.

The Fatah movement is the largest group in the Palestinian Authority. This movement has recognized the existence of Israel and has participated as a representative of the Palestinian people in peace negotiations with Israel to resolve disputes and establish an independent Palestinian state.

This general position, along with some disputes with Yasser Arafat in mediating the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and Arafat's upkeep for Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Kuwait war (1991) made Iran, after the Oslo Accords (1993 & 1995) support the establishment and empowerment of Hamas as another Palestinian Sunni group. Iran's relationship with Hamas includes a range of financial, religious and ideological relations. From a financial point of view, Iran has been one of the supporters of Hamas. Despite

Iran's support, this group refused to follow the Islamic Republic's policies towards Syria to support Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president. In any case, Iran has tried to maintain and improve its relationship with the Palestinian groups despite occasional differences (Tait, 2013).

2.1.1. Sunni Crescent; Fields and Functions

The establishment of Sunni Crescent is a new evolution of Iran's foreign policy in South Asia and Central Asia, with an emphasis on the countries of Pakistan (Jamaat-e-Islami Party), Afghanistan (Taliban) and Tajikistan (Islamic Movement Party).

Map 1: Sunni Crescent



From a geographical point of view, the Sunni crescent is at the opposite point of the Shiite crescent (South Asia and Central Asia) and includes a wide range of Sunni Islamic parties, groups and movements, which has the role of balancing the religious part of

the Shiite crescent. It seems that Iran has made the necessary use of the gap between these Sunni parties and the government and used them as a lever of regional pressure for political bargaining and forming a convergent network. Some political and cultural factors such as the existence of a common enemy, religion (Islam) and language (Persian), suffering some damages from religious unilateralism, being a minority of Shiites in predominantly Sunni countries and their low political weight and lack of long-term interests, relying on Shiites, have caused Iran to turn towards Sunni groups. In this section, the activity of Sunni groups in this crescent will be explained in detail.

A) Pakistan

Although Pakistan has a significant population of Shiites (50 million people), Iran's relationship with the country's Shiites - who have not had much weight in domestic and international political equations - has never been as strong as the Sunnis of Pakistan. On the other hand, Iran, with its political realism, has established deeper connections with the Jamaat-e-Islami Party of Pakistan and the Sunni leaders of this party, including Abul Ala Maududi and Iqbal Lahori. The interaction between Iran and Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan has continued until today, and this party is aligned with Iran's religious and political positions. In the latest positions, he condemned the Terror of martyr Qassem Soleimani, one of the commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard by the United States in 2019¹. The Jamaat-e-Islami Party of Pakistan and its intellectual leader Abul Ali Maududi formulated the idea of the revival of Islam and the establishment of the Islamic government and the Islamic Republic in his works.

Seyed Vali Nasr (1994) in the book "The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution"; The Jama'at-i Islami of Pakistan has claimed that Imam Khomeini wrote his book "Islamic Government" under the influence of Maududi (Nasr, 1994). It seems that the fields of new relations between Iran and Pakistan in the framework of the Sunni crescent should be considered in cases such as:

- a) The possibility of using the capacity of the Sunni fundamentalist forces of Pakistan to mobilize against American interests in the region,
- b) The possibility of Pakistan bargaining on the issue of the Taliban,
- c) The existence of religious and linguistic commonalities
- d) Pakistan's inspiration for Iran from a nuclear point of view and ethnic management,
- e) Participating in mutual religious conferences such as the Unity Conference in Tehran and the international conference "Rahma llal al-Lamin",
- f) Minimizing Iranian Sunni relations with the Sunni groups of Pakistan.

B) Afghanistan

Afghanistan has a diverse demographic composition of Hanafi Sunnis and Shiites (Ismaili, Imami and Hazara with a population of 7 million people); But Iran never took Afghanistan's Shiites seriously from a political point of view. During the first period of the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban in the political scene of Afghanistan (1994-2001), Iran had a warm relationship with Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Massoud, of the leaders of the Afghan Mujahideen, who were Tajik Hanafi Sunni.

During this period, Saudi Arabia's support for the Taliban, the cooperation of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan with some Iranian Sunni groups, and the Taliban's anti-Shia approach towards Iran, which culminated in the killing of eight Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1999, limited the possibility of interaction between Iran and the Taliban. With the establishment of the National Unity Government of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, Iran started relations with the Taliban. Factors such as the presence of the United States in Afghanistan, as the common enemy of Iran and the Taliban, the emergence of security threats such as the activities of ISIS in Afghanistan, along with the inability of the Afghan national government to establish border security, caused Iran and the Taliban to reach common horizons.

This connection and common horizon caused Iran to call the Taliban Sunni Islamists one of the "genuine movements of the region" and "an important part of Afghanistan's future" and tried to

maintain its relationship with this nation despite its political non-recognition. Unlike Iran's first period, it maintained its neutrality in favor of another Sunni group (Taliban), because the weight of the Taliban in Afghanistan's equation and the increase of Iran's influence are greater. Iran's relationship with the Taliban is based on a set of political, social, environmental, and other factors.

What has brought the Taliban closer to Iran is a kind of "mutual need". To survive, the Taliban needs weapons, money and recognition by countries in the region, including Iran; While Iran needs to show its power to America and other regional rivals.

The cooperation fields of Iran with the Taliban were matters such as establishing security in its eastern borders, the existence of a common enemy (America and ISIS), increasing Iran's influence through the Taliban channel with Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Pakistan, using the Taliban as a pressure lever on Europe and the United States, the alignment of Iran and the Taliban on anti-Western and anti-American issues, and the Taliban's anti-Israeli nature, and the use of violence by the Taliban to fight ISIS in Afghanistan.

C) Tajikistan

Although Tajikistan has the majority of Sunni Islam of Hanafi in terms of religion, it has the largest Persian-speaking population in the world after Iran and Afghanistan (Factbook, 2020). There have always been strong civilizational, cultural and historical ties between Iran and Tajikistan. Iran's relationship with the Islamic Movement Party, which is the only legal Islamic party in the Central Asia region, was established in the early 1990s. Abdullah Nouri, one of the Sunni Hanafi Islamist leaders of Tajikistan, founded this party in October 1991. The establishment of this party was a function of the reaction of the Islamist currents to the Marxists and the desire to recognize the Persian language and was inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran placing them in the ranks of the major reformists of Tajikistan after independency from the Soviet Union.

The geopolitical vacuum of the Soviet Union caused Islamist actors inside Tajikistan and regional actors such as Iran and Saudi Arabia to inspire Tajik Islamists trying to take over the political management of Tajikistan; for this reason, many Islamist leaders of

Tajikistan were influenced by the Islamic Revolution of Iran and the thoughts of Ayatollah Khomeini in entering political power (Koolae, 1993, p.6). The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan with more than 40,000 members, is considered the second most influential party in Tajikistan after the ruling People's Democratic Party led by Emomali Rahmanov. This party believes in political Islam and intends to reform the secular structure of Tajik society. Aftermath signing of the 1997 Peace Agreement, in which Iran also participated, and the division of power between the government and the opposition, the 5-year civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997) ended. During the civil war, Islamist forces led by the Islamic Movement Party were supported by Iran. The government of Tajikistan has expressed dissatisfaction with Iran's support for Islamic groups against the government during the civil war and subsequent periods. In 2015, the government of Tajikistan announced the dissolution of this party, mosques and its publication (Najat) due to anti-government activities and terrorist charges. In 2016, an amendment to Tajikistan's constitution banned the establishment of any political party based on a religious platform, effectively preventing any attempt to reorganize the Islamic Movement (ISFARA, 2006).

In addition to Iran's financial and political support for the Islamic Movement Party, former and current leaders of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, Abdullah Nouri and Mohyeddin Kabiri have maintained their interactions with Iran and have met the political senior officials as well as the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. A recent example was the visit of Mohyeddin Kabiri as the leader of Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan in 2015 to Tehran at the 29th Islamic Unity Conference and meeting with the supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei (Khamenei.ir). The other areas of Iran's cooperation with the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan include participation in Islamic Unity conferences, religious meetings to introduce Shia religious sacred things and the need for Tajiks to respect them, the presence of Tajik and Zoroastrian Shia Iranian immigrants in Tajikistan, the relationship of this party with the religious offices of Iran in Tajikistan and the sale of Islamic movement books at the Tehran International Book Fair and the bilateral trips of the Iranian delegation to Tajikistan and Tehran.

2. Sunni Crescent; Results and Consequences

As aforementioned, the logic of relations between Iran and the Sunni Crescent is based on the set of political and regional factors. The religious divide of Iran's Shiite government has never been an obstacle to communication with Sunni Islamist groups and expanding Iran's regional influence. After the developments of the Arab Spring and the clarification of the weight of Shiites in the Sunni countries, Iran consciously acted towards the creation of a Sunni crescent in the region of South Asia and Central Asia, taking into account the previous contexts of relations. This issue was followed more seriously in countries like Tajikistan and Afghanistan, where the political situation of Sunni groups was in opposition or lack of cooperation with the ruling political system. The groups that Iran is related to them in the Sunni Crescent (Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan) are concerned about the formation of some kind of Islamic government. However, it should not be overlooked that the Sunni crescent is not as powerful as the Shia crescent and considering the political conditions of Afghanistan and Tajikistan, it is currently in a potential stage. However, the experience of the Taliban showed that Iran is ready to communicate with any Sunni religious group that provides its interests. The Sunni crescent plays a complementary and balancing role to the Shiite crescent. Iran is also in regional competition in the Sunni Crescent. In addition to U.S., Saudi Arabia and Qatar also are Iran's serious competitors in Pakistan and Afghanistan, while Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Russia can influence the religious and political situation in Tajikistan.

Conclusion

The change in Iran's policy regarding relations to Sunni groups and the formation of the Sunni Crescent is the result of several fundamental factors, such as the existence of common security threats between three countries mentioned, the existence of previous relations, the existence of the capacity for interaction such as the common religion and language, and the need to maintain the balance of power between the Shia and Sunni groups. In addition, the promoting sources of Iran influence in Sunni countries and forces in, the management of Iran's Sunni relations to Sunni

countries, and finally Iran's will to avoid the charge of being anti-Sunni from Arab public opinion has multiplied Iran's motivations for forming the Sunni Crescent.

The formation of the Sunni Crescent naturally leads to consequences for Iran in the long term, such as the rivalry of the Iranian Sunni groups with the Sunni groups supported by Iran in the Sunni Crescent, creating motivation for the internal Sunnis to follow the pattern of the foreign Sunni groups for establishing intellectual links between internal Sunnis and these Sunni groups. As much as Iran requests these foreign Sunni groups to develop their political and social activities, it depoliticized the Sunnis inside Iran.

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