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## Iran's Regional Role and Russia-US Rivalry in West Asia

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Received: 27 Dec 2021 ; Accepted: 20 Feb 2022

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### **Abstract:**

Over the past four decades, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran has always been influenced by the games and deals of great powers, including Russia and the United States. Iran's geopolitical position and access to energy resources; Internal and identity-building historical developments, including a long-standing enmity with the United States; The structural pressure of the international system and the developments related to the Islamic Awakening and the Arab Spring and the development of the axis of resistance in West Asian countries. All of the above are fundamental components that give Iran a distinct and prominent role in the Russian-American rivalry. The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the key government actors in the West Asian region; Despite forty years of striving for independence and easing international pressures, the conventional interpretation of foreign policy has always been influenced by extra-systemic and intra-systemic currents such as US-Russian interactions. The purpose of the research is the regional role of Iran and the competition between Russia and the United States in West Asia, and the main question is what is the regional role of Iran and the competition of Russia and the United States in West Asia? And the hypothesis is that Iran has played a multiple role in the political, military-security, economic-energy, and geographical spheres in the rivalries and relations between the two great powers, Russia and the United States, over the past two decades from 2000 to 2020 in West Asia. This research will be done using combined methods including descriptive, analytical and statistical methods based on communication and exchange theories. In fact, the author tries to use these theories to formulate a specific model to test the main hypothesis. Then, using the specialized texts available in relation to the three variables "Iran's regional position", "Belt-Road Initiative" and "South Asian convergence" in libraries, scientific and research quarterly; As well as internet texts and data and interviews with several experts in the field of foreign policy and communications and transportation in Iran to analyze the relationship between these variables.

**Keywords** West Asia, Iran, Russia, USA, Competition

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## Introduction

Since the founding of the nation-state and the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the rivalry between the great powers has been one of the fundamental realities of the international system. The rivalries and conflicts of the great powers have been the driving force of the international system and have influenced the behavior and actions of other states, especially the regional and small powers. The rivalry of the great powers in the bipolar atmosphere of the international system in the second half of the twentieth century between the Soviet Union and the United States is a clear example of this pattern of relations; That rivalry between the two superpowers determined the behavior of almost all other states and had a profound effect on the international arena and domestic politics for decades. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the level of competition between the two countries was greatly reduced. But with Putin in office and continued US geopolitical expansionism, they have, in practice, returned to the politics of great power competition after a decade-long hiatus (1990s).

From the beginning of the new millennium, the United States pursued a policy of expanding NATO eastward; And by supporting and paving the way for color revolutions, it narrowed Russia's sphere of influence and life. Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008 is a concrete example of the two countries' return to the model of "great power rivalry" relations; Which was hidden under the ideological struggles between the model of Western democracies and Russia's favorable political system. Geographically, North Africa, East Asia, West Asia, Central Asia and the Caucasus, Eastern Europe, the Baltic Sea, Latin America, and even Antarctica and space became their competitors once again. The same great power rivalries between Rus-

sia and the United States were pursued in various other political, economic and security fields between the two countries. In a clear example, the US National Security Document in 2018 mentions the concept of competition of great powers (long-term strategic competition) fourteen times. In addition, the document specifically mentions three major power struggles.

The focus on the geostrategic regions of the world has also overshadowed the pattern of rivalry between the great powers of the United States and Russia in West Asia. In this regard, Russia's competition with this great world power to deepen its presence and strengthen its military bases in West Asia, shows the geostrategic importance of this region in the equations and economic and military relations of the world. These new rivalries will affect Iran's position in Russian foreign policy in its rivalry with the United States.

On the one hand, Russia is an important factor in the grand equations and future trends of the international system and has good relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran in contemporary history. Iran is currently one of the most important strategic players in West Asia and Russia's ally against the United States in various political and military fields. By investing in Bushehr power plant, Russia is the main supplier of nuclear technology and the main seller of military weapons to Iran in the world. Also, Russia's cooperation with Iran as a political-military power has supported Bashar al-Assad's government in the Syrian crisis since 2012 in West Asian security processes, and especially in the pattern of Iran's cooperation with major powers after the new revolution. However, in regulating its equations with Iran, Russia largely considers the pattern of great power competi-

tion, and its friendly relations with Iran have always been influenced by its relations and interactions with the United States. On the other hand, the United States, despite the continuation of the pattern of hostile relations with Iran, does not forget the rivalry of a great power with Russia in regulating relations with this country. In recent years, the United States has shifted its focus back to the Atlantic and Russia, following NATO's policy of eastward expansion in competition with Russia in the first decade of the second millennium; And especially since 2017, when Trump took office, he has been trying to strengthen his deterrent power in the Atlantic and restore the trust of his allies. This US policy will further deepen the transboundary balance sheet strategy in West Asia; And this factor will greatly affect the type of relations it has with Iran, as well as its relations with allies such as Israel and the conservative Arab countries in the region. To the extent that the United States increases its focus on China or Russia as two major challenging powers in Asia Pacific (China) and in the Atlantic (establishing two new navies and supporting right-wing parties in Eastern Europe); The cross-border balancing strategy is also being pursued more seriously in West Asia. This issue (i.e. competition with Russia) will affect Iran's position in US foreign policy and its policies towards Iran (both negatively and positively).

The present study seeks to answer the questions of what is the nature of the relations between the actors in the international arena and what is the Arab uprising and the evolution of Iran's role in the West Asian region? What is the position of Iran in the US-Russia competition? And the research hypothesis is that Iran's communication and transportation position in the framework of the China Road Belt Initiative can pave the way

for the expansion of economic, infrastructural and communication ties, the ground for convergence in Southwest Asia.

There are no specific practical purposes or references for the results of the present dissertation; However, its achievements should be used in general in promoting and developing regional cooperation related to the Road Belt Initiative in activities related to the Ministry of Communications and the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development.

## **Theoretical Foundations**

### **Foreign policy**

The constructivist approach to foreign policy is based on the social human model, as opposed to the rationalist approach, which emphasizes the economic man model. The social actor is not a wise, calculating and optimistic actor who is guided by a set of selfish goals in order to choose cost-effective solutions and tools. The social actor acts in accordance with the social role that he acquires in the process of national and transnational socialization and plays in the current situation. Therefore, the main motive for action and reaction of countries' policy behavior is not the result of various actions to achieve obvious and predetermined goals and interests. Rather, specific behavior is adopted for this purpose; That common and value-based interpersonal expectations are compatible with appropriate behavior that arises from specific and sufficiently comprehensive social norms, both domestic and international (Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2009, pp. 46-47).

Constructivism has had a significant effect on the concept of foreign policy and is based on the premise that actors build their world and that foreign policy analysis begins with the state as an actor; That is, actors interpret, decide, announce, and execute. Foreign policy is, in part, the act of making what

the actors decide, and this view reflects the effect of internal factors on foreign policy, and also why the foreign policies of different countries are, in many cases, identical despite internal differences. From a constructivist point of view, in order to understand the foreign policy of countries, in addition to material structures, one must also pay attention to epistemological structures, ideas, beliefs, norms and thoughts. From a constructivist perspective, identities, norms, and cultures play an important role in foreign policy. The identities and interests of states are shaped by norms, interactions, and cultures, and it is this process that drives interaction between states. Constructivist theory seems to be the best way to define the concept of foreign policy. In their view, the international system is a social construct whose characteristics are determined by the communication and interaction between its units (Shafiee and Zamanian, 2011, pp. 127-128).

#### **The nature of actors' relations in the international arena**

In the framework of constructivist theory, the actors in the international arena are not merely states; And transnational and transnational forces are also considered influential elements in interactions. The nature and type of relationships in the form of different levels of cooperation, conflict or competition go back to the common intersubjective understanding of the relationship at the domestic and international levels and the culture and structural paradigm that governs the perception of these forces.

#### **Patterns of friendship and enmity**

From a constructivist point of view, it is understandable how states are formed and how they act between states within the framework of intersubjective understanding that each

party has of the environment of each other's action and behavior. Whereas in this intellectual approach, inter-subjective understanding is given importance in the light of relations between states; The perception of actors from the international environment and the behavior of others is influenced by their experience and historical background towards "self" and "other". Therefore, the behavior of a state regarding its interests and security is more due to the experiences and historical and mental context of that state than to the external reality. In such circumstances, friendship and enmity are defined by the governments themselves according to their mental environment, which is full of background experiences (Soltaninejad and Shapoori, 2012, p. 113).

#### **Negative reconstruction cycle**

Constructivists believe that when government (a) takes action, government (b) reacts to (a) its underlying mental environment and inter-subjective understanding, which is a grounded understanding. Interpretation of the actions of the state (a) in the mental environment of the state (b) and the definition of the state (b) of the situation and consequently the action taken by the actor (b); It leads to a cycle of actions and reactions. If this interaction cycle is in a positive direction, it leads to cooperation and convergence; But if it is accompanied by misunderstanding, suspicion and conflict, it leads to divergence and intensification of differences (Soltaninejad and Shapoori, 2012, p. 113).

#### **Iran and the Greater Middle East Plan**

Perhaps if we want to analyze Iran's role in the West Asian security environment, this issue can be better assessed by understanding its confrontations with the United States after 9/11, and as a result of the two wars in Afg-

hanistan and Iraq. After these two wars, the United States launched the Greater Middle East Initiative to contain Iran. The Greater Middle East Initiative is a political term coined in March 2004 in an article by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace as part of the US Government's Preliminary Work for the June 2004 G8 Summit; And referred to an ambiguous region as the Arab world plus Afghanistan, Iran, Israel, Pakistan and Turkey. The plan offered proposals for a sweeping change in the West's approach to West Asia and North Africa. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice first used the Greater Middle East Plan as the "New Middle East" in June 2006 in Dubai, outlining the Bush administration's vision for a second term and the future of the region. Rice noted at the meeting that this would be achieved through "constructive chaos," a phrase she repeated a few weeks later during a joint news conference with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert as the Lebanese war began. The meaning of this phrase and the vision of the Bush administration have been much debated since then, and efforts to achieve this new Middle East have been called the "Greater Middle East Project." Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former US national security adviser, said a political awakening was taking place in the region, which could be an indicator of a multipolar world now developing. He referred to the Greater Middle East as the "global Balkans" and as a lever of control in a region he called Eurasia (Brzezinski, 1997: pp. 133-139).

According to Andrew Bacevich in *The American War for the Greater Middle East* (2016), the region is associated with a series of conflicts from 1980 and the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war. Since then, the United States has played a role in striking a balance between the conflicts between these interconnected cultural nations in order to further

its interests in the region. From the end of World War II until 1980, no American soldiers were killed in action while serving in the Greater Middle East. In the 1980s, Bacevich argues, something big happened. With the end of the Cold War, the United States launched a new conflict - a war for the Greater Middle East - that continues to this day (Bacevich, 2016).

To pursue its foreign policy goals, the Bush administration has sought to fundamentally change the minds of Americans about West Asia. Reference to the "new" or "larger" Middle East included countries outside the traditional definition of the region, including West Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia. The Bush administration claimed that the region was defined not by cultural (Arab) or religious (Islamic) characteristics but by a lack of democracy. So a big strategy is needed to implement the reforms. The outline of the plan was the US effort to bring about reform in the region, exploiting the ideological components of the new Middle East, the role of Iraq, and the potential role of Turkey as a "model" for the region (Stewart, 2005, p. 400).

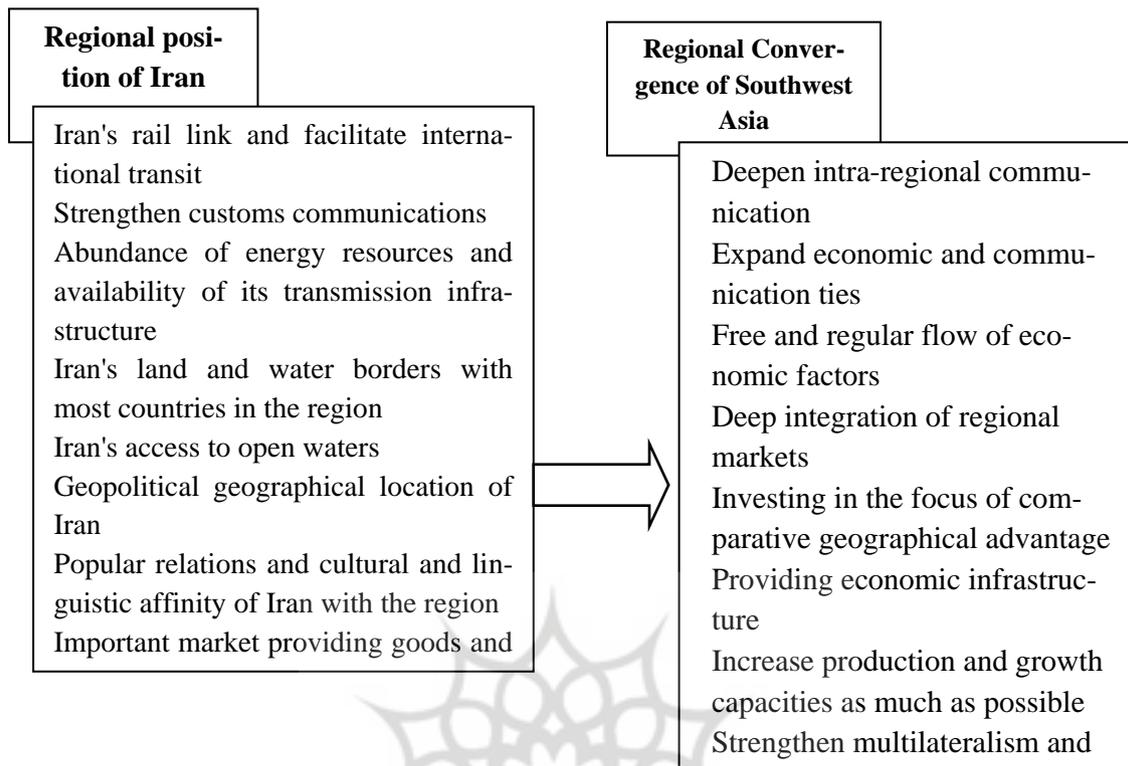
Another challenge in West Asia for the United States that paved the way for the Greater Middle East Initiative was the role of Iran. Basically, with the fall of the Pahlavi government, the United States lost its influence in Iran. Iran confronted the United States and its interventions in the region with the government of Velayat-e Faqih and had disputes with many countries in the region, including Iraq. Iran and the Gulf Arab states also came into conflict, and despite US efforts to integrate them into the Gulf Cooperation Council; On the contrary, Iran had continued its relations with some of these countries in the form of cooperation and competition and with some in the form of political

conflicts and disputes until the introduction of the Greater Middle East Plan (Hallis, 2004, p. 225). In general, the Greater Middle East Initiative is a plan to transform the Muslim countries of West Asia into democratic, secular and conscious societies. The plan consisted mainly of three areas of reform: the promotion of democracy and good governance, the provision of economic opportunities, and the dissemination of knowledge in society (Mirkasimov, 2007, p. 1). These mechanisms were a major threat to the Islamic Republic of Iran and its model in West Asia. In general, the United States has always tried to threaten the Islamic Republic with its Greater Middle East Initiative, given its ethnic diversity in Iran.

#### **Iran and the US military presence in the region**

The strategic region of West Asia has long been considered by supranational powers such as the United States due to its unique geopolitical, geostrategic, and geo-economics position. In this regard, the Second Persian Gulf War and subsequent dynasty crises led to the consolidation of Washington's military position in this strategic region. Since then, the Americans have sought to establish a presence in the West Asian region in a pragmatic manner, based on a range of specific regional interests and goals; Which hosts a

wide range of cultures, religions and ethnic groups including Arabs, Jews, Kurds, Persians, Turks as well as religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Baha'i and Zoroastrianism. These measures include these options; Facilitate long-term access to high quality and cheap fossil fuels (oil and gas); Prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; Preserving the Arab kingdoms of the region and creating markets for their military-industrial complexes. It is noteworthy that Washington's military presence in the West Asian region, for whatever purpose, has threatened Tehran's vital interests and challenged its affiliated Islamic resistance groups. An example of this is the rivalry between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran in Iraq in the years after the fall of Saddam and the developments in the suppression of the terrorist group ISIS, which has not only led to the deterioration of relations between the two countries; Rather, it has plunged the West Asian region into a complex security dilemma. In the middle of this gap are those countries and non-state actors in West Asia that are reluctant to accept US (and Israeli) hegemony over the region. In this regard, the Islamic Republic of Iran has emerged in recent years as the de facto leader of the camp, which includes Syria and prominent non-governmental actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah (Loret, 2010, p. 75).



*figure 1). Analytical model of research*

### **The regional role of Iran**

#### **The Arab Uprising and the Transformation of Iran's Role in the West Asian Region**

More than a decade has passed since the events called the Islamic Awakening, the Arab Spring or the Arab Uprising, which triggered the flood of popular revolutions in some countries of the Arab world. With the dust of regimes falling and the excitement of emerging forces subsiding, the region is now entering a new phase of security and political crisis, the effects of which are not limited to the geography of West Asia. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian peddler, in protest of police harassment in the small town of Seydi Bouzeyd in 2011, marked the beginning of a much-anticipated public movement. The demonstrations that followed Bouazizi's self-immolation spread

throughout the Arab world immediately after the overthrow of Zine Al-Abedin Ben Ali in Tunisia; Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Algeria, Sudan and Mauritania in the African part of the Arab world and Jordan, Kuwait, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain and Syria in the Asian part of the Arab world, were subject to widespread unrest and popular demonstrations.

The rise of the opposition in each of these countries met with a different fate. In a way, during what was called the Arab uprising, four Arab governments were overthrown in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Syria and Yemen have experienced severe civil crises that have continued to this day in the form of a bloody civil war. And some other governments (such as Bahrain, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia) have been able to avoid escalating internal crises and political collapse to some

extent, despite serious political and security challenges (Achagoe, 2013, pp. 11-15).

### **Regional Convergence Development Initiatives in Southwest Asia**

Throughout the twentieth century, efforts were made to pursue regional convergence, especially by Arab leaders, and to integrate Arab identity into Southwest Asia. The banner of these measures was the former president of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who, under the title of Pan-Arabism and the struggle against imperialism, tried to raise the identity of his target regions in opposition to the colonial approach of the European powers. Abdul Nasser's actions culminated in 1958 with the establishment of the "Union of Arab States" with Syria. The alliance with Abdul Nasser, which gained considerable popularity among the Arab nations of Southwest Asia, including Syria, after the Suez Canal crisis in 1956; It was seen by the Syrian Ba'ath party elites as a viable option for rebuilding a common Arab identity and confronting foreign threats. In this regard, the Union of Arab States between Egypt and Syria was formed under the presidency of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1958; However, Abdel Nasser's approach to electing Egyptian officials to high-ranking positions in Syria and dissolving all the parties in that country gradually reduced the support of the Syrian people for their country's alliance with Egypt. Growing dissatisfaction with Nasser's discriminatory policies toward Syria eventually led to a coup d'état in that country and the end of the alliance in 1961. Meanwhile, the decline of Abdel Nasser's Pan-Arabism and nationalist policies intensified after the 1967 defeat of the Arab states by the Israeli regime. Another important point of Nasser's attitude towards regionalism was that it was competitive with other Arab countries in the region. King Hus-

sein's concerns about Jordan's growing power in the region prompted King Nasser to make a proposal to King Faisal of Iraq to form an alliance against Egypt and Syria. Acceptance of this proposal by King Faisal led to the establishment of the "Arab Federation" consisting of Jordan and Iraq in February 1958; However, this federation, with the July 1958 coup in Iraq and the overthrow of King Faisal, was only enough for a few months (Sayigh, 1961, pp. 487-507).

### **The evolution of Iran's role in the security crises of West Asia**

The West Asian region has been plagued by a number of security crises since 2001. But these crises are rooted in the security issue of Palestine and Israel, the Iraq war and the Arab uprising. These three crises can be divided into three parts according to its roots: hard, semi-hard and soft. What is certain is that the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a new discourse in the region, has used different methods in the face of these three super-crises. What can be clearly seen in these three super-crises is the efforts of regional countries to deepen the presence of extra-regional forces. This has turned the issue of security into an issue of identity in the case of the Arab uprising. In the security crisis of the Arab uprising that led to the overthrow of the regimes in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, religion and Arabism as two identity frameworks in the Arab region became the boundary between one another and the creation of a framework outside of individual thinking.

Saddam Hussein changed the most important ideological principles of the Ba'ath party while implementing his tribal policies. Saddam Hussein's tribal politics began shortly after the party came to power in July 1968, but experienced a major leap in the late 1980s and early 1990s. First, instead of eli-

minating the tribal sheikh as a socio-political force, as dictated by the party doctrine, he sought to manipulate the sheikhs; And through a process of socialization, turn them into obedient tools in the service of the regime. Second, he distanced himself more sharply from the party tradition, turning tribal elders into legitimate partners for the division of power (Bram, 1997, p. 1). Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, sectarianism has risen from the bottom to the top in regional politics. This issue became acute after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, as well as the Arab uprisings. The transformation of religion into an element of security crisis in creating a terrorist identity in the sense of holy terror, which eventually led to the suicide of fellow believers in the form of terrorist groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra; It plays an important role that was able to change the ideological form of thinking in response to the crisis. In fact, the security of religion through the conflicting identities of regional actors, two rival religious identities of Iran and Saudi Arabia, relying on the framework of dignity, glory, shame and return to pure Islam, began to create a new security structure in the region. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's direct presence in the Yemeni crisis and efforts to increase the presence of extra-regional forces by Saudi-affiliated governments in the region's crises have paved the way for Iran to create identity frameworks for playing in the region.

Distrust of some Arab countries in Iran Another issue of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the face of security crises is the lack of trust of some countries in the region in security issues. This has led countries in the region to strike a balance of defense with Iran in an effort to increase the presence of extra-regional forces, increase military spending, and build defense alliances. The depth of

Arab countries' distrust of Iran's policies led to their disregard for Iran's security plans, and this was evident in the Omid plan (Peace of Hormoz) (Zaccara, 2019). On the other hand, this issue has led to an increasing effort to increase international pressure against Iran by the countries of the Persian Gulf region. The prevailing atmosphere of pessimism between Iran as a regional power and the GCC countries has led to the formation of deep differences that have made constructive interaction between them difficult. This issue (common interest in curbing the power of foreign enemies) has even led the countries of the region to make public relations with Israel as a framework for a new balance of power against Iran (Hoffman, 2020).

Israel's activities in the region, along with the increase in political-intelligence cooperation with Arab countries, which was rebuilt after the Arab uprising and became public in 2020; It has been able to speed up the Iranian military-intelligence siege in Syria and the escalation of the crisis in Syria, delaying the arrival of Lebanese Hezbollah with precision-guided missiles. On the other hand, the presence of Russia, the United States and Turkey in the Syrian security crisis could limit Iran in shaping Syria and Iraq as part of its sphere of influence. However, in the security crises of the region, the Islamic Republic of Iran seeks to create a unique endogenous security, economic and political system that can generate power by creating strategic ambiguity in the region. In fact, years of economic sanctions, armaments, and the centralization of Iran's economy, along with widespread institutionalization to manage strategic tensions between the IRGC and government institutions, have led to; So that the Islamic Republic of Iran can to some extent adapt to regional crises and find a way to improve the situation and increase

its power in the region. In general, the Islamic Republic's conflict with the security crises in West Asia since 2001 has caused; That Iran, despite obstacles such as sanctions, economic problems and internal security, which at every moment activated the ethnic faults of this country, continues to become an active to a semi-active security player in the region.

Despite its limitations and weaknesses, Iran manages to maintain and turn threats into opportunities that maintain not only the survival of the regime, but also its regional influence. Tehran has the patience to fulfill its aspirations and is very determined and pragmatic along with having a well-written plan with strategic patience. Over the past four decades, the country's leaders have adapted their strategies to meet new challenges. Iran's security strategy in West Asia has been largely driven by the ruling domestic actors and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These actors are a leading force behind the creation, expansion and preservation of Shiite identity in the region, which is interpreted by political experts as the Shiite crescent. The presence of Hezbollah and the Houthis, as well as Shiite groups in Iraq and Syria, extends through the allied regions. Important determinants of Iran's security strategy are both internal, such as Imam Khomeini's thinking and the principle of exporting the Islamic Revolution throughout the region. This view has led to the emergence of two informal alliances between pro-Iranian and pro-Shiite factions on the one hand and the Arab-Israeli-US-led regimes on the other over the past decade. Russia and Turkey, which each seek a pragmatic view and tend to be more pragmatic, have cooperated with both sides, although in recent years they have preferred to work with Iran.

### **US-Russia regional rivalry in West Asia**

Russian and American perceptions of strategic partners A serious point in Russia's new geopolitics, both in the world and especially in the region of Southwest Asia, is that Moscow has almost no deep strategic alliance with any country; Rather, it has coalitions that it will use in accordance with the circumstances and developments (Sariolghalam, 2016, p. 119). Russia does not have the same ideological view of southwest Asia as the Soviet era does with the current US era. Now, for example, one of the salient features of Russia's presence in Southwest Asia compared to Soviet times is that Russia does not have a clear ideological agenda for doing so. That is, Russia, given the realm of politics, does not think about what kind of makeup would be right for it. Moscow is interested in Southwest Asia, a region that can strengthen its economic and political presence and also ensure that Southwest Asia does not have security problems for post-Soviet or Russian countries.

Eri Buzan and Ole Wæver believe that the main feature of the pattern of hostility and conflict in Southwest Asia, like the pattern of friendship in this region, is "complexity and multidimensionality" (Buzan, 2010, p. 104). In Southwest Asia, they find it difficult for any actor, whether local or global, to support another actor against a common enemy without simultaneously threatening a friendly third party" (Buzan, 2010, p. 129). Because of this complex situation, any outside power that enters the equations and problems of Southwest Asia usually cannot be neutral and will inevitably face friends and enemies; Of course, experience has shown that their friendship and enmity can be volatile (due to the complexity of the pattern of friendship and enmity in Southwest Asia). Overall, Russia has tried to avoid engaging in a complex

pattern of friendship and hostility in Southwest Asia, and has been relatively successful in this regard as well; To the extent that the Israelis look at Russia as a "silent partner"; The Iranians are looking for strategic relations with Russia and in some cases even consider the current level of relations with Moscow to be strategic; The UAE is considering strategic relations with Russia; Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who visited Russia in late May 2017, said that Saudi-Russian relations are moving towards their best moments of all time (Kozhanov & Issaev, 08/24/2017). Turkey and Russia have announced that they seek to deepen strategic relations (Mercouris, 27/05/2017).

Thus, it can be said that Russia has been largely successful in circumventing the pattern of friendship and enmity in the Middle East. Contrary to Russia's tactical and contingent approach in cooperating with other actors in the international arena as well as in the Southwest Asia region; The United States has bilateral and multilateral military, security, and political alliances and alliances with various countries around the world. Over the past century, the United States has entered into joint military and security alliances in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the Pacific. In addition to including Turkey in NATO, and despite not having a bilateral defense agreement with Israel, the United States has far more strategic relations with Israel than Turkey. Israel has received about \$ 3 billion in annual aid from the United States since 1985 and has partnered with the United States to build and assemble the most advanced and confidential military and weapons technology.

According to Stephen Walt (Harvard University) and John Mearsheimer (University of Chicago), both Jewish and prominent US international relations experts; Currently, the

most important factor influencing Israel in determining US foreign policy is the US-Israel Public Relations Committee (IPC), which actively shapes US foreign policy in support of Israel (BBC / 03/15/2015). Other US strategic partners in Southwest Asia include the Gulf Cooperation Council. The United States has very close military ties, including arms sales to those countries, military bases, joint military exercises, and agreements on joint threats (External threat to the territorial integrity of any of these countries contrary to the Charter of the United Nations) with those countries. Although there is no military-security treaty between the United States and these countries that would give them unequivocal mutual support; But the level of political, military, security and economic cooperation between the United States and the GCC countries is broad, long-term and purposeful. This has caused their relationship to take on a strategic aspect. The result of this difference in behavior between Russia and the United States has been that US allies have more security on the part of the United States in dangerous security and military situations. The United States, based on its exceptionalism, global mission, and concept of absolute power and security, justifies its presence in various parts of the world; And countries such as Europe, Israel, Turkey, and the Gulf Cooperation Council are widely supported by the United States as actors, both within the Central Asian region and as foreign actors supporting some US policies in the region.

Thus, Americans' perceptions of actors in Southwest Asia are defined in terms of strategic friends and allies, rivals, and enemies. Russia, on the other hand, does not have friendly and strategic relations with any of the countries in the South-West Asian region and is defined in the form of fluid and coop-

erative relations based on time and / or strategic periods, rivals and enemies. While Russia does not have friendly and strategic relations with any of the countries in the Southwest Asia region; And in the form of fluid and cooperative relations based on time periods and monitoring opportunities and threats, participates and cooperates with some countries, including Iran, Syria, Turkey and Israel. Also, unlike the United States, which has defined enemies such as Iran in front of its strategic friends and allies, Russia has relations with Iran's rivals such as Turkey and Qatar, and with its enemies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia at various levels. Thus, Russia's view is not the same as the American view, ideological and based on a strategic alliance with certain friends.

#### **Consequences of competitions for Iran**

Iran's mission and role politically in the regional and international order is the arena of competition between Russia and the United States. Over the past two decades, Iran has been an influential element in regional trends, and Russia has sought to use this Iranian influence to compete; On the other hand, the United States has also tried to prevent this role and Iran from entering Russia's political arena and foreign policy lines.

Iran is an important piece in the puzzle of strategic considerations between Russia and the United States. Iran, as an important power in the West Asian region, can become one of the most important challenges for the common goals and interests of Russia and the United States in the region; Therefore, the United States has become a threat and Russia has become a strategic ally with Iran. This could deter Iran from increasing its deterrent power in the region. If that happens, the United States could pursue its main goals, which include building an Arab NATO, in-

creasing the security of the Zionist regime, and continuing the normalization process with Israel in the absence of a serious response from Iran. On the other hand, the consensus between Russia and Iran is based on a precise interpretation of geopolitical and strategic priorities, which is based on similar perceptions of the world order. Also, the post-Cold War world order, which established the hegemony of US positions, makes strategic alignment between Moscow and Tehran inevitable.

Russia is also positioning itself as Iran's partner in the region. Russia is trying to gain a foothold in the future arms market in the region by using the equipment it provides to Iran. Russia, on the other hand, can provide its technological capability through Israel. It could open the door to Jewish investors in Russia by using Iran to restrain Israel. Given the above, Iran could be a big card in Russia's hands to use in its current and future conflicts with the United States.

Iran's relations with Russia are crucial given the role of the two countries in the geostrategic regions of the Middle East and Central Eurasia and the mutual interests of both sides in this vast area; And the role of Iran and Russia in these two regions obliges the two governments to cooperate in the face of existing and emerging threats. Naturally, as long as the rules of the game in the international system are based on the game of power and spheres of influence and the great game of powers to maintain spheres of influence; Regional cooperation and cooperation is also a basic principle for ensuring national interests and security, and establishing balance in foreign relations is necessary to ensure interests and stabilize relations with important actors at the regional level. Both countries are concerned about the intervention of supra-regional powers, and both are

advocates for the preservation of the regional geopolitical status quo, as well as for independent, recognized states with national sovereignty. Both countries are concerned about radicalism and terrorism and are cooperating on this issue, and it can be considered the most important area of cooperation between the two countries in this area. Therefore, cooperation between Iran and Russia in regional crises has been an important and effective issue (Karami, 2018, p. 87).

From a structural point of view, Russia is of particular importance to Iran due to its high nuclear and military capabilities. Given Iran's limited supply of the weapons it needs; Russia is important to Iran as a country with high-quality weapons. Russia is also a good economic partner for Iran. Because after the dual containment strategy, the Damato plan, and the economic sanctions of the last decade (before JCPOA and after that in the form of maximum pressure), Iran has come under pressure from all sides; And has sought a way through which he can escape complete isolation. And in order to neutralize US hostile policies to isolate Iran, Russia is the best choice as a neighbor of Iran. Russia also needs financial revenues from the sale of technology, military weapons, energy and gas to rebuild its economy; Therefore, it seeks to strengthen relations with activists opposed to the unipolar and unilateralist system of the United States, including Iran (Jafari and Taghinejad, 2012, p. 75).

The historical evolution of relations between the great powers and other active government units in the international system causes some unique strategic components in the behavior of the great powers to gradually gain legitimacy despite the negative reaction of some other state actors. An understanding of a great power of its economic, political and military capabilities - which has also

been reproduced in a historical process of social interaction with other countries - can shape the nature of that state's behavior and activism in the international arena. It seemed to pay attention to defining Iran's position with Russia and the United States at the international strategic level.

Until the outbreak of World War II, the United States pursued an isolationist policy toward developments in Europe. At the same time, its interaction with its allies and rivals beyond Latin America led it to declare war on allied nations in World War II - Germany, Italy and Japan. The key role of the United States in the victory of the Allies in the war, which was also acknowledged by other Allied countries. In addition to its awareness of its military, political, and economic capabilities, it has led the United States to play a key role in softening the post-World War II internationally and in the Economic-Burton Woods and political-UN areas. During the Cold War, too, military and economic capabilities were far more dynamic than in war-torn European economies and the atomic bomb; It prompted US joint engagement with Europe and the Soviet Union to, in a short time, make it the central hub of the Western bloc and the originator of regional security initiatives in Europe, such as NATO. This identity stems in part from US interaction with European governments and, consequently, their encouragement to pursue deterrence against the Soviet threat from the United States; And the continuation of interaction with the Soviet Union and the change in the union nature of relations between the two countries during World War II was to produce an international construct of the Cold War. In the meantime, identity, beyond the capabilities of forces such as competition or cooperation, can be a factor for the survival of alliances. Accordingly, the common

norms and values between the member states of an alliance can increase the likelihood of that alliance surviving in the long run (Limonis, 2012, pp. 30-36). From this perspective, Iran provides international alliances and alliances and networks that bring together great powers. It is important for Russia not to be in the security and strategic puzzle of the West and the United States, and for the United States to remain neutral in the Russian game.

Russia and Iran are cooperating militarily, economically and diplomatically, and contrary to conventional analysis, which shows that non-democratic countries such as Russia, Iran and China are constantly pursuing strategic goals in their foreign policy. Emphasizes that the convergence of Syria's foreign policy with Russia (Soviet Union before 1989) and the prospects of Iran's regions after 1979 are based on new realities and changes in US foreign policy in the Mena region (Heto, 2019, p.2).

Iran's efforts to maintain and expand its influence in West Asia in a number of ways undermine US democracy and human rights in the region. For Americans, its support for militant groups such as Hezbollah undermines nonviolent and democratic political actors in the region. Its influence in Iraq after the fall of Saddam's regime, as well as in its fight against ISIS, has shaped forces that have weakened institutions close to the United States, especially the Iraqi army. Throughout these events, Iran, with its interpretations of democracy and the right to self-determination, has sought to protect and legitimize authoritarian and non-liberal allies (Sajjadpour and Talebpour, 2014, p. 44).

In general, Iran and Russia give priority to maintaining the sovereignty of states in the discussion of universal values and principles (In the post-World War I era, especially after

the collapse of the Soviet Union and US-Western humanitarian intervention in the 1990s) constructed in the structure of international politics in the two-pronged competition of the right of nations to self-determination or non-interference in sovereignty. And they condemn Western interference not only in the internal affairs of their own country, but also in the countries around them in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and West Asia. And they strongly avoid pro-democracy revolutions in Western democracies. Because they see it as a tool used by the US-led ideological system and the powers in the Atlantic to serve the interests of the West. Iran's leaders, like their Kremlin counterparts, believe that international norms are based on two criteria aimed at consolidating the hegemony of Western powers. Russia sees Iran as a credible player in its efforts to strengthen its alliance against global domination and hopes that this will lead to the emergence of an alternative architecture for world affairs. Even Iran and Russia sided with the pro-US and pro-Western insurgents and forces in Venezuela to survive, and supported each other with political, military and economic means.

### **Consequences of competitions for Iran Iran's Nuclear Program**

Iran's nuclear program has been one of the most influential areas for the past two decades, which has led to cooperation, competition, and interaction between Russia and the United States. Of course, the analysis of this issue should be done in two stages. In the first step, it is important that from a structural point of view, ideological motives are of the highest importance in strengthening Iran's nuclear program. According to this analysis, this development agenda is intertwined with Iran's historical emphasis on nationalism and regional status, as well as the need to gain

Islamic credibility at the domestic and regional levels. First, the nuclear program has allowed Iran to demonstrate an awakening of national pride. Many Iranians see access to nuclear capability as part of their national right, and the government has used it as a means of mobilizing domestic and regional public opinion.

Although under the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, every nation has the right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, this is debatable; From a structural point of view, it is due to uncertainty about each other's goals and intentions. In general, the answer revolves around the word peaceful and whether Iran's nuclear demands are civilian or military, or both; And we have seen the rivalry of major powers such as Russia, China and the United States, and even at times the emergence of emerging powers such as South Africa, Brazil and Turkey.

According to the constructivist theory, negative identities have caused a confrontation between Iran and the United States, which is rooted in the historical history of relations between the two countries. On the issue of nuclear, we witnessed two conflicting Iranian identities versus American ones, which causes a conflict in the interests of the two countries in the international arena (Tor-kashvand and Ghorjili, 2013, pp. 74-75).

The issue of Iran's nuclear program is important from a thematic perspective in Russia-US interactions. Over the past two decades, since the start of the Iran nuclear crisis, Russia has used the issue as a bargaining chip with the United States. In this regard, Russia, in the context of protecting foreign markets and regional partners and preventing the weakening of national sovereignty by US unilateral actions outside international institutions; Has tried to prevent the harsh actions of the United States and to limit it to some

extent (Karami, 2010, p. 185). In general, Russia opposes any action outside the framework of international institutions and unilaterally by the United States. Therefore, any action, if it does not have international legitimacy, does not help to solve international problems (Karami, 2005, 59).

The West-Iran conflict over its nuclear program, as well as the issue of Russia's cooperation and rivalry with the United States over it, can also be explained through the role of any actor in contemporary international politics. Constructivism states that there is no fundamental law that dictates the actions of a country, but that these actions are the natural expansion of the plans they have made for themselves and each other with past actions in their common history. Iran has created two roles for itself; One of the oppressed (Iran's self-concept) - a nation that simply wants to peacefully achieve nuclear power (which many other nations have already achieved). And another provocative factor (Western perspective) - a country that challenges Western political control. For Western countries and their allies (European Union, Israel, United States, etc.) two roles can be envisaged; The image that Westerners and Americans present is that it wants to help Iran pursue its peaceful goals in accordance with international law. And the other image is the severe punishment of Iran for its behavior contrary to the international laws of this country. While China and Russia often try to act as a sponsor, sometimes they have to agree with the second image of the West (punishing Iran's behavior) in order to appease the West (Dorman, 2013). Iran is violating international law by continuing to enrich uranium to the potential level of nuclear weapons production, as well as shortening the IAEA's inspections of the nuclear industry. For this reason, Russia, in terms of its re-

sponsibility and role as a great power, has opposed this behavior of Iran.

It should be noted that Russia has been skeptical of its relations with Iran since the early 20th century. Because Iran had not informed the country of the secret uranium enrichment at the Natanz and Fordow facilities, they only learned about it through Western intelligence in the early 2000s. This happened while Russia was the main supplier of Iranian nuclear technology. On the other hand, Iran was also dissatisfied with the delays of the Russians in building the Bushehr nuclear facilities and their slowness in selling the S-300 missile system (Esfandiari and Tabatabaei, 2018, p. 140). These issues show fluctuations in Russian-Iranian relations. The great sensitivity that the Iranians showed when announcing Russia's use of the infrastructure of the Nojeh base in Hamedan to facilitate participation in the Syrian war despite the conflict of interests, was partly in line with these fluctuations in bilateral relations (Esfandiari and Tabatabaei, 2018, p. 142). Russia has also seen the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant with Iran as a way to revive its nuclear industry, gain economic benefits, and revive its role in West Asia. Russia, while gaining economic benefits after the nuclear deal, was able to gain a foothold in numerous projects in West Asia in competition with Western and American powers. Russia has signed agreements with the governments of Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia to build nuclear power plants, as well as cooperation agreements with Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman. As a rule, Russia's interpretation of its role in West Asia - that is, a government that seeks to help countries pursue their peaceful goals in accordance with international law - is based on past experience with Iran. With this interpretation, it has nar-

rowed the competition for the United States in nuclear cooperation with West Asian countries.

Russia, on the other hand, has sought to define itself as a responsible superpower vs the United States by actively participating in the nuclear negotiations, the implementation of the UN Security Council, and condemning the Trump administration's behavior after leaving the UN Security Council in 2018. Russia remains an important partner in Iran's international policy due to its permanent membership in the Security Council and the guarantor of the Comprehensive Joint Action Plan on Iran's 2015 nuclear program. And it has backed its stance on US and European positions on the implementation of the nuclear deal and US sanctions. The nuclear deal is in the calculations because it allows Russia to strengthen Iran, which helps maintain a balance of power in West Asia. JCPOA also removes UN Security Council restrictions and allows Russian leaders to work much more openly with Tehran on developments in West Asia. At the same time, it gives the country the flexibility to present itself as a permanent option for Iran in the region. The approach of Iran and the United States and the exchange of messages between them in different periods to resume negotiations or reduce tensions is apparently welcomed by Russia, but there is something else inside. Because if Washington and Tehran talk and their relations move to normal, it means limiting Russia's growing political and economic role in the region and in Iran.

### **Iran competes with Russia for arms sales to the United States**

The constructivism, the international economic order and system governing the economic, financial and trade relations of states is not a consequence imposed by market

forces; Rather, it recognizes a construct of the process of interaction of social norms, national identity, and consequently expectations, the distinct goals and interests of states. In addition, in the field of economics, the state is still an important agency from a structural point of view, whose priorities are not determined according to the liberalism view of internal political confrontations, nor according to the realism view by bearing the anarchist pressure in the form of self-help. Constructivism, on the other hand, relies on the belief that the priorities of each state can be different from other states, depending on the interaction between domestic communities or states or international norms related to legitimate action. In the next step, the resources that shape the economic behavior and performance of governments are also very important in a constructivist approach. Contrary to the liberal view of materialistic motives or the realistic view of differences in the relative strength of states and their quest for security; He considers the constructivism of politics as a result of international norms and institutions, domestic cultural norms and national identity (Abdullah, 2009: pp. 65-66). It is important to evaluate the Russian-American arms race over or in relation to Iran. In this regard, identities and norms lead them to a unique interpretation of the goals of economic activity or arms competition with Iran and Iran with them.

It is noteworthy that the Iranian army reorganized during the Pahlavi era and after the coup of August 19, 1953, and was gradually influenced by American markets. Since then, the organization of the army has changed from British and French equipment to American equipment. Of course, perhaps the root of this can be traced to two basic issues. The first is the increase in oil prices in world markets and the second is Iran's mem-

bership in the CENTO Pact, which was actually formed to counter the Eastern Bloc along with Pakistan, Turkey, Iraq and the United Kingdom as the front line against the Eastern Bloc, especially the Soviet Union. In other words, the Iranian military was known as a Western army. The Iranian arms embargo imposed by the United States in the early months of the Islamic Republic's victory, along with the start of the imposed war, prompted the Iranian military to seek creativity and self-sufficiency in armaments (Eisenstadt, 2001). The collapse of the Soviet Union provided Iran with the first step in security and arms cooperation with Russia. Meanwhile, Iran was able to use this opportunity to supply part of its needs from Russia and start long-term security and weapons projects with this country. In 1992, Iran made defense purchases from Russia, and the two countries broke off, albeit again under US pressure on the ruling Atlanticists in Moscow; But since Putin took office in 2000, Iran-Russia arms cooperation has entered a new phase. This year, arms sales for a period of 10 years' worth more than \$ 3 billion, as well as training of Iranian forces and engineers in Russian military academies were reached (Amiri, 2008, pp. 257-258).

After the Arab uprising in 2011 and the beginning of the developments in the Arab countries, the relations between Iran and Russia became closer, but in terms of strategic relations with Iran, Moscow leaders have shown different behaviors. However, the extensive cooperation between Iran and Russia in various fields has raised the two countries to the level of two strategic allies (Khoshnood, 2019). But among the elites of the two countries, most of this is interpreted as cross-cutting and tactical opportunities. On the one hand, Russia is deeply concerned about the improvement of Iran's relations with the

West, and Russia's political elites believe that Iran will ultimately prefer cooperation with the West to cooperation with Russia; On the other hand, Iran's elites have always considered Russia an unreliable country that has always benefited from Iran's differences with the West. In the meantime, the issue of arming and equipping the Islamic Republic of Iran with Russian weapons is important. Since arms deals are a strategic deal, we cannot easily address this issue.

One of the most important reasons that can be mentioned as Russia's desire to equip Iran with weapons is the increase of Iran's dependence on this country. As a strategic country in the region, Iran can link Russia to the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia. This has led Russia to think more and more about deepening economic, security and geopolitical relations with Iran. On the one hand, this will increase Russia's strategic depth in the geopolitical region of the Persian Gulf, and on the other hand, it will deepen its direct presence in West Asia. This issue, along with joint security and political issues such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Syria and Yemen, and Russia's desire to increase its influence in Iran through arms deals has been growing. On the other hand, by increasing its influence in Iran, Russia has been able to become a lever to reduce the military confrontation between Iran and the Zionist regime (Geranmayeh, 2019).

Because Iran and Russia, in addition to purchasing military equipment from each other, have defined joint defense and weapons projects. The countries bordering the Persian Gulf are also seeking to equip themselves with Russian weapons along with other weapons to strengthen and stabilize the balance of power in the region (Geranmayeh, 2019). This has led to an increase in the purchase of Russian weapons among the Arab

countries of the Persian Gulf. Such are the arms deals between Riyadh and Moscow. The US interest in the conflict with Russia is debatable in terms of arms sales. On the one hand, the United States finds it difficult to try to return to the Iranian arms market, and on the other hand, it exploits the security of the Iranian case in West Asia to sell American weapons to West Asian countries. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the 8-year war, the United States, which considered Iran as its base in the region, tried to place Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf countries as its base in the region, so the Persian Gulf countries became American bases. Meanwhile, Russia's presence in the region's conflicts with Iran, along with its differences with that country, could be in the interests of the United States.

The United States has been able to increase its influence in the Persian Gulf countries by spreading Iranophobia in the region. The result of this influence has been the increase of military bases on the one hand, the increase of arms sales and the creation of an integrated defense system. The United States is working to transform the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council into a kind of Arab NATO in the region by establishing an integrated defense system in the Gulf states. This issue will be strengthened when a joint security agreement is signed between these countries and the Zionist regime.

In a way, in the interests of the United States in the region, it can be seen that the United States and Russia are in a clear division of labor trying to divide West Asia. Meanwhile, Iran, as one of the influential regional powers, can become one of the challenges of the new regional order. Hence, the United States is trying to achieve its goals in the region by increasing Russia's influence in Iran (Grajowski, 2020).

### Conclusion

Iran's position in the complex and complex security environment of West Asia is linked to its independent and non-aligned foreign policy, which opposes hegemony, power politics and a unipolar world; And it wants to develop its relations with all countries except Israel on the basis of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit. During these two decades, he sometimes advocated dialogue between different civilizations and at one point advocated the establishment of a new international political and economic order in a fair and just manner. It opposes Western interference, especially by the United States, in the internal affairs of West Asia under the pretext of democracy, freedom, human rights, and disarmament. He also believes that Israel is the main source of tension in the Middle East, supports the just struggle of the Palestinian people for the liberation of the occupied territories, and opposes Arab-Israeli peace talks, including the Century Deal or the normalization of Arab relations with the government. Iranian leaders believe that peace and security in the Persian Gulf should be achieved by the neighboring countries through cooperation. In this regard, Iran opposes foreign intervention and the deployment of American forces in the Persian Gulf.

Developments in the Arab world over the past two decades have had a major impact on Iran's position in West Asia. From September 11 to the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan; Fundamental differences with the US presence in West Asia, the Arab uprisings, and the rise of ISIS have all led Iran to further develop its foreign policy. In short, Iran's strengths include military power, the cohesion of the Shiite alliance, and Iran's proven military capabilities and proxies. Its weaknesses include conventional military weakness, significant war erosion, and the practic-

al nature of its alliances with the classic form of state-centeredness, including Syria, Russia, and Turkey. Russia is essential to challenging US sovereignty over Iran as part of its strategic project. In the last two decades, and especially in West Asia, the Syrian civil war has been an important factor in the expansion of diplomatic and military interactions between them. In Central Asia and the South Caucasus, the willingness of the two sides to resist the presence of the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) led to cooperation and interaction between the two countries.

Over the past decade and after the Arab uprisings and US pressures under the Trump administration, relations between Russia and Iran have deepened in terms of military and economic relations and diplomatic support. At the military level, as a result of Iran's exposure to US pressure and international sanctions, Russian arms sales to Iran have increased, which is the most important variable at the level of bilateral relations; Because Iran has become the third largest recipient of Russian weapons after China and India. The main goal of Iran-Russia cooperation is to control the expansion of regional influence and end US development at various levels (political, economic, security and cultural) and various international regions (including Central Asia, the Caucasus, West Asia, North Africa and even Latin America and South America). Since the Islamic Revolution and Russia immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran has sought to challenge US control individually as well as through cooperation, partnership, and alliance in the world in West Asia and elsewhere.

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