

## The Influence of the Axis of Resistance on the Balance of Power in the Middle East 2002-2020

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### Abstract

The axis of resistance, which consists of Iran, Syria, Lebanon's Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, and Yemen's Ansarullah Movement, is known as one of the most influential powers in the region. The expansion of the axis of resistance provided many benefits and opportunities for the Islamic Republic of Iran, among which was the deepening of the military and strategic geography of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the improvement of the internal and external power balance of this country. This research aims to investigate the impact of the axis of resistance on the balance of power in the Middle East region between 2002 and 2020, using the theoretical framework of the balance of power and neo-realist ideas and based on the descriptive-analytical method, and by using library and internet resources, it tries to answer the question of how the axis of resistance has influenced the security (balance of power) of the Middle East during the years 2002 to 2020? The results show that the resistance axis by overcoming extremist and Salafist groups, and Western regional allies, including Turkey and Saudi Arabia, has led to the superiority of the balance of power in favor of the resistance axis from 2002 to 2020.

**Keywords:** Resistance, Iran, Middle East, Neo-realism, Balance of power

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## Introduction

ethnic and religious diversity has always been the scene of regional and transregional power competitions. Before World War I, Iran and the Ottoman Empire, as leaders of the Shia and Sunni movements, were competing independently with each other for a superior regional position. After World War II, with the rise of bipolar governance and the Cold War, the United States replaced Britain as the new regional power. During this period, regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt did not play an independent regional role but rather executed the policies of the United States and the former Soviet Union. Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey were considered Western allies, while Egypt, Syria, and Iraq were seen as Eastern allies. The events from 2000 to 2020, including the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, followed by the Arab Spring, fundamentally shifted the balance of power in the region. This has posed a security dilemma for regional countries, and this research aims to examine the balance of power in the Middle East from 2002 to 2020 using a descriptive-analytical method, emphasizing security complex theory and without bias, and to propose solutions to enhance Iran's power. The main question is how the Axis of Resistance has influenced the security (balance of power) in the Middle East from 2002 to 2020.

## Research background

There are sources related to this research that have explored the topic of this article. Among them are:

Askari Kermani and Moeinabadi Bidegli (2021) in the article "Investigating the Security Complex of the Middle East and

Understanding Alliances and Threats with an Emphasis on the Role of the Axis of Resistance in its Relations." Hashempour and colleagues (2021) in the article "Identity Formation of the Islamic Revolution of Iran towards the Axis of Islamic Resistance (Case Study: Hezbollah in Lebanon)." Baqeri and colleagues (2021) in the article "The Impact of the Axis of Resistance on the Strategic Depth of the Islamic Republic of Iran." Nouri (2020) in the article "Challenges to Hegemonic Order, Stability, and Balance in the Middle East; Opportunities for Iran and Russia." Adami and Keshavarz Moghadam (2015) in the article "The Position of the Security Complex of the Axis of Resistance in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran." Kamali Dolatabadi (2013) in the thesis on "The Application of the Balance of Power Theory in Organizing the Structure of Regional Security Complexes (Case Study: Middle East Security Complex)." Alaee (2012) in the article "Analysis of Changes in the Balance of Power in the Middle East Following Popular Uprisings in Arab Countries." These are some of the most important sources in this field.

## Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical framework used in this research is based on security-centric nature and the perception of regional powers in the Middle East that consider other influences as threats. The neoclassical realism theory, encompassing both offensive and defensive realism, is employed. Neoclassical realism, covering all levels of analysis and incorporating concepts of balance of power and threat balance, effectively explains the confrontation and balance between the Shia-Sunni axes, particularly focusing on Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Balance of power has a close relationship with the intellectual school of realism. This thought's logic originates from the structure of an anarchic international system. Anarchy is a self-help system where states are compelled to prioritize their security and independence. In pursuing their independence and security, states, in the face of any power-seeking central development that threatens control, unite against it. Therefore, balance of power is perceived as a mechanical tendency in the behavior of states (McLean, 2002: p. 61).

Realists argue that an increase in the power of one country poses a serious threat to the survival of other countries. Consequently, other countries strive to counterbalance that power increase. A state's inclination to enhance power implies that if successful, the state can dominate other states, ending the diversity of players and the resulting anarchy emerging from that diversity. However, since states are not inclined to accept superior power, they react to such movements.

Many researchers in international relations examine Middle Eastern country relations based on a realist model. For example, Joseph Nye believes that global country relations do not adhere to a single pattern. While relations between Western countries, such as the United States and Canada or the European Union, follow a liberalist pattern, Middle Eastern country relations are closer to a realist pattern (balance of power). He points to the relations between Israel and Syria as an example (Nye, 2004, p.188). Considering the intensely realistic nature of the Middle East and the absence of regional security structures, realism provides the best option for organizing and formulating its security policy (Spiegel, 2001).

The belief is that the balance of power in the region occurs when none of the regional players gain power superiority. If a power in the

regional environment attains surplus power, the regional power balance will change. These conditions also prevail in the Middle East (Mossalanejad, 2011: p.p. 158-131).

The Axis of Resistance, led by the Islamic Republic of Iran, as one of the subsets of stable security in the Middle East, is worth examining. The existence of at least two influential actors (Iran and Syria), geographic proximity, and shared identity factors (culture, race, ethnicity) have made the Axis of Resistance not only a subset of Middle Eastern security but perhaps the most important and stable one. A unique component influencing the characteristics of the Axis of Resistance's security complex in the Middle East is the social construction of the region. Within this anarchic structure, beyond power relations, patterns of friendship and enmity also play a role in determining the fundamental structure and nature of the security complex in this region. This shows that these patterns have been created through influence, interests, and conflicting identities in the fundamental structure of the regional security complex (Buzan and Viore, 2009: p. 210).

The regional security order in the post-Cold War era fundamentally has more independence compared to the regional security order during the Cold War and before. Scholars in the field of security and international relations have paid considerable attention to this issue, placing it at the center of their focus. Barri Buzan is one of these scholars who, in his book "People, States, and Fear" in 1983, first introduced his theory of regional security complex. In the following sections, an examination of this theory, along with the possibilities and tools provided to researchers in the field of regional security, to analyze and

scrutinize security issues in geographical areas, has been placed on the agenda.

### **Historical Application of Power Balance:**

The mechanism of power balance has historically prevailed in Europe during the periods of 1648-1789 and 1815-1914. The signing of the Peace of Westphalia treaty in 1648 marked the beginning of the power balance in Europe. Its effects included "independence and equality of nations," "non-interference of the Pope and the Church in the internal affairs of European governments," "formation of international law and its observance," and "power balance." The solution of power balance prevented the occurrence of extensive wars and the emergence of a dominant power until 1789. The consequences of the French Revolution in that year led to the expansionist ambitions of Napoleon Bonaparte, disrupting the balance. With Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and the establishment of the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the balance was restored, continuing until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. (Behzadi, 1997: p. 57)

### **Objectives and Functions of Maintaining Power Balance:**

Generally, maintaining the balance of power has several historical functions considered essential objectives for members and main actors in this system. These functions include:

Preventing the transformation of the system into a global empire.

Preserving the independence of states in specific regions (through the existence of local balance systems).

Maintaining the existing order (preserving the current situation rather than changing it).

Providing a conducive environment for the functioning of institutions that strive to create order (such as diplomacy, management of great power, and international law, etc.). However, balance generally requires action against a government that increases its power, either legitimately or illegitimately. (Qasemi, 2005: p. 79)

### **Axis of Resistance in the Middle East:**

The Islamic Republic of Iran, as a country that strategically experienced hardship during the years of the Iraq War, has come to believe that it can only preserve its security through power superiority and influence. This strategic action, through a conceptual, abstract, and strategic framework, involves creating and strengthening groups loyal and committed to its anti-Zionist and anti-American ideology. It also involves establishing military bases for resistance groups, strengthening their military power, and forming alliances with like-minded countries, alongside maintaining internal power balance. The term "Axis of Resistance" was first used when George Bush, the President of the United States, in February 2002, called Iran, Iraq, and North Korea an "axis of evil." Responding to this stance, the Libyan magazine Al-Zahf Al-Akhḍar referred to these countries not as an "axis of evil" but as an "Axis of Resistance" against the United States (Karimi, 2017: p. 2).

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, for the first time in August 1993, spoke about the Islamic Resistance Front during a meeting with Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah Lebanon, considering it a result of Israeli aggressions that, by their invasion of Lebanon, not only did not achieve their political and military goals but also led to the unity and solidarity of the people (Khamenei, 1993).

### **The identity of the resistance-oriented security complex**

Undoubtedly, identity is one of the most important components of regional security systems and their sub-systems, which have also attracted the attention of Copenhagen school thinkers. Theorists such as Barry Buzan and Wæver, as the founders of the Copenhagen school, emphasize the necessity of using normative signs of values, stability, culture and society in international politics, just like the identity norms of Iran's Islamic revolution that were explained in the late 1970s.

### **The anti-western view of the Islamic revolution and the axis of resistance**

Iran's Islamic revolution was a revolution against the western domination over Iran and the Middle East region, which contrast with the global bipolar system led by the Soviet Union and especially the United States can be seen in its slogan of neither East nor West and its practical behavior. On the other hand, the strategic goal of America in the Middle East region has been to preserve the existence of Israel. In the developments in the Middle East, Israel is a reliable and trusted option for the capitalist system and the United States at the head of it, which can maintain the existing order.

### **Islamic Identity – Shi'a Islamic Revolution and Axis of Resistance**

In analyzing the foreign policy behavior of the Islamic Republic of Iran and, consequently, the positions of the Axis of Resistance towards Israel, the Islamic-Shi'a identity of the Islamic Revolution has played and continues to play a determining role in defining interests and objectives of the foreign policy of the Islamic

Republic of Iran. The Iranians' sense of attachment to Islamic culture, ideas, and values, especially Shi'a, and their affiliation with a specific geographical-religious environment are among the most important identity-forming issues for the Islamic Revolution and the Axis of Resistance. The Iranian spirit and Shi'a religion are in the category of factors for the reproduction of political power in Iran. These components should be considered the main linguistic indicators of the language of Islamic resistance. This is the most crucial factor in generating resistance power in the political structure of Iran (Hutchinson, 2005: p. 31).

### **Historical Experience**

Among the identity sources of the Islamic Republic of Iran and other players in the Axis of Resistance, in addition to Islamic values, and anti-Western and anti-colonial sentiments, the historical experience of their nations towards Israel has been significant. For example, the specific perception and reception that the Iranian society had in 1979 and after towards contemporary history is a meaningful source within the current framework for the revolutionaries. The people of Iran and the policy-makers of the Islamic Republic of Iran perceive the contemporary history of Iran and its fate in the international relations system in the context of aggressive behavior by colonial powers, including the United States and its proxy, Israel, with a negative outlook (Mottaghi and Kazemi, 1386: 234).

### **Coalitions in the Middle East Security Complex**

The ongoing developments in the Middle East, marked by widespread tensions, indicate the

necessary groundwork for regional coalition-building.

Coalition and alliance-building are among the most important strategies of the actors in the Middle East security complex. The theory of coalition-building, influenced by game theory, suggests that states engage in creating alliances for the sake of gaining benefits and advantages. In this situation, the desirable form of distribution of interests and benefits within the alliance has become highly diverse, as elaborated in one of the most important definitions of Laov and Spencer, emphasizing the necessity of cooperation and alliance with other players in different periods and pursuing processes that lead to political mobilization and diversity in the strategic interaction process (Ahmadzadeh and colleagues, 1398: 6).

The Middle East Security Complex possesses all the components of a security complex mentioned earlier and aligns with regional security structures. However, we are here to identify political-security coalitions within this security complex.

### **Axis of Resistance Coalition**

The Axis of Resistance is a geopolitical regional coalition composed of both state actors (Iran, Iraq, and Syria) and non-state actors (Hezbollah in Lebanon, Ansarullah in Yemen, and Hamas) who share common national and ideological interests. They strive to play a role in the Middle East security complex with their independent and resistance-oriented policies (Same).

#### **Islamic Republic of Iran (Nuclear Axis of Resistance)**

The Islamic Republic of Iran, based on Islamic discourse and the slogan "Neither East nor West," not only identifies the ruling system as its greatest enemy but also emphasizes commonality with the Axis of Resistance.

#### **Iraq (Cradle of Civilization in the Axis of Resistance)**

The Arab populist model in Iraq, seen as an Arab Country where the Western model has been institutionalized, has led to the empowerment of Shi'as and the emergence of individuals and groups aligned with the U.S. and the established regime of Israel. Iraq's cooperation with the Axis of Resistance can pose a security challenge for other coalitions and jeopardize their interests (Qasemi, 2016: 22).

#### **Syria (Logistic Bridge in the Axis of Resistance)**

Due to its geographical and strategic position, Syria is considered one of the most important countries in the Middle East, playing a significant role in recent decades in regional developments.

#### **Hezbollah in Lebanon (Symbol of Stability in the Axis of Resistance)**

Hezbollah, as one of the powerful members of the Axis of Resistance, has always maintained close relations with other members, especially the Islamic Republic of Iran.

#### **Ansarullah in Yemen (Peacock in the Axis of Resistance)**

The geopolitics of Yemen, especially its strategic position in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait,

which is a route for oil shipments, has created special advantages for the Axis of Resistance.

### **Hamas (Sixth Side in the Axis of Resistance)**

Hamas has consistently been on the path of resistance and struggle to liberate Palestine from the occupation of the Israeli regime.

### **Sunni Bloc Coalition**

From the perspective of many analysts, the main goal of establishing this coalition is to address internal problems and conflicts within the Sunni world to confront a larger issue known as the Axis of Resistance and the Shi'a Crescent. The biggest concern of this coalition, led by Saudi Arabia, is the focus on Yemen. Therefore, efforts to form a Sunni coalition have become Saudi Arabia's primary concern to counter Iran and the Axis of Resistance.

### **Saudi Arabia (Designer and Founder of the Sunni Bloc Coalition)**

Saudi Arabia seeks to increase its regional influence in the Middle East. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has actively moved in various arenas to counter the coalition-building of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Axis of Resistance.

### **Jordan (Symbol of Life in the Sunni Bloc Coalition)**

Despite close ties with Saudi Arabia, Jordan is reluctant to play a prominent and important role in this coalition. However, in terms of intelligence cooperation and providing airports and military bases, Jordan contributes to the Sunni Bloc Coalition.

### **United Arab Emirates (High-Flying Member of the Sunni Bloc Coalition)**

In recent years, the United Arab Emirates has pursued support for the Sunni Bloc Coalition, especially in its involvement in the war against Ansarullah in Yemen.

### **Egypt (Logistic Force in the Sunni Bloc Coalition)**

Egypt's contribution to this coalition is more prominent on ideological and logistical fronts. Al-Azhar is the most prominent Sunni educational institution globally.

### **The Influence of the Resistance Axis on the Balance of Power Between 2002-2020**

One of the factors that should be considered in examining the structure of Middle Eastern relations is the debate on national interests and government-centric policies in the foreign policy of regional countries, which has consistently harmed their cooperation and relations. In other words, this variable weakens the characteristics and unifying features present in the region. The differences and conflicts created in the region over the national interests of governments versus the supra-national interests of the Arab nation clearly illustrate this. For example, in the Palestine-Israel conflict, Arab countries in the region can cooperate and unite based on their Arab identity to support Palestine and resolve the dispute in the direction of supra-national interests. However, when the variable of national interests and government-centricity in the foreign policy of these countries is brought up, the coordinated performance based on Arab identity may be weakened. For instance, Egypt and Jordan, despite being Arab, may act in line with their national interests and establish peaceful relations with Israel. (Ghahramanpour, 2007, p. 113)

The Middle East Security Complex, unlike the European Union Security Complex, is not homogeneous, and its internal coalitions not only do not cooperate and interact with each other but also constantly threaten each other. Therefore, due to the extensive dimensions of the transformations in the Middle East Security Complex, the theory of the security complex by Buzan seems to provide the clearest and most comprehensive analysis of events in the Middle East and the functioning of each of these coalitions.

With the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the regional influence of this country, the Middle East has been witnessing the presence of two major currents and coalitions for the past three decades, which have always been defined in confrontation with each other. The success of one in the region means a reduction in the influence of the other, and vice versa. These two axes are the Axis of Accord led by Riyadh and Cairo, which has made supporting Western interests and maintaining the current status quo in support of existing dictators its main agenda, and the Resistance Axis with the presence of Tehran, Damascus, Hezbollah, and Hamas, which have prioritized defending Palestinian ideals and confronting the prevailing system.

One of the most significant consequences of the collapse of the bipolar system is the importance of recognizing the roles of regions and the relative autonomy of regional levels in security discussions. Gradually, this transformation has become the focus of various theoretical approaches in the literature of international relations. One of these approaches to regional security is Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory. The main concern of this research is the issue of organizing the order and security of the regional system in this theory, and through the balance of power system, as one of the most effective and important types

of mechanisms for organizing regional order and security, this study examines how the function and application of the balance of power in organizing the order and security of regional security complexes work and what characteristics the policy-making and organization of the order and security of the Middle East Security Complex have based on the model derived from such functioning. In this regard, the central question of this research is how the function and application of the balance of power in organizing the order and security of regional security complexes are and, based on the derived model of such functioning, what characteristics the policy-making and organization of the order and security of the Middle East Security Complex have. To answer this question, it is hypothesized that the balance of power, as a theory in international relations and an applied system in the field of global and regional order, has two distinct and interdependent agendas under the headings of the balance of power security agenda based on the principle of division and the balance of power security agenda based on the principle of combination. Therefore, this model takes shape in the form of divisional and combinational balance, and in this regard, the Middle East Security Complex, as one of the most important security complexes, has two models of divisional and combinational balance of power based on the balance of power model.

The theory of balance of power in terms of geopolitics is the oldest, most enduring, and most contentious theory of international politics. However, there is no consensus on it. The meaning of balance of power has always been a source of disagreement; hence, analysts of international relations have been unable to agree on a single interpretation. Consequently, this theory has been strongly criticized. After addressing various semantic aspects of the

balance of power and categorizing it based on six parameters, including realism schools, the geographical scope of cultures and dictionaries, concentration or dispersion of power, and being hard or soft as well as being pervasive or classical; Several other topics such as historical application of the balance of power, methods of ensuring and maintaining the balance of power, and the goals and functions of maintaining the balance of power were also examined. Following that, presenting a logical model of the balance of power system and a physical model of this system became a priority in the work. Finally, regional security policymaking and security agenda based on the balance of power were discussed under this heading:

"Regional security policymaking refers to a set of decisions, policies, programs, and guidelines (referred to as security agendas) aimed at regulating, controlling, and organizing the problems, puzzles, security transactions, and pursuits faced by regional countries and regional systems and managing regional order.

It was also examined that one of the most important mechanisms of this policymaking is the balance of power and its two important patterns, namely the patterns of decomposition and composition, and the explanation of these two patterns was dedicated to the end of the first section of this chapter.

With the emergence of Islamic movements in Arab countries, new dimensions of the power equation are emerging. The decline of autocratic political systems has made the emergence of new actors in the Middle East security environment inevitable. The current process has disrupted the balance of power in the Middle East, and the regional position of countries is changing. The social environment of the Middle East is religious and has an

Islamic identity, and today, identity is the source of political action in social transformations. The current situation in the Middle East, as a transitional period, largely outlines the future of the region. With changes in the Middle East, the central role of the United States in the Persian Gulf and the geopolitical space of the Middle East will weaken. Therefore, the role of the United States in the future structures of the balance of power in the region will change but will continue to exert its influence. However, the United States will try to continue its military presence in this region, especially in the Persian Gulf and alongside oil wells and gas resources, but its political role will be less than before in the power equations in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the political, educational, and soft power role of NATO, along with its military role, will increase, and the United States and Europe will seek to expand their influence through this organization.

Although Russia cannot be indifferent to the developments in its southern region, inevitably, in the new balance of power equations in the Middle East, Russia's role and influence in countries such as Libya and Yemen will weaken. China has not been an active player in the strategic arena in the Middle East so far, but China's economy is dependent on the Middle East market and oil. Therefore, China will seek a greater role in the future of the region. Attention to the Palestinian issue by new governments to meet the demands of their people and convergence among Palestinian groups will increase. Groups like Hamas will come out of isolation. The blockade of the Gaza Strip will be reduced, and the Zionist regime's capacity to pressure the Palestinian people will decrease.

On the other hand, political activities to secure the rights of Palestinians will increase. The Zionist regime will be in more trouble, and

conditions will favor the Islamic Republic of Iran in developing relations with regional countries.

### Conclusion

With the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, relying on Islamic-Shi'a thoughts and the dominance of justice-oriented discourse, opposition to oppression, and support for the oppressed, the Islamic Republic of Iran, while confronting the bipolar system dominating international relations and their interests cast doubt on the legitimacy of Israel as the most important ally of the United States. It emphasized the eradication of this cancerous gland from the Middle East. Therefore, gradually, the discourse of resistance gained attention among oppressed nations under Western domination, and Israel's aggression became the focal point, leading to the formation of the security axis centered around the Islamic Republic of Iran. This has posed a significant threat and challenge to Israel's security.

Components such as the existence and formation of a common identity, especially in the

form of a religious identity (Islamic-Shi'a), and the shared negative historical mindset towards Israel, along with the perception of Israel's danger among their nations, have led to the formation of patterns of friendship and enmity and mutual security dependence among the players in the security axis. This has contributed to the stability and strength of this security subset in the Middle East.

By examining the sources and information obtained and analyzing them based on the views of pragmatists, it can be concluded that the security axis of resistance, as one of the security

subsets in the Middle East during the years 2002 to 2020, has been able to change the security order of this region and undermine Israel's security as the main enemy of the resistance axis and also damage the interests of its Western allies, especially the United States. Additionally, with the awakening of Islamic movements known as the Islamic Awakening, countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Turkey attempted to strike the resistance axis by creating organizations such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. However, the resistance axis managed to confront and defeat them.

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