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# **THE FUTURE OF IRAN'S REGIONAL ROLE AND THE ARAB WORLD'S OPTIONS**

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**T**he interest in reviewing Iran's future role in the Middle East, particularly post-nuclear agreement has been renewed by several factors and developments. In particular because of the negative consequences of the already growing Iranian role in several regional issues on the one hand and because of the regional and international reactions on the other, particularly on Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. Recently, civil unrest erupted across Iran in late 2017 that re-questioned the stability of the Iranian regime, given the disagreements that exist between internal powers inside Iran; the prospects of leadership change post Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei; the increasing regional and international pressure on Iran; and U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal in May 2018 and its new position against Iran.

Accordingly, the study aims to predict the likely developments that may happen in Iran and the region by synthesizing brainstorming techniques, relying on previous relevant estimates and analyses of the overall and partial future perspectives of Iran and the region. Also, it applies scenarios and techniques –based on forecasting and backcasting analysis-<sup>(1)</sup> to envision the future and then, uncover present variables and motives determining these scenarios and the possible ways to achieve them.<sup>(2)</sup>

This paper is divided into two parts. The first analyzes three key scenarios for Iran's role in the future of the Middle East while the second analyzes the differentiation between the proposed scenarios and others, as well as some alternatives and mechanisms to increase the probability of achieving some desired scenarios for the Arab world.

### **First: Scenarios of Iran's Regional Role**

This part will analyze the key issues related to Iran's internal developments, its nuclear program, and its relations with the United States, as well as regional-Iranian interactions. These issues represent the most important factors that shape Iran's position, policies, and its near and mid-term future within the context of scenarios for the continuation of its existing role or a shift towards a more cooperative or conflict environment.

#### **1- Continuity of the current critical conditions and balance of power**

This scenario of chaos is most likely to continue in some regional countries despite partial stability in others. There will be a tendency from regional regimes to try to manage and resolve the existing economic and political issues in part rather than addressing the underlying problems. Also, regional regimes will focus on security issues, which will lead to chronic instability and an inability to improve the level of development, regional economic integration, and political accommodation despite avoiding total collapse.<sup>(3)</sup> Iran's regional interventions and conflict role are expected to expand by it building networks with non-state players, which will deepen sectarian divisions, proxy wars and indirect confrontations. This will deplete Iran's capabilities as regional and international pressure will increase, along with containment, which will not reach the level of direct confrontation.

#### **A- Internal developments in Iran**

This scenario is linked to Iran's ability to maintain its relative internal stability and the continuity of the current regime and its institutions despite some internal pressures. The succession of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is not expected to provoke major unrest or change in Iran's politics. In the post-Khamenei period, power will be peacefully transferred to a figure supported by Iran's deep state institutions, mainly, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). The list of Khamenei's potential successors includes Ibrahim Ra'isi, the Head of the Razavi Holy Shrine; Sadiq Larijani, the Chief of Iran's judiciary, and other key figures with the same alignments, experiences, and links with the conservative circle and key Iranian institutions.<sup>(4)</sup>

The December 2017 - January 2018 demonstrations signified some of the internal problems facing the Iranian regime and they were led by laborers and young people from the most marginalized provinces. However, the relatively rapid reaction of the regime in dealing with and containing these demonstrations highlighted the regime's ability to maintain its relative stability, given that these protests were smaller, in size and pressure than the Green Movement protests in 2009.<sup>(5)</sup> The Iranian regime is expected to contain demonstrations and unrest caused by economic, political, and social factors. It will not

collapse neither will a dramatic transformation take place in its institutions because of its ability to contain differences on internal policies and external roles; relying on loyal institutions and factions to fend off the opposition; as well as, the use of external threats to intimidate the public; de-legitimize the opposition by presenting it as a foreign stooge to break Iran and threaten its national security and stability.<sup>(6)</sup>

### **B- Nuclear program and the role of the United States**

On May 8, 2018, the United States announced its withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. However, this scenario is derived from President Donald Trump's previous war of words that went beyond the United States actual policies towards Iran, the same as he did with North Korea and Syria. In addition, President Trump adopts the former President Barack Obama's strategy of offshore balancing to avoid direct confrontation by relying on regional allies to achieve a balance of power as Iran stands to benefit the most from any confrontation with the United States. Accordingly, the United States provides logistical support to its allies and only takes limited action when necessary, along with postponing the direct confrontation as much as possible, as well as withdrawing immediately once the mission is completed to make the most of its gains, reduce the costs of conflict, and prevent any party from achieving superiority over the region. Indeed, this strategy explains the synchronicity of President Trump's statement concerning the withdrawal of the United States forces from Syria and his request to replace them with Arab forces while increasing pressure on Tehran.<sup>(7)</sup>

This scenario does not contradict the United States withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the resumption of sanctions on Tehran. The U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo threatened that the United States will 'crush' Iran through sanctions and a pressure campaign in case of a failure to amend the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).<sup>(8)</sup> Or it will start negotiating a new nuclear treaty in which the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will have full control over all previous and current Iranian nuclear activities, post-2025 arrangements, and Iran's ballistic missile program, as well as, reviewing all of Iran's destabilizing activities that threaten U.S. allies in the region. In addition, the new nuclear treaty will ensure the withdrawal of all forces under Iranian command from the region, end its support to armed groups, and its threatening behaviour towards international shipping lanes in the region.<sup>(9)</sup> Many observers believe these demands represent the beginning of direct confrontation and an attempt to incur regime change in Iran, given the impossibility for Iran to accept such demands, which would remove all of its bargaining chips in addition to the lack of significant criteria to verify Iran's compliance with these obligations in case it agreed to the demands. Nevertheless, the United States sanctions are not expected to incur dramatic impact on Iran's role for many considerations such as their gradual re-imposition and because of internal institutional procedures in the United States concerning some of these sanctions. In particular, sanctions imposed by Congress and affect third parties with the possibility of hindering these sanctions in case of any change in the structure of the US Congress in the upcoming midterm elections. Iran and the other signatories of the nuclear deal might preserve the international pact as expressed by some European countries with the possibility for developing sovereign alternatives to protect European companies from any sanctions on Iran's economic activities despite some companies deciding to leave the Iranian market for fear of sanctions. Iran is used to dealing with the United States sanctions, the negative economic consequences resulting from the United States statements on reviewing the agreement, and the possibility for the other signatories to move to review the terms of the nuclear deal or reach a new understanding on additional issues.<sup>(10)</sup>

Whatever the United States and Iran's reactions to the nuclear deal are, the United States will not go further than tightening sanctions on Iran (probably without full European participation or with a Russian and Chinese compensatory role that will relatively limit the negative consequences of these sanctions). In addition, the United States might target some of Iran's proxy militias without direct confrontation with Tehran unless the latter take any direct hostile activities against the United States or its allies, which is unlikely to happen at a regional level.

### **C- The evolutionary role of regional powers**

This scenario proposes that regional powers will continue to balance Iran's influence in the region by adopting several policies. Some regional powers such as Ankara might adopt micro policies to cooperate and coordinate with Tehran on some issues like Kurdish expansion and their independence quest in Iraq and Syria while continuing to disagree on others. Regional powers might exert pressure on international players to prevent them from reaching a comprehensive settlement with Iran, to continue tightening sanctions on this country, to cooperate with non-state actors in confronting Iran and its allies, and to target Iran's allies and proxy militias outside its borders. An example that can be cited here are the Israeli airstrikes on some sites that belong to the Syrian regime, Hezbollah, and Shiite militias in Syria. Some of these policies might succeed in part while others might fail and result in opposite consequences with the willingness of all sides to avoid direct confrontation with Iran despite a movement towards escalation with this country.

Israel might escalate further until breaking all balances by war and direct confrontation or a settlement with Iran. However, Israel has adopted a partial escalation policy on Iran without direct confrontation by using intelligence and air force capabilities to stop the spread of Iran's forces and proxy militias, as well as, arms supplies to Hezbollah accompanied by a propaganda war in the media and with words to bring international pressure on Iran. This policy appeared in the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu's press conference at the end of April 2018 to prove Iran's lies and its failure to fulfill its international obligations by working on developing its nuclear program secretly. In addition, Prime Minister Netanyahu mentioned the Israeli readiness for military confrontation as authorized by the Israeli Knesset to the Prime Minister and Minister of Defense to take necessary actions; to prepare for war or launch military operations abroad. In the same vein, Israel carried out several strikes following the United States withdrawal from the nuclear deal, most notably, on May 10, 2018, on what it described as Iranian and Hezbollah military bases in Syria and on Syrian air defense installations in response to rockets from Syria towards the occupied Golan Heights. Despite all these moves, Israeli officials asserted their unwillingness to engage in direct confrontation with Iran, but, without denying the possibility of such confrontation in the future.<sup>(11)</sup>

According to this scenario, regional developments are the most critical in terms of balances. On the one hand, the policy of pressure and partial and indirect escalation might continue and succeed in reaching an agreement or lead to an official understanding with Iran based on the red lines of regional powers, which is, according to some analyses, likely to happen between Iran and Israel with Russian and European or others' mediation. These understandings tend to follow Israeli red lines in regards to safe areas free of Iran and its allies on the Northern borders of Israel with Syria and prevent the establishment of logistical support lines to Hezbollah that would improve its stockpile of missiles against Israel. In addition, Israel wants to receive pledges to withdraw or reduce the presence of Iran and its proxy militias gradually in Syria with new rules of understanding in case the red lines are

bypassed like the Israel-Syria understandings during the presence of the latter's forces in Lebanon. Iran might be eager to reach such understandings in an undeclared form with Israel, given the high risk of direct confrontation and the Israeli threat of direct action against Iran's interior. Iran tries to prevent such confrontation to preserve its major goals in supporting and restoring its allied regimes in Iraq and Syria, proxy militias, expanding its regional influence, and developing its deterrent capabilities against Israel.<sup>(12)</sup> In addition, Russia might exert pressure to impose such an compromise and understanding on Syria, given that Russia's interests might converge with the Israeli ones partially in terms of reducing the size of Iran's presence in Syria in case of sustaining the relative stability of the Assad regime and safeguarding Russian interests and military bases in this country.<sup>(13)</sup> However, reaching such a settlement with Israel might encourage Iran to fuel conflicts in other areas such as in Yemen in the face of other regional powers, leading to a continuity of a regional Arab-Iran conflict. Even in case of reaching an understanding for de-escalation in Yemen, the nature of such an understanding and the possibility of it being bypassed by some parties will keep the door open for renewed confrontation and indirect clashes and the possibility of them turning into direct confrontation in case of a continuity of conflict in the region.

In general, there are many indications on the possibility of this scenario happening because of the current situation. However, it remains subject to changing into direct confrontation and conflict at all levels.

## **2- Scenarios of chaos and clash between the rise or retreat of Iran's hard power**

These scenarios forecast the failure of regional countries, especially Arab countries to address some major political and economic issues because of their focus on security. This would result in an increase in public discontent and destabilization accompanied by a decline in the ability of some regional regimes' to continue external conflicts and focus on internal unrest instead. On the other hand, other regimes would adopt a foreign policy inclined towards conflict leading to direct and proxy wars in the region along with internal turmoil in pursuit of security or to move outside their borders fueling regional crises and conflicts.<sup>(14)</sup> Basically, these scenarios open the door for the continuity of Iran's hard power interference in light of its militarization and its proxy militias' experiences in guerrilla warfare by using chaotic conditions for their own interests.<sup>(15)</sup> This goal of Iran might come about in case of keeping conflict outside of Iran's borders in aligning with its theory of forwarding defense and preserving the relative cohesion between Iran and its allies in comparison to conflicts and disagreements with other parties or in case these crises and conflicts partially break into Iran's interior.

### **A- Potential internal developments**

The increasing instability of Arab regimes might encourage the West to strengthen its relations with Iran as a more stable regional power, especially if Iran shows flexibility in dealing with the West's demands, which would reinforce Iran's economic gains and support the moderate current in Iran. In this context, Iran might strengthen its regional role and international openness, as well as, reducing internal pressure by electing relatively moderate figures. The new Supreme Leader could be Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, the former Chief of the Iranian judiciary and the Chief of the Supreme Commission for Resolving Conflicts and Regulating Relations between Iranian Authorities. Shahroudi's joint Iranian-Iraqi affiliations—given that he was born in Najaf, his former position as Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and his contacts with Shiite authorities in Najaf— may be used to entrench Iran's influence in Iraq and among Shiites, given the

expected vacuum or relative decline of Najaf's Jurisprudence in the post-Sistani period.<sup>(16)</sup> All in all, leadership change or partial internal pressures are not expected to incur internal and external political change in Iran, with the political class taking advantage of Iran's relative stability considering the regional disorder that exists surrounding it.

### **B- Nuclear program and the American role**

Some parts of the scenario of regional chaos might be linked to the U.S. allies' involvement resulting from the Trump administration's policies. In his speeches, President Trump encouraged his allies to enter an escalation against Iran, which has burdened and depleted the capabilities of these countries. In contrast, the United States option of military intervention- similar to what we saw in Iraq- that could resolve the conflict with Iran is an unrealistic option because of the high economic and political cost, as well as, the risk of such an option for the United States and the need for exceptional. In addition, the United States declared strategy opposes such an option and favors a balance of power in the Middle East.<sup>(17)</sup> Thus, the United States role is limited to providing remote support to its allies by launching strikes and light or medium deployment of forces in some areas when fearing a power imbalance in favor of Iran. Therefore, the United States aims to curb Iran's regional role as it works to erode the legitimacy of the Arab regimes considering its problematic nature of relations with the United States<sup>(18)</sup> and the inability of regional powers to balance its regional role.

### **C- Evolution of the role of regional powers**

The rise of Iran's regional role has been because disputes between Sunni regional powers, demands for economic and political reform, and its inability to contain increasing security threats.

Instability and the possibility of a breakdown of Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, despite the negative impact on Iran, will preserve the Iranian spheres of influence in the North (Iraq) and South (Yemen) of the Arab Peninsula, which will exert pressure on Saudi Arabia and the other GCC countries.<sup>(19)</sup> However, the negative impact of these developments on the GCC countries would be severe if Iran relatively succeeded in achieving stability in Syria, further improving Hezbollah's standing in Lebanon. In addition, stability in Iraq, a decline in the ISIS threat and an increasing balance of power in favor of the central government in the Kurdish territories by bringing about new understandings for a unified Iraq would further support Iran's role in the region.<sup>(20)</sup> The Iranian security role is expected to strengthen by participating in restructuring security organizations in Iraq and Syria and benefiting from proxy factions as their thought, direction, and structure model the IRGC and Basij similar to the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq. This step will reduce the need for direct deployment of Iranian forces, strengthen Iran's ability to engage in asymmetric wars, improve its strategy of forwarding defense beyond its borders, and embody the idea of exporting the Iranian revolution in its security dimension.<sup>(21)</sup>

This scenario might witness active Iranian and Turkish participation in the reconstruction of Iraq and Syria, creating additional common interests between these two countries. Similarly, it is expected that Israel and Turkey will reach partial understandings with Iran to share influence and develop buffer zones on the borders. Iran's role might strengthen due to some internal unrest in Turkey and Israel; in Turkey represented by the growing power of the opposition against the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Erdogan's authoritarian practices, accusations of corruption against AKP symbols and a growing economic crisis. In Israel represented by Palestinian demonstrations and uprisings against Israeli policies and the United States support to this country.

The previous analysis of Iran's progress does not deny the possibility of retreat in light of the scenarios of regional chaos resulting in the spread of strife in Iran or it being exposed to total military defeat by a multi-front regional-international direct confrontation. These developments might emerge from the spread of chaos and instability inside Iran; taking into account the disagreement between the regime's wings over the succession of Khamenei, President Hassan Rouhani and the moderate current being capable mobilizing their supporters to counter the Iranian deep state, and each party attempting to delegitimize the other by a strategy of political debunking. This might expand the wave of public unrest to the marginalized classes against the regime and all of its currents.<sup>(22)</sup> These events will coincide with mounting economic pressure on the regime because of tightening United States sanctions following its withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. The sanctions are expected to be expanded to include Iran's various oil and non-oil exports and various imports, including food products with the United States exerting pressure on all parties, including Europe and Turkey and perhaps China and India to prevent the Iranian regime from violating the sanctions. The United States will tighten secondary sanctions on banks and firms cooperating with Iran and narrow or eliminate the scope of waivers granted to any party in this regard, or subject them to periodic reviews that require a clear decrease in dealing with Tehran. The fear of United States sanctions was reflected in the behavior of the French company Total, with it announcing the withdrawal of its investment in developing the South Pars Field unless it received a special project waiver from the United States not to be included in the sanctions. Also, other European companies announced reducing their economic activities in Iran for fear of sanctions despite the European attempts to save the nuclear deal.<sup>(23)</sup> This might be accompanied by the success of regional and international endeavors to transfer conflict into Iran's interior by working with ethnic and Sunni groups and minorities, mainly, Kurds and Baloch's in this country.<sup>(24)</sup>

In addition, the United States might review its regional options and re-intensify its direct military presence in the region with the possibility of direct confrontation and war between Iran and any of the regional powers in an unplanned way as a result of irrational movements by the Iranian regime. This could happen, in case of feeling its existence is under threat, by activating its proxy forces and militias and supplying some of them with unconventional weapons in regional countries and beyond, closing the Strait of Hormuz, impacting navigation at the Bab Al-Mandeb, and targeting oil plants, as well as, the United States and its allies' military bases by ballistic missiles. Accordingly, the Iranian regime's behavior might bring about a collective international intervention that will incur a dramatic impact on the whole region.<sup>(25)</sup>

A lesser degree of escalation might occur, but it will curb Iran's role once Israel or the United States carries out military strikes on some nuclear plants inside Iran accompanied by threats of international sanctions in cooperation with Europe and international coordination against any possible reaction by Iran.<sup>(26)</sup> In the same context, Turkey might change its position in case the United States shows seriousness against Iran and its regional practices by adopting clear policies of regime change in Syria with a heavy military presence on the ground or launching military strikes to overthrow the regime rather than just weaken it. Probably, an Arab-Israeli-Turkish coordination will emerge against Iran that would reduce its capability to respond or engage in a war of attrition against any party. Consequently, Iran would not be fully able to mobilize its forces or proxy militias if international and regional multilateral confrontation erupted. In addition, the logistical lines between Iran and its militias might be blocked. Also, these militias might adopt rational policies to avoid asymmetric conflicts and choose to assimilate in national security institutions within their local environments.

However, this collective stalemate against Iran is less likely for several constraints such as threatening the vital interests of each party in case of direct confrontation as well as clear differences between these parties in the period post-weakening of Iranian influence, mainly, in Syria as a main theatre for confrontation. It is difficult to assess Iran's reaction and assume its rationality once the regime perceives it is facing a battle of survival. In addition, the escalation of internal and external pressure does not negate the availability of popular and security bases that support the current Iranian regime inside Iran and abroad, securing its survival, and reducing the possibility of its sudden or rapid collapse. Given the high risk and cost of the scenario of a direct confrontation —whatever its consequences would be— and the existence of a medium-term probability for its occurrence whether in the context of deliberate or unintentional escalation, it might be a motive for various regional and international players to avoid it. That may contribute to a continuation of the existing scenarios or a reduction in the probability of direct confrontation and an inclination towards a scenario of reform and regional coordination.

### **3- Scenarios of reform and regional coordination between retreat and the rise of Iran's soft power**

These are optimistic scenarios but are less likely. They rely on the awareness of people and leaders' in the Arab region in particular- of the necessity of reform and the adoption of policies inclining towards cooperation and coordination to confront common threats and challenges. This would motivate regional countries or at least some of them to implement broad reforms for economic recovery, find common grounds for security and protect the interests of all parties, and non-zero solutions for regional conflicts and disputes, which will establish an environment for regional cooperation and coordination. The future holds a path that either stops Iran's negative role in the face of increasing Arab power or changes the nature of its role within new regional arrangements.<sup>(27)</sup>

As for Iran's interior, this scenario might evolve from its various starting points either through continuity of the Iranian regime's current critical balances or tilting the balance of power in favor of hardliners. In both cases, the Iranian regime would pose a threat to neighboring countries with the possibility of confrontation and continuity of the United States reluctance to involve itself in direct confrontation with Iran that would motivate Arab Leaderships to prioritize reform and coordination. The presence of moderate Iranian leaders, normally or resulting from the impact of reform procedures in Arab states on the Iranian regime, might result in Gulf-Iranian de-escalation that would pave the way for Iran to involve itself in regional security arrangements with accepting its new role and participation based on the review of its policies.

According to the Iranian nuclear program and the United States position on this issue, this scenario basically assumes that the United States is an unreliable ally. Whether that is stemming from Iran's resumption of its nuclear program, or because of the United States adoption of the policy of preserving balances remotely and pushing its regional allies to get involved in wars of attrition with Iran while proceeding on its biased policy in favor of Israel, which complicates resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. In fact, American pressure to impose unbalanced solutions for the Arab-Israeli conflict might increase awareness of the Arab and Islamic powers to increase their strength and impose a suitable settlement that responds to Palestinian and Arab demands while questioning the obstacles to addressing the other regional conflicts, including conflict with Iran without necessarily going to war.

At the regional level, this scenario is mainly related to the developments of intra-Arab cooperation. It reviews the Arab countries' awareness to the challenges of existence

facing them and the limits/problems of establishing new non-Arab alliances as a result of American tradeoffs, the resumption of Israeli escalation in the region, and the belief in the impossibility of continuity of the existing scenarios because of the depletion of regional resources without addressing the real problems. In case of implementing cooperation and reforms in Arab countries, it will provide mechanisms for balancing soft power with Iran. This might be linked to Arab countries realization of the importance of collective cooperation as a necessity to address internal and regional problems and challenges, such as: youth unemployment, terrorism, drought and desertification, as well as, problems of water and food security and increasing interferences and threats by non-Arab regional states. Indeed, these factors might lead Arab countries to adopt several reforms and security, economic, and political coordination mechanisms that might include activation of plans of joint Arab forces and military industries. The Arab countries may adopt a selective defense approach away from direct confrontation to achieve an Arab deterrence force and its mobilization while adopting an Arab Marshall Plan like that of Europe after WWII. In addition, Arab countries can develop an Arab fund to save suffering Arab economies, support necessary reforms to revitalize economic growth and adopt gradual political and cultural reforms to contain the various opposition forces and reduce Arab political vulnerability to pressures and external interventions.<sup>(28)</sup>

In addition to the Arab scenario of curbing Iran, the scenario of reform and coordination might expand to include Iran itself, or starting a sort of appeasement with it. In this case, Saudi-Iranian de-escalation may emerge, leading to relaxation in Gulf-Iran tensions with a continuity of the United States policy of avoiding interference while seeking to transfer the burden of confrontation- economic and human- to the rest of the Arab countries. The Saudis and Iranians are aware of their inability to bear the consequences of war. This is while believing in the importance of making initiatives and extraordinary decisions to start new relations, ensure common security, and focus on trade and confidence-building measures in the Gulf with a joint security command and a gradual retreat of the United States in the region.<sup>(29)</sup> This trend could be reinforced by the fact that there are a number of global development projects in which Iran plays a central role. The new China-Europe railway route links China to Europe through Russia, and the position of Iran as a center of trade for Central Asia with the world will be improved by developing logistical service areas and transit routes on the coasts of Iran. This is in addition to the projects of energy and gas transportation lines across Iranian territories and other projects that require, in part, regional stability and Iranian guarantees regional and international parties.<sup>(30)</sup> The United States-Israeli escalation against Iran could further increase Iran's willingness for rapprochement with regional powers, compromise, or reach understandings to limit the possibility of forming a united regional-international front against it.

The United Nations or other international parties such as Russia, China, or Europe want to make certain preparations for confidence-building to improve Arab Gulf-Iran security issues, gradually relaxing relations between the two, addressing controversial border and security issues, and diminishing the severity of sectarianism.<sup>(31)</sup> Thus, the outcome of this process might begin an Arab-Iranian dialogue based on each party's review of some of its own policies and concerns, focusing on interests and areas of cooperation, and facing common threats. For example, Iran reviews its sectarian and interventionist policies in Arab countries, stops supporting authoritarian regimes such as the Assad regime, and opens the way for dialogue with its opposition in exchange for Arab de-escalation, recognizing Iran as a normal neighbor and building stronger partnerships with this country, and addressing the problems of governance.

## **Second: Evaluation and Alternatives of the Arab Movement**

The paper handles some of the possible scenarios for Iran's role and its evolution in the Middle East. It shows the probability of continuity of the current situation and its critical balances that represent medium-term risks, the scenarios- with medium-term possibility- of direct confrontation and internal unrest with their dangers and negative consequences where Iranian hard power interference is expected to persist. Finally, in the light of the current situation and its developments, the scenario of reform and regional integration, either with or without an Iranian role, is less likely. The region might face acute conflicts and power imbalance leading to a chaos. This would arise from the consequences of the United States withdrawal from the nuclear deal; the resumption of sanctions on Iran and on companies and individuals cooperating with it; the possibility of transforming sanctions into an economic blockade, and a possible Israeli-regional escalation under an American umbrella, which would open the door for moving between the first and second scenarios.

In fact, it is difficult to decide on these scenarios in the light of their complexity and overlap, the possibility of their combination, the response of major players, and the discrepancy of some tracks within some scenarios, and the impact of timing and synchronization on the probability of their happening and impact and even the nature of this impact. For example, this can be seen in the complex relationship of external pressure and escalation with internal pressure as well as the impact of Israeli pressure in conjunction with other regional and international pressures. Despite these factors sharing the tendency of curbing Iran's role, their timing and complex interactions might help the Iranian regime to weaken their influence, use them to strengthen its internal and regional legitimacy, empower the most radical wings of its institutions, and escalate its conflict role in the region.

In addition, complexities related to unexpected scenarios; the so-called black swans or low-probability scenarios with high impact might open the way for new developments in the form of strategic surprises.<sup>(32)</sup> This includes the potential for a changing leadership and its leanings within normal or exceptional contexts in Iran, Syria, Turkey, other regional countries, post-Putin Russia, or even in the United States- especially with the pressure and internal accusations facing President Trump. Indeed, these factors might change critical balances and incur new dramatic shifts in interaction towards further escalation or appeasement. In addition, a relatively unexpected scenario might happen; the outbreak of war or direct confrontation between Iran and any regional power in an unplanned way because of ill-conceived action that might be, in part, related to escaping internal pressures and crises in either Israel, the United States, or other countries. This might lead to chaos beyond the scenario of war and confrontation where conflict spreads widely and dramatically impacts the whole region.

Other studies analyzing the future of the region suggest that other surprise developments would emerge. An energy-technology revolution may break out, triggering a further review of the strategic importance of the Middle East; in addition to calculations of regional countries and rivalry between them; and the possibility of natural disasters- floods, severe droughts, epidemics, or an explosion in Iran's Bushehr nuclear plant located in an earthquake zone and adjacent to several Arab GCC states. This would strengthen regional cooperation and prompt all parties to review regional nuclear proliferation and the necessity for cooperation. Despite the current failure in a Kurdish independence quest under regional and international pressure against the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan in September

2017, Kurdish expansion in North Syria, and possible changing positions towards a Kurdish state would have a direct negative impact on regional conflicts, opportunities of cooperation, and on other non-Kurdish groups beyond the Iranian-Turkish-Syrian-Iraqi arena.<sup>(33)</sup>

Given the normative and descriptive nature of future studies, it might be necessary to explore some alternatives related to how to increase the likelihood of desired scenarios to achieve Arab interests. In addition to Arab reform and regional integration in the face of the negative Iranian role as stated hereinbefore, other basic alternatives and options available for Arab countries can be explained as follows:

### **1. Avoiding confrontation**

This option relies on a combination of isolation, internal development while trying to adopt policies closer to neutrality and a reduction in engagement and confrontation against Iranian expansion. Instead, the Arab countries can adopt strategies of monitoring points of weakness and differences within the Iranian regime and their impact on destabilizing this regime and changing its policies. Moreover, they can pass the responsibility of pressuring Iran to their alliances and other international players; the United States, European Union, and Russia, or regional players; Israel and Turkey since they have strong motives to limit Iran's threatening role to protect their vital interests in the region. The danger of this alternative lies in the possibility that these parties reach explicit or implicit agreements and understandings to share influence with Iran without observing Arab interests as before by signing the nuclear deal in July 2015.

### **2. Escalation and confrontation**

This option relies on balancing hard power in the face of Iranian hostile activities by improving military capabilities and strengthening coalitions; either inter-Arab or with regional and international powers opposing Iranian policies and tendencies. This alternative can set up pressure on Iran and temporarily curb its role. However, it has several problems in terms of incurring opposite consequences by escalating regional confrontation and increasing Iranian extremism. In addition, Iran could use any mistakes or consequences of confrontation in its own favor given its experience in dealing with regional crises. Its pragmatic opportunistic nature allows it to turn crises into opportunities and increase its influence by using the mistakes of other major players as in the use of the strategic vacuum created by the United States post-invasion of Iraq.<sup>(34)</sup> In addition, the Arab countries might suffer the burden of excessive involvement in external conflicts and resource depletion. This would negatively affect the Arab countries' priorities and deepen their divisions because of their divergent priorities and mechanisms of confrontation with Iran. The dangers of taking incorrect sides would delegitimize Arab regimes, especially the Israeli side. Consequently, the legitimacy of the Iranian role as being the pivot in the 'Axis of Resistance' would be further strengthened. They might face serious troubles by getting involved in allies' projects in the region.

These problems are particularly evident in the need to deal with the United States, especially President Trump who combines the policy of a remote balance of power with business management and economic agreements in international relations.<sup>(35)</sup> Relying on the United States as a costly and unreliable ally is increasing because of President Trump's dealing with each interaction as a "one-shot deal" and simultaneous tradeoff with all parties, which increases the complexity, cost, and the relatively short-term nature of the tradeoff. This prompted many analysts to underscore the need for no-rivalry between US allies and that they should coordinate between each other to get better bargains.<sup>(36)</sup>

In this context, the best alternative for Arab countries could be adopting hedging strategies to deal with the high-risk and low-certainty environment through a simultaneous and temporary combination of various options to deal with Iran and the other regional and international players.<sup>(37)</sup> All in all, the Arab movements can combine between the following:

A- the attempt to partially employ the strategy of remote balances and buck-passing on Iran's expansionist role in certain issues and geographical spheres, particularly Syria, to allies and other major players, mainly, the United States, Israel, Turkey, and even Russia and avoid leading confrontation in the Syrian crisis with the possibility to employ the Iranian role in Syria and Iraq similar to the Russia-Iran employment of the Turkish role and consider these areas as spheres of declining Iranian and other regional power influence. Arab countries can focus on international mechanisms for post-conflict settlement to control the presence of these forces and their roles with the possibility of moving to maximize Arab roles in international frameworks for the reconstruction of Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, they can link between issues and files to reach compromises and share influence and limit external interference that could escalate tension and conflict in areas of direct interest to Arab countries more than to other regional powers such as in Yemen. For example, they can link the Arab intervention in Syria to the Iranian intervention in Yemen, coordinate on the Palestinian question, and so on. They can start with addressing regional differences on Yemen, Syria, and Iraq in the light of reciprocal arrangements to share spheres of influence; Gulf-Yemeni and Iranian-Iraqi and Syrian. In addition, they can work within the context of consensual arrangements to share power in these areas to ensure participation of the various groups in their respective areas of focus to allow spheres of influence for each party within the surrounding countries.<sup>(38)</sup> Despite the failure of implementing such arrangements before, the realization of the impossibility to take full control over these areas and the high cost of alternatives might renew all parties' commitment to try to make them work.

B- Copying Iran's comprehensive approach of communicating with governments and non-state players simultaneously with the possibility of positive contact with some of them and its non-state allies with partial employment of some aspects of this openness to control Iran's regional role and alliances. In the same context, it can be referred to the Saudi model of openness and its initiatives with Iraq by starting a dialogue with the Iraqi Shiite jurists in Najaf— given the differences between Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran on the political role of religious authorities and the policies of dealing with Shiites in these two countries and abroad, in particular the tension between the sectarian identity and the concept of citizenship.<sup>(39)</sup> Accordingly, this movement can be considered as part of the mechanisms of ruining or at least weakening and controlling Iran's regional alliances, diminishing the sectarian nature of the balancing policies against Iran, and ensuring its association with the nature of Iran's role rather than its sectarian inclinations. In addition, there would be a possibility for opening channels of indirect communication with Iran itself through its allies. Many analyses handled the results of the Iraqi parliamentary elections in May 2018 and the failure of Iran's proxy parties and forces to achieve positive results against the rise of the Sadri movement- as an opportunity to increase the effectiveness of strategies to balance Iran's influence while recognizing the limits of strategies at the same time.<sup>(40)</sup>

C- Combining the strategies of pressure and sanctions, defining Arab red lines for Iran's role, seeking informal agreements and understandings while adopting strategies of integration and incentives with Iran. In this regard, Arab countries can start a joint military and security coordination, develop a joint Arab force, and conduct joint military exercises. This would be forged with parallel political movement through the Arab

League to establish an Arab-Iranian strategic dialogue that would resolve all regional crises, and study the possibility of increasing economic and trade cooperation, which might contribute to building confidence and peace between them. Both sides can start a dialogue to remove the gap between Sunni and Shiite sects with the participation of major religious institutions, including Azhar University, in Egypt and others while presenting other relevant proposals in this concern.<sup>(41)</sup> The activation of Arab national reforms and strengthening Arab regional integration remains one of the main scenarios supporting any Arab capability to increase internal strength and stability, while reducing Arab exposure to any Iranian or others' interferences.

## Endnotes

- (1) "The major distinguishing characteristic of *backcasting analysis* is a concern, not with what futures are likely to happen, but with how desirable futures can be attained. It is thus explicitly normative, involving working backwards from a particular desirable future end-point to the present in order to determine the physical feasibility of that future and what policy measures would be required to reach that point," according to John B. Robinson.
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- (3) Florence Job and Alexandra Laban, *Scenarios of the Arab Future: Three Scenarios for 2025*, trans. Suha Ismail, Series 26, (Alexandria: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2017).
- (4) Sanam Wakil and Hossein Rassam, "Iran's Next Supreme Leader: The Islamic Republic after Khamenei," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 3, (May/June 2017), accessed 25/3/2018: <http://cutt.us/t9YN4>.
- (5) For more information, see: "Protests Regime's Crises in Iran," *Rasanah IIIS*, 5 January 2018, accessed 22 October 2018, <http://v.ht/8Aee>.
- (6) Ali A.Pourezat et al.: "The future of governance in Iran," *Foresight*, vol.20, no. 2, 2018, p.175.; Sanam Wakil, "Iran on the brink: Challenges & opportunities for Washington", *Hoover Institution*, 25 April 2018, accessed October 22, 2018, <http://cutt.us/VpxDk>.
- (7) Stephen M. Walt, "Has Trump become a realist?" *Foreign Policy*, 17 April 2018, accessed October 22, 2018, <http://cutt.us/26Xs>.
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- (13) Ephraim Kam, "The Iranian Military Intervention in Syria: A Look to the Future", *Strategic Assessment* 20, no. 4, (January 2018): 24-26, accessed 13 April 2018, <http://cutt.us/YTUSB>.
- (14) Job and Laban, *Scenarios of Arab Future*, 45-52.
- (15) Vali Nasr, "Iran among the Ruins: Tehran's Advantage in a Turbulent Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, no. 2 (2018), accessed 15 April 2018, <http://cutt.us/HAKYG>.
- (16) Jeffrey Martini, Heather Williams and William Young, *The Future of Sectarian Relations in the Middle East* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017), 9.
- (17) Ibid; Peter D. Feaver and Hal Brands, "Trump and Terrorism: U.S. Strategy after ISIS", *Foreign Affairs*, (March/April 2017), 2 February 2018, <http://cutt.us/8qIv8>.
- (18) Walt, "Has Trump become a realist?"
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- (20) Martini et al., 9.
- (21) Kam, "The Iranian Military Intervention in Syria."
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- (27) Job and Laban, *Scenarios of Arab Future*, 53-61.

- (28) Job and Laban; Mu'taz Salamah et al., "Arab and Regional System," ed. Amro Hashem Rabee', *Arab Strategic Report 2017*, (Cairo: Political and Strategic Studies Center- Ahram, 2018), 153-155.
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- (31) Job and Laban, *Scenarios of Arab Future*, 59.
- (32) For more information about the "Black Swans" as an expression of low-possibility and high-impact surprising events that seem real with objective justifications after their happening, see: Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The impact of the highly improbable*, (New York: Random House, 2007)
- (33) Job and Laban, *Scenarios of Arab Future*, 62-64.
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- (35) Mohammed Abdussalam, "The Trump Principle: Managing Business of International Relations During the Period 2017-2021," *Itijahat Alahdath Journal*, no., 20 (March-April 2017): 6-7.
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- (37) Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, (London: Cornell University Press, 2013), 70-104.
- (38) Al-Shogairat and Yurtaev, "The Prospect of the Relationship", 91-92.
- (39) "The Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement: Step Against Sectarianism or to Circumvent Iran?" *DW*, 17 August 2017, accessed 22 October 2018, <http://cutt.us/2hNIs>.
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