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المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية  
International Institute for Iranian Studies

# DEFENDING SACRED SHRINES AND IRAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY POLICIES

Firas Elias

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A researcher in regional and international affairs

The theory of securitization emerged as part of the scientific theories focusing on security dimensions in international relations in the post-Cold War era. In general, the Copenhagen School of Security Studies is accredited with building this theory, and the two professors Ole Waever and Barry Buzan widened the traditional understanding of security. Securitizing a certain issue does not mean that it threatens a state's existential existence. But rather it means that a state has managed to make a certain issue an existential problem.

After the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq in 2014 and the group's destruction of many holy Shiite shrines including the bombing of the Al-Askari shrine in Samarra, the security decision-makers in Iran opted to securitize this issue, deeming it one of the dimensions threatening Iranian national security. Through securitizing holy shrines, Iran formed militias to defend holy shrines in the region. They consisted of Iraqi, Syrian, Pakistani and Afghani citizens. This is in addition to the Qods Force and Hezbollah. These militias played a significant role in the Syrian war under the guise of defending holy shrines. Iran pushed in the direction of securitizing holy shrines, harnessing all its military capabilities in this respect and made it a justification for its regional interference in order to safeguard its national security.

The main idea of this study stems from the rising threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) against Shiites in Iraq and Syria, endangering Iranian national security. It sheds light on how ISIS deals with Shiites, their shrines and beliefs. Therefore, the researcher looks into the way Iranian security policymakers have dealt with this existential threat posed by ISIS, which became a basis for them to adopt the *securitization theory* and its tenets. The main tenet of this theory is based on raising any issue to the level of a threat, allowing material and moral capabilities to be mobilized in order to overcome this threat. Here emerges the central questions: How has Iran managed to securitize the issue of defending holy shrines? And how has it employed this issue to serve its security agenda? And what are the implications at the political, social and security levels? And how has it impacted the political scene in Iraq and Syria based on all the foregoing?

The central argument of this study is that the issue of defending holy shrines has today become one of the main security concerns in Iran's regional security strategy. The study will try to answer the questions raised above by discussing the general dimensions of security put forward by Iranian security decision-makers, particularly the securitization and defense of holy shrines, and their relationship to Iranian national security.

Based on the foregoing, the study can be divided into three main elements as follows: securitization, national security, and Iranian security policy

## **I- Theoretical Background**

Iranian security policy and the securitization of holy shrines can be analyzed through focusing on the concepts of securitization and national security. This can be done by referring to the following:

### **1- The Theory of Securitization**

The core essence of securitization theory is its definition of security as a speech act. Ole Wæver pointed to this argument by saying, "Everything could be a security trap" as long as the elite announces that it is a security problem. Wæver says "*Securitization* is the intersubjective establishment of an existential *threat*, which demands urgent and immediate attention, as well as the use of *extraordinary measures* to counter this threat." Moreover, supporters of this theory believe that successful securitization should have two conditions: 1- speech and its high approval among the masses 2- identification of actual threats and urgent action to address these threats. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver state, "If we do not tackle this problem, everything else will be irrelevant (because we will not be here or we will not be free to deal with the situation in our own way." This step towards successful securitization is called a *securitizing move*.<sup>(1)</sup>

If we look at the *Copenhagen School's* (it refers to the work of Barry Buzan and his colleagues at the Centre for Peace and Conflict) definition of securitization theory in order to specifically understand its meaning, we find that the concept of securitization means in general *survival*. Realists claim to believe in this definition too, however, realists believe that securitization is only limited to the state as one entity while securitization theory covers all state sectors.<sup>(2)</sup>

One of the main elements of securitization theory is the speech act. The theoretical framework outlines that the securitizing actor (i.e. political elite) who performs the speech

act, when uttering that a certain problem is a security problem, it becomes a security problem. They need to convince the audience that something in the state is threatened (i.e. a threat) and needs urgent attention to ensure their survival.<sup>(3)</sup> Thus, the theoretical framework of securitization consists of: speech act, audience and threat. A threat may be material or moral.<sup>(4)</sup> The audience is identified by those who pose the threat. The main concept here is about convincing the targeted masses that a certain issue is a security problem and that there is a threat endangering their survival.

In line with the importance given by the theory to the state, it is generally in agreement with the realist conception of the state. However, the approach pursued by the Copenhagen School is not dependent on state sovereignty as is the case in the realist school of thought.

Buzan, Wæver and Wilde say, "We acknowledge that there is some analytical truth, as well as a legitimate political position, in this tight link between state and security. But the logic of our approach forces us to reject the use of such a narrow and self-closing definitional move." Therefore, they resorted to establishing a wider concept in which the state is central. They said, "the state-centric position is possible but not a predetermined outcome." When it comes to security the state is privileged over other sectors because the state itself is structured for security purposes." That does not mean other sectors are not significant in security nor that security is equally significant for all, i.e., for the state and other sectors. Security combines all yet the state is privileged as the actor of security tasks.<sup>(5)</sup>

## **2- National Security**

National security is known as the state's ability to protect its territories, resources and interests against comprehensive domestic and outside threats. The concept of national security has undergone several transformations due to globalization, and the metamorphosis of the concept of power. The concept is no longer related to the military aspect alone and now includes politics, technology, education, economic growth and information technology.<sup>(6)</sup>

Global meddling in the internal affairs of many countries in light of globalization has become bigger than ever before. It has taken different forms. For example, some social movements, new ideas and civil society organizations have been given room to play multiple roles. Also, violence and terrorism which have surged in the past two decades have led to changes in the concept of national security. For example, the national security of the United States has extended to every spot on the globe.<sup>(7)</sup> As for Iran, the concept is related to keeping away any threat which attempts to approach its borders.

The approaches for defining the concept of national security are multiple. They can be detailed as follows:

### **A- The Traditional Approach**

This asserts the military aspect of security, which means that national security is intrinsically linked to military power and that the threats to which the state is exposed are on most occasions external and military in nature which target the state's territorial integrity and sovereignty. This approach believes that building a military capable of countering threats and achieving military superiority or even a balance is the best blueprint for national security.<sup>(8)</sup>

### **B- The Modern Approach:**

This approach holds that national security is a comprehensive concept which is related to the state in its political, economic and social dimensions. It argues that a host of threats targeting national security not only emanate from outside sources, but also from domestic and transboundary sources. It sets out a range of non-military alternatives which have a comprehensive security impact such as political legitimacy, religious and ethnic coexistence, economic development, and the availability of basic primary resources. This is added to military alternatives which constitute one of the basic requirements for national security.<sup>(9)</sup>

### C- The Ideal Approach

This approach believes that the concept of national security is not limited to the boundaries of the state, but it goes beyond it to developments overseas and what other countries are doing at all levels. A certain country committing acts of violence, repression and prosecution against its own people may prompt them to emigrate to another country, causing harm to the latter's national security, which could result in hostile behavior which threatens its sovereignty.<sup>(10)</sup>

This approach is called the ideal approach which expands the scope of threats to national security to include repression, environmental and economic threats, as well as natural disasters and terrorism. This approach believes that national security is achieved through cohesion at the global level, and political and economic stability at home.<sup>(11)</sup>

Hence, we notice the multiplicity of national security approaches that focus on the state's ability to deter, prevent and repel threats against its territory, society and all functions of its government.<sup>(12)</sup>

### 3- National Security in Iran's Security Policy

Iran's security policies, especially those related to Iran's vital Shiite sphere, i.e., 'defending shrines' can be analyzed through the prism of the Copenhagen School. Yet, we can also apply in our analysis realist theories. If we conduct studies on Iran's security using international relations theories, we are applying the realist framework. Iran's security policy is modelled on the realist approach. Thus, a review of Iranian national security policies after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 can be interpreted from the perspective of *offensive realism*. When it comes to nuclear negotiations, they can be viewed from the perspective of *defensive realism*. As to the way it addresses the security shifts caused by the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, it can be viewed from the perspective of *securitized realism*.

Yet, Iran's security policy has to be interpreted and analyzed using new perspectives and approaches other than realism, especially when one seeks to study Iran's security regarding its vital Shiite sphere. In this context, the theoretical theses developed by the Copenhagen School emerged. It can be said that Iranian security policy and defending holy shrines can be dealt with through the theories of securitization and national security, which are the two pillars of the Copenhagen School. The reason for giving precedence to the theory of securitization when studying Iranian policy toward defending holy shrines is that the security problems in countries like Iran, Syria and Iraq are so intertwined that they cannot be separated. Therefore, it will not be correct to believe that Iran is independent of the security policies applied in Iraq and Syria. On the contrary, threats to Shiites, Shiism and its holy shrines, are considered as threats to Iran's national security. Hence, maintaining Shiite incubators and shrines, means, consequently, maintaining Iran's influence and clout. This is why Iranian policy is dealt with from the perspective of the theory of securitization and its tenets.<sup>(13)</sup>

## II- The Theory of Securitization and Its Functions in Iranian National Security Policy

The concept of securitization within the framework of Iranian policy can be characterized as follows:

### 1- The Traditional Dimension of the Concept of National Security

Studying Iran's national security from a globalization perspective is still influenced by traditional security considerations, on top of them comes Iran's geographical location. Iran is located within regions which are historically, politically and socially different from it. Hence, Iran's security factors have been influenced by global security developments in the post-Cold War era, and those developments are nothing new but a continuation of the past. The extent of those developments depends on international interactions and on the factors contributing to internationalizing Iran's national security spheres.<sup>(14)</sup>

**Map 1: Geopolitics of Iran's National Security** <sup>(15)</sup>



Source: Iran Freedom, <https://goo.gl/V58p8k>.

The threats and challenges facing Iran's national security are notable in the mindset of Iranian leaders. Iran sees the world from its own ideological perspective. According to the Iranian mindset, the world is divided into two spheres: *the evil* (the oppressors led by the United States) and *the good* (the oppressed led by Iran). Therefore, Iran's perspective of its national security is heavily reliant on its relations with the great world powers. In addition, Iran takes into account the significance of its Shiite dimension and its belief that the Arabian Gulf is Persian. In short, we can summarize via four levels the challenges facing Iranian national security:<sup>(16)</sup>

- A- *The First Level*: the world order, its results and developments such as globalization.
- B- *The Second Level*: threats posed by major world powers such as the United States.
- c- *The Third Level*: regional threats, which include the Arab Gulf region, the Caspian Sea, Asian neighbors and Israel.
- D- *The Fourth Level*: domestic threats, including those related to identity/ethnic crises, national cohesion problems, rise in militancy threats, separatist movements, socio-economic challenges and political disputes.

Since the outbreak of the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran has worked to outline a national security policy which addresses the threats discussed above according to the following dimensions:<sup>(17)</sup>

#### 1- *The Domestic Dimension*

This is based on embracing the strategy of adjustment and balance and was developed in order to contain the blows and domestic challenges witnessed at the beginning of the revolution. This is in addition to containing the major problems resulting from the Iran-Iraq war. As a result, Iran established the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Supreme National Security Council, revolutionary courts and other bodies/institutions, while maintaining the central role of the supreme leader in outlining and approving the country's overall strategy.

#### 2- *The Regional Dimension*

Iran aimed to break the international isolation imposed on it after the Iran-Iraq war via adopting an effective neutrality strategy in addition to attempting to join the Shanghai

Cooperation Organization in order to take advantage of forging closer ties with Russia and China to boost its regional and global standing.

### 3- *The International Dimension*

Through embracing the strategy of expansionism in the face of the United States and the European Union, while adopting firm and flexible positions simultaneously, Iran was able to win more time to gain more clout in the Middle East and averted any further US attempts to pressure it.

Iran's strategy on regional security is abundantly complicated whether at the level of definition or forecasting. However, the practices of Iran's security apparatuses reveal the main tenets thereof. Iran's general national security policy is dominated by two trends: the first is the inevitability of the Iranian revolution. The second is a fear of the state collapsing due to its ethnic components. This is in addition to the nature of the prevailing international economic relations, which are the bedrock of Iran's foreign relations.

### 2- *Shaping the Concept of National Security*

Strategic planning operations and directives issued by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei play a huge role in shaping Iranian national security. Khamenei emphasizes military development and the promotion of the Iranian revolutionary ideology. This is in addition to Khamenei giving a larger role to other Iranian institutions to participate in outlining ideologies and strategies. Those institutions include the IRGC, the Expediency Discernment Council, and Iran's legislative, executive and judicial authorities. In addition, some non-official organizations participate such as the Bazaar, the clergy, as well as religious, social and economic institutions. These institutions played a role in implementing the concepts, tactics and measures of war through the policies of military imports and training; the responsibility of which is shouldered by the Ministry of Defense and the armed forces.

Although agencies such as the preventive security apparatus and the Supreme Council for Cyberspace formed in 2012 are performing a huge role in developing Iran's strategy and ideology, given their increasing importance for national defense, and the need for it within the government, the coordination of strategies to address wars and planning for military emergencies is shouldered by the Supreme National Security Council.

Most likely, the process of strategic planning focuses on coordination with the Office of the Supreme Leader. However, members of the IRGC could undertake this responsibility themselves. Some of the foundations of this relationship between different bodies/institutions are not clearly defined, although the recent shakeup in the Supreme National Security Council may suggest that it is being given more importance when it comes to running the process of strategic planning.

The Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters conglomerate plays an important role in coordinating between the IRGC and the rest of the branches of the armed forces. This is in addition to its role in boosting the combat capabilities of the Iranian forces through providing the Iranian armed forces with fighters who are ideologically indoctrinated. This institution played an active role in the Iran-Iraq war through the support and coordination operations it carried out during that period.

This is in addition to the role played by the Iranian military education institutions via the training and services operations carried out in coordination with the leadership of the IRGC and the General Staff College. This involved solidifying Iranian military tenets in the minds of the new cadets. In the post-Iran-Iraq war period, the Iranian general staff colleges were merged in 1990 into one body in order to increase professionalism. This happened along with establishing professional military education institutions for jurisprudential purposes. They aim to strengthen the Iranian military doctrine and reinforce the ideological commitment to the Iranian military strategy.

The Supreme National Defense University is tasked with all the services related to training

and educating senior military commanders. This is in addition to the offices focusing on development and training as well as submitting direct reports to the government and the preventive security apparatuses and sponsoring scientific research to improve the operations of hiding and camouflaging civilian and military targets against the attacks waged by the United States which maintains technological superiority over Iran. The Supreme Council for Cyberspace develops Iranian capabilities to play a similar role in the cyber sphere and render Iran effective in the field of cyberattacks as it mounted several cyberattacks on landmark websites such as Twitter during the period of heightened popular protests when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won a second presidential term in 2009.<sup>(18)</sup>

Also, cultural, political and strategic research centers play a big role in developing Iranian national security policy along with several centers and think tanks controlled by the Iranian government as well as academics dedicated to research on security and military issues.

In addition, the government in Iran exploits military industrial institutions to influence the knowledge and technical policy of the Iranian military establishment. It should be noted that the approach adopted in developing Iranian national security policy through think tanks sponsored by the government and military academies in Iran are strikingly similar to those embraced by Chinese and Russian institutes when it comes to strengthening military culture and the Iranian philosophical and religious blueprint in the mind of Iranian soldiers.

It is also worth noting that most Iranian think tanks are linked to official entities such as the Foreign Ministry, the Expediency Discernment Council, and the Office of the Supreme Leader. The most experienced foreign policy veteran, Ali Akbar Velayati, is currently responsible for these centers. The think tanks are also linked to the presidential office, major government offices, the Islamic Consultative Assembly and all think tanks working in the field of Iranian national security policymaking.

Imam Hossein University monopolizes education and research in the military field along with the IRGC and the Center for Defensive National Security Studies (CDNSS). There are four other direct military research centers which are working under the supervision of the IRGC. Apart from the Command and Staff College, the Center for Strategic Defense Research which is run by the former Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi, who is also the current Chairman of the Defense and National Security Committee of the Expediency Discernment Council, plays an important role in outlining Iranian strategies through taking advantage of the historical experiences of the most outstanding politicians and military leaders who occupied important and prominent positions. These institutions and centers play a similar role to those based in the United States through investing intellectually and professionally in key figures after they retire to take advantage of their consultative and scientific expertise in a way that ensures they will remain in the circle close to the political authority in Iran as did the current Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who continued to be the Chairman of the Strategic Research Center of the Expediency Discernment Council, which is one of the top advisory bodies controlled by the supreme leader, until he won the presidential elections.

Other important personalities, by sitting on the executive boards of key institutions and centers, play an effective role through the publication of articles in leading journals specializing in issues of national interest and foreign relations. They also publish scientific journals in the field of defense and security policies, as well as military science and strategy. They play an important role in shaping Iranian public opinion through publications aimed at instilling certain political concepts in the Iranian mindset.

In addition to all the foregoing, Iranian military commanders, security leaders and national figures such as Hassan Rouhani, Ali Akbar Velayati, Ahmed Vahidi and Saeed Jalili, for example, in addition to authors who commonly publish in think tank journals, most of whom are professors, constitute a limited elite who shape and develop the Iranian military and strategic doctrine. Understanding the writings of this group, its theories and views on the world are of crucial importance in order to understand Iranian national security policy.<sup>(19)</sup>

### 3- The Employment of the Concept of Securitization and the Engineering of a Threat

Although the emergence of the Islamic Republic preceded the development of the theory of securitization and its tenets, the policies embraced by the Islamic Republic after its success were significantly consistent with the tenets of this theory.

In the early years after the success of the Islamic revolution, principal security measures were implemented to a large extent in accordance with the theory of securitization. These included all the sectors of the newly established Iranian state. The issue of keeping the political system in power, which the government prioritized, could be evaluated in the context of political security. The phenomenon of Shiite Islamic identity could be evaluated within the context of social security. Given the nature of the actors involved in the process of security decision-making in Iran, it is possible to analyze Iranian national security in light of the Iranian policy on the issue of defending holy shrines, through three dimensions – the domestic, regional and international. Shiite holy shrines are one of the dimensions and foundations of Iranian national security policy since they are one of the top priorities for Iranian foreign policy. The issue of defending holy shrines is not related to a specific marginal area. Here we mean Syria and Iraq. Iran wants to send a clear message that it is responsible for defending Shiite holy shrines across the world. This gives the issue a broader international dimension.

The Iranian view of the outside world is full of distrust.<sup>(20)</sup> The world, according to its point of view, engenders the sentiments of insecurity in all contexts. This vision is consistent with its political secrecy and the concealment of its real intentions and ideas— also known in Shiite literature *Taqiyah*. Sociologists attribute Iran's constant belief in being under threat, to a number of political, social and psychological factors: Colonialism in Iran's modern history, Zoroastrian beliefs in the effectiveness of Satanic forces in the world; Islamic beliefs, including Shiite ones, on the inevitable power of God in the affairs of mankind; and the need for a collective defense mechanism at times of weakness and national humiliation.

At the cultural level, Persian history with its myths and poetry contribute to the acceptance of enemies surrounding the Iranian state. The Iranian political system uses Iranian culture as a tool to make people accept that they are being threatened by an external force.

The constant Iranian inclination towards accepting the hypothesis of *threat* involves two aspects:

A- *The Impact* generates a sense of incapacity and being inevitably threatened, constituting a source of deep suspicion towards any action and mistrust of the motives and intentions of the other, who is depicted as a constant source of threat. This has impacted the Iranian military doctrine which interprets movements or developments in the region and the world as part of a conspiracy targeting the Iranian people and the state. Moreover, domestic developments were also subject to the interpretations and hypothesis of the securitization theory. The protests staged by the supporters of the reformist candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi known as the Green Movement formed after the former President Ahmadinejad won a second term, have been interpreted as part of an international conspiracy threatening the Iranian state and the legitimacy of its political system. These interpretations resurfaced again during the protests the country witnessed in December 2017.

B- *Iran's Manipulation of the Presence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq* by arguing the country is under threat by the world powers. Iran suggested that ISIS is a Zio-American-Arab organization which seeks to undermine the security of Iran as well as dismantle the Islamic resistance axis. There is no doubt that this approach produced good results at home as Iranian media was employed to adopt this line and promote it among Iranians via media outlets run by the Iranian government and the IRGC.<sup>(21)</sup>

Therefore, securitization policies, in all three aspects as discussed, are operationalized in a similar fashion to industrial policies with a great role played by the Iranian media in shaping the Iranian mindset. The language of threat – and securitization – is one of the weapons that



To reiterate the value and priority of the Shiite sect in Iranian security policy, Iran supported its allies in Iraq after the occupation. It also deemed the success of its efforts in Iraq as a base from which it could extend its influence to the rest of its Shiite incubators in the region in order to empower them politically as in the case of the Iraqi model.<sup>(25)</sup>

Iran asserted the value of defending Shiites and undertook active steps in this regard. Iran opened several offices for Khamenei's representatives in several countries in the region. It also encouraged intermarriages, tourism, cultural courses and other initiatives that led to strengthening bonds between Shiites and Iranian citizens. Different Iranian entities financed study centers, institutes and media outlets to attract influential figures from the region's countries to bring them to Iranian cities, strengthening Iran's clout in the region.

Iran sought to interpret its identity and political ideologies in accordance with its political relations with regional countries. It managed to galvanize some Shiites into armed militias loyal to Iran, the number one guardian of Shiites across the world. This happened under the pressure of Iranian propaganda and its tools. This is in addition to its pursuit to control Shiites in some countries in the region through exercising its guardianship of holy shrines<sup>(26)</sup> and asserting its role in protecting these shrines from the threat posed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Additionally, Iran has consolidated the idea that it is the only country capable of protecting Shiite gains obtained in their countries while pushing Shiite communities in the region to view Iran in a way that transcends the sect-inspired relationship by looking at Iran at a higher level leading to a deeper relationship. This was reflected in the remarks made by the Adviser to the Iranian President for the Affairs of Ethnicities and Religious Minorities Ali Younesi during the Iranian Identity Forum that the relationship between Tehran and Baghdad involves nothing that amounts to a difference; therefore, we should either live together or die together, because our history and culture are one. This is all in addition to the continued efforts to promote Iranian figures. Most of them have become familiar across the main streets and squares in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. Perhaps the Iranian aim behind this is to direct Shiite communities towards following in the footsteps of these figures at the expense of their national figures, whether religious, social or military.

Iran's utilization of the religious sectarian dimension in its security doctrine is not only through slogans, but also actions on the ground which seek to support Shiite minorities in the Arab and Gulf states politically and culturally. Iran attempts to establish political parties or militant groups which work to achieve Iranian interests in these countries, whether by pressuring their governments as is the case with Hezbollah of Lebanon or thwarting any political actions which are inconsistent with its interests as is the case with the Houthis when it instructed them to undermine the Gulf Initiative for a political settlement in Yemen and provided them with military assistance enabling the Houthis to seize the Yemeni capital Sanaa in September 2014. It seems that, in light of Iranian movements over the years, Tehran employs the sectarian dimension in its military doctrine to position itself as the country that is leading Shiites in the region and the world. Therefore, it justifies in its Constitution intervention to defend the oppressed anywhere, bypassing the boundaries and sovereignty of countries. Maybe this is what could be understood by the remarks made by President Hassan Rouhani as he said plainly that Iran will intervene anywhere to protect Shiite shrines from terrorists.<sup>(27)</sup> This is the pretext under which Iran explains its intervention in Syria and Iraq.

## **2- Using Shiite Holy Shrines and the Strategy of Attracting Parties**

According to the strategy of attracting parties, a political power, whether it is a state or a regional alliance in its maneuvers against its enemies, exploits certain elements that are beyond its traditional assessment of its enemy, particularly its power. These elements are generated by the political power to weaken its enemy's capabilities during conflict time. It uses them as part of its comprehensive maneuvers of strategic confrontation. Consequently, it weakens the targeted

state's ability to resist via resorting to creating domestic sectarian enclaves or strengthening those enclaves already established in its spheres of influence. In addition, Iran encourages those sectarian enclaves to bypass the state and weaken its ability to face growing Iranian clout, which is mainly based on Shiite popular incubators. This makes the targeted party fight in fragile arenas leading to the depletion of state resources, deepens hostilities and prevents parties from targeting the core issues. This principle is the real axis of the Iranian regional strategy, which is based on partitioning Arab countries which contain Shiite incubators in accordance with sectarian considerations and taking advantage of the social makeup in these countries.

This strategy is the number one pillar on which the theory of the Shiite Crescent, which is made up of Shiite political and military forces in the Middle East that have cordial relations with Iran, is based. These forces are one of the mainstays of Iranian regional policy towards the countries which contain Shiite shrines or incubators, with Iran developing cooperative relations with Shiite political and military forces and movements. This is enforced via several means, including the establishment of mosques and shrines, opening cultural and religious centers, encouraging and calling for the dissemination of Shiism, and pressuring to get the approval to support, develop and protect existing Shiite shrines, as well as enforcing operations to change the demographic makeup through which Iran seeks to pressure the countries where there are Shiite shrines and mosques, as is happening today in Syria and Iraq.

Without limitation, the Iranian side has been keen to promote slogans of 'protecting the Shiite shrines' in Syria to justify its support for the Assad government in repressing the popular revolt that began in early 2011. But this protection has gone beyond known Shiite shrines in Syria such as the Sayeda Zeinab Shrine and Sayeda Ruqaiya Shrine in Damascus. Iran has revived forgotten Shiite shrines in Deir Ezzor and its suburbs to Aleppo. Earlier in 2018, after Shiite militias gained control in Deir Ezzor at the expense of ISIS, Iran began to establish a shrine on a fountain in the desert near al-Qouria in the countryside east of Deir Ezzor, which was part of a campaign to establish shrines carried out by Iraqi Shiite entities under the guise of reconstructing what ISIS destroyed. Later on, Iran handed over the responsibility for running this shrine – named the Holy Fountain – to local agents from Hatla village who embraced Shiism, becoming Iran's main hotspot in an area which is Iraq's gateway to Syria.<sup>(28)</sup>

This is in addition to what Shiite endowments are doing today with the support of Iran by seizing and taking control of commercial and religious spots belonging to Sunni endowments in the cities liberated from ISIS in Anbar, Salah al-Din and Mosul in Iraq. Iran transforms them into places belonging to Shiite endowments.

Iran makes these Shiite shrines sacrosanct in order to assume the mission of protecting them. It is a general policy adopted by Iran in all Syrian and Iraqi cities and provinces. Iran seeks to create holy shrines to serve its expansionist project, which aims to spread Iran's influence across the region. This has happened by converting several social classes in these countries to Shiism, transforming them into communities serving Iran's security and political agendas.

The Iranian presence in countries such as Iraq and Syria, to protect holy shrines or the Shiite sect, could pose a security threat to the region's countries. It could also lead to a growing Iranian military presence in the region to serve Iranian interests such as creating a geo-sectarian depth in areas where Iranian Shiism failed to exercise influence and render any future economic or military siege on Iran as futile. This would happen via Iran harnessing Shiite incubators to protect the central guardian of the Shiite sect from annihilation and collapse in case there was a face-off between Iran and the Arabs or Iran and the United States. Shiite incubators would be mobilized to threaten and strike US interests or foment political or security instability across Arab countries in a military alliance which would bring together Iran and non-state Shiite groups capable of providing Iran with support in due time.

This is based on the Iranian orientation to activate the role of Shiite forces in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. This poses a clear threat to Arab national security with Iran strengthening sectarian parties, sowing discord between them and Arab governments, and monitoring different movements of the Arab countries where Shiites exist in order to exploit the weaknesses of Arab countries to deter would-be or existing dangers.

The Iranian government's insistence on using mobilization-centered political language is based on sectarian and factional considerations. It constitutes a means to religiously exploit every military or political accomplishment by the government. The Iranian government uses rhetoric claiming that their victory is endowed from the heavens (God) to explain every accomplishment, giving an impression that a supernatural force and a sublime will were behind the victory. This rhetoric is an effective method to cover up the government's awkward and difficult situations.

When the Iran-Iraq war lost its significance for Iranians and calls mounted inside Iran to stop it, Khomeini insisted that the "establishment of prayers in Jerusalem" was imminent. When doubts mounted inside Iran on the moral justification to support the Syrian government which kills its people to the level of a genocide in Syria, these doubts were met with counterpropaganda that showed the noble and sublime objectives of the Iranian intervention, to defend holy shrines. In addition, Iranian media highlighted epic and supernatural heroic acts and triumphs which cannot happen without heavenly help.

The leaders of the Iranian government find that connecting their policy with holy shrines is a successful means to ensure longevity in power and reduce responsibility for any administrative setback or moral breach. It is also an effective means of mobilization which guarantees them extensive clout. However, this politicized veneer of religiosity has thrown the Iranian government into a voluntary detachment from reality and a denial of its offensive nature. It has also instilled aggressive narcissism within it, which prompted others to look at Shiite holy shrines with doubt and suspicion.<sup>(29)</sup> This was explained as nothing but a policy of sectarian and factional expansionism. Under the guise of defending holy shrines, several genocides have occurred in Syria and Iraq, in addition to the operations to implement demographic change which created vital buffers to protect Iran's national security against would-be threats. This happened through Iran's destruction of Iraq's military force and Iranian influence over Iraq's military doctrine. This is in addition to aborting the ambitions of the Sunni majority in Syria and opposing their attempt to overthrow the Bashar al-Assad government.

### 3- The Narrative of Defending Holy Shrines

Since the beginning of the Iranian revolution in 1979, Iran has been seeking to find strategic points of access to its regional neighbors where there is sectarian proximity in order to connect them at the political and security level with the wheel of its regional strategy. After the tenets of exporting the revolution and defending the oppressed, the tenet of defending holy shrines began to take a foothold in the Shiite political mindset, especially in Iraq and Syria. Iran had worked deliberately to extensively employ this tenet within its pursuit to securitize, and protect Shiite identity in order to impact the national security of the countries targeted by Iran.

Iranian sectarianism plays a leading role in directing the Iranian movement at home and abroad. The dimension related to Iranian identity and Shiite factions is a parameter of Iranian strategy. Though Iran does not explicitly express sectarianism in its policy, its actions in the region, specifically its behavior in the Middle East, reveal the strategy Iran follows.<sup>(30)</sup>

The idea of defending holy shrines has provided vast scope for implementing Iranian regional strategy. Since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, Iran has mobilized all its military forces to serve its political and strategic project in Syria and Iraq. The excesses committed by ISIS against Shiite holy shrines in Syria and Iraq provided Iran legitimacy to

defend them in a manner that serves its security and military strategy. The Iranian military propaganda managed to convince Shiites in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain and other Shiite minorities existing in the region that the conflict is against Shiism and hence there should be a stand against this existential threat to Shiite identity. This led to the formation of armed Shiite militias whose mission was to protect Shiite holy shrines in Syria and Iraq, which evolved in later phases under the slogan 'Defenders of the Holy Shrines.'

The IRGC announced the formation of the 'Defenders of the Holy Shrines' in May 2013 at a huge 10,000-strong Basij rally at Shahid Shiroudi Stadium in Tehran. In addition, it announced that the 'Defenders of the Holy Shrines' were heading to Syria to defend Shiite shrines and the Golan Heights.<sup>(31)</sup>

The 'Defenders of the Holy Shrines' is composed of different nationalities including fighters from Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. But the overwhelming majority of them consist of Lebanese and Iraqi fighters. The Fatemiyoun Army or Fatemiyoun Brigade, which fought alongside Assad's forces for years, is considered among the most important groups which contributed to the establishment of the 'Defenders of the Holy Shrines.' It is followed by Hezbollah of Lebanon, Hezbollah of Syria, the Badr Organization, The Brigade of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, the Quds Force, Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades, Zeinab Brigades, the Zulfikar Brigade, Asaib Ahl Al-Haq, Imam Ali Brigades, al-Salam Brigades, Saraya al-Khorasani, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba.

The IRGC is the main founder of the 'Defenders of the Holy Shrines' after it recruited tens of thousands of Basij force members to its ranks. General Hussein Hamadani, one of the IRGC commanders, said before his death in Syria that 130,000 trained fighters of the Basij force await permission to enter Syria. He said that today we are fighting in Syria for the sake of our interests. He pointed out that the IRGC forces are fighting with an organization made up of 42 groups and 128 battalions.<sup>(32)</sup>

These remarks were made to give the issue of defending holy shrines a securitized dimension linking them to Iranian national security. The remarks made by other Iranian officials reiterate the point that defending holy shrines is at the top of Iran's security agenda. The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei commended the sacrifices of fighters who were defending Shiite holy shrines. He said that if there had been no one offering such sacrifices, the love for Imam Hussein would not have prevailed and been exalted in the world as is the case now. He also said that what the Holy Shrine Defenders did is similar to what some figures did during the Abbasid dynasty preventing the destruction of the tomb of Sayyid al-Shuhada. He spoke to the families of the martyrs, saying that "if it weren't for the sacrifices of your sons, the enemy would have been much closer to the shrine of Imam Hussein and shelled Karbala with artillery, but those youths made these sacrifices to protect Islam and Muslims." He also lauded their jihad in the cause of God without motivation from any entity. "During the days of the imposed war, Imam Khomeini issued orders and directives to people. But today the situation is different. The youth rose up to defend the country without being ordered to do so," he said.<sup>(33)</sup>

It seems clear that in light of Iranian actions over the past few years, Tehran is employing the issue of defending holy shrines in its military doctrine to a large extent. It is attempting to position itself as the leader of Shiites across the world. Therefore, it justifies in its Constitution intervention in order to defend Shiites anywhere in the world. The issue of defending holy shrines, as we mentioned above, has significantly served Iranian national security. After the emergence of ISIS, Major General Yehia Rahim Safavi, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's adviser for military affairs, pointed out that Iran informed ISIS that it is ready to enter Iraq to defend Shiite holy shrines. He noted that Iran had sent this message to ISIS before it advanced towards the holy Shiite cities in Iraq.

The senior adviser to the supreme leader reiterated justification for the Iranian military intervention in Iraq and Syria. He said: "If Iran had not offered support for Syria and

Iraq, it would have fought terrorists near its borders.”<sup>(34)</sup> Iranian officials also announced repeatedly that Iran’s military and security intervention in Syria and Iraq was within the context of defending Iran’s national security, even if it would lead to prolonging the war in these two countries. Meanwhile, the former IRGC chief, Major General Mohammed Ali Jafari, said that the Iranian interventions in Yemen and Syria come within the framework of expanding the map of the Shiite Crescent in the region. He also called on Navei Aqdam, who is a veteran IRGC general, to join the Basij militias to fight in Syria and Iraq in order to maintain Iranian national security. He also said that if Iran did not crush ISIS in Iraq and Syria, it would engage in battles with it in Khuzestan or even Tehran. He also called on all Basij force recruits to volunteer to defend Iranian national security and the shrines of Ahl al-Bait in Iraq and Sayeda Zeinab in Syria, consistent with Iranian rhetoric deeming military intervention in other countries as ‘defense of its national security.’<sup>(35)</sup>

After the Iranian press deliberately ignored Iranian losses in Syria initially, it began to publish articles on the deaths of IRGC commanders in Syria, interview their families, and mention their virtues. Iranian officials also began to visit the families of those killed and publish their photos with their wives and children. Their families received care and attention from the supreme leader. It has been noted that all of these families were Afghans residing in Iran whose sons joined the Fatemiyoun Brigade. Khamenei also stated that all Iranians owe these families. Their sons fought in defense of Ahl al-Bait’s women in Syria and Iraq and faced Iran’s enemies overseas. Without this confrontation with Iran’s enemies overseas, the enemies would have entered Iran. If they did not stop them, Iran would have been forced to fight those enemies in Kermanshah, Hamadan and the rest of Iran’s cities. These (martyrs) sacrificed their lives in defense of Iran, Iranians and the Islamic revolution. Above all, they have died beyond Iran’s borders.<sup>(36)</sup>

All in all, it can be said that the phenomenon of Shiite militias and the securitization of the Shiite sect as well as the defense of Shiite holy shrines needs – in some of its aspects – to be interpreted within the rhetoric of the party promoting it. This is because the aforementioned emerged in certain historical contexts that Iran has experienced and it has undergone a profound securitization process for the sake of which all the resources of the Iranian state have been harnessed. This has also produced a chaotic regional situation due to Iranian sectarian behavior. Therefore, it cannot be understood without being listed within the framework of the ‘holy missions’ assigned to the IRGC and the justifications of its presence in Syria, Iraq and in other places in a way that made the IRGC go beyond the idea of being an organization established to protect the revolution. One of the missions of the IRGC is guarding the Infallible Imam and protecting Shiites and their holy shrines beyond the borders of Iran. It is also one of Iran’s central tools to establish the centrality of Iran to Shiites among those who believe in it and its role, a belief that is based on the fact that this role is transboundary and transcends nationalities.<sup>(37)</sup>

## Conclusion

The Iranian revolution has been seeking to renew itself based on its own ideological tenets. Therefore, it came forward with new interpretations to export the revolution and new formulas to dominate regional countries through boosting Shiite incubators in Iraq and the Arabian Gulf states. These Shiite incubators were transformed from minorities into political pressure groups which serve the Iranian regional project. This is in addition to Iran forming militias and political parties which have ideological and intellectual connections with it. All the foregoing is clear evidence of the influence of the Khomeini-inspired revolutionary hypotheses on Iranian regional policy and its interactions. Perhaps the issue of defending holy shrines is, in its general framework, a new Iranian attempt to give momentum to its regional policy which is stagnating after the failure in ‘exporting the revolution.’

The theory of securitization constituted the theoretical framework through which Iran’s

defense of holy shrines was studied. Iran managed to rally Shiite incubators existing in the region behind its regional project. Through this theory, Iran managed to make Shiites feel that they are exposed to existential threats which completely encircle them. This produced a state of sectarian and ethnic tension in the region. There are domestic and external parameters in Iranian national security policy which have been discussed throughout the study. The theoretical tenets brought forward by the Copenhagen School 'inspired by the theory of securitization' have caused major transformations in the Khomeini-inspired revolutionary thought, which tirelessly seeks to contain the region's countries and communities via empowering Shiites, forming armed militias and creating new shrines and defending them.

Stemming from its endeavor to outline its major goal, a country clearly defines the nature of its political actions. Then, it uses suitable means, whether peaceful or not, in order to achieve its desired goals. The Iranian strategic planner outlines several main objectives related to the national interests of the state and its supreme national security strategy represented in safeguarding Iranian national security, maintaining Iranian domination over the regional order, and seeking to render successful Iranian efforts to achieve superiority in political, economic, military and cultural fields. In order to achieve these ends, Iranian decision-makers resort to creating outside motives to render these efforts fruitful. The issue of defending holy shrines is a case in point.

The Iranian political and strategic decision-maker attempts to expand the scope of Iranian interests overseas when he feels that the state's strength is increasing or national security is facing external threats. The aim is to achieve domination and secure supreme national interests represented in the state's ideological values and beliefs, material resources and potentials, as well as military strength and its implications on the balance of power in the regional order.

In sum, Iranian security policy, especially when it comes to defending holy shrines, is shaped according to regional dynamics, and the frameworks of interactions with other influential powers as well as its role in outlining Iran's security agenda. This security agenda is used to establish a securitized policy. In the same way, regional parties implement the policy of securitization towards Iran. The relationship between defending Shiite holy shrines and Iran's national security strategy will depend on the circumstances which Iran will face. As Iran made the Shiite sect its main pillar for regional clout, the scenario suggesting the use of defending holy shrines as a main locomotive for Iranian policy is likely to continue, and vice versa, too.

Here, Iran's cultural and religious clout plays a big role in solidifying this perception. As long as Iran succeeds in making Shiites feel that they are being threatened, and that Shiite shrines are facing danger, the issue of defending holy shrines will continue to be central to Iranian national security policy.

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