

Iran's Interests in the Syrian Conflict

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Abstract: *The conflict in Syria has been going on for years and is not over yet. Iran has always been a major player in the Syrian conflict, which is determined by its interests in the conflict. Iran's fundamental interest in the Syrian conflict is to safeguard the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. Its major interests in the conflict include fighting the ISIS, working with Russia, and reaching a comprehensive agreement on Iran's nuclear program and maintaining it.*

Key words: *Iran; the conflict in Syria; interest; Marxism*

The initial mass anti-government protests in Syria quickly turned into a civil war. Due to the increasing number of foreign forces directly involved in this civil war and the involvement of terrorist organizations, the term of the Syrian civil war is not an accurate one. Therefore, this kind of armed confrontation in Syria, involving Syrian factions and many countries, is called in this article the Syrian conflict. Iran is an important country in the Middle East and enjoys long-term friendly cooperation with Syria under President Bashar al-Assad. Iran and Syria have long depended on each other to safeguard and expand their respective interests and common interests. What are Iran's interests in the conflict in Syria? This is the question for this article.

To explore Iran's interests in the Syrian conflict, we need to analyze Iran's national interests, and to analyze Iran's national interests, we need to make clear what kind of national interests view is used. The concept of national interests is closely related to the view of the state and interests. This paper discusses Iran's interests in the Syrian conflict, using the Marxist view of the state and interests.

I. Iran's National Interests

Marxism holds that the state is an instrument of class rule. That is to say, the state is the state of the ruling class, so the national interests are essentially the interests of the ruling class, with distinct class nature. But at the same time, the national interest is also of the whole people feature. The ruling class should take into account not only the interests of the whole people, but also the realization of the interests of the whole people. "Political rule is everywhere based on the carrying out of a social function, and political rule can only be sustained if it carries

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out its social function.”¹ Therefore, the interests of the state are not only of the class nature but also of the whole people feature. Being mutually exclusive, separate, and interdependent, the class nature and the whole people nature of national interests are dialectically unified.

Therefore, to analyze Iran’s national interests, we must first understand Iran’s ruling class. The ruling class can be regarded as the class that controls and uses the state power to maintain and consolidate the existing social form (the unity of economic foundation and superstructure). The Islamic Republic of Iran is a country where religion and politics are integrated and theocracy is practiced, the central characteristic of its political institution and the political system determined by it being that theocracy is superior to civil rights.² Thus, although it is difficult to accurately and comprehensively identify the ruling class in Iran, it is certain that the core of the ruling class in Iran is the clerical class or the mullah group. In essence, therefore, Iran’s national interests are largely those of the country’s mullahs. Then what are the interests of Iran’s mullahs?

Marxism holds that interest is the social transformation of needs, and its essence is social relations, because social relations determine the satisfaction of needs and the realization of benefits. Therefore, for the Iranian mullah group, its interests are fundamentally to maintain and consolidate the existing domestic economic, political, legal and cultural relations. The above relations are not only manifested by the state power to a large extent, but also maintained by the state power. If there is no state power (in this case “no” means not only “lost” but also “broken”), then the social relations that determine the interests of the mullahs will disappear. Therefore, the national interest of Iran is largely the interest of the mullahs, and in particular, to safeguard and consolidate Iran’s theocracy.

In order to maintain and consolidate Iran’s theocracy, the mullah group should not only control and possess the means of production, but also effectively manage the means of production, so that it can have positive effects in social and economic processes. The effective possession of the means of production will inevitably lead to the possession and control of more social wealth, so as to meet people’s material and cultural needs to the greatest extent through political management and other means, and avoid the distributive crisis caused by unfair distribution and large gap between the rich and the poor. In particular, countries such as Iran, which are highly dependent on oil exports for their development, should pay particular attention to improving their oil production and processing capacity and strive to develop international markets. In order to maintain and consolidate the theocracy, the mullahs should also master violence, greatly improve the ability and quality of the performers of violence, enhance the rigor and effectiveness of the operation of violent organizations, and enhance the technical level and deterrent power of the tools of violence. Given this, it is understandable that Iran, as a medium-sized and regional power, is focused on developing missile and nuclear technology, or even secretly building nuclear weapons facilities. In order to maintain and consolidate Iran’s theocracy, the Iranian mullah group not only needs to consolidate the political power foundation, social foundation and public function foundation, but also needs psychological foundation, that is, to enable the members of society to recognize and agree with the ruling methods of the mullah group both mentally and psychologically. For this reason, the mullah group must take various measures to socialize the people politically, promote and publicize religious ideology, internalize it in the hearts of the Iranian people, and externalize it in their daily actions. For the Iranian mullahs, religious thought is not only conducive to enhancing the legitimacy of their own rule, but also to promoting the Iranian people’s sense of identity, enhancing the cohesion of their citizens and avoiding the occurrence of the identity crisis.

In international politics, Iran’s national interest is still to safeguard and consolidate the theocracy, and its

¹ *Selected works of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 3, Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1995, p. 523.

² See Hanjing Yue, “Iran’s Political System: Theoretical Base, Constituent Units and Democratic Nature,” *International Relations and Diplomacy*, Volume 3, Number 11, 2015, pp.773-779.

essence is the international relations conducive to safeguarding domestic social relations. This requires Iran's political power subject with the mullah group as the core to make efforts to improve Iran's comprehensive national strength, and meanwhile to build, in accordance with the external environment, international economic relations, international political relations and international cultural relations conducive to its own domestic security and stable development. This national interest of Iran determines its interests in the Syrian conflict. Accordingly, the author begins to analyze the interests of Iran in the Syria conflict, and first analyzes its fundamental interest in the conflict.

II. Iran's Fundamental Interests in the Syrian Conflict

The fundamental interest mentioned here refers to the interest throughout the Syrian conflict and as the overall objective of Iran's policies and actions in Syria. Iran's fundamental interest in the Syrian conflict is to preserve the rule of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. It is in Iran's overall national interest.

Outside Iran, the biggest threat to the rule of the mullahs is the US. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, the United States has made promoting regime change in Iran a fundamental goal of its policy toward Iran. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and especially of the Saddam Hussein regime, the America's aim for regime change in Iran has hardened, because an important goal of the US Middle East strategy is to prevent the emergence of regional powers that challenge US interests in the region. Iran's regional influence has risen sharply since the toppling of the Taliban and Saddam regimes, with the "help" of the United States. The United States cannot willingly allow Iran to pick up a big advantage and further threaten its own interests in the Middle East.

In the 1980s, the United States was able to balance Iran and Iraq through the Iran-Iraq War. After the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the relative strength of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq increased, but it was weakened after the gulf war. The US then pursued a so-called "double containment" strategy against Iran and Iraq to further weaken their regional influence. Even under the strategy of "double containment", the balance of power between Iran and Iraq still existed, concurrently with the rise of the Afghan Taliban after the Cold War and the positive development of the Middle East peace process, so Iran's influence in the region remained limited. But at the beginning of the 21st century, the United States launched wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, eliminating two old enemies on both sides of Iran, and the new regimes in both countries faced severe challenges from the old and new political forces at home for a long time, thus greatly limiting the power of the United States. In view of geographical, historical, religious and cultural reasons, the new regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq established under the guidance of the so-called democratic system of the West have actively developed friendly relations with Iran based on Iran's great influence on them, which has further enhanced Iran's regional influence. While Iran's regional influence has been relatively greatly enhanced by America's blessing, the Iranian nuclear issue has also emerged, heightening fears of Iran among the United States and its regional allies. For the United States, the most fundamental way to reduce Iran's regional influence and solve the Iranian nuclear issue once and for all is to change Iran's regime, which is increasingly urgent for the United States. So the US is the biggest external threat to the Iranian regime.

Because the United States is the biggest threat to the security of the regime, Iran has made dealing with the United States' challenges and repression its top foreign policy priority. At the international level, Iran has taken advantage of the contradiction between major powers to actively develop relations with Russia, China, even some European Union countries and many Islamic countries. At the same time, Iran also pays attention to developing relations with hostile countries of the United States, such as North Korea and Venezuela. At the regional level, Iran has actively developed relations with Iraq and Afghanistan and has worked hard to

consolidate its traditional friendly relations with Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran has also tried to maintain its support for Hamas's armed forces as much as possible, trying to show that it is an Arab and even Islamic interest representative, enhancing its influence in the Islamic world and effectively relieving US pressure. Thanks to America's "contribution" and Iran's efforts, a so-called "Shia crescent" has taken shape, starting from western Afghanistan in the east, passing through Iran, Iraq, Syria to Lebanon in the west.

The "Shia crescent" is very important to Iran. As mentioned above, the national interests in international politics are essentially international relations, and the "Shia crescent" provides Iran with an important means to meet the security needs of its regime. The crescent zone will help increase Iran's religious identity and reduce the ruling cost of Iran's mullahs. The crescent zone would make it easier for Iran to extend its power into the Mediterranean, strengthening Iran in the geopolitical game with countries including the United States. One of the main aims of the United States in toppling Saddam Hussein was to try to build Iraq into a "beacon of democracy" in the region that would serve as a model for the rest of the region. But Iraq's post-war development suggests that this is only wishful thinking of the United States. Iraq's political development after Saddam has been faltering, and internal strife has continued. Because of its economic, political, religious and cultural influence in Iraq, Iran can use post-war Iraq to contain the United States to some extent.

Syria is key to Iran in this crescent first because, unlike Iraq, Syria, like Iran, is firmly anti-American and anti-Israeli, supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon and even Hamas. Second, Iran needs Syria's support to prevent Iraq from fully tilting towards the United States. Third, due to geographical and political reasons, Iran's influence on Hezbollah guerrillas, such as the delivery of weapons to them, requires special cooperation from Syria. The maintenance and improvement of political influence of Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon requires not only Iranian support but also Syrian support. Since Syria is an important pillar of Iran's overall interests, Iran sees the fall of the Assad regime as a threat to its survival.

Iran's cooperation with Syria has much to do with both countries' Shia regimes, in addition to their common external enemies. Although Syria's Bashar regime is a secular one, its political power is dominated by Shia Alawites, who make up only about 12 per cent of the country's population. Although the two Shias are different factions, Syria's Shiite branch is closer, at least religiously, to Iran's Imams than to Sunnis. And even if Syria alienates Iran and goes to Sunni countries such as Saudi Arabia, they will still, for their own sake, be pleased to see Syria's Sunnis come to power and the Alawites lose power.

The emergence of the "Shia crescent" underscores Iran's regional influence, a headache not only for the US, which is increasingly focused on the Asia-Pacific region, but also for states such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, the home of the Islamic holy land, a country whose Shiite localities largely overlap with its oil enrichment region, increasingly sees Iran as the number one enemy because of concerns about the impact of the crescent zone on domestic stability and its influence in the Islamic world. To this end, the country is willing to cooperate with Israel to some extent and actively cooperate with the United States to suppress Iran.

Starting in 2010, the so-called "Arab spring", greatly changed the political ecology of the Arab world. Countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Libya, Yemen experienced in succession political earthquake. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and other countries have also experienced large-scale riots. Iran has maintained relative political stability in the Middle East upheaval despite severe U.S. repression. The Arab spring has proved to be the Arab winter. The political earthquake in the Arab world has provided Iran with an opportunity to expand its influence (in Yemen, for example, in support of the Houthis), further stoking hostility from countries such as Saudi Arabia to Iran. But the Obama administration was keen to push forward the "rebalance to the Asia-Pacific" strategy, correspondingly implemented the "offshore balance" strategy in the Middle East, and signed accordingly the agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue with Iran and other countries. This has angered Saudi Arabia and others.

But the upheaval in the Middle East has also given countries such as Saudi Arabia an opportunity to strike Iran, which is the Syrian crisis.

Influenced by the situation in Morocco, Egypt and Libya, 15 students in the southern Syrian city of Deraa painted anti-government slogans in public places in mid-March 2011. The Syrian government arrested them. This immediately sparked anti-government protests. In the face of an emergency, Syria's Assad government introduced a series of reforms, but instead of stopping, the anti-government protests grew in size. Western countries, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other countries took the opportunity to impose various economic, political and diplomatic pressures on the Assad administration and publicly urged Assad to step down. Within Syria, several rebel groups, including the free Syrian army, quickly emerged, linked to foreign rebels and backed by foreign forces in an armed struggle to overthrow the Assad government, plunging the country into a civil war. In 2013, under the pretext of the chemical weapons attacks in Syria, the western countries threatened to carry out military strikes against the Syrian government. Later, under the mediation of Russia, the United States and Russia reached an agreement on "chemical weapons for peace", which initiated the process of Syria's chemical weapons removal. However, the issue of chemical weapons has been floating like a ghost in the Syrian conflict. On the night of April 13, 2018, the United States, Britain and France launched large-scale air strikes on the Syrian capital Damascus and other places under the pretext of the chemical weapons attack.

The Syrian civil war had provided a good environment for the development of extremist groups. The rise of the ISIS, which is closely linked to al Qaeda, controlled large areas of Syria and Iraq. The radical ideology and brutality of the ISIS have almost pitted it against the rest of the world. The United States, Russia and other countries, under the pretext of fighting the ISIS, have successively intervened militarily in Syria and formed their respective anti-terrorist alliance. But America's fight against the ISIS was double-minded. Its main strategic principle is that overthrowing the Assad regime is superior to counter-terrorism. Russia's main aim is to preserve the Assad regime. In this context, the Kurds in Syria, backed by the United States, have been gaining strength in the fight against the ISIS and have established their own armed forces, the people's protection force. In the case of Russia's growing influence and the fact that the Syrian opposition isn't worth helping, the United States is more dependent on the Syrian Kurdish armed forces as a grip on the development of the Syrian future. But that worries Turkey, which sees it as an offshoot of the Kurdistan workers' party. On January 18, 2018, the Turkish army entered Syria and launched the "olive branch" military operation to drive the "people's protection force" out of the Syrian Avlin area.

In the Syrian conflict, various factions in Syria, the Middle East and even outside the region have entered the arena. But generally speaking, they can be divided into two camps: the anti-Assad camp and the pro-Assad camp. That is to say, the focus of all factions' competition is the fate of the Assad regime.³ In the struggle between the two parties, the Syrian government was once in a precarious position, and Russia's military intervention turned the situation around. However, it seems that the Syrian government still has a long way to go before it can unify the country. One of the main reasons why the outside stalwarts of the anti-Assad camp, such as the United States, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, is to weaken Iran's regional influence, because the fall of the Assad government in Syria would severely fracture the "Shia crescent". The fundamental interest of Iran in the Syrian conflict is to safeguard the Assad regime in Syria because of the extremely severe challenges that the Syrian regime has faced since the outbreak of the civil war and because the regime is so important to the realization of Iran's overall national interests.

In fact, since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Iran has been paying close attention to the situation in

³ After Russia's strong military intervention in the Syrian civil war, western countries and others have not really given up on the goal of toppling the Assad regime, although they have said that the future of Syria should be decided by the Syrian people.

Syria and has invested a lot of resources to help the Syrian government. Initially, Iranian support for Syria was limited to advisory and training services for the Syrian government, as well as technical, intelligence, financial and military equipment. Later, it expanded its support to the deployment of a significant number of members of the Islamic revolutionary guards, regular forces and Basij militia. Of course, the governments of Iran and Syria only acknowledge that Iran has provided military advisers. Iran has also guided Hezbollah in Lebanon since the start of the Syrian civil war to join it to support president Assad. Hezbollah guerrillas have been involved in almost every major battle, especially in Aleppo, which has turned the tide. Iran has also mobilized, funded and armed thousands of Shiite fighters to defend the Assad regime. The fighters were recruited from the Arab and Islamic worlds, including Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

III. Iran's Important Interests in the Syrian Conflict

Important interests refer to the important means to realize the fundamental interests. As has been demonstrated above, Iran's fundamental interest in the Syrian conflict is to safeguard the regime of Bashar Assad. Iran's important interest in the Syrian conflict refers to the policy or means that play an important role in promoting Iran's maintenance of the regime of Bashar. Of course, these important measures include all kinds of support mentioned above, including direct support in economic, political, military and other aspects. The author will analyze these important measures, or important interests, from the perspective of international relations.

1. Combating the ISIS

Without the direct military involvement of foreign forces in the Syrian civil war or their support of the Syrian opposition against the Syrian government forces, it would have been difficult for Syrian opposition forces to pose a real threat to the Syrian government's survival due to their lack of cohesion and their independent fighting. But the rise of the ISIS posed a serious challenge to the Syrian government. The group is a Sunni extremist group with the ultimate goal of establishing a "caliphate" across the borders of nation-states. It is extremely hostile to Shi'ites, secular Sunnis, and of course the West. Partly financed by Sunni states and coddled by the United States and others, its occupation of large swaths of Iraq and Syria in the "Shia crescent" has undoubtedly threatened the national security of Iran, a leading Shia, and the fight against the ISIS is part of the problem of safeguarding the Assad regime.

Here's a brief look at the sources and supporters of ISIS members to show the need for Iran to fight the group. Turkey was originally in fact a supporter of the ISIS, and there is strong evidence that Turkey allowed jihadists from around the world to cross its territory into Syria. The idea is to allow the Syrian opposition to defeat the Assad government and the Syrian Kurds. Turkey sees the Syrian Kurds and Assad's government as a bigger threat than ISIS. Of course, Turkey's actions also have to do with Chechnya being an important source of jihadists in Syria. The mujahideen, who sought to recapture the lost glory of a once brilliant Islam, were also inspired by people with more secular motives. The latter have the appetite for adventure and wealth, as well as the morbid need to kill for pleasure and rape and plunder. Paradoxically, even some Christians and Kurds have joined the ISIS, either at risk, for ideological reasons or seeking revenge from the US and Europe over their dissatisfaction with the status quo. The ISIS is influenced by Wahhabi Islam and funded by sympathizers from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and other countries, although the group vehemently denies Saudi's ruling authority. More important is ISIS's ties to the Baath party. Nineteen of the top 20 positions in the ISIS cabinet were held by former Baath party members, who had been middle-ranking members when Saddam fell. So it can be said that ISIS in Iraq is largely a homegrown Sunni Arab group, while in Syria it contains more foreigners. This also shows that the US is actually the driving force behind the rise of the ISIS. The United

States has helped the ISIS intentionally or unintentionally, because its lax policies allowed many of its current leaders to have escaped U.S. detention centers in Iraq.⁴

Iraq is a test bed for democracy in the Middle East, carefully crafted by the US. The ISIS's presence in Iraq could further reduce production of an already unsatisfactory test plot and weakened western soft power, making it an important interest for countries such as the United States to fight the ISIS in Iraq. But the United States has different concerns about the ISIS in Syria. For the United States, overthrowing the Assad regime is more important than attacking the ISIS. The United States tried to use Syria's ISIS to overthrow the Syrian government and then it would begin to destroy the extremist organization. It is not difficult to understand that when the United States helped Iraq to encircle and suppress the ISIS in its territory, it deliberately left a gap for extremists to escape to Syria. Unlike the United States, whether it is the "Islamic state" in Iraq or the "Islamic state" in Syria, Iran is firmly opposed, which makes the United States and Iran have common interests in the fight against the "Islamic state" in Iraq, but in the fight against the "Islamic state" in Syria, there is a conflict of interests. It is not difficult to understand that the legal basis given by the US for its military attack on the "Islamic state" in Iraq is the collective self-defense that the Iraqi government agreed to, and the legal basis for its military attack in Syria is the extension of the collective self-defence of Iraq, and the Syrian government is unwilling and unable to combat ISIS. The legal basis given by the United States is actually untenable, but it is clearly aimed at maintaining consistency in its position that the Assad government is an illegitimate government. Meanwhile, in the context of the Obama administration's "Middle East offshore balance" strategy, the United States is trying to make Iran and the ISIS internecine. America's aim was almost achieved. The ISIS, with its rich experience and strong fighting capabilities, had scored remarkable successes, attracting not only a large number of jihadists from all over the world, but also a large number of members of the Syrian opposition. As a result, the Syrian government was in a very critical situation. Even Iran, struggling in Syria, began to plan for a post-Assad Syria. But in late September 2015, Russia formally intervened in the civil war in Syria and promptly saved the dying Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, thus completely disrupting the US plan.

2. Cooperating with Russia

Iran's primary partner in securing the Assad regime was initially Hezbollah, the Lebanese guerrilla group, because Iraq, too, was under enormous threat from the ISIS. In addition to direct support for the Syrian government, Iraq's fight against extremist groups in its own territory was indirect support for the Syrian government. But no matter how Iran worked with Iraq and Hezbollah, it would be hard for them to maintain the Assad regime on their own. Importantly, in addition to supporting the Assad regime, Iran's deep involvement in the civil wars in Iraq and Yemen over the same period also consumed a lot of Iran's resources. Iran had been forced to allocate its limited resources as reasonably as possible between the three countries, and the slightest indiscretion would leave the other way. For example, Iran sent Shiite militias from Syria to Iraq in the spring of 2015 to help the Iraqi government fight the ISIS, leaving Syrian government forces defeated in Idlib and Palmyra for lack of the necessary support. The power to oppose and to topple Assad's regime is too strong. They include western countries led by the United States, Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and others. This had given strategic support to the Syrian opposition and even extremists, so that they had greater courage and confidence to attack the Syrian government. Naturally, western countries and Turkey, in the early stages of Syria's civil war, were optimistic that the Syrian President would step down. At a critical moment when the fighting situation in Syria's civil war was extremely unfavorable to the Syrian government, Russia's direct

⁴ Andrew Thompson and Jeremi Suri, "How America Helped ISIS," *The New York Times* (international edition), October 2, 2014, 7.

military intervention has changed all these things and changed the strategic balance of forces of all parties in the Syrian conflict. Cooperation between Iran and Russia is inevitable because the two countries have the greatest common interest in Syria's civil war -- protecting the Assad regime. Russia and Iran have a common goal: to stop the Syrian regime from falling into the hands of rebels or Islamic extremists who are hostile to both countries, and to stop the West expanding its influence in Syria.

The Russian army's entry into Syria to combat the Islamic state had the needs of counter-terrorism, geopolitics and isolating the isolated situation.⁵ But the most important of these is the geopolitical need, or more specifically the need to preserve the Assad regime, because: First, if Syria were to be ruled by Sunnis, Russia would lose its key geopolitical interests; Second, the need for counter-terrorism is in fact the common interest of Russia and the Assad government in Syria; Third, the possibility of intending to get rid of the isolated situation may exist, but less important, because Russia is not in tune with the United States, in the fight against the ISIS, especially the ISIS in Syria. Russia has used its fight against the ISIS as an important way to maintain the Assad regime in Syria, while the United States and other western countries have tried to use the ISIS to overthrow the Syrian government. For them, getting rid of President Bashar is better than fighting the ISIS. What might help lift Russia out of its isolation was that an effective Russian crackdown on the ISIS would help ease the refugee crisis that had plagued Europe. Russia has other strategic considerations. Russia believes that the U.S. military intervention contributed to the emergence of failed states, which are the source of tension and war in the region. Establishing itself as an indispensable guarantor of collective security in the Middle East is Russia's grand goal, and Russia sees its military operation in Syria as a necessary step towards achieving it.

In view of the importance of Iran, Russia cannot achieve its goals without Iranian cooperation. Iran needs to cooperate with Russia to achieve its goal in Syria. Russia's direct military involvement has greatly reduced the pressure on Iran, providing what both Syria and Iran desperately lack: modern artillery systems and effective air support. Of course, Iran has also provided effective ground support for Russia. Iran, together with Iraq and Syria, has actively organized a coalition against terrorism with Russia. In August 2016, Iran even allowed Russian planes to take off from Hamadan air base in Iran and attack the target in Syria. Russia's use of the air base was temporarily suspended because critics in Iran criticized the government for allowing foreign troops to use Iran's military bases. Nevertheless, senior officials in Iran still claim that Iran may again allow Russia to use the military base again as needed. This approach by Iran undoubtedly constitutes a strategic deterrent to the United States and other western countries, regional countries and anti-government organizations in Syria. In December 2016, after the Syrian army resumed the second major city of Aleppo, the president of Iran and the Russian president conducted four telephone conversations to discuss cooperation in Syria.⁶ After the fundamental reversal of the Syria war, Iran was actively involved in the Russian led Astana peace talks and the Sochi peace talks, and actively took on the responsibility to implement the results of the peace talks.

3. Seeking to Reach and Maintain the Comprehensive Agreement

Iran's other diplomatic priority in the Syrian conflict is its nuclear program. Both the Syrian conflict and the nuclear issue have a lot to do with the United States and its allies. Similar in nature to sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program, attempts by the United States and others to overthrow the Assad government, have the goal of weakening Iran's regional influence. Iran, under pressure from both the Syrian civil war and the nuclear issue, needed a breakthrough on the nuclear issue to focus on the Syrian conflict and other issues if it was to achieve

⁵ See Hongye Bi, "The Syrian Crisis, the New Regional War and Russia's Middle East Strategy," *Foreign Affairs Review*, 2016, No.1, 2016, pp.61-65.

⁶ Raz Zimmt, "Iranian Concerns Grow over Russia's Syrian Policies," January 9, 2017, https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_21129/E_009_17_360644559.pdf.

its goal of safeguarding Bashar's regime. Iran, on the other hand, is trying to find leverage in the Syrian civil war to reach and defend the nuclear deal. Therefore, seeking to reach and maintain the comprehensive agreement on Iran's nuclear program is another important interest of Iran in the Syrian conflict.

On June 9, 2010, the United Nations security council adopted the 1929 resolution to launch new international sanctions against Iran. Western countries continued to try to use economic sanctions to force Iran to back down on its nuclear program. But soon after the start of the Arab spring, western countries were too busy dealing with Egypt, Libya and other countries to take new action on the Iranian nuclear issue. But with the end of US and European military intervention in Libya and the fall of Gaddafi's regime, as well as the deepening crisis in Syria, the US and Europe imposed unprecedented unilateral economic sanctions on Iran and stepped up military threats in an attempt to use the backdrop of upheaval in the Middle East and elections in Iran to press for regime change. After the Syrian crisis broke out, Iran actively supported the Syrian government to deal with the crisis. The Syrian conflict is both divisive and united, dividing the Muslim world and strengthening the identities of Sunni and Shia Muslims alike. In addition, in the face of external threats, there will be a greater degree of convergence between the class nature of national interests and the whole people feature than under normal circumstances. So the Syrian crisis is good for Iran's political stability.⁷ The US and Europe have failed in their attempts to press for change. However, a military strike against Iran would plunge the US into the Middle East again, which is not conducive to the "Asia-Pacific rebalance". Therefore, the US was willing to make certain concessions and reach a nuclear agreement. While it is important to enhance nuclear capabilities, violence is not isolated. It is based on the effective possession of productive resources and social wealth. "Everywhere and at all times, it is economic conditions and economic means of power that help 'violence' prevail, without which violence would not be violence."⁸ As far as Iran is concerned, the crisis in Syria was deepening, its own investment in the country was increasing, and its resources were becoming more limited under the pressure of strong sanctions. It seems necessary to make concessions to reach a nuclear deal in order to secure more resources to effectively safeguard the Assad regime. This facilitated the conclusion of the interim agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue in November 2013.

The situation in Syria's civil war became increasingly unfavourable to the Syrian government since the interim agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue was reached. The rise of the "Islamic state" also threatened the Iraqi regime, but the country still had American care. But the Syrian government was facing a severe test in the face of the ISIS. Iran needed to continue to invest more resources in the country. Therefore, it was in Iran's interest to make some concessions and reach a final agreement. The United States was also trying to take advantage of Iran to fight ISIS. This contributed to the conclusion of the comprehensive agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue in July 2015.

The pressure on Iran of sanctions had eased since the comprehensive deal was reached, but the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad was facing a life and death test as Iran continued to grapple with the growing threat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria at the same time. Russia's military intervention soon led to a strategic shift in Syria's war situation in favor of the Syrian government, and also completely disrupted the Obama administration's strategy of "off-shore balance in the Middle East". In this situation, the United States had to take concrete action against the ISIS. The organization was quickly routed. Russia has great influence in post-ISIS Syria. Although the United States is also involved militarily, it has shown that "there is no moderate Syrian opposition with which the United States is worthy to cooperate except Syrian Kurds"⁹, and the United

7 See Hanjing Yue, "Why Iran Comparatively Enjoys Political Stability amid the Middle East Upheaval," *Tamkang Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.19, No.4, 2016, pp.75-109.

8 *Selected works of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 3, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1995, p. 515.

9 Michael M. Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the U.S. and Turkey,"

States and the EU dare not rush into direct military strikes against Syrian government forces under the restrictions of Russian military forces and international law. As a result, Iranian influence in Syria has grown as Syrian government forces have gradually recovered much of the lost territory. But this poses an indirect threat to the Iranian nuclear deal.

The steady victory of Syrian government forces and the expansion of Iran's power in Syria have first unnerved Israel, because Iran can carry out military strikes on the Israeli border, but Israel can not do this to Iran. The United States is equally upset, not only because Iran is a further threat to Israel's security, but also because Russia's strategic cooperation with the Shi'ite crescent countries, especially Iran, and their success in Syria, have made it difficult for the United States to respond. Given Israel's special relationship with Russia and its military prowess, the United States needs Israel's help in Syria and in its dealings with Russia. Of course, the US also needs to strengthen relations with traditional allies such as Saudi Arabia. Since you need someone, you should give them a little temptation. The relocation of the embassy to Jerusalem is a gift from the Trump administration to Israel. But the Trump administration in doing so faces opposition from Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia. On May 8, 2018, Mr. Trump formally announced the withdrawal of the United States from the Iranian nuclear deal and the resumption of economic sanctions against Iran, in an effort to calm the anger of Saudi Arabia and other countries and further engage Israel.

Although other major powers did not follow suit, the US's withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal has had a significant negative impact on Iran. It is in Iran's interest, in the near term, to work with other major powers to try to maintain the Iranian nuclear deal. To do this, Iran may use its military presence in Syria as a bargaining chip.

Conclusion

Marxism holds that the state is an instrument of class rule. The core of Iran's ruling class is the clerical class. Therefore, Iran's national interest is essentially the interest of the mullahs, the content of which is to maintain and consolidate Iran's theocracy. Such national interests determine Iran's interest in the Syrian conflict. Since the United States is the biggest security threat to Iran's regime, Iran has made it a top priority in its foreign policy to deal with the challenges and repression of the United States. Syria is a key country in the "Shia crescent", on which Iran depends for much of its response to the American threat. Therefore, Iran's fundamental interest in the Syrian conflict is to maintain the rule of the Assad regime in Syria. Iran's fundamental interest in the Syrian conflict determines its important interest, that is, the means to safeguard its fundamental interest. Since ISIS seriously threatens the security of the Syrian regime, it is an important interest of Iran in Syria to fight against ISIS. Cooperation with Russia is also an important interest of Iran in the conflict in Syria, where Russia has played an extraordinary role in maintaining the dominance of the Assad regime as the conflict intensifies. Iran, which is under double pressure on the Syrian conflict and the nuclear issue, needs to make a breakthrough on the nuclear issue to focus on the Syrian conflict and other issues if it wants to achieve its goal of maintaining Bashar al-Assad's regime. Iran is also trying to find leverage in the Syrian conflict to reach and defend its nuclear deal. Therefore, seeking to reach and maintain the comprehensive agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue is another important interest of Iran in the Syrian conflict.