

Effective Geopolitical Foundations of Shia in Regional System of the Middle East

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Abstract

Shia Muslims, including the geographical area of the government, are of such a plurality and diversity regarding the natural and humane geographical dimensions. These have made the very complex geopolitical issues full of structural differences and conflicts which are dependent on the accurate recognition of the geopolitical roots and foundations affecting the region. To this end, in this paper the effective geopolitical foundations of Shia in the regional system of the Middle East have been considered. The method of the present research is descriptive-analytical. The research question is as the following: What are the main factors effecting the geopolitical formation of Shia in the regional system? Data collection was carried out through a library and field method and to complete the questionnaires and determine the sample population 269 samples were selected from Morgan standard table. According to the results, geographical area was the first influential factor in creating a link to the concept of power that Shia today has become geopolitical subject, because the **gravity** of the Shia geography is the regions that affect the power relations at the regional and global levels. The existence of the **Higher Atabat** is the second factor affecting the Shias and the third factor is the disputes and Wahhabism that influence the creation of the patterns and mutual actions of Shias in the Middle East.

Keywords: Geopolitical Foundation, Shia, Regional System, Middle East, Iran.

Introduction

In today's world, intellectual currents and providers of religion and religious teachings of Shia should seek to represent themselves in line with the developments of globalization and in the context of created opportunities. In the meantime, in

order to strengthen the resistant and deterrent elements, if the Shiite identity as a dynamic religion establish itself with a realistic view regarding the optimal use and constructive balance of other cultures, and provide a dynamic and consistent identity for its religious beliefs, it will be able to gain a global opportunity to spread the Shiite culture. By applying the technologies of the age of globalization, the most important of which are the Internet and satellite, Shia can offer its beliefs and values alongside other cultures and civilizations and interact with them, and to be considered a valuable global source for other cultures. The south-west Asia region has traditionally been an arena of neighborhood and interaction among several countries that have historically had a wide range of relationships. However, the geopolitical motifs of each of these countries and powers have often wide-ranging conflicts. The classical geopolitical theorists had an emphasis on distance, space, and borders. But in this century military power is no longer the only indicator of leadership power for countries on the international stage, since we are entering an era in which there is no chance for direct strife and new factors or variables determine our way of evaluation of geopolitical situations. Nowadays, regarding cultural and belief factors in geopolitics, other areas of political geography have become of prime importance. The crucial role of Islam in international politics has in recent decades led to a reconsideration of the geopolitics of countries that all or most of their population are Muslims.

Shi'ite dispersions in strategic geographical environments and their strong potential, such as political ideology, the culture of Ashura and Mahdaviat, and a coherent world order plan, have placed them in a prominent position. But, before the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, most of these Shias were in a passive position, they were less of interest to the world powers. However, with the victory and continuity of the Islamic Revolution, its increasing expansion and significant progress, this influence has deepened and it has caused a reaction from the West that all these developments have influenced the geopolitical situation of Shiia and added to its importance. Nowadays, the sensitive geopolitical status of the Islamic world has forced the Western authorities and politicians to pay special attention to Islam, and especially to the Shiite element. The internal potential of Shiite Islam, the existence of some stirring and revolutionary elements within this religion has made it possible to present a revolutionary interpretation of it. On the other hand, the presence of beliefs and concern of the oppressed make it easy to homogenize. Today Shia has a particular geopolitical importance for the West due to its power to influence regional and international developments and

policies. In recent decades, developments such as the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the achievements of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, the expansion of the wave of Islamic liberation and awakening in South-West Asia and North Africa have put Shi'ite in the center of development. These factors along with the establishment of Shias in the strategic areas with geo-economic capabilities, caused to upgrade Shia's place and turn it into a powerful geopolitical component. The South-West Asia region has traditionally been the area of neighborhood and interaction with several countries which have a wide range of relationships. However, the geopolitical motifs of each country and power in this region often have various conflicts. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, Shi'ism has become one of the most important and influential elements of the geopolitical world, especially in the Southwest Asian region. It is evident that Shi'a politicization in the world has taken on a geopolitical character, since from the geopolitical point of view, the problems of Iran and Shi'ism have been somehow interrelated. Therefore, this paper seeks to answer the following question: What are the main factors affecting the geopolitical formation of Shia in the Middle East regional system?

Theoretical foundations

By this time, various scientific and practical definitions and interpretations of the term "geopolitics" have been provided that their common denominator is the interaction of geography (at different scales) and politics in terms of power relations. It means that the geographical regions due to their status and content play a major role in giving meaning to the characteristics and features of political entities (co-existence, overlap, and disunity) and provide a direction for the identity and events of the regions (Kaviani Rad and Tihami, 2013, p. 121). Hence, geopolitics studies the interaction of politics and geography of space, place and territory. These relations have been a spectrum of co-existence, convergence, and tension of war at the center of political geography research. Meanwhile, geography provides opportunities and constraints for political actors and spatial political units action in the form of states, national groups and organizations. Based on such features, geopolitics has been considered the study of the interaction between geography, power, politics, and interaction of these phenomena combined (Hafez Nia, 2011, p.90). At present, the population of Muslims has reached more than one billion and 600 million across the world and based on the statistics from different sources, Shiites account for at least 20 percent of this

population. In 2030, the population of Muslims is estimated to be two billion and two hundred million, and the Shia population to be over 400 million (Mohammadpur, 250:2005).

Shi'a geopolitics means an extension of the Shi'a political geography in different countries of the Greater Middle East or Hartland of Iran (Talshan, 2009:16). The importance of Iran is as such that Graham Fuller calls Iran as Qibla Alam (Fuller, 2011). Martin Kramer, an anti-Islam American scholar, in his book entitled: *Shia, Resistance and Revolution*, implicitly writes about the importance of the Shi'ite geopolitical element as the following: In modern times, Shi'ite movements have created some of the most powerful concepts of revolutionary rebellion; today's Shiite political movements have devised incredibly central political strategies that have often surprised and astonished the Islamic world and the West. These practices have greatly been successful in Iran and have also inspired other Shia Muslims in the Arab world and South Asian (Hosseini Zadeh, 2003:103). A belt of Shi'a encompasses the economic, strategic and historical life of Islam and covers parts of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Divided into a majority and a minority of Shi'ite in these countries, the belt by itself is a world where different impacts are rapidly transferred. In fact, the geographical location of Shia or Shia geopolitics in the Middle East results from the Shiite settlement in the heart of the Middle East's largest oil-rich region, which holds 75% of the world's oil reserves (Sadjadpour, 2010:12)

Geopolitical factors affecting the sustainability of Shia: In fact, along with language, religion is considered to be one of the strongest influential forces in the present independent countries. Religion is also the cause of the existence and survival of many countries (Jordan and Rountree, 171:2002). Glasner also refers to the role of religion in political phenomena and notes some of the examples: The rise of Ireland due to the existence of two Catholic and Protestant religions, Syria due to the Muslim and Christian community, India due to the existence of two Muslim and Hindu religions, Palestine by Jews and Muslims, are examples that demonstrate the role of religion. In each of these regions, as the world's political map and the corresponding historical period changed, a minority group was formed in the form of new units, and some of them brought about problems for fusion with the national system (Sehfi, 2001: 55). The importance of religion in some of these areas was so great that it led to a great deal of disintegration and the collapse of national unity (Ahmadi, 2018: 62).

Today, the Shia world has an important itinerary, starting from the east of China and India, then reaching Iran to Syria and Lebanon through Iraq and the Persian Gulf. (Geographical Organization of the Armed Forces, 2012: 138). Large Shiite communities live in Iran and Arab countries, such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Bahrain and Lebanon, and in some of these countries they comprise the majority. There are numerous instances in the case of non-Iranian, non-Arab Islamic countries, where Shi'ism has a very long history. In Indian peninsula Shia has long been present, so it can be said that although it has a centuries-old history in Iran, it is not a special Iranian state and has been rooted in most Islamic countries and among most Shia ethnicities and nationalities. (Zarghami et al. 2012, 202)

Table 1: The population of countries in the region and the percentage of Shia population in the Middle East

| Country | Population | Percentage of Shia population |
|--------------|------------|-------------------------------|
| Iran | 82801663 | 95 |
| Azerbaijan | 8795000 | 85 |
| Bahrain | 727785 | 92 |
| Iraq | 28946657 | 65 |
| Lebanon | 4.017095 | 36 |
| Yemen | 23822783 | 46 |
| Kuwait | 2691158 | 30 |
| Pakistan | 176242949 | 21 |
| Afghanistan | 33609937 | 20 |
| Syria | 20178475 | 17 |
| Turkey | 76805524 | 20 |
| Arabia | 28686633 | 15 |
| Qatar | 833285 | 21 |
| Emirates | 4798491 | 17 |
| Uzbekistan | 27606007 | 6 |
| Oman | 3418075 | 2 |
| Tajikistan | 7349145 | 6 |
| Turkmenistan | 4884887 | 4 |
| India | 1166079217 | 15 |

| | | |
|------------|----------|---|
| Jordan | 6342948 | 2 |
| Kyrgyzstan | 5431747 | 3 |
| Egypt | 83082869 | 2 |

Resource: islamicweb.com

Thus, one can talk about a Shiite extension that starts from Indian subcontinent and covers large parts of India and Pakistan, and then covers an important part of Afghanistan and even Central Asia. Further, it covers all of Iran, the majority of Iraq, Yemen and some Persian Gulf countries, such as Bahrain and the eastern region of Saudi Arabia. Population of important parts of Turkey include Imami, Alawi and Bektashi Shiites; in Lebanon, the majority of population is composed of Imami, Alawi and Druze Shiites; and in Syria, Alawites rule, and a large population of another Shiite minority in Jordan on the Syrian coast is historically present (Majidi, 2013, 41).

Palestine and Israel are the ones who complete this Shiite extension. In some parts of Africa, Shiism has a historical precedent, and this is not limited to the Arab countries of Africa, but this issue is true in non-Arab Africa as well. For example, the presence of Ismaili Shiites has existed in East Africa for a long time. Therefore, we are now facing a Shiite identity stretching from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea, which of course is in the form of a historical extension and presence, and Shiism in all these places has very old historical roots that are mixed with the ethnicities and nationalities of this geographical stretch, and it has become one of the important elements of their identity (Javadani Moghadam, 2011, 35).

Zainolabedin Amuqin (2006), in an article entitled *"Iran's National Interests and New Shiite Geopolitics"*, points out that nowadays Iran's national interests are deeply connected with the new geopolitics of Shiism. So that Iran always wants to play a role among the Shiites of the world, especially in Iraq. Recent global and regional developments have created this opportunity for Iran; therefore, the purpose of this article is to investigate and analyze the new geopolitical situation of Shia and to specify the regional and extra-regional threats and their consequences in the current world, especially the role played by Iran in this regard. In the current situation, Iran can become a superior regional power due to its special status.

Hafez-Niya (2008), in an article entitled *"the effect of geopolitical interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia in creating regional challenges in Southwest Asia"*, refers to the fact that Southwest Asia includes 19 countries. Currently, the region of Southwest Asia is the space of competition and challenge of the

three powers of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. These three powers have multiple and diverse geopolitical interests, and their indivisible attitude (simplicity of geopolitical interests) has formed the basis of challenges and conflicts. This state of affairs has led to the formation of regional categories, production of crisis and conflict.

Afshardi (2009), in an article entitled *"the effect of Shia geopolitical factors on the development of the influence of the Islamic Revolution"*, points out that the purpose of the expansion or development and continuation of the influence of the teachings of the Islamic Revolution of Iran in the region is to fight against arrogance, seek justice and support the needy (**Mustafeen**), which is one of the most important slogans of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, was well received by many people in the Middle East. Development is a multidimensional process that usually refers to a change from a desirable status. Influence is also used as a non-coercive act of power because influence can be defined like power as an ability or as a relationship. As a result, instead of being forced to change its decision, the other party is convinced and took the intended action.

Bazdar (2010), in an article titled "Research and Prioritization of Different Factors Affecting Relations between Iran and Islamic Countries in the Surroundings" points out that the occurrence of the Islamic Revolution in Iran under the leadership of Imam Khomeini (RA) was one of the major events of the second half of the 20th century leading to many changes and transformations in the countries of the region and also in the global power structure. Undoubtedly, one of the most important identity-creating and influential actors in the Middle East region has been the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This revolution, with its cross-border perspective, has influenced many countries and nations both in its distant and adjacent neighborhood, especially in the Middle East.

Fazlinia (2013), in an article entitled *"Shia geopolitics and Iran's national security problem, stated"* states that Iran's special situation has always provided a suitable platform for creating political and military tensions and jeopardizing its national security. In the past, Iran's geopolitics was taken into account due to factors such as raw resources or transit location, but following the victory of the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the fall of the Shah, Iran, which was one of the allies of America and the West in the region, became their most powerful enemy in the region, and their interests became the target of its propaganda attacks. Therefore, the West feels threatened by new dimensions of Iran's geopolitics, one of which is the issue of Shiite geopolitics, and they conclude that: Iran must rebuild

and present an identity in the region and the world that not only disarms itself from America in terms of thinking, but a positive and constructive identity of Iran and Islam should be reconstructed, which along with the strengthening of the internal structure, would provide a wide range of security for the country.

Zain-al Abdin and Shirzad (2013), in the article on *the position of Shia in postmodern geopolitics*, state that the geopolitical study of Shiism is very complicated because its presentation, especially in the field of postmodern geopolitics, emphasizing the spatial capabilities of nations is associated with concerns. In the meantime, due to the awareness and information in the post-modern world, the artificial borders that deprived the Shiites of economic, political and democratic benefits and capabilities for a long time have lost their importance. In this way, the study of Shiites has gained increasing global importance due to their special geopolitical privilege. They conclude that the specific territory of energy reserves (oil and gas) and the nature of Shiite religion (flexibility of Shiites and the principle of **taqiyyah**) lead to role-creation of Shia in the region. Therefore, fulfilling the role of Shias will be accompanied by many regional and global challenges.

Tahalhan (2013), in an article titled *"Shiite geopolitical perspective in Iraq"*, points out that it is an explanation of the Shiite geopolitical system in Iraq. Two basic scenarios about the future political system of Iraq and the characteristics of each of them have been examined, and it is concluded that out of the two scenarios based on federalism and authoritarian system, the conditions are ready for the first scenario, which can promote the power and geopolitical territory of the Shiites.

Zain-al-Abdin-Amouqin et. al (2012), in an article titled *"Geopolitical analysis of Shiism in the Middle East"* using the SWOT model, point out that the Shiites of the Middle East due to their geographical distribution and presence in areas with high geo-economic value, have a good geopolitical position in the political arena and in the regional and global economy. On the other hand, developments such as the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran, the successes of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the role played by the Shiites in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, and the spread of the wave of Islamic awakening have caused the geopolitics of Shiism to be at the center of developments in the Middle East region. In this regard, understanding the real geopolitical position of Shiism and identifying the opportunities and challenges facing it is of prime importance.

Zain-al-Abdin-Amouqin and Khairkhah (2013), in an article entitled *"Analysis of the factors affecting the divergence of Shiites in the Middle East region"* state that Shiites, having always possessed characteristics such as rationality based on the spirit of resistance and justice-seeking, have had an active and influential presence throughout the history of Islam in various domains. Nowadays, in the sensitive and important region of the Middle East, Shia and geopolitics are considered as an influential and undeniable fact. This influence gained wide dimensions after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the establishment of the Islamic government with a Shiite orientation. From the geopolitical point of view, the distribution of Shiites in the Middle East has a special value and credibility. The northern and southern borders of the Persian Gulf are continuously considered to be the residence of Shiites.

Hafeznia and Romina (2016), in an article entitled *"the effect of the geopolitical interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia in creating regional challenges in Southwest Asia"*, state that the competition between the countries of the region is a widespread phenomenon in the world, but the action between the claimant countries depends on the type and the number of contested cases and the way to resolve them. Two countries that are trying to be the first in the region will not have a peaceful relationship with each other. The relationship between these two countries will be subject to a kind of stable competition that will continue in the direction of helping other countries in the region, challenging each other and supporting smaller countries and groups to stabilize their regional position. Currently, the mutual competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia has created tensions in the region of Southwest Asia, which has spread to other countries in the region and created tensions in this part of the globe.

Mohammadi et al. (2017), in an article entitled *"Redefining Shiite Geopolitics (with an emphasis on the Arbaeen procession)"*, state that religion in politics and its connection with power can be discussed in geopolitical studies in general and cultural geopolitics (geoculture), in particular. In this sense, Shiite geopolitics means the power and intensity of influence of the Shiite community on regional and international developments and policies. Several factors such as the superior position of the Shiites in the region, the maximum dominance of the Shiites over the energy resources of the Middle East, the ability to threaten the Zionist regime, the regional power of Iran, the democratic nature of the Shiite governments and, in short, the events in the region during these four decades (since the Iranian revolution) have paved the ground for power

consolidation of Shiites in the region. Although the power bases of this geopolitics have always caused fear of Shia on the part of Western-Arab countries in the region, but the existing facts show the geopolitical power of Shia.

Zain-ul-Abdin Amuqin and Jamshidpour (2018), in an article entitled "*Future studies of influential drivers on the geopolitics of the Islamic world*" point out that future research and geopolitics are different and related concepts. From the point of view that future research is an interdisciplinary concept and it can be placed as a suffix or prefix of any scientific field. The study of geopolitics increases the level of human information about the country, nation state, or a geographic location at the national, regional, and global levels in the geographic space. Therefore, the study of geopolitical future research paves the ground to achieve power. So, the use of future studies in the formulation of geopolitical theories increases its importance. It seems that the components of war, Arab and oil are among the drivers that will play a role in the formation of the scenario of the continuation of the current conditions and the scenario of transformational changes in the Islamic world.

Research Method

The current research is descriptive-analytical with a practical approach which employed library and field method to collect data. In the library method, the information and data for the article have been collected by referring to the libraries and taking copies of the desired books and studying the documents related to the subject of the article, on the sites of reputable scientific centers, and in the field part, a questionnaire has been used. The statistical population is 900 members of the Geopolitical Association channel, the questionnaire is placed electronically in the channel. The sample of study is 269 individuals who were selected randomly from the completed questionnaires using Morgan's standard table. The collected data was analyzed using SPSS software.

Scope of research

The Middle East or Southwest Asia is used in classic texts as a vast geographical area that includes several famous regions that are considered as separate regions in regional studies. Parts of the Caucasus region, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, parts of Central Asia, Iraq, Turkey, the peripheral countries of the Persian Gulf, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and sometimes Egypt are also used in popular literature as a part of Southwest Asia. In fact, in this view, Western Asia is considered a set of 5 regions that are assumed to be separate regions in classical studies. According to this map, Southwest Asia includes a region from

the north of the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Asia Minor, the Persian Gulf region, and the major part of the Middle East in the meaning of the term. This is the view that exists even in some health and immigration programs of the United Nations.

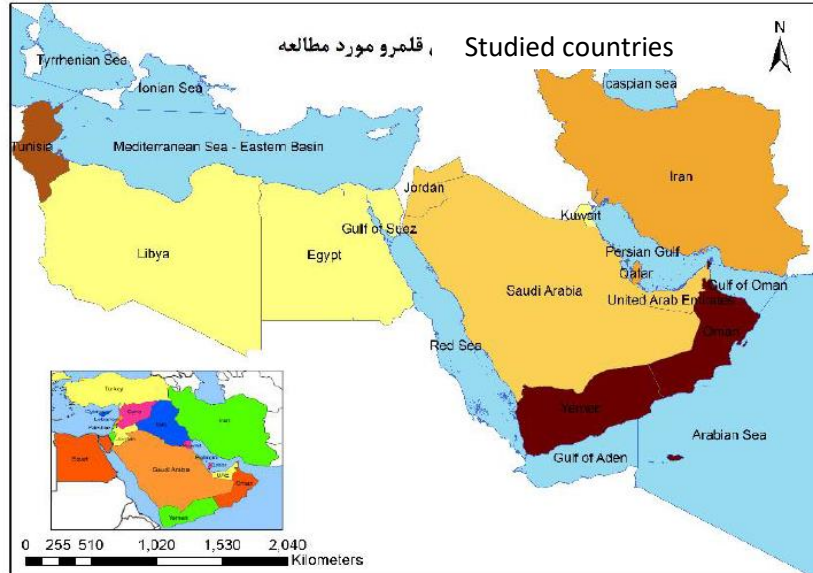


Figure 1. The geographical region of the Middle East and the countries of this region

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Findings and discussion

The effect of Iran's Islamic revolution in building a Shia government based on religious theory, in the politicization of the Shia population, and so-called Shia awakening and Shia uprising in the Shia populations of the region has presented them as an internal actor among the governments. The self-awareness of the Shias in the social and political arena in the Arab countries and in connection with the demand for social rights and access to resources of dignity, authority and wealth, over time has forced the Sunni rulers to accept the rights of the Shias and their role in the domestic arenas.

Also, the awakening of the Shia populations and their self-awareness and understanding of their position in the Persian Gulf region and the Middle East have elevated them to the level of an international actor and in fact has manifested Shia geopolitics more than before, because the Shiites are located in a region that politically and strategically has an exceptional position in the world. This region has been the main focus of conflicts in the last 50 years, and with huge energy resources at its disposal, the industrial world and energy consumption

markets it need this source more than before (Naderi, 2011: 183). Even today, Shia has a significant role in the current events in the Middle East region and has attracted all political attention. The success of Shiite candidates in the Iraqi elections, the pivotal role of Lebanon's Hezbollah in mobilizing demonstrations in support of Syria, Hezbollah's victorious war against Israel, the activation of various Shia movements and their request for political reforms in Yemen, and other developments in the region, including: Egypt, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan show the fact that the Shia political identity is being formed in the region (Ahmadi and Hosseini Nasrabadi, 2015: 20). By the way, the true Shia power and geopolitics will become obvious for us when we have an understanding of the source of the true Shia power. In fact, it is the internal potential of Shiite Islam and the internal factors of this religion that per se have paved the way for it to become hegemonic. For this reason, Shia geopolitics is meaningless regardless of its beliefs and symbols that brings about its ideology.

The concept of Shia and the theories of its origin: The words "Shi'a" and "Shia" are derived from the root "Shi'a" in the Arabic language. *Shia* means *supporter, disciple, group, follower, supporter and a group that speaks for one thing* (Khizri, 2392: 23). In other words, the word "Shia" literally means *follower and helper* (Ansar), and its origin is from "fellowship" which means to *obey and follow*. This word is used exclusively for people who are followers of the Commander of the Faithful, Ali (AS) and his infallible children. They are of the opinion that Imam Ali (A.S.) is the guardian and successor of the Prophet of Islam is determined through the sharia text, and his imamate and other Shiite imams are also confirmed through the sharia text (Ahmadi and Hosseini Nasrabadi, 2016: 6). Some western authors and a number of Arab researchers are inclined to consider Shiism as a deviant sect that emerged from the historical political movements of the first century of Hijri, but the analysis of historical narratives and documents confronts us with other realities. Saqeefah is related, that is, the first gathering of Muslims after the death of the Prophet (PBUH) that they set up to determine his successor. Some others believe that Shia emerged after the caliphate of Ali (AS). From the point of view of these people, Shi'ism in the general sense of the word appeared after the death of Uthman and divided the people into two groups, Alawites and Ottomans. Some have linked the emergence of Shia to the Battle of Jamal, and others have linked the emergence of Shia to the Battle of Safin and considered Shia as the followers of Ali (a.s.). Some others have assumed the rise of Shiism to the incident of Karbala as a practical result and the immediate reaction of the society against the Umayyads and

considered the rise of Shiism to be a form of religious honoring of the people of Iraq, especially the Kufis, to Imam Ali (a.s.) and the family of Prophet (s.a.w.). Another group considers Shiism as a religion created by Iranians against the Arabs and believe that Iranians have turned to this religion for political reasons and to prevent the domination of the Arabs who were trying to conquer them through Sunni Islam. Against all these theories, Shiites believe that the foundation of Shiism goes back to the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (pbuh), and that Shiite thought is nothing but the same Islam that the Prophet of God presented, and that political Shiism is the truth of Islam (Khizri, 2012: 37).

The main structure of Shia political thought: Shia political thought has preserved four different dimensions at once: 1. being divine; 2. being rational; 3. being revolutionary; and 4. its popularity.

Although both the concepts of Shia geopolitics and Shia crescent are created by the opponents of Shia power-seeking in the region and the world, which seems to be the ultimate goal of spreading Shia-phobia in both concepts, a difference should be made between these two terms. Of course, apart from this issue, it should be said that Shiite geopolitics is an undeniable fact about the regional power of Shiites in the Middle East, which would have been undeniable even if the Western world had not tried to build and represent it. It should be said that Shia geopolitics like the Shia crescent has a Shia-phobic nature, which was first scientifically created and studied by Westerners. Those like "Tawal" and "Fuller" were among the first ones who introduced the concept of Shiite geopolitics with the intention of reminding the Western countries, in order to gain the power of Shiites in the future of the region and even the world (especially Iran). Of course, such an alarm was not without logic, because despite the presence of a sensitive region such as the Middle East (and above all the Persian Gulf), the Shiites with the largest population in these regions are considered a potential threat to the West, more than the Sunnis. From several aspects such as the threat to the energy security of the West, threat to the security of Israel and the existence of the Shiite center (Iran) in the region, Shiite geopolitics is a real concept, but a threat to the Arabs and especially the West.

Shia thinking due to globalization: Shia ideology and thought, especially the mainstream Shia Imamia, with its justice-seeking and providential attitude, provides the necessary dynamics for the necessary change and transformation in international politics in the present era. Henri Carbon, a famous French Shia scholar, believes: "The Shia society, parallel to its historical

developments, has always promoted a prophetic and occult view of the world and history" (Tabatabai, 2011: 146). With the failure of the ideologies of nationalism and socialism at the end of the 1960s, Shiite Islam flourished as a political ideology after the decline of the ideologies of nationalism and socialism in the second half of the 20th century in Islamic societies. From that date, Shiite Islamists gradually got the opportunity to become a leading force. The peak of this process was the Iranian Islamic Revolution. In fact, the Islamic Revolution of Iran caused the awakening of the Shiites who, as a silent part of the Muslim community, did not have any role in their destiny and in the political structure of their country until then. As a result of the Islamic Revolution, the Shiites regained their courage and audacity, and after a period of indolence, they woke up from negligence and found a new identity (Ahmadi and Hafez Nia, 2010: 56). This revolution awakened the dormant movements, reorganized the inactive movements, and even called the active movements to the new ideology in some cases (Darakhshah and Jamiri, 2010: 39). Undoubtedly, in the contemporary era, Shiism has created some of the strongest concepts of revolutionary uprising. Today, Shiite movements have invented extremely original political strategies, which have often caused surprise and astonishment in the Islamic world and the West. Therefore, in these few decades, Shiite Islam has shown its capability as a political ideology more than ever (Tavana and Salimian, 2011: 793).

If the truth of Shiism is propagated in the language of the day and by taking into account of the global conditions, using the rich resources of Shiism, and using global tools such as satellites, the Internet, and global information systems, it will be able to spread its ideas, promote its pure and humanitarian beliefs and values along with other cultures and civilizations and establish its real identity in the world. As a religion, Shia is not local or regional in any way and has a global and communal thought, and it must be acknowledged that it is only Shia that has promising theoretical foundations to deal with the issue of updating Islam (Fuller, 1997: 311).

Dispersion of the Shia population in strategic energy areas: In relation to Shia geopolitics, today, one of the challenges of the western countries like America is the maximum presence of Shia in the oil-rich areas of the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. This issue can be seen as the matching of "energy geopolitics" with "Shia geopolitics".

In fact, there is a close relationship between the oil and gas resources of the Middle East and the areas inhabited by Shias, so that 80% of the native population of the Persian Gulf is made

up of Shias, while three quarters of the world's oil reserves are in this region. A review of the world's oil-rich regions shows that the Middle East, with 23% of the world's population; It contains 30% of the world's mineral resources, 74% of the world's crude oil reserves and 50% of the discovered natural gas reserves (Kaviani-Rad et al., 2011: 207). For example, in Saudi Arabia, Shiites live on the largest oil field of this country in the eastern region, including cities such as Qatif and Al-Ahsa, and Shiites actually do most of the oil executive work. In addition to Saudi Arabia, in the countries of Oman, Iraq, Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait and Qatar, Shiites also live in areas that are considered to be the main oil-rich centers in the region (Motaghi et al., 2013: 10-11).



Figure 2: Shiite population distribution in the Middle East region

Source: (Erkami et al., 2015)

Shia in the regional system of the Middle East: The Islamic Republic of Iran is regarded as the heartland of Shia in the world due to its human population, Islamic political system and the majority of its Shia population. Other Shia centers in different countries are located along the continuum of this heartland which can be considered as the geopolitical complements of Shiism in Iran and their authority is somewhat dependent on the strength of Iran. Today, the Shiite world includes an important route geographically, which actually starts from the east of China and India, and after reaching Iran, it traverse Syria and Lebanon through Iraq and the Persian Gulf. Some authors refer to this trajectory and geographical extension of Shiism as the Shiite Belt, and some others, including the King of Jordan, call it the Shiite Crescent. In the territory of the Shiite settlement, due to the geographical continuity, any kind of incident is quickly transmitted. The geographical territory of the Shiites has great potential in terms of politics, economy,

culture, etc. In recent years, events such as the Iranian revolution, the rise of Shiites in Iraq, the victory of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the pro-democracy movements in the Middle East have led to the revival and strength of Shiite geopolitics in the world political scene (Zein al-Abidin and Khairkhah, 2013: 5). Most of the world's Shiites live in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region. In this region, Iran is the country that has the largest population both in terms of the total population and in terms of percentage. According to the most statistics, 90% of Iran's population is made up of Shias, which compose more than 40% of the world's Shia population. After Iran, most Shias live in countries that are mostly around Iran, and most of them are geographically connected with Iran (having a land or water border). Bahrain, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Oman are among these countries. (Ahmadi, 2010: 69).

The Shia religion has been the official religion of the country since 1501, that is, with the beginning of the Safavid dynasty in Iran. However, with the Islamic revolution of 1979, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, for the first time in history, clerics took over the reins of the Shia government. Undoubtedly, this is considered to be the most important event in the history of Shia. On the other hand, besides being the cradle of Islam and Abrahamic religions, the Middle East has attracted the attention of other countries not only from a geopolitical point of view, but also from the point of view of being placed on the world's energy resources. On the other hand, after the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the attention of intellectuals and colonial and puppet Arab governments considered the Shiite populations around the world as a threat factor and thus the Middle East due to the location of Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other Muslim countries have absorbed the attention of countries and governments (www.mashregnews.ir).

Also, the political geography of Shiites has a suitable strategic position. Most of the world's Shiites live near the Persian Gulf. This international gulf connects the 3 continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa, and in the past, it was considered the shortest way to reach India by the hegemonic powers. But today, the geographical location of the Persian Gulf in relation to its neighboring countries has an undeniable value. Currently, for the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf is the most suitable route for the access of the mentioned countries and Afghanistan to the Oman Sea, the Indian Ocean and the whole world. On the other hand, due to the fact that the Persian Gulf connects its 8 neighboring countries with the

Indian Ocean, as an operational area, it has always been considered in military strategies (Lehbaru et al., 2015:33).

Shia and geoconomy in the Middle East regional system: The Middle East region contains 41% of the world's gas reserves, which are estimated at 75.91 trillion cubic meters. Based on these statistics, it plays a key role in the global industry due to its high energy reserves and has a special place in the world. Considering the existence of rich energy resources in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, and the distribution of Shiites in this region, it is a proof regarding the intersection of energy geopolitics and Shiite geopolitics. About 70% of the population of the oil fields of the Persian Gulf are Shiites, and the oil wells of the countries in the region are somehow located in Shiite areas, which has a positive effect on the geopolitical importance of Shiites in the region and the world (Talashan, 109:2010).

The increasing importance of energy and its role in the prosperity of industry in today's world has led some experts and writers such as Castells to state that the Middle East region has moved from its marginal position in the 20th century and the age of militarism to the context of crisis and the center of global security equations in the 21st century and has become a global issue that all major and important powers are in some way related to this region and have defined their security along with it. Today, the presence of big powers in different regions of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf is definitely due to access to cheap and reliable energy sources, and on the other hand, competition for economic benefits. Former American President Richard Nixon wrote about the importance of Persian Gulf oil: Oil is the lifeblood of modern industry and the Persian Gulf is the heart that pumps this blood like a pump, the sea lanes around the Persian Gulf are the arteries that this vital blood passes through them. The US Strategy Development Commission considers the Persian Gulf region as a strategic and important region and emphasizes the need for American politicians to try to dominate this region. This commission concludes that the national security of the United States depends on satisfying the security of the Persian Gulf region and the strategic goal of this analysis is to provide energy security, because the United States, with 2% of the world's oil reserves, has allocated 25% of the world's oil. Today, the reconciliation of Shiite geopolitics and energy geopolitics is considered as one of the major concerns of the West, and in the meantime, the powerful presence of Iran in the Middle East and its influence among the Shiites of the neighboring regions have added to the difficulties of Shiite geopolitics from the perspective of the

West. The location of Iran between two major sources of energy (Caspian and the Persian Gulf) in the 21st century and the maximum presence of Shiites in the oil-rich regions of the Persian Gulf, which is referred to as the adaptation of Shiite geopolitics and energy geopolitics, has a considerable impact on the ideological and geoeconomic importance of Shiites. Shiites play an important role in regional equations due to their presence in the strategic areas of the Middle East and their establishment in oil-rich areas and potential commercial centers. On the other hand, Europe and America are definitely forced to negotiate with Shiites due to their strong dependence on reliable and cheap energy that will be more visible in the long run. In recent years, we have witnessed the significant efforts and presence of NATO in the Persian Gulf, which can be attributed to the geo-economic importance of this region. One of the main reasons for NATO's presence in the Middle East is Russia's political use of energy tools in regulating its relations with its western neighbors, which puts the issue of energy security on the agenda of NATO (Dolatyar, 2010: 21).

Shia and geoculture in the Middle East regional system: In the current era, the Middle East and the Persian Gulf regions form the heart of the Islamic world, and Saudi Arabia as the cradle of Islam has a high value and prestige. On the other hand, Shiites are the second largest religious group in the Islamic world scattered in a certain geographical area in the Middle East. As the heartland of Shiism in the Islamic world, Iran has a special geographical and cultural position. This country is considered as the center of Shiites in the world with its brilliant civilizational and historical history, and Shiites in the surrounding region are strongly affected by its developments. In fact, it can be said that the power and influence of Iran has a direct effect on the situation of Shiites in the world. The geopolitics of Shiism in the current era does not include only Islamic countries, but it is connected from Turkey to the Persian Gulf and affects international relations. The victory of the Islamic revolution in 1979 and the establishment of the government of the Islamic Republic had a great cultural and political impact on the Shiites of the Middle East region. Today, the Shiites of different countries are influenced by its scientific, jurisprudential and cultural Shiite power through the relationship with Iran. The Persian Gulf region has a special place in the world as one of the main centers of concentration of Shiites. This region is considered as the ideological center of the Islamic world and especially Shiism, and Islamic currents around the world are inspired by this region. One of the main factors of the spread of Shiism in the region and the world is the transcendental cultural teachings of this religion, among which we can mention the

special place of justice-seeking, anti-tyranny, expectation and revolutionary spirit in this school of thought. The struggles of the Shiites are not only based on their religious mission, but also the conflict with the powerful and loyalty to the tradition of fighting against injustice. In fact, it can be said that the plan of this religion in its worldly aspect is to live in anticipation of the appearance of the Imam Zaman (Imam of the Time) along with the struggle to establish justice on earth (Toval, 2004:25).

According to the fundamentals and theoretical and religious elements of Shiites, it can be concluded that there is a revolutionary element in Shiite thinking, to the extent that George Jardaq introduces Shiites as followers of the revolutionary religion or revolutionary school of thought (Fazelinia, 2007:70).

A point that should not be forgotten in this regard is the discussion of defense in the struggle, so that by looking at the ups and downs history of Shiism, we find out that the wars of Muslims were in line with the continuation of life, the defense of one's existence and the fight against oppression. In today's world, the culture and religious components of the Shia school have received the attention of different countries. It has gained an important political position due to its sensitive geopolitical and geoeconomic position on the one hand and its inspiration from its religious doctrine, which has continuously faced oppressive government institutions and colonialists and nullified their position. In the current era, Western countries are trying to destroy the authentic culture of Shiism in various ways. The culture of liberalism, which is now the envelope of globalization and the exclusive claimant of universalism, is essentially a world-oriented culture and avoids the hereafter, and it challenges the religious culture that has an approach based on the hereafter (Sajadi, 2003:421)

By promoting secularism and pluralism and using new possibilities in the field of technology, the Western world is trying to overcome the Shiite culture or reduce its power and in this way achieve its goal of dominating the Middle East region and establishing its hegemony. The expansion of the process of globalization in various fields, especially the cultural field, will lead globalization to penetrate the identity layer of the Islamic world to create new identities, which to a large extent consider themselves alien from Islamic culture, and accelerates the process of cultural colonization by political actors in the Islamic world and ultimately lead to its collapse. Marginalization of Islamic countries in the process of development, trying to prevent Muslims from going through the stages of development and achieving scientific achievements is a serious challenge that

weakens the high potential of Islamic countries and the possibility of adopting a policy of optimal use of their power and providing grounds for the emergence of scientific ability of Muslims (Safawi, 259:2008)

Table 2. Components affecting the influential geopolitical foundations of Shia in the regional system of Southwest Asia (Middle East)

| The factors affecting the influential geopolitical foundations of Shia in the Middle East region | Percentage | | | | | Rank mean | Rank |
|--|------------|------|----------|-----|----------|-----------|------|
| | Very high | High | Moderate | Low | Very low | | |
| Geographical location | 6 | 8 | 66 | 18 | 2 | 91/2 | 14 |
| Geographical extent | 8 | 67 | 17 | 8 | 8 | 80/3 | 1 |
| Shiite population | 7 | 22 | 42 | 26 | 3 | 04/3 | 15 |
| Sources available in Shiite territory | 17 | 24 | 36 | 19 | 4 | 3/3 | 10 |
| Cultural characteristics | 10 | 27 | 33 | 25 | 5 | 11/3 | 11 |
| The political power of the Shiites | 11 | 26 | 35 | 23 | 5 | 24/3 | 9 |
| The development of Shiite territory | 10 | 23 | 33 | 29 | 4 | 03/3 | 4 |
| Shia ceremonies and rituals | 10 | 24 | 43 | 21 | 2 | 20/3 | 7 |
| Shia seminaries | 10 | 22 | 41 | 23 | 4 | 11/3 | 8 |
| Shi'ite shrines | 16 | 23 | 43 | 18 | | 37/3 | 2 |
| Culture of sacrifice and martyrdom | 15 | 23 | 39 | 22 | 1 | 29/3 | 6 |
| The leadership of | 10 | 26 | 46 | 17 | 1 | 27/3 | 5 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|----|----|----|----|---|------|----|
| the Islamic Republic of Iran | | | | | | | |
| Shia and Wahhabi differences | 17 | 23 | 40 | 17 | 3 | 34/3 | 3 |
| Shia political rule | 7 | 24 | 50 | 15 | 4 | 15/3 | 12 |
| Religious differences in Shiite territory | 13 | 24 | 32 | 22 | 9 | 1/3 | 13 |
| Political participation of Shiites | 15 | 22 | 34 | 20 | 9 | 14/3 | 4 |

Several factors such as: The superior position of the Shias in the region, the maximum dominance of the Shias over the energy resources of the Middle East, the ability to threaten the Zionist regime, the regional power of Iran, the democratic nature of the Shia governments and the events of the region, during these four decades (since the Iranian revolution), provided the context for the stabilization of Shiite power in the region. Although the power bases of this geopolitics have always caused fear of Shia on the part of Western-Arab countries in the region, the existing facts are indicative of the geopolitical power of the Shiites. To investigate the various components, a test was conducted. According to the average ranking, three factors were the most influential factors effecting the region. The effect geographical extension of the influential geopolitical foundations of the Shiites in the Middle East was the first factor. The effect of **Atabat Aliat** of Shia on influential geopolitical foundations of Shia in the Middle East was the second factor, and the effect of Shia and Wahhabi differences on the influential geopolitical foundations of Shia in the Middle East was the third factor.

Conclusion

Shiism, with its inherent rationalism, the desire for justice and pacifism of the masses, relying on the existing geopolitical capacities, intelligent understanding of regional and global conditions, and effective interaction in the three spheres of Shia, Islam and the world, can consolidate its historical position as well as defend the interests and security of the Shiites in the Middle East in the era of darkness and destruction. On the one hand, based on the fundamental ideas of the Shiites regarding the Islamic government in the occult period and the political

isolationist tradition of Shiite authority in history, and on the other hand, due to their position as a minority in the Islamic world, Shiites always has had limited political participation in the government structure of Islamic societies in the Middle East countries. Therefore, due to the individual and non-political identity of Shiites, discriminatory policies have always been imposed on them by the autocratic governments of Arab states.

Today, Shia has become a geopolitical issue, because the point of gravity of Shia geography is the regions that influence power relations at the regional and global level. Regarding the fact that in geopolitical discussions, three main elements, i.e., geography, politics and power, have inherent characteristics, Shiite geopolitics should also be presented and interpreted by evaluating these three basic elements. The first element is the interconnected and coherent geography of the Shiite territories, which ironically is full of different capabilities and resources. This element includes the location, territory and geographical capacities in a habitat where Shiites live continuously and non-continuously. In fact, the geographical extent is the most influential factor effecting on the geopolitical foundations of Shia in the Middle East, and this component is one of the most influential one because most of the world's oil and gas reserves are located in the area of Shia settlement, especially around Iran, as the main focus of Shia, and this case, along with the importance of Iran's reserves, shows its strategic importance in the energy sector. Iran's central position provides the possibility of taking advantage of this situation in political, military and economic measures. From a geopolitical point of view, being in the center of the main energy region of the world and having a significant position in oil and gas reserves, together with the intermediate position between East-West and North-South and the connection of the Central Asian energy region to open waters and Europe, all lead to the improvement of Iran's geopolitical status and position compared to other oil and gas producers, which forms the foundations of the Shiites in the region. The second element to the influence is related to the **Shiite authorities** on the influential geopolitical foundations of the Shiites in the Middle East. Essentially, from the perspective of identity, the connection between religion and politics is observed in the Middle East more than in other places, and one of the most important factors in the formation of domestic and foreign policies in this region is religion and religious places. In other words, the separation of religion from the state, as it appeared in the West, did not occur in the Middle East, and this is the second most influential factor effecting the geopolitical foundations of Shia according to field studies.

Since its inception, Shiism has had certain political ideas and doctrines, which have played a role throughout history. By playing a political role, Shia has established a link with the concept of power in the region. The Shiite construct is striving for power to recover its lost rights. In addition, Shia political role-playing is connected with power structures and influences them.

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