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EXPLORING THE POLITICAL CHESSBOARD OF SYRIA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF THE US, RUSSIA, IRAN AND TURKEY THROUGH THE LENS OF REALISM(S)

Joana Filipa Prata e Cunha

Dissertation submitted as partial requirement for the conferral of
Master's in International Studies with the Specialization In the area of the Middle East and North Africa region

Supervisor:
Dr. Pedro Seabra, Guest Assistant Professor,
Iscte - University of Lisbon

October, 2020

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**SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS**

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To all the forgotten victims of the Syrian war,

shall them rest in peace.

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Acknowledgments

The present dissertation is the result of a long passion for the field of International Relations, and in particular for the Middle East. With this dissertation, I aimed to contribute to the study and analysis of a conflict that is almost counting a decade. Despite having lost the focus of the media coverage, the Syrian war is far from over. People continue to die in the war and fleeing from it. Every death we look the other way is another lost life in a war that is no longer from the Syrians. Millions of Syrian people have lost their country. Their homes. Their families. Their lives. And we can, at least, raise the debate about it and not letting it fade away from Western reality.

With this in mind, I would like to thank my supervisor, Pedro Seabra, who guided me and motivated me throughout this long journey, contributing with his knowledge, dedication and time to my project.

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I could not be prouder at the end of this intense journey and happier to be surrounded by people that make me go further: thank you all!

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Resumo

A Guerra na Síria é, desde 2011, um dos assuntos mais prementes da atualidade. A rápida transformação de uma revolução pacífica numa guerra civil traduziu-se numa situação de violência cada vez mais acentuada, conduzindo a um elevado número de mortes e milhões de deslocados tanto dentro como para fora do país, motivando a intervenção de forças externas, quer de Estados quer de atores não-estatais. Dado o significativo contributo dos Estados Unidos da América, da Rússia, do Irão e da Turquia em matéria de formulação e decisão política, esta dissertação visa analisar de que maneira a participação destes atores estatais influenciou o desenrolar dos acontecimentos no conflito. Com base nos princípios teóricos propostos pelo realismo, neorrealismo, realismo neoclássico e pelo realismo defensivo e ofensivo, enquanto modelos de análise que se distinguem na avaliação de perceções de segurança, visamos explorar o impacto dos interesses e objetivos de cada Estado na complexificação da guerra entre 2011 e 2018. Concluimos que o desenvolvimento dos acontecimentos na guerra civil síria motivou o diferente envolvimento de cada um dos Estados indicados, e que ao apresentarem uma agenda política com interesses e objetivos distintos, tais atores apenas tornaram uma possível resolução do conflito ainda mais difícil de ser alcançada.

Palavras-chave: Guerra na Síria; realismo e neorrealismo; EUA; Rússia, Irão; Turquia.

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Abstract

The Syrian war has played a major role in current international political affairs since 2011. What started as a peaceful revolution soon turned into a civil war: the escalation of violence, the rise of the death toll and the displacement of millions of people within and outside the country triggered the intervention of external state and non-state actors. Given their significant contribution to decision-making and policymaking in Syria, this dissertation aims to investigate how the involvement of the United States, Russia, Iran and Turkey impacted the developments of the Syrian war. Based on the core principles and theoretical tools of realism, neorealism and neoclassical realism and on the different perceptions of security in the defensive and offensive realism(s), we aim to explore how the interests and goals of each state can particularly explain their participation and contribution to the complexification of the Syrian war between 2011 and 2018. We conclude that the development of the events in the Syrian civil war triggered the involvement of each state, which, in turn, made a possible resolution of the conflict increasingly more difficult due to the distinct interests and goals of each state's political agenda.

Keywords: Syrian war; realism and neorealism; United States; Russia; Iran; Turkey.

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Glossary of terms and acronyms

CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States

EU – European Union

FSA – Free Syrian Army

IR – International Relations

IS – Islamic State

ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (Greater Syria) or ISIL, Islamic State of Iraq and Levant

KRG – Kurdish Regional Government

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

PKK – Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*)

PYD – Kurdish Democratic Union Party

SNC – Syrian National Council

SOC – National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces

UK – United Kingdom

UN – United Nations

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNSC – United Nations Security Council

US – United States

YPG – Syrian Kurdish Yekîneyên Parastina Gel or People's Protection Units

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa, widely known as MENA, comprises a heterogeneous region, due to the different domestic regime power of each country and to the regional and international relations they pursue. Syria is no exception. The current chaos in Syria is the result of the interference of many international and regional actors fighting for influence and their interests in the region. The Syrian case represents not only a civil war, but also a war between international and regional actors since it has become the stage of confrontation for power, influence, resources and a strengthened position on the international multipolar order. For all purposes, Syria has become a political chessboard.

This dissertation aims to provide the theoretical and analytical tools to comprehend the intricacies of the war in Syria. The present analysis proposes to examine how certain states – in their capacity as rational actors with specific interests – influence and are influenced by the international system, in particular, by the developments that took place throughout the Syrian civil war. Although the conjuncture of the outbreak of the Syrian war was similar to other "Arab Springs" in the region, the enrollment of external state actors, particularly the US, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, has been determinant to explain the violence, the duration and the intensity of the conflict. Inversely, other state actors such as UK, France, Lebanon, Jordan, UAE and non-state actors as Hezbollah, PKK and YPG have also contributed to the complexification of the war, but have yet to play a larger role. The multiplicity and the heterogeneity of the actors involved make them pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, difficult to disassemble in theoretical terms.

In this context, it is worth recalling that the discipline of International Relations (IR) was itself created with the aim to explain the international system and the behavior among states, inducing debates and advancing proposals about new ways of preventing war. One of the most persistent ontological debates in IR consisted of classical realism *versus* idealism/liberalism/liberal institutionalism. Even though these theories share the same starting assumptions (sovereign states as the central actors in an anarchical international system), liberalism went in the opposite direction of realism, arguing that states can surpass their disagreements through economic interdependence, shared democratic principles or by engaging in international organizations. Contrarily, classical realism emphasized the role of military power in the state's pursuit of national security within the international system. Despite suffering changes since their creation until the present day, these two theories remained central to analyze political and international affairs.

In what concerns Syria, the conflict has quickly become one of the worst humanitarian disasters of the XXI century[1]. Two sets of dynamics essentially characterize its evolution. On the one hand, growing dialogue and political cooperation within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the Geneva Peace Talks, with the aim of establishing ceasefires and discussing a possible resolution for the conflict. On the other hand, repeated violations of cease-fire agreements, political deadlocks over UN resolutions calling for more effective action on the ground, and the overall escalation of violence in Syria, with the interests of the different players overlapping with the political *consensus* reached in multilateral institutions. Given how international institutions appear to have failed to manage hostilities, liberalism stands out as a less than ideal theoretical framework to explain this war, leaving realist tenets as the only other possible tools in this regard.

In that sense, this dissertation aims to answer the following research question:

"How can the participation of external actors, namely the US, Russia, Iran and Turkey in the Syria war, between 2011 and 2018, be explained by realism, neorealism, neoclassical realism, and the defensive and offensive realist theories?".

For the purpose of this dissertation, it should be taken into account that, firstly, these states were selected due to their significant contribution in decision-making and policymaking towards Syria; and, secondly, their process of selection entailed the criteria of representativeness – two international actors and two regional actors, with one of each aligned with one side of the war. Due to the limited length of this project, it is acknowledged that other state and non-state actors that could equally be important for the analysis will not be analyzed in greater detail. The option for the time period 2011-2018 is justified by the outbreak of the war in 2011 and the emergence of a new key actor – ISIS – in the conflict in 2014, which triggered important changes in the alignments of the state actors aforementioned. The definition of 2018 as the threshold of analysis also enables the study of the transition between US administrations,[2] which had significant changes in the foreign policy orientation towards Syria.

The methodology implemented in this study consists of a qualitative analysis, aimed at explaining a particular situation through the investigation of a research question that combines theoretical and empirical aspects. To comprehend the Syrian war through the theoretical framework of the different branches of realism, this study relied on primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include official statements of the state-actors chosen, official

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[1] It is estimated that the Syrian humanitarian crisis, provoked by the Syrian war, involved more than 17.6 million people, with more than half being children (World Vision, 2020).

[2] The United States is the only state that had a change in the government during the period of analysis, unlike the governments of Russia, Iran and Turkey.

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documents from public institutions and news reports from media channels, whereas secondary sources were obtained from scientific articles, books, and opinion articles. During the research, the use of official documentation from the US, Russia, Iran, and Turkey was complemented by the resource to academic literature aiming to overcome possible bias from relying on the national statements of each state alone; that was attained with regard to three of the four actors.

The dissertation is divided into three main parts: the theoretical, the historical and the analytical-empirical chapters. The first provides a brief introduction about the origins of International Relations' theories, whereby the conceptual and theoretical tools for the analysis are provided. Despite realism being one of the oldest theories in IR, it is argued that it is still pertinent enough to explain current war scenarios, particularly in the case of Syria. The second chapter provides the historical framework, namely the political, economic and social conditions that ultimately triggered the protests which culminated in the outbreak of the Syrian war. The third chapter is then divided into two subsections – on the international actors and on the regional players – whereby it is discussed, on one hand, the role of the US and Russia as superpowers with similar interests, purposes and goals in matters of foreign policy, and, on the other hand, the enrollment of Iran and Turkey, as regional actors, engaged in opposite sides of the conflict, with distinct agendas and motivations.

The core argument of this dissertation is organized around four central claims. First, in line with classical realism, states cooperate according to their calculation of interests, establishing intentional, instrumental and ephemeral alliances in order to achieve their goals. This was particularly noticeable at the time ISIS emerged when the enrolled external actors were forced to adapt their strategies in the face of a new major threat. Second, this dissertation argues Syria can be considered a "power-balancing war" in neorealism terms, since each great power involved in the conflict seeks to increase its relative power in the system, consolidating its positioning both regionally and internationally. Third, neoclassical realism reveals internal conditionings, such as the case of public opinion influencing the foreign policy decision-making process and, thus, the behavior of the state in the international system. The weight of public opinion in the US government's decision to intervene or not in the Syrian war was particularly relevant in this regard. Finally, this dissertation also demonstrates that, in accordance with offensive realism, the war in Syria has been used by the US, Russia, Iran and Turkey to try and change the regional status quo in their favor.

Chapter I - Theoretical framework

Both World Wars devastated Europe and the world during the XX century, bringing about a discussion over the need for new ways of preventing war, inducing debates and theories of International Relations (IR) to explain the international system and the behavior among states. This chapter, divided into seven subsections, aims to provide the theoretical framework to analyze the Syrian conflict through the presentation of key concepts of different branches of realism. Although the debate of IR theories has become increasingly complex and inter-disciplinary, influenced by new theoretical models, this dissertation suggests that the different postulates of realism and its derivations still allow to properly understand contemporary conflicts such as in the case of Syria.

Accordingly, the first subsection discusses the classical realism of Morgenthau and Carr focused on comprehending the nature of conflicts between states while the second subsection approaches the ontological debate between realism and liberalism, which constitute the main paradigm in IR to understand how states relate with each other. The third subdivision analyzes neorealism, theorized by Kenneth Waltz, whereby the author proposes a dynamic relation between states and the international system. Fourth, it is presented an overview of the contributions and criticisms of classical theories and neorealism by Grieco, Krasner, Keohane e Nye. Fifth, and following the criticisms mentioned to neorealism, Gideon Rose develops neoclassical realism, whereby the domestic variant is for the first time accommodated in a realist theory. The sixth part addresses the variants of realism over the concept of security, particularly the defensive and the offensive realism. Finally, the last subsection of the theoretical framework summarizes the key concepts of the different branches of realism that constitute the theoretical tools to comprehend the Syrian conflict.

1.1. Classical Realism

Realism "was the dominant theoretical tradition throughout the Cold War" (Walt, 1998: 2), providing a rational explanation of *power politics*, or the struggle for power among states based on their calculations of interests. States act as unitary and sovereign actors – whose behavior is expected to be similar – focused on one goal: to guarantee the balance of power. Since the international system is anarchical[3], states are prone to cooperate in a self-interested way, so as to assure their national security. In this sense, cooperation – or the establishment of alliances – is always intentional, instrumental and ephemeral in a logic of international competition for power,

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[3] For realism, the anarchy of the international system is characterized by the lack of a supranational entity capable of ruling the behavior of states or protecting them from external threats and attacks. However, even though the international system is anarchical, it is hierarchical according to the relative power of states in the system (Waltz, 1979: 114).

assuring their relative position in the international system. Hence, alliances only last as long as they serve their purpose. This does not necessarily translate into complete trust among states, but in an interested cooperation due to the roots of politics in the human nature, essentially Hobbesian from Morgenthau's perspective (1993: 199; 210-212).

According to the realist perspective, states prioritize military power to maximize their national security, guaranteeing, in the first place, the survival of the State itself: "Self-help is necessarily the principle of action in an anarchic order" (Waltz, 1979: 111). For this reason, the morality of the actions of the leaders/Head of State on behalf of the state needs to be evaluated according to the result and in a given context. In other words, in a Machiavellianism logic, the end justifies the means.

In Kenneth Waltz's words, "Weak states operate on narrow margins. Inopportune acts, flawed policies, and mistimed moves may have fatal results. In contrast, strong states can be inattentive; they can afford not to learn; they can do the same dumb things over again" (1979: 195). In practical terms, this means there are states stronger than others, based on their military power, who may then choose to establish diplomatic ties to cooperate and, then, accomplish their foreign policy goals.

1.2. Realism *versus* Liberalism: an ontological debate

Whilst Realism consolidated itself as a theory, Liberalism emerged and created one of the most persistent ontological debates in IR: Classical Realism *vs* Idealism/Liberalism/Liberal Institutionalism. Even though these theories share the same starting assumptions (sovereign states as central actors in an anarchical international system), Liberalism goes in the opposite direction of Realism, arguing that states can surpass their disagreements in different ways: first, increasing economic interdependence through free trade agreements, for example, would lessen the probabilities of war, since a conflict would affect the economy of each state; second, proponents of the *Democratic Peace Theory* sustained the spread of democratic principles would promote peace, since "democratic states were inherently more peaceful than authoritarian states" (Walt, 1998: 3); and, finally, engaging in international organizations would open channels of communication, generate long-term benefits and, subsequently, favor the promotion of peaceful resolutions of conflicts due to consolidated cooperation amongst states. To sum up, despite facing anarchy in the international system, liberalism defends that relations between states will reveal a decreasing tendency to go to war if economic relations among them are enhanced.

Nevertheless, History has shown that conflict has not just been the result of misunderstandings among states that could be solved through dialogue in international forums. Instead, conflict is rather the inevitable product of incompatible goals and aspirations of different states that try to fix the international distribution of power, and thus improve their relative position

in the system (e.g. the ambition of Hitler with the project of the *Third Reich* and the *Vital Expansion* resulting in the Second World War).

The second half of the XX century brought classic theories into question. Internally, the exclusive focus of realism in military power was criticized for neglecting important social, economic and cultural dynamics within states. Externally, the period of *détente* in the Cold War (with the exception of the Vietnam war) and the increasing globalization trend clashed with some theoretical principles of the classical debate. In this context, both 'classical theories' spawned the 'neo-neo debate' (neo-realism and neo-liberalism), which entailed theoretical innovations in order to account for changes in the international system.

1.3. The impact of the two World Wars in IR: neorealism and Kenneth Waltz

Neorealism (or structural realism) is the product of the evolution of Kenneth Waltz's work from his contribution to classical realism with *Man, the State and War* in 1959 to his book *Theory of International Politics* in 1979, whereby he proposes an updated approach of realism to the international relations.

Waltz considered realism failed to explain how superpowers performed so similarly despite having two distinct economic systems: capitalist US with a liberal democracy and communist USSR with a popular democracy. He aimed to create a transversal theory of international politics, which Raymond Aron and Hans Morgenthau had previously considered an impossible task.[4] For Waltz (1990), the anarchy of the international system continued to be the key to international politics, yet the behavior of states is the result of the nature of the system and not the opposite (cf. Fig. 1), as Morgenthau previously argued.

"Systems language used to describe interactions and outcomes"

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[4] The authors did not believe theories of International Relations could be constituted as an independent field of study, such as Economics, which develops theories applicable in different contexts and situations.
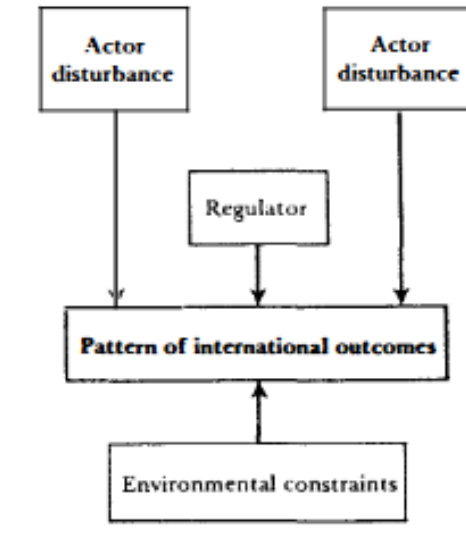
Fig. 1. Waltz, 1979: 40

Consequently, regardless of time and space, when systems present similar conditions, one may expect similar behaviors, which theoretically explains the foreseeability of states' behavior (Waltz, 1979: 116-118). These systemic constraints sustained a similar behavior by both superpowers during the Cold War, despite their meaningful domestic structural differences, whether ideological, cultural, social, or economic. He also considered that:

> "*In international politics the appropriate concerns, and the possible accomplishments of systems theory are twofold: first, to trace the expected careers of different international systems, for example, by indicating their likely durability and peacefulness; second, to show how the structure of the system affects the interacting units and how they in turn affect the structure*" (1979: 40).

The last point of Waltz's argument is related to the distribution of units' capacities in the system, which implies a multidimensional conceptualization of power. In fact, the dynamic positioning of states in the international system is closely related to their capacities, which, in turn, determine their relative power. The variations in the structure (the international system) affect directly the units (states) and, in consequence, the result of their interaction, just like a change in the relative capabilities of a given state will also mean a change in the system. An example of this argument resides in the nuclear arms race between the US and the USSR whereby both superpowers struggled to consolidate their military power and, thus, their relative position in the international system.

The constraints of the system are reflected, for instance, in processes of socialization (whereby the states define acceptable behavioral patterns and sanctions for deviant behaviors)

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and competition (through which the states reproduce the behavior of the most successful actors in the international arena). At this point, it may be interesting to consider the struggle for nuclear weapons among weaker states[5] such as the UK, France and China, all interested in assuring their military power, consolidating their relative position in the system and within the established alliance. The importance of relative gains is highlighted in the following quote:

> "*In self-help systems, as we know competing parties consider relative gains more important than absolute ones. Absolute gains become more important as competition lessens. Two conditions make it possible for the United States and the Soviet Union to be concerned less with scoring relative gains and more with making absolute ones. The first is the stability of two party balances, a stability reinforced by second-strike nuclear weapons. Where a first-strike capability is almost as difficult to imagine as to achieve, gains and losses need not be so carefully counted. The second condition is the distance between the two at the top and the next most powerful states, a distance that removes the danger of third states catching up*" (Waltz 1979: 195).

Regarding the balance of power and stability theory, Waltz specifies two types of system: a bipolar system (characterized by the prevalence of two superpowers, such as in the Cold War) and a multipolar system (rooted in different great powers, with a certain degree of international influence). The author considers the first system preferable since "both [powers] can be expected to act to maintain the system" in consideration of the resulting benefits from preserving the status quo (1979: 204). In a multipolar world, the rationality of the state's decisions may be disrupted by the difficulty in foreseeing the result due to a higher number of variants involved. Hence, it is more likely that "great powers fight power-balancing wars" (ibid) to increase their relative power and consolidate their position in the system. This case is illustrated by Germany's ambitions, expressed in the annexation of smaller neighborhood countries during both world wars[6]. Germany could only be stopped by a coalition of great powers, and the maintenance of the status quo in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War was only possible due to the division of Berlin in fair shares between the parties involved in Germany's defeat.

Moreover, Waltz also warned about the danger of underestimating threats, finding it one of the reasons behind the preceding world wars. Within a rational framework of decision, states should orientate their actions in order to assure the balance of power, while taking into account the *security dilemma* conceptualized by John Herz in the 1950s[7]. The dilemma emerges when, within the anarchical international system, states look to guarantee their national security.

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[5] When in comparison to the superpowers at the time; yet the countries referred still had considerable influence in each sphere of influence of the correspondent superpower.

[6] Which proved to not be a rational choice from German leaders throughout the course of the wars.

[7] See Herz (1951).

However, if a state starts to accumulate too much (conditions for) power, other states will feel more insecure, leading them to also increase their own military power in order to assure their security, thus generating a vicious circle with escalating tensions and a rising probability of starting a war. In this sense, the excessive accumulation of power by a given state may disrupt the international status quo, revealing itself a counterproductive decision in the zero-sum game of the anarchical international system.

1.4. Contributions and criticisms of classical theories and neorealism: an overview

Realist theory has also been refined by some scholars who focused on addressing previous criticisms and exploring specific points. In particular, the institutionalists' argument – that states prefer to cooperate in order to reach long-term benefits instead of short-term results, thus reinforcing their role as sovereign actors in the system against international economic organizations – generated replies by Joseph Grieco and Stephen Krasner.

On one hand, Grieco (1988) argues that liberal institutionalism fails to address the constraints generated by the international system (as the structure) in the states' behavior, becoming too optimistic about international anarchy. Neoliberals "[argue] that states seek to maximize their individual *absolute gains* and are indifferent to the gains achieved by the others" (Grieco, 1988: 487), not acknowledging that the relative gains arising from cooperation can impact the balance of power, as realists do; that is why "realism is still the most powerful theory of international politics" (ibid).

On the other hand, Krasner (1985), offers a different perspective on the topic, providing a reinterpretation of North-South relations, namely the Third World's[8] demands for a new international economic order (NIEO[9]). The rising of the Third World as a collective unit during the Cold War, choosing to align neither with the US nor with the USSR while claiming a new economic order, reveals the concern of states with the distribution of power in the name of their survival[10][11]. Krasner's argument breached the mainstream analysis at the time, which considered economic aims subordinated to the primary goal of improving the relative position of states

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[8] Third World is the designation conferred to the group of countries predominantly located in the south hemisphere which formed the Non-Aligned Movement in 1955, during the Conference of Bandung. As the name suggests, these countries refused to align with the superpowers' political and economic systems.

[9] About this concept, see Hart (1983); cf. Lake (1987).

[10] This point is particularly relevant in the case of Third World countries since a considerable percentage had been recently decolonized and was thus still in the process of state-building. See Smith (1986).

[11] Until 1981, most of the analyses considered the North-South conflict the result of an unequal distribution of global resources, and also of differences over the best economic system of production in the South.

through power distribution in the international system: "Third World states want power and control as much as wealth" (1985: 3).

Therefore, both Grieco and Krasner agreed that relative gains, resulting from a stronger relative position in the system – which, in turn, steams from having more power in the international system – are more urgent than the management of absolute gains brought by the economic rationality inherent to liberalist thought. Krasner believed the behavior of Third World states was best explained by their political weaknesses and their vulnerability, and as Walt had also reaffirmed: Third World's states would become increasingly less vulnerable due to their gains in face of the superpowers (1998: 5).

The argument of Stephen Krasner also explores an important point of Kenneth Waltz's theory: the interconnection between the structure and the units of the system; and the influence of the structure's constraints in the units, which, in turn, affect and limit the structure.

Although neorealism addressed some flaws in realism, some criticisms were still acknowledged, in some cases, by Waltz himself. The author recognized his theory of international politics needed to be complemented with a theory of foreign policy capable of explaining irrational behaviors of different states as well as other situations of non-strategic actions, looking at the 'black box' of the state – which remains closed in Waltz's approach. In this sense, the limitation of neorealism in incorporating the *domestic factor* with the *systemic* one is outright acknowledged in Waltz's work. Keohane and Nye[12], preeminent neoliberal academics, also criticized the lack of connection between the domestic environment of the state and the international structure, proposing a review of the neorealist approach through which it could include the consideration of elements, such as economic cooperation and international institutions, thus possibly explaining differences in states' behavior in similar situations.

1.5. Neoclassical realism: the role of domestic factors in influencing states' behavior in the international system

The unexpected end of the Cold War raised the debate about the viability of neorealism to predict political events of this magnitude. The inability of neorealism to explain the differences in the behavior of similar superpowers sustained previous criticisms about the importance of taking into consideration domestic elements. In this sense, Gideon Rose focused on developing a theory that could explain how states can respond differently to the same stimulus from the structure, particularly due to domestic factors, such as the perception of relative power capabilities, the strength of the *state apparatus* and the relation between the society, in the form of public opinion, and the ruling elites, as the ultimate decision-makers.

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[12] See Bliddal et al. (2013).

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By accommodating the neoclassical strand with the realist focus on military power capabilities, the author provided a new model of analysis, acknowledging for the first time, the role of the domestic environment in shaping a state's foreign policy, and, consequently, its behavior in the international system.

Gideon Rose highlights the importance of Kenneth Waltz's work in developing a theory of international politics by "describ[ing] the range of likely outcomes of the actions and interactions of states within a given system" (1998, 145). The author also acknowledged that the exclusion of foreign policy in Waltz's work was a necessary limitation to achieve his proposed goal of creating an autonomous field of study since foreign policy is influenced by both domestic and systemic factors.

Neoclassical Realism is one of the four schools of foreign policy[13], coined by Rose, which incorporates external and internal factors, previously disregarded by the previous variants of realism. Realism in the neoclassical realist theory results from the belief that "the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy are driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities", while the neoclassical strand comes from "Thucydides' formula, that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (Rose, 1998: 146). Therefore, a state's foreign policy is not only determined by the state's military capability but also by the impact of internal variables in the process of foreign policy decision-making. Neoclassical realists look at the state's 'black box', admitting that the pressures of the international system can have distinct impacts, according to the specific domestic context of each state.

Rose also introduces two other points of analysis: the perception of relative power and the strength of the state apparatus and its relationship with the society. Firstly, the author finds that foreign policy's guidelines and decisions are made by elites and the decision-makers, which makes Rose argue that the perception of relative power of the state is more valuable than the real military capability of a state (1998: 159-60). Secondly, that there are constraints imposed to decision-makers in what concerns the management of national resources; an analysis of the power of a state cannot, therefore, ignore the role of the state apparatus and the proximity between the state's leaders and the society, since the latter can influence the proportion of the resources allocated to a specific realm, in this case, foreign policy (1998: 161-5).

Consequently, states with strong military power but with distinct domestic contexts will, first, act distinctively. The pressures resulting from the anarchy in the international system can indeed shape the state's behavior to a certain extent; however, the conduct of a state will be specifically defined by its foreign policy orientations, which, in turn, considers the domestic context of the state in question.

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[13] See Annex 2.

For Rose (1998: 167), in order to understand power and politics, one cannot forget to analyze the context of the policies. In this sense, neoclassical realists predict that states will try to control and shape the international environment according to their relative military power or, in neoclassical terms, their perception of it. Hence, a state with increasing military capabilities will have a wider ambition of influence and power and a state with decreasing perception of power will adjust its behavior in the international system according to its capabilities: "Yet for neoclassical realists these are tendencies, not inexorable laws, whether the region actually erupts into conflict, they argue, will depend in large part on how the [key actors] (…) decide to manage their ambivalent relationships" (ibid, p. 171).

1.6. Security in the international system: a myth or a reality?

The final conceptual development that will be considered in this chapter is the discussion of two variants of realism that, even if stemming from the main assumption that the international system is anarchical, are opposed in their perceptions about the security of states: defensive and offensive realism.

Security is one of the cornerstones around which realism and its derivatives theories have developed throughout the XX century. In the aftermath of the Second World War and in the context of the bipolar confrontation during the Cold War, security issues gained increased importance, turning into a subdiscipline of IR. The definition of a strategy to guarantee the national security of states became a priority for Western decision-makers who regularly faced security dilemmas and the arising imbalances of power resulting from the contingencies of military alliances, characteristic of that period (Barrinha, 2013: 205). Even though Security Studies became an independent field of study in the 1980s, in large part due to the contribution of Barry Buzan – who focused on widening the conceptualization of security beyond military concerns –, for the purpose of this dissertation, the concept of security will only be considered in terms of military power (ibid, pp. 206-7).

In this sense, the following subsections investigate the differences between defensive and offensive realist perceptions about the (in)security of the international system as the global structure in which states interact as rational and unitary actors. Since their views oppose, these theories diverge in the quantity of power a state should pursue, in the preferable system of distribution of power (unipolar, bipolar, multipolar) and in the cost-benefit assessment of going or not to war with other states to maintain or change the status quo.

1.6.1. Security as a reality: Defensive Realism

Defensive realists such as Waltz, Stephen Van Evera, Charles L. Glaser and Robert Jervis believed that, despite the anarchic international system, states are secure, and they hold such a perception: "States are not as vulnerable as men are in a state of nature" (Jervis, 1978: 172) and

"Structural realism properly understood that, under a wide range of conditions, adversaries can best achieve their security goals through cooperative policies, not competitive ones, and should, therefore, choose cooperation when these conditions prevail" (Glaser, 1995: 51).

Robert Jervis (1978) deepened the work of Herz on the security dilemma, concluding the national security of states is only exposed if an external threat emerges; however, the author points out this situation is also rare. Even if there is a threat, Jervis argues states will react to neutralize the threat and rebalance the system – i.e. the balance of power. In this framework, foreign policy is the tool whereby states materialize their reaction to the constraints of the international system, which means they will only go to war when there is a security dilemma, leading them to create strategic alliances of resistance. In line with Waltz, Jervis also argues that even if there is a possibility of winning a war, the costs will always be superior to the gains. Hence, given the rationality of states, they will be discouraged to go to war.

Stephen Van Evera (1999) also argues that states only go to war if they overestimate the gains of war or underestimate the costs of war, calling it "False Optimism[14]". There is a third situation where states might go to war preemptively when they feel threatened to prevent severe changes in the status quo, for example, due to its geography. Russia constitutes an interesting case, revealing historically the 'syndrome of encirclement' due to its extensive geographical area that needs to be protected in order to guarantee the country's borders and periphery (Lukin and Stankevich *apud* Lo, 2001: 49).

Charles Glaser (2010) considers an extra variable in the decision-making process of how a state's leaders define a rational strategy. First, he considers the motives of states, namely interests and goals, in terms of security concerns or "greedy" concerns (related to non-security reasons, for example, desire for expansionism). Second, the author refers to material variables, the power of states, defined according to their military capabilities, which helps to calculate the offense-defense balance. Finally, and this is referred to as the special contribution of Glaser to the realist approach, he considers the information variable, meaning the knowledge of a state about the motives and capabilities of its opponent.

Although Glaser provides an approach to a rational decision, he believes states do not necessarily act rationally. However, he defends this approach would be useful for policymakers since "the theory analyses the strategies a state *should* choose" (2010: 2, emphasis added). Critics to Glaser's approach soon emerged, pointing out the default stage of states' economic concerns, the ambiguity in the distinction between "security" and "greedy" concerns, and also the simplistic realist classical definition of power exclusively based on military capabilities. For example, Sophia Dingli highlights "China's role in stabilizing the US debt via the purchasing of American

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[14] Designation of the second chapter of Evera's book whereby the author explains the precipitation of a decision of going to war.

bonds" (2012: 680). Both Dingli (ibid) and Walt (1998: 5) recall Randall Schweller's statement whereby he defends that "states today do not primarily seek power, but influence, wealth and the maximization of the consumption". And, they continue, History has also proven that an expansion can have more benefits than costs, such as in the case of Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe during the Cold War. To conclude, defensive realists acknowledge there are sometimes opportunities for a state's expansion in the international system, yet, they also warn that will probably not be cost-effective, but rather self-defeating and counterproductive.

On the other hand, offensive realists as Eric Labs and John Mearsheimer argue that, given the scarce security in the international system, anarchy induces competition among great powers, through the maximization of the relative position/advantage in the system and due to the uncertainty of a possible emerging revisionist power[15]. At this point, Mearsheimer criticizes the mainstream idea of the 'everlasting peace' underpinning 'the end of the history'[16], arguing that the end of the Cold War could induce competition among great powers notwithstanding their liberal democratic regimes. This idea is best reflected in the need of the US, for example, to maintain troops and/or bases in some allied countries[17] all over the world.

1.6.2. Security as a myth: Offensive Realism

According to John Mearsheimer, there are two different types of 'power' that can define material capability in the international system: relative and latent power. The relative power of a state is defined by its material capacities, meaning its military power. On the other hand, the latent power consists of the socioeconomic mechanisms that sustain the military power and it is defined by the wealth of the state and the size of the population. These two variables allow the state to calculate its potential in the framework of competition for security in the international system, answering the question: "How long and at what cost can a state manage its war machine?". Therefore, in Mearsheimer's conceptualization, a state is not exclusively dependent on military power to increase its relative power in the system; in fact, other possibilities are presented such as growing wealth or population growth. China is illustrative of how a non-democratic economic power can indeed defy the US power, generating imbalances of power because "neither its neighbors nor the United States would stand idly by while China gained increasing increments of power" (Mearsheimer, 2001: 2).

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[15] A revisionist power is a state who reveals, through its actions and behavior in the international system, the desire to change (review) the status quo, tendentially to obtain a stronger relative position.

[16] See Fukuyama (1992).

[17] See Annex 1.

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For offensive realists, the structure of the international system and the generalized environment of fear and uncertainty lead states to decrease their vulnerability by increasing their power, which ends up generating conflicts:

> "*This situation, which no one consciously designed or intended, is genuinely tragic. Great powers that have no reason to fight each other—that are merely concerned with their own survival—nevertheless have little choice but to pursue power and to seek to dominate the other states in the system*" (Ibid).

Therefore, by this logic, a state accumulates power until it stands in a hegemonic position as a superpower, thus guaranteeing its survival. For instance, the US-led unipolar order during the 1990's dissuaded a possible external attack from another state, since the costs of retaliation could mean the non-survival of that state. Peace is only possible if the balance of power is assured by states in order to preserve the status quo. Nevertheless, as Mearsheimer argues, during the pursuit of international hegemony to guarantee survival, states often end up creating conflicts – what the author considers *the tragedy of the great power politics*.

1.7. Final remarks

Stemming from realism's basic assumption – the international system is anarchical – states are prompted to search for power in order to guarantee their national security. Classical realism, as developed by Morgenthau, was and still remains a significative contribution to IR theories. For that matter, it is important to highlight the role of classical realism in explaining that the major cause of conflict among states is the human Hobbesian nature, which is then reflected directly in politics. States struggle for power in order to survive within the international system, cooperating intentionally whenever so needed.

Nevertheless, new theories proposing a different perception of states' behavior in the context of anarchy have also emerged, revealing the need to develop a more accurate approach, capable of explaining international events during the 1970s. It is in this context that Kenneth Waltz presents a more structured approach whereby the constraints of the international system induce similar behaviors among states. The author also analyses the systems of power distribution, namely the bipolar and the multipolar. In this sense, Waltz reinforces the idea that the number of great powers among which power is distributed comprises a major variable in international dynamics, ultimately affecting interaction among states.

However, Waltz also acknowledged the structural limitations of neorealism in explaining non-strategic, or even irrational, state's decisions. Gideon Rose strived to close this loophole, by incorporating the analysis of internal factors in the process of decision-making, such as public

opinion's favorability towards a certain topic, the management of national resources or, particularly, the proportion of national resources allocated to foreign policy.

Finally, the last theoretical distinction involves defensive and offensive strands of realism, which differ essentially in the quantity of power a given state should pursue to assure its national security. On the one hand, for defensive realists, external threats to states are rare, so states should seek to maintain the status quo and the equilibrium of power. On the other hand, offensive realists believe states should look for power to guarantee their survival, given the uncertainty of the international system. In this sense, states are motivated to change the status quo, searching for a better relative position. At best, a hegemonic position in a unipolar system would dissuade external threats since the costs of retaliation would not be cost-effective for the weaker state.

The present chapter provides the necessary framework of analysis to explore the Syrian War. Based on the realist assumption that the international system is anarchical, states will seek to guarantee their national security and relative position, cooperating through strategic alliances when needed. Accordingly, it should be highlighted that, in neorealist terms, states' actions are simultaneously constrained by the international environment and acting over it, in a reciprocal process towards a common goal: ensuring a balance of power. More recently, domestic environments have also been admitted to display an increasing influence in foreign policy decision-making.

Moreover, the last fundamental idea of this chapter is that states have different perceptions of security in the international system. If, on the one hand, a state believes that security is abundant and the possibility of emerging an external threat is rare, its decisions will tend to guarantee the equilibrium of the international status quo. If, on the other hand, states feel insecure or threatened, they will increase their military power in order to improve their relative power capabilities and, thus, achieve the best relative position in the international system, preferably a hegemonic one, breaching the established status quo.

This dissertation proposes to demonstrate how the different nuances inherent to realism, neorealism and neoclassical realism provide fundamental concepts and theoretical tools to understand the participation of external actors – US, Russia, Iran and Turkey – in the Syrian War between 2011 and 2018.

Chapter II - Syria – from independence to a civil war

The conflict in Syria represents a conundrum of several actors, interests and internal and external dynamics, from the protesting civil society to the increasingly radicalized groups, mixed with regional clashes among countries and sectarian groups aiming for power and influence, which effectively turned the conflict into a political chessboard. In this context, this chapter is divided into six subsections that explain the most important moments of Syria's history that are fundamental to comprehend the country's particular political changes triggered by the Arab Spring.

Accordingly, the first subsection goes from Syria's political independence in 1945 until the foundation and failure of the United Arab Republic with Egypt in 1958, with Syria facing increasing political instability and deteriorating social and economic conditions. The second subsection focuses on the rule of Hafez al-Assad who came to power through a coup d'état but managed to rule the country for thirty years, despite economic difficulties and social contestation. The third part emphasizes the early years of Bashar al-Assad's regime, who inherited the same structural problems of his father's rule. The fourth subsection encounters the outbreak of the Syrian civil war following the burst of the Arab Spring movement in the country while the fifth explains the progressive escalation of violence between 2011 and 2013, providing a brief overview of the reaction of the international community.

2.1. Syria: from independence to the United Arab Republic

Syria became independent from France in 1945. Until then, Syria had been governed by foreign political entities (i.e. Persians, Greeks, Romans, British, French forces) which led to sectarian and regional partitions within its society. This inhibited the development of the *imagined community*[18]: Syria was a geographical expression with no unified political identity or community" (Darwishesh, 2013: 3). Syria can also be considered to have been invented by the international system, as a product of the Second World War and the subsequent decolonization process (Phillips, 2016: 10-11). Hence, like all post-colonial states, Syria is a 'state-nation' rather than a 'nation-state' (Breuilly *apud* Dostal, 2014: 6; Hinnesbuch, 2001), struggling with, among other factors, permeable artificial borders.

After Syria's independence, the ruling elite "acted as a mere executive committee of the landed commercial ruling class" between 1946 and 1963 (Khatib *apud* Dostal, 2014: 3), maintaining the same patterns of government as the ones established by former colonial states[19]

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[18] This concept was coined by Benedict Anderson (1983) and stems from the idea that nations are a social construction based on the feeling of belonging to a societal group.

[19] The ruling Syrian elite after the independence had been in power since the French Mandate of Syria and Lebanon, which started in 1923.

(Hinnebusch, 2001: 22-23). Syrian politicians had to face rival Arab powers that aimed to provoke political instability while "[looking] for external patrons and protection" (ibid, pp. 153-4). However, the defeat against Israel in the First Arab-Israeli War[20] in 1948 compelled the breakdown of the traditional elite in power and allowed the military to rise in politics. By 1953, a military dictatorship had been established. In the same year, the Baath Party is founded through the merger of the Arab Socialist Party with the Arab Baath Party, progressively acquiring an urban-middle-class basis, but still focusing on recruiting supporters from rural areas (Hinnebusch, 2001: 28-30).

The escalation of tensions in Syrian-Israeli borders brought years of political instability, signaling to Syrian leaders that changes were required, in particular concerning limitations to the regime's power capabilities (Hinnebusch, 2001: 153-4). The struggle between pro-Western Iraq and the nationalist Egyptian government of Nasser embodied an inter-Arab regional confrontation with considerable impact in the MENA region.

Domestically, the position of the nationalist middle-class was more proponent of Pan-Arabism[21], and thus more supportive of Nasser. Accordingly, in 1956, Syria constituted a National Front Government, openly anti-imperialist and pro-Egyptian. This led to several external attempts from both the US and USSR to overthrow the regime. In 1958, Syria reasserted both its Arab-nationalist ambitions and disengagement from both superpowers by creating a unified political entity with Egypt: the United Arab Republic (UAR). This confederation represented "the epitome, in the realist world view, of state weakness and foreign policy failure" since Syrian elites were led to surrender Syrian sovereignty to Nasser (Seale et al. *apud* Hinnebusch, 2001: 153-154).

Despite the fact the UAR did not last long, this entity still introduced changes in Syria, "by exporting the Egyptian systems of economic and political management, (…) [it] laid the basis for consolidating one-party rule that used the state to advance the development and block the formation of independent social, political or civil organizations (Darwishesh, 2013: 3). However, the dissolution of the UAR in 1961 created a deep rift within the Baath Party, motivating the rising of a new faction hostile to pan-Arabism, with a radical socialist view, led by Salah Jadih, against the moderate faction, headed by Hafez al-Assad.

In 1963, the radical-socialist-wing of the Arab Socialist Baath party carried out a coup d'état, known as the 8th March revolution. This military coup strived to overthrow Syria's feudal oligarchy, aiming for the inclusion of the marginalized rural areas, working classes and religious minorities, and expecting these groups to create a diversified, stable and sustained basis of support

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[20] The First Arab-Israeli War occurred within the 1947-49 Palestine War. Following Israel's Declaration of Independence in 1948, a military coalition of Arab states constituted by, among others, Egypt and Syria entered in Palestine to fight Israeli forces.

[21] Pan-Arabism consists of an ideology which advocates the unification of Arab countries in a major community, commonly referred to as the Arab World. See Farah (2019).

for the regime. The goal was that the "new rural-based elite replaced the urban rich of Damascus and Aleppo used to form the old regime" (Darwishesh, 2013: 4). The populist discourse focused on the promises of wealth redistribution and on the easing of inequalities, given how the growing middle-class[22] and the traditional elite had always dominated the agrarian sector, at the time, the greatest source of national income. This Leninist political organization (Hinnebusch, 2001: 44) was coupled with radical nationalism, manifested in the goals to nationalize industry and commerce.

Nevertheless, in 1967, the Third Arab-Israeli War (also known as the Six-Days War) led to Syria's second military defeat against Israel and the loss of the Golan Heights, which fostered even more divisions among moderates and radicals Baathists, and undermined the radical leadership (ibid, p. 55; Phillips, 2016: 11-12). Sorenson (2016: 18) refers to the consequences of this defeat as "calamitous" and mentions the "humiliation" of Syria. The "political 'adventurism'" and the goals of radical social change cost the government high instability (Dostal, 2014: 4).

2.2. Hafez al-Assad: from a coup d'état to a 30 years' rule

The until-then Minister of Defense Hafez al-Assad took power in 1970 through a coup d'état and soon realized the need to prioritize two political aspects: state construction and power consolidation, in order to bring some stability to the country. He wanted to avoid increasing tensions with Israel and its Western allies, while promoting a united Syrian political identity and a wider network of regime supporters since "[s]ectarianism alone did not secure elite cohesion" (Hinnebusch, 2001: 5-6). Instead, resentment caused by the coup d'état aggravated divisions among Islamic factions (Sorenson, 2016: 86). To reinforce his basis of support, Assad developed a two-way approach by reconnecting with the old traditional bourgeoisie in order to win the loyalty of farmers, mostly Sunni, while at the same time investing in the development of socio-political organizations, such as unions and peasants' organizations (Dostal, 2014: 4; Sorenson, 2016: 19[23]).

For this reason, and also to guarantee the rapprochement of the military[24], Hafez attributed key positions in the party and in the army not only to a reserved circle of loyal Allawi colleagues but also to Sunnis, which constituted an economically important group for the regime (Hinnebusch, 2001: 6).

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[22] The concept of "new middle-class" in Syria is explained by Hinnebusch (2001: 3).

[23] Sorenson also points out Assad's goal of having virtual control of Lebanese politics since he defended Lebanon was Syrian territory. However, the dispute over Lebanon is considered to be a part of Syria's confrontation with Israel.

[24] Including the military as a "reliable regime pillar" was important for Assad's successful leadership, since the military had been the driven force for different coups d'état in Syria until then (Hinnebusch, 2001: 5; Sorenson, 2016: 19).

Meanwhile, the 1973 Constitution also empowered Assad towards a strong presidential system, deemed essential to guarantee the state's autonomy:

> "*Assad's power concentration was driven by foreign policy and shaped by international forces. It was accepted within the political elite as necessary to confront the gravest threat the country and regime had ever faced, a defeat and occupation brought on by the weakness and recklessness of a factionalized regime*" (Hinnebusch, 2001: 155).

Syria's abundance of oil resources allowed the country's rise to rentier state-status,[25] with national revenues being invested in the public sector and in its industrialization (Dostal, 2014: 4-5). Simultaneously, Assad's political agenda benefited from political and strategic rents, relying particularly on the financial and military support of the USSR, namely arms and oil revenues, thus "[enabling] the regime to expand the bureaucracy and co-opt the bourgeoisie" (Hinnebusch, 2001: 156; Phillips, 2016: 14).

Despite the relative success of this strategy, slow economic growth, periods of stagnation, and increasing income inequalities marked the 1980's. The regime's Leninist-leftist political organization (see Hinnebusch, 2001: 62; 69) was also not generating enough revenue to handle the ensuing economic crisis (Darwisheh, 2013: 8). Accordingly, the economic difficulties triggered social contestation and a sharped political opposition from the Sunni majority (Sorenson, 2016: 21)

Facing this conjuncture, the regime had to choose between maintaining the "patronage", meaning the alliance between the state and popular sectors – which represented a burden for the economy that was facing "permanent resource shortages" – and implementing neoliberal economic reform policies, which would favor the new domestic bourgeoisie and international capital (Dostal, 2014: 5). Assad decided to "mobilize private capital and [loosen] the state's grip over the market with limited liberalization", but still controlling the newly emerging economic elites. To manage this situation, the ruler counted, internally, on the new bourgeoisie with economic power and oil revenues, and, externally, on foreign aid from Arab Gulf countries. Despite being supposedly controlled, the economic opening towards liberalization exhausted the Syrian economy and undermined the social-basis upon which Assad's regime was relying on (Darwisheh, 2013: 18).

At the international level, the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 represented an additional challenge for Syria's leadership. On the one hand, "Assad

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[25] Beblawi (1987) suggests that a rentier state is a state whose economic revenues derive predominantly from the rent of national resources to external clients and the principal recipient of the income is the state's government.

condemned Iraq's invasion of Iran as the wrong war at the wrong time against the wrong enemy, predicting, rightly, that it would exhaust the Arabs, divide them, and divert them from the Israeli menace" (Seale *apud* Hinnebusch, 2001: 152). On the other hand, the rise of a "New World Order" unilaterally led by the US forced countries in the MENA region to search for new alliances. From the perspective of the Syrian leader, the UN force that freed Kuwait from Iraq in 1990-91[26] appeared to be a wise choice with whom to align (Darwisheh, 2013: 9; Phillips, 2016: 16). However, this shift in the international order also caused regional fissions within the Arab World:

> "*while other parts of the world were forming regional blocs, the Arab World was going in the opposite direction, with individual Arab states putting their security in the hands of outside powers to the detriment of all the Arabs. Syria struggled to minimize such detrimental regional consequences of the post-cold War global order*" (Hinnebusch, 2001: 156).

Given how US-Syrian relations remained tense[27], Syria turned to the East, in particular, to China and North Korea, seeking military protection or, at least, allies with whom it could count on (Hinnebusch, 2001: 156).

2.3. The rule of Bashar al-Assad: when expectations fall apart

The turn of the century brought Bashar al-Assad, son of Hafez al-Assad, to power, with public opinion portraying him as a modernizer. Assad was well informed about the new computerized and technological world, economic theories and mechanisms for modernization (i.e. the liberalization of markets). His British education supposedly made him enlightened about politics and anti-corruption systems (ibid; Phillips, 2016: 14) and he was soon considered a "benevolent dictator" (International Crisis Group *apud* Berzins, 2013: 1). However, expectations over Assad quickly fell flat (Sorenson, 2016: 22).

Despite claims of being a modernizer, Bashar ended up facing the same structural crises that had plagued Syria since the 1990s. Neoliberal economic reforms promoted the private sector but also aggravated the concentration of income and unemployment[28] (Berzins, 2013: 1-2). Moreover, Assad faced an intensive wave of internal migration, from 2006 to 2010, triggered by a harsh drought. Since neoliberal policies did not focus on social protection or income distribution, the breakdown in farmer's production reinforced rural poverty and "sparked massive rural-urban

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[26] This alliance is specifically analyzed by Hinnebusch (2001: 153-4).

[27] In 1993, the White House blocked Syria from acquiring weapons and also refused to remove Syria from the US terrorism list (Hinnebusch, 2001: 156)

[28] "In 2010, the poverty rate as a whole was 34.3 percent, while in rural areas it was considered to be around 62 percent" (ibid).

migration, generating unprecedented polarization between urban and rural areas" (Darwisheh, 2013: 11; Berzins, 2013: 2). Water scarcity heightened to a point where the regime was drowning in poverty and the resources mobilized were not enough (Sorenson, 2016: 25).

At the political level, repression combined with high levels of corruption[29], lack of infrastructures and sectarianist resentment aggravated social protests (Berzins, 2013: 3). The last straw was the welcoming of 1,5 million refugees from Iraq, following the US invasion in 2003, which further deepened Syrian domestic chaos: "homelessness, inflation, food and rent prices, unemployment, and economic inequalities all increased." (Darwisheh, 2013: 13).

2.4. The Syrian "Spring": from a peaceful revolution to a civil war

The Syrian "Arab Spring movement" started in 2011, with social manifestations modeled on other Arab countries, such as Tunisia and Egypt. Social turmoil evolved from small protests fragmented among rural and peripherical areas to urban centers, namely Homs, Banias, Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor, increasingly organized around rebel groups against the regime (Berzins, 2013: 2-4; Lantis, 2020: 7 Phillips, 2016: 48-50; Sorenson, 2016: 32-3). However, the course of events did not entirely follow the Tunisian or Egyptian cases. On the contrary, Bashar al-Assad immediately ordered the use of force, which revealed the excessive use of state power and a disproportional response[30] (Sorenson, 2016: 32; The Economist, 2018), thus inciting further revolt and protests within the society (Berzins, 2013: 2). The regular use of violence had already been an institutionalized tool characteristic of both Assad's since the state of emergency was first declared in 1963[31] (Darwisheh, 2013: 20), revealing the autocratic slope of the Syrian regime since its early independence.

In order to justify the actions of his regime, Assad worked on two fronts: on the one hand, he "made official propaganda [raising] the specter of sectarianism[32] (…) and [spreading] rumors of sectarian attacks among various communities in villages and cities" (Darwisheh, 2013: 22); on the other hand, he argued protests were backed up by foreign forces (ibid; Sorenson, 2016: 33). The quick escalation of violence led to thousands of deaths[33], and thousands seeking to flee from

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[29] In 2011, the perception of corruption in Syria was 2.9, putting it in the 129th place as a highly corrupted country (Corruption Perception Index, 2011).

[30] The trigger event in Syria was an antiregime graffiti that a group of young people scratched in a wall influenced by the Arab Spring in other neighboring countries.

[31] The author highlights the risk of repercussions from the regime, including "physical disappearance" in case of any manifestation that jeopardized "the political or ideological orientation of the Ba'thist regime or discusses the freedom of expression" (ibid).

[32] Sectarianism consists on "the politicization of differences between sects within a religion, often leading to discrimination, hate or tension" (Haddad *apud* Phillips, 2016: 20).

[33] Sorenson (2016) refers to 260,000 to 470,000 deaths by 2016, recalling the difficulty in accessing accurate number of deaths in Syria.

Syria (Asseburg and Wimmen, 2012: 2; Berti *apud* Lantis, 2020: 7; Phillips, 2016: 1; 53; 66). This humanitarian crisis soon impacted neighboring countries and placed Syria under the spotlight of the international community (Darwisheh, 2013: 23; Gaffar, 2017: 116; Phillips, 2016: 3; 67). Syria was thus identified as "the most internationalized case [of the Arab Spring] as the result of its global repercussions" (Akpinar, 2016: 2288).

For scholars and analysts, the most astonishing accomplishment of the Assad regime resided in its resilience, which is explained by the existing power structure that guaranteed the support of a strong and cohesive political and military force, able to overcome the heterogeneity of Syria's society (Borshchevskaya, 2018; Darwisheh, 2013: 16; Hokayem, 2014: 42). In fact, Bashar al-Assad believed in Syria's "exceptionalism" and that Syria was "too stable to degenerate into a political turmoil" (Richard, 2014: 41) since he was "very closed linked to the beliefs of the people" (Phillips, 2016: 41).

2.5 The escalation of violence from 2011 to 2013 and the reaction of the international community

Despite Assad's strong belief that he could overcome the increasing protests, the escalation of violence triggered a reaction from the international community. From 2011 to 2013, there was a considerable investment from the UN Secretary-General to help in the management of the Syrian conflict and its consequences. Initially, Kofi Annan developed a six-point plan which aimed to solve the Syrian civil war, through mediation and promotion of political talks, commonly known as Kofi Annan's diplomacy[34]. In this context, the creation of the Geneva action group[35] counted with the participation of the US, Russia, China, France and the UK, whose leaders focused on working towards a political resolution that could accommodate both members of the current regime and of the opposition (Phillips, 2016: 75-79; 170-171).

However, before the beginning of the Geneva Peace Talks, and following the escalation of tensions between the parties in the conflict, Western leaders made sure to express their condemnation of Assad's actions. On 18th August 2011, a joint communication from the US, UK, France, Germany, and Canada called for Assad's resignation since "the future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. (…) [He] must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. (…) the time has come for President Assad to step aside". If, on the one hand, this joint position raised expectations in the region of further US support to the Syrian opposition, on the other hand, it also deepened the fear of another Western-led intervention, motivating the enhancement of Russian and Iranian support to Assad's regime.

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[34] For a more detailed analysis, see Gowan (2013).

[35] The Geneva peace talks began in 2012 and have been extend to present day.

Simultaneously, in the summer of 2011, Turkey welcomed the Syrian National Council[36] (SNC), which was constituted by groups from the opposition, fond of a "peaceful revolution and a rejection of western military intervention" (Phillips, 2016: 113). However, as the violence in Syria increased, the SNC abandoned its non-violence policy in early 2012 and tried to join the fight from the opposition, in particular with the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Due to internal disagreements within the SNC and between the SNC and the FSA, the first ended up losing influence (ibid, p. 114).

At the same time, by mid-2012, it was becoming clearer Assad would not resign as easily as the West expected and that Kofi Annan's diplomacy[37] was not resulting. In this sense, Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia aligned with major Western powers, creating the "London 11", that gathered the UK, US, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, UAE, Italy, Egypt and Jordan, aimed at restructuring the opposition towards a more united and cohesive approach (ibid, p. 114).

Later that year, a new anti-Assad agreement created the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC), absorbing the SNC. Despite SOC's efforts and actual accomplishments in reorganizing and formal arranging the opposition, the external competition among several powers within SOC generated deadlocks, precluding further achievements in the following years (ibid, p. 115).

The regional trio of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey displayed a key role in supporting the rebels, notably by providing arms, finance and non-lethal assistance (ibid, p. 36; Sorenson, 2016: 91). The Turkish border with Syria represented "the main entry point and supply line for the armed opposition[38] and Ankara's acquiescence [played] a major role in shaping the civil war." (Phillips, 2016, 70). Qatar and Saudi Arabia purchased millions in weaponry while Turkey's intelligence services focused essentially on organizing the distribution to the rebels. However, despite sharing a common goal to topple Assad and backing the FSA, the regional trio followed different approaches, undermining any possible achievements (ibid, pp. 137-139).

In 2013, it was already evident the danger of Syria turning into a new proxy war between the two former superpowers given the "situation of equilibrium, where both sides [were] unable to achieve a decisive military victory" (ibid, p. 5; Hove, 2017: 136; Phillips, 2016: 7). The repetition of the bipolar confrontation patterns from the Cold War made Syria resemble a zero-sum game (Asseburg and Wimmen, 2012: 3; Richard, 2014: 43).

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[36] The Syrian National Coalition is a heterogeneous block constituted by seven groups, with distinct goals and interests, among which the following may be emphasized: the Muslim Brotherhood, the Syrian National Council and the Kurdish National Council (Al Jazeera *apud* Berzins, 2013: 4).

[38] "By mid-2012 rebel fighters claimed that 15% of their weaponry came from foreign sources" (Phillips, 2016: 137).

Even though a diplomatic resolution was urgently needed with almost 100,000 casualties on the ground, the political deadlock in the UN's organs had no end in sight: in the UN Security Council, Russia and China vetoed a resolution condemning Syria on 4th February 2012, and, 14 days later, the UN General Assembly passed a nonbinding resolution, commending the withdrawal of Assad (CNN News, 2020; Richard, 2014: 43).

What started as a civil war had progressively become polarized into two main blocks with divergent goals (Hove, 2017: 148-149): on the one hand, a coalition of countries and groups supporting the maintenance of Assad's regime and, on the other hand, a Western-led coalition striving for its removal.

2.6. Final remarks

The analysis of Syria's history enables the comprehension of the long-dated social contestation that reached its peak in 2011, culminating in a civil war. Since its independence in 1945, Syria struggled with permeable artificial borders, facing external interference from rival Arab powers. The defeats in the wars with Israel brought years of political instability and increasing tensions between political parties – Alawites (Shia) and Sunnis – that strived for power. In 1970, Hafez al-Assad came to power and focused on consolidating a unified Syrian political identity, attributing important positions in the military not only to his reserved trusted circle of Alawites but also to Sunnis, economically relevant for the regime.

Although Hafez's strategy was relatively successful, Syria encountered economic difficulties that triggered social contestation over the levels of corruption and political repression and a stronger Sunni political opposition. The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR represented an additional challenge for the leader, who turned to the East – China and North Korea – to seek military protection in an international order led unilaterally by the US.

The rise of Bashar al-Assad to power, in 2000, created expectations about a possible political opening towards a less authoritarian regime, but the younger leader could not cope with the legacy of structural social and economic problems Syria encountered. The worsening of the economic crisis and the deteriorating social conditions motivated a wave of pacific protests, similar to the Arab Spring movements in the region, to which Assad responded with military brutality. The escalation of violence between the regime and the opposition soon resonate both domestically, with thousands of deaths and displaced people, and in the neighboring countries, to where other thousands flee, trying to escape from the war and the violence. The promotion of mediation and peace talks was also largely driven by the Geneva action group and the UN Secretary-General, known as "Kofi Annan's diplomacy".

In the summer of 2011, the magnitude of the war led to the mobilization of the Western leaders who, consensually, communicated their disapproval of Assad's reaction to violence, demanding his resignation from power since the destiny of one society must be led by its people.

Simultaneously, Turkey welcomed the SNC as a point of coordination for the opposition to Bashar al-Assad. Due to several internal disagreements, the opposition suffered some changes, turning the SNC into the SOC, but the political deadlocks remained the same. Regionally, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey displayed a major role in backing the rebels, through the supply of intelligence, arms and money.

Nevertheless, by 2013, no progress had been made towards a possible end of the conflict: the UNSC faced a political deadlock since the US and Russia disagreed on the authorization of a joint intervention; and the balance of power between both parties in the civil war represented a zero-sum game with no decisive military victory from any part, despite the increasing death toll.

Chapter III - From a civil war to the global stage

The Syrian state has historically suffered from the interference of external threats interlocked with a considerable degree of domestic opposition, resulting in political instability through the years. However, the civil war in Syria and the subsequent humanitarian crisis was so chaotic that a possible resolution of the conflict had to invariably include other actors such as countries in the region, specifically the ones more directly affected by hostilities. Overall, the country's geostrategic position turned Syria into "a wicked policy conundrum, complicated by numerous external actors who have compelling interests and webs of relationships" (Sloat, 2018).

Although the civil war began in the context of the Arab Spring movement, the Syrian conflict presents three main particularities that distinguish it from developments in other countries, such as Tunisia or Egypt.

First, Syria juggled different levels of clashes: internal, regional and international. The original front was established internally, with the SNC, the FSA and military forces from the opposition fighting against Assad's regime. The bulk of opposition was supported by the US[39] and Western allies while Assad was backed by Russia both with military equipment and afterward with diplomatic support (Berzins, 2013: 5; 8).

Second, Syria was converted into a "regional proxy battleground" for different actors and forces, in particular, Hezbollah[40] and Iran against a conservative coalition of Sunni countries led by Saudi Arabia[41] (Berzins, 2013: 2; Hove, 2017: 139; Phillips, 2016: 4). Moreover, the Syrian war has become a mirror of other ongoing regional confrontations, particularly the Islamic nationalists[42] *versus* secular nationalists[43], the traditional Arab monarchies *versus* the republics.

Third, the multidimensionality of the Syrian conflict ultimately denotes the confrontation between great powers, namely Russia and Iran *versus* the US, which, in turn, represents a "clash between worldviews, resulting in competition for global hegemony" (Berzins, 2013: 3; Richard, 2014: 42). In this sense, the Syrian conflict has been used by regional and international actors to alter the distribution of power in the MENA region, further sustaining the "intensity, determination and the violence of the conflict" (ibid, pp. 3-4) and making its resolution seems increasingly more difficult.

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[39] The US provided support for the opposition groups considered to be "moderate" and whose goals were, supposedly, aligned with US democratic values. However, this strategy was later reversed (see Sorenson, 2016: 99).

[40] Hezbollah is a Shia militia founded in the 1980's, following the invasion of Lebanon by Israeli forces, which has been incrementally gaining power force in the region (see Sorenson, 2016: 109-111).

[41] The largely Shia Iran and the Sunni Saudi Arabia have a decade-rivalry scrambling for influence in the Middle East through proxy wars (see BBC News, 16 September 2019; Hokayem, 2014: 40-41).

[42] For example, the Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Qaeda's affiliates.

[43] This movement supports the regime in order to avoid the establishment of a radical Islamist regime (Berzins, 2013: 4).

This chapter therefore analyses the US, Russia, Iran and Turkey's contribution and role in the Syrian war. For the purpose of this dissertation, this chapter is divided into two main subsections which aggregate, on the one hand, the international actors – the US and Russia, and, on the other hand, the regional actors – Iran and Turkey. The option for this division is related to the greater complexity of alliances in the Syrian war and also to the structural similarities between the interests of the US and Russia as former superpowers, and Iran and Turkey as regional powers, with particular interests in their regional environment.

Accordingly, the first subsection explores the role of international powers, the US and Russia, and their particular interests in Syria, looking at the states' behavior between each other and with Syria unilaterally. Firstly, even though the US remained optimistic about the outcomes of the Arab Spring in Syria, the escalation of tensions between the parties and the regime's chemical weapons' attack in 2013 incited further involvement from American policymakers. Secondly, Russia, which had grown closer to Syria since the Cold War, maintained an ambivalent position in the early years of the conflict: while supporting the regime, Putin also mediated and conducted negotiations between all parties in the conflict. However, in 2014 and 2015, the emergence and consolidation of ISIS throughout Syrian territory provoked a major turn of events, triggering new alliances and forms of cooperation as well as unexpected interventions. The last part concerning the role of international powers focuses on the discussion of the patterns of confrontation between the US and Russia given their main interests and goals in the region.

The second subsection analyzes, first, the role of Iran whose relation and commitment with the Syrian regime dates back to the period of Hafez al-Assad. The involvement of Iran in Syria confirms the historical alliance between both states which have long shared a common regional goal: to counter the influence of Sunnis in the MENA region. The following subsection focuses, in turn, on Turkey's participation in the Syrian war. With the Turkish President going from Assad's personal friend to his declared opponent, Turkey made a significant adjustment in its foreign policy towards the developments of the conflict in Syria.

Finally, the last chapter summarizes the main contributions of the different nuances of realism to understand the complexity of the Syrian civil war. Despite multiple ceasefire agreements, both the regime and the opposition, backed by their respective allies, ended up violating the agreements since they sought to achieve a strategic advantage and balancing the power in their favor. The emergence and consolidation of ISIS – as a terrorist group with whom there were no negotiations – motivated the escalation of violence from 2014 to 2018.

3.1. The role of international powers in Syria

Bickering dynamics between the US and Russia are not a novelty. Both states always had distinct, and even opposite, political, social and economic policies in domestic politics. The height of these tensions was reached during the Cold War when both superpowers actively sought to expand and

consolidate their influence in certain areas of the globe. The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR favored the emergence of a US-led-unipolar international order, where Russia had a more discrete role in international affairs.

However, the election of Vladimir Putin in 2000 and the new international conjuncture in the following years led to the re-emergence of the Russian Federation, seeking to be recognized once more as a great power. The outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011 triggered the rekindling of tensions between Russia and the US. Despite being on opposite sides of the conflict, both powers encountered a common enemy: the rise and consolidation of the Islamic State, which forced these international players to put aside their divergences and cooperate to fight it, while still fighting each other at the same time.

3.1.1. 2011-2013: US cautious optimism towards the events in Syria

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 and the intense economic crisis the US was facing brought a renewed foreign policy agenda with a more flexible and pragmatic approach towards international events: a reevaluation of relations with Russia; a backlash in the Global War on Terror (since 2001) and a decrease in US external involvement, as well as a more practical view of Arab Spring events occurring throughout the MENA region (Walt, 2005).

The progressive US disengagement from the Middle East limited the access to intelligence and knowledge of Syria, thus delaying an official response. However, US foreign policymakers were also not prone to prioritize Syria in the first place due to several factors, including the underestimation of Assad's ability to remain in power, Obama's hope that, similarly to Egypt, the joint appeal for Assad's resignation would be successful[44], and internal pressures inherent to the US elections expected in the following year (Krieg *apud* Lantis, 2020: 7; Phillips, 2016: 76-77).

In fact, initial US support for the opposition was very limited. Obama's administration prioritized economic sanctions[45], particularly assets' freeze and the imposition of barriers to commercial transactions, thus avoiding the direct involvement on another war as a "foreign policy trap" (Goldberg *apud* Lantis, 2020: 7; Phillips, 2016: 76; Sorenson, 2016: 89), where the US had already spent too many military and economic resources (Phillips, 2016: 24). However, allegations over a possible use of chemical weapons[46] by the Syrian regime triggered the "Red Line Declaration" on 20th August 2012, defined as the time "when [US] start seeing a whole bunch

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[44] Contrary to Egypt, Assad was used to diplomatic isolation and he benefited from Iran's advisement concerning the Western sanctions.

[45] See Richard (2014: 44) for more detailed sanctions.

[46] The possession of chemical weapons was denied by the Syrian regime until July 2012, despite multiple reports to the contrary (Sorenson, 2016: 39).

of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized, that would change [US Foreign Policy] calculus" (The Atlantic, 2016; Lantis, 2020: 7; Sorenson, 2016: 39).

3.1.1.1. 2013 and the radicalization of the war: will the US get further involved?

By early 2013, the fight led by different insurgent movements had turned into a civil war which was, in turn, increasingly facing external involvement. With states and non-state actors backing both factions, the distribution of power in the conflict remained balanced, with neither side being able of reaching a decisive military victory, sufficient to put an end to the war. The progressive complexification of the war with the participation of more external actors further complicated the resolution of the conflict given that there were more interests and foreign policy goals to accommodate (Sorenson, 2016: 38; Phillips, 2016: 7).

In April 2013, another event occurred that further complexified the Syrian war. The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), founded in 2006[47], merged with the Al-Nusra Front[48], an affiliate to al-Qaeda, characterized by *The Washington Post* (2012) as "the most aggressive and successful arm of the rebel force". This combination resulted in the formation of the current Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL or ISIS[49]) and in the creation of "a war within a war" between the Syrian Islamic moderates and the jihadists groups (Berzins, 2013: 5; Phillips, 2016: 133) whose presence shattered the status quo of the conflict. With extremist jihadists joining both sides, Assad counted on Hezbollah to help the regime fighting the opposition[50] (Ataman and Özdemir, 2018: 17; Sorenson, 2016: 38; 110; Phillips, 2016: 157). In response, the FSA and the opposition began to collaborate with radical groups (Sorenson, 2016: 49).

Later in August 2013, the release of Sarin nerve gas by the Syrian government to attack the areas controlled by the rebels resulted in more than 1,000 deaths and thousands of injuries, which generated a debate amongst US policymakers over the country's foreign policy course. Following the Red Line Declaration, and using the argument of historicity and, thus, credibility, US Secretary of State John Kerry argued in favor of an intervention: "As previous storms in history have gathered, when unspeakable crimes were within our power to stop them, we have been warned against the temptations of looking the other way", reiterating the role of the US in

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[47] ISI was established following the 2003 intervention in Iraq by Western forces and aimed to establish a Caliphate within Syria. For the history of the rise of the Islamic State, see Sorenson (2016: 58-71).

[48] Jabhat al-Nusra is a terrorist group whose presence in Syria was announced in 2012 (Sorenson, 2016: 35).

[49] ISIS and ISIL stand for the same organization.

[50] By early 2011, Hezbollah's infiltrates in Syria were working as Assad's advisors (Phillips, 2016: 157).

maintaining the world order, or, in realist terms, the status quo (The Atlantic, 2016; Lantis, 2020: 7; PBS Hour, 2016; Phillips, 2016: 175-177; Sorenson, 2016: 39-40).

Following these events, a British-US joint air strike was planned to happen on 31st August based on the idea of "not letting Assad's crimes unpunished because they violated international norms[51]". However, the day before the attack, the British Parliament did not approve the motion that would authorize the joint airstrike, leaving the UK out of the plan. According to Jeffrey Goldberg (The Atlantic, 2016), the UK was still suffering an "Iraq hangover like everybody else". In fact, the Western-led intervention in Iraq in 2003, which had not obtained approval in the UN as well, remained highly controversial within public opinion and decision-making circles. The Parliament's disapproval of the interventionist motion in Syria was a living proof of the lasting effects that an intervention that went wrong can have in the society's imagery, which, ultimately, constrained the orientation of the British foreign policy.

With the UK stepping back, Obama's administration faced a major dilemma regarding the reputational risk intrinsic to the intervention: if Assad outlasted the attack, it would mean a declaration of victory over the US "merely by surviving". On the other hand, a non-retaliation from the US would be perceived as a "free pass" to Assad continue violating international norms. Even worse, it would damage the US credibility by not complying with the previous "Red Line Declaration" made in 2012, thus undermining the global perception of US capabilities and power.

Later on, National Security officials flinched from the intervention, advocating Obama "would seek authorization for the use of force from the American people's representatives in Congress" (The Atlantic, 2016), in a further acknowledgment of the importance of public opinion in foreign policy matters. A 2013 poll from Pew Charitable Trust revealed that the Western public opinion was "almost uniformly reluctant to see the United States or Europe engage militarily in Syria. (…) When the public lack of support is added to the realist question of what interests European or North American countries had in the Syrian civil war, it is less surprising that no country was willing to intervene in a major way, either by sending in significant weapons or military forces" (Sorenson, 2016: 88). While "some argue that stepping back in the Middle East is a way of preventing US global decline elsewhere", others concluded that the "[US] no longer enjoys the perceived hegemony of the 1990s and 2000s, and [that] regional actors and Russia have vied to increase their influence [in the region]" (Phillips, 2016: 5; 182). In neoclassical realism terms, the perception of loss of military capabilities from a state may affect its position in the international system, in particular, the idea that the US were not able to lead an intervention without the British support damaged the other states' perception of US military capabilities.

Obama defended his position of retreating from intervention by claiming the diplomatic path was the best way to deal with the crisis. In fact, Obama decided to cooperate with Russia to

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[51] Goldberg, 2016.

negotiate the reduction of Assad's chemical weapons' arsenal. To justify the change of Obama's position from an intervention to the negotiation of an agreement, the US President argued that the later solution was better both for the public opinion – since it would appease the people "from Europe to Americas, from Asia to the Middle East, who agree on the need for action" (CNN, 2013) – and also to the state's national interests given that "the Russian deal achieved all of Obama's goals" (Phillips, 2016: 182).

Secretary of State, John Kerry, and Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, were in charge of the negotiations concerning the reduction and, ultimately, the destruction of the Syrian chemical arsenal[52]. Lavrov then convinced Assad to surrender the chemical weapons, therefore avoiding a military intervention from the US that could jeopardize the capabilities of the Syrian regime (Phillips, 2016: 181; Sorenson, 2016: 40). The renunciation of chemical weapons by Assad also represented a change for the US and Russia in the balance of (military) power in Syria, yet it was not sufficient to lead to a victory from one side over the other.

This political move had a strategic purpose: successful cooperation between US and Russia – since "both […] portrayed the agreement as a victory" (Sorenson, 2016: 40) – allowed Obama to recover from the political damages inherent to the decision of stepping back from the attack and, thus, restore the perception of US power by third parties. In fact, the US President even emphasized that the progress made with Russia (and also with the UK, France and China) would have never been possible if the airstrike had been carried out (CNN, 2013). In this sense, the instrumental alliance with Russia allowed the US to recover from previous reputational damage, and to guarantee the US's position amidst the status quo in Syria, thus demonstrating the usefulness of calculated alliances to achieve strategic goals in the international system.

Nevertheless, and despite the removal of Syrian chemical weapons, the death toll continued extremely high[53]. Negotiations conducted within the framework of the Geneva II Peace Talks and within the UN Security Council led to the unanimous approval of the UN 2139 Resolution on 23rd February 2014 that enhanced access to humanitarian aid in Syria (CNN, 2020).

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[52] The Syrian program of chemical weapons had been developed since the 1970's while backed by USSR as a counteraction to increasing Israeli capabilities. According to US reports, Syria kept one of the world's biggest reserve of chemical weapons, notably VX and Sarin (Phillips, 2016: 175).

[53] The number of fatalities perpetrated by the Syrian regime using conventional weapons and "other weapons of terror like "barrel bombs"" were higher than the casualties resulting from chemical attacks (Sorenson, 2016: 40).

3.1.1.2 2014 and the inevitable turnaround: twists and turns of US Foreign Policy

By 2014, the increasing number of areas controlled by ISIS[54] incited further and more direct involvement from the US since it was urgent to fill the vacuum of power generated by the Syrian civil war (Hokayem, 2014: 39; Lantis, 2020: 8). The declaration proclaiming the creation of a Caliphate under Sharia Law[55] by the leader of ISIS was indicative of the change in the distribution of power in the conflict. In fact, the territories and the respective resources controlled by ISIS were such that "[f]or the first time in history, IS merged the role of religious and political leader into one office and restored the title "Caliph" to it" (Sorenson, 2016: 66-7). This increase of ISIS military power and the consolidation of its relative position in the conflict meant, in neorealist terms, a setback in the position of the remaining actors, who had to readapt their strategies in order to face these environmental constraints.

Until 2014, the credibility of ISIS as a terrorist group with considerable influence in the region had been dismissed by the US[56], which maintained its assertiveness, refusing any kind of military intervention in Syria (Lantis, 2020: 9). Obama considered that an interventionist foreign policy would be "naïve and unsustainable" (Sinha *apud* Lantis, 2020: 9), or – in other terms – an irrational decision for the state's benefit since interventions could bring more costs than gains (Regan *apud* Sorenson, 2016: 87).

The original reluctance of Obama in ordering an intervention can be first and foremost explained by the pronounced divergences of opinion within Congress, the public opinion and also advocacy groups, making it difficult to streamline a foreign policy that could safeguard and combine the interests of all stakeholders with the overall national security interest (Lantis, 2020: 9). In fact, the stakeholders against the intervention were essentially concerned about US strategic engagement in the region, in case the mission were to go wrong, in particular, with the costs of the war; contrarily, the group favorable towards the engagement in Syria was focused on the importance of fighting IS as a terrorist group and on the emerging influence of forces supported by Iran. Despite the evident violations of Human Rights through the use of chemical weapons the year before, US Congress sustained that the authorization of the use of military force against the Syrian regime would be an "act of war" (Lantis, 2020: 12). In fact, a military intervention from the US could shift the balance of power in the Syrian conflict in favor of the opposition. In this

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[54] The CIA estimated that, by 2014, there were around 31.500 IS fighters in Syria and Iraq (Lantis, 2020: 8).

[55] The declaration "was revolutionary in the modern history of Islamist movements [since] no previous Islamist group had ever attempted to re-create the (…) medieval nature of political Islam" (Sorenson, 2016: 64).

[56] Obama called the group a "jayvee team" of terrorists (Lantis, 2020: 8).

sense, and according to defensive realism's proposal, the counterparts in the conflict, namely Assad's faction and his allies – Russia and Iran –, would react in order to neutralize the US gains and restore the previous status quo. Hence, the costs of a possible intervention would be superior to its potential gains, which would make the US Congress' decision a rational one.

However, in mid-2014, the growing access of ISIS to resources and the circulation of videos of Western hostages being killed marked a turning point in Obama's positioning[57]. The increasing influence of ISIS in Syria (and Iraq) changed the assessment over the group's potential threat and converted anti-intervention US political forces and representatives[58] to a favorable view towards military action. This came "in part to counter terrorism[59] but also as a way to send powerful signals to Syria, Iran, and other countries about continued US interests in stability" (Humud, Blanchard and Niktin *apud* Lantis, 2020: 9).

Hence, Obama introduced moderate changes in US foreign policy, such as air operations with a limited number of strikes in Syria and Iraq, aiming to protect American lives, interests and assets abroad and, allegedly, to avoid a humanitarian disaster (ibid, p. 10; CNN, 2020). Obama's grudging decision in approving the use of lethal force for selected military targets was due to the risk of collateral civilian deaths in case of retaliation by the Syrian regime, whose capabilities were not fully acknowledged by US intelligence (Berzins, 2013: 5-6). By the end of 2014, Obama recognized he had miscalculated the threat ISIS constituted, which, ultimately, favored the consolidation of the group in Iraq and Syria.

In mid-2015, ISIS continued to control large areas of Syria, but Obama continued to be against a more direct involvement[60]. It was only in the fall of 2015 that Obama decided to proceed with a long-term campaign based on equipping and training moderate Syrian rebel fighters (Lantis, 2020: 10; Sorenson, 2016: 100; Phillips, 2016: 142-144), thus, improving the military capabilities of the opposition (Berzins, 2013: 5-6).

Obama's action was criticized domestically either by excess or by default: anti-interventionist groups believed the involvement, even limited, was too much all the while an increasing part of Congress stated Obama was "not doing enough", with an "embarrassing performance by the leader of the free world" (Bennet *apud* Lantis, 2020: 10). This shift in US foreign policy symbolizes the complexity of managing internal restraints (such as public opinion and divergences within the Congress) while responding to environmental constraints (particularly the change of the status quo in the Syrian war with the rise of ISIS's influence and power).

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[57] Memories over the intervention of Iraq were still fresh within the White House (Berzins, 2013: 5).

[58] Such as moderate Republican members, moderate Democrats and military forces.

[59] The fight against terrorism is a basic pillar of US Foreign Policy Concepts since 2001, following the Global War on Terror's Doctrine of George W. Bush.

[60] Obama insisted on limited number of strikes, maintaining his hesitation and revealing caution in the involvement (Lantis, 2020: 9).

3.1.1.3. 2016 and Trump's Administration: power, politics and interests

By 2016, the war had already caused more than 400,000 fatalities, 6 million refugees in the neighboring countries and the internal displacement of more than half of the population. This outlook led to a temporary ceasefire of hostilities in February in order to assist the civilians in need. Notwithstanding, in September, several killings during an airstrike led to mutual accusations between the US and Russia, resuming the climate of international tension in Syria. This situation culminated, in early 2017, in another chemical attack by the Syrian regime[61] (CNN, 2020).

For the US, Syria remained a controversial topic. Donald Trump explicitly expressed his opposition against US engagement and collaboration with moderate rebel groups in Syria, because "whenever the United States helped such groups (…) [t]hey end up being worse than the people" (quoted in Lantis, 2020: 10). From Trump's perspective, "[he doesn't] like Assad at all, but Assad is killing ISIS. Russia is killing ISIS. And Iran is killing ISIS. And those three have (…) lined up because of [US] weak foreign policy" (ibid), revealing how actors can cooperate and establish occasional alliances in order to achieve a shared goal.

Between 2017 and 2018, the newly elected US President focused on withdrawing US troops from Syria since he believed that this war only entailed high military, human and financial costs[62] for little or no gains at all. Therefore, the decision of staying in a conflict that does not bring any added value in terms of national security or military power for the US was irrational, in a realist logic. However, Trump also faced strong opposition from the pro-intervention coalition[63], which insisted on the importance of upholding military operations in Syria to contain terrorism, manage the humanitarian crisis and not let Assad war crimes remain unpunished. Hence, 2000 US soldiers remained in Syria to help with air operations and to support the Kurdish allies in the fight against ISIS. As a consequence, in 2017, ISIS started losing control of areas, such as the self-declared capital of the Caliphate, Raqqa (CNN, 2020; Lantis, 2020: 11).

In fact, the approach adopted by Trump's administration, notably the declaration of Secretary of Defense James Mattis whereby he summarizes the dilemma the US was struggling with – "We are trying to stop the murder of innocent people. But, on a strategic level, it's how do we keep

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[61] The sarin attack in April 2017 was confirmed in October by the UN.

[62] See Trump's statement at the time: "We should stay the hell out of Syria, the 'rebels' are just as bad as the current regime. WHAT WILL WE GET FOR OUR LIVES AND $BILLIONS? ZERO" (Fandos *apud* Lantis, 2020: 11).

[63] Pro-interventionist actors in Trump's administration involved top advisors to the President such as 2017 National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and leaders of the Republican Party, namely Senators Lindsey Graham and John McCain, House Speaker Paul Ryan, and the Chairman of Senate Foreign Relations, Senator Corker (Lantis, 2020: 11).

this from escalating out of control" (Baker, Gibbons-Neff and Cooper *apud* Lantis, 2020: 11) – demonstrates the importance of the cost-benefit assessment according to the national security interest and power capabilities of a state, since the excessive use of force could potentially jeopardize the US lives, assets and interests[64]. On the other hand, while Secretary of Defense Mattis advocated for foreign policy retrenchment, the 2018 National Security Advisor John Bolton encouraged the maintenance of troops to contain a possible new upsurge by ISIS and to counter Iran influence and interests on the ground (Filkins *apud* Lantis, 2020: 12).

The pro-engagement coalition was satisfied with the achievements of US operations concerning the counterbalance of Iranian power in Syria (DePetris *apud* Lantis, 2020: 12). However, Trump's declarations in December 2018 announcing the withdrawal of US troops caused additional concerns. The President continued to insist on the elevated financial costs of the war (Berzins, 2013: 7), and on transferring responsibilities to Arab allies whose action would be fundamental to stabilize and reconstruct the areas free from ISIS (Hokayem, 2014: 51). For Trump, there was nothing more to profit from Syria since "[it] was lost long ago" and "the country offered nothing more than "sand and death"" (Khanna; Lieu *apud* Lantis: 2020; 12-13).

Trump's intent in shifting the course of US foreign policy illustrates the adaptation of state actors to changes in the international system. In his view, the US mission in the Syrian war had been concluded since the goal under which troops had been sent abroad, had already been accomplished and the benefits that the US could reap were less than the costs in terms of national security interests. In realist terms, the US mission in Syria did not serve any further purpose: once the mission's goal had been achieved and the threat to the US national security had been contained, it would be expected, theoretically, that US troops would withdraw from the conflict.

3.1.2. From the Soviet Union to Russia: the engagement with Syria

Russia's relations with Syria date back to the latter's independence. The Cold War fostered US-Soviet competition for influence in the Middle East: while the Western superpower turned to Israel, Turkey, Morocco and Gulf Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, the Soviet Union had the support of Egypt, Libya, Algeria, South Yemen, Syria and Iraq. Syria played a major role in the economic interests of the USSR, notably arms contracts that represented over US\$200 million, as well as geopolitical interests, through the Tartous naval facility, essential for the repair and replenishment of navies (Berzins, 2013: 7; Sorenson, 2016: 103). When the Syrian civil war broke out, Putin initially adopted an ambivalent position, since he supported the maintenance of Assad's regime while simultaneously seeking the mediation of all parties.

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[64] For example, members of the opposition believed that US action in Syria did not bring any significant contribution to US national security (Lantis, 2020: 12).

3.1.2.1. The outbreak of the war and Russia's moderate positioning

By the end of 2012 and in early 2013, Assad's regime was facing major losses of military personnel and territories under his control, leading to a change of strategy following the counseling of Iran and Hezbollah. This allowed them to regain lost ground and make advances in strategic areas, such as Homs and Latakia. The regime's upper hand "weakened the rebel presence in rump Syria and boosted Assad's confidence of survival" (Phillips, 2016: 150-151).

Later that year, following the Red Line crisis, Russia backed the US proposal of the UN 2118 Resolution condemning Syria's arsenal of chemical weapons (Sorenson, 2016: 103). This represented a strategic move by Russia to avoid direct engagement from the US, which could damage Assad's relative power in the conflict. Notwithstanding, Russia provided crucial advice and technical personnel and agreed to a $4.6 billion loan with Iran to equip the Syrian military in that same year. Putin justified those actions by claiming they countered western anti-Assad measures (Phillips, 2016: 149).

3.1.2.2. 2014-2015: the rise of ISIS and Russia's increasing military presence

The rise of ISIS and its advances on the ground between 2014 and 2015 led Russia to appeal for a coordinated effort to fight the radicals, share intelligence about the group and make agreements with unexpected countries, such as Iraq and the US. Taking advantage of Assad's readjustment of the forces deployed on the ground to face this new emerging threat, ISIS managed to launch successful attacks, brutalizing cities from the north-east to the north-west. In the south, rebels were gaining modest advantages against the regime (Phillips, 2016: 216; Sorenson, 2016: 103-104).

The rebel resurgence in the spring of 2015, which lead them to control Idlib (Phillips, 2016: 214), generated a real threat of regime collapse that worried Syria's allies. The geographical closeness between Idlib and Latakia justified the city's geostrategic importance and made these gains by the rebels a point of concern for Assad and Russia, particularly, given that such advances undermined Assad's and Russia's relative position.

In fact, by June 2015, following Assad's several setbacks due to the regime's manpower shortage, Putin confirmed and reasserted Russia's support since he "was the only thing keeping Syria from deteriorating into a Libya or Iraq-like situation" (Sorenson, 2016: 103-104). Later that summer, concerns about being on the losing side of the war triggered Russia's investment in military assistance[65], sending a military mission to an airbase near Latakia – Syria's major port

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[65] The deployment of Russia weaponry in Syria concerned Israel whose Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu looked for Putin's assurance the weapons would not end in Hezbollah's hands (Schmitt and MacFarquhar *apud* Sorenson, 2016: 104).

city – with 28 planes and 2000 troops to Syria (Phillips, 2016: 217) to counter the balance of power, particularly the regime's increasing territory losses to the rebels and ISIS. This was a major turn of events for Russia, given that it represented the first time Moscow intervened militarily outside the post-Soviet space since the end of the Cold War (Phillips, 2016: 213; Sorenson, 2016: 103). In neorealist terms, Russia's intervention constituted a reaction to the environmental constraints, namely the increasing gains from rebels and ISIS, and the respective loss of control of the regime. In this sense, Russia cooperated with Assad in order to achieve the same goal: the maintenance of Assad's regime which ultimately served both countries' interests.

The rapid mobilization of Russian troops and Moscow's decision to intervene exposed Russia's particular set of goals in the Syrian civil war: to avoid the spillover effect of jihadism in the region through the creation of a buffer zone, thus assuring Russia's national security; to guarantee the flow of arms exports[66]; and to counterbalance Western influence in the Middle East, by ensuring the prevalence of the regional status quo and the consolidation of a multipolar order. With the exception of the arms' exports, these goals were of great importance for the Russian perception of (in)security. The 14% of Muslim Russian population and the presence of Russian speakers among ISIS fighters (namely, Chechens, who purposely went to Syria in 2012 to form and/or join violent groups) worried Putin, who was afraid that jihadists went back home to the Caucasus, Central Asia and Russia[67] (Berzins, 2013: 7-8; Phillips, 2016: 217, 220-1; Sorenson, 2016: 104).

Concerned with the rise of the threat posed by ISIS, Putin reached out to the UN General Assembly, trying to gather an international coalition to target the Islamic State, and announced a Baghdad-based anti-ISIS joint information center (ibid). However, the Russian-Iranian-Hezbollah's ground offensives to target ISIS, previously agreed upon with the US, also allowed the regime to undermine the rebel advantage and to "[make] a show of its interventions being more than just military" (Phillips, 2016: 218). It also led to the expectation of boosting the sales of Russia's arms by $6-7 billion (Luhn *apud* Phillips, 2016: 221). In fact, Russia's gains from its offensive on the ground in September 2015 changed the fleeting structural balance of power, improving its relative position in the conflict and making Russia (and Assad) less predisposed to negotiate.

Nevertheless, the escalation of violence in the conflict led US Secretary of State, John Kerry, to urge Sergei Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister, to discuss a ceasefire in another round of

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[66] In 2015, Russian arms' exports totaled $15.5 billion, representing an important share of Russia's economy (Phillips, 2016: 221).

[67] Russian-speaking elements – the 'Chechens'— travelled to Syria in 2012 to fight against Assad (Phillips, 2016: 221).

negotiations and peace talks, originally deemed Geneva III[68] but later known as the Vienna Peace Process. Although these talks faced some of the previous limitations, a particular set of conditions allowed states to go further: firstly, the upper hand of Russia's position after its intervention in Syria by the fall of 2015 coincided with the change of US administration, who claimed to no longer be interested in the ouster of Assad, but instead in fighting terrorism, and, in particular, ISIS (Lantis, 2020: 11; Phillips, 2016: 225); secondly, the negotiations of Iran's nuclear deal in July 2015 (analyzed below) attenuated Western reluctance over Iranian support to Syria; and, lastly, the generalized fear of the growing jihadist threat in Europe, US and Russia (following the terrorist attacks in November 2015) increased the probabilities of cooperation in the Vienna Process, which reached "[for] the first time, anything approaching a ceasefire" agreement for 27th February 2015 (Phillips, 2016: 229).

3.1.2.3. 2016-2018: Russian troops attempt at withdrawal but tensions rekindled

In early 2016, following the ceasefire agreement and having achieved its military operation, Moscow announced the withdrawal of Russian troops, expecting Assad would want to begin discussions over an agreement to end the war. Yet, Russia's military victory which provides some relative advantage for the regime instead led Assad "[to figure] he [could] game the system in a way that preserves the existing core in power" (Barnard *apud* Sorenson, 2016: 105; CNN, 2020; Phillips, 2016: 229-231). Assad's regime had already been accused of perpetrating a chemical attack back in 2013, being condemned by the international community again in 2017 and 2018.

Subsequently, in May 2017, the Geneva Talks returned for a new round of negotiations whereas, in parallel, Russia initiated the Astana negotiations to debate an ending to the Syrian civil war, together with Iran, Turkey and members from both parties of the Syrian war – the regime and the opposition, which agreed on the establishment of four de-escalation areas (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). However, later in 2018, a break in the ceasefire and mutual accusations from both parties triggered once again the escalation of tensions, violating the established de-escalation zones. The regime's chemical attack with toxic gas in Goutha motivated a joint response with airstrikes from the US, France and the UK (CNN, 2020; Ramani, 2019).

Russia's behavior throughout the war from 2011 to 2018 reflected its strong opposition to a US victory and to the success of rebel groups. The maintenance of Assad's regime was more advantageous than a Western victory in the region, which would favor US influence in the Middle East and damage Russia's political interests in the region (Phillips, 2016: 219). However, despite Russia's defensive stance in 2011, developments throughout the war motivated Putin to intervene

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[68] These talks focused on guaranteeing the provision of humanitarian aid and on ending Russian airstrikes (Phillips, 2016: 227-228)

in order to avoid a post-American Middle East order, and consolidate Russia's international status as "a global superpower on an equal footing with the US" (Phillips, 2016: 220). Russia's struggle for recognition was also evident in Putin's efforts at the UN General Assembly calling for joint action against ISIS.

Overall, Russia's intervention in Syria aimed, first and foremost, as neorealism and defensive realism argues, to restore the balance of power in the conflict, countering the rebels' advantage and the consolidation of ISIS in 2014 and 2015. The maintenance of Assad's regime would therefore guarantee Russia's privileged alliance with Syria, particularly in Latakia's port, essential for Russia's national interest – the major driver of the state's action, under a realist view. Once the purpose of the military intervention was fulfilled, Putin ordered the withdrawal of Russian troops in 2016. However, environmental constraints, namely war developments and the rekindling of tensions in 2017 and 2018 triggered Putin to keep military forces on the ground, reacting and adjusting to the shifts in power. From a security perspective, the intervention in Syria also allowed Russian troops to gain combat experience in case of any threat in the post-Soviet space, while the eradication of jihadism would also mitigate the possibilities of an Islamic upsurge within Russian borders (Berzins, 2013: 7; Phillips, 2016: 220-221; Sorenson, 2016: 104). Finally, Russia's cooperation with Western countries to fight the greater ISIS threat – Russia's continuing alliance with Assad notwithstanding – revealed the ability to cooperate and readjust its alliances whenever needed in order to achieve the proposed goals.

3.1.3. US and Russia's confrontation in the Syrian war: goals, interests and conclusions

The evolution of the Syrian civil war highlighted international and regional dynamics of confrontation between great powers. Russia's military intervention in Syria represented a significant moment in Moscow's foreign policy as it was the first time Putin deployed military troops outside the post-soviet space. On the other hand, Obama's reluctance in providing more direct support to the opposition and even deploying troops on the ground revealed a 'lessons-learned' mentality inherited from Iraq.

Changes in the international system, notably the developments of the Syrian conflict, motivated Russia to readjust its strategy towards Syria, namely in what concerns foreign policy's priorities and national interests. For each move from the axis supporting the regime, there was an effect in the behavior of the West, as the opposite side of the conflict. This structural cause-effect relation, previewed in the neorealist theory, characterizes the relation between the US and Russia as well as their confrontation in the Syrian conflict.

Moscow's gradual enrollment not only as a mediator but also as a part of the conflict confirms Russia's struggle for recognition as an actor on an equal footing to the US in the new multipolar

international order. These ambitions of recovering and consolidating Russia's strategic influence in the region are particularly relevant in Russia's Foreign Policy Concepts since the 2000s when the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) went back to the security agenda (Freire, 2016: 43).

US-Russia relations from the eve of the war to 2018 reflect the cyclical pattern of behavior between both governments during the Cold War – the peak period of neorealism – from trials to the 'reset' of relations after the Russia-Georgia crisis in 2008, to negotiations in the 2012 and 2014 Geneva Peace Talks, from Russia's diplomatic isolation by the US following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 to the forced bilateral dialogue in the sequence of Russia's military intervention in 2015. Washington and Moscow demonstrated their ambivalent relationship, negotiating when needed and when it was in the interest of both parties, like during the coordinated efforts to fight ISIS or the temporary ceasefires to allow the entrance of humanitarian aid (CNN, 2020).

All in all, developments in terms of the behavior of external actors, like the US and Russia, notably the consolidation of alliances to try to leverage and level up each country's strategic position, and the polarization of the Syrian civil war between two confronting sides, essentially confirmed that states continued to seek to guarantee their national security, reacting to the constraints of the international system, and cooperating when needed, often accommodating to domestic limitations in their foreign policy's decisions (Berzins, 2013: 7; Richard, 2014: 45). Despite recognizing the contribution of other IR theories that focus on cooperation, dialogue and on the investment in economic and cultural ties to facilitate the achievement of agreements, it can be concluded that the US and Russia are first and foremost moved by their national interests which aim to guarantee their national security, while attending to the constraints of the anarchical international system.

3.2. From Syria's civil war to regional rivalries: the role of Iran and Turkey

The Middle East is not and never was a heterogeneous region. The legacy of different colonial empires and the personality of the leaders shaped each country's political landscape, fostering most of the time divisions within societies where religion plays a significant role. In fact, Syria's regional neighbors, notably Iran, have revealed themselves as fundamental for the maintenance of Assad in power. Yet, contrarily, other states, such as Turkey, found themselves fighting against the Syrian regime after Assad's refusal to make any concessions to the opposing parties in the conflict. If, on the one hand, international actors have played a significant role in condemning or supporting Assad's rule, on the other hand, regional actors such as Iran and Turkey, have also had a major contribution in shaping the conflict between 2011 and 2018.

3.2.1. The Islamic Republic of Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran was founded in 1979 through the Iranian Islamic Revolution and, since then, and particularly since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by US-led troops, has had a significant role both in the MENA region and internationally. Among Iran's revolutionary narrative, it is possible to highlight the self-declared responsibility of guaranteeing the interests of Shia communities in the Middle East and the opposition against US interference in Iran's politics. Iran's self-perception as lying in an unfavorable position in the Middle East has driven its leadership to establish strategic alliances to outweigh the balance of power in the region and to achieve its ambitious goals of expanding its influence (Al-Jazeera, 2014; Phillips, 2016: 18; Sorenson, 2016: 101)

Although President Hassan Rouhani, elected in June 2013, presented himself with a more moderate positioning towards both internal and external politics (Simão, 2015: 426), seeking to soothe tensions prompted by a more aggressive foreign policy approach of his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Phillips, 2016: 18; 30), he kept on following previous policy outlines nonetheless. In this sense, Iran's policy on Syria was more concerned with the defense and survival of Iran rather than with disrupting the regional status quo established after 2003 (ibid, p. 151).

3.2.1.1. Iran and Syria: allies matter

Political ties between Iran and Syria date back to Hafez al-Assad's period when Iran allied with Syria to counterbalance the Sunni threat from Iraq. Iran also benefited from Syria's geostrategic position to communicate with and send weapons to Hezbollah, all the while sharing a common opposition to Israel (Simão, 2015: 428; Phillips, 2016: 152).

Iran supported the Syrian regime since the immediate outbreak of the civil war by providing military supplies to Bashar al-Assad, thus bringing both countries closer than ever. Insofar as violence escalated, Iran accelerated and increased the financial and military support by sending trained militias to fight the opposition, which was being backed by Arab-Gulf monarchies with whom Iran historically contends[69] (Hokayem, 2014: 41; Sorenson, 2016: 101). Iran's support and pledged allegiance to Assad were essential to assure the balance of power in 2012 (Ataman and Özdemir, 2018: 23; Hokayem *apud* Sorenson, 2016: 102; Phillips, 2016: 31; 148). In turn, the survival of Assad's regime was considered fundamental to Iran's national security, since the latter needed land connections and facilitated communications with Hezbollah (Phillips, 2016: 165; Pollock, 2020), and to ensure that Syria did not fall into the hands of a Sunni and Saudi-supported ruler in an "anti-Iran Sunni axis" (Slim *apud* Sorenson, 2016: 102). Assad's substantial losses in

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[69] See footnote 35.

2014 and 2015 forced the regime to rely on Iranian fighters to tackle the casualties in the Syrian army, either by desertion or by death. Accordingly, Iran's (and Russia's) support to Assad revealed its commitment towards a decisive military victory from the regime's side (Phillips, 2016: 165-66).

3.2.1.2. Assad's losses and Syrian increasing burden for Iran's economy

If, on the one hand, the increasing financial and military support represented a financial cost for the Iranian state, without which Syria could not resist, on the other hand, Iranian decision-makers struggled with the restricted number of geostrategic and political options. More so since, in the event of Assad's deposition, "[u]nlike in Iraq, (…) Iran had no viable options beyond Assad" (Slim *apud* Sorenson, 2016: 102). An analysis of Iran's strategic decision in terms of financial cost *versus* benefits concludes that Iran faced "a classic case of mission creep: It is being forced to commit ever-greater military and financial resources in Syria, falling deeper into the Syrian quagmire with no clear exit strategy" (ibid). Iran's willingness to defend the regime was underestimated by anti-Assad forces, which did not expect the continued involvement after Assad's harsh setbacks, forcing the Western coalition to maintain its presence to counter Iranian influence (DePetris, 2018; Phillips, 2016: 167). The close interdependence between Syria and Iran triggered the debate whether Iran was a partner, as an allied state to Assad, or a "puppet", in the sense that the increasing costs arising from the Syrian war could translate into significant losses for the Iranian state.

However, in realist terms, this cooperation is best explained by Iranian strategic goals in terms of protecting the Shia community abroad; countering US regional influence in the Middle East; and facing Turkey's further progresses concerning its regional role. Despite the financial costs from the Syrian war representing a considerable share of Iran's budget, Tehran's government considered that this "ideological alliance" was fundamental to the axis of resistance in the region (Pollock, 2020).

Despite the Syrian increasing debt to Iran[70], the signature of Iran's nuclear deal in 2015 with the P5+1[71] was expected to break a loose on prevailing economic sanctions[72], which would then allow some economic growth and, thus, enable the allocation of resources and upkeep of the Iranian influence in the Syrian civil war (Simão, 2015: 428; Sorenson, 2016: 102). In fact, the

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[70] The debt that Syria owned to Iran represented 59% of Syrian GDP in 2013 (Phillips, 2016: 164).

[71] P5 + 1 stands for the designation given to US, UK, France, China, Russia and Germany, which worked on a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran to decrease its arsenal of nuclear weapons.

[72] The importance of the success of the nuclear deal is discussed by Simão (2015: 428-429).

increasing defections and desertions from the Syrian military resulted in a manpower shortage that Iranian fighters helped to compensate (Phillips, 2016: 150).

The uprising and consolidation of ISIS brought a surprising opportunity for cooperation and lessening of the violence between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Hokayem, 2014: 42), with the extremist group becoming a common enemy, since "Iran [was] concerned about the activities of the Da'ish in Iraq and Syria, [and] the Saudis [were] also worried about its activities in Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan and Yemen, with all of which they have common borders" (Musavi-Khalkhali *apud* Sorenson, 2016: 102-103). Iran also benefited from the failed role of the Arab monarchies in addressing the regional spillover and growth of ISIS, whose quick advances forced Western powers to make the group a priority in their foreign policies towards Syria (Hokayem, 2014: 51).

If the only commonality Iran and Syria shared by the 1980s, was the common enemy of Saddam's Iraq, from 2011 onwards the outlook changed dramatically. Born as a tactical relationship, ties between Iran and Syria rapidly developed into a strategic and ideological alliance that aimed to disrupt the hegemony of the US in Middle Eastern politics. In fact, Iran's increasing commitment to Assad's victory reveals its investment in the protection of the Shia identity and the maintenance of a strong anti-Sunni axis, which would allow to create a focus of resistance against Western influence in the region. Despite being frequently criticized due to the rising economic debt that the support to Syria entailed, Rouhani's decisions are justified from a realist perspective: the preservation of Assad's regime was fundamental to Iranian national security and the cessation or even the decrease of Iranian support could translate into tremendous losses for Assad, including its deposition.

3.2.2. The Republic of Turkey

The geographical positioning between the West, the East and the Middle East puts Turkey in a strategic position for the international system, which largely explains Turkish foreign policy's orientation over the years, with a foot in NATO and the other aligned with Russia.

Geographically, Turkey shares a long border and history with Syria since both were a part of the Ottoman Empire. Despite being neighbors, Turkey and Syria followed different political orientations in the aftermath of the Second World War. The end of the Cold War in 1990-1991 transformed Turkey's regional context, notably the end of the USSR and the emergence of republics in Central Asia, with whom Turkey shared historical and cultural ties, profoundly re-shaping Middle Eastern geopolitics (Barrinha, 2015: 368- 369; 374). From the mid-1990s to the early years of the XXI century, Turkey's foreign policy focused on deepening political and military ties with the Middle East and on adapting to the new international order (ibid, p. 374; Phillips, 2016: 35). The escalation of violence in the Syrian civil war led to major consequences in the neighboring countries, including the enrollment of foreign actors, such as Turkey.

3.2.2.1. Turkey: From Assad's friend to a regional opponent

The election of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan[73] from the AKP – Justice and Democracy Party – in November 2002 disrupted the traditional isolationist orientation, renewing political ties with the EU[74] and reinforcing relations in the neighborhood[75], particularly with Israel and Syria. Part of these political achievements benefited from Erdoğan's political charisma, given how he was known to be considerably "populist and savvy" (Phillips, 2016: 70-71; Sorenson, 2016: 91).

Although Assad represented an important political and economic ally to Turkey, the increasing number of refugees fleeing from the war and the fear of PKK gaining leverage amid the Syrian chaos concerned the Turkish leader (Ataman and Özdemir, 2018: 19; 22). While increasingly condemning Assad's behavior, Erdoğan promoted private diplomacy efforts with both sides of the conflict because he believed Assad was surrounded by the wrong people, and that "he was not a bad man" (Phillips, 2016: 71-73). When the Turkish President realized Assad was not available to make actual concessions and that he was only buying time, Erdoğan "felt personally betrayed by the dictator's duplicity" (Robins *apud* Phillips, 2016: 72), thus acknowledging the danger of underestimating threats, as Waltz had previously advanced. Turkey then turned on Assad, hosting the SNC in Turkish territory and demanding Assad's resignation.

3.2.2.2. The weight of miscalculated influence

The tipping point for Erdoğan's positioning towards Syria derived not only from the personal betrayal but also from other multiple factors. In fact, the strong belief in Turkish economic and soft power, associated with his personal ties with Assad, led Erdoğan to overestimate Turkey's ability to influence and promote changes in Syria (Hokayem, 2014: 42). But Erdoğan forgot to accommodate the influence of Syria's oldest regional ally: Iran, which had already provided support to both Assads' regimes throughout the years.

The western orientation of Erdoğan's foreign policy also misled Turkish political calculus. Despite increasing trade and exchanges between both countries since the 2000s, both the President and his foreign policy advisor assumed "they knew Syria due to a shared Islamic culture that would somehow compensate for the knowledge gap", but still failed to "understand that reform for the Syrian regime was a matter of life and death" (Phillips, 2016: 73). These crucial

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[73] Erdoğan was Prime Minister from 2003 to 2014 and has been President since 2014 until present day.

[74] In 1997, diplomatic relations between Turkey and Brussels were suspended after the EU's negative assessment about Turkey as a candidate state, who responded with allegations about EU being a 'Christian club' ("Robins, Dismorr *apud* Barrinhas, 2015: 371). However, in 1999, the European Council approved Turkey as an official candidate to become a member state (ibid, p. 373).

[75] In 2009, Turkey lifted visa requirements from former Arab countries of the Ottoman Empire such as Jordan, Lebanon, Libya and Syria and invested on a common free-trade zone (Pope *apud* Sorenson, 2016: 91).

miscalculations pushed Turkey into a position of relative disadvantage given that Assad had no intentions of making concessions since the outbreak of the civil war.

Third, the Turkish U-turn on Assad can also be explained by political calculus, and by the ideological nature and context in which the Syrian protests happened. The precedent Tunisian and Egyptian cases of the Arab Spring induced the belief of a foreseeable victory of the masses over the regime and, naturally, Erdoğan wanted to stay on the victorious side.

Fourth, the change of Turkish regional calculations, notably the closer approximation with regional Arab countries, made the economic and geopolitical motives that pushed Turkey to come closer to Syria in the previous decade lose importance[76]. In addition, the outbreak of the Arab Spring had also favored Turkey's role in terms of the regional status quo. Erdoğan's ability to stay in power, and even be re-elected, fostered his popularity and admiration by his counterparts in the West and in the Arab World "as a 'model' to follow, striking the right balance between Islamism and democracy" (Phillips, 2016: 74).

Finally, the last weighting factor for the U-turn decision was the reputational risk inherent to staying by Assad's side as an autocrat that could bring negative regional outcomes (ibid, p.75).

All in all, in the newly emerging regional order, the replacement of Assad by a moderate Islamist government was aligned with Turkish foreign policy ambitions of having a greater influence in the region and was explained by changes in the international system that forced Turkey to adapt and recalculate its strategy.

3.2.2.3 2012-2014: Turkey's increasing frustration

Turkish leaders opted for a proxy warfare by backing the rebels rather than leading a military intervention of their own, despite their significant military power. With the escalation of violence in Syria, Turkey adopted a defensive approach, protecting its borders from spillover effects. The long-shared border with Syria made Turkey a crucial entry point for jihadi recruits in the Syrian war, thus resulting in major pressure from regional countries to force Turkey to enhance its border controls (Sorenson, 2016: 92).

Throughout 2012 and 2013, Turkey and Syria struggled with mutual strikes, bombing attacks and slaughtering aircraft: Erdoğan backed the rebel's opposition in Syria since Turkish policymakers agreed that an intervention would only occur in case of an imminent threat or as part of a broader coalition, and never unilaterally; meanwhile, Assad favored PKK attacks in Turkish national territory.

Turkey's demands for the establishment of a no-fly zone were rejected by the US and did not find consensus within NATO nor within the UNSC (Tattersall, 2013; Sorenson, 2016: 91).

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[76] In the meantime, Iraq was more stabilized and consolidated as a great market for Turkish goods, thus lessening Syria's economic and geostrategic importance (Phillips, 2016: 75-76).

Erdoğan was impatient with the developments of the Syrian civil war, which made him increasingly in favor of a Western-led intervention. However, US inaction frustrated the ambitions of the Turkish President, given that he was calling for a more direct involvement while still not being able to go ahead with it (Phillips, 2016: 172-173; Sorenson, 2016: 91).

3.2.2.4 2015-2016: ISIS and the revival of Turkish alliances

The emergence of ISIS as a key player in the civil war triggered a deeper involvement from the Turkish government. Turkey had sought to be involved since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, however, the rise of the threat posed by ISIS in mid-2015 revived and deepened the military relationship between the US and Turkey. In a joint strategic and military effort, both governments readjusted their approaches and were able to establish a "safe zone" or an "ISIL-free zone". Ankara also managed to establish local ceasefire agreements with Iran in exchange for the evacuation of civilians from both sides (Phillips, 2016: 217; Sorenson, 2016: 92-93). From a realist perspective, both moments are illustrative of the state's ability and predisposition to cooperate towards a common goal, satisfying the national interests of all parties involved.

However, on the other side, US support to the Syrian Kurdish Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG[77]) to fight ISIS was not welcomed by Turkey. In fact, given the closeness between PKK and YPG, Turkey strongly believed YPG was helping Assad. This belief led Turkey to carry out airstrikes[78] both against PKK and later against YPG. Since YPG had simultaneously the support of the US and Russia to eliminate the ISIS' threat, Turkish actions generated a crossfire that pleased neither the US nor Russia (Phillips, 2016: 11; Sorenson, 2016: 93). In this case, it is interesting to notice how crossfires can result from the constraints that states face in such kind of conflicts: while trying to guarantee their national security and establishing alliances with the actors with the best probability of serving their goals, states often end up in situations that may result in contradictory effects.

On the one hand, in early 2016, Turkey's relations with Russia deteriorated, particularly after the shooting down of a Russian aircraft claimed to be on Turkish airspace. Russia denied and instead imposed a trade embargo on Turkey. These events, combined with the continued Russian support to YPG in areas already freed from ISIS, created a climate of intense tension between both governments, enhanced the historical Ottoman's fear of encirclement and created further concerns within Turkish national security circles (Sorenson, 2016: 93-94; Toucas, 2018).

On the other hand, Turkey's relations with the US were not in their best shape. In early 2016, the issue of crossfire between the US, Turkey and YPG increased, with Erdoğan accusing the US

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[77] YPG consisted of PYD's militia and they were "by far the best [militia] armed among Syrian Kurds, trained by PKK" (Phillips, 2016: 111).

[78] From the 400 airstrikes announced by the Turkish government by late 2015, only 4 targeted ISIS (Sorenson, 2016: 93).

as being responsible for killings associated with YPG actions, given Turkey's view of YPG as allied to PKK (Sorenson, 2016: 93-94; Toucas, 2018). The peak of tension was reached when Turkey accused the US of backing an internal failed military coup[79] that occurred later that year (European Parliament, 2019).

3.2.2.5. 2016-2018: Turkey steps in

In early 2016, Turkey focused on three main national security priorities: the management of the refugee crisis, the containment of the ISIS threat and the old dispute with PKK both domestically and abroad, in Iraq and Syria.

Following developments in the previous year, Erdoğan enhanced ties with Moscow, revealing himself increasingly more autocratic with an anti-Western discourse and anti-NATO foreign policy decisions. Warding from Western influence, Turkey decided to launch two significant military operations in Syrian territory[80]: "Euphrates Shield" from August 2016 to March 2017, and "Olive Branch" in 2018. The use of hard power in an assertive military approach allowed Turkey to clear the area of the Euphrates both from the PYD and the ISIS. The weakening of ISIS presence in Syria and the subsequent US withdrawal created a vacuum of power from which Turkey, Russia and Iran could take advantage from (Ataman and Özdemir, 2018; European Parliament, 2019).

Meanwhile, in September 2016, the Presidents of Russia, Iran and Turkey gathered to discuss the resolution of the Syrian civil war – the so-called Astana Process –, particularly the future of northeastern Syria and the struggle for Idlib. Even though the negotiations went well, Iran did not give in to Russia's demand of a security reform in its military, and Turkey did not indulge in renouncing control of Afrin to Assad's government, resulting in Russia's frustration. The growing divergences between Iran and Turkey also worried Russia which had been investing in outreach to the Arab world's leaders[81], in order to mitigate the effects of Syria's diplomatic isolation (Ramani, 2019).

3.3. Turkey, Iran and the competition in Syria: a struggle for regional influence

The unconditional Iranian support to Syria throughout the war was one of Turkey's main concerns since Syria could become a satellite state of Shiite Iran, thus favoring its consolidation of

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[79] This resulted in the adoption of 18 constitutional amendments, reinforcing Turkish presidential rule. These changes did not merit a favorable opinion from the West but were supported by Russia.

[80] These operations had been proposed to Obama's Administration, which opposed them.

[81] Russia reached out to Iraq, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon to become a part of Astana Process' negotiations.

influence in the region. In that case, and combined with the "Shiization of Iraq", the Iranian state would be able to turn the regional balance of power in its favor (Nasur *apud* Ataman and Özdemir, 2018: 23).

Iran has been accommodating all Shiite-related groups in its foreign policy goals, developing a strategy of *tashayyu* – whereby Iran promotes the conversion of people or, in this case, states to Shiism – in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. In this context, Turkey displayed a key role in counterbalancing Iran's influence by being the only state that pursued a non-sectarian regional policy. However, the normalization of US-Iran relations during Obama's administration and US support to the PYD – against Turkey's interests – ended up mitigating the success of Turkey's policies over Syria.

Nevertheless, between 2016 and 2018, the resort to hard power put Turkey on advantage, allowing "to promote a political solution based on a democratic, inclusive and non-sectarian system while preserving Syria's political unity and territorial integrity" (Çavuşoğlu *apud* Ataman and Özdemir, 2018: 25). At the same time, the change of US administrations from Obama to Trump backed Turkish efforts to damp Iranian expansion, since the newly elected US President had no problem in ordering the launch of missiles after a chemical attack in Idlib in 2017 – contrarily to Obama's reluctant approach. Moreover, the Astana process and the sponsoring of negotiations by Turkey and Russia – who support opposing parties in the conflict – meant, at least, that Turkey was finally able to counter the asymmetric proxy war with Iran (Ataman and Özdemir, 2018: 25-26).

All in all, it is worth assessing the evolution of Turkish foreign policy's orientation, moving from the West to Russia and then to the Middle East, according to the established national priorities, whereby Turkey managed to influence the regional order while still adjusting and reacting to the constraints in the international system. The fluctuations of power in the Syrian civil war, notably, the rise of ISIS, required the reformulation of preexisting alliances: as the US increasingly supported YPG, Turkey found itself stuck between complying with NATO commitments, guaranteeing the containment of the PKK threat, pursuing its regional ambitions and counterbalancing Russia's influence from the Black Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, it is possible to divide Turkey's enrollment in the Syrian civil war from 2011 to 2018 into two major periods. The first until 2016, when, despite being increasingly frustrated with US inaction, Turkey used soft-power diplomatic tools to negotiate agreements; and the second, after 2016 and the U-turn by the US administration, when Turkey decided to step in, carrying out two military interventions, aimed at materializing Turkish long-defined foreign policy goals: the removal of Assad, the elimination of the threat posed by ISIS, the containment of PKK and YPG, the management of the refugee crisis, the containment of Iranian expansion, and, finally, the consolidation of Turkish influence in the Middle East.

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Chapter IV – Conclusions

To understand the scale and magnitude of the Syrian war, it is necessary to comprehend first and foremost its roots and the progressive complexification of the conflict. The outbreak of the civil war attracted state and non-state foreign actors who benefited from the political chaos and the extreme violence between opposing parties to obtain power, influence or any political leverage that could serve their agendas, or national interests, in the case of states.

The entrainment of the civil war during a decade devastated Syrian infrastructures and aggravated the social conditions, which had initially triggered the social protests and the escalation of violence that triggered the civil war. Amidst the chaos, an extreme version of Sunni Islam in the form of ISIS emerged and consolidated itself both in Iraq and Syria, triggering unexpected alliances between opposing factions, such as the US and Russia, and the US with YPG – which Turkey condemned, despite being a US ally.

The increasing radicalization of the war and the stemming effects – namely the refugee crisis whereby more than six million people sought political asylum in neighboring countries – favored the involvement of external state actors and armed groups, at each party's disposal. This external involvement reflected the calculations of each actor, which, in turn, shaped the performance of the Syrian regime and the armed opposition. The progressive changes of power capabilities of each party influenced and are influenced by developments on the ground: the US, initially reluctant towards a new involvment in the Middle East, found itself stuck between the moral responsibility of reacting to the chemical attack in Syria and managing internal pressures and a public opinion unfavored towards an intervention; Russia, following Assad's formal request of support, proceeded with its first intervention outside the former Soviet space; Turkey overestimated the President's personal friendship with Assad, leading Erdoğan to turn sides; and Iran remained stuck in mission creep, with increasingly financial costs generated from the support provided to Assad, but whose survival remained essential for its influence in the Middle East.

From this analysis, it can be concluded that, in line with classical realism, states cooperated accordingly to their own interests, establishing intentional, instrumental and ephemeral alliances in order to achieve their goals. Some examples can be found in terms of the US and Russia negotiations towards the reduction of Syria's chemical arsenal; Turkey's U-turn on Assad in order to guarantee a major role in a post-Syrian war's regional order in the Middle East; and Iran's unconditional support to Assad to assure Shia identity and influence in the region. The emergence of ISIS favored a joint effort between Western countries and Russia, while the US's approximation to YPG (against Turkey's will) as an ally pushed back the consolidation of the radical group.

Secondly, this dissertation argued Syria can be considered a "power-balancing war" in neorealism terms since each great power involved in the conflict revealed an agenda with

geostrategic goals of consolidating their position in the Middle East and benefiting from their influence: for the US, the ouster of Assad could bring to power a coalition more prone to cooperate with the West; for Russia, the survival of Assad would mean the maintenance of the historical alliance with the regime, the containment of a possible extremist's upsurge on Russia's national territory and also help the Russian economy by exporting arms; for Iran, the survival of the regime was crucial for the alliance and communication with Hezbollah in Lebanon and for the Shia axis in the Middle East; and, finally, for Turkey the ouster of Assad would open an opportunity of Turkey's major influence within the region.

Thirdly, according to neoclassical realism, this dissertation highlighted how internal conditionings, such as public opinion, influence foreign policy's decision-making process and, thus, the behavior of the state in the international system. The best example can be found in Obama's reluctance to send troops to the Middle East, after the previous interventions in Iraq and Libya, and the difficulties in managing opposing opinions and factions within the Congress; but also the need to legitimize the US's reputation both internally and externally after stepping back from the intervention announced in the context of the Red Line crisis.

Overall, this dissertation demonstrated that the war in Syria was used by the US, Russia, Iran and Turkey to change the regional status quo in their favor. In particular, it exposed that the main states promoting and beneficiating from international organizations, namely the UN, are the same states responsible for the duration, intensity and escalation of violence in the Syrian war where each actor aims to make the best of the chaos, proving that realism remains pertinent enough to explain contemporary wars.

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Annexes

"US Military Bases around the World"
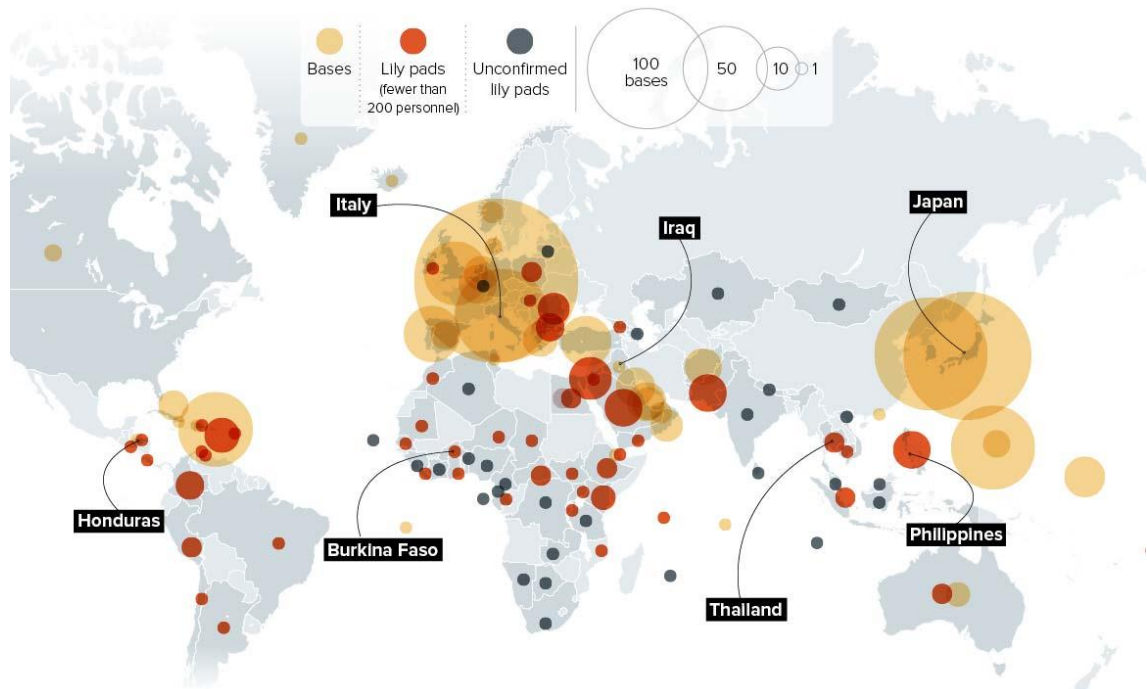
1. Image designed by Lori R. Kelley. Politico Magazine.

"Four theories of Foreign Policy"

2. Rose, 1998: 154.

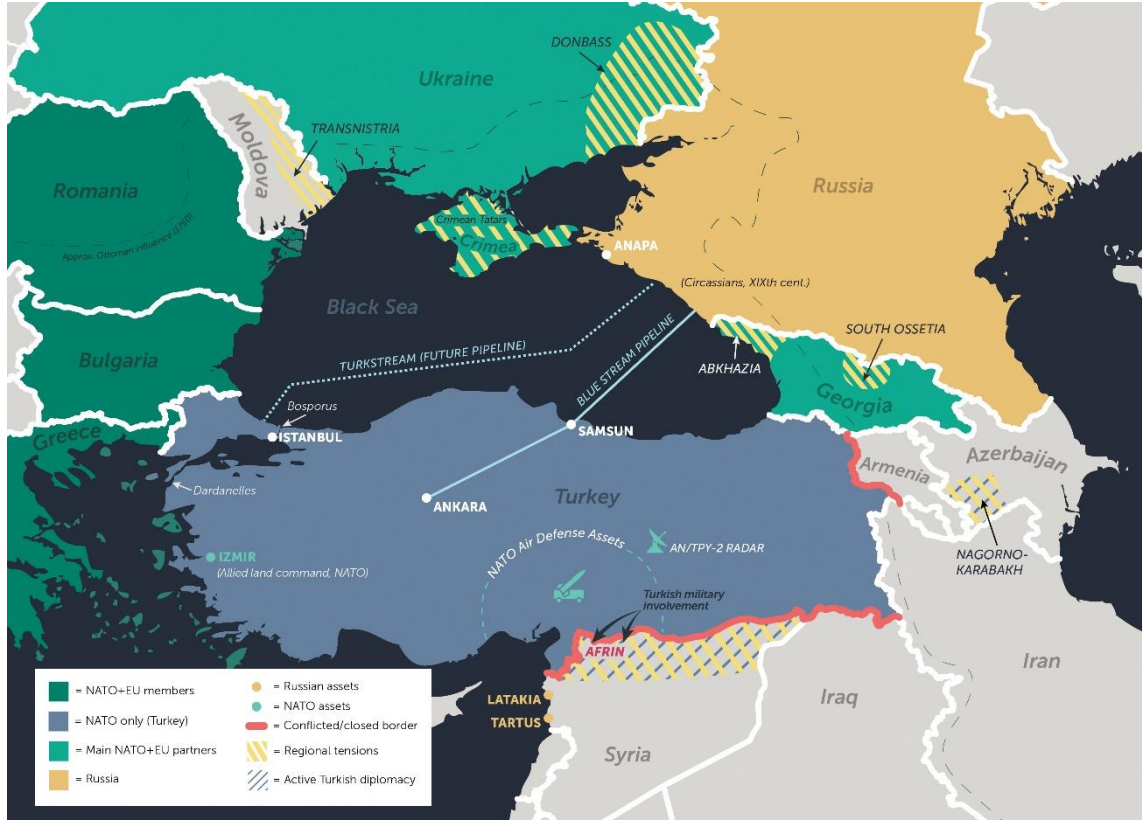### 3. "Bosphorus strait and Turkey's geopolitical position in the Middle East"

Image from the Center of Strategic & International Studies.