

**DOKUZ EYLÜL UNIVERSITY**  
**GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**  
**INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PROGRAM**  
**DOCTORAL THESIS**  
**Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)**

**REVISITING THE MIDDLE EASTERN SECURITY**  
**ORDER: THE SYRIAN CONFLICT IN VIEW OF**  
**RUSSIA-IRAN-TURKEY RELATIONS**

**Hossein AGHAIE JOOBANI**

**Supervisor**  
**Assoc.Prof. Dr. Ali Şevket OVALI**

**İZMİR – 2022**

## THESIS APPROVAL PAGE



## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this doctoral thesis titled as “Revisiting the Middle Eastern Security Order: The Syrian Conflict in View of Russia-Iran-Turkey Relations” has been written by myself in accordance with the academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that all materials benefited in this thesis consist of the mentioned resources in the reference list. I verify all these with my honour.

Date

29/11/2021

Hossein AGHAIE JOOBANI

## **ABSTRACT**

**Doctoral Thesis**

**Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)**

**Revisiting the Middle Eastern Security Order: The Syrian Conflict in View of  
Russia-Iran-Turkey Relations**

**Hossein AGHAIE JOOBANI**

**Dokuz Eylül University**

**Graduate School of Social Sciences**

**Department of International Relations**

**International Relations Program**

**This dissertation seeks to analyze the emergent security and geopolitical impacts of the ongoing war in Syria (2011-present) on the Middle East security order. By adopting a hybrid theoretical framework that links Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), as developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, with Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll's Regional Powers and Security Framework (RPSF), this thesis aims to unpack the significance of the Syrian conflict and examines the potential spillover effects of the Syrian conflict on other Middle East security sub-complexes in light of the policies of Iran, Russia and Turkey.**

**A key finding of this research is that the tactical partnership among Turkey, Russia and Iran in the context of the Syrian conflict is a *sui generis* case of conflict management in the MENA region entailing far-reaching implications on the regional security order and on the nature of the U.S. role in the region. The thesis argues that just as the U.S. is pivoting away from the Middle East, the region is witnessing a hybrid regional logic that entails a blending of *balance of power* and *collective security* and is animated largely by the interactions among countries within it.**

**Although the endgame of the Syrian conflict is unknown, the war in Syria will remain one of the most defining regional security *problematicues* around which a panoply of regional and extra-regional powers will gather, with each of**

**these actors seeking to adjust their foreign policies to the new geopolitical realities of a post-U.S. Middle East.**

**Keywords: Syrian Conflict, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Regional Security Complex Theory**



## **ÖZET**

### **Doktora Tezi**

**Ortadoğu Güvenlik Düzenini Yeniden Ele Almak: Rusya-Türkiye-İran İlişkileri**

**Açısından Suriye Çatışması**

**Hossein AGHAIE JOOBANI**

**Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi**

**Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü**

**Uluslararası İlişkiler Anabilim Dalı**

**Uluslararası İlişkiler Programı**

Bu doktora tezi, 2011 yılından günümüze değin süren Suriye'deki savaşın Ortadoğu'nun güvenlik düzeninde ortaya çıkardığı jeopolitik ve güvenlik kaynaklı etiklerini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Barry Buzan ve Ole Wæver tarafından ortaya atılan Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi Teorisi (BGKT) ile Derrick Frazier ve Robert Stewart-Ingersoll'un geliştirdiği Bölgesel Güçler ve Güvenlik Çerçevesi'ni (BGGÇ) bağdaştırarak oluşturduğu teorik çerçevesi ile bu çalışma, Suriye'deki savaşın önemini ortaya koymayı ve İran, Rusya ve Türkiye'nin politikaları ışığında Suriye'deki çatışmanın Ortadoğu Güvenlik Kompleksi'ndeki diğer çatışmalara olası yayılma etkisini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Bu araştırmanın en önemli bulgusu olarak, Suriye krizi üzerinden gelişen, bölgesel güvenlik yapısında ve ABD'nin bölgede sahip olduğu rolde uzun erimli etkilere yol açabilecek Türkiye, Rusya ve İran arasındaki taktiksel birlikteliğin, Ortadoğu ve Kuzey Afrika bölgesindeki çatışma yönetimleri içinde kendine özgü bir yere sahip olduğudur. ABD'nin güvenlik odağının başka bölgelere kaymayısıyla birlikte Ortadoğu'nun, güç dengesi ile kolektif güvenliği bir araya getiren ve büyük ölçüde bölgedeki ülkelerin birbirleriyle olan etkileşimleriyle şekillenen karma bir mantığa sahne olduğu bu tezde iddia edilmektedir.

Suriye'deki çatışmanın nihayeti belirsiz olsa da Suriye'deki savaş, bölgedeki ve bölgedışı güçlerin tekmili birden yer aldığı ve her aktörün dış

**politikalarını yeni jeopolitik gerçekliklere uyarladığı ABD sonrası dönemde en belirleyici bölgesel güvenlik sorunsalları arasında yer almaya devam edecek.**

**Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye Savaşı, Rusya, İran, Türkiye, Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi Teorisi**



# **REVISITING THE MIDDLE EASTERN SECURITY ORDER: THE SYRIAN CONFLICT IN VIEW OF RUSSIA-IRAN-TURKEY RELATIONS**

## **CONTENTS**

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE	ii
DECLARATION	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
CONTENTS	viii
ABBREVIATIONS	xi
LIST OF TABLES	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiv
INTRODUCTION	1

## **CHAPTER ONE OVERVIEW OF THESIS**

1.1. AIM OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS	9
1.2. THE STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE THESIS	12
1.2.1. Qualitative Research Methodology	13
1.2.2. Trend Analysis	15
1.3. LITERATURE REVIEW	19

## **CHAPTER TWO THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

2.1. SECURITY: FROM REGIONS TO COMPLEXES	32
2.2. REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY (RSCT) DEFINED	35
2.3. THE NEXUS BETWEEN REGIONAL POWERS AND SECURITY FRAMEWORK (RPSF) AND REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY (RSCT)	43



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **SYRIAN CONFLICT AND IRAN-TURKEY-RUSSIA RELATIONS**

3.1. THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: THE EVOLUTION OF TURKEY-RUSSIA-IRAN PARTNERSHIP IN THE LEVANT	50
3.2. ASTANA PEACE PROCESS: COOPERATION THROUGH COMPETITION	56
3.3. RUSSIA-TURKEY RELATIONS: THE ROAD TO PRAGMATIC ENTENTE IN THE MIDDLE EAST	70
3.3.1. US Factor and Turkey's Multivectoral Foreign Policy	81
3.3.2. Changing Role of Turkey in the MERSC	96
3.4. TURKEY-IRAN RELATIONS: RECURRENT PATTERNS OF SECURITIZATION AND DE-SECURITIZATION	108
3.4.1. The AKP effect and the Syrian Conflict	111
3.4.2. Iran's Levantine Penetration vs. Decline of US Hegemony	130
3.4.3. Iran's Syria Strategy and Regional Role	142
3.5. IRAN-RUSSIA RELATIONS: TOWARDS A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP OR PATRON-CLIENT SYNERGY?	162
3.5.1. U.S. Factor, Sanctions and Iran's 'Look to East' Policy	181
3.5.2. Russia's War in Syria and Implications on the Security Complex in the Middle East	191
3.5.3. Russia's Role in the MERSC	204
3.5.4. Russia as a New Security Provider	230

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **REGIONAL ORDER**

4.1. REVISITING ORDER IN THE MIDDLE EAST SECURITY COMPLEX IN VIEW OF THE RSCT+RPSF MODEL	242
4.2. THE MORBID SYMPTOMS OF THE MIDDLE EAST'S SEARCH FOR A NEW ORDER	243

4.3. RSC THEORY + RPSF MODEL: IRAN, TURKEY AND RUSSIA IN THE MERSC	265
4.3.1. Turkey's Post-2011 Doctrinal Shifts in its Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications	266
4.3.2. Iran: The Wildcard in the Middle East Security Complex	278
4.3.3. Russia: A Co-Equal Partner of the U.S. in the MERSC?	294

## CHAPTER FIVE PROSPECTIVE ORDER

5.1. WHAT KIND OF REGIONAL ORDER IN THE MIDDLE EAST?	312
5.2. HOW THE SYRIAN CONFLICT CHANGED THE MIDDLE EAST	318
CONCLUSION	346
REFERENCES	356

## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AKP</b>	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-Justice and Development Party
<b>BRI</b>	Belt and Road Initiative
<b>CAATSA</b>	Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act
<b>CENTO</b>	Central Treaty Organization
<b>CPC</b>	Communist Party of China
<b>EU</b>	The European Union
<b>FSA</b>	Free Syrian Army
<b>GCC.</b>	Gulf Cooperation Council
<b>GNA</b>	Government of National Accord (Libya)
<b>HOPE</b>	Hormuz Peace Endeavour
<b>HTS</b>	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
<b>IRGC-QF</b>	Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force
<b>IRNA</b>	Islamic Republic News Agency
<b>ISIS</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
<b>JCPOA</b>	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
<b>KRG</b>	Kurdish Regional Government
<b>LNA</b>	Libya National Army
<b>MENA</b>	Middle East and North Africa
<b>MERSC</b>	Middle East Regional Security Complex
<b>MHP</b>	Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi–Nationalist Movement Party
<b>MSRI</b>	Maritime Silk Road Initiative
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>NDF</b>	National Defense Forces
<b>OPEC</b>	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
<b>PJAK</b>	Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan
<b>PKK</b>	Kurdistan Workers’ Party
<b>PMCs</b>	Private Military Companies
<b>PMU</b>	Popular Mobilization Units
<b>PYD</b>	Democratic Union Party
<b>R2P</b>	Responsibility to Protect

<b>RPSF</b>	Regional Powers and Security Framework
<b>RSCT</b>	Regional Security Complex Theory
<b>SAA</b>	Syrian Arab Army
<b>SCO</b>	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
<b>SDF</b>	Syrian Democratic Forces
<b>SNA</b>	Syrian National Army
<b>SREB</b>	Silk Road Economic Belt
<b>TAF</b>	Turkish Armed Forces
<b>TITR</b>	Trans-Caspian International Transport Route
<b>UCAV</b>	Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles
<b>UAE</b>	United Arab Emirates
<b>UN</b>	The United Nations
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>UNSC</b>	United Nations Security Council
<b>USSR</b>	The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
<b>YPG</b>	People's Protection Units

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table 1:</b> RPSF Breakdown for Russia, Turkey, Iran in the Middle East Security Complex	p. 309
<b>Table 2:</b> Types of Regional Security Orders	p. 328
<b>Table 3:</b> Dynamics and Effects in RSCs	p. 331



## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure 1:</b> Middle East Regional Security Complex Map	p. 41
<b>Figure 2:</b> Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) + Regional Powers and Security Framework (RPSF)	p. 46
<b>Figure 3:</b> RSCT+RPSF Analytical Framework	p. 49
<b>Figure 4:</b> Patterns of Amity and Enmity in Turkey Russia Relations	p. 71
<b>Figure 5:</b> Turkey's Multi – Vector Foreign and Security Policy	p. 87
<b>Figure 6:</b> Four-Axis Orientation of Turkey's Foreign Policy (2015-2020)	p. 90
<b>Figure 7:</b> Timeline of Iran- Turkey Relations (2001-2021)	p. 127
<b>Figure 8:</b> Key Developments in Russia – Iran Relations (1990-2021)	p. 184
<b>Figure 9:</b> The Islamic Republic of Iran's Military Strategy	p. 284

## INTRODUCTION

This study is primarily about three things: the significance of the Syrian conflict, the complex relations among Iran, Russia and Turkey in the context of the Syrian conflict, and how the Middle East security order has changed as a result of the conflict in Syria and the ensuing regional geopolitical developments occurring in the Middle and North African region (MENA) since 2011. Secondly, using a hybrid theoretical framework consisting of Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll's Regional Powers and Security Framework (RPSF), this dissertation should also be considered a theoretical contribution to the RSCT in the aftermath of the post-Syrian conflict developments in the MENA region. This timely contribution is aimed at broadening the readers' understanding of the changing foreign policy role and orientations of Russia, Iran, Turkey and the United States as direct consequence of the ongoing (frozen) conflict in Syria.

After more than a decade into the Syrian conflict, the unfolding developments in the MENA region continue to pose empirical as well as theoretical questions. Many analysts in the academic, media and policy circles are still looking at the Syrian conflict as a fateful moment in the history of the MENA region. For one thing, the MENA region has ever since the end of the First World War been largely associated with familiar refrains such as oil, realpolitik, wars, foreign interventions, sectarian conflicts, political Islam and not least the rise of radical Islam.<sup>1</sup> These signature terms along with transnational factors such as migration, trade, tribes, culture, arms and linguistic affinities have played instrumental roles in shaping the Middle East history and in our understanding of the region. The Syria conflict, however, has begot the need for a robust re-appraisal of these terms and factors and of our understanding of the MENA region as a whole.

Basically, it was the end of the First World War and the ensuing fall of the Ottoman Empire that gave birth to the formation of new territorial entities which

---

<sup>1</sup> The neologism *Middle East* is a contested term subject to varying interpretations about what it means and what it represents. See, Pinar Bilgin. "Whose 'Middle East'? Geopolitical Inventions and Practices of Security", **International Relations**, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2004, pp. 18-25.

became states such as Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the MENA region has gone through multiple phases of state formation beginning from the period of oligarchy (1945-1955), populist revolutions (1956-1970) to the phase of authoritarian state consolidation (1970-1990), post-populist authoritarianism (1990-2000) and the age of (post-) Arab uprisings (2011-present).<sup>3</sup> Throughout these phases of state formation in the Middle East, epoch-making events re-define the roles and orientations of regional and extra-regional actors and shape the regional order. In this study, the Syrian conflict is treated as one of those foremost pivotal events, or a significant marker of change in the MENA region entailing regional as well as system-level impacts.

Beset by rampant security dilemma and geopolitical power struggles, the Middle East and North Africa region is in a complete disarray. It remains prone to great intrusions by great powers and rising regional actors and is increasingly subject to fundamental shifts in power and security dynamics. Since the beginning of the 2010–11 Arab uprisings, the MENA region has entered a new era of tectonic power shifts and intense geopolitical rivalries among key regional and external stakeholders. These dynamics became much more noticeable particularly after Donald Trump came to office with his “America First” grand strategy and in view of the growing perceptions of U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East under the current Biden administration.<sup>4</sup> Most specifically, the region has witnessed military interventions and heightened foreign policy activisms from Russia, Turkey, Iran and the United States and to a lesser extent from Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

More than a decade into the chain of events in 2011 that resulted in the ouster of long-standing authoritarian leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Libya and Yemen hopes for democratization of the Middle Eastern countries are seen as profoundly

---

<sup>2</sup> Fred Halliday. **The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology**, Cambridge, 2005, p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami. **The Foreign Policy of Middle East States**, 2014, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, pp. 22-27

<sup>4</sup> See, Michael C. Hudson. “Geopolitical Shifts: Asia Rising, America Declining in the Middle East?”, **Contemporary Arab Affairs**, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2013, pp. 458-466. F. Gregory Gause III, “Should We Stay or Should we Go? The United States and the Middle East”, **Survival**, Vol. 61, No. 5, 2019, pp. 7-24. Jeffrey Feltman et al. “The New Geopolitics of the Middle East: America’s Role in a Changing Region”, Brookings, 01.01.2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-new-geopolitics-of-the-middle-east-americas-role-in-a-changing-region/>, (05.03.2019). Albert B. Wolf, Strategies of Retrenchment: Rethinking America’s Commitments to the Middle East, **Comparative Strategy**, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2020, pp. 94-100.



misplaced. In the words of one scholar, “although the Arab uprisings did not result in successful new democracies, they did reshape regional relations. The traditional great powers---Egypt, Iraq, and Syria---are now barely functional states. Wealthy and repressive Gulf countries—Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—are thriving.”<sup>5</sup>

While looking closely at the current state of play in the Middle East geopolitical theater, it appears that from among the key regional actors only a few states such as Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia currently meet the basic requirements that major regional powers share: claim to leadership, possession of necessary power resources, employment of successful foreign policy strategies, and the acceptance of leadership role by other states in their region.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, only these states can be categorized as having a fair chance of taking on the mantle of regional leadership in a true sense of the word since they have not suffered state de-construction. Focusing on the post socio-economic and geopolitical impacts of the Arab uprisings, there are ample evidence suggesting that Iraq, Syria and Egypt currently lack sufficient *capabilities*, at least from a Waltzian perspective, to establish themselves as pre-eminent forces capable of exercising dominance in the MENA region.<sup>7</sup>

For example, in the case of Egypt, the country faces formidable challenges in bringing about significant improvements in economic performance in spite of a range of austerity measures and economic reforms that the government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has implemented over the past few years. As a corollary to the chronic problems of the Egyptian economy, some scholars hold strong reservations about Cairo’s ability to maintain long-term political stability and security in the face of acute challenges the country faces.

In Syria, the overall picture is by far bleaker. Bashar al Assad’s forces are, at the time of writing this dissertation, exploiting the U.S. retreat from the region to regain control of rebel-held territories and slowly shift the strategic focus from the

---

<sup>5</sup> Marc Lynch. “The New Arab Order, Power and Violence in Today’s Middle East”. **Foreign Affairs**. September/October 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Henner Furtig. **Regional Powers in the Middle East: New Constellations after the Arab Revolts**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> For more details about Waltz’s view on the distinction between power and capabilities see Kenneth Waltz. **Theory of International Politics**, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley) p.131. John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens. **The Globalization of International Politics: An Introduction to International Relations**, Sixth Edition, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 107.

military phase of the Syrian conflict to the reconstruction period. Assad is most likely to win the Syrian civil war but he is nowhere near enough to put an end to the country's economic despair and its isolation. Although some Arab countries including Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain and the UAE (if not Saudi Arabia) are testing the waters in order to possibly enter into normalization of ties with the regime in Damascus, the challenges ahead are aplenty. A decade of war has totally devastated the Syrian economy as the cost of rebuilding the country is estimated at as high as 400 billion U.S. dollars.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that absent significant foreign direct investment which can only be achieved through the resumption of Syria's diplomatic ties with i.e. the European countries and the Persian Gulf states, it is almost impossible for Damascus to be able to project effective military and economic power beyond its borders let alone achieving regional dominance in the same way as Hafez al Assad did during the 1970s.

The case of Iraq is indeed not identical to the Syrian and the Egyptian examples but bears clear resemblances to both in the sense that Baghdad is also reeling from years of war following the U.S. invasion in 2003 and the rise of the Islamic State but is still lagging behind in terms of economic progress and military prowess. With the U.S. administration is adamant about containing Iran's geopolitical expansion and ideological outreach in the Middle East, Iraq has in reality turned into a battleground for protracted proxy wars between Tehran and Washington. Consequently, Iraq at present cannot be pigeonholed as a solid member of the league of MENA states capable of exerting the power required for assuming the mantle of regional dominance.

As previously mentioned, and for the reasons which will be sketched out in the proceeding chapters, it can be argued that from among the states in the MENA region only Iran, Israel, Turkey and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia can be viewed as presently possessing sufficient powers resources and capabilities to effectively use the balance-of-power logic and alliance-formation tactics aimed at exerting *order-making capabilities* and/or stymieing their competitors' bid for attaining the position of regional dominance.

The MENA region is currently experiencing turbulent power shifts and geopolitical imbalances as a corollary of a multiplicity of factors ranging from the

---

<sup>8</sup> Jospheh Daher. "The Paradox of Syria's Reconstruction", **Carnegie Middle East Center**, 04.09.2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/09/04/paradox-of-syria-s-reconstruction-pub-79773>, (15.11.2020).

socio-economic and geopolitical ramifications of the 2011 Arab uprisings and rise and fall of the Islamic State to the “declining role of the United States as an off- or on-shore balancer” in the region and the proclivity of regional and extra-regional powers such as Iran, Russia, Turkey and Israel for filling the power vacuum in line with their national and regional interests.<sup>9</sup> Hence, a *great debate* has been formulating recently in academic circles about the meaning of the present rapid geopolitical and security dynamics and their potential implication on the Middle East regional security order.

Now, it is time to put these taxonomies aside and draw our attention to an oft-ignored geopolitical reality in the MENA region. Of all the major zones of conflict in the Middle East security complex, namely Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Libya, only one country has become the battleground for all four Middle East great powers (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel) vying for dominance and regional leadership at the same time: Syria. It is important to note that neither in Iraq nor in Libya and elsewhere in the region can one identify deep indirect or direct penetration in the form of military intervention by all the four great regional powers mentioned above. It is noteworthy too that for a good number of reasons which will be enumerated later on, it is only in Syria that Russia and the United States as two military superpowers have become simultaneously engaged, albeit to varying degrees and with divergent interests and goals.

But what does this caveat entail in so far as the main scope of the research is concerned?

As previously mentioned, what distinguishes the Syrian case from the other theaters of conflict is the *sui generis* nature of the ongoing war in the sense that a proliferation of regional powers and their affiliated proxies along with two military superpowers (Russia and the United States) have been contesting and balancing against each other at the same time. Notwithstanding the foregoing propositions, the most important development regarding the shifting alliances in the context of the Syrian crisis has, *inter alia*, been the emergence of a growing rapprochement between Iran, Turkey and Russia under the “Astana Peace Process” and the Sochi Agreements. In other words, Russia, Turkey and Iran have sought to exploit the unstable

---

<sup>9</sup> Mehran Kamrava. “Accessing the Multipolarity and Instability in the Middle East”, **Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI)**, Fall 2018, Vol. 62, No. 4, p. 598.

geostrategic environment and the security vacuum created in the aftermath of the (physical) demise of IS and the so-called U.S. withdrawal scheme to create their own niche of influence in Syria and beyond.

Given the recent spread of the Coronavirus pandemic worldwide, the geopolitical scene in the Middle East has become inexorably unpredictable. The contours of the Syrian conflict have become extremely blurred and convoluted as Russian and Turkish interests have clashed over Syria and Iran's divergences of interests with both Turkey and Russia have come to surface over the past few months.<sup>10</sup> Knowing these complexities, it remains to be seen whether the war in Syria will wind down anytime soon or how the Syrian endgame will unravel in the medium to long-term.

Another pertinent but increasingly salient development in the context of the Syrian case is that while one can safely attribute Turkey's and Iran's Syrian involvement to factors such as geographical proximity and other security-geopolitical concerns, the emergence of Russia as a major power broker in the conflict has gain growing scholarly attention. It is somewhat puzzling and extraordinary that Russia, which is traditionally concerned with its "privileged sphere of influence" in the post-Soviet space, appears to proceed with an aggressive and bold foreign policy toward the Middle East, starting from Syrian case.<sup>11</sup> Noteworthy too is that Turkey, which is considered as an 'insulator state', has since 2016 become a major stakeholder in the MENA region. The same goes for the changing role of Iran as it struggles to extend its sphere of influence from Persian Gulf into the Levant and beyond. Therefore, the Syrian conflict tells us a lot about the changing foreign policy roles and orientations of Iran, Turkey and Russia.

In fact, while the bulk of Russian scholars and Russian foreign policy literature acknowledge that in Kremlin's national security strategy Europe and Asian take precedence over the Middle East region, the importance of an increased level of Russian foreign policy activism in the Middle East since the onset of the Syrian crisis

---

<sup>10</sup> Seçkin Köstem. "Russia-Turkish Cooperation in Syria: Geopolitical Alignment with Limits", **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Cooley. "Whose Rules, Whose Sphere? Russian Governance and Influence in Post-Soviet States", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 30.06.2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/06/30/whose-rules-whose-sphere-russian-governance-and-influence-inpost-soviet-states-pub-71403>, (21.09.2019)

should not be underestimated.<sup>12</sup> Of course, one should not overstate Russia's Middle Eastern engagements since some scholars postulate that the Russian Federation under the presidency of Vladimir Putin lacks preponderant economic and soft power capabilities in comparison to the United States to effectively perform the role of a

<sup>12</sup> For reflections on Russia's Middle East policy, namely vis-à-vis Syria see, Paul Stronski and Richard Sokolsky. "The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 14.11.2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/12/14/return-of-global-russia-analytical-framework-pub-75003>, (21.09.2019)., Alexey Vasiliev. **Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin**, Routledge, 2018. Nikolay Kozhanov. "Russian Policy Across the Middle East: motivation and Methods", **Chatham House**, Research Paper, February 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/site-s/default/files/publications/research/2018-02-21-russian-policy-middle-east-kozhanov.pdf>, (21.09.2019)., Irina Zvyagelskaya. "Russian Policy in the Levant", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 15, No. 60, 2018, pp.121-133., Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky. "Russian Campaign in Syria: Change and Continuity in Strategic Culture", **Journal of Strategic Studies**, Vol. 43, No. 1, 2020, pp. 104-125., Jeremy Greenstock Sir. "Is This Russia's Moment in the Middle East?", **Asian Affairs**, Vol. 48, No. 3, 2017, pp. 419-427., Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru. "Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles", Chaillot Papers, European Union Institute for Security Studies, No. 146, 31.07.2018, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP\\_146.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_146.pdf), (21.09.2020)., Eugene B. Rumer. "Russia, the Indispensable Nation in the Middle East", **Foreign Affairs**, October 2019., Aaron Lund. "Russia in the Middle East", **The Swedish Institute of International Affairs**, February 2019, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2019/ui-paper-no.-2-2019.pdf>, (21.09.2020)., Stephen J. Blank. "Russian Strategy and Policy in the Middle East", **Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2014, pp. 9-23., Rod Thornton. "Countering Prompt Global Strike: The Russian Military Presence in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean and Its Strategic Deterrence Role", **The Journal of Slavic Military Studies**, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2019, pp. 1-24., Andrey Kortunov. "Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Achievements and Limitations", **The Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 22.07.2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/russian-foreign-policy-in-the-middle-east-achievements-and-limitations/>, (21.09.2020)., Alexander D Chekov et al. "War of Future: A View from Russia", **Survival**, Vol. 61, No. 6, pp. 25-48., Donald N. Jensen. "Russia in the Middle East: A New Front in the Information War", **The Jamestown Foundation**, (20.12.2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-middle-east-new-front-information/>, (20.09.2020), The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Concept of the Russian Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016), Moscow, 30.10.201, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248) (20.09.2020)., Dmitri Trenin. "Russia in The Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, And Policy Drivers", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 2016, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16\\_Trenin\\_Middle\\_East\\_Moscow\\_clean.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16_Trenin_Middle_East_Moscow_clean.pdf), Steven Cook. "Russia in the Middle East to Stay", **Foreign Policy**, March 16, 2018., James Sladden, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable, and Sarah Grand-Clement, "Russian Strategy in the Middle East", **RAND Corporation**, 2017. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE236.html> (21.09.2020)., Jeremy Greenstock. "Is This Russia's Moment in the Middle East?", **Asian Affairs**, Vol. 48, No.3, 2018, pp. 419-27., Richard Sakwa. **Russia against the Rest: The Post-War Crisis of World Order**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017., Paul Stronski and Richard Sokolsky. "The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, December 2017, Liz Sly. "In the Middle East, Russia is Back", **The Washington Post**, 05.12.2018., Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru. "Russia's Return to the Middle East Building sandcastles?", **EU Institute for Security Studies**, 2018, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP\\_146.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_146.pdf). & Suchkov, Maxim. *Essays on Russian Foreign Policy in the Caucasus and the Middle East*. Nomos, 2015. & Ghaidaa Hetou. "Russia's Intervention in Syria", **The Syrian Conflict: The Role of Russia, Iran and the US in a Global Crisis**, Ed. Ghaidaa Hetou, Routledge, 2019, pp. 67-92.

hegemonic (regional) power and restore its Soviet-era influence in the MENA region.<sup>13</sup> However, any rigorous scholarly research about the impact of the Syrian conflict on the Middle East security order should take into consideration the import of Moscow's, Tehran's and Ankara's role and orientations towards external actors involved in the Syrian conflict as well as the bilateral relations between them.



---

<sup>13</sup> Eugene Rumer. "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 31.10.2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10-31/russia-in-middle-east-jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none-pub-80233>, (21.09.2020).

## CHAPTER ONE

### OVERVIEW OF THESIS

#### 1.1. AIM OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Taking the Syrian conflict as a case for the current study, this dissertation seeks to analyze the emergent geopolitical and security impacts of the tactical cooperation (i.e., via Astana Peace Process) among Iran, Turkey and Russia and the trio's military interventions in Syria on the Middle Eastern Regional Security Complex (MERSC). From an empirical perspective, it aims to further investigate the past and present dynamics of Russia-Turkey-Iran relations in the context of the Syrian conflict and explain how and in what possible ways the ongoing patterns of cooperation and conflict, and amity and enmity among the three players have affected the security and geopolitical dynamics within the MERSC and its sub-complexes.

From a theoretical angle, drawing on the constructivist-structuralist framework of Regional Security Complex theory (RSC), this volume intends to contribute to and upgrade the RSC theory in the context of Russia's, Turkey's and Iran's regional foreign policy activisms in the Middle East. As developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver in their seminal book *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, the RSC theory provides an analytical toolkit for the explanation of security dynamics at regional levels of the international system.<sup>14</sup> There is already a voluminous scholarship on the various aspects of the Syrian conflict ranging from the evolution of the civil war and its impacts on regional and global security to the empirical/theoretical analyses of the interventionist policies of the external players such as Iran, Russia, Turkey and the United States as well as the study of the bilateral relationship between each of these actors. The list of academic papers, books, research and policy papers germane to the Syrian conflict and its aftermath is by no means exhaustive. Nevertheless, the assertion here is that the bulk of existing research suffer from lack of theoretical bite and most importantly has received less scrutiny from the perspective of the Regional Security Complex theory. The RSC theory, therefore, is

---

<sup>14</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security.** Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003.

used as a primary theoretical framework for this work mainly because its structuralist and constructivist underpinnings provide a multilayered lens to examine a wide array of variables that affect the relations between different powers in relation to the case at hand.<sup>15</sup>

As indicated earlier, an important question is whether Russia's recent growing *penetration* into the MENA region, namely its increased rapprochement with Turkey and Iran over the Syrian conflict signifies that Kremlin harbors a (long-term) strategy for the purposes of crafting a new security order in the Middle East region. Hence one hypothesis is that Syrian conflict has changed the roles and strategic orientations of Russia, Iran and Turkey. Specifically, since 2015 both Turkey and Iran have inadvertently facilitated Russia's remarkable return to the Middle East through bilateral and trilateral agreements (Astana Peace Process and Sochi Agreements), thereby enabling Kremlin to carve out for itself a new regional sphere of influence, assert itself as a great power willing to craft out a new regional security order in the Middle East and strengthen its foothold in the region as a useful alternative to the United States. Therefore, Russia appears to have made use of signing political and economic deals with Middle Eastern governments in the realms of FDI, energy sector, arms trade and exports to expand its influence in the MERSC.<sup>16</sup> Russia as a great powerbroker in the ongoing conflict in Syria has at least until recently managed to create a tactical convergence of interests (i.e., via Astana Peace Process) between Iran and Turkey and is perceived to be able to maintain a semblance of *security order* within and possibly outside the Levant sub-complex.

The second hypothesis is that the Levant sub-complex of the Middle East regional security complex has ever since the onset of the Syrian civil war experienced mounting overlays by Iran (a member of the Persian Gulf sub-complex), Russia, and Turkey (an insular state) and that the trio states' overlays of the Levant sub-complex

---

<sup>15</sup> Of particular emphasis here is that this dissertation will use structural realism embedded within the RSCT as the secondary but the most dominant theoretical lens throughout the theorization phase because as will be charted out in the theory section, the study wants to be parsimonious in theory but eclectic in methodology. Nevertheless, the constructivist dimension of the RSCT cannot be overlooked in explaining the various dynamics of relations among Iran-Turkey and Russian in the context of the Syrian conflict but the main theoretical lens is neorealism.

<sup>16</sup> James Sladden, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable, and Sarah Grand-Clement, "Russian Strategy in the Middle East", **RAND Corporation**, 2017. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/-PE236.html> (21.09.2020)



have had major implications for the future of regional security order in the Middle East. It must be borne in mind that the concept of security order in this study does not imply *hegemony* and is meant to connote what Lake and Morgan defined as “the mode of conflict management within a specific regional security complex.”<sup>17</sup> In this sense, the military overlay of Syria by Turkey, Russia and Iran is seen as producing significant spillover effects into all three sub-complexes within the broader Middle East security complex. Consequently, these spillover effects of the Syrian conflict, which are observable in Libya, Iraq, Yemen, South Caucasus and Lebanon, affect the regional order in the MERSC. As the United States seeks to pivot away from the broader MENA region and Russia seizes the opportunity to broaden its footprint in the MERSC, an important question arises as to what kind of regional (dis) order the region is experiencing against the backdrop of the lingering impacts of the Syrian conflict on the roles and orientations of regional and extra-regional actors.

The claim is that Russia’s reorientation towards the Middle East as “a penetrated system” was partly made possible through Kremlin’s effective balancing acts, diplomatic engagements, military intervention and great power management capabilities, all of which have been tested out in the Syrian conflict.<sup>18</sup> For example, Russia’s balancing acts have played a crucial role in preventing the various Syrian stakeholders (i.e., Israel and Iran) to engage in unbridled military conflicts. In addition, Russia has forged ever-closer military and economic ties with both Iran and Turkey, thereby driving a wedge between Ankara and Washington within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and bolstering Moscow’s strategic ties with Tehran. Even if a federalist system were to be established in Syria, the mere fact that the U.S. is, realistically speaking, expected to maintain its bare-minimum foothold in the Kurdish-held territories in eastern Syria would require both Turkey and Iran to preserve their interest-based relations with Russia as a means to balance the U.S. power at the regional level. What can be distilled from this argument is not that the tactical (if not strategic) convergences of interests among Russian-Iran-Turkey are perpetual. Rather, the claim is that although the Syrian conflict is still underway, it

---

<sup>17</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World.** Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Brown. **International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game, Princeton Studies on the Near East,** Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984.

seems unlikely that Russia-Turkey-Iran tactical (if not strategic) synergy, whose aim is to minimize U.S. regional influence, will collapse anytime soon. The Syrian conflict, therefore, entails important implications on the roles and orientations of Russia, Iran and Turkey in the Middle East security complex.

Seen in this light, the study poses three main questions as follows:

- 1) What is the significance of the Syrian conflict and how and in what ways the ongoing war in Syria has impacted the patterns of continuity and change in the foreign policy role(s) and orientation(s) of Russia, Iran and Turkey towards each other and towards outside actors, namely the United States?
- 2) What are the potential contagions or spillover effects of the Syrian conflict on other Middle East regional security sub-complexes such as the Persian Gulf and the Levant? How and in what ways the Syrian war has affected the traditional role of the United States in the Middle East security complex?
- 3) What does the Syrian conflict and its regional repercussions thereafter tell us about the Middle East regional security order, especially in the Levant and the Persian Gulf sub-complexes? Are we witnessing a change of the regional order or a new kind of pattern of prolonged disorder within the existing regional order?

## 1.2. THE STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE THESIS

To answer these questions, this dissertation adopts a qualitative research methodology as “a broadly inductivist, constructionist, and interpretivist approach to social/political sciences research.”<sup>19</sup> Because the intention, is, *inter alia*, to examine the tactical partnership among Iran, Russia and Turkey as a corollary of the active engagement of the three states in the Syrian conflict, the dissertation will employ mixed/hybrid methods involving content analysis and trend analysis in order to acquire sufficient data, derive cogent inferences and develop tentative hypothesis and conclusions.

Before we proceed ahead, however, it is vitally important to be mindful of the role of theory in the course of empirical research in general and in the context of *how*

---

<sup>19</sup> Alan Bryman. **Social Research Methods**, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 374.

to predict and/or forecast future trends in particular.<sup>20</sup> As Chouchri argues, “without theory, forecasting becomes crude prophecy. With theory, forecasting assumes scientific proportions.”<sup>21</sup> A thorough appraisal of the theory-prediction nexus will be conducted in the theory section of the dissertation. Nevertheless, suffice it to say that there is a close correlation between how we employ theory and how we come up with predictive assessments of empirical value.

This section consists of two parts. The first part offers a detailed explanation of the qualitative approach as the favored research methodology in this study and of how and why it fits in well with the purpose and scope of the study. The second section seeks to shed light on the various methods used in this study in view of the type of research questions to which the study seeks answers. Hence, attempts will be made to dissect the “multi-method” approach into three components, including the content analysis, trend analysis and process tracing.<sup>22</sup>

### 1.2.1. Qualitative Research Methodology

Driven by certain ontological and epistemological assumptions and heavily influenced by the research question(s), the term ‘methodology’ pertains to “the choice of *research strategy* taken by a particular scholar — as opposed to other, alternative research strategies”.<sup>23</sup> Although the terms methods and methodology are often used interchangeably, this study tends to refer to qualitative research as a distinct methodology because it deals primarily with *how* research methods are used whereas methods are concerned with what ways of acquiring information are employed in a research.<sup>24</sup> Bearing this distinction in mind, the following section delves into the choice of qualitative methodology and its relevance to the scope and objectives of the current research.

---

<sup>20</sup> Nazli Chouchri. “Forecasting in International Relations: Problems and Prospects”, **International Interactions**, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1974, p. 65.

<sup>21</sup> Chouchri, p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal. **The Oxford Handbook of International Relations**, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020, (para. 3), p. 500.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Grix. **Demystifying Post-Graduate Research: From MA to PhD**, University of Birmingham Press, First Edition, 2001, p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> Donatella Della Porta. **Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 29.

Unlike quantitative researchers who tend to focus on “a statistical type of analysis” with a primary attention on “(statistical) representativity, validity and reliability,” the practitioners of qualitative research are often engaged in a predominantly contextual type of analysis.<sup>25</sup> Hence, qualitative researchers attempt to understand the subject of inquiry and derive inferences and develop tentative hypothesis based on the meanings individuals attach to it. In the words of one scholar, one of the benefits of using qualitative methodology is that it provides, on the one hand, “detailed empirical facts of the past and present situation and, on the other hand, the inclusion of the intuitive, the speculative, and the hypothetical when probing for respondents’ images of future.”<sup>26</sup> In fact, it is often the case that with a crude reliance on finding statistically significant relationships among various variables in large-n studies, quantitative researchers seem to be acquiring greater validity and veracity of the results of their research as compared to practitioners of qualitative research.<sup>27</sup> However, some argue that what logical positivists tend to overestimate are the proclivities of the quantitative International Relations community to denigrate the salience of prediction in their analyses.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, although some scholars, including Kenneth Waltz see predictive analyses in a less favorable light, there are critical voices who argue that explanation (causal inference) in the absence of prediction is not scientific.<sup>29</sup> As Ward argues, we need more predictions in the realm of security studies because analyses that attempt to reveal alternative possibilities and scenarios are not only instrumental in keeping track of how well we understand the world around us but also help us test the power and utility of our theories.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note that the desire for prediction was noticeable even in the voluminous oeuvre of the 19<sup>th</sup> century social analysts such as Marx, Weber, Marshall, Spencer, and Durkheim as they were

---

<sup>25</sup> Della Porta, p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> Wendell Bell. **Foundations of Futures Studies: History, Purposes, and Knowledge**, Routledge, p. 82.

<sup>27</sup> Michael D Ward, Brian D Greenhill, Kristin M Bakke. “The Perils of Policy by P-Value: Predicting Civil Conflicts”, **Journal of Peace Research**, Vol. 47, No. 4, 2010, p. 363.

<sup>28</sup> Philip A. Schrod. “Seven Deadly Sins of Contemporary Political Analysis”, **Journal of Peace Research**, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2014, p. 289.

<sup>29</sup> Schrod, p. 295., William Ascher, **Forecasting: An Appraisal for Policy Makers and Planners**, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978.

<sup>30</sup> Michael D. Ward. “Can We Predict Politics? Toward What End?”, **Journal of Global Security Studies**, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2016, p. 88.

concerned about the future paths and/or the current and the likely predispositions of their societies.<sup>31</sup>

In light of the foregoing, the contention here is two-fold. First, while it is imperative that we draw a clear distinction between concepts such as explanation, analysis, and prediction and forecasting, it is equally but fundamentally important not to denigrate the analytical as well as predictive power of qualitative methodology. In fact, care must be taken not to disparage such methodological approach as pre-scientific simply on the grounds that it excludes numerical measurements and statistical analyses based on Large-N cases or complex algorithms. Second, the key assertion is that by employing proper and well-crafted forecasting methods within a qualitative methodological framework and by virtue of developing multi-method research designs, researchers adhering to non-quantitative models would be able to successfully conduct a scientific analysis of a particular subject of inquiry and generate scenarios about the future.<sup>32</sup> Hence, although making predictions does not constitute the sole objective of this study, it behooves us to lend credence to the salience of prospective thinking (prediction) in parallel with the empirical analyses of a particular phenomenon in the realm of security studies. It is in this context that futures studies gain relevance as an identifiable field of academic inquiry that has contributed greatly to the body of research conducted not just by futures-oriented scholars but also by social analysts.

### 1.2.2. Trend Analysis

Trend analysis and content analysis constitute the main methodological pillars of this study. In the words of one scholar, trend analysis is a methodological approach which “collates data and then attempts to discover patterns, or trends, within that data for the purposes of understanding or predicting behaviors.”<sup>33</sup> Roughly speaking, trends are certain types of *markers of change* or patterns of events that take place in the

---

<sup>31</sup> Wendell Bell, **Foundations of Futures Studies: History, Purposes, and Knowledge**, Routledge, p. 100.

<sup>32</sup> Michael D. Ward, p. 84., Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal. **The Oxford Handbook of International Relations**, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 511.

<sup>33</sup> Alasdair Rae. “Trend Analysis”, **Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research**, Alex C. Michalos, Springer Science + Business Media Dordrecht, 2014, p. 6736.

context of issue-areas of socio-political and economic import such as the population growth, international trade, investment flows, wars, revolutions, environmental degradation, etc.<sup>34</sup> In Choucri's opinion, "trends provide the context within which events gain meaning in the short range. Patterns of events eventually become trends and constitute the context within which new events take place in the long run."<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, trend analysis helps us in "reducing uncertainty surrounding the probabilities and implications of particular outcomes and assists researchers in discovering where the relevant actors, factor, issues and other determinants of change have been heading and which probable and/or possible direction they will take in near or distant future."<sup>36</sup> Notwithstanding the foregoing, it is important to be mindful that trends are not constant and that the continuity and permanence of trends hinge on the persistence of certain specific conditions.<sup>37</sup>

Hence, care must be taken not to treat trends as unconditional and impervious to variations which emanate largely from sudden shifts in policies of various states under specific conditions and within particular time frames. To redress the anomaly and further eschew the problem of overreliance on trend extrapolation, the study will not only benefit from a multivariate methodological approach, as discussed above, but also endeavor to take into account and even conceive of certain conditions under which trends under examination would either disappear or lose relevance. A sound incorporation of such auxiliary approach affords us an opportunity to minimize the risks associated with generation of ad-hoc hypotheses merely based on permanence of specific trends and thereby reduce the "problem of uncertainty" and overcommitment to existing situation which come about as a result of apathy to assess unexpected findings.<sup>38</sup>

To be more accurate, the thesis will extract and analyze the effects of the current trends in Turkey-Russia-Iran relations and examine the dynamics of

---

<sup>34</sup> Kalevi Holsti. "The Problem of Change in International Relations Theory", *Kalevi Holsti: A Pioneer in International Relations Theory, Foreign Policy Analysis, History of International Order, and Security Studies*, Kalevi Holsti, Springer, 2016, p. 40-41.

<sup>35</sup> Nazli Chouchri. "Forecasting in International Relations: Problems and Prospects", **International Interactions**, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1974, p. 76.

<sup>36</sup> Choucri, p. 76., Mert Bilgin. "The State of Future in International Relations", **Futures**, Vol. 82, 2016, pp. 52-62.

<sup>37</sup> Karl R. Popper. **The Poverty of Historicism**, Routledge & Kagan Paul, London, 1961, p. 128.

<sup>38</sup> Choucri, p. 76., Mert Bilgin. "The State of Future in International Relations", **Futures**, Vol. 82, 2016, p. 74.

relationship between the three countries based on the present and future trends in light of their military engagements in the Syrian conflict. To this end, the dominant views on the concept of “regional order” as well as its elements and features will be used to extract a number of indicators for determining the type and extent of effects these trends will have. By dint of using the four indicators underpinning the “Regional Security Complex Theory”, namely *boundary*, *anarchic structure*, *patterns of amity and enmity*, and *polarity*, the thesis will use trend analysis method to study what changes the interaction between the current trends in the relationships among the three countries and these four indicators in tandem with the “overlay” factors will cause in the Middle East security order.<sup>39</sup> The inclusion of the four indicators in tandem with an accurate identification of the potential areas of cooperation and conflict among these sets of actors will provide us with an opportunity to take stock of unexpected conditions and potential sources of change.

This study draws on a plethora of various sources, including books, academic journals, policy papers and recommendations, official documents, news and scholarly websites “in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge.”<sup>40</sup> Data collection method used in this research will be based on the analyses of primary as well as secondary data (including government publications, websites, books, journal articles related to the subject of inquiry). In order to increase the level of validity of the analysis and its findings, this thesis has gathered information from an immense number of scholarly and media works published by various Russian, Turkish and Iranian scholars who are seasoned experts in the field. The organization of this thesis is as follows.

Having described the aims, key research questions, main methodology and the literature review of this research in Chapter One, Chapter Two deals with the theoretical framework of this study. Using a hybrid theoretical framework that links Regional Security Complex Theory, as developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, with Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll’s Regional Powers and Security Framework (RPSF), this thesis will put forth a synthetic theoretical framework for

---

<sup>39</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Juliet Corbin & Anselm Strauss. **Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory**, Third Ed, Sage, Thousand Oaks: California, 2008, p. 1.

understanding the Syrian conflict and the foreign policies of Iran, Russia and Turkey. By employing the neorealist-constructivist lenses of the RSCT+RPSF, this chapter will introduce a new theoretical framework in order to explain how and in what ways the region's anarchic structure, polarity and social construction of the Middle East security complex may have been influenced by the variations in Turkey, Iran and Russia's orientations and roles as per their Syrian engagements. Chapter Three will provide an overview of the trends and events associated with the Syrian conflict and further explain the emergence of the Astana Peace Process as a mode of conflict management among Iran, Russia and Turkey. This chapter will focus on the evolution of the tactical partnership among Iran, Turkey and Russia in the context of the Syrian conflict and on how the ongoing war in Syria and the ensuing military interventions of the three main military players of the conflict have contributed to creation of patterns of cooperation and conflict (amity and enmity) in relations between Russia-Turkey, Turkey-Iran and Russia-Iran. In this chapter, the main focus will be on examining the foreign policy activism of each of the trio state towards Syria, how the Syrian conflict impacted the foreign and security policies of these states and how it produced spillover effects far beyond the Levant sub-complex. In Chapter Four, attempts will be made to make sense of the changing roles and orientations of the key players of the Syrian conflict, i.e., Russia, Iran and Turkey on the basis of the three dimensions of regional power roles (leadership, custodianship, and protection) and three axes of a regional power's foreign policy orientations (status quo-revisionist, unilateral-multilateral, and proactive-reactive). The primary aim in this chapter is to conceptualize the foreign and security policies of Russia, Iran and Turkey in light of the Syrian conflict and the changing nature of their relations towards the United States. In Chapter Five, after looking at the consequences of the military interventions of penetrating regional and extra-regional powers, the study will endeavor to determine as to whether the Middle East region is evolving towards a single specific or a mixture of the two or three types of the regional security order as provided by the RSCT+RPSF framework. The aim here is to identify and examine the implications of the Syria conflict on the security order in the Levant sub-complex and the broader Middle East security complex.



### 1.3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The wave of the Arab revolts that rippled through MENA countries in 2011 caused a deluge of scholarly and journalistic articles and opened up the field of International Relations and its subfields to new challenges and opportunities for conducting theoretical and empirical examination of the various dynamics of the Arab uprisings and their aftermath. Indeed, the comparative politics literature on the Arab uprisings is teemed with scholarly works which have generated sophisticated analyses of the Arab revolts dynamics by scrutinizing them through the lenses of democratization and modernization theories, political culture and domestic politics, political regimes, social movements theory and theories of state formation, and so on and so forth.<sup>41</sup> Having this in mind, the intention here is not to review in details a litany of scholarship on the Arab uprisings simply because such an undertaking is neither practical, given the lack of space here, nor is it within the scope of this study. However, it is imperative to mention that according to the results of the American Political Science Association's symposium on "The Arab Uprisings and International Relations Theory", "with a few notable exceptions the academic literature on the Arab uprisings is dominated by comparative analysis and country case studies, with IR included as one among several variables—if it is included at all."<sup>42</sup> Consequently, as the

---

<sup>41</sup> See, Lingyu Lu and Cameron G. Thies. "War, Rivalry, and State Building", **Political Research Quarterly**, Vol. 66, No. 2, pp. 239-253., Raymond Hinnebusch. "Understanding Regime Divergence in the Post-Uprising Arab States", **Journal of Historical Sociology**, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2018, pp. 39-52., Karel Cerny. "Great Middle Eastern Instability: Structural Roots and Uneven Modernization 1960-2012", **Journal of Historical Sociology**, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2018, pp. 53-71., Larbi Sadiki (ed). **Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization**, Routledge, 2014., Ibrahim S. I. Rabaia, Makmor Tumi and Emile Kok-Kheng Yeoh. "Religion and Revolution: Theorizing of the Arab Spring in Accordance with the Selectorate Approach", **Asian Politics & Policy**, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2017, pp. 222-244., Kurt Weyland. "The Arab Spring: Why the Surprising Similarities with the Revolutionary Wave of 1848?", **Perspectives on Politics**, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2012, pp. 917-934., Şuay Nihan Açıkalın. "Understanding of Arab Spring with Chaos Theory: Uprising or Revolution", *Chaos Theory in Politics*, Santo Banerjee, Safika Sule Ercetin, and Ali Tekin, Springer, 2014., Steven Heydemann. "Explaining the Arab Uprisings: Transformations in Comparative Perspectives", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2016, pp. 192-204., Alfred Stepan and Juan J. Linz. Democratization Theory and the "Arab Spring", **Journal of Democracy**, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2013, pp. 15-30., Holger Albrecht. "Does Coup-Proofing Work? Political-Military Relations in Authoritarian Regimes amid the Arab Uprisings", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2015, pp. 36-54., Holger Albrecht and Oliver Schlumberger. "'Waiting for Godot': Regime Change Without Democratization in the Middle East", **International Political Science Review**, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2004, pp. 371-392.

<sup>42</sup> Marc Lynch & Curtis R. Ryan. "The Arab Uprisings and International Relations Theory", **American Political Science Association**, 2017, p. 643. A prominent research paper published in September 2015 by The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) under the title "International

geopolitical and security aftershocks from the Arab uprisings continue to reverberate across the MENA region, namely in Syria, the need for tracing the connection (cross-fertilization) between those revolutions and IR theories cannot be overstated. In so far as the existing literature on the evolution of the Syrian civil war and the ensuing military interventions in the country is concerned, the story is not much different. Since 2011, there has been a plethora of scholarship on the so-called domino effects of the Arab uprisings in the MENA region, namely in Syria.

The bulk of the existing academic literature about the Syrian conflict, its evolution and its possible security, economic and geopolitical implications for both regional and global order can roughly be divided into three overarching but inter-related categories.

In the first category, the existing literature have the tendency to provide a predominantly *historical narrative* of the pivotal trends and watershed moments that contributed to the current state of affairs in Syria, starting from the initial phase of the conflict (March-July 2011) to the ongoing escalatory phase of geopolitical competition and proxy wars among principal players of the Syrian war. Bounded in good part by dictates of path dependency, trend analysis, agency and the role of external variables and factors, these studies tend to border on presentism and at times parochialism. This is primarily because in these types of obsessively linear and temporal analyses, the core analytical framework appears to be fundamentally if not exclusively predicated on a merely trajectorial study of foreign and domestic policies of the Syrian Republic, namely under the former President Hafez al Assad (1971-2000) and his successor Bashar al Assad (2000-now).<sup>43</sup> Fred Halliday underscores some of the limitations to the narrative approach, alluding to the tendency of these types of research to “overstate the degree of continuity over time, assuming that the ‘past’ explains the present.”<sup>44</sup>

---

Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East”, draws similar conclusion, indicating that “regional specialists within the field of comparative politics have been able to attract more attention from generalists than have regional specialists dealing with Middle East international relations. See, Morten Valbjorn. “International Relations Theory and the New Middle East: Three Levels of a Debate”, **International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East**, Ed. POMEPS Studies No. 16, 2015, p. 75.

<sup>43</sup> See, Linda Matar and Ai Kadri. **Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 30. Raymond Hinnebusch identifies the over-reliance of much of the analysis of the Syrian conflict on path dependency, agency and external factors as analytic deficiencies that must be overcome.

<sup>44</sup> Fred Halliday, **The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 24.

While overlooking the salience of rigorous theorizing, it appears that many of these types of analyses approach the Syrian case with a focus on a history of “coups, institutions of repression, or the primordial” as well as a myriad of endogenous and exogenous factors that played an instrumental role in various periods of crises since 1946 and eventually led to the 2011 revolt of the Syrian Sunnis against the secular state.<sup>45</sup> One particular downside of these types of research is that very seldom, if any, have they undertaken the task of conducting futures-oriented studies aimed at developing, with the help of theory, alternative (scenario-based) futures for security in the MENA region, and analyzing the potential implications of the past, present and future trends within and outside the Middle East context. As Pinar Bilgin posits, “uncritical adoption of existing knowledge produced by prevailing discourses that do not offer anything other than more of the same does itself constitute ‘threat to the future’”.<sup>46</sup> Although Bilgin’s assertion basically alludes to the utility of critical approaches to security studies, it behooves us to be mindful about the hazards of relying on unquestioned or pre-determined knowledge which emanate largely from *a priori* (what is before) and *a posteriori* (what is after) justifications.

In the second category of dominant literature on the Syrian conflict, which has noticeable overlapping with the narrative approach, researchers and scholars often times put a heavy premium on the role of external actors and exogenous factors (i.e. colonialism, an embattled sense of Arab nationalism) in conjunction with issues of territory, history and identity which taken together are often labelled as chief determinants of Syrian foreign policy towards the states in the MENA region and beyond. These predominantly ‘*actor-specific studies*’ take the form of theoretical and/or empirical analyses of the foreign and security policies of the Syrian Republic under the Assads from 1970 onwards, while emphasis is devoted to the roles played

---

<sup>45</sup> See, Raymond Hinnebusch, “Syrian Foreign Policy Under Bashar al Assad”, **Ortadoğu Etütleri**, July 2009, Vol 1, No 1, pp. 7-26., Annette Büchs, The Resilience of Authoritarian Rule in Syria Under Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad, **German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA)**, March 2009., Linda Matar and Ai Kadri, **Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019., Joseph Holliday, “The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Cold War”, **Institute for the Study of War**, 2013., Reese Erlich, **Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect**, Prometheus, 2016., Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, **The Foreign Policies of the Middle East States**, Second Ed, Reinner, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Pinar Bilgin. **Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective**, Routledge, 2004, p. 165.

by external powers, on top of the historical context, in shaping Damascus's policy in the MENA region and beyond.<sup>47</sup> Taking into consideration the history of Western imperialism in the Levant and the post-World War I, territorial partition of this specific region, these studies do not dispense with theory but primarily incorporate a historical sociological, constructivist and mostly realist perspectives to explain the vicissitudes of Syria's foreign and security policy towards Israel, the former Soviet Union, Iran and Egypt and Lebanon in different periods of Assads' rule.<sup>48</sup> As regards the post-Arab uprisings tectonic shifts in Syria's foreign policy towards the neighboring states and towards external powers such as Russia, China and the United States, the main focus of these actors-specific studies is, for the most part, geared towards analyses of the rapprochement among Iran, Russia and Turkey via Astana/Sochi agreements vis-à-vis the United States in its tacit alliance with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel and the PYD/YPG (which Turkey sees as the Syrian branch of the PKK terror group – Kurdistan Workers' Party). Owing to the inherently multidimensional and complex nature of the Syrian conflict, it bears noting that numerous academic/journalistic papers and books are not limited to examining the relationship among Turkey, Iran and Russia *per se*. They also need to delve into the broader interaction between each of the trio players with each other as well as with the other key geopolitical actors outside the MENA region, foremost among them the United States.<sup>49</sup> It is in this

<sup>47</sup> For more on Syria's foreign policy from 1970s onwards see, Bente Scheller. **The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game: Foreign Policy Under the Assads**, Hurst Publishers, 2014., Linda Matar and Ai Kadri. **Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019., J. K. Gani. **The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations: Conflict and Cooperation**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014., Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar al Assad", **Ortadoğu Etütleri**, July 2009, Vol 1, No 1, pp. 7-26., Annette Büchs. "The Resilience of Authoritarian Rule in Syria Under Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad", **German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA)**, March 2009. Joseph Holliday. "The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Cold War", **Institute for the Study of War**, 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami. **The Foreign Policies of the Middle East States**, Second Ed., Reinner, 2014, p. 207-232., Linda Matar and Ai Kadri. **Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

<sup>49</sup> On the various dynamics of Iran-Turkey relations, See, Mehmet Akif Kumral. **Exploring Emotions in Turkey-Iran Relations: Effective Politics of Partnership and Rivalry**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020., Süleyman Elik. **Iran-Turkey Relations, 1979-2011: Conceptualizing the Dynamics of Politics and Security in Middle-Power States**, Routledge, 2012., Stephen F. Larrabee and Alireza Nader. "Turkish-Iranian Relations in a Changing Middle East", **RAND Corporation**, 2013., Mansoureh Ebrahimi, Kamaruzaman Yusoff and Mir Mohamadali Seyed Jalili. "Economic, Political and Strategic Issues in Iran-Turkey Relations, (2002-2015)", **Contemporary Review of the Middle East**, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2017, pp. 67-83., Bayram Sinkaya. "The Kurdish Question in Iran and its Effects on Iran-Turkey Relations", **British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 45, No. 5, 2017, pp. 840-859., John Calabrese. "Turkey and Iran: Limits of a Stable Relationship", **British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1998, pp. 75-94., Alberto Gasparetto. "Iranian-Turkish

broader context that the underlying causes of the divergences and convergences of interests and the potential impacts of patterns of amity and enmity among and between Iran-Turkey and Russia on the regional security order gains relevance.

Having said this, the exigencies of the changing character of war in the 21 century deserves rapt attention as states competing with each other in the context of not only the Syrian conflict but also in various other contemporary theaters of war (i.e., in Ukraine, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Lebanon) have shown significant inclination to rely on military involvement by proxies. Since 2011, the Syrian uprising, in Helle Malmvig's view, has morphed into a "complex proxy war between global, regional and non-state actors" and it has now become "a tragic arena for regional and international rivalries where outside powers pursue multiple conflicting interests and

---

Relations in a Changing Middle East", **International Studies**, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2018, pp. 83-98., Buğra Sari. "The Strategic Interaction Between Turkey and Iran in the Syrian Crisis: A Game Theoretical Analysis of the Time Frame from 2011-2015", **Bilig – Türk Dünyası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi**, No. 87, 2018, pp. 203-227., Iain William MacGillivray. "The Paradox of Turkish-Iranian Relations in the Syrian Crisis", **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 41, No. 6, 2020, pp. 1-21., Hossein Aghaie Joobani and Umut Can Adisönmez. "Turkey's Volte-Face Politics, Understanding the AKP's Securitization Policy towards the Syrian Conflict", **New Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2018, pp. 42-62., Lenore G. Martin. "Analyzing a Tumultuous Relationship: Turkey and the US in the Middle East", **Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2019, pp. 262-277., Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür, **Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity**, Routledge, 2013., İnan Rüma and Mitat Çelikpala. "Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 16, No. 62, 2019, pp. 65-84., Ruslan Mamedov and Grigory Lukyanov. "Russia and Turkey: Approaches to Regional Security in the Middle East", **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, 2018, pp. 51-71., Dilip Hiro. **Cold War in The Islamic World: Saudi Arabia and Iran and The Struggle for Supremacy**, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019., Shira Efron. "The Future of Israeli-Turkish Relations", RAND Corporation, 2018., C Akça Ataç, "Pax Ottomanica No More! The 'Peace' Discourse in Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post-Davutoglu Era and the Prolonged Syrian Crisis", **Digest of Middle East Studies (DOMES)**, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2018, pp. 48-69., Meliha Benli Altunışık and Özlem Tür, "From Distant Neighbors to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations", **Security Dialogue**, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2006, pp. 229-248., Ünal Çviköz, "Turkey's Relations with NATO & Russia: A Foreign Policy Impasse?", **Turkish Policy Quarterly**, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2018, pp. 39-50., Burcu Sari Karademir. "A Dance of Entanglement: The US-Turkish Relations in the Context of the Syrian Conflict", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 16, No. 62, 2019, pp. 27-43., Min Wei, "Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Syrian Crisis: Dynamics of Transformation", **Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2019, pp. 462-477., Shireen Hunter. "Iran and Russia: Strategic Partnership or a Fool's Bargain?", **Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order**, Shireen Hunter, Praeger, 2010., Thomas Juneau. "Iran's Costly Intervention in Syria: A Pyrrhic Victory", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2018, pp. 26-44., & Tatev M. Antonyan. "Russia and Iran in the Syrian Crisis: Similar Aspirations, Different Approaches", **Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2017, pp. 337-348., Nader Uskowi. "The Evolving Iranian Strategy in Syria: A Looming Conflict with Israel", **Atlantic Council**, September 2018, pp. 1-12., Hooshang Amirahmadi and Nader Entessar. **Iran and the Arab World**, Palgrave Macmillan, 1993., Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni. "Iran's Syria Strategy: The Evolution of Deterrence", **International Affairs**, Vol. 95, No. 2, 2019, pp. 341-364., Marwa Daoudy. "The Structure-Identity Nexus: Syria and Turkey's Collapse (2011)", **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2016, pp. 1074-1096.

security agendas.”<sup>50</sup> Therefore, the phenomena of proxy intervention in civil or interstate wars, which some scholars refer to as “surrogate warfare” and “privatized or informal wars” has become a highly pertinent subject of inquiry for scholars and journalists conducting research on the Syrian conflict.<sup>51</sup> Although it has gained increasing scholarly attention in recent decades, the phenomenon of proxy war is by no means novel. Throughout history from the Roman Empire, the Ottomans and the European colonial empires to Napoleon’s France and Stalin’s Soviet Union made use of non-state actors such as mercenaries to further their interests and goals.<sup>52</sup> However, the Syrian war can be identified as a *sui generis* case in this respect because it represents a paradigmatic theater of proxy warfare in which a multiplicity of different regional and global actors within multiple cross-cutting alliances have made quite an impact in the Syrian conflict as evidenced by the deep presence of, *inter alia*, Iran-backed Shia militias such as Hezbollah, Russia’s Wagner Group, Turkey’s Sunni factions such as National Liberation Front and the PKK’s Syrian offshoot the People’s Protection Units known as YPG,<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Alexander D Barder, Bashir Saade, Carolie Pison Hindawi, Helle Malmvig, Karim Makdisi, Lars Erslev Andersen, Manni Crone, Rasmus Alenius Boserup, Vibeke Schou Tjalve, Waleed Hazbun. “New Conflict Dynamics: Between Regional Autonomy and Intervention in the Middle East and North Africa”, **Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS)**, 2011, pp. 66-67.

<sup>51</sup> For more reflections on the phenomena Proxy Wars, see, Mary Kaldor. **New & Old Wars: Organized Violence in Global Era**, Thirds Ed., Polity Press, 2012., Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli. **Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century**, Georgetown University Press, 2019., Tyrone L. Groh, **Proxy War: The Least Bad Option**, Stanford University Press, 2019., Andrew Mumford. “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict”, **The RUSI Journal**, Vol. 158, No. 2, 2013, pp. 40-46., Michael Innes (ed). **Making Sense of Proxy Wars: States, Surrogates and the Use of Force**. Potomac Books, Dulles, 2012., Geraint Alun Hughes, **My Enemy’s Enemy: Proxy Warfare in international Politics**, Sussex Academic Press, Eastbourne, 2020., Chris Loveman. “Assessing the Phenomenon of Proxy Intervention”, **Conflict, Security & Development**, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2002, pp. 29-48., Geraint Alun Hughes, “Syria and Perils of Proxy Warfare”, **Small Wars & Insurgencies**, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2014, pp. 522-538., Olivier J. Walther and Patrick Steen Pedersen, “Rebel Fragmentation in Syria’s Civil War”, **Small Wars & Insurgencies**, Vol. 31, no. 3, 2020, pp. 445-474. & Esther Meininghaus and Carina Schlusing. “War in Syria: The Translocal Dimension of Fighter Mobilization”, **Small Wars & Insurgencies**, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2020, pp. 475-510.

<sup>52</sup> Seyom Brown. “Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy: A Systemic Analysis”, **Small Wars & Insurgencies**, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2016, p. 244., Bertil Duner. “Proxy Intervention in Civil Wars”, **Journal of Peace Research**, Vol. XVIII, No. 4, 1981, pp. 353-361.

<sup>53</sup> Jean-Loup Samaan. “Missile Warfare and Violent Non-State Actors: The Case of Hezbollah”, **Defense Studies**, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2017, pp. 156-170., Özden Zeynep Oktav, Emel Parlar, Ali Murat Kurşun (eds). **Violent Non-State Actors and the Syrian Civil War: The ISIS and YPG Cases**, Springer International Publishing, 2018., Afshon Ostovar. “The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran’s Way of War”, **Security Studies**, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2018, pp. 1-30.

Consistent with this argument is the declaration of statehood by the Islamic State in June 2014 and the various strategies, and methods of bureaucratic and security-subjectivity governance it employed to win popular support and accomplish its utopian state-building project. The rise and the (physical) fall of this Salafist-Wahhabi quasi-state terrorist organization presented the world with a perplexing question: how and why a non-state actor or an insurgency group would go so far as to upend the post-Westphalian international order and existentially threaten the global security.<sup>54</sup>

The two above-mentioned factors have played an important role in proliferation of theoretical and empirical studies on the role of armed non-state actors—also referred to elsewhere as “foreign fighters” in interstate and civil wars.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, researchers and scholars specializing in the Middle Eastern security studies have tried to diversify their theoretical lens by shifting the attention away from over-reliance on state-centric explanations to the salience of the role of foreign non-state actors along with airpower, drones and cyber-weapons in theaters of conflict, namely in Syria.<sup>56</sup> To take one example, Christopher Phillips & Morten Valbjorn highlight the potential impact of the ‘content’ of identities on proxy war dynamics, drawing attention to the crucial question of “whether differences between identities make a difference when it comes to why and how external actors are involved and whether the domestic and international implications of their involvement are the same.”<sup>57</sup> Needless to say, a growing body of literature has sought to identify the primary motives of Iran, Russia, Turkey in employing foreign fighters in Syria from both *interest-based* and *identity-based* viewpoints in a bid to unpack the idiosyncratic and sometimes overlapping *modus operandi* of each external player in micro-managing their proxy warfare.

Although analyzing the role of armed non-state actors does not constitute the main purpose of this study, suffice it so say that the geopolitical trends related to the

---

<sup>54</sup> Andrew Phillips. “The Islamic State’s Challenge to International Order”, **Australian Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 68, No. 5, 2014, pp. 495-498., Noriyuki Katagiri. “ISIL, Insurgent Strategies for Statehood, and the Challenge for Security Studies”, **Small Wars & Insurgencies**, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2015, pp. 542-556.

<sup>55</sup> Barak Mendelsohn. “Why Do Armed Nonstate Groups Use Foreign Volunteers? The Case of the Islamic State”, **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, Vol. 64, No. 1, 2020, pp. 111-130.

<sup>56</sup> Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli. “Surrogate Warfare: The Art of War in the 21 Century?”, **Defense Studies**, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2018, pp. 113-130.

<sup>57</sup> Christopher Phillips & Morten Valbjorn. “What is in a Name?: The Role of (Different) Identities in Multiple Proxy Wars in Syria”, **Small Wars & Insurgencies**, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2018, pp. 414-433.

Syrian conflict is so inextricably intertwined with the issue of surrogate warfare that any empirical study of the former cannot be thoroughly conducted without paying attention to the latter. Accordingly, a synthetic and holistic approach binding those literature focusing on the historical narratives (case-specific) with those concentrating on the role of external actors and exogenous factors (state-specific) is deemed necessary to enrich the tapestry of knowledge germane to the Syrian conflict.

In the third category of the existing literature on the Syrian conflict, a multitude of aspects connected to the issue ranging from the evolution of the conflict (the underlying causes of the conflict) to the role of external actors (the intervention of global and regional-level actors) come under scrutiny but the emphasis is mostly placed on theorization of the conflict.

These *theory-oriented* approaches to the Syrian conflict seem to have been largely wedded to the prevalent characterization of the Middle East as the region of realist thinking *par excellence*.<sup>58</sup> By looking at the foreign policies of individual states and the various ways in which states form alliances on the basis of perceived threats and opportunities, much of the theory-induced body of literature is organized around principles of balance of power and hegemony under the ‘security dilemma’. Hence, analysts of international relations in the Middle East frequently use structural realist (neo-realist) perspectives to identify the external sources of Syrian conflict, explain the foreign and security policies of the regional and extra-regional powers, and further analyze the strategic and geopolitical implications of the patterns of cooperation and conflict among Iran-Russia-Turkey on the regional security order.

These (neo)realist accounts of the Syrian conflict, however, tend to denigrate the importance of factors internal to states and societies, namely factors such as systemic pressures and ideological imperatives that determine the orientation of foreign policy outcomes.<sup>59</sup> Hence, neoclassical realism has alternatively been used as a powerful lens through which one can incorporate domestic phenomena as intervening variable with an emphasis on the international system in analyzing state

---

<sup>58</sup> Paul Aarts. “The Middle East: A Region without Regionalism or the End of Exceptionalism”, **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 20, No. 5, 2010, p. 911.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Juneau et al. “Neoclassical Realism: Domestic Politics, Systemic Pressures, and the Impact on Foreign Policy since the Arab Spring”, **Routledge Handbook of International Relations in the Middle East**, Shahram Akbarzadeh, Routledge, 2019, p. 10.



behaviors.<sup>60</sup> Anchored in a social constructivist approach, several contributions to the study of Syrian conflict, including the analyses of bilateral/trilateral relations between/among the intervening actors and the various other interlinked dimensions of the Syrian case have also provided prolific insights by alluding to a synthesis of structural and identity-based factors in determining state behaviors and foreign policy outcomes. For example, Samir al-Taqi and Raymond Hinnebusch capture the interlinkages between systemic pressures in the post-Cold War security and geopolitical environment (systemic pressures) in tandem with ideational factors shaping states' 'threat perceptions' in order to explain the patterns of amity and enmity in Turkey-Syria relations.<sup>61</sup> Borrowing from other conventional approaches in international relations and comparative politics, the existing literature on the case of Syria also apply game theory, historical sociology approach as well as the Copenhagen School's securitization theory and the English School to provide insights about the various aspects of the case and offer critiques of the existing knowledge.<sup>62</sup>

Taking into consideration the merits and demerits of each of the three categories of the academic literature about the Syrian case, it is tenable to argue that the case of Syria continues to remain a perplexing theoretical and empirical puzzle. Put differently, the empirical and theoretical explanations of the patterns of cooperation and conflict among Turkey, Iran and Russia in the context of the Syrian conflict and the potential impacts of the current trilateral *modus operandi* on the future of the regional order remain underdeveloped.

---

<sup>60</sup> See, Şevket Ovalı and İlkin Özdikmenli. "Ideologies and the Western Question in Turkish Foreign Policy: A Neo-Classical Realist Perspective", **All-Azimuth**, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2019, pp. 105-126., Ahmet K. Han. "Paradise Lost: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy and the Case of Turkish-Syrian Relations", **Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür, Routledge, 2013, pp. 55-70. Thomas Juneau et al. "Neoclassical Realism: Domestic Politics, Systemic Pressures, and the Impact on Foreign Policy since the Arab Spring", **Routledge Handbook of International Relations in the Middle East**, Shahram Akbarzadeh, Routledge, 2019., Gökтуğ Sönmez. **A Neo-Classical Approach to Turkey Under JDP Rule**, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Samir al-Taqi and Raymond Hinnebusch. "As Seen From Damascus: The Transformation in Syrian-Turkish Relations", **Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür, Routledge, 2013.

<sup>62</sup> For a game theoretical analysis see, Buğra Sarı. "The Strategic Interaction Between Turkey and Iran in the Syrian Crisis: A Game Theoretical Analysis of the Time Frame From 2011-2015", **Bilig – Türk Dünyası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi**, No. 87, 2018, pp. 203-227. For contributions based on historical sociology approach see, Raymond Hinnebusch. "The Arab Uprisings and the MENA Regional States System", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 11, No. 42, 2014, pp. 7-27., Anoushiravan Ehteshami. "Middle East Middle Powers: Regional Role, International Impact", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 11, No. 42, 2014, pp. 29-49.

The contention here is that very seldom have the existing academic literature offered a rigorous theoretical and empirical examination of the role and orientations of Iran, Russia and Turkey in Syria. Further to this, it is important to point out that understanding the underlying causes and potential impacts of the quasi-tactical alliance among them under the Astana Agreement and Sochi deals has attracted less attention whereas since the formation of the trio alliance the MENA region has seen tectonic geopolitical and security shifts, namely the declining role of the U.S. as a hegemon and the growing geopolitical penetration of Russia into the MENA region.

Noteworthy too, however, is that some scholars and researchers have recently employed Regional Security Complex Theory as developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver to analyze how ongoing transformation processes in the Middle East since the onset of the Arab uprisings have altered the geopolitical and security dynamics within the existing security complexes, thereby contributing to debates about possible impact of such changes on the regional security order.<sup>63</sup> Underpinned by the “vitality of the regional level in international security issues”, scholars and researchers working in this purview employ regional sub-systems as the object of their security analyses.”<sup>64</sup> But in so far as the Syrian case is concerned, there seems to be a dearth of academic literature from the vantage point of RSCT on whether or not and in what possible ways the Syrian civil war and the interventions by Turkey, Russia and Iran may influence,

---

<sup>63</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 44., Ruth Hanau Santini. “A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Security Complex Theory Revisited”, **The International Spectator**, Vol. 52, No. 4, 2017, pp. 93-111., Oguz Dilek, Emre Iseri and Nihat Celik. “Turkey’s Regional Powerhood Within Regional (In)Security Complex: Transformation From a Conflict-ridden Environment Into a Security Community”, **Journal of Regional Security**, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2015, pp. 155-176., Rafaella A. Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig and Edward Soler I Lecha. “Interregnum: The Regional Order in The Middle East and North Africa After 2011”, **MENARA**, Final Reports, No. 1, 01.02.2019, <https://www.iai.it/en/pu-bblicazioni/interregnum-regional-order-middle-east-and-north-africa-after-2011>, (25.09.2020)., Jaroslaw Jarzabek. “The Theory of Regional Security Complexes in the Middle Eastern Dimension”, **Wschodnioznawstwo**, 2018., Mohammed Ayoob. “From Regional System to Regional Society: Exploring Key Variables in the Construction of Regional Order”, **Australian Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 53, No. 3, 1999, pp. 247-260., Brendon J. Cannon and Federico Donelli. Asymmetrical Alliances and High Polarity: Evaluating Regional Security Complexes in The Middle East and Horn of Africa, **Third World Quarterly**, 2019, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2020, pp. 505-524., Alice Hills. Managing the Interface: Regional Security and Substate Politics in Africa, **African Security**, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2008, pp. 92-114., Ramazan Erdağ. **Libya in the Arab Spring: From Revolution to Insecurity**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017., Erika Holmquist and John Rydqvist. “The Future of Regional Security in the Middle East: Four Scenarios”, **FOI- Swedish Defense Research Agency**, April 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Ramazan Erdağ. “Regional Security Complex Theory and The Middle East and North Africa”, **Libya in the Arab Spring: From Revolution to Insecurity**, Ramazan Erdağ, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 18.

in a meaningful manner, the security and geopolitical dynamic in the Middle East regional security complex.

Upon closer examination, it can be argued that the bulk of existing academic works which have benefited from the RSCT framework, tend to present a case-specific analyses of individual state's foreign policies either towards Syria or vis-à-vis other intervening states instead. For example, one scholar applies RSCT to assess the similarities and differences between the Cold War of the 1950s/1960 and the ongoing "new regional Cold War" between Iran and Saudi Arabia—two regional players situated in the Maghreb sub-complex.<sup>65</sup> To take another example, some scholars use RSCT in order to shed light on "the systemic, sub-systemic, and domestic factors that altogether contributed to turkey's failure to transform the conflict-ridden Middle East (in)security complex into a pluralistic security community at the time of Arab uprising."<sup>66</sup>

As can be seen, the Arab uprising has afforded researches an opportunity to look at this watershed moment in the history of the modern Middle East mostly through the lens of major IR theories and at some rare instances from the perspective of RSCT. With regard to the Syrian case, one of key pieces of literature which bears close resemblances to the scope and aim of this study relates to Raymond Hinnebusch & Adham Saouli's seminal book titled "*the War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprisings*".<sup>67</sup> Examining the international dimensions of the Syrian conflict, the book specifically seeks to decode the 'black box' of the foreign policies of key regional and international players (Hezbollah, Palestinians, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, U.S., Russia and the EU) and further analyses the impact of the conflict on relations between key regional actors (Turkey-Syria, Turkey-Iran, Iraq-Syria).

Nevertheless, the claim here is that akin to the existing literature that have attempted to analyze the Syrian conflict and its various other dimensions from RSCT,

---

<sup>65</sup> Ruth Hanau Santini. "A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Security Complex Theory Revisited", **The International Spectator**, Vol. 52, No. 4, 2017, pp. 93-111., Jaroslaw Jarzabek. "The Theory of Regional Security Complexes in the Middle Eastern Dimension", **Wschodnioznawstwo**, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Oguz Dilek, Emre Iseri and Nihat Celik. "Turkey's Regional Powerhood Within Regional (In)Security Complex: Transformation From a Conflict-ridden Environment Into a Security Community", **Journal of Regional Security**, Vol. 100, No. 2, 2015, pp. 155-176.

<sup>67</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli (eds). **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Routledge, 2019., Ghaidaa Hetou. **The Syrian Conflict: The Role of Russia, Iran and the US in a Global Crisis**, Routledge, 2019, pp. 67-92.

Raymond and Saouli's volume suffers from three main shortcomings: 1) While it focuses on the role of external actors in relation to the Syrian conflict and uses the RSCT, the volume fails to provide substantial empirical insights as to if and how the conflict and the interventions of key international players may have some potential spillovers into other Middle East security complexes. This is an important caveat particularly when juxtaposed next to Buzan & Wæver's assertion that each sub-complex within the MERSC has a remarkable capacity to affect other, i.e., the Levant sub-complex can influence the Gulf sub-complex in one way or another, and vice versa. 2) Although Schmidt's contribution regarding the Syrian case uses RSCT as its theoretical framework, it falls short of striking a meaningful balance between theorization and foreign policy analysis as evidenced by the volume's particular emphasis on the role of motives and strategies than that of operationalization of the theory of RSCT into the case at hand. 3) Schmidt's contribution can also be viewed as one of the very few chapters on the Syrian which incorporates a futures-oriented approach but it nonetheless provides the reader with only a single future scenario. The contention is that given the dynamicity and complexity of the Syrian conflict whose endgame remains, as of writing this dissertation, to be an enigma, forecasting of the future trends based on the existing data risks being inaccurate. Hence, this study attempts to remedy this anomaly by virtue of adopting a futures-oriented approach methodology.

In sum, the present review of the existing academic literature on the Syrian conflict reveal that few academic studies have touched upon and delved into past and present as well as future prospects as well and even fewer works have been conducted with a view to the future implications of the current equations in Syria for the regional order in the Middle East particularly as seen through the perspectives of RSC theory. It also has become clear that all three categories of the dominant oeuvre on the Syrian conflict, that is the *historical narrative* of pivotal trends and watershed events in Syria with a focus on domestic and exogenous factors, *actors-specific* analyses focusing predominantly on the role of external actors and exogenous factors, and the *theory-oriented* approaches incorporating the dimensions mentioned above, have made significant contributions in order to produce original insights into and enhance our understanding of the various dimensions of the ongoing conflict in Syria. Nevertheless,

in all three categories less attention has been accorded to the role of rigorous theorization, forecasting and methodological plurality- all of which constitute the main contributions of this study. Therefore, due to its contemporary nature, the bulk of the existing scholarship has taken the form of journalistic analyses to merely express the nature of interactions and actors' interests under the current conditions. On the contrary, not only does the present research attempt to distance itself from such a journalistic approach by applying a theoretical framework and the pluralist research method but it also takes a further step to study the question from a broader perspective by employing a futures-oriented approach.

Furthermore, given that Iran, Turkey and Russia consider the Syrian issue one of their top foreign policy priorities, this research will also help generate policy papers that have relevance for diplomats and policy matters. In the academic sphere, the results of this study can offer domestic and international academic communities an alternative viewpoint on the Syrian issue that is up-to-date, original and based on first-hand data which in turn can serve as a subject for further research. Another feature of the research is that it will simultaneously binds the three areas of geopolitics, security studies and strategic studies together for the purpose of producing an inter-sectoral analysis.

Having clarified these shortcomings, the proceeding chapter seeks to present the analytical framework of this research and provide explanations as to why the Regional Security Complex theory has been chosen as the theoretical prism and how it can be linked to the Syrian case.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 2.1. SECURITY: FROM REGIONS TO COMPLEXES

This study will adopt Regional Security Complex Theory as developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver in order to analyze the dynamics of bilateral and trilateral relations between and among Iran, Russia and Turkey, most specifically in the context of the Syrian conflict and further examine the impact of the trio's foreign policy activism on the Middle East regional security order.

The RSC theory, which was first expounded by Buzan in the first edition of *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the post-Cold War Era*, emphasizes the *centrality of regions* in the study of security dynamics.<sup>68</sup> The theory's emphasis on regions and territoriality marks a clear distinction from neorealist perspective in the sense that the former puts a premium on the system level of analysis to study international relations whereas the latter accentuates the importance of the regional level of analysis, seeking to illustrate that the three levels of analysis (individual, unit, and system) fail to adequately explain the overall security dynamics after the Cold-War. As Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde argue, while subscribing to the designation of the state as the primary unit of analysis and retaining the principal postulates of structural realism, the RSC theory is premised on the assumption that in the post-Cold War world, international relations has taken on a more regionalized character".<sup>69</sup> And by regionalized character of the post-Cold War international environment, Buzan and other proponents of the RSC theory do not exactly mean *regionalism*, primarily because regionalism, often referred to as *new regionalism*, is widely seen as "the growth of societal integration within a region and ... the often undirected process of social and economic interaction".<sup>70</sup> Hence, care must be taken not to conflate these two terms together and use them interchangeably particularly

---

<sup>68</sup> Barry Buzan. **People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era**, ECPR Press, 2016.

<sup>69</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap D. Wilde. **Security a New Framework for Analysis**, Lynne Rienner: Boulder, 2013, p. 9-11.

<sup>70</sup> John Baylis, et al. **The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations**, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, p. 402.

when we talk of regional security complexes. Consequently, one should be mindful that the rationale behind Buzan and Wæver's emphasis on the regionalized character of the post-Cold War world lies in the very assumption that the termination of the ideological battle between the Soviet Union and the United States did not bring an end to the states' desire to fight wars. It set in motion a significant alteration in nature and locus of conflict and cooperation under which conflicts in the so-called periphery of the global system—Northeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere became more of a threat to the national and international security. To put it another way, the abrupt collapse of bipolarity diminished the effects of the global system on regional security dynamics and national decisions and set in motion a “restoration of regional sovereignty”.<sup>71</sup> As a result, just as the penchant of external powers for domination of and/or penetration into the local (security) complexes subsided, regions of the world began to undergo significant power shifts which enabled them to bring about dynamics that could be meaningfully independent from global and systemic pressures.<sup>72</sup>

The post-Cold War regionalization of security, or better say the growing awareness to the understanding of “regionness” evinced itself in conflicts throughout the Middle East (i.e. Persian Gulf war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), in the Balkans (the former Yugoslavia), and in Africa.<sup>73</sup> The assertion, however, is that the RSC theory's conceptualization of regions does not connote that regions are a new phenomenon; rather it professes that in the Cold War period, the global *overlay* of great powers masked regional variations whereas after the Cold War, the pervasive global overlay came to a halt and regions became more salient objects of study than ever before.<sup>74</sup> As such, the gist of RSC theory is that the post-Cold War environment has largely been characterized by the relative autonomy of regional security relations and that the import of regional sub-systems should not be overlooked in security analysis. As Buzan contends,

*Comprehensive security analysis requires that one take particular care to investigate how the regional level mediates the interplay between states and the international system as a whole. Unless that level is properly comprehended,*

---

<sup>71</sup> Raimo Vayrynen. “Regionalism: Old and New”, **International Studies Review**, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2003, p. 28.

<sup>72</sup> Robert E. Kelly. “Security Theory in the ‘New Regionalism’”, **International Studies Review**, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2007, p. 199.

<sup>73</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**, Penn State Press, 1997, p. 48.

<sup>74</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, p. 45.

*neither the position of the local states in relation to each other, nor the character of relations between the great powers and local states can be understood properly.*<sup>75</sup>

Seen in this light, one of the key logics of the RSC theory is rooted in the assumption that “efforts to cope with conflict and to promote security are frequently occurring within regional security complexes, rather than at the global level.”<sup>76</sup> Analogous to this argument, what RSC theory intends to emphasize is that regional complexes are indeed the byproducts of the anarchic structure but at the same time they are subsystems—miniature anarchies—in their own right.<sup>77</sup> It means that regional complexes have idiosyncratic structures of their own that are not necessarily identical to the broader international structure.

Having sketched out the main differences between regionalism and the regionalizing logic of RSC theory, a number of important questions arises as to: what are these *security complexes* and what kind of significance do they entail in studying security dynamics at both regional and international levels? What are the constitutive components of these security complexes and how can the theory itself provide us with a rigorous analytical framework that can best explain the regional conflict and cooperation patterns as well as the spillovers they generate in regions such as the Middle East? How and in what specific ways can the RSC theory be relevant to the subject of inquiry in this dissertation and what benefits does the theoretical lens offer that those other theories do not? Specifically, how is it conceivable, in both theoretical and empirical ways, to analyze the impact of the Syrian conflict and of the cooperative and sometimes conflictual dynamics in relations among and between Turkey, Russia, and Iran on the Middle East security complex? How can the RSC theory address the issue of regional order at both regional and global levels in light of the Syrian conflict?

---

<sup>75</sup> Barry Buzan. **People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era**, ECPR Press, 2016, p. 158.

<sup>76</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 343.

<sup>77</sup> Barry Buzan. “Regional Security Complex Theory in the Post-Cold War World”, **Theories of New Regionalism**, Fredrik Söderbaum and Timothy M. Shaw, Palgrave Macmillan, Chapter 8, p. 143.



## 2.2. REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY (RSCT) DEFINED

Buzan introduced the concept of ‘regional security complex’ first in his 1983 book titled *People, States and Fear* which unearthed the oft-ignored importance of regional sub-system as the object of security analysis. In this volume, Buzan defined a security complex as “a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another.”<sup>78</sup> Seven years later, Buzan and his colleagues, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, built extensively on their previous theoretical framework by incorporating a new constructivist dimension to it in order to interrogate the various workings of security and broaden the security agenda so as to engage political, economic, societal, environmental sectors on top of the traditional focus—that is military sector. There, Buzan and his colleagues enriched their RSC theory and, on this basis, described a security complex as “a set of states whose major security perceptions and concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another.”<sup>79</sup> It was in 2003, however, that Buzan and Wæver provided a fully-fledged formulation of the RSC theory in their seminal book *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. By problematizing the neorealist creed’s tendency to overstress the role of great powers and downplay the emergence of regionalized international security, and by dint of injecting constructivist elements into their theoretical framework, the RSC theoreticians proffered a standard definition of a security complex as “a set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another.”<sup>80</sup>

As can be seen, the RSC theory has undergone a conceptual development commensurate with the paradigmatic transformations the world has witnessed ever since the end of the Cold War. In so far as its theoretical ripeness is concerned, the RSC framework can best be seen as an analytic fusion between some of the basic

---

<sup>78</sup> Barry Buzan. **People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era**, ECPR Press, 2016, p. 160.

<sup>79</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap D. Wilde. **Security a New Framework for Analysis**, Lynne Rienner: Boulder, 2013, p. 12.

<sup>80</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 44.

features of neo-realism and constructivism. In the words of one scholar, “the global map presented in *Regions and Powers* sketches a graticule of mutually exclusive RSCs, whose patterns of amity and enmity are dependent upon both proximity and specific roles (enemy, rival, friend). The latter aspect is a particular influence of constructivist theory, which Buzan and Wæver take on board in order to improve the depth of their propositions.”<sup>81</sup>

Seen in this light, it is safe to assert that the RSC theory has, on the one hand, borrowed from the Wendtian constructivism to underscore the existence of dichotomous categories such as *friend/enemy*, and *us/them* which are essential to understanding the patterns of amity and enmity among the units of a specific RSC and, on the other hand, has further infused these ideational precepts with neorealism’s principal assumptions such as the balance of power, anarchic structure of international system, and polarity—except that the RSC theory seeks to ensure that regional sub-systems are given their proper and independent weight in security analysis.

With this in mind, the global map according to Buzan and Wæver is populated by three types of units: mutually exclusive RSCs, insulator states, and global actors.<sup>82</sup> With regard to RSCs, it is important to note that the essential structure of security complexes—that is the benchmark according to which one can evaluate major transformations in a regional complex—is composed of three key components: 1) the arrangement of the units and the differentiation among them, 2) the patterns of amity and enmity among the principal units, 3) the distribution of capabilities among these units. Nevertheless, the variables that constitute the essential structure of a regional

---

<sup>81</sup> Emilian Kavalski. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, **Cambridge University Press Book Review**, 2013, [https://inspirejournal.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/k-avalski01\\_regions\\_and\\_powers\\_review.pdf](https://inspirejournal.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/k-avalski01_regions_and_powers_review.pdf), (21.06.2021).

<sup>82</sup> It is important to note that “insulator position” is defined as a “location occupied by one or more units where larger regional security dynamics stand back-to-back. Also, mention must be made that Buzan and Wæver make a clear distinction between superpowers, great powers and regional powers. For more details see, Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 41. In this thesis, the author uses Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier’s definition of regional powers as certain states that play a disproportionally critical role in the creation, maintenance and possibly breakdown of regional security. These states not only define the structure of their regional system but also drive its order. While the possession of a sufficient quantity of relative capabilities is essential for a state to be a regional power, it is also the relationship that they have to the process of the regional system that makes them a regional power. See, Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier. **Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework**, Routledge, 2012, pp. 2-7. By this definition, Iran is considered a regional power while Russia and Turkey are regarded as extra-regional powers and the US is categorized as a superpower.

security complex are as follows: *boundaries*, *an anarchic structure*, *polarity* and *social construction* (pattern of amity and enmity among the units). These variables serve as independent variables that influence the various dynamics of relations among different actors and the essential structure as well.<sup>83</sup> For example, polarity pertains to the power distribution of the units and boundaries refer to the geographical borders between a regional complex and its adjacent neighbors.

Taking all the above-mentioned factors into consideration in analyzing the dynamics within RSCs, the Regional Security Complex theory posits that the effects of transformations on a security complex can be divided into four distinct types: maintenance of the status quo (unchanged essential structure), external transformation (change in essential structure/*boundary* changes), internal transformation (a change in the balance of power, polarity and the patterns of amity/enmity) and overlay (external powers introducing themselves into a security complex). For the purpose of clarity, maintenance of the status-quo occurs when there is no change in the four variable that constitute the essential structure—that is when boundaries, an anarchical structure, polarity and the patterns of amity and enmity remain the same as before the external actors' intervention. Otherwise, the external transformation takes place. The collapse of the Soviet Union or the decolonization process in the Middle East and North Africa are stellar cases in point. As regards internal transformation, one can point to examples such as the foundation of Israel and even the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, or ISIS) within the Middle East Regional Security Complex. The concept of overlay is central to understanding the role of external actors in a specific local security complex and the various possible ways in which members of a complex interact with the outside state(s). In so far as the scope and aim of this dissertation is concerned, it is of vital importance to highlight the last two effects of transformations on a security complex, namely the internal transformation and overlay, simply because this study claims that the Levant sub-complex has ever since the onset of the Syrian conflict has undergone meaningful internal transformations and overlays by Russia, Turkey and Iran. This study will provide a comprehensive analysis of these dynamics based on the RSC theory in the proceeding chapters but it would be remiss not to

---

<sup>83</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 11.

mention a few words about the salience of the concept/function of overlay from a theoretical perspective.

In Buzan's opinion, overlay happens "when the direct presence of outside powers in a region is strong enough to suppress the normal operation of regional security dynamics among the local units."<sup>84</sup> Overlay, often times, results in the long-term deployment of external powers' military forces in a specific complex and "the alignment of the local states according to the patterns of power rivalry."<sup>85</sup> It must be borne in mind that one should distinguish between intervention and overlay primarily because the former usually "reinforces the local security dynamics" whereas the latter subordinates the local dynamics to the larger pattern of major power rivalries, and may even obliterate them."<sup>86</sup> For instance, the colonization of the Third World by European powers and the United States engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq are considered overlays. As can be seen, the overlaying states tend to change the local power dynamic by "imposing their own direct presence on the entire complex."<sup>87</sup> External powers can embark on this endeavor in two ways: "either by joining a local complex, if they are adjacent, or by making alignments within it, whether they are either adjacent and/or members of a higher-level complex."<sup>88</sup>

As a general rule of thumb, extra-regional powers can influence a certain RSC in four specific ways: First, they can have little or no involvement in an RSC such that security orders are driven primarily by regional power behavior and regional structure alone (for example, the current South African RSC). Second, they can influence regional structure in ways that could alter the distribution of capabilities (for example, USSR military aid to Nasser's Egypt in 1955-1972). Third, these states can influence

---

<sup>84</sup> Barry Buzan. "Regional Security Complex Theory in the Post-Cold War World", **Theories of New Regionalism**, Fredrik Söderbaum and Timothy M. Shaw, Palgrave Macmillan, Chapter 8, p. 143.

<sup>85</sup> Brendon J. Cannon and Federico Donelli. "Asymmetric Alliances and High Polarity: Evaluating Regional Security Complexes in the Middle East and Horn of Africa", **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2019, p. 508., Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**. Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 61.

<sup>86</sup> Barry Buzan, p. 143. In this book chapter, Buzan states that both concepts are different from penetration which usually refers to the situation in which one or more external powers move directly into the regional complex. Nevertheless, some scholars argue that the distinction among the three terms are rapidly fading away.

<sup>87</sup> Barry Buzan. **People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era**, ECPR Press, 2016, p. 176.

<sup>88</sup> Barry Buzan. **People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era**, ECPR Press, 2016, p. 176.

the behavior of regional powers in ways that could encourage, deter, or reverse their actions (for example, USSR military support to Angola versus South Africa). Fourth, extra-regional great powers can directly alter the security order itself (for example, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003).<sup>89</sup>

As can be gleaned from these caveats, one of the central theses of this study is that just as Afghanistan and Iraq were *overlaid* by the U.S. in the post-colonial era,<sup>90</sup> the Levant sub-complex of the Middle East regional security complex has ever since the onset of the Syrian civil war experienced mounting overlays by Iran (a member of the Persian Gulf sub-complex), Russia, and Turkey (an insular state) as the three states have made military interventions in the country. Hence, the Russia-Turkey-Iran overlays in the Levant sub-complex have potential implications for the future of regional security order in the Middle East as Russia, an outside state, penetrates more effectively into the sub-complex via creating convergences of interests with both Iran and Turkey and thereby seeks to introduce itself as an alternative to the United States.

Before an assessment of the afore-mentioned dynamics on the Middle East regional order ensues, it is imperative to gain insights about the term Middle East regional security complex and the constitutive components of MERSC. According to Buzan and Wæver, a regional security complex has appeared in the Middle East since the end of the decolonization period (1945-1948). The Middle East RSC, which consists of approximately 20 states ranging from Morocco (and Western Sahara) to Iran, has been characterized by a high degree of local conflicts and a prevailing U.S. presence. Since the end of the Cold War, the Middle East RSC has undergone colossal and tectonic transformations such as the Gulf War, Arab-Israeli conflict, the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring and the resultant civil war in Syria, the rise of the Islamic Caliphate and the intense geopolitical and ideological rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. All of these transformations have taken place in the context of what

---

<sup>89</sup> Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll. "Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order Within Regional Security Complexes", **European Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2010, p. 734.

<sup>90</sup> Ramazan Erdağ. **Libya in the Arab Spring: From Revolution to Insecurity**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 12.

Buzan and Wæver refer to as a 4+1 global power structure with the U.S. remaining as a superpower, and Russia, China, the EU, Japan as great powers.<sup>91</sup>

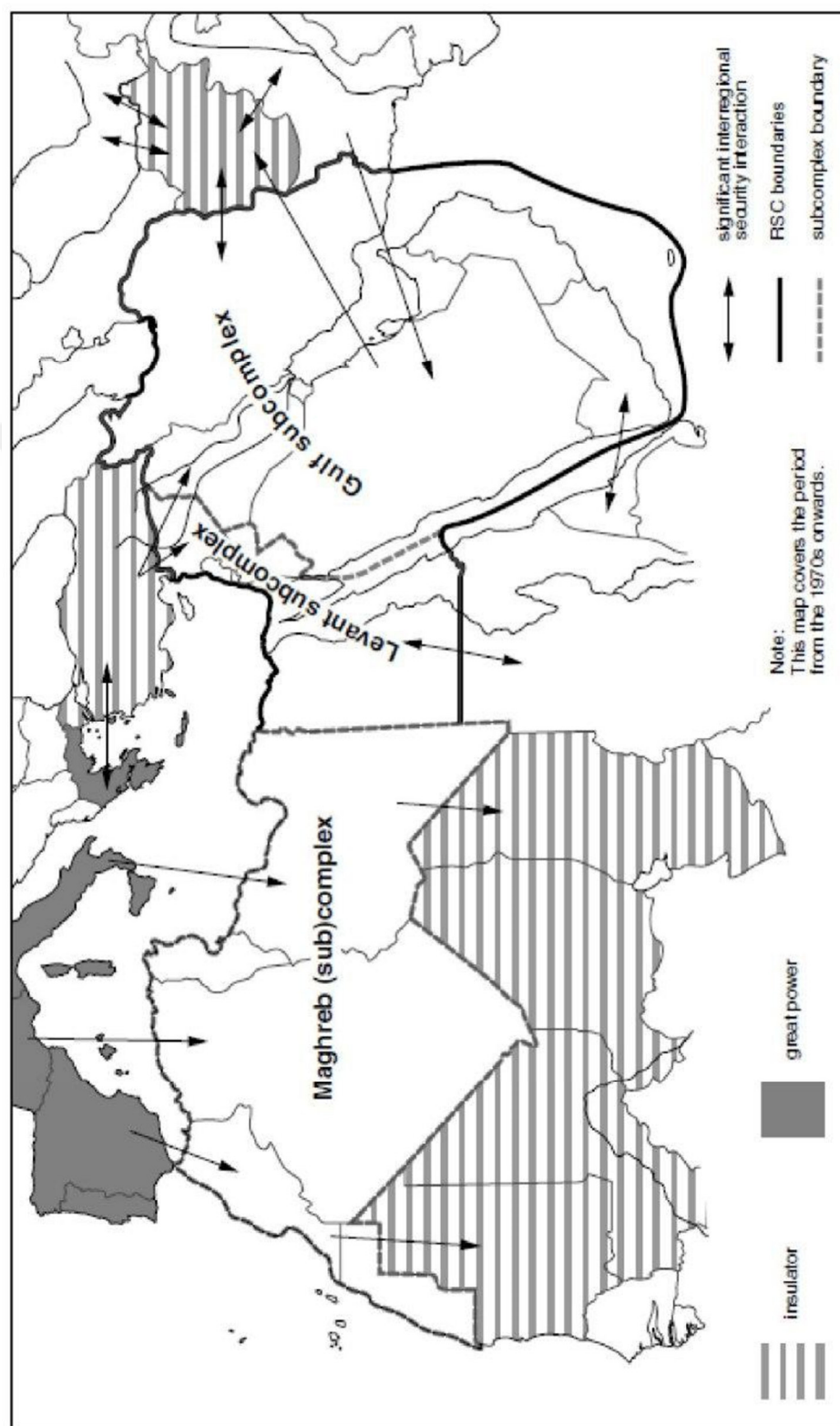
Most importantly, Buzan and Wæver argue that gradually three sub-complexes have emerged in the MENA region, two of which are centered in the Mashreq (Levant) and the Persian Gulf, with a less significant one in Maghreb.<sup>92</sup> Located in the center of Middle East RSC, the Levant sub-complex includes Israel with occupied Palestine territories, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. The Persian Gulf sub-complex is composed of Iran, Iraq and all the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), namely: Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. The Persian Gulf sub-complex is located in the eastern periphery of the Middle East RSC and is considered the largest sub-complex in the MERSC. Finally, the Maghreb sub-complex, which is located in the western periphery of the Middle East RSC, comprises states in Western Sahara, and Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. (See the following map of the Middle East Regional Security Complex).

---

<sup>91</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 446.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Seeberg. "Analyzing Security Subcomplexes in a Changing Middle East—the Role of Non-Arab State Actors and Non-State Actors", **Palgrave Communications**, Vol. 2, 2016. p. 2.

**Figure 1:** Middle East Regional Security Complex Map



Source: Buzan and Waever, 2004, p. 187.

Having discussed these typology, four caveats are noteworthy: First, according to the RSC theoreticians each sub-complex within the MERSC has a remarkable capacity to affect the other, i.e. the Levant sub-complex can influence the Persian Gulf sub-complex in one way or another, and vice versa.<sup>93</sup> Second, regional powers have a unique and significant impact on the development and management of security orders at the regional levels.<sup>94</sup> Third, the United States participates deeply in a regional security complex that also remains dependent upon power-balancing, although a nascent concert may be forming among some regional powers.<sup>95</sup> Fourth, a regional conflict can be defined as one taking place within a regional security complex and seen by the members as having considerable relevance to their security and associated relationships.”<sup>96</sup>

As attested to by the four caveats, the contagious spillover effects of security dynamics in regional security complexes and sub-complexes, the role of regional powers in establishing security arrangements which in return may contribute to the formation of regional security orders, the role of great (super-) powers in various dynamics within RSCs, and the ways in which a regional conflict can force units within a RSC to recalibrate their foreign and security policies are important variables in analyzing security dynamics in regional complexes. If one melds these variables with those of factors that constitute the essential structure of RSCs, namely *boundaries*, *an anarchic structure*, *polarity* and *social construction* (pattern of amity and enmity among the units), it will be possible to use these yardsticks to analyze the dynamics in the Middle East complex in general and the Levant sub-complex in particular.

Here another important caveat is called for: in order to gain a better understanding of the possible emergence and variation of *regional order* in the Middle East, it is imperative to buttress the RSC theory with an analytical tool to find answers to our research questions about the roles and orientations of key regional actors (Turkey, Russia, and Iran) in Syria and, most importantly, what kind of security order, if any, can be envisioned for the region. The issue of *order* is considered foundational

---

<sup>93</sup> Ramazan Erdağ. **Libya in the Arab Spring: From Revolution to Insecurity**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 2.

<sup>94</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, pp. 6-7.

<sup>95</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, p. 351.

<sup>96</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, p. 31.



primarily because as Ikenberry once stated “the central problem of international relations is the problem of order—how it is devised, how it breaks down, and how it is recreated.”<sup>97</sup>

### **2.3. THE NEXUS BETWEEN REGIONAL POWERS AND SECURITY FRAMEWORK (RPSF) AND REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY (RSCT)**

By this logic, this dissertation endeavors to use RSC theory with its neorealist-constructivist elements that we discussed previously as the main theoretical lens and blend it with the Regional Powers and Security Framework (RPSF) as espoused by Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll to achieve two sets of goals in line with the research questions of this study: First, to gain insights about interactions and actions of not just the regional powers (Iran and Turkey) with a regional sub-complex (i.e. Levant sub-complex) but also the behaviors of external (great) powers (Russia) in introducing themselves into a security complex (Middle East RSC) as evidenced by the military interventions of Iran, Turkey and Russia in Syria. Second, to explain how a regional conflict such as the ongoing Syrian conflict in which regional actors and global powers are simultaneously involved, can potentially impact the various security dynamics in the Middle East RSC and create conditions of possibility for major shifts and colossal transformations in regional security architecture.

The RPSF spells out three important essential factors that help us find answers to these questions: regional structure, regional power roles and regional power orientations. By way of seeking to determine whether states are playing the roles of regional powers, and which orientations they are demonstrating by the manner in which they play these roles, Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll’s aim is three-fold: (1) to provide a systematic method through which to identify regional powers; (2) to provide a systematic method through which the influence of regional powers upon the development of their regional security orders can be analyzed; and (3) to provide a

---

<sup>97</sup> John Ikenberry. **After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars**, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 22.

basis upon which comparative analysis of the efforts of regional powers within different security complexes can be performed.<sup>98</sup>

In so far as this research is concerned, one of the primary reasons for inclusion of RPSF into the RSC theory is that the former provides us with a concrete framework for understanding security orders in RSCs by virtue of highlighting three specific roles and sets of orientations with respect to the influence of regional powers. Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll identify three types of regional power roles (leadership, custodianship, and protection), along with three dimensions of foreign policy orientation (status quo-revisionist, unilateral-multilateral, and proactive-reactive) to address how regional orders are defined and how regional orders function.<sup>99</sup>

As regards the three types of foreign policy roles, the leadership role refers to regional powers' ability to strongly influence other RSC members to move towards security policy decisions and strategic preferences that are favorable to their own. The custodianship role accounts for efforts by regional powers to actively maintain and/or stabilize the current security order within a certain RSC ranging from those aimed at acting against internal and external threats to efforts such as conflict management, peacekeeping and mediation. The protection role is markedly different from the previous ones in that the focus of protection is outside of the RSC. It implies that a regional power assumes the burden of defending the area from external security threat by means of engaging in activities such as deflecting a power or problematic issue from the region in an active capacity or through traditional preventative deterrence.<sup>100</sup>

As regards the three dimensions of foreign policy orientation, it bears emphasizing that Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll define orientation as "inclination, disposition, or preferences of a state with respect to the development and maintenance of the security order."<sup>101</sup> The relevance of foreign policy orientation to regional power role and the notion of regional order is largely attributed to the fact that regional power

---

<sup>98</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier. **Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework**, Routledge, 2012, p. 226.

<sup>99</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, p. 41., Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll. Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order Within Regional Security Complexes, **European Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2010, p. 748.

<sup>100</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, p. 122.

<sup>101</sup> Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll. Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order Within Regional Security Complexes, **European Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2010, p. 744.

orientation serves as an important variable in determining “how roles are likely to be expressed in attempts to achieve a state’s preferences for a particular type of security order.”<sup>102</sup> The regional powers’ orientation can be analyzed along three axes. The status quo/revisionist axis refers to a regional power’s satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the RSC’s status-quo order. Analogous to the state of affairs at the level of international system, status quo powers within a certain RSC are those state which are content with preservation of the essential characteristics of the existing order and the general distribution of power within that RSC.<sup>103</sup>

In this context, both the leadership and custodianship roles imply that regional powers may actively seek to develop and maintain a status quo order within their RSC. The multilateral-unilateral axis relates to the question as to whether or not a regional power’s orientation is towards taking actions aimed at developing rules and patterns of interaction among member states with a focus on expectations of reciprocity or taking actions geared towards an individualist sense of security with a primary accent on relative gains and short-term interests.<sup>104</sup> Finally, the proactive-reactive axis accounts for a regional power’s motivation to respond to *specific* and *immediate* actions or events. On the basis of the RPSF, a regional power is reactive if it falls short of either taking independent or multilateral initiatives whereas a regional power is regarded as proactive if it is willing and capable enough to initiate changes in the security dynamics of a certain RSC in ways that are diffuse and long-term oriented.<sup>105</sup>

---

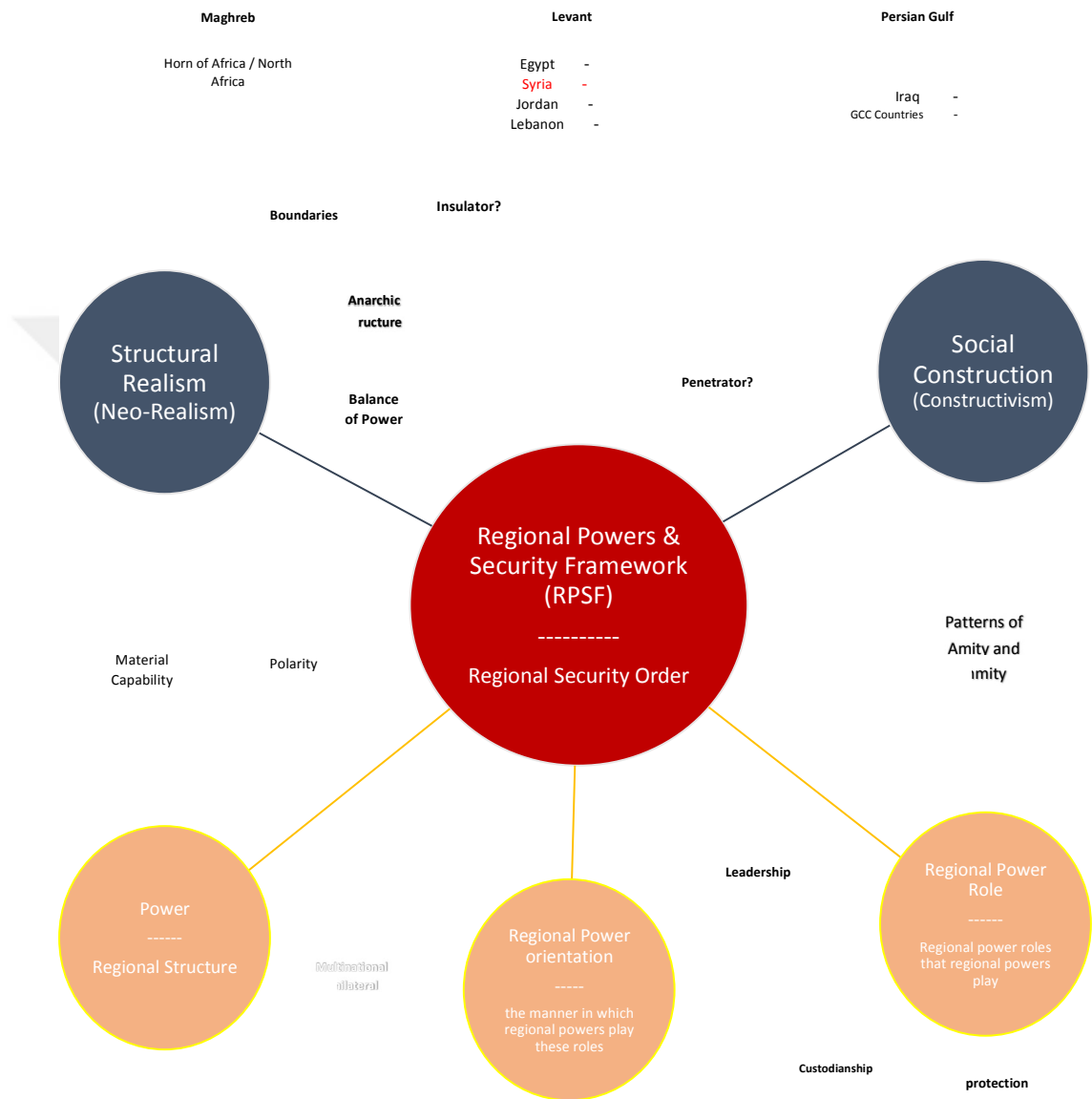
<sup>102</sup> Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll, p. 744.

<sup>103</sup> Randall L. Scheweller, **Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler’s Strategy of World Conquest**, Columbia University Press: New York, 1998, p. 24.

<sup>104</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier. **Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework**, Routledge, 2012, p. 180-201.

<sup>105</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, pp. 203-206.

**Figure 2: Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) + Regional Powers and Security Framework (RPSF)**



Source: Designed by the author

As the authors of the RPSF argue, it is the combination of these roles and orientations discussed above, along with the RSC's structure and its interactions with

significant external powers that drive the regional security order.<sup>106</sup> The incorporation of these variables is critically important when examined in the context of structural factors that are attributed to the neorealist dimension of the RSC theory (balance of power, polarity, anarchic structure) as well as ideational factors that are germane to the constructivist elements of RSC theory, namely the patterns of amity and enmity. The Syrian conflict is thus a litmus test of our RSCT-RPSF theoretical framework to examine, for instance, which kind of roles and orientations regional powers such as Iran and Turkey may have exhibited by dint of entering into an alliance with Russia under the Astana Peace Process and also to capture the various ways in which they have attempted to influence the security dynamics not only within a specific security sub-complex such as the Levant but also within the Middle East RSC as a whole. The key question therefore is what specific impacts, if any, the Syrian conflict may have on the Middle East regional security order.

Influenced by Morgan's conceptualization of the regional security order as the "patterns of management that can provide a modicum of security" within RSCs, the authors of RPSF take regional powers and their *agential* role in defining regional order very seriously.<sup>107</sup> As Henry Kissinger once stated, "the contemporary quest for world order will require a coherent strategy to establish a concept of order within the various regions and to relate these regional orders to another."<sup>108</sup> In a similar vein, Amitav Acharya posits that in contradistinction to the conventional belief among liberal thinkers who see regionalism as a threat to world order, the maintenance of world order depends on regional orders.<sup>109</sup> Such a sobering statement begs greater scrutiny at this critical juncture in world politics as many pundits in the academic and think-tank communities raise an important question: whether the Trump Doctrine constitute an impetuous surrender of the American hegemony that has characterized the Middle East

---

<sup>106</sup> Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll. "Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order Within Regional Security Complexes", **European Journal of International Relations**, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2010, p. 748)

<sup>107</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 332.

<sup>108</sup> Henry Kissinger. "Henry Kissinger on the Assembly of a New World Order", **Wall Street Journal**, 29.08.2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/henry-kissinger-on-the-assembly-of-a-new-world-order-1409328075>, (11.10.2020).

<sup>109</sup> Amitav Acharya. "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order", **Ethics & International Affairs**, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2017, p. 279.

regional order since the 1980s.<sup>110</sup> It is against the backdrop of the ongoing uncertainties about the future of U.S. foreign policy in general and the future prospects of the U.S. engagement in the Middle East in particular that Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll's emphasis on regional powers and regional orders gain relevance.

Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll define the regional security order as "the governing arrangements among the units of a regional system, including their rules, principles and institutions, which are designed to make security-related interactions predictable and to sustain collectively salient goals and values related to patterns of securitization and de-securitization."<sup>111</sup> As can be seen, the RPSF's focus on *patterns of management* that are intended to promote security within the region is in many ways illustrative of the "mechanism side of the order concept" in RSC theory.<sup>112</sup> Add to this argument the Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll's assertion that "certain states, from among regional and great powers, play a disproportionately critical role in the creation, maintenance and possibly breakdown of regional security orders."<sup>113</sup> Taking these two observations into consideration a number of key questions arise as to 1) how (extra) regional (great) powers, either within or outside RSCs, can influence patterns of management and security dynamics in a certain RSC, 2) how one can classify various types of regional security orders. The claim here is that Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll provide cogent answers to the above-mentioned questions as they divide regional security orders into four categories, namely hegemony-based, strength-based, concert-based, integration based, and unordered.<sup>114</sup>

What can be distilled from the preceding classifications is that in the case of the Syrian conflict—which has occurred in the Levant sub-complex of the broader Middle East RSC— although Turkey and Russia are considered powers outside the

---

<sup>110</sup> See, Sean Yom. "US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Logic of Hegemonic Retreat", **Global Policy**, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2020, pp. 75-83., Joseph S. Nye, JR. "The Rise and Fall of American Hegemony from Wilson to Trump", **International Affairs**, Vol. 95, No. 1, 2019, pp. 63-80., F Gregory Gause III. "Should We Stay or Should We Go? The United States and the Middle East", **Survival**, Vol. 61, No. 5, 2019, pp. 7-24., Albert B. Wolf. "Strategies of Retrenchment: Rethinking America's Commitments to the Middle East", **Comparative Strategy**, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2020, pp. 94-100., Joan Polaschik, Geoffrey Kemp and Daniel Benaim. "The Future of US Engagement in the Middle East, Symposium: Future of US Engagement", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2019, pp. 5-30.

<sup>111</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier. **Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework**, Routledge, 2012, p. 229.

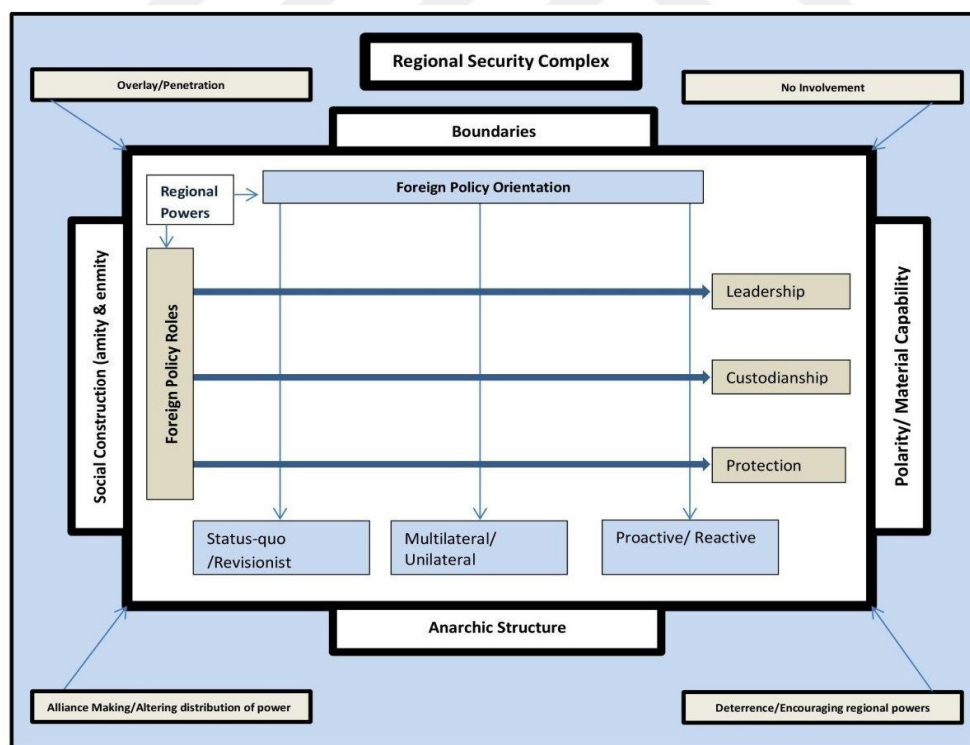
<sup>112</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, p. 21.

<sup>113</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, p. 2.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, p. 26.

original MERSC and Iran is regarded as a member of the Persian Gulf sub-complex, all three players have exploited the Syrian crisis in order to introduce themselves into the Middle East RSC via overlays and by making alignments with other key players within the MERSC. It is argued that the trio states' engagement in the Syrian conflict has apparently afforded them a unique opportunity to embark on altering the patterns of management within Middle East RSC, thereby contributing to debunking regional security order in line with their national and geopolitical interests. Most notably, the Syrian conflict poses important challenges to the position of Turkey as an insulator state located at the margins of the three RSCs—the European Union, the Middle East. It has been acknowledged by the RSC theoreticians that Turkey fits into the category of insulator state but one can argue that Turkey's foreign policy activism in the Middle East as evidenced by its military interventions in Syria and fierce engagements with Iran, Iraq, and Libya has turned Turkey into a pole in the MERSC.

**Figure 3:** RSCT+RPSF Analytical Framework



Source: Designed by the author

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **SYRIAN CONFLICT AND IRAN-TURKEY-RUSSIA RELATIONS**

#### **3.1. THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: THE EVOLUTION OF TURKEY-RUSSIA-IRAN PARTNERSHIP IN THE LEVANT**

More than a decade into the Syrian civil war, Syria remains a geopolitical chessboard on which a bewildering number of regional and extra-regional actors are ceaselessly jostling for power and influence. As of writing this dissertation, the fate of Syrian President Bashar al Assad hangs in the balance, the future prospects of a possible military withdrawal of the key stakeholders of the conflict, including the Iran, and Turkey and Russia along with their proxy forces are blurry and the peace efforts undertaken by bodies such as the United Nations or within the context of the Astana Peace Process have yet to yield concrete and reliable results. The situation in Syria is very complex and fluid due in part to the protean nature of the conflict in which alliances between a multiplicity of state and not-state actors have been constantly shifting and all key players need to adjust their security and foreign policies in tandem with regional and global developments and factor into domestic-level variables in their foreign policy decision-making.

As mentioned in the methodological part of the dissertation, despite the vicissitudes inherent in any regional or international security arrangements which partly derive from “the perennial problem of uncertainty of international life”, the pattern of events and trends provide the context within which one can gain insights into where the relevant actors and determinants of foreign policy change might be heading and what kind of possible or probable outcomes can be logically perceivable in near and distant future.<sup>115</sup> As regards the Syrian conflict, the argument here is that the Astana Peace Process brokered by Russia, Turkey and Iran in early 2017 can arguably qualify as the most prominent and dominant framework for conflict management in the context of the Syrian debacle under which the so-called “guarantors of peace” regularly interfere with the patterns of events and trends related to the

---

<sup>115</sup> Fareed Zakaria. **From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role**, Princeton University Press, Princeton, p. 20.



conflict by means of diplomacy. It is important to note, however, that the Astana Peace Process is not *the* sole peace initiative aimed at resolving the Syrian conflict. Since the onset of the civil war in Syria, five peace initiatives were launched by regional and global actors: the Arab League Plan, the UN plans which were set up mainly by UN Special Envoys for Syria, the Geneva Conferences, the Vienna Peace Talks which was initiated in 2015, and the Astana Peace Process whose first meeting was held in January 2017.<sup>116</sup> As can be seen, the peace initiatives to narrow down the differences among the warring parties and achieve a peaceful solution to the Syrian conflict are aplenty, but none of the conflict resolution platforms cited above have been as effective and durable as the Astana Peace Process. In so far as the durability of peace initiatives is concerned, the existing record regarding the UN initiatives, for example, show that the Six-Point Peace Plan submitted in March 2012 by Kofi Annan, the joint United Nations and Arab League envoy to Syria, failed to result in ceasing hostilities among the parties and launching an “inclusive Syrian-led political process”. In a similar vein, the Arab League Plan, which was the first initiative to end the Syrian civil war, faced a somewhat similar dénouement as the Syrian government and the opposition parties’ agreement to curb violence went down the drain. Similarly, the Vienna Peace Talks which coincided with the UNSC’s ratification of the Resolution 2254 to achieve a ceasefire and end the conflict did not avail primarily because the opposition factions could not reach an agreement on who would represent the Syrian opposition at a time when Iran and Russia also intensified their support for Bashar al Assad. The Geneva Conferences, aka Geneva peace talks on Syria, which began under the auspices of the UN in February 2017 and concluded in March 2017, did not deliver any meaningful solutions to the conflict either but it laid the foundations for the Astana Peace Process. Primarily focused on establishing a ceasefire and, later on, the creation of de-escalation zones, the Astana Peace Process was not intended to supplant the UN-led Geneva talks nor was it able to develop an immediate political solution to the Syrian conflict.

Nevertheless, if more than 16 rounds of Astana talks since January 2017 to this date (December 2021) are anything to go by, one can claim that although the talks have had limited success in establishing an all-encompassing Syrian political dialogue, the

---

<sup>116</sup> Aytaç Kadioğlu. “International Peace Efforts in The Syrian Civil War: The ‘Inevitable’ Failure?”, **Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2020, pp. 13-43.

Astana model remains to be seen as the most serious attempt aimed at reaching a full-fledged peace settlement in comparison to other past and present negotiation platforms in which the Syrian military opposition were either absent or had a low-profile presence. It remains to be seen as to how the Astana process can be incorporated into the UN-led talks in Geneva or whether it can produce a successful and coherent mediation initiative conducive to securing a lasting political settlement.<sup>117</sup> But it is tenable to postulate that the Astana model serves as a main generator of patterns of cooperation and conflict among Turkey, Iran and Russia and herewith provides a trilateral *modus operandi* which significantly contributes to crafting a semblance of *security order* within the Levant sub-complex as the locus of the Syrian conflict. Widely viewed as a Russian initiative, the Astana platform should not be seen as merely a meeting point for key regional stakeholders to deliberate over high-priority problems. Although uncertainties exist about the long-term efficacy and durability of Russia, Iran and Turkey partnership, one of the central theses of this study is that Astana process should be viewed as a viable tactical security arrangement in which the three key military players of the conflict strive to develop a particular *mode of conflict management* that functions in ways that not only influence the security dynamics in Syria but also have the potential to provide a *modicum of security order* within the Levant sub-complex with possible spillover effects of that security order within the Middle East security complex.<sup>118</sup>

The Astana talks are of considerable importance primarily because “it is the ongoing Syrian conflict where the struggle between conflicting conceptions of regional order is most acute” and it is the failure or success of Syria talks that will to a large extent define the interests and positions of all major regional and global actors that are involved in this conflict.<sup>119</sup> One must be aware that the conflicting and competing conceptions of regional security order have come to the fore as the U.S. appears to be descending the ladder of Middle Eastern hegemonic preeminence

---

<sup>117</sup> Sinem Cengiz. “Assessing the Astana Peace Process for Syria: Actors, Approaches, and Differences”, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 202.

<sup>118</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 332.

<sup>119</sup> Steven Heydemann and Emelie Chace-Donahue. “Sovereignty Versus Sectarianism: Contested Norms and the Logic of Regional Conflict in the Greater Levant”, **The Levant: Search for a Regional Order**, Mustafa Aydin, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, December 2018, p. 32.

especially under the presidency of Donald Trump and Russia scrambles to fill the security void through creating patterns of management under Astana framework. The hasty quest for military interventions of key regional and extra-regional payers in the Syrian conflict can thus be construed as a corollary of the waning position of the US as the traditional provider of checks and balances in the Middle East.

The gradual decline of the U.S. role in the Middle East acts as a double-edged sword for the traditional U.S. allies in the Middle East such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, while simultaneously is seen as geopolitical godsend for revisionist states such as Iran and Russia and non-state actors such as the Islamic State and Hezbollah. For Turkey, the Obama administration's antipathy to U.S. military intervention in Syria and Washington's policy of arming the PKK/YPG under both Obama and Trump administrations are the primary cause of considerable discord between the two NATO allies. The list of U.S.-Turkey disagreement is by means exhaustive, but the main bones of contention cited above have raised the specter of *the Sevres Syndrome* in Turkish politics and society, reinforcing popular perceptions that outside forces are conspiring to weaken and carve up Turkey.<sup>120</sup> As the level of Turkey's threat perception of "the so-called devil triangle consisting PKK-PYD-Assad" and the rift between Ankara and Washington over a range of issues namely the Syria file and the 2016 abortive coup attempt increased, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) began to adapt to new geopolitical realities.<sup>121</sup> A full examination of the various security and geopolitical dynamics that contributed to Turkey's post-2015 foreign policy shift will be examined in the proceeding parts of this chapter but suffice it to say that the U.S.-Turkey divide had quite ironically provided Ankara with an opportunity to attenuate its border security and geopolitical concerns via tactical partnership with Russia and Iran under the Astana framework.

For Iran, the Syrian civil war was initially seen as the "U.S. and Western plot" to defeat the "axis of resistance" to which the Syrian regime belonged. Hence, Tehran sought to preserve and protect the *status quo ante* by means of i.e. suppression of

---

<sup>120</sup> Taner Akçam. **From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and The Armenian Genocide**, Zed Books, London, 2005, p. 230.

<sup>121</sup> Hossein Aghaie Joobani and Umut Can Adisönmez. "Turkey's Volte-Face Politics, Understanding the AKP's Securitization Policy towards the Syrian Conflict", **New Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2018, pp. 42-62.

opposition group and safeguarding Syrian territorial integrity at all costs.<sup>122</sup> The Syrian civil war was also related to Iran's conflict with Israel within the Levant sub-complex as well as to its conflict with Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf sub-complex—both of which are widely seen as the two conflict zones that have dominated the Middle East RSC for years.<sup>123</sup> In the words of one scholar, the demise of the Assad regime would not only mean the loss of Iran's closest ally, it would also represent one of the most serious geopolitical blows to the Islamic Republic since 1979 because the overthrow of Assad would, among other things, be tantamount to cutting Iran and Hezbollah's access to Lebanon.<sup>124</sup>

Another key factor that contributed greatly to intensification of Iranian threat perceptions in the Levant relates to Saudi Arabia's policy of drawing Syria into Riyadh's sphere of influence by means of countering Tehran's regional expansion and influence.<sup>125</sup> In fact, Saudi Arabia as the Custodian of the two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina and Iran as the self-proclaimed standard-bearer of Shia Islam slowly but surely developed patterns of enmity as the two regional powers' policies clashed over Syria at both ideational/normative and material/geopolitical levels. Therefore, the intensification of Saudi Arabia's proxy involvement in tandem with the Obama administration's reluctance to stage a Libya-style intervention in Syria factored gravely into Tehran's strategic calculations. By dispatching Hezbollah and other Shia militias from Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan and deploying its own troops (as military advisors) in 2014, Iran would not only succeed in saving the Assad regime but also make use of the rare opportunity to create a land corridor linking Iranian territory to the Mediterranean through the Levant.<sup>126</sup> It is worthwhile to emphasize that the United

---

<sup>122</sup> Sanam Vakil. "Understanding Tehran's Long Game in the Levant", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 15, No. 60, 2018, p. 117., Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict, **Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)**, 01.08.2016, p. 7, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/understanding-irans-role-syrian-conflict>, (26.11.2020).

<sup>123</sup> Soren Schmidt. "The Middle East Regional Security Complex", **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli (eds), Routledge, 2019.

<sup>124</sup> Thomas Juneau. "Iran's Costly Intervention in Syria: A Pyrrhic Victory", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2018, p. 31.

<sup>125</sup> Hasan Mohammad Almomani. "Saudi Arabia's Geopolitical Interests", **Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences**, Vol. 46, No. 4, 2019, p. 528.

<sup>126</sup> Sanam Vakil, p. 118., Itamar Rabinovich. "How Iran's Regional Ambitions Have Developed Since 1979", **Brookings**, 24.01.2019, p. 5, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/24/how-irans-regional-ambitions-have-developed-since-1979/>, (05.11.2020).

States' entry into the Syrian conflict, which first began at Kobane in 2014, might have thrown yet another wrench into the bilateral U.S.-Turkey relations but Tehran's reading of the U.S. engagement to counter ISIS campaigns in Syria was that it deviated Washington's focus from wading off Iran's medium/long-term strategy of building "strategic depth" via Shia proxies in the Levant and Persian Gulf sub-complexes. The foregoing assertion is particularly important because as Hinnebusch argues, the U.S. dominance had already begun to dwindle as the invasion of Iraq inadvertently emboldened Iran and the subsequent chorus of calls in and outside the U.S. against costly interventions pushed the Obama administration to resort to the policy of offshore balancing.<sup>127</sup>

As can be seen, the ambivalence of the Obama administration to wage a direct military campaign against Iran's foremost ally (Assad) and its backing of Turkey's arch enemy (PKK/YPG) can be viewed as two principal driving forces behind Tehran's and Ankara's proclivity to enter into a marriage of convenience with Moscow under the Astana framework. Intent on crafting new patterns of conflict management that seek, *inter alia*, to debunk the United States' attempts to create a "new Middle East" based solely on U.S. predominance at the expense of the regional actors' concerns, the three key participants of the Astana process joined forces, however tactically, to contribute to the formation of a new regional security architecture compatible with their own national and geopolitical interests. The relationship among Iran, Russia and Turkey, at both trilateral and bilateral levels, have been fraught with clashes of interests as evidenced by recurring disagreements among the 'guarantors of peace' on a variety of issues, namely the protracted conflict in the Idlib province, the situation in northwestern Syria, the contours of each actor's 'zone of influence' in Syria and not least the fate of Assad. Despite the divergences of interests that occur in light of the existing multiple conceptions of regional order in the Middle East, the Astana peace process has thus far provided a clear example where the three countries have been to a large degree successful in reconciling their contradictory policies in Syria and find common grounds on the basis of balancing their power and interests.

---

<sup>127</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch. "Thinking about the International Factor in the Syrian Crisis", **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli (eds), Routledge, 2019, p. 7.

### 3.2. ASTANA PEACE PROCESS: COOPERATION THROUGH COMPETITION

By October 2012, the tide of the Syrian civil war was turning against the Assad regime as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other rebel groups captured large swathes of territory in the governates of Homs, Idlib and Aleppo. Two months earlier, former U.S. President Barack Obama had stated in response to queries about the possibilities of U.S. military intervention in Syria that “We have been very clear to the Assad regime [...] that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus.”<sup>128</sup> Concurrently, the chorus of international calls for Assad to resign gained further traction in the second half of 2012. It all happened at a time when on the one hand Iran ratcheted up its military and financial assistance with the help of Hezbollah and on the other hand Russia deployed its navy to Tartous on multiple occasions: in summer 2010, and again in January 2013.<sup>129</sup> The Syrian rebels’ rapid advances were partially interrupted in late 2013 and 2014 as a result of a number of important factors and developments, including rapid involvement and relative success of Iran-backed militias in counter-insurgency operations alongside the Syrian Arab Army as well as the formation of the National Defense Forces (NDF) under the supervision of Qasem Soleimani, the former commander of the Quds Force of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC-QF).

The moment of truth in the early years of the Syrian civil war, however, came on August 21, 2013, when news broke of a chemical attack in Ghouta near Damascus which the United States blamed on the Syrian government only days after intelligence reports indicated with ‘high confidence’ that a string of alleged sarin gas attack had claimed the lives of more than a thousand people in the enclave.<sup>130</sup> Echoing the cries of ‘never again’ following the genocide in Rwanda and Srebrenica and atrocities of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi, a number of MENA states

---

<sup>128</sup> Ben Rhodes. “Inside the White House During the Syrian ‘Red Line’ Crisis”, **The Atlantic**, 03.06.2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/inside-the-white-house-during-the-syrian-red-line-crisis/561887/>, (28.10.2020).

<sup>129</sup> Christopher Phillips. “The International and Regional Battle for Syria”, **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli (eds), Routledge, 2019, p. 45.

<sup>130</sup> BBC World Service, “Syria Chemical Attack: What We Know”, 24.09.2013, **BBC**, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23927399>, (29.10. 2020).

such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE and Turkey invoked the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) on the off chance that UNSC would authorize interventionist action in the case of Syrian civil war. To no avail, however, not only was the propensity to cite R2P in justification of greater UNSC involvement in the Syrian case markedly weaker than it was in Libya, Obama also retracted his earlier statement that Assad's violation of "red lines" would trigger a direct military strike against the Syrian government.<sup>131</sup> Adding to the further complexity and deterioration of the situation, the U.S.-Russia agreement on the elimination of chemical weapons in Syria in September 2013 failed to provide an all-encompassing solution to the Syrian crisis.<sup>132</sup> As the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria declared the establishment of a 'caliphate' in June 2014, Russia, Turkey and Iran began to view the transformation of a terror group into a quasi-state as mother of all threats to the sovereignty of a country which had already turned into a battleground for geopolitical gains along sectarian lines.

Bent on preventing the spread of international terrorism to its borders, particularly in predominantly Muslim North Caucasus region, Russia seized the opportunity provided by Obama's strategic ambivalences to establish an anti-ISIS coalition of its own. By 2014, Turkey was confronted with a moment of epiphany in its quest for deposing Assad primarily because instead of achieving results in its securitization policy towards Assad, Ankara had to digest a *new reality*: its southern border was surrounded by ISIS and its own soil was directly attacked by the terror group, most notably in May 2013 in Reyhanlı, in March 2014 and July 2015. Therefore, it is logically admissible to ascertain that by 2014 Ankara became fully cognizant of the existential threat posed by ISIS which at the time presented a major security threat to Turkey and reinforced the country's threat perceptions towards the presence of PKK-affiliated factions close to its borders with Syria. Borrowing one scholar's words, "the unprecedented territorial expansion of ISIS forced Turkey to revise its strategic priorities, acknowledging that the removal of Assad should not remain the single most important objective when ISIS represented a serious threat and

---

<sup>131</sup> Justin Morris. "Libya and Syria: R2P and the Specter of the Swinging Pendulum", **International Affairs**, Vol. 89, No. 5, 2013, p. 1277.

<sup>132</sup> Andrey Kortunov, "The Astana Model: Methods and Ambitions of Russian Political Action", The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition, Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli (eds), **Atlantic Council**, 2019, p. 55.

caused the strengthening of the Syrian Kurdish groups—the PYD (Democratic Union Party/YPG—People’s Protection Units) in Northern Syria.<sup>133</sup> For Iran, the rise of ISIS had a binary impact on Tehran’s strategic calculations on the Syrian conflict. On the one hand, Iran apparently embarked on an internal campaign of securitization and mediatization of “the vehemently anti—Shia and anti-Iranian ISIS” and used these dual policies as a trump card in order to inculcate in the minds of the Iranian populace that the terror group poses an existential security threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country.<sup>134</sup> On the other hand, just as the populace were becoming vociferously critical of Iran’s profligate spending for propping up Assad, Tehran left no stone unturned to portray Assad as the lesser evil than ISIS. Put in a different way, under the pretext of the fight against ISIS, the Iranian government went into overdrive in shoring up the waning position of the Ba’thist regime and continued to pour in more men, money and material to “protect Shi’te holy sites against the Islamic State” in theory and suppress the Syrian opposition forces in principle.<sup>135</sup>

As can be seen, the rise of ISIS and the dire need to eradicate its threat can be construed as the primary cause that forced Iran, Turkey and Russia to adopt securitization policies aimed at fighting the terror group. In other words, although the divergences of interests among the three primary actors of the Syrian conflict were aplenty, the ISIS threat functioned as a common thread that woven their short-term interests together in Syria, thereby resulting in a simultaneous adoption of securitization policies towards the Syrian conflict by Russia, Turkey and Iran. Under the rubric of the aforementioned securitization policy, however, each state did not necessarily pursue identical strategic objectives: Using the ISIS card, Turkey sought to curb the resurgence of PYD/YPG as a consequence, Iran tried to advance its “strategic depth” in Syria and Iraq and Russia made strenuous efforts to create an anti-ISIS coalition most preferably in cooperation with the U.S. for the purpose of creating

---

<sup>133</sup> Ayşegül Sever. “Regional Power Role and Intervention: The Turkish Case Over Syria in the 2000s”, **Contemporary Review of the Middle East**, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2020, p. 145-157.

<sup>134</sup> Jubin M. Goodarzi. “Iran and the Syrian Civil War”, **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli (eds), Routledge, 2019, p. 147.

<sup>135</sup> Jubin M. Goodarzi, p. 147-149., Babak Dehghanpisheh. “Iran’s President Declares End of Islamic State”, **Reuters**, 21.11.2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-rouhani-islamic-state/irans-president-declares-end-of-islamic-state-idUSKBN1DL0J5>, (02.01. 2021).



a common front against international terrorism similar to Moscow's offer to help following the 9/11 attacks.<sup>136</sup>

Despite Russia's attempt to invite the U.S. to join forces in the anti-ISIS coalition and form a united front together with the Syrian army, Turkey and Iran, the U.S. administration declined the offer on the grounds that Washington holds reservations about the nature of the Assad's regime and of certain armed opposition and terrorist groups. In a tit-for-tat move, Moscow refused to join the anti-terrorist coalition led by the United States because, in Russia's view, such coalition required a mandate from the UN Security Council and the permission of the Syrian government. With a steadily deteriorating military situation in Syria, the Idlib province in March 2015 came under rebels' control as Saudi Arabia and Turkey threw their weight behind a coalition of rebel groups called Jaish al Fateh, or Conquest Army (including Nusra) in northern Syria.<sup>137</sup> The rebel forces' seizure of Idlib province along with the Syrian Arab Army's loss of parts of Hama and Homs provinces to ISIS were widely regarded as heavy military blows to the Assad's regime and its main allies, namely Iran and Russia, who became increasingly apprehensive of any potential advances of al Nusra and its allies further into Latakia and even Damascus.<sup>138</sup> Therefore, the summer of 2015 saw a noticeable surge in the deployments of Iran-backed militias followed by former IRGC chief Qasem Soleimani's visit to Moscow where he reportedly solicited Kremlin's support for possible arrangements for Russia's direct military intervention in Syria.<sup>139</sup> With the beginning of Russia's military intervention in September 2015, the balance of military power in the battlefield gradually tipped in favor of the Assad regime as the Syrian army and Iran-backed militias made considerable gains between 2016 and 2017 starting with the fall of Eastern Aleppo in mid-December 2016. The entry of Russia into the Syrian melee was seen by Iran and Assad as an immense

---

<sup>136</sup> Richard Sakwa. **Russia against the Rest: The Post-War Crisis of World Order**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 87.

<sup>137</sup> Christopher Phillips. "The International and Regional Battle for Syria", **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli (eds), Routledge, 2019, p. 46.

<sup>138</sup> Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni. "Iran's Syria Strategy: The Evolution of Deterrence", **International Affairs**, Vol. 95, No. 2, 2019, pp. 341-364.

<sup>139</sup> Ghaidaa Hetou, "Russia's Intervention in Syria", **The Syrian Conflict: The Role of Russia, Iran and the US in a Global Crisis**, Ghaidaa Hetou Routledge, 2019, p. 43., Laila Bassam and Tom Perry. "How Iranian General Plotted Out Syrian Assault in Moscow", **Reuters**, 06.10.2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh/how-iranian-general-plotted-out-syrian-assault-in-moscow-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>, (05.01.2021).

geopolitical lifeline but it came at a high price for Turkey whose radical diplomacy aimed at preventing the PYD/YPG from territorial expansion in northern Syria and overthrowing the Syrian regime ran aground. On 24 November 2015, a Turkish F-16 jet intercepted and shot down a Russian Su-24 over northern Syria for an alleged Turkish airspace violation. The jet incident plunged Turkey and Russia relations into a historic low as the two took unprecedented retaliatory economic measures against each other and speculations arose that the crisis would risk drawing NATO—of which Turkey is a member—into a military confrontation with Russia.<sup>140</sup> As Michael A. Reynolds argues, “if the Turks’ calculation was that the threat of an armed clash with a NATO member would cause the Russians to pull the throttle back on their operations inside Syria, the misfired entirely ... Washington’s cool attitude toward Ankara in its wake signaled that Turkey would be on its own in managing Russia.”<sup>141</sup> The enmity between Moscow and Ankara following the jet incident was short-lived. Just as the U.S. continued its support of YPG in northern Syria and Russia intensified its attacks on anti-Assad forces, Turkey experienced a terrorist attack on Istanbul Ataturk Airport which claimed 41 civilian lives on June 29, an incident that drew Moscow’s condemnation forthright. Notable in this regard is that only days earlier Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had sent a letter of “regret and apology” to President Putin in which he asked to be forgiven for the downing of the Russian jet seven months earlier.<sup>142</sup> Borrowing Seçkin Köstem’s words, the reason for President Erdoğan’s offer of olive branch to President Putin was that “it became apparent to Ankara that a protracted crisis with Moscow would have dire consequences not only for Turkey’s exporters, investors and domestic tourism sector, but also for its national security”.<sup>143</sup>

On July 15, 2016, Turkey experienced an abortive coup attempt which cast a harsh shadow over Ankara’s relations with both the European Union and the United

---

<sup>140</sup> Strategic Comments. “The Russian-Turkish Rapprochement”, **Strategic Comments**, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2018, pp. iv-vi.

<sup>141</sup> Michael A. Reynolds. “Turkey and Russia: A Remarkable Rapprochement”, **War On The Rocks**, 24.10.2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/turkey-and-russia-a-remarkable-rapprochement/>, (05.01.2020).

<sup>142</sup> Reuters. “Turkey’s Erdoğan Expresses Regret over Downing of Russian Jet: Spokesman”, **Reuters**, 27.06.2016 June 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-erdogan/turkeyserdoganexpressesregretoverdowningofrussianjetspokesmanidUSKCN0ZD1WQ>, (05.01.2020).

<sup>143</sup> Seçkin Köstem. “Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria: Geopolitical Alignment with Limits”, **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, 2020, p. 5.

States because they not only did not act swiftly to condemn the coup attempt they behaved hesitantly to congratulate Turkish president and the people of Turkey for defeating the coup plotters.<sup>144</sup> Contrary to the U.S. position, however, Russian President Vladimir Putin was very quick to express his sympathy to Turkey as he rejected “the use of unconstitutional and violent methods against states” and wished for “the restoration of constitutional order and stability in Turkey as soon as possible.”<sup>145</sup> Putin’s statement was welcomed by Turkey’s President Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu who blamed coup plotters for hurting Russia-Turkey relations and thanked Russian president for his ‘unconditional support’ of Turkish government in the wake of the July 15 failed coup attempt.<sup>146</sup> Owing to the just-discussed developments, the patterns of enmity which overshadowed Turkey-Russia relations following the downing of the Su-24 gradually evolved into a particular kind of rapprochement on 9 August 2016 when President Erdoğan made a visit to St. Petersburg and met with President Putin. It bears noting that the St. Petersburg meeting heralded a new era in Turkey-Russia relations and was considered a prelude to the emergence of the soon-to-be tactical partnership between Ankara and Moscow on the Syrian portfolio which later on included Tehran.<sup>147</sup> To be more specific, it was agreed in St. Petersburg talks that Turkey-backed Syrian opposition forces withdraw from Aleppo to the narrow strip of the Turkish-Syrian border, thereby paving the way for the Syrian army to intensify the siege of Aleppo city.<sup>148</sup> By dint of what has been widely perceived as “a form of ‘land swap’ – effectively, Russia and Turkey granting each other permission to take control of an area, or facilitating offensives on different parts of the country [Syria]”, Moscow and Ankara began to sow the seeds of a tactical cooperation at the expense of the U.S.-led operations and UN initiatives.<sup>149</sup> A month

<sup>144</sup> Bezen Balamir Coşkun. “Turkey’s Relations with Russia after the Failed Coup: A Friend in Need of a Friend Indeed?”, **New Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2019, p. 43.

<sup>145</sup> Bezen Balamir Coşkun, p. 43.

<sup>146</sup> Hurriyet. “Turkey Thanks Putin for Unconditional Support over Coup attempt”, **Hurriyet**, 25.07.2016, [https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-thanks-putin-for-unconditional-support-over-coup-attempt---102062, \(07.01.2020\).](https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-thanks-putin-for-unconditional-support-over-coup-attempt---102062, (07.01.2020).)

<sup>147</sup> Iran joined Turkey and Russia as a guarantor state after the third round of meetings in Astana was held between 14 and 15 March.

<sup>148</sup> Min Wei. “Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Syrian Crisis: Dynamics of Transformation”, **Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2019, p. 475.

<sup>149</sup> Coar Global. “‘Land Swaps’: Russian-Turkish Territorial Exchanges in Northern Syria”, **Coar-Global**, 14.11.2019, <https://coar-global.org/2019/11/14/land-swaps-russian-turkish-territorial-exchanges-in-northern-syria/>, (06.01.2020). It is worthwhile to mention that Turkey launched its military offensive dubbed Operation Euphrates Shield in Jarablus city on 29 August 2016 and then

after Putin-Erdoğan meeting, the Syria deal signed by the then US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in September 2016 failed to implement a nationwide truce and succeed in joint military targeting of banned Islamist groups.<sup>150</sup> Consequently, Russia made adjustments to its own policy on Syria by virtue of halting attempts to resolve the Syrian conflict in concert with the United States which in turn led to the Astana format of Syrian negotiations.<sup>151</sup>

In late 2016, Russia, Turkey and Iran eventually took over the Syrian peace process, sidelining the United States in its efforts to impose a ceasefire between the Syrian Arab Army and the opposition forces while seeking to initiate a regional security format to supplement the stumbling Geneva peace process on Syria. As such, the first round of Astana talks on Syria sponsored by Iran, Russia and Turkey was held in January 2017 in the former capital of Kazakhstan to, *inter alia*, set up a tripartite monitoring mechanism for implementation of the ceasefire that had come into force on December 30, 2016. According to the joint statement issued by the three guarantors of peace at the end of the talks, the foremost aim of the Astana platform is to develop a UN-facilitated Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process for the purpose of contributing to global efforts to implement UN Security Council Resolution 2254.<sup>152</sup> In contrast to other existing negotiation formats, the Astana Peace Process did not set a highly ambitious goal since its inception. Rather, it started with less ambitious objectives because it was essentially a diplomatic conflict resolution mechanism developed by the co-brokers of the Astana process to de-escalate the military situation in Syria first, on the basis of *quid pro quo* land-swap, and then gradually move away from the military phase of the conflict and facilitate the political process for the attainment of a lasting ceasefire and peace. Of paramount importance here is that the Astana negotiations were essentially focused on establishing a ceasefire and, later on,

---

expanded the operation in Azaz (2 September) and later in Al-Bab on 29 December 2016. The Operation Euphrates Shield was concluded on 29 March 2017.

<sup>150</sup> Reuters. "U.S., Russia Clinch Syria Deal, Aim for Truce from Monday", **Reuters**, 09.09.2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kerry/u-s-russia-clinch-syria-deal-aim-for-truce-from-monday-idUSKCN11F0HC>, (06.01.2020)., Andrey Kortunov. "The Astana Model: Methods and Ambitions of Russian Political Action", **The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition**, Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli (eds), Atlantic Council, 2019, p. 55.

<sup>151</sup> Ruslan Mamedov and Grigory Lukyanov. "Russia and Turkey: Approaches to Regional Security in the Middle East", **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, p. 61.

<sup>152</sup> Al Jazeera. "Astana Joint Statement by Iran, Russia, Turkey: in full", **Al Jazeera**, 24.01.2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/astana-joint-statement-iran-russia-turkey-full-170124133951063.html>, (06.01.2020).

the creation of the so-called de-escalation zones in Syria which took place during the fourth round of Astana talks in May 2017.<sup>153</sup>

Widely viewed as a Russian initiative, the establishment of four de-escalation zones, including the Idlib Governorate and adjoining districts of Hama, Aleppo and Latakia, the Homs Governorate, the Eastern Ghouta, and along the Syria-Jordan border, was ostensibly a political mechanism by which the Syrian regime and the opposition could pave the way for local ceasefires. In reality, however, since military operations were still allowed only against terrorists, the introduction of the de-escalation zones redounded in fits and starts to the interests of Damascus-Tehran-Moscow axis. Under the pretext of fighting terrorism, the Syrian army with the backing of Russia and Iran proceeded with their military offensives in southwestern region which includes Daraa and Quneitra and also in the besieged Eastern Ghouta suburb of Damascus.<sup>154</sup>

In the words of Nikolay Kozhanov, the unraveling of the de-escalation zones helped Russia to achieve four sets of goals. First, the idea of creating the de-escalation zones afforded Moscow with an opportunity to take the leading role in the process of finding a political settlement in Syria while deviating other international players' attention away from working out their own strategies for settling the Syrian conflict. Second, fearing the U.S. administration's inclination to introduce its own no-fly zone in Syria and, thus support the fragmentation of Syria into several areas, Russia ploughed through with its own initiative to establish protected Sunni enclaves that would eventually come under the control of Damascus' allies rather than letting these enclaves come under the U.S. control. Third, intent on isolating the "most hostile military groups" within the four de-escalation zones, Moscow embarked on regionalizing the Syrian (military) conflict by means of dissecting the rebel-held territories into discrete de-militarized zones. Fourth, determined to focus on the implementation of the de-escalation zones, Russia exploited the initiative to keep the

---

<sup>153</sup> Sarah Deeb and Lynn Berry. "Russia-backed Syrian Safe-Zones Plan Goes into Effect", **The Associated Press**, 06.05.2017, <https://apnews.com/c80332ce05724be49f7a9d586e4bab8a>, (06.01.2020).

<sup>154</sup> Aisha Han and Shruti Kumar. "Syria's Southwest Offensive: A Timeline", **Atlantic Council**, 05.07.2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/syria-s-southwest-offensive-a-timeline/>, (06.01.2020).

Syrian opposition busy jostling for power inside them and instead concentrate on defeating ISIS and radical groups.<sup>155</sup>

What can be culled from these observations is that the Astana Peace Process has since its inception managed to bring to the negotiating table the three main overlaying actors of the Syrian conflict, thereby gaining the status of a *regionalized* conflict resolution mechanism to find a solution to an international armed conflict such as the Syrian crisis. From a different point of view, what is generally referred to as the “Astanzation” of the Geneva talks, in fact, lends credence to the regionalizing logic of the Regional Security Complex theory according to which efforts to resolve conflicts and to promote security frequently occurs within regional security complexes, rather than at the global level.<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that “the Astana process could never replace and was never intended to replace the UN-led Geneva dialogue on the political future for Syria.”<sup>157</sup>

The core assertion here is that the co-brokers of the Astana platform have, despite a multiplicity of conflicting interests, managed to create the conditions of possibility for the formation of a particular *mode of conflict management* that has thus far operated at the regional level. Another important caveat is that the Astana process also evinced the regionalization of Russia’s MENA policies as Moscow spearheaded substantial diplomatic efforts aimed at creating patters of convergences of interests not only among the three overlaying players of the Syrian conflict but also between the government and opposition forces and between Damascus and other regional actors such as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>158</sup> One of the novelties of the Astana

---

<sup>155</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov. “From Russia’s Military Development in Syria to the Astana Process”, **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli (eds), Routledge, 2019. 256-257.

<sup>156</sup> Aytaç Kadioğlu. “International Peace Efforts in the Syrian Civil War: The ‘Inevitable’ Failure?”, **Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 32., David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 343.

<sup>157</sup> Andrey Kortunov. “The Astana Model: Methods and Ambitions of Russian Political Action”, **The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition**, Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli (eds), Atlantic Council, 2019, p. 56.

<sup>158</sup> Samuel Ramani. “Russia’s Efforts to Expand the Astana Process in Syria”, 07.10.2019, **Middle East Institute**, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-efforts-expand-astana-process-syria>, (07.01.2020)., Ekaterina Stepanova. Russia’s Foreign and Security Policy in the Middle East: Entering the 2020s, **Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)**, No. 20, 16.06.2020, p. 5, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/russias-foreign-and-security-policy-middle-east-entering-2020s>, (07.01.2020).

process and the subsequent formation of de-escalation zones was that it affected the role and orientations of the involving actors in substantial ways. For example, the Syrian opposition felt that it remained relevant despite considerable military defeats in the Syrian battlefield. The Assad regime viewed the process as a chance to regain lost credibility and remain relevant to the peace process while the three overlaying actors made use of the Astana format to increase their leverage and strengthen their hand at both the negotiating table and on the battlefield.<sup>159</sup>

In parallel with the Astana talks, the Syrian Congress of National Dialogue was held in the Russian resort city of Sochi in late January 2018 as part of Moscow's diplomatic efforts to broker peace between the Syrian regime and the opposition. Although the Russia-sponsored Sochi conference was boycotted by the key opposition and rebel groups, the participants agreed to the "full implementation" of the UNSC resolution that calls for the creation of a transitional Syrian government which would pave the way for a new constitution and elections.<sup>160</sup>

The import of the Sochi conference in view of its relevance to the Astana Peace Process is two-fold: First, the Sochi conference sought to bridge the divide between the Astana process and the Geneva talks. In so doing, it endeavors to create a situation in which the troika of the Astana format could showcase that they can function effectively at the Syrian Congress of National Dialogue and succeed in channeling even the bare-minimum political achievements of the Sochi confab into the broader political process for the future of Syria.<sup>161</sup> Second, albeit the Sochi conference failed to reconcile the two models, it, nevertheless, served as the most salient and still-functioning platform that seriously tested the willingness of all the involving actors of the Syrian conflict in reaching a solution to their deeply entrenched differences at the political level. In other words, while the Astana negotiations focuses, in large parts, on

---

<sup>159</sup> Sinem Cengiz. "Assessing the Astana Peace Process for Syria: Actors, Approaches, and Differences", **Contemporary Review of the Middle East**, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2020, p. 212,213.

<sup>160</sup> Nataliya Vasilyeva and Vladimir Isachenkov. "Russia's Syria Talks End with Plan to Draft New Constitution", **The Associated Press**, 31.01.2018, <https://apnews.com/e7a72b1-dbdbb4d05bb69dcd3c6dbd3ac/Russia%27s-Syria-talks-end-with-plan-to-draft-new-constitution>, (08.01.2020).

<sup>161</sup> Andrey Kortunov. "The Astana Model: Methods and Ambitions of Russian Political Action", **The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition**, Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli (eds), Atlantic Council, 2019, p. 57. & Maxim A. Suchkov. "Hosting Syria Talks in Sochi Presents Challenges for Russia", **Al Monitor**, 17.01.2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse-/originals/2018/01/ru-ssia-challenge-national-dialogue-syria-iran-turkey.html> , (08.01.2020).

the military complexities of the Syrian conflict, the Sochi conference was aimed at putting the political intricacies of the conflict on the front burner so that the warring parties, including the troika of the Astana process as well as the opposition and the Syrian regime, could narrow down their differences for achieving a political settlement to the conflict. It remains to be seen as to whether the Sochi conference could eventually produce “an inclusive and Syrian-led political process”, not least because almost all Astana/Geneva-related bones of contention that the Astana talks are supposed to tackle remain unresolved, namely “ceasefires are used for tactical gain and rarely last; prisoner exchanges are limited; no political negotiations are happening between Syrian parties; and the constitutional committee is paralyzed by Assad’s procedural obstruction.”<sup>162</sup> Having said this, the Sochi dialogue in parallel with the Astana platform is in Kremlin’s view “a booster rocket for the Geneva payload.”<sup>163</sup>

Of particular note here is that the Astana negotiations and the Geneva talks are not considered the *only* viable conflict resolution platforms designed to attenuate the military phase of the conflict and navigate it possibly towards the political process. Notably, the bilateral and trilateral negotiations taking place at the presidential level within and outside the Astana framework play an instrumental role in changing the realities on both diplomatic and military fronts of the Syrian conflict. Take for instance the numerous and at times spontaneous bilateral meetings between the presidents of Russia and Turkey, including the Sochi summit of September 2018, Erdogan-Putin talks on 22 October 2019 following Turkey’s launch of Peace Spring Operation in east of the Euphrates River in northern Syria and the subsequent Nur-Sultan meeting of Iran, Russia and Turkey delegations in December 2019, the virtual meeting of the three heads of states in early July 2020, and Putin-Erdogan’s meeting on Syria in September 2021. On the basis of empirical observation, it is tenable to argue that the Astana model—formed by Russia, Turkey and Iran—and the frequent meetings of the state leaders at both bilateral and trilateral levels accounts, to a large extent, for the sudden

---

<sup>162</sup> Charles Thepaut. “The Astana Process: A Flexible but Fragile Showcase for Russia”, 28.04.2020, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-astana-process-a-flexible-but-fragile-showcase-for-russia>, (08.01.2020).

<sup>163</sup> Charles Thepaut., UNSC. “Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2254 (2015), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, Setting Timetable for Talks”, UN Security Council, Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, **UNSC**, 18.12.2015, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm> (08.01.2020).



shifts and adjustments in security and foreign policies of the main state and non-state actors on the Syrian battlefield. This is not to say that the key trends related to the Syrian conflict in both military and political spheres are thoroughly and solely contingent upon what happens within the context of the Astana format; nor does it mean that the divergences and convergences of interests among Iran, Russia and Turkey as well as the troika's relations to other key actors in the Syrian conflict are determined by the Astana talks alone.

The contention here is that the Astana Peace Process, despite its just-discussed setbacks and shortcomings, continues to function as a *regionalized* mechanism for conflict management with the most palpable and enduring implications on the security and military situation in Syria. Such a regional security mechanism initiated by the three main military players of the Syrian conflict has yet to withstand the test of time but it is widely seen as a regional mediatory framework for micro-managing a highly complex geopolitical disorder in the Middle East security complex. Hence, the Astana Peace Process can be interpreted as a particular *mode of conflict management* that functions in ways that not only can influence the security dynamics within the Syrian geopolitical theater but also has the potential to enable the emergence of a *modicum of security order* within the Levant sub-complex with potential spillover effects into the broader Middle East security complex. The ongoing discussions since 2019 about the potential replicability of the Astana model in the case of Libyan conflict as well as ongoing attempts aimed at creating a “3+3” negotiation format, consisting of Iran, Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia for resolving regional tensions over Nagorno-Karabakh are stellar cases in point.<sup>164</sup> Without a doubt, the key question is begged: whether or not Russia can feasibly initiate and apply a regionalized conflict resolution model such as the Astana format into other zones of conflict in the Middle East especially when Russia's, Turkey's and Iran's efforts have yielded no sustainable

---

<sup>164</sup> Kirill Semenov. “Will Russia, Turkey launch ‘Syria Scenario’ for Libya?”, 02.01.2020, **Al Monitor**, <https://www.almonitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/01/libyasyrarussiaturkeyastana.html> , (08.01. 2020)., & Kirill Semenov, “Russian-Iranian Competition Heats Up in South Caucasus”, **Al Monitor**, 15.10.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/1-0/russian-iranian-competition-heats-south-caucasus>, (08.01.2020)., Leonid Issaev & Andrey Korotayev. “Russia's Policy Towards the Middle East: The Case of Yemen”, **The International Spectator**, Vol. 55, No. 3, 2020, pp. 132-147., Eugenio Dacrema. “From Syria to Libya: Why the ‘Astana Approach’ Doesn't Work”, **ISPI Istituto Per Gli Studi di Politica Internazionale**, 28.02.2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/syria-libya-why-astana-approach-doesnt-work-25225>, (08.01.2020).

and enduring results in the Syrian strife and uncertainties abound as to whether the co-brokers of the Astana format can turn the Astana platform into an inclusive regional negotiation mechanism for the purpose of forging the basis for a new regional order.

Notwithstanding the foregoing arguments, what appears to be irrefutable is that the Astana Peace Process has thus far proved to be a temporary success. Although the early 2020 round of military escalations in Idlib posed a significant challenge to the Astana model, the Astana format remains, as of writing this dissertation, to be the only workable meeting point for Turkey, Russia and Iran to collectively de-escalate the military situation and discuss the future of Syria. Underpinned by a marriage of convenience among Turkey, Russia and Iran, the Astana negotiations function as a key generator of patterns of amity and enmity among the three main overlaying actors of the Syrian conflict as evidenced by, *inter alia*, the particular ways in which they adjust their foreign policy interests in light of the political and military developments related to the Syrian conflict. In reality, the Astana negotiations provide Turkey, Russia and Iran with an opportunity to simultaneously balance one another as a trio and also in pairs. In so doing, the Astana platform contributes to the creation of *patterns of management* by means of luring and locking Russia, Turkey and Iran into a seemingly unavoidable state of tactical cooperation in Syria. Simply put, in the absence of U.S. leadership, particularly in the MENA region, the Astana negotiations on Syria can be seen as a perfect illustration of how the main military players of the conflict can cooperate through competition. Of course, the key question lingers as to whether this marriage of convenience would end in divorce or bring about a modicum of regional security order in the long-term. It is vital, therefore, to take into serious account some of the most salient critiques of the Astana Peace Process. In this regard, some critics postulate that the rationale of the Astana ‘conflict management’ has been about “perpetuating the military crisis while taking care of those interests that do not conflict with those of other Astana group’s members...the outcome was nothing else than constant postponement of an inevitable military solution.”<sup>165</sup> Others depict it as a fleeting triumph of Russia’s “incremental and opportunistic military diplomacy” in Syria, bereft of a clear end game beyond the establishment of “alternative tracks that

---

<sup>165</sup> Eugenio Dacrema. “From Syria to Libya: Why the ‘Astana Approach’ Doesn’t Work”, **ISPI Istituto Per Gli Studi di Politica Internazionale**, 28.02.2020, <https://www.ispio-nline.it/en/publicazione/syria-libya-why-astana-approach-doesnt-work-25225>, (08.01.2020).

are most favorable to Russia's goals than to the framework defined by UN Security Council Resolution 2254.”<sup>166</sup>

As can be seen, the evolution of Iran-Russia-Turkey partnership in the context of the Syrian conflict cannot be properly understood without taking stock of the patterns of events and trends that led to the creation of the Astana Peace Process in the first place. Of course, there are several intervening variables that impinge on the nature and trajectory of the relationship among Turkey, Russia and Iran. To name but a few, realist systemic variables such as whether the international system will transform into a bipolar or multipolar system, the declining role of the United States as a hegemonic balancer in the Middle East, and variables at the sub-system level including the growing geopolitical penetration of emerging regional powers such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates into the MENA region against the backdrop of the intense Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry and even domestic-level factors constitute a distinct set of variables that, one way or another, affect the foreign policy behaviors of the three overlaying players of the Syrian conflict.<sup>167</sup> Having said this, the assertion is that the study of the Syrian conflict brings to the foreground almost all the above-cited variables in assessing the variations in Turkey's, Iran's and Russia's foreign policy orientations and roles in light of their military interventions in the Syrian conflict. Hence, this segment of the chapter sought to deconstruct the Astana Peace Process through a detailed analysis of the patterns of trends that led to the creation of the platform in 2017 and of a series of incidents and events that contributed to the emergence of the subsequent tactical alignment among Turkey, Iran and Russia in the Levant sub-complex (the locus of Syrian conflict). Such an empirical undertaking is a *sine qua non* for a rigorous theoretical appraisal of the three overarching themes of the research: a) the evolution of the foreign policies of Turkey, Russia and Iran in the context of the Syrian conflict, b) the potential security and geopolitical implications of the tactical cooperation among the three main players of the conflict on the regional order as seen from the perspective of the RSC theory, c) future scenarios of the Syrian

---

<sup>166</sup> Charles Thepaut. "The Astana Process: A Flexible but Fragile Showcase for Russia", 28.04.2020, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-astana-process-a-flexible-but-fragile-showcase-for-russia>, (09.07.2020).

<sup>167</sup> Waleed Hazbun. "Regional Powers and The Production of Insecurity in the Middle East", **MENARA**, No. 11, 01.09.2018, [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara\\_wp\\_11.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_11.pdf), (18.01.2020).

conflict and its potential impacts on the Middle East security complex in view of the question of order.

Therefore, the remainder of this study is devoted to providing answers to the above-mentioned questions.

### **3.3. RUSSIA-TURKEY RELATIONS: THE ROAD TO PRAGMATIC ENTENTE IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

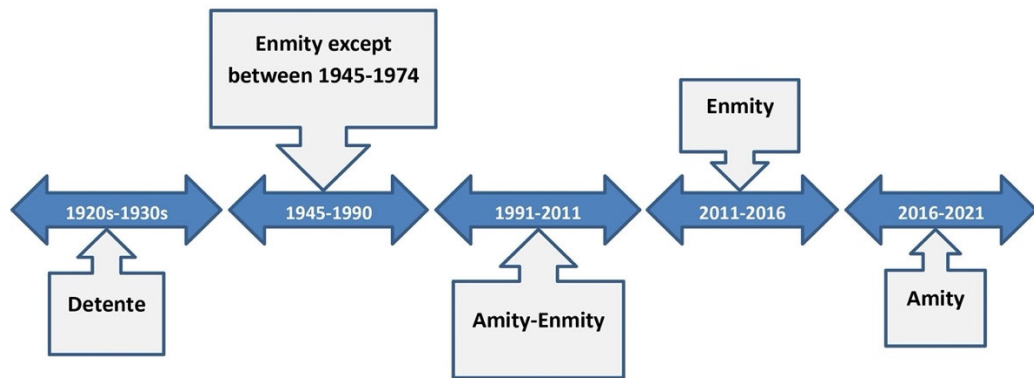
The relations between Turkey and Russia have attracted copious scholarly attention in recent years as the two neighbors attempted to deepen their engagements with the Middle East beginning from the early and the mid-2000s. It goes without saying that throughout the history the dynamics of collective memory of conflict and cooperation between Russians and Turks have had a strong and lasting bearing on the transformation of the bilateral ties. Take for example that from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the Russian and the Ottoman Empire fought more than 15 major wars whereas the end of the First World War ushered in a period of “empathy and accommodation” between Lenin’s Bolsheviks in Moscow and Atatürk’s nationalists in Ankara.<sup>168</sup> Looking at the winding trajectory of Russia-Turkey relations, it becomes clear that, owing to the Ottoman-Russian imperial struggle, the mutually-held threat perceptions have been a constant feature of the bilateral ties for over a century.<sup>169</sup> Barring the period of imperial military confrontation, the relations between Moscow and Ankara transformed from détente in the 1920s and mid-1930s to enmity between 1945 to 1990—although with a short-lived phase of Turkish-Soviet *rapprochement* from roughly 1966 to 1974 as a result of, *inter alia*, the Cyprus issue. The relations then vacillated between amity and cynicism in the interval between the end of the Cold War and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, regressed back into enmity following the entry of both countries into the Syrian war and the 2015 ‘jet incident’ in Syria, and grew into amity after the failed July 2016 coup in Turkey.

---

<sup>168</sup> Barry M. Rubin and Kemal Kirişci. **Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Multiregional Power**, Lynne Rienner Publication, 2001, p. 153

<sup>169</sup> Lerna K. Yanık. “Allies or Partners? An Appraisal of Turkey’s Ties to Russia, 1991-2007”, **East European Quarterly**, Vol. XLI, No. 3, 2007, p. 350.

**Figure 4: Patterns of Amity and Enmity in Turkey Russia Relations**



Source: Designed by the author

As can be seen, the patterns of amity and enmity which are inexorably intertwined with the processes of securitization and de-securitization constitute the key determinants of the changes and continuities in relations between Turkey and Russia. From the viewpoint of RSC theory, it is the interplay between the patterns of amity and enmity in the processes of (de-)securitization that significantly affects the identification of security threats.<sup>170</sup> Therefore, it merits noting that *ideational* patterns of amity and enmity must be taken into consideration in conjunction with *material* power relations for a better understanding of the dynamics of Russia and Turkey relations and their foreign policy role and orientations.

Several scholars and observers have portrayed the various epochs in Turkey and Russia relations in different lights. For example, the period after the end of the Cold War was referred to as the era of “cold peace” or “virtual rapprochement” as the Russian threat profoundly diminished in the eyes of Turkey and, as a corollary, both Moscow and Ankara signed multiple cooperation agreements covering various issues.<sup>171</sup> With the radical change in the balance of power after the Cold War, the patterns of amity between Russia and Turkey became more pronounced due to an

<sup>170</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p.47,48., Tomas Maltby. “Between Amity, Enmity and Europeanization: EU Energy Security Policy and the Example of Bulgaria’s Russian Energy Dependence”, **Europe-Asia Studies**, 2015, Vol. 67, No. 9, p. 811.

<sup>171</sup> Suat A. Bilge. “An Analysis of Turkish-Russian Relations”, **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 2, No. 2, June-August 1997, p. 92)., Duygu Bazoğlu Sezer. “Turkish-Russian Relations A Decade Later: From Adversity to Managed Competition”, **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 6, No. 1, March-May 2001, pp. 79-99.

increase in economic interdependence but the bilateral relations, nonetheless, contained the seeds of distrust because the interests of both countries diverged in relation to the regional conflicts in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The early 2000s, however, ushered in an era of “strategic partnership” between Russia and Turkey chiefly due to the growing convergences of mutual interests in expanding venues for cooperation in areas of security, defense and anti-terrorism.<sup>172</sup>

In explaining the dynamics in the early 2000s, some scholars refer to Russia and Turkey as the “axis of excluded”, positing that a sense of exclusion by the United States prior to and after the U.S. invasion of Iraq pushed Moscow and Turkey toward strengthening bilateral ties in that period.<sup>173</sup> As Emre Erşen posits, on the one hand, the U.S.-Russia rapprochement after the 9/11 attacks had ended due to three main factors, namely Washington’s decision to launch its missile defense program, NATO’s expansion toward the Baltic states, and the outbreak of color revolutions in former Soviet space. On the other hand, Turkey-U.S. relations simultaneously frayed over Washington’s bid to strengthen ties with the Iraqi Kurdish government and its alleged indifference towards the PKK’s expansion in Northern Iraq.<sup>174</sup> All of which developments led to significant momentum in Turkey-Russia relations. Nevertheless, some scholars find fault with attempts to depict Russia-Turkey relations in terms of “strategic partnership”, arguing that despite progresses made in bilateral ties on the economic front, the two Black Sea powers are on the opposite side of the fence when it comes to the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine, Russia’s war with Georgia in 2008, the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and not least the ongoing Syrian war.<sup>175</sup>

---

<sup>172</sup> Şener Aktürk. “Turkish-Russian Relations after the Cold War (1992-2002)”, **Turkish Studies**, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2006, pp. 337-364.

<sup>173</sup> Fiona Hill and Omer Taspinar. “Turkey and Russia: Axis of the Excluded?”, **Survival**, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2006, pp. 81-92.

<sup>174</sup> Emre Erşen. “The Transatlantic Dimension of Turkey’s Strategic Rapprochement with Russia: The Turkish Perspective”, **Turkey and Transatlantic Relations**, Sasha Toperic and Aylin Ünver Noi (eds), Center for Transatlantic Relations, The Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC, 2017, p. 205-206.

<sup>175</sup> Seçkin Köstem. “Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria: Geopolitical Alignment with Limits”, **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, 2020, p. 4., Öniş Ziya and Şuhnaz Yılmaz. “Turkey and Russia in a Shifting Global Order: Cooperation, Conflict and Asymmetric Interdependence in a Turbulent Region”, **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2016, pp.81-87.

A closer look reveals that the first serious signs of geopolitical discord between Ankara and Moscow emerged after the Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Nevertheless, the Russian military intervention in Syria in September 2015 followed by Turkey's downing of the Russian jet can be construed as the most serious sign of political disagreement between two countries. In the words of two scholars, although Russia and Turkey have weathered numerous ups and downs in their relations in the post-Cold War era, the 2010s marked the climax of disagreements on a number of serious issues such as "NATO missile defense shield, the military coup in Egypt, fight against ISIS, conflict in Ukraine, Crimean statues referendum and the Syrian civil war."<sup>176</sup> Having said this, it is important to note that nowhere has the disagreement between Turkey and the Russia-Iran axis been more pronounced than in the case of the Syrian conflict as exemplified by the diametrically opposed views of Moscow and Ankara towards the Assad regime. Despite the divergences of geopolitical interests, however, Turkey and Russia have over the last decade managed to avoid causing an irreparable damage to their bilateral ties. With a strategy commonly known as "compartmentalization", both countries have tried to handle geopolitical and economic issues in isolation from each other so that the differences over the former domains do not hinder or irreparably harm economic cooperation.<sup>177</sup> Turkey's and Russia's willingness to resolve the jet crisis of November 2015 and the ensuing restoration of "strategic dialogue" between the two regional powers are striking cases in this regard. Despite divergences of interests in the Syrian context, Russia and Turkey have managed to establish a number of mechanisms of cooperation and basic security agreements which are relevant to this day, such as the Astana Peace Process (January 2017), agreements on the establishment of four de-escalation zones in Syria (May 2017), two Sochi Agreements of September 2018 and October 2019, as well as Idlib Ceasefire Agreement (March 2020).

In light of the preceding arguments regarding the patterns of amity and enmity in Russia-Turkey relation, three key claims merit pondering:

First, from an empirical perspective, the Syrian conflict has proven to be the most important determinant of foreign policy shifts in Turkey-Russia relations, thereby

---

<sup>176</sup> İnan Rüma and Mitat Çelikpala. "Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 16, No. 62, 2019, p. 67.

<sup>177</sup> Seçkin Köstem, p. 4.

posing a significant challenge to the principle of compartmentalization in bilateral ties. Second, from the perspective of RSC theory, one can argue that Turkey's foreign policy activism in the Middle East as exemplified by its military interventions in Syria, Iraq and Libya as well as its growing engagements with Iran call into question the conventional perceptions of Turkey as an insulator state. The examples provided above attest to the claim that Turkey, as a corollary of its deepening overlays in Syria, Iraq and Libya, has become a major pole in the Middle East regional security complex, most particularly in the Levant sub-complex. Third, as previously alluded to, the tactical partnership between Turkey and Russia which also included Iran in the Syrian context has had important implications on the regional security order in the Levant sub-complex and possibly on the Middle East security complex with major repercussions for the future role of the United States in the region.

In so far as the potential impact of the Syrian conflict on the principle of compartmentalization in Russia-Turkey relations is concerned, it is important to note that although the jet crisis of November 2015 seriously upended the principle for at least eight months, the economic cooperation resumed after a short hiatus. Therefore, contrary to Erşen's argument that the jet crisis practically ended the compartmentalization strategy that had marked bilateral relations in the preceding two decades, the assertion here is that except the nine-month period between November 2015 until August 2016 when the presidents of Turkey and Russia met in person, the bilateral ties have once again reverted to the same policy of compartmentalization. Of course, there cannot be any iron-clad guarantee that Turkey and Russia would be able to indefinitely sustain their relations on the basis of the principle of compartmentalization. But, if the history of Ankara-Moscow relations in the post-Cold War is anything to go by, it is likely that geopolitical issues and economic cooperation would potentially remain as discrete agendas even if it proves otherwise in short intervals of crisis. One reason is that economic interests have always been a key pillar of bilateral relations although the economic cooperation has taken on the form of "asymmetric interdependence" in favor of Russia due in part to Turkey's heavy dependence on Russian gas and to a lesser extent oil.<sup>178</sup> As a matter of fact, the

---

<sup>178</sup> Öniş Ziya and Şuhnaz Yılmaz. "Turkey and Russia in a Shifting Global Order: Cooperation, Conflict and Asymmetric Interdependence in a Turbulent Region", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2016, pp. 71-95.



economic relations between Turkey and Russia cover areas such as trade, construction, energy, tourism and defense.

In all sectors, the relationship has significantly developed since Ankara shot down a Russian plane in late 2015. For instance, the trade volume between Russia and Turkey stood at \$27.3 billion in 2019 albeit far from the stated goal of \$100 billion in bilateral trade.<sup>179</sup> Notwithstanding the negative impacts of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic on the global tourism industry, it must be noted that tourism from Russia to Turkey broke a record in 2019, exceeding 7 million tourists.<sup>180</sup> In the energy sector, which is regarded as the nexus of the growing strategic imbalance between Turkey and Russia, there has been an increase in cooperation agreements on various projects as Ankara remains reliant on Russia with the latter looking at Ankara as a consumer and a transit route for its energy to reach Western consumer markets. In January 2020, Erdoğan and Putin launched the TurkStream pipeline project, an alternative to Russia's South Stream pipeline that will use Turkey's EEZ and its territory to transport gas to Europe without using the Ukrainian route. Another important mega-project between the two countries concerns the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant by Russia's State Atomic Energy Corporation (Rosatom) in Turkey's southern Mersin province on the Mediterranean coast with an estimated investment of \$25 billion.<sup>181</sup> In the defense sector, it is vital to note, first and foremost, that the Syrian conflict has served as a catalyst for expansion of military cooperation between Turkey and Russia as the United States' initial *volte-face* on Assad and its support of YPG forces linked to PKK exacerbated the traditional fears of isolation in the Middle East and the culture of insecurity that the AKP government had struggled to overcome.<sup>182</sup> To be sure, it was not the first time in the tumultuous history of Turkey and the U.S. that the relationship between the two NATO allies was reaching a 'crisis point'. One can recall

---

<sup>179</sup> Ivan Starodubtsev. 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Turkish-Russian Ties: Time to Talk More than Ever, **The Daily Sabah**, 03.06.2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/100th-anniversary-of-turkish-russian-ties-time-to-talk-more-than-ever>, (20.01.2020).

<sup>180</sup> Ivan Starodubtsev.

<sup>181</sup> Nigyer R. Masumova. "Russia and Turkey: Resetting Economic Partnership", **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2018, pp. 33-50, p. 42., Yunus Furuncu. "The New Dimension of the Turkey-Russia Energy Cooperation TurkStream", **SETA Foundations**, 15.01.2020, No. 57. <https://www.setav.org/en/analysis-the-new-dimension-of-the-turkey-russia-energy-cooperation-turkstream/>, (25.01.2020).

<sup>182</sup> Hasan Kösebalaban. "Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy Toward Syria: The Return of Securitization", **Middle East Critique**, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2020, p. 335-334.

the Cyprus crisis of the 1970s which resulted in a temporary rapprochement between Turkey and the USSR, or Turkey's reluctance to help U.S. overthrow Saddam Hussein in 2003—precisely at a time when the 'hood incident' involving US military detention of Turkish special forces fueled anti-American sentiments in Turkey.<sup>183</sup>

That being said, what makes the Syrian conflict a *sui generis* case in terms of its implication on Turkey's relations with Russia and the United States is two-fold: First, as Ovalı and Özdikmenli argue, reminiscent of the Cyprus crisis of 1974-1980, the Syrian crisis has once again exposed Turkey's "Western question", referred to as strategic considerations in Turkish foreign policy in the form of a recurrent pattern of the criticism of Ankara's alignment with the West.<sup>184</sup> In their view, "Turkey's perennial state of emulation and suspicion towards the West" as exemplified in the Syrian conflict strikes at the heart of a deeper and multi-faceted structural problem in Turkey's foreign policy which involves not only Ankara's relations with the US, but also its relations with the EU, the US and NATO as a whole.<sup>185</sup> Second, if we look at Turkey's relations with Russia and Turkey through this lens, it is justifiable to posit that it was because of Ankara's and the West's failure to address the Western question, as evidenced by the U.S. administrations' Syria policy, that the AKP government in 2017 decided, *inter alia*, to procure the Russian S400 anti-aircraft systems and later expressed its willingness in August 2019 to discuss cooperation on Russia's Su-35 jet and possible joint works on its Su-57. In September 2021, after travelling to New York, President Erdogan articulated Turkey's dissatisfaction with the U.S. approach towards the S-400 issue. President Erdogan later on met with his Russian counterpart in Sochi where he deliberated with Putin over joint steps to be taken on "jet engines, warplanes, ships and submarines."<sup>186</sup>

Seen in this light, Turkey's alienation from the United States should not be taken lightly as Turkey has arguably become the first NATO member state to acquire

---

<sup>183</sup> Congressional Research Service, "Turkey-U.S. Relations: Timeline and Brief Historical Context, **Congressional Research Service**", 09.04.2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/I-F10487.pdf>, (12.10.2020).

<sup>184</sup> Şevket Ovalı and İlkin Özdikmenli. "Ideologies and the Western Question in Turkish Foreign Policy: A Neo-Classical Realist Perspective", **All-Azimuth**, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2019, p. 106.

<sup>185</sup> Şevket Ovalı and İlkin Özdikmenli, p. 107.

<sup>186</sup> Selcan Hacaoglu and Firat Kozok. "Erdogan Discussed Warplanes, Submarine Cooperation with Putin", **Bloomberg**, 30.09. 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-09-30/erdogan-says-talked-warplane-submarine-cooperation-with-putin>, (12.10.2021).

the Russian S-400 system. In a sign of further disillusionment with the U.S., Turkey received the first batch of the systems in July 2019, followed by the delivery of the second S-400 battery from Russia in August of the same year. In response, the U.S. suspended Turkey from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program and imposed sanctions on Turkey in late December 2020 under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).<sup>187</sup>

In sum, the overall picture suggests that despite the myriads of geopolitical disagreements between Moscow and Ankara over Syria, Libya, the status of Crimea, Nagorno-Karabakh, etc., the economic cooperation did not come to a permanent halt except for a nine-month period after the 2015 jet incident. Hence, the past and present state of affairs in Russia-Turkey relations corroborate the claim that the strategy of compartmentalization still remains relevant but is on a shaky ground.

It should be acknowledged, however, that the strategy of compartmentalization was more conspicuous under the Trump administration, though it was the same administration that in late 2020 imposed the CAATSA sanctions on Turkey over the deployment of the Russian missile defense system. As the Trump presidency neared its end, Turkey abruptly embarked on a charm offensive on multiple fronts to achieve certain objectives. In its relations with the European Union, President Erdogan's government reached out for exploratory talks with Greece and exchanged a personal letter with French President Emmanuel Macron, putting the EU in a bind over whether to press ahead with further sanctions against Ankara.<sup>188</sup> In so far as Turkey's relations with the Gulf states is concerned, President Erdogan spoke with Saudi Arabia's King Salman by phone ahead of G20 virtual summit.<sup>189</sup> The two leaders discussed improvement of bilateral ties which were deteriorated after the 2018 killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. Later in January 2020 when the GCC Gulf Arab states ended a partial blockade on Qatar—Turkey's close

---

<sup>187</sup> Paul Iddon. "Why Turkey Isn't Going to Sell its Russian S-400 Missiles to the United States", **Forbes**, 02.07.2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2020/07/02/why-turkey-wouldnt-sell-its-russian-s-400-missiles-to-the-united-states/#3aaba0f8516a>, (28.11.2020).

<sup>188</sup> Jacopo Barigazzi and Rym Momtaz. "Turkey's Charm Offensive Puts EU in a Tight Spot", **Politico**, 19.01.2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-charm-offensive-eu-tight-spot-sanctions-recep-tayyip-erdogan/>, (21.10.2021)

<sup>189</sup> The Associated Press. "Turkish, Saudi Leaders Speak by Phone Ahead of G20 Summit", **The Associated Press**, 21.11.2020, <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-saudi-arabia-istanbul-riyadh-summits-cf096fc947de167c72526f4f6cdd333a>, (14.12.2021).

ally in the region, the grounds were ripe for a rekindling of ties between Ankara and the Saudi-Egypt-Bahrain-the UAE axis. The visit in early May 2021 of a high-ranking Turkish delegation to Cairo can be seen a byproduct of Turkey's overtures to Riyadh. Although it remains to be seen as to whether the ongoing Turkey-Egypt détente would produce tangible results in terms of full normalization of bilateral ties, it is convincing to argue that Turkey reached out for talks with Egypt partly because it seeks to weaken and counterbalance the alliance among Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt.<sup>190</sup> As regards Turkey's relations with Israel, President Erdogan made use of the good offices of his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev to express "Ankara's willingness to improve bilateral ties".<sup>191</sup> In the eyes of some analysts, despite this trend of deteriorating relations between Israel and Turkey, changing political realities of the Middle East provide Ankara with an opportunity to establish stronger relations with the Biden administration by means of attempted rapprochement with Israel.<sup>192</sup> This opportunity was dealt a severe blow after the Israel's war with Hamas in May 2021 when President Erdogan went on to accuse Biden of "having blood on his hands" for backing Israel during the crisis.<sup>193</sup>

Mindful that President Biden will significantly toughen the U.S. policy towards Turkey, President Erdogan's government has apparently attempted to tone down its anti-western rhetoric since January 2021, instead, angling for a possible reset in Washington-Ankara ties. Therefore, Turkey's charm offensive since late December 2020/early 2021 should be seen in this light. To no avail, it took Biden more than 90 days to call his Turkish counterpart only to inform him about the United States'

---

<sup>190</sup> Hürcan Aslı Aksoy and Stephan Roll. "A Thaw in Relations between Egypt and Turkey", **German Institute for International and Security Affairs**, No 39, 29.06.2021, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/a-thaw-in-relations-between-egypt-and-turkey>, (11.07.2021).

<sup>191</sup> The Daily Sabah. "Turkey Hopes for Better Relations with Israel, Erdogan Says", **The Daily Sabah**, 25.12.2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-hopes-for-better-relationships-with-israel-erdogan-says>, (07.01.2021).

<sup>192</sup> Oğul Tuna and Gökhan Çinkara. "The Potential for Azerbaijani Mediation of Turkish-Israeli Relations, Fikra Forum", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 20.07.2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/potential-azerbaijani-mediation-turkish-israeli-relations>, (24.09.2021).

<sup>193</sup> Maggi Gile. "Tayyip Erdogan Accuses Joe Biden of 'Bloody Hands' After Report of \$735M Weapons Sales to Israel", **Newsweek**, 17.05.2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/tayyip-erdogan-accuses-joe-biden-bloody-hands-after-report-735m-weapons-sale-israel-1592247>, (26.08.2021)

decision to recognize the 1915 events as “genocide”.<sup>194</sup> Even the Biden-Erdogan meeting on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Brussels on 14 June 2021 and in Rome in late October 2021 failed to usher in a firm revitalization of U.S.-Turkey relations. Referring to Turkey’s past experiences with the previous U.S. administrations, President Erdogan stated in a TV interview on June 1, 2021 that he “had never experienced such tension’ with the White House.”<sup>195</sup> Nevertheless, the ‘strategic dilemma’ confronting Turkey in its relations with the U.S. did not dissuade President Erdogan’s government from trying to explore alternative ways to mend ties with Washington even if such (tactical) overtures would irk its foremost regional partner, most notably Russia. In this spirit, Turkey and Russia have found themselves on opposite sides of the Ukraine conflict. The Turkish government, which has not, as of yet, recognized Crimea as a Russian territory, offered diplomatic and military support to Ukraine as seen in Erdogan’s high-profile meeting with Ukraine’s president in Istanbul in April 2021 and the sale of Turkish Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs) for use in eastern Ukraine against Russia’s proxy forces.<sup>196</sup> The growing pattern of amity between Turkey and Ukraine evinced itself as the Ukrainian media were speculating about Kyiv’s possible use of the Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones in order to reclaim territories from Russian-backed separatists.<sup>197</sup> Turkey and Russia also found themselves on the opposite sides of the geopolitical fence in the Black Sea region as exemplified by Ankara’s participation in mid-2021 in NATO’s air defense drills off Romania’s coast.<sup>198</sup> As one scholar argues,

*The Turkish leadership tends to prioritize political and military maneuvers in the eastern Mediterranean over the Black Sea theatre, but in the former it often has to play against heavy odds, while in the latter it has some unique advantages and can grant, or deny, NATO crucial assets in the developing confrontation with Russia.*

---

<sup>194</sup> Kevin Liptak, Biden Officially Recognizes the Massacre of Armenians in World War I as Genocide, CNN, April 24, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/24/politics/armenian-genocide-biden-erdogan-turkey/index.html>

<sup>195</sup> Sedat Ergin, Erdogan-Biden Meeting Can be Rough, **Hurriyet Daily**, 11.06.2021, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/sedat-ergin/erdogan-biden-meeting-can-be-rough-165431>, (26.08.2021)

<sup>196</sup> Paul Stronski. “A Difficult Balancing Act: Russia’s Role in the Eastern Mediterranean”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, June 2021, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Stronski\\_RussiaEastMed\\_final1.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Stronski_RussiaEastMed_final1.pdf)

<sup>197</sup> Metin Gurcan. “Will Washington Buy Ankara’s ‘Drone Crescent’ against Russia?”, **Al Monitor**, 11.06.2021, June 11, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/will-washington-buy-ankaras-drone-crescent-against-russia>

<sup>198</sup> NATO, “NATO Hold Air Defense Exercise in the Black Sea”, **NATO**, 03.07.2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185677.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185677.htm), (09.08.2021).

*Turkey's military cooperation with Ukraine could, if advanced as planned, thwart Russian assumptions of sustained conflict dominance.*<sup>199</sup>

It is because of these very trends that Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused Turkey of instigating 'militaristic sentiments' in Ukraine after Ankara boosted its defense cooperation with Kyiv.<sup>200</sup> In a further sign of Turkey's pro-Western tilt, Ankara looks to play a bigger role in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal at a time when China, Russia and Iran set their sights on filling the security void.<sup>201</sup>

As can be seen, while the bulk of journalistic writings tend to portray the complex relations between Russia and Turkey as 'strategic', a meticulous scrutiny of the recent trends and developments in Moscow and Ankara relations suggest a somewhat blurry picture. Upon closer examination it becomes clear that Turkey and Russia are seen as developing an 'adversarial collaboration' as they harbor divergent interests in Ukraine, Libya, the Black Sea region, the Eastern Mediterranean and Syria.<sup>202</sup> In fact, the import of the foregoing observations is that although the relations between Ankara and Moscow have withstood daunting tests in the Syrian, Libyan and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts, there is little assuredness that the same compartmentalization strategies which have been an asset in regulating bilateral ties in times of conflict would bring about optimal outcomes in all theaters of conflict and contestation. For this very reason, some analysts view the past and present dynamics in Turkey and Russia relations as posing a formidable challenge to the durability and viability of compartmentalization strategy in regulating ties between Ankara and Moscow. Take for example Ozdal's contention that "Turkey's downing a Russian jet due to an airspace violation in November 2015 put an end to that compartmentalization and began a new era in bilateral ties in which the defining characteristics have also

---

<sup>199</sup> Pavel Baev. "Russia and Turkey: Strategic Partners and Rivals", French Institute of International Relations (ifri), No. 35, 01.05.2021 [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/baev\\_turkey\\_russia\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/baev_turkey_russia_2021.pdf), (17.09.2021).

<sup>200</sup> Reuters, "Russia Warns Turkey over Ties with Ukraine", **Reuters**, 24.05.2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-warns-turkey-over-ties-with-ukraine-2021-05-24/>, (24.06.2021).

<sup>201</sup> Michael Kugelman. "Turkey Looks to Expand Footprint in Afghanistan", **Foreign Policy**, 17.06.2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/17/turkey-afghanistan-footprint-us-withdrawal-security/>, (25.09.2021).

<sup>202</sup> Güney Yıldız. "Turkish-Russian Adversarial Collaboration in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh", **German Institute for International and Security Affairs**, No. 22, 24.03.2021, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021C22/>, (03.09.2021).

changed”.<sup>203</sup> He adds that “while there is clear evidence of a continuation in bilateral relations, Moscow and Ankara still face certain challenges. In other words, there seems to be intensive cooperation along with irreversible differences”.<sup>204</sup>

### 3.3.1. US Factor and Turkey’s Multivectoral Foreign Policy

Related to this argument is the notion that in light of the Biden administration’s stern approach towards Turkey and given the adverse impacts of the global Covid-19 pandemic on Turkish economy, President Erdogan’s government endeavors to promote Ankara as the best regional partner of the United States in the Middle East security complex and beyond. It remains to be seen whether Turkey’s overtures to the Biden administration would pay off anytime soon, but one can postulate that Turkey’s pursuit of an independent foreign policy requires Ankara to carry out a skillful and delicate balancing act between Russia and the United States.<sup>205</sup> The preceding arguments warrants a careful assessment of two interlinked issues: the changing nature of Turkey-U.S. relations under the leaderships of Biden and Erdogan and Turkey’s assertive regionalized and securitized foreign policy in and beyond the Middle East security complex.

In regard to the first issue, some scholars argue that the relations between Turkey and the United States suffer from ‘a crisis of framework and status’ in the sense that Ankara is on the path towards redressing its asymmetrical relations, and addressing its status anxiety vis-à-vis the West.<sup>206</sup> Others indicate that the main challenge facing Ankara and Washington is to find a new *modus operandi* between preserving old strategic partnership and transactionalism. Recognizing the litany of divergences of interests and the degrees of policy contestations between the two NATO allies, these scholars refer to ‘transactionalism’ as the organizing principle in

---

<sup>203</sup> Habibe Ozdal, Irina Zvyagelskaya, Irina Svistunova, “Russia and Turkey: Partners or Adversaries”, **Friedrich Ebert Stiftung**, 01.06.2021, p. 3, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/moskau/1-8044.pdf>

<sup>204</sup> Habibe Ozdal, Irina Zvyagelskaya, Irina Svistunova, p. 3.

<sup>205</sup> The Daily Sabah. “Turkey is Independent in its Foreign Policy, President Erdogan Says”, **The Daily Sabah**, 05.12.2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2019/12/05/turkey-is-independent-in-its-foreign-policy-president-erdogan-says>, (08.09.2021).

<sup>206</sup> Galip Dalay, Ian Lesser, Valeria Talbot and Kadri Tastan. “Turkey and the West: Keep the Flame Burning”, **The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS)**, 08.06.2020, No. 6, p. 5-6, <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkey-and-west-keep-flame-burning>, (12.09.2021)

management of Turkey-U.S. relations.<sup>207</sup> For example, Şaban Kardaş introduces ‘structured transnationalism’ as a dual framework governing bilateral ties under which the core of the Turkey-U.S. security relationship will continue through the existing strategic partnership within the NATO alliance while the substantial disagreements and the overall ‘issues in-between’ will fall into the second area of the relationship that can be managed by structured transactionalism.<sup>208</sup> As noted above, whether or not the Biden administration would be willing to provide Turkey with an opportunity to help realize this preferred transactionalist approach is open to question. Yet, mention must be made that Turkey’s grand strategy is heavily influenced by the turbulences in Washington-Ankara relations and that any serious assessment of Turkish foreign policy should account for the import of the U.S. factor in bilateral ties. Equally important is that the bilateral ties are particularly affected by “the public perception that the international arena remains hostile, that foreign countries, including Turkey’s allies, continue to threaten Turkey and that it needs to stand alone rather than joining with other countries”.<sup>209</sup> This public perception has deep roots in the so-called “Sevres Syndrome” denoting Turkey’s feeling of ontological insecurity which exacerbates the fear of restricting, undermining and partitioning the Turkish state by the dealings of the great powers of the time, as was the case via the Balkan wars, the First World wars,

<sup>207</sup> See, Serhat Güvenç and Soli Özal. “U.S.-Turkey Relations Since WWII: From Alliance to Transactionalism”, **The Oxford Handbook of Turkish Politics**, Güneş Murat Tezcür, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020., Şaban Kardaş and Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı. “A Dual Framework for the Turkey-U.S. Security Relationship”, **The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS)**, 19.03.2021, March, pp. 1-15, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/dual-framework-turkey-us-security-relationship>, (20.09.2021)., Galip Dalay. “US-Turkey Relations Will Remain Crisis-Ridden for a Long Time”, **Brookings**, 29.01.2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/29/us-turkey-relations-will-remain-crisis-ridden-for-a-long-time-to-come/>, (20.09.2021)., Dimitar Bechev. “Turkey’s Tightrope Between Russia and the United States”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace** (Moscow Center), 14.04.2021, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/84317>, (29.09.2021)., Max Hoffman. “Flashpoints in U.S.-Turkey Relations in 2021”, **Center for American Progress**, 19.01.2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2021/01/19/494738/flashpoints-u-s-turkey-relations-2021/>, 29.09.2021., Semih Idiz. “U.S.-Turkey Relations Set to Remain Loveless, Transactional”, **Al Monitor**, 24.06.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/us-turkey-ties-set-remain-loveless-transactional>, (29.09.2021).

<sup>208</sup> See, Şaban Kardaş and Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı. “A Dual Framework for the Turkey-U.S. Security Relationship”, **The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS)**, 19.03.2021, March, pp. 1-15, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/dual-framework-turkey-us-security-relationship>, (20.09.2021).

<sup>209</sup> Mustafa Aydin. “Grand Strategizing in and for Turkish Foreign Policy: Lessons Learned from History, Geography and Practice”, **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. XXV, No. 2, Winter 2020, p. 212.



and the Sevres Treaty of 1920.<sup>210</sup> Following such a realist-oriented public understanding of international life, prominent experts such as Nicholas Danforth believe that “Turkey’s new combative approach to foreign policy has already brought Erdogan enough political and geopolitical benefits that, whatever happens, he is unlikely to abandon it anytime soon”.<sup>211</sup> Therefore, given ‘the fragmentation of the regional order’ in the Middle East in tandem with the rise of ‘new security culture and power bloc’ in Turkish domestic politics, Turkey’s new Middle East policy possess the following characteristics: 1) increased threat perceptions and a securitization of issues, plucked out from the realm of normal politics and elevated to the realm of national security threats, 2) increased embeddedness in the geopolitical polarization of the region and engagement in zero-sum competition with other regional powers, 3) increased use of military power and engagement in risky behaviors, 4) an increased preference for unilateral actions, reluctance to depend on traditional alliances, balancing policy between major powers while seeking (strategic) autonomy.<sup>212</sup>

In regards to the second issue—Turkey’s assertive regionalized and securitized foreign policy—the assertion is that Turkey under the leadership of President Erdogan is pursuing a multi-vector foreign and security policy in and outside the Middle East complex.

In the first vector which pertains to Turkey-U.S. relations, Turkey aims to preferably seek ‘strategic autonomy’ from the United States on the basis of preserving a more transactionalist approach in foreign and security policies. It is worthwhile here to note that strategic autonomy, loosely defined, entails a state’s ability to devise and pursue “a dependence control strategy aimed at safeguarding its independence in both foreign policy decision-making and protecting strategic assets against American pressure”.<sup>213</sup> In the context of Turkey’s approach towards the U.S., it means “acting

---

<sup>210</sup> Stavros Drakoularakos. “Turkey and Erdogan’s Rising ‘Lausanne Syndrome’”, **Digest of Middle East Studies (DOMES)**, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2021, pp. 22-33.

<sup>211</sup> Nicholas Danforth. “Between Cooperation and Containment: New U.S. Policies for a New Turkey”, **Brookings**, 01.02.2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/between-cooperation-and-containment-new-us-policies-for-a-new-turkey/>, (29.09.2021).

<sup>212</sup> Meliha Benli Altunışık. “The New Turn in Turkey’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Regional and Domestic Insecurities”, **Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)**, No. 20, 17.07.2020, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/new-turn-turkeys-foreign-policy-middle-east-regional-and-domestic-insecurities>, (29.09.2021).

<sup>213</sup> There are many different definitions of the concept ‘strategic autonomy’ in foreign policy literature. See, Jeff M. Smith. “Strategic Autonomy and U.S.-India Relations”, **The Heritage Foundation**,

independently of western powers, and this requires the cooperation of major non-western players, notably the Russia-China axis, an increasingly dominant authoritarian bloc within the BRICS”.<sup>214</sup> Also, transactionalist approach here is referred to as “a foreign policy approach that favors bilateral to multilateral relations, focuses on short term wins rather than longer-term strategic foresight, adheres to a zero-sum worldview where all gains are relative and reciprocity is absent, rejects value-based policymaking”.<sup>215</sup> The primary goal of Turkey’s quest for ‘strategic autonomy’, which can be seen as an integral part of the AKP’s “regional geopolitical vision” since 2002, is to portray itself as one of the dominant actors in its surrounding region.<sup>216</sup> From Kutlay and Öniş’s perspective however, strategic autonomy, on the one hand, constitutes “a framework within which Turkish ruling elites can *align* themselves with non-western Great Powers and *balance* the U.S.-led hierarchical order,” while, on the other hand, “it serves as a legitimizing foreign policy discourse by which an authoritarian populist government can mobilize its support base at home”.<sup>217</sup> The fate of this approach hangs in the balance as the Biden administration is seen as highlighting the importance of normative values such as human rights and democratic principles in its relations with Turkey whereas Ankara puts transactional benefits in areas of mutual strategic and economic interests on the front burner in its ties with Washington.

It is also worthwhile to mention that in the eyes of some scholars, one corollary of Turkey’s march towards ‘strategic autonomy’ means that Ankara is “partially trading its dependency on the West with dependency on Russia and China, over which it has even less leverage”.<sup>218</sup> However, others believe that while strategic autonomy

---

09.11.2020, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/commentary/strategic-autonomy-and-us-indian-relations>, (11.11.2020).

<sup>214</sup> Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş. “Turkey’s Foreign policy in a Post-Western Order: Strategic Autonomy or New Forms of Dependence”, **International Affairs**, Vol. 97, No. 4, 2021, p. 1094.

<sup>215</sup> Galib Bahirov and Ihsan Yilmaz. “The Rise of Transactionalism in International Relations: Evidence from Turkey’s Relations from the European Union”, **Australian Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 74, No. 2, 2020, pp. 165-184.

<sup>216</sup> Murat Yeşiltaş. “Deciphering Turkey’s Assertive Military and Defense Strategy: Objectives, Pillars, and Implications”, **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2020, p. 96.

<sup>217</sup> Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş. “Turkey’s Foreign policy in a Post-Western Order: Strategic Autonomy or New Forms of Dependence”, **International Affairs**, Vol. 97, No. 4, 2021, p. 1088.

<sup>218</sup> Galip Dalay. Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts, **German Institute for International and Security Affairs**, No. 5, 04.08.2021, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/turkish-russian-relations-in-light-of-recent-conflicts>, (01.10.2021)

connote charting an independent foreign policy, it does not mean dependency on Russia and China at the expense of maintaining utilitarian and institutional ties with the United States. In the words of Dalay and Keyman, strategic autonomy in this sense represents “the government’s quest to reduce Turkey’s dependency on the West in the geostrategic, political, and security realms” while simultaneously holding onto its position within Western institutions—“Turkey asserting its autonomy vis-à-vis the West”.<sup>219</sup> In the second vector, which is related to relations between Turkey and Iran, China and Russia, the Turkish government is seen as striving to retain compartmentalization as a guiding principle in resolving bilateral and regional divergences of interests. In the third vector which concerns the relations between Turkey and the Arab countries, including the GCC Gulf Arab countries plus Israel, Ankara opts for possible normalization and/or de-securitization with Arab states such as Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia with Qatar playing the role of a possible mediator.<sup>220</sup> The main objective in this vector is to extract Turkey out of its isolation as a consequence of the formation of the Abraham Accords between Israel and the Gulf Arab states and of the creation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum which has intensified the level of cooperation among a number of countries such as Greece, Italy, the Greek-Cypriot administration, and Israel. In the fourth vector, Turkey adopts penetration and/or overlay of its immediate neighboring regions and states, including Syria, norther Iraq, the eastern Mediterranean, and if possible, seek political and economic integration with its immediate neighbors in a bid to neutralize security threats (i.e. PYD-YPG/PKK) and prevent the military presence of great powers in those regions.<sup>221</sup> Turkey’s penetration and military overlay of its immediate neighborhood which is largely predicated on a larger securitization approach permits Ankara to carve out a benign security environment for more autonomic space for geopolitical and security maneuverings. This approach ostensibly requires Turkey to pursue an assertive regional strategy to gain strategic leverage against its rivals by

---

<sup>219</sup> Galip Dalay and E. Fuat Keyman. “Has Turkey’s Quest for ‘Strategic Autonomy’ Run its Course?”, **The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS)**, 26.07.2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/has-turkeys-quest-strategic-autonomy-run-its-course>, (01.10.2021).

<sup>220</sup> See, for example, Meliha Benli Altunışık. “The New Wave of Normalization in Turkey’s Middle East Foreign Policy”, **Middle East Institute**, 27.04.2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/new-wave-normalization-turkeys-middle-east-foreign-policy>, (01.10.2021).

<sup>221</sup> See, Şener Aktürk. “Turkey’s Grand Strategy as the Third Power: A Realist Proposal”, **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 25. No. 2, 2020, pp. 152-177.

augmenting its military power (operational autonomy) through increasing its military readiness, pre-emptive status, and deterrence capability.<sup>222</sup>

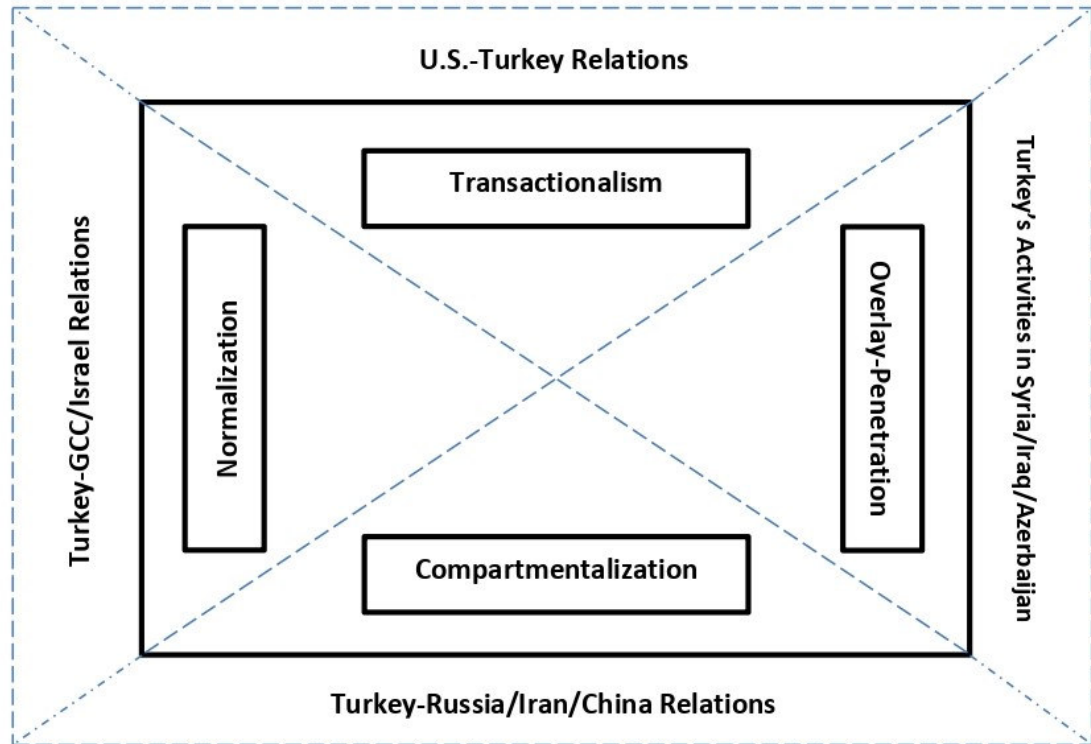
It is important to be mindful, however, that while the first and second vectors pertain to Turkey's relations with great powers, the third and fourth vectors are associated with Ankara's regionalized foreign and security approach which crystalizes itself in the country's overtly militarist activities, i.e., in the Levant and the Maghreb sub-complexes in particular.



---

<sup>222</sup> Murat Yeşiltaş. "Deciphering Turkey's Assertive Military and Defense Strategy: Objectives, Pillars, and Implications", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2020, p. 97.

**Figure 5: Turkey's Multi – Vector Foreign and Security Policy**



Source: Designed by the author

Meanwhile, an intriguing question arises as to how and in what ways Turkey's quest for an independent foreign policy will play itself out given the salience of the above-mentioned multi-vector policy. The answer can be that Turkey is seen as seeking to achieve this goal by adopting a specific foreign policy orientation along four axes. The first axis relates to the unceasing game of balancing act between the United States and Russia, which the AKP government uses to increase its room for geopolitical maneuvering at the regional and extra-regional levels. The second axis pertains to Turkey's intense competition with Egypt-Saudi-Israel-the UAE entente from Syria to Libya while backing Qatar, Pakistan and the Muslim Brotherhood movements across the Middle East complex. Turkey engages in this balancing act while probing the conditions and possible ways of normalization with the GCC Gulf Arab states. The third axis consists of a combination of cooperation and conflict with Iran (in the Levant and Gulf sub-complexes) and China in the Middle East complex. The fourth axis concerns Turkey's strategic dilemma with the NATO and its further alienation from the European Union.

Herein lies the importance of regionalization and quest for regional dominance in Turkey's multi-vector foreign and security policy. In other words, as noted above, Turkey's new turn in foreign and security policy requires President Erdogan's government to pursue an aggressive regional policy which rests on "the assertive use of hard power, both to advance Turkey's interests in an unstable world and to thwart a perceived axis of regional states seeking to encircle it".<sup>223</sup> One of the striking aspects of Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy from the United States and its growing military expeditionary posture relates to Ankara's large-scale and pioneering development and use of indigenous UCAVs in various theaters of conflict in the MENA region. From Yemen to Iraq, to Syria and Libya, the use of armed drones has substantially increased over the past few years particularly by Iran, Israel, the UAE and Turkey.

It is estimated that military UCAVs accounted for about 82 percent of the overall regional drones' market in 2019, representing a lucrative 'business space' for defense companies such as the Turkish drone magnet Baykar Makina, the Chinese Chendu Aircraft Industry Group or the Emirati Adcom Systems.<sup>224</sup> The global attention to the proliferation of armed drones in the Middle East initially came after the September 2019 drone attacks on Saudi Arabia's Aramco facilities. In a different context, however, the *dronization* of Turkey's foreign and security policy is observable in the country's overseas military operations in Syria, Libya and Iraq.<sup>225</sup>

As some scholars put it, the Bayraktar TB2's armed version, regarded as one of the crown jewels of Turkey's drone fleet, has been deployed to conduct airstrikes

---

<sup>223</sup> Nicholas Danforth. "Between Cooperation and Containment: New U.S. Policies for a New Turkey", **Brookings**, 01.02.2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/between-cooperation-and-containment-new-us-policies-for-a-new-turkey/>, (10.10.2021).

<sup>224</sup> Federico Borsari. "The Middle East's Game of Drones: The Race to Lethal UAVs and Its Implications for the Region's Security Landscape", **Italian Institute for International Studies (ISPI)**, 15.01.2021, p. 3, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/middle-east-s-game-drones-race-lethal-uavs-and-its-implications-regions-security-landscape-28902>, (10.10.2021).

<sup>225</sup> On Turkey's development and deployment of UCAVs, see for example, Can Kasapoğlu and Barış Kirdemir. "The Rising Drone Power: Turkey on The Eve of its Military Breakthrough", **Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM)**, 01.06.2018, <https://edam.org.tr/en/the-rising-drone-power-turkey-on-the-eve-of-its-military-breakthrough/>, (10.10.2021)., Ismail Demir. "Transformation of the Turkish Defense Industry: The Story and Rationale of the Great Rise", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 22, No.3, 2020, pp. 17-40., James Marson and Brett Forrest. "Armed Low-Cost Drones, Made By Turkey, Reshape Battlefields and Geopolitics", **Wall Street Journal**, 03.06.2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/armed-low-cost-drones-made-by-turkey-reshape-battlefields-and-geopolitics-11622727370>, (11.10.2021).

on Turkish soil and northern Iraq against the PKK, in northern Syria as part of Turkey's military operations in the region as well as in Libya and the Nagorno-Karabakh region.<sup>226</sup> In this vein, an argument goes that the Turkish power projection, including its use of armed drones, "has prevented five military *fait accomplis* threatening its interests or partners: annexation of Azerbaijani territory, General Haftar's offensive against Tripoli, Emirati subordination of Qatar, liquidation of Idlib opposition, and YPG (People's Defense Units) PKK control along the Syria-Turkey border".<sup>227</sup>

Another salient argument is that the *dronization* of Turkey's military and security approach can be seen as parts and parcel of the country's pursuit of strategic autonomy which in turn requires operational autonomy at the ground level. According to this approach, the use of UCAVs provides Turkey with more room for maneuverability in order to take independent military action and ultimately advance a strategic military posture abroad.<sup>228</sup> This tendency has become more observable as a consequence of a number of key factors, namely Washington's disinclination to provide Ankara with the US-made MQ-9 Reaper drones, and the US decision to indefinitely halt a secretive military intelligence drone program with Turkey which for years helped Ankara target the PKK in Syria and Iraq.<sup>229</sup>

All these factors combined have paved the way for Turkey's ambitious strategic posture in various conflict zones of the Middle East security complex.

---

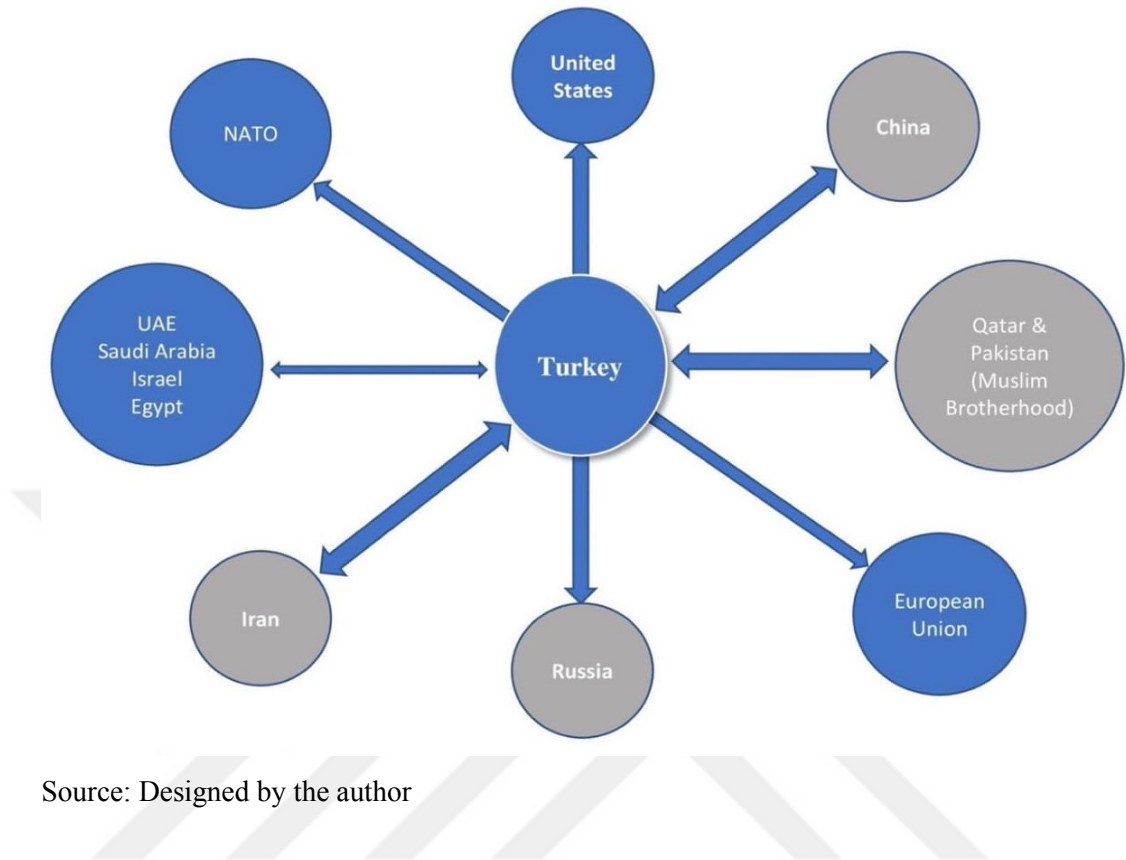
<sup>226</sup> See for example, Francesco F. Milan and Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi. "Armed, Unmanned, and in High Demand: The Drivers Behind Combat Drones Proliferation in the Middle East", **Small Wars and Insurgencies**, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2020, p. 733.

<sup>227</sup> Rich Outzen. "Deals Drones, and National Will: The New Era in Turkish Power Projection", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, No. 108, 09.07.2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deals-drones-and-national-will-new-era-turkish-power-projection>, (14.10.2021).

<sup>228</sup> See, Murat Yeşiltaş. "Deciphering Turkey's Assertive Military and Defense Strategy: Objectives, Pillars, and Implications", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 22, No. 3, Summer 2020, p. 96.

<sup>229</sup> Humeyra Pamuk and Phil Stewart. "Exclusive: U.S. Halts Secretive Drone Program with Turkey over Syria Incursion", **Reuters**, 05.02.2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-usa-drone-exclusive-idUSKBN1ZZ1AB>, (29.05.2021).

**Figure 6:** Four-Axis Orientation of Turkey's Foreign Policy (2015-2020)



Source: Designed by the author

In Libya, Turkey has staged an overt military intervention on the side of Libya's internationally recognized Government of National Accord as part of efforts to prevent Fayeze al-Sarraj's government from collapsing and exert Ankara's dominance in the gas-rich Eastern Mediterranean. It is in Libya, Syria and eastern Mediterranean disputes that the second axis of Turkey's foreign policy orientation, that its balancing of and possible normalization with Egypt-Saudi-Israel-UAE entente are at play. Turkey, as of writing this chapter, is flexing its military and diplomatic muscles in the eastern Mediterranean to disrupt and possibly confront the joint energy exploration of EastMed bloc comprising Egypt-Israel-Cyprus-Greece who are backed by France, the UAE and the United States. These dynamics have led some scholars to believe that Turkey's penetration into the Libyan conflict signals a shift of its foreign policy focus from the Middle East to the Mediterranean, posing undeniable challenges to Europe, the European Union and the NATO. Nevertheless, as noted by Jalel Harchaoui, the primary drivers of Turkey's securitized approach in Libya include, 1) assertiveness on the [Mediterranean] water, 2) commercial interests on the Libyan soil,



including in the energy sector, 3) political and commercial ambitions in the remainder of Africa.<sup>230</sup> As some Turkish scholars and pundits posit, the Mavi Vatan or “Blue Homeland” doctrine, which was developed by the retired Admiral Cem Gürdeniz in 2006, constitute the maritime wing of Turkey’s overlay of Libya, and the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>231</sup> According to this doctrine, “the Turkish state must be proactive and use military force—unilaterally if necessary—to protect its interests in the Mediterranean and beyond” and “redefine its role and place in the changing world by shifting its geopolitical camp and forging new alliances with rising Asian powers Russia, China, and Iran”.<sup>232</sup>

In Iraq, a member of the Gulf sub-complex, the spillover effects of the Syrian conflict are observable in parallel with Turkey’s growing threat perceptions towards the PKK/YPG/ISIS triangle. A somewhat similar geopolitical and security consideration that the AKP government seeks to achieve in Syria and Libya fits into the context of the ongoing Turkish military operations in northern Iraq. Of course, Turkey has a long history of conducting multiple cross-border military operations into the northern parts of the country. But since the collapse of the ceasefire between Turkey and the PKK in July 2015, the scope and scale of Turkish anti-PKK operations in Iraq have significantly increased, mostly in Iraq’s Qandil Mountains. Most particularly, the year 2020 has seen multi-stage and multi-level military operations, dubbed Operation Claw-Eagle and Operation Claw-Tiger, which are unique in that

<sup>230</sup> Jalel Harchaoui. “Why Turkey Intervened in Libya”, **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, 07.12.2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/12/why-turkeyintervenedinlibya/>, (08.05.2021).

<sup>231</sup> On the concept of “Blue Homeland” doctrine see, Cem Gürdeniz. **Mavi Vatan Yazilari**, Kirmizi Kedi, 2018., Galip Dalay. “Turkey, Europe, and the Eastern Mediterranean: Charging a Way Out of the Current Deadlock”, **Brookings**, Doha Center, Policy Briefing, 01.01.2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Turkey-Europe-and-the-Eastern-Mediterranean.pdf>, (08.05.2021)., Hakan Yapar. “From Strategic Depth to Blue Homeland and Beyond: Understanding Turkey’s Drift towards Greater Strategic Autonomy”, **Instituto Espanol de Estudios Estrategicos**, No. 41, 12.04.2021, [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero-/docs\\_opinion/2021/DIEEE040\\_2021\\_HAKYAP\\_Turquia\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero-/docs_opinion/2021/DIEEE040_2021_HAKYAP_Turquia_ENG.pdf), (08.05.2021)., Hakkı Taş. “The Formulation and implementation of Populist Foreign policy: Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean”, **Mediterranean Politics**, October 2021, pp. 1-25., İlhan Uzgel. “The ‘Blue Homeland’ and Turkey’s New Forward Defense Doctrine”, **Duvar English**, 25.06.2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/columns/2020/06/25/the-blue-homeland-and-turkeys-new-forward-defence-doctrine>, (08.05.2021)., Tavfik Kadan. “The Formulation of the Blue Homeland Doctrine”, **Belt and Road Initiative Quarterly (BRIQ)**, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2021, pp. 36-50.

<sup>232</sup> Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş. “Turkey’s Foreign policy in a Post-Western Order: Strategic Autonomy or New Forms of Dependence”, **International Affairs**, Vol. 97, No. 4, 2021, p. 1101., Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar. “Syria and Libya’s Contributions to the Evolution of the Turkish ‘Forward Defense’ Doctrine”, **Geneva Center for Security Policy (GCSP)**, No. 7, June 2021, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/syria-libya-turkish-forward-defence>, (11.01.2021).

they are more comprehensive and more powerful than previous military operations.<sup>233</sup> It is vital to note here that Turkish policy makers have pursued a de-securitized approach towards the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) since 2008 except for a brief period in 2017 when the issue of the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum took center stage in bilateral ties. Although relations between Ankara and Erbil remain mostly amicable, a new securitized approach, accompanied by the rise of a flamboyant nationalistic public discourse, has contributed to the formation of a political alliance between the AKP and the ultra-nationalist MHP party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi).<sup>234</sup> Therefore, these domestic-level factors in tandem with regional-level variables, such as the foreign interventions in the Syrian conflict itself, have given rise to Turkey's overtly security-oriented and militarist foreign policy in the Levant and to a lesser extent in the Gulf sub-complex, notably in northern Iraq. To force the PKK out of Iraqi Kurdistan, and prevent another northern Iraq to its southern frontiers, Turkey has established several military bases and deployed more than 5000 Turkish troops in Iraqi Kurdistan in order to cut off access between the PKK's main hubs connecting Qandil to the Syrian border.<sup>235</sup> More to this, Turkish government has also alluded to the importance of strategic projects with Iraqi government, such as "a second border crossing between the two neighbors, the reopening of the oil pipeline from Kirkuk to Turkey's Mediterranean coast, a railroad between the two countries and a highway from the Iraqi border city of Zako to the Persian Gulf".<sup>236</sup> There is also an increasing competition between Iran and Turkey for influence in the oil-rich Nineveh province in northern Iraq. Both Iran and Turkey are fearful of Kurdish separatism in their countries but the former appears to have aligned itself with the US-designated terrorist

---

<sup>233</sup> Firas Elias. "The Turkish Military Operation in Northern Iraq: Goals and Dimensions", 30.06.2020, **The Emirates Policy Center (EPC)**, <https://epc.ae/brief/the-turkish-military-operation-in-northern-iraq-goals-and-dimensions>, (11.01.2021).

<sup>234</sup> Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi and Federico Donelli. "Turkey's Changing Engagement with the Global South", **International Affairs**, Vol. 97, No. 2, 2021, p. 1109.

<sup>235</sup> Amberin Zaman. "Turkey to Establish New Military Base in Iraqi Kurdistan", **Al Monitor**, 30.04.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/turkey-establish-new-military-base-iraqi-kurdistan>, (11.01.2021).

<sup>236</sup> Fehim Tastekin. "PKK Remains Thorn in Side of Turkish-Iraqi Relations", **Al Monitor**, 23.12.2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/12/turkey-iraq-kurdistanpkkproblem-mahkmour-camp-dohuk.html>, (11.01.2020)., Nur Ozkan Erbay. "Iran-PKK Cooperation Exposed Over Sinjar Operation: Experts", **The Daily Sabah**, 22.04.2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/news-analysis/iran-pkk-cooperation-exposed-over-sinjar-operation-experts>, (12.01.2021).

organization the PKK in Sinjar, Nineveh province.<sup>237</sup> Therefore, there are widespread speculations that just as the Syrian conflict enters in fits and starts into the diplomatic and political phase, the northern Iraq could turn into a locus of immense geopolitical rivalry between external actors, most notably between Iran and Turkey.<sup>238</sup> This eventuality is deeply concerning as the Islamic Republic of Iran struggles to establish a redundant Iranian ground line of communication into northeastern Syria by dint of using its Shia proxies to entrench their military presence in the disputed Sinjar district whereas Turkey seeks to get the PKK and Iran-backed militias out of the district and buttress a member of the Ankara-aligned Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to administer the Sinjar region, thereby weakening Iranian clout.<sup>239</sup>

It is important to be mindful that Turkey's mounting penetration of the Gulf sub-complex is not confined to Iraqi territories. Interestingly, the growing patterns of amity between Turkey and Qatar have laid the ground for Ankara's penetration of Yemen. Aiming to counterbalance the influence of what is called Saudi-Egypt-UAE alliance in the Gulf sub-complex, Turkey has sought to entrench itself both militarily and politically in Yemen to the detriment of the Saudi-led axis. There are reports that indicate an alleged covert agreement has been reached between the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen and the Yemeni Houthis under the supervision of Turkey, Iran and Qatar to share areas of influence in the war-ravaged country, with the rebels controlling the northern parts of Yemen in exchange for supporting the MB's ambitions to wrest control over the southern regions.<sup>240</sup> Of paramount importance here is that Turkey has established a military base in Qatar and was granted temporary

---

<sup>237</sup> Mamoon Alabbasi. "The PKK-PMF Nexus in Iraq", **TRT World Research Center**, 07.05.2021, <https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/featured/the-pkk-pmf-nexus-in-iraq/>, (12.01.2021)., Fehim Tastekin. "Turkish-Iranian Rivalry Heats up Over Mosul", **Al Monitor**, 26.02.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/turkey-iran-iraq-sinjar-heats-up-turkish-iranian-rivalry.html>, (12.01.2021).

<sup>238</sup> See for example, Vali Nasr, "The Middle East's Next Conflicts Won't be Between Arab States and Iran", **Foreign Policy**, 02.03.2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/02/the-middle-east-s-next-conflicts-wont-be-between-arab-states-and-iran/>, (12.01.2021)., Galip Dalay, "Turkish-Iranian Relations Are Set to Become More Turbulent", **The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS)**, 09.02.2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkish-iranian-relations-are-set-become-more-turbulent>, (12.01.2021).

<sup>239</sup> Katherine Lawlore. "Iraq 2021-2022: A Forecast", **The Institute for the Study of War (ISW)**, 01.06.2021, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Iraq%20%20A%20Forecast.pdf>, (12.01.2021).

<sup>240</sup> Raul Redondo. "Turkey Sets its Sights on Yemen", **Atalayar**, 22.06.2020, <https://atalayar.com/en/content/turkey-sets-its-sights-yemen>, (12.01.2021).

control over Sudan's Suakin Island, both of which entail critical importance in the sense that they provide Turkey with an opportunity to penetrate deeply, in both military and political terms, into the Red Sea and beyond.<sup>241</sup> The import of Turkey's overlay of the Gulf sub-complex, namely in Yemen and Iraq from a theoretical perspective is that while much of the existing literature tend to characterize the unfolding geopolitical trends and dynamics in the Gulf as an interminable rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, less attention has been accorded to the new-found role of Turkey in the Gulf sub-complex. Another important point raised by some scholars is that "the Gulf security sub-complex was reshaped in the wake of the Arab uprisings, notably through the emergence of Turkey and Qatar as revisionist states" and that "the Qatar-Turkey alliance has paved the way for restricting the sub-complex to three poles: Saudi Arabia and the Emirate-led bloc, the Turkey-Qatar bloc and Iran".<sup>242</sup> Accordingly, one can logically infer that Qatar, as a member of the Gulf sub-complex, has contributed greatly to the entry of Turkey into the Gulf security sub-complex in an unprecedented manner.

As it was stated previously, Turkey's Middle Eastern engagement has been more conspicuous in the Levant and that Ankara's Levantine policy activism has had significant spillovers into other sub-complexes of the MERSC such as the Gulf and Maghreb. Therefore, the role of Turkey in geopolitical theaters outside the Levant should be taken into theoretical and empirical consideration. As it was discussed in depth, a steady *regionalization* of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East security complex is underway, which was hastened by Ankara's overlay into the Syrian conflict and its post-2015 tactical partnership with Russia and Iran. No longer considered a mere insulator between the RSCs, Turkey has introduced itself as a major pole in the Levant sub-complex and the Gulf security sub-complex, exhibiting a militarized foreign policy activism predicated on hard power and overseas military interventions in order not only to secure its geopolitical and economic interests but

---

<sup>241</sup> Emily Przyborowski. "Is Yemen Turkey's Next Frontier?", **The Meddah**, Turkish Heritage Organization, 29.05.2021, <https://medium.com/meddah-a-u-s-turkey-storytelling-project/is-yemen-turkeys-next-frontier-832482fbb03d>, (13.01.2021).

<sup>242</sup> Mustafa Cüneyt Özşahin. "Qatar-Turkey Rapprochement: Challenging the Regional Status Quo in the Gulf Security Sub-Complex", **The 2017 Gulf Crisis: An Interdisciplinary Approach**, Mahjoob Zweiri et al, Springer, 2021, p. 35-45.

also cement its role as major regional power possessing order-making capabilities, from the Levant to the Maghreb sub-complex.

With respect to the impact of Russia's and Turkey's partnership in Syria on Ankara's regional power orientation and role, the claim is that Turkey's Syrian military engagement demonstrated that in contradistinction to its erstwhile policy of 'non-involvement', the AKP has adopted an interventionist foreign policy orientation that entails significant security and geopolitical implications in the Levant-sub-complex and in the broader Middle East security complex. Turkey's intensified military operations against the PKK in northern Iraq (part of the Gulf sub-complex), its four discrete rounds of direct military intervention since August 2016 in Syria (part of the Levant sub-complex), its growing penetration in support of the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya (part of the Maghreb sub-complex) should be viewed as clear indications of a major shift in Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East, catalyzed mostly by the Syrian conflict. All of these transformations are taking place against a background of rapid and sometimes astonishing structural developments at the international and regional levels, namely American retrenchment from the Middle East, Russia's growing assertiveness in the Middle East, intense competition among Iran-led Shi axis versus Saudi-led Sunni axis, and Turkey-led Muslim Brotherhood axis, and not least the rivalry between United States and Russia in Syria.<sup>243</sup> Accordingly, this changing security environment raises striking questions about the nature of Turkey's engagement with other key regional powers in the Middle East and its impact on the country's regional power role and orientations at large.<sup>244</sup>

---

<sup>243</sup> Mohammad Reza Dehshiri and Hossein Shahmoradi. "Resurgence of Geopolitical Rivalry in the MENA after the 'Arab Spring'", *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2020, pp. 194-215.

<sup>244</sup> Meliha Benli Altunışık. "The New Turn in Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Regional and Domestic Insecurities", *Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)*, No. 20, 17.07.2020, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/new-turn-turkeys-foreign-policy-middle-east-regional-and-domestic-insecurities>, (14.01.2021).

### 3.3.2. Changing Role of Turkey in the MERSC

Before we proceed ahead with the core arguments, few words must be mentioned about the traditional position of Turkey from a theoretical perspective. As previously mentioned in the second chapter of the study, one must be mindful that, from the viewpoint of the RSC theory, Turkey is considered an insulator state between the Middle East and Europe and is largely characterized as a geographical in-between facing difficult security challenges from both regions.<sup>245</sup> According to Buzan and Wæver, an insulator state is defined as a “location occupied by one or more units where larger regional security dynamics stand back to back.”<sup>246</sup> Care should be taken to distinguish between the concept of insulator and the traditional idea of a *buffer state*, in the sense that the latter’s function is “defined by standing at the center of a strong pattern of securitization, not at its edge.”<sup>247</sup>

Seen in this light, Turkey as an insulator state sits at the margins of three different regional security complexes without belonging to any of them. These regional security complexes are as follows: the European security complex (including the Balkans sub-complex); the Middle East complex (including the Levant, the Gulf and the Maghreb sub-complexes); and the post-Soviet space (including the Caucasus and Central Asia). In the words of Buzan and Wæver, Turkey defines itself not as an insulator state but as an important regional power because it is situated at a metaphorical intersection of ‘Bermuda Triangle’ between the conflict regions of the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East.<sup>248</sup> In Buzan’s and Wæver’s view, Turkey remains to be an insulator state but it is “playing an increasingly active role” in the sense that in recent years it has evidently ratcheted up its involvement in regions.<sup>249</sup> Following this line of thought, what can be inferred from Buzan’s and Wæver’s contestation is that Turkey’s traditional policy of non-involvement in the Middle East, despite Ankara’s post-Cold War regional entanglements, has been carefully

---

<sup>245</sup> Kohei Imai. “Rethinking the Insulator State: Turkey’s Border Security and the Syrian Civil War”, *Eurasia Border Review*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2017, p. 25.

<sup>246</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 41.

<sup>247</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, p. 41.

<sup>248</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, p. 394.

<sup>249</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, p. 394.

maintained in such cautious ways that the country could be perceived as part of the West and therefore avoid being defined as a 'Middle Eastern' country.<sup>250</sup> Of particular importance, when it comes to analyzing the various conceptualization of Turkey's foreign policy orientation on the basis of RSC theory, is that some scholars such as Thomaz Diez and Barry Buzan contended in 1999 that Turkey should play the role of an active insulator as an alternative to becoming a member of the European security complex.<sup>251</sup>

Following the rise of the AKP to power and the implementation of a series of constitutional and legal changes required for a possible accession of Turkey to the European bloc, Diez revisited his earlier position, asserting that it was "increasingly problematic to not view Turkey as a member of the European Security Complex" unless Ankara renounces its EU candidacy or was rejected by Brussels.<sup>252</sup> Given that the European Parliament has called for the suspension of EU accession talks with Turkey, albeit in a non-binding vote, it is reasonable to conjecture that the prospects of Ankara's membership of the European Security Complex are slim to none at least for a foreseeable future. As part of Turkey's detour from the traditional non-involvement policy, the AKP government has since the onset of the Arab uprisings waded into the Middle East's troubled waters, dispensing with its fundamental foreign policy principle of "zero-problem with neighbors" and relying on "hard power and overseas military interventions" in order to secure its interests, particularly in the Middle East region.<sup>253</sup> Deeply suspicious of the malicious intentions of *Dış Mihraklar* (external powers), such as the United States and facing an existential threat from a range of external enemies i.e. the PKK/YPG and a regional axis composed of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Israel, the Turkish government has apparently opted for an aggressive regional policy sustained by military engagements from Syria, Iraq and Qatar to Kuwait, Libya and Somalia. Turkey's new policy of military activism is not merely confined to the Middle East security complex. In fact, the AKP government

---

<sup>250</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, p. 392.

<sup>251</sup> Barry Buzan and Thomas Diez. "The European Union and Turkey", *Survival*, Vol. 41, No. 1, Spring 1999, p. 54.

<sup>252</sup> Thomas Diez. "Turkey, The European Union and Security Complexes Revisited", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2005, p. 173.

<sup>253</sup> Nick Danforth. "Turkey's New Hard Power Foreign Policy", *Center for Global Policy*, No. 133, 19.02.2020, <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/turkeys-new-hard-power-foreign-policy/>, (14.01.2021).

has significantly enhanced its naval power projection capabilities in response to the new geopolitical realities of Eastern Mediterranean, taking explicit military diplomatic measures to forestall efforts by Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt in developing East Mediterranean gas.<sup>254</sup>

All of the above-cited instances of Turkey's paradigmatic shift from 'zero problems with neighbors' doctrine towards a 'new hard power foreign policy', can be construed as serious efforts of the AKP government to extricate the country from its commonplace status of a dependent geopolitical and security player and elevate Turkey's status into a central (proactive) regional power and possibly into a global power position.<sup>255</sup> Having said this, it bears noting that although some scholars differentiate between two phases of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP—a phase from 2002 to 2011 characterized by an emphasis on soft power mechanisms of power projection and a phase from 2012 onwards characterized by hard power—there is a significant interface between these two phases.<sup>256</sup> To be more exact, the struggle for becoming a regional hegemon and turning Turkey into an "order-instituting actor" continue to be the shared leitmotif of Turkish foreign policy approach in both phases.<sup>257</sup>

The foregoing propositions invoke a theoretical conundrum in relation to Turkey's new foreign policy approach towards the Middle East in general and vis-à-vis the Syrian conflict in particular. The question is what does Turkey's Syria policy—in light of its partnership with Iran and Russia combined with its growing penetrations into other theaters of conflict in the Middle East—mean for the country's traditional

---

<sup>254</sup> Luke Baker, Tuvan Gumrukcu and Michele Kambas. "Turkey-Libya Maritime Deal Rattles East Mediterranean", **Reuters**, 25.12.2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-libya-eastmed-tensions-explain/turkey-libya-maritime-deal-rattles-east-mediterranean-idUSKBN1YT0JK>, (14.01.2021).

<sup>255</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu. **Stratejik Derinlik**, İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2011.

<sup>256</sup> Mudde Cas. "The Political Zeitgeist, Government and Opposition", Vol. 39, No. 4, 2004, pp. 542-563., Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş. "Turkey's Foreign policy in a Post-Western Order: Strategic Autonomy or New Forms of Dependence", **International Affairs**, Vol. 97, No. 4, 2021, pp. 1085-1104., Katerina Dalacoura, "Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Power Projection and Post-Ideological Politics", **International Affairs**, Vol. 97, No. 4, 2021, pp. 1125-1142., Rich Outzen. "Deal, Drones, and National Will: The New Era in Turkish Power Projection", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, No. 108, 09.07.2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deals-drones-and-national-will-new-era-turkish-power-projection>, (15.01.2021).

<sup>257</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu. "Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring", **TEPAV**, Turkey Policy Brief Series, 20.04.2012, <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/haberler/s/2827>, (14.01.2021).



position as an insulator between the Middle East and Europe? According to Buzan and Wæver, for Turkey to become a great or superpower status, it is necessary that it first gains the status of a *regional* power and for that to occur Ankara needs to become a member of a particular RSC. In the words of the RSC theoreticians:

*[i]f a much-strengthened Turkey actually becomes the regional great power it claims it is, it could trigger such a coalescence of its neighbor; it would then increasingly have to be analyzed as a pole in some RSC, not only as an insulator between RSCs.*<sup>258</sup>

Bearing in mind such conceptualization of Turkey's role, it is pertinent to note that in academic debates about whether or not it is possible for Turkey to become a regional/global power while retaining the status of an insulator, some scholars contend that the intensification of Ankara's relations with its neighbors concomitant with its growing weariness of the EU accession process in recent years do not, *ipso facto*, imply that Turkey has shifted to an exclusive RSC.<sup>259</sup> When deconstructing Turkey's changing role from the viewpoint of the RSC theory, Barrinha also concludes that "by redefining the relations between the conditions of insulator and great power status, it is possible to retain RSCT's analytical value regarding Turkey's international ambitions; that is to say, it may ultimately be possible for Turkey to be a great power insulator."<sup>260</sup> Nevertheless, if we look at the trajectory of Turkey's foreign policy behavior under the AKP government especially from 2011 onwards, it becomes clear that owing to a confluence of factors such as Ankara's several rounds of military interventions into the Syria conflict, its intensified penetrations into multiple regional theaters of conflicts such as Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, combined with the country's increasing diplomatic overtures and military presences from Qatar to Somalia, the conventional perceptions of Turkey as an insulator state are questionable.

The claim is that based on the above-mentioned arguments Turkey has become a major pole in the Middle East regional security complex and that the Levant sub-

---

<sup>258</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 395.

<sup>259</sup> Andre Barrinha. "The Ambitious Insulator: Revisiting Turkey's Position in Regional Security Complex Theory", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2014, p. 166.

<sup>260</sup> Andre Barrinha, p. 167.

complex can be considered the most prominent locus of Turkey's foreign policy activism which was catalyzed by the country's overlay into the Syrian conflict.

Three essential observations are moot which taken together can corroborate the claim regarding Turkey's newly-found role as a pole in the Middle East security complex.

First, it is not for the first time that Turkey has made concrete economic and geopolitical inroads into the Levant sub-complex, whose members under the RSC framework include Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. Turkey had made multiple efforts to expand cooperation with the Levantine countries since the late 1990s.<sup>261</sup> In a security environment characterized by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the Yugoslav wars, and the issue of Arab-Israeli peace process, Turkey was in the early 1990s not seen as relevant to the debates pertaining the hot-button issues of the Middle East. In Altunışık's view, Turkey was not seen as an important member of the emergent regional order in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Cold War and its relations in the Arab world throughout the 1990s was largely dominated by patterns of antagonism and mutual distrust.<sup>262</sup> For example, although Turkey and Syria enjoyed a moment of respite in their conflicts as a result of a temporary alliance in the U.S.-led coalition against Iraq during the Gulf Crisis (1990-1991), the level of securitization in Ankara-Damascus was so high in the late 1990s that the two neighboring countries to the brink of a militarized conflict in 1998. Nevertheless, the dynamics of Syria-Turkey relations in the post-Adana agreement era up until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war were marked by positive developments mostly as a corollary of the mutual cooperation of both countries in combating terrorism—which significantly attenuated Ankara's threat perceptions about Damascus's support of the PKK-affiliated elements—and most importantly as a result of the AKP's coming to power in November 2002 general elections. It is interesting to note that owing to an unexpected turn of events four months after the AKP's rise to power, namely Turkey's 2002 decision to inhibit U.S. access to its bases for an attack on Iraq, the amity between Ankara and Damascus grew stronger. As Sür

---

<sup>261</sup> Mustafa Aydın and Cihan Dizdaroğlu. "Levantine Challenges on Turkish Foreign Policy", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 15, No. 60, 2018, p. 90.

<sup>262</sup> Meliha Benli Altunışık. "Turkey: Arab Perspectives", **TESEV Publications**, No. 11, 01.05.2020, p. 8. [https://www.tesev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/report\\_Turkey\\_Arab\\_Perspectives.pdf](https://www.tesev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/report_Turkey_Arab_Perspectives.pdf), (14.01.2021).

explains, Turkey's decision was soon followed by the then Turkish Prime Minister Abdullah Gül's hectic tour of the Middle East region which quite interestingly started from Damascus.<sup>263</sup> In the following years the Ankara-Damascus entente contributed to the resumption of indirect peace talks between Syria and Israel.

Second, the import of the preceding propositions and its relevance to Turkey's geopolitical inroad into the Levant sub-complex is that for ages Syria has invariably served as a litmus test for Turkey's foreign policy primarily because, if the past is anything to go by, one can assuredly argue that Turkey can play the role of a major regional power in much greater capacity and strength when benefiting from a stable and peaceful relations with its neighboring country, Syria. In other words, Syria can be construed as Turkey's geopolitical gateway to the Levant sub-complex and a potential launching-pad of its geopolitical influence into the broader Middle East security complex. Thus, Syria was chosen as the 'poster-child of Turkish foreign policy, largely seen as the best case for Ankara to prove that the patterns of enmity with neighboring countries were the by-products of the Kemalist foreign policy and that the restoration of an Ottoman-like peace discourse would rekindle the old friendship.<sup>264</sup> Paradoxically, it was the Syrian civil war and the subsequent transformations in the essential structure of a regional security complex such as that of the Middle East since 2011 that put a spanner into Turkey's quest for regional ascendancy, if not hegemony.

As one scholar puts it, only a few years prior to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Turkey's zero problems approach in dealing with a range of Middle Eastern issues had reconfigured Ankara's image as an acceptable broker for most players in the region and its 'soft power' technique had transformed its regional role from sidelines to occupy center stage in regional politics.<sup>265</sup> In the words of Turkey's former Foreign

---

<sup>263</sup> Berna Süer. "Ripeness Theory and Coercive Diplomacy as a Road to Conflict Resolution: The Case of the Turkey-Syria Showdown in 1998", **Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür, Routledge, 2013, p. 30.

<sup>264</sup> C Akça Ataç. "Pax Ottomanica No More! The 'Peace' Discourse in Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post-Davutoglu Era and the Prolonged Syrian Crisis", **Digest of Middle East Studies (DOMES)**, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2018, p. 59, Christopher Phillips. "The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the Middle East", Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, p. 34.

<sup>265</sup> Christopher Phillips, p. 31.

Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Turkey will act not as a peripheral but as a central country (merkez ülke).”<sup>266</sup>

As stated previously, Turkey’s Levantine activism started in the late 1990s but it was accelerated after the dramatic change in the transformations of relations with Syria in the late 1990s and during the 2000s in the form of establishing good political and economic relations with Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Jordan.<sup>267</sup> Anchored in a neo-Ottoman *weltanschauung* that is expected to be able to “mediate the complex relation between Islam, modernity and democracy,” the Turkish foreign policy, under the AKP government, has sought to “assert Turkey’s rightful place as a cultural, political, and economic hegemon in the [Middle East] region.”<sup>268</sup> As such, establishing good relations (zero problems) with neighbors constituted an integral part of Davutoğlu’s ‘Strategic Depth’ doctrine in conjunction with acceleration of EU accession talks in order for Turkey not to “de-Westernize” its foreign policy orientation.<sup>269</sup>

Third, the key here is that such transformations in Turkish foreign policy appear to be indicative of a gradual *regionalization* of Ankara’s approach towards the Middle East particularly after the coming to power of the AKP government. Although the implications of regionalization on Turkish foreign policy can be traced back to the beginning of the 1990s, it was in the first decade of the AKP rule that regionalist activism formed the main plank of Ankara’s foreign and security approach.<sup>270</sup> To be more precise, the AKP elite’s proclivity towards regions and regionalization during the early 2000s evinced itself in the form of Turkey’s active diplomacy to mediate Israeli-Palestinian conflict and improve its relations with Iran, Iraq and Syria. It is worthwhile to note that Turkish officials, i.e. the then Prime Minister Abdullah Gül chose Syria, Jordan and Egypt as the first destinations of his debut foreign visits,

---

<sup>266</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, **Türkiye Merkez Ülke Olmalı**, Radikal [print edition], 2004.

<sup>267</sup> Mustafa Aydın and Cihan Dizdaroğlu. “Levantine Challenges on Turkish Foreign Policy”, **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 15, No. 60, 2018, p. 94.

<sup>268</sup> Federico Donelli. “Historical Reflection on Neo-Ottoman Weltanschauung: Between Identity-Making and Foreign Policy”, **The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies**, No. 1, p. 61., Edward Wastnidge. “Imperial Grandeur and Selective Memory: Re-Assessing Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign and Domestic Politics”, **Middle East Critique**, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2019, p. 4.

<sup>269</sup> Mehmet Sinan Birdal. “The Davutoğlu Doctrine: The Populist Construction of the Strategic Subject”, **Turkey Reframed: Constituting Neoliberal Hegemony**, İsmet Akça, Ahmet Bekmen and Barış Alp Özden, Pluto Press, London, pp. 92-106.

<sup>270</sup> Alper Kaliber and Esra Kaliber. “From De-Europeanization to Anti-Western Populism: Turkish Foreign Policy in Flux”, **The International Spectator**, Vol. 54, No. 4, 2019, p. 2.

followed by Gül's second Middle East tour to meet Saudi and Iranian leaders on 11 and 12 January, 2003, respectively.<sup>271</sup> Borrowing Aydın and Dizdaroğlu's words, with these moves, Turkey's economic relations with the Levant expanded steadily and its volume of trade increased significantly so much so that a litany of agreements were signed between Ankara and a number states such Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Egypt in the realms of free trade, strategic cooperation and visa-free agreements.<sup>272</sup>

As can be seen, notwithstanding the salience of several factors such as geographical proximity, history, cultural affinities and Islamic roots, the Levant sub-complex of the broader MERSC was seen by the AKP government as a central locus of geopolitical maneuverability. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that Turkey's regional activism was not confined to the Middle East *per se* because the AKP government at the same time accelerated the process of Europeanization at least from 2002 until 2005 when the EU Council decided for the first time to start accession negotiations with Turkey. It means that Turkey has been actively pursuing a regionalist strategy towards the EU, Central Asia and the Levant. What is remarkable here is that some Arab states of the Middle East took a sanguine view of "the possible spillover effects of Turkey's developing relations with the EU" and believed that if the country joins the EU, it will provide economic opportunities in the Arab world.<sup>273</sup> This is why the notion of Turkey as an insulator state, on the basis of Buzan's and Wæver's 'security complexes', gains relevance. It is axiomatic that since the days of President Turgut Özal in the early 1990s the country has been predominantly viewed as a "bridge" between the East and West, albeit this notion underwent modifications during Davutoğlu's tenure as he advocated for turning Turkey into a "pivotal" state in the region. By and large, however, it is not unwise to conjecture that despite normative penetrations into the Levant and Gulf sub-complexes in the first decade of AKP rule, Turkey continued to retain its role as an insulator state at least until 2015. As mentioned previously, the Syrian conflict has shattered the prevalent perceptions about

---

<sup>271</sup> Ali Balci and Murat Yeşiltaş. "Turkey's New Middle East Policy: The Case of the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Iraq's Neighboring Countries", **Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 24, no. 4, 2006, p. 20-21.

<sup>272</sup> Mustafa Aydın and Cihan Dizdaroğlu. "Levantine Challenges on Turkish Foreign Policy", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 15, No. 60, 2018, p. 93.

<sup>273</sup> Meliha Benli Altunışık. "Turkey: Arab Perspectives", **TESEV Publications**, No. 11, 01.05.2020, p. 8. [https://www.tesev.org.tr/wpcontent/uploads/report\\_Turkey\\_Arab\\_Perspectives.pdf](https://www.tesev.org.tr/wpcontent/uploads/report_Turkey_Arab_Perspectives.pdf), (14.01.2021).

Turkey as an insulator state partly because it forced the AKP government to mount an overlay into the Levant sub-complex as a consequence of its four phases of military interventions in the war-ravaged country and the ensuing penetrations into Libya, northern Iraq, and the Eastern Mediterranean.

As previously discussed, according to the RSC theory, *internal transformations* within a specific security complex in the form of a change in the balance of power, polarity and the patterns of amity and enmity along with *overlay* are considered key variables that affect the security and geopolitical dynamics within security complexes. By this logic, it is tenable to argue that the Middle East security complex in general and the Levant-sub complex in particular have undergone tectonic internal transformations and overlays as a consequence of Russia-Iran-Turkey partnership which manifested itself by the militarized foreign policy activism of the three members of the Astana Peace Process. The Syrian conflict and the ensuing overlays of Russia, Turkey and Iran created both internal and external transformations at the levels of Levant sub-complex and the broader MERSC. In this respect, Turkey's and Russia's overlays into the Syrian conflict heavily impinged on the polarity and the distribution of power and the patterns of amity and enmity at both the MERSC level and in the level of the two external power's bilateral relations.

For Turkey, "preventing cross-border attacks and eliminating the territorial presence of ISIS and the YPG in northern Syria" constituted a top priority.<sup>274</sup> Therefore, as the result of the post-2015 dynamics of the Syrian conflict, which created a convergence of interests among Iran, Turkey and Russia, the AKP government launched four rounds of military interventions in Syria: Operation Euphrates Shield in the triangle between Azaz, Jarablus and al-Bab in northern Syria (29 August 2016-29 March 2017); Operation Olive Branch aimed at gaining control of Afrin (19 January 2018-17 March 2018); Operation Peace Spring for the establishment of a safe zone between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn in eastern Euphrates region (9 October 2019-27 November 2019), and Turkey's military operations in Idlib since October 2017.<sup>275</sup>

---

<sup>274</sup> Lacin Idil Oztig. "Syria and Turkey: Border-Security Priorities", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2019, pp. 117-126.

<sup>275</sup> See for example, Khayrallah al-Hilu. "The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies", **Robert Shuman Center for Advanced Studies**, 14.01.2021, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69657/Khayrallah%20al-Hilu%20->

What merits pondering here is three-fold:

First, the Turkish-Russian relations in recent years have been shaped more than anything else by the multi-layered pressures of the Syrian crisis.<sup>276</sup> The current state of affairs between Moscow and Ankara can be characterized as a synthesis of competition and cooperation with compartmentalization of economic issues and geopolitical rivalries acting as a guiding principle in order to prevent the negative spillover of certain disagreements into areas of bilateral cooperation.<sup>277</sup> Shorn of a fully-fledged “strategic cooperation”, the relationship between Russia and Turkey has significantly developed on economic and security fronts as a result of, *inter alia*, the tactical cooperation in the context of the Syrian conflict, albeit the overall picture continues to be dominated by asymmetries of interdependence. In so far as Turkey’s overlaying of the Syrian geopolitical theater is concerned, it should be emphasized that absent Russia’s green light and its military cooperation, Turkey would have hardly been able to successfully achieve its short to medium-term goals in at least three of its military incursions, namely in Afrin, Idlib and the eastern Euphrates. Of paramount importance here is that while Russia is apparently seeking to drive a wedge between Turkey and NATO, it is at the same time aiding Turkey’s penetration of the Syrian conflict which can have spill-over impacts on other theaters of conflict not only in the Levant but also in the Maghreb sub-complex.

Second, as we alluded to, Turkey’s partnership with Russia and Iran under the Astana model along with its military interventions in the Syrian conflict have taken together provided a fertile ground for the country to introduce itself as a major pole in the MERSC as opposed to the conventional view of Ankara playing the role of merely an insulator. Time was when “modesty, caution and non-involvement in the Arab world” served as the guiding principle of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East region.<sup>278</sup> Between 2004 and 2011, Turkey’s mediatory efforts in the Middle East were

---

%20The%20Turkish%20Intervention%20in%20Northern%20Syria%20One%20Strategy%20Disc  
repant%20Policies.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y, (15.01.2021).

<sup>276</sup> İnan Rüma and Mitat Çelikpala. “Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater”, **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 16, No. 62, 2019, pp. 65-84.

<sup>277</sup> Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz. “Turkey and Russia in a Shifting Global Order: Cooperation, Conflict and Asymmetric Interdependence in a Turbulent Region”, **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 71-95.

<sup>278</sup> Ömer Taşpınar. “Turkey’s Strategic Vision and Syria”, **The Washington Quarterly**, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 130.

accompanied mostly by ‘soft power’ tools of statecraft, rather than reliance on hard power capabilities and overseas military interventions. The rapid transformations at the regional and system levels as a consequence of the outbreak of the Arab uprisings and later the Syrian conflict in tandem with the growing divergences of interests between Washington and Ankara have had a revolutionary impact on Turkish foreign policy. In the Middle East, Turkey’s ‘new hard power foreign policy’ has, due to the reasons stated above, deeply polarized the Middle Eastern regional security complex, putting Ankara along with the United States, Russia, Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates as important stakeholders. For Turkey, expansion of tactical cooperation with Russia and Iran is a textbook example of balance of power in international relations *par excellence*. It can be construed as Turkey’s idiosyncratic yet uncertain way of demonstrating its discontent with its NATO ally, the U.S., while at the same time biding time to put its relations with Washington on the right footing, if the ‘right’ circumstances arrive.

For Russia, the Syrian conflict afforded the country with a unique opportunity to become attuned to the idiosyncratic structures of a highly perplexing regional complex such as the Middle East, albeit Moscow had once experienced overlays into the MERSC during the Cold War. Thus far, however, while the current partnership between Russia and Turkey in Syria has helped the former to augment its self-perception as a great power on a par with the United States, it has also played into the latter’s self-identification as a regional power capable of influencing the future of the regional order in the Middle East. Borrowing Seçkin Köstem’s words, “Russia and Turkey have for the first time in the post-Cold War era cooperated on a regional security issue in the Middle East, despite the continuation of a clash of interests in other regions such as the Black Sea and the Caucasus.”<sup>279</sup>

This observation brings us to the third caveat: it is no exaggeration to surmise that Turkey and Russia may be willing to exploit a somewhat similar mode of conflict management such as that of the Syrian Astana framework in order to create a new semblance of regional order in the Middle East security complex and thereby challenge the Western-led liberal order. As one scholar points out, an important case in point in

---

<sup>279</sup> Seçkin Köstem. “Russia-Turkish Cooperation in Syria: Geopolitical Alignment with Limits”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2020, p. 18.



regard to the possible applicability and replicability of the Astana model is the potential for management of heavily regionalized and internationalized civil wars by a conglomerate of regional and selected extra-regional powers (not necessarily the same ones as the Astana co-brokers) playing as equals and balancing each other.<sup>280</sup> In other words, in Turkey's and Russia's views, international relations has taken on a regionalized character, gravitating towards "a decentralized architecture of order management featuring old and new powers with a greater role for regional governance."<sup>281</sup> Opposed to what they perceive as Western unilateralism in the global politics, Russia and Turkey seek to carve out regional influence as the basis to act as a major pole in the international system that is presumably transmogrifying into multipolarity.<sup>282</sup>

Arguably, the Syrian conflict helped Turkey and Russia, as regional powers that were traditionally seen as external to the Middle East security complex, to be identified as poles to be reckoned with, and provided them with an opportunity to penetrate deeper into the MERS to achieve their economic and geopolitical goals at the expense of the American unilateralism. Nevertheless, the realist lens with its focus on power and self-interest only explains one aspect of the kaleidoscopic image of international life. This is why social constructivism and the role of ideational factors gain relevance in analyzing international phenomena. By this logic, one can argue that both Russia and Turkey harbor analogous narratives of discontent towards the United States which influence their foreign policy decisions. For Russia, the decision by Western leaders to skip the 2015's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary Victory Day military parade in Moscow's Red Square symbolizes the hostility Russia perceives from the West. Failure to observe and celebrate Russia's role in liberating Europe from Nazi Germany is interpreted as a denial of Russian nationhood. Some 20 million Russians died in the Second World War.<sup>283</sup> Similarly, Turkey holds historical grievances towards the West

---

<sup>280</sup> Ekaterina Stepanova. "Russia's Foreign and Security Policy in the Middle East: Entering the 2020s", **Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)**, No. 20, 09.06.2020, p. 11, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/russias-foreign-and-security-policy-middle-east-entering-2020s>, (21.01.2021).

<sup>281</sup> Amitav Acharya. **The End of American World Order**, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2014, p. 4.

<sup>282</sup> Jeane L. Wilson. "Russia as a Regional Actor: Goals and Motivations", **Russia in The Changing International System**, Emel Parlar Dal and Emre Erşen, Springer, 2020. p. 59-76.

<sup>283</sup> Kari Roberts. "Understanding Putin: The Politics of Identity and Geopolitics in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse", **International Journal**, Vol. 72, No. 1, 2017, p. 40.

because pivotal events such as the 1964 Johnson Letter, the protracted EU accession process for Turkey, lack of EU support for its Syria policy, the indifference of the West towards the 2016 abortive coup and its culprits, and last but not least the U.S. backing of the YPG/PYD factions in Syria remain in the collective memory of the Turkish populace as recurrent specters of *Sèvres Syndrome*. Indeed, for a country, a NATO ally, whose soldiers (Turkish Army Infantry Brigade) fought with the American troops during the Korean War (1950-1953), these instances of “deceitful western polemics” against Turkey tend to aggravate the country’s sense of self vis-à-vis other, begetting the need for a new understanding of Turkey’s role in global politics.<sup>284</sup>

### 3.4. TURKEY-IRAN RELATIONS: RECURRENT PATTERNS OF SECURITIZATION AND DE-SECURITIZATION

Looking at the labyrinth of relations between Iran and Turkey throughout the history it is justifiable to assert that the two of the most powerful neighboring states in the Middle East have perceived each other as frenemies. Despite a litany of divergent foreign policies, conflicting interests and well-entrenched historical mistrust, Turco-Iranian relations have been defined by the dictates of geographical proximity, fear of domestic subversion and of partitioning by foreign powers. Irrespective of mutual interests in cooperation on energy, trade and border security, the above-mentioned factors have taken together led to creation and sustenance of an enduring sense of pragmatism reigning over Tehran-Ankara relations.

From a historical perspective, the Shia Safavid/Qajar Persian Empire and the Sunni Ottoman Empire were arch enemies and the Turkish-Iranian mutual threat perception and enmity came to a halt only in the second half of the eighteenth century, particularly after the signing the Treaty of Erzurum in 1847.<sup>285</sup> The collapse of the Safavid Empire in the 1720s and the emergence of the Qajar dynasty ushered in a new era in the Ottoman-Persian relations as the two empires encountered immense pressures from Russia and other European powers and witnessed growing political and

<sup>284</sup> Shakir Husain. “Deceitful Western Polemics against Turkey”, **The Daily Sabah**, 28.11.2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2019/11/28/deceitful-western-polemics-against-turkey>, (01.03.2021).

<sup>285</sup> Hossein Aghaie Joobani and Mostafa Mousavipour. “Russia, Turkey, and Iran: Moving Towards Strategic Synergy in the Middle East”, **Strategic Analysis**, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2015, p. 148.

economic exchanges at the bilateral level. In the post-World War I period, the ascendance of Western-oriented and nationalist regimes in Turkey and Iran in the 1920s put to rest the religious sectarian conflicts and facilitated cooperation and friendly relationship between the two nation-states.<sup>286</sup> Following World War II and during the Cold War, the mutual perception of Soviet threat and the fear of the territorial and ideological expansion of communism generated synergies between Turkey and Iran and compelled the two countries to forge security alliances with the United States. Against the backdrop of the growing bipolar security environment, both Turkey and Iran, as *status quo* regional powers, sought to prove their geopolitical prominence to the Truman and Eisenhower administrations and thereby assist the policy of dual containment. As evidence of Turkey's and Iran's amity and their subsequent cooperation with the U.S., the two countries joined ranks with other U.S. allies in the Middle East, including Greece and Jordan to contain the communist threat and counter the influence of Soviet clients such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq.<sup>287</sup> Consequently, Iran and Turkey played a leading role in the establishment of the Baghdad Pact in 1955, which later morphed into the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). At that time, Turkey not only joined the Baghdad Pact, it also permitted the U.S. to use Turkish military bases in Operation Lebanon for extra-NATO missions after the Iraqi revolution in 1958, it also agreed in 1959 to the deployment of Jupiter Missiles in the Turkish soil. As such, Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognize the State of Israel in 1949 and actively engaged in Western security efforts in line with the Eisenhower Doctrine.<sup>288</sup>

The advent of 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran presaged a tumultuous and unpredictable course in Ankara-Tehran relations because the newly-founded Islamic Republic emerged as a revisionist power bent on exporting its ideology whereas Turkey retained its *status quo* foreign policy orientation and its secular identity. In this security environment, Turkey became increasingly apprehensive of the Islamic

---

<sup>286</sup> Bayram Sinkaya. **Turkey-Iran Relations after the JDP**, Les Dossiers de l'IFEA, No. 26, p. 7, <https://books.openedition.org/ifeagd/3118?lang=en> , (01.03.2021).

<sup>287</sup> Ayşe Ömür Atmaca. "The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years", **All Azimuth**, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2014, p. 25.

<sup>288</sup> Omer Goksel Isyar. "An Analysis of American-Turkish Relations from 1945 to 2004: Initiatives and Reactions in Turkish Foreign Policy", **Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations**, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2005, p. 24.

Republic of Iran's militant discourse and its efforts to undermine the Persian Gulf monarchies as opposed to Ankara's willingness to maintain stable and peaceful ties with them. In Calabrese's words, the relations between Iran and Turkey was further confounded throughout the 1980s as Iranian officials accused Turkey of harboring regime dissidents, namely the members of the Mujaheddin-e-Khalq (MEK) whereas Turkish officials charged that Iran might support Kurdish guerillas and meddle in domestic affairs of other countries.<sup>289</sup> The end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union posed yet another significant challenge to the Turco-Iranian relations, fomenting competition in Central Asia as a result of the security vacuum left in the aftermath of the fall of the USSR. Iran realized the importance of spreading its influence in the post-Soviet space, especially in the newly independent Muslim Turkic states of Central Asia while Turkey seized the opportunity to maximize its ideational and geopolitical influence in Central Asia by emphasizing ethnic Turkic ties, secularism, integration into Western economic and political institutions and heightened economic and cultural affinities.<sup>290</sup> Against the backdrop of the heightened geopolitical and ideological contest in Central Asia and given the mutual accusations of interference and involvement in destructive activities against each other, the relations between Turkey and Iran reached its nadir in 1997 when Iranian ambassador to Ankara along with a number of Iranian diplomats were forced to leave Turkey. The relations between the two countries were significantly improved with the dramatic rise of the coalition government of the pro-Islamic Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan in 1996. Upon the invitation of Iran's former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Erbakan paid an official visit to Tehran in August 1996 where the two signed a twenty-five-year natural gas deal. The milestone in Turkey-Iran relations came in June 2002, when Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer visited Iran in what was regarded as "the symbol of a relatively amicable trend that Turkey-Iran relations entered into just before the AKP came to power in Ankara."<sup>291</sup>

---

<sup>289</sup> John Calabrese, "Turkey and Iran: Limits of a Stable Relationship", **British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1998, p. 78.

<sup>290</sup> Nihat Ali Özcan and Özgür Özdamar, "Uneasy Neighbors: Turkish-Iranian Relations Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2010, p. 107.

<sup>291</sup> Bayram Sinkaya, **Turkey-Iran Relations after the JDP**, Les Dossiers de l'IFEA, No. 26, p. 15, <https://books.openedition.org/ifeagd/3118?lang=en>, (01.03.2021).

### 3.4.1. The AKP effect and the Syrian Conflict

The triumph of the Justice and Development Part (AKP) in the Turkish parliamentary elections in 2002 gave rise to powerful paradigmatic shifts in Turkey's foreign and domestic politics. In this context, Turkey's *de-securitization* of foreign and security policy was set in motion aimed at establishing good relations with its neighbors, including Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

It is interesting to note that three pivotal yet discrete developments in Syria, Iran and Iraq contributed to furtherance of the de-securitization policy which in turn paved the way for the increasing Middle Easternization of Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP rule.<sup>292</sup> In Syria, the signing of the Adana accord in 1998 which put an end to Damascus's backing of PKK terrorism coupled with the reciprocal official visits of Turkish and Syrian presidents and the de-escalatory measures regarding the issue of Hatay province led to significant improvements in Damascus-Ankara relations. In Iran, the *détente* policy of former reformist president Mohammad Khatami created the groundswell for fostering cordial relations between Iran and the world, including the Arab states primarily because Tehran decided to back away from the slogan "Export of Islamic Revolution" in order to avoid confrontation with its neighbors.<sup>293</sup>

In this setting, Turkey's perceived threats from Iran was markedly diminished, however temporarily, due to a number of key factors such as Iran's refusal to use the PKK as a trump card, finalization of the natural gas pipeline project and the attenuation of the fervid discourse of revolutionary zeal in Iran.<sup>294</sup> In Iraq, the U.S. invasion in 2003 enabled Turkey to fill in the security and authority gap in northern Iraq. By indirectly recognizing Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), Turkey found an opportunity to actualize its geopolitical and security penetration in Iraq despite the U.S. opposition to Ankara's military operations against the PKK in northern Iraq. As indicated by Aras, it is worthwhile to note that two fundamental developments contributed to Turkey's post-2001 de-securitization approach: a) the European Union

---

<sup>292</sup> Tarik Oğuzlu. "Middle Easternization of Turkey's Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Dissociate from the West?", **Turkish Studies**, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2008, pp. 3-20.

<sup>293</sup> Shah Alam. "The Changing Paradigm of Iranian Foreign Policy under Khatami", **Strategic Analysis**, Vol. 24, No. 9, p. 1630.

<sup>294</sup> Nülüfer Karacasulu and İrem Aşkar Karakır. "Iran-Turkey Relations in the 2000s: Pragmatic Rapprochement", **Ege Academic Review**, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2011, p. 112.

accession process and the ensuing efforts towards democratization at the domestic level, b) the emergence of a conducive environment for de-securitization at the regional level due in part to the isolation of Syria and Iran, the adoption of EU norms, and the post-2003 developments in Iraq.<sup>295</sup> As a result of the above-cited developments, Turkey's foreign policy became increasingly Middle Eastern-oriented but this Middle Easternization did not connote a break with the West but rather it was emblematic of the growing salience of the Middle East in Turkey's relations with the West.<sup>296</sup> All in all, one can argue that the genesis of Turkey's Middle Eastern penetration partially goes back to "the initiatives which were taken in order to establish a secure environment in the region that was completely destabilized after September 11, and thus, to eliminate the security threats that especially arouse from the developments in Iraq."<sup>297</sup>

Noteworthy to mention is that at the same time the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq turned out to be a blessing in disguise for Iran because these military interventions removed two major security problems threatening Tehran: Saddam and Taliban. The U.S. war on terror once again demonstrated the American military superiority but, ironically, the growth of U.S. as the global superpower did not necessarily lead to the acceptance of its hegemonic presence in the Middle East.<sup>298</sup> Hence, regional powers, those states aspiring to become regional hegemons and even non-state actors exploited the perennial conditions of "fragmented anarchy" in the Middle East—which was exacerbated following the 2001 Afghan war and 2003 invasion of Iraq—in order to actively pursue their own interests.<sup>299</sup>

It merits attention that Iran under the presidency of Khatami (1997-2005) was initially poised for a thaw in its relations with the United States because of three main factors, namely Khatami's call for "dialogue of civilizations" as opposed to Samuel

---

<sup>295</sup> Bülent Aras and Rabia Karakaya Polat. "From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey's Relations with Syria and Iran", **Security Dialogue**, Vol. 39, No. 5, 2008, p. 496-497.

<sup>296</sup> Tarik Oğuzlu. "Middle Easternization of Turkey's Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Dissociate from the West?", **Turkish Studies**, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2008, p. 3.

<sup>297</sup> Nuri Yeşilyurt and Atay Akdevelioğlu. "Turkey's Middle East Policy under the JDP Rule", **The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations**, Vol. 40, 2009, p. 43.

<sup>298</sup> Pietro Marzo and Francesco Cavatorta, An Exceptional Context for a Debate on International Relations? Towards a Synthetic Approach to the Study of the MENA's International Politics, **The Routledge Handbook to the Middle East and North African State and States System**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Jasmine Gani, Routledge, 2020, p. 320.

<sup>299</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami. "Middle East Middle Powers: Regional Role, International Impact", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 11, No. 42, 2014, p. 33.

Huntington's clash of civilizations theory, the then U.S. Secretary of States Madeleine Albright's admittance in March 2000 to Washington's role in the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, and the Islamic Republic of Iran's collaboration with the US to counter Taliban in Afghanistan.<sup>300</sup> Despite these positive normalization gestures, the U.S.-Iran relations failed in actuality to proceed to a fully de-securitized stage. Not only Tehran was and has been (to this day) opposed to the presence of foreign forces, particularly the U.S. troops in the region, the former President George Bush's characterization of Iran, Iraq and North Korea as "an axis of evil" in his January 29 State of the Union address was also perceived by Tehran as a missed opportunity that severely backtracked nascent cooperation between the two arch-enemies. Contemporaneous with the abrupt rupture in the Iranian-American regional cooperation and the growing threat perception of Tehran about the Bush administration's commitment to regime change, Iran not only embarked on severe domestic crackdown of political dissent, it also took advantage of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the U.S. policy towards the Middle East to confront the American hegemonic overlay. Simultaneously, both Iran and Turkey witnessed an increasing spate of violence by PKK/PJAK (Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan), which created a convergence of interests between the two neighboring countries. Just as the existential threat of Kurdish separatism paved the way for growing security cooperation between Tehran and Ankara, the rift between Ankara and Washington grew after the Turkish government blocked the U.S. forces from using Turkish territory to launch the 2003 invasion.

What can be distilled from the preceding appraisal of the complex trends and tracing of processes in Iran-Turkey relations and of the patterns of amity and enmity between the two key regional players, especially after the 9/11 attacks as well as the coming to power of the AKP in Turkey is two-fold. First, as was illustrated earlier, a combination of domestic and foreign policy changes in both Turkey and Iran as well as structural transformations at the global and regional levels have served as key contributing factors affecting the progress of relations between the two countries in the early 2000s. Second, the U.S. factor has also served as a key variable determining the

---

<sup>300</sup> Daniel Heradstveit and G. Matthew Bonham. "What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran", **Middle East Journal**, Vol. 61, No. 3, 2007, p. 427.

continuities and changes in Turkey-Iran relations as exemplified by, i.e. the case of U.S. invasion of Iraq which led to the overlapping of interests in regional politics between Ankara and Tehran.<sup>301</sup> Put differently, an assessment of Turkey-Iran relations from 2001 until now bear testimony to a fact of life in their bilateral relations: the patterns of amity and enmity and divergences and convergences of interests between the two regional powers are contingent upon if not tightly wedded to each country's state of affairs with the United States at certain period of time.

Keeping these variables in mind, Turkey-Iran relations (patterns of amity and enmity) in the period between 2001 and 2021 can be divided into four phases.

The first phase is between 2001 and 2010, in which the patterns of amity grew strong as a result of a series of developments. As indicated earlier, notwithstanding Turkey's shift towards active engagement with Iran and the Arab Middle East and the failure of Iran's détente policy, the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were seen as watershed moments which provided the fertile ground for an alignment between Iran and Turkey based on the logic of *realpolitik*. Turkey's de-securitization policy towards Syria, Iran and Iraq which enabled its Middle Easternization approach reached its plateau in 2009 when Turkey as a "trading state" represented a successful example of coherence between Islam and democracy and a rising soft power in the Arab Middle East.<sup>302</sup> Turkey's rising profile in the Middle East as a normative power in tandem with its Europeanization policies strengthened its position as a reliable mediator in Middle Eastern interstate and intrastate conflicts. Albeit without shortcomings, Turkey made concrete efforts to mediate in the Lebanese crisis, between Israel and Syria, and between Iran and the west over Tehran's nuclear dossier. Seen in this context, the relations between Turkey and Iran experienced a significant boost as several negotiations between the EU3 and their Iranian counterparts, and between the P5+1 and Iran took place in Turkey.<sup>303</sup>

---

<sup>301</sup> Robert Olson. "Turkey's Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council from 2003 to 2007: New Paradigms?", **Mediterranean Quarterly**, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2008, p. 68.

<sup>302</sup> Kemal Kirişçi. "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State", **New Perspectives on Turkey**, Vol. 40, 2009, pp. 29-56., Emel Parlar Dal. "The Transformation of Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Illusion or Awakening?", **Turkish Studies**, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2012, p. 255.

<sup>303</sup> Moritz Pieper. "Turkish Foreign Policy toward the Iranian Nuclear Programme: In Search of a New Middle East Order after the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War", **Alternative: Turkish Journal of International Relations**, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2012, p. 85.



Of particular note here is that Turkey has consistently pursued a pragmatic and prudent policy towards Iran-U.S./EU nuclear conflict as evidenced by Ankara's cautious reaction when the news about the clandestine Iranian nuclear program first surfaced in 2002. Turkey's attempts to mediate and facilitate the nuclear dispute eventually paid off in May 2010 when Turkish foreign minister Davutoglu signed the Tehran declaration along with his Brazilian and Iranian counterparts. Noteworthy too is that prior to the signing of the tripartite nuclear swap deal, the relations between Turkey and Israel had deteriorated after the Gaza crisis in December 2008 and due to the Israeli killing of ten Turkish activists in the Mavi Marmara aid flotilla incident in May 2010. Borrowing one scholar's words, "Turkey's differentiation from the West on the Iranian nuclear question led some international and Turkish observers to conclude that Turkey has been shifting away from the West."<sup>304</sup> The Gaza flotilla incident is widely viewed as the breaking point in Turkey-Israel relations, which provided yet another impetus for a however tactical alignment between Tehran and Ankara. A month later in June 2010 Turkey voted against UN Security Council Resolution 1929, the first Turkish vote against the US position since 1952. In July 2010, a Turkish firm signed a \$1.3 billion deal with Iran to build a gas pipeline from Iran to Turkey that would supply gas to Europe. From an economic perspective, bilateral trade gradually increased from around \$1.2 billion in 2001 to \$15 billion in 2011.<sup>305</sup> In sum, the modified foreign policy approaches of Turkey and Iran and the changing regional contexts in view of the United States' increasing penetration of the Middle East security complex after the Gulf War and the U.S. invasion of Iraq led to the regionalization and increasing alignment of Tehran-Ankara relations between 2001 and 2011.

The second phase of Turkey-Iran relations is between 2011 and 2015, in which the patterns of amity were abruptly replaced by a period of intense geopolitical competition, most importantly due to the outbreak of the Arab uprisings and the ensuing Syrian civil war. In fact, structural power distributions at global, regional and domestic levels had important bearings on the ebbs and flows in Turkish-Iranian

---

<sup>304</sup> Emel Parlar Dal. "The Transformation of Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Illusion or Awakening?", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2012, p. 256.

<sup>305</sup> Bayram Sinkaya. "Regionalization of Turkey-Iran Relations: Prospects and Limits, Insight Turkey", Vol. 14, No. 2, 2012, p.141.

relations. Before we venture into the trends and processes impinging on the trajectory of Turkey-Iran relations in this period, a few words must be mentioned about the anarchical regional and structural context in which this trajectory emerged.

While the Syrian uprising began in early 2011, the Obama administration (2009-2017) had exhibited a paradoxical and incoherent approach towards the conflicts emanating from the Arab uprisings. On the one hand, the Obama administration called for regime change in Libya and thereby launched a U.S.-led NATO intervention in the North African country under the rubric of Responsibility to Protect (R2P). On the other hand, the same U.S. administration reverted to the policy of offshore-balancing in the MENA region, and, for that matter, refrained from staging a Libya-style intervention in the Syrian context despite vociferous calls by Turkey and Qatar for regime change.

Notwithstanding the post-2011 U.S. policy towards the MENA region, one must take note of an important caveat regarding the fluid regional context in which the Syrian uprisings took place. From Hennebusch's perspective, during the early years of the uprising, the balance of power had shifted from Iran-led Resistance axis toward the pro-Western Saudi-led bloc as Gulf monarchies, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar along with Turkey exploited the security vacuum left by the marginalization of Egypt, Syria and Iraq to become "the only effective agency in inter Arab politics."<sup>306</sup> For Iran, the proceeding factors can be considered among the most salient opportunities that Tehran thought it must seize to introduce itself as a regional power: the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 respectively, Hezbollah's self-proclaimed victory in the 2006 Lebanon War and Obama's widely assumed appeasement towards Tehran as well as the arrival of the unforeseen moment to 'appeal to the Arab street and to outflank the Arab monarchies' after the Arab uprisings.<sup>307</sup> Under these circumstances, the mutual threat perceptions of Iran and Turkey towards each other were substantially increased beginning from 2011 and these dynamics inevitably led to widening fissures between Tehran and Ankara.

---

<sup>306</sup> Raymond Hennebusch. "Thinking about the International Factor in the Syrian Crisis", **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Raymond Hennebusch and Adham Saouli (eds), Routledge, 2019, p. 5.

<sup>307</sup> Shahram Chubin. "Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated", **Gulf Research Center**, 01.09.2012, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Iran\\_and\\_Arab\\_Spring\\_2873.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Iran_and_Arab_Spring_2873.pdf), (13.03. 2021).

The relations between Iran and Turkey suffered yet another setback in September 2011, when Turkey allowed the deployment of U.S. missile defense radar on its soil as part of the NATO's program. In another major blow to the bilateral relations, Turkey in September 2011 alleged that there had been an agreement between the PKK and Iran over the sheltering of the PKK leader Murat Karayilan in the Iranian region of the Qandil Mountain.<sup>308</sup> The allegation was rejected by Tehran but fact of the matter remained that the emergence of these patterns of enmity in light of the Syrian civil war worsened the hitherto threat perceptions between Iran and Turkey and significantly affected each country's Middle Eastern policy. As one scholar postulates, Turkey's perception of the Iranian threat essentially emanates from the prospect of 1) any uncontrollable domestic instability inside Iranian territories, 2) any Iranian march towards expansion of its ideological and geopolitical footprint in the region or interference in regional affairs. Iran's perception of the Turkish threat stems from "Euro-Atlantic vision and quasi-alliance relationship with Israel and Azerbaijan."<sup>309</sup>

The assertion here is that, in spite of the foregoing assumptions, nowhere has the sense of mutual threat perception between Iran and Turkey and the quest for regional hegemony been more pronounced than in the case of the Syrian conflict. Nevertheless, what is often overlooked in any realist analysis of Turkey-Iran relations is that although the dimension of competition and conflict reigned supreme in the period between 2011 and 2016, the bilateral economic relations showed a downward trend not because of the growing divergences of geopolitical interests over the Syrian case but as a consequence of the imposition of international sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program. The ironical import of this assertion is that although Turkish trade with Iran reached around \$22 billion in 2012 before dropping off sharply to less than half that by 2015, the AKP government strove between 2012 and 2015 to help Tehran evade sanctions in one of the biggest sanctions-evasion schemes in recent history.<sup>310</sup>

---

<sup>308</sup> Bayram Sinkaya. "Regionalization of Turkey-Iran Relations: Prospects and Limits", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2012, p.152.

<sup>309</sup> Iain William MacGillivray. "The Paradox of Turkish-Iranian Relations in the Syrian Crisis", **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 41, No. 6, 2020, p.1049.

<sup>310</sup> Jonathan Schanzer. "The Biggest Sanctions-Evasion in Recent History", **The Atlantic**, 04.01.2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/iran-turkey-gold-sanctions-nuclear-zarrab-atilla/549665/>, (14.03.2021)., Orhan Cokun and Tulay Karadeniz. "Syria Divisions Aside, Turkish PM Eyes Closer Ties with Iran", **Reuters**, 04.03.2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-iran/syria-divisions-aside-turkish-pm-eyes-closer-ties-with-iran-idUSKCN0W61WD>, (13.03.2021).

As can be seen, we can observe a somewhat similar compartmentalization strategy that had marked the relations between Turkey and Russia in the bilateral ties between Iran and Turkey as well. The 2015 marked yet another *annus horribilis* in Turkish-Iranian relations. The bilateral ties reached lowest point beginning with the signing of the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 in July 2015 followed by the commencement of Russia's military intervention in Syria in September. Interestingly, the trend of conflict and rivalry prevailed Ankara-Tehran relations in the aftermath of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement as evidenced by the last-minute cancellation of former Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's visit to Turkey in August 2015. Quite ironically, while expectations were running high about the prospects of improved Turkey-Iran trade relations as a corollary of the removal of sanctions on Tehran, the main regional actors, including Turkey viewed the US-Iran détente as a boon for Iran to pursue an aggressive revolutionary agenda throughout the Middle East security complex. As indicated by Sinkaya, the spread of views arguing that the United States decided to side with 'Shiite Iran' in regional politics contributed to negative presentation in Turkey of the (nuclear) deal and the increasing perceptions about an 'implicit alignment' between Tehran and Washington also upended the regional balance of power against Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia.<sup>311</sup> Russia's military intervention in Syria, which occurred after the IRGC Quds Force's Qasem Suleimani visited Moscow, further deteriorated the relations between Turkey and Iran.<sup>312</sup> Needless to say, the continued provision of financial aid by Russia and Iran to the regime of Bashar al Assad, which the UN estimated in mid-June 2015 to stand at \$6 billion annually, was indicative of Iran's and Turkey's geopolitical clash in the Syrian theater.

Another thorny issue in Turkey-Iran relations surfaced in March 2015 when Turkish President Erdogan stated that Ankara supports Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen and called for withdrawal of "Iran and the terrorist groups" from the country. In response to a question regarding Iran's ambitions in Iraq and Syria, Erdogan also

---

<sup>311</sup> Bayram Sinkaya. "Iran and Turkey Relations after the Nuclear Deal: A Case for Compartmentalization", *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2016, p. 91.

<sup>312</sup> Ghaidaa Hetou. "The Onset of the Syrian Crisis and Iran's Role", In Ghaidaa Hetou, *The Syrian Conflict: The Role of Russia, Iran and the US in a Global Crisis*, Routledge, 2019, p. 43.

remarked that “Iran is trying to chase (ISIS) from the region only to take its place.”<sup>313</sup> These remarks had a negative impact on Erdogan’s visit to Tehran in April 2015 as shown by the harsh criticism of Iranian officials leveled against Turkey and the summoning by Iran of Turkish *charge d’affaires* to the Foreign Ministry. The Turkish-Iranian relations proved its pragmatic and realist-based course in spite of the ideational and geopolitical differences on regional issues, particularly over Syrian conflict. In his Tehran visit, Erdogan was quick to aggrandize trade and economic ties instead of dwelling on geopolitical differences as evidenced by the signing of eight economic cooperation agreements, a positive trend that culminated in President Rouhani’s visit in April 2016 to Istanbul.

The third phase of Turkey-Iran relations is between 2016-2017, in which the patterns of conflict and competition slowly gave way to an increasing pattern of amity due to three important developments. First, the abortive military coup attempt in July 2016 foregrounded the exigency of regime survival for both countries, overshadowing for a short interval even the most acute clashes of interests regarding regional policies in the Middle East. It must be borne in mind that for Turkey, the Gezi Protests of 2013 had previously undermined the “Turkish model” discourse of being a secular Muslim democracy, thereby exacerbating the AKP’ fear of losing political hegemony, if not political survival.<sup>314</sup> Nevertheless, the July coup further deteriorated “the inter-social security dilemma between two religious social forces—Gülenist organization and political Islamists” in Turkey but most importantly it raised the specter of the AKP collapse.<sup>315</sup> The failed coup in Turkey was seen by Iran as a portend of a violent conflict in a large, important neighboring country that could be exploited by the Kurds living in Turkey, and which would also affect ethnic minorities in Iran, including the Kurds living there.”<sup>316</sup> It is, therefore, no coincidence that it was regional rival Iran, a

<sup>313</sup> Cengiz Candar. “Erdogan Focuses on Trade During Iran Visit, **Al Monitor**, 08.04.2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/turkey-iran-difference-between-speaking-ankara-tehran.html>, (13.03.2021).

<sup>314</sup> Iain William MacGillivray. “The Paradox of Turkish-Iranian Relations in the Syrian Crisis”, **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 41, No. 6, 2020, p. 8.

<sup>315</sup> Tuncay Kardaş and Ali Balci. “Understanding the July 2016 Military Coup: The Contemporary Security Dilemma in Turkey”, **Digest of the Middle East Studies (DOMES)**, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2019, p. 159.

<sup>316</sup> Sima Shine and Gallia Lindenstrauss. “The Failed Coup Attempt in Turkey: A Boost for Iran-Turkey Relations”, **The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)**, No. 839, 31.07.2016, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-failed-coup-attempt-in-turkey-a-boost-for-iran-turkey-relations/>, (15.03.2021)

Shi'ite Muslim nation and a staunch backer of Syria's Bashar al Assad, which voiced its support for the AKP government over the coup attempt along with Russia.<sup>317</sup> While the ideological and geopolitical disparities were smoldering in the background, the bilateral relations between Turkey and Iran experienced a sudden revival which evinced itself in the later security realignments and convergences of interests at the regional level. In the words of one scholar, the ensuing Turkish-Iranian rapprochement was further strengthened as a result of three major issues: 1) a mutual pro-Qatar stance in the Saudi Arabia-Qatar spat, 2) mutual opposition to a Kurdish state in northern Iraq and 3) increasingly troubled relations with the US.<sup>318</sup>

The preceding intervening variables attest to the second important factor that led to greater synergy in bilateral ties between Turkey and Iran: the opposition to Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government's passage of a controversial independence referendum in September 2017. A month earlier, the Iranian Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces Mohammad Bagheri visited Ankara. It was an unprecedented visit because it was the first such visit by a high-level Iranian military officer to Turkey in 38 years. Viewing Kurdish separatism as an existential threat to Turkey's national security and territorial sovereignty, President Erdogan was also quick to pay a visit to Tehran (in October) where he met with Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei as well as President Rouhani to mull over plans to lay economic sanctions on Iraqi Kurdistan and conduct joint 'counterterrorism operations' in Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) territory against the PKK and related groups.<sup>319</sup>

As can be seen, the Kurdish question occupied a central place as a source of cooperation between Tehran and Ankara at least in 2017. Of paramount importance here is that Turkey-Iran-Baghdad's tactical alignment to thwart Kurdish bid for statehood had two profound implications on the purported role of Tehran and Ankara in the Middle East security complex. Emboldened by the territorial weakening of ISIS which had lost its control of Mosul in July 2016 and owing to the rising profile and

---

<sup>317</sup> Reuters. "Regional Rival Iran Expresses Support for Turkey over Coup Attempt", **Reuters**, 16.07.2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-iran-reaction/regional-rival-iran-expresses-support-for-turkey-over-coup-attempt-idUSKCN0ZW0LM>, (14.03.2021).

<sup>318</sup> Vahid Yücesoy. "The Recent Rapprochement between Iran and Turkey: Is it Durable or Is it a Relationship of Convenience?", **Turkish Studies**, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2019, pp. 274-296.

<sup>319</sup> Farzin Nadimi. "Iran Flexes its Muscles after the Kurdish Referendum", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 10.10.2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-flexes-its-muscles-after-the-kurdish-referendum>, (15.03.2021).

influence of former Iranian Commander of Quds Force, Major General Qasem Soleimani in Iraq and Syria, Iran exploited the opportunity arising from opposition to the Kurdish independence to further extend its geopolitical footprint in Iraq. As a member of the Gulf sub-complex, Iran intensified its backing of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) or al-Hashd al-Shaabi, an Iran-backed militant proxy organization with close ties to the IRGC, to fight against the Kurdish forces and wrest control of many disputed areas including Kirkuk, Sinjar and Hanekin. Iran's growing penetration of the Gulf sub-complex took place against the backdrop of growing threat perception among the Gulf states about the emergence and possible entrenchment of a 'Shia Crescent' in the Middle East, from Yemen to Lebanon. On the other hand, Turkey also took advantage of the acute regional security dilemma to reproduce and cement its discourse of PKK terror domestically, and link it with the Kurdish dimension of the Syrian crisis—that is the PYD's pursuit of connecting the three autonomous cantons in northern Syria which were known collectively as Rojava. In so doing, the AKP government sought to brandish nationalistic sentiments and manufacture the consent of the Turkish populace about any future Turkish military interventions in northern Syria as it was the case in the January 2018 Turkish invasion of Kurdish controlled Afrin, albeit with Russia's green light.<sup>320</sup>

As can be observed, the September 2017 independence referendum in the KRG served as a catalyst for greater penetration of Iran and Turkey in Iraq—a member of the Gulf sub-complex—at a time when only a few months earlier the blockade of Qatar had also pushed Ankara and Tehran closer together. Having said this, in so far as Iran's and Turkey's overlay of the Gulf sub-complex, i.e., in Iraq is concerned, the two regional rivals have so far forged respective spheres of influence at the opposite ends of Iraq with Iran holding sway throughout southern Iran and with Turkey maximizing its economic and political clout in northern parts of Iraq.<sup>321</sup>

The third important contributing factor that can be mentioned as a cause of growing synergy on the basis of mutual interests between Turkey and Iran pertains to the conditions under which the trio states agreed to officially create the Russia-

---

<sup>320</sup> Bill Park. "Explaining Turkey's Reaction to the September 2017 Independence Referendum in the KRG: Final Divorce or Relationship Reset?", *Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2017, p. 53-54.

<sup>321</sup> Henri J. Barkey. "Turkish-Iranian Competition after the Arab Spring", *Survival*, Vol. 54, No. 6, 2012, p. 148.

brokered Astana Peace Process on Syria in January 2017. It is undeniable that Turkey, Russia and Iran harbor fundamental differences vis-à-vis the Syrian conflict but these recurrent clashes of interests are superseded by the threat of the United States to all three countries.<sup>322</sup> As mentioned in the previous section of the research, the Astana framework has a multifaceted function: on the one hand, it allows Turkey, Iran, and Russia to advance their economic, political and military interests in the Syrian theater while simultaneously counterbalancing each other's positions and preventing the unstable situation in Syria from spiraling out of control. On the other hand, each of the three partners of the Astana Peace Process, seen no other alternative than the Astana format to enter a tactical alliance aimed at balancing balance against the United States who they perceive as the greatest threat to their geopolitical, economic and security interests. As such, it is the scale and scope of anti-Americanism as well as the threat of Kurdish irredentism that can be seen as a common thread that binds Turkey-Iran ties, regardless of the prevalent economic and trade factors at play. The period between 2016-2018 can thus be labeled as the *anni mirabilis* between Turkey and Iran, albeit the amicable relations frayed at times, i.e., because of Iran's prominent military presence in the Turkmen city of Tal Afar in Iraqi Nineveh province or the entry of pro-Syrian forces into Afrin in northwestern Syria.<sup>323</sup> Nevertheless, the crux of the matter here is that since 2017 a period of cooperation over the Syrian case evolved between Turkey and Iran.

The fourth phase of Iran-Turkey relations is between 2018-2021, in which the relations vacillated between cooperation and conflict and between amity and enmity. But tensions regarding Syria, Iraq, and the South Caucasus dimmed the prospects for an easy cooperation, much less a strategic alignment at the regional or bilateral level. In this respect, the unfolding Idlib crisis can be identified as an enduring bone of contention between Turkey and Russia-Iran-Syria axis. Turkey's military offensive in the last major rebel stronghold of Idlib in northwest Syria, which started in October 2017, reinforced the pattern of competition and rivalry among the three main actors of

---

<sup>322</sup> Kaan Namli and Fadi Farasin. "ASTANA: The Rise of a New Alliance and its Implications for International Relations", **The Syrian Crisis: Effects on the Regional and international Relations**, Dania Koleilat Khatib, Springer, 2021, p. 131-132.

<sup>323</sup> Stephen J. Flanagan, et al. "Turkey's Nationalist Course: Implications for the US-Turkish Strategic Partnership and the US Army", **RAND Corporation**, 2020, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2589.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2589.html), (16.03.2021).



the Syrian geopolitical theater. For Turkey, the dire prospect of Syrian regime's full capture of the opposition stronghold in light of the massive wave of refugee inflow into Turkey would be tantamount to the collapse of its Syrian policy, *tout court*. Therefore, President Erdogan has consistently tried to draw the regional and international attention to the Idlib crisis and for that matter warned on several occasions that any Syrian government attack on Idlib would cause significant humanitarian and security risks for Turkey, Europe and beyond.<sup>324</sup> Although a multitude of deals were signed between Russia and Turkey, some of which also involved Iran, and security arrangements have been established to de-escalate tensions and oversee the Idlib ceasefires, the Idlib crisis remains to function as a litmus test of relations among Turkey, Russia and Iran. Add to these uncertain dynamics, Turkey's military operation in Afrin (January 2018-March 2018) followed by Turkey's launch of Operation Peace Spring in east of the Euphrates River in northern Syria (October 2019-November 2019), which taken together fueled the flames of competition in the Syrian conflict. Having been publicly opposed to Turkey's previous military operations in northern Syria, namely Operation Olive Branch in 2018, and Idlib offensives from 2017 onwards, the Iranian government cautiously upbraided Ankara's Operation Peace Spring and urged Ankara to respect the territorial sovereignty of Syria. Signs of deterioration in Turkey and Iran relations over the Syrian conflict surfaced itself mostly in the Iranian media as *Farhikhtegan Newspaper* published a headline 'insulting' President Erdogan.<sup>325</sup>

The assertion here is not that the discursive practices adopted by the media outlets and some Iranian officials could cause an irreversible damage to Turkish-Iranian relations. Rather, the caveat begging attention is that the Idlib crisis has invariably been seen as a game changer and that Idlib is of such high strategic and geopolitical value that it can determine the fate of the Syrian conflict and affect the trajectory of the entire region. The Idlib conundrum has, nonetheless, failed to cause

<sup>324</sup> Reuters. "Turkey's Erdogan says Attack on Syria's Idlib would Cause Humanitarian, Security Risks", **Reuters**, 11.09.2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-security/turkeys-erdogan-says-attack-on-syrias-idlib-would-cause-humanitarian-security-risks-idUSKCN1LQ2OM>, (16.03.2021).

<sup>325</sup> Anadolu Agency (Persian Website). "*Safir-e Iran: Roozname-ye Farhikhtegan be Dalil-e Eghdam Moghayer ba Manaf-e Melli Tazakor Gereft*", **Anadolu Agency**, 09.10.2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/fa/ایران/سفیر-ایران-روزنامه-فرهیختگان-به-دلیل-اقدام-مغایر-با-منافع-ملی-تذکر-1606606/گرفت>, (10.10.2021).

irreparable damage to the relations among Iran, Turkey and Russia as the three 'guarantors of peace' have made at least 16 rounds of meetings under the Astana framework from January 2017 until December 2021 and the compartmentalization strategy remains intact.

The relations between Turkey and Iran plunged into a new chill after the Syrian Arab Army backed by Iran and Russia staged a new round of military operation [Dawn of Idlib 2] in December 2019 to March 2020, aimed at retaking control of the Aleppo-Latakia (M4) and Aleppo-Damascus (M5) highways in the Idlib province. Only a month prior to the flare-up of military escalation in the Idlib front, a U.S. drone strike near Baghdad International Airport had targeted and killed Iranian major general Qasem Soleimani, the main architecture of Iran's foreign military interventions and asymmetric warfare.<sup>326</sup> Without Soleimani at the helm of its locomotive of 'Axis of Resistance', there were widespread speculations that Iran's proxy war will eventually run out of steam. To no avail, however, during the height of the Operation Dawn of Idlib 2, Syrian Arab Army forces along with Iran-backed militias retained their presence in eastern Aleppo front and clashed with Ankara-backed rebels and Turkish forces in late February and March 2020. In an unprecedented response, Turkish strikes targeted Hezbollah headquarters near the city of Saraqib in Idlib, killing 31 Shia militias including one Iranian commander, 9 Hezbollah militias and 21 forces from the Pakistani Zaynabiyoun Brigade and the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade.<sup>327</sup> On 27 February 2020, Russian jets and Syrian army forces conducted airstrikes against a Turkish Army convoy in Idlib province's Balyun region, killing at least 34 Turkish soldiers and wounding many others.<sup>328</sup>

For Iran, Turkey's direct military confrontation in Idlib, whether deliberate or inadvertent, was unprecedented in every perceivable way. For Turkey, Russia's military strikes incurred the biggest Turkish military loss on the Syrian battlefield in recent years. Although the aforesaid military confrontations of the three main

---

<sup>326</sup> Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Zeina Karam. "US Kills Iran's Most Powerful General in Baghdad Airstrike, **The Associated Press**, 02.01.2020, <https://apnews.com/article/5597ff0f046a67805c-c233d5933a53ed>, (17.03.2021).

<sup>327</sup> Hadi Khodabandeh Loui. "Would Iran Confront Turkey in Idlib Frontier?", **Anadolu Agency**, 05.03.2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/wouldiranconfrontturkeyintheidlibfrontier/1755905>, (17.03.2021).

<sup>328</sup> BBC World Service. "Syria War: Alarm After 33 Turkish Soldiers Killed in Attack in Idlib, **BBC**, 28.02.2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51667717>, (17.03.2021).

geopolitical actors in the Syrian conflict briefly cast a harsh shadow over bilateral relations, but the Astana format served as a trilateral governing management aimed at creating a mode of security order in Syria. To corroborate this claim, one should take note of the ceasefire deal brokered by Russia and Turkey in Moscow on 5 March 2020 which resulted in a ceasefire between the warring parties. The truce can best be seen as feeble and ephemeral as maintaining the status-quo appears far-fetched primarily because of occasional clashes between the Syrian forces and rebels in Idlib over the past few months. What is pragmatically remarkable, however, is that no other alternative other than the Astana framework has been able to create a semblance of de-escalation and relative stability in Syria. Noteworthy too is that the presidents of Iran and Turkey met six times from January 2018 to December 2020.

Further down the road, an unstable atmosphere reigned over Turkey-Iran relations in which the bilateral ties became increasingly suffused with an aura of *restrained antipathy* leaning towards cautious amity due in part to four overriding developments.

First, from the beginning of Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in northeastern Syrian in October 2019, Iranian officials condemned Ankara's actions, with former President Rouhani urging his Turkish counterpart to solve problems via dialogue and the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament Ali Larijani cancelling his visit to Turkey as did the former president of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Second, the level of antagonism, albeit on the Syrian military front, reached its climax in February 2020 when Turkey-backed forces killed pro-Iran Hezbollah militias in the southern Idlib countryside, particularly in the Saraqib axis. Although the tensions in Idlib subsided in early March, the Libyan crisis as well as Operation Claw-Eagle against PKK terrorism in northern Iraq became front and center in Turkey's foreign policy agenda in May and June respectively.<sup>329</sup> Turkey's deeper overlays of the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRG), as a member of the Gulf sub-complex, coupled with rapid advances by Turkey-backed forces of Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya in April and May, can be attributed to the *regionalized* character of

---

<sup>329</sup> Dilara Hamit. "Turkey Launches Operation Claw-Eagle", **Anadolu Agency**, 15.06.2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-launches-operation-claw-eagle/1877001>, (18.03.2021).

Turkish foreign policy which contained the seeds of militarized activism in recent years.

Third, Turkish Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu's remarks in June 2020 about the alleged presence of around 100 PKK terrorists in Iran's Dambad region ruffled the feathers of Iranian officials with the Commander of Ground Forces of IRGC dismissing these remarks as "baseless and irresponsible."<sup>330</sup> Only a few days later, Iran's former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif paid a visit to Istanbul where he met with his Turkish counterpart and expressed Tehran's support for the Turkish-backed GNA and on ways to end the crises in Libya and Yemen. For his part, Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu reiterated Ankara's opposition to U.S. sanctions on Iran. During the meeting, the Iranian side also put a premium on the need for resumption of gas exports and repairing the section of the gas pipeline which was damaged as result of an explosion claimed by PKK as a sabotage attack in March.<sup>331</sup>

Fourth, in early September 2020, Iran and Turkey also agreed to take steps, including joint operations against the PKK and PJAK as well as other terrorist organizations.<sup>332</sup> Undoubtedly, Iran has never been impervious to the threat posed by PKK as its Iranian branch the PJAK has been active inside the country for many years. As one analyst postulates, "if the YPG gained territorial sovereignty in Syria, Iran would be vulnerable to terror attacks like Turkey. This would put the region's stability and security in jeopardy. Yet, Iran voluntarily closed its eyes to this reality."<sup>333</sup>

---

<sup>330</sup> Xinhua. "IRGC Denies Presence of PKK Militants in Iran Near Border, **Xinhua**, 13.06.2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/13/c\\_139136866.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/13/c_139136866.htm), (20.03.2020)., Hakki Uygur. "Süleyman Soylu'nun Uyarıları Ne Anlama Geliyor?", **IRAM Center**, 11.06.2020, [https://iramcenter.org/suleyman-soylunun-uyarilari-ne-anlama-geliyor/?send\\_cookie\\_permissions=OK](https://iramcenter.org/suleyman-soylunun-uyarilari-ne-anlama-geliyor/?send_cookie_permissions=OK), (20.03.2021).

<sup>331</sup> Middle East Monitor. "Iran FM Voices Support for Turkey-backed Libya Government", **Middle East Monitor**, 17.06.2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200617-iran-fm-voices-support-for-turkey-backed-libya-government/>, (21.03.2021).

<sup>332</sup> Baris Kilic. "Turkey, Iran Agree to Take Steps Against Terrorist PKK", **Anadolu Agency**, 08.09.2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkey-iran-agree-to-take-steps-against-terrorist-pkk/1966973>, (21.03.2021).

<sup>333</sup> Mustafa Caner. "Why Does Iran Fail to Grasp Turkey's Security Concerns in Syria?", **Politics Today**, 30.10.2019, <https://politicstoday.org/why-does-iran-fail-to-grasp-turkeys-security-concerns-in-syria/>, (22.03.2021).

**Timeline of Iran-Turkey Relations (2001-2021)**

**2001-2010: Amity**

- 2001:** AKP wins Turkey's parliamentary elections
- 2001:** US invasion of Afghanistan
- 2003:** US invasion of Iraq
- 2003:** Regional powers rushing to fill the security vacuum
- 2003:** Iran's reformist President Khatami still in power (1997-2003)
- 2002:** Revelations about Iran's clandestine nuclear program
- 2002:** AKP adopts a cautious approach vs. Iran's nuclear dossier
- 2002:** AKP engages in mediatory efforts with the West over Iran's nuclear dispute
- 2002:** Turkey cut all diplomatic ties with Israel
- 2002:** Gaza flotilla incident between Turkey and Israel
- 2002:** Declaration signed between Turkey and Iran and Brazil over nuclear swap deal.
- 2002:** June 2010: Turkey votes against UNSC Resolution 1929 in support of Iran

**2011-2015: Competition & Conflict**

- December 2010:** Outbreak of the Arab Uprisings
- March 2011:** Syrian Civil war
- Implication:** Saudi-UAE-Qatar-Turkey vis-à-vis Iran-Syria-Russia
- September 2011:** Turkey permits deployment of US missile defense radar on its soil
- September 2011:** Turkey alleged Iran shelters PKK elements
- March 2015:** Erdogan supports Saudi's intervention in Yemen, urges Iran withdrawal
- July 2015:** Iran and the P5+1 sign landmark JCPOA (nuclear deal)
- Implication:** Iran's backing of Assad & JCPOA deal increase mutual threat
- Implication:** perceptions of TR/IR
- 2011-2015:** downward trend in trade volumes between Turkey and Iran
- 2011-2015:** Turkey helps Iran evade sanctions

**2016-2017: Amity**

- July 2016:** the failed military coup against the AKP by Gulenists
- Implication:** Iran and Russia first countries to support Turkey
- October 2017:** Turkey launches Idlib operation in northwest Syria
- Implication:** losing the last stronghold of rebels would be tantamount to the collapse of Turkey's Syria policy
- January 2017:** formal creation of the Astana Peace Process on Syria
- August 2016-March 2017:** Turkey's Euphrates Shield Operation (Azaz-Jarabulus-Al Bab triangle)
- September 2017:** KRG's passage of controversial independence referendum
- Implications:**
  - 1) Iran-Turkey-Baghdad alliance to thwart Kurdish bid for statehood in northern Iraq
  - 2) Growing rivalry of Iran & Turkey in the Levant (Syria) and Gulf sub-complexes (Iraq) of the MEESC

**2018-2021: Enmity, Realpolitik (Compartmentalization)**

- December 2019-March 2020:** Turkey's launch of Idlib operation
- Implication:** Turkey and Iran manage to preserve compartmentalization strategy, geopolitically divided on Syria but united against PKK/PJAK terrorism
- January 2018-March 2018:** Turkey launches military operation in Afrin, Iran criticizes the move
- May 2019:** Turkey stopped purchasing Iranian oil under U.S. pressure
- October 2019-November 2019:** Turkey's launch of Operation Peace Spring in east of Euphrates
- June 2020:** Iran's FM Javad Zarif pays a visit to Turkey, on the same day Turkey and Iran conduct anti-PKK/PJAK operations
- December 2020:** Erdogan recited a poem about the Aras River on the Iranian-Azerbaijani border, causes harsh reactions from Tehran
- February 2021:** Iran-backed group threatens to attack Turkish military in Iraq, (Turkey-PMU Tensions mount as Ankara expands operations in Iraq)
- 27 February 2021:** Iranian Ambassador to Iraq (Iraq) Nasrullahi says "Turkey must leave Iraq"
- June 2020:** Iran's FM Javad Zarif pays a visit to Turkey, on the same day Turkey and Iran conduct anti-PKK/PJAK operations
- Implications:** Turkey and Iran manage to preserve compartmentalization strategy, geopolitically divided on Syria but united against PKK/PJAK terrorism
- Note:** 14 rounds of Astana talks 2017-2020, neo-politik prevails, de-escalate clash of interests

**2021-2021: Enmity, Realpolitik (Compartmentalization)**

- December 2020:** Erdogan recited a poem about the Aras River on the Iranian-Azerbaijani border, causes harsh reactions from Tehran
- February 2021:** Iran-backed group threatens to attack Turkish military in Iraq, (Turkey-PMU Tensions mount as Ankara expands operations in Iraq)
- 27 February 2021:** Iranian Ambassador to Iraq (Iraq) Nasrullahi says "Turkey must leave Iraq"
- June 2020:** Iran's FM Javad Zarif pays a visit to Turkey, on the same day Turkey and Iran conduct anti-PKK/PJAK operations
- Implications:** Turkey and Iran manage to preserve compartmentalization strategy, geopolitically divided on Syria but united against PKK/PJAK terrorism
- Note:** 14 rounds of Astana talks 2017-2020, neo-politik prevails, de-escalate clash of interests

127

But in the eyes of Tehran and Ankara the Syrian conflict and the spectator of Kurdish irredentism have changed the paradigm for years to come. On the same day that foreign ministers of Iran and Turkey met in Istanbul (15 June), Turkish army launched an all-out military offensive against the PKK positions in northern Iraq. Surprisingly, the IRGC simultaneously launched its own attacks against the PJAK and its affiliated groups. As of writing this dissertation, Iran's influence in Iraq has been substantially declined as a consequence of a number of factors such as the economic costs of containing Covid-19 pandemic and the negative impacts of U.S. economic sanctions on the activities of Shi'ite proxy paramilitary groups, but it continues to retain a modicum of influence, most particularly in Baghdad and southern Iraq.<sup>334</sup> Turkey, by contrast, has cemented its economic and political influence in the northern parts of KRG.<sup>335</sup> The fourth development that created a convergence of geopolitical interest between Turkey and Iran pertains to the historic signing in August 2020 of the Abraham Accord between Israel and the UAE regarding the normalization of relations and later on the Bahrain-Israel normalization deal; both of which were vehemently condemned by Tehran and Ankara. There are ample reasons to believe that Iran and Turkey have shared threat perceptions towards the UAE's growing regional activism and interventionism in the Levant (i.e., in Syria), in Yemen and in the Maghreb sub-complex (i.e., in Libya and the Horn of Africa). In Tehran's viewpoint, the bulk of Iran's antipathy towards Abu Dhabi stems from the UAE's alignment with other GCC countries and Egypt to cut off all diplomatic ties with Qatar in the 2017 Gulf crisis, from the UAE's overt backing of Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran, and from the Emirates' support of Maxim Pressure policy against Iran and of preventing Tehran from buying and selling arms.<sup>336</sup>

Turkey, for its part, finds itself at geopolitical loggerheads with the UAE within the Egypt-Greece-Cyprus-Israel bloc in the eastern Mediterranean dispute and also over the Libyan conflict as well as the Syrian war. It is interesting to note that both President Erdogan and the Islamic Republic of Iran's Leader Ali Khamenei lashed out

---

<sup>334</sup> Reuters. "Coronavirus and Sanctions Hit Iran's Support of Proxies in Iraq", **Reuters**, 02.07.2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-proxies-insight-idUSKBN2432EY>, (22.03.2021).

<sup>335</sup> Henri J. Barkey. "Turkish-Iranian Competition after the Arab Spring", **Survival**, Vol. 54, No. 6, 2012, p.148.

<sup>336</sup> Ayman El-Dessouki and ola Rafik Mansour. "Small States and Strategic Hedging: The United Arab States' Policy towards Iran", **Review of Economics and Political Science**, 2020, pp. 1-14.

at the 2020 Abraham Accord, deriding it as the “UAE’s betrayal of the Palestinians”.<sup>337</sup> Regardless of the UAE/Saudi factor in creating a relative semblance of amity between Tehran and Ankara, it must be mentioned that the recent eruption of conflict in September 2020 between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region revived the rancor and mutual suspicion between Iran and Turkey because of the latter’s reluctance to practically side with Baku-Ankara axis versus Moscow-Yerevan alliance. Although Iranian officials verbally stated that the Upper Karabakh is an Azerbaijani territory and must be returned to Azerbaijan but Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior advisor to Iran’s Supreme Leader prevaricated about the official position of the Islamic Republic, blaming Turkey and Israel for fanning the flames of war in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.<sup>338</sup> Meanwhile, President Erdogan’s recitation of a poem about the Aras river in December 2020 caused an unprecedented reaction from Iranian officials and the media circles so much so that the two countries summoned their ambassadors for explanations. One should also point to the growing Iran-Turkey rivalry over geopolitical influence in northern Iraq as a clear case of the growing patterns of guarded enmity between Tehran and Ankara in this phase.

Under these circumstances and depending on a wide array of intervening variables that can instantaneously affect and transform the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, all evidence to this date suggest that Turkey and Iran have “maintained a modicum of amity and enmity that work together when necessary” in spite of the recurrent geopolitical and ideological divergences of interests at the regional level.<sup>339</sup> It is important to note that despite the growing divergences of interests between Iran and Turkey, the two sides have to this date managed to compartmentalize their relations and focus largely on areas that can bring about cooperation than protracted conflict. Hence the rise of compartmentalization in Iran-

---

<sup>337</sup> The Daily Sabah. “History Will not Forgive Betrayal of Palestinians, Turkey Says”, **The Daily Sabah**, 14.08.2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/history-will-not-forgive-uaes-betrayal-of-palestinians-turkey-says>, (24.03.2021)., Al Jazeera. “Iran’s Khamenei says UAE Betrayed Muslim Worlds with Israel Deal”, **Al Jazeera**, 01.09.2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/1/irans-khamenei-says-uae-betrayed-muslim-world-with-israel-deal>, (23.03.2021).

<sup>338</sup> Yeni Safak. “What is Iran’s Approach to the Upper Karabakh Dispute?”, **Yeni Şafak**, 19.10.2020, <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/news/what-is-irans-approach-to-upper-karabakh-dispute-3551285>, (24.03.2021).

<sup>339</sup> Henri J. Barkey. “Turkish-Iranian Competition after the Arab Spring”, **Survival**, Vol. 54, No. 6, 2012, p. 141.

Turkey relations. It is also important to realize that the ongoing paradigmatic shift is the UAE policy towards Iran and Turkey may potentially obstruct Tehran's and Ankara's deeper penetrations into the Gulf and much less into the Levant sub-complex. Another important caveat is that the geopolitical ascendance of Saudi Arabi and the UAE in contradistinction to Turkey's and Iran's willingness to expand their military and geopolitical footprints have added to the hitherto rigid polarization of the Middle East security complex, thereby disrupting the patterns of amity/enmity co-defining the character of RSCs of the Middle East.

The growing polarization and fragmentation of the Middle East security complex have thus paved the way for the intervention of great powers and regional powers, most particularly in Syria; but in the words of Hennebusch "none of these powers could any more control the region than could regional powers."<sup>340</sup> This is why the role of regional powers gains relevance and each sub-complex within the MERSC, i.e. the Levant sub-complex, has become overlayed by regional and extra-regional powers from both within and out of the members of Middle East security complex. And it is for the same reason that the essential structure of regional security complexes in general and the Levant-sub complex of the MERSC has undergone paradigmatic changes simply due to variations in terms of polarity, anarchic structure and social construction (patterns of amity and enmity) of those security complexes. In the previous section of the chapter, we elaborated in depth about how Turkey, as a major pole in the Levant sub-complex, and Russia as an external great power, have penetrated the MERSC by dint of overlying of the Levant sub-complex.

In this part, we now turn to an appraisal of how the relations between Iran and Turkey, as members of the Astana format along with Russia, have affected the Levant sub-complex with a major focus on Iran's Levantine penetration.

### **3.4.2. Iran's Levantine Penetration vs. Decline of US Hegemony**

At the outset of this chapter, we unpacked the processes and trends that contributed to the evolution of Turkey-Russia-Iran Partnership in the Levant sub-

---

<sup>340</sup> Raymond Hennebusch. "Thinking about the International Factor in the Syrian Crisis", **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Raymond Hennebusch and Adham Saouli (eds), Routledge, 2019, p. 7.



complex with a major focus on the emergence of the Astana Peace Process. Just as we discussed the vicissitudes of Turkey-Russian relations in the context of the Syrian crisis with a particular attention to Turkey's efforts to introduce itself as a major pole in the Levant sub-complex, the remainder of this segment is dedicated to identifying and analyzing the conditions under which and various ways in which Iran as a member of the Gulf sub-complex exploited the Syrian conflict to deeply penetrate the Levant sub-complex.

The Arab uprisings exposed the nascent struggle between conflicting conceptions of Middle East regional order. Prior to the tumultuous events of Arab uprisings, there were two geopolitical camps enmeshed in an struggle to foster cooperation and find answers to crises at the regional level: "a U.S.-dominated coalition regionally led by the main Sunni Arab powers, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and tacitly including Israel, stood for Pax Americana and deepened neoliberalism; and Iran-led 'Resistance Axis' heavily but not exclusively Shia, including Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, stood for statism and anti-imperialism."<sup>341</sup> When analyzing the dynamics of Iran-Turkey relations in light of the aforesaid geopolitical equation, it is evidently clear that on the eve of the Arab uprisings, Tehran and Ankara enjoyed a fairly amicable bilateral relationship albeit the two regional powers harbored two different conceptions of regional order: The Islamic Republic of Iran conceptualized and viewed the Arab uprisings as a harbinger of an "Arab Islamic Awakening" inspired by Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution that replaced a U.S.-backed monarchy with a Muslim theocracy.<sup>342</sup> Turkey saw the events leading to the Arab uprisings as an opportunity to brandish its self-perception of a democratic Muslim country cherishing Western liberal values and export its AKP-style mode of governance to the MENA countries which were ruled by authoritarian leaders. Barring the enduring ideological differences, Turkey and Iran had managed, at least prior to the Arab uprisings, to act pragmatically on the basis of a compartmentalization approach that largely quenched the two sides' desire to indulge in an all-out geopolitical confrontation over regional spoils. Nevertheless, the Syrian civil war which later on evolved into an all-out regional

---

<sup>341</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch. "The Arab Uprisings and the MENA Regional State System", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 11, No. 42, 2014, p. 10.

<sup>342</sup> Robin Pomeroy. "Iran Hopes Gaddafi Domino Will Fall the Right Way", **Reuters**, 25.08.2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-58970320110825>, (26.03.2021).

geopolitical conflict pitted Iran directly against Turkey and the GCC, which saw an opportunity to form an anti-Assad coalition with the US in the background in order to debilitate and potentially destroy the Iran-led Resistance axis.<sup>343</sup> It was against this background that debates over the Turkish model versus the Iranian model as alternative modes of governance and the ability of each of these regional powers to impose its *modus vivendi* on the post-revolutionary Arab states took a pole position in bilateral relations during the initial phases of the Arab uprisings.

In sum, one can argue that at the very beginning of the Arab uprisings, before the popular protests engulfed Syria, much of Iran-Turkey contestations took on a *discursive* articulation of othering, and portraying the counterpart as merely a rival, framed through their competing mode of governance for the region. When the waves of protests reached Syria and the survival of Assad's regime was on the line, the Turkish-Iranian rivalry took on a *securitized* characteristic with both states regarding each other as strategic adversaries in Syria. In this setting, in a major aberration of an erstwhile policy of soft balancing each other, Turkey and Iran became entangled in an intricate process of hard balancing each other through reliance on proxy warfare, a trend which contributed to 'militia-ization' of the Syrian conflict.<sup>344</sup> According to this perspective, the dichotomous Shia-Sunni components of the unfolding proxy warfare in the Levant sub-complex (the locus of the Syrian conflict) contributed to 'sectarian entrapment of Turkey and Iran, albeit all parties to the conflict resorted to the same identity-based narratives as well as the sovereignty-based norms of international law to legitimize their *modus operandi* in Syria.<sup>345</sup> As a consequence of the deepening chasm between Iran and Turkey over regional upheavals related to the Arab uprisings, Iran and Turkey, with Russia in the background, became the main rivals in a proxy war that facilitated their penetration into other's sphere of influence, or into sub-complexes to which they did not traditionally belong. Having said this, what is striking

---

<sup>343</sup> Raymond Hennebusch. "Thinking about the International Factor in the Syrian Crisis", **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Raymond Hennebusch and Adham Saouli (eds), Routledge, 2019, p. 7.

<sup>344</sup> Gülriz Şen. "Dynamics of Estrangement and Realignment in Turkey-Iran Relations in the 2000s: Exploring the US Dimension", **Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order**, Emre Erşen and Seçkin Köstem, Routledge, 2019, pp. 147-166.

<sup>345</sup> Steven Heydemann and Emelie Chace-Donahue. "Sovereignty Versus Sectarianism: Contested Norms and the Logic of Regional Conflict in the Greater Levant", **The Levant: Search for a Regional Order**, In Mustafa Aydin (eds.), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, December 2018, p. 32.

is that the Syrian conflict upended the old alliances and ushered in an era of complex multipolarity in the MERSC. In this setting, as some scholars postulate, the status-quo actors in the greater Levant and the Arab east such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey appeared to defend a Sunni-dominated regional order based on the norm of sovereignty whereas revisionist regional powers like Iran and non-state actors, including Hezbollah and ISIS exploited the norm of sectarianism to upend this order.<sup>346</sup> Hence, the geopolitical and security impacts of the spillover of the Arab uprisings into the Levant and the Gulf sub-complexes foregrounded the issue of regional order, especially when considering that the US policy in the Middle East between 2009 and 2017 distanced itself from the grand strategy of liberal hegemony it had pursued since 1945.

Before we proceed ahead with a thorough examination of the impact of Syrian conflict on the relations between Turkey and Iran and vice-versa, it would be remiss not to take stock of the implications of the gradual decline of U.S. hegemonic influence not just on the Middle East security order but also on the potential variations in role and orientations of Turkey and Iran towards the Arab uprisings.

Time was when Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former National Security Advisor to President Carter, argued that preserving geopolitical dominance over the Middle East is vital to secure U.S. hegemony around the world. In reality, the United States displayed scant interest in international affairs in general and in the Middle East in particular during and after World War I. The Middle East began to fall under the radar of the American policy makers throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, particularly after Jimmy Carter stated that the U.S. had vital security interests in the Middle East for which it was willing to fight as a bulwark against the Soviet expansion in the region at that period of time. In the aftermath of the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971 and given the outcomes of the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973 and ultimately the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States remained as the sole dominant regional and global superpower. The United States' military intervention in the First Gulf War of 1991 to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in the Second Gulf war of 2003 to overthrow Saddam Hussein were seen as epoch-making turning points that consolidated the US hegemony in the Middle East. From a

---

<sup>346</sup> Steven Heydemann and Emelie Chace-Donahue. "Sovereignty Versus Sectarianism: Contested Norms and the Logic of Regional Conflict in the Greater Levant", **The Levant: Search for a Regional Order**, In Mustafa Aydin (eds.), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, December 2018, p. 30.

theoretical perspective, during the 1990s and 2000s, both liberal internationalism and realism co-existed as theoretical frameworks which could explain events in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>347</sup>

From an empirical viewpoint, it was because of the U.S. primacy, albeit in military terms, in the Middle East security complex in this period that weaker regional actors in the Levant and the Gulf sub-complexes had no practical and viable alternative but to bandwagon with and accept the U.S. dominance. But not all actors responded to the American primacy in the same way. The imposition of Western liberal values by military means opened the Pandora's box of anti-Western Islamism as evidenced by the rise of Islamist parties and the resurgence of Sunni insurgency in Iraq between 2004 and 2007 which later on gave rise to the creation of 'al-Qaeda in Iraq', the progenitor of the Islamic State. Still, the U.S. largely maintained its hegemonic presence in the Middle East in congruence with a vengeful Wilsonian ideology that puts a high premium on the spread of human rights through democracy promotion and sees the United States as *primus inter parus* in an anarchic globalized world. In Fareed Zakaria's words, the "formula to explain Bush's foreign policy is simple: Unipolarity + 9/11 + Afghanistan = Unilateralism + Iraq."<sup>348</sup> Under the presidency of Barack Obama, "rightsizing" the American footprint in the MENA region by adherence to reducing material presence and practicing restraint diplomatically marked a Jeffersonian turn in U.S. foreign policy which entailed tremendous security and geopolitical implications for the Middle East security complex.<sup>349</sup> Obama doctrine was partly codified in the 2020 National Security Strategy, "reaffirming the U.S. leadership in a changing world where the American power has been challenged by new actors, especially the emerging countries of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa as 'the new challengers'"<sup>350</sup> The Obama doctrine of "overarching

---

<sup>347</sup> Pietro Marzo and Francesco Cavatorta, An Exceptional Context for a Debate on International Relations? Towards a Synthetic Approach to the Study of the MENA's International Politics, **The Routledge Handbook to the Middle East and North African State and States System**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Jasmine Gani, Routledge, 2020, p. 319.

<sup>348</sup> Fareed Zakaria. **The Post-American World and the Rise of the Rest**, Penguin Books, London, 2008, p. 223.

<sup>349</sup> Marc Lynch. "Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, No. 5, 09.10.2015, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/10/09/o-bama-and-middle-east-rightsizing-u.s.-role-pub-61582>, (28.03.2021)

<sup>350</sup> The White House. "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (NSS), **The White House**, Washington D.C., May 2020. [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf), (28.03.2021).

American retrenchment and accommodation” evinced itself most visibly in the Middle East as there was a shift in U.S. discourse from democratization to security issues such as the surge of terrorism in the region.<sup>351</sup> In 2009, Obama in his Cairo speech had attached a profound importance to normative and ideational values such as the promotion of human rights, liberalization and democratization in U.S. approach towards the MENA region. But barely five years into the Arab uprisings, Obama, in his 21 May 2015 speech, stated that for Washington the war against ISIS, the Iran nuclear deal and the U.S. president’s relations with Israel and the Jewish people had become front and center in U.S. foreign policy.<sup>352</sup> Be it “pragmatic internationalism”, “retrenchment”, “off-shore balancing” or “restraint”, the dominant U.S. grand strategic thinking after the unfolding of the Arab uprisings focused on four priorities: avoidance of deep military commitments in Syria (with an exception in Libya), withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, adoption of appeasement policy towards Iran in the hopes of achieving a nuclear deal, and endorsement of the Arab uprisings.<sup>353</sup>

The logical inference that can be derived from the preceding arguments is two-fold. First, Obama’s pivot away from the Middle East which coincided with the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and its contradictory policies of his administration vis-à-vis the Arab uprisings inculcated the prevailing perception among regional state and non-state actors that the era of *Pax Americana* in the Middle East predicated on order-making interventionism and hegemonic presence is coming to an end. Borrowing one scholar’s words, “as the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya fell and other regimes appeared next in line, ‘analogies were quickly conjured to 1989, when another frozen political space, Eastern Europe, saw one dictatorship after another collapse.’”<sup>354</sup> But

---

<sup>351</sup> Hall Brands. “Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy”, **The Washington Quarterly**, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2016, p. 101., Cihat Battaloglu and Fadi Farasin. “From Democratization to Securitization: Post-Arab Spring Political Order in the Middle East”, **Digest of Middle East Studies (DOMES)**, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2017, p. 314.

<sup>352</sup> The Atlantic. “The Atlantic’s Jeffrey Goldberg’s Interviews President Obama”, **The Atlantic**, 21.05.2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/press-releases/archive/2015/05/president-obama-discusses-israel-iran-isis-with-the-atlantic/394001/>, (29.03.2021).

<sup>353</sup> For more on theoretical aspects of US grand strategy see, Barry Posen and Andrew Ross. “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy”, **International Security**, Vol. 21, No. 3, Winter 1996/97, pp. 5-53., John Ikenberry. “Obama’s Pragmatic Internationalism”, Vol. 9, No. 5, 2014, **The American Interest**, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/04/08/obamas-pragmatic-internationalism/>, (29.03.2021).

<sup>354</sup> Cihat Battaloglu and Fadi Farasin. “From Democratization to Securitization: Post-Arab Spring Political Order in the Middle East”, **Digest of Middle East Studies (DOMES)**, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2017, p. 305.

rather than moving towards adopting an overt interventionist approach to establish a semblance of order on the region, Obama refrained from protecting its aging authoritarian allies. On the one hand, Obama administration along with NATO allies together launched military intervention in Libya based on the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which calls on the international community to protect civilians against acts of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. On the other hand, while the Obama administration's Libyan intervention were seen as a realist and pragmatic decision, the U.S. retreated from military action against the regime of Bashar al Assad regardless of Iranian and Russian support for Damascus and irrespective of the fact that Assad crossed Obama's vaunted "red line" for Syrian regime over the use of chemical weapons.<sup>355</sup>

The contradiction between the democratic norms and values versus strategic and geopolitical interests in general and the discrepancy in U.S. foreign policy regarding the Libyan and Syrian cases in particular became all the more conspicuous when considering that even Obama himself had stated in his September 2013 UN speech that the MENA region remains an integral part of U.S. policy and that the U.S. will continue to lend priority to its military presence there along with its allies. But the ambivalent and incoherent nature of the U.S. policy in the post-2011 geopolitical environment generated conflicting forms of insecurity and threat perceptions among key regional players, namely the U.S. regional allies, in the Middle East security complex, i.e., among Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Israel. For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the Obama administration's deference to the overthrow of Egypt's former president Hosni Mubarak, the U.S. decision to engage Muslim Brotherhood in the MENA political process, the lack of progress in peaceful settlement of Arab-Israeli conflict, and the United States' *retrenchment* from the Gulf sub-complex at a time when Obama was seeking détente with Iran over a nuclear deal were regarded as primary points of regional contestation and geopolitical divergence between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia.<sup>356</sup> In fact, the Arab uprising completely upended the balance of power in the MENA region. Simultaneously, the absence of a dominant or hegemonic

---

<sup>355</sup> Youssef M. Sawani. "The United States and Libya: The Contradictions of Intervention and Disengagement", **International Relations and Diplomacy**, Vol. 2, No. 12, 2014, p. 788.

<sup>356</sup> Ghada Ahmed Abdel Aziz. "The Saudi-US Alliance Challenges and Resilience, 2011:2019", **Review of Economics and Political Science**, 12.12.2019, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/REPS-04-2019-0057/full/html>, (30.03.2021).

power in the Middle East security complex in light of the Obama administration's preference of maintaining a defensive realist approach over pursuance of the grand strategy of liberal hegemony left the American allies in the lurch, further exacerbating the perennial problem of 'security dilemma' at the regional level. Therefore, in the post-2011 geopolitical environment a "new geopolitics of regional power conflict" emerged in the MENA region whereby regional powers had to fend off for themselves for security and/or geopolitical gains or, if possible, shape the regional order in the post-Arab uprisings' era.<sup>357</sup> To put it differently, the absence of a dominant or hegemonic power in the Middle East security complex after the Arab uprisings created a new reality in which regional powers within the MERSC and also states outside the MERSC could penetrate or possibly overlay the MENA region for the purpose of, *inter alia*, influencing and/or managing security orders at the regional level.

The second logical inference that can be derived from the impact of the Obama administration's ambivalent and incoherent policy after the Arab uprising is that the United States' disorderly approach afforded regional and extra regional actors an opportunity to "develop a complex set of shifting tactical alliances with both state and non-state actors in the region."<sup>358</sup> From Hinnebusch's perspective, as the region became entangled in inter-state power struggle, "there were three rival *regional powers*, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, that had enough power resources and enough immunity to the uprisings to be in contention to shape the post-uprisings regional order."<sup>359</sup> If we look at these propositions through the prism of RSC theory—that the number of regional powers determines the polarity of any regional security complex—it is justifiable then to posit that the involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran as members of the Gulf sub-complex, Turkey as an insulator state and Israel as a member of the Levant sub-complex contributed to a perilous polarization of the MERSC and tilted the balance of power in the Middle East in their favor.

To put it another way, from the perspective of RSC theory, the post-2011 geopolitical environment confronted the MERSC with three novel phenomena that

---

<sup>357</sup> Waleed Hazbun. "Regional Powers and The Production of Insecurity in the Middle East", **MENARA**, No. 11, 01.09.2018, p. 5, [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara\\_wp\\_11.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_11.pdf), (30.03.2021).

<sup>358</sup> Waleed Hazbun, p. 9.

<sup>359</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch. "The Arab Uprisings and the MENA Regional State System", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 11, No. 42, 2014, p. 13.

took place all at once: polarization, securitization, and regionalization. As mentioned earlier, the American withdrawal from the region fomented the audacity of the above-mentioned regional powers to penetrate the MERSC by creating networks of *ad hoc* alliances, thereby providing the impetus for deeper polarization of the Middle East. The contention here is that the polarization of the MERSC in the absence of a hegemonic power, which in turn accelerated the competition for hegemony in the Middle East took place at four axis or regional blocs. 1) Iran and the Shia proxies under the so-called “axis of resistance”, 2) Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood axis including Qatar, 3) Saudi Arabia-UAE-Egypt-Bahrain-Jordan axis seeking to maintain the status-quo in the Middle East and contain the hegemonic ambition of non-Arab states, 4) Israel-US and the pro-western axis.

Another important assertion is that three discrete securitization moves adopted by three key main players/axis from among the above cited regional blocs. For example, Saudi Arabia axis except Qatar framed the Muslim Brotherhood as an existential threat, and took ‘securitizing moves’ to justify the use of exceptional measures against Muslim Brotherhood in the post-Mubarak period. The bloody massacres in Rabaa and al-Nahda Square(s) in August 2013 by Egyptian security and military forces as part of a coup allegedly backed by Saudi Arabia and UAE is a clear case of securitization efforts against the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>360</sup> Saudi Arabia, for its part, consistently framed Iran as a source of threat and instability in the Gulf region. While Tehran argued that the main brunt of responsibility for management of order and stability in the Persian Gulf lies on the shoulders of the members of the Gulf sub-complex, Riyadh believes that the U.S. presence is *sine qua non* of any security architecture for the Gulf sub-complex. As a consequence, the signing of nuclear deal between Iran and the United States under the Obama administration in July 2015, when Syria was in the throes of an increasing sectarian war, turned into another source of tension between Washington and Riyadh. Hence, Riyadh used the dichotomous mechanism of *us* versus *them* and contributed to the “othering” of Iran-backed Shiite

---

<sup>360</sup> Nicola Pratt and Dina Rezk. “Securitizing the Muslim Brotherhood: State Violence and Authoritarianism in Egypt after the Arab Spring”, **Security Dialogue**, Vol. 50, No. 3, 2019, pp. 239-256., Patrick Werr, UAE Offers Egypt \$3 billion Support, Saudis \$5 billion, **Reuters**, 09.07.2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-protests-loan/uae-offers-egypt-3billion-support-saudis-5-billion-idUSBRE9680H020130709>, (04.04. 2021).



expansionism, or what has been largely referred to as a ‘Shia Revival’ or the emergence of a ‘Shia Crescent’ in the face of Obama’s appeasement towards Iran.<sup>361</sup>

One should not forget that prior to the ouster of Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi in 2013, Turkey and Saudi Arabia shared similar concerns regarding i.e. realizing their objective of deposing Bashar al Assad and preventing Iran to “position itself as the center of a new Levantine order” through solidifying its Shia expansionism in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon.<sup>362</sup> Therefore, at another level of securitization, wary of Iran’s ambitions in its immediate neighborhood and given that Ankara-Saudi Arabia-Qatar and UAE were bent on toppling Assad, an ally of Iran, the AKP government also illustrated a noticeable level of securitization towards Tehran because of the latter’s direct support of Shia proxies to prop up Assad against the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in the Syrian conflict.<sup>363</sup> It is also worthwhile to note that it was partially because of the deterioration of Turkey’s relations with Iran and Syria following the Arab uprisings that their trilateral “counterterrorism partnership” against the PKK and its affiliates fell apart.<sup>364</sup> At the third level of securitization, it is needless to say that the U.S.-Iran détente over the nuclear deal sent an alarming signal to Israel. The Jewish state has also made strenuous efforts to securitize not just Iranian nuclear energy aspirations but also the threat of Iran’s Shia expansionism in the Middle East given that Tehran has used Syria as the main conduit for sending weapons to Tel Aviv’s arch nemesis, Hezbollah. It was in this geopolitical environment that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated in 2012 that “a nuclear Iran is an existential threat to the state of Israel” and in another speech in 2015 referred to Iran’s nuclear deal as a ‘historic mistake’.<sup>365</sup> It is no surprise that when in May 2018 Trump announced his decision to withdraw from the JCPOA, there were only two prominent states that rushed to applaud the Trump administration: Israel and Saudi Arabia.

---

<sup>361</sup> Alam Saleh and Hendrik Kraetzschmar. “Politicized Identities, Securitized Politics: Sunni-Shi’a Politics in Egypt”, **Middle East Journal**, Vol. 80, No. 4, 2015, p. 558.

<sup>362</sup> Galip Dalay. “Turkey in the Middle East’s New Battle Lines”, **Brookings**, 20.05.2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-middle-east-s-new-battle-lines/>, (04.04.2021).

<sup>363</sup> Tomas Kavalek. “The Catch-22 in Ninevah: The Regional Security Dynamics between Turkey and Iran”, **Middle East Research Institute**, Vol. 3, No. 4, December 2016, pp. 1-15, [http://www.merik.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Policy\\_note\\_vol3.No4\\_.pdf](http://www.merik.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Policy_note_vol3.No4_.pdf), (05.04.2021).

<sup>364</sup> Süleyman Elik. “The Arab Spring and Turkish-Iranian Relations, 2011-2016”, **Turkey’s Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters after the Arab Spring**, Hüseyin Işıksal and Oğuzhan Göksel, Springer, 2018, p. 109.

<sup>365</sup> Simon Mabon. “Muting the Trumpets of Sabotage: Saudi Arabia, the US and the Quest to Securitise Iran”, **British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 45, No. 5, 2018, p. 756.

In addition, care must be taken not to overlook the fact that the Arab uprising had already widened the ideological and geopolitical cleavages among the aforementioned blocs. Of particular note is that Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who had earlier labelled the uprisings as the Islamic Awakening that would topple western puppet leaders, denounced the Syrian unrest as a "pre-planned agenda by Western countries aimed at weakening and destroying Islamic resistance opposed to the Zionist regime (Israel)." As indicated by some scholars, with the unravelling of the Syrian conflict, Iran saw Saudi Arabia and Turkey as working in tandem with the United States to effect regime change against Iran's reliable ally in Damascus.<sup>366</sup> Notwithstanding the lack of U.S. interest in overlaying of the Middle East in the same way his predecessor did, Obama came under harsh criticism for his appeasement of Iran by means of ignoring Iranian regime's human rights violations, lack of support for the 2009 Green Revolution, and working directly to embolden Tehran by not allowing the U.S. alliance with Saudi Arabia, UAE and Israel hinder the attainment of a nuclear deal with Iran. This is why some argue that the Iran nuclear deal in 2015 was the climax of Obama's appeasement policy towards Iran.<sup>367</sup> In Hazbun's words, under President Barak Obama, the U.S. helped to negotiate the P5+1 deal concerning Iran's nuclear program, avoided direct military involvement in Syria and fought in parallel with Iran in the battle against the Islamic state.<sup>368</sup>

It must be borne in mind that although Iran and the P5+1 signed the JCPOA in July 2015, the back-channel talks between Iran and U.S. officials that led to the nuclear deal had begun in 2012 with Oman playing a key role in facilitating détente between the two arch enemies. Therefore, it is not unwise to contend that the simultaneity of the Obama administration's penchant for securing a deal with Iran in the throes of the Arab uprisings as well as its willingness to recalibrate and limit U.S. alliances with major partners such as Saudi Arabia, Israel and the UAE cannot be underestimated. In

---

<sup>366</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry. "Iran and Turkey: Not Quite Enemies but Less Than Friends", **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 38, No. 4, 2017, pp. 980-995.

<sup>367</sup> Alex Titus. "Obama's Doctrine of Appeasement has Finally Come to an End", **The Hill**, 01.10.2018, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/368161-obamas-doctrineofappeasement-in-iran-has-finally-come-to-an-end>, (10.04.2021)., Matthias Küntzel. "Obama's New Iran Policy: Is America Drifting toward Appeasement?", **Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2014, pp. 25-36.

<sup>368</sup> Waleed Hazbun. "Regional Powers and The Production of Insecurity in the Middle East", **MENARA**, No. 11, 01.09.2018, p. 7, [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara\\_wp\\_11.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_11.pdf), (10.04.2021).

other words, in search of a foreign policy legacy, the Obama administration ‘dissociated’ the nuclear deal with Iran from any other thorny issues associated with non-nuclear malign activities of Iran. As indicated by Mark Dubowitz and Annie Fixler, “the nuclear deal did nothing to address the full range of Iran’s illicit activities, including ballistic missile development, support for terrorism, regional destabilization, and human rights abuses.”<sup>369</sup> One can argue that the dominant perception in Obama administration was that resolving the Iranian nuclear question would not only prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear bomb, it would also reduce the likelihood of an Israeli military strike against Iran, ensure the safety of oil flow through the Strait of Hormuz, and reduce the threat perception of regional allies such as Saudi Arabia towards Iran. On the basis of this logic, ‘de-securitizing’ Iran would make it easier for the United States to concentrate more effectively on Obama’s so-called rebalance or “pivot to Asia”. Accordingly, some analysts posit that Obama’s ambivalent and cautious response to the Arab uprising was emblematic of a realist policy aimed at defending key U.S. interests such as oil security, combating terrorism and containing Iran’s geopolitical ascendance and its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the fact of the matter is that although by the time of the spread of Arab uprisings to Syria, the Iranian regime was under UN sanctions, the US-Iran détente over the nuclear deal and the subsequent lifting of sanctions afforded Tehran much greater leeway to increase its geopolitical outreach in the Middle East.

Noticeable in this regard is that the post-2011 geopolitical *zeitgeist* experienced a significant shift in the center of gravity of the MERSC from the Gulf sub-complex to the Maghreb and Levant because of the outburst of the Arab uprisings and the Syrian civil war. In the meantime, Iran’s expanded influence had generated insecurity on the part of its Sunni rivals. Concurrent with Obama’s early diplomatic overtures to Tehran and taking into consideration his disinclination towards military intervention in Syria, together with the withering away of hopes for democratic change in MENA region, the conditions of possibility were provided for the Iranian regime to penetrate unhindered into the Syrian theater beginning from 2012.

---

<sup>369</sup> Mark Dubowitz and Annie Fixler. “The Iran Deal’s Fatal Flaws After One Year: Emboldened Iran and Diminished American Deterrence”, **Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD)**, 14.07.2016, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2016/07/14/the-iran-deals-fatal-flaws-after-one-year-emboldened-iran-and-diminished-american-deterrence/>, (10.04.2021).

Such was the geopolitical and regional context in which Iran benefited from the solidification of the nucleus of the security dilemma in the region to accelerate its Levantine adventurism in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, posing significant challenges for the American leadership and assisting the resurgence of Russian activism in the Middle East security complex.

### **3.4.3. Iran's Syria Strategy and Regional Role**

For one thing, the survival of Assad regime has been a matter of life and death in Iran's geopolitical calculations. Syria represents a Trojan horse for the Iranian regime's resistance to Western interferences in MENA affairs, its revolutionary ambition of crafting an anti-status quo and post-Western regional order. Most importantly, Syria serves as an indispensable pillar of the Islamic Republic's so-called 'Axis of Resistance' against Israel and the West and a vital gateway for extension of its hegemonic influence from Iran to Lebanon and Israel as members of the sub-complex of the Levant. It is important to emphasize that Syrian civil war should not be seen as Iran's first foray into the Levant sub-complex. To be more precise, Tehran's direct military involvement in the Syrian conflict from 2012 onwards can be best described as the apex of Iran's penetration into the Levant sub-complex.

Historically speaking, the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel involving the latter's neighboring Arab states has invariably been viewed as the defining characteristic of the Levant sub-complex. Since the advent of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the theocratic regime's creeping into the Levant and the Gulf sub-complexes increased substantially as Tehran appeared zealously in pursuit of exporting its own version of political Islam based on a Khomeinist ideology of Shia expansionism. Iran's increasing intervention into the Levant, as pointed out by Sanam Vakil, has been aided and abetted by its support for Lebanese Hezbollah, the Assad's regime in Syria and Palestinian groups such as Hamas.<sup>370</sup> After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Iran contributed significantly to the creation of a group of Shia fighters under the banner of Amal movement—an acronym for the Lebanese

---

<sup>370</sup> Sanam Vakil. "Understanding Tehran's Long Game in the Levant", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 15, No. 60, 2018, p. 106.

Resistance Detachments—and later Hezbollah which devoted themselves during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) to contesting the Israeli dominance and duplicating the Iranian Islamic revolution in Lebanon.<sup>371</sup> In Seeberg's opinion, Hezbollah as a significant, if not dominant, organization in Lebanon since the first half of the 1980s, is a "highly cohesive and institutionalized organization, which plays an important role in Lebanese politics, has an advanced and well-functioning network and a very strong military apparatus."<sup>372</sup>

Although Syria and Iran threw their weight behind Hezbollah, one caveat is worth pondering: it appeared that whereas Iran considered its Lebanese proxies as standard-bearer for its grand strategy of Shia expansionism in the MESC, Syria took more of an instrumentalist approach towards Hezbollah in the sense that it could be used as a leverage by Damascus against the U.S. and Israel for the preservation of its security interests.

Nevertheless, just as the American military invasion of Iraq in 2003 enabled Turkey to fill in the security and authority gap in northern Iraq, it also provided the Islamic Republic of Iran with a historic opportunity to extend its geopolitical footprint and thus establish itself as a major external power broker in Iraq. To this aim, Iran apparently pursued a two-prong strategy. On the one hand, Iran endeavored to influence the 2005 and 2010 parliamentary elections as well as the 2009 provincial elections through funding and promoting its preferred candidates. In this context, although Nouri Al Maliki was not considered Tehran's ideal candidate for Iraqi premiership, Maliki's government during his second term served as a pivotal moment in Iranian regime's concerted efforts to unify Shia political allies in Iraq.<sup>373</sup> On the other hand, Iran attempted to provide arms, financial aid and training of Shia militants to stoke sectarian tensions, wield its proxy foothold in Iraq and drive a wedge between Washington and Baghdad, use them as deterrence against U.S. military strikes and exploit their influence to build a strategic corridor linking Iran to Syria and Lebanon

---

<sup>371</sup> Ghaidaa Hetou, **The Syrian Conflict: The Role of Russia, Iran and the US in a Global Crisis**, Routledge, 2019, pp. 67-92.

<sup>372</sup> Peter Seeberg, "Analyzing Security Subcomplexes in a Changing Middle East—the Role of Non-Arab State Actors and Non-State Actors", **Palgrave Communications**, Vol. 2, 2016, p. 6.

<sup>373</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights and Ahmed Ali, "Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-Government Approach", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, No. 11, 26.04.2011, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-influence-iraq-countering-tehrans-whole-government-approach>, (15.04.2021).

via Iraq. According to some accounts, as three main Iran-backed Shia proxy groups gained ground in Iraq—Mehdi Army, Badr Organization and Hashd al Shaabi—the number of Iraqi Security Forces rose from 55 percent Shia to 95 percent Shia.<sup>374</sup>

Keeping this in mind, it is tenable to be also mindful that, in retrospect, two important incidents after the 2003 U.S. intervention of Iraq had set in motion the so-called Shia revival in the form of the Iranian exportation of “non-state Shia proxy model” to project power in the Levant and Gulf sub-complexes.<sup>375</sup>

First, the July 2006 Israeli war in Lebanon had enhanced Iran’s confidence in projecting military and political power by using Lebanese Shia proxy group Hezbollah as it showcased Iranian regime’s ability to effectuate its partnership with Syria and Hezbollah. Second, the January 2009 Israeli war in Gaza against the then Iran-backed Hamas group further galvanized the Iranian regime’s willingness to cement its influence in the Levant, under the aegis of defending the Palestinian cause, and to fuel anti-Israeli and anti-U.S. sentiments across the region. Hezbollah gradually morphed into the most powerful force in Lebanon, more powerful than the state and the army, receiving a huge arsenal of rockets and missiles from Iran, the country which used the militant proxy group as a deterrent against a potential Israeli or American military strike.<sup>376</sup>

Unable to match the American military prowess and procure modern and sophisticated weapons from global powers (due to sanctions) and owing to harsh lessons that Iran had learnt from the costly war it fought with Saddam’s Iraq (1980-1988), the leaders of the Islamic Republic have since the mid-1980s cultivated a strategy of *asymmetrical warfare*. Anchored in a grand strategy of “forward-defense”, Iran’s military strategy of asymmetrical warfare has two core elements and rests on a number of main pillars. *Deterrence* and *denial* constitute the two fundamental elements of this strategy in the sense that they connote Iran’s predominantly defensive

---

<sup>374</sup> Alireza Nader. “Iran’s Role in Iraq: Room for U.S.-Iran Cooperation”, RAND Corporation, 2015, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE151/RAND\\_PE151.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE151/RAND_PE151.pdf), (16.04.2021).

<sup>375</sup> Alex Vatanka. “Iran’s Use of Shi’i Militant Proxies: Ideological and Practical Expediency Versus Uncertain Sustainability”, **Middle East Institute**, 01.06.2018, No 5, [https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Vatanka\\_PolicyPaper.pdf](https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Vatanka_PolicyPaper.pdf), (17.04.2021).

<sup>376</sup> Itamar Rabinovich. “How Iran’s Regional Ambitions Have Developed Since 1979”, **Brookings**, 24.01.2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/24/how-irans-regional-ambitions-have-developed-since-1979/>, (13.04.2021).

nature of its military posture and that Tehran opts for “opacity and ambiguity as force multipliers.”<sup>377</sup> The main pillars of this strategy, as indicated by Bahgat and Ehteshami, include, among other things, naval forces, ballistic missiles, and cyber capabilities.<sup>378</sup> As part of this strategy, the mobilization and formation of “Shia foreign legions” under the banner of ‘proxy warfare’ play an instrumental role in Tehran’s efforts to expand its influence in the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories) as well as in the Gulf sub-complex (i.e. in Iraq) and in Afghanistan.<sup>379</sup>

As explained briefly in the preceding arguments, the wars in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories served as laboratories of proxy warfare for Tehran in order to put to test and operationalize its asymmetric and deterrent strategy in the MERSC. Most Particularly, the Syrian war became a formidable testing ground of an “anarchic proxy warfare” involving a broad network of shifting benefactor-proxy agent relationships, each with conflicting objectives and sometimes mutable affiliations.<sup>380</sup>

Unlike Iran, Turkey lacked previous experience in conducting proxy warfare simply due to its reliance on strong regular army, its access to Western military technology and the traditional value of Turkey for NATO and vice versa. While the overthrow of Mubarak, the Shia uprising in Bahrain and the dire situation in Yemen had created theaters of geopolitical maneuvering for Iran and the ‘Axis of Resistance’, Turkey had, prior to the uprising, tried to position itself as “a balancer between the two rival pre-uprising blocs.”<sup>381</sup> But the worsening of Syrian civil war along with the Kurdish militants’ alliance with Damascus and Tehran’s growing military support of the Assad regime tilted the AKP government’s position squarely towards the Saudi-Qatar-UAE bloc versus Iran-Syria-Hezbollah.

Hence, in the early stages of the Syrian conflict, Saudi Arabia and Qatar provided small arms and light weapons to Syrian rebels via Turkey and Jordan whereas

---

<sup>377</sup> Amin Saikal and David Vestenskov. “Iran’s National Security and Operational Capability”, **Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies**, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2020, p. 21., Shahram Chubin. “Is Iran a Military Threat?”, **Survival**, Vol. 56, No. 2, 2014, p. 78.

<sup>378</sup> Gawdat Bahgat and Anoushiravan Ehteshami. “Iran’s Defense Strategy: The Navy, Ballistic Missiles, and Cyberspace”, **Middle East Policy**, Vol. XXIV, No. 3, 2017, p. 90.

<sup>379</sup> Ali Alfoneh. “Tehran’s Shia Foreign Legions”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 30.01.2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/30/tehran-s-shia-foreign-legions-pub-75387>, (18.04.2021).

<sup>380</sup> Şafak Oğuz and Kadir Ertay Çelik. “Conflict in Syria: Is It A Proxy Warfare?”, **ANKASAM, Uluslararası Kriz ve Siyaset Araştırmaları Dergisi**, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2018, p. 50.

<sup>381</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch. “The Arab Uprisings and the MENA Regional States System”, **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 11, No. 42, 2014, p. 15.

the Turkish government began to enhance its proxy warfare capabilities via formation and training of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a group of the officers from the national Syrian army that broke ranks in 2011. In other words, although Turkey's experience in proxy warfare in the early stages of the Syrian conflict apparently paled beside Iran's longstanding and significant asymmetrical warfare capabilities, Ankara was quick to adapt to the realities on the ground and for that matter helped to create the FSA, now the Syrian National Army (SNA) in Ankara's fight against three enemies: the Iran-Backed Shia militants/Syrian Arab Army, ISIS, and the YPG/PYD forces. Since its inception in the summer of 2011, the FSA, also known as SNA, has remained the main armed proxy group mostly aligned with Turkey. Throughout 2012 and 2013, the FSA led a series of momentous military victories as the Assad regime suffered from shortage of manpower and faced the specter of an inevitable collapse. Many factions under the SNA umbrella have fought alongside the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) in every Turkish military operation in Syria (the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Operation Peace Spring and Operation Spring Shield in Idlib). To be more specific, back in October 2019, more than 44 factions teamed up under the banner of SNA, which comprises of approximately 70,000-90,000 fighters with Ahrar al Sham and Faylaq al-Sham constituting the biggest faction in the National Army.<sup>382</sup> In the words of Fehim Taştekin, Turkey is [as of writing this dissertation] mobilizing fighters from various groups in Idlib to deploy in its military outposts with an objective of forming an 'organized army' and forcing Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the dominant group in the Idlib enclave to disband and joining the Turkey-backed army.<sup>383</sup> Concurrent with the continued pace of militia-ization of the Syrian conflict by the regional and extra-regional powers, the U.S. Defense Department inspector general stated in September 2020 that Turkey sent to Libya at least 5,000 Syrian mercenaries from the Syria's civil war in support of Libya's UN-backed government of Fayeze al-Sarraj.<sup>384</sup>

---

<sup>382</sup> Can Kasapoğlu. "Turkey's Burgeoning Defense Technological and industrial Base and Expeditionary Military Policy", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 22, No. 3, p. 119.

<sup>383</sup> Fehim Taştekin. "Turkey Plays Extra Time in Idlib Game with New 'Army' Plan", *Al Monitor*, 17.04.2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/turkey-syria-russia-idlib-new-army-plan-cleanse-jihadis-hts.html>, (19.04.2021).

<sup>384</sup> Samy Magdy. "US: Turkey-sent Syrian Fighters Generate Backlash in Libya", 02.09.2020, *The Associated Press*, <https://apnews.com/article/middleeastafrika679a6d6fc549bda59f8627d91d9a363c>, (20/04.2021).



According to another report, Russia also recruited Syrian militias to fight for Libya's eastern-based government aligned with warlord Khalifa Haftar.<sup>385</sup> It is also an open secret that Russia has made use of Private Military Companies (PMCs) such as Wagner Group in Ukraine and especially in Syria where the killing of over 200 Wagner personnel near Deir el-Zour in early February shed light on the salience of the role Russian mercenaries play in the Kremlin's foreign policy.<sup>386</sup> As we mentioned previously, Iran, for its part, tried to replicate its prolific experience of proxy warfare in Iraq and Lebanon this time in Syrian civil war by first dispatching in early 2011 a small group of senior officials from the IRGC's Quds Force to Syria to assess the military situation on the ground. In late 2012, the Islamic Republic played an instrumental role in formation of the National Defense Forces (NDF) or *quwat al-difa'a al-watani*, modeled after the Iranian Basij militia, with roughly 10,000 forces allegedly funded and supervised by Iran.<sup>387</sup> In a video circulating on social media a few years ago, the current Minister of Defense of Syria, Ali Abdullah Ayoob, is seen as paying homage to General Qasem Soleimani, the Iranian commander killed by a U.S. air strike at Baghdad airport in January 2020, for designing a plan to retake control of Baba Amr, a suburb of the country's third largest city, Homs, in March 2012. Indeed, for Iran, the fall of Assad's regime would mean an irreparable rupture, if not a total breakup, of the strategic linkage that connects Iran's sphere of influence in the Gulf sub-complex (i.e., Iraq) with its self-proclaimed 'strategic depth' in the Levant sub-complex. To prevent this from happening, the Islamic Republic spearheaded "an extensive, expensive and integrated effort to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power as long as possible while setting conditions to retain its ability to use Syrian territory and assets to pursue its regional interests should Assad fall."<sup>388</sup>

<sup>385</sup> Reuters. "Exclusive: Russian Hiring of Syrians to Fight in Libya Accelerated in May", **Reuters**, 07.06.2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-syria-russia-exclusive-idUSKBN23E06H>, (21.04.2021).

<sup>386</sup> Sergey Sukhankin. "'Continuing War by Other Means': the Case of Wagner, Russia's Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East, Russia in the Middle East, Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank, **The Jamestown Foundation**, 13.07.2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-war-by-other-means-the-case-of-wagner-russias-premier-private-military-company-in-the-middle-east/>, (21.04.2021).

<sup>387</sup> Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci. "Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict", **Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)**, 01.08.2016, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/understanding-irans-role-syrian-conflict>, (21.04.2021).

<sup>388</sup> Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer. "Iranian Military Strategy in Syria", **Institute for the Study of War**, 01.05.2013, p. 2. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>, (21.04.2021).

Between 2011 and early 2015, as the situation on the ground deteriorated, Iran devised a six-pronged strategy.

First, Qasem Soleimani, the main architect of Iran's regional expansionism doctrine, advised Assad forces to focus on suppressing the unrests and stabilizing the situation in the southern and western fronts, which were essential to the regime's survival.

Second, Iran dispatched members of its Law Enforcement Force, which had gained experience for its role in government crackdown on protesters during Iran's June 2009 election, as well as IRGC Ground Forces to provide logistical and intelligence support to Damascus and to help the Assad regime in suppressing the Syrian people.<sup>389</sup> It was during this period that the IRGC's Quds Force embarked on a robust reorganization of Syria's various militia forces into a new 50,000-strong unit known as NDF.

Third, using Iraqi airspace for shipment of weapons and ammunitions to Damascus in the wake of widening rifts between Iran and Turkey and the 2011 withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, Tehran found greater leeway to continue to resupply both Assad regime and its own proxies. In another major development, Iran accelerated Lebanese Hezbollah's involvement in Syria as evidenced by Hezbollah's role in February 2013 in launching a ground offensive against rebel-held territories near al-Qusayr. Simultaneously, Iraqi Shia militant groups such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Badr Organization and Kata'ib Hezbollah confirmed their involvement by publishing videos and photographs.<sup>390</sup>

Fourth, just as the United States, Russia, Gulf states and Syria's neighbors such as Turkey and Iraq agreed to partake in Geneva talks over a transitional governing authority, Iran was excluded from the peace talks. As a consequence, Iran's former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif kickstarted a diplomatic campaign aimed at criticizing the U.S. policies and the Sunni involvements while rejecting Western demands for Assad to step down.

---

<sup>389</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). "Tehran's Strategic Intent", **Iran's Network of Influence in the Middle East**, Routledge, 2020, pp. 11-38, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-03-ch-1-tehrans-strategic-intent>.

<sup>390</sup> Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer. "Iranian Military Strategy in Syria", **Institute for the Study of War**, 01.05.2013, p. 2. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>, (21.06.2021).

Fifth, with no diplomatic openings in sight, the restoration of government control became an indispensable component of the IRGC's Quds Force strategy, beginning from the re-capturing control of the strategic city of al Qusayr in June 2013.<sup>391</sup> Nevertheless, these piecemeal military victories were followed by the rise of ISIS and the fall of Mosul a year later in June 2014 when it became increasingly apparent that the incremental gains by Syrian rebels, if not interrupted, would ultimately interdict the supply routes for Iran-backed forces and that rebel capture of the Syrian airfields would hit the final nail in the coffin of IRGC's Quds Force strategy. Therefore, Iran embarked on recruiting a large number of Afghan refugees and migrants living in Iran known as Fatemiyoun Division as well as Pakistani Shia proxies under the banner of Zainabiyoun Bridage, many of whom were poorly trained and thus suffered heavy casualties on the Syrian battlefields. In a remarkable if little-noticed development between 2014 and early 2016, the news of growing war casualties among Iranian generals and Iran-backed proxy groups came to light. For example, in June 2015, the official IRNA news agency reported that at least 400 Iranian and Afghan volunteers had been killed since 2011. Hence, in the face of growing public discontent about the money and manpower that Iranian regime was frittering away, Tehran resorted to shift the public perceptions by emphasizing on the need for protecting Shia shrines at all costs, maintaining Iranian strategic depth and extending the Shia footprint as a means to 'manufacture consent' at the domestic level. It must be borne in mind that along the very same rationale, Ali Akbar Velayati, an advisor of Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, stated in March 2013 that "Syria is the golden ring of resistance against Israel and if it weren't for Syria's active government the country would become like Qatar or Kuwait. Iran is not prepared to lose this golden counterweight. Similarly, Mehdi Taeb, a senior Iranian cleric, sought to justify Iranian presence in the Levant by saying that "Syria is the 35<sup>th</sup> province [of Iran] and a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and seeks to take over Syria or [Iran's] Khuzestan, the priority lies in maintaining Syria, because if we maintain Syria, we can take back Khuzestan. However, if we lose Syria, we won't be able to hold Tehran."<sup>392</sup>

<sup>391</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies, pp. 11-38.

<sup>392</sup> The National Council of Resistance of Iran. "Khamenei's Crony: If Syria, the 35<sup>th</sup> Province of Iran Falls, Tehran Falls", **The National Council of Resistance of Iran**, 17.02.2013, <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/ncr-statements/terrorism-fundamentalism/khamenei-s-crony-if-syria-the-35th-province-of-iran-falls-tehran-falls/>, (28.04.2021).

Such discursive practices of Iranian officials apparently aimed at justifying Iran's growing sacrifices in Syria for domestic audience and vindicating Iranian losses by drawing public attentions to the rise of ISIS as an existential threat to Iran's security and territorial integrity.

Sixth, it appeared in 2015 that Assad's strategy of keeping Syrian Arab Army units in "every corner...north, south, east, west and between" was not working because not only was the Syrian army militarily overstretched and highly disorganized, the regime outposts were regularly overrun in areas such as Raqqa and Hasakah in late summer 2014 and in Idlib in 2014 and 2015.<sup>393</sup> As Idlib fell to the rebel forces and Palmyra to the Islamic State, the opposition forces were gaining the upper-hand in terms of the swathes of territory that came under their control so much so that by August 2015, only about one-sixth of territories were under the control of Assad's forces.<sup>394</sup> On the defensive, IRGC-Quds Force's ex-commander Soleimani reportedly flew in July 2015 to Moscow and met with President Putin to negotiate joint military intervention in the Syrian conflict as the Syrian regime and Iran-backed militias were suffering gravely from a lack of combat air support, etc. Two months after the reported meeting, Russia launched its airstrikes in Syria and by mid-April, the tide of war began to turn in Assad's favor.

We will thoroughly delve into the various dynamics of Iran-Russia relations in the context of the Syrian crisis but suffice it to say that the Russian intervention in Syria boosted Damascus-Hezbollah-Tehran alliance and, more importantly, it was seen as a prelude to the transformation of the Middle East security complex into a multi-polar area of competition between regional and great powers altogether.

In this deeply polarized and highly volatile geostrategic environment, Iran provided diverse military and financial support to its militant clients or proxies in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Palestine. With the fall of Yemen's capital Sanaa under the control of Shia Houthi militia in 2014, Iranian officials began

---

<sup>393</sup> Gregory Waters. "The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth", **Middle East Institute**, 18.07.2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/lion-and-eagle-syrian-arab-armys-destruction-and-rebirth>, (28.04.2021).

<sup>394</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). "Tehran's Strategic Intent", **Iran's Network of Influence in the Middle East**, Routledge, 2020, pp. 11-38, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-03-ch-1-tehrans-strategic-intent>, (29.05.2021).

to take pride in their influence in the MENA region as one member of parliament proclaimed that Iran now rules in four Arab capitals – the three others being Beirut, Baghdad and Damascus.<sup>395</sup> In another controversial reference to Iran's expanding regional clout, former Iranian Minister of Intelligence Ali Younesi stated that “all of Middle East is Iranian”, vowing that Tehran would confront the threats of “Islamic extremism, takfirism, atheism, and the domination of neo-Ottomanism, and Wahhabism.”<sup>396</sup> These iterations evoked fears and concerns among regional powers that, from the perspective of securitization theory, facilitated the ‘purchase’ of a securitization of Iran in Arab countries and further augmented the threat perceptions of the Gulf states towards a growing Iranian ‘encrescentment’.<sup>397</sup> Turkey's Erdogan, for his part, accused Tehran of seeking to dominate the Middle East and called for cessation of Iranian “annoying” and “intolerable” policies in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.<sup>398</sup> Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia began to blame Iran's support for the Houthis and in March 2015 began to assemble an international coalition for the purpose of launching a military offensive aimed at restoring Mansour Hadi' rule and forcing Iran-backed Houthis out of the capital and other important cities in Yemen. In the wake of attacks against the Saudi Embassy in Tehran and the consulate in Mashhad in protest of the execution of the prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al Nimr in Saudi Arabia, Riyadh and Tehran broke off all diplomatic and trade ties and Bahrain also severed diplomatic ties with Iran.

It is imperative to be mindful that Iran's and Saudi Arabia's proxy war was not confined to only Syria. The two key members of the Persian Gulf security sub-complex have been at geopolitical loggerheads with each other and have backed up opposing parties in the conflicts in Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen and Lebanon. For example, the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran heated up in Lebanon in November 2017

---

<sup>395</sup> Samia Nakoul. “Iran Expands Regional ‘Empire’ Ahead of Nuclear Deal”, Reuters, 23.03.2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-iran-region-insight-idUSKBN0MJ1G520150323>, (29.04.2021).

<sup>396</sup> Mamoon Alabbasi. “Iran Continues to Boast of its Regional Reach”, **Middle East Eye**, 13.03.2015, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/irancontinuesboastitsregionalreach>, (29.04.2021).

<sup>397</sup> Philip Gater-Smith. “Asia and the Saudi-Iranian “Cold War”: the Desirability of Non-Alignment, the Prospects for Détente, and the Chances of an Asian Peace Initiative”, **Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 14, No.2, p. 162.

<sup>398</sup> Humeyra Pamuk. “Turkey's Erdogan Says Can't Tolerate Iran's Bid to Dominate Middle East”, **Reuters**, 26.03.2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-turkey-idUSKBN0MM2N820150326>, (29.04.2021)

when Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri abruptly resigned during a visit to Saudi Arabia, a surprising decision which “Iran saw as a premeditated attempt by Saudi Arabia’s new crown Prince Salman to weaken Hezbollah in Lebanon.”<sup>399</sup> In light of the growing geopolitical proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia in both Gulf and Levant sub-complexes, Riyadh launched a diplomatic effort that resulted in designation of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization by most of the twenty-two members of the Arab League.<sup>400</sup> As previously mentioned, it is widely argued that one of the main root causes of Saudi-Iranian antagonism, notwithstanding the ideological and sectarian differences, stems from the Obama administration’s reluctance to conduct a Libyan-style military intervention in Syria, his appeasement policy towards the Islamic Republic in the hopes of securing a nuclear deal and the alleged Obama administration officials’ leniency towards Hezbollah in U.S. counterterrorism policy. We thoroughly examined the Obama’s Syria policy, but in in so far as Obama’s Iran policy is concerned, the widespread assumption among the main regional U.S. allies is that the signing of JCPOA and the subsequent payment of \$1.8 billion in cash to the Iranian regime helped Tehran to “create hell in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iraq.”<sup>401</sup>

As regards Obama’s approach towards Hezbollah, an expose in *Politico Magazine* revealed that the Obama administration allegedly ran roughshod over an ambitious law enforcement campaign targeting drug trafficking and money-laundering activities by Hezbollah simply because doing otherwise would nip in the bud any prospect of achieving a nuclear deal with Iran.<sup>402</sup> In light of the aforesaid factors, the contention here is that the American retreat, as perceived by the Gulf states in general and Saudi Arabia in particular, raised cogent doubts about the willingness and the ability of the U.S.—traditionally their defense provider—to deliver. Hence, the

---

<sup>399</sup> Jianwei Han and Hassan Hakimian. “The Regional Security Complex in the Persian Gulf: The Contours of Iran’s GCC Policy”, *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2019, p. 494.

<sup>400</sup> Zaid Sabah and Lin Noueihed. “Arab League Condemns Iran, Calls Hezbollah a Terrorist Group”, **Bloomberg**, 19.11.2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-11-19/arab-league-labels-lebanon-s-hezbollah-a-terrorist-organization-ja77de7b>, (20.04.2021).

<sup>401</sup> Aaron Blake. “As Trump Claims a Win on Iran, He Accuses Obama of Funding its Attacks”, **The Washington Post**, 08.012020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/0-1/08/trump-claims-win-iran-he-accuses-obama-funding-its-attacks/>, (01.05.2021).

<sup>402</sup> Josh Meyer. “The Secret Backstory of How Obama Let Hezbollah Off the Hook”, **Politico**, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2017/obamahezbollahdrugtraffickinginvestigation/>, (01.05.2021).

vacuum of power as a consequence of U.S. retrenchment and the rise of Iran precipitated the emergence of new regional alliances and the arrival on the scene of regional and global actors committed to challenging Pax Americana as well as the formation of the so-called ‘Shia Crescent’. The Syrian civil war is the clearest manifestation of the gravest security and geopolitical challenges the Middle East security complex has faced ever since the Arab uprisings. The Syrian conflict is the ultimate incubator of sectarianism as well as the greatest theater of proxy war that has aggravated the potential for conflict contagion in the broader Middle East.

Two caveats are in order here. First, from an empirical viewpoint, mention must be made that the Syrian war has been identified as a war which permeated into the broader Levant as well as Gulf security sub-complexes. This “spillover or neighborhood effect” did not occur merely because it has pitted regional powers against each other in their bid for regional hegemony as a consequence of the Syrian conflict.<sup>403</sup> It also happened because the unprecedented proliferation of proxy warfare in the Middle East security complex, i.e. Iran’s *modus operandi* in supporting non-state actors in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, has also led other actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabi and the UAE to duplicate similar tactic in order to stave off potential threats to their national and geopolitical security interests. These *negative externalities* strike at the heart of the power-security dilemma, which is itself the key statement of the security *problematique* under anarchy. Most importantly, however, the spillover or neighborhood effects of a particular geopolitical contest such as that of Syrian war beg the question of whether we have been witnessing a tectonic change of the regional order in MENA region. We will analyze the implication of the Syrian conflict on the Middle East security order through a synthesis of RSC theory and the Regional Powers and Security Framework in the next chapter but it is timely to mention that the issue of conflict contagion or spillover, as seen through the prism of the RSC theory, point to a thought-provoking theoretical dilemma. We must first bear in mind that Buzan and Wæver defined security complexes as subsystems—miniature anarchies—in the own right.<sup>404</sup> Borrowing this caveat, when we apply this theoretical

---

<sup>403</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 49.

<sup>404</sup> Barry Buzan. **People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era**, ECPR Press, 2016, p. 173.

precept into the Middle East security complex and compare and contrast it with the *new realities* in the MERSC, an important question arises as to what extent and in what specific ways the Syrian conflict may have contributed to the growing spillover or neighborhood effects of such transnational war. Put differently, given the transnational nature and contagion effects of the Syrian conflict, is it justifiable to update the concept of spillover or neighborhood effect as propounded by the RSC theory and in so doing contest the rigid and fixed typology of MENA states as fitting into a single regional sub-complex? This question is of particular importance when we consider four oft-ignored developments at both regional and systemic levels.

First, as previously mentioned, the post-2011 geopolitical environment has witnessed the phenomena of American retrenchment in the MERSC. The claim is that the United States have had very few options left, at least under the former Trump administration, to actively influence and shape the outcome of the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen because the proxies Obama had employed were unable to hold their ground against the Russian and Iranian penetrations of the Middle East security sub-complexes.<sup>405</sup> Of course, in a major shift from Obama's policy of appeasement toward Iran, the Trump administration tried to create a particular type of *regional ordering* with an objective of re-securitizing the Iranian regime and compelling it to change its behavior by dint of Maximum Pressure doctrine.<sup>406</sup> Although the Maximum Pressure campaign has deprived Iran of much-needed funds and resources to pursue its nuclear, ballistic missiles, and regional activities in the MERSC, Tehran continues to retain a semblance of military overlay in the Levant and the Persian Gulf sub-complexes mainly through its proxies.<sup>407</sup>

Second, as alluded to earlier, the Syrian conflict instantiated a noticeable shift in the center of gravity of the MENA region from the Maghreb sub-complex to the Levant and the Persian Gulf-sub complexes as the main locus of geopolitical transformation. In this unstable geopolitical environment, the American retreat created

---

<sup>405</sup> Andreas Krieg. "Trump and the Middle East, 'Barking Dogs Seldom Bite'", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 19, No. 3, 10.07.2017, p. 140.

<sup>406</sup> Hossein Aghaie Joobani and Mohammadhossein Daheshvar. "Deciphering Trump's "Maximum Pressure" Policy: The Enduring Challenge of Containing Iran", **New Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2020, pp. 22-44.

<sup>407</sup> Amy Teibel. "Iran's Rouhani Says U.S. Sanctions Cost Country \$200 Billion", **Bloomberg**, 31.12.2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-12-31/iran-s-rouhani-says-u-s-sanctions-cost-country-200-billion> , (05.01.2021).



a dangerous security vacuum and led main regional powers as well as great powers such as Russia to develop a complex set of shifting tactical alliances with both state and non-state actors in the region to fill in the purported security gap. For example, Iran, Turkey and Russia, as members of the Astana Peace Process, penetrated into the Levant sub-complex with Turkey practically consolidating its role as a major pole in the Levant instead of merely an *insulator* as traditionally defined by the RSC theory. In a similar vein, Iran as a traditional member of the Persian Gulf sub-complex asserted itself deeply into the Levant sub-complex against the backdrop of a brewing Iranian-Saudi bipolarity. Viewed by the RSC theory as a dominant ‘great power’ in the post-Soviet space, including Central Asia and the Caucasus, Russia has steadily increased its foothold in the MENA region since the early 2000s. Absent a dominant or hegemonic power with order-making capabilities, Russia seized the unique opportunity provided by the Syrian conflict to introduce itself as a major pole capable of producing a mode of conflict management exclusive of the United States within the Levant sub-complex. For this to happen, Moscow, beyond the immediate priority of propping up Assad’s regime, needed the cooperation of Iran and Turkey. One must note that the Syrian campaign, both military-wise and under the Astana Peace Process, was not aimed at dislodging the United States from the Middle East but rather to get the U.S. recognition of Russia as a “co-equal partner” in a multipolar world.<sup>408</sup> The Syrian conflict can be seen as a geopolitical launching pad for Moscow’s spectacular return to the Middle East as an external penetrating great power, challenging the U.S.-led liberal hegemonic system in order to demonstrate that “there can be order without hegemony”.<sup>409</sup>

Third, the Syrian conflict also enabled Iran’s and Turkey’s deeper penetration into the Levant sub-complex with conspicuous spillover effects into the Gulf sub-complex and even the Maghreb. Although the center of gravity of the MENA region initially moved from the Maghreb and the Persian Gulf sub-complexes to the sub-complex of Levant, the relative efficacy of the Astana Peace Process under Turkey-Iran-Russia tactical partnership afforded each of the Levantine penetrating powers to maximize their influence in another sub-complex to which they did not traditionally

---

<sup>408</sup> Dmitri Trenin. “What Is Russia Up to in the Middle East”, **Polity Press**, 2018, p. 63.

<sup>409</sup> Richard Sakwa, **Russia against the Rest: The Post-War Crisis of World Order**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 129.

belong. For example, the possibility of Libya, a member of the Maghreb sub-complex, turning into a new field of cooperation between Turkey and Russia analogous to their partnership over the Syrian conflict manifested itself as Ankara and Moscow as the two main power brokers of the Libyan war reached an agreement on ceasefire, the result of diplomatic efforts in which the US played a key role.<sup>410</sup> In another example, Yemen, as a country adjacent to Saudi Arabia as a member of the Persian Gulf sub-complex, did not constitute any significant or core security interest for Tehran in the first place. Nevertheless, geopolitically emboldened Iran took advantage of Yemen's instability in order to penetrate deeper into the Persian Gulf sub-complex and thereby acquire an additional leverage against Saudi Arabia and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council via its Zaydi Shia movement known as the "Houthis" (Ansar Allah). These examples indicate that the Levant sub-complex has exhibited an extraordinary potential to influence security dynamics in the Gulf sub-complex and the Maghreb because of, *inter alia*, the perception of American retrenchment from the Middle East, the penetration of both regional and extra-regional powers into the sub-complexes they do not belong, as well as the proliferation of proxy warfare. A similar inference can be made regarding the unprecedented capacity of the Gulf sub-complex to shape security and geopolitical power dynamics in the Levant and Maghreb sub-complexes. In the words of Santini, this capacity has drawn regional non-Arab players (Turkey) and international powers (Russia, the U.S. and several European countries) into regional proxy wars, most notably in Syria, but also in Libya and Yemen.<sup>411</sup>

Fourth, in another example that testifies, in part, to the naked exposure of one regional security complexes to internal transformations (changing patterns of enmity and amity among actors, balance of power and polarity) occurring in another regional security complex, one can point to Turkey's and Russia's efforts to broker a ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. In this conflict, Iran also strove to play the role of a mediator due to its proximity to the zone of conflict between Yerevan and Baku, via introducing a "peace initiative" to resolve

---

<sup>410</sup> Reuters. "Turkish, Russian Officials Nearing Deal on Libya Ceasefire, Political Process – Minister", Reuters, 16.09.2020, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-libya-security-turkey-russia-idUKKBN2673FR>, (06.05.2021).

<sup>411</sup> Ruth Hanau Santini. "A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Security Complex Theory Revisited", **The International Spectator**, Vol. 52, No. 4, 2017. P. 104.

the tensions which cut little ice with Russia and Turkey.<sup>412</sup> Notwithstanding Iran's botched diplomatic efforts, the fact remains that Turkey, albeit being a major pole in the Levant sub-complex, also made concrete military and diplomatic efforts to assert itself as a powerbroker in the post-Soviet security complex (including the Caucasus and Central Asia).

What can be culled from the preceding arguments is that this study finds it imperative in both theoretical and empirical terms to revisit the concept of *spillover or neighboring effects* as well as the fixed designation or categorization of a specific Middle Eastern states as belonging to a particular regional sub-complex as propounded by the practitioners of RSC theory. One of the findings of this research is therefore that based on the empirical evidences provided above regarding 1) Turkey becoming a major pole in the Levant as a consequence of its military intervention in the Syrian conflict and a powerbroker in the Maghreb, 2) Iran, traditionally a member of the Persian Gulf sub-complex, also becoming a penetrating power in the Levant due to its overlaying of the Syrian conflict and its penetration into Lebanon 3) the changing nature of the role of Russia as an external great power introducing itself into the Middle East security complex by exploiting the Syrian conflict and crafting a tactical partnership with Turkey and Iran under the Astana Peace Process, it is not inadmissible to contest the rigid and fixed typology of Middle East and North African states as fitting into a single regional sub-complex.

Instead, the assertion here is that one can use the term '*membership overlapping*' for a more accurate clarification and clearer understanding of the concept of membership of MENA states in multiple regional security sub-complexes in the Middle East. This classification is analogous but not identical to Lake and Morgan's concept of 'overlapping regions', in which "membership of a particular region is not exclusive to the geographical members of that region, with the immediate consequence of counting external great powers as members of distant regions because they have enough capabilities to project power and influence".<sup>413</sup> One of the reasons for using

---

<sup>412</sup> IRNA. "Iran's Initiative Can Help End Karabakh Conflict: Deputy FM", **Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)**, 01.11.2020, <https://en.irna.ir/news/84096019/Iran-s-initiative-can-help-end-Karabakh-conflict-Deputy-FM>, (07.05.2021).

<sup>413</sup> David Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997., Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi. **Confrontational and**

this term pertains to the fact that the state of fragmented anarchy and the territorial fragmentation has prevailed in the MENA region as a result of civil wars or state collapse since the 2011 Arab uprisings. These dynamics have generated two important phenomena that further validate the argument regarding the overlapping of the membership of a particular state from a certain security sub-complex of the Middle East with another state in a different sub-complex.

The first phenomenon relates to the earlier contestation about the fact that Syrian conflict further aggravated the condition of fragmented anarchy in the region and consequently the Middle East as “a penetrated system, one subject to an exceptional level of external intervention”, became a magnet for great geopolitical rivalry and rampant penetration of (external) actors within and outside the Middle East security complexes.<sup>414</sup> In this context, Iran can be simultaneously a member of the Persian Gulf sub-complex and a member (pole) in the Levant because of, *inter alia*, its Syrian military campaign. Following this line of thought, Turkey, as discussed earlier, may have not abjured its role as an insulator in toto, but Ankara’s multiple military interventions in the Syrian conflict and in Iraq and Libya qualifies Turkey, on the basis of the RSC theory, as a major pole in the Middle East security complex.

The second oft-ignored phenomenon is that the current Middle East is experiencing the proliferation of failing and failed states and the rise of non-state actors all at once. Borrowing Garfinkle’s words, “four Arab countries no longer exist as states for practical purposes—Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya—and this has happened over the course of just a few years.”<sup>415</sup> As another scholar suggests, it appears that in these failed or failing states, trans-state movements have gained exceptional state-like features, i.e. Hezbollah, Democratic Union Party/People’s Protection Units and the Islamic State whose aim is to re-make state boundaries and strengthen alternative identities.<sup>416</sup> In this context, one can specifically point to the Islamic State’s declaration

---

**Cooperative Regional Orders: Managing Regional Security in World Politics**, Routledge, 2020, p. 23.

<sup>414</sup> Carl Brown. **International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game**, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984.

<sup>415</sup> Adam Garfinkle. “The Geopolitical Frame in the Contemporary Middle East”, **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2015, p. 534.

<sup>416</sup> Raymond Hennebusch. “Thinking about the International Factor in the Syrian Crisis”, **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Raymond Hennebusch and Adham Saouli (eds), Routledge, 2019, p. 12.

of a caliphate in June 2014, stretching from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala near Iraq's eastern border with Iran, as a stellar example of the extent to which small "non-state" actors such as ISIS could pose an existential threat to established states and challenge the (post-)Westphalian order.<sup>417</sup> When the militants of ISIS bulldozed the border between Iraq and Syria and claimed the end of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the essential structure of the Levant and the Persian Gulf sub-complexes apparently underwent an abrupt change. Seen through the prism of RSC theory, the dismantling of the borderlands of Syria and Iraq constituted a colossal change in *boundaries* as a key variable affecting the essential structure of a regional security complex, that is the MERSC. Although the Islamic State's attempt to erase the borderlands of Iraq and Syria was short-lived, the security and geopolitical implications of this development which can be analyzed in light of "the growing pressure on borders since the Arab uprisings" were long-standing.<sup>418</sup> Bearing in mind the import of changes in boundaries, polarity and the balance of power as variables determining the various dynamics within regional security complexes, it is fundamentally important to attend to factors that, in the case of the post-ISIS security environment, contribute to the increase in the likelihood of cross-border contagion or spillover effects in a particular regional security sub-complex.

In this context, Emel Parlar Dal spells out *seven factors* or constraints that significantly increase the likelihood of contagion/spillover. These seven factors are (1) the proximity of nearby conflicts, (2) the existence of a common border and the length of the border shared with the conflict neighbor, (3) the existence of transnational ethnic ties to the neighboring conflict population, (4) influx of refugees from a conflict neighbor, (5) the severity of the neighboring conflict, (6) the nature of the neighboring conflict, and (7) the size of the neighboring country experiencing conflict.<sup>419</sup> By examining the conflict spillover cases of ISIS threat and the rise of PYD-YPG/PKK,

---

<sup>417</sup> Ali Nehme Hamdan. "Breaker of Barriers? Notes on the Geopolitics of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham", **Geopolitics**, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2016, p. 612.

<sup>418</sup> Raffaella A. Del Sarto. "Contentious Borders in the Middle East and North Africa: Context and Concepts", **International Affairs**, Vol. 93, No. 4, 2017, p. 783.

<sup>419</sup> Emel Parlar Dal. "Impact of the Transnationalization of the Syrian Civil War on Turkey: Conflict Spillover Cases of ISIS and PYD-YPG/PKK", **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, Vol. 29, No. 4, 2017, p. 1403.

the author explains how Turkey was critically affected by the conflict spillover effects of the Syrian civil war.

Following Parlar Dal's line of thought, a somewhat similar argument can be made about the Islamic Republic's fear of ISIS advances to the border areas in western Iran and the terrorist group's avowed aim of annihilation of Shiites and partition of Iraq, which ultimately forced Tehran to send 100 IRGC's Quds Force members to Iraq in mid-June 2014 and further intensify its level of military presence in Syria.<sup>420</sup> The two examples clearly indicate that the Syrian conflict not only served as a primary source and a main generator of *spillover (contagion) or neighboring effects* in the MERSC but also, given the import of the above-cited seven factors, it also contributed to the emergence of what can be labeled as *inter-subcomplex interconnectivity* within the Middle East security complex. Inter-subcomplex interconnectivity can thus be defined as an acute condition of anarchy under which the security dynamics and developments within and across the various sub-complexes within a particular complex become heavily interconnected as a corollary of the changes in the essential structure of a particular complex. Following this logic, in the Middle East, we are witnessing an acute condition of anarchy under which the security and geopolitical dynamics within the sub-complexes of the Levant and the Persian Gulf and to a lesser extent the Maghreb become inextricably interconnected not merely because the security interdependence is more intense among the units inside such sub-complexes but primarily because factors such as overlaying and/or penetration of extra-regional actors, internal transformations and external transformations within such sub-complexes have rendered these dynamics as such.<sup>421</sup>

Having said this, it is important to note that as Buzan explains, minor adjustments to the existing outer boundary of a specific regional security complex may not affect the essential structure of that particular RSC and for that matter these minor changes may not be counted as an external transformation in a true sense of the word. Nevertheless, when we examine the *new realities* of the Middle East in view of Buzan's assertion, one can plausibly argue that although the main regional powers

---

<sup>420</sup> Özden Zeynep Oktav. "Understanding Iran's Approach to Violent Non-State Actors: The ISIS and YPG Cases", **Violent Non-State Actors and the Syrian Civil War**, Özden Zeynep Oktav, Emel Parlar Dal and Ali Murat Kursun, Springer International Publishing, 2018, pp. 201-203.

<sup>421</sup> It is important to note that on the basis of RSC theory if a security complex's structure/boundary changes—enlarges or narrows—external transformation occurs.

such as Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as outside powers such as Russia put a heavy premium on “upholding of some kind of overarching territorial status quo”, the Middle East security complex has encountered the most dangerous phase of border pressure as a consequence of the Syrian conflict.<sup>422</sup> For example, in the words of one scholar, the territorial contours of Lebanon have started to evaporate under the pressure of the Syrian conflict as a de-facto zone of Hezbollah and pro-Assad militia has emerged between East and West of the Lebanese-Syrian border.<sup>423</sup> Moreover, the cross-border contagion and spillover of the Syrian conflict have seriously threatened the political cohesion of Lebanon especially after the Beirut port explosion in August 2010, an incident which laid bare the country’s problem of state failure and its uncertain future. In another example, the territorial contours of the borderlands of Iraq and Syria remains blurry chiefly because the Bukamal-Qa’im border area has turned into a theater for geopolitical rivalries. The contentious area which has long been a vital border crossing for jihadi militants has become heavily militarized, providing a conduit for pro-Iranian militias moving between Iraq (a member of the Persian Gulf sub-complex) and Syria in the Levant. As indicated by Hasan and Khaddour, the border area is so porous and contentious that “rather than merely denoting the line between two sovereign countries, it acts more as a hub for the overlapping authorities of Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus.”<sup>424</sup>

With the rise of highly active, often interventionist regional powers in the Middle East, the U.S. and Europe can no longer expect Middle East states to acquiesce to regional order imposed or designed from the outside. At the same time, no regional state has the capacity or recognized regional authority to define or take leadership in the establishment of such an order. The U.S., EU, Russia, China and responsible regional and international organizations need to begin to focus on attempting to

---

<sup>422</sup> Louise Fawcett. “States and Sovereignty in the Middle East: Myths and Realities”, **International Affairs**, Vol. 93, No. 4, 2017, p. 807.

<sup>423</sup> Volker Perthes. “The Dynamics of Disorder: Power Shifts and Geopolitics in The Middle East”, **What’s Next – Essays on Geopolitics that Matter**, World Economic Forum, November 2013, pp. 18-25.

<sup>424</sup> Harith Hasan and Kheder Khaddouri. “The Transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian Border: From a National to a Regional Frontier”, **Carnegie Middle East Center**, 31.03.2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/31/transformation-of-iraqi-syrian-border-from-national-to-regional-frontier-pub-81396>, (10.05.2021).

counter “the negative interdependence of security fears, conflict, and sectarian violence” that has come to dominate regional politics in the Middle East.<sup>425</sup>

### 3.5. IRAN-RUSSIA RELATIONS: TOWARDS A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP OR PATRON-CLIENT SYNERGY?

The Russo-Iranian relationship has reached a historic level of *entente* after more than 500 years. Five centuries of recurrent patterns of distrust and competition between Iranians and Russians manifested itself in different periods beginning from the fleeting acquaintances of the Kingdom of Muscovy and the Persian Empire by the fifteenth century and the internecine conflicts between 1651 to 1828 to the secret Anglo-Russian agreement in 1907 to carve up Iran into discrete spheres of influence and the Soviet Union’s intervention in Iran and the World War II era of occupation of the north of the country. In this context, the history of Russo-Iranian relations can be conceptualized as a blend of Russian dominance over Iran, balancing and re-balancing and military triumphs of Russians until the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) took the reins of power in Iran.<sup>426</sup> With the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the so-called Great Game between Russia and Britain and the Anglo-Soviet *entente* over Iran came to a halt but the Russian desire to replicate the czarist pattern of behavior and revitalize the imperial ambition toward Iran showed no signs of respite. Under the pressure of the Soviet Union’s geostrategic siege of Iran, the then Shah of Iran agreed to join the Baghdad Pact, an American-led defense alliance for the ‘northern tier’ states of the Middle East and South Asia. During the Cold War period, the USSR pursued a dual policy toward Iran, characterized by maintaining formal relations and supporting leftist opposition groups while the U.S. simultaneously sought to expand military and security ties with Iran.<sup>427</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Russian threat left an indelible imprint on the political psyche and normative discourse of even the most fervid Iranian

---

<sup>425</sup> Waleed Hazbun. “Regional Powers and The Production of Insecurity in the Middle East”, **MENARA**, No. 11, September 2018, p. 13, [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara\\_wp\\_11.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_11.pdf), (10.05.2021).

<sup>426</sup> Utrikes Magasinet. “The Russia-Iran Relationship in a Sanctions Era, Utrikes Magasinet, November 2019, <https://www.ui.se/utrikesmagasinet/analyser/2019/november/the-russia-iran-relationship-in-a-sanction-era/>, (10.05.2021).

<sup>427</sup> Shireen Hunter. **Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order**, Praeger, 2010, p. 104.



revolutionaries, thereby providing the perfect fodder for Khomeini's slogan of "Neither East nor West but the Islamic Republic."<sup>428</sup> Small wonder then the collective historical memory behind Russo-Iranian relations reflects an enduring sense of "Iranian pessimism" towards Russia.<sup>429</sup> There is ample historical evidence suggesting that Iran's suspicion of Russian behavior is substantiated and cannot be rule out. To name but a few, one can enumerate the following turning points: the Tsarist Russia's occupation of parts of Iran in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Tsarist Russia's military intervention against Iran's Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911), the Soviet's support of secessionist factions in northwestern Iran at the end of WWI, Joseph Stalin's refusal to withdraw Soviet troops from Iran after the end of World War II, the Soviet Union's support of Iraq during its 1980-1988 war with Iran, Russia's 10-year procrastination in completion of Busheh's nuclear reactor, Moscow's delayed deliverance of the S-300 air defense system to Iran, Russia's votes in favor of all UNSC sanctions resolutions against Iran from 2006 to 2010, Russia's stance towards the status of the Caspian Sea, and Moscow's hands-off approach towards numerous Israeli airstrikes against Iran-backed militias in Syria and areas close to Iraqi border.

Setting aside the 'politics of memory' in analyzing Russo-Iranian relations, it is widely argued that the bilateral ties underwent a positive change towards amity due in part to four pivotal transformations: the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 and the death of Khomeini in mid-1989, and the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>430</sup> It must be parenthetically added that although the fall of the pro-American Pahlavi dynasty in 1979 could initially be seen as a potential prelude to a cessation of anti-Soviet policies in Iran, it nevertheless did not *ipso facto* amount to a significant change or much less a concrete rapprochement between Tehran and Moscow.

By early 1989, however, a new chapter was opened in bilateral ties between the Soviet Union and Iran as the Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze paid a

---

<sup>428</sup> Michael Rubin. "Iran-Russia Relations", **American Enterprise Institute**, 01.07.2016, <https://www.aei.org/articles/iran-russia-relations/>, (10.05.2021).

<sup>429</sup> IRAS. "Gholamreza Shafei: Iranian Pessimism towards Russia is One of the Reasons Hindering Further Economic Cooperation", **The Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies**, 04.05.2016, <http://iraneurasia.com/en/doc/interview/1190/print/gholamreza-shafei-iranian-pessimism-towards-russia-is-one-of-the-reasons-hindering-further-economic-cooperation>, (11.05.2021).

<sup>430</sup> Mark N. Katz. "Russian-Iranian Relations in the Putin Era", **Demokratizatsiya**, Vol. 10, 2002, pp. 69-81.

visit to Tehran in mid-1989 and met with Iran's first Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini. In the immediate aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the unraveling of the "unipolar moment" in international system, Iran and Russia gradually developed shared areas of conflict and cooperation, particularly in reaction to the American penetration into the post-Soviet RSC, which is largely viewed as a Russian sphere of influence. As illustrated by Shireen Hunter, following the demise of the Soviet Union, Iranian and Russian interests and ambitions aligned in some areas and clashed with each other in other spheres. For example, convergences of interests between Moscow and Tehran emerged around a number of issue-areas, chiefly among them a mutual commitment to territorial status-quo in the southern rim of the post-Soviet space, common concerns over the potential domination of the post-Soviet RSC by the West through i.e. EU and NATO expansions, and mutual concerns over Turkey's long-term goals in Central Asia and trans-Caucasian republics.<sup>431</sup> As for the areas of divergences of interests between Russia and Iran in the immediate aftermath of the USSR's demise, Hunter underlines salient issues such as competition over energy resources, especially natural gas in Central Asia, rivalry over extending economic as well as political clout in the Middle East and Central Asia, and not least Russia's averseness to jeopardizing relations with the United States at the expense of crafting 'strategic ties' with Iran.<sup>432</sup>

As seen through the perspective of the RSC theory, it can be argued that the post-Soviet space as a distinct regional security complex, a "centered region around a great power and part of a weak supercomplex with EU-Europe", has become increasingly multipolar with the Chinese, Iranian, Turkish and American infiltrations.<sup>433</sup> Hence, the concept of 'near abroad' (*blizhnee Zarubezh'e*) as a contested geopolitical field has become front and center in Russia's foreign policy thinking since 1992, with a principal view to safeguard its geopolitical sphere of influence against foreign encroachment and advance Russian geopolitical outreach,

---

<sup>431</sup> Shireen Hunter. **Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order**, Praeger, 2010, p. 105-106.

<sup>432</sup> Shireen Hunter, p. 105-106.

<sup>433</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 405-435.

including in Syria.<sup>434</sup> In this context, Iran's military intervention in the Syrian conflict served as a catalyst for Russia's geopolitical ascendance in the Middle East, marking a new chapter in the history of relations between Russia and Iran.

If we look at the chronicles of Iran-Russia relations in light of the changing patterns of amity and enmity, as indicated within the framework of the RSC theory, one can argue that the bilateral ties between Tehran and Moscow entered a short period of amity from 1990 to 1995 when the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement was signed between the U.S. and Russia. The relations leaned toward latent enmity from 1995 until 2000 when Vladimir Putin became president, oscillating between amity and enmity from 2000 to 2006 before reverting back to 'watchful enmity' between 2008 and 2012. In 2009, with 'the Obama-Medvedev reset' in U.S.-Russia relations and the growing proclivity of Russia and the United States towards the resolution of the Iranian nuclear question, the relation between Tehran and Moscow plunged into a new ebb for a duration of roughly three years. The ice in Iran and Russia relations began to thaw as Putin became president in 2012 and Rouhani took office in 2013 at a time when the Arab uprising spilled over into Syria. From 2013 onwards, Russia and Iran have managed to develop and sustain amicable ties on the basis of pragmatism and opportunism due in large part to both countries' tactical partnership over the Syrian portfolio.

The state of amity in Iran and Russia relations gained traction after the latter took the decision in September 2015 to directly intervene in the Syrian civil war. Although it is still premature to talk of a new regional 'strategic' partnership or alliance between Russia and Iran, there is a general consensus among pundits and scholars that both the current rapprochement between Russia and Iran are unprecedented and that the two countries aim to create solid grounds for bilateral dialogue that would guarantee sustainable economic, security and political progress.<sup>435</sup> Indeed, complexities and paradoxes abound in Iran-Russia relations but it is essential to keep in mind that in the overall scheme of things the symbiosis in relations between Moscow and Tehran is for the most part based "less upon shared values and rests more on shared

---

<sup>434</sup> Gerard Toal. **Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus**, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016, p. 43.

<sup>435</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov. "Understanding the Revitalization of Russian-Iranian Relations", **Carnegie Moscow Center**, 01.05.2015, p. 1. [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP\\_Kozha-nov\\_web\\_-Eng.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Kozha-nov_web_-Eng.pdf), (12.05.2021).

enmity toward both the United States and Sunni radicalism, as well as economic opportunism.”<sup>436</sup>

Having said this, the relations between Iran and Russia can be divided into five phases.

In the first phase (1990-1995), the relations got off to a friendly start after the Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze’s visit to Tehran in mid-1989 and the then speaker of Iranian Majlis (parliament) Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani visited Moscow and, most specifically, as a result of a confluence of factors and events leading up to the fall of the Soviet Union. With Ayatollah Khomeini dead and Russian Presidents Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin opting for rapprochement with Tehran—as a means to, first and foremost, influence the geopolitical playing field rather than increase the level of bilateral ties *per se*—the Islamic Republic of Iran also made certain adjustments to its approach towards Russia.<sup>437</sup> In this respect, Iran, quite orthodoxically, decided not to back Muslim separatists during the First Russian-Chechen war (1994-1996), and instead supported Russia’s territorial integrity in the face of secessionist movements. Further to this, Iran also pursued a cooperative approach with Russia for the purpose of ending the five-year civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997). Moreover, Tehran positioned itself as a mediator in the First Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the early 1990s and worked with Moscow in supporting various Afghan factions opposing the Taliban.<sup>438</sup> In the words of Eisenstadt, in this propitious geostrategic environment conducive to the betterment of Iran-Russia relations, “a de facto alliance emerged whereby Moscow came to see Iran as a responsible partner in the pursuit of stability in the Caucasus and Central Asia; a potentially lucrative market for arms and technology [...] and as a means by which to continue to exert some influence in the Middle East, and an ally in the fight against American ‘hegemony’.”<sup>439</sup> Hence, in 1992, Russia and Iran signed an agreement which assigned Moscow to

---

<sup>436</sup> Michael Rubin. “Iran-Russia Relations”, **American Enterprise Institute**, 01.07.2016, <https://www.aei.org/articles/iran-russia-relations/>, (10.05.2021).

<sup>437</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov, p. 4.

<sup>438</sup> Seyed Hossein Mousavian and Mohammad Reza Chitsazian. “Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East: A Grand Strategy”, **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2020, p. 103.

<sup>439</sup> Michael Eisenstadt. “Russian Arms and Technology Transfers to Iran: Policy Challenges for the United States”, **Arms Control Association**, 01.03.2001, p. 2, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2001-03/iran-nuclear-briefs/russian-arms-technology-transfers-iranpolicy-challenges-united>, (11.05.2021).

commission four nuclear reactors in Iran, including the construction of Iran's first nuclear power unit in Bushehr. As Vitaly Naumkin argues, however, despite the post-Cold War thaw in relations between Russia and Iran, there has been a considerable and persistent mismatch between the level of political and diplomatic progress in bilateral ties and the level of economic and commercial interactions, a discrepancy that has lasted up to now.<sup>440</sup>

The second phase of Iran-Russia relations (1995-2000), which can be referred to as the period of latent enmity, began with the signing of the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement (1995) and continued until the coming to power of Putin in 2000 as the president of the Russian Federation. In this period, the Russian foreign policy showed considerable signs of "enthusiastic Atlanticism", which in turn brought about a sort of rapprochement between Moscow and Washington.<sup>441</sup> Hence, Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin and U.S. Vice President Al Gore signed a secret deal under which Moscow agreed to halt the implementation of existing military-supply contracts with Tehran and not to sign any new conventional arms deals with Iran. In return, the U.S. pledged to expand cooperation with Russia's military-industrial complex and not to take punitive measures against Russia under a 1992 U.S. law that prohibits weapons sales to states designated by Washington as 'state sponsor of terrorism'.<sup>442</sup> It might be interesting to note that Russia decided in 1998 to balk at its pledge to implement the contract for supply of the Bushehr power plant to Tehran simply because Moscow wanted not to forfeit the unique opportunity for a revival of Russia-U.S. ties at the expense of recklessly cozying up to Iran. The decision was seen as an untimely blow to Iran-Russia relations and was perceived by Iranians as betrayal of their previous contracts at the benefit of the United States.<sup>443</sup> It is also important to note that Russia's decision coincided with Rafsanjani's presidency (1989-1997) during which he endeavored to *de-securitize* the relations between Iran and the West through a string

---

<sup>440</sup> Vitaly Naumkin. "The Russian-Iranian Relations: Present Status and Prospects for the Future", **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1998, p. 6.

<sup>441</sup> Richard Sakwa. **Russia against the Rest: The Post-War Crisis of World Order**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 9.

<sup>442</sup> John M. Broder. "Despite a Secret Pact by Gore in '95, Russian Arms Sales to Iran Go On", **The New York Times**, 13.10.2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/13/world/despite-a-secret-pact-by-gore-in-95-russian-arms-sales-to-iran-go-on.html>, (12.05.2021).

<sup>443</sup> Maxim A. Suchkov and Polina I. Vasilenko. "The Pendulum of Russian-Iranian Relations: From Common Goals to Divergent Interests", **Iran Looking East: An Alternative to the EU?**, Annalisa Perteghella, Ledizioni LediPublishing, 2019, p. 65.

of measures such as negotiations leading up to the release of American hostages in Lebanon and adoption of a non-alignment approach toward the first Persian Gulf War. Noteworthy too, however, is that the enmity between Iran and Russian in this period took on a predominantly latent characteristic as it was revealed that both Russia and Iran were busy improving their relations with the U.S. at that time and that despite the so-called Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement, Moscow clandestinely supplied conventional arms as well as missile technology to Tehran.<sup>444</sup>

The pendulum in Russia and Iran relations swung back and forth from amity to enmity in the third phase (2000-2006/2009) in which the synchronicity of Putin's and Khatami's *new* foreign policy doctrines and practices created the conditions of possibility for a renewed alignment between Moscow and Tehran. What affected Russian-Iranian relations, in a mostly positive manner, were two-fold: First, Mohammad Khatami's accession to power in 1997 with his reformist policies which were grounded upon the precepts of prudence, détente in foreign relations and 'dialogue among civilizations' provided the context for an improve in Iran-Russia relations.<sup>445</sup> Second, Vladimir Putin's rise to the presidency in 1999 with his Eurasianist leitmotifs undergirding Russia's foreign policy, which 'pragmatic cooperation' with the West while engaging with non-western partners contributed greatly to the positive dynamics in bilateral relations.<sup>446</sup> As one scholar points out, on the one hand, various endogenous and exogenous variables such as "Iran's continued 'good behavior' in the post-Soviet south, Russia's anxiety over possible U.S.-Iran rapprochement under Khatami, and Putin's determination to show Russia's independence from America created a better atmosphere for improved Russia-Iranian relations."<sup>447</sup> On the other hand, the Russian foreign policy under Putin marked a detour from "liberal integration in the early 1990s to one shaped by geopolitical

---

<sup>444</sup> **SIPRI Yearbook 2007: Armaments, Disarmaments and International Security**, Oxford University Press, 2007, Oxford, p. 398.

<sup>445</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri. **Iran's Foreign Policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad**, IHTACA Press, 2008, p. 61.

<sup>446</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov. **Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity**, Rowman & Littlefield, Fourth Edition, 2016, p. 20.

<sup>447</sup> Shireen Hunter. **Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order**, Praeger, 2010, p. 112.

realism under Primakov, which in turn between 2000 and 2012 was modified by the pursuit of pragmatic realism.”<sup>448</sup>

Hewing to the concept of a multi-polar world and bent on pursuing pragmatic realism, Putin immediately canceled the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement (1995) and agreed in November 2000 to sell conventional arms to Tehran after a six-year gap, a historic move that heralded a new era of bilateral defense cooperation between Iran and Russia. In what was widely viewed as the highest-level visit of an Iranian official to Russia since 1989, Khatami and defense minister of Iran traveled in March 2001 to Moscow and together with their Russian counterparts signed a 20-year oil and weapons pact.<sup>449</sup> Consequently, in the period between 2002 and 2005 Iran became one of the biggest Russian arms importer countries with 85 percent of Iranian weapons commissioned by Russian defense industries.<sup>450</sup> As one leading Iranian expert argues, the Russians viewed the renewal and expansion of relations in the realm of defense and arms cooperation as a source of revenue as well as a means to increase Moscow’s capacity to bargain with the United States.<sup>451</sup> Notwithstanding the convergences of interests between Moscow and Tehran in this period, there were certain areas of disagreements in bilateral relations, chief among them the issue of the delimitation of the Caspian Sea and the division of its oil resources. Having said this, in early 2006 Russia invested in hundreds of millions of dollars in energy projects in Iran and supported the P5+1 format for negotiations with Iran over the nuclear issue.

What deserves attention is that precisely in this period, the proclaimed U.S.-Russia strategic partnership that emerged at the outset of Putin’s tenure as president went down the drain as both sides became increasingly distrustful of each other’s intentions. The trust deficit between Russia and the U.S. became all the more conspicuous after the American military *overlay* of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, the timing of which coincided with Russia’s economic recovery after the

---

<sup>448</sup> Richard Sakwa. **Russia against the Rest: The Post-War Crisis of World Order**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 107.

<sup>449</sup> Michael Wines. “Iran and Russia Sign Oil and Weapons Pact”, **The New York Times**, 12.03.2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/12/world/iran-and-russia-sign-oilandweapons-pact.html>, (12.05.2021).

<sup>450</sup> Hoshimjon Mahmadv and Muhammad Yaseen Naseem. “Russia-Iran Defense Cooperation: Past and Present”, **The Journal of Iranian Studies**, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2018, p. 101.

<sup>451</sup> Elahe Kolaei and Afife Abedi. “Fluctuations in Iran-Russia Relations During the Past Four Decades”, **Iran and the Caucasus**, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2020, p. 223.

collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Jeffrey Mankoff, the U.S. support for expansion of NATO to the states of the former Soviet Union, for deploying new missile defense systems in Eastern Europe, and for building a system of energy pipelines bypassing Russian territory were all viewed by Moscow as clear indications of Washington's unyielding perception of Russia as "a potentially dangerous rival rather than and erstwhile partner."<sup>452</sup>

Against the background of U.S.-Russian enmity, a puzzling paradox overshadowed the dynamics of Russian-Iranian relations, especially after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad assumed office in 2005. Concurrent with Russia's exports of arms and missile technology to Iran, the Kremlin abruptly reversed its earlier policy of vetoing punitive measures against Iran and agreed to refer Iran's nuclear file to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). To be more specific, between 2006 and 2008 and in 2010, Russia joined the U.S., and voted in favor of all four UNSC sanctions resolutions against Tehran. Several reasons have been adduced to explain the Kremlin's rationale for such a U-turn toward Iran's nuclear file ranging from geopolitical considerations, domestic shifting bilateral priorities, the U.S. factor, and economic pragmatism.<sup>453</sup> The Russian change of heart, however, reinforced the dominant narrative among many Iranians that Moscow views Tehran as a bargaining chip in wheeling and dealing with the United States. This assertion gained more credence particularly after it was revealed that the Bush administration at the time had made the implementation of a bilateral agreement with Russia contingent upon Moscow's help on the Iranian nuclear dossier.<sup>454</sup> In this period, even Putin's short visit in 2007 to Tehran did not bring about a tangible rapport in Russia-Iran relations.

In the fourth phase of Russia-Iran relations (2008-2012), the bilateral ties bordered on watchful enmity, initially becoming hostage to the "reset" between Moscow and Washington which was announced less than a month after the

---

<sup>452</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff. **Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics**, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009, p. 98.

<sup>453</sup> Mariya Y. Omelicheva. "Russia's Foreign Policy toward Iran: A Critical Geopolitics Perspective", **Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies**, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2012, p. 333.

<sup>454</sup> Alexander A. Pikayev. "Why Russia Supported Sanctions Against Iran", **James Martin Center for Non-proliferation Studies**, 23.06.2010, p. 2, <https://nonproliferation.org/why-russia-supported-sanctions-against-iran/>, (12.05.2021).



inauguration of Barack Obama as the president of the United States.<sup>455</sup> Prior to the ‘reset policy’, the U.S.-Russia ties reached “a new post-Soviet nadir” as a result of, *inter alia*, the U.S. plans for missile defense in Europe, NATO enlargement, the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008, disputes over agricultural exports and the Iranian nuclear issue.<sup>456</sup> In this environment of intense volatility, speculations were rife that U.S.-Russia relations had morphed into a ‘new cold war’.<sup>457</sup> Of particular importance, however, is that Obama’s and Medvedev’s march towards *détente* came at a high cost for Iran as Russia sided with the U.S. anew in voting in favor of the UNSC Resolution 1929, which paved the way for imposition in June 2010 of a raft of harsh sanctions against the Islamic Republic regime, including on issues of cargo inspection, arms exports and financing and servicing of vessels.<sup>458</sup> In a decision that intimately comported with the developments regarding Washington-Moscow ties, President Dmitry Medvedev issued a decree in September 2010 imposing additional sanctions on Iran, including the termination of the sale of the S-300 anti-air missile to Iran and even returning the money paid for it to Tehran. According to one leading Russian expert, part of Moscow’s change of heart towards Tehran can be explained by the former’s growing concerns in 2009 when Iranian officials disclosed plans to build a second enrichment facility and refrained from exchanging low-enriched nuclear fuel for high-enriched fuel.<sup>459</sup>

What is often overlooked is that it was during this period of Russia-U.S. *rapprochement* that Moscow obtained significant concessions from Washington, including the pause in NATO enlargement to the East, the suspension of the deployment of U.S. missile system in Eastern Europe, negotiations on START III

---

<sup>455</sup> David J. Kramer. “Resetting U.S.-Russian Relations: It Takes Two”, **The Washington Quarterly**, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2010, pp. 61-79.

<sup>456</sup> Anders Aslund and Andrew Kuchins. “Pressing the “Reset Button” on US-Russia Relations”, **Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)**, 05.03.2009, pp. 1-14, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pressing-reset-button-us-russia-relations-0>, (12.05.2021).

<sup>457</sup> Edward Lucas. **The New Cold War: How the Kremlin Menaces Both Russia and the West**, Bloomsbury, London, 2008., Richard Sakwa. “New Cold War or Twenty Years’ Crisis? Russia and International Politics”, **International Affairs**, Vol. 84, No. 2, 2008, pp. 241-267.

<sup>458</sup> UNSC. “The United Nations Security Council, UNSC Resolution 1929”, **The United Nations**, 09.06.2010, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2010/sc9948.doc.htm>, (12.05.2021)., Stephen Blank. “Resets, Russia, and Iranian Proliferation”. **Mediterranean Quarterly**, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2012, pp. 14-38.

<sup>459</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov. “Understanding the Revitalization of Russian-Iranian Relations”, **Carnegie Moscow Center**, 01.05.2015, p. 6, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP\\_Kozhanov\\_web\\_Eng.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Kozhanov_web_Eng.pdf), (13.05.2021).

(Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), the U.S. consent to Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization, resumption of the Russian-NATO Council, and the establishment of a joint anti-missile defense shield between the two parties at the NATO-Russia Summit in Lisbon in the late 2010.<sup>460</sup> Notable in the tracing of pattern of enmity in this period of Iran-Russia relations is that following the ban on the transfer of S-300 systems, Iran filed a lawsuit against Russia at the International Court of Justice for cancelling the \$800 million bilateral contract to supply Iran with five S-300 missiles. Additionally, frustrated with Russia's dallying tactics in finalizing the Bushehr nuclear reactor project and the termination of the S-300 contract, Tehran ordered all Russian commercial pilots to leave Iran within two months, a move that coupled with other sticky points in bilateral relations served to aggravate the level of distrust and enmity between the two countries in this period.<sup>461</sup>

Another salient development that partly affected the dynamics of Russian-Iranian relations in this period was the series of anti-government protests and the subsequent armed rebellions that engulfed the MENA region, dubbed as the 'Arab Spring', which not only posed a significant challenge to Russian interests in the Middle East but also made the Kremlin acutely apprehensive of the Western military intervention into Libya and the threat of the spread of Islamism extremism.<sup>462</sup>

Mentions must be made here that in late 2011 to early 2012 massive anti-Putin protests broke out in multiple cities following controversial parliamentary elections and against the background of the Arab uprisings, prompting concerns among Russian authorities about the potential spillover of dissent in Russia's own Muslim community. These developments came as similar anti-government protests had taken place following Iran's June 2009 presidential elections, thereby refueling Russian deep-seated ontological insecurity that the wave of protests of the type witnessing during the Arab Spring—reminiscent of the revolutions in 1989 in East Central Europe—

---

<sup>460</sup> Elahe Kolaei and Afife Abedi. "Fluctuations in Iran-Russia Relations During the Past Four Decades", **Iran and the Caucasus**, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2020, p. 225.

<sup>461</sup> Mark N. Katz. "Russian-Iranian Relations in the Obama Era", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. XVII, No. 2, Summer 2010, p. 67.

<sup>462</sup> Rosella Cerulli. "Russian Influence in the Middle East: Economics, Energy, and Soft Power", **American Security Project**, 01.09.2019, p. 3, <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Ref-0230-Russian-Influence-in-the-Middle-East.pdf>, (14.05.2021)., Roland Dannreuther. "Russia and the Arab Spring: Supporting the Counter Revolution", **Journal of European Integration**, vol. 37, no. 1, 2015, pp. 77-94.

might provide the West with a further opportunity to engage in regime change through engineer ‘color revolutions’ or ‘humanitarian intervention’.<sup>463</sup>

Aside from the foregoing concerns, what is profoundly important to emphasize here is that the Arab uprisings in tandem with developments in Libya affected the Russian strategic orientations in fundamental ways. For Russia, the Arab Spring was deemed as a significant turning point within the various interconnected sequence of events from the 2008 Russo-Georgian war to the U.S. military interventions in Libya and Syria and, not least, the Russian annexation of the Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine in 2015. Of particular importance is that in almost all previous cases of U.S.-Russia tensions prior to the Arab uprisings, Moscow strove to devise its actions in the Middle East and orient its relations with both the EU and the U.S. in ways that these actions and orientations do not upset Russia’s relations with the West. The assertion he is that the Arab uprisings and the events following the upheavals in the Arab world forced Russia to abjure its role as a ‘passive spectator’ that tries to keep itself out of the what was taking place in the Middle East.<sup>464</sup> These events also marked a noticeable departure in Russia’s relations with Iran and other members of the Middle East security complex in the sense that Moscow, from 2012 onwards, showed no scruples about risking confrontation with the West as well as mounting a military overlay into Ukraine and Syria for its geopolitical, security and economic benefits in the Middle East and beyond.

Thus, the fifth phase of the relations between Russian and Iran (2012-onwards) should be explained and analyzed with a close attention to the foregoing mutations. During this period, Iran and Russia have managed to develop a largely immutable pattern of amity as a corollary of a multiplicity of internal drivers and external challenges, but most importantly, as a result of the two countries’ entrance into a tactical partnership over the Syrian conflict. The post-Arab uprising *rapprochement* between Iran and Russia evinced itself in a much more conspicuous fashion after Putin’s return to the Kremlin in May 2012 followed by Hassan Rouhani’s ascendancy as president in Iran in August 2013. As one leading scholar on Iranian politics posits,

---

<sup>463</sup> Natalia Morozova. “From Ontological Insecurity to Counter-Hegemony: Russia’s Post-Soviet Engagement with Geopolitics and Eurasianism”, **Fear and Insecurity in Europe: The Return to Realism?**, Roberto Belloni, Vincent Della Sala and Paul Viotti, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

<sup>464</sup> Leonid Issaev. “Russia in the New Middle East”, **Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies**, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2021, p. 427.

the Russians perhaps welcomes the departure of irksome Ahmadinejad but, that aside, the Arab uprising events and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 contributed immensely to the Iranian-Russian fellowship in the Middle Eastern theater.<sup>465</sup> It must be kept in mind that two months after his election, Putin held a meeting with his Iranian counterpart Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on the sidelines of a Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit where he labelled Iran as 'Russia's old traditional partner'.<sup>466</sup> A week after the meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov paid a visit to Tehran and met with Iranian officials, expressing Moscow's interest in boosting cooperation with Iran on the situation in Syria and Afghanistan.

In Kozhanov's view, when Rouhani came into office in 2013, the state of play in relations between Iran and Russia geared towards establishing mutual political dialogue on two hot-button issues: the future of the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) and the Syrian conflict.<sup>467</sup> On the one hand, Russia and Iran developed a pattern of synergy and cooperation on the nuclear issue as part of a concerted effort to counterbalance the West during the nuclear talks between Iran and the P5+1 group, which eventually led to the signing in July 2015 of the JCPOA. On the other hand, Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran developed key areas of convergences of interests in the context of the Syrian civil war by, first and foremost, preventing what they perceived as 'a U.S.-led regime change in Syria'.

In this setting, there are two important analytic inferences that can be derived from the two arguments cited above:

First, For Russia, the policy of cooperation and engagement with Iran on the nuclear issue serves four important goals: 1) to promote Russia's image as a responsible power broker and an influential nuclear negotiator in international politics, 2) to preserve Russia's dominant position in Iranian nuclear market and raise its share of the emergent nuclear-energy market, 3) to make substantial economic gains in Iran by compelling the European powers and the U.S. to lift international sanctions on

---

<sup>465</sup> Alex Vatanka. "Iran's Russian Conundrum", Russia in The Middle East, Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank, **The Jamestown Foundation**, December 2018, p. 98.

<sup>466</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov. "Understanding the Revitalization of Russian-Iranian Relations", **Carnegie Moscow Center**, 01.05.2015, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP\\_Kozh-anov\\_web\\_Eng.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Kozh-anov_web_Eng.pdf), (12.05.2021).

<sup>467</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov. "Iran and Russia: Between Pragmatism and Possibilities of a Strategic Alliance", **Foreign Policy of Iran under President Hassan Rouhani's First Team (2013-2017)**, Luciano Zaccara, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 152.

Tehran, 4) to use and at times maximize the Russian leverage on Iran in an attempt to ascertain Iranian support of Moscow in regional politics, including in major theaters of geopolitical strife, namely Syria.<sup>468</sup>

Second, For Russia, the policy of developing tactical partnership with Iran along with Turkey in relation to the Syrian conflict is driven by four specific motivations: 1) to forestall what the Kremlin has long perceived as a pattern of ‘western-encouraged regime changes’ by means of “color revolutions” and with total disregard for the ensuing consequences of such actions. Consistent with this argument, it should be stressed that for Russia the NATO-led military campaign against Libya, sanctioned by UNSC Resolution 1973 of 17 March 2011, was the last straw and that the looming threat of the Russian “loss” of Ukraine to the West necessitated an aggressive foreign policy on the part of Moscow.<sup>469</sup> Hence, motivated by its self-perception as a great power, Russia viewed the Libyan example as a portend of what the U.S. was trying to replicate in the case of Syria, and, for that matter, the Russian leaders acted accordingly.<sup>470</sup> 2) to safeguard Russia’s core economic interests in Syria, including procuring oil, natural gas, and securing reconstruction contracts. For one thing, the overthrow of Moammar Gadhafi’s regime as a consequence of the U.S.-led intervention had cost Russia roughly \$6.5 billion worth of past and promised contracts.<sup>471</sup> For obvious reasons, the last thing Russia needed was a Libyan scenario taking shape in Syria. 3) to defeat the Islamic State and fight approximately 5000 from other former Soviet republics and some 4000 people from Russia who joined the insurgency in Syria. Therefore, one important pillar of Russian military *overlay* of Syria rested on Moscow’s forward defense strategy aimed at defeating ‘terrorists over there’ instead of having to confront them back home.<sup>472</sup> 4) to deviate the public attention in Russia

---

<sup>468</sup> Bulent Aras and Fatih Ozbay. “Dances with Wolves: Russia, Iran and the Nuclear Issue”, **Middle East Policy**, Vol. XIII, No. 4, Winter 2006, p. 143-144.

<sup>469</sup> Keir Giles. “The Turning Point for Russian Foreign Policy”, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, 2017, p. XV, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep11857.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A997e4a6f514bef5a94f5ead733f37ba7>, (20.05.2021).

<sup>470</sup> Seth G. Jones. “Moscow’s War in Syria”, **Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)**, 12.05.2020, p. 12. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/moscows-war-syria>, (20.05.2021).

<sup>471</sup> Jejel Harchaoui. “The Pendulum: How Russia Sway its Way to More Influence in Libya”, **War on The Rocks**, 07.01.2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-pendulum-how-russia-sways-its-way-to-more-influence-in-libya/>, (20.05.2021).

<sup>472</sup> Richard Sakwa. **Russia against the Rest: The Post-War Crisis of World Order**. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 230.

from the economic woes gripping the country in the post-Crimean period (2015-2016) when Moscow was faced with sanctions imposed by the West.<sup>473</sup>

Having outlined the main internal and external drivers behind Russia's growing proclivity for cooperation with Iran, it bears noting that, for Iran, the deepening of bilateral relations with Russia in specific areas such as the nuclear issue and the Syrian conflict accorded the country a unique opportunity to achieve its much sought-after goal of relying on a leading world power that could serve as a counterweight to the post-Cold War American penetration of the Middle East, especially at a time when a *securitized* competition was brewing between Iran and Saudi Arabia, dubbed as the new regional cold war.<sup>474</sup>

The import of the foregoing proposition becomes even more conspicuous considering the fact that owing to the American military supremacy in the mid-1990s and the 2000s, the weaker states of the Middle East had to respond with *bandwagoning* and acceptance of its dominance.<sup>475</sup> The Middle East today, however, is deeply polarized due to an increased level of penetration of actors within and outside the MERSC and because of the emergence of new regional alliances, all of whom one way or another seek to advance their own interests and possibly challenge the American unipolarity. But nowhere has the inclination towards challenging *Pax Americana*, or in Walter Russel Mead's words the post-Cold War Wilsonian order, been more pronounced than in Russia, China, Iran and Turkey.<sup>476</sup> The Syrian civil war, which took place against the backdrop of Obama administration's 'pivot to East Asia' created a precarious geopolitical and security environment in which some Arab states had to fend off for themselves with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iran competing for regional hegemony.

---

<sup>473</sup> Leonid Issaev. "Russia and the New Middle East", **Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies**, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2021, p. 429.

<sup>474</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov. "Iran and Russia: Between Pragmatism and Possibilities of a Strategic Alliance", **Foreign Policy of Iran under President Hassan Rouhani's First Team (2013-2017)**, Luciano Zaccara, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 132., Ruth Hanau Santini. "A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Security Complex Theory Revisited", **The International Spectator**, Vol. 52, No. 4, 2017. pp. 1-19.

<sup>475</sup> Pietro Marzo and Francesco Cavatorta. "An Exceptional Context for a Debate on International Relations?: Toward a Synthetic Approach to the Study of the MENA's International Politics", **The Routledge Handbook to the Middle East and States System**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Jasmine Gani, Routledge, 2020, p. 320.

<sup>476</sup> Walter Russell Mead. "The End of the Wilsonian Era: Why Liberal Internationalism Failed", **Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 100, No. 1, January/February 2021, p. 131.

But in the case of Iran, one can argue that since the onset of the Syrian conflict and the unravelling of Trump's 'Maximum Pressure' policy against the Islamic Republic of Iran, there has been a conspicuous shift in foreign policy behavior of the Iranian regime at the level of grand strategy. Put differently, the contemporary shift in the foreign and security policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in view of its growing regional activism in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and in light of its *strategic reliance* on Russia and China can best be defined as Iran's multi-layered strategy of '*forward defense*'.<sup>477</sup>

Hence, the contention here is that the Syrian file presented Iran with both challenges and opportunities at the same time. The argument regarding Iran's further shift in foreign and security policy in post-Syrian conflict period gains further prominence when we take note of Russia's operationalization of its idiosyncratic version of 'hybrid warfare', also known as Grasimov Doctrine—use of mixed methods, including propaganda, disinformation, information warfare, and special forces to achieve non-linear military victory—from the Ukrainian to the Syrian battlefield.<sup>478</sup> Seen in this light, hybrid warfare, as employed in the context of the Syrian conflict, is arguably an innovative tool used by the Kremlin to, *inter alia*, divide and degrade NATO, subvert pro-Western governments, concoct pretexts for war, annex territory, and ensure access to European territories.<sup>479</sup>

Taken together the Iranian synthetic policy of '*forward defense*' and Russia's '*hybrid warfare*' strategy, it is justifiable to conjecture that the Russo-Iranian tactical partnership since the 2000s in general and during the fifth phase of Russo-Iranian relations (2012 up to now) in particular is aimed at undermining U.S. hegemony and potentially creating the conditions of possibility for a military withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East security complex as a whole. Mention must be made here that although there is no definitive sign, as of writing this dissertation, that the U.S. is fully withdrawing from the Middle East, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic

---

<sup>477</sup> Radio Free Europe. "Zarif: Ta Dah Sale Ayande Etekaye Ravabet Khareji Iran be Chin va Rusiye Ast", Radio Farda, 04.04.2021, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran-fm-javad-zarif-defends-25-year-agreement-with-china/31186425.html>, (21.05.2021).

<sup>478</sup> Vallery Grasimov. "The Value of Science is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Thinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations", **Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier (Military Review)**, Vol. 96, 26.02.2013, p. 23., Richard Sakwa. **Russia against the Rest: The Post-War Crisis of World Order**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 104.

<sup>479</sup> Christopher S. Chivvis. "Understanding Russian 'Hybrid Warfare' and What Can be Done About It", **RAND Corporation**, 22.03.2017, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/testim-onies/CT468.html>, (22.05.2021).

in Iran has often stated that Tehran's overarching strategic objective is to end the United States' "corrupt presence" in the Middle East, threatening that Americans will be expelled from Iraq and Syria.<sup>480</sup> Noteworthy too is that although many scholars and pundits argue that Moscow does not have a grand strategy for the Middle East and that it does not intend or lacks enough soft and hard power capabilities to supplant the United States in the Middle East, it, nevertheless, stands to reason to postulate that Iran's struggle to make the American Middle Eastern presence increasingly costly for Washington and its allies is most likely to redound to Russia's geopolitical and economic benefits simply because the Kremlin harbors a long-term goal of fundamentally reordering the prevailing powers structure in the region.<sup>481</sup> In sum, the mutual objective of countering U.S. hegemony or helping create a 'post-American Middle East' serves as the glue that binds Russia's and Iran's interests in the Middle East security complex.<sup>482</sup> Therefore, the claim is that the relations between Iran and Russia in the period after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war cannot be properly contextualized absent a realistic appraisal of the foregoing mutations and realities.

It was in this context that the Russo-Iranian relations showed tangible signs of a gradual but incremental march towards a regional alliance, albeit tactical, from 2012 onwards. With the 2011 Syrian civil war and the 2014 Crimean crisis smoldering in the background, Russia viewed Iran as an important ally as evidenced by an increasing frequency of mutual high-level visits that resulted in Kremlin's decision to revoke the ban on the sale of S-300 missiles to Tehran and well as Putin's call on member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to accept Iran as a member state of the organization and, last but not least, Russia's alleged use in 2016 of Iranian Hamadan airbase to strike targets in Syria.<sup>483</sup> It is worthwhile to parenthetically add that Lavrov

---

<sup>480</sup> Al Jazeera. "Iran's Khamenei says Missile Strike a 'Slap in the Face for U.S.'", **Al Jazeera**, 08.01.2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/1/8/irans-khamenei-says-missile-strike-a-slap-in-the-face-for-us>, (21.05.2021)., **Reuters**. "Iran's Supreme Leader says Americans will be Expelled from Iraq and Iran", **Reuters**, 17.05.2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-khamenei-idUSKBN22T0PF>, (21.05.2021).

<sup>481</sup> Dmitri Trenin. **What is Russia Up to in the Middle East**, Polity, 2018, p. 86.

<sup>482</sup> For more on the concept of 'Post-American Middle East', see Richard N. Haass. "The Post-American Middle East", **Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)**, 18.12.2019, <https://www.cfr.org/article/post-american-middle-east>, (21.05.2021)., Gideon Rose. "The Post-American Middle East: What's Inside", **Foreign Affairs**, November/December 2015.

<sup>483</sup> Ashraf Mohammed Keshk. "Iranian-Russian Rapprochement and Its Impact on Regional Security", **The Syrian Crisis: Effects on the Regional and International Relations**, Dania Koleilat Khatib, Springer, 2021, p. 89.



in February 2015 rolled out Russia's 'turn to Asia' policy after Putin had previously declared that cooperation with the Middle East countries constitute a priority of Russia's diplomacy.<sup>484</sup> It was in the second part of the 2010s that Russia's relations with the countries of GCC, as members of the Gulf sub-complex of the MERSC, exhibited signs of further amity despite a falling-out period in 2012-2014 caused by the GCC's negative reaction towards Moscow's support of Assad regime.<sup>485</sup> Also, it was in this context that Putin paid an important visit to Tehran in November 2015, four months after the signing of the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 and barely two months after the Russian military intervention in Syria.

Set against this backdrop, it can be argued that, for Russia the JCPOA and the ensuing removal of U.S. sanctions on Iran would, on the one hand, help Moscow and Tehran to reinvigorate their stagnant economic ties. In this respect, the volume of trade between Russia and Iran manifolded by 70 percent in 2016 in comparison to the previous year, reaching to \$1.74 billion in 2018 before taking a sharp turn downward in 2019 as a direct consequence of the Trump administration's decision to re-impose sanctions against Tehran.<sup>486</sup> On the other hand, the entry of Russia into the Syrian melee and the formation of subsequent tactical partnership among Iran, Russia, and Turkey under the Astana Peace Process, helped Moscow and Tehran to further develop their geopolitical synergy, albeit the two countries do not necessarily share identical goals in the Levant and other sub-complexes of the MERSC. Nevertheless, the *annus mirabilis* in Russia-Iran ties came in November 2017 when Vladimir Putin visited Iran and held talks with the Islamic Republic's Leader Ali Khamenei and former President Hassan Rouhani. In a move that dovetailed with Putin's goal of reasserting Russia's political and economic influence in the Middle East, the Russian oil producer Rosneft and the National Iranian Oil Company agreed on a deal to advance a handful of

---

<sup>484</sup> Official Website of the President of Russia (2014), Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, **Kremlin Website**, 04.12.2014, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/23341>, (22.05.2021).

<sup>485</sup> Leonid Issaev and Nikolay Kozhanov. "Diversifying Relationships: Russian Policy Toward GCC, International Politics", 27.02.2021, <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.10-57/s41311-021-00286-4.pdf>, (22.05.2021).

<sup>486</sup> Mehr News Agency. "Iran-Russia Trade Volume to Grow Further in 2017", **Mehr News Agency**, 18.04.2017, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/124874/Iran-Russia-trade-volume-to-grow-further-in-2017>, (22.05.2021)., IRIB. "Trade between Iran and Russia Rises Despite 'External Conditions'", **IRIB News**, 14.02.2020, <https://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/264434-8/>-افزایش-گردش-مالی-تجاری-میان-ایران-و-روسیه, (22.05.2021).

“strategic projects” worth up to \$30 billion.<sup>487</sup> Yet, Trump’s exit from the JCPOA and re-imposition of a string of successive sanctions on Iranian economy in line with the ‘Maximum Pressure’ doctrine threw a wrench into Russia’s efforts to entrench its economic foothold in Iran with ease.

On the military-security level, however, the relations between Russia and Iran developed on a positive trajectory in the Syrian conflict after Assad, Iran and Russia succeeded in crushing the Syrian revolution and capturing the Aleppo city in December 2016. As was mentioned in previous sections of this dissertation, from 2017 onwards, Russia exploited the framework of de-escalation zones in Western Syria under the Astana Peace Process to, *inter alia*, create military and diplomatic synergy among Moscow-Tehran-Ankara in the Syrian battlefield. Paradoxically, however, the relations between Russia and Iran began to show signs of divergences of interests in the Syrian context, particularly in the period after a series of military successes in western and southern Syria. The bone of contention between Iran and Russia relates to the former’s perception of Syrian conflict as a geopolitical windfall for realization of its arc of influence from Tehran to Beirut at the expense of Israel’s security. Indeed, few would argue against the argument that Russia relied on Iran-backed Shia militias such as Lebanese Hezbollah to secure its military presence in Latakia and Tartus, thereby using them as a Trojan horse against NATO’s power of maneuverability in the Mediterranean Sea. The Russian decision-makers, however, do not share Tehran’s adversarial view towards Israel, and for that matter, have *de facto* enabled and largely condoned Israeli’s routine military strikes against Iran-backed forces in Syria.

A thorough examination of the potential areas of agreement and disagreement between Iran and Russia in the context of the Syrian conflict and its impacts on the geopolitical dynamics within Middle East security complex will be teased out in the proceeding section but suffice it to say that the Russian-Iranian tactical partnership faces acute challenges at both the level of the Syrian conflict and at the regional level. Despite a multitude of challenges, the Russo-Iranian relations witnessed a potent pattern of increased amity after 2018, albeit in a way that accrued more benefits to Moscow than the other way around.

---

<sup>487</sup> Denis Pinchuk. “Khamenei Says Iran, Russia Should Cooperate to Isolate U.S., Foster Middle East Stability”, **Reuters**, 01.11.2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-russia-putin-idUSKBN1D14CK>, (23.05.2021).

### 3.5.1. U.S. Factor, Sanctions and Iran's 'Look to East' Policy

As briefly noted earlier, with all U.S. sanctions reactivated as of November 5, 2018, Russia found itself in a paradoxical situation in its relations towards Iran. On the one hand, Russia, in principle, expressed its dissatisfaction with the Trump administration's 'Maximum Pressure' campaign against Iran, thereby throwing its weight behind Tehran in helping the country circumvent the U.S. economic sanctions which might have had negative impacts on Tehran-Moscow bilateral relations. On the other hand, Russia, in reality, held reservations in providing significant assistance to the Islamic Republic as Russian banks reduced their economic transactions with Iran in order to avoid the U.S. secondary sanctions or loss of business with the United States.<sup>488</sup> Adding to the complexity of the situation, it is worthwhile to be mindful that although the Trump administration's flurry of sanctions on Iranian economy impacted the dynamics of Iran-Russia economic relations in a negative way, the U.S. economic pressure was at the same time a manna from heaven for Moscow in some specific ways.<sup>489</sup> For example, concurrent with the crises in Libya and Venezuela which practically removed millions of barrels from the oil market Russia as the world's second biggest oil producer found the opportunity to make use of the sharp decline of the Iranian share of the fuel market since the imposition of sanctions to turn the tide of the global market in its own favor.<sup>490</sup>

Seen in this light, one can argue that to the extent that U.S. sanctions on Iran and/or a small-scale conflict in the Middle East can result in a spike in oil prices, the American economic pressure does not necessarily bode ill for the Russian economy. Put differently, although the Kremlin is a staunch opponent of Iran developing nuclear weapons and plays an instrumental role in nuclear talks between Tehran and

---

<sup>488</sup> Radio Free Europe. "Russian, Chinese Banks Refuse Transactions with Iran", **Radio Farda**, 05.08.2020, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/chineserussianbanksrefusetransactionswithiran/30767647.html>, (23.05.2021).

<sup>489</sup> Deutsche Welle. "*Safir-e Iran dar Moscow: Ravebet-e Eghtesadiye Do Keshvar Zaif Ast*", **Deutsche Welle Farsi**, 21.04.2020, <https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/-سفير-ایران-در-مسکو-روابط-اقتصادی-دو-کشور-بسیار-ضعیف-است/a-53202163>, (23.05.2021).

<sup>490</sup> Abdolrasool Divsallar and Pyotr Kortouev. "The Fallout of the US-Iran Confrontation for Russia: Revisiting Factors in Moscow's Calculus", **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 28.01.2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/the-fallout-of-the-us-iran-confrontation-for-russia-revisiting-factors-in-moscow-s-calculus/>, (24.05.2021).

Washington, any perceivable thaw in U.S.-Iran relations coupled with a growth in trade ties between Iran and major European economic powers could have negative implications for Russia.<sup>491</sup>

During the fifth phase of Iran-Russia relations (2012-now), Moscow has, nonetheless, introduced a number of initiatives to help Iran mitigate the adverse effects of economic sanction, including using national currencies and establishing interaction between the Russian and Iranian financial messaging system as an alternative to making payments through SWIFT.<sup>492</sup> In spite of the Russian efforts, there are many good reasons to believe that the consequentiality of the economic cooperation between Tehran and Moscow is far less than the tactical partnership between the two countries over key areas of military and security concern. Simply put, the Russian partnership with Iran is mainly driven by arms deals and military-technology exchanges since Tehran is viewed by Moscow as a lucrative market in this field.

Of paramount significance is that although Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA and the subsequent renewal of unilateral U.S. sanctions have thrown the Russian-Iranian military and arms deals into uncertainty, Moscow has remained fully committed to the nuclear deal. Further to this, it is important to mention that even at the pinnacle of U.S.-Iran tensions beginning from May 2019—when Iran began reducing its JCPOA-related commitments and intensifying the so-called 'tanker war' in the Persian Gulf—all the way to the outbreak of the Aramco attack in September 2019 and the killing of Qasem Soleimani at the hand of the United States in January 2020, Russia tried to maintain a delicate balancing act in its relations with Iran and the United States. In the post-JCPOA environment, Russia upbraided the Trump administration for its decision to unilaterally give up on its commitments to implement the JCPOA but simultaneously cranked up its pressure on the Islamic Republic for its Middle Eastern military activism.<sup>493</sup>

---

<sup>491</sup> Arman Mahmoudian and Giorgio Cafiero. "Does Russia Really Want a US Return to the Iran Deal?", **Atlantic Council**, 19.01.2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/does-russia-really-want-a-us-return-to-the-iran-deal/>, (24.05.2021).

<sup>492</sup> Nicole Grajewski. "Friends or Frenemies? How Russia and Iran Compete and Cooperate", **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, 12.03.2020, p. 8, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/0-3/friends-or-frenemies-how-russia-and-iran-compete-and-cooperate/>, (24.05.2021).

<sup>493</sup> The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Foreign Ministry Statement on Developments around the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran Nuclear Program", **The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation**, 08.05.2018,

On the one hand, the bulk of the Russian official's discourse against Trump's decision entailed normative and legal undertones as Moscow chided Washington for 'trampling on the norms of international law' and 'lack of capacity to negotiate'.<sup>494</sup> In so doing, Russia sought to utilize the opportunity of American exit from the JCPOA in order to blame the United States for creating 'disruptions' to the post-war international legal order, of which Russia was a key architect. On the other hand, Russian officials knew that Moscow benefited to a certain degree from Trump's JCPOA withdrawal in the sense that such decision drove a wedge between the United States and Europe and that it made Iran more reliant on Russia.<sup>495</sup>

Frustrated by European's lack of resolve to reward Tehran, economically and politically, the Islamic Republic accelerated its 'Look to the East' policy by gravitating in a strategic way towards China, Japan and India.<sup>496</sup> Russia, however, behaved in such a way so as not to give the impression of a full-blown 'strategic partnership' between Moscow and Tehran. For example, in January 2019 at a time when Israeli attacks against Syria targets were raging, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov dismissed the idea of an 'alliance' between Iran and Russia, noting that "I would not use this type of words to describe where we are with Iran."<sup>497</sup>

---

[https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3212053](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3212053) , (24.05.2021).

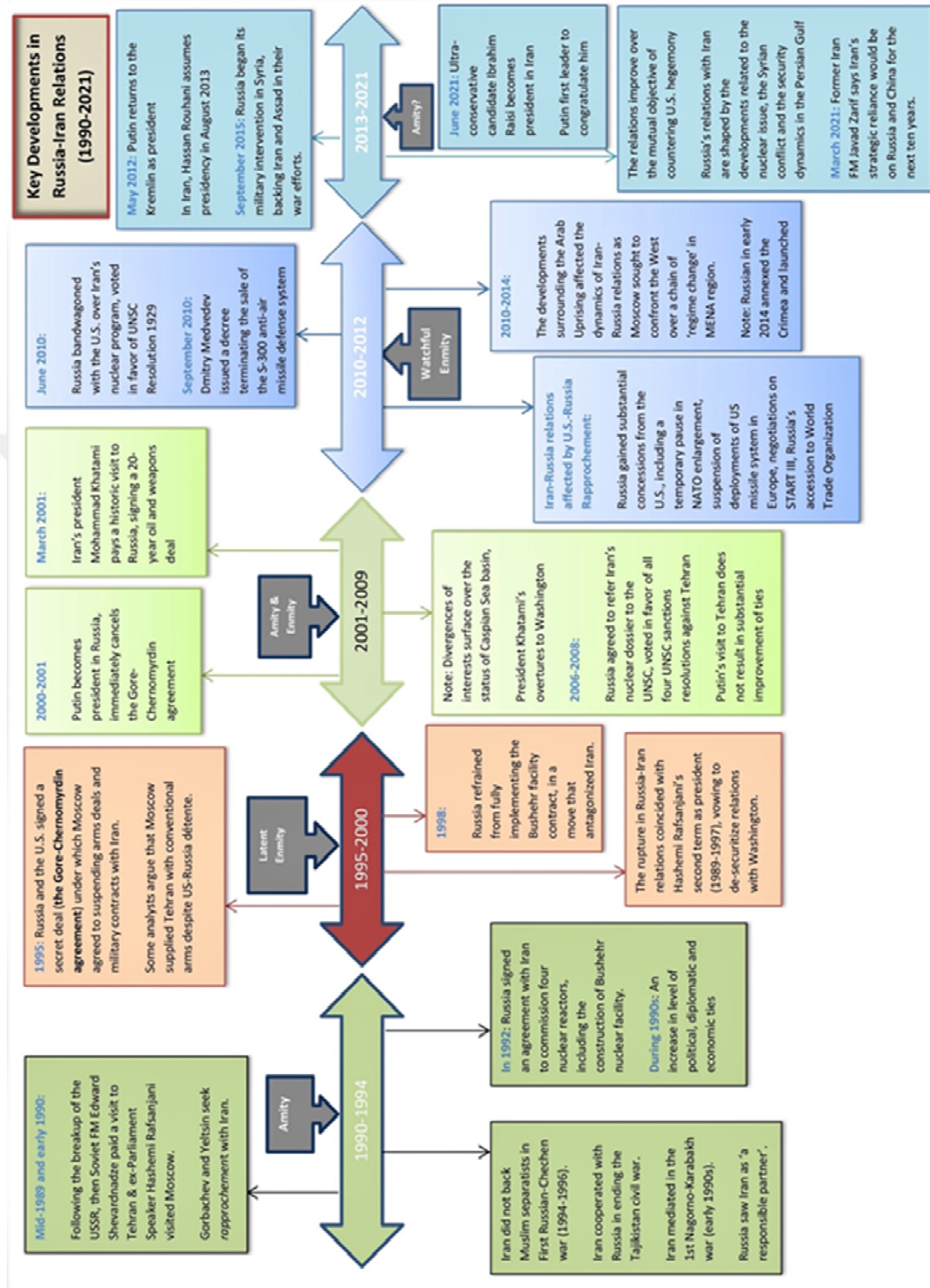
<sup>494</sup> The Moscow Times. "Russia Accuses U.S. of 'Trampling' Norms of International Law in Backing out of Iran Nuclear Deal", **The Moscow Times**, 09.05.2018, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/05/09/russia-accuses-us-trampling-international-law-backing-out-iran-nuclear-deal-a61395>, (24.05.2021).

<sup>495</sup> Mark N. Katz, "Russia Benefits from Trump's Iran Deal Withdrawal", **The Arab Weekly**, 15.05.2018, <https://the arabweekly.com/russia-benefits-trumps-iran-deal-withdrawal>, (25.05.2021).

<sup>496</sup> Mohsen Shariatnia. "Iran Sticks to 'Look to the East' Doctrine amid Frustration with Europe", **Al Monitor**, 07.06.2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/06/iran-asia-look-to-east-china-india-japan-oil-exports-europe.html>, (29.07.2020).

<sup>497</sup> Radio Free Europe, "Russia, Iran Not Allies in Syria, Says Senior Russian Diplomat", **Radio Farda**, 27.01.2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/russian-diplomat-ryabkov-says-iran-russis-not-allies-in-syria/29733774.html>, (22.09.2020).

**Figure 8: Key Developments in Russia – Iran Relations (1990-2021)**



Source: Designed by the author

Taking into consideration these contextual factors, one can posit that Russia has practically pursued a Janus-faced opportunistic-spoiler policy towards the conflicts in the Middle East, including in the case of its overall stance toward Iran's nuclear and regional behaviors. This policy was more evident during the fifth phase of Iran-Russia relations. In view of these dynamics, Russia and Iran signed in July 2019 a memorandum of understanding on the expansion of military cooperation according to which the two sides could further extend venues for cooperation beyond regional issues to include bilateral measures in the northern Indian Ocean and in the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>498</sup> In exactly the same month, Russia laid out its "Concept of Collective Security for the Persian Gulf" as an ad hoc regional security mechanism for conflict management in the Persian Gulf sub-complex.<sup>499</sup> Simultaneously, Iran presented its initiative, known as "Coalition for HOPE" (Hormuz Peace Endeavour), which was aimed at forging a non-aggression and non-interference pact among the main actors in the Persian Gulf region. As can be seen, Russia as a power external to the Middle East security complex has from roughly 2018 onwards made significant penetrations into the Persian Gulf sub-complex in tandem with its ongoing overlaying of the Levant sub-complex.

In a development that signaled Iran's overt strategic drift towards Russia and China, the three countries in late December 2019 conducted naval exercises in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman at the height of 'tanker wars' in the Persian Gulf.<sup>500</sup> In February 2021, a month after U.S. President Joe Biden took office, Russia and Iran embarked on yet another joint naval exercise in the Indian Ocean.<sup>501</sup> In addition, with the lifting of the 13-year UN arms embargo under the JCPOA in 2020, Iran has

---

<sup>498</sup> Maxim A. Suchkov and Polina I. Vasilenko. "The Pendulum of Russian-Iranian Relations: From Common Goals to Divergent Interests", **Iran Looking East: An Alternative to the EU?**, Annalisa Perteghella, Ledizioni LediPublishing, 2019, p. 74.

<sup>499</sup> Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations. "Press-Conference by the Charge d'affair of Russian Federation Dmitry Polyanskiy", **Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations**, 08.08.2019, [https://russiaun.ru/en/news/press\\_conference080819](https://russiaun.ru/en/news/press_conference080819), (25.05.2021).

<sup>500</sup> The United Nations, "At UN, Iran Proposes 'Coalition for Hope' to Pull Gulf Region from 'Edge of Collapse'", **UN News**, 25.09.2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472>, (25.05.2021)., Saeed Khatibzadeh. "HOPE for a New Regional Security Architecture: Towards a Hormuz Community", **Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)**, Vol. 26, No. 20, 05.10.2020, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/hope-new-regional-security-architecture-toward-hormuz-community>, (25.05.2021).

<sup>501</sup> Reuters. "Iran, Russia Navies Start Exercises in Indian Ocean", **Reuters**, 16.02.2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-russia-drill-int-idUSKBN2AG1EE>, (25.05.2021).

expressed its willingness to purchase at least \$8 billion of Russian arms and military warfare.<sup>502</sup> Speculations about the Islamic Republic's pitch for a major arms deal with Russia was further reinforced after Iran's former Defense Minister Ali Hatami paid an official visit to Moscow where he attended the International Military Technical Forum 'Army 2020' and was briefed by senior Russian military officials on the main features of the S-400 air defense missile system.<sup>503</sup> Despite Iran's strong appetite to bolster its ties with Russia in the realm of military-technical cooperation, the prospects for Moscow's prompt approval of Tehran's request for offensive arms hangs in the balance. For one thing, the Kremlin would most likely factor in the security concerns of the United States and the GCC countries, namely Saudi Arabia and the UAE before making any final decision on the issue. There are a number of other limitations and factors that makes it harder and possibly infeasible, albeit in short-term, for Russia to embark on a swift and significant sale of military hardware and defense systems to Iran, namely, the likelihood of United States' economic sanctions and political pressure, the IRGC's reportedly shoot-down of a Ukrainian passenger plane in January 2020 and its attempted seizure of tankers in the Strait of Hormuz in 2019 and 2020.<sup>504</sup> However, it is not wholly inconceivable that Russia gives the green light for sales of offensive arms to Iran provided that U.S.-Russia relations continue to further deteriorate during Biden's presidency.

Having said this, the patterns of a 'watchful amity' between Iran and Russia became all the more visible in April 2021 when Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov paid a visit to Tehran where the two sides signed an action plan for economic cooperation and agreed to draft a roadmap for a comprehensive cooperation agreement.<sup>505</sup> An important caveat here is that in a reference to a series of oil and

---

<sup>502</sup> Nicole Grajewski. "Friends or Frenemies? How Russia and Iran Compete and Cooperate", **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, 12.03.2020, p. 6, <https://www.fpri.org/article-e/2020/03/friends-or-frenemies-how-russia-and-iran-compete-and-cooperate/>, (25.05.2021).

<sup>503</sup> IRNA. "Iran Attends 6<sup>th</sup> Int'l Military Forum Army in Russia", **IRNA**, 23.08.2020, <https://en.irna.ir/news/83919838/Iran-attends-6th-Int-l-Military-Forum-Army-in-Russia>, (25.05.2021).

<sup>504</sup> Ellie Geranmayeh. "Do not Expect a Rush of Arms Sales to Iran", **European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)**, 16.10.2020, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_do\\_not\\_expect\\_a\\_rush\\_of\\_arms\\_sales\\_to\\_iran/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_do_not_expect_a_rush_of_arms_sales_to_iran/), (26.05.2021)., Anton Mardasov. "What's Next for Russia-Iran Military Partnership?", **Al Monitor**, 27.08.2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/08/iran-russia-military-partnership-army-2020-moscow-un-arms.html>, (26.05.2021).

<sup>505</sup> IRNA. "Iran, Russia to Sign Two Important Documents", **IRNA**, 12.04.2021, <https://en.irna.ir/news/84292481/Iran-Russia-to-sign-two-important-documents>, (26.05.2021).



weapons deals signed by Iranian and Russian officials under the *Treaty on the Basis for Mutual Relations and Principles of Cooperation*, Iran's former Foreign Minister Javad Zarif had indicated in July 2020 that "the two sides are likely to extend their 20-year agreement", an issue which apparently was on high agenda in the very meeting between Lavrov and Zarif in March 2021.<sup>506</sup> Also, it is worthwhile to heed that Lavrov's visit to Iran also came after the signing of a controversial 25-year "comprehensive cooperation agreement" between China and the Islamic Republic which drew public criticism of the current regime in Iran for 'selling out interests to foreigners'.<sup>507</sup> Notwithstanding the domestic fanfare surrounding the long-term agreement with China, the import of the recent trends and dynamics in Iran's external relations with Russia and China can be found in Zarif's assertion that "Iran's strategic reliance would be on Russia and China for the next ten years".<sup>508</sup> When juxtaposed to Turkey's tactic of playing the China and Russia card against the United States, Zarif's assessment of the future path of Iranian foreign policy begs important questions about the issue of *order* in the Middle East security complex, especially when the U.S. appears to be retrenching from the MERSC. With that in mind, the fact remains that the U.S. factor has almost invariably played an indispensable role in the dynamics of Russo-Iranian relations, in the sense that these relations have often times become a dependent variable of Russo-American and Iranian-American ties.

Given such a backdrop, one can ascertain that despite the patterns of amity and enmity undergirding the Russo-Iranian relations in all the five periods discussed above, the overall dynamics and key drivers of relations between Moscow and Tehran can best be analyzed at three levels:

At the bilateral level, for reasons outlined earlier, it can be argued that economic and security factors entail much greater importance and relevance in Russia-Iran relations at least according to Moscow's calculus. At this level, Moscow's desire

<sup>506</sup> The Islamic Republic of Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Statement on 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Iran-Russia Cooperation Treaty, **Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, 12.03.2021, <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/631442/statement-on-20th-anniversary-of-iran-russia-cooperation-treaty>, (26.05.2021).

<sup>507</sup> Bilal Guler. "Iranians Protest Cooperation Pact with China", **Anadolu Agency**, 30.03.2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iranians-protest-cooperation-pact-with-china/2192750>, (25.05.2021).

<sup>508</sup> Donyaye Eghtesad. "*Tahil-e Zarif az Ravabet ba Rusiye va Chin Dar Dah Sal-e Ayande*", **Donyaye Eghtesad**, 06.04.2021, <https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/تحليل-ظریف-از-روابط-با-چین-روسیه-در-سال-آینده>, (26.05.2021).

to strengthen its cooperation with Tehran appears to be predominantly driven by areas of common interest pertinent to arms and weapons deals, and military-technical exchanges. On the other hand, from the standpoint of the Islamic Republic, maintaining strong relations with Russia at bilateral levels accords Tehran with an opportunity to be treated by Moscow as a peer of a great regional power in addressing regional conflicts, namely in Syria. In other words, Iran endeavors to fulfill its purpose of securing the support of a great power and relying on Russia, preferably in a strategic way, to counterbalance the American hegemony. In this context, Iran's goals go beyond a mere bilateral economic and security cooperation and is geared towards dragging Russia into the Levant and Persian Gulf sub-complexes of the Middle East in an attempt to *share the region* with Russia and achieve a grander vision of a Middle Eastern regional order exclusive of the United States. Whether or not the Islamic Republic would be able to succeed in achieving this putative goal is open to question. But suffice it to say that Tehran's long-term objective is to elevate the bilateral relations into 'strategic' ties even if it requires the regime in Iran to sacrifice parts of its geopolitical and security interests.

At the regional level, Russia's relations with Iran are predominantly shaped by the developments related to the Syrian conflict and to a much lesser extent to the ongoing situation in Afghanistan and the security and geopolitical dynamics in the Persian Gulf. At this level, it is important to note that the partnership between Moscow and Tehran, as of writing this dissertation, has not developed beyond Syria. Although the continuity of the Russo-Iranian tactical partnership over the Syrian file in the future is uncertain, the fact remains that by doing the heavy lifting in Syria, the Islamic Republic of Iran played a vital role in catapulting Russia into the Middle East regional security complex, albeit principally as an external power in the Levant sub-complex. In the words of Jennifer Cafarella and Jason Zhou, Moscow has benefited from its alliance with Iran and the SAA to build a military hub in Syria and thereby project power in the Levant and beyond while reviving its former sphere of influence in the Middle East.<sup>509</sup> Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, Russia has been circumspect and pragmatic enough not to go beyond the contours of a tactical partnership on a case-by-

---

<sup>509</sup> Jennifer Cafarella and Jason Zhou. "Russia's Dead-End Diplomacy in Syria", **Institute for the Study of War**, 2019, p. 12. <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/russias-dead-end-diplomacy-syria>, (26.05.2021).

case basis with Iran, because Moscow does not want to forswear its healthy relations with the wealthy Arab countries and/or harm its ties with the West beyond repair.<sup>510</sup>

Overall, Russia's diplomatic and military penetration of the Middle East is partly enabled through establishing patterns of amity, albeit competitive and adversarial at times, with three non-Arab states—Turkey, Iran, and Israel and not least as a direct result of the United States' repositioning of its own interests in the MERSC. To be sure, the Syrian conflict reshuffled the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East by, *inter alia*, pulling the major regional powers into a vortex of competing and shifting regional alignments, with each alliance seeking to balance the other and prevent a powerful local actor from attaining the status of regional hegemony. In this setting, Russia's 2015 military intervention in Syria, as indicated by one scholar, positioned Moscow at the nexus of the Middle East's overlapping conflicts, leveraging Russia's influence far beyond Syria's borders to include all countries with a stake in the outcome of the war—foes such as Israel and Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Syria and Turkey.<sup>511</sup> For Russia, the objective is to exploit the regional developments and, most specifically, work with Iran, Turkey and other GCC countries in order to generate patterns of management that can provide *a modicum of security order* within the MERSC. Therefore, it is in this context that Russia's relations with Turkey and Iran find meaning and relevance at the regional level.

At the global level, the Russo-Iranian relations should be seen in the context of the relations towards the United States and the Syrian conflict and the Russia-Turkey-Iran tactical cooperation under the Astana process. For one thing, notwithstanding the regional dimension of the Syrian conflict, Syria has mirrored the new trends and great transformations in international relations and highlighted the “symptoms of a broken international order”.<sup>512</sup> The war in Syria, unlike Russia's post-Cold War interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, has important implications in terms of the use of military force

---

<sup>510</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov. “Iran and Russia: Between Pragmatism and Possibilities of a Strategic Alliance”, **Foreign Policy of Iran under President Hassan Rouhani's First Team (2013-2017)**, Luciano Zaccara, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 140.

<sup>511</sup> Liz Sly. “In the Middle East, Russia is back”, **The Washington Post**, 05.12.2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-the-middle-east-russia-is-back/2018/12/04/e899df30-aaf1-11e8-9a7d-cd30504ff902\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-the-middle-east-russia-is-back/2018/12/04/e899df30-aaf1-11e8-9a7d-cd30504ff902_story.html), (26.05.2021).

<sup>512</sup> Ramesh Thakur. “Syria a Symptom of a Broken International Order”, **The Strategist**, 16.04/2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/syriasymptombrokeninternationalorder/>, (26.05.2021).

outside the post-Soviet space and the scale of the challenge to the balance of power at the global level.<sup>513</sup> Furthermore, the protracted conflict in Syria upended the regional balance of power and geopolitical dynamics in an unprecedented way, exacerbating the Saudi-Iranian competition for hegemony, compelling Turkey to proactively cooperate with Russia even if it was meant to strain strategic ties with the United States, and pushing back Russia into the Middle East. More than anything else, however, the eventual outcome of the Syrian conflict will have major implications for the broader geopolitical competition for leadership in the Middle East security complex and whatever takes shape in future in Syria will have a direct impact on the strategic geometry of the MERSC with enormous risks and challenges for the global order. As Alexander Aksenyonok, Former Vice President of the Russian International Affairs Council puts it, the conflict in Syria poses the question as to whether “the international community is able to take concerted action to eliminate hotbeds of conflict, or will the geopolitical interests of the leading world powers and inflated ambitions of the regional centers of power gain the upper hand?”<sup>514</sup> For Russia, military intervention in Syria marked a new transcendental phase in Russian foreign policy in the sense that it provided Moscow with an opportunity to envisage new mechanisms and develop new approaches to conflict resolution in the Middle East as an alternative to flawed policies and regional constructs of the United States.

In sum, the import of the Russo-Iranian relations in view of the two countries’ cooperation with Turkey in the Syrian context stretch far beyond the regional border when contextualized in the absence of a dominant or hegemonic regional power in the MERSC. Russia-Iran relations are best understood as a tenuous partnership that oscillates between ‘strategic’ and ‘tactical’ cooperation on common security issues despite long-lasting mistrust, unmet expectations, and weak economic ties.<sup>515</sup>

---

<sup>513</sup> Barbara Pisciotta. “Russian Revisionism in the Putin Era, an Overview of Post-Communist Military Interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria”, **Italian Political Science Review**, Vol. 50, No. 1, 2020, p. 98.

<sup>514</sup> Alexander Aksenyonok. “Syria as a Mirror of The Changing World Order”, **Russia in Global Affairs**, No. 1, January/March 2013, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/syria-as-a-mirror-of-the-changing-world-order/>. (27.05.2021).

<sup>515</sup> Nicole Grajewski. “Friends or Frenemies? How Russia and Iran Compete and Cooperate”, **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, 12.03.2020, p. 1, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/03/friends-or-frenemies-how-russia-and-iran-compete-and-cooperate/>, (25.05.2021).

### 3.5.2. Russia's War in Syria and Implications on the Security Complex in the Middle East

As previously argued, Russia's military campaign in Syria, which is widely viewed as "the largest and most significant Russian out-of-area operation since the end of the Cold War", was enabled to a certain extent by the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>516</sup> This is not to say that had it not been for Iran's swift action to help Assad quell the Syrian uprising and that if the Obama administrations' had not refrained from staging a Libya-style intervention in Syria, Russian policy makers would have not opted for a military intervention in the first place.

To be sure, from the Kremlin's standpoint, Russia's inertia towards the Syrian civil war would potentially pave the way for an American repetition of its erstwhile pattern of behavior, namely deposing regimes in Yugoslavia in 1995, Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011. As indicated by some analysts, Moscow was convinced that the West had no intention of desisting with its policy of 'regime change'. For that matter, the Kremlin found the Syrian turmoil as an ideal case to draw a line in the sand and thereby thwart what it viewed as 'the U.S.-led regime change' by brandishing "its leaders' understanding of world affairs—that of 'absolute sovereignty'".<sup>517</sup> Of course, as it was explained in the previous sections, geostrategic and security considerations played a key role in Russia's calculus. But by intervening in Syria, Russia sought to "prove its mettle as a great power actor, box in the United States politically and broaden the confrontation [with the West] on terms more favorable to itself."<sup>518</sup> In this context, the benefits to Russia of joining Iran and Syria in the so-called 'axis of resistance', in a pure pragmatic manner, are plenty and profoundly significant. For one thing, if we look at Russian engagement in Syria

---

<sup>516</sup> Seth G. Jones. "Moscow's War in Syria", **Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)**, 12.05.2020, p. 1, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/moscows-war-syria>, (26.05.2021).

<sup>517</sup> Natan Sachs and Kevin Huggard. "Israel in the Middle East: The Next Two Decades", **Brookings**, 01.11.2020, p. 34, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/FP\\_-20201120\\_israel\\_me\\_sachs\\_huggard-1.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/FP_-20201120_israel_me_sachs_huggard-1.pdf), (26.05.2021).

<sup>518</sup> Aron Lund. "Russia in the Middle East", **The Swedish Institute of International Affairs**, 01.02.2019, p. 23, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/20-19/ui-paper-no.-2-2019.pdf>, (27.05.2021)., Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, JD. "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?", **Military Review**, 01.01.2018, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Army-Press-Online-Journal/documents/Rojansky-v2.pdf>, (27.05.2021).

through the lens of cost-benefit calculations, the benefits to Russia of intervening in Syria are substantial. This is particularly true given that Russia has reportedly spent approximately \$4 to \$5 million per day for its military campaign in Syrian since 2015, which brings the total cost of Russian intervention to almost \$11 billion in 2021, whereas the Islamic Republic is estimated to have spent a stupendous amount of money ranging from 30 billion to 105 billion USD for only the first seven years of the conflict.<sup>519</sup> Also, one should not forget that with the ‘Afghan Syndrome’ (national trauma caused by huge military casualties of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s) still in living memory, the Kremlin devised its military campaign in Syria in such a pioneering way so as to concentrate on ‘contactless warfare’ through deployment of Russian mercenaries to fight on the frontlines alongside Iran-backed militias and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).<sup>520</sup> Therefore, it is not unrealistic to conclude that Russia’s military overlay of Syria was both economically and geo-strategically beneficial to the Kremlin in light of the above-mentioned domestic and external variables at play.

Bearing these caveats in mind, the Russo-Iranian cooperation in the Syrian conflict can be divided into four distinct but overlapping campaign phases: 1) ensuring the survival of Assad’s regime and suppressing the rebel uprisings in core areas of western Syria through massive aerial and ground military attacks (September 2015-September 2016); 2) conducting a mixture of continued military and diplomatic offensives to reclaim control of key areas of strategic importance such as Aleppo plus four de-escalation zones established in the besieged Eastern Ghouta suburb of Damascus, Homs, Daraa-Quneitra, and Idlib.<sup>521</sup> The formation of the Astana Peace

---

<sup>519</sup> For more see, Karam Shaar and Ali Fatollah-Nejad. “Iran’s Credit Line to Syria: A Well that Never Runs Dry”, **Atlantic Council**, 10.02.2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ira-nsource/iran-credit-line-to-syria-a-well-that-never-runs-dry/>, (27.05.2021)., David Adesnik. “Iran Spends \$16 Billion Annually to Support Terrorists and Rogue Regimes”, **Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD)**, 10.01.2018, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2018/0-1/10/iran-spends-16-billion-annually-to-support-terrorists-and-rogue-regimes/>, (28.05.2021)., Arsalan Shahla. “Iran has Spent as much as \$30 billion in Syria, Lawmaker Says”, **Bloomberg**, 20.05.2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-20/iran-has-spent-as-much-as-30-billion-in-syria-lawmaker-says>, (27.05.2021).

<sup>520</sup> Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru. “Russia’s Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles”, Chaillot Papers, **European Union Institute for Security Studies**, No. 146, 31.07.2018, p. 112. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/russia-s-return-middle-east-building-sandcastles>, (27.05.2021).

<sup>521</sup> Russia and Iran failed to replicate their success in the final de-escalation zone in the Idlib Province in August 2018 mainly due to the presence of the jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al Sham in the enclave

Process involving Russia, Iran and Turkey as well as the establishment of the so-called 'de-escalations zones' and the fight against the Islamic State in central and eastern Syria took place in this phase (September 2016-September 2018); 3) a protracted period of amity and rivalry starting with Sochi agreement between Russia and Turkey to create buffer zone in Syria's Idlib until March 2020 when Russia and Turkey agreed on Idlib ceasefire (September 2018-March 2020); 4) oscillating between cooperation and competition in the period of Covid-19 pandemic which has to a large extent frozen political negotiations and military operations in Syria (March 2021- present).

Mention must be made, however, that akin to the Islamic Republic's modes of operation in the early years of the Syrian civil war, dozens of Russian military advisors were sent to Damascus and elsewhere in Syria. Unlike their Iranian counterparts, Russian leaders initially decided to refrain from direct military involvement and instead sought to fortify their Khmeimim airbase and Tartus naval facility and let the IRGC and Iran-backed militia alongside Assad's regime forces take the brunt of military operations in rebel-held areas before Moscow conducts its aerial campaign.<sup>522</sup> Noteworthy too is that both the Islamic Republic regime and the Russian Federation employed similar if not identical securitization narratives towards the Syrian civil war, using a particular 'grammar of security' and certain 'speech acts' that were couched in terms of the immediacy of fight against terrorism. In actuality, however, both Iran and Russia exploited the normative-laden narratives regarding the urgency to fight ISIS in Syria and a legitimizing tool to materialize an immediate realist-based objective: full restoration of Assad's rule at all costs. In order to illustrate this point clearly, researchers and scholars demonstrate that the bulk of Russia's airstrikes targeted positions outside ISIS-controlled territories, which indirectly strengthened the Islamic State to gain ground against the rebels.<sup>523</sup> In another clear instance that

---

as well as the influence of the Turkey-backed National Liberation Front, both of which refuted the ceasefire offers by Russia.

<sup>522</sup> Emil Aslan Souleimanov and Valery Dzutsati. "Russia's Syria War: A Strategic Trap?", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. XXV, No. 2, Summer 2018, p. 44.

<sup>523</sup> Paul Rogers and Richard Reeve. "Russia's Intervention in Syria: Implications for Western Engagement", **Oxford Research Group**, 2015, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/194291/PR-%20briefing%20October%202015.pdf>, Thomas Gibbons-Neff. "ISIS Attacks Increase in Syria Despite Russian Air Strikes, Report Says", **The Washington Post**, 24.02.2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/02/24/isis-attacks-spike-in-syria-with-help-from-russian-air-cover-report-says/> & Anna Borshchevskaya. "Russia's War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned", **Foreign Policy Research Institute**,

corroborates the arguments cited above, the Syrian Defense Minister, General Ali Abdullah Ayyoub is seen in a video as implicitly admitting that the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Syrian regime were closely collaborating in the crackdown of the anti-Assad uprising long before the creation of the Islamic State and al-Nusra front.<sup>524</sup>

What begs attention in light of the aforementioned observations is three-fold. First, while both Russia and Iran pursued somewhat similar *securitization* and *militarization* tactics along with overlapping interests in the Syrian conflict, this does not necessarily mean that the two countries share long-term goals and interests in Syria. Second, the conflict in Syria—a country located at the heart of the Levant sub-complex of the MERSC—sucked in regional and extra-regional powers, i.e., Russia, Iran and Turkey into a sub-complex to which they traditionally did not belong. Accordingly, the Syrian conflict in view of the vicissitudes of Turkey-Russia-Iran relations reveals important insights about the changing role of the Russian Federation in regional politics and its emerging position as a great regional power in the Middle East security complex along with China.

In so far as the overarching areas of disagreement between Iran and Russia in the Syrian context are concerned, one can divide these points of divergences of interests into realist-based (pragmatic) and normative-laden (ideological) categories. From a pragmatic viewpoint, Russia's interests clash with Iran when it comes to the latter's medium/long-term efforts aimed at 1) ensuring long-term military entrenchment in Syria as a means to maintain an important link between Tehran and Beirut; 2) securing access to Syria's rare economic resources and securing contracts on phosphates and other natural resources in the post-ISIS reconstruction period;<sup>525</sup> 3) increasing capacity to project influence in the Levant and using Syrian territory to transfer arms and funding to Hezbollah to enable it to threaten Israel from the Golan

---

2020, p. 22. <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/report-borshchevskaya.pdf>, (27.05.2021).

<sup>524</sup> Radio Free Europe. "General Admits Soleimani's Role in Syria's Civil War Long Before Jihadists Emerged", Radio Farda, 22.01.2020, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/general-admits-soleimani-s-role-in-syria-s-civil-war-long-before-extremists-emerged/30390923.html>, (27.05.2021).

<sup>525</sup> Ambassador Michel Duclos. "Russia and Iran in Syria—a Random Partnership or an Enduring Alliance? An Interim Report", **Atlantic Council**, 17.06.2019, p. 2, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/russia-and-iran-in-syria-a-random-partnership-or-an-enduring-alliance/>, (27.05.2021).



Heights;<sup>526</sup> 4) creating a *fait accompli* situation in which Russia and the U.S. clash militarily in Syria or the GCC countries and Damascus cannot normalize relations over the long haul.

From an ideological perspective, the clash of interests between Iran and Russia in the Syrian setting is germane to Iran's concrete attempts at 1) steady entrenchment of Shia influence inside Syria by dint of various schemes i.e., repopulating Sunni areas with members of Shia community (Shi'ization and demographic change), particularly in southern parts of Syria and the oil-rich eastern Deir ez-Zour province<sup>527</sup>; 2) framing the Syrian conflict as part of a wider ideological Shia-Sunni struggle stirred by ethnic and sectarian discords.

The significance of the ideological nexus in the Iranian approach towards the Syrian conflict lies in the fact that the growing sectarian (Sunni-Shia) divide, which is hitherto embedded within the Middle East structural system, has been used by Iran and the GCC countries alike, as a catalyst of the conflict as well as a favorable tool to sustain it.<sup>528</sup> However, an important caveat deserves attention here: Iran, Saudi Arabia and a number of other Gulf countries are not the *only* actors tapping into ideology-drive and normative-laden precepts to advance their interests within the framework of the Syrian conflict. While the conventional view is that Russian foreign policy has incontrovertibly repudiated the ideological tendencies of the Tsarist and the Soviet-era and replaced it with non-ideological, pragmatic guidelines and narratives, this does not mean that today's Russian foreign policy is bereft of ideological overtones, nor does

---

<sup>526</sup> Larry Hanauer. "Israel's Interests and Options in Syria", **RAND Corporation**, 2016, p. 4, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE185/RAND\\_PE185.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE185/RAND_PE185.pdf), (29.05.2021).

<sup>527</sup> Oula A. Raifi. "In the Service of Ideology: Iran's Religious and Socioeconomic Activities in Syria", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, No. 100, 14.03.2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/service-ideology-irans-religious-and-socioeconomic-activities-syria>, (01.06.2021)., Ziad Awad. "Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities", **European University Institute**, 21.10.2019, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/64687>, (01.06.2021)., Oula A. Rifai. "What is Iran Up to in Deir al Zour", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 10.10.2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-iran-deir-al-zour>, (01.06.2021)., Navvar Saban. "Factbox: Iranian Influence and Presence in Syria", **Atlantic Council**, 05.11.2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>, (01.06.2021)., Omer Behram Ozdemir. "Three Fronts of Iranian-backed Militia in Deir ez-Zor", **ORSAM-Center for Middle Eastern Studies**, 22.02.2021, <https://www.orsam.org.tr/en/three-fronts-of-iranian-backed-militia-in-deir-ez-zor/>, (01.06.2021).

<sup>528</sup> Kim Hua Tan and Alirupendi Perudin. "The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War" A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis", **Sage Open**, April-June 2019, Vol. 9, No. 2, p. 11.

it mean that ideology is nonexistent in Moscow's Middle Eastern strategy, namely towards Syria.<sup>529</sup> To illustrate this point clearly, one can allude to Putin's remarks in April 2015, five months prior to Russia's entry in the Syrian war, that "concerning the situation of the Christians in the Middle East—they are terrible. We have already raised this problem several times, and we believe that the international community is not taking adequate measures to protect the Christian population in the Middle East."<sup>530</sup>

As can be seen, this statement substantiates the claim that while the geopolitical factors figure prominently in Russian approach towards the Middle East, the role of the Russian Orthodox Church influences the various ways in which the Kremlin framed its military interventions in normative terms as a "realization of Russian civilization's role in rescuing persecuting Christians".<sup>531</sup> To put it another way, if we look at the ideological repertoire of the Russian foreign and domestic policy, it should be acknowledged that the Orthodox question constitute a fundamental element of modern Russian identity as a way of legitimizing the actions of the Russian leadership in Syria.<sup>532</sup> However, the Russian Orthodox question and the 'moral-spiritual values' it propagates does not manifest itself in the form of, inter alia, creation of like-minded militia groups in Syria in the same way that the Islamic Republic seeks to take advantage of Shia ideology as part of its sectarian mobilization strategy in the Syrian conflict. Therefore, while the ideas and ideology continue to influence Putin's foreign policy, it is the weight of geopolitics—the impact of "space" and "location" on states' policies—as a conduit for construction a new form of political 'order' in the face of 'chaos' that has been more influential in Russian foreign policy.<sup>533</sup> We will elaborate on the issue of order in the proceeding chapter.

---

<sup>529</sup> Ekaterina Stepanova. "Does Russia have a Grand Plan for the Middle East," *Politique Etrangere*, Vol. 2016, No.2, 2016, pp. 23-35.

<sup>530</sup> RIA Novosti. "Putin: Measures to Protect Christians in the Middle East are not Sufficient", *RIA Novosti*, 16.04. 2015, <https://ria.ru/world/20150416/1058989211.%20html>, (28.05.2021).

<sup>531</sup> Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky. "Christ-loving Diplomats: Russia Ecclesiastical Diplomacy in Syria", *Survival*, Vol. 61, No. 6, 2019, p. 50.

<sup>532</sup> Leonid Issaev and Serafim Yuriev. "The Christian Dimension of Russia's Middle East Policy", *Al Sharq Forum*, March 2017, p. 1. <https://www.hse.ru/mirror/pubs/share/217045866>, (03.06.2021).

<sup>533</sup> David G. Lewis. *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order*, Edinburgh University Press, 2020, p. 8., Alexander Korolev. "Bringing Geopolitics Back In: Russia's Foreign Policy and Its Relations with the Post-Soviet Space", *International Studies Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2015, pp. 298-312.

Nevertheless, in so far as strategy-faith nexus in Russia's and Iran's approach towards the Syrian conflict is concerned, it is not implausible to conclude that pragmatism, at least in the case of Russia's foreign policy towards Syria, has unvaryingly outweighed ideology. The discourse of Iran's foreign policy, however, entails a broad emphasis on ideological and religious leitmotifs as witnessed by its overt involvements in a series of sectarian-driven conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. Accordingly, while Russia has taken advantage of ideological narratives, i.e., Christian messianism as a discursive practice aimed at scoring certain pragmatic and geopolitical goals, the Iranian side has yet to strike a balance between its Shia-based sectarian tendencies and purely realist-based priorities and objectives. That being said, mention must be made here that despite the sectarian dimensions of Iran's foreign and security policy, it is not wise to infer that the vast majority of foreign policy decisions in Iran are *essentially* determined by ideological and religious imperatives. The above-cited dichotomy between strategy and ideology strikes at the heart of 'sectarian dilemma' in Iran's foreign policy in the sense that the country has two overlapping levels of foreign policy, both of which take different forms and contents. In the words of one scholar, the first level relates to state-to-state policies, which in most cases, are managed by the elected government in Tehran. The second level concerns the Islamic Republic's relations with non-state client, which are run by the IRGC and managed by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in Iran.<sup>534</sup>

The import of the above-cited contention is that when one investigates Iran's strategic behavior and decision-making, i.e., in the Levant and Persian Gulf sub-complexes, one can come to the following plausible conclusion: In a regional security environment favorable to the Islamic Republic, ideological and sectarian predilections are meant, in various cases of Iran's foreign policy decision-making, to take a backseat to realist-based and rational inclinations. Conversely, in an unfavorable regional security environment marked by military overlay and penetration of regional rivals as well as hegemonic great powers, the sectarian-ideological imperatives within the Iranian foreign policy apparatus are usually put on the front-burner as a defensive mechanism against external and internal threats. Hence, as one scholar argues, as a

---

<sup>534</sup> Afshon Ostovar. "Sectarianism and Iranian Foreign Policy", **Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East**, Frederic Wehrey, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017, p. 92.

matter of fact, “Iran might not see itself as a sectarian actor. But circumstances and an aggressive regional policy have progressively moved it in that direction.”<sup>535</sup> However, it is worth noting that the growing military involvement of Iran in the Syrian conflict—often perceived as Iran’s costliest military intervention—concurrent with the unilateral US withdrawal from the JCPOA and the ensuing imposition of massive economic sanction on the country posed significant challenges for decisions makers of the Islamic Republic. These momentous developments of historic significance have, more than anything else, encountered the Islamic Republic with an existential challenge to its political and regime security.

With revelations about the *real* costs of Iran’s overseas military campaigns, i.e., in Syria and the simmering public anger over the failed economic policies of Rouhani government, questions have risen, among pundits and analyst, as to whether the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic can be explained in accordance with the dictums of rational choice theory which assume that the maximization of utility on the basis of cost-benefit calculations is the ultimate aim of foreign policy.<sup>536</sup> The overriding claim here is not that Iran is essentially an irrational actor bent on advancing a revolutionary ideology at the expense of its survival. Rather the claim is that Iran’s rationality, when it comes to its regional and nuclear ambitions, may not necessarily be based on cost-benefit calculations as defined by rational choice theorists, principally because the Islamic Republic is a *sui generis* state in international politics harboring unorthodox rationality of its own making. Put succinctly, rationality is what Iran makes of it. To illustrate this point clearly, take, for instance, the Islamic Republic’s recent high-cost and high-risk foreign policy actions, such as its explicit turn towards the revolutionary narratives and practices after the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the nuclear deal, its aggressive regional and nuclear activities despite the United States’ economic and diplomatic pressures, and its unremitting financing of Shia-backed militias in spite of the devastating impacts of U.S. sanctions on the Iranian economy.

---

<sup>535</sup> Afshon Ostovar. “Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 30.11.2016, p. 20. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/30/sectarian-dilemmas-in-iranian-foreign-policy-when-strategy-and-identity-politics-collide-pub-66288>, (04.06.2021).

<sup>536</sup> Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, Stephan Haggard, David A. Lake, and David G. Victor. “The Behavioral Revolution and International Relations”, **International Organization**, Vol. 71, 2017, pp. 1-31.

As seen through a cost-benefit calculus, one might argue that owing to a number of interrelated factors such as severe economic sanctions, low economic growth, economic depression, and the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, former commander of IRGC Quds Force and Mohsen Fakhrizade, the most important figure in Iran's nuclear program, the Islamic Republic would, realistically speaking, err on the side of caution and refrain from engaging in costly confrontations and operations. From this perspective, with a sanctioned economy, Iran is expected to be pragmatic and realistic enough, on the basis of cost-benefit calculations, not to set geopolitical ambitions beyond its available economic recourses and capabilities. However, the evidence suggest that not only did the Islamic Republic pursue risky and costly military activism in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, it also embarked on a dangerous nuclear escalation policy in contravention of the provisions of the 2015 nuclear deal.<sup>537</sup> But Iran's assertive approach has failed to yield concrete results in terms of thwarting the 'Maximum Pressure' doctrine, and, instead brought further economic burden and diplomatic isolation for Tehran.<sup>538</sup> This is not to claim that the Maximum Pressure policy under the Trump administration succeeded in forcing the Islamic Republic to change its regional behavior.<sup>539</sup> Rather, the claim is that while the United States' expectation was that the Islamic Republic would ultimately acquiesce to maximum pressure, it was primarily because of Tehran's lack of attention to the cost-benefit calculations—equilibrium of soft/hard power resources and geopolitical ambitions—that the U.S. policy in actuality stopped short of fulfilling its intended objectives. Put simply, Iran's political rationality proves to be an unconventional kind of rationality that does not necessarily comport with the sort of rationality that is widely understood and practiced by the United States and other countries. While it seems perfectly rational for a state to ensure survival in the face of external and internal threats, it, simultaneously, seems not necessarily rational to preserve state survival at the expense

---

<sup>537</sup> Eric Brewer and Ariane Tabatabai. "Understanding Iran's Nuclear Escalation Strategy", **War On the Rocks**, 12.12.2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/understanding-irans-nuclear-escalation-strategy/>, (05.06.2021).

<sup>538</sup> Raz Zimmt. "Iran's Regional Ambitions Are Not Going Anywhere", **Atlantic Council**, 10.04.2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-regional-ambitions-are-not-going-anywhere/>, (05.06.2021).

<sup>539</sup> Michael R. Gordon. "U.S. Lays Out Demands for New Iran Deal", **The Wall Street Journal**, 21.05.2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/mike-pompeo-laysoutnextstepsoniran1526909126>, (06.06.2021).

of social and economic security. In addition, while Iran has arguably often acted in ways that are at odds with its ideology, it has under immense economic pressure and geopolitical impasse acted in seemingly *irrational* ways and has done so in ways that may even jeopardize regime survival in the long run.<sup>540</sup> As expressed by Takeyh, Iran, like any other revolutionary states, do not engage in cost-benefit analysis that other states do because their purpose is to forge a certain identity and to propound certain values and for that matter they are willing to pay the price in terms of both economic sanctions and setbacks in national interest.<sup>541</sup>

The relevance of the issue at hand, in so far as the Russo-Iranian relations in view of the Syrian conflict is concerned, is that Moscow has invariably benefited from the state of uncertainty and weakness in Iran against the backdrop of the country's pattern of abiding antagonism against the United States. In simple terms, Iran's enduring isolation and economic degradation can be partly seen as a symptom of the very unorthodox rationality of the Islamic Republic. To corroborate this claim, one needs to recall Iran's former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's revelations in a leaked interview in April 2021 that "diplomacy in Iran was sacrificed for IRGC operations in the region" and that "Russia has been opposed to the normalization of Tehran's ties with Washington".<sup>542</sup> Zarif's remarks demonstrated, in part, the extent to which Russia benefits from Iran's weakness, at both economic and diplomatic levels, and how Russia finds the Islamic Republic as merely a regional geopolitical asset rather than a strategic partner in the true sense of the word.

From a comparative perspective, one can argue that in contrast to the sharp variations in ideology-strategy nexus undergirding Iran's foreign policy behavior, Russian foreign policy behavior is viewed as *essentially* realist with the balance of power politics serving as a permanent fixture of the Kremlin's external relations from

---

<sup>540</sup> Reuters, "Iran's Final Report Blames Air Defense Operator Error for Ukraine Plane Crash", **Reuters**, 17.03.2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-irancrashukraineidUSKBN2B92CL>, (07.06.2021).

<sup>541</sup> Ray Takeyh. "OP-ED: Iran's Foreign Policy Driven by Identity", **National Public Radio (NPR)**, 28.08.2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/08/28/160185199/op-ed-irans-foreign-policy-driven-by-identity>, (07.06.2021).

<sup>542</sup> Iran International TV. "Exclusive: Zarif Claims Soleimani Intervened in Diplomacy, Russia Wanted to Destroy JCPOA", **Iran International TV**, 25.04.2021, <https://iranintl.com/en/world-exclusive-zarif-claims-soleimani-intervened-diplomacy-russia-wanted-destroy-jcpoa>, (07.06.2021).

the Tsarist period to Putin's era.<sup>543</sup> Undoubtedly, there have been some variations in the balance between pragmatism and messianism in the Tsarist and Soviet regional policies. But few would argue against the proposition that the Russian foreign policy (under Putin), has shown a great deal of predictability and continuity in the sense that Russian leaders are widely viewed to have been guided by a clear understanding of Russia's national interests. While the Russian foreign policy functions on the basis of the centrality of geopolitics and national interests, it should be borne in mind that the Kremlin's foreign policy objectives are often associated with the concept of Russia's 'great power identity' (*derzhavnost*), which is an enduring legacy of its imperial past.<sup>544</sup> Although the concept entails considerable ideational and normative undertones, it should be acknowledged that the ideational and normative components of Russian foreign policy in the post-Cold War period are not confined merely to the concept of great power status.

Following Surkov's concept of 'sovereign democracy', which is largely adopted by Putin, one can argue that in parallel with other ideational ingredients of Russian foreign policy, the concepts of *sovereignty* and *order* can be seen as the most salient ideational markers of Russian power and policy.<sup>545</sup> From this perspective, which is largely advocated by the Kremlin, the United States' blatant infringement of the norm of sovereignty as evidenced by i.e., the American invasion of Iraq, the U.S. support for the color revolutions of 2003-2005 and the Libya intervention in 2011, are regarded as stellar examples of the Western violation of the principles of sovereignty and order in international politics. When examined in this constructivist light, even the most realist analyses of Russian foreign policy gain relevance because both ideational and non-ideational constituents of the Kremlin's external policy attest to the importance of state *sovereignty* as a structuring principle of international *order*.

From the foregoing arguments, two important corollaries arguably follow:

---

<sup>543</sup> Charles E. Ziegler. "Conceptualizing Sovereignty in Russian Foreign Policy: Realist and Constructivist Perspectives", *International Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 4, 2012, p. 412.

<sup>544</sup> Bobo Lo. "Going Legit? The Foreign Policy of Vladimir Putin", *Lowy Institute*, 17.09.2018, p. 6. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/going-legit-foreign-policy-vladimir-putin>, (07.06.2021).

<sup>545</sup> V. lu. Surkov. "Nationalization of the Future: Paragraphs pro Sovereign Democracy, Russian Studies in Philosophy", Vol. 47, No. 4, 2009, pp. 8-21., Ruth Deyermond. "The Uses of Sovereignty in Twenty-First Century Russian Foreign Policy", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 68, No. 6, 2016, pp. 957-984.

First, the ideational and normative components of Russian foreign policy under Putin, as seen through the ideology-strategy nexus, do not connote a messianic ideological battle between Russia and the West in the same fashion that Islamic Republic's Shia Twelver doctrine seeks to depict a messianic battle against the enemies for the return of Imam Mahdi.<sup>546</sup> Although certain variations exist in the balance between ideology and strategy in Russian political thinking, it is factually untenable to posit that ideology outweighs geopolitics when it comes to the theory and practice of Russian foreign policy at both regional and global levels. As a prominent Russian scholar argues, it is true that the Soviet Union forged ideological allies and had clearly-defined adversaries as part of its regional policy which were supposed to advance revolutionary aim of communism. Putin's Russia, however, has cultivated good relations with Israel, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia as well as Hamas and Hezbollah.<sup>547</sup> Further to this, the U.S.-Russia acrimony is less about Cold War-era ideology than it is about geopolitics. By contrast, revolutionary discourse and ideological-religious narratives are seen as major sources of the Islamic Republic's identity and interests and, for the same reasons, Iran's foreign policy is fundamentally shaped by ethical, ideological and spiritual norms that at times trump material national interests.<sup>548</sup> To be more precise, the foreign policy of Iran in the post-revolutionary period is principally characterized by pan-Islamism, Pan-Shi'ism, anti-Americanism anti-Westernism, anti-Zionism and support of the Resistance Movement (aka. Axis of Resistance). Owing to the above-cited factors, Iran's foreign policy is widely seen as "irrational and unpredictable" and can be explained by "the radicalism of its principles and objectives, and opaqueness of the internal decision-making mechanisms".<sup>549</sup>

---

<sup>546</sup> For more about the Islamic Republic's Twelver Shia doctrine see, Mehdi Khalaji. "Iran's Regime of Religion", **Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 65, No. 1, 2011, pp. 131-147., Mohammad Al Sayyad, Mahdism and Political Manipulation in Iran, **International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah)**, 20.08.2017, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/centre-for-researches-and-studies/mahdism-and-political-manipulation-in-iran/>, (07.06.2021)., Girayalp Karakuş. "Iran Real Politics and Political Motivation of Shiite", **Bilecik Seyh Edebali Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi**, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2020, pp. 110-124.

<sup>547</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya. "Russia's War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned", **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, 2020, p. 27. <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/report-borshchevskaya.pdf>, (02.07.2021).

<sup>548</sup> Mahdi Mohammad Nia. "Discourse and Identity in Iran's Foreign Policy", **Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 3, No. 3, Fall 2012, p. 29-30.

<sup>549</sup> Luciano Zaccara. "Iran's Permanent Quest for Regional Power Status", **Diplomatic Strategies of Nations in The Global South: The Search for Leadership**, Jacqueline Anne Braveboy-Wagner, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 184.



Following this rationale, it is not unwise to conjecture that ideology and pragmatism are seen as competing elements of Iranian foreign policy especially when one considers the significance of Shia Crescent at the heart of Iran's geopolitical thinking.<sup>550</sup> Such an imbalance between ideology and pragmatism in view of the role of ideology as a basis for Iran's foreign policy renders the United States as permanent enemy. In Tehran's view, Iran and the United States are seen as belonging to two diametrically opposed ideological camps, each pursuing divergent and conflicting geopolitical objectives in the Middle East security complex, i.e., in the Syrian conflict.

As demonstrated earlier, in Moscow's eyes, the United States cannot be viewed as a perpetual ideological enemy. As expressed by Ziegler, the foremost grievance of the Kremlin is that Washington wants Moscow to subordinate itself to the U.S.-dominated international hierarchy of the post-Cold War era, whereas Russia seeks to be recognized, first and foremost, as a great power within this new order.<sup>551</sup> Accordingly, the Syrian conflict has turned into a testing ground for Russia and Iran in terms of the two regional powers' ability and willingness to strike a fair balance between ideology and pragmatism and recalibrate their policies vis-à-vis the United States. The Syrian case has, nevertheless, proven to be a more daunting challenge for the Islamic Republic due, in part, to the ideological *raison d'être* of the so-called 'Axis of Resistance' which rests on Iran's attachment to strong ideational factors such as anti-Americanism and Shi'ism. Hence, it should be acknowledged that while ideological affinities do exist between the Islamic Republic, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, one cannot logically draw the same conclusion about the nature of Russia's support of Assad's regime and the Shia proxies in Syria. This is a crucially important caveat in analyzing Iran-Russia-Turkey relations not only in the context of the Syrian conflict but also in view of the trio regional powers' pattern of amity and enmity in their relations towards the United States. Indeed, Iran and Turkey seek overlapping interests in Syria, namely a) crafting a durable zone of influence, be it social, cultural, economic and geopolitical, in particular areas of the Syrian landmass for regional deterrence purposes, and b) challenging the United States

---

<sup>550</sup> Tuğba Bayar. "Multiple Dualities: Seeking the Patterns in Iran's Foreign Policy", **All Azimuth**, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2019, p. 41.

<sup>551</sup> Charles E. Ziegler. "Conceptualizing Sovereignty in Russian Foreign Policy: Realist and Constructivist Perspectives", **International Politics**, Vol. 49, No. 4, 2021, p. 412.

*hegemony* in the Levant for the purpose of demonstrating their order-making capabilities in solving the crises gripping the MERSC.

Seen in this light, while the Islamic Republic's and Turkey's *modus operandi* contain, to varying degrees, the seeds of a curious search for ideological hegemony in the post-war Syria, the Russian approach is essentially averse to such ideological predilections and is more attuned to geopolitical and security interests.<sup>552</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that in the overall scheme of things, unlike Iran, neither Russia nor Turkey are willing to open and sustain an ideological battle front against the United States in the sub-complexes of the MERSC. When looked at Russian Syria policy from this perspective, it becomes clear that even Russia's ideational narratives about the importance of reviving Russia's great power status in international politics as well as its normative emphasis on a 'rules-based' international order are tailored to constrain the American power geopolitical-wise.

Second, as mentioned previously, Russia and Iran have gone through rough patches in their relations, particularly as a direct consequence of the Syrian conflict. Although Russia has significantly less normative and ideational connections towards the Middle East than Turkey and Iran do—at least from a historical viewpoint—the Kremlin's military overlaying of Syria reveals perceptive insights about Moscow's changing status in the Middle East security complex.

### 3.5.3. Russia's Role in the MERSC

Drawing upon the regional security complex (RSC) theory of Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, Russia basically belongs to the post-Soviet security complex, whose main structural feature are its relative autonomy vis-à-vis outside powers and Russian hegemony within it.<sup>553</sup> According to the RSC theory, the post-Soviet security complex, which is centered on the Russian Federation, consists of four sub-complexes: Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia), the Baltic region (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), and Eastern

---

<sup>552</sup> See, for example, Nicholas Danforth. "Ideology and Pragmatism in Turkish Foreign Policy: From Ataturk to the AKP", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2008, pp. 83-95.

<sup>553</sup> Philip G. Roeder. "From Hierarchy to Hegemony: The Post-Soviet Security Complex", *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*, David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 221.

European States (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova).<sup>554</sup> Seen through the lens of RSC theory, the sub-complex of the Eastern European States falls under the influence of Russia given general historical, ethno-religious, cultural and economic relations on top of the issue of geographical proximity. The sub-complexes of the Caucasus and Central Asia, however, show a more fragmented and volatile structure than the sub-regions formed by these states.<sup>555</sup> The Baltic sub-complex is important because it is widely regarded as a locus of Russian and Western rivalry in the sense that the EU aims to maintain the upper-hand in those states while Russia struggles to effectively recalibrate its policies in this sub-complex as a ‘forward defense’ in relation to Ukraine.<sup>556</sup> Accordingly, the sub-complexes of the Baltic region and the Eastern European States constitute the most salient sub-region as well as the biggest security and geopolitical challenge for Russia as exemplified by, *inter alia*, Moscow’s annexation of Crimea and its intervention in eastern Ukraine. While Ukraine poses an identity crisis for Russia, other states in the post-Soviet security complex have, in somewhat similar ways, become the locus of an increasingly aggressive Russian foreign policy in recent decades. For instance, the Russian Federation waged war against Georgia in 2008, repeatedly suspended energy supplies to neighboring states like Moldova and Lithuania, meddled on multiple occasions in the internal affairs of a number of former Soviet republics, boosted its military presence in countries like Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Belarus, and used economic coercion against neighboring states to pull them into the Russia-led organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>557</sup> These examples clearly indicate that the MENA region, as seen through the prism of RSC theory, has not been traditionally seen as Russia’s ‘near-abroad’, or its main ‘sphere of influence’ analogous to the post-Soviet space. In other words, Russia is theoretically considered a regional power external to the Middle East security complex.

---

<sup>554</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 397-436.

<sup>555</sup> Burak Sarikaya. “Evaluation of The Ukrainian Crisis Within the Context of Regional Security Complex Theory”, **Afro Eurasian Studies Journal**, Vol. 6, No. 1&2, Spring & Fall 2017, p. 35.

<sup>556</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, p. 415.

<sup>557</sup> Elias Götz. “Putin, the State and War: The Causes of Russia’s Near Abroad Assertion Revisited”, **International Studies Review**, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2016, pp. 228.

To be sure, time was when the Soviet Union maintained a strong military presence in the Middle East. The USSR supported its pro-Soviet client states in Egypt (until mid-1970), Syria, Iraq (since 1958), Algeria and South Yemen up until Egypt's *volte face* in 1973 when Moscow began to lose its important regional position and influence in the Arab world.<sup>558</sup> At the apex of its influence in the Middle East (1955-1982), the Soviet Union was in pursuit of two specific goals in the MERSC: 1) the spread of the Soviet influence through arms deals, diplomatic support and economic aid, 2) the promotion of Communist ideology and the so-called 'national-democratic parties'.<sup>559</sup> Therefore, barring the import of ideology, the current Russian foreign policy towards the MENA region can be seen as pursuing four main goals: establishing Russia as a major power in the region; containing Islamist extremism; affirming Russian military presence in the region; expanding Russian markets, including arms trade, nuclear technology, oil, food, etc., and attracting investments from affluent Gulf countries.<sup>560</sup> Upon closer examination, however, it seems that despite Russia's comeback to the Middle East under Putin's leadership, the MERSC continues to play a secondary role in Russian foreign policy, a policy that is, in Issaev's opinion, largely predicated on three principles of pragmatism, opportunism and pursuance of simultaneous relations with all regional players.<sup>561</sup> In this spirit, Syria plays a central role in Russian foreign policy as it augurs a new era of Russian foreign policy activism in the MERSC and marks the gradual "regionalization" of Russia's approach to the conflicts in the Middle East in general.<sup>562</sup>

As it was argued in previous chapters, the geopolitical and security landscape in the Middle East has, ever since the Arab uprisings, witnessed the simultaneous occurrence of three relatively new phenomena: regionalization, securitization and

---

<sup>558</sup> Jaroslaw Jarzabek. "The Theory of Regional Security Complexes in the Middle Eastern Dimension," **Wschodnioznawstwo**, 2018, pp. 155-170, p. 159., Dmitri Trenin, "Russia in The Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, And Policy Drivers", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 2016, p. 31, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16\\_Trenin\\_Middle\\_East\\_Moscow\\_clean.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16_Trenin_Middle_East_Moscow_clean.pdf), (08.06.2021).

<sup>559</sup> Robert O. Freedman. "From Khrushchev and Brezhnev to Putin: Has Moscow's Policy in the Middle East Come Full Circle", **Contemporary Review of the Middle East**, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2018, p. 104.

<sup>560</sup> Wojciech Michnik. "Russia's Role in the Middle East – A Grand Plan or Opportunism?", **Insight Turkey**, No. 1, 2019, pp. 64-65.

<sup>561</sup> Leonid Issaev. "Russia and the New Middle East", **Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies**, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2021, p. 428.

<sup>562</sup> Seçkin Köstem. "Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria: Geopolitical Alignment with Limits", **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, 2020, p. 7.

polarization. For one thing, when we look at Russia's Syrian engagement from the viewpoint of RSC theory, it is justifiable to infer that while Moscow had relatively *minimal* military, economic and diplomatic engagement in the Middle East security complex between 2004-2010, the MERSC turned into a foremost regional priority for Russian foreign policy in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings in general and since the onset of the Syrian conflict in particular. Contrary to the conventional view, it is a misconception to interpret that the Syrian conflict, *ipso facto*, marked Russia's "return" to the Middle East. Such hackneyed contention flies in the face of abundant evidence suggesting that beginning in 2004, Russia had gradually augmented its diplomatic and economic engagements in the Middle East security complex, albeit in a non-strategic way. Evidently, from 2005 to 2008, Russia's President Vladimir Putin made visits to Turkey, Egypt, Israel, and Palestinian territories, Jordan, Qatar, Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran.<sup>563</sup> As can be seen, Syria, a former Soviet ally, was absent in Putin's itinerary but that inadvertent exclusion, in and of itself, did not put a dent into Russia's active policy towards the MERSC. While Russia had, in principle, returned to the Middle East in the period between 2005-2010, it was, nevertheless, after the unfolding events of Arab uprisings and Russia's deployment of troops in the Syrian conflict that the Middle East gradually became one of the priorities of Russian foreign policy.<sup>564</sup>

Simply put, Russia's overlay in the Syrian conflict contributed significantly to further deepening of Moscow's geopolitical foothold in the Middle East security complex, this time, however, in a markedly strategic way. In other words, following its erstwhile return to the Middle Eastern scene from 2005-2010, Russia took advantage of the Syrian conflict in order to re-establish itself as a major external regional power in the MERSC and a great global power – for the first time since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. All of these trends and developments took place against the backdrop of the fact that Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had in February 2015 explicitly stated that "the turn to Asia" (which according to Russia's

---

<sup>563</sup> James Sladden, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable, and Sarah Grand-Clement. "Russian Strategy in the Middle East", RAND Corporation, 2017, p. 2, <https://www.rand.org/pubs-/perspectives/PE-236.html>, (08.06.2021).

<sup>564</sup> The Presidency of Russia, Vladimir Putin, Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," **The Presidency of Russia**, 04.12.2014, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/23341>, (07.06.2021).

playbook includes Middle East), reflected Moscow's "long-standing national interests in the twenty-first century".<sup>565</sup>

Having said this, three caveats are in order:

First, Russia's "turn to Asia" as exemplified by, *inter alia*, Moscow's military overlay of Syria showcased the increasing regionalization of Kremlin's approach towards the MERSC. From the perspective of RSC theory, the regionalization of Russia's foreign and security policy has occurred against the background of the regionalized character of the post-Cold War international environment which has been extended to the Middle East complex. In this particular environment, not only have conflicts taken an increasingly regionalized character, the efforts to contain them and to provide security and order are also occurring within regional security complexes, rather than at the global level.<sup>566</sup>

It is in this context that Russia's regionalized approach towards conflicts in the Middle East, chief among them the Syrian civil war, should be analyzed. Noteworthy too is that this regionalized approach has not evolved in a vacuum. Notwithstanding the key drivers of Russia's military intervention in Syria—which we touched upon in the preceding segments of the dissertation, the Kremlin's military intervention in Syria which later on facilitated Russia's re-entry to the MERSC or beyond the post-Soviet space, can be seen as byproduct of the following intervening variables: the worsening of the condition of "aggravated anarchy" in the MERSC following the Arab uprisings, the growing pattern of convergences of interests among Turkey, Russia and Iran (i.e. Astana Peace Process), the proliferation of failing and failed states, the rise of proxy warfare, the emergence of non-state armed groups which some states label as terrorists, and Washington's Middle East retrenchment.

One cumulative effect of the foregoing factors is that they contribute, among other things, to the relative intensity of interstate security relations within a particular security complex, namely the MERSC. However, in Buzan's view, "the security interdependence is more intense among the states inside such complexes than with

---

<sup>565</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov. "Iran and Russia: Between Pragmatism and Possibilities of a Strategic Alliance", **Foreign Policy of Iran under President Hassan Rouhani's First Team (2013-2017)**, Luciano Zaccara, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 136.

<sup>566</sup> Barry Buzan, **People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era**, ECPR Press, 2016, p. 343.

states outside them.”<sup>567</sup> Accordingly, these relations lead to regional patterns shaped by the differentiation among the units of the complex, patterns of enmity and amity among these units and as a result, the distribution of power. In other words, on the basis of Buzan’s assumption, Russia, as a great power outside the MERSC, traditionally shares less common security concerns and minimum intensity of security interactions with the units of the MERSC. The contention here is that the Syrian conflict, in view of the growing tactical partnership among Russia-Iran-Turkey, can be seen as a crucial point of transition in Russia’s history of engagement in the Middle East. The war in Syria has served as a springboard for Moscow’s entrance into the Middle Eastern geopolitical theater not merely as an “outsider” but, most importantly, as a major pole in the MERSC that shares both minimum and maximum-security intensity and growing interplays with other members of the security complex. According to this new typology, redefining Russia’s status as a main pole in the MERSC instead of an “outside” power bears resemblances to Turkey’s changing status from an insulator to a major pole in the Middle East security complex—an important development which was discussed in depth previously. Mention must be made, however, that despite its foreign policy activism in the Middle East, Russia possesses limited military and diplomatic capacity to decisively determine the course of policies and outcomes in the MERSC and that even the Syrian crisis itself has foregrounded, to a certain degree, the multiple challenges and constraints that Moscow faces in regional security governance.<sup>568</sup>

To be sure, as indicated by David Lake, even “great powers will be affected by the character of the security and non-security externalities, transaction costs, and regional and global systems structures in ways nearly identical to those of non-great powers”.<sup>569</sup> Regardless, however, the extensive body of literature on Russia’s role in the MENA region acknowledges that the Arab Spring events, namely the Syrian conflict, provided the Kremlin with a geopolitical opening to forcibly find relevance in the MERSC and

---

<sup>567</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap D. Wilde, **Security a New Framework for Analysis**, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2013, p. 9-11.

<sup>568</sup> Emel Parlar Dal and Emre Erşen. “Russia and the Changing International System: An Introduction”, **Russia in The Changing International System**, Emel Parlar Dal and Emre Erşen, Springer, 2020, p. 15.

<sup>569</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 64.

that Moscow seeks to remain more actively and substantially engaged in the Middle East for a foreseeable future.<sup>570</sup> This assertion is consistent with the growing regionalization of Russia's foreign policy approach towards the Middle East with Syria serving as a catalyst for Moscow's re-entry into the MERSC. If we apply RSC theory, one can infer that an external actor external to a local complex, i.e., Russia, can extend assertive regionalization and thereby influence the power structure and security dynamics of another complex "either by joining a regional security complex, if they are adjacent, or by making alignments within it."<sup>571</sup>

Given this dissertation's thorough examination of the evolving tactical partnership among Iran, Turkey and Russia in the context of the Syrian conflict, it is, therefore, logically permissible to assert that the Syrian crisis catapulted Moscow into the MERSC, allowing it to *join* the Levant sub-complex through fostering tactical alignments with Iran and Turkey, albeit short-term and situational at best. The argument regarding Russia's foreign policy activism in the Middle East gains further credence when we attend to Buzan's assumption that a regional security complex can be defined as "a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot reasonably be considered apart from one another."<sup>572</sup>

When looked at the Syrian conflict in this light, Russia's growing concerns about issues such as loss of geostrategic and geopolitical sphere of influence in the Middle East in the event of Assad's downfall, the western encroachment of the UN-enshrined principles of non-intervention and state sovereignty, and the threat of the Levantine spillover of Islamist fundamentalism and Jihadist ideology into Russia's restive Caucasus region created particular areas of convergences of interests, mutual threat perception and patterns of amity-enmity between Russia and the members of the Levant sub-complex. Hence, although not being traditionally categorized as a member of the MERSC, these primary security concerns, which were not shared by all

---

<sup>570</sup> James Sladden, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable, and Sarah Grand-Clement, "Russian Strategy in the Middle East", **RAND Corporation**, 2017, p. 9-11, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE236.html>, (08.06.2021).

<sup>571</sup> Barry Buzan, **People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era**, ECPR Press, 2016, p. 176.

<sup>572</sup> Barry Buzan, **People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era**, ECPR Press, 2016, p. 160.



members of the Middle East security complex, created the conditions of possibility for Russia to penetrate deeply into the MERSC, namely the Levant sub-complex, in the form of an overlay, to promote its interests and, if possible, redefine its role as a major pole in the MERSC.

Again, of particular importance is that the Russian overlay of the Levant sub-complex in conjunction with its broader regionalization approach towards the Middle East, was aided and abetted by Turkey and Iran. In this setting, Russia's pivot to the Middle East complex poses remarkable security challenges for the United States' role in the MERSC. In Sakwa's words, the war in Syria, which the Russian media refer to as Operation *Vozmezdie* (Retribution), testified that Russia is bent on restoring its status as a world power that should be recognized by the West and consulted by the United States on the basis of an equal partnership in dealing with regional and global issues.<sup>573</sup> Whether or not Russia will be successful in its new role and whether it can sustain its challenge to American regional dominance is an open question. But the fact remains that for the first time since the end of the Cold War, Moscow has broken 'Washington's de-facto monopoly' on foreign military operations beginning from Syria and enabled the Kremlin to display Russia as a valuable interlocutor to all Middle Eastern players in the region's conflicts. In this sense, Russia's Syrian *Vozmezdie* has made the Kremlin privier to the Kremlin's military and diplomatic capacity to insert itself forcefully into the main conflict-zones of the MENA complex and advance its own interests to the detriment of the United States and/or play the role of spoiler bent on disrupting the interests of other major players. For that matter, concurrent with the contagion/spillover effects of the Syrian conflict, Russia's military intervention has, in and of itself, entailed larger ambitions than those involving Syria. Put simply, Russia's Syrian adventure substantially intensified the Kremlin's regionalization strategy in the MERSC and beyond.

To corroborate this claim, one needs to pay attention to the various ways in which Russia has endeavored to establish itself as a great power of the MENA complex by virtue of boosting diplomatic and military activism in some of the major theaters of geopolitical struggle such as Libya, the eastern Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, and

---

<sup>573</sup> Richard Sakwa. **Russia against the Rest: The Post-War Crisis of World Order**. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 166.

Israel-Palestine and in Africa. Granted that the Russian Federation's assertive regionalization strategy is hampered by the country's severe economic and industrial shortcomings, Moscow, as of writing this dissertation, possesses some form of permanent or temporary military presence in Syria, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, and Central African Republic on top of a number of countries outside the MERSC such as Armenia, Azerbaijan's Nagorno Karabakh, the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Ukraine (Crimea and Donetsk), and Belarus.<sup>574</sup> What merits attention is that analogous to the post-Cold War era, when the weakness of most of the successor states of the former Soviet Union and their reliance on Russia accorded the Kremlin enough leverage to craft a regional hegemonic order, the current state of affairs in the Middle East in view of the American retrenchment in tandem with the chronic problem of state weakness has provided the Russian government with a rare opportunity to render itself as a security provider in the Middle East complex.<sup>575</sup> Another point worthy of attention is that despite the limitations and shortcomings of Russian strategy and in spite of fragile nature of the Turkey-Iran-Russia triangle, there is a confluence of interests among Russia, Iran and Turkey in materializing the common objective of, *inter alia*, reducing the U.S. influence in the Middle East security complex.

Following this, in so far as the Russia's assertive regionalization approach towards the MERSC in light of the Syrian conflict is concerned, one can analyze the security and geopolitical implications of this approach accordingly:

In the Levant sub-complex, the most important development concerning Russia's foreign policy activism relates to the Syrian conflict. The Russo-Iranian-Turkish partnership has had important implications not only for the MERSC but also for Russia's present and future role and strategic orientations in this particular sub-complex. In one instance, the war in Syria has resulted in a noticeable rapprochement between Israel and Russia. Although the two countries experienced turbulent relations during the Cold War, including a 24-year rupture between the Soviet Union and Israel (1967-1991), Moscow and the Jewish state have in recent decades disavowed zero-sum policies in exchange for a cooperative relationship that compartmentalizes areas

---

<sup>574</sup> Jeff Hawn. "Russia's Extraterritorial Military Deployments", **The Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy**, 31.03.2021, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/russia/russias-extraterritorial-military-deployments/>, (08.06.2021).

<sup>575</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 243.

of divergences of interests. In Syria, Israel and Russia have developed a modus of security arrangement or a special “security mechanism” which allows them to coordinate their security policies and military actions while pursuing divergent interests.<sup>576</sup> The litmus test of this particular *modus operandi* came three years later when Syrian air defense ‘accidentally’ shot down a Russian Ilyushin II-20 surveillance aircraft over the Mediterranean following Israeli airstrikes on the military positions of Iran-backed militias in Latakia. It might be interesting to note that although the Kremlin pinned the blame squarely on the Jewish state, the Ilyushin incident did not put an end to Israel’s campaign of active containment against Iran in line with the former’s policy of avoiding a ‘fait accompli’ of an Iranian stronghold on Israel’s northern border.<sup>577</sup> Indeed, even if the penchant for deposing Assad has lost momentum for the time being, few would argue against the argument that the extensive campaign of Israeli’s military strikes against Iran-backed proxy militias in Syria would have not be possible and enduring without Russia’s so-called ‘green light’. Russia and Israel share overlapping interests in returning Syria to the *status quo ante* and in preventing the Iran-backed ‘axis of resistance’ from exploiting the Syrian battlespace as a launching pad for further attacks against the state of Israel—essentially another Lebanon.<sup>578</sup> Nevertheless, some analysts argue that due to a myriad of factors, the idea of evicting Iran from Syria in its entirety is unrealistic and far-fetched, partly because such ‘ideal type’ scenario which is favorable to Israel, requires ousting Bashar al Assad, the *sine qua non* of any meaningful and tangible action to accomplish the task of eradicating Iran’s Syrian stronghold.<sup>579</sup>

---

<sup>576</sup> Following the meeting in September 2015 between former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Israeli government announced that Moscow and Jerusalem agreed on a mechanism to coordinate their military actions in Syria in order to avoid “misunderstandings” between their forces. See, Maria Tsvetkova. “Israel and Russia to Coordinate Military Action on Syria: Netanyahu”, **Reuters**, 21.09.2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-israel-idUSKCN0RL10K20150921>, (10.06.2021).

<sup>577</sup> Gil Murciano. “Israel vis-à-vis Iran in Syria: The Perils of Active Containment”, **German Institute for International and Security Affairs**, No. 41, 26.10.2017, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/israel-and-irans-growing-influence-in-syria/>, (10.06.2021)

<sup>578</sup> Daniel L. Byman. “Will Israel and Iran Go to War in Syria?”, **Brookings**, October 05.10.2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/10/05/will-israel-and-iran-go-to-war-in-syria/>, (21.06.2021).

<sup>579</sup> Kyle W. Orton, “‘Zionism is Making Us Stupid’: The Russian Relationship with Israel from the Soviets to Putin”, **Medium**, 12.12.2018, <https://kyleworton.medium.com/zionism-is-making-us-stupid-the-russian-relationship-with-israel-from-the-soviets-to-putin-668f080ef016>, (21.06.2021).

Notwithstanding the foregoing complexities of Israeli-Russian relations, it seems irrefutable to conclude that the Syrian conflict has become a stellar case of Israel-Russia and Iran-Russia partnership in the Levant all at once, in the sense that the Kremlin's status, as a direct consequence of these puzzling partnerships, has been raised to that of a major interlocutor for the two regional arch-enemies (Iran and Israel) particularly when the U.S. has shown clear signs of retrenchment from the MERSC.

That aside, it is important to be mindful that Russia has also established evident patterns of amity in its relations with Egypt, another member of the Levant sub-complex and the most populous country in the Arabic-speaking world. Time was when Egypt played an important role as a loyal partner of the Soviet Union in the Levantine geopolitical landscape, until the then President Anwar Sadat abruptly shifted from Soviet to American patronage in 1972 in a move that solidified nearly half a century of U.S. primacy in the Middle East complex. For the time being, however, we can see a meaningful improvement of Cairo-Moscow relations particularly after Abdel Fatah al-Sisi's rise to power as president following the 2013 military *coup d'état* that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood. Since then, the ties between Russia and Egypt have demonstrated a clear pattern of amicable exchanges as the two countries have signed multiple cooperation agreements in various sectors, namely the oil and gas exploration, civilian nuclear energy cooperation, tourism and military and security. Nevertheless, nowhere has the Egyptian-Russian rapport and collaboration been more prominent than in the military and arms sector in which Cairo is considered the second biggest importer of Russian weaponry among Arab countries behind Algeria.<sup>580</sup> The growing pattern of amity has also manifested itself in the Libyan conflict where both Russia and Egypt supported Khalifa Haftar and his Benghazi-based Libya National

---

<sup>580</sup> Russia and Egypt have since 2014 signed several arms deals and military cooperation agreements worth over \$3.5 billion, the latest of which relates to Moscow's delivery in late February 2021 of five Sukhoi Su-35 advanced fighter jet to Cairo despite the COVID-19 Pandemic and in defiance of US warnings that it will impose sanctions under The Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, or CAATSA, on any person/country that makes 'significant transactions' with Russia's military sector. On Egypt-Russia defense deals see, A Correspondent in Egypt. "Egypt Moves Ahead with Purchase of Russian Arms Despite US Warnings", **Al Monitor**, March 3, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/03/egypt-us-tension-sanctions-russia-arms-deal.html>, Bradley Bowman, Maj. Jared Thompson and Ryan Brobst. "Egypt's Transition Away from American Weapons is a National Security Issue", **DefenseNews**, 25.05.2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/05/25/egypts-transition-away-from-american-weapons-is-a-national-security-issue/>, (21.06.2021).

Army (LNA), especially after Turkey staged a military intervention into the Libyan civil war in January 2020 in favor of the Tripoli-based government.<sup>581</sup>

Another case emblematic of the Russo-Egyptian cooperation regards the Syrian conflict, which offered a vital opportunity for a relative growth in convergences of interests between Moscow and Cairo at the level of Levant sub-complex. The Egyptian government's mediatory engagements in facilitating negotiation deals on the formation of two de-escalation zones in Syria, namely Eastern Ghouta and Homs and in engaging in the so-called "Cairo Group" of the Syrian opposition in Syria talks stand out as a key manifestation of the Russo-Egyptian cooperation in the Syrian context.<sup>582</sup> From this angle, one can argue that while Russia views Egypt as an important partner in settling regional disputes, i.e., the Syrian conflict, Egypt perceives Russia as a major regional great power whose intervention in Syria opened up opportunities for Cairo in order to advance its own interests, i.e., in the fight against ISIS in the restive northern Sinai Province and use Moscow as a counterweight to the U.S. influence. In Syria, it should be also noted that Egypt's President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi openly supported the Syrian Arab Army during the civil war and currently backs Assad' regime, a key Russian ally, as Damascus desperately seeks normalization of relations with Arab countries.<sup>583</sup> Despite the patterns of amity between Russia and Egypt after 2013, the burgeoning bilateral relations are not devoid of bilateral irritants and/or divergences of interests on regional issues and structural constraints, chief among them the U.S.-Egypt strategic partnership, Cairo's financial dependence on the Gulf states and America's sanctions policy.<sup>584</sup> In sum, while the relations between Russia and Egypt

---

<sup>581</sup> Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali and Lin Noueihad. "Exclusive: Russia Appears to Deploy Forces in Egypt, Eyes on Libya Role – Sources", **Reuters**, 13.03.2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-libya-exclusive-idUSKBN16K2RY>, (21.06.2021).

<sup>582</sup> Reuters. "Russia Announces 'De-escalation Zone' North of Syria's City of Homs", **Reuters**, 03.08.2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-idUSKBN1AJ0S6>, (22.06.2021)., Amr Eltohamy. "The Limits of Egypt's Role in the Syria Crisis", **Al Monitor**, 09.08.2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/08/egypt-sponsors-truce-deal-syria-homs-eastern-ghouta-role.html>, (23.06.2021).

<sup>583</sup> Sarah Ch. Henkel, "The Difficult Normalization of Relations Between Arab Countries and Bashar al-Assad", No. 1, **German Institute for International and Security Affairs**, 01.11.2020, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/journal\\_review/2020JR01\\_ArabCountriesAssad.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/journal_review/2020JR01_ArabCountriesAssad.pdf), (21.06.2021).

<sup>584</sup> Alexey Khlebnikov. "Russia and Egypt: A Precarious Honeymoon", **Alshargh Forum**, 24.09.2019, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2019/09/24/russiaandegyptaprecarioushoneymoon/>, (23.06.2021).

are driven mostly by security and economic imperatives, there is no doubt that the increasing level of cooperation between Cairo and Moscow, albeit tactical, has contributed to the Kremlin's deeper penetration of the Levant sub-complex as a means to, *inter alia*, undermine U.S. influence in the MERSC.

In another instance, Russia has also made concrete efforts to draw Lebanon into its newly-reinvigorated Levantine sphere of influence by taking advantage of the political instability and economic weakness of the country following the 2020 Beirut explosion. In this context, Russia has deepened its ties with Lebanon, a strategic country on the Mediterranean but a member of the Levant sub-complex, in several areas of cooperation such as defense, infrastructure projects, energy investments and vaccinations. Many analysts and scholars believe that Lebanon constitutes an important geopolitical arena which Russia regards as an extension of its interests in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>585</sup> In Rakov's and Mizrahi's opinion, for Russia "Syria and Lebanon are 'interrelated tools' in security and economics, so that instability in one affects the other."<sup>586</sup>

A logical inference that can be derived from this observation is that security sub-complexes are not merely about the wider security dynamics and patterns that define the RSC as a whole. They are also about the interplay between and among the members of a specific sub-complex. Hence, for Russia, as an external actor capable of affecting the Middle East security complex, any change in power distribution, security interdependence and patterns of amity and enmity in a specific sub-complex inadvertently influences the Russian foreign policy not merely towards these states of a specific sub-complex as well as towards the wider RSC. This is why any external power capable of overlaying or introducing itself into a security complex, i.e., MERSC, faces the challenge of carefully calibrating its policies towards almost all members of RSCs. To corroborate this claim, one can allude to the current state of relations between Russia and Lebanon which requires Moscow to play a delicate balancing act with the Lebanese Hezbollah and other stakeholders such as Damascus

---

<sup>585</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya. "Is Russia Trying to Play Kingmaker in Lebanon?", *The National Interest*, 16.03.2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/russia-trying-play-kingmaker-lebanon-180414>, (23.06.2021).

<sup>586</sup> Daniel Rakov and Orna Mizrahi. "Enhanced Russian Involvement in Lebanon?", **The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)**, No. 1461, 28.04.2021, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/lebanon-russia/>, (24.06.2021).

and Beirut. Russia needs a watchful stratagem aimed at maintaining a durable influence in both Lebanon and Syria while avoiding rising tensions with Israel along the Lebanese border.<sup>587</sup> Having said this, an important caveat should be mentioned that despite Russia's attempts to curry favor with Lebanon in various areas of mutual interests, there are considerable challenges confronting the Kremlin to convert its aggressive diplomacy into a systemic, coherent and successful *modus vivendi* to gain leverage over Beirut or forge an enduring alliance to the detriment of the European countries, namely France.<sup>588</sup>

In yet another example, under Putin, Russia has also expanded its ties with Jordan, another member of the Levant sub-complex and a major U.S. ally hosting over 3000 American troops. The growing pattern of amity between Russia and Jordan is primarily driven by economic and commercial relations, convergences of interests in Syria and Libya, shared positions on Gulf security and community-level links.<sup>589</sup> In his meeting with President Putin in October 2019, King Abdullah II of Jordan hailed "Russia's strong presence in the Middle East", adding that Jordanian officials share Russia's vision of the emerging multipolar order in the Middle East region.<sup>590</sup> In the same month, President Putin praised Jordan as a 'key Russian partner in the region and called for deepening trade relations between Amman and Moscow.<sup>591</sup> Beyond the diplomatic parlances and formalities, it is important to note that Russia-Jordan partnership yielded fruitful results in the context of the Syrian conflict. The Moscow-Washington-Amman agreement on creation of the de-escalation zones in the southern areas of Dara'a, Suwayda, and Quneitra in July 2017, which was chiefly initiated by Russia, is a prime example of the results of cooperation between Russia and Jordan.<sup>592</sup>

---

<sup>587</sup> Anton Mardasov. "What's Next for Russia's Relations with Hezbollah?", **Al Monitor**, 18.03.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/03/whats-next-russias-relations-hezbollah>, (26.06.2021).

<sup>588</sup> Tomas Kavalek and Filip Sommer. "Russian Encroachment in Arab Countries Since 2011", **New Direction**, 2018, pp. 38-40, <https://newdirection.online/2018-publications-pdf/NDreportCZ-Kavalek.pdf>, (26.06.2021).

<sup>589</sup> Samuel Ramani. "An Integral Partner: The Growing Ties between Amman and Moscow", **Middle East Institute**, 18.02.2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/integral-partner-growing-ties-between-amman-and-moscow>, (26.06.2021).

<sup>590</sup> Samuel Ramani., "Jordan King Welcomes Russian Presence in the Middle East", **Xinhua**, 04.10.2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-10/04/c\\_138446863.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-10/04/c_138446863.htm), (26.06.2021).

<sup>591</sup> Russian News Agency (TASS). "Putin Hails Jordan as Key Russian Partner in the Middle East", **TASS**, 03.10.2019, <https://tass.com/politics/1081269>, (27.06.2021).

<sup>592</sup> BBC World Service. "Syria Crisis: US, Russia and Jordan Agree Ceasefire Deal", **BBC**, 07.07.2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40539535>, (27.06.2021).

With a declining economy and acute domestic challenges, however, it appears unlikely that Russia can afford to attach priority importance to its relations with Jordan in the Levant, preferring instead to use Amman as a junior partner in resolving regional security issues. Nor does Jordan intend to go to great lengths in its relations with Russia so much so that it loses the backing of traditional allies such as the United States and Britain.

As regards Russia's forays into the Maghreb sub-complex, the Libyan civil war, which has been ongoing since 2014, is a stellar case that elucidates the extent to which Moscow has advanced its overseas military interventions in the post-Soviet RSC. The key assertion here is that if we fairly label Russia's Syria involvement as the Kremlin's first (largest) military operation outside the post-Soviet RSC, Russia's Libyan intervention can be considered Moscow's second such military operation beyond the borders of the post-Soviet Eurasia—albeit the latter entails a much lesser military deployment and economic cost for Russian political-military leadership. Nevertheless, Russia's overlay of Libya in light of the prolific combat experience of the Russian Army gained from the Syrian battlespace have had important security and geopolitical implications for the Middle East security complex. In Libya, Russia along with Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and France have sided with rebel commander Khalifa Haftar's LNA while Turkey, Qatar, Italy and Algeria have thrown their weight behind Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj's GNA. According to one analyst, although proxy warfare constitutes a main plank of the Russian military policy in Libya, Moscow has, more than anything else, gained leverage in the conflict using “a sophisticated mixture of tools, ranging from disinformation to diplomacy to banking interference to clandestine military intervention”.<sup>593</sup> Russia's tactical alignment with a number of key GCC Gulf Arab states in the context of the Libyan battlespace creates a discrete but distinct venue for security and diplomatic engagement, or forums for bargaining and cooperation, which can possibly be made use of, if not replicated, in the Syrian context for the purpose of achieving a semblance of security order. For Russia views an increase in diplomatic and economic input of the Gulf Arab states in

---

<sup>593</sup> Jalel Harchaoui. “The Pendulum: How Russia Sways its Way to More Influence in Libya”, **War On The Rocks**, 07.01.2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-pendulum-how-russia-sways-its-way-to-more-influence-in-libya/>, (27.06.2021).



the Libyan theater as a form of incentive accorded to the Arab states for a possible readmission of Syria into the Arab League.

The interplay between Russia's overlays in the Syrian and Libyan geopolitical theaters should not be underestimated because both cases demonstrate one of the perks of Russia's diplomatic activities: its ability to be on friendly terms with all of the key MENA players, namely Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, the Assad regime in Syria and even Hamas and Hezbollah.<sup>594</sup> While the United States seems to be retrenching, the Russian Federation appears bent on exploiting the existing rift between the current U.S. administration and major Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE in order to leveraging its diplomatic engagements with the GCC Gulf Arab countries.<sup>595</sup> By so doing, Russia aims to coax the GCC states into adhering to a mode of conflict management which not only sees Russia as an indispensable regional power in the Middle East but also looks at the Arab states as key partners in crafting a multipolar Middle East security architecture. Hence, Russia's evolving overlays of the Levantine and Maghreb security sub-complexes, i.e., in Libya and Syria, can be seen as a litmus test of the Kremlin's vision for a multi-polar Middle East in which the U.S. is deprived of its hegemonic status.

However, mention must be made that in both sub-complexes, Russia sees Turkey as a formidable stakeholder and, more precisely, as a major pole that poses key challenges to the Kremlin's regionalization agenda in geopolitical theaters such as Libya. For instance, owing to Turkey's game-changing military intervention in January 2020 against the LNA's 14 month-long campaign to wade into Tripolitania, Russia, Egypt and the UAE intensified their military support of the eastern Libyan-based commander Khalifa Haftar and his forces.<sup>596</sup> Although Turkey's military intervention since January 2020 helped Ankara entrench its military presence in

---

<sup>594</sup> Irina Zvyagelskaya. "Russian Policy in the Levant", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 15, No. 60, 2018, p. 128.

<sup>595</sup> Warren P. Strobel. "Biden Re-Examining U.S. Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia, U.A.E", **The Wall Street Journal**, 27.01.2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-freezes-u-s-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia-uae-11611773191>, (27.06.2021).

<sup>596</sup> Following Turkey's military intervention, Russia dispatched Pantsir-type air defense systems, and deployed forces and operatives from the Russian private military company (PMC) Wagner Group, Syrian mercenaries and eventually MiG 29 and Su-24 fighter jets in Libya in support of Haftar's Libyan National Army Forces. See, BBC World Service. "US Says Russia Sent Jets to Libya 'Mercenaries'", **BBC**, 26.05.2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52811093>, (25.06.2021).

northwest Libya to the detriment of the Russia-UAE-Saudi-Egypt-Jordan-France axis, it at the same time prevented the emergence of a *fait accompli* situation in which Russia can dominate the post-conflict Libya through securing lucrative deals in oil and gas sectors and investments in defense area including securing permanent military bases.<sup>597</sup> At the same time, Russia sees Turkey as an adversarial partner in both Levant and Maghreb sub-complexes, particularly in Libya and Syria. In the Libyan context, Turkey threw a spanner into Russia's efforts to reap the geopolitical and economic spoils of war while simultaneously helping Moscow to penetrate into the Libyan scene. Simply put, the Libyan conflict reveals an interesting pattern of "adversarial collaboration" between Russia and Turkey which has evinced itself in the particular ways that the two external powers conduct a mode of conflict management from Syria in the Levant sub-complex all the way to Libya in the Maghreb sub-complex.

As applied to the case of Russia-Turkey relations in these sub-complexes, adversarial collaboration denotes a peculiar situation in which Turkey and Russia create "an asymmetric balance of power that ensures Turkey will lose more and Russia will win less if they continue with zero-sum game strategy".<sup>598</sup> Therefore, the Russian overlay of the Libyan conflict should be evaluated in the context of the overlapping and conflicting interests between Ankara and Moscow which contribute to the adversarial nature of the tactical collaboration between these two key actors of the MERSC. While Russia and Turkey do not pursue identical interests in the Libyan context, it is important to be reminded that the Libyan context provides them with new opportunities to achieve four overlapping goals: 1) reviving the stalled investments in Libya's energy sector and secure new lucrative economic contracts, 2) securing military positions and security basing along NATO's southern flank beyond the Black Sea and the Mediterranean sea, 3) undermining the US hegemonic influence in the MERSC and embed themselves into regional politics as indispensable players that can create a mode of conflict management in the Middle East complex, 4) turning the Maghreb sub-complex and the remainder of Africa into a sphere of influence.

---

<sup>597</sup> See, Jalel Harchaoui. "Why Turkey Intervened in Libya", **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, 07.12.2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/12/whyturkeyintervenedinlibya/>, (25.06.2021).

<sup>598</sup> Güney Yıldız. "Turkish-Russian Adversarial Collaboration in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh", **German Institute for International and Security Affairs**, No. 22.03.2021, p. 3 <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021C22/>, (27.06.2021).

What can be distilled from the foregoing caveats is that conflicts in Syria, Libya and eastern Mediterranean should not be evaluated in isolation. For one thing, the Libyan conflict itself cannot be separated from the new geopolitics of the eastern Mediterranean which signifies intense competitions over resource allocation as a result of the discovery of gas in the Mediterranean basin. Needless to say, the eastern Mediterranean incorporates conflict areas such as division in Cyprus, the war in Syria, and the Israeli-Palestine conflict.<sup>599</sup> In other words, as reflected by the RSC theory, in all of these conflicts we see a set of units whose major securitization and securitization as well as the broader impacts of their regionalization policies are so entwined that their security and geopolitical concerns cannot be analyzed and resolved in isolation. Hence, a logical inference can be derived to the effect that the security dynamics in one specific conflict area inexorably affects the security dynamics in another conflict area, leaving open the possibility of spillover and neighborhood effect—as it was previously discussed within the framework of the RSC theory. Another important implication of the interlinked nature of the conflict areas in the Levant and Maghreb sub-complexes pertains to what we previously referred to as the emergence of the condition of *inter-subcomplex interconnectivity* in the MERSC under which the security dynamics and developments within and across the three sub-complexes of the MERSC become heavily interconnected as a corollary of the changes in the essential structure of the MERSC, changes that are exerted by the recurring involvement of multiple internal and external players in various conflicts in different sub-complexes. Put differently, this condition emerges, chiefly but not solely, because the security and geopolitical dynamics in one sub-complex create direct *externalities* for the other and significantly impacts the security and geopolitical dynamics in other sub-complexes.

On the basis of this rationale, Russia's overseas military operations in Syria, Libya and eastern Mediterranean cannot be analyzed without taking into consideration the overlays of other major actors such as Turkey, Iran and Israel. Under the condition of *inter-subcomplex interconnectivity*, these traditionally external powers have not only become militarily embedded within different RSCs, even the bilateral relations they establish with other actors populating a specific sub-complex have potential

---

<sup>599</sup> Gökhan Takir. "Russian-Turkish Involvement in the Civil War in Libya", *Türkiye Rusya Araştırmaları Dergisi*, No. 3, 2020, pp. 190-220.

impacts on the security dynamics in RSCs and their sub-complexes. For example, some analysts argue that Russia's overlay of Libyan conflict was to a certain extent a byproduct of not only Moscow's geopolitical agenda at regional and global levels, but also "a natural progression of Moscow's renewed partnership with Egypt under Sisi, especially in the sphere of military-technical cooperation."<sup>600</sup>

A similar argument can be made in regards to Russia's tactical cooperation with the UAE and its impact on the Syrian conflict as evidenced by Moscow's efforts to use the GCC states' diplomatic weight to bring the Syrian regime back to the Arab League.<sup>601</sup> In this context, Russia's bilateral relations with the Egypt and its growing ties with the UAE affects, on the one hand, the Russia-Turkey relations, and, on the other hand, the security dynamics and patterns of amity and enmity in Maghreb and the Levant sub-complexes. The core argument here is that, as in the case of the Maghreb sub-complex, had it not been for Russia's growing security relations with Egypt in the Libyan and the Syrian contexts, Turkey might not have felt the urge to set in motion a cautious process of normalization of ties with Egypt as well as with Gulf heavyweights, namely the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Of course, Turkey's foremost aim for a *détente* with Egypt in 2021, after almost eight years, pertains to the ongoing disputes and rivalry over natural gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean, including maritime rights and scuttling Israel, Egypt, the UAE alliance with Greece and Greek Cypriots.<sup>602</sup> Nevertheless, the mere penetration of Russia, as an external great power,

---

<sup>600</sup> Ekaterina Stepanova. "Russia's Approach to the Conflict in Libya, the East-West Dimension and the Role of the OSCE", **Search for Stability in Libya: OSCE's Role between Internal Obstacles and External Challenges**, Andrea Dessi and Ettore Greco, Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2018, p. 96.

<sup>601</sup> Anton Mardasov. "Putin Appoints Third Special Envoy to Syria", **Al Monitor**, 27.05.2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/05/russia-putin-new-envoy-syria-damascus-conflict-efimov.html>, (26.07.2021).

<sup>602</sup> For Turkey-Egypt relations see, Meliha Altunışık. "Turkey's Relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia: From Hopes of Cooperation to the Reality of Conflict", **Aspiring Powers, Regional Rivals: Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the New Middle East**, Gönöl Tol, David Dumke, (eds.), Middle East Institute, 2019, pp. 17-38., Burhanettin Duran. "Logic and Timing of Turkey's Normalization with Egypt", **The Daily Sabah**, 05.05.2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/logic-and-timing-of-turkeys-normalization-with-egypt>, (26.06.2021)., Marwa Maziad. "Turkey and Egypt: Time for Normalization? Not Quite Yet", **Moshe Dayan Center**, Turkey Scope: Insights on Turkish Affairs, Vol. 5, No. 1, January-February 2021, <https://dayan.org/content/turkey-and-egypt-time-normalization-not-quite-yet>, (27.06.2021)., Amberin Zaman. "Will Turkey's Efforts to Woo Egypt Yield Fruit?", **Al Monitor**, 05.05.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/will-turkeys-efforts-woo-egypt-yield-fruit>, (27.06.2021)., Fehim Tastekin, "Turkey Faces Rough Road to Normalization with Egypt", **Al Monitor**, 07.05.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/turkey-faces-rough-road-normalization-egypt> & Ali Bakir. "Turkey-Egypt Relations: What's Behind Their New Diplomatic

in the Levantine and the Maghreb sub-complex ineluctably influences the patterns of amity and enmity and the balance of power in ways that diminish Turkey's emergent pattern of penetration in the Maghreb space.

Following this line of thinking, some scholars put forth the argument that irrespective of the objective of attenuating its isolation in the eastern Mediterranean, Turkey under the AKP has come to this realization that for it to become an "inter-regional power" with a commercial reach that can link the eastern Mediterranean, the Arabian Peninsula and the wider East Africa region, it should put an end to its "strategic antagonism" to Cairo.<sup>603</sup>

Seen in this context, in so far as Russia-Turkey relations in the context of the Libyan geopolitical scene are concerned, two interesting yet paradoxical caveats are in range. First, we can see that, on the one hand, Turkey's overt military intervention tilted the geopolitical balance of power in Libya in favor of Ankara vis-à-vis Russia, France, Egypt and the UAE. On the other hand, however, we can see that while the war in Libya has subsided following the formation in February 2021 of the Government of National Unity, Turkey has felt the exigency of overtures to the Franco-Emirati-Egyptian axis. Yet, the very same Turkish bid for a *rapprochement* towards this axis, regardless of its success or failure, is taking place against the backdrop of increasing rivalry for reaping the spoils of the Libyan war, thereby increasing the possibility of intense competition between external penetrating powers, namely Russia and Turkey in the Maghreb sub-complex. In this sense, the Maghreb sub-complex epitomizes such competitive dynamics in the best way possible.

What follows is that since 2003, Turkey has deepened its outreach to Africa (locus of the Maghreb sub-complex) as a main plank of its regional approach which is arguably linked to its wider global agenda. By employing *soft power* tools, Turkey has steadily expanded its influence in Africa in order to advance its economic, energy and

---

Push?", **Middle East Eye**, 12.03.2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/turkey-egypt-relations-new-diplomatic-push-what-behind>, (27.06.2021).

<sup>603</sup> Michael Tanchum. "Turkey's Rise as an Inter-Regional Power Requires Rapprochement with Egypt", **Turkey Analyst**, 29.05.2021, <https://turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/665-turkeys-rise-as-an-inter-regional-power-requires-rapprochement-with-egypt.html>, (27.06.2021).

military interests, particularly in the Maghreb countries such as Algeria and Tunisia and Sub-Saharan states such as Ethiopia, Niger, Chad and Somalia.<sup>604</sup>

There is no scope here to present a detailed appraisal of Turkey's role in Africa, but mention must be made that in line with Ankara's growing penetration of Africa, the number of Turkish embassies and diplomatic representatives has grown exponentially from 12 in 2009 to 42 in 2021.<sup>605</sup> Also, the trade volume between Turkey and Africa has ballooned from \$5.5 billion in 2003 to over \$26 billion in 2021.<sup>606</sup> Given Turkey's military presence in Somalia and considering that Turkey has exhibited its *hard power* capabilities in conducting overseas military operations, i.e., in Syria and Libya, it is plausible to argue that Ankara's prospects for carving a strategic niche in Maghreb sub-complex has substantially increased as a consequence of the aforesaid factors. However, with the rise of China and other emerging powers, Turkey faces an uphill struggle in cementing its status as a major power in the Maghreb sub-complex and south of the Sahara. Russia has also become a major contender of Turkey and China for geopolitical and economic influence in Maghreb sub-complex. According to some pundits, Russia's penetration of Africa is aimed at reducing the impact of coercive western sanctions, providing additional revenue to the Kremlin and expanding its military footprint and global disinformation network.<sup>607</sup> It is also important to note that France has also posed a challenge to other rivaling states who appear bent on expanding their influence. But France holds a "double ring of hard power around Libya and Algeria—an inner ring of operational facilities in Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, supported by an outer ring of permanent bases in Senegal, cote D'Ivoire, and Gabon".<sup>608</sup> In the overall scheme of things, it can be

---

<sup>604</sup> Mark Langan. "Virtuous Power Turkey in sub-Saharan Africa: the 'Neo-Ottoman' Challenge to the European Union", **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 38, No. 6, 2017, pp. 1399-1414.

<sup>605</sup> Burak Bir. "Turkey Continues to Increase its Presence in Africa", **Anadolu Agency**, 22.02.2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkey-continues-to-increase-its-presence-in-africa/2153572>, (27.06.2021).

<sup>606</sup> African Business. "Turkey Builds Embassies Across Africa as Erdogan Boosts Influence", **African Business**, 08.03.2021, <https://african.business/2021/03/trade-investment/turkey-builds-embassies-across-africa-as-erdogan-boosts-influence/>, (27.06.2021).

<sup>607</sup> Nataliya Bugayova and Darina Regio. "The Kremlin's Campaign in Africa: Assessment Update", **Institute for the Study of War**, 23.08.2019, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/kremlins-campaign-africa>, (27.06.2021).

<sup>608</sup> Michael Tanchum. "Turkey Advances in Africa against Franco-Emirati-Egyptian Entente", **Turkey Analyst**, 25.08.2020, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/646-turkey-advances-in-africa-against-franco-emirati-egyptian-entente.html>, (27.06.2021).

argued that given the intense level of polarization, securitization and regionalization strategies adopted by multiple penetrating powers in Northern Africa, Horn of Africa and the Sahel region, the Maghreb sub-complex is likely to remain a hotbed of geopolitical competition between Turkey, Russia and China in a foreseeable future with immense security implications in the MERSC.

In the Gulf sub-complex, Russia has less strategic and tactical interactions with Turkey than it has with the Islamic Republic of Iran and Arab countries, obviously because this sub-complex is, first and foremost, viewed as the epicenter of geopolitical competition between Tehran and Riyadh. In this context, the Syrian conflict served as a catalyst for Russia's growing military-security involvement in the Levant and greater penetration of Moscow into the Gulf sub-complex—composed of Iran, Iraq and GCC countries. Now that Russia has apparently achieved its bare-minimum political objectives in the Syrian conflict, namely the preservation of Assad regime, the Kremlin has set its sights on broadening its geopolitical canvass of influence to include MENA states, such as GCC countries. Russia seeks to establish sustainable patterns of cooperation in the areas of energy, commerce and military-defense while seeking to chip away at the so-called U.S. primacy in the Middle East complex. Notwithstanding the import of the Syrian factor, Russia's penetration of the Gulf sub-complex is motivated largely by three other key variables.

First, former U.S. President Donald Trump's October 2019 decision to withdraw the American troops from parts of the Middle East, including in Iraq and northern Syria, and the U.S. administrations' willingness to reduce its commitments in the Middle East complex has tilted the balance of power in favor of Russia and China. Although the scope and scale of the United States' retrenchment strategy towards the Middle East complex remain to be seen, there emerges a broad consensus that the growing disparity between the Gulf states' expectations from the U.S. and Washington's willingness to unequivocally and effectively respond to the GCC Gulf Arab states' security concerns has made the recalibration of the U.S. Middle Eastern strategy inevitable.<sup>609</sup> Likewise, the GCC states have also decided to adjust their

---

<sup>609</sup> Emile Hokayem. "Reassuring Gulf Partners While Recalibrating U.S. Security Policy", **From Hardware to Holism: Rebalancing America's Security Engagement with Arab States**, Frederic Wehrey and Michele Dunne, (eds.), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18.05.2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/18/reassuringgulfparkerswhilerecalibrating-u.s.-security-policy-pub-84522>, (25.06.2021).

foreign and security policies to the *new realities* of the MENA region. The vast majority of GCC Gulf Arab states have sought to diversify their relations and for that matter may look at Russia and China as potential security providers while retaining their core security and economic interests with Washington. Looking at these developments, the RSC theory assumes that great powers that are “outside” a specific regional security complex—Russia in the context of the Middle East—are unlikely to intervene in the region unless they are instigated by “internal and idiosyncratic factors”.<sup>610</sup>

As applied to the case of Russia’s penetration of the Gulf sub-complex, one can logically infer that the Russian military overlay of the Levant (the war in Syria), under the condition of the so-called American retrenchment, has provided Moscow with an opportunity to present itself as a partial security provider to the major powers of the Middle East, including those in the Gulf sub-complex. It must be parenthetically noted, however, that this is not to suggest that Russia can or is willing to usurp the U.S. position as key security provider in the MERSC, but rather that the GCC countries are fully cognizant of the Biden administration’s pivot away from the Middle East and that they seem to be adjusting their policies accordingly. The Biden administration’s salient decisions, such as scrapping the Trump-era ‘Maximum Pressure’ policy towards Iran in exchange for a diplomatic engagement with Tehran, exerting pressure on Riyadh to end the Yemen war, halting arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and stopping carte-blanche support of the Gulf states are reflective of the Biden administration’s ostensible recalibration of U.S. policy towards Gulf Arab countries.

The foregoing arguments partially explain the reasons behind the inclination of the UAE and Saudi Arabia to explore possible venues for cooperation and potentially enter into new alliances with other extra-regional powers, namely with Russia as part of their “general diversification of their foreign policy away from overreliance on the United States”.<sup>611</sup> As suggested by some analysts, the Saudis, for example, have thus far managed to pursue a foreign policy of delicate balance, hedging, and risk

---

<sup>610</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 64.

<sup>611</sup> Dmitri Trenin. “Russia in the Middle East, Moscow’s Objectives, Priorities and Policy Drivers”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 25.03.2016, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16\\_Trenin\\_Middle\\_East\\_Moscow\\_clean.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16_Trenin_Middle_East_Moscow_clean.pdf), (27.06.2021).



management, similar to Beijing's policy of "both this and that," namely, a policy of developing their "economic plus" relations with China while maintaining strategic relations with the United States".<sup>612</sup> A similar dynamic exists in the UAE's relations with Russia given that the two countries have signed the *Declaration of Strategic Partnership* in 2018 for political, security and economic cooperation.

Nevertheless, seeing Russia as a potential security provider is one thing, the actual material capabilities of Moscow, military-/economic-wise, to deliver substantially is another. This is why even some prominent Russian scholars caution that despite the new trends transpiring in the MERSC, Russia should be best viewed as "a tier-2 non-regional player for GCC states with states with a wide dialogue agenda but limited capacities [...] Moscow is weak economically, which, in turn, weakens its political leverage of influence".<sup>613</sup> Other Russian experts argue that Moscow tends to offset its material weakness by its capacity to focus on achieving specific foreign policy objectives, mobilizing needed resources and sustaining a coherent long-term strategy in various regions.<sup>614</sup> Granted that Russia's adverse economic situation and limited resources are usually identified as major hinderances to Russia's successful realization of its new regional role in the Middle East complex, the fact remains that the counter-hegemonic discourses of restraint and offshore balancing and even American isolationism under the Trump presidency have redounded to Russia's benefits. These factors have more than anything else augmented the threat perceptions of the GCC countries towards their chief enemy, namely Iran.<sup>615</sup>

While the Biden administration should not be seen as sole perpetrator of Gulf state's alienation, it is convincing to suggest that the current U.S. administration's actions have worsened the sense of threat perception and vulnerability amongst the most of Gulf states. Of course, there are variations across the GCC states regarding the

---

<sup>612</sup> Gerald Feierstein and Yoel Guzansky. "Saudi Arabia Returns", **Middle East Institute Policy Center**, 24.08.2021, p. 5, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/saudi-arabia-returns>, (27.06.2021).

<sup>613</sup> Leonid Issaev and Nikolay Kozhanov. "Diversifying Relationships: Russian Policy Toward GCC", **International Politics**, 27.02.2021. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1057/s41311-021-00286-4.pdf>, (26.06.2021).

<sup>614</sup> Zhaao Huasheng and Andrey Kortunov. "The Coming Bipolarity and Its Implications: Views from China and Russia", **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 23.11.2020, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-coming-bipolarity-and-its-implications-views-from-china-and-russia/>, (27.06.2021).

<sup>615</sup> George Löffmann. "From the Obama Doctrine to America First: The Erosion of the Washington Consensus on Grand Strategy", **International Politics**, Vol. 58, August Issue, 2020, pp. 588-605.

extent to which they see Iran as an existential threat. For example, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain see Iran as an existential threat whereas Qatar, Oman and Kuwait hold less securitization approaches towards Tehran. Nevertheless, no case is more emblematic of the GCC Gulf Arab states' sense of strategic vulnerability than that of the Trump administration's reluctance to engage in an armed conflict in the Middle East in support of Saudi Arabia following the September 2019 attack by Iran or its proxy forces on Saudi Aramco's oil refineries in Abqaiq and Khurais.<sup>616</sup> In this context, the unprecedented attack on Saudi Arabia's largest facilities not only exposed the vulnerabilities of critical Saudi infrastructure to missile and drone attacks, it also raised complicated strategic questions for Saudi and U.S. policy makers regarding responses and future security needs of the American Gulf allies in the Middle East.<sup>617</sup> Borrowing the words of one scholar, the rampant uncertainty and unpredictability of the previous U.S. administrations have cultivated "a shared impression of U.S. neglect" in different countries of the region, especially the status quo players in the Gulf as well as Israel.<sup>618</sup> Therefore, it was in this context and in view of the growing indications of an apparent U.S. military withdrawal from the Middle East that Russia is striving to present itself as a "specific" model of security provider in the Gulf sub-complex by "bringing the positions of regional and non-regional players closer together in order to stabilize the region".<sup>619</sup> Therefore, it is no coincidence that barely two months prior to the Saudi's Aramco attack, on July 23, the Russian Foreign Ministry released "the concept of collective security in the Persian Gulf" to introduce itself, albeit on paper, an alternative security provider.<sup>620</sup>

---

<sup>616</sup> Reuters. "Special Report: 'Time to Take out Our Swords' - Inside Iran's Plot to Attack Saudi Arabia", **Reuters**, 25.11.2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks-iran-special-report/USKBN1XZ16H>, (28.06.2021).

<sup>617</sup> Heather L. Greenley. "Attacks on Saudi Oil Facilities: Effects and Responses", 01.10.2019, **Congressional Research Review**, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11173>, (28.06.2021).

<sup>618</sup> Jordi Quero and Andrea Dessi. "Unpredictability in US Foreign Policy and the Regional Order in the Middle East: Reacting vis-à-vis a Volatile External Security-Provider", **British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2019, pp. 311-330.

<sup>619</sup> Ruslan Mamedov. "Russia as a Security Provider in the Middle East: Understanding the Limits and Opportunities", **Institut Für Sicherheitspolitik**, 12.08.2019, <https://www.institut-fuersicherheit.at/russia-as-a-security-provider-in-the-middle-east-understanding-the-limits-and-opportunities/>, (29.06.2021).

<sup>620</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Russia's Security Concept for the Gulf Area", **The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation**, Press Review, 23.07.2019, [https://www.mid.ru/en/ligaarabskihgosudarstvlag/asset\\_publisher/0vP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/3733593](https://www.mid.ru/en/ligaarabskihgosudarstvlag/asset_publisher/0vP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/3733593), (29.06.2021).

The chief conclusion drawn from these observations is that the success story of Turkey-Russia-Iran tactical partnership in creating a mode of conflict management in Syria (i.e., via Astana Process) has encouraged the Russian leadership to try to redo a somewhat similar regional security mechanism in reducing regional tensions, thereby introducing itself as a regional stabilizer by taking advantage of the so-called American retreat.

However, as previously mentioned, the prospects of Moscow's *ability* to prove itself as a sustainable alternative (military) security provider in the MERSC is murky due to three primary reasons, namely Russia's limited economic and financial resources which have been negatively affected by the impact of Covid-19 pandemic, the potential for unpredictability and temporality of Russia's presence in MENA region as a consequence of the protean nature of U.S.-Russia relations, and the mistrust of a number of GCC Gulf Arab countries towards the Kremlin's intention especially given Moscow's warm partnership with Tehran. Despite all of these limitations and challenges, the Kremlin has consolidated Russia's position as an influential external power—a major pole in the Middle East complex, including in the Gulf sub-complex, thanks mainly to the United States' retrenchment from the MERSC. In this spirit, even the change of U.S. administration has created opportunities as well as challenges for a deeper penetration of Russia into the Gulf sub-complex on both economic and geopolitical fronts.

Second, when it comes to Russia's penetration of the Gulf sub-complex, one cannot turn a blind eye to the sheer significance of Moscow's willingness to translate its diplomatic and geopolitical weight into quantifiable *economic* gains in its relations with GCC states plus Iran and Iraq. While the bulk of academic scholarship on Russia-GCC relations focus on the political and security aspects of these ties, less attention has been accorded to the import of economic factors in shaping interactions between Moscow and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Although the economic relations between Russia-GCC have a long pedigree, there is little doubt that the Russian direct involvement in the Syrian conflict ushered a new era in Russian relations with the GCC. Barring a period of deep-freeze in Russia-GCC relations (2012-2014) caused by the Kremlin's outright support of the Assad regime in Syria, Moscow and the countries of the GCC have developed a *transactional relationship*

guided not by long-standing alliances or partnerships but by short-term pragmatism and compartmentalization strategies. In the economic sphere, Russia's strategy towards the Gulf sub-complex is aimed at advancing its own interests in three main domains: arms sales, energy, and investment.<sup>621</sup> In the area of arms sales, the MENA region emerges as Russia's second most important arms market after Asia with the GCC countries showing increasing interest in buying Russian weaponry.<sup>622</sup>

#### 3.5.4. Russia as a New Security Provider

According to a report in March 2021 published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the increase in Russia's transfer of arms to the Middle East comes as the countries of the MENA region, including the GCC states, imported 25 percent more major arms in 2016-2020 than they did in 2011-2015.<sup>623</sup> Despite the increasing trend in arms sales to the Middle East, the United States remains to be "the single greatest arms supplier to the Middle East by volume and value." However, the GCC countries have increasingly diversified their sources of arms supplies. Although there is no exact figure available in terms of the value and volumes of Russian arms sales to the MENA region, by some accounts, Russia supplied 19.3 % of the Middle East's arms import after the United States.<sup>624</sup> From among the members of the Gulf sub-complex (except the case of Iran which was discussed in depth previously), the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar apparently see Russia as a new source of defense material. According to Kozhanov, the United Arab Emirates is seen as the most salient buyer of Russian weaponry particularly after the two countries

---

<sup>621</sup> James Sladden, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable, and Sarah Grand-Clement, "Russian Strategy in the Middle East". **RAND Corporation**, 2017. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE236.html>, (29.06.2021).

<sup>622</sup> Alexey Khlebnikov. "Russia Looks to the Middle East to Boost Arms Exports, **Middle East Institute**, April 08.04.2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-looks-middle-east-boost-arms-exports>, (29.06.2021).

<sup>623</sup> SIPRI, International Arms Transfers Level off after Years of Sharp Growth: Middle Eastern Arms Imports Grow Most, Says SIPRI", **SIPRI**, 15.03.2021, <https://www.sipri.org/media/pr-ess-release/2021/international-arms-transfers-level-after-years-sharp-growth-middle-eastern-arms-imports-grow-most>, (29.06.2021).

<sup>624</sup> Congressional Research Service. "Arms Sales in the Middle east: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy", **Congressional Research Service**, 23.11.2020, <https://fas.org/gsgp/crs/mideast/R44984.pdf>, (29.06.2021).

signed a “strategic partnership” agreement in June 2018.<sup>625</sup> The same trajectory of an increase in arms supplies from Russia is seen in the case of Saudi Arabia as the Kingdom maintains a securitized approach towards Iran while facing a possible cancellation of weapons exports by the Biden administration.<sup>626</sup> In the case of Saudi Arabia, In early 2021, it was reported that Saudi Arabia was in the process of sealing the deal for purchase of S-400 air defense systems and Su-35 fighter jets with Russia.<sup>627</sup>

It is imperative to note that following the September 2019 attacks on Saudi oil-processing facilities, Putin seized the opportunity and openly expressed the Kremlin’s inclination to supply Saudi Arabia with S-400 systems. As a general rule of thumb, it can be argued that given the strategic ambiguity that the previous two U.S. administrations have shown towards the GCC states, chief among them Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the Gulf Arab states have seen Russia as an alternative provider of military armaments and technology. In this context, it is no coincidence that the Trump administration’s decision in October 2019 to withdraw U.S. soldiers from northern Syria was followed by “triumphant visits” by Putin to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.<sup>628</sup> Similarly, it is also no coincidence that following the earlier successful military operations of Russia in Syria (2015-2017), which was accompanied by a powerful display of Russian modern strike systems, including its missiles defense systems and fighter jets, King Salman of Saudi Arabia paid a historic visit in October 2017 to Moscow. Some scholars argue that by gravitating towards Russia in security and economic terms, the GCC states’ aim is to a) dilute the Iranian overconfidence that Russia will support Tehran under any circumstances and geopolitical conditions, and

---

<sup>625</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov. “Russia-GCC Economic Relations: When Quality Matters More Than Quantity”, **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter 2021, p. 189.

<sup>626</sup> Al Jazeera. “Biden Team Considering Halting Some Arms Sales for Saudis”, **Al Jazeera**, 26.02.2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/26/biden-team-considering-halting-some-arms-sales-for-saudis-report>, (30.06.2021).

<sup>627</sup> Mark Episkopos. “Five Weapons Saudi Arabia Would Love to Buy from Russia”, **The National Interest**, 28.01.2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/five-weapons-saudi-arabia-would-love-buy-russia-177251>, (01.07.2021).

<sup>628</sup> Eugene Rumer. “Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 31.10.2019, p. 1, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/31/russia-in-middle-east-jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none-pub-80233>, (01.07.2021).

b) pursue a hedge against the U.S. Middle Eastern disengagement and use Russia as a bargaining chip to procure U.S. weaponry such as F-35 fighter jets.<sup>629</sup>

Having said this, the crux of the argument here is that Russia's penetration of the Gulf sub-complex is multi-dimensional, sophisticated and transactional and at the same time on predicated on a case-by-case basis. Following this line of thinking, a Russian scholar argues that "arms sales entail far more to the Kremlin than mere financial gains. They are also Moscow's tactical foreign policy tool for wielding political influence and changing power balance dynamics".<sup>630</sup> Seen in this light, investment and energy cooperation constitute the two remaining building blocks of the Russian economic penetration of Gulf sub-complex. In converting financial cooperation into geopolitical and strategic influence, Russia has since 2007 made significant inroads into GCC countries. The so-called "soft-power" dimension of Russia's penetration of the Middle East complex is most visible in the various ways that Kremlin uses the Gulf Arab states' attractive market for the purpose of promoting the interests of Russian state-owned and private companies as well as for generating financial revenues for Russia's ailing economy. In Theodore Karasik's view, the Persian Gulf states are the main target for Russia's financial tactics since 2007 and these tactics are as follows: 1) establishing a north-south" corridor of economic interconnectivity linked to Russia's growing influence in the Middle East, 2) promoting economic connectivity through soft power projects such as "Roadshows" which encourages Russian business leaders to the Gulf countries, 3) securing financial cooperation agreements between Russia and the Gulf states with a main focus on expanding synergy among the various sovereign wealth funds, 4) printing currency for distribution in the Middle East war zones.<sup>631</sup> From among the GCC countries, the oil-rich UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are considered the main sources of significant investments.

---

<sup>629</sup> Mark N. Katz. "Supporting Opposing Sides Simultaneously: Russia's Approach to the Gulf and the Middle East", **Al Jazeera**, 23.08.2019, p. 9, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/re-ports/2018/08/support-opposing-sides-simultaneously-russias-approach-gulf-middle-east-180823104054250.html>, (01.07.2021)., Samuel Ramani. "Russia and the UAE: And Ideational Partnership", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 27, No. 1, 2020, p. 125.

<sup>630</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya. "The Tactical Side of Russia's Arms Sales to the Middle East", Russia in The Middle East, Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank, **The Jamestown Foundation**, December 2018.

<sup>631</sup> Theodore Karasik. "Russia's Financial Tactics in the Middle East", Russia in The Middle East, Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank, **The Jamestown Foundation**, December 2018.

It is notable that a detailed investigation of the highways and byways of the Russia-GCC economic investments projects is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Yet, the growing body of literature testifies that there have been major improvements in economic relations, i.e., investment and energy cooperation fields, between Russia and the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar and to a lesser extent between Russia and Oman and Kuwait.<sup>632</sup> In the field of energy cooperation, Russia, as one of the world's top three producers of hydrocarbons, has vital interests in the MENA region's oil and gas supplies especially at a crucial time when the shale revolution has apparently relieved the American dependence on Persian Gulf oil. In terms of Russia-GCC cooperation in energy fields, one can allude to the joint Russia-Saudi efforts in creation in 2016 of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC+), an alliance of OPEC members and some of the major non-OPEC oil-exporting countries in order to regulate oil prices. Not to mention that Russian energy giants such as Gazprom, Lukoil, Rosatom and Rosneft have secured lucrative energy deals with the UAE, Qatar, Iran and Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Of particular importance is that energy is the prime asset of Russian economic policy in Iraq with a total of \$10 billion in investments in the country's energy sector.<sup>633</sup> Nevertheless, Russia's growing footprints in Iraq faces a paradoxical dilemma. On the one hand, the U.S. administration's partial withdrawal opens windows of opportunity for Russia to penetrate into the Iraqi political and economic spheres. On the other hand, the U.S. disengagement which has contributed to a protracted conflict between Iran and the U.S. could dash the Russian hopes of inserting itself into Iraqi market. These challenges are indicative of the kinds of importance that

---

<sup>632</sup> For a comprehensive review of Russia-GCC economic relations see, Theodore Karasik. "Russia's Financial Tactics in the Middle East", *Russia in The Middle East*, Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank, **The Jamestown Foundation**, December 2018., & Nikolay Kozhanov. "Russia-GCC Economic Relations: When Quality Matters More Than Quantity", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter 2021, pp. 183-203., James Sladden, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable, and Sarah Grand-Clement. "Russian Strategy in the Middle East", **RAND Corporation**, 2017. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE236.html>, (02.07.2021)., Tomas Kavalek and Filip Sommer. "Russian Encroachment in Arab Countries Since 2011", **New Direction**, 2018, pp. 38-40, <https://newdirection.online/2018-publications-pdf/NDreportCZ-Kavalek.pdf> , (03.07.2021)., Yuri Barmin. "Russian Energy Policy in the Middle East", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2017, pp. 125-136.

<sup>633</sup> TRT. "The Importance of Russia's Growing Footprint in Iraq", **TRT World**, 25.09.2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/the-importance-of-russia-s-growing-footprint-in-iraq-40054>, (02.07.2021).

the Kremlin attaches to the need for keeping diplomatic channels open with various political and military, as well as militia groups such as Iran-backed Hashd al-Shaabi.

In the final analysis, it can be argued that Russia's penetration of the Gulf sub-complex has been enabled not just by the Russian interventions into various conflict zones, namely in Syria, but also by the emergence of shared economic interests between Moscow and the countries of the GCC plus Iran and Iraq. Without a doubt, the Gulf states have the financial largesse to help Russia partially extract itself from its economic predicaments. Most importantly, the wealthy states of the Persian Gulf possess ample economic capacity to participate in Syria's reconstruction projects and thereby ameliorate the financial challenges that Russia faces to bring about a semblance of stability in Syria. Therefore, the upward trend in Russia's economic involvement in the MENA region, namely in the Gulf sub-complex through energy, investment and arms deals, can be described as integral parts of the Kremlin's broader compartmentalization strategy to create specific patterns of cooperation and shared interests with key Gulf states. This transactional and multi-vectoral strategy is not only profit-driven for both Russia and other key Gulf states but also is regarded as a carefully-crafted tactic for Moscow to convert these economic opportunities into geopolitical influence at the regional level.

Overall, the Russian strategy is aimed at 1) counterbalancing the U.S. influence in the Persian Gulf sub-complex, 2) building sanctions-resistant economy and rendering U.S. sanctions regime as ineffective, 3) creating a healthy and stable geopolitical environment so that Russia can portray itself an indispensable regional power that can help the rivaling powers of the MENA region negotiate a settlement, potentially beginning from a possible resolution of the Syrian conflict.

Having said this, it should be acknowledged that despite the post-2017 improvements in relations between Russia and the member of the Gulf sub-complex, Moscow's power to significantly influence the security dynamics in the region remains limited compared to that of the United States and is constrained by the uncertainties and complexities that are produced by the ongoing tensions between the United States and Iran in the Persian Gulf and the Levant.

This issue brings us to the third complicated aspect of Russia's penetration of the Gulf sub-complex, which pertains to the challenges posed by the uncertainty



regarding Iran-U.S. state of affairs as well as its implication on the security dynamics in and outside this volatile sub-complex. Of paramount significance is that after the Trump administration's withdrawal from the nuclear deal (JCPOA) and the re-imposition of U.S. sanctions on Iran, Tehran set in motion an orchestrated campaign of escalatory attacks on the United States and its regional allies starting from May 2019. On the defensive, the Islamic Republic sought to make use of prolific military experiences it has learned from the Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi battlefields and, for that matter, it employed asymmetrical deterrence tactics in the Gulf sub-complex. Seeking to achieve its strategic goal of coercing the Trump administration to remove sanctions and withdraw from Iraq and the region, the Islamic Republic targeted the U.S. and its regional allies' interests, including attacks on international oil tankers (May, June 2019), Houthi attacks on Saudi pipeline (May 2019), drone attacks on Abqaiq and Khurais refineries in Saudi Arabia (September 2019), and multiple proxy militia attacks on U.S. diplomatic and military interests in Iraq (December 2019-January 2020).<sup>634</sup> While Iran's and its proxies' cruise and ballistic attacks targeted mainly the U.S. military bases in the Persian Gulf region, the September 2019 attacks on Saudi's Aramco oil facilities raised important questions about Tehran's regional intentions and its implications on the security and geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East complex.

Before we proceed ahead with a brief appraisal of the implications of the continued Iranian overlay of the Gulf sub-complex, its regional implications and how it might have affected the regional roles and orientations of Russian Middle Eastern engagement, it is important to provide a synoptic overview of Iran-GCC relations and examine the main objectives of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy towards the GCC. In so far as the trajectory of Iran-GCC relations is concerned, it is important to note that these relations entered a period of détente following the culmination of Iran-Iraq war, reverted back to a phase of intermittent tensions from 2002 under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad until 2013 when the ties bordered on a period

---

<sup>634</sup> For a timeline on Iran's escalation attacks on U.S. and its allies in the Middle East see, Frederick W. Kagan, et al. "Iranian Escalation Timeline", **Institute for the Study of War**, 08.01.2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/iranian-escalation-timeline>, (02.07.2021)., **Reuters**, "Iran's Supreme Leader says Americans will be Expelled from Iraq and Iran", **Reuters**, 17.05.2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iranusakhmaneidUSK-BN22T0PF>, (02.07.2021).

of watchful entente in the first tenure of Hassan Rouhani's presidency which declared establishing "friendly relations" with neighbors, including the countries of the Gulf region.<sup>635</sup> The relations between Iran and the GCC countries (with an exception of Qatar) underwent a tumultuous period of enmity from early 2015—concurrent with the beginning of Saudi involvement in Yemen war—until early 2021 when reports surfaced about 'secret talks' between Riyadh and Tehran.<sup>636</sup> In general, Iran's policy towards the GCC is aimed at three main objectives. First, Iran seeks to solve the security dilemma in the Persian Gulf region by asserting its geopolitical weight and diplomatic relevance in its relations with the Arab countries and by normalizing relations with them on the basis of cooperation in areas of common interests at both bilateral and regional levels. Second, developing trade relations with the Gulf countries and advancing Iran's economic interests so that the Islamic Republic can evade political isolation. Third, driving a wedge between the Gulf states and the United States and further contribute to intra-GCC disagreements in order to deal a blow to the U.S. influence in the Persian Gulf and weaken the GCC's perceptions of the U.S. as an ally.<sup>637</sup>

As for the implications of the Islamic Republic's overlay of the Gulf sub-complex, three considerations are apposite. First, the September 2019 attacks on Saudi Arabia's Aramco oil installations and the ensuing U.S. administration's inaction not only signaled a profound recalibration of U.S. policy towards Gulf security but also eroded the Gulf states' confidence in the traditional U.S. position in the region. Second, the growing Iranian overlay of the Gulf sub-complex against the backdrop of the Trump administration's unwillingness to provide security for the Saudi-UAE axis gave birth to a new security realignment in the Middle East as exemplified by the various normalization agreements signed between Israel and a number of GCC states

---

<sup>635</sup> Mohammad Javad Zarif. "What Iran Really Wants: Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era", **Foreign Affairs**, (May/June 2014), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2014-04-17/what-iran-really-wants> & Mohammad Javad Zarid. "Mohammad Javad Zarif: A Message from Iran", **The New York Times**, 20.04.2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/20/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-a-message-from-iran.html>, (06.07.2021).

<sup>636</sup> Reuters, Iran Confirms Talks with Saudi Arabia, Promises Best Efforts, **Reuters**, 10.05.2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-confirms-talks-with-saudi-arabia-promises-best-efforts-2021-05-10/>, (06.07.2021).

<sup>637</sup> Jianwei Han and Hassan Hakimian. "The Regional Security Complex in the Persian Gulf: The Contours of Iran's GCC Policy", **Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2019, p.494.

under the Abraham Accords. Third, the absence of a dominant or hegemonic regional power and the erosion of the U.S. role as a reliable security provider for the Arab Gulf countries favored the emergence of not only new regional alliances but also the arrival on the scene of new external actors bent on presenting themselves as new regional poles or main geopolitical stakeholders possessing order-making capabilities.

From among other actors external to the Gulf sub-complex, Russia called for collective security system in the Persian Gulf to prevent a large-scale military conflict in the region.<sup>638</sup> In other words, Russia opportunistically exploited the hyper volatile geopolitical and security environment of the Middle East— which was further aggravated as a corollary of the deepening of U.S.-Iran and Iran-Saudi/UAE tension— in order to insert itself into the geopolitical equations in the Persian Gulf sub-complex. In Shireen Hunter's view, just as Moscow has been steadily expanding its relations with the Gulf and other Arab states, the United States hostile policies towards Iran afforded Moscow with the much-needed opportunity to broaden its influence in Iran and further gain a geopolitical footprint in the Persian Gulf.<sup>639</sup> The multiple joint military exercises conducted between Iran and Russia in the Persian Gulf from roughly December 2019 to February 2021 (the latest) are illustrative of the Kremlin's willingness to increase its military presence in the region to the detriment of the United States' influence. Also, from a diplomatic perspective, it bears emphasizing that Russia has endeavored to position itself as an ideal intermediary between Iran and the GCC in view of the so-called 'tanker war' in the Persian Gulf as well as between Iran and the U.S. in light of the recent rounds of nuclear negotiations. In the former's case, the concept of a new 'collective security mechanism' as a *regionalized* security system to resolve the contentious issues in the Persian Gulf region has become an integral part of Russia's Middle Eastern strategy. Akin to the Helsinki Accords in 1975, the Russian initiative for a multilateral security system based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of states and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law, seeks to infuse a degree of predictability and stability into the Gulf

---

<sup>638</sup> Edith M. Lederer. "Russia Calls for Collective Security in Gulf, US Blames Iran", **The Associated Press**, 21.10.2020, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-iran-persian-gulf-tensions-russia-united-nations-a51594cbca5517c27524e6d621b9a015>, (07.07.2021).

<sup>639</sup> Shireen Hunter. "Could Russia Get its Persian Gulf Port?", **LobeLog**, 13.09.2019, <https://lobelog.com/could-russia-get-its-persian-gulf-port/>, (07.07.2021).

region.<sup>640</sup> Russia then hopes that it can broaden the scope and scheme of enhanced consultations to include regional negotiations over issues-areas related to other conflict zones, namely in Syria. It is interesting to note that Russia's security concept which is consistent and compatible with Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavor has not been, as of yet, rejected by the GCC and other Arab countries.<sup>641</sup>

Ironically, much to the dismay of the Islamic Republic, Moscow's willingness to involve all regional actors—including Israel, Tehran's arch-enemy, as well as the permanent members of the UNSC, contradicts the Iranian view that such security platform should be limited to the participation of immediate neighbors in the Persian Gulf.<sup>642</sup> It goes without saying that since Israel has also introduced itself into the Gulf sub-complex, namely due to the signing of Abraham Accords with a number of key GCC countries, neither Israel nor Turkey cannot be excluded from this collective security system. Consequently, while elaborating on the myriads of challenges facing the Russian initiative, experts such as Andrey Kortunov caution that "a collective security model, despite looking attractive and desirable, turns out to be unattainable under the current political circumstances [...] it would make sense to start with relatively modest incremental confidence-building measures, particularly between Iran and the major Arab Gulf states."<sup>643</sup>

Hence, the four-day visit by Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in March 2021, followed by a rare meeting with Lebanon's Hezbollah delegation and a meeting with the former Israeli Foreign Minister as well as Lavrov's visit to Tehran in April 2021 can be seen as the Kremlin's efforts to surmount some of these challenges and project diplomatic power into the Gulf sub-complex. In sum, this chapter provides two sets of arguments:

---

<sup>640</sup> For more on Helsinki Process see, Mikael Wigell, Mika Aaltola and Mariette Hagglund. "The Helsinki Process and Its Applicability: Towards Regional Security-Building in the Persian Gulf", **Finish Institute of International Affairs**, No. 288, 03.09.2020, <https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/the-helsinki-process-and-its-applicability>, (07.07.2021).

<sup>641</sup> Mahjoob Zweiri and Suleiman Muyassar. "Iran Hormuz Peace Initiative and the Neighboring Countries: The Helsinki Model", **Gulf Insights**, No. 11, 2019, [https://www.qu.edu.qa/static\\_file/qu/research/Gulf%20Studies/documents/Hormuz%20Initiative%20%20No11%20gulf%20insight%20english%20version.pdf](https://www.qu.edu.qa/static_file/qu/research/Gulf%20Studies/documents/Hormuz%20Initiative%20%20No11%20gulf%20insight%20english%20version.pdf), (07.07.2021).

<sup>642</sup> Milan Czerny. "Russia's Security Image in the Gulf, **RIDDLE Russia**, 30.04.2021, <https://www.ridl.io/en/russia-s-security-mirage-in-the-gulf/>, (07.07.2021).

<sup>643</sup> Andrey Kortunov. "Meeting Security Challenges in the Gulf: Ideal Solutions and Practical Steps", **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 14.05.2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/meeting-security-challenges-in-the-gulf-ideal-solutions-and-practical-steps/>, (07.07.2021).

Empirically, it claims that the Syrian conflict demonstrated the limits of western powers, especially the United States, in creating its own *reality* in the MENA region. It marked the end of the era of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East and North Africa region and showed that Washington is no longer the only power capable of affecting regional security dynamics and providing security for sub-regional actors. We also argued that since the beginning of the Syrian civil war and the ensuing military interventions of two major regional players (Turkey and Iran) and two extra-regional global powers (Russia and the United States) into the conflict, the MENA region has experienced parallel and cross-cutting levels of regionalization, securitization, and polarization all at once. The ongoing Russia-Turkey tactical partnership over Syria, without mischaracterizing it as an alliance, is a prime example of the deepening polarization of the Middle East. The United States' incremental retrenchment strategies towards the Middle East since 2011 have provided both regional and extra-regional players with an opportunity to influence security and geopolitical dynamics as well as the distribution of power in the region. Seen in this light, Turkey, Iran and Russia have thus become major poles in the Middle East security complex, thereby taking advantage of the conflicts from Yemen to Libya and the United States' pivot away from the Middle East in order to advance their own interests. Specifically, the Russian Federation has established itself as a major power broker in the MENA region to the detriment of the U.S. and its allies' interests. The GCC Gulf Arab states have also diversified their defense and security relations and looked at China, Russia and non-US suppliers as potential security providers and economic partners, albeit they are not opting for strategic autonomy from the United States.

The *new realities* of the Middle East have also contributed to an increasing level of regionalization and localization approaches due in part to the failure of external powers to provide a coherent strategy aimed at bringing order and stability in this hyper volatile region. These regionalized and localized *modi operandi* can be seen in the foreign and security approaches of Iran, Russia and Turkey as they seek to craft regionalized forums for settling conflicts, i.e., the Astana Peace Process in the case of the Syrian conflict. The wave of agreements between Arab countries and Israel brokered by the Trump administration, which was aimed at confronting Turkey's and Iran's influence, is another case in point. Underneath the complex rivalry for regional

influence and the growing asymmetric threat perceptions of actors involved in the Syrian conflict and beyond lies securitization approaches that each actor adopted in order to respond to the threats and challenges they faced both domestically and externally. Hence, following the war in Syria, three distinct securitization patterns emerge in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia-the UAE-Bahrain-Egypt versus Qatar-Turkey bloc, Iran-Turkey-Russia bloc versus U.S., and Iran versus Israel. From among these securitization blocs the latter two have proven to be more robust whereas the former has to a certain extent evaporated following the Al-Ula GCC summit in January 2021 which resulted in the lifting of the boycott that was imposed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt in 2017. While the longevity of the two latter blocs has yet to withstand the test of time, it is not unwise to postulate that Russia-Turkey-Iran bloc has, as a direct cause of the Syrian civil war, become the most formidable liability for the United States in its grand strategy towards the Middle East. Ironically, the more the U.S. exerts pressure on each of the three regional powers, the greater the proclivity of Tehran, Ankara and Moscow to reinforce and build up on their patterns of amity as a means to counterbalance the United States. Therefore, the concurrent emergence of heightened levels of securitization, regionalization and polarization in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Syrian civil war entailed significant implications for the trajectory of regional politics, most importantly, for the issue of order(s) in the Middle East. In sum, this chapter sought to proffer two key arguments:

Theoretically, we explained that the *new realities* of the Middle East beg the need for an updating of RSC theory to be applied to such an empirical study of the impact of the Syrian conflict on the Middle East security order. The assertion is that the regional security complex theory suffers from shortcomings in explaining the newly-found roles played by Turkey and Russia in the MERSC. Moreover, this chapter uncovered the various ways the conflict in Syria in regional and extra-regional powers, i.e., Russia, Iran and Turkey into a sub-complex to which they traditionally did not belong. Accordingly, the study put forth three new concepts and arguments which explain the new realities of the MENA region in light of the Syrian conflict in a clearer manner. Namely, it was argued that Turkey can no longer be regarded as an insulator state. Instead, due to reasons we provided in preceding segments, chief among them

the AKP government's overlay of the Levantine sub-complex and the Maghreb sub-complex, Turkey has become a major pole in the Middle East complex. Additionally, the Kremlin's military overlay of the Syrian conflict catapulted Russia into the heart of the Middle East security complex and transformed Moscow's role from an external power into a major pole on a par with the United States.

In this chapter, new concepts that help us better explain and understand the security dynamics in the region, such as inter-subcomplex interconnectivity and membership-overlapping were outlined. The former concept was defined as an acute condition of anarchy under which the security and geopolitical dynamics within the sub-complexes of the Levant and the Persian Gulf and to a lesser extent the Maghreb become inextricably interconnected not merely because the security interdependence is more intense among the units inside such sub-complexes but primarily because factors such as overlaying and/or penetration of extra-regional actors, internal transformations and external transformations within such sub-complexes have rendered these dynamics as such. The latter refers to a complex situation dominating the Middle East security complex in which one regional actor can be a member of two or three sub-complexes in the Middle East. For instance, Iran can be regarded as both a member of the Persian Gulf sub-complex (the epicenter of Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry) as well as a member of the Levant (the locus of the Syrian war). Finally, it was argued that since the beginning of the Syrian conflict the Middle East has undergone an internal transformation as a consequence of changes in balance of power, polarity and patterns of amity and enmity.

The underlying factor contributing to this international transformation was the military involvement of a number of regional and extra-regional actors in the Syrian civil war, foremost the Russian Federation. Although it remains to be seen whether Russia can maintain a durable geopolitical influence in the Middle East security complex, the fact remains that its cooperation with Turkey and Iran have had important bearings on the regional security order with implications on the global order as a whole.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### REGIONAL ORDER

#### 4.1. REVISITING ORDER IN THE MIDDLE EAST SECURITY COMPLEX IN VIEW OF THE RSCT+RPSF MODEL

The Middle East and North Africa region is in a state of great transformation. A decade into the developments associated with the Arab uprisings, chiefly among them the Syrian civil war, the Middle East security complex continues to display enduring symptoms of disorder and crisis. Recalling Antonio Gramsci's reference to "morbid symptoms" and applying it into the MENA region's current *zeitgeist*, "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear".<sup>644</sup> From this viewpoint, one can comprehend what is happening in the MERSC in light of the region's lingering *search for order*.

From the perspective of the evolution of the regional system as a whole, however, the MENA region, in Hinnebusch's view, can be divided roughly into six overarching phases: 1) the age of imperialism and oligarchic multipolarity from 1920 to 1955, 2) the age of pan-Arab revolution from 1956 to 1970 as exemplified by Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arab hegemony, 3) the age of state-centric Arabism in 1970s as evidenced by the formation an interest-based trilateral alliance among Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia, 4) the age of realism from 1975 to 1990, 5) the age of U.S. hegemony from roughly 1990 to 2010, 6) the age of Arab uprisings from 2010 onwards.<sup>645</sup> In the sixth phase, the Syrian conflict itself together with the ensuing military interventions by Turkey, Russia and Iran have proven to be the most enduring developments within the timespan since the outbreak of the Arab uprising events. Although the military phase of the Syrian war is slowly subsiding—with an exception of the situations in Idlib and the uncertain future of areas controlled by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in eastern parts of the country—and the trio members of the

---

<sup>644</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, vol. 1, Quaderni 1-5 (Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1977), 311. English translation quoted from **Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci**, ed. Trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1971, p. 276.

<sup>645</sup> Antonio Gramsci, pp. 36-72



Astana Peace Process struggle to push Syria into the reconstruction period, there are ongoing debates within the academic as well as the mainstream media about the lingering impacts of the Syrian conflict on the issue of regional order. After examining the dynamics and impacts of the relations between and among Iran, Turkey and Russia, this chapter aims to probe the role of the Syrian conflict and the tactical partnership among Turkey, Iran, Russia on the issue of order in the MENA as seen through the RSCT+RPSF framework.

#### 4.2. THE MORBID SYMPTOMS OF THE MIDDLE EAST'S SEARCH FOR A NEW ORDER

Time was when the security system in the Middle East complex was centered around three major Arab states (Egypt, Syria and Iraq) and traditional non-Arab players (Turkey, Iran and Israel). During the Arab cold war of the 1950s and the 1960s, the Middle East security complex bore witness to an intense power struggle characterized by the competition between “revolutionary” republics, led by pan-Arab nationalist military ranks and files under the Soviet tutelage, and more conservative or even reactionary monarchies under the western security umbrella.<sup>646</sup> Similar to the systemic-level dynamics which characterized the superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Middle East security complex began in this period to imitate the bipolar structure of the international system. With the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971, a new era began in which Iran and Saudi Arabia emerged as the regional guardians of the status-quo through the so-called ‘Twin-Pillars strategy’, seeking to fill in the security vacuum left by the British exit.<sup>647</sup> Following a series of events such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the decision by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to visit Jerusalem and establish peace talks with Israel, and, most importantly, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the era of *Pax Americana* was set in motion. The U.S. primacy in the Middle East

---

<sup>646</sup> Curtis Ryan. “The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria”, **Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)**, Spring 2012, <https://merip.org/2012/03/the-new-arab-cold-war-and-the-struggle-for-syria/>

<sup>647</sup> Esra Çavuşoğlu. “Britain’s Post-Colonial Foreign Policy Towards Persian Gulf Security (1971-1991): An Alternative Approach”, **Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2018, p. 37.

security complex was further consolidated after the American use of force to push back against Saddam's August 1990 invasion and occupation of Kuwait, and, most specifically, as a direct consequence of the 2003 U.S. military intervention in Iraq. In general, from the 1950s to the 1990s and beyond, the Middle East security complex saw the Eisenhower Doctrine (1957-1960), the Nixon Doctrine (1969-1976), and the Carter Doctrine (1980-present). Afterwards, the Bush's Doctrine based on the ideas of 'democratization and pre-emption' contributed to the formation of a new regional power structure in which states like Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates leaned strategically towards the United States whereas a revisionist front emerged among Iran, Syria and the Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>648</sup>

As it was briefly examined in the previous chapters, the removal of Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 and the ouster of Saddam in Iraq in 2003 obliterated two of Tehran's enemies and helped Iran to create a 'sphere of resistance' (*hoze-moghavemat*) in the region. As Iran elevated its position as a regional power in the post-Iraq invasion in 2003, Saudi Arabia's threat perceptions towards Tehran was significantly increased. As one scholar observes, "the weakening and unravelling of the Iraqi state following the two destructive Gulf wars transformed the Persian Gulf sub-complex from a tripolar power orientation into a bipolar structure at the beginning of the 2000s in which Iran and Saudi Arabia were positioned as the dominant powers."<sup>649</sup> In the broader Middle East security complex, there were serious concerns especially on the part of the GCC countries as well as Turkey about the future of American engagement and commitment in the region. These concerns were aggravated as a consequence of three key developments, namely the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2010 and 2011, the U.S. disinclination to buttress Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt during the 2011 Arab uprisings, and the Obama administration's backtracking on its 'red line' about the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons. In this setting, the 'new Arab cold war' in the Middle East security complex reached its pinnacle with the outbreak of the Syrian conflict as the GCC states called for international pressure to depose Assad while Iran and Hezbollah backed the regime in Damascus.

<sup>648</sup> Ross Harrison. "Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power: An Historical Perspective, *Al Jazeera*, 02.09.2018, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/09/shifts-middle-east-balance-power-historical-perspective-180902084750811.html>, (08.07.2021).

<sup>649</sup> Fatma Aslı Kelkitli. "Saudi-Iranian Entanglements in the Persian Gulf: Is Rapprochement Possible?", *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, Vol. 47, 2016, p. 44.

It is worth recalling that in this period the U.S. discourse shifted from an erstwhile emphasis on democratization to securitization. Nevertheless, such discursive detour away from normative concerns fell short of gratifying the GCC countries' foremost security concern about the growing threat posed by Iran. As Fawaz Gerges suggested the uprisings marked "a psychological and epistemological rupture, creating new patterns of contentious politics" in the Middle East, particularly in the Arab world.<sup>650</sup> In a somewhat similar vein, one can argue that the Arab uprisings in general and the Syrian civil war in particular marked a moment of reflection for the GCC countries in the sense that it confronted these Arab states with serious dilemmas about their prospective regional roles and the reality of their perceived expectations from the United States, a country that they perceived as the 'dominant hegemon' in the Middle East security complex. These dilemmas were further aggravated when, much to the dismay of the GCC states, the Obama administration provided Iran with substantial economic relief as part of an interim nuclear agreement with Tehran—the interim deal was in July 2015 christened as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also referred to as JCPOA.<sup>651</sup>

Israel also shared the GCC concerns about Iran's growing penetration of the Middle East region as the Jewish state's strategic neighborhood underwent rapid transformations. Meanwhile, former Mossad chief Yossi Cohen stated in January 2016 that the JCPOA emboldened Iran, adding that the Islamic Republic "continues to call for Israeli's destruction, it upgrades its military capabilities and deepens its grip in our area ... via its tentacles of terror."<sup>652</sup> Even the then U.S. Foreign Secretary John Kerry acknowledged that some of the unfrozen funds allocated to Iran under the JCPOA agreement could go to funding terrorism and that "the US has no control over it."<sup>653</sup>

---

<sup>650</sup> Fawaz Gerges. **The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World**, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2014, p. 1.

<sup>651</sup> According to the FDD, the Obama administration's decision to lift sanctions on Iran's use of frozen overseas assets of about \$100 billion provided the Islamic Republic with badly needed hard currency to repair its economy and finance its regional activities in the region and beyond. See, Mark Dubowitz and Annie Fixler. "The Iran Deal's Fatal Flaws After One Year", Center on Sanctions and Illicit Finance, **Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD)**, 14.07.2016, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2016/07/14/the-iran-deals-fatal-flaws-after-one-year-emboldened-iran-and-diminished-american-deterrence/>, (09.07.2021).

<sup>652</sup> For a detailed study of Israel's approach towards Iran see, for example, Dalia Dassa Kaye and Shira Efron. "Israel's Evolving Iran Policy", **Survival**, Vol. 62, No. 4, 2020, pp. 7-30.

<sup>653</sup> Elise Labott. "John Kerry: Some Sanctions Relief Money for Iran will Go to Terrorism", **CNN**, 21.01.2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/21/politics/john-kerry-money-iran-sanctions-terrorism/index.html>, (10.07.2021).

The post-Arab uprising events also put Turkey and Iran at loggerhead over their competition conception of regional order. While Turkey boasted about its political status as a model that could be a source of inspiration for the Arab countries, Iran, by contrast, brandished its unripe vision of ‘Islamic awakening’ which was based on Iranian-type Islamic revolution (*enghelab-i-eslami*).<sup>654</sup> Yet the United States and European states perceived the ‘Iranian model’ based on the Velayat-e Faqih—or the Guardian of the Islamic Jurist—as more of a threat than a viable alternative to the decadent authoritarian political systems in the region. In reality, in 2012 the Middle East was perceived to be on the cusp of a “new regional order” that was friendly to Turkey.<sup>655</sup> Yet the Turkish euphoria over the Arab uprisings proved to be ephemeral. In the context of the Syrian civil war, Iran interpreted the United States’ apathy to wage a Libya-style military intervention in Syria as a tell-tale sign of the ‘decline of American hegemony’. With the passage of time, the course of war was reversed in favor of Iran as well as the Assad regime following the Russia’s military intervention in Syria, much to the detriment of the United States and its regional allies, namely the GCC states, Turkey and Israel. According to some accounts, by September 2015, the number of IRGC forces in Syria reached at approximately 8,000 to 10,000, in addition to 5,000 to 6,000 soldiers from the regular Iranian army. The number of IRGC and Iranian paramilitary personnel in Syria reached between 6,500 and 9,200 in April 2016.<sup>656</sup> For Iran, Assad’s regime survival served as both the means and the ends. Ensuring the preservation of Assad’s regime was in practice and in principle a means for creating “a contiguous zone of indirect influence spanning historical Mesopotamia (where Iran strives for domination and targets the US military presence) and the Levant toward the Mediterranean—the so-called Iranian ‘land bridge’.”<sup>657</sup> For Moscow,

<sup>654</sup> Bulent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar. “Turkey and Iran after the Arab Spring: Finding a Middle Ground”, **Middle East Policy**, Vol. XXI, No. 4, Winter 2014, pp. 112-130.

<sup>655</sup> Galip Dalay. “Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts”, **German Institute for International and Security Affairs**, No. 5, 04.08.2021, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/turkish-russian-relations-in-light-of-recent-conflicts>, (10.07.2021).

<sup>656</sup> Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci. “Understanding Iran’s Role in the Syrian Conflict”, **Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)**, August 2016, [https://rusieurope.eu/sites/default/files/201608\\_op\\_understanding\\_irans\\_role\\_in\\_the\\_syrian\\_conflict\\_0.pdf](https://rusieurope.eu/sites/default/files/201608_op_understanding_irans_role_in_the_syrian_conflict_0.pdf), (10.07.2021)., Ido Yahel. “Iran in Syria: From Expansion to Entrenchment”, **The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies**, Vol. 15, No. 2, 17.06.2021. <https://dayan.org/content/iran-syria-expansion-entrenchment>, (10.07.2021).

<sup>657</sup> See, Steve McCabe MP et al. “The New Middle East: A Progressive Approach”, **Labour Friends of Israel**, July 2021, <https://www.lfi.org.uk/publications/the-new-middle-east/>, (10.07.2021)., Jose Ignacio Castro Torres. “The Importance of Land Corridors (II): The Iran’s Race to the

however, regime survival was first and foremost a political tool to deter the west, a means to prevent the west from external intervention and internal insurrections.<sup>658</sup> For Turkey, the foremost objective was to prevent the establishment of a *de facto* autonomous YPG/PYD-dominated region along the country's southern border and if possible, ameliorate its deep-seated anxiety about losing its status and value vis-à-vis the West.

Two factors, however, drastically altered Turkey's approach towards the Syrian conflict, namely the Obama administration's decision to airlift weapons to YPG as the United States' partner in its war against ISIS and the growing convergence of interests between Iran and Russia over Assad regime's survival. Hence, as indicated by Sinan Ülgen, in 2016 Turkey was forced to align itself with the Moscow-Tehran axis in order to defend its interests and, if possible, impose a degree of stability in Syria particularly when Ankara was convinced that the 'tactical' relationship between YPG and the United States morphed into an overt 'strategic' partnership.<sup>659</sup> Turkey's tactical partnership with Iran and Russia enabled Ankara to launch its first military intervention in August 2016 in northern Syria, and, by so doing, effectively obliterating the Islamic State in its southern frontiers and paving the way for creation of a buffer zone between territories controlled by the SDF. Noteworthy too is that between 2014 and 2017, the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia manifested itself in Yemen and Lebanon. The intensification of proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia against the backdrop of the GCC's perceptions about the Obama administration's so-called 'appeasement policy' towards Iran raised important questions among the Gulf Arab states about the changing role and strategic orientations of the United States in the Middle East security complex. In the words of one scholar, the absence of a dominant or hegemonic regional power capable of restoring order

---

Mediterranean Sea", **Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE)**, No, 26, 16.06.2021, [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2021/DIEEEA26\\_2021\\_JOSCAS\\_Iran\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA26_2021_JOSCAS_Iran_ENG.pdf), (10.07.2021).

<sup>658</sup> See, Anna Borshchevskaya. "The Russian Way of War in Syria: Threat Perception and Approaches to Counterterrorism", *Russia's War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned*, **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, 2020, p. 22. <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/report-borshchevskaya.pdf>, (10.07.2021)., Mehran Kamrava. "Assessing Multipolarity and Instability in the Middle East", **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, August 2018.

<sup>659</sup> Sinan Ülgen. "Redefining the US-Turkey Relationship", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 26.07.2021, p. 10, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/07/26/redefining-u.s.-turkey-relationship-pub-85016>, (10.07.2021).

(stability) in the region, coupled with the external interventions of major global powers was seen as generating various forms of insecurity.<sup>660</sup> Having said this, the Gulf Arab state's concerns were, to some extent, alleviated in October 2017 when the Trump administration rolled out a new strategy for Iran, referred to as Maximum Pressure doctrine, according to which Washington accused the Islamic Republic of 'developing and proliferating ballistic missiles, supporting terrorism and extremism, supporting the Assad dictatorship and being hostile to Israel'.<sup>661</sup> Further to this, in May 2018 the United States under the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA and re-imposed the 'toughest sanctions in history' against Iran.

Concomitant with the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the maximum pressure policy, Israel, which until mid-2018 had not attacked Iranian positions directly in Syria, intensified its deep military penetration of the Levant and even parts of the Gulf sub-complex by openly and directly targeting Iran-backed forces, IRGC officers and their assets in Syria and northwestern Iraq.<sup>662</sup> With the shifting security dynamics of post-Arab uprisings lingering in the background, the Middle East security complex witnessed an acute level of disruption in the regional *status quo*. As a result, the Levant sub-complex became the main arena of intense geopolitical power rivalry as a direct result of the Syrian conflict. It should be noted that the Syrian conflict, nonetheless, turned the attention of many Arab states away from the Palestinian-Israeli disputes—which for decades had occupied a special place in the Arab leaders' discourses and narratives of securitization in the Middle East. In this environment, while working in parallel with Israel to contain Iran through maximum pressure, the Trump administration began to envisage some form of regional order centered on an anti-Islamic Republic 'realignment' among Israel, Egypt and the Gulf Arab states.<sup>663</sup> The securitization of Iran under the Trump administration along

---

<sup>660</sup> Raffaella A. Del Sarto. "Contentious Borders in the Middle East and North Africa: Context and Concepts", **International Affairs**, Vol. 93, No. 4, 2017, pp. 767-787.

<sup>661</sup> Matthias Küntzel. "Obama's New Iran Policy: Is America Drifting Towards Appeasement?", Vol. 8, No. 2, 2014, pp. 25-36.

<sup>662</sup> Dan Williams. "Israel Says Struck Iranian Targets in Syria 200 Times in Last Two Years", **Reuters**, 04.09.2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-israel-syria-iran-idUSKCN1LK2D7>, (10.07.2021).

<sup>663</sup> Dania Koleilat Khatib. "Iran and 'Exporting' the Revolution: The Syrian Case", **The Syrian Case: Perspectives on Developments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region**, Dania Koleilat Khatib, The Springer, 2021, p. 79., Galip Dalay. "The Middle East After Trump: A Reshuffling of the Cards", **Istanbul Political Research Institute**, 15.12.2020,

with Tehran's growing penetration of the MERSC ultimately pushed Israel and a number of Gulf Arab states to forge 'friendships' under the Abraham Accords, a historic move that further downgraded the immediate urgency of the Palestinian-Israeli issue for the Arab leaders, albeit for a short period. Therefore, instead of moving towards a fixed pattern of Iran-Saudi competition, the MERSC appeared to gravitate more towards 'bloc politics' or the 'politics of a regional subsystem' in which rival states sought to define their concept of order and redefine the norms of regional order.<sup>664</sup> In the context of the Syrian conflict, however, this bloc politics has evinced itself in the form of the tactical partnership among Iran, Russia and Turkey which can be defined as a *mode of conflict management* in the Syrian context with a potential to be replicated, at least theoretically, in somewhat similar forms in other conflict zones of the MERSC.

What can be interpretively distilled from the above-cited trends and processes is that the current regional settings attest to the fact that the Middle East security complex has entered a phase of deeply fragmented and competitive multipolar order in which *blocs of influence* consisting of powerful regional actors and extra-regional powers define competing conceptions of regional order. No dominant power (regional or international) has been able to acquire a hegemonic position or bring about a semblance of stability and/or order in the region. The Syrian conflict was a textbook example of the foregoing development against the backdrop of the United States' downscaling of its Middle Eastern commitments. Borrowing one scholar's words, the U.S. failed to build an enduring regional security order after the war to liberate Kuwait—an objective that also remained elusive in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, when the war on terror leapt to the top of Washington's agenda and began to fundamentally influence both the regional and international

---

<https://www.istanpol.org/post/the-middle-east-after-trump-a-reshuffling-of-the-cards>, (10.07.2021).

<sup>664</sup> Waleed Hazbun. "Regional Powers and The Production of Insecurity in the Middle East", **MENARA**, No. 11, 01.09.2018, [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara\\_wp\\_11.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_11.pdf), (10.07.2021)., Muhammad Nadeem Mirza et al. "Structural Sources of Saudi-Iran Rivalry and Competition for the Sphere of Influence", **SAGE Open**, Vol. 1, No. 9, July-September 2021, p. 1., Karim Makdis, "Intervention and the Arab Uprisings: From Transformation to Maintenance of Regional Order", **New Conflict Dynamics: Between Regional Autonomy and Intervention in the Middle East and North Africa**, Rasmus Alenius Boserup et al, (eds.), Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen, pp. 93-107.

landscape.”<sup>665</sup> In this spirit, the Trump administration’s attempts to create an anti-Iran coalition, also known as ‘Arab NATO’, can be construed as the early indications of Washington’s ambitious quest for crafting a semblance of regional order and normalcy in the Middle East as part of its broader grand strategy for outsourcing security to regional allies.<sup>666</sup> However, it remains to be seen how and to what extent these trends and process would continue to evolve under the Biden administration. While the Trump administration embraced great power competition between the *status quo* bloc of pro-Abraham Accords and the revisionist bloc consisting of Iran, Russia, Turkey and China as the organizing principle of its Middle Eastern approach, the Biden administration has tried to prevent the MERSC from falling prey to this stark binary security vision for regional *ordering*. Under the Biden administration, it appears that the Middle East has lost its strategic importance at a time when the drawdown of U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan continues apace. In a somewhat dramatic policy U-turn from the Trump era, the U.S. President Joe Biden has sought to return to the nuclear deal with Iran, declared his administration’s willingness to end the war in Yemen, stopped supplying offensive weapons to Saudi Arabia and shown indications that his administration will set human rights as a key issue in its policies towards the Middle Eastern countries.

As regards the United States’ Syria policy, it should be noted that while the future policies of Washington are still unclear, some analysts argue that the Biden administration is likely to avoid further isolation of the Assad regime in the hopes that Damascus can attract financial resources from the Gulf countries through de-securitization with the GCC and the Arab League.<sup>667</sup> Given the Biden team’s emphasis on diplomatic engagement with both allies and adversaries, one can expect that the United States might rely on Turkey and Russia, albeit in a tactical fashion, thereby

---

<sup>665</sup> Ebtesam Al Ketbi. “Contemporary Shifts in UAE Foreign Policy: From the Liberation of Kuwait to the Abraham Accords”, **Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2020, pp. 1-8.

<sup>666</sup> Andrew Miller and Richard Sokolsky. “Arab NATO: An Idea Whose Time Has Not (And May Never) Come”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 21.08.2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/21/arab-nato-idea-whose-time-has-not-and-may-never-come-pub-77086>, (10.07.2021)., Yara Bayoumy. “Trump Seeks to Revive ‘Arab NATO’ to Confront Iran”, **Reuters**, 27.07.2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-gulf-alliance-idUSKBN1KH2IK>, (10.07.2021).

<sup>667</sup> Andrew J. Tabler. “The Search for a Syria Strategy”, **Foreign Affairs**, 27.07.2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-07-27/search-syria-strategy>, (11.07.2021).



assigning the responsibility of counter-ISIS operations to these countries without having to commit the U.S. military to another ‘forever wars’ in the MERSC. In Aaron Stein’s opinion, the Syrian civil war would remain a priority but “the Biden administration’s policy is no longer linked to broader regional ambitions, such as the Trump team’s effort to topple the Iranian regime with sanctions or to prevent U.S. Arab partners from updating their own policy through outreach to Damascus.”<sup>668</sup> Other prominent analysts expertizing in Syrian conflict argue that the Biden administration should enforce the sanctions regime associated with the Caesar Syrian Protection Act as a leverage against the Syrian regime, Iran and Russia in a bid to force them to engage meaningfully with a political process defined by UNSC Resolution 2254.<sup>669</sup>

The import of the foregoing observations can be summarized in the assertion that the era of American primacy in the Middle East security complex is long gone. The realities of the decade-old Syrian conflict have demonstrated that the U.S. hegemonic position in the MERSC has been seriously challenged by Russia, China, and a number of regional powers aligned with them, namely Iran and Turkey. Even an array of non-state actors, such as Iran-backed Hashd al Shabi in Iraq, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Houthis in Yemen have exploited the American retrenchment—or even the mere perception of a physical disengagement from the Middle East and North African—in order to challenge and confront the United States and its traditional allies in the region. To corroborate this claim, one can recall top U.S. Commander General Kenneth McKenzie’s warning in his testimony to the House Armed Services Committee April 2021 that Iran’s widespread use of small- and medium-sized drones for surveillance and attacks means that “for the first time since the Korean War, we are operating without complete air superiority.”<sup>670</sup>

Hence, the core challenge for the United States would be how best to square its superpower status or the so-called ‘imperial temptation’ with the willingness to

---

<sup>668</sup> Aaron Stein. “Assessing the Biden Administration’s Interim Syria Strategy”, **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, 15.06.2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/06/assessing-the-biden-administrations-interim-syria-strategy/>, (11.07.2021).

<sup>669</sup> Charles Lister. “Syria: Two Viewpoints”, **The Biden Administration and the Middle East: Policy Recommendations for a Sustainable Way Forward**, Paul Salem et al. TMiddle East Institute, March 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/middle-east-policy-recommendations>, (12.07.2021).

<sup>670</sup> Peter Martin and Tony Capaccio. “Iran is a Daily Threat as U.S. Dominance Wanes, General Says”, **Bloomberg**, 20.04.2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-04-20/iran-presents-daily-threat-as-u-s-dominance-wanes-general-says>, (12.07.2021).

maintain a ‘light footprint’ approach towards the Middle East conflicts.<sup>671</sup> The real question is whether a *new* regional order is in the making or we are seeing changes within the [*old*] order in light of the Russian return to the Middle East and the rise of highly active and interventionist regional powers in the MERSC, namely Turkey and Iran.<sup>672</sup>

Taking into consideration these propositions, one can safely argue that the Syrian conflict in view of the tactical partnership among Russia, Iran and Turkey have, among other things, exposed the limits of American primacy in the MERSC, thereby entailing significant implications for the regional security order for years to come. It is in these settings that this dissertation attempts to delve into the issue of Middle East security order in light of the Syrian conflict and puts it into a theoretical perspective by adopting Regional Security Complex theory and Regional Powers and Security framework.

As outlined in Chapter Two, the most salient advantage of the RSC theory is that it provides a reliable benchmark “against which to identify and assess changes at the regional level.”<sup>673</sup> Indeed, the RSC theory is made up of four interlinked levels of analysis: domestic, state-to-state relations, interactions between regions and the interplay between global and regional structure. But according to Buzan’s and Wæver’s theoretical framework, while these four levels operate simultaneously, it is at the regional level that the extremes of national and global security interplay and the most of the actions occur.<sup>674</sup> The central ideas are that regions are primarily defined by two kinds of relations, namely power relations and patterns of amity and enmity, and that “since most threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones, security interdependence is normally patterned into regionally-based clusters: security complexes.”<sup>675</sup> In regional security complexes, any significant change in the two

---

<sup>671</sup> See, for example, Bradford Ian Stapleton. “The Problem with the Light Footprint”, **Cato Institute**, 07.06.2016, <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/problem-light-footprint-shifting-tactics-lieu-strategy>, (10.07.2021).

<sup>672</sup> Similar question has been posed by Rafaella A. Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig and Eduard Soler I Lecha in their seminal work entitled “Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa After 2011”. However, these questions did not address the question of Russia-Turkey-Iran partnership in the context of the Syrian conflict.

<sup>673</sup> Buzan, Barry and Ole Wæver. **“Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 53.

<sup>674</sup> Buzan, Barry and Ole Wæver. **“Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 43.

<sup>675</sup> Buzan, Barry and Ole Wæver. p. 49-55.

parameters cited above as well as both internal and external causes, such as penetration of outside powers can result in shifts in the balance of power and the overall security order in the RSC. Hence the *importance* of regional security order from the perspective of RSC theory. In this view, one of the advantages of RSC theory is that it treats the issue of order from a composite theoretical lens that includes both constructivist and neo-realist assumptions.

As it was explained in Chapter Two, the RSC theory accepts both neo-realist assumptions of anarchy, balance of power, polarity and material capabilities, and constructivist precepts of social construction of reality, discursive practices, ideational structures, and patterns of amity and enmity in terms of conceptions of self and other.<sup>676</sup> Owing to these concepts and issues outlined by Buzan and Wæver, the RSC theory provides a synthetic view to analyze security dynamics at the regional levels, namely in the Middle East security complex. Nevertheless, there are two caveats are apposite in so far as the usefulness of RSC theory as applied to the case of Syrian conflict is concerned. First, this dissertation argues that although Buzan's and Wæver's seminal book "Regions and Powers" has made considerable contributions to our understanding of the Middle East security complex, it, nonetheless, has not accounted for the changes and variations related to the period and after the Syrian conflict. This is arguably regarded as one of the shortcomings of the original contributions made by Buzan and Wæver, which is endeavored to be remedied in the study at hand. Second, it is argued that "no one IR theory seems well-equipped to fully explain all these features of the MENA region."<sup>677</sup> Accordingly, given the fluidity and dynamicity of the state-of-affairs in the MENA region, it is imperative for researchers and analysts from both academia and foreign policy circles to seek to adapt their theoretical lenses to the changing realities in the Middle East. In this respect, this dissertation has attempted to employ the RSC theory and links it with Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll's Regional Power and Security Framework (RPSF) in order to

---

<sup>676</sup> Dale C. Copeland. "The Constructivist Challenge to Structural Realism", **International Security**, Vol. 25, No. 2, 200, pp. 187-212., Yücel Bozdağlıoğlu. "Constructivism and Identity Formation: An Interactive Approach", **Uluslararası Hukuk ve Politika**, Vol. 3, no. 11, 2007, pp. 121-144.

<sup>677</sup> Pietro Marzo and Francesco Cavatorta. "An Exceptional Context for a Debate on International Relations? Towards a Synthetic Approach to the Study of the MENA's International Politics", **The Routledge Handbook to the Middle East and North African State and States System**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Jasmine Gani, Routledge, p. 316.

advance theoretical debates about the impact of the Syrian conflict in light of Iran-Russia-Turkey relations on the issue of *order* in the Middle East security complex. There is significant degree of interaction between RSC theory and RPSF but the primary reason for inclusion of the latter framework is because it provides a rigorous and practical analytical framework “to understand order within regional security complexes, and—interestingly—the roles and orientations of leading regional actors in initiating agreements on security policy.”<sup>678</sup> Moreover, it should be emphasized that the RPSF argues that “it will be a combination of the polarity of the region as well as the effectiveness and manner in which regional powers play their roles that will largely drive the type of security order that operates within an RSC.”<sup>679</sup> Hence, the salience of the roles and orientations of regional powers as well as extra-regional powers in view the changing trends and processes transpiring in the Middle East security complex cannot be overstated.

In so far as the scope and aim of this dissertation is concerned, the central argument here is that the MERSC has ever since the beginning of the Syrian civil war has experienced five entwined and at times paradoxical trends: (1) the erosion of state authority and proliferation of weak or failed states—deep fragmentation, (2) the ascendance of new dynamics of power rivalry (poles) in a context of changes in the distribution of power among regional actors and because of penetration of outside powers—polarization, (3) the increasing tendency of Middle Eastern powers to adopt (sub-)regionalized policies, and the growing significance and occurrence of patterns of interaction (amity and enmity) at the regional level—regionalization, (4) the rise of alternative models of governance and the narrowing the space for western liberal democratic models—authoritarianism, (5) the growing porousness of physical borders of Middle Eastern states (namely Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen) because of rampant wars, and, not least, because of the mounting spillover effects of conflicts into other members of MERSC—interconnectedness. It should be noted that these trends are observable, albeit in varying degrees and forms, in all three sub-complexes of the MERSC. Although there are variations in terms of the level and intensity of impacts

---

<sup>678</sup> Barney Walsh. “Revisiting Regional Security Complex Theory in Africa: Museveni’s Uganda and Regional Security in East Africa”, **African Security**, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2020, p. 302.

<sup>679</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier. **Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework**, Routledge, 2012, p. 229.

of these trends, it is noteworthy that despite these trends, the region has, as a corollary of the phenomenon of ‘de-sovereignization’ (breakdown of state authority), become so interconnected, perhaps more than any time since the end of World War I.<sup>680</sup> Hence, as noted by one scholar, “by adopting a novel approach to fragmentation in the Middle East and North Africa, regional players may see the collapse of state unity as an opportunity for a new interconnected order.”<sup>681</sup> The central argument presented here is that Turkey, Russia and Iran along with a handful of other regional and extra-regional actors as well as non-state actors looked at the Syrian civil war from this lens.

Of paramount importance is that since trends and processes leading to the formation of patterns of conflict and cooperation are considered as important features of RSCs, one can identify five key events that affect and define the security dynamics in the Middle East security complex: (1) Russia’s return to the Middle East, or its introduction into the MERSC as a major pole, as a direct consequence of its military overlay of the Syria and its tactical partnership with Iran and Turkey, (2) the United States’ downscaling of its commitment in the Middle East since the Arab uprising in general and the in the Syrian conflict in particular, (3) the growing patterns of amity (de-securitization) between Israel and a number of Gulf Arab states under the ‘Abraham Accords’, and the lifting of the Quartet state’s (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and the UAE) blockade on Qatar, (4) the rise of ‘bloc politics’ in the MERSC as a consequence of the increasing attempts by a string of actors, whether regional or extra regional, to fill the power vacuum left by the United States. Today, three key extra-regional powers define great power rivalry in the MERSC, namely Russia, China and the United States. From among key regional actors capable of projecting hard and soft powers, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE play an important role in shaping security dynamics, mainly in the Gulf and the Levant sub-complexes. Moreover, one cannot denigrate the salience of the increasing role played by hybrid non-state actors (i.e., proxies and armed terrorist groups) as these entities have been able not only to influence a country’s domestic and regional politics but also seek to

---

<sup>680</sup> For a detailed study on the phenomenon of de-sovereignization see, Daniela Huber and Eckart Woertz. “Resilience, Conflict and Areas of Limited Statehood in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria”, **Democratization**, Vol. 28, No. 7, 2021, p. 1264.

<sup>681</sup> Galip Dalay. “Break-up of the Middle East: Will We See a new Regional Order?”, **Middle East Eye**, 14.09.2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/break-middle-east-will-we-see-new-regional-order>, (12.07.2021).

deter or coerce another adversary, even an (extra) regional power such as the United States to accommodate the interests of the less militarily powers regional actors. For example, by using non-state actors such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and Hashd al Shaabi in Iraq, the Islamic Republic of Iran has benefited from operating in the ‘gray zone between war and peace’ as part of its regional efforts to challenge and, if possible, upset the status-quo while minimizing the risks of an all-out war with the United States.<sup>682</sup>

In his stellar policy report on Iran’s gray zone strategy, Michael Eisenstadt quotes Frank G Hoffman as saying that non-state actors constitute a main pillar of Iran’s asymmetric warfare (*jange-namoteqaren*). Accordingly, “hybrid actors like Iran often employ regular and irregular forces together on the battle; blend conventional military capabilities, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal activities, (e.g., smuggling, money laundering, bribery, cybercrime, and illicit arms transfers); and conduct simultaneous operations across domains [...] to create synergies and maximize leverage.”<sup>683</sup> (5) the ever-increasing securitization of Iran as a consequence of its defiance to curb its activities in the realms of regional proxy networks, nuclear program and ballistic missiles. In fact, the trio issues have been considered among the most important factors that have shaped the regional security dynamics in the MERSC, especially in the Gulf sub-complex, primarily because these issues have significantly affected the perceptions of regional as well as international actors. Therefore, in the eyes of the pro-Abraham Accords bloc as well as the United States, the Iranian threat needs to be treated by ‘extraordinary measures’, albeit these states diverge on the issue of how and by what effective means to proceed ahead with the securitization approach towards Tehran.

---

<sup>682</sup> See, for example, Michael Knights, Hamdi Malek and Aymenn Jawad Al Tamimi. “Honored But Not Contained: The Future of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces”, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 23.03.2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/honored-not-contained-future-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces>, (10.07.2021)., Alex Vatanka. “Iran’s Use of Shi’i Militant Proxies: Ideological and Practical Expediency Versus Uncertain Sustainability”, **Middle East Institute**, Policy Paper No. 5, 01.06.2018, [https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Vatanka\\_PolicyPaper.pdf](https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Vatanka_PolicyPaper.pdf), (12.07.2021)., Afshon Ostovar. The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran’s Way of War, **Security Studies**, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2018, pp. 159-188.

<sup>683</sup> Michael Eisenstadt. “Operating in the Gray Zone: Countering Iran’s Asymmetric Way of War”, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, Policy Focus 162, 07.01.2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operating-gray-zone-countering-irans-asymmetric-way-war>, (13.07.2021).

To further illustrate the impacts of such trends and processes, one can put forward the argument that the center of gravity in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring initially changed from the Gulf sub-complex into the Maghreb and Levant sub-complexes, mainly due to the outbreak of conflicts in Libya and Syria. In recent years, however, the center of gravity has reverted back to the Gulf sub-complex primarily as a direct result of the growing securitization of Iranian *problématique* by the United States and the Gulf Arab States in the region. As a number scholars argue, the Gulf has replaced the Mashreq/Levant as the epicenter of geopolitical rivalries [...], the collapse of what can be referred to as the ‘old Arab order’ facilitated the rise of the Gulf as the new powerhouse of the MENA region”.<sup>684</sup> As seen from the viewpoint of RSC theory—as it was explained in depth in previous chapters—it can be inferred that the Arab uprisings in 2011 in general and the Syrian conflict in particular have altered the patterns of social construction (amity and enmity among the units), overlays and penetrations by external actors, and polarity (distribution of power among the units), which all together can lead to changes in internal transformation of the MERSC. To be sure, the U.S. policy is heavily contingent upon these internal transformations and intra-regional dynamics. In other words, the United States’ roles and orientations are seen as both the cause and effect of these internal transformations in the MERSC.

As such, it should not be implausible to conjecture that there is a strong nexus between the issue of order and the U.S. regional role in the context of the MENA region. It should be stressed that the role of the United States is arguably determined by three pivotal factors: the extent to which the region is framed in the American political system, the existence (or non-existence) of a political and/or strategic partner in a specific regional order, and the overall significance of the region for U.S. foreign policy.<sup>685</sup>

Given the changing nature of the role of the United States in the MERSC, the central contention here is that the MERSC has lost its strategic importance to the United States, due in part to Washington’s shift of its strategic focus (economic

---

<sup>684</sup> Rafaella A. Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig and Edward Soler I Lecha. “Interregnum: The Regional Order in The Middle East and North Africa After 2011”, **MENARA** Final Reports, No. 1, 01.02.2019, p. 33, [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara\\_fr\\_1.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_fr_1.pdf), (13.07.2021).

<sup>685</sup> Helmut Hubel, Markus Kaim, and Oliver Lembcke. “The United States in Regional Orders: “Pax-Americana” as an Analytic Concept”, **Amerikastudien/American Studies**, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2001, p. 600.

interests and military prowess) from the Middle East towards the Asia-Pacific. This is why the traditional U.S. partners in the Middle East accuse Washington of abandonment in the face of, *inter alia*, the threat posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Relatedly, two major events have further reinforced Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's perceptions of Tehran as an existential security threat. First, the September 2019 drone attacks against Saudi Arabia's Aramco oil processing plants which was not met by a military response from the United States. Second, the Biden administration's surprise decision in August 2021 to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan after rapid advances by the Taliban.<sup>686</sup>

Against the backdrop of such notions of American retreat or disengagement from the region, there is a growing consensus that in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, the United States has few options left to actively shape the outcome of these countries, in part because the surrogates and proxies aligned with the Western countries are unable to hold their ground against their Russian and Iranian counterparts.<sup>687</sup> Hence, on the one hand, the proliferation of drones, proxy conflicts and asymmetric means of warfare have jeopardized major U.S. strategic interests while, on the other hand, the lack of strong U.S. response has encouraged traditional U.S. partners in the region to act unilaterally or initiate a strategic pivot to U.S. rivals. These dynamics are reflected in Senator Chris Murphy's acknowledgment that due to the U.S. policies in the Middle East, "the Saudis and Emiratis cooperate with the United States on an awful lot, but they are acting very differently today than they were 30 years ago."<sup>688</sup> These dynamics are also observable in Israel's increasing proclivity to expand diplomatic and economic relations with China despite American criticisms, in the wave of normalization processes between a number of Arab countries under the Abraham Accords, and in Turkey's efforts to strengthen the patterns of amity in defense and economic realms

---

<sup>686</sup> Michael MacKinley. "We All Lost Afghanistan", **Foreign Affairs**, 16.08.2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-16/we-all-lost-afghanistan-taliban>, (13.09.2021).

<sup>687</sup> Andreas Krieg. "Trump and the Middle East: 'Barking Dogs Seldom Bite'", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2017, pp. 139-158, <https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/trump-and-the-middle-east-barking-dogs-seldom-bite>, (10.07.2021).

<sup>688</sup> Jon Alterman's interview with Senator Chris Murphy, in US Restraint in the Middle East, **Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)**, 10.08.2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-restraint-middle-east>, (16.07.2021).



with Russia and China.<sup>689</sup> The import of these examples lies in the fact that, as seen through the prism of RSC theory and Regional Powers and Security framework, the future of regional security order, including the identification of security concerns and the security itself, is predicated upon these shifting trends and new phenomena. To elucidate this point more clearly, one can point to the case of Syrian crisis as starkest example that showed how and to what extent the foreign and security policies of the countries within (Iran and the GCC states) and outside the MERSC (Russia, the U.S.) have become heavily regionalized and that it is the *regional* element which is the most crucial factor in providing alternative modes of conflict management, if not security order, for the Middle East.<sup>690</sup>

In this context, the Syrian conflict is seen as a pivotal geopolitical event that presaged a new security dynamic in the region. Based on this dynamic, the regional powers and extra regional powers are now competing on multiple fronts whereas the conflicts of the previous decades were more localized and were mainly shaped by the Arab Israeli wars.<sup>691</sup> It is on the basis of the foregoing rationale that this study identified *membership overlapping* and *inter-subcomplex interconnectivity* as important toolkits that can better explain these changing dynamics, particularly in the aftermath of the Syrian civil war. Another pertinent empirical point begging attention is that, as Ross Harrison cogently observes, the realities of the Syrian conflict attests to the fact that while conflict spreading used to and still continues to cross state borders—based on factors such as terrorism, refugee flows, arms transfers and the rebel groups operating in more than one country—the individual conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya involve conflict contagion, spreading not just laterally to neighboring fragile or failed states but also upward to stronger and larger regional powers. Borrowing Ross Harrison’s words, “in addition to the regional powers pushing

---

<sup>689</sup> As for China-Israel relations see, for example, Aghavni Harutyunyan. “China and Israel: Evolving Relationships within the Belt and Road Initiative”, **Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2020, pp. 410-429.

<sup>690</sup> Ross Harrison. “Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power: An Historical Perspective”, **Al Jazeera**, Analysis, 02.09.2018, p. 1-7, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/09/shifts-middle-east-balance-power-historical-perspective-180902084750811.html>, (15.07.2021).

<sup>691</sup> Hybrid CoE Trend Report. “Trends in MENA: New Dynamics of Authority and Power”, **Hybrid CoE**, No. 7, 30.06.2021, p. 17, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-trend-report-7-trends-in-mena-new-dynamics-of-authority-and-power/>, (10.07.2021).

themselves into the civil wars [horizontal contagion], they are pulled in by something this author has labeled “vertical contagion.”<sup>692</sup> As Harrison argues,

*There are two aspects of this vertical contagion to consider. The first is how the compression of time, the fog of war, and “bad neighborhood effects” of civil wars have drawn regional actors like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and how Israel, into the region’s civil wars. But the second aspect of vertical contagion is in many ways the most profound in terms of shifts in the balance of power. That is that the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya have morphed into a regional conflict among the major regional powers, where a vicious competition for short-term regional dominance completely overshadows longer-term shared interests of a stable and prosperous Middle East.*<sup>693</sup>

Based on the foregoing insights, it becomes clear that the Syrian conflict generated both horizontal and vertical contagions, pulling in various regional powers (Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia) and extra-regional powers (Russia and the United States) into this geopolitical battlefield in the MERSC. The trends and processes associated with the Syrian conflict contributed to the creation of a new power structure in the MERSC which was informed by the changes in the internal structure of the Middle East security complex as a result of tangible alterations in polarity, balance of power, anarchic structure and the patterns of amity and enmity.

As a corollary, the assertion here is two-fold. First, the case study of Syrian conflict demonstrated that the regional powers and even extra-regional actors are compelled, or even at times forced, to define and design their relations on the basis of the specific *security problematique* or an *issue-area* at the regional level. It means that “within every border created around a problematique, one or more countries are more active and influential than others and make others to accompany.”<sup>694</sup>

In this sense, an argument goes that due to the transnational nature of the Syrian problematique a panoply of regional and extra-regional actors become heavily

---

<sup>692</sup> Ross Harrison. “The Global and Regional Geopolitics of Civil War in the Middle East”, **Middle East Institute**, 04.01.2019, <https://www.mei.edu/test-global-and-regional-geopolitics-civil-war-middle-east>, (16.07.2021).

<sup>693</sup> Ross Harrison. “Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power: An Historical Perspective”, **Al Jazeera**, 02.09.2018, p.10, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/09/shifts-middle-east-balance-power-historical-perspective-180902084750811.html>, (15.07.2021).

<sup>694</sup> Najmīyeh Pour Esmaeili, Hossein Salimi and Seyed Jalal Dehghani Firoozabadi. “Critical and Contemporary Review of Buzan’s Regional Security Complex Theory in the Wake of Middle East Regional System”, **Geopolitics Quarterly**, Vol. 16, No. 4, Winter 2021, p. 139-141, [http://journal.iag.ir/article\\_105739\\_2aa419417c077c82f09f5a1c7ff12938.pdf](http://journal.iag.ir/article_105739_2aa419417c077c82f09f5a1c7ff12938.pdf), (15.07.2021).

involved in the Levant sub-complex, be it in the form of military overlay or mere penetration as evidenced by the varied forms of involvement by Russia, Iran, and Turkey as well as the United States. These dynamics have a strong bearing on the level and intensity of membership overlapping as well as the degrees of inter-subcomplex interconnectivities in the MERSC. Second, the case study of Syrian conflict in light of Iran-Russia-Turkey tactical partnership also indicated the limits and/or decline of U.S. hegemonic status in the MERSC, and the changing roles and strategic orientations of the traditional U.S. partners, namely the GCC states. Indeed, time was when the United States formed a special partnership with its traditional partners in the MERSC, thereby contributing to the formation of one bloc of states against another to counter a security threat. The Nixon administration's Twin Pillars policy formed around strategic partnerships with Iran and Saudi Arabia as bulwarks against the Soviet Union, or George H. W. Bush's and Clinton's "Dual Containment" policy aimed at countering and isolating Baathist Iraq and Revolutionary Iran are regarded as clear examples. Nowadays, however, a new power structure has emerged in the MERSC according to which the existence of one bloc of countries to counter an existential threat cannot be taken at face value. Instead, as indicated earlier, the region is going through the phase of 'bloc politics' in the sense that a multitude of loose alliances take shape around certain individual security problematiques, such as wars in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Iraq at a time when the United States is seen as relinquishing the burden of leadership in the MERSC. Put differently, bloc politics has turned the entire MERSC into a hotbed of instability and disorder. Each security problematique begets conflict and with each conflict emerges new blocs of power and influence. Thus, the region is no longer functioning solely around the United States' role and function as the dominant hegemon capable of ordering the MENA region. As indicated by Waleed Hazbun, "since the Arab uprisings, Middle East geopolitics has transformed from a system organized around and against a U.S.-managed security architecture into a multipolar system lacking norms, institutions, or balancing mechanisms to constrain conflict and the use of force."<sup>695</sup>

---

<sup>695</sup> Waleed Hazbun. "In America's Wake: Turbulence and Insecurity in the Middle East", *Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East*, **POMEPS Studies**, No. 34, March 2019, p. 14. [https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/POMEPS\\_Studies\\_34\\_Web.pdf](https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/POMEPS_Studies_34_Web.pdf), (15.07.2021).

In this setting, the condition of security dilemma has aggravated, leaving major powers and regional actors in a bind to play to the tunes of bloc politics in the region. Glenn Snyder points to “alliance security dilemma” to elucidate on this point, positing that under this condition “states are then torn between two opposite potential outcomes—*abandonment* or *entrapment*—in which one’s own allies either abandon a state at its moment of greatest insecurity or entrap it in a war that it would otherwise prefer to avoid.”<sup>696</sup> Therefore, ‘bloc politics’ can be seen as a source for mitigation of this dilemma in the eyes of regional powers and smaller regional actors operating in the Middle East complex. As applied to the case of Syrian civil war and in view of contemporary security dynamics in the MERSC, it is possible to identify at least three blocs: a counter-revolutionary bloc consisting of Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Morocco and Bahrain aimed at maintaining a regional status-quo, a revisionist bloc consisting of Qatar, Iran, and Turkey seeking to upset the status-quo in the Middle East security complex, and an emerging tripartite alliance between Iraq, Jordan and Egypt largely formed largely based on economic and security interests.<sup>697</sup>

It must be mentioned, however, that Turkey’s position, as of writing this dissertation, is uncertain as it remains to be seen whether Ankara’s charm offensive toward the Gulf Arab states and Egypt would yield significant results.<sup>698</sup> It is also important to be mindful that although the 2017-2021 Qatar crisis was ended at the Al-Ula GCC Summit in early 2021, it is far from certain that the root causes of intra-GCC rivalries are removed indefinitely.<sup>699</sup> Therefore, given the existence of strong patterns

---

<sup>696</sup> Glenn Snyder. “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics”, **World Politics**, Vol. 36, No. 4, 1984, pp. 461-495., Curtis R. Ryan. “Alliances and the Balance of Power in the Middle East”, **The Routledge Handbook to the Middle East and States System**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Jasmine Gani, Routledge, 2020, p. 342.

<sup>697</sup> See, for example, Osmā Al-Sharīf. “Jordan-Egypt-Iraq Alliance Ready to Blossom”, **Arab News**, 29.06.2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1885591>, (15.07.2021)., Katherine Harvey and Bruce Riedel. “Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan: A New Partnership 30 Years in the Making”, **Brookings**, 02.07.2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/0-7/02/egypt-iraq-and-jordan-a-new-partnership-30-years-in-the-making/>, (17.07.2021)., Emily Hawthorne. “What to Make of Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq’s New Alliance”, **Stratfor**, 06.07.2021, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/what-make-jordan-egypt-and-iraq-s-new-alliance>, (16.07.2021).

<sup>698</sup> Semih Idiz. “How Likely is Turkey’s International Charm Offensive to Succeed?”, **Al Monitor**, 26.03.2021. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/03/how-likely-turkeys-international-charm-offensive-succeed>, (17.07.2021).

<sup>699</sup> Marwan Kabalan. “The Al-Ula GCC Summit: An End to Gulf Rivalry or Just Another Truce?”, **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter 2021, pp. 51-59.

of amity between Qatar and the governments of Iran and Turkey, one cannot assuredly designate Doha in the same camp as Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

It is also important to allude to the fact the aforementioned alliances are not given and solid, meaning that 1) these alliances erode in time depending on the actual situations, 2) one country can be a member of one or two alliances at the same time, and 3) actors' tendencies to cooperate in a specific alliance do not necessarily emanate from ideological affinities and collective identities based on fundamental norms. Rather, from a neorealist perspective, the states' tendencies to partake in alliance formation activities are largely shaped by their need to meet immediate and temporary interests and/or counter specific threats.<sup>700</sup> This complex dynamic can be explained by Soler's identification of "liquid alliances" in which states may ally on one particular front and be at loggerheads with each other on another one.<sup>701</sup> Four factors explain the root cause of this dynamic: 1) bad neighborhood and vertical contagion of conflicts, 2) interaction opportunities and costs, 3) conflict characteristics, 4) the changing nature of threats perceptions of states commensurate with the changing realities of the battlefield.<sup>702</sup> An example of 'liquid alliance' pertains to the way in which Russia and Turkey ally in the context of the Syrian conflict while being at odds with each other in Libya or over the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. This is why some scholars surmise that the friendship between Russia and Turkey should be considered as "a marriage of convenience: a union that is based neither on a common project nor an emotional connection but on temporary interest. As a consequence, it can be dissolved quickly if one of the parties (or both) considers the other to be dispensable."<sup>703</sup>

Having said this, in the context of the tactical partnership among Iran, Turkey and Russia under the Astana Agreement and the Sochi deals (mainly between Turkey

---

<sup>700</sup> For a study of alliances see, Stephen M. Walt. "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse?", **Survival**, Vol. 39, No. 1, 1997, pp. 156-179.

<sup>701</sup> Eduard Soler i Lecha. "Liquid Alliances in the Middle East", **Notes Internacionals CIDOB**, Barcelona Center for International Affairs, No 169, 01.03.2017, [https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/notes\\_internacionals/n1\\_169/liquid\\_alliances\\_in\\_the\\_middle\\_east](https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionals/n1_169/liquid_alliances_in_the_middle_east), (18.07.2021).

<sup>702</sup> For a somewhat similar debate see, Rafaella A. Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig and Edward Soler i Lecha. "Interregnum: The Regional Order in The Middle East and North Africa After 2011", **MENARA**, No. 1, 01.02.2019, p. 33, [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara\\_fr\\_1.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_fr_1.pdf)

<sup>703</sup> Eduard Soler i Lecha. "Liquid Alliances in the Middle East", **Notes Internacionals CIDOB**, Barcelona Center for International Affairs, No 169, 01.03.2017, [https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/notes\\_internacionals/n1\\_169/liquid\\_alliances\\_in\\_the\\_middle\\_east](https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionals/n1_169/liquid_alliances_in_the_middle_east), (18.07.2021).

and Russia), the claim is that the primary motivation for the Syrian trifecta is *tethering*. As some scholars argue, tethering is considered a particular tendency within an *ad hoc* alliance whose aims is to manage adversarial relationships between states.<sup>704</sup> Instead of acting on adversarial relations by balancing or going to war, states tether to specific *threats* by aligning themselves with their peer rivals or enemies, thereby improving the exchange of information between states, raising the costs of defection and making cooperation more appealing.<sup>705</sup> As Weitsman argues, “alliances are often not about aggregating capabilities, but rather ways for rival powers to ally to reduce conflicts and manage peace between them.”<sup>706</sup> From this perspective, states are expected do their best in order to *manage* their relations despite harboring divergent interests or threat perceptions towards a specific security problematic. Hence, the partnership among Iran, Russia and Turkey can be best characterized as a form of tethering or an adversarial alliance through which the so-called guarantors of peace in Syria manage to hold their animosities in check. The Astana Peace Process as well as the Sochi Agreements are thus clear manifestations of such tethering activities aimed at producing ‘*patterns of management*’ that can bring about a modicum of security order in Syria and the broader MENA region as an alternative to any western formula for conflict management.

Despite the foregoing caveats, however, the fact remains that a great deal of power competition is underway between the three above-cited blocs in several different parts of the Middle East, particularly in the Levant and the Gulf sub-complexes. As such, the Middle East security complex “can be best visualized as a game of multi-dimensional chess in the sense that different actors in the Middle East are playing different games at the same time.”<sup>707</sup> A salient implication of these trends and process is that ‘bloc politics’ has ironically made the MERSC more complex and vulnerable. Another important implication is that on this multi-dimensional

---

<sup>704</sup> Patricia Weitsman. **Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War**, Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2004, p. 21.

<sup>705</sup> Sten Rynning and Oliver Schmitt, “Alliances”, **The Oxford Handbook of International Security**, Alexandra Gheciu and William C. Wohlforth (eds.), Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 655.

<sup>706</sup> See a review of Patricia Weitsman’s “Dangerous Alliances” by Jonathan A. Grant. “Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War”, **The Journal of Military History**, Vol. 68, No. 4, October 2004, pp. 1271-1272.

<sup>707</sup> Joshua S. Krasna. “It’s Complicated: Geopolitical and Strategic Dynamics in the Contemporary Middle East”, **Journal of World Affairs**, Vol. 63. No. 1, 2019, pp. 64-79.

geopolitical chessboard, the roles and orientations of Iran, Russia, Turkey and the United States have been dramatically changed as a direct impact of the recent conflicts in the MERSC, chiefly among them the Syrian conflict. By using the RSCT+RPSF model, the proceeding segment seeks to ruminate on the question of roles and orientations of Russia, Iran, and Turkey, followed by an in-depth appraisal of the impacts of their alliance on the issue of order in the Middle East security complex.

#### **4.3. RSC THEORY + RPSF MODEL: IRAN, TURKEY AND RUSSIA IN THE MERSC**

As it was discussed in depth in Chapter Two, according to the RSCT+RPSF model, regional powers often times play three specific foreign policy roles: regional leadership, regional custodianship, and regional protection. Regional leadership is defined as “the act of eliciting cooperation toward or acceptance of shared objectives and a means through which to achieve them amongst members of a group” (i.e., Russia’s and China’s role in creation and development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization). Regional custodianship is described as “the engagement in efforts to maintain and/or stabilize the current security order”, including the actual deterrence of challenges to the order within the region. Israel’s efforts in the late 1970s and 1980s to stymie Iraq’s pursuit of nuclear weapons through a pre-emptive military strike on Osirak nuclear plant is considered a case of custodianship of the security order. Finally, regional protection is referred to a regional power’s ability to assume the burden of defending and managing the relationship between the security order and external actors and processes.<sup>708</sup>

As examined previously, regional powers’ orientations can be analyzed along three axes: status-quo versus revisionist, multilateral versus unilateral, and proactive versus reactive. It is important to assert that according to RPSF, it is the combination of the polarity of the region as well as the existence, effectiveness and manner in which regional powers play their role and seek their orientations that will determine the kind of security order that operates within a RSC.<sup>709</sup> In other words, it is through the

---

<sup>708</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier. **Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework**, Routledge, 2012, p. 229.

<sup>709</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, p. 229.

consideration of all of these factors that we can identify the various ways in which regional and extra-regional powers influence a regional security complex and affect regional security order. Therefore, the contention here is that one must assess the changing roles, orientations and behaviors of Iran, Russia, and Turkey in the context of the Syrian conflict in order to make sense of how they could contribute to the development and functioning of the regional security order. Another contention is that as the case of the Syrian conflict shows, regional powers have a significant and unique impact on the design and management of order at the regional level.<sup>710</sup> Keeping these caveats in mind, the analysis below draws on a synthesis of Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security Complex theory—with its primary focus on relative autonomy and uniqueness of particular regional contexts, and Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll's Regional Powers and Security Framework—with its principal attention to the issue of order and roles and orientations of regional powers, to explain how and in what ways a regional conflict such as the ongoing Syrian conflict affects the security dynamics in the region as well as the regional security order.

As the proceeding analysis will show, the RSCT+RPSF offers a practical framework for security analysis and a better template for both academics and policy-makers to understand present as well as future security dynamics and concerns at the regional level. This final segment therefore seeks to revisit the utility of RSC theory in the context of the ongoing conflicts in the MERSC with a main focus on tactical partnership among Iran, Russia, and Turkey in the context of the Syrian conflict.

#### **4.3.1. Turkey's Post-2011 Doctrinal Shifts in its Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications**

Following a thorough appraisal of Turkey's relations with Iran, Russia and the U.S. in the context of the Middle East, it becomes immediately apparent that the AKP has substantially transformed Turkish foreign policy in recent two decades. Since we considered the Syrian conflict as our benchmark, an important question arises as how and in what ways Turkey's regional role and orientations might have gone through

---

<sup>710</sup> Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll. "Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order Within Regional Security Complexes", *European Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2010, p. 748.



changes and how this may entail implications on the regional order in the MERSC. Turkey's military penetration of the Syrian conflict provides us with useful clues to identify and further analyze these roles and orientations. As it was discussed in length in the previous chapter, the AKP's military involvement in Syria since 2016 has arguably molded Turkey's regional status from a mere regional power into a major power pole in the Middle East security complex. The identification of Turkey as a major pole in the MERSC is significant because the country is often viewed by RSC theoreticians as an insulator state. But, the growing involvement of Turkey in the Levant requires a redefinition of Turkey's status in the MERSC in these sense that it is difficult, both empirically and theoretically, to consider Turkey as merely an insulator given its assertive regional policies over the past decade.

As previously stated, the Syrian conflict served as *the* pivotal moment in Turkey's foreign policy thinking, pushing the direction of the state's decision-making process toward depending on hard power. Indeed, prior to the Syrian civil war, the AKP government pursued regional policies predicated largely on soft power whereas the Turkish government's foreign policy began to place a substantial premium on hard power tools in the immediate aftermath of the Syrian war. As expressed by Kutlay and Önis, in the first decade of AKP rule, the 'logic of interdependence' constituted the driving force behind the country's foreign policy whereas in the second decade of AKP rule, especially after 2016, the 'logic of interdependence' and the 'mediator—integrator' role were gradually replaced by an assertive quest for 'autonomy', accompanied by military interventionism and coercive diplomacy.<sup>711</sup> Having said this, the post-2016 orientation of Turkish foreign policy has become increasingly militarist as evidenced by the state's military involvements in Syria, Libya, and Iraq. Some experts proffer that reminiscent of Turkey's security policies of the 1990s, Turkey's assertive regional policy has manifested itself in several forms, such as "overseas military operations, military deployments on foreign soil, forwards military bases, and displaying its land, sea, and air strength in several regional theaters in the Levant, Gulf, Horn of Africa, North Africa, Eastern Mediterranean, and South Caucasus."<sup>712</sup> Hence,

---

<sup>711</sup> Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş. "Turkey's Foreign policy in a Post-Western Order: Strategic Autonomy or New Forms of Dependence", **International Affairs**, Vol. 97, No. 4, 2021, pp. 1085-1104.

<sup>712</sup> See, Ali Bakir. "Mapping The Rise of Turkey's Hard Power", **Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy**, 24.08.2021, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/turkey/mapping-the-rise-of-turkeys-hard-power/>.

scholars like Meliha Benli Altunisik argue that since Turkey began to identify more threats than opportunities in the post-2011 geopolitical and security environment, the AKP government projected a significant degree of military power to counter those threats, thereby becoming part of the regional polarization.<sup>713</sup> Other scholars look at these doctrinal shifts in Turkish foreign policy direction from a fairly different perspective. For example, Murarriu and Anglitoiu note that Turkey's growing penetration of the Middle East can be considered a "forward defense of its Anatolian heartland", in the sense that it is the "geography of Anatolia that enables Turkey to project its power into the Marmara straits, the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, while simultaneously placing the state in proximity to the Caucasus and even within striking distance of the Persian Gulf."<sup>714</sup>

Having said this, it bears emphasizing that even if the Syrian conflict is identified as the main starting point for our analysis of the post-2011's doctrinal shifts in Turkish foreign, it is ill-conceived and inaccurate to attribute all of these foreign policy changes entirely to the country's military intervention in Syria. Although this study's main theoretical premise does not rest on neo-classical realism—given the theory's inclusion of domestic variable in foreign policy making, one should not exclude the importance of domestic sources of changes in analyzing Turkish foreign policy role and orientation. Hence, one underscores both domestic variables as well as variables at both regional and systemic levels in order to develop a clearer and more accurate understanding of Turkey's changing role and orientation. These variables include: the victory of the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in August 2014 presidential election, the AKP's loss of electoral support in the June 2015 elections, the collapse of 2009-2015 peace process between Kurdish PKK group and Turkey, the then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's resignation in May 2016, the abortive coup in July 2016, the establishment of the new presidential system in 2018, the rise of the

---

Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar. "Syria and Libya's Contributions to the Evolution of the Turkish 'Forward Defense' Doctrine", **Geneva Center for Security Policy (GCSP)**, Research Project Report No. 7, 01.06.2021, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/syria-libya-turkish-forward-defence>, (06.08.2021).

<sup>713</sup> Meliha Benli Altunışık. "The New Turn in Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Regional and Domestic Insecurities", **Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)**, No. 20, 17.07.2020, p. 3. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/new-turn-turkeys-foreign-policy-middle-east-regional-and-domestic-insecurities>, (10.08.2021).

<sup>714</sup> Mihai Murariu and George Anglitoiu. "Anatolian Security and Neo-Ottomanism: Turkey's intervention in Syria", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. XXVII, No. 2, Summer 2020, p. 132.

Islamic Caliphate in Iraq and then in Syria, and the growing tensions in relations between Washington and Ankara following the former's *de facto* alliance with the Kurdish YPG in northern Syria.<sup>715</sup>

As can be seen, there is a significant correlation between exogenous pressures and internal transformations when it comes to the study of Turkish foreign policy role and orientation. In the words of some scholars, as a corollary of these changes “a new securitized approach, accompanied by a rise in nationalistic rhetoric”, has facilitated the emergence of a political alliance (known as the People's Alliance) between the AKP and the ultra-nationalist MHP party, thereby contributing to the evolution of an interventionist and security-based foreign policy. The discursive narrative of Islamism and nationalism are then used as tools to legitimize Turkey's overseas penetrations, be it in economic or military terms. To summarize, a net assessment of these factors indicate that it is the amalgamation of a range of domestic political developments inside Turkey as well as changes in security and geopolitical dynamics outside the country that has given rise to a foreign policy in Turkey that is more autonomous, nationalistic, assertive, and militarist. Of all these variables, however, the Syrian conflict can be seen as the most pivotal outcome of such doctrinal shift in Turkey's foreign policy role and orientation.

When looked at these transformations from the perspective of the constructivist dimension of the RSC theory, it is permissible to argue that Turkey's search for regional hegemony is grounded in ideational factors as well as material considerations. For one thing, Turkey is central to the changing patterns of amity and enmity (i.e., socialization and perceptions of status) in the MERSC and at the same time is affected by the same patterns. It is important to parenthetically add that based on RSCT-RPSF model, patterns of amity and enmity are integral parts of ideationally-motivated patterns in state-to-state interactions as well as regional dynamics. Therefore, in conceptualizing Turkey's status as a major pole in the MERSC, especially in the

---

<sup>715</sup> See, Katerina Dalacoura. “Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Power Projection and Post-Ideological Politics”, **International Affairs**, Vol. 97, No. 4, 2021, pp. 1125-1142., Bill Park. “Turkey's Isolated Stance: An Ally No More, or Just the Usual Turbulence”, **International Affairs**, Vol. 91, No. 3, 2015, pp. 581-600., Arin Savran. “The Peace Process between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, 2009-2015”, **Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies**, Vol. 22, No. 6, 2020, pp. 777-792., Özlem Tür and Mehmet Akif Kumral. “Paradoxes in Turkey's Syria Policy: Analyzing the Critical Episode of Agenda Building”, **New Perspectives on Turkey**, No. 55, 2016, pp. 107-132.

Levant sub-complex, one should also attend to non-material or ideational factors that determine the content of a state's interests and therefore the way it will 'act' in global and regional politics.<sup>716</sup> To be more specific, acknowledgement of the relevance of identity to security in the RSC theory leads to a better understanding of the AKP government's regional role and orientations. Knowing this, from a constructivist standpoint, the identities and interests of states are not viewed as a constant as neo-realists perceive them to be; rather they are subject to transformation and redefinitions as the result of social interactions between agent and structure. Moreover, seen in this light, states can learn about and make reliable inferences about what they are thinking and doing through social interaction and socialization. Keeping these constructivist assumptions of the RSCT-RPSF model in mind, an important question arises as to how identities are socially constituted and what encourages actors to realize the possibilities of 'being' and 'doing' in international politics.

It is in this context that some assumptions embedded within ontological (in)security perspective come to the fore as a useful (theoretical) bridge that links RSCT-RPSF model with its underlying constructivist dimension in analysis of state's behavior at the regional level. To be sure, this study does not seek to fall in for *theoretical overstretch* by delving deeply into ontological (in)security perspective; rather it aims to draw attention to the existing linkages between the issue of self-identity of a state and its relations with the 'other', at both regional and state-to-state levels. The contention, therefore, is that there are close affinities between constructivism and ontological (in)security approach, especially when it comes to the works focusing on the significance of identity, fear, continuity and change, and 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy in foreign policy analysis. As Mitzen and Giddens argue, ontological security is better understood as "security-in-being" through which actors are able to generate a sense of certainty about the world and their status within it.<sup>717</sup> As such, the foreign policy role and orientations of Turkey, Russia and Iran cannot be understood absent these constructivist precepts undergirding ontological (in)security perspective.

---

<sup>716</sup> Paul D. Williams and Matt McDonald. **Security Studies: An Introduction**, Third edition, Routledge, 2018.

<sup>717</sup> Jennifer Mitzen. "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma", **European Journal of International Relations**, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2006, pp. 341-370., Anthony Giddens. **The Consequences of Modernity**, Polity Press, 1990.

The import of these arguments is that Turkey's military involvement in Syria, and by extension in Iraq and Libya, can be theoretically construed as Turkey's efforts to rectify its feeling of being in the world, or its ontological insecurity. It is Turkey's idiosyncratic way of exercising its politics of belonging in regional and global affairs. In other words, part of the reason why the Turkey has endeavored to be recognized as regional leader holding a central position in all matters of disputes in the MERSC and beyond stems from what is referred to as Turkey's quest for redressing its *structural insecurity* and *temporal insecurity*. In Zeynep Çapan and Ayşe Zarakol's view, "the modern Turkey's ontological insecurity was constructed *spatially*, on the one hand, as liminality and structural in-betweenness, and *temporally*, on the other, as lagging behind the modernization of the west".<sup>718</sup> In this telling, for Turkey to be able to redress or ameliorate its structural and temporal insecurities, it needs to promote two strategies all at once, namely 'strategy of being' in order to "secure a stable and esteem-enhancing identity and a strong narrative"; and 'strategy of doing' in an effort "to ensure cognitive consistency through routinized practice while also undertaking action contributing to a sense of integrity and pride."<sup>719</sup> As a corollary, Turkey's doctrinal shift in its foreign policy in the post-2011 era, as exemplified by its military intervention in Syria, can be interpreted as the country's efforts to find 'ontic spaces', or redefine the concept of "home", through reintegration with its neighbors and reassertion of its "historic responsibility" to build stability in the Middle East security complex.<sup>720</sup> It is important to note that 'ontic spaces' are referred to as material environments, natural or man-made that define and stabilize a state's self-identity and narrative. They are spatial extensions of the collective self of a state, or the material bedrock that provides a state with a material anchor of its agency.<sup>721</sup> Seen in this light,

<sup>718</sup> Zeynep Gülsah Çapan and Ayşe Zarakol. "Turkey's Ambivalent Self: Ontological Insecurity in 'Kemalism' versus 'Erdoganism'", **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2019, pp. 263-282.

<sup>719</sup> See, Trine Flockhart. "The Problem of Change in Constructivist theory: Ontological security Seeking and Agent Motivation", **Review of International Studies**, Vol. 42, No. 5, December 2016, p. 799.

<sup>720</sup> Filip Ejodus. "'Not a Heap of Stones': Material Environments and Ontological Security in International Relations", **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2017, p. 27., Catarina Kinnvall. "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security", **Political Psychology**, Vol. 25, No. 5, 2004, pp. 741-767., Nick Danforth. "Exhuming Turkey's Past: Ottoman Revivalism, Then and Now", **Foreign Affairs**, 11.03.2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2015-03-11/exhuming-turkeys-past>, (10.08.2021).

<sup>721</sup> Stavros Drakoularakos. "Turkey and Erdogan Rising "Lausanne Syndrome", **Digest of Middle East Studies (DOMES)**, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2020, p. 24., Filip Ejodus, p. 27.

Turkey's efforts to create and expand spheres of influence in the Levant are aimed at "rebordering of in-between spaces" in northern Syria and northern Iraq, and "a potential restructuring of the regional power balance in the eastern Mediterranean."<sup>722</sup>

As alluded to by one scholar, "lacking its own 'backyard' or 'a regional basis from which to operate', Turkey has 'to play on diverse chessboards simultaneously, while always doing so as a guest in someone else's region.'"<sup>723</sup> The importance of these 'in-between spaces' along Turkey's immediate neighbors lies in the fact that they serve as a buffer zone between Turkey and a host of potentially hostile great powers who have substantial influence in those areas. These ontic spaces are, in effect, the "'home' safe from intruders", which at the same time may function as a 'marker of exclusion, and a site of violence'.<sup>724</sup> It is for this reason that some Turkish scholars like Sener Aktürk stress that any of these powers' occupation of or indefinite military presence in any of Turkey's immediate neighbors would pose a potentially overwhelming security threat for Turkey.<sup>725</sup> Hence, it is in this context that Turkey's efforts to take the mantle of leadership role in the Levant sub-complex gain meaning and relevance. In fact, beyond the discussions about Turkey's neo-Ottomanistic tendencies, the AKP government's assertive and militarist regional policy in the post-2011 is a reflection of the country's search for reifying an imaginary "home", a sustainable mental as well as spatial 'map of reality' by which it can discover and locate ontological security vis-à-vis threats posed by the intruding 'others' that do not have a firm understanding of Turkey's complexities and nuances. To achieve this goal, the Turkish state tactically clings onto its Ottoman past as an 'imagined history' that substantiates the Turkish nations' self-victimization, thereby legitimizing its assertive regional policy in the MERSC and beyond.<sup>726</sup>

---

<sup>722</sup> Peter Seeberg. "Neo-Ottoman Expansionism Beyond the Borders of Modern Turkey: Erdogan's Foreign Policy Ambitions in Syria and the Mediterranean", **De Europa**, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2021, p. 120., Daniel Meier. "In-Between Spaces in the Levant: Conceptual Reflections", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2020, pp. 273-288.

<sup>723</sup> Didem Buhari Gulmez. "The Resilience of U.S.-Turkey Alliance: Divergent Threat Perceptions and Worldviews", **Contemporary Politics**, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2020, pp. 475-492,

<sup>724</sup> Linus Hagström. "Great Power Narcissism and Ontological (In)Security: The Narrative Mediation of Greatness and Weakness in International Politics", **International Studies Quarterly**, Vol. 65, No. 2, 2021, p. 333.

<sup>725</sup> Şener Aktürk. "Turkey's Grand Strategy as the Third Power: A Realist Proposal", **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. XXV, No. 2, Autumn-Winter 2020, p. 160.

<sup>726</sup> Omar Al-Ghazzi. "We will Be Great Again: Historical Victimhood in Populist Discourse", **European Journal of Cultural Studies**, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2021, p. 46.

From an empirical perspective, seeing its NATO ally, the United States as having left Turkey in the lurch in the face of acute security challenges, the AKP government recourses to cost-imposing strategies against the U.S. by aligning itself, however tactically or strategically, with alternative non-Western countries such as Iran, Russia and China in order to ‘soft balance’ the U.S. in pursuit of regional leadership role.<sup>727</sup> In other words, Turkish foreign and security policy after the Arab uprisings in 2011 and especially after the country’s military intervention in Syria can be described as ‘multilateral hedging’. According to this policy, Turkey becomes engaged in a balancing act between the U.S. and other non-western states such as China and Russia, while at the same time engaging actively in a form of *hedging* in order to play politics with other states, aimed at maximizing its own interests without having to officially choose sides.

Accordingly, one can argue, according to RSCT-RPSF, that Turkey demonstrates a revisionist orientation with respect to the MERSC and at the level of global security order. According to Buzan, if stability is the security goal of the status quo powers, then change is the motto of revisionists.<sup>728</sup> This revisionist orientation stems from Turkey’s sense of lack of belonging to the Western alliance, as well as its feelings of ontological insecurity which has been exacerbated because of the actions of the Obama administration and by the continuation of somewhat similar trends under the Biden administration. Such revisionist tendencies are evident in President Erdogan’s assertions that ‘the world is bigger than five’ and that the United Nations Security Council should be reformed so that it could become “more democratic, equal and multilateral”.<sup>729</sup> The Turkish president has also published a book titled “A Fairer World in Possible”, reiterating that the global system is deeply unjust and in need of

---

<sup>727</sup> See, for example, Barcin Yinanc interview with Mustafa Aydin. “Turkey ‘on a Balancing Act Between NATO and Russia’”, **Hürriyet Daily News**, 16.07.2018, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-on-a-balancing-act-between-nato-and-russia-134599>, (10.08.2021)., Jacob Lindgaard. “Walking a Tight Rope, The U.S.-Turkey Balancing Act is Becoming Increasingly Untenable”, **War On the Rocks**, 30.10.2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/walking-a-thin-rope-the-u-s-turkey-balancing-act-is-becoming-increasingly-untenable/>, (10.08.2021).

<sup>728</sup> Barry Buzan. **People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era**, ECPR Press, 2016, p. 241.

<sup>729</sup> Razi Canikligil. “Erdogan’ın Ardından; Güvenlik Konseyi Adaylığımız, BM Reformu”, **Hürriyet**, 17.10.2014, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/razi-canikligil/erdogan-in-ardindan-guvenlik-konseyi-adayligimiz-bm-reformu-27321583>, (10.08.2021)., Emel Parlar Dal and Oğuz Gök. “Locating Turkey as a ‘Rising Power’ in the Changing International Order: An Introduction”, **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 1-18.

amendments. It should be borne in mind, however, that in this study the language of ‘revisionist’ and the ‘status-quo’ is not couched in the frame and meaning of international (im)morality; rather it is used to indicate a state’s satisfaction or dissatisfaction with its place in international affairs and to what extent it wants change in the prevailing international system.<sup>730</sup>

Against this background, it can be considered that there are different forms of revisionist orientations: orthodox, radical and revolutionary. In Buzan’s typology, orthodox revisionism is purely about power and status and does not involve any major challenge to the prevailing order. Revolutionary revisionism is referred to as an admixture of struggle for power within the system with a basic challenge to the organizing principle of the dominant status quo. According to Buzan, radical revisionists fall between orthodox and revolutionary ones as their objectives extend beyond the simple self-promotion of the orthodox, but fall short of the transformational ambitions of the revolutionary.<sup>731</sup> Hence, Turkey can be pigeonholed as an orthodox revisionist regional power that does not seek to dramatically change the organizing principles of the international system but aims to gain a powerful status within the regional and global security order. Of paramount importance is that Turkey under the AKP government also exercises such orthodox revisionist orientation through multilateral channels and temporary alliance instead of acting alone. As such, Turkey’s tactical alliance with Russia and Iran in the context of the Syrian conflict can be seen as a microcosm of such orthodox revisionist orientation that functions at the multilateral level. Entering into an alliance with Iran and Russia in the context of the Syrian conflict, allowed Turkey to stay relevant and remain a key stakeholder of the geopolitical and security equation, an opportunity which was not granted to the AKP government under the western security alliance, namely NATO prior to and after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. It is for this reason that Turkey threw its weight behind the Astana Peace Process in a more concrete and established way instead of the Geneva process.

---

<sup>730</sup> See, for example, Oliver Turner and Nicola Nymalm. “Morality and Progress: IR Narratives on International Revisionism and the Status Quo”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2019, pp. 407-428.

<sup>731</sup> For a detailed study of the different forms of revisionism, see, Barry Buzan. *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, ECPR Press, 2016, p. 241-244.



It is important to be mindful that the key argument here is *not* that Turkey is *essentially* a revision state bent on upending the western international system. Rather, the contention is that the AKP government has taken on a revisionist *orientation* because of, *inter alia*, the natural outcome of local dynamics of the MENA region as well as and systemic transformations that came about following the Arab uprisings and the Syrian conflict. Mention must be made that while Turkey's ultimate goal is to be a member of the Western state system, it appears that the AKP government intends to achieve this goal on a favorable term with the Western states instead of forfeiting its national security goals for the sake of becoming an EU member. In simple terms, Turkey under the AKP government appears to be abstaining from achieving its strategic goals *merely* through overreliance on and/or prioritizing relations with Western powers and Western alliances. In this view, Turkey is seen as having common goals and interests with the Western powers while at the same time harboring common strategic interests with Iran, Russia, China. Seen in this context, Turkey's orthodox revisionist orientations over the past decade can also be construed as an outcome of the Western neglect of Turkey's security and geopolitical concerns as evidenced by the lingering dispute over the S-400 issue between Washington and Ankara.

Upon these considerations, it can be argued that Turkey's orthodox revisionist orientations since 2011 and most specifically after the Syrian civil war has had important implications on its foreign and security policy outlook. As such, some scholars argue that "Turkey's perception of unequal and unfair treatment by its Western allies has led to an increasing Eurasianism" in the country.<sup>732</sup>

While Eurasianist tendencies were observable, to varying degrees, in Turgut Özal's, Ismail Cem's and Ahmed Davutoglu's era, the discourse and practice of Eurasianism (Ulusalçı) has been reinforced under the AKP government. More specifically since 2014 a de facto political coalition has emerged among the Islamist AKP, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the Eurasianist Vatan Party. As Colakoglu argues, while until 2014 the Eurasianists possessed limited capacity to influence Turkish foreign and security policies, the tide has turned ever since then in

---

<sup>732</sup> Habibe Ozdal, Irina Zvyagelskaya, and Irina Svistunova. "Russia and Turkey-Partners or Adversaries?", **Friedrich Ebert Stiftung**, 01.06.2021, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/moskau/18044.pdf>, (11.08.2021).

favor of these predilections as a consequence of the emergence of the Islamist-Neonationalist-Eurasianist coalition on foreign policy.<sup>733</sup>

According to Eurasianists, Turkey should turn to the East in both political and military terms, and strengthen friendly relations with the Turkic states (of Central Asia and the south Caucasus) in order to channel the economic and cultural influence of Turks into the neighboring region.<sup>734</sup> In the words of Bilgin and Bilgiç, they want Turkey to “de-emphasize its ties with the European Union in favor of establishing closer relations with Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Russia, have for a long time utilized geopolitics.”<sup>735</sup> Based on the foregoing, no small wonder that the narrative of the alleged cultural unity stretching “from the Great Wall of China to the Adriatic” has become a familiar refrain of Turkish policy discourse.<sup>736</sup> In the realm of actual foreign policy, however, the Turkish government’s Eurasianist drifts and discourses have gained traction in the aftermath of Ankara’s active military engagement in support of Azerbaijan in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, which began on September 27, 2020 and lasted 44 days.

The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020 tilted the balance of power in the South Caucasus in favor of Ankara. As a consequence, Iran found itself with an increasingly limited room for geopolitical maneuvering north of its border while Turkey gained a land corridor that connects Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan, thereby solidifying its footprint in the south Caucasus to the detriment of Iran’s regional interests.<sup>737</sup> Having learned the lessons of the Syrian conflict in terms of deployment of Turkish *Bayraktar* drones, Turkey followed a similar pattern during the second Nagorno-Karabakh war by supplying drones and investing in training Azerbaijani’s armed forces.<sup>738</sup>

---

<sup>733</sup> Selçuk Colakoğlu. “The Rise of Eurasianism in Turkish Foreign Policy: Can Turkey Change its Pro-Western Orientation?”, **Middle East Institute**, 16.04.2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/rise-eurasianism-turkish-foreign-policy-can-turkey-change-its-pro-western-orientation>, (11.08.2021).

<sup>734</sup> Ozgur Tufekci. **The Foreign Policy of Modern Turkey: Power and The Ideology of Eurasianism**, I.B. Tauris, 2017, p. 5.

<sup>735</sup> Pinar Bilgin and Ali Bilgiç. “Turkey’s “New” Foreign Policy toward Eurasia”, **Eurasian Geography and Economics**, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2011, pp. 173-195, p. 180.

<sup>736</sup> Merlene Laraulle and Sebastien Peyrouse. **Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Challenged of Economic Development**, M.E Sharpe, 2013, p. 76.

<sup>737</sup> See, for example, Ruslan Rehimov. “Zangezur Corridor to Provide New Link Between Turkey and Azerbaijan”, **Anadolu Agency**, 01.06.2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/zangezur-corridor-to-provide-new-link-between-turkey-azerbaijan/2260088>, (11.10.2021).

<sup>738</sup> Shaan Shaikh and Wes Rumbaugh. “The Air and Missile War in Nagorno-Karabakh: Lessons for the Future of Strike and Defense”, **Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)**,

It is important to note that since Azerbaijan plays the role of an important economic partner and a bridge to the Central Asian republics east of the Caspian Sea, the strengthening of the patterns of amity between Baku and Ankara serves as a springboard for Turkish influence in the Eurasian landmass. Based on this rationale, some analysts argue that since Turkey has developed warm and friendly relations with Ukraine and Azerbaijan, the Turkish government is at the embryonic stages of forming ‘a new geo-strategic axis’ from Baku to Kyiv that can entail important implications on Ankara’s Eurasianist agenda.<sup>739</sup> Indeed, the creation of such axis in parallel with Azerbaijan-Nakhichevan corridor and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR)—with the latter referred to as a railway transit route that runs from China through Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and further to Europe—enhances Turkey’s position as a pivotal player in China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)’.<sup>740</sup> Nevertheless, as Galip Dalay cautions, the Turkish quest for a role in the post-Soviet space is likely to revive the ‘geopolitical Eurasianism’, which in turn would pit Ankara against Moscow, the repercussions of which will be felt in different regions.<sup>741</sup>

All of these instances represent Turkey’s proactive turn towards Eurasia since 2011. Coupled with its orthodox revisionist orientation, Turkey’s Eurasianist turn provides Turkey with an ample room to manage its relations with the West. As indicated earlier, however, Turkey appears to embark on this pattern of behavior through multilateral means than going it alone. From RSCT+RPSF model, one can conclude that while Turkey aims to take the leadership role in the MERSC and beyond, it has done so by

---

08.12.2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/air-and-missile-war-nagorno-karabakh-lessons-future-strike-and-defense>, (11.08.2021)., Aaron Stein. “Say Hello to Turkey’s Little Friend: How Drone Help Level the Playing Field”, **War On the Rocks**, 11.06.2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/say-hello-to-turkeys-little-friend-how-drones-help-level-the-playing-field/>, (11.08.2021).

<sup>739</sup> Taras Kuzio. “Turkey Forges a New Geo-Strategic Axis from Azerbaijan to Ukraine”, **Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)**, 18.11.2020, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/turkey-forges-new-geo-strategic-axis-azerbaijan-ukraine>, (11.08.2021).

<sup>740</sup> Selçuk Colakoglu. “China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Turkey’s Middle Corridor: A Question of Compatibility”, **Middle East Institute**, 29.01.2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-and-turkeys-middle-corridor-question-compatibility>, (12.08.2021).

<sup>741</sup> Galip Dalay. “Turkey’s Geopolitical and Ideological Eurasianism and its Relations with Russia”, **German Marshall Fund of United States (GMFUS)**, 21.09.2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkeys-geopolitical-and-ideological-eurasianism-and-its-relations-russia>, (12.08.2021).

adopting an orthodox revisionist orientation which is informed by a mid to long-term Eurasianist understanding of regional affairs. Such transformation in Turkish foreign and security policy necessities the country to continue to play the role of a major pole in the MERSC, a role that can be replicated in the post-Soviet space.

#### 4.3.2. Iran: The Wildcard in the Middle East Security Complex

After more than four decades of the Islamic Republic's political life, Iran still remains a peculiar challenge for regional and global actors. The challenge posed by Iran under the Islamic Republic's rule stems, partially if not entirely, from its special *raison d'être* as a theocratic state in international relations and from a confluence of intervening variables functioning at the domestic, regional and systemic levels. Much has been written about Iran's foreign and security policy after the Arab uprising events but it is important to be reminded that any study of the Iranian state's role and orientations would suffer from the problem of simplification and undertheorizing absent a careful attention to the *sui generis* nature of the Islamic Republic and the complexities inherent to this peculiar and 'paradoxical regime'.<sup>742</sup> To be more specific, Iran is one of the rarest countries, if not the only country, that has two parallel military organizations with some degrees of integration at the command level: the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, known in Persian as *Sepah-e Pasdaran*, and the regular Army, or *Artesh* in Persian. Iran is also ruled by the *Velayat-e Faqih* system that places the Supreme Leader (*rahbar*) as the highest authority who has ultimate saying over the decision-making processes in matters of 'high politics' and 'low politics' in the country.<sup>743</sup> Although the peculiarities of Iranian political system are not confined to these two internal factors, it is essential to incorporate these variables into the analysis of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy orientations.

---

<sup>742</sup> Abbas Milani. "Iran's Paradoxical Regime", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 26, No. 2, April 2015, pp. 52-60.

<sup>743</sup> According to the Rule of the Jurisconsult, in the absence of Hidden Imam Mehdi, the clergy were the true guardian of the state. The Article 110 of the Iranian Constitution accords significant authority to the Supreme Leader, I.e., the Islamic Republic's power to appoint six clerical members to the Council of Guardians, who along with six non-clerical members decide whether any legislation would conform to the Constitution. See, Bahman Bokhari. "The Islamic Republic of Iran: Shai'a Politics and the Transformation of Islamic Law, *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2012, pp. 35-44, p. 36.

As far as the role of IRGC is concerned, it bears noting that since its inception in April 1979, shortly after the Islamic Revolution which succeeded in toppling the Shah, the Guards were tasked with defending the regime and coup-proofing the army as well as counter-revolutionary groups.<sup>744</sup> However, the IRGC rose to prominence in Iran's foreign and security policy as a result of Iraq's invasion and the ensuing 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war during which it molded into a military combat force with land force, air force and naval units. Boosted by direct support of the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the IRGC's proximity to power has turned the Guards into a kingmaker in domestic and external politics in Iran. In this regard, the Quds Force, the external operations arm of the IRGC, has played a vital and central role in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic.<sup>745</sup> The important role played by the IRGC-QF has been the focal point of countless speeches by the leader of Islamic Republic. For example, Ali Khamenei stated in May 2021 that "the Quds Force is the biggest effective factor in preventing passive diplomacy in the West Asia region".<sup>746</sup> It is also worth underscoring that given Khamenei's central role in Iran's decision-making process and his deeply-held suspicions, it is often the informal circles close to Leader's Office (*Biet-e Rahbari*) and the paramilitary groupings such as IRGC that are more relevant to policy making than the formal institutions around i.e., the Foreign Ministry.<sup>747</sup>

The best example of the centrality of the IRGC-QF's role in foreign policy making in Iran can be seen in the wide latitude with which the former Commander of

---

<sup>744</sup> According to the Article 150 of Iran's Constitution, the IRGC is responsible for "guarding the Revolution and its achievements".

<sup>745</sup> Sepehr Zabih. "Aspects of Terrorism in Iran", **Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science**, Vol. 463, No. 1, 1982, pp. 84-94., Kamran Taremi. "Iranian Foreign Policy Towards Occupied Iraq, 2003-05", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2005, pp. 28-47., Ardavan Khoshnood. "The Role of the Qods Force in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran", **Central European Journal of International and Security Studies**, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2020, pp. 4-33.

<sup>746</sup> Tehran Times. "Leader Highlights Quds Force's in Strengthening Iran Foreign Policy", **Tehran Times**, 02.05.2021, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/460529/Leader-highlights-Quds-Force-role-in-strengthening-Iran-foreign>, (14.08.2021).

<sup>747</sup> See, David E. Thaler, Alireza Nader, Shahram Chubin, Jerrold D. Green, Charlotte Lynch, and Frederic Wehrey. "Mullas, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics", **RAND Corporation**, Santa Monica: Arlington, 2020, p. 170, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG878.html>, (14.08.2021)., Karim Sadjadpour. "Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 2009, p. 30, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sadjadpour\\_iran\\_final2.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sadjadpour_iran_final2.pdf), (14.08.2021)., William Anthony Rivera. "Discursive Practices of Honor: Rethinking Iran's Nuclear Program", **Foreign Policy Analysis**, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2016, p. 399.

the Quds Force Qasem Soleimani used to advance the Islamic Republic's military and diplomatic activities in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. Undoubtedly, Soleimani was the main architect and the chief executor of Iran's regional policy from Yemen to Lebanon. He played a pivotal role in the course of Syria war through many policies and initiatives and is often viewed as the General who convinced Russian President Vladimir Putin into taking the decision to militarily intervene in Syria in September 2015.<sup>748</sup> Therefore, Soleimani was regarded as "Iran's pseudo minister of foreign affairs".<sup>749</sup> The assassination of Soleimani in January 2020 had a profound impact on the IRGC because his successor General Esmail Qaani lacks experience in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Syria. Nevertheless, the role and orientation of Iran's foreign policy has not shown any substantial change. Since Soleimani's death, the IRGC remains in charge of the Islamic Republic's naval operations, oversees Iran's ballistic missile program and manages the country's regional activities and operations in the Middle East and beyond.<sup>750</sup> Hence, it can be concluded that the role of IRGC is integral to our understanding of Iran's foreign policy role and orientation, especially in the context of the Syrian conflict.

Broadly speaking, there are key turning points in the doctrinal maturation of the IRGC and its impact on Iran's regional policy. In this regard, it is widely viewed that for more than a decade after Iran-Iraq war, the Islamic Republic pursued a defensive doctrine aimed at preserving the territorial integrity of the country, avoiding aggressive military action and maintaining post-war recovery. Yet, Iran's military doctrine underwent modifications after the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s as part of the 2005 concept of 'Mosaic Defense' (*Defa-e Mozayiki*).

As a prominent Iranian scholar argues,

*Following the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003, respectively, the IRGC has adopted an asymmetric military doctrine aimed at*

<sup>748</sup> Sarah El Deeb. "Iranian General Transformed Syria's War in Assad's Favor", The Associated Press, 07.01.2020, <https://apnews.com/article/syria-ap-top-news-tehran-international-news-iraq-a0557de2499d53eb9d298bbea35bb9d8>, (14.08.2021)., John W. Parker. "Qasem Soleimani: Moscow's Syria Decision – Myth and Reality", **The Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS)**, 04.02.2020, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/207413-2/qasem-soleimani-moscows-syria-decision-myth-and-reality/>, (14.08.2021).

<sup>749</sup> Ardavan Khoshnood. "The Role of the Qods Force in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran", **Central European Journal of International and Security Studies**, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2020, p. 13.

<sup>750</sup> See, Afshon Ostovar. **Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards**, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 5-6.

*guarding the republic, based on four main elements: decentralizing IRGC ground forces, expanding diverse missile programs managed by the IRGC Aerospace Force, developing an asymmetric naval strategy through the IRGC navy, and creating and supporting aligned paramilitary groups in the region through the Quds Force.*<sup>751</sup>

These set of principles were largely defensive in nature and depended on naval and air-defense capabilities to counter conventional territorial-based invasion. It merits attention that Iran's military strategy has ideational (ideological) undertones. In a March 2005 speech former IRGC Commander Brigadier General Yahya Rahim Safavi states that "the spirit of Jihad and martyrdom-seeking" enables the Guards to fight for endless defense on land, sea and in the air.<sup>752</sup> Another turning point in Iran's military strategy which had a profound impact on the Islamic Republic's foreign policy role and orientation came in 2011. Following the Arab spring events, Iran made a meaningful revision into its doctrine by supplementing its defensive strategy with an offensive one dubbed "forward defense" (*defa'e ru bejolo*).<sup>753</sup> In sync with Iran's "forward defense" doctrine, the Islamic Republic along with its IRGC-QF wing and Hezbollah militias has sought to expand its strategic depth beyond its borders while simultaneously preventing the other side from targeting Iran's interests. In simple terms, as Amr Yossef posits, according to the "forward defense" doctrine, Iran should fight its enemies beyond its borders so as to avoid conflict within the country.<sup>754</sup>

As can be seen, although the core of the doctrine is aimed at deterrence, the forward defense has both defensive dimension (deterrence) and offensive dimension (forward bases and overseas operations). In this context, Iran's assistance to Assad's forces in the face of rebellion and Syrian civil war is the best example of such forward defense strategy. From a realist perspective, for Iran, a Syrian war front with Israel was deemed necessary in order to maintain deterrence through extending the physical

---

<sup>751</sup> Saeid Golkar. "The Supreme Leader and the Guard: Civil-Military Relations and Regime Survival in Iran", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 25.02.2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/supreme-leader-and-guard-civil-military-relations-and-regime-survival-iran>, (14.08.2021).

<sup>752</sup> See, Mohammed Nuruzzaman. "What Comes Next for Iran's Defense Doctrine", **The National Interest**, 10.11.2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/what-comes-next-irans-defense-doctrine-18360>, (14.08.2021).

<sup>753</sup> Amr Yossef. "Military Doctrines in Israel and Iran: A Doctrinal Hybridity", **The Middle East Journal**, Vol. 75, No. 2, Summer 2021, p. 253.

<sup>754</sup> Amr Yossef. "Upgrading Iran's Military Doctrine: An Offensive 'Forward Defense'", **Middle East Institute**, 10.12.2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/upgrading-irans-military-doctrine-offensive-forward-defense>, (15.08.2021).

boundaries of its strategic depth to include Syria in the Levant and Yemen in the Gulf sub-complexes. To this aim, the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis in the Middle East was shaped to materialize this strategic objective. As some analysts argue, Iran's military involvement in Syria was an integral part of a long-term strategic project aimed at creating "a contiguous zone of direct influence spanning historical Mesopotamia (where Iran strives for domination and targets U.S. military presence) and the Levant toward the Mediterranean—the so-called Iranian 'land bride'".<sup>755</sup> At the regional level, the growing patterns of competitive amity among Iran, Russia and Turkey under the Astana Peace Process allowed the IRGC and its affiliated militia groups to penetrate deeply in the Syrian landmass. Prior to the Trump administration's 'Maximum Pressure' policy, the level and intensity of Iranian penetration of the MERSC, i.e., in the Levant sub-complex (Syria, Lebanon, Palestinian territories) and the Gulf sub-complex was so much so that some senior Iranian officials proudly claimed that "the Islamic Republic of Iran effectively controls four Arab Capitals: Baghdad, Damascus, Sana'a and Beirut."<sup>756</sup> It is worthwhile to note that Iran's new Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian stated in February 2018 that "Iran has a plan for destruction of Israel".<sup>757</sup> Even the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic Ali Khamenei said in May 2020 that "Israel is a 'cancerous tumor' that 'will undoubtedly be uprooted and destroyed'".<sup>758</sup>

From a constructivist perspective, these remarks, although taken less seriously in academic circles, are of particular importance as they indicate Tehran's offensive leanings in its role and orientation at the regional level. These ideologically-driven iterations are particularly important primarily because "a state's foreign policy role (or ideology) implies an identity and defines orientations toward neighbors (friend or

<sup>755</sup> Steve McCabe MP, et al. "The New Middle East: A Progressive Approach", **Labour Friends of Israel**, July 2021, p. 11, <https://www.lfi.org.uk/publications/the-new-middle-east/>, (15.08.2021).

<sup>756</sup> Samia Nakhoul. "Iran Expands Regional 'Empire' Ahead of Nuclear Deal", **Reuters**, 23.03.2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us/mideastiranregioninsightidUSKBN0MJ1G520150323>, (15.08.2021).

<sup>757</sup> Donyaye Eghtesad. "Amir Abdollahian: Iran Baraye Naboodi Esraeel Barname Darad", **Donyaye Eghtesad**, 27.02.2018, <https://donya-e-eghtesad.com/بخش-سایت-خوان-3359578/62-امیر-عبداللهیان-ایران-برای-نابودی-اسرائیل-برنامه-دارد>, (15.08.2021).

<sup>758</sup> Amir Vahdat and John Gambrel. "Iran Leader Says Israel a 'Cancerous Tumor' to be Destroyed", **The Associated Press**, 22.05.2020. <https://apnews.com/article/ali-khamenei-israel-persian-gulf-tensions-tehran-jerusalem-a033042303545d9ef783a95222d51b83>, (16.08.2021).



enemy), toward great powers (threat or patron), and toward the state system (revisionist or status quo).”<sup>759</sup>

Since the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the national role conception of Iran in the Middle East has been that of a revisionist state bent on upending the international order in its entirety. This perception of Iranian threat has given rise to a series of securitization moves by regional and extra-regional powers bent on containing Iran. Starting with the Trump administration (2017-2020), the United States embarked on ‘hard containment’ of the Islamic Republic through imposition of crippling sanctions against Iran under the ‘Maximum Pressure’ campaign. The rationale behind the Trump administration’s Maximum Pressure policy was that the Iranian regime, under immense economic pressure, will have to either ultimately change its behavior or will face the worst-case scenario of regime collapse or regime change.<sup>760</sup> However, following the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal in May 2018, Iran abstained from changing its behavior and further intensified its activities in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, both politically and militarily. The Islamic Republic also doubled down on its projection of power also through multiple missile tests and launched a satellite into space in May 2018.<sup>761</sup> As noted by some analysts, the Trump administration’s decisions pushed Tehran to rely heavily on the ‘revolutionary’ narrative undergirded by the pivotal role of deterrence, the aspiration to fight ‘global arrogance’, and the reliance on self-sufficiency.<sup>762</sup>

Of particular relevance is that concurrent with the Maximum Pressure policy, the Islamic Republic unveiled Iran’s sixth national development plan for 2017-2022 according to which a heavy premium was placed on enhancing missile, and naval force

---

<sup>759</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami. “Foreign Policy Making in the Middle East: Complex Realism”, **International Relations of the Middle East**, Louise Fawcett, Oxford University Press, Fourth Edition, 2016, p. 242.

<sup>760</sup> See, for example, Hossein Aghaie Joobani and Mohammadhossein Daheshvar. “Deciphering Trump’s ‘Maximum Pressure’ Policy: The Enduring Challenge of Containing Iran”, **New Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2020, pp. 22-44., Mohammad Nuruzzaman. “President Trump’s ‘Maximum Pressure’ Campaign and Iran’s Endgame”, **Strategic Analysis**, Vol. 44, No. 6, 2020 pp. 570-582.

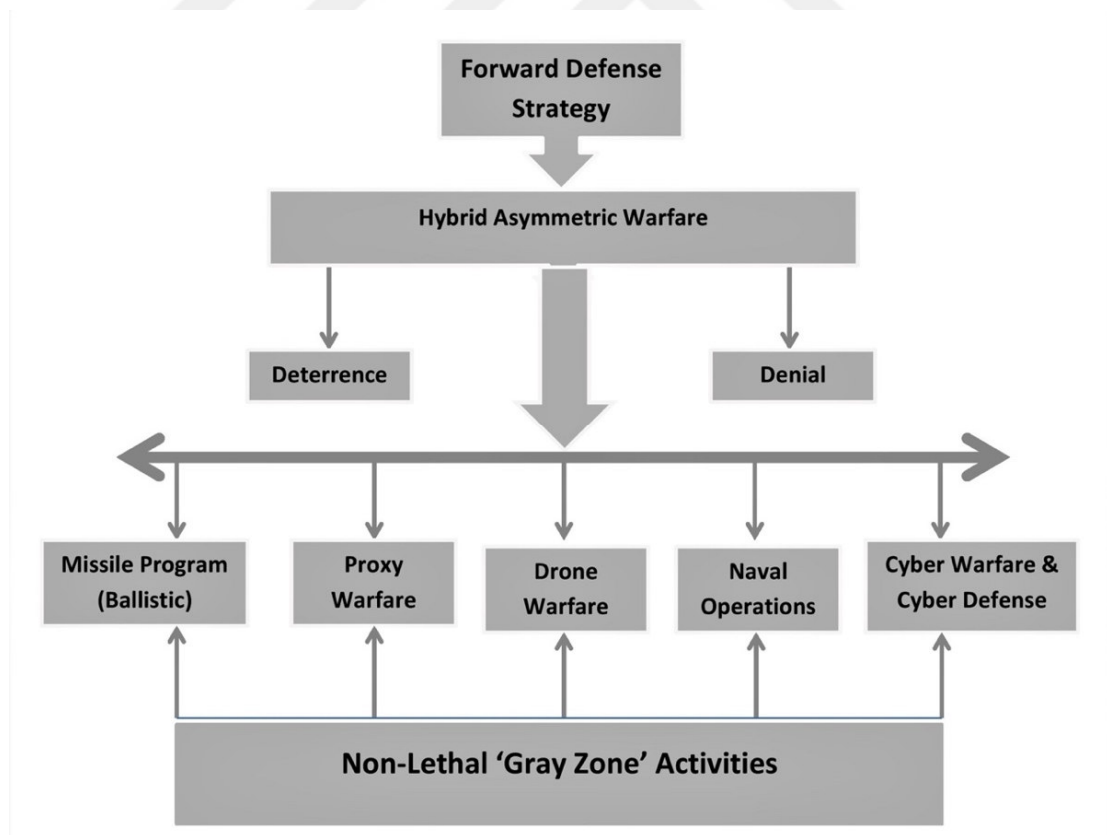
<sup>761</sup> Naveed Ahmad. “Iran’s ‘Forward Defense’ Doctrine: Missile and Space Programs”, **International Institute for Iranian Studies (RASANAHI)**, 11.10.2020, p. 7. <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/centre-for-researches-and-studies/irans-forward-defense-doctrine-missile-and-space-programs/>, (16.08.2021).

<sup>762</sup> Mohammad Eslami and Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira. “Iran’s Strategic Culture: The ‘Revolutionary’ and ‘Moderation’ Narratives on the Ballistic Missile Program”, **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2020, p. 313.

capabilities, and cyber warfare ‘at the level of regional power’, and developing air power with a focus on offensive capabilities, especially drones and UAVs. As can be seen, efforts to increase kinetic and non-kinetic warfare constituted a main plank of the national development plan. It is worth highlighting that for Iran the Syrian conflict was seen as a laboratory of a wide spectrum of military as well as non-military instruments of warfare in line with Iran’s forward defense doctrine.<sup>763</sup>

Given that Syria is considered a cornerstone of Iran’s regional strategy, the implementation of these instruments of ‘hybrid warfare’ along with its tactical alignment with Russia and Turkey created the conditions of possibility for Tehran, as a member of the Gulf sub-complex, to introduce itself forcefully in the Levant sub-complex. In this spirit, entering into tactical and even strategic alignment with Russia and Turkey permitted Iran to put a garment of reality to its vision of creating a ‘Shia Crescent’ extending from Tehran to Beirut through the Syrian landmass.

**Figure 9:** The Islamic Republic of Iran’s Military Strategy



<sup>763</sup> Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski. “‘Mosaic Defense:’ Iran’s Hybrid Warfare in Syria 2011-2016”, *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, No. 3, 2017, pp. 18-68.

Source: Designed by the author

Indeed, the expansion of the Shia across the Lebanese shore predates the Islamic Republic. The region experienced Shia expansion originally between the tenth and early thirteen centuries.<sup>764</sup> But what is new about the Islamic Republic's expansionist policies, namely in Syria, is that if we look at it from a constructivist view, it would be tenable to argue that Iran is seeking to achieve its regional strategic objectives through 'frontierization' and re-territorialization of 'in-between spaces'.<sup>765</sup> In other words, if we consider *frontiering* as 'socio-spatial outcomes of power struggles' and territories as physical borderlands and the geographic space, then Syria can be viewed (in the eyes of the IRGC and its Shia militia proxy networks) as an in-between space that can be militarily overlayed so that it becomes part of Iranian land-bridge from Tehran to Beirut. Simply put, the Islamic Republic's military intervention in the Syrian civil war demonstrated in actuality the extent to which a perceived 'in-between space' such as Syria were being frontierized and re-territorialized by Iran—with the latter phenomenon as being evident by the great transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian border (the Qa'im-Bukamal border).

For this strategic objective to be achieved the Islamic Republic needed a strategic military doctrine dubbed forward defense as it was discussed earlier. To put it into a proper context, this forward-leaning military strategy refers to the implementation of an admixture of hybrid asymmetric warfare that Iran describes it as *forward defense*—carrying out offensive and defensive operations aimed at 'pre-empting the penetration of symmetric and asymmetric threats inside Iran's borders'—and the policy of "*omnibalancing*"—allying with a global power [i.e., Russia and China] that would help a local regime [Iran] counter its own home-grown or internal threats.<sup>766</sup> Largely viewed as a modification and/or a critique of the existing 'balance

---

<sup>764</sup> Hadi Wahab. "Syria's Sect-Coded Conflict: From Hezbollah's Top-Down Instrumentalization of Sectarian Identity to Its Candid Geopolitical Confrontation", **Contemporary Review of the Middle East**, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2021, pp. 149-167.

<sup>765</sup> For a relevant study on 'frontierization' see, Richard Schofield. "Borderland Studies, Frontierization, and the Middle East's In-Between Spaces", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2020, p. 404., Daniel Meier. "In-Between Spaces in the Levant: Conceptual Reflections", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2020, pp. 273-288.

<sup>766</sup> 'Hybrid Warfare' refers to 'a range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.' For more see, Frank G. Hoffman. **Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Rise of**

of threat’ as well as ‘balance of power’ theories as espoused by neo-realist thinkers such as Stephen Walt and Kenneth Waltz, respectively, the concept of omnibalancing suggests that world leaders in third world countries, i.e., developing countries, tend to balance against all significant threats to their regimes, including external as well as internal ones.<sup>767</sup> Although the designation ‘third world countries’ belongs to the Cold War era, the assertion here is that some of the elements underpinning the concept of omnibalancing is highly relevant in explaining the foreign policy role and orientations of those few numbers of states (mostly developing countries) that do not necessarily act based on cost-benefit calculations, namely the Islamic Republic.

This study previously tapped into Iran’s idiosyncratic way of rationalizing international affairs, but suffice it to say here that based on the concept of omnibalancing some leaders in developing or less-developed countries will sometimes act against the interest of their states in order to preserve and protect their regimes rather than the national interests of their purported countries.<sup>768</sup> In these countries domestic threats are so widespread and frequent that they become an ‘ideal vehicle’ for advancing the interests of outside states.<sup>769</sup> Based on the assumptions cited above, the claim is that some leaders, such as the Islamic Republic’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in Iran, decide for the state to align itself with global powers, including second adversaries (through giving concessions and entering into negotiations) in order to, first and foremost, concentrate on primary threats that emanate from domestic upheavals i.e., popular unrests. As expressed by one analyst, when viewed through the concept of omnibalancing, ‘the core of the theory (focus on threats to leaders, and on

---

**Hybrid Wars**, Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007, p. 14. For more on ‘Forward Defense’ doctrine, see, Kayhan Barzegar. “The Assassination of Qasem Soleimani Institutionalizes Anti-American Sentiment in Iran”, **Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft**, 07.01.2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft-ft.org/2020/01/07/the-assassination-of-qasem-soleimani-institutionalizes-anti-american-sentiment-in-iran/>, (16.08.201)., Alex Vatanka. “Whither the IRGC of the 2020s?: Is Iran’s Proxy Warfare Strategy of Forward Defense Sustainable?”, **New America**, January 2021, p. 20, <https://www.newamerica.org/internationalsecurity/reports/whitherirgc2020s/>, (15.08.2021)., Curtis R. Ryan. “Alliances and the Balance of Power in the Middle East”, **The Routledge Handbook to the Middle East and States System**, Raymond Hinnebusch and Jasmine Gani, Routledge, 2020, p. 342.

<sup>767</sup> Stephen R. David. “Explaining Third World Alignment”, **World Politics**, Vol. 43, No. 2, 1991, pp. 233-256.

<sup>768</sup> Stephen R. David. “Explaining Third World Alignment”, **World Politics**, Vol. 43, No. 2, 1991, p. 239.

<sup>769</sup> Stephen R. David, p. 241.

the careful balancing of internal and external threats to maximize the power and ensure survival of the regime) becomes exceedingly useful in helping us to elicit a better way of understanding the policy decisions and orientations adopted by certain leaders.<sup>770</sup>

Applied to the case of Iran's foreign policy role and orientation, it would be permissible to suggest that Iran's tactical alignment with Russia and China as well as its indirect diplomatic engagements with the United States and Saudi Arabia (as secondary adversaries) are partially aimed at balancing threats to the regime survival. These alignments are directed at threats emanating from the worsening economic situation in the country. In this respect, the controversial 25-year strategic cooperation between Iran and China (March 2021) as well as similar cooperation agreement signed between Iran and Russia (January 2021) entail provisions pertaining to cyber security and countering domestic threats.<sup>771</sup> The ongoing overt or behind-the-scenes negotiations between Iran and the U.S./European countries aimed at reviving the nuclear deal also put into evidence the security concerns of the Islamic Republic in the sense that through keeping diplomatic channels open Tehran can buy time to concentrate on suppressing domestic discontent. Negotiations provide Tehran with enough time and latitude to address security threats at the domestic level, threats which, if not addressed, can jeopardize the survival of the Islamic Republic as a political entity.

As can be seen, whereas Waltz's 'balance of power' and Walt's 'balance of threat' theories tend to recognize external threats as a key variable in decision-making processes, the concept of omnibalancing takes into consideration internal threats into the equation and analyses state's alignments accordingly. Put differently, for Iran, the military strategy of forward defense works for the most part at the regional level

---

<sup>770</sup> Danielle Beswick. "The Return of Omnibalancing? A Multi-Level Analysis of Strategies for Securing Agency in Post-Genocide Rwanda", Seminar Paper, University of Birmingham. <https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/bisa-africa/files/africanagency-seminar4-beswick.pdf>, (16.08.2021).

<sup>771</sup> See, Omree Wechsler. "The Iran-Russia Cyber Agreement and U.S. Strategy in the Middle East", **Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)**, 15.03.2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/iran-russia-cyber-agreement-and-us-strategy-middle-east>, (18.08.2021)., Bilal Guler. "Iranians Protest Cooperation Pact with China", **Anadolu Agency**, 30.03.2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iranians-protest-cooperation-pact-with-china/2192750>, (19.08.2021)., Lucy Hornby. "China Paper Slams U.S. Role for In Iran Unrest", **Reuters**, 24.01.2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-us-internet-idUSTRE60N0V320100124>, (19.08.2021)., Fabio Rugge. "Confronting An 'Axis of Cyber'?: China, Iran, North Korea, Russia in Cyberspace", **Ledizioni LediPublishing**, 2018, [https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/cyber\\_def\\_web2.pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/cyber_def_web2.pdf), (18.08.2021).

whereas omnibalancing functions primarily at the domestic level. At the regional level, the idea is that building a corridor at the heart of Syria (as an in-between space in the Levant) will potentially link Iran to Syria and the Lebanese coast, thereby providing Iran-Assad-Hezbollah with a ‘two-sided buffer’ that could help them survive.<sup>772</sup> For the wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen are not simply strategic for the indigenous Shia; they are fights for survival.<sup>773</sup> In this context, omnibalancing through alignment with Russia and China also allows Iran to adjust its strategic focus on domestic threats while the public attention is focused on external issues such as war in Syria. At the domestic level, the idea is that cementing cooperation with Russia and China as well as maintaining limited negotiations with the U.S. and the GCC heavyweights such as Saudi Arabia will afford Tehran with a minimal capacity to manage geopolitical threats, thereby leaving the space open for it to confront domestic concerns. Therefore, this study introduces “*forward defense plus omnibalancing*” as a suitable conceptual framework for understanding and explaining the foreign policy orientation and role of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a revisionist regional power.

When looked at this conceptual framework from the RSCT+RPSF model, one can argue that as far as Iran’s regional role is concerned, the Islamic Republic is seeking leadership role in the MERSC with a primary focus on the Gulf and the Levant sub-complexes. While Iran’s military engagement in Syria, through IRGC or its militia proxy networks, has made the country a *de facto* member of the Levant sub-complex, in addition to its membership in the Gulf sub-complex, Tehran pursues its quest for leadership through eliciting cooperation at multilateral levels with a group of like-minded states. Unlike the other two roles as specified by the RSCT-RPSF model, namely protection and custodianship, the Islamic Republic does not seek to appear as regional custodian or a regional protector in terms of protecting and/or stabilizing the current security order. The actions and rhetoric of the Islamic Republic towards the members of the MERSC is a testimony to Tehran’s willingness to take the mantle of leadership role in the region. Yet, as noted earlier, it does so preferably through cooperation with other regional or extra-regional actors with whom it shares some

<sup>772</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch. “The Arab Uprisings and the MENA Regional States System”, **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 11, No. 42, 2014, p. 14.

<sup>773</sup> Afshon Ostovar. “Sectarianism and Iranian Foreign Policy”, **Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East**, Frederic Wehrey, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 109.

semblance of revisionist tendencies, such as Russia, China and to a lesser extent Turkey. Therefore, Iran's entry into a tactical partnership with Russia and Turkey over the Syrian conflict can be seen as a peculiar form of adversarial cooperation aimed at upending the regional security order in the MERS, to the detriment of the regional interests of the United States and its traditional regional allies (i.e., signatories of the Abraham Accords).

Mention must be made, however, that unlike Turkey which is regarded as an orthodox revisionist regional power, the Islamic Republic is treated here as a revolutionary revisionist regional power because Iran's actions and discourse indicate that it seeks changes to the existing distribution of power in terms of 'territory, status, markets, expansion of ideology, and the existing international law and institutions'.<sup>774</sup> What is often ignored is that part of the Islamic Republic's revisionist orientation stems from, *inter alia*, the centrality of martyrdom in warfare in Shiism and the importance attached to the Battle of Karbala between Imam Hussain and the Umayyad Caliph Yazid. Imam Hussain, the son of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first infallible Shia Imam, was martyred at Karbala after he and 72 followers rose against what they saw as the oppressive and morally corrupt Umayyad caliphate of Yazid I. Although Hussain and his followers ultimately lost the battle against Yazid's army, Hussain's courageous resistance and willingness to sacrifice himself in the face of tyranny was enshrined in Shia philosophy.<sup>775</sup> In the lexicon of Shia political discourse, the battle of Karbala is a major symbol of the fight between good vs evil, justice vs oppression, honor vs shame a noble resistance against the oppressor Other. The debate surrounding the Karbala narrative is attributable to the issue of "whether or not to actively rebel against unjust rulers like the Pahlavi regime and what was characterized as the oppressive imperialist order."<sup>776</sup> Since Syria is home to a number of Shia pilgrimage sites, including the Shrine of Sayyedah Zeinab, the Prophet Muhammad's granddaughter, many Iranian

---

<sup>774</sup> Oliver Turner and Nicola Nymalm. "Morality and Progress: IR Narratives on International Revisionism and the Status Quo", **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2019, p. 408.

<sup>775</sup> See, Kasra Aarabi. "Beyond Borders, The Expansionist Ideology of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps", **Tony Blair Institute for Global Change**, 01.02.2020, p. 28. <https://institute.global/sites/default/files/2020-01/IRGC%20Report%2027012020.pdf>, (20.08.2021).

<sup>776</sup> Kamran Aghaie. "The Karbala Narrative: Shi'i Political Discourse in Modern Iran in the 1960s and 1970s", **Journal of Islamic Studies**, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2001, p. 152.

officials declared that Iranian nationals and those Shia militias killed in Syria war were volunteer ‘martyred guardians of the shrine’ (Shohada-e Modafe-e Haram).<sup>777</sup> Even the Shia discourse of Hezbollah entailed a considerable accentuation of the nexus between the events in Syria and the appearance of Imam Mahdi who is believed by the Twelver Shia to have been in the Great Occultation since 941 CE. As can be seen, from constructivist viewpoint, there are significant correlations between Shia ideology and its implication on the formation of Iran’s regional orientations and actions, namely in the Levant.

This revolutionary dimension of the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy orientation is deeply rooted in Iran’s Islamic identity which is largely viewed as distinctly sectarian.<sup>778</sup> In essence, the IRGC members and its proxy Shia groups are trained in state-sanctioned Islamist Ideology, a Khomeini-charged ideology that regards imperialism, particularly that of the U.S. and Israel as main enemies of Iran and the Muslim world.<sup>779</sup> The veneration and promulgation of the martyr challenging the powerful ‘oppressor’ is thus a recurring discursive tool used by IRGC to justify state’s action in its main battlefields such as in Syria. The leader of the Islamic Republic himself has stated that “if in the Revolutionary Guard there is not strong ideological-political training, then [the] IRGC cannot be the powerful arm of the Islamic Revolution.”<sup>780</sup> The argument presented here is that Iran uses a wide array of non-military elements of hybrid-warfare such as the use of Shia clergy networks for social mobilization, religious indoctrination, and the operational organization and control of foreign Shia volunteers.<sup>781</sup> As noted by one author, by imagining and ritualizing martyrdom, contemporary Iran sanctified strategic interests in Syria, which enhances its domestic legitimacy. However, it should be stressed that, as noted previously, Shia ideology and realpolitik are two competing dimensions of the Islamic

---

<sup>777</sup> Ali Alfone. “Shiite Combat Casualties Show the Depth of Iran’s Involvement in Syria”, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 03.08.2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/shiite-combat-casualties-show-depth-irans-involvement-syria>, (20.08.2021).

<sup>778</sup> See, Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry. “State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy”, **British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol 43, No. 4, 2016, pp. 613-629.

<sup>779</sup> Kasra Aarabi.

<sup>780</sup> Sadeghi Haji, Dr Abdullah. “Enjoin What is Right and Forbid What is Wrong”, Deputy of Ideological-Political Education of the Representative of the Supreme Leader in the IRGC, **Zamzam Hedayat Publishers**, No. 11, 2016, no. 11, <http://bit.ly/3apzPMs>, (22.08.2021).

<sup>781</sup> Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski. “‘Mosaic Defense:’ Iran’s Hybrid Warfare in Syria 2011-2016”, **The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs**, No. 3, 2017, p. 26.



Republic foreign policy. Over time, however, Iran's costly involvements in the Gulf and the Levant sub-complexes demonstrated that pursuance of foreign policy goals based on Shia Islam themes and principles may at times take precedence over realism, prudence and the economic wellbeing of the nation as a whole.

As can be inferred from the foregoing arguments, an appraisal of the military *modus operandi* of the Islamic Republic with a primary focus on the role of the IRGC provides a sharper way for understanding Iran's role and orientations in the Middle East complex and beyond. All of this leads to the final question: How is it that these pieces fit together to explain how Iran operationalizes its revolutionary revisionist role along with its quest for leadership role in the region. To answer this question, it is important to reiterate that the war in Syria was a 'catalyst event' for the Islamic Republic to introduce itself as a new member of the Levant sub-complex. While Buzan and Wæver cast Iran as a member of the Gulf sub-complex, this study has found that Tehran has, as a direct consequence of its ongoing military and geopolitical penetration of Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, drifted off to become a major pole in the Levant sub-complex next to other actors such as Turkey. However, this study agrees with Buzan and Wæver's proposition that Iran continues to be actively penetrating the Gulf sub-complex and that the Arab-Israeli conflict is no longer the epicenter of the Middle East sub-complex's violence.<sup>782</sup>

As far as the implementation of Iran's role and orientations is concerned, it is vital to take a few numbers of factors into account. First, Iran has over time demonstrated that under *extreme* economic and political pressure the ideological dimensions of its foreign and security policy may take a backseat to realpolitik, power politics and most importantly survival of the state.<sup>783</sup> To put it bluntly, the past and present trends in Iran's foreign policy behavior demonstrates that although the Islamic Republic does not bow down to *any* kind of pressure and coercion exerted by the United States, it, nevertheless, engages in coercive diplomacy with Washington and its traditional regional allies. In retrospect, during the presidency of Donald Trump, the United States sought to bring severe economic pressure to bear on the Islamic

---

<sup>782</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 215.

<sup>783</sup> Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan. "Islamic Realpolitik: Two-Level Iranian Foreign Policy", **World Peace**, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2009, p. 7.

Republic under the Maximum Pressure doctrine. However, many analysts converge on the idea that even in the presence of immense economic and political pressure, the Islamic Republic refrained from changing its behavior in the realm of the sensitive triad, namely the nuclear enrichment program, ballistic missiles program and regional interferences.

By deliberately moving up on the ladder of escalation, and orchestrating a ‘chicken game’ with the United States, Iran engaged in coercive diplomacy aimed at gaining concessions from the Trump administration, albeit to no avail.<sup>784</sup> Nevertheless, the fact remains that economic and political coercion alone does not force the Islamic Republic to show signs of compromise or submission. This is primarily because Iran is arguably a *sui generis* actor in international politics that sees attempts at coercion by the United States—as its arch enemy—in existential terms and views concessions, not pressure, as the greater risk to regime survival.<sup>785</sup> Put simply, for rulers in Tehran overt acquiescence to a superpower’s coercion is considered as an existential affront to the Islamic Republic’s ideologically-driven *raison d’être*. Therefore, reminiscent of Nixon’s “madman theory” of negotiations, Iran has showed a great deal of willingness to escalate tensions, so much so that the Islamic Republic’s “madness” in action and words provides it with negotiating leverage or at least give the regime an appearance of invincibility vis-à-vis the United States.<sup>786</sup> Second, there past and present trends in Iran’s foreign policy role and orientations also indicate that the Islamic republic has both revolutionary revisionist orientations and realpolitik deliberations—that is, refraining from moving up the escalation ladder to the extent that its survival comes at a grave stake, and contributing to the regional security structure in ways that it supports and defends regime survival.<sup>787</sup> Borrowing the words of an Iranian scholar:

---

<sup>784</sup> Natasha Turak. “‘A Dangerous Game of Chicken’: Iran Sets Up Challenge for Biden with Nuclear Ramp-Up”, CNBC, 12.01.2021., <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/12/playing-chicken-iran-sets-up-challenge-for-biden-with-nuclear-ramp-up.html> , (20.08.2021).

<sup>785</sup> Michael Singh. “Biden’s Iran Dilemma”, **Iran and the International Arena: Challenges and Opportunities**, Sima Shine, Institute for National Security Studies, February 2021, p. 41, [https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/IranMonograph\\_e.pdf](https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/IranMonograph_e.pdf), (20.08.2021).

<sup>786</sup> See, Roseanne W. McManus. “Crazy Like a Fox? Are Leaders with Reputations for Madness More Successful at International Coercion?”, **British Journal of Political Science**, Vol. 51, No.1, 2021, pp. 275-293., Roseanne W. McManus. “Revisiting the Madman Theory: Evaluating the Impact of Different Forms of Perceived Madness in Coercive Bargaining”, **Security Studies**, Vol. 28, No. 5, 2019, pp. 976-1009.

<sup>787</sup> See, for example, Amin Saikal. **Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic**, Princeton University Press, p. 170.

*Iran has at times responded to the US with 'accommodation policy,' which consisted of expanding cooperation after Saddam's fall with the main Arab world actors, principally Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and seeking direct talks with the United States. This included Iran's engagement in direct talks with Coalition Forces regarding the prevailing security situations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In this way, Iran hoped to avoid both a new round of rivalry with its Arab neighbors and a new security dilemma in its relations with the United States.*<sup>788</sup>

The importance of these caveats lies in the fact that although Iran has a *sui generis* way of rationalizing international affairs, it should not be gaged as an entirely irrational actor bent on pursuing revolutionary ideological actions at the expense of its demise. Iran is a peculiar actor in international politics primarily because it has under severe economic coercion of the United States forfeited national interests for the sake of regime survival. Therefore, seeing from this purely realist way of thinking, the Islamic Republic is in some peculiar and curious ways exceptionally rational. According to a report by the *Wall Street Journal* in February 2015, Ayatollah Khamenei sent a 'secret letter' to Obama concerning the nuclear talks months prior to the signing of the JCPOA deal in July the same year.<sup>789</sup> The former Iranian government's willingness to negotiate with the Biden administration over the nuclear issue is emblematic of Tehran's rational thinking. The current conservative government led by Ibrahim Raisi has also uttered Iran's readiness to negotiate with the United States, although such willingness comes at a time when Iran's economic has tanked miserably because of, *inter alia*, Trump-era Maximum Pressure policy.<sup>790</sup> Having said this, in so far as operationalization of Iran's escalatory military actions is concerned, it is important to note that countries like Iran often operate in the grey zone between war and peace in order to challenge the status quo while managing risks and avoiding war. As expressed by Michael Eisenstadt, the Islamic Republic should be seen as an anti-status quo regional power bent on neutralizing the U.S. hegemonic influence in the Middle East complex, eliminating the state of Israel, and expand its

---

<sup>788</sup> Kayhan Barzegar. Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy After Saddam", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 33, no. 1, p. 173.

<sup>789</sup> Reuters. "Iranian Leader Ayatollah Khamenei Sent Obama Secret Letter", *Reuters*, 14.02.2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-usa-idUSKBN0LI01220150214>, (20.08.2021).

<sup>790</sup> Iran International TV. "Iran's New Foreign Minister Says Negotiating with the US Not a Taboo", *Iran International TV*, 13.08.2021, <https://iranintl.com/en/world/irans-new-foreign-minister-says-negotiating-us-not-taboo>, (20.08.2021).

own sphere of influence in order to take the mantle of leadership role in the region.<sup>791</sup> Nevertheless, since its material capacities in terms of access to conventional military equipment and technological might is no match to the United States' it embarks on pursuing these goals through 'forward defense plus omnibalancing' doctrine. In this sense, gray zone strategy can be considered an integral part of grander 'forward defense plus omnibalancing' doctrine. As part of the gray zone strategy the Islamic Republic uses indirect means (e.g., mines and improvised explosive devices), foreign proxies (e.g., Hezbollah), and activities on foreign soil to create standoff and ambiguity while avoiding decisive engagements.<sup>792</sup> The contention, therefore, is that Syria is a prime locus of operationalization of this strategy by Iran and that entry into an alignment with Russia and Turkey has enable Tehran to pursue its revolutionary revisionist orientation forcefully in the hope of realizing the role of regional hegemon in the MERSC.

#### **4.3.3. Russia: A Co-Equal Partner of the U.S. in the MERSC?**

Since the beginning of the Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015, the configuration of the balance of power in the Middle East security complex has undergone drastic changes so much so that the post-Cold War U.S. primacy in the MERSC has, at least for now, become fragile if not obsolete. In previous chapters, this study attempted to provide a *tour d'horizon* of the real motives and interests of the Russian overlay of the Syrian conflict without elaborating on the question of the role and orientations of Moscow as seen through the RSCT+RPSF model. This section will take on the latter's task.

As noted previously, Russians should not be considered as novices in the Middle East region. When World War I broke out, Russia was cut off from the Levant sub-complex only to return in the region towards the end of World War II.<sup>793</sup> Today

---

<sup>791</sup> Michael Eisenstadt. "Operating in the Gray Zone: Countering Iran's Asymmetric Way of War", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, Policy Focus No. 162, 07.01.2020, p. 7 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operating-gray-zone-countering-irans-asymmetric-way-war>, (21.08.2021).

<sup>792</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, p. 7.

<sup>793</sup> Udi Blanda. "Syria-Russia and the 'Arab Spring': A Reassessment", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. XXVII, No. 4, Winter 2020, pp. 62-82.

for the first time since the late 1980s, when the Soviet's military advisors and experts left much of the region, Russia has reasserted its presence in the three sub-complexes of the MERSC, particularly in the Levant. Noteworthy is that Russia's assertive military campaign in Syria has played a much more significant role in bolstering Moscow's global position than its military reactions in Crimea, Ukraine, and South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions.<sup>794</sup> The Russian inroads in the MERSC and beyond are taking place against the backdrop of the declining of U.S. influence and its security commitments in the region. Nevertheless, developments ranging from the Libyan conflict to the Syrian war have created fertile ground for Russia's deeper penetration of the Middle East security complex. Put simply, the Syrian war can be seen as Russia's new geopolitical gateway into the Middle East security complex. Although it is still uncertain that the Russian penetration of the MERSC will prove its longevity and that what specific ends Russia wants to achieve from the war, one can hardly ignore the colossal impacts of the Kremlin's geostrategic inroad on the security and power dynamics in the broader MENA region. Indeed, it is a misconception to conclude that Russia's inroads began with the Syrian conflict alone. To be sure, the Kremlin's Middle Eastern adventures started after Putin officially assumed the role of president in May 2000. The Syrian debacle should thus be seen as merely a catalyst for Russian resurgence in the MERSC. More specifically, as seen through the prism of RSC theory, what is particularly unique about Russia's Syria campaign is that it, very much like the Kremlin's war in Ukraine, had a profound and enduring impact on the role and orientations of Russian foreign and security policy in the region.

At the regional level, it seems that Russia has decisively made the choice to regionalize its Middle Eastern policy as evidence by not only its military intervention in Syria but also by its explicit desire to cultivate stronger relations with the members of the GCC and North African countries. Nevertheless, much of Russia's Middle Eastern engagements, in terms of its increased influence across the region, including in broader conflict management in Libya, Yemen, or the Israeli-Palestinian settlement, were catalyzed by Moscow's operations in Syria.<sup>795</sup> In this context, the war in Syria

---

<sup>794</sup> See, Timofey Bordachev. "Russia in the Middle East: 10 Years After the Arab Spring", **Modern Diplomacy**, 19.04.2021, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/04/19/russia-in-the-middle-east-10-years-after-the-arab-spring/>, (21.08.2021).

<sup>795</sup> Ekaterina Stepanova. "Russia and Conflicts in the Middle East: Regionalization and Implications for the West", **The International Spectator**, Vol. 53, No. 4, 2018, p. 42.

has pushed Russia, which is seen as a dominant geopolitical actor in the post-Soviet space, to become an outlier (provisional) member of the MERSC. By entering into a (tactical) security alliance with Iran and Turkey under the Astana Peace Process and Sochi Agreements, Russia has since 2015 elevated its regional position into a major pole of the MERSC affecting the security and geopolitical dynamics in the complex to the detriment of the interests of the United States. It is still unclear as to what the end-game of the Syrian conflict will turn out to be or whether Russia will stay in the war-ravaged country but according to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov “Russia intends to stay in Syria for the indefinite future and the West should work with Russia rather than try to remove Assad.”<sup>796</sup>

At the systemic (global) level, the Russian Federation is seeking to reclaim great power status enjoyed by the Soviet Union. But for this aim to be achieved Moscow needs to ensure that it can dominate its immediate sphere of influence, better known as the Near Abroad. As Andrei Kozyrev, the first Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation under President Boris Yeltsin once observed “Russia’s vital interests are concentrated in, and being threatened from, that space.”<sup>797</sup> Seen in this light, the civil war in Syria next to the near abroad exposed the perceivable dangers lying in wait for the Kremlin as the threat of terrorism and Islamist extremism percolated the fractured region adjacent to the countries of the former USSR. Very similar to the logic prevailing among the military and political leadership in Iran and Turkey, The Russian officials were of the conviction that the threat of a transnational militant Islamist movement linking Russia’s North Caucasus with the MENA region must be addressed from abroad before one has to deal with it at home. As one analyst argues, “Moscow’s greatest success in the near abroad will be the transformation of the region into a real strategic resource, and its biggest failure will be its transformation into a strategic burden for Russia.”<sup>798</sup>

---

<sup>796</sup> Ali Vitali, Abigail Williams, and Halima Abdullah. “Trump and Lavrov Meet Amid Scrutiny of Campaign, Russia Ties”, **NBC News**, 10.05.2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politic-s/white-house/trump-lavrov-meet-amid-scrutiny-campaign-russia-ties-n757321>, (21.08.2021).

<sup>797</sup> David Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 227.

<sup>798</sup> Zhao Huasheng. “Russia and its Near Abroad: Challenges and Prospects”, **Valdai Discussion Club**, 09.03.2021, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-and-its-near-abroad-challenges-and-prospect/>, (22.10.2021).

According to this logic, Russia could not sit idly by in the aftermath of the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS in mid-2014 given the potential spillover of these developments into Russia's sphere of influence. From a vantage point, it should be noted that in the eyes of Russian political and military leadership, the Syrian civil war and the ensuing proliferation of non-state actors (i.e., ISIS) was a symptom of the malfunctioning post-Cold War international order. Borrowing Averre's words, "in Russian eyes, the onset of the 'Arab Spring' has reinforced these trends, weakening or destroying state institutions and producing multiple cross-cutting conflicts involving powerful non-state actors, with fundamental political and social upheaval generating humanitarian crises spilling across borders and facilitating the spread of terrorism."<sup>799</sup>

The Russian interpretation of the post-Cold War liberal international order is that absent Russia's cooperation on equal terms with the United States in a polycentric world, these challenges will remain unaddressed. For one thing, Russia's dissatisfaction with the current security order in the world is deeply rooted in the alleged 'unfairness' (from Russia's perspective) with which the United States has promoted *Pax Americana* and the 'unequal' treatment of Moscow by Washington. Vladimir Putin made this point explicitly clear in his speech at the Security Conference in March 2007, where he called for a "fair and democratic world order."<sup>800</sup> At the heart of Putin's statement was the unavoidable necessity for the recognition by Western powers of Russia's role as "a great power" that must be "*primus inter pares*" (first among equals) in the regional and global affairs.<sup>801</sup> As a well-known Russian scholar posits,

*The Russian view of world order after the Cold War is that it was boxed into some sort of strategic dead end. The Western ideas and institutions that had triumphed were considered in some way universal, and certainly contained no inherent sense of finality in Europe or even globally. The only choice for Russia appeared to be to adapt to these ideas and institutions, or face ostracism and isolation.*<sup>802</sup>

<sup>799</sup> Derek Averre. "Russia, the Middle East and the Conflict in Syria", **Routledge Handbook of Russian Security**, Roger E. Kanet, Routledge, 2019, p. 400.

<sup>800</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Speech and the Following Discussion on the Munich Conference on Security Policy", 10.02.2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events-/president/transcripts/24034>, (22.08.2021).

<sup>801</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov. "Russian Dilemmas in a Multipolar World", **Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 63, No. 2, 2010, pp. 19-32.

<sup>802</sup> Richard Sakwa. **Russia against the Rest: The Post-War Crisis of World Order**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 22-23.

The Russian disgruntlement with the current order in the world emanates from i.e., the lack of recognition of Russia by the West as a great power holding order-making capabilities, from Obama's dismissal of Russia as a 'regional power' was acting out of weakness in Ukraine, and from Russia's striving to dispel the well-entrenched perception of itself as a 'besieged fortress' facing hostile western powers but never arriving to the point where it can gain ontological security.<sup>803</sup> Some offensive realists, most notably John Mearsheimer, argue that the root cause of the Russian dissatisfaction is NATO's enlargement as part of a larger strategy to peel Ukraine away from Russia's orbit as well as the EU's expansion eastward, and the West's support of the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine starting from the Orange Revolution in 2004.<sup>804</sup> In this view, when the regional and global levels of analysis are combined, it becomes clear that since in the international system there is no higher authority or a benign powerful actor to offer a state the status and recognition it thinks it deserves, any state actor has no other choice but to fend off for itself through maximizing power or maximizing its security. Therefore, at first sight Russia can be seen as a prime example of a rational actor behaving based on the neo-realist precepts.

It must be borne in mind, however, that many analysts argue that Russia has no intention to completely overturn the post-Cold War liberal international order and replace it with its own governance structures and designs. Rather the intention is to see the return of multipolarity as stipulated in a Great Power Concert where the United States would have to share power, and pool resources and responsibilities with other great powers irrespective of the domestic designs and structures of individual states.<sup>805</sup> In this view, the problem is that while the Western powers tend to see domestic systemic transformation as having to take precedence over international structural

---

<sup>803</sup> See, Steve Holland, Jeff Mason. "Obama, In Dig At Putin Calls Russia 'Regional Power'", **Reuters**, 25.03.2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-weakness-idUSBREA2019J20140325>, (25.08.2021)., Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rummer. "Russia's Global Ambitions in Perspective", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, February 2019, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/RumerGurganus\\_Perspective\\_final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/RumerGurganus_Perspective_final.pdf), (25.08.2021).

<sup>804</sup> John Mearsheimer. "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault", **Foreign Affairs**, September/October 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>, (25.08.2021).

<sup>805</sup> See, Andrej Krickovic. "Russia's Challenge: A Declining Power's Quest for Status, **PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo**, No. 543, 12.10.2018, p. 5. <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/russia-s-challenge-a-declining-power-s-quest-for-status-d66/>. (26.08.2021).



change, the mainstream Russian position makes a clear differentiation between the regime types, domestic systemic issues, and the international structural variables such as the interaction of sovereign states in the international system.<sup>806</sup> As postulated by some scholars, Russian political leaders “insist[ed] on the primacy of order over justice domestically”, believing that it is internal order that is entwined with and integral to Russia’s sovereignty and international status.<sup>807</sup> Hence, ideas such as domestic order, sovereign democracy and a multipolar world order are considered Russia’s principal ethical and ideological tenets that must be promoted and pursued in the realm of international affairs. These ideas are crucially important for a better grasp of Russia’s strategic culture because understanding strategic culture guides as a light post that illustrates the behavior and orientations of a state. Therefore, the claim is that Russia’s Syrian engagement and its broader Middle Eastern penetration since the onset of the Arab uprisings should be seen in this light.

In reality, the Syrian conflict was emblematic of Russia’s search for power, status, and prestige. It is a search for recognition of Russia by the United States as a great power that has order-making capabilities that are largely ignored by the West. That being said, it is no exaggeration to say that it is the outcome of the Syrian conflict that will determine whether Russia will be able to solidify its position as ‘a great power’ in international system in general and whether it will be able to remain as a major pole in the Middle East security complex in particular. For the time being, it appears that given the characteristics of Russian approach towards the Middle Eastern countries, including regional powers such as Iran and Turkey can relate better to this kind of ‘order over justice mentality’. Regardless of the fact that Russia’s very identity has been developed in close proximity to the Middle East and Islam, Russia has been relatively successful in presenting itself as a country that culturally understand the region better than the Western countries because Moscow does not have colonial backgrounds in the Middle East in comparison to other Western powers.<sup>808</sup> In other

---

<sup>806</sup> Richard Sakwa. **Russia against the Rest: The Post-War Crisis of World Order**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 11.

<sup>807</sup> See, David G. Lewis. **Russia’s New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order**, Edinburgh University Press, 2020, p.16., Elena Chebankova, Russia’s Idea of the Multi-Polar World Order: Origins and Main Dimensions, **Post-Soviet Affairs**, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2017, pp. 217-234.

<sup>808</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya. “Russia’s Soft Power Projection in the Middle East”, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 04.12.2020, p. 15. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-soft-power-projection-middle-east>, (28.08.2021).

words, in today's turbulent and volatile security environment in which alliances have become highly mutable and the United States has apparently scaled down its security commitments in the MERSC, the regional powerful actors find transactional relationships based on short-/medium-term interests with Russia and China more beneficial than over-reliance on a seemingly difficult alliance with the United States.

When analyzed through the lens of RSCT+RPSF model, a couple of points merits pondering in order to explain the caveats cited above:

From a social constructivist viewpoint—which is considered a theoretical aspect of the RSCT+RPSF model along with neo-realism—it should be emphasized that part of the reason behind the Middle Eastern pivot to Russia and China in general, and Russia's strategic shift towards the Middle East is attributable to ideational and non-material considerations. Put differently, realist theories *per se* fall short of accounting for the nuances and complexities of Russia's foreign policy role and orientations in the MERSC, namely its behavior in relation to the Syrian conflict. Hence, the need for an accurate and all-encompassing theoretical framework is of utmost importance. As such, the nexus between interests and identities should be taken note of in order to throw light on complications underpinning Russia's role and orientations. Foremost among an array of conceivable ideational complexities are Russia's historically-entrenched sense of insecurity and its heightened levels of threat perception.

History matters in explaining foreign policy trends and processes because it plays an important role in shaping identity in a way that can relate to contemporary social and political circumstances. Of particular note is that Russian strategic culture itself can be seen as a byproduct of the country's long history of patterns of enmity with the other major European powers. In this sense, one has to attentively consider that the modern Russian state itself has emerged following traumatic historical events, including the Mongol invasion and the 250-year struggle to liberate itself from the 'yoke' of the oppressors, the Russian Revolution (1917-1923), including the February Revolution (1917), the October Revolution (1917), the Russian Civil War (1917-1923), the abolishment of the Russian Empire, the Cold War (1945-1991), and not

least the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.<sup>809</sup> In the more contemporary era, a series of pivotal events have contributed greatly to Russia's threat perceptions, including the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Orange Revolution in 2004, the EU and NATO expansions in mid-2000s, the Arab uprisings, the NATO intervention in Libya and the domestic public protests during the 2002 elections.<sup>810</sup> These historical reflections reveal a lot about the patterns of continuity and change in Russia's behaviors and help us identify potential sources of insecurity and threat perceptions of the Kremlin. More importantly, what emerges is that if we define ontological security as a sense of continuity and order in events regarding self-identity and biographical identity, the above-mentioned occurrences then serve as 'dislocatory events' that disrupt if not severely imperil one's perception of ontological security.<sup>811</sup> These traumatic experiences are literally speaking 'critical situations' in which 'habitual modes of activity' are disrupted and the system of 'basic trust' becomes dismantled.<sup>812</sup>

To make this point explicitly clear, since Russians have experienced two cases of imperial disintegration—one in 1917 and the other in 1991—the modern Russia looks, in retrospective, at these critical ontological crises as evidence of the disruption of its biographically narrated self-image as a great power and, more importantly, as a sign of historical victimhood.<sup>813</sup> This sense of historical victimhood in tandem with disruption of biographical identity narrative go hand in hand with Russia's sense of insecurity which in turn is reinforced by the rejection of Moscow by the main Other as a 'great power' in the international system. In principle, recognition is fundamentally important for state actors because maintenance of a consistent sense of

---

<sup>809</sup> Dmitri Trenin. "Russia's Changing Identity: In Search of A Role in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, Carnegie Moscow Center, 18.07.2019, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/79521>, (28.08.2021)., Diana Galeeva. "How Have Russia's Policies in the Middle East Changed Since the Arab Uprisings", **Middle East Institute**, 21.04.2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-have-russias-policies-middle-east-changed-arab-uprisings-0>, (28.08.2021).

<sup>810</sup> Ivor Wiltenburg. "The importance of Understanding Russian Strategic Culture", **Atlantisch Perspectief**, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2020, pp. 7-12.

<sup>811</sup> See, for example, Anthony Giddens. **Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age**, Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, 1991, p. 53-243., Linus Hagström. "Great Power Narcissism and Ontological (In)Security" The Narrative Mediation of Greatness and Weakness in International Politics", **International Studies Quarterly**, Vol. 65, No. 2, 2021, p. 333.

<sup>812</sup> Aliaksei Kazharski. "Civilizations as Ontological Security?", **Problems of Post-Communism**, Vol. 67, No. 1, 2020, p. 25.

<sup>813</sup> On the issue of historical victimhood see, Omar Al-Ghazzi. "We will Be Great Again: Historical Victimhood in Populist Discourse", **European Journal of Cultural Studies**, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2021, p. 46.

the self requires recognition by others. In the words of one scholar, “refusal to recognize a given state and society under their self-description will generate incongruence between reflexive and social aspects of collective identity threatening to undercut the collective sense of ontological security.”<sup>814</sup> Indeed, the fast-developing academic literature on ontological security is too large and diverse to summarize here, but the core argument of the extant scholarship is that states seek not only physical security (i.e., their territory and governance structures) but also ontological security – security-in-being – or a clear sense of identity.<sup>815</sup> As can be seen, there is a correlation between sense of collective identity and international recognition, all of which impinge on foreign policy decision-making.

In this regard, the contention is that just as the United States and European powers continue to withhold its recognition of Russia as a great power, the foreign policy discourse and deeds of the Kremlin are likely to become increasingly anti-Western, nationalist and aggressive. As one scholar notes, the refusal of recognition contributes to exacerbation of a state’s sense of ontological insecurity, which in turn creates a situation in which “the state will either revise its self-image or assert it by means of aggressive foreign policy.”<sup>816</sup> Having said this, it must be kept in mind that Russia’s self-image is shaped by “the unique character of Russia’s past and geopolitical conditions” and by a prevailing national idea which entitles the Russian nation and its diaspora abroad with a ‘special path’ – a *Sonderweg*.<sup>817</sup> Therefore, it is the dissonance between Russia’s great power self-image and external recognition of this self-image by an allegedly hostile West that breeds conflict. One should also bear in mind that Putin’s foreign policy outlook is to a large extent grounded in the idea of the Russian World [*russkii mir*] – a concept the Russian president first brought up in 2007 that assumes that there is such a thing as ‘*samobytnost*’ or the national

---

<sup>814</sup> Tanya Narozhna. “Revisiting the Causes of Russian Foreign Policy Changes”, **Central European Journal of International Security Studies**, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2021, p. 58.

<sup>815</sup> See, for example, Catarina Kinnvall. “Feeling Ontologically (in)secure: States, Traumas and the Governing of Gendered Space”, **Cooperation and Conflict**, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2016, pp. 90-108., Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen. “Anxiety, Fear and Ontological Security in World Politics: Thinking with and Beyond Giddens”, **International Theory**, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2020, pp. 240-256.

<sup>816</sup> Tanya Narozhna. “Revisiting the Causes of Russian Foreign Policy Changes”, **Central European Journal of International Security Studies**, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2021, p. 76.

<sup>817</sup> Flemming Splidsboel Hansen. “Russia’s Relations with the West: Ontological Security Through Conflict”, **Contemporary Politics**, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2016, p. 365.

distinctiveness and/or a distinctive Russian civilization with its own territory to be governed by a single political and religious authority.<sup>818</sup>

Taking into consideration the ideational idiosyncrasies embedded within Russian foreign and security policy, it is not unwise to see Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula as an initial phase of the Kremlin's agenda to advance the idea of *Russkii mir* as part of a grander strategy to promote 'Novorossiia' (New Russia) at the global level. It also merits recalling that the ideational and material building blocks of Russian foreign and security policy can also be traceable in Syrian war. The assertion here is that while Russia's annexation of Crimea, in the eyes of the Kremlin, provided the country with a semblance of coherence of its biographical identity narrative, and further advanced Russia's self-image as a major gear power in the international system, Moscow's Syria war did both. For one thing, Russia's discursive and non-ideational behavior in Ukraine and Syria demonstrate that the country envisages itself as being entitled to certain responsibilities. According to one analyst, while carrying a heavy baggage of ontological insecurities, the Russian Federation seeks to frame these crises, including the war in Syria, as an extension of a series of traumas that Russians have overcome as exemplified by the most cardinal of Russian struggles against evil, namely the war against Nazism.<sup>819</sup> Therefore, beyond Russia's geopolitical considerations, it is empirically and theoretically befitting to argue that Russia's military intervention in Syria is the Kremlin's idiosyncratic way of seeking ontological security in response to existential insecurities and anxieties it feels towards its entitled place in the world. It is in light of Russia's quest for ontological security, on top of neorealist considerations, that the Russian Federation's Syrian engagement and its entry into a tactical partnership with Turkey and Iran gain meaning. In the words of Karaganov, for Russia, the Syrian conflict lends credence to Moscow's notion that "it is a serious power once again [...] Russia is regaining its

---

<sup>818</sup> See, Adam Balcer. "The Twilight of the Russian World", **Henrich Boll Stiftung**, 26.11.2018, <https://eu.boell.org/en/2018/11/26/twilight-russian-world>, (01.09.2021)., Andrei Tsygankov and Pavel A. Tsygankov. "Constructing National Values: The Nationally Distinctive Turn in Russian IR Theory and Foreign Policy", **Foreign Policy Analysis**, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2021, p. 2., Moritz Pieper. "Russkii Mir: The Geopolitics of Russian Compatriots Abroad", **Geopolitics**, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2020, pp. 756-779.

<sup>819</sup> Hugo von Essen. A Typology of Ontological Insecurity Mechanism: Russia's Military Intervention in Syria", Bachelor's Thesis, Department of Government, Uppsala University, 2020, pp. 1-38, p. 25.

traditional and internationally important role of one of the main, if not the main, suppliers of security.”<sup>820</sup>

As mentioned in previous chapters, the role of Russia has turned into a security provider for the regional actors in the MERSC seeks to derive its legitimacy by providing security for RSC members through military and security deals. No longer seen as merely an external power preoccupied with its security and geopolitical concerns in the post-Soviet space, Russia has since its military overlay of Syria become a major pole of the Middle East complex, and at times is seen by Iran, Turkey, Israel and the GCC countries as an alternative purveyor of security at a time when the U.S. is seen as reducing its security/military commitments towards the members of the Middle East security complex.

Regardless of matters pertaining to moral justifications of external actor's intervention in Syria, the tactical partnership with Iran and Turkey as part of the Astana Peace Process allows Russia to create alternative venues for negotiations aimed at conflict management. In the words of one analyst, “by gaining territories and creating new conflicts with its leverage, Russia is improving its position for the negotiations that Moscow believes will take place” against the backdrop of the Western strategic retreat.<sup>821</sup> The Russian rationale is that this will in turn coerce the Western countries to play by the Kremlin's rules when it comes to ameliorating the most acute security challenges in the Middle East complex, namely the Syrian conflict. To put in a different way, from the Kremlin's perspective, the presence of Russia in the MERSC would contribute to the creation of an international environment conducive to the management of the conflict itself as well as maintenance of the Russian Federation's system of governance at home.<sup>822</sup> The prevailing assumption in Russia appears to be that “the Middle East has not only become an arena of interaction and rivalry between Russia and the West [...], but it has also provided an opportunity to work out new mechanisms and develop new approaches to conflict resolution and rehabilitation of

---

<sup>820</sup> Sergei Karaganov. ‘2016 - A Victory of Conservative Realism’, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), 27.02.2017. <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/2016-a-victory-of-conservative-realism/>, (01.09.2021).

<sup>821</sup> Mamuka Tsereteli. “Can Russia's Quest for the New International Order Succeed?”, **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, Vol. 62, No. 2, 2018, p. 209.

<sup>822</sup> James Sherr. **Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad**, Chatham House: London, 2013, p. 96.

societies.”<sup>823</sup> The idea is that with each conflict, whether it is taking place in the post-Soviet space or in the Levant sub-complex or elsewhere, these methods of regional conflict management should have spill-over effects with Russia playing the desired role of an indispensable great power that can fill in the security and leadership void as a result of the United States’ disinclination to conduct on-shore balancing in conflict zones.

It might be interesting to note, however, that Russia’s penetration of the MERSC as a consequence of its direct military involvement in Syria has two paradoxical connotations. First, while Russian officials highlight the significance of state sovereignty in their state-to-state relations, there are certain areas, like in Syria, that the Russian assertion of sovereignty has had the potential to limit the sovereignty of other countries. Second, while the Russian federation has placed a heavy emphasis in its legal discourse on the importance of abiding by the rules of international law, it has at least on two occasions (one as per Security Council Resolution 2249 in November 2015, and the other through multiple vetoing of UNSC resolutions) exploited the principles of international law in order to either shield Assad from legal punishment due to use of chemical weapons or justify its military operations against ISIS in Syria.<sup>824</sup> These instances pose important questions about the role and orientation of the Russian foreign and security policy in the aftermath of the Syrian conflict. In this vein, some scholars, most notably Roy Allison, argue that when it comes to the discussions about Russia’s main role and ambitions one must note that Russia’s legal rhetoric around the use of force and its assertion of broad entitlements to intervene in its neighborhood represent a recognition of the international legal system.

As suggested by the RSCT+RPSF model, Russia’s orientation can be described as that of a *radical* revisionist. Unlike Iran, Russian does not harbor revolutionary revisionist tendencies aimed at upending the entirety of the international system. For one thing, the Russian Federation enjoys its hitherto position as a veto-wielding member of the UNSC and the Russian officials constantly insist on the institutional

---

<sup>823</sup> Vasily Kuznetsov, Vitaly Naumkin and Irina Zvyagelskaya. “Russia in the Middle East: The Harmony of Polyphony”, **Valdai Discussion Club**, 21.05.2018, p. 14. <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/report-russia-in-the-middle-east/>, (02.09.2021).

<sup>824</sup> See, Roy Allison. “Russian Revisionism, Legal Discourse and the ‘Rules-Based’ International Order”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 72, No. 6, 2020, pp. 976-995.

influence they hold at the United Nations in devising international rules. Nevertheless, by dint of preserving a *radical* revisionist orientation, the Kremlin maintains an intermediate position (between being revolutionary and orthodox) which is characterized by its proclivity for changing the rules within the existing framework of international society.<sup>825</sup>

It is important to note that various scholars hold onto different interpretations of revisionism and of Russia's orientations. For example, a group of scholars like Paul Dibb find Russia as a 'revanchist power' seeking to undo the very foundations of the liberal world order.<sup>826</sup> Another group of scholars like Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes suggest that Russia should be seen as a 'aggressive isolationist' that looks for incremental twists within the existing international order.<sup>827</sup>

In another example, Anne Clunan argues that 'Russia is not a revisionist power seeking to challenge the United States and the West and create a non-western institutional order', adding that "Russia seeks to join the West but in a manner that allows its leaders to maintain national self-esteem in the eyes of Russian political elites, primarily through Russia's involvement in the management of global affairs".<sup>828</sup> Richard Sakwa alludes to 'neo-revisionism' in analyzing Russia's foreign policy orientations, arguing that although the Kremlin has engaged in some selective revisionist activities, it is "far from being a genuine revisionist power dedicated to transforming the basis of world order."<sup>829</sup> Sakwa's key assertion is that Russia's neo-revisionism does not denote a wholesale rejection of international laws and norms; rather, Russia is seeking to contribute to the "creation of a more pluralist international system [in order] to balance the unchecked hegemony of the Atlantic system".<sup>830</sup> Applying the same neo-revisionist label to Russian foreign policy orientation, Tatiana

---

<sup>825</sup> See, Barbara Pisciotta. "Russian Revisionism in the Putin Era: An Overview of Post-Communist Military Interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria", *Italian Political Science Review*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 2020, pp. 87-106.

<sup>826</sup> Paul Dibb. "Why Russia is a Threat to the International Order, *Australia Strategic Policy Institute*, 29.06.2016. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/why-russia-threat-international-order>, (02.09.2021).

<sup>827</sup> Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes. "Russia's Aggressive Isolationism", *The American Interest*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2014, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/12/10/russias-aggressive-isolationism/>, (02.09.2021).

<sup>828</sup> Anne L. Clunan. *The Social Construction of Russian Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests*, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, MD, 2019, p. 220.

<sup>829</sup> Richard Sakwa. *Russia against the Rest: The Post-War Crisis of World Order*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, Cambridge, pp. 104-131.

<sup>830</sup> Richard Sakwa. *Russia against the Rest: The Post-War Crisis of World Order*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, Cambridge, p. 63.



Romanova postulates that ‘Russia seeks to transform the global order so it accommodates its views and concerns better, but does not attempt to replace it with a completely new set of rules’. Meanwhile, Averre and Davies point out that Russia’s foreign policy orientation in relations to the Arab uprisings was less a challenge to the core legitimacy of the Western liberal democracies than an emphasis on alternative interpretations of traditional international law.<sup>831</sup>

All of these instances demonstrate the wide variety of different interpretations of Russia’s revisionist tendencies. However, the argument in this study is that the patterns of Russian behavior since the onset of the Arab uprising indicate that the Russian Federation is pursuing a *radical* revisionist orientation aimed at reforming the existing international order so that its status as a major great power holding order-making capabilities are recognized by the alleged hostile Other – the West. Hence Russia’s actions in Syria should be analyzed in the wider context of how Russia orients its strategies at the systemic level. In Syria, Russia has tried to expose the limits of the Western capacity to affect the developments in the war-torn country by means of crafting the Astana Peace Process and the Sochi Agreements in parallel with the UN-brokered Geneva talks.

An important caveat should be kept in mind that Russia is not essentially opposed to the UN-brokered talks on Syria, but merely aiming to demonstrate that the tactical partnership among Turkey-Russia-Iran is more effective in bringing about a modicum of security order in Syria. As for Russia’s *radical* revisionist orientations in regional politics, it is notable that by dint of penetrating the MENA region the Kremlin endeavors to carve out Russia-centered geopolitical hubs in which ‘local’ solutions influenced by the Russian way of conflict management would offer effective solutions to the security and geopolitical ills of the region compared to the Western-initiated schemes. Although many scholars refute the idea that the Kremlin has a coherent ‘strategic’ approach to regional policy, one cannot overlook the fact that the Russian regional policy has furnished noticeable signs of a pivot to Muslim states in the Middle

---

<sup>831</sup> Derek Averre and Lance Davies. “Russia, Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: The Case of Syria”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 4, 2015, pp. 813-834.

East – also known as a Russia’s “Ummah pivot”, to use a Russian scholar’s terminology.<sup>832</sup>

It is a veritable proposition that the Syrian war partly damaged the Russian de-securitization efforts to present itself as a friendly country to Islam and Muslims in the post-Soviet space and the Middle East, there is ample evidence, including economic, security, military and cultural activities, suggesting that Russia’s influence has been spreading in recent years, especially after the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2017 and the relative decline in the military phase of the Syrian conflict.<sup>833</sup>

Seen in this light, much of Russia’s regional attention since the success of its Syrian engagement has been devoted to becoming ‘the supreme balancing force’ in Eurasia and the Middle East security complex by means of deeper engagements with the Muslim-majority countries.<sup>834</sup> In this sense, an increase in bilateral security, political and economic relations with Iran and Turkey accords Russia the opportunity to accelerate its deeper penetration of the MERSC to the detriment of the interests of the United States and other regional actors. Although the Middle Eastern countries are uncertain about Russian intentions, they, nonetheless, appear to have accepted the Russian Federation’s presence as a major pole of the MERSC with which they can sign a wide variety of political and economic deals as means of signaling to the United States that they have alternative options.<sup>835</sup>

---

<sup>832</sup> Andrew Korybko. “The Geostrategic Challenges of Russia’s ‘Ummah Pivot’”, **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 24.06.2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-geostrategic-challenges-of-russia-s-ummah-pivot/>, (02.09.2021).

<sup>833</sup> Robert Service. **Russia and its Islamic World: From the Mongol Conquest to the Syrian Military Intervention**, Hoover Institution Press, 2017; Karina Fayzullina. “Interpreting Russian Foreign Policy and Islam”, Aljazeera Center for Studies, 28.09.2014. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2014/09/2014928101146511560.html>, (03.09.2021); M.S. Meyer. “Russia and the Islamic World”, **Russian Studies in History**, Vol. 57, No. 2, 2018, pp. 103-124.

<sup>834</sup> Andrew Korybko. “The Geostrategic Challenges of Russia’s ‘Ummah Pivot’”, **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 24.06.2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-geostrategic-challenges-of-russia-s-ummah-pivot/>, (02.09.2021).

<sup>835</sup> James Sladden, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable, and Sarah Grand-Clement, “Russian Strategy in the Middle East”, **RAND Corporation**, 2017. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/pe-rspectives/PE236.html>, (03.09.2021).

**Table 1:** RPSF Breakdown for Russia, Turkey, Iran in the Middle East Security Complex

Table. RPSF Breakdown for Russia, Turkey, Iran in the Middle East Security Complex

	Russia	Turkey	Iran
Structure	Multipolar	Multipolar	Multipolar
Leadership	Cautiously active	Extensive, open, relatively effective	Extensive, open, not highly effective
Custodianship	Extensive, moderately effective	Extensive, relatively effective	Extensive, not highly effective
Protection	Intent is present, but costly	Intent is present, not highly effective	Intent is present, mildly effective
Status-quo--- Revisionist	Radical revisionist towards leadership	Orthodox revisionist towards integration	Revolutionary revisionist
Multilateral--- Unilateral	Multilateral	Multilateral	Multilateral
Proactive-reactive	Proactive	Proactive, sometimes reactive	Predominantly reactive

Source: Designed by the author

In so far as Russia's role as per the RSCT+RPSF typology is concerned, this study finds that the Kremlin is likely to play the role of custodian in the Middle East security complex. By engaging in actual deterrence of challenges to the security order within the region or actions that provide resources and supplies for stabilization of security concerns, the custodian maintains and/or stabilizes the current security order in a specific region.<sup>836</sup> One of the reasons the leadership and protection role is not accredited to Russia in this study is that the Kremlin has not shown any tangible and/or significant inclinations to take the mantle of leadership in the region, not least because of its unwillingness to enmesh itself deeply in the security and geopolitical complexities of the region and due in part to lack of Russian economic prowess to

<sup>836</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier. **Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework**, Routledge, 2012, p. 239.

expend for this hefty responsibility in the MERSC. Protection role is also extremely costly and difficult to manage for Russia because the designation of regional protector implies that a regional power assumes the burden of defending and managing the relationship between the security order and external actors and processes.<sup>837</sup> A clear example of Russian custodianship can be found in the country's full invasion of Georgia in 2008.<sup>838</sup> In the context of the Syrian conflict, Russia appears to have taken the custodianship role as its efforts are geared more towards defending the *status-quo* in the region rather than merely seeking to avoid Assad's downfall.

This argument is fully consistent with Sergei Lavrov's statement in May 2016 that "Assad is not our ally – we support him in the fight against terrorism and in the preservation of the Syrian state." In this view, the preservation of the Syrian regime is indicative of Russia's custodianship of the principle of territorial integrity and sovereignty of a member of the Middle East security complex. To be sure, just as Russia continues its penetration of other sub-complexes of the Middle East, namely in the Gulf and the Maghreb, Russia is expected to act on the basis of its captainship role. Nevertheless, Russia seeks to perform this role in a multilateral way than unilaterally as evidenced by the Moscow's tactical alliance with Iran and Turkey in relation to the Syrian conflict. One should be also mindful that Russia has been advocating a similar multilateral approach in the post-Soviet sub-complex and beyond. In a speech at the virtual meeting of foreign ministers of the BRICS countries in June 2021, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov alluded to the significance of multilateralism in the Kremlin's foreign policy approach, reiterating that "the UN is the greatest possible embodiment of multilateralism in our world, and we will defend exactly this approach, especially in light of attempts by our Western colleagues to promote an alternative concept, which they call a 'rules-based world order'".<sup>839</sup> As can be seen while the element of multilateralism is plain in Lavrov's speech, there is also a particular attention to the willingness of Russia to challenge the international order, albeit Moscow has no other option but to achieve this goal in a multilateral and proactive way. The Russian quest for countering the existing international order is consistent

---

<sup>837</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier. **Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework**, Routledge, 2012, p. 239.

<sup>838</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, p. 107.

<sup>839</sup> Xinhua. "BRICS Countries to Promote Multilateralism", **Xinhua News Agency**, 02.06.2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/europe/2021-06/02/c\\_139983587.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/europe/2021-06/02/c_139983587.htm), (04.09.2021).

with the Russian concept of state mobilization (*mobilizatsiya*) that denotes “a coordinated attempt on the part of the state to address an array of evolving security threats—in both narrow and broad senses”.<sup>840</sup>

In sum, one can conclude that since the Russian overlay of the Syrian conflict in 2015 the Kremlin has adopted a radical revisionist orientation in its foreign and security policy. This orientation buttresses Russian regionalized policy in the Middle East in close conjunction with its growing custodianship role in the MERSC. These role and orientations combined were the constitutive elements of Russian approach towards the Syrian crisis and its relations towards the United States and other members of the Middle East security complex.

It should be borne in mind however, that although the tactical partnership of Russia, Iran and Turkey have minimized the impact of differences between them in approaches to the Syrian conflict, it has failed to bring about a meaningful and sustainable political solution to the crisis. Nevertheless, the new roles and orientations of the Syrian troika (Iran, Russia, and Turkey) have had important implications on the issue of order in the Middle East security complex.

---

<sup>840</sup> Ivor Wiltenburg. “The Importance of Understanding Russian Strategic Culture”, **Atlantisch Perspectief**, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2020, pp. 7-12.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PROSPECTIVE ORDER

#### 5.1. WHAT KIND OF REGIONAL ORDER IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

The history of the modern Middle East is replete with multiple different phases during which a number of pivotal state actors within and outside the MENA region struggled in varying degrees, and through various means to create viable security orders, and gain regional dominance. To name but a few of these states, the British had envisaged a post-Ottoman Middle East order, but their quest came to a naught as the realities of power sharing with the French, the rise of Turkey, and the colonial upheavals in Iraq, Egypt and Palestine shattered the hopes for a regional ordering asserted by the Britain.<sup>841</sup> Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Syria under Hafez al Assad, and Iraq under Saddam Hussein in the late 1970s and mid-1980s each exploited the unstable geopolitical and security environment to impose their own regional order and possibly carve out hegemony or a form of dominance over their competitors in the MENA region. Nevertheless, none of these regional and extra-regional actor's quests for hegemony in the Middle East paid off. Yet, although none of these efforts were more durable than those of the Great Britain and the United States respectively from 1917 to 1956 and from 1991 to 2011, the region still to this day remains to be an incubator of instability and chaos.<sup>842</sup>

As we discussed in previous chapters, with the end of the Cold War 'the regional level stands more clearly on its own as the locus of conflict and cooperation for the states changes, attributing the Middle East and North Africa with more characteristics of *regionness*.<sup>843</sup> But the notion of *regionness* of the Middle East and North Africa is not a causal effect of geographical proximity *per se*. As emphasized by Amitav Acharya "physical proximity or shared cultural, linguistic, political, or

---

<sup>841</sup> Paul Salem. "The Middle East: Evolution of a Broken Regional Order", **Carnegie Middle East Center**, No. 9, 01.06.2008, p. 19. [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/158020/CMEC-9\\_salem\\_broken\\_order\\_final.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/158020/CMEC-9_salem_broken_order_final.pdf), (09.09.2021).

<sup>842</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch. "Failed Regional Hegemons: The Case of the Middle East's Regional Powers", **Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations**, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2013, pp. 75-88.

<sup>843</sup> David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**, Pennsylvania State Press, 1997, p. 6.

economic ties are no longer considered to be a sufficient condition for regionness.”<sup>844</sup> In fact, the *regionness* of the Middle East and North Africa is more attributable to, in RSC theory’s terms, the existence of “the relative intensity of security interdependence among a group of units, and security indifference between that set and surrounding units.”<sup>845</sup> It is the ‘closeness of relations’ and the interdependence of security problems that gives the MENA its quality of *regionness*, and/or makes it a *complex*.

In this sense, given that the security problems of states populating a security complex i.e., the MERSC, is so interlinked with each other, the need for a regional ordering mechanism becomes a legitimate concern for all actors inside and outside the MERSC. Therefore, the basic empirical *problematique* is that the post-Cold War *regionness* of the MERSC continues to elude any semblance of stability, and that the growing autonomy and security interdependence of the complex is not synonymous with regional order or stability. As Paul Salem once remarked, an important question arises as to why does the MENA region remain to be one of the few regions of the world devoid of any semblance of regional security, economic, or political order to contain conflict and manage its intra-regional affairs?<sup>846</sup> Another question is that given the grave consequences of the Syrian conflict in the Middle East and beyond, what kind of regional security (dis)order is being experienced by the Middle East security complex? Are we witnessing a change of the regional order or a new kind of pattern of prolonged disorder within the existing regional order? How has the tactical partnership among Iran, Russia and Turkey in relations to the Syrian conflict made an impact on the security (dis)order in the MERSC and what are the reactions of other regional and extra-regional powers (the United States) to these transformations? In simple terms, what does the Syrian conflict and its consequences thereafter tell us about the emerging regional security (dis)order in the Middle East?

To begin with, it is important to recall that the Syrian conflict sits at the epicenter of the Middle Eastern insecurity complex. After more than a decade into the

---

<sup>844</sup> Amitav Acharya. “The Emerging Regional Architecture of World Politics”, **World Politics**, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2007, p. 634.

<sup>845</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**. Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 47-48.

<sup>846</sup> Paul Salem. “The Middle East in 2015 and Beyond: Trends and Drivers”, **Middle East Institute**, No. 2014-5, 18.11.2014, Policy Focus, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/middle-east-2015-and-beyond-trends-and-drivers>, (10.09.2021).

Syrian conflict, the spillover effects of the conflict are evident in the patterns of continuity and change in foreign and security policies of almost all members of the Levant and Gulf sub-complexes. The Syrian dossier is ubiquitous in the past and present policies of the states of the MERSC and many of powers outside the Middle East security complex. As one scholar notes, “the Syrian conflict continues to metastasize precisely because of how it sits at the intersection of so many regional circuits that generate crises rather than contribute to resolving them.”<sup>847</sup>

The spillover effects of the Syrian conflict are discernable at four levels. At the regional level, the Syrian conflict produced both ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical contagion’ in the sense that the conflict has spilled over not just *laterally* to neighboring fragile or failed states but also *vertically* to stronger and larger regional powers, some of whom are not considered as member of the Levant sub-complex or are outside the MERSC.<sup>848</sup> At the state level, the spillover effects of the Syrian conflict have resulted in growing insecurities of the members of the MERSC, in the sense that the Syrian war has contributed immensely to what is referred to as “crises ecologies” – that is the overlapping and entwined insecurities of states converging at the intersections of civil conflict itself, mass human displacement, proxy wars, environmental and epidemiological crises, state militarization, external interventions, and economic collapse.<sup>849</sup> At the level of non-state actors’ activities, the cascading effects of the Syrian conflict have, on the one hand, resulted in the “hollowing-out” of state institutions, while, on the other hand, they have contributing to the rise of ‘hybrid’ actors, i.e., militant proxy groups, with semi-sovereignty authority over territory, capable of “performing” like a state as they struggle to present themselves as security providers among the populations.<sup>850</sup> At the level of conflict resolution mechanisms,

<sup>847</sup> Samer Abboud. “Syria, Crisis Ecologies, and Enduring Insecurities in the MENA”, in MENA’s Frozen Conflicts, **POMEPS Studies**, No. 42, November 2020, <https://pomeps.org/pomeps-studies-42-menas-frozen-conflicts>, (10.09.2021).

<sup>848</sup> Ross Harrison. “Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power: An Historical Perspective”, **Al Jazeera**, 02.09.2018, p.10, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/09/shifts-middle-east-balance-power-historical-perspective-180902084750811.html>, (10.09.2021).

<sup>849</sup> Samer Abboud, p. 6.

<sup>850</sup> See, for example, Jose Ciro Martinez and Brent Eng. “Struggling to Perform the State: The Politics of Bread in the Syrian Civil War”, **International Political Sociology**, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2017, pp. 130-147., Waleed Hazbun. “Beyond the American Era in the Middle East: An Evolving Landscape of Turbulence”, **New Conflict Dynamics: Between Regional Autonomy and Intervention in the Middle East and North Africa**, Waleed Hazbun, Karim Makdidi and Helle Malmvig, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), 2017, pp. 31-43., & Ariel I. Ahram, “Hybrid Security, Frozen Conflicts, and Peace in MENA”, MENA’s Frozen Conflicts, **POMEPS Studies**, No. 42,



the Astana Peace Process and the Sochi Agreements have effectively replaced the UN-led Geneva process as a tripartite way of bringing about a mode of conflict management (order) in Syria. As some leading experts argue, the triangular diplomatic track initiated by Russia under the Astana Peace Process can be construed as an incremental and multilayered endeavor to marginalize and if possibly stymie the UN-led process by trying to co-opt UN actors in processes shaped by the Kremlin.<sup>851</sup>

That being said, mention must be made that the Russian diplomatic enterprise in relations to the Syrian conflict has yet to withstand the test of time as the endgame of the war is still uncertain and that there are considerable signs that show the conflict may remain a frozen one in short-/medium terms. At the global level, one should not lose sight of the fact that there is a complex but considerable interplay between dynamics transpiring at the regional level, namely as a corollary of the war in Syria, and those happening at the global level. In this context, the Syrian conflict can be interpreted as the miniature of what the future would look like in the MERS. To be more specific, the Syrian conflict can be viewed as a microcosm of the rising performativity of 'region-specific dynamics' in the Middle East by means of which the United States is no longer seen as the regional hegemon capable of structuring the regional alliances or performing its erstwhile role as a main provider of security or order. Some scholars refer to these new dynamics as the "politics of a regional sub-systems" in which states have sought to define their concepts of order at the regional level.<sup>852</sup> As Harrison notes, even though Russia and the United States are engaged in the region's hotspots, the metamorphosis ongoing today is mostly driven by local and regional factors".<sup>853</sup> This does not mean that a regional state has the capacity to play

---

November 2020, pp. 10-14 <https://pomeps.org/pomeps-studies-42-menas-frozen-conflicts>, (10.09.2021).

<sup>851</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya and Andrew J. Tabler. "Triangular Diplomacy: Unpacking Russia's Syria Strategy", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, Policy Notes No. 107, 07.07.2021, p. 6, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/triangular-diplomacy-unpacking-russias-syria-strategy>, (10.09.2021).

<sup>852</sup> Weleed Hazbun. "Regional powers and the Production of Insecurity in the Middle East", **MENARA**, No. 11, September 2018, p. 3, [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menar-a\\_wp\\_11.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menar-a_wp_11.pdf), (11.09.2021)., Helle Malmvig, Jordi Quero and Eduard Soler I Lacha. "The Contemporary Regional Order", in Eduard Soler I Lecha et al (eds.), "Reconceptualizing Orders in the MENA Region. The Analytical Framework of the MENARA Project", in **MENARA Methodology and Concept**, No. 1, November 2016, pp. 33-50. [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara\\_cp\\_1.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_cp_1.pdf), (12.09.2021).

<sup>853</sup> Ross Harrison. "Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power: An Historical Perspective", **Al-Jazeera**, 02.09.2018, p. 11, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/09/shifts-middle-east-balance-power-historical-perspective-180902084750811.html>, (10.09.2021).

the role of a regional hegemon capable of establishing order or stability in the MERSC. Rather, it means that contemporary developments ranging from the Syrian conflict, the Libyan civil war to the Abraham Accords and the Biden administration's decision to "right-size" the U.S. commitments in the MERSC are indicative of the fact that it is the "regional piece" that has a considerable degree of autonomy from the global-level patterns and one-size-fits-all solutions set by the global powers.<sup>854</sup>

All of these levels of spillover repercussions of the Syrian conflict are, as noted in previous chapters, taking place against the backdrop of a number of relatively new phenomena that are occurring in the MERSC simultaneously and in parallel with each other: regionalization, securitization, polarization and de-sovereignization (breakdown of state authority) of weak states. The byways and highways of these phenomena were elaborated in depth in the preceding sections of the study, but it is important to reiterate that the *essential structure* of the MERSC has undergone considerable changes as a consequence of the very impacts that the aforesaid phenomena couple with the spillover repercussions of the Syrian conflict have had on the various dynamics of relations among different units and the essential structure as well. Another issue begging attention is that since orders within RSCs are driven by three explanatory variables, namely the regional structure (bipolar, multipolar, etc.) regional power roles (leadership, custodianship, protection) and regional power orientations (status-quo, revisionist), the Syrian conflict has had substantial impacts on the foreign policy roles and orientations of different actors, namely Russia, Iran and Turkey as the principal actors engaged in the War in Syria.<sup>855</sup>

As can be observed, on the one hand, Buzan and Wæver's RSC theory helps us understand to what extent the Syrian conflict –in view of the tactical partnership among Russia, Iran and Turkey– have had certain implications on the essential structure of the MERSC, while on the other hand, Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll's RPS framework assists us in gaining insights about the impacts of the Syrian conflict on the foreign policy role and orientations of the Syrian troika. Hence, the RSCT+RPSF

---

<sup>854</sup> Ross Harrison, p. 11, (10.09.2021)., Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes. "How to Do More with Less in the Middle East", **Foreign Affairs**, 15.09.2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-09-15/how-do-more-less-middle-east>, (12.09.2021).

<sup>855</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier. **Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework**, Routledge, 2012.

framework guides us to examine what the Syrian conflict tells us about the regional security order in the MERSC. As indicated in the preceding chapters, the rationale behind the utilization of the RPSF and RSCT paradigms is that a theoretical synthesis of neo-realism and constructivism provides us with a much more holistic and accurate framework for analysis of the material as well as ideational aspects of the impact of the Syrian conflict on the issue of order in the MERSC. This is primarily because the constructivist tradition posits that RSCs are shaped by ideational factors, including foremost among them the patterns of amity and enmity between different actors in a specific security complex.<sup>856</sup> According to the neorealist creed, structural factors such as the distribution of power and great power conflicts determine regional transformations. As such, the utilization of RSCT+RPSF model mediates “the gap between neorealism and constructivism by allowing both structure and securitization to determine the content of regional security”.<sup>857</sup> Hence the employment of this synthetic theoretical paradigm is empirically more befitting in exploring the issue of order in the MERSC.

Now, back to the discussion of the impact of the Syrian conflict on the regional order, it should be noted that various scholars use different narratives to interpret the regional and global *zeitgeist* in the aftermath of the Syrian conflict. For example, a noticeable number of scholars have developed cogent arguments about the international system’s tendency at both global and regional levels towards ‘multipolarity’ while others have brought up the ‘nonpolarity’ thesis, thereby posing a challenge to the traditional role of great powers as the only independent actors in the international system.<sup>858</sup> Fareed Zakaria uses the term the “post-American order” while Charles Kupchan alludes to “no one’s world” in order to define the structural and

---

<sup>856</sup> See, for example, Brendon J. Cannon and Federico Donelli. “Asymmetrical Alliances and High Polarity: Evaluating Regional Security Complexes in The Middle East and Horn of Africa”, **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2019, p. 3.

<sup>857</sup> Rajesh M. Basrur. “Decentralizing Theory: Regional International Politics”, **International Studies**, Vol. 43, No. 4, 2006, p. 420.

<sup>858</sup> Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu. “After Unipolarity: China’s Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline”, **International Security**, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2011, pp. 41-72.; Barry Posen. **Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy**, Cornell University Press, 2015.; Nuno P. Monteiro. “Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful”, **International Security**, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2012, pp. 9-40. For thesis about non-polarity see, Richard Haass. **A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order**, Penguin Books: New York, 2018., & Nerses Kopalyan. **World Political System After Polarity**, Routledge: Abingdon, Oxon.

regional changes as a consequence of the so-called American retrenchment.<sup>859</sup> Kristina Kausch argues that the ongoing shifts in the MENA region, including the Syrian conflict, bespeak of the rise of “competitive multipolarity” as the new order in the region.<sup>860</sup> Some scholars argue that reminiscent of the 1950s and the 1960s, the MENA region is undergoing “a new Arab Cold War”, whereas others posit that the regional dynamics in the post-Arab uprisings can be defined as the emergence of a “new regionalism”, the “New Thirty Years’ War, or an intense “struggle for a new regional order.”<sup>861</sup> Russian scholars and diplomats, including Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov tend to use terms such as “multi-polar order”, “the decline of American era in the Middle East”, “complex multipolarity, and most notably “polycentric world”.<sup>862</sup>

## 5.2. HOW THE SYRIAN CONFLICT CHANGED THE MIDDLE EAST

Irrespective of what nomenclature we use to make sense of the tectonic shifts in the MERSA, almost all pundits and scholars embrace the idea that the regional local politics have gained considerable amount of autonomy and agency in the light of downscaled U.S. military presence. The ‘increased assertiveness of local actors’, including states traditionally allied with the United States and even non-state actors

<sup>859</sup> Fareed Zakaria. **The Post-American World**, New York: W.W. Norton, 2008., Charles A. Kupchan, **No One’s World: The West, The Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn**, Oxford University Press: New York, 2012.

<sup>860</sup> Kristina Kausch, Competitive Multipolarity in the Middle East, Research Network Paper, **Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)**, 01.09.2014, pp. 1-18, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/183837/iaiwp1410.pdf>, (15.09.2021).

<sup>861</sup> Morten Valbjørn and Andre Bank. “The New Arab Cold War: Rediscovering the Arab Dimension of Middle East Regional Politics”, **Review of International Studies**. Vol. 38, No. 1. 2012, pp. 3-24., & Ruth Hanau Santini. “A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Security Complex Theory Revisited”, **The International Spectator**, Vol. 52, No. 4, 2017. pp. 93-111., Bulent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar. “Mideast Geopolitics: The Struggle for a New Order”, **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2017, pp. 57-69., & Marc Lynch, The New Arab Order: Power and Violence in Today’s Middle East, **Foreign Affairs**, September/October 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-08-14/new-arab-order>, (12.09.2021).

<sup>862</sup> Andrew Korybko. “Towards Increasingly Complex Multipolarity: Scenario for the Future”, **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 11.06.2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/columns/global-governance-and-world-politics/towards-increasingly-complex-multipolarity-scenario-for-the-future/>, (16.09.2021)., Andrey Kortunov. “Between Polycentrism and Bipolarity”, **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 04.09.2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analyticsandcomments/analytics/betweenpolycentrism-and-bipolarity/>, (18.09.2021)., Sergei Lavrov. “The World at a Crossroads and a System of International Relations for the Future”, **Russia in Global Affairs**, No. 4, October/November 2019, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-world-at-a-crossroads-and-a-system-of-international-relations-for-the-future/>, (19.09.2021).

suggest that 1) relatively speaking, the U.S. is likely to be less capable of influencing the developments in the Middle East, 2) Russia and China are likely to exploit the perceived U.S. military ‘retreat’ from the MERSC in order to impose their preferred modes of conflict management (ordering principles) on the region, from the Gulf sub-complex to the Levant and Maghreb sub-complexes, 3) the region is likely to stoop to more degrees of disorder because of the effects of the great transformations on the Middle East security complex in the post-Arab uprising era, and not least because of the Biden administration’s willingness to balance out China and Russia’s resurgence.<sup>863</sup>

In this context, the Syrian conflict can be seen as the microcosm of the instances of assertive actorness and agency of local actors, be it state actors or non-state ones. It is also in this context that scholars such as Waleed Hazbun suggest that the current Middle East regional system can be best understood as a model of “turbulence” in which “a proliferation of heterogenous actors below and above the state level with expanded capabilities that complicate the dynamics of the regional politics.”<sup>864</sup> Therefore, one can argue that the U.S.-led security architecture of the Middle East is gradually succumbing to heightened degrees of disorder and entropy; it is encountering a deeply polarized system marked by the rise of mechanisms and modes of conflict management that are structured by regional and extra regional actors, namely Russia, and China.

The main argument presented here is that the MERSC has transformed from a regional system marked, at least since the 1990s, by the dominance of the United States as a sole hegemonic power into a system characterized by perplexing patterns of cooperation and conflict among several regional and outside actors. The Syrian case has thus been an emblematic of these great shifts as evidenced by the success of Syrian troika (i.e., Russia) in cementing their position as major poles in all three sub-complexes of the MERSC, namely in the Levant and the Persian Gulf. It is worth emphasizing that the withdrawal in August 2021 of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan

---

<sup>863</sup> Alexander D Barder, et al. “**New Conflict Dynamics: Between Regional Autonomy and Intervention in the Middle Est and North Africa**”, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), 2011, p. 31.

<sup>864</sup> Waleed Hazbun, “In America’s Wake: Turbulence and Insecurity in the Middle East, in Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East”, **POMEPS Studies**, No. 34, 01.03.2019, p. 14, [https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/POMEPS\\_Studies\\_34\\_Web.pdf](https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/POMEPS_Studies_34_Web.pdf), (20.09.2021).

has reinforced these complex dynamics, providing Russia, China as well as a number of regional powers such as Iran, Turkey and Qatar with opportunities to seek out ways to pressure the United States in the Middle East.<sup>865</sup> It goes without saying that, as some analysts posit, the war in Syria has shown that “between the US and Russia, a division of spheres of influence has emerged, with the US preserving its dominance in the Gulf, and Russia reviving its influence in the Fertile Crescent and, to some extent, in North Africa.”<sup>866</sup>

Seen in this light, the tactical partnership over Syria involving Russia, Iran and Turkey can be seen as a relatively successful model of conflict management that has effectively replaced the US-led regional schemes aimed at managing and/or resolving conflicts in the MERS. That being said, it should be borne in mind that despite the ongoing talks about the perceived US decline and a physical withdrawal from the region, the United States maintains, as of writing this, sizable troop deployments in the Middle East, is in possession of multiple military bases and conducts regular maritime and naval activities across the region. According to one estimate, “there are still 200,000 troops deployed overseas, everywhere from Bahrain to Germany and South Korea, and a \$700 billion annual defense budget—a massive military force to be reckoned with.”<sup>867</sup> Hence, in the words of Brandon Friedman, it is a paradox that the United States is perceived as withdrawing or disengaging from the Middle East while it maintains a considerable military presence and conducts multiple operations throughout the region.<sup>868</sup> This paradoxical trend is not confined to the case of the Biden administration. In fact, all the previous two U.S. administrations had opted for revamping of the American global role. But what is remarkable is that “it is Biden who offers a more coherent version of pragmatic realism” than the ones Trump and

---

<sup>865</sup> Sakia Brechenmacher et al. “Afghanistan Under Taliban”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 18.09.2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/18/afghanistan-under-taliban-pub-85168>, (19.09.2021).

<sup>866</sup> Itai Brun and Sarah Feuer. “In Search of a Regional Order: The Struggle over the Shape of the Middle East”, **Strategic Assessment**, Vol. 24, No. 1, January 2021, <https://strategicassessment.inss.org.il/en/articles/in-search-of-a-regional-order-the-struggle-over-the-shape-of-the-middle-east/>, (19.09.2021).

<sup>867</sup> James Politi. “The Biden Doctrine: The US Hunts for a New Place in the World”, **Financial Times**, 03.09.2021, p. 7, <https://www.ft.com/content/2a88ac0b-d3d7-4159-b7f5-41f602737288>, (19.09.2021).

<sup>868</sup> Brandon Friedman. “US Engagement and Disengagement in the Middle East: Paradox and Perception”, **Strategic Assessment**, vol. 24, no. 1, January 2021, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/us-engagement-and-disengagement-in-the-middle-east-paradox-and-perception/>, (19.09.2021).

Obama sought to pursue—a policy orientation that shows protecting the flow of oil in the Gulf sub-complex, safeguarding Israel’s sovereignty, maintaining U.S. military bases, especially those in the Persian Gulf region, defending traditional U.S. allies, especially Saudi Arabia, and fighting terrorism no longer make the Middle East an urgent priority for American foreign policy.<sup>869</sup> Nor are they sufficient reasons for the American policy makers to justify a large and long-term U.S. military presence in the region when the strategic orientation of the U.S. should be directed towards balancing out China and Russia and when there is much to be done on the home front. Put simply, the U.S. is physically retreating from the MERSC, not in the sense of leaving it for good, but in the sense that it wants the regional actors to be able to fend off for themselves in the face of existential threats.

Nevertheless, the regional dynamics in the MERSC do not lend themselves to this line of thinking, and the traditional allies of the United States have a hard time adapting themselves to these uncertain realities and challenges at a time when the threat of Iran is real. Another paradoxical caveat that should be taken into consideration about the repercussions of the United States’ strategic reorientations towards the MERSC is that while wars and spillovers of conflicts have made state fragility and de-sovereignization a reality, violent conflicts have ironically molded the states of the MERSC, especially those in the Levant (Syria, Iraq, Iran) into “fierce states”, in the sense that these states are acquiring new capabilities and leaning new modes of governance to avoid regime collapse and adapt to the new geopolitical and security challenges.<sup>870</sup> The last paradoxical outcome of the relative decline of the U.S. influence in the MERSC is that the while the traditional regional allies of the United States, namely Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt tend to pursue their policies based on ‘region-specific dynamics’, these countries’ purported pursuance of strategic autonomy from the United States in tandem with their pivot to Russia and China turns

---

<sup>869</sup> Steven Cook. “No Exit: Why the Middle East Still Matters to America”, **Foreign Affairs**, November/December 2020, pp. 133-142. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-10-13/no-exit>., Joshua Shiffrinson and Stephen Wertheim. “Biden the Realist: The President’s Foreign Policy Doctrine Has Been Hiding in Plain Sight”, **Foreign Affairs**, 09.09.2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-09/biden-realist>, (19.09.2021).

<sup>870</sup> Steven Heydeman and Emilie Chase-Donahue. “Sovereignty *versus* Sectarianism: Contested Norms and The Logic of Regional Conflict in the Greater Levant”, **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 15, No. 60, December 1, 2018, p. 10.

them into ‘perilous partners’ for Washington.<sup>871</sup> In the words of some scholars “the anxiety to maintain alliances, bases and a structure of hegemonic power creates ‘reverse leverages,’ whereby the Gulf monarchies, in particular, exploit American anxiety about losing its position.”<sup>872</sup>

Both of these dynamics, i.e., reliance on U.S. patronage while contributing to reverse leverage, create a situation in which the members of the Gulf sub-complex tend to craft certain policies according to their own self-interests, policies which in turn may not be aligned with U.S. interests at the regional level. It is important to note that somewhat similar dynamics are also observable in the context of the U.S.-Turkey relations. The former Assistant Secretary of the State Tom Malinowski’s remarks about the behaviors of Saudi Arabia and the UAE are stellar cases for reflection when he said that “they [Gulf monarchies] are just not willing to listen” to the United States. Despite the foregoing propositions, one should not lose sight of the fact that the United States’ “light footprint” approach, regardless of the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, has to a certain extent convinced Saudi Arabia to engage in “aggressive diplomacy” aimed at “finding a more constructive approach with Iran”, which in turn plays an instrumental role in helping Washington to redeploy U.S. forces from the region.<sup>873</sup> Indeed, the recent negotiations between Iran and Saudi Arabia which was mediated by Iraq is yet another vivid example of how the United States has indirectly compelled Riyadh and Tehran to engage in an American-led “structured regional dialogue” so that they can de-securitize relations for the betterment of the regional peace and security.<sup>874</sup>

As can be seen, when it comes to the issue of order in the MERSC, it is hard to refute the fact that the key members of the Levant and Gulf sub-complexes no longer

---

<sup>871</sup> Ted Galen Carpenter and Malou Innocent. **Perilous Partners: The Benefits and Pitfalls of America’s Alliances with Authoritarian Regimes**, Cato Institute: Washington DC, 2015.

<sup>872</sup> David Blagden and Patrick Porter. “Desert Shield of the Republic? A Realist Case for Abandoning the Middle East”, **Security Studies**, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2021, pp. 5-48.

<sup>873</sup> Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan. “America’s Opportunity in the Middle East: Diplomacy Could Succeed Where Military Force Has Failed”, **Foreign Affairs**, 22.05.2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-05-22/americas-opportunity-middle-east>, (19.09.2021).

<sup>874</sup> Nussaibah Younis. “Mediation Nation: Iraq’s New Role in Iranian-Saudi Talks”, **European Council on Foreign Relations**, 14.05.2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/mediation-nation-iraqs-new-role-in-iranian-saudi-talks/>, (19.09.2021)., Tehran Times. “Baghdad Talks Pave the Way for Iranian-Saudi Rapprochement”, **Tehran Times**, 13.09, 2021, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/465030/Baghdad-talks-pave-the-way-for-Iranian-Saudi-rapprochement>, (19.09.2021).



look to the United States to provide security and order for them especially at a time when the American influence is in a state of relative decline. The key argument here is that the dynamics surrounding the Syrian conflict over the past decade have compelled regional and extra-regional actors to look to Russia and China as important if not alternative security providers in the Middle East security complex. If we use Lake and Morgan's definition of *regional order* as 'the mode of conflict management within the regional security complex', the tactical partnership among Russia, Iran and Turkey has proven to be relatively successful in bringing about a semblance of order and patterns of management in the Levant sub-complex. Although the Syrian conflict may be seen as only an exception in the way Russia, Iran and Turkey succeeded in *managing* a regional conflict, it, nevertheless, entailed profound implications on the issue of order in the Middle East security complex and posed important questions about the future role of the U.S. in the MERSC. Indeed, the relative decline of the U.S. influence in the MERSC may be short-lived but the fact remains that the MERSC is pregnant with disorder and entropy and that a whole host of regional and extra-regional actors, some of whom are non-state actors, are stepping up to the plate in order to build 'niches' of influence in the region.

It is worth parenthetically noting that the Middle Eastern quest for order and stability is a particularly uncommon case. The MENA region itself defies linearly-founded laws that are largely attuned to the Westerners' view of a world of harmonized relations, simple behaviors and equilibria.<sup>875</sup> The Middle Eastern search for order and stability in the MERSC does not comport with the classical or Newtonian ideas. This perennial search can be best explained by non-linearity laws because the region as a whole follows such *modus vivendi*. Using Prigogine and Stengers's viewpoint, one can argue that given the chaotic nature of the MERSC, the MENA region should be seen as an enormously diverse and highly complex system which is characterized by "small fluctuations or perturbations and non-equilibrium conditions within its various subsystems."<sup>876</sup> These chaotic systems operate based on non-linear laws according to which variations in initial conditions of the scale of the force of a butterfly's wing beat

---

<sup>875</sup> R. Pred, A. Pred. "The New Naturalism—a Critique of *Order Out of Chaos*", **Environment and Planning D: Society and Space**, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1985, p. 471-473.

<sup>876</sup> R. Pred, A. Pred., Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, **Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature**, Flamingo: London, 1985.

(states' roles, behaviors and orientations) can produce vastly different (weather) outcomes over quite short time periods.<sup>877</sup> Borrowing the words of two experts, non-linearity dynamics and coexistence with the condition of *chaos* appear to be the principal features of the security order in the MERSC.<sup>878</sup> As applied to the case of the MERSC, it is plausible to argue that due to the prevalence of entropy, and far-from-equilibrium systems (i.e., in the MENA region) an observer witnesses a *dissipative* structure whose stability is vulnerable to fluctuations.<sup>879</sup> In this non-linear system of the MERSC, small changes make for big differences and lots of things are out to play, together and as the entropy increases, predictions become difficult and vice versa.<sup>880</sup>

When looking at the Syrian conflict through this lens, it becomes clear that the cascading effects of the war and the growing penetration and/or overlay of the regional and extra-regional actors beget more entropy. These spillover effects contribute to profound changes in the form of considerable internal transformations in all three sub-complexes of the MERSC. These transformations in turn make a significant impact on the essential structure of the MENA region (anarchic structure, polarity and patterns of amity and enmity) as a whole. It is in this context that the study of the potential impacts of the Syrian conflict on the regional security order makes sense, both empirically and theoretically. It is based on this very notion of entropy and chaos that, for example, the foreign policy role and orientations of revolutionary revisionist states such as Iran run counter to the 'logic of consequence' which is arguably the primary way of behavior of the Western states.

As discussed in the previous segments of this study, decision-making in the realm of foreign policy in Iran, as an example, is largely based on the 'logic of appropriateness' or 'logic of responsibility', due in part to the ideological nature of the regime which attaches colossal importance to ideational factors such as justice, emancipation from the 'yoke' of the oppressor, excellence and piety in international

---

<sup>877</sup> David Byrne. **Complexity Theory and The Social Sciences: An Introduction**, Routledge, 1998, p. 19.

<sup>878</sup> Mohammad Reza Faraji and Vahid Ranbar Heydari. "Middle East Security Order in a Complex Situation", **Quarterly Journal of Strategic Studies of Public Policy**, Vol. 10, No. 35, September 2020, pp. 254-275.

<sup>879</sup> R. Pred, A. Pred. "The New Naturalism—a Critique of *Order Out of Chaos*", **Environment and Planning D: Society and Space**, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1985, p. 464.

<sup>880</sup> David Byrne. **Complexity Theory and The Social Sciences: An Introduction**, Routledge, 1998, p. 18.

relations.<sup>881</sup> In this non-linear system of the MERSC, alliances are also, for the most part, functioning on the basis of non-linearity logic and are potentially dissipative as a consequence of i.e., the chaotic nature of the region and the protean nature of foreign policy interests, roles and orientations of the states of the MENA region. In this context, although the Astana Peace Process and the Sochi Agreements have contributed to the diminution of the state of disorder in the Levant (locus of the Syrian conflict), it is far from certain if these alliances can be sustainable if not dissipative. To explain this more clearly, given the Islamic Republic of Iran's preoccupation with the nuclear issue, the Astana Peace Process has, for the most part, become a venue for negotiations mostly between Turkey and Russia, making Iran less relevant in problem-solving equations in so far as the Syrian issue is concerned.

This does not mean that Iran has become irrelevant in the Astana Peace Process as a regional platform for bringing about a semblance of order in the Levant sub-complex; rather, the contention is that alliances in the MERSC are becoming increasingly vulnerable because of a number of factors such as fluctuations in patterns of amity and enmity between the regional and extra-regional actors, the changing distribution of power, as well as the non-linear nature of regional dynamics and structure of the MERSC.<sup>882</sup> The preceding argument attracts much more importance when we consider Buzan and Wæver's argument that the regional dynamics are shaped by the very fluctuations cited above. Theoretically speaking, on the one hand, the phenomenon of dissipative or liquid alliances (i.e., the Astana Peace Process) in non-linear and chaotic systems can be seen an outcome of the fluctuations or "pull factors" and "push factors". The former refers to those forces from 'above' which influence the autonomy and structure of the regional sub-systems, whereas the latter highlights those pressures from 'below' which converts domestic preferences and orientations into foreign policy options.<sup>883</sup> On the other hand, by linking the pull and push factors with

---

<sup>881</sup> Seyed Jalal Dehghani Firoozabadi. "Emancipating Foreign Policy: Critical Theory and Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy", *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 23, 2008, pp. 1-26.

<sup>882</sup> An important caveat is that regional transformations and by extension the dissipative nature of alliances in the Middle East are also shaped by the degree to which these interactions are bounded by domestic factors.

<sup>883</sup> Ariel Gonzales Levaggi. **Confrontational and Cooperative Regional Orders: Managing Regional Security in World Politics**, Routledge Global security Studies, Routledge, 2020, p. 33., Samuel Brazys and Diana Panke, "Push and Pull Forces in the UNGA: Analyzing Foreign Policy

variables that result in changes in the essential structure of RSCs (anarchic structure, polarity and patterns of amity and enmity), it is not implausible to argue that there is a causal relationship between the pull and push factors, and changes in the essential structure of RSCs.

Seen in this light, it can be argued that based on the ‘push-and-pull framework’, an amalgamation of nationalist political-economy coalitions framed within a relatively weak democratic environment (push factors) and extra-regional hard engagement (pull factors) generate further regional conflict and chaos.<sup>884</sup> It is also important to note that regional and extra-regional powers’ penetrations/overlays of certain sub-complexes in the Middle East such as the Levant have produced changes in the essential structure of the MERSC. Therefore, from the RSCT+RPSF model, we can look at pull and push factors in order to explain to what extent the essential structure of RSCs may have undergone change(s) and whether a regional security complex is moving towards a cooperative or a confrontational regional order based on the nature of certain alliances (i.e., liquid alliances). Before we venture into the issue of the impact of the Syrian conflict on the issue of order in the MERSC, it is worth noting that according to Levaggi,

*a cooperative regional order is one in which the major actors share common norms and approaches on conflict resolution, the main actors have developed a joint regional agenda, and they are committed for supporting regional integration, whereas in a confrontational order, the regional powers dispute on norms, support different regional agendas, and are not engaged with regional institutionalization.*<sup>885</sup>

In this context, the assumption is that regional orders that are marked by extra-regional hard engagement strategies and nationalist domestic coalitions in the context of democratic backsliding in key regional powers will be more prone to conflictive regional settings while regional orders that are characterized by extra-regional soft

---

Change in the Context of International Norms”, **International Politics**, Vol. 54, No. 6, 2017, pp. 760-774.

<sup>884</sup> Ariel Gonzales Levaggi, p. 33-34.

<sup>885</sup> Ariel Gonzales Levaggi. **Confrontational and Cooperative Regional Orders: Managing Regional Security in World Politics**, Routledge Global security Studies, Routledge, 2020, p. 31-32.

engagement strategies in tandem with internationalist coalitions within democratic stability in major regional powers will be prone to cooperative regional settings.<sup>886</sup>

As applied to the case of Syrian conflict, one can conveniently notice that the Middle Eastern regional order in the post Arab uprisings has witnessed clear extra-regional hard engagement—or overlays to use RSCT terms, along with significant instances of democratic backsliding in key regional powers (i.e., Iran and Turkey) which taken together have made the region prone to conflictive regional settings. Although Russia and China are interested in creating patterns of conflict management (order) within the MERSC by means of creating issue-specific alliances like the one in Syria, the result is that the effects of transformations on the Middle East security complex in light of the Syrian conflict is so immense that efforts at crafting a cooperative regional order face serious complications and obstacles. As mentioned earlier, these complexities are related to the pull and push factors as well as the changes in the essential structure of the MERSC as a consequence of the war in Syria and the regional changes that took place thereafter. Therefore, while the tactical partnership among Iran, Russia and Turkey may have paid certain dividends in terms of attenuating the level of conflict in Syria, the limitations mentioned above have confronted the Syrian troika with formidable challenges on the pathway towards formation of a similar regional alliance that can provide a semblance of security order and/or resolve conflicts in the MERSC as a whole. In this sense, what we see in the MERSC is an “order of disorder”, a circuit of chaos as defined by “disorderly and unpredictable behavior of complicated nonlinear dynamic system.”<sup>887</sup>

Nevertheless, as seen through the prism of RSCT+RPSF model, based on the variables identified earlier, there are five ideal types of regional security order: hegemony-based, strength based, concert-based, integration-based, unordered. Each of the five types of regional security order are defined in the following table:

---

<sup>886</sup> Ariel Gonzales Levaggi, p. 34.

<sup>887</sup> James Gleik. **Chaos** (Trans: F. Uccan), TUBITAK, Popular Science Books, Ankara, 1995, p. 16., Mehtap Yeşilorman. “Chaos Theory and Modern Jurisprudent: An Essay on Deconstruction of Parameters’ Order and Linearity”, **Hcettepe HDF**, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2017, p. 9.

**Table 2:** Types of Regional Security Orders

<i>Regional security order</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
Hegemony-based	Security is primarily pursued through a system of rules in which one dominant actor that has sufficient power to design and enforce such that its interests are promoted and in which that actor has no real competitor.
Strength-based	Security is pursued primarily through the use of material power-based strategies that seek to either deter or confront security problems through the deployment of conventional power capabilities.
Concert-based	Security is pursued primarily through the coordinated efforts of the strongest states in the system who meet regularly and accept joint responsibility for shared threats, but maintain a rival-based relationship with one another.
Integration-based	Security is pursued primarily through the intentional promotion of various types of interdependence across the system in order to generate a shared set of interests, values and identity.
Unordered	There is no consistent pattern of management techniques through which security is pursued.

Source: Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, p. 27

In a hegemony-based order, a hegemonic state dominates all other states in the system, considers itself to be at the apex of such an order and is generally recognized as such by other members of the system.<sup>888</sup> In Robert Gilpin's view, a hegemonic power not only sets the rules of the game for the system, it also possesses sufficient capabilities and instruments of pressure to influence and regulate the foreign policies of other members in favor of its own preferences, norms and values.<sup>889</sup> In the context of the Middle East, time was when the U.S. and Britain held dominance thorough the region but the "ordering of politics" and the security dynamics have come under colossal changes since the onset of the Arab uprisings. In the words of one scholar, "the Middle East region has therefore, no great powers and while it arguably has several middle powers with some potential regional hegemony, all of these suffer from

<sup>888</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier. **Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework**, Routledge, 2012, p. 27.

<sup>889</sup> Robert Gilpin. **War and Change in World Politics**, Cambridge University Press, 1981., John Ikenberry & Daniel H. Nexon. "Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders", **Security Studies**, Vol. 28, No. 3, p. 402.

certain liabilities.”<sup>890</sup> But the Russian military intervention in Syria which is seen as a true reflection of an extra-regional power’s assertion as a counter-power to the United States has posed serious question, namely if the Kremlin is seeking to replace US hegemony with a more balanced multipolar order.<sup>891</sup>

A strength-based order is one in which the largest power does not have the sort of dominating relationship with the rest of the system that is characterized as hegemonic but the states within the system pursue security predominantly through creation and maintenance of ‘suitable’ or ‘stable’ distribution of power.<sup>892</sup> In a certain RSC, this category of regional order is associated with *power restraining power* arrangement whereby states build on conventional strength via hard balancing and soft balancing so much so that no state gains sufficient strength to make aggression rationally feasible.<sup>893</sup>

An integration-based order is defined to exist when “security is primarily pursued through the promotion of deep levels of interdependence across multiple dimensions of activity in which most security problems are dealt with through collective institutions.”<sup>894</sup> Driven by the logic of ‘complex interdependence’, the integrationist order seeks to bolster the relationships of the member states in political, economic and socio-cultural spheres with the ultimate aim of forming a Karl Deutschian security community.<sup>895</sup>

A concert-based order is one in which several core powers that operate in a highly influential manner form a particular *modus operandi* together to guide the

---

<sup>890</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch. “Failed Regional Hegemons: The Case of the Middle East’s Regional Powers”, **Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations**, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2013, p. 77.

<sup>891</sup> Theodor Tudoroiu. “The Reciprocal Constitutive Features of a Middle Eastern Partnership: The Russian-Syrian Bilateral Relations”, **Journal of Eurasian Studies**, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2015, pp. 143-152, Brice Didier. “The Syrian Conflict and Russia’s Search for Regional Hegemony in a Contested Middle East: Implications for the Euro-Atlantic Community”, **EU Diplomacy Papers** 10/2017, pp. 1-31., Ekaterina Stepanova. “Russia in the Middle East: Back to a Grand Strategy—or Enforcing Multilateralism”, **Politique Etrangere**, No. 2, 2016.

<sup>892</sup> Morgan PM. “Regional Security Complexes and Regional Orders”, **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**, In David Lake and Morgan PM (eds.), University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 33., Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, **Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework**, Routledge, 2012, p. 28.

<sup>893</sup> Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll. “Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order Within Regional Security Complexes”, **European Journal of International Relations**, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2010, p. 736.

<sup>894</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, **Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework**, Routledge, 2012, p. 232.

<sup>895</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, p. 30.

operation of a region-wide security structure.”<sup>896</sup> In one breath, these regional powers tend to remedy security problems by dint of ‘compromise and offsetting concessions’, while in the next breath they do not interact to such a cooperative degree that they would be regarded as members of a security community. In other words, driven by the logics of *balance of power* and *collective security*, the concert-based order is defined to exist when the influential concert members compete and cooperate with each other but simultaneously operate in the form of a special group that works through diplomatic means to carve out *patterns of management* for the sake of maintaining a degree of system stability in the system.

Having said this, a regional security order is defined as unordered or unstructured when “there will be no effective security order that exhibits a consistent pattern of security management.”<sup>897</sup> According to Buzan and Wæver, for a regional security order to be identified as unstructured, either of two conditions must be met: (1) local states must have such a low capability that their power does not project much, if at all, beyond their own boundaries, (2) geographical insulation must be such that makes interaction difficult—for instance where islands are separated by oceans.<sup>898</sup>

---

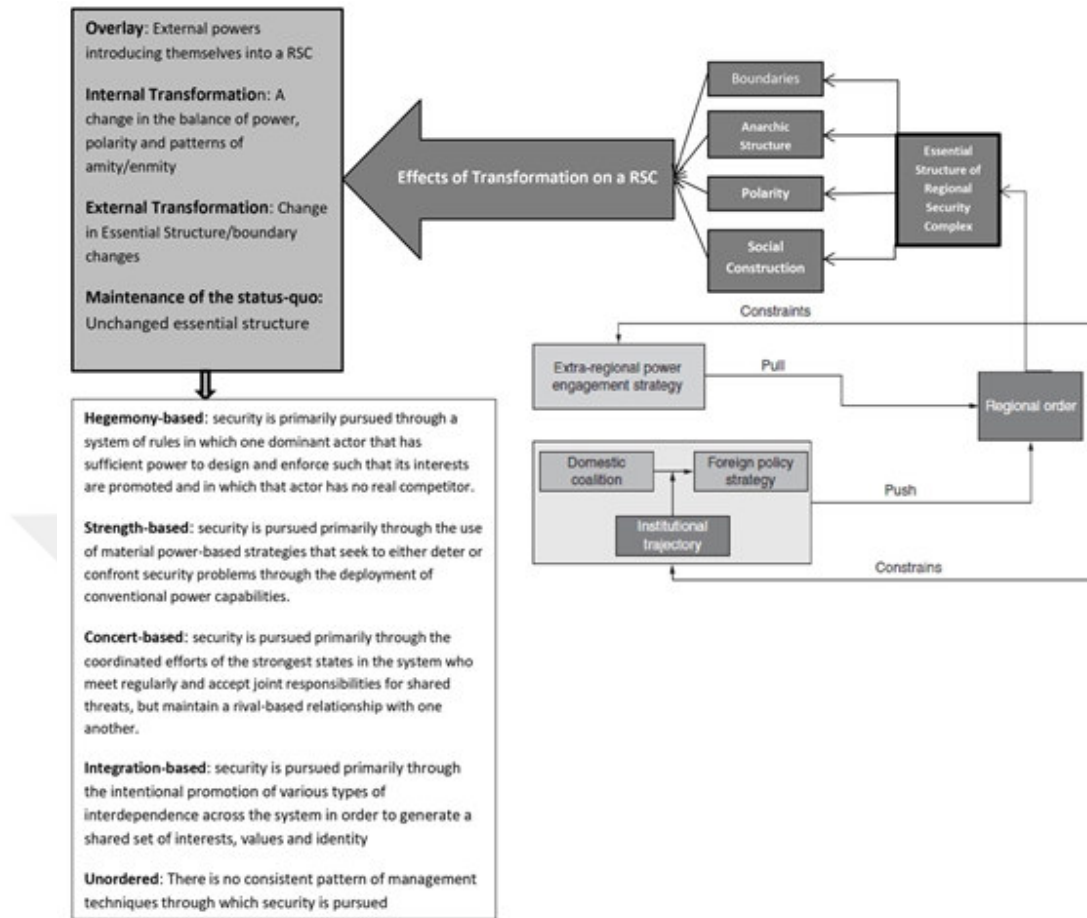
<sup>896</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, p. 29.

<sup>897</sup> Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, p. 31.

<sup>898</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 62.



**Table 3:** Dynamics and Effects in RSCs



Source: Designed by the author

In looking at the impact of the Syrian conflict on the regional security order, it becomes clear based on the dissertation's observations, that are witnessing *an admixture of strength-based and concert-based regional order of disorder* whereby the largest power (Russia) does not have the sort of dominating relationship with the rest of the members of the system (namely Iran and Turkey) but succeeds in establishing certain patterns of cooperation and conflict, a sort of adversarial cooperation to bring about a modicum of security order in the region, mostly in the Levant. It is in this context that one can develop a better understanding of the Russian efforts to foster a semblance of security architecture based on the idea of cooperative security in order to manage the myriads of regional tensions and potential conflicts. For instance, Russia seeks to maintain regional cooperation with Iran and Turkey under the Astana Peace Process and the Sochi Agreements to manage the Syrian

conflict until a lasting equilibrium is achieved among key stakeholders in the conflict. The Kremlin also emphasizes on the resumption of nuclear talks between Iran and the U.S., hoping that a new accord between Tehran and Washington can serve as a springboard for a new security architecture in the MENA region.<sup>899</sup> In parallel, Moscow has also made no stones unturned in trying to prevent a large-scale war in the Persian Gulf by proposing the concept of collective security for the Persian Gulf on top of the Iranian plan dubbed Hormuz Peace Endeavor which was introduced at the UN in 2019.<sup>900</sup>

However, as mentioned earlier, these enterprises are being pursued based on a hybrid logic that combines *balance of power* and *collective security*, according to which soft and hard balancing mechanism are also present in Russia's dealings with the key members of the Middle East security complex. In this manner, while Russians are seen as feeling "the inexorable pull of *derzhavnost*—a feeling of being entitled to great power status they push for collective security mechanisms that can bring about a modicum of security order in the MENA region, a prime locus of the Russian exercise of great power status and prestige as the country doubles down on its great power competition with the United States."<sup>901</sup> If the United States continues its pivot away from the MENA region, the situation will be ripe for Russia and China to penetrate more in the region and establish themselves as 'co-equal partners' of the U.S. in shaping international and regional orders. The question of whether or not Russia has a long-term grand strategy towards the Middle East was briefly teased out in previous chapters, but as former Israeli Ambassador to Russia Zvi Magen once observed, "Putin's long-term goal is not just an empire but global superpower status, at least equal to the United States."<sup>902</sup> In order to achieve this goal, Russia needs to make sure

---

<sup>899</sup> Nabil Fahmy. "The Iran Nuclear Deal: A Springboard for a New Middle East Security Architecture", **European Leadership Network**, 24.02.2021, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/the-iran-nuclear-deal-a-springboard-for-a-new-middle-east-security-architecture/>, (19.09.2021).

<sup>900</sup> Cornelius Adebahr. "Collective Security in the Persian Gulf: Preparing for an Opening", **Carnegie Europe**, 20.07.2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/07/20/collective-security-in-persian-gulf-preparing-for-opening-pub-84959>, (20.09.2021).

<sup>901</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya, Raed Wajeeh, Daniel Rakov, and Li-Chen Sim. "Russia in the Middle East, A Source of Stability or a Pot-Stirrer", **Atlantic Council**, 21.04.2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/russia-in-the-middle-east-a-source-of-stability-or-a-pot-stirrer/>, (21.09.2021).

<sup>902</sup> Joshua Spurlock. "'Emperor' Putin's Middle East, Russia's Ongoing Role in the Region", **The Mideast Update**, 08.05.2018, <https://www.bridgesforpeace.com/article/emperor-putins-middle-east-russias-ongoing-role-in-the-region/>, (20.09.2021).

that it has substantial and effective order-making capabilities. Thus, Syria was the prime arena for the Russian Federation to test its order-making capabilities at the regional level. Borrowing Theodore Karasik's words, in the context of the war in Syria, Russia sought to force regional bipolarity upon the West in order to compel the acceptance of global multipolarity, i.e., Russia's equal standing to Moscow both in the Middle East and at large.<sup>903</sup> In this sense, one can hardly refute John Mearsheimer's observation that Russia has turned into a resurrected great power.<sup>904</sup> Another scholars and experts argue that "it is Russia's job to intervene militarily in the Middle East, and, thereby to take the heart from the Americans [...] Russia's ability to perform as China's stalking horse in the Middle East depends significantly on its military alliance in Syria with Iran".<sup>905</sup> Nevertheless, one should not lose sight of the fact that the Russian and Iranian 'destabilizing' campaign in Syria has had certain benefits for China. These destabilizing activities can help Iran, Russia as well as China to foster the impression that that the era of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East has come to an end, that the U.S. is incapable of providing security and order in the Middle East, that the United States is not a reliable ally for the countries of the Middle East security complex. For China, the Syrian conflict has been a clear example of "how Beijing's use of Iran as a stalking horse pays economic and strategic dividends simultaneously".<sup>906</sup>

Without a doubt, Iran has spent more money and manpower in Syria than China. Another potential benefit of Iranian and Russian involvement in Syria relates to the question of how the principle of preserving the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the war-torn country is being exercised by Turkey, Iran and Russia. Since the normative principle of non-intervention is regarded as one of the most important elements of China's 'Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence', Beijing has acted

---

<sup>903</sup> Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank, Russia in The Middle East, **The Jamestown Foundation**, December 2018, p. 15-31.

<sup>904</sup> Quoted in Jozef Hrabina. "The Year of Crises: How 2020 Will Reshape the Structure of International Relations", **Russia in Global Affairs**, No. 1, January/March 2021, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/2020-international-relations/>, (19.09.2021).

<sup>905</sup> Michael Doran and Peter Rough. "China's Emerging Middle Eastern Kingdom", **Tabletmag**, 03.09.2020, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israelmiddleeast/articles/chinamiddleeastern-kingdom>, (20.09.2021).

<sup>906</sup> Michael Doran and Peter Rough, p. 20.

cautiously not to become overtly sucked into the Syrian conflict.<sup>907</sup> However, China's predominantly 'wait-and-see' strategy towards the Syrian conflict does not question the growing importance of the MENA region for China. For one thing, China has vital energy interests in the region as the Middle East and North Africa remain the main source of its crude oil imports.<sup>908</sup> Notwithstanding the energy factor in China's relations with the Middle Eastern states, the region is, nonetheless, significant for the achievement of "Beijing's wider aim of rebalancing the global political and economic orders."<sup>909</sup> As such, China is seen as an opportunist global power lying in wait to see how the outcomes of the Syrian conflict will help it adjust its policies towards the MERSC and possibly reap the geopolitical harvest. In the words of Steven A. Cook, "rather than mitigate or contain conflicts, the Chinese have demonstrated a willingness to clean up after they are over or nearly over, all the while advancing Beijing's mercantilist agenda."<sup>910</sup>

Seen in this light, one can assuredly contend that Syria is most likely to become an integral geopolitical link that, with the help of Russian and Iranian overlays, can connect China to the Levant and Gulf sub-complexes as part of its grand mercantilist scheme for the MENA region. This is particularly important given that China is in the possession of sufficient economic resources as compared to Russia in order to make a lasting penetration across the western edge of the Middle East security complex.<sup>911</sup> Noteworthy too is that in 2017, Beijing established a logistics base in Djibouti and has expanded its security, political and economic relations with the Gulf Arab states of the Middle East. China has established 'comprehensive strategic partnerships' with Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and the UAE, and 'strategic partnerships' with Qatar, Sudan, Jordan, Iraq, Morocco, Djibouti and Oman and a 'strategic cooperative

---

<sup>907</sup> On China's 'Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence' see, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, China's Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence, **Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China**, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/ziliao\\_665539/3602\\_665543/3604\\_665547/t18053.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18053.shtml), (20.09.2021).

<sup>908</sup> Martina Ponizilova. "Foreign Policy Activities of China in the Middle East: Establishing Energy Security or Being a Responsible Emerging Power?", **Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies**, Vol. 21, No. 6, 2019, pp. 643-662.

<sup>909</sup> Tim Niblock. "China and the Middle East: A Global Strategy Where the Middle East Has a Significant but Limited Place", **Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 14, No. 4, 2020, p. 504.

<sup>910</sup> Steven A. Cook. "Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East", **Council on Foreign Relations**, 01.03.2021, p. 28. <https://www.cfr.org/report/major-power-rivalry-middle-east>, (20.09.2021).

<sup>911</sup> Russia, as of 2021, has a GDP that is only 10 to 20 percent of China's GDP.

partnership' with Turkey in 2020 and an 'innovative comprehensive partnership with Israel in 2017'.<sup>912</sup> As can be seen, China has deepened economic and security ties with both Arab and non-Arab states of the MERSC, namely Iran, Turkey and Israel. Most notably, there has been significant momentum in the Israeli-China relationship in recent years despite the United States' critical views of Israeli's openings to Beijing.

As such, the contention regarding China's opportunist stance towards the Syrian conflict gains further weight when we see the rising economic and security footprints of Beijing in the Levant and Gulf sub-complexes. The Persian Gulf countries including Iran and Saudi Arabia constitute an important component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a \$1 trillion project which serves as a land bridge linking Central Asia to Southeast Europe and beyond. The BRI program, which was first articulated by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 during a trip to Central Asia, can be interpreted as China's grand strategy of securing its long-term interests in the Middle East and undermining the American order at both global and regional levels. The BRI consists of two main projects: the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), with each element having the potential to transform the global geopolitical landscape through the construction of interlinked infrastructure projects, including ports, highways, railways and pipelines.<sup>913</sup> It is estimated that since the launch of the BRI, the Chinese government has invested more than \$123 million in the MENA region and is currently considered the region's largest source of foreign investment despite the negative impacts of Covid-19 on regional and global trade.<sup>914</sup> All of the aforementioned arguments have three important implications.

First, since China's BRI passes through a MERSC deeply convulsed by conflicts and outside penetrations, such as the war in Syria, it is imperative, at least in the eyes of China and Russia, that the MENA region gains a modicum of security and order. In other words, efforts aimed at enhancing the security and stability in Syria will

---

<sup>912</sup> See, Bingbing Wu. "China and the Middle East", **Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies**, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2021, p. 450.

<sup>913</sup> See, for example, Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Colin Flint. "The Geopolitics of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative", **Geopolitics**, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2017, pp. 223-245.

<sup>914</sup> Jonathan Fulton. "After Aramco Attacks: China's Middle East Interests at Stake, **Atlantic Council**, September 20, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/after-aramco-attacks-chinas-middle-east-interests-are-at-stake/>, (21.09.2021)., Jonathan Fulton. "China's Changing Role in the Middle East, **Atlantic Council**, 01.06.2019, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Chinas\\_Changing\\_Role\\_in\\_the\\_Middle\\_East.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Chinas_Changing_Role_in_the_Middle_East.pdf), (21.09.2021).

have a direct positive impact on the realization of Chinese broader goals in the region. This partially explains why China has entered into a tacit alliance with Russia and Iran over the Syrian case, thereby becoming a silent partner of them in pursuing common goals.

Second, Syria is regarded as China's entryway to the Levant and Gulf sub-complexes that can serve as a "strategic fulcrum" for building Chinese influence.<sup>915</sup> In addition, Syria has huge potential to enhance 'BRI connectivity' with other states in the MENA region. China's push into the Levant and the Gulf sub-complexes, spearheaded by the BRI projects, adds to the notion of *inter-subcomplex interconnectivity* which was discussed in the earlier segments of this study. As a result of the BRI-based interconnectivity, be it in security or economic terms, the Communist Party of China (CPC) under the leadership of Xi Jinping can pursue "Beijing's global ambitions for a greater Chinese role in shaping the rules, standards, and norms of an international order that is no longer dominated by the United States".<sup>916</sup> However, it should be noted that the tensions in Afghanistan, in the Levant (i.e., in Syria) and the Gulf sub-complex (i.e., Iran) against the backdrop of the United States' withdrawal of troops from the Middle East have encountered the Chinese officials with a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, these security problems in view of the end of *Pax Americana* in the region compels China to increase its level of penetration of the MERSA in terms of projecting military power to protect its massive security and economic interests in the region. On the other hand, an increase in penetration levels may pose a risk to China's "competition without confrontation" approach and further undermine the Chinese normative principles of non-interference and respect for territorial sovereignty of states. This is why some Chinese analysts caution that the MENA region has become a litmus test for an unavoidable alteration of Chinese policy principles, including the notion of non-intervention.<sup>917</sup>

---

<sup>915</sup> Jesse Marks, China's Pursuit of a "Strategic Fulcrum" in the Middle East, Middle East Institute, September 15, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-pursuit-strategic-fulcrum-middle-east>

<sup>916</sup> Steven Simon. China and the Persian Gulf in the Aftermath of a U.S. Withdrawal", **Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft**, 21.09.2021, No. 17, pp. 1-19, p. 8, <https://quincyinst.org/report/china-and-the-persian-gulf-in-the-aftermath-of-a-u-s-withdrawal/>, (21.09.2021).

<sup>917</sup> James M. Dorsey. **China and The Middle East: Venturing into the Maelstrom**, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2019, p. 203.

Third, the entry of China into a tacit alignment with Russia, Iran and Turkey over the Syrian conflict poses important implications for the future of security order in the MERSC. If the Biden administration continues to downscale its commitments in the Middle East, it is likely that the regional balance of power would dramatically shift towards Beijing. This is not to say that China is capable of or willing to fill a supposed U.S. power vacuum in the MENA region, rather, that Beijing would exploit the U.S. exhaustion in the region to portray itself as a provider of security and stability in the era of the American retreat from the Middle East. As Doran and Rough argue, in the case of Syria, Russia's job is to intervene militarily in the Middle East and, thereby, to take the heat from the Americans while China benefits from Russia's "destabilizing" activities.<sup>918</sup> Whether or not such opportunistic tendencies of the Chinese government will bring about intended outcomes remain to be seen but the fact remains that just as the military phase of the Syrian conflict give way to diplomatic and economic phases China is expected to appear as more assertive in pursuing its foreign policy goals in all three sub-complexes of the MERSC, namely in the Levant and the Persian Gulf. Therefore, there are arguments that China has abandoned the 'Keeping a Low Profile' (*taoguangyangui*) approach which Deng Xiaoping had formulated in the 1980s, and replacing with more activist or assertive—in Chinese terms, strategy of Striving for Achievements (*fenfayouwei*).<sup>919</sup>

In summation, it has become clear that China has benefited immensely from Iranian and Russian overlaying of the Syrian conflict and that this tacit alignment entails important implications for the regional security order. To be clear, owing to the Syrian conflict, China along with Russia is set to take incremental steps to create regional bipolarity in the region, predicated on a strategic competition between Beijing and Washington.<sup>920</sup> As seen through the prism of the RSCT+RPSF model, China's

<sup>918</sup> Michael Doran and Peter Rough. "China's Emerging Middle Eastern Kingdom", **Tabletmag**, 03.08.2020, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/china-middle-eastern-kingdom>, (21.09.2021).

<sup>918</sup> Michael Doran and Peter Rough, p. 14.

<sup>919</sup> Tim Niblock. "China and the Middle East: A Global Strategy Where the Middle East Has a Significant but Limited Place", **Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 14, No. 4, 2020, p. 500.

<sup>920</sup> Ashley J. Tellis. "The Return of U.S.-China Strategic Competition", **Strategic Asia 2020: US-China Competition for Global Influence**, Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills (eds.), National Bureau of Asian Research: Washington D.C., 2020. [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/SA\\_20\\_Tellis.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/SA_20_Tellis.pdf), (23.09.2021).

penetration of the MERSC as a manifestation of its greater rivalry with the United States will follow the pattern of strength-based and concert-based regional order. Accordingly, *power restraining power* arrangements, i.e., soft balancing of the U.S., and *collective security*, i.e., alignment with Iran, and Russia and Turkey on specific cases will guide Chinese policies in the MERSC.

Having discussed the role of China in influencing regional dynamics, it is worth remembering that the Middle East security complex's pathway towards a synthesis of strength-based and concert-based regional order faces acute challenges. Put differently, the formation and maintenance of a strength-based and concert-based regional order in the MERSC hinge on three main challenges: the future role of the United States in the Middle East, the denouement of the ongoing negotiations between Iran and world powers over its nuclear enrichment program, ballistic missiles program and regional interferences, and Israel's response to the Iranian behaviors in the realms of the aforementioned sensitive triad. Before we delve into this debate, mention must be made that the geopolitical and security landscape of the Middle East has long been characterized by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, also known as the Middle East's cold war. This pattern of securitization between Iran and Saudi Arabia was reinforced by the Syrian conflict as the discourse of Shia-Sunni confrontation became the dominant theme explaining the root-causes of the rampant tumults in the Middle East security complex. Today, however, the competition most likely to determine the MERSC is no longer between Arab states and Israel or between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but among the region's three non-Arab regional powers: Iran, Israel and Turkey.<sup>921</sup>

The assertion here is not that the competition between the Iranian and Saudi versions of a regional order will cease to exist; rather, the argument is that this competition will not *ipso facto* define the regional dynamics of the region due in part to the changing patterns of relationships and interactions between states of the MENA region. Therefore, just as the proxy conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslim subside in Syria, the next stage in the Syrian conflict would be gradual de-securitization processes between Damascus and Turkey and between Damascus and the GCC players. In this context the role of the United States in future dynamics in Syria and

---

<sup>921</sup> Vali Nasr. "The Middle East's Next Conflicts Won't be Between Arab States and Iran", **Foreign Policy**, 02.03.2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/02/the-middle-east-s-next-conflicts-wont-be-between-arab-states-and-iran/>, (21.09.2021).



beyond becomes relevant. The salience of the U.S. role is rooted in the fact that, as Robert Jervis argued, “we are dealing with a system when (a) a set of units or elements is interconnected so that changes in some elements or their relations produce changes in other parts of the system, and (b) the entire system exhibits properties and behaviors that are different from those of the parts.”<sup>922</sup>

Hence, the continued presence or withdrawal of U.S. troops will most likely have butterfly-effects in the MERSC so much so that they will reverberate at both regional and global levels. As of writing this dissertation, the Biden administration is seen as reassessing its role in the MERSC and that nearly every member of the Gulf Cooperation Council is apprehensive of the future of the U.S. posture in the Middle East.<sup>923</sup> It is important to emphasize that a number of factors have contributed to the reshaping of U.S. force posture in the MERSC: 1) the physical destruction of the Islamic State’s caliphate in Syria and Iraq, 2) the growing patterns of amity between Israel and Arab states as a result of the Abraham accords, 3) the Saudi Arabia-the UAE’s détente with Qatar since January 2021, 4) the growing engagement of the US with Iran over its nuclear program.<sup>924</sup> However, the core principles of the Obama’s doctrine, that is *burden-sharing*, are also traceable in the policies of the Biden administration. The Biden administration’s strategic ‘burden-sharing’ policy towards the Middle East is predicated on ‘strengthening local partners’ and traditional allies which inescapably involve the reduction of security commitments of the U.S. and lessening of its military presence in specific countries.<sup>925</sup> Ironically, it is said that the impulse to scale back the force posture in the MERSC dovetails with a transition away from post-9/11 entanglements in Afghanistan, and to a lesser extent Iraq as well as the

---

<sup>922</sup> Robert Jervis. **System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life**, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1997, p. 6.

<sup>923</sup> See, Emile Hokayem. “Reassuring Gulf Partners While Recalibrating U.S. Security Policy”, **From Hardware to Holism: Rebalancing America’s Security Engagement with Arab States**, Frederic Wehrey and Michele Dunne, (eds.), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 18, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/18/reassuring-gulf-partners-while-recalibrating-u.s.-security-policy-pub-84522>, (21.09.2021).

<sup>924</sup> Christine McVann. “Reshaping U.S. Force Posture in the Middle East”, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, Policy Analysis No. 3447, 10.03.2021, p. 1, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reshaping-us-force-posture-middle-east>, (22.09.2021).

<sup>925</sup> Andreas Krieg. “Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and the US Foreign Policy in the Middle East”, **International Affairs**, Vol. 92, No. 1, 2016, p. 104.

small but effective presence in Syria.<sup>926</sup> The rationale behind the Biden administration's strategic 'burden-sharing' approach in the region is that the U.S. does not have the luxury of providing its traditional allies and partners a blank checks to pursue policies at odds with American interests especially at a time when the U.S. must focus on containing China and Russia as the foremost national security threats.<sup>927</sup> Hence, in the eyes of the Biden administration officials, the GCC countries, Israel and Egypt should be able to provide their own external security and consider the United States' any swift military actions to protect them as a last resort not as an obligation of the U.S. to be done at any given time or under any circumstances.

These propositions can be best explained in terms of a debate between advocates of restraint, or "offshore balancing" who argue that costs of overseas missions and forward-based forces outweigh the purported benefits and critiques of "offshore balancing" who posit that it is vital that the U.S. maintains its military presence in the MENA region because "both US influence and international stability are thoroughly interwoven with a robust US forward presence."<sup>928</sup> As some scholars argue the problem is that leaders of the MENA region aligned with the United States tend to seek *presence* because it is a manifestation of U.S. commitment to their security, making posture reductions or changes potentially difficult to navigate. In the words of these scholars, "the U.S. hopes to reduce presence in the region without upsetting regional partner", it wants "to *reduce presence* but retain *access* to critical infrastructure in case a contingency requires U.S. military power."<sup>929</sup> However, several members of the Gulf Cooperation Council are concerned that the U.S. withdrawal from the MERSC would pave the way for Iran's deeper penetration of the region, especially when the Biden administration is pursuing nuclear diplomacy with Tehran. Hence, the Gulf Arab states are now faced with two major challenges: 1) stoop to the Biden

---

<sup>926</sup> Hussein Ibish. "The Debate over the U.S. Military Role in the Gulf", **The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington**, 31.08.2021, <https://agsiw.org/debate-over-us-military-role-gulf/>, (21.09.2021).

<sup>927</sup> The White House, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance", **The White House**, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>

<sup>928</sup> Renanah M. Joyce & Becca Wasser. "All About Access: Solving America's Force Posture Puzzle", **The Washington Quarterly**, Vol. 44, No. 3, 2021, p. 46., Christopher Layne. "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing", **International Security**, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1997, pp. 86-124., John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt. "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior US Grand Strategy", **Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 95, No. 4, 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>, (21.09.2021).

<sup>929</sup> Renanah M. Joyce & Becca Wasser, p. 48.

administration's policy of strategic burden-sharing in the MERSC in terms of learning to cope with and possibly counter regional security threats without an unconditional and swift assistance of the United States 2) preserve the Abraham Accords as a *hedge* against the declining levels of U.S. commitment in the region and avoid risking a lasting damage to the core of the relation with the United States by overtly leaning towards China and Russia.<sup>930</sup> Both challenges will be daunting for the GCC states as the U.S. primacy in the Middle East security complex is being challenged.

The second challenge on the pathway towards the formation of strength-based and concert-based regional order in the MERSC relates to the outcome of the ongoing negotiations between Iran and world powers. From a vantage point, it appears that Iranian foreign policy is expected to show more continuity than change under the president Ibrahim Raisi, who is largely viewed as the protégé of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Given the emergence of a somewhat 'monolithic ultraconservative control' over various echelons of power in Iran, i.e., the judiciary, the parliament, and the executive branch, it has become easier for the Islamic Republic to craft and pursue unified policies especially in the realm of foreign affairs.<sup>931</sup> However, whether or not the Islamic Republic of Iran and the world powers will be able to revive the nuclear deal or instead reach a 'comprehensive agreement' on the sensitive triad (nuclear dossier, ballistic missiles program, and regional issues) is uncertain. For the time being, the Islamic Republic regime is using nuclear blackmail as a leverage against the United States and European powers in order to gain concessions from regional and extra-regional powers. Meanwhile, regional actors such as Turkey, Israel and key members of the GCC are seen as deeply worried about the possibility of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.<sup>932</sup> They are also concerned about the continuation of 'aggressive and

---

<sup>930</sup> Aaron Magid and Mohammad Barhouma. "New Political and Security Challenges for Jordan and Gulf States After U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 17.09.2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/85367>, (21.09.2021).

<sup>931</sup> See, Adnan Tabatabaie. "Iran's Political Shake-up and Ebrahim Raisi as President", **European Leadership Network**, 18.08.2021, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/iran-s-political-shake-up-and-ebrahim-raisi-as-president/>, (22.09.2021).

<sup>932</sup> Reuters. "Erdogan Says It's Unacceptable that Turkey Cannot Have Nuclear Weapons", **Reuters**, 04.09.2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-nuclear-erdogan-idUSKCN1VP2QN>, (21.09.2021).

destabilizing regional activities' of the Islamic Republic in the Levant and the Gulf sub-complexes.<sup>933</sup>

Although Iran and Saudi Arabia have taken certain steps towards de-securitization in bilateral ties, it is far from certain as to whether the rocky relations will amend anytime soon. Nevertheless, it should be noted that given the Biden administration's 'pivot' away from the MENA region, Iran along with Russia and China will seize the opportunity in order to find a settlement to the Syrian conflict in the mid to long-term period. If any tentative agreement on the sensitive triad and/or a restoration of nuclear deal is achieved between Tehran and the world powers to the effect that it contains Iran's destabilizing activities, it is likely that the members of the Gulf sub-complex as well as Israel and Turkey would *bandwagon* and avoid confrontations with the Islamic Republic. Attentions must be paid to the fact that for the time being almost all countries of the MERSC have limited financial resources due in part to the negative economic impacts of Covid-19 pandemic.

Hence, it is likely that the key members of the MERSC including Iran will seek to look inwardly in trying to solve problems on the home front while working in a multilateral way to *manage* conflicts in the Levant and the Gulf sub-complexes. But as mentioned earlier, all of these efforts boil down to the outcome of the nuclear talks between Iran and world powers as well as regional talks between Tehran and Riyadh. For now, it appears that the Islamic Republic under the reign of Raisi is accelerating its "look to the East" policy as a means to gain possible concessions from the United States and most importantly as a guarantee for regime survival.<sup>934</sup> In this sense, the Islamic Republic's jumping on the opportunity of joining the Shanghai Cooperation Council (SCO) can be construed as the Islamic Republic's way of securing regime survival against internal and external threats to its survival.

It is important to parenthetically emphasize that the outcome of the nuclear talks will determine the future path of Iranian behaviors in the region. The Islamic

---

<sup>933</sup> U.S. Department of State. "Iran Action Group, Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities", 2020 Edition, **U.S. Department of State**, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Outlaw-Regime-2020-A-Chronicle-of-Irans-Destabilizing-Activity.pdf>, (21.09.2021).

<sup>934</sup> Mher Sahakyan. "Iran's 'Look to the East Policy': Pivot Towards China and Eurasian Economic Union", **IRNA**, <https://en.irna.ir/news/84472848/Presence-in-SCO-enhancing-Iran-s-Look-to-East-Policy>

Republic regime is fully aware that the quickest way to extricate Iran from international isolation and sever sanctions is to negotiate with the world powers. But the regime is also privy to the fact that resuscitation of the Iranian economy requires major concessions from Tehran, including on the sensitive triad, such as its regional agenda in the MENA region. As Alex Vatanka observes, the leader of Islamic Republic, and the generals in the IRGC, “are not yet prepared to bite the bullet on that. Instead, the Raisi government appears set to redouble its efforts to push ahead with its regional agenda, centered around the concept of the ‘Axis of Resistance.’”<sup>935</sup>

Hence, it appears that Tehran would be in no rush to give these concessions and for that matter it might follow a “resistance-based approach” towards the United States. This approach sits in stark contrast to the “JCPOA-based policy” during the presidency of Hassan Rouhani as well as the “nuclear-centered strategy” under the reign of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.<sup>936</sup> It is important to bear in mind that supporting non-state actors such as Hezbollah has been a main plank of the Islamic Republic’s regional activities. However, the degree to which Iran’s regional policy agenda has been using asymmetric ways of power projection is tied to the state of affairs between Iran and the United States. Accordingly, the internal dynamics inside Iran as well as the external dynamics related to its regional behaviors and nuclear enrichment efforts will have a direct impact on the emergence of a strength-based and concert-based regional order in the Middle East security complex.

Finally, it is of utmost importance to be mindful that the type and extent of Israel’s possible reaction towards Iran’s wheeling and dealings with the world powers will determine as to whether the Middle East security complex will see an admixture of strength-based and concert-based regional order. It seems that there is a realization in Jerusalem that they cannot rely on the United States for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons if it chose to do so. From Israel’s perspective, the most effective approach to prevent Iran from developing its nuclear capabilities is deterrence in the shape of i.e., a preventive war against Tehran’s nuclear

---

<sup>935</sup> Alex Vatanka. “Beholden to Khamenei and the IRGC, Raisi will Stick to the Hardline Script”, **Middle East Institute**, 16.09.2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/holden-khamenei-and-irgc-raisi-will-stick-hardline-script>, (19.09.2021).

<sup>936</sup> See, for example. “Nora Maher, Balancing Deterrence: Iran-Israel Relations in a Turbulent Middle East”, **Review of Economics and Political Science**, 2020, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/REPS-06-2019-0085/full/html>

infrastructure.<sup>937</sup> As such, Israel has long been pursuing “campaign between the wars” (known in Hebrew as *m’aracha bein ha- milchamat* or, in short, the acronym *Mabam*) in order to a) deter Iran from developing its nuclear program and b) debilitate and neutralize Iranian regional activities in places such as Syria and Lebanon.<sup>938</sup> In the words of some experts, Israel’s mabam campaign against the Islamic Republic of Iran and its Shia militias in Syria has been “one of the most successful military efforts to push back against Iran in the ‘gray zone’”.<sup>939</sup>

Having said this, the contention is that there is a wide dissonance between what Israel and Gulf states expect from the United States and what Washington is willing to offer in regard to providing them with security in the MERSC against the Islamic Republic’s aggressions. On the diplomatic front, Israel has signed the Abraham Accords with a number of Arab states such as the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco to normalize relations and use it as a diplomatic fence against Iran’s deeper penetration of the Levant and Gulf sub-complexes. One of the impacts of the growing patterns of amity between Israel and the Arab states of the Gulf sub-complex is that “the security of Israel and Gulf Arab states now overlap in ways that will likely provide important new opportunities for U.S. allies to cooperate both with Washington and each other in ways that also enhance U.S. regional strategic goals.”<sup>940</sup> The key argument presented here is that the perceived threat posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran, be it in Syria or in regard to its nuclear enrichment program, has been one of the principal driving forces behind the emergence of inter-subcomplex interconnectivity between the Gulf sub-complex and the Levant sub-complex. In this sense, the Syrian conflict served as the main incubator of security threat in the eyes of both Israel and the key members of the GCC, thereby contributing to further ‘security

---

<sup>937</sup> Cheryl M. Graham. “To Deter or not to Deter: Applying Historical Lessons to the Iranian Nuclear Challenge”, **Strategic Studies Quarterly**, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2011, pp. 50-66.

<sup>938</sup> On works regarding the concept of ‘Mabam’ see, for example, Amos Yadlin and Ari Heistein. “The Mabam Strategy: Israel, Iran, Syria (and Russia)”, **Jewish Review of Books**, Spring 2019, <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/5205/the-mabam-strategy-israel-iran-syria-and-russia/>, (22.09.2021).

<sup>939</sup> Ilan Goldenberg, Nicholas A. Heras, Kaleigh Thomas, and Jennie Matuschak. “Countering Iran in the Gray Zone: What the United States Should Learn from Israel’s Operations in Syria”, **CNAS Research**, April 2020, p. 1, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/countering-iran-gray-zone>, (21.09.2021).

<sup>940</sup> Hussein Ibish. “The Debate Over the U.S. Military Role in the Gulf”, **The Gulf Arab States Institute in Washington**, 31.08.2021, <https://agsiw.org/debate-over-us-military-role-gulf/>, (29.10.2021).

interdependence' between these actors at the regional level. In this context, what has made the patterns of amity between Israel and the GCC stronger is three-fold: the threat of Iran's deeper penetration of the Levant and the Gulf sub-complexes, Iran's nuclear enrichment program and its growing activities regarding its ballistic missile program, all of which are the focal points of any negotiations between Iran and world powers. As can be seen, on the military front, Israel is pursuing its 'Mabam' strategy to push back against Iran's regional and nuclear activities while working on the diplomatic front to further Abraham Accords for the purpose of reaching a multilateral way of containing Iran. Therefore, a mixture of power restraining power strategy and collective security has been underway to contain Iran.

That being said, it is important to be reminded that the Abraham Accords have yet to change the "rules of the game" on a strategic level to prove its effectiveness and that much depends on how the world powers will treat Iran in the short to medium term. Nevertheless, it is permissible to argue that given the cascading impact of the Syrian conflict in the MERSC the Middle East security complex has entered an era in which a combination of strength-based and concert-based regional order will emerge with the United States advocating 'leading from behind' policies so that the region finds a semblance of security order and stability through multilateral means or plunges into the state of entropy and disorder. In between these two possibilities lie unique opportunities for Russia and China to advance their own security, economic and geopolitical interests counter to the American interests, thereby giving the impression of a 'post-American' Middle East.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation argues that the Syrian conflict (2011-present) has been a main catalyst for drastic changes in the Middle East regional security order, entailing significant implications on the foreign policy roles and orientations of Russia, Iran and Turkey as well as on the future role of the United States in the Middle East security complex. This study was conducted at a time when the Biden administration decided to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan and forge a coalition of Asian states in the Indo-Pacific region to contain China, spearheaded by the so-called ‘Quad’—the United States, India, Japan and Australia. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan coupled with the apparent trend towards reduction of the United States’ military footprint in the broader MENA region, have, in the words of a former Saudi intelligence chief, created ‘strategic confusion’ for the MENA actors and raised serious questions about the influence of the United States in the broader Middle East region.<sup>941</sup> While the key regional allies of the United States such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Turkey, Qatar and Bahrain will have to reassess their position in view of the *new realities* in the region, other extra-regional actors such as China and Russia will take advantage of the U.S. power vacuum in the Middle East in order to maximize their regional influence.

But the American withdrawal from the Middle East and the transition to a ‘post-American’ Middle East can have a dangerous boomerang effect. For one thing, it was President Barak Obama’s decision to initiate a ‘Pivot to Asia’ and his reluctance to intervene in Syria in the case of Assad’s use of chemical weapons that led to a U.S. pivot back in the Middle East. We might see a similar trend with respect to the unfolding situation in Afghanistan. In other words, just as the Biden administration seeks to pivot away from the Middle East, the tides of unpredictable events, whether in Iran or in Afghanistan or a terrorist attack and the resurgence of ISIS can pull the U.S. back in the Middle East. This is partly the reason why this study focuses on the case of Syrian conflict because the ongoing war in Syria provides an interesting test case to examine the broader implications of the decade-old conflict on the Middle East

---

<sup>941</sup> The Daily Sabah. “US Loses Grip on Power in Middle East: Saudi Intel Chief”, The Daily Sabah, 03.11.2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/mid-east/us-loses-grip-on-power-in-middle-east-saudi-intel-chief>, (05.11.2021).



regional security order in view of the changing role and orientations of Turkey, Russia, and Iran and the United States.

This dissertation attempted to provide a thorough understanding of the impact(s) of the Syrian conflict on the Middle East regional security order in light of the tactical partnership among Iran, Turkey and Russia. Drawing on Buzan's and Wæver's Regional Security Complex theory—with its primary focus on relative autonomy of particular regional contexts—and Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll's Regional Powers and Security Framework—with its principal attention to the issue of order and roles and orientations of regional powers—this study endeavored to identify and explain the patterns of continuity and change in the foreign policy roles and orientations of Iran, Russia and Turkey towards each other and towards outside actors, namely the United States in light of the war in Syria. It sought to contribute in both theoretical and empirical terms to an already crowded field by offering a synthetic theoretical framework for understanding of the spillover effects of the Syrian conflict in the MENA region and how it affected the security order in the Middle East complex.

The case study of the Syrian conflict was chosen primarily because after more than a decade into the conflict Syria still sits at the epicenter of the changing power politics of the Middle East. The Syrian conflict is seen as a sharpest illustration of the gravest security and geopolitical challenges the Middle East security complex has faced ever since the Arab uprisings. It is argued that the conflict in Syria, whose end-game is yet unknown, is one of the most, if not the most, defining regional security *problematicues* around which an array of regional and extra-regional powers has gathered, with each of these actors seeking to adjust their foreign and security policies to the new realities of the region and further pursue their own geopolitical and security interests. Undeniably, the tectonic geopolitical shifts that the Middle East security complex is experiencing cannot be attributed solely to the Syrian conflict.

This study is cognizant of the hazards of reductionism and/or aggrandizement of certain benchmark events in the MENA region. Yet, the dissertation has attempted to delve deep into the highways and byways of the Syrian conflict from a theoretical perspective. Specifically, it has treated the tactical partnership among Turkey, Iran and Russia as a *sui generis* case of conflict management in the Middle East entailing far-

reaching implications on the foreign policy roles and orientations of all three states towards each other and towards the United States.

This study has made a number of contributions to the existing literature about the Syrian conflict. The research also offers new empirical and theoretical findings that can help people in the academia, media and policy circles to gain a better understanding of the impact(s) of the Syrian conflict on the Middle East security order. It can also provide a useful yardstick that can help researchers and pundits to gauge possible future dynamics in the MERSC in light of the purported downsizing of the U.S. military involvement in the Middle East security complex.

From an empirical viewpoint, one of the central findings of this research is that the Syrian conflict showed that the Middle East security complex has entered a phase of deeply fragmented and competitive multipolar order in which blocs of influence composed of powerful regional actors and extra-regional powers define competing conceptions of regional order. No dominant power, including the United States as a global power seeking to 'retrench' from the MENA region, has been able to attain a hegemonic position and no dominant power, whether regional or global, has been able to bring about a semblance of stability and security order in the region.

The central thesis is that considering the impacts of the Syrian conflict, the Middle East security complex has experienced a combination of strength-based and concert-based framework for crafting a semblance of order whereby the largest power (Russia) do not have the sort of domination relationship with the rest of the members of the system (i.e., Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia) but through establishing certain patterns of cooperation and conflict, a sort of adversarial cooperation with them succeeds in producing a modicum of security order in the region, namely in the Levant. In other words, the MERSC is witnessing a hybrid regional logic that entails a blending of balance of power and collective security (i.e., Astana Peace Process) according to which soft and hard balancing mechanism are simultaneously at play. To be more specific, the trends and processes associated with the Syrian conflict in light of the tactical partnership among Turkey, Russia and Iran suggests that a 'self-generating regional balance of power' is emerging in the MERSC independent of the designs and dictates of the United States, if any, and that the region is now being reshaped primarily by interactions among countries within it, albeit Russia and China will continue to

undermine the confidence of regional actors in the United States as a reliable security provider. Hence, a *new geopolitical reality* is emerging in the MENA region according to which the United States is no longer seen as the sole external power capable of projecting military power and exerting its order-making capabilities. Simply put, it is now the “regional piece” that has a significant degree of autonomy from the systemic-level patterns and one-size-fits-all solutions to the conflicts set by global powers.

The contention is that the Syrian conflict in light of the tactical partnership among Russia, Iran and Turkey under the Astana Peace Process was a microcosm of the rising performativity of ‘region-specific dynamics’ in the Middle East by means of which the United States is no longer seen as the regional hegemon capable of structuring the regional alliances or performing its erstwhile role as a main provider of security and order. Therefore, it was argued that the American-led security architecture of the Middle East is gradually succumbing to heightened degrees of disorder and entropy; it is turning into a deeply polarized system marked by the rise of mechanisms and modes of conflict management, in the mold of the Astana Peace Process, that are structured by regional and extra regional actors. In line with these ‘region-specific dynamics’ one can allude to the “Abraham Accords” signed between Israel and a number of Arab states, Saudi Arabia’s reconciliation with Qatar, Turkey’s de-securitization of its relations with Egypt, the UAE and possibly Saudi Arabia, Iraq’s efforts to broker talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia in light of the Yemen conflict, and Russia, Iran and Turkey’s efforts to deal with Taliban in a post-American era in Afghanistan. Not to mention, however, that the negative economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic also made regional power and global actors privier to the need for creating regional synergies based on concerted efforts in order to mitigate if not end protracted conflicts.

This study also demonstrated that the war in Syria coupled with the spillover effects of this transnational conflict into other countries such as Libya and Iraq created the conditions of possibility for Turkey to introduce itself forcefully as major pole in the Middle East security complex, particularly in the Levant sub-complex. Hence, this study offered a robust rethinking of RSC theoreticians’ designation of Turkey as an insulator state located at the margins of three different RSCs. Furthermore, it was argued that Russia’s military overlay of the Syrian conflict catapulted the Russian

Federation into the heart of the Middle East security complex and transformed Moscow's role from a major power external to the region into a major (provisional) pole in the MENA region possessing order-making capabilities on a par with the United States. Additionally, Iran's traditional position in the MERSC as a traditional member of the Gulf sub-complex has showed noticeable changes as a direct result of the Islamic Republic's overlay of the Syrian battlespace since 2012. Hence, Iran has become a member of the Levant sub-complex on top of its traditional membership in the Gulf sub-complex as previously defined by the RSC theoreticians. For all three actors, the Syrian conflict served as a geopolitical gateway to the Levant sub-complex and a potential launching-pad for each state to project geopolitical influence into the broader Middle East security complex. The above-cited empirical findings attest to important theoretical contributions this study has attempted to add to the extant literature on RSCs. The assertion is that although Buzan's and Wæver's seminal book "Regions and Powers" has made significant contributions to our understanding of the Middle East security complex, it is high time to make a necessary update of its theoretical and empirical contributions by identifying and analyzing the changes taking place in the period after the Syrian conflict. For one thing, the foreign and security policies of Russia, Iran, and Turkey as main players of the Syrian conflict and those of external powers such as the United States have witnesses tectonic shifts in tandem with the evolving trends and processes associated with the ongoing conflict in Syria.

As such, the theoretical contributions of this research are four-fold:

First, the study sought to revisit the concept of spill-over or neighboring effects by introducing the concept of "membership-overlapping" as the possibility for a state within a particular sub-complex in the MERSC to be a member of two or three sub-complexes at the same time. For instance, Iran can be simultaneously a member of the Persian Gulf sub-complex and a member (major pole) in the Levant because of, *inter alia*, its Syrian military overlay. The utilization of this concept provides us with a better understanding of the changing roles of the states in response to conflicts and the overall security dynamics transpiring in the Middle East security complex.

Second, since the Syrian conflict is seen as a primary source and a main incubator spillover or contagion effects in the MERSC, it has contributed to the

emergence of what can be referred to as ‘inter-subcomplex interconnectivity’. This concept is defined as an acute condition of anarchy under which the security and geopolitical dynamics within the sub-complexes of the Levant and the Persian Gulf and to a lesser extent the Maghreb become inextricably interconnected not merely because the security interdependence is more intense among the units inside such sub-complexes but primarily because factors such as overlaying and/or penetration of extra-regional actors, internal transformations and external transformations within such sub-complexes have rendered these dynamics as such. This phenomenon partially explains why despite various crises, conflicts and controversies in different parts of Middle East, from the Mediterranean to the Gulf, the MERSC has become increasingly interlinked and interconnected.

Third, the realities of the Syrian conflict bear testimony to the fact that while conflict-spreading used to and still continues to cross state borders—based on factors such as terrorism, refugee flows, arms transfers and the rebel groups operating in more than one country—the individual conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya involve conflict-contagion spreading not just *laterally* to neighboring fragile or failed states but also upward to stronger and larger regional powers, pulling in various regional powers (Iran, Turkey, Israeli, Saudi Arabia) and extra-regional powers (Russia and the United States) into this geopolitical battlefield in the MERSC. The trends and processes associated with the Syrian conflict contributed to the creation of a new power structure in the MERSC which was informed by the changes in the internal structure of the Middle East security complex as a result of tangible alterations in polarity, balance of power, anarchic structure and the patterns of amity and enmity among units. Fourth, the Syrian conflict caused major alterations in foreign policies of the involving countries. It revealed notable patterns of continuity and change in foreign policies of Iran, Russia and Turkey in the MENA region and occupied a central position in analyzing the patterns of amity and enmity between Turkey-Iran, Russia-Turkey, and Iran-Russia. The Syrian conflict and the ensuing security and geopolitical developments related to the conflict, i.e., the establishment of the Astana Peace Process and Sochi Agreements, impacted the relations of each of the trio actors towards the United States.

In order to gain a better understanding of these developments and dynamics, this study made concrete efforts to provide a theoretical framework for understanding of the foreign policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation with a close attention to the centrality of the case study of Syrian conflict. For example, drawing on a synthesis of structural realism and social constructivist approaches, this study introduced ‘forward defense plus omnibalancing’ as an apropos conceptual framework for understanding and explaining the foreign policy roles and orientations of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In a similar vein, the research argued that Turkey under the leadership of President Erdogan is pursuing a ‘multi-vectoral foreign policy’ in and outside the Middle East security complex at a time when the Syrian conflict laid bare Ankara’s strategic vulnerability towards the United States, which in turn carries considerable long-term consequences for the country’s geopolitical position.

No longer seen as a mere insulator state between the RSCs, the Turkish government has since 2016 demonstrated an assertive regionalized and militarized foreign policy predicated on the use of hard power and overseas military interventions in order to secure certain geopolitical and economic interests and cement its role as a regional hegemon possessing order-making capabilities from the Levant to the Maghreb sub-complex. It was also argued that the Syrian conflict is illustrative of Russia’s search for power, status and remedying its ontological insecurity vis-à-vis the West as the threatening ‘Other’. The Russian campaign in Syria since September 2015 can be construed as Moscow’s search for recognition of Russia by the United States as a great power which possesses order-making capabilities that are, in the Kremlin’s view, largely ignored by the West. All in all, while multiple actors of the Syrian imbroglio took advantage of the conflict to pursue divergent goals and interests, the primary motivation of Russia, Iran, and Turkey under the Astana Agreement was a form of *tethering* strategy. In fact, by exploiting the American disinclination to get itself heavily involved in the Syrian conflict, Turkey, Russia and Iran formed an adversarial alliance through which they managed, to this date, to hold their enmities in check. The Astana Peace Process as well as the Sochi Agreements are thus clear manifestations of such tethering activities aimed at producing ‘patterns of conflict

management' that can bring about a modicum of security order in Syria and the broader MENA region as an alternative to any western formula for conflict management.

As can be seen, the overriding rationale behind the utilization of the RSC theory and RPSF paradigm is that the former can best explain the patterns of amity and enmity in relations of Turkey, Russia, and Iran towards each other and towards other actors in light of the Syrian conflict whereas the latter can provide a solid explanation of the roles and orientations of each actor and account for the impact of them on the issue of order in the MERSC. In other words, a theoretical synthesis of neorealism and constructivism as theoretical underpinnings of the RSCT+RPSF model provides us with a holistic framework for analysis of the material as well as ideational dimensions of the impact of the Syrian conflict on the regional order in the MERSC. Therefore, one of the novelties of the research is that it uses a hybrid theoretical framework while hewing to *parsimony* in its theoretical approach and by *eclecticism* in its methodological framework. Such hybrid theoretical framework helps achieve cogent empirical conclusions in relations to the roles and orientations of the actors involved in the Syrian conflict and what kind of a security (dis)order the MENA region has been experiencing since 2012.

Seen in this context, this research indicated the Middle East security complex has since the onset of the cascading events related to the Arab uprisings, i.e., the Syrian conflict, has undergone five interlinked and at times paradoxical trends: 1) deep fragmentation, 2) polarization, 3) regionalization, 4) authoritarianism, 5) interconnectedness. In this context, the most defining events that significantly affect the security dynamics in the MERSC are as follows: 1) Russia's return to the Middle East as a result of the country's military presence in Syria, 2) the United States' downscaling of its security commitments in the MENA region, 3) the rise of 'bloc politics' as a consequence of the growing polarization and fragmentation of the MENA region, 4) the growing pattern of amity between Israel and a number of Arab states under the Abraham Accords, 5) securitization of Iranian threat. The claim is that these trends and dynamics in light of the United States' retrenchment strategies towards the Middle East since 2011 have provided both regional and extra-regional players with an opportunity to influence security and geopolitical dynamics as well as the distribution of power in the region. These factors have accelerated the competition for

hegemony in the Middle East which is taking place at three axes or regional blocs. 1) Iran and the Shia proxies under the so-called “axis of resistance”, 2) Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood axis including Qatar, 3) Saudi Arabia-UAE-Egypt-Bahrain-Jordan axis backed by the United States and Israel, all seeking to maintain the status-quo in the Middle East. It is important to note that Turkey and Iran have entered the path of normalization with the Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia. As the United States promotes burden-sharing for achieving security and order in the MERSC, it remains to be seen whether Ankara’s and Tehran’s march for détente with Riyadh will pay dividends. Nevertheless, given that the Arab states, especially, the UAE and Egypt are advocating for the return of Damascus to the Arab League, one can expect a situation in which the Syrian geopolitical theater becomes less of policy priority for Iran and Turkey and the two enter into new arena of geopolitical rivalry such as South Caucasus, Iraq and Afghanistan. The crux of the argument is that while Turkey and Iran may enter into full normalization of ties (de-securitization) with Saudi Arabia, the two may be inching towards a securitized atmosphere of geopolitical rivalry in the MERSC centered around the Caucasus, Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, much depends on the actual fate of the Syrian conflict and the future role of the United States in the MENA region.

It is also worthwhile to be mindful that the fate of Iran’s nuclear file is of critical importance in shaping security dynamics in the MERSC. If the Islamic Republic of Iran embarks on advancing its nuclear program to the threshold of actually developing a nuclear bomb, it could prompt a preemptive Israeli strike which could in turn drag the United States back into another war in the MENA region. As can be seen, there is a multiplicity of factors that can affect the security and geopolitical dynamics in the region in a much greater intensity than the way the Syrian conflict shaped the regional order in the post-Arab uprisings period. Nevertheless, all these variables indicate that according to the current geopolitical zeitgeist of region, the Middle East security complex is being transformed from within rather than from outside. In other words, the main drivers of change come from the region and its sub-complexes, emanating from the civil wars in Syria, Libya, Yemen and the interstate rivalries between Iran-Israel, Iran-Saudi Arabia, Iran-Turkey and Turkey-Saudi Arabia. Simply put, the



Middle East security complex is being transformed more often according to its own image rather than by the designs and images imposed by the United States.

In the final analysis, the Syrian conflict remains to be a microcosm of these very complex dynamics; it is the microcosm of the Middle Eastern chaos and disorder and the regional actors' ability to craft region-specific mechanisms of conflict management. The war in Syria continues to be a main locus of regional and extra regional power's quest for geopolitical expansion. More than anything else, it attested to Iran, Russia, and Turkey's quest for a restructuring of the global security and political system in a post-American Middle East. As the United States seeks to pivot away from the broader MENA region, blocs of influence composed of powerful regional actors and extra-regional powers define competing conceptions of regional order. In this complex geopolitical geometry of the Middle East, China and Russia will seize up on the American retrenchment to put a garment of reality to their own conception of Middle Eastern regional order. Yet, the MENA region is not being transformed into Pax-Americana, or Pax-Sinica or Pax-Russica. Rather, it is being transformed into *Pax Regionalica*.

## REFERENCES

Aarts, Paul. "The Middle East: A Region without Regionalism or the End of Exceptionalism", **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 20, No. 5, 2010, pp. 911-925.

Abdel-Aziz, Ghada Ahmed. "The Saudi-US Alliance Challenges and Resilience, 2011:2019", **Review of Economics and Political Science**, 2019, pp. 1-18.

Abedi, Afife and Elahe Kolaee. "Fluctuations in Iran-Russia Relations During the Past Four Decades", **Iran and the Caucasus**, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2020, pp. 216-232.

Acharya, Amitav. "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order", **Ethics and International Affairs**, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2017, pp. 271-285.

Acharya, Amitav. "The Emerging Regional Architecture of World Politics", **World Politics**, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2007, pp. 629-652.

Acharya, Amitav. **The End of American World Order**, Polity Press, 2014.

Açikalın, Şuay Nihan. "Understanding of Arab Spring with Chaos Theory: Uprising or Revolution", **Chaos Theory in Politics**, Ed. Santo Banerjee, Safika Sule Ercetin, and Ali Tekin, Springer, 2014.

Adamsky, Dmitry. "Christ-loving Diplomats: Russia Ecclesiastical Diplomacy in Syria", **Survival**, Vol. 61, No. 6, 2019, pp. 49-68.

Adamsky, Dmitry. "Russian Campaign in Syria: Change and Continuity in Strategic Culture", **Journal of Strategic Studies**, Vol. 43, No. 1, 2020, pp. 104-125.

Aghaie Joobani, Hossein and Mohammadhossein Daheshvar. "Deciphering Trump's "Maximum Pressure" Policy: The Enduring Challenge of Containing Iran", **New Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2020, pp. 22-44.

Aghaie Joobani, Hossein and Mostafa Mousavipour. "Russia, Turkey, and Iran: Moving Towards Strategic Synergy in the Middle East", **Strategic Analysis**, Vol. 39, No. 2, pp. 141-155.

Aghaie Joobani, Hossein and Umut Can Adısonmez. "Turkey's Volte-Face Politics, Understanding the AKP's Securitization Policy towards the Syrian Conflict", **New Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 42-62.

Aghaie, Kamran. "The Karbala Narrative: Shi'a Political Discourse in Modern Iran in the 1960s and 1970s", **Journal of Islamic Studies**, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2001, pp. 151-176.

Ahmadian, Hassan and Payam Mohseni. "Iran's Syria Strategy: The Evolution of Deterrence", **International Affairs**, Vol. 95, No. 2, 2019, pp. 341-364.

Akbarzadeh, Shahram and James Barry. "Iran and Turkey: Not Quite Enemies but Less Than Friends", **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 38, No. 4, 2016, pp. 980-995.

Akbarzadeh, Shahram and James Barry. "State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy", **British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol 43, No. 4, 2016, pp. 613-629.

Akçam, Taner. **From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and The Armenian Genocide**, Zed Books, London, 2005.

Akdevelioğlu, Atay and Yeşilyurt, Nuri. "Turkey's Middle East Policy under the JDP Rule", **The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations**, Vol. 40, 2009, pp. 40-69.

Aktürk, Şener. "Turkey's Grand Strategy as the Third Power: A Realist Proposal", **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2020, pp. 162-177.

Aktürk, Şener. "Turkish-Russian Relations after the Cold War (1992-2002)" **Turkish Studies**, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2006, pp. 337-364.

Al-Ghazzi, Omar. "We will Be Great Again: Historical Victimhood in Populist Discourse", **European Journal of Cultural Studies**, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2021, pp. 45-59.

Al-Ketbi, Ebtesam. "Contemporary Shifts in UAE Foreign Policy: From the Liberation of Kuwait to the Abraham Accords", **Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2020, pp. 1-8.

Al-Taqi, Samir and Raymond Hinnebusch. "As Seen from Damascus: The Transformation in Syrian-Turkish Relations", **Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity**, Ed. Raymond Hinnebusch, and Özlem Tür, Routledge, 2013.

Alam, Shah. "The Changing Paradigm of Iranian Foreign Policy under Khatami", **Strategic Analysis**, Vol. 24, No. 9, pp. 1629-1653.

Albrecht, Holger and Oliver Schlumberger. "Waiting for Godot: Regime Change Without Democratization in the Middle East", **International Political Science Review**, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2004, pp. 371-392.

Albrecht, Holger. "Does Coup-Proofing Work? Political-Military Relations in Authoritarian Regimes amid the Arab Uprisings", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2015, pp. 36-54.

Allison, Roy. "Russian Revisionism, Legal Discourse and the 'Rules-Based' International Order", **Europe-Asia Studies**, Vol. 72, No. 6, 2020, pp. 976-995.

Almomani, Hasan Mohammad. "Saudi Arabia's Geopolitical Interests", **Human and Social Sciences**, Vol. 46, No. 4, 2019, pp. 524-536.

Altunışık, Meliha and Özlem Tür. "From Distant Neighbors to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations", **Security Dialogue**, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2006, pp. 229-248.

Amirahmadi, Hooshang and Nader Entessar. **Iran and the Arab World**, Palgrave Macmillan, 1993.

Andre, Bank and Morten Valbjorn. "The New Arab Cold War: Rediscovering the Arab Dimension of Middle East Regional Politics", **Review of International Studies**, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2012, pp. 3-24.

Antonyan, Tatev. "Russia and Iran in the Syrian Crisis: Similar Aspirations, Different Approaches", **Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2018, pp. 337-348.

Aras, Bulent and Emirhan Yorulmazlar. "Turkey and Iran after the Arab Spring: Finding a Middle Ground", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2014, pp. 112-130.

Aras, Bulent and Fatih Ozbay. "Dances with Wolves: Russia, Iran and the Nuclear Issue", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2006, pp. 132-147.

Aras, Bulent and Rabia Karakaya Polat. "From Conflict to Cooperation: De-securitization of Turkey's Relations with Syria and Iran", **Security Dialogue**, Vol. 39, No. 5, 2008, pp. 495-515.

Aras, Bulent. and Emirhan Yorulmazlar. "Mideast Geopolitics: The Struggle for a New Order", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2017, pp. 57-69.

Ascher, William. **Forecasting: An Appraisal for Policy Makers and Planners**, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Ataç, C Akça. "Pax Ottomanica No More! The "Peace" Discourse in Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post-Davutoglu Era and the Prolonged Syrian Crisis", **Digest of Middle East Studies (DOMES)**, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2018, pp. 48-69.

Atmaca, Ayşe Ömür. "The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years", **All Azimuth**, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2014, pp. 19-34.

Averre, Derek and Lance Davies. "Russia, Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: The Case of Syria", **International Affairs**, Vol. 91, No. 4, 2015, pp. 813-834.

Aydın, Mustafa and Cihan Dizdaroğlu. "Levantine Challenges on Turkish Foreign Policy", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 15, No. 60, 2018, pp. 89-103.

Aydın, Mustafa. "Grand Strategizing in and for Turkish Foreign Policy: Lessons Learned from History, Geography and Practice", **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2020, pp. 203-226.

Ayoob, Mohammed. "From Regional System to Regional Society: Exploring Key Variables in the Construction of Regional Order", **Australian Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 53, No. 3, 1999, pp. 247-260.

Bahgat, Gawdat and Anoushiravan Ehteshami. "Iran's Defense Strategy: The Navy, Ballistic Missiles, and Cyberspace", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2017, pp. 89-103.

Bahirov, Galib and Ihsan Yilmaz. "The Rise of Transnationalism in International Relations: Evidence from Turkey's Relations from the European Union", **Australian Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 74, No. 2, 2020, pp. 165-184.

Balci, Ali and Murat Yeşiltaş. "Turkey's New Middle East Policy: The Case of the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Iraq's Neighboring Countries", **Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 24, No. 4, 2006, pp. 18-37.

Balci, Ali and Tuncay Kardaş. "Understanding the July 2016 Military Coup: The Contemporary Security Dilemma in Turkey", **Digest of the Middle East Studies (DOMES)**, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2019, pp. 144-163.

Barkey, Henri. "Turkish-Iranian Competition after the Arab Spring", **Survival**, Vol. 54, No. 6, 2012, pp. 139-162.

Barmin, Yuri. "Russian Energy Policy in the Middle East", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2017, pp. 125-136.

Barrinha, Andre. "The Ambitious Insulator: Revisiting Turkey's Position in Regional Security Complex Theory", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2014, pp. 165-182.

Barzegar, Kayhan. "Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy After Saddam", **The Washington Quarterly**, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 173-189,

Basrur, Rosecrance Rajesh. "Decentralizing Theory: Regional International Politics", **International Studies**, Vol. 43, No. 4, 2006, pp. 419-424.

Battaloglu, Cihat and Fadi Farasin. "From Democratization to Securitization: Post-Arab Spring Political Order in the Middle East", **Digest of Middle East Studies (DOMES)**, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 299-319.

Bayar, Tuğba. "Multiple Dualities: Seeking the Patterns in Iran's Foreign Policy", **All Azimuth**, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2019, pp. 37-54.

Baylis, John. Patricia Owens, And Steve Smith. **The Globalization of International Politics: An Introduction to International Relations**, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014.

Bell, Wendell. **Foundations of Futures Studies: History, Purposes, and Knowledge**, Routledge, 2003.

Benaim, Daniel, Geoffrey Kemp and Joan Polaschik. "The Future of US Engagement in the Middle East", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2019, pp. 5-30.

Bilge, Suat "An Analysis of Turkish-Russian Relations", **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1997, pp. 66-92.

Bilgin, Mert. "The State of Future in International Relations", **Futures**, Vol. 82, 2016, pp. 52-62.

Bilgin, Pinar and Ali Bilgiç. "Turkey's "New" Foreign Policy toward Eurasia", **Eurasian Geography and Economics**, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2011, pp. 173-195.

Bilgin, Pinar. "Whose 'Middle East'? Geopolitical Inventions and Practices of Security", **International Relations**, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2004, pp. 18-25.

Bilgin, Pinar. **Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective**, Routledge, 2004.

Birdal, Mehmet Sinan. "The Davutoğlu Doctrine: The Populist Construction of the Strategic Subject", **Turkey Reframed: Constituting Neoliberal Hegemony**, Ed. İsmet Akça, Ahmet Bekmen and Barış Alp Özden, Pluto Press, pp. 92-106.

Blagden, David and Patrick Porter. "Desert Shield of the Republic? A Realist Case for Abandoning the Middle East", **Security Studies**, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2021, pp. 5-48.

Blanchard, Jean-Marc and Colin Flint. "The Geopolitics of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative", **Geopolitics**, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2017, pp. 223-245.

Blanga, Udi. "Syria-Russia and the 'Arab Spring': A Reassessment", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2020, pp. 62-82.

Blank, Stephen. "Resets, Russia, and Iranian Proliferation", **Mediterranean Quarterly**, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2012, pp. 14-38.

Blank, Stephen. "Russian Strategy and Policy in the Middle East", **Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2014, pp. 9-23.

Bokhari, Bahman. "The Islamic Republic of Iran: Shi'a Politics and the Transformation of Islamic Law", **The Review of Faith and International Affairs**, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2012, pp. 35-44.

Bonham, Matthew and Heradstveit, Daniel. "What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran", **Middle East Journal**, Vol. 61, No. 3, 2007, pp. 421-440.



Bozdağlıoğlu, Yücel. “Constructivism and Identity Formation: An Interactive Approach”, **Uluslararası Hukuk ve Politika**, Vol. 3, No. 11, 2007, pp. 121-144.

Brands, Hall. “Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy”, **The Washington Quarterly**, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2016, pp. 101-125.

Brazys, Samuel and Diana Panke. “Push and Pull Forces in the UNGA: Analyzing Foreign Policy Change in the Context of International Norms”, **International Politics**, Vol. 54, No. 6, 2017, pp. 760-774.

Brent, Eng and Jose Ciro Martinez. “Struggling to Perform the State: The Politics of Bread in the Syrian Civil War”, **International Political Sociology**, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2017, pp. 130-147.

Brown, Leon Carl. **International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game (Princeton Studies on the Near East)**, Princeton University Press, 1984.

Brown, Seyom. “Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy: A Systemic Analysis”, **Small Wars & Insurgencies**, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2016, pp. 243-257.

Bryman, Alan. **Social Research Methods**, Oxford University Press, 2001.

Buzan, Barry and Ole Waever, **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Buzan, Barry and Thomas Diez. “The European Union and Turkey”, **Survival**, Vol. 41, No. 1, 1999, pp. 41-57.

Buzan, Barry, Ole Waever, and Jaap Wilde. **Security a New Framework for Analysis**, Lynne Rienner, 2013.

Buzan, Barry. "Regional Security Complex Theory in the Post-Cold War World". **Theories of New Regionalism**, Ed. Fredrik Söderbaum and Timothy Shaw, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 143.

Buzan, Barry. **People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era**, ECPR Press, 2016.

Byrne, David. **Complexity Theory and The Social Sciences: An Introduction**, Routledge, 1998.

Calabrese, John. "Turkey and Iran: Limits of a Stable Relationship", **British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1998, pp. 75-94.

Cannon, Brendon and Federico Donelli. "Asymmetric Alliances and High Polarity: Evaluating Regional Security Complexes in the Middle East and Horn of Africa", **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2019, pp. 1-20.

Çapan, Zeynep Gülsah and Ayşe Zarakol. "Turkey's Ambivalent Self: Ontological Insecurity in 'Kemalism' versus 'Erdoganism'", **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2019, pp. 263-282.

Carl, Brown. **International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game**, Princeton University Press, 1984.

Carpenter, Ted Galen and Malou Innocent, **Perilous Partners: The Benefits and Pitfalls of America's Alliances with Authoritarian Regimes**, Cato Institute, Washington DC, 2015.

Cas, Mudde "The Political Zeitgeist", **Government and Opposition**, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2004, pp. 542-563.

Çavuşoğlu, Esra. "Britain's Post-Colonial Foreign Policy Towards Persian Gulf Security (1971-1991): An Alternative Approach", **Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2018, pp. 37-64.

Çelik, Kadir Ertaç and Şafak Oğuz. "Conflict in Syria: Is It a Proxy Warfare?", **Journal of Crises and Political Research**, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2018, pp. 44-69.

Celik, Nihat, Oguz Dilek, and Emre Iseri. "Turkey's Regional Power-hood Within Regional (In)Security Complex: Transformation from a Conflict-ridden Environment into a Security Community", **Journal of Regional Security**, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 155-176.

Çelikpala, Mitat and İnan Rüma. "Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 16, No. 62, 2019, pp. 65-84.

Cengiz, Sinem. "Assessing the Astana Peace Process for Syria: Actors, Approaches, and Differences", **Contemporary Review of the Middle East**, Vol: 7, No: 2, 2020, pp. 200-214.

Cerny, Karel. "Great Middle Eastern Instability: Structural Roots and Uneven Modernization 1960-2012", **Journal of Historical Sociology**, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2018, pp. 53-71.

Chase-Donahue, Emilie and Steven Heydeman. "Sovereignty versus Sectarianism: Contested Norms and The Logic of Regional Conflict in the Greater Levant", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 15, No. 60, 2018, pp. 5-19.

Chebarkova, Elena. "Russia's Idea of the Multi-Polar World Order: Origins and Main Dimensions", **Post-Soviet Affairs**, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2017, pp. 217-234.

Chekov, Alexander D., et al. "War of Future: A View from Russia", **Survival**, Vol. 61, No. 6, 2019, pp. 25-48.

Chitsazian, Mohammad-Reza and Seyed Hossein Mousavian. "Iran's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: A Grand Strategy", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2020, pp. 99-114.

Chouchri, Nazli. "Forecasting in International Relations: Problems and Prospects", **International Interactions**, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1974, pp. 63-86.

Chubin, Shahram. "Is Iran a Military Threat?" **Survival**, Vol. 56, No. 2, 2014, pp. 65-88.

Copeland, Dale. "The Constructivist Challenge to Structural Realism", **International Security**, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2000, pp. 187-212.

Corbin, Juliet and Anselm Strauss. **Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory**, Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE Publications, 2008.

Coşkun, Bezen Balamir. "Turkey's Relations with Russia after the Failed Coup: A Friend in Need of a Friend Indeed?", **New Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 36-52.

Cunan, Anne. **The Social Construction of Russian Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests**, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.

Çviköz, Ünal. "Turkey's Relations with NATO & Russia: A Foreign Policy Impasse?", **Turkish Policy Quarterly**, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2018, pp. 39-50.

Dal, Emel Parlar and Emre Erşen. **Russia in the Changing International System**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Dal, Emel Parlar and Oğuz Gök. "Locating Turkey as a 'Rising Power' in the Changing International Order: An Introduction", **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 1-19.

Dal, Emel Parlar. "Impact of the Trans-nationalization of the Syrian Civil War on Turkey: Conflict Spillover Cases of ISIS and PYD-YPG/PKK", **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, Vol. 29, No. 4, 2017, pp. 1396-1420.

Dal, Emel Parlar. "The Transformation of Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Illusion or Awakening?", **Turkish Studies**, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 245-267.

Dalacoura, Katerina. "Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Power Projection and Post-Ideological Politics", **International Affairs**, Vol. 97, No. 4, 2021, pp. 1125-1142.

Dalia Dassa Kaye and Shira Efron, "Israel's Evolving Iran Policy", **Survival**, Vol. 62, No. 4, 2020, pp. 7-30.

Dannreuther, Roland. "Russia and the Arab Spring: Supporting the Counter Revolution", **Journal of European Integration**, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2015, pp. 77-94.

Daoudy, Marwa. "The Structure-Identity Nexus: Syria and Turkey's Collapse (2011)", **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2016, pp. 1074-1096.

David, Stephen. "Explaining Third World Alignment", **World Politics**, Vol. 43, No. 2, 1991, pp. 233-256.

Davutoğlu Ahmet. **Stratejik Derinlik**, İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2011

Davutoğlu, Ahmet. **Türkiye Merkez Ülke Olmalı**, Radikal [print edition], 2004.

Dehghani Firoozabadi, Seyed Jalal. "Emancipating Foreign Policy: Critical Theory and Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy [in Persian]", **The Iranian Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 2, No. 23, 2008, pp. 1-26.

Dehghani Firoozabadi, Seyed Jalal. Najmiyeh Pour-Esmaeili and Hossein Salimi. "Critical and Contemporary Review of Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory in

the Wake of Middle East Regional System”, **Geopolitics Quarterly**, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2021, pp. 135-164.

Dehshiri, Mohammad-Reza and Hossein Shahmoradi. “Resurgence of Geopolitical Rivalry in the MENA after the Arab Spring”, **Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 194-215.

Del-Sarto, Raffaella. “Contentious Borders in the Middle East and North Africa: Context and Concepts”, **International Affairs**, Vol. 93, No. 4, 2017, pp. 767-787.

Della Porta, Donatella. **Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective**, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Demir, Ismail. “Transformation of the Turkish Defense Industry: The Story and Rationale of the Great Rise”, **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 22, No.3, 2020, pp. 17-40.

Derek, Averre. **Russia, the Middle East and the Conflict in Syria**, Ed. Roger Kanet, Routledge Handbook of Russian Security, 2019.

Deyermond, Ruth. “The Uses of Sovereignty in Twenty-First Century Russian Foreign Policy”, **Europe-Asia Studies**, Vol. 68, No. 6, 2016, pp. 957-984.

Diez, Thomas. “Turkey, The European Union and Security Complexes Revisited”, **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2005, pp. 167-180.

Donelli, Federico and Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi. “Turkey’s Changing Engagement with the Global South”, **International Affairs**, Vol. 97, No. 2, 2021, pp. 1105-1124.

Donelli, Federico. “Historical Reflection on Neo-Ottoman Weltanschauung: Between Identity-Making and Foreign Policy”, **The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies**, No. 1, pp. 55-65.

Dorsey, James. **China and The Middle East: Venturing into the Maelstrom**, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2019.

Drakoularakos, Stavros. "Turkey and Erdogan's Rising Lausanne Syndrome", **Digest of Middle East Studies (DOMES)**, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2021, pp. 22-33.

Duner, Bertil. "Proxy Intervention in Civil Wars", **Journal of Peace Research**, Vol. 18, No. 4, 1981, pp. 353-361.

Dzutsati, Valery and Emil Aslan Souleimanov. "Russia's Syria War: A Strategic Trap?" **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2018, pp. 42-50.

Ebrahimi, Mansoureh, Mir-Mohamadali Seyed-Jalili, and Kamaruzaman Yusoff. "Economic, Political and Strategic Issues in Iran-Turkey Relations, (2002-2015)", **Contemporary Review of the Middle East**, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2017, pp. 67-83.

Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Mahjoob Zweiri. **Iran's Foreign Policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad**, Ithaca Press, 2008.

Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Raymond Hinnebusch. "Foreign Policy Making in the Middle East: Complex Realism", **International Relations of the Middle East**, Ed. Louise Fawcett, Oxford University Press, 2016.

Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Raymond Hinnebusch. **The Foreign Policy of Middle East States**, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014.

Ehteshami, Anoushiravan. "Middle East Middle Powers: Regional Role, International Impact", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 11, No. 42, 2014, pp. 29-49.

Ejdus, Filip. "Not a Heap of Stones, Material Environments and Ontological Security in International Relations", **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2017, pp. 23-43.

El-Dessouki, Ayman and Ola Rafik Mansour. "Small States and Strategic Hedging: The United Arab States' Policy towards Iran", **Review of Economics and Political Science**, 2020, pp. 1-14.

Elik, Süleyman. “The Arab Spring and Turkish-Iranian Relations, 2011-2016”, **Turkey’s Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters after the Arab Spring**, Ed. Hüseyin Işıksal and Oğuzhan Göksel, Springer, 2018.

Elik, Süleyman. **Iran-Turkey Relations, 1979-2011: Conceptualizing the Dynamics of Politics and Security in Middle-Power States**, Routledge, 2012.

Erdağ, Ramazan. **Libya in the Arab Spring: From Revolution to Insecurity**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Erlich, Reese. **Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect**, Prometheus, 2016.

Erşen, Emre. “The Transatlantic Dimension of Turkey’s Strategic Rapprochement with Russia: The Turkish Perspective”, **Turkey and Transatlantic Relations**, Ed. Sasha Toperic and Aylin Ünver Noi, Center for Transatlantic Relations SAIS, 2017, pp. 205-206.

Eslami, Mohammad and Alena-Vysotskaya Guedes-Vieira. “Iran’s Strategic Culture: The ‘Revolutionary’ and ‘Moderation’ Narratives on the Ballistic Missile Program”, **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2020, pp. 312-328.

Faraji, Mohammad-Reza and Vahid Ranjbar-heydari. “Middle East Security Order in a Complex Situation”, **Quarterly Journal of Strategic Studies of Public Policy**, Vol. 10, No. 35, 2020, pp. 254-275.

Fawcett, Louise. “States and Sovereignty in the Middle East: Myths and Realities”, **International Affairs**, Vol. 93, No. 4, 2017, pp. 789- 807.

Flanagan, Stephen, et al. **Turkey’s Nationalist Course: Implications for the US-Turkish Strategic Partnership and the US Army**, Rand Corporation, 2020.



Flockhart, Trine. "The Problem of Change in Constructivist theory: Ontological security Seeking and Agent Motivation", **Review of International Studies**, Vol. 42, No. 5, 2016, pp. 799-820.

Frazier, Derrick and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll. "Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order Within Regional Security Complexes", **European Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2010, p. 731-753.

Frazier, Derrick and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll. **Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework**, Routledge, 2012.

Freedman, Robert. "From Khrushchev and Brezhnev to Putin: Has Moscow's Policy in the Middle East Come Full Circle", **Contemporary Review of the Middle East**, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 102-115.

Friedman, Brandon. "US Engagement and Disengagement in the Middle East: Paradox and Perception", **Strategic Assessment**, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2021, pp. 136-153.

Furtig, Henner. **Regional Powers in the Middle East: New Constellations after the Arab Revolts**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Gani, J. K. **The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations: Conflict and Cooperation**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Garfinkle, Adam. "The Geopolitical Frame in the Contemporary Middle East", **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2015, pp. 530-540.

Gasparetto, Alberto. "Iranian-Turkish Relations in a Changing Middle East", **International Studies**, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2018, pp. 83-98.

Gater-Smith, Philip. "Asia and the Saudi-Iranian "Cold War": the Desirability of Non-Alignment, the Prospects for Détente, and the Chances of an Asian Peace Initiative",

**Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 14, No.2, 2020, pp. 159-178.

Gause, Gregory. "Should We Stay or Should We Go? The United States and the Middle East", **Survival**, Vol. 61, No. 5, 2019, pp. 7-24.

Gerges, Fawaz. **The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World**, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2014.

Giddens, Anthony. **Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age**, Stanford University Press, 1991.

Giddens, Anthony. **The Consequences of Modernity**, Stanford University Press, 1991.

Gilpin, Robert. **War and Change in World Politics**, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Gleick, James. **Chaos: Making a New Science**, Penguin Books, 2008.

Goodarzi, Jubin. "Iran and the Syrian Civil War", **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli, Routledge, 2019.

Götz, Elias. "Putin, the State and War: The Causes of Russia's Near Abroad Assertion Revisited", **International Studies Review**, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2016, p. 228-253.

Graham, Cheryl. "To Deter or not to Deter: Applying Historical Lessons to the Iranian Nuclear Challenge", **Strategic Studies Quarterly**, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2011, pp. 50-66.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Quaderni del Carcere*, vol. 1, *Quaderni 1-5* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1977), 311. English translation quoted from **Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci**, ed. Trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1971.

Grant, Jonathan. "Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War", **The Journal of Military History**, Vol. 68, No. 4, 2004, pp. 1271-1272.

Grasimov, Vallery. "The Value of Science is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Thinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations", **Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier (Military Review)**, Vol. 96, 2013, pp. 23-29.

Greenstock, Jeremy. "Is This Russia's Moment in the Middle East?", **Asian Affairs**, Vol. 48, No. 3, 2017, pp. 419-427.

Grix, Jonathan. **Demystifying Post-Graduate Research: From MA to PhD**, University of Birmingham Press, 2001.

Groh, Tyrone. **Proxy War: The Least Bad Option**, Stanford University Press, 2019.

Gulmez, Didem Buhari. "The Resilience of U.S.-Turkey Alliance: Divergent Threat Perceptions and Worldviews", **Contemporary Politics**, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2020, pp. 475-492,

Gürdeniz, Cem. **Mavi Vatan Yazilari**, Kirmizi Kedi, 2018.

Güvenç, Serhat and Soli Özal. "U.S.-Turkey Relations Since WWII: From Alliance to Transactionalism", **The Oxford Handbook of Turkish Politics**, Ed. Güneş Murat Tezcür, Oxford University Press, 2020.

Haass, Richard. **World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order**, Penguin Press, 2018.

Hafner-Burton, Emilie M., Stephen Haggard, David A. Lake and David G. Victor. "The Behavioral Revolution and International Relations", **International Organization**, Vol. 71, 2017, pp. 1-31.

Hagström, Linus. "Great Power Narcissism and Ontological (In) Security, The Narrative Mediation of Greatness and Weakness in International Politics", **International Studies Quarterly**, Vol. 65, No. 2, 2021, pp. 331-342.

Halliday, Fred. **The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology**, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Hamdan, Ali Nehme. "Breaker of Barriers? Notes on the Geopolitics of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham", **Geopolitics**, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2016, pp. 605-627.

Han, Ahmet. "Paradise Lost: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy and the Case of Turkish-Syrian Relations", **Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity**, Ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür, Routledge, 2013.

Han, Jianwei and Hassan Hakimian. "The Regional Security Complex in the Persian Gulf: The Contours of Iran's GCC Policy", **Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2019, pp. 493-508.

Hansen, Flemming Splidsboel. "Russia's Relations with the West: Ontological Security Through Conflict", **Contemporary Politics**, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2016, pp. 359-375.

Harutyunyan, Aghavni. "China and Israel: Evolving Relationships within the Belt and Road Initiative", **Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2020, pp. 410-429.

Hetou, Ghaidaa. **The Syrian Conflict: The Role of Russia, Iran and the US in a Global Crisis**, Routledge, 2019.

Heydeman, Steven. "Explaining the Arab Uprisings: Transformations in Comparative Perspectives", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2016, pp. 192-204.

Hill, Fiona and Omer Taspinar. "Turkey and Russia: Axis of the Excluded?", **Survival**, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2006, pp. 81-92.

Hills, Alice. "Managing the Interface: Regional Security and Substate Politics in Africa", **African Security**, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 92-114.

Hinnebusch, Raymond and Adham Saouli. **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Routledge, 2019.

Hinnebusch, Raymond. "Failed Regional Hegemons: The Case of the Middle East's Regional Powers", **Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations**, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2013, pp. 75-88.

Hinnebusch, Raymond. "Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar al Assad", **Ortadoğu Etütleri**, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 7-26.

Hinnebusch, Raymond. "The Arab Uprisings and the MENA Regional States System", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 11, No. 42, 2014, pp. 7-27.

Hinnebusch, Raymond. "Understanding Regime Divergence in the Post-Uprising Arab States", **Journal of Historical Sociology**, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2018, pp. 39-52.

Hiro, Dilip. **Cold War in The Islamic World: Saudi Arabia and Iran and The Struggle for Supremacy**, Oxford University Press, 2019.

Holsti, Kalevi. **A Pioneer in International Relations Theory, Foreign Policy Analysis, History of International Order, and Security Studies**, Springer, 2016.

Hubel, Helmut, Markus Kaim, and Oliver Lembcke. "The United States in Regional Orders: "Pax-Americana" as an Analytic Concept", **American Studies**, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2001, pp. 593-608.

Huber, Daniela and Eckart Woertz. "Resilience, Conflict and Areas of Limited Statehood in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria", **Democratization**, 2021, pp. 1261-1279.

Hudson, Michael. "Geopolitical Shifts: Asia Rising, America Declining in the Middle East?", **Contemporary Arab Affairs**, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2013, pp. 458-466.

Hughes, Geraint. "Syria and Perils of Proxy Warfare", **Small Wars & Insurgencies**, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2014, pp. 522-538.

Hughes, Geraint. **My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in international Politics**, Sussex Academic Press, Eastbourne, 2014.

Hunter, Shireen. "Iran and Russia: Strategic Partnership or a Fool's Bargain", **Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era**, Shireen Hunter, Praeger, 2010.

Ikenberry, John and Daniel Nexon. "Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders", **Security Studies**, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2019, pp. 395-421.

Ikenberry, John. **After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars**, Princeton University Press, 2001.

Imai, Kohei. "Rethinking the Insulator State: Turkey's Border Security and the Syrian Civil War", **Eurasia Border Review**, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2017, pp. 19-29.

Innes, Michael. **Making Sense of Proxy Wars: States, Surrogates and the Use of Force**. Potomac Books, 2012.

Issaev, Leonid. "Russia and the New Middle East", **Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies**, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2021, pp. 423-442.

Isyar, Omer Goksel. "An Analysis of American-Turkish Relations from 1945 to 2004: Initiatives and Reactions in Turkish Foreign Policy", **Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations**, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2005, pp. 21-52.

Jarzabek, Jaroslaw. "The Theory of Regional Security Complexes in the Middle Eastern Dimension", **Wschodnioznawstwo**, No. 12, 2018, pp. 155-170.

Jeremy, Greenstock. "Is This Russia's Moment in the Middle East?" **Asian Affairs**, Vol. 48, No.3, 2018, pp. 419–427.

Jervis, Robert. **System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life**, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1997.

Joyce, Renanah and Becca Wasser. "All About Access: Solving America's Force Posture Puzzle", **The Washington Quarterly**, Vol. 44, No. 3, 2021, pp. 45-67.

Juneau, Thomas, et al. "Neoclassical Realism: Domestic Politics, Systemic Pressures, and the Impact on Foreign Policy since the Arab Spring", **Routledge Handbook of International Relations in the Middle East**, Ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh, Routledge, 2019.

Juneau, Thomas. "Iran's Costly Intervention", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2020, pp. 26-44.

Kabalan, Marwan. "The Al-Ula GCC Summit: An End to Gulf Rivalry or Just Another Truce?", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2021, pp. 51-59.

Kadan, Tavfik. "The Formulation of the Blue Homeland Doctrine", **Belt and Road Initiative Quarterly (BRIQ)**, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2021, pp. 36-50.

Kadioğlu, Aytaç. "International Peace Efforts in the Syrian Civil War: The 'Inevitable' Failure?", **Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2020, pp. 13-43.

Kaldor, Mary. **New & Old Wars: Organized Violence in Global Era**, Polity Press, 2012.

Kaliber, Alper and Esra Kaliber. "From De-Europeanization to Anti-Western Populism: Turkish Foreign Policy in Flux", **The International Spectator**, Vol. 54, No. 4, 2019, pp. 1-16.

Karacasulu, Nülüfer and Aşkar Karakır, İrem. “Iran-Turkey Relations in the 2000s: Pragmatic Rapprochement”, **Ege Academic Review**, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2011, pp. 111-119.

Karademir, Burcu Sari. “A Dance of Entanglement: The US-Turkish Relations in the Context of the Syrian Conflict”, **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 16, No. 62, 2019, pp. 27-43.

Karakuş, Girayalp. “Iran Real Politics and Political Motivation of Shiite”, **Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University Journal of Social Science**, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2020, pp. 110-124.

Kasapoğlu, Can. “Turkey’s Burgeoning Defense Technological and industrial Base and Expeditionary Military Policy”, **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 115-130.

Katagiri, Noriyuki. “ISIL, Insurgent Strategies for Statehood, and the Challenge for Security Studies”, **Small Wars & Insurgencies**, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2015, pp. 542-556.

Katz, Mark N. “Russian-Iranian Relations in the Obama Era”, **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2010, pp. 62-69.

Katz, Mark N. “Russian-Iranian Relations in the Putin Era”, **Demokratizatsiya**, Vol. 10, 2002, pp. 69-81.

Kausch, Kristina. “Competitive Multipolarity in the Middle East”, **Italian Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 50, No. 3, 2015, pp. 1-15.

Kazharski, Aliaksei. “Civilizations as Ontological Security?” **Problems of Post-Communism**, Vol. 67, No. 1, 2020, pp. 24-36.

Kelly, Robert. “Security Theory in the New Regionalism”, **International Studies Review**, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2007, pp. 197-229.



Keshk, Ashraf Mohammed. "Iranian-Russian Rapprochement and Its Impact on Regional Security", **The Syrian Crisis: Effects on the Regional and International Relations**, Ed. Dania Koleilat Khatib, Springer, 2021.

Khalaji, Mehdi. "Iran's Regime of Religion", **Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 65, No. 1, 2011, pp. 131-147.

Khatib, Dania Koleilat. "Iran and 'Exporting' the Revolution: The Syrian Case", **Perspectives on Developments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region**, Ed. Khazal Abdullah Auzer, et al, The Springer, 2021.

Khatibzadeh, Saeed. "HOPE for a New Regional Security Architecture: Towards a Hormuz Community", **The International Spectator**, Vol. 26, No. 20, 2020, pp.1-31.

Khoshnood, Ardavan. "The Role of the Qods Force in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran", **Central European Journal of International and Security Studies**, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2020, pp. 4-33.

Kinnvall, Catarina and Jennifer Mitzen. "Anxiety, Fear and Ontological Security in World Politics: Thinking with and Beyond Giddens", **International Theory**, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2020, pp. 240-256.

Kinnvall, Catarina, "Feeling Ontologically (in)secure: States, Traumas and the Governing of Gendered Space", **Cooperation and Conflict**, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2016, pp. 90-108.

Kinnvall, Catarina, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security", **Political Psychology**, Vol. 25, No. 5, 2004, pp. 741-767.

Kirişçi, Kemal. "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State", **New Perspectives on Turkey**, Vol. 40, 2009, pp. 29-56.

Kopalyan, Nerses. **World Political System After Polarity**, Routledge, 2017.

Korolev, Alexander. “Bringing Geopolitics Back In: Russia’s Foreign Policy and Its Relations with the Post-Soviet Space”, **International Studies Review**, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2015, pp. 298-312.

Korotayev, Andrey. “Russia’s Policy Towards the Middle East: The Case of Yemen”, **The International Spectator**, Vol. 55, No. 3 ,2020, pp. 132-147.

Kösebalaban, Hasan. “Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy Toward Syria: The Return of Securitization”, **Middle East Critique**, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2020. pp. 335-344.

Köstem, Seçkin. “Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria: Geopolitical Alignment with Limits”, **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, ,2020, pp. 1-23.

Kozhanov, Nikolay. “From Russia’s Military Development in Syria to the Astana Process”, **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli, Routledge, 2019.

Kozhanov, Nikolay. “Iran and Russia: Between Pragmatism and Possibilities of a Strategic Alliance”, **Foreign Policy of Iran under President Hassan Rouhani’s First Team (2013-2017)**, Ed. Luciano Zaccara, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Kozhanov, Nikolay. “Russia-GCC Economic Relations: When Quality Matters More Than Quantity”, **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2021, pp. 183-203.

Kramer, David. “Resetting U.S.-Russian Relations: It Takes Two”, **The Washington Quarterly**, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2010, pp. 61-79.

Krasna, Joshua S. “It’s Complicated: Geopolitical and Strategic Dynamics in the Contemporary Middle East”, **Journal of World Affairs**, Vol. 63, No. 1, 2019, pp. 64-79.

Krieg, Andreas and Jean-Marc Rickli. "Surrogate Warfare: The Art of War in the 21 Century?" **Defense Studies**, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2018, pp. 113-130.

Krieg, Andreas and Jean-Marc Rickli. **Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century**, Georgetown University Press, 2019.

Krieg, Andreas. "Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and the US Foreign Policy in the Middle East", **International Affairs**, Vol. 92, No. 1, 2016, pp. 97-113.

Krieg, Andreas. "Trump and the Middle East, 'Barking Dogs Seldom Bite'", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2017, pp. 139-158.

Kristin, Bakke, Brian Greenhill and Michael Ward. "The Perils of Policy by P-Value: Predicting Civil Conflicts", **Journal of Peace Research**, Vol. 47, No. 4, 2010, pp. 363-375.

Kumral, Mehmet Akif and Özlem Tür, "Paradoxes in Turkey's Syria Policy: Analyzing the Critical Episode of Agenda Building", **New Perspectives on Turkey**, No. 55, 2016, pp. 107-132.

Kumral, Mehmet Akif. **Exploring Emotions in Turkey-Iran Relations: Effective Politics of Partnership and Rivalry**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Küntzel, Matthias. "Obama's New Iran Policy: Is America Drifting Towards Appeasement?", **Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2015, pp. 25-36.

Kupchan, Charles. **No One's World: The West, The Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn**, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Kurşun, Ali Murat, Emel Parlar Dal, and Özden Zeynep Oktav. **Violent Non-State Actors and the Syrian Civil War: The ISIS and YPG Cases**, Springer International Publishing, 2018.

Kutlay, Mustafa and Ziya Öniş. "Turkey's Foreign policy in a Post-Western Order: Strategic Autonomy or New Forms of Dependence", **International Affairs**, Vol. 97, No. 4, 2021, pp. 1085-1104.

Lake, David A. and Patrick M. Morgan. **Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World**, Penn State Press, 1997.

Langan, Mark. "Virtuous Power Turkey in sub-Saharan Africa: the 'Neo-Ottoman' Challenge to the European Union", **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 38, No. 6, 2017, pp. 1399-1414.

Lapenko, Marina, Ahmad Naser Vakhshiteh and Aigerim Aigera Ospanova. "Moscow-Ankara-Tehran: A Tripartite Tactical Alliance in the Syrian Crisis", **Central Asia & the Caucasus**, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2020, p7-19.

Laraulle, Merlene and Sebastien Peyrouse. **Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Challenged of Economic Development**, Routledge, 2013.

Layne, Christopher. "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing, International Security", **International Security**, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1997, pp. 86-124.

Levaggi, Ariel Gonzalez. **Confrontational and Cooperative Regional Orders: Managing Regional Security in World Politics**, Routledge, 2020.

Lewis, David. **Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order**, Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

Löfflmann, George. "From the Obama Doctrine to America First: The Erosion of the Washington Consensus on Grand Strategy", **International Politics**, Vol. 58, No. 1, 2021, pp. 588-605.

Loveman, Chris. "Assessing the Phenomenon of Proxy Intervention", **Conflict, Security & Development**, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2002, pp. 29-48.

Lu, Lingyu and Cameron Thies. "War, Rivalry, and State Building", **Political Research Quarterly**, Vol. 66, No. 2, pp. 239-253.

Lucas, Edward. **The New Cold War: How the Kremlin menaces both Russia and the West**, London: Bloomsbury, 2008.

Luciano Zaccara. "Iran's Permanent Quest for Regional Power Status", **Diplomatic Strategies of Nations in The Global South: The Search for Leadership**, Ed. Jacqueline Anne Braveboy-Wagner, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Lukyanov, Fyodor. "Russian Dilemmas in a Multipolar World", **Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 63, No. 2, 2010, pp. 19-32.

Lukyanov, Grigory and Ruslan Mamedov. "Russia and Turkey: Approaches to Regional Security in the Middle East", **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2018, pp. 51-71.

Lynch, Marc and Curtis Ryan. "The Arab Uprisings and International Relations Theory", **Political Science & Politics**, Vol. 50, No. 3, 2017, pp. 643-646.

Mabon, Simon. "Muting the Trumpets of Sabotage: Saudi Arabia, the US and the Quest to Securitize Iran", **British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 45, No. 5, pp. 742-759.

MacGillivray, Iain. "The Paradox of Turkish-Iranian Relations in the Syrian Crisis", **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2020, pp. 1-21.

Mahmadoy, Hoshimjon and Muhammad-Yaseen Naseem. "Russia-Iran Defense Cooperation: Past and Present", **The Journal of Iranian Studies**, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2018, pp. 91-119.

Maltby, Tomas. "Between Amity, Enmity and Europeanization: EU Energy Security Policy and the Example of Bulgaria's Russian Energy Dependence", **Europe-Asia Studies**, Vo. 67, No. 5, 2015, pp. 809-830.

Mankoff, Jeffrey. **Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics**, Rowman and Littlefield, 2009.

Martin, Lenore. "Analyzing a Tumultuous Relationship: Turkey and the US in the Middle East", **Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2019, pp. 262-277.

Marzo, Pietro and Francesco Cavatorta. "An Exceptional Context for a Debate on International Relations? Toward a Synthetic Approach to the Study of the MENA's International Politics", **The Routledge Handbook to the Middle East and States System**, Ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Jasmine Gani, Routledge, 2020.

Masumova, Nigyer. "Russia and Turkey: Resetting Economic Partnership", **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 33-50.

Matar, Linda and Ali Kadri. **Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

McDonald, Matt and Paul Williams. **Security Studies: An Introduction**, Routledge, 2018.

McManus, Roseanne. "Crazy Like a Fox? Are Leaders with Reputations for Madness More Successful at International Coercion?" **British Journal of Political Science**, Vol. 51, No. 1, 2021, pp. 275-293.

McManus, Roseanne. "Revisiting the Madman Theory: Evaluating the Impact of Different Forms of Perceived Madness in Coercive Bargaining", **Security Studies**, Vol. 28, No. 5, 2019, pp. 976-1009.

Mehtap Yeşilorman. "Chaos Theory and Modern Jurisprudent: An Essay on Deconstruction of Parameters' Order and Linearity", **Hcettepe HDF**, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2017, pp. 7-32.

Meier, Daniel. "In-Between Spaces in the Levant: Conceptual Reflections", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2020, pp. 273-288.

Meininghaus, Esther and Carina Schlüsing. "War in Syria: The Trans-local Dimension of Fighter Mobilization", **Small Wars & Insurgencies**, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2020, pp. 475-510.

Mendelsohn, Barak. "Why Do Armed Nonstate Groups Use Foreign Volunteers? The Case of the Islamic State", **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, Vol. 64, No. 1, 2020, pp. 111-130.

Meyer, M.S. "Russia and the Islamic World", **Russian Studies in History**, Vol. 57, No. 2, 2018, pp. 103-124.

Michnik, Wojciech. "Russia's Role in the Middle East, A Grand Plan or Opportunism?" **Insight Turkey**, No. 1, 2019, pp. 64-65.

Milan, Francesco and Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi. "Armed, Unmanned, and in High Demand: The Drivers Behind Combat Drones Proliferation in the Middle East", **Small Wars and Insurgencies**, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2020, pp. 730-750.

Milani, Abbas. "Iran's Paradoxical Regime", **Journal of Democracy**, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2015, pp. 52-60.

Mirza, Muhammad-Nadeem, et al. "Structural Sources of Saudi-Iran Rivalry and Competition for the Sphere of Influence", **SAGE Open**, Vol. 1, No. 9, 2021, pp-1-9.

Mitzen, Jennifer. "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma", **European Journal of International Relations**, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 341-370.

Mohammad-Nia, Mahdi. "Discourse and Identity in Iran's Foreign Policy", **Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2012, pp. 29-64.

Monteiro, Nuno. "Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful", **International Security** Vol. 36, No. 3, 2012, pp. 9-40.

Morozova, Natalia. "From Ontological Insecurity to Counter-Hegemony: Russia's Post-Soviet Engagement with Geopolitics and Eurasianism", **Fear and Insecurity in Europe: The Return to Realism?**, Ed. Roberto Belloni, Vincent Della Sala and Paul Viotti, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Morris, Justin. "Libya and Syria: R2P and the Specter of the Swinging Pendulum", **International Affairs**, Vol. 89, No. 5, 2013, pp. 1265-1283.

Mumford, Andrew. "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict", **The RUSI Journal**, Vol. 158, No. 2, 2013, pp. 40-46.

Murariu, Mihai and George Anglitoiu. "Anatolian Security and Neo-Ottomanism: Turkey's intervention in Syria", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2020, pp. 132-147.

Namli, Kaan and Fadi Farasin. "ASTANA: The Rise of a New Alliance and its Implications for International Relations", **The Syrian Crisis: Effects on the Regional and international Relations**, Ed. Dania Koleilat Khatib, Springer, 2021, pp. 131-132.

Narozhna, Tanya. "Revisiting the Causes of Russian Foreign Policy Changes", **Central European Journal of International Security Studies**, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2021, pp. 56-81.



Naumkin, Vitaly. "The Russian-Iranian Relations: Present Status and Prospects for the Future", **Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1998, pp. 1-9.

Niblock, Tim. "China and the Middle East: A Global Strategy Where the Middle East Has a Significant but Limited Place", **Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 14, No. 4, 2020, pp. 481-504.

Nuruzzaman, Mohammad. "President Trump's 'Maximum Pressure' Campaign and Iran's Endgame", **Strategic Analysis**, Vol. 44, No. 6, 2020, pp. 570-582.

Nye, Joseph. "The Rise and Fall of American Hegemony from Wilson to Trump", **International Affairs**, Vol. 95, No. 1, 2019, pp. 63-80.

Nymalm, Nicola and Oliver Turner. "Morality and Progress: IR Narratives on International Revisionism and the Status Quo", **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2019, pp. 407-428.

Oğuz, Şafak and Kadir Ertaç Çelik. "Conflict in Syria: Is It a Proxy Warfare?", **ANKASAM, UluslararasıKriz ve Siyaset Arastirmalari Dergisi**, Vol. 2. No. 2, 2018, pp. 44-69.

Oğuzlu, Tarik. "Middle Easternization of Turkey's Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Dissociate from the West?", **Turkish Studies**, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2008, pp. 3-20.

Olson, Robert. "Turkey's Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council from 2003 to 2007: New Paradigms?" **Mediterranean Quarterly**, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2008, pp. 68-87.

Omelicheva, Mariya. "Russia's Foreign Policy toward Iran: A Critical Geopolitics Perspective", **Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies**, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2012, pp. 331-344.

Öniş, Ziya and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, “Turkey and Russia in a Shifting Global Order: Cooperation, Conflict and Asymmetric Interdependence in a Turbulent Region”, **Third Word Quarterly**, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 71-95.

Ostovar, Afshon. “Sectarianism and Iranian Foreign Policy”, **Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East**, Ed. Frederic Wehrey, Oxford University Press, 2017.

Ostovar, Afshon. “The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran’s Way of War”, **Security Studies**, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2018, pp. 159-188.

Ostovar, Afshon. **Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards**, Oxford University Press, 2016.

Ovalı, Şevket and İlkin Özdikmenli. “Ideologies and the Western Question in Turkish Foreign Policy: A Neo-Classical Realist Perspective”, **All-Azimuth**, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2019, pp. 105-126.

Özdamar, Özgür and Nihat Ali Özcan. “Uneasy Neighbors: Turkish-Iranian Relations Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution”, **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2010, pp. 101-117.

Özşahin, Mustafa Cüneyt. “Qatar-Turkey Rapprochement: Challenging the Regional Status Quo in the Gulf Security Sub-Complex”, **The 2017 Gulf Crisis: An Interdisciplinary Approach**, Ed. Mahjoob Zweiri, et al., Springer, 2021, p. 35-45.

Oztig, Lacin Idil. “Syria and Turkey: Border-Security Priorities”, **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2019, pp. 117-126.

Park, Bill. “Explaining Turkey’s Reaction to the September 2017 Independence Referendum in the KRG: Final Divorce or Relationship Reset?” **Ethnopolitics**, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2017, pp. 46-60.

Park, Bill. "Turkey's Isolated Stance: An Ally No More, or Just the Usual Turbulence", **International Affairs**, Vol. 91, No. 3, 2015, pp. 581-600.

Pedersen, Patrick Steen and Olivier Walther. "Rebel Fragmentation in Syria's Civil War", **Small Wars & Insurgencies**, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2020, pp. 445-474.

Phillips, Andrew. "The Islamic State's Challenge to International Order", **Australian Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 68, No. 5, 2014, pp. 495-498.

Phillips, Christopher and Morten Valbjorn. "What is in a Name? The Role of (Different) Identities in Multiple Proxy Wars in Syria", **Small Wars & Insurgencies**, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2018, pp. 414-433.

Phillips, Christopher. "The International and Regional Battle for Syria", **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli, Routledge, 2019.

Phillips, Christopher. **The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the Middle East**, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2016.

Pieper, Moritz. "Russkiy Mir: The Geopolitics of Russian Compatriots Abroad", **Geopolitics**, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2020, pp. 756-779.

Pieper, Moritz. "Turkish Foreign Policy Toward the Iranian Nuclear Program: In Search of a New Middle East Order after the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War", **Turkish Journal of International Relations**, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 81-92.

Piotrowski, Marcin Andrzej. "Mosaic Defense: Iran's Hybrid Warfare in Syria 2011-2016", **The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs**, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2017, pp. 18-68.

Pisciotta, Barbara. "Russian Revisionism in the Putin Era, an Overview of Post-Communist Military Interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria", **Italian Political Science Review**, Vol. 50, No. 1, pp. 87-106.

Ponizilova, Martina. "Foreign Policy Activities of China in the Middle East: Establishing Energy Security or Being a Responsible Emerging Power?", **Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies**, Vol. 21, No. 6, 2019, pp. 643-662.

Popper, Karl. **The Poverty of Historicism**, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961.

Posen, Barry and Andrew Ross. "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy", **International Security**, Vol. 21, No. 3, 1997, pp. 5-53.

Posen, Barry. **Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy**, Cornell University Press, 2015.

Pratt, Nicola and Dina Rezk. "Securitizing the Muslim Brotherhood: State Violence and Authoritarianism in Egypt after the Arab Spring", **Security Dialogue**, Vol. 50, No. 3, pp. 239-256.

Pred, R and A Pred. "The New Naturalism, a Critique of Order Out of Chaos, Environment and Planning D", **Society and Space**, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1985, pp. 461-475.

Proggine, Ilya and Isabelle Stengers. **Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature**, Flamingo, London, 1985.

Pu, Xiaoyu and Randall Schweller. "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline", **International Security**, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2011, pp. 41-72

Quero, Jordi and Andrea Dessi. "Unpredictability in US Foreign Policy and the Regional Order in the Middle East: Reacting vis-à-vis a Volatile External Security-

Provider”, **British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2019, pp. 311-330.

Rabaia, Ibrahim, Makmor Tumi and Emile Yeoh. “Religion and Revolution: Theorizing of the Arab Spring in Accordance with the Selectorate Approach”, **Asian Politics & Policy**, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 222-244.

Rae, Alasdair. “Trend Analysis.” **Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research**, Ed. Alex Michalos, Springer, 2014.

Ramani, Samuel. “Russia and the UAE: And Ideational Partnership”, **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 27, No. 1, 2020, pp. 125-140.

Ramazan, Erdağ. **Libya in the Arab Spring: From Revolution to Insecurity**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Reus-Smit, Christian and Duncan Snidal. **The Oxford Handbook of International Relations**, Oxford University Press, 2010.

Rieffer-Flanagan, Barbara Ann. “Islamic Realpolitik: Two-Level Iranian Foreign Policy”, **International Journal on World Peace**, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2009, pp. 7-35.

Rivera, William Anthony. “Discursive Practices of Honor: Rethinking Iran’s Nuclear Program”, **Foreign Policy Analysis**, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2016, pp. 395-412.

Roberts, Kari. “Understanding Putin: The Politics of Identity and Geopolitics in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse”, **Canada’s Journal of Global Policy Analysis**, Vol. 72, No. 1, 2017, pp. 28-55.

Rubin, Barry and Kemal Kirişçi. **Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Multiregional Power**, Lynne Rienner, 2001.

Rüma, İnan and Mitat Çelikpala. “Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater”, **International Relations**, Vol. 16, No. 62, 2019, pp. 65-84.

Ryan, Curtis. "Alliances and the Balance of Power in the Middle East", **The Routledge Handbook to the Middle East and States System**, Ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Jasmine Gani, Routledge, 2020, p. 342.

Rynning, Sten and Oliver Schmitt. "Alliances", **The Oxford Handbook of International Security**, Ed. Alexandra Gheciu and William Wohlforth, Oxford University Press, 2018.

Sadiki, Larbi. **Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization**, Routledge, 2014.

Saikal, Amin and David Vestenskov. "Iran's National Security and Operational Capability", **Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies**, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2020, pp. 18-30.

Saikal, Amin. **Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic**, Princeton University Press, 2019.

Sakwa, Richard. "New Cold War or Twenty Years' Crisis? Russia and International Politics", **International Affairs**, Vol. 84, No. 2, 2008, pp. 241-267.

Sakwa, Richard. **Russia against the Rest: The Post-War Crisis of World Order**, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Saleh, Alam and Hendrik Kraetzschmar. "Politicized Identities, Securitized Politics: Sunni-Shi'a Politics in Egypt", **Middle East Journal**, Vol. 80, No. 4, 2015, pp. 545-562.

Samaan, Jean-Loup. "Missile Warfare and Violent Non-State Actors: The Case of Hezbollah", **Defense Studies**, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2017, pp. 156-170.

Santini, Ruth Hanau. "A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Security Complex Theory Revisited", **The International Spectator**, Vol. 52, No. 4, 2017. pp. 93-111.

Sarikaya, Burak. "Evaluation of The Ukrainian Crisis Within the Context of Regional Security Complex Theory", **Afro Eurasian Studies Journal**, Vol. 6, No. 1-2, 2017, pp. 33-53.

Sarı, Buğra. "The Strategic Interaction Between Turkey and Iran in the Syrian Crisis: A Game Theoretical Analysis of the Time Frame from 2011-2015", **Bilig: Journal of Turkish World Social Sciences**, No. 87, 2018, pp. 203-227.

Savran, Arin. "The Peace Process between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, 2009-2015", **Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies**, Vol. 22, No. 6, 2020, pp. 777-792.

Sawani, Youssef. "The United States and Libya: The Contradictions of Intervention and Disengagement", **International Relations and Diplomacy**, Vol. 2, No. 12, 2014, pp. 783-793.

Scheller, Bente. **The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game: Foreign Policy Under the Assads**, Hurst, 2014.

Schmidt, Soren. "The Middle East Regional Security Complex", **The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising**, Ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli, Routledge, 2019.

Schofield, Richard. "Borderland Studies, Frontierization, and the Middle East's In-Between Spaces", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2020, pp. 394-411.

Schrodt, Philip. "Seven Deadly Sins of Contemporary Political Analysis", **Journal of Peace Research**, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2014, pp. 287-300.

Seeberg, Peter. "Analyzing Security Subcomplexes in a Changing Middle East, the Role of Non-Arab State Actors and Non-State Actors", **Palgrave Communications**, Vol. 2, 2016, pp. 1-8.

Seeberg, Peter. "Neo-Ottoman Expansionism Beyond the Borders of Modern Turkey: Erdogan's Foreign Policy Ambitions in Syria and the Mediterranean", **De Europa**, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2021, pp. 107-123.

Şen, Gülriz. "Dynamics of Estrangement and Realignment in Turkey-Iran Relations in the 2000s: Exploring the US Dimension", **Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order**, Ed. Emre Erşen and Seçkin Köstem, Routledge, 2019.

Service, Robert. **Russia and its Islamic World: From the Mongol Conquest to the Syrian Military Intervention**, Hoover Institution Press, 2017.

Sever, Ayşegül. "Regional Power Role and Intervention: The Turkish Case Over Syria in the 2000s", **Contemporary Review of the Middle East**, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2020, pp. 145-157.

Sezer, Duygu Bazoğlu. "Turkish-Russian Relations A Decade Later: From Adversity to Managed Competition", **Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2001, pp. 79-99.

Sherr, James. **Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad**, Chatham House, London, 2013.

Sinkaya, Bayram. "Iran and Turkey Relations after the Nuclear Deal: A Case for Compartmentalization", **Ortadoğu Etütleri**, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2016, pp. 80-100.

Sinkaya, Bayram. "Regionalization of Turkey-Iran Relations: Prospects and Limits", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2012, pp. 137-156.



Sinkaya, Bayram. "The Kurdish Question in Iran and its Effects on Iran-Turkey Relations", **British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 45, No. 5, 2017, pp. 840-859.

SIPRI Yearbook, **Armaments, Disarmaments and International Security**, Oxford University Press, 2007.

Snyder, Glenn. "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics", **World Politics**, Vol. 36, No. 4, 1984, pp. 461-495.

Sönmez, Göktuğ. **A Neo-Classical Approach to Turkey Under JDP Rule**, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.

Stepan, Alfred and Juan Linz. "Democratization Theory and the "Arab Spring"", **Journal of Democracy**, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2013, pp. 15-30.

Stepanova, Ekaterina. "Does Russia have a Grand Plan for the Middle East", **Politique Etrangere**, Vol. 2016, No. 2, 2016, pp. 23-35.

Stepanova, Ekaterina. "Russia and Conflicts in the Middle East: Regionalization and Implications for the West", **International Spectator**, Vol. 53, No. 4, 2018, pp. 35-75.

Stepanova, Ekaterina. "Russia in the Middle East: Back to a Grand Strategy or Enforcing Multilateralism", **Politique Etrangere**, Vol. 81, No. 2, 2016, pp. 1-14.

Strategic Comments. "The Russian-Turkish Rapprochement", **Strategic Comments**, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2018, pp. 4-6.

Suchkov, Maxim and Polina Vasilenko. "The Pendulum of Russian-Iranian Relations: From Common Goals to Divergent Interests", **Iran Looking East: An Alternative to the EU?**, Ed. Annalisa Perteghella, Ledizioni, 2019. p. 65.

Suchkov, Maxim. **Essays on Russian Foreign Policy in the Caucasus and the Middle East**, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2015.

Süer, Berna. "Ripeness Theory and Coercive Diplomacy as a Road to Conflict Resolution: The Case of the Turkey-Syria Showdown in 1998", **Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity**, Ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür, Routledge, 2013.

Surkov, V. Lu. "Nationalization of the Future: Paragraphs pro Sovereign Democracy", **Russian Studies in Philosophy**, Vol. 47, No. 4, 2009, pp. 8-21.

Takir, Gökhan. "Russian-Turkish Involvement in the Civil War in Libya", **Türkiye Rusya Araştırmaları Dergisi**, No. 3, 2020, pp. 190-220.

Tan, Kim Hua and Alirupendi Perudin. "The "Geopolitical" Factor in the Syrian Civil War" A Corpus-Based Thematic Analysis", **Sage Open**, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2019, pp. 1-15.

Taremi, Kamran. "Iranian Foreign Policy Towards Occupied Iraq, 2003-05", **Middle East Policy**, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2005, pp. 28-47.

Taş, Hakkı. "The Formulation and implementation of Populist Foreign policy: Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean", **Mediterranean Politics**, October 2021, pp. 1-25.

Taşpınar, Ömer. "Turkey's Strategic Vision and Syria", **The Washington Quarterly**, Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 127-140.

Thornton, Rod. "Countering Prompt Global Strike: The Russian Military Presence in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean and Its Strategic Deterrence Role", **Journal of Slavic Military Studies**, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2019, pp. 1-24.

Toal, Gerard. **Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus**, Oxford University Press, 2016.

Trenin, Dmitri. **What is Russia Up to in the Middle East**, Polity Press, 2018.

Tsereteli, Mamuka. "Can Russia's Quest for the New International Order Succeed?", **Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI)**, Vol. 62, No. 2, 2018, pp. 204-219.

Tsygankov, Andrei and Pavel Tsygankov. "Constructing National Values: The Nationally Distinctive Turn in Russian IR Theory and Foreign Policy", **Foreign policy Analysis**, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2021. pp. 1-20.

Tsygankov, Andrei. **Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity**, Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

Tudoroiu, Theodor. "The Reciprocal Constitutive Features of a Middle Eastern Partnership: The Russian-Syrian Bilateral Relations", **Journal of Eurasian Studies**, Vol, 6, No. 2, 2015, pp. 143-152.

Tufekci, Ozgur. **The Foreign Policy of Modern Turkey: Power and the Ideology of Eurasianism**, I.B. Tauris, 2017.

Vakil, Sanam. "Understanding Tehran's Long Game in the Levant", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 15, No. 60, 2018, pp. 105-120.

Vasiliev, Alexey. **Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin**, Routledge, 2018.

Vayrynen, Raimo. "Regionalism: Old and New", **International Studies Review**, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2003, pp. 25-51.

Wahab, Hadi. "Syria's Sect-Coded Conflict: From Hezbollah's Top-Down Instrumentalization of Sectarian Identity to Its Candid Geopolitical Confrontation", **Contemporary Review of the Middle East**, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2021, pp. 149-167.

Walsh, Barney. "Revisiting Regional Security Complex Theory in Africa: Museveni's Uganda and Regional Security in East Africa", **African Security**, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2020, pp. 300-324.

Walt, Stephen. "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse?", **Survival**, Vol. 39, No. 1, 1997, pp. 156-179.

Waltz, Kenneth. **Theory of International Politics**, Waveland Press, 1979.

Ward, Michael. "Can We Predict Politics? Toward What End?" **Journal of Global Security Studies**, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2016, pp. 80-91.

Wastnidge, Edward. "Imperial Grandeur and Selective Memory: Re-Assessing Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign and Domestic Politics", **Middle East Critique**, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2019, pp. 7-28.

Wei, Min. "Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Syrian Crisis: Dynamics of Transformation", **Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2019, pp. 462-477.

Weitsman, Patricia. **Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War**, Stanford University Press, 2004.

Weyland, Kurt. "The Arab Spring: Why the Surprising Similarities with the Revolutionary Wave of 1848?", **Perspectives on Politics**, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2012, pp. 917-934.

Wilson, Jeane. "Russia as a Regional Actor: Goals and Motivations", **Russia in The Changing International System**, Ed. Emel Parlar Dal and Emre Erşen, Springer, 2020. pp. 59-76.

Wiltenburg, Ivor. "The importance of Understanding Russian Strategic Culture", **Atlantisch Perspectief**, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2020, pp. 7-12.

Wolf, Albert. "Strategies of Retrenchment: Rethinking America's Commitments to the Middle East", **Comparative Strategy**, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2020, pp. 94-100.

Wu, Bingbing. "China and the Middle East", **Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies**, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2021, pp. 443-457.

Yanık, Lerna. "Allies or Partners? An Appraisal of Turkey's Ties to Russia, 1991-2007", **East European Quarterly**, Vol.41, No. 3, 2007, pp. 349-370.

Yeşiltaş, Murat. "Deciphering Turkey's Assertive Military and Defense Strategy: Objectives, Pillars, and Implications", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2020, pp. 89-114.

Yom, Sean. "US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Logic of Hegemonic Retreat", **Global Policy**, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2020, pp. 75-83.

Yossef, Amr. "Military Doctrines in Israel and Iran: A Doctrinal Hybridity", **The Middle East Journal**, Vol. 75, No. 2, 2021, pp.243-263.

Yücesoy, Vahid. "The Recent Rapprochement between Iran and Turkey: Is it Durable or Is it a Relationship of Convenience?", **Turkish Studies**, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2019, pp. 274-296.

Zabih, Sepehr. "Aspects of Terrorism in Iran", **Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science**, Vol. 463, No. 1, 1982, pp. 84-94.

Zakaria, Fareed. **From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role**, Princeton University Press, 1999.

Zakaria, Fareed. **The Post-American World and the Rise of the Rest**, Penguin Books, London, 2008.

Ziegler, Charles. "Conceptualizing Sovereignty in Russian Foreign Policy: Realist and Constructivist Perspectives", **International Politics**, Vol. 49, No. 4, pp. 400-417.

Ziya, Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz. "Turkey and Russia in a Shifting Global Order: Cooperation, Conflict and Asymmetric Interdependence in a Turbulent Region", **Third World Quarterly**, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 71-95.

Zvyagelskaya, Irina. "Russian Policy in the Levant", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 15, No. 60, 2018, pp.121-133.

## ONLINE SOURCES

A Correspondent in Egypt. Egypt Moves Ahead with Purchase of Russian Arms Despite US Warnings, **Al Monitor**, 03.03.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/03/egypt-us-tension-sanctions-russia-arms-deal.html>, (03.03.2021).

Aaltola, Mika. Mariette Hagglund, and Mikael Wigell. "The Helsinki Process and Its Applicability: Towards Regional Security-Building in the Persian Gulf", **Finish Institute of International Affairs**, 30.09.2020, <https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/the-helsinki-process-and-its-applicability>, (30.09.2020).

Aarabi, Kasra. "Beyond Borders, The Expansionist Ideology of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps", **Tony Blair Institute for Global Change**, 30.02.2020, <https://institute.global/sites/default/files/2020-01/IRGC%20Report%2027012020.pdf>, (30.02.2020).

Abboud, Samer. "Syria, Crisis Ecologies, and Enduring Insecurities in the MENA", **POMEPS Studies**, 30.11.2020, <https://pomeps.org/pomeps-studies-42-menas-frozen-conflicts>, (30.11.2020).

Adebahr, Cornelius. "Collective Security in the Persian Gulf: Preparing for an Opening", **Carnegie Europe**, 20.07.2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/07/20/collective-security-in-persian-gulf-preparing-for-opening-pub-84959>, (20.07.2021).

Adesnik, David. "Iran Spends \$16 Billion Annually to Support Terrorists and Rogue Regimes", **Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD)**, 10.01.2018, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2018/01/10/iran-spends-16-billion-annually-to-support-terrorists-and-rogue-regimes/>, (10.10.2019).

African Business. "Turkey Builds Embassies Across Africa as Erdogan Boosts Influence", **African Business**, 08.03.2021, <https://african.business/2021/03/trade-investment/turkey-builds-embassies-across-africa-as-erdogan-boosts-influence/>, (08.03.2021).

Ahmad, Naveed. "Iran's 'Forward Defense' Doctrine: Missile and Space Programs", **International Institute for Iranian Studies**, 11.10.2020, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/centre-for-researches-and-studies/irans-forward-defense-doctrine-missile-and-space-programs/>, (11.10.2020).

Aksenyonok, Alexander. "Syria as a Mirror of The Changing World Order", **Russia in Global Affairs**, 15.04.2013, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/syria-as-a-mirror-of-the-changing-world-order/>, (20.04.2020)

Aksoy, Hürcan Aslı. and Stephan Roll. "A Thaw in Relations between Egypt and Turkey", **German Institute for International ad Security Affairs**, 29.06.2021, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/a-thaw-in-relations-between-egypt-and-turkey/>, (29.06.2021).

Al Jazeera. "Astana Joint Statement by Iran, Russia, Turkey: in full," **Al Jazeera**, 24.01.2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/astana-joint-statement-iran-russia-turkey-full-170124133951063.html>, (29.10.2020).

Al Jazeera. "Iran's Khamenei says Missile Strike a 'Slap in the Face for US'", **Aljazeera**, 08.01.2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/1/8/irans-khamenei-says-missile-strike-a-slap-in-the-face-for-us>, (08.01.2020).

Al Jazeera. "Iran's Khamenei says UAE Betrayed Muslim Worlds with Israel Deal", **Al Jazeera**, 01.09.2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/1/irans-khamenei-says-uae-betrayed-muslim-world-with-israel-deal>, (01.09.2020).

Al Jazeera. Biden Team Considering Halting Some Arms Sales for Saudis, **Al Jazeera**, 26.02.2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/26/biden-team-considering-halting-some-arms-sales-for-saudis-report>, (26.02.2021).

Al-Hilu, Khayrallah. "The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, **European University Institute**, 14.01.2021, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69657/Khayrallah%20al-Hilu%20-%20The%20Turkish%20Intervention%20in%20Northern%20Syria%20One%20Strategy%20Discrepant%20Policies.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, (14.01.2021).

Al-Sayyad, Mohammad. "Mahdism and Political Manipulation in Iran", **International Institute for Iranian Studies**, 20.08.2017, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/centre-for-researches-and-studies/mahdism-and-political-manipulation-in-iran/>, (17.08.2021).

Al-Sharif, Osama. "Jordan-Egypt-Iraq Alliance Ready to Blossom", **Arab News**, 29.06.2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1885591>, (29.06.2021).

Alabbasi, Mamoon. "Iran Continues to Boast of its Regional Reach", **Middle East Eye**, 13.03.2015, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-continues-boast-its-regional-reach>, (17.08.2020).

Alabbasi, Mamoon. "The PKK-PMF Nexus in Iraq", **TRT World Research Center**, 07.05.2021, <https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/featured/the-pkk-pmf-nexus-in-iraq/>, (07.05.2021).

Alfone, Ali. "Shiite Combat Casualties Show the Depth of Iran's Involvement in Syria", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 03.08.2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/shiite-combat-casualties-show-depth-irans-involvement-syria>, (06.05.2020).

Alfone, Ali. "Tehran's Shia Foreign Legions", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 30.01.2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/30/tehran-s-shia-foreign-legions-pub-75387>, (27.01.2021)



Ali, Ahmed. Michael Eisenstadt, and Michael Knights, “Iran’s Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran’s Whole-of-Government Approach”, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 11.04.2011, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus111.pdf>, (07.07.2020).

Ali, Idrees, Lin Noueihad and Phil Stewart, “Exclusive: Russia Appears to Deploy Forces in Egypt, Eyes on Libya Role, Sources,” **Reuters**, 13.03.2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-libya-exclusive-idUSKBN16K2RY>, (20.05.2021).

Alterman, Jon. “US Restraint in the Middle East”, **Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)**, 10.08.2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-restraint-middle-east>, (10.08.2021).

Altunışık, Meliha. “The New Turn in Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Regional and Domestic Insecurities”, **Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)**, 17.07.2020, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/new-turn-turkeys-foreign-policy-middle-east-regional-and-domestic-insecurities>, (17.07.2020).

Altunışık, Meliha. “The New Wave of Normalization in Turkey’s Middle East Foreign Policy”, **Middle East Institute**, 27.04.2021, <https://www.mei.-edu/publications/new-wave-normalization-turkeys-middle-east-foreign-policy>, (27.04.2021).

Altunışık, Meliha. “Turkey: Arab Perspectives”, **TESEV Publications**, 30.05.2020, [https://www.tesev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/report\\_Turkey\\_Arab\\_Perspectives.pdf](https://www.tesev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/report_Turkey_Arab_Perspectives.pdf), (30.05.2020).

Altunışık, Meliha. “Turkey’s Relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia: From Hopes of Cooperation to the Reality of Conflict”, **Middle East Institute**, 30.12.2019, [https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/201912/Aspiring%20Powers%2C%20Regional%20Rivals\\_Dec.%2013%2C%202019.pdf](https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/201912/Aspiring%20Powers%2C%20Regional%20Rivals_Dec.%2013%2C%202019.pdf), (30.12.2019).

Anadolu Agency (Persian Website). “Safir-e Iran: Roozname-ye Farhikhtegan be Dalil-e Eghdam Moghayer ba Manaf-e Melli Tazakor Gereft”, **Anadolu Agency**, 09.10.2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/fa/-مغایر-اقدام-بہ-دلیل-تازاکور-ایران-سفر>, 1606606/گرفت-ملی-تذکر-با-منافع (10.10.2021).

Ariel, Ahram. “Hybrid Security, Frozen Conflicts, and Peace in MENA, in MENA’s Frozen Conflicts”, **POMEPS Studies**, 30.11.2020, <https://pomeps.org/pomeps-studies-42-menas-frozen-conflicts>, (, 30.11.2020).

Aslund, Anders. and Andrew Kuchins. “Pressing the “Reset Button” on US-Russia Relations”, **Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)**, 05.03.2009, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pressing-reset-button-us-russia-relations-0>, (11.06.2020).

Awad, Ziad. “Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities”, **European University Institute**, 21.10.2019, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/-1814/64687>, (23.12.2020).

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, Michael Knights and Hamdi Malek, “Honored But Not Contained: The Future of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces”, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 23.03.2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/honored-not-contained-future-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces>, (23.03.2020).

Baev, Pavel. “Russia and Turkey: Strategic Partners and Rivals”, **IFRI**, 03.05.2021, [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/baev\\_turkey\\_russia\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/baev_turkey_russia_2021.pdf), (03.05.2021).

Baker, Luke, Tuvan Gumrukcu and Michele Kambas. “Turkey-Libya Maritime Deal Rattles East Mediterranean”, **Reuters**, 25.12.2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-libya-eastmed-tensions-explain/turkey-libya-maritime-deal-rattles-east-mediterranean-idUSKBN1YT0JK>, (25.12.2019).

Bakir, Ali. "Mapping The Rise of Turkey's Hard Power", **News Institute for Strategy and Policy**, 24.08.2021, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/turkey/mapping-the-rise-of-turkeys-hard-power/>, (24.08.2021).

Bakir, Ali. "Turkey-Egypt Relations: What's Behind Their New Diplomatic Push?" **Middle East Eye**, 12.03.2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/turkey-egypt-relations-new-diplomatic-push-what-behind>, (12.03.2021).

Balcer, Adam. "The Twilight of the Russian World", **Henrich Boll Stiftung**, 26.11.2018, <https://eu.boell.org/en/2018/11/26/twilight-russian-world>, (13.10.2021).

Barigazzi, Jacopo. and Rym Momtaz. "Turkey's Charm Offensive Puts EU in a Tight Spot", **Politico**, 19.01.2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/turky-charm-offensive-eu-tight-spot-sanctions-recep-tayyip-erdogan/>, (19.01.2021).

Barzegar, Kayhan. "The Assassination of Qassem Soleimani Institutionalizes Anti-American Sentiment in Iran", **Responsible Statecraft**, 07.01.2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/01/07/the-assassination-of-qassem-soleimani-institutionalizes-anti-american-sentiment-in-iran/>, (07.01.2020).

Bassam, Laila and Tom Perry. "How Iranian General Plotted Out Syrian Assault in Moscow", **Reuters**, 06.10.2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh/how-iranian-general-plotted-out-syrian-assault-in-moscow-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>, (19.10.2020)

Bassiri Tabrizi, Aniseh et al. "Understanding Iran's role in the Syrian Conflict", **Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)**, 06.04.2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/understanding-irans-role-syrian-conflict>, (06.04.2021).

Bayoumy, Yara. "Trump Seeks to Revive 'Arab NATO' to Confront Iran", **Reuters**, 27.07.2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-gulf-alliance-idUSKBN1KH2IK>, (09.06.2021).

BBC World Service. "Syria chemical attack: What we know", **BBC**, 24.09.2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23927399>, (17.08.2020).

BBC World Service. "Syria Crisis: US, Russia and Jordan Agree Ceasefire Deal", **BBC**, 0707.2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/worldmiddleeast40539535>, (13.10.2020).

BBC World Service. "Syria war: Alarm after 33 Turkish soldiers killed in attack in Idlib", **BBC**, 28.02.2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51667717>, (28.02.2020).

BBC World Service. "US Says Russia Sent Jets to Libya Mercenaries", **BBC**, 26.05.2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52811093>, (26.05.2020).

Bechev, Dimitar. "Tukey's Tightrope Between Russia and the United States", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Moscow Center)**, 14.04.2021, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/84317>, (14.04.2021).

Benaim, Daniel and Jake Sullivan. "America's Opportunity in the Middle East: Diplomacy Could Succeed Where Military Force Has Failed", **Foreign Affairs**, 22.05.2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-05-22/americas-opportunity-middle-east>, (22.05.2020).

Berry, Lynn and Sarah Deeb. "Russia-backed Syrian Safe-Zones Plan Goes into Effect", **The Associated Press**, 06.05.2017. <https://apnews.com/c80332ce057-24be49f7a9d586e4bab8a>, (11.10.2020).

Beswick, Danielle. "The Return of Omni-balancing? A Multi-Level Analysis of Strategies for Securing Agency in Post-Genocide Rwanda", **University of Birmingham**, 29.12.2011, <https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/bisaafrica/files/afriacanagency-seminar4-beswick.pdf>, (15.11.2020).

Bir, Burak. "Turkey Continues to Increase its Presence in Africa", **Anadolu Agency**, 22.02.2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkey-continues-to-increaseitspresence-in-africa/2153572>, (22.02.2021).

Blake, Aaron. "As Trump Claims a Win on Iran, He Accuses Obama of Funding its Attacks", **The Washington Post**, 08.01.2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/01/08/trump-claims-win-iran-he-accuses-obama-funding-its-attacks/>, (08.01.2020).

Bordachev, Timofey. "Russia in the Middle East: 10 Years After the Arab Spring", **Modern Diplomacy**, 19.04.2021, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/04/19/russia-in-the-middle-east-10-years-after-the-arab-spring/>, (19.04.2021).

Borsari, Federico. "The Middle East's Game of Drones: The Race to Lethal UAVs and Its Implications for the Region's Security Landscape", **Italian Institute for International Studies**, 15.01.2021, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/middle-east-s-game-drones-race-lethal-uavs-and-its-implications-regions-security-landscape-28902>, (15.01.2021).

Borshchevskaya, Anna and Andrew Tabler, "Triangular Diplomacy: Unpacking Russia's Syria Strategy", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 07.07.2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policyanalysis/triangulardiplomacy-unpacking-russias-syria-strategy>, (07.07.2021).

Borshchevskaya, Anna, Daniel Rakov, Li-Chen Sim and Raed Wajeeh. "Russia in the Middle East, A Source of Stability or a Pot-Stirrer", **Atlantic Council**, 21.04.2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/russia-in-the-middle-east-a-source-of-stability-or-a-pot-stirrer/>, (21.04.2021).

Borshchevskaya, Anna. "Is Russia Trying to Play Kingmaker in Lebanon?", **National Interest**, 16.03.2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/russia-trying-play-kingmaker-lebanon-180414>, (16.03.2021).

Borshchevskaya, Anna. "Russia's Soft Power Projection in the Middle East", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 04.12.2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-soft-power-projection-middle-east>, (21.04.2021).

Borshchevskaya, Anna. "The Russian Way of War in Syria: Threat Perception and Approaches to Counterterrorism, In Russia's War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned", **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, 29.09.2020, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/report-borshchevskaya.pdf>, (29.09.2020).

Borshchevskaya, Anna. "The Tactical Side of Russia's Arms Sales to the Middle East, In Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank, Russia in The Middle East", **Jamestown Foundation**, 29.12.2018, <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads-/2018/12/Russia-in-the-Middle-East-online.pdf?x87069>, (29.12.2018).

Boserup, Rasmus Alenius, Waleed Hazbun, Helle Malmvig, and Karim Makdisi. "New Conflict Dynamics: Between Regional Autonomy and Intervention in the Middle Est and North Africa", **Danish Institute for International Studies**, 29.12.2017, [https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/830699/2017\\_DIIS\\_New\\_Conflict\\_Dynamics\\_in\\_the\\_Middle\\_East\\_and\\_North\\_Africa\\_web.pdf](https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/830699/2017_DIIS_New_Conflict_Dynamics_in_the_Middle_East_and_North_Africa_web.pdf), (29.12.2019).

Bowman, Bradley, Ryan Brobst, and Jared Thompson. "Egypt's Transition Away from American Weapons is a National Security Issue", **Defense News**, 25.05.2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/05/25/egypts-transition-away-from-american-weapons-is-a-national-security-issue/>, (25.05.2021).

Brechenmacher, Sakia, et al. "Afghanistan Under Taliban", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 18.08.2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/20-21/08/18/afghanistan-under-taliban-pub-85168>, (18.08.2021).

Brewer, Eric and Ariane Tabatabai. "Understanding Iran's Nuclear Escalation Strategy", **War on the Rocks**, 12.12.2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/understanding-irans-nuclear-escalation-strategy/>, (12.12.2019).

Broder, John. "Despite a Secret Pact by Gore in '95, Russian Arms Sales to Iran Go On", **New York Times**, 13.10.2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/13/world/despite-a-secret-pact-by-gore-in-95-russian-arms-sales-to-iran-go-on.html>, (18.11.2020).

Büchs, Annette. "The Resilience of Authoritarian Rule in Syria Under Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad", German Institute for Global and Area Studies, 29.03.2009, <http://ir.amu.ac.in/13812/1/T%2011157.pdf>, (12.11.2020).

Bugayova, Nataliya and Darina Regio. "The Kremlin's Campaign in Africa: Assessment Update", **Institute for the Study of War**, 23.08.2019, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/kremlins-campaign-africa>, (23.08.2019).

Byman, Daniel. "Will Israel and Iran Go to War in Syria?" **The Brookings**, 05.11.2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/10/05/will-israel-and-iran-go-to-war-in-syria/>, (05.11.2018).

Cafarella, Jennifer and Jason Zhou. "Russia's Dead-End Diplomacy in Syria", **Institute for the Study of War**, 30.11.2019, <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/russias-dead-end-diplomacy-syria>, (30.11.2019).

Cafiero, Giorgio and Arman Mahmoudian. "Does Russia Really Want a US Return to the Iran Deal?" **Atlantic Council**, 19.01.2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/does-russia-really-want-a-us-return-to-the-iran-deal/>, (19.01.2021).

Candar, Cengiz. "Erdogan Focuses on Trade During Iran Visit", **Al Monitor**, 08.04.2015, <https://www.almonitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/turkeyirandifference-between-speaking-ankara-tehran.html>, (11.11.2020).

Caner, Mustafa. “Why Does Iran Fail to Grasp Turkey’s Security Concerns in Syria?”, **Politics Today**, 30.10.2019, <https://politicstoday.org/why-does-iran-fail-to-grasp-turkeys-security-concerns-in-syria/>, (30.10.2019).

Canikligil, Razi. “Erdogan’ın Ardından; Güvenlik Konseyi Adaylığımız, BM Reformu”, **Hürriyet**, 17.10.2014, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/razi-canikligil/erdogan-in-ardindan-guvenlik-konseyi-adayligimiz-bm-reformu-27321583>, (20.09.2020).

Capaccio, Tony. And Peter Martin. “Iran is a Daily Threat as U.S. Dominance Wanes, General Says” **Bloomberg**, 20.04.2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-04-20/iran-presents-daily-threat-as-u-s-dominance-wanes-general-says>, (20.04.2021).

Castro, Torres and Jose Ignacio. “The Importance of Land Corridors (II): The Iran’s Race to the Mediterranean Sea”, **Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies**, 30.06.2021, [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2021/DIEEEA26\\_2021\\_JOSCAS\\_Iran\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA26_2021_JOSCAS_Iran_ENG.pdf), (30.06.2021).

Cerulli, Rosella. “Russian Influence in the Middle East: Economics, Energy, and Soft Power”. **American Security Project**, 17.09.2019, <https://www.american-securityproject.org/perspective-russian-influence-in-the-middle-east/>, (10.04.2020).

Chivvis, Christopher. “Understanding Russian ‘Hybrid Warfare’ and What Can be Done About It”, **RAND Corporation**, 22.03.2017, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT468.html>, (17.07.2020).

Christina, Arabia. Christopher Blanchard, Clayton Thomas, and Jeremy Sharp. “Arms Sales in the Middle east: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy”, **Congressional Research Service**, 23.11.2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=R44984>, (23.11.2020).



Chubin, Shahram. “Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated”, **Gulf Research Center**, 27.09.2012, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/09/27/iran-and-arab-spring-ascendancy-frustrated-pub-49626>, (08.12.2020).

Çinkara, Gökhan and Oğul Tuna. “The Potential for Azerbaijani Mediation of Turkish-Israeli Relations”, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 20.06.2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policyanalysis/potentialazerbaijani-mediation-turkish-israeli-relations>, (20.06.2021).

Coar Global. “‘Land Swaps’: Russian-Turkish Territorial Exchanges in Northern Syria”, **Coar-Global**, 14.11.2019, <https://coar-global.org/2019/11/14/land-swaps-russian-turkish-territorial-exchanges-in-northern-syria/>, (06.01.2020)

Cokun, Orhan and Tulay Karadeniz. “Syria Divisions Aside, Turkish PM Eyes Closer Ties with Iran”, **Reuters**, 04.03.2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-iran/syria-divisions-aside-turkish-pm-eyes-closer-ties-with-iran-idUSKCN0W61WD>, (11.09.2020).

Colakoğlu, Selçuk. “China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Turkey’s Middle Corridor: A Question of Compatibility”, **Middle East Institute**, 29.01.2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-and-turkeys-middle-corridor-question-compatibility>, (07.01.2020).

Colakoğlu, Selçuk. “The Rise of Eurasianism in Turkish Foreign Policy: Can Turkey Change its Pro-Western Orientation?”, **Middle East Institute**, 16.04.2019. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/rise-eurasianism-turkish-foreign-policy-can-turkey-change-its-pro-western-orientation>, (30.09.2021).

Congressional Research Service. “Turkey-U.S. Relations: Timeline and Brief Historical Context”, **Congressional Research Service**, 09.04.2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/IF10487.pdf>, (09.04.2020).

Connable, Ben, Sarah Grand-Clement, James Sladden, and Becca Wasser. "Russian Strategy in the Middle East". **RAND Corporation**, 29.12.2017. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE236.html>, (29.12.2020).

Cook, Steven. "Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East", **Council on Foreign Relations**, 30.03.2021, <https://www.cfr.org/report/major-power-rivalry-middle-east>, (30.03.2021).

Cook, Steven. "No Exit: Why the Middle East Still Matters to America", **Foreign Affairs**, 13.10.2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-10-13/no-exit>, (13.10.2020).

Cook, Steven. "Russia in the Middle East to Stay", **Foreign Policy**, 16.03.2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/16/the-middle-east-needs-a-steady-boyfriend/>, (20.05.2020).

Cooley, Alexander. "Whose Rules, Whose Sphere? Russian Governance and Influence in Post-Soviet States", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 30.06.2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/06/30/whose-rules-whose-sphere-russian-governance-and-influence-inpost-soviet-states-pub-71403>, (27.08.2020).

Czerny, Milan. "Russia's Security Image in the Gulf", **RIDDLE Russia**, 30.04.2021, <https://www.ridl.io/en/russia-s-security-mirage-in-the-gulf/>, (30.04.2021).

Dacrema, Eugenio. "From Syria to Libya: Why the "Astana Approach" Doesn't Work", **Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale**, 28.02.2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/syria-libya-why-astana-approach-doesnt-work-25225>, (28.02.2020).

Daher, Josphe. "The Paradox of Syria's Reconstruction", **Carnegie Middle East Center**, 04.09.2019, <https://carnegiemec.org/2019/09/04/paradoxofsyriasreconstruction-pub-79773>, (04.09.2019).

Dalay, Galip. "Break-up of the Middle East: Will We See a new Regional Order?", **Middle East Eye**, 14.04.2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/break-middle-east-will-we-see-new-regional-order>, (17.09.2020).

Dalay, Galip. "The Middle East After Trump: A Reshuffling of the Cards", **Istanbul Political Research Institute**, 15.12.2020, <https://www.istanpol.org/post/the-middle-east-after-trump-a-reshuffling-of-the-cards>, (15.12.2020).

Dalay, Galip. "Turkey and the West Need a New Framework," **The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS)**, 29.06.2020, <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkey-andwestkeepflameburning>, (29.06.2020).

Dalay, Galip. "Turkey in the Middle East's New Battle Lines", **Brookings**, 20.05.2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-middle-east-s-new-battle-lines/>, (20.08.2020).

Dalay, Galip. "Turkey, Europe, and the Eastern Mediterranean: Charging a Way Out of the Current Deadlock", **Brookings**, 29.01.2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Turkey-Europe-and-the-Eastern-Mediterranean.pdf>, (29.01.2021).

Dalay, Galip. "Turkey's Geopolitical and Ideological Eurasianism and its Relations with Russia", **German Marshall Fund of United States (GMFUS)**, 21.09.2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkeys-geopolitical-and-ideological-eurasianism-and-its-relations-russia>, (21.09.2021).

Dalay, Galip. "Turkish-Iranian Relations Are Set to Become More Turbulent", **The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS)**, 09.02.2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkish-iranian-relations-are-set-become-more-turbulent>, (09.02.2021).

Dalay, Galip. "Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts", **German Institute for International and Security Affairs**, 04.08.2021, <https://www.swp->

berlin.org/en/publication/turkish-russian-relations-in-light-of-recent-conflicts, (04.08.2021).

Dalay, Galip. "US-Turkey Relations Will Remain Crisis-Ridden for a Long Time", **Brookings**, 29.01.2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/29/us-turkey-relations-will-remain-crisis-ridden-for-a-long-time-to-come/>, (29.01.2021).

Dalay, Galip. and Fuat Keyman. "Has Turkey's Quest for "Strategic Autonomy" Run its Course?" **The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS)**, 26.07.2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/has-turkeys-quest-strategic-autonomy-run-its-course>, (26.07.2021).

Danforth, Nicholas. "Between Cooperation and Containment: New U.S. Policies for a New Turkey", **Brookings**, 30.02.2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/between-cooperation-and-containment-new-us-policies-for-a-new-turkey/>, (30.02.2021).

Danforth, Nicholas. "Exhuming Turkey's Past: Ottoman Revivalism, Then and Now", **Foreign Affairs**, 11.03.2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2015-03-11/exhuming-turkeys-past>, (11.05.2020).

Danforth, Nicholas. "Ideology and Pragmatism in Turkish Foreign Policy: From Ataturk to the AKP", **Turkish Policy Quarterly**, 30.03.2008, [http://turkishpolicy.com/images/stories/2008-03-tpq/nicholas\\_danforth.pdf](http://turkishpolicy.com/images/stories/2008-03-tpq/nicholas_danforth.pdf), (17.08.2020).

Danforth, Nicholas. "Turkey's New Hard Power Foreign Policy", **Center for Global Policy**, 19.02.2020, <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/turkeys-new-hard-power-foreign-policy/>, (19.02.2020).

Davutoğlu, Ahmet. "Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring", **The Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV)**, 20.04.2012, <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/haberler/s/2827>, (10.09.2020).

Deeb, Sarah. "Iranian General Transformed Syria's War in Assad's Favor", **Associated Press**, 07.01.2020, <https://apnews.com/article/syria-ap-top-news-tehran-international-news-iraq-a0557de2499d53eb9d298bbea35bb9d8>, (07.01.2020).

Dehghanpisheh, Babak. "Iran's president declares end of Islamic State", **Reuters**, 21.11.2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-rouhani-islamic-state/irans-president-declares-end-of-islamic-state-idUSKBN1DL0J5>, (23.09.2019).

Del-Sarto, Rafaella, Edward Soler Lecha and Helle Malmvig. "Interregnum: The Regional Order in The Middle East and North Africa After 2011", **MENARA**, 30.02.2019, [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara\\_fr\\_1.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_fr_1.pdf), (30.02.2019).

Deutsche Welle. "Safir-e Iran dar Moscow: Ravabet-e Eghtesadiye Do Keshvar Zaif Ast", Deutsche Welle Farsi, 21.04.2020, <https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/-سفير-ایران-در-مسکو/a-53202163>, (23.05.2021).

Dibb, Paul. "Why Russia is a Threat to the International Order". **Australia Strategic Policy Institute**, 29.06.2016. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/why-russia-threat-international-order>, (14.03.2020).

Didier, Brice. "The Syrian Conflict and Russia's Search for Regional Hegemony in a Contested Middle East: Implications for the Euro-Atlantic Community", **EU Diplomacy Papers**, 30.10.2017, [http://aei.pitt.edu/92485/1/edp-10-2017\\_didier.pdf](http://aei.pitt.edu/92485/1/edp-10-2017_didier.pdf), (17.11.2020).

Divsallar, Abdolrasool. and Pyotr Kortonuv. "The Fallout of the US-Iran Confrontation for Russia: Revisiting Factors in Moscow's Calculus", **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 28.01.2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/>

en/activity/publications/the-fallout-of-the-us-iran-confrontation-for-russia-revisiting-factors-in-moscow-s-calculus/, (28.01.2021).

Donyaye Eghtesad. “Amir Abdollahian: Iran Baraye Naboodi Esraeel Barname Darad”, **Donyaye Eghtesad**, 27.02.2018, <https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/>-بخش-سایت-خوان-, (15.08.2021).  
3359578/62 , امیر عبداللہیان-ایران-برای-نابودی-اسرائیل-برنامه-دارد

Doran, Michael and Peter Rough. “China’s Emerging Middle Eastern Kingdom”, **Tablet Magazine**, 03.08.2020, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/china-middle-eastern-kingdom>, (03.08.2020).

Dubowitz, Mark and Annie Fixler. “The Iran Deal’s Fatal Flaws After One Year: Emboldened Iran and Diminished American Deterrence”, **Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD)**, 14.07.2016, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2016/07/14/the-iran-deals-fatal-flaws-after-one-year-emboldened-iran-and-diminished-american-deterrence/>, (17.07.2020).

Duclos, Michel. “Russia and Iran in Syria, a Random Partnership or an Enduring Alliance?”, **Atlantic Council**, 17.06. 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/russia-and-iran-in-syria-a-random-partnership-or-an-enduring-alliance/>, (17.06. 2019).

Duran, Burhanettin. “Logic and Timing of Turkey’s Normalization with Egypt”, **Daily Sabah**, 05.05.2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/logic-and-timing-of-turkeys-normalization-with-egypt>, (05.05.2021).

Efron, Shira. “The Future of Israeli-Turkish Relations”, **RAND Corporation**, 30.05.2018, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2445.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2445.html), (20.08.2020).

Eisenstadt, Michael. “Operating in the Gray Zone: Countering Iran’s Asymmetric Way of War”, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 07.01.2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operating-gray-zone-countering-irans-asymmetric-way-war>, (07.01.2020).

Eisenstadt, Michael. "Russian Arms and Technology Transfers to Iran: Policy Challenges for the United States", **Arms Control Association**, 30.03.2001, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2001-03/iran-nuclear-briefs/russian-arms-technology-transfers-iranpolicy-challenges-united>, (03.03.2020).

Elias, Firas. "The Turkish Military Operation in Northern Iraq: Goals and Dimensions", 30.06.2020, **The Emirates Policy Center**, <https://epc.ae/brief/the-turkish-military-operation-in-northern-iraq-goals-and-dimensions>, (30.06.2020).

Eltohamy, Amr. "The Limits of Egypt's Role in the Syria Crisis", **Al Monitor**, 09.08.2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/08/egypt-sponsors-truce-deal-syria-homs-eastern-ghouta-role.html>, (15.08.2020).

Episkopos, Mark. "Five Weapons Saudi Arabia Would Love to Buy from Russia", **The National Interest**, 28.01.2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/five-weapons-saudi-arabia-would-love-buy-russia-177251>, (28.01.2021).

Erbay, Nur Ozkan. "Iran-PKK Cooperation Exposed Over Sinjar Operation: Experts", **Daily Sabah**, 22.04.2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/news-analysis/iran-pkk-cooperation-exposed-over-sinjar-operation-experts>, (22.04.2021).

Ergin, Sedat. "Erdogan-Biden Meeting Can be Rough", **Hurriyet Daily**, 11.06.2021, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/sedat-ergin/erdogan-biden-meeting-can-be-rough-165431>, (11.06.2021).

Fahmy, Nabil. "The Iran Nuclear Deal: A Springboard for a New Middle East Security Architecture", **European Leadership Network**, 24.02.2021, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/the-iran-nuclear-deal-a-springboard-for-a-new-middle-east-security-architecture/>, (24.02.2021).

Fayzullina, Karina. "Interpreting Russian Foreign Policy and Islam", **Aljazeera Center for Studies**, 28.09.2014. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/-2014/09/2014928101146511560.html>, (11.03.2020).

Feierstein, Gerald and Yoel Guzansky. "Saudi Arabia Returns", **Middle East Institute Policy Center**, 24.08.2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/saudi-arabia-returns>, (24.08.2021).

Feltman, Jeffrey, et al. "The New Geopolitics of the Middle East: America's Role in a Changing Region", **Brookings**, 29.01.2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/-the-new-geopolitics-of-the-middle-east-americas-role-in-a-changing-region/>, (29.01.2019).

Feuer, Sarah and Itai Brun. "In Search of a Regional Order: The Struggle over the Shape of the Middle East", **Strategic Assessment**, 29.01.2021, <https://strategicassessment.inss.org.il/en/articles/in-search-of-a-regional-order-the-struggle-over-the-shape-of-the-middle-east/>, (29.01.2021).

Forrest, Brett and James Marson. "Armed Low-Cost Drones, Made By Turkey, Reshape Battlefields and Geopolitics", **Wall Street Journal**, 03.06.2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/armed-low-cost-drones-made-by-turkey-reshape-battlefields-and-geopolitics-11622727370>, (03.06.2021).

Fulton, Jonathan. "After Aramco Attacks: China's Middle East Interests at Stake", **Atlantic Council**, 20.09.2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/after-aramco-attacks-chinas-middle-east-interests-are-at-stake/> (20.09.2019).

Fulton, Jonathan. "China's Changing Role in the Middle East", **Atlantic Council**, 29.06.2019, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/06/Chinas\\_Changing\\_Role\\_in\\_the\\_Middle\\_East.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/06/Chinas_Changing_Role_in_the_Middle_East.pdf), (29.06.2019).

Fulton, Will, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer, "Iranian Military Strategy in Syria", **Institute for the Study of War**, 30.05.2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>, (17.11.2020).

Furuncu, Yunus. "The New Dimension of the Turkey-Russia Energy Cooperation Turk-Stream", **SETA Foundations**, 30.01.2020, <https://www.setav.org/en/analysis-turk-stream/>



the-new-dimension-of-the-turkey-russia-energy-cooperation-turkstream/,  
(30.01.2020).

Galeeva, Diana. “How Have Russia’s Policies in the Middle East Changed Since the Arab Uprisings”, **Middle East Institute**, 21.04.2021, -<https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-have-russias-policies-middle-east-changed-arab-uprisings-0>,  
(21.04.2021).

Geranmayeh, Ellie. “Do not Expect a Rush of Arms Sales to Iran”, **European Council on Foreign Relations**, 16.10.2020, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_do\\_not\\_expect\\_a\\_rush\\_of\\_arms\\_sales\\_to\\_iran/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_do_not_expect_a_rush_of_arms_sales_to_iran/), (16.10.2020).

Gibbons-Neff, Thomas. “ISIS Attacks Increase in Syria Despite Russian Air Strikes, Report Says”, **The Washington Post**, 24.02.2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/02/24/isis-attacks-spike-in-syria-with-help-from-russian-air-cover-report-says/>, (28.08.2020).

Gile, Maggi. “Tayyip Erdogan Accuses Joe Biden of ‘Bloody Hands’ After Report of \$735M Weapons Sales to Israel”, **Newsweek**, 17.05.2021, -<https://www.newsweek.com/tayyip-erdogan-accuses-joe-biden-bloody-hands-after-report-735m-weapons-sale-israel-1592247>, (17.05.2021).

Giles, Keir. “The Turning Point for Russian Foreign Policy”, **Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press**, 30.10.2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep11857.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A997e4a6f514bef5a94f5ead733f37ba7>, (30.10.2021).

Goldenberg, Ilan, Nicholas Heras, Jennie Matuschak, and Kaleigh Thomas. “Countering Iran in the Gray Zone: What the United States Should Learn from Israel’s Operations in Syria”, **Center for a New American Security**, 14.04.2020, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/countering-iran-gray-zone>, (14.04.2020).

Golkar, Saeid. "The Supreme Leader and the Guard: Civil-Military Relations and Regime Survival in Iran", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 25.02.2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/supreme-leader-and-guard-civil-military-relations-and-regime-survival-iran>, (29.03.2021).

Gordon, Michael. "U.S. Lays Out Demands for New Iran Deal", **Wall Street Journal**, 21.05.2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/mike-pompeo-lays-out-next-steps-on-iran-1526909126>, (21.09.2020).

Grajewski, Nicole. "Friends or Frenemies? How Russia and Iran Compete and Cooperate", **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, 30.03.2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/03/friends-or-frenemies-how-russia-and-iran-compete-and-cooperate/>, (30.03.2020).

Greenley, Heather. "Attacks on Saudi Oil Facilities: Effects and Responses", 01.10.2019, **Congressional Research Review**, -<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11173>, (01.10.2019).

Guler, Bilal. "Iranians Protest Cooperation Pact with China", 30.03.2021, **Anadolu News Agency**, 30.03.2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iranians-protest-cooperation-pact-with-china/2192750>, (30.03.2021).

Gurcan, Metin. "Will Washington Buy Ankara's 'Drone Crescent' against Russia?", **Al Monitor**, 11.06.2021. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/will-washington-buy-ankaras-drone-crescent-against-russia>, (11.06.2021).

Gurganus, Julia and Eugene Rummer. "Russia's Global Ambitions in Perspective", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 30.02.2019, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/RumerGurganus\\_Perspective\\_final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/RumerGurganus_Perspective_final.pdf), (30.02.2019).

Haass, Richard. "The Post-American Middle East", **Council of Foreign Relations (CFR)**, 18.12.2019, <https://www.cfr.org/article/post-american-middle-east>, (18.12.2019).

Hacaoglu, Selcan and Firat Kozok. "Erdogan Discussed Warplanes, Submarine Cooperation with Putin", **Bloomberg**, 30.09.2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-09-30/erdogan-says-talked-warplane-submarine-cooperation-with-putin>, (30.09.2021).

Hamit, Dilara. "Turkey launches operation Claw-Eagle", **Anadolu Agency**, 15.06.2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-launches-operation-claw-eagle/1877001>, (15.06.2020).

Han, Aisha and Shruti Kumar. "Syria's Southwest Offensive: A Timeline", **Atlantic Council**, 05.07.2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/syria-s-southwest-offensive-a-timeline/>, (05.08.2020).

Hanauer, Larry. "Israel's Interests and Options in Syria", **RAND Corporation**, 30.12.2016, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE185/RAND\\_PE185.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE185/RAND_PE185.pdf), (16.10.2020).

Harchaoui, Jalel. "The Pendulum: How Russia Sways its Way to More Influence in Libya", **War on The Rocks**, 07.01.2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-pendulum-how-russia-sways-its-way-to-more-influence-in-libya/>, (07.01.2021).

Harchaoui, Jalel. "Why Turkey Intervened in Libya", **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, 07.12.2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/12/why-turkey-intervened-in-libya/>, (07.12.2020).

Harrison, Ross. "Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power: An Historical Perspective", **Al Jazeera**, 02.09.2018, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/0-9/shifts-middle-east-balance-power-historical-perspective-180902084750811.html>, (20.09.2020).

Harrison, Ross. "The Global and Regional Geopolitics of Civil War in the Middle East", **Middle East Institute**, 04.01.2019, <https://www.mei.edu/test-global-and-regional-geopolitics-civil-war-middle-east>, (09.07.2021).

Harvey, Katherine and Bruce Riedel. "Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan: A New Partnership 30 Years in the Making", **Brookings**, 02.07.2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/07/02/egypt-iraq-and-jordan-a-new-partnership-30-years-in-the-making/>, (02.07.2021).

Hasan, Harith and Kheder Khaddouri. "The Transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian Border: From a National to a Regional Frontier", **Carnegie Middle East Center**, 31.03.2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/31/transformation-of-iraqi-syrian-border-from-national-to-regional-frontier-pub-81396>, (31.03.2020).

Hawn, Jeff. "Russia's Extraterritorial Military Deployments", **The Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy**, 31.03.2021, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/russia/-russias-extraterritorial-military-deployments/>, (31.03.2021).

Hawthorne, Emily. "What to Make of Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq's New Alliance", **Stratfor**, 06.06.2021, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/what-make-jordan-egypt-and-iraq-s-new-alliance>, (06.06.2021).

Hazbun, Waleed. "America's Wake: Turbulence and Insecurity in the Middle East, In Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East", **POMEPS Studies**, 17.03.2019, [https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/POMEPS\\_Studies\\_34\\_Web.pdf](https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/POMEPS_Studies_34_Web.pdf), (17.03.2019).

Hazbun, Waleed. "Regional Powers and The Production of Insecurity in the Middle East", **MENARA**, 17.09.2018, [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara\\_wp\\_11.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_11.pdf), (27.02.2021).

Heistein, Ari and Amos Yadlin. "The Mabam Strategy: Israel, Iran, Syria (and Russia)", **Jewish Review of Books**, Spring 2019,

<https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/5205/the-mabam-strategy-israel-iran-syria-and-russia/>, (05.06.2020).

Henkel, Sarah. “The Difficult Normalization of Relations Between Arab Countries and Bashar al-Assad”, **SWP Journal Review**, 01.10.2020, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/journal\\_review/2020JR01\\_ArabCountriesAssad.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/journal_review/2020JR01_ArabCountriesAssad.pdf), (01.10.2020).

Hoffman, Frank. “Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars”, **Potomac Institute for Policy Studies**, 29.12.2007, <https://potomac institute.org/reports/19-reports/1163-conflict-in-the-21st-century-the-rise-of-hybrid-wars>, (07.12.2020).

Hoffman, Max. “Flashpoints in U.S.-Turkey Relations in 2021”, **Center for American Progress**, 19.01.2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2021/01/19/494738/flashpoints-u-s-turkey-relations-2021/>, (19.01.2021).

Hokayem, Emile. “Reassuring Gulf Partners While Recalibrating U.S. Security Policy”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 18.05.2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/18/reassuring-gulf-partners-while-recalibrating-u.s.-security-policy-pub-84522>, (18.05.2021).

Holland, Steve and Jeff Mason. “Obama, In Dig at Putin Calls Russia Regional Power”, **Reuters**, 25.03.2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-weakness-idUSBREA2O19J20140325>, (15.03.2021)

Holliday, Joseph. “The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Cold War”, **Institute for the Study of War**, 30.03.2013, <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/TheAssadRegime-web.pdf>, (30.03.2013).

Holmquist, Erika and John Rydqvist. “The Future of Regional Security in the Middle East: Four Scenarios”, **Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI)**, 30.04.2016, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--4267--SE>, (07.06.2020).

Hornby, Lucy. "China Paper Slams U.S. Role for In Iran Unrest", **Reuters**, 24.01.2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uschinausinternetidUSTRE60N0V320100124>, (24.01.2010).

Hrabina, Jozef. "The Year of Crises: How 2020 Will Reshape the Structure of International Relations", **Russia in Global Affairs**, 30.03.2021, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/2020-international-relations/>, (30.03.2021).

Huasheng, Zhaao and Andrey Kortunov. "The Coming Bipolarity and Its Implications: Views from China and Russia", **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 23.11.2020, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-coming-bipolarity-and-its-implications-views-from-china-and-russia/>, (23.11.2020).

Huasheng, Zhaao. "Russia and its Near Abroad: Challenges and Prospects", **Valdai Discussion Club**, 09.03.2021, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-and-its-near-abroad-challenges-and-prospect/>, (09.03.2021).

Hunter, Shireen. "Could Russia Get its Persian Gulf Port?", **LobeLog**, 13.08.2019, <https://lobelog.com/could-russia-get-its-persian-gulf-port/>, (13.08.2020).

Hurriyet Daily News. "Turkey Thanks Putin for Unconditional Support over Coup attempt", **Hurriyet Daily News**, 25.07.2016, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-thanks-putin-for-unconditional-support-over-coup-attempt---102062>, (11.05.2021).

Husain, Shakir. "Deceitful Western Polemics against Turkey", **The Daily Sabah**, 28.11.2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2019/11/28/deceitful-western-polemics-against-turkey>, (28.11.2019).

Ibish, Hussein. "The Debate over the U.S. Military Role in the Gulf", **The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington**, 31.08.2021, <https://agsiw.org/debate-over-us-military-role-gulf/>, (31.08.2021).

Iddon, Paul. "Why Turkey Isn't Going to Sell its Russian S-400 Missiles to the United States", **Forbes**, 02.07.2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paul-iddon/2020/07/02/why-turkey-wouldnt-sell-its-russian-s-400-missiles-to-the-united-states/#3aaba0f8516a>, (02.07.2020).

Idiz, Semih. "How Likely is Turkey's International Charm Offensive to Succeed?" **Al Monitor**, 26.03.2021. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/03/how-likely-turkeys-international-charm-offensive-succeed>, (26.03.2021).

Idiz, Semih. "U.S.-Turkey Relations Set to Remain Loveless, Transactional", **Al Monitor**, 24.06.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/us-turkey-ties-set-remain-loveless-transactional>, (24.06.2021).

Ikenberry, John. "Obama's Pragmatic Internationalism", **The American Interest**, 08.04.2014, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/04/08/obamas-pragmatic-internationalism/>, (08.07.2020).

Iran International TV. "Exclusive: Zarif Claims Soleimani Intervened in Diplomacy, Russia Wanted to Destroy JCPOA", **Iran International TV**, 25.04.2021, <https://old.iranintl.com/en/world/exclusive-zarif-claims-soleimani-intervened-diplomacy-russia-wanted-destroy-jcpoa>, (25.04.2021).

Iran International TV. "Iran's New Foreign Minister Says Negotiating with the US Not a Taboo", **Iran International TV**, 13.08.2021, <https://iranintl.com/en/world/iran-s-new-foreign-minister-says-negotiating-us-not-taboo>, (13.08.2021).

IRAS. "Shafei, Gholamreza: Iranian Pessimism towards Russia is one of the Reasons Hindering Further Economic Cooperation", **The Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies**, 04.05.2016, <http://www.iras.ir/en/doc/interview/1190/gholamreza-shafei-iranian-pessimism-towards-russia-is-one-of-the-reasons-hindering-further-economic-cooperation>, (07.07.2019).

IRIB News, “Trade between Iran and Russia Rises Despite External Conditions”, **IRIB News**, 14.02.2020, <https://www.tribnews.ir/fa/news/2644348/>, (14.02.2020).

IRNA. “Iran Attends 6th Int’l Military Forum Army in Russia”, **Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)**, 23.08.2020, <https://en.irna.ir/news/83919838/Iran-attends-6th-Int-l-Military-Forum-Army-in-Russia>, (23.08.2020).

IRNA. “Iran, Russia to Sign Two Important Documents”, **Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)**, 12.04.2021, <https://en.irna.ir/news/84292481/Iran-Russia-to-sign-two-important-documents>, (12.04.2021).

IRNA. “Iran’s Initiative Can Help End Karabakh Conflict: Deputy FM”, **Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)**, 17.11.2020, <https://en.irna.ir/news/84096019/Iran-s-initiative-can-help-end-Karabakh-conflict-Deputy-FM>, (17.11.2020).

Isachenkov, Vladimir and Nataliya Vasilyeva. “Russia’s Syria Talks End with Plan to Draft New Constitution”, **The Associated Press**, 31.01.2018, <https://apnews.com/e7a72b1dbdbb4d05bb69dcd3c6dbd3ac/Russia%27s-Syria-talks-end-with-plan-to-draft-new-constitution>, (31.01.2018).

Islamic Republic of Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Statement on 20th Anniversary of Iran-Russia Cooperation Treaty”, **Islamic Republic of Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, 12.03.2021, <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/63144-2/statement-on-20th-anniversary-of-iran-russia-cooperation-treaty>, (12.03.2021).

Issaev, Leonid and Nikolay Kozhanov. “Diversifying Relationships: Russian Policy Toward GCC”, **International Politics**, 27.02.2021, <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1057/s41311-021-00286-4.pdf>, (27.02.2021).

Issaev, Leonid and Serafim Yuriev. “The Christian Dimension of Russia’s Middle East Policy”, **Al-Sharq Forum**, 30.03.2017, <https://www.hse.ru/mirror/pubs/share/217045866>, (28.09.2020).



Jensen, Donald. "Russia in the Middle East: A New Front in the Information War", **Jamestown Foundation**, 20.12.2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-middle-east-new-front-information/>, (29.12.2019).

Jones, Seth, Danika Newlee and Edmund Xavier Loughran. "Moscow's War in Syria", **Center for Strategic & International Studies**, 12.05.2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/moscows-war-syria>, (12.05.2020).

Jones, Seth. "Moscow's War in Syria", **Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)**, 12.05.2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/moscows-war-syria>, (12.05.2020).

Joseph Holliday, "The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Cold War", **Institute for the Study of War**, 30.03.2013, <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/TheAssadRegime-web.pdf>, (17.08.2020).

Kagan, Frederick, Nicholas Heras, Kyra Rauschenbach and Jason Zhou. **Institute for the Study of War**, 08.01. 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/background-iranian-escalation-timeline>, (08.01. 2020).

Kamrava, Mehran. "Accessing the Multipolarity and Instability in the Middle East", **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, 13.12.2018, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/11/multipolarity-and-instability-in-the-middle-east/>, (17.10.2020).

Karaganov, Sergei. "2016 - A Victory of Conservative Realism", **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 27.02.2017, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/2016-a-victory-of-conservative-realism/>, (10.04.2020).

Kardaş, Şaban and Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı. "A Dual Framework for the Turkey-U.S. Security Relationship", **The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS)**, 19.03.2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/dual-framework-turkey-us-security-relationship>, (19.03.2021).

Karlin, Mara and Tamara Cofman Wittes. "How to Do More with Less in the Middle East", **Foreign Affairs**, 15.09.2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-09-15/how-do-more-less-middle-east>, (15.09.2020).

Kasapoğlu, Can and Barış Kirdemir. "The Rising Drone Power: Turkey on The Eve of its Military Breakthrough", **Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies**, 01.06.2018, <https://edam.org.tr/en/the-rising-drone-power-turkey-on-the-eve-of-its-military-breakthrough/>, (05.08.2019).

Katz, Mark N. "Russia Benefits from Trump's Iran Deal Withdrawal", **The Arab Weekly**, 15.05.2018, <https://the arabweekly.com/russia-benefits-trumps-iran-deal-withdrawal>, (17.08.2020).

Katz, Mark N. "Supporting Opposing Sides Simultaneously: Russia's Approach to the Gulf and the Middle East", **Al Jazeera Center for Studies**, 23.08.2019, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/08/supportopposingsidessimultaneously-russias-approach-gulf-middle-east-180823104054250.html>, (23.08.2019).

Kavalek, Tomas and Filip Sommer. "Russian Encroachment in Arab Countries Since 2011", **New Direction**, 30.12.2018, <https://newdirection.online/2018-publications-pdf/NDreportCZ-Kavalek.pdf>, (19.04.2021).

Kavalski, Emilian. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. **Cambridge University Press Book Review**, 2013. [https://inspirejournal.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/kavalski01\\_regions\\_and\\_powers\\_review.pdf](https://inspirejournal.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/kavalski01_regions_and_powers_review.pdf), (26.08.2021).

Kelkitli, Fatma Aslı. "Saudi-Iranian Entanglements in the Persian Gulf: Is Rapprochement Possible?", **The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations**, Vol. 47, 2016, pp. 23-44.

Khlebnikov, Alexey. "Russia and Egypt: A Precarious Honeymoon", **Alshargh Forum**, 24.09.2019, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2019/09/24/russia-and-egypt-a-precarious-honeymoon/>, (16.09.2020).

Khlebnikov, Alexey. "Russia Looks to the Middle East to Boost Arms Exports", **Middle East Institute**, 08.04.2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-looks-middle-east-boost-arms-exports>, (08.04.2019).

Khodabandeh-Loui, Hadi. "Would Iran Confront Turkey in Idlib Frontier?" **Anadolu Agency**, 05.03.2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/would-iran-confront-turkey-in-the-idlib-frontier/1755905>, (05.03.2020).

Kilic, Baris. "Turkey, Iran agree to take steps against terrorist PKK", **Anadolu Agency**, 08.09.2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkey-iran-agree-to-take-steps-against-terrorist-pkk/1966973>, (08.09.2020).

Kissinger, Henry. "Henry Kissinger on the Assembly of a New World Order," **Wall Street Journal**, 29.08.2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/henry-kissinger-on-the-assembly-of-a-new-world-order-1409328075>, (11.09.2020).

Kofman, Michael and Matthew Rojansky. "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?" **Military Review**, 30.01.2018, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/ArmyPressOnlineJournal/documents/Rojansky-v2.pdf>, (17.07.2020).

Kortunov, Andrey. "Between Polycentrism and Bipolarity", **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 04.09.2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/between-polycentrism-and-bipolarity/>, (04.09.2019).

Kortunov, Andrey. "Meeting Security Challenges in the Gulf: Ideal Solutions and Practical Steps", **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 14.05.2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/meeting-security-challenges-in-the-gulf-ideal-solutions-and-practical-steps/>, (14.05.2021).

Kortunov, Andrey. "Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Achievements and Limitations", **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 22.07.2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/russian-foreign-policy-in-the-middle-east-achievements-and-limitations/>, (22.07.2019).

Kortunov, Andrey. "The Astana Model: Methods and Ambitions of Russian Political Action, In The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition", **Atlantic Council**, 30.12.2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MENA-Region-Great-Power-Competition-Report-Web-2.pdf>, (16.10.2020).

Korybko, Andrew. "The Geostrategic Challenges of Russia's "Ummah Pivot"", **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 24.06.2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-geostrategic-challenges-of-russia-s-ummah-pivot/>, (24.06.2021).

Korybko, Andrew. "Towards Increasingly Complex Multipolarity: Scenario for the Future", **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, 11.06.2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/columns/global-governance-and-world-politics/towards-increasingly-complex-multipolarity-scenario-for-the-future/>, (11.06.2021).

Kozhanov, Nikolay. "Russian Policy Across the Middle East: motivation and Methods", **Chatham House**, 21.02.2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/02/russian-policy-across-middle-east>, (16.09.2020).

Kozhanov, Nikolay. "Understanding the Revitalization of Russian-Iranian Relations", **Carnegie Moscow Center**, 30.05.2015, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP\\_Kozhanov\\_web\\_Eng.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Kozhanov_web_Eng.pdf), (30.03.2020).

Krastev, Ivan and Stephen Holmes. "Russia's Aggressive Isolationism", **The American Interest**, 10.12.2014, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/12-10/russias-aggressive-isolationism/>, (13.10.2020).

Krickovic, Andrej. "Russia's Challenge: A Declining Power's Quest for Status", **Ponars Eurasia**, 12.11.2018, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/russia-s-challenge-a-declining-power-s-quest-for-status-d66/>, (17.09.2020).

Kugelman, Michael. "Turkey Looks to Expand Footprint in Afghanistan", **Foreign Policy**, 17.06.2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/17/turkey-afghanistan-footprint-us-withdrawal-security/>, (17.06.2021).

Kuzio, Taras. "Turkey Forges a New Geo-Strategic Axis from Azerbaijan to Ukraine", **Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)**, 18.11.2020, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/turkey-forges-new-geo-strategic-axis-azerbaijan-ukraine>, (18.11.2020).

Kuznetsov, Vasily, Vitaly Naumkin and Irina Zvyagelskaya. "Russia in the Middle East: The Harmony of Polyphony", **Valdai Discussion Club**, 21.05.2018, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/report-russia-in-the-middle-east/>, (10.04.2020).

Labott, Elise. "John Kerry: Some Sanctions Relief Money for Iran will Go to Terrorism", **CNN**, 21.01.2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/21/politics/john-kerry-money-iran-sanctions-terrorism/index.html>, (11.09.2020).

Larrabee, Stephen and Alireza Nader. "Turkish-Iranian Relations in a Changing Middle East", **RAND Corporation**, 30.08.2013, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR258.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR258.html), (12.17.2020).

Lavrov, Sergei. "The World at a Crossroads and a System of International Relations for the Future", **Russia in Global Affairs**, 24.12.2019, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-world-at-a-crossroads-and-a-system-of-international-relations-for-the-future/>, (24.12.2019).

Lawlore, Katherine. "Iraq 2021-2022: A Forecast", **The Institute for the Study of War**, 30.06.2021, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Iraq%20-%20A%20Forecast.pdf>, (30.06.2021).

Lecha, Eduard Soler. “Liquid Alliances in the Middle East”, 29.03.2017, **Barcelona Centre for International Affairs**, [https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/notes\\_internacionals/n1\\_169/liquid\\_alliances\\_in\\_the\\_middle\\_east](https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionals/n1_169/liquid_alliances_in_the_middle_east), (19.07.2020).

Lederer, Edith. “Russia Calls for Collective Security in Gulf, US Blames Iran”, **Associated Press**, 21.10.2020, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-iran-persian-gulf-tensions-russia-united-nations-a51594cbca5517c27524e6d621b9a015>, (21.10.2020).

Lindenstrauss, Gallia and Sima Shine. “The Failed Coup Attempt in Turkey: A Boost for Iran-Turkey Relations”, **Institute for National Security Studies**, 31.07.2016. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-failed-coup-attempt-in-turkey-a-boost-for-iran-turkey-relations/>, (20.12.2020).

Lindgaard, Jacob. “Walking a Tight Rope, The U.S.-Turkey Balancing Act is Becoming Increasingly Untenable”, **War on the Rocks**, 30.10.2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/walking-a-thin-rope-the-u-s-turkey-balancing-act-is-becoming-increasingly-untenable/>, (30.11.2019).

Liptak, Kevin. “Biden Officially Recognizes the Massacre of Armenians in World War I as Genocide”, **CNN**, 24.04.2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/24/politics/armenian-genocide-biden-erdogan-turkey/index.html>, (24.04.2021).

Lister, Charles. “Syria: Two Viewpoints, in The Biden Administration and the Middle East: Policy Recommendations for a Sustainable Way Forward”, **Middle East Institute**, 10.03.2021, <https://www.mei.edu/middle-east-policy-recommendations>, (10.03.2021).

Lo, Bobo. “Going Legit? The Foreign Policy of Vladimir Putin”, **Lowy Institute**, 17.09.2018, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/going-legit-foreign-policy-vladimir-putin>, (19.09.2021).

Lund, Aaron. "Russia in the Middle East", **The Swedish Institute of International Affairs**, 16.03.2019, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2019/ui-paper-no.-2-2019.pdf>, (17.03.2021).

Lynch, Charlotte, Shahram Chubin Jerrold Green, David Thaler, Alireza Nader and Frederic Wehrey. "Mullas, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics", **RAND Corporation**, 29.12.2010, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG878.html>, (05.07.2020).

Lynch, Marc. "Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 09.10.2015, <https://carnegieendowment.org/-2015/10/09/obama-and-middle-east-rightsizing-u.s.-role-pub-61582>, (15.06.2020).

Lynch, Marc. "The New Arab Order: Power and Violence in Today's Middle East", **Foreign Affairs**, 14.08.2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-08-14/new-arab-order>, (19.03.2020).

MacKinley, Michael. "We All Lost Afghanistan", **Foreign Affairs**, 16.08.2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-16/we-all-lost-afghanistan-taliban>, (16.08.2021).

Magdy, Samy. "US: Turkey-sent Syrian Fighters Generate Backlash in Libya", 02.09.2020, **Associated Press**, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-africa-679a6d6fc549bda59f8627d91d9a363c>, (02.09.2020).

Magid, Aaron and Mohammad Barhouma. "New Political and Security Challenges for Jordan and Gulf States After U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 17.09.2021, <https://carnegieendowment.-org/sada/85367>, (17.09.2021).

Maher, Nora. "Balancing Deterrence: Iran-Israel Relations in a Turbulent Middle East, **Review of Economics and Political Science**, 14.03.2020,

<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/REPS-06-2019-0085/full/html>, (14.03.2020).

Malmvig, Helle, Quero Jordi and Eduard Soler I Lacha. “The Contemporary Regional Order, in Eduard Soler I Lecha et al, eds., Reconceptualizing Orders in the MENA Region. The Analytical Framework of the MENARA Project”, **MENARA**, 30.11.2016, [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara\\_cp\\_1.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_cp_1.pdf), (20.10.2020).

Mamedov, Ruslan. “Russia as a Security Provider in the Middle East: Understanding the Limits and Opportunities”, **Institut Für Sicherheitspolitik**, 12.08.2019, <https://www.institutfuersicherheit.at/russia-as-a-security-provider-in-the-middle-east-understanding-the-limits-and-opportunities/>, (09.07.2021).

Mamedov, Ruslan. “Zangezur Corridor to Provide New Link Between Turkey and Azerbaijan”, **Anadolu News Agency**, 01.06.2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/zangezur-corridor-to-provide-new-link-between-turkey-azerbaijan/2260088>, (01.06.2021).

Manis, Athanasios and Tomáš Kaválek. “The Catch-22 in Nineveh: The Regional Security Complex Dynamics between Turkey and Iran”, **Middle East Research Institute**, 29.12.2016, [http://www.merik.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/12/Policy\\_note\\_vol3.No4\\_.pdf](http://www.merik.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/12/Policy_note_vol3.No4_.pdf), (12.11.2019).

Mardasov, Anton. “Putin Appoints Third Special Envoy to Syria”, **Al Monitor**, 27.05.2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/05/russia-putin-new-envoy-syria-damascus-conflict-efimov.html>, (27.05.2020).

Mardasov, Anton. “What’s Next for Russia-Iran Military Partnership?” **Al-Monitor**, 27.08.2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/08/iran-russia-military-partnership-army-2020-moscow-un-arms.html>, (27.08.2020).



Mardasov, Anton. “What’s Next for Russia’s Relations with Hezbollah?” **Al Monitor**, 18.03.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/03/whats-next-russias-relations-hezbollah>, (18.03.2021).

Marks, Jesse. “China’s Pursuit of a “Strategic Fulcrum” in the Middle East”, **Middle East Institute**, 15.09.2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-pursuit-strategic-fulcrum-middle-east>, (15.09.2020).

Maziad, Marwa. “Turkey and Egypt: Time for Normalization? Not Quite Yet”, **Moshe Dayan Center**, 30.02.2021, <https://dayan.org/content/turkey-and-egypt-time-normalization-not-quite-yet>, (30.02.2021).

McCabe, Steve, et al. “The New Middle East: A Progressive Approach”, **Labor Friends of Israel**, 30.07.2021, <https://www.lfi.org.uk/publications/the-new-middle-east/>, (30.07.2021).

McVann, Christine. “Reshaping U.S. Force Posture in the Middle East”, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 10.03.2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reshaping-us-force-posture-middle-east>, (10.03.2021).

Mead, Walter Russell. “The End of the Wilsonian Era: Why Liberal Internationalism Failed”, **Foreign Affairs**, 08.12.2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-12-08/end-wilsonian-era>, (08.12.2020).

Mearsheimer, John and Stephen Walt. “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior US Grand Strategy”, **Foreign Affairs**, 13.06.2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>, (13.06.2020).

Mearsheimer, John. “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault”, **Foreign Affairs**, 18.08.2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>, (27.08.2020).

Mehr News Agency, “Iran-Russia Trade Volume to Grow Further in 2017”, **Mehr News Agency**, 18.04.2017, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/124874/Iran-Russia-trade-volume-to-grow-further-in-2017>, (11.08.2020).

Meyer, Josh. “The Secret Backstory of How Obama Let Hezbollah Off the Hook”, **Politico**, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2017/obama-hezbollah-drug-trafficking-investigation/>, (30.11.2020).

Middle East Monitor. “Iran FM voices support for Turkey-backed Libya government”, **Middle East Monitor**, 17.06.2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200617-iran-fm-voices-support-for-turkey-backed-libya-government/>, (17.06.2020).

Miller, Andrew. and Richard Sokolsky. “Arab NATO: An Idea Whose Time Has Not (And May Never) Come”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 21.08.2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/21/arab-nato-idea-whose-time-has-not-and-may-never-come-pub-77086>, (21.08.2019).

Moscow Times. “Russia Accuses U.S. of ‘Trampling’ Norms of International Law in Backing out of Iran Nuclear Deal”, **Moscow Times**, 09.05.2018, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/05/09/russia-accuses-us-trampling-international-law-backing-out-iran-nuclear-deal-a61395>, (10.09.2021).

Murciano, Gil. “Israel vis-à-vis Iran in Syria: The Perils of Active Containment”, **German Institute for International and Security Affairs**, 29.10.2017, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/israel-and-irans-growing-influence-in-syria/>, (07.08.2019).

Muyassar, Suleiman and Mahjoob Zweiri. “Iran Hormuz Peace Initiative and the Neighboring Countries: The Helsinki Model”, **Gulf Insights**, 11.11.2019, [https://www.qu.edu.qa/static\\_file/qu/research/Gulf%20Studies/documents/Hormuz%20Initiative%20-%20No11%20gulf%20insight%20english%20version.pdf](https://www.qu.edu.qa/static_file/qu/research/Gulf%20Studies/documents/Hormuz%20Initiative%20-%20No11%20gulf%20insight%20english%20version.pdf), (11.11.2019).

Nader, Alireza. "Iran's Role in Iraq: Room for U.S.-Iran Cooperation", **RAND Corporation**, 29.12.2015, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE151/RAND\\_PE151.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE151/RAND_PE151.pdf), (10.10.2019).

Nadimi, Farzin. "Iran Flexes its Muscles after the Kurdish Referendum", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 10.10.2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-flexes-its-muscles-after-the-kurdish-referendum>, (20.10.2020).

Nakhoul, Samia. "Iran Expands Regional 'Empire' Ahead of Nuclear Deal", **Reuters**, 23.03.2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-iran-region-insight-idUSKBN0MJ1G520150323>, (30.11.2020).

Nasr, Vali. "The Middle East's Next Conflicts Won't be Between Arab States and Iran", **Foreign Policy**, 02.03.2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/02/the-middle-easts-next-conflicts-wont-be-between-arab-states-and-iran/>, (02.03.2021).

NATO. "NATO Hold Air Defense Exercise in the Black Sea", **NATO**, 03.07.2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185677.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185677.htm), (03.07.2021).

Nicu, Popescu and Stanislav Secieru. "Russia's Return to the Middle East Building sandcastles?", **EU Institute for Security Studies**, 29.07.2018, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP\\_146.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_146.pdf), (20.04.2021).

Noueihed, Lin and Zaid Sabah. "Arab League Condemns Iran, Calls Hezbollah a Terrorist Group", **Bloomberg**, 19.11.2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-11-19/arab-league-labelslebanonshezbollahterroristorganization-ja77de7b>, (12.12.2020).

Nuruzzaman, Mohammed. "What Comes Next for Iran's Defense Doctrine", **National Interest**, 10.11.2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/what-comes-next-irans-defense-doctrine-18360>, (19.10.2020).

Official Website of the President of Russia. “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly”, **Official Website of the President of Russia (Kremlin Website)**, 04.12.2014, <http://eng.Kremlin.ru/transcripts/23341>, (17.05.2020).

Orton, Kyle. “Zionism is Making Us Stupid: The Russian Relationship with Israel from the Soviets to Putin”, **Medium**, 12.12.2018, <https://kyleworton.medium.-com/zionism-is-making-us-stupid-the-russian-relationship-with-israel-from-the-soviets-to-putin-668f080ef016>, (12.12.2018).

Ostovar, Afshon. “Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 30.11.2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/30/sectarian-dilemmas-in-iranian-foreign-policy-when-strategy-and-identity-politics-collide-pub-66288>, (11.09.2020).

Outzen, Rich. “Deal, Drones, and National Will: The New Era in Turkish Power Projection”, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 09.07.2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deals-drones-and-national-will-new-era-turkish-power-projection>, (09.07.2021).

Ozdal, Habibe, Irina Svistunova and Irina Zvyagelskaya. “Russia and Turkey: Partners or Adversaries”, **Friedrich Ebert Stiftung**, 29.06.2021, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/moskau/18044.pdf>, (29.06.2021).

Ozdemir, Omer Behram. “Three Fronts of Iranian-backed Militia in Deir ez-Zor”, **ORSAM-Center for Middle Eastern Studies**, 22.02.2021, <https://www.orsam.org.tr/en/three-fronts-of-iranian-backed-militia-in-deir-ez-zor/>, (22.02.2021).

Pamuk, Humeyra and Phil Stewart. “U.S. Halts Secretive Drone Program with Turkey over Syria Incursion”, **Reuters**, 05.02.2020, <https://www.reuters.com-/article/us-turkey-security-usa-drone-exclusive-idUSKBN1ZZ1AB>, (05.02.2020).

Pamuk, Humeyra. “Turkey’s Erdogan Says Can’t Tolerate Iran’s Bid to Dominate Middle East”, **Reuters**, 26.03.2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-turkey-idUSKBN0MM2N820150326>, (17.06.2020).

Parker, John. “Qassem Soleimani: Moscow’s Syria Decision, Myth and Reality”, **The Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS)**, 04.02.2020, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2074132/qassem-soleimani-moscows-syria-decision-myth-and-reality/>, (04.02.2020).

Pikayev, Alexander. “Why Russia Supported Sanctions Against Iran”, **James Martin Center for Non-proliferation Studies**, 23.06.2010, <https://nonproliferation.org/why-russia-supported-sanctions-against-iran/>, (13.10.2020).

Pinchuk, Denis. “Khamenei Says Iran, Russia Should Cooperate to Isolate U.S., Foster Middle East Stability”, **Reuters**, 01.11. 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-russia-putin-idUSKBN1D14CK>, (17.11. 2019).

Politi, James. “The Biden Doctrine: The US Hunts for a New Place in the World”, **Financial Times**, 03.09.2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/2a88ac0b-d3d7-4159-b7f5-41f602737288>, (03.09.2021).

Polyanskiy, Dmitry. “Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, Press-Conference by the Charge d’affair of Russian Federation Dmitry Polyanskiy”, **Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations**, 08.08.2019, [https://russiaun.ru/en/news/press\\_conference080819](https://russiaun.ru/en/news/press_conference080819), (08.08.2019).

Pomeroy, Robin. “Iran hopes Gaddafi domino will fall the right way”, **Reuters**, 25.08.2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia58970320110825>, (25.08.2011 ).

Popescu, Nicu and Stanislav Secieru. “Russia’s Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles”, **European Union Institute for Security Studies**, 30.06.2018,

<https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/russia's-return-middle-east-building-sandcastles>, (30.03.2020).

Przyborowski, Emily. "Is Yemen Turkey's Next Frontier? The Meddah," **Turkish Heritage Organization**, 29.05.2021, <https://medium.com/meddah-a-u-s-turkey-storytelling-project/is-yemen-turkeys-next-frontier-832482fbb03d>, (29.05.2021).

Rabinovich, Itamar. "How Iran's Regional Ambitions Have Developed Since 1979", **Brookings**, 24.01.2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/24/how-irans-regional-ambitions-have-developed-since-1979/>, (24.01.2019).

Radio Free Europe, "Russia, Iran Not Allies in Syria, Says Senior Russian Diplomat", **Radio Free Europe**, 27.01.2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/russian-diplomat-ryabkov-says-iran-russis-not-allies-in-syria/29733774.html>, (27.01.2019).

Radio Free Europe, "Russian, Chinese Banks Refuse Transactions with Iran", **Radio Free Europe**, 05.08.2020, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/chinese-russian-banks-refuse-transactions-with-iran/30767647.html>, (05.08.2020).

Radio Free Europe. "General Admits Soleimani's Role in Syria's Civil War Long Before Jihadists Emerged", **Radio Free Europe**, 22.01.2020, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/general-admits-soleimani-s-role-in-syria-s-civil-war-long-before-extremists-emerged/30390923.html>, (22.01.2020).

Radio Free Europe. "Zarif: Ta Dah Sale Ayande Etekaye Ravabete Khareji Iran be Chin va Rusiye Ast", **Radio Farda**, 04.04.2021, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran-fm-javad-zarif-defends-25-year-agreement-with-china/31186425.html>, (21.05.2021).

Raifi, Oula. "In the Service of Ideology: Iran's Religious and Socioeconomic Activities in Syria", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 14.03.2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/service-ideology-irans-religious-and-socioeconomic-activities-syria>, (14.03.2021).

Raifi, Oula. “What is Iran Up to in Deir al Zour”, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 10.10.2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-iran-deir-al-zour>, (10.10.2019).

Rakov, Daniel and Orna Mizrahi. “Enhanced Russian Involvement in Lebanon?”, **The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)**, 28.04.2021, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/lebanon-russia/>, (28.04.2021).

Ramani, Samuel. “An Integral Partner: The Growing Ties between Amman and Moscow”, 18.02.2021, **Middle East Institute**, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/integral-partner-growing-ties-between-amman-and-moscow>, (18.02.2021).

Ramani, Samuel. “Russia’s Efforts to Expand the Astana Process in Syria”, 07.10.2019, **Middle East Institute**, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-efforts-expand-astana-process-syria>, (30.11.2020).

Raynolds, Michael. “Turkey and Russia: A Remarkable Rapprochement”, **War on The Rocks**, 24.10.2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/turkey-and-russia-a-remarkable-rapprochement/>, (24.10.2019).

Redondo, Raul. “Turkey Sets its Sights on Yemen”, **Atalayar**, 22.06.2020, <https://atalayar.com/en/content/turkey-sets-its-sights-yemen>, (22.06.2020).

Reeve, Richard and Paul Rogers. “Russia’s Intervention in Syria: Implications for Western Engagement”, **Oxford Research Group**, 20.10.2015, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/194291/PR%20briefing%20October%202015.pdf>, (19.03.2020).

Reuters. “Coronavirus and Sanctions Hit Iran’s Support of Proxies in Iraq”, **Reuters**, 02.07.2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/usiraniraqproxiesinsightidUSKBN2432EY>, (02.07.2020).

Reuters. “Erdogan Says It’s Unacceptable that Turkey Cannot Have Nuclear Weapons”, **Reuters**, 04.09.2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-nuclear-erdogan-idUSKCN1VP2QN>, (04.09.2019).

Reuters. “Exclusive: Russian Hiring of Syrians to Fight in Libya Accelerated in May”, **Reuters**, 07.06.2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-syria-russia-exclusive-idUSKBN23E06H>, (07.06.2020).

Reuters. “Iran Confirms Talks with Saudi Arabia, Promises Best Efforts”, **Reuters**, 10.05.2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-confirms-talks-with-saudi-arabia-promises-best-efforts-2021-05-10/>, (10.05.2021).

Reuters. “Iran, Russia Navies Start Exercises in Indian Ocean”, **Reuters**, 16.02.2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-russia-drill-int-idUSKBN2AG1EE>, (16.02.2021).

Reuters. “Iran’s Final Report Blames Air Defense Operator Error for Ukraine Plane Crash”, **Reuters**, 17.03.2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-crash-ukraine-idUSKBN2B92CL>, (17.03.2021).

Reuters. “Iran’s Supreme Leader says Americans will be Expelled from Iraq and Iran”, **Reuters**, 17.05.2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-khamanei-idUSKBN22T0PF>, (17.05.2020).

Reuters. “Iranian Leader Ayatollah Khamenei Sent Obama Secret Letter”, **Reuters**, 14.02.2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/usiranannuclearusaidUSKBN0LI01220150214>, (23.09.2020).

Reuters. “Regional Rival Iran Expresses Support for Turkey over Coup Attempt”, **Reuters**, 16.07.2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-iran-reaction/regional-rival-iran-expresses-support-for-turkey-over-coup-attempt-idUSKCN0ZW0LM>, (16.07.2016).



Reuters. "Russia Announces 'De-escalation Zone' North of Syria's City of Homs", **Reuters**, 03.08.2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-idUSKBN1AJ0S6>, (10.10.2020).

Reuters. "Russia Warns Turkey over Ties with Ukraine", **Reuters**, 24.05.2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-warns-turkey-over-ties-with-ukraine-2021-05-24/>, (24.05.2021).

Reuters. "Special Report: 'Time to Take out our Swords' - Inside Iran's Plot to Attack Saudi Arabia", **Reuters**, 25.11.2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks-iran-special-rep-idUSKBN1XZ16H>, (10.08.2020).

Reuters. "Turkey's Erdogan Expresses Regret over Downing of Russian Jet: Spokesman", **Reuters**, 27.06.2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-erdogan/turkeys-erdogan-expresses-regret-over-downing-of-russian-jet-spokesman-idUSKCN0ZD1WQ>, (11.06.2021).

Reuters. "Turkey's Erdogan says Attack on Syria's Idlib would Cause Humanitarian, Security Risks", **Reuters**, 11.09.2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-security/turkeys-erdogan-says-attack-on-syrias-idlib-would-cause-humanitarian-security-risks-idUSKCN1LQ2OM>, (17.07.2021).

Reuters. "Turkish, Russian officials nearing deal on Libya ceasefire, political process - minister" **Reuters**, 16.09.2020, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-libya-security-turkey-russia-idUKKBN2673FR>, (16.09.2020).

Reuters. "U.S., Russia Clinch Syria Deal, Aim for Truce from Monday", **Reuters**, 09.09.2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kerry/u-s-russia-clinch-syria-deal-aim-for-truce-from-monday-idUSKCN11F0HC>, (21.11.2020).

Reuters. "UAE Offers Egypt \$3 billion Support, Saudis \$5 billion", **Reuters**, 09.07.2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-protests-loan/uae-offers-egypt-3-billion-support-saudis-5-billion-idUSBRE9680H020130709>, (25.10.2020).

Rhodes, Ben. “Inside the White House During the Syrian 'Red Line' Crisis”, **The Atlantic**, 03.06.2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/inside-the-white-house-during-the-syrian-red-line-crisis/561887/>, (04.09.2020).

RIA Novosti. “Putin: Measures to Protect Christians in the Middle East are not Sufficient”, **RIA Novosti**, 16.04.2015, <https://ria.ru/world/20150416/1058989211.%20html>, (28.05.2021).

Rose, Gideon. “The Post-American Middle East: What’s Inside”, **Foreign Affairs**, 20.10.2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2015-10-20/post-american-middle-east>, (09.07.2021).

Rubin, Michael. “Iran-Russia Relations”, **American Enterprise Institute**, 01.07.2016, <https://www.aei.org/articles/iran-russia-relations/>, (08.11.2020).

Rugge, Fabio. “Confronting An ‘Axis of Cyber’? China, Iran, North Korea, Russia in Cyberspace”, **Italian Institute for International Studies**, 29.10.2018, [https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/cyber\\_def\\_web2.pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/cyber_def_web2.pdf), (10.10.2021).

Rumbaugh, Wes and Shaan Shaikh. “The Air and Missile War in Nagorno-Karabakh: Lessons for the Future of Strike and Defense”, **Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)**, 08.12.2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/air-and-missile-war-nagorno-karabakh-lessons-future-strike-and-defense>, (08.12.2020).

Rumer, Eugene. “Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 31.10.2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/31/russia-in-middle-east-jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none-pub-80233>, (31.10.2019).

Rumer, Eugene. "Russia, the Indispensable Nation in the Middle East", **Foreign Affairs**, 31.10.2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2019-10-31/russia-indispensable-nation-middle-east>, (31.10.2019).

Russian News Agency (TASS). "Putin Hails Jordan as Key Russian Partner in the Middle East", **TASS**, 03.10.2019, <https://tass.com/politics/1081269>, (03.10.2019).

Ryan, Curtis. "The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria", **Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)**, 20.04.2012, <https://merip.org/2012/03/the-new-arab-cold-war-and-the-struggle-for-syria/>, (07.11.2020).

Saban, Navvar. "Fact-box: Iranian Influence and Presence in Syria", **Atlantic Council**, 05.11.2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>, (05.11.2020).

Sachs, Natan. and Kevin Huggard. "Israel in the Middle East: The Next Two Decades", **Brookings**, 30.11.2020, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/FP\\_20201120\\_israel\\_me\\_sachs\\_huggard-1.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/FP_20201120_israel_me_sachs_huggard-1.pdf), (30.11.2020).

Sadeghi Haji, Dr Abdullah. "Enjoin What is Right and Forbid What is Wrong", Deputy of Ideological-Political Education of the Representative of the Supreme Leader in the IRGC (Zamzam Hedayat Publishers), Qom, 2016, No. 11, <http://bit.ly/3apzPMs> (20.11.2020).

Sadjadpour, Karim. "Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader", **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 10.03.2008, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2008/03/10/reading-khamenei-world-view-of-iran-s-most-powerful-leader-pub-19975>, (10.03.2020).

Sahakyan, Mher. "Iran's 'Look to the East Policy': Pivot Towards China and Eurasian Economic Union", 23.03.2021, **International Institute for Peace**, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03177190/document>, (23.03.2021).

Salem, Paul. "The Middle East in 2015 and Beyond: Trends and Drivers", **Middle East Institute**, 18.11.2014, Policy Focus, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/middle-east-2015-and-beyond-trends-and-drivers>, (18.11.2014).

Salem, Paul. "The Middle East: Evolution of a Broken Regional Order", **Carnegie Middle East Center**, 30.07.2008, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/158020/CME-C\\_9\\_salem\\_broken\\_order\\_final.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/158020/CME-C_9_salem_broken_order_final.pdf), (19.09.2020).

Samia Nakhoul. "Iran Expands Regional 'Empire' Ahead of Nuclear Deal, Reuters, 23.03.2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-iran-region-insight-idUSKBN0MJ1G520150323> , (15.08.2021).

Schanzer, Jonathan. "The Biggest Sanctions-Evasion in Recent History", **The Atlantic**, 04.01.2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/iran-turkey-gold-sanctions-nuclear-zarrab-atilla/549665/>, (07.08.2020).

Scheweller, Randall L. **Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest**, Columbia University Press: New York, 1998.

Semenov, Kirill. "Russian-Iranian Competition Heats Up in South Caucasus", **Al Monitor**, 15.10.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/russian-iranian-competition-heats-south-caucasus>, (15.10.2021).

Semenov, Kirill. "Will Russia, Turkey launch 'Syria Scenario' for Libya?" 03.01.2020, **Al-Monitor**, 03.01.2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/-2020/01/libya-syria-russia-turkey-astana.html>, (03.01.2020).

Shaar, Karam and Ali Fatollah-Nejad. "Iran's Credit Line to Syria: A Well that Never Runs Dry", 10.02.2020, **Atlantic Council**, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-credit-line-to-syria-a-well-that-never-runs-dry/>, (10.02.2020).

Shahla, Arsalan. "Iran has Spent as much as \$30 billion in Syria, Lawmaker Says", **Bloomberg**, 20.05.2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-20/iran-has-spent-as-much-as-30-billion-in-syria-lawmaker-says>, (20.05.2020).

Shariatinia, Mohsen. "Iran Sticks to 'Look to the East' Doctrine amid Frustration with Europe", **Al Monitor**, 07.06.2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019-06/iran-asia-look-to-east-china-india-japan-oil-exports-europe.html>, (07.07.2019).

Shiffrinson, Joshua and Stephen Wertheim. "Biden the Realist: The President's Foreign Policy Doctrine Has Been Hiding in Plain Sight", **Foreign Affairs**, 09.09.2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-09/biden-realist>, (09.09.2021).

Simon, Steven. "China and the Persian Gulf in the Aftermath of a U.S. Withdrawal", **Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft**, 21.09.2021, <https://quincyinst.org/report/china-and-the-persian-gulf-in-the-aftermath-of-a-u-s-withdrawal/>, (21.09.2021).

Singh, Michael. "Biden's Iran Dilemma", **Institute for National Security Studies**, 30.02.2021, [https://www.inss.org.il/wpcontent/uploads/2021/02/IranMonograph\\_e.pdf](https://www.inss.org.il/wpcontent/uploads/2021/02/IranMonograph_e.pdf), (30.02.2021).

Sinkaya, Bayram. "Turkey-Iran Relations since the JDP's came to Power", **Institut Français D'études Anatoliennes**, 29.12.2019. <https://books.openedition.org/if-eagd/3118?lang=en>, (29.12.2019).

SIPRI. "International Arms Transfers Level Off After Years of Sharp Growth; Middle Eastern Arms Imports Grow Most", **Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)**, 15.03.2021, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/international-arms-transfers-level-after-years-sharp-growth-middle-eastern-arms-imports-grow-most>, (15.03.2021).

Sly, Liz. "In the Middle East, Russia is back", **The Washington Post**, 05.12.2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-the-middle-east-russia-is-back/2018/12/04/e899df30-aaf1-11e8-9a7d-cd30504ff902\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-the-middle-east-russia-is-back/2018/12/04/e899df30-aaf1-11e8-9a7d-cd30504ff902_story.html), (12.06.2020).

Smith, Jeff. "Strategic Autonomy and U.S.-India Relations", **The Heritage Foundation**, 09.11.2020, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/commentary/strategic-autonomy-and-us-indian-relations>, (09.11.2020).

Spurlock, Joshua. "Emperor' Putin's Middle East, Russia's Ongoing Role in the Region, **Bridges for Peace**, 08.05.2018, <https://www.bridgesforpeace.com/article/emperor-putins-middle-east-russias-ongoing-role-in-the-region/>, (09.09.2020).

Stapleton, Bradford Ian. "The Problem with the Light Footprint", **Cato Institute**, 07.06.2016, <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/problem-light-footprint-shifting-tactics-lieu-strategy>, (10.10.2021).

Starodubtsev, Ivan. "100th Anniversary of Turkish-Russian Ties: Time to Talk More than Ever", **The Daily Sabah**, 03.06.2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/oped/100th-anniversary-of-turkish-russian-ties-time-to-talk-more-than-ever>, (03.06.2020).

Stein, Aaron. "Assessing the Biden Administration's Interim Syria Strategy", **Foreign Policy Research Institute**, 15.06.2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/06/assessing-the-biden-administrations-interim-syria-strategy/>, (15.06.2021).

Stein, Aaron. "Say Hello to Turkey's Little Friend: How Drone Help Level the Playing Field", **War On the Rocks**, 11.06.2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/say-hello-to-turkeys-little-friend-how-drones-help-level-the-playing-field/>, (11.06.2021).

Stepanova, Ekaterina. "Russia's Approach to the Conflict in Libya, the East-West Dimension and the Role of the OSCE, In Andrea Dessi and Ettore Greco, Search for Stability in Libya: OSCE's Role between Internal Obstacles and External Challenges",

**Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)**, 30.12.2018,  
[https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iairs\\_1.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iairs_1.pdf), (20.11.2020).

Stepanova, Ekaterina. “Russia’s Foreign and Security Policy in the Middle East: Entering the 2020s”, **Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)**, No. 20, 16 June 2020,  
<https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/russias-foreign-and-security-policy-middle-east-entering-2020s>, (07.01.2020).

Strobel, Warren. “Biden Re-Examining U.S. Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia, U.A.E.”, **The Wall Street Journal**, 27.01.2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-freezes-u-s-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia-uae-11611773191>, (27.01.2021).

Stronski, Paul. “A Difficult Balancing Act: Russia’s Role in the Eastern Mediterranean”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 28.06.2021,  
[https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Stronski\\_RussiaEastMed\\_final1.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Stronski_RussiaEastMed_final1.pdf),  
(28.06.2021).

Stronski, Paul. and Sokolsky, Richard. “The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 14.12.2017,  
<https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/12/14/return-of-global-russia-analytical-framework-pub-75003>, (18.02.2021).

Suchkov, Maxim. “Hosting Syria Talks in Sochi Presents Challenges for Russia”, **Al Monitor**, 17.01.2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/01/russia-challenge-national-dialogue-syria-iran-turkey.html>, (17.01.2018).

Sukhankin, Sergey. “Continuing War by Other Means’, the Case of Wagner, Russia’s Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East”, **Jamestown Foundation**, 13.07.2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-war-by-other-means-the-case-of-wagner-russias-premier-private-military-company-in-the-middle-east/>,  
(20.10.2020).

Tabatabaie, Adnan. "Iran's Political Shake-up and Ebrahim Raisi as President", **European Leadership Network**, 18.08.2021, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/irans-political-shake-up-and-ebrahim-raisi-as-president/>, (18.08.2021).

Tabler, Andrew. "The Search for a Syria Strategy", **Foreign Affairs**, 27.07.2021 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-07-27/search-syria-strategy>, (27.07.2021).

Takeyh, Ray. "Iran's Foreign Policy Driven by Identity", **National Public Radio (NPR)**, 28.08.2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/08/28/160185199/op-ed-irans-foreign-policy-driven-by-identity>, (10.09.2020).

Tanchum, Michael. "Turkey Advances in Africa against Franco-Emirati-Egyptian Entente", **Turkey Analyst**, 25.08.2020, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/646-turkey-advances-in-africa-against-franco-emirati-egyptian-entente.html>, (25.08.2020).

Tanchum, Michael. "Turkey's Rise as an Inter-Regional Power Requires Rapprochement with Egypt", **Turkey Analyst**, 29.05.2021, <https://turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/665-turkeys-rise-as-an-inter-regional-power-requires-rapprochement-with-egypt.html>, (29.05.2021).

Tastekin, Fehim. "PKK Remains Thorn in Side of Turkish-Iraqi Relations", **Al Monitor**, 23.12.2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/12/turkey-iraq-kurdistan-pkk-problem-mahkmour-camp-dohuk.html>, (23.12.2020).

Tastekin, Fehim. "Turkey Faces Rough Road to Normalization with Egypt", **Al Monitor**, 07.05.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/turkey-faces-rough-road-normalization-egypt>, (07.05.2021).



Tastekin, Fehim. “Turkey Plays Extra Time in Idlib Game with New ‘Army’ Plan”, **Al Monitor**, 17.04.2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04-/turkey-syria-russia-idlib-new-army-plan-cleanse-jihadis-hts.html>, (17.04.2020).

Tastekin, Fehim. “Turkish-Iranian Rivalry Heats up Over Mosul”, **Al Monitor**, 26.02.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/turkey-iran-iraq-sinjar-heats-up-turkish-iranian-rivalry.html>, (26.02.2021).

Tehran Times. “Baghdad Talks Pave the Way for Iranian-Saudi Rapprochement”, **Tehran Times**, 13.09.2021, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/465030/>, (13.09.2021).

Tehran Times. “Leader Highlights Quds Force’s in Strengthening Iran Foreign Policy”, **Tehran Times**, 02.05.2021, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/46-0529/Leader-highlights-Quds-Force-s-role-in-strengthening-Iran-foreign>, (02.05.2021).

Teibel, Amy. “Iran’s Rouhani Says U.S. Sanctions Cost Country \$200 Billion”, **Bloomberg**, 31.12.2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-12-31/iran-s-rouhani-says-u-s-sanctions-cost-country-200-billion>, (31.12.2019).

Tellis, Ashley. “The Return of U.S.-China Strategic Competition, in Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills, Strategic Asia 2020: US-China Competition for Global Influence”, **National Bureau of Asian Research**, 30.01.2020, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/SA\\_20\\_Tellis.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/SA_20_Tellis.pdf), (30.01.2020).

Thakur, Ramesh. “Syria a Symptom of a Broken International Order”, **The Strategist**, 16.04.2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/syria-symptom-broken-international-order/>, (10.04.2020).

The Associated Press. “Turkish, Saudi Leaders Speak by Phone Ahead of G20 Summit”, **The Associated Press**, 21.11.2020, <https://apnews.com/article/turkey->

saudi-arabia-istanbul-riyadh-summits-cf096fc947de167c72526f4f6cdd333a,  
(21.11.2020).

The Associated Press. “US Kills Iran’s Most Powerful General in Baghdad Airstrike”, **The Associated Press**, 02.01.2020, <https://apnews.com/article/5597ff0f0-46a67805cc233d5933a53ed>, (02.01.2020).

The Atlantic. “The Atlantic’s Jeffrey Goldberg’s Interviews President Obama”, **The Atlantic**, 21.05.2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/press-releases/archive/2015/0-5/president-obama-discusses-israel-iran-isis-with-the-atlantic/394001/>, (10.04.2020).

The Daily Sabah. “History Will not Forgive Betrayal of Palestinians, Turkey says”, **The Daily Sabah**, 14.08.2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/history-will-not-forgive-uaes-betrayal-of-palestinians-turkey-says>, (14.08.2020).

The Daily Sabah. “Turkey Hopes for Better Relations with Israel, Erdogan says”, **The Daily Sabah**, 25.12.2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-hopes-for-better-relations-with-israel-erdogan-says>, (25.12.2020).

The Daily Sabah. “Turkey is Independent in its Foreign Policy, President Erdogan Says”, **The Daily Sabah**, 05.12.2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2019/12/05/turkey-is-independent-in-its-foreign-policy-president-erdogan-says>, (09.05.2021).

The Daily Sabah. “US Loses Grip on Power in Middle East: Saudi Intel Chief”, **The Daily Sabah**, 03.11.2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/mid-east/us-loses-grip-on-power-in-middle-east-saudi-intel-chief>, (05.11.2021).

The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. “Hybrid CoE Trend Report, Trends in MENA: New Dynamics of Authority and Power”, **The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats**, 07.06.2021,

<https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-trend-report-7-trends-in-mena-new-dynamics-of-authority-and-power/>, (07.06.2021).

The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). “Iran’s Network of Influence in the Middle East”, **The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)**, 29.11.2019, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-03-ch-1-tehrans-strategic-intent>, (29.11.2019).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. “China’s Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence”, **Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China** [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/ziliao\\_665539/3602\\_665543/3604\\_665547/t18053.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18053.shtml), (19.07.2021).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Speech and the Following Discussion on the Munich Conference on Security Policy”, **Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation**, 10.02.2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>, (11.09.2021).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. “Concept of the Russian Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation” **The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation**, 30.11.2016, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents//asset\\_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents//asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248), (18.06.2021).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. “Russia’s Security Concept for the Gulf Area”, **The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation**, 23.07.2019, [https://www.mid.ru/en/liga-arabskih-gosudarstv-lag/-/asset\\_publisher/0vP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/3733593](https://www.mid.ru/en/liga-arabskih-gosudarstv-lag/-/asset_publisher/0vP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/3733593), (23.07.2019).

The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. “Foreign Ministry Statement on Developments around the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran Nuclear Program”, **The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation**, 08.05.2018, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news//asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3212053](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news//asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3212053), (08.05.2018).

The National Council of Resistance of Iran. “Khamenei’s Crony: If Syria, the 35th Province of Iran Falls, Tehran Falls”, **The National Council of Resistance of Iran**, 15.02.2013, <https://www.ncriran.org/en/ncristatements/terrorismfundamentalism/khamenei-s-crony-if-syria-the-35th-province-of-iran-falls-tehran-falls/>, (17.07.2020).

The White House. “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance”, **The White House**, 29.03.2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>, (29.03.2021).

The White House. “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (NSS), The White House, Washington D.C., March 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>, (28.03.2021).

Thepaut, Charles. “The Astana Process: A Flexible but Fragile Showcase for Russia”, **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 28.04.2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-astana-process-a-flexible-but-fragile-showcase-for-russia>, (28.04.2020).

Titus, Alex. “Obama’s Doctrine of Appeasement has Finally Come to an End”, **The Hill**, 01.10.2018, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/368161-obamas-doctrine-of-appeasement-in-iran-has-finally-come-to-an-end>, (12.10.2020)

Trenin, Dmitri. “Russia’s Changing Identity: In Search of A Role in the 21st Century”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Moscow Center)**, 18.07.2019, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/79521>, (18.07.2019).

Trenin, Dmitri. Russia in the Middle East, Moscow’s Objectives, Priorities and Policy Drivers, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Moscow Center)**, 29.12.2016, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/032516\\_Trenin\\_Middle\\_East\\_Moscow\\_clean.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/032516_Trenin_Middle_East_Moscow_clean.pdf), (11.10.2020).

TRT World. “The Importance of Russia’s Growing Footprint in Iraq”, **TRT World**, 25.09.2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/the-importance-of-russia-s-growing-footprint-in-iraq-40054>, (25.09.2020).

Tsvetkova, Maria. “Israel and Russia to Coordinate Military Action on Syria: Netanyahu”, **Reuters**, 21.09.2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-israel-idUSKCN0RL10K20150921>, (25.05.2020).

Turak, Natasha. “‘A Dangerous Game of Chicken’: Iran Sets Up Challenge for Biden With Nuclear Ramp-Up”, **CNBC**, 12.01.2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01-12/playing-chicken-iran-sets-up-challenge-for-biden-with-nuclear-ramp-up.html>, (20.08.2021).

U.S. Department of State. “Iran Action Group, Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran’s Destructive Activities”, **U.S. Department of State**, 29.05.2018, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Outlaw-Regime-2020-A-Chronicle-of-Irans-Destabilizing-Activity.pdf>, (29.05.2018).

Ülgen, Sinan. “Redefining the US-Turkey Relationship”, **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, 26.07.2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/07/26/redefining-u.s.-turkey-relationship-pub-85016>, (26.07.2021).

UN News. “At UN, Iran Proposes ‘Coalition for Hope’ to Pull Gulf Region from ‘Edge of Collapse’”, **UN News**, 25.09.2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story-/2019/09/1047472>, (25.09.2019).

UN. “Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2254 (2015), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, Setting Timetable for Talks”, **UN**, 18.12.2015, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>, (12.11.2020).

UNSC. “UNSC Resolution 1929”, **The United Nations Security Council (UNSC)**, 09.06.2010, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2010/sc9948.doc.htm>, (11.09.2020).

Uskowi, Nader. "The Evolving Iranian Strategy in Syria: A Looming Conflict with Israel", **Atlantic Council**, 27.09.2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/the-evolving-iranian-strategy-in-syria-a-looming-conflict-with-israel/>, (08.09.2020).

Utrikes Magasinet. "The Russia-Iran Relationship in a Sanctions Era", **Utrikes Magasinet**, 20.11.2019, <https://www.ui.se/utrikesmagasinet/analyser/2019/november/the-russia-iran-relationship-in-a-sanction-era/>, (20.11.2019).

Uygur, Hakki. "Süleyman Soylu'nun Uyarıları Ne Anlama Geliyor", IRAM Center, 11.06.2020, [https://iramcenter.org/suleymansoylununuyarilarineanlamageliyor/?send\\_cookie\\_permissions=OK](https://iramcenter.org/suleymansoylununuyarilarineanlamageliyor/?send_cookie_permissions=OK), (20.03.2021).

Uzgel, Ilhan. "The "Blue Homeland" and Turkey's New Forward Defense Doctrine", **Duvar English**, 25.06.2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/columns/2020/06-25/the-blue-homeland-and-turkeys-new-forward-defence-doctrine>, (25.06.2020).

Vahdat, Amir and John Gambrel. "Iran Leader Says Israel a "Cancerous Tumor" to be Destroyed", **Associated Press**, 22.05.2020, <https://apnews.com/article/ali-khameneiisraelpersiangulftensionstehranjerusalem033042303545d9ef783a95222d51b83>, (22.05.2020).

Valbjorn, Morten, "International Relations Theory and the New Middle East: Three Levels of a Debate", **POMEPS Studies**, 08.05.2015, <https://pomeps.org/international-relations-theory-and-the-new-middle-east-three-clusters-of-a-debate>, (23.09.2020).

Vatanka, Alex. "Beholden to Khamenei and the IRGC, Raisi will Stick to the Hardline Script", **Middle East institute**, 16.09.2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/ beholden-khamenei-and-irgc-raisi-will-stick-hardline-script>, (16.09.2021).

Vatanka, Alex. "Iran's Russian Conundrum, In Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank, Russia in The Middle East", **Jamestown Foundation**, 29.12.2018, <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Russia-in-the-Middle-East-online.pdf?x87069>, (29.12.2018).

Vatanka, Alex. "Iran's Use of Shi'i Militant Proxies: Ideological and Practical Expediency Versus Uncertain Sustainability", **Middle East Institute**, 01.06.2018, [https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Vatanka\\_PolicyPaper.pdf](https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Vatanka_PolicyPaper.pdf), (11.08.2020).

Vatanka, Alex. "Whither the IRGC of the 2020s? Is Iran's Proxy Warfare Strategy of Forward Defense Sustainable?", **New America**, 15.01.2021, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/whither-irgc-2020s/>, (15.01.2021)

Vitali, Ali, Abigail Williams and Halima Abdullah, "Trump and Lavrov Meet Amid Scrutiny of Campaign, Russia Ties", **NBC News**, 10.05.2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-lavrov-meet-amid-scrutiny-campaign-russia-ties-n757321>, (12.07.2020).

Volker Perthes, "The Dynamics of Disorder: Power Shifts and Geopolitics in The Middle East, What's Next Essays on Geopolitics that Matter", **World Economic Forum**, 30.11.2013, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/the-dynamics-of-disorder-power-shifts-and-geopolitics-in-the-middle-east>, (10.09.2020).

Von Essen, Hugo. (2020). *A Typology of Ontological Insecurity Mechanism: Russia's Military Intervention in Syria*, (Bachelor's Thesis), Department of Government, Uppsala University.

Waters, Gregory. "The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth", **Middle East Institute**, 18.07.2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/lion-and-eagle-syrian-arab-armys-destruction-and-rebirth>, (18.07.2019).

Wechsler, Omree. “The Iran-Russia Cyber Agreement and U.S. Strategy in the Middle East”, **Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)**, 15.03.2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/iran-russia-cyber-agreement-and-us-strategy-middle-east>, (15.03.2021).

Williams, Dan. “Israel Says Struck Iranian Targets in Syria 200 Times in Last Two Years”, **Reuters**, 04.09.2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-israel-syria-iran-idUSKCN1LK2D7>, (09.09.2019).

Wines, Michael. “Iran and Russia Sign Oil and Weapons Pact”, **New York Times**, 12.03.2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/12/world/iran-and-russia-sign-oil-and-weapons-pact.html>, (19.07.2020).

Xinhua. “BRICS Countries to Promote Multilateralism”, **Xinhua**, 02.06.2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/europe/2021-06/02/c\\_139983587.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/europe/2021-06/02/c_139983587.htm), (02.06.2021).

Xinhua. “IRGC denies presence of PKK militants in Iran near border”, **Xinhua**, 13.06.2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/13/c\\_139136866.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/13/c_139136866.htm), (13.06.2020).

Xinhua. “Jordan King Welcomes Russian Presence in the Middle East”, **Xinhua**, 04.10.2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-10/04/c\\_138446863.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-10/04/c_138446863.htm), (04.10.2019).

Yahel, Ido. “Iran in Syria: From Expansion to Entrenchment”, **The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies**, 17.06.2021. <https://dayan.org-/content/iransyriaexpansionentrenchment>, (17.06.2021).

Yapar, Hakan. “From Strategic Depth to Blue Homeland and Beyond: Understanding Turkey’s Drift towards Greater Strategic Autonomy”, **Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies**, 12.04.2021, [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2021/DIEEE040\\_2021\\_HAKYAP\\_Turquia\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2021/DIEEE040_2021_HAKYAP_Turquia_ENG.pdf), (12.04.2021).



Yaşar, Nebahat Tanrıverdi. “Syria and Libya’s Contributions to the Evolution of the Turkish “Forward Defense” Doctrine”, **Geneva Center for Security Policy**, 30.06.2021, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/syria-libya-turkish-forward-defence>, (30.06.2021).

Yeni Şafak. “What is Iran’s Approach to the Upper Karabakh Dispute?”, **Yeni Şafak**, 19.10.2020, <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/news/what-is-irans-approach-to-upper-karabakh-dispute-3551285>, (19.10.2020).

Yinanc, Barcin. “Interview with Mustafa Aydın, Turkey ‘on a Balancing Act Between NATO and Russia’”, **Hurriyet Daily News**, 16.07.2018, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-on-a-balancing-act-between-nato-and-russia-134599>, (16.07.2018).

Yıldız, Güney. “Turkish-Russian Adversarial Collaboration in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh”, **German Institute for International and Security Affairs**, 22.03.2021, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021C22/>, (22.03.2021).

Yossef. Amr, “Upgrading Iran’s Military Doctrine: An Offensive “Forward Defense””, **Middle East Institute**, 10.12.2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/upgrading-irans-military-doctrine-offensive-forward-defense>, (10.12.2019).

Younis, Nussaibah. “Mediation Nation: Iraq’s New Role in Iranian-Saudi Talks”, **European Council on Foreign Relations**, 14.05.2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/mediation-nation-iraqs-new-role-in-iranian-saudi-talks/>, (14.05.2021).

Zaman, Amberin. “Turkey to Establish New Military Base in Iraqi Kurdistan”, **Al Monitor**, 30.04.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/turkey-establish-new-military-base-iraqi-kurdistan>, (30.04.2021).

Zaman, Amberin. “Will Turkey’s Efforts to Woo Egypt Yield Fruit?” **Al Monitor**, 05.05.2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/will-turkeys-efforts-woo-egypt-yield-fruit>, (05 .05.2021).

Zarif, Mohammad-Javad. “A Message from Iran”, **The New York Times**, 20.04.2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/20/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-a-message-from-iran.html>, (20.04.2015).

Zarif, Mohammad-Javad. “What Iran Really Wants: Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era”, **Foreign Affairs**, 17.04.2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2014-04-17/what-iran-really-wants>, (23.09.2020).

Zimmt, Raz. “Iran’s Regional Ambitions Are Not Going Anywhere”, **Atlantic Council**, 10.04.2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-regional-ambitions-are-not-going-anywhere/>, (10.04.2020).