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The Syrian Civil War as a modern proxy-war

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Abstract

One of the most intricate and destructive conflicts of the twenty-first century has been the Syrian Civil War, which started in 2011. Millions of people have been displaced, hundreds of thousands of people have died, and infrastructure and cultural heritage sites have been destroyed as a result of the conflict. The conflict, which started as a domestic uprising against the Assad regime, quickly expanded to involve both domestic and foreign parties. The involvement of outside parties in the conflict has been one of the main characteristics of the Syrian Civil War.

This research paper investigates the extent to which the Syrian Civil War can be considered a modern proxy war. The study examines the involvement of regional and global actors in the conflict using a variety of primary and secondary sources, including academic literature, articles, and reports. The paper investigates the motivations and goals of the various actors, the nature and extent of their involvement, and the impact of their actions on the conflict's outcome and regional order. According to the findings, the Syrian Civil War is a modern proxy war, with multiple external powers using the conflict to advance their own interests and agendas. The paper concludes by highlighting the challenges and implications of proxy warfare for regional stability and international security.

Keywords: proxy war, indirect intervention, Syrian civil war, national interests, regional order.

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Introduction

Oppressed by the repressive regime, Tunisians began a wave of successful protests in 2010, which were led to regime change in the country. This movement gave hope to the residents of the rest of the Middle East, and was the beginning of a process that would later be called the “Arab Spring”. Syria was no exception, and a number of protests took place in a number of major cities of the country. But all the protests were suppressed by the government in early 2011, and instead of democratization, full-scale armed conflicts began in the country, which later turned into a full-fledged civil war (Marshall, 2016).

The conflict was also influenced by regional and international factors. The complex confessional and ethnic composition of Syria, including the split between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, has turned it into a battlefield for regional powers and superpowers fighting for influence in the Middle East. Among these countries were the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey. As a result, the civil war in Syria, which has been going on for almost 12 years, is one of the largest conflicts in the international arena in recent decades. “More than 465,000 Syrians have been killed in the fighting, over a million injured, and over 12 million – half the country’s prewar population – have been displaced.” (Al Jazeera, 2018).

For better understanding of the conflict, the research question of this study was defined as: "What are the key factors that contributed to the fact that the Syrian civil war was classified as a modern proxy war, and how did these factors affect the conflict and its results?". This research question allows us to study the various elements that define the proxy war and how they manifest themselves in the Syrian conflict. It also involves an analysis of the impact of these factors on the course of the war and its final resolution. The proxy nature of the Syrian

civil war has led to the emergence of a complex web of alliances and rivalries between various States and non-State actors, which has made conflict resolution a difficult task.

To answer this research question, the study will cover four main subtopics:

The Civil War in Syria: History and evolution:

In order to understand the essence of the conflict, it is necessary to briefly consider its origins and the history of the country. To do this, the background of the al-Asad's regime formation, the chronology of the conflict and how it evolved will be considered. The internal dynamics of the conflict, as well as the causes of the escalation of violence and the split of Syrian society will also be covered in this sub-topic. In addition, it will be considered how the Syrian government reacted to the opposition movement in the country and what it led to in the end.

Great powers involvement in the Syrian crisis:

The second sub-topic will examine the involvement of great powers in the Syrian civil war. In the course of the study, it was decided to focus on US and Russia, which in one way or another were involved in the conflict in Syria. The participation of these countries will be reviewed and evaluated in this chapter. The motives and reasons of these countries and how these countries interacted with each other in the framework of the Syrian Civil War will also be analyzed.

Regional powers involvement in the Syrian crisis:

In the third sub-topic, the involvement of regional powers, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, will be analyzed. This sub-topic will examine Turkey's duality in Syria, how it has built a relationship with both the United States and Russia in this conflict, and how Turkey has shifted its policy course depending on the behavior of its allies. In addition to Turkey, the

complex relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Syrian civil war will also be examined.

Transformation of the conflict:

The third sub-topic will be devoted to the study of the influence of foreign participation on the course of the conflict. As the conflict developed with foreign participants, the transformation/deterioration of the conflict will be analyzed. Also, in this chapter we will consider the general regional order and background system, which were formed or changed as a result of the participation of third parties in the conflict.

1. Theoretical and conceptual framework

1.1 Conceptual framework

Since the main purpose of this study is to study the Syrian civil war through the prism of proxy war, it is necessary to study the concept of proxy war and understand its nature. To do this, the study will attempt to define proxy warfare based on previously studied literature. Concepts such as "military intervention" and what kind of support and intervention can be considered a proxy war criterion will also be considered. The study of the concept of proxy war is of great importance in understanding the regional order of the Middle East and the analysis of the foreign policy of the participants in this conflict.

In the modern literature, many studies on the topic of proxy wars (Marshall 2016, Oxnevad 2020, Rauta 2020, 2021, Rondeaux & Sterman 2019 Tamm 2014,) adopt or refer to the definition provided by Andrew Mumford (2013). According to Mumford (2013, p.1) "proxy wars defined as conflicts in which a third party intervenes indirectly in order to influence the strategic outcome in favor of its preferred faction" Some studies have also referred to stronger third parties as "patron states" and countries that accepted this support as

"client states" (Bar-Siman-Tov, 1984). Also, Fox (2020), in his presented five models of strategic relationships in proxy-wars: exploitative, transactional, coerced, cultural and contractual models. Each model varies from the goals and motives of the proxy-client relationship and the national interests of both parties.

In the study of the reconceptualization of the concept of proxy war, Rauta (2021) defined proxy war as a type of intervention. He also mentioned that "In the simplest sense, intervention means large-scale military operations designed to influence strategic results" (2021, p.9). Further, in the same study, Rauta (2021) classified types of intervention and divided them into direct intervention and indirect (proxy) intervention (citing Regan 1996, 2010, Yoon 1997, Gleditsch 2007, Jones 2017). Yoon also classified the types of intervention and gave them a definition:

"An indirect military intervention is an event that includes one or a combination of such activities as initiation or increase of arms supply or deployment of military advisers without participation in actual fighting. Finally, a direct military intervention, as the most explicit form of intervention, includes one or a combination of such activities as dispatch of combat personnel to the conflict zone, actual combat action, aerial bombing of targets, or naval assistance." (1997, pp. 585-586)

Often, direct intervention implies a risk of rapid escalation and higher losses for the patron country. This is why patron countries use proxy intervention (Loveman, 2002). For example, during the Libyan civil war, Hezbollah was created with the support of Syria and Iran as a proxy because direct intervention would have been too expensive. (Bayman, 2008 cited in Rauta, 2021)

By setting a certain conceptual framework, the study will draw on both primary and secondary sources, and look at "proxy-clients" relationships between actors in the Syrian civil war and consider more indirect intervention by third countries, but also by examining the

dynamics of conflict, looking at the transition to more direct intervention, in situations where this is relevant.

1.2 Theoretical approaches

This theoretical framework will examine the concept of proxy war from the prism of three major international relations theories, which are realism, liberalism and constructivism (Sell, 2012). After a brief review of these three theories and their manifestation in the Syrian Civil War, an analysis will be conducted to provide an answer that best explains the concept of proxy war and justifies its relevance to the Syrian context.

The theory of liberalism in international relations states that the most important asset is human life and basic human rights. And the most important national interest of a country is its inhabitants and their well-being. This theory denies the need for military intervention or imperialism. Liberalism also asserts the need for institutions and norms that will create benefits for the people and share political power. Liberalism tries to encourage more humane and peaceful instruments of foreign policy. According to liberalists, relationships between countries should be built on mutual trust and cooperation. (Meiser, 2018).

If one takes the theory of liberalism to the concept of proxy wars, one can view proxy war as a failure of institutions, diplomacy, and international norms. As democracies liberal countries avoid military conflicts, because they are costly and inhumane. But on the other hand, a democratic country can start or engage in a military conflict with a non-democratic country in order to spread liberal views, spreading the process of democratization. For example, the armed conflict between the U.S. and Iraq in 2003. (Meiser, 2018)

The constructivist approach in international relations emphasizes the importance of ideas, norms, and identities of actors in international relations. From a constructivist

perspective, it is ideas and actions that shape reality (Theys, 2018). For example, in his writings, Wendt pointed out that actors' actions depend on their identities and shared interests (Mengshu, 2020). All of these constructivist variables are interrelated and influence each other. "Without interest, identity has no motivational power; without identity, interest has no direction" (Mengshu, 2020 cited Wendt, 1999, 231).

If we consider constructivism as a tool for analyzing proxy wars, however, it views its nature as a consequence of actors' ideas and identities. Proxy countries support weaker client states that share similar ideas and identities. For example, Iran supports Syria because both countries are governed by Shiite Muslims, and their interests converge to maintain this identity within the country. (Baltacioglu-Brammer, 2013). From a constructivist perspective, Proxy wars can be viewed as an expression of competing identities and the struggle for dominance or survival of specific ideas, values, or ideologies. By examining the social and ideological aspects of proxy wars, constructivism allows us to understand how ideas and identities shape conflicts.

For this particular study, constructivism can be of great value because the origins of the Syrian civil war have ethnic causes and to this day, the fighting takes place between members of different ethnic groups and religious branches.

The third theory of international relations to which this study will refer is realism. In realism, the state is a rational and sole actor on the world stage, whose main objective is survival (Antunes & Camisão, 2018). For this purpose, realism operates with basic concepts like: power, balance of power and national interest. These three concepts are key in realism and each of them is interrelated.

When it comes to proxy wars, from a realist perspective, larger countries support weaker countries in order to advance their strategic interests and increase their influence. Because the state is rational, proxy wars allow it to achieve results and its own goals in a conflict without risking its own resources and forces. Also, proxy war allows the state to expand its spheres of influence and maintain a balance of power in different regions simultaneously. In the case of the Syrian civil war, realism suggests that regional and world powers support opposing factions to secure their influence in the region, control vital resources or create a counterweight to each other.

Among the three theories, realism seems to provide the most comprehensive explanation of the concept of proxy war and its manifestation in the Syrian civil war. Realism's emphasis on power, national interests and balance of power explains well the behavior of states in the Syrian crisis. Competition for influence, control of resources, and the desire to shape regional dynamics are all key aspects that realism effectively reflects.

While liberalism and constructivism offer valuable insights into specific aspects of proxy wars, such as the involvement of NGOs, terrorist groups, violations of norms and international law, social factors, and the identity of participants, they do not provide as comprehensive an explanation as realism in the context of the Syrian civil war. The main drivers of the proxy wars in Syria revolve around power struggles, which makes realism the most appropriate theoretical lens for analyzing and understanding the dynamics of what is happening.

1.3 Methodology

The Syrian crisis has been ongoing for more than 10 years and is one of the most protracted and large-scale conflicts of the 21st century. In this regard, we already have a large amount of literature on both the Syrian crisis and the concept of proxy wars. Therefore, this study will use a qualitative method of research and a secondary method of data collection. This study relies heavily on existing literature and the interpretation of previous studies. Therefore, this thesis will use a descriptive-interpretive approach.

The interpretative approach of qualitative research staging open-ended research approaches, involves collecting open-ended (nonnumerical) data, systematically analyzing existing work to extract meaningful ideas, and constructing a coherent narrative (Elliot et al., 2021). Also, by reviewing existing literature, research can gain a deeper understanding of the situation, and obtain some data and facts, from first-hand sources who were directly at the epicenter of the conflict. Then, by analyzing and interpreting the data, come to one's own conclusions in order to build a picture of what happened in Syria.

2. Syrian Civil War: History and Evolution

2.1 Background: The dynasty of Hafez al-Assad

For a general understanding of the background and origins of the conflict, it is necessary to look not only at the period of the Syrian president, Bashir al-Assad, but to begin with the vector of the country's development set by his predecessor and father, Hafez al-Assad. It should also be noted that Hafez was born into an Alawite family and was himself an Alawite. The Alawites are an ethno-religious minority historically located primarily in the Levant and adhere to Alawism; a sect of Islam derived from Shiite Islam (Cosman et al., 2008).

Hafez al-Assad began his political ambitions with several military coups. On his way to power and to increase his influence inside the country, Hafez al-Asad built his career as a military man and actively manifested himself in the Baath Party. (Seale, 1989) As a result of the military coup in 1970, initiated by General Hafez al-Assad himself, he as an Alawite brought this ethnic minority to power. As a result, in 1971 Hafez Assad became the first Alawite president of Syria (Baltacioglu-Brammer, 2013).

To further examine the situation in Syria, it is necessary to dissect the neopatrimonial regime that has been established in the country. Neopatrimonial regimes are hybrids of personal and bureaucratic power, which are predominantly common in the Middle East. The use of primordial connections to create a core of trusted followers around a patrimonial leader is a historically reproducible technology of power (Hinnebusch, 2019).

Thus, as president of Syria, Hafez al-Assad was able to build a kind of "monarchy" in the country by appointing Alawites close to him to command positions in the country. Thanks to this, people from Hafez's family could not only suppress but also carry out brutal repression against the opposition and Sunnis, who made up the majority of the country's population. (Holliday, 2011) Although most of the security apparatus positions were held by Alawites, the fact that the ethnic majority of the country was Sunni began to show the most significant flaws in the regime that Hafez al-Assad had built. Even though Hafez had built a "wall" of loyalists from his family around him, he was predominantly ruled by Sunnis, who in turn were already dissatisfied with the order that had been established by the president. Serving the Alawites and the constant repression only built-up animosity toward the president's personality.

2.2 Origins of the conflict: The rule of Bashir al-Assad

Having considered the rule of President Bashir al-Assad's predecessor, we can say, that the regime that was created by Hafez al-Assad, although it had its drawbacks, was still quite stable. After 30 years of Hafez Assad's rule, he died of heart failure in 2000. At the age of 34, the current President Bashir al-Assad became the nominal successor of the country. But due to the minimum age for presidential candidates, Bashir could not become the head of the country. After that, the Syrian Parliament amended the constitution, lowering the minimum age of a presidential candidate from 40 to 34 years (Fares, 2014). Thus, on July 17, 2000, Bashir al-Assad became President of Syria. These amendments to the constitution were negatively accepted by the opposition public of the country.

Despite the fact that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad came to power, in his speech to the delegates of the Baath party, Bashar stressed the need to modernize the party and added that “The continuity of the party depends on its ability to adapt to today's reality in Syria and to changes in various spheres of state life.” (Zisser, 2004). Positioning himself as a reformer, he put himself in an awkward position, creating feelings within the Alawites and as a stabilization of the political situation for the Sunnis inside the country.

Baltes (2016) also mentioned in her work that during his inaugural speech, President Bashar not only praised his father for his achievements, but also criticized the failed Syrian institutions and government policies, called for reducing corruption and increasing transparency, and also touched on the topic of democracy.

In the course of political reforms, in 2005 at the party congress in 2005, Bashar al-Assad was able to concentrate power in his own hands and remove the “old guard” from the narrow

circle of the government (Hinnebusch, 2019). But unfortunately, this was not an act for the sake of creating a transparent and honest government. By this act, Bashar al-Assad has only narrowed the circle of the inner core of the government and strengthened his influence in the country. For example, as Zintl et al. (2015) write, after 2005 a new elite in the person of technocrats began to come to power. The main task of which was to carry out new economic reforms focused on modern capitalist realities. As a result of which, Bashar's family, in particular, his cousin Rami Makhlouf, had the opportunity to increase their capital. The modernization of authoritarianism created the illusion of democracy in the country and was able to ensure the survival and development of the Assad regime. A partial result of such reforms was described in the book *Syria: From national independence to proxy war*:

The purge of the old guard Sunni barons had narrowed the elite and cost the al-Asad government the support of their clientele networks in Sunni society. It made the regime over-dependent on the presidential family, Alawi security barons and technocrats lacking support bases. Bashar had debilitated the party apparatus and the worker and peasant unions, which he saw as resisting his reforms, but this also enervated his regime's connection to its rural Sunni constituency (Hinnebusch, 2019, p.35).

As a result, sectarian violence between Alawites and Sunnis began to increase in Syria.

2.3 Evolution: “Syrian spring”

In 2011, a democratic uprising began in Tunisia, which further developed in the countries of the Middle East. The Arab Spring has become a point of no return for the countries of the region. Oppressed by authoritarian regimes of different countries, they began to go to rallies and demonstrate their discontent. Poverty, a low level of economy, lack of human rights and a repressive regime are what caused residents to turn against the governments of their countries. Syria, of course, was no exception. In Syria, the situation was even more complicated, for the reason that various opposition groups and ethnic groups began to unite

against the Assad regime. And in order to keep power in his hands, Bashar al-Assad again began to strengthen relations between the Alawites, promoting them to high positions in the government (Baltacioglu-Brammer, 2013).

It was this event that caused the popular unrest to escalate into a large-scale civil war against the Assad regime. Looking back at the history of Syria over the past half century, we can say that it was inevitable. This time, to contain the protesters in his country, Bashar began to seek support from outside. To do this, he began to enlist the support of Iran and Hezbollah in Iran. This decision could provide the regime not only as another authoritarian government whose popularity was declining in the Arab world, but also as a Shiite state rooted in the region against neighboring Sunni states (Baltacioglu-Brammer, 2013). Also, in her article Baltacioglu-Brammer mentions that:

“Al-Assad began to position himself as a pious Shi’ite through public events, appearances, and organizations. And the main Shi’ite political and military organizations in the region, Hezbollah and Iran, decided to back up the Assad regime in very concrete ways. They sent much needed financial and military support and ideologically bolstered Bashar al-Assad's fight against the Sunni “terrorists.”

It was this decision by President Bashar al-Assad that fundamentally changed the vector of the conflict. By enlisting Iran's help, Syria has become an arena for more global conflicts.

3. Great powers involvement in the Syria Crisis

3.1 The US policy in the Syria

The U.S. policy towards Syria cannot be considered without mentioning U.S. influence and involvement in other countries of the Middle East. Since the end of WW2, U.S. foreign policy has been focused on protecting and maintaining its national interests and maintaining hegemony in the international system. The War on Terrorism served as the impetus and justification for advancing the US hegemonic project (Jackson, 2011). Under the auspices of

the Global War on Terrorism, the US was involved in armed conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 respectively. This policy of the war on terrorism has led to a wave of criticism of the US. Many have attributed the US. to imposing its world order on other countries and destabilizing the regional order. Operation Iraqi Freedom was not recognized by the United Nations at all. "Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, in an interview with the BBC World Service, explicitly stated that the US-led war in Iraq was illegal" (MacAskill & Borger, 2004).

The policy followed by the U.S. under President Bush Jr. led to a tainted image of an invader and a rise in anti-Americanism. Therefore, the Obama administration adopted a new foreign policy approach, which implied "leadership from behind" and "direct non-interference" (Eksi, 2017). This policy of President Barack Obama is more restrained and does not imply direct military intervention in the conflict. Washington's first reaction to the protests in Syria was to impose sanctions against several Syrian officials and Bashar al-Assad himself (Al Jazeera, 2019).

But sanctions against the Syrian rulers were ignored, and as a consequence of Obama's new policy, Washington decided to support opposition groups that opposed the Assad regime. One such group is YPG (People's Self-Defense Units) which is a military unit of PYD (Kurdish Democratic Union Party) (Davis et al., 2017). Support to the YPG, which was led by the CIA consisted of providing weapons, intelligence, air support, and training. In August 2013, the Syrian government used chemical weapons against civilians for the first time (Price, 2022). After such actions, the US could not stand idly by, and President Barack Obama issued an official statement condemning the actions of Bashar al-Assad and stating that such actions by the Syrian government directly impacted US national security interests. As part of this speech, Obama also stated that in order to protect its own national interests, the US could respond to

such actions with a targeted military strike (Obama, 2013). As mentioned earlier, Russia was also involved in the Syrian civil war and it was not beneficial for Russia to directly intervene in this conflict because Russia supported the Assad regime. Just three days after Obama's speech, Russia offered Syria to hand over control of its chemical weapons to the international community for dismantling to avoid a US military strike (Strobel & Karouny, 2013). This incident is also well described in Eksi's work (2017):

“In this sense, the United States has managed to use its rivals to carry out its policy without direct interference. In other words, even the possibility of direct US intervention in the Syrian crisis by military force ensured compliance with the requirements of US policy on the part of Russia.”

From 2011 to 2017, Washington continued to pursue its own policy of "direct non-interference" and only provided humanitarian and financial support to Syrian opposition groups. Then in 2017 Obama resigned and was replaced by Donald Trump, who made it clear that he would stay out of Syria. Perhaps it was Washington's new policy on the conflict in Syria that gave Assad carte blanche, after which, in the spring of 2017, Assad again uses chemical weapons against his own people (Deutsch, 2017). Further, this decision by Assad was called by Trump "an affront to humanity." "I will tell you that yesterday's attack on children had a big impact on me - a big impact," "My attitude toward Syria and Assad has changed a lot," Trump said in his speech (Borger et al., 2017).

After this speech, Trump orders airstrikes. On April 7, 2017, the White House launches dozens of Tomahawk missiles at the Syrian airbase of Shayrat, considered the site of the chemical attack. This was the first direct U.S. action against Assad and his regime (Al Jazeera, 2019).

3.2 Russian motives in the Syria

Russia has been a long-standing strategic ally of Syria and, in particular, of the al-Assad family. Their alliance dates back to the 1950s and is, though complex, quite close (TASS, 2015). This relationship between the two countries grew closer as Syria became involved in more regional conflicts. The Soviet leaders needed Syria as a shining example of their magnanimity, military might, and reliability (Lund, 2019). It was for this reason that the Soviet Union never stopped providing both military and humanitarian support to Syria, continuing to sell arms and military equipment that supported the Syrian Army. In the dossier on military-technical cooperation between Syria and Russia, the following information was provided:

"Between 1956 and 1990, Syria was supplied with weapons worth over \$26 billion, including 65 tactical and operational-tactical missile systems, about 5,000 tanks, over 1,200 combat aircraft, including Su-22, MiG-29 and Su-24MK, 4,200 artillery pieces and mortars, surface-to-air missile systems, about 70 warships and boats. By the end of the 20th century, the Syrian army was more than 90 percent equipped with Soviet weapons." (TASS, 2015)

As the conflict progressed, the Kremlin grew increasingly tense. With the overthrow of the Assad regime, Russia could lose one of its important importers of Russian arms. Besides material interests, this conflict was an opportunity for Russia to regain power in the Middle East and increase its influence in the world. Trenin wrote: "For the Russian military, still in the process of post-Soviet transformation and modernization, Syria was a return to the premier league, albeit on a relatively small scale." (2016, p.2) For Russia, and Vladimir Putin in particular, Syria was an opportunity to restore the country's position as a great power outside the former Soviet Union. The Middle East was a key testing ground for Russia's attempt to return to the world stage. (Trenin, 2016)

In general, from 2011 to 2015, we can say that Russia, as well as the U.S., followed a policy of direct non-interference and was not directly involved in the conflict. All Russian

support consisted only of financial assistance and the provision of weapons and military equipment. Russia avoided direct confrontation with its main opponent, the United States. In 2013, Russia even went towards the US and showed its concern about Assad's use of chemical weapons (Strobel & Karouny, 2013).

But as Bashir al-Assad's regime became increasingly threatened, on September 30, 2015, the Russian Federation officially entered the Syrian civil war. (Petkova, 2020) The fall of Assad would be a serious blow to Russia, as it would primarily threaten Russia's personal national interests and deprive them of another ally in the Middle East. Another factor that prompted Russia's direct intervention in Syria in 2015 was the Ukraine crisis. Involvement in the conflict in Syria allowed Putin to solve the problem of political isolation after Ukraine and also allowed Moscow to lead in a complex relationship with the United States. (Weiss & Ng, 2019). Moscow tried to present itself as a power that resolutely fights terrorism in order to start cooperation with the U.S. and break the cohesion of the West, which strengthened after the Ukraine crisis and to make itself look good. (Kofman & Rojansky, 2018)

4. Regional powers involvement in the Syria Crisis

4.1 The duality of Turkish foreign policy

Turkey's position in this conflict may seem very ambiguous, because when studying the Syrian civil war, it seems that Turkey defended its own national interests and fought on several fronts, trying to "sit on two chairs. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Erdoğan has made clear his negative attitude towards the Assad regime and called for regime change in Damascus. (Siccardi, 2021) However, Turkey was not in a hurry to intervene directly in the conflict. Turkey's primary concern in this conflict was to maintain security on the border with Syria and tried to stabilize the region, as it did not benefit from the fighting in neighboring

territories. Turkey supported the Arab League's plans to stabilize the region and fight the repressive Assad regime. (Yazıcı, 2018). At the beginning of the conflict in Syria, Turkey together with Qatar and Saudi Arabia provided weapons and military equipment to opposition groups. Turkey also provided military training to Syrian dissidents on its territory, who later formed a military group called the Free Syrian Army. (Manna, 2012) Despite Turkey's restrained policy towards Syria, numerous hostilities on the border between the two countries created a "tense atmosphere" in Turkey.

Turkey first directly engaged in the Syrian conflict in the summer of 2015 after ISIS suicide bombing in Suruç city, which is near the Syrian border. Turkey's policy in this conflict has focused on fighting the terrorist organization ISIS and its ally, the Assad regime (Shaheen & Letsch, 2015). Also, ISIS took over the northern part of Syria, which was home to Syria's largest ethnic group, the Kurds. To fight ISIS, the U.S. began to support the Kurds by providing them with weapons and military equipment and air support. The rise of the Kurds was seen as a threat by President Erdoğan because the YPG, which was supported by the US, is part of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) according to Turkey (Yazıcı, 2018). The PKK has been fighting the government for decades as they demanded a Kurdish autonomy within Turkey. This threatened Turkey's national interests and put its territorial integrity at risk. As a consequence, Turkey fought not only the Assad regime, but also the YDG, which was supported by the United States.

This clash of interests between the U.S. and Turkey has only aggravated the situation in the region and created tension between the two countries, despite the fact that both countries are members of NATO and allies in the fight against the Syrian government. As a consequence, the allied relationship between Turkey and the United States was interrupted. Against this

backdrop, Turkey was able to get closer to Russia, which further led to a change in the balance of power in Syria (Eksi, 2017). Despite the effectiveness of this alliance, we can say that it was short-lived, as the main interests of these two countries in this conflict were different. For the most part, the only thing they had in common was that both sides were fighting against the PKK, PYD, and YPG opposition groups, which had secured US support. The relationship between Turkey and Russia is well described in Eksi (2017):

“Turkey made a change in its Syria policy and turned into the policy of balance with Russia against the US. With this policy, Turkey had the chance to increase its military presence in Syria.”

4.2 Saudi Arabia – Iran rivalry

4.2.1 Iran

Iran is one of the first countries to be involved in this conflict. Iran began to support the regime of Bashir al-Assad, against the background of the long-standing friendly relations between the two countries. Another factor was the Alawite roots of the al-Assad family, which come from Shiite Islam. From the beginning of the conflict to this day, Iran has been one of the Syrian government's biggest allies. Iran provides both military and financial support to opposition forces in Syria. (Jenkins, 2014) The alliance between Iran and Syria also stems from common views in the countries' foreign policy, such as the creation of the Islamic State, historical alliances with the USSR/Russia and opposition to the Western democratization process in the region. (Wastnidge, 2017) Moreover, the first state which recognized the Islamic Republic of Iran was Syria. (Piotrowski, 2011 cited in Yolcu, 2016)

For Iran's long-term regional strategy, the preservation of the Shia-Alawite regime in Syria, and later in the Levant, was categorically important for Iran and the ideology of the Islamic Republic and the confrontation of Saudi Arabia for regional power. Therefore, Iran used the religious aspect to justify its involvement in the conflict. The Iranians, by sending their military,

wanted not only to save the Assad regime, but also to justify their troops in Syria, close to the border with Israel, which could be of strategic importance in the future.

To further its interests, Iran used not only its own troops, but also supported the Lebanese “Hezbollah”, various military groups and regional rebel factions in Syria. One of the military groups that Iran sent to Syria was the so-called the Quds ("Jerusalem") Force, which was Iranian revolutionary guard's expeditionary army. At the height of the civil war, to fight the opposition, the Quds Force in Syria consisted of some 80,000 Shiite militias. These militias also included Hezbollah fighters, mainstream Iraqi Shiite fighters, and Afghan and Pakistani Shiite militias, commanded by nearly 2,000 officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Quds Force. (Uskowi, 2018).

Beyond the struggle for power and regional power status, ideological opposition to Saudi Arabia was not the only motivation for Iran's foreign policy in Syria. Iran needed a permanent presence in Syria, establishing permanent command centers and military bases in the country. Because, in addition to Saudi Arabia, another historical enemy of Iran is Israel. And control of the Syrian-Israeli borders is an important factor when considering Iran's involvement in this conflict. Also, a permanent presence and increased supply of weapons to Syria, would create a permanent land corridor from Iran to Lebanon and Syria.

4.2.2 Saudi Arabia

The wave of revolutions in the Middle East could not pass unnoticed by Saudi Arabia. The Saudis have always been interested and closely involved in the politics of the countries of the region. Although during the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia was most frightened by the democratization process in much of the Arab world, the Saudis reacted differently to each

country and sought a different approach depending on their own interests. For example, Saudi Arabia actively participated in the fight against the regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen and also supported the intervention of NATO countries in Libya, after which former Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi and his regime were overthrown. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has tried in every way to preserve the regimes of al-Khalifa and Hosni Mubarak, the former presidents of Bahrain and Egypt respectively. (Berti & Guzansky, 2014) In each of the above revolutions, the Saudis defended their national interests, and such involvement in internal conflicts of "neighbors" only shows their intention to become a hegemon in the Middle East. Another motive for involvement in this conflict was the growth of radical Islam and its spread in the Middle East. (Blanga, 2017) The development of this "trend" strongly threatened the legitimacy of the royal family.

The Syrian civil war is no exception, and Saudi Arabia's interests in Syria are well explained by its relationship with Iran. It is the rivalry between these two countries that has complicated the conflict, making it longer and more destructive. It is in Syria that the two regional powers conduct their most open political confrontation. (Hokayem, 2014) Saudi Arabia has always been concerned about the Alawite roots of the al-Assad family, and the fact that Alawites are in power in Syria. As mentioned earlier, Sunni Muslims in Syria have not infrequently been repressed and oppressed by the Assad regime. Therefore, primarily for the Saudis, Syria was an arena to promote their ideology and save their "brothers".

Although Saudi Arabia tried to prevent direct intervention in Syria, El Riyadh used its leverage to reduce the influence of the Iranian-Syrian "Shiite axis. For example, they tried to promote an initiative to exclude Syria from the Arab League. (Berti, 2017) In addition to diplomatic and political methods, the Saudis have actively supported rebel groups with financial aid, arms and equipment. In 2013, The Times reported on Saudi funding and provision

of small arms to fighters against the Assad regime in Syria. In addition to small arms, numerous anti-tank weapons, such as American-made TOW anti-tank missiles, were also provided. (Ellison, 2016)

While the conflict in Syria is quite protracted, and the Saudis do not always disclose information about the opposition military groups they support, some sources indicate that Saudi Arabia has supported groups such as: Free Syrian Army (FSA), the militia coalition Jaish al-Islam (Islamic Front), Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, jihadist-Salafist group Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. (Ellison, 2016) There is no specific information in public sources about how much has been spent on supporting militias in Syria. But based on information provided by Blanga (2017): "In 2014, Crown Prince Salman traveled to Paris, where he spent \$1 billion on weapons for the Lebanese army to help it overcome the threat posed by jihadist groups in Syria," we can conclude that Saudi Arabia is spending ("investing") billions of dollars to support the opposition in Syria.

5. Models of Strategic Relationship in Proxy War

After 12 years of conflict in Syria and the involvement of several actors, by analyzing the level of involvement of countries in the Syrian civil war, we can draw some conclusions and select models of strategic relationships in proxy war. Earlier in the conceptual framework, five models of strategic relationships in proxy war were indicated, which are: exploitative, transactional, coerced, cultural and contractual models Fox (2020).

Fox cites the relationship between Russia and the Assad regime as an example of a transactional model, emphasizing the main criteria of this model. For example, according to this model, "the proxy state is often a strategic intermediary of the client state, the proxy state

government is not subjugated to the client state, the proxy-client relationship is dominated by a running clock - objectives achieved drive divergence, also sponsor state has fixed political and social interest in the principal; dependence will end when objectives are met" (for example, Russia has reduced its presence on Syrian territory after the US forces withdraw (2020, p.7.) But in turn, this study also emphasizes Russia's involvement in the contractual model, as there are facts proving the presence of the private military corporation "Wagner group" on the territory of Syria (Gibbons-neff, 2018).

As for the U.S. involvement in the Syrian crisis, the U.S. can also be attributed to the contractual model, as the U.S. as well as Russia has sponsored the participation of a private military corporation in Syria and the fight against the Assad regime. The best-known American PMC on the territory of Syria was "Academy" (ex "Blackwater") (Gibbons-neff, 2018). Of the pluses of the contract model, there is increased secrecy, cheap but at the same time rapid response, lower risks and the ability to deny direct military intervention (Fox, 2020).

To describe the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran, one cultural model fits. This model is based on support from proxy clients, by cultural, religious and ethnic similarities. This model best describes Saudi Arabia's support for Sunni minority and military groups and Iran's sponsorship of Shiite militia groups.

Turkey's involvement in the conflict is best explained by the coercive model. The criteria of this model are the low level of trust between proxy and client, not high interest in fighting a common enemy, physical presence as the only factor maintaining the relationship. "Enemy of the enemy, but not a friend," is the expression that best describes the duality of Turkey's policy in the Syrian crisis.

Conclusion

The Syrian civil war is indeed one of the most protracted and destructive conflicts of the 21st century. Millions of refugees and hundreds of thousands of deaths have been the victims of a political regime, and further a major proxy war between regional and world powers. The Syrian crisis has exhausted itself as a civil war between the Assad dictatorship and the opposition. As the country to this day, it is experiencing a geopolitical and ideological rivalry between third countries. Syria was the first major example of proxy war in the post-Cold War era. Syria has also become just another Middle Eastern country where regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran are conducting their sectarian clashes between ethnic groups.

Syria is a good classic example of a proxy war. Regional conflicts and rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran have always taken place in the modern Middle East, and the Syrian crisis can be called another stage in the protracted rivalry between regional hegemony. Even after 12 years, fighting is still going on between the ruling government and the opposition, and it is difficult to predict when this conflict will end. The Syrian civil war also signals Russia's return to the "big leagues," demonstrating its influence in the region. Moreover, this conflict shows that the regular change of power in the United States can have a negative impact on the country's sphere of interests, as each new leader sets a new direction for foreign policy.

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