



Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences

Department of International Relations

**THE 2015 RUSSIAN MILITARY INTERVENTION IN SYRIA:  
A NEO-GRAMSCIAN HEGEMONY APPROACH**

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Master's Thesis

Ankara, 2020



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## ABSTRACT

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The International Relations (IR) literature on the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria is mainly based on the interpretations of the mainstream IR theories and tends to see this intervention in the context of economic or military concerns. Nevertheless, these interpretations ignore the non-material aspects of the Russian intervention and the historic depth of the Russian-Syrian relations. Instead, approaching the same intervention from the perspective of the neo-Gramscian hegemony provides the finding of these missing pieces. For this reason, the major purpose of this study is to analyze the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria from the perspective of the neo-Gramscian hegemony.

In order to achieve its purpose, this study benefits not only from the concept of hegemony but also other Gramscian and neo-Gramscian concepts such as domination, intellectual and moral leadership, political society, civil society, historic bloc, organic intellectuals, crisis of authority, cultural leadership, material capabilities, and international institutions that are accepted as subsidiary to the concept of hegemony. Through this terminology, it becomes possible to analyze the Soviet-Syrian relations, the bourgeois social forces inside the Russian Federation, and the post-Soviet Russian-Syrian relations, along with the more current developments the Arab revolts of the 2010s, the Syrian civil war, the 2015 Russian military intervention, and the latest situation in Syria in accordance with the neo-Gramscian hegemony. In the light of these analyses, it is found that the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria can be understood as a hegemonic move on the way of a Russian-led world hegemonic project around neoliberalism.

### **Keywords**

Gramsci, hegemony, Russia, military intervention, the Syrian civil war

## ÖZET

AKGÜDEN Muhterem. *2015 Rusya'nın Suriye'ye Askeri Müdahalesi: Bir Neo-Gramşiyen Hegemonya Yaklaşımı*, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara, 2020.

2015 Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalesini esas alan Uluslararası İlişkiler yazını, çoğunlukla yaygın Uluslararası İlişkiler teorilerinin yorumlarına dayalıdır ve bu müdahaleyi ekonomik veya askeri kaygılar bağlamında görme eğilimindedir. Ancak bu yorumlar, Rus müdahalesinin maddi olmayan özelliklerini ve Rusya-Suriye ilişkilerinin tarihsel derinliğini göz ardı etmektedir. Bunun yerine, aynı müdahaleye neo-Gramşiyen hegemonya bakış açısından yaklaşmak bu kayıp parçaları bulmayı sağlamaktadır. Bundan dolayı, bu çalışmanın esas amacı 2015 Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalesini neo-Gramşiyen hegemonya bakış açısından analiz etmektir.

Bu çalışma, amacına ulaşmak için sadece hegemonya kavramından yararlanmakla kalmayıp ayrıca bu kavramın tamamlayıcıları kabul edilen diğer Gramşiyen ve neo-Gramşiyen kavramlar olan egemenlik, entelektüel ve ahlaki liderlik, politik toplum, sivil toplum, tarihsel blok, organik entelektüeller, otorite krizi, kültürel liderlik, maddi kabiliyetler ve uluslararası kurumlar gibi kavramlardan da faydalanır. Bu terminoloji sayesinde SSCB-Suriye ilişkilerini, Rusya Federasyonu'ndaki burjuva sosyal güçlerini, Sovyet-sonrası Rusya-Suriye ilişkilerini ve daha güncel gelişmeler olan 2010'lardaki Arap isyanlarını, Suriye iç savaşını, 2015 Rus askeri müdahalesini ve Suriye'deki son durumu neo-Gramşiyen hegemonyayla analiz etmek olası hale gelir. Bu analizler ışığında şu sonuca ulaşılabilir: 2015 Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalesi Rusya önderliğinde neoliberal bir dünya hegemonyası oluşturma yolunda bir hegemonik hamle olarak anlaşılabilir.

### **Anahtar Sözcükler**

Gramşi, hegemonya, Rusya, askeri müdahale, Suriye iç savaşı

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

**BRICS:** Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa

**CIS:** Commonwealth of Independent States

**CSTO:** Collective Security Treaty Organization

**EAEU:** Eurasian Economic Union

**EEAS:** European External Action Service

**EU:** European Union

**ISIS:** Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

**KGB:** Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (Committee for State Security)

**MENA:** Middle East and North Africa

**UN:** United Nations

**UNESCO:** United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

**UNHCR:** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

**UNSC:** United Nations Security Council

**US:** United States

**USSR:** Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

**PLO:** Palestine Liberation Organization

**SCO:** Shanghai Cooperation Organization

**SCP:** Syrian Communist Party

**YPG:** Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Protection Units)

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## INTRODUCTION

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, it did not only mean the cease of the existence of a state, but also the end of the habit of a nation in terms of addressing a certain production relation, being accepted as a super power, and gathering around a world hegemonic project. Although the USSR applied some neoliberal and capitalist measures during its final years, the new Russian state of the 1990s needed to adopt them in a solidier way with a transition process. When these conditions were added by the Russian values, a kind of non-pro-American liberalization and capitalization emerged. It meant not approving the US hegemony inside the system, but also not having enough strength and popularity to do anything about it. This circumstance ensured until the end of the mid-2000s, when a new Russian hegemonic project around neoliberalism was born.

Within this scope, the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria is the main concern of this study in the post-mid-2000s period. This study engages in its main research question, whether the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria can be evaluated as a hegemonic move in terms of the neo-Gramscian understanding of hegemony. It also tries to answer some secondary questions that are how the Russian public opinion was persuaded in favor of the military intervention and what are the social forces inside Russia that benefited directly from the intervention.

This study argues that the start of the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria can be understood as a hegemonic move on the way of a Russian-led world hegemonic project around neoliberalism. It uses the Gramscian perspective, when it approaches the domestic conditions inside Russia and Syria such as the dominant bourgeois class fractions in the 1990s Russia or the role of marginalized groups in the Syrian revolt in 2011. It means that when the name of a particular country or a capital city is called in the chapters with domestic contexts, it refers to the ruling class in this state. The study also addresses the neo-Gramscian perspective on hegemony, which was mainly drawn from the contribution of Robert W. Cox, when it focuses on the relations of Russians with other nations in the context of the world hegemony.

The study also accepts that when many countries and their ruling classes are being defined as capitalist or neoliberal today, it would be wrong to accept them as the members of the same historic bloc. For this reason, it is assumed that there is a formed US-led neoliberal capitalist historic bloc and other forming historic blocs in accordance with their look to the US hegemony. Although it is unclear how many historic blocs are forming, it can be seen that many of them are tried to be formed as new capitalist blocs by rising powers that are opposed to the US hegemonic order. In this case, Russia is one of these powers and it is running for the leadership of a forming neoliberal capitalist historic bloc, which is different than the US-led historic bloc.

In terms of methodology, a qualitative research was made in this study. In order to collect data, the study benefited from many primary and secondary sources such as books, book chapters, articles, theses, news, newspaper articles, interviews, encyclopedias, reports, public opinion polls and web pages. Even though it was easy to access these sources for the recency of the topic, there were also some challenges that the study faced during the data collection process.

The first challenge was the availability of limited sources on how Syrians, as a unity not only prominent Syrian figures, perceive Russians within nine years of the Syrian conflict, due to the ongoing war in their home. In this issue, the majority of the sources focused on the perception of the Syrian statespeople in Damascus, pro-regime people or prominent activists towards the Russians and the Russian military intervention. The study had to focus on only the voices that found place in the literature.

The second challenge was the non-transparency of the structure of the Russian civil society and political society that shadowed the role of people on the decision-making process for the 2015 military intervention in Syria. It is only known that the Russian military intervened in Syria after a decision-making process, but it is unclear how this decision was taken and which social forces impacted on this decision. This point can only be thrown light with further explanations from the Kremlin.

The third challenge was the dominance of state-centric analyses in the literature on some issues that were studied here. It forced the study to make a class-based Gramscian analysis with the help of the sources that the most of them accept the state as the main

actor in their analyses. For instance, this study was planned to focus more on community-leveled relations between the Soviet and Syrian people in the second chapter, but there were only two primary works, which suit this intention (Dawisha, 1975 and Riordan, 1974). Thus, the rest of the necessary data had to be collected from the sources that studied the state-leveled Soviet-Syrian relations. It was hard to find useable data from these sources and analyze them with the Gramscian perspective for the chapters that have domestic contexts.

Facing with these challenges might deter the study of this topic with the neo-Gramscian framework. Nevertheless, the study moved with the belief that even well-embraced ideas need to be questioned in order to find other possibilities. For this reason, the topic of the 2015 Russian military intervention was still wanted to be studied with the neo-Gramscian hegemony. Indeed, this topic was highly dominated by realist and liberal perspectives and, in brief, the Russian military intervention was interpreted as an act of economic or geopolitical ambition by them. Nevertheless, looking to the same topic from another perspective would create other views about the intervention. It is true; there were abovementioned challenges that directed the study to focus on only existing data rather than expecting one, but this situation also contributed to the definition of the limits of the study area and the putting into final form of the thesis.

As the theoretical approach, the neo-Gramscian hegemony was chosen to be studied. This preference rooted in the lack of any other approach to highlight the historical depth of the Russian-Syrian relations, the link between the bourgeois social forces inside Russia and the lives of Syrian people, the consent-based side of a military action, and the determined stand of the Syrian representatives with their Russian counterparts in international organizations and areas of bilateral cooperation, in a holistic way. For these reasons, this study attempts to approach the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria from the perspective of the neo-Gramscian hegemony.

Since it is not possible to examine the research topic in all aspects, the study area was needed to be limited. In this sense, the study made a choice to focus on only the particular Gramscian concepts (hegemony, domination, intellectual and moral leadership, civil society, political society, the state, historic bloc, organic intellectuals, and crisis of authority) among the others inside the Prison Notebooks of Antonio

Gramsci, center upon the topic of the Russian hegemony instead of the Soviet hegemony, and approach to a certain military action, the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria, rather than the diplomatic processes over the Syrian conflict that the Russians have also involved.

In the literature, there are plenty of sources that studied the Russian strategies towards the Arab Spring (Malashenko, October 2013; Tudoroiu 2015; Dannreuther 2015) and the Syrian civil war (Khlebnikov, 2011; Zifcak, 2012; Allison, 2013; Kozhanov, 2014; Rogers& Reeve, 2015; Kaim& Tamminga, 2015; Abdenur, 2016; Bannelier-Christakis, 2016; Har-Zvi, 2016; Stepanova, 2016; Souleimanov, 2016; Trenin, 2016; Valenta& Valenta, 2016; Werner, 2017; Kofman, 2017; Maitra, 2017; Sakaoglu, 2017; Unnikrishman& Purushothaman, 2017; Kofman& Rojansky, 2018; Gaub, July 2018; Ford, April 2019). Among them, the works of Har-Zvi (2016), Trenin (2016), Sakaoglu (2017), Valenta& Valenta (2016), and Charap et al (2019) focused on the main concern of this study, the Russian military intervention in Syria. The most of these sources were dominated by the realist and liberal perspectives. Even though the study benefited from them, there were very limited sources to give a neo-Gramscian point of view to the study. In this point, the works of Munif (2013), Kirkham (2016), Melander (2010), and Worth (2002, 2017) enabled the study of this topic with this methodology, through the Gramscian focus of their own works.

The point which distinguishes this study from the previous ones in the literature is its being an attempt to approach the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria with the neo-Gramscian hegemony, a perspective which is not popular as realist and liberal views to study this issue. Only example which can be considered as similar is the work of Sargsyan (December 2018) that studied the reasons of the Russian military intervention with the Gramscian hegemony. However, this study did not cite from his work, because the research questions and main focuses of the both studies are different than each other. Thus, it is believed that the conjunction of this topic and this methodology is rare. Therefore, this study would contribute to future studies that function within this context.

In order to address the topic and the research questions properly, the four chapters of this study focus on different aspects of the study area. The first chapter provides a



theoretical background for the neo-Gramscian understanding on hegemony. This chapter starts with the examination of different usages of the concept of hegemony in the International Relations literature and answers why the neo-Gramscian usage was preferred in the writing of this study among them. Then, the chapter gives place for some Gramscian concepts that will be used to evaluate the following chapters along with the concept of hegemony. The chapter continues with the contributions of Robert W. Cox to the concept of hegemony that led to the application of the Gramscian hegemony to the international level as the neo-Gramscian hegemony. Here, the features of the neo-Gramscian hegemony are mentioned in detail.

The second chapter includes the Soviet-Syrian relations in order to provide historical background to the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria. Here, the Soviet-Syrian relations are examined as a chronology of important events such as the start of diplomatic relations in 1946 or the signature of the amity agreement in 1980. The chapter also highlights the ideological similarities and the shared cultural experiences. Then, it is remarked that the Soviet-Syrian relations in the mentioned period were in the context of the Cold War. Here, it is questioned how the Cold War conditions affected the relations and what were the disagreements that the Soviets and Syrians had during this period.

The third chapter examines domestic conditions inside Russia after the collapse of the USSR. The chapter remarks a transition process that led a series of change as a result of the Soviet collapse and the presence of different groups inside the society, as the people oppose or support these changes. Here, the Russian bourgeoisie and its prominent class fractions are also examined in terms of their potential for the establishment of hegemony. Then, the chapter addresses some changes that are experienced inside Russia in the mid-2000s and approaches them as signals for the start of the intentions for a hegemonic project. After forming an image for the post-Soviet Russia, the chapter gives place for the general situation of the Russian-Syrian relations from the end of the Cold War to the Arab Spring.

The fourth chapter focuses on the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria. In order to overview the main developments that were followed by the intervention, this chapter initially gives place for the emergence of the Arab Spring as a series of organic crises.

Then, the Syrian revolt and the Syrian civil war are approached in particular and the chapter examines the Russian position toward these developments. Here, it is remarked that the Russians support, its historical ally, the Assad regime of Syria through many channels. In this sense, the start of the 2015 military intervention is given place as a new channel for support. When the chapter approaches the military intervention in Syria in detail, it also focuses on the domestic dynamics inside Russia. Here, the chapter examines the process that led the Russian public consent for the intervention and the specific social forces inside Russia that benefited from the intervention. Finally, the chapter addresses the current situation in Syria and defines the overall picture following the Russian military intervention.

In short, this study benefits from these four chapters to examine the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria and its subsequent period, as well as engaging in historical Russian-Syrian relations and the major events that occurred before the intervention, in order to understand the environment in which the intervention took place. As a result of this analysis, this study approaches the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria from the neo-Gramscian perspective and considers it as a hegemonic move towards a Russian-led world hegemonic project around neoliberalism.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE NEO-GRAMSCIAN UNDERSTANDING OF HEGEMONY

This chapter has an objective to provide a theoretical background on the neo-Gramscian understanding of hegemony to this study. To achieve this objective, there are three main parts included: The first one is about the different usages of the concept of hegemony in the International Relations (IR) literature in order to show the meaning and difference of the concept of hegemony which is used in this study. The second part focuses on the original source of the neo-Gramscian understanding: Antonio Gramsci and his concept of hegemony. This part is detailed with other concepts of Gramsci –within the limits of the scope of this study- which are subsidiary to understand his concept of hegemony. The final part is related to the neo-Gramscian hegemony and the contributions of Robert W. Cox to this understanding. With this content and structure, this chapter aims to provide the necessary information on the Gramscian and the neo-Gramscian understandings of hegemony in the following chapters of this study.

#### 1.1. Hegemony in the International Relations Literature

The origin of the word *hegemony* comes from the Greek word *hēgemonia*. This word is derived from *hēgeisthai* which means *to lead*. In this sense, the word of hegemony can be understood as dominance or leadership which is particularly exercised by a social group or a state over others (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). It can be also referred to as the status of being the strongest which gives ability to control others (Cambridge Dictionary, 2018). Apart from these general usages, among the studies on hegemony within the IR literature, hegemony is mainly accepted as a condition of the existence of coercion and great level of control or influence over international system and international decisions of its units (Antoniades, 2017: 3). Nevertheless, it is not the sole understanding inside the discipline. Actually, the IR literature includes many different understandings of the concept and this section regards eight of the most commonly known usages.

The first understanding is shared by the classical realist and neorealist IR thinkers. Although power is a contested term between the classical realists and neorealists, they both agree that hegemon is the most powerful state inside the international system

(Schmidt, 2018: 5). For the classical realist Hans Morgenthau (1948: 80-108), the establishment of hegemony in the condition of anarchy requires material resources such as industrial capacity, natural resources and military preparedness. For the neorealist John Mearsheimer (2001: 41), the condition of hegemony depends on a state which has sufficient power to dominate other states inside the system. In these perspectives, hegemony is seen as connected to material power and dominance over others through this strength.

The second one is formed by the neoliberal perspective. This view accepts the importance of material power for the concept of hegemony just like the realist understanding (Schmidt, 2018: 10), but the neoliberals mainly focus on economic capabilities and the creation of a liberal economic order (Öner, 2018: 18). Thus, hegemony in neoliberal sense can be understood as economic dominance of a state inside a system (Dirzauskaite & Ilinca, 2017: 53). In their perception, hegemony means a world order which is constructed around liberal institutions and norms (Öner, 2018: 18). It is also argued that the stability of the international order depends on the existence of a hegemony which is formed through international institutions and regimes (Brown & Ainley, 2005: 35 cited in Öner, 2018: 17). Thus, in this understanding, hegemony can be defined as a condition in which a state has enough power to apply rules that govern international relations, but this application of the rules becomes possible with a certain degree of consent from other states (Keohane & Nye, 2011: 37; Keohane, 1984: 46). A similar argument on consent is also shared by the Gramscian understanding, but it is about consent of other social groups, not states.

The third understanding arises from the hegemonic stability theory which is inspired by both the realist and neoliberal perspectives. This theory argues that the existence of hegemony brings a free-market economy and stability to the international system (Öner, 2018: 20). According to Keohane (1984, 32), the hegemonic stability theory understands hegemony as a supremacy over material resources. For this reason, a hegemon must have control over markets, capital, valued goods, and raw materials. Thus, the hegemonic stability theory sees hegemony as synonymous with material strength and liberal economic order.

The fourth understanding of hegemony is derived from the world-system theory. This theory defines two different systems as empires and world economies. It argues that empires existed for thousands of years as a political unit in history. Through their political centralization, they were able to direct economic flows from periphery to center by force or monopoly in trade. On the other side, world economies are economic units, not political ones and their influence is beyond political boundaries. Although world economies could have existed in the pre-capitalist era, it is believed that modern capitalism and modern science are beneficial for world economies to grow, produce and expand without a unified political structure. In the capitalist world, regions can be defined as core, semi-periphery and external in accordance with their places in the world economy (Wallerstein, 2011: xxiv, 15-16, 63). In this understanding, hegemony is about superiority over world economy. Wallerstein (1984: 40-41) defines hegemony as a short period where there is advantage in agro-industrial production, commerce and finance at the same time. Thus, this theory interprets hegemony as related to economic power.

The fifth understanding is formed by the English School. The perspective of the English School is different than the material-oriented perspectives on hegemony. Here, it is argued that hegemony is not only about material superiority (Schmidt, 2018: 22). Instead, hegemony is defined as “an institutionalized practice of special rights responsibilities” of a state which has resources for leading. It is understood as a position which is given by others and based on recognition by them (Clark, 2009: 24). It is also accepted as an institution of the international society (Clark, 2011: 5). Thus, hegemony is more about the relationship between hegemon and others, and less about the hegemon itself (Schmidt, 2018: 22).

The sixth one is produced by the post-structural IR scholars. Although there is not a single perspective towards hegemony, some post-structural scholars have their own interpretations about the concept. For example, Laclau and Mouffe study hegemony and believe that there are only hegemonic moments inside a discursive social reality and hegemony is provided through discursive links of subject positions inside the social realm (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985 cited in Stoddart, 2007: 206). On the other side, Hardt and Negri argue that hegemony is a tool of rule and “regulates social life from its

interior”. These scholars call hegemony as empire and relate it to hegemony of individuals, not states or classes (Hardt& Negri, 2000 cited in Antoniades, 2017: 6). Thus, there are various post-structural ideas over hegemony which are different than other approaches on hegemony.

The seventh one is used by the Gramscian and neo-Gramscian approaches. The main difference of these approaches is that the Gramscian approach on hegemony is about the construction of hegemony at the state or domestic level and the neo-Gramscian approach is about the spread of domestic hegemony to the international level. The source of the both approaches is Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony (Antoniades, 2017: 5). According to Gramsci, hegemony is one of the two types of political control. When the political control which rests upon coercion is called as domination, hegemony is regarded as consent-based political control (Gramsci, 1971 cited in Antoniades, 2017: 5). In this context, hegemony is the political leadership which rests upon consent of the governed and this consent is provided through the spread and popularization of the worldview of ruling class (Bates, 1975: 352). Thus, in the condition of hegemony, a ruling class transforms its own interests and values into common interests and values for the rest of the society (Antoniades, 2017: 5). In the Gramscian approach, hegemony is considered as a domestic phenomenon and it is practiced by social groups and classes not by states (Robinson, 2005: 3).

In the neo-Gramscian understanding, the concept of hegemony shares the meaning of the Gramscian hegemony: It is based on consent and the acceptance of ideas by others (Bieler& Morton, 2004: 87). The neo-Gramscian hegemony can be considered as an extended version of the Gramscian concept of hegemony. In the 1980s, Robert W. Cox developed the Gramscian hegemony through applying it at the international level (Germain& Kenny, 1998: 3). In this sense, the neo-Gramscian understanding engages in the idea of ‘world hegemony’ and considers that it begins with the “outward expansion” of a national hegemony (Cox, 1983: 171). For Cox (1981: 139), the concept of hegemony is based on a conjunction among material power, institutions, and collective image of world order. Thus, hegemony does not rest upon sole material domination in the Gramscian or neo-Gramscian understandings.

The final one is used by the social constructivist IR scholars. They stress the importance of ideational aspects of hegemony over material ones. Although most of them agree with the Coxian version of hegemony for its being less materialistic and more ideational, it is still criticized for being too materialistic (Schmidt, 2018: 16). The social constructivist Ted Hopf (2013: 318) believes that the Gramscian hegemony is useful to understand why masses accept a given order. As a thinker who aims to involve the position of masses in world politics, Hopf (2013: 321) argues that hegemonic power is applied when dominant ideas are accepted by the people in general. Qingxin Ken Wang is another social constructivist who focuses on masses in the scope of hegemony. According to Wang, hegemony is not only about gaining elites of secondary states, but also gaining mass public (Schmidt, 2018: 17).

Among the different understandings of hegemony in the IR literature, this study uses the term ‘hegemony’ with the meaning that the Gramscian and the neo-Gramscian approaches use. The reason for this choice is that the Gramscian hegemony is useful to explain the context of this study: Particular interstate relations which are not explained only with material capabilities. The Gramscian usage is more ideational and less materialistic. It is about the guarantee of consent, but not necessarily about the construction of an economic order in terms of a neoliberal hegemony. Thus, it is believed these features of hegemony will contribute to the study. The concept will be evaluated in the context of next chapters, but firstly, the following section will focus on Antonio Gramsci, his concept of hegemony and the neo-Gramscian hegemony.

## **1.2. Gramsci and Hegemony**

Antonio Gramsci was a member of parliament and the General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party in Fascist Italy. In 1926, a movement started inside the state to ban the remaining opposition organizations and publications, and to conduct mass arrests. Antonio Gramsci was one of those who were arrested (Hoare & Smith, 1971: 23) and he was sentenced to twenty years in prison (Bates, 1975: 351). During his trial, the official prosecutor demanded from the judge that they stop the working of his brain for the next twenty years. Nevertheless, they did not become successful to stop it: During his years in prison, Gramsci wrote his ideas on 2.848 pages which were smuggled out of Italy after his death (Hoare & Smith, 1971: 23). The Italian Marxist spent the final decade of

his life in prison (Rupert, 2013: 161) and his years in there led to his death in 1937, as well as, the emergence of the concept of hegemony which made a major contribution to the 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxism (Bates, 1975: 351).

The ideas of Gramsci were connected to the historical context that he lived in: He experienced the movement of for workers' councils in the 1920s, the Third International and the opposition to fascism (Cox, 1983: 162). Apart from those, he was also well-informed about the texts of the Second International and was generally using a Marxist-Leninist framework. Even so, Marxism was not the sole source of his ideas. He was also influenced by the idealist philosophy -particularly the Italian-oriented type. His understanding about the certain differences between force and consent, which was primarily taken from the Italian thinker Machiavelli, was perhaps the most obvious contribution from the Italian tradition (Germain& Kenny, 1998: 9-10).

Indeed, it would be strange not to see the reflections of the experiences of Gramsci in his concept of hegemony. The origins of the Gramscian hegemony can be associated with the works of Marx, Machiavelli, Labriola, Croce and the Italian socialists, the early international communist movement, the Third International discussions on the Bolshevik Revolution and the emergence of the socialist Soviet states, and Gramsci's own linguistic studies and understanding on history and social reality (Cox, 1983: 163; Germain& Kenny, 1998: 9; Boothman, 2008: 213). With this variety of inspirations, Gramsci is viewed as dissenting from Marxism for his shifting the meaning of some categories of Marxism and returning to Hegel with the influence of some thinkers like Croce and Labriola. His attaching importance to folklore, myths, and national identity in the formation of hegemony also possibly set Gramsci apart from the Marxist orthodoxies (Germain& Kenny, 1998: 9-10). Nevertheless, Gramsci was successful in using this variety of sources on hegemony and inventing an application to civil, social, economic, cultural, and national and international political areas (Boothman, 2008: 213).

### 1.2.1. Gramscian Hegemony

As it was mentioned above, the meaning of the Gramscian concept of hegemony differs from the other usages of hegemony in the IR literature. Although the conventional



approaches on hegemony emphasize coercion and exclusion (Burgess, 2008: 65), the Gramscian understanding rejects hard power as the sole way to reach dominance and leadership (Dirzauskaite & Ilinca, 2017: 38). The Gramscian hegemony rests upon the distinction between consent and coercion (Gramsci, 1992 cited in Stoddart, 2007: 200). In this point, Gramsci is inspired by the centaur figure of Machiavelli, which is half-human and half-beast, representing a necessary conjunction of consent and coercion (Machiavelli, 1977: 49-50 and Gramsci, 1971: 169-170 cited in Cox, 1983: 164). How to control both these characters of the centaur must be known, for Machiavelli (2008: 279).

In the Gramscian sense, hegemony rests upon consent rather than coercion (Rupert, 2013: 161). Cox (1983: 164) argues that coercion which exists as latent is solely applied to marginal cases. In this sense, a hegemonic order is the one in which consent is the leading feature rather than coercion in the relationship between the state and civil society and in the relationship among classes (Gramsci, 1971 cited in Gill & Law, 1993: 93). Here, it cannot be referred to as hegemony of states, because hegemony is a kind of social domination which is exercised by social groups, not by states (Robinson, 2005: 3, 6).

According to Gramsci, the establishment of hegemony requires the development of a critical self-understanding, the formation of alliances, the capture of the ideological area, and –if it is desired to expand hegemony to a wider public- the guarantee of economic development (Augelli & Murphy, 1993: 132). Gramsci (1992: 161) also argues that only the leading classes which play roles in economic activities can become hegemonic in industrial societies. Through their roles, these classes are able to earn respect, and their political duty becomes acceptable to others (Augelli & Murphy, 1993: 130).

The establishment of hegemony is achieved when economic-corporate consciousness of a leading class is spread and the norms and values of this class are embraced at the domestic level, thereby an ethical and political adaptation is provided between subaltern and dominant groups (Germain & Kenny, 1998: 17). In the process of the establishment of hegemony, other classes need to be persuaded to accept the leadership of a dominant class and most of its cultural, moral, and political values (Joll, 1977: 99 cited in Gill,

1986: 210). Dominant classes also make compromises to satisfy subordinate ones, but these compromises are limited so as not to endanger the position of the dominant ones (Cox, 1977: 387).

The establishment of hegemony is not imposed from above; it is the outcome of negotiation which is conducted between the dominated and the dominant. Wherefrom the consent of the dominated cannot be presumed for a long time, re-negotiation is always needed in changing historical situations (Moolakkuattu, 2009: 441). Thus, in hegemony, the dominant rules, but rules “with and over, rather than against” the subordinate classes (Germain& Kenny, 1998: 17). Hegemony is mostly enough to guarantee the harmony of the behaviors of the majority (Cox, 1983: 164).

Although the Gramscian understanding is a less materialistic and more ideational approach, the importance of economic development is not ignored in the Gramscian hegemony. Gramsci regards economic development as a requirement of hegemony and a factor which provides for its expansion toward a larger mass. This view can be seen in their relationship between a potential hegemon and its allies; the potential hegemon has to maintain its economic development and satisfy the interests of its allies. This is why hegemonies can be established in industrial societies by the classes which have important roles in the economy (Augelli& Murphy, 1993: 131-132).

#### 1.2.1.1. Concepts Related to the Gramscian Hegemony

This part includes some Gramscian concepts in order to provide a subsidiary understanding on Gramscian hegemony. In reality, the concept of hegemony lies along with these concepts inside the notes of Gramsci, because Gramsci could not systemize the concept of hegemony as an elaborated theory and it remained spread throughout his Prison Notebooks (Bates, 1975: 351). For this reason, the Gramscian and the neo-Gramscian hegemony remain incomplete without these concepts. This part covers them within the limits of the relevance to the study.

#### 1.2.1.2. Two Forms of Supremacy: Domination and Intellectual and Moral Leadership

According to Gramsci (1992: 57), there are two possible forms of supremacy of a social group at the domestic level: Domination, and intellectual and moral leadership.

Domination means the exercise of power without the consent of the governed, and intellectual and moral leadership refers to ethical hegemony (Augelli& Murphy, 1993: 127-128). In this point, hegemony is more than being dominance via coercion, inducement, punishment, and sanction; it also includes intellectual and moral leadership (Gramsci, 1971 cited in Özçelik, 2005: 95). The exercise of intellectual and moral leadership is a precondition to win governmental power. Nevertheless, the leadership must be continued even after the winning of power. Thus, a social group that becomes dominant has to lead as well (Gramsci, 1992: 57-58).

The Gramscian forms of supremacy are the reformulation of the Machiavellian power which is a conjunction of consent and coercion. Here, consent means moral leadership and coercion refers to the use of force or threat of the use of force (Arrighi, 1993: 149). Nevertheless, the use of force does not mean domination. Domination occurs when hegemony is not ethical and based on deception and fraud (Augelli& Murphy, 1993: 128).

#### 1.2.1.3. Civil Society, Political Society, and the State

Gramsci claims that society consists of three levels: An economic structure and the two superstructures as civil society and political society (Augelli& Murphy, 1993: 128). Civil society and political society together form Gramsci's 'integral state' or 'extended state'<sup>1</sup> (Rupert, 1995: 28). This part focuses on the superstructures, civil society and political society, and their junction, the state.

Civil society is the primary political area where intellectual activities, ideological struggle, and identity formation take place and the establishment of hegemony becomes possible. Thus, civil society is related to the creation of socio-political consciousness (Gramsci, 1966: 9 cited in Bates, 1975: 353). People become conscious and engage in their first political actions through civil society (Augelli& Murphy, 1993: 129). It comes out of cultural practices, formal and informal networks, institutions, and voluntary associations (Germain& Kenny, 1998: 14; Augelli& Murphy, 1993: 129) such as

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<sup>1</sup> 'The state' is another term which refers to the articulation of civil society and political society (Augelli& Murphy, 1993: 129).

churches, schools, clubs, parties, and journals (Gramsci, 1966: 9 cited in Bates, 1975: 353).

Political society consists of institutions which regulate societies (Augelli& Murphy, 1993: 129) such as government, police, armies and courts which perform “direct dominion” (Gramsci, 1966: 9 cited in Bates, 1975: 353). Thus, political society refers to the same meaning which many realists refer to as the ‘state’ (Augelli& Murphy, 1993: 129). Nevertheless, Gramsci does not accept the state as equal to political society. In his ideas, the state arises from both political society and civil society and it can be referred as the integral state (Bieler& Morton, 2004: 91-92).

In the state, ruling classes manage intellectual and moral choices in the struggle for hegemony to form an ‘ethical’ state (Gramsci, 1971: 258, 271 cited in Bieler& Morton, 2004: 92). In this struggle, both political society and civil society witness some activities: Intellectuals who are active in civil society spread the perspective of ruling class to the ruled classes and they guarantee the consent of crowds for the construction of hegemony. In the case where they fail to construct hegemony, ruling class addresses the coercive capabilities of political society to discipline people who do not consent. In this way, ruling classes exercise power over people through civil society and political society (Gramsci, 1966: 9 cited in Bates, 1975: 353).

It is necessary to note that although the Gramscian hegemony is based on social groups and classes (Robinson, 2005: 3); Gramsci does not minimize the importance of the state. According to him, the state is the basic unity of the international relations. Social conflicts occur and hegemonies of social classes can be formed in states. In this sense, Gramsci believes that powerful states experience deep social and economic revolutions throughout their histories and their forms of state and social relations are shaped as the results of these revolutions. Gramsci gives the example of the French Revolution, but Cox believes that the US and the USSR can also be regarded similarly. In these examples, the revolutions which started at the national level spread across the borders and the other countries were affected more passively by these developments (Cox, 1983: 169-170).

In accordance with its relevance to the concepts of civil society and political society, and the state, Gramsci also mentions about public opinion. It is represented as contact between civil society and political society. For Gramsci, the state struggles to create enough positive public opinion when it wants to start an unpopular action. It is done to affect civil society in favor of this action (Gramsci, 1966: 158 cited in Bates, 1975: 363). Thus, ruling classes use the channels of civil society to legitimate their activities.

#### 1.2.1.4. Historic Bloc

Historic bloc refers to the establishment of a relationship over conflicting social forces by leading social forces (Gramsci, 1971 cited in Bieler& Morton, 2004: 90). It cannot come into existence without a national context and a hegemonic class (Cox, 1983: 168, 174). Thus, a historic bloc is a temporal unification among main social relations under the hegemony of a ruling coalition at the national level (Germain& Kenny, 1998: 10). When a historic bloc exists, there is a historical harmony of material forces, ideologies, and institutions, or, in general, “an alliance of different class forces” (Gramsci, 1971: 366 cited in Gill& Law, 1993: 94).

For Gramsci (1992: 168), a social class does not maintain its dominance only via force in modern conditions; it also exercises moral and intellectual leadership and makes limited compromises for the creation of a social bloc with its unified allies. Nevertheless, a historical bloc is not an ordinary alliance of classes for Gramsci; it involves cultural, political, and economic sides of a specific social formation and unites these sides in historically particular manners to create an ensemble of social relations. In this way, a historic bloc reflects a world view which is related to specific types of production relations and socio-political conditions (Rupert, 1995: 29-30).

A historic bloc needs the integration of interests of different classes (Gramsci, 1971 cited in Bieler& Morton, 2004: 90). A new bloc can be established, when a subaltern class forms its hegemony over other subaltern classes. This period for the formation of historic bloc requires intensive dialogue (Cox, 1983: 168). Thus, leaders of historic blocs must be planned and conscious, because there is necessity for persuasive ideas and claims (Gill& Law, 1993: 94). When a class becomes dominant in a country, the state ensures identity and unity inside the historic bloc via the spread of a common

culture (Cox, 1983: 168). The creation of a historic bloc means that there is consent for the social order in which a dominant class form and re-form its hegemony (Robinson, 2005: 6).

According to Gramsci, the predominance of a corporate actor rests upon hegemony over its allies within the historic bloc and domination over other social groups that remain outside of the bloc. Although Gramsci argues that the supremacy cannot be reached only through force or domination, he does not underestimate the role of force to ensure supremacy over the groups that remain outside of an alliance (Augelli& Murphy, 1993: 132).

#### 1.2.1.5. Organic Intellectuals

According to Gramsci, there are two kinds of intellectuals as traditional and organic intellectuals. Traditional intellectuals are the ones who have close allegiances to their traditions and crafts. They see themselves as independent from social practices and interests (Richardson, 1987: 350), but Gramsci (1992: 8, 60) argues that intellectuals are not independent from classes. On the other side, organic intellectuals are the ones who come from a particular social group and have allegiance to this group (Richardson, 1987: 350). They are organizing and thinking functions of their classes (Hoare& Smith, 1971: 131) and producers of hegemonic ideology which provides harmony inside historic blocs. Thus, Gramsci argues that organic intellectuals are needed for the formation of historic blocs (Gill, 1986: 211).

The leadership of intellectuals is necessary for the achievement of hegemony. In hegemony, consent of others is guaranteed through the spread and the popularization of the worldview of a ruling class (Bates, 1975: 352, 360). Thus, the ruling class needs creative intellectuals to elaborate, to change, and to spread its world view (Showstack-Sassoon, 1980: 134 cited in Gill, 1986: 211) and the intellectuals of this class must persuade people to believe that the interests of the rulers serve the entire society (Gramsci, 1971 cited in Augelli& Murphy, 1993: 131).

Organic intellectuals must defeat intellectuals of other classes through inculcating them with the dominant world view, offering more convincing theories, and assimilating them to the cause of the hegemon (Augelli& Murphy, 1993: 131). For Gramsci (1992:

60), even though every social group owns its intellectuals, only “the intellectuals of the historically progressive class” are able to gather intellectuals of other groups around them and create a system of unity with these intellectuals.

#### 1.2.1.6. Crisis of Authority

In Gramsci’s notes, the concept of crisis of authority is connected to the concept of organic crisis which refers to a situation where members of a social class abandon their traditional parties and leaders that are no longer seen as the expression of their class. The reason for such a crisis is generally the failure of the ruling class in their initiatives -like a war- to guarantee the required consent of people or a sudden transformation of masses (particularly peasants and petit bourgeoisie intellectuals) from political passivity to activity and their putting forward of demands (Gramsci, 1992: 210). Cox (1993: 278-279) believes that the solution of organic crises is the re-formation of hegemony around a social class which is able to lead and gather support of the others.

An organic crisis is also a crisis of hegemony -or a ‘crisis of authority’-, when ruling classes are unable to find solutions to underlying problems (Dawson, 2018). In a crisis of authority, ruling class is “no longer leading, but only dominant” and addresses only coercion and masses are no longer keeping their ideologies and beliefs (Gramsci, 1992: 275-276). Within a state, political leaders and social groups become separate (Dirzauskaite& Ilinca, 2017: 46). The crisis emerges when “the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (Gramsci, 1992: 275-276).

The establishment of hegemony requires the development of a critical self-understanding, the formation of alliances, the capture of ideological area and –if it is desired to expand hegemony to a wider public- the guarantee of economic development. In the absence of one of these requirements, there is a crisis of authority (Augelli& Murphy, 1993: 132), by reason of the fact that crisis of authority is also a “general crisis of the state” (Gramsci, 1992: 210).

### 1.3. Neo-Gramscian Hegemony

By the 1980s, Robert W. Cox was studying on a critical theory of hegemony which is contrary to state-centric and ahistorical mainstream approaches on hegemony (Bieler&

Morton, 2004: 86). Cox built on the Gramscian ideas and many other sources (Moolakkattu, 2009: 439) and developed the neo-Gramscian hegemony which expanded the scope of hegemony (Bieler& Morton, 2004: 87). His article, '*Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method*', brought about innovations on the application of hegemony at the international level (Germain& Kenny, 1998: 3).

Cox accepts that the Gramscian usage of hegemony is different than the neorealist usages of the concept which perceive hegemony as the dominance of a state over the other states (Özçelik, 2005: 95). Thus, in the neo-Gramscian approach, there is an image of a world order which is far from the limitations of the state-centric perspectives (Germain& Kenny, 1998: 7). This approach is relevant to the replacement of state-centrism with class-leveled study and their positions in the national and international contexts (Burnham, 1991: 86).

In the neo-Gramscian sense, hegemony is accepted as mainly bases on consent and the acceptance of ideas, but it is also supported by institutions and material capabilities (Bieler& Morton, 2004: 87). In this sense, the dominance of a powerful state can be needed, but solely its power is not enough for the formation of hegemony (Cox, 1981: 139). It means that both the ideational and material capabilities are needed for hegemony.

### 1.3.1. Hegemony at the World Level

The Coxian understanding argues that it is possible to apply the Gramscian hegemony to the international or world level (Cox, 1983: 170). According to Cox (1983: 171), this application is not only an order among states. It is also an order inside world economy with its dominant mode of production which links other modes of production and affects all of the countries. It also connects social classes of different countries with each other. Thus, world hegemony is a system of political, economic, and social relations among and within states (Burgess, 2008: 70). It is not simply another order; it is the one with a dominant mode of production, system of social institutions, and culture which influence entire countries (Burnham, 1991: 75).

World hegemony starts with the "outward expansion" of a national hegemony which is formed by a dominant social class at the domestic level. For the hegemonic struggle of a



dominant state abroad, its culture, technology, social and economic institutions which are related to its national hegemony become useful (Cox, 1983: 171). The classes of this dominant state also find allies in the classes of other states. Thus, a hegemonic order which provides for the supremacy of leading social classes and leading states and gives some prospects to less powerful ones is established around an ideology by a dominant state (Cox, 1987: 7).

The outward spread of a national hegemony affects the developments inside peripheral countries. Even though peripheries did not experience the same social revolution with dominant state and their economies did not develop in the same manner, they try to adopt features of hegemon without touching their own old power structures. When they are more able to adopt cultural and economic features of hegemon, they are less able to interiorize its political features. For this reason, hegemony is intensive at the core and more contradictory at the periphery in the condition of world hegemony (Cox, 1983: 171).

The emergence of world hegemony is also related to the formation of a historic bloc at the international level, because a hegemonic world order arises from a successful international historic bloc (Burnham, 1991: 76). Although the Gramscian concept of historic bloc has a national context, Cox uses this concept at the international level as “transnational historic bloc”. It is different than “transnational class alliance” composed of two or more classes, instead a transnational historic bloc means a unity of civil societies and governmental institutions of a number of countries with the inclusion of weak ones (Gill, 1986: 210-211). In this meaning, a historic bloc connects ideological views and mutual interests of classes in different states and helps the emergence of global classes (Cox, 1987: 7).

### 1.3.2. Essential Parts of the Neo-Gramscian Hegemony

Although the neo-Gramscian hegemony shares the same source with the Gramscian hegemony and uses the same or similar terms with it, it is possible to define some extra content for this international-leveled understanding. They are cultural leadership, material capabilities and international institutions which Konrad (2012) calls as essential parts of the neo-Gramscian hegemony.

### 1.3.2.1. Cultural Leadership

The Gramscian ideas do not see hard power as the sole way to achieve leadership; instead leadership rests upon hard power and soft power. In this sense, cultural leadership is seen as soft power and regarded as a factor which increases influence and power of actors. It is related to the usage of attractive ideologies, values, culture, and institutions which are valuable to provide other actors to admire, follow, and see a potential hegemon as a pacemaker (Dirzauskaite& Ilinca, 2017: 38). The neo-Gramscian scholars believe that a hegemon can keep its status much longer with powerful ideology and culture (Konrad, 2012). Thus, cultural leadership is seen as an important factor in the neo-Gramscian hegemony.

### 1.3.2.2. Material Capabilities

Although the Gramscian ideas cannot be deemed as too materialistic, both Gramsci and Cox do not neglect the role of material capabilities in the concept of hegemony. Gramsci connects the establishment of hegemony with leading groups in economic activities (Gramsci, 1971 cited in Konrad, 2012), when Cox (1981: 139) argues that hegemony bases on the conjunction between material power, institutions and collective image of world order.

In the neo-Gramscian approach, hegemony mostly rests upon consent and embracement of ideas, but it is also supported by material capabilities (Bieler& Morton, 2004: 87). Even though the Gramscian hegemony is an ethico-political concept which does not include a detailed economic content (Gramsci, 1971 cited in Konrad, 2012), it is believed that material wealth is an important condition for hegemony (Konrad, 2012) and economic development is accepted as an obligation of the expansion of hegemony toward larger masses (Augelli& Murphy, 1993: 131). Thus, material capabilities are seen as necessary in the creation and continuation of power (Konrad, 2012).

### 1.3.2.3. International Institutions

Along with material capabilities and cultural leadership, international institutions can be thought of as another important part of neo-Gramscian hegemony (Konrad, 2012). They function as a process that improves ideology and institutions of hegemony. Cox (1983:

172-173) accepts them as a mechanism that states world hegemony and regards the five features of international institutions as the following.

Firstly, international institutions comprise rules which ease the spread of hegemonic world orders. They pave the way for the expansion of dominant social and economic forces and allow adjustments of the subordinated interests with minimum harm at the same time. Rules about world monetary and trade relations have specific importance for the promotion of economic expansion (Cox, 1983: 172).

Secondly, they are outputs of hegemonic world order. The formation of international institutions and their rules are mostly decided by hegemon. If it is not occurring, at least hegemon has to give support for their formation. Hegemon guarantees the consent of other states in accordance with a hierarchy of powers, and at least, it asks the consent of some peripheries (Cox, 1983: 172).

Thirdly, international institutions function to ideologically legitimate norms of world hegemony. They reflect the features of its dominant social and economic forces. They are able to shape the policy principles of states through their ideological role. In this way, they can legitimate particular institutions and actions at the domestic level (Cox, 1983: 172).

Fourthly, they enroll the elites of peripheral countries. When individuals come from peripheries to international institutions with the purpose of transforming the system, hegemony prevents such attempts. They are co-opted to transform their possible counter-hegemonic ideas into harmonious ones with hegemony (Cox, 1983: 172-173).

Finally, international institutions absorb the counter-hegemonic ideas. Counter-hegemony inside international institutions is accepted as a danger for the position of hegemony. Thus, the co-option of talented people who come from peripheries decreases the risk of counter-hegemony (Cox, 1983: 172-173).

#### **1.4. Conclusion**

This chapter was written with an objective to provide necessary theoretical information on the neo-Gramscian hegemony. In order to achieve this objective, firstly, eight different approaches on hegemony in the IR literature were introduced, and it was

shown that among these approaches, the Gramscian and the neo-Gramscian meanings of hegemony are being used in this study. Secondly, the brief life of Antonio Gramsci and his concept of hegemony were touched on. The concept of hegemony was later detailed through other Gramscian concepts: Domination, intellectual and moral leadership, civil society, political society, the state, historic bloc, organic intellectuals, and crisis of authority. Finally, the neo-Gramscian hegemony was focused on. Here, it was seen that the intra-state understanding of the Gramscian hegemony was expanded to an international context with the contributions of Robert W. Cox as the neo-Gramscian hegemony. With this structure and context, the chapter provides a theoretical background on the neo-Gramscian hegemony as a basis to evaluate the following chapters.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION OF THE RUSSIAN-SYRIAN RELATIONS**

This chapter examines the Soviet-Syrian relations between the 1940s and the 1980s from the neo-Gramscian perspective. In doing so, it purposes to provide a historical depth to the relations between Moscow and Damascus that are seen necessary to interpret their current relations. In order to provide a holistic approach in the bilateral relations and the general context of the study, this chapter gives place to the development of the Moscow-Damascus alliance from the 1940s to the 1980s, the ideological and cultural dimensions of their relations, the position of the Baath regime as a Soviet ally during the Cold War and the diversities of views on the Soviet-Baath relations<sup>2</sup>.

#### **2.1. Development of the Moscow-Damascus Alliance**

This part covers the historical background of the alliance between the Soviet and Syrian regimes with the limitation of the significant developments between the 1940s and 1980s which influenced their relations. Through this content, it is argued that the Moscow-Damascus alliance developed throughout the Soviet era until the 1980s when the signals of the collapse of the USSR started. During this period, the Baath years are also evaluated as the starting point of hegemonic relations between the Soviet and Baath regimes. This part follows this line and continues as a chronology.

When the First World War witnessed the defeat and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the people who live in the geographical region Syria was under the Ottoman rule for more than four hundred years (Fildis, 2011:129). Before the end of the war, Syria was promised to the Hashemite family by the United Kingdom, but a British-French deal later decided to give the control of Syria to France. Both the Hashemite family and France continued their claims over Syria until the French army defeated the Hashemite troops and took control of Syria in 1920. In this way, a French mandate was established in Syria (Rubin, 2007: 32).

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<sup>2</sup> For the historical Soviet-Syrian relations, see also: Çalışkan (Mart 2016) and Dilek (2017).

During the Second World War, the French surrendered to the Axis powers, but the German control of Syria was prevented with the entering of the British and the Free French troops to Syria in 1941. At the same year, France announced the independence of Syria, but this announcement remained as symbolic. In 1945, the termination of the mandate was recognized under the authority of the UN and the evacuation of Syria completed in the next year (Hitti, 1959: 247-249).

The Soviet leadership was not interested in developing relations with the colonial Arab countries, before the 1940s, and the Soviet relations with them were mostly shaped by the relations with their mandatory countries in Europe (Dawisha, 1980: 19). During the Second World War, the USSR entered to the war on the side of the Allies (Ro'i, 1974: 375) and stepped into the Middle East with the Soviet-British invasion of Iranian August 1941 (Schoenberger& Reich, July 1975: 8). Following this year, the Gulf region was prepared for possibility of any hot conflict, but the victories of the Allies elsewhere prevented such possibilities during the final years of the war (Jackson, 2018: xi-xii).

After the end of the Second World War, Moscow made little effort for developing relations with the progressive Arab countries, because the Soviet leadership argued that there is no middle camp between socialists and capitalists. Only the national liberation movements whose leaders express their commitment to socialism could be backed by the USSR<sup>3</sup>. With the death of Stalin in 1953, the new Soviet leadership made a policy change and started to defend solving problems with agreements. This view led to attempts that would develop positive relations with the Middle Eastern countries (Schoenberger& Reich, July 1975: 9). In this context, the approach to the Arab nationalist movements became friendlier and the USSR started to see progressive side of "military socialism" (Laqueur, 1969: 9).

Soon after the end of the Second World War, the Middle East became a major ground for the American-Soviet rivalry (Reich& Gotowicki, 1994). The Soviet leaders were developing relations with the Middle Eastern countries through diplomacy, political support, economic aid, deployment of military, and arms delivery. Nevertheless, the US

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<sup>3</sup> There were some exceptions to this Soviet intention. For instance, Moscow supported the independence of Syria and Lebanon and proposed giving verbal support for the Egyptian struggle for independence (Schoenberger& Reich, July 1975: 9).

purposed to prevent the expansion of the Soviet power in the region from early as 1945 (Campbell, 1972:126-127). The American hegemony was engaging in making alliances in order to contain the USSR (Cox, 1981: 140) and shaping new policies over the Middle East as response to the Soviet activities in the region. For instance, the Truman Doctrine of 1947 aimed to protect Greece, Turkey, and to a lesser extent, Iran from the Soviet threat (Reich& Gotowicki, 1994) or the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 foresaw American military interventions in the Middle East in order to protect legitimate regimes from communist overthrows (Murphy, 2018: 196). On the other hand, the USSR was taking advantage of the rise of the Arab nationalism and the distrust towards the US in the region and supported the Arab regimes that are committed to revolutionary change, opposed to more conservative Western-supported regimes (Campbell, 1972: 127).

Under these conditions, the relations between the Soviet and Syrian regimes started with a secret agreement which was signed in 1946, before the independence of Syria from France. This agreement provided the Soviet diplomatic, political, and military support for the Syrian regime and was followed by the Soviet-Syrian non-aggression pact in 1950 (Aghayev&Katman, 2012: 2067). During these years, Syrian people were experiencing political instability: Only between 1949 and 1953, they witnessed three coups d'état, twenty-one cabinet reshuffle along with the establishment of two military dictatorships. After the military coup of 1954, the Baath Arab Socialist Party came into prominence in the political life of Syria (Armaoğlu, 1996: 514). The Baath regime was being led by a group of elites from the minority Alawite sect and for the first time in modern history of Syria, the Sunni groups were not leading. The new regime which was desperate to have international recognition made an alliance with the socialist Soviet regime (Ginat, 2000: 150) and with the lead of the Baath Party, the USSR became a significant country for Syria (Aghayev&Katman, 2012: 2066).

In 1955, the formation of the Baghdad Pact led improvement of the Soviet-Baath relations (Karabulut, 2007: 72). This pro-Western pact caused tension among the Baath and the neighbor regimes of Iraq and Turkey which were also the members of the pact, because the Baath regime was threatened to be attacked if it continues its principle of non-participation to military blocs and its negative attitude toward the pact (Ginat,

1993: 186-187 cited in Ginat, 2000: 156). Thus, the Baath regime perceived the nature of the pact against itself and became closer to the Soviet regime (Karabulut, 2007: 72). The Soviet side stood with the Baath and promised to defend it in case of a conflict with its neighbors (Ginat, 1993: 186-187 cited in Ginat, 2000: 156). In this way, the Baghdad Pact contributed to the development of the Soviet-Baath alliance.

In 1956, the Soviet and Baath regimes signed several agreements which worth five-hundred million dollars economic and military aids. This amount was agreed to be purchased for the armament and the construction of railways, roads, a port and six airports along with irrigation and energy projects. The next year in 1957, after the declaration of these agreements, the Syrian Crisis<sup>4</sup> emerged. In this period, the moderate Chief of Staff of the Syrian Army, General Nizam al-Din was replaced by Colonel Afif al-Bizri who was a member of the French Communist Party in his youth. Thus, the Syrian orientation was shifting to the left, while the influence of the communists in the country was increasing. These developments caused excitement in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel where it was believed that Syria currently became a Soviet satellite (Armaoğlu, 1996: 514).

In 1966, the Military Committee of the Baath Party which was headed by Hafez al-Assad and Salah Jadid seized power and formed a leftist revolutionary government. The new government committed to the domestic social revolution, the overthrow of the entire Arab monarchies, the battle with the US and Israel, and the alliance with the USSR (Rubin, 2007: 37). The Soviet regime supported the Assad-Jadid regime in order to prevent the strengthen of the ring-wing inside the Baath Party, to support the communists into establishment, to strengthen the revolutionary camp inside the divided the Arab world as revolutionary and conservative, and to prevent the Chinese from seizing opportunity as a stronghold in Syria (Ginat, 2000: 163).

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<sup>4</sup> The 1957 Syrian Crisis was one of the most serious confrontations of the Cold War in the Middle East. It emerged as a result of an asserted Western plot to attack Syria and topple its pro-Soviet government. Following, the American, Soviet and Turkish troops were deployed on the Turkish-Syrian border and the American and Soviet foreign ministers made accusations against each other at the UN. The crisis passed without creating serious problem, but it became the root of the strategic partnership between Moscow and Damascus which still continues (Easter, 2018: 227).



In 1971, Hafez al-Assad seized control of the party and the government via a bloodless military coup d'état (Galvani, 1974: 10). His accession to power became a positive development for the Soviet-Baath relations (Aghayev&Katman, 2012: 2067). Although Hafez al-Assad was criticizing the dependence of his country on the Soviet regime before 1970 (Karsh, 1991: 6), he gradually realized the vital importance of a strong supporter (Tudoroiu, 2015: 145). Under his rule, Hafez al-Assad demanded even more economic and military assistance from the Soviet regime. Although the Soviet and Baath regimes had economic and military ties for years, Hafez al-Assad carried them to a higher level. According to Aghayev and Katman (2012: 2067), Assad chose this path, because his country was economically and militarily a Soviet-modeled state which had no alternative apart from the Soviet regime in the Cold War bipolarity, the Assad regime was ideologically close to Moscow, and the Baath would use the aids of the Eastern Bloc through its relationship with the Soviet regime. More importantly, Tudoroiu (2015: 150) argues that, the Hafez al-Assad regime would not achieve to survive politically, economically, and militarily without an external supporter, because of the domestic and regional instability of the era. Nevertheless, the Baathist Syria was able to become a regional power through the Soviet support.

In the Soviet public broadcasts and statements, Syrians were being referred as “allies” and “friends” (Borshchevskaya, 2013) and they were already one of the most important Soviet partners in the Middle East in the 1950s. Nevertheless, the Soviet-Baath relationship became more valuable, when the Egyptians aligned with the Americans after the 1973 October War and signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1979 (Khlebnikov, 2011: 2). After Moscow lost Cairo, the Baath became the most important Soviet ally in the Arab world (Gvosdev& Marsh, 2014: 375).

In 1980, the Soviet and Baath regimes signed an amity and cooperation agreement. According the context of this agreement, in case of the existence of a threat against peace and security of one of the sides; the Soviet and Baath regimes will communicate with each other to cooperate in the removal of the threat and the promotion of the reconstruction of peace (Armaoğlu, 1996: 740). This agreement also gained military positions to the Soviet regime as a submarine base in Tartus and an air base in Tias (Aghayev&Katman, 2012: 2068).

In the mid-1980s, while the economic concerns of the Soviet ruling class were increasing, its ideological concerns ceased to be a priority. Finding economic partners became more important than finding allies in the Middle East (Aghayev&Katman, 2012: 2068). While the Soviet economic survival was being seen so important, Mikhail Gorbachev noticed that the Soviet aids to the Middle East do not bring enough economic benefits. Although the regimes of Syria and South Yemen were receiving the highest Soviet aids of the era, they had their own economic troubles which made them not likely to return the favor of the Soviet investments (Shad et al, 1995: 81). In such a period, the Soviet regime began to withdraw their military experts in Syria after Assad's 1985 visit to the USSR. In this visit, Gorbachev had signaled to Assad that the Baath is no more sole Soviet ally in the Middle East. Following, the Soviet regime established diplomatic relations with the Israelis and took a number of decisions that would anger Damascus in the late-1980s (Aghayev&Katman, 2012: 2068).

By this point, it can be seen that the Soviet and Syrian regimes intended to develop good relations with each other, when they started their bilateral relations early as the 1940s before the Syrian independence. Here, the abovementioned positive developments in their relations between the 1940s and 1980s are evaluated as attempts to establish hegemonic relations. It is believed that these attempts became successful and a Soviet hegemony<sup>5</sup> over Syria was formed under the Baath rules, because the

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<sup>5</sup> This argument means that this study assumes the USSR intended a world hegemonic project with its ideology, production relations and leading class. Although it can be asked whether majority of Soviet people were supporting Soviet policies or ruling class was actually leading within the USSR, the answer probably changes for the glorious and bitter periods that the people experienced during sixty-nine years lifetime of the USSR. Nevertheless, the abovementioned argument is derived from the formation of the USSR following the mobilization of the united social forces around similar ideological perspectives- as a revolution- and the start of their rule. Thus, this argument bases on the most distinct point of hegemony: The formation of a unity through a movement which was willingly started by people. This argument also rests upon sources that accept the presence the Soviet hegemony and consent among the Soviet people in different contexts. A part of them focus on the domestic conditions for hegemony inside the USSR. Among them, Bartels and Bartels (December 1998: 337), highlight the existence of the Soviet hegemony among Northern Peoples until the final days of the USSR. Harrison (1979: 24 cited in Hoffman, 1984: 138) argues that Stalinism was linked with mass consent and mass participation. Cohen (1999: 28) also agrees that Stalinism had popular support inside and outside officialdom "from its beginning and through the very worst". Apart from these perspectives, there are also sources that study hegemonic relations of the USSR with other nations. One of them is Dominguez (1989: 78, 104-105) who claim that Cuba consented the formation and the re-formation of the Soviet hegemony in the 1960s and 1980s and this hegemonic relation was re-constructed with consensus rather than pure asymmetry of

Baath was a pro-socialist and pro-Soviet regime and, as it will be evaluated in the following parts, made a clear choice toward the Eastern Bloc instead of the Western Bloc during the bipolar atmosphere of the world. In this sense, the Baath and the leading socialist class in the USSR can also be considered as the parts of the same historic bloc which was being shaped around the socialist ideology and led by the Soviet ruling class.

## **2.2. Ideological Dimension of the Relations**

The success of the Soviet-Baath alliance can be associated with the ideological proximity that was shared. There was a cooperation including material and non-material ingredients (like being encouraged, being supported or feeling like a member of a team) as a result of following the similar ideological ways. In this sense, the Soviet ruling class had the left-oriented allies inside the Baath regime that were needed to be cooperated and supported for their standing and the Baath regime had a strong supporter on material and non-material gains. In this context, this part introduces ideology as a connecting feature in the Soviet-Baath relations in the examples of the lightening of the initial mutual mistrust between the regimes, the Baath perception of the socialist camp as a positive group for the anti-imperialist stance of the both sides, and the Soviet policies towards the leftist Arab regimes to provide their sympathy for communism.

Before giving place to the ideological relation of the Baath Party with the Soviet regime, it is necessary to mention about the general characteristics of the party. The Baath Arab Socialist Party as founded in 1947 (Official Website of the Baath Party, 2015) by Michel 'Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar and adopted the features of non-alignment, anti-imperialism, and anti-colonialism (Britannica, 2015). The party constitution defined the methodology of the party as pan-Arab, socialist, popular, and revolutionary (Official Website of the Baath Party, 2015). Two essential principles of the party were socialism and pan-Arabism (Ataman, April 2012: 43) that can be seen in the article four of the party constitution which claims that:

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power. Another study belongs to Spinetti (2009: 123) who claims the presence of consent among Tajik people to the power structures that were created by the Soviets and he reasons this argument with the continuation of these structures even after the collapse of the USSR.

...Socialism is a necessity that emanates from the core of Arab Nationalism because it is the most ideal system which allows the Arab People to materialize their potentials and the maturing of their genius in the most perfect manner... (Official Website of the Baath Party, 2015).

Thus, it is also possible to define the party as the Arab nationalist version of a communist party (Rubin, 2007: 126).

Arab nationalism that the party committed to was secular and not necessarily related to religion. Actually, religion was rarely addressed during the long rule of Hafez al-Assad (Harvard Divinity School, 2020). Being an Arab was not seen equal to being a Muslim or being a religious person. One of “the greatest creations” of the Arab people was Islam, but their “soul” was the Arabism (Galvani, 1974: 5).

The pro-Soviet stance of the Baath Party was in accordance with one of its essential principles, socialism (Ataman, April 2012: 16). Its sympathy for communism was a factor that affected the formation of an alliance with Moscow rather than Washington (Peretz, 1983: 410 cited in Karabulut, 2007: 69). Nevertheless, in order to develop friendly relations with the Soviet ruling class, being socialist was not enough for the Baath regime; it also needed be socialist over Arab socialist<sup>6</sup>. In the early stages of the Baath rule, both the Soviets and Baathists were feeling mutual suspicion for each other. This situation partially changed through the reformulation of some of the ideological views of the Baath Party in 1963. This reformulation pleased the Soviet ruling class, because some of the concepts were taken from the Marxist-Leninist doctrine rather than Aflaq’s Arab socialist understanding (Ginat, 2000: 157). Thus, the Baathist rhetoric started to share some bold similarities with the earlier Soviet rhetoric in terms of ideas on revolutionary change, role of party, and organization of masses (Meininghaus, 2016: 79).

The Baath Party was not the only socialist political party in Syria; there was also the Syrian Communist Party (the SCP) which was accepted as illegal in the one-party system of the country. The presence of the SCP sometimes complicated the Baath and Soviet relations. For instance, when the newly-formed 1963 Syrian government refused to accept the SCP as legal, it caused tension between the government and the Soviet

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<sup>6</sup> For the differences between Arab socialism and socialism see: Özkoç (2007: 42-44).

regime. Even though the stance of the government toward the SCP did not change, the relations with the Soviet regime became more moderate with a new arms deal in 1964 (Ramet, 1990: 33f cited in Meininghaus, 2016: 96). After the 1966 coup d'état in Syria, the Soviet regime recognized the new government, but also supported the SCP and engaged in forming of a Progressive Front between 1966 and 1970. Nevertheless, the new Syrians leaders insisted the continuation of the single party rule (Rabinovich, 1972: 159 cited in Meininghaus, 2016: 97) and the SCP remained as illegal, but tolerated (Ismael & Jacqueline, 1998: 155 cited in Meininghaus, 2016: 97). According to Ulyanovski (December 1989 cited in Vasiliev, 2018: 150-151), the Baath leaders were aware that this tolerance would please the Soviet regime.

The Baath was supporting a principle for non-commitment to any international camp in the bipolar world; however, it perceived the socialist camp as a positive force for its anti-imperialist character. Thus, it was not treating the socialist and capitalist camps as equals. For the Baath, the socialist camp was more compatible with the interests of the Arab people and the Arab states (Rabinovich, 1972: 245). This approval was also shared by the socialist camp: The Soviet regime was aiding to some of the Arab regimes with an expectation that their socialist and Arab nationalist policies can be transformed into sympathy for communism (Shad et al, 1995: 79). According to Dawisha (1975: 421), the Soviet regime would certainly look with favor on the formation of a communist regime in the Middle East. If this scenario did not become reality, at least these regimes would be loyal to Moscow (Shad et al, 1995: 79). Although the Arab regimes had billions of debts to Moscow and the benefits of the economic relations with them were limited, Moscow was choosing ideological and political rapprochement with the Middle Eastern regimes. Because that the Soviet regime was giving more importance to the ideological and political rapprochement rather than economic gains in the relations with them (Malashenko, 2013: 4).

The content of this part is evaluated as the intention of the Soviet ruling class to re-secure the consent of its socialist Arab allies in favor of the Soviet leadership in the forming socialist historic bloc. Although these allies were already pro-socialist, the Soviet ruling class was seen as caring the economic, ideological, and political good relations with them. The reason for this situation can be the possibility of the loss of an

ally to the neoliberal capitalist historic bloc in the Cold War conditions. A pro-socialist regime which was not supported enough by the Soviet ruling class would shift to capitalism and a world order which was not approved by Moscow.

### **2.3. Cultural Dimension of the Relations**

The Soviet-Baath relations were not only standing on material or ideological aspects. There was also cultural side of their relations which is important for having an impact on the Syrian and Soviet populations. Here, the cultural dimension of the Soviet-Baath relations will be evaluated in terms of Soviet rulers' understanding of cultural revolution, their strategy to allow other regimes to witness the Soviet example, and the formal and informal cultural activities that the Soviet and Syrian people shared.

Firstly, Soviet leadership had an understanding of cultural revolution which was not planned as a rapid or violent movement, but a duration of gradual ideological transformation. Cultural revolution in the USSR aimed to provide the creation of a new intelligentsia, equal cultural opportunity, democratized culture, and rapid increase in educational level (Fitzpatrick, 1974: 33). It was led by the Communist Party after it seized political power (Barghoorn, 1958: 45) and was closely related to the promotion of the Soviet culture as a property of the entire people, not only the citizens of the USSR (Encyclopedia of Russian History, 2004).

Secondly, the Soviet ruling class had a strategy to let other regimes to witness their way as an example. The ruling class understood the political value of the popularization of the Soviet culture abroad (Barghoorn, 1958: 45) and it was believed that the developed and the less developed non-socialist regimes can adopt socialism through their witnessing the example of the USSR and its allies (Dawisha, 1975: 420). Thus, the Soviet cultural policy aimed to provide a positive image of the socialist Soviet civilization to other regimes (Barghoorn, 1958: 44). Witnessing the Soviet culture was possible with the establishing cultural relations with the USSR and the Soviet regime was willing for this interaction -particularly following the death of Joseph Stalin- (Dawisha, 1975: 420).

When the Arab countries recently became independent and were proud of the greatness and richness of their Arab-Islamic civilization, the Soviet leaders wanted them to know

that Moscow supports their cultural revival. The Soviet cultural diplomacy focused on the strengthening of “the Arab awareness of their own cultural and political independence from a colonial past”. In this point, the strategy of ‘witnessing’ was also used in the Soviet-Arab East relations (Dawisha, 1975: 420, 423). For instance, as a clause of the 1946 secret agreement, the Soviet and Syrian officials agreed on sending of teachers from the USSR to Syria to help the creation of a native educational system in Syria which is freed from foreign influence (Ginat, 1991: 89).

Thirdly, there were formal and informal cultural activities between the Syrian and the Soviet populations. In this context, Moscow did not neglect to develop a program of cultural relations with their counterparts in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq through the exchange of mutual interest groups, performing arts, films, printed media, television, education, radio links, and tourism (Dawisha, 1975: 425). In this regard, the Soviet and Baath regimes signed a cultural agreement in 1956 for sharing experiences in literature, education, art, science, physical culture, sports and so on (Pravda, 22 August 1956 cited in Dawisha, 1975: 426). Following this agreement, several Soviet folklore groups performed in Damascus (Gorbatov& Cherkassky, 1973: 300-306 cited in Dawisha, 1975: 427); a scholarship program was started for the Arab Armenians for their studying at the Armenian State Music Conservatory in Erevan (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1959 cited in Dawisha, 1975: 427-428); many mutual interest groups which consists of artists, musicians, sport teams, scientists, trade union delegates, religious leaders, and etc. exchanged. The number of the Soviet personnel, particularly academics, who sent to Syria as a part of the formal cultural agreements between 1955 and 1970, were minimum 317 (Dawisha, 1975: 428, 434).

Indeed, the cultural agreements for the development of the relations were influential. For instance, the exchange of groups was instrumental for the creation of shared interests, perspectives, and attitudes between the Soviet and Arab peoples. There was a belief that the Soviet-Arab amity can be harmed by the negative Arab view of the atheistic features of communism and the lack of religious freedom inside the Soviet Union (Dawisha, 1975: 428). On the contrary to this belief, a religious delegation from the Central Asia started the first Soviet Muslim pilgrimage to Caaba in 1954. In a press conference, the leader of the religious delegation claimed that the Soviet Muslims are

free to live in accordance with their religion inside the USSR (Moscow News, 1954 cited in Dawisha, 1975: 428). It can be seen as a move which can positively affect the Arab look towards the Soviet regime.

Just like other cultural tools, sport had an important role in the Soviet-Baath cultural and political relations, because the Soviet strategy for sports was closely related to the line of the foreign policy which was determined by the Soviet ruling class. The Soviet leaders believed that sport can be a tool to gain support for the communist system and the friendly relations within the communist bloc (Riordan, 1974: 342). In this regard, within the five years up to 1971, there were more than hundred Soviet coaches and instructors in charge in the Afro-Asian countries with the inclusion of Syria (Prokhorov, 1970: 14 cited in Riordan, 1974: 340). There were also students from these countries who receive a Soviet coaching diploma or graduate from the Soviet institutes of physical culture (Sovetskii Sport, 14 July 1971: 4 cited in Riordan, 1974: 341). Further, the Soviet and Baath regimes signed a five-year sports cooperation agreement in 1972 for the organization of training and seminars, the exchange of documents and matches in both the countries, the production of necessary equipment, and the construction of sports facilities (Riordan, 1974: 330).

Apart from the formal cultural agreements, Soviet and Syrian people shared many activities with each other. Among these populations, intermarriages happened, many Syrian elites came to the USSR for university education, and many Russians moved to Syria (Borshchevskaya, 2013). Thus, informal cultural activities also contributed to the development of cultural closeness between the Soviet and Syrian populations.

In the previous chapter, it was claimed that hegemony is not only related to domination, but also cultural leadership. It means that a power cannot be hegemonic without the rule through consent and the application of its leadership. In this sense, the struggle of the Soviet ruling class to develop cultural ties with Arab regimes and people that is covered in this part can be considered as a tool to provide their consent and to seek a ground for leading among them.

In the neo-Gramscian hegemony, the impacts of deep social and economic revolutions that states experienced can spread across national borders and affect other states in a



more passive way (Cox, 1983: 169-170). This idea can be related to the potential of the previous Soviet revolutions, which resulted with the emergence of socialist Soviet culture, in terms of affecting other people. In this part, the Soviet regime was seen as following a strategy for popularizing its culture and ideology abroad through letting other nations to witness its practices through developing relations with them. In accordance with the concept of the neo-Gramscian hegemony, this strategy would be successful to influence other regimes and people through improving cultural relations between these regimes and Soviet regime.

For the neo-Gramscian hegemony, a potential world hegemon benefits from culture and values to attract admiration and follow of other actors (Dirzauskaite & Ilinca, 2017: 38). Cox (1983, 171) accepts culture as a useful tool in the hegemonic struggle of the potential hegemon abroad. In this respect, the abovementioned Soviet cultural strategies can be evaluated with the neo-Gramscian hegemony. In this section, the Soviet ruling class was seen as intended to spread its cultural values around the world through the development of formal and informal cultural relations and its strategy of the cultural revolution. The Arab regimes, particularly the Baath in Syria, would be a good place to start this spreading since the Soviet and the progressive Arab regimes have similarities on ideology. In this sense, anti-colonialism can be considered as a common value between them. The Soviet support for the anti-colonial feature of the Arab identity can be seen as an attempt to form a powerful historic bloc which share common values.

#### **2.4. Meaning of Being a Soviet Ally during the Cold War**

The Cold War was a period which is characterized by the faction of many leading or dominant ruling groups as the members of the Western or Eastern blocs, the rise of their security concerns, and the increase of their military spending. For this reason, the value of diplomatic lines and military capabilities of these groups increased for their potential to face a war threat. In this regard, many groups were influenced by their alliances with the US or the USSR diplomatically and militarily during the Cold War. Here, it is argued the diplomatic affairs and military program of the Baath regimes were also deeply influenced by its alliance with the Soviet ruling class in the Cold War period. In this sense, this part is related to the Soviet connection with the diplomatic and military conditions of the Baath during the Cold War.

Firstly, the diplomatic affairs which were managed by the Baath regime were affected from its alliance with the Soviet leading class during the Cold War. Any event or war put the Soviets and Baathists together in this period (Karabulut, 2007: 71). The Baathists even became the main Soviet allies in the Middle East, after the loss of Egypt as a Soviet ally in the region. After this event, the last twenty years of the Cold War witnessed almost an ideal type of the Soviet-Baath relations between a superpower and its regional ally (Tudoroiu, 2015: 143, 145).

During the Cold War, the foreign policy decisions of the Baath were heavily influenced by the close relations with the Soviet ruling class and Syria was even known as “shadow of the Soviet in the Middle East” by politicians and academics (Aghayev&Katman, 2012: 2068). Although the Baathists were avoiding being a Soviet satellite, their identity was affected so much from their Soviet partnership and developed in a way which was special to the Third World allies and clients of Moscow. This partnership with the Soviets placed the Baathists to the anti-Western camp during the Cold War and this situation led negative relations between the Baath and the Western regimes (Tudoroiu, 2015: 145, 150). Even so, the Baathists were always caring what the Soviet goals are (Pipes, 1986: 2) and they were following the Soviet line in international relations (Ginat, 2000: 166). Although the Soviet and Baath regimes sometimes had different views on developments, these differences were on the limits what allies can tolerate and were less troublesome than the differences between the Americans and their NATO allies (Pipes, 1986: 3).

Being a Soviet ally was also meaning being an ally of the Soviet family. For this reason, deals, visits, and delegations were not limited with the USSR. The Baath regime and the Soviet bloc were mutually supporting each other. Many examples can be given as proof: A high-ranking North Korean official visited Syria to bring a message of thanks from Kim II-Sung for the Syrian support to the unification of two Koreas. In 1985, through a cable from Assad to Castro, the friendship of Cuba and Syria was praised in the twentieth year of their diplomatic relations. In the 1973 October War, when the Baathists were in need of military aid in 1973 and 1974, the Cubans sent pilots and tank operators to help them. During the 1981 missile crisis, the Baathists made a call for “world Communist and labor parties and progressive forces” to denounce the Israeli

aggression and the American projects for hegemony and this call was appealed to be responded by them. In 1983, a cooperation agreement was signed between the Baath regime and each of the regimes in East Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and two with the Rumanian regime; five delegations were also exchanged by the officials of North Korea, Poland, the USSR, Syria, and East Germany. Apart from these agreements and delegations, the entire Communist international was visiting the Hafez al-Assad regime from the Mongolians to Angolans along with the communist parties in the oppositions from Greece, Italy and Chile. In return, the Baath representatives were joining the Communist party congresses (Pipes, 1986: 2-4).

Secondly, the Syrian military structure was shaped by the alliance with the Soviet leading class. The Syrian military was designed to have a fourth service which is the Air Defense Command apart from army, navy and air force that was similar to the Soviet Troops of Air Defense. The Syrian soldiers who were sent abroad for military training were going to the Soviet bloc countries and the entire foreign military experts were coming from here. Even, some uniforms of the Syrian military were changed to resemble the Soviet uniforms (Pipes, 1986: 3-4).

Militarily, the Moscow-Damascus alliance was meaning Soviet military advisers and Soviet-made tanks, missiles, fighter aircrafts, anti-aircrafts, and other equipments for the Baath regime (Rubin, 2007: 142-143). The ninety percent of the Syrian military weapons were coming from the USSR. The Syrian military had the most sophisticated Soviet supplied air defense system outside the USSR and it was the owner of six-hundred and fifty Soviet combat airplanes and approximately four-thousand Soviet tanks. Syria was also an integral unit of the Soviet security mechanisms, because the air defense system in Syria was connected to the stations in the USSR and to the Soviet ships in the Mediterranean (Pipes, 1986: 3-4). Apart from them, the Soviet leading class took a further step in the 1980s and began to supply all of the economic and military needs of Syria (Aghayev&Katman, 2012: 2067). This step was also including the internal protection for Hafez al-Assad. In the mid-1980s, when the Muslim Brotherhood revolt was in its highest level, five-hundred KGB advisers were responsible to train the Syrian intelligence officers in Syria. Other officers were sent to the USSR for similar training (Pipes, 1986: 4).

In this part, it is seen that the general close relations between the Soviet and Baath regimes during the Cold War led the development of common perspectives between the sides. The Baath was following the Soviet line in international relations and its choice toward the Eastern Bloc was seen clear. It can be evaluated that the Baath was following the Soviet leadership in the forming socialist historic bloc in a hegemonic project and established diplomatic relations with other members of this bloc.

Although the neo-Gramscian hegemony is not a material-oriented approach, even so it recognized the importance of material capabilities (Konrad, 2012). In this regard, the Soviet military and economic capabilities to assist the Baath during the Cold War was valuable for the creation and continuation of the Soviet hegemonic project, because an unaided Baath would have given up consenting for the leadership of the Soviet socialist class in the project or it would have found support from the neoliberal capitalist historic bloc in the Cold War bipolarity.

## **2.5. The Soviet-Baath Diversities of Views**

This part involves the serious disagreements between the Soviet and Baath regimes which caused tension and even threats, but could be overcome at the end of the day. Although the sides were sharing the same opinion on the most issues in the Middle East, there were some exceptions (Pipes, 1986: 3). There is a brief list of them.

Firstly, the Soviet and Baath regimes had a disagreement over the Arab-Israeli conflict and the outbreak of the 1973 October War. The Soviet leaders were supporting a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict under the UN negotiations, when the Baath regime perceived an armed conflict as the only way to deal with the Israelis. The Soviet leaders pressed the Baath to participate in the Geneva Forum, especially with their arms-supply cutback. Nevertheless, the Baath leaders chose to launch a war against the Israelis in 1973<sup>7</sup> (Karsh, 1991: 13, 20). It was a failure of the Soviet diplomatic and political capabilities, the Soviet leaders could not succeed to persuade Assad and prevent the outbreak of the fourth Arab-Israeli war (Karsh, 1991: 15-16). Even so, when the Syrian forces suffered heavy losses in the war, the Soviet regime chose to help them

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<sup>7</sup> Many Arabs considered that the 1973 October War regained their honor after the defeat of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War (Rubin, 2007: 87).

via sending military advisers, weapons, and equipment in 1974. This help restored the Syrian forces and increased their quality (Kirshin, 1998: 65).

Secondly, there was a debate over Lebanon between Moscow and Damascus. Lebanon was the ground of a civil war which launched in 1975 and counted the Sunni, Shiite, Christian, Druze, and Palestinian in (Sharnoff, 2009). The Baath regime of Syria was also a part of this conflict via its military presence in Lebanon. In 1976, the Baathists took a decision to establish permanent presence in Lebanon. This decision was not welcomed by the Soviet leaders and caused the most intense tension among Moscow and Damascus in the pre-Gorbachev period (Karsh, 1991: 22). Through a personal letter from Brezhnev to Assad, the Soviet leader criticized the Syrian policy on Lebanon, called for a truce, and threatened with the Soviet sanctions if the Syrian army did not withdraw from Lebanon (Le Monde, 20 July 1976 cited in Karsh, 1991: 24). Nevertheless, Assad totally ignored the Soviet demand for the withdrawal (Karsh, 1991: 24).

Finally, the Soviet and Baath regimes disagreed over the leader of the PLO, Yasser Arafat<sup>8</sup>. The PLO was one of the leftist belligerents which were supported by the Soviet ruling class in the Lebanese civil war (Sharnoff, 2009) and both the PLO and the Baath were the Soviet allies. Nevertheless, they fell into a serious conflict under Yasser Arafat and Hafez al-Assad. In 1976, the Baathists started a military intervention against the PLO in Lebanon. The total control of the Baath over Lebanon would mean almost end of the influence of the PLO in the country and the Soviet regime did not welcome this possible situation. Nevertheless, the Soviet leaders were seen as unable to affect actions of their Baathist allies. When the PLO- Syrian conflicts transformed into hot war in

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<sup>8</sup> Arafat and Assad had many disagreements which go back to the 1960s. When the Jadid-Assad regime was sponsoring Arafat's Fatah, Assad was viewing Arafat as a tool of his rivals. In 1966, the Assad faction of the regime backed Yousuf al-Urabi, a friend of Assad and a Palestinian in the Syrian army, to replace Arafat with him as the leader of Fatah, but Urabi was killed by Arafat or his supporters. It led Arafat to be jailed for six weeks and an enmity between Assad and Arafat. In 1970, Assad became influential to prevent Jadid's willingness to aid Arafat against the Jordanian army of the King Hussein during the Black September. In 1972, Assad tried to overthrow Arafat once again via giving his support for Hamdan Ashour, but Arafat was able to get over this move. After the 1982 War, Assad wanted to benefit from the defeat of the PLO in Lebanon to control the organization. Thus, when the biggest anti-Arafat revolt occurred inside Fatah in May 1983, the Syrians helped the rebels to seize offices and military equipments of Fatah and arrested the Palestinians who supported Arafat (Rubin, 2007: 39-42, 87-89).

1976, 1983, and 1985, the Soviet leaders avoided harming their relationship with the Baath regime, the most valuable remained Arab ally, but also harshly pressed on it (Khalidi, 1985: 722-724, 730). The Soviet leaders did not approve the decisions of Assad toward Arafat, but Assad ignored the Soviet stance (Neumann, 1983-1984: 243). Thus, the Soviet leading class improved relations with the PLO only to see it as a side in the conflicts with the Baath, the main regional Soviet ally. It was a situation which deeply embarrassed the Soviet rule (Khalidi, 1985: 719).

This study argues that the disagreements which were mentioned in this part showed up during the times when the level of the Arab nationalism increased. They occurred in the Middle East during the 1970s and the 1980s when the Soviet leadership objected to some of the actions of the Baath regime which were capable of causing military conflict in the region. The period was just after the Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and during the 1973 and 1982 wars, while the Syrians and other Arabs were viewing the 1967 defeat as a dishonorable. Thus, this period was characterized by the rise of nationalism in the Arab Middle East. During the same years, the Baath regime was interested in the situation in Lebanon and Palestine which were called as parts of the Greater Syria region<sup>9</sup>. It did not want to be isolated from the decision-making over Lebanon or Palestine, although it would mean tension with the PLO and Yasser Arafat. This stance can also be connected to Arab nationalism. The Baath rule of Syria had nationalistic dreams about ruling over the Greater Syria. The aforementioned disputes between Assad and Arafat, which were far from being personal rivalry, also need to be considered in the line of nationalism for the Syrian willingness to call the tune over Lebanon and Palestine through controlling the PLO. Thus, it can be said that the Soviet-Baath disagreements derived from the actions which were influenced by Arab nationalism.

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<sup>9</sup>Assad was viewing the issues over Palestine directly related to his country and intending to have a voice in these issues. According to Rubin (2007: 85), Damascus aimed to prevent the independence of Palestine or the control of any Arab regime over Palestine. As Assad stated to Arafat once, the president of Syria believed that a Palestinian entity or Palestinian people does not exist, because Palestine is an integral part of Syria (Junbalat, 1982: 28 cited in Rubin, 2007: 84). In this respect, it can be considered that Assad would have welcomed the elimination of Yasser Arafat or a powerful PLO to be the most influential actor in the decisions over Palestine.

These disagreements also show the times that the Baath did not apply its Cold War habit to follow the Soviet line in international relations. Although this situation can be interpreted as the overweight of the Pan-Arab character among the pan-Arab and socialist characters of the Baath Party<sup>10</sup>, the Baathists did not freeze off the Soviet leading class or end the alliance. Instead the sides overcame their disagreements. For this reason, it is believed that these disagreements cannot be considered as the end of the Baath's consent for the Soviet hegemonic project or the breaking of the hegemonic relation.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

This chapter was written to provide a historical depth to the Russian-Syrian relations through examining the Soviet-Syrian relations from the perspective of the neo-Gramscian hegemony. Here, it was argued that a hegemonic relation was established between the Soviet ruling class and the Baathists of Syria during the Soviet era. When the USSR was considered as a country which experienced deep social and economic revolutions in its history, it had potential to affect other states and to be a world hegemon. At this stage, it is argued that the Baathists gave consent to this hegemonic project as well as the Soviet leadership in the socialist-historic bloc. The formation and the maintenance of their hegemonic relation were strengthened through cultural and ideological factors which are also needed to exercise leadership. The Cold War conditions which require the usage of the Soviet material capabilities to support the Baath and to re-guarantee the Baath consent for the continuation of its presence inside the socialist-historic bloc. Although the general view of the Soviet-Baath relations was good, the disagreements which occurred over the 1973 October War, Lebanon and, Yasser Arafat, were due to the rise of the Arab nationalism at that time. Nevertheless, these disagreements were able to be tolerated and did not signal the end of their hegemonic relations.

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<sup>10</sup>According to Özkoç (2007: 37), although the socialist understanding inside the Baath Party rose by the mid-1950s, Arab nationalism became more prominent than socialism in 1966 and the 1970s in accordance with the nationalist events of the era.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE BOURGEOIS SOCIAL FORCES WITHIN RUSSIA AND THE RUSSIAN-SYRIAN RELATIONS IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA

This chapter is written to introduce the bourgeois social forces inside Russia and the transformation of the Russian-Syrian relations after the dissolution of the USSR. It is questioned how the collapse of the Soviet hegemonic project affected the new Russian state and its bourgeois class as well as the dynamics of the relation between Moscow and Damascus. Here, the neo-Gramscian hegemony is benefited in the evaluation of the findings of these questions, when particularly the class-centric focus of the Gramscian hegemony is used to analyze the capitalist class inside Russia for the requirement of social classes in the construction of hegemony. Through this context, the chapter aims to remark the transformation of the intra-state conditions inside Russia and inter-state relations with Syria and the possibility of a new Russian hegemonic project.

#### 3.1. The Collapse of the USSR and the Transition Process

The USSR was comprising of fifteen republics until the upheavals of 1991 (Blum, 1992: 354). In August 1991, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia declared their independences after a failed coup d'état and they were recognized by the USSR in the next month (Schemann, 7 September 1991). The remained twelve republics also became independent by December 1991 (Blum, 1992: 355), after the declaration of the cease of the existence of the USSR as a geopolitical reality and an actor of and international law (Schemann, 9 December 1991).

After the collapse of the USSR, the new Russian Federation became a country which is no longer one of the two powers that formed the post-Second World War society, but a semi-peripheral or even a third-world country. It struggled to come to terms with its past and form a state that has global practices, when Russians had to overcome the failure of a mode of production and the loss of their 'Soviet empire'. Although the Russian nation had emblematically maintained a stance against the Western-inspired global capitalism in their history, the end of state socialism as well as the dissolution of the USSR led claims that Russia is starting a programme of liberal democratic reform which has initial



hardships, but should be completed with the full integration of Russia to the global economy (Worth, 2017: 1-4).

The transition process in Russia can be perceived as a transformation from communism to post-communism and from market economy to neoliberal economy<sup>11</sup> (Granville & Oppenheimer, 2001: 64 cited in Melander, 2010: 9). Nevertheless, Russia did not experience a smooth transitional process toward marketization and democracy and the Russian mode of production evolved to a “neoliberal autocracy” and “barbaric capitalism” (Kagarlitsky, 2002 cited in Worth, 2017:6). Thus, there was peripheral capitalism in Russia in the late of the twentieth century. At the present time, the Russian capitalism is not “entirely capitalism” and, in a sense, “not capitalism at all”. Indeed, it is a capitalist state and a component of the global capitalist economy, but the state is authoritarian, corporatist, communal, and feudal bureaucratic at the same time (Kagarlitsky, 2002: 7). Even so, the transition process is often seen as concluded with more neoliberal economy and post-communist political order (Granville & Oppenheimer, 2001: 64 cited in Melander, 2010: 9).

### **3. 2. A Fragmented Society**

The post-Cold War administrations in Russia under Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin tried to create a Russian style of capitalism for the distrust to the Western-inspired practices and norms. This Russian style of capitalism was related to the Russian integration into the global economy and capital liberalization along with paying regard to particular nationalist causes (Zyuganov, 1997 cited in Worth, 2002: 313). The Yeltsin and Putin administrations also had strategies to provide a gradual consolidation into the global economy, but they were hard to be achieved for the existence of different ideologies, political groups, and organizations which have been alive since the Glasnost period. In this period, historical variety of the social forces within the USSR had found opportunity to re-emerge and it had created a difficult situation for any successive state to come to terms (Worth, 2017: 3, 6).

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<sup>11</sup> For much detailed information about the transition process, see also: Kaygusuz (October 2018).

In the beginning of the 1990s, there were many groups inside the Russian civil society. They were either the opponents or supporters of the changes which were being experienced (Worth, 2005: 105-106 cited in Melander, 2010: 1). Among the opponents, there were the nationalist and neo-communist groups who were against any form of the Western development (Worth, 2002: 313), when there were also supporters like the oligarchs who were taking advantage from the changes (Worth, 2005: 105-106 cited in Melander, 2010: 1).

The Russian civil society was lack of reflecting a new political economic mode of production and the fragmented political perspectives inside the country was one of its reasons (Worth, 2002: 311). According to Jeremy Lester (1995: 20, 26 cited in Worth, 2017: 4), a Russian specialist and political theorist, the variety of ideological views and movements in the post-communist era ought to be perceived as “a battle between hegemonic strategies” and the reward of this battle is the center of the Russian civil society. Further, ‘minimum hegemony’ seems prominent, because of the weakness of the Russian civil society in the post-Soviet era.

### **3.3 The Change of the Prominent Bourgeois Class Fractions**

While Russia was being shaped in accordance with the capitalist development, the leading position inside the capitalist class was changing. This part introduces the three stages of the post-Soviet capitalism in Russia and the prominent groups of these stages. This categorization is created by Kirkham (2016:115) who believes that the first stage was experienced between 1991 and 1998, when the oligarchs rose as political actors. The second stage was between 1998 and 2008; it started with the Russian financial crisis and ended with the global financial crisis. This stage witnessed the rise of the siloviki (members of law and security structures). The third stage which started in 2008 still continues and witnesses the rise of the importance on the middle class. Here, these stages are focused to remark the change of the power dynamics inside the potential hegemonic groups in Russia.

#### **3.3.1. Stage One: The Rise of the Oligarchs**

In Russia, oligarchs are often understood as business people who have influence on national politics through their adequate control over resources (Melander, 2010: 20).

They are a few dozen of ‘families’ who are influential in financial flows, raw material resources, media, and politics (Kagarlitsky, 2002: 6). During the early years of the new state, they provided guidance and aid to the government and soon had important positions inside the governmental structures (Shevtsova, 2007: 104 cited in Melander, 2010: 1). They became influential in politics, finance, and society (Melander, 2010: 13). By the many, they were blamed for the fragmentation of the society and economic and social problems of the country in the early years of the post-Soviet period. Others believed that the problems were derived from making bad decisions during the transition process and allowed the oligarchs to become more powerful than they could do alone (Worth, 2005: 105 cited in Melander, 2010:1).

Vladimir Putin believed that much power is given to the oligarchs and he vowed to diminish their roles as a part of his political manifesto, by the end of the 1990s (Melander, 2010: 1). The president invited the oligarchs to the Kremlin in order to say that they would be supported in economic area, but they are obliged to follow his line in politics (Rigi, 2005: 202). Nevertheless, Melander (2010: 1, 24) argues that the oligarchs are still influential in politics as well as finance and it is like Russia is battling with the oligarchy and the fragmented society even today.

### 3.3.2. Stage Two: The Counterbalancing with the Siloviki

The siloviki refers to the former and current officials of the intelligence services, armed services, and law enforcement bodies (Bremmer& Charap, 2006-2007: 86). The members of this group started to be appointed to administrative and political positions with the election of Putin as president in 2000 (Renz, 2006: 903). They became a part of the Kremlin fractions which were commonly regarded as the technocrats, liberals, and siloviki. Among these fractions, the siloviki was probably the most influential one. The presidential administration, which is likely the most powerful institution in Russia, was strongly affected by the siloviki (Bremmer& Charap, 2006-2007: 85, 87).

While Putin was supporting that the oligarchs collected too much power on their hands (Melander, 2010: 1), the financial crisis of 1998 brought a necessity for a new order between the oligarchs and the state elites (Dzarasov cited in Pirani, 2011: 499). The federal bureaucracy of Putin sought ways to provide economic growth and

counterbalance the oligarchs with the siloviki at the same time. In this context, the siloviki was working to reduce the pressures on businesses (Kirkham, 2016: 115-116) and struggling against the oligarchs. There were also reports which claim that the siloviki was the starter of the Yukos affair (Bremmer& Charap, 2006-2007: 84) that started in 2003 with the arrestment of Mikhail Khodorkovsky who was the chief executive of Yukos Oil Company and a well-known oligarch (Brookes, 2004; Hays, 2008).

### 3.3.3. Stage Three: The Potential of the Middle Class

In this stage, the siloviki witnessed the global financial crisis of 2008 and started to influence the decision-making process among the low and medium level bureaucrats who were trying to collect as much rent as they could collect from medium-sized businesses (Kirkham, 2016: 116). The siloviki was seeking to expand their control on rent sources of economy (Yakovlev, 2014: 10). For this reason, it gradually became oppressive toward businesses which were protected from oppression by themselves in the beginning of the 2000s. Under these conditions, the global financial crisis showed that the siloviki could no longer be a part of the social base of the regime. It is believed that the needed economic growth and social stability would be achieved through the strengthening of middle class and the support for medium sized businesses. Thus, in the late 2000s, the Russian authorities began to protect middle class and medium sized businesses from the pressures of the siloviki (Kirkham, 2016: 115-116, 124). According to Kirkham (2016: 125), the middle class of Russia has a potential for hegemonic project: Its cultural leadership was formed inside Russia, but it is not strong enough for a hegemonic project today.

### 3.4. Changes inside Russia in the Mid-2000s

In the early 2000s, the Russian leaders were busy with domestic policy issues such as securing control over regional governors, countering terrorism, or resisting political influence of oligarchs, when they were also trying to deal with the negative influence of the 1998 economic crisis. Nevertheless, some changes started to be observed in Russia in 2004. Firstly, the oligarchs lost influence inside the ruling coalition, when the siloviki gained power. It was a result of the arrestment of Khodorkovsky, the defeat of big

business, and the massive support that the ruling elites gained in the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2003 and 2004 (Yakovlev, 2016: 148-149). Secondly, the emergence of “color revolutions” in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan led Russians thinking these movements as Western, particularly American, attempts to decrease the Russian influence in the post-Soviet space (Karaganov, 2007 cited in Yakovlev, 2016: 149). Thirdly, the mid-2000s witnessed economic growth, rise in oil prices, flow of direct investment, and termination of capital flight. After pulling through the negative effects of the 1998 economic crisis, the Russian leaders started to feel as capable of shaping an independent economic policy. When this economic recovery combined with the European dependence on the Russian energy export, the Russian elites also felt confident to adopt a new status for the country as an “energy superpower”. The manifestation of these changes reflected to the speech of Putin at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. This speech highlighted the necessity of a “new global order” which pays regard to the interests of the Russians and the other main developing nations (Yakovlev, 2016: 148-149).

Following the mid-2000s, the Russian authorities re-started foreign aid programs. In 2007, the first concept note of the country on development assistance was adopted and this assistance was officially interested in the idea of forming “a stable, fair and democratic world order” (Asmus et al, 9 April 2018). The authorities decided to spend 400-500 million dollars annually as foreign aids. Although this amount is smaller than the aid budgets of many countries, Russia is often seen as a “re-emerging” donor (Provost, 25 May 2011). This adjective makes a reference to the obligatory ending of the Soviet aid programs in the 1990s and the emergence of the successor Russia as a country in need of aid for itself, due to rapid economic decline in the early post-Soviet era (Asmus et al, 9 April 2018). Nevertheless, this position of “re-emerging” donor revealed the Russian willingness to re-build its public image and impact (Provost, 25 May 2011).

Moscow has not only been known through its foreign aids since the end of the mid-2000s. It has been always on agenda with the bold decisions of the Russian rulers. For instance, the Russians fought with the Georgians in 2008, declared the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Gurganus& Rumer, 20 February 2019), intervened in Syria militarily

in 2015, and involved to the Venezuela Crisis<sup>12</sup> in favor of the Maduro regime and even opposed Guaidó's American-supported coup in 2019 (Ellyatt, 10 February 2020). Thus, the return of Moscow to the global stage was assertive (Gurganus& Rumer, 20 February 2019).

According to Garibaldi (2004: 15 cited in Kirkham, 2016: 116), between 1998 and 2008, a successful initiative was started in Russia to form a domestic social base which expands the historic bloc towards the post-Soviet space. To his idea, the Russian people were much supportive of closer cooperation with neighbor nations with shared language, history, and business tradition in the mid-2000s than they were in the 1990s. The reason for their being skeptical in the 1990s was their perception of cooperation as a return to the Soviet times. Kirkham (20016: 112) admits these views of Garibaldi and defends the presence of a Russian hegemonic project towards to the post-Soviet nations. This study also agrees the presence of the hegemonic project in Russia and argues that it started after the abovementioned changes observed in the mid-2000s. The reason for this argument is that these changes led the willingness of Russians to be more active in the global stage and be heard more as one of the many voices of developing countries. These changes, which can be perceived as signals of recovery from the Soviet collapse, prepared a ground for a hegemonic project which is not only limited to the post-Soviet space. It was the start of a world hegemonic project, which also covers Syria. In this context, how the 2015 military intervention in Syria can be understood as a hegemonic move will be evaluated in details in the following chapter.

### **3.5. Evaluation**

In this section, it is argued that the prominence of the oligarchs, siloviki, and middle class was changing inside Russia. Although there was no stability for a particular class fraction among them to maintain its prominence wherefrom the weakening of one group

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<sup>12</sup> In Venezuela, President Nicolás Maduro won a second term after the presidential election in 2018, but the election was widely accepted as rigged. In 2019, Juan Guaidó, the leader of the National Assembly, declared himself interim president, after referring a paragraph in the constitution that permits such a move in case of the vacancy of the presidency. Guaidó has been recognized as president by more than fifty countries, when the military has remained loyal to Maduro (BBC, 6 January 2020).

was connected to the rise of the other, the ruling class coalition continued to consist of capitalist, bourgeois, and neoliberal features.

It is also argued that a series of changes experienced in Russia by the mid-2000s. It is believed that these changes were the signals of the Russian willingness to be more heard and respected in the global stage. After the mid-2000s, it is argued that a hegemonic project around neoliberal capitalism was intended by the bourgeois class of Russia, even though the leading class fraction of this class changed in this project. By the 2000s, when the siloviki was active and the influence of the oligarchs was tried to be nullified, a domestic hegemony was not or could not be established within Russia. As Huseynov (2014) claimed that in case of a hegemonic order was created, it would spread beyond borders. Although this scenario did not happen in the past, this study believes that it is not impossible for the future. The middle class of Russia which started to strengthen inside the bourgeois class after the mid-2000s can make a difference (Kirkham, 2016: 125). Indeed, in the following years, it can be replaced by another class fraction or it can create conditions to complete the hegemonic project successfully, but today it has a potential to affect the intra-state and inter-state relations via the hegemonic intentions.

### **3.6. The Russian-Syrian Relations in the Post-Soviet Era**

The transformative wind of the Soviet collapse was not only special to the post-Soviet countries; it was also involving Soviet allies and clients. Syria, as an ally and client of the USSR, was one of these countries that faced with the obligation of change. Apart from the necessity of new arrangements after the loss of its supporter, the collapse of the USSR also signaled the transformation of the relations between Moscow and Damascus. They were unable to protect the former level of their relations, so their relations started cold in the early-post-Soviet period and could not be better until the mid-2000s. Here, it is questioned what happened in the mid-2000s and led the development of the Russian-Syrian relations. Thus, this part presents the development of the post-Soviet Russian-Syrian relations and evaluates it with the neo-Gramscian hegemony.

After the Soviet collapse, Moscow found itself in a powerless state, its main concern was the post-Soviet space and it was not active in the Middle East (Tudoroiu, 2015: 150). The Russians had their own economic troubles to cope with (Rubin, 2007: 153),

so they did not supply military and economic aids to the Syrians. Although the continuation of the duties of the Russian generals as advisers in the Syrian army and the Russian military presence in Tartus base (Aghayev& Katman, 2012: 2068), the Kremlin did not have enough strength to continue its former level of relations with the Arab governments and did not have defined interests in the Middle East. Thus, the Arab regimes were disappointed in Russia as an economic partner and a political ally (Malashenko, 2013: 5).

The post-Soviet era started problematic for Damascus, too. The Syrian heavy reliance on the USSR caused the weakening of the position of Hafez al-Assad (Tudoroiu, 2015: 145) and the strength of the Syrian army (Rubin, 2007: 55). Right after the collapse of the USSR, the degree of the Russian-Syrian relations declined to a low point in the Yeltsin period and Syria was unable to receive aid from Russia (Aghayev& Katman, 2012: 2068). The Russian opening to Israel in the Yeltsin era also complicated their relations (Gvosdev& Marsh, 2014: 376). Under these circumstances, the Syrians firstly pretended to be nice to the remained superpower, the US, but later got closer with Iran, a new ally and protector, which share common interests with Syria. In 2000, Hafez al-Assad died and left a regionally and internationally isolated Syria to his son, Bashar al-Assad (Rubin, 2007: 76, 131). In this context, Damascus increasingly rested upon Tehran because of isolation and insecurity (Tudoroiu, 2015: 150).

In the 2000s, Russia under Putin started to follow more active Middle Eastern policies (Malashenko, 2013: 5). In these years, Russia was selling arms to the Middle East, expanding the role of the Russian energy companies in the region (Bourtman, 2006: 1), and sharing the same view with Syria against the American invasion of Iraq; even so the Russian-Syrian relations were not so close. This situation changed dramatically after a meeting which was joined by Putin and Assad in January 2005. The achievement of the meeting in the development of the relations was related to the Russians' not insisting the Syrians to pay their entire Soviet-era debt, in return of Syria's buying weapons from Russia. In this meeting, the Russians agreed to delete the seventy-three percent of the Syrian debt (Katz, 2006: 1-2, 4).

In the following years, Syria, a supporter of the Russian policy towards the Northern Caucasus (Kreutz, 2010: 12), also gave approved the Russian military action in Georgia.



According to Bashar al-Assad, the Russian decision was a reaction to the provocation of Georgia (Weitz, 2008). After 2008, Damascus continued its cooperation with Moscow on military area including armament and infrastructure improvement (Simmons, 2017). In this way, the period of Putin and Assad witnessed better bilateral relations (Aghayev& Katman, 2012: 2068).

Although the Russian-Syrian cooperation reached a new high level after 2005, it does not mean Moscow and Damascus had no problems in the post-Soviet period. There was negative influence of the development in the Russian-Israeli relations. In the 2000s, Putin intended to develop relations with the Israelis while keeping the traditional Arab alliances of Russia. In this strategy, the Syrians were affected directly by the better Russian-Israeli relations, because the quantity and quality of the Russian-supplied arms to Syria declined with the increase of the Russian-Israeli cooperation. Although Moscow accepted to sell some missiles to the Syrians, it also took care of the Israeli concerns (Bourtman, 2006: 7-9). The Russians were also gaining much from trade with the Israelis than trade with the Syrians and the development of the Russian-Syrian relations cost worse Russian-Israeli relations. In these circumstances, some believes that improving relations with Damascus was not in favor of the Russians (Katz, 2006: 6). Even so, the Russian-Syrian cooperation ensured and among the former strong alliances of Moscow, Syria remained as the only one which is close to Russia<sup>13</sup> (Khlebnikov, 2011: 3).

In this section, it is seen that the Russian and Syrian administrations were unable to maintain the level of their relations in the Soviet era, after the end of the Cold War. This study believes that this change in the post-Soviet relations was the break of their

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<sup>13</sup>Although Khlebnikov (2011: 2-3) does not refer the reasons of the continuation of the Russian-Syrian alliance openly, his article associate this alliance to the good Russian-Syrian relations since the 1940s, the Syrian necessity for the Russian support in front of the hostility against the Israelis and pressures from the US and the West, the Russian acceptance of Damascus as a key factor in its Middle East policy and in an Arab-Israeli peace, the development of the Russian-Syrian cooperation since 2005, the Syrian position as a military ally of Moscow and one of the largest buyer of the Russian arms, their energy deals, and the Russian position towards the Syrian conflict since 2010. In this sense, it can be said that although the Syrians did not welcome the development of the Russian-Israeli relations and a tension rose for this reason, there were many other reasons for Damascus to continue to develop relations with Moscow.

hegemonic relations. The collapse of the USSR also caused the end of the Soviet hegemonic project and the collapse of the Soviet leadership in the socialist historic bloc. Whether Moscow had desire for a new hegemonic project or not right after the collapse of the USSR, it did not have enough strength to start such a project. Under these conditions, the Syrians could not have rested upon a weaker Moscow.

Although the leading bourgeois class fractions of Russia was being changed over time, the Russians, who became stronger than the first years after the collapse, revealed their desire for a new hegemonic project after the mid-2000s. Now, Russia was a capitalist state<sup>14</sup> which is different than the American-kind of capitalism and its leading classes were not willing to accept neither the leading of the capitalist historic bloc nor the hegemony of the US inside this bloc<sup>15</sup>. In case of the establishment of a bourgeois capitalist domestic hegemony inside Russia, it will need the support of the leading classes of other states for a project of world hegemony. For this reason, securing the consent of the states which supported the Soviet hegemonic project in the history can be considered as a solid start. The increase of the Russian attention towards the Syrians and the developing Russian-Syrian relations since the mid-2000s can be evaluated in this line. Even though the Syrians and the Russians had disagreement over the developing Russian-Israeli relations, the general situation after the mid-2000s looks like Syria was willing to re-consent for the leadership of Moscow.

### **3.7. Conclusion**

This chapter was written to focus on the bourgeois social forces inside Russia and the post-Soviet Russian-Syrian relations. It was argued that the Soviet hegemonic project came to an end with the collapse of the USSR. Thus, Moscow lost its leadership in the socialist-historic bloc and its hegemonic relation with Syria. It was seen that the

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<sup>14</sup>Although the Russian position as a capitalist state is being discussed for the nature of the post-Soviet transformation and is called as “peripheral capitalism” by Kagarlitsky (2002:7), Arrighi (1993: 184-185) argues that each successive hegemon has been less capitalist than the previous one such as the change of hegemonies of the Dutch, British, and American.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, Robinson (2005: 9-10) regards the Russian oligarchy as a dominant group which is less integrated or opposed to global capitalism and a challenger to the global capitalist bloc which is called as the US-led capitalist historic bloc in his study.

prominence of the oligarchs, the siloviki, and the middle class as the bourgeois class fractions has changed since the 1990s. When a domestic hegemony was not or could not be established during the active years of the oligarchs and the siloviki, after 2008 a potential of a domestic hegemony which would be led by the middle class emerged. The Russian intention for a new hegemonic project also influenced the Russian-Syrian relations in a positive way. It can be said that there is a mutual intention for the re-establishment of the hegemonic relations. Thus, in case of the construction of a Russian domestic hegemony around the bourgeois, its spread from the country would be supported by the consent of the Syrian regime.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE 2015 RUSSIAN MILITARY INTERVENTION IN SYRIA**

This chapter aims to understand the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria from the neo-Gramscian perspective on hegemony. For this purpose, the context of the chapter is related to the period which covers the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, the Russian military intervention, and the current period after the intervention. Here, the revolts of the Arab Spring in general and the Syrian revolt and its transformation into the civil war in particular are seen as organic crises. Inside Russia, the moves to take decision of a military intervention in favor of the Assad regime are connected to the concepts of organic intellectuals, civil society, and organic crisis. The supportive position of Moscow toward the Assad regime is also seen relevance to the essential parts of world hegemony: Material capabilities, cultural leadership and international institutions. As a result of these evaluations, this chapter argues that the start of the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria can be considered as a part of the Russian project of world hegemony.

#### **4.1. The Emergence of the Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring refers to an array of anti-government revolts which have affected the Arab countries of the Middle East and the North Africa (the MENA) beginning in 2010 (Merriam-Webster, 2019). These revolts started in Tunisia with the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010. Bouazizi was a university graduate who was working as a peddler and whose products were confiscated by a police officer. As a reaction to this treatment and probably to the poor living standards of the Ben Ali regime which force the educated youth to sell fruits, Bouazizi set himself on fire in the public arena. Following this event, many people gathered at the central squares in the most of the Tunisian cities (Dupont& Passy, 2011: 447).

It was the beginning of a revolution started by marginalized social groups such as the unemployed - particularly graduate unemployed and the southern-mining-region workers. They were not a part of the middle class or northern urbanites; they were people from the southern regions who suffer from political, economic, and social marginalization (Ayeb, September 2011: 468). The source of the revolution was

“intense labor activism”, because the neo-liberal policies of the regime were making the living conditions of working class harder for years (Ayelabola, 2012: 18).

The union rank and file of L’Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (Tunisian General Labor Union), a main historical social force in the organization of social affairs in Tunisia, shaped the protests and mobilized the different parts of society. They were joined by professional associations, human rights organizations, students, and academics (Kodmani, February 2011: 2, 4). By January 2011, the middle class also took side with these people (Ayeb, September 2011: 468). Their protests grew and mobilized millions of people until the fled of Ben Ali from Tunisia on 14<sup>th</sup> of January, 2011. In this way, Ben Ali’s twenty-three years in power was ended (Dupont& Passy, 2011: 447).

The protests did not stay limited to Tunisia. They spread to Egypt immediately as January 2011 and led the end of the third-year-old Mubarak regime in the last (Dupont& Passy, 2011: 447; Alperen, 2013: 86). After Egypt, the wave of the protests affected people of many Arab countries such as Bahrain, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Lebanon, and Syria (Dupont& Passy, 2011: 447). When some of the Arab revolts ended peacefully as they started, others did not. The Syrian case particularly did not fall into the first category: Although the revolts reached to Syrians as popular non-violent movements in 2011, they transformed into a violent civil war during 2012 (Härdig, 2015: 1147).

This study argues that the Arab revolts can be understood as organic crises: They happen, when people rapidly become active and put forward demands from their leaders (Gramsci, 1992: 210). An organic crisis emerges, when marginalized sections of society failed to be persuaded that interests of hegemonic class are also shared by them. As a consequence of this failure, subaltern class becomes distrustful towards the hegemonic class (Warner, 2009: 18). This study believes that these features of organic crisis are harmonious with the Arab revolts and in order to support this argument that the Tunisian example can be evaluated since it has similar starting points with the revolts in other Arab countries. In the Tunisian case, the Ben Ali regime failed to prove that its policies- as well as its presence- serve the interests of all sections of the society. With the self-immolation of Bouzazi, the marginalized social groups mobilized with the

belief that the regime is responsible for their poor living conditions. Thus, the marginalized social groups rapidly organize in Tunisia, were participated by different segment of society, and demand better conditions or regime change from their leaders. For these reasons, it is argued that the Tunisian case was an organic crisis.

#### **4.2. The Arab Spring and Syria**

In February 2011, some small-scale protests were organized in Syria (UCDP, 2019). Their content was related to poverty, inequality and limitations upon democracy, human rights and freedom of speech (Zifcak, 2012: 73). Although the Bashar al-Assad regime of Syria was able to control these protests quickly; the scale of the protests grew after the arrest and torture of a group of children who sprayed anti-government slogans. In March 2011, thousands of people gathered in the city of Dara'a and the protests spread towards other parts of Syria later (UCDP, 2019). These places were rural towns, suburbs or medium-sized cities, such as Homs where small manufacturers were negatively affected by trade liberalization of the regime. During this time, the main cities which are invested, like Damascus and Aleppo, remained mostly quiet for months (Wieland, 2012 and Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2014 cited in Hinnebusch, 2016: 25). Many wealthy neighborhoods were supporting the regime, when poor neighborhoods of the unemployed and workers were at the forefront of the revolts (Munif, 2013: 211).

Peaceful nature of the protests changed with the crackdown of the regime on the protestors. It was followed by the transformation of the demand of the protestors from reform to overthrow of the regime (Hinnebusch, 2016: 25). The crackdown also led the sympathy for protestors and the participation to oppositional groups (Moss, 2016: 287; Munif, 2013: 212). Even though the regime addressed some political compromises when it lifted the state of emergency in effect since 1963, reshuffled the government, and promised reforms, they remained as cosmetic decisions (UCDP, 2019) and could not prevent the largest protest that the regime faced, a week after the announcement of the compromises (Blanford, 2011 cited in Zifcak, 2012: 73).

It can be argued that the Syrian revolt started as an organic crisis just like other Arab revolts, but it was also joined by a crisis of authority- which means that ruling class is no more leading, only dominant and rests upon only coercive measures; while people

are no longer loyal to their beliefs and ideologies- (Gramsci, 1992: 275-276). This concept is suitable with the Syrian case where the Assad regime was unable to end the protests peacefully and resorted to coercion to deal with them. Its crackdown on the protests caused the loss of its supporters to alternative beliefs and groups. The regime was not able to lead due to the presence of the crisis of authority. According to Munif (2013: 215), the hegemony of the dominant class in civil society was damaged. Nevertheless, the subaltern groups were not able to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, when the dominant class could not end the crisis of authority. In this context, Munif (2013: 203, 216) agrees the presence of crisis of authority in the Egyptian, Algerian, and Syrian revolts. He considers the Arab revolts as subaltern counter-hegemonic projects to national hegemonies and the ruling elites aim to overcome the crisis of authority with the reformation of their hegemonic order.

### **4.3. The Start of the Syrian Civil War**

The one-sided violence of the regime towards the peaceful demonstrations escalated the situation in Syria quickly (UCDP, 2019). In July 2011, a part of Syrians mobilized to fight back. Some of them were the former soldiers of the Syrian army who defected to join the oppositional forces. In this way, a civil war started between the internal actors (Vitkine, 2016 cited in Werner, 2017: 15), but did not remain limited to them.

The development of the civil war witnessed the involvement of many actors, so the war can be considered as four overlapping conflicts. The core conflict is the one between the forces which are loyal to Bashar al-Assad and the forces which are opposed to him. Their main disagreement is about whether the Assad regime should stay in power or not (Fisher, 2016). The leadership of the opposition forces is hard to define because of the change of the leading coalitions and the existence of many groups inside these coalitions that each of them has different perspectives. For instance, in July 2011, the defectors of the Syrian army established the Free Syrian Army as an oppositional umbrella group and claimed the leadership of the armed opposition forces in Syria, but its claim was not largely accepted by local militias. In August 2011, the Syrian National Council was founded, but it remained as too narrow to represent the opposition. Finally, in November 2012, the oppositional leaders constituted a new coalition as the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (Britannica, 2019). Today,

this coalition is active and, along with its other goals<sup>16</sup>, it aims to overthrow the Assad regime and form a transitional government (Official Website of the National Coalition of the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, 2019).

The second conflict is related to the creation of a de facto Kurdish mini-state in Syria and its effects. During the civil war, the Kurdish minority of Syria found opportunity to gain control over the territory what they accept as Kurdish territory (Fisher, 2016). They tried to avoid battling against the Assad regime and the non-radical forces and focused on the creation of a semi-autonomous region where the Kurds are the majority. With this purpose, in 2012, they declared autonomous administration for three cantons with the intention to centralize them later. In March 2016, a federal region was declared in the areas under their control (The New Arab, 31 December 2016). The Syrian Democratic Forces, which was established in October 2015 by thirteen organizations with the primary goal to fight against the ISIS and the forces which attack to the peoples of Syria (Kurdishquestion.com, 2016), was accepted as the “armed defense forces” of the declared federation (The New Arab, 31 December 2016). When the activities of the Kurdish forces were opposed by the Turkish government, they sometimes backed by the US administration which sees them as an ally against the jihadist forces (Fisher, 2016).

The third conflict is about the ISIS (Fisher, 2016), a militant movement that seized territory in Iraq, Syria, and Libya and tried to establish a caliphate. It benefited from the Syrian civil war in order to expand and declare a jihad against the Assad regime. The battlefield successes of the movement in 2014 led the participation of thousands of foreign recruits in its body, while its terrorist attacks were being carried out in many parts of the world from the US to South Asia (Laub, 2016). Apart from the unilateral struggle of many states against the ISIS, the Obama Administration of the US formed an international coalition in order to defeat the ISIS in September 2014. The representatives from over sixty states and organizations participated in this coalition with their military forces or resources (McInnis, 2016: 1). The momentum of the ISIS

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<sup>16</sup> For further information on the mission statement and goals of the National Coalition of the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces see: <<http://en.etalaf.org/about-us/goals.html>>. Accessed 19 June 2019.



withered in 2016, when it was ousted from much of the territory that it controlled (Laub, 2016).

Apart from the ISIS, there was al-Nusra Front as other strong jihadist organization of the civil war, which is necessary to be mentioned. Al-Nusra Front was the official branch of al-Qaeda in Syria (Joscelyn, 28 January 2017) and a part of the list of terrorist organizations of the UNSC<sup>17</sup> (UNODC, 2019). It was the best financed and equipped force against the Assad regime (Mahmood& Black, 8 May 2013) and was the largest of a series of jihadist organizations. Al-Nusra Front aimed to create an Islamic state under sharia law, not only consists of Syria, but also other Arab states and preferably the world. The organization was also known for applying extreme methods such as beheading, suicide bombers, and car bombs. (Sherlock, 2 December 2012). In July 2016, the name of al-Nusra Front was changed to Jabhat Fath al-Sham. In January 2017, the jihadist groups Jabhat Fath al-Sham, Jaysh al-Sunnah, Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zanki, Liwa al-Haqq, and Ansar al-Din merged as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to fight against the Assad regime (CSIS, 2018; Joscelyn, 28 January 2017).

The fourth conflict involves foreign interventions in Syria. In this sense, the Assad regime is supported by the regimes of Russia and Iran and the leaders of Hezbollah, while the oppositional groups are supported by the regimes of the US, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (Fisher, 2016). As the first group, Iran and Hezbollah are being mentioned in here, because the Russians are being covered in detail in the following parts. The Iranians and Hezbollah initially were supplying weapons to the Assad regime during the first stages of the Syrian conflict, but, Hezbollah fighters began to enter Syria for battling against the rebel forces by 2012 (Britannica, 2019), when the Assad regime was losing control of the Syrian territory<sup>18</sup>. The Iranian forces were already in Syria probably for the training of the Syrian forces by 2011 (Abdo, 5 September 2011), but they were also decided to deploy the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Ground Forces in Syria (Fulton et al, 2013: 6).

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<sup>17</sup> The UNSC Resolution 2253 (2015) extended the Al-Qaeda list to involve the ISIS and al-Nusra Front (UNODC, 2019). For the Resolution 2253 (2015) see: <[https://undocs.org/S/RES/2253\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2253(2015))>. Accessed 20 June 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Bröning (17 December 2012) stated that the opposition forces are controlling about forty percent of Syria during the time his article was written.

Among the supporters of the opposition, the US administration started a train and equip program for some oppositional groups in Syria in 2014. One of the goals of this program was supporting the American efforts in fighting against the ISIS and other terrorist organizations (Blanchard& Belasco, 2015). In August 2014, the US forces began airstrikes against the ISIS in Iraq with the purpose of stopping its expansion and reducing threat to the American personnel in Iraq. On September, the American airstrikes expanded to Syria in order to prevent the ISIS from the usage of Syria as a military base for its operation in Iraq (Humud et al, 2017: 6) and in the same month the formation of the US-led international coalition was announced (McInnis, 2016: 1).

In 2012 and 2013, Ankara, Doha, and Riyadh came to the forefront with their funding and arming the Syrian opposition groups (Britannica, 2019). The Turkish government which accepts the People's Protection Units (the YPG) inside the Syrian Democratic Forces as a terrorist organization which has connection with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Jones, 12 December 2018) sent its troops into Syria in order to push back against the Kurdish forces and to fight against the ISIS (England, 27 December 2018). In this way, the main Turkish objective in Syria became preventing the establishment of a Syrian Kurdish entity in the north of the country (Ford, April 2019: 7). The Saudi rule chose to involve to the civil war via its airstrikes in Syria against the ISIS as a part of the international coalition and it ranked as the second in the number of airstrikes which are carried out inside the coalition (Aboufadel, 3 December 2018). Riyadh is still opposed to the normalization process with the Assad regime in terms of the re-opening of its embassy in Damascus<sup>19</sup> or the Syrian return to the Arab League<sup>20</sup> (The New Arab, 4 March 2019). The Qatari involvement into the civil war was also in favor of the Syrian opposition. By 2014, the unspecified moderate rebels claimed that they travelled to Qatar for their training in fighting techniques and the use of sophisticated arm (Youssef, 26 May 2014). In 2019, the Qatari rule also expressed its opposition to the Syrian return to the Arab League (The New Arab, 4 March 2019).

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<sup>19</sup> Saudi Arabia closed its embassy in Damascus in March 2012 (Al Jazeera, 4 March 2019).

<sup>20</sup> The Syrian membership in the Arab League was suspended in 2011, as a result of the brutal crackdown of the Assad regime on the protests (Al Jazeera, 4 March 2019).

About the Jordanian and Emirati strategies toward Syria, it can be said that they are getting different than their strategies in the early years of the civil war. Although the Jordanian rule was a strong supporter for the Syrian opposition, it decided to develop bilateral ties with the Syrian regime in 2017. On this issue, the Jordanian government spokesperson Mohammad al-Momani stated that:

... -after seven and a-half years of war- states that were committed to toppling the Syrian leader are now resigned to him staying (Chulov, 31 August 2017).

Abu Dabi was also a supporter of the Syrian opposition. Even though its support was less active than Riyadh or Doha (England, 27 December 2018), the Emirati rule is currently open to a settlement among the main political actors in Syria with the inclusion of Assad (Ramani, 3 August 2016).

By 2013, the oppositional groups in Syria were able to weaken the Assad regime without giving birth to a solid counter-hegemonic force. Although the regime was able to remain supreme over political society, the revolts shook its hegemony over civil society. Its reliance on violence also showed that it is not capable of producing a hegemonic discourse. Thus, the Syrian ruling class was not leading or solving the crisis of authority, but the subaltern groups were not strong enough to achieve a hegemonic project<sup>21</sup> (Munif, 2013: 209, 211-212, 215).

When the civil war reached its third year by 2016; there were more than 470.000 Syrians who were killed, over 11.000 people who died in government prisons and at least 11 million people (half of the population of Syria) who internally or externally displaced (Moss, 2016: 287). Nevertheless, the civil war was continuing as well as the organic crisis and the crisis of authority, when the internal and external actors could not able to end the war.

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<sup>21</sup> According to Munif (2013: 212-213), there were internal opposition which mainly consists of the leftist and nationalist parties; external opposition which consists of the Muslim Brotherhood, liberals, and small leftist parties; the Free Syrian Army and the Local Coordination Committees. These actors were re-building institutions and values of civil society, but it was unclear whether they will be able to form a historic bloc. After the seven years from this article, the continuation of the conflict can mean that a historic bloc that would end the civil war have not established yet.

#### 4.4. The Russian Position towards the Syrian Civil War

With the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011, the Russian government began to provide continuous political, economic, diplomatic, and military support for the Assad regime<sup>22</sup> (Humud et al, 2017: 7). Although the US administrations<sup>23</sup> and the EU<sup>24</sup> imposed sanctions on the Assad regime in the following period, the Kremlin maintained its support<sup>25</sup>. For Moscow, the Russian military aid to the Assad regime was not an infraction of the Western sanctions, because it believed that these sanctions were illegal

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<sup>22</sup> In 2016, then Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev explained that Russia supports the Assad regime for its being the legitimate regime of Syria and the Russian policy towards Syria is not related to Bashar al-Assad regime personally. Medvedev stated that “Russia supports friendly relations with the Syrian state, which emerged long before Bashar Assad’s presidency”. The then prime minister also added that “We come from the point that right now there’s no legitimate power in Syria other than Bashar Assad. You can like that or not, but he’s the president in power” (Euronews, 13 February 2016).

<sup>23</sup> According to the US Department of Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control, the American sanction program on Syria started in 2004 due to the Syrian government’s support for terrorism, occupation of Lebanon, connection with the missile programs, weapons of mass destruction, and sabotage of the American and international struggle to stabilize Iraq (OFAC, 2013: 3). In the context of the Syrian civil war, the US firstly imposed sanctions against five key figures and entities in the Assad regime with the inclusion of the Syrian intelligence agency and two relatives of Bashar al-Assad in April 2011 (Skuld, 7 June 2019; Mohammed& Oweis, 18 May 2011). On May 18, 2011, the US imposed sanctions in terms of travel bans and asset freezes against Assad and six other senior Syrian officials (CNN, 9 April 2019; Britannica, 2019). On August 18, 2011, the US imposed economic sanctions on Syria which consists of the freeze of the Syrian government assets in the US, the prohibition of new investments in Syria by the American citizens, and the ban of the American transactions over Syrian petroleum products (CNN, 9 April 2019).

<sup>24</sup> On May 9, 2011, the EU imposed arms embargo on Syria along with travel restrictions and asset freezes to the thirteen senior Syrian officials. On May 23, the sanctions were extended to include Bashar al-Assad (Britannica, 2019). On September 2, the EU banned the import of oil from Syria. In the same months, the EU imposed additional sanctions as a result of the continuation of governmental violence against the Syrian citizens (CNN, 9 April 2019).

<sup>25</sup> During the first years of the Syrian conflict, when President Vladimir Putin stated that the Russian stance "is not to keep Assad and his regime in power at any cost" (Ischenkov& The Associated Press, 20 December 2012) and then Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev claimed that Russia has "never said that our goal was to preserve the current political regime, or making sure that President Assad stays in power" (Smith, 28 January 2013), they expressed that the Russian support for the Assad regime is not unconditional. This stance can be seen as a warning to the Assad regime for its actions or a sign of the Russian preparation to start good relations with any potential post-Assad regime without harming the existential historic good Russian-Syrian relations -particularly when Medvedev believed Assad’s days in his office can be numbered by 2013 (Smith, 28 January 2013). Despite both the possibilities, as it can be seen in the following parts, the Russian support to the regime did not come to an end, it grew to the contrary.

for not authorized by the UNSC (Har-Zvi, 2016: 9). Nevertheless, the Russian policy in favor of the Assad regime brought international criticism to the Russian administration (Malashenko, 2013: 12). In 2017, then British Foreign Minister, Boris Johnson expressed that:

It is time for Putin to face the truth about the tyrant he is still propping up... He must now understand that Assad is now toxic in every sense. He is poisoning the innocent people of Syria with weapons that were banned 100 years ago. And he is poisoning the reputation of Russia (Hawkes, 9 April 2017).

The relations of the Kremlin with the Western and the Arab-Middle Eastern regimes were affected negatively as a result of this policy toward the Assad regime (Dannreuther, 2015: 86; Malashenko, 2013: 13). Nonetheless, there was no sign that this policy was abandoned.

Moscow took advantage of its permanent seat in the UNSC to protect the Assad regime. It repeatedly prevented attempts of the use of force or imposition of sanctions against the regime (Har-Zvi, 2016: 10). This stance was explained by President Putin in *Moskovskiye Novosti* on February 27, 2012 as:

We are against accepting Security Council resolutions that would be interpreted as a green light toward military intervention in internal Syrian affairs (Bohm, 7 June 2012).

According to the president, instead of such actions, international community should not take side in the Syrian conflict and should respect the sovereignty of Syria (Bohm, 7 June 2012).

Although Russia used its veto right twice in the 1990s in the UNSC, the Russians vetoed twelve resolution drafts which concerns Syria from October 2011 to April 2018. Their contents were related to the willingness to act after the alleged use of chemical weapons (S/2018/321, S/2017/970, S/2017/962, S/2017/884, S/2017/315, and S/2017/172) and the violation of human rights and the existence of violence (S/2016/1026, S/2016/846, S/2014/348, S/2012/538, S/2012/77, and S/2011/612) (Research.un.org, 2019). In this way, Moscow showed its determination to prevent any intervention or sanction against Syria via the channels of the UNSC (Allison, 2013: 798).

The Russians also supported the mediation process that aims to end the violence in Syria through bringing the representatives of the regime and the opposition together. Even though the Russian insistence that Assad's leaving the office cannot be a part of any peace settlement (Borger& Inzaurrealde, 15 September 2015) led the cancel of an Obama-backed talk (Dorell, 7 October 2013), Moscow continued to be interested in diplomatic channels. Regarding this issue, it worked to broker ceasefires among the belligerents in Syria (Humud et al, 2017: 13; France 24, 5 September 2018; Sanchez& Reuters, 27 December 2016) and participated in peace talks on the Syrian conflict such as the UN-brokered Geneva talks (Humud et al, 2017: 12), the US-led Lausanne talks (Wroughton& Winning, 15 October 2016), and the Vienna talks (un.org, 30 October 2015; EEAS Press Team, 14 October 2015). Moscow also started its own initiatives through sponsoring the Sochi talks (Ensor, 30 January 2018) and co-sponsoring the Astana talks with the Iranian and Turkish officials (France 24, 5 September 2018; Al Jazeera, 30 July 2018).

In 2013, Moscow helped the Assad regime to avoid a possible military intervention. On August 21, the Syrian opposition activists expressed that a wide-scale chemical weapons attack took place at the suburbs of the Ghouta region (armscontrol.org, March 2019). The Assad regime was accused of the use of chemical weapons<sup>26</sup> against its people on August 21 by the Western states (BBC, 10 July 2018). Although Bashar al-Assad announced that the Syrian army did not use chemical weapons on August 21, the French intelligence assessment stated that the regime was responsible from the use of sarin gas on that day. The Joint Intelligence Committee also reported that the Assad regime was "highly likely" responsible from this attack (armscontrol.org, March 2019).

Apart from becoming the target of the accusations, the Assad regime was also targeted by a possible American military strike as a result of the August 21 Incident (Malashenko, 2013: 13). On August 31, then President Obama argued that he would get authorization for a limited military action in Syria from the Congress (armscontrol.org, March 2019). The Kremlin, which believed the chemical attack was carried out by the

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<sup>26</sup> The Assad regime or the Syrian armed forces were accused of the use of chemical weapons on December 23 in 2012; March 24, April 13, April 29, August 21 in 2013; April 11 in 2014; April 4 in 2017 and the four chlorine attacks from January to July in 2018 by the Syrian opposition or the international community (armscontrol.org, March 2019).

opposition forces (RT, 31 August 2015 and RT, 8 September 2015 cited in Har-Zvi, 2016: 11), helped the regime to overcome the crisis through a deal (Valenta& Valenta, 2016: 10). On September 9, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov proposed a deal that the Syrian officials would agree international control over chemical weapons of the country and their removal and in return the American officials would agree not to conduct a military action in Syria (armscontrol.org, March 2019). Thus, Assad signed the Chemical Weapons Convention to annihilate the named chemical arsenal of Syria (BBC, 10 July 2018) and the Russian and American authorities agreed on their destruction (Moss, 2016:287).

It is needed to note that the Syrian interest towards the Russian-led or involved organizations also accelerated after the start of the Syrian conflict. In 2014, then Syrian Deputy Minister of Economy and Foreign Trade Hayan Salman revealed the Syrian application to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (El-Khatib, 29 June 2014). In 2015, then Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halqi argued that the Syrian officials started negotiation process with their Russian counterparts to join the EAEU and the custom-free zone (RT, 21 July 2015). In 2019, the Syrian Member of Parliament Nora Arissian argued that the Syrian-Russian Business Council, Syrian Economy Ministry, and other governmental institutes are working for the Syrian accession to the EAEU. Arissian also added that the accession to the EAEU will be beneficial to develop economic relations with the members of this organization (Qaddour, 10 April 2019). Apart from the EAEU process, then Russian Deputy Economic Development Minister Alexei Likhachyov claimed that Damascus applied for the formation of a free trade zone with Russia in 2014. Likhachyov expressed that the Syrian and Russian officials were holding talks with this purpose before the Syrian conflict put the talks on hold (The Moscow Times, 24 October 2014).

Damascus also applied for observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (the SCO) (TASS, 13 February 2015), which uttered its respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria in 2014 (World Bulletin, 12 September 2014), and expressed intension for membership of the SCO and the BRICS in the future (Sputniknews, 27 April 2013). Further, Assad sent a letter to the BRICS which

requested their help in halting of the conflict and protecting the territorial integrity of Syria in 2013<sup>27</sup> (Abdenur, 2016: 117). In the letter, it was written that:

President Bashar al-Assad asks for intervention by the BRICS to stop the violence in his country and encourage the opening of a dialogue, which he wishes to start (Mahapatra, 19 March 2013).

It can be said that the regime was not only receiving the support from Moscow, but also expecting the support of the Russian-connected organizations.

On the other hand, the Kremlin was also interested in engaging attention of the Russian-involved organizations to the Syrian civil war. For instance, almost a month after the Russian military intervention, the leaders of the former-Soviet countries met at the summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States (the CIS) in Kazakhstan. Here, the most of the speech of Putin centered upon the combat against terrorism and the necessity of the formation of a joint foreign policy (Dubnov, 30 October 2015). The context of the speech can be perceived as a call for the CIS members to act together in the Syria's war. Moscow also tried to draw some members of the Russian-led military bloc Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) directly in the Syrian conflict in 2017 (Botobekov, 10 July 2017), when the Russian officials claimed that negotiations are being held with the Kazakh and Kyrgyz officials for their sending troops to Syria (RIA Novosti, June 22 cited in Botobekov, 10 July 2017).

The multifaceted policies of the Kremlin on Syria such as running aid program, calling for international support in the re-integration of the refugee population, and reconstructing the Syrian war-battered cities created a positive image of Russia in Syria (Speakman-Cordall, 2018). As an example, in 2014, Russian language was accepted as the second language in government schools in Syria (Todman, 2018) and became an alternative to French, which has a rooted history in Syrian education system (Al Jazeera, 20 August 2018). Riyad Hadda, Syria's Ambassador in Moscow, claimed that it was "a sign of gratitude to the Russian people for their support of the Syrians" (Todman, 2018).

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<sup>27</sup> During the first years of the Syrian conflict, the BRICS countries opposed to an American and European-led UN resolution which condemns the Syrian regime for the bloodshed and adopts sanctions against it. They argued that this decision would not solve the domestic problems of Syria or promote a peaceful resolution to the crisis (Khlebnikov, 2011:3). The BRICS countries believe that the Syrian conflict should be resolved through peaceful channels and dialogue (Mahapatra, 19 March 2013).



The attempt for the creation of a positive image of Russia can also be seen in the concert in Palmyra, a UNESCO heritage in Syria. In March 2016, the ten-month-old occupation of the ISIS over Palmyra was ended by the Russian-backed Syrian government forces. Following, the Russians organized a classical music concert in Palmyra (Black, 11 May 2016). The maestro, Valery Gergiev, claimed that the concert is a protest against the violence of the ISIS that had used the amphitheater as a platform for execution (BBC, 5 May 2016). The Western media and politicians criticized this move as an attempt to ignore realpolitik, but it was an implication from Russia which says that the common values which are shared with the Western culture are supported in here, Syria, against the ISIS and the Russians have a huge role in this struggle (Black, 11 May 2016). In general, the Russian intervention was represented as a way of defending the roots of the global cultural elements (Frost& Michelsen, 2017: 26). The Russians wanted to show they are contributing positively to Syria in terms of peace and stability and they are saving a UNESCO heritage in Palmyra (BBC, 5 May 2016).

This study believes that the abovementioned strategies of the Russian ruling class towards the Syrian crisis can be perceived as a struggle not to lose an old ally that was a supporter of the Soviet hegemonic project and is a potential supporter for the new project. Within this scope, the Russian diplomatic, economic, humanitarian, or military aids can be considered as tools to provide consent of the Syrian leaders. Here, it is also seen that the effects of the Russian military intervention will not be only in military field in the future. For instance, the Syrian approval of the military aid of Russia led the acceptance of Russian language as the second language in the Syrian schools and the students who can speak Russian will probably provide more cultural ties in future. It is also seen that the Russian and Syrian sides attempts to provide Syrian closeness to the Russian-led institutions. This study argues that the Russian elites try to legitimize their strategy to keep the Assad regime in power through its recognition as the legitimate representative of Syrians by the Russian-led institutions. About the Palmyra case, it is argued that the Russians practiced soft power and tried to create a Russian image which is respectful for human rights and anti-terrorism as global cultural values, when they organized the concert. It is believed that the Russians wanted to practice cultural leadership through this concert.

#### **4.5. The Russian Military Intervention**

Even though Moscow used its channels to support the Assad regime, it did not involve the Syrian crisis with the direct military intervention before 2015. It was the year that the Assad regime faced a series of territorial losses: The opposition forces that were backed by Al-Qaeda-linked fighters took control of Idlib and its surrounding, the Kurdish forces captured some areas in the north, and the ISIS seized some areas in central Homs. Under these conditions, Moscow started a gradual build-up of the Russian military staff, military equipment, and aircraft and in Syria during the summer of 2015 (Humud et al, 2017: 6-7). In mid-August, several media outlets reported that Russian military committees visit Syria to evaluate capabilities of airfields in order to host Russian fighting jets. Subsequently, the information about the redevelopment of Latakia Airport along with two other airports emerged (Kozhanov, 2 October 2015). In August 2015, the Russian and Syrian administrations signed an agreement which allows unlimited Russian military presence in Syria for an unlimited period. This agreement opened the door for the Russian military intervention in the next month (Birnbaum, 15 January 2016).

In early-September, Russian attack helicopters, warplanes, tanks, marines, and anti-aircraft systems were deployed to Syria (BBC, 1 October 2015). In the second half of September, Russian military helicopters and jets in Syria exceed the number of Syrian pilots who were available to fly them (Kozhanov, 2 October 2015). On September 24, President Putin implied in an interview that his goal is trying to save the Assad regime (CBS News, 24 September 2015). On September 30, the upper house of the Russian parliament approved the request of Putin on launching airstrikes in Syria (Quinn, 14 March 2016; BBC, 1 October 2015). Within hours, the Russian intervention started (BBC, 1 October 2015) as the first Russian military action outside the borders of the post-Soviet space, after the collapse of the USSR (Quinn, 14 March 2016).

The Russian military intervention was a response to the official request of the Syrian government (Maitra, 2017: 1) and it was started when the opposition forces were only eight kilometers far from the presidential palace in Damascus (Rosbalt, 15 March 2016 cited in Souleimanov, 2016: 109). For Moscow, this intervention was the result of the invitation of the Syrian government that the Kremlin accepts as legitimate government

(Bannelier& Christakis, 2016: 760). On October 15, the letter of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov informed the UNSC about the Russian intervention in the following way:

... in response to a request from the President of the Syrian Arab Republic, Bashar al-Asad, to provide military assistance in combating the terrorist group Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other terrorist groups operating in Syria, the Russian Federation began launching air and missile strikes against the assets of terrorist formations in the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic on 30 September 2015 (UN Document S/2015/792).

Moscow chose to manage its operations in Syria mainly through Hmeimim Airbase and Tartus Port. Among them, Hmeimim Airbase was a neglected place before the military intervention, but it was transformed into an important center of the Russian military campaign in just a few months (RT, 3 October 2015). It locates in the northwestern province of Latakia in Syria and houses the Russian Aerospace Defense Forces. The airbase does not legally belong to the Russian authorities, but it is actively used by the Russian forces (Sputniknews, 19 December 2015).

In September 2015, the Russian tactical aviation began grouping at Hmeimim. The first deployment to Syria comprised of seventeen helicopters and thirty-three aircrafts<sup>28</sup> (Kofman& Rojansky, March-April 2018: 9, 14) and the variety of military forces<sup>29</sup> in Hmeimim increased with the later deployments. After a Turkish F-16 warplane shot down a Russian Su-24M bomber on November 24, 2015, the Russian leadership took action to boost the security of Hmeimim Airbase and the Russian flights in the Syrian airspace (Khodaryonok, 12 February 2016). For this purpose, a cutting-edge S-400 air defense system<sup>30</sup> was deployed to Hmeimim (RT, 26 November 2015). Hmeimim Airbase is still actively used by the Russian forces, as a military source told to Zaman

<sup>28</sup> They consisted of one Il-20M1 reconnaissance plane, four Su-SM heavy multirole fighters, four Su-34 fighter-bombers, twelve Su-24M2 bombers, and four Su-30SM/UB attack aircrafts (Kofman& Rojansky, March-April 2018: 15).

<sup>29</sup> Apart from the military forces in the first deployment, Kaim and Tamminga (November 2015: 1), mention the arrival of Mi-24 attack helicopters and Su-25 ground attack aircraft in 2015.

<sup>30</sup> RT (26 November 2015) expresses that the S-400 is state of the art of anti-aircraft defense system in Russia and it has no alternative in the world. Apart from the S-400, there are other air defense systems in Syria. According to public sources, as November 2015, the Russian and Syrian air defense forces in the war zones were involving Osa-AKM, Pantsir-S1, Buk-M2E, S-125 Pechora-2M, S-200VE Vega, along with the S-400 (Khodaryonok, 12 February 2016).

al-Wasl (4 February 2019) the Russian deployment of warplanes and helicopters to Hmeimim continues as 2019.

Secondly, Tartus Port, which is the sole Russian logistic center in the Mediterranean, was also decided to be used for the military intervention. Although the Russian presence in Tartus Port dates back to the Soviet years<sup>31</sup>, the Russian ships used here as a resupply point with little military importance after the Soviet collapse. Thus, the well-situated base of the Soviet years transformed to an ill-equipped place. Nevertheless, this situation changed with the preparations of the Russian military intervention in Syria. The port was expanded and became more capable of supporting military operations and resupplying the Russian Mediterranean squadron that has been here to support Syria since 2013<sup>32</sup> (Kofman& Rojansky, March-April 2018: 7-8).

The Russian intervention initially purposed breaking encirclement of the Syrian bases, re-accessing to key roads, weakening the opposition, and linking infrastructure. The Russian aircrafts flew approximately forty to fifty times per day, but these numbers rose to one hundred during the peak of combat times (Kofman& Rojansky, March-April 2018: 15-16). In October and November 2015, it was reported that the Russians are deploying ground troops in Syria, along with the most advanced Russian battlefield tank, the T-90 (Quinn, 14 March 2016). The Russians also relocated weapon systems which were not related to fight against the opposition and the ISIS. These systems were in Syria in order to protect the regime, because their purpose was the prevention or limitation of enemy aerial warfare, the protection from enemy airstrikes, and the prolongation of the unity of airspace (Kaim& Tamminga, November 2015: 2).

The Russian military intervention was welcomed by the Syrian government circles. The government repeated its approval and support for the intervention (Bannelier& Christakis, 2016: 761). On October 21, 2015, Assad thanked Putin for the military

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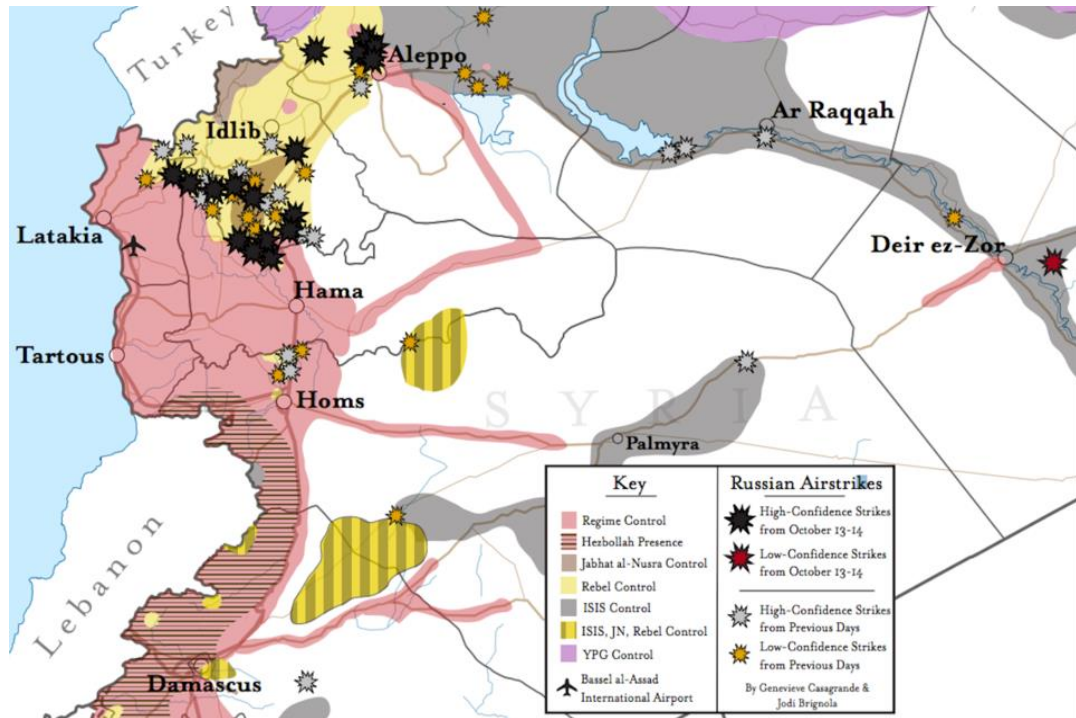
<sup>31</sup> The amity and cooperation agreement which was signed between the Soviet and Baath regimes in 1980 gained Russia the usage of the Tartus Port (Aghayev&Katman, 2012: 2068).

<sup>32</sup> In early 2015, Bashar al-Assad stated that it would not be minded if the Russians decided to use Tartus as a full-fledged military base (Sputniknews, 19 December 2015). It is not clear how actively Moscow will use Tartus in the future. Nevertheless, it is certain that the Russian military presence in here will ensure in the following years, because the Russians signed a forty-nine-year rental agreement on Tartus in 2017(Kofman& Rojansky, March-April 2018: 8).

support and the anti-terror intervention of his country (Quinn, 14 March 2016). Riyad Haddad, Syria's Ambassador in Moscow, also claimed that the strikes are welcomed and accepted as legal, when he called other states to side with the Syrians and Russians to honor international law (SANA, 1 October 2015).

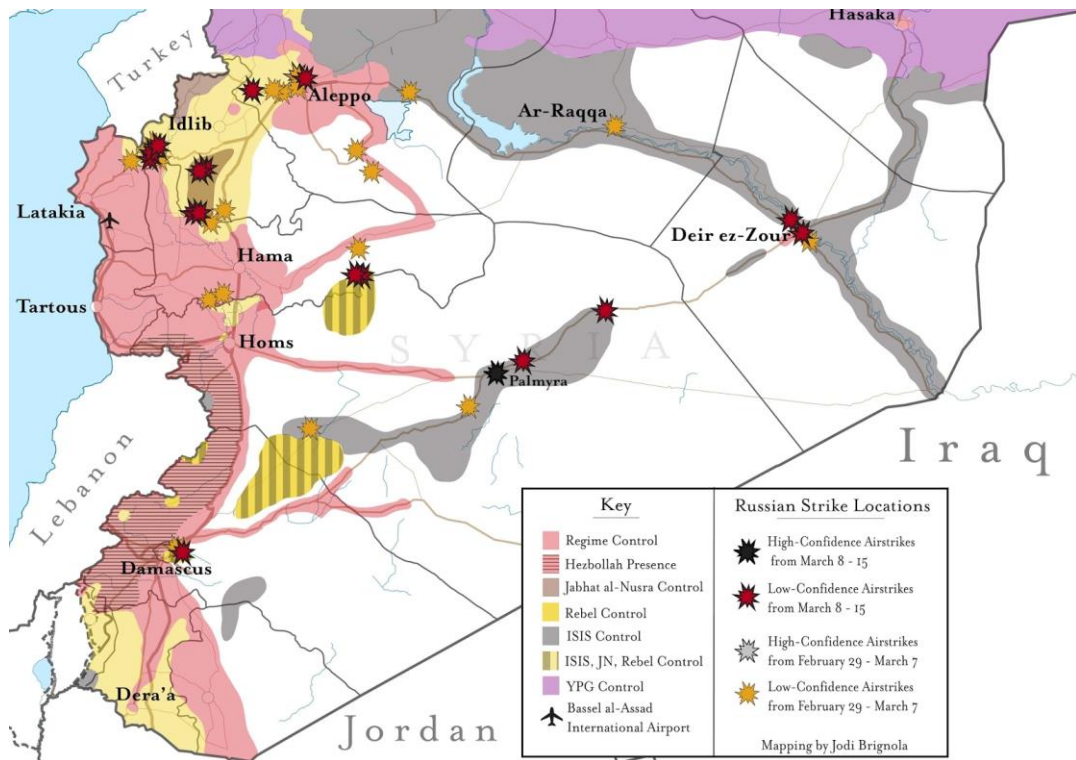
The military intervention was struggling to strengthen the position of the Assad regime in the western regions of Syria where the regime had relative support. Rogers and Reeve (2015: 1-3) argue that the intervention was seeking advantage for the regime in the northwest, while its airstrikes were mostly targeting the anti-regime groups rather than the ISIS. For Souleimanov (2016: 108-109, 111), the Russian airstrikes centralized on the western areas where the Syrian army and the pro-regime groups had relative strength and considerable popular support. The airstrikes helped to stabilize the control of Assad over the west of Syria pretty much. By December 2015, the results of the Russian airstrikes became visible and the oppositional and extremist groups were in retreat in January and February 2016 (Kofman, 2017: 167). The intensity of the western-targeted Russian airstrikes and the expansion of the regime-controlled territory can be seen in the following maps in Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3 which show the situation in September-October 2015, February-March 2016 and June 2016.

Figure 1 - Russian Airstrikes in Syria between September 30 and October 14, 2015



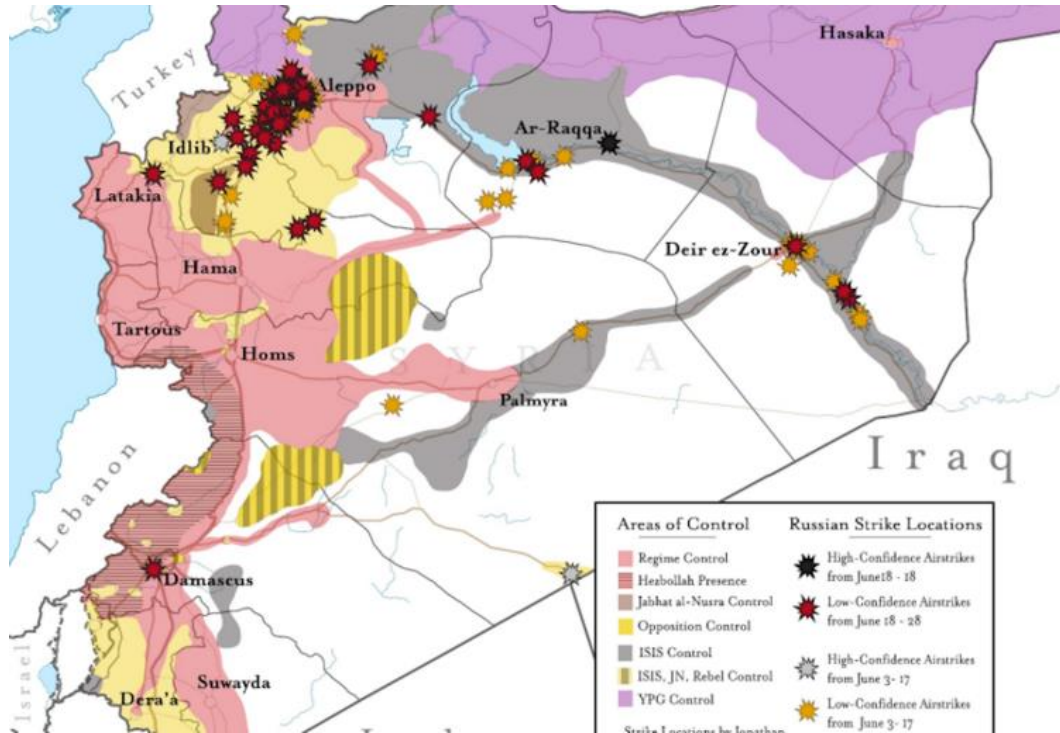
Source: [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Airstrikes%20Maps-30%20SEPT%202015-28%20JUN%202016%20Final\\_0.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Airstrikes%20Maps-30%20SEPT%202015-28%20JUN%202016%20Final_0.pdf)

Figure 2 - Russian Airstrikes in Syria between February 29 and March 15, 2016



Source: [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Airstrikes%20Maps-30%20SEPT%202015-28%20JUN%202016%20Final\\_0.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Airstrikes%20Maps-30%20SEPT%202015-28%20JUN%202016%20Final_0.pdf)

**Figure 3 - Russian Airstrikes in Syria between June 3 and June 28, 2016**



Source: [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Airstrikes%20Maps-30%20SEPT%202015-28%20JUN%202016%20Final\\_0.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Airstrikes%20Maps-30%20SEPT%202015-28%20JUN%202016%20Final_0.pdf)

The Russian military operation lasted full-strength from October 2015 to March 2016 (Stepanova, 2016: 10). In March 2016, President Putin declared the withdrawal of the military forces from Syria, apart from the presence in Hmeimim and Tartus, after claiming that the Russian forces largely completed their goals in Syria and paved the way for the start of the peace process (Souleimanov, 2016: 108). Thus, the large parts of the Russian military forces began to withdraw from Syria with the exception of the Russian air-defense systems and the mentioned bases, when the Kremlin continued to supply military assistance to the Syrian army after the decision of the withdrawal (Har-Zvi, 2016: 7).

The Russian policies towards the Syrian conflict can be associated with the features of the neo-Gramscian hegemony: Material capabilities, cultural leadership, and international institutions. It means that a potential world hegemon needs to have control

over these factors. In this sense, the Russian actions can be seen as an attempt to do so over the Syrian case and an evaluation can be done in the following way:

About the concept of material capabilities, it can be seen that Moscow addressed its material capabilities in order to support the Assad regime. There were bilateral economic and military agreements, humanitarian aids, and reconstruction of the Syrian cities as the Russian material support, but this support was also expanded to cover a direct military involvement which needed more resources to spend on military personal, equipment, and operations. Indeed, they were the decisions that require the usage of material capabilities. In this sense, the Russian material capabilities that were directed to Syria prevented the fall of a Russian-friendly regime. In case of Russia was unable to support the regime with its material capacity, it would be unclear whether the current situation in Syria exist or not.

The concept of cultural leadership can be connected to the Russian diplomatic struggle for the end of the conflict or the advantage for the regime, because this concept is related to the usage of ideologies, values, culture, and institutions in order to lead others follow a potential hegemon. In this sense, the Russian-led or co-led meetings and conferences can be perceived as Russia's showing its own way of supporting its arguments about the Syrian conflict and searching for potential solutions. Maybe, there cannot be mentioned about political ideologies in this case, but it cannot be said that the Russian-led meetings which centered on the Syrian conflict are not affected by the perspective, culture, values, and worldview of the Russian ruling class.

The usage of the concept of international institutions can also be related to the Russian policy in Syria. The Russian-led or involved international institutions were benefited to support the Assad regime or the Russian strategies in Syria. Firstly, the BRICS countries opposed the American and European-led UN resolution against the Assad regime and even the organization was addressed by Bashar al-Assad in order to provide their support in his case. Secondly, although they did not involve the Syrian conflict, the EAEU and the SCO relatively cooperated with the Assad regime for the Syrian presence in these organizations. When there is an organic crisis in Syria, it shows that these organizations accepted the regime as legitimate to connect. Thirdly, Russia seemed willing to bring the military forces of the CSTO members Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan



to the active conflict in Syria in 2017. Although the negotiations on this issue came to nothing, the situation showed that the Kremlin wanted the CSTO support along with the Russian forces in the Syrian war.

#### 4.5.1. Hegemony of the Interventionist Discourse among Russians

When the Russian ruling elites decided to adopt an interventionist policy towards Syria in 2015, they needed to persuade their own citizens in favor of this move. Before the military intervention in September 2015, the Russian public polls were showing that the majority of the Russians are opposed military involvement in Syria (Borshchevskaya, 2015). According to Snegovaya (17 December 2015), 69 percent of the Russians were opposed to a direct military involvement in favor of Bashar al-Assad in September 2015. A poll of the Levada Centre which was conducted before the start of the military intervention in September 2015 also showed that only 39 percent of the respondents approve the Russian foreign policy toward Syria (Bodner, 29 October 2015).

Indeed, the idea of a military intervention was not popular inside Russia before the start of the intervention. In order to start a consent-based intervention, the Russian public needs to be persuaded. For this reason, the Russian elites started an interventionist discourse by August 2015. Czuperski et al. (April 2016: 6) argues that it was the first time since the start of the Syrian conflict that the Russian leaders were mentioning about the possibility of a military intervention. On August 26, following a meeting with President Sisi of Egypt, Putin stated that:

We stressed the need for a broad counterterrorism front in which the key international players and the region's countries, including Syria, would take part. We also discussed other issues concerning the situation in the region (Putin, 26 August 2015).

A week later, the president affirmed the Russian willingness to form an international coalition against terrorism in Syria (Putin, 4 September 2015). During the time of this statement, an international coalition which is led by the US had been already performing operations against the ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, the statement of Putin was related to his belief that the American policy against the ISIS is ineffective (Czuperski et al, April 2016: 8). A few days later, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also criticized the US-led coalition. Lavrov (13 September 2015) stated that the

coalition has the knowledge of the location of the ISIS units, but the US does not authorize the launch of airstrikes to hit them.

Two days before the intervention, Putin repeated the necessity of an international coalition that will fight against terrorism and explained that this necessity is for the common good:

...it is not about Russia's ambitions, dear colleagues, but about the recognition of the fact that we can no longer tolerate the current state of affairs in the world. What we actually propose is to be guided by common values and common interests rather than by ambitions. Relying on international law, we must join efforts to address the problems that all of us are facing, and create a genuinely broad international coalition against terrorism (Putin, 28 September 2015).

The start of the military intervention in September 2015 did not end the Kremlin's struggle to create positive public opinion. Apart from its discourses, the Kremlin also benefited from some civil society channels to provide the support of the public opinion on the military intervention<sup>33</sup>.

Firstly, media was a part of these civil society channels. It functions in shaping the political consciousness of individuals. In the Syrian case, the Russian media started a campaign to approach the military intervention as an anti-terrorist operation and it worked. According to Levada Centre, 70 percent of the respondents claimed that the Russian airstrikes in Syria are effective, when 48 percent stated that they are bombing the ISIS targets and 13 percent said that they are hitting the Syrian opposition groups in 2015 (Bodner, 29 October 2015). However, the Russian airstrikes were mostly targeting the anti-regime groups rather than the ISIS (Rogers& Reeve, 2015: 3)

The Russian media also directed its focus from Ukraine to Syria and remarked the presence of terrorism in Syria. The reflection of terrified people and violence in the

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<sup>33</sup> This study believes that the connection between the Kremlin and the civil society channels were organic intellectuals who function in civil society. They were anonymous people who work for the normalization of the interventionist idea among the public. For instance, media members who prepare broadcasts about necessity of a military intervention in Syria were serving the interest of the ruling class as organic intellectuals, as well as, the writers of the pro-interventionist songs. In their own ways, they were serving for the popularization of the perspective of the ruling class.

country found place in news (Borshchevskaya, 2015). For Moscow and Damascus, any militarily active opposition group in Syria was terrorist (Kaim& Tamminga, November 2015: 1) and President Putin referred the war in Syria as a war on terror many times (Alami, 4 September 2018). To his idea:

There's no need to play with words and split terrorists into moderate and not moderate (Walker, 22 October 2015).

With this perspective, the leaders of Russia, along with their counterparts in Syria, chose to define the enemies of the Assad regime as terrorists and attempted to create a counter narrative over Syria (Alami, 4 September 2018).

Secondly, church was also part of the civil society channels. It has a potential to influence ideas and decisions of people. Indeed, the expressions from religious communities have an impact on devout people. In this sense, expressing an opinion of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Russian military intervention matters. The church approached the military intervention in Syria as an anti-terror operation and a way of protecting the Middle Eastern Christians and it gave full support for the intervention (Weir, 23 November 2015). Vsevolod Chaplin, the head of the public affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church, stated that fighting against terrorism is a moral and holy struggle and Russia is the most active country that does so (Borshchevskaya, 2015).

Thirdly, music sector was another component of the civil society channels. Songs reflect partial perspectives to people and become a part of their idea forming process on a particular issue. Since the Soviet years, popular patriotic military songs have been used to support the military forces during tough times (The Military Times, 13 February 2018). The Syrian civil war also triggered the writing of new Russian songs<sup>34</sup>. One of these songs is "Syria, My Sister, Your Russian Brother Will Save You" which remarks that any person who fights against Assad is a torturer and a killer (Borshchevskaya, 2015).

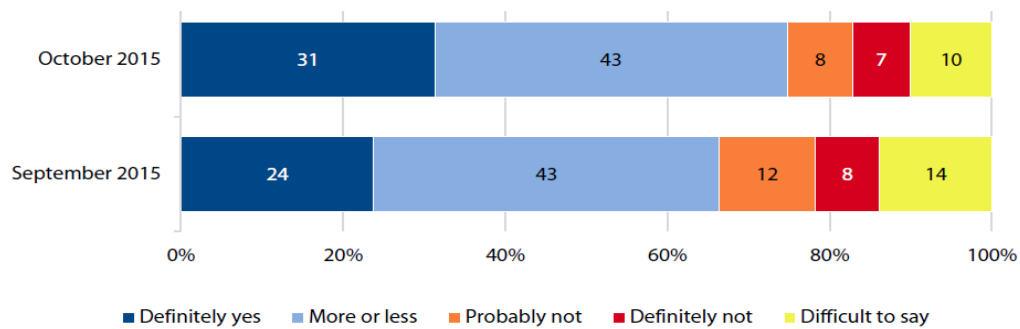
As the US State Department estimated in 2015, annual spending of Moscow on propaganda, general diplomatic efforts, and promotion of its narrative through funding

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<sup>34</sup> For the detailed information about the supportive or critical Russian songs over the Syrian conflict, see: The New Arab (29 December 2019) and The Military Times (13 February 2018).

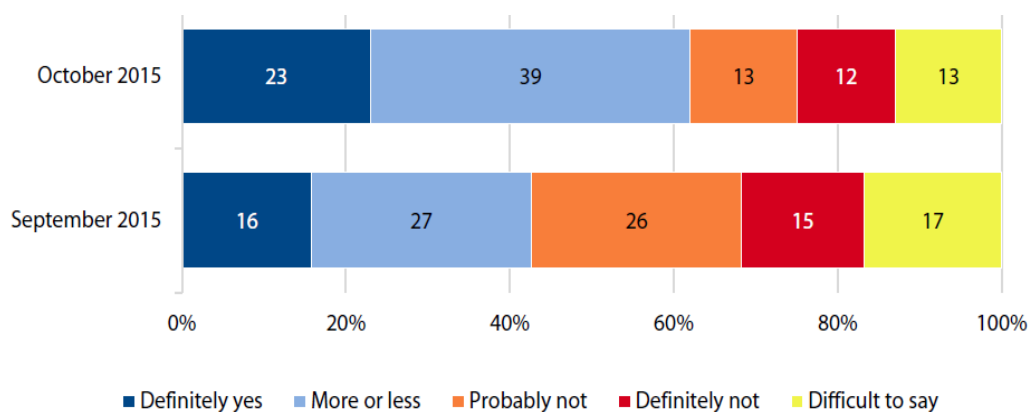
think tanks is over 1.4 billion dollars (Alami, 4 September 2018). The aforesaid strategy inside the civil society channels can be considered within the scope of this spending. This strategy resulted with reaching of the approval rating for Putin to 89.9 percent. This high rate was interpreted as an approval to Putin’s policies toward Syria and solely a minority remained against the military intervention (Borshchevskaya, 2015). The gradual and initial increase of the Russian support for the air operations in Syria from September 2015 to October 2015 can be seen below.

**Table 1 – Poll Result to the Question “Should Russia Aid the Syrian Leadership by the Following Means: Political and Diplomatic Support?”**



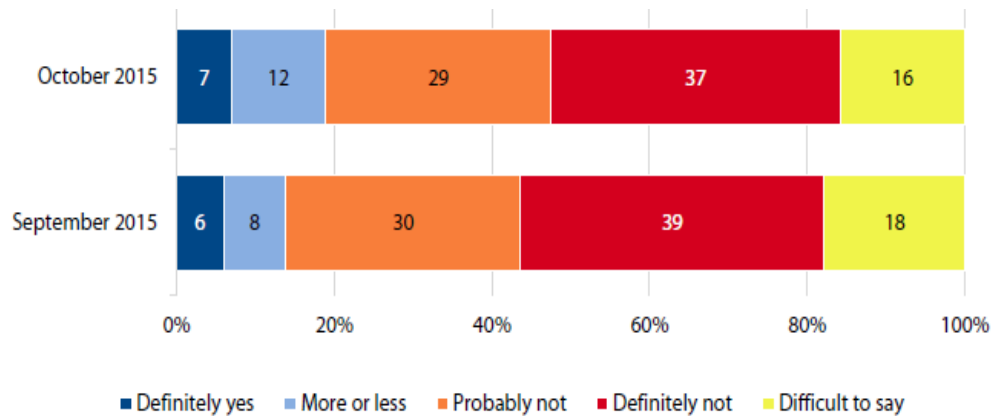
Source: <https://www.levada.ru/en/2015/11/06/russian-participation-in-the-syrian-military-conflict/>

**Table 2 – Poll Result to the Question “Should Russia Aid the Syrian Leadership by the Following Means: Military Aid (Military Advisors, Arms Deliveries)?”**



Source: [www.levada.ru/2015/10/29/uchastie-rossii-v-voennoj-operatsii-v-sirii](http://www.levada.ru/2015/10/29/uchastie-rossii-v-voennoj-operatsii-v-sirii)

**Table 3 – Poll Result to the Question “Should Russia Aid the Syrian Leadership by the Following Means: Direct Military Support (Troops on the Ground)?”**



Source: <https://www.levada.ru/en/2015/11/06/russian-participation-in-the-syrian-military-conflict/>

Almost a month after the intervention, a Levada poll which was conducted in October 2015 showed that the number of the respondents who are supporting and opposing the intervention rose: The percentage of the respondents who approve Russian policy toward Syria rose from 39 to 53, when the percentage of the ones who do not approve the policy rose from 11 to 22 (Bodner, 29 October 2015).

In September 2015, when 69 percent of the Russians were opposed to a direct military intervention in Syria, 72 percent of them were supporting the air operations in Syria in early-November 2015 (Snegovaya, 17 December 2015). This shift was related to the Kremlin strategy (Borshchevskaya, 2015) and as the Gramscian understanding argued, enough public opinion was produced for this unpopular decision. It can be said that a domestic hegemony of the interventionist discourse was provided by October and November 2015. The efforts of the regime to secure the consent of the people can also be understood as a move to avoid an organic crisis. It would emerge, in case of the Russian leaders failed to guarantee the consent of the people for the idea of military intervention.

By October 2016, the Levada Centre’s polls were showing that the support for the intervention is still high. Even though the percentage of the respondents who fully support the attacks fell from 21 to 16, 52 percent of the respondents stated that they are supporting the attacks in Syria. Aleksey Grazhdankin, the deputy director of the Levada

Centre, claimed that the majority of people are considering the Kremlin's role in Syria as positive (Cichowlas, 2 November 2016).

A poll of the Levada Centre conducted in August 2017 showed that the percentage of the people who support the military intervention declined sharply. According to this poll, only 30 percent was in favor of the military intervention, when 49 percent stated that the intervention in Syria should end (The Moscow Times, 5 September 2017). Elena Suponina, a Middle East researcher, stated that the polls of the Levada Centre do not remark the military intervention is supported by the less, because the people who want the end of the intervention do not mean its immediate end (Petkova, 30 September 2017). However, a transformation in the public opinion toward the continuing intervention can be seen by 2017.

The differentiated results of the polls by 2017 can be approached as a change in the hegemony of the interventionist discourse and can be resulted from some reasons. One of them can be related to the Russian casualties in Syria. Some Russians worry about the war's causing deaths, when they are not sure about the exact number of the soldiers who died in Syria, because the families of the late soldiers are asked not to be spoken about this issue, and the number of the Russian mercenaries who dies in Syria is not included to the official numbers. Some people also worry about the possibility of the transformation of the Russian intervention in Syria into a prolonged war that the Russians experienced in Afghanistan (Petkova, 30 September 2017).

Other reason can be relevant with the rise of economic concern when the second year of the intervention was being financed. In this point, the opposition started to argue that the Kremlin should not spend so much resource on a foreign war, when the country is witnessing an economic crisis itself (Petkova, 30 September 2017). During an interview Alexei Navalny, the leader of the opposition, argued that he believes the promise of Putin to reconstruct Palmyra is a good action, but he also questions:

Why don't you look at the roads in your city? What do you think the priority should be? Fixing the roads in Voronezh or Stavropol or rebuilding Palmyra? (Navalny, 29 April 2017).

In 2017, Kremlin attempted to re-secure the consent of the Russian society in favor of the intervention through drawing attention to what is going on Syria and how it would affect the daily lives of Russians. In this sense, President Putin stated in 2017 that:

I hope, in the near future we will bring the fight against terrorism in Syria to an end, though it is clear that some new hotbeds of terrorism may still emerge... There still are many terrorism-related issues facing the world and the Middle East, including Syria... But the main task is almost achieved, and in the near future we will be able to say that we have completed it (TASS, 21 November 2017).

These words signaled the near end of the Russian operations in Syria, while they were explaining the operations are still continuing due to the danger of possible emergence of new terrorist zones beyond Syria. The continuation of the intervention was reflected as good not only for Syria, but also for Russia and even for the world.

In September 2017, the official website of the Kremlin published an article of Putin. In this article, the president argued that the Russians contributed the fight against terrorism and the creation of a ground for political settlement in Syria. Nevertheless, he added that Moscow calls for the formation of a counter-terrorism front to continue fight against terrorism in Syria and other parts of the world (Putin, 1 September 2017). It can be considered as an explanation for the Russians which signaled that the duty of the Russian forces in Syria has not ended yet. In December 2017, when Putin declared the achievement of the mission objectives and announced victory against the ISIS (Gaub, July 2018: 58), the Russian forces continued their duties in Syria, too.

Although the Russian public polls highlighted the end of the support in favor of the intervention by 2017, the Russians did not express their ideas over the continuation of the military intervention in Syria via a strong anti-war discourse or movement, as they used to do in the case of Ukraine in 2014 (Petkova, 30 September 2017). It is possible that the elites would be encouraged to continue the intervention through this lack of an organized pressure on them.

A poll of the Levada Centre which was conducted in April 2019 stated that the percentage of the respondents who want the end of the military intervention in Syria rose from 49 to 55 (The Moscow Times, 6 May 2019). The Russian people were raising questions about the resources that are being spent in defending a foreign country. A few

months later, another survey of the Levada Centre showed that 48 percent of the respondents do not follow news about Syria, when 39 percent of them stated that they knew nothing about the developments in Syria (Shaikh, 10 October 2019). These results mark the decline of the interests of the Russian society toward the events in Syria.

The hegemony of the interventionist discourse seems like ended by 2017. Even though Moscow attempted to re-guarantee the consent of the people in this issue, the public polls showed that it failed. In order to accept the continuation of the military intervention as hegemonic, the consent of the Russians was necessary. Nevertheless, it could not be secured.

#### 4.5.2. Social Forces that Are Favored by the Military Intervention

In the previous parts, it was mentioned that the Kremlin affected the domestic public opinion through persuading the majority of the Russian society in favor the military intervention in Syria. Although it needs to be analyzed whether certain non-governmental social forces inside Russia affected the Kremlin initially to act in this way, the literature on the Russian military intervention in Syria has not focused on this point.

This study attempts to consider which social forces are likely to benefit from the decision for the Russian military intervention, but it cannot say that these social forces influenced the Kremlin to decide in this way and are responsible for the intervention, due to the lack of resources. Nevertheless, it is considered that absence of knowledge in this issue cannot mean the start of the Russian military intervention in Syria cannot be seen as a hegemonic move. It is still related to Gramsci's thought that the state tries to shape public opinion in order to start an unpopular action in condition of hegemony (Gramsci, 1966: 158 cited in Bates, 1975: 363). This study argues that taking of decision for the military intervention was not an act of domination for seeking soft power through civil society channels, which are mentioned in the previous part, to control the public opinion. The leaders in the Kremlin wanted to see supportive domestic narrative for their initiative or absence of an important organized opposition against it (Charap, et al, 2019:9).



When the military intervention was welcomed by the majority of the Russians by early-November 2015 (Snegovaya, 17 December 2015), some social forces inside Russia was already started to take advantage over the intervention. This study defines them as social forces in arms industry and energy sector.

Firstly, the Russian arms industry needs to be focused. It is the second-largest arms exporter of the world after the American arms industry and its future seems bright through huge number of arms demands (Connolly& Sendstad, March 2017: 2). The arms industry is an influential interest group inside Russia (Rumer, October 2019: 3) and around 2.5 million people are working as a part of it (Federal State Statistics Service, 2016 cited in Connolly& Sendstad, March 2017: 3). Both workers and managers of this industry benefit from export of armaments. Arms exports function as a source of revenue for the treasury and provide the survival of the national arms industry when the military supply-budget runs short. For instance, the Russian arms sales to the Middle Eastern governments during the 1990s and 2000s were constructive for its struggling arms industry in these years (Rumer, October 2019: 3, 6). Today, exports are not vital for the arms industry as it was in the 1990s, but they are helping the continuity of production (Connolly& Sendstad, March 2017: 2)

The Russian arms industry benefits from the military intervention in Syria for some reasons. The first of them is its finding opportunity to test the military forces and equipments in a war environment (Shaikh, 10 October 2019; Charap, et al, 2019:8). About the forces, Charap et al (2019: 8) drew attention to the Russian Aerospace Forces which was not tested until the Syrian war after its poor military performance during the war with Georgia in 2008. About the test of equipments, analyst Ruslan Pukhov argues that the national state-of-art armaments were developed as a consequence of ground results which were reached in Syria (Shaikh, 10 October 2019). Vladimir Shamanov, the head of the Defense Committee of Duma, states that more than two-hundred new kinds of weapons were tested in Syria and he relates this situation to the increase of the demand for the Russian weapons (Fakih, 12 March 2018).

Other reason is the arms industry's showing the capabilities of the Russian armaments to potential customers via the Syrian war (Luhn, 29 March 2016). Rosoboronexport, the state-owned Russian arms export monopoly (Saul, 17 January 2014), gained profit from

the Kremlin's support for the Assad regime (Fakih, 12 March 2018). According to Safronov (3 April 2016), Moscow can earn more than it spends in its military intervention through exporting the weapon systems which were tested in Syria in next a few years. Analysts and media estimate that this interest toward the Russian armaments can lead new sales which are worth several billion dollars (Luhn, 29 March 2016). The sales are also welcomed by Putin who stated that the companies of the arms industry "can't miss this opportunity to strengthen our position in the global arms market" (Harshaw, 25 April 2017).

Another reason is the arms industry's gaining profit from arms trade with Damascus in the war conditions. The Russian arms industry remained as one of the three arms exporters for Damascus, along with the Chinese and Iranian counterparts, after the start of the Syrian conflict (SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, n.d.). This situation leads positive domestic developments for the both ruling elites and workers of the Russian arms industry. In terms of the workers, Raian Menon, a professor at Lehigh University, remarks the dependence of their employment on arms sales. In the way of the Kremlin, Sarah Michaels, the chief Russia analyst of Oxford Analytica, relates the presence of the Moscow-Damascus arms business to its return as the votes of the Russian factory workers (O'Toole, 10 February 2012).

Secondly, the Russian energy sector is needed to be studied because the national energy companies are interested in expanding their investments in Syria for a while (Sogoloff, 30 August 2017). For instance, in 2010, Tatneft, the sixth-largest oil company of Russia (Russia Business Today, 8 July 2019), got into the Syrian market with a development in South Kishma oil field which is estimated to have 4.9 million tons of oil. Three years later, Soyuzneftegaz, a Russian gas and oil company, won a special tender to explore and develop gas reserves of Syria in onshore Block 12. Both of these companies have suspended their activities in Syria due to security concerns during the war. Nevertheless, they remained determined to turn back (Sogoloff, 30 August 2017).

In 2015, Gissa Gutchel, executive director for the Union of Oil and Gas Producers, expressed the intention of the Russian energy companies to return their activities in Syria with these words:

When the fighting stops and the situation in Syria is stabilized, Russian companies which had to freeze their operations due to the civil war will be ready to quickly resume their operations and fulfill contracts signed before the war that are valued at minimum at \$1.6 billion (Sogoloff, 30 August 2017).

Oil production in Syria collapsed with the outbreak of the conflict in 2011 and the Assad regime lost the control of the most of the oil fields to the oppositional groups and the ISIS. The Russian military assisted the Syrian forces for their regaining the control of oil production (BBC Reality Check Team, 21 November 2019). In 2019, the Syrian parliament approved contracts that authorize two Russian energy companies, Mercury LLC and Velada LLC, for oil exploration. Syrian Oil Minister Ali Ghanem stated these contracts were accordance with the strategy of the Syrian government “towards friendly states that stood by Syria, with Russia and Iran at the forefront.” (Oil and Gas Eurasia, 13 January 2020).

The situation was the same for phosphate fields. Phosphate production in Syria declined during the first year of the Syrian conflict and it stopped when the ISIS took control of the phosphate fields near Homs. Stroytransgaz, a Russian company which functions at oil and gas industry, was only capable of operating in these fields, after the Russian and al-Nimr forces took control of the phosphate fields during the civil war. It was followed by the monopolization of the Syrian phosphate production with a fifty-year contract in 2018 by Stroytransgaz (Al-Modon, 3 August 2018).

In February 2016, a Syrian delegation met with Russian Minister of Energy Alexander Novak and the heads of the Russian oil industry in Moscow where the delegation asked the assistance of the Russian energy companies in the restoration of the destroyed energy sector of Syria. In July 2017, Damascus also offered twenty-five percent of the gas and oil revenues which are gained from the freed energy fields from the ISIS to Evro Polis, a Russian military contractor reportedly owned by Evgeniy Prigozhin who is a close friend of Putin (Sogoloff, 30 August 2017). In 2018, the officials from Russia and Syria agreed over an energy cooperation deal which gives exclusive rights to the Russians in restoring Syrian energy sector (BBC Reality Check Team, 21 November 2019).

Thus, stability in Syria would lead to the return of the Russian energy companies to their business in the country. By 2016, the Russian airstrikes and the standing of the Russians with the Assad regime with their arms and assistance supplies could reduce political uncertainty for future. This prospect for stability was a positive development for the Russian energy companies, because they would focus on their activities in Syria (Sogoloff, 30 August 2017).

#### **4.6. Current Situation in Syria**

After the capture of the final portion of the ISIS-controlled territory with an American-backed operation in March 2019 (Shatz, 5 April 2019), the Syrian territory remained divided into the three zones. The first zone is controlled by the Syrian government and backed by Russia and Iran. This zone consists of around 60 percent of the total Syrian territory and the entire major cities. The second zone is controlled by a Kurdish-Arab force and supported by the US. This zone which is located in the east has around 30 percent of the total Syrian territory. The third zone is under the Turkish control with the opposition forces that are dominated by the Islamist extremists. It consists of around 10 percent of the Syrian territory (Ford, April 2019: iii-1; Spyer, 18 March 2019). It seems the Syrian government will also be able to re-control the second zone after the planned American withdrawal which was announced in later-2018, because this announcement forced the Syrian Kurdish leadership to deal with the Assad regime over the re-deployment of the Syrian forces in the east after the withdrawal of the US forces (Ford, April 2019: 1).

Under these circumstances, there are beliefs that the Syrian civil war is slowing down or coming to an end<sup>35</sup> and Assad and his government forces are winning<sup>36</sup>. It is probably an unexpected scenario for the years before 2015, because experts had been predicting the fall of the Assad regime since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011. In 2015, the position of the regime went from bad to worse, while it was losing the control of 18 percent of its territory from January to August. The start of the Russian military

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<sup>35</sup> See Ford (April 2019: iii), Spyer (18 March 2019), or Zisser (16 June 2019).

<sup>36</sup> See Hassan (30 December 2018), Karlin (13 February 2018), Phillips (4 August 2018), or Sky News (18 August 2018).

intervention in Syria in September 2015 changed this situation and the predictions about the fate of the regime (Heistein, 22 March 2016). The Russian air-support operations for the Syrian ground forces and its formation of a sort of no-fly zone over the west of Syria contributed to the shift of developments in favor of Bashar al-Assad in 2016 (Ford, April 2019: 6).

The regime managed to strengthen its rule in the most of Syria with the help of the forces of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah (Wright, 14 April 2018). Backed by the Russian air-support and the Iranian militias, the regime forces took control of the entire major cities of Syria from the oppositional forces (Daher, 27 September 2018). It was also seen that after the Russian military intervention, the opposition was not able to win a main victory and it lost majority of the territory under its control (Lister, 11 July 2019). Thus, the Russian intervention affected the dynamics of the Syrian civil war and guaranteed the political survival of the presidency of Assad (Rodgers, 11 January 2019) and his regime (Weiss& Ng, 20 March 2019). Further, the intervention created an image of Russia which is an undeniable actor in the international politics. As Kommersant cited from Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the former Foreign Minister of Germany, the international community began to perceive Moscow as a serious player with its operations in Syria (The Moscow Times, 27 January 2017). In 2019, Dmitri Trenin (20 October 2019) was able to state that:

Russia has saved the regime in Damascus, and defeated Isis, and, most importantly, restored its image as a great power

On the eighth year of the conflict, the subject of Syria is currently associated with the discussions on the return of the Syrian refugees, the reconstruction of Syria, the re-engaging with the regime, or the sanction relief (Lister, 11 July 2019). While the both Russian military intervention and diplomatic efforts<sup>37</sup> over the conflict are continuing, the Russian leadership seems closely interested in these post-war scenarios. Moscow works in these fields at the present time:

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<sup>37</sup> According to Human Rights Watch World Report (2019), the UN-led negotiations came to a standstill, while the Russians were attempting to politically legitimize the military gains of the Syrian government. Nevertheless, the Russian representatives continue to meet with their Turkish and Iranian counterparts over the Syrian conflict as a part of the Astana talks.

Firstly, the Russians are interested in the return of the Syrian refugees. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (the UNHCR), there are 6.6 million displaced people inside Syria, when 5.6 million people are displaced abroad during the civil war. When active conflict in Syria decreases relatively, Moscow joined Damascus to make a call for displaced Syrians abroad in for their returning to the home (Human Rights Watch World Report 2019). The UNHCR's regional coordinator for the MENA, Mohamed Amin Awad Abubakir stated that the UNHCR works for the safe return of the Syrian refugees, in cooperation with the governments of Syria and Russia and other stakeholders (TASS, 2 July 2019).

Secondly, Moscow does not approve the continuation of the Western sanctions against Syria. It is related to the belief that these sanctions can be considered as an unattractive feature for the return of refugees. Bashar Ja'afar, Syria's Ambassador at the UN, believes that the lift of the economic sanctions against Syria will lead the return of the Syrian refugees to their jobs and their normal lives (Vasilyeva, 29 November 2018). The Kremlin seems like sharing this opinion. It started a campaign for the end of the American and European sanctions against Syria (Jabr, 30 May 2019) and the Russian-Syrian joint coordination headquarters claimed on a report that:

We urge the United States and the European Union to lift anti-Syrian economic sanctions. Such restrictive measures do not contribute to solving urgent humanitarian and socio-economic problems in Syria (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation Joint Statement "The Problems Hindering the Return of Refugees from the Rukban and al-Hol Camps", 29 May 2019).

Thirdly, the Russians back the reconstruction of Syria. The Syrian government lacks necessary resources to afford the reconstruction and heal the shattered economy (Ford, April 2019: iii-1). Although the certain amount which is required for the reconstruction is unclear (Shatz, 5 April 2019), it is predicted at least 250 billion dollars (Human Rights Watch World Report 2019). The Chinese, Russians, and Iranians are making some investments in Syria, but they cannot afford the total cost of the reconstruction. For this reason, they are willing to see the contributions of other countries (McDowall, 2 September 2018).

When Moscow contributes to the reconstruction itself -via signing nearly a billion dollar worth of deals to improve the sectors of the Syrian war-torn economy as then Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halqi argued in 2016 (RT, 22 November 2016), it invites the international community and the Russian-involved organizations such as the BRICS and the SCO in order to back Syria at the same time (TASS, 24 April 2018; RT 12 February 2018). Alexander Kinshchak, a Russian ambassador, stated that Moscow is aware that it will be hard for Syria to have required money for the post-crisis recovery and that's why the Russians called the international community- first of all, the states which are friendly to Syria- to support the Syrian recovery (RT, 12 February 2018). The authorities of the US and the European Union argued that they will not aid the recovery process in the absence of a political transition under the line of the UNSC Resolution 2254<sup>38</sup>, when many European states such as Switzerland and France support rehabilitation and stabilization efforts in the territories that are re-controlled by the government or open humanitarian offices in Damascus (Human Rights Watch World Report 2019).

About the current situation of Syria, it can be evaluated that the divided zones mean that there are still struggles of the different local groups in order to be the only leading group inside the country, so the Syrians are unable to gather around a historic bloc. Moscow, the supporter of one of these zones, would not choose to interfere to the conflict in favor of the Assad regime and only contribute to the reconstruction of Syria, if its support was not unconditional for the regime as the Russian leaders claimed in the first years of the war. Instead, it is observed that the Russian forces involved to the conflict to avoid the defeat of the regime in 2015. After the Russian military intervention along with the support of Iran and Hezbollah, the regime had the advantage in the country. For this reason, the Russian intervention can be considered as a way to guarantee the consent of the ruling class in Syria whose position was protected by the Russians.

The Russian stance in favor of the return of the Syrian refugees can be perceived as the Kremlin's trying to look sympathetic to other countries with refugee issue. An attempt to decline their refugee population would be appreciated and gained prestige for Russia.

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<sup>38</sup> It is a road map for the Syrian peace process. Available from: < <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>> Accessed 16 July 2019.

The Russian contribution for the Syrian reconstruction can also be related to prestige, because the Russian rulers would be perceived as responsible leaders that have intention and enough material capabilities to support a war-battered country. Material capabilities are important in this point, because they are accepted as a necessary factor in the neo-Gramscian hegemony in terms of creating and keeping power. Thus, the Russian strategies toward the refugees and reconstruction along with the continuation of the Russian mediation efforts on the Syrian conflict would lead other actors to respect, to admire, or to follow Russia and these conclusions are what have been expected from practicing cultural leadership.

#### **4.7. Conclusion**

This chapter purposed to approach the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria from the neo-Gramscian understanding on hegemony. For achieving this purpose, an evaluation was made about the emergence and spread of the Arab Spring, the main developments in the Syrian civil war, the Russian support and the military intervention in favor of the Assad regime, and the current situation in Syria. In this sense, the Arab Spring was understood as an array of organic crises where a division arises between the ruled and rulers and people make protests to demand from their leaders. In the Syrian case, an organic crisis and a crisis of authority emerged as a result of the regime's inability to end the protests peacefully and resting upon coercive measures. It was seen that the conflict in Syria transformed into a civil war and engaged internal and external players.

Moscow became one of the external players of the Syrian civil war and took decision to support the Assad regime, firstly with economic, military, and diplomatic channels later also with its military intervention. Before the intervention, it tried to create enough positive public opinion inside Russia in favor of the intervention. These struggles resulted with the consent of the Russian people on this issue. There were the Russian arms industry and energy sector that are focused as social forces that are benefiting from the decision of the intervention.

In this chapter, the Russian support was associated to the former consent-based Soviet-Syrian relations and the Russian struggle of the re-establishment of hegemonic



relations. It was claimed that the Russian ruling class tried to avoid an organic crisis while trying to secure consent of the Russian public in favor of a military intervention in Syria, so it benefited from the certain civil society channels to affect the public opinion in favor of the intervention. When the decision was taken to intervene in Syria, the Russians tried to use their material capabilities via sending humanitarian aids, spending on the reconstruction of war-battered cities, and starting military intervention. They also attempted to practice cultural leadership via their contribution to the reconstruction of Syria, their diplomatic attempts to end the conflict, and their strategy for the return of the Syrian refugees.

It was seen that the Russian ruling elites failed to re-secure consent of the people in favor of the intervention in the following years. It made the continuation of the intervention non-hegemonic. As a consequence of this evaluation, it was argued that the start, not the continuation, of the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria can be seen as a hegemonic move for the Russian project of world hegemony.

## CONCLUSION

When the Russian Federation initiated a neoliberal capitalist world hegemonic project after the mid-2000s, Syria emerged as a potential supporter of this project. The rulers in Damascus, the traditional Soviet allies, used to give its consent to an alternative world hegemonic project and a forming socialist historic bloc under the Soviet leadership in the past. Same thing seemed possible with the post-Soviet Russia, particularly after the development of the Russian-Syrian relations following 2005 and the Russian support for the Assad regime in the 2010s. Within this framework, this study focuses on the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria and analyzes it from the perspective of the neo-Gramscian hegemony. As a result, it is reached that the start of the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria can be considered as a hegemonic move on the way of the Russian-led hegemonic project. Defending this argument is only possible after reaching the following findings.

During the Cold War years, the relation between the Soviet Union and Syria can be accepted as hegemonic. The Baath regimes of Syria and the Soviet regimes were sharing similar values and ideologies like socialism, anti-colonialism, or standing against the American-led global order. They also leaned to the Eastern Bloc: The USSR was leading inside the Eastern Bloc, when the Baath regimes were much close to it rather than the Western Bloc in the Cold War conditions. When these factors are considered together with the efforts in establishing cultural relations and following similar foreign policy lines, these states can also be considered as the members of the same forming socialist historic bloc that was led by the Soviet ruling class.

There were some disagreements in the Soviet-Syrian relations, mainly over the outbreak of the October War in 1973, the formation of permanent military presence of Syria in Lebanon in 1976, and the position of Yasser Arafat, when the decisions of the Baath Party was heavily impacted by Arab nationalism. Nevertheless, these disagreements could be overcome and did not change general good course of the events. The regimes did not dissociate themselves from each other. Thus, it is believed that hegemonic relations did not come to an end with these difficulties.

The hegemonic relations between the Soviet and Baath regimes weakened in the 1980s when the USSR was re-evaluating its relations with other nations due to its economic contraction. Nevertheless, the hegemonic relations came to an end with the collapse of the USSR, because the Russian and Syrian governments were unable to maintain the former level of their relations in the early post-Soviet period. The relations did not get better until the mid-2000s. In this period, there was a sudden improvement in the bilateral relations and this study believes that it was related to the new hegemonic intension of the Russians. In case of the formation of a domestic hegemony inside Russia, it will need the support of the leading classes of other states for a project of world hegemony. Indeed, the regimes that supported the Soviet hegemonic project once in their history can have potential to support the Russian hegemonic project.

It is found that the USSR applied some strategies in order to re-secure the consent of Syria and other progressive Arab allies during the Cold War. The Soviet understanding of 'cultural revolution' can be given as an example. This understanding believed in the promotion of the Soviet culture for humanity and the gradual ideological transformation. Thus, the USSR was interested in introducing and spreading its values and ideology to other nations through establishing cultural relations with them. It was also willing to establish formal and informal cultural ties with Syria and other progressive Arab states in order to let them witnessing the Soviet example; they were accepted as attempts to popularize its culture, to practice cultural leadership, and to construct a strong historic bloc. It is believed that these strategies would also re-guarantee consent these regimes to the Soviet-led world hegemonic project and to prevent their falling into the hands of the neoliberal capitalist historic bloc, when it is considered that the USSR had already supported the development of the Arab identity, the anti-colonialism character and the sympathy towards socialism in the progressive Arab states.

When the internal conditions inside Russia in the mid-2000s are approached, some important domestic changes attract the attention. They can be regarded as the transition of the power balance from the oligarchs to the siloviki, the influence of the "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet space, and the economic recovery after the collapse of the USSR and the 1998 economic crisis. Following these changes, Russia started to

adopt more independent policies, to speak louder about its disapproval about the current world order, and to take bold decisions that affect its relations with other nations. Thus, Russia became more confident in the international stage following the mid-2000s. It is believed that the process after the mid-2000s represents the recovery of Russia from the Soviet collapse and its starting a new hegemonic project.

It can be said that the prominence of the oligarchs, the siloviki, and the middle class has changed inside the Russian ruling class from the collapse of the USSR to today. The oligarchs took advantage of the transition process in the country, but they lost their prominence with the rise of the siloviki. The power of the siloviki also declined with the general disapproval over their decisions. Although the oligarchs and the siloviki could not establish their hegemony, this study highlights the considerations over the potential of the Russian middle class in forming a domestic hegemony. When the leading class fractions inside the Russian bourgeoisie are changing, the invariable picture since the early 1990s is the capitalist, bourgeois, and neoliberal characters of the ruling class coalition. Thus, it is argued that a world hegemonic project around neoliberal capitalism was intended by the Russian bourgeois class after the mid-2000s, although the leading class fraction of this class changed over time.

When the Arab revolts of the 2010s are examined, it is reached that they emerged as organic crises, when marginalized sections of society were failed to persuade that their interests are the same with the interests of hegemonic class. It led the organization of people in order to put forward demands from their governments and leaders. For instance, the Tunisian case witnessed the mobilization of the marginalized social groups against the Ben Ali regime after the self-immolation of Bouzazi, with the belief that the regime is responsible for their poor living conditions. The Syrian revolt also started as an organic crisis, but a crisis of authority also emerged in Syria, because of the inability of the Assad regime to end the protests peacefully. The regime rested upon coercion to deal with them. Thus, the regime was not able to lead or end the crisis of authority, when no subaltern groups were able to overthrow Bashar al-Assad.

The outbreak of the Syrian conflict started a multi-faced Russian support towards the Assad regime. Before September 2015, the Kremlin got involved diplomatic, political, military, and economic practices to settle the conflict in favor of the Assad regime. In

September 2015, the scope of this support was expanded to include a military intervention. Even though this intervention affected the course of events in favor of the regime, it was not capable to end the war. Today's Syria is still divided into zones of local and international actors and this situation shows that the leadership of any social group has not gained the acceptance of others and a historic bloc that would end the civil war has not established yet.

In September 2015, when the Russian military intervention in Syria started, it was not a popular idea inside the Russian public. Nevertheless, the Russian elites started a campaign by August 2015 that aimed to persuade public opinion in favor of the intervention through their statements and civil society channels. The campaign became successful and provided the avoidance from a potential organic crisis in the country. Less than two months later, the Russians who were informed about the Russian airstrikes via the channels of the Kremlin, expressed their support for the intervention. It was the start of the hegemony of the interventionist discourse inside the Russian people. Nevertheless, the consent of the people came to an end by 2017. The Russian ruling class attempted to re-guarantee the consent of the people several times, but they failed. It made the continuation of the intervention problematic. Without the public consent, it was no more a hegemonic decision. For this reason, it is argued that the start of the military intervention was a hegemonic move for its success to secure the consent of the people, but its continuation was not.

The literature on the Russian military intervention is quiet silent about whether any non-governmental social forces influenced taking the decision of the military intervention or not. There is a lack of resources to answer this question. Nevertheless, it is believed that this absence of knowledge cannot mean the start of the Russian military intervention in Syria is not related to hegemony. The intervention is still compatible with main features of the neo-Gramscian hegemony and the Gramscian understanding that the state tries to shape public opinion to start an unpopular action in condition of hegemony. There are the social forces in Russian energy sector and arms industry that was regarded as the social forces that benefited from the military intervention. Although it is unclear whether they influenced the Russian elites to take decision for the military intervention or not, it is certain that the start of the intervention was in their favor.

The period following the start of the intervention is compatible with the features of the neo-Gramscian hegemony on several counts. Firstly, international institutions have a role in the Syrian case. There are ongoing Russian and Syrian efforts for the Syrian membership or observer status in the Russian-led institutions. These efforts are important, because when there is a crisis of authority in Syria, the Assad regime is accepted as legitimate representative of the Syrian people by these institutions. For example, the BRICS expressed its opposition to a potential American and European-led UN resolution against the Assad regime and the EAEU and the SCO started to connect with the Assad regime for the Syrian participation. Apart from them, in 2017, Russia wanted the military forces of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the two CSTO members, in the Syrian war. Although the negotiations did not result with military presence of these forces in Syria or a CSTO military intervention, the situation showed that the Kremlin considered the option of a direct CSTO military support in the war.

Secondly, Russia addresses its material capabilities in order to stabilize the position of the pro-Russian Assad regime. The Kremlin decided to engage in bilateral economic and military agreements, humanitarian aids, and reconstruction of the war-battered Syrian cities; it even expanded the scope of the usage of material capabilities with a military intervention which requires more resources to spend on military personal, equipment, and operations. Without the Russian material capabilities, the current picture of Syria would absolutely be different and it would not be in favor of the Assad regime.

Thirdly, there are many examples of the Russian attempts to practice cultural leadership in Syria. For instance, the acceptance of Russian language as the second language in Syrian government schools can show that the effect of the military intervention will not only in the military field. The students who learn Russian in these schools will probably contribute the development of the Russian-Syrian cultural relations in the future. For another example, there are Russian-led or co-led meetings and conferences over the Syrian conflict that reflects the perspective, culture, and values of the Russian ruling class. These diplomatic efforts are showing the Russian way of researching solutions and supporting its arguments over the Syrian war. Thus, they are related to the concept

of cultural leadership that requires the usage of culture, ideologies, values, and institutions in order to lead others follow.

This study also associates the Russian-organized a concert in Palmyra, the ancient city that was taken from the ISIS, to cultural leadership. It aimed to provide a Russian image, which is respectful for human rights and anti-terrorist efforts, because the ISIS executed many people in Palmyra. The Russian call for the return of the refugees to Syria can also be accepted as an example of cultural leadership. In case of this strategy would be successful to return the Syrian refugees, the countries with refugee issue would welcome the decline of the refugee population in their homes. Since this strategy would appear to be shaped by Russian values and institutions, it would create respect and prestige for Russia.

As a consequence of these findings, it is reached that the 2015 Russian military intervention witnessed the Russian ruling class' benefiting from the civil society channels to create positive public opinion in favor the military intervention; addressing its material capabilities to finance the costs of aids, reconstruction projects, and the military operations; attempting to practice cultural leadership through its support for mediation, reconstruction, and return of the refugees; and trying to include the Russian-led international institutions to the Syrian case. In the light of these developments, this study reaches the result that the start of the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria was a hegemonic move towards an alternative Russian-led world hegemonic project around neoliberalism.

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## APPENDIX5. TURNITIN REPORT

### THE 2015 RUSSIAN MILITARY INTERVENTION IN SYRIA: A NEO-GRAMSCIAN HEGEMONY APPROACH

#### ORIGINALITY REPORT

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