Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sicences

Department of International Relations

THE "ENDLESS" SYRIAN WAR
AN ASSESSMENT

Dilek KÖRÜKCÜ

Master's Thesis

Ankara, 2023

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ACCEPTANCE AND APPROVAL

The jury finds that Dilek KÖRÜKCÜ has on the date of 19.01.2023 successfully passed the defense examination and approves her Master Thesis titled "The "Endless" Syrian War: An Assessment".

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ETİK BEYAN

Bu çalışmadaki bütün bilgi ve belgeleri akademik kurallar çerçevesinde elde ettiğimi, görsel, işitsel ve yazılı tüm bilgi ve sonuçları bilimsel ahlak kurallarına uygun olarak sunduğumu, kullandığım verilerde herhangi bir tahrifat yapmadığımı, yararlandığım kaynaklara bilimsel normlara uygun olarak atıfta bulunduğumu, tezimin kaynak gösterilen durumlar dışında özgün olduğunu, **Doç. Dr. Ayşe Ömür ATMACA** danışmanlığında tarafımdan üretildiğini ve Hacettepe Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Tez Yazım Yönergesine göre yazıldığını beyan ederim.

Dilek KÖRÜKCÜ

To my beloved mother, father and sister

To the memory of Azra Apaydın

ABSTRACT

KÖRÜKCÜ Dilek, *The "Endless" Syrian War: An Assessment*, Master's Thesis, Ankara, 2023.

With the end of the Cold War, while non-state actors gained importance in international relations, humanitarian crises, environmental problems, and civil wars began to become important. Although civil wars have often been linked to third-world countries, the civil wars in Europe and the Balkans in the 1990s increased the interest in civil war studies within the discipline of International Relations. With third-party interventions in civil wars, the distinction between civil and interstate wars has become increasingly blurred.

Since the 20th century, the Middle East has been associated with prolonged ethnic and religious conflicts, political and humanitarian crises, and military interventions. The Arab-Israeli conflict, the Lebanese civil war, and the Iran-Iraq war have made the region unstable and open to foreign interventions. Recently, the uprisings that started in Tunisia in 2010 – although commonly referred to as the "Arab Spring", have thrust the region into long, dark winter instead. The demonstrations in Syria in 2011 quickly turned into a country-wide civil conflict. Although it began as a civil war for various economic, political, social, ethnic, and religious reasons, the Syrian War has evolved into a proxy war due to the diversity of state and non-state actors involved.

This study aims to understand why the Syrian war has lasted for more than ten years. To do this, initially, a conceptual framework is drawn that focuses on civil and proxy wars. How the process leading to the civil war was shaped, and the Syrian war from a historical perspective are then discussed. The reason why the war has continued for more than ten years is subsequently discussed under three headings: regional, international, and Syria itself in the context of third-party interventions in civil wars. The thesis focuses on regional factors, which are considered more important in terms of the diversity of actors and their influence on the dynamics of war.

Keywords

Syria, Civil War, Proxy War, Turkey, Middle East.

ÖZET

Dilek KÖRÜKCÜ. *"Bitmeyen" Suriye Savaşı: Bir Değerlendirme*, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara, 2023.

Soğuk Savaşın son bulmasıyla birlikte uluslararası ilişkilerde devlet dışı aktörler önem kazanırken insani krizler, çevresel sorunlar, sivil savaşlar gibi konular önemli hale gelmeye başlamıştır. Suriye Savaşı on yılı aşkın bir süredir uluslararası ilişkileri meşgul etmektedir. Her ne kadar üçüncü dünya ülkelerine aitmiş gibi görülse de 1990lı yıllarda Avrupa'da ve Balkanlarda yaşanan sivil savaşlar uluslararası ilişkiler disiplininde sivil savaşlara olan ilgiyi artırmıştır. Sivil savaşlara üçüncü tarafların müdahaleleri ile sivil savaşlar ve devletler arası savaşlar arasındaki ayrım giderek belirsizleşmiştir.

Özellikle 20. Yüzyıldan itibaren Ortadoğu sürekli etnik ve dini çatışmalar, siyasi ve insani krizler, askeri müdahaleler ile anılmıştır. Arap-İsrail Savaşları, Lübnan iç savaşı, İran-Irak savaşları bölgeyi istikrarsız ve dış müdahalelere açık hale getirmiştir. Son olarak, 2010 yılında Tunus'ta başlayan ayaklanmalar her ne kadar "Arap Baharı" olarak anılsa da bölgeyi uzun, karanlık bir kışa çevirmiştir. 2011 yılında Suriye'de başlayan sivil gösteriler kısa sürede bir iç savaşa dönüşmüştür. Ekonomik, siyasi, toplumsal, etnik ve dini sebeplerle bir sivil savaş olarak başlasa da savaşa müdahil olan devlet ve devlet dışı aktörlerin çeşitliliği ile Suriye Savaşı zamanla bir vekalet savaşına evrilmiştir.

Bu çalışmanın amacı Suriye savaşının neden on yılı aşkın süredir devam ettiğini anlamaktır. Bunun için ilk olarak sivil savaş ve vekalet savaşı konseptleri ile kavramsal çerçeve çizilmiştir. Ardından sivil savaşa giden sürecin nasıl şekillendiği ve tarihsel bir perspektiften Suriye savaşı ele alınmıştır. Savaşın neden on yılı aşkın süredir devam ettiği sivil savaşlara üçüncü tarafların müdahaleleri bağlamında bölgesel, uluslararası ve Suriye'nin kendisinden kaynaklanan nedenler olarak üç başlıkta tartışılmıştır. Tezde, aktörlerin çeşitliliği ve savaşın dinamiklerini etkilemeleri bakımından daha önemli olduğu düşünülen bölgesel faktörlere odaklanılmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Suriye, Sivil Savaş, Vekalet Savaşı, Türkiye, Ortadoğu.

TABLE OF CONTENT

ABBREVIATIONS

FSA   Free Syrian Army

IS   Islamic State

ISIL   Islamic State of Iraq and Levant

JDP   Justice and Development Party

SNC   The Syrian National Council

SDF   Syrian Democratic Forces

UN   United Nations

US   United States

YPG   The People's Defence Units

FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

The end of the bipolar structure of the Cold War period, based on the balance of power between states, allowed non-state actors to gain more importance in international relations, and issues such as humanitarian crises, environmental problems, civil wars, and genocides have become increasingly important. The fact that civil wars, which seem to occur primarily in underdeveloped countries, had also been observed in Europe and the Balkans in the 1990s increased interest in civil war studies within the discipline of International Relations. Moreover, third-party interventions in civil wars have progressively blurred the distinction between interstate and civil wars. The Middle East is one of the regions where civil wars have occurred most frequently. Power struggles, humanitarian crises, political unrest, and proxy wars have proliferated in the region, especially after the twentieth century; the most recent of these were the popular uprisings that started in Tunisia in 2010 called the "Arab Spring". These uprisings rapidly affected many countries in the region and led to the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in power for years. The last of these uprisings took place in Syria in 2011. The events there quickly turned into a civil war and became increasingly complex because of the involvement of so many state and non-state actors.

Although there are many studies in the literature on the Syrian war, these primarily deal with the Syrian refugee crisis, Turkey's relations with the US and Russia – in the context of the Syrian crisis – and the Syrian policies of regional and global powers. Although many studies on the concept of civil war exist in the literature, research on the Syrian war as a case study about the causes of civil wars, the interventions of third parties, and the duration of these kinds of wars within the conceptual framework of civil war is lacking. The main question in this thesis is why the Syrian Civil War has lasted for more than ten years. First, how the process leading to the Syrian war was shaped politically, economically, and socially is discussed. How the civil war started and progressed and who the actors are in the war are sub-questions. In addition, the principal dynamics that determine the political relations and foreign policies of the actors involved in the war, both with the Syrian regime and each other, are additional sub-questions.

Estimating the duration of civil wars is difficult. However, studies have generally shown that they last much longer than interstate wars. The duration of a civil war may depend on many internal and external factors. While the number and complexity of these factors affect the course and duration of a civil war, third-party interventions are almost certain to prolong the duration of these types of conflicts. Despite this, third-party interventions in civil wars are quite common. These interventions include military, economic, logistical, or educational support. An intervention by a third party in a civil war can be instigated by that party itself or by invitation from other parties. The involvement of third parties in conflicts directly and/or indirectly through proxies to achieve foreign policy goals gives rise to the concept of a proxy war.

Proxy wars, usually much less bloody and costly than interstate wars, are typically more preferred by states. Indeed, technological developments after the end of the Cold War and the advent of a "highly networked and multipolar world" increased the number of state and non-state actors and proxies involved in civil wars. The Syrian war stands out in terms of the diversity of state and non-state actors involved. Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Lebanon, Iraq, and Israel are the region's countries directly or indirectly involved in the war through proxies. The US, Russia, the European Union, China, France – and even North Korea – are the global actors participating, in one form or another, in the war. In addition, non-state actors that have reached levels that enable them to be their own kind of "state" are also operational and very influential in the Syrian war. For instance, ISIL, the Free Syrian Army, Al-Nusra, the YPG-PYD, Hezbollah, and SNC have all been involved in Syria at one point or another.

The primary goal of this thesis is to analyse and discuss the factors that have caused the Syrian civil war to continue for more than a decade. Hence, the thesis aims to comprehend the political motivations, foreign policy decisions, and relations among all actors. Therefore, it follows a qualitative research methodology based on the existing literature, explanations of authority figures, media reports, and justifications from official institutions or individuals. Some numbers, examples, and contextual situations are visualized with facts, figures, and maps. Primary and secondary sources, including books and articles, constitute the main framework of the work.

The conflict in Syria was triggered with the phrase "next is your turn, doctor" in Deraa, and spread rapidly to large portions of the country. In addition to the economic and political reasons stemming from the general conditions in-country, Syria was quickly dragged into its civil war due to ethnic and religious conflicts that varied according to the locale or region. In 2012, the situation there was officially declared a "civil war" by the UN and ICRC. Although regional and global actors asked Bashar Assad to stop the conflict and immediately implement political reforms, his administration was reluctant to implement these requests. To date, increasing conflicts in Syria have caused more than 13 million people to be forcibly displaced within the country; in addition, 5.5 million Syrians have had to leave their country and become refugees in neighbouring ones (UNHCR, 2022).

Turkey, which hosts 3.5 million Syrians today, is first among these; it considered the conflict in Syria an "internal issue" and became involved in the war soon after it started. The increasing number of refugees and terrorist attacks from Syria have made Turkey more vulnerable in terms of its domestic and foreign policy and have increased security concerns. Russia, which got involved in the war alongside the Assad regime as a "game changer" in 2015, is a key actor because it has changed the balance in the war. Military interventions initiated by Turkey, the US, and their European allies in the fight against ISIL and Russian military and logistic support to the Assad regime, coupled with the participation of Iran, make the war increasingly complex. Even the incompatibility of the interests of state actors working on the same side contributes to the insolvency of the conflict. Therefore, the war's finality becomes more uncertain with each passing day.

The Syrian territory has become an environment for a new power struggle for regional and global actors. Due to its geography, Syria has been the scene of civil war and various conflicts for more than a decade, and no actor now involved wants to lose ground. This thesis discusses the Syrian war's 10-year duration under three headings: regional and global factors and those arising from Syria. More specifically, the cause for war stemming from Syria itself, such as the Assad administration's determination to identify its future with the future of the country, why the regime does not want to relinquish power, its motivation to continue fighting until it takes control of the whole country, the Syrian army's loyalty to the government, the divided structure of the Syria-based opposition, ethnic and religious differences, the regime and the opposition being supported by

external forces, will be explored. Among the regional factors that have caused the war's prolongation, the Iranians view of Assad's Syria as a safe corridor between themselves and Hezbollah and their desire to keep the Shiite Crescent strong by consolidating the Assad regime, the sectarian-focused regional power and hegemonic struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Iran's anti-US and anti-Israeli policies over Syria, military and financial support provided by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey and their relations with the Syrian opposition, and Turkey's security concerns will be outlined. Finally, among the global factors, the historical US-Russia power struggle over Syria, US hostility to Iran, the west's determination to initiate political transition, and Russia's determination to protect the Assad regime and consolidate its influence in the region, will be looked at.

While each of these main factors requires a separate, detailed study, this thesis primarily focuses on regional factors in the continuation of the Syrian war. Turkey and Iran, in particular, and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Lebanon, Iraq, and Israel have stood out as important regional actors in the war. The irreconcilable interests and power struggles of the region's countries with Syria and each other are also crucial in extending the duration of the Syrian war. In this prolonged conflict, no single enemy exists, and allegiances are constantly shifting according to the parties involved. Turkey's security concerns and the military operations it has carried out have drawn reactions from the Syrian regime and Iran – and they oppose Turkey's actions. Iran is one of the most ardent supporters of the Assad regime in the region, contrary to the fact that Turkey initially saw the solution in Syria as overthrowing the Assad regime. Similarly, Saudi Arabia believes that a pro-Iranian Syria will weaken its power in the region; it has, for many years, expressed an anti-Iranian sentiment and supports the overthrow of the Assad regime. Hence, the Syrian war continues as an extension of the "New Cold War" process, in which the region's countries are positioned around the US and Russia. No actor wants to be on the losing side in this struggle, which has turned into a conflict of power and interest. Therefore, the solution does not seem possible unless actors in the region come to an agreement; as they have yet to find a solution, and as the war drags on, it has turned into an endless war.

This thesis covers the period from the start of the war in 2010 until 2020. The latter date was chosen because Turkey is allegedly starting talks with Syria at the intelligence agency level. A solution without Assad, considered for years, is about to be abandoned. The process post-2020 is the policy change of Turkey. The region's dynamics and Syria's

overall fate have been reshaped accordingly. In this context, this work consists of three chapters. In Chapter 1, a conceptual framework is presented. The characteristics of civil and proxy wars, the causes of civil wars, and the duration of these wars in the context of third-party interventions are discussed in this section. In addition, information is given about the history of the Middle East, with particular emphasis on conflicts and the Arab Spring process. In Chapter 2, the events leading up to the Syrian Civil War, the beginning of the war, and the turning points experienced with the interventions of third parties are discussed. In this section, third-party interventions thought to have prolonged the war are classified as regional and international factors. In addition, the reasons for the war's extension originating from Syria itself are discussed. In the third part, regional factors are focused on under four sub-headings: the Iran-Saudi Arabia sectarian conflict, Turkey's security concerns, the relations between regional countries with the US and Russia, and, lastly, other regional factors.

CHAPTER 1

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Only the dead have seen the end of war

Plato

Since early history, conflicts have occurred in almost every region of the world. Conflicts can be between states, tribes, religious sects, and ethnic groups. They are often based on many different factors such as economic, political and military-related issues and frequently involve a clash of interest or are a manifestation of a struggle for power and sovereignty between parties. Wars, on the other hand, are organized conflicts that take place for a specific purpose. As a policy tool used by states to achieve certain political goals, wars have different names depending on the methods and actors involved. Wars initiated by ethnic, religious, and political social groups against each other and/or against the sovereign state in which they reside are called civil wars, while the cooperation of warring parties and third parties and their involvement in conflicts are called proxy wars. Powerful nations frequently resort to proxy wars in international relations because traditional wars are much more costly. While it is difficult to estimate the duration of civil wars, the common view is that third-party interventions prolong the duration of these types of wars.

After the Cold War, the disappearance of the Soviet threat and the escalation of conflicts worldwide increased interest in civil war studies in International Relations. Issues related to the threat of nuclear war, the balance of power, and deterrence, which were primarily focused on during the Cold War, have been replaced by those involving ethnic/religious conflict, genocide, environmental issues, and human rights arising from civil wars (David, 1997). Civil wars, believed to occur mostly in undeveloped third-world countries, have become a phenomenon that developed countries have increasingly experienced after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The weak states that emerged after the dissolution of the USSR, the Chechen conflict in Russia shortly thereafter, and the long-running Yugoslavian Civil War showed the proximity of the West to some civil wars (David, 1997). Although some regions are much more conflict-prone than others, every region of the world has experienced conflicts in some shape or form.

Historically, the Middle East has long been associated with conflict. The complex ethnic, political, religious, and social structure of the region, along with its economic struggles have made it prone to civil wars and foreign intervention. The last of these conflicts are a cluster of social uprisings deeply affecting the region collectively known as the "Arab Spring". These popular uprisings began in Tunisia in 2010 and spread to many Middle Eastern countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, Yemen – and most recently Syria in 2011. These conflicts, growing and spreading in a short time, changed the balance both within the affected countries and in the region.

Accordingly, in this chapter, the concept of "civil war" and "proxy war" will be briefly discussed. The main causes of civil wars and the reasons why civil wars last longer than interstate wars will then be explained; subsequently, evaluations will be presented within the framework of the realist and neorealist paradigms. Finally, the impact of third-party intervention on the duration of civil wars and the history of the Middle East as a conflict-prone region will be focused on and discussed.

1.1 UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPTS: FROM CIVIL WAR TO PROXY WAR

Wars have been a method used frequently by states as a policy tool in almost every period of history. In a basic sense, war is organized violence to reach political aims (Metz & Cuccia, 2010). In other words, wars are made up of violent, organized, and united conflicts that take place around the habitat of a particular society (Dennen, 2005). The main purpose of a warring state may be to acquire new territory, annex a region, and/or weaken another state. Although the main actors in wars are states, sometimes various political, ethnic, or religious groups can come into conflict with each other, and this can constitute a civil war. Civil war, defined most simply, "is a war between opposing groups of citizens of the same country" (Merriam-Webster Dictionaries, n.d.) or can be described as "a war between political factions or regions within the same country" (Dictionary.com, n.d.). According to the Correlates of War Project, which is a model frequently referenced in the civil war literature, a civil war is defined as a violent conflict resulting in at least a thousand deaths per year (Collier, Hoeffler, & Söderbom, 2004). The International Peace Institute defines "civil war" in more detail, as follows:

> A civil war consists of one or several simultaneous disputes over generally incompatible positions that (1) concern government and/or territory in a state; (2) are causally linked to the use of armed force, resulting in at least 500 battle-related deaths during any given year during the conflict; and (3) involve two or more parties, of which the primary warring parties are the government of the state where armed force is used, and one or several nonstate opposition organizations (Cockayne, Mikulaschek, & Perry, 2010).

Therefore, civil war is a way of weakening the state that has the legitimate use of force (Gersovitz & Kriger, 2013). Two primary topics of international relations, in the classical sense, are the causes of war and conditions of peace (Smith, 2016). According to the realist point of view, war and peace are inseparable and, in both cases, the main motivation is the "struggle for power" (Dennen, 2005). Since the main actors in international relations are states, wars also occur between states. States fight to achieve their national interests for different purposes (Dennen, 2005). In addition, wars arise from the structure of the international system (Cunningham & Lemke, 2013). Interstate wars are caused by the anarchic structure of the international system, while civil wars are caused by states or because of society-level factors (Cunningham & Lemke, 2013). The actors in civil wars can be armed groups, insurgents, terrorists, guerrillas, and/or ethnic religious minority groups within a country.

In the 1960s, although some scholars like Samuel Huntington, George Modelski, and Harry Eckstein emphasized the significance of civil wars in shaping the policies of the great powers, the main actors in international relations were, at the time, seen as states, and civil war studies could not develop further because of the emergence of the Soviet threat (David, 1997). However, it is believed that the line between interstate wars and civil wars has become increasingly blurred, especially since the end of the Cold War (Mason, 2009). One of the main reasons for this is the intervention of third parties in civil wars. Despite the common belief that civil wars arise from internal causes, in fact, many internal conflicts are also affected to cross-border and external interventions that change the dynamics of war (Salehyan, Gleditsch, & Cunningham, 2011). Today, a large portion of the research deals with the phenomenon of civil war in the context of third-party intervention.

States facing civil war may need the direct or indirect support of third parties to maintain their current power and/or to prevail against rebels by increasing their power. Similarly, insurgents may need the support of third parties to prevail against the state they are fighting for their specific purposes. On the other hand, great powers may intervene in conflicts spontaneously, without the help of other parties and in line with their interests. The indirect involvement of third parties in a conflict, which will affect the results of a war, is called a "proxy war" (Mumford, 2013). In a proxy war, the parties, which are usually in a hierarchical relationship, act together to achieve a common goal (Fox, 2019). The main actor tries to dominate the opponent by using the "agent" or "proxy" as a tool to achieve its goals (Fox, 2019). Typically, a proxy war is defined as:

> …an international conflict between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country; disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of that country; and using some of that country's manpower, resources and territory as a means for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies (Karabulut & Oğuz, 2018).

Proxy wars are not a new phenomenon in international relations; throughout history, states or empires avoided direct military conflict and encouraged proxies to attack their enemies in their stead (Karabulut & Oğuz, 2018). Although the idea of direct warfare between the world's great powers is discussed or given consideration periodically, proxy warfare has become the more common form of modern warfare as the conditions that determine this type of war erode the idea of direct interstate warfare (Fox, 2019). During the Cold War, the support given by the great powers to rebel forces in the ongoing conflicts in third-world countries fuelled numerous proxy wars (Einsiedel, 2017). However, the end of the Cold War and the transition from a bipolar world order to a multipolar one did not reduce the number of proxy wars. According to Rondeaux and Sterman, the erosion of state power in the "highly networked and multipolar world" order, the increase in transnational social movements, and technological developments increase the number of proxies, states, and non-state actors in conflicts today, and this is unlike the bipolar order developed under the leadership of the United States and Russia (Rondeaux, & Sterman, 2019). States resort to proxy wars more frequently and avoid direct wars, which are much more costly and deadly (Mumford, 2013).

Since the Cold War, great powers have been involved in many conflicts in different parts of the world by using proxies. Among these, Iran's proxy war in the Middle East by using Hezbollah for years, the US proxy war in Syria by using Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) since 2014, Russia's proxy war in the Donbas region of Ukraine by using separatist forces can be given as examples (See, Figure 1).

Sampling of Modern Proxy Wars

Principal	Proxy	Conflict	Theater	Date
United States	Mujahideen	Soviet-Afghan War	Afghanistan	1979–1989
Iran	Hezbollah	Multiple	Greater Middle East	1980s–present
United States	Iraqi security forces	Operation Inherent Resolve	Iraq	October 2014–May 2018
United States	Syrian Democratic Forces	Operation Inherent Resolve	Syria	October 2014–present
Russia	Syrian regime forces	Syrian Civil War	Syria	October 2014–present
Russia	Various proxies	Operation Inherent Resolve	Syria	October 2014–present
Iran	Shia militia groups	Operation Inherent Resolve	Iraq	October 2014–present
Iran	Houthi rebels	Yemeni Civil War	Yemen	Spring 2015–present
United States	Philippine defense forces	Defeat ISIS campaign	The Philippines	Fall 2016–present
Russia	Separatists	Russo–Ukrainian war	Donbas region of Ukraine	Spring 2014–present
United States	Iraqi security forces	Operation Iraqi Freedom/ New Dawn	Iraq	March 2003–December 2011
United States	Afghan defense forces	Operation Enduring Freedom/ Freedom's Sentinel	Afghanistan and Pakistan	October 2001–present
Russia	Taliban	Operation Enduring Freedom/ Freedom's Sentinel	Afghanistan and Pakistan	Unknown–present
Russia	Chechen forces (regular and irregular)	Multiple: Russo–Ukrainian war, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Inherent Resolve, Operation Enduring Freedom	Multiple: Ukraine, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan	2001–present

1. This matrix is not inclusive; it is a sampling of recent proxy wars.
2. Data comes from a variety of open-source information.
3. In instances when hard dates are unavailable, dates listed are an approximation based on open-source information.

Figure 1: Sampling of modern proxy wars, (Fox, 2019)

1.1.1 Main Reasons of the Civil War: Economic Greed and Political Grievance

While more than 80 percent of wars and casualties following World War II were originally caused by civil wars, this situation became even more striking after the Cold War ended (David, 1997). Only five of the 96 armed conflicts occurring between 1989 and 1996 were between states, and there was no interstate conflict between 1993 and 1994 (David, 1997). These circumstances have increased the interest in civil war studies in international relations. As conflicts between states and social and political groups increased, the causes of civil wars have become more interesting and relevant. Many studies point out that civil wars are more common in societies suffering from economic inequalities and occur more frequently in poor states. According to some viewpoints, ethnic divisions and political institutions are the potential sources of civil wars (Besley & Persson, 2008). If a country has an ethnically diverse majority with a large single ethnic

minority, the probability of a civil war doubles (O'Loughlin, 2005). However, there are also countries with ethnically homogeneous social structures, such as Somalia and Ireland, which have also experienced devastating civil wars (O'Loughlin, 2005).

According to O'Loughlin, this contradictory situation is due to economic reasons. For Karimi and Shafaee, ethnic, religious, and cultural differences cannot by themselves be a reason for civil war. Driving factors must exist, such as economic difficulties, exclusion, and bad governance, that trigger these differences (Karimi & Shafaee, 2018). Similarly, Collier and Hoeffler describe the main motivations of civil war as "greed" in the economic sense and "grievance" in connection with the structure of political power (Ibrahim & Nicholas, 2002). According to Fearon and Laitin, economically, politically, and organizationally weak central governments are more prone to civil wars due to weak local policing and inadequate and corrupt counterinsurgency practices (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Moreover, if a state cannot ensure the security of its society, violence is inevitable (Meiser, Heye, & McKee, 2018). Therefore, it is not possible to consider economic and political causes as separate from each other. For example, as stated by O'Loughlin, although most civil wars in third-world countries stem from ethnic division (such as the Tutsi massacres in Rwanda in 1994 and the Bosnian genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995), the primary reason underlying the outbreak of these kinds of wars is an economic one.

The main aim of rebel groups in a civil war is regime change because they do not trust the government, even if the current government accepts the changes they require (Fearon & Laitin, 2008). While it is more difficult to peacefully convey demands to regimes in countries having more authoritarian and low-level democracies, the "potential of grievance" increases. According to Faisal Ahmed (2021), economic disparity, which is mainly related to "ethnic and/or religious" differences, tends to be connected with "political exclusion" and "grievances" (Ahmed, 2021). Moreover, since economically poor communities are often politically powerless and oppressed, they may tend to rebel against oppressive governments rather than complain or express their views in a political manner (Ahmed, 2021). Therefore, Butler and Gates state that the main motivations of rebels fall under three categories: (1) government or regime change, (2) instigation of different policies with the government, and (3) motivations related to greed (Asymmetry,

Parity, and (Civil) War: Can International Theories of Power Help Us Understand Civil War?, N.D).

According to the realist paradigm, the cause of wars stems from human nature and human behaviour (Waltz, 2001). Human nature is inherently bad, and this causes anarchic conditions within states. Realists believe that civil wars stem from these anarchic situations (Cunningham & Lemke, 2013) because in these conditions, like for states, groups within states also have security concerns (David, 1997). On the other hand, under these anarchic circumstances, the state has to intervene in the conflict; if it does not, state authority will weaken, the state will lose power, and, subsequently, a domestic and external security deficit will arise. David (1997) argues that this will create a "security dilemma" as it will increase the distrust of groups within the state.

According to Aydın and Regan, states engage in civil war to pursue their security interests (Aydin & Regan, 2011) because when state authority weakens or completely collapses, individuals often come together to defend themselves according to religious, ethnic, or tribal ties to ensure their security (Meiser, Heye, & McKee, 2018). The state intervenes harshly to ensure its security against those who organize against it. The state must prove its power against any rebel action. The aim of violent groups may be to retain power and authority and thus legitimacy to rule – or to seize power from those who hold it (eGyanKosh, 2017). According to David, most civil wars stem from power struggles in which ethnic and religious groups try to take control of the state by force from regimes they believe are oppressing them (David, 1997). Institutional weakness or an absence of central authority fuels violence. The prevailing view is that in the absence of state authority, individuals are more prone to violence (Meiser, Heye, & McKee, 2018). According to the neo-realist paradigm, the way to stop civil war is to have a strong central government (David, 1997).

1.1.2 Third Party Intervention and Duration of the Civil War
According to Fearon and Laitin, civil wars last much longer than interstate wars. For example, the average duration of the interstate wars that started and ended after 1945 is less than three months, while for civil wars it is approximately seven years (Fearon & Laitin, Civil war termination, 2008). Moreover, Cunningham and Lemke argue that civil wars cause more deaths than interstate wars and are more frequent (Cunningham &

Lemke, 2013). How long a civil war lasts depends on different internal and external factors. Economic and political pressure before conflicts, natural resources, ethnic diversity, the possibility of illegal financing, and the foreign intervention of international and regional organizations and states in a civil war affect its duration (Aydin & Regan, 2011).

According to some sources, the first known examples of civil wars date back to the 16th century, while, according to Faisal Ahmed (2021), the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, is the bloodiest period in human history due to an increase in civil wars (Ahmed, 2021). Fearon and Laitin describe this increase and attribute it to a series of prolonged struggles:

> The prevalence of internal war in the 1990s is mainly the result of an accumulation of protracted conflicts since the 1950s rather than a sudden change associated with a new, post-Cold War international system. Decolonization from the 1940s through the 1970s gave birth to a large number of financially, bureaucratically, and militarily weak states (Fearon & Laitin, Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War, 2003).

Similar to the previously-mentioned authors, Collier, Hoffler, and Söderbom claim that civil wars last an average of seven years, whereas international wars last an average of 11 months (Collier, Hoeffler, & Söderbom, 2004). One of the most important factors determining the duration of civil wars is the intervention of third parties. According to Akcinaroglu and Radziszewski, interventions involving interstate rivals constantly lead to long conflicts, unlike unrivalled interventions. The prevailing view is that longer conflicts are inevitable when foreign interventions are not robust or sufficient enough to result in victory (Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski, 2005). However, as conflicts become much more complex with the influence of foreign intervention, they tend to increase. While the rate of states that intervened in civil wars was 4% in 1991, this number reached 40% in 2015 (Einsiedel, 2017).

Third-party intervention in civil wars can take different forms. Third-party intervention can take place in various economic, military, logistics, and educational training spheres, affecting the "balance of power" between the government and opposition forces (Collier, Hoeffler, & Söderbom, 2004). In cases in which the balance of power between the conflicting parties within the state cannot be achieved, third parties may intervene in favour of the weaker party (David, 1997). For example, insurgent groups that enjoy the

support of neighbouring states or benefit from shelter in neighbouring countries can prolong the duration of an insurgency with "hit-and-run tactics" (Aydin & Regan, 2011). Akcinaroglu and Radziszewski argue that some interventions can decisively change the balance of power between the warring parties in favour of one side and end conflicts with a decisive victory or reconciliation (Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski, 2005). Moreover, according to Fearon and Laitin, in the absence of a strong third-party guarantor state, a civil war cannot reach a negotiated settlement (Fearon & Laitin, 2008).
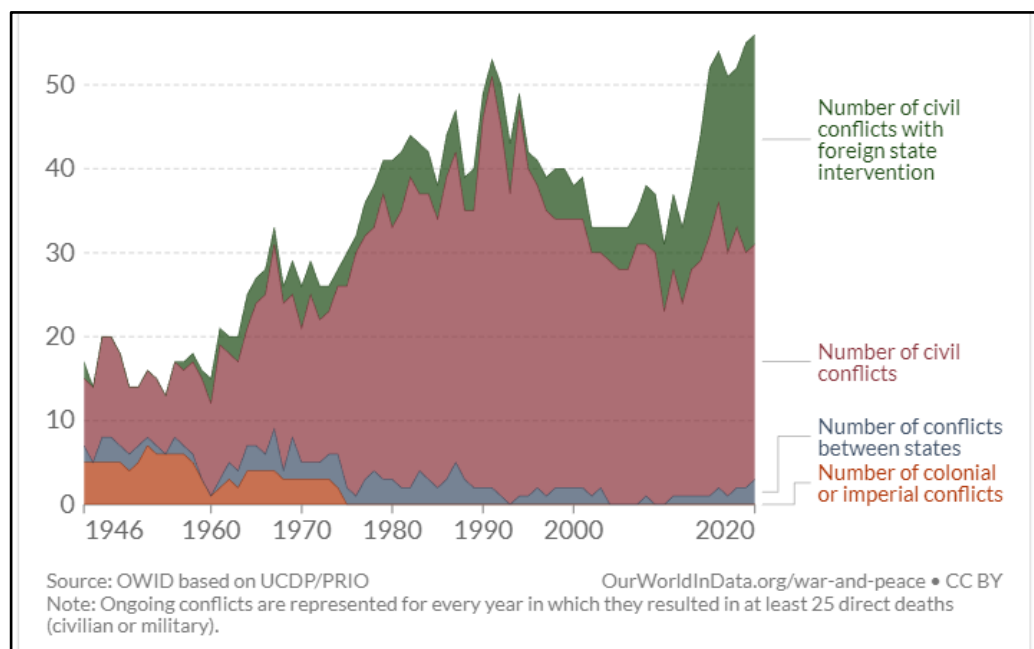
Figure 2: Number of active state-based conflicts, 1946-2020[1]

In general, it is difficult to predict how long a civil war will last or when and how it will end. If a conflict results in a military defeat, peace treaty, or armistice, it is easy to predict the end date of a civil war, but it is often a challenge to date the end of a war as the above-mentioned events are not so common during civil wars (Collier, Hoeffler, & Söderbom, 2004). In interstate wars, the parties commonly withdraw after a defeat or victory, while in civil wars, the possibility of reconciliation is more difficult as the parties that had fought and killed each other will eventually live and work together within the same society and government after the conflict stops (Mason, 2009). According to the common view, it is thought that a government or rebel victory will contribute more to the end of a civil war, rather than a negotiated solution (Fearon & Laitin, 2008). Fearon and Laitin

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[1] https://ourworldindata.org/war-and-peace, 19.11.2022

argue that even when attempts are made to negotiate between parties in civil wars, negotiations to end a conflict often fail over issues related to political power-sharing, mutual disarmament, and military integration; these situations often lead to the collapse of negotiations and, thus, to an extension of war.

1.2 THE MOST CONFLICT-PRONE REGION: MIDDLE EAST

One of the best ways to learn geography is to study and observe international crises (Davison, 1960). When the word "crisis" is mentioned, the Middle East region is often one the first places that comes to people's minds. Although there are differing ideas about the borders of the Middle East, Keddie (1973) describes the geography of the region as including Anatolia and the predominantly Muslim countries – from Morocco to Afghanistan (Keddie, 1973). It is difficult to decide on an agreed-upon and common definition, but the Middle East was considered "the area lying between and including Libya on the west and Pakistan on the east and Turkey on the north and the Arabian Peninsula to the south, plus the Sudan and Ethiopia" by American officials in the past (Davison, 1960). However, today, the Middle East has more of a geopolitical meaning rather than a geographical one. In Dictionary.com, the Middle East is described as the "cradle of the Western Civilization" because it is home to many different civilizations and because the region is where major religions emerged (Dictionary.com, n.d.). The Middle East is often a place about which metaphors are developed by the West to emphasize an "us and them" distinction. Undoubtedly, the basis of this distinction is primarily due to the region's predominant religion (Islam). For example, "rogue states", "axis of evil", and "Shiite crescent" are expressions sometimes used by Western officials to refer to several of the region's countries, such as Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon.

Davison considers places like Baghdad, Cyprus, Lebanon, Algeria, and Suez, which he defines as crisis centres, as the Middle East in essence. Zulfqar (2018), on the other hand, asserts that the Middle Eastern regions are examples of "shatterbelts", which point to geographical locales besieged by local conflicts within or between states and involving the participation of competing great powers since the Middle East is more "conflict-prone" than other regions (Zulfqar, 2018). Keddie (1973) emphasizes the religious structure of the region and states that it covers an area where Muslims live in large numbers, stretching from Morocco to Afghanistan (Keddie, 1973). Based on these

definitions, the Middle East region stands out because of its "conflict" and "Muslim" identity.

No matter how the Middle East region is defined, it undoubtedly occupies a very important place in world history. As the Middle East is made up of the holy lands, where civilizations and three major religions emerged, the region is strategically important, and, according to some, it is the heart of civilization because of this. According to others, while the region is a centre of wealth in terms of its rich underground resources, it is also resonant of poverty; while it is a symbol of peace for some, it is a region where endless wars and conflicts take or have taken place according to others (Çınar & Çukur, 2020). In 1950, the then Prime Minister of Turkey, Adnan Menderes, in his speech at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, stated that the Middle East countries are of great importance for the security of the world (Albayrak, 2005); he emphasized that world peace depends on what happens in the Middle East. In 2021, the Turkish newspaper, the Daily Sabah, published the headline "Peace in Middle East, Peace in The World" to emphasize the key position and importance of the region (Czarnecki, 2021). Similarly, Sarker refers to the French writer Arthur De Gobineau's statement, "The Middle East is a delicious meat, but it poisons those who eat it" in a 2014 article (Sarker, 2014). What happens in the Middle East today practically justifies this phrase in terms of the region's influence and importance in determining the world's political agenda. The Middle East has been the scene of wars, social upheavals, and conflicts in almost every historical period.

While the conflicts in the Middle East have been going on for decades, the main source of these clashes can be traced back to the last years of Ottoman rule in the region, when its borders were reshaped artificially after World War I (Turan, 2017). Indeed, Middle Eastern lands were divided between England and France through both secret and open agreements following the Great War. In this period, as Jewish immigration to Palestinian lands caused reactions among the Arabs, the first conflicts between the two groups began (Süer & Atmaca, 2007). After the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, five Arab states (Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq) carried out their first attacks against Israel in the same year (Süer & Atmaca, 2007). The refugee problem after the war and the conflicts in the region because of the Cold War continued until the 1980s. The Lebanese Civil War, which started in 1975, turned into a religious and sectarian conflict triggered

by both domestic and regional factors and continued until 1990 (Makdisi & Sadaka, 2005). The region has been in constant conflict since then, with the war between Iran and Iraq between 1980–1988 and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

Unquestionably, the most important turning point that shaped the region's dynamics was the 9/11 attacks of 2001. As Dittmer and Doods have noted, the effect of the geopolitical discourse became more important after the 9/11 attacks in terms of feeding fear within the public sphere via "political discourse and mediated imaginaries" (Christensen, 2013). In fact, after the attacks, the Western bloc, led by the US, declared a "war on terror" against extremists. The main sources of terrorism were predominantly seen as Muslim countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon. Thus, the Middle East has become much more open to foreign interventions due to the "fight against terrorism". The most important foreign intervention that changed the fate of countries in the Middle Eastern region and that triggered many new developments in that geographic area was the invasion of Iraq by the US.
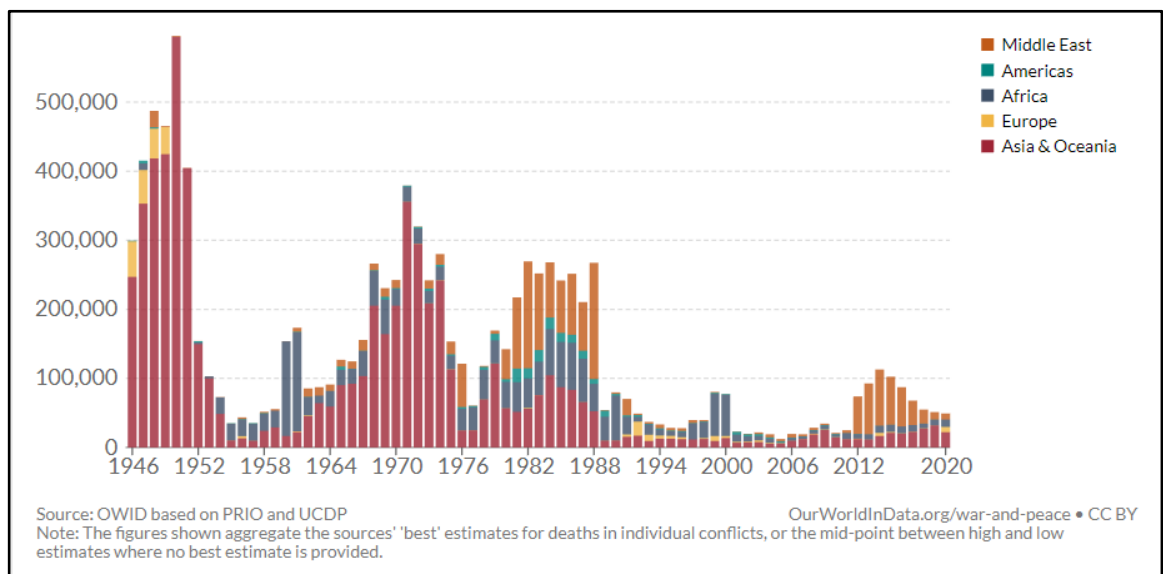
Figure 3: Deaths in state-based conflicts, by world region[2]

The years shown in Figure 3 show the distinct periods in which war-related deaths increased worldwide, including during the Korean War (early 1950s), the Vietnam War (around 1970), and the Iran-Iraq and Afghan wars (1980s). The recent conflicts in the

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[2]https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/battle-related-deaths-in-state-based-conflicts-since-1946-by-world-region, 19.11.2022

Middle East, especially those happening in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, have also caused an increase in war-related fatalities (Roser, Hasell, Herre, & Macdonald, 2016).

In 2003, Iraq was invaded by the US, and the invasion caused radical movements to gain ground in the Middle East (Orhan, 2014). The collapse of the strong central authority that had dominated the country for such a long time created a power vacuum in Iraq, and this power vacuum attempted to be filled by many radical organizations such as Al-Qaeda (Orhan, 2014). Shiite-Sunni polarization also deepened in the region, and this led to new conflict dynamics (Orhan, 2014). The invasion also fundamentally transformed various alliances among Arabs and in the geopolitics of the Middle East overall (Salloukh, 2013). Following this, the region was geopolitically divided into "moderate" pro-American states (Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates) and "radical" states and entities that opposed the US (mainly Iran and its allies: Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad) (Salloukh, 2013). In this way, a "New Cold War" has gradually developed among the Middle Eastern countries (Santini, 2017). Along with this regional change, the 2000s witnessed large-scale civil wars in countries such as Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Yemen. The last of these, and perhaps one of the most important in terms of its consequences, is the political and social phenomenon called the "Arab Spring" of 2010. However, this event and what individuals experienced during the changes are reminiscent of a long, cold, and dark winter season in the region rather than of warm spring weather.

In 2010, the civil demonstrations that started in the Middle East spread to practically the entire region in a short time and led to the dissolution of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. The primary reasons for the uprisings are listed by Demir and Rijnoveanu as stemming from "dictatorial authorities, deficiency of democratic foundations, outrageous inequalities, dishonesty, unjust sharing of economic sources, poverty, nepotism and ill-treatment of public resources by state authorities" (Demir & Rijnoveanu, 2013). As Dalacoura (2012) stated, "an explosive mix of socio-economic problems and widespread and deepening political grievances constituted a common causal thread behind all the uprisings" (Dalacoura, 2012). Therefore, the main goal of these movements was to defeat dictatorial regimes and introduce democratic values (Sarker, 2014). At the same time, these uprisings triggered regional and global rivalries in the region (Aras & Kardaş, 2021). Conflicts stemming from similar circumstances have

developed in Syria, and there is an almost "endless" civil war in the country today. According to Tan and Perudin (2019), compared to other Arab uprisings, the Syrian uprising transformed into a "prolonged quagmire of a civil war" (Tan & Perudin, 2019) in a very short time. In this respect, the conflict in Syria, which started as a civil war, has turned into an endless civil and proxy war because of the interventions of regional and global powers. In the next section, the Syrian Civil War will be discussed in detail.

CHAPTER 2

UNDERSTANDING THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

The Syrian Civil War, which is now nearly a decade long, has many variables in terms of causes and results, and its sphere of influence is extensive. The war has had political but also economic, social, military, humanitarian, sectarian, regional, and global effects, both in terms of its emergence and its consequences. Due to the diversity of regional and global actors involved in Syria, the existence of different and irreconcilable interests has made the war increasingly complex. The Syrian war, which started as a multi-faction, civil conflict, has turned into a multi-actor proxy war with no discernible end in sight.

In this section, to better understand the situation in Syria and the reasons for the ongoing war, the process leading to the Syrian Civil War will first be discussed from a historical perspective. The structure of the Syrian community and its economic and political structure will also be briefly mentioned. The conflicts that started in 2011 will then be explained in chronological order, and the processes related to regional and global actor involvement in the war will be focused on. Along with key turning points, the point Syria has reached today and the ongoing process the country is experiencing in terms of this multi-actor and multi-dimensional conflict will be addressed. Based on the fact that foreign interventions cause the prolongation of civil wars, the reason for the continuation of the Syrian war for more than a decade will be explained as originating from and in Syria itself; however, many of the causes are regional and international, as well.

2.1 THE ROAD TO THE CIVIL WAR IN SYRIA

"Young Country in an Ancient Land"

Christopher Phillips

Syria, located at the intersection of the Middle East, the Mediterranean region, and Africa, has great historical and geographical significance. The country shares territory with Turkey in the north and is bordered by Iraq in the east; Jordan and Israel lie to its south, and Lebanon is located to its west. The total area of the country is 185,180 km² (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2008). Syria is considered a "window on the world" as it has a 193-km border with the Mediterranean in the west

(Phillips D. A., 2010). Because of its location, Syria is strategically important. Those in control of this Middle Eastern territory control a vital gateway of passage between continents (Phillips D. A., 2010). This geographic location produces problems as well as power. Syrian President Bashar Assad put it this way:

> This is the Middle East, where every week you have something new; so whatever you talk about this week will not be valuable next week. Syria is geographically and politically in the middle of the Middle East. That is why we are in contact with most of the problems forever, let us say, whether directly or indirectly (Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, 2011).

Located in the middle of this complex geography, Syria has a very mixed social structure. According to World Bank population data, 21.3 million people resided in Syria before the Civil War, but only 17.5 million people lived there in 2020 (The World Bank, n.d.).


Figure 4: Map of Syria[3]

Among the 21.3 million people living there before the war, many were from different ethnic groups living together within the country's territory: approximately 12% of Syrian society was Alawite and 64% were Sunni Muslims, while 9% were Christians, 3% Druze,

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[3]Among the Ruins: Syria Past and Present, Christian C. Sahner (2014)

and 1% Shia (Phillips C. , 2015). Before the war, besides the religious divisions, Syrian society was also divided into four major ethnic groups: Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, and Armenians (Library of Congress of the USA, 2005). Administratively, the country was separated into "14 mohafazats (governorates)" (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2008) and Kurds, the largest minority group, lived in the northern part of the country. Arab Alevis, also known as Nusayris, mostly lived in the western parts of the country, while Turkmens were dispersed in the northern and western parts of the country.
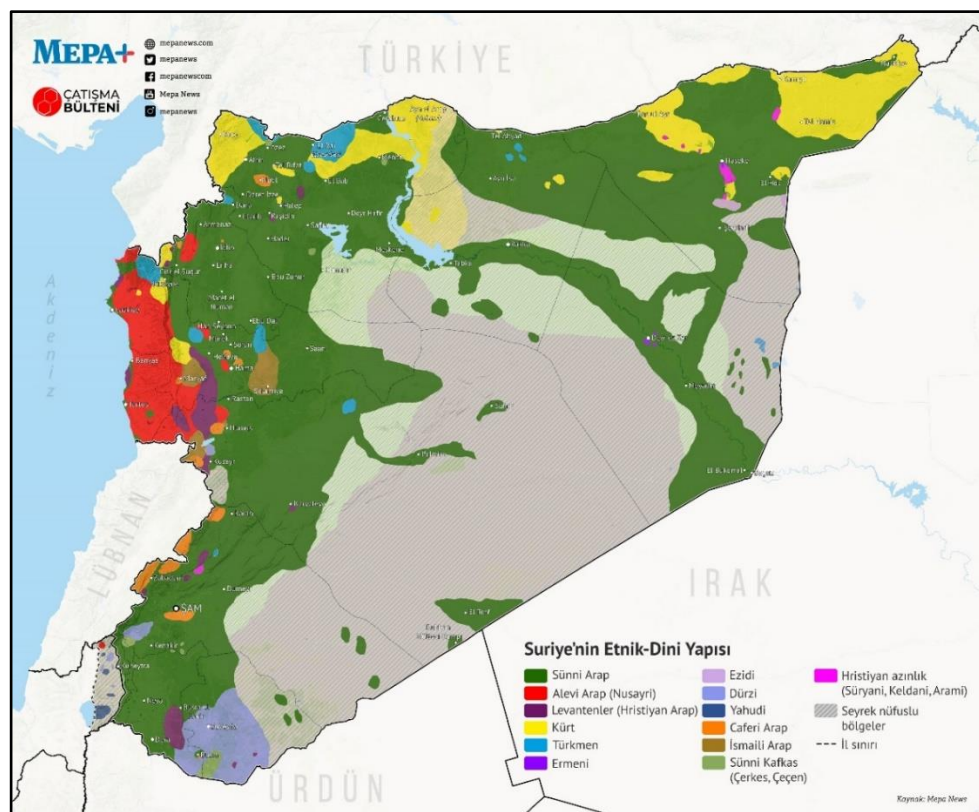
Figure 5: Ethnic and religious make-up of Syria[4]

The land encompassing modern Syria is rich in history and has been host to some of the world's oldest civilizations; it has always had fertile soil, and important trade routes have crisscrossed the area for millennia. Various empires, from the Arabs and Romans to the Byzantines, Turks, and Ottomans, have conquered and administered Syrian lands at different times. For instance, the Syrian capital, Damascus, is the world's oldest urban place (Phillips D. A., 2010). In the 16th century, Syria was under the administration of

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[4]https://www.mepanews.com/syria-ethnic-and-religious-map-31149h.htm, 06.02.2022

the Ottoman Empire. The common view is that the country was relatively stable under Ottoman rule until the beginning of the 20th century. During this period, the interests of Britain and France in the Middle East increased. In 1916, with the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement, Syria was handed over to France and ruled under French mandate from 1920 to 1946. Accordingly, Syria is portrayed by Phillips (2015) as an "artificial state", formed by France and Britain based on ethnic and sectarian division after World War I (Phillips C., 2015).

Following its independence, the country struggled with political, economic, and social problems. Between 1949 and 1970, Syria was considered one of the most inconsistent and unpredictable countries in world politics (Rubin, 2007). From independence to 1970, when Hafez Al-Assad came to power, the average life expectancy of governments in Syria was less than one year (Karim & Islam, 2016). Rubin states that because of the many coup attempts taking place during that period, an American diplomat once said that Syria showed "stability of instability". In 1963, The Arab Socialist Resurrection (Baath) Party, with its secular, socialist, and Arab nationalist orientation, came to the power (Library of Congress of the USA, 2005). The "Resurrection" in the party's name referred to the need to get rid of colonial rule (Rabil, 2006).

Today, the country is governed by the Baath Party, and its power and position in Syria are quite significant; the party is emphasized as the leading party in state and society according to the Syrian Constitution (Koyuncu, 2018). Although the state is called a "republic" in the constitution, "in reality, Syria is an authoritarian, military-dominated regime where opposition to the president is not tolerated" (Library of Congress of the USA, 2005). In the past, the Syrian people's rights and freedoms were limited because the struggle for Arab nationalism and opposition to imperialism and Zionism could only be possible through strict measures and systematic mobilization provided by the dictatorial system (Rubin, 2007). As a result of the dictatorial practices of the Baath Party, the country became stable after several coups and other forms of disorder and evolved into a regional player under Hafez al-Assad (Phillips D. A., 2010).

During the Cold War, Syria was under the influence of the Soviet Union (Library of Congress of the USA, 2005), and there was an enmity against the West during this period. One of the main reasons for this was the Israeli issue (Phillips D. A., 2010). Although it

wanted to promote Arab unity in the 1970s, the Syrian regime's main goal in the 1980s was to preserve its power (Rubin, 2007). This was directly related to maintaining the power of the Baath Party, much like a state party model, and preserving this power necessitated complete control of Syrian society (Rabil, 2006). Rubin quotes Syrian opposition film director Omar Amiralay, who was arrested in 2006, about the Baath Party:

> The only civil society practicing politics, culture, social activities, is the Baath Party. You have to join the party to have any opportunities (Rubin, 2007)

For instance, party membership could improve one's career, and the scores of students who joined the party could more easily enter prestigious universities (Rubin, 2007). The Baath Party was also a great supporter of Arab nationalism, which promotes Arab literature and art – and highlights Arab history, the Palestinian issue, socialism, and opposition to Western imperialism (Britannica, n.d.). Syria is considered a "bellwether" of Arab nationalism in terms of its strategic location between Egypt and Iraq, which are considered bases of Arab power and nationalism; Syria is also perceived as being the "heartland of Arab nationalism" (Demir & Rijnoveanu, 2013). Indeed, Koyuncu (2018) states that the biggest goal of the Baathists in Syria was to form the first core of the Arab League by uniting Egypt and Syria. Although this dream became a reality in 1958, it did not last long. In 1961, the United Arab Republic dissolved. However, Hafez al-Assad, who built his own "presidential monarchy" in Syria, appointed people he trusted from within his family, tribe, and the Alawite community to important positions in the state apparatus, including in the ministries of security and defence (Hinnebusch, 2019).

The Syrian economy has mainly been based on agriculture and petroleum, which constitute half of the country's gross domestic product (Phillips D. A., 2010). Although oil is an important source of income, Syria lags behind regional countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran in terms of oil reserves (BBC News, 2019). As a way to contribute to the prosperity of the country, the Baath Party during Hafez Al-Assad's rule supported the country's farmers economically and invested in infrastructure projects within Syria (Phillips C. , 2016). Additionally, Syria which is a "rentier state with a socialist system", managed the economy according to its functional sectors (Rabil, 2006). For instance, in terms of their specific functional aims, The Peasant Union represented farmers and agricultural workers; public sector workers were represented by trade unions (Rabil, 2006). Moreover, during the 1970s and 1980s, Syria as a rentier state received income

from oil, financial assistance from the Gulf states, and funds from the plundering of the Lebanese economy (Baczko, Dorronsoro, & Quesnay, 2017). However, in the 1980s a new bourgeois class emerged that gained its economic power not from production but from its links to the state bureaucracy (Baczko, Dorronsoro, & Quesnay, 2017). Accordingly, supporting the regime was practically a prerequisite for enriching oneself and having a prosperous life. Nevertheless, in the 1990s and 2000s, the state allowed the development of the private sector, albeit this was done in a limited manner (Phillips D. A., 2010).

By 2000, Hafez Assad's health had been deteriorating; he died on June 10, 2000, on a summer day at the age of 69. Assad had ruled the country for more than 30 years (Phillips C. , 2016). Although he wanted his eldest son Bassel to be his successor, he was succeeded by his younger son Bashar as Bassel had died in an unexpected car accident in 1994. The minimum age requirement to be elected president in Syria, which was 40 until 2000, was reduced to 34 with a constitutional amendment made especially for Bashar Assad to become president (Koyuncu, 2018). The first two years of Bashar Assad's rule, starting from 2000, are characterized by his determination to maintain the support of the old guard, gradually modernize the country, and reform the economy (Research, Development and Statistics (RDS) Home Office, 2007). The BBC reported that Assad gave hints that a new era of "openness" and "reform" was imminent in his inauguration speech (Muir, 2010). Interestingly, this new period was called the "Damascus Spring":

> The "Damascus Spring" is the name given to period of intense opposition activism and tentative political liberalization that followed the death of Hafez al-Assad in the year 2000. It was characterized by demands for political, legal, and economic reforms, some of which were tentatively introduced before being withdrawn (Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012).

Thus, during the first years of his rule, Assad instigated specific changes in the security, military, political and economic realms of government to bring new life to the old bureaucracy; he formed and promoted elites that were close to him politically, ideologically, and personally (Zisser, 2003) because, according to him, the way to keep power was to cast out the former Sunni barons of his father's time and weaken the network between these individuals and the Sunni sub-elites (Hinnebusch, 2019). Assad worked towards initiating many changes and innovations in the country with the advent of the "Damascus Spring" in the first months he took office. He issued a general amnesty

for the release of political criminals in November 2000 (Zisser, 2003). Many oppositional and highly critical political groups were founded at this time; these were "the Kawakibi Forum, the Atassi Forum and the National Dialogue Forum"(Anderson, 2016). However, these groups did not last long and were banned or dissolved. For the sake of "national unity" and "stability", the opposition movement as a whole was suppressed (Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012). In other words, the Assad period was the modernization of authoritarianism (Perthes, 2004).

In 2003, the US invaded Iraq as part of its fight against terrorism. Therefore, Syria was caught between two hostile occupying powers: Israel and America (Anderson, 2016). Syria's generous hosting of refugees from Iraq resulted in US accusations about supporting the Iraqi resistance and, later, sanctions (Anderson, 2016). By 2005, an important turning point was taking place in Syria's history. After the civil war in Lebanon, the Syrian army, which had been in the country since 1976, decided to withdraw; the anti-Syrian demonstrations that started in Beirut after the death of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in a bomb attack in the city on February 14, 2005, played an important role in the withdrawal (Phillips C. , 2016). Philips (2016) states that after Hariri's death, the then American President George W. Bush's call to the international community to boycott Syria diplomatically and isolate it followed Assad's declaration that instead of being a so-called "Axis of Evil", Syria was an "Axis of Resistance" against the US and Israel.

Demir and Rijnoveanu note that the Syrian President implemented neo-liberal policies that further aggravated people's living conditions (Demir & Rijnoveanu, 2013). This economic liberalization did not go beyond benefitting elites and their collaborators (BBC News, 2020). Indeed, when the Syrian war started in 2011, per capita income (Gross National Income (GNI)) in the country was around 5,600 dollars (World Bank, 2019). Although it was declared to be 10% by official sources, unemployment among young people was very common and estimated to be around 20% by outside sources (Phillips C. , 2016). Phillips asserts that until 2010, 30% of Syrian society lived under the poverty line and 11% remained under the subsistence level.

In October 2005, the "Damascus Declaration", a call for new democratic reforms, was released by the Syrian opposition (Anderson, 2016); it directed international pressure

against the Assad administration and was an opportunity to voice concerns at the time because of the Hariri assassination (Acar, 2013). The declaration called for the dissolution of the emergency law (that lasted from 1963 to 2011) and other political prohibitions (Zoepf, 2005). In 2005, an academic at Damascus University shared the following about the Declaration: "the declaration was a response to these pressures, an effort on the part of Syrian opposition groups to put aside their differences and to demonstrate to the world that a coherent alternative to the Assad regime is emerging inside Syria" (Zoepf, 2005). However, Anderson (2016) indicates that the Declaration caused the secular opposition to be viewed as powerless by the US, and the suppression of sectarian Islamists caused it to shape the tactics and policies of the regime (Anderson, 2016). In fact, the opposition was either imprisoned or forced to flee the country by Assad's administration; the regime did not allow the opposition to rise again, freedom of press and expression were severely restricted, and human rights violations occurred (Acar, 2013).

Despite all of this, the most popular Arab leader in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates was President Assad, according to a 2009 US-based public opinion poll (Albawaba News, 2009). However, Assad could not prevent the demonstrations that began in the region in 2010 from happening in the country. The Syrian government is still trying to gain the upper hand after the demonstrations that started in the city of Daraa in March 2010. Considering the division in the country's economic, political, and social structures, it can be said that the Syrian Civil War is a multidimensional war characterized by sectarian divisions and socio-economic problems, as well as class conflict between wealthy ruling elites and Sunni Arabs (Abhyankar, 2020).

The economic, political, and social structure of Syria was discussed in this section to better understand some of the reasons why the Syrian Civil War has continued for so many years. In the next part of the thesis, the war's beginnings until events in 2020 will be discussed, together with factors such as important turning points, pauses in the war, and parties involved in the fighting. The reasons why the war continues today, despite being in its 12th year, will also be discussed from in terms of the different actors involved.

2.2 THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR (2011 TO 2020)

"Bread, Freedom and Dignity"

The "Arab Spring" wave of demonstrations, which started in Tunisia in 2011, spread throughout the Middle East and in North African countries such as Algeria, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen in a very short time. In 2011, Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak, who had been in power for 30 years, was overthrown. The same year, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown and brutally murdered. The revolutions that had started with popular movements caused cold winter winds to blow in the region, and these also reached Syria in March 2011. Two female doctors in Deraa were arrested and punished after having a conversation that included the phrase, "Hosni Mubarak has fallen, the same to ours...". They were unaware that they were being listened to by Syrian intelligence, and their arrest led to the start of civil demonstrations in the same city (Gazete Vatan, 2013).

Reacting to these arrests, a group of high school students wrote on a school wall the words "next is your turn, doctor" and "down with the regime", phrases they had heard in an Al-Jazeera broadcast during the protests in Egypt (Phillips C. , 2016). Later, the families of the arrested – and tortured – youths began peacefully protesting for the release of their children. On March 30, in his speech to parliament, Assad blamed foreign powers, specifically the US and Israel, for the conflicts, stating that "Daraa is on the frontline with the Israeli enemy" (Phillips C. , 2016).

By mid-March, demonstrations had also broken out in Damascus and other cities (Homs, Banias, Latakia, Qamishli, Tartous, Raqqa, Idlib, Deir-ez-Zor, Hama). Although the demonstrations had economic and political motives, there were also local reasons that varied according to the region (Phillips C. , 2016). For example, in the Sunni city of Banias, the government's secular policies prohibiting female teachers from covering their faces with veils were protested, while in Homs this was perceived as a privilege among Alawites (Phillips C. , 2016). The security forces intervened very harshly in the demonstrations, which were getting increasingly violent, and, as a result, many people died. The first turning point in the anti-government demonstrations was the establishment of the "Free Syrian Army (FSA)" in July 2011 by a group of Syrian military officers

(Karim & Islam, 2016). A month later, The Syrian National Council (SNC), which was backed by the Muslim Brotherhood, was formed in Turkey as an anti-government group (Karim & Islam, 2016). These two "umbrella opposition groups" were the political and armed wings of oppositional groups in Syria (Humud C. E., 2021). Therefore, the political wing of the opposition had to meet in Turkey and Qatar (BBC News, 2021). In the same month, the then-Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, went to Damascus to meet with the Assad administration, which had very close relations with Ankara up until the uprisings began (BBC News, 2021). It was the last high-level diplomatic meeting between officials of Turkey and Syria. Concurrently, Syria's diplomatic activity continued intensively. President Barack Obama of the US called for Bashar Assad to resign (Humud & Blanchard, 2020).

In September 2011, the Turkish Prime Minister at the time, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was on his way to Egypt, described Damascus as "throwing bullets at the people, raiding the cities with tanks and artillery" and later added, "The Syrian people do not believe in Assad right now; neither do we" (BBC News, 2021). Subsequently, all diplomatic ties with Syria were cut off. Following this, Turkey, together with its western allies, began to openly support opposition groups to ensure regime change in Syria (Manhoff, N.D). To counter western sanctions, Assad released radical Islamists from prisons. Together with jihadists from Iraq, however, they joined the side of the opposition (BBC News, 2021). In January 2012, Al-Nusra was established as the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda (Karim & Islam, 2016). Demonstrations spread to more parts of the country, and the number of people taking to the streets to demand reform gradually increased. The clashes intensified when the Assad regime, calling those who demanded a change of power "terrorists" in 2012, increased its attacks. The government-sponsored armed forces, including Shabiha and Mukhabarat, and these groups contributed to an increase in violence (Phillips C. , 2016). Meanwhile, several steps were taken by the international community to find solutions to the conflict.

In February 2012, Kofi Annan was appointed as the United Nations (UN) Arab League Joint Special Representative for Syria (Karim & Islam, 2016). The situation in Syria was declared a civil war by the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross for the first time in 2012 (Karim & Islam, 2016). In June 2012, Assad accepted that "they live in state of war" but avoided mention of the term "civil war" to not give legitimacy to the

country's opposition groups (Phillips C. , 2016). In the same month, the US and Russia, together with other major powers (except Iran, which was excluded because of its opposition to the US), met in Geneva to find a political solution to the conflict in Syria (BBC News, 2014). A road map, called the Geneva Communique, was created for Syria's political transition (Atassi, 2014). The People's Defence Units (YPG) was established in July 2012 after the Assad regime withdrew, without fighting or conflict, from Kurdish-populated areas. Assad initiated this withdrawal as a move against Turkey, which was now opposed to his regime.
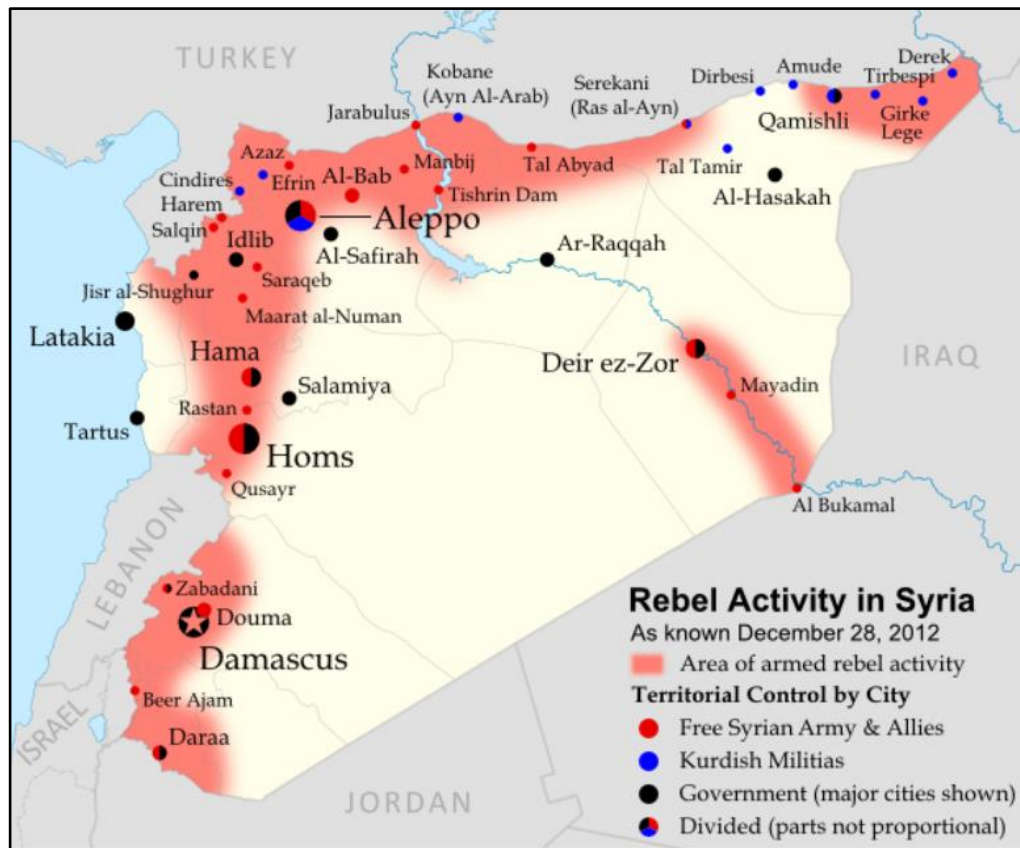
Figure 6: Armed groups in Syria in December 2012[5]

In March 2013, the city of Raqqah was captured by opposition groups, and the Assad regime received new regional and international support from Iran, Lebanon, and Russia); subsequently, the US, Turkey, and other western allies extended their support to opposition groups (Humud C. E., 2021). Because Iran did not want to lose its significant Syrian ally in the region, it provided weapons and training/command support to Assad's

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[5]https://www.polgeonow.com/2012/12/syria-uprising-map-december-2012.html, 26.03.2022

regime through the Iranian militia and the Quds Force (BBC News, 2021). The following month, the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) was established under the leadership of Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi. In August, the situation worsened: chemical weapons were used by the regime in Ghouta, in the eastern region of Damascus. This was a turning point in the war and was highlighted in parts of a speech by President Barack Obama in 2012: "Use of chemical or biological weapon is a red line" (BBC News, 2021). The US and 10 other countries made a joint statement to express a strong international response to the Syrian regime's actions, but Russian President Vladimir Putin reemphasized his opposition to the overthrow of Bashar Assad (Karim & Islam, 2016). In November, the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, asked for a meeting in Geneva to talk about peace between the opposition and the Assad regime (Atassi, 2014). It was agreed to by the Syrian government under the condition that the opposition's demand that Assad steps down and their statement that whoever supported Assad's overthrown should "wake up from their dreams" be ignored (Atassi, 2014).

In January 2014, ISIL seized Raqqah from opposition groups and declared it the capital of the Caliphate (BBC News, 2021). Organizations such as Ahrar al-Sham and Al Nusra, which were driven out of Raqqa, mostly returned to Idlib. Therefore, the number of radical groups on or near the Turkish border increased (BBC News, 2021). ISIL then changed its name to the Islamic State (IS) and thousands of foreign fighters from all over the world joined the group (Humud C. E., 2021). Afterwards, IS grew stronger and carried out attacks beyond Syria; it carried out large-scale attacks in different parts of the world, especially in Europe and Turkey. Thousands of people died in these attacks at different times and in different places. In July, Resolution 2165 was adopted by the UN Security Council to authorize "cross border aid" to areas where the opposition still held territory (Humud C. E., 2021). Two months later, the US initiated air strikes in Syria to prevent IS from gaining ground in Syrian lands used as a base for its operations in nearby Iraq (Humud & Blanchard, 2020). In October, Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve was established by the US State Department to regulate continuing military actions against the increasing threat posed by IS in Syria and Iraq (Humud & Blanchard, 2020). In particular, the US was aiming to stop the advance of IS in YPG-controlled regions. The US also announced that it would provide military aid to the YPG. This group,

the first to resist and fight IS, which had besieged Kobani, then rapidly advanced along the Turkish border and moved south, capturing Raqqa (BBC News, 2021).

In 2015, one of the most important turning points of the Syrian Civil War was the involvement of Russia in the war; Russia was, in effect, supporting the Syrian regime. In September of that year, Russia initiated an air strike against opposition groups and IS. After this, Federica Mogherini, the European Union (EU)'s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, described Russia's role in the war as a "game-changer". Putin defended Russia's air strikes, describing them as "stabilizing the legitimate authority of Syrian President Bashar Assad" (BBC News, 2015). The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were established to compete against IS, with the help of the YPG (Humud C. E., 2021). In November 2015, the International Syria Support Group meeting was held in Vienna with the participation of 24 representatives from 20 countries, including Iran – for the very first time (Karim & Islam, 2016). However, no solution for the conflict came out of that meeting either. In the summer of 2016, the Turkish government launched the Euphrates Shield Operation to stop YPG advances near its border. In December, Aleppo was captured by Syrian regime forces (Humud C. E., 2021). In an interview with a Russian journalist, Assad answered, "taking back Aleppo" when asked about the turning point of the war (BBC News, 2021).

In January 2017, the Astana Peace Process was launched by Turkey, Russia, and Iran to stop the conflict between the Syrian government and its opposition. Four "de-escalation zones" were established to provide peace in the regions. These four zones included: "(1) the Idlib province, (2) the parts of Hama, Homs, and Aleppo provinces, (3) the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta, (4) areas of Daraa, Suwayda, and Quneitra provinces" (Russia Monitor, 2018). Accordingly, "security zones" would be formed around them, with control points and monitoring centres that would be collectively staffed by military forces from guarantor states (France 24, 2018). However, within a short time, three of the de-escalation zones were taken by Syrian regime forces, with the exception of the Idlib region (France 24, 2018).
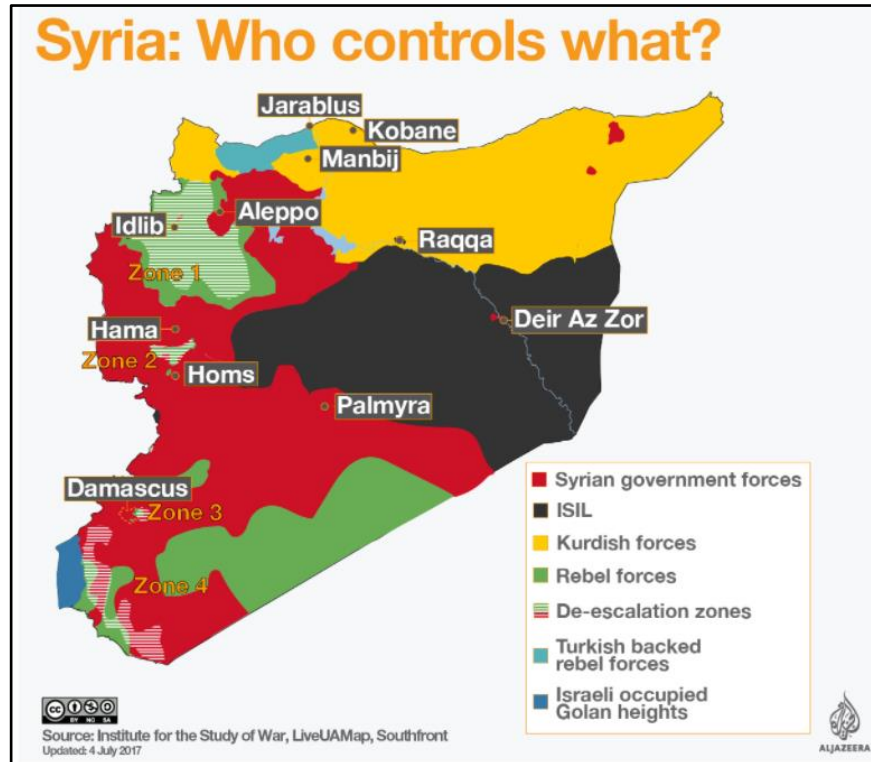
Figure 7: De-escalation zones, 2018[6]

In October 2017, the IS capital of Raqqah was captured by the US-backed SDF (Humud C. E., 2021). At the beginning of 2018, Turkey initiated its second military operation, called the Olive Branch Operation, and targeted the PYD/PKK and IS in Syria. In April, after Syrian government forces used chemical gas in Douma, missile attacks were carried out by Britain, France, and the US on chemical weapons depots (Humud C. E., 2021). Hence, four of the UN Security Council's five permanent members were now directly participating in the Syrian war (Abhyankar, 2020). At the beginning of 2018, the Syrian Congress of National Dialogue was held in Sochi; there, the decision was made to establish a Constitutional Committee that would consist of Syrian government officials, representatives from opposition groups, Syrian experts, civil society members, tribal leaders, women, and various independent actors (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). During that year, the Syrian regime continued to expand its control of other areas. The provinces in the south of the country and the capital Damascus were completely under the control of the regime in 2018 (Anadolu Agency, 2021). Turkey and Russia signed the Sochi Memorandum, maintaining the ceasefire in Idlib. However,

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[6]https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/7/4/syrias-de-escalation-zones-explained, 28.03.2022

violations by the regime did not decrease. Since the signing of Sochi Agreement, a total of 2,000 civilians have died in attacks carried out by the regime and its supporters in Idlib (Anadolu Agency, 2021).

In October 2019, American military forces started to withdraw from Syria. The Turkish Armed Forces, together with the Syrian National Army, launched the Peace Spring Operation to establish a "safe zone" against the PKK/YPG and IS in northern Syria (Anadolu Agency, 2021). IS's leader, Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi, was killed by US military forces (Humud C. E., 2021). At the end of the year, regime forces launched military attacks into Idlib "de-escalation zone" (Anadolu Agency, 2021). With the involvement of Russia, the fighting in Idlib between (Turkish-backed) Syrian opposition groups and the (Russia and Iran-backed) Syrian regime resulted in the deaths of a number of Turkish soldiers (Humud C. E., 2021). Turkey and Russia then signed a ceasefire agreement in March (Humud C. E., 2021). However, by that time, many had been killed and millions displaced due to the conflict in Syria. Although the course of the war seems to have turned in favour of the Assad regime, there are still oppositional groups in the country, and the deadlock continues.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, an estimated 6.7 million people had been internally displaced within the country up to 2020 (UNHCR, 2020). Additionally, it is estimated that at least 350,000 civilians have died so far during the war. With 6.7 million people among the world's 82.4 million forcibly displaced people – of which 26.4 million are international refugees – Syria is in first place (UNHCR, 2020). For this reason, it can be said that the country has experienced the greatest humanitarian crisis since World War II. Because of the eruption of war, the Syrian economy has gradually deteriorated. More specifically, the Syrian currency lost two-thirds of its value in 2020 alone, causing high inflation, a shortage of necessities, and increasing poverty (Yacoubian, 2021). Assad and members of his regime were subjected to heavy political and economic sanctions by the west. Military conflicts took place in almost every part of the country, and these conflicts continue in the north. Although the international community is trying to find a solution to this multilateral, multidimensional war, there is a deadlock in Syria today. At this point, what makes the Syrian war different from other conflicts are the confrontations between so many different actors and the local, regional, and global elements involved, combined with the military and civilian factions that have

taken different sides in the war. The overall complexity and diversity previously-mentioned will determine the fate of the war.

In this regard, the Syrian Civil War is a significant example of a proxy war because of its complex and multidimensional state and the involvement of non-state actors in the warfare. Berti and Paris state that international reports often emphasize the sectarian aspect of the Syrian crisis, which is between the country's Sunni majority and Alawite minority (Berti & Paris, 2014). According to the authors, this sectarian division is also very important in terms of the regional aspect of the Syrian war. For example, the war has led to a wider "proxy war" between the Middle East's two major regional powers, Saudi Arabia, and Iran (Berti & Paris, 2014). For Karim and Islam, the Syrian war is a multidimensional, multilateral, and complex war. According to them;

> the crisis in Syria is partly a civil war between the government and opposition rebel forces; a religious war pitting President Assad's minority Alawite sect, aligned with Shiite fighters from Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon against Sunni rebel groups; and increasingly a proxy war featuring Russia and Iran against the United States (US) and its allies (Karim & Islam, 2016).
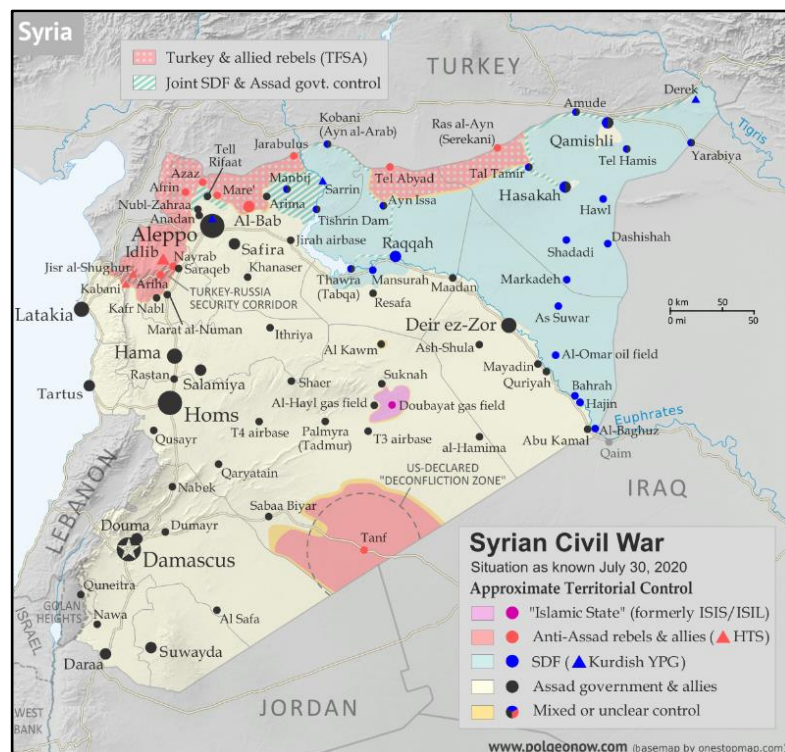

Figure 8: War in Syria in 2020[7]

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[7] https://www.polgeonow.com/2020/07/syria-controlled-areas-map-2020.html, 30.03.2022

2.3 THE SYRIAN WAR: IS IT AN ENDLESS WAR?

Technically, the term, "endless war" refers to the period certain wars last. Although not a new concept, it was used more frequently after the 9/11 attacks. According to David Sterman, a war is characterized as "endless" if it satisfies two conditions:

(1) when a belligerent adopts objectives while lacking the capability to achieve said objectives

(2) when the belligerent side is also not at risk of being defeated, despite failing to achieve its objectives (Sterman, 2021).

When we look at the warring parties in Syria today, it can be said that almost all of them have these two features to some extent. Regime forces led by Assad, the rebel groups, IS, forces affiliated with Kurdish groups, global powers, including Russia, the US, and the EU, and regional actors, including Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are all today participants in the Syrian war; many of their interests conflict with each other, and they all want to prevail. While the diversity of these actors results in conflicts of interest, the enemy is not the same; rather, it is constantly changing according to actors involved. This situation makes the Syrian war an endless war and a dystopia with each passing day. As Sterman (2021) states,

> Ending a war means bringing one's objectives in line with what is achievable and then achieving them. Substituting a tactical withdrawal or pause or a shift to air strikes while continuing to pursue the same objectives is not an end to war. It is important that those who talk about endless war not fall into the trap of assuming that troop withdrawals are permanent or that the return of troops constitutes a new war when it pursues the same objectives under the same authorizations that justified previous uses of force (Sterman, 2021).

According to studies investigating the effect of third-party intervention in a civil war on the overall duration of the fighting, conflicts in which foreign powers intervene tend to last longer than conflicts without any intervention because an intervention alters the balance of abilities needed to wage war, affecting the estimation of each actor's chances of victory (Regan P. M., 2000). As a multilateral, multi-factor war, the Syrian Civil War has been going on for more than a decade, and it seems that an end is not in sight because of its irreconcilable, complex, and multidimensional nature – both domestically and externally.

2.4 WHY HAS THE SYRIAN WAR LASTED MORE THAN A DECADE?

It is difficult to predict how long a civil war will last or when it will end because the duration may depend on many internal and external factors. The common view is that foreign interventions prolong the duration of civil wars. In this section, besides the regional and international interventions in the Syrian war, three factors arising from Syria's own internal dynamics will be discussed. Although these factors can be evaluated independently from each other, all are undoubtedly closely related to one another.

2.4.1 Syria and Regime Factor

After the conflicts started in 2011, the Syrian territory is still a conflict area for regime forces, non-state actors, and regional and global powers, and the war is now more than 10-years old. In the beginning, although the rebel groups appeared to be victorious against the Assad regime because of the west's support, the balance changed in favour of the regime because of the large-scale support of Iran and Russia to the Syrian army (Karim & Islam, 2016). Although control of areas in the country is constantly changing, today, the Syrian regime is dominant in most parts of Syria except in the north – and it is determined to continue the conflict. The effect of the regime's hold on the region of Damascus since the beginning of the war has had a great impact. Losing control of Damascus would deprive the Syrian regime of the solid base from which it can administer policies aimed at playing sides and pitting various social groups, regional factions, and ethnicities in Syria against each other – doing the same with various regional and international powers (Wakim, 2012). However, as stated in a 2015 BBC interview, Assad often repeats that he sees the fate of the regime as the fate of the entire country: "It was not about me to survive, it was about Syria" (Khaddour, 2015).

The Assad regime, indifferent to the military and diplomatic steps taken in the international arena to ensure security in Syria, states that "the main purpose of the government is to ensure security in every region of Syria" (BBC News, 2021). Today, Turkey and Western-backed opposition groups, mostly located in northern Syria, are often referred to as "invaders" and "terrorists" by the official Syrian news outlet, the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) (Syrian Arab News Agency, 2022). Opponents have not been able to form military and political unity among themselves and have remained divided due to various ideological, sectarian, and personal interests (Brom, Berti, & Heller, 2014). Affecting the divided structure of the opposition, the role of the Syrian

army is quite significant in the efforts of the Syrian regime to ensure security and re-establish its power. In an interview with Al-Jazeera in 2011, a citizen summarized the situation as follows:

> 'The army in Syria is the power structure,' he says. 'The armed forces would fight to an end. It would be a bloodbath, literally, because the army would fight to protect not only the institution of the army but the regime itself, because the army and the regime is one and the same' (Wikstrom, 2011).

Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, where the Arab Spring began, Syrian society has a diverse ethnic and sectarian social structure (Brom, Berti, & Heller, 2014). These unique features and ethnic and religious diversity geopolitically complicate the Syrian war. A small portion of Syrian society, mostly Alawites, support Assad and his regime, while the majority of the Sunni Muslim population generally support the opposition (Phillips C. , 2015). While the regime accuses opponents of being radical Islamists trying to persecute minority sects and secularists in Syria, the opposition, conversely, claims that the regime's rogue militia, the Shabiha, has deliberately incited sectarianism so that Assad could present himself as the defender of the majority (Phillips C. , 2015). This situation has further increased the interest of regional countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, which carry out sectarian policies in the region, towards the conflicts in Syria. Sectarian division has been manipulated by Saudi Arabia, and it has attempted to support its regional alliances and isolate Iran and its allies (Salloukh, 2013). For Iran, Syria serves as a corridor that enables it to reach Hezbollah and as a partner in its blocking of Israel. Mass killings by the Syrian regime and opposition forces have shattered the country's national unity and have turned Syria into a playground for larger geopolitical wars, such as Lebanon after 1976 (Salloukh, 2013). As the civil war in Syria drags on, radical Islamist groups have grown stronger (Brom, Berti, & Heller, 2014). The fact that the Syrian regime sees itself as the protector of the Syrian state against jihadist groups makes it impossible to find a solution to the crisis (Khaddour, 2015).

The economic, political, and military support of major powers such as Iran, Russia, and China allow the Syrian regime to prolong the conflict. While Russia and China support and protect Syria at the UN Security Council, they also support the Assad regime by trading with it and supplying weapons to its military (Asseburg & Wimmen, 2012). For example, more than 63,000 military personnel have been sent by Russia to Syria (France

24, 2022). Assad, in an interview with the American-based NBC television network in 2016, accepted that Russian support was a crucial factor in the conflict (Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad: Exclusive Interview | NBC Nightly News, 2016). Iran continues to support the Syrian regime in terms of military, financial, and energy-related supplies (Asseburg & Wimmen, 2012). According to SANA, on March 31, 2022, Hammouda Sabbagh, who is the Syrian People's Assembly Speaker, met with Ali Nikzad, the Vice-President of the Iranian Shura Council. During the meeting, Sabbagh highlighted Syria's cooperation with Iran with the following statement:

> Syria, Iran, and countries of the axis of resistance stand united in the face of the Israeli entity and the Western powers that support it, particularly the US which tries to pressure the peoples and undermine their unity and their independent decision (Syrian Arab News Agency, 2022).

However, economic and military support to the opposition by foreign actors made the opposition more resilient, though they are divided (Brom, Berti, & Heller, 2014). In sum, the factors stemming from Syria and the regime that lead to a continuation of the Civil War are the following:

- The regime's determination to fight until it takes control of the entire country
- Assad's insistence on seeing the future of the regime as the future of the country and his insistence on staying in power
- The divided structure of opposition groups in Syria
- Commitment and loyalty of the Syrian army to the Syrian regime
- Ethnic and sectarian diversity in Syria and the division between these groups
- Support by neighbouring countries in the region and the great powers of both the Syrian regime and the opposition.

The attitudes of countries that are against the Syrian regime and opposition groups are important factors that determine the continuation of the Syrian war. In the following section, these will be evaluated, and the geopolitical interests of various actors will be discussed.

2.4.2 Regional Factors

At present, the interaction and interdependence between countries are more important than ever. Therefore, it is inevitable that developments occurring in one country or one region will affect most of the world. Geographical proximity is an important factor that

determines the extent of this effect. Syria, as the Middle East's window to the Mediterranean, is neighbours with Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and Israel – and this location makes the country geopolitically important. The developments that have been occurring in the country for more than a decade undoubtedly affect the countries of the region the most. So far, the Syrian territory has become a geopolitical competition area for both countries in the region and the global powers.

A regional rivalry that has been quite observable during the Syrian Civil War consists of two power centres: one is the "Sunni axis", which includes Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey and the other is the "Shiite Crescent", made up of Iran, Iraq, the Syrian regime, and Lebanon (Demir & Rijnoveanu, 2013). Most of the material support to the Syrian regime comes from Iran and Hezbollah, which are Syria's traditional partners and members of the "axis of resistance" (Brom, Berti, & Heller, 2014). The relations between Iran and Syria have continued for more than three decades, despite the many crises they have faced, including the Syrian Civil War (Goodarzi, 2013). It has been observed that Iran's security and intelligence services have helped the Syrian army to protect Assad's current position (Fulton, Holliday, & Wyer, 2013). Iran perceives Syria as a secure and direct supply line to Hezbollah and Lebanon-based Shiite militias – and as a way for Tehran to expand its borders within the "Shiite Crescent" (Karim & Islam, 2016). Hezbollah also openly supports the Syrian regime, in line with Iran's interests (Fulton, Holliday, & Wyer, 2013). Another reason why Iran supports the regime is that it is against the interests of the US and Israel in the region (Kinninmont, 2014). In addition, the war in Syria is a new site for Iran's sectarian conflict with Saudi Arabia in the region and its rivalry with the US. A French political scientist summarizes the situation below:

> Syria is a major front in Tehran's geostrategic competition with the United States, its Cold War with Saudi Arabia and its war against Salafis and al-Qaeda affiliated groups, whose hatred of Shiism is well known. Tehran perceives the collapse of the Assad regime as an inauspicious move that could checkmate Hezbollah and the Islamic republic (Álvarez-Ossorio, 2019).

Iraq, one of the countries in the region most affected by the conflicts in Syria, supports both sides in Syria, according to sectarian divisions (Kinninmont, 2014). For example, Iraqi Shiite militias fight alongside the Assad regime, while Sunni fighters support the opposition (Kinninmont, 2014). However, although Saudi Arabia's relations with Syria were never close, there was no direct conflict between them – until the 2005 assassination

of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri (Berti & Guzansky, 2012). Saudi Arabia, which blamed Syria for Hariri's murder, was also dissatisfied with Syria's closeness to Iran. Syria, meanwhile, blamed Saudi Arabia for financially supporting Salafist groups and jihadists in Lebanon and within its territory and accused it of protecting its own security by encouraging sectarianism in Syria and Iran (Salloukh, 2013). Not surprisingly, Saudi Arabia, along with Qatar and Turkey, has supported the opposition in Syria. Saudi Arabia approved the establishment of the Salafi Front (Al-Nusra, ISIL, and Islamic Front) in Syria in 2013 as part of the sectarian rivalry (Phillips C. , 2015). The main reason for this was the overthrow of Assad as his defeat and absence would result in breaking the Iran-Syria axis, as well as isolating Iran and Hezbollah, limiting Iran's influence in the region, and transforming Saudi Arabia into a hegemonic power in the region (Demir & Rijnoveanu, 2013). In addition, if there was a pro-Saudi Sunni administration in Syria, this would be crucial for Saudi Arabia's national security (Demir & Rijnoveanu, 2013).

Another key actor in the Syrian war has been Turkey. In the first phase of the social uprisings, Turkey assumed the role of short-term mediator between the regime and the opposition – thanks to its geopolitical influence in the Arab world; however, it later openly criticized the increasing violence of the Assad regime and stood against it, becoming a critical ally of Saudi Arabia and Qatar by calling for Assad's overthrow (Salloukh, 2013). Kinninmonth (2014) states that these three countries were not against state violence at the beginning, but rather that each leader personally tried to come to terms with Assad and changed their stance towards Syria when they realized that Assad had backed off from his commitments. For Turkey, one of the main determinants of its stance in the Syrian war has been the Assad regime's attitude towards the Kurdish forces in the country. The departure of Assad's military from the northern regions, where the Kurdish population is most concentrated, without conflict, led to the strengthening of Kurdish armed forces in the region. This situation has gradually increased security concerns about Turkey's southern border. These concerns have brought Turkey's geopolitical interests to the forefront, causing tensions with Syria and other countries in the region, as well as with global powers, especially the US and Russia.

During this period, one of Turkey's closest allies has been Qatar, which was one of the first countries to close its embassy in Damascus in 2011 after the Assad regime increased its attacks on civilians; it also played an important role in the suspension of Syria's

membership in the Arab League (Görgülü, 2018). In addition to the competition between regional actors about which would support the regime, a lack of consensus within the Arab League about the next steps triggered a deadlock in Syria (Ulrichsen, 2014). Especially regarding the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar and Turkey were distancing themselves from the policies of Saudi Arabia. In 2017, Qatar was boycotted by four Arab countries (the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain) – called the "Arab Quartet" by Qatar – because of Qatar's foreign policy objectives, its support of so-called "extremism", and the relationship between Iran and the Al-Jazeera news agency (Kinninmont, 2019). Qatar also felt pressure from the US to make sure that none of the weapons Doha sent to Syria fell into the hands of the Nusra Front or other radical groups (Ulrichsen, 2014).

Overall, the attitudes of the countries in the region in terms of the Syrian war vary. The fact that the geopolitical interests of these countries are different reveals that they are not completely acting as allies, even if these states sometimes seem to be on the same side. As a result, the lack of consensus and the completely different attitudes towards the Assad regime have resulted in deadlock. The Assad regime, which took Aleppo in 2017, accepts that its claim to victory will not be possible as long as Britain, France, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey continue to support opposition groups (Görgülü, 2018). In conclusion, the regional factors causing the continuation of the Syrian war, which are supported in this thesis, are as follows:

- Iran's attitude towards Syria, seeing it as a safe corridor between Lebanon and Hezbollah and its strong desire to keep the Shiite Crescent robust
- Iran's desire to continue its anti-US and anti-Israeli policies through the Syrian war
- The ongoing regional sectarian and separatist policies of Saudi Arabia and Iran
- The military and economic support of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey for the opposition and their determination to change the regime in Syria
- Turkey's security concerns about its southern border
- The clash of the geopolitical interests of the region's states
- The relationships of the regional states with the US and Russia.

In this section, regional factors were discussed, and the geopolitical positions of regional states concerning Syria were looked at. In the next section, the impact of the presence of global powers, especially the US and Russia, which are on opposite sides in the ongoing war, and the effects of their geopolitical interests in the war will be discussed.

2.4.3 International Factors

One of the most important features of the Syrian war is the diversity of the parties involved. In addition to local, religious, and ethnic groups and regional countries, global powers are also directly embroiled in the war. As such, Syria has become a geopolitical area of competition for global actors. In fact, all five permanent members of the UN Security Council directly or indirectly support a group militarily, financially, and/or politically in the Syrian war. Especially in 2013, with ISIL's proliferation in previously government-controlled areas in Syria and the increase of terrorist attacks in Europe and Turkey, the US, UK, France, Turkey, and their allies increased their military presence in Syria (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022).

Undoubtedly, one of the most important actors in the Syrian war is the US. After the Obama administration, which announced the use of chemical weapons as a red line, the Trump administration shaped the US's Syria policy with three main goals: (1) a total defeat of ISIL, (2) a political solution to the conflict, and (3) removal of Iranian military forces (Humud & Blanchard, 2020). On the one hand, the overthrow of ISIL and Iran's withdrawal from Syria – America considers Iran to be a part of the "Axis of evil" and a terrorist state – are part of its strategy to combat terrorism and extremism. On the other hand, the war in Syria triggered the ongoing rivalry between America and Russia. It is a well-known fact that the US and Russia fiercely compete with each other for international influence, subordinating many countries to their political aims (Simons & Strovsky, 2016). The geopolitical location of Syria made it inevitable that the two countries would compete head to head, but the colour revolutions of the 2000s and the Georgian-Russian war in 2008 set the tone for the geopolitical rivalry and conflict between the two (Simons & Strovsky, 2016). The Syrian war has become a new site for America's geopolitical rivalry with Iran and Russia, and the competition continues. While the US states that it is fighting against terrorism and extremism, some groups believe that America supports sectarian conflicts in Syria in favour of "moderate Sunni states", in pursuit of its own interests. In other words, the US is playing a kind of "double game" in Syria (Anderson,

2016). This was hinted at by the Defense Intelligence Agency in 2012 in the following statement:

> The Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood and AQI are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria…There is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in eastern Syria (Hasaka and Der Zor), and this is exactly what the supporting powers (The West, Gulf monarchies and Turkey) to the (Syrian) opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime (Anderson, 2016).

Moreover, the destabilization of the Syrian border, the transformation of Syria into a safe place for Al-Qaeda, and the use of chemical weapons increased Israel's security concerns (Asseburg & Wimmen, 2012). In this way, in addition to reducing the influence of Iran and Russia in the region during the Syrian war, the other aim of the US was to protect Israel's security and stability. Nevertheless, despite security concerns, Israel chose not to be directly involved in the war. Although there have been several reports that Israel carried out deterrent airstrikes to cut off arms transfers to Hezbollah, these have not been confirmed by either Israel or Syria (Kinninmont, 2014).

At the start of the war, the US and its European partners recognized the Syrian National Council, repeatedly condemned the regime's excesses, demanded the eventual replacement of Assad as part of any political solution, and organized opposition support groups such as Friends of Syria (Brom, Berti, & Heller, 2014). They also supported a peaceful political transition in Syria. In addition to repeatedly urging the Assad regime to negotiate and respond to the Syrian people's demands, Europe increased economic and political sanctions against the Assad regime because civilian deaths had increased, the regime had rejected international demands, and the violence had escalated. As ISIL grew stronger, the EU's security concerns also increased. ISIL had started to build an Islamic state in major cities in Syria and Iraq and carried out terrorist attacks in different European cities (Kızılkan, 2019). Additionally, the EU's security concern also increased because of the participation of Europeans in ISIL; it is estimated that the number of Europeans fighting for ISIL was approximately 6,000 in 2015 (Havlová, 2015). For this reason, the EU closely followed the developments of the group and, since then, its attention has shifted from focusing on the overthrow of Assad and a democratic transition in Syria to the struggle with ISIL (Kızılkan, 2019). Additionally, Syria, because of its proximity to countries with strategic importance for the EU, such as Cyprus and Turkey, poses a

security problem. In the Country Strategy Paper for Syria, it was observed that what happened in Syria was crucial for regional stability and that Syria was critically important as a transit country between the EU and the Middle East (Turkmani & Haid, 2016).

One of the most significant external actors in the war is Russia. For Russia, Syria is an important window to the Mediterranean. Historically, Russia has had good military and economic relations with Syria. Since the Cold War period, the Russian naval facility in the Syrian port of Tartus has been its only base in the Mediterranean; Syria is also the only state in which Russia has a military base in the Middle East (Ekşi, 2017). Besides, the Damascus administration is an important customer of Russian weapons (Phillips C. , 2016). Initially, Russia's role in the Syrian Civil War was limited to providing diplomatic support to the Syrian government, providing arms and ammunition support, and training the Syrian army (Oligie, 2019). However, Russia's direct involvement in the war alongside the Assad regime in 2015 was a turning point because, due to its position, Russia, after the events in Libya and Iraq, does not want to allow a "western-led" regime change in Syria; hence, Russia's involvement in the war is of great benefit to the Assad regime (Phillips C. , 2016).

In this context, Syria has an important place in Russia's global competition with America. Dmitri Trenin, from the Carnegie Institution, summarizes this in the following:

> To Moscow, Syria is not primarily about Middle Eastern geopolitics, Cold War era alliances, arms sales—or even special interests, like the under-renovation Tartus naval resupply facility which gives Russia some capacity to operate on the Mediterranean [….]. Rather, from a Russian policy perspective, Syria—much like yesterday's Libya, Iraq, or Yugoslavia—is primarily about the world order. It is about who decides: who decides whether to use military force; who decides the actors for use of that force; and who decides under what rules, conditions, and oversight military force is to be used (Demir & Rijnoveanu, 2013).

Russia's desire to maintain its influence in the region – and globally – is one of the most important factors underlying its involvement in the Syrian war. This is due to the country's desire to reduce its geopolitical disadvantage – in terms of its access to the Mediterranean compared to its rivals – and protect its strategic and geopolitical interests (Oligie, 2019). For this reason, has been vital that Russia not lose Syria, which is its only ally in the region and the location of one of its military bases. Although it chose not to be directly involved in the war, China, an important international ally of Russia, supported

the Syrian crisis because of its relationship with Russia (Ekşi, 2017). Thus, the global and economic China-US rivalry has shifted to Syria, as well.

In summary, the conflicting geopolitical interests of global actors are important factors that also cause the Syrian crisis to be in a deadlock, and Syria has practically become a new environment in which the global powers compete with each other and with countries of the region. Thus, the international factors that have led to the continuation of the Syrian war, which are the main topics of this thesis, can be summarized as follows:

- Hostility between the US and Iran
- Continuation of the US-Russia rivalry
- Determination of the West to change the Assad regime
- Direct involvement of the EU in the war due to security and humanitarian concerns
- Russia's military and political resolve to protect the Assad regime and desire to consolidate its influence in the region.

In this chapter, the reasons that have led to the continuation of the Syrian war were discussed; these can be categorized as follows: reasons originating in or from Syria itself, regional reasons, and global reasons. The Syrian war has its own dynamic and many different state and non-state (f)actors. The fact that the war has lasted so long is due to the irreconcilable nature of these actors and their interests. Assad's determination to stay in power, divisions within the Syrian opposition, the military capacity of the regime, and Iran and Russia's support are the most important factors prolonging the war. In addition, the policies of regional actors such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have had a significant impact on the continuation of the Syrian war. Finally, the policies of the major international actors involved in the war are additional factors that determine the course of the war. Each of the previously-mentioned factors increases the failures in Syria by influencing and prolonging the course of the war. Although each factor requires in-depth analysis, regional factors will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

CHAPTER 3

REGIONAL FACTORS IN THE CONTINUATION OF THE SYRIAN WAR

"You can't make war in the Middle East without Egypt,

and you can't make peace without Syria."

Henry Kissinger

Syria has been the scene of a bloody civil war since 2011. Historically, it is one of the most critical countries in the region because of its geopolitical location, complex ethnic and religious structure, and relations with regional countries like Egypt, Israel, Iran, Turkey, and Lebanon. Because of the country's significance, its civil war and related, ongoing conflicts have not been ignored by regional and international powers, and they have been involved or have intervened in the overall conflict directly or indirectly. Considering the developments in the Syrian Civil War and the diversity of the actors involved, it has turned into a proxy war.

Figure 9: Various actors involved in the Syrian Civil War [8].

While the diversity of the actors makes it increasingly difficult to reconcile interests, a proxy war is being waged in the region over Syrian territory. Today, Syria is the focus of

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[8]https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/syrian-civil-war-guide-isis/410746/,30.08.2022

a power struggle due to it being a window to the Mediterranean, its location near strategic regional countries, its proximity to energy sources, and its lands in the Fertile Crescent, a term which became popular at the beginning of the 20th century and first used by James Henry Breasted, an American orientalist (Britannica, 2020). The fighting in Syria has further been aggravated by ethnic and religious diversity, and the Syrian territory has become a competition field for regional and global actors since 2011.

Figure 10: Fertile Crescent[9].

American diplomat and political scientist Henry Kissinger once said, "You can't make war in the Middle East without Egypt, and you can't make peace without Syria", to emphasize the importance of Syria in the region (Lister, 2011). Moreover, Syria is a country that the dominant powers want to include in their sphere of influence due to its influence in Lebanon and Jordan and because of its importance in the Israel-Palestine issue (Bostancı, 2016). At the same time, Syria is in an important position in terms of the security of Turkey and Israel as it is a neighbour of these two countries; it is also in a central geographical location regarding Iranian foreign policy goals and stability in

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[9]https://www.britannica.com/biography/James-Henry-Breasted, 30.08.2022

Lebanon (Sandıklı & Semin, 2012). However, Syria, which hosts Russia's only military base in the Mediterranean and the only ally of Iran in the Arab world (Sandıklı & Semin, 2012), is vital and indispensable for regional and global powers, and regional and global powers' taking sides in the Syrian war in a short time is proof of this. While Russia, Iran, and China have supported the Assad regime, the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the EU, and Qatar sided with the opposition groups. Bechtol (2015) claims that despite the few existing news stories or reports about the issue, North Korea has also provided weapons to the Assad regime and supported the training of the Syrian army (Bechtol, 2015).

Because of its geopolitical importance, the Syrian territory has been divided between different powers. Millions of Syrians have been displaced within the country and have become refugees in other countries, especially neighbouring ones. The Syrian issue has brought together members of the international community and states in the region many times to find a solution for the deadlock going on for years; those involved have tried to find a solution to the issue through the Astana process and the Geneva negotiations. However, for more than a decade, Syria has not been able to go beyond being the new field of geopolitical competition of both regional countries and global powers. In this part of the thesis, the policies of the region's governments pertaining to the continuation of the war will be discussed. The factors that have led to the continuation of the war will be evaluated in four sections:

- Sectarian conflict in the region: Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry over Syria
- Turkey's security concerns
- Relations of regional countries of the region with the US and Russia
- Other regional factors

3.1 SECTARIAN CONFLICTS IN THE REGION: IRAN-SAUDI ARABIA RIVALRY OVER SYRIA

Although sectarianism has always been at the forefront of the cultural makeup of the Middle East, today it has become more politicized and happened in an environment where militarism and polarization between Sunni and Shiite groups have increased; sectarianism has also led to the disintegration of multi-sectarian countries and the strengthening of authoritarian regimes in the region (Hinnebusch, 2016). Sectarian strife in the region is led by two of its principal states, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Gause (2014), who likens the

policies and overall situation in the area to the Cold War because of the regional politics primarily based on the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, argues that these two actors are prominent regional players because of their competition to influence the domestic policies of the weaker states – rather than engaging in a military confrontation (Gause, 2014). However, although the sectarian element, a vital element of this new cold war, is essential in the rivalry over Syria, it is much more than a simple Sunni-Shiite conflict (Gause, 2014).

Religion has always been important in shaping the discourse on conflicts in the Middle East and understanding their actual dimensions (Ali & Camp, 2004). However, it would be an incomplete assessment to explain the conflicts in Syria and the parties' motivations using only the aspect of religion. Iran has been the strongest supporter of the Assad regime since the beginning of the war. Although the country's affinity and support for Syria is explained mostly due to the Shiite origins of both governments, Syria "is a secular pan-Arab socialist republic, which has different political foundations, structures and ideologies with Iran which is a revolutionary pan-Islamist theocracy" (Goodarzi, 2013), religion is not the only factor explaining the two countries' alliance. Regarding the motives behind Iran's support of the Assad regime, the most basic view is that this support is more linked to geostrategic elements than religious ones (Shanahan, 2014). In other words, although the strong bond between Iran and Syria is broadly explained by the sectarian factor, in reality, this relationship is more about a realpolitik based on the interests of the two countries.

Historically, relations between Iran and Syria date back more than 40 years. Wastnidge (2017) claims that religious elements are not the most decisive in the alliance, contrary to popular belief. According to the standard view, the closeness of Iran and Syria is mainly based on their pragmatist foreign policies (Sandıklı & Salihi, 2011). Especially after the Iraq crisis in 2003, Iran's foreign policy towards Syria and Iraq has been shaped pragmatically and by the geopolitical, political, and cultural realities of the region (Bargezar, 2007). Geopolitical factors and the common threat perception of the two countries are thought to be the main reasons behind their partnership, which has deepened over time (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2019). Iran believes that the security of Syria and the Assad regime ensure the security of Iran (Karim & Islam, 2016).

With its ancient culture, history, and civilization, Iran has always been a leading actor in the Middle East region. More than 90% of Iranian society is Shiite, the most significant percentage in the Islamic world. Iraq and Bahrain also have substantial Shiite populations in the region, in addition to Kuwait, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia (BBC News, 2013). After the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, one of the most critical debates in its foreign policy was the "Shiite Crescent" issue, while concerns about Iran's "regime export" to countries in the Middle East region also increased during this period (Dündar, 2019).

The term "Shiite Crescent" was coined by King Abdullah of Jordan in 2004 to express his belief that Shiite states led and influenced by Iran surrounded Sunni Arab countries (Sandıklı & Salihi, 2011). It has been claimed that in the elections held in Iraq in 2004, Iran transferred large amounts of money to Iraq for a pro-Tehran government to come to power and that 1 million Iranians crossed the border to Iraq so that they could vote in the elections (Wright & Baker, 2004). Stating that it would be in Iran's interests to control Iraq, King Abdullah noted that the dominance of pro-Iranian parties and politicians in the government would create a new Shiite movement or a political "crescent" stretching from Iran to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and that this would lead to the emergence of Sunniism; he argued that changing the balance of power from Sunniism to Shi'ism would also create new challenges for the US and its allies (Wright & Baker, 2004).

The first and most common factor uniting Iran and Syria is their opposition to the US-led regional security order and desire to defend themselves against increased Western penetration in the Middle East (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2019). On a recent visit to Syria, the Iranian Foreign Minister emphasized that "Iran and Syrian enjoy common stances on the ongoing developments of the region" (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2022). Similarly, in May 2013, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah expressed his open support and determination for the Assad regime to remain in power (Barnes-Dacey, 2013). However, it is also known that Iran, which has strategic relations with Hezbollah, establishes pragmatic and strategic interests with the Maronite Christians in Lebanon as part of this pragmatic foreign policy understanding (Vakil, 2018). This supports the view that the relations between the two countries are based on strategic and pragmatic interests

rather than on sectarian motives, although sectarianism has been broadly emphasized. In other words, the sectarian divide is only a tool for a wider manoeuvring of geopolitical games (Santana, 2018).

It is a well-known fact that since the beginning of the Syrian war, Iran has supported Syria internationally and provided political, economic, and military support to the Assad regime. Two viewpoints interpret Iran's actions from different perspectives: The first one reflects an expansionist view and states that "an attempt to recreate the Persian empire, by means including the creation of a land bridge from the Iranian plateau to the Mediterranean Sea"; the second asserts that Iran, as the dominant Shiite power in the region, acts with sectarian motivation and anti-Israeli ideology (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2019). Supporting the first view, Ehud Yaari (2017) states that Iran has established two land corridors, one in the north and the other in the south, connecting Iran to the Mediterranean and that these consist of the Euphrates and Tigris valleys from Iran's western borders and the vast desert in Iraq and Syria. Iran claims that it will provide a link to Hezbollah in Lebanon, enabling passage through a land corridor that will eventually end at the edge of the Golan Heights; Iran also believes that the two corridors will act as supply chains used to transport military supplies or militias if necessary (Yaari, 2017). According to Filkins (2017), this development is significant because, in this way, for the first time, the Assad regime, including Hezbollah, and the Iranian-backed government in Iraq will be connected by a single land route (Filkins, 2017).

The second factor explaining the close relationship between Iran and Syria is based on their shared strategic perspective on important regional concerns, such as the Palestinian issue and maintaining their presence in Lebanon (Wastnidge, 2020). Hence, in terms of its anti-Israeli policies, "the Iranian land bridge" or "Iranian corridor", which is controlled directly by Iranian troops or by their proxies, strengthens the geopolitical axis between Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut (Balanche, 2018). When considered in the context of Iran's "deterrence strategy", Syria provides the country with strategic depth in the Levant. It enables it to reach Hezbollah, Syria, having "a unified conventional and asymmetrical deterrence strategy against Israel" (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2019). Therefore, removing the Assad regime and replacing it with a "Pro-Western" and/or "Sunni-led" government means a "strategic loss" and an "existential threat" for Iran that must be avoided (Kelkitli, 2016). In fact, in 2016, Ali Akbar Velayati, an advisor to the

Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, emphasized that "Syria is like the golden ring in the chain of the resistance in the face of the Zionists and their protectors" (Sabbagh, 2016).

Regarding another factor strengthening the Iranian corridor, Balanche draws attention to the possibility of a reversal in the demographic balance in favour of the Shiites since migrants have mostly been made up of Sunnis after the Syrian War (Balanche, 2018). Iran has allegedly established small Shiite neighbourhoods in Damascus by granting Syrian citizenship to foreign citizens who are primarily Shiite Afghan refugees (Özkızılcık, 30). This is an essential factor prolonging the war in Syria because the rivalry between ethnic and religious groups and the perception that one group is superior to the other increase the social and political reactions while also fuelling conflicts (Jackson & Howe, 2008).
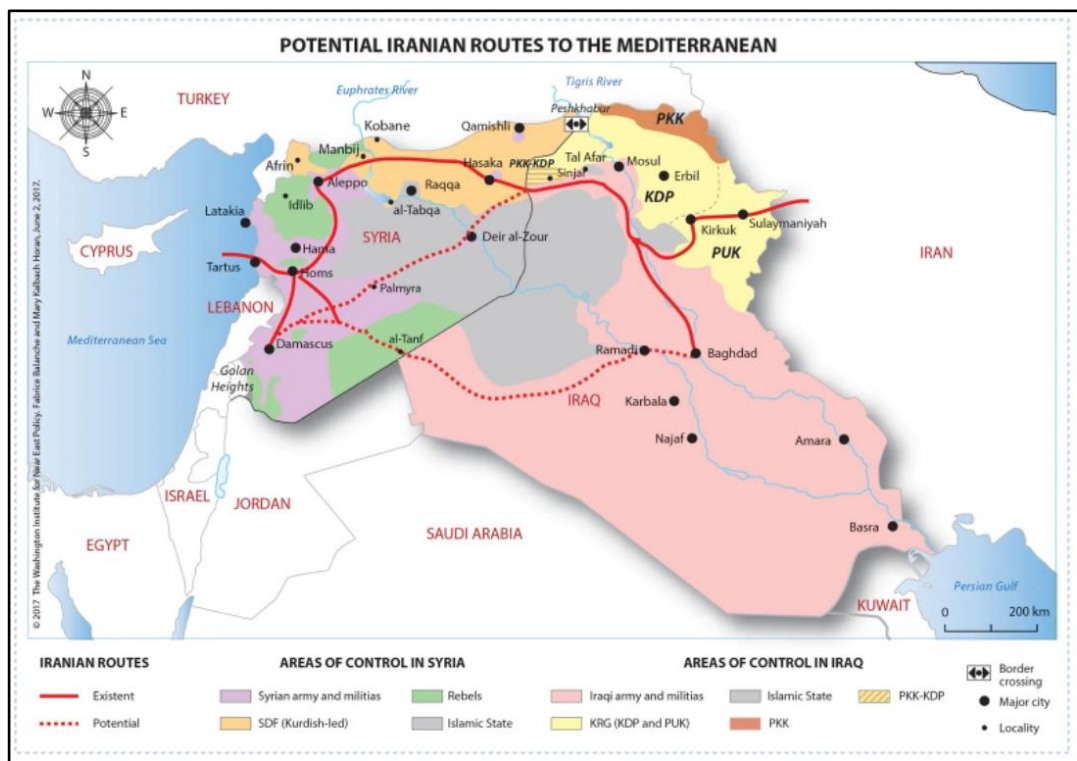

Figure 11: Iranian corridor[10].

Although it is not a determinant in the relations between Iran and Syria, the Shiite community living in Lebanon is an important factor connecting Iran and Syria in terms of the common value that the two countries attach to Shiism (Wastnidge, 2020). For Iran,

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[10]https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/iran-extends-its-reach-in-syria, 30.08.2022

relations with Lebanon have always depended on its relationship with Syria (Bargezar, 2007). This situation is closely related to Syria's role as a bridge between Iran and Hezbollah. Hezbollah, which has advocated an armed struggle against Israel, is supported by Syria and Iran. While Iran protects its interests in Lebanon through Hezbollah, keeping Hezbollah strong has historically been for Syria a control tactic against Israeli aggression and narrows Tel-Aviv's manoeuvring capabilities in Lebanon (Wastnidge, 2020). Therefore, a pro-Iranian and pro-Hezbollah regime in Syria seems to guarantee Iran's foreign policy goals.

Most of the areas that make up the road network in Syria are known to be controlled by Iranian allies formed by Hezbollah and Shiite militias from Iraq and Afghanistan (Filkins, 2017). Iran's increasing dominance in the region over Syria constantly needs to be checked by its rival in the Sunni bloc, Saudi Arabia. Adding that Iran must accept that Assad must be overthrown to end the war in Syria, the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister stated that Assad must either leave through a political process or be forcibly removed from power (Jenkins, 2015). Removing the Assad regime is an important foreign policy goal for Saudi Arabia. Considering Syria as an important ally of Iran, Saudi Arabia sees the overthrow of the Syrian regime as a way to reduce Iran's influence in Syria and Lebanon (Awaad, 2019). According to diplomatic correspondence leaked in 2008, Saudi Arabia has repeatedly recommended to "cut off the head of the snake" to the US by organizing attacks on Iran (Postel & Hashemi, 2018). In this sense, to reduce Iran's influence, Saudi Arabia, which sees itself as a defender of Sunni Islam, considers it its duty to support groups that oppose the Syrian regime.

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Syria has always fluctuated in the historical process. Conflicting opinions on the proxies in Lebanon and Palestine, pan-Arabism led by Egypt, and the bipolar structure of the Cold War have positioned Saudi Arabia and Syria on different sides in the past (Akgul & Selcen, 2016). During the Iran-Iraq war, Syria's rapprochement with Iran and Saudi Arabia blaming Syria for the death of the Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri, worsened relations (Akgul & Selcen, 2016). At the beginning of the Syrian war, Saudi Arabia did not favour regime change, fearing it would cause general instability in the region (Blanga, 2017). However, as the conflicts intensified and despite all of the warnings from Saudi Arabia to Assad, the regime's

failure to carry out the expected reforms and its increasing closeness with Iran resulted in a change in Saudi Arabia's Syria policy (Blanga, 2017).

In the period when the Syrian regime claimed that foreign powers were behind the conflicts, the fatwa of a sheik named Salih Al-Luheydan, stating that the murder of Alawites was obligatory, was broadcast on Wisal, the Saudi Arabian state channel; the subsequent slogans "Alevis to the graves, Christians to Beirut" heard in some demonstrations made one think that Salafists were behind the events (Önhon, 2021). While this situation deepened the hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia, one that is based on religious and ideological antagonism, conflicting political and geostrategic interests, and regional hegemony rivalry, it also increased the conflicts of interest of the parties involved (Berti & Guzansky, 2014). According to Akdoğan, when we look at the main dynamics determining Saudi Arabia's Syria policy, it is understood that the national security strategy and regional goals and priorities of the Saudis are more critical than sectarian solidarity (Akdoğan, 2015).

Saudi Arabia perceives Iran as a regional threat and rival in the region. Among the reasons for this perception are Iran's effort to establish security in the region without foreign interference, its efforts to strengthen its presence in areas it perceives as its natural sphere of influence, and its military and nuclear capabilities (Berti & Guzansky, 2014). According to Saudi Arabia, Iran is taking advantage of the social and political turmoil in the Arab countries of the region to pursue its own expansionist ambitions (Akbarzadeh, 2020). It believes that Iran does this with a policy geared towards weakening Sunni regimes, mainly by providing patronage to Shiite actors (Akbarzadeh, 2020). This situation has prompted Saudi Arabia to take action because of the fear that potential conflicts in neighbouring states, such as Bahrain and Yemen, will threaten its security, especially in terms of the minority Shiite group living on its territory (Blanga, 2017). For this reason, Saudi Arabia believes that weakening an Assad regime supported by Iran means weakening the power of the "Shiite Axis" in the region (Berti & Guzansky, 2014). For Saudi Arabia, Syria is Iran's entry into the Arab world, and the overthrow of the Assad regime would be a strategic blow to Iran (Sullivan, 2012). Moreover, Assad's overthrow in Syria and the establishment of a friendly and Sunni majority-based regime means consolidating Riyadh's position in Lebanon and increasing its influence over Iraq (Blanga, 2017).

However, Iran sees the main reason for the conflicts in the region as stemming from Wahhabism supported by Saudi Arabia. Iran's the then foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, stated the following in an article he wrote for the New York Times in 2016:

> Over the past three decades, Riyadh has spent tens of billions of dollars exporting Wahhabism through thousands of mosques and madrasas across the world. From Asia to Africa, from Europe to the Americas, this theological perversion has wrought havoc…and virtually every terrorist group abusing the name of Islam – from al-Qaeda and its offshoots in Syria to Boko Haram in Nigeria – has been inspired by this death cult (Zarif, 2016).

Postel and Hasemi claim that ISIL is the most extreme manifestation of anti-Shiite opposition in the rivalry led by Saudi Arabia (Postel & Hashemi, 2018). According to Kelkitli (2016), the support provided by Saudi Arabia to Salafi groups in Syria has led to the emergence of radical Islamic organizations such as al-Nusra and ISIL, which have resorted to terrorist methods (Kelkitli, 2016). Abu Musab al-Zarqawi died in 2006 and is considered the ideological architect of ISIL. The group adheres to a strict anti-Shiite ideology and has waged an "all-out war" against the "crafty and malicious scorpion" of Shiism and invited Sunnis to revolt against Shia "snakes" across the Middle East (Postel & Hashemi, 2018). ISIL's harsh ideological and sectarian policy has been a challenge that would weaken Iran's position in the region. The existence of a radical Sunni caliphate on the Iraq-Syria border means that Iran's ties with Damascus and Hezbollah are cut off (Divine, 2015). In addition, the terrorist group's geographic vision of the world has it divided into "Dar al-Islam (House of Islam)" and "Dar al-Kufr (House of Infidelity)". It encourages Muslims to migrate to the former (Bandeoğlu, 2016). Therefore, ISIL has also threatened the demographic order Iran wanted to establish in favour of the Shiites in Syria.

In sum, Syria is a new arena for the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and this rivalry has gradually turned into a proxy war. The conflicting interests and irreconcilable calculations of the two sides and their unwillingness to make concessions have caused the war in Syria to prolong, and it does not seem that lasting peace will come to Syria (Kelkitli, 2016). While it is possible to see the Sunni-Shiite conflict as one of the reasons for the conflicts between Saudi Arabia and Iran, this alone would be an incomplete assessment. As a part of the US-backed Saudi Arabian and Russia-backed Iran alliances that have been the norm since the Cold War, the Saudi-Arabian-Iranian conflict has been presented as sectarian. However, the relations of both countries with

Syria have developed on a much more strategic and real politick basis. The two countries' security concerns, geopolitical struggles, national interests, and desire to expand their sphere of influence in the region can be the crucial reasons for the rivalry. At this point, it is understood that Syria is essential in terms of both countries' foreign policy goal realization. For this reason, the irreconcilable interests of the two sides and their strong desires to achieve their goals increase the conflict and cause the prolongation of the war. Unless the competitive postures of Iran and Saudi Arabia, both towards each other and against the Assad regime, are reconciled, finding a solution to the Syrian crisis will be challenging.

In the next part of this chapter, Turkey, one of the most important actors in the region, will be discussed in the context of its national security.

3.2 TURKEY'S SECURITY CONCERNS

Historically, the political relations between Turkey and Syria fluctuated until the early 2000s. There were three significant issues between the two countries. First, the accession of Alexandretta (Hatay) to Turkey in 1939 negatively affected Turkey-Syria relations. Shortly after World War I, Iskenderun Sanjak was occupied by the French army in December 1918; then, Syria and Lebanon were left to France as part of a mandate state in 1920 (Sancak, 2019). Although Hatay is located within the borders of the National Pact, after the Ankara Agreement signed with France in 1921, the border between Turkey and Syria was determined, and Iskenderun Sanjak was left to Syria under the French mandate (Sancak, 2019). However, a special provision was added to Article 7 of the agreement to protect the Turkish presence in the region. According to the provision, "A special administrative regime shall be established for the district of Alexandretta. The Turkish inhabitants of this district shall enjoy every facility for their cultural development. The Turkish language shall have official recognition" (Sanjian, 1956). This article constituted an important step for Turkey for the future independence of Iskenderun Sanjak (Atabey, 2015).

During the mandate period, the French authorities argued that Sanjak of Iskenderun was a province with some allowed privileges but entirely dependent on Syria (Sanjian, 1956). However, after Syria gained independence from the French mandate in 1936, the Hatay problem emerged (Atabey, 2015). Turkey reacted to the absence of a statement about

Iskenderun Sanjak in the independence agreement signed between France and Syria, sending a note to the French on 9 October 1936 requesting that Iskenderun Sanjak gain independence (Sancak, 2019). With the aforementioned note, the Turkish government officially put forward a proposal for the solution to the Sanjak problem, demanding that the right of independence, which France decided to grant to Syria and Lebanon, should also be given to Sanjak, whose population was mostly Turkish (Atabey, 2015). When France refused to provide independence to Sanjak of Iskenderun, the Turkish government was determined to take the issue to the League of Nations (Atabey, 2015). The agreements signed between Turkey and France on the future of Iskenderun Sanjak in 1937 were opposed by Syria, and its officials stated that Iskenderun Sanjak belonged to the Syrian administration (Atabey, 2015).

After the elections held in 1938, under the administration of Turkey and France, the Hatay Assembly was founded and the State of the Republic of Hatay was established (Atabey, 2015). As a result of a referendum held a year later, Hatay joined Turkey on 23 July 1939. Although the Syrian Assembly declared that it did not accept the decision, the result did not change. However, the Hatay issue continued to be a significant problem in the relations between Turkey and Syria. With the influence of rising Arab nationalism in 1945, the Syrian press even called on Arabs to fight for the country's liberation to take back the Arab region of Iskenderun, claiming that it had been taken from Syria (Sanjian, 1956). The Syrian state was officially established in 1946. The Soviet Union, hostile towards Turkey then, claimed that Turkey would use the recognition of Syria's independence and diplomatic relations with Syria to legitimize its possession of Iskenderun Sanjak (Sanjian, 1956). Until the 2000s, even as relations between Turkey and Syria improved, Syria never gave up its historical claim on Hatay. Although the map showing Hatay on Syrian territory was changed by the Syrian Foreign Minister in 2003 (Hürriyet, 2003), Syria continues to consider Hatay as part of its territory.

In the world divided into blocs following World War II, the fact that Turkey and Syria saw their interests in different ones caused the two to increasingly go against each other in events that developed in the Middle East (Duran, 2011). Therefore, Turkey and Syria have been seen as enemy countries in the historical process. According to Turkey, Syria is an "enemy" country because it hosts Turkey's enemies, causes problems in the sharing of water resources, and interferes with Turkey's territorial integrity geographically;

According to Syria, Turkey is an "enemy" because it does not share water resources fairly, is a supporter of western countries, and claims rights over "its own lands" (Hatay) (Benek, 2016). Syria and Turkey, which were on opposite sides during the Cold War, have come to the brink of crisis numerous times; the crisis in 1957 is but one of them. The two countries piled weapons on their borders and started conducting military exercises. Syria had received arms aid from the Soviets, and the US declared that if there were an attack against Turkey, it would respond (Kıyanç, 2021). A compromise was finally reached, the UN later managed the crisis, and war was eventually avoided.

The second important issue affecting Turkey-Syria relations is the water problem. In the 1960s, concerns about water resources became an agenda item in their shared foreign relations as both started using the waters of the Euphrates-Tigris basin (Maden, 2012). In the 1960s, Syria, Turkey, and Iraq initiated large-scale dam projects. While Turkey was building the Keban Dam, Syria started the construction of the Tabqa Dam (Maden, 2012). The largest is Turkey's South-eastern Anatolia Project (GAP) (Kibaroglu, Klaphake, Kramer, Scheumann, & Carius, 2005). The activities of these riparian states, which strengthened their efforts to expand their water resources to increase their hydroelectric potential and expand irrigated agricultural areas, caused problems among them (Kibaroglu, Klaphake, Kramer, Scheumann, & Carius, 2005). Indeed, Turkey financed the GAP project with its national budget, as international financial institutions did not provide financing to Turkey because of Arab protests (Maden, 2012). By the 1980s, the water problem had become more political. In the early 1980s, Syria established relations with the PKK and allowed it to be on Syrian territory to push Turkey back; Syria was at odds with Turkey over the use of rivers in the region and wanted to gain the upper hand in regional competition (Gökcan, 2020). Thus, a problem related to terrorism emerged as the third most crucial issue between Turkey and Syria.

Syria has systematically supported the terrorist organization PKK to weaken Turkey (Duran, 2011). In 1987, after Turkey asked Syria to withdraw its support for the PKK, Syria requested that Turkey sign an agreement on sharing the waters of the Euphrates River (Maden, 2012). According to the protocols signed by the two sides, Turkey promised to release 500 cubic meters of water per second from the Euphrates to the Syrian border, while Syria pledged to end its support of the PKK (Maden, 2012). However, Syria has continued its support of the PKK. There are three strategic goals behind its backing

of terrorism: (1) prevent Turkey from becoming a political and military power in the region by preventing its economic development, (2) export its Kurdish problem abroad by exploiting its Kurdish citizens and putting pressure on them (3) prevent the realization of the GAP by limiting Turkey's access to water resources (Karabulut & Eryılmaz, 2016).

In May 1979, the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan, believing that he would not be able to operate in the political chaos that had emerged in Turkey, decided to cross into Syria and manage the PKK's activities from there (Gökcan, 2018). This change led to a period during which the Syrian administration would use the PKK as a political trump card in its dealings with Turkey (Gökcan, 2018). During this period, Syria allowed the PKK to organize on its territory, enabling the group to move from Turkey to Syrian territory illegally. Syria wanted to use the terrorist group to gain the upper hand in terms of its past grievances with Turkey.

Throughout the 1980s, the PKK carried out many bloody terrorist acts in Turkey. In 1985, the Border Security Protocol was signed with Syria at the behest of Turkey (Gökcan, 2018). However, Syria continued its support of the PKK. In 1986, despite Turkey's repeated warnings, Hafez Assad's administration allowed the PKK to hold its third congress in the Bekaa Valley (Gökcan, 2018). Due to increasing PKK attacks in the 1990s, Turkish officials met with their Syrian counterparts several times, demanding that support to the group be cut off and requesting that Syria cooperate with Turkey in the fight against terrorism. Finally, in 1993, Syria recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization for the first time (Karabulut & Eryılmaz, 2016). Despite this, the PKK held a conference in Syria in 1994, and terrorist attacks in Turkey increased in the following period. As relations between the two countries gradually deteriorated in 1996, Turkey included the following statements in a communiqué it sent the Syrian government:

> Syria has been waging a covert war in Turkey since 1983, using the PKK to impose a favourable solution with Turkey regarding Euphrates waters. The main actor responsible for the loss of life and property suffered by Turkey due to this war is Syria, which has supported and still supports the PKK and its leader in its country and territory under its control. With this attitude, Syria used force against Turkey's territorial integrity and political freedom. Syria must end all PKK activities in its country or territory under its control, prosecute the criminals, and extradite Abdullah Öcalan and his assistants to Turkey (Karabulut & Eryılmaz, 2016).

In response to the above message, Syria stated that Öcalan was not on its territory and rejected Turkey's demands. Not believing that the problem would be resolved diplomatically, Turkey started to consider a military option against Syria (Gökcan, 2018). In October 1998, Turkey openly stated that it would intervene militarily against Syria, which gave no response to increasing demands for resolution. Military measures soon began to take place on the Syrian border. Tensions between the two countries began to subside with diplomatic efforts and the deportation of Abdullah Öcalan from Syria on 9 October 1998 (Gökcan, 2018). The Adana Consensus was signed between the two countries, which came together on 19–20 October 1998 for meetings. Relations started to improve with the signing of the Adana Protocol, an agreement in which Syria promised not to support terrorism (Demir & Rijnoveanu, 2013).

In the 2000s, Turkey's relations with the Middle East were reformulated as a part of proactive policies adopted in the country's foreign policy. After the general elections in 2002, the conservative Justice and Development Party (JDP) came to power. During the era that followed, contrary to traditional Turkish foreign policy, an emphasis on "history", "culture", and "Islam" began to come to the fore in Turkey's relation with countries in the region (Altunışık, 2009). In this period, the idea of "Neo-Ottomanism" – that is, the belief that Turkey should be more active in areas formerly controlled by the Ottoman Empire and more involved in providing solutions for regional problems – emerged as a new alternative in Turkish foreign policy (Altunışık, 2009). Moreover, relations with Syria began to improve rapidly as part of the policy of "zero problems with neighbours" put forward by Ahmet Davutoğlu, the Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time. In addition, the personal and familial relations between then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Bashar Assad and his family were influential in developing ties with Syria. It has been frequently mentioned that the two families were close enough to each other even to spend a holiday vacation together (Hürriyet, 2012). Assad's visit to Turkey in January 2004 was Syria's first official visit Syria at the presidential level since 1946; in the subsequent period, the trade volume between the two countries increased, visa liberalization ensued, minefields on the border were cleared, and relations increased at the higher levels (Duran, 2011).

The Arab Spring, which started in Tunisia in 2010, spread to Syria in March 2011. Turkey closely followed the Syrian crisis due to the historical ties, geographical proximity, and close relations between the two countries. Turkey's last ambassador to Damascus, Ömer Önhon, wrote that while demonstrators across Syria were chanting "islah ul nizam" (let the order be restored) slogans at first, after a while, these slogans were replaced by "iskat ul nizam" (let the regime go) and "yallah irhal ya Beşar" (let's leave Bashar). Önhon also stated that Bashar supporters held counter demonstrations, chanting slogans such as "Allah, Beşar, Suriye u bes" (There is only Allah, Bashar, and Syria, nothing else) (Önhon, 2021). While these opposing, irreconcilable slogans dragged the country towards a civil war, Turkey initially stressed that the Assad regime needed reforms to stop the demonstrations. In a speech made on August 7, 2011, Erdoğan stated that Syria was a domestic policy issue for Turkey with the following words:

> We do not see the Syria issue as an external issue, as an external problem. The Syrian issue is our internal issue (Euronews Türkçe, 2011).

In another speech, Erdoğan underlined that the situation in Syria would not be like Libya and shared that he worried about the disintegration of Syria and the outbreak of a sectarian conflict. He again stressed that because of Turkey's 850-km border with Syria and the intensity of kinship ties, Syria was practically a domestic issue – and that the situation was closely followed (Önhon, 2021). The statement made by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 25 March 2011 provides important clues about Turkey's Syria policy at that time:

> We closely follow the events taking place in friendly and brotherly Syria. Turkey attaches great importance to the peace, prosperity and stability of Syria, with which it has deep-rooted and unshakable ties, and to the happiness and well-being of the friendly and brotherly Syrian people. We wholeheartedly support the steps that our Syrian brothers have announced they will take to advance the reform process. Turkey is ready to support and contribute to the work within the framework of the reform process in every possible way (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011).

Erdoğan expressed that he was hopeful for the Assad regime and that the Syrian president was in an advantageous position in his country at a time when the footsteps of sectarian divisions were being heard; the Turkish Prime Minister further added that because his wife is Sunni and he is Nusayri, Assad had a presidential profile that worked well for Syria (Milliyet, 2011). However, in time, contrary to the expectations of many Turkish

politicians, the Assad regime did not carry out the desired reforms. In June of 2011, the Syrian opposition held a Change in Syria conference in Antalya after an initial meeting it held in Istanbul. Ankara took an easy-going attitude instead of preventing these conferences, and Turkish politicians began openly opposing the Assad administration. In addition to allowing the FSA and SNC to organize in Turkey, the country openly supported regime change in Syria through diplomatic activities (Altunışık, 2016). Consequently, several pro-Assad groups in Damascus started to increase their criticism of Turkey (Miş, 2011). Attempts to attack the Turkish Embassy in Damascus and demonstrations in favour of Erdoğan in Der'a were the first signs of Turkey's direct involvement in the revolutionary process (Miş, 2011).

In August, the then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu met with Assad in Damascus for a six-hour meeting. Afterwards, he emphasized that operations in Syria should stop immediately and added, "These operations against the civilian population and concentrated in the cities must be stopped immediately. If the operations do not stop, there will be nothing to talk about the steps to be taken on this process from now on" (Milliyet, 2011). Shortly after, then-President Abdullah Gül stated that trust in the Assad regime was lost (Milliyet, 2011). Assad's statements regarding the visit from Turkey's main opposition party, the Republican People's Party, to Syria in September and Turkey's attitude towards Syria were noteworthy. Assad denies that there was a sectarian conflict in the country:

> Syria is the only secular Muslim Arab state. In a secular country, there is no dealing with sects. Get out and talk to whomever you want on the street, there is no such thing on the agenda of my people. They reduce the incident to the sectarian dimension to confuse Syria…I take every step, but I do not allow religious and sharia parties. I will not allow any organization that will harm secularism. There are different groups behind the events. I will do as those who sincerely want reform say. But there are also shariaists: Al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood. What the PKK is to Turkey, the Muslim Brotherhood is same to us. It saddens us that Turkey behaves as a patron of the Muslim Brotherhood (Milliyet, 2011).

Thus, with these statements, the Assad administration demonstrated its attitude towards Turkey. After increased mutual economic and diplomatic sanctions, relations with Syria were completely broken. On March 26, 2012, the Turkish Embassy in Damascus announced that it had temporarily suspended all of its activities, and the ambassador and

embassy staff left Damascus per Erdoğan's instructions (TRT Haber , 2012). Turkey also requested that all Syrian diplomatic personnel in Ankara leave Turkey within 72 hours as of 30 May 2012 (Duran, 2011). Believing that the Assad regime would not last long, Davutoğlu stated that the process in Syria would end within months or even weeks (NTV, 2012).

Turkey did not hesitate to resort to economic and political sanctions against Syria and thus became a party to the situation in Syria. In his speech in September 2012, Erdoğan stated that they would go to Damascus as soon as possible and pray at the Umayyad Mosque (Hürriyet, 2012). Demir & Rijnoveanu (2013) explain that being a party to the Syrian conflict is costing Turkey more than expected; examples of the repercussions include a Turkish jet fighter being shot down by the Syrian regime in 2012, artillery shells from Syria landing on Turkish soil numerous times, and many citizens have lost their lives (Demir & Rijnoveanu, 2013). Concurrently, there was a refugee influx to Turkey due to increased conflict and civil war. Although it was manageable then, the increasing number of refugees began to affect Turkey economically, socially, and politically. According to official figures, the number of Syrian refugees, which was around 14,200 in 2012, totalled 3.7 million by 2020 (Presidency of Migration Management, 2022). The increasing number of Syrian refugees has made Turkey more vulnerable in domestic politics and international relations. Turkey's relations with the EU began to hover around the refugee issue constantly. The increasing economic burden of hosting so many refugees and the related social reactions from the Turkish citizenry have turned the issue into a security concern for Turkey.

In 2013, a major attack occurred in Reyhanlı, which was thought to have been carried out by Syrian intelligence, and 43 people lost their lives (BBC News, 2013). ISIL's increasing terrorist attacks further deepened Turkey's security concerns. After 32 people lost their lives in a bomb attack in Suruç in 2015, Turkey placed ISIL at the top of its list of serious threats to national security, along with the PKK (Euronews, 2015). This change was initiated to prevent the many kinds of terrorist threats originating from Syria and to ensure Turkey's security. Within the framework of ISIL's worldview, the fact that Turkey was considered part of the "Dar al Kufr" because of its strategic relations with the US and because of its NATO membership demonstrated the threat of ISIL for Turkey and the region (Şenol, Erdem, & Erdem, 2016). According to data from the Turkish Ministry of

Interior, ISIL carried out 14 deadly terrorist attacks in Turkey. As a result of these attacks, 304 people lost their lives, and 1,338 people were injured (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior, 2017). Between 2015-2016, ISIL increased its attacks on civilians in Turkish cities. Stating that ISIL was the highest priority security issue, Turkey carried out three essential counter-terrorism operations in Syrian territory close to the border (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

3.2.1 Military Operations

a) Operation Euphrates Shield

According to a statement made by the Ministry of National Defence on August 24, 2016, "Turkey, within the scope of its right of self-defence stemming from Article 51 of the United Nations Convention, launched Operation Euphrates Shield to neutralize existing terrorists in northern Syria, especially the terrorist organization DAESH, which threatens its security, and to ensure border security" (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of National Defence, 2016). Within the scope of the operation, the FSA, supported by the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK), assumed control over a 2,015-square kilometre area and neutralized 2,647 ISIL fighters (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). According to Cagaptay, Turkey's first major operation in Syria served three purposes: First, it made ISIL move back from the Turkish border. Second, it prevented the Democratic Workers Party (PYD) from seizing northern Syria. Finally, it created a safe zone for the opposition in northern Syria (Cagaptay, 2016). According to Yeşiltaş et al. (2017), this operation was not only an operation against ISIL and the PKK/YPG but also a political operation against state-level actors that complicated the situations related to Turkish alliances and opposition to Turkey (Yeşiltaş, Seren, & Özçelik, 2017). In short, besides the officially announced reasons for the operation, it is thought that there were also different political, humanitarian, and military objectives.

The operation aimed to clear the city of Jarabulus from terrorist groups and push ISIL back from the Turkish border; Turkish authorities stated that ensuring the security of Jarabulus would support the territorial integrity of Syria and prevent the country from falling into further chaos (TRT World, 2016). Operation Euphrates Shield was described in one Turkish newspaper in this way: "The Turkish army is fighting in the same place after 500 years!" referring to the Battle of Mercidabik between the Ottoman Empire and

the Mamluks in the 16th century (Milliyet; Sabah, 2016). Emphasizing that this war resulted in an Ottoman victory that expanded Turkish dominance in the Middle East, the news gave important clues about the importance of Operation Euphrates Shield, where Turkey had positioned itself in the region, and the primary motivation behind the operation.

In October 2016, President Erdoğan stated that Turkey could not protect its national goals and explained that,

> The collapse of the Ottoman Empire left a deep wound on the nation. The size of our lands, which was 2.5 million square meters, decreased to 700 thousand square meters with the signing of Lausanne in 9 years. Unfortunately, we could not maintain our National Pact goals on both our western and southern borders. There may be those who excuse this situation due to the conditions of the period and those who try to show it. This approach can be excused to some extent. The most serious thing is the understanding of accepting this situation arising from necessity and imprisoning ourselves completely within this shell. We reject this notion. The aim of those who have imprisoned Turkey in such a vicious circle since 1923 is to make us forget our millennial existence in our geography, our Seljuk and Ottoman past (NTV, 2016).

From this point of view, it would not be wrong to say that Turkey exhibited an attitude that challenged the existing order with a historical emphasis, pursued an active foreign policy to have a say about the Syrian territory, and thought that the opposite was an incorrect security policy – and that terrorist organizations threatened national security by growing in numbers. In this respect, it can be said that historical discourses are instrumentalized in line with geopolitical purposes.
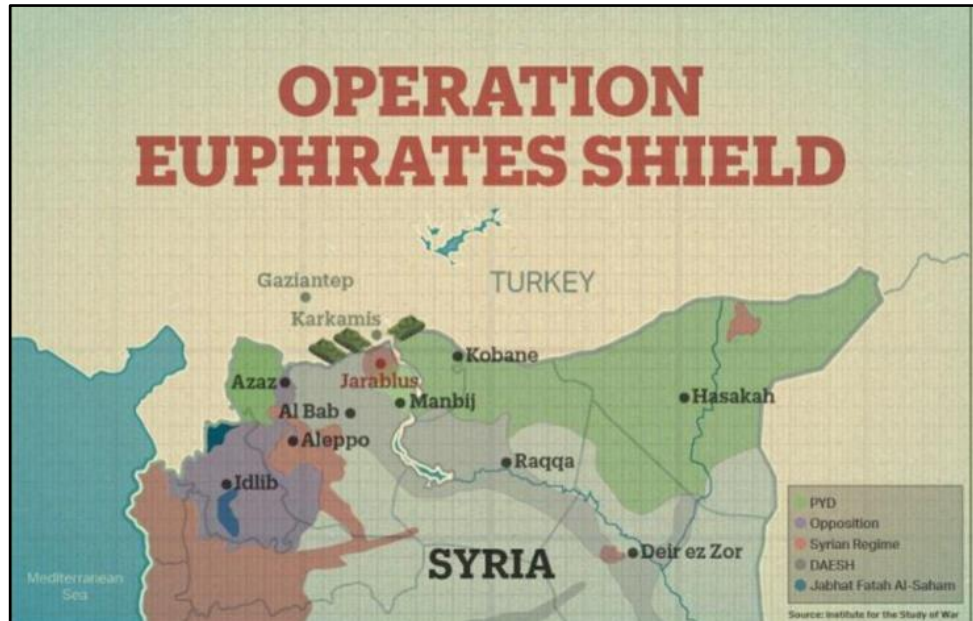
Figure 12: Operation Euphrates Shield[11].

Even though the operation was terminated in March 2017, the continuation of the attacks by the PKK/YPG and ISIL, despite all of the precautions and efforts, made it obligatory for Turkey to carry out a new operation. The new cross-border operation was called Operation Olive Branch.

b) Operation Olive Branch

On January 20, 2018, Operation Olive Branch was launched by the TSK and the FSA, which was supported by the Turkish army (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained the rationale for the operation as follows:

> The danger posed by PKK/YPG terrorist organization elements deployed in Afrin, northwest of Syria, to the safety of life and property of both the people of the region and our citizens living in our border region, has been brought to an advanced level with harassment shots and attacks. There has also been a risk that DAESH elements coming from other parts of Syria and nesting in this region will attack our country and border areas and cross over to Europe via Turkey (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

It has been stated that the main purpose of the operation was (1) to ensure the security of Turkey's borders and (2) to neutralize the terrorists in the Afrin region, thereby saving the people of the region from the oppression and persecution of terrorists (Republic of

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[11]https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/what-the-turkish-operation-in-syria-means-2566, 02.10.2022

Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). The Ministry of National Defence also stated that the operation, which lasted for 57 days, was carried out "in full view of the whole world and in full compliance with international law and respecting human rights" and announced that "terrorists were buried in tunnels they dug with their dreams" (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of National Defence , 2018).

Referring to the operation, Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım mentioned that Turkey wanted to create a 30-km "secure zone" in Afrin. At the same time, President Erdoğan stated that the operation was necessary for Turkey's security and Syria's territorial integrity (Voice of America, 2018). The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, also specified that the main aim of establishing peace in the Middle East was to protect the territorial integrity of states (Çavuşoğlu, 2018). Çavuşoğlu justified the operation by stating that the PKK/YPG camps on the Turkish border served two purposes. According to him, these camps aimed to create an uninterrupted terror belt by opening an additional front for PKK terrorist operations, in addition to the one in northern Iraq, and to create terrestrial positions for their own "statelets" to be built in Syria and Iraq in the areas evacuated by ISIL (Çavuşoğlu, 2018). Ülgen and Kasapoğlu (2018) indicate that the YPG, which has strong organic ties with the PKK, gained tremendous military and paramilitary power because of the Syrian Civil War and that if it were not controlled, the YPG would be equipped with advanced hybrid warfare capabilities in ten years, which would be comparable to the Lebanese Hezbollah in the Middle East; therefore, Turkish officials stated that Operation Olive Branch was a necessity in terms of Turkey's national security (Ülgen & Kasapoğlu, 2018).

According to the Turkish government, the YPG, established in 2014 to fight ISIL with the support of the US, benefits from the support of global powers to maintain its dominance in northern Syria and uses the fight against ISIL as an "excuse" despite the de facto eradication of ISIL from the region (TRT World, 2018). However, it is known that the YPG/PKK is constantly attempting to infiltrate Turkey from Afrin and support terrorism by recruiting militants and smuggling weapons and ammunition from Syria to Turkey (TRT World, 2018). For these reasons, Turkey has demonstrated that it would not allow even the slight possibility of the establishment of a "Kurdish statelet" supported by global powers on its borders and would not hesitate to resort to military operations to

guarantee both its national security and the territorial integrity of the countries in the region.

In this respect, President Erdoğan considered Operation Olive Branch a "domestic and national" operation and stated that the operation's goal was to return the 3.5 million Syrians residing in Turkey to their homes (Cumhuriyet, 2018). In addition, he emphasized the reason for Turkey's presence in Afrin and of Olive Branch Operation by sharing several phrases from Sultan Abdulhamid in another historical reference: "I will not sell even an inch of the land of my homeland, because this land does not belong to me, but to my nation. My nation gives these lands for the price they get. These lands were taken with blood, given with blood. This is why we are in Afrin" (Milliyet, 2018). Moreover, Erdogan described the operation in Afrin as an "Ottoman slap" for the West, as in World War I, Gallipoli, and Kut'ül Amare (Euronews, 2018). Erdoğan also compared the FSA to the "Kuvayi Milliye" forces in the Turkish War of Independence, describing it as a civilian organization coming together and organizing to protect their homeland (Anadolu Ajansı, 2018). From this point of view, the Turkish government tried to legitimize further carrying out the operation by showing that Olive Branch Operation was an act of homeland defence and part of a war for liberation – with historical precedents – much like Euphrates Shield Operation.

Figure 13: Turkey's military operation in Afrin[12].

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[12]https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkey-s-operation-in-afrin-five-things-you-need-to-know-14469, 05.10.2022

In summary, the main reason for the Olive Branch operation came from a perceived threat to Turkey's national security. Turkey did not even want to bring up the possibility of establishing a Kurdish state supported by global powers, especially the US, on its southern border. Moreover, it shows its determination not to allow the formation of a terror corridor on the southern border in any way. Historical references were frequently cited by Turkish authorities to increase the legitimacy of the operation. By carrying out the operation, Turkey also wanted to prevent the movement of weapons, ammunition, and terrorists from Syria to Turkey. As a policy goal, Turkish authorities were trying to create safe areas for Syrian refugees in Turkey to return to their countries. In this context, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement, as of March 18, 2018, control was achieved in Afrin's district centre within the scope of the operation. In less than two months, an area of approximately 2,000 km² was cleared of PKK/YPG and DAESH elements. Since the beginning of the operation, about 4,600 terrorists have been neutralized (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

c) Operation Peace Spring

In the context of the threat posed by the PKK/YPG to Turkey's national security, the country started to negotiate with the US about the option to establish a safe zone in the northeast of Syria, which is close to the border (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). However, because the US failed to fulfil its commitments to the safe zone and due to the ongoing PKK/YPG threat, the Peace Spring Operation was launched by the TSK and the FSA on October 9, 2019 (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). Similar to Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch, the rationale for Operation Peace Spring had multiple elements: (1) to ensure the security of Turkey's borders, (2) prevent the creation of a terror corridor in the south, and (3) ensure the return of Turkey's displaced Syrian population to their homes (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of National Defence, 2019). President Erdoğan stated that, despite having shared the safe zone plan at the UN General Assembly, Turkey concluded that the international community would not take action; another reason mentioned by the Turkish president was that Turkey started the operation to put an end to the humanitarian crisis in the region and eliminate the violence and instability that was the source of irregular migration (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 2019). According to Lindenstrauss and Shavit, Operation Peace

Spring is Turkey's third and most ambitious operation in northern Syria and the one that drew the most reaction from the international community (Lindenstrauss & Shavit, 2019).

According to a statement made by the White House, the US did not support this operation and that it was a "bad idea" (Regan & Britton, 2019). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bahrain and Egypt condemned Turkey's operation in Syria and called the Arab League to an emergency meeting (Regan & Britton, 2019). According to Pleitgen (2019), Turkey's operation would cause Russia to increase its influence in Syria (Pleitgen, 2019). Conversely, the EU Parliament stated that Turkey had security concerns on the Syrian border that should be understood but did not support the creation of a so-called safe zone (BBC News Türkçe, 2019). Germany believed the operation would cause a new wave of migration and instability in the region and called for Turkey to end all military activities (BBC News Türkçe, 2019).

The response of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to international criticism against the Peace Spring Operation was as follows:

> The operation is carried out on the basis of international law, in accordance with our right of self-defence stemming from Article 51 of the United Nations Charter and the resolutions of the UN Security Council on the fight against terrorism. Turkey has no aim to change the demographics of the operation area. Since the beginning of the conflict, the PYD/YPG terrorist organization has implemented a policy of pressure and intimidation against the people of the region, especially the Kurds, and forcibly evicted the local people from their homes. It is essential for Turkey to protect the territorial integrity and political unity of its neighbour Syria. The baseless accusations against Turkey by countries that tacitly or openly support the separatist agenda of the PYD/YPG terrorist organization are the manifestation of a reaction stemming from the disruption of their plans targeting the division of Syria (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

Turkey, emphasizing that it was exercising its rights stemming from international law, reiterated that it respected the territorial integrity of Syria. The Minister of National Defence, Hulisi Akar, also emphasized that every precaution had been taken in the operation area and that the goal was to end the existence of terrorists, especially DAESH, PKK/PYD-YPG – and also to establish a peace corridor in the east of the Euphrates (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of National Defence, 2019).
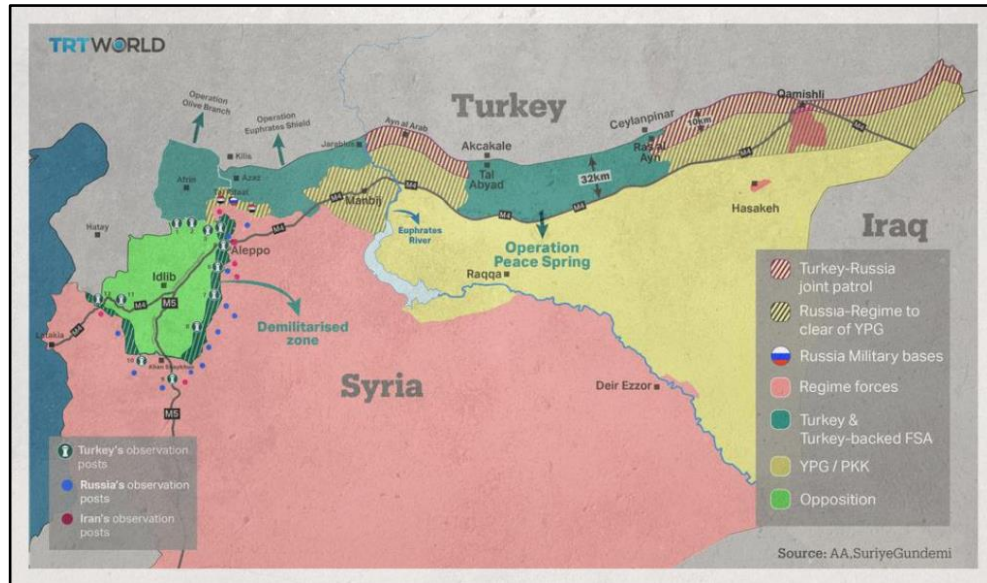
Figure 14: Operation Peace Spring[13].

In sum, Turkey showed an encouraging and supportive attitude towards the political reforms that the Assad regime announced it was implemented at the beginning. Although Turkey initially believed that the situation in Syria would end in a short time, it was not as the Turkish government expected, and the conflicts gradually intensified. Turkey subsequently saw the solution in the fall of the Assad regime. The increase in disputes and insecurity has disrupted Turkey's domestic and international stability. Additionally, after the expected reform steps in Syria were not taken, Turkey, with its clear stance against the Syrian regime, directly requested that economic and diplomatic sanctions be taken against the Assad regime and changed its basic policy towards a political transition in Syria to end the conflict. However, the number of actors involved in the conflicts, which gradually turned into a civil war, increased, and regional and global powers, in addition to the religious and political groups in the country, began to get involved in the conflicts. The increasingly bloody attacks of ISIL prompted Turkey to take measures for its national security. Turkey cooperated with the Syrian opposition – mainly the FSA – so that a possible terror corridor would not form on its southern border. It started a difficult military struggle in northern Syria, first against ISIL and later against the YPG/PKK.

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[13]https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/operation-peace-spring-in-a-nutshell-30779, 06.10.2022

In its Syria policy, Turkey not only reiterated its shared historical and cultural ties with Syria, emphasizing "Neo-Ottomanism" initially but later instrumentalizing history to realize its foreign policy goals with reference to the Turkish War of Independence and recent history by emphasizing the National Pact. Therefore, Turkey, initially seeking a solution to the Syrian crisis with economic and diplomatic sanctions, noted that it would not hesitate to resort to military sanctions when its national security was threatened. After the failed coup attempt in July 2016, the government's Syria policy re-established the balance between civilian and military power while increasing confidence in the TSK (Siccardi, 2021). Therefore, the Turkish authorities may have deemed these operations inevitable to restore confidence in the army.

Expressing that they are in favour of preserving the territorial integrity of Syria at every opportunity, Turkish officials highlighted that the terrorist operations against Syria are based on Turkey's right of "self-defence" stemming from international law. Another reason behind the three operations was to ensure the safe return of more than 3.5 million Syrians hosted by Turkey. For this reason, efforts are now being made to create "safe zones" that are free from terrorism. Ensuring that Syrian refugees can return to their countries humanely, voluntarily, and safely is also an important initiative for Turkey's increasingly polarized social security. However, when military operations, which have often been emphasized as occurring for security reasons, have been explained with historical references, Turkey's "real" ambitions are questioned by the international community and deemed contradictory.

Despite believing it was alone in Syria, Turkey did not give up its determination in its operations and stressed that it would not allow a terror corridor to form on its southern border and that it wanted to end terrorism at its source. Thus, becoming one of the most important actors in the Syrian war, Turkey has shown that it will not compromise its goals in ensuring its national security and the fight against terrorism. This situation indicates that it will not be easy to come to terms with the Syrian regime, which has been using terror against Turkey for many years; additional difficulties have occurred because several major powers provide military, economic, and political support to terrorist organizations in northern Syria. The Syrian crisis cannot be solved unless Turkey's security concerns about terrorist organizations operating in Syria are resolved.

In addition to its military operations, Turkey has also strived to find diplomatic solutions to the Syrian crisis. With the support of Russia and Iran, the fact that the Assad regime has remained in power showed that there would be no solution without Assad this time. Turkey has pursued an active foreign policy to find diplomatic solutions to the conflicts, using its mediator role and an enterprising and humanitarian foreign policy. Due to the failure of the Geneva Peace Process, the Astana Peace Talks started in 2017 under Turkey's leadership, along with the involvement of Russia and Iran. One of the main reasons Turkey took part in this process was to minimize the cost of the war and protect its national interests (Cengiz, 2020). Initially, Turkey's stance in the Astana process was the overthrow of Assad to force a transfer of power; however, over time, Turkey's priority has been to prevent the establishment of an independent Kurdish state on its border (Cengiz, 2020). Therefore, Turkey has tried to strengthen its national security and repel threats through military and diplomatic means.

3.3 RELATIONS OF REGIONAL COUNTRIES WITH THE US AND RUSSIA

This section will discuss Syria's relationship with the US and Russia and the Syrian policies of these two countries. Undoubtedly, the relations of these two actors with Syria and other actors in the region, along with their specific policies in Syria, significantly impact the continuation of the war.

In the bipolar structural context of the Cold War, Syria took sides with the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, relations between the US and Syria remained extremely low in the historical process. Syria's closeness to Russia and Iran, its aid to Hezbollah, its "anti-Israeli" policies, and its dubious nuclear program have distanced Syria from the United States (Karim & Islam, 2016). The US defined Syria, together with Iran and Libya, as "terrorist-sponsoring states" and stated that these entities constituted "an axis of evil that takes up arms to threaten world peace" (Bolton, 2002).

In 2004, the US announced that it would impose a series of economic and military sanctions to put pressure on Syria. Accordingly, Syrian planes were banned from entering American airspace, and transactions with the Syrian Commercial Bank were also suspended (TASAM, 2006). In 2009, the Obama administration renewed sanctions against Syria as the state continued to threaten the security of the US as the Americans believed that it supported terrorism and continued its missile program, along with the

development of weapons of mass destruction (ABC News, 2009). Specifically, the close relationship with Iran plays a significant role in the US attitude towards Syria. The Americans accuse Syria and Iran of destabilizing the region and supporting conflicts in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine (Yacoubian, 2007).

However, Syria has determined that American policies are two-faced. Syria has underlined that Israel's nuclear power capabilities are accepted and allowed but that its chemical weapon development is targeted by the US and other states (Hinnebusch, 2009). As Syria's "hostility" and "aggressive" attitude towards Israel grew, its relationship with the US also gradually deteriorated (Hinnebusch, 2009). Syria's biggest ally in this setting has been Iran, which describes the US as the "great satan" and Israel as "little satan" (Alonso-Trabanco, 2022). As a matter of fact, according to Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei, Syria is an important country that forms a "forward line" in the fight against America and is a part of the "axis of resistance" (Larrabe & Nader, 2013). The possibility of losing Syria when the West is trying to encircle Iran means that Washington and its allies may increase pressure on Tehran to destabilize the Islamic regime (Wakim, 2012).

Regarding the demonstrations in Syria in 2011, the US announced that they opposed the use of violence against peaceful protests and would continue to impose sanctions against the Assad administration by supporting the universal rights of the Syrian people (The New York Times, 2011). In 2012, the US started to provide military and economic aid to the Syrian opposition, supported by Saudi Arabia and Qatar (Cornwell, 2012). In the same year, Barack Obama, who stated that they would recognize the Syrian opposition council as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, mentioned the following in a speech:

> We have made the decision that the Syrian opposition coalition is now inclusive enough, is reflective and representative enough of the Syrian population that we consider them the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people in opposition to the Assad regime (Madhani, 2012).

In 2014, the US announced that it had agreed with Turkey to train the moderate opposition in Syria (BBC News, 2014). A few years later, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson underlined the five critical goals of the US's Syria policy. Accordingly, the aims of the US were: "(1) defeating ISIS, (2) reducing Iranian influence, (3) reaching a negotiated solution to the Syrian civil war, (4) removing Bashar Assad; and (5) ensuring that Syria is not producing weapons of mass destruction" (Turkish Heritage Organization, 2020). In

2015, stating that Assad and his regime created the instability in Syria, the US underlined that the solution entailed his immediate removal from power (Cumhuriyet, 2015). Subsequently, the US announced the establishment of the SDF, which, at the time, included 50,000 Kurdish-Arab fighters that would offset Russia's support of the Assad regime and the increasingly powerful Iranian branch of Hezbollah; these fighters would not only combat the regime alliance but also fight to take Raqqa back from ISIL (Milliyet, 2015). However, cooperation between Turkey and the US in the joint fight against ISIL did not correspond with the overall support given by the US to the Kurdish opposition and the fight against the YPG/PKK terrorist organization in northern Syria.

The program, established by the US in 2013 to "equip" and "train" opposition fighters against the Assad government, was stopped by the US administration in 2017 (Walcott, 2017). This step was interpreted as the US's acceptance of the strengthening of Russia and Iran in Syria; it was also seen as a sign that America wanted to improve its relationship with Russia regarding Syria (Walcott, 2017). However, the US-Turkey relationship had further deteriorated due to US support for the Kurdish opposition, which allowed Turkey to get closer to Russia – and also further along in a deal concerning the deployment of Russian S-400 missile systems in Turkey (Siccardi, 2021). After ISIL was weakened, Turkey's primary goal in Syria was to weaken YPG/PKK forces. Its support of other opposition groups and its rapprochement with Russia prompted the US to distrust Turkey (Siccardi, 2021). Thus, the conflict between two principal actors in the Syrian war, the US and Turkey, and the conflict of interest between them emerges as one of the largest obstacles to ending the conflict in Syria. The distrust of the parties involved prevents a possible consensus between them, and this situation enables the regime, strongly supported by Russia and Iran, to consolidate its power.

Russia is one of the most important actors in the war in terms of its bilateral relations with the region's countries and its Syria policy. Syria is in a key position in terms of Russia's historical ties with the country and its interests in the Middle East. Syria's adoption of nationalist and anti-Western policies since its independence has brought it closer to Russia since the Cold War period. Syria's geopolitical position is attractive to Russia as it undermines the US foreign policy goal of surrounding Russia (Çalışkan, 2015). For Russia, after the two Chechen conflicts following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the security of its southern regions and containment of radical Islam have become strategic

issues, and its good relations with Islamic states strengthened its geopolitical desires to prevent Western attacks and access the Mediterranean (Kreutz, 2010). According to Kreutz, Russia's Syria and Middle East policy is, in essence, a defence policy for Russia to develop its economic and political interests in the region and protect its southern border in a non-aggressive way (Kreutz, 2010).

One of the most important factors furthering Russia's military, economic, and political interests in the region is the advantage it has gained in Tartus. In 1971, Russia obtained the right to establish a naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus (Cordesman, 2015). This means that Russia's reach now extends to the Mediterranean. The fact that Russia can reach the Mediterranean from the Black Sea means that "Russia gets rid of its geopolitical position stuck in the land geography between the frozen seas and its involvement in the Levant trade, which promises wealth" (Hosking, 2019). In addition, according to the 2001 Russian Naval Doctrine, the Mediterranean was accepted as part of the Atlantic region and a dimension of Russian naval power in terms of regional security; it was stated that the security of the Black Sea Basin starts from the Mediterranean (Çalışkan, 2015). With this development, Russia's goal of reaching the Mediterranean, which has been going on for hundreds of years, was finally realized. Cooperation with a country like Syria in the Middle East is essential today in terms of the power consolidation and national security of the two countries.

After Russia acquired the base in Tartus, thousands of Syrian officers received military training in the Soviet Union, and the twenty-year Friendship and Cooperation Agreement signed between the two countries in 1980 added multidimensionality and depth to bilateral relations (Aslanlı, 2018). Today, the Middle East region ranks second in Russia's arms export destinations after Asia Pacific (Zulfqar, 2018). Over time, Syria has also become an important market for Russian weapons. Between 2005 and 2010, Russia exported around $3 billion worth of weapons to Syria (Kamalov, 2013). In 2010 alone, the value of weapons exported from Russia to Syria was $700 million, corresponding to 7% of Russia's arms sales (Daou, 2012). In addition, Russia, with its significant military presence in Syria, also has air defence systems and air and land fleets in the country (Özcan, 2021).

Syria's tense relationship with the US and security concerns arising from the Israeli issue have been decisive in the rapprochement of Syria with Russia. Seeing Israel as a constant external threat, Syria's loss of the Golan Heights, a natural security barrier, has increased its insecurity and fear in the region (Zulfqar, 2018). Moreover, the invasion of Iraq by the US in 2003 caused Syria to perceive Western imperialism as a threat to its security once again and to feel stuck between the US in the East and Israel in the West (Hinnebusch, 2009). The Syrian President expected Moscow to have a more vital political role in the Middle East when he said, "The Arab World has great hopes to strengthen Moscow's hand in the world" (Kreutz, 2010). Therefore, Syria sees cooperation with Russia as balancing the power of the US in the region and ensuring its security against external threats.

Unlike the bloc led by the US and Turkey in the Syrian Civil War, Russia has sided with the regime from the very beginning. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who made a statement on May 13 soon after the events started in Syria, stated that they were against the intervention of foreign powers in Syria and that no one should be trying for the "Libya scenario" in Syria (Miş, 2011). In this context, it was underlined that no UN sanctions would be allowed. The use of chemical weapons by the regime in Ghouta in 2013 made the US, which sees the use of chemical weapons as a red line, start preparations for military intervention in Syria. However, the same year, Russia sent weapons equipped with more advanced radar systems to prevent a possible military operation by the West in Syria (Gorden & Schmitt, 2013).

At a time when the Assad regime was immensely weakened militarily, Idlib was captured by the opposition in the north, attacks on Daraa increased, and ISIL seized and sacked the desert city of Palmyra in the south; the regime was thought to be close to collapse (Phillips C. , 2016). What changed its fate was Russia's involvement in the war in September 2015. Thus, Russia used its veto power to limit the sanctions against Syria in the international arena, and the military aid it provided to the Assad regime increased to the next level. At Assad's invitation – Russia's support was requested in a letter he sent directly to Putin – Russia started air strikes in Syria (BBC News, 2015). It officially became a party to the war in September 2015. Therefore, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, the Russian military was deployed outside the territory of the former Soviet Union, offering its direct support to the Assad regime (Phillips C. , 2016). Although Russia explains its presence in Syria as fighting against ISIL and other radical Islamic groups, it is thought

that its primary purpose is to show its ability to use hard power and successfully defend its geopolitical interests against the West, led by the US, especially after its wars in Georgia and Ukraine (Antonyan, 2018).

Russia's involvement in the stalemated conflict has changed the balance of power in the region (Phillips C. , 2016), and it quickly put the Assad regime ahead of the opposition and their supporters. The downing of a SU-24 Russian warplane that violated Turkish airspace on the Syrian border on November 24, 2015, by Turkish F-16s caused a sudden deterioration in relations between Turkey and Russia (NTV, 2015). Russian President Vladimir Putin, stating, "We interpret the shooting down of the Russian plane as being stabbed in the back," announced that they had placed an S-400 missile defence system in Syria, a cruiser was sent to the Eastern Mediterranean, military relations with Turkey were suspended, and economic sanctions would be applied against Turkey (CNN Türk, 2015). Against Putin, who accused Turkey of buying ISIL-sourced oil, Turkey accused Russia of supporting the Assad regime, which, it believed, practiced state terrorism against its citizens. After Turkey apologized to Russia in June 2016, Russia lifted the economic sanctions, and after that, relations between the two countries were re-established based on cooperation.

In December 2016, the Russian-backed regime forces captured Aleppo, winning their most significant victory since the beginning of the conflict (Paraschos, 2017). Diplomatic initiatives to resolve the conflicts, led by Russia and Turkey, gained momentum. At the end of 2016, a ceasefire was declared across Syria at the behest of Russia and Turkey, excluding al-Nusra and ISIL. Afterwards, again initiated by Russia and Turkey, a meeting was organized in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, to bring the parties in Syria together (BBC News, 2017). It is believed that Turkey and Russia getting the Syrian government and their opposition together in Astana at a time when the Geneva process held at the UN tried to be revitalized was also a reflection of the changing situation in the field (BBC News, 2017). While the US strongly rejected this, the American government stated that the Geneva process would continue to be politically exclusive and would not allow Russia to manipulate political developments with the Astana Process (Humud & Blanchard, 2020). As a result of the negotiations, it was decided that Russia, Turkey, and Iran would be designated as "guarantor" countries, and "de-escalation zones" would be determined in which the use of air and land weapons would be stopped; in addition, urgent and

uninterrupted humanitarian aid flow would be provided (BBC News, 2017). Thus, while Russia and Iran enabled the Assad regime to take the lead in conflicts with the military support they provided, they further strengthened their position in the Syrian crisis with the diplomatic initiatives they initiated with Turkey. Both militarily and diplomatically, they seemed ahead of the US-led West.

While it is known that bombers sent by Russia to support the Assad regime were taking off from an Iranian airbase, Iran worried about a possible US-Russian rapprochement – provided that US sanctions against Russia were lifted (Paraschos, 2017). Russia is one of the most critical stakeholders in the Syrian crisis for Iran, which did not want the US to participate in the Astana talks. According to Balanche, Iran and Russia complement each other militarily in helping the Assad regime. Iran would not have been influential in ground operations if Russia did not dominate the Syrian airspace – just as Russian air strikes would not have been effective without the ground operations of Iran and Syria (Antonyan, 2018). Iran and Russia, which need each other in Syria, have effectively divided the country into two control zones: the southwest, maintained by Iran, and the northwest and Palmyra, controlled by Russia (Balanche, 2016). Moreover, Russia and Iran have common interests in protecting the Assad regime and fighting radical Islamist organizations in Syria (Antonyan, 2018). This mutual power relationship in favour of Assad strengthens his negotiating position (Antonyan, 2018). In addition, after the port of Tartus was leased to Russia for 49 more years by the regime in 2019 (Habertürk, 2019), Russia further consolidated its power and influence in Syria.

In line with the interests of Turkey and Iran, two important regional actors of the war, these two nations generally maintain good relations with Russia. The problems with the US have a significant effect on this. In terms of Russia, the support given to the Assad regime is based on its strategic goals. At the same time, the current Russian administration's policy of dominance over the US and countering the US in the Middle East region increase the tension between the parties. Russia seems to need the support of Iran and Turkey to maintain its superior position in the war. However, this multilateral competition and struggle contribute to its deadlock.

As a result, the Syrian war, which started as a violent civil war stemming from Syria's social, ethnic, religious, and political structures, has become multilateral with the

participation of non-state actors and regional and global players. The conflicting interests of these outside participants have turned the Syrian war into an endless proxy war. The Syrian territory has become an area where regional, global, and non-state actors struggle for power. Today, this territory is divided into regions controlled by internal and external forces. The structure of the Middle East, defined by "conflict," leads the international community to accept this situation as normal and generally remain silent about the war's deadlock. The fact that both parties supporting the Assad regime and those supporting the opposition have different goals and interests causes the war to prolong because the regional and global powers involved in the Syrian Civil War have irreconcilable geopolitical interests and different visions for Syria's political and social order (Asseburg, 2020). Each entity pursuing its interests in Syria considers that the Syrian war is a way to change the geostrategic dynamics (Tan & Perudin, 2019). The side that loses the war or that is on the losing side may have to relinquish the rich energy resources of the Middle East and a place of dominance in the region; thus, its position in world politics will be weakened. At this point, the fact that the crisis is still ongoing shows that diplomatic efforts are also insufficient.

3.4 OTHER REGIONAL FACTORS

Although they are not decisive in the course of the war as the main actors in the region, the policies of other regional states also contribute to the continuation of the Syrian war. Israel, Qatar, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan are important countries in the region that have been influential in the Syrian crisis. At the beginning of the conflict, Israel wanted the Assad regime to stay in power with a "the devil we know" approach; however, with the "Resistance Axis" gaining control in favour of Iran, Israel supported the idea of removing the Assad regime from power (Rabinovich, 2012). Iran's influence over neighbouring Syria on the Israeli border worries the Israelis (Hanauer, 2016). Even though it wants a change of regime, Israel has security concerns about the uncertain consequences regime change would entail and about the potential for an increase in radical Islamist organizations in Syria; therefore, it has chosen to be cautious about any transformation (Tür, 2015) and refrained from supporting one side in the Syrian Civil war (Hanauer, 2016).

However, Israel has not been entirely inactive. It did not hesitate to provide humanitarian aid to the Syrians and retaliate against enemy sources from Syria; it also tried to thwart

Hezbollah's efforts to strengthen its arsenal with advanced weapons (Yadlin, 2016). Israel admitted that it carried out more than 200 airstrikes targeting Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria up until 2020 (Humud & Blanchard, 2020). While these attacks did not have a decisive effect on the course of the war, it is clear that they weakened the Assad regime's power and increased the number of conflicting parties. As a result, Israel, which has limited ability to shape the results of the conflicts, has tried to protect its territory against a possible Iran-Hezbollah attack to guarantee its security.

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Qatar is the country that has come to the fore with its support of the opposition groups in the war. In recent years, it has been among the region's major countries because of its growing economy and good relations with the West. Not wanting Syria to be a constant source of conflict like Iraq, Qatar started to support the opposition against Assad and stood out as an influential actor in the crisis thanks to a foreign policy focused on diplomacy and mediation (Görgülü, 2018). At the beginning of the crisis, Syria's membership in the Arab League was suspended because of Qatari initiatives (NTV, 2011). In 2012, the Syrian opposition gathered in Qatar and established the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (BBC, 2012). Qatar provided significant financial and military support to the Syrian opposition in the following period. In the first two years of the war, it spent $3 billion financing the opposition, more than any other state (Khalaf & Fielding Smith, 2013). In addition, Qatar also provided media support to the opposition through its Doha-based Al-Jazeera news network (Ulrichsen, 2014).

However, Qatar's Syria policy became a nuisance to Saudi Arabia. Although Qatar's rivalry with its larger neighbour is decades long, unlike Saudi Arabia, which blames Syria for the murder of Rafic Hariri in Lebanon, Qatar's support of the Assad regime made the enmity between the two countries even more evident (AbuKhalil, 2018). The differences in opinion between the two countries have increased since 2013, so they started to support competing groups in Syria (Görgülü, 2018). While the Saudis saw the Muslim Brotherhood as a radical and increasingly dangerous Islamic power, Qatar sought to ally itself with it to become a significant player in the Middle East, despite Saudi Arabia's stance (Blanga, 2017). The increasing division, mainly over which Muslim brethren are supported in the Syrian crisis, has increased the political clashes between the two and

deepened the cracks between the Syrian opposition (Blanga, 2017). While this situation has fuelled the political and military deadlock, it also has caused the war to prolong.

The diversity of the opposition in Syria and the emergence of new groups that are growing and diversifying with the financial support given by the Gulf countries make the solution increasingly difficult. Although some groups supported financially and militarily disintegrated over time, new groups emerged after them. Görgülü (2018) summarizes the situation as follows:

> It is not possible to describe the opposition in Syria under any single category or as a single group; instead, it is possible to identify a number of partnerships and groupings that have emerged, ended, and resumed over this period. Since the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, a number of Gulf states, including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE in addition to Qatar, have given financial support to various wings of the opposition. Over time, as the opposition disintegrated and new groups formed, the Gulf states have continued to identify and support new groups in Syria (Görgülü, 2018).

Unless the cycle that constantly feeds the opposition financially and militarily is broken, it does not seem likely that the Syrian war will be resolved. Assad, who took back Aleppo in 2017, stated that as long as the terrorist groups in his country continue to be supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and western powers, the war in Syria would not end, and there would be no winners (Namias, 2017).

Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan are among the countries most affected by the conflicts in Syria. While the sectarian strife has deepened sectarian fissures in Iraq and Lebanon, fighters from these countries have separately supported both the Sunni opposition and the Assad regime (Kinninmont, 2014). While Iran-backed Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite fighters support the regime, Sunni fighters support the Syrian opposition. Although Jordan is reluctant to involve itself in the war directly, the number of Syrian refugees in this country is increasing Jordan's economic and political burden (Kinninmont, 2014). However, Jordan's historical position as a transit country in the drug trade between Syria and the Gulf countries and the fact that it allows large monetary transactions (İbrahim, 2022) that strengthen radical groups and criminal networks in Syria help contribute to the continuation of the war. Iraq has not provided a comprehensive and coherent solution for the camps in north-eastern Syria that contain large numbers of Iraqi ISIL members, which poses a significant problem for Iraq and Syria – and for the region as a whole (İbrahim,

2022). Iraq's inability to fight ISIL, known to have originated, has only fuelled the Syrian war and instability in the region. While fighting against ISIL was a primary motivation to participate in the war for some regional and global powers, eradicating the group has taken many years.

In summary, although the Syrian war started as a civil war driven by social, economic, political, and sectarian problems and divisions from Syria, it has turned into a proxy war involving regional and global powers. The irreconcilable interests of the actors involved have caused the war to continue because the number and diversity of these actors do not make reconciliation possible. The Syrian opposition and the forces supporting them are separated from each other. Even though the primary motivation of the forces supporting the opposition is the fall of the Assad regime, they are waging proxy wars over non-state actors to rebuild their influence in the region. While Iran and Russia, which support the Assad regime, they have provided continued military, political, and economic support for the Assad regime to stay in power. In this way, they have consolidated the regime's power and their own. Although this consolidation of power makes them appear ahead of the opposition, the inability to establish a reconciliation plan to end the war continues. None of those involved in Syria wants to lose because of the importance of Syria in the region and world politics. However, the opportunities offered by remaining engaged in the Middle East and Syria show that this region will not be easily abandoned, which explains why the war in Syria has continued for over a decade.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to determine why the Syrian war has continued for more than ten years. A conceptual framework was first presented, followed by sections on how the war started, the involvement of regional and global actors, and the political relations of the actors with each other. Lastly, the main factors determining the actors' policies in the war were discussed. All actors involved in the Syrian war have acted according to their national interests and security concerns, and alliance arrangements have been formed in this direction. Because it is a place where conflicts of interest and power struggles have occurred for over a decade, the Syrian territory has turned into a fight that no actor wants to lose. In this respect, the Syrian Civil War stand out, and being on the losing side in Syria means losing in the Middle East.

The Syrian war has been discussed extensively in the literature from different theoretical and conceptual frameworks with its economic, social, and political dimensions. These studies mostly explore the context of the Syrian policies of the actors involved in the war and their political relations with each other, along with security and migration issues. One of the first questions is when the war will end at a time when uncertainties, humanitarian crises, environmental disasters, and economic problems increase in the world. However, studies on when and how the Syrian war, which has caused nearly 7 million Syrians to become refugees in different countries, will conclude are lacking in the literature. To close this gap, this study focused on regional and international factors within the framework of third-party interventions in civil wars and analysed the factors originating from Syria itself. Each factor deserves a separate and detailed study in the context of the central question of this thesis. However, the present thesis concentrated on regional factors, considered more important in terms of the diversity of actors and their influence on the dynamics of war.

The Middle East, especially since the 20th century, has been referred to as a conflict-prone region due to its local, religious and ethnic conflicts, political crises, military coups, and disputes between the great powers. The Arab-Israeli conflicts, the Palestinian refugee issue, the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (1990) have made the region unstable and open to foreign interventions in almost every period. After the attacks on September 11, the US invaded

Iraq in 2003 within the scope of the "fight against terrorism" doctrine. The collapse of the authoritarian Iraqi regime, which had been going on for years, resulted in a power vacuum. Radical Islamist organizations such as Al-Qaeda attempted to fill this vacuum. While sectarian divisions deepened in the region, the Middle East became geopolitically divided into two sides: pro-US moderate countries and anti-US radical countries. As a result, these alliances, reshaped around Russia and the US, nearly started a "New Cold War" in the Middle East. The uprisings in Tunisia in 2010 quickly made the region experience a long, cold, and dark winter.

The civil demonstrations in Syria in March 2011 rapidly turned into a civil war. In this study, the process leading to the Syrian war was discussed from a historical perspective; it also analysed how Syria's social, economic, and political structure facilitated processes that led to the war. Considering the country's economically, socially, and politically divided structure, the Syrian Civil War is regarded as a multi-cause, multidimensional, and complex war. The inability of the Assad regime to stop the conflicts and realize expected reforms caused the international community to increase its pressure against it. Turkey, the US, and the EU have not refrained from expressing their adverse reactions to the regime nor supporting the Syrian opposition. They wanted the political transition process to be completed immediately and implemented several diplomatic initiatives to find a political solution to the conflict. In 2012, Kofi Annan was appointed as the UN Special Representative, and the Geneva Conference was convened under American and Russian leadership. Following the capture of Raqqa by the opposition in 2013, Iran increased its military support of the Assad regime. The regime's use of chemical weapons in Eastern Ghouta, the declaration about the caliphate by ISIL in 2014, and the US's launch of air strikes the same year as part of the fight against ISIL were important turning points in the war. Russia, showing its support for the regime by vetoing the sanction decisions on Syria in the UN Security Council at every opportunity, directly intervened in the war at the invitation of the Assad regime in 2015 and changed the war's course.

Today, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council directly and/or indirectly support a group militarily, economically, and/or politically in the Syrian war. The Syrian war has turned into a new battleground for historical hostilities to be played out. Indeed, the animosity between the US and Iran and the geopolitical conflict between Russia and the US, which continued with the colour revolutions in the 2000s and the Georgian-

Russian war, continue today in Syria. On the one hand, as the US fights radical Islamist organizations within the framework of the fight against terrorism, it supports sectarian conflicts in Syria in favour of "moderate Sunni states" in line with its interests. This "double game" fuels the conflicts in Syria. On the other hand, Russia shows at every opportunity that it will not allow a "US-led" regime change in Syria after its experiences in Libya and Iraq; as a result, Russia has stood out as a critical actor in the Syrian war. Russia wants to maintain its influence in the region and globally, and Syria is indispensable for protecting its geopolitical interests. With its presence in Syria, Russia is again trying to show its clout in world politics.

Besides Russia, Iran is another important supporter of the Syrian regime. Although sectarian ties partly explain the cooperation between the two countries, the alliance between Syria, a pan-Arab secular Socialist republic, and Iran, a pan-Islamic theocracy, is much more complex and can be explained by factors other than sectarian ties. Iran's support of the Assad regime is mainly shaped within the framework of its real-political interests. Moreover, the two countries have a common threat perception; Syria's geopolitical location – its access to the Mediterranean and its geographical proximity to Israel and Lebanon – makes Syria indispensable for Iran, which sees Syria's security as its security. This consideration has increased Iran's effectiveness in Syria and the region, a reality that disturbs Saudi Arabia. To the Saudis, the overthrow of Assad is seen as something that will diminish Iranian influence in both Syria and Lebanon. Although many experts consider that the US-backed Saudi Arabia and Russia-backed Iran rivalries, which have existed since the Cold War, are sectarian, the policies of the two countries, both in Syria and in the region, are now discussed on a much more strategic and real-political basis. While both countries want to strengthen their spheres of influence in the region, the security concerns and geopolitical interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran are decisive in their policies in Syria. In this regard, it is thought that sectarian discourses are used as tools to make broader geopolitical moves.

Another important regional actor in the Syrian war is Turkey. Until the 2000s, Turkey's relations with Syria had been shaped around three main concerns: the Hatay issue, the water problem, and terrorism. Although they came to the brink of war many times, relations between Syria and Turkey started to improve in 2002 with the rise in power of the JDP. The emphasis on "history", "culture", and "Islam" has come to the fore in

Turkish foreign policy within a framework of "zero problems with neighbours" and "Neo-Ottomanism". In this context, Turkish officials have asked the Assad regime to stop the fighting and implement expected reforms, describing the conflicts in Syria as an internal matter. However, these reforms were not realized, and relations worsened and eventually broke down entirely in 2012. From then on, Turkey has expressed that the only solution in Syria was overthrowing the Assad regime; the then-Prime Minister Erdoğan conveyed the following message in September 2012: "I hope we will go to Damascus as soon as possible and pray" (Hürriyet, 2012). Thus, Turkey initially sided against the Assad regime in the Syrian war, and this has come at a high economic, political, social, and military cost.

In 2016, Turkey launched cross-border military operations to ensure its national security due to increasing terrorist attacks, fight PKK/YPG elements, and return the Syrians it hosts to safe areas because of the refugees' increasing economic, social, and political burden. Although it believed it was left alone by allies in these operations, Turkey, not giving up its determination, emphasized at every opportunity that it would not allow a terror corridor to form on its southern border and that it wanted to end terrorism at its source. However, Turkey has sought diplomatic solutions to the deadlock in Syria and conducted military operations. The US's decision to withdraw from Syria in 2019 enabled Russia and Iran to consolidate their power and presence. With the support of these two countries, the Assad regime's protection of power has shown over time that a solution without him would not be possible. In the Astana Peace Talks, initiated in 2017 by Turkey, Iran, and Russia, Turkey's primary stance changed from wanting to overthrow Assad to preventing the establishment of an independent Kurdish state on its southern border. The Turkish authorities, expressing that they were in favour of preserving the territorial integrity of Syria at every opportunity, made a compulsory policy change due to the cost of the Syrian war in terms of Turkey's domestic and foreign policy.

In summary, regional factors have had an important place among the dynamics that determine the course of the Syrian war. In addition to Syria's geopolitical position, its proximity to Lebanon and Israel and common enemy perceptions such as the US and Israel make the Assad regime indispensable for Iran; however, for Saudi Arabia, which sees Iran as a threat to both its national security and the security of the region, overthrowing Assad means weakening Iran's influence in the area. Establishing a pro-

Saudi Arabian Syrian government to replace Assad implies that the Saudis could consolidate regional power. The ongoing rivalry between pro-US Saudi Arabia and pro-Russian Iran, which has been going on since the Cold War, continues on a strategic and real-political basis through Syria. The main areas of competition between the two countries are shaped by geopolitics, security, and national interests. Unfortunately, his rivalry and the two countries' irreconcilable interests prolong the Syrian war.

Turkey, also an essential player in Syria, has generally developed its relations with Syria on a security-based basis. Until the 2000s, when relations began to improve, the water problem and terrorism issue were decisive in the relations between the two countries. In the first years of the war, the relations between the two progressed on political, diplomatic, and humanitarian grounds. Still, it soon shifted to discussions surrounding military and security issues. Due to the power vacuum created by the civil war in Syria, terrorist groups that re-emerged on Syrian territory have become a serious threat to Turkey's national security. In this context, Turkey's security concerns increased fragility in domestic and foreign policy due to Syrian refugees, and the economic costs are now the main determinants of Turkey's Syria policy. It is difficult to predict when the war will end unless Turkey's security concerns are addressed.

The scope of the Syrian war, a multi(f)actor civil war, is wide. Although it started as a multi-factional civil war with political, economic, military, sociological, religious, regional and global variables, it has turned into a multi-actor proxy war. The diversity of actors makes reconciliation difficult, while the absence of a ceasefire, peace agreement, or defeat makes it challenging to predict when the war will end. The standard view is that it is much more difficult for parties to compromise in a civil war than in an interstate war. Therefore, the absolute victory of one of the parties is more likely to contribute to the end of the war than a negotiated solution. However, third-party interventions that typically prolong the duration of civil wars could contribute to an end by increasing the probability of victory, and this could change the balance of power in favour of one side. In the Syrian war, Russia's involvement in 2015 and the fact that the war turned in favour of the Assad regime can be evaluated in this context. According to Fearon and Laitin (2008), a third guarantor state is needed for a civil war to reach a negotiated settlement. Turkey, Russia, and Iran stand out as possible guarantor states in terms of their diplomatic initiatives. However, Turkey is considered to be in a privileged position against Iran and Russia as it

is the only country that carries out dialogue with the Syrian opposition and other regional and global actors involved in the war. Negotiations that started at the intelligence level with the Assad regime in 2020 have now moved to higher levels. Although the knots in the Syrian war could be disentangled with Turkey's efforts, many believe it will take a long time for all parties to reach an absolute consensus and, in the end, no war ever has a real winner.

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