

The Impact of the Russian-Turkish Proxy War in Syria on Stability in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the nature of the proxy war between Russia and Turkey in the Syrian conflict, as well as the impact of the Syrian conflict on the stability of the Middle East. In this study, the author employs a qualitative research method, collecting data through a literature review. The concept of 'proxy war' is utilised to analyse the nature of the Russian-Turkish proxy war in Syria. Furthermore, to examine the impact of the Syrian conflict on the stability of the Middle East, the analysis is based on the concept of the 'Regional Security Complex'. The findings of this study reveal that a proxy war is being waged by Russia and Turkey in Syria, taking the form of both soft power and hard power. Both countries provide assistance in the form of arms and military equipment, financial support, backing in international forums, and even direct military intervention. Consequently, this proxy war has led to instability not only in Syria but also at the regional and global levels.

KEYWORDS

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Introduction

The Middle East is a region with a highly volatile geopolitical landscape. The political and security conditions in this region are influenced by various surrounding powers (Zada, 2015). Furthermore, the region's geographical location places it at the crossroads of Asia, Europe and Africa. Events in the Middle East continue to this day to influence the interests and foreign policy directions of nations across the globe. The region serves as both a trade route and a communication corridor linking Africa, Asia and Europe. It is also known to hold 60 per cent of the world's oil reserves and 40 per cent of its natural gas reserves.

Middle Eastern regionalism is defined in terms of cultural spheres and political terminology used to refer to a region comprising several countries on the Arabian Peninsula. The Middle East encompasses Western Asia and North Africa (Ruslin, 2013). The countries in this region share similarities in various aspects, such as history, culture, topography, demography and systems of government. Conditions in the Middle East can be described as characterised by a weak economy, high rates of unemployment and poverty, social

inequality, and civil and political freedoms restricted by the ruling regimes. Clement Henry Moore (cited in Indrajati, 2017) refers to these systems of government as 'Bunker Regimes'.

The political dynamics unfolding in the region have captured the attention of nations around the world. Ideological, political, religious and socio-economic interests clash, giving rise to complex issues. This is inextricably linked to religious sectarianism—namely between Sunnis and Shias—which has existed for a long time. Sunnis and Shias are two competing branches of Islam vying for dominance in the Middle East. This has been the case from the time of the Caliphate until the present day. Furthermore, situated between them are the Jewish people, who have sought to expand their territory, leading to hostility from both Shias and Sunnis. On the other hand, rivalry between pro-democratic Western nations and communist states also played a part in the Middle East. These rivalries subsequently led to wars. Some of the most notable examples are the Arab–Israeli War, the Gulf War, and the civil wars in Libya, Yemen and Syria, which are still ongoing.

Between 2010 and 2011, a fruit and vegetable vendor in Tunisia set himself alight in protest against the treatment he had received from the security forces. No one could have foreseen the events that would follow. This incident sparked a mass movement that rapidly spread from Tunisia to Egypt. What began as an individual act eventually became a mass movement that led to a conflict between the civilian population and the regime (a civil war) (Serman, 2019). These events took the Arab rulers by surprise, as regimes that had previously never faced large-scale resistance from their people were now toppled by sustained popular movements. A regime that had been authoritarian and powerful for decades was threatened with collapse. This marked a highly significant change for the Arab world, as the system of government and politics—which had been absolute for decades—was now threatened by the democratisation sought by the vast majority of the Arab people (Zada, 2015).

Consequently, the ongoing political transformation has created vulnerabilities to the stability and security of both the state and the region. It is amidst this transition that various political actors and movements—including jihadist, liberal and socialist groups—have begun to emerge, vying for power. (Zada, 2015). Since the Arab Spring, the process of democratisation in the Middle East does not appear to be progressing well. Similarly, the political and security situation has not recovered immediately. Indeed, the region has experienced a decline in social, economic and political terms.

The instability in the Middle East following the Arab Spring has, in fact, been caused by protracted civil wars. Upon closer examination, the civil wars that have taken place in several Middle Eastern countries have involved numerous actors—not only domestic ones, but also regional and global actors. Based on these characteristics, it can be concluded that the instability experienced in the Middle East in the years following the Arab Spring has been caused by proxy wars.

Syria is one of the countries experiencing a proxy war. According to a document published by the General Secretariat of the People's Representative Council of the Republic of Indonesia (DPR RI), the conflict in Syria constitutes a proxy war because it involves external powers such as Russia, the United States, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt; consequently, it has the potential to increase instability not only in Syria itself, but also to have an impact on the region and globally

(Poltak Partogi Nainggolan, 2022). As has been the case in several other Arab countries, Syria has also been plunged into internal conflict. Since 2011, the Syrian conflict has become a major conflict that has opened a new chapter whilst also linking several previous conflicts within a regional rivalry for influence and power. Many countries are involved in the regional political constellation, leading to prolonged instability. Russia and Turkey are two countries that have played a major role in the dynamics unfolding in Syria.

Russia's support for Bashar al-Assad stems from the close ties between the two countries dating back to the Cold War. Russia has been seeking new allies in the Middle East following the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya by the West and its allies. Furthermore, Russia also wishes to position itself to play a role on the international stage (Rosales, 2020). On the other hand, Turkey is one of the countries affected by the civil war in Syria. Historically, since Syria has been led by the Assad family, relations between Turkey and Syria have always been poor. This is due to Syria's claims over the Turkish region of Hatay, water disputes, and Syria's support for Kurdish groups that pose a threat to Turkey (Sandhiyudha, 2017). The involvement of Russia and Turkey in the civil conflict in Syria has the potential to exacerbate the situation in that country. These nations have their own respective interests, the realisation of which will depend on the outcome of the conflict. It is for this reason that they are present there, seeking to safeguard their respective interests.

A geopolitical analyst (Cohen, 2009), in his book entitled "Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations", states that acute internal conflicts and foreign intervention have led to the Middle East being categorised as a 'shatterbelt'—that is, a region characterised by a high level of instability. This high level of instability naturally has an impact on many countries, both directly and indirectly. Furthermore, Barry Buzan and Imanuel Waever (2003) argue in their theory that internal unrest within a state not only threatens that state's security, but also has the potential to pose a threat to its neighbouring states, as well as to regional and global security. Conflicts occurring within a region always carry the potential to spread more widely, as the security structure is shaped by interactions between states, meaning that their security is mutually influential and interdependent.

Based on the above explanation, the involvement of external actors in proxy wars within a conflict contributes to the instability of a country or even a region. This paper specifically examines the nature of the Russian and Turkish proxy wars in Syria and outlines the impact of Russian and Turkish involvement on stability in the Middle East from the aftermath of the Arab Spring until 2017.

Literature Review

The study of Rivai (2019) explains that the presence of external actors in a country's internal conflict is one of the factors contributing to the prolonged duration of a war. This is because the greater the number of combatants involved, the more conflicting interests there are to reconcile, making it extremely difficult to find a solution or a middle ground to the conflict.

Peace efforts have also become extremely difficult because the external actors involved prioritise their own countries' interests in the Syrian conflict over those of the domestic actors themselves. In light of this situation, the study concluded that the protracted conflict is caused by the involvement of external actors and that peace will be achieved if the actors

involved withdraw on humanitarian grounds or other normative considerations (Rivai M. R., 2019).

Subsequently, research into Russian-Turkish relations in Syria conducted by Hasanuddin University alumni and lecturers Haydhar M. Bachtiar and Agussalim Burhanuddin found that a dynamic of 'hard balancing' exists between Russia and Turkey in Syria. This 'hard balancing' rivalry between the two powerful nations has caused the conflict in Syria to drag on (Burhanuddin, 2019)

Research on Middle Eastern stability was also conducted by (Basundoro, 2020) in a journal article entitled "The Contemporary Saudi-Iranian Proxy War as a Form of Middle Eastern Turbulence". In his research, Basundoro found that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the Middle East manifests itself in the form of a proxy war. Basundoro examined the impact of the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the stability of the Middle East region using the theory of internal conflict proposed by Michael Brown. In truth, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been ongoing for a long time. This is due to sectarian competition within Islam between Sunni Muslims, the majority of whom are in Saudi Arabia, and Shia Muslims, the majority of whom are in Iran. However, as a result of political instability in several Middle Eastern countries following the Arab Spring, the rivalry between these two Islamic nations has reignited. Both nations are waging proxy wars to advance their interests and expand their hegemony in the region. The study concludes that this situation has led to a balance of power, resulting in endless conflict in the Middle East (Basundoro, 2020).

Furthermore, a study by Arini (2021) states that the civil conflict in Libya is heavily influenced by external actors. The presence of two factions, represented by Turkey and Egypt in this study, has further exacerbated the situation. Turkey and Egypt are rival nations in this conflict. As explained in several other studies, there are many factors that lead external states to pursue their own agendas in the conflicts of other nations. Although both are predominantly Sunni Muslim countries, their interests in this instance stem not only from oil but also from ideological differences regarding the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya. In his research, he concluded that the worsening situation in Libya is due to the involvement of external actors. Apart from Turkey, there are many other external actors involved in this civil conflict.

From the findings of several previous studies, it is clear that when external actors become involved in a conflict, it becomes extremely difficult to achieve a peaceful resolution. External actors waging proxy wars often serve to prolong the conflict, thereby causing instability in a particular region.

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach and, in the course of the study, does not utilise statistical data or other quantitative procedures. This research seeks to understand and interpret a particular event or phenomenon. Qualitative research tends to be descriptive and narrative in nature when analysing a specific issue based on the data and facts that have been collected. The author has used this method to analyse the impact of the Russian-Turkish proxy war in Syria on regional stability in the Middle East.

In this study, the author examines the phenomena occurring on the ground and collects concrete data. The author will then assess whether the Russian-Turkish proxy war in Syria

is the cause of the protracted conflict and instability in the Middle East. This study is a form of generalisation in which the relationship between two distinct concepts leads to a conclusion. This conclusion can then be applied to similar phenomena under the same conditions.

The Dynamics of Russian-Turkish Relations

Russia and Turkey have clashed on approximately ten occasions, with Russia emerging victorious in the majority of these conflicts, resulting in the expansion of Russian territory and influence into Asian regions that were formerly under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Their rivalry has persisted since 1568 and continues into the contemporary era. This rivalry spans various fields, particularly geopolitics. The Republic of Turkey was established following the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate after the First World War (Yusup, 2017).

In the contemporary era, the rivalry between Russia and Turkey as they pursue their respective interests in the Eurasian region has led both nations to become embroiled in proxy wars in the South Caucasus, Libya and Syria, resulting in differing outcomes. In the conflict in Libya, Russia and Turkey did not act independently but joined alliances with other nations. The GNA (Government of National Accord), supported by Turkey, and the LNA (Libyan National Army), supported by Russia, each reached an impasse as a result of NATO intervention.

Meanwhile, in the South Caucasus, the conflict between Russia-backed Armenia and Turkey-backed Azerbaijan was won by Azerbaijan. In this conflict, both Russia and Turkey succeeded in preventing intervention by other actors. The OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Minsk Group, which had long acted as a mediator, was sidelined by the involvement of Russia and Turkey, who were waging a proxy war. Meanwhile, in Syria, the UN's role has lost its influence and been superseded by the Astana Agreement, initiated by Russia, Iran and Turkey (Russell, 2021).

Nevertheless, the two countries are not entirely free from cooperation. The accelerating process of globalisation means that both require economic cooperation with one another (Yusup, 2017). Several cooperation agreements were planned by Russia and Turkey, including the 1991 'Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation'; in 1992, there were the 'Agreement on Reciprocal Promotion and Protection of Agreements' and the 'Agreement on the Avoidance of Double Taxation'. Both of these agreements were subsequently ratified and signed in 1997. These agreements will prove increasingly beneficial to both nations (Russell, 2021). One example of Russia-Turkey cooperation is the Blue Stream project, which is a collaboration in the energy sector. This cooperation forms part of Turkey's policy in its efforts to achieve energy security. The limitations of Turkey's domestic energy resources mean that the country relies on energy imports from other nations, particularly oil and natural gas, with Russia being one of its strategic partners in this regard (Azzam, 2018).

In 2008, economic cooperation between the two countries rose to 38 billion USD, with plans to increase this to 100 billion USD. However, due to the global economic crisis in 2009, this figure fell to 22 billion USD. It rose again in 2010, with Turkey's foreign exchange earnings increasing thanks to tourism, as more than 3 million Russian tourists visited Turkey that year (Azzam, 2018).

In addition to the agreements mentioned above, Russia and Turkey also entered into a trade partnership for military equipment in 1996, which included the ATA project. The Turkish Armed Forces paid a total of 186.5 million USD to purchase military equipment from Russia. The ATA project will see 145 helicopters delivered to Turkey. Russia and Turkey have also agreed on military cooperation whereby the two countries will exchange military personnel to conduct joint military training as part of counter-terrorism efforts (Russell, 2021). On 5 November 1999, the two countries met to sign an anti-terrorism cooperation agreement. This cooperation represented a step by Russia and Turkey in combating separatist groups in their respective regions.

Although historically Russia and Turkey have agreed on numerous forms of cooperation, both military and economic, they have not been able to escape the rivalry that pits them against one another. One such conflict involving both nations took place in Syria. In the Syrian conflict, Russia and Turkey supported opposing sides, leading to their involvement in a proxy war. This has led to tensions between the two nations, particularly following an incident on 3 October 2015, when a Russian Su-30 fighter jet entered Turkish airspace after flying over northern Syria, which borders Turkey at the town of Bom. Turkey subsequently dispatched F-16 fighter jets to intercept the aircraft, ultimately forcing it to withdraw from Turkish airspace. Turkey regarded the incident as a deliberate act by Russia. In contrast, Russia claimed that the incident was a navigational error. This led to the Russian Ambassador in Ankara being summoned to receive a protest from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Following the incident, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs lodged a strong protest with the Russian Ambassador in Ankara. This incident further worsened relations between the two countries (Sandhiyudha, 2017). The following year, a tragic incident occurred. The Russian Ambassador to Ankara was killed by an armed man believed to be a Syrian rebel. The death of Andrei Karlov further worsened relations between Russia and Turkey. (Indrajati, Russian Intervention in Syria 2011–2016, 2017).

The death of the Russian Ambassador to Ankara, along with the shooting down of a Russian Su-24 aircraft—which resulted in the death of one of its pilots—triggered tensions between the two nations. This led both sides to become increasingly active in the Syrian conflict as they sought to retaliate against one another. As a result of these incidents, Russian President Vladimir Putin imposed serious consequences on Turkey. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov immediately cancelled his visit to Turkey. Furthermore, he banned Russian citizens from travelling to Turkey. This led Russia to intensify its attacks on the rebel groups it deemed to be terrorists. The tragic death of the Russian ambassador, the downing of a Russian Su-24, and the killing of a Russian soldier by rebels led Russia to further consolidate its position in Syria. Russia subsequently deployed its warships to Syrian waters off Latakia with the aim of reinforcing its air force (Sandhiyudha, 2017).

Furthermore, in November 2015, Russia announced economic sanctions against Turkey. These included a boycott of goods originating from Turkey, restrictions on Russian nationals working in Turkey, and restrictions on Turkish nationals working for Russian companies. Furthermore, both countries banned flights between the two nations and prohibited tour operators from selling ' ' holiday packages to Turkey. This was despite the fact that Russia and Turkey had previously been major trading partners, benefiting each other mutually (Sandhiyudha, 2017).

Forms of the Russia–Turkey Proxy War

Relations between Russia and Syria have long existed, and ties between the two countries have intensified following the Arab Spring. When Syria descended into civil war, Russia did not stand idly by. Seeing its ally threatened with overthrow by the opposition, Russia subsequently provided substantial aid to Syria. When the UN Security Council (UNSC) issued a resolution regarding the conflict in Syria, Humanitarian intervention was to be implemented at that time under a UN mandate on humanitarian grounds. Many countries supported the implementation of this resolution, but at that time Russia and China exercised their veto, meaning that humanitarian intervention failed to materialise.

At an international forum at the UN, Russia repeatedly criticised those arming the Syrian rebels. Although it did not name any specific parties, the accusations were directed at the United States and its allies, including Turkey. According to Russia, support for Syrian rebels violates international norms and the principle of non-intervention to safeguard state sovereignty. (Indrajati, Russian Intervention in Syria 2011–2016, 2017).

On 4 October 2011, the UN Security Council held a meeting to discuss the conflict in Syria. UN draft resolution S/2011/612 called for sanctions against the Syrian government, a cessation of the use of violence against civilians and freedom of expression, but was vetoed by Russia and China. According to Russia, the draft resolution, sponsored by France, Germany, Portugal and the United Kingdom, was not the appropriate political approach to ending the conflict. Russia firmly rejected military intervention, which the Security Council regarded as a model for future action in conjunction with NATO, as had occurred in Libya (Caesario, 2021).

Furthermore, Russia also disagreed with the Arab League's proposal calling on the two warring parties in Syria to cease all forms of armed attack and urging them to resolve the conflict through negotiations. The proposal specifically called on the Syrian government to cease attacks on civilians and protect them, release all prisoners, withdraw its military forces, guarantee civil rights, and allow demonstrations to take place. The proposal was supported by the UN Security Council and placed on the agenda for the meeting on 4 February 2012. The UN Security Council session was held in response to the Syrian military's attacks on opposition forces based in the city of Homs.

Although many countries supported the draft resolution, Russia and China once again exercised their veto and rejected the proposal in order to protect the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Russia subsequently vetoed yet another UN measure on Syria, as set out in the draft resolution tabled by the United Kingdom. It is noted that, within a nine-month period, Russia has vetoed UN resolutions on three occasions.

Subsequently, on 22 May 2014, as the conflict in Syria was still ongoing, France sought to address the humanitarian crisis unfolding there. France then sponsored a draft resolution stating that the conflict in Syria should be referred to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as it constituted a crime against humanity that had claimed many lives. This draft subsequently received the support of 13 UN Security Council member states; however, Russia and China once again exercised their veto for the fourth time, resulting in the draft failing to be adopted. Russia's perspective on the conflict in Syria has consistently differed from that of the other UN Security Council members. According to Russia, referring the

conflict to the ICJ would only complicate matters and, in fact, undermine the joint peace efforts currently being pursued (Caesario, 2021).

Russia then launched a military intervention on 30 September 2015. Russia reportedly used military aircraft to drop bombs and fire rockets at Turkish-backed armed militants (Caesario, 2021). According to press reports, the exact nature of Russia's military and weapons support to Syria remains unclear, but so far the known Russian assistance includes:

1. The expansion of Russian naval base facilities in Tartus and the expansion of the airfield by converting it into an airbase south of Latakia
2. The deployment of 4 Su-27 fighter aircraft, 12 Su-24 fighter aircraft, 12 Su-10 close-support fighter aircraft, and Pchela-1T UAVs.
3. The provision of R-166-0.5 (HF/VHF) (ultra) high-frequency vehicles with voice and data capabilities that are resistant to interference and offer high accuracy.
4. Delivering new 82A/B armoured personnel carriers (BTRs) equipped with 30mm cannons, and a number of Russian Humvee armoured fighting vehicles (AFVs).
5. Deploying an unknown number of SA-22 ground-based air defence systems
6. Deploying approximately 200 marines and 1,500 personnel near the airfield situated close to Bashar al-Assad's residence, whilst protecting Bashar al-Assad and his family from rebel attacks (Cordesman, 2015).

Russia's support for Bashar al-Assad's regime extends beyond military and diplomatic backing to include financial assistance. This support takes the form of financial loans and access to Russian banking services for the Syrian government. From this, it can be seen that Russia has reaffirmed its consistent support for and defence of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. This indicates good relations between Russia and Syria, thereby strengthening both countries' positions in the Middle East. For Russia, the al-Assad government is a legitimate government, and its continued existence must be protected from intervention by other states.

On the other hand, ever since Syria has been led by the Assad family, relations between Turkey and Syria have consistently been poor. This is due to Syria's claims over the Turkish province of Hatay, water disputes, and Syria's support for Kurdish groups that pose a threat to Turkey (Sandhiyudha, 2017). Although relations between the two countries had been normalised, in 2011, when a wave of protests erupted in Syria, Turkey initially adopted a proactive approach towards Bashar al-Assad, urging him to implement political reforms and to cease responding to his opponents with violence. However, Bashar al-Assad ignored this and stuck to the policies he had adopted. Since then, Turkey has condemned Syria for these human rights violations. Turkey's support for the Syrian opposition has caused relations between the two countries to deteriorate further (Sandhiyudha, 2017).

Turkey has been involved in the Syrian war since 2011, supporting several rebel groups opposing Assad. Indeed, Turkey has provided specialised training to these rebel factions through its intelligence organisation, the Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı (MIT). Turkey's aim is not only to fight Assad, but also to combat ISIS and Kurdish groups. The reason for Turkey's involvement in the conflict was that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had condemned the regime of Bashar al-Assad and accused him of committing war crimes (Oktarianisa, 2020).

Turkey has also provided support to the Syrian opposition by allowing them to establish their headquarters in Turkey. It should be noted that Turkey is a country that enjoys greater

stability and security compared to Syria's other neighbours. Initially, Turkey did not wish to be seen as a country aiding the rebels and provided assistance covertly. Turkey focused its support on humanitarian aid by implementing an 'open-door policy' for Syrian citizens seeking refuge, without exception. This included Syrian soldiers who refused to fight against the demonstrators and eventually defected and fled to Turkey (Oktarianisa, 2020).

Russia and Turkey are engaged in a proxy war in Syria. Turkey is strongly opposed to the regime of Bashar al-Assad, as evidenced by its support for the Syrian rebels. Meanwhile, Russia has long been Syria's key partner, having repeatedly assisted Syria by supplying weapons and helping it to combat the rebels (Indrajati, Russian Intervention in Syria 2011–2016, 2017). It should also be noted that the Syrian opposition groups—namely the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA)—were formed and are headquartered in Turkey. (Oktarianisa, 2020).

When Russia began establishing a military base in the Latakia region in 2015, it launched a military operation that lasted until February 2016. As a result of this operation, the uprisings in the provinces of Homs, Latakia and Hama were successfully contained. The most significant breakthrough for Bashar al-Assad came when Russian air support helped him cut off the supply route from Turkey to Aleppo (Indrajati, Russian Intervention in Syria 2011–2016, 2017). Seeing that Russia was assisting Bashar al-Assad against the opposition, the United States and its allies, including Turkey, sought to support the opposition forces. In December 2016, the United States relaxed its regulations and authorised the arming of the Syrian opposition. Consequently, many foreign parties sent aid to the Syrian rebels. This subsequently posed a threat to Syria and its allies (Indrajati, 2017).

Russia and Turkey actually share a common desire to resolve the conflict in Syria. However, before this can be achieved, their relations are marred by tensions and mutual accusations. Furthermore, each country prioritises its own national interests in Syria, thereby hindering efforts to resolve the conflict. The proxy war waged by Russia and Turkey has led to an escalation of the civil conflict in Syria. The unstable situation in Syria has caused numerous actors to emerge and become involved in the conflict. The emergence of various new actors has made the conflict increasingly complex and prompted both regional and global powers to become involved, thereby forming a pattern of relations characterised by both amity and enmity. This situation has led to the deconstruction of the security landscape in the Middle East.

The Impact of the Russian-Turkish Proxy War in Syria

Support from Russia and Turkey has led to a balance of power between the two sides. This is the reason why the conflict continues, as both sides are equally strong, both militarily and in terms of international support. The conflict in Syria has escalated since Russia and Turkey intervened. Military aid, political support and financial backing have enabled the Syrian rebels to grow and expand, leading to a large-scale uprising. Bashar Al-Assad, feeling threatened, has also received intensive support from Russia, making it increasingly difficult to topple his regime.

The Russian-Turkish proxy war in Syria has had a domino effect on the region. This is in line with the concept of regional security put forward by Barry Buzan, which states that a country's domestic conditions can impact regional security, and vice versa. Furthermore, this

theory suggests that the security situation in a particular region can be altered by the involvement of global powers.

According to Rafizadeh Majid (cited in Arifin, 2019), the Syrian conflict has various dimensions. The dynamics unfolding there are shaped by four levels of competition, and interactions within these four levels of competing interests influence security stability in the Middle East. These levels of competition can be seen in Buzan's RSC framework, which comprises Syria's domestic conditions, regional competition, inter-regional competition, and global competition (Arifin, 2019).

These four levels of competition are explained using levels of analysis based on the units or actors involved. The following are some of the actors with significant involvement in the Syrian conflict following the Arab Spring:

Domestic Conditions in Syria

On the domestic front, the war in Syria is unfolding on multiple fronts. The early phase of the Syrian war involved only the Al-Assad regime, supported by Russia, against moderate rebels seeking democracy, who were backed by Turkey. However, as the conflict developed, the instability resulting from the proxy war led to the emergence of numerous domestic actors, thereby giving rise to a multidimensional war (Arifin, 2019).

The deteriorating situation in Syria has been exploited by various groups to come to the fore, each pursuing their own objectives. Among them are extremist jihadist groups that have joined the fighting and are influencing the dynamics of the conflict in Syria. Although they all share the aim of overthrowing Assad, these jihadist groups hold differing views regarding Syria's future. Whilst moderate groups seek a democratic state with Western support, these jihadist groups seek an independent Islamic caliphate. Among them are groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Arifin, 2019).

Initially, the situation in Syria was a civil war between the Assad regime and the pro-democracy rebels of the SNC-FSA. The SNC-FSA aimed to take control of the existing government by overthrowing the regime in Syria and establishing a democratic Syrian state. However, as the conflict unfolded, the emergence of other actors made the situation increasingly complex.

The map of civilian actors in the Syrian conflict is illustrated in the diagram below (Luerdi, 2014).

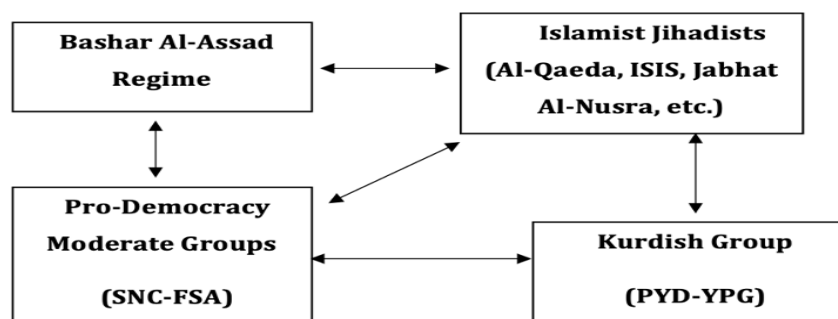


Figure Description: \longleftrightarrow = Fighting each other

Figure 1. Conflict Involving Civilian Actors in Syria

Sources: Processed by author

These domestic actors are in conflict with one another and seek alliances with other countries, both within and outside the region. Openness to external powers wishing to assist has led to unstoppable intervention from many quarters. As a result, proxy wars are taking place everywhere, and regional states with vested interests have become embroiled in these civil conflicts.

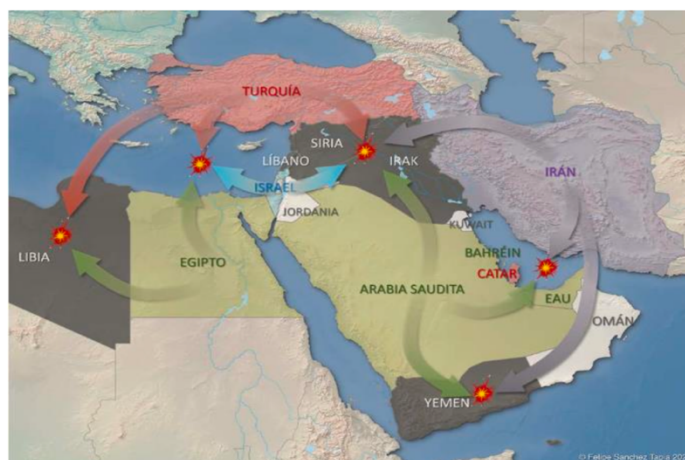


Figure 2. Polarisation of Countries in the Middle East

Source: Tapia, 2021

The image above shows that the Syrian conflict has divided the countries in the region into four blocs. The first bloc consists of Turkey and Qatar, whose national interests do not always align with those of the major powers. These “ nations actually tend to be independent and have their own objectives. On the opposite side are Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, which are seeking to prevent expansion by Turkey and Iran. The next bloc is represented by Iran, which has long been Saudi Arabia’s main rival. Pressure from the United States, which is allied with Saudi Arabia, has prompted Iran to draw closer to Russia and China. The final bloc is Israel, which also regards Iran as its primary threat. Iran’s military actions in Syria are essentially aimed at strengthening its position towards the west, where it borders Israel. On the other hand, Israel is seeking to secure its position in the Eastern Mediterranean (Tapia, 2021).

As John Mearsheimer has explained, a state’s actions—whether offensive or defensive—constitute a threat to other states. Even if a state has no prior strategic interests in a particular region, the presence of an adversary in that region prompts other states to take action; this is linked to a state’s defence policy. In short, a state would rather contain an enemy state’s expansion in another region than fight that enemy on its own territory. This is also the case in the Middle East, with Syria serving as the arena for conflict involving other states. The situation in the Middle East, which is experiencing the turmoil of a proxy war in Syria, has also drawn other states in the region into the conflict.

Global

Instability in the Middle East has led to external powers from outside the region becoming involved in the turmoil unfolding there. As explained in the RSC concept, instability in one region can cause countries in other regions to face a security dilemma. Consequently,

countries from outside the region will also become involved in conflicts taking place in that particular region.

There are two major powers from outside the region that are also engaged in geopolitical competition. These are Russia and the United States, along with its Western allies. The United States and Russia have, in fact, been competing since the Cold War. Although the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has continued this rivalry. The legacy of the Cold War is still felt to this day. It is evident that Russia is close to Iran and China, whilst the United States has forged an alliance with the European Union and Sunni Arab states, which are Iran's enemies. In the conflict in Syria, Russia and the United States are once again competing, with Russia and its allies supporting Bashar al-Assad, whilst the United States and its allies support the rebels. Russia subsequently deployed its military forces to Syria in 2015. This marked the first time Russia had carried out a military intervention outside the former Soviet bloc.

On the other hand, the United States has long maintained a military presence in the region. The Syrian conflict has drawn Russian military forces into the Middle East. This has created a security dilemma for the United States regarding Russia's involvement in the region. The United States has long been an active player as the principal external actor in the Middle East, conducting various military operations such as those in the Gulf War, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Iran, as a major regional power, poses a threat to the United States. This is one of the reasons why the United States continues to station its forces in the region. Moreover, since the Syrian conflict began, the ties between Iran, Syria and Russia have grown ever closer, causing the United States to once again face fierce competition with Russia in the region.

Russia

Russia is a country that has consistently supported the Al-Assad regime, enabling it to remain in power despite repeated public protests, the most severe of which was the wave of the Arab Spring revolutions. Russia has sent military aid to Syria and has also used its veto to prevent Western intervention in a resolution tabled at the UN (Schmidt, 2019). Russia and its allies do not want Bashar Al-Assad to step down from power, as happened in Libya. It is believed that such a power vacuum would only further exacerbate the situation in Syria. Consequently, on 17 August 2011, Russia adopted a policy to supply weapons to Syria, despite facing strong international protests at the time (Mustofa, 2021).

The United States and its Allies

The United States (US) has become the Syrian government's main adversary, providing support to opposition groups and launching air strikes against Syrian government forces. The US and its allies are active players in the Syrian conflict, helping the Syrian people move towards a democratic system of government. The US and its allies openly announced the delivery of weapons to assist the opposition after it was believed that Bashar Al-Assad had used chemical weapons to suppress them (Safitri, 2019).

The US wants Bashar al-Assad to step down from power immediately and for Syria to establish a new system of government without delay. The US and its allies—namely the UK, France, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey—have been actively providing support to the

opposition and issuing strong threats against the Syrian government at UN sessions. However, this alliance has faced difficulties as Russia and China have consistently vetoed every draft resolution put forward by them (Safitri, 2019).

One of the reasons the US became involved in the Syrian conflict was on humanitarian grounds. The US claims to have provided humanitarian aid to Syria totalling USD 6 billion, including the provision of food, logistics, medical aid and sanitation to communities affected by the war. In addition, the US has also supported members of anti-Assad combatant groups by supplying them with weapons so that they can resist the government (Safitri, 2019).

The US is reported to have carried out air strikes in Syria in 2014 as part of its campaign to destroy ISIS forces. The US government has stated that it will continue to maintain its presence in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, in order to ensure the destruction of ISIS, counter Iranian influence, and help bring an end to the protracted civil war (Yulivan, 2019).

The US also established a joint operations centre with its allies—Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia. This organisation, known as the Military Operations Centre (MOC), was tasked with training, controlling, arming and paying the anti-Assad regime rebels (Mustofa, 2021) in order to suppress the demonstrators and provoke violence. As Assad's stance towards his own people grew increasingly harsh and negotiations reached an impasse, the United States and its allies ultimately chose to support the pro-democracy movement, which subsequently coalesced into the armed Free Syrian Army (FSA).

The United States and the European Union openly provided arms to rebel groups to fight Assad. France and the United Kingdom were two EU member states that remained actively involved during the early stages of the Syrian conflict. Both countries provided financial assistance and sent senior military officers to train the anti-Assad militants (Rofii M. S., 2019). Although its involvement was not on a par with that of other actors, in 2012 the United Kingdom did provide communications equipment, medical supplies and intelligence support to the FSA (Trimulya, 2019). For the United States and its allies, Syria would find it easier to move towards democratisation if Assad were successfully overthrown (Rofii M. S., 2019).

Pieter D. Wezeman, in (Mustofa, 2021), states that in 2013 the United States provided financial aid amounting to \$250 million to the opposition. In the same year, according to a report from the US Secretary of Defence, weapons were supplied to senior military figures within the rebel forces, although there were no definitive reports as to which groups received this military aid. In early 2014, it was also reported that the US Congress, through a vote, had agreed to supply weapons to rebel forces. Weapons were the main focus of the distribution, including small arms, anti-tank rockets and missiles, which had been sent to rebel groups in southern Syria. (Mustofa, 2021).

The proxy war waged by Russia and Turkey in Syria led to a particularly bloody and devastating conflict initially as a result of interference from both countries, causing the Arab Spring unrest in Syria to escalate into a civil war. In the contemporary era, civil war is a type of conflict that has a significant impact on security. This is because the state has failed to bring about political transformation. This has had an impact on Syria's domestic situation, which has become increasingly chaotic, making it difficult to achieve peace. Overall, it can be concluded that the Russian-Turkish proxy war has indirectly contributed to instability in the Middle East. This is because the civil war in Syria is not merely viewed as a conflict between

local actors within a single country, but rather presents an opportunity for intervention by external actors. This can be seen in the conflict in Syria, where the civil war has attracted the attention of various countries due to their direct or indirect links to the region. The outcome of the conflict has significant implications for other nations, thereby drawing them into involvement (Arifin, 2019).

Competition between states can lead to conflicts that result in changes to a country's political landscape. The resulting political instability can damage relations between states and may lead to a wider war. The current conflict in Syria is also part of the post-Cold War RSC implications, with this conflict representing a continuation of previous conflicts. The Syrian conflict has evolved, initially as a civil war and subsequently becoming a proxy war between regional and global powers. This has had dire consequences not only for Syria but also for the wider region.

Conclusion

The security landscape of the Middle East prior to the Arab Spring was shaped by major alliances and rivalries, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Gulf War and Sunni-Shia tensions. The conflicts occurring in the region are inextricably linked to the interests of major regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran, as well as the presence of superpowers such as the member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Russia, along with their allies. Iran and Saudi Arabia have always been at the centre of various conflicts, vying for influence. This is inextricably linked to religious sectarianism—namely between Sunnis and Shias—which has existed for a long time. Similarly, the presence of the United States and Russia is part of the struggle for political hegemony.

Since 2011, the Syrian conflict—as a continuation of the Arab Spring—has opened a new chapter, linking these conflicts within a ‘’ of regional rivalry over influence and power. Russia and Turkey are two external powers involved in the conflict in Syria. Initially, the conflict in Syria was merely a civil conflict between demonstrators demanding democracy and the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad, who was unwilling to step down from office. Turkey's stance in supporting the demonstrators caused the mass movement to evolve into an armed movement, transforming the civil conflict in Syria into an armed conflict between Assad's military forces and the Turkish-backed rebels. Turkey believed that its support would enable the rebels to defeat Assad easily. At the outset of the armed conflict, it was thought that Bashar al-Assad would be overthrown. However, thanks to support from Russia, the regime became so strong that it proved difficult to defeat. Consequently, both Russia and Turkey provided their best support. This support takes the form of ‘hard power’, such as the supply of weapons, military equipment, and direct military training and troop deployment. In addition to ‘hard power’, there is also ‘soft power’ assistance, including financial aid, economic embargoes, and support in international forums. Russia is recorded as having military cooperation worth 20 million USD; in international forums such as the UN General Assembly, Russia has repeatedly vetoed UN resolutions that tended to be detrimental to Bashar al-Assad. Similarly, Turkey has consistently defended the Syrian rebels on humanitarian grounds and condemned the Assad regime's actions at UN General Assembly sessions. Turkey has also provided financial assistance to the rebels, though the exact amount remains unknown.

The involvement of Russia and Turkey in the Syrian conflict has had a significant impact on the escalation of the conflict. Russia has played a key role by providing military and logistical support to the Syrian government, whilst Turkey has supported various opposition groups fighting against the Syrian government. It is these external powers that have contributed to the conflict becoming increasingly complex. Rather than aiding peace efforts, the involvement of these two countries has made the conflict even more devastating. Overall, the Syrian conflict has had a significant impact on the stability of the Middle East, and the involvement of Russia and Turkey has played a key role in this instability.

From the findings of this study, we can understand that the civil conflict, fuelled by the Russian-Turkish proxy war, can affect regional security, forcing several countries in the region to become involved. Conversely, the involvement of numerous actors can heighten tensions and tends to prolong the duration of the existing conflict. Consequently, what is happening in Syria resembles a never-ending vicious circle. As long as these external actors remain involved, the war will continue. The Syrian conflict has given rise to a new geopolitical rivalry, drawing Sunni-Shia tensions into the conflict – which has led to the involvement of Iran and Saudi Arabia – whilst also reigniting the long-standing hostility between the US and Russian blocs, and inviting the presence of non-state actors deemed to be terrorists who pose a threat to the world. Ultimately, these issues have shaped patterns of friendship and enmity in the Middle East, rendering the region increasingly unstable.

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