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The Syrian Proxy War

A GEOPOLITICAL POKER GAME

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the emergence of the Syrian proxy war by tracing the actions and motivations of international actors supporting the Assad regime or the opposition forces. In terms of sequence of involvement, the 'first movers', Iran and Russia, and the 'second movers', Saudi Arabia and the US. The involvement of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Russia is primarily related to their threat perception and interests related to 'regime security', 'ideology' and 'the strive for power'. The US involvement is attributed to its political and ideological goals in the Middle East. This research analyses how these interests and the rivalries influence the decision to engage the other parties by proxy by supporting a favoured side of the Syrian conflict. This analysis suggests that Iran's support for Assad was a driver for Saudi support to the opposition forces. Moreover, both countries, primarily Iran, intensify their support following proxy defeats and perceived losses, which, following the logic of balance of risk theory, leads to growing stakes in the conflict. Consequently, these rivals are motivated to repeatedly intensify their support for their proxy whereby creating an interplay of subsequent actions among these two actors. At the same time, the Russian government base their choice of action heavily on the potential threat for increasing US involvement or direct military intervention to pursue regime change in Syria. As such, this analysis suggests that Russia tends to intensify its efforts when it perceives an increase of US involvement in the Syrian conflict. This thesis concludes with the notion that these relations have not only influenced the actions of the external actors, they also contributed to the prolongment and escalation of the Syrian civil war.

Key words: Syrian civil war, proxy warfare, loss aversion, balance of risk theory

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1. INTRODUCTION

'Proxy warfare' is generally understood as a strategy of a third party to indirectly intervene in a conflict between different parties in order to influence the outcome in favour of the preferred faction (Mumford, 2013a). Most people would associate proxy wars with the Cold War, when the US and the USSR sought confrontation through the use of proxies in order to avoid a direct confrontation (Hughes, 2014; Marshall, 2016). Nevertheless, proxy warfare strategies were extensively adopted throughout history. In ancient times, the Romans used foreign tribes and forces to secure their borders with hostile parties (Mumford, 2013b). Similarly, the British have used local troops to exert influence over regions for their colonial pursuits during the 18th and 19th century (Mumford, 2013b). Yet, the topic of proxy warfare has been largely understudied even though proxy warfare strategies are not losing steam. The current conflicts in Yemen and Eastern Ukraine are two contemporary examples of proxy wars where both Iran and Russia have supported local groups (Gelvin, 2018; Myers, 2016) Due to the growing apathy towards direct conflict among larger nations, the rise of private military companies, the increased use of cyberspace, and China's rise as a global superpower, proxy wars are likely to occur more often (Borghard, 2014; Fox, 2019; Hughes, 2014; Mumford, 2013a). This persistence of proxy wars is also illustrated by the current Syrian conflict.

Since 2011, Syria has been experiencing the most disastrous conflict since the Second World War (Wimmen, 2016). The Arab Spring, which started in Tunisia in 2010, has led to growing uprisings across the countries in the MENA-region. Numerous Arab governments were faced with mounting protests who were inspired by popularized democratic ideals (Blanga, 2017; Daher, 2018; Gause, 2014; Gelvin, 2018). In Syria, these people were initially aggressively tackled by governmental forces, which further fuelled the prevalent frustrations with the regime of President Bashir Al-Assad amongst the Syrian public (Gelvin, 2018). With the emergence of different factions and the growth of violence in the country the protests turned into a civil war. The Syrian civil war has been largely influenced and prolonged by the involvement of external countries (Gelvin, 2018; Hughes, 2014). While the Western nations, Saudi Arabia and a number of Gulf countries have supported the opposition forces, Russia and Iran have assisted the Assad regime (Kadioglu, 2018). All of these external parties have provided their favoured faction with (military) equipment, expertise, intelligence and other non-material assistance in order to give that particular party an advantage over the other party (Hughes, 2014). Consequently, the Syrian conflict has immensely intensified and prolonged to

the point where millions of Syrians have been victimized by the conflict that has been waging for almost 10 years.

Although the Syrian conflict has been researched extensively by both academics and journalists, only little attention has been given to the question of how the Syrian proxy war exactly evolved. Authors (Mumford (2013), Hughes (2016) and Marshall (2016)) have found several reasons and factors for why countries adopt proxy warfare strategies. Following the realist view for the strive for relative power, proxy warfare strategies are adopted for acquiring (relative) power in the international system in order to guarantee the state's survival in the anarchic international pollical system (Chiozza & Goemans, 2011; Mumford, 2013a; Simon Tov, 1984; Waltz, 1979). Similarly, ideology can act as a cognitive basis or tool for pursuing a proxy warfare strategy (Mumford, 2013b). Yet, the extent of the applicability of these factors has barely been scrutinized. Moreover, it is not only about the applicability of the factors, but also how these actors and their reasons for intervention relate to each other. The existing theories analyse military interventions in isolation although the decision of a major or regional power to engage in proxy warfare is related to actions by other major/regional powers. For example, the Cold War brought multiple instances when the US and the USSR had clashed in 'Third world' countries with the use of proxy forces. In other words, it is reasonable to examine US actions in the context of Russia support for the regime, and vice versa, as well as the Iran-Saudi relations that predate the Syrian conflict.

This study attempts to address this understanding on the emergence of the Syrian proxy war by answering the question; '*How has the Syrian civil war evolved into a multi-level proxy war*?' This research seeks to explain the dynamics for the emergence of the Syrian proxy war and expanding our understanding as to why states choose to intervene by proxy. The main focus is on Iran, Saudi-Arabia, Russia and the United States, because these countries were, and are still, the largest benefactors for each faction of the Syrian conflict and offer a large amount of academic and policy material to be analysed for this study.

In order to get a better understanding on the literature on proxy wars and the Syrian civil war, the next chapter includes a theoretical exploration of the relevant literature. This discussion is followed up by a chapter on the process tracing research design of this survey. These chapters form the starting point for the analytical chapters which start with a comprehensive analysis of the relationships between the rivalling parties. Subsequently, Chapter 5 encompasses an chronological analysis of the Syrian civil war where the emphasis lies on the international dimension of the conflict in order to identify patterns for why actors chose to adopt a proxy

warfare strategy and subsequently why they have chosen to increase their support for their favoured faction over time. The concluding chapter includes a discussion of the findings complemented by its implications for the proxy warfare academic literature and suggestion for future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before diving into the literature on the emergence of proxy wars, some background knowledge on the Syrian crisis is in order. Based on the literature, I briefly describe the Syrian conflict with an emphasis on the actions by the external parties. Subsequently, an explanation of the concept of 'proxy warfare' is provided in order to provide an understanding of the characteristics and nature of this type of warfare. Based on the literature on proxy wars and foreign military intervention, the emergence of proxy wars is explained by elaborating on several potential factors and types of motivations for why Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia and the US adopt proxy warfare strategies.

2.1 THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

The Syrian civil war began as an uprising and protest movement, following the trend set by protest movements in other countries in the MENA-region. According to most authors, this Arab Awakening was inspired by democratic and Islamic ideals in countries where authoritarian regimes were in power (Gelvin, 2018). Yet, the Syrian population was primarily motivated by social and economic grievances following droughts, economic crises and structural marginalization by the Syrian government (Gelvin, 2018; Philips, 2016). As the Syrian uprising was starting to threaten the Assad regime, Syria's allies Russia and Iran made the 'first move' by assisting the regime in dealing with the protest movements with material and immaterial means (Dorhal, 2018; Dostal, 2018; Gelvin, 2018; Gause, 2014). Iran has predominantly supported Assad with the deliverance of military equipment and weapons, the assistance of military advisors and the involvement of other proxy forces (Halit Yolcu, 2018; Karim, 2016; Tabrizi & Pantucci, 2016). Similarly, Moscow provided weaponry, equipment and also established intensive military cooperation programs with the Syrian governmental forces during the war (Lund, 2019; Mankoff, 2014; Sladden et al., 2017).

As the Syrian uprising was starting to transform into a civil war, Saudi Arabia and the United States were among the main countries that assisted the Syrian opposition forces by supplying them with military equipment, training, and intelligence (White, Tabler & Zelin, 2013). Although other countries like Turkey, Qatar, France and the UK have also played a

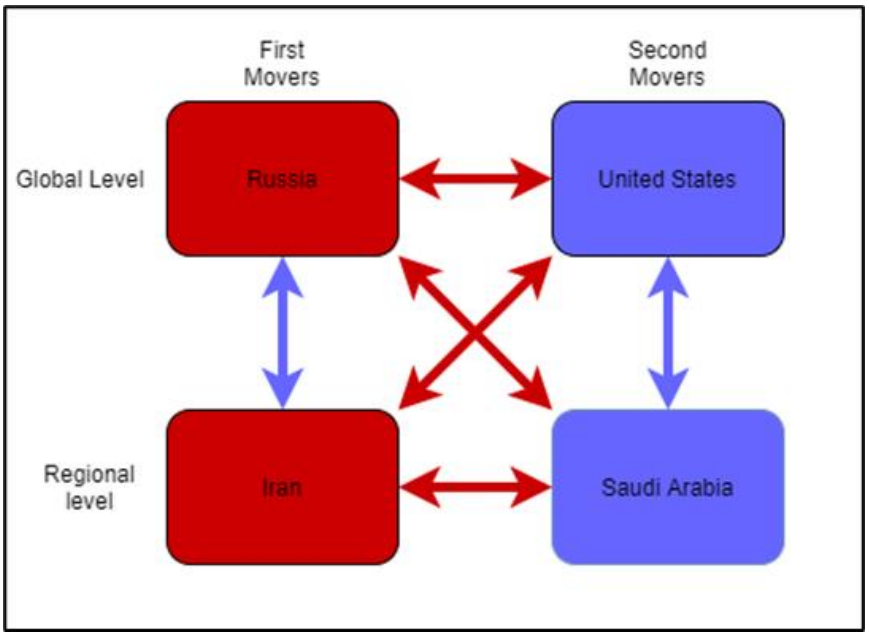

Figure 1 The multi-dimensional nature of the Syrian proxy war

major role, Saudi Arabia and the US became two of the most important external actors supporting the opposition in the conflict (Dostal, 2018).

The multi-level character of the Syrian proxy war can be visualized with two levels. As is also illustrated in figure 1, At the regional level, Saudi Arabia and Iran are using the Syrian civil war as a theatre for their Middle Eastern rivalry. Since the late 20th century, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been locked into a regional rivalry over who dominates the Middle-Eastern region (Blanga, 2017; Dostal, 2018; Gelvin, 2018). Tensions are characterized by political and ideological differences which have led to growing hostilities over time[1]. Moreover, Iran's hostile attitude towards the US and other Western countries has also contributed to the growing geopolitical confrontation in the Middle East (Gause, 2013).

The global level confrontation in Syria is a product of increasing hostilities between the NATO countries and Russia. Tensions between the two parties have increased drastically prior to the Syrian crisis. Since 2000, relations between the Western countries and Russia have intensified over multiple issues. Several authors (Worcester, 2016; Philips, 2018, Myers, 2016) have pointed towards Russia's increasingly confrontational policies in regard to the US. According to Worcester (2016), Russia's aggressive strategy is a method to reach Putin's

[1] Since the end of the 20th century, the sectarian Shiite-Sunni divide has played a role in the increasing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Gause (2013) and Gelvin (2018) emphasize that both countries have used the religious differences as a way to demonize the other, whereby increasing tensions.

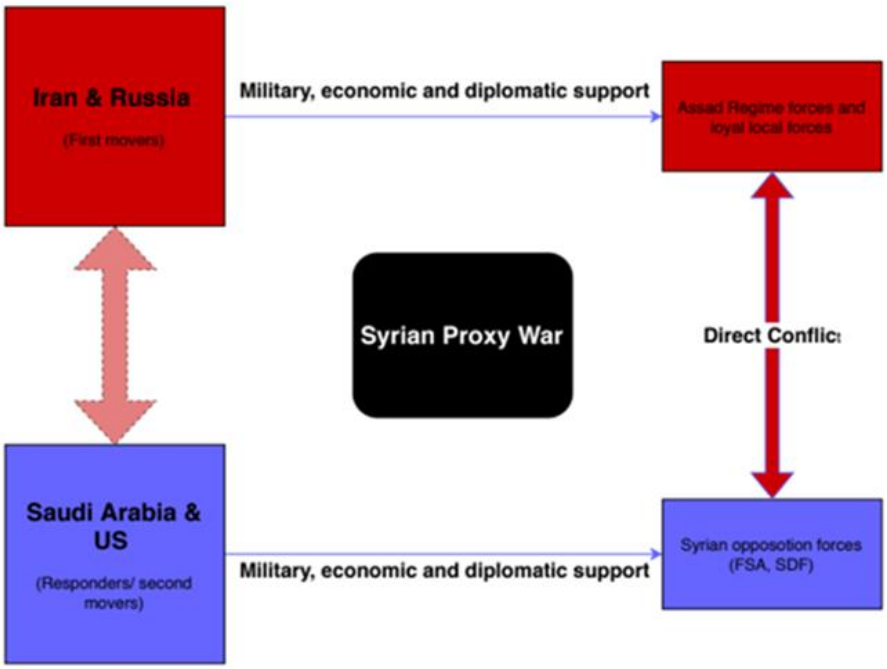

Figure 2 The Syrian proxy war visualized

ultimate goal to turn Russia back into a global superpower. If this logic holds then this strategy leads to a confrontation with the West in the Syrian civil war where Putin supports the Assad regime while Western states call for Assad's resignation (Lund, 2019). The US has always voiced that it does not seek direct confrontation in the Middle East or with Russia (Philips, 2016). Similarly, relations between Iran and US have worsened in recent years. The Iranian pursuit towards the acquisition of nuclear weapons and the subsequent international sanctions have to led to growing hostile attitudes which are also reflected by Iranian support for local forces across the Middle-East that are undertaking undermining actions against US and west-European institutions and individuals (Gelvin, 2018; Philips, 2016; Tabrizi & Pantucci, 2016).

2.2 ENDURING RIVALRIES

The Syrian conflict is intertwined with interstate rivalries. While Saudi Arabia and Iran hold prevalent hostilities which some authors label as a Middle Eastern Cold War, the US-Russia confrontation may remind some readers to the Cold War hostilities back in the 20th century. According to Diehl & Goertz (2001), understanding conflict requires knowledge about the relationship between the parties in conflict. Their research shows that "Enduring rivalries contain about half of the militarized disputes, violent territorial changes, and wars in the international system." (1993: 167). As such, authors have researched how rivalries play a role for why and how countries repeatedly engage one another. Vazquez (1993) defines rivalries as

relationships of persistent hostility between states of roughly equal power. Doehl & Goertz (2001) focus more on the militarized character by regarding rivalries as a militarized interstate competition. Thompson (2001) offers a more general definition by defining strategic rivalry as a competitive relationship between independent states where both parties identify the other as an enemy and an explicit threat. These definitions are applied to the relationships between the external parties of the Syrian conflicts. Mabon (2013), Rubin (2014) and Gause (2014) emphasize the nature of the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia becoming increasingly characterized by growing hostilities over regional power. Similarly, the contemporary relationship between the US and Russia has also been difficult considering their historic hostile attitudes during the Cold War-era (Kuchins, 2015; Monaghan, 2016).

Most of the rivalry definitions emphasize the role of how hostile histories impact the present context of the international relationship (Colaresi & Thompson, 2002). The competition between the states hold particular stakes and interests which can be protected by adopting strategies of force and intense conflict (Colaresi & Thompson, 2002). Because of their analysis on the role of rivalries in the international system, Diehl and Goertz rivalry approach (2001) argues how rivalries function relatively as stabilization mechanism in international politics. Tensions and rapprochement generally follow a general trend whereby conflict is mostly avoided. Yet, these relations are very susceptive to environmental shock and changes in international politics (Diehl & Goertz, 2001). Such shocks destabilize the mechanisms keeping the peace in the rivalry which leads to a potential outbreak of conflict (Diehl & Goertz, 2001). Similar to Thompson (2001) and Vazquez (1993), this approach for understanding conflict regards rivalries as longitudinal relationships where policies, decisions and interests over time have made confrontation between two interstate parties more probable (Colaresi & Thompson, 2002).

Diehl & Goertz (2001) assert that confrontation between two rival states is prevalent in the early and final stages of the rivalry relationship. As such, environmental shock function as starting point and amplifying factor for hostilities between interstate parties which remain over time (Diehl & Goertz, 2001). This establishes a stabilizing equilibrium which can be disrupted by a political shock leads to a new and final confrontation which leads to the end of a rivalry dynamic (Diehl & Goertz, 2001). Yet, direct conflict between rival nations is not necessarily the only way rivals confront one another. In 1989, McGinnis & Williams (1989) analysed the superpower rivalry between the US and the USSR which encompasses an escalating arms race which ultimately has not led to a direct confrontation. However, it is important to remember

that there was a reactionary decision-making process among the political elite of both countries to expected future behaviour of the other party, which contributed to the escalating arms race between the two rivals (Mcginnes & Williams, 1989).

Although the rivalry approach has been acknowledged and expanded by a wide-range of different authors (ex. Dreyer, 2014; Thompson, 2001; Thompson, 2015; Colaresi & Thompson, 2002), Diehl & Goertz's model underscores the observation of multiple clashes between different existing rivalry relationships. Especially when proxy warfare is added to the equations, the rivalry approach needs to be considered in an entirely different way. The external role of the US, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Syrian conflict requires a closer look into how their rivalries or overall relationships can explain their involvement. Yet, apart for several studies on the Cold War rivalry between the US and the USSR, the role of rivalry and proxy warfare has been a relatively understudied phenomenon.

2.3 PROXY WARFARE

The above description of the Syrian proxy war encompasses several key features of a 'proxy war'. It is crucial to get a full understanding of these features in order to explain the potential factors for why proxy wars occur. Traditional literature on 'warfare' have often used the definition of warfare introduced by the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz in his work On War (1832). According to Clausewitz (1832), warfare can be understood as "… not merely an act of policy, but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on by other means." (Von Clausewitz, 1832: 87). These 'other means' mostly entail the instrumentalization of acts of aggressions against other parties aimed to accomplish political goals by compelling them to your will (Von Clausewitz, 1832).

Similarly, proxy warfare entails the same characteristics as the conventional warfare concept, but with a particular emphasis on the use of external forces instead of the conventional military forces used by states. Yet, a definitive definition of 'proxy war' is still a debating issue. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a 'proxy' as "the agency, function, or office of a deputy who acts as a substitute for another.". As such, proxy wars can be regarded as one party fighting on the behalf of the other, or as Mumford (2013a) puts it: "proxy wars are the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome" (2013a: 11). Nevertheless, the outbreak of the Cold War and the subsequent superpower involvement in civil conflicts has led to multiple interpretations of the concept by several authors at the time.

Both the US and the USSR used civil unrest following a period of decolonization as a way to gain international influence by supporting a favoured faction in a particular conflict (Mumford, 2013b).

Consequently, proxy warfare became a subject of interest for many IR scholars. This also meant that the focus was mainly on the international context of this phenomenon. To illustrate, Karl Deutsch (1964) defined proxy warfare, inspired by the events during the first years of the Cold War period, 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 that country's manpower, resources and territory as a means for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies" (Deutsch, 1964 in Mumford, 2013a: 40). Similarly, Dunér (1981) and Simon Tov (1984) declared the foreign support for local forces is best explained as a way superpower pursue their interests while avoiding the risk of direct engagement. This is also applicable to the Syrian proxy war where foreign nations have supported local forces. Yet, the case is not as simplistic as those during the Cold War. There is longer a clear demarcating alignment with superpowers, whereby the context of the conflict has become much more complicated with regional powers also adopting proxy warfare strategies.

Although not fully applicable for the contemporary international system considering the emergence of other kinds of actors and reshaping of power, Deutsch's definition does highlight some crucial characteristics of proxy warfare which are still relevant today (Rauta & Mumford, 2017). Firstly, and most importantly, every definition of proxy warfare is required to emphasize the indirect nature of the intervention by the foreign actor (Rauta & Mumford, 2017). Without this, the demarcation between direct intervention and proxy warfare strategies become much more ambiguous. To illustrate, the Russian government's proxy warfare strategy transformed into a direct military foreign intervention as the Syrian conflict progressed. The use of Russian forces for engagement thus serves as a stepping stone from proxy warfare to direct intervention.

Secondly, the relation between the proxy agent and the foreign power supporting that particular faction, the benefactor. The emergence of a proxy alliance is best explained as an artificial partnership based on mutual interests (Hughes, 2012; Mumford, 2013b). Dunér (1981) characterized the relationship as asymmetrical whereby the proxy is dependent on the support given by the benefactor. Yet, Fox (2016), Borghard (2014) and Mumford (2013b) unnerve this notion by highlighting that the proxy forces hold agency in themselves and that they can have interests which often diverge from the benefactor's interests.

Thirdly, the benefactor-proxy alliance translates to the material and immaterial support given by the benefactor to the proxy forces (Brewer, 2011; Dunér, 1981; Fox, 2016; Hughes, 2012). The best example of material support is the supply of military equipment or additional manpower (Mumford, 2013b). For example, the US and Saudi Arabia have provided moderate opposition forces with various kinds of weapons in their struggle against the Assad regime. Similarly, support can also take an immaterial form with diplomatic and political support, or by providing training for the favoured proxy forces.

Another reason why the pursuit of a definitive definition of proxy warfare is hindered is due to different forms such a conflict can take. Proxy wars most often do not exist in themselves, but evolve from existing tensions and conflict (Marshall, 2016). Especially after the Cold War, proxy wars developed upon an existing local or regional conflict whereby the proxy hold their own motives and reasons for waging a war (Mumford, 2013b). Also, Simon-Tav (1984) asks himself if we can regard "a war by proxy by proxy for one side and not for the other?" (1984: 264). For example, some authors argue that the Vietnam war was a one-sided proxy war from the perspective of the USSR and China which had supplied the Vietcong with military equipment and advisors for their struggle against US troops (Mumford, 2013b). Similarly, the US support for the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan could also be characterized as a one-sided proxy conflict (Mumford, 2013b). This is also something we see in the later years of the Syrian civil war, whereby the Russians have used their own conventional forces in their support for Assad while the US and Saudi Arabia have limited their military presence and solely concentrated on expanding the capabilities of the SDF or moderate Islamic forces (Philips, 2016).

2.3 THE EMERGENCE OF PROXY WARS

Although it is important to highlight the dynamics of the benefactor-proxy agent relationship in order to get a better understanding on what proxy warfare entails, this research primarily focuses on the motivations of foreign powers to support particular faction in the Syrian conflict. Answering the research question demands attention towards factors for the emergence of proxy wars. Some authors argue that 'the collapse of central authority; grievances; the potential emergence of local war economies; the presence of natural resources; and economic cycles of the global economy as factors for the emergence of proxy wars (Hughes, 2014; Marshall, 2016). Yet, while these conditions and factors can be impactful for the development towards proxy

wars, they primarily function as conditions that facilitate the outbreak of conflicts within and between countries and not necessarily explain why foreign powers get involved.

One important assumption to keep in mind when assessing the factors for emergence of proxy wars is a state's natural aversion to avoid unnecessary and high risks. One recurrent reason in the literature for why state-actors specifically intervene through proxies is risk aversion (Brewer, 2011; Mumford, 2013a; Siman-Tov, 1984; Taliafero, 2004). During the Cold War, one of the main reasons for why the US and the USSR chose to support local forces across the world was to avoid direct conflict (Mumford, 2013b). With the development of nuclear weapons, the two superpowers were locked into power balance of mutual assured destruction (Mumford, 2013a). As such, the relative costs for direct conflicts are deemed too high. Even in contemporary society, direct conflict avoidance still forms a major reason for the support of proxy forces (Mumford, 2013a). To illustrate, Iran's support for Hamas and Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon is aimed to undermine Israeli influence in the region while avoiding direct confrontation with Israel and its allies (Mumford, 2013b). In short, by engaging in strategically inconsequential places with the use of irregular forces, major risks are avoided.

Furthermore, Mumford (2013a) argues that international condemnation, loss of life to military personnel; high financial costs of deployments, and international embarrassment has led some nations to avoid conflict altogether. Especially for democratic states, these risks form major incentives to avoid war undertakings. Proxy warfare strategies largely limit these risks. By supporting proxy forces covertly, the benefactor holds on to a certain degree of plausible deniability which may limit international condemnation (Brewer, 2011). Finally, the use of proxies is a cheap alternative to the deployment of regular troops. Especially for western states, this would limit economic costs and domestic political backlash (Mumford, 2013b). Risk aversion is therefore an important assumption to consider when reviewing the potential explanations for why states turn to wars by proxy.

Important factors for the emergence of proxy wars ultimately comes down to three factors: 'power and interest' and 'ideology'. 'Power & interest' reflect the realist view whereby the choice for intervention is explained as a pursue for economic, diplomatic and military interests. Realism holds the assumption that the international system is anarchical where the state actors act in accordance with their strive for power that guarantees their survival (Waltz, 1979). Governments act in their rational self-interest whereby they use different kinds of methods to protect their interests within the international system (Taliaferro, 2004; Waltz, 1979). Warfare is in this regard a method and instrument for states to pursue their interests with

military means. Similarly, proxy warfare strategies are means of foreign policies to increase a state's influence in the international system (Dunér, 1981; Siman-Tov, 1984). As such, proxy wars are a result of the strive of power and the protection of interests by different states. To illustrate, Siman-Tov (1984) notes how "…a superpower may regard or use a local war to advance its global and regional strategic or political interests without the need to intervene by its own forces" (Siman-Tov, 1984: 263). Even with the Cold War context, this statement is still applicable for the contemporary international system. In order to adequately theorize why proxy wars, occur, it requires us to also look at why direct intervention takes place. For the matter of power and interests, Pearson (1974) explains that potential territorial acquisition and the protection of economic interests are major motivations for why states choose to intervene. Andrew Mumford (2013b) uses these arguments of Pearson and places them in the context of proxy warfare. Similarly, diplomatic, military and economic interests form 'the cornerstone of state motivations… in creating clashes between states' (2013b: 32).

Furthermore, the adoption of proxy warfare strategies can also be attributed to the strive for influence as a method to counter threats. Realists often refer to the 'balance of power' as a way to explain the avoidance or the emergence of conflict (Waltz, 1979). Similarly, Walt (1987) argues how threat perception can lead to a 'balancing' or 'bandwagon' effect in international politics. As was briefly mentioned in the previous paragraph, authors of the rivalry approach have emphasized that state actors do not only respond on their surroundings but also base their choice of action on the actions undertaken by rival countries (Diehl & Goertz, 2001; Thompson, 2015). When one powerful state gains power which threatens the power of others, these countries would invoke actions that would eliminate the increasing threat that a particular state pose (Diehl & Goertz, 2001). This does not only apply for the global level but can also take shape between regional and local rivalries. As such, the strive for relative power among all actors also functions as balancing system for power distribution (Diehl & Goertz, 2001; Taliaferro, 2004). When states turn towards direct intervention or confrontation, it may lead to a subsequent aggressive response from surrounding and rival countries. In order to avoid such a response, nations can turn to other subversive actions.

Even though power is considered to be the cornerstone of a country's motivation to act in a certain way, it still does not fully explain why state-actors choose to intervene in a foreign conflict (Pearson, 1974). Interests only partly explain the occurrence of proxy wars. Pearson (1974) argues that in relation to a state-actor's pursuit of its interests, ideology plays a huge role. In order to adequately explain the impact identity and ideology have on the emergence of

proxy wars, authors (Pearson, 1974; Loveman, 2002; Brewer, 2011; Hughes, 2012; Mumford, 2013) have used the Cold War as an example to illustrate how closely linked ideology is with the pursuit of power and interest. In the Cold War period, the US and the USSR engaged in a fierce rivalry characterized by their polarized ideologies. These ideologies were not only part of their identity but also functioned as a product used in their engagement with non-aligned third world countries (Pearson, 1974). Both the USSR and the US were engaged in an indirect conflict whereby they tried to increase their power by spreading their ideology and the protection of their ideological sphere of influence (Loveman, 2002; Brewer, 2011; Mumford, 2013b). As such, military intervention by these countries was often motivated by developments which threatened their ideological dominance in a particular country or region. When foreign powers observe that ideologically like-minded people or populations are under threat then it would form a motivation to help this party to counter this development (Loveman, 2002; Mumford, 2013b).

Yet, ideology and identity are not only a tool to increase a country's sphere of influence, but also functions as the basis from which the decision is made to engage in proxy warfare. Mumford (2013b) highlights this by briefly explaining how, after Stalin's death, Soviet leadership returned reincorporated Lenin's goal to promote socialist ideals around the globe. Global politics was again interpreted as the "manifestation of a mass class struggle between the forces of capitalism and communism" (2013: 35), where the USSR had the obligation to aid their communist comrades (Mumford, 2013b). Even after the Cold War, ideology remained an important motivation for states to intervene in foreign countries. A notable example of this are the US and European countries like France and United Kingdom, which were often motivated by their liberal democratic values and ideals to intervene directly or indirectly both during and after the Cold War (Mumford, 2013a). The US government regarded itself as the leader of the world, whose objective is to promote and protect democracy around the world. As such, these ideological values and ideals function as an explanation and legitimisation for (proxy) intervention, which also makes 'ideology' an explanatory factor alongside 'power and interest' (Mumford, 2013a: 37).

Another potential factor and motivator for military intervention is 'regime security'. As mentioned previously, there is an assumption among realists that governments act rationally in their self-interest, which primarily comes down to the preservation of the state within the international system (Walt, 1989; Waltz, 1979). Based on this idea, authors of international relations have studied the survival of political leadership as a driver for foreign policy choices

for a particular country. One important demarcating factor for assessing this argument is 'regime type'. Some authors (e.g. Chiozza & Goemans, 2011; Ryan, 2001) found that political leaderships are more likely to adopt aggressive strategies when the political leadership is under threat by domestic factors. In their book, '*Leaders in international conflict'*, Ciozza and Goemans (2011) argue how political leaders initiate international crises and wars based on international and domestic developments that may threaten the empowerment of the political leadership. They do not only point to the factor of losing of office, but also the manner in which this potentially can happen. In countries where there are no institutions that mitigate a transfer of power and protect the well-being of removed political leaders, the safety of these figures is not guaranteed. This is one of the reasons why autocracies and semi-democracies are more likely to adopt aggressive external foreign policy strategies. Chiozza & Goemans (2011) argue that "…as the risk of a forcible removal increases, leaders become more likely to initiate international conflict" (2011: 195). Ryan (2001) offers an illustrating example of this phenomenon by comparing the survival strategies of different Egyptian regimes in the second half of the 20th century (Ryan, 2001). Egyptian leadership have multiple times turned to international affairs to increase the legitimacy of the political leadership while diverting public attention from domestic concerns (Ryan, 2001).

Democratic leadership are also subject to this factor. Although democratic political leaders are less likely to become victimized by violence after leaving office, it is still in their interest to stay in office, or at least keep political opponents from office. Tangeras (2008) emphasizes how the outcome of conflicts where democratic countries are involved can greatly affect the electoral behaviour of people in those democratic countries. Therefore, democratic states are more likely to only get involved in those conflicts where they know they can be successful (Tangeras, 2008). Yet, the outcome of a conflict is not only assessed by the completion of goals, but also by economic and social costs. Warfare often involves major economic and social costs which can often exceed the benefits for being victorious in a conflict (Mumford, 2013b). Especially in democratic states where governmental transparency and political accountability are prevalent, these developments can have a negative effect on the potential re-election of political leaders (Zeigler, Pierskalla & Mazumder, 2013). As such, democratic leaders can choose to avoid conflict when the potential costs are deemed too high.

2.4 LOSS AVERSION AND INTERVENTION

Following this discussion of the theoretical work on rivalries and proxy warfare, it becomes clear that the protection of interests in the form of regime security, and the prospect of acquiring power is an important dynamic for why direct and indirect conflicts emerge. Especially in an interstate rivalry national leader will seek to protect their assets and undermine the interests of the other. Nevertheless, the theoretical literature of international relation focusing on 'prospect theory' asserts that decisionmakers are heavily influenced by an anticipated prospect of the international system (Taliafferro, 2004). Jervis (1993) summarises 'prospect theory as "the theory [that] argues…people tend to be risk-averse for gains (this was generally known before) but simultaneously to be risk-acceptant for losses (this was the surprise). People are loss-averse in the sense that losses loom larger than the corresponding gains" (Jervis, 1993: 187). This argument has been used in the academic discipline to explain why governments decide to undertake risky undertakings like military interventions.

From this premise, Taliaferro (2004) has formulated his 'balance of risk' theory where the decision to undertake risk acceptant policies like military interventions and warfare is based on a potential loss of relative power. Anticipated changes in relative power, international standing or status stimulate a response from policymakers to ether avert from, or continue towards, the anticipated future of the international system (Taliaferro, 2004). This means that anticipated changes which can lead to a potential decrease of relative power may spark a response from political leadership to adopt more risk acceptant strategies (Taliaferro, 2004). As such, anticipated losses of power can spark a decision from national officials to engage in a conflict (Taliaferro, 2004). In contrast, when there are anticipated gains, national leadership become less risk acceptant whereby avoiding potential risky interventions (Taliaferro, 2004).

Furthermore, balance-risk-theory explains escalating military interventions along a similar dynamic. According to Taliaferro (2004), national leaders are less likely to reassess their decision for intervention when it was based on an anticipated loss of relative power. Especially when the formulated goals for intervention are not achieved, national leaders are likely to commit more resources for their cause for acquiring the desired results and avoiding sunk costs (Taliaferro, 2004). Consequently, loss aversion can drive states into persistently failing strategies while also forcing national decision-makers into taking additional risks for reacquiring their investments.

2.5 HYPOTHESIZED CAUSAL MECHANISM

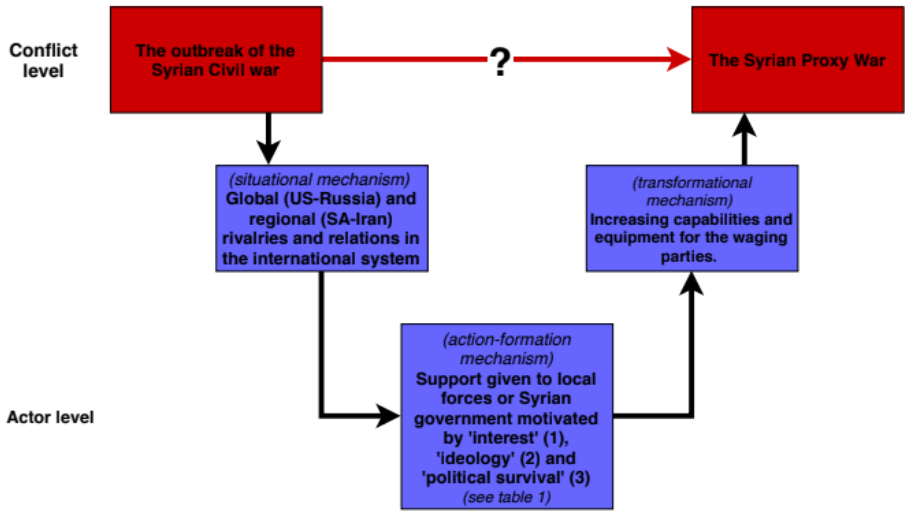

Figure 3 Hypothesized Causal Mechanism

Like many social phenomena, the Syrian proxy war cannot be attributed to one or several distinctive factors. The international political system is much too complicated to make such causal distinctions. Rather, research for such phenomenon should focus on considering the identified correlated factors as an interconnected mechanism which will provide a better understanding of why the Syrian proxy war occurred. Such a mechanism needs to incorporate international and regional developments and events that are in some way related to the case and the motivations of the actors involved. As such, expectations of a research on the emergence of the Syrian proxy war should encompass not only the motivations of the foreign actors, but also the relations between the players. Therefore figure 3 presents a hypothesized causal mechanism that illustrates the process of the emergence of the Syrian proxy war.

The previous paragraphs illustrated a wide range of explanation for how and why Iran, Saud Arabia, Russia and the US intervened in the Syrian civil war. However, these factors cannot fully explain the motivations for why the ‘the first movers’ (Iran and Russia) supported the Assad regime, and ‘the second movers’ (Saudi Arabia and the US) sponsored the opposition forces. Therefore, the applicability of the factors for supporting a particular faction in the conflict needs to be analysed in a comprehensive way. By analysing the interrelated motivations of the foreign actors to indirectly intervene in Syria, this research attempts identify and assess the impact of the conditions that led to the Syrian civil war developing into proxy war at the regional and global level. As such, the strive for relative power, the role of ideology and

ensuring regime security are hypothesized to play a big role for why states engage in proxy warfare. These forms of motivations cannot explain the adoption of proxy warfare strategies themselves, but by combining their explanatory value this research is able to present the logic surrounding the emergence of the Syrian proxy war. As such, table 1 provides an overview of the hypothesized motivational factors for each actor.

From these comprehensive motivations for involvement, I will be able to analyse the actions of the first and second movers. In international politics, and consequently proxy warfare, formulated strategies are not isolated rational choices but are linked to the decisions and policies of other actors. Especially in rivalry dynamics, governments seem to base their actions on the (anticipated) behaviour of rival countries as shown by McGinnis & Williams research on the US-USSR relationship during the Cold War. Similarly, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has started to follow a similar dynamic. Rivals want to protect their interests while undermining those of the other. Yet, Studies on 'loss aversion' in international politics (Jervis, 1992; Taliaferro, 2004) suggests that countries are generally defensive and primarily respond aggressively to anticipated losses. By combining the rivalry dynamic with the 'loss aversion' approach for analysing the actions of the first and second movers in the Syrian conflict, I expect that the intensification of support for a favoured faction is attributed to an anticipated loss of power or other interest in relation to their existing rivalry. This means that there is an expectation that the actors engaged in a proxy war are participating in an interplay of responses which contributes to the intensification of the Syrian civil war. As such, I regard that, in contrast to existing theories, proxy warfare is a relational concept.

Table 1 Hypotheses motivational factors

Country	Motivation Factor	Hypothesized main reason or motivation for indirect intervention in Syria
First Movers		
Iran	*Power & Interest*	Iran's PW strategy in Syria is motivated by Iran's interest to keep Assad in power as a strategic ally for Iran in their regional rivalry against Saudi Arabia.

	Identity & Ideology	Iran's PW strategy in Syria is motivated by Iran's goal to limit Sunni influence in the Middle East and protect an ideological aligned partner.
	Regime security	Iran's PW strategy is a method with which the Iranian regime hopes to divert public attention from domestic affairs in order to limit Iranian protests that can threaten the regime.
Russia	*Power & Interest*	Russia's PW strategy is motivated by Russia's interest to keep the Assad regime as a strategic ally for Russia in order to exert Russian military and diplomatic influence in the Middle East
	Identity & Ideology	Russia's PW strategy is motivated by Putin's ultimate ideological goal to make Russia a global power again
	Regime security	Russia's PW strategy is a method with which the Russian regime hopes to divert public attention from domestic affairs in order to limit Iranian protests that can threaten the regime.
Second movers		
Saudi Arabia	*Power & Interest*	Saudi Arabia's PW strategy is their rivalry with Iran, whereby the Saudi government tries to limit the growth of Iranian influence in the region by forcing the Assad regime in Syria to fall.
	Identity & Ideology	Saudi Arabia's proxy warfare strategy is motivated by its self-declared leadership of

		Sunni populations and perceives this as a reason to protect the Sunni people in Syria against the Assad regime.
	Regime Security	Saudi Arabia's PW strategy is a method with which the regime tries to divert domestic and international attention from its domestic affairs while trying to gain more legitimacy and international support from western states, MENA region countries and Israel.
United States	*Power & Interest*	The US's PW strategy functions as a way to undermine Iranian and Russian influence in the region by removing the Assad regime from power
	Identity & Ideology	The US's PW strategy is motivated by the atrocities committed by the Assad regime against the Syrian people, which is not in line with western ideals and beliefs concerning the protection of human rights.
	Regime Security	The US's PW strategy is motivated by presidential administration's reluctance to commit to another direct military intervention after highly economic and social costly military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq previously. Committing to another direct intervention may threaten re-election.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This section will explain the methodological framework used for this research. Firstly, an elaboration on the choice of a single case study is provided followed up by the operationalization of the concepts and causal mechanism. Subsequently, the data collection and data analysis techniques are explained based on process tracing methodology.

3.1 CASE SELECTION

This research on the emergence of the Syrian proxy war is based on qualitative research methodology in the form of a single case study. The single case study approach is often criticized for its lack of reliability and basis for generalization of the potential findings (Flyvberg, 2006). Because a single phenomenon is studied, only a limited number of sources is available. Therefore, researchers have only a limited pool of sources to draw their data from. Furthermore, the findings of a single case study are often limited in their generalization ability to the case that was studied. Yet, I argue that despite these critiques, the Syrian case is beneficial for a number of reasons. The Syrian case resembles a 'extreme' case[2] in that the proxy warfare has developed into a multi-level conflict whereby multiple state-actors and non-state actor are participating in a conflict between the Syrian government and fragmentated opposition forces. Furthermore, it is remarkable to witness both a global and regional level of proxy warfare. Before this phenomenon, proxy wars were still regarded in a traditional fashion with one proxy and benefactor on either side. These types of multi-level conflicts are expected occur more often in the future (Mumford, 2013a). Therefore, a research on the emergence of the multi-level Syrian conflict will be of additional value for our fundamental understanding for potential similar cases in the future.

3.2 OPERATIONALIZATION

[2] Extreme cases are, according to Yin (2009), cases where the phenomenon is a rare occurrence which is worth documenting for its uniqueness and in case there may occur similar phenomenon in the future. (Terminology adopted from Yin, R.K. (2009) Case study research: Design and methods (4th ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage)

In order to adequately answer the question, 'How has the Syrian civil war evolved into a multi-level proxy war?', the concepts used throughout this research need to be definitively defined and operationalized. For this research, proxy warfare is defined as "… conflicts in which a third party intervenes indirectly in order to influence the strategic outcome in favour of the preferred faction "(Mumford, 2013a: 40). When referring to the 'Syrian proxy war', it points to the warfare dimension between the foreign powers that support the different factions in the Syrian civil war. Furthermore, for the purpose of demarcation, limited time and the nature of the dynamics that are studied, I will primarily focus on the time period between 2011 and 2014.

Table 2 Operationalization of the hypotheses and expectations

Conceptualization of the mechanism	**Predicted evidence**	**Type of *evidence*[3] used to measure prediction**
1. The outbreak of the Syrian civil war	Expect to see the emergence of a conflict between two or more parties within Syria	Measured using *trace* evidence and *account* evidence
2. Emergence of different distinctive groups and parties in the conflict	Expect to see the formation of several groups and factions based on interest and ideas	Measured using *sequence* evidence and *account* evidence
(first- and second movers)[4] **3. Support given to local forces or Syrian government motivated by a potential loss in terms of 'interest', 'ideology', and 'political survival'**	Expect to see evidence of foreign governments support a certain faction because: a. it protects their economic, diplomatic and military interests b. the particular faction is ideological aligned or shares certain ideas and values	Measured using *account* evidence, *pattern* evidence and *trace* evidence

[3] Evidence typology derived from Beach, D., & Pedersen, R. B. (2013). Process-Tracing Methods. US, US: The University of Michigan Press. (see pages 99-100)

[4] Concerning the expectation that external parties respond to one another in engaging in a proxy war, I expect to see an interplay of subsequent action coming from Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the US. I consider documents specifying policy choices concerning the Syrian civil war, hostile attitudes towards other international actors involved; and considerations over actors' interests in the Middle East, as potential evidence for the expectation that governments engage in proxy warfare as a strategy to avert 'losses' in relation to their rival.

Support given to local forces as a response to the involvement of rivals	c. it serves as a method to gain legitimacy and divert public attention from Expect to see evidence of foreign governments supporting the opposing party of their rival's favoured faction	
4. Increasing capabilities and equipment for the waging parties	Expect to see evidence of an increase in the use of sophisticated weaponry and military tactics at the parties that enjoy support from foreign governments.	Measured using *sequence* evidence and *account* evidence
5. The Syrian proxy war	Expect to see evidence of the common features of proxy warfare derived from the literature a. Proxy-benefactor relationship b. Supply of material and immaterial support from the benefactor to the proxy c. Prolongment and intensification of the conflict	Measured using *trace* evidence and *account* evidence

3.3 DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

The collected data for this study will be analysed through the triangulation of public sources. Due to the character of this research and the conflict is still waging today, it is unfeasible to assume that policymakers are willing to share potentially delicate information on their government's choice to engage in a proxy war. Therefore, triangulation is achieved by using primarily western policy and intelligence reports, think tank reports, conducted research reports and articles and international news reports[5]. As such, this research is able to clarify the actor-level decision for supporting a certain faction.

Furthermore, the emergence of the Syrian proxy war is a factual story with an established process. Even though this research primarily focuses on the motivations and reasons

[5] It is important to highlight that the exclusive use of Western sources is bound to introduce a degree of bias to the empirics.

for why states got involved in the Syrian conflict, causal mechanisms assist in adequately presenting the whole process and pattern towards a social phenomenon. Therefore, process tracing helps in identifying and presenting this story in an adequate way. The potential evidence for the causal mechanism is subsequently subjected to strength tests as described by Beach and Pederson in their work *Process-Tracing Methods* (2013). The triangulated evidence for this research is subsequently subjected to the process tracing analysis technique. These techniques are designed to assess the strength of the evidence based on its 'uniqueness' and 'certainty'. Beach and Pederson (2013) establish the following tests for assessing the strength of hypothesized conditions and mechanisms: 'straw-in-the-wind test', 'hoop-test', 'smoking-gun test', 'double-decisive test' (2013: 102-103). These tests shall be used to assess the strength of the hypothesized causal mechanism.

4. PREVAILING RIVALRIES

The major power involvement in the Syrian conflict is not a stand-alone case within the geopolitical arena. Rather, the Syrian proxy war is a product of a larger confrontation of regional and global actors characterized by a strive for geopolitical influence and major ideological differences as a basis for the ultimate aim of regime security. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran strive to acquire relative power at the cost of the other whereby securing the survival of the regime and dominating the region. Religion functions as an amplifier for these hostilities which spill over to conflict areas like Syria where both countries seek to increase their influence. Russia has a similar dynamic where its Western threat perception forms the basis for many decisions made in Moscow. In contrast, the US focusses primarily on its own absolute goals in the international system which are not related to a rivalry dynamic.

4.1 SAUDI ARABIA & IRAN: A MIDDLE EAST COLD WAR?

4.1.1 STRATEGIES FOR REGIME SECURITY, REGIONAL POWER & RELIGION

The origin of the rivalry goes back to the 20th century. Before the emergence of the Iranian Islamic Republic in 1979, both countries held a great level of regional cooperation to limit Russian expansionism and the rise of the Ba'ath regimes in surrounding countries (Gause, 2014; Philips, 2016). After the Islamic Iranian revolution in 1979, hostilities between the two nations grew immensely as demonstrated by Iranian incentives to spread the Islamic revolution to other nations, and Saudi Arabia's support to Iraq during Iraq-Iran war from 1981 to 1989 in order to undermine the recently established Islamic regime (Philips, 2016; Rubin, 2014). Evidently, Riyadh viewed the newly installed Iranian government as a major threat for its government structure. In the 1980's, Tehran stimulated the spread of the Islamic movement to other countries which has led to emerging protests across multiple Middle Eastern countries, among these Saudi Arabia, which has made Riyadh wary for any new Iranian inspired calls for revolution or protest against the Saudi government (Philips, 2016).

At the same time, Tehran views Saudi Arabia as a threat for Iranian security and the Islamic government. Apart from Riyadh's support for Hussein during the Iraq-Iran War, the main reason for Iran's early hostilities was the Saudi's regime structure and their alliance with the US which Tehran regards as the ultimate threat for Iranian security (Bazoombandi, 2014;

DNI, 2019; Ward, 2009). Shortly after the 1979 revolution in Iran, the new Iranian government, under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, adopted a foreign policy primarily aimed to undermine Western (American) and Israeli presence in the region while also protecting the survival of the newly established regime from international and domestic threats (Ansari & Tabrizi, 2016; Gause, 2014; Gelvin, 2016). This foreign policy was reinforced by pressures coming from the Gulf-region and cumulating international sanctions orchestrated by the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia (Katzman, 2020). Domestically, the regime was constantly under pressure by protest movements and emerging rebel groups (DNI, 2019; Keddie, 2003). Thus, it became a primary Iranian concern to mitigate its international isolation for ensuring regime security. Therefore, Iran adopted a comprehensive security policy to acquire regional influence and undermine Western, Israeli and Saudi power in the region (DNI, 2019; Katzman, 2020; Mabon, 2013). Having endured persistent and economic crippling international sanctions, Tehran has been forced to primarily use military means and strategies in order ensure Iranian security (DNI, 2019; Mabon, 2013). This has led to a comprehensive proxy warfare strategy which encompasses the formation and support for militia groups by the Iranian revolutionary forces (IRCG) (DNI, 2019; The Soofan Center, 2019). This strategy proved to be highly successful, as illustrated by the establishment of Hezbollah, a Shia militia and political party based in Lebanon and Syria, which has repeatedly sought confrontation with the state of Israel (DNI, 2019; Philips, 2016).

Furthermore, in its pursuit for regional influence and Iranian security, the Iranian government has also demonstrated to seek cooperation beyond ideological lines (Gelvin, 2018). Initially, clerical leadership leaned on a radical pursuit of spreading the ideals of the Islamic revolution and empowering the Shia populations in the region, but it became clear that such a policy would only further isolate them from the rest of the region (Gelvin, 2018; Philips, 2016). Moreover, The Shia population in many Middle-Eastern countries is a minority with only limited influence in a country where other religious groups are mostly in control (Gause, 2014; Gelvin, 2018). Consequently, the Iranian government under the new leadership of Khamenei in 1989 pursued a more moderate foreign policy agenda aimed to prioritize increasing their influence and protecting their interests rather than solely aligning with Shia groups (Gause, 2014; Philips, 2016). Yet, even before this moderation of Iran's foreign policy, Tehran has shown to be willing to seek alliances beyond sectarian or ideological lines. This is reflected by the existing alliance between the Syrian Alawite dominated secular regime and Iran since the 1980's (Gause, 2014; Lund, 2016). Shortly after the consolidation of the Iranian Islamic

Republic, the Syrian government has been one of the first entities to recognize the newly established Iranian government (Lund, 2016). Another example of the Iranian government pragmatic foreign policy strategy has been their support for the Sunni group Hamas in the Palestine regions. By supporting Hamas in their struggle against the Israelis, Iran tried to present itself as not only a Shia state, but rather a representation of all Muslims in the region, something that the Islamic regime has consistently aspired to be (Gause 2014; Maloney, 2017).

Iran's foreign policy agenda clashed with the interests of the authoritarian regime of Saudi Arabia. Due to Saudi Arabia's close relations with the US and its normalization of diplomatic ties with Israel in recent years, Saudi Arabia has been a regular target of diplomatic and subversive actions of Iran (Gause, 2014; Ryan, 2012). Moreover, one other major difference for the existing tensions has been their difference in governance model. Saudi Arabia upholds a governance model whereby the ruling dynastic family, the House of Saudi, holds all the power in the country (Gelvin, 2018; Mabon, 2013). The Saudi's have always discouraged Islamic activism, afraid it would threaten the status quo in the region where the Saudis dominate (Gelvin, 2018; Mabon, 2013; Wehrey et al., 2009). In contrast, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic government under the leadership of a Supreme Leader with some democratic characteristics (Gelvin, 2018; Keddie, 2003). The Iranian revolution inspired a Shia uprising in the eastern, oil rich parts of Saudi Arabia, which were eventually subdued by the authorities, but left a pressing impact on Saudi leadership (Gause, 2014). Although the surrounding countries were able to withstand the domestic unrest, Khomeini had always advocated to 'spread the Islamic revolution' to other Middle Eastern countries and push the US out of the Middle East (DNI, 2019). Until Khomeini's death in 1989, this ideological push for political change had become part of Iran's foreign policy. In consequence, this Iranian ambition and its hostilities towards the West put Iran at odds with the Saudi regime, who felt threatened by the Iranian government's political agenda (Mabon, 2013).

Iran's strategy for gaining regional influence and Saudi Arabia's aim to uphold the status quo has led to indirect confrontations (Gause, 2014). Many Arab countries have been able to uphold their political authority by their state apparatus and financial revenues from oil and gas exports (Gause, 2014; Philips, 2016). Nevertheless, governments in Lebanon and Yemen have barely been able constitute a robust central authority which has led the emergence of non-state actors challenging the authority of the existing government (Gelvin, 2018). To illustrate, Iran's biggest success in exporting their revolution to other Middle Eastern countries has been Lebanon. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia supported different sectarian factions during the

Lebanese civil war where eventually Hezbollah emerged as the most important actor in the region (Gause, 2014; Philips, 2016; Wehrey et al., 2009). Similarly, the unification of North- and South Yemen under the rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh has also seen domestic unrest characterized by tribal and regional factions, and Islamic leaders. Initially Saudi Arabia has been able to control the country with his proxy in the country (Gause, 2014), escalating civil unrest has seen the supremacy of the Houthi group, which reportedly receives support from Tehran (The Soufan Center, 2019).

However, the most prominent theatre for conflict that has reignited the intensity of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been Iraq. After the 2003 US invasion, Washington chose to ban the ruling Ba'ath party, dissolving the Iraqi military and purging the governmental bureaucracy of experienced civil servants who were members of the party (Dodge, 2007). This created a power vacuum for regional, sectarian and tribal factions which turned to external support in order to gain influence within Iraq (Dodge, 2007). Both Saudi Arabia and Iran supported opposing, often sectarian, factions which turned Iraq into proxy battleground in the Middle East (Dodge, 2007; The Soufan Center, 2019). Especially Iran benefitted immensely from this political development. The Sunni Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein has not only been a threat for the Iranian political leadership, but also posed a blockade to expand Iranian influence beyond the Gulf states (Gause, 2014; Goodrazi, 2013). The US invasion gave the Iranian government an opportunity to gain political control over Iraq by empowering Shia groups (Philips, 2016).

The backing of sectarian groups by both Saudi Arabia and Iran has led to some authors explaining the rivalry as a political and violent manifestation of the Sunni-Shia divide within Islam (Tzemprin et al., 2015). The Sunni-Shi'i split find it origin after the death of the prophet Muhammed when there emerged a discussion about his succession (Rubin, 2014). While the Iranian Islamic Republic is dominated by a Shi'i inspired government, Saudi Arabia is mostly a Sunni dominated country guided by the Wahabi ideology (Rubin, 2014). This has led some authors and journalists to emphasize the role religion plays in the existing rivalry (Tzemprin et al., 2015). Yet, recorded history shows that the two groups have cooperated and lived alongside one another for centuries without any significant violent confrontations (Gause, 2014). Moreover, many Shi'i or Sunni dominated governments have cooperated with another in pursuit for common interests (Gause, 2014; Philips, 2016). To illustrate, before the Iranian revolution, both Saudi Arabia and Iran overcame their divide and cooperated extensively with the US. Moreover, Iran has demonstrated to be pragmatic in their alliances as is illustrated by their

alliance with the Alawite Ba'athist regime of Assad and its support for the Sunni dominated group Hamas in Palestine (Gause, 2014).

Although the critics have a point with their argument to not overstate the importance of the sectarian divide between the two countries, it is crucial to highlight the growing relevance and stimulating effect this demarcation has on the rivalry, and as such the Syrian conflict. Philips (2016) describes the importance of Sunni and Shia identities has risen due to the regional political developments since the 1990's. One development was the structural discrimination of Shia populations by Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq, which led to the emergence of several sect-based networks (Philips, 2016). The emergence of sectarian inspired groups was further stimulated by the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent downfall of the Iraqi regime in 2003 (Haddad, 2011). These developments saw a further growth in support for emerging opposing sectarian groups and militias from governments (Gause, 2014). Moreover, this Shia-Sunni violence was extensively reported by wide ranging, often biased, news outlets, which further stimulated growing hostilities between the two sectarian groups and countries (Philips, 2016). With the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Iranian government lost a challenging adversary which enabled them to effectively further support Shia groups in eastern Iraq (Goodrazi, 2013). This potential threat of growing Shia influence in Iraq has led to Sunni clerics in Saudi Arabia to push their leadership into supporting Sunni groups and militias in Iraq (Philips, 2016). Admittedly, the sectarian divide is not a fundamental explanatory factor for the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Yet, it is worth emphasizing that since the start of the 21th century that the aggravating divide between Sunni's and Shi'ites has been an important characteristic of the rivalry in contemporary international politics in the Middle East.

On the basis of this short historical analysis, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry several features. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is an enduring rivalry on the basis of a mutual threat perception. Since 1979, both countries have pursued a confrontational and hostile policy which enforced a mutual mistrust and gave both governments enough time to develop an image of their opponent as a persistent threat to their objective (DNI, 2019; Mabon, 2013). This objective primarily comes down to ensuring regime security. The Saudi authoritarian regime and the cleric regime of Iran both strive for survival whereby domestic and international threats are to be countered with the accumulation of regional power at the expense of the other(Blanga, 2017; DNI, 2019). This has led to a diplomatic and violent confrontations where both countries have tried to undermine each other's growing regional power (Mabon, 2013). As such, developments that threaten their regime security and their relative power spark a response from both nations

which may lead to a confrontation to some extent. Proxy wars are the most illustrative product of this dynamic, whereby the sectarian divide acts as an amplifying factor for both the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the manner in which this confrontation takes place. Religion acts as an amplifying factor for both the geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia while also stimulating the rift between the proxies both countries are supporting. As such, the historical and psychological factors of the rivalry may spill over to the proxy conflict, whereby potentially intensifying the conflict as well (Colaresi & Thompson; Mabon, 2013; Mumford, 2013b).

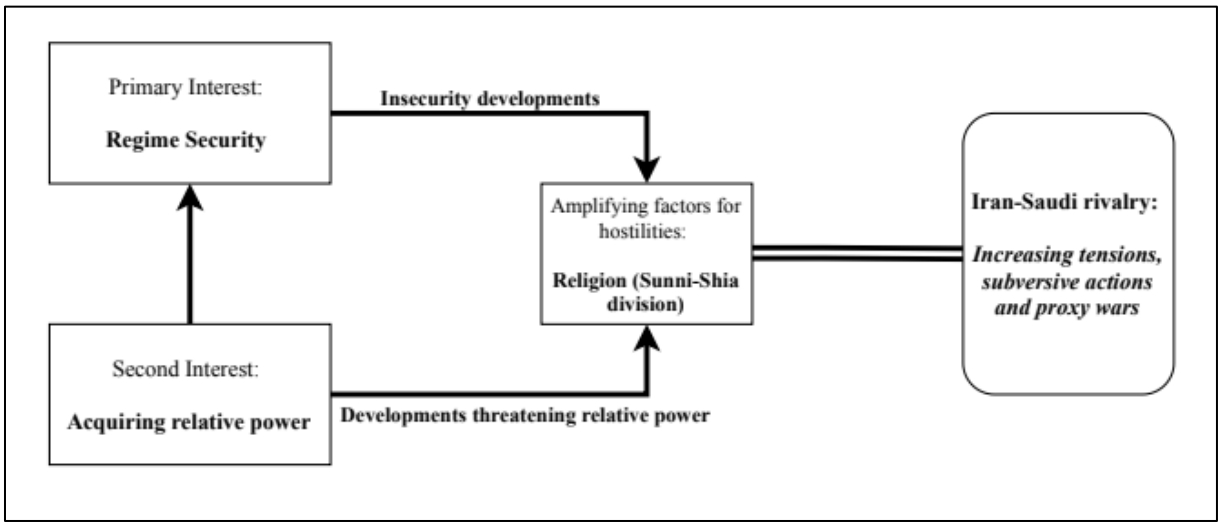

Figure 4 Saudi Arabia & Iran hostile rationale visualized

4.1.2 A NEW CLASH IN SYRIA

From this rationality, the Syrian conflict is by both countries perceived as a threat for their relative power in the region and regime security. This perception translates into both countries deciding on whether to support or oppose Assad. Starting with Iran, Tehran's decision to support Assad comes down to its main goal to the preserve the cleric authoritarian regime threatened by the US and its European and Middle-Eastern allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia. As such, regional influence is vital for the cleric regime to counter the perceived threat posed by these parties. For Tehran, the Assad regime is a vital strategic regional ally that enables the Iranian government to spread its influence over the region and mitigate international sanctions (DNI, 2019). After the 1979 revolution, The Syrian government has been one of the first regimes to recognize the new Iranian government, and supported Iran through diplomatic, economic and military means in their subsequent war against Iraq in the 1980's (Halit Yolcu, 2016; Philips, 2016). Moreover, the Syrian government shared Iran's hostility and threat

perception of the US and Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq, which made the emergence of the Syrian-Iranian alliance a collaboration largely based on Walt's argument of 'balancing'.

Furthermore, the Iranian government has also been keen to protect its strategic interests in the Levant and maintain its regional power in this region (The Soufan Center, 2019). Similar to Iran, the Assad regime has maintained overall hostile relations with the West, and in particular the US (DNI, 2019). One major factor for this development has been Western support for Israel. Relations between Syria and Israel have always been characterized by moments of tensions and conflict as is illustrated by the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, which still is an ongoing geopolitical issue to this day (DNI, 2019). The Syrian government facilitates Iranian subversive actions against the Israeli state by supporting Hezbollah and other militias in the Syrian southern and western regions. The Assad regime permits the militia to be active in Syria's southern and western region while also collaborating economically and militarily as part of the Iranian-led alliance termed 'Axis of Resistance' (ICG, 2017; Naame Shaam, 2017). This enabled the Iranian constructed political and military organization to become one of the most influential actors in the region and persistently undermine Israeli security (Uskowi, 2018).

In addition, the Assad regime forms an important ally in protecting Iranian influence in Iraq. When Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq fell following the US invasion, there emerged a growing power vacuum, which the Americans and British were unable to fill due to their exhaustive counterinsurgency against Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups (Gelvin, 2018; Philips, 2019). This gave Iran an opportunity to increase its influence over Iraq by supporting Shia militia's in the country (DNI, 2019). Ironically, the US collaborated with these groups in order to stabilize the country and set up a democratic political system (Gelvin, 2018). This has led to the Iranian aligned Shia groups emerging as a dominant party within Iraq. As such, Iran turned an old rival into a valuable ally, which subsequently mitigated Iran's isolation since it acquired influence over a direct 'axis' from Lebanon to Iraq (Philips, 2016).

These forms of relative power serve as the primary motivation for Iranian support to the Assad regime. Should Assad fall than Iranian influence in the Levant and indirectly Iraq is at risk (Goodrazi, 2013; Naame Shaam, 2016). As such, Iran's deliberation on supporting Assad was primarily based on a potential loss of relative power in the Middle East. In contrast, Saudi Arabia perceived the Syrian uprising both as a threat and opportunity. The 'Arab Awakening' demonstrations and riots in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and finally Syria were perceived as a dangerous development for the Middle-East by the Saudi government (Blanga, 2017). The uprisings were often characterized by protests calls for democratization or Islamization of

governmental institutions which oppose the governmental structure in Saudi Arabia (Blanga, 2017). As these protests grew larger, Riyadh supported the Assad regime in order to maintain a certain degree of stability in the Levant and placate Assad in order to undermine Iran's alliance with the Syrian government (Blanga, 2017). By supporting the Syrian government, Riyadh hoped to turn Assad and removing an important strategic ally from Tehran. Moreover, it would also lead to Iran being cut off from its strategic proxies in Lebanon and losing a facilitator for its operations in the Levant (Blanga, 2017; Philips, 2016).

Yet, Assad's intensification of relations with Iran and domestic pressures in Saudi Arabia would eventually have led to Riyadh supporting the opposition instead (Blanga, 2017; Philips, 2016). The increasingly violent tactics used by the Syrian government against the majority Sunni protestors has led to Riyadh and its influential clerics becoming increasingly hostile towards the Syrian regime and arguing for Saudi support for the opposition (Blanga, 2017; Philips, 2016). As such, delivering a heavy blow to Iran's regional influence remained the central interest for Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Syrian conflict. Saudi Arabia perceived the Syrian crisis as an opportunity to replace Iran's ally with a Saudi-favoured Sunni dominated government whereby achieving Riyadh's goal to limit Iran's growing presence after its proxy successes in Iraq and Lebanon (Blanga, 2017). As such, there is a potential 'gain' of relative power to be acquired. Thus, Saudi interests are at first sight much more related to potential gains in the Middle Eastern cold war.

However, it should be mentioned that domestic pressures and international developments in this period have made the Saudi regime's position less secure which made a potential loss of security and power an additional stake for Riyadh's involvement in Syria (Blanga, 2017). Western allies, primarily the US, have shown to be keen on pushing their democratization agenda indiscriminately in the MENA-region. Especially the US abandonment of its ally Mubarak in Egypt was alarmingly received in Riyadh (Philips, 2016). Similarly, domestic unrest and criticism coming from the clerical class posed an insecurity factor. Islam has always played a significant role within Arabian society, which gives clerics a prominent position in maintaining stability within the country (Blanga, 2017; Lacroix, 2014). The alliance between the Saudi family and the cleric class and the prevalence of the Islamic Wahhabi ideology in the country forces the Saudi government to often act in accordance with public and religious opinion in order to maintain its domestic power (Blanga, 2017 Lacroix, 2014;). As such, it became a concern when clerical leaders in Saudi Arabia criticised the violent tactics used by the Assad regime against their 'Syrian Sunni brothers' and disapproved of Riyadh's

ties with the Syrian leader (Lacroix, 2014). The clerical elite viewed the Syrian conflict as a Shia Alawite suppression of the Sunni Syrian population whereby appealing to states and individuals to support the opposition whereby playing into the sectarian divide between Sunni's and Shi'ites (Lacroix, 2014; Wehrey, 2012). Due to the newly installed modernization reforms, relations between the cleric elite and the government had already been strain (Blanga, 2017). As such, it was in the government's interest to support the Syrian opposition as the clerics had appealed to do so. This indicates that transnational religious ties matter for the regime security and power of the Saudi government.

4.2 NEW TENSIONS BETWEEN THE US AND RUSSIA

4.2.1 US DOMINANCE & ANTI-WESTERN KREMLIN

In addition to the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, there has been another geopolitical confrontation which has had a major political impact on the Middle East. During the Cold War, the Middle East has functioned as a diplomatic battleground for the two superpowers, the US and the USSR, which shaped the political environment in the region (Philips, 2019; Vasiliev, 2018). Although many countries in this region have been largely neutral, some countries like Saudi Arabia and Syria have aligned themselves with a particular side (Lund, 2016). The post-Cold War period saw asymmetrical balance of power between the US and the USSR's successor, Russia, but diplomatic confrontations remained a persisting characteristic, which was also reflected by their responses to political developments in the Middle East (Vasiliev, 2018).

One major development for the US-Russian relation is the political and economic collapse of Russia after the fall of the USSR. The 1990's was a period where Russia, the USSR's successor, experienced major political unrest and economic decline (Kuchins, 2015). The presidencies of Gorbachev and Yeltsin initiated political reforms which disregarded the long-established communist regimes and introduced a rapid liberalisation of the Russian economy (Kuchins, 2015). Yet, the Russian government had been unable to turn their rapid decline around. What was once a great major power was reduced to a struggling country that had to deal with political and economic collapse (Lund, 2019). Therefore, Russia concentrated more on its own domestic issues then getting involved in securing Russian interests in the Middle East (Lund, 2019). Under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, Russia turned into a violent oligarchic

society which ultimately further destabilized Russia's economy (Saunders, 2017; Ziegler, 2014). Moreover, 1998 financial collapse was not only massive blow for Russia's economic capability, it also showcased the corruptive and oligarchic domestic system, which further crippled Russia's international reputation (Saunders, 2017). Ultimately, this financial crisis and devaluation of the rouble left Russia with a GDP of 2% of that of the US in 1999/2000 (Ziegler, 2014).

During this same period, the US emerged as the victor of a four decades long bipolar confrontation. The American hegemony gave way to a more ambitious strategic and political foreign policy (Brands, 2016). After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Bush administration used US leverage to secure German reunification within NATO while also diplomatically approaching former Soviet satellite states (Brands, 2016; Ziegler, 2014). The absence of another major global superpower enabled the US to pursue its interests in regions like the Middle East and Africa. The US dependency on oil supplies coming from the Arabian Peninsula and the 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution have made the Persian Gulf one of the US's major strategic security regions (Brands, 2016). This is also shown by military operations like Desert Storm in Iraq, or the American-led intervention in Somalia and Yugoslavia. This foreign policy has often been paired with, and motivated by, an early strive for western values like human freedoms and democracy (Brands, 2016). Already in 1989, the Bush administration believed it had the opportunity to push forward in its statecraft policies as is also shown by his address in May 1989:

"…So today, I want to speak about our security strategy for the 1990's, one that advances American ideals and upholds American aims. Amidst the many challenges we'll face, there will be risks. But let me assure you, we'll find more than our share of opportunities. We and our allies are strong - stronger, really, than at any point in post-war period, and more capable than ever of supporting the cause of freedom. Shaping the World…" - George H. W. Bush, 1989 (NY Times, 1989)

In Russia, Yeltsin's resignation in 2000 has led to the Russian state being led by Vladimir Putin, a former KGB intelligence officer who demonstrated to have a different political approach compared to Yeltsin, despite being Prime Minister during Yeltsin's presidency (Myers, 2016). Like many other Russian nationalist elitists, Putin was worried about

American unilateral foreign policy actions. Among the Russian elite there emerged a perception of Washington trying to further undermine Russian power and increase its power in former Soviet territory (Myers, 2016; Ziegler, 2014). The 1990's were regarded as a period where state authority collapsed and foreigners exercised influence over Russian affairs (Kuchins, 2015). It was Putin's goal to regain Russian power and recentralize the executive national state as the dominant authority in the country (Kuchins, 2015; Myers, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018). Putin had been able to redirect power towards the executive which led to a trend of authoritarianism, as described by US analysts, throughout the early 2000's (Kuchins, 2015). At the same time, the Russian oligarchic business community was stripped of its influence and under the control of the Russian government in a period where the Russian economy experienced an immense recovery (Kuchins, 2015). Putin reinstated the prominence of the Russian Orthodox church which was paired with Putin's political strategy and emphasis on Russian nationalism and anti-Western rhetoric, whereby linking domestic problems with foreign actions (Myers, 2016).

Putin's anti-Western and nationalistic stance is important to understand Russia's foreign policy in the subsequent years. NATO enlargement, emphasis on democratic ideals and Western interventionism were viewed as the US's attempt to increase its influence and seek regime changes in regions such as the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and ultimately, Russia itself (Kuchins, 2015; Vasiliev, 2018). As such, foreign policies of the US and the Western states were often presented and viewed as a threat to the resurgence of Russia as a global actor. Growing anti-American sentiment was used to further push Russia towards an authoritarian state, whereby opposition was often framed for colluding with foreign, often Western, governments (Ziegler, 2014). This also extended towards foreign policy whereby the Russian government has often demonstrated to resist American attempts to invoke and justify international interventions like it did in the Middle East, Africa and former Yugoslavia throughout the 1990's (Kuchins, 2015; Lund, 2019; Vasiliev, 2018).

Russian-American relations in the 1990's and early 2000's has seen alternating periods of cooperation and confrontation. The subsequent Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations have many times tried to reset relations with Russia in an attempt to constitute Russian alignment with Western policy and ideals (Kuchins, 2015). Some of these initiatives like the NATO-Russian council or the US-Russian dialogue for nuclear non-proliferation proved to be very fruitful. Yet, these instances of cooperation were also paired with moments of confrontation between Russia and the West. The Russian campaigns in Chechnya and its increasing trend towards authoritarianism under the presidency of Putin has led to a growing

criticism from the West towards Russian security policy (Kuchins, 2015). Similarly, the Russian has shown its resistance towards NATO enlargement and Western interventions (Myers, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018). The Russians have always regarded the West as the largest Russian security threat and perceived the incorporation of countries like Poland and the Baltic states into the NATO-framework as American overreach of influence (Kuchins, 2015; Ziegler, 2014). Similarly, the Iraq war proved to be an important benchmark for Russian and western diplomatic confrontation. Prior to the American invasion of Iraq, Russia had repeatedly condemned US and UK bombardments on Iraqi targets (Vasiliev, 2018). Moreover, while the Americans were preparing for war against Hussein, Russian diplomats had argued for a diplomatic solution to their American and British colleagues, aiming to keep the Iraqi government intact in order to protect Russian economic and military interests (Vasiliev, 2018). As such, the 2003 invasion of Iraq was highly negatively perceived in Russia.

The Russian economic recovery and his increasing authority gave Putin greater means to pursue Russian foreign interests which were often conflicting with those of the US and its allies (Kuchins, 2015; Saunders, 2017). Russia embraced its status as a rising power by paying off its debts to the IMF and Paris Club and modernize its armed forces (Kuchins, 2015). Meanwhile, the 9/11 attacks, the failing US counterinsurgency in Iraq and the rising power of other countries, like China, showed cracks in US global supremacy (Kuchins, 2015). As such, the Russian government became increasingly critical of US foreign and security policies paired with a strategy to increase Russian influence by undermining democratization in countries in the Russian periphery and re-establishing relations with countries in neglected regions like the Middle East and Africa (Lund, 2019; Kuchins, 2015). These are also the major events and developments Russia and the US clashed on. The Orange revolution in Ukraine, NATO enlargement, the placement of NATO missile systems and finally the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 were events and subjects that proved to be destructive for US-Russian relations prior to the Arab Spring (Kuchins, 2015).

Based on this brief historic analysis of US-Russian relations in the post-cold war period, tensions before the Syrian uprisings can be largely attributed to a confrontation of strategic interests. During its hegemony, the US has pursued a strategy to increase its global influence by using its ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ power that manifested itself in the increasing global liberalisation where western norms and values were at the forefront (Brands, 2016; Kuchins, 2015; Vasiliev, 2018). This strategy is reflected by American-led diplomatic rapprochement to Eastern European countries and other formerly Soviet aligned nations. Ultimately, this has led to some

former Soviet nations joining NATO or seeking membership (Brands, 2016; Kuchins, 2015). Moreover, the US initiated international interventions under the pretext of 'responsibility to protect' and potential violations of human rights (Philips, 2016). For example, the 'War on Terror' held a similar ideological dimension where western interventions were targeted against authoritarian regimes in the Middle East.

This strategy is directly at odds with Moscow's foreign policy since 2000. Under the leadership of Putin, the Russian government began comprehensive and opportunistic strategy to return Russia to the global stage and reinstate the nation as a global power (Myer, 2016; Ziegler, 2014). Especially after the failing American invasion of Iraq, the rise of China and the resurgence of the Russian economy, there emerged an expectation among the Russian leadership that as the world enters a new power balance of multipolarity Russia would emerge as one of these global powers which will determine the future of the international system (Myer, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018).

Knowing that Russia cannot match Western conventional power, Moscow have used other comprehensive strategies to undermine Western influence diplomatically and militarily (Monaghan, 2016). As mentioned previously, the Western states, under the leadership of the United States, adopted an interventionist foreign policy agenda under the justifications of 'R2P' and 'War on Terror', which was often followed up by regime change (Allison, 2013; Brands, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018). Vasiliev (2018) highlights how this international western policy was alarmingly perceived in the Kremlin. This again plays into Kremlin's suspicion towards the West. There was a prevalent belief that the US sought to increase its influence by strategically placing and replacing favoured governments (Vasiliev, 2018). Considering their Cold War proxy war history and the changes of governments and government structure that took place after the interventions in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, Russian suspicions towards the West did not come out of nowhere. These developments combined with NATO-enlargement and Western disregard for Russian interests in the geopolitical system fuelled a conspiracy among some of the Russian leadership that the Western states are also seeking regime change in Russia, or at least stimulate democratic reform (Vasiliev, 2018). Therefore, Moscow has tried to stop Western involvement in other states' affairs by presenting itself as a protector of state sovereignty and territorial integrity within the UN Security Council (Charap, 2013; Lund, 2016; Sladder, Wasser, Connable & Grand-Clement, 2017)

Yet, Russian suspicion towards the West goes beyond western interventionism and amounted to Western conspiracy among some within Russian leadership (Vasiliev, 2018). As

we have touched upon before, the Kremlin has been keen on linking domestic and international issues with Western interference. This also extended towards the uprisings following the Colour revolutions and the Arab Awakening which was by many in Moscow perceived as a Western orchestrated protest movement aimed to invoke widespread regime change (Vasiliev, 2018). Moscow observed how Western media supported the protestors with positively frames rhetoric combined Western government diplomatically pressuring their Arab partners and other countries to seek democratic reform (Vasiliev, 2018). Especially American pressure and eventual abandonment of the Egyptian president Mubarak was alarmingly perceived in the Kremlin. As such, the Russian government became increasingly warry of Western attempts to pursue a similar strategy for Russia.

4.2.2 OPPOSING INTERESTS IN THE MENA-REGION AND SYRIA

To a large extent, Russian and American involvement follows a similar risk and loss aversive logic like that of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Like these countries, American and Russian confrontation over the Syria conflict stretches over a wider strategy encompassing strategic interests and ideological factors. These factors translate into particular interests which impact US and Russian decision-making to respectively oppose and support the Assad regime.

US interests in removing the Assad regime comes to its historic hostile ties with Syria. Since the 20th century, US-Syrian relations haven been were characterized by several political developments. The Syrian government has been, and still is, strongly against the constitution of Israel. Following Syria's independence in in 1960's, the Syrian government viewed Israel as the primary adversary in the Middle East (Gani, 2014). Many Syrians viewed Israel, and its Western support, as a new form western imperialism whereby reinforcing the government's hostile attitude towards the US and its allies (Gani, 2014). On the other side, the US grew increasingly irritated by Damascus' attitude towards the West and its constant undermining activities against the Israeli government (Gani, 2014; Philips, 2016).

Additionally, the Assad regime has facilitated and orchestrated subversive actions that directly undermined Western presence in the region. The Syrian government recognition of the anti-American Iranian Islamic regime in 1979 and its subsequent close cooperation on several security issues has made the Syrian government an important target in the US's Middle Eastern policy (Gani, 2014; Philips, 2016). This cooperation comes down to Syrian facilitation of Hezbollah's and Hamas conducts against Israel (Philips, 2016). Moreover, Assad adopted his

father's old tactic for proxy support by facilitating the flow and supply of Jihadists into Iraq in order to undermine the US counterinsurgency (Philips, 2016). The Syrian government became a secondary target for the American regional strategy which has led to international economic sanctions and embargoes and political pressure to pull back Syrian troops from Lebanon, which Damascus ultimately did in 2005 (Crane, 2005). In short, relations between Syria and the US had deteriorated immensely in the 2000's.

Another American interest for Assad's potential downfall relates to Western influence through democratic and western ideals in the Middle East. US administrations have repeatedly pursued opportunistic foreign policies aimed to stimulate democratization in authoritarian countries whereby reforming the international system along Western ideals and indirectly expanding American influence (Vasiliev, 2018). As such, many policymakers in Washington perceived the "Arab Spring" as western democratic inspired protest movements which would have seen the toppling of autocratic regimes and replace them with new regimes aligned with liberal and democratic ideals and values (Gelvin, 2018; Philips, 2016). Even though the precise impact of this interpretation for US policy regarding the Middle East remains ambiguous, it is clear that this western ideological perception played a role in Washington's decision-making concerning the MENA-region unrest, including Syria. Moreover, The US has presented itself as protector and advocator for democracy whereby leading the international community in protecting human rights and well-being (Gelvin, 2018). As such, Assad's violent strategy during the early stages of the 2011 Syrian uprising accumulated similar international reactions, which further estranged Syria with the West and regional countries (Gani, 2014).

Similar to Russia's overarching geopolitical perspective and strategy, Moscow's, and primarily Putin's, support for the Assad regime amounts to a response to Western external involvement throughout the Middle East. Being already suspicious of the US, Russian leadership interpreted Western responses to the Colour revolutions and the Arab Awakening as Western opportunism to pursue its interventionist strategy paired with regime change (Allison, 2013; Myers, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018). According to Vasiliev (2018), Western media attention and Western politicians have predominantly adopted a negative narrative against authoritarian regimes whereby reinforcing a belief in the Kremlin of Western meddling in Arab countries.

In addition, Putin and many Russian security experts were wary of the empowerment of radical Islamic groups already at the early stages of the Middle Eastern protest movements. Rather than assessing the Arab movement as a primarily democratic inspired revolution, Russian experts in the Kremlin highlighted the Islamic character of many of these protest

movements, warning for the empowerment of fundamentalist and radical groups in these countries (Myer, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018). Even if democratization takes place, Putin and many other people inside the Kremlin believed that democratization would lead to chaos where radicalization and politicization reigns supreme (Myers, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018). This situation would only facilitate the emergence of parties with a radical Islamic agenda which potentially favours terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and subsequently undermine the democratic process (Myers, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018). The Russian government has had a violent history with Jihadi and terrorist groups which stimulated Moscow's secure strategy in dealing with Middle-Eastern issues

Although these perceptions form the basis for Russia's position, Moscow also holds some strategic interests which further pushes the Kremlin in protecting Assad. Russian military modernization in the early 2000's extended to the Russian naval outpost in Tartous, the only military base outside of Russia, which enables the Russian military to escape NATO encirclement (Charap, 2013). Plans for repairs and expansion were implemented, which was paired with an increase of military and civilian cooperation between the two states (Lund, 2019). Maintaining the port is important for Russia's access to the Mediterranean, which functions as an important region for Russia to show its presence on a global scale (Charap, 2013). In addition, Russian weapon industry has important lucrative contracts with the Syrian government which have facilitated the expansion of the Syrian armed forces (Lund, 2019).

5. THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR IN AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE: 2011 – 2014

5.1 FIRST MOVERS: TEHRAN AND MOSCOW STAND BY THEIR ALLY

The start of the second decennium of the 21st century was for many Middle Eastern countries characterized by increasing uprisings, violence and instability. What started as a small Tunisian protest developed in an immense regional movement which many Western analysts named the 'Arab Awakening' or 'Arab Spring' (Gelvin, 2018). Initially, Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad believed the unrest would not spread to Syria, based on an assumption that Syrian economic and political reforms would be enough to limit public protests (Philips, 2016: 41). Yet, this was a mistake. Although the Syrian uprising was inspired by a democratic or Islamic belief set, the most crucial factor for the uprisings were the social and economic grievances among the Syrian population (Wimmen, 2016).

Events in the provincial city of Daraa sparked the Syrian uprising in March 2011. Syrian security forces forcefully arrested and tortured ten schoolchildren when they wrote "*nizam"* ("Down with the regime") on a building near the city centre (Gelvin, 2018). Subsequent weeks saw the emergence of other protest movements in both rural and urban places, which were violently struck down by Assad's security forces (Khaddour, 2015). Assad adopted his father's counterinsurgency approach in dealing with growing protests, a strategy that was successful during previous protest movements led by the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980's (Philips, 2016). Yet, this harsh and aggressive approach had a counterproductive effect and further fuelled public dissatisfaction whereby stimulating a growing resistance against the government. To illustrate, 100.000 protestors marched across Syria chanting anti-regime slogans and calls for democratic reform in July 2011 (Gelvin, 2018). However, the Syrian uprisings did not yet enjoy the amount of international attention like it would in the following months. Concerning the Arab Awakening, the international community was mostly focussed on the crises in Libya and Egypt (Philips, 2016: 60). Especially US departments and agencies have been struggling in 'handling and understanding the ongoing unrest in the MENA-region' (Philips, 2016: 60).

Meanwhile, Tehran and Moscow remained mostly quiet about the situation in Syria. From the beginning, both countries have backed the Assad regime by transferring weapons and equipment and facilitating the Syrian leadership with military expertise (Holiday, 2013). As illustrated in the previous chapter, Tehran was keen on seeing the Assad regime holding on to its power because it would otherwise have led to the loss of Iranian relative power in the region.

There was no alternative ally in Syria which could guarantee Iran's interests, which made it necessary for Tehran to support the Syrian government in their counterinsurgency approach (Philips, 2016; Naame Shaam, 2016). In June 2011, The Guardian quotes a Western diplomat saying, "Tehran has upped the level of technical support and personnel support from the Iranian Republican Guard to strengthen Syria's ability to deal with protesters" (Tisdall, 2011). Indeed, Iranian support for the Assad regime encompassed (military) equipment, IRCG military advisors and intelligence sharing which expanded the regime's capabilities and effectivity in dealing with the growing protest movements, which the Iranian cleric Supreme Leader, Khamenei, termed as a "US and Israeli ploy" (Abdo, 2011; Holiday, 2012). As such, Iran's support for Assad held the primary goal to avert losses, which motivated Iran's leadership to intervene in the Syrian conflict.

This is not the first time Tehran has supported a favoured faction in order to secure its interests. Proxy warfare strategy is an important of Iran's military doctrine. Since the end of the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1989, the Iranian government has reshaped its armed forces, focussing more on fastmoving, low level, military groups for countering larger and technologically advanced armed forces (DNI, 2019). This adaptation was focussed on a comprehensive security policy that included the formation and support for Shia militia groups in foreign countries in the region (Katzman, 2020). This has led to the establishment of the IRGC Quds Force, Iran's primary external covert operation conduit tasked with arming, training and advising allies and ideological aligned groups in the MENA-region and under the direct authority of the Supreme Leader (DNI, 2019; Ward, 2009). Apart from being low on resources following the war with Iraq and Iran's growing isolation from the international system, the Iranian government lacked partners and diplomatic means to gain regional influence (DNI, 2019; Philips, 2016). Proxy warfare strategies, like in Syria, are also often cost-effective strategies which limits the exhaustion of the already scares Iranian resources (Mumford, 2013; Philips, 2016). The situation in Syria did not require an extensive support coming from Tehran, which motivated Iranian cleric and military leadership to limits its role the way it did. Yet, the growing scale of the clashes between the SAA and protesters prompted Tehran to steadily increase Iranian assistance (Uskowi, 2018).

In this same period, Moscow has contributed to Assad's struggle by supplying military equipment and weaponry, and forming a diplomatic block against Western attempts to internationally condemn and pressure the Syrian government (Lund, 2019; Trenin, 2013). Like Tehran, the Kremlin perceived Assad's downfall as a threat and potential loss for Russia's

strategic interests. Especially after the NATO intervention in Libya, Russian leadership became increasingly convinced that Western countries aggressively pursued a regime change policy whereby threatening the Russian regime as well (Philips, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the Kremlin publicly disapproved of Assad's actions and pressured him to pursue reforms on multiple occasions in 2011. To illustrate, six months after the start of the Syrian uprising Russian president Medvedev believed that "If the Syrian leadership is incapable of conducting such reforms, it will have to go…", whereby highlighting that "…this decision should be taken not in NATO or certain European countries. It should be taken by the Syrian people and the Syrian leadership." (Chulov, 2011). This disposition illustrates an important dynamic of Moscow's dilemma during the earlier stages of the Syrian conflict. On the one hand, the Russian government was adamant in its critical decision against external involvement in other countries affairs. On the other hand, the protection of the Assad, someone not liked by both Medvedev and Putin, came with a growing international political backlash due to the growing violent tactics employed by the SAA against civilians (Philips, 2016). Yet, the developments in Libya has led to a reinforced scepticism and hostility towards the West whereby stimulating Russia's resolve to adhere Syrian territorial integrity and sovereignty for the purpose of protecting their Middle Eastern ally and indirectly hindering Western attempts to pursue their regime change policies (Vasiliev, 2018).

Furthermore, Russia's disposition in the diplomatic arena contributed to its relatively distant support for the Assad regime. In the diplomatic arena, most notably the UN Security Council, Russia had argued repeatedly that the Syrian people should resolve their issue and that external parties should not intervene (Charap, 2013; Philips, 2016). Apart from hindering external intervention, Moscow was with this strategy also able maintain Assad's legitimacy and strong position within Syria (Lund, 2019). At the time, Assad was still in a strong position which meant that his position as the dominant party within the Syria conflict gave the Assad regime an advantage if the conflict would have been resolved through diplomatic means (Philips, 2016). Moreover, Russia's limited footprint in Syria was necessary to avoid international backlash (Lund, 2019). It would looked hypocritical when Russia would have actively and openly supported the Assad regime with material and immaterial means while at the same time criticizing the US and other Western countries for illegitimate interventions or involvement. As such, political reluctance and Russia's diplomatic disposition initially limited Russian support was to pre-conflict agreed military equipment and humanitarian aid. Nevertheless, this was enough assistance considering Iran's growing contribution to Assad's

counterinsurgency (Holiday, 2013). More importantly, Iran's intensifying support enabled Moscow to concentrate on its diplomatic efforts to seek a peaceful resolution where the Assad regime would stay in power (Philips, 2016).

5.2 'SECOND MOVERS': A RESPONSE TO EXTERNAL ACTORS AND GROWING VIOLENCE

The consequential escalating violence following the spread of the protest movement, which was amplified by Damascus' violent strategy gave way for individuals within communities and the movements to organize militia groups aimed to protect protestors against the SAA (Holiday, 2012). Yet, as regime-induced violence grew, and the number of protestors increased, military personnel of the SAA started to defect. many Syrians within the Syrian armed forces (SAA) were growing tired of the regime's counterinsurgency which has led to many professionally trained soldiers turning against the Assad regime (Lister, 2016; O'Bagy, 2012). This has led to the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which would eventually develop into the umbrella organization of many opposition groups (O'Bagy, 2012; Philips, 2016). In addition, the first signs of radical Islamic groups like ISIS and the Nusra front became apparent in this same period. Although the first protests were primarily motivated by social and economic grievances, the conflict and the opposition forces grew more sectarian as the Syrian conflict progressed (Philips, 2016). Sunni people within Syria felt marginalized by the minority Alawite dominated government which has ruled the country through violent methods (Philips, 2016). These grievances and resentment were amplified by Assad's approach for stopping the uprisings drove the sectarian character of the conflict (Philips, 2016).

Following Iran's and Russia's support, Western countries, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Countries started to oppose the Assad regime. Following Saudi Arabia's failing attempts to "turn" Assad, the Gulf countries had changed their strategy by planning on supporting the opposition forces (Blanga, 2017; Philips, 2016). Assad's collaboration with Tehran remained the most pressing reason for Riyadh's involvement in Syria (Blanga, 2017). As Assad's counterinsurgency grew more violent domestic pressures inside Saudi Arabia started pushing the Saudi government for a more critical stance towards the Assad regime (Blanga, 2017; Philips, 2016). In the summer of 2011, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) condemned the actions undertaken by the SAA and started planning measures against the growing violence in Syria (Blanga, 2017). In June 2011, the New York times quotes the king of Saudi Arabia announcing that "…The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stands before its historical

responsibility toward her brothers, demanding the stoppage of the killing machine and bloodshed, and the use of reason before it is too late." (Goodman, 2011). As such, many Gulf countries started to voice their persisting argument for the removal of the Assad regime from power.

There are two factors at play for Saudi support to the opposition. The first concerns a potential threat for Saudi regime security related to domestic pressures. Clerics inside Saudi Arabia have been criticizing Riyadh's lack of action in supporting the Syrian "Sunni" opposition against the Assad forces, which many cleric leaders perceive as a Shia dominating aggressor (Lacroix, 2014; Philips, 2016). This growing criticism coming from the cleric elite is problematic for Riyadh. Religion plays a major role within Saudi Arabian society where the Wahhabi-ideology holds a prominent spot (Blanga, 2017; Mabon, 2013). This gives the clerics influence over the Saudi Arabian population, whereby making the alliance between the Saudi royal family and the cleric elite an important pillar for domestic stability (Blanga, 2017). Yet, this alliance has become strain. Riyadh's modernization reforms and its subsequent rapprochement towards Assad prompted clerics to become more critical towards the Saudi government (Blanga, 2017). This development meant a direct insecurity for Saudi regime security, which was already under threat because of their own domestic unrest. Moreover, Riyadh's lack of action in opposing Assad was, according to some, in contradiction with Saudi Arabia's Sunni leadership role, which would mean a potential loss of prestige in international politics (Gause, 2014; Blanga, 2017). As such, there emerged a potential loss over state security should the Saudi government not support the opposition as pushed by domestic calls.

Another factor for Saudi Arabia's support for the opposition groups was Iranian support for the Assad regime. Seeing that "turning" Assad towards the Saudi-camp did not succeed, Riyadh needed to pursue other routes to undermine Iran's presence in the Levant (Blanga, 2017; Philips, 2016). As such, the predominantly Sunni opposition forces provided Riyadh with an opportunity to install a new Saudi-favoured government (Philips, 2016). This would not only reduce Iranian presence in the Levant, but would also further isolate Iran from the region giving Saudi Arabia the opportunity to achieve a greater influence over the region (Gelvin, 2018; Philips, 2016). Opposition forces were struggling against Assad's troops backed by Iranian personnel and supplies which prompted a response from Riyadh and other Sunni governments to assist the struggling communities in Syria (Lister, 2016). Especially when diplomatic attempts to deescalate the violence in Syria failed, Riyadh was keen to find other ways to protect their "Sunni brothers" (Goodman, 2011; Philips, 2016). As such, Iran's assistance for the Assad

regime combined with Riyadh's failing policy to "tun" Assad, motivated the Saudi government to assist Sunni groups in Syria in fighting against regime forces.

Based on these factors, Saudi Arabia's initial involvement has been based on deliberation of potential gains and anticipated losses. This creates a 'push' and 'pull' dynamic where the domestic and international threats to Saudi regime security function as a push for intervention while the potential decrease of Iran's regional influence creates an extra attraction for supporting Sunni-groups in Syria in order to remove Tehran's strategic ally. Subsequently, Iran's assistance to the Assad regime forces sparked a reaction from Riyadh where Saudi leadership changed their strategy to opposing Assad seeing Damascus's ties with Tehran intensify. As such, the rivalry dynamic and the deliberation of potential losses and gains has contributed to both parties of the Syrian civil war acquiring a benefactor, which subsequently stimulated the escalation of the conflict.

Meanwhile, the US and other Western states also became much more vocal in their anti-Assad position from the start. The US already had enough reasons to oppose Assad apart from his violent approach in dealing with the protest movement (Philips, 2016). Although western representatives were in contact with Syrian officials, members of Western embassies in Damascus started forging connections with the protestors already at the early stages of the growing unrest (Goldberg, 2016; Philips, 2016). Ultimately, US President Barrack Obama announced in the summer of 2011 that "…the time has come for President Assad to step aside." (BBC, 2011). Yet, despite for some diplomatic efforts through the UN for increasing sanctions or other forms of pressure, which were eventually rejected by Russia and China in the UN Security Council, the Obama administration initially did little to bring Assad down (Kahl & Lynch, 2013; Philips, 2016). According to some analysts, US leadership believed that regime change in Syria could be enforced by diplomatic and economic pressure like the US did in Egypt and Libya (Philips, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018). However, this belief seems naïve, considering that the US did not possess the same kind of leverage over Syria like it did over Cairo (Philips, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018).

American distant involvement in Syria follows a different dynamic compared to the other external actors involved. Iran and Saudi Arabia are motivated by a mutual threat perception which reinforces a desire to avert losses of relative power that threatens their regime security. For Tehran and Riyadh, the Syrian conflict ultimately comes down to a struggle for regional relative influence, where one's victory would spell a decrease of power for the other. Moscow's involvement in Syria is much more a response to what the Kremlin perceives as

"Western overreach" and external involvement for regime change (Myers, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018). In contrast, American motivations to oppose Assad were primarily directed towards the Syrian government itself and Assad's actions against the protestors (Philips, 2016)

The US has been very ambivalent in its support for the opposition throughout the Syrian civil war. Because of its reputation as a world leader and protector of democratic and humanitarian ideals, the US was "obligated" to adopt a critical stance towards the Assad regime (Goldberg, 2016; Philips, 2016). Yet, extensive military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, and ongoing issues in Egypt, Libya and other countries in the Middle East made American leadership reluctant to engage in another conflict through military means (Gelvin, 2018; Goldberg, 2016). Moreover, US president Obama had been very explicit in its pursuit to reduce US presence in the region whereby trying to maintain stability and US influence through its allies (Goldberg, 2016). The Obama administration, and especially Obama himself wanted to avert American attention towards other regions in the world, specifically South-East Asia (Goldberg, 2016). In short, there was little American appetite in getting involved in another potential "quagmire" in the Middle East (Philips, 2016).

This American reluctance for further regional involvements versus the need to condemn Assad and protect the Syrian opposition is also reflected within the Obama administration. Members of Obama's cabinet repeatedly tried to convince the president to support the Syrian opposition (Goldberg, 2016). Cables with moderate groups inside Syria had already been prepared by US intelligence services and diplomats which has led to a low-level support structure for local communities (Goldberg, 2016; Holiday, 2012; Philips, 2016). Yet, this did not extend towards a wider support because the risks were deemed too high. Traumatized by the consequences of US support for the Mujahedeen, which has ultimately led to the formation of Al-Qaeda, Obama and other members of the administration were sceptical of arming groups with American weapons which may land in the hands of terrorist groups (Goldberg, 2016). This idea was reinforced by the disorganization among the opposition groups. The protestor movement in Syria was still a largely disorganized civil uprising despite the emergence of militia groups like the FSA (Holiday, 2012; Lister, 2016). Obama explained: " When you have a professional army that is well armed and sponsored by two large states [Iran and Russia] who have huge stakes in this, and they are fighting against a farmer, a carpenter, an engineer who started out as protesters and suddenly now see themselves in the midst of a civil conflict …the notion that we could have—in a clean way that didn't commit U.S. military forces—changed the equation on the ground there was never true." (Goldberg, 2016: 73). This meant that the

situation in Syria was still highly unpredictable which made the President wary to actively and "enthusiastically" support the protestors like many within the Obama administration had argued to do so (Goldberg, 2016: 73). Nevertheless, as the growing violence progressed and the UN reported protestor death count reached 1900 by mid-July, internal and external pressures increased to take more active measures against the Assad regime (Philips, 2016). Still looking for a diplomatic solution, Western states facilitated the Turkish and Qatari-led formation of the Syrian National Council (SNC), recognized by many countries as the official representatives of the Syrian opposition, hoping to engage the Syrian government politically and finding a solution, peacefully reducing the bloodshed in Syria (Philips, 2016).

Yet, diplomatic efforts to deescalate the violence remained unfruitful. As more Syrian civilians took up arms against pro-Assad regime forces and more military officers and soldiers defected to the FSA and other militia groups, the conflict became increasingly confrontational and deathly (Holiday, 2012; Philips, 2016). At the international stage, UN resolutions against the Assad regime were blocked by Russia and China, while the UN-approved Arab League Observer Mission proved to be ineffective (Blanga, 2017; Myers, 2016). Several countries, among them the US, refused to acknowledge any agreement where the Assad regime would stay in power, or even play a role in Syrian political transition (Philips, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018). According to both Vasiliev (2018) and Philips (2016) this position in the diplomatic arena was based on three miscalculations. First, opposition supporting countries overestimated the Syrian opposition capabilities and effectivity (Philips, 2016). Second, Western and Gulf countries supporting the opposition groups underestimated Assad's support base in Syria and its military capabilities (Vasiliev, 2018). Finally, Western and Gulf countries underestimated Russia's resolve to support Assad. Many policymakers and diplomats believed the Russian government could be swayed in giving up its support for Assad like it did previous crises in the Middle East (Philips, 2016).

The absence of a diplomatic solution gave way for further escalation in the winter of 2011-2012. Frustrated by a lack of progress, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia started planning transferring financial resources, arms and other equipment to the insurgents (Blanga, 2017). During this period the first forms of external support coming from the Gulf and the West arrived in Syria. Militia groups received financial, military and humanitarian support which increased their capabilities (Holiday, 2012; O'Bagy, 2012). Especially when support from external support for the opposition was formalized in February 2012, external support was becoming more structural (Lister, 2016). The 'Friends of Syria', led by the US, UK, France, Turkey, Saudi

Arabia and Qatar, was formed to discuss measures to actively support the opposition forces and officially recognizing the SNC as the political representatives of the Syrian opposition (Philips, 2016). During the meetings in February 2012, Qatar and Saudi Arabia persistently argued for weapon deliveries while the Western states initially sought to support the opposition through humanitarian, financial and medical support and only limited weapon transfers (Goldberg, 2016; Philips, 2016).

5.3 2012-2013: ESCALATION

The first months of 2012 proved to be a transition period where the Syrian governmental suppression of civilian and militias over the entire country was replaced by a civil war dynamic. The Assad regime forces were starting to experience material and manpower problems, which was hindering the regime's counterinsurgency progress (Holiday, 2013). Meanwhile, financial support and weapon deliveries coming from the Gulf countries combined with increasing recruitment made the opposition groups of the FSA more effective in their operations (Holiday, 2012). This progress was also stimulated by the prevalent number of deserters coming from the SAA who offered training and an ability to formulate military strategy (Holiday, 2012; Lister, 2016). Financial resources were used to acquire weapons on the black-market which offered an abundance of weaponry following the many conflicts the region had endured over the years (Philips, 2016; Small Arms Survey, 2016). As such, the military capabilities of the opposition increased drastically at the start of 2012, which would eventually lead to battlefield success after the spring of 2012 (Holiday, 2012)

External support for the growing opposition forces and Assad's growing manpower and equipment issues motivated Tehran to increase Iran's involvement in Syria (Uskowi, 2018). Several Iranian military institutions, among them the IRCG Quds Force started to intensify their contribution by setting up training programs, supply lines and organizing Assad loyal militia groups (Fulton, Holiday & Wyer, 2013; Holiday, 2013; Smyth, 2017). In the winter of 2011-2012, Iran began sending Shia militia groups to Syria for assisting the Syrian army against the opposition forces (Fulton, Holiday & Wyer., 2013). The groups came from surrounding countries in the Middle East where Iran has been actively sponsoring local militias for gaining regional influence in those particular countries (The Soufan Center, 2019).

Also, Iranian military personnel started training Assad-loyal groups (Philips, 2016). These Iranian trained, often Alawite, groups were often highly motivated communities fearing

potential Sunni retaliation[6]. This contributed to the increasing sectarian character of the conflict. While Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries primarily sponsored Sunni-groups, many minority communities relied on the secular Assad regime for their security. Fearing potential Sunni retaliation for their discriminate marginalization and oppression during the Ba'athist party reign, minority groups started to organize themselves for defensive purposes (Philips, 2016). As such, local Alawite community militias and so-called '*shabiha*' groups were initially organized as a measure to counter potential Sunni resentment against the minority population, which would eventually be incorporated into the Syrian government's military organisation, stimulated by Tehran (Fulton, Holiday & Wyer, 2013; Holiday, 2013).

To a large extent, Iran's intensification of support can be explained as a loss aversive response to Assad's growing struggle, and indirectly Saudi Arabia's involvement. Based on the assumption that the Assad's regime empowerment in Syria secures Iranian interests, the growing resistance against Assad and his manpower problem are a growing threat for Iran's relative power in the region. Especially when these developments indicate Saudi Arabian influence in Syria, this insecurity of Iranian power motivates the Iranian government to invest more of its resources into their support for the Assad regime. Moreover, Iran's potential losses in the form of sunk costs, keep rising as Tehran invests its resources in the Syrian regime forces (Fulton, Holiday & Wyer, 2013; Hatahet, 2019; Philips, 2016). According to Taliaferro (2004), "Loss aversion drives decision makers to not only persist in failing strategies, but also to take additional risks in the hope of recouping their initial investments". (2004: 50). Following this logic, Tehran's initial supporting investments for the SAA scale up Iran's interests in maintaining Assad's position, which motivates Iranian leadership to become more "risk acceptant" (Taliaferro, 2004). As such, Assad's manpower problem also becomes a concern for Tehran, which motivates Iranian leadership to use of other proxies to solve some of these issues.

Yet, A second motive for Iran's manpower support is Tehran's pursuit to safeguard its interests by directly positioning proxy forces in Syria. Fulton, Holiday and Wyer (2013) assess that as Assad's position becomes increasingly insecure due to domestic and international pressures, Tehran is inclined to build up an alternative security force should the Assad regime

[6] Before the outbreak of the Syrian Uprising, the 75% majority Sunni populations has been structurally marginalized by the Syrian government (Philips, 2016). To illustrate, the brutal governmental approach for countering the Muslim Brotherhood protest movement in the 1980's is, according to some analysts (Lund, 2019; Philips, 2016), still a prevalent trauma for the Sunni population during the Syrian civil war.

fall and a potential hostile government emerge. Moreover, opposition forces were starting to threaten Iranian assets and interests as they are making progress which leads to a response coming from Tehran (Philips, 2016). This development and Saudi Arabia's earlier decision to become involved indicate that these rivals in Syria do not only respond to each other's actions, but are also led by developments in the Syrian conflict which indirectly threaten their assets and interests in the Levant, and indirectly their relative power.

These kinds of responses can also be observed when analysing Moscow's support for the Assad regime as well. Russian support for the Assad regime encompassed the delivery of heavy weaponry like attack helicopters, artillery and jet fighters and air defence systems (BBC, 2012; Elder, 2012a; Elder, 2012b; Jones, 2020). Again, the Russian government explained these deliveries as pre-agreed transactions while also stating that these systems were for defensive purposes (Philips, 2016). Like Tehran, the Russian government seems to respond to Assad's growing struggle against the opposition. Assad's manpower problem made the SAA much more reliant on sophisticated weaponry to make up for the lack of personnel (Holiday, 2013). To illustrate, monitoring and offensive operations by the SAA were starting to concentrate more on the use of helicopters, artillery and other kinds of heavy weaponry whereby covering the SAA's growing personnel problem. Additionally, the Russian government also needed to deal with the growing threat for direct Western military intervention (Bino & Krause, 2017). The increasing involvement of the US and other western states worried Russian policymakers, especially when NATO placed Patriot defence systems in Turkey after the downing of a Turkish military jet fighter (Philips, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018). The Russian government responded with transferring ballistics and defensive systems to the regime forces in order to discourage Western growing military presence (Philips, 2016). This tactic to prohibit military intervention reoccurred extensively since Vladimir Putin returned to the Russian presidency. While Medvedev has been moderately open towards cooperation with the US and European states, Putin returned to a more confrontational approach towards the NATO-countries (Myers, 2016).

` In this same year, diplomatic attempts to broker a peace agreement between the Syrian opposition forces and the Syrian government repeatedly failed. Syrian opposition forces refused to enter a dialogue with the Syrian government while Assad was adamant in not giving up his position (Philips, 2016). Both the Russian peace initiatives and the Kofi Annan peace plan struggled over the same hurdle – the question over Assad's role in a potential new Syrian transitional government (Philips, 2016). Western and Gulf states remained adamant that a diplomatic agreement could not be made when it meant that Assad would stay in power

(Vasiliev, 2018). In contrast, Moscow and Beijing sided with the Assad regime, not willing to concede to calls for regime change (Jones, 2020; Philips, 2016). This was also at the forefront during the Geneva Conference in June. Although western leaders were keen on finding a diplomatic route for resolving the Syrian conflict, they remained stern in their position for Assad's removal (Goldberg, 2016). Especially during the summer of 2012, when the opposition was starting to book significant gain in Syria many analysts believed that Assad's downfall was imminent which made the US and Saudi Arabia less inclined to agree with an agreement where Assad's position would not change (Vasiliev, 2018). As such, the uncompromising position of the major external players contributed to a continuous delay of a diplomatic solution which has led to a prolongment of the Syrian conflict.

Going back to Syria, the first successes of the FSA and other opposition groups in 2012 were primarily due to Assad's withdrawal from rural areas and the increasing support and organisation from the Gulf, the US, France, the UK and Turkey (Philips, 2016). When Assad's manpower problem became more pressing, Iranian advisors recommended a concentration of efforts and resources on retaking and maintaining urban areas like Hama and Homs (Fulton, Holiday & Wyer, 2013; White, Tabler & Zelin, 2013). At the same time, Saudi Arabia's support for the FSA and other opposition groups was intensifying (Philips, 2016). Because of Iran's growing presence and the emergence of Shia militia groups in Syria, the anti-Shia narrative inside Saudi Arabia also became more vocal (Philips, 2016). The conflict was becoming increasingly framed along an anti-Iranian perspective whereby motivating and reinforcing a response in Riyadh to increase its support for the opposition forces (Blanga, 2017; Philips, 2016). A such, domestic pressures to the regime subsequently contributed to Saudi Arabia's increasing support.

In addition, Western countries were more prepared to facilitate Gulf weapon transfers. Especially the CIA started to become more active in undermining the Assad regime (Philips, 2016). Although many policymakers in Washington remained reluctant to intervene in Syria, many believed that the US should increase their support for the opposition groups (Goldberg, 2016; Philips, 2016). This pressured the Obama administration into increasing their support for the opposition forces by upscaling their secured weapons transfers and "non-lethal" aid (Goldberg, 2016; Philips, 2016). Yet, US involvement remained focussed on the latter form of support, which encompassed humanitarian equipment and training programs for setting up institutions in areas where governmental institution collapsed after the SAA left (Philips, 2016).

Indeed, these LCC's were the first groups that received direct western material support and (very) limited lethal support for defensive purposes (Lister, 2016).

5.4 POTENTIAL DIRECT MILITARY INTERVENTION

In the spring of 2012, the initiative shifted to the opposition parties. From March to August 2012, Syrian opposition forces were making considerable gains (White, Tabler & Zelin, 2013). Apart from taking control of rural areas, the FSA and other opposition groups achieved successes in Aleppo and parts of Damascus and Idlib (Lister, 2016; White, Tabler & Zelin, 2013). Also, opposition forces were able to secure territory along the Turkish and Jordanian borders, which was an important development for the external partners, who were now able to transfer weapons and other equipment more securely (Lister, 2016; Philips, 2016). Following the victories of opposition forces, Saudi Arabia sought to take over Qatar and Turkey's role as the main benefactor of the Syrian opposition (Blanga, 2017). Riyadh wanted to become the leading sponsor of the opposition groups in order to limit the influence of their rival, Qatar, and Turkey over the Sunni groups by upscaling its support and organizing meetings between representatives of the several opposition groups (Philips, 2016). In the winter of 2012-2013, Riyadh purchased large quantities of Croatian weaponry for the opposition forces which were subsequently smuggled into Syria by the CIA from Jordan (Chivers & Schmitt, 2013; Philip, 2016;). Moreover, the formation of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in November 2012, has made Riyadh able to counter Qatar's influence over the opposition and position itself as the main benefactor of the opposition groups (Philips, 2016). With this position, the Saudi government hoped to acquire a considerable amount of leverage over the potential new Sunni government should Assad's government fall (Philips, 2016).

By the end of 2012, Assad's position was under immense pressure and many western analysts believed that Assad's day in power were numbered (Vasiliev, 2018). Nevertheless, the opposition forces started to directly threaten regime officials and Iranian assets in the region, which stimulated a response from Tehran (Philips, 2016; Sullivan, 2014). This included the openly and extensively participation of Hezbollah, Iran's ally and (old) proxy in Lebanon and Southern Syria (ICG, 2017). Although Hezbollah can be regarded as an autonomous actor in itself, Tehran still maintains a degree of influence over the group, which has been used to pursue cooperative actions between Iran and the Lebanese group in Syria (Sullivan, 2014). During the early stages of the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah distanced itself from the fighting and only

provided limited support to it ally and patron (Sullivan, 2014). This initial avoidance of participation was, according to analysts, motivated by Iran's and Hezbollah's affiliation with Hamas, a group which supported the Syrian uprisings against the Assad government (DNI, 2019; Philips, 2016). Would Hezbollah actively and openly engage the FSA then it feared that Iran and the group would lose the already limited social support of Sunni populations against Israel and the West whereby hurting Tehran's goal to make Iran the leading country of the Muslim world (DNI, 2019). Nevertheless, there emerged a rising fear that Hezbollah would lose its most important facilitator which made both Iran and Hezbollah became increasingly willing to accept the risk of losing reputation for securing its interests (Sullivan, 2014)

Although the Assad regime was able to regain some portions of its territory with the increasing involvement of Tehran and support coming from Moscow, Assad's position remained incredibly insecure in 2013 (Philips, 2016; Sullivan, 2014). Yet, development in 2013 would eventually lead to a fragmentation of the opposition forces which enabled the Assad regime to focus on its own defences (Lister, 2016). Since the start of the Syrian conflict, disorganization and a lack of coordination was a prevalent issue for the Syrian opposition (Philips, 2016). The SNC and its military component did not fully represent the entire opposition force and was also incapable of organizing training and transfer programs (Lister, 2016; Philips, 2016). Moreover, many external actors like Saudi Arabia and Qatar bypassed the SNC and focused on supporting their own favoured groups within the FSA (Philips, 2016). Success on the battlefield overshadowed this growing issue. Most of the victories were achieved by Islamic groups which became increasingly powerful within the Syrian opposition forces (Lister, 2016; White, Tabler & Zelin, 2013) The successes on the battlefield, access and provision of resources and radicalization in an increasing sectarian conflict attracted fighters from other opposition groups as well (Lister, 2016). FSA cooperation with radical Islamic groups was primarily based on a mutual desire to topple the regime, but as tensions arose concerning resources and ideology, division between these parties, and within the FSA, led to conflicts between radical Islamic groups and other opposition forces (Lister, 2016). As such, Al Nusra Front openly announced its allegiance to Al Qaeda, while ISIS was starting to gain territory by turning against the FSA and Kurdish forces in the summer of 2013 (Philips, 2016).

This development created a new dimension in the Syrian conflict which shifted the focus of many external parties to the Islamic threat. In 2013, The FSA's call for intensified support coming from external parties is honoured by both the US and Saudi Arabia which became increasingly worried that radical groups would take over rebel occupied regions in Syria

(Philips, 2016; Yacoubain, 2020). Seeking to counter the empowerment of radical Islamic group and further pressuring the Assad regime, both Riyadh and Washington decided to intensify their support for moderate and secular groups within the FSA (Philips, 2016). At the beginning of June, the Obama administration acknowledged that it gave the CIA clearance to conduct US arms deliveries to approved groups (Goldberg, 2016). Although Western states were still keen on seeing Assad's downfall, the next period was characterized by an increasingly Western focus on countering Jihadi and terrorist groups (Kagan, Kagan & Lewis, 2014; Philips, 2016; Yacoubain, 2020). Especially when ISIS was starting to accumulate territory rapidly, the international community, including Russia and Iran, started to focus much of their efforts against the ISIS threat (Clemons, 2014; Philips, 2016). This would eventually lead to the US focussing their support towards the Kurdish forces in Northern Syria while also conducting airstrikes against strategic positions of the terrorist groups in 2014 (Goldberg, 2016).

Nevertheless, many analysts and policymakers predicted that direct US military intervention in Syria would have come sooner. Already in August 2012, Obama addressed the possibility of US intervention in Syria by stating that "We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus…" (Ball, 2012; Goldberg, 2016: 72). Consequently, Obama was faced with immense pressure when, on August 21 2013, chemical weapons were used in Ghouta, east of Damascus, killing approximately 300 civilians (Vasiliev, 2018). Western leaders and diplomats were quick in blaming the Syrian government for the attack, while Russians in the Kremlin reacted quickly in attempting to cast doubt over the evidence that Assad's forces orchestrated the attack (Philips, 2016). No matter the truth, the Obama administration was stuck in its own rhetoric (Vasiliev, 2018). UK Prime Minister David Cameron supported a reactionary Western intervention, but was not able to get parliamentary approval for a potential British military operation (Goldberg, 2016). This had a discouraging effect on President Obama to rely on another US military endeavour, something he desperately wanted to avoid (Goldberg, 2016). Meanwhile, most cabinet members within his administration supported the idea for a military operation, believing it would be a disastrous hit for US credibility towards its allies in the Middle East and in overall international politics (Goldberg, 2016).

On the other side, the Russian government threatened to complete the S-600 air defence systems should the US decide to pursue military intervention against the Assad regime (Philips, 2016). As mentioned before, Putin was much more confrontational compared to Medvedev

(Myer, 2016). To illustrate, within a few days of inauguration Putin brusquely informed the White House that he would not attend the planned G8-Summit meeting later that month, whereby rekindling hostilities between the US and Russia after Obama's attempts to reset relations between the two countries (Myers, 2016). The Ghouta-attacks of 2013 proved to be another confrontation between the two nations. Vasiliev (2018) argues that there were some people inside the Kremlin that perceived the attacks as an American ploy to justify intervention. It highlights the extent of Western threat perception in Moscow which became increasingly prevalent since Putin returned to power in 2012 (Jones, 2020; Myer, 2016). Despite these developments, Putin kept supporting Assad and maintained Russian strategy in dismissing any Western initiative for international action against Assad (Philips, 2016). Even so, wanting to avoid Assad's downfall and American intervention, Putin used Obama's dilemma to approach the American president with a proposition which encompassed an international mission overseeing the destruction and removal of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal (Philips, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018). Although Obama's agreement with the proposition would hurt relations with its Middle Eastern partners and proxies in Syria, it enabled the US government to avoid a potential new military quagmire while also accomplishing Western concerns over the use of chemical weaponry by the Assad regime or other parties (Philips, 2016). Meanwhile, the Russian government has been able to avoid Western incentivised regime change in Syria, whereby accomplishing its main goal in keeping the Assad regime in power (Vasiliev, 2018). As such, this period has demonstrated how Moscow has responded directly to US threats and actions with comprehensive diplomatic and military means, which gives an indication that, like Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Russian government tends to respond to their own threat perception in the international system.

6. CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to provide an understanding for why state-actors decide to engage in proxy war by conducting a single-case study on the emergence of the multi-level Syrian proxy war. Considering Mumford's prediction (2013b) concerning to potential growing prevalence of proxy wars in the future, there is a societal and scientific need to expand our understanding for why and how these kinds of conflicts emerge. In order to this, I have used a framework of potential causal factors derived from the extensive IR theoretical work for the emergence of wars and other conflicts. From this work I used 'regime security', 'the strive for power' and 'ideology' as factors for assessing the interests at play for the state actors involved. On the basis of these interests, I have used the theory of 'loss aversion' and Taliaferro's (2004) 'balance of risk theory' to explain how the perception of threats and loss motivate state actors to support a faction in the Syrian civil war. Finally, this logic was used to explain how the existing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the confrontation between the US and Russia, has led to the sequence of involvement in the Syrian conflict

6.1 FACTORS FOR THE EMERGENCE OF THE SYRIAN PROXY WAR

The central question in this thesis is 'how has the Syrian civil war transformed into a multi-level proxy war?'. The first puzzle for answering this question concerned the identification of state actor's interests in the region. Focussing on the regional level, both Iran and Saudi Arabia hold similar interests in terms of 'regime security' which drives their pursuit for regional influence. Because of their mutual threat perception, both countries have pursued policies reinforcing their own regime security while undermining the regional power of their Middle Eastern rival (DNI, 2019; Philips, 2016). This dynamic also applies to the Syrian conflict. the Assad regime is a major strategic ally for Iran in the Middle East, enabling growing Iranian influence in the Levant region and mitigating international sanctions crippling Iran's economy (Philips, 2016). If the Assad regime were to fall, then Iran's security and regional power would be at great risk (Philips, 2016). From the other perspective, Assad's downfall could mean an increase of Saudi Arabian power when Assad is replaced by a Saudi favoured regime (Blanga, 2017). Moreover, the Saudi regime has been enduring domestic pressures to support the Syrian opposition (Blanga, 2017; Lacroix, 2016). As such, there emerges a dynamic within the Saudi-Iranian rivalry where both countries aim to avert losses or try to increase their regional power by supporting a favoured faction in the Syrian civil war.

At the global level, the US-Russian confrontation is a result of clashing strategic interests. The ambivalent involvement of the US has primarily been motivated by an ideological and political motivation to pursue a foreign policy of democratization and regime change whereby replacing the Assad government with a Western aligned Syrian leadership (Philips, 2016). This is in direct contrast to Moscow's foreign policy strategy. Apart from Moscow's close ties to the Assad regime, the Russian government has persistently opposed western interventions or Western attempts to influence political developments in any particular way (Myer, 2016). This disposition has been the result of a prevalent Russian threat perception towards the US and its American enforced or Western inspired regime change or political transitions, which Moscow viewed as a direct threat for Russia's overall security and the political survival of Russian leadership (Vasiliev, 2018). As such, the Kremlin has positioned itself as a protector of state sovereignty within the international diplomatic arena in order to hinder western incentives for regime change, as it did in the Syrian conflict (Lund, 2019). By supporting Assad, the Russian government did not only protect its Middle Eastern ally, it was also able to hinder trend of regime change in the Middle East supported by Western states.

Although the interests for supporting and opposing Assad offer insights into the motivation to become involved in the Syrian civil war, the rivalries and threat perceptions of Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran function as a driver to actively support a particular faction. In accordance with McGinnis & Williams (1989) argument for the reactionary US-USSR Cold War dynamic, Saudi Arabia responded to Iran's support for Assad by supporting the opposition militia groups. Their perception of Iran as threat for their regional influence and regime security encouraged Riyadh to counter Iranian presence. This reactionary nature of rivalries also helps in explaining the subsequent actions of the external parties concerning their support for their proxies. For example, the Russian government has repeatedly threatened to, or intensify its support for the Assad regime as a response to Western and Gulf intensification of military and diplomatic support (Philips, 2016). As such, rivals tend to respond to one another when engaged in a proxy war.

This interplay is also visible when analysing developments of the Syrian civil war. According to Taliaferro's 'balance of risk' theory (2004), national leaders tend to preserve and intensify their military commitments to persistently pursue goals that have not yet been achieved and to avoid sunk costs (Taliaferro, 2004). This logic also applies for the benefactor commitment in the Syrian conflict. National leadership regards their proxies as a representation for the security of their interests. This means that a trend of negative developments, like the

loss of territory, leads to a response from the benefactor to increase its support for their proxy and intensify its commitment to the proxy war. In Syria, this can be observed by looking at Iran's intensification of support during the conflict. Iran's intensification of support at the start of 2012 was largely based on the growing resistance of the Syrian opposition and the manpower problems of the regime forces (Holiday, 2013). Similarly, Saudi Arabia's growing commitment was the result of Assad's growing counterinsurgency against the opposition groups. These observations are also acknowledged by Philips (2016) stating that "…for every rebel gain, the regime received greater support from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah." (2016: 144). Yet, it is important to highlight that this finding is highly selective and is mediated by other developments or intervening variables.

One final point concerning the role of rivalries was their influence over the conflict intensification of the Syrian civil war. Although authors on proxy warfare often highlight that proxy warfare is conducted to avoid conflict escalation between two major parties, it can have an escalating impact on the proxy conflict itself. Mumford (2013b) argued that the participation of external participation can lead to the intensification of conflict. Similarly, the increasing involvement of external actors by providing their Syrian proxies with weapons and other kinds of support has contributed to a continues upscaling of capabilities on both sides (Philips, 2016). This meant that both parties gradually gained access to better and more sophisticated equipment, which increased the intensity of clashes between opposing parties (Philips, 2016). Also, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has amplified the ideological dimension of the Syrian conflict by playing into the grievances and divide of ethnic groups which contributed the escalating violence (Philips, 2016). This intensification was able to manifest due to diplomatic confrontation between the US and Russia, whose uncompromising positions has led to the absence of a diplomatic settlement and a potentially early peace.

6.2 LIMITATIONS

This thesis aimed to provide an understanding into how the Syrian civil war acquired its multi-actor proxy war dimension. In light of this thesis, it is important discuss the limitations of this research and its findings. First of all, the generalisation of the findings to other cases is troubling considering the use of a single-case study research design. One recurring critique of single case studies is their lack of generalization ability, which makes it harder to legitimize the findings over a wider phenomenon. Fortunately, this was not the prime aim of this research. This research aimed to explain how the Syrian conflict evolved between 2011 and 2014. Moreover,

this research focussed on applying and testing the theories discussed in chapter 2 whereby trying to explain in a comprehensive way how the Syrian proxy war emerged.

A second limitation for this research is its reliance on western sources. Due to the author's lack of knowledge of Arabian, Farsi and Russian, this research was primarily based on English sources. This can influence the results of the research because of Western biases. Moreover, potential sources potentially debunking the arguments and logic considered in this thesis was not consulted. The author attempted to mitigate Western bias by critically analysing the empirics with sources providing a different perspective. Yet, this bias is still prevalent.

Finally, it is worth considering that classified data would dispute or challenge the findings of this research. Considering the subject of this research and the agencies involved in the conflict, potential classified data confirming or challenging the findings was not considered by the author. Should this information eventually become available, then that would influence the arguments and findings of this thesis.

6.3 FUTURE RESEARCH

Considering the research design of this survey, I welcome scholars to test these findings on other cases. Following Mumford's prediction that proxy warfare will most likely become a more prevalent form of conflict, both the academic and political world will benefit from a better understanding into why and how these kinds of conflicts emerge and evolve. At the time of writing, several countries like Ukraine, Yemen, Libya and South-Sudan are experiencing a level of conflict where one or all parties are supported by external (state-) actors in some way. Therefore, there are enough cases to be analysed which can expand our knowledge on proxy wars. Moreover, I believe that a quantitative analysis of the interplay of actions by the benefactors may be able to shed light on the likelihood for state-actors to increase their support for their proxy forces. Finally, research on the proxy warfare policies of Qatar, Turkey, the UK and France will offer other prevalent insights on the development of the Syrian civil war. For example, one other research focussing on the rivalry dynamic in the Syrian proxy war is the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which was only briefly mentioned in this thesis.

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