A NEOCLASSICAL REALIST ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN INTERVENTION IN 2015 AND NON-INTERVENTION IN 2024 IN SYRIA

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ABSTRACT

A NEOCLASSICAL REALIST ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN INTERVENTION IN 2015 AND NON-INTERVENTION IN 2024 IN SYRIA

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This thesis examines Russia's changing foreign policy behavior with regard to her act of intervention and non-intervention in Syria at two critical junctures. By using neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of why Russia intervened in Syria in 2015 to support the rule of Bashar al-Assad but refrained from doing the same act in 2024 when the broad coalition of opposition forces led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham overthrew Bashar's regime on December 8. Since there have been few studies benefiting from neoclassical realism in explaining Russia's intervention in Syria, and her decision not to intervene in 2024 prompted further scholarly inquiry, this study aims to contribute to the literature by comparatively analyzing these two critical moments in Russian foreign policymaking, namely Russia's act of intervention and non-intervention in Syria. After analyzing systemic, sub-systemic and domestic factors in both events, the study argues that even though systemic and sub-systemic factors have, to a great extent, affected Russia's foreign policy choices, domestic factors, particularly leader's perceptions as shown in the study, have determined her foreign policy behaviors at both critical junctures.

Keywords: neoclassical realism, Syria, Russia, intervention, non-intervention.

ÖZ

SURİYE'DE RUSYA'NIN 2015 ASKERİ MÜDAHALESİ İLE 2024'TE MÜDAHALEDEN KAÇINMA EYLEMİNİN NEOKLASİK GERÇEKÇİLİK PERSPEKTİFİNDEN ANALİZİ

ÖZGÜL, Azad
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Bu tez, Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalede bulunma ve müdahaleden kaçınma eylemleri bağlamında, iki farklı dönemde değişen dış politika davranışlarını incelemektedir. Neoklasik gerçekçiliği teorik çerçeve olarak kullanan bu çalışma, Rusya'nın 2015 yılında Beşar Esad yönetimini desteklemek için Suriye'ye neden müdahalede bulunduğu ancak Hayat Tahrir el-Şam liderliğindeki muhalif güçler koalisyonunun 8 Aralık 2024 tarihinde Beşar rejimini devirdiği esnada Rusya'nın aynı eylemi yapmaktan neden kaçındığını kapsamlı bir şekilde ele almaktadır. Rusya'nın Suriye müdahalesini açıklarken neoklasik gerçekçilikten faydalanan çalışmaların azlığıyla birlikte 2024'te Rusya'nın müdahaleden kaçınma kararının bu konuda yeni akademik sorgulamaları tetiklemesi nedeniyle, bu çalışma her iki önemli olayı da tek bir vaka içerisinde karşılaştırmalı olarak analiz ederek literature katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma belirtilen her iki kritik anda da sistemik, alt sistemik ve iç faktörleri analiz ettikten sonra, her ne kadar sistemik ve alt sistemik faktörler Rusya'nın dış politika tercihlerini şekillendirmiş olsa da, iç faktörlerin, özellikle de

çalışmada gösterildiği gibi liderin algılarının, her iki kritik anda da dış politika davranışlarını belirlediğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: neoklasik gerçekçilik, müdahale, Rusya, Suriye, müdahaleden kaçınma

To my beloved family

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APCs	Armored Personnel Carriers
BRIC	Brazil, Russia, Indonesia, China
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, Indonesia, China, South Africa
CIS	Common Independent States
CFR	Council on Foreign Relations
EU	European Union
FBK/ACF	Fond borby s korruptsiyey/Anti-Corruption Foundation
FSA	Free Syrian Army
G-7	Group of Seven
G-7+	Group of Seven Plus
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HRW	Human Rights Watch
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
IFVs	Tracked Infantry Fighting Vehicles
INF	Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces
IR	International Relations
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISI	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IT	Information Technology
LDF	Local Defense Force
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
MBTs	Main Battle Tanks
MED	Ministry of Economic Development
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoD	Ministry of Defense

NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCR	Neoclassical Realism
NDF	National Defense Forces
NGOs	Non-governmental Organizations
OFSI	Office for Financial Sanctions Implementation
OPCW	Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
OPEC+	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries Plus
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
RIC	Russia, Indonesia, China
RT	Russia Today
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SAFE	Security Action for Europe
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SNA	Syrian National Army
SNC	Syrian National Council
START	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
SWIFT	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UCAVs	Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles
UK	United Kingdom
UN IIIM	United Nations the International, Impartial, Independent Mechanism
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar
USSR	Union of Socialist Soviet Republics

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Scope and Objective

Russian foreign policymaking has a long history in the Middle East dating even back to the centuries, possibly as early as the 9th Century when Constantinople's Orthodox Christian Church began to spread Christianity to Kyivan Rus, and following of Prince Volodymir's adoption of Christianity for himself and his realm (Borshchevskaya, 2022). This religious transformation has highlighted a turning point in Kyivan Rus since it granted marriage to Prince Volodymir with Byzantine Princess and created new religious as well as political and economic bonds between Kyivan Rus and the Byzantine Empire. It enabled Kyivan Rus to access new trade routes and connect with the regions that were under the sphere of Byzantine influence, including the Middle East. This marked the start of Russian interests in the Middle East prior to the formation of the Russian state. Russia's interests and engagements with the region have continued ever since then. Throughout the history, Russian rulers or leaders have long sought dominance in the region, fought countless major and minor wars with the Ottoman Empire, and competed for maximizing their geopolitical, economic, cultural and religious interests, whether under the Khanate, the Tsarist Empire, the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation (Borshchevskaya, 2022).

Today, it is not much different from the past since the Middle East, as a key region with its rich energy resources, strategic access to trade routes and ports as well as its ideational significance for Russia, continues to occupy an important place in Russian foreign policymaking[1] (Borshchevskaya, 2022). In this vein, the Syrian civil war that

[1] For instance, this was well-pronounced in relations between the Soviet Union and Syria during the Cold War years when great power competition with the United States was at its highest. From the earlier years of the Cold War, the Soviet Union had sought to grow her influence in the Arab world, notably in Egypt and Syria following the Arab- Israeli war and aimed to counter the Western influence in the Middle East. For instance, Sidiropoulos (2025) argues that the Soviet Russia's commitment to Syria, from Brezhnev to Gorbachev, has extended beyond strategic alignment covering only military

was sparked by the Arab uprisings and Russia's military intervention in Syria in the year of 2015 represent one of the watershed moments in Russian foreign policymaking and regional politics.

Russia's military intervention in Syria and its growing political and military presence there since 2015 has oftentimes been explained with material and ideational factors by many scholars in the literature. Yet, a notable gap has emerged in the literature following recent events in Syria, particularly with regard to Russia's decision to refrain from safeguarding al-Assad regime in spite of its long-standing political and military support since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. Therefore, there is a growing need to explain the strategic shift that took place in Russian foreign policymaking when Bashar al-Assad was overthrown by the broad coalition of opposition forces led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on 8th of December and Russia chose not to intervene in Syria. And this strategic shift lays out the groundwork for my research problem. Beyond this emerging significant gap, current literature on this subject has also a major limitation since it lacks studies focusing on comparative analysis methodology between intervention and non-intervention. In this sense, this study aims to explain Russia's changing foreign policy behavior in Syria while offering insights regarding how systemic pressures, regional dynamics and domestic factors interact to shape her foreign policy decisions. That is, this study will be guided by the main tenets of Neoclassical Realism proposed by Rose (1998), which suggests that a country's foreign policy behavior can be best understood by combination of both external and internal factors. The theory provides a framework making it possible to systematically analyze different factors all together. That is, it brings structure and agency together, instead of putting one above another. In this sense, Rose bridges the analytical gap

dimension. Syria's Ba'athist nationalist ideology corresponded with Soviet's anti-imperialist agenda, and this positioned it as a significant country within the Arab world, countering the US influence in the Middle East. In addition to this, it must be noted that the relations between the Soviet Union and Syria was not always the stable one. According to Lund (2019), the Soviets' relations with Syria have significantly improved under Hafez al-Assad. However, Hafez al-Assad, as in Lund's words, was "a champion of the military and of realism", so his foreign policy approach grounded on national interests rather than ideological tendencies (Lund, 2019, p. 6). For instance, Hafez al-Assad regarded it as a necessity to maintain relations with the Western states to take the Golan back, while recognizing the potential risk of growing dependence on the Soviet Union. To this end, he, for instance, accused the Syrian Communist Part of being the Soviet's arm and interfering in Syria's internal affairs. Similarly, Syria's relations with the US improved after 1973. Therefore, the Soviet-Syrian alliance was the close yet complicated one during the Cold War years (Lund, 2019).

between previous variations of realism, namely neorealism and classical realism and proposes that even though systemic and sub-systemic factors, in other words, the role of structure primarily influence a country's foreign policy choices, domestic factors, referring to intervening variables, such as leader's perceptions, culture, political parties or economic factors ultimately determine its foreign policy behaviors. That is, it seeks out how systemic and sub-systemic constraints or opportunities are filtered through domestic political factors, as in our case. In this context, this study will respectively focus on systemic, sub-systemic and domestic factors at both decisive moments so as to understand Russia's changing foreign policy behavior in Syria. Throughout the inquiry, the nature of the strategic environment at both systemic and sub-systemic level as well as leader's perceptions as a unit-level intervening variable will be closely examined at both moments in the case. Yet, it must be noted that the study will only focus on leader's perception as an intervening variable in analyzing domestic factors in order to keep it within the scope of a master thesis.

Therefore, neoclassical realism in IR theory will be employed as a theoretical framework throughout this study, while being utilized from qualitative research methodology in the analysis in order to examine the two critical junctures in Russian foreign policymaking in Syria: military intervention in 2015 and non-intervention in the events that led to the fall of Assad regime in 2024.

Thus, the thesis will address the following main research question: What explains the strategic shift in Russian foreign policymaking in Syria? To answer this question, the study also examines several sub-questions: Which domestic and international factors influenced Russia's earlier decision of non-intervention? How can neoclassical realism account for the subsequent strategic shift that occurred in Russian foreign policy? In what ways did regional dynamics in the Middle East contribute to changes in Russian foreign policy behavior? Finally, how has the Russian Ukrainian war in 2022 reshaped Russia's priorities in Syria?

To summarize, even though there is a vast body of work covering different aspects of Russia's policies in Syria, the current literature lacks explaining Russia's changing foreign policy behavior in Syria, which became an issue with her act of non-intervention in 2024 when Bashar's regime were on the verge of collapse. In this regard, this study aims to contribute to current literature by shedding new light on very

recent gap that emerged following Russia's changing foreign policy behavior in Syria. While doing so, neoclassical realism in IR theory and comparative analysis within the case study will be employed to understand and explain this strategic shift in Russian foreign policymaking. In this sense, above-mentioned main research question along with sub-questions will be directing our research and help us to develop a coherent argument throughout the study.

1.2. Methodology

In line with Uwe Flick's discussion of research paradigms, positivist paradigm will form epistemological bases of this study since neoclassical realism will be applied as a theoretical framework. As Rose (1998) posits, neoclassical realism emphasizes on how systemic and sub-systemic factors are translated through domestic ones and turn into state action. That is, it ontologically acknowledges that 'objective' international system exists yet recognizes the role that domestic factors play in shaping foreign policy outcomes in the meantime. When it comes to how to study what we study, it proposes us to focus on causal explanations. Hence, this research aims to trace cause-effect relationship between structural and unit level variables in our chosen case. It comes to mean that it will not only look for systemic regularities but also domestic constraints, encompassing interpretative approaches that seek to understand human nature and state identity. Nevertheless, I must underline that domestic variables that require us to deal with interpretative approach will be used for the purpose of empowering the explanatory power of causal relationships between variables. That is, it should be noted that ontological base of this study will not produce any inconsistency, with regard to object of study.

Moreover, Ferejohn (2004) defends: "Externalists explain action by pointing to its causes; internalists explain action by showing it as justified or best from an agent's perspective. Externalist explanations are positivist and predictive; internalist explanations are normative or hermeneutic." (as cited in Porta and Keating, 2008, p.27). As it was put by Ferejohn, positivist and interpretivist research explain social reality with different perspectives and methods; however, one should take into account that there is no sharp distinction between these paradigms in terms of employing research methods that are supposedly belonging to different paradigms. For instance, positivist tradition does not necessarily have to opt for quantitative methodology and

analyze big datasets to generate causal explanations. Indeed, as King, Keohane and Verba (1994) put it, they may also benefit from qualitative methodology and methods as long as they help to reinforce causal explanations and consolidate their epistemological base. In this respect, this study will benefit from qualitative research methodology and adopt case analysis in order to explain Russia's changing foreign policy behavior at two critical junctures in Syria.

In addition to case analysis, discourse analysis method will also be employed as a sub-method so as to unpack the role of intervening variables, referring to domestic factors. In this regard, the data that require for my analysis will be gathered from both primary and secondary sources, such as library materials, text-books, literature reviews, newspapers, think-tank reports, interviews, documents published by Kremlin and statements issued by Russian officials.

1.3. The General Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into five chapters, and each chapter is designed to examine a different part of the main argument and develop a coherent answer to the main research question.

Chapter one briefly introduces the groundwork for the related research problem. It presents the main research question and sub-questions directing this research while explaining why this research is worth conducting. It informs the reader about the potential contribution of this research into literature, its methodology as well as the general structure of the thesis

Chapter two focuses on the literature review and theoretical framework, and it addresses why the current literature fails to explain Russia's changing foreign policy behavior in Syria between two decisive moments. In addition to this, it also introduces our chosen theoretical framework and explains why neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework best fit into this research with its limitations, especially as compared to other variations of realism.

Chapter three emphasizes on Russia's act of intervention in Syria on September 30, 2015 and systematically analyzes international, regional and domestic factors that paved the way for Russia's act of intervention. This chapter asserts that permissive

international and regional environment that were respectively shaped by multipolarity and Arab uprisings as well as domestic factors, referring to leader's perception with regard to security concerns urged Russia to intervene in Syria.

Chapter four focuses on Russia's act of non-intervention in Syria when the Bashar's regime was confronted by the collapse. This chapter, as in chapter three, systematically analyzes international, regional and domestic factors to understand why Russia chose not to intervene in Syria. This chapter claims that restrictive international and regional environment caused respectively by Russian-Ukrainian and Hamas-Israeli war as well as domestic factors, referring to leader's negative perceptions towards Bashar's regime have all shaped Russia's decision not to intervene in Syria.

Chapter five aims to conclude by analytically comparing two events within a case, referring to Russia's act of intervention and non-intervention that even though systemic and sub-systemic conditions have primarily shaped Russia's foreign policy choices, domestic factors, especially leader's perceptions have determined her foreign policy behavior at both moments.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Literature Review

This section aims to critically review the literature written on Russia's Syria policies, particularly encompassing the period after its involvement in Syrian civil war on the official invitation of the Bashar al-Assad regime in 2015. We see that a large body of academic study has been conducted on this topic and thus the literature has been divided into different lines. Some scholars explain Russia's Syria policies with material factors, such as geo-politics, national security, economic and military gains whereas others focus on ideational factors, namely defined as great power identity and religious dimension among others in order to understand Russia's engagement in Syria. Even though all these studies have their own merits and sound groundings, they mostly fell a short of offering a comprehensive understanding of Russian foreign policymaking in Syria, particularly following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Therefore, the current body of literature will be examined as material and ideational factors instead of addressing each specific factor under separate subheadings. While doing so, our literature review will engage not only with the general tendencies and prevailing explanations in the literature but also examine studies that provide alternative perspectives and different points of view.

2.1.1. Material Factors

Although realist traditions diverge among themselves and they approach material interests differently, we see that their basic definition remains fundamentally associated with the concept of power. Whereas Morgenthau, a prominent classical realist, defines national power with state capacity and mostly tangible resources referring to geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, military preparedness,

population, national character and morale, and the quality of diplomacy[2], Kenneth Waltz and Robert Gilpin, leading neorealist scholars, explain it with distribution of material capabilities and more specifically their positions within the hierarchy determined by their material capabilities, and assert that "the structure of a system changes with changes in the distribution of capabilities across the system's units" (Waltz, 1979, p. 97). In this context, Russia's policies in Syria are mostly examined through the lens of power and its wide range of material determinants in the literature.

According to Sluglett (2013), the nature of international system that is characterized by bipolarity following the end of the Second World War created a sharp power competition between superpowers, namely the US and the USSR. We have witnessed that both sought to project power and increase their influence throughout the Middle East. And it is no coincidence that scholars who contributed to the literature on this benefited mostly from realist point of view in explaining why superpowers act the way they did during the Cold War years in the Middle East. As Korany (2013) points out, in his book chapter entitled as "The Middle East since the Cold War: Initiating the Fifth Wave of Democratization?", this mainly stems from the very nature of the Middle East that is characterized by "high politics" covering particularly military and security related issues. Today, it is hard to tell any differences in terms of the prevalent realist tendencies in the literature when examining Russia's policies in Syria after the outbreak of Syrian civil war. For instance, Diriöz and Alımcı (2020) pay particular attention to classical geopolitical approaches in their analysis, and they argue that Russia's involvement in Syria is an extension of her policies that she pursued in Georgia and Crimea to counter NATO's encirclement. The authors explain NATO's encirclement strategy through classical geopolitical approaches, such as Mackinder's Heartland and Spykman's Rimland Concepts, and Kennan's Containment Strategy. Also, they touch upon the Primakov Doctrine, and they state that Russia's assertive policies in Syria reflect its opposition to the unipolar world order and Western-led regime changes, as in the case of Libya. In addition to this, they further add that

[2] Hans Morgenthau divides elements of national power into eight different categories, in his book entitled as Politics Among Nations. These, as mentioned above, are consisting of geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, military preparedness, population, national character and morale, and the quality of diplomacy. And Morgenthau (1948, p. 73) asserts that "two groups of elements have to be distinguished; those which are relatively stable, and those which are subject to constant change."

security concerns that may arise from the possible power vacuum with the fall of Bashar al-Assad also played a part since these conditions would have allowed radical Islamist groups to flourish and threat Russia's security. Thus, we see that Diriöz and Alımcı make sense of Russia's policies in Syria in accordance with the multipolarity, balancing behavior, and security-related concerns.

Likewise, Ulusoy (2021) considers Russia's intervention in Syria as part of geopolitical struggle, and she benefits from 'The Barakah Circle Theory' in her study to explain Russia's presence in Syria. She asserts that Russia's intervention in Syria is related with her broader strategic interests in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, so the author explains it with El-Awaisi's Barakah Circle Theory. According to El-Awaisi (2007), "who rules in Bayt al-Maqdis, controls the whole globe". In this regard, El-Awaisi divides his theory into three important circles: "Who rules the first circle (Bayt al-Maqdis), commands the second circle (Al-Sham and Egypt). Who rules in the second circle, commands the third circle (Iraq and Türkiye). Who rules the third circle, commands the globe." (as cited in Ulusoy, 2021, p. 189). In this regard, it is argued that one must secure control over Syria if it is aimed to dominate the region. The author, in particular, makes reference to the Tartus Naval Base and its importance for Russia to gain access to the Mediterranean Sea. Therefore, we see that it is considered as a strategic prerequisite under the Barakah Circle Theory of Islamic-Jerusalem and the author explained Russia's foreign policy behavior with geopolitical power competition.

Similarly, Pisciotta (2019) capitalizes on the revisionism research agenda and develop a new typology of revisionism for Russia's military intervention in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria. We see that Pisciotta (2019) identifies Russia's military intervention in Syria as radical revisionist with regard to choices of means, objectives and level of action put forward by Russia. As Pisciotta (2019) underscores, Russia's military engagement outside the post-Soviet space, unlike Georgia and Ukraine, directly opposed American interests in the region since she obtained certain strategic and political privileges, including naval base in Tartus and the conduct of future negotiations. In the level of action, the author emphasizes on Russia's quest for changes at global level, particularly refers to establishment of multipolar system where the principle of non-interference and sovereignty is respected. Hence, Russia's

military engagement in Syria, and her demands towards territorial control and changes in international order places her into category of radical revisionist, in the new typology of revisionism developed by Pisciotta.

In addition to this, Mason (2019) underlines Russia's endeavors for cultivating alliances in the region and economic aspect of its engagement with the region, indicating that Russia sought to secure future LNG supply networks and cooperate in nuclear energy and defense areas. And what makes his study distinctive from other studies explaining Russia's foreign policy behavior with geopolitical concepts and securitization theory is that its ability to provide context for the following regional and international developments. Similar to Mason's points, Maher and Pieper (2021) offer us an alternative perspective centered on Russia's economic aspirations in Syria rather than prevailing political explanations. For instance, they explain Russia's intervention in Syria with regime consolidation and potential multi-billion-dollar gas pipeline projects that may empower Russian dominance in the region. As they put it out, it was anticipated to construct Iran-backed pipelines that may pass through Syria, known as the Islamic Pipeline and compete against US-Qatari pipeline projects in the region. In this sense, they adopt the 'dual logic'[3] concept to understand Russian intervention in Syria; however, this study lacks sufficient empirical testing. That is, empirical evidence that is provided in the study does not strongly suggest any direct correlation between Russian airstrikes and proposed pipeline projects. Moreover, it should be noted that since the conflict data indicating Russian airstrikes was reported by governorate, empirical data presented in the study may contain potential biases, though.

Moreover, Dannreuther (2015) puts out that geopolitical factors had a great impact on determining Russia's foreign policy behavior; however, he also pays attention to domestic political factors and asserts that Russian elections that were held in 2011 and 2012 made this intervention necessary for regime consolidation at home. Moreover,

[3] According to Stokes and Raphael (2010), the 'dual logic' is based on two premises. The first one is a transnational logic suggesting that the US indirectly strengthen its position by preserving maintenance of an open global economy where other core powers enjoy freely. The second one is the US' direct policy to secure its own national interests and sustain its superior position over the same core powers (as cited in Maher and Pieper, 2021, pp. 953-954).

Dannreuther (2015) employs two key concepts, which are ‘sovereign democracy’ and ‘counter-revolution’ to explain Russia’s support for the Bashar al-Assad regime. In this respect, Dannreuther’s study includes ideational elements, which allow us to make sense of Russian perspective and thinking, in the face of the Arab Spring. Yet, it must be noted that they are used to amplify explanatory power of the study, especially in understanding Russia’s foreign policymaking in Syria. Furthermore, it is important to underline that Dannreuther (2015) adopts discourse analysis method and gives direct quotations from Putin’s speeches in his study. For example, he quotes Putin’s remarks on resolutions issued by the UN Security Council: “resolution was ‘deficient and flawed’ and that it ‘allows anyone to do anything they want to take any actions against a sovereign state” (Dannreuther, 2015, p. 83).

Additionally, Souleimanov and Dzutsati (2018), in their article entitled as ‘Russia’s Syria War: A Strategic Trap?’, claim that Russia has gained little with its presence in Syria and even she has incurred losses in its reputation both domestically and internationally. For instance, they draw attention to the air strikes initiated by Russia who indiscriminately targeted hospitals, marketplaces, and other opposition-controlled areas that civilians are mostly populated. In this vein, the article addresses a significant gap in the literature by dividing into phases by time, such as Phase One (2015-16), Phase Two (2016-17), Phase Three (2018). This is also important in the sense that it enables us to evaluate the power politics behind it and calculate whether or not this intervention outweighs its costs for Russia, at least for the time frame until 2018.

2.1.2. Ideational Factors

As Alexander Wendt (1999: 1) put it out, “students of international politics have increasingly accepted two basic tenets of “constructivism”: (1) that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and (2) that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature”. That is, we see that ideational factors simply refer to non-material elements, such as norms, beliefs, identities, culture or shared ideas and they play a decisive role in determining foreign policy behavior of states as well as the structure of international politics. Hence, some scholars have examined Russia’s policies in Syria through lens of constructivism in the literature as

they believed that international system that is driven by material capabilities or factors does not completely determine state interests and behaviors.

According to Borshchevskaya (2022: 7), "Far from an arbitrary whim of the latest Russian authoritarian, Putin's Syria intervention highlighted longstanding Russian interests, fears, and ambitions". As this excerpt written in the beginning of the first chapter clearly states that Russian history is crucial for understanding Putin's Russia and its involvement in Syrian conflict. According to Borshchevskaya (2022), Russia's interests in the region might vary from geo-strategic, economic to cultural and religious one, and these interests have been the main drivers for Russian rulers to dominate the region for centuries. And Putin's era and his interventions in the region, particularly in Syria cannot be separated from this fact, today. In addition to the geo-strategic and economic factors identified as the main drivers of Peter the Great and subsequently Catherine the Great, notably balancing the European powers, expanding Russian borders to south, establishing naval presence and accessing to commercial waterways, Russia has also pursued for her religious interests in the region, as Borshchevskaya stressed out in her study. This is what makes Borshchevskaya's study unique in this sense because it is relatively an understudied field in the literature. For instance, according to Figes (2011), Catherine the Great was aspiring for a Russian Empire "as a Black Sea power linked through trade and religion to the Orthodox world of Eastern Mediterranean, including Jerusalem" (as cited in Borshchevskaya, 2022: 12). This actually proves how religious interests have been playing an important role in the Russian foreign policymaking towards the Middle East since then, and we see that it later has become more than just an aspiration with the concessions gained by Russian Empire through the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca and Treaty of Adrianople. This is because that they gave her a right to represent Orthodox Christians and become a protector of Armenian and Greek Orthodox communities in the Ottoman Empire.

Similarly, Chen (2024) emphasizes on internal cultural dimensions in examining Russian foreign policymaking under the Putin era and asserts that Putin's foreign policy actions are deeply rooted in Russian culture and history. We see that the author focuses on national ideology, referring to its historical stance against the West and underlines that it is shaped by national self-perception or what he calls 'national consciousness' about Russia's greatness. In addition to this, Chen (2024) also explains

Russia's national ideology with the concept of 'Third Rome'[4] and messianism and contends that they provided legitimization for Russia's assertive foreign policy behaviors in international politics, particularly her interventions in Common Independent States and considered those as Russia's historical mission and moral obligation embedded in her national self-perception. In the article, we see that the author explained Russia-Georgian War and further annexation of Crimea through these lenses and touched upon international factors and referred to NATO's expansionist activities in Russia's former spheres of influence. In contrast to Borshchevskaya, Chen's article does not explain Russia's actions in Syria but it provides us a solid background knowledge regarding Russia's national self-conceptions and state identities as well as explains Russian foreign policymaking with theory and concepts centered on religion.

In addition to this, there is also a vast body of work in literature employing theoretical frameworks on status and status-seeking. As Götz (2021, p. 228) clearly puts it out, there are three seminal books representing different theoretical perspectives in status research in international politics: "Renshon's Fighting for Status offers a rationalist–instrumental approach; Larson and Shevchenko's Quest for Status draws on insights from social identity theory; and Murray's The Struggle for Recognition is informed by constructivist theory.". That is, status and status seeking research engages with both rationalist-instrumental and constructivist approaches. To briefly elaborate them, on the one hand, rationalist-instrumental perspective associates status with power and position of states in the hierarchy yet it necessitates their recognition by 'significant others'[5], as in Renshon words. This perspective tends to measure status with diplomatic exchange data and triumph in conflicts and wars. In this sense, this

[4] According to Strémooukhoff (1953), throughout Christian history, ancient Rome was widely viewed as the heart of Christianity and thus called as 'the First Rome'. After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in 476 AD, the Byzantine Empire's capital Constantinople emerged as 'the Second Rome'. In 1453, Ivan III, self-proclaimed the successor of the Byzantine Emperor, adopted the Byzantine double-headed eagle as the national emblem of Russia. Then, as put by Poe (2011), the Russian Eastern Orthodox Church has grown its influence and authority with the support of Ivan III and shaped the idea of Moscow as the 'Third Rome' (as cited in Chen: 2024, 105).

[5] Renshon (2017) argues that states evaluate and put themselves in a place in the hierarchy not by comparing their capabilities with all states in international system but those who they attribute value and significant status.

perspective acknowledges Gilpin's argument on status and prestige[6]. On the other hand, social identity theory argues that status depends on perception and value that states obtained in the international system. And it defends that states seek status even if it costs them material benefits. Therefore, they regard it "an end in itself, rather a means to an end" (Götz, 2021, p. 233). In similar to social identity theory, constructivists relate status with national self-image or identity and asserts that a state's actions and foreign policy behaviors must be in line with its identity narrative and reinforce its self-image.

In the case of Russia, Freire and Heller (2018) depict Russia as a status-inconsistency country and claim that Russia makes use of hard power in her near abroad and the Middle East, referring to Syria and acts beyond her capabilities for the purpose of status-seeking at the expense of high political and economic costs. We see that Freire and Heller argue that Russia aims to maintain its great power identity that is inherited from the Soviet Union and follow assertive foreign policy to this end.

Similarly, Koçak (2023) engages with status-seeking research agenda and employ Larson and Shevchenko's status-seeking approach in his article in order to examine Russia's military intervention in Syria. In doing so, he focuses on Russia's objectives, rhetoric and actions and asserts that Russia has enhanced its status in the international system and challenged U.S. in the region, while increasing its influence throughout the Middle East and advancing her commitment to international norms and rules.

Moreover, Takhshid and Shoja (2019) explain Russia's policies through elite perception in the face of transition of international system, and they analyze Putin's statements and documents issued by Russian Foreign Ministry in 2005, 2007 and 2016 among others and Russian Constitution to put that Russia is pursuing for its 'great power' status. In their article, they explain that Russia's intervention in Syria is driven by her motives to revive her great power status in international system as well as to

[6] Gilpin states that a country resorts to war when it believes that its power and material capabilities does not well resonance with its status and prestige in international politics. In this sense, he argues that "although prestige is largely a function of economic and military capabilities, it is achieved primarily through successful use of power, and especially through victory in war. The most prestigious members of the international system are those states that have most recently used military force or economic power successfully and have thereby imposed their will on others" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 32)

secure her position and regional role in the Middle East, particularly after her experience in Libya.

Lastly, Pieper (2019) employs 'rising power'[7] concept to explain Russia's engagement in Syria with non-material factors and the author approaches Russia's rise with normative perspective. We see that Pieper (2019) offers us a conceptual innovation by combining literature on norm dynamics with rising power concept and he suggests that "power shifts also occur in non-material ways" (Pieper, 2019, p. 366). It is asserted in the article that Russia, instead of fully rejecting Western norms, positions herself as a co-shaper of international norms and defends 'democratization' of international hierarchies. For instance, the author emphasizes norm contestation over the principle of non-interference and sovereignty in the case of Syria and put clear image of Russian skepticism towards international law and Western-promoted norms and values with examples from Iraq and Libya cases. In this regard, Russia sought recognition as a great power in international security governance by raising concerns over Western-led norms, including R2P, regime stability, non-interference, sovereignty, and challenged normative dynamics in the international system through this way.

All in all, it is possible to categorize general tendencies and prevailing explanations in the literature on Russia's policies in Syria under two main subheadings. These are material and ideational factors. Even though Russia's military intervention in Syria is examined more from a realist point of view and explained with geopolitical and security related concerns, it is fair to say that there exists a considerable number of studies that capitalizes on ideational factors as well. Yet, we see that current literature fails to explain Russia's policies in Syria, particularly after what happened on 8th of December, following the fall of Bashar al-Assad regime. That is, the literature does not explain Russia's act of non-intervention when the Assad regime faced with the threat of collapse. However, it must be noted that there is only one study explaining Bashar's fall and following developments in view of Russian policy in Syria. In their

[7] According to Organski (1968), Organski and Kugler (1980), and Gilpin (1981), in the power transition paradigm, 'rising powers' position themselves against established powers in the creation of new system of governance where growing economic power brought about political influence (as cited in Pieper, 2019, pp. 365-66).

article, Akhmedov and Kuznetsov (2025) examine Bashar's fall and its consequences for Russia's policies in Syria. While doing so, they focus on post-Assad Syria and discuss how new authority in Syria can resolve country's long-standing security and development related problems with the help of Moscow. In this sense, this article, instead of explaining Russia's act of non-intervention in Syria, focuses mostly on Russia's policies in post-Assad Syria and explain Bashar's fall with domestic internal factors and its weakening regional stance in the aftermath of failed normalization process with Türkiye and the war in Gaza. At this point, even though the authors touch upon some regional developments in explaining Bashar's fall, their approach fails to offer a systemic in-depth analysis of regional context. In this regard, this study aims to shed a new light on this topic by examining the issue from neo-classical realist framework in IR discipline with in-depth analysis and understand Russia's foreign policy behaviors in Syria at two critical junctures, particularly her act of intervention and non-intervention.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This section introduces the theoretical framework guiding this research and further it reveals how neoclassical realism can be used to understand Russia's changing foreign policy behavior in Syria, notably after 8th December of 2024. In this regard, it aims to showcase that neoclassical realism has a more explanatory power in understanding Russian foreign policymaking as compared to other IR theories since it brings agency and structure together to explain social reality in our case and enables us to conduct a more accurate and comprehensive inquiry. In this sense, it complements the previous studies that focused either solely on material or ideational factors in current literature. Also, it is important to underline that this section will only provide information about the theoretical framework that was adopted in this study and its limitations whereas its application to the cases will be given in detail in the next chapters.

Realism has long stood as one of the most influential yet mainstream schools of thought in the discipline of international relations. From its philosophical foundations in the works of Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War and Niccolò Machiavelli's Prince to the Kenneth Waltz's 'structure', realism has constantly evolved through different formulations, such as classical realism, neorealism and neoclassical realism (Antunes and Camisão, 2018). And even though each focuses on

different elements, they are all state-centric and seek to explain foreign policy behavior of states in the international system characterized by anarchy, referring to the absence of a central authority. For instance, Hans J. Morgenthau, a prominent figure in classical realism, focuses on human nature and argues that human beings are driven by an *animus dominandi*[8], that is, human beings strive for power and domination by their very nature and states are no different in international politics as they are governed by individuals. On the other hand, neorealism, as put forward by Kenneth Waltz, focuses on structure of the international system rather than human nature and posits that states are rational actors and they must act rationally for their survival in the international system. That is, it explains systemic outcomes and foreign policy behaviors of states with their material capabilities and balance of power, such as population, military power, political stability and economic resilience and alliance strategies. In this regard, neorealists put structure over agency and ignore domestic factors, role of the state leaders, or ideology in contrast to classical realists and they assume that actions of states are constrained by the structure. That is the reason why this theory has a widespread use of 'structural realism'. Yet, neoclassical realism is relatively new among these different versions of realism. We see that it was first coined in 1998 by Gideon Rose in the World Politics review article, entitled as Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy, and it posits that:

> Neoclassical realism explicitly incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematizing certain insights drawn from classical realist thought. Its adherents argue that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its country's relative material power capabilities. However, they further argue that the impact of power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening unit-level variables. This is why they are neoclassical. (Rose, 1998, p. 146)

That is to say, Rose (1998) contends that neoclassical realism incorporates both external and internal variables and systematizes certain insights from classical realist

[8] Morgenthau defines power with "man's control over the minds and actions of other men" (Morgenthau, 1948, p.13). And he considers political power as a psychological relation between top-dog and underdog where top-dog can exert influence through 'orders, threats persuasion, or combination of any of these'. Hence, he formulates that "A has or wants political power over B signifies always that A is able, or wants to be able, to control certain actions of B through influencing B's mind" (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 14).

thought. Therefore, it is clear that material power is one of the basic parameters of a country's foreign policy yet not the only one determining its foreign policy behavior. State leaders and their decisions along with domestic factors including legislature, political parties, economic factors, or in other words what Rose calls as 'intervening variables', also play a significant role in shaping foreign policy behavior of states. They are called as 'intervening variables' because they do not directly affect state action, but they intervene in the causal chain between external determinants imposed by structure and state action. Thus, these domestic factors may affect short term policy choices of states and constrain their foreign policy behavior. In this regard, Rose bridges the analytical gap between classical realism and neorealism by utilizing structural and unit-level variables, eliminates certain setbacks that these theories have on their own and offers a systematic and more importantly complementary outlook in studying foreign policy behavior of states.

Table 1.1. Classical realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism

Research program	Epistemology and methodology	View of the international system	View of the units	Dependent variable	Underlying causal logic
CLASSICAL REALISM	Inductive theories; philosophical reflection on nature of politics or detailed historical analysis (generally drawn from W. European history)	Somewhat important	Differentiated	Foreign policies of states	Power distributions or distribution of interests (revisionist vs. status quo) → foreign policy
NEOREALISM	Deductive theories; competitive hypothesis testing using qualitative and sometimes quantitative methods	Very important; inherently competitive and uncertain	Undifferentiated	International political outcomes	Relative power distributions (independent variable) → international outcomes (dependent variable)
NEOCLASSICAL REALISM	Deductive theorizing; competitive hypothesis testing using qualitative methods	Important; implications of anarchy are variable and sometimes opaque to decision-makers	Differentiated	Foreign policies of states	Relative power distributions (independent variable) → domestic constraints and elite perceptions (intervening variables) → foreign policy (dependent variable)

Source: Adapted from Taliaferro, Lobell, & Ripsman (2012), p. 20

As indicated in Table 1.1, neorealism seeks to explain international political outcomes directly with relative power distributions whereas neoclassical realism aims to explain foreign policies of states with relative power distribution and domestic constraints and elite perceptions. Moreover, both neorealism and neoclassical realism consider that the ordering principle in the international system is anarchy; however, both view 'the units', they are states in our case, differently. Neorealists accept them as 'undifferentiated' since they believe that all states behave in the same way when they are in a self-help situation whereas neoclassical realists regard them as 'differentiated' and advocate that they may respond differently based on the conditions and circumstances under which foreign policy choices are going to be made by state leaders. That is, it forces us to think about other factors that may or may not influence the decision-making process. Therefore, neoclassical realism provides us more in-depth insights as it makes use of explanatory power of intervening variables in understanding causal relationship between dependent and independent variables. For instance, it poses following research questions, regarding the politics of threat assessment, strategic adjustment and resource extraction, domestic mobilization and policy implementation and allow us to understand and explain changes in the foreign policy behavior of the same state over time:

> Who are the relevant actors within the state with respect to international threat assessment? Who decides how to respond to international threats? To what extent can domestic actors bargain with the state and influence foreign and security policies in different state settings? Which domestic actors have the greatest influence on security policy? Under what circumstances? How much power do domestic actors have to obstruct the state when it seeks to mobilize resources in different settings? (Taliaferro, Lobell and Ripsman, 2012, pp. 31-32).

In this regard, as Reichwein (2012) suggests that researchers have to find out and identify which intervening variables matter the most by asking the right questions and figure out how both independent and intervening variables are intermingled in the casual process, leading to state action. In both events, this study deals with how both systemic and sub-systemic opportunities and constraints are translated through domestic factors, especially leader's perceptions in our case.

In the first event, referring to Russia's act of intervention in Syria in 2015, it was argued that both systemic and sub-systemic opportunities that then embedded in both

international and regional environments created incentives for Russia to follow more assertive policies in her policymaking. As examined in detail later, Russia's long-quest for empowering multipolarity and reasserting herself as a great power in the international system that combined with geopolitical opportunities presented in the regional system primarily shaped her decision to intervene in Syria. Yet, even though systemic and sub-systemic factors primarily shaped Moscow's decision to intervene in Syria, they remained limited in understanding all the motives behind this intervention, especially considering the determining role that domestic factors, referring to leader's perceptions played. In the domestic political and economic atmosphere of 2011 and 2012, Putin relied more on input sources of legitimacy for his rule inside the country and thus instrumentalized foreign policy as a tool for regime consolidation to this end. These systemic and sub-systemic opportunities, as well-reflected in his rhetoric, were translated through Putin's perceptions on self-preservation, international terrorism issue, and anti-Westernism and determined Moscow's act of intervention at domestic level.

On the other hand, in the second event, referring to Russia's act of non-intervention in Syria in 2024, both systemic and sub-systemic pressures that then presented in both international and regional environments due to the severe consequences of the war in Ukraine and Gaza created constraints for Russia to intervene in Syria when Bashar was on the verge of collapse on December 8, 2024. For instance, the economic, military and geopolitical costs of the war in Ukraine forced Russia to change her priorities in Syria as they hampered Moscow's ability to provide financial and military support for Bashar's regime. Similarly, the Hamas-Israeli war and its unfolding ramifications caused power oscillations that reshaped regional dynamics and pushed Moscow for reinforcing her alignments with the pivotal states, namely Türkiye and Iran instead of pursuing assertive policies. However, even though both systemic and sub-systemic factors created constraints for Russia to militarily intervene in Syria, Putin's perceptions that manifested themselves in different ways determined Moscow's act of non-intervention in Syria. Bashar's uncompromised stance on the constitutional talks and play off Moscow against Tehran as well as failure of the rebuild of state authority and military enforcements all contributed to impediment of Putin's long-term objectives in Syria and reinforced her perceptions that Bashar's

regime was not worth of rescuing in the face of systemic and sub-systemic constraints. Hence, these systemic and sub-systemic constraints were translated through Putin's distrust and negative perceptions towards Bashar's regime at domestic level.

2.3. Limitations of Theoretical Framework

Even though neoclassical realism offers us a more comprehensive understanding of foreign policy behavior of states as it benefits both from the foundations of classical realism and neorealism by incorporating systemic and unit-level variables, there are still certain limitations that one needs to take into consideration in studying neoclassical realism. First of all, neoclassical realism aims to explain why states behave the way they do in international politics and while doing so it does not focus solely on independent variables but also numerous intervening variables. According to Meibauer et al (2021, p. 269), scholars prefer to employ neoclassical realism "with such different intervening variables as strategic interaction (Onea 2012), regime type (Juneau 2015), extraction and mobilization capacity (Christensen 1996; Zakaria 1998; Taliaferro 2006), public opinion and media pressures (Steinsson 2017), culture and identity (Hadfield 2010; Giusti 2016; Smith 2016; Schweller 2018; N. R.), and perceptions, ideas, and beliefs (Wohlforth 1993; Dueck 2008; Kitchen 2010; Foulon 2015; He 2017; Meibauer 2020)". Therefore, we see that a wide range of different intervening variables is at play, and this frankly makes it hard for scholars to choose and define the right set of intervening variables in their cases. That is to say, it is not clearly identified that which set of intervening variables are the most significant, so it is fair to say that it does not offer a general framework that researchers can follow in contrast to grand theories. And what is more challenging is the fact that new set of variables will continue to emerge and diversify more and more as long as neoclassical realism continues to be employed as a theoretical framework by scholars in their cases. Therefore, even though neoclassical realism expands its empirical applications with different set of intervening variables, it also establishes its limits in the meantime.

In addition to this, it has been widely discussed in the literature that this flexibility in defining set of intervening variables may create theoretical incoherence as well as ontological and epistemological inconsistency along with methodological confusion at some point. For instance, neoclassical realism is ultimately a version of realist theory, and it is situated within positivist paradigm. In this vein, it is supposed to

ontologically regard social reality as something ‘objective’ separate from human subjectivity and aim to find out causal explanations through testable hypotheses. However, neoclassical realism also deals with intervening variables which are subject to human subjectivity, such as ideas, culture, identity and it requires us to generate contextual knowledge as well. In other words, it is a mid-range theory between ‘pure structural theorists’ and ‘constructivists’, as in Rose’s words (Rose, 1998, p. 152). Therefore, combination of these variables belonging to different paradigms holding different world views carries the risk of theoretical incoherence and methodological confusion that may occur during research, and this may put scientific validity of research in jeopardy. This is the reason why some scholars, namely Legro and Moravcsik 1999; Walt 2002; Tang 2009; Narizny 2017 consider neoclassical realism as “degenerative” theorizing (as cited in Meibauer et al, 2021).

The last limitation stems from application of neoclassical realism to the targeted country case and generation of contextual knowledge in the process. As Christensen put it out that one has to have a great deal of knowledge about the nation in question, including its language in order to be able to properly determine intervening variables in the domestic realm and identify how state structures and decision-makers operate in that specific country both theoretically and practically (as cited in Rose, 1998). Only through this way, researchers can have an accurate understanding of targeted country’s foreign policy behavior and adequately apply neoclassical realist theory as a theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 3

RUSSIA'S ACT OF INTERVENTION IN SYRIA IN 2015

This chapter will analyze Russia's act of intervention on September 30, 2015, when the Bashar al-Assad's regime was on the verge of collapse. While doing so, it will systematically examine international, regional and domestic factors in detail through the lens of neoclassical realism.

The chapter consists of five sections. The first section depicts how the Arab uprisings rapidly turned into region-wide protests and spread to Syria where it evolved into a civil war, while underlining that Russia's decision to intervene represented one of the watershed moments in the Syrian conflict.

The second section focuses on how systemic conditions, referring to shifts from unipolarity to multipolarity, especially with the decline in the U.S.' hegemonic presence in the region created a permissive international environment and allowed Russia to intervene in Syria, while further pointing out that Russia's act of intervention was merely about Syria itself at systemic level.

The third section discusses regional sub-systemic dynamics in understanding Russia's act of intervention. It underlines that, geopolitical opportunities then embedded in the regional order as well as regional power balance considerations in the face of the Arab uprisings prompted Russia to intervene in the conflict.

The fourth section focuses on domestic factors, particularly to leader's perceptions in understanding why Russia intervened in Syria and underlines that domestic security concerns, referring to domestic legitimacy played a decisive role in Russia's intervention in Syria. In this sense, Putin's perceptions, as well-reflected in his rhetoric on self-preservation and international terrorism with anti-Western narratives, were examined as they inform us about how leaders interpret systemic signals on their own terms and justify their actions to domestic and international audiences. Additionally,

it must be underlined that the chapter will only focus on leader's perception as an intervening variable in analyzing domestic factors in order to keep this study within the scope of a master thesis.

The last section provides a brief summary of how systemic, sub-systemic and domestic factors all together played a critical role in our case, Russia's act of intervention in Syria. That is, this section, as discussed throughout the chapter, aims to concisely highlight that even though both international and regional structure created incentives for Russia to intervene in Syria, domestic factors, referring to the role of agency was the ultimate factor that determined Russia's act of intervention.

3.1. A Brief Historical Background

The Arab Uprisings that erupted in late 2010s and rapidly spread to the Arab world in 2011 has dramatically reshaped the trajectory of the Middle East over the past decade. The mass protests that outbroke in Tunisia when a street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself afire after being harassed by a police officer have abruptly spilled over Egypt and then Yemen, Jordan, Algeria Bahrain, Libya, Morocco and Syria. Many people, mostly young generations, have participated in anti-regime protests and revolted against their governments due to the socio-political and economic conditions that they found themselves in, such as authoritarianism, political repression, corruption, high unemployment, social injustice, inequalities and poverty. Even though each country has experienced different outcomes, the mass protests that shook the region failed to bring a widespread democratization wave contrary to early expectations. Indeed, many regimes have further consolidated their authoritarian resilience after violently suppressing those protesters who poured into the streets with the aim of affirmation of democracy and democratic rights. In this sense, Bashar's regime has emerged more resilient from mass protests that posed the most serious threat ever to his rule after coming to power in 2000[9]. According to BBC (2012),

[9] In this regard, Bashar has secured and further consolidated his regime not only through military repression but also sectarianism and reliance on foreign powers during the Syrian civil war. Despite the debates over the role of sectarianism with regard to its tendency to overlook political, economic and historical processes behind the civil war, it has been clear that Assad has employed sectarian divisions as a ruling strategy to consolidate his power during the Syrian civil war. In this sense, even though some scholars, such as Christopher Philips characterize the Syrian civil war as 'semi-sectarian' for this reason, there is no doubt that Assad has deliberately instrumentalized sectarian cleavages as a tool for reinforcing his rule.

Bashar's violent response to the initial protests that took place among school children in Deraa[10] has rapidly escalated the tension and sparked nationwide protests with the new demonstrations in Baniyas, Homs, Hama and the suburbs of Damascus. Although Bashar first intended to implement new democratic reforms to ease nationwide protests and reestablish political control in early stages of the protests, his limited and ineffective efforts failed to yield any significant outcome[11]. After the failure of reform initiative, Bashar's continued efforts to further suppress nationwide protests through coercive measures, including mass arrests, torture and the use of fatal force worsened an already deteriorating situation and eventually paved the way for thirteen year-long civil war in Syria[12].

The Syrian civil war, as a national conflict in a sub-, inter- and transnational context, has undergone significant transformation with its dynamics evolving across different periods[13]. In this regard, Russia's act of intervention with the official invitation of Bashar al-Assad on September 30, 2015 marked one of the central turning points in the Syrian civil war, considering that Russia's military support rescued Bashar's

[10] School children wrote on a wall the iconic slogan that had emerged during the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, 'The people want the downfall of the regime' in March 2011 and immediately after they were detained and tortured by the regime forces. For more details, please see this: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13855203

[11] Following the protests in Deraa in March 2011, Bashar revoked the Emergency Law after decades in force and held a referendum on the establishment of a new constitution, while endorsing formation of new political parties in the country (BBC, 2024)

[12] After Assad's violent response to civilians that culminated in increasing death tolls, peaceful civilian protests have evolved into an armed insurgency movement, particularly with the establishment of Free Syrian Army by defected army officers who refused to attack civilians and stood against the regime's violence (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2011, as cited in Salık, 2023). In this sense, the regime and anti-regime forces have engaged in armed conflicts many times across the country, and this ultimately resulted in de-facto partition of Syria between the regime and opposition (Spyer, 2013, as cited in Salık, 2023). Additionally, opposition groups have also formed a united front, called as Syrian National Council led by Burhan Ghalioun and the Muslim Brotherhood, to provide support for the revolution and overthrow of the regime, in spite of their differences (BBC, 2012). In this sense, this shift from peaceful protests to organized armed insurgency backed by a civilian opposition formally representing the Syrian people, referring to SNC who sought for major political change in the face of rising death tolls have characterized unfolding developments as a civil war in Syria.

[13] Veen et al. (2021) identifies five distinct periods and examine conflict dynamics by looking at the key contestation, major conflict factors and central turning points. In this sense, they categorize periods as such: early 2011 to early 2012, early 2012 to 2017, 2014 to 2016, 2017-2018, 2019-2020 and respectively name them 'from peaceful protest to militancy', 'from militancy to radicalization', 'from regime setbacks to regime recovery', 'from regime recovery to reconquest', 'from re-conquest to stalemate'.

regime in the fight against the opposition forces and Islamic State[14]. That is, Russia's political support thus far turned into direct military involvement with the act of intervention in 2015 and fundamentally altered the key dynamics in the Syrian civil war. In this regard, this chapter will address how international and regional dynamics along with domestic factors played a decisive role in determining Russia's act of intervention in Syria on September 30, 2015. Therefore, this chapter shows that the evidence provided throughout preceding pages is necessary to answer the main question of this thesis: "What explains the strategic shift that took place in Russian foreign policymaking in Syria?". In order to be able to answer this question and explain the strategic shift that occurred with Russia's act of non-intervention when Bashar's regime was on the verge of collapse, one needs to first explain why Russia decided to intervene in Syria with a comprehensive outlook.

3.2. Systemic Factors

"The expansion of powers is a product not only of internal pressure but also of threats and opportunities in the external environment" (Schweller, 2006, p. 24). As put by Schweller, system-level conditions or external environment in the international system play an important part in determining a state's foreign policy behavior either by constraining or advancing its interests. In this sense, Russia's decision to intervene in the Syrian conflict was shaped by the opportunities presented in the international system, especially with the perceived retreat of the U.S. from engaging in direct military interventions in the Middle East in the post-2003 environment. The Obama administration further demonstrated that the US was not interested in militarily intervening in Syria. Therefore, Russia's deliberate move to intervene in Syria was directly related with the erosion of global power structure that emerged in the post-Cold War period, given that the US hegemony has been gradually declined with the transition toward a more multipolar order where alternative centers of power, both globally and regionally, flourished and challenged the US' key interests across various regions in the international system (Mearsheimer, 2018). In this sense, this section will

[14] According to Charap, Treyger and Geist (2019), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) took control of Palmyra in May 2015. In the meantime, coalition forces led by Jabhat al-Nusra continued to launch coordinated attacks against the regime in northwest Syria. As put by Valery Gerasimov, the Syrian government had only control of more or less 10 percent of the entire territory, and it was expected to lose the remaining under the ISIS control by the end of 2015. Therefore, Bashar's regime would likely have collapsed, had Russia not intervened.

address how Russia's act of intervention in Syria was driven by the shifts in the international system and underline that Russia's act of intervention was merely about Syria itself at systemic level.

According to Krauthammer (2002), the nature of the international system underwent a major shift shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1990. Even though many assumed that the international system would transform from bipolarity to multipolarity, the world entered the 'unipolar moment' with the triumph of the West in the Cold War, and the U.S. emerged as the sole superpower in the international system[15]. In its immediate aftermath, the U.S. acted as a global policeman in the international system and actively sought to promote peace and security by engaging in humanitarian intervention and mediation efforts in other parts of the world, including Balkans and the Middle East (Halliday, 2005). For instance, the U.S. militarily intervened in the Gulf War of 1991, actively involved in Arab-Israeli peace process with the initiation of Madrid Conference of 1991 and Oslo Talks of 1993 as well as contributed to peace-keeping operations to halt the humanitarian catastrophe in Kosovo in 1999 (Fawcett, 2013). In the same vein, the U.S.' war against Afghanistan in 2001 with the aim of removing the Taliban regime after being hit at home with the terror attack that was carried out on September 11, 2001, and following Iraqi invasion of 2003 in breach of international law are among other examples indicating U.S.' unchecked power in the unipolarity. In the light of these, it is apparent that the U.S. has not confronted with any counterbalancing in the first decade of the American unipolarity and quite the opposite, other major powers began to even position themselves behind the U.S. shortly after (Krauthammer, 2002). For instance, Lynch (2016, p. 7) argues that Russia has pursued a 'bandwagon strategy of maximizing Russian interests'[16] and thus developed more cooperative relations in political and

[15] Kennedy (2002) explains with historical groundings that this new era that was characterized by unipolarity under the U.S. supremacy would not persist indefinitely. In this respect, he describes the scope of the American power in the following manner: "nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing" and acknowledges that international system experienced a unipolar moment after the Cold War. However, he also pays particular attention to the risk of 'imperial overstretch' in the meantime, which makes long-term hegemony unlikely (Kennedy, 2002, as cited in Krauthammer, 2002, p 5; Kennedy, 1987). And today, we see that Kennedy's predictions regarding the nature of the international system came true with the gradual shift of international system from unipolarity to multipolarity with the resurgence of Russia and China.

[16] Lynch (2002, p. 162), in his article entitled as The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s, defines Russia's vital interests as follows: "(i) preservation of the territorial integrity of the Russian

economic spheres, if not integration, with Western world, particularly with the U.S. and NATO throughout most of the 1990s. As clearly put by Lynch (2002), Russia's initial policies in foreign policymaking, as expressed by Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, were rooted in liberal internationalism[17] yet being shaped by two potentially conflicting policy objectives or what Lynch calls as twin interests[18]. In this respect, Russia reaffirmed its bilateral interests with the West, supported U.S. intervention in Gulf War of 1991 and halted military ties with China, India and other countries during this period (Cohen, 2009; Roxburgh, as cited in Kumar, 2018). Therefore, it is safe to argue that the unipolarity in the international system created a permissive international environment for the U.S. to pursue its goals without facing any constraints or restrictions in the early 1990s onward.

Yet, NATO's eastward expansion with the joining of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic along with the U.S.' intervention in Serbia brought centrality of geopolitics back into agenda in post-Cold War politics in the late 1990s. The internal debates that emerged in the early 1990s over whether Russia should continue to follow liberal policies in her foreign policymaking or embrace a more nationalist line came to an end following Kozyrev's replacement by Primakov in 1996. In this sense, Russia's pro-Western policies that were initially shaped by 'New Thinking' of Gorbachev[19] before

Federation"; "(ii) assuring the geopolitical primacy of Russia in the region described by the borders of the former USSR"; "(iii) assuring the security and stability of Russian nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction"; "(iv) promoting Russian economic development", "(v) maintaining Russia's status as a great international power", "(vi) asserting the maximum feasible peerage with the G-7 group of advanced industrial democracies."

[17] To this end, Russia's convictions in establishing partnerships with the West has institutionalized under several bodies, including the Gore-Chernomyrdin commission, the Contact Group on the former Yugoslavia, the G-7 plus 1, and NATO-Russian Charter of May 1997. Ibid, p.163

[18] These policy objectives include to reclaim Russia's great power status and dominance in the post-Soviet space while establishing partnerships and cooperative relations with the West. Yet, as Lynch (2002) indicates, Russia's two folded policies in the face of the Western interventions and NATO's expansion provoked large-scale public protests against the West as early as mid-1992 in Russia and culminated in polarization of Russian foreign policy along liberal and nationalist lines, which later would affect her stance in relations with the West and question the unipolarity of the international system.

[19] Gorbachev's democratic aspirations, referring to the advent of perestroika and glasnost and emphasis on universal values have reoriented Russia's foreign policymaking in this period and transformed the nature of global politics, especially with the signing of several treaties on disarmament and demilitarization, such as INF and START (Kumar, 2018).

the disintegration of the Soviet Union gave its place to the Eurasianism[20] and the search for multipolarity in the subsequent period between 1996 and 2006 (Kumar, 2018)[21]. In this period, Russia's pro-Western policies in foreign policymaking were replaced by more nationalist policies that prioritized multipolarity in the international system. For instance, Russia signed off the 'Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Formation of a New International Order' with China in 1997 and further put forward the framework anticipating cooperation among Russia, India and China (RIC) to counter the Western hegemony in the international system (Kumar, 2018).

When it comes to the 2000s, Russia's quest for creating multiple alternative centers of power to balance the Western influence in the international system became one of the key policy objectives in Russia's foreign policymaking under Vladimir Putin. As soon as he became president, Russia adopted Foreign Policy Concept of 2000, and this marked a decisive shift that officially laid the strategic foundations for Russia's assertive foreign policy from the early 2000s[22]. In this vein, Russia, in the following period, strongly voiced criticisms against the unipolarity and its unfolding ramifications in the international system, especially by Putin's anti-American speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy in 2007[23] and further strengthened the

[20] Eurasianism prioritizes: "(a) restoring the pride of Russia, (b) economic integration of the former Soviet space, (c) countering the Western attempt to regime change in the neighborhood, (d) departure from the West-centric policy and search for partners in Asia, (e) protecting the Russian diaspora in the former Soviet space and (f) close cooperation with China.". Ibid, p. 218

[21] Kumar (2018, p. 210) categorizes Russia's foreign policy in the last three decades as follows: "neo-liberalism and the West-centric policy (1991-1995); Eurasianism and the search for multipolarity (1996-2006); and crossing the Rubicon (2007-2015)-marked by external interventions."

[22] The Foreign Policy Concept that was approved in 2000 sets the main foreign policy priorities of Russia and recognizes that the new world order must have body of institutions enabling to produce solutions to the key problems in the system. In this respect, the document openly states that the unipolar world order that was dominated by the U.S. generated new challenges that posed significant threats to international peace and security. To this end, Russia officially defended that new world order must ensure peace and security for all and offer an equal opportunity to each member of the international community to be represented in international institutions. Therefore, Russia globally aimed to enhance multipolarity for a more just world order in the international system whereas she regionally prioritized to enhance relations in all fields with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and counter the Western influence in the post-Soviet space, referring to her negative stance against the expansion of NATO. For more details, please see this: https://www.bits.de/EURA/russia052800.pdf

[23] In his speech, Putin openly criticizes that unipolar nature of the international system produces illegitimate actions that undermines democracy and drags the world into "an abyss of permanent conflicts" in his words, while destroying the international system itself from within. He also underscores that economic potential of newly arising countries, referring to BRIC countries would inevitably reinforce multipolarity by creating alternative centers of power to the Western influence in the international system. For instance, Putin puts out that the combined GDP of India and China already

emphasis on multipolarity and Russia's great power status with the Foreign Policy Doctrine of 2008. In this sense, all these systemic critiques of international order that were articulated in above-mentioned documents have not only delegitimized the hegemon's authority in the current international order but also functioned as a strategic framework that legitimized Russia's subsequent military interventions that she carried out in her near abroad, referring to Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. In this vein, Russia's intervention in Syria cannot be held separately from her engagements in her near abroad, considering that they all were primarily driven by similar calculations at systemic level, and aimed to counter the Western influence that has prevailed in the international system since the end of the Cold War[24]. Schweller and Pu (2011) explain this with 'balancing as revisionist behavior under unipolarity' and argue that potential contenders initially aim to create conditions for the emergence of counterhegemonic coalition that may lead to a change of system during delegitimization process. Therefore, even though Russia initially pursued band wagoning strategy in relations with the West and chose to adapt to the systemic conditions after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, her priorities in foreign policymaking evolved over time in parallel with changing circumstances and eventually extended to systemic counterbalancing. This shift in her foreign policy orientation helps us to understand intervention in Syria at systemic level, especially taking into account that rising challengers, as in Schweller and Pu's words, are more inclined to pursue assertive policies as their power and influence grow vis-à-vis the hegemon. In Gilpin's theory of hegemonic war, this was defined as 'the law of uneven rates of growth', which explains their quest for power and prestige in the international system (as cited in Schweller and Pu, 2011, p. 43). In

exceeded of U.S.' and further states that this gap would only increase in the future. Therefore, Putin's speech at the Munich has not only fueled geopolitical tension, especially with his remarks on security related issues covering NATO's expansion and stagnation in the disarmament process but also economic competition in the system as well. For more details, please see this: http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/24034

[24] Moscow has repeatedly voiced criticisms against the U.S.-led humanitarian interventions that culminated in regime change in countries being intervened, such as Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, and further instabilities that it created in the international system after the end of the Cold War. This was the reason why Russia framed her intervention as a sovereign action that favored regime survival contrary to so-called humanitarian interventions that resulted in regime change. Since Russia regards those direct and indirect interventions as a potential threat to her regime stability, especially after the Libyan experience, she refused to act together with the international community on finding a solution to the Syrian crisis and effectively utilized an opportunity to intervene in Syria with the official invitation of Bashar al-Assad (Charap, 2013).

this sense, Moscow saw a window of opportunity with lower costs that would reclaim her power and prestige amidst the U.S.' hegemonic decline in the Middle East. That is, Russia's assertive policies, particularly her act of intervention in Syria are linked to permissive international environment that came out with the rise of multipolarity in the international system. To elaborate more, according to Phillips (2019), the U.S' imperial overstretch that combined with its quest to pivot to Asia curtailed its eagerness to follow more interventionist policies in the Middle East[25]. In addition to this, Yom (2020) argues that the U.S. has recalibrated its long-standing overseas commitments in the Middle East and shifted its engagement strategy under the Obama administration that typically used to anticipate for interventionist policies to maintain its regional imperium. Yom (2020) explains this gradual shift with changing structural dynamics that no longer pose a serious threat to the U.S.' security and national interests in the region. Similarly, Kreig (2016) also underlines that the U.S. has sought to lower defense spendings under the austerity measures during the Obama administration since the U.S. public was war fatigue due to the high military costs of interventions inherited from the Bush era. In particular, the U.S.' failures in Iraq domestically called in question the merits of direct military interventions in terms of deniability, legitimacy, urgency, costs and capability. In this respect, the U.S. has adopted a doctrinal approach called as 'war by surrogate' and externalized the strategic and operational burden of warfare to human and technological surrogates with the capacity building at local level (Krieg, 2016). Therefore, the U.S.' deliberate move to decline in its hegemonic presence and follow of non-interventionist policies have created room for other great powers to advance their interests and consolidate their influence across the various regions in the international system. China's increasing economic and military capacity that coupled with political influence globally as well as Russia's resurgence with the interventions in the Middle East and Europe challenged the U.S. hegemony and

[25] Phillips (2019) draws attention to Kennedy's imperial overstretch to assert that economic cost of sustaining military interventions was no longer viable due to the massive military expenditures that proved to be in vain in Iraq along with financial and economic crisis of 2008. Yet, Yom (2020) explicitly puts out that the U.S. hegemonic decline is related with the change of threat perceptions towards the Middle East instead of economic constraints or ideological turns. Different from Yom, Kreig (2016) underlines that the U.S. no longer considers military intervention as a first resort unless its vital interests are at a great risk. In this sense, it is remarkable to note that all three do share the same opinion, but their explanations have different nuances with respect to the U.S.' hegemonic retrenchment from the Middle East.

contributed to the rise of multipolarity in the international system[26] (Yom, 2020; Phillips, 2022). In this sense, Russia's quest to intervene in Syria has nurtured by those systemic dynamics that has already been at play, though less obviously, in the international system, regarding the multipolarity. Therefore, as Charap (2013) concludes in his article, entitled as 'Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention', that Russia's bottom line in declining to become a party to any diplomatic resolution on Western or Arab terms[27] and further her intervention in Syria stemmed from pursuit of shaping the international system in her own way rather than addressing the underlying issues in Syria. In this respect, Russia's act of intervention was just more than a military operation, it went beyond regime survival in Syria and became a geopolitical statement in the international system, as in Phillips' words, at systemic level.

3.3. Sub-Systemic Factors

Even though Russia's quest for shift in the international system enable us to understand her foreign policy behavior at systemic level, this alone does not fully explain the complex regional context behind her act of intervention in Syria. That is, one also needs to analyze how Moscow framed her foreign policy decision to militarily intervene in Syria at the regional level. In this sense, this sub-section will focus on geopolitical opportunities that were then embedded in the regional order and enabled Moscow to project her power and influence across the Middle East.

According to Rumer and Weiss (2024), Russia's return to the Middle East after 20 years of isolation from the region following the collapse of the Soviet Union took place with the extensive visits to Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian territories in 2005 and then

[26] According to Layne (2012), China is expected to surpass the U.S. share in the world economy in 2020, and its economic power would enable it to challenge U.S. dominance diplomatically, economically and militarily (as cited in Phillips, 2022). In addition to this, Posen (2017) argues that even though Russia's economic and military power has not dramatically increased since 2000, her ability to challenge and balance the West through interventions in several parts of the world, including Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, Libya and Kazakhstan contributed to this shift to multipolarity in the international system (as cited in Phillips, 2022).

[27] According to SNHR (2020), Russia, either alone or with China, has four times vetoed draft resolutions that were submitted by other countries to condemn and hold the Syrian regime accountable for the war crimes that it committed against humanity in between 2011 and 2014, a time period before she militarily intervened in Syria. These drafts were respectively vetoed on October 4, 2011, February 4, 2012, July 19, 2012, May 22, 2014. Yet, it must be underlined that Russia kept vetoing resolutions after the intervention as well.

to the Persian Gulf, namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan in 2007 under the leadership of Putin. Those visits, as put by Smith (2007), as well as Putin's criticisms regarding the U.S. led order undermining regional stability with reference to tragic consequences of military intervention in Iraq show Russia's intention to play a more active role in the Middle East. In this respect, Smith (2007) argues that Putin's high-level visits to the Persian Gulf countries are explicit attempts to counter the U.S. hegemony with the cultivation of relations with those states traditionally aligned with Washington, especially considering that his visit took place a few days after Munich Security Conference. In addition to this, Russia's endeavors to assume an intermediary role in Arab-Israeli peace process under the framework of the Quartet[28] and will to include conflicting parties, referring to Hamas leadership to the process were positively received by the Arab and Muslim world[29] and convinced the Arab leaders that Russia's policies correspond with the realities in the region in spite of the U.S.' policies being implemented since 2001[30]. In this sense, Russia's comeback to the region at a time when the negative consequences of the U.S.' devastative policies still felt across the Middle East in the post-2003 regional setting created permissive regional environment to raise her profile and balance the U.S. hegemony throughout the region, prior to the Arab uprisings.

In the following period, Russia has further maintained her efforts to increase her power and influence across the region as she was concerned about the regional power balances in the face of the Arab uprisings. In this respect, Russia gave her explicit support to Bashar's al-Assad regime to keep him in power for the purpose of securing her long-term interests in the Middle East. In particular, even though Russia had historical ties with Syria that have been largely dominated by arms trade and kept her

[28] The Quartet came into being with the UN Security Council resolution of 1397 in 2002, following the Second Intifada. This mechanism brought the EU, US, UN and Russia together to facilitate the Middle East Peace Process negotiations. For more details, please see this: https://www.un.org/unispal/the-quartet/

[29] For instance, Smith (2007) shows that Russia obtained an observer position at the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 2005 and then took a part in the formation of a Russia-Islamic World Strategic Vision Group a year later.

[30] According to Smith (2007), Secretary-General of the Arab Leage Amr Moussa expressed in his visit to Moscow in 2007 that Russia's policies in the Middle East are widely appreciated by the Arab world and they match with the realities of the region when it is compared to the policies of 'other countries', Moussa refers to the U.S. here, that has been proved unsuccessful.

foots with the small naval facility at Tartus, her relations with Syria was far from de-facto alliance that came into being when the Syrian civil war erupted in 2011 (Charap et al. 2021). That is, Russian-Syrian relations have leveled up with the sign of long-term agreements that allowed Moscow to maintain her military presence at Tartus naval base and Khmeimim air base after the intervention. Similarly, Russia's relations with other major powers in the region, especially with Iran, Israel, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye have also considerably improved. Therefore, Russia geopolitically invested more in the region and utilized her diplomatic, military and economic resources to increase her regional influence. In this sense, one can argue that geopolitical interests along with regional balances determined Moscow's foreign policy behavior at regional level and contributed to the intervention in 2015.

3.3.1. Regional Balances and Geopolitical Opportunities at the Threshold of a Shift from Balanced to Decisive Intervention

Civil wars have emerged as the most prevalent form of conflict in the international system, and so they have attracted extensive scholarly attention in the post-Cold War era (Gleditsch et al. 2002, as cited in Gleditsch, 2007). Despite the proliferation of theoretical approaches and empirical research on causes of civil wars, the research on transnational aspects of civil wars, referring to third-party intervention has developed relatively late. Reagan (2000) suggests that third parties are involved in conflicts with the purpose of stopping the fighting whereas Gartzke and Gleditsch (2006) point out that their motivations to intervene may vary from one to another (as cited in Gleditsch, 2007). That is, they are not only motivated with humanitarian concerns alone. Indeed, they may reflect a confluence of different interests varying from economic and security concerns to alliance politics and regional balance of power considerations. In this respect, external parties play a decisive role in determining the outcome of civil wars, referring to settlement or escalation of conflicts, depending on their motivations. From this perspective, Russia's act of intervention as a third party in Syria were shaped by the geopolitical opportunities and regional power balances in a multipolar regional system. Even though the Syrian civil war has domestically polarized into two main opposing camps, namely the regime and opposition, it has rapidly internationalized with the involvement of both regional and extra-regional actors into the conflict, and this resulted in the emergence of different camps at regional level. Yet, as Phillips

(2022) points out that those actors that were positioned in different camps do not necessarily act with the bloc mentality as in the bipolar regional or global system where their interactions are determined with fixed alliances. On the contrary, they may choose to cooperate with one partner in one domain while competing in another. Hence, they act individually in a multipolar system, and their alignments may change both over time and across issues. This was the reason why some actors supported different factions or prioritized other issues to advance their interests even if they were positioned in the same camp in the Syrian conflict. Posen (2017) explains this with 'divided attention of the multipolar system'[31] (as cited in Phillips, 2022, p. 372). In this respect, while the Syrian conflict initially evolved through balanced interventions with the support given to domestic actors by outside powers, Russia's direct military involvement turned it into decisive intervention and tipped of balances in favor of Bashar's regime in the conflict (Phillips, 2022). Therefore, Russia's decision to militarily intervene in Syria was shaped by those balanced interventions that fueled geopolitical considerations in the Syrian conflict.

To begin with, Russia's decision to intervene in Syria was driven by the strategic imperative to prevent Saudi-led camp to outpower and gain upper hand in the Syrian conflict. Otherwise, this would have put key Russian interests in jeopardy, considering that firm support given to the opposition by the Saudi-led camp could lead to the regime change in Syria. In this sense, one needs to situate Russia's act of intervention within the context of the regional order that emerged in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and analyze it over the regional power competition. According to Beck and Richter (2020), the Middle Eastern regional order has been experiencing deep

[31] Posen's divided attention of the multipolar system conceptualization proved to be very helpful in understanding the regional balances. This conceptualization helps us to grasp why regional and extra regional actors operating at the regional sub-system act the way the do in the regional politics and it helps us to eliminate certain confusions regarding their positions. For instance, it is clear that Russia and Iran geopolitically align with each other, especially in Syria. Yet, Russia, who has friendly relations with Israel, blinded her eyes to Israeli attacks against Iranian-led militias in Syria and Lebanon and intentionally avoided any confrontation with Israel. Moreover, even though Turkish-Russian relations have been strained due to divergent interests in Syria, and both countries came to the brink of the war with the downing of the Russian jet, we have witnessed rapid rapprochement between two countries in the period following the failed July 2016 coup attempt and subsequent the launch of Operation Euphrates Shield (Rüma and Çelikpala, 2019). Similarly, Russia and Saudi Arabia had different agendas in the Syrian conflict, yet they developed very cooperative economic relations in the wake of the intervention as Russia became a member of OPEC+ countries. Therefore, Posen's approach is important in the sense that it enables us to make sense of regional dynamics and follow them in such a fluid multipolar regional system.

structural changes with the new regional dynamics that came into at play in the past decade. Beck and Richter (2020) argue that the Arab monarchies of the Gulf started to play a more active role in the regional politics from the early 2010s when the Arab uprisings outbroke and competed for the regional leadership. In this sense, the U.S.' deliberate move to decline its hegemonic presence in the region and subsequent region-wide protests have created room for both regional and extra-regional countries to advance their interests in regional politics. Hence, those new dynamics have given rise to emergence of a highly contested multipolar regional system, which has been identified differently by various scholars[32]. In this multipolar regional system, Saudi-Iranian rivalry, a rivalry that has been at play in the region since 2003, has continued to shape the geopolitics of the region, especially by impacting over domestic politics of several fragile Arab states in the region, including Syria (Salloukh, 2013). In this respect, Syria has become another theatre in the Saudi-Iranian contest where respective regional and extra-regional actors situated in those camps sought to increase their influence in the face of the Arab uprisings[33]. That is, Syria turned into a proxy arena where rival powers intervened in Syria's internal affairs and transformed the Syrian conflict into a more complex and protracted struggle that "took thousands of lives,

[32] For instance, Gause (2014) locates the Iran-Saudi rivalry at the center of the new regional order and asserts that this new regional structure that has been primarily driven by power mirrors the classical Arab Cold War of the 1950s with the main distinction that Egypt were then the main antagonist vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia in this rivalry (as cited in Beck and Richter, 2020). Similarly, Valbjørn and Bank (2012) draws attention to the New Arab Cold War and the transformation of the Arab nationalism in the region. On the other hand, some scholars, such as Beck (2020), Ryan (2019), Hinnebusch (2020) and Darwich (2020) benefit from alternative perspectives, including liberalism, social constructivism, institutionalism, and political economy approach due to the limitations of realist conceptualizations (as cited in Beck and Richter, 2020). Yet, even though there have been certain limitations to frame the new regional order over one dividing line, referring to power politics, it must be underlined that it has, so far, proved to be very productive in explaining unfolding regional developments.

[33] In post-2003 setting, the Middle East divided into two different political camps due to the significant power vacuum that emerged with the U.S. invasion of Iraq. These two camps separately led by Saudi Arabia and Iran sought to fill this power vacuum and eventually increase their regional outreach, while also trying to contain each other's influence in conflict-prone areas as much as it is possible. According to Salloukh (2013) and Steinberg (2021), Iranian-led camp, known also as axis of resistance, consist of Shi'a political parties and militias in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas, Houthis in Yemen, Syria and Russia whereas Saudi-led camp included the U.S., UAE, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain. That is, it is mostly made up of Sunni-dominated, Gulf-centered and pro-U.S. countries opposing to Iranian expansion in the region. Yet, it must be underlined that what we have witnessed so far has proved that polarization by political camps has only contributed to further exacerbation of instabilities in the Middle East through sectarian cleavages or proxy warfare.

displaced more than half the population, and shattered the country's physical and social foundations" in the passing 14 years [34] (Kabbani, 2025).

According to Salloukh (2013), Saudi Arabia attributed utmost attention to the developments in Syria since it was aware of the fact that Damascus, as the main territorial link between Tehran and Hezbollah and Hamas, was important for containing Iran's growing role in the region. Therefore, Saudi Arabia indirectly intervened in the Syrian conflict as it became deeply concerned about Iran's domination in Syria, particularly considering that Iran immediately provided arms support and deployed its military advisors to Syria to suppress the protests and save Bashar al-Assad's regime in late 2011 when the demonstrations evolved into the civil war[35] (Steinberg, 2021). To this end, Riyadh financially assisted the Free Syrian Army groups and given its covert support to Salafi-jihadi fighters, including al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham in order to overthrow Bashar al-Assad's regime and reorient Syria towards Saudi-led camp in this regional rivalry (Salloukh, 2013). In return, Iran adopted dual-track strategy to ensure that Bashar would continue to stay in power in Syria from 2012 onward. In order to achieve this outcome, Iran tried to resolve the Syrian conflict through both diplomatic and military means. According to Goodarzi (2020), Tehran put forward a six-point peace proposal to achieve national reconciliation in Syria in 2012[36]. Similarly, Ali Akbar Salehi, Iranian Foreign Minister then in 2013, met with Ahmad Moaz al-Khatib, the leader of the Syrian National Coalition on the margin of global security conference in Munich, and kept maintaining dialogue with the opposition for a political settlement. While doing so, Tehran did not step back from providing military assistance to Bashar's regime in the meantime. In 2013, Bashar's regime brought various paramilitary and militia

[34]For more details, please see this: https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/syria-one-year-on-is-still-emerging-from-the-rubble-of-war/#:~:text=The%20first%2Dyear%20anniversary%20of,country's%20physical%20and%20social%20foundations.

[35] As put by Steinberg (2021), Iran also supplied military assistance to the regime in Syria. Even though IRGC did not official admit that they have deployed Quds Forces to Syria in the wake of the civil war, IRGC General Mohammad Ali Jafari later confirmed in 2012 that their military personnel were then active in Syria. For more details about Jafari's statements, please see this: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/16/iran-middleeast

[36] It must be noted that this plan was immediately rejected by the opposition on the ground that it failed to fulfill their precondition to remove Bashar al-Assad from power.

formations[37] together under the name the National Defense Forces with the help of Iranians (Goodarzi, 2020). Therefore, the Iranian-Saudi rivalry, to a great extent, shaped the emerging regional order as well as the course of events in Syria after the Arab uprisings; however, as Phillips (2020) explained that it was not the only component to grasp the unfolding developments both in Syria and the regional politics.

The emergence of other regional actors, namely Türkiye and Qatar as well as non-state actors, such as ISIS also shaped the new regional context and further contributed to weakening of the regime with the military and financial support given to the opposition. In this regard, the Syrian regime encountered with a major offensive from late 2014 to 2015 and suffered from substantial territorial losses including important military sites and cities, namely Wadi al-Dhaif, Palmyra, Idlib, Jisr al-Shughur, Bosra al-Sham, the base of the 52nd Brigade in Harak to the opposition and ISIS (Foreign Policy, 2015; Reuters, 2015; The Observer, 2015; as cited in Goodarzi, 2020). This outcome undoubtedly achieved with the coordinated efforts of regional countries who gave their firm support to the opposition with the aim of toppling Bashar's regime[38]. In the light of these developments, Iran's support for the regime fell short of saving the regime in the face of unfolding developments on the ground in 2015 and this ultimately paved the way for Russia's direct military involvement in Syria.

Hence, all these balanced interventions provoked by regional powers, including non-state actors to advance their interests in Syria came to an end with the Russia's decisive intervention in 2015. Regional power balances that favored then the opposition in 2015 prompted Russia to intervene in the Syrian conflict. According to Charap et al. (2021), Russia chose to intervene and keep Bashar al-Assad in power due to the broader

[37] By 2013, it became apparent that the Iranian-led alliance in Syria made up of Shi'a militias consisted of several different groups, including Iran's Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, Iraqi militias who have been affiliated with Hezbollah Battalions, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq and the Badr Organisation, and Afghan and Pakistani volunteer troops (Steinberg, 2021).

[38] In the Syrian conflict, as Phillips (2022) puts out that even though Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey have given their support to the opposition, they favored different armed groups due to their divergent interests. Whereas Turkey and Qatar supported armed groups ideologically close to the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia particularly avoided from supporting those MB affiliated ones. Yet, when it comes to March 2015, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia eliminated their differences and initiated a coordinated their efforts in supporting the opposition, and this brought about significant changes on the ground as it culminated in great territorial losses for the regime (Goodarzi, 2020).

geopolitical consequences it would have entailed if it had not intervened. Moscow was then concerned that Bashar's fall by the opposition would result in loss of her military assets and privileges she obtained from the regime due to her close ties. That is, new regime would cut ties with Russia as a retaliation for her firm support given to the regime to sustain itself. This would undoubtedly undermine Russia's influence and key interests in the Middle East and North Africa, considering that the naval base at Tartus and the airbase in Khmeimim were the key military assets that she used for her operations in these regions. According to Borshchevskii (2024), the Tartus base is home to what the Russian Navy calls its "permanent task force in the Mediterranean Sea" whereas Khmeimim air base serves as a strategic point that facilitates Russian operations mostly in Africa by providing key logistic support, referring to maintenance and refueling to Russian aircraft.[39] Therefore, it is clear that the loss of those military assets with the possibility of regime change would generate significant costs that would diminish Russia's geopolitical position and influence in the region. In this regard, Russia chose to intervene in Syria when Bashar al-Assad officially invited her in 2015. In its aftermath, Russia increased its naval presence and extended her privileges on these key military assets with 2017 agreement between Moscow and Damascus (Alajlouni, Dempsey and Ribe, 2025). TASS (n.d.) reports that Russia expanded its naval base with the long-term assurances provided in the document, such as allowance for nuclear-powered cruisers entry to the Syria's waters and ports, use of the base for a minimum of 49 years free of charge with the possibility of a 25-year extension and sovereign jurisdiction.[40] Therefore, it is evident that Russia's naval base at Tartus occupies an important place in its military strategy in the Mediterranean. In this sense, as put by Buckley, 2012; Lesch, 2012; Mankoff, 2012; Nasser-Eddine, 2012; Zifcak, 2012; Janik, 2013; Jafarova, 2014; Plakoudas, 2015; Rafizadeh, 2015; Perišić, 2017, Russia's support for the regime accounts for more than protecting her interests only in Syria, it encompasses her broader geostrategic interests in the MENA (as cited in Oligie, 2019).

[39] For more details, please see this: https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0002yky

[40] For more details, please see this: https://tass.com/defense/983682

3.4. Domestic Factors

3.4.1. Leader's Perceptions as a Unit-Level Intervening Variable

Even though systemic and sub-systemic conditions have created a permissive international and regional environment for Russia to follow more assertive policies in her foreign policy making and shaped, to a great extent, her decision to intervene in Syria, they remain limited in addressing all the motives behind this intervention, especially considering the decisive role that domestic factors have played. In this sense, structural factors alone, referring to systemic and sub-systemic conditions, fail to cover different aspects all together and provide a comprehensive understanding of why Russia intervened in Syria in 2015. In this sense, this subsection, as NCR suggests, will focus on the role of agency, referring to Putin's perceptions that inevitably determined Russia's act of intervention. While doing so, Putin's rhetoric on self-preservation and international terrorism will be examined in detail as they were the main themes in Putin's speeches given to both domestic and international audiences.

Even though Russia was preoccupied with the presidential elections when the Syrian civil war erupted in 2012 and it was considered by Vorobyeva (2020) that it was highly unlikely that Russia would engage in any major shift in her foreign policymaking until the elections had taken place in the country, we see that Russia's domestic political dynamics significantly influenced her decision to intervene in Syria. When we look at domestic political atmosphere in Russia back then, millions of Russian people took to the streets to protest flawed parliamentary and presidential elections in the country. They gathered around Bolotnaya Square and mounted the largest political protests in modern Russian history (The Moscow Times, 2021). Those protests were ignited by highly contested parliamentary elections held in December 2011 and Medvedev's subsequent support for Putin's candidacy for the third term in the presidential elections, although formally prohibited by the Russian Constitution[41]. That is, Putin's legitimacy in the eyes of Russian people was in question at that time due to staged

[41]Putin's return to the presidency was accompanied by excessive control over the media and judiciary and further marginalization of political opposition. After coming to power in 2012, he violently suppressed protests in the country. For more details about the protests, please see this: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/12/09/10-years-since-bolotnaya-the-biggest-protests-of-the-putin-era-a75739

elections as well as political corruption and growing authoritarianism in the country. According to Burret (2025, p. 6), Putin's legitimacy does not solely rely on his charismatic leadership but also "what has been termed 'output' and 'input' sources". Output legitimacy, in a wider context, is used to refer to a leader's performance in providing basic needs and maintaining material well-being for its own people whereas input legitimacy is more associated with long-term relationship that is driven by shared values and beliefs between the state and public. Since his ability to deliver improvements in economic well-being weakened in 2012 onwards[42], Putin has turned to input sources to reclaim his legitimacy. To this end, Putin has targeted public opinion and extensively worked towards shaping Russian's beliefs and perceptions in order to sustain domestic support for his rule. According to Burret (2025, p. 3), Putin, after being elected for the third term in 2012, focused on three nationalist narratives: "glorification of the military, social conservatism, and an existential battle for survival against the West". In this sense, Putin reinforced his leadership and heightened nationalist sentiments by projecting power abroad and framing his discourse around self-preservation and international terrorism with anti-Western narratives. Hence, the military intervention in Syria functioned as an input source of legitimacy that helped him to consolidate his authority and shifted public attention away from economic stagnation in the country. On the opposite scenario, Moscow to share the same position with the West on Syria would have resulted in further decline in public support, particularly given that Russia's failure in the Libyan case had already generated widespread discontent among the Russian people, including several Russian diplomats as well (Vorobyeva, 2020). For instance, Levada Center (2011) shows that over 60 percent of the participants in the opinion poll conducted in Russia "believed that the establishment of the No-Fly Zone was wrong because aerial attacks constituted an 'interference in Libya's internal affairs and an aggression against a sovereign nation' (as cited in Committeri, 2012, p. 7). That is, Russia's assertive policies that were precipitated by military engagement in Syria were driven by domestic political

[42] Economic pessimism after the 2008 financial crisis has become widespread among young Russians. In this sense, public perceptions of economic performance have significantly changed in 2012 as compared to Putin's first two terms, so ordinary Russians became less optimistic on this. According to Levada Center (2016), public concern about an economic downturn rose from 22 percent to 59 percent in 2009 and then fell to 30 percent in 2011 (as cited in Burret, 2025). Therefore, Putin's output sources for legitimacy, referring to economic performance faced significant losses in generating public support as the public fear for economic crisis spiked, and led Putin to turn to input sources for legitimacy.

considerations. In this regard, Putin's perceptions that were well reflected in his rhetoric particularly on external enemies, referring to radical terrorist organizations and the Western support given to them became consistent theme that was utilized for reclaiming his legitimacy inside the country. Consequently, it reinforced Putin's image as a leader who managed to protect the country from terrorist threat while being empowered its position as a great power vis-à-vis the West in the international stage. Through this way, Putin managed to consolidate his power and legitimacy in both domestic and international realms. When we examine how Putin interpreted systemic and sub-systemic events through his experiences, we see that Putin's discourses on self-preservation and international terrorism with anti-Western narratives become increasingly salient.

To begin with, Russia's decision to intervene in Syria, in the context of domestic political considerations, has manifested itself in Putin's rhetoric on self-preservation and fight against terrorism. In a meeting with government members held on the day when the intervention occurred, Putin explicitly underlined that Moscow has always given her firm support in the fight against international terrorism and the only way to terminate growing threat of international terrorism is to eliminate the terrorist threat in its origin, referring to territories captured by terrorist groups, once and for all without "waiting for them to arrive on our soil" [43]. In this regard, Putin has framed her intervention in Syria as a move for self-preservation "with a shade of anti-Americanism"[44], which aims to prevent a future threat that may jump into her territories, especially considering that many people who have crossed the border and joined to the so-called Islamic State and other radical organizations came from Europe, Russia and post-Soviet space, and that they would eventually return to their home countries with the combat experience that they have gained in jihadist strongholds. This potential threat became increasingly serious as the numbers indicating people who had joined radical organizations reached out over 2,400 by 2015[45]. In this respect,

[43] http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50401

[44] Putin's anti-American sentiments regarding the rising extremism in Syria appeared in his speeches to both international and domestic audience and usually centered on the theme of sovereignty and statehood. In his speeches, Putin emphasized that the U.S.' irresponsible policies it pursued in the region have created a power vacuum that enabled radical terrorist organizations to flourish, particularly with the absence of strong statehood.

[45] https://www.cnbc.com/2015/12/09/russian-fighters-are-joining-isis-in-record-numbers.html

Russia as a country where Muslims constitutes 10 percent of her total population felt threatened by the spread of extremism in the Middle East and neighboring countries. This dynamic becomes even more pronounced when her experience in Chechnya is taken into account together with the fact that many of foreign fighters who went to Syria were of Caucasus and Chechnya origin[46]. That is, the growing presence of radical terrorist organizations has reinforced Russia's threat perceptions. This is why Russia came to rescue Bashar's regime and prevented Syria from coming under the rule of ISIS. It was perceived as an imminent threat to Russian security that had to be eliminated. Therefore, Putin's rhetoric on international terrorism and prevention of its potential spread inside the country has occupied an important place in his discourses. This enabled him to justify the intervention in Syria while consolidating his legitimacy both in domestic and international politics.

Moreover, as Putin emphasized in the same meeting, even though many factors from domestic political and ethno-religious to interstate factors have played a significant role in shaping the Syrian conflict, the current situation in Syria, with regard to its becoming a home for extremists has largely stemmed from the U.S.' interventionist policies it has pursued in the past decade in the region (Borshchevskaya, 2022, p. 90). To this end, Putin frequently drew attention to how the Western-led interventions that sought to regime change as in the case of Libya created conditions for terrorist organizations to increase their influence across the region and cause long-term instabilities. For instance, Putin, on the margin of 70th session of the UN General Assembly on September 28, 2015, delivered a speech addressing that Western intervention brought about more violence, poverty, and social disasters instead of democracy and progress. He puts out that:

[46] There are several Muslim communities populated in various regions of Russia. Among these groups, the Chechens who were exposed to repression and forced migration by Russia in the 1940s engaged in two major wars with Russia in pursuit of secession in the 1990s. Their further exposure to war and violence for years as well as infiltration of Islamic extremists into their independence movement, notably after the second Chechen war transformed their cause. As stated by Abdullaev (2016)," Chechen independence has been transformed into an Islamist jihad", as some groups have pledged obedience to ISIS and become part of global jihad. In this regard, considering the return of more than 2000 jihadists who were origins of Caucasus and Chechnya to their home or their future reign in Syria would cause potential uprisings in these regions, or inspire other Muslim communities in Russia. This, irrespective of which happens, would eventually challenge Russia's internal security and broader interests in her neighborhood.

> Power vacuum in some countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa obviously resulted in the emergence of areas of anarchy, which were quickly filled with extremists and terrorists. The so-called Islamic State has tens of thousands of militants fighting for it, including former Iraqi soldiers who were left on the street after the 2003 invasion. Many recruits come from Libya whose statehood was destroyed as a result of a gross violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1973. And now radical groups are joined by members of the so-called "moderate" Syrian opposition backed by the West. They get weapons and training, and then they defect and join the so-called Islamic State (Russian Federation, 2015).

In this sense, Putin attached great importance to preservation of state authority in Syria to prevent it from becoming a second Libya. By referring to what had happened in Iraq and Libya, he underlined the necessity of providing comprehensive assistance to Bashar's regime, the legitimate government in Syria, so as to prevent similar problems from arising. In addition to this, Russia's threat perceptions had another aspect, particularly with regard to Western efforts to support for opposition to overthrown regimes. According to Charap, Treyger and Geist (2019), Russian officials interpreted Arab uprisings and its unfolding ramifications in Syria as another instance similar to 'color revolutions' where the West attempted to topple legitimate governments without using military force, unlike previous cases as seen in Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan and Serbia. From Moscow's perspective, Western interventionism constituted a substantial challenge to her national security as "the Kremlin seems convinced that the West, particularly the United States, will use similar tactics to undermine—if not overthrow—the Russian government, its autocratic allies in its neighborhood, or both" (Charap, Treyger and Geist, 2019, p. 6).

Hence, Putin's remarks on terrorism issue with anti-Western stance as well as his further statements he made on legitimate bases of the intervention that promises full compliance with the international law and anticipates for limited engagement with substantial gains have aimed to generate widespread public support and political legitimacy for the intervention in Syria. This is why Putin explicitly made it clear that "Syria was not going to be another Afghanistan", where they encountered with a strong resistance that rendered her intervention indecisive and made her suffer from substantial economic and military losses as well as legitimacy crisis at home as the intervention stretched over nearly a decade and failed to yield the intended results (Borshchevskaya, 2022, p. 90).

3.5. Conclusion

Neoclassical realism offers a comprehensive understanding in analyzing Russia's decision to intervene in Syria on September 30, 2015, as it enables us to scrutinize different motives that played a decisive role at different levels in this intervention. As neoclassical realism suggests, systemic and sub-systemic factors alone cannot explain a state's foreign policy behavior although they primarily influence their foreign policy choices by providing opportunities and constraints. Domestic factors, especially leaders' perceptions, as in our case, also play a significant role in understanding why states behave the way they do in international politics and determine their foreign policy behavior. In this respect, Russia's act of intervention, as shown above, was systematically analyzed through systemic, sub-systemic and domestic factors.

To briefly summarize key points in our case, Russia's act of intervention was driven by the systemic changes observed in the international system at systemic level. The unipolar nature of the international system that emerged in the post-Cold War era has gradually given its place to multipolarity with the rise of new alternative centers of power. And this major shift that took place in the international system challenged and eroded the U.S. hegemony across various regions in the world. This situation inevitably created a permissive international environment where Russia projected her power abroad, especially considering that, since early 2000s, Russia has long pursued policies that aimed at reinforcing a multipolar international order where she could counter the Western influence while reasserting herself as a great power. Therefore, Russia's decision to intervene in Syria stemmed from the opportunities that presented then in the international system and as claimed above.

In addition to this, geopolitical opportunities as well as regional power balances have played a decisive role at sub-systemic level. The turmoil that led by the Arab uprisings reshaped the dynamics of regional politics and divided the region into different political camps, namely Saudi and Iranian-led camps. And this well-resonated in Syria. In this sense, Syria has turned into a proxy arena where both regional and extra-regional countries situated in different camps tried to maximize their interests either by supporting the regime or the opposition in the Syrian conflict. This dynamic that has prevailed in regional politics culminated in balanced interventions by rival powers supporting different camps and this persisted until Russia's decisive intervention on

September 30, 2015, when Bashar's regime was about to lose almost all his territories to the opposition groups and ISIS. In this regard, Russia's military intervention reversed the situation on the ground and tipped of balances in favor of the Bashar's regime. It appears that this decision was not only shaped by regional power balances but also geopolitical opportunities as well, especially considering that Syria is home to Russia's strategic military bases, referring to the naval facility at Tartus and the Khmeimim air base, that occupy an important place in Russia's military strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Lastly, the role of agency, referring to Putin's perceptions has played a critical role in Moscow's decision to intervene in Syria by filtering systemic opportunities through regime interests and internal political dynamics. As outlined above, Russia's domestic political atmosphere in 2011 and 2012 that coupled with economic downturn compelled Putin to follow a more assertive policies in foreign policymaking for the purpose of consolidating his rule. That is, internal political dynamics forced Putin to rely more on input sources and instrumentalize foreign policy as a tool for domestic legitimacy. In this regard, Putin has focused on self-preservation and international terrorism issue with anti-Western narratives in his rhetoric and aimed to generate both domestic and international support for the intervention in Syria. Thus, Putin's perceptions, as shown above, and domestic factors significantly affected Moscow decision to project power abroad and intervene in Syria.

CHAPTER 4

RUSSIA'S ACT OF NON-INTERVENTION IN SYRIA IN 2024

This chapter will analyze Russia's act of non-intervention in the face of the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8, 2024, and while doing so, it will systematically examine domestic, regional and international factors in detail through the lens of neoclassical realism.

The chapter consists of five sections. The first section portrays how fragile was the situation in Syria before the December 8 and underlines that most significantly it was Russia's act of non-intervention brought to end to the Bashar's regime.

The second section analyzes how systemic dynamics affected Russia's policies in Syria, and while doing so, it focuses on Russia's relative position and material capabilities and claims that Russia's relative position has weakened due to the heavy economic sanctions, military losses and geopolitical costs of the war in Ukraine. As put out in detail, even though Russia is still able to sustain her war efforts in the long term, she had to shift her priorities and broader policies in Syria due to the systemic constraints.

The third section discusses regional sub-systemic dynamics in understanding Russia's act of non-intervention. It assumes that the recent developments, referring to the Hamas-Israeli war created a power oscillation for pivotal and extra-regional states in the region. In such a restrictive environment, it asserts that Russia has become more concerned with aligning with pivotal states and refrained from engaging with any risky situation in an environment where clarity of emerging threats is so blurred. Therefore, this chapter maps out Russia's alignment strategy with Türkiye and Iran, pivotal states having military foothold in Syria, in the face of regional uncertainties, and indicates that Russia has increased her efforts to cooperate with those pivotal states to secure her influence in Syria.

The fourth section focuses on domestic factors including leadership and politics in Russia and benefits from Lo's formulation in understanding Russia's policy landscape. This section engages with Russia's perceptions and suggests that these perceptions have changed towards Bashar's regime over time, especially with the failure of constitutional talks, Bashar's playing off Tehran against Moscow and fulfillment of Russia's objectives, while also implying that Russia chose not to intervene on December 8 since Moscow was convinced that an alternative to Bashar's regime existed. At this point, it must be underlined that this section will only focus on leader's perception as an intervening variable in analyzing domestic factors in order to keep this study within the scope of a master thesis.

The last section provides a brief summary of how restrictive strategic environment at systemic and sub-systemic level as well as leader's perceptions as intervening variable all together shaped Russia's decision to not to intervene in Syria in our case.

4.1. A Brief Historical Background

The modern history of Syria has been profoundly shaped by the Assad family and their political order under the Baath rule. Following his father's decline in health, Bashar al-Assad returned to Syria in 1994, sought to familiarize with the dynamics of Syrian politics and prove himself for the future leadership. After his father's death, Bashar took over the presidency in 2000[47] and ruled the country through harsh authoritarian measures until his overthrow by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on 8th of December 2024. Syria, under Bashar's rule, plunged into a very devastating civil war when mass protests that was ignited by the Arab uprisings spread to Syria in 2011 and Bashar chose to violently suppress them[48]. Due to brutal crackdown on protests, Bashar's

[47] Even though many Syrians initially called Bashar's early years as 'Damascus Spring' and hoped that Bashar would be more prone to change and political reform due to his educational background and familiarity with Western values and political culture, it later turned out that Bashar has become even a greater dictator than his father, Hafiz al-Assad (Shoup, 2018). That is, Bashar al-Assad initially sought to maintain the power structure that was inherited from his father in both domestic and regional politics and consolidate his authoritarian rule. In the following period, Bashar's authoritarian rule, particularly with the erupt of Syrian civil war, moved onto a whole new trajectory, namely dictatorial rule.

[48] As it is well-documented in reports that were prepared by Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the United Nations, Bashar al-Assad regime has extensively used prohibited chemical weapons and barrel bombs on his own people, especially in Ghouta, Khan Al Asal, Jobar, Saraqueb and Ashrafiah Sahnaya , and systematically tortured and disappeared Syrians who opposed his dictatorial rule. For instance, the UN IIIM Detention Report (2024) reveals that the Bashar al-Assad regime built more than 100 Government Detention facilities in Syria for the purpose of

regime became increasingly marginalized in both regional and international politics, faced extensive sanctions and suffered from decline in state capacity from 2011 onwards.[49] The regime's fragility, due to external pressures, further exacerbated by the effects of global pandemic of COVID-19[50], trade restrictions imposed by Gulf countries[51], and devastative earthquakes of February 2023[52]. Despite the regime's

repressing Syrian people. The report suggests that the Assad regime committed war crimes and crimes against humanity since 2011 in those detention centers and subjected detainees to inhumane conditions, sexual violence and systematic torture. For more details see these: https://iiim.un.org/the-syrian-government-detention-system-as-a-tool-of-violent-repression/ and https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2013_735.pdf

[49] For instance, the U.S. issued an Executive Order 13582 in August 2011 and imposed sanctions on Syria, and this prevented any commercial activity that might have taken place in Syria by U.S. citizens, including new investments, export of goods and products and import of petroleum or petroleum products. Similarly, Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 that was issued by the US Senate anticipated for additional sanctions and financial restrictions on institutions and individuals who cooperated and involved in direct or indirect economic engagements with the Syrian government. In the same vein, European Union has also imposed various sanctions on Syria and prohibited export of certain goods and services in order to undermine Bashar's regime. These sanctions included ban on financial transactions, investments, export of arms, jet fuel, oil, tracking and surveillance software and equipment as well as travel restrictions. Even though EU sanctions were more targeted and narrower in scope than US sanctions, they were undoubtedly sufficient enough to inflict significant harm on the Syrian economy. For more details, please see these: https://www.state.gov/syria sanctions#:~:text=In%20August%202011%2C%20in%20response,investments%20in%20Syria%20by%20U.S. ; https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/31 ; https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/us-and-european-sanctions-on-syria-091620.pdf

[50] According to the World Food Programme (2020), the food security situation in Syria had already been severe due to the financial crisis of 2019 in Lebanon and it deteriorated even more with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 since food prices dramatically increased and depreciation of Syrian pound coupled with inflation in the country. Hence, COVID-19 worsened already dire economic situation and melted purchasing power of Syrian people. WFP (2020, p.7) indicates that "As of April 2020, some 9.3 million people, 46 percent of the total population of the country, were estimated to be food insecure, an increase of 1.4 million since September 2019". For further details: https://syria.un.org/en/137874-syria-socio-economic-impacts-covid-19-pandemic-october-2020

[51] Gulf countries have also imposed trade restrictions on Syria in order to prevent Captagon smuggling across their borders. Lister (2022) states that Syria has turned into a narco-state and become a major center for Captagon production, "a very popular street drug in the Gulf region". As Lister (2022) puts, authorities seized Syrian-origin Captagon worth to at least 3.5. billion dollars in 2020 whereas this number almost doubled and rose to nearly 6 billion dollars in 2021. As those numbers suggest, the revenue generated from Captagon is at least four times higher than Syria's legal total exports. Since the end destination for Captagon was the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia put trade restrictions on the import of Syrian goods (The New Arab, 2023). Similarly, Iraq also did not reopen al-Qaim border crossing with Syria due to the same concerns about illicit drug trafficking and banned Syrian trucks enter the country through al-Qaim border (Haid, 2023). Therefore, the Syrian economy struggling to sustain itself through illicit drug trafficking after being imposed to devastative sanctions has faced further trade restrictions and become more vulnerable and fragile.

[52] According to World Bank (2023), the earthquake severely damaged infrastructure in Syria and it resulted in heavy death toll and displacement of people along with the aggravation of economic fragility and trade disruptions. For instance, it deepened currency depreciation by 23 percent against US dollar, exacerbated price inflation and interrupted oil production. For further details see this: https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/45cbbf41-e0dc-4009-83ae-3c01162d7385

vulnerabilities, Bashar's success in staying in power, one way or another, compelled regional countries to normalize relations with his regime so that they could address their shared concerns triggered by the Syrian civil war, such as border security, refugee and drug smuggling crises (Armstrong, 2023). In this sense, Bashar's Syria, after more than a decade of suspension, reinstated the Arab League with the decision taken on a meeting of Arab foreign ministers on May 7, 2023, in Cairo[53]. As Altunışık (2023) argues that this decision to be taken has long been expected, given that several Arab countries have already shown their intentions to restore diplomatic ties with the regime. For instance, the UAE restored its diplomatic ties and reopened its embassy in Damascus in 2018 and further effectively instrumentalized both pandemic and the earthquake diplomacy to advance relations with regime (Altunışık, 2023). Similarly, many Arab countries, with the exception of Qatar, have approached Bashar's regime to resume diplomatic ties prior to Syria's readmission into the League. In this sense, Bashar's rapprochement with the Arab world, although largely remained symbolic and failed to meet expectations on addressing aforementioned shared concerns, as well as diplomatic efforts by Türkiye have reinforced his legitimacy in the regional realm, especially given that his appearances in regional summits as well as reopening of embassies and resume of diplomatic ties contributed to his recognition while ending Syria's long-standing political isolation in the region. In this context, Bashar's fall came at a great surprise amidst the recent normalization efforts in the regional realm.

Although Bashar's regime fundamentally weakened by the protracted civil war that eroded the country's physical as well as social and economic foundations while affecting more than half the population through death or forced displacement, Russia's act of non-intervention in the face of a large-scale military operation led by HTS and Syrian National Army (SNA) on 27th of November and following their entry into Damascus on 8th of December 2024 marked the end of 61 year-long Baath regime in Syria. In this regard, the chapter will primarily address complex interplay of

[53] According to Armstrong (2023), even though Arab countries have taken steps to rehabilitate diplomatic relations with Bashar's regime, the UK and US have stayed firm in their positions and strongly criticized their normalization efforts with the regime while stressing that sanctions would remain in place. For more details, please see these: https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/arab-league-reinstates-syria-after-12-years/2891361 and https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-65519288

international dynamics, regional developments and domestic factors that determined Russia's foreign policy behavior in Syria, with respect to her act of non-intervention. Hence, the chapter will provide coherent answer to the main and sub-questions of this study: what kind of domestic and international factors influenced Russia's decision on non-intervention? How does neoclassical realism explain the strategic shift that occurred in Russian foreign policymaking? And how regional dynamics in the Middle East also played a part in changing Russian foreign policy behavior? How did Russian Ukrainian war in 2022 shaped Russia's priorities in Syria?

4.2. Systemic Factors

> Over the long term, international political outcomes generally mirror the actual distribution of power among states. In the shorter term, however, the policies states pursue are rarely objectively efficient or predictable based upon a purely systemic analysis (Taliaferro, Lobell, Ripsman, 2009, p.4).

Neoclassical realists argue that states' relative position within international system along with material capabilities are among the most significant factors determining their foreign policy choices. Yet, they also contend that systemic pressures must be translated through unit level variables since there is no perfect transmission belt explaining foreign policy behavior of states only with their relative material capabilities (Rose, 1998). And this is well pronounced in Russia's three-and-a-half-year long war in Ukraine that affected her policies in Syria. This is because Putin views this war as an extension of century-long struggle against the West which is largely driven by identity-based enmity rather than national interests[54] (Bergmann and Snegovaya, 2025). Despite the systemic pressures generated by Russian-Ukrainian war, Russia has not, yet, withdrawn from Ukraine over the long term. Instead, Russia has changed her policies in Syria in the short term. In this sense, this section will explore how Russia's prolonging war in Ukraine with its economic, military and geopolitical costs has affected its short-term policies in Syria. While doing so, this section highlights that Russia's ability and quest for sustaining her war efforts in

[54] In this regard, Russia's main aim is to prevent Ukraine from joining the Western institutions, including the EU and NATO at any costs. While doing so, Putin intentionally prolongs the duration of the war by keeping it at a lower level and seeks to outpower Ukraine in the long run (Bergmann and Snegovaya, 2025).

Ukraine, although heavily affected by systemic pressures as shown below, has reshaped her commitments in Syria due to domestic political factors.

In the aftermath of Russia's war in Ukraine, European powers including the EU and NATO have strongly opposed Russian aggression and sided with Ukraine. To this end, they have imposed a series of economic sanctions on Russia and revised their threat perceptions. For example, the EU's Strategic Compass that was released just a few weeks after the start of the Russia's war in Ukraine in March 2022 strongly condemned 'Russian invasion of Ukraine' and affirmed that the EU member states are fully committed to support Ukraine in the face of Russia's aggressive actions. In the document, Russian invasion of Ukraine and the return of the war back in Europe is considered as 'the most serious security crisis in Europe in decades', while further being stressed that the instruments of power extend beyond military assets and encompass financial sanctions, trade restrictions and various forms of external interference (European External Action Service, 2022, p. 5). In this sense, the EU has responded Russian aggression with the harshest package of sanctions that have ever been imposed and inflicted high political and economic costs on Russia and Russian political elites. These included 'sanctions on individuals', 'companies and organizations', 'financial and business service measures', 'energy sector', 'transport and infrastructure sectors', dual-use goods and advance technology items, 'trade restrictive measures: import and export bans' and 'visa measures'[55]. That is, the EU has not only targeted Russian government and oligarchs but also key sectors driving the Russian economy and contributing to Russia's war efforts. As provided by Council of the European Union, the EU has, so far, imposed a total of nineteen packages of sanctions against Russia as of November 2025[56] and within this framework, more than 2,700 individuals and entities including political parties, media organizations, companies in energy, defense and IT sectors were sanctioned[57]. In this regard, all accounts belonging to sanctioned individuals and entities in EU banks were frozen by

[55] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/fs_22_1402

[56] For further details about the timeline showing the EU sanctions against Russia, please see this: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/timeline-sanctions-against-russia/

[57]This number was sixteen as of December 16, 2024. For further details, please see this: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/

Freeze and Seize Task Force. According to Council of the European Union (2025), the EU has immobilized around €210 billion worth of Russian Central Bank assets[58] and excluded Russia from financial and capital markets with the bans on transactions, investments in projects co-financed by the Russian Direct Investment Fund, SWIFT system, and provisions of crypto assets[59].

Moreover, the EU restrictions on energy sector, particularly prohibition of import of crude oil and petroleum products from Russia have dramatically affected Russian economy in a bad way and appears likely to continue do so, considering that the EU has reduced its oil imports from Russia by more than 90 percent and planning to completely end its reliance on Russian gas and oil by 2027. In addition to this, G7+ Price Cap Coalition's decision[60] to lower the upper limit for crude oil and petroleum products have also led Russian economy to shrink and lower its earnings, given that Russian economy substantially relies on revenues from the export of oil and gas. Hence, all these restrictive measures aimed to hamper Russia's ability to sustain its illegal and unprovoked war against Ukraine by paralyzing Russian economy with maximum pressures. While doing so, we see that the EU has further adopted additional measures to prevent Russia from bypassing these restrictions through complex financial schemes and misleading declarations regarding origin of the products traded. In this regard, the EU has implemented further restrictions on crypto providers and vessels that were suspected of being part of Putin's shadow fleet having access to the EU ports and strengthened bilateral relations with third parties to prevent those sanctioned individuals and entities from bypassing the EU restrictions.

[58] It equals to 70 percent of the Russian banking system's assets. In addition to this, EU has also frozen over 28 billion of private assets in the EU (Council of the European Union, 2025).

[59] It is also remarkable to note that the EU generated revenues from those frozen assets to support their war efforts against Russia after establishing the necessary legal framework in May 2024. For instance, the EU respectively received two payments with worth of 1.5 billion and 2.1 billion euro in July 2024 and April 2025. Of 1.5-billion-euro, 90 percent of the revenue was transferred to the European Peace Facility, while the remaining 10 percent went to Ukraine Facility. Additionally, the EU decided to convey 95 percent of those revenues generated from frozen assets to convey to the EU budget and channel through the Ukraine Loan Cooperation Mechanism with the rules adopted on October 25, 2024 (Council of the European Union, 2025). For further details, please see this: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/

[60] According to Council of the European Union (2025, p.2), Russian seaborne crude oil, 'premium-to crude' petroleum products, and 'discount-to-crude' petroleum products respectively fixed at a maximum price of USD 60, USD 100, and USD 45 per barrel.

In addition to the EU, the UK and the US along with other allies and partners also have imposed extensive economic sanctions against Russia since February 2022. According to Mills (2025), the UK, EU and US have immobilized at least estimated value of $450 billion worth of Russian assets in total since February 2022. As reported by the Office for Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI) in October 2025, the UK has frozen £28.7 billion worth of Russian assets as of May 2025, while putting sanctions on 1,816 individuals, 561 entities and nearly 500 vessels under the Russia sanctions regime (Mills, 2025). Moreover, it is remarkable to note that the UK has started to target third parties who covertly support Russia's war efforts as of February 2025, including financial institutions, referring to Kyrgyzstan-based OJSC Keremet Bank and producers and suppliers of machine tools and advance technologies based in Central Asian states, Türkiye, Thailand, India and China.[61]. Therefore, the EU and UK sanctions on above-mentioned strategic sectors went hand in hand and their scope expanded over time. As similar to the UK and EU sanctions, the U.S.'s sanctions on Russia included financial sector, energy, military technology and miscellaneous sectors (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025) According to CFR, the U.S., starting from 2022, put restrictions on almost 80 percent of Russian banking assets, including ban of Russian banks from SWIFT system, froze of 5 billion dollars worth of Russian central bank's U.S. assets as well as seizure of assets belonged to sanctioned Russian individuals, including Vladimir Putin. Moreover, the U.S. sanctions also covered energy, military, and miscellaneous sectors, particularly included ban on export of diamonds. As put by CFR, the U.S. put restrictions on import of Russian crude oil and implemented G-7 Price Coalition Cap so as to reduce Russia's oil revenues as well as banned export of high-tech products and of diamonds to prevent Russia to enhance her military capabilities and evade from sanctions[62]. In this sense, the West's harsh

[61] https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10342/

[62] However, it must be noted the US has not introduced new sanctions on Russia under the Trump administration and even refused to support G7+ Price Coalition Cap's decision to lower the oil price cap until October 2025 when Trump felt that the peace process with Russia does not go anywhere and announced new sanctions on Russian oil companies, namely Rosneft and Lukoil. Moreover, the Trump administration has stated to subject additional tariffs to third parties who continue to import oil and gas from Russia, including Brazil, India, and China. In addition to Brazil, China and India, Trump also forced Turkey to halt Russian energy purchases for F-35 deal. Also, it is remarkable to note that Turkey has signed to 20-year deal with Mercuria to buy US LNG as an alternative to Russian gas, following President Erdogan's meeting with Trump. For more details, please see these: https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/turkeys-botas-mercuria-sign-20-year-lng-supply-deal-2025-09-24/ ; https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8jm3lr7vkyo ;

economic sanctions regime that has been and is still extensively at play since February 2022 has been continuously intensifying over years and exerting profound systemic pressures on Russia.

Apart from economic consequences, Russia's military losses have also significantly impacted her foreign policy behavior in Syria. According to Mediazona (2025), Russia has lost at least 149,241 military personnel, confirmed by their name from February 2022 to November 20, 2025 whereas this figure goes much higher when including wounded personnel in it[63]. As Minfin (2025) reported, based on data shared by Armed Forces of Ukraine, that the number of Russian military personnel who have been killed and wounded as of November 30, 2025 are approximately 1, 172. 860.[64] Even though all sources have their own methods to compile and verify these casualties and they all offer estimated data, we see that those figures that are more or less same in different sources exceed one million casualties in total as of 2025.[65] In addition to military personnel losses, Russia's loss of military equipment including vehicles, artillery systems and aircraft among others have increasingly grown in number. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (2025), Russia has approximately lost 14,000 MBTs, IFVs and APCs from February 2022 to December 2024[66]. Similarly, Oryx[67] reports that the number of military equipment[68] that has been destroyed,

https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/general/trump-to-impose-tariffs-on-china-india-brazil-over-russian-oil-purchase-us-senator/50585

[63] https://en.zona.media/article/2025/11/21/casualties_eng-trl

[64] https://index.minfin.com.ua/en/russian-invading/casualties/

[65] For other sources, please see these: https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2025/jun/22/one-million-and-counting-russian-casualties-hit-milestone-in-ukraine-war ; https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-battlefield-woes-ukraine ; https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/11/29/verified-russian-deaths-in-ukraine-war-surpass-150k-independent-tally-a91279

[66] For further details, please see this: https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2025/02/combat-losses-and-manpower-challenges-underscore-the-importance-of-mass-in-ukraine/

[67] Oryx shares and updates its data based on evidence verified either through video or photograph.

[68] It includes in tanks, armored and infantry fighting vehicles, armored personnel carrier, mraps, infantry mobility vehicles, command posts and communication stations, engineering vehicles and equipment, unmanned ground vehicles, self-propelled anti-tank missile systems, artillery support vehicles and equipment, towed artillery, self-propelled artillery, multiple rocket launchers, anti-aircraft guns, self-propeller anti-aircraft guns, surface-to-air missile systems, radars, jammers and deception systems, aircraft, helicopters, ucavs, recon uavs, naval ships and submarines, trucks, vehicles and jeeps. For more details, please see this: https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-equipment.html

damaged, captured or abandoned is 23,551 in total, as of November 2025. Even if these figures are far greater in data provided by the Armed Forces of Ukraine[69], many analysts confirm that it is highly likely that they are exaggerated for disinformation and propaganda purposes. Nevertheless, Russia's heavy losses of both military personnel and equipment when combined with above-mentioned military-industrial sanctions have put significant strain on her military capabilities since 2022 and forced her to change her military strategy in the battlefield, mobilizing small units and unmanned vehicles in the frontline. Even though Russia has managed to sustain her war efforts in Ukraine with the implementation of military, economic and political measures and to a great extent, achieved to do so, one needs to note that Russia's military equipment as well as human losses was unprecedented for the post-Cold War era and dramatically affected her relative position in the international politics while being shifted her policies in Syria.

Lastly, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has generated not only significant economic and military costs but also geopolitical ones as well. These geopolitical costs have stemmed from the consequences that emerged with the European powers' desire to improve their institutional capacity and coordination along with changes in their threat perceptions and strategic priorities. As pointed out earlier, European powers have demonstrated collective effort to stand against Russian aggression and mobilized their institutional mechanisms, including the EU's economic sanctions regime to support Ukraine. That is, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has forced European powers to question and review their defense and security policies with the return of full-scale war back in Europe since the Second World War. In this respect, the EU has significantly increased its spending on defense and strengthened collaboration through several initiatives including Security Action for Europe or SAFE and European Peace Facility.[70] For instance, European Defence Agency (2025) shows that the EU spent a total of €343 billion on defense in 2024 and this amounted to 19 percent rise when

[69] Armed Forces of Ukraine reports that estimated enemy personnel losses have been 1.176.230 as of December 3, 2025 whereas these numbers were around 809.760 in early January, 2025. Please see these for further details: https://www.zsu.gov.ua/en ; https://mod.gov.ua/en/news/the-estimated-combat-losses-of-russians-over-the-last-day-1-510-persons-183-ua-vs-and-37-artillery-systems

[70] For more details, please see this: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/defence-numbers/

compared to last year's spending.[71] Therefore, the EU's internal consolidation combined with coordinated defense policies and reduced energy dependence has dramatically undermined Russia's geopolitical leverage and influence over Europe.

Similarly, NATO has also significantly increased its defense capabilities and reinforced unity and solidarity within the Alliance in the face of Russian threat against the international peace and security and the wider transatlantic community. In this sense, Russia was defined as the most significant and direct threat to transatlantic peace and security in NATO's Strategic Concept of 2022. It is underlined in the same document that Ukraine's sovereign rights and territorial integrity are vital for the European security while highlighting that Russian threats and hostile actions have created deep instabilities in the Euro-Atlantic area (NATO, 2022). In this regard, it is no coincide that Alliance members stood against Russian aggression and provided extensive security assistance varying from delivery of military equipment and training to logistical support to Ukraine. Additionally, Russia's war of aggression has not only prompted NATO to enhance its defense and deterrence capabilities but also paved the way for Finland and Sweden's accession to the Alliance. Therefore, NATO's enlargement with the joining of Finland and Sweden has increased its influence throughout Arctic and Baltic areas, considering that Finland's long border with Russia together with Sweden's naval presence in the Baltic Sea extended NATO's frontier and increased its ability to counter Russian aggression in the region.

To wrap up, systemic constraints, including far-reaching economic sanctions and military support given to Ukraine by the US, UK, EU and NATO have immensely affected Russia's material capabilities and weakened her relative position in the international system. This clearly articulated itself in Russia's broader policies in the Middle East. In particular, Russia's prolonging war in Ukraine and Putin's desire and ambitions for the continuation of the war, in spite of its heavy military, economic, and geopolitical costs, have affected her short-term threat management in Syria. As put out

[71]According to RAND Corporation (2025), SIPRI data indicates that European powers' spending on defense and security in the continent have increased by 16 percent from 2022 and 2023 and reached out to the highest levels of spending since the end of the Cold War. For more details about 2024 defense spending, please see this: https://eda.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/2025/09/02/eu-defence-spending-hits-343-bln-in-2024-eda-data-shows

above, Russia has been continuously exposed to very harsh economic measures covering almost all sectors driving its economy since February 2022. Consequently, Russia's ability to provide financial assistance for Bashar al-Assad's regime and regime-aligned actors as well as resource extraction for Russian military has substantially diminished. According to Giustozzi (2025), Russia cut off their financial commitments for Syria by $1.7 billion in 2024. Similarly, Russia's military presence that was made up largely of air force units, special forces and military police in Syria has significantly decreased due to the protraction of the war in Ukraine and her changing political priorities (Adar et al., 2025). As Adar et al. (2025) indicate in their article, Russia has directed her focus on the war in Ukraine and redeployed her ground units that had been small from the outset in Syria to Ukraine[72], while relying mostly on pro-Iranian militias and the Syrian military as of mid-2024. In addition to Adar et al, Karazi (2024) also shows that Russia's military sites in Syria decreased from 132 to 105 by 2023 with the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war and then rose to 114 in early 2024[73] when Russian units moved into locations in Quneitra that Iranian militias had previously abandoned due to the Gaza crisis and confrontation with Israel[74]. Therefore, Russia's downsizing of financial commitments as well as of military sites and personnel due to the systemic constraints has accompanied by Iran and its proxies' inability to fill the economic and military gap left by Russians in the face of the regional developments and eventually culminated in the collapse of the al-Assad regime. In this sense, systemic pressures that unveiled after the war in Ukraine have not only led Russia to lose her geopolitical leverage and influence on Europe, particularly with increasing defense and security cooperation among the EU and NATO member states but also undermined her geopolitical position and policies in Syria. Even though all these sanctions have not stopped Russian aggression in Ukraine

[72] As Adar and et al. (2025) puts out that the number of Russian military personnel deployed in Syria were estimated to be around 7,500 in 2024.

[73]For more details, please see these: https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/10/how-russias-involvement-in-syria-shifted-on-political-and-military-levels/ and https://jusoor.co/en/details/map-of-foreign-forces-in-syria-mid-2024

[74] According to Giustozzi (2025, p. 28), the IRGC had only 1,500 men in Syria one year before regime's collapse and number of foreign militias has drastically declined as compared to its peak year in 2018. Figures suggest that there was a total of 13,000 men, "of 7.000 men in the ranks of Hezbollah, of 3,000 men in the Afghan Fatimiyun, 1,000 in the Pakistani Zainabyun and some 2,000 Iraqis and Yemenis of various groups" as of July 2024 whereas this number was 37,400 in April 2018.

over a long period[75], it has reshaped her short-term actions in Syria. Hence, all these economic, military and geopolitical constraints have weakened Russia's relative position and material capabilities and inevitably affected her foreign policy behavior in Syria.

4.3. Sub-systemic Factors

> The relative distribution of power and the clarity of emerging threats at both the systemic and the regional levels provide incentives for extra-regional hegemons and pivotal states within particular regions to coordinate their respective foreign and security policies (Taliaferro, 2012, p. 76).

As put by Taliaferro, states' foreign policy choices may depend on multiple independent variables, including their relative position, clarity of emerging threats and opportunities as well as the nature of strategic environment at systemic and sub-systemic level. These variables are external factors that influence state behavior either by constraining or advancing their foreign and security policies. For instance, states are inclined to adopt more assertive policies in their foreign policymaking and exert their influence across the regional and global systems when they increase their material capabilities. In the same vein, they are less inclined to follow ambitious policies and exercise power when they are relatively in a weak position.

In addition to relative material capabilities, multipolar nature of the international and regional sub-system also imposes certain sets of threats and opportunities on states and thus affect their foreign policy behavior. In the regional sub-system, threats and opportunities mostly stem from intra and interstate competition as well as the involvement of extra-regional actors in internal affairs of states. In particular, one may observe that regional powers are primarily faced with systemic threats posed by the great powers and their influence on regional dynamics. This has been well-pronounced

[75] According to Bergmann and Snegovaya (2025), Russia is able to afford economic, military, social and demographic costs of its current war for more than two or three years. As they put out, even though Russia has faced with economic and military strains including high inflation and slow economic growth, she can sustain the war in Ukraine with the help of public resilience, regime stability, mobilization of people and economy for war efforts, steady energy revenues as well as with the constant support of China, Iran and North Korea. Yet, it should be noted that her relative position in the global economy as well as energy dominance and military strength has eroded with the war in Ukraine. For more details, please these: https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russias-oil-fuel-export-revenues-touch-lowest-level-since-ukraine-invasion-iea-2025-12-11/ ; https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/impact-sanctions-russian-economy/

in Middle East politics when it is taken into account the fact that the modern history of the Middle East has been, to a great extent, shaped by external powers.[76] In this context, Russia holds the view, for instance, that the U.S.' policies have recently played a decisive role in shaping the regional dynamics in the Middle East. In an interview with TASS news agency on December 30[77], 2024, Sergey Lavrov expressed that the tragic turn of events that dramatically destabilized the Middle East and North Africa has been, to a great extent, driven by the United States' irresponsible policies in Iraq, Libya, and Syria. He even further emphasizes that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict persists to be a constant source of tension in the region due to the U.S.' failed mediation efforts as the sole intermediary. Therefore, Russia perceives that the U.S.' "reckless actions", including interference in the internal affairs of Arab countries as well as its unwavering support for Israel have plunged the region into instability, shifted the regional balances and brought us to the violence and human tragedies that recently unfolded in the Middle East since October 2023.

In this respect, even though regions have their own dynamics and they are mostly shaped by intra- and inter-state competition, they are not independent from the great power politics which, in fact, overwhelmingly influence regional balances. Therefore, it is evident that states' material capabilities together with the clarity of emerging threats and opportunities determined by multipolarity and the nature of the strategic environment largely affect states' foreign policy behaviors.

Even though all these external factors play a significant role in shaping state behaviors at systemic and sub-systemic level, it is important to bear in mind the fact that state leaders cannot accurately analyze systemic or sub-systemic constraints all the time. It is within the possibilities that they may sometimes misread regional and international developments, or that they particularly choose to follow different foreign policy options that may not well align with the nature of strategic environment due to domestic constraints. As put by Lobell (2012, pp. 43-44), "Leaders can act

[76] Even though extra-regional powers have played a significant role in shaping the modern history of the Middle East, it should be noted that this perspective on its own remains insufficient to adequately explain the region's historical transformation as it overwhelmingly overlooks the role that regional powers as well as non-state actors have played in shaping it.

[77] https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/themes/id/1989723/

internationally for domestic reasons or domestically for international purposes.[78]". This is because state is not a unitary actor responding external threats based solely on material capabilities[79]. But rather it comprises of multiple domestic actors[80] whose threat perceptions may vary one from another based on their positions and interests. For instance, some states put regime survival over national interests whereas others do the opposite under the same circumstances. Therefore, it is imperative that states may behave differently when they are subjected to similar external conditions.

As briefly outlined above, multiple independent variables, referring to external factors along with intervening ones have undeniable impact over states' foreign policy choices. In the following sub-section, the nature of the strategic environment will be examined more in detail to understand Russia's foreign policy behavior in the face of the recent developments at regional sub-systemic level.

4.3.1. The Nature of Strategic Environment, Constraints and Power Oscillation

All major powers or, in more broad terms, all actors operating either within an international system or a regional subsystem have been, one way or another, subjected to certain systemic limitations throughout history. Taliaferro (2012, p. 84) explains those systemic limitations with the concept of strong and weak conditional constraints and asserts that conditionality of constraints depends on 'relative power, anticipated power trends, geopolitics, and leaders' subjective time horizons for identifying and redressing external threats'. In this regard, he defines the nature of strategic environments as permissive and restrictive. States relatively face less constraints in advancing their interests in permissive international environments whereas this is exact opposite in restrictive environments. In a restrictive environment, states have to deal with relatively strong constraints while protecting their interests. They have relatively limited time to identify and redress emerging threats. Therefore, they must

[78] Many scholars describe state leaders and foreign policy executives as Janus-faced and underline that they are prone to capitalize on the interplay between the domestic and the international when it fits into their own interests (Lobell, 2012).

[79] Rose states that "there is no immediate or perfect transmission belt linking material capabilities to foreign policy behavior" (as cited in Lobell, 2012, p. 44).

[80] These may include political parties and elites, societal interest groups, state bureaucracy, public opinion, and state-society relations as a whole.

act rapidly when confronted with them; otherwise, they would find themselves in a relatively weak position.

Additionally, states' ability to assess and predict long-term power dynamics as well as their ability to adopt certain strategies to eliminate or minimize risks is very difficult due to the polarity of the system, regardless of whether operating within an international or a regional sub-system. Hence, states' ability to navigate those constraints and craft strategic policies highly depends on their relative material capabilities, long or short-term interests as well as their geopolitical positioning. In this regard, Russia, who has been already weakened militarily by the war in Ukraine, has confronted with a power oscillation that created a restrictive strategic environment with the recent developments in the Middle East, referring to Hamas-Israeli war and its unfolding ramifications in the region. As put by Taliaferro (2012), 'power oscillation' or 'window of vulnerability' pushes great powers to become more concerned with power balances in a multipolar system[81]. In this sense, Russia has cemented her alignments with the pivotal states in the region, especially with Türkiye and Iran. For instance, Russia has sought to diplomatically reconcile the disputes between Türkiye and al-Assad regime through High Level International Meetings under the Astana Format and quadrilateral framework. Similarly, Russian-Iranian rivalry for influence in Syria has evolved into cooperation and subsequently paved the way for the Treaty on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Therefore, Russia has opted for reinforcing her alignments with pivotal states amidst sub-systemic constraints and avoided to perpetuate or involve in any engagements that may further create risks for herself. That is, Russia has aimed to secure and advance her interests by aligning with pivotal states in a restrictive strategic environment at sub-systemic level.

4.3.2. The Hamas-Israeli War

The Hamas-Israeli war has dramatically evolved since October 7, 2023 after Hamas launched a surprise multi-front attack[82] to Israel during the Jewish holiday of Simchat

[81] Taliaferro treats Copeland's power oscillation and Trachtenberg and Van Evera's window of vulnerability as synonymous (Taliaferro, 2012).

[82] The head of the Qassam Brigades, Mohammed Deif, announced the start of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and reported that more than 5,000 rockets fired from the Gaza Strip to southern Israel in the initial

Torah and killed approximately 1,200 people while taking hundreds of civilians as hostages. Israel has, in response, declared a full-fledged war against Hamas and initiated series of aerial attacks along with ground offensive on Gaza.

The Hamas-Israeli war outbroke at a time when the Arab-Israeli normalization process was in progress in the region. After decades of adhering to a policy of non-recognition, Arab countries, namely UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan changed their long-held stance against Israel in the wake of Abraham Accords of 2020 and began to cooperate and foster relations with Israel in various fields ranging from political and security to economic affairs, albeit in different intensity. Even Saudi-Israeli normalization was expected to become a reality if not disrupted by the Hamas-Israeli war, as acknowledged by many experts[83]. In this sense, Israel's disproportionate use of military force in response to Hamas' sudden attacks predominantly halted the recent normalization process in the Middle East and deeply affected the entire region. In other words, Hamas-Israeli war has brought war and conflict up on the agenda again in regional politics and significantly reshaped regional dynamics.

Almost all Arab and non-Arab countries across the region strongly condemned Israeli aggression that targeted innocent civilians and caused the death of thousands of people in Gaza.[84] In this sense, the massive humanitarian catastrophe led by Israel provoked widespread public outrages and resentment across the Arab world[85].

attacks. For further details, see this: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/7/what-happened-in-israel-a-breakdown-of-how-the-hamas-attack-unfolded

[83] Saudi-Israeli rapprochement and its disclosure have shocked many regional states, including experts and analysts closely watching the region, considering that Saudi Arabia has long stood with the Palestinian cause and positioned itself as a leader of the Arab states and the wider Muslim world. As reported by Al-Jazeera (2023), Saudi-Israeli rapprochement facilitated by the U.S. aimed to break Israel's isolation in the region and advance its interests. For further details, please see these: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/21/whats-happening-with-normalising-ties-between-saudi-arabia-and-israel, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/5/us-committed-to-saudi-israeli-normalisation-blinken-tells-aipac

[84] According to Al-Jazeera (2025), more than 67,000 Palestinians have been killed whereas at least 169,000 people have been severely injured as of October 7, 2025. For more details, please see this: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/7/two-years-of-israels-genocide-in-gaza-by-the-numbers.

[85] For more details, please see these: https://agsi.org/analysis/the-violence-in-gaza-arab-public-opinion-matters/ and https://www.dw.com/en/gaza-conflict-how-arab-attitudes-are-hardening-against-israel/a-67769920

Beyond its humanitarian aspect, Israel's desire to spread the ongoing war to the entire region, especially with the attacks against Hamas and Hezbollah officials in Lebanon[86] and Iranian targets in Syria[87] as well as its subsequent attacks against Hamas officials in Qatar[88] has further escalated the tension and turned the region into a powder keg. Therefore, Israel's efforts to weaken "the axis of resistance" have generated profound military, security and diplomatic challenges for the regional and extra-regional powers. It created power oscillation that reshaped regional dynamics and compelled pivotal and extra-regional powers to reorient their policies.

In this regard, Russia was convinced that Bashar's economically devastated and diplomatically isolated Syria with its fragmented state authority allowing Iran and Iranian proxies to freely operate would pose a significant threat to her vital interests and drag her into a quagmire in the face of recent developments in the region, referring to even the risk of direct engagement with Israel[89]. Therefore, Russia chose not to provide economic assistance and security guarantees that may further consolidate al-Assad's regime, especially at a time when her relative position weakened due to the war in Ukraine. Instead, she aimed to foster cooperative relations with pivotal states to secure her long-term interests in the region, namely Türkiye and Iran. In this respect, Russia has properly assessed potential risks and constraints amid recent developments and never acted beyond her capabilities in Syria when Bashar al-Assad's regime was on the verge of collapse. Therefore, Russia's relations with pivotal states in the context

[86] According to Euro-Med Monitor (2024), Israel has violated the ceasefire agreement at least 62 times with its attacks on Lebanon as of December 1, 2024. More details, see this: https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/israeli-attacks-lebanon-continue-despite-ceasefire-agreement

[87] According to Al-Jazeera (2025), Israel has launched more than 600 attacks across Syria over the past year. Please more details, see this: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/9/israel-attacked-syria-more-than-600-times-over-the-past-year

[88] According to BBC (2025), Israel has carried out an airstrike to kill Hamas members by violating Qatar's national sovereignty. For more details, please see this: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c20z3ykyxwzo

[89] As Syrian Observer (2024) puts out that "Putin has instructed National Security Council member Sergei Shoigu to engage with Iran and the Syrian regime to emphasize the importance of keeping Syrian territory neutral in the escalation. This mission led Shoigu to visit Tehran several days ago". This is because, as Russian envoy expressed, that Iran's further attacks in Syria could provoke Washington and Israel to not only target Iranian factions but also the Syrian regime. For more details please, see this: https://syrianobserver.com/foreign-actors/putin-warns-assad-stay-away-from-iran-to-avoid-escalation.html

of Syria will be respectively examined to understand her foreign policy behavior, referring to her act of non-intervention in the face of regional sub-systemic constraints.

4.3.2.1. Russia's efforts for Turkish-Syrian Normalization

Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine and its consequences that unraveled afterwards have significantly influenced Russia's engagements in the Middle East, particularly in Syria. Even though Russia has long given both military and economic support to Bashar al-Assad for the purpose of consolidating his regime, we see that Russia's relative material capabilities and resources that she could allocate for Bashar al-Assad has lessened after being exposed to heavy Western sanctions in the face of prolonging war in Ukraine. In this context, Russia has increasingly relied more on her diplomatic capabilities rather than coercive ones after realizing that the war in Ukraine would last longer than what had been expected and sought to preserve her influence by positioning herself as a key mediator in Syria. At this point, it is important to underline that Russia has long-pursued to reinstate Bashar al-Assad regime into the regional order and normalize Syria's relations with the regional countries as well as resolve the Syrian conflict through a political settlement from the outset; however, her endeavors on this have remarkably become vigorous, considering that escalation of the war in Ukraine coupled with the new regional uncertainties that were introduced by Hamas-Israeli war in 2023[90].

The most apparent manifestation of Russia's intense diplomatic endeavors came in the form of quadrilateral meetings involving Russia, Türkiye, Syria and Iran. The most significant step taken in this regard occurred when the defense ministers and intelligence chiefs of Russia, Türkiye and Syria met in Moscow on December 28, 2022. This meeting, headed by Russia, brought parties together to discuss variety of issues from counterterrorism and return of Syrian refugees to border security and ensure stability in Syria and the wider region. Since all parties agreed to reconvene again on another occasion and showed their desire to advance the high-level talks,

[90] As Syrian Observer (2024) puts out that Putin advised Assad to give up the preconditions for normalizing relations with Ankara, in the face of Israel's intense attacks in the region. For more details, please see this: https://syrianobserver.com/foreign-actors/putin-warns-assad-stay-away-from-iran-to-avoid-escalation.html

especially with Iran's subsequent inclusion with Türkiye's calls, it gave birth to the quadrilateral format. Thereafter, Moscow hosted a series of foreign ministerial and technical meetings at the defense ministerial level to discuss security-related issues in early 2023. As reported by Anadolu Agency, all quadrilateral meetings were held in Moscow respectively on March 15-16 at Deputy Foreign Ministers level[91], April 25 at Defense Ministers and Intelligence Chiefs level[92] and May 10 at Foreign Ministers level[93]. Even though Russia's initiative could not achieve to eliminate the differences between the parties, these high-level meetings within the quadrilateral framework marked an important attempt for Russia to not only eliminate Türkiye's security related concerns but also consolidate regime security in Syria through diplomacy and regional cooperation in the face of strong conditional constraints. In this respect, Russia's mediation efforts created incentives for her to maintain regional influence without committing too much on one side and preserve her image as an extra-regional great power.

Moreover, Russia's efforts to normalize Syria's relations with Türkiye have continued under the Astana Format until the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad. Following the quadrilateral meetings, 20th, 21st and 22nd International High-Level Meetings on Syria in the Astana Format[94] were respectively held in between June 20-21, 2023, January 24-25, 2024, and November 11-12, 2024. In these meetings, it is remarkable to note that Israel's war on Gaza and its further extension into Syrian and Lebanese territories strongly condemned by the parties in the joint statement issued on the 21st and 22nd International Meetings on Syria. That is, the Gaza crisis has created a shared sense of

[91] https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/quadrilateral-meeting-on-syria-to-be-held-in-moscow-on-march-15-16/2844223#

[92] https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkiye-says-4-way-meeting-in-moscow-discussed-strengthening-security-in-syria/2881219

[93] https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/russia-confirms-quadrilateral-meeting-for-may-10/2890478

[94] https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-152_-20-21-haziran-2023-tarihlerinde-astana-da-duzenlenen-suriye-konulu-yuksek-duzeyli-toplanti-hk.en.mfa ; https://www.mfa.gov.tr/iran--rusya-ve-turkiye-temsilcileri-tarafindan-yapilan-astana-formatindaki-suriye-konulu-21-yuksek-duzeyli-toplanti-ya-iliskin-ortak-bildiri.en.mfa ;

https://www.mfa.gov.tr/iran-rusya-ve-turkiye-temsilcileri-tarafindan-yapilan-astana-formatindaki-suriye-konulu-22-yuksek-duzeyli-toplanti-ya-iliskin-ortak-bildiri-11-12-kasim-2024.en.mfa

urgency for Russia and Türkiye, regarding Israel's attacks that may further yield instabilities in the region.

All in all, Russia's prolonging war in Ukraine together with the Gaza crisis have pushed her to align with Türkiye over Syria under Astana format, despite their divergent positions. This dynamic in Russian-Turkish relations was actually there for some times and that emerged lately with their engagements in Caucasus and Central Asia and the Middle East as well. The nature of this relation has been primarily discussed by several scholars in literature. For instance, Cheterian (2023) argues that Russian-Turkish relations are mostly transactional and driven by geopolitical competition and tactical cooperation, especially over Syria, instead of long-term strategic alignment. Similarly, Köstem (2021) claims that the concept of alignment best explains the nature of Russian-Turkish relations over Syria and contends that alliances and formal defense treaties are no longer as effective as they were used to be in offering solutions to immediate security threats. Therefore, Köstem defines Russian-Turkish cooperation that has been the case in Syria since 2016 as informal geopolitical alignment.[95] In this sense, Russia with demised military capabilities has cemented her alignment with Türkiye in the face of the recent volatilities in the region and tried to secure her position in Syria through mediation efforts anticipating for Turkish-Syrian normalization.

4.3.2.2. Russian-Iranian Relations

Although Russia and Iran competed for increasing their economic and military influence in Syria, we see that their rivalry never turned into a hostility but became a useful tool for al-Assad to maximize his interest. In this respect, Russia and Iran along with their proxies were in a state of constant tension in Syria and they frequently came to the brink of conflict over territorial control and power competition.

According to Giustozzi (2025), the first reports suggesting that pro-Russian and Iranian factions came into confrontation date back to 2015 when fighters under Quwat

[95] Köstem (2021) benefits from Synder's definition of alignment that refers to 'expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions' (as cited in Köstem, 2020, p. 796)

al-Ridha[96] engaged in armed conflict with regime forces in Homs. It is even acknowledged that Iran intended to end their cooperation with Russia after Iranian factions, namely Hezbollah and Fatimiyun suffered from heavy losses when they clashed with Russian military police, the 5th AC and Liwa al Quds in Deir ez Zor.[97]Similarly, both sides engaged in major clashes over territorial control in Aleppo, Daraa and Al-Zuhra.

Additionally, Russia's decision to suspend air support given to IRGC and IRGC-linked militia groups directly affected Russian-Iranian relations adversely from 2016 to 2022. For instance, Iran has suffered from heavy military losses[98] when Russia did not provide air support for Iranian forces in the Jaysh al-Fatah siege of Khan Touman (Grajewski, 2021). As acknowledged by a Syrian Military Intelligence officer, Russians and Iranians have even stopped to work jointly with the Syrian military and evade from each other in the center for coordinating advisers that was closed in 2019 (Giustozzi, 2025).

However, this fierce competition came to an end when Russia's priorities shifted with the prolonging war in Ukraine in 2022 and further evolved into strategic partnership in early 2025[99]. Given the strong conditional systemic and regional sub-systemic constraints posed by the war in Ukraine and post-October 7 setting, Russia and Iran have sought to cultivate more cooperative relations. That is, their rivalry for influence turned into collaboration in Syria. In this regard, Russia allowed Iran to advance its interests in Syria and even retreated from areas including Aleppo where Russian-Iranian competition over the militias was the most acute[100]. Similarly, Iran helped

[96] Quwat al-Ridha is a group within the National Defense Forces supported by Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

[97] It is confirmed with sources aligned with the regime and Russian officers in an interview conducted by Giustozzi and his research team.

[98] According to Grajewski (2021), Iran has experienced one of its largest military losses in the Syrian Civil War and lost nearly 80 to 100 militias from IRGC and its proxies

[99] Treaty on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership came out as an outcome of this after signed by Russia and Iran in Moscow cooperation on January 17, 2025. It should be noted that the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership does not entail provisions for mutual defense. That is, it does not bind parties to engage in military confrontation with their adversaries.

[100]Iran has moved to expand its influence and control over the Syrian government and militia groups with Russia's diminished military and economic presence. As acknowledged by an IRGC commander, the IRGC planned to channel additional 100 million dollars to militias in Syria and keep expanding their influence over them even in the aftermath of the Gaza crisis (Giustozzi, 2025).

Russia for the procurement and joint production of unmanned aerial vehicles to be deployed in Ukraine, and Russia, in return, deepened her cooperation in military technology and intelligence sharing with Iran (Azizi, 2025).

Additionally, it is important to note that the nature of this cooperation is largely shaped by systemic and sub-systemic pressures to which they both were exposed, including US policies and regional uncertainties. Although their agendas differ from each other in scope and aim, the systemic constraints posed by Western-led global order converged their political, economic and military interests (Azizi, 2025). In this respect, Russia's criticisms against Israel's war on Gaza and support of Iran's narrative[101] regarding the Western-led order and conflicts and volatilities it has generated in the region have further, as expected, deepened their strategic alignment. Additionally, it should be noted that even though Russia had competed with Iran and experienced serious problems and disagreements back then, she had no intention to fully contain Iranian influence in Syria (Mardasov and Semyonov, 2020, as cited in Giustozzi, 2025). Instead, she opted for sharing potential risks and burden with Iran without fully committing her resources and capabilities in the face of systemic and sub-systemic constraints. This is why their competition never turned into hostility. The same is actually valid even for their strategic alignment that came out after post-Assad period as well, considering that Russia has never escalated the situation when Israel and the U.S. has carried out joint strikes against Iran's nuclear program[102]. Therefore,

[101] In particular, Russia has intensely voiced criticisms against Israel's airstrikes that targeted military and civilian facilities within Syrian territory after December 8. For instance, Maria Zakharova, in the briefing delivered on December 11, 2024, answered media questions and commented on Israel's recent attacks against Syria and underlined that Israel's assertive actions and breach of 1974 Israeli-Syrian Disengagement Agreement dragged the region into further instabilities and violated the principles of international law. Moreover, Zakharova agreed on the statement issued by Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Iran, holding the U.S. and Israel responsible for the situation in Syria and stated that the U.S.' decision not to lift sanctions even during the pandemic further aggravated the economic and humanitarian conditions in Syria and paved the way for the events unfolding today. For further details, please see this: https://mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/briefings/1986964/#Q01

[102] Putin's statements truly reflect Russia's avoidance to engage in any conflicts with Israel, considering the recent attacks that were carried out by the U.S. and Israel against Iran and its proxies. For instance, Putin immediately condemned Israeli and the U.S. strikes against Iran's nuclear program on June 22, 2025, and described them as 'absolutely unprovoked'. It is clear that any military support given to her long-standing regional ally to counter these attacks was out of question. Indeed, Dmitry Peskov, Kremlin spokesman, answered a question about Russia's plans to defend Iran military before the start of the meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and stated that "We have offered our mediation efforts. This is concrete. We have stated our position. This is also a very important manifestation. This is a kind of support for the Iranian side" (Washington Post, 2025). In this sense, Peskov's statements truly vindicate Russia's unwillingness to intervene in conflicts in the Middle East

Russia has aligned with Iran to secure her long-term interests in Syria after being faced with series of military and economic challenges following the war in Ukraine and avoided to involve in any clashes or risky situation that may jeopardize her regional interests after October 7, 2023.

4.4. Domestic Factors

"The international system may still "shape the broad contours" of a state's foreign policy but it hardly determines "the specific details of state behavior" (Rose 1998: 146–147, as cited in Więcławski, 2020, p. 123). As Więcławski (2020) explicitly puts that the structure of the international system sets the boundaries of states' foreign policy choices; however, this alone does not fully explain their foreign policy behaviors. In this sense, domestic factors having undeniable impact over decision making process play a significant role in shaping foreign policy behavior of states. However, identifying domestic factors and analyzing their role are not as easy as one might imagine since deeper inquiry is not always feasible. Therefore, this may inevitably lead researchers to an impasse in most cases, particularly considering that studying these dynamics may even be difficult sometimes within open democracies empowered by rule of law and strong and transparent state institutions. In this sense, there is no doubt that this challenge even becomes far greater in authoritarian regimes where strong culture of secrecy and informal networking prevailed, as in the case of Russia[103].

According to Lo (2015), the Russian policy landscape consists of four main functions, and these are decision making; ideational inspiration; implementation; and rationalization. To elaborate them briefly, Lo (2015) states that decision making is the most important function and it is dominated by the supreme decision maker, Putin, and senior regime figures. The second function is ideational inspiration, and it is well-reflected in global power competition in the international system while being

amidst power oscillation emerged with the war in Ukraine and October 7 and help us to understand Russia's changing foreign policy behavior in the face of sub-systemic constraints For further details, please see these: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/06/23/iran-russia-alliance-strikes-nuclear/ ; https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/2029109/

[103] As aptly noted, "In Putin's Russia individuals make institutions, not institutions the individual" (Lo, 2015, p. 10).

considered as an indispensable part of Russian strategic culture. The third one refers to state institutions that are held responsible for the implementation of public policy, and these are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Ministry of Defense (MOD) and Ministry of Economic Development (MED). The last function is policy rationalization, and it is orchestrated through public diplomacy activities that are performed by MFA's Information Department, several state-controlled media outlets, namely RT and Rossiya Segodnya, policy documents as Foreign Policy Concept, the Concept of National Security and the Military Doctrine, and certain committees in Duma, such as International Affairs Committee, National Strategic Council of Russia. In this regard, our unit level variable will include Putin and senior figures' perceptions that were founded within statements, interviews or news by state officials or state-backed media institutions[104]. Since our unit-level variable, referring to the leader's perception manifested itself in different ways in our case, all will be examined together in the analysis.

4.4.1. Leadership, Politics and State in Russia

The Russian system of government largely relies on individuals and individualistic networks instead of well-functioning state institutions and thus policy landscape of Russia in the past two decades and a half is shaped by President Vladimir Putin and very few people involved in decision making process. We see that Russian foreign policymaking under Putin has become so personalized that certain terms and phrases, particularly Putinism and Putinization of Russian foreign policy is used to bring attention to this matter in literature. Although Russian society has long adhered to autocratic rule and historically bounded by the culture of secrecy, we see that it has been systematically reinforced during Putin era and become a useful tool in serving for Putin's ambitious policies in domestic and international politics.

According to McFaul (2020), Putin has gradually taken control of media and introduced autocratic policies to consolidate his power since early 2000s, and he further adopted a more autocratic form of governance on the name of fighting against domestic and international forces destabilizing the country together with repairing

[104] This is because Putin's perceptions overwhelmingly affect decision making process and he has complete control over domestic institutions, including state-backed media outlets and they all are instrumentalized for policy implementation and rationalization.

Russia's international image after winning his third term in 2012[105]. Even though countless examples and news exist regarding Putin's autocratic practices since then, including criminalization and close of foreign organizations and liberal TV channels[106], arrest of journalists[107] and political leaders who challenged Putin's authority[108], we see that Alexei Navalny[109] and his tragic death in jail after being poisoned with the Novichok stood as one of the iconic case demonstrating what happens to those who criticize and challenge Putin's leadership and the system he built in Russia. In this sense, Putin sent direct message to Russian society that no one can question his legitimacy, even the most visible ones who gained national recognition and strongly backed by international community.

[105] According to Burrett (2019), Putin regarded integration with the West as necessary for achieving economic growth and modernization after coming to power for the first time and took steps towards that end in his first and second term. And this was well reflected to approval ratings on the 2004 presidential election (Levada Center, 2014). It is indicated that Putin's anti-Western rhetoric dates back to 2004, following Orange Revolutions in post-Soviet space and his speech that he made at Munich Security Conference in 2007; however, use of this rhetoric, referring to international and domestic forces undermining Russia's interests has become a consistent theme only after his third term since Russian economy experienced a significant downturn following the financial crisis of 2008 and onwards (Burrett, 2020).

[106] Putin enacted a law on July 21, 2014, anticipating for banning commercial advertising on paid cable and satellite television channels. Human Rights Watch puts that these new amendments restrict the right to access information and interferes with the freedom of speech. Moreover, HRW (2013) puts that Russian government introduced and implemented news laws, including "foreign agents law, the treason law, the 'Dima Yakovlev law' and the assembly law" to crack civil society by restricting activities of NGOs, advocacy groups and political activists.

For more details see these: https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/25/russia-repeal-new-tv-advertising-law ; https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/04/24/laws-attrition/crackdown-russias-civil-society-after-putins-return-presidency

[107] Institute of Mass Information provides the list of journalists detained by Russia since 2014. For more details see this: https://imi.org.ua/en/monitorings/list-of-journalists-detained-by-russia-since-2014-i64704

[108] For more details, please see these: https://apnews.com/article/russia-crackdown-opposition-jail-navalny-f4a70f0275e41748a39630a6c9ae3aa0 ; https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/who-are-other-opposition-activists-jailed-russia-2024-02-16/

[109] Alexei Navalny was an anti-corruption campaigner who openly criticized the corruption and patronage system in Putin's Russia via his blog. In 2011, he flooded people into the street by using his power on social media and challenged President Putin with claims about official corruption. His anti-corruption organization, FBK, listed as 'extremist' and he was banned from general elections in 2017. In 2021, after being poisoned on his way to Siberia, he recovered in Berlin and returned to Moscow and after that he was immediately detained and charged with prison sentence. For more details see this: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16057045

Moreover, Russia's domestic political sphere is deeply tied to Putin and his authority. According to Campbell and Ross (2008), although elections are regularly held at the federal, regional and local levels, Putin does not comply with the election results and appoints those within his own networks as governors. Thus, Putin firmly controls domestic institutions and does not allow any alternative power centers to flourish against his regime. In this sense, he constantly reclaims his authority through the power structure that he established with the combination of his personal, institutional and corporate networks (Gill 2016; Hill, 2017, as cited in Burrett, 2025).

Similar to domestic politics, Putin's autocratic style of rule has also articulated itself in international realm, considering the fact that leaders' perceptions play a pivotal role in determining a country's foreign policy. For instance, Putin has followed more assertive policies in international politics with the purpose of consolidating his legitimacy and popularity inside the country. As Burrett (2025) puts it out, Putin reclaimed his power abroad and bolstered his image as a leader with the interventions in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014 and 2022) and Syria (2015). Therefore, it is apparent that Putin's autocratic leadership and the regime type in Russia have direct linkage to changes in foreign policymaking. In this regard, Putin's perceptions have also profoundly manifested itself in Russia's act of non-intervention in Syria when al-Assad regime was on the verge of collapse.

4.4.2. Leader's Perceptions as a Unit-Level Intervening Variable

> Distinguished members of the Constitutional Committee,
>
> You are here today on the basis of an agreement between the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Syrian Negotiations Commission, and that agreement will guide this Committee's work. This is the first political agreement between the Government and the Opposition to begin to implement a key aspect of Security Council Resolution 2254, which called for setting a schedule and a process for drafting a new constitution.
>
> This is a historic moment, because for the first time, 50 nominees of the Government and 50 nominees of the Opposition are sitting face-to-face – but also two co-chairs side-by-side – to work as Committee members on a

> key project: a new constitutional arrangement for Syria, a chance for something new for Syria.[110]

These lines belonged to Geir O. Pedersen, United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, were delivered in the opening session of the Constitutional Committee[111] on 30 October 2019 and they marked a very significant milestone achieved in the long-standing Syrian conflict until that date. However, even though the Syrian Constitutional Committee aimed to peacefully end the Syrian conflict through a political solution and it brought Syrian government and opposition as well as civil society representatives together to discuss on the creation of a new and more inclusive constitution, we have witnessed that the Committee could not achieve any significant results due to Bashar al-Assad's insistence on maintaining disagreements until his overthrown by broad coalition of opposition forces led by HTS on December 8, 2024. And these disagreements that were deliberately perpetuated by al-Assad regime have been extensively addressed by the UN Special Envoy Geir O. Pedersen on several occasions. For instance, Pedersen announced the failure of the second round of talks and disagreements between parties over the agenda prevented this meeting to happen[112] (The New Arab, 2019). Similarly, Pedersen spoke to the media during a news conference in Geneva on 17 October 2021 and expressed that the Syrian government refused to present revisions on the draft of constitutional text as they claimed that they could not see any common ground. And he further added that parties also failed to agree to convene again before the end of the year (Al Arabiya, 2021)[113].

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[110] https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/statements-and-speeches/2019/10/opening-statement-constitutional-committee-geir-o

[111] The Syrian Constitutional Committee was decided to be established during the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi in 2018 for the purpose of implementing UN Security Council Resolution of 2254 and finding a political solution to the Syrian conflict. For further details, see this: https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/sochi-talks-end-constitutional-committee-to-be-formed/1048047

[112] As The New Arab (2019) gave place to points of Syria TV's reporter in Geneva, the Bashar's regime intentionally stalled the constitutional talks by rejecting five proposals from the opposition for a meeting agenda. Similarly, Bibbo (2019) anonymously shares opposition delegates' remarks saying that Syrian government was bringing up topics out of committee's scope, rejecting formulations and unwilling to discuss issues related to the constitution. For more details, please see this: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/29/no-consensus-on-agenda-in-syria-constitution-talks-held-in-geneva

[113] Pedersen, for the first time, named and criticized the Bashar al-Assad regime after the failure of the sixth rounds of talks in October 2021. For further detail, please see this: https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/new-round-of-syrian-peace-talks-begins-in-geneva/2601220

Moreover, Pedersen further emphasized at the EU's Sixth Brussels Conference on 10 May 2022 that negotiations on the new constitution are far from a political solution[114], with regard to the failure of the seventh round of talks held in Geneva on March 25, 2022 (Kenny, 2022). In this sense, Syrian government has showed that they had no real intention to engage seriously with constitutional reform. They have deliberately stalled the constitutional talks by blocking drafting process and remaining firm on their uncompromised stance throughout the negotiation process. Therefore, Bashar al-Assad's firm stance on constitutional talks created deep resentment and frustrated Russia, al-Assad regime's staunch ally, in the long run. This is because Russia wanted Assad regime to reclaim his legitimacy in international realm with the creation of a new constitution and lay the financial burden to rebuild Syria on international coalition.

In this vein, Putin's frustration on the failure of constitutional talks was well resonated with several media outlets, namely Pravda, Kommersant, Federal News Agency and Moscow-funded think-tank organizations. To illustrate, Alexander Shumilin[115] explicitly stated that "The Kremlin needs to get rid of the Syrian headache. The problem is with one person – Assad - and his entourage" (Bloomberg, 2020). Similarly, Alexander Aksenenok[116] pointed that "If Assad refuses to accept a new constitution, the Syrian regime will put itself at great risk", while adding that Russia considers that the regime purposefully sabotaged the negotiations (Bloomberg, 2020).

Moreover, the Federal News Agency[117] published a report explicitly accusing Bashar al-Assad's regime, particularly office of Imad Khamis of corruption and refuting the regime's central claim that the long hours of electricity cuts stemmed from terrorists controlling gas fields, instead arguing that the regime was selling electricity and gas outside the country rather than providing it for its own people (Middle East Monitor,

[114] https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/-we-are-far-from-political-solution-in-syria-says-un-envoy/2584069

[115] Alexander Shumilin is a former Russian diplomat and head of the Europe and Middle East Center funded by Moscow.

[116] Alexander Aksenenok is a former Russian diplomat and the vice-president of the state-financed Russian International Affairs Council.

[117] It is a Russia-based news agency whose owner was one of Putin's closest friends and also known as 'Putin's chef', named Prigozhin. He was also main funder of a private military company Wagner Group.

2020). Furthermore, Russian International Affairs Council has underscored their expectations on removal of Bashar's regime and forming of a transitional government following a consensus that was anticipated to be reached between Russia, Türkiye and Iran, and sent a direct message to Bashar al-Assad on the upcoming elections in the country, with reference to an opinion poll conducted in Syria by Foundation for the Protection of National Values[118] (Middle East Monitor, 2020). In the opinion poll, it was suggested that only 32 percent of the Syrian population would vote for Bashar al-Assad in the upcoming presidential elections in 2021[119]. This clearly aims to remind al-Assad regime that they have largely lost their legitimacy in domestic realm while stressing out that their ability to stay in power entirely relies on Russia's support. Therefore, Russia's openly voiced criticisms raised in the media outlets and think-tank reports strongly demonstrate the dissatisfaction of Russia with the Bashar's regime. Nonetheless, Russia was then reluctant to abandon Bashar's regime in Syria since no viable alternative to his leadership existed at that time[120] and removed most of these criticisms appeared in the media from the Internet days later. In this vein, Putin's perceptions towards Assad's leadership have started to deteriorate since 2019 when Bashar al-Assad had deliberately failed the constitutional talks and impeded Russia's efforts for a political solution. In this sense, Bashar's uncompromised stance on this has undermined Russia's image and credibility when it is considered that Russia has tried to position herself as a potential peacemaker alternative to the West and cultivate a narrative that she is more than a military actor[121] (Wieland, 2022). Additionally, Russia feared that Bashar al-Assad and his irrational stance prolonging the Syrian conflict would lead her to the same end as in Afghanistan. In this regard, Russia left

[118] Foundation for the Protection of National Values is a Russian organization associated with the Kremlin and her security services.

[119] https://eaworldview.com/2020/04/syria-assad-annoying-russia-putin/

[120] Russian media, based on the statements of a government official, has frequently circulated that Putin considers Assad as a stubborn figure and a disappointment and they highlighted that Assad was irreplaceable at that moment. This opinion was also shared by experts working at state-affiliated think-tanks. For further details, see this: https://eaworldview.com/2020/04/syria-assad-annoying-russia-putin/

[121] Similarly, Lewis (2022) puts out that Russia has developed an alternative framework for peacemaking that diverges fundamentally from the liberal peacebuilding model. In this regard, she considers her activities in Syria, Libya and the Central African Republic as a form of peacemaking (mirotvorchestvo).

Bashar al-Assad's request[122] on transportation of arms and weapons from Iran through Khmeimim air base unanswered when coalition forces seized Aleppo on 29th of November and advanced their positions. And Russia's restraint in responding Bashar al-Assad's requests inevitably contributed to bring his brutal regime to an end.

Secondly, Putin's perceptions towards al-Assad regime have negatively affected due to Assad's play off Tehran against Moscow and uncertainty that emerged from the intense competition in shaping the future of Syria with Iran. We see that Russia and Iran have sharply diverged from each other since both held differing visions and goals concerning the future of Syria. Whereas Russia sought to achieve a political settlement in line with UN Security Council Resolution of 2254 and restore state institutions, Iran strove to increase its influence by exploiting the fragmented structure of state authority and establish its own presence inside state institutions as far as possible. In this sense, Russia has compelled Bashar al-Assad regime to integrate militias into the Syrian Arab Army under the command of the Syrian Ministry of Defense and re-centralize state authority. On the contrary, IRGC intended to spread its ideology through the creation of political parties based on Shi'a military force as in Iraq, so they strongly opposed to integration of militias into the SAA as they believed that "the decay of the SAA was irreversible" and that it would hinder them to pursue their own agenda (Giustozzi, 2025, p. 15). Thus, they hampered Russia's efforts for militias' integration into the SAA by increasing their control over militias and threatening to suspend their activities and fundings to the major militia groups, namely National Defense Force and the Local Defense Force.[123] At this point, we see that Russia's policies towards reforming the military and putting all militia forces under the chain of command of the Syrian MoD could not produce intended results as they failed to match with the political and social

[122] Kamel Saqr, Assad's former media chief, who spoke to Al Arabiya claimed that Putin paved the way for al-Assad's fall by not allowing Iranians to use Hmeimim airbase to deliver military aid to the al-Assad regime and help them to stop advance of coalition forces. Saqr states that Iranians told them that "we did not receive any signals to proceed with moving Iranian aircraft to the Hmeimim base or to fly through Iraqi airspace to land at the base". For further details, please see this: https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2025/01/06/syria-s-ex-media-chief-reveals-al-assad-s-escape-details-final-plea-to-al-assad-

[123] National Defense Forces (NDF) and Local Defense Force are among Hezbollah's one of the largest militias groups operating in Syria. They are Iran-backed and mostly refused to follow the chain of command under the MoD.

realities on the ground. According to Mardasov (2020), most of militias operating in Syria were not willing to integrate into the SAA and to be bounded by the rules and obligations under the MoD. This is because they retained certain degree of autonomy in the local areas where they were placed and involved in criminal activities. Therefore, they were not interested in giving up their power and autonomy that they held at local level. As acknowledged by one Russian diplomat in Syria, Russia's policies in rebuilding the SAA in the face of these developments on the ground along with Iran's firm opposition were mostly likely to fail, or in his or her words 'chances of succeeding it were very low'.[124] (Giustozzi, 2025, p. 16). In the end, Russia could not achieve her long-term goals in having military reforms enforced. Although some militia groups integrated into the SAA, NDF and LDF with others were intentionally kept outside this integration process. Thus, Russia has failed to rebuild centralized state authority with robust institutions in Syria since Bashar al-Assad somehow managed to handle both sides by partially pleasing their requests and preventing either side from gaining the upper hand.

Similarly, Bashar al-Assad never allowed Russia-backed officials to gain influence in the Presidential Guard as he was concerned that Russia might have removed him from power[125]. Giustozzi (2025) puts out that Bashar al-Assad has also built his own command structure, apart from the official one and kept senior figures he trusted close to himself. These figures were directly taking orders from al-Assad himself instead of following the official chain of command in the ministry. In this vein, this issue has also remained as a point of contention in Russia's relations with Bashar al-Assad, particularly considering that it has totally contradicted with Russia's desire to rebuild fully functioning state institutions and to eliminate any situation undermining the centralized state authority.

[124] Giustozzi and his research team interviewed with a Russian diplomat in Syria who evaluated the current situation and progress in achieving Russia's policies towards rebuilding the SAA and reflected Russia's insights on this.

[125] To this end, Bashar al-Assad has also regularly dismissed people serving in critical posts within government in order to prevent them to become too close to Russia or Iran. For example, Assef al Dikr who was responsible for all promotions and matters related to the officer corps in the SAA, was removed from his office in the SAA in 2020 on the suspicion that he was too close to Russians. Similarly, Major General Zaid Saleh, the head of security committee for Idlib, and Nizar Ahmed al Khader, the commander of the 17th Division, were also dismissed from their positions with the same pretext in 2021 (Ibid).

In addition to Russia's failed efforts to establish a centralized state authority, Bashar al-Assad's play off Tehran against Moscow and Russia's further dissatisfactions were also evident in the military appointments. Both Russia and Iran sought to gain advantage in Syria's military and intelligence apparatus and forced al-Assad regime to appoint senior officers close to themselves. However, they both were confronted with al-Assad's pure opportunism in balancing the two actors. That is, even though al-Assad relied heavily on both actors to stay in power, he exploited them at every possible moment without falling under the control of either side.

In this regard, Bashar al-Assad played to both sides and balanced one against another accordingly. In 2018, he appointed key figures close to Iran to the security forces and allowed Iranian influence to prevail in security apparatus vis-à-vis Russian influence. For instance, pro-Iranian figures, namely General Ziad Saleh, Commander Mohamed Rafi, Commander Fateh Al Hassoun, Colonel Tahir Hamid Khalil, General Muhamad Mahla, General Ahmed Abbas were respectively appointed as head of security for Aleppo, chief of logistics within the MoD, head of Military Intelligence for Hama, leader of the 18th Armored Division, commander of a battalion of the Republican Guard and head of SAA Special Forces (Giustozzi, 2025). On the other hand, Russia's influence in security apparatus remained limited with the appointments of Colonel Jamel Al Hassan, Colonel Mohammed Bilal and General Ghazi Jalali[126]. This is because Bashar al-Assad was exposed to immense pressures from Iranians after they were being felt threatened with the loss of power and potential risk of further marginalization in the face of Russia's diplomatic endeavors for a political settlement in Syria. Yet, the balance of power in security apparatus shifted in Russia's favor a year later. Bashar al-Assad removed many senior intelligence officers who linked to Iran and IRGC from their positions in April 2019[127] with the aim of ceasing further expansion of Iranian influence and of easing Russia's concerns. That is, he aligned with Russia's policies when it served for his objectives and acted the other way around

[126] These figures were respectively appointed as head of Syrian Air Force Intelligence, head of the 103rd Brigade of the Republican Guard Division and deputy chief of the General Staff for logistics and supplies (Ibid).

[127] Bashar al-Assad dismissed a total of 150 senior intelligence officers who were linked to Iran and IRGC from their positions just in April 2019, including Ali Mamlouk and General Mahala, head of the Military Intelligence Directorate (Ibid).

when it was not and turned to Iran, and vice versa. In this regard, Bashar al-Assad leveraged the rivalry between Russia and Iran for his own benefit until his overthrown; however, Bashar al-Assad's insincere attitudes as well as Iran's further penetration and clashes over military appointments have adversely affected Russia's perceptions as all these have contributed to impediment of Russia's long-term agenda in Syria.[128]

Lastly, Putin's statements following Keir Simmons' question[129] and further his assumption on Russia's military failure in Syria help us to understand Russia's act of non-intervention in the face of unfolding developments in Syria at leadership level. In response to Simmon's question, Putin stated that "We came to Syria ten years ago to prevent the creation of a terrorist enclave there, like the one that we saw in some other countries, for example, Afghanistan. We have achieved that goal, by and large"[130]. These statements clearly show that Russia's act of non-intervention does not solely rely on distrust and negative perception towards al-Assad regime. Putin acknowledges that her security concerns regarding radical Islam and its potential risk to jump into Russian territory no longer exist. He makes it clear that many European countries and the United States would not cooperate with coalition forces had they been terrorists and implies that Russia's efforts to global fight against terrorism has paid off. In this regard, Putin confirms that Russia's act of intervention has mostly reached out its purpose with the elimination of threat of terrorism driven by extremist ideologies.

In addition to this, Russia has adopted a rhetoric that emphasizes long-established diplomatic relations with Syria and her commitments to Syria's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity after the fall of al-Assad regime. It is apparent that Russia aimed to underline that her ties with Syria were not confined to the Bashar al-Assad regime and that it would establish relations with the forthcoming authority in Damascus after

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[128] Since Russia had no any alternatives to Bashar then, she had to bear with all the political and military complications in her relations with him. The clashes over military appointments have immediately come to the attention of Russian observers and heavily being criticized. As put by Sergei Chvarkov, the former head of the Russian Reconciliation Center in 2016, in an interview with RIA Novosti, Iran's further penetration in Syria will add additional layers and difficulties to the situation in Syria, regarding the implementation of reforms and advancement of political process (Sazhin, 2020).

[129] Keir Simmons is a Moscow-based journalist working for NBC News. In an event, called 'Results of the Year with Vladimir Putin', he asked President Putin about his meeting with Donald Trump and implied that he would be in a weaker position in the meeting, with reference to developments in Syria.

[130] http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75909

becoming properly institutionalized. For example, Maria Zakharova[131], in the briefing delivered on December 18, points out that Russia's position regarding Syria remained unchanged while underlining Russia's substantial efforts to alleviate the dire humanitarian situation in Syria with the delivery of economic and humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people as well as facilitation of an inclusive intra-Syrian dialogue and a comprehensive political settlement. Similarly, Sergey Lavrov, in an interview with TASS news agency on December 30[132], underscores that Bashar al-Assad regime has failed to settle socioeconomic problems and foster a constructive dialogue with the opposition despite Russia's strong insistence and support.

Moreover, Sergey Lavrov states, in another interview with Russian and international news media on December 26, that "As President Vladimir Putin has emphasized, we are open to contacts with all major political groups that are active in Syria. We have been maintaining these contacts for quite some time now. We were in touch with most of them even before the recent events"[133]. In this regard, it would not be wrong to argue that Russia convinced that Bashar al-Assad and his corrupted regime is replaceable and that they can develop political, economic and military relations with an alternative one. Therefore, Russia chose not to prevent stopping the coalition forces from advancing towards Damascus and allowed Bashar al-Assad's regime to collapse, in contrast to her position in 2019 suggesting that no alternatives to Bashar al-Assad regime exist in Syria.

4.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has caused her to be subjected to heavy systemic pressures at the systemic level. These systemic pressures have shown up in the form of series of extensive economic sanctions, heavy military losses and significant geopolitical costs. Russia's exposure to those pressures have increasingly intensified from 2022 to the present. Even though Russia has somehow managed to

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[131] Maria Zakharova serves as the Spokeswoman of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. For further details, please see this: https://mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/briefings/1988088/

[132] https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/themes/id/1989723/

[133] https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/themes/id/1989213/

sustain her war efforts in the long run and resisted against systemic pressures with the help of public resilience, regime stability, mobilization of people and economy as well as support of China, Iran and North Korea, her material capabilities and relative position in the system have significantly harmed. That is, systemic pressures have created a restrictive international environment where Russia had to reassess her policies in Syria. Yet, systemic pressures were not the only determining factor affected her foreign policy behavior in Syria. Sub-systemic factors that had been at play at regional level have also affected her act of non-intervention in Syria. Since Hamas-Israeli war and its unfolding ramifications, referring to the risk of spread of the ongoing war to the entire region, have created a restrictive strategic environment at regional level, Russia has become more concerned about power balances and reinforced her alignments with the pivotal states in the region, instead of pursuing assertive policies that may put her best interests in jeopardy. For instance, Russia's diplomatic initiatives for Turkish-Syrian normalization have intensified during this period and gave birth to quadrilateral format and to 21st, 22nd and 23rd International High-Level Meetings under Astana Format. Similarly, Russia's competition with Iran over Syria has evolved into a more cooperative relations due to above-mentioned systemic and sub-systemic constraints stemmed from the Russian-Ukrainian war and Israel's destabilizing activities in the region. In this sense, Russia stayed reluctant in providing support for Bashar's regime due to the restrictive strategic environment at regional level as well.

Although systemic and sub-systemic factors have created restrictive strategic environment and shaped Russia's act of non-intervention in Syria, domestic factors, referring to leader's perceptions as intervening variable played a decisive role in determining her foreign policy behavior amidst developments that resulted in Bashar's fall. As shown above, Putin's frustration on the failure of constitutional talks, enforcements of military reforms and rebuild of state authority as well as his acknowledgements regarding the elimination of terror threats have determined Russia's act of non-intervention in Syria. In this sense, Russia's decision to not to intervene in Syria did not only stem from distrust and negative perceptions towards Bashar's regime but also acknowledgements that her objectives had been fulfilled with the elimination of terror threats.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Russia's interests in the Midde East has a long history dating even back to 9th Century. Throughout the history, Russian rulers or leaders, irrespective of whether under the Khanate, Tsarist Empire, Soviet Union or Russian Federation, have long pursued dominance in the region. Today, the present situation, in fact, does not differ from the past. The Middle East has been and still is preserving its strategic importance in Russian foreign policymaking. In this sense, Russia's military intervention in Syria on September 30, 2015, on the official invitation of Bashar al-Assad stood as one of the most powerful manifestations, especially bearing in mind that it was the first intervention that she carried out beyond her near-abroad after the Soviet era. Therefore, Russia's policies in Syria have recently attracted scholarly attention and been widely discussed in the literature. Many scholars have analyzed Russia's act of intervention in Syria from different perspectives and made significant contributions to the literature; however, Russia's decision not to intervene in Syria when Bashar was on the verge of fall has prompted further scholarly inquiry. In this regard, the thesis has aimed to analyze this strategic shift that took place in Russian foreign policymaking at two critical junctures in Syria by comparing her act of intervention and non-intervention through neoclassical realist lenses. While doing so, the thesis has, so far, focused on systemic, sub-systemic and domestic factors at both decisive moments and provided a comprehensive answer to the main and sub-questions of this research throughout the inquiry. Now, the final chapter will thus make comparisons between these two critical events and highlight the key differences, regarding what truly drove this strategic shift in Russian foreign policymaking at different levels.

To begin with, Russia was exposed to different external conditions at systemic level in both cases. In the first case, referring to Russia's act of intervention, systemic conditions have created *incentives* for Russia to project her power abroad and reclaim her status as a great power in the international system. Russia's policies that she has been officially pursuing since early 2000s have aimed at criticizing and further

challenging the unipolar nature of the international order where the U.S. hegemony prevailed and dragged the world into "abyss of permanent conflicts", as in Putin's words. As previously discussed, the major shift from unipolarity to multipolarity in the international system with the rise of alternative centers of powers vis-à-vis hegemon has created a permissive strategic environment where other great powers balance the hegemon and pursue more assertive policies in their foreign policymaking at systemic level. In this regard, the U.S.' hegemony has been challenged across various regions in the international system, including the Middle East. In this sense, Russia's assertive policies and further military intervention in Syria have represented or at least contributed to this major shift in the international system and meant that Russia, as a great power, are able to project her power abroad without violating the international law and restore the state authority in Syria, despite the U.S.' policies that destabilized the entire region. That is, Russia's act of intervention was, in a way, a geopolitical statement, as in Phillip's words, at systemic level, at our first critical moment. On the contrary, the nature of the strategic environment was opposite at our second moment, referring to Russia's act of non-intervention. Shortly after her war of aggression in Ukraine, Russia has been exposed to heavy sanctions, deep military losses and geopolitical costs. The scale and severity of these economic, military and geopolitical costs have intensified over time, and this inevitably has created a *restrictive* strategic environment for Russia at systemic level. Even though Russia has somehow achieved to sustain her war efforts in Ukraine over the long run, she had to recalibrate her policies in Syria due to the systemic constraints. That is, Russia's ambitions for the continuation of war in Ukraine came at another geopolitical costs in Syria. In this regard, Russia's act of intervention in Syria was facilitated by a permissive international environment at our first moment whereas her act of non-intervention at our second moment, by contrast, was largely reshaped by a restrictive strategic environment at systemic level.

Secondly, the same strategic environment was valid for both cases at sub-systemic or regional level as well. The unfolding regional developments following the Arab uprisings have created *incentives* for Russia to intervene in Syrian civil war, after officially being invited by Bashar al-Assad. The geopolitical opportunities as well as the balance of power considerations that then embedded in the regional order paved

the way for Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015. With her act of intervention, Russia further advanced her key interests, in a wider context, in the Middle East, considering that naval base at Tartus and Khmeimim air base, which are important components of Russia's military strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean, were not only safely secured but also their status and privileges enhanced after the intervention. On the other hand, when it comes to our second event, the Hamas-Israeli war and its ramifications, including the potential risk of its spread to the entire region created a restrictive strategic environment at regional level. That is, Russia, whose relative position already weakened by the war in Ukraine, has faced further uncertainties amidst the regional developments. This has caused power oscillation that reshaped the regional dynamics and pushed Russia to become more concerned about regional power balances. Hence, Russia, instead of rescuing Bashar's regime, has reinforced her alignments with the pivotal states, especially referring to Türkiye and Iran having military footholds in Syria for the purpose of advancing her interests. As given in details, Russia has intensified her diplomatic efforts for Turkish-Syrian normalization within the Astana Format and quadrilateral framework. Similarly, she has developed more cooperative relations with Iran and put aside their rivalry for influence in Syria. In this sense, Russia's decision to intervene and not to intervene both shaped by the unfolding regional developments. On the one hand, Bashar's official invitation to Russia to intervene as well as prevailing geopolitical opportunities created a *permissive* strategic environment where Moscow maximized her key interests in the Middle East. On the other hand, Hamas-Israeli war and its region-wise repercussions created a *restrictive* strategic environment where Russia had to pursue more balanced relations while refraining from any military engagement at regional level.

Thirdly, *domestic factors*, notably the leader's perceptions have played a determining role in Russia's act of both intervention and non-intervention. In the face of domestic political and economic environment in 2011 and 2012, Putin relied more on input sources to reassert his legitimacy and thus instrumentalized foreign policy as a tool for regime consolidation. In this sense, Putin has framed Russia's military intervention in Syria as a move for self-preservation and counterterrorism with anti-Western narratives, as they were reflected well in his rhetoric. In our second event, Putin's negative perceptions towards Bashar's regime, which developed, as asserted, starting

from the failure of the constitutional talks, encompassing the period during which Bashar played Moscow off against Tehran and failed to rebuild state authority despite Russia's endeavors have deeply affected his decision not to intervene in Syria and rescue Bashar's regime. Additionally, Putin's acknowledgements on the elimination of terror risk have also shown that what prompted Russia to intervene in Syria at the first place have ceased to exist. Therefore, it is evident that Putin's perceptions in both cases have played a crucial role in determining Russia's foreign policy behavior in Syria. We see that systemic and sub-systemic opportunities filtered through domestic political factors in both cases, Russia's act of intervention and non-intervention in Syria. Whereas Moscow's act of intervention was shaped by Putin's quest for reinforcing his legitimacy inside the country, her act of non-intervention was primarily influenced by Putin's negative perceptions towards Bashar al-Assad at domestic level. Lastly, Russian public opinion, in our first case, shows that almost half of Russian people, 47 percent supported the decision to militarily intervene in Bashar's fight against ISIS and the Syrian opposition, whereas 28 percent opposed it. When it comes to providing support and aid to Bashar's regime, instead of direct military engagement, 67 percent supported the decision to provide both political and diplomatic support, whereas 55 percent expressed support for humanitarian aid, 43 percent for military and 41 percent for economic aid [134] (El Baz and Volkov, 2025). In our second case, the data indicates that 42 percent of Russian people supported the recent retreat of Russian armed forces from Syria whereas 32 percent opposed and 27 percent remained unsure (El Baz and Volkov, 2025). In this regard, even though Russian public was prone to military engagement or support for Bashar's regime in Syria, now it appears that they welcomed the recent retrenchment of Russian forces from Syria.

All in all, even though systemic and sub-systemic conditions, to a great extent, determine states' foreign policy choices, as they expose them to certain opportunities

[134] According to Borshchevskaya (2022), even though most of public opinion polls, namely FOM, VTsIOM, ROMIR, and Bashkirova and Partners are Moscow-funded and used for shaping public opinion, there are still some objective ones available, such as Levada Center. In this sense, while providing data regarding Russian public opinion, Levada Center's data was employed in our both cases. In the first case, Levada's public opinion polls that was conducted on September 28, 2015, just two days before the act of intervention was used. When it comes to the second one, Levada's public opinion polls that was conducted jointly by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and fielded on January 23-29, 2025, was used.

and challenges at both levels, they alone are not sufficient enough to explain their foreign policy behaviors. These systemic and sub-systemic conditions must be translated through domestic factors, as neoclassical realism theoretical framework suggests. In this respect, the thesis, after focused on systemic and sub-systemic factors, engaged with domestic factors and filtered systemic and sub-systemic conditions through leader's perceptions in both events to explain Russia's foreign policy behavior in Syria at two critical junctures.

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APPENDICES

A. TURKISH SUMMARY / TÜRKÇE ÖZET

Rusya'nın Orta Doğu bölgesindeki çıkarlarını 9. Yüzyıla, yani modern Rus devletinin kurulmasından önceye Kiev Rus'unun yaşamış olduğu dini dönüşüme ve Bizans İmparatorluğu'yla kurulan dini, siyasi ve ekonomik bağlara dayandırmak mümkündür. Tarih boyunca Rus liderler bu bölgede egemenlik kurmayı ve çıkarlarını muhafaza etmeyi amaçlamışlardır. Bugün Orta Doğu bölgesi sahip olduğu stratejik konumu, zengin enerji kaynakları ve düşünsel önemiyle halen Rus dış politikasında önemli bir yer kaplamaya devam etmektedir. Bu çerçevede, Rusya'nın 2015 yılında Suriye iç savaşına askeri müdahalede bulunmuş olması Rus dış politikasında önemli dönüm noktalarından birini temsil etmektedir.

Bu tezin temel amacı, Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalede bulunma ve müdahaleden kaçınma eylemleri bağlamında, iki farklı kritik anda değişen dış politika davranışlarını incelemektir. Neoklasik gerçekçiliği teorik çerçeve olarak kullanan bu çalışma, Rusya'nın 2015 yılında Beşar Esad yönetimini desteklemek için Suriye'ye neden askeri müdahalede bulunduğunu ancak Hayat Tahrir el-Şam liderliğindeki muhalif güçler koalisyonunun 8 Aralık 2024 tarihinde Beşar rejimini devirdiği esnada Rusya'nın aynı eylemi yapmaktan neden kaçındığını kapsamlı bir şekilde ele almaktadır.

1998 yılında Gideon Rose tarafından ortaya atılan Neoklasik Gerçekçilik teorisi, farklı faktörleri sistematik olarak birlikte analiz etmeyi mümkün kılan kapsayıcı bir çerçeve sunmakla birlikte dış politika yapım süreçlerinde bağımlı ve bağımsız değişkenler arasındaki nedensellik ilişkisini ara değişkenlerin karar yapım süreçlerindeki etkisine

de temas ederek açıklar. Yani, devletlerin dış politika davranışlarını analiz ederken klasik gerçekçilik ve neorealizmden farklı olarak yapı ve aktörün oynamış olduğu rolü bir araya getirir. Bunu yaparken de sistemik ve alt sistemik faktörlerin, yani sistemsel veya alt-sistemsel fark etmeksizin yapının oynamış olduğu rolün, bir ülkenin dış politika tercihlerini önemli ölçüde etkileyebileceğini fakat lider algılamaları, kültür, ekonomik faktörler, gibi ara değişkenlere atıfla iç faktörlerin nihayetinde dış politika davranışlarını belirlediğini öne sürmektedir. Başka bir deyişle, sistemik ve alt sistemik kısıtlamaların veya fırsatların, bu çalışmada yer alan vaka çalışmasında gösterildiği gibi, iç siyasi faktörler üzerinden süzülerek dış politikaya nasıl yansıdığına odaklanır. Ancak, bu çalışmanın yüksek lisans tezi kapsamı içinde kalabilmesi için iç faktörler analiz edilirken her iki kritik anda da yalnızca lider algılamaları ara değişken olarak ele alınmıştır.

Bu tezin temel araştırma sorusunu "Rusya'nın Suriye'deki dış politika stratejisindeki değişimi ne açıklıyor?" oluşturmaktadır. Bu soruyu yanıtlarken aynı zamanda birkaç alt araştırma sorusuna da odaklanılmaktadır. Bunlar: "Rusya'nın askeri müdahalede bulunma kararını hangi iç ve dış faktörler etkiledi? Neoklasik gerçekçilik Rus dış politikasında meydana gelen stratejik değişimi nasıl açıklayabilir? Orta Doğu'daki bölgesel dinamikler, Rusya'nın dış politika davranışındaki değişikliklere ne şekilde katkıda bulundu? Son olarak, 2022'deki Rusya-Ukrayna savaşı, Rusya'nın Suriye'deki önceliklerini nasıl yeniden şekillendirdi? Mevcut literatürde Rusya'nın Suriye müdahalesini açıklarken neoklasik gerçekçilik teorisinden faydalanan çalışmaların azlığıyla birlikte 2024'te Rusya'nın müdahaleden kaçınma kararının bu konuda yeni akademik sorgulamaları tetiklemesi nedeniyle, bu çalışma her iki kritik anı neoklasik gerçekçilik teorisiyle karşılaştırmalı olarak analiz ederek literatüre katkıda bulunmayı hedeflemektedir.

Bu araştırmada nitel yöntemlerden yararlanılmıştır. Araştırmanın asıl yöntemini vaka analizi oluşturmakla birlikte söylem analizi yönteminden de alt-yöntem olarak, özellikle ara değişken olarak lider algılamalarının rolünü ortaya çıkarırken faydalanılmıştır. Bu bağlamda, analiz için gerekli olan veri hem birincil hem de ikincil kaynaklardan, detaylandırmak gerekirse elektronik kaynaklardan, mevcut literatürden, ders kitaplarından, gazetelerden, düşüncü kuruluşu raporlarından, röportajlardan ve

Kremlin tarafından yayınlanan belgeler ve Rus yetkililer tarafından yapılan açıklamalardan toplanmıştır.

Bu tez beş bölüme ayrılmıştır ve her bölüm, tezin ana argümanın farklı bir yönünü incelemek ve ana araştırma sorusuna tutarlı bir yanıt geliştirmek üzere tasarlanmıştır. Giriş bölümünde, yukarıda kısa bir özeti sunulduğu üzere, tezin amacı, kapsamı, yöntemi ve genel yapısının açıklanmasının ardından ikinci bölümde mevcut literatürde, özellikle Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalesini konu eden akademik çalışmalar eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla incelenerek mevcut çalışmaların eksiklikleri ortaya konmuş ve bu müdahaleyi açıklarken merkeze alınan genel eğilimler maddi faktörler ve düşünsel faktörler olarak sınıflandırılmıştır. Ayrıca ikinci bölümde, çalışmanın teorik alt yapısını oluşturan neoklasik gerçekçilik teorisi limitasyonlarıyla birlikte detaylıca ele alınmıştır. Üçüncü ve dördüncü bölümlerde ise teorik çerçeve sırasıyla Rusya'nın askeri müdahalede bulunma ve müdahaleden kaçınma eylemlerini konu alan önemli olaylara/ kritik anlara uygulanmıştır. Vakaların analiz edildiği her iki bölümde de teorik çerçevenin önerdiği üzere ilk önce sistemik ve alt sistemik faktörler analiz edilirken devamında bu faktörlerin iç faktörlerle, özellikle lider algılamalarıyla filtrelenerek dış politika davranışlarını belirlemedeki rolü analiz edilmiştir. Sonuç bölümünde ise her iki kritik olaydaki bulgular özetlenerek, karşılaştırmalı olarak analiz edilmiştir.

İkinci bölüm ise yukarıda kısaca bahsedildiği üzere literatür taraması ve teorik çerçevenin yer aldığı alt bölümlerden oluşmaktadır. Rusya'nın Suriye politikaları, özellikle askeri müdahalede bulunma eylemi üzerine yazılmış mevcut literatürde yer alan çalışmaları maddi ve düşünsel faktörler olarak iki ana başlık altında kategorize etmek mümkündür. Bu anlamda, bazı araştırmacılar Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalesini jeopolitik, ulusal güvenlik, ekonomik ve askeri kazanımlar gibi maddi faktörlerle açıklarken, bazıları ise Rusya'nın Suriye müdahalesini anlamlandırmak için büyük güç statüsü/kimliği ve dini boyut gibi düşünsel faktörlere odaklanmaktadır. Bunların dışında, Rusya'nın Suriye'de askeri müdahaleden kaçınma eylemiyle ilgili olarak doğrudan bir çalışma bulunmamakla birlikte Esad sonrası Rusya'nın Suriye politikalarını ve Esad'ın devrilmesini ağırlıklı olarak iç dinamiklere bağlayan bir makale mevcuttur. Yani bahse konu bu çalışma kısmen Beşar'ın düşüşüne odaklanarak bunu iç faktörlerle ve Beşar'ın bölgede Türkiye ile olan normalleşme

çabalarının olumsuz sonuçlanması ve Gazze'de devam savaşla birlikte zayıflayan konumuyla açıklamaktadır. Fakat, bu çalışma her ne kadar Beşar'ın düşüşünü açıklarken bazı bölgesel gelişmelere değinse de bölgesel bağlamın sistemik ve derinlemesine bir analizini sunmakta başarısız olmuştur. Bu anlamda, bu tez Rusya'nın Suriye'de askeri müdahaleden kaçınma kararını sistemik, alt sistemik ve iç faktörlerle derinlemesine analiz ederek, Rusya'nın Suriye'deki değişen dış politika davranışını müdahalede bulunma ve müdahaleden kaçınma eylemlerini karşılaştırarak kapsamlı bir şekilde anlamayı sağlayacaktır.

Bu bölümde yer alan bir diğer alt bölüm ise teorik çerçevenin limitasyonlarıyla birlikte yer aldığı kısımdır. Giriş kısmında büyük ölçüde özetlendiği üzere, neoklasik gerçekçilik, sistemik, alt-sistemik ve iç faktörleri analiz etmeyi mümkün kıldığından ve daha kapsamlı bir teorik çerçeve sunduğundan dolayı bu çalışmada kullanılmıştır. Klasik gerçekçilik ve neorealizm arasındaki teorik boşluğu yapı ve aktörü bir araya getirerek dolduran neoklasik gerçekçilik, sistemik ve alt sistemik kısıtlamaları ve fırsatları karar vericilerin algıları veya devlet yapısı gibi birim düzeyindeki ara değişkenler (unit-level variables) aracılığıyla aktarır. Neoklasik gerçekçilik her ne kadar devletlerin dış politika davranışlarını anlamada kapsamlı bir çerçeve sunsa da bu teorik çerçevenin belirli sınırlamaları mevcuttur. Özellikle iç faktörler analiz edilirken araştırmacıların stratejik etkileşim, rejim türü, kamuoyu ve medya baskıları, kültür ve kimlik, algılar, fikirler ve inançlar gibi birbirinden farklı ara değişkenlere odaklanması ve bu konuda genel bir çerçevenin olmayışı, aynı zamanda ara değişkenlerin sürekli olarak çeşitlenmesiyle birlikte hangi değişkenlere odaklanılması gerektiği hususu önemli sınırlılıklar ortaya çıkarmıştır. Ara değişkenlerin tanımlanması noktasında ortaya çıkan bu zorluk teorik bağdaşmazlık, hatta epistemolojik ve ontolojik tutarsızlıklara bile yol açabileceği ön görülmektedir. Bu yüzden, bazı araştırmacılar bu teorik çerçeveyi dejeneratif kuramsallaştırma olarak isimlendirmektedir. Bunun yanı sıra, neoklasik gerçekçiliğin hedef ülke örneğine uygulanması ve bu çerçevede bağlamsal bilginin üretilmesi sürecinde belli sınırlamalar ve zorluklar bulunmaktadır. Christensen gibi önde gelen neoklasik gerçekçilerin belirttiği üzere, hedeflenen ülkedeki iç faktörleri analiz ederken, özellikle ara değişkenleri doğru bir şekilde belirleyebilmek adına söz konusu ülkede devlet yapılanması ve karar verme mekanizmalarının işleyişini hem teorik hem de

pratik olarak tespit edilebilmesi, hatta hedef ülkenin dili ve kültürü de dahil olmak üzere çok fazla bilgiye sahip olunması gerekmektedir. Bu gerekliliğin teorik çerçevenin iyi bir şekilde uygulanması ve bahse konu ülkenin dış politika davranışlarının doğru bir şekilde analiz edilebilmesi için ne kadar önemli olduğu düşünüldüğünde, özellikle kurumların ve karar verme süreçlerinin şeffaf olarak işletilmediği otoriter ülkelerde bu teorik çerçevenin doğru bir şekilde uygulanabilmesi araştırmacıları önemli bir zorluk ve sınırlılıkla karşı karşıya bırakmaktadır.

Üçüncü bölümde ise Rusya'nın Suriye'de askeri müdahalede bulunma eylemi temel olarak sistemik, alt sistemik ve iç faktörlere, özellikle lider algılamalarına odaklanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Bu bölüm beş alt bölümden oluşmaktadır.

İlk alt bölüm de Arap ayaklanmalarının nasıl hızla bölgesel protestolara dönüştüğü ve Suriye'ye yayılarak iç savaşa evrildiği, yani Rusya'nın askeri müdahalede bulunma eylemine giden süreç kısa bir tarihsel arka plan bilgisi olarak incelenmiştir.

İkinci alt bölümde ise sistemik koşulların, özellikle uluslararası sistemdeki tek kutupluluktan çok kutupluluğa geçişin Rusya'nın müdahalede bulunma eylemi için nasıl elverişli bir uluslararası ortam yarattığına ve olanak sağladığına odaklanılmaktadır. Bunu yaparken de Rusya'nın askeri müdahalede bulunma eyleminin, uluslararası sistemde gözlemlenen sistemik değişikliklerden kaynaklandığı iddia edilmiştir. Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde ortaya çıkan uluslararası sistemin tek kutuplu yapısı, yeni alternatif güç merkezlerinin ortaya çıkışı ve yükselişiyle birlikte özellikle yerini yavaş yavaş çok kutupluluğa bırakmıştır. Çin'in yükselişi ve Rusya'nın çeşitli müdahalelerle yeniden ortaya çıkışı, uluslararası sistemde uzun süredir ABD tarafından şekillendirilen siyasi, ekonomik ve güvenlik yapılarına meydan okumuştur. Dolayısıyla, tek kutupluluktan çok kutupluluğa geçişle birlikte, ABD hegemonyası dünyanın çeşitli bölgelerinde aşınmaya ve sınanmaya başlanmıştır. Örneğin, ABD'nin Çin'in yükselişine karşı koymak için odağını Orta Doğu'dan Asya'ya çevirmesi, bölgedeki hegemonik varlığını bilinçli olarak azaltması ve bununla birlikte bölgede müdahaleci politikalar izlemek yerine yerel düzeyde kapasite geliştirerek vekil güçlere daha fazla yaslanması bunun önemli göstergelerindendir. Bu durum, yani tek kutupluluktan çok kutupluluğa geçişle birlikte ABD hegemonyasının aşınması meselesi kaçınılmaz olarak, özellikle de Rusya'nın 2000'li yılların başından itibaren uluslararası sistemdeki Batı etkisine karşı koymak ve büyük güç statüsünü

yeniden tesis etmek amacıyla çok kutuplu bir uluslararası düzeni güçlendirmeyi amaçladığı politikalar göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, Rusya'nın müdahaleci politikalar izleyeceği uluslararası bir ortam yaratmıştır. Dolayısıyla, Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalede bulunma kararı, o dönemde uluslararası sistemde ortaya çıkan fırsatlardan kaynaklanmıştır. Rusya'nın Suriye müdahalesi çok kutupluluk tarafından beslenmekle birlikte askeri bir operasyon olmanın ötesine geçmiş ve Christopher Phillips'in ifade ettiği üzere uluslararası sistemde ABD hegemonyasının aşınmaya başladığını gösteren jeopolitik bir ifadeye dönüşmüştür.

Üçüncü alt bölümde ise sistemik faktörlerin tek başına Rusya'nın Suriye'ye müdahalede bulunma eylemini tam anlamıyla açıklayamadığını ve alt sistemik faktörlere yani bölgesel faktörlere de odaklanılması gerektiğinin altı çizilmektedir. Bu alt bölümde, bölgesel düzeydeki stratejik ortamın, Beşar Esad'ın Rusya'yı müdahalede bulunması için resmi olarak davet etmesi göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, sistemik düzeyde olduğu gibi, müdahaleye elverişli bir ortam oluşturduğu ve bölgesel düzeyde jeopolitik fırsatların ve bölgesel güç dengelerinin Moskova'nın müdahalede bulunma kararını şekillendirdiği savunulmaktadır. Kısaca açıklamak gerekirse, Arap ayaklanmalarından sonra Suriye vekalet savaşlarının yapıldığı bir çatışma alanına dönüşmüştür. Özellikle ABD'nin Irak müdahalesinden sonra bölgesel düzende ortaya çıkan ve her kriz anında daha da derinleşen Suudi Arabistan ve İran rekabeti Suriye'de de vuku bulmuştur ve bu rekabette farklı siyasi kamplarda yer alan hem bölge hem de bölge dışı ülkeler, kendi çıkarlarını maksimize etmek amacıyla Suriye'deki rejimi veya muhalefet güçlerini desteklemiştir. Bu durum, Suriye iç savaşını daha da karmaşık hale getirerek çatışmaların uzun süre devam etmesi sonucunu doğurmuştur. Örnek vermek gerekirse, Suudi Arabistan, Beşar Esad rejimi devirmek ve Suriye'yi bu bölgesel rekabet bağlamında Suudi Arabistan liderliğindeki kampa kaydırmak amacıyla Özgür Suriye Ordusu gruplarına, El Kaide bağlantılı Nusra El-Ehl-i Şam Cephesi de dahil olmak üzere Selefi-cihatçı savaşçılara örtülü olarak finansal ve askeri desteğini vermiştir. Buna karşılık olarak ise İran, Beşar Esad'ın Suriye'de iktidarda kalmasını sağlamak için 2012'den itibaren çift yönlü bir strateji benimseyerek Suriye İç Savaşı'nı hem diplomatik hem de askeri yollarla çözmeye çalışmıştır. Ancak bölgesel gelişmeleri incelediğimiz zaman Suudi Arabistan-İran rekabetinin Suriye İç Savaşı'nı şekillendiren bölgesel düzendeki tek dinamik olmadığı görürüz. Özellikle,

Türkiye, Katar ve devlet dışı bir aktör olarak IŞİD'in yeni bölgesel bağlamı şekillendirdiğini ve Suriye'de Beşar Esad rejiminin zayıflamasına katkıda bulunduğunu görmekteyiz. Bu nedenle, Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalede bulunma eyleminin bölgedeki bu dengeli müdahaleler ve güç rekabetiyle oldukça bağlantılı olduğunu göz önünde bulundurmak gerekir. Bölgesel politikada hâkim olan bu dinamik, yani dengeli müdahale anlayışı, Beşar Esad rejiminin topraklarının neredeyse tamamını muhalif gruplara ve IŞİD'e kaybetmek üzere olduğu 30 Eylül 2015 tarihine, yani Rusya'nın belirleyici müdahalesine kadar devam etmiştir. Rusya'nın 30 Eylül 2015 tarihindeki belirleyici müdahalesi, sahadaki durumu ve dengeleri Beşar Esad rejiminin lehine çevirerek, rejimin devamlılığını sağlamıştır. Ancak Rusya'nın müdahalede bulunma kararı yalnızca bölgesel güç dengeleri tarafından değil aynı zaman da bölgesel jeopolitik fırsatlar tarafından da şekillenmiştir. Moskova, özellikle Beşar Esad rejimiyle olan yakın bağları nedeniyle Beşar'ın devrilmesi durumunda sahip olduğu askeri varlıkların ve çeşitli ayrıcalıkların sona ereceğinden endişe etmekteydi. Bu yüzden, Rusya, Suriye İç Savaşı'na doğrudan askeri müdahalede bulunarak başlıca çıkarlarını korudu ve hatta daha da pekiştirdi. Örneğin, Rusya, Doğu Akdeniz'deki askeri stratejisi için önemli olan Tartus'taki deniz üssü ve Khmeimim hava üssünü güvence altına alarak bahse konu askeri unsurları korumakla birlikte bu askeri varlıkların statülerini ve ayrıcalıklarını iyileştirdi.

Dördüncü alt bölümde ise Rusya'nın Suriye müdahalesi ele alınırken iç faktörlere, özellikle Putin'in algılamalarına odaklanılmakta ve sistemik ve alt sistemik koşulların iç faktörler aracılığıyla nasıl filtrelendiği veyahut şekillendiği açıklanmaktadır. Sistemik ve alt sistemik koşullar, Rusya'nın dış politika yapımında daha atılgan veyahut iddialı politikalar izlemesi için elverişli bir uluslararası ve bölgesel ortam yaratmış ve Suriye'ye askeri müdahalede bulunma kararını büyük ölçüde şekillendirmiş olsa da bütün bunlar Rusya'nın bulunmuş olduğu askeri müdahalenin ardındaki tüm motivasyonları açıklamada, özellikle iç faktörlerin oynadığı belirleyici rolü de göz önünde bulunduracak olursak, yetersiz kalmaktadır. Bu anlamda, Moskova'nın askeri müdahalesinde belirleyici rol oynayan unsurlardan biri de özellikle Putin'in algılamaları olmak üzere, iç faktörler olmuştur. 2011 ve 2012 Rusya'sının in iç siyasi ve ekonomik ortamında Putin, iktidarını daha çok iç kaynaklı meşruiyet unsurlarına dayandıran bir politika izlemiştir ve bu doğrultuda dış politikayı

kendi rejimini sağlamlaştırmak amacıyla araçsallaştırmıştır. Buna yönelik olarak ise Rus kamuoyunu hedefleyerek Rusların düşünce ve inançlarını şekillendirmiştir. Burret'e (2025) göre, Putin, 2012'de üçüncü kez seçildikten sonra üç milliyetçi anlatıya odaklanmıştır. Bunlar: "ordunun yüceltilmesi, sosyal muhafazakarlık ve Batı'ya karşı varoluşsal bir hayatta kalma mücadelesi" (s. 3). Suriye meselesinde ise Putin'in algılamaları üç temel söylem etrafında şekillenmiştir. Bunlar: öz koruma, uluslararası terörizm sorunu ve Batı karşıtı söylemler. Bunlara kısaca değinmek gerekirse, öz koruma söylemi özellikle IŞİD'e katılan yabancı savaşçıların birçoğunun Rusya ve eski Sovyet ülkelerinden Suriye'ye geçmiş Kafkas ve Çeçen kökenli savaşçılar olması ve günün sonunda Suriye'de edindikleri savaş deneyimleriyle ülkelerine dönerek terör saldırılarında bulunacaklarına dair daha güvenlikçi bir söylem etrafında şekillenmiştir. İkincil olarak, benzer şekilde, uluslararası terörizm meselesinde, Suriye'de muhtemel bir devlet otoritesi yokluğunda ortaya çıkacak bir güç boşluğunda Irak, Libya ve Afganistan'dakine benzer radikal unsurların filizlenerek yeni terör sorunlarına yol açacak olmasına ve bölgeyi daha da istikrarsızlaştıracağını yönelik algılamaları Putin'in söylemlerinde genişçe yer bulmuştur. Üçüncül olarak ise bölgede ortaya çıkan Arap ayaklanmaları ve bunun Suriye sahasına yansımaları, Batı'nın meşru hükümetleri askeri güç kullanmadan, yani Libya, Irak, Afganistan ve Sırbistan'daki Batı müdahalelerinin aksine, ayrılıkçı hareketleri ve muhalif grupları desteklediği 'renkli devrimlere' benzetilmiştir. Kremlin'in bu durumu özellikle Batı'nın Rusya'nın müttefiklerini çeşitli yollarla devirmeyi amaçladığı ve günün sonunda ise bu taktikleri kullanarak Rusya'yı zayıflatmayı planladığı şeklindeki düşüncesi Putin'in söylemlerine yansımıştır.

Beşinci alt bölüm ise, sistemik, alt sistemik ve iç faktörlerin Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalesinde nasıl kritik bir rol oynadığının kısa bir özetini sunmaktadır. Yani bu bölüm, bölüm boyunca tartışıldığı üzere hem uluslararası hem de bölgesel yapının Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalesinde elverişli bir ortam yarattığını ancak iç faktörlerin yani aktörlerin oynamış olduğu rolün, Rusya'nın müdahale eylemini belirleyen nihai faktör olduğu özlü bir şekilde vurgulanmıştır.

Dördüncü bölümde ise Rusya'nın Suriye'de müdahaleden kaçınma tutumu temel olarak üçüncü bölümde olduğu gibi sistemik, alt-sistemik ve iç faktörlere, özellikle

lider algılamalarına odaklanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Bu bölüm beş alt bölümden oluşmaktadır.

İlk alt bölüm, 8 Aralık öncesinde Suriye'deki durumun ne kadar kırılgan olduğunu tasvir ederken Suriye'deki rejimin uzun zamandır maruz kaldığı siyasi izolasyonun sona erdiği ve bölge ülkeleriyle ilişkilerinin normalleştiği bir zamanda neden çöktüğünü açıklamaktadır. Bunu yaparken de her ne kadar küresel salgın, ticaret kısıtlamaları, 2023 yılındaki yıkıcı depremlerin etkileri ve 14 yıla yakın süren Suriye İç Savaşı Esad rejimi ciddi bir şekilde zayıflatmış olsa da Rusya'nın müdahaleden kaçınma eyleminin Suriye'deki Esad rejiminin sonunu getirdiği iddia edilmektedir.

İkinci alt bölümde ise sistemik dinamiklerin Rusya'nın Suriye politikalarını nasıl etkilediği analiz edilirken, Rusya'nın göreli konumuna ve maddi kapasitesine odaklanılmakta ve Rusya'nın Ukrayna'daki savaşın ağır ekonomik, askeri ve jeopolitik maliyetleri nedeniyle uluslararası sistemdeki konumunun göreceli olarak zayıfladığı ve bu yüzden Suriye'deki önceliklerini değiştirdiği iddia edilmektedir. Başka bir deyişle, Rusya'nın uzun vadede Ukrayna'daki saldırganlığını sürdürebilecek askeri, demografik, ekonomik ve siyasi kapasiteye sahip olsa da sistemik kısıtlamalar nedeniyle Suriye politikasını yeniden kalibre etmek zorunda kaldığının altı çizilmektedir. Ayrıntılı olarak incelemek gerekirse, Rusya'nın Ukrayna'ya yönelik saldırganlığı ABD, İngiltere ve AB tarafından sistemik düzeyde ağır baskılara maruz kalmasına yol açmıştır. Bu sistemik baskılar, kapsamlı ekonomik yaptırımlar, ağır askeri kayıplar ve önemli jeopolitik maliyetler şeklinde tezahür etmiştir. Özellikle Rusya'nın maruz kaldığı sistemik baskılar savaşın başladığı 2022 yılından günümüze kadar katlanarak artmaya devam etmiştir. Kısaca değinmek gerekirse, AB, Rusya'nın saldırganlığına şimdiye kadar uygulanan en sert yaptırım paketiyle karşılık vererek Rusya'ya ve Rus siyasi elitlerine ağır siyasi ve ekonomik bedeller ödetmiştir. Bunlar 'bireylere yönelik yaptırımlar', 'şirketlere ve kuruluşlara yönelik yaptırımlar', 'finans ve iş hizmetleri önlemleri', 'enerji sektörü', 'ulaşım ve altyapı sektörleri', 'ileri teknoloji ürünleri', 'ticareti kısıtlayıcı önlemler: ithalat ve ihracat yasakları' ve 'vize önemleri' gibi alanları kapsamaktadır. Bu ağır yaptırımlar, özellikle Rus ekonomisinin itici gücünü oluşturan kilit sektörleri hedeflemiştir. Örneğin, AB, Rusya'dan petrol ithalatını yüzde 90'dan fazla azaltmakla birlikte 2027 yılına kadar Rus doğalgaz ve petrolüne olan bağımlılığını tamamen sona erdirmeyi planlamaktadır.

Benzer şekilde, Mills'e (2025) göre, Şubat 2022'den bu yana İngiltere, AB ve ABD, toplamda en az 450 milyar dolar değerinde Rus varlığını dondurmuş veyahut hareketsiz hale getirmiştir. Bu nedenle, Batı yaptırımlarının stratejik sektörleri hedef aldığını ve kapsamlarının zamanla genişletilerek Rusya üzerinde ağır sistemik baskılar oluşturduğunu söylemek mümkündür. Ekonomik yaptırımların yanı sıra, Rusya önemli askeri personel ve teçhizat kayıplarına da uğramıştır. Rakamlara göre 2025 yılı itibariyle hayatını kaybeden ve yaralanan toplam askeri personel sayısı bir milyonu aşarken, Kasım 2025 itibariyle imha edilen, hasar gören, ele geçirilen veya terk edilen askeri teçhizat sayısı toplamda 23.551'e ulaşmıştır. Bu anlamda, Rusya'nın askeri personel ve teçhizat kayıpları Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde daha önce eşi benzeri görülmemiş düzeydedir ve bu durum Rusya'nın uluslararası sistemdeki göreli konumunu önemli ölçüde etkilerken, Suriye'deki önceliklerini de değiştirmesine etki etmiştir. Son olarak, Rusya'nın Ukrayna'daki savaş saldırganlığı, yalnızca önemli ekonomik ve askeri maliyetlere değil, aynı zamanda AB'nin iç konsolidasyonu, savunma iş birliği ve harcamalarının artması ve Finlandiya ve İsveç'in katılımıyla NATO'nun genişlemesi göz önünde bulundurulduğunda ciddi jeopolitik maliyetlere de yol açmıştır. Bu nedenle, bu sistemik baskılar Rusya için kısıtlayıcı bir uluslararası ortam yaratmıştır. Rusya, Ukrayna'daki saldırganlığını ve maruz kaldığı sistemik baskıları rejim istikrarı ve halkın ve ekonominin seferber edilmesi sayesinde uzun vadede sürdürmeyi başarmış olsa da uluslararası sistemdeki göreceli konumu ve materyal kapasitesindeki düşüş Moskova'yı Suriye'deki önceliklerini değiştirmeye zorlamıştır. Bu nedenle, Rusya'nın Beşar Esad rejimine ve rejimle bağlantılı aktörlere askeri ve finansal yardım sağlama, Suriye'deki Rus ordusu için kaynak ayırma kapasitesi ve isteği önemli ölçüde azalmıştır.

Üçüncü alt bölümde ise bölgesel düzeyde etkili olan alt sistemik faktörlerin, Moskova'nın Suriye'de müdahaleden kaçınma tutumuna katkıda bulunduğu savunulmaktadır. Bölgesel düzeyde stratejik ortamın yapısı Hamas-İsrail savaşı ve İsrail'in bölgedeki istikrar bozucu faaliyetleri ve savaşı tüm bölgeye yayma çabalarından dolayı sistemik düzeyde olduğu gibi kısıtlayıcıydı. Hamas-İsrail savaşıyla birlikte ortaya çıkan savaşın tüm bölgeye yayılma riski karşısında Rusya, bölgesel düzeyde güç dengeleri daha fazla gözetmeye ve bölgedeki kilit devletlerle, özellikle Suriye'de askeri varlığı olan Türkiye ve İran gibi devletlerle Suriye

konusunda daha uyumlu politikalar izlemeye ve kendi çıkarlarını tehlikeye atabilecek iddialı politikalar izlemekten kaçınmaya başlamıştır. Örneğin, Rusya'nın Türkiye-Suriye ilişkilerinin normalleşmesine yönelik diplomatik girişimleri bu dönemde yoğunlaşmış ve Türkiye, Suriye, İran ve Rusya'nın yer aldığı dörtlü formatın yanı sıra Astana Formatı kapsamında 21., 22., ve 23. Uluslararası Yüksek Düzeyli Toplantıların düzenlenmesine zemin hazırlamıştır. Benzer şekilde, Rusya'nın Suriye konusunda İran'la olan rekabeti, Rusya-Ukrayna savaşı ve İsrail'in bölgedeki istikrarsızlaştırıcı faaliyetlerinden kaynaklanan sistemik ve alt sistemik kısıtlamalar nedeniyle daha işbirlikçi bir ilişkiye dönüşmüştür. Örneğin, İran, Ukrayna'da konuşlandırılacak insansız hava araçlarının tedariki ve ortak üretimi konusunda Rusya'ya yardımcı olurken, Rusya da bunun karşılığında İran ile askeri teknoloji ve istihbarat paylaşımı alanındaki iş birliğini derinleştirmiştir. Bu yüzden, genel olarak, Rusya'nın Beşar Esad rejimini destek vermekte isteksiz kalmasının diğer bir nedeni olarak bölgesel düzeydeki kısıtlayıcı stratejik ortam olduğunu söyleyebiliriz.

Dördüncü alt bölümde ise Putin'in Beşar rejimine yönelik algılamalarının, Moskova'nın müdahaleden kaçınma eyleminde belirleyici bir rol oynadığı savunulmaktadır. Putin'in anayasa görüşmelerinin başarısızlığından duyduğu hayal kırıklığı, Beşar'ın Moskova'yı Tahran'a karşı kullanması, askeri reformların uygulanması ve devlet otoritesinin yeniden inşası konularında beklentilerin karşılanmaması ile terör tehditlerinin ortadan kaldırılmasına ilişkin açıklamaları, Rusya'nın Suriye'de müdahaleden kaçınma kararını belirlemiştir. Detaylı bir şekilde incelediğinde ise Putin'in algılamalarının farklı şekillerde tezahür ettiğini söylemek mümkündür. Örnek vermek gerekirse, anayasa görüşmelerinin başarısızlıkla sonuçlanması Putin'in Suriye'deki uzun vadeli hedeflerini sekteye uğratmıştır ve Beşar'ın bu tutumu Rus medyasında geniş yankı bulmuş ve ciddi şekilde eleştirilmiştir. Benzer şekilde, Beşar'ın Moskova'yı Tahran'a karşı kullanması ve askeri reformların ve merkezi devlet otoritesinin yeniden inşasındaki başarısızlığı, Beşar rejimi ile Rusya arasında derin bir güvensizlik yaratmıştır. Bu durum özellikle Antonio Giustozzi tarafından ortaya konulduğu üzere Suriye'deki Rus diplomatlar tarafından da dile getirilmiştir. Ayrıca, Putin ve Lavrov'un terör riskinin ortadan kalkması ve Beşar rejimine alternatiflerin olduğuna ilişkin açıklamaları, Moskova'nın müdahaleden kaçınma politikasını lider seviyesinde doğrudan açıklamaktadır.

Dolayısıyla, Rusya'nın Suriye'de müdahaleden kaçınma kararı sadece Beşar rejimine duyulan güvensizlik ve olumsuz algılamalardan değil, aynı zamanda Rusya'nın Suriye'deki misyonunu tamamladığı ve terör riskinin ortadan kalktığına ve Beşar Esad'ın yerinin başka alternatiflerle doldurulabileceğine dair oluşan algılamalardan da kaynaklanmıştır.

Beşinci alt bölümde, yani bölüm içi sonuç bölümünde ise sistemik ve alt sistemik düzeyde, Rusya'nın Ukrayna'daki savaş saldırganlığıyla birlikte Orta Doğu'da ortaya çıkan Hamas-İsrail savaşının uluslararası ve bölgesel düzeyde kısıtlayıcı bir stratejik ortam yarattığına ancak iç faktörlerin yani farklı biçimlerde tezahür etmiş olan lider algılamalarının oynamış olduğu rolün, Rusya'nın müdahaleden kaçınma eylemini belirleyen nihai faktör olduğu özlü bir şekilde vurgulanmıştır.

Beşinci bölüm, yani sonuç bölümünde ise Rusya'nın Suriye'de müdahalede bulunma ve müdahaleden kaçınma eylemleri farklı düzeylerde karşılaştırılarak Moskova'nın Suriye politikasındaki bu stratejik değişime gerçekten neyin yol açtığına dair temel farklılıklar vurgulanmaktadır.

Örneğin, uluslararası stratejik ortamın yapısı Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalede bulunma eylemini elverişli kılarken, bu durum Rusya'nın müdahalede kaçınma eyleminde tam tersidir ve sistemik düzeyde kısıtlayıcı bir stratejik ortam vardır. İlgili bölümlerde detaylıca açıklandığı üzere sistemik faktörlerin, özellikle uluslararası sistemde alternatif güç merkezlerinin yükselişiyle birlikte tek kutupluluktan çok kutupluluğa doğru yaşanan büyük değişim ve ABD'nin Orta Doğu'daki angajman şeklini değiştirmesi ve odağını Asya'ya kaydırması Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalesini şekillendiren önemli bir sistemik etken olurken, Rusya'nın Suriye'de yeni bir müdahaleden kaçındığı ikinci kritik anda, Rusya-Ukrayna savaşının yaratmış olduğu sistemik baskılar, özellikle karşı karşıya kalmış olduğu ağır ekonomik, askeri ve jeopolitik maaliyetler Suriye'deki önceliklerini yeniden şekillendirmesine ve müdahaleci politikalardan kaçınmasına yol açmıştır.

Benzer şekilde, bölgesel stratejik ortamın yapısı, özellikle Beşar Esad'ın Rusya'ya askeri müdahalede bulunması için yapmış olduğu resmi davet ve mevcut jeopolitik fırsatlar düşünüldüğünde Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalede bulunabileceği ve Orta Doğu'daki temel çıkarlarını en üst düzeye çıkarabileceği elverişli bir stratejik

ortam yaratmıştır. Bu durum, Hamas-İsrail savaşı ve devam eden savaşın bölgesel yankılarının sürdüğü alt sistemik stratejik ortam düşünüldüğünde Rusya'yı kendi çıkarlarını tehlikeye atabilecek müdahaleci politikalar izlemek yerine, bölgedeki kilit devletlerle olan yakın ilişkilerini güçlendirdiği politikalar izlemeye itmiştir. Yani, bölgesel stratejik ortamın kısıtlayıcı yapısı Rusya'nın Suriye'de müdahaleden kaçınma tutumuna katkıda bulunmuştur.

Son olarak, iç faktörler, özellikle Putin'in algılamaları Moskova'nın hem müdahalede bulunma hem de müdahaleden kaçınma eylemlerinde belirleyici rol oynamıştır. Her iki anda da sistemik ve alt sistemik faktörler Putin'in perspektifinden geçerek veyahut başka bir deyişiyle süzgecinden süzülerek dış politika davranışına dönüşmüştür. Bu bağlamda, Putin'in söylemlerinde açıkça görüldüğü üzere ilk kritik anda, yani Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalesi üç anlatı etrafında; işaret etmek gerekirse: Batı karşıtı anlatılarla, terörle mücadeleyle ve öz koruma ile çerçevelenmiştir. İkinci kritik anda ise Putin'in Beşar rejimine karşı farklı şekillerde tezahür eden olumsuz algılamaları ve rejime karşı duyulan güvensizlikle birlikte Rusya'ya karşı yönelebilecek bir terör riskinin ortadan kalkışı ve Suriye'de Beşar Esad rejimine alternatif olabilecek aktörlerin ortaya çıkışı Moskova'nın müdahaleden kaçınma eylemini belirlemiştir.

Özetle, sistemik ve alt sistemik koşullar, her iki düzeyde de devletlerin belirli fırsatlara ve zorluklara maruz kalmalarına ve dış politika tercihlerini büyük ölçüde belirlemelerine neden olsalar da tek başlarına bir devletin dış politika davranışlarını açıklamaya yetmezler. Bu bağlamda, bahse konu bu tez Rusya'nın Suriye'ye askeri müdahalede bulunma ve müdahaleden kaçınma eylemlerinde sistemik ve alt sistemik faktörlerin etkisini analiz ettikten sonra iç faktörlere de odaklanarak her iki kritik anda da sistemik ve alt sistemik koşulların lider algılamaları üzerinden süzülerek nasıl dış politika davranışına dönüştüğünü ortaya koymuştur.

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