The Role of Status in Military Interventions of Russia, Iran, and Türkiye in Syria

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Abstract

The Syrian civil war provides a novel contemporary case for examining how different status-seeking powers engage in military interventions simultaneously. This study evaluates the actions of Russia, Iran, and Türkiye in Syria to assess the extent to which their interventions serve to enhance their international status. Through a comparative analysis of primary and secondary sources, the research reveals the complex dynamics between status deficits and military conflicts. The findings indicate that while status gains through military intervention were evident for all three nations before the downfall of the Assad regime, only Russia explicitly pursued status enhancement. In contrast, for Türkiye and Iran, any status acquired was largely a byproduct of their broader strategic goals and security concerns. After the regime's collapse, Russia and Iran struggled to retain their status, whereas Türkiye managed to maintain, or even enhance, its standing. This empirical study also contributes to the status literature by demonstrating that not only major powers but also middle powers may resort to violence and gain international status. Furthermore, this research challenges state-centric views on status by showing that dissatisfied states may confront non-state actors to elevate their status without engaging in traditional interstate warfare.

Keywords: Status-Seeking, Status Deficit, Military Conflict, Syrian Crisis.

1. Introduction

The civil war in Syria emerged as a complex conflict in contemporary international relations, marked by the involvement of various external actors trying to influence the conflict and reshape the regional balance of power. In this conflict, Russia, Iran, and Türkiye played key roles through direct and indirect military actions. These interventions significantly impacted the course of the war in Syria and have also affected the international standing of these countries.

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This study examines whether and to what extent the military interventions by Russia, Iran, and Türkiye in Syria can be regarded as a means to achieve international status. It aims to provide a clearer understanding of how the pursuit of status intersects with strategic geopolitical concerns in shaping the foreign policy behaviors of these countries.

International status is a country's perceived rank within the global and regional hierarchy recognized by others. Along with other material and ideational factors, status-seeking is a significant motivation influencing state behavior. It is mainly associated with soft power tools like diplomacy and participation in international organizations. However, military intervention also acts as a way to gain status. Additionally, the existing literature extensively examines these interventions through geopolitical perspectives and highlights the power-maximization and security motives of these countries in Syria, but such accounts often overlook the role of status deficits and aspirations. In this regard, the conceptual and theoretical understanding of the role of status in military conflicts has been insufficiently explored in studies of Russia, Iran, and Türkiye's military interventions in Syria. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the connection between their status-seeking efforts and military interventions in Syria. The Syrian civil war presents a unique empirical case where different types of status-seeking powers engaged in military intervention simultaneously, offering an opportunity to compare how these actors' status pursuits intersect with hard power projection.

As a subjective and socially constructed concept, status presents methodological challenges. In this sense, both quantitative and qualitative methods have limitations in studying status-driven behaviors. Quantitative methods offer limited indicators for measuring status (Duque, 2018, pp. 582–585; Renshon, 2016, pp. 527–534, 2017, pp. 120–132), and they also struggle to capture ideational dimensions in the pursuit of status. For this reason, our study employs a qualitative approach, focusing both on the discourse of leaders and policymakers and foreign policy actions, to clarify the role of status in military interventions better. We examine subjective and perceptual statements, acknowledging that status motivations are often expressed indirectly through terms like national rights, honor, and dignity (Murray, 2019, p. 85; Ward, 2017, p. 63). This approach allows us to map out each state's perceived place in the international hierarchy and their status aspirations (MacDonald & Parent, 2021, p. 367) while admitting the potential tactical use of emotional language in official discourse (Götz, 2019).

This study also conducts an in-depth comparative analysis of Russia, Iran, and Türkiye's motivations for military intervention in Syria. These countries, all with status deficits, provide useful case studies to investigate whether and how states may resort to violence to achieve desired status in the same context. Their interventions in the same conflict under similar conditions make them ideal subjects for comparison. We employ qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources, including official statements and speeches, official documents, reports, and newspapers, to examine the underlying motives for their military engagement in Syria. This approach aims to extract and interpret expressions of status from the discourse of decision-making elites and their foreign policy actions. The methodology is designed to uncover status-driven behaviors and elucidate the link between the pursuit of status and military conflicts.

With a detailed understanding of status and its empirical application to contemporary cases, this study aims to demonstrate the intricate relationship between status deficits and military conflicts. This study finds that status gains were observable for all three actors before

the fall of the Assad regime, although only Russia deliberately sought to improve its status. For Türkiye and Iran, the acquired status emerged as byproducts of strategic actions aimed at achieving other goals. Furthermore, after the collapse of the Assad regime, Russia and Iran were unable to sustain the status they had gained. On the contrary, considering its position in the post-Assad Syria, Türkiye seems to have succeeded in maintaining or even enhancing its status. These findings also highlight that seeking status through military intervention may yield short-term gains, but is an unstable long-term strategy for maintaining and improving status due to its high reliance on the shifting conditions of the battlefield.

Meanwhile, this empirical investigation advances the literature on status by illustrating that not only major but also middle powers may use violence to compensate their status deficits. Additionally, it contests state-centric perspectives on status by highlighting that dissatisfied states can engage with non-state actors in an effort to enhance their status, without necessarily resorting to conventional interstate conflict.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

In the existing literature, status is described as the collective beliefs about a state's ranking or position in the international hierarchy, based on various valued attributes (Lake, 2013; Larson & Shevchenko, 2014b; Renshon, 2017, p. 33; Ward, 2017, p. 35; Wohlforth, 2009). Conventional approaches evaluate a state's status by focusing on material qualities, such as wealth, territory, population, technology, and military capability. In this view, militarily stronger or wealthier states achieve a higher standing in the international hierarchy (Gilpin, 1981, p. 31; Morgenthau, 1948, pp. 52, 55; Wohlforth, 2009, p. 39). On the other hand, some scholars consider ideational factors such as ideology, culture, civilization, religion, moral superiority, and diplomatic influence as status attributes (Duque, 2018, p. 579; Neumann, 2014). Following Renshon's argument (2016, p. 522), we argue that status is inherently social, perceptual, and positional; it is distinguishable from material capabilities because it requires acknowledgement from other actors to be valid.

In this study, we aim to move beyond general definitions and descriptions of the concept and analyze the relationship between status-deficit and military intervention. We empirically assess the role of status in Russia, Iran, and Türkiye's military interventions in Syria. Additionally, we evaluate whether and how status deficits trigger military interventions and how the success of such interventions can be assessed through specific diplomatic and operational outcomes.

2.1. Status-Seeking

Status plays a significant role in international relations and influences the foreign policy decision-making processes (Morgenthau, 1948; Wohlforth, 2009; Lake, 2013; Larson & Shevchenko, 2014a; Renshon, 2016). For policymakers, preserving or elevating a state's status is a fundamental motivation (Duque, 2018, p. 577; Renshon, 2016, p. 521). A higher status provides countries with greater decision-making autonomy and deference from other states. So, it contributes to the security and prosperity of states because an elevated status grants them increased independence in foreign policy and fosters a greater likelihood of receiving respect from other states. Since status is a valuable resource, political leaders make serious efforts to preserve or enhance their states' status (Gilpin, 1981, p. 31), even when

such efforts may entail significant costs and risks.

Status is a limited resource in international relations (Paul et al., 2014, p. 9). This leads states to adopt diverse status-seeking strategies, whether collaborative or conflictual. Such strategies are dependent on a state's willingness and capacity, as well as systemic factors (Volgy & Gordell, 2019). Even if a state is willing to elevate its status, it must possess the necessary material and ideational capabilities to achieve a higher standing (Volgy & Gordell, 2019, pp. 517–518). Meanwhile, the nature of the international system, whether it is unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar, determines the strategies available for status enhancement. Options are limited in more stratified systems, whereas a multipolar world order provides greater flexibility and opportunities for states to pursue various strategies (Wohlforth, 2009).

States can achieve higher status in two primary ways: first, by joining collective entities that grant a specific level of status to all their participants; and second, through a hierarchical ranking within those collective entities (Larson, 2017; Renshon, 2017). Social Identity Theory (SIT) proposes three status-seeking strategies: social mobility, involving the embracing of the norms and values of a high-status group to seek membership; social creativity, involving initiation of innovative cultural, diplomatic, or developmental initiatives; or social competition, involving the use of geopolitical rivalry, arms race, and military power to gain status (Larson & Shevchenko, 2003, 2010, 2014b, 2019).

This study focuses exclusively on the conflictual dimension in social competition. This strategy is mostly adopted by revisionist dissatisfied states excluded from elite groups and those viewing the existing international hierarchy as illegitimate. When avenues for achieving a desired status through social mobility or social creativity are limited, these states attempt to establish spheres of influence, interfere in the military affairs of lower-status or less powerful states, and employ spoiler strategies (Duque, 2018; Larson & Shevchenko, 2010).

2.2. Status Deficits and Military Conflicts

The construction of national identities and roles influences the desired status of states and their foreign policy behavior through defining the objectives (Holsti, 1970; Larson, 2017; Larson & Shevchenko, 2003, 2010; Parlar Dal, 2019). National identity narratives stemming from various sources, including history, culture, and geography, shape the perception of state elites. Since political leaders and policymakers take actual decisions and govern countries through various institutions, they are assumed to reflect states' status concerns. These elites might demand others to recognize their national identity narratives. If the desired status is not recognized, an incompatibility will emerge between the status that a state has and the status that its political elite thinks their state deserves. This delicate situation, or the discrepancy between reality and expectations, is called status deficit (Renshon, 2016, p. 544).

Accommodating status aspirations could reduce international conflicts. Nevertheless, those at the top are usually hesitant to lose their status (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019; Murray, 2019). This reluctance can result in persistent rivalries and destabilize regional and global politics (MacDonald & Parent, 2021). Thus, a growing body of research suggests that status dissatisfaction, or status inconsistency, may cause aggression and conflicts, and the use of violence can be a viable strategy for status enhancement (Lebow, 2010; Murray, 2019, pp. 12–17; Renshon, 2015, 2016; Ward, 2017; Wohlforth, 2009). This literature mainly underscores the desire of major powers to attain higher international status through violence (Larson

& Shevchenko, 2019, pp. 233–234; Volgy et al., 2011). However, the pursuit of status is not limited to powerful states alone. As will be elaborated in this study, declining powers (Onea, 2014) or middle powers (Karim, 2018) can also show a keen interest in protecting or improving their international status and use violent methods for achieving status.

The self-proclaimed status will not grant a state a higher status in the international hierarchy if this claim is not acknowledged by others. The failure to achieve adequate recognition may thus lead to serious tensions. If an actor has the necessary instruments to force others to accept its identity narratives, it will be easier to show dominance and deterrence. Accordingly, conflict is one of the methods to achieve a higher status, allowing the international community to reassess a state's standing through visible and dramatic military engagements. Since status is a perceptual social construct, salient and public events, such as wars, will help to revise the collective beliefs about a state's position in the international community (Renshon, 2016). Consequently, military conflicts over status claims can be strategic instruments to recalibrate positions within the international hierarchy. They do not have to be irrational or a last resort to achieve status objectives (Renshon, 2016).

2.3. Analytical Framework

In light of the theoretical insight discussed above, there is a need for empirical evidence supporting a causal relationship between status deficits and military conflicts (Renshon, 2016, 2017). Therefore, this research attempts to provide empirical evidence through a comparative analysis, and to test whether three states with status deficits (Russia, Iran, and Türkiye) used military engagement during the Syrian Civil War as a method to achieve higher status. In this way, it aims to explain to what extent the Russian, Iranian, and Turkish military interventions into Syria can be interpreted as efforts to seek international status, rather than being driven solely by geopolitical or security-related objectives. Moreover, this study discusses whether the status gains achieved in the short term through military means can be sustained over time.

This study examines military interventions through two analytical dimensions related to status-seeking. It differentiates between status-seeking as a deliberate primary strategy and status as a byproduct of other strategic objectives. In the former, military interventions are purposely designed to enhance a state's status within the international system. In the second, security concerns or other realpolitik considerations primarily motivate the intervention, with status gains occurring as unintended byproducts.

Additionally, this study argues that military achievement alone is insufficient for achieving international status, as it requires international recognition. Diplomatic inclusion can be regarded as a form of status enhancement, as participation in high-level diplomatic negotiations signifies that a state's role is deemed essential and its influence is acknowledged by the international community. Also, recognizing the role and significance of an actor through explicit rhetorical acknowledgments by competitors or other powers is considered a sign of status gains. This analytical framework assesses whether a military intervention has solely accomplished its operational and strategic objectives or has successfully converted the intervening actor's international status.

3. From Regime Protection to Diplomatic Recalibration: Russia's Pursuit of Status in Syria

3.1. Russia's Status Aspirations

Russia's ambition to elevate its international status has decisively shaped its foreign policy, leading to assertive—at times aggressive—actions, such as its military intervention in the Syrian conflict. Scholars identify several motivations for Moscow's use of force. For instance, Trenin (2016) emphasizes domestic concerns regarding extremism, whereas Ahmed (2013) underscores the strategic need to secure critical energy corridors—especially the Iran Iraq Syria pipeline intended to challenge Europe's gas supply options. Although the Kremlin officially frames its deployments as counterterrorism operations (Melvin et al., 2015), Yacoubian (2021) argues that they primarily serve to enlarge Russia's sphere of influence. Taken together, these assessments suggest that the overriding driver of the Syrian campaign was Moscow's quest for higher international status. Consistent with the broader literature, President Vladimir Putin has sought to re establish Russia as a pivotal global actor and to rebut Western narratives of irreversible Russian decline (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014b; Nitoiu, 2017). The Syria intervention can therefore be seen as functioning as a demonstration of Russia's capacity to act autonomously and to challenge the Western led international order.

The Kremlin's 2000 Doctrine explicitly stressed the importance of multipolarity and of preserving Russia's permanent UNSC seat (Putin, 2000). Throughout the 2000s, Putin replaced the conciliatory foreign policy of the Yeltsin era with a more assertive, status oriented approach. His 2007 Munich Security Conference address encapsulated this shift by affirming Russia's "independent foreign policy" tradition and its capacity to exercise such independence in a changing global system (Putin, 2007).

The color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan reinforced perceptions that Western powers were seeking to curtail Russian influence along its periphery. Moscow's responses—the 2008 war with Georgia and the 2014 annexation of Crimea—demonstrated a willingness to deploy military force in defense of what it regards as its legitimate sphere of influence. These actions likewise signaled Russia's determination to reclaim its great power standing (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014b).

Despite persistent domestic challenges—including economic volatility and authoritarian governance—Russia remains intent on aligning its perceived standing with its great power aspirations. The 2023 National Security Strategy reiterates that "the formation of a multipolar world continues," declares the era of "colonial powers" is "over", and accuses those powers of employing "illegal methods" to undermine Russia's "civilizational role." In short, Moscow's reliance on military power is best interpreted as an instrument for status enhancement within an evolving multipolar order (Kontseptsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii [The concept of foreign policy of the Russian Federation], 2023).

3.2. Russia's Military Intervention in the Syrian Theatre

Russia's military intervention in Syria marked a turning point in its efforts to elevate its role from a regional actor to a global power, directly challenging Western dominance in international crisis management. While initially framed as support for the Assad regime, the intervention was strategically aimed at counterbalancing Western influence and reasserting

Russia's position as a key global power broker. The Syrian conflict thus offered Moscow a unique platform to project its international status, particularly amid what was perceived as a hesitant and fragmented Western response.

Initially, Russia confined its involvement to diplomatic backing of the Assad regime, avoiding direct military engagement (Molodykh, 2017, p. 28). However, Moscow increasingly portrayed Western support for opposition groups as a direct affront not only to its interests in Syria but also to its broader self-image as a guarantor of international norms and state sovereignty (Petkova, 2020). In September 2015, Russia escalated its engagement by launching an airstrike campaign targeting various opposition forces. This marked a strategic shift, signaling Russia's determination to influence the trajectory of the conflict and secure the Assad regime's survival (Smagin, 2023).

Beyond tactical gains, the intervention served to highlight Russia's ability to project power beyond its immediate neighborhood. The expansion of its naval facility in Tartus reinforced this message, symbolizing Russia's re-emergence as a military actor with global reach. In this regard, the Syrian theatre became a testing ground for demonstrating Russia's capacity to act independently and assertively in reshaping regional dynamics.

3.3. Russia's Gains in Syria

Russia's military campaign in Syria constituted a calculated effort to enhance its global standing. A key component of this strategy has been its portrayal as a leading force in international counterterrorism. Moscow officially framed its intervention as a response to a formal request from the Syrian government, thereby invoking principles of state sovereignty. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov frequently emphasized Russia's "inclusive and cooperative" approach to counterterrorism (Lavrov, 2019), contrasting it with what he described as the "reckless adventurism" of the United States (US) for strategic ends (Lavrov Hopes West Won't Embark on 'Reckless' Adventurism in Syria, 2018).

This narrative was instrumental in bolstering Russia's image as a responsible and capable global actor. By positioning itself as an effective and principled opponent of terrorism, Russia sought to contrast its actions with the perceived recklessness and double standards of the West. The intervention thus functioned as both a military and discursive strategy to reinforce Russia's position as a great power engaged in global security governance.

Other actors, especially the US, acknowledged the Russian military presence and modified their behavior to avoid any conflict with Russia, thereby implicitly recognizing Russia's sphere of influence. Furthermore, the establishment of the Astana Process in January 2017, initiated in partnership with Iran and Türkiye, represented a significant diplomatic achievement and recognition. By steering this alternative negotiation framework, Russia positioned itself at the center of efforts to shape Syria's political future (Cengiz, 2020, p. 208). This initiative not only sidelined Western-led peace efforts but also signaled Russia's capacity to lead complex multilateral negotiations and manage regional conflicts. The Astana Process thereby enhanced Russia's profile as a credible peace broker and affirmed its status as a global power with both coercive and diplomatic capabilities.

In sum, Russia's intervention in Syria served as a multifaceted instrument for status-seeking. Through a combination of military action, counterterrorism narratives, and diplomatic initiatives, Moscow sought to challenge the US hegemony and reassert itself as a

key player in global security and conflict resolution.

3.4. Evaluating Russia's Status-Driven Syria Policy After Assad's Fall

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked a significant rupture in the trajectory of Russia's Syria policy. It dealt a symbolic blow to Russia's longstanding narrative as a steadfast protector of allies and a guarantor of regime survival. For over a decade, Russia had positioned itself as a decisive actor in Syria militarily, diplomatically, and discursively, using the conflict as a key theatre to project global status and challenge Western dominance. The sudden fall of the regime, followed by Assad's evacuation to Russia, inevitably raised questions about the sustainability and effectiveness of its status-based foreign policy.

Despite the regime's collapse, Russia moved swiftly to contain reputational damage and reframe the outcome. Moscow portrayed its evacuation of Assad as evidence of loyalty and capability, insisting that the intervention had prevented Syria from descending into terrorist control and thus achieved its core objectives. Putin publicly denied any notion of defeat, declaring that Russia "never fought in Syria" in the conventional sense, and emphasized that its limited operation had fulfilled counterterrorism goals (Seddon, 2025). This rhetorical shift demonstrated a key feature of status-driven strategy: the capacity to reinterpret failure as constrained success to preserve international image and narrative dominance.

At the operational level, Russia prioritized the retention of strategic assets, particularly its naval facility in Tartus and the Khmeimim airbase. These bases, central to Russia's Mediterranean access and regional power projection, became focal points in negotiations with the new interim Syrian government. Moscow resisted demands for debt repayment and the extradition of Assad, while signaling a willingness to revise lease agreements pragmatically. In doing so, Russia attempted to decouple its broader strategic posture from its client's fate—aiming to sustain great power symbolism through basing rights and presence, even as its ally was deposed (Nakhoul & Azhari, 2025).

Yet, after the collapse of Assad's regime, Russia's narrative of being a reliable and effective power was weakened. Its influence among fragile regimes and non-Western partners may suffer as a result. So, the fall of the regime represents a "loss of prestige" for Moscow, challenging its claims to status legitimacy and potentially weakening its leverage in future crises (Kozhanov, 2024).

Nevertheless, Russia's swift diplomatic recalibration suggests a persistent commitment to status maintenance. Rather than retreating, it has sought to embed itself in the post-Assad Syria through pragmatic engagement, preserving symbolic assets, and reasserting its broader role in the region via continued cooperation with Iran and transactional diplomacy with other regional actors (Melkonian, 2024). In this regard, Russia's Syria policy illustrates the resilience—but also the limitations—of a status-driven foreign policy: while it can sustain symbolic relevance through flexibility and narrative management, it remains vulnerable to reputational shocks when tangible outcomes contradict strategic messaging.

4. Military Intervention and Prestige: The Assessment of Iran's Status Gains in Syria

This part of the study examines the role of international status in Iran's military interventions in Syria. Existing literature provides valuable insights into Iran's motivations for military intervention in Syria, mainly through the perspectives of power maximization and deterrence,

but it overlooks Iran's status concerns. Milani (2013) and Goodarzi (2013) emphasize Iran's goal to expand regional influence and maintain the "axis of resistance," while others, including Ahmadian and Mohseni (2019) and Akbarzadeh et al. (2022), focus on deterrence strategies aimed at countering perceived threats. Fawcett (2015) also places Iran's actions within a broader regional (in)security framework, where power projection, revisionism, and regional autonomy are prioritized.

On the other hand, some recent studies examine Iran's foreign policy from a status-seeking perspective. Noori (2012) offers a valuable discourse-based account of Iran's pursuit of status, but it is limited to examining presidential rhetoric at the United Nations (UN). Additionally, a RAND Corporation report (Tabatabai et al., 2021) lists "national status concerns" among six key motivations behind Iran's intervention, acknowledging its role in projecting regional leadership and military competence. However, this report presents status concerns as a secondary factor subordinate to strategic and security goals without explaining how status concerns fulfill this role.

This part of the study aims to reveal the status dynamics in Iran's interventions in Syria. It shifts the focus from simply whether status was intentionally sought to how status gains actually emerged. In doing so, it addresses an important gap in the literature by offering a comparative framework that systematically explores how and under what conditions military interventions—whether intentional or not—can act as mechanisms for gaining status, and whether these gains are sustainable or fragile over time.

4.1. Iran's Status Concerns

Iran has persistently sought to get a higher status in the regional and global order (Fawcett, 2015, p. 654; Hunter, 2010, p. 189). A close examination of official papers and elite discourse reveals this aspiration. For example, Iran's official 20-Year Vision Document of Horizon 1404 (2025) describes Iran as a country aiming to be the "first in the region in the realms of economy, knowledge, technology…"(20 Year National Vision Document, 2005). Furthermore, Iran's political elites often highlight narratives of historical greatness and Iranian exceptionalism that bolster Iran's status aspiration (Akraminia, 2013, p. 34). Ali Younesi, advisor to former President Hassan Rouhani and intelligence minister (2000-2005) during Khatami's government, highlights Iran's historical role as an empire, which grants it a natural leadership position in the region and offers a distinctive perspective on global affairs ("Advisor To Iranian President Rohani", 2015). This idea of leadership is further reinforced by Iran's religious narratives, which depict the country as a symbol of Islamic values and a protector of Muslims and all oppressed people (Nouri, 2013, p. 8).

More explicitly, Iran's status aspirations are further revealed by the rhetoric of high-ranking military and political actors during the Syrian Civil War. Yahya Rahim Safavi, senior advisor to Ali Khamenei and former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), proclaimed that "We are the regional superpower. The US must acknowledge this fact" ("Iran Has Won the War in Syria" 2019). These statements were not only the reflections of self-perceived status but also expressions highlighting the desire for external recognition.

On the other hand, it is debatable whether Iran's status aspirations directly shape objectives and translate into status-seeking behavior. Iran's intervention in Syria offers an instructive example addressing this debate. The following sections argue that this intervention was

primarily driven by power maximization and security concerns rather than status aspirations. Although Iran did not initially intend this, its intervention in Syria produced reputational byproducts that contributed to Iran's status until the end of 2024, when opposition forces toppled the Assad regime.

4.2. Dominance and Deterrence: The Strategic Rationale Behind Iran's Syrian Intervention

Iran's military intervention in Syria was mainly driven by strategic needs focused on maximizing power and deterrence, rather than a clear desire for status. Iran's military involvement in Syria reflected its goal of regional dominance through the Axis of Resistance. This vision goes beyond immediate security issues to include larger ambitions for shaping the political landscape of the Middle East. In this framework, Syria is not just an ally but a vital part of Iran's regional strategy. Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior advisor to Ali Khamenei, emphasized Syria's essential role as the "golden ring of the chain of resistance against Israel" ("Velayati: Syria Is Golden Ring", 2016). In this framing, losing Syria would not only weaken Iran's ability to support Hezbollah but also significantly impair its regional strategy (Goodarzi, 2013, pp. 31–34).

Along with projecting power and preserving its influence, another objective of Iran's intervention in the Syrian Civil War was to enhance its deterrence capabilities against Israel. Syrian support enabled Iran to build a forward-defense structure against Israel through a network of proxy groups (Akbarzadeh et al., 2022). As Ahmadian and Mohseni (2019, pp. 343–345) claim, achieving this forward deterrence against Israel and also the US was the primary driver of Iran-Syria relations from Tehran's perspective.

To maintain its influence in the Eastern Mediterranean and its forward deterrence capabilities, Iran has traditionally relied on Syrian support to bolster Hezbollah and counter Israel. Before the fall of the Assad regime, Syria allowed Iran to use its territory for logistical and military purposes, helping Iran achieve its strategic goals. Through Syria, Iran extended its influence into the Eastern Mediterranean and used Syrian territory as a transit route and a new front against Israel, aiming to enhance its deterrence capabilities against Israel (Tabatabai et al., 2021, pp. 81–82). At the same time, Iran's military intervention unintentionally enhanced its status. In the next section, this article examines how military efforts to achieve security and influence produced status as a byproduct and discusses the risks and sustainability of status gained through military intervention.

4.3. Status as a Byproduct: Recognition and Fragility of Iran's Status Gains

During the Syrian Civil War, Iran demonstrated its capacity to conduct complex military operations using asymmetric tools. At the beginning of the crisis, Iran focused on controlling the protests. It sent Basij units with crowd control equipment and trained Syrian officials on suppressing protests (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020, p. 171). When the uprisings turned into a civil war, Iran decided to intensify its support to the Assad regime and sent IRGC commanders to Syria ("Iran and Syria," 2012). The IRGC-Quds Force provided organizational support to the regime and created the National Defense Force and Local Defense Force from Syrians. Also, the Quds Force armed and trained these forces directly or through Hezbollah (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020, p. 172).

With the evolution of the civil war and the emergence of the Islamic State of Iran and Syria (ISIS) as a new threat, Iran increased the level of its engagement in Syria. Furthermore, when battlefield conditions necessitated, Iran directly intervened by sending its conventional troops to reinforce the Assad regime's forces and command Iranian proxies in Syria (Bucala, 2017). Iran's direct and indirect military interventions in Syria helped preserve the regime and strengthened Iran's influence in Syria until late 2024.

Furthermore, Iran's military intervention in Syria led to the recognition of Iran's important role in the Syrian crisis by regional and Western powers. This intervention caused regional and Western powers to acknowledge Iran's involvement in Syria and compelled them to negotiate Syria's future with Iran. For instance, in the early diplomatic processes, such as Geneva I, Iran was excluded (International Crisis Group, 2018, p. 19) but in the following diplomatic initiatives, such as the International Syria Support Group and the Vienna process, Iran was invited, thereby symbolizing a "grudging recognition" of Iran's importance in Syrian crisis by the West, including the US (Tabatabai et al., 2021, p. 96).

Another important sign of Iran's status gains through recognition of its significance was its participation in the Astana Process. The Astana Process represented a shift away from Western-led diplomatic frameworks in attempts to resolve the Syrian Civil War. Iran's involvement in the Astana Process was enabled by its direct and indirect interventions, which directly affected conditions on the battlefield in Syria.

By launching this initiative with Iran, Russia and Türkiye acknowledged Iran's influence in Syria and negotiated the settlement of the crisis with Iran. Also, in August 2017, the French President Emmanuel Macron stated that:

> "The Astana Process had excluded us from a resolution of the conflict in terms of military de-escalation. By introducing substantial dialogue with the Turks, Iranians and Russians, we were able to make concrete headway on the situation" (Speech by President E. Macron for a Global French Diplomacy, 2017).

These remarks signify the recognition of the importance of the Astana Process and the status Iran gained through its military intervention. So, for a period, the Astana Process provided Iran with a formal diplomatic arena to negotiate the future of Syria and assert itself as an influential actor in a regional crisis (Tabatabai et al., 2021, p. 96). Recognition of this by regional and Western powers shows that Iran gained status in the international system during the Syrian Civil War by employing military methods.

Although Iran managed to turn its battlefield successes and political influence in Syria into international recognition, it failed to convert this into an enduring, institutionalized position acknowledged by others. As a result, Iran's previously gained status through military intervention was fragile and highly dependent on battlefield conditions. Consequently, Israeli attacks on Iranian assets in Syria, the fall of the Assad regime, and the reduction in the military presence of Iran, its proxies, and its allies in the post-Assad Syria also led to Iran's exclusion from international diplomatic negotiations concerning Syria's future. The Iranian case shows that states can acquire status through military intervention, even unintentionally. However, gains achieved through military intervention depend on battlefield conditions and may not ensure lasting international status.

5. Bridging Security and Prestige: Türkiye's Evolving Foreign Policy in the Syrian Conflict

This section seeks to elucidate the importance of Türkiye's status-seeking initiatives in its foreign policy regarding the Syrian crisis. Although much of the existing scholarship primarily examines this issue through realist (Ataman & Özdemir, 2018; Hinnebusch, 2015; Siccardi, 2021) or critical securitization lenses, the pursuit of greater international status has always been a central concern in Turkish foreign policy (Arı & Munassar, 2020; Hoffmann, 2019; Kardaş, 2013; Koçak & Akgül, 2022; Parlar Dal, 2016; Rüma & Çelikpala, 2019). In recent years, Türkiye, as a middle power, has consistently employed its military capabilities as an effective means of pursuing its foreign policy objectives. This tendency may be linked to a sense of status dissatisfaction, as Türkiye aspires to be recognized as a pivotal regional player or even a great power (Arı & Munassar, 2020; Kardaş, 2013; Koçak & Akgül, 2022; Parlar Dal, 2016). So, it is essential to examine the influence of status-seeking behavior on Turkish military interventions in Syria to better understand its underlying motivations. While wars and conflicts are generally categorized under hard power considerations, status-seeking is typically related to soft power aspects. In contrast, this analysis will explore the Turkish case, considering the interplay between status deficits and military engagements.

5.1. The Syrian Crisis, Security Challenges, and Status Deficit

When the Syrian crisis erupted in 2011, Türkiye urged the Assad regime to implement reforms that would address the people's demands to maintain political stability in the country with a value-based approach (Davutoğlu, 2012). However, the regime opted for a repressive approach, leading to widespread violence, deaths, and the displacement of millions of Syrians. As protests escalated into a civil war, Türkiye attempted to persuade the US to engage in a joint military operation to remove the regime. Still, this initiative did not succeed due to differing priorities between the US and Türkiye in the region (Sarı Karademir, 2019, p. 38). Additionally, Türkiye emphasized the need for no-fly zones to protect regions held by rebels (Erdoğan: Suriye'de Uçuşa Yasaklı Bölge Ilan Edilmeli, 2014). However, Türkiye faced challenges in securing adequate backing from Western allies, which hindered its ability to influence the trajectory of the Syrian crisis.

Ultimately, Türkiye's attempts to secure international support for addressing the Syrian refugee crisis were largely unsuccessful. The lack of Western cooperation exacerbated the negative repercussions of the Syrian crisis for Türkiye. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan publicly voiced his frustrations, stating that "the West left Türkiye alone" ("Erdoğan," 2016a). This sentiment was echoed by İbrahim Kalın, former Turkish presidential spokesperson and current intelligence chief, who referred to the situation as "precious loneliness" (Kalın, 2013). This situation reflected Türkiye's alienation from the West.

Furthermore, during the period from 2013 to 2017, ISIS expanded its influence by seizing control of substantial territories in Syria, notably near the Turkish border. This situation had critical implications for Türkiye's domestic security. There was a marked increase in terrorist incidents within Türkiye between 2015 and 2016. In 2016 alone, the country experienced over 15 terrorist attacks, which resulted in severe economic repercussions, especially impacting the tourism industry (Rüma & Çelikpala, 2019, p. 69). Consequently, the defeat of ISIS and the enhancement of border security became one of Türkiye's primary strategic goals in Syria.

Finally, the establishment of a Kurdish autonomous administration in northeast Syria, led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), raised significant concerns for Türkiye, as it risked resuscitating aspirations for Kurdish separatism within Türkiye itself. Accordingly, restraining the territorial advancements of the PYD became a key objective of Turkish foreign policy regarding Syria. Türkiye identified the westward expansion of the PYD beyond the Euphrates River as its red line. Erdoğan consistently reiterated Türkiye's commitment to thwarting the formation of a "terror corridor" under the control of the PYD along its borders. In June 2015, he declared, "I am addressing the whole world. Whatever the cost, we will not allow the creation of a state in the north of Syria, in the south of Türkiye" (Erdoğan, 2015).

By supporting the PYD as a key ground force against ISIS, the US underestimated Türkiye's longstanding security concerns related to the PKK. This decision contributed to Türkiye's feelings of status deficit. Following the battle of Kobane (Ayn al-Arab), the US intensified its engagement with the PYD, providing heavy weapons and military training. This support not only exacerbated tensions with Türkiye (Spencer, 2017) but also called into question Türkiye's role as a primary Western ally in the region. In this context, particularly after the 2016 coup attempt, Türkiye altered its foreign policy approach to better address security issues and to enhance its perceived standing in the international arena. To illustrate, Erdoğan declared that "Türkiye left its wrong assessment of security, and it is ready to play an independent role with unilateral actions to fight terrorism" ("Erdoğan," 2016b). Türkiye's military involvement in Syria marked a significant shift from its traditional policy of non-involvement in internal affairs (Oktav, 2015).

5.2. Türkiye's Military Operations in Syria

The shift in Turkish foreign policy initiated a closer relationship with Russia regarding the resolution of the Syrian crisis (Köstem, 2021). Türkiye also collaborated with Iran to facilitate the relocation of opposition forces to Idlib in December 2016. These efforts led to the Moscow Declaration, which established the Astana Process (Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers, 2016). While the Astana Process did not provide a comprehensive resolution to the Syrian conflict due to divergent objectives among the participating countries, it enabled Türkiye to advance its agenda in Syria through military operations. In this regard, the Astana Process can be seen as a status marker for Türkiye and its partners until its eventual collapse, as, for a significant period, Russia, Iran, and Türkiye collaboratively influenced the dynamics in Syria.

Throughout its unilateral military engagements in Syria, Türkiye maintained a strategic avoidance of confrontation with Russia (Goff-Taylor, 2017). The core objectives of these operations centered on combating ISIS and the PYD, as well as mitigating the further influx of refugees. The first operation, termed Operation Euphrates Shield, commenced in August 2016. Its primary goals included securing the border, addressing the threat posed by ISIS, and obstructing the PYD from connecting the Kobane and Afrin cantons (Seren et al., 2017). As a result of this operation, Turkish forces established control over the triangular area encompassing Azaz, Jarabulus, and Al-Bab. Subsequently, in January 2018, Türkiye initiated Operation Olive Branch with the intent of targeting the PYD-controlled Afrin province to eradicate its presence in the western Euphrates region (Kasapoğlu & Ülgen, 2018). After the

operation, Türkiye removed the PYD presence from Afrin and found a possible destination for the resettlement of Syrian refugees. The third military operation, known as Operation Peace Spring, was launched in October 2019 within the PYD-held areas between the towns of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain. This operation was prompted by the Trump administration's decision to withdraw US troops from the region and aimed at establishing a safe zone extending 30 kilometers into Syrian territory (Diab, 2019). With this operation, Türkiye identified additional relocation options for Syrian refugees. It is worth noting that the effective use of advanced unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) in the Operation Olive Branch and the Operation Peace Spring drew considerable global attention to Türkiye's growing military capabilities (Marson & Forrest, 2021).

The concentration of opposition forces and Syrian refugees in Idlib was long a point of friction between Türkiye and Russia. Amid the framework of "de-escalation zones" established in the Astana Process ("Russia, Turkey Agree to Create Buffer Zone in Syria's Idlib," 2018), Idlib persisted as the last stronghold for the opposition over an extended duration. During this time, Türkiye committed to ensuring security in Idlib and facilitating access between regime-controlled areas. Nevertheless, on 27 February 2020, the Syrian Air Force, with Russian support, executed an airstrike that resulted in the deaths of at least 33 Turkish soldiers in the village of Balyun (Syria War, 2020). In response to this attack, Türkiye promptly launched Operation Spring Shield to repel regime forces and avert a new wave of refugees. This operation effectively curtailed the advancement of regime forces toward Idlib, created a safe haven for the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) faction for organizing and empowering itself and helped protect civilians from further massacres, thus preventing an additional influx of millions of refugees into Türkiye.

5.3. From Intervention to Influence: Türkiye's Growing Stature

It appears that Turkish state elites have viewed military operations as a way to address not only security concerns but also Türkiye's status deficits. For instance, Kalın asserted that Türkiye has the same right to intervene in Syria as Russia and the US do ("Kalın: Rusya ve ABD'ye Suriye'ye girme hakkı tanındıysa Türkiye'nin de aynı hakka sahip oldu," 2021). This framing positions Türkiye's actions on similar grounds with those of major global powers. Similarly, after a cabinet meeting in October 2020, Erdoğan uttered that:

> Türkiye has attained the power to carry out with active military support its political and economic policies on the ground. ... Those accustomed to speaking to us with an imperious tone now negotiate with us on equal terms. ... We have fully subverted their policies to subjugate us to decisions taken without us on all regional and global matters (Yackley, 2020).

Therefore, Türkiye's utilization of military force in Syria appears to align with the perspective suggesting that states facing status deficits might resort to violence as a status-seeking strategy.

More recent developments within Syria appear to offer Türkiye an additional, though fragile, boost in international status. Although priorities have shifted in response to the evolving dynamics throughout the prolonged Syrian Civil War, Türkiye has always supported the opposition. Between 2020 and December 2024, the situation and balance of power in Syria remained relatively stable, yet significant changes occurred in the regional and international environments (Ziadeh, 2024). The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022

forced Moscow to pull back much of its military assets, particularly warplanes, from Syria. The Russian air force had been critical in defeating opposition forces. In addition, other key allies of Assad, such as Iran and Hezbollah, faced weakening and distraction due to their involvement in the war with Israel starting in October 2023. During this conflict, Israel has effectively dismantled Hezbollah's leadership and reduced its capacity to support the regime. This situation was compounded by Iran's decision to withdraw senior military officers of the IRGC from Syria. Then, Assad's army, already reduced to a hollow shell after years of civil war, struggled with low morale and a pervasive sense of abandonment (Why the Assad Regime Collapsed in Syria – and Why so Fast, 2024).

On the other hand, opposition factions in Idlib had united and been well-prepared for their operations against the regime, under Turkish protection. The largest and most organized of these factions was the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which was established in January 2017 by Abu Muhammed al-Joulani following his breakup with al-Qaeda in July 2016. Another important group was the Syrian National Army (SNA), which received training and funding from Türkiye (What Happened in Syria?, 2024). On 27 November 2024, the opposition forces, led by HTS, launched Operation Deterrence of Aggression and succeeded in toppling the regime within just 12 days. Türkiye's support, which included both logistical and military assistance, was decisive in shifting the balance of power against Assad.

Türkiye's enhanced status in the international arena has been particularly evident through its diplomatic initiatives and its critical role in the reconstruction of post-Assad Syria. The country's military interventions have compelled other major powers to recognize its significance in the Syrian conflict. One clear indicator of this shift is Türkiye's evolution from a requester of buffer zones to a key security provider in operational areas. Moreover, Türkiye is increasingly positioned as a primary architect of the post-Assad Syrian landscape, with its strategic red lines acknowledged by other international actors.

The future of Syria remains ambiguous and is dependent on complex regional and international dynamics. However, Türkiye appears to have emerged in a stronger position following the ousting of Assad, as the principal supporter of the opposition. Notably, Trump acknowledged that Türkiye would play a crucial role in Syria's future, emphasizing that it is a major force and its military has not been worn out with the war (Hernandez, 2024). Türkiye's involvement in the reconfiguration of Syria after Assad is likely to intensify, thereby enhancing its stature both regionally and internationally.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated whether and how military interventions by Russia, Iran, and Türkiye in the Syrian Civil War can be viewed as attempts to seek status. This comparative case study revealed significant differences among these three countries' interventions regarding purpose, scope, and how lasting their status gains were. Before the fall of the Assad regime, all three states gained status through military interventions. However, Russia was the only one among them that deliberately aimed for status as a main goal. Iran and Türkiye did not focus on status, rather, their interventions were mainly motivated by security and geopolitical reasons. For them, status gains emerged as byproducts.

Furthermore, the period after the fall of the regime highlighted the fragile nature of gaining status through military intervention. Russia's failure to maintain itself as a reliable ally and

protector, along with Iran's inability to sustain its influence in Syria and its marginalization in the post-Assad negotiations, also demonstrated the volatility of status achieved through military means when battlefield conditions shift. Türkiye, on the other hand, strengthened its position as the supporter of the victorious opposition forces, and has seen its central role in a post-Assad Syria being recognized by other powers. However, unless Türkiye's role is institutionalized through post-conflict arrangements and converted into lasting political influence, its status gains will rely on Türkiye's continued military success and the success of its backed groups, which will introduce additional risks and costs.

The findings of this study include contributions to the literature on international status. While this literature mainly focuses on major powers, this study empirically compares three status-seeking powers with different capacities to explore the role of status in their interventions in the same setting and under similar conditions, thereby providing a good basis for comparison and theory testing. This study shows that different types of powers may use military intervention to gain status. Moreover, in contrast to the state-centric status literature, this research reveals that the pursuit of status through violent means is not confined to interstate warfare. Dissatisfied states have the ability to engage in direct or indirect interventions in ongoing conflicts, confronting violent non-state actors. Such actions can be framed as counterterrorism efforts, allowing states to elevate their status without resorting to traditional interstate conflicts.

This study also showed that military intervention can elevate the international status of the intervening states, regardless of whether that was the original goal. However, the Syrian case also demonstrates that the durability of status gains from military intervention heavily depends on battlefield dynamics, making them potentially costly and unsustainable unless such successes are institutionalized. In other words, military victories might offer short-term status benefits but could lead to long-term status deterioration unless they are politically institutionalized. Therefore, the Syria case illustrates that relying too much on military means to gain international status can be a risky and expensive strategy. Future research applying this framework to contemporary cases in other regions of the world is necessary to determine whether the findings are unique to the Syrian context or can be applied elsewhere.

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