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EXPLOITATION OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: AN ANALYSIS OF IRANIAN AND TURKISH INVOLVEMENT IN SYRIA

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Exercise Solo Flight

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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INTRODUCTION

Since the initial political protests in the southern Syrian town of Deraa in 2011, the international community has been shocked by the manner in which the scale and speed of the fighting has escalated and intensified.¹ As the Assad regime failed to effectively repress the uprisings, the protests expanded throughout the Syrian state. While the conflict spread, an impression of civil war was developed by the international community, one that continues to be reinforced by world leaders² and major media outlets.³ By the end of 2012, the majority of Syria was embroiled in political uprisings and fighting against government forces. Demands were raised for the removal of President Assad and the opinion was that this might in fact occur in 2013 when opposition fighters were gaining victories and momentum throughout the country. However, as the Assad regime started to receive diplomatic and military assistance from regional actors such as Iran and Russia, the momentum of the fighting shifted towards the favour of the regime. The conflict now includes pro and anti-government forces, local militias, terrorist organizations, and direct military involvement of regional and international state actors.

¹Jeffrey Martini, Erin York and William Young, "Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition," *RAND Corporation* (2013): 1.

²Barack Obama, "Address to the Nation," Washington, D.C., United States of America, 10 September 2013; Ban Ki-Moon, "Remarks to the Security Council on the report of the United Nations Missions to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons on the incident that occurred on 21 August 2013 in the Ghouta area of Damascus," New York, New York, United States of America, 16 September 2013.

³For example, on 10 February 2016, The Canadian Press summarized a comment from Foreign Affairs Minister Stephane Dion in that more Canadian help was needed, "in order to survive the pressure of the Syrian Civil War." Nick Walsh, a CNN Senior International Correspondent, refers to the Syrian conflict as a civil war in his 16 February 2016 article: *Syria: How one strip of land could change everything*. The Guardian newspaper included a story on its website on 7 April 2016 which discussed how, "mass abductions have taken place on occasion in Syria during the country's civil war, now in its sixth year." Sharif Nashashibi, an Al Jazeera journalist, had an article published online entitled *Syrian Civil War: Negotiating in bad faith*. Finally, The Economist published an article on 4 April 2015, *Syria's civil war: Assad on the back foot*.

Based on the increased involvement of regional state actors, this paper will demonstrate that the Syrian conflict has evolved from a civil war into a regional proxy war involving the competing interests of aspiring regional hegemons. In order to establish the validity of this argument, two regional state actors, Iran (pro-Assad) and Turkey (anti-Assad), will be analyzed. This analysis will incorporate their interests, methods of national power used to influence outcomes, successes achieved and the associated consequences of their actions in the conflict. Following this comparative analysis, potential outcomes of the Syrian conflict will be reviewed and contrasted with the interests of Iran and Turkey to assess the likelihood of each outcome. Finally, this paper will conclude by briefly considering the wider scope of the Syrian proxy war problem and recommend further aspects of this problem that may be studied to reinforce the argument that the Syrian conflict is a regional proxy war that holds implications for the entire Middle East.

CIVIL AND PROXY WAR DEFINITIONS

Though the difference between a civil and a proxy war may be overlooked by western politicians or media outlets, recent conflicts have demonstrated how the intensity, viciousness and duration of localized conflicts may be impacted due to external influences. The Bosnian War⁴ and the Lebanon War⁵ are examples of recent proxy war conflicts and their associated costs, prices that are again being measured in Syria.

⁴The Bosnian War from 1992 – 1995 may be viewed as a proxy war due to the fact that the Bosnian Serbs received support directly from the Serbian government of Slobodan Milošević. Over 100,000 lives were lost in this war, due to the prolonged fighting, war crimes and ethnic cleansing. Serbian support to the Bosnian Serbs prolonged this war and contributed to the increased casualty count of this conflict.

⁵The Lebanon War from 1975 – 1990 may be viewed as a proxy war due to wide range of international and non-state actors in this conflict such as the United States of America, France, Italy, Israel, Syria, Iran, Hezbollah and the Palestine Liberation Organization. Over 250,000 fatalities occurred throughout the entirety of this conflict due to the prolonged fighting, terrorist events and war crimes. Regional and

To frame the concept of what constitutes a civil war, the definition developed by Nicholas Sambanis has been chosen to help frame the arguments of this paper. He states that civil war attributes consist of a conflict within the territory of a state that is a member of the international system, the state population must exceed 500,000 citizens, the conflict parties are politically and militarily organized, the state government must be a principal combatant and that the main insurgent organization(s) must be locally represented and must recruit locally.⁶ Though the conflict in Syria meets the framework of this civil war definition, parameters of the Syrian conflict have evolved such that this definition is not sufficient to describe all of the external attributes of the fighting within Syria.

To frame the concept of what constitutes a proxy war, the definition presented by Chris Loveman has been chosen. He states that within a proxy war a relationship exists between a principal and a proxy. The principal is a state with sufficient resources and interests to assist a proxy in waging a conflict. In the case of Syria, the proxy could be defined as either the pro-government forces of President Bashar al-Assad, or the proxy could be the anti-government forces, depending upon which side the principal state supports. The principal's aim is to influence affairs and provide the proxy with material aid. As well, principal actors will often have a basis or interest in the conflict.⁷

The consequences of amplifying internal state conflicts to include support from other regional or international state actors will often shift the outcome of the conflict,

international support to the various sides of the conflict prolonged this war and contributed to the increased casualty count of this conflict.

⁶Nicholas Sambanis, "What Is Civil War? CONCEPTUAL AND EMPIRICAL COMPLEXITIES OF AN OPERATIONAL DEFINITION," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 48.6 (December 2004): 825-826. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/224561098/fulltextPDF/6A484B165E2748C5PQ/1?accountid=9867>.

⁷Chris Loveman, "Assessing the phenomenon of proxy intervention," *Conflict, Security & Development* 2.03 (2002), 32-33. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14678800200590618>.

prolong the time frame of the war and lead to an increase of fatalities for the citizenry of the affected state. In some cases, this may lead to war crimes or crimes against humanity. In these cases, it is crucial for the international community to understand all state and non-state actors in a conflict to identify appropriate responses or for the pursuit of justice against perpetrators. Multiple actors are involved in the Syrian conflict and the subsequent sections will demonstrate the involvement and interests of two of these states.

IRANIAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

Iran and Syria have maintained strong political ties for decades.⁸ Apart from strong diplomatic and military measures of support, there is also a cultural and religious link that strengthens relations. “As a 15% minority among the world’s Muslims, Shi’a feel empathy toward each other [sharing] cultural and religious ties.”⁹ Due to this relationship foundation, it was a logical assumption that President Assad would be able to rely on support from Iran in the current Syrian conflict. However, the reasons for this support expand beyond the idea of Iran simply supporting President Assad. Instead, the Syrian conflict has presented Iran’s leaders an opportunity to advance Iranian interests and objectives throughout the Middle East. Three key interests; regime survival, hegemonic aspirations and Hezbollah¹⁰ will be examined and how the Syrian conflict is enabling the pursuit of these goals.

The first interest relates to the manner in which Iran is exploiting the Syrian conflict to ensure its own survival and increased relevance. During the Afghanistan and

⁸Elie Elhadj, “The SHI’I CRESCENT’S PUSH FOR REGIONAL HEGEMONY AND THE SUNNI REACTION,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs (Online)*, 18.1 (Spring 2014): 46. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1534292934?pq-origsite=summon>.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Hezbollah is mentioned at various points throughout this paper, though the spelling of the organization may vary depending upon the various authors that are cited. “Hezbollah” is what shall be used throughout the majority of this paper, however, alternate versions (e.g. Hizbollah, Hizbullah, etc...) of its name have been kept when cited from alternate sources.

Iraq campaigns led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United States (US), “Tehran’s regional strategy [had been] built around escaping western-led containment, deterring military attacks from either the U.S or Israel, [and] insulating Iran’s borders from regional instability.”¹¹ The drawdown of NATO and US coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan strengthened Iran’s position against containment but Iranian influence in the region was being further eroded by the various associated events of the Arab Spring. Thus,

the survival of the Syrian dictator, Bashar al-Assad, is regarded by Tehran to be of vital interest for the preservation of the Islamic regime. Tehran has been worried that such a fall would trigger several crises for the Iranian leadership: It would impact its influence in the Middle East, threaten Hezbollah’s ability to dominate events in Lebanon, and could encourage unrest in Iran.¹²

In order to avoid this outcome, Iran has directly applied components of its diplomatic and military elements of national power.

Iran has physically inserted itself in the intertwined conflicts. It has dispatched not just fuel and weapons but hundreds of ‘advisers’ from its elite Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as well as thousands of fighters from the Shi’a militias that Iran has fostered, armed, trained and funded in Lebanon and Iraq.¹³

Concerning the level of success of this first Iranian interest of regime relevance and survival, Iran’s stability has increased compared to its Arab neighbours. Also, its status as a regional or international security partner, through its relations with Russia, has

¹¹James Devine, “Iran versus ISIL,” *Insight Turkey*, 17.2 (Spring 2015): 22.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1732783429?pq-origsite=summon>.

¹²S. Gülden Ayman, “TURKEY AND IRAN: BETWEEN FRIENDLY COMPETITION AND FIERCE RIVALRY,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 36.1 (Winter 2014): 18.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1524181286?pq-origsite=summon>.

¹³“Death of a general; Iran in Iraq and Syria,” *The Economist*, 414.8919 (January 2015): 34.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1641939009?pq-origsite=summon>.

been considerably enhanced.¹⁴ In fact, as recent as 2015, the Pentagon stated that Iran is clearly, “supporting groups, organizations and states that threaten the American’s interests and allies, which means that Iran is undeniably the most influential external force across the Middle East.”¹⁵ Through Iran’s support of President Assad and the manner in which the leadership void within Iraq was exploited following the drawdown of American forces from the region, Iran has increased its status, relevance and legitimacy as a strong and viable regional actor. However, Iran’s regime survival and legitimacy is only one interest that is being supported through the use of diplomatic and military measures. A second interest that is evident from Iran’s involvement in the Syrian conflict is related to its regional hegemon aspirations and the realization of a Shi’a Crescent across the Middle East.

The recent opportunity for the Iranian hegemonic and Shi’a Crescent aspirations commenced as US influence was being withdrawn from Iraq. This created an opportunity for Iran to strengthen its own presence throughout the region, with particular attention being paid to the Assad regime in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹⁶ In addition to Iran’s quest for increased influence throughout the region, the other benefiting factor of a Shi’a Crescent was to ensure that Iran could maintain a permanent outlet to the Mediterranean

¹⁴Louise Fawcett, “Iran and the regionalization of (in)security,” *International Politics*, 52.5 (2015): 653. <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/ip/journal/v52/n5/pdf/ip201521a.pdf>; Jihad Aldeen Albadawi, “IRAN AND THE UNITED STATES AND THE NEW MIDDLE EAST SETTLEMENT,” *European Scientific Journal*, Vol. 2 (June 2015): 318. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1752139471?pq-origsite=summon>.

¹⁵Jihad Aldeen Albadawi, “IRAN AND THE UNITED STATES AND THE NEW MIDDLE EAST SETTLEMENT,” . . . , 312.

¹⁶Jamal Wakim, “END OF AL-ASSAD, OR OF ERDOGAN? TURKEY AND THE SYRIAN UPRISING,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 36.3 (Summer 2014): 192. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1561353313?pq-origsite=summon>.

Sea.¹⁷ However, other regional state actors, principally Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council, remain a concern for Iran and every Iranian action must consider any reciprocating effects from opposing regional actors.¹⁸ Regardless of the concerns of other Middle East states, due to its regional position, Syria is regarded as a key component of legitimizing Iran's regional status. The possibility of the Assad regime losing power has become a dilemma for Iran to resolve, reinforcing the argument and reasoning as to why Iran is involved directly in the Syrian conflict.

Currently, Iran's level of success towards their hegemonic aspirations and the realization of a Shi'a Crescent are positive, but will ultimately be tied to the outcome of the conflict in Syria. Iran's continued involvement in the conflict will likely lead to internal pressures due to the cost in blood and treasure to fund the actions in Syria. As well, as more Shi'a influence is extended throughout the Middle East, a Sunni reaction from other Gulf States or the Gulf Cooperation Council should be expected. Thus, the complete assessment of Iran's aspirations for hegemony through the exploitation of the Syrian conflict is dependent upon any resolutions that are eventually reached in the Syrian conflict.

A third interest that Iran holds in Syria relates to the survival of Hezbollah. Hezbollah, a key strategic and regional asset both politically and militarily, is of vital importance for Iran to exert influence throughout the Middle East. Hezbollah acts as a deterrent against any direct attack against Iran as it has the capacity to destabilize the

¹⁷Matthew D. Crosston, "Cold War and Ayatollah Residues: Syria as a Chessboard for Russia, Iran, and the United States," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 8.4 (Winter 2014): 105.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1635296068?pq-origsite=summon>.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 94.

Israeli-Lebanese border.¹⁹ Hezbollah is also a strong political ally of the Iranian regime, holding similar political views towards opposing regional state actors such as Israel and the Arab Gulf regimes²⁰ This relates to the conflict in Syria as the Assad regime enables a physical bridge within secured borders to Hezbollah in order to provide logistics, financial aid and military support and weapons to the organization.²¹

Apart from the military support that Iran has deployed in support of the Assad regime, Hezbollah has also been deployed in support of Syrian and Iranian interests.

Hezbollah was advising the Syrian regime and army leadership, working with Iranian advisors operating in Syria, helping to train the regime paramilitary organization, and placing intelligence operations on the ground not only to assist the regime in infiltrating opposition ranks but also to conduct its own assessment of the conflict's on the ground dynamics. Iran also relied on Hezbollah operatives to track evolving military developments in Syria.²²

Without a Syrian government that is aligned with the interests of Iran, the effectiveness, and possibly even the existence of Hezbollah could be put at risk. A more extreme point of view is that, "Hezbollah's army is in an existential fight in Syria. Without Assad, it would be strangled."²³ The involvement of Hezbollah within Syria is further evidence of how Iran has direct interest in the outcome of the conflict. As well, the level of commitment of Hezbollah fighters towards Syria is indicative of the importance of the Assad regime to Iran's and Hezbollah's leaders.

Hezbollah's longstanding ties with the House of Assad lie at the core of its domestic and regional policies. Losing Assad would undermine Hezbollah's regional strategic posture and embolden its domestic

¹⁹James Devine, "Iran versus ISIL," . . . , 23.

²⁰Randa Slim, "Hezbollah and Syria: From Regime Proxy to Regime Savior," *Insight Turkey*, 16.2 (Spring 2014): 65. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1543467329?pq-origsite=summon>.

²¹"Death of a general; Iran in Iraq and Syria," . . . , 35; Elie Elhadj, "The SHI'I CRESCENT'S PUSH FOR REGIONAL HEGEMONY AND THE SUNNI REACTION," . . . , 47.

²²Randa Slim, "Hezbollah and Syria: From Regime Proxy to Regime Savior," . . . , 63.

²³Elie Elhadj, "The SHI'I CRESCENT'S PUSH FOR REGIONAL HEGEMONY AND THE SUNNI REACTION," . . . , 44.

opponents to challenge its military status. Hezbollah is thus fighting in Syria to protect its status in Lebanon and its regional standing as much as to protect Iranian interests in the region.²⁴

Iran has a mixed level of success associated with its Hezbollah interests in the Syrian conflict. “On one hand, Hezbollah has gained new experiences in military theatres in which it had not engaged before. On the other hand, this intervention has damaged Hezbollah’s credibility and respect that it commanded in Arab countries.”²⁵ Also, considering that the Shiite population is a minority throughout the Middle East, the impact of losing hundreds of fighter within the Syrian conflict may have an impact on Hezbollah’s ability to recruit and sustain its own operations.²⁶ However, the Assad regime has become increasingly reliant on Hezbollah, illustrating the importance for the continued Iranian support towards Hezbollah and the degree to which Lebanon, Syria and Iraq remain regionally and strategically interconnected.²⁷ Overall, the fact that President Assad remains in power is an example in how Iran’s strategies and interests are having an effective influence throughout the Middle East. However, the secondary and tertiary consequences of Iranian actions must also be considered for the implications toward the entire Middle Eastern region.

From a positive perspective, a direct consequence of Iran’s actions in Syria is the influence that they have been able to achieve as a regional actor throughout the Middle East. Even President Obama has stated that, “Iran has become the pre-eminent strategic player in West Asia.”²⁸ The Iranian concern of a western containment strategy has

²⁴Randa Slim, “Hezbollah and Syria: From Regime Proxy to Regime Savior,” . . . , 61.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 65.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 67.

²⁷James Devine, “Iran versus ISIL,” . . . , 23.

²⁸Dr. Paridah Abd Samad, “Amid war, Iran’s hegemony rises,” *New Straits Times*, (March 2015): 16. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1663467579?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:summon&accountid=9867>.

receded and the political conditions throughout Iraq, Syria and Lebanon with Shi'a dominated governments support the arguments and position for the foundations of a Shi'a Crescent. However, subsequent challenges for Iranian leaders will be to normalize the current conditions so that they can remain favourable towards Iran for future generations. Also, apart from ensuring that these positive consequences become enduring conditions of success, Iran also faces the negative consequences of their actions that must be resolved.

An obvious negative outcome for Iran is the escalating costs in lives as well as the associated cost in financial resources, something that will become more burdensome the longer oil prices remain low.²⁹ Another negative consequence is that the conflict within Syria remains unresolved and that Iran was unable to influence a decisive win for the Assad regime. "Despite some successes, gains in popularity, and the [application of] political, economic and military resources [towards Syria, Iran has] not been able to achieve a hegemonic status in the regional order."³⁰ Additionally, since Iran has become involved in Syria, it has contributed to the prolongation of the conflict in Syria. One outcome of a protracted war in Syria is that it could lead to the dissolution of Syria as it is known today into a number of mini-states divided among the country's three major religious and ethnic groups: Alawites, Sunnis and Kurds.³¹ Though these remain a predictive outcome for now, it would have a severely negative consequence for Iran's leadership and draw into question Iran's role and effectiveness as a regional power. As well, the protracted conflict provides additional time and opportunity for sectarian groups

²⁹"Death of a general; Iran in Iraq and Syria," . . . , 35.

³⁰Elizabeth Monier, "The Arabness of Middle East regionalism: the Arab Spring and competition for discursive hegemony between Egypt, Iran and Turkey," *Contemporary Politics*, 20.4 (October 2014): 428. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13569775.2014.968474>.

³¹Randa Slim, "Hezbollah and Syria: From Regime Proxy to Regime Savior," . . . , 62.

to conduct and grow their operations throughout the Middle East. This is most evident through the continued actions of ISIL as well as the Kurds. Concerning the Islamic State, Iran remains committed to fighting this organization. However, its policies towards the Kurdish population remained flexible to bolster the Assad regime while also pressuring Turkey's government by providing logistical support, free passage and refuge in an attempt to support their fighting in Iraq and Syria.³² However, this policy could lead to further negative consequences for Iran as its officials have fears that the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) could join with the Iranian Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) to focus on its own struggles against Iran³³ All of these consequences lead to a portrayal of a continued sense of instability throughout the Middle East and reinforces the argument that Iran has been able to exert its influence across the region.

Iran's actions reinforce the Loveman definition of a regional proxy war. In the Syrian conflict, Iran has fulfilled the role of the principal and the Assad regime as the proxy. Material aid, financial support, and military support have all been provided by Iran, either directly or indirectly through external organizations such as Hezbollah. Fighting throughout Syria has continued, in some regions it has escalated and it is likely that the outcome of the Assad regime has been altered due to Iran's intervention and involvement in this conflict. Regardless of the interests of Iran's involvement, whether it is for the continuity of that Alawite regime within Syria, or the ability to demonstrate the manner in which Iran has evolved as an influential and relevant state actor within the Middle East, the Syrian theatre of conflict is more than a civil war and has evolved into a regional proxy war that affects all Middle East state actors.

³²S. Gülden Ayman, "TURKEY AND IRAN: BETWEEN FRIENDLY COMPETITION AND FIERCE RIVALRY," ... 21.

³³*Ibid.*, 22.

To further reinforce this argument, Turkey will be the focus in the following section in order to determine its involvement in the Syrian conflict and how its actions and interests support the argument of a regional proxy war within Syria.

TURKISH INVOLVEMENT IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

The relationship between Turkey and Syria has been mixed since the initial protests and the Syrian governments' response. Turkey's initial stance on Syria was to encourage the implementation of comprehensive reform packages by the Assad regime to set the conditions for democratic governance in Syria.³⁴ However, as the conflict persisted, this view changed to demands to the removal of the Assad regime.

Turkey's legitimization of its stance against the Syrian government involved the demonization of the Assad regime for its violation of human rights, democratic norms and religious principles, juxtaposed to Turkey's "selfless" stance on the side of the Syrian citizens and on the right side of the history.³⁵

The government in Turkey is not supporting the Syrian regime under President Assad and this conflict has presented an opportunity for Turkey's leaders to advance their interests and objectives throughout the Middle East. Three key objectives for Turkey; relevance, regional security and the Kurds, will be examined and how the pursuit of these goals is aided by the Syrian conflict.

The first interest involves Turkey's desire to increase its relevance by being accepted as the role model for democratic governance in the Muslim world.³⁶ The elites viewed that,

³⁴Özlem Demirtas-Bagdonas, "Reading Turkey's Foreign Policy on Syria: The AKP's Construction of a Great Power Identity and the Politics of Grandeur," *Turkish Studies*, 15.1, (Winter 2014): 141. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14683849.2014.890412>.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 144.

³⁶Nilüfer Karacasulu and Irem Askar Karakir, "EU-Turkey Relations in the Context of the Middle East after the Arab Spring," *Insight Turkey*, 16.4, (Fall 2014): 215. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679736173?pq-origsite=summon>.

Turkey's unique position as the representative of international law, human rights, democracy, core Islamic values, as well as trans-religious principles thus served to present Turkey as the sole "moral" actor in the region that has stood on the right side of history, and as a "basic" model" of the way authoritarianism and cruelty could be confronted and democracy and justice consolidated in the Middle East.³⁷

Originally, Turkey hoped that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood would replace the Assad regime and began to openly support the Free Syrian Army and the Muslim Brotherhood within the Syrian National Council.³⁸ However, even though Turkey has announced its intentions through an active foreign policy to undertake increased regional responsibilities,³⁹ any success in exploiting the situation in Syria to elevate Turkey's standing throughout the Middle East has been limited.

Turkey's biggest mistake, however, was to underestimate the regime's staying power, the international community's reluctance to become embroiled in Syria, and the extent to which radicals – including al-Qa'ida – could seize control of the insurgency. Turkey overestimated its leverage over Assad and assumed his fall was imminent.⁴⁰

Concerning the level of success for Turkey's interest to have increased relevance throughout the Middle East, despite some initial gains in popularity due to its views against the Assad regime, Turkey has not been able to achieve a hegemonic status in the regional order.⁴¹ While democracy and economic development are the foundation of Turkey's vision as a leader throughout the region,⁴² the inability of the Turkish government to successfully influence the removal of the Assad regime demonstrates its challenges as a regional hegemon. While this displays problems with Turkey's "soft

³⁷Özlem Demirtas-Bagdonas, "Reading Turkey's Foreign Policy on Syria . . . 147.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 142.

³⁹Nilüfer Karacasulu and Irem Askar Karakir, "EU-Turkey Relations . . . 216.

⁴⁰Semra Sevi, "TURKEY'S TWISTS AND TURNS ON SYRIA," *Middle East Review of International Affairs (Online)*, 18.1, (Spring 2014): 5. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1534292999?pq-origsite=summon>.

⁴¹Elizabeth Monier, "The Arabness of Middle East regionalism . . . 428.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 426.

power” approach to its regional hegemon aspirations, it does not yet represent a failure of their ambitions. Instead, it will necessitate a “long-game” approach by Turkey to influence a favourable outcome of the Syrian conflict to extend its democratic principles through the Middle East.

Regardless of any incorrect assumption concerning the longevity of the Assad regime, Turkey maintains a political stance that any solution short of regime change is unacceptable in the Syrian case.⁴³ While the removal of the Assad regime has not succeeded diplomatically, it has given rise to additional concerns for the Turkish government along its borders with Syria. This introduces the second key interest for Turkey, enhanced security along its borders with Syria as well as wider sense of security for the region.

As Syria’s fighting intensified, its border regions have become destabilized. In the extreme case, the border between Iraq and Syria is almost non-existent in some regions. Refugees mass at the borders between Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey adding to the human security dilemma, and in other cases, military engagements have occurred between Syria and Turkey.

Turkey is taking tight measures at its Syrian border since the Syrian crisis threatens Turkish security. [A] Turkish jet shot down a Syrian war plane on March 23, 2014. Syrian air missile batteries locked onto five Turkish F-16 planes on March 25. When a rocket from Syria hit a mosque near Turkey’s border on March 31, Turkish artillery retaliated in response. These incidents deepened strains in Turkish-Syrian relations that have already been tense.⁴⁴

Apart from the risks posed by direct military confrontation between Syria and Turkey, an increase in terrorist related activities has been noted within the Turkey-Syria

⁴³Semra Sevi, “TURKEY’S TWISTS AND TURNS ON SYRIA . . . 3.

⁴⁴Nilüfer Karacasulu and Irem Askar Karakir, “EU-Turkey Relations . . . 209.

border region.⁴⁵ The injury and death of Turkish citizens, within Turkey, due to insecure borders reinforces the importance of enhanced security and reduced fighting within Syria. In addition to the direct threat to the life of Turkish citizens, the refugee crisis has compounded the strain on Turkey's border regions.⁴⁶ At the end of 2015, the United Nations estimate the number of refugees residing within Turkey has increased to approximately 1.9 million. Of these, 1.7 million refugees originated from the Syrian Arab republic.⁴⁷

While Turkey has enhanced its military level of readiness at its borders with Syria, it has predominantly relied upon its diplomatic and information instruments of national power to resolve stability and security issues along its border regions. Turkey has gained approval from the European Union for its recent decision to allow the diversion of refugees to Turkey and it lends weight to the argument that Turkey is contributing to regional solutions by being a strong and reliable mediator and facilitator to the Syrian conflict.⁴⁸ Regardless, this "soft power" approach has not enabled a resolution of the regional security or migration problem. As well, by working in favour of European Union concerns, Turkey risks being perceived as a state that is more concerned with European perspectives than Middle Eastern issues.

Concerning its borders and regional security as a whole, Turkey has not had significant success. Though Turkey plays a positive role in supporting the lives of Middle Eastern refugees, its capacity to maintain such a significant number of refugees within its borders will continue to be stressed. Therefore, a resolution of the conflict in Syria will

⁴⁵S. Gülden Ayman, "TURKEY AND IRAN . . . 18.

⁴⁶Nilüfer Karacasulu and Irem Askar Karakir, "EU-Turkey Relations . . . 208.

⁴⁷United Nations High Commission for Refugees, "2015 UNHCR country operations profile – Turkey," last accessed 1 May 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48e0fa7f.html>.

⁴⁸Nilüfer Karacasulu and Irem Askar Karakir, "EU-Turkey Relations . . . 204.

increase security on Turkey's borders. However, Turkey's stance on regime change within Syria may continue to prolong and increase the refugee situation which will continue the plight and the associated costs by the Turkish government to support the refugees.

The final Turkish interest concerns the Kurdish population of the Middle East. Due to the uncertainty within Syria concerning potential resolutions of the conflict, a significant concern for Turkey involves any spillover effects towards its own population. Basically, autonomy for Syrian Kurds may strengthen the demands of Turkey's Kurds.⁴⁹ In addition to the risk of Kurdish cessation aspirations, Turkey also worries that northern Syria could become a safe haven for PKK operations against Turkish sovereignty.⁵⁰

The government of Turkey continues to maintain a soft power approach, predominantly through diplomatic measures, to prevent any rise of internal Kurdish nationalism. Turkey strongly opposed any type of independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq [and Syria] and continues to object to the autonomous zone that exists.⁵¹ However, the Turkish government has maintained its position on the right to intervene militarily against Kurdish uprisings. Whether the uprisings are within its own border regions or within northern Syria, the government of Turkey considers the threat of significant military action as a valid response and a necessity for Turkish sovereignty.⁵²

Concerning Turkey's level of success in minimizing Kurdish aspirations of recognition and autonomy, it has had some success in maintaining the status-quo, however the threat posed by armed Kurdish groups remains a relevant concern for the

⁴⁹Semra Sevi, "TURKEY'S TWISTS AND TURNS ON SYRIA . . . 4.

⁵⁰Özlem Demirtas-Bagdonas, "Reading Turkey's Foreign Policy on Syria . . . 142.

⁵¹S. Gül den Ayman, "TURKEY AND IRAN . . . 11; Jamal Wakim, "END OF AL-ASSAD, OR OF ERDOGAN? . . . 195.

⁵²Semra Sevi, "TURKEY'S TWISTS AND TURNS ON SYRIA . . . 3.

government of Turkey. As well, due to Iranian support for Kurdish operations throughout the region⁵³ the threat of Kurdish autonomy may actually be increasing. This demonstrates the manner in which the interests of Iran and Turkey are intersecting within the scope of the Syrian conflict. Should Kurdish actions continue to increase and their support from other regional actors continues to improve, Turkish military action within Syria will remain a valid course of action.⁵⁴

The Turkish government's application of "soft power" to the Syrian conflict has had associated consequences. From a positive perspective, Turkey has maintained its moral stance concerning the human rights violations being committed within the Syrian conflict. As well, Turkey's acceptance of millions of refugees has been a positive example of how human suffering may be reduced, and it has also reduced the migrant burden on other western countries. Through these actions, Turkey has demonstrated that it can be a strong, relevant and responsible regional actor, but should Turkey be resolved to confront the source of the problems within the Syrian conflict, it is likely that further applications of "hard power" would be required to influence the situation and the outcome of the Syrian conflict.

From a negative perspective, the position held by the government of Turkey that the Assad regime must be removed from power has helped justify the support that Turkey provides to the opposition fighters within Syria. Turkey provides a safe haven and operational space for the Syrian opposition,⁵⁵ including elements of the Syrian National Council and leaders of the Free Syrian Army in exile.⁵⁶ Though Turkey predominantly

⁵³S. Gülden Ayman, "TURKEY AND IRAN . . . 21.

⁵⁴Nilüfer Karacasulu and Irem Askar Karakir, "EU-Turkey Relations . . . 215.

⁵⁵Semra Sevi, "TURKEY'S TWISTS AND TURNS ON SYRIA . . . 1.

⁵⁶*Ibid*, 2.

applies its diplomatic power to try and influence the situation within Syria, these examples of deliberately assisting the opposition groups indicate that Turkey is contributing to the fighting against the Assad regime. Should the Assad regime eventually prevail and retain power within Damascus, both Syria and Iran will likely attempt to exploit the actions taken by Turkey in order to strengthen the validity and influence of Shi'a control throughout the Middle East.

The continued fighting within Syria also places a strain on Turkey's economy and security within the region. This is most evident from the millions of refugees that are now residing within its borders and the associated costs of administering the refugee camps. Attacks against its citizens, either through armed conflict on its borders or through acts of terrorism within its cities, contribute to the security dilemma that Turkey faces on its borders. Finally, the longer the conflict persists, the more armed Kurdish groups will continue to push to regions of autonomy from the Syrian government, which could easily translate into similar views being pursued from the Kurdish population within Turkey's own borders.

Turkey's actions also reinforce the Loveman definition of a regional proxy war. In the Syrian conflict, Turkey has fulfilled the role of the principal and some of the armed opposition groups, such as the Syrian National Council or the Free Syrian Army are its proxies. Material aid, financial support, and military support have been provided by Turkey, predominantly within the "safe zones" throughout southern Turkey. Fighting throughout Syria has continued, in some regions it has escalated but it remains unknown whether the support that Turkey is providing will affect the outcome of the Assad regime. Regardless of the interests of Turkey's involvement, whether it being the democratic

model for other Middle Eastern states, or to influence the outcome of the conflict in order to enhance regional security and stability, the Syrian theatre of conflict is much more than a civil war and has evolved into a regional proxy war that affects all Middle East state actors.

Based on the preceding reviews of Iranian and Turkish interests within Syria, it is now possible to consider possible outcomes to the conflict and how the current interests of Iran and Turkey may influence any, or all, of the outcomes that are discussed. Though the fate of Syria remains unknown, the studies and arguments for possible outcomes that were developed by the RAND Corporation will be used for the next section of this paper.

SYRIA'S ALTERNATE FUTURES AND THE REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

In 2014 the RAND Corporation published its analysis of four likely outcomes to the Syrian conflict. The first outcome is that of a prolonged conflict, a scenario where war continues unabated, with high levels of violence, continued external support to all sides but where neither side is able to develop the military capability or advantage to break the stalemate. The second scenario is that of a victory for the Assad regime, where it is able to wear down the various elements and factions of resistance through force and contain them to small pockets of resistance within remote regions of the country. The third outcome involves the collapse of the Assad regime where Syria would effectively collapse into a series of small fiefdoms. The final scenario involves a negotiated settlement, based on the stalled Geneva peace talks, in which the Assad family would relinquish power and a new multi-sectarian council would run the country prior to democratic elections being held.⁵⁷

⁵⁷Andrew M. Liepman, Brian Nichiporuk, and Jason Killmeyer, "Alternative Futures for Syria: Regional Implications and Challenges for the United States," *RAND Corporation*, (2014): 3-8.

From Iran's perspective, any option which involves the removal of the Assad regime is unacceptable. Iran will continue to influence Syria to avoid any option that involves the collapse of the Assad regime or any type of negotiated settlement where the Assad family is forced to flee Syria. A victory for the Assad regime would be Iran's preferred outcome with the prolonged conflict being acceptable as well, as long as President Assad remains in power. In order to achieve either of these outcomes, Iran will need to maintain its policies of providing military and logistical aid to the Assad regime, ensuring the continued operational effectiveness of Hezbollah and be prepared to sacrifice a considerable amount of blood and treasure to the conflict in Syria. This will ensure a continued level of Iranian influence throughout the Middle East, but it will involve political risk within Iran as the costs of its involvement continue to escalate. As well, if Iran or the Assad regime begin to form a significant regional advantage, other regional actors such as Turkey or Saudi Arabia may be forced to increase their level of support to opposition forces, resulting in the likelihood of the prolonged conflict option to occur.

From Turkey's perspective, the government has clearly stated that no solution exists to the Syrian conflict while President Assad remains in power. A collapse of the Assad regime or a negotiated settlement in which the Assad family leave Syria would be the preferred outcome for the government of Turkey. Based on the current level of aid and support provided by Turkey, it is unlikely that either of these options would be possible. As well, should Turkey take a more prominent role in the fighting in Syria, the risk of regional backlash from Iran would increase, as well as an increased risk of invoking domestic Kurdish insurrection or rebellion within Turkey's borders. Therefore,

as it is likely that Turkey will continue its existing level of support to opposition groups operating within Syria, the most likely outcome that Turkey will be able to influence is that of the first scenario, a prolonged conflict.

After considering the proposed outcomes for the Syrian conflict, this paper has demonstrated that the outcome will be decided, or prolonged, due to the regional influence and direct actions of external state actors. The Syrian conflict is no longer a civil war and has become a regional proxy war involving considerable influence from both Iran and Turkey. Though this paper has only focussed on two external state actors within the conflict, further research could expand upon this argument by considering other regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Lebanon or Iraq. As well, it could be expanded even further by considering the international aspect of the conflict by considering the actions of the US and Russia. Regardless, it remains important to clarify the full scope of the conflict as it exists if there is to be a negotiated settlement in the future. Due to the regional implications that this conflict now holds, peace cannot be achieved without considering all of the actors that are involved and the conditions that would need to be met in order to satisfy the majority of all regional state actors throughout the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed the current conflict within Syria to demonstrate that it has become a regional proxy war and should no longer be considered a civil war. It has focussed on how Syria has become a battleground for competing regional interests in which two aspiring hegemon, Iran and Turkey, are both attempting to exert their influence. Through a comparative analysis of their interests, methods, levels of success

and the consequences of their actions it was possible to demonstrate further that their actions contribute directly to the definition of a proxy war, as offered by Chris Loveman.

Though the outcome of the conflict in Syria remains unknown, potential outcomes were considered based on the analysis provided by the RAND Corporation. Iran prefers a future in which the Assad regime consolidates power and Turkey prefers a future with Assad removed. The continued involvement of these two states will likely contribute to the prolongation of the conflict instead of any type of decisive victory for the government forces or opposition groups.

The conflict in Syria should continue to be a field of study in order to further develop a complete understanding of regional aspirations and goals that are being developed by external state actors within the scope of this conflict. Not only will this contribute to the possibility of ensuring that all factors are considered for any eventual peace negotiation but may also be used in the pursuit of justice for the conduct of war crimes that have been committed throughout the course of the conflict. Finally, should the situation in Syria develop in which more external involvement occurs, or if western governments wish to take more direct action in Syria, it is crucial to fully understand the conflict, not as a civil war between the citizens of Syria, but as a wider regional proxy war, where levels of success will be hard to achieve and the associated consequences of external state influence will remain unknown for years.

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