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THE ROLE OF IRAN IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sparked by the fire of the civil unrest within the Arab Spring in 2011, and fueled by a water drought that displaced thousands of people in 2006, the Syrian Civil War has remained in the spotlight of the international media ever since, and up until the present. In similarity with most modern-protracted conflicts, Syria quickly became an internationalized war of competing ideologies. Both state and non-state actors are using Syria as the new battlefield to showcase their interests and take control over the heart of the Middle East. Government forces versus rebel factions and irregular forces, Russians versus Americans, a secular-authoritarian regime versus Islamic fundamentalists, Sunnis versus Shiites etc. To many, the Syrian war brings back memories of the shadows left in the wars of Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The story already sounds familiar.

Unlike other state actors involved in the conflict, Iran was quick to voice its open support towards the Assad government. The other nations who are directly or indirectly involved were more reluctant to enter the war and to openly voice support towards one side. Such is the case of the United States, Russia, Turkey, Israel, and the Gulf Countries in the Syrian war. In contrast, Iran has a clear agenda in mind, to support Shia militias across the Middle East in order to become a hegemonic power. Through different proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the Palestinian Territories, Iran seeks to manifest its perceived destiny to become the next major powerhouse in the Middle-Eastern heartland. The latest revolutions and wars in the Middle East have left a vacuum of power, a void that can only be filled by the next actor who possesses the will and the means to proclaim itself as the dominator. Iran is a suitable candidate for this triumph of the will. In this competition, however, Tehran believes (rightly so) that they will be led towards semi-direct, or indirect, confrontation with Israel and Saudi Arabia.

1.1. ABSTRACT

Ever since the inception of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the Islamic Republic of Iran has carried out a foreign intervention to save the Syrian regime of Bashar Al Assad. Iran has created an alliance with the Russian Federation and with the Lebanese paramilitary group

Hezbollah in order to assure Assad's victory in the midst of the chaotic Syrian situation. Through a combination of monetary and financial assistance and provision of weapons, manpower, and logistics to the Assad regime, this tripartite alliance has emerged victorious. Hezbollah has been crucial to victories for the Syrian regime in the eastern front, such as in the battle of Aleppo, but they have taken massive losses in terms of human capital and ultimately depend on the financing of Iran. Russian airstrikes and private military contractors have proven decisive for Assad's victory, allowing Russia to keep its naval ports and airbases in Syria, but in the end the Russian Federation doesn't hold more sway over the Syrian regime than Iran does. On the other hand, Iran has paid a massive economic cost to sustain the Syrian intervention, but their human loses haven't been catastrophic as those of Hezbollah and in the end of the day they are the ones who control the Syrian regime, not Russia. Emerging the clear-cut winner, Tehran has gained more influence in the region, allowing the Islamic Republic to project power towards the Levant and the Mediterranean. Such advances did not go unnoticed by the regional military hegemon, Israel, who will not allow Iran to question the current status quo in the region. All of this might give pretext for the next major coming war in the Middle East.

1.2. MOTIVATION

The aim of this project is to take a closer look at Iranian geopolitics in the Middle East: the motivations, strategy, and vision that lead the revolutionary state to behave as a hegemon. Syria is the most recent case of Iranian involvement in the proximity, adding to the country's previous experience in Lebanon and Iraq. The ultimate goal is to open a corridor towards the Mediterranean. Syria is the last piece in the Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut puzzle for Tehran to gain full access to the Mediterranean. In Southern Lebanon, the alliance with Hezbollah and the withdrawal of Israeli forces has given Iran an indirect proximity to the sea and to Israel. In Iraq, the vacuum of power left after America's intervention and the removal of Saddam Hussein has given Iran sway over the country's large Shiite population (over 60%). Therefore, Syria is the most relevant open case at the current moment to dive into Iranian geopolitics and understand their nature.

There is a handful of reasons that have led me to choose such topic of investigation. First, my general interest in geopolitics, security, and diplomacy as some of the fundamental pillars in the doctrine and political science of International Relations. Second, my preference of gravitating towards the Middle East as an area of expertise. Third, the fact that Iran is an uprising power in the Middle East, and therefore, likely to be a key actor in challenging the current status quo and re-writing the future of the region.

1.3. OBJECTIVES

The goal of this research project is to understand Iranian geopolitics in both a wider and narrower framework. A lot has been written about post-revolutionary Iran, the change in the country's society and politics. Iranian funding of Shiite militias as a catalyst to fight its proxy wars across the Middle East is thoroughly documented as well. However, the connection between these two manifestations of Iran's behavior: (1) the change in the country's political and societal structure, and (2) its consequential promotion of similar values across the region; is not so commonly made. Tehran seeks to export the values of the 1979 Islamic revolution across the Middle East. Tehran has formally refused to let Iran be a mere satellite country or an irrelevant actor, with no say or power to decide. Tehran proclaims its willingness to expand its influence, vision, and values elsewhere to the maximum reachable extent. The goal of this paper is to understand such behavior, prominently promoted and funded by the Ayatollah regime, through the practical case and window-of-opportunity that can be found in Syria.

The objective in this work isn't to build a narrative or counter-narrative towards Iran, to promote propaganda in favor or against the Ayatollah regime and what they stand for. Rather than the narrative-propaganda aspect, the goal here is to make a detailed-descriptive analysis of Iran as a main actor in the game of geopolitics in the Middle East. Constantly bashed and demonized by Western propaganda, we usually tend to regard Iran as a hostile country. However, Iran itself is a millenary civilization, rich in culture, philosophy, political tradition, natural resources (gas and petrol reserves), a country of 80 million people, an emerging

economy with incredible potential. While often overlooked, it is worth the effort to understand Iran from a meta-political perspective.

This research effort will seek to answer a set of questions relevant to Iran that are interconnected between them. Why does Iran seek to export the values of the revolution and to increase Shia dominance in the Middle East? Is Iran a messianic actor? How practical or achievable are Tehran's goals in reality? What chance do the Ayatollahs have in promoting their agenda beyond the Persian borders? Why do they stand a better chance now than they did before? None of these questions can be asked separately or cast-aside from the rest. Each of these questions should be asked as a follow-up to the previous, since they share common ground on the answers, but are essentially not the same.

It is also important to note that the war in Syria isn't over, although it soon might come to an end. Throughout the entire process of reading and writing for this project, the Syrian Civil War has kept a continuation without permanent cease-fire. How does the continuation of the war affect the quality of this work? It goes without saying that its' hard to elaborate definitive conclusions for a process that is still taking place. The future is uncertain. This paper is an analysis of the recent past and present, roughly from the years 2011 to 2017, and a prospective of the near future.

My overall analysis might be correct, a close approximation to the reality, or it might as well be overkill. As of right now, it appears that the Assad regime is winning the war thanks to the intervention of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. However, with the vast amount of factors to take into account in a civil war of this magnitude, the course of action could change and reverse drastically. The war could capitulate soon, with Bashar al-Assad consolidating power once again as an Iranian proxy with Russian support. While this is the most likely scenario, the war could also prolong itself for another decade like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan did if the stalemate between the different sides is maintained. While unlikely, the outcome of never-ending warfare in Syria is still possible. Long story short, there is no half-way solution, someone must achieve an absolute victory and someone else has to be annihilated for this conflict to end. Syria is the war of the decade, and as such, it deserves to be analyzed with great care and calculation.

1.4. HYPOTHESIS

My main hypothesis is that Iran has risen as the victor of the Syrian Civil War. I emphasize Iran as the winner, rather than the Syrian Arab Republic, Hezbollah, or the Russian Federation, for a number of reasons. First of all, not the Syrian regime, because Bashar al-Assad and the government did not start to be on the winning side of the war until its Iranian, Lebanese, and Russian supporters came to its aid. Second, while the Russian airstrikes and private military contractors were essential to eliminate multiple targets of the Islamic State and the Free Syrian Army, their investment hasn't gone far beyond air support. Russian troops on the ground and other forms of Moscow's land support haven't been as present in Syria as those of their Shiite allies. Third, Hezbollah is an Iranian proxy, so I wouldn't treat their victory as if it were from a separate, independent, entity. Ultimately, Hezbollah depends to a large extent on Tehran's finance. Also, Hezbollah has been the actor with more casualties and bloodshed in this side of the equation. In other words, the human cost that Hezbollah is paying to push back into Syria is massive.

Meanwhile, Tehran has heavily invested into funding, training, and logistics of Shiite proxies in Syria, but it hasn't lost many of their own soldiers in comparison to the other actors. A lot of the personnel that they send to the front lines are former Afghan refugees who are forced to fight in exchange of Tehran's asylum, they aren't Iranian citizens. The registered number of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corp (IRGC) or Quds Force casualties is considerably lower than anyone else's in the war. And yet, they are still on the victorious side at someone else's expense. Taking all these factors into account, from a cost and benefit perspective, Tehran is winning the war by all accounts.

Something else to take into account is the proximity factor. My theory is that Iran is more involved in Syria than other regional powers due to its proximity. By proximity, I'm not restricting myself to the geographical concept, but also applying it to religious terms. Strictly speaking, countries like Israel and Turkey are geographically closer, considering that Iraq serves as a buffer zone between Syria and Iran. However, Iran's margin of opportunity in Syria, partly due to its geographical proximity and the proximity of the Shiite religion across the area, is higher than anyone else's. To a certain extent, countries like Lebanon, Syria and Iraq already serve as Iranian satellite failed-states, since the governments of those countries

no longer control large areas of their territory. The Shiite religion allows this to happen, since Iraq is majority Shia, and both Syria and Lebanon have a considerably high Shiite part of the population. Tehran considers these three states as buffer zones, essential for the survival of Iran's foreign policy. If Tehran loses control of Syria, Lebanon and Iraq could quickly follow since there would be a part missing in their equation towards a Mediterranean corridor. In other words, Iran is facing an 'enemy at the gates' situation. Winning Syria is Iran's chance to maintain and increase an active, assertive, coercive foreign policy. If Iran wants to challenge the status quo in the region and reshape an order that serves its interests, the Islamic Republic must win in Syria first. Consequently, not being victorious on the Syrian front could cost Iran its last chance to maintain a robust foreign policy in the area.

1.5. METHODOLOGY

Due to the uncertainty that arises as a consequence of the continuity of the Syrian Civil War, this research project will focus exclusively on a limited timeframe. The conflict in Syria is still ongoing, and is likely to remain continuing in the near future. As I write these words, the premise and the nature of the war in Syria are changing. The future is uncertain, and so is Syria's fate for the moment. As I mentioned above, the final outcome of Assad winning the war backed by Iran seems certain, but the tide could very well change into a completely different, or not so clear, direction. Such is the nature of the waters of geopolitics in an area as volatile and unpredictable as the Middle East. This paper has been researched from September 2017, written since January 2018, and finished in April 2018. In the time process of writing this paper, some major event could have taken place that would ultimately change the course of events, jeopardizing all my assumptions and final conclusions. Therefore, a timeframe must be established, for it is the only way to write about and deal with an ongoing war of massive proportions if the purpose of the writer is to maintain credibility. For all these logical and practical reasons, this project will strictly focus on the role of Iran in the Syrian Civil War from the time frame of 2011 to 2017. Also, its important to note that while this work is focused on an established number of years, it is not strictly chronological. That is, it

won't be a chronological-linear account of the war from 2011 to 2017, but rather a combination of the events that happened in such time period.

In regards to the main two methodological frameworks, quantitative and qualitative work, this research paper will mostly apply the latter. Due to the actuality of the issue at hand, the logical measure here is to mostly rely on qualitative, rather than quantitative, sources. Since the focus is on both the recent and immediate presence of Iranian influence in the Syrian war, the most important sources will be the ones that covered and analyzed the conflict. Consequently, most of the sources used are articles from a variety of international media and press, think tanks, and foreign policy magazines. Quantitative data, such as the total numbers of casualties and of funds invested in the war will be used occasionally as support.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Asymmetric Deterrence: According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "the maintenance of military power for the purpose of discouraging attack." The term became popularized during the Cold War, especially in terms of nuclear deterrence, which consists on the stockpiling of nuclear warheads in order to avoid attack. However, symmetric deterrence implies that the opponents are on somewhat equal terms and have similar capacities of escalation. In contrast, asymmetric deterrence implies that the power of the belligerents differentiates substantially. In other words, a conflict between a much stronger versus a far weaker opponent. The term is often used to describe the fight that a government and its professional army carry out against smaller militias, insurgencies, terrorist movements, rebellions, riots etc. "Deterrence of a challenger by a defender is modeled by explicitly relating uncertainty and the credibility of retaliatory threats to the stability of an asymmetric deterrence relationship." (Zagare, Kilgour, 1993)

Attrition Warfare: According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 'attrition' derives from the Latin term *attritio*, meaning "the act of wearing down by friction." In the context of warfare, it is the "act of weakening or exhausting (the opponent) by constant harassment, abuse, or attack." This mode of conducting warfare consists on defeating the opponent through exhaustion of his troops, resources, and material. Rather than a military strategy based on calculation, this is a type of warfare based on which side can fight the war for the longest time in terms of numbers of human and economic capital. In other words, the conflict becomes all about who has the most resources and is willing to spend them. In this type of conflict, there are usually no clear winners, as the victor usually ends up being slightly less exhausted than the losing side. The victor achieves a Pyrrhic victory in which he has suffered such substantial loses that the reality ends up being a lose-lose situation. This concept became popularized after the bordering conflict that was fought between Israel and Egypt in 1968-1970, commonly referred to as the War of Attrition. Since then, the term has been used to describe other cross-border conflicts in the Middle East, such as with the Iran-Iraq war. (Murray, 2016) (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013)

Axis of Resistance: The Middle Eastern alliance between Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shia militias. The objective of this alliance is to counter the interests of the United States, Israel, and the West in the region. The secondary objective is to further Shiite interests in the region, with expansive ambitions to extend into mostly Sunni-dominated territory. To a lesser extent, the Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Yemeni Houthi rebels are sometimes loosely associated or included in the alliance in order to counter Israeli and Saudi interests in the region. (Hubbard, Kershner, Barnard, 2018) (Mohseni, Kalout, 2017)

Foundation of Martyrs and Veteran Affairs: Established in 1979 to look after the families of "martyrs" of the Iranian Islamic revolution. The foundation receives its budget directly from the government. It is an Iranian para-governmental organization whose mission is to aid the families of the "martyrs" of the Iran-Iraq war and those who became disabled during the conflict. In the modern times, the organization has expanded its mission to cover those Iranians killed or injured in the war in Syria and their families. The foundation offers a variety of aid programs to the families, such as financial assistance and the provision of inexpensive goods. It also helps people find employment and make it through their studies. The foundation has an annual university quota through which its members can access Iranian universities without having to go through the official examination process. (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1995) (Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2017)

Hezbollah: A militant Islamic Shia political party and paramilitary group that emerged in Lebanon in 1985 as a consequence of the Israeli invasion of the country during the Lebanese Civil War in 1982. Since 1992, the organization has been headed by leader Hassan Nasrallah. The organization holds tremendous political, social, and religious power, owning a massive set of welfare and possessing seats in both the Lebanese parliament and in the cabinet, making it one of the largest political parties represented in Lebanon. Additionally, Hezbollah also has its own army, therefore operating as a 'state within a state' in Southern Lebanon. Hezbollah is Israel's most formidable military opponent, having fought against the Jewish state during the 1980s, in 2000, and in 2006. Hezbollah has a long history of being directly allied with Iran, receiving training, funding, and logistics from the Islamic Republic. Hezbollah promotes a lot of the same ideas of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, such as

Khomeinism, Jihadism, and anti-Western imperialism. In the context of the Syrian Civil War, Hezbollah is a supporter of President Bashar Al Assad. (Levitt, pgs. 11-16, 2013) (Zahriyeh, 2015)

Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC): Also known as the *Pasdaran* in Farsi, the IRGC are branch of Iran's Armed Forces that is estimated to have approximately between 100,000 and 125,000 members. Following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the IRGC was created by direct order of supreme leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomenei in order to protect Iran's Islamic Republic system from internal and external threats, such as future attempts of *coup d'etat*, reforms, and other dangers. According to Bruce Riedel, a former CIA analyst, the IRGC's goal is to act as a "counterweight to the regular military in order to protect the revolution against a possible coup." As opposed to the regular army within the Iranian Armed Forces, whose mission is to protect Iran's borders and internal territory according to the constitution, the IRGC carries out a much deeper mission. The Revolutionary Guards often overlaps with the rest of the regular army, as it is also involved in maintaining domestic order, projecting Iranian influence in the Middle East, and presiding over major business interests. The IRGC has its own army, navy, air force, manages Iran's ballistic missile program and coordinates foreign irregular warfare operations with the elite Quds Force and regional proxies such as Hezbollah. The IRGC also controls the paramilitary volunteer Basij militia, who has an active personnel of 90,000 strong. Due to its vastly expanded power, some authors have argued that the IRGC has become a 'state within a state,' since its generals also own businesses and real state within Iran. Answering only to Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Revolutionary Guards are endowed with enormous leverage over legal, political, and religious power. Finally, the Revolutionary Guards also have their own media and propaganda branch, Sepah News. In short, the IRGC are a present institution in all forms of Iranian political, economic, and military power. (Takeyh, 2016) (Bruno, Bajoria, Masters, 2013) (Deutsche Welle, 2017)

Proxy War: According to the English Oxford Dictionary, "A war instigated by a major power which does not itself become involved." Proxy wars or warfare is an indirect intervention when an actor, usually the state, uses a proxy against a specific target. The term 'proxy' can also be applied directly when referring to a group or militia that conducts warfare

in such manner. In historical conjunction with terms such as 'patron,' 'client,' 'principal,' and 'pawn,' the term 'proxy' became a popular English vocabulary asset during the Cold War days to describe the type of global chess game and bloc-building strategy that the United States utilized against the Soviet Union. Modern proxies are manifested in two ways: "(1) projecting a rivalry on an ongoing conflict by indirectly supporting a party; (2) using a third party to fight your conflict." When a state uses conflict to further its own interests, proxies can be used to escape the inconvenient reality of conventional warfare. Providing economic and military assistance to the proxy can be a way to fight against the enemy with actual or proven involvement, thus avoiding an open declaration of war. (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018) (Rauta, 2014)

Quds Force: Elite special forces unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) responsible for foreign and external operations. The name comes from the Arabic translation of *Quds*, which means Jerusalem, based on the promise of liberating the holy city from the perceived Jewish colonizers and to destroy the state of Israel. The mission of the Quds force is to carry out special operations through direct action, information, military assistance, logistics, financing, and weapons-transferring of other like-minded states, groups or individuals. The force is under direct command of Qassem Soleimani (Commander of the Quds Force and senior military officer of the IRGC), supporting multiple non-state actors in various scenarios such as: Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories of Israel, Shiite militias in Iraq, and Shiite groups in Yemen and Afghanistan. In terms of numbers, there isn't a fixed or secure figure that reflects how many members it is composed of. Most sources claim that the force has at least 3,000 members, while other sources claim that the real number ranges up to 15,000. The force is divided by a centralized headquarters and eight regional command posts. Unit 2000 / Lebanon Corps is responsible for all operations in the Levant and is the major branch of the entire force. For the sake of this project, it is important to note that this is the armed branch that maintains strong ties to Hezbollah and gives support to the Assad regime. (Castro Torres, pgs. 210-215, 2015)

Realpolitik: According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "politics based on practical and material factors rather than on theoretical or ethical factors." According to the Cambridge

Dictionary, "practical politics, decided more by the urgent means of the country, political party, etc., than by morals or principals." Meaning 'real politics' in German, the term refers to the type of pragmatic politics carried out by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in order to assure Germany's political and economic power. The basic premise is that there are no morals or justice in the international order, thus, countries are better off by putting aside those principles if they seek to assure their security. Hard power is the most important tool in order to achieve the ends that satisfy the national interest. This ideology is a natural variant of its Machiavellian and Hobbesian predecessors. Those who practice realpolitik aren't necessarily opposed to promoting human rights or international law, but they see them as lesser priorities. The term is sometimes used pejoratively to describe politics perceived as amoral, unjust, or inhumane. The term gained notable importance and use during the Cold War, while modern proponents of realpolitik include former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. (Bew, 2016)

Shadow Warfare: An irregular conflict that is fought indirectly by a state or another actor in foreign territory. In this type of warfare, the benefactor isn't fighting officially, its presence might be perceived but at the same time isn't there, thus acquiring the term 'shadow'. The term is somehow related, sometimes overlapping, with proxy warfare. What differentiates shadow warfare from proxy warfare is that the former is more secretive than the latter. For example, in Syria, Hezbollah openly and admittedly acts as an Iranian proxy. The relation between both is widely recognized due to their Shiite alliance. On the other hand, shadow warfare is conducted in light footprint, clandestine and covert action, through special operations forces etc. Also, while proxies are usually much larger in terms of personnel, shadow warfare is carried with very light presence. (Lyckman, Weissmann, 2015) In many cases, shadow warfare is conduced by secret and intelligence security services. Most notably, the term arose to describe the type of foreign operations carried by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency during the 1960s and 1970s. The term became popular as well during the Afghanistan War, with numerous accounts of CIA personnel participating, and even dying, in battles against Taliban forces. (Brooks, 2012) Shadow warfare is characteristic of modern 21st Century conflict, since the fighting often takes place in packed urban areas where insurgent and rebel movements fight government forces. Such is the case of the conflicts in Gaza, Iraq, and Ukraine. (Barno, 2014)

Strategic Depth: In military terms, it refers to the distance that separates the country's heartland, where the vast majority of the population, cities, and infrastructure are concentrated, and the bordering frontline in which the war is being fought. Makes reference to how vulnerable the core of the country is to a possible enemy attack. A country with more strategic depth, or general land mass, is at a greater advantage than a country with less land, because it has a higher possibility to retreat, maneuver, and launch counter-attacks within its own territory. It is a geographical characteristic that reinforces the country's defense capacities and poses a big challenge on the opponent invader. Strategic depth relates directly to a country's safety and security, especially in the case that the country has conflictive or hostile neighbors. An example of a country with great strategic depth is Russia, reflected in how difficult it is to invade the country due to its large landmass before reaching the bigger cities like Moscow, as shown in the Napoleonic and Nazi Germany invasions during WWII. A country with poor strategic depth is Israel, a very small country surrounded with hostile neighbors on every front, posing a threat to its existence during the Six Day War in 1967. In comparative advantage, one of the reasons why India has won every war against Pakistan is because India has about three times the strategic depth that Pakistan has. (Masood, 2015)

Sunni / Shia Islam: Although in religious belief and practice there are more similarities than differences between the two main branches of Islam, the two differ over the conflict of who is the righteous successor of Prophet Muhammad after his death in 630. Following the Prophet's death, division arose over whether his succession should be based on kinship or on knowledge of his life and works. Some chose to advocate Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali, while others advocated the Prophet's closest companion, Abu Bakr. Those who followed Ali became known as Shia and those who followed Abu Bakar became known as Sunni. There are 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, of which about 87-90% are Sunni. Meanwhile, only 10-13% of the world's Muslims are Shia, but they are majority in countries like Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Azerbaijan and Bahrain. In the rest of Muslim countries, the majority of the population is Sunni by a long shot of difference. In the context of the Syrian Civil War, the country is ruled by a minority Alawite government while the vast majority of the population is Sunni, and Iran, the country tipping the balance in favor of the regime, is majority Shia. Like in most wars of the Middle East, the Syrian Civil War poses a conflict for status quo

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between Shias and Sunnis. (Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, 2016)
(Pew Research Center, 2009)

3. STATE OF AFFAIRS

3.1. IRANIAN JUSTIFICATION AT HOME

The justification of war is a trend that generally applies to the nation-state. That is to say that the large majority of nation states, regardless of ideology or type of government, tend to justify war to their population. Even authoritarian regimes, who have lesser accountability with their citizens than democracies, tend to justify warfare when necessary and sell to the citizenry the different reasons as to why the nation is fighting someone else. Democracies do it almost without exception, and few are the totalitarian governments that don't fit the scheme. Prominent authors, from Carl von Clausewitz[1] to Cormac McCarthy[2] have defined the nature of war in endless fatalist forms. Regardless of such definitions, however, there is a generalized consensus that war is a tragedy, for it often requires the destruction of cities and the deaths of thousands and millions. The general public, whether in a democracy or not, generally isn't reticent to waging war, for they are often the ones who either fight or pay for it. If the voice of the public matters to some minor or major extent, then so does the justification of war. In short summary: "Well-established literature on public opinion and war suggests that the public is generally casualty-averse. However, the public might tolerate casualties if there are plausible justifications and expectations of success in military operations." (Asadzade, 2017)

With all this in mind, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a country that constantly dances between the thin red line that separates a hybrid regime and an authoritarian regime. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, ever since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has been more closely classified as an authoritarian regime. Despite currently being classified amongst the strongest autocracies in the world, presidential elections are still held

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[1] "War is merely the continuation of politics through other means." – Carl von Clausewitz (Retrieved from *On War*, 1832).

[2] "War is the testing of one's will against the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because it is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is God." – Cormac McCarthy (Passage known as 'The Judge on War,' retrieved from *The Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*, 1985).

in Iran. While the Islamic Republic certainly isn't a democracy, and freedom is far from guaranteed, it seems that the voice of the general public in Iran still matters. For that reason, Iran's intervention in the Syrian Civil War is justified to the Iranian public through a number of ways. Despite the number of Iranian casualties, recent polls in Iran have demonstrated that with a proper justification on part of the government, Iranians still favorably support the Syrian intervention. (Asadzade, 2017)

According to the Gallup Poll, 39% of Iranians are following the Syrian conflict "very closely" or "somewhat closely," 18% say they are not watching it closely, and 41% don't have an opinion on the matter. Of those, there is a substantial difference in support for the Syrian intervention between those who follow the conflict "very closely" or "somewhat closely" versus those who are not following it closely. Based on the three parameters of (1) economic support, (2) military support, and (3) political support, poll contestants answered in favor in the following percentages. Of those who follow the Syrian conflict "very closely/somewhat closely:" 60% favor giving economic aid, 49% favor giving military support, and 65% favor giving political support to the Assad regime. Of those who don't follow the conflict closely: 47% favor giving economic aid, 37% favor giving military support, and 50% favor giving political support to the Assad regime. Therefore, Iranian civilian support for the Assad regime is higher among those who are following the conflict closely. (Loschky, 2013)

Despite the high costs and stakes of the Syrian intervention: "The Iranian leadership has resorted to two main discourses or narratives to legitimize their involvement in the Syrian Civil War. The first revolves around the religious ideology of Shiism and is captured by the originally Persian phrase 'defense of the shrine.' The second has secular underpinnings and concerns Iran's 'national security' and defense of the nation" (Behravesh, 2017). The fact that the authorities in Tehran are selling the war to their own citizens with a religious justification over Shiite beliefs and a practical justification over national security shows the duality within Iran. On one part, it demonstrates that the Islamic Republic is a deeply theocratic state that holds very dear its own religious convictions and the values that it stands for above all else. On the other part, it reflects that Iran is a state that operates according to the terms of *realpolitik*, and dances to the tune of the international order as much as any other

state. Overall, the Islamic Republic of Iran fights and justifies itself both for God and for the nation.

3.1.1. DEFENDING SHRINES AND THE SHIA RELIGION

The first justification towards the Iranian general public is related to religion, ideas, and beliefs. "Despite its pragmatist tendencies and realist practices, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a fundamentally religious regime and follows an Islamic ideology". Ever since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been adhering deeply to religious discourse in order to justify its existence and position in the world, and also to project power across the Middle East and beyond to other Muslim territories. It may be that the Ayatollah regime is practical-realist in practice, but in foundation and beliefs the country's authorities are also constituted by a profound messianic religious principle. The main reason why this religious justification is used is because it resonates fairly well within Iranian society and beyond. Essentially, it portrays Iran as the beacon, defender, and main representative of the Muslim faith and values. Of course, all of this guarding of Shia shrines and holy sites is naturally followed by a fair amount of martyrdom and death worshipping. Venerating martyrs and other dead heroes is a tendency often practiced by theocratic governments in order to gain followers. In the Islamic Republic, this theocratic tendency is present by the existence of an official martyr institution, known as Iran's Martyr Foundation. This organization claims that since the start of the Syrian Civil War, at least 2.100 'defenders of the shrine' have been killed fighting in the front for their beliefs. Its essential to highlight the importance of holy shrines to the Iranian population, for they are the pillar that strongly symbolizes and stands for Shia Islam, versus Sunni Islam. (Behravesh, 2017) (Kermalli, 2017)

3.1.2. NATIONAL SECURITY & FIGHTING WITHIN IRAN'S BORDERS

The second justification towards the Iranian general public is related to national security and defense of the nation. Iranian officials and authorities have created a sense of urgency in order to justify their Syrian excursion. Among others, Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force and senior military officer of the IRGC, stated the following: "If we don't fight

in Syria, we will have to fight inside Iran." Other prominent figures, such as Ali Shamkhani, the former defense minister and current secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, have often repeated this justification. At this point, it seems like this is the regime's official, agreed explanation for the intervention in Syria: warning for an incoming 'enemy from within' situation. This is their way of instigating fear mongering within the Iranian public in order to justify a preventive war that they would supposedly fight within their border at a later moment in time. Tehran's iron fist in Syria has come at a high human and economic cost, subsequently, the authorities are interested in portraying the situation as if they had no other choice but to intervene. Nation-states constantly use defense as an excuse to justify war, Iran is no exception, warning the population that the terrorists will either be fought outside in Syria or within the Islamic Republic. (Behravesh, 2017) (Kermalli, 2017)

3.1.3. MOTIVATING IRANIANS TO JOIN THE WAR THROUGH HEROISM AND MARTYRDOM

Another way in which the Iranian regime motivates its' citizens to mobilize for the warring effort is through heroism and martyrdom. Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, made this very clear in a public statement: "The door for martyrdom, which was closed by the end of the Iranian-Iraqi war, is now open in Syria." By stating this on Iranian public television, Khamenei and the authorities are promoting the Syrian intervention as a sacred war that Iranians should look forward to fight in. In the Islamic Republic, this works as a successful incentive because the youth is highly influence by the war legends and accounts of the Iran-Iraq war during the 1980s. A lot of these younger generations have grown up with tales of heroism and martyrdom regarding their conflict against Iraq, and they want their turn in living a similar experience to fight for their country and their religion. Those who take part in this fight will either be regarded as heroes if they come alive or as martyrs if they get killed. Creating glorious tales of honor, death, and glory has always been a prime motivator to get young men to join any conflictive cause, and Iran is no exception in that human tendency. (Kermalli, 2017) Such is the case, especially, when it comes to fighting ISIS. The Islamic State has carried out plenty of cultural vandalism in both Syria and Iraq, such as the destruction of Shia shrines and mosques, thus forcing Iranians to volunteer in Syria to defend

their religion. Not to mention the Islamic State's treatment of the Shia population in Syria and Iraq, which has included all kinds of atrocities ranging from murder and rape and beyond. (Sengupta, 2017) (Amanat, pgs. 91-109, 2009)

3.1.4. STRAWMAN ARGUMENTS & BIGGER PROBLEMS

A large portion of the Iranian citizenry, especially the more modernized secular-metropolitan population, believes that this is a strawman argument and a fallacy. While it is important to keep terrorists and enemies of the state at bay, Iran has bigger economic and social problems, for instance. Even in the case that Tehran was concerned with preventing terrorism at home, they would focus more resources to the unstable bordering countries: Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan. On one hand, there have been more Iran-affiliated soldiers killed in Iraq than in Syria. On the other hand, Afghanistan and Pakistan are terrorist nests adjacent to the Iranian border. Finally, if the authorities in Tehran were really concerned with stopping terrorism, they would have not promoted practices that create terrorism in the region. They wouldn't have supported the former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, whose questionable governance methods played a strong role in creating the boiling pot that gave rise to the Islamic State. (Behravesh, 2017)

Also, in Syria, Tehran chose a strategy based on radicalizing the opposition at the early stage of the civil war in order to transform the conflict from Assad versus "rebels" to Assad versus "terrorists." As a part of this plan, Iran allowed the Free Syrian Army to radicalize on purpose so that they would lose legitimacy and international support. To a very large extent, Iran was responsible for creating the current situation in which the international community has accepted Assad as a 'lesser of two evils' in comparison with the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and other jihadist factions that encompass the reality on the ground in Syria. Assad and the Syrian regime were also very keen in regards to this strategy of creating Sunni radicals to combat, rather than a unified opposition. (Castro Torres, pg.315, 2015) (Behravesh, 2017)

3.1.5. NEITHER GAZA, NOR LEBANON

Reality of the situation is that Iran's involvement in Syria doesn't have as much to do with defending the Shiite religion or countering terrorism. The real reason for Tehran investing so much for Assad is that the Islamic Republic has to act as a balance against the upcoming leverage of Saudi Arabia and Israel in the region. This tactic, commonly referred to as 'asymmetric deterrence' or 'strategic depth,' cannot be carried out without maintaining constant supply lines of weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon, for instance. In essence, Iran's intervention in Syria seems to be about preserving the so called 'axis of resistance' against external foes and challengers in the Middle East. The problem with all this *realpolitik* is that it simply isn't a popular explanation that the Iranian public opinion would accept. This abstract concept of 'strategic depth' doesn't resonate well with the average Iranian, who is more concerned about his economic well-being, for example. Let's keep in mind that a lot of Iranian society is secular and nationalistic, and they reject this discourse of supporting Hezbollah and the Syrian regime for some abstract, long-term goal. In the 2009 Tehran protests, Iranians chanted "neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, I give my life for Iran." Translated into common language, this means that a large section of the Iranian population doesn't support the governments excursions to go save supposed allies in the region. They are more concerned with the well-being of their country and don't perceive the need of going into an unnecessary war, supporting a dictator and a terrorist organization, and gaining more enemies in the global sphere. (Behravesh, 2017).

3.2. REASONS WHY IRAN BACKS THE SYRIAN REGIME: GEOPOLITICS, PRACTICALITY, REALISM, IDEOLOGY, RELIGION

3.2.1. THE MEDITERRANEAN-LEVANT CORRIDOR

This is the most common explanation given as to why Iran still chooses to stubbornly support the Assad regime against all odds. Despite considerable costs in human capital, economic

investment, internal turmoil, and towards its international image, the authorities in Tehran feel the need to secure a corridor towards the Mediterranean Sea that crosses through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This is commonly known as the "Shia crescent" or "axis of resistance," argument often given by the Revolutionary Guards Corps. The strategy consists on consolidating an alliance with loose Shiite groups and sympathizers of the Shia cause along the three countries to counter other forces in the Middle East. By consolidating control over this axis, Iran can maintain a solid supply line of weapons and resources to Hezbollah, project power towards the Mediterranean and the Levant, and contain regional arch enemies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. (Behravesh, 2017) (Spyer, 2017)

In a future Iranian-Israeli war, Iran could position ballistic missiles in the proximities of the Syrian border and fire them into Israel, it could also arm Hezbollah through a constant supply of weapons and allow them to open a second front along Israel's northern border. This would effectively carry the fight onto enemy territory both in terms of man-power and artillery bombardment. (Deutsche Welle, 2017) As far as the pseudo Cold War that Iran is waging against Saudi Arabia in order to expand Shiite interests versus Sunni interests, the Mediterranean corridor would give the Islamic Republic control over Iraq (10% Sunni – 89% Shiite), Syria (74% Sunni – 16% non-Sunni Muslim), and Lebanon (23% Sunni – 38% Shiite) (Armanios, 2004). Most Muslims countries worldwide hold predominantly Sunni populations, but many of them are also composed of a considerate number of Shia population. By exercising power over the Shiite axis, Iran would hold sway over Saudi Arabia, undermining the kingdom's power projection in the region. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have proclaimed themselves as the leaders of the Islamic world, a role that can only be contested in terms of influence. (Behravesh, 2017)

3.2.2. LACKING ALLIES: KEEP YOUR FRIENDS CLOSE, YOUR ENEMIES CLOSER

Due to an array of geopolitical factors, security challenges, ideological identity, and harsh memories of Anglo-Soviet military invasion in the 1940s and American political in the 1950s, Iran has strategically isolated itself from foreign influence. Since the 1979 revolution,

the Islamic Republic has carried a 'revisionist' foreign policy that has laid a footprint on the country's national security and interests. The main consequence of this strategy is that Iran has become relatively isolated from the international arena in terms of alliances, what is often referred to as 'strategic loneliness.' Currently, Iran doesn't have any nation-state allies apart from Syria. To a lesser extent, Tehran maintains great relations and conventional friendship with Moscow and Ankara. However, those supposed allies haven't been reliable when push came to shove during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, since neither Russia nor Turkey dared to force the American hand in that respect. (Behravesh, 2017)

In order to compensate for this lack of nation-state allies, Iran has built a structure network of different non-state actors across the region. Basically, the modus operandi is that Tehran funds and supports like-minded groups in terms of the Shia identity. Examples of such asymmetrical alliances are the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, the coalition of Shia militias under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq (such as the Badr Organization), Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Islamic Jihad and to a lesser extent the Hamas in the Palestinian Territories. The benefit of these alliances is that Iran can successfully carry out proxy warfare throughout the region on a wide set of fronts. The problem is that those groups mostly tend to live off constant financial injections from their masters in Tehran. In terms of military, political, and economic capacity, these groups simply can't sustain themselves on their own. (Behravesh, 2017)

Lacking alliances with nation states, Iran has maintained support for Assad as the legitimate president of Syria. Tehran has obstructed international efforts to create a transition of power from Assad to a less controversial candidate. In fact, the Islamic Republic has rejected any peace negotiation that has the removal of Assad as a 'prerequisite.' For the sake of argument, Iran could have sacrificed Assad for a more suitable candidate and still somewhat maintain control over Syria without dragging the Persian nation into a war with massive economic costs. However, this argument doesn't hold because Tehran knows that there are few, if any, alternatives in Syria that suit their interest. Without Assad, Iran loses Syria, because only the regime's Alawite minority and a loose collection of Shia groups are sympathetic to Tehran's ambitions and plans for the region. (Behravesh, 2017)

3.2.3. LOYALTY, CREDIBILITY, AND RELIABILITY

"We are not like the Americans. We don't abandon our friends." – Qassem Soleimani
(Commander of the Quds Force and senior military officer of the IRGC)

If Tehran leaves Assad and the Syrian regime at the hands of other foreign and rebel forces, it will send a dangerous message across the region. Inevitably, leaving Assad alone against the Coalition and radical Salafist terrorist groups would create a negative image of unreliability for the Islamic Republic. If other non-state actors see that Iran abandons its allies during times of trouble, they might slowly drift away from their patron and undermine their allegiance to the Islamic Republic. This would destroy the 'asymmetric deterrence' strategy that Iran has worked so hard to build. Iran is facing a sword against the wall situation, where it has no choice but to maintain the current alliances it has and build new ones. In order to do so, Tehran must remain loyal, credible, and reliable to all its partners. Therefore, Tehran's scrupulous loyalty to regional allies is driven almost entirely by pragmatic thinking, strategic decision, and *realpolitik* principles. Long story short: "Iran's Syrian strategy derives less from spurious religious ties than it does from geopolitics" (Barfi, 2016). The moment Iran loses its alliance with Shiite militias that it funds across the region, its capacity to carry out foreign policy in the Middle East and beyond will capitulate. (Behravesh, 2017)

Non-state actors generally tend to be clandestine and isolated, since the current world order holds the State as the owner of sovereignty and the use of force. Like anywhere else, these non-state actors that Iran is allied with don't have access to territory or access to sources of power and wealth. They are largely dependent on Iran's funding, but if the Islamic Republic doesn't deliver, they might be forced to operate autonomically. Since Iran doesn't have conventional allies, like the United States is for Saudi Arabia or Israel, losing its unconventional allies, such as Hezbollah, would expose the country as vulnerable to foreign aggression. If Iran seeks to remain secure from the globalist agenda directed by the United States and Israel, it must develop a solid nuclear weapons program and a solid ballistic missile capacity, and to maintain the unconventional alliances with Shiite militias across the region. (Behravesh, 2017)

In the early 1980s, when the Islamic Republic was inaugurated and beginning to take off, Saddam Hussein's Iraq attempted to invade the country with overwhelming financial and military support from the West and multiple Arab countries. Due to a substantial lack of asymmetric deterrence capabilities, Iran did not have much leverage that would have made Saddam Hussein 'think twice' before invading the country. As a result, Iran payed a massive human price, losing tens of thousands of soldiers in ineffective 'human-wave' tactics. The argument goes that this could have been prevented if Iran had some present Shiite militias fighting within Iraq's territory or along its borders. In similarity with the Iran-Iraq war, authorities in Tehran consider that having Hezbollah right next to Israel's northern border with Lebanon has prevented a war with the Jewish state. Israel and Iran could have fought a war over the latter's nuclear program; but having Hezbollah in close proximity might have been one of the reasons as to why Israel would have been deterred from such initiative. (Behravesh, 2017)

3.2.4. MAJOR COSTS FOR TEHRAN

Six years into the Syrian Civil War, Tehran's commitment to backing Assad's regime remains intact. Despite increasing costs, both in terms of human and monetary capital, Iran has maintained a constant policy of supporting the Syrian government and not letting it fall. The transformation of a conflict into a war of attrition have forced all the contesting parties to invest a larger amount of capital into the effort. Cost estimates on military and economic aid vary substantially, depending on the consulted source. The most modest estimates put Iran's expenditure in a figure of $6 billion spent annually to support Assad. Other sources suggest that the total cost is likely to be around $15 to $20 billion per year (Behravesh, 2017). The higher estimates claim that the same figure could go as far as $35 billion annually to keep the Syrian regime standing and victorious. Meanwhile, Iran's military budget per year is roughly about $15 billion. If the numbers truly speak for themselves, an instant comparison between Iran's annual military budget and the annual expenditure given to Assad shows just how important the Syrian intervention is considered for Tehran (Rafizadeh, 2018).

As far as human costs go, Iran has already offered a significant sacrifice for the warring effort in Syria. Some of the most modest estimates say that there have been more than 700 Iranian casualties from the elite Quds Force and also from the regular army. The state's Martyrs Foundation now gives financial support and compensation to more than 1,000 families of Iran-backed forces killed in Syria, many those being Afghan refugees seeking Iranian citizenship. Finally, Hezbollah, acting as Iran's main regional proxy and military arm in the region, has suffered more than 1,000 confirmed casualties, with experts highlighting the fact that the real number probably involves 2,000 dead and 6,000 wounded in total. As common sense suggests, all of these numbers are probably far higher in reality. (Behravesh, 2017) (Sengupta, 2017)

Finally, Iran's controversial intervention in Syria has further tarnished the country's image as the self-proclaimed "leader of the Muslim world," the one true Islamic Republic. That notion has lost much credibility, for it has become increasingly clear that Iran only seeks to further Shiite interests in the region, fueling the existing animosity and antipathy of the Sunni powers. Iran was already seen by some countries, such as Israel and the Arab sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf, as an invasive menace in the Middle East that had to be contained. (Kermalli, 2017) The Syrian intervention has, to some extent, confirmed Israel's and Saudi Arabia's preoccupation that Iran is an ambitious expansive force that seeks to actively meddle in the affairs of other countries and rewrite the status quo and regional order. Iran's effort in Syria has increased this Iranian-Saudi rivalry that is manifesting itself as a pseudo Cold War, increased the chances for a future Israeli-Iranian war along the Syrian-Lebanese front, damaged relations with members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and alarmed the United States. (Behravesh, 2017)

3.3. HEZBOLLAH

Hezbollah is a battle-hardened organization who has demonstrated its assertive capacity to contain, deter, and even pose a substantial threat to Israel on a number of occasions. Hezbollah was founded in 1985, but their ideological predecessors (future founding fathers) posed an insurgent counterattack against Israel's invasion during the 1982 Lebanon War,

which came to a very high cost for the Jewish state. To a very large extent, it was their participation in the Lebanese Civil War that forced Israel out of Lebanon, since the IDF could penetrate and fight inside Southern Lebanon but they couldn't pacify the region off insurgents, mostly due to lack of man-power, a high economic cost, and an unbearable human death-toll. A similar case was seen two decades later in the 2006 Lebanon War, when Hezbollah fighters successfully kidnapped Israeli soldiers, fired hundreds of rockets into Israel, and fought the IDF within their own villages and territory. A decade after that, Hezbollah finds itself fighting in a contentious front, with bloody battles never seen before by the Shiite organization. Such is the case of Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian Civil War, to comply in backing their masters in Tehran by supporting the Assad regime in warfare against the Islamic State and various factions of the Free Syrian Army and other Syrian rebels. (Castro Torres, pgs.327-333, 2015)

3.3.1. HEZBOLLAH'S FRONT ON THE LEBANESE-SYRIAN BORDER

Islamic State militants advanced into the Qalamun Mountains, a geographical area that extends throughout the Syrian-Lebanese border. Since they were well-armed, the jihadists made a quick advance into Lebanese territory, expecting little resistance from a country that was already divided by its own civil war in the 1980s. Although divided, however, the Lebanese government was interested in kicking the Islamic State out of its territory. (Reuters, 2017) As a result, the Lebanese army made a loose alliance of momentary interest with Hezbollah and Iran. Such an alliance would have been previously unthinkable, since of the many divisions that takes place in Lebanon is that the northern part of the country is controlled by the Lebanese government and the south is controlled by Hezbollah. The main division that currently exists in Lebanon is between two different coalitions: (1) the Sunnis, Druze, and Christian Maronites; (2) Shias and other Christians. Ever since the 1990s, Hezbollah has been the *de facto* leader of the latter alliance, often being opposed and even challenging the agenda of the Lebanese government. In short summary, according to Israeli political scientist Eitan Azani, "Hezbollah operates as a state within a state." Although it has been a member of the Lebanese National Assebly since 1992, Hezbollah is an independent political force that possesses its own military force. (Deutsche Welle)

In such an unprecedented alliance with the Lebanese army, Hezbollah has managed to cleanse the Lebanse border of ISIS militants (Spyer, 2017). In the frontline, the Lebanese army has fought ISIS alongside U.S. special forces in the middle-northern section of the Qalamun Mountains, inside Lebanese territory (Haaretz, 2017). On the other hand, Hezbollah has fought ISIS on the middle-southern section of the mountainous region, in addition with occasional incursions into Syrian territory in order to surround the jihadists (Reuters, 2017). After a week-long battle, Hezbollah declares victory after managing to push out ISIS out of Lebanon (Haaretz, 2017). The problem was that ISIS had managed to capture Lebanese population and soldiers before being defeated, which gave them room for negotiation. The hostage situation forced a peace deal between Hezbollah and ISIS militants that allowed the transfer of the latter to Eastern Syria in exchange for their release of Lebanese prisoners and their withdrawal out of Lebanon. (Reuters, 2017)

3.3.2. HEZBOLLAH'S ROLE IN THE BATTLE OF ALEPPO

The battle of Aleppo brought an unbeknownst intensity and pressure to Hezbollah, one that they had never seen before. "Commanders ordered Hezbollah militants to take the city of Aleppo at any cost to themselves and the city," meaning that they would assimilate any number of civilian and military casualties, and racing the city's infrastructure to the ground, if it was deemed necessary. Rather than a 'liberating force,' Hezbollah's presence in Aleppo rather resembled the role of an occupying army. Hezbollah controlled vast amounts of broken urban landscape, justified its role in the deaths of thousands of civilians, and held a fragile alliance with the Syrian regime. Hezbollah was willing and ready to secure a fast victory in Aleppo, even if it meant the sacrifice of 10,000 of its men. (Alami, 2017)

In one of the most significant battles of the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah has carried out a take-no-prisoners approach, because they must win over Syria at any cost. Despite tensions and disagreement between the Syrians, Iranians, and Hezbollah militants over the latter's apparent use of brutal means and methods to win the battle, the Lebanese organization clearly differentiates between its friends and its foes. During the combat and siege in Aleppo, however, Hezbollah made no distinction between the Syrian political opposition and rebels,

the Islamic State, and Al Qaeda affiliates known as the Nusra Front. All are enemies of the Shiite alliance equally, and must be treated as such. In the eyes of Hezbollah, "all of the Syrian opposition are terrorists." (Alami, 2017)

Prior to the incursion, Hezbollah and other actors sieged Aleppo, which greatly weakened the rebels' resources and capability to put up a decent fight in return. After the siege, Hezbollah quickly took over the rebel-held areas of the city in three consecutive waves. First, an offensive team to conquer the territory. Second, a demining team to cleanse the streets. Third, a stabilization team to secure the area. Due to the amount of troops that Hezbollah invested into this operation, they looked closer to a conventional army rather than a guerrilla force, which is how they are often categorized. All of this was facilitated, and feasible to a great extent, due to their training the latest Iranian weapon systems (Alami, 2017). Now that victory is assured, Hezbollah will need well-trained man-power to secure the city and other areas. The organization has several training centers located both in Lebanon and Syria, some of their militants claim that up to 120,000 Shia fighters have been trained in those camps. Superstition suggests that those numbers are being prepared for future Iranian ambitions in the region, and perhaps for a war against Israel. That estimate seems overstretched, since Hezbollah was estimated to have somewhere around 45,000 and 50,000 fighters as of 2016 (Cohen, Harel, 2016) (Lappin, 2016). This estimate may very well be an exaggeration on part of Hezbollah's propaganda, but they surely possess a large amount of militants nonetheless. (Alami, 2017)

Assad's government hasn't been keen on letting foreign forces intervene, but he had no other choice if he pretended to win and survive throughout this conflict. Assad needed Hezbollah to cleanse the border with Lebanon, Aleppo, and other territories from ISIS and the Syrian rebels. Despite the need, Hezbollah's intervention in Syria has angered the regime, since "there have been increasing clashes and growing resentment from Syrian officers toward Hezbollah fighters" (Alami, 2017). The former sees the latter as an occupying army that favors their interests, but an occupying force nonetheless. From Hezbollah's point of view, the organization points out that "Syrian soldiers are mistreated by their superiors, which translates into a lack of loyalty to the army and to soldiers often abandoning their positions during battle". However, there is another side to the story for which Hezbollah is to blame.

Apparently, Hezbollah's militants have carried out such a generalized reckless, overtly violent behavior that it has also led on some instances to clashes and bloody confrontation with their more civilized, Iranian counterparts. (Alami, 2017)

First of all, such actions imply that Hezbollah has probably been the most brutal, blood-thirsty actor of the Russian-Iranian-Syrian-Hezbollah partnership. Second, they immediately suggests that the alliance between Hezbollah, Iran, and the Syrian regime may be a lot more fragile than it looks at first sight. Third, it partly explains why Syria fell and why the regime lost control in the first place, due to their brutality expressed towards their own population, even those loyal to Assad. It hints at the rumor that the authorities in Damascus were so brutal towards their own population and loyalists that they created a generalized resentment which acted as fuel to the fire of the Arab Spring in 2011. Consequently, this also explains why the regime is so eager to win the war, because they are aware that their past actions and treatment of their population will give them no quarter or mercy if they ever lose. For Assad, Iran, and Hezbollah, the war in Syria is of existential nature because the fall of the regime would mean the end of the alliance of the Dahieh[3], Tehran, and Damascus (Alami, 2017). Losing this war would mean the total extermination of the Syrian regime, and the capitulation of Hezbollah's and Iran's possibility to carry out foreign policy and geopolitics across the region.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah sees Russia's involvement in Syria determined by pragmatism, according to a commander named Abou Ali: "Moscow is not our ally, but a faction involved like us in the war. It is the partner of President Assad, but like any other country it has its own agenda, our agendas meet for now in Syria." In cooperation with Hezbollah, Russia provides the Lebanese organization with air support and intelligence gathering, but they rarely collide in the battlefield and the relationship doesn't go much further. In other words, Hezbollah allies with Russia out of convenience for the particular situation in Syria, since they both back Iran and the Syrian regime. It isn't likely that their partnership will go far beyond once the war in Syria is over. (Alami, 2017)

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[3] Predominantly Shia suburb in the southern outskirts of Beirut that is considered to be a Hezbollah stronghold in the capital of Lebanon.

3.4. RUSSIA

The Russian Federation has backed the Assad regime for a long time. In the logistical aspect, Russia has given troops on the ground, air support, weapons to the Assad regime since the commencement of the war. In the diplomatic aspect, Russia has supported the Syrian government at the United Nations and in international peace talks. (Deutsche Welle, 2017) Essentially, what Russia wants is to keep Assad in power, since the Syrian regime is Moscow's closest ally in the Middle East. Having Damascus as a close friend is what has united Moscow and Tehran for the same agenda. In close similarity with Iran, for Russia, Syria is the catalyst that allows the country to project power and secure military influence across the Middle East. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has slowly lost a lot of the leverage that the former Soviet Union used to have across the Middle East. (Castro Torres, pgs.314-315, 2015)

Russian power projection is currently manifested in Syria through the use of two establishments of strategic importance: (1) its military airbase in the province of Latakia, (2) its naval base in the city of Tartus. The Russian and the Syrian governments signed an accord that allows 11 Russian warships to be stationed in Tartus permanently, and the deal is set for a duration of 49 years. Additionally, the deal could be automatically updated for 25-year periods if neither government objected. Since its construction in 1976, Tartus remains as Russia's only port in the Mediterranean. Among the Russian warships, there are destructors, submarines, aircraft carriers, and nuclear-powered cruisers. (Deutsche Welle, 2017) Mantaining naval control over Tartus allows Russia to keep its footprint in a region that is slowly becoming NATO dominated. From a Russian point of view, Tartus allows the country to have constant presence in the Mediterranean without having to force its ships to sail through the Black Sea straits of Turkey, one of the closest U.S. allies in the region. (Castro Torres, pgs.314-315, 2015) Regardless of the latest conflict in Syria between Turkey and U.S. over the latter's support of Kurdish YPG forces (Reuters via Haaretz, 2018), Turkey still remains a crucial foothold in which the U.S. holds both military airbases and nuclear weapons. Russia must seek to challenge the obstacles of that alliance by any means possible. Meanwhile, a separate accord has also been signed among Russian and Syrian authorities to

prolong the duration of the military airbase base in Latakia. The Russian airbase was built in 2015 to facilitate Russian air support for the Syrian regime. (Deutsche Welle, 2017)

Since its first intervention in 2015, the Kremlin has been bombing Islamic State and other jihadist groups' positions in Syria in order to facilitate the regime's reconquest of the country. Multiple U.S. authorities have countered this narrative by claiming that Russia is mainly bombing rebel factions of the Free Syrian Army. Although officially Moscow has declared that it is only fighting the Islamic State, likelihood shows that just like Iran, they are also fighting moderate and extremist actions of the rebel opposition. (Deutsche Welle, 2017) The Russians initially sold the campaign with the objective of keeping Assad in power and ending ISIS. The mission has been successful since both of those objectives have been accomplished. The Syrian war looks to be nearing its end, with Assad in power, clear Russian and Iranian leverage over Damascus, ISIS on the run, and no sustainable opposition from the United States or the Arab countries in place. At the beginning of the war, countries like the United States, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia sang a different tune when they clearly stated that Assad would not be able to participate in the Syrian transition to peace. As of today, they no longer do so because they simply aren't on the winning end of the spectrum anymore. Russia reluctantly disagreed from the start, showing full support for the dictator and allowing him to remain in power. (Rosenberg, 2017)

Regarding the matter of Russian troops on the ground in Syria, the issue proved controversial. For the Russian Federation, one thing is to provide military air support and finance to the Assad regime, another thing is to lose. Especially when Vladimir Putin is up for reelection in 2018, the narrative of hundreds of dead soldiers being brought back home in caskets wouldn't do well in the Russian elections. In Moscow, the Russian war strategists feared that the Syrian intervention would bring home the same results as those of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in the decade-long conflict that ended the life of over 10,000 Soviet soldiers. (BBC News, 2018) Since the beginning of the Russian intervention in September 30, 2015, the numbers of both Russian personnel and casualties on the ground has varied, with no clear figure in sight. Different sources claim that at it's height, the number of Russian personnel in Syria was somewhere between 2000-4000. As of the end of 2017, the Kremlin has only confirmed little over 40 confirmed casualties from the Armed Forces of the Russian

Federation. By April 2018, that number has risen to an approximate 90. The number, however, is likely to be much higher since Moscow has downplayed the numbers from the start, changing the accounts of numerous single incidents multiple times. Additionally, there are also many Russian private military contractors and mercenaries who are also fighting Putin's shadow warfare. The higher estimates claim that there have been over 300 Russians killed in total and over 900 wounded. In summary, due to lack of actual data on part of the Kremlin, and most of the casualties reported by Reuters, it is hard to determine the actual extent of Russia's human cost in Syria. One thing is clear though: the human cost has probably been high enough if Russia doesn't want to reveal the actual numbers. (Tsvetkova, 2018) (Vasilyeva, 2017)

Finally, Russia has also been backing the Syrian government at the United Nations. Ever since the start of the conflict in 2011, Russia has vetoed every single resolution that would go against the Syrian government. The last resolution in November 16, 2017, consisted on an international investigation proposal made by the United States to review international inquiry for who is to blame for the multiple chemical weapons attacks that have been taking place in Syria since 2011. (Loveluck, 2017) As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, this is the 10th resolution that Russia vetoes since the inception of the war. This comes to show that Putin has Assad's back not only in military terms, but also in an international legal manner against the West. (Nichols, 2017) Towards the end of 2017, Vladimir Putin made a secret visit to the Russian airbase in Latakia, where he reunited in celebration with Bashar al Assad and Russian personnel in order to declare 'mission accomplished' and victory in the Syrian war. This time, Putin announced that there would be a substantial reduction of the amount of Russian personnel in Syria, taking into account that the offensive against the Islamic State and rebel Syrians had been of huge success. Now, there is still war to be fought in Syria, since neither ISIS or the rebels have been entirely defeated, but it is pretty clear at this point that the Russian hand has tilted leverage of the situation in favor of Assad's regime. (Walker, 2017)

3.5. DRUMS OF WAR: FUTURE ISRAEL-IRAN CONFLICT?

Due to historical tensions over the Golan Heights with Syria, Israel is aware of Iran's and Hezbollah's intentions to establish Southern Lebanon and Syria as a second front in a future war with the so-called Jewish state. Iran's desire to liberate the Golan Heights was manifested in a military unit designated for that purpose. In order to eliminate such Iranian ambitions across its border, Israel has recently carried out a double strategy. First, it has launched multiple drone strikes against Iranian efforts to build paramilitary infrastructure. Second, it is giving logistical support to Syrian rebel jihadi groups across the border that in turn are fighting the Shiite Iranian-backed militias. Reality of the situation is that Israel will not let Iran gain a stronghold in Syria or anywhere close to its border. Israeli authorities have observed over the course of the Syrian Civil War that Iran is winning in its expansion across the Middle East. In retaliation to avoid such advances, Israeli war-planes have bombed strategic Hezbollah and Syrian regime facilities in Syria. Such initiative consisted on countless efforts to prevent Iranian weapons transferring to Hezbollah through the Syrian route. It also consisted on avoiding the production of chemical weapons and storing of ballistic missiles by the Syrian regime. (Spyer, 2017) (Kam, 2017)

Both Israel and Iran constantly provoke each other through different means across the Syrian border. On one part, there have been some instances in which Tehran has flown Iranian drones over the Syrian border to Israel, consequently being shot down by the Israeli air defense systems. On the other part, Iran has Shiite proxy militias placed close to the Syrian border with Israel, forcing the Jewish state to shower them with artillery and firing airstrikes as a preventive warning to not get too close. Finally, there have also been cases of Israeli jets targeting and killing Iranian military commanders and other types personnel in Syria. In all of this, Israel finds itself in an uncomfortable position, feeling that the Iranian threat isn't being seriously addressed by neither American or Russian authorities. If Russia and the U.S. don't act to prevent Iranian expansive ambitions in the region, Israel will take matters to its own hands if nobody else will. At the moment it seems that if the major powers don't intervene more consistently, this situation may lay down the ground-work for a future Israeli-Iranian conflict. (Lesch, 2017) Russian and American mediation proposed a ceasefire in

South-Western Syria, in which Moscow agreed that Iranian-would be kept at least 25k away from the Israeli border, drawn from former Syrian territory in the occupied Golan Heights. However, Israel has little interest in a ceasefire close to the Syrian border, because that way it cannot carry out bombings or airstrikes to prevent the Iranians from building military bases. (Spyer, 2017) (Kam, 2017)

For the moment, it seems that Syria is the current testing ground for Iran's future war against Israel. The Islamic Republic and the Jewish State will likely face each other off at some point due to their diametrically opposed policies in Lebanon and Syria. (Lesch, 2017) On the possibility of a future Hezbollah-Israel war, Hassan Nasrallah commented that there would likely be involvement of pro-Iranian militias. In such war, Hezbollah could take advantage of Iranian naval ports and air bases, support of Iranian ground forces, and thousands of Shiite militiamen. All of this is just one of the many manifestations from which Israel perceives that a power-shift is occurring in the Middle East in favor of the pro-Iranian bloc. The current blocs in the Middle East are: (1) Iran and mostly Shiite allies plus Russia; (2) U.S. allies such as the Arab gulf autocracies, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel; (3) Conservative Sunni Islamist forces such as Turkey, Qatar, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Sunni Arab rebels in Syria; (4) Sunni Salafi jihadism such as ISIS, Al Qaeda, and others. With exception to the Iranian bloc, all the other coalitions are losing substantial power in the Middle East. Israel is aware that the Iranian bloc is the only one gaining substantial leverage in the region. Not only that, Iran is also the only country that appears willing to defy and put to the test the Israeli regional hegemony in the Middle East. As a consequence, the Tel-Aviv shall continue to deploy military defenses to counter Iranian meddling in the region. (Spyer, 2017)

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. WAR IS NO LONGER ACCEPTABLE: HOW HYBRID REGIMES JUSTIFY WARFARE

In the past, wars were fought proudly, between sovereign states and their large armies. The wars of the past were more straight to the point, much bloodier in terms of loss of human life, with absolute winners and losers. This nature of state-versus-state conflict was reflected in the First and Second World Wars, where large nation-states committed to fighting their opponents until total victory or defeat was reached, implying any means necessary (West, 2014). In the 20th Century wars, large loss of civilian life and destruction of urban landscapes was also accounted for, considering that the bombings and firepower exchange in WWII ravaged the ground European cities like Berlin, Warsaw, and the former Stalingrad. However, fights between conventional armies more often took place in open battle-field, partly to avoid civilian casualties and most importantly because of easier maneuverability than in urban landscapes.

In the context of the large 20th Century wars, little excuses were given to the general population. The public accepted war as a natural consequence of life, sometimes even proudly waving the flag to protect the nation, the family, and God. Especially in the first half of the 20th Century, democracy wasn't yet consolidated as a political world phenomenon that could be seen in many countries. This meant that the government and the military answered to no one, they had to sell and justify warfare, but not to the extent observed today in modern developed states. With the arrival of the 21st Century, and even before that, all of this changed dramatically. We now live in a world in which war is generally frowned upon, demanding governments to justify the deaths of their soldiers more than ever. For the United States, in the context of modern warfare, this tendency was felt during the wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan. For American history, this dates all the way back to the Vietnam war, when demonstrators first took to the streets to protest a foreign war carried out by their government.

Due to the large spread and access to the media, the American public was able to see the pictures of their soldiers coming back home in coffins covered with the Star-Spangled

Banner. Not only that, they were also able to see photographs and written accounts of the massive loss of Afghan and Iraqi civilians, women and children making the toughest pill to swallow. In democratic countries, access to information is larger than ever, fooling the public is now harder than it was before. Governments are slowly running out of ideas or options to justify warfare, which is why Western countries appear ever-more so reluctant to sending their troops on the ground.

What is interesting though is that in the modern era, this doesn't only apply to democratic countries, it also often applies to hybrid and authoritarian regimes. In the case of Syria, this is clearly reflected in how Russia and Iran portray the war at home. After all, both countries lower the real number of casualties that their troops have had in Syria. Russia and Iran are often described as hybrid regimes, neither democratic nor authoritarian, situated in a grey area somewhere in between. According to Freedom House data retrieved in 2018, both Russia and Iran score low on the Freedom in the World Scores. The Russian Federation gets an aggregate score of 20/100, 0 being least free and 100 most free. The Islamic Republic of Iran gets an aggregate score of 18/100 based on the same measurements. In terms of political rights and civil liberties, Russia scores 5/40 in political rights and 15/60 in civil liberties. On the same aspect, Iran scores 7/40 in political rights and 11/60 in civil liberties. (Freedom House, 2018)

Although the press in these countries certainly isn't free, with journalists often being censored or subject to arbitrary arrests (among many other things), general elections are still held in Russia and in Iran. The extent to which these elections are reliable, democratic, and not-staged is a separate debate. The point is that the governments in Russia and Iran have to justify the war in Syria to their population one way or another. Although not democratic, Russia and Iran still answer to their population, public opinion matters to a certain degree. This might be due to the fact that both countries are authoritarian to a large extent, but not totalitarian. In the case of Iran, it is interesting to observe how an Islamic theocracy justifies its intervention in the Syrian war. Perhaps because Iran is a revolutionary state, whose modern incarnation was founded by an Islamic uprising that required the support of the masses to overthrow the Shah, the authorities answer to the Iranian people.

4.2. SYRIAN SHADOW WARFARE

Shadow warfare is a symptom of modernity, a consequence of the fact that war is no longer considered acceptable. As I mentioned above, governments are finding war ever-more complicated to justify. Even hybrid-authoritarian regimes can't get away with it without some kind of explanation to the general public. The solution that governments often find for this problem is that they either have someone else fight their wars (i.e. through proxies) or they do it through very secretive operations abroad. Shadow wars were invented for this purpose, because the public can't be aware of the things that the governments must do sometimes in order to satisfy the interest of the state. Shadow warfare is carried out by ghosts in battle, everybody fights but no one is there. The government doesn't have to justify its foreign interventions to the same extent because, at least officially, they aren't even participating in the first place. Through the media and a bit of intuition, the public knows that certain governments have active personnel in Syria, but fingers can hardly be pointed because the accounts of such activity are always kept in very low profile.

Syria is a clear-cut example of this modern tendency of carrying out occult wars. The majority of the foreign state belligerents have fought the war through proxies or shadow operations, too afraid that conducting open warfare and sending troops on the ground would have a repercussion at home. At the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, conservative Sunni Islamist countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey supplied monetary assistance and weapons to like-minded individuals, such as the jihadists in the Syrian Islamic Front and the rebels in the Free Syrian Army. Of the three conservative Islamist forces, only Turkey has taken an active role in the Syrian war by shelling Islamic State positions and later against the Kurdish YPG. All of this according to the image provided below in the annexes, *The Tangled Web In The Fight For Syria's Future*, by Think Progress. Meanwhile, the United States supplied its allies in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey to the the Syrian war. According to the same source, the United States apparently gave monetary assistance and weapons to the Free Syrian Army at the beginning of the conflict, likely through its regional allies of the Gulf countries and Turkey.

Later, after the collapse of the Free Syrian Army into numerous ideological subdivisions, the United States moved into giving monetary assistance and weapons to the Kurdish Peshmerga.

Meanwhile, there have also been numerous accounts of the U.S. having special operations teams on the ground operating. On the other side of the spectrum, Russia is using in Syria the same type of private contractors that the United States used in Afghanistan through the Blackwater organization. Putin's secret army consists of Russian private contractors, recruited by Russian private military companies like the Wagner Group, who are not officially part of the Russian armed forces but are believed to be directed by them (Ayres, 2018). Iran has its proxies in Syria, such as Hezbollah and other Shiite militia groups, but it also has active personnel of the Quds Force participating. The Quds Force inherently operates in shadow warfare, carrying out operations abroad that are kept in low profile.

4.3. THE COMING WAR IS INEVITABLE

Back in 2011, right at the beginning of the civil war in Syria and Iran's intervention to backup Bashar Al Assad's regime, a mock article was published of an alleged interview that portrayed the thoughts of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on the current geopolitical situation in the Middle East. The title speaks for itself: *"If You Can't Hear the Drums of War You Must Be Deaf",* in which Kissinger supposedly predicts the coming war that will give birth to the next world order. Such future conflict will consist on global warfare between the three main military superpowers: Russia, China, and the United States. In this context, the majority of the conflict will be fought in the Middle East, when Israel will have to launch all its might in order to defeat the Arab powers in the region and hit Iran, 'the last nail in the coffin.'

Bear in mind that Kissinger never conducted such interview and has never said any of these things. In other words, it's a hoax article, a parody that satirizes the supposed warmonger, megalomaniac, Machiavellian stance of Henry Kissinger. In the international geopolitics-chess game, orthodox *realpolitik* thinkers like Kissinger are known for their one-framed world vision in which states behave exclusively to satisfy their own interests. The purpose of this article is to satirize such realist thinking by taking it to the extreme. Terrific humor in the literal sense. Still, whether or not this parody accurately describes what Kissinger would think or say, there is still some remote truth and probability related to it. In my view, this article

exaggerates the opinion of some modern political analysts. However, in this case parody meets reality, for a future regional conflict in the Middle East of such nature isn't unlikely. Claiming that a regional war will take place between Israel and Iran, in which the major powers such as the United States and Russia will have a prominent role, isn't far-fetched at all. A prominent topic that political scientists are treating with care: the possibility that a big showdown between regional powers awaits in the Middle East.

A quick overview of the current geopolitical situation in the Middle East gives a hint of the slight possibility that a great war might be on its way. Lebanon has been characterized by political instability since the country's civil war in the 1980s, with Hezbollah rising to power in the south and rearming itself with militiamen and large stockpiles of weapons. Neighboring Syria has been ravaged by the civil war, weakening a once powerful regime led by Bashar Al Assad that now serves as an Iranian satellite state, a decaying authority that also owes Russia and Hezbollah for its survival. The United States is slowly opting out of Iraq, handing over the leverage of that vacuum of power to Iran. The chaos of the wars in Syria and Iraq gave a steadfast rise and fall to the most financially successful terrorist organization in history, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS-ISIL).

Meanwhile, Turkey is launching an offensive against the Kurdish Peshmerga in northern Syria. Rumors are giving hint that Saudi Arabia wants to go nuclear, planning to build its own nuclear program, something that concerns Israel and Iran. The Islamic Republic authorities in Tehran could change their minds, break the deal with the United States, and decide to acquire their own nuclear arsenal in response to the Saudis. For the first time in history, this would give rise to the first nuclear love triangle in the Middle East. Finally, Iran seems to have won the war in Syria by backing the Assad regime, giving Tehran access to place armed Shiite militias and ballistic missiles next to Israel. The biggest military superpowers, the United States and Russia, seem reluctant to enter troops in the Middle East but don't withdraw entirely, carrying out drone attacks, air bombings, and supporting different proxies. Syria is literally in the center of all of this, and likelihood shows that the next big war will be partly contested on Syrian soil.

However, this great war benefits none of the parties in the long run. A regional conflict of such magnitude would leave a large amount of the Middle East devastated. Even the winners

of this war would suffer such great substantial losses of human capital and economic resources that it simply wouldn't be worth the effort, a clear case of Pyrrhic victory. If it ever takes place, this war would not be ended quickly unless the contending powers decided to go nuclear on each other, the biggest taboo in international warfare. Even at the heated height of the Cold War, that scenario never took place. Consequently, the contending powers would end up fighting attrition warfare across a wide range of territory. The bombardments, chemical weapons attacks, and crossfire would leave thousands of civilians dead, entire cities raced to the ground, and exhausted economies and militaries of the contending parties. The leaders who run the show on the countries that would fight this war are aware of all of this. Assuming that global rulers and statesmen are rational at the end of the day, none of this will occur because the suffered destruction would be far higher than the benefit achieved. Regardless, this great war is something to be warned about and not forget that the possibility exists. Syria could be one the last straws that broke the camel's back.

4.4. BETTER THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

In 2011, the Arab Spring brought hopes of democracy and regime change in the Middle East. Many hoped that the rise of the masses to overthrow the old secular authoritarian order would bring about a positive change towards democracy. At the initiation of the Arab Spring, one could observe a modern, moderate, enthusiastic Arab youth take to the streets of Tunis, Tripoli, Cairo, and Damascus, to demand their governments to be less repressive and grant larger freedoms similar to the ones seen in the West. Soon, however, the apparent pro-democracy movement was quickly hijacked from within by radical Islamists and Salafists. In Egypt, the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak led to the masses voting for the Muslim Brotherhood, leading to a counter-coup by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to overthrow Mohamed Morsi. In Libya, the NATO-facilitated murder of Muammar Gaddafi by Libyan rebels led to a never-ending state of chaos in which nobody governs, jihadist groups such as the Islamic State roam the streets, coastal mafias traffic migrants into Europe, and African slaves are sold in plain sight of the light of day. Tunisia is the only success story intro transitional democracy, still remaining somewhat unstable due to the strong Salafist influence in the country. In Syria, the supposed to be democratic resistance against the Assad regime was the

Free Syrian Army rebels, who quickly disbanded into different ideological groups that had little to do with a democratic agenda, many of them being Islamic extremists.

Taking all of this into account, the powers at work seem to have finally accepted that it is better to have a secular dictator in power than jihadists and Islamic fundamentalists roaming around. Ultimately, a choice to determine which is the lesser evil. In the case of Syria, the civil war hasn't led to change considering that the regime seems to have achieved a victory through exhaustion. As of the Syrian situation in 2018, the course of things seems to be going back to step one in 2011. The massive loss of human life, millions of displaced refugees, and entire cities completely destroyed have been in vain. In the meantime, the world has seen the Assad regime use chemical weapons on civilian population and the rise and fall of the Islamic State, the most successful terrorist organization in history in terms of financial achievements and territorial conquest. Even the conservative Islamist forces found in the Saudis, Qataris, and Turks, with their vested interest in backing the Free Syrian Army and the Islamic Front, have accepted that their mission has failed. Long story short, there simply isn't another way forward in the Middle East. It seems that for now, the best the region can hope for is to maintain the old order and hope that stability will triumph over chaos. Removing the Secular authoritarian regimes means chaos and we have come to accept it. In the case of Syria, without Bashar al Assad's regime, the elevator only goes down.

4.5. REWRITTING THE STATUS QUO: IS IRAN MESSIANIC?

It would be appropriate to refer back to the questions posed in the objectives of this project. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 'messianic' means to be "marked by idealism and an aggressive crusading spirit." In relation to the Islamic Republic of Iran, the term messianic is both applicable and non-applicable.

On one part, Iran has demonstrated that it operates in terms of *realpolitik*, calculating the costs and benefits of its foreign policy action. In that sense, it isn't messianic, for the Islamic Republic is a sovereign nation-state that carefully calculates its role in regional geopolitics as much as any other state. Iran has demonstrated that its goals are achievable, the authorities in Tehran have enjoyed considerable success not only Syria, but also in Lebanon, Iraq, and

the Palestinian Territories. Iran has risen as the undisputable winner of the Syrian Civil War, bringing the Assad regime into lasting survival. None of that is marked by idealism, but rather, by calculated action. Through stone cold realism, Iran has managed to export the values of the revolution and increase Shia leverage in certain areas of the Middle East, the goals in mind have proven to be practical in reality, the Ayatollah regime has been able to promote its agenda across the region effectively.

On the other part, Iran has been driven by that "idealism and aggressive crusading spirit" to promote its agenda in Syria. As mentioned previously in the state of affairs, the Shia religion, martyrdom, hero worshipping, and the death-honor-glory culture have had a strong role in motivating the Iranian youth to go forward in this pursuit to further the interests of the Islamic Republic. In this respect, Iran truly shows its messianic undertones, using the Shia religion to fuel its expansionist ambitions across the region. By proclaiming itself as the legitimate leader of the Muslim world against Saudi Arabia, Iran bears light to that idealism that can often be seen in empires, the story already sounds familiar if one looks at the ideological nature that drove American Manifest Destiny and European Imperialism in the 1840s. Some prominent authorities of the Benjamin Netanyahu cabinet in Israel have accused the Iranian government of being a "messianic and apocalyptic regime," including Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon. This might be an exaggeration, as Iran is driven by rational factors in the international arena just as much as anybody else. However, it is true that the religious authorities in Iran have created a sense of messianic and apocalyptic urgency within their territory to justify the Syrian warfare. Claiming that Iranians will have to fight the enemy within Iran if they don't fight in Syria is in itself an apocalyptic warning. Calling the Iranian youth to enlist in the Basij militia or in the Quds Force to honor the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq War is messianic without a doubt.

4.6. FRAGILE ALLIANCES

The Russia-Iran-Hezbollah-Syria alliance is fragile to a considerable extent. Taking into account what was said on the state of affairs, it can be concluded that the bonds that unite these four entities in the Syrian Civil War aren't as strong as one would initially contemplate.

Definitely, there is more than meets the eye in this case, due to the substantial disagreements between the members of the Shiite Axis of Resistance. What unites Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah is their ultimate interest that Bashar Al Assad survives and emerges as the winner of the Syrian war. The bigger difference here arises between the interests of the Russian Federation versus those of the Shiite comrades. The interests of Hezbollah and Iran are more similar, and only meet with the Russian interests in Syria due to an absolutely pragmatic, convenient partnership. For now, the interests of Hezbollah and Iran meet with those of Russia in the context of saving the Assad regime. However, it isn't likely that those mutual interests would meet on a separate, different context that wasn't the Syrian war.

Also, as described in the state of affairs, there is a substantial disagreement between Iran and the Syrian regime against the methods used by Hezbollah in the war. The Syrians and the Iranians perceive the Hezbollah fighters to be overtly violent, accounting for some of the worst atrocities in the war. Additionally, Hezbollah militants have been reported to start bloody confrontations with Syrian and Iranian allies over minor methodological disputes regarding how to carry action in the field. Meanwhile, the Syrian regime is worried about the role of occupying army and treatment of their soldiers that Hezbollah has carried in instances such as the Aleppo offensive. The Syrians are also worried of becoming a satellite state controlled entirely by Iran, something that former Syrian president Hafez Al Assad constantly warned about, feared, and acted against. Finally, Iran wants as much control as possible over what it considers as its own proxies, both Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. Proof shows that their control isn't always as thorough as they would want it to be in order to promote their interests in the Middle East. Hezbollah and the Syrian regime are like-minded individuals that Iran doesn't control entirely. In short, even the strongest, winning alliances in this war aren't as robust as they first appeared to be.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

At this point it would be appropriate to refer back to the predictions proposed in the hypothesis. A final evaluation of the winners of the Syrian Civil War should be made in order to conclude the extent to which I was correct or incorrect.

My main hypothesis has been proven right, for Iran has undoubtedly emerged as the victor of the Syrian Civil War. Tehran has heavily invested into funding, training, and providing logistics to Shiite proxies and like-minded individuals in Syria. The Islamic Republic has made a massive economic investment, but the loses in terms of human capital haven't been as massive as those of Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. Of those killed in the Persian foreign units, many are actually forcefully-recruited Afghans, not Iranians. Also, the Quds Force and IRGC personnel have the lowest casualties of the winning side. Iran has fought a costly war, but in total terms the benefits have been much higher than the expenses. Yes, the Syrian intervention has taken a massive monetary toll on Iran, but in terms of human capital, they haven't loss as many lives as they potentially could have.

On the other hand, the Syrian regime has won only because Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia were there to tip the balance in their favor in the first place. Assad's regime will survive, but at the expense of having their country torn to shreds, their population divided, infrastructure of entire cities destroyed, an elevated record of war crimes and human rights violations, and also a poor international image. Additionally, the regime has taken the biggest economic and human capital cost of this alliance, losing tens of thousands of men.

Hezbollah, regardless of their impressive victories when defeating the Islamic State and the Syrian rebels on multiple fronts, couldn't have grown to achieve such force and momentum without Iran providing them with weapons and monetary assistance. Hezbollah isn't close to being entirely independent, the organization has that power for as long as Iran is there to support it. Additionally, Hezbollah has taken a massive human toll, accounting for the actor in the Shiite alliance with the biggest number of casualties of the foreign actors that intervened from the winning side. Overall, Hezbollah has been strengthened after the Syrian war due to their victories, but they have paid every inch of blood necessary to achieve that.

Finally, Putin's Russia has declared mission accomplished in Syria, considering that the Russians have achieved their goal of securing the maritime and air bases they have in the country. In terms of human capital, has lost a high amount of Russian private contractors. Even if they are ghost soldiers, they are still their men. Although Russian airpower and manpower has been crucial for the Shiite Axis of Resistance to win the war, their victory isn't as clear as that of Iran. Russia has managed to secure the assets that it had located in Syria for the purpose of remaining relevant in the Middle East, but it hasn't won anything new. The difference between Russia and Iran in this victory is that the Syrian regime owes a lot to Russia, but Russia doesn't control Syria. On the other hand, Iran has more leverage of over the Syrian regime, it is no longer far-fetched to call Syria an Iranian satellite state.

In summary, all of the parties have achieved their goal of saving Assad in order to secure a foothold in the region, but some to a lesser extent than others. In terms of what has been won and lost, Iran emerges as the clearest benefactor of this victorious alliance.

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7. ANNEXES

THE TANGLED WEB IN THE FIGHT FOR SYRIA'S FUTURE

KEY

DIRECT CONFLICT
INDIRECT CONFLICT
MONETARY ASSISTANCE
ALLEGED MONETARY ASSISTANCE
SUPPLYING WEAPONS AND/OR FIGHTERS

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