

**GALATASARAY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**UNDERSTANDING THE FOREIGN POLICIES OF
TÜRKİYE, RUSSIA AND IRAN IN THE FIVE SEAS
BASIN DURING THE POST-ARAB SPRING PERIOD**



PhD THESIS

Doğuş SÖNMEZ

Thesis Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Ali Faik DEMİR

JULY 2025

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JULY 2025

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
ABBREVIATIONS.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES	viii
RÉSUMÉ.....	ix
ABSTRACT	xiii
ÖZET	xvii
INTRODUCTION	1
1. GEOPOLITICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE IN TURKISH- RUSSIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS	25
1.1. Near Abroad of Türkiye: Junction Point of the Seas, Five Seas Basin	29
1.1.1. Black Sea Region.....	29
1.1.2. Mediterranean Sea Region	38
1.1.3. Persian Gulf Region.....	46
1.1.4. Caspian Sea Region	51
1.1.5. Red Sea Region	56
1.2. The Historical Perspective of Turkish-Russian-Iranian Relations	60
1.3. The Components of Turkish-Russian-Iranian Relations	75
2. FOREIGN POLICY MAKING: TÜRKİYE, RUSSIA AND IRAN.....	89
2.1. Neoclassical Realism in Foreign Policy Making	89
2.2. The Driving Forces Behind Foreign Policy: Türkiye, Russia and Iran in the post-Arab Spring Period.....	99
2.2.1. Key Determinants and Influences of Turkish Foreign Policy	99
2.2.2. Key Determinants and Influences of Russian Foreign Policy.....	112
2.2.3. Key Determinants and Influences of Iranian Foreign Policy	124
2.3. The Structure of the International and Regional System in the post-Arab Spring Period	132

3. THE FOREIGN POLICIES OF TÜRKİYE, RUSSIA AND IRAN IN THE FIVE SEAS BASIN.....	143
3.1. Syrian Civil War	144
3.1.1. Turkish Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War.....	157
3.1.2. Russian Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War	171
3.1.3. Iranian Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War.....	183
3.2. Nagorno Karabakh Conflict	194
3.2.1. Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict....	206
3.2.2. Russian Foreign Policy towards the Nagorno Karabakh Conflict....	215
3.2.3. Iranian Foreign Policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict....	223
3.3. Qatar Diplomatic Crisis	232
3.3.1. Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis	236
3.3.2. Russian Foreign Policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis	244
3.3.3. Iranian Foreign Policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis	249
CONCLUSION	257
BIBLIOGRAPHY	274
BIOGRAPHY	315

ABBREVIATIONS

AKP	: Justice and Development Party
BSEC	: Black Sea Economic Cooperation
BTC	: Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan
BTE	: Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum
CENTO	: Central Treaty Organization
CHP	: Republican People's Party
CIS	: Commonwealth of Independent States
CRB	: Counterrevolutionary Bloc
CSTO	: Collective Security Treaty Organization
EAEU	: Eurasian Economic Union
EU	: European Union
FPA	: Foreign Policy Analysis
FPE	: Foreign Policy Executive
FSA	: Free Syrian Army
FSB	: The Five Seas Basin
G20	: Group of Twenty
GCC	: Gulf Cooperation Council
GCC	: Gulf Cooperation Council
GEGMR	: Geology and Mineral Resources
HTS	: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
IMF	: International Monetary Fund
IRGC	: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IS	: Islamic State
ISIS	: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ITC	: International Transport Corridor
JCPOA	: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
MHP	: Nationalist Movement Party
NATO	: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGOs	: Non-Governmental Organizations
NKAO	: Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast
OIC	: Organization of Islamic Cooperation
OPEC	: Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
OSCE	: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OTS:	: Organization of Turkic States
PKK	: Kurdistan Workers' Party
PYD	: Democratic Union Party
QNA	: Qatar's News Agency
SAM	: Center for Strategic Research
SC	: Security Council

SCO	: Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SDF	: Syrian Democratic Forces
SESRI	: Qatar University's Social and Economic Survey Research
Institute	
SNA	: Syrian National Army
SNC	: Syrian National Council
SNSC	: Supreme National Security Council
SPIEF	: St. Petersburg International Economic Forum
SSR	: Soviet Socialist Republic
STG	: Stroytransgaz Logistic Company
TAF	: Turkish Armed Forces
TANAP	: Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline
TRNC	: Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus
TÜİK	: Turkish Statistical Institute
UAE	: United Arab Emirates
UAR	: United Arab Republic
UAVs	: Unmanned aerial vehicles
UN	: United Nations
UNSC	: UN Security Council
US	: United States
USSR	: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
YPG	: People's Protection Units

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1. Wars between Ottoman Empire and Iran, Ottoman Empire and Russia, and Russia and Iran in the 16th-20th Centuries	61
Table 3.1. Turkish Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War	158
Table 3.2. The Military Operations of Türkiye in Syria	168
Table 3.3. Russian Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War.....	172
Table 3.4. Iranian Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War	184
Table 3.5. Turkish Foreign Policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict.....	207
Table 3.6. Russian Foreign Policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis	216
Table 3.7. Iranian Foreign Policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis	223
Table 3.8. Turkish Foreign Policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis	237
Table 3.9. Russian Foreign Policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis.....	245
Table 3.10. Iranian Foreign Policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis	250
Table 3.11. Intervening Variables of Türkiye, Russia and Iran.....	258
Table 3.12. Differences and Similarities between the Intervening Variables	269

RÉSUMÉ

Le Printemps arabe après 2010 a entraîné des changements importants dans les régimes des pays de la région et dans l'environnement proche du Moyen-Orient. Il s'agit d'un phénomène de longue date qui a bouleversé l'équilibre mondial et régional. Outre les grandes puissances, les principaux acteurs régionaux, à savoir la Turquie, la Russie et l'Iran, ont naturellement été influencés par ce phénomène. Leurs politiques étrangères dans le bassin des Cinq Mers, défini comme le point de jonction entre la mer Noire, la mer Méditerranée, le golfe Persique, la mer Caspienne et la mer Rouge, ont également été affectées par les opportunités et les menaces créées par le Printemps arabe. Le bassin couvre une vaste zone géopolitique s'étendant de la mer Noire à la mer Rouge, comprenant des corridors énergétiques, des zones de conflits ethniques et politiques, et des points d'intersection entre les rivalités des grandes puissances.

La Turquie, la Russie et l'Iran sont les acteurs les plus importants du bassin des Cinq Mers. Ils ont tous des liens historiques et culturels avec différentes parties du bassin. Par exemple, alors que l'Empire achéménide et l'Empire ottoman dominaient toute la région, la Russie tsariste et l'Union soviétique contrôlaient une partie importante du bassin. C'est pourquoi il est essentiel d'examiner les politiques étrangères de la Turquie, de la Russie et de l'Iran dans le bassin. Dans le même temps, ces trois acteurs ont des intérêts divergents dans le bassin, mais ils ont commencé à coopérer dans le cadre de la guerre civile syrienne et à mener un processus de réconciliation appelé « processus d'Astana » dans la région. Parallèlement, alors que la Russie et la Turquie ont pris l'initiative de résoudre le conflit du Haut-Karabakh, qui dure depuis près de trente ans, l'Iran et la Turquie ont joué un rôle de médiateurs dans la crise diplomatique du Qatar entre 2017 et 2021.

Il est intéressant et mérite réflexion que ces trois États, avec leurs caractéristiques différentes et leurs intérêts contradictoires, soient capables d'éviter les conflits et d'agir ensemble en temps de crise. Dans ce contexte, sur la base de la littérature et des questions d'actualité, la question de recherche de cette étude est la suivante : quelles sont les conditions et les facteurs qui influencent et façonnent les relations entre la Turquie, la Russie et l'Iran dans la période post-Printemps arabe et dans le bassin des Cinq Mers ? Comment ces conditions et ces facteurs ont-ils façonné les relations entre les trois acteurs ? Dans cette optique, la thèse soutient que dans la période post-Printemps arabe, la Turquie, la Russie et l'Iran dans le bassin des Cinq Mers ont évité les conflits entre eux en raison de l'influence de facteurs internes et externes dans les trois pays. En d'autres termes, bien qu'ils aient coopéré de temps à autre, le concept qui définit la relation entre les trois pays est « l'évitement des conflits ».

Les méthodes utilisées tout au long de l'étude sont le suivi des processus, l'analyse de contenu et l'étude de cas comparative, qui ont été utilisées séparément dans la littérature sur l'analyse de la politique étrangère ces dernières années. Tout d'abord, le suivi des processus est une méthode de recherche utilisée pour établir des relations de cause à effet et enquêter sur les causes des cas. Dans cette méthode, où les causes multiples d'un résultat sont étudiées, le processus allant de la cause à l'effet est analysé. Le raisonnement déductif et inductif peuvent tous deux être utilisés dans cette méthode d'analyse de la politique étrangère. La forme inductive est utilisée pour étudier les relations de cause à effet qui ne peuvent être expliquées par une théorie, tandis que la forme déductive révèle les relations de cause à effet dans le cadre défini par une théorie. La méthode de suivi des processus est utilisée à trois fins principales : tester une théorie, produire une nouvelle théorie, mettre à jour une théorie existante et expliquer les résultats. Dans cette étude, les politiques étrangères de la Turquie, de la Russie et de l'Iran à l'égard de trois cas différents, à savoir la guerre civile syrienne, le conflit du Haut-Karabakh et la crise diplomatique du Qatar, ont été suivies à la suite des phénomènes et des impacts de ces politiques étrangères sur les relations entre les trois États. Le réalisme néoclassique a été utilisé comme cadre théorique. La théorie a été testée à travers trois cas liés aux politiques étrangères de la Turquie, de la Russie et de l'Iran. Des contributions ont été apportées à la théorie dans le contexte de l'analyse des politiques étrangères des pays non occidentaux. Parallèlement, des contributions ont été apportées à la théorie concernant la structure intégrée de l'analyse au niveau des dirigeants et de l'analyse au niveau des unités dans les États ayant des tendances à la centralisation du pouvoir.

Deuxièmement, une analyse qualitative du contenu a été utilisée dans cette étude. Elle est importante dans les cas où il n'existe pas de cadre théorique, car elle permet de collecter et de classer les données de manière appropriée, conférant ainsi une dimension conceptuelle nouvelle et originale aux données collectées. L'objectif fondamental de l'analyse du contenu est d'aboutir à des sections significatives des données existantes sans cadre prédéfini. Étant donné que l'étude dispose d'un cadre théorique complet, l'analyse de contenu a été utilisée pour aider à détecter les variables intermédiaires de la Turquie, de la Russie et de l'Iran à un niveau fondamental. La méthode d'analyse de contenu utilisée dans cette étude a été appliquée aux documents officiels publiés après la période du Printemps arabe afin d'établir un cadre pour l'élaboration de la politique étrangère des trois États, ainsi qu'aux déclarations et explications des dirigeants de la Turquie, de la Russie et de l'Iran après le Printemps arabe afin de détecter les variables intermédiaires. Les raisons qui ont motivé l'examen de la période postérieure au Printemps arabe sont notamment les effets régionaux, voire mondiaux, du phénomène du Printemps arabe et son impact sur les régions environnantes, la détérioration/tension des relations politiques entre la Turquie, la Russie et l'Iran pendant le Printemps arabe, et le fait que le phénomène du Printemps arabe a permis à la Turquie, à la Russie et à l'Iran de s'ouvrir à d'autres régions et d'interagir avec elles.

Parallèlement, une étude de cas comparative a été utilisée comme troisième méthode. Afin de simplifier et de comprendre les relations entre les trois acteurs du bassin, trois cas ont été sélectionnés. Ces cas ont été choisis selon trois critères. Premièrement, les cas devaient être sélectionnés dans le bassin des Cinq Mers pendant

la période qui a suivi le Printemps arabe. Deuxièmement, les cas devaient être sélectionnés parmi ceux dans lesquels aucun des trois acteurs n'était impliqué dans le conflit. En d'autres termes, aucun des trois États ne pouvait être partie prenante directe à un conflit. Par exemple, la guerre entre la Russie et l'Ukraine n'était pas un cas approprié pour cette étude. Troisièmement, dans le ou les cas sélectionnés, il était nécessaire de choisir des phénomènes dans lesquels les trois acteurs avaient mené des relations diplomatiques bilatérales ou trilatérales et avaient assumé le rôle de médiateur ou de grand frère pour résoudre ces phénomènes.

L'objectif de cette étude est d'examiner les facteurs internes et externes qui ont influencé les politiques étrangères de la Turquie, de la Russie et de l'Iran dans le bassin des Cinq Mers au cours de la période qui a suivi le Printemps arabe, ainsi que l'impact de ces facteurs sur les relations entre ces trois États. Il s'agit de comprendre la dynamique des relations entre la Turquie, la Russie et l'Iran et leurs politiques étrangères à l'égard de trois cas issus du bassin. À cet égard, l'importance et l'originalité de l'étude peuvent être soulignées en cinq points principaux. Premièrement, l'exhaustivité de l'étude est importante dans la mesure où elle aborde les relations entre trois acteurs (la Turquie, la Russie et l'Iran) ayant un potentiel et des ambitions hégémoniques régionaux dans le bassin des Cinq Mers dans une perspective large et théorique. Deuxièmement, la définition du phénomène du bassin des Cinq Mers, l'utilisation croissante de ce terme et la détermination de ses limites contribuent à son établissement théorique dans la littérature. Troisièmement, l'examen des politiques étrangères et des relations entre la Turquie, la Russie et l'Iran à travers une étude de cas comparative permet de comprendre les raisons qui sous-tendent les orientations de la politique étrangère des acteurs concernés et de révéler la dynamique de ces orientations dans le contexte régional. Quatrièmement, l'utilisation du réalisme néoclassique à trois niveaux d'analyse (unité, système, individu) comme cadre théorique pour expliquer les politiques étrangères de la Turquie, de la Russie et de l'Iran dans la période post-Printemps arabe a contribué à la littérature sur le plan théorique.

Dans le contexte des phénomènes et des politiques étrangères de la Turquie, de la Russie et de l'Iran à l'égard de ces phénomènes, sept conclusions sont essentielles. Premièrement, dans les politiques étrangères de la Turquie, de la Russie et de l'Iran concernant le bassin des Cinq Mers dans la période post-Printemps arabe, il existe des variables intervenantes ou des motivations internes similaires pour ces États, telles que l'existence d'un leader, le désir d'accroître et de maintenir leur influence, l'impact de l'identité, les préoccupations économiques, l'impact de l'opinion publique et des médias, et la perception de la menace. D'autre part, il existe différents facteurs internes tels que des types de régimes similaires, une vision multipolaire de la politique étrangère et une répartition autoritaire des capacités. Deuxièmement, dans les États autoritaires ou les États ayant des tendances à la centralisation du pouvoir, il est difficile de faire la distinction entre l'analyse au niveau individuel et l'analyse au niveau de l'unité, car les phénomènes des dirigeants et des États sont étroitement liés.

Étant donné que la perception ou l'attitude idéologique du dirigeant est considérée comme la perception et l'attitude idéologique de l'État, le fait de traiter la perception du dirigeant comme une variable intermédiaire distincte entraîne une répétition dans l'analyse. Dans le contexte de cette étude, on peut dire que le nombre

d'analyses au niveau des dirigeants de la Turquie, de la Russie et de l'Iran concernant la guerre civile syrienne, le conflit du Haut-Karabakh et la crise diplomatique du Qatar est beaucoup plus faible que le nombre d'analyses au niveau des unités. Ce fait illustre également la deuxième conclusion.

Troisièmement, le facteur indépendant systémique ou la contrainte du système international qui rapproche la Turquie, la Russie et l'Iran est le vide de pouvoir créé par le retrait des États-Unis du bassin des cinq mers. Ce vide de pouvoir est comblé par la Turquie, la Russie et l'Iran, qui souhaitent accroître l'influence du bassin. Quatrièmement, alors que les politiques de la Russie et de l'Iran s'inscrivent dans des stratégies à plus long terme, la Turquie adopte une approche plus tactique que ses deux voisins. Cette approche tactique de la Turquie s'explique par sa politique traditionnelle d'équilibre entre l'Est et l'Ouest, héritée de l'Empire ottoman. Grâce à cette politique d'équilibre, et donc à sa politique tactique à court terme, la Turquie continue de s'harmoniser avec la Russie et l'Iran dans le bassin des Cinq Mers et de construire des relations en évitant les conflits.

Cinquièmement, les crises, considérées comme des perturbations dans la littérature sur l'analyse de la politique étrangère dans le bassin des Cinq Mers, améliorent les relations diplomatiques, définies comme une pratique de rassemblement au sein d'une plateforme, entre la Turquie, la Russie et l'Iran. Tous trois assument le rôle de médiateur et, à travers ce rôle, tentent d'accroître ou de maintenir leur influence dans le bassin, tout en améliorant leurs relations diplomatiques. Sixièmement, alors que dans la guerre civile syrienne et le conflit du Haut-Karabakh, au moins quatre variables intermédiaires sont détectées pour la Turquie, la Russie et l'Iran, dans la crise diplomatique du Qatar, deux variables intermédiaires sont détectées pour les trois États.

Septièmement, on peut dire que pendant la période post-Printemps arabe, tant que les trois États tirent un avantage économique des crises dans le bassin des Cinq Mers, ils maintiennent leurs relations en évitant les conflits. Ils ont tous le désir d'accroître et de maintenir leur influence dans le bassin, mais en même temps, ils donnent la priorité à leurs préoccupations économiques. La raison de leur désir est enracinée dans leur passé impérial et leurs liens historiques, culturels et même économiques avec les pays du bassin. Le fait de donner la priorité à leurs préoccupations économiques les éloigne des conflits.

ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring after 2010 has led to significant changes in the regimes of the regional countries and the near environment of the Middle East. It is a longstanding phenomenon that has shaken global and regional balance. Apart from the great powers, naturally, the major regional actors, Türkiye, Russia and Iran, have been influenced from that phenomenon. Their foreign policies in the Five Seas Basin, defined as a junction point of the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea and Red Sea, have also been affected by the opportunities and the threats created with the Arab Spring. The Basin covers a broad geopolitical area stretching from the Black Sea to the Red Sea, including energy corridors, ethnic-political conflict zones, and points of intersection between great power rivalries.

Türkiye, Russia and Iran are the most significant actors in the Five Seas Basin. They all have historical and cultural ties with the different parts of the basin. For example, while Achaemenid Empire and Ottoman Empire dominated whole region, the Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union controlled an important part of the basin. That's why examining the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran in the basin is critical. At the same time, these three actors have clashing interests in the basin, but they started to cooperate in Syrian Civil War and to conduct a reconciliation process called Astana process in the region. At the same time, while Russia and Türkiye took initiative to resolve the almost thirty-year Nagorno Karabakh Conflict, Iran and Türkiye played mediator roles in Qatar Diplomatic Crisis between 2017 and 2021.

It is noteworthy and worthy of consideration that these three states, with their different characteristics and conflicting interests, are able to avoid conflict and act together in times of crisis. Within this context, based on the literature and current issues, the research question of this study is as follows: What are the conditions and factors that influence and shape the relations between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran in the post-Arab Spring period and in the Five Seas Basin? How have these conditions and factors shaped the relations between the three actors? In that direction, the thesis argued that in the post-Arab Spring period, Türkiye, Russia, and Iran in the Five Seas Basin have avoided conflict with each other due to the influence of internal and external factors in all three countries. In other words, although they have cooperated from time to time, the concept that defines the relationship between the three countries is "avoidance of conflict."

The methods used throughout the study are process tracing, content analysis, and comparative case study which have been separately used in foreign policy analysis literature in recent years. Firstly, process tracing is a research method used to establish cause-and-effect relationships and investigate the causes of cases. In this method, where multiple causes of a result are investigated, the process from cause to effect is analyzed. Both deductive and inductive reasoning can be used in this foreign policy analysis method. The inductive form is used to investigate cause-and-effect relationships that cannot be explained by a theory, while the deductive form reveals cause-and-effect relationships within the framework outlined by a theory. The process tracing method is used for three main purposes: testing a theory, producing a new theory, updating an existing theory, and explaining the results. In this study, the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran towards three different cases, Syrian Civil War, Nagorno Karabakh Conflict and Qatar Diplomatic Crisis were tracked in the aftermath of the phenomena and the impacts of these foreign policies on the relations of three states. Neoclassical Realism was used as the theoretical framework. The theory was tested through three cases related to the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran. Contributions were made to the theory in the context of analyzing the foreign policies of non-Western countries. At the same time, contributions were made to the theory regarding the embedded structure of leader level analysis and unit level analysis in states with power centralization tendencies.

Secondly, qualitative content analysis was used in the study. It is important in cases where there is no theoretical framework, as it allows for the appropriate collection and categorization of data, thereby imparting a new and original conceptual dimension to the collected data. The basic aim of content analysis is to arrive at meaningful sections of the existing data without a given framework. Since the study has a comprehensive theoretical framework, the content analysis was used to assist detecting the intervening variables of Türkiye, Russia and Iran in a fundamental level. The content analysis method used in this study was applied to the official documents published after the Arab Spring period to draw a framework of foreign policy making of three states and also applied to the statements and explanations of the leaders of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran after the Arab Spring to detect the intervening variables. The reasons for examining the period after the Arab Spring include the regional and even global effects of the Arab Spring phenomenon and its impact on surrounding regions, the deterioration/straining of political relations between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran during the Arab Spring, and the Arab Spring phenomenon enabling Türkiye, Russia, and Iran to open up to other regions and interact with them.

At the same time, comparative case study was used as a third method. In order to simplify and comprehend the relations of three actors in the Basin, three cases were selected. There are three selection criteria for these cases. Firstly, the cases had to be selected from within the Five Seas Basin during the period following the Arab Spring. Secondly, the cases had to be selected from cases in which none of the three actors were involved in the conflict. In other words, neither of the three states could be a direct party to any conflict. For example, the Russia-Ukraine War was not a suitable

case for this study. Thirdly, in the selected case or cases, it was necessary to select phenomena in which the three actors had conducted bilateral or trilateral diplomatic relations and had assumed the role of mediator or big brother to solve the phenomena.

The aim of this study is to examine the internal and external factors that influenced the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran in the Five Seas Basin during the period following the Arab Spring, and the impact of these factors on the relations between the three countries. It is to understand the dynamics of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran relations and their foreign policies towards three cases from the Basin. In this regard, the importance and originality of the study can be emphasized in five main points. First, the study's comprehensiveness is important in that it addresses the relations between three actors (Türkiye, Russia, and Iran) with regional hegemonic potential and ambitions in the Five Seas Basin from a broad perspective and theoretical perspective. Second, defining the Five Seas Basin phenomenon, increasing its use, and determining its boundaries contributes to its theoretical establishment in literature. Third, examining the foreign policies and the relations between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran through comparative case study helps to understand the reasons behind the foreign policy orientations of the relevant actors and reveal the dynamics of these orientations in the regional context. Fourth, using Neoclassical Realism at three levels of analysis (unit, system, individual) as a theoretical framework to explain the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran in the post-Arap Spring period contributed to the literature theoretically.

Within the context of the phenomena and the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran towards these phenomena, seven findings are crucial. First, in the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran regarding the Five Seas Basin in the post-Arab Spring period, there are similar intervening variables or domestic motivations of the states like the leadership, the desire to increase and maintain their influence, the impact of identity, economic concerns, the impact of public opinion and media and the threat perception. On the other hand, there are different internal factors such as similar regime types, multipolar foreign policy vision, and authoritative allocation of capacity. Second, in authoritarian states or the states having power centralization tendencies, it is difficult to distinguish between individual-level analysis and unit-level analysis, as the phenomena of leaders and states are intertwined. Since the perception or ideological attitude of the leader is seen as the perception and ideological attitude of the state, treating the perception of the leader as a separate intermediate variable causes repetition in the analysis. Within the context of this study, it can be said that the number of leader level analyses of Türkiye, Russia and Iran towards Syrian Civil War, Nagorno Karabakh Conflict and Qatar Diplomatic Crisis is much lower than the number of unit level analyses. This fact also exemplifies the second finding.

Thirdly, the systemic independent variable or constraint of the international system that brings Türkiye, Russia, and Iran closer together is the power vacuum created by the US withdrawal from the Five Seas Basin. This power vacuum is being filled by Türkiye, Russia, and Iran, which are eager to increase the influence of the Basin. Fourth, while Russia and Iran's policies have more long-term strategies,

Türkiye is more tactical than Russia and Iran. Türkiye's tactical move is thought to stem from its traditional balancing policy between East and West since the Ottoman Empire. Through this balancing policy, and hence short-term tactical policy, Türkiye continues to harmonize with Russia and Iran in the Five Seas Basin and build relations by avoiding the conflict.

Fifth, the crises as disturbances in the foreign policy analysis literature in the Five Seas Basin improve the diplomatic relations, defined as a practice of gathering in a platform, of Türkiye, Russia and Iran. They all take on the role of mediator and via playing mediator role, try to increase or maintain their influence in the Basin, while improving diplomatic relations. Sixth, while both in Syrian Civil War and in Nagorno Karabakh Conflict, minimum four intervening variables are detected for Türkiye, Russia and Iran, in Qatar Diplomatic Crisis, two intervening variables are detected for the three states.

Seventh, it can be said that during the post-Arab Spring period, as long as the three states benefit from the crises economically in the Five Seas Basin, they maintain their relations by avoiding the conflict. They all have the desire to increase and maintain their influence in the Basin, but at the same time they prioritize their economic concerns. The reason for their desire is rooted in their imperial past and their historical, cultural and even economic ties with the countries in the Basin. Prioritizing their economic concerns keeps them away from conflict.

ÖZET

Arap Baharı, bölge ülkelerinin rejimlerinde ve Orta Doğu'nun yakın çevresinde önemli değişikliklere yol açmıştır. Arap Baharı, küresel ve bölgesel dengeyi sarsan uzun süredir devam eden bir olgudur. Büyük güçler dışında, doğal olarak, Türkiye, Rusya ve İran gibi başlıca bölgesel aktörler de bu olgudan etkilenmiştir. Bu üç aktörün Karadeniz, Akdeniz, Basra Körfezi, Hazar Denizi ve Kızıldeniz'in kesiştiği nokta olarak tanımlanan Beş Deniz Havzası'ndaki dış politikaları da Arap Baharının yarattığı fırsat ve tehditlerden etkilenmiştir. Havza, Karadeniz'den Kızıldeniz'e uzanan geniş bir jeopolitik alanı kapsamakta olup, enerji koridorları, etnik-siyasi çatışma bölgeleri ve büyük güçler arasındaki rekabetin kesiştiği noktaları barındırmaktadır.

Türkiye, Rusya ve İran, Beş Deniz Havzası'nın en önemli aktörleridir. Bu ülkeler, havzanın farklı bölgeleriyle tarihi ve kültürel bağlara sahiptir. Örneğin, Ahemeniş İmparatorluğu ve Osmanlı İmparatorluğu bölgenin tamamını hakimiyetleri altında tutarken, Çarlık Rusyası ve Sovyetler Birliği havzanın önemli bir bölümünü kontrol etmiştir. Bu nedenle, Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ın havzadaki dış politikalarını incelemek büyük önem taşımaktadır. Aynı zamanda, bu üç aktörün, söz konusu havzada çatışan çıkarları vardır, ancak Türkiye, Rusya ve İran, Suriye İç Savaşı'nda iş birliği yapmaya ve bu doğrultuda Astana süreci adı verilen bir uzlaşma süreci yürütmüştür. Rusya ve Türkiye neredeyse otuz yıldır süren Dağlık Karabağ çatışmasını çözmek için inisiyatif alırken, İran ve Türkiye 2017 ile 2021 yılları arasında Katar Diplomatik Krizi'nde arabulucu rol oynamıştır.

Farklı özelliklere ve çatışan çıkarlarına rağmen, bu üç devletin kriz zamanlarında çatışmadan kaçınıp birlikte hareket edebilmesi önemli ve dikkate değer bir durumdur. Bu bağlamda, literatür ve güncel meselelere dayanarak, bu çalışmanın araştırma sorusu şu şekildedir: Arap Baharı sonrası dönemde ve Beş Deniz Havzasında Türkiye, Rusya ve İran arasındaki ilişkileri etkileyen ve şekillendiren koşullar ve faktörler nelerdir? Bu koşullar ve faktörler üç aktör arasındaki ilişkileri nasıl şekillendirmiştir? Bu doğrultuda tez, Arap Baharı sonrası dönemde Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ın Beş Deniz Havzası'nda, üç ülkedeki iç faktörlerin ve dış faktörlerin etkisiyle birbirleriyle çatışmaktan kaçındıklarını savunmuştur. Diğer bir deyişle, zaman zaman iş birliği yapmış olsalar da üç ülke arasındaki ilişkiyi tanımlayan kavram “çatışmadan kaçınma”dır.

Çalışma boyunca kullanılan yöntemler, son yıllarda dış politika analizi literatüründe birbirinden bağımsız olarak kullanılan süreç izleme, içerik analizi ve karşılaştırmalı vaka çalışmasıdır. İlk olarak, süreç izleme, neden-sonuç ilişkilerini kurmak ve vakaların nedenlerini araştırmak için kullanılan bir araştırma yöntemidir.

Bir sonucun birden fazla nedeninin araştırıldığı bu yöntemde, nedenden sonuca kadar olan süreç analiz edilir. Bu dış politika analizi yönteminde hem tündengelimli hem de tümevarımlı akıl yürütme kullanılabilir. Tümevarımsal biçim, bir teoriyle açıklanamayan neden-sonuç ilişkilerini araştırmak için kullanılırken, tündengelimli biçim, bir teorinin çizdiği çerçeve içindeki neden-sonuç ilişkilerini ortaya çıkarır. Süreç izleme yöntemi üç ana amaç için kullanılır: bir teoriyi test etmek, yeni bir teori üretmek, mevcut bir teoriyi güncellemek ve sonuçları açıklamak. Bu çalışmada, Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ın Suriye İç Savaşı, Dağlık Karabağ Çatışması ve Katar Diplomatik Krizi olmak üzere üç farklı vakaya yönelik dış politikaları ve bu dış politikaların üç devletin ilişkileri üzerindeki etkileri izlenmiştir. Teorik çerçeve olarak Neoklasik Realizm kullanılmıştır. Teori, Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ın dış politikalarıyla ilgili üç vaka üzerinden test edilmiştir. Batı dışı ülkelerin dış politikalarının analizi bağlamında teoriye katkı sağlanmıştır. Aynı zamanda, gücü merkezileştirme eğilimi olan devletlerde lider düzeyinde analiz ve birim düzeyinde analizin iç içe yapısı ile ilgili teoriye katkılar sağlanmıştır.

İkinci olarak, çalışmada nitel içerik analizi kullanılmıştır. İçerik analizi metodu, teorik bir çerçeve bulunmayan durumlarda önemlidir, çünkü verilerin uygun şekilde toplanmasını ve sınıflandırılmasını sağlar, böylece toplanan verilere yeni ve özgün bir kavramsal boyut kazandırır. İçerik analizinin temel amacı, belirli bir çerçeve olmaksızın mevcut verilerin anlamlı bölümlerine ulaşmaktır. Çalışma kapsamlı bir teorik çerçeveye sahip olduğundan, içerik analizi, temel düzeyde, Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ın dış politikalarının ara değişkenlerini tespit etmeye yardımcı olmak için kullanılmıştır. Bu çalışmada kullanılan içerik analizi yöntemi, Arap Baharı döneminden sonra yayımlanan resmî belgelere uygulanarak üç devletin dış politika yapımının bir çerçevesini çizmek için ve ayrıca Arap Baharı'ndan sonra Türkiye, Rusya ve İran liderlerinin söylemlerine uygulanarak ara değişkenleri tespit etmek için kullanılmıştır. Arap Baharı sonrası dönemi inceleme nedenleri arasında, Arap Baharı olgusunun bölgesel ve hatta küresel etkileri ve çevre bölgelere etkisi, Arap Baharı sırasında Türkiye, Rusya ve İran arasındaki ilişkilerin değişmesi ve Arap Baharı olgusunun Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ın diğer bölgelere açılmasını ve onlarla etkileşime girmesini sağlaması sayılabilir.

Aynı zamanda, karşılaştırmalı vaka çalışması üçüncü bir yöntem olarak kullanılmıştır. Havzadaki üç aktörün ilişkilerini basitleştirmek ve anlamak için üç vaka seçilmiştir. Bu vakalar için üç seçim kriteri vardır. İlk olarak, vakalar Arap Baharı sonrası dönemde Beş Deniz Havzası içinden seçilmiştir. İkinci olarak, vakalar üç aktörün hiçbirinin çatışmaya dahil olmadığı vakalardan seçilmiştir. Diğer bir deyişle, üç devletten hiçbirisi herhangi bir çatışmanın doğrudan tarafı değildir. Örneğin, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı bu çalışma için uygun bir vaka değildir. Üçüncü olarak, seçilen vaka veya vakalarda, üç aktörün ikili veya üçlü diplomatik ilişkiler yürüttüğü ve olguyu çözmek için arabulucu rolünü üstlenebileceği olgular seçilmiştir.

Çalışmanın amacı, Arap Baharı'nı takip eden dönemde Beş Deniz Havzası'nda Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ın dış politikalarına etki eden iç ve dış faktörleri ve bu faktörlerin üç devletin birbirleriyle ilişkilerine etkisini incelemektir. Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ın ilişkilerinin dinamiklerini ve Havza'daki üç vakaya yönelik dış politikalarını anlamaktır. Bu bağlamda, çalışmanın önemi ve özgünlüğü beş ana noktada vurgulanabilir. İlk olarak, çalışmanın kapsamlı olması, Beş Deniz Havzası'nda

bölgesel hegemonya potansiyeline ve hırsına sahip üç aktörün (Türkiye, Rusya ve İran) ilişkilerini geniş bir perspektif ve teorik bakış açısıyla ele alması açısından önemlidir. İkincisi, Beş Deniz Havzası olgusunu tanımlamak, kullanımını yaygınlaştırmak ve sınırlarını belirlemek, literatürde teorik olarak yer almasına katkıda bulunmaktadır. Üçüncüsü, Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ın dış politikaları ve ilişkilerini karşılaştırmalı vaka çalışması yoluyla incelemek, ilgili aktörlerin dış politika yönelimlerinin ardındaki nedenleri anlamaya ve bu yönelimlerin bölgesel bağlamdaki dinamiklerini ortaya çıkarmaya yardımcı olmaktadır. Dördüncü olarak, Arap Baharı sonrası dönemde Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ın dış politikalarını açıklamak için üç analiz düzeyinde (birim, sistem, birey) Neoklasik Realizm'i teorik çerçeve olarak kullanmak, literatüre teorik olarak katkı sağlamaktadır.

Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ın Suriye İç Savaşı, Dağlık Karabağ Çatışması ve Katar Diplomatik Krizi vakalarına yönelik dış politikaları bağlamında yedi bulgu önem arz etmektedir. İlk olarak, Arap Baharı sonrası dönemde Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ın Beş Deniz Havzası'na yönelik dış politikalarında, liderin varlığı, devletlerin nüfuzlarını artırma ve sürdürme arzusu, kimliğin etkisi, ekonomik kaygılar, kamuoyu ve medyanın etkisi ve tehdit algısı gibi ortak ara değişkenler veya devletlerin iç motivasyonları tespit edilmiştir. Öte yandan, benzer rejim türleri, çok kutuplu dış politika vizyonu ve otoriter kapasite dağılımı gibi farklı iç faktörler de bulunmaktadır. İkincisi, otoriter veya gücü merkezileştirme eğilimi olan devletlerde, lider ve devlet olguları iç içe geçmiş olduğundan, birey düzeyinde analiz ile birim düzeyinde analiz arasında ayırım yapmak zordur. Liderin algısı veya ideolojik tutumu devletin algısı ve ideolojik tutumu olarak görüldüğünden, liderin algısını ayrı bir ara değişken olarak ele almak analizde tekrara neden olmaktadır. Bu çalışma bağlamında, Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ın Suriye İç Savaşı, Dağlık Karabağ Sorunu ve Katar Diplomatik Krizi'ne yönelik literatürdeki lider düzeyinde analizlerin sayısının birim düzeyinde analizlerin sayısından çok daha az olması ikinci bulguyu örneklemektedir.

Üçüncüsü, Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ı birbirine yaklaştıran sistemik bağımsız değişken veya uluslararası sistemin kısıtlaması, ABD'nin Beş Deniz Havzası'ndan çekilmesiyle oluşan güç boşluğudur. Bu güç boşluğu, Havza'nın etkilerini artırma arzusu içerisinde olan Türkiye, Rusya ve İran tarafından doldurulmaktadır. Dördüncüsü, Rusya ve İran'ın politikaları daha uzun vadeli stratejilere sahipken, Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'dan daha taktiksel davranmaktadır. Türkiye'nin taktiksel tavrının, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndan bu yana Doğu ve Batı arasında sürdürdüğü geleneksel dengeleme politikasından kaynaklandığı düşünülmektedir. Bu dengeleme politikası ve dolayısıyla kısa vadeli taktiksel politika sayesinde Türkiye, Beş Deniz Havzası'nda Rusya ve İran ile uyum içinde olmaya ve çatışmadan kaçınarak ilişkiler kurmaya devam etmektedir.

Beşincisi, Beş Deniz Havzası'ndaki krizler, Türkiye, Rusya ve İran'ın bir platformda bir araya gelme pratiği olarak tanımlanan diplomatik ilişkilerini iyileştirmektedir. Hepsi arabulucu rolünü üstlenmekte ve arabulucu rolünü oynayarak, diplomatik ilişkilerini iyileştirirken Havza'daki etkilerini artırmaya veya korumaya çalışmaktadır. Altıncı olarak, Suriye İç Savaşı ve Dağlık Karabağ Çatışması'nda, Türkiye, Rusya ve İran için en az dört ara değişken tespit edilirken, Katar Diplomatik Krizi'nde üç devlet için iki ara değişken tespit edilmektedir.

Yedinci olarak, Arap Baharı sonrası dönemde, üç devletin, Beş Deniz Havzası'ndaki krizlerden ekonomik olarak faydalandıkları sürece, çatışmayı önleyerek ilişkilerini sürdürdükleri söylenebilir. Üç aktör, Havza'daki etkilerini artırma ve sürdürme arzusuna sahiptir, ancak aynı zamanda ekonomik kaygılarını önceliklendirmektedir. Bu arzunun nedeni, imparatorluk geçmişlerine ve Havza'daki ülkelerle olan tarihi, kültürel ve hatta ekonomik bağlarına dayanmaktadır. Ekonomik kaygılarını önceliklendirmeleri, onları çatışmadan uzak tutmaktadır.



INTRODUCTION

The Arab Spring after 2010 has led to significant changes in the regimes of the regional countries and the near environment of the Middle East. It is a longstanding phenomenon that has shaken global and regional balance. Apart from the great powers, naturally, the major regional actors, Türkiye, Russia and Iran, have been influenced from that phenomenon. Their foreign policies in the Five Seas Basin, defined as a junction point of the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea and Red Sea, have also been affected by the opportunities and the threats created with the Arab Spring. The Basin covers a broad geopolitical area stretching from the Black Sea to the Red Sea, including energy corridors, ethnic-political conflict zones, and points of intersection between great power rivalries.

These three actors have both clashed and produced various models of cooperation in regional cases such as the Syrian Civil War, the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, and the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis. However, these collaborations are based more on conjunctural alignments than on permanent institutionalization. In other words, Türkiye's strategic partnership with Russia and Iran in the post-Arab Spring era emerged as a pragmatic and transactional response to fundamental changes in the regional structure around 2016. These changes created a hostile environment that threatened Türkiye's national security. At the same time, President Erdogan and the AKP government faced significant domestic problems that jeopardized regime survival, thereby limiting Turkish foreign policy options and precluding reliance on the United States. Thus, forging a partnership with Russia and Iran helped Türkiye to mitigate both external and internal threats. However, this partnership is described as

fragile and inherently short-term, lacking a strong ideological foundation and long-term sustainability.¹

Within this context, this study aims to compare the foreign policies followed by Türkiye, Russia, and Iran in the Five Seas Basin after the Arab Spring and the dynamics of the relationships between these policies. The analysis, based on the Five Seas Basin, aims to systematically reveal how the actors developed strategies based on which variables and what types of conflict or cooperation these strategies led to.

Literature Review

21 master's and doctoral theses published between 1949 and 2024 in Türkiye and abroad, in Turkish and English, covering the actors of Türkiye, Russia and Iran, were examined in terms of their year of publication, author, advisor, university of publication, department of publication, subject (generally including keywords), language, theme, actors involved, and the parameters of the period they examine.

One of the theses was written during the Cold War. The thesis published in 1949 analyzed Iran's relations with Britain, Türkiye and Russia between 1815 and 1830. This doctoral thesis was written in English.² After this thesis, three theses were written from 1996, 1997 and 1999 until 2000. Published in 1996, in English, the doctoral dissertation compared the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 with the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and the Russian revolution of 1905³, while written in 1997 in English, master's thesis examined the power struggle among Türkiye, Russia and Iran in Central Asia between 1991 and 1996.⁴ Another master's thesis, also written in English in 1999, focused on the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran towards Azeri oil.⁵

¹ Colin Giacomini, **Explaining Turkey's Partnership with Russia and Iran in the post-Arab Spring Era**, San Francisco State University, Master Thesis, San Francisco, 2019.

² Fereyduun Adamiyat, **The diplomatic relations of Persian with Britain, Turkey and Russia 1815-1830**, University of London, PhD Thesis, London, 1949.

³ Nader Sohrabi, **Constitutionalism, Revolution and State: The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906 with comparisons to the Russian Revolution of 1905**, University of Chicago, Master Thesis, Chicago, 1996.

⁴ Aziz Hasanov, **Central Asia and the Great Three: The Struggle for Influence Between Turkey, Russia and Iran**, Marmara University, Master Thesis, Istanbul, 1997.

⁵ Pinar Araz, **Turkish, Iranian and Russian Policies Regarding the Azeri Oil**, Middle East Technical University, Master Thesis, Ankara, 1999.

Two theses were written between 2000 and 2010. Written in 2000, in English, the master's thesis also examined the power struggle between Türkiye, Russia and Iran over the Central Asian Republics.⁶ In 2010, the second thesis, written in Turkish, focused on the ethnic conflicts in the South Caucasus region and analyzed the actors of Türkiye, Russia and Iran in this context.⁷ Between 2010 and 2020, nine theses were written. Written in 2011 in Turkish, the master's thesis focused on energy-based power struggles in Central Asia and the Caspian region and their impact on regional crises.⁸

In 2013, the master's thesis, written in Turkish, again emphasized the energy issue and dealt with the energy policies of Russia, Turkmenistan and Iran as important actors of the global natural gas market and the impact of these policies on Türkiye.⁹ The Turkish-language doctoral dissertation published in 2015 examined the power struggle between Türkiye, Russia and Iran in the Middle East.¹⁰ The master's thesis written in 2017 in Turkish compared the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran towards the Middle East in the post-1990 period.¹¹ In 2017, another thesis written in Turkish was a doctoral dissertation. In this thesis, the strategies of Türkiye and Iran towards Russia were analyzed in the context of the strategies of secondary powers towards great powers.¹²

The third thesis written in 2017 was a PhD thesis in English. This thesis analyzed the policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran towards Azerbaijan.¹³ In 2018, the master's thesis written in English examined the power transition in the Middle East in the post-Arab Spring period through the Syrian Civil War.¹⁴ In 2019, another master's thesis

⁶ Hüseyin Muslu, **Struggle for Influence Between Russia, Turkey and Iran on Central Asian Republics**, Marmara University, Master Thesis, Istanbul 2000.

⁷ Duhan Kalkan, **Güney Kafkasya Bölgesi'ndeki Etnik Çatışma Alanları**, Selçuk University, Master Thesis, Konya, 2010.

⁸ Yonca Yalçın Çakmaklı, **Orta Asya ve Hazar Bölgesinde Enerji Odaklı Güç Mücadelelerinden Kaynaklanan Bölgesel Krizlerin Ekonomi Politikası ve Türkiye'ye Yansımaları**, Harp Akademileri Komutanlığı, Master Thesis, Ankara, 2011.

⁹ Özlem Uluğ Paksoy, **Küresel Doğalgaz Pazarının Önemli Aktörleri Rusya, Türkmenistan ve İran'ın Enerji Politikaları ve Türkiye**, Ufuk University, Master Thesis, Ankara, 2013.

¹⁰ Jalaladdin Seyyedi, **Ortadoğu'da Güç Mücadelesi: Bölge Dışı ve Bölge Aktörleri Açısından; ABD - Rusya, Türkiye - İran**, Gazi University, PhD Thesis, Ankara, 2015.

¹¹ Zeynep Coşkun, **1990 Sonrası Güçler Dengesinde (ABD-Türkiye-Rusya-İran) Ortadoğu Politikalarının Karşılaştırılması**, Marmara University, Master Thesis, Istanbul, 2017.

¹² Mustafa Atalay, **İkincil Güçlerin Büyük Güçlere Yönelik Stratejileri: Türkiye ve İran'ın Rusya'ya Yönelik Stratejilerinin Analizi**, Sakarya University, PhD Thesis, Sakarya, 2017.

¹³ Serkan Yolacan, **Order Beyond Borders: The Azerbaijani Triangle Across Iran, Turkey, and Russia**, Duke University, PhD Thesis, Durham, 2017.

¹⁴ Eric Michael Clary, **Using the Syrian Civil War to Measure Hierarchy: Regional Power Transition in the Middle East**, Portland State University, Master Thesis, Portland, 2018.

written in Turkish evaluated the regionalization trend through the actors of Türkiye, Russia and Iran.¹⁵

Written in 2020 in Turkish, this master's thesis examined the Syrian Civil War and Iranian factors in Türkiye-Russia relations in the context of the balance of power approach.¹⁶ The last thesis of this decade was a doctoral dissertation written in Turkish. Published in 2020, this dissertation evaluated the possibility of regional cooperation between Türkiye, Russia and Iran within the theoretical framework of the Copenhagen School.¹⁷ Five theses were published between 2020-2025. The first of these theses was a doctoral dissertation published in 2022. In this thesis, written in English, the Syrian conflict factor in Russia-Türkiye-Iran relations was studied in the context of security architecture in the Middle East.¹⁸ The second thesis of 2022 was a master's thesis written in English. This thesis focused on regional cooperation initiatives in the South Caucasus in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War.¹⁹

The remaining three theses were published in 2024. The first thesis published in 2024 was a master's thesis written in Turkish. This thesis evaluates the security perceptions of Türkiye, Russia and Iran within the framework of neorealism in the context of the developments in the South Caucasus in the post-Cold War period.²⁰ In 2024, another master's thesis published in Turkish read the geopolitical struggles in the South Caucasus after the Cold War through Türkiye, Russia and Iran.²¹ The last thesis published in 2024 was a master's thesis in English. In this thesis, the role of intelligence in the reconciliation process conducted by Türkiye, Russia and Iran in

¹⁵ Meryem Kartal, **Küreselleşme Ekseninde Bölgeselleşme Eğilimleri: Türkiye, İran ve Rusya Örneği**, (MA Thesis, Fırat University, 2019).

¹⁶ Mehmet Keyik, **Güç Dengesi Yaklaşımı Bağlamında Türkiye Cumhuriyeti-Rusya Federasyonu İlişkilerinde Suriye Krizi ve İran Faktörü**, Gazi University, Master Thesis, Ankara 2020.

¹⁷ Aziz Balcı, **Kopenhag Okulu Yaklaşımları Ekseninde Bölgesel İşbirliği İhtimallerinin Analizi: Türkiye-Rusya-İran Örneği**, Selçuk University, PhD Thesis, Konya, 2020.

¹⁸ Hossein Aghaie Joobani, **Revisiting the Middle Eastern Security Order: The Syrian Conflict in View of Russia-Iran-Turkey Relations**, Dokuz Eylül University, PhD Thesis, İzmir, 2022.

¹⁹ Fidan Valiyeva, **Regional Cooperation Initiatives in the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War**, Khazar University, Master Thesis, Bakü, 2022.

²⁰ Osman Gündüz, **1990 Sonrası Dönemde Güney Kafkasya'da Yaşanan Gelişmeler: Aktörlerin Güvenlik Anlayışlarının Neorealizm Çerçevesinde Analizi**, Sakarya University, Master Thesis, Sakarya, 2024.

²¹ Nur Çümen Aşçı, **Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Güney Kafkasya'da Jeopolitik Mücadeleler: Türkiye-Rusya-İran**, Ege University, Master Thesis, İzmir, 2024.

Syria was evaluated through the concept of clandestine diplomacy and the literature on foreign policy analysis.²²

The distribution of theses involving three important regional actors, namely Türkiye, Russia, and Iran, over time shows a parallel development with the increasing importance of these three countries in regional and international politics. The first thesis was written in 1949, at the beginning of the Cold War, and analyzed Iran's relations with the great powers in the 19th century in a historical context. In the 1990s, academic interest in this field was revived with three theses, particularly highlighting the power vacuum and regional restructuring processes that emerged with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The fact that only two theses were written between 2000 and 2010 indicates that there was relatively less academic interest during those years. However, after 2010, the number of theses increased significantly due to both the intensity of international crises and the active role played by these three actors in conflict zones such as Syria and the South Caucasus. Nine theses were written between 2010 and 2020, and six between 2020 and 2024. This increase indicates that the Türkiye-Russia-Iran triangle has become a rising field in the literature on international relations.

The language distribution of theses reveals that the subject has attracted attention in both national and international academic circles. Of the 21 theses examined, 11 were written in Turkish and 10 in English. While English theses were more prevalent in the 1990s and early 2000s, the number of theses written in Turkish has increased since the 2010s. This situation can be explained by the proliferation of postgraduate programs in the field of international relations in Türkiye and the fact that researchers are increasingly focusing on regional agendas developing around these three actors. The increase in Turkish-language theses indicates that the subject is considered important in terms of global knowledge production but also in terms of local knowledge production.

When examining the degrees of the theses, it is seen that there are more master's theses (13 theses) than PhD theses (8 theses). This distribution shows that the subject is frequently studied by graduate students at various universities and attracts academic interest. However, PhD theses are generally more original, theory-focused, and based

²² Recep Erkam Çelik, **Shaping Peace in Shadows: The Role of Intelligence in the Syrian Reconciliation Process**, Middle East Technical University, Master Thesis, Ankara, 2024.

on comprehensive research, making them important for in-depth analyses of Türkiye-Russia-Iran relations. For example, a PhD thesis written in 2020 examined the regional cooperation potential of these three actors within the framework of the Copenhagen School, while another thesis evaluated the strategies developed by Türkiye and Iran against Russia through the concept of “secondary power.”

The main themes highlighted in the theses include energy policies, the Syrian Civil War, regional competition in the South Caucasus, and regional security architecture. Theses written in 1999, 2000, 2011, and 2013 particularly addressed energy competition developing through Azerbaijan and Central Asia. After 2015, the Syrian crisis became a clear focus of the theses. Theses written in 2017, 2018, 2020, and 2022 evaluated this crisis as a decisive factor in Türkiye-Russia-Iran relations. On the other hand, theses dated 2010, 2022, and 2024 focused on the South Caucasus, addressing issues such as ethnic conflicts, opportunities for regional cooperation after the Karabakh War, and geopolitical balances. Thematic diversity has increased significantly in recent years, indicating that the subject is being addressed in academia from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

The theoretical frameworks used in theses have also diversified over time. While historical narratives and comparative history methods were prominent in early studies, theoretical diversity has been notable since 2010. For example, a thesis written in 2020 applied the Copenhagen School’s securitization approach in the context of Türkiye-Russia-Iran regional cooperation. Another thesis written in 2024 examined the covert intelligence diplomacy conducted by these three actors in Syria through the lens of foreign policy analysis and secret diplomacy literature. This situation demonstrates that theoretical depth is increasing in the academic community and that analyses are being conducted based on events and through conceptual inquiries.

Almost all theses have analyzed Türkiye, Russia, and Iran as a triangle. However, some theses have added other regional actors to this triangle. Countries such as Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan have been included as a fourth actor in energy policies or Caucasus-centered studies. In the thesis written in 1949, the presence of Britain in the historical context is noteworthy. This is important in terms of understanding both historical continuity and multilateral dynamics in regional relations. The scarcity of research conducted in the last five years and the small number of studies conducted in English are noteworthy. Another important observation is that the research conducted

has focused on a single region and has generally been centered on energy. At the same time, it is important to note that the majority of the studies focus on foreign policy.

In addition to postgraduate theses, a literature review of published books and articles is important for revealing the originality of the study. The literature has been arranged chronologically to reveal the course of the relations between the three actors. In their article published in the *Security Dialogue* journal in 1999, Criss and Güner emphasized that the spatial dimension of international politics had been neglected and shaped their work around geopolitical thinking. Focusing on the possibilities of strategic cooperation and conflict between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran, the authors addressed the issue of energy transportation through the states of Central Asia and the Caucasus from a geopolitical perspective. The researchers concluded that the triangle of Russia, Türkiye, and Iran is significant in terms of the rich energy resources of the Caspian Region and that all three countries would enter into a conflictual relationship in which they would seek to obtain the largest share of the energy pie in the aforementioned region.²³

In his opinion piece published in 2000, Cutler defined the relationship between Russia, Türkiye, and Iran as an infinite triangle and emphasized that their relations were evolving in harmony. Focusing solely on the three actors' relations in Central Asia, their positions in newly established multilateral structures in the region, and their energy-based interests, the author concluded that Russia was the agenda setter, Iran was the agenda implementer, and Türkiye was the agenda disruptor.²⁴

In a chapter called *Eurasia between Russia, Turkey, and Iran* he wrote for the 2010 book *Key Players and Regional Dynamics in Eurasia*, Mesbahi focused on the positions and general interactions of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran in Eurasia. The author, who examined the relationship between the three states in geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geocultural terms, described Russia as a regional hegemon and Türkiye and Iran as major powers in the region.²⁵

²³ Nur Bilge Criss, Serdar Güner, "Geopolitical Configurations: The Russia-Turkey-Iran Triangle", *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 1999, pp. 365-376.

²⁴ Robert M. Cutler, "Russia, Turkey and Iran: An Eternal Triangle", *CACI Analyst, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, 2000, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/7193-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2000-7-5-art-7193.html> (Retrieved on 10 August 2023).

²⁵ Mohiaddin Mesbahi, "Eurasia between Russia, Turkey, and Iran", in Maria Raquel Freire and Roger E. Kanet (Eds.), *Key Players and Regional Dynamics in Eurasia: The Return of the 'Great Game'*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp.164-192.

In an article prepared for an international workshop in 2012, Likhachev attempted to explain the advancing energy-based relations of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran in regional developments in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Eastern Mediterranean against the United States (US) and other countries. He emphasized that Russia wanted to be a critical actor in the Eurasian energy region, which connected the European and Asian energy markets, and that to achieve this goal, it needed to develop its relations with Türkiye, an important consumer and transit country, and Iran, an important hydrocarbon producer and potential partner.²⁶

Egaizarian, who examined the strategies of Iran, Türkiye, and Russia, actors with different regional expansion policies, in Central Asia and the Caucasus through Wallerstein's World-Systems Theory, has reached a conclusion that includes political economy. According to the conclusion reached, the way for Russia to increase its semi-peripheral role and strengthen its position in the region is to move from mercantilism to integration with the leaders of the capitalist world system. However, it is emphasized that the emergence of new powers such as China in the region would undermine Russia's process of strengthening its position in the region.²⁷

In his 2013 article, "The Turkey-Russia-Iran Nexus: Eurasian Power Dynamics," Flanagan described the relations between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran as complex and inconsistent, focusing on three main regions: the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The researcher, who claimed that the relations between the three actors were influenced by the US and influence the US, concluded that in the Middle East, the possibility of a potential conflict between Türkiye and Russia-Iran in Syria increased and that the US should support Türkiye to prevent this outcome. The author also claimed that Türkiye, Russia, and Iran's interests would clash in the Caucasus, while in Central Asia, the three states had few overlapping interests but many conflicting ones.²⁸

In an article published in Strategic Analysis in 2015, Joobani and Mousavipour investigated whether Russia, Türkiye, and Iran had converging and diverging interests

²⁶ Vladimir Likhachev, "The Role of Energy in Russia's Relations with Turkey and Iran", **Center for Strategic and International Studies**, International Workshop on The Turkey, Russia, Iran Nexus: Economic and Energy Dimensions, 2012.

²⁷ Ashot Egaizarian, "Iran, Turkey, and Russia: Semi-Peripheral Strategies in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus", **Central Asia and the Caucasus**, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2013, pp. 57-71.

²⁸ Stephen J. Flanagan, "The Turkey-Russia-Iran Nexus: Eurasian Power Dynamics", **Washington Quarterly**, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2013, pp. 163-178.

in the Middle East. Based on three cases, they argued that the three actors set aside their short-term geopolitical differences and the three cases discussed in the article are the Syrian issue and rising extremism in the Middle East, Iran's efforts to normalize relations with the West, and Russia's annexation of Crimea. The researchers concluded that these three cases have caused in a new era of cooperation between Russia, Türkiye, and Iran in the Middle East, emphasizing that this cooperation would change the priorities and foreign policy orientations of the actors involved. At the same time, it has been concluded that cooperation on low-level policy issues could evolve into cooperation on high-level policy issues, and that cooperation exposed the harmful aspects of the conflict dynamics between the three actors.²⁹

In an opinion piece published in Al-Monitor in 2017, Bakeer claimed that Russia would use Türkiye and Iran to achieve its goals in Syria, and that Türkiye and Iran had concerns about this. He emphasized that these concerns would materialize when the ISIS threat disappeared and the number of issues on which they could agree decreased. He stated that the reason for the cooperation in Syria was to balance the US position in Syria.³⁰

In their article published in 2018, Şahin and Özel discussed the fundamental components of the relations between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran in the Eurasian region from past to the present and the cooperation options of these three states. Using neorealism theory as a framework, the authors investigated whether these three states, which were competing throughout history, could put aside their historical prejudices and whether their common interests could change their friend-foe discourse towards each other. At the same time, another research question was whether the political and military cooperation between the three states, which began with the Syrian case, would spread to other areas. In this regard, it is argued that the cooperation between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran was based on a shared history and culture and the common goal of stabilizing the region, and it is predicted that this cooperation would spread to different areas.³¹

²⁹ Hossein Aghaie Joobani, Mostafa Mousavipour, "Russia, Turkey, and Iran: Moving Towards Strategic Synergy in the Middle East?", **Strategic Analysis**, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2015, pp. 141-155.

³⁰ Ali Bakeer, "Turkey, Iran, Russia: Trilateral Distrust in Syria", **Al-Monitor**, 20 November 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/11/turkey-iran-russia-trilateral-distrust-in-syria.html> (Retrieved on 15 September 2023).

³¹ Güngör Şahin, Yücel Özel, "Çatışmadan İş Birliğine: Türkiye, Rusya ve İran", **Elektronik Siyaset Bilimi Araştırmaları Dergisi**, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2018, pp. 53-70.

In his book published in 2018, Hasanli focused on the historical dimension of the relations between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran. The researcher, who examined the relations between the three actors in the South Caucasus during the Sovietization of Azerbaijan between 1920 and 1922, used archival research as his method and claimed that Sovietization of Azerbaijan was a complex political process shaped by internal forces, regional and international dynamics involving Russia, Türkiye, and Iran. In other words, Hasanli's work presents Sovietization as a multifaceted historical phenomenon involving local agency, imperial ambitions, and international politics rather than a single, isolated event of a Bolshevik takeover.³²

In Manyuan's article titled "The Russia-Turkey-Iran Coalition and Its Prospects," published in 2019, he examined the effects of the Türkiye-Russia-Iran coalition in the Middle East after 2011 on great power relations and regional power competition. The research question of this study was whether the relationship between the three states would increase peace, stability, development, and cooperation in the Middle East. The researcher explained the fundamental reasons for the coalition of the three states in the Middle East as the alignment of interests and the balancing of the US presence in the region. The author claimed that the Türkiye-Russia-Iran coalition would continue in the future and play a strategic role in terms of Middle Eastern dynamics, concluding that the US would try to break up this coalition by luring Türkiye, but that the coalition will not break up.³³

Hakim, Gholami, and Jafari asked about the fundamental components of the Middle East coalition between Iran, Türkiye, and Russia in their article published in 2020 and analyzed the future of the coalition. The researchers used case study and scenario writing methods in their analysis and obtained the content they used through library research. The authors concluded that the three countries came together not as a result of a natural process such as the balance of power, but as a result of their short-term interests aligning, and predicted that the coalition would break down in the event of any conflict of interest.³⁴

³² Jamil Hasanli, **The Sovietization of Azerbaijan: The South Caucasus in the Triangle of Russia, Turkey and Iran, 1920-1922**, Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2018.

³³ Dong Manyuan, "The Russia-Turkey-Iran Coalition and Its Prospects", **China International Studies**, Vol. 79, 2019, pp. 15-32.

³⁴ Hamid Hakim, Saeed Gholami, Mohammad Mehdi Jafari Vonashi, "Future Studies of the Coalition of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkey and Russia in the Middle East (Emphasis on Syria based on screenwriting)1", **Political Studies of Islamic World**, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2020, pp. 1-32.

Vogel's article aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex triangular relationship between Russia, Iran, and Türkiye in the context of the Syrian civil war. Its main argument was that despite supporting opposite sides in the conflict, these three powers have successfully delineated their spheres of influence and established a *modus vivendi* to coexist and co-manage the Syrian crisis. The trio acted as equals, balancing and checking each other's actions in Syria. The article examined the converging and diverging interests, motivations, and policies of Russia, Iran, and Türkiye in Syria by considering the impact of the Ukraine War on the balance of power in Syria, especially regarding Russia's reduced focus, Iran's expanding influence, and Türkiye's assertiveness. The theoretical framework was grounded in structural realism, assuming states as rational actors seeking to maximize power and security in an anarchic international system.³⁵

Based on all these articles and books, thirteen studies involving all three actors, Türkiye, Russia, and Iran, have been identified. The published articles and books generally use case study, library research, scenario writing, and archival research methods. Seven of the publications focus on the political relations between the three actors; the three focus solely on energy relations; one provides an analysis of political economy through the lens of world system theory; and one examines the relations from a broad perspective, focusing on their geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geocultural dimensions. Four of the books and articles cover only the Middle East region, one covers only the Central Asia region, one covers only the Caucasus region, two cover both the Central Asia and Caucasus regions, one covers the Middle East, Central Asia, and Caucasus regions, one covers the Eastern Mediterranean, Central Asia, and Caucasus regions, while two cover the Eurasia region in a broader sense. There are five studies that emphasize the conflictual nature of relations and five studies that emphasize the cooperative nature of relations.

On the other hand, it is possible to analyze the course of relations or the academic focus of the researchers by looking at chronologically arranged literature. As mentioned earlier, in the literature between 1999 and 2020, some academics focused on conflictual aspects and possibilities of relations, while others focused on cooperative aspects and possibilities. For this reason, no conclusion can be drawn as

³⁵ Amin Vogel, "Russian–Iranian–Turkish trilateral relations in the Syrian civil war", *Pathways to Peace and Security*, Vol. 1, 2023, pp. 76-110.

to which aspect of the relations prevails. However, it is clear that researchers who focused on energy-based relations between the three actors mentioned above between 1999 and 2012 shifted their focus to the political dimension of the relations, especially after 2015. The Astana and Sochi Processes are considered to be important turning points in this change.

The literature on the trilateral relations between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran has developed with academic depth since 1999 and has evolved with different theoretical approaches. In early analyses, the role Türkiye played in relation to the Russia-Iran alliance was less emphasized, with the focus instead on energy and power struggles. Mesbahi's 2010 analysis expanded this framework to include geo-economic and geo-cultural elements in addition to the geopolitical dimension. Thus, trilateral relations began to intertwine with energy and security and with concepts such as identity, regional leadership, and strategic autonomy. This can be a means of transition from classical realism to neoclassical realism. In the post-2015 period, an increasing number of studies have questioned the cooperation capacities of the three actors through mechanisms such as the Astana Process. A repeated emphasis in these period analyses is that this cooperation serves to balance the West, particularly the US. However, some of these authors (e.g., Bakeer) have argued that with the elimination of the ISIS threat, the basis for cooperation could be lost and Russia could use the two countries against each other. In general, this literature shows that Türkiye-Russia-Iran relations are analyzed at three different levels: (1) Energy-geopolitical competition, (2) Tactical cooperation based on a shared threat perception, and (3) Structural system criticism and historical continuities.

As a result, within the context of the theses, books, and articles examined, there are four main points worth mentioning. First, no study takes into account the Five Seas Basin as a geographical limitation. Second, neoclassical realism, which operates in three levels of analysis, is not utilized as a theoretical background in studies. The studies generally select one of the levels. That's why while selecting one level, they basically ignore the other two levels. Third, while some studies use the method of process-tracing, some studies use the method of case study. However, no researcher uses the methods of process-tracing, content analysis and case study together in order to explain the foreign policy of a state. On the other hand, Syrian Civil War and Nagorno Karabakh Conflict are separately used as a single case study, but no study

analyzes both of them in the same context. Fourth, the studies use single case study as mentioned before. However, they do not use comparative case study. At the same time, the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis is not examined as a case study in literature.

Research Question and Argument

Türkiye, Russia and Iran are the most significant actors in the Five Seas Basin. They all have historical and cultural ties with the different parts of the basin. For example, while Achaemenid Empire and Ottoman Empire dominated whole region, the Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union controlled an important part of the basin. That's why examining the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran in the basin is critical. At the same time, these three actors have clashing interests in the basin, but they started to cooperate in Syrian Civil War and to conduct a reconciliation process called Astana process in the region. At the same time, while Russia and Türkiye took initiative to resolve the almost thirty-year Nagorno Karabakh Conflict, Iran and Türkiye played mediator roles in Qatar Diplomatic Crisis between 2017 and 2021.

It is noteworthy and worthy of consideration that these three states, with their different characteristics and conflicting interests, are able to avoid conflict and act together in times of crisis. Within this context, based on the literature and current issues, the research question of this study is as follows: What are the conditions and factors that influence and shape the relations between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran in the post-Arab Spring period and in the Five Seas Basin? How have these conditions and factors shaped the relations between the three actors? In that direction, the thesis argued that in the post-Arab Spring period, Türkiye, Russia, and Iran in the Five Seas Basin have avoided conflict with each other due to the influence of internal and external factors in all three countries. In other words, although they have cooperated from time to time, the concept that defines the relationship between the three countries is "avoidance of conflict."

The aim of this study is to examine the internal and external factors that influenced the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran in the Five Seas Basin during the period following the Arab Spring, and the impact of these factors on the relations between the three countries. It is to understand the dynamics of Türkiye,

Russia, and Iran relations and their foreign policies towards three cases from the Basin. In this regard, the importance and originality of the study can be emphasized in five main points. First, the study's comprehensiveness is important in that it addresses the relations between three actors (Türkiye, Russia, and Iran) with regional hegemonic potential and ambitions in the Five Seas Basin from a broad perspective and theoretical angle. Second, defining the Five Seas Basin phenomenon, increasing its use, and determining its boundaries contributes to its theoretical establishment in literature. Third, examining the foreign policies and the relations between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran through comparative case study helps to understand the reasons behind the foreign policy orientations of the relevant actors and reveal the dynamics of these orientations in the regional context. Fourth, using Neoclassical Realism at three levels of analysis (unit, system, individual) as a theoretical framework to explain the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran in the post-Arap Spring period contributed to the literature theoretically. Fifth, using process tracing, content analysis and comparative case study at the same time is the methodological contribution of this study.

Methodology

The methods used throughout the study are process tracing, content analysis, and comparative case study which have been separately used in foreign policy analysis literature in recent years. The content analysis method will be used in a qualitative context.

Firstly, process tracing is a research method used to establish cause-and-effect relationships and investigate the causes of cases. Process tracing seeks to uncover the connections between potential causes and observed effects. In process-tracing, the researcher analyzes histories, archival materials, interview transcripts, and other relevant sources to determine whether the causal sequence hypothesized or implied by a theory is actually reflected in the order and values of the intervening variables within a case. This approach can be used to assess if remaining differences between two similar cases are genuinely causal or merely coincidental in producing different outcomes. Additionally, an intensive examination of an anomalous case can yield valuable theoretical insights. Beyond testing, process-tracing also serves a heuristic role by generating new variables or hypotheses based on inductively observed

sequences of events in case studies.³⁶ The term intervening variable in this definition can lead to confusion because social scientists typically conceive of variables as either causal (independent) or caused (dependent). Yet, the term that an intervening variable is entirely determined by the preceding independent variable(s) and that it simply transmits this causal force unchanged, without augmenting, diminishing, or modifying it, to subsequent intervening variables, and ultimately to the dependent variable.³⁷

Process tracing is a crucial method that bridges both positivist and interpretivist approaches. Process tracing is used to identify causal relationships and to examine theoretical mechanisms in detail, while also enabling an understanding of actors' perceptions, intentions, and actions. Unlike mere storytelling, it involves a selective, theory-driven, and focused analysis aimed at explaining causal processes. Thus, process tracing emerges as a flexible and powerful tool in the social sciences that supports theory development, testing, and policymaking processes.³⁸

In process tracing, a causal mechanism refers to the specific way in which one event or variable generates or produces another within a causal process. It is the explanatory link that connects nodes in a causal graph by showing how a particular set of events or conditions lead to subsequent events. Establishing a causal mechanism involves providing theoretical statements about the processes or forces linking cause and effect and showing empirically that events in the case study were generated by those mechanisms.³⁹ Process tracing is a method aimed at reconstructing causal processes to develop or assess theoretical propositions that explain an outcome within a specific phenomenon. It assists in revealing the connections between outcomes and their preceding factors.⁴⁰

³⁶ Alexander L. George, Andrew Bennett, **Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences**, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005, pp. 6-7; Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Tracing Causal Mechanisms", *International Studies Review*, Vol.8, No. 2, 2006, p. 363.

³⁷ Andrew Bennett, Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Process Tracing: From Philosophical Roots to Best Practices", in Andrew Bennett, Jeffrey T. Checkel (Eds.), **Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 6-7.

³⁸ Pascal Vennesson, "Case Studies and Process Tracing: Theories and Practices", in Donatella Della Porta, Michael Keating (Eds.), **Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 232-236.

³⁹ David Waldner, "What Makes Process Tracing Good? Causal Mechanisms, Causal Inference, and the Completeness Standard in Comparative Politics", in Andrew Bennett, Jeffrey T. Checkel (Eds.), **Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 128.

⁴⁰ Pascal Vennesson, Ina Wiesner, "Process Tracing in Case Studies", in Joseph Soeters, Patricia M. Shields, Sebastiaan Rietjens (Eds.), **Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Military Studies**, Oxon: Routledge, 2014, p. 94.

On the other hand, systematic process analysis is a qualitative research method that rigorously examines causal mechanisms by formulating competing theories, deriving testable predictions about causal processes, gathering detailed observations from a small number of cases, and comparing these observations to assess which theory best fits the evidence. Unlike correlational approaches, it focuses on understanding how and why variables produce outcomes by tracing the sequence of events, actors' decisions, and interactions within cases, enabling stronger causal inference especially in complex or context-specific situations. This method combines theory-driven prediction with rich empirical detail to provide nuanced explanations and more reliable tests of social science theories.⁴¹

In this method, where multiple causes of a result are investigated, the process from cause to effect is analyzed. Both deductive and inductive reasoning can be used in this foreign policy analysis method. The inductive form is used to investigate cause-and-effect relationships that cannot be explained by a theory, while the deductive form reveals cause-and-effect relationships within the framework outlined by a theory. The process tracing method is used for three main purposes: testing a theory, producing a new theory, updating an existing theory, and explaining the results.⁴²

At the same time, process tracing is a fundamentally important method that brings causal mechanisms back into focus, helps counter researcher bias, bridges theoretical approaches, and clarifies when enough data has been collected. However, it often produces complex, less generalizable theories, depends on indirect proxies, requires substantial time and data, struggles with capturing causal complexity, and faces challenges in deciding how deeply to analyze mechanisms. Moreover, it risks losing sight of broader contexts and demands clearer philosophical and epistemological grounding, ideally through post-positivist frameworks like scientific realism, to improve its rigor and coherence.⁴³

Viewing mechanisms as ideal types in which treating mechanisms as abstract, conceptual models that capture the essential features of how a process works in a general sense, rather than as fixed, empirical realities, allows for an in-depth focus on

⁴¹ Peter A. Hall, "Systematic Process Analysis: When and How to Use It", **European Management Review**, Vol. 3, 2006, pp. 27-28.

⁴² Bezen Balamir Coşkun, İnan Rüma, **Dış Politika Analizi Konu, Kuram, Yöntem**, İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, p. 78-80.

⁴³ Checkel, "Tracing Causal Mechanisms", p. 363.

unique case details in foreign policy analysis while also enabling the abstraction of generalizable conceptual insights from these cases. This approach accounts for actors' meaning-making processes and contextual factors, acknowledging that the concrete manifestations of mechanisms can vary across situations, thus preserving agency and uncertainty in decision-making. Ideal types serve as flexible, portable tools that facilitate holistic understanding of specific cases and meaningful comparison across different cases without predetermining outcomes.⁴⁴

In a different point of view, process tracing is not just a method for causal inference, identifying pieces of evidence to test hypotheses, but that narrative elements play a fundamental role in producing knowledge through the method. Viewing process tracing solely to gather evidence misses important aspects related to how the method constructs coherence and organizes information cognitively. In other words, process tracing involves more than collecting data points; it requires integrating those points into a coherent, meaningful story that connects events causally, considers alternative possibilities, and makes sense of how the outcome was produced. Without attending to the narrative dimension, process tracing's full capacity for knowledge production is overlooked.⁴⁵

In this study, the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran towards three different cases, Syrian Civil War, Nagorno Karabakh Conflict and Qatar Diplomatic Crisis were tracked in the aftermath of the phenomena and the impacts of these foreign policies on the relations of three states. Neoclassical Realism was used as the theoretical framework. The theory was tested through three cases related to the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran. Contributions were made to the theory in the context of analyzing the foreign policies of non-Western countries. At the same time, contributions were made to the theory regarding the embedded structure of leader level analysis and unit level analysis in states with power centralization tendencies.

Secondly, qualitative content analysis was used in the study. It is important in cases where there is no theoretical framework, as it allows for the appropriate collection and categorization of data, thereby imparting a new and original conceptual

⁴⁴ Hilde van Meegdenburg, "Process Tracing: An Analyticist Approach", in Patrick A. Mello, Falk Ostermann (Eds.), **Routledge Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis Methods**, Oxon: Routledge, 2023, pp. 406-410.

⁴⁵ Sharon Krasnow, "Process Tracing in Political Science: What's the Story?", **Studies in History and Philosophy of Science**, Vol. 62, 2017, pp. 6-7.

dimension to the collected data. In the content analysis, the broad range of materials can be examined, including books, films, speeches, interviews, diaries, and even nonverbal behavior, depending on the research question. Speeches are often carefully crafted by speechwriters or committees, targeted at specific audiences, and reflect the leader's desired public persona aimed at gaining support or votes. In contrast, press conferences and interviews tend to be more spontaneous, revealing the leader's private persona and decision-making style. The most spontaneous interactions provide deeper insights into a leader's true character. Such materials can be found in diverse sources, including government archives, media outlets, and services like the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. It is important to use verbatim texts to avoid distortions caused by editing or media framing. Content analysis can be qualitative or quantitative, depending on whether the focus is on the presence or absence of characteristics or the degree to which the speaker exhibits them.⁴⁶ While the qualitative analyses are exploratory and interpretive, the quantitative content analysis aims to reach numerical summaries and generalizable findings.⁴⁷

Content analysis in International Relations has evolved through two main waves. The first wave between 1940s and 1960s was predominantly manual and quantitative, focusing on counting words and themes but criticized for lacking interpretation, contextualization, and representativeness. The second wave emerged in the early 2000s, emphasizing computer-assisted quantitative methods that enabled the rapid analysis of large datasets with improved reliability, yet still struggled with capturing latent meanings and nuanced interpretation. To overcome these limitations, scholars now advocate for a fully integrated content analysis approach that combines quantitative and qualitative, manual and computer-assisted techniques within a single study.⁴⁸

Content analysis basically consists of four stages. First, the data is coded. Second, themes are identified. Third, codes and themes are organized. Fourth and

⁴⁶ Margaret G. Hermann, "Content Analysis", in Audie Klotz, Deepa Prakash (Eds.), **Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide**, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 152-156.

⁴⁷ Kimberly A. Neuendorf, **The Content Analysis Guidebook**, 2nd ed., California: SAGE Publications, 2017, p. 44-45.

⁴⁸ Arash Heydarian Pashakhanlou, "Fully Integrated Content Analysis in International Relations", **International Relations**, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2017, pp. 450-453.

finally, the findings are defined and then interpreted.⁴⁹ The basic aim of content analysis is to systematically analyze meaningful matter, texts, images, and voices, to understand what they mean to populations of people, what they enable or prevent, and what the information conveyed by them does. It seeks to make explicit how researchers derive their judgments about texts so that others can replicate results or build on them. Content analysis aims to transform the analysis of textual data from a subjective reading into a disciplined, transparent, and methodologically sound inquiry that addresses the meanings constructed by social actors through their textual productions and transmissions.⁵⁰ Specifically, the aim of basic form of content analysis is to raise awareness, to educate and to describe whether topics are present, absent, or prevalent within any type of communication material.⁵¹

Since the study has a comprehensive theoretical framework, the content analysis was used to assist detecting the intervening variables of Türkiye, Russia and Iran in a fundamental level. The content analysis method used in this study was applied to the official documents published after the Arap Spring period to draw a framework of foreign policy making of three states and also applied to the statements and explanations of the leaders of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran after the Arab Spring to detect the intervening variables. The reasons for examining the period after the Arab Spring include the regional and even global effects of the Arab Spring phenomenon and its impact on surrounding regions, the deterioration/straining of political relations between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran during the Arab Spring, and the Arab Spring phenomenon enabling Türkiye, Russia, and Iran to open up to other regions and interact with them.

At the same time, comparative case study was used as a third method.⁵² The comparative method is the testing of empirical hypotheses by carefully selecting a small number of comparable cases to control variables, distinct from statistical methods that require larger case numbers and use different analytic techniques. Comparable cases might be similar not only in confounding background variables but

⁴⁹ Ali Şimşek, *Sosyal Bilimlerde Araştırma Yöntemleri*, Eskişehir: Anadolu Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2012, p. 186-187.

⁵⁰ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 4th ed., California: SAGE Publications, 2019, p. 2, 6.

⁵¹ James W. Drisko, Tina Maschi, *Content Analysis*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 28.

⁵² Rahime Süleymanoğlu Kürüm, “Uluslararası İlişkilerde Nitel Yöntemlerle Makale Yazımı: Vaka Analizi ve İncelikleri”, *Pamukkale Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, Vol. 42, 2021, pp. 149-169.

also in the operative variables, which complicates isolating true causal relationships. The goal is to maximize the variance of the independent and dependent variables while minimizing the variance of control variables; however, the variance in dependent variables should not bias case selection to avoid prejudging results.⁵³

Comparative case study, which simultaneously addresses the macro, meso, and micro levels of case-based research. This approach incorporates two comparative logics: the traditional compare and contrast method, and a “tracing across”⁵⁴ logic that follows phenomena across different sites or scales. It is viewed that comparative case study as heuristic, which refers to a method based on experience that facilitates discovery or problem-solving. It is not a fixed formula or set of rules; rather, the comparative case study primarily serves as a reminder of the vast potential that comparison holds for advancing understanding.⁵⁵

Comparative case studies commonly use the method of selecting on the dependent variable, which means choosing cases based on the occurrence of the phenomenon of interest and then identifying shared characteristics. This approach has a long history and has been applied in various political science fields, such as economic growth, social revolutions, and international conflict. Although useful especially when data is scarce, this method has faced sharp criticism because it leads to biased estimates in ordinary least squares regression that cannot be fixed by control variables or more data, even with very large samples.⁵⁶

The choice of cases for study usually begins with the analyst selecting cases of personal or scholarly interest to explain outcomes using existing concepts and theories. Comparative case studies combine detailed, in-depth analysis of reality and theoretical insights better than single case studies alone. They typically involve selecting relevant and salient cases, focusing on variations pertinent to conceptual issues while holding constant other factors to isolate explanatory variables, a method termed structured, focused comparisons. Comparisons can be made through multiple instances within the same case (e.g., comparing successes and failures in mediation attempts within a

⁵³ Arend Lijphart, “II. The Comparable-Cases Strategy in Comparative Research”, **Comparative Political Studies**, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1975, pp.163-165.

⁵⁴ Lesley Bartlett, Frances Vavrus, “Comparative Case Studies: An Innovative Approach”, **Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education (NJCIE)**, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2017, p. 6.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Douglas Dion, “Evidence and Inference in the Comparative Case Study”, **Comparative Politics**, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1998, p. 127.

conflict) or across similar cases, though the latter makes it harder to hold elements constant. Increasing the number of cases risks losing important details but allows richer lessons and testing of theories.⁵⁷

In order to simplify and comprehend the relations of three actors in the Basin, three cases were selected. There are three selection criteria for these cases. Firstly, the cases had to be selected from within the Five Seas Basin during the period following the Arab Spring. Secondly, the cases had to be selected from cases in which none of the three actors were involved in the conflict. In other words, neither of the three states could be a direct party to any conflict. For example, the Russia-Ukraine War was not a suitable case for this study. Türkiye's military support to Azerbaijan in Nagorno Karabakh Crisis and Russia's military support to Syria in Syrian Civil War do not violate the second criteria, because the Nagorno Karabakh Crisis has two direct sides, Azerbaijan and Armenia and Syrian Civil War has more than two sides including Syrian government and other domestic groups in Syria. Thirdly, in the selected case or cases, it was necessary to select phenomena in which the three actors had conducted bilateral or trilateral diplomatic relations and had assumed the role of mediator or big brother to solve the phenomena.

Research Design

In that direction, the thesis consists of three main chapters. The first chapter called *Geopolitical and Historical Perspective in Turkish-Russian-Iranian Relations*, has three sections. In this chapter, the geographical limitations of this study were determined as a Five Seas Basin, the historical relations influenced on the current relations among Türkiye, Russia, and Iran were depicted and the "constant variables" of the foreign policies of these three actors and their impact on the foreign policies were emphasized. In the first section called *Near Abroad of Türkiye: Junction Point of the Seas, Five Seas Basin*, Five Seas Basin were defined as junction point of the five seas, Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea and Red Sea. The political geography-based definition was made by the author of this study by referring

⁵⁷ I. William Zartman, "Comparative Case Studies", *International Negotiation*, Vol. 10, 2005, pp. 6-10; Andrew Bennett, Colin Elman, "Case Study Methods in the International Relations Subfield", *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2007, pp. 172-176.

to the near abroad or sphere of influence of Türkiye and was evaluated within five criteria including the size, actors and borders of the region, the names of the region, the definitions of geopoliticians regarding the region, a brief history of the region, a descriptive map of the region and the positions of Türkiye, Russia and Iran in this region.

In the second section called *The Historical Perspective of Turkish-Russian-Iranian Relations* analyzed the historical relations of Türkiye, Russia and Iran from their first trilateral contact, Astrakhan Campaign between 1568-1570. The battles among those empires and the effects of the battles were discussed. In the third section called *The Components of Turkish-Russian-Iranian Relations*, the constant variables of foreign policies of Türkiye, Iran and Russia were examined within the perspective of four elements which were historical ties of the states, geopolitical proximity and geopolitics of the countries, economy and energy issues of the states and culture, identity and ideology of the states.

The second chapter called *Foreign Policy Making: Türkiye, Russia and Iran*, has three sections. In this chapter, the theoretical framework of the study was drawn, the domestic factors influenced foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran were depicted and the features of the current international system were pointed out to complete the theoretical framework. In the first section called *Neoclassical Realism in Foreign Policy Making*, the realist international relations were explained by mentioning classical realism, neorealism, briefly, and neoclassical realism. Neoclassical realism's concepts of independent variable as restrictions of the international system, dependent variable as foreign policy outcomes of the states, and intervening variable as domestic or internal factors affected foreign policy outcomes were noted. In the second section called *The Driving Forces Behind Foreign Policy: Türkiye, Russia and Iran in the post-Arab Spring Period*, the key determinants and influences of foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran were analyzed separately, by revealing the intervening variables of the foreign policies towards various cases in literature. At the same time, the contribution of domestic political institutions to foreign policy outcomes and the impacts of the leaders' characteristics on foreign policy outcomes were depicted. In the third section called *The Structure of the International System in the post-Arab Spring Period*, the multipolar structure of the international system and the great power

politics of the Five Seas Basin regional system were pointed out in order to complete the independent variable of the theoretical background which was neoclassical realism.

The third chapter called *The Foreign Policies of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran in the Five Seas Basin* has three sections. In this chapter, the elements, determinant and influences of the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran and the restrictions of the international and regional systems were melting in the same pot through three case studies. In other words, the reflections of all three variables could be understood in the third chapter. In the first section or case called *Syrian Civil War*, after the historical background of the phenomenon was mentioned, the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran towards Syrian Civil War analyzed separately within the context of intervening variables of the states and foreign policy outcomes in the phenomenon. In the second section or case called, *Nagorno Karabakh Crisis*, after the historical background of the phenomenon was mentioned, the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran towards Nagorno Karabakh Crisis analyzed separately within the context of intervening variables of the states and foreign policy outcomes in the phenomenon. In the third section or case called, *Qatar Diplomatic Crisis*, after the historical background of the phenomenon was mentioned, the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis analyzed separately within the context of intervening variables of the states and foreign policy outcomes in the phenomenon. By analyzing the cases, four parameters were utilized to understand the foreign policies of three actors towards the phenomena. These parameters, intervening variables (domestic motivations of the actors), dependent variables (the foreign policy outcomes of the actors), the period of the foreign policy outcomes, the nature of the foreign policy outcomes including strategy, tactic and maneuver.

The nature of the foreign policy outcomes should be framed. In that sense, the concept of strategy is defined as “*in warfare, the science or art of employing all the military, economic, political, and other resources of a country to achieve the objects of war.*”⁵⁸ The concept of tactic is defined as “*in warfare, the art and science of fighting battles on land, on sea, and in the air. It is concerned with the approach to combat; the disposition of troops and other personalities...*”⁵⁹ The concept of maneuver is

⁵⁸ Eliot A. Cohen, “Strategy”, **Encyclopedia Britannica**, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/strategy-military> (Retrieved on 17 July 2025).

⁵⁹ Martin van Creveld, “Tactics”, **Encyclopedia Britannica**, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/tactics> (Retrieved on 17 July 2025).

defined as “*a clever or skillful action or movement.*”⁶⁰ In the third chapter, while the term of strategy was used as long term foreign policies of three actors, the term of tactic was used as short term foreign policies of three actors. On the other hand, the term of maneuver was used as a short-term change of strategies and tactics of foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran.

In the conclusion, the trilateral relationship among Türkiye, Russia and Iran was analyzed case by case within the context of the phenomena and change and continuities in the foreign policies of these three states.



⁶⁰ “Maneuver”, **The Britannica Dictionary**, <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/maneuver> (Retrieved on 17 July 2025).

1. GEOPOLITICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE IN TURKISH-RUSSIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS

The concept of the Five Seas Basin refers to a single basin connected to each other by physical and cultural structures, even though it ostensibly characterizes five separate regions of five separate seas. Throughout history, civilizations that wanted to become great powers aimed to dominate this basin. The Achaemenid Empire, the Kingdom of Macedonia, the Roman Empire and the Ottoman Empire dominated this important and vast geography. At the same time, this geography, which acts as a bridge by connecting Asia and Europe, has an eclectic but related and unified identity that has hosted many cultures due to its location.

The concepts of the Five Seas Region/Basin/Plateau, which, although named in different ways, refer to similar regions in terms of content, were first used by Tareq Y. Ismael to characterize the Near East, or in other words, what is now called the Middle East, as the “Five Seas Region”.⁶¹ Subsequently, Sander sought alternatives in the naming of the Middle East region, which again characterized the region where the Turks established contact with Muslim communities. Claiming that the term Middle East was a complex and prejudiced Western term, Sander found it appropriate to use the concept of the Five Seas Plateau as an alternative, influenced by Ismael.⁶²

Based on Sander’s concept of the Five Seas Plateau, Aydın and Erhan used the term Five Seas Basin to describe Türkiye’s near abroad and emphasized that Türkiye contains different sub-regions.⁶³ They also integrated these different sub-

⁶¹ Tareq Y. Ismael, **Governments and Politics of the Contemporary Middle East**, Homewood, Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1970, p. 3-5.

⁶² Oral Sander, **Anka’nın Yükselişi ve Düşüşü**, Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Yayınları, 1987, p. 5-6.

⁶³ Mustafa Aydın, Çağrı Erhan (Eds.), **Beş Deniz Havzasında Türkiye**, Ankara: Siyasal Yayınevi, 2006.

regions with religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity and drew attention to Türkiye's unique structure. The sub-regions consist of the Black Sea, Mediterranean, Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea and Red Sea Basins.⁶⁴ This term, which can also be read through Türkiye's Ottoman heritage, is similar to Russia's Near Abroad Doctrine.⁶⁵ In Çolakoğlu and Hecan's article analyzing Türkiye's place in global governance, the concept of the Five Sea Basin is defined as the Mediterranean, Black Sea, Caspian Sea, Red Sea and Persian Gulf Basins as used by Aydın and Erhan.⁶⁶

At this point, the conceptualization of Türkiye's near abroad should also be mentioned. In the context of the Syrian Civil War and Türkiye's cross-border interventions, especially in the post-Arab Spring period, Türkiye's near abroad is expressed in different ways and these expressions refer to different geographical regions. While Teoman defines Northern Syria and Northern Cyprus as Türkiye's near abroad in the context of its military operations and the expansion of its sphere of influence through this method⁶⁷, Yalınkılıçlı defines Ukraine as Türkiye's near abroad.⁶⁸ Similar to Teoman's definition, Yüksel defined Türkiye's near abroad as Northern Cyprus.⁶⁹ The Middle East and North Africa region has also been emphasized as Türkiye's near abroad in the immediate post-Arab Spring period.⁷⁰ Ahmet Davutoğlu, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and former Prime Minister of the Republic of Türkiye, has defined Türkiye's near abroad in three sub-regions. These are: the near land basins comprising the Balkans, the Caspian Sea and the Middle East; the near maritime basins comprising the Black Sea, the Adriatic, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea; and the

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Litera Bohuslav, "The Kozyrev Doctrine - a Russian Variation on the Monroe Doctrine", **Perspectives**, No. 4 1994, pp. 45-52.

⁶⁶ Selçuk Colakoglu, Mehmet Hecan, "Turkey in Global Governance: An Evaluation of Turkey's G20 Presidency and the Antalya Summit 2015", **Global Summitry**, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2016, p. 146.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Teoman, "Turkey's Near Abroad Expansion", **Institute for the Study of War**, 15 November 2018, <https://www.iswresearch.org/2018/11/turkeys-near-abroad-expansion.html> (Retrieved on 15 August 2023).

⁶⁸ Eşref Yalınkılıçlı, "Turkey's 'near abroad' in the Black Sea: Ankara's predicament between Kiev and Moscow", **Daily Sabah**, 16 October 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2017/10/16/turkeys-near-abroad-in-the-black-sea-ankaras-predicament-between-kiev-and-moscow> (Retrieved on 20 August 2023).

⁶⁹ Engin Yüksel, "Turkey's Interventions in its Near Abroad: The Case of Northern Cyprus", **CRU Policy Brief**, May 2022, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Policy_brief_Turkeys_interventions_Northern_Cyprus.pdf (Retrieved on 20 August 2023).

⁷⁰ Bahri Yılmaz, "Turkey and the Arab Spring: The Revolutions in Turkey's Near Abroad", in Stephen Calleya, Monika Wohlfeld (Eds.), **Changes and Opportunities in the Emerging Mediterranean**, Malta: University of Malta 2012, p. 357. [349-369].

near continental basins comprising Europe, North Africa, South Asia, Central Asia and East Asia.⁷¹ Baird, on the other hand, identified Africa as Türkiye's near abroad.⁷²

The concept has been used by various researchers without establishing a direct relationship with Türkiye. The concept of the Five Seas Basin, which has also been used in literature to refer to five different seas, has started to be used with the European Union (EU) in the last five years. The concept has been used to characterize the basins around the EU. Przedzrymirska et al. use the concept of Five EU Sea Basins. The authors limit this concept to the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the North Sea basins.⁷³ Li and Jay, who argue that the EU is shaped around five sea basins, define the EU's five sea basins in the same way as Przedzrymirska et al.⁷⁴ Based on the same definition, Giorgetti et al. also framed the EU with the above-mentioned basins.⁷⁵

Druzhinin and Lachininskii, underlining Russia's geographical size and accordingly its geopolitical importance, categorized the basins that are very important for the Russian economy under five headings: Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Arctic, Pacific and Caspian Sea Basins.⁷⁶ In Rusetsky, Dorokhina and Boychuk's article on the security of the Black Sea region, the concept of the Five Sea Basins is used in the sense of the Wider Black Sea Region and the region is limited and defined by the Black Sea, Caspian Sea, Arabian Sea and Mediterranean basins.⁷⁷

At this point, the concepts of basin, region and plateau in the literature should also be defined. These definitions were made by considering and comparing TDK dictionary and Cambridge dictionaries. Firstly, the concept of *basin* is defined in

⁷¹ Ahmet Davutoğlu, **Stratejik Derinlik**, İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001, p. 151-152.

⁷² Theodore Baird, "The Geopolitics of Turkey's 'Humanitarian Diplomacy' in Somalia: A Critique", **Review of African Political Economy**, Vol. 43, No. 149, 2016, pp. 470-477.

⁷³ Joanna Przedzrymirska et al., "Multi-use of the sea as a sustainable development instrument in five EU sea basins", **Sustainability**, Vol. 13, No. 15, 2021, p. 8159.

⁷⁴ Shenghui Li, Stephen Jay, "Transboundary marine spatial planning across Europe: Trends and priorities in nearly two decades of project work", **Marine Policy**, Vol. 118, 2020, p. 104012.

⁷⁵ Giorgetti, A., E. Partescano, Alexander Barth, L. Buga, J. Gatti, G. Giorgi, A. Iona et al., "EMODnet chemistry spatial data infrastructure for marine observations and related information", **Ocean & Coastal Management**, Vol. 166, 2018, p. 10.

⁷⁶ A. G. Druzhinin, S. S. Lachininskii, "Russia in the World Ocean: Interests and lines of presence", **Regional Research of Russia**, Vol. 11, 2021, p. 341.

⁷⁷ Alexander Rusetsky, Olga Dorokhina, Alina Boychuk. "From geopolitical anomie to a syncretic metamodel of the Greater Black Sea Region—"Five Sea Region"", **Security and Defence Quarterly**, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2022, p. 4. [4-23].

TDK dictionary as “a region bounded by mountains and hills, whose waters flow into the same sea, lake or river”.⁷⁸ In the Cambridge dictionary, on the other hand, “a low area of land from which water flows into a river” is defined as a basin.⁷⁹ Secondly, the concept of *region* is defined in the TDK dictionary as “a piece of land whose borders are determined according to administrative and economic unity, similarity of soil, climate and plant characteristics, or the fact that the people living on it are of the same ancestry”.⁸⁰ In the Cambridge dictionary, on the other hand, “a particular area in a country or the world” is defined as a region.⁸¹ Thirdly, the concept of *plateau* is defined in the TDK dictionary as “a part of the earth that is high above the sea surface, which is deeply cleaved and fragmented by rivers, on which plains are distinctly locate”.⁸² In the Cambridge Dictionary, on the other hand, “an area of high flat land; a mountain with a wide, flat top” is named plateau.⁸³ Based on these definitions, in this study, the geographical naming used to characterize Türkiye’s near abroad will be made using the concept of “basin”. This near abroad is an area comprised of administratively, geographically and culturally diverse regions and characterizes the countries on the shores of the five seas rather than a high landmass. In other words, since a single geographical area consisting of different countries on the coasts of the seas was envisioned, it was deemed appropriate to use the concept of a basin for this area.

The Five Seas Basin is a very important region in terms of its conflict potential, cultural diversity, its multi-civilizational structure that has hosted many civilizations in history and being a transit point of continents.⁸⁴ The basin consists of five sub-regions. These are the Black Sea, Mediterranean, Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea and Red Sea Regions. The regional actors have an asymmetric power relationship. In addition to middle regional powers such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, actors such as Türkiye and Iran with ambitions for regional hegemony or Russia with ambitions for global hegemony are also present in this region.

⁷⁸ “Havza”, *Türk Dil Kurumu Sözlüğü*, <https://sozluk.gov.tr/> (Retrieved on 9 June 2023).

⁷⁹ “Basin”, *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-turkish/basin> (Retrieved on 9 June 2023).

⁸⁰ “Bölge”, *Türk Dil Kurumu Sözlüğü*, <https://sozluk.gov.tr/> (Retrieved on 9 June 2023).

⁸¹ “Region”, *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-turkish/region> (Retrieved on 9 June 2023).

⁸² “Yayla”, *Türk Dil Kurumu Sözlüğü*, <https://sozluk.gov.tr/> (Retrieved on 9 June 2023).

⁸³ “Plateau”, *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-turkish/plateau> (Retrieved on 9 June 2023).

⁸⁴ Sander, Anka’nın Yükselişi ve Düşüşü; Aydın, Erhan, *Beş Deniz Havzasında Türkiye*.

Although Türkiye, Russia and Iran have different historical and cultural/identity-based backgrounds, all three actors have a long history and similar ambitions in the region.

This study will use the term Aydın and Erhan's Five Seas Basin as it is defined as Türkiye's near abroad and as a geographical area where Russia and Iran have been and continue to be actively positioned throughout history. In this respect, the basin, which consists of five sub-regions, will be analyzed by examining each sub-region in the context of five criteria. First, the size of the region and its actors will be mentioned and its borders will be drawn, second, the names by which the region has been referred to throughout history will be mentioned, third, the definitions of geopoliticians who have mentioned the region will be referred to, fourth, a brief history of the region will be given, and finally, a descriptive map of the region will be drawn by underlining the positions, if any, of Türkiye, Russia and Iran in this region in history. In other words, the regions will be analyzed geopolitically. The regions will be analyzed as Black Sea, Mediterranean, Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea and Red Sea sub-regions respectively.

1.1. Near Abroad of Türkiye: Junction Point of the Seas, Five Seas Basin

1.1.1. Black Sea Region

In the eighth edition of Encyclopedia Britannica, published in 1853, the Black Sea is described as a large inland sea, framed by Rumelia, Bulgaria and Bessarabia to the west, Russian Tatarstan to the north, Megrelia, Circassia and Georgia to the east, and Anatolia to the south.⁸⁵ In the electronic version of the current Encyclopedia Britannica, the Black Sea is defined as the southeastern extension of Europe. It is bordered by Ukraine to the north, Russia to the northeast, Georgia to the east, Türkiye to the south, and Bulgaria and Romania to the west.⁸⁶ While the 8th edition of the encyclopedia includes the Greek version of the sea, the current version includes the

⁸⁵ "Black Sea", **Encyclopedia Britannica**, <https://digital.nls.uk/encyclopaedia-britannica/archive/193781164/#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=765&xywh=-1864%2C-708%2C7040%2C5795> (Retrieved on 9 June 2023).

⁸⁶ Aleksey Nilovich Kosarev, Vladimir Petrovich Goncharov, "Black Sea", Encyclopedia Britannica, 17 May 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Black-Sea> (Retrieved on 9 June 2023).

Russian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Romanian, Romanian and Turkish versions. However, since the names and borders of the states in the basin have changed according to the past, different naming has been used for the regions on the borders of the Black Sea.

Almost twice the size of the Great Lakes of North America today, the Black Sea is only slightly larger and twice as deep as its neighbor, the Caspian Sea. To the west is the Bulgarian port of Burgas, to the east is the Georgian port of Batumi, to the north is the Crimea and to the south is the Turkish port of Inebolu. On a clear day, it is claimed that both the north coast and the south coast can be seen from the center of the sea.⁸⁷ The basin, which is seen as one of the sub-units of the Eurasian geography, is the region where the Asian and European continents are closest to each other. At the same time, this closed basin, which harbors a wide social diversity, has not been able to create a regional super-identity.⁸⁸

The Black Sea is one of the most important seas in the world, serving as a bridge between Europe and Asia. There are six states bordering the Black Sea, which cover a total area of 423.000 km². These states are Romania, Ukraine, Bulgaria, the Russian Federation, Türkiye and Georgia. The Black Sea basin has an area of 2 million km². At the same time, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Moldova, although not bordering the Black Sea, are also considered within the Black Sea Region due to their historical ties, frozen conflicts and Soviet Union past.⁸⁹ The importance of the region can be summarized in four points. First, the integration of the countries of the region with Western institutions. Second, the importance of the sustainability of the Black Sea transit projects. The third is the implications of the competition for regional hegemony, and the fourth is the region's role in the transfer of energy from the Caucasus, Caspian and Central Asian regions.⁹⁰

The Black Sea has been named in different ways by the powers that dominated it throughout the period of domination. For many years, the Black Sea was called "Axeinos" by the Ancient Greeks, who claimed that people who traveled on it had to have a strong will and an even stronger stomach. This name originated from a language

⁸⁷ Charles King, **The Black Sea**, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 15.

⁸⁸ Nadire Filiz İrge, "Karadeniz Havzası Jeopolitiğinde Güç Mücadelesinin Arka Planı ve Bölgesel Güvenliğin Uluslararası Önemi", **Marmara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilimler Dergisi**, Vol. 5, No. Özel Sayı, 2017, p. 83.

⁸⁹ Herd P. Graeme, Fotios Moustakis, "Black Sea Geopolitics: A Litmus Test for The European Security Order?", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 5, No. 3, p.117.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 118.

of Persian civilization, meaning “dark” and “gloomy”. Over time, the name of the sea changed to “Axenos”, meaning “hostile”, and later Greek and Roman sailors called the sea “Pontus Euxinus, meaning “hospitable sea”.⁹¹

The sea and its basin, called “Pontus Euxinus” between 700 B.C. and 500 A.D., is portrayed as a region where various lifestyles and traditions transformed and intertwined along the Black Sea coast, rather than a meeting point of civilized and barbaric communities.⁹² Some of these lifestyles and traditions belong to the Iranians. The Achaemenid Empire was the first Iranian state in history. During this period, the famous Achaemenid Emperor Darius the Great expanded the borders of his empire to the Black Sea, conquering modern-day Romania, Bulgaria and Ukraine.⁹³

Between 500-1500 the Black Sea, mostly under the rule of the Byzantine Empire, was called “Mare Maggiore”, meaning the expanding or growing sea.⁹⁴ After the conquest of İstanbul in 1453 and the conquest of Trabzon in 1461, the region was called the “Black Sea” between 1500-1700, and for the first time in history all the coasts of the sea were connected to a single political and commercial network which was the Ottoman Empire. During this period, ships of foreign powers were banned from passing through the straits and regional trade was under the sultan's initiative. Ottoman hegemony at sea continued until the opening of the sea to European traders in the late 18th century. During this period, European diplomats and later historians used the term “Turkish Lake” for the sea.⁹⁵

In the late 18th century, Tsarist Russia’s growing political and economic power gave it access to the Black Sea. Reaching the warm ports of Crimea, Russia tried to push the Ottoman Empire away from the region. Between 1700 and 1860, the Black Sea, called “Chernoe Mor”, became a region where imperial aims clashed within Russia’s sphere of influence.⁹⁶ After 1860, the sea was renamed the Black Sea. In this period, empires lost their influence and nation states began to emerge. The Black Sea was no longer just a region where imperial aims clashed, but also a region where state-

⁹¹ King, **The Black Sea**, p. 12.

⁹² Ibid., p. 25.

⁹³ “Persian Empire”, **History.com**, <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-middle-east/persian-empire> (Retrieved on 10 June 2023).

⁹⁴ King, **The Black Sea**, p. 65-66.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 111.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 139-140.

building projects competed. First Romania and Bulgaria, then the Soviet Union and Türkiye, and finally Georgia and Ukraine are examples of this situation.⁹⁷

The Black Sea, which has a critical geopolitical position and has done so throughout history, has been the subject of the work of well-known geopoliticians. Braudel discussed the Black Sea Basin in the context of Tsarist Russia and associated the basin with Russia. Referring to the Russian Empire during the reign of Ivan the Terrible, Braudel said that the Black Sea was a geography dominated by Turks and jealously and persistently protected. For this reason, he stated that the Russians were only able to reach the Black Sea in the 19th century.⁹⁸

At the same time, Braudel described the Black Sea as one of the narrow seas surrounding the Mediterranean Sea and described the Black Sea as a “half-Mediterranean Sea” to the east of the Mediterranean. Situated in the middle of barbaric and later barbarized masses, the Black Sea is surrounded by giant mountains. Throughout history, the Black Sea has been regarded as an important economic area, an enormous feeding ground for Istanbul and, in this sense, a sine qua non for Istanbul. The sea has been depicted as cloudy and wavy throughout history, as it is today.⁹⁹

While Halford Mackinder, considered one of the founders of geopolitics, emphasized that the Black Sea was an important region for the “Heartland” and that controlling the Heartland depended on controlling the Black Sea coast¹⁰⁰, Nicholas Spykman saw the Black Sea as part of the “Rimland”.¹⁰¹ He argued that control over the Rimland, including the Black Sea and its coastal regions, was necessary to prevent any power from dominating Eurasia. Alfred Thayer Mahan, known for his naval strategy, underlined the importance of sea control. He emphasized the importance of the Black Sea region for maritime access and control of straits such as the Bosphorus and Dardanelles.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 189-191.

⁹⁸ Fernand Braudel, **Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century Volume II The Wheels of Commerce**, Sian Reynolds (trans.), London: Book Club Association, 1983, p. 535.

⁹⁹ Fernand Braudel, **Akdeniz ve Akdeniz Dünyası Cilt I**, Mehmet Ali Kılıçbay (trans.), İstanbul: Eren Yayıncılık, 1989, p. 59.

¹⁰⁰ Halford Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History”, **The Geographical Journal**, Vol. 23, No. 4, 1904, pp. 421-437.

¹⁰¹ Nicholas John Spykman, **The Geography of the Peace**, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944, p. 40.

¹⁰² Alfred Thayer Mahan, **The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783**, Dodo Press, 1889.

Zbigniew Brzezinski argued that Russia could re-establish a powerful imperial state if it regained control over Ukraine and gained access to the Black Sea and mentioned Türkiye and Iran as important geopolitical actors in the region in addition to Russia. In this sense, Brzezinski's assessments can be considered more contemporary than Braudel's. Türkiye was seen as an actor stabilizing the Black Sea basin, controlling access to and from the Mediterranean, and balancing Russia in the Caucasus. Iran, on the other hand, was seen as an important actor in supporting the post-Cold War political diversity in Central Asia and preventing the Russian threat in the Persian Gulf region in the long term.¹⁰³

At the same time, the Black Sea is seen as an important starting point for Russia's naval power in the Mediterranean.¹⁰⁴ Russia's presence as a strong actor in the Black Sea, which is also a significant region for the transportation of energy, especially in the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia, is considered a threat to other regional states.¹⁰⁵ He also emphasized that the Black Sea is a region of significant geopolitical importance, especially in the context of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s expansion and Russia's influence in the region. He argued that the Black Sea is a critical pivot area in broader Eurasian geopolitics.

Samuel P. Huntington, known for his "Clash of Civilizations" work, considered the Black Sea region as a point where cultural and civilizational fault lines intersect. According to Huntington, the region is characterized by a mix of Orthodox Christian, Muslim and Western influences, which can lead to cultural and political tensions.¹⁰⁶

The Black Sea region has been inhabited since ancient times. It was home to early civilizations such as the Thracians, Scythians and Cimmerians, and Greek colonies on the northern coast of the Black Sea played an important role in trade and cultural exchange. As mentioned earlier, the Black Sea was known as "Pontus Euxinus" in Antiquity. Greek city-states, including Byzantium, established colonies on its shores. Later, the Romans incorporated the region into their empire and used it as a vital trade route.

¹⁰³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, **The Grand Chessboard**, New York: Basic Books, 1997, p. 47.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 140.

¹⁰⁶ Samuel Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations?", **Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer 1993, p. 38.

The region's dominant powers progressed from the Seljuk Turks (after 1071), to the Mongol Ilkhans and Golden Horde (13th century), followed by Italian maritime powers (Venetians and Genoese) in trade, the Ottoman Empire decisively taking control by the 15th century and then finally the Tsarist Russia obtaining Crimea by the 18th century. On the other hand, the Byzantine Empire (Eastern Roman Empire) maintained control over the Black Sea region for centuries. Byzantine influence was particularly evident in Crimea, where it established the Kingdom of Bosphorus.

After their victory at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, the Seljuks gained control over much of Asia Minor, profiting greatly from overland trade routes crossing the region, including trade in slaves, spices, and silks from the Black Sea and Persia to Mamluk Egypt and the Mediterranean. They even exerted overlordship over Trebizond and threatened Georgian territories before their decline. The Mongol Empire decisively defeated the Seljuks at the Battle of Köseadağ in 1243, ending Seljuk dominance.¹⁰⁷ The Mongol Empire had an important influence especially on the northern and eastern shores of the Black Sea between circa 1270-1360 in which it dominated the key territories such as Crimea and the fields near the Sea of Azov. At that time, the Mongols provided the security of the Black Sea, and it contributed the trade dominance of Venetians and Genoese governments to increase their influence.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, the Golden Horde consolidated control over the Pontic Steppe and exerted influence over Black Sea trade.

The Byzantine Empire was weakening and nearly collapsed in Asia Minor during this period. The early Ottoman state emerged challenger to these powers, expanding in Asia Minor and the Balkans during the 14th century, ultimately replacing the Seljuks and Mongol influence as the dominant force around the Black Sea by the mid-15th century with the conquest of İstanbul in 1453 by Sultan Mehmed II. The Ottoman Empire maintained control over the Black Sea until the 18th century, when Russia forcibly dislodged the Ottomans from Crimea and neighboring regions following military conflicts culminating in the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Carl M. Kortepeter, "Ottoman Imperial Policy and the Economy of the Black Sea Region in the Sixteenth Century", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 86, No. 2, 1966, pp. 87-88.

¹⁰⁸ Nicolo Di Cosmo, "Black Sea Emporia and the Mongol Empire: A Reassessment of the Pax Mongolica" *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 53, No.1 /2, 2010, pp. 83-84, 91-92.

¹⁰⁹ Kortepeter, "Ottoman Imperial Policy", pp. 109-113.

The Black Sea region was the scene of conflict during World War I and the Russian Civil War. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 resulted in the cession of Crimea to Germany and the Ottoman Empire. After the Russian Revolution, the Black Sea region came under Soviet control. The Soviet Union established naval bases in the Black Sea and maintained control over territory in Ukraine and Crimea.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the independence of several Black Sea littoral states, including Ukraine, Georgia and Bulgaria. The region continues to play a role in post-Soviet politics and international relations. The Black Sea region has been the focus of geopolitical tensions, especially in recent years. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, the Russia-Ukraine War and the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine have heightened regional and global concerns.

The entire region or parts of it have been ruled chronologically by Ancient Greece, the Achaemenid Empire, the Kingdom of Macedonia, the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Russian Federation. In the 19th century, with the declining of the Ottoman Empire, new nation states such as Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Ukraine, and Türkiye emerged in the region and became new actors in the international arena.¹¹⁰

In ancient times, the Black Sea basin was considered property given to Miletus and Athens in return for their services. From 1265 to the 1500s, it was under the rule of the Italians and Genoese, and from the 1500s onwards, it came under the rule of İstanbul.¹¹¹ From that point on, the Ottoman Empire closed the Black Sea to the West, locked its gates, and turned it into İstanbul's grain storehouse.¹¹²

From the 15th century onwards, the Black Sea basin became an area of competition between the Ottoman Empire and Tsarist Russia. This competition between the Ottoman Empire and Tsarist Russia evolved into competition between Republic of Türkiye and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the Cold War. After the Cold War, actors from outside the region became more involved in the basin, enriching the existing power struggle in terms of actors. In other words,

¹¹⁰ King, **The Black Sea**, pp. 18-19.

¹¹¹ Braudel, **Akdeniz ve Akdeniz Dünyası Cilt I**, p. 60.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 61.

cooperation and competition in the Black Sea have an international dimension.¹¹³ The power struggle between the aforementioned regional and global actors stems from the economic and commercial potential of the Black Sea basin. At the same time, the basin's importance is further enhanced by its energy resources and, more importantly, its critical role in the transportation of energy resources.¹¹⁴

The moment when all parties in the Black Sea were symbolically closest to each other is said to be January 3, 1922, when Firunze, the representative of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), invited Türkiye, Soviet Ukraine, Soviet Russia, and Soviet Azerbaijan to the Ukrainian embassy in Ankara. At this meeting, Mustafa Kemal Pasha stated that the Black Sea was not a barrier to the brotherhood between Ukraine and Türkiye, nor did it constitute an obstacle. This statement did not materialize, as politics and academia turned inward, and physical and academic boundaries formed around the Black Sea. While Türkiye emphasized the Turkishness of the Black Sea basin, the Soviet Union viewed the Black Sea as an area of competition.¹¹⁵

Throughout the Cold War period, the Black Sea was based on the geopolitical divide between Türkiye, who was a NATO member and US ally, and the USSR. The dispute between the two states in the Black Sea stemmed from the USSR's desire to have a say over the Straits.¹¹⁶ From the 1980s onwards, infrastructure and economic interdependence played an important role in the Black Sea region. These activities have increased cooperation in the region. With the agreement signed between the two states in 1978, the continental shelf issue in the Black Sea was resolved, and a regulation was made regarding military bases outside the country's borders. At the same time, the process of selling Soviet gas to Türkiye was initiated with a protocol signed in 1984.¹¹⁷

In the post-Cold War period, although foreign policy decision-makers encouraged regionalization in the Black Sea basin, primarily in economic and military

¹¹³ Gökhan Koçer, "Karadeniz'in Güvenliği: Uluslararası Yapılanmalar ve Türkiye", **Gazi Akademik Bakış**, Vol. 01, 2007, p. 196.

¹¹⁴ İrge, "Karadeniz Havzası Jeopolitiğinde", pp. 80-81.

¹¹⁵ Alexander E. Balistreri, Boris Belge. "Exchange and Non-Exchange: Confronting Borders in the History of the Black Sea" **Euxeinos-Culture and Governance in the Black Sea Region**, Vol. 11, No. 32, 2021, pp. 3-4.

¹¹⁶ Etienne Forestier-Peyrat, "Enemy Shores? The Dilemmas of Writing Cold War Histories of the Black Sea", **Euxeinos**, Vol. 11, No. 32, 2021, p. 43.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 48-49.

terms, poverty in the region and competition between states have strained the dynamics of regionalization. Despite the challenges, the energy policies of the region's states are driving them toward cooperation.¹¹⁸ During this period, Türkiye and Russia are physically considered basin states, while Iran is involved in the Black Sea basin, particularly in the context of energy resources and energy transportation.

Although the Black Sea primarily borders Eastern European and South Caucasus countries, namely Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, and Türkiye, three of them, Türkiye, Russia, and Iran have specific roles and interests in the wider Black Sea region. Türkiye is an important player in the Black Sea region because it controls the İstanbul and Çanakkale Straits, which connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. This gives Türkiye significant influence over maritime access to the Black Sea. Historically, Türkiye's control over the straits has been a source of concern for Russia and other Black Sea states, leading to international agreements and negotiations to regulate access to the Black Sea. Türkiye has also played a role in regional security and diplomacy, including by joining the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organization and engaging with other coastal countries on issues of mutual interest.

Russia's role in the Black Sea region is important both historically and in today's geopolitics. Russia's relationship with the Black Sea has a long history, dating back centuries, with its control of Crimea and Sevastopol and access to warm-water ports in the Black Sea. Following the Ukraine crisis, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent Russia-Ukraine War have heightened tensions in the region and sparked concerns among Black Sea littoral states, particularly Ukraine. The Black Sea has been a key area for Russian naval operations, and Russia has sought to maintain its influence in the region, particularly in the context of its rivalry with NATO and its role in the conflicts in eastern Ukraine and Georgia.

Iran is not a Black Sea coastal state, but it has a broader interest in the region's security and stability, particularly given its location in the Middle East. Iran has historically established relations with Black Sea states and participated in regional diplomatic initiatives.¹¹⁹ Iran's focus on the Black Sea region is linked to broader foreign policy objectives, including economic cooperation in the energy sector, trade,

¹¹⁸ King, *The Black Sea*, pp. 241-244.

¹¹⁹ Mojtaba Barghandan, "Iran's New Presence in the Chess of the Black Sea Region and the Caucasus", *Florya Chronicles of Political Economy*, Vol. 3 No. 2, 2017, pp. 23-40.

and regional security, as well as its relations with states in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe.

Türkiye and Russia are littoral states of the Black Sea, but Iran is not a littoral state. However, it has had an influence on the Black Sea geopolitics, especially within the context of energy transfer. On the other hand, as a littoral states of the Black Sea, Türkiye and Russia has direct impact due to their geographical proximity, historical ties and cultural affinities. As a result, it can be said that one of the sub-regions of Five Seas Basin, the Black Sea is significant for Türkiye, Russia and Iran.

1.1.2. Mediterranean Sea Region

In the eighth edition of the Britannica Encyclopedia, published in 1853, the Mediterranean Sea was named “Mare Internum” and defined as an inland sea separating Africa from Europe. The sea, which touches the coasts of three continents, stretches approximately 3.700 km from the Strait of Gibraltar to the coast of Syria. According to the encyclopedia, the sea has taken shape according to the characteristics of the coasts it touches. The Eastern Mediterranean is described as the region extending from the Tunisian coast to the coasts of Türkiye and Syria, consisting of the Adriatic and Aegean Seas and the Levant Basin, outside the Western basin of the Mediterranean.¹²⁰ In the current electronic version of the Britannica Encyclopedia, the Mediterranean Sea is described in a similar way to previous versions, as a closed sea separating Africa from Europe, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to Asia in the east. The Eastern Mediterranean consists of two large basins. The Ionian Basin, which extends to southern Italy, Albania, and Greece, forms the first basin, while the Levant Basin, which extends from east of Crete to Türkiye, forms the second basin.¹²¹ It is observed that the definitions in the two different versions of the same source are not different from each other.

¹²⁰ “Mediterranean Sea”, **Encyclopedia Britannica**, <https://digital.nls.uk/encyclopaedia-britannica/archive/193802033/#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=480&xywh=1362%2C-744%2C7184%2C5915> (Retrieved on 10 June 2023).

¹²¹ “Mediterranean Sea”, **Encyclopedia Britannica**, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mediterranean-Sea> (Retrieved on 7 June 2023).

When considered in a broad sense, the Mediterranean covers an area of 2.510.000 km square.¹²² The Mediterranean has been examined in three broad categories in literature. The first of these is a holistic approach, exemplified by Braudel's Mediterranean World. Secondly, the Mediterranean is a combination of different cultural areas, and a geographical region divided into autonomous regions. The third category merges the two categories mentioned above. According to this category, the Mediterranean is the interconnectedness and interdependence of histories and cultures.¹²³ Abulafia defines the borders of the Mediterranean as follows: The Mediterranean is a sea that stretches from the Strait of Gibraltar to the Dardanelles, with Istanbul as its border, and along the coasts of Gaza, Jaffa, and Alexandria. Emphasizing that his definition is narrow but stable, the historian differs from Braudel in his delimitation.¹²⁴

In English and other Romance languages, the Mediterranean Sea refers to the sea between land masses or the sea at the center of the world. This definition is used in two senses. In the first definition, it refers to a sea completely surrounded by land; in the second definition, it refers to the center of the world known by ancient Western Afro-Eurasian societies.¹²⁵ The Mediterranean Sea has been named in many different ways throughout history. It was called "Our Sea" (Mare Nostrum) by the Roman Empire, "Great Sea" (Yam Gadol) by the Jews, "Middle Sea" (Mittelmeer) by the Germans, "Great Green" by the ancient Egyptians, and "Akdeniz" by the Turks. In addition to these names, terms such as "Inland Sea," "Friendly Sea," "Faithful Sea," "Enclosed Sea," "Bitter Sea," "Corrupt Sea,"¹²⁶ and "Liquid Continent" have been used for the Mediterranean Sea from time to time.¹²⁷

The Mediterranean, which has always been in a critical geopolitical position, has been the subject of work by well-known geopoliticians throughout history. When we think of the Mediterranean, the first person that comes to mind is Fernand Braudel, the

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Özlem Çaykent, Luca Zavagno, (Eds.), **The Islands of the Eastern Mediterranean: a History of Cross-cultural Encounters**, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014, p. 3.

¹²⁴ David Abulafia, **The Great Sea: A Human History of The Mediterranean**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

¹²⁵ Craig Benjamin, Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, "The Mediterranean", in Craig Benjamin (Ed.), **The Cambridge World History Volume IV A World with States, Empires, and Networks, 1200 BCE-900 CE**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 325.

¹²⁶ Peregrine Horden, Nicholas Purcell, **The corrupting sea: a study of Mediterranean history**, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000.

¹²⁷ Abulafia, **The great sea**, p. xxiii.

great historian and founder of Annales School. According to Braudel, who is known for his work “The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II” and his *longue durée* (long-term) approach to history, understanding the Mediterranean is “*a singular effort to comprehend the details that shape the shared destiny of numerous civilizations layered upon one another, including their human, commercial, geographical, religious, and climatic characteristics.*”¹²⁸

Going beyond chronological distinctions and offering a historical perspective guided by sociological and economic developments, Braudel defined the Mediterranean as a “*mishmash of seas.*”¹²⁹ It is possible to say that the division between East and West originated from here. This sea, stretching from Gibraltar to the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, has generated two hostile worlds from the Greek and Phoenician colonial periods to modern times.¹³⁰ Braudel thus evaluated the Greek and Roman civilizations alongside Eastern civilizations such as Egypt, Phoenicia, and Mesopotamia in the same way and united them all under the common denominator of the Mediterranean. By the 21st century, however, it is evident that the axis of debate has become locked in this traditional division, unable to move beyond interpreting the control mechanisms of developed/hegemonic states. As Braudel put it, “*just as the people of the 20th century could not fully dominate the area where the Pacific spread, dominating the Mediterranean space has always been difficult.*”¹³¹

For Mackinder, the Mediterranean region is also important for controlling the Heartland.¹³² Mahan acknowledged that the Mediterranean is a vital area for naval power. He emphasized that control of key sea lanes such as the Strait of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, and the Dardanelles is essential for a country’s global influence. Spykman, on the other hand, approached the Mediterranean in the context of the “Rimland” and argued that the path of an actor seeking to prevent domination of Eurasia passes through the Mediterranean coast.¹³³

¹²⁸ Braudel, **Akdeniz ve Akdeniz Dünyası**, p. 237.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 1.

¹³⁰ Fernand Braudel, **Akdeniz ve Akdeniz Dünyası Cilt II**, Mehmet Ali Kılıçbay (trans.), İstanbul: Eren Yayıncılık, 1990, p. 11-12; Ali Faik Demir, Doğu Sönmez, Emre Önkibar, “Winning the Zero on Eastern Mediterranean Chessboard: Players, Games, and Moves”, **Galatasaray University Managerial and Social Sciences Letters**, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2023, p. 72.

¹³¹ Braudel, **Akdeniz ve Akdeniz Dünyası**, p. 238.

¹³² Halford Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History”, **The Geographical Journal**, Vol. 23, No. 4, April 1904, pp. 421-437.

¹³³ Spykman, **The Geography of the Peace**, p. 25.

Unlike Braudel, Brzezinski engages in a more contemporary discussion on the Mediterranean, pointing to the Iberian Peninsula, the western Mediterranean northern coast, and the region extending to eastern and central Europe, including Germany, as France's most important geopolitical area. According to Brzezinski, for France's sake, this region must either be in France's hands or France must protect it from the domination of another powerful country.¹³⁴ At the same time, the instability of the southern shores of the Mediterranean is seen as a growing social and political threat to all the states of Southern Europe.¹³⁵ In other words, Brzezinski discussed the Mediterranean in the context of regional security and great power rivalries. He viewed the Mediterranean as a region where the geopolitical interests of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa intersect. Robert D. Kaplan, a contemporary geopolitical analyst and writer, has written extensively on the importance of the Mediterranean. He has examined the region's history, its role as a historical crossroads of civilizations, and the contemporary security challenges it faces.¹³⁶

According to Huntington, the Eastern Mediterranean, southwestern Asia, and northern India, in particular, have been a connecting point for civilizations since the 1500s, similar to Braudel's view. In the absence of these connecting points, communication and trade relations between civilizations were limited, and reaching distant places was a serious problem. Thus, with the discovery of the Eastern Mediterranean as a hub, communication and economic relations between civilizations increased, and the region gained geopolitical importance.¹³⁷ Especially after the Cold War, the Mediterranean gained importance for Greece in terms of cooperating with Russia through Orthodoxy to transport oil from the Caucasus and Central Asia to Europe via a Bulgarian Greek pipeline, so that it would not be confined to Türkiye and other Muslim countries.¹³⁸

The Mediterranean basin has been the host of many ancient civilizations, including the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans. These civilizations established powerful city-states and empires that left a profound impact on the region's

¹³⁴ Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, p. 63.

¹³⁵ Ibid., pp. 78-79.

¹³⁶ Robert D. Kaplan, *Mediterranean Winter: The Pleasures of History and Landscape in Tunisia, Sicily, Dalmatia, and the Peloponnese*, New York: Random House Publishing, 2005.

¹³⁷ Huntington, "The Clash of Civilization", pp. 48-49.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 163; Demir, Sönmez, Önkibar, "Winning the Zero on Eastern Mediterranean Chessboard" p. 72.

history and culture. The Roman Empire ruled the Mediterranean world, uniting a large part of the region under Roman domination. The Roman Empire's control of the Mediterranean facilitated trade, administration, and the spread of Roman culture.¹³⁹

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, with its capital at Constantinople (modern-day İstanbul), maintained control over parts of the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. Byzantine influence was instrumental in preserving the Roman legacy and passing it on to the Middle Ages.¹⁴⁰

In the 7th century, Arab Muslim conquests brought Islam to the Mediterranean region. Islamic caliphates established a vast Mediterranean empire that included the Iberian Peninsula and Sicily. The Mediterranean was a center for medieval trade, cultural exchange, and intellectual development. The Crusades, maritime republics such as Venice and Genoa, and the Reconquista in Spain played an important role during this period.¹⁴¹

The Ottoman Empire expanded into the Mediterranean region and conquered Constantinople in 1453. The Ottomans controlled coastal regions, including North Africa, Greece, and the Balkans, for several centuries. The Age of Discovery in the 15th and 16th centuries provided European powers, including Spain, Portugal, and later France and England, to establish colonies and trade networks in the Mediterranean and beyond. These colonial powers had a presence and influence in the Mediterranean region, including North Africa and the Middle East. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 facilitated access to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean by sea.¹⁴²

The Mediterranean region was a major theater of conflict during both World War I and World War II, with battles and operations in North Africa, Italy, and the Balkans. After World War II, the Mediterranean region witnessed decolonization, the

¹³⁹ Simon Horblower, Paul Petit, "The Establishment of Roman Hegemony in The Mediterranean World", **Encyclopedia Britannica**, <https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/The-establishment-of-Roman-hegemony-in-the-Mediterranean-world> (Retrieved on 7 June 2023).

¹⁴⁰ John L. Teall, Donald MacGillivray, "Byzantine Empire", **Encyclopedia Britannica**, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Byzantine-Empire> (Retrieved on 7 June 2023).

¹⁴¹ Manuel Sánchez Martínez, "Muslims in The Iberian Peninsula, The Mediterranean Coast and Its Islands", in M. A. Al-Bakhit, L. Bazin, S. M. Cissoko, **History of Humanity: Scientific and Cultural Development, Volume IV: From The Seventh to The Sixteenth Century**, UNESCO, 2000, pp. 805-824.

¹⁴² Salim Al- Qassmi, "The International Politics of the Red Sea and Beyond: An Analytical Approach", **Istanbul Kent University Journal of Political, Social and Strategic Research**, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2025, pp. 174-202.

establishment of new nation states, and ongoing conflicts, including the Arab-Israeli conflict. The region's importance as a trade route, energy transit corridor, and geopolitical hotspot has continued to grow.

Based on all these narratives, the Mediterranean basin refers to a vast geography encompassing parts of Europe, Africa, and Asia. However, since this study will examine the spheres of influence of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran, although the Mediterranean basin will initially be considered in its broadest sense, the discussion will be conducted in a reductive manner, focusing on the Eastern Mediterranean geography, which is an important part of the Mediterranean basin. In other words, the basin will be limited to the actors Greece, Türkiye, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus.

The Eastern Mediterranean basin, defined by famous historian James H. Breasted as the "Fertile Crescent," connects the Arab geography to the south, the European geography to the west, and the Iranian geography to the east.¹⁴³ Throughout history, many civilizations have ruled over this fertile region with its rushing rivers. The Hittites, Phoenicians, Ancient Egyptian Civilization, Ionians, Macedonian Empire, Persian Empire, Roman Empire, Seljuk Empire, and Ottoman Empire are among the great civilizations that have controlled the region at various times.¹⁴⁴ Among these civilizations, the Persians, or the Achaemenid Empire, expanded the borders of their empire to the Eastern Mediterranean during the reigns of Cyrus and Cambyses, and this basin was also controlled by the Achaemenid Empire during the reign of Darius the Great.¹⁴⁵

Until the Mamluk armies conquered the region, the Crusaders ruled the Eastern Mediterranean for approximately two centuries. The Ottoman Empire arrived in this basin less than 300 years later and ruled the Eastern Mediterranean for 400 years between 1516 and 1917. Subsequently, Europeans returned to the region and contributed to the formation of new modern states in the region, such as Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon.

¹⁴³ Albert T Clay, "The so-called Fertile Crescent and desert bay", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 44, 1924, p. 186.

¹⁴⁴ Benjamin, Wiesner-Hanks, "The Mediterranean", p. 325.

¹⁴⁵ Briant Pierre, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, Peter T. Daniels (trans.), Eisenbrauns, 2002, p. 62.

In the 17th century, sovereignty in the Eastern Mediterranean passed from the Ottoman Empire to the Venetians. In the 18th century, as part of its policy of turning eastward, Great Britain seized Gibraltar in 1713 with the Treaty of Utrecht¹⁴⁶ and Malta in 1800.¹⁴⁷ After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869¹⁴⁸, efforts to establish dominance in the Eastern Mediterranean increased. With the London Treaty signed in 1878, Britain effectively gained control of Cyprus, and in 1882, it brought Egypt under its control.¹⁴⁹ The Eastern Mediterranean region, which was once ruled by the Turks through their connection to the Ottoman Empire and by the Iranians through their connection to the Achaemenid Empire, was not controlled by the Russians. Russian involvement in the region only began after the Cold War.

Today, the energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is part of the Middle East, increase the region's existing energy potential. In addition to the resources in the Middle East, according to Brzezinski, the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia have become quite important in terms of energy and pipelines. If the main pipelines mentioned pass through Russia, the political consequences of this situation will become clear without Russia needing to strengthen its position. In such a case, the dependence of the relevant regions on Russia will increase dramatically, and the region's wealth will inevitably be shared with Russia. If one pipeline is constructed via Türkiye using a Mediterranean connection, and the other via Afghanistan using the Arabian Sea, no country will be able to monopolize access to energy.¹⁵⁰ Within the scope of this study, it is deemed necessary to analyze the energy relations between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran—which directly or indirectly affect all countries—through the lens of the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean Sea has historically been a crossroads of civilizations and, although primarily associated with Southern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, Türkiye, Iran, and Russia have had various roles and interests in the wider Mediterranean region. Türkiye plays an important role in the Mediterranean due to its extensive coastline along the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. Turkish history includes the Byzantine Empire, centered in İstanbul, and the Ottoman Empire, which controlled

¹⁴⁶ Abulafia, **The great sea**, p. 497.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 520.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 552.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 568.

¹⁵⁰ Brzezinski, **The Grand Chessboard**, pp. 140-156.

most of the Mediterranean coast. Today, Türkiye is a significant actor in Mediterranean geopolitics. It is involved in regional security dynamics, including disputes over energy resources and maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean. Türkiye's relations with Southern Cyprus, Greece, and regional alliances are central to its role in the Mediterranean.

As for Russia, its historical role in the Mediterranean is linked to its expansion as the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union established a naval presence in the Mediterranean, maintained bases in Syria, and participated in naval operations. Today, Russia is seeking to re-establish its influence in the Mediterranean. By establishing naval bases in Syria and conducting military operations, it has contributed to its role in regional security dynamics and its involvement in the Syrian civil war.

Iran's presence in the Mediterranean region is not as direct as in other regions due to its location in the Middle East. However, Iran has historical ties with countries in the Eastern Mediterranean and has played a role in regional diplomacy. Iran has diplomatic and economic interests in the Mediterranean, including trade and energy cooperation. Its relations with countries on the Mediterranean coast, such as Syria and Lebanon, are of strategic importance. At the same time, its rivalry with Israel directs Iran to enhance its influence in the region.

The Mediterranean, especially the Eastern Mediterranean region is geopolitically significant for Türkiye, Russia and Iran. While Türkiye is a littoral state of Mediterranean Sea and the Sea is a way for Türkiye to reach the Middle East, Russia has crucial bases in Syria and it has had good relations with Syria since the Baath regime came to power. Although Russia does not have geographical proximity to the Mediterranean, its transnational bases and influence provide it to stay tuned for the conflicts in the Middle East. On the other hand, Lebanon is a critical actor for Iran due to Hezbollah and regarding the struggle with Israel. That's why it does not want to diminish its influence. At the same time, Türkiye, Russia and Iran aim to be a part of the extraction of energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean and the transfer of energy from Asia to Europe. As a result, the three actors have historical, cultural and geopolitical ties with the Mediterranean region as a part of the Five Seas Basin.

1.1.3. Persian Gulf Region

In the eighth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, published in 1853, the Persian Gulf was considered as an inlet or mouth of the Indian Ocean and described as the great inland sea in the south of Asia. The northern and northeastern coasts were said to be surrounded by Persia and the western and southern coasts by Arabs. It is stated to cover an area of approximately 182,000 square kilometers. It is emphasized that the region is generally composed of vast deserts and that the green areas are so few as to break the monotony of the image.¹⁵¹ The electronic version of the current *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes it as a shallow and marginal sea of the Indian Ocean located between the Arabian Peninsula and southwestern Iran. It covers an area of approximately 241,000 square kilometers. It is bordered to the north, northeast and east by Iran; southeast and south by Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE); southwest and west by Qatar, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia; and northwest by Kuwait and Iraq. In other words, the actors of the basin are Oman, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq, with Iran in the lead. The region, called the Arabian Gulf by Arabs, is characterized in the literature not only as the Persian Gulf but also as the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman.¹⁵² In the eighth edition of the encyclopedia, the area covered by the gulf is expressed as smaller, the different nomenclatures of the gulf are not included, and, more importantly, the actors of the region are not mentioned. In the electronic version, the boundaries of the gulf are drawn quite clearly based on the geographical location of the actors towards the gulf.

There is a debate in the literature on the naming of the gulf that emerged after 1960 and continues to this day. While almost all pre-1960 maps show the region as the “Persian Gulf” as named by ancient Greek geographers, with the rise of Arab nationalism in the 1960s, Arab states named the region the “Arabian Gulf” (*Sinus Arabicus*).¹⁵³ European cartographers also used the name “Persian Gulf” (*Sinus Persicus*) to characterize the water source between the Arabian Peninsula and the

¹⁵¹“Persian Gulf”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://digital.nls.uk/encyclopaedia-britannica/archive/193836512/#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=457&xywh=470%2C1038%2C1886%2C1398> (Retrieved on 9 June 2023).

¹⁵² Graham Evans, “Persian Gulf”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Persian-Gulf> (Retrieved on 3 June 2023).

¹⁵³ Martin H. Levinson, “Mapping the Persian Gulf Naming Dispute”, *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, Vol. 68, No. 3, 2011, p. 279.

Iranian Plateau. Early Roman historians, on the other hand, characterized the gulf as Persian, calling it “Aquarius Persico”.¹⁵⁴

Iranian Muslim geographers used the terms Persian Sea or Persian Gulf in their research. After the siege of Baghdad by the Ottoman Empire, Gerardus Mercator called the gulf the Basra Sea, the Persian Gulf, and a map produced in 1569 called it the Arabian Sea. In 1570, in the atlas prepared by Abraham Ortelius, the terms Persian Gulf, Persian Strait, El Katif Sea were used for the gulf. In 1840, the gulf was referred to by Britain as the British Sea. In reaction to the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry in the 1950s, the British referred to the gulf as the Arabian Gulf.¹⁵⁵ Throughout history, states have tried to lay claim to the gulf by naming it in different ways. In particular, there is a dispute between the Arabs and the Iranians over the naming of the Gulf that continues to this day. This dispute can be exemplified as follows: In 2005, Iran declared April 30 as “Nat”ional Persian Gulf Day”. The Arabs, on the other hand, claim that the name of the Persian Gulf belongs to the Persian Empire and that it is not correct to name the gulf in this way since the Persian Empire no longer exists. They also argue that it is correct to refer to the region as the Arabian Gulf, given that the population living around the gulf is mostly Arab.¹⁵⁶

Throughout history, important geopoliticians have defined the region in terms of its natural resources. The presence of oil in the region is the most important factor affecting the region geopolitically. There have been both regional and global rivalries over the extraction and transportation of oil.

Brzezinski emphasized the importance of the “Eurasian Balkans”¹⁵⁷ including the Persian Gulf. He argued that this region, with its energy resources, geopolitical rivalries and potential for conflict, could affect global stability and the balance of power. According to Brzezinski, during the Cold War, the United States (US) was committed to the defense of the Persian Gulf region. This defense policy was in line with Western and Eastern Eurasian security interests in order to prevent the spread of Soviet political and military power in the region.¹⁵⁸ In the post-Cold War period, the Persian Gulf has been an important region in terms of protecting American economic

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 279-280.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 280.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 281.

¹⁵⁷ Brzezinski, **The Grand Chessboard**, pp. 123-151.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

interests against Iraq.¹⁵⁹ Described as an unstable region, the possibility that the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Gulf could undermine pro-Western Middle Eastern governments posed a further threat to American interests.¹⁶⁰ Brzezinski understood the region in the context of the realization of US interests and underlined its geoeconomic importance.

Huntington, as mentioned above, emphasized the importance of the Persian Gulf region through the theme of energy. He argued that the West is dependent on the energy of the Gulf countries. Similarly to Brzezinski, he stated that the US is an important actor in the resolution of conflicts and disputes between Arab countries.¹⁶¹

The Persian Gulf has historically served as a critical link between the Middle East and the wider Indian Ocean world. The region's port cities were critical issues connecting the Gulf to global trade networks. Throughout history, major ports shifted location due to geographic and political changes, reflecting the dynamic geopolitical landscape.¹⁶² Modern economic zones such as Dubai's Jebel Ali free trade zone were established for political motives as much as economic ones. This was part of broader strategies by Gulf states and Iran to project power and secure borders amidst regional instability. The region's geopolitical position facilitates influence over maritime routes, economic activities, and political dynamics.¹⁶³

The Persian Gulf's harsh environment, including scarcity of water and risk of natural disasters like earthquakes, affects regional stability. The heavy dependence on desalination and the risk of earthquakes indicate that environmental and security issues are intertwined with geopolitical concerns. At the same time, historical shifts in authority, such as the Persian Gulf's Arab principalities, Iranian frontier consolidation, and tensions over customs and trade controls, highlight ongoing geopolitical contestation. This dynamic interplay between local powers and external actors defines the Gulf's geopolitical position.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 53-54.

¹⁶¹ Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations", p. 31.

¹⁶² Lawrence G. Potter, "The Rise and Fall of Port Cities in the Persian Gulf", in Lawrence G. Potter (Ed.), **The Persian Gulf in Modern Times: People, Ports, and History**, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 131.

¹⁶³ Potter, "The Rise and Fall of Port Cities in the Persian Gulf", p. 144.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 143-144.

According to Mackinder, the Persian Gulf region is of course also important for controlling the Heartland.¹⁶⁵ As a gateway to this region, the Persian Gulf has a strategic importance in this geopolitical view. Spykman argued that controlling the Rimland, including the Persian Gulf, is key to preventing any power from dominating Eurasia.¹⁶⁶ In this context, the Persian Gulf serves as a vital geopolitical battleground. Mahan's ideas apply to the Persian Gulf because it is a crucial maritime transit point for the global oil trade. Controlling the Gulf allows a nation to influence the global flow of energy.

Regarding the brief history of the region, the Persian Gulf region was home to ancient civilizations, including the Sumerians and Elamites. The ancient city of Ur, located near the Euphrates River, was an important center of Sumerian civilization. The Achaemenid Empire extended its rule over the region, including parts of present-day Iran and Mesopotamia. The Achaemenids maintained control over the Gulf for several centuries.

The 7th century conversion of Iran to Islam and the spread of Islam there had a profound impact on the region, which became part of the Islamic Caliphates. The city of Basra in Iraq and the Iranian port city of Siraf were important centers of trade and culture. The Persian Gulf region witnessed conflicts and shifting territorial control between the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid Empire. The Ottomans took control of parts of the region, while the Safavids extended their rule into the Gulf region.

European colonial powers established trading posts and forts along the Gulf coast in the 16th and 17th centuries.¹⁶⁷ The British played an important role in the establishment of the Trucial States.¹⁶⁸ The discovery of oil in the early 20th century transformed the Persian Gulf region, bringing it to the forefront of global energy

¹⁶⁵ Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," p. 430.

¹⁶⁶ Spykman, **The Geography of the Peace**.

¹⁶⁷ Francisco Bethencourt, Geraldo U. de Sousa, "The Longevity of the Portuguese Empire: Problems and Hypotheses", **Mediterranean Studies**, Vol. 9, 2000, p. 24.

¹⁶⁸ The Trucial States refer to a group of sheikhdoms along the southern coast of the Persian Gulf that entered into a series of maritime truces and Exclusive Agreements with Britain starting in the 19th century. These agreements established Britain's role as their protector, particularly in matters of foreign affairs and defense, while allowing the rulers to maintain local autonomy. The Trucial States include Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras al-Khaimah, Umm al-Qaiwain, Ajman and Fujairah. Today, the territory of the Trucial States forms the United Arab Emirates. See. J. B. Kelly, **Britain and The Persian Gulf 1795-1880**, London: Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. 354-410.

production. Countries such as Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE have become major players in the global oil industry.

The region was the scene of major conflicts throughout the 20th century and early 21st century. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) was one of the deadliest conflicts in the region's history. The Persian Gulf War (1990-1991) was the result of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent international military intervention. Today, the Persian Gulf remains a critical geopolitical center. The region includes countries with vast energy resources, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, and continues to play an important role in global energy markets. The region has also been the focal point of international tensions and conflicts, such as Iran's nuclear deal, Yemen's civil war and Qatar crisis.

In the history of the Persian Gulf, Türkiye, Russia and Iran have been involved and influential to different degrees, each with specific roles and interests. Prior to the establishment of the modern Turkish Republic, the Ottoman Empire, of which Türkiye is the successor, had a presence and influence in parts of the Persian Gulf. The Ottomans controlled the Basra region in southern Mesopotamia (now part of Iraq) and had historical ties with Arab tribes in the region. After the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the newly established Republic of Türkiye under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk focused primarily on internal reforms and establishing itself as a modern nation-state. During this period, Türkiye's activities in the Persian Gulf remained limited. In the contemporary period, Türkiye sought to expand its political and economic influence in the Middle East, including the Persian Gulf region. Türkiye's foreign policy in the Gulf has been characterized by trade, diplomacy, and efforts to create closer ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. However, it has also tried to become a mediator in the regional tensions and conflicts, particularly with regard to Iran and the Gulf states.

Russia's influence in the Persian Gulf has historically been limited compared to its influence in other regions, but it has interests in the South Caucasus and Northern Iran. Throughout the 19th century, Russia was engaged in a power struggle in the region with the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has sought to rebuild its presence in the Middle East, including the Persian Gulf. It focused on energy cooperation, arms sales, and diplomatic intervention in regional conflicts. Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war has added a new layer to its relations with Gulf states, including Iran and Türkiye. Russia's support for the

Syrian government has led to complex interactions with these countries, which have different positions on the conflict.

Historically known as the Persian civilization, Iran has a deep historical connection with the Persian Gulf. The region was part of the Persian Empire and remains an integral part of Iran's cultural and political identity. In the modern era, Iran has been a major player in the Persian Gulf. It has sought to increase its influence through regional alliances, particularly with Iraq and parts of Yemen. Iran has also been involved in regional conflicts in Iraq and Syria that have affected the balance of power in the Gulf region. The Persian Gulf is vital for Iran's energy exports. The country uses its position as an energy exporter to advance its geopolitical goals. Apart from the energy issue, the region is an area of influence for Iran. Iran tries to increase its influence in the region especially over Qatar and competes with its sectarian rival, Saudi Arabia.

As a result, in the Persian Gulf, Türkiye, Russia and Iran each shape regional dynamics through their unique historical roots and national interests. Türkiye, which carries its Ottoman legacy to the Persian neighborhood, today seeks to establish multifaceted relations with the Gulf states through trade, diplomacy and mediation initiatives. While Russia has rebuilt its influence in the region from the 19th century struggle for concessions to post-Cold War energy cooperation, arms sales and intervention in Syria, it has sought balance in the fields of conflict and diplomacy. Iran, on the other hand, with its historical-Iranian identity, energy exports and sectarian strategies, is a permanent actor in the Gulf, balancing with Saudi Arabia and consolidating its regional influence through its partnerships in Iraq, Yemen and Qatar. The interaction of these three actors deepens the complex and multi-layered character of the Persian Gulf, both in terms of energy security and geopolitical competition.

1.1.4. Caspian Sea Region

In the eighth edition of Encyclopedia Britannica, published in 1853, the Caspian Sea is described as the largest inland sea in the world with no outlet to the ocean. Throughout the fact sheet, both the terms sea and lake are used to describe the Caspian Sea. At the time of the encyclopedia's publication, it was surrounded by the Russian

governments of Astrakhan and Orenburg, the Caucasian states, the Persian Empire and Tatarstan. Its area was said to be between 310,000 and 365,000 square kilometers. It is stated that almost all of its shores are covered with sand and are shallow. It was emphasized that its waters were rich in nephty oil and therefore tasted bitter, but horses still did not refuse to drink from its shores. It is stated that this sea has an important feature that distinguishes it from other seas. Approximately every thirty years, the volume of the sea increases and decreases, and the exact reason for this change in volume is unknown. It is stated that the entire trade in the sea is under the control of Russia.¹⁶⁹

In the electronic version of the current Encyclopedia Britannica, the Caspian Sea is described as the largest inland water body in the world, located east of the Caucasus Mountains and west of the vast steppes of Central Asia. It covers an area of 386,400 square kilometers. The sea is bordered by Kazakhstan to the northeast, Turkmenistan to the southeast, Iran to the south, Azerbaijan to the southwest and Russia to the northwest. In addition, the Caspian is recognized as the largest salt goal in the world. Caspian shipping and fishing play an important role in the regional economy, as does oil and natural gas production in the Caspian basin. The beaches of the sea also serve as health and recreation centers. Oil and natural gas are the most important natural resources of the region. Exploration for natural resources began in the 1920s and continued to increase after the Second World War. The highest capacity for natural resources is located on the northeast coast of the sea. Minerals such as sodium sulfate mined in Kara-Bogaz-Gol, a lagoon-like bay of the sea, are also considered economically important. The ports of the coastal states also play an important role in the transportation of oil, cotton, grain, rice and wood.¹⁷⁰

Determining the international legal status of the Caspian Sea is one of the biggest problems among the states of the region. Whether the sea should be called a lake or a sea is an example of this problem.¹⁷¹ Throughout history, under the influence of different cultures, the North Iranian Sea has been called the Mazandaran Sea, the Gilan

¹⁶⁹ "Caspian Sea", **Encyclopedia Britannica**, <https://digital.nls.uk/encyclopaedia-britannica/archive/193293019#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=321&xywh=-852%2C-150%2C5526%2C4096>, (Retrieved on 9 June 2023).

¹⁷⁰ Oleg Konstantinovich Leontiev, Aleksey Nilovich Kosarev, Lewis Owen, "Caspian Sea," **Encyclopedia Britannica**, 17 May 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Caspian-Sea> (Retrieved on 9 June 2023).

¹⁷¹ Michal Pietkiewicz, "Legal Status of Caspian Sea-problem solved?", **Marine Policy**, Vol. 123, 2021.

Sea, the Tabarestan Sea, Caspi Darya and Daryacheh Khazar. In all of these names, the concept of 'sea' was used.

The Caspian Sea, which was called Mare Hyrcanum in antiquity, meaning the sea of the land of wolves, and named Caspian in English after the Caspian tribe that inhabited its shores, has been named in different ways throughout history. It was called the Astrachan Sea by the Russians and Bahri-Ghong by the Turks.¹⁷² The names Khazarsk and Khvalysnk come from the people who lived in the region in the past, while the name Girkansk comes from Girkanos, which, as mentioned above, means the land/land of wolves.¹⁷³

Famous geopoliticians have emphasized the importance of the Caspian Sea from different perspectives. For example, for Mackinder, the Caspian Sea region is certainly important in the context of controlling the Heartland.¹⁷⁴ Although he did not specifically emphasize the Caspian Sea, the control of the Heartland may also include the Caspian region due to its location in Central Asia and its proximity to the Eurasian landmass.

Brzezinski considered the Caspian region to be part of the “Eurasian Balkans.”¹⁷⁵ He emphasized the importance of the region in terms of its significant energy reserves and the potential for competition between major powers, primarily the US, Russia, China, and Iran. Mahan did not focus on the Caspian Sea, but his emphasis on the control of sea routes had an impact on the region.¹⁷⁶ The importance of the Caspian Sea in terms of trade and energy transportation makes it a region that must be taken into account from a geostrategic perspective.

In terms of the region's short history, during the 18th and 19th centuries, Russian Empire and Iran, two poles of the Caspian region, competed for the control of it. The Russian Empire expanded its presence along the northern Caspian coast. The Treaty of Turkmanchai in 1828 and the Treaty of Akhal in 1881 defined the southern border

¹⁷²“Caspian Sea”, **Encyclopedia Britannica**, <https://digital.nls.uk/encyclopaedia-britannica/archive/193293019/#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=321&xywh=-852%2C-150%2C5526%2C4096> (Retrieved on 9 June 2023).

¹⁷³ Oleg Konstantinovich Leontiev, Aleksey Nilovich Kosarev, Lewis Owen, “Caspian Sea,” **Encyclopedia Britannica**, May 17, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Caspian-Sea> (Retrieved on 9 June 2023).

¹⁷⁴ Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History”, pp. 425-427.

¹⁷⁵ Bkz. Brzezinski, **The Grand Chessboard**, pp. 123-151.

¹⁷⁶ Mahan, **The Influence of Sea Power Upon History**.

of the Russian Empire along the Caspian coast, leading to territorial disputes.¹⁷⁷ The discovery of oil in the region in the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought the Caspian Sea to the forefront of global energy production. Oil-rich regions around the Caspian Sea, such as Baku in Azerbaijan, became important players in the global energy industry.¹⁷⁸

Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Caspian region became the focal point of tension between the Soviet Union and Iran. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the independence of many states bordering the Caspian Sea, including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Each of these states gained sovereignty over their own coastal regions but faced difficulties in defining the legal status of the Caspian Sea. The legal status of the Caspian Sea has been a source of tension between the five states bordering the sea (Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan).¹⁷⁹ Negotiations to define the legal regime of the Caspian, including its waters and resources, have been ongoing for decades. The Caspian Sea region retains its importance in terms of energy resources, particularly oil and natural gas. It serves as a critical transit route for energy exports and plays a key role in global energy markets.

While the main states bordering the Caspian Sea are Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan; Türkiye, Russia, and Iran have been involved in and interested in the region's historical and current dynamics to varying degrees. Türkiye has historical and cultural ties with Turkic-speaking states bordering the Caspian Sea, particularly Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. These ties are based on shared linguistic, ethnic, and historical connections. Türkiye has sought to develop economic and energy cooperation with countries bordering the Caspian Sea, particularly Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.¹⁸⁰ The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline has facilitated the transportation of Caspian energy resources to Türkiye and global markets. Türkiye has engaged in diplomatic initiatives to promote stability and

¹⁷⁷ Guive Mirfendereski, *A Diplomatic History of the Caspian Sea / Treaties, Diaries, and Other Stories*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, p. 26, 60; Barbara Janusz-Pawletta, *The Legal Status of the Caspian Sea: Current Challenges and Prospects for Future Development*, 2nd Edition, Berlin: Springer Nature, 2021, p. 19.

¹⁷⁸ Mirfendereski, *A Diplomatic History of the Caspian Sea*, pp. 119-120.

¹⁷⁹ Janusz-Pawletta, *The Legal Status of the Caspian Sea*, p. 1.

¹⁸⁰ Mustafa Aydin, "Foucault's Pendulum: Turkey in Central Asia and the Caucasus", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2004, pp. 4-6, 13-14; Janusz-Pawletta, *The Legal Status of the Caspian Sea*, p. 118.

cooperation in the Caspian region. It has advocated for a peaceful resolution of the legal status of the Caspian Sea.¹⁸¹

Russia has a long history of influence in the Caspian region, particularly in the northern coastal areas. Russian dominance increased during the Russian Empire and continued during the Soviet era. Russia protects its energy interests in the Caspian region, focusing particularly on oil and natural gas. It plays a role in transporting Caspian energy resources to global markets. Russia has sought to maintain its political influence in the Caspian region, particularly in the context of regional security and stability. It has been involved in diplomatic efforts regarding the legal status of the Caspian Sea. At the same time, the region states except Iran are considered the near abroad, ex-Soviet countries, by the Russian Federation. That's why the region is area of influence for the Russian foreign policy.¹⁸²

Iran has deep cultural and historical ties with the Caspian region. It has been influential in northern Iran and some areas of the southern Caspian coast. Iran has been one of the key parties in negotiations regarding the legal status of the Caspian Sea. The Caspian region is important for Iran's energy and trade interests. It cooperates with neighboring countries, particularly Azerbaijan, in the fields of energy and trade.¹⁸³

As a result, Türkiye, Russia, and Iran are shaping the dynamics of the Caspian Sea region based on their historical origins and current interests. Türkiye is transforming its relations with Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, strengthened by historical and linguistic ties, into economic cooperation through energy pipeline (BTC), while also taking diplomatic initiatives in favor of a peaceful resolution of the Caspian's legal status. Russia, on the other hand, is consolidating its sovereignty over the northern shores through energy transport routes and regional security mechanisms while preserving its imperial and Soviet legacy and still considers the former Soviet republics as its sphere of influence in the sense of the "near abroad." Iran, meanwhile, leverages its position rooted in cultural and historical ties to secure a voice in legal negotiations regarding the Caspian Sea while also protecting its economic interests through energy and trade cooperation. The interaction among these three actors

¹⁸¹ Janusz-Pawletta, *The Legal Status of the Caspian Sea*, p. 118.

¹⁸² Mirfendereski, *A Diplomatic History of the Caspian Sea*, pp. 195-201.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

highlights the multi-layered and dynamic structure of the Caspian region in terms of both energy security and geopolitical balance.

1.1.5. Red Sea Region

In the eighth edition of the Britannica Encyclopedia, published in 1853, the Red Sea is defined as an inland sea separating the Arabian Peninsula in Asia from Abyssinia, the Kingdom of Nubia, and Egypt in Africa. It extends from the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb in the north to the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba. It covers an area of approximately 280.000 square kilometers. The entrance to the sea is divided into two channels, the Great and Little Straits, by Perim Island.¹⁸⁴ In the electronic version of the current Britannica Encyclopedia, it is defined as a narrow sea extending southeast from the city of Suez in Egypt, connecting to the Gulf of Aden and the Sea of Oman, and extending to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Gate of Tears).¹⁸⁵ The sea separates Egypt, Sudan, and Eritrea in the west from Saudi Arabia and Yemen in the east. The sea, which has the hottest and saltiest water in the world, is one of the busiest waterways for travel between Europe and Asia. It derives its name “Red” from the *trichodesmium erythraeum* algae, which turn the sea’s surface a reddish-brown color after they die. It is reported to cover an area of 450.000 square kilometers. There are five main natural resources in the sea. These are oil fields, evaporite deposits, sulfur, phosphates, and heavy metal deposits. All natural resources except heavy metal deposits are exploitable. However, despite their value, heavy metal deposits have not yet been exploited. Transportation in the Red Sea is difficult. The lack of natural harbors in the northern half of the sea, due to its rugged coastline, and the large coral reefs in the southern half¹⁸⁶, which restrict navigable channels and block some port facilities, make transportation challenging.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ “Red Sea”, **Encyclopedia Britannica**, <https://digital.nls.uk/encyclopaedia-britannica/archive/193257620/#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=828&xywh=4847%2C1479%2C1577%2C1169> (Retrieved on 9 June 2023).

¹⁸⁵ Alexis Wick, **Kızıldeniz: Kayıp Mekanın İzinde**, Ezgi Dikici (çev.), İstanbul: Koç Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2023, p. 51.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 56-57.

¹⁸⁷ B. Charlotte Schreiber, William B. F. Ryan, “Red Sea”, **Encyclopedia Britannica**, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Red-Sea> (Retrieved on 25 May 2023).

Its name derives from the translation of the ancient terms “Rubrum,” meaning red, and “Erythraeum,” referring to the southern hemisphere of Mars.¹⁸⁸ Throughout history, it has also been referred to as “Arabic Sinus,” meaning the Arabian Gulf. The origin of the name “Red” remains an unanswered question, neither ancient nor modern historians have been able to provide a definitive answer. Four speculations have been put forward on this matter. The first is that the name “Red” derives from the abundant red and purple corals found in the sea. Second, the colors of the microscopic animals found on the surface of the sea caused it to be named “red.” Third, in Phoenician and Hebrew, the sea was named after the country of Edom, which is located near the region and means “red.” Finally, it is said that the name of the sea comes from Erythrus, the great leader who ruled the region. The sea is also referred to as Yam Suph in Hebrew, meaning “sea of grass.”¹⁸⁹

Famous geopolitical thinkers emphasized the Red Sea region in their studies. Mackinder recognized the geopolitical importance of controlling access to the Indian Ocean. He discussed the potential for naval powers to dominate the “Rimland,” which includes the coastal regions along the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Peninsula, and the parts of Africa bordering the Red Sea.¹⁹⁰ Mahan also emphasized the importance of naval power. Although he did not focus specifically on the Red Sea, his ideas suggest that controlling key sea passages such as the Suez Canal, which is an integral part of the Red Sea dynamics, is critical.¹⁹¹

John Mearsheimer has discussed the strategic importance of the Red Sea region in today’s context. Mearsheimer has talked about the competition and alliances between regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt, emphasizing that the three actors are competing to influence and control maritime trade routes in the region.¹⁹² Robert D. Kaplan has written extensively on the importance of the Red Sea

¹⁸⁸ Wick, Kızıldeniz, pp. 45-51.

¹⁸⁹ “Red Sea,” **Encyclopedia Britannica**, <https://digital.nls.uk/encyclopaedia-britannica/archive/193257620/#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=828&xywh=4847%2C1479%2C1577%2C1169>, (Retrieved on 25 May 2023).

¹⁹⁰ Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” pp. 428-432.

¹⁹¹ Mahan, **The Influence of Sea Power Upon History**.

¹⁹² John J. Mearsheimer, **The Tragedy of Great Power Politics**, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001, p. 150.

and its security issues. In his work, he frequently highlights the Red Sea's role in regional power struggles, piracy, and global trade.¹⁹³

Regarding the region's brief history, ancient civilizations, including the Egyptians, Nubians, and the Kingdom of Aksum in present-day Ethiopia, have lived in the Red Sea region. These civilizations took advantage of the Red Sea's strategic location to engage in trade and maritime activities. The Romans also controlled parts of the Red Sea coast, including cities such as Aelana (modern-day Aqaba). With the rise of Islam in the 7th century, the Red Sea became an important part of the Islamic trade network, facilitating connections between the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. The Ottoman Empire maintained a presence along the Red Sea coast, particularly in the Hijaz region (present-day western Saudi Arabia), which included the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The Ottomans retained control of these regions until the early 20th century. European colonial powers such as the Portuguese and British established forts and trading posts along the Red Sea region, particularly along the East African coast and the southern entrance to the Red Sea.¹⁹⁴

Opened in 1869 by French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps, the Suez Canal significantly shortened the sea route from Europe to Asia by connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea. The Canal increased the strategic importance of the region. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Red Sea region underwent political changes. Areas along the eastern coast, including Aden (in present-day Yemen) and the Trucial States came under British control. The region also witnessed anti-colonial movements and struggles for independence. In modern times, the Red Sea region has become a vital maritime trade route, particularly for oil shipments. Countries along the Red Sea coast, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, and Eritrea,

¹⁹³ Robert D. Kaplan, **Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power**, New York: Random House, 2010.

¹⁹⁴ Throughout the 19th century, Britain brought Aden and its surroundings under its influence, despite Ottoman rule in the region. Aden, in particular, was captured by the British East India Company (EIC) in 1839 and became an important British base in the region. Britain's regional policy involved preserving Ottoman sovereignty nominally but simultaneously cultivating local alliances and signing treaties around Aden throughout the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. This strategy was designed to maintain influence without overt territorial conquest beyond Aden itself. Britain shifted the balance of power in its favor by signing rescue and defense agreements with local leaders (such as Sheikh Nasr Ambari) in the Tihamat Yemen region. Additionally, at the beginning of the 20th century, the struggle for dominance and interests over various port cities and coasts in the Red Sea continued, with British, French, Italian competition complicating the political situation in the region. See: Nicholas W. Stephenson Smith, **Colonial Chaos in the Southern Red Sea: A History of Violence from 1830 to the Twentieth Century**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 106-121.

have become key players in regional politics and global trade. The Red Sea region is characterized by geopolitical complexities, including competition, conflict, and alliances between states, including regional formations such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Israel, and the Horn of Africa countries. The conflict in Yemen has further exacerbated regional tensions. The history of the Red Sea region has been shaped by its strategic location, which has served as a hub for trade, cultural exchange, and geopolitical competition. The region's importance in global trade and energy transportation continues to influence the dynamics of contemporary international politics.

Although the Red Sea is primarily associated with Middle Eastern and North African countries, it has also been historically and currently involved with various nations, including Türkiye, Russia, and Iran. Historically, the Ottoman Empire maintained a presence along the Red Sea coast. The Ottomans controlled the Hijaz region (including the holy cities of Mecca and Medina) and part of the Arabian Peninsula. In the contemporary era, Türkiye has sought to expand its influence in the Red Sea region. By establishing military bases and public diplomacy activities in Somalia, it aims to enhance its role in regional security and trade.

Although Russia does not have a coastline on the Red Sea, it has been involved in the Red Sea region through diplomatic and military activities. Russia has sought to expand its influence in the Middle East, including the Red Sea region, through diplomatic engagement, arms sales and military bases. It has become involved in the Syrian conflict, which has implications for the security dynamics of the Red Sea. It confirmed a deal with Sudan to open Russian airbase in there.¹⁹⁵

On the other hand, Iran has historical ties with the Red Sea region, which has cultural, religious, and commercial links with countries such as Yemen and parts of Saudi Arabia. Iran's presence in the Red Sea region is intertwined with its involvement in the civil war in Yemen. Iran is accused of supporting the Houthi rebels in Yemen, which is fueling regional tensions and conflicts.

As a result, Türkiye, Russia, and Iran are shaping the dynamics of the region in line with their historical legacies and current strategic interests. Türkiye is focusing on

¹⁹⁵ Basilloh Rukanga, "'No obstacles' to Russian Red Sea base – Sudan," **BBC**, 13 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c30del8dz51o>. (Retrieved on 25 May 2023).

regional security and economic cooperation by strengthening its historical presence on the coasts of Hejaz and Arabia, inherited from the Ottoman Empire, with military bases in Somalia and diplomatic and trade initiatives in Sudan and Egypt. Despite not having a coastline on the Red Sea, Russia is attempting to exert influence in the region through its intervention in Syria, arms sales, diplomatic contacts, and an airbase agreement in Sudan, thereby becoming part of the geostrategic balance in the Middle East. Iran, on the other hand, is using its cultural and religious ties with Yemen and Saudi Arabia, which border the Red Sea, to expand its military and political influence through its support for proxy forces in the Yemeni civil war. The different tools and objectives of these three actors with regard to the Red Sea demonstrate that the region has a multi-layered and competitive character in terms of both security and economic access.

The Five Seas Basin (FSB) is characterized by a multi-actor, multi-identity, and multi-crisis structure. The FSB is a basin which consists of five sub-regions: the Black Sea region, the Mediterranean region, the Persian Gulf region, the Caspian Sea region, and the Red Sea region. In its simplest form, it can be defined as the region where the basins of five seas intersect. Throughout history, this geographical complex has been dominated by the predecessors of the Republic of Türkiye, the Russian Federation, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, sometimes individually and sometimes jointly. The Achaemenid Empire, the Safavid Dynasty, Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Ottoman Empire have all left significant marks on this region. Today, Russia, Iran, and Türkiye are involved in the crises in the region, either by escalating the crisis or by acting as mediators. For this reason, it is important to understand the history of the relations between these three actors in the basin and their current relations in order to understand the basin.

1.2. The Historical Perspective of Turkish-Russian-Iranian Relations

Throughout history, relations between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran have been shaped around the axis of cooperation and conflict, just as they are today. To understand the trilateral relations and grasp the attitudes of the three actors toward each other, the actors will first be examined bilaterally (Türkiye-Russia, Türkiye-Iran, and Russia-Iran relations), followed by an examination of the 1568-1570 Astrakhan

Campaign, the historical event that brought the three actors together, and the trilateral relations will be described up to the present day.

Table 1.1. Wars between Ottoman Empire and Iran, Ottoman Empire and Russia, and Russia and Iran in the 16th-20th Centuries

Bilateral Relations	Ottoman-Iran	Ottoman-Russia	Russia-Iran
Battles			
1	1514 Battle of Chaldiran	1568-70 Astrakhan Campaign	1651-53 Battle
2	1515-17 Euphrates-Tigris Campaign	1676-81 Moscow Campaign	1722-23 Battle
3	1533-36 Battle	1686-1700 Battle	1796 Iran Campaign
4	1548-49 Battle	1710-11 Pruth River Campaign	1804-13 Battle
5	1552-54 Battle	1735-39 Battle	1826-28 Battle
6	1578-90 Battle	1768-74 Battle	
7	1603-18 Battle	1787-92 Battle	
8	1623-39 Battle	1806-12 Battle	
9	1723-27 Battle	1828-29 Battle	
10	1730-32 Battle	1853-56 The Crimean War	
11	1735-36 Battle	1877-78 Battle	
12	1742-46 Battle	1914-17 World War I	
13	1774-79 Battle		
14	1821-23 Battle		

Issues of cooperation and conflict ranged from influence and control in the rugged and challenging border regions of the Caucasus, where both powers were involved in a trilateral relationship with the Ottoman Empire, to a shared interest in exploring the idea of a coalition against the Ottomans, trade agreements, and disputes. The reign of Shah Abbas (1587–1629) was a period of particularly intense relations. At that time, Russia’s foreign policy was focused on isolating the Ottomans. During the same period, Russia was also exploring the idea of forming an anti-Ottoman alliance with the Safavids.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ Rudi Matthee, “Rudeness and Revilement: Russian-Iranian Relations in the Mid-Seventeenth Century”, *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 3, May 2013, p. 333.

Continuing their steady advance southward, which led to their domination of Kazan in 1552 and Astrakhan in 1556, the Russians became deeply involved in the affairs of the North Caucasus during this period, seeking to increase their influence in competition with the expanding Safavids and Ottomans by forming alliances with local dynasties.¹⁹⁷

Türkiye and Iran share cultural and historical ties as predominantly Muslim countries with deep-rooted histories and a common religious heritage. This has led to cultural exchange and some common interests in the Islamic world. Relations between Türkiye and Iran began with the adoption of Islam by both nations. The period in which these relations intensified began with the Seljuk Empire¹⁹⁸, which ruled over the entire BDH region. With the spread of the Seljuk Empire into Iranian territory, the Persian language and Persian art became important in the Seljuk Empire. For example, Persian became the official language of the state. At the same time, Persian began to be used in religious and literary works. The Seljuk sultans promoted the advancement of the Persian language and literature and supported Persian-writing poets such as Lami-i Gorgani, Burhani, and Emir Muizzi.¹⁹⁹

After the Seljuk Empire, three wars shaped the relationship between these two states. These were the Battle of Ankara in 1402 between the Ottoman Empire and the Great Timurid Empire, the Battle of Otlukbeli in 1473 between the Ottoman Empire and the Akkoyunlu Empire, and the Battle of Çaldıran in 1514 between the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid Empire. The Timurid Empire and the Akkoyunlu, which ruled over present-day Iran, were not Iranian, but as states ruling over the lands, they were in relations with the Ottoman Empire. The Battle of Ankara in 1402, in which Bayezid I was defeated by Timur, and the Battle of Otlukbeli in 1473, in which Uzun Hasan was defeated by Mehmed II, can be considered examples of these relations.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 336.

¹⁹⁸ It was a Turkish and Sunni Muslim empire founded in 1037 by Tughril Bey, a member of the Kınık tribe of the Oghuz Turks. See. Ali Sevim, Erdoğan Merçil, **Selçuklu Devletleri Tarihi: Siyaset, Teşkilat ve Kültür**, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1995.

¹⁹⁹ Şehram Azadyan, Hamid Rıza Hekimi, “Selçuklular ve Fars Edebiyatını Himayesi”, Çetin Kaska (trans.), **MUTAD**, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2020, p. 508-510; Bedi’ullah Debiri Nejad, “Selçuklular Devrinde Kültürel Durum,” Mürsel Öztürk (trans.), Erdem, Vol. 3 No. 8, 1987, p. 487-490.; Hüseyin Kayhan, “Selçuklular Devrinde Türk Saraylarında Fars Şairleri,” **Turkish Studies**, Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 2011, pp. 1433-1441.

²⁰⁰ Vural Genç, “Timur’u Geçmek: Akkoyunluların Osmanlılara Karşı Üstünlük İddiaları”, **Osmanlı Araştırmaları**, Vol. 54, No. 54, 2019, pp. 27-56; Remzi Kılıç, “Fatih Devri (1451-1481) Osmanlı-Akkoyunlu İlişkileri”, **Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi**, Vol. 14, 2003, pp. 95-118.

From the time of the Great Timurid Empire and the Akkoyunlu dynasty until the period following World War I, three states ruled over Iranian territories, while only the Ottoman Empire ruled over Turkish territories. The three states that ruled Iranian territories were, in order, the Safavid Empire (1501-1736), the Zand Dynasty (1750-1794), and the Qajar State (1779-1925). Despite the change in the states ruling the territories, the battles with the Ottoman Empire continued. A total of eleven battles took place between the Safavid Empire and the Ottoman Empire, six in the 16th century²⁰¹, two in the 17th century²⁰², and three in the 18th century.²⁰³ The first battle was the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, and the last battle was the Battle of Arpaçay in 1735. The Battle of Chaldiran was won by the Ottomans, while the Battle of Arpaçay was won by the Safavids.²⁰⁴

The aim of the Ottoman Empire in winning the Battle of Chaldiran was to establish superiority over the Safavids, one of the powerful states of the time, and to prevent the “Qizilbash” from becoming influential in Iran and the spread of Shiism.²⁰⁵

All of the battles fought between the two major actors of the period before the collapse of the Safavid Empire are important, but three of these battles are critical for the purposes of this study. First, the Ottoman Empire won the battle that took place between 1578 and 1590. As a result of the battle, the Ferhat Pasha Treaty was signed, and the Ottoman Empire reached its widest borders in the East, while the Ottoman army reached the Caspian Sea.²⁰⁶ Second, the Ottoman Empire won the Ottoman-Safavid War that broke out in 1623 over the issue of Iraq. The most important outcome of this war, which still affects the present day, is the Treaty of Kasr-i Şirin, signed at the end of the war, which largely determined the current Türkiye-Iran border.²⁰⁷ The

²⁰¹ The battles were, in order: the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, the Euphrates-Tigris Campaign of 1515-1517, the Battle of 1533-1536, the Battle of 1548-1549, the Battle of 1552-1554, and the Battle of 1578-1590. The Ottoman Empire won all of these battles.

²⁰² The battles were the 1603-1618 Battle and the 1623-1639 Battle. The Safavid Empire won the first battle, while the Ottoman Empire won the second.

²⁰³ The battles were, in order: the Battle of 1723-1727, the Battle of 1730-1732, and the Battle of 1735-1736. The Ottoman Empire won the first two battles but lost the last one.

²⁰⁴ Ernest Tucker, “The Peace Negotiations of 1736: A Conceptual Turning Point in Ottoman-Iranian Relations,” *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Spring 1996, pp. 16-37.

²⁰⁵ Rıza Yıldırım, “The Safavid-Qizilbash Ecumene and the Formation of the Qizilbash-Alevi Community in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1500-c. 1700”, *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 3-4, 2019, pp. 449-483.

²⁰⁶ Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire*, New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1977, p. 287; Bekir Kütükoğlu, *Osmanlı-İran Siyasi Münasebetleri I: 1578-1590*, İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Yayınları, 1962.

²⁰⁷ İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi 3. Cilt: II. Selim’in Tahta Çıkışından 1699 Karlofça Andlaşmasına Kadar*, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1988, p. 213-214.

Treaty of Kasr-i Şirin, signed in 1639, defined the borders between the two states. For this reason, the treaty is considered the foundation of a centuries-long friendship between the two states.²⁰⁸

Thirdly, the Ottoman Empire also won the battle that took place between 1723 and 1727. The most important aspect of this battle in the context of this study is the involvement of the Russian Empire. Prior to this war, which coincided with the decline of the Safavid Empire, Russia was rapidly advancing in the Safavids' territories on the shores of the Caspian Sea. The Ottoman Empire's aim in entering the war was to prevent Russian advance.²⁰⁹ As a result of the battle, Tsarist Russia and the Ottoman Empire divided the territories west of the Safavid Empire through the Treaty of Istanbul. For this reason, the Treaty of Istanbul is considered the first Ottoman-Russian friendship treaty.²¹⁰ This war, which took place between 1723 and 1727, marks the beginning of the Türkiye-Russia-Iran trilateral relations.

After the collapse of the Safavid Empire in 1736, the Ottoman Empire and Iran fought three more battles, two in the 18th century²¹¹ and one at the beginning of the 19th century.²¹² Two of these battles are significant in the context of this study. The first of these was the battle that took place between 1742 and 1746. In this battle, the Ottoman Empire took advantage of the power vacuum in Iran and declared war on Iran. Russia and the Ottoman Empire unwittingly fought together against Iran. In this war, the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and Russia were all involved in the same war.

In the 16th and 17th centuries and the first half of the 18th century, the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid Empire were the two major powers in the region. They were often in conflict due to differences in territory, influence, and religion. The region now known as Azerbaijan was an important point of contention between the two actors.²¹³

The decline of the empires' glory due to the military and economic advances of the Western colonial powers and the Russian Empire against Iranian and Ottoman

²⁰⁸ Bayram Sinkaya, "Turkey-Iran Relations after the JDP", *Les Dossiers de l'IFEA*, No: 26, 2019, p. 6.

²⁰⁹ İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi 4. Cilt: Karlofça Andlaşmasından XVIII. Yüzyılın Sonlarına Kadar*, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1988, pp. 185-203.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ The battles were, in order, the Battle of 1742–1746 and the Battle of 1774–1779.

²¹² The battle referred to is the battle between the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar Dynasty that took place between 1821 and 1823.

²¹³ Tucker, "The Peace Negotiations of 1736", p. 21.

territories led both countries to adopt a process of modernization in the 19th century. The sectarian differences and imperial rivalry that shaped Ottoman-Iranian relations were overshadowed by the common challenges of imperialism and modernity, which preoccupied decision-makers in both countries.²¹⁴

Following the 1821-1823 war between the two countries, and despite Iran's relative military inferiority, the Ottoman Empire evaluated Iran as a potential military threat, particularly in the event of a potential Russian invasion of Anatolia. Therefore, the threat from Iran remained a central issue for the Ottomans during both the Crimean War of 1853-1856 and the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878.²¹⁵

While Sinkaya focuses on the phenomenon of cooperation between the two actors, Çetinsaya focuses more on the phenomena of conflict and competition. In this sense, power struggles took place in Eastern Anatolia/Iranian Azerbaijan and Iraq/Western Iran. While the Ottomans focused their attention on Azerbaijan and the Caucasus region, the Iranians were interested in Iraq, which housed the holiest sites of Shiite Islam. This long-standing struggle continued to varying degrees until the end of World War I.²¹⁶

From 1923, when Shah Reza Pahlavi established the Pahlavi dynasty and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded the Republic of Türkiye, until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the two states developed political, economic, and security-based relations. The Sadabad Pact, established in 1937, and the Baghdad Pact, established in 1955, are examples of this. Following the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, Türkiye established close relations with Iran in order to prevent Iran from falling under the influence of the Soviet Union. Thus, relations between the two states did not suffer despite the Islamic Revolution. With the end of the Cold War, the two actors, seeking to take advantage of the power vacuum in Central Asia and the Caucasus, entered into competition in these regions while continuing their cooperation.

The occurrence of Western-tended nation-states in Türkiye and Iran in the 1920s, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Reza Shah Pahlavi, further increased cooperation between the two countries. The rise of secular, nationalist and Western-oriented

²¹⁴ Sinkaya, "Turkey-Iran Relations after the JDP", p. 6.

²¹⁵ Gökhan Çetinsaya, "Essential Friends and Natural Enemies: The Historic Roots of Turkish-Iranian Relations", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 3, September 2003, p. 116.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

regimes in both countries decreased the dominance of sectarian differences between the two countries. However, under the leadership of Atatürk and Reza Shah, the two states came through their hardships and improved good neighborly relations. In a similar vein, Ankara and Tehran defined their borders and signed a friendship agreement. Reza Shah's visit to Türkiye in 1934 emphasized the growing friendly relations between the two states.²¹⁷

Moreover, British dominance in the Middle East and Soviet influence over the Caucasus dissuaded Türkiye and Iran from stimulating irredentist claims and left them as "*status quo powers*"²¹⁸ determined to maintain their sovereignty and territorial integrity. Türkiye and Iran were the members of the Sadabad Pact. At the same time, the Türkiye-Iran Brotherhood Society was founded in Istanbul in 1952. During the Cold War, fear of the spread of communism to Türkiye and Iran initiated them to move closer to the US and enter into a security relationship. The two countries were part of Baghdad Pact, which was established in 1955, security-based alliance and later became the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). In 1964, the two states established the Regional Cooperation for Development with Pakistan.²¹⁹

On the one hand, Türkiye and Iran improved their relations, on the other hand, they could not develop into a full-fledged partnership because of the various geostrategic priorities of them and the distrust between the leaders. The complex structure of the relations reminded the history in which the myth of constant conflict in the Battle of Chaldiran and the myth of eternal Turkish-Iranian friendship in the Treaty of Kasr-i Shirin. In other words, the history of bilateral relations between Türkiye and Iran has fluctuations and this fluctuation revolved around the circle including friendly and fierce competition.²²⁰

The period following the 1979 Iranian Revolution was a time when Iran suddenly turned its back on the West, even opposing American hegemony, and viewed Türkiye as a NATO member and Sunni Muslim. Türkiye-Iran relations during this period have been examined in four phases. These periods are: The period between 1980 and 1988, when the Iran-Iraq War shaped bilateral relations; the period between

²¹⁷ Sinkaya, "Turkey-Iran Relations after the JDP", p. 7.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

1988 and 1997, shaped by the collapse of the Soviet Union; the period between 1997 and 2002, when internal political problems shaped bilateral relations; and the period of great reconciliation after 2003.²²¹

During the Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988, Türkiye and Iran cooperated in the commercial and economic fields. This cooperation began when Türkiye recognized the new regime three days after the revolution.²²² The Iran-Iraq War, which began in September 1980, increased the importance of trade with Türkiye for Iran. During this period, Iran purchased goods from Türkiye in exchange for oil and gas. Trade with Iran supported Türkiye's struggling economy. The volume of trade between the two actors exceeded \$2 billion during this period.²²³ Türkiye did not take sides in the war but maintained economic relations with both sides.

Özcan and Özdamar show that even after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Türkiye-Iran relations can be defined as a “structural regional competition” determined by conjunctural changes at the systemic and regional levels. Although historical analysis shows a tendency toward competition, opportunities for close cooperation have also emerged from time to time, such as the rapprochement between the two actors since the early 2000s. The relationship between the two has been examined in three periods with reference to them. The first period is economic cooperation between 1979 and 1988. The second period is the competition and conflict period between 1988 and 2002. The third period is the rapprochement period between 2002 and 2010. Özcan and Özdamar's argument is as follows: Although the long-term nature of Türkiye-Iran relations is based on competition, certain factors can lead the two neighbors to engage in close cooperation.²²⁴

Today, as in the past, Türkiye and Iran have a complex relationship characterized by both cooperation and competition. Türkiye and Iran maintain important commercial relations, particularly in the fields of energy, machinery, and transportation. Despite international sanctions against Iran, both countries are striving to strengthen their

²²¹ Nihat Ali Özcan, Özgür Özdamar, “Uneasy Neighbors: Turkish-Iranian Relations Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 17, No. 3, Fall 2010, pp. 105-112.

²²² There were reasons behind Türkiye's sudden decision to recognize the new regime. First, Bülent Ecevit, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Türkiye at the time, was opposed to the Shah's regime and the CENTO alliance. Second, the collapse of Iran could draw the Soviet Union into the region, and Moscow could support Kurdish separatists on Türkiye's eastern border.

²²³ Halis Akder, “Turkey's Export Expansion in the Middle East, 1980-1985”, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 4, pp. 553-567.

²²⁴ Özcan, Özdamar, “Uneasy Neighbors”, p. 101.

economic ties. In regional conflicts such as the Syrian civil war, Türkiye and Iran have often supported opposing groups. However, they have also participated in diplomatic initiatives such as the Astana process, which aims to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis.

Both Türkiye and Iran were former imperial centers, and the modern states established in these two countries are considered the successors of the Ottoman and Safavid empires, which ruled over much of Western Asia for centuries. In this sense, it can be said that both states have a tradition of conflict and cooperation stemming from their past, as well as a unique relationship. Common areas of conflict carried over from the past, such as the South Caucasus, and the fact that the Sunni-Shia divide continues to be sharply defined, exemplify this relationship. In terms of their relations within the context of Five Seas Basin, the most important region between Türkiye and Iran has been the Persian Gulf. During the Ottoman-Safavid Empire period in particular, the Persian Gulf witnessed power struggles between the two states.

Turkish-Russian relations began in the late 15th century with trade in the Black Sea. These relations between the Ottoman Empire and Tsarist Russia saw a total of twelve battles²²⁵ during the period of these two actors. One battle took place in the late 16th century²²⁶, two battles in the late 17th century²²⁷, and four battles in the 18th century.²²⁸ The last battle between the two great empires, which also experienced four battles in the 19th century,²²⁹ was World War I, in which Russia was a party until the Bolshevik Revolution. The first battle between the two states was the Astrakhan War of 1568-1570, which ended in victory for Tsarist Russia. In the final battle, Tsarist Russia withdrew from the conflict before its conclusion, leaving neither state as the victor. These battles primarily involved territorial disputes in the Black Sea and the Balkans.

²²⁵ See. Brian Davies, **Empire and Military Revolution in Eastern Europe: Russia's Turkish Wars in the Eighteenth Century**, London: Continuum, 2011.

²²⁶ This war took place between 1568 and 1570.

²²⁷ The wars were the 1676-1681 Battle and the 1686-1700 Battle respectively. While the Ottoman Empire won the first war, Tsarist Russia won the second war.

²²⁸ The wars were respectively; 1710-1711 Battle of Prut, 1735-1739 Ottoman-Russian-Austrian War, 1768-1774 War and 1787-1792 War. While the first two wars were won by the Ottoman Empire, the last two were won by Tsarist Russia.

²²⁹ The wars were the War of 1806-1812, the War of 1828-1829, the Crimean War of 1853-1856 and the 93 War of 1877-1878. While the first, second and fourth wars were won by Tsarist Russia, the Crimean War was won by the Ottoman Empire.

All of the wars fought between the two major actors of the period are important, but three of them are critical for this study. First, the Astrakhan Campaign, which took place between 1568 and 1570, was a campaign organized by the Crimean Khanate of the Ottoman Empire against the Astrakhan Khanate of Russia. In this war, which Russia won²³⁰, the Ottoman Empire's aim was to prevent Russia from reaching the Black Sea by conquering the Astrakhan fortress and to facilitate the expulsion of the Safavid Empire from the Caucasus and Azerbaijan. At the same time, the sultan of the time, Selim II, aimed to open a canal between the Don and Volga rivers and to build a waterway between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.²³¹ What makes this war important is that the Ottoman Empire saw both Russia and Iran as rivals and fought against both states at the same time. In other words, this war involves three states, the main actors of the study. Moreover, Selim II's effort to connect the Black Sea with the Caspian Sea proves that the Five Seas Basin was seen as a whole even during the Ottoman Empire.

Secondly, Tsarist Russia won the war that took place between 1768-1774 and resulted in the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca. After this war, the Crimean Khanate became independent and was annexed by Russia in 1783.²³² The Black Sea lost its characteristic of being a Turkish lake. Another important result of the war was that the Russian navy entered the Mediterranean for the first time on the opportunity of this war. In other words, with this war, Russia was able to expand its sphere of influence in one sub-region of the Five Seas Basin and intervene in the other sub-region. Thirdly, Russia won the war that took place between 1828-1829. At the end of the war, Russia overtook Iran and became the dominant power in the Caucasus.²³³ The importance of this war is that it shows that three actors were in competition in the Caucasus in the past as well.

Hale categorized the relationship between these two actors into three broad periods. These periods are the multipolar system with shifting alliances from 1798-

²³⁰ İlyas Kamalov, **Rus Elçi Raporlarında Astrahan Seferi**, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2011.

²³¹ Halil İnalcık, "Osmanlı-Rus Rekabetinin Menşei ve Don-Volga Kanalı Teşebbüsü", **Belleten**, Vol: 12, No: 46, 1948, pp. 349-402.

²³² İdris Bostan, "Rusya'nın Karadeniz'de Ticarete Başlaması ve Osmanlı İmparatorluğu (1700-1787)", **Belleten**, Vol. 59 No. 225, Ağustos 1995, pp. 353-394.

²³³ Kinross, **The Ottoman Centuries**, pp. 450-451.

1841, the alliance within the bipolar system from 1841-1878 and 1952-1991, and the indefinite détente from 1878-1914, 1921-1939, and 1991 to the present.²³⁴

During the War of Independence, the two newly established states supported each other politically, economically and on security grounds, and their cooperative relations continued until the Soviet Union canceled the Soviet Union-Türkiye Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality in 1945.²³⁵ Subsequently, Türkiye's joining the opposing bloc as a member of NATO in 1952 separated the two states. After the death of Soviet Union leader Joseph Stalin, relations began to improve following the Soviet Union's note in 1953 that it no longer had any territorial claims on Türkiye.²³⁶ Economic relations improved in 1964-65²³⁷ and Türkiye's energy imports from Russia began to grow with the signing of the Natural Gas Treaty in 1984.²³⁸

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye and Russia began to establish closer economic and diplomatic relations. This included trade, energy cooperation, and diplomatic coordination on regional issues. Both countries have expressed a desire to maintain positive relations. Energy plays an important role in Turkish-Russian relations. Türkiye is a major importer of energy, while Russia is a major exporter of energy, mainly natural gas. The construction of pipelines such as Blue Stream and Turkish Stream (TurkStream) has increased energy cooperation.²³⁹

The two actors are in a close relationship in the Five Seas basin on the axis of cooperation and competition. For example, Russia-Türkiye relations in the wider Black Sea region are characterized by a dilemma of cooperation and competition. While there are well-known areas of collaboration—particularly in energy and economic cooperation and regional security—competitive interests are equally strong and occur within the same fields where cooperation exists. The fragile nature of their

²³⁴ William Hale, "The Turkey-Russia Relationship in Historical Perspective: Patterns, Change and Contrast", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 28, No. 78, 2023, p. 43.

²³⁵ Onur İşçi, "Turkey at a Crossroads: The Soviet Threat and Postwar Realignment, 1945–1946", *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 47, No. 4, September 2023, pp. 621-646.

²³⁶ Jamil Hasanli, *Stalin and the Turkish Crisis of The Cold War: 1945-1953*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011; İsmet Giritli, "Turkish-Soviet Relations", *India Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1, January-March 1970, p. 16.

²³⁷ Giritli, "Turkish-Soviet Relations," p. 16.

²³⁸ Seçkin Köstem, "The Political Economy of Turkish-Russian Relations: Dynamics of Asymmetric Interdependence", *PERCEPTIONS*, Vol. 23, No. 2, Summer 2018, p. 14.; Ziya Öniş, Şuhnaz Yılmaz, "Turkey and Russia in a Shifting Global Order: Cooperation, Conflict and Asymmetric Interdependence in a Turbulent Region", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2016, p. 75.

²³⁹ Emre Erşen, Mitat Çelikpala, "Turkey and the Changing Energy Geopolitics of Eurasia", *Energy Policy*, Vol. 128, 2019, pp. 585-588.

partnership, pointed out by events such as the 2015 plane crisis, demonstrates the need for a more comprehensive and multi-level approach to managing these bilateral relations.²⁴⁰ On the other hand, according to Alim, Türkiye's foreign policy toward Russia in the Black Sea region is best understood through the lens of strategic hedging, which emphasizes managing the power asymmetry and security risks posed by a neighboring great power. Unlike traditional explanations such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality, Türkiye's complex and sometimes contradictory behavior—such as maintaining close economic ties with Russia while indirectly balancing Russia's military assertiveness by supporting Ukraine and Georgia's NATO aspirations—reflects a careful, security-driven attempt to avoid provoking Russia while safeguarding its own regional interests. Thus, Ankara prioritizes structural imperatives and security considerations over purely economic ties or ideological alignments in formulating its Black Sea policy.²⁴¹

On the other hand, Russian-Iranian relations began in the second half of the 16th century with the Russian capture of Astrakhan, the largest port in the north of the Caspian Sea, in 1556. On this occasion, Russian ships sailing in the Caspian Sea started to trade with Iran. Later, diplomatic relations were established between the two states. The first factor that brought the Russians closer to the Iranians was the common enemy, the Ottoman Empire. Five wars took place between the two states. One of these wars took place in the 17th century²⁴², two in the 18th century²⁴³, and two in the first half of the 19th century.²⁴⁴ The first war between the two states took place between 1651-1653 and resulted in the victory of the Iranians. The last war took place between 1826-1828 and ended with the victory of Tsarist Russia.²⁴⁵

These wars, which were fewer in number than those between Ottoman-Iran and Ottoman-Russia, are important. However, two wars are critical for this study. The first

²⁴⁰ Pavel Shylykov, "Russian-Turkish Relations in the Wider Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Competition", *PERCEPTIONS*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2018, pp. 109-111.

²⁴¹ Eray Alim, "Strategic hedging in the Black Sea: The case of Turkey versus Russia", *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 41, No. 5, 2022, p. 476.

²⁴² This war took place between 1651-1653. The war was won by the Safavid Empire. See. Rudi Matthee, "Rudeness and Revilement: Russian-Iranian Relations in the Mid-Seventeenth Century", *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 3, May 2013, p. 344.

²⁴³ The wars were the 1722-1723 War and the 1796 Persian Expedition respectively. While Tsarist Russia won the first war, the second war was inconclusive.

²⁴⁴ The wars were the 1804-1813 War and the 1826-1828 War respectively. Both wars were won by Tsarist Russia.

²⁴⁵ See. Maziar Behrooz, "Revisiting the Second Russo-Iranian War (1826-28): Causes and Perceptions", *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2013, pp. 359-381.

critical war is the one that took place in 1722-1723, which Russia won. There are two aspects that make this war important. First, Russia occupied Baku and Gilan and dominated the western shore of the Caspian Sea from the lower regions of the Five Seas Basin. Second, Russia attacked Iran in order to prevent the Ottoman Empire from filling the power vacuum created by the weakening of the Safavid Empire.²⁴⁶ Again, it is the Five Seas Basin region and the power relations between the three actors that unite the three main actors of the study.

The second war of importance is the one that took place between 1804-1813, which Russia won. The Treaty of Gulistan signed at the end of the war gave Russia the right to have a navy in the Caspian Sea.²⁴⁷ As one of the Five Seas, dominating the Caspian Sea was as important in the past as it is today.

In the years after the 1920s, when new states were established, the rivalry and contentious relations between the two states continued. Until the 1979 Revolution in Iran, they were on opposite sides. 1979 Iran opposed the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. In the Iran-Iraq War immediately after the revolution, the Soviet Union supported Iraq. Relations between the two states softened during the Gorbachev era and had an economic axis.²⁴⁸

The political relationship between Moscow and Tehran since 1991 is complex yet patterned and rational, shaped by a consistent set of both international security dynamics and domestic political factors in each country. The cooperation between Russia and Iran has fluctuated due to changing geopolitical conditions, such as energy competition and NATO's relative power, as well as shifts in domestic political pluralism and factional balances within each nation's political landscape.²⁴⁹

Today, Russia and Iran have established close relations in the energy and defense sectors. Russia has supplied Iran with military equipment and the two countries have cooperated in energy projects, including the construction of the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant.²⁵⁰ Russia and Iran have found themselves on the same side in some

²⁴⁶ Mirfendereski, **A Diplomatic History of the Caspian Sea**, p. 11.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 25-26.

²⁴⁸ Elahieh Koolaei, Hamed Mousavi, Afifeh Abedi "Fluctuations in Iran-Russia Relations During the Past Four Decades", **Iran & the Caucasus**, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2020, pp. 217-219.

²⁴⁹ Eric D. Moore, **Russia-Iran Relations Since the End of the Cold War**, Oxon: Routledge, 2014, pp. 2-5.

²⁵⁰ Nansi Paulraj, "The JCPOA and Changing Dimensions of the Russia-Iran Relations", **Contemporary Review of the Middle East**, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2016, p. 100.

regional conflicts, notably in Syria, where both support the Assad government. Their cooperation in Syria had a significant impact on the outcome of the conflict. While Russia and Iran have common interests, they also have differences on regional issues. These include areas where their interests do not coincide, such as the struggle for influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Russia and Iran have participated in international forums and agreements aimed at addressing Iran's nuclear program, such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Cooperation in such forums can be tactical and driven by mutual interests.²⁵¹ Russia and Iran have the most active relationship in the Caspian Sea. The Caspian Sea has been an important area of cooperation and competition for both actors.

The historical background of Türkiye-Russia-Iran relations is complex and has developed over centuries. These three countries have interacted and clashed in various ways throughout history. The historical background of their relations is a complex fabric of conflict, cooperation, and shifting alliances. Trilateral relations can be analyzed in three distinct actor-based periods. The first one is the relationship between the Ottoman Empire-Tsarist Russia and Safavid Iran, which covers the long period of trilateral relations and can be termed as *the period of three empires*. The second is the Cold War period between the Republic of Türkiye, the Soviet Union and Iran. The third is the post-Cold War period between the Republic of Türkiye, the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Relations between Türkiye, Russia and Iran throughout history can be divided into seven broad phases, each characterized by different features and dynamics. The seven phases are sub-phases of the three broad phases mentioned above. The first one is the pre-modern rivalry, covering the 16th and 17th centuries. The starting point of this period is the Astrakhan Campaign between the Ottoman Empire and Tsarist Russia. While the Ottoman Empire was engaged in power competition with Tsarist Russia, it also engaged in territorial disputes, religious conflicts and military conflicts with the Safavid Empire. These rivalries were centered on disputed territories in the Caucasus, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia and were driven by sectarian differences. The sharp Sunni-Shia divide between the two states led to the use of Turkish and Iranian identities as

²⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 103-106.

synonymous with Sunni and Shia.²⁵² The Battle of Chaldiran, which took place during this period, resulted in the victory of the Ottoman Empire led by Yavuz Sultan Selim.²⁵³ The second phase, covering the 18th and 19th centuries, was one of colonial expansion and great power rivalry. During this period, foreign interventions increased, especially with the emergence of the Russian Empire. The Ottoman Empire was referred to as the “Sick Man of Europe” and both Russia and Western powers sought to influence and capitalize on its decline. The Ottomans, Iran and Russia engaged in great power competition and faced territorial losses. A total of six wars²⁵⁴ involving three actors took place in these two phases. These two phases can be labeled as the phase of the wars of the three empires, in which power competition was embodied and manifested through wars.

The third phase is the period of treaties covering the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This phase witnessed the signing of several important treaties, including the Treaty of Turkmanchai (1828) between Russia and Iran and the Treaty of Kars (1921) between multiple parties. These treaties aimed to resolve border disputes and stabilize relations in the South Caucasus. The fourth phase is the period of the early republic and diplomacy, spanning the 1920s and 1930s. With the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye and the Soviet Union, Türkiye sought diplomatic recognition and reaffirmation of its borders. Diplomatic efforts and treaties were instrumental in clarifying borders and ending hostilities between the newly established states.

The fifth phase was the period of Cold War alliances in the mid-20th century. During the Cold War, Türkiye was a member of NATO, while Iran and the Soviet Union were aligned to varying degrees with the Eastern Bloc. Türkiye’s NATO membership affected its relations with both Iran and the Soviet Union. The region became a theater of Cold War rivalry. The sixth phase is the post-Cold War period, which corresponds to the end of the 20th century. After the end of the Cold War, Türkiye, Russia and Iran began to pursue different foreign policy goals. Türkiye sought greater engagement with Europe, Russia sought to rebuild its influence, and Iran

²⁵² Max Scherberger, “The Confrontation between Sunni and Shi’i Empires: Ottoman-Safavid Relations between the Fourteenth and the Seventeenth Century”, in Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak (Eds.), **The Sunna and Shia’a in History**, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 51-67.

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 57.

²⁵⁴ The wars were; 1568-1570 Astrakhan Campaign, 1722-1723 Russo-Iranian War, 1723-1727 Ottoman-Safavid War, 1742-1746 Ottoman-Iranian War, 1774-1779 Ottoman-Iranian War and 1828-1829 Ottoman-Russian War.

oscillated between regional conflicts and international sanctions. The seventh and final phase is the period of contemporary relations covering the 21st century. In the 21st century, relations between these countries are characterized by a mix of cooperation and competition. Energy partnerships, trade and diplomacy have played important roles in their interactions. However, they have also taken opposing sides in regional conflicts, including in Syria.

1.3. The Components of Turkish-Russian-Iranian Relations

The components of Türkiye, Russia and Iran relations can be categorized under four components. These are historical ties, geographical proximity and geopolitics, economy and energy, and culture, identity and ideology.²⁵⁵ The three actors relate to each other through these components and shape their foreign policies towards each other. These components either cause conflict or provide them to cooperate. In this section, the meaning of each component for the three countries will be explained and then the extent to which they affect the relationship between the actors will be analyzed.

First, in terms of historical ties, the Republic of Türkiye has a long and deep-rooted history of the Ottoman Empire. The history of the Ottoman Empire has provided Türkiye with the experience of holding different societies together and merging various cultural elements. A strong imperial past has led Türkiye to claim leadership in its region of influence, or at least a desire to interact with regional actors. Hence, Türkiye's desire to be an influential actor in the Five Seas Basin, its willingness to mediate the regional crises, and its efforts to promote regional stability.

At the same time, the Treaty of Sèvres, which the Ottoman Empire faced during its disintegration phase, has traumatized Türkiye's collective memory. This trauma, dubbed the "*Sevres Syndrome*", was inherited by Türkiye as a fear of being invaded.²⁵⁶ Atatürk's famous phrase "*peace at home, peace in the world*" has been the overarching and defining roadmap for Türkiye's foreign policy. Today, Türkiye's involvement in mediating conflicts and preventing their escalation rather than being a party to them

²⁵⁵ In this context, inspiration has been drawn from Baskın Oran's edited book on Turkish Foreign Policy. See. Baskın Oran (ed.), **Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar, Cilt I: 1919-1980**, 19th edition, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2014, p. 20-45.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 137.

can be seen as a reflection of this statement in foreign policy.²⁵⁷ For example, Türkiye's constructive and peaceful stance in the Russia-Ukraine War was aimed at both stabilizing its sphere of influence and ensuring that the world's grain demands are met and the grain chain is not disrupted through the Grain Corridor Treaty.²⁵⁸

Mustafa Kemal's replacement of the three big ideas (Ottomanism, Islamism and Turanism) with three principles (Republicanism, Secularism and Nationalism) has influenced the decisions of today's foreign policy makers. Another example of historical ties can be given from more recent history. The "zero problems with neighbors policy" of Ahmet Davutoğlu, who served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs between 2009-2014 and Prime Minister between 2014-2016, influences today's foreign policy. The reflections of this policy, in which Türkiye is an "order builder" and "center" actor, can be seen in Türkiye's soft power in Africa and the Middle East.²⁵⁹

The balancing strategy is another historical legacy Türkiye inherited from the Ottoman Empire.²⁶⁰ For years, Türkiye has pursued a balancing strategy between the West and the East. When it was in conflictual relations with the West, it turned to the East, and when it was in conflictual relations with the East, it turned to the West. In other words, it turned to one power to balance it against the other.²⁶¹ The interwar period (1919-1939) provided the perfect ground for Türkiye to implement this policy. Türkiye separated France and Italy from Britain and instrumentalized the isolation of the Soviet Union by the Allies. This strategy led to the Italian withdrawal from Antalya and the French withdrawal from Adana and Antep. In this way, Türkiye was able to focus on Greece, Britain's only ally on the ground.²⁶² Similarly, the Soviet Union was the first state to recognize the Ankara Government. Arms and economic support from

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

²⁵⁸ "Bölgemizdeki gelişmeler Türkiye'nin Avrupa Birliği için ne denli önemli olduğunu ortaya koymuştur", **Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı**, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/138643/-bolgemizdeki-gelistmeler-turkiye-nin-avrupa-birligi-icin-ne-denli-onemli-oldugunu-ortaya-koymustur->, (Retrieved by 15 September 2023).

²⁵⁹ Mustafa Aydın, "Grand Strategizing in and for Turkish Foreign Policy: Lessons Learned from History, Geography and Practice", **PERCEPTIONS**, Autumn-Winter 2020 Volume XXV Number 2, p. 210.

²⁶⁰ Ali L. Karaosmanoğlu, "The Evolution of the National Security Culture and the Military in Turkey", **Journal of International Affairs**, Fall 2000, Vol. 54, No. 1, p. 201.

²⁶¹ See. Nur Çetinoğlu Harunoğlu, Ayşegül Sever, Emre Erşen, **Turkey between the United States and Russia Surfing on the Edge**, Lexington Books, 2021.

²⁶² Mustafa Aydın, "Grand Strategizing in and for Turkish Foreign Policy", p. 211.

the Soviet Union became the stabilizing factor in Türkiye's struggle against the occupying forces.

Unlike Türkiye, the Russian Federation has two strong imperial antecedents. The first is Tsarist Russia and the second is the Soviet Union. Tsarist Russia is called a great power, while the Soviet Union is called a superpower and a pole of the Cold War bipolar international system. Russia has an imperial tradition. The imperial tradition has three implications for contemporary Russian foreign policy. First, this tradition manifests itself in Russian foreign policy as a desire to have a great power image.²⁶³ Secondly, Russia also has the experience of keeping different societies together and uniting various cultural elements. Third, Russia seeks to expand its regional sphere of influence. The former Soviet space is referred to as Russia's "near abroad"²⁶⁴ and Russia tends to increase its influence in its neighborhood. At the same time, the vast Russian territory has been subjected to three major occupations throughout history. In the 13th century, the Mongol Empire invaded Russia and held a significant part of the Russian territory. In the early 18th century, Napoleonic France invaded Russia. During the Second World War, Hitler's Germany made progress in Russian territory with Operation Barbarossa. As in the case of Türkiye, these three invasions traumatized Russia's collective state memory. This trauma created a fear of being invaded in Russia.

Accordingly, although the Russian Empire and Western states cooperated with each other before the Cold War, they fought each other as enemies in many wars. The experience of this war made Western states a potential threat to Russia and Russia thought that a Western country could attack it at any time. Because of this mentality, Russia needs to gather more forces and secure itself against attacks from the West.²⁶⁵

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a long history of empire. Iranian territory has been ruled by powerful and long-established regimes such as the Achaemenid Empire, the Safavid Empire, the Zend Dynasty, the Qajar Dynasty and the Pahlavi Dynasty. Each of them was decisive and important actors in the international system of their time. Iran's deep-rooted imperial past has led it to have an imperial tradition. This

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²⁶⁴ Bohuslav Litera, "The Kozyrev Doctrine-a Russian Variation on the Monroe Doctrine", **Perspectives**, No:4, Winter 94/95, p. 45.

²⁶⁵ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The Sources of Russia's Fear of NATO", **Communist and Post-Communist Studies**, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2018, p. 103.

tradition shows itself in Iranian foreign policy as a desire to increase its sphere of influence. At the same time, the fear of being invaded is embedded in the collective memory of Iran, which has been previously occupied by the Ottoman Empire, Tsarist Russia, the United Kingdom, Britain, the Soviet Union and, more recently, Iraq. Iran's past weakness against foreign domination has profoundly and enduringly impacted the Iranian mindset, shaping elite perspectives for decades. This has fostered an almost obsessive concern over external interference in Iran's internal matters or the matters perceived as internal by Iran, making Iranians cautious of major powers' intervention in the region.²⁶⁶

After coming into the power, the main goal of the foreign policy of Reza Shah was to use Soviet Union against the United Kingdom and vice versa. Thus, he could rescue from Iran the foreign interventions of Russia and Britain. At that time, Iran desired help from the US, but in order not to interfere the policies of Russia and Britain, the US preferred to avoid providing help to Iran. Thus, Iran started to maintain close relations with the Nazi Germany, and it used this cooperation as a tool to prevent Soviet and British influence in his state. Soviet Union and the United Kingdom used German Iranian alliance as an excuse to occupy Iran and to toppled Reza Shah in 1941.²⁶⁷ Reza Shah wanted to follow the policy of Persianization being influenced by Mustafa Kemal's Turkification policies. That's why he aimed to and succeeded in combining nationalism with state centralization.²⁶⁸ Furthermore, Iranian relations with Türkiye and the United Kingdom determined its foreign policy towards the Middle East.

Since the time of Cyrus the Great in 6th century BC, Iran has been navigating the balance between ideology and pragmatism in shaping its domestic and foreign policies.²⁶⁹ Although the Iranian Islamic Revolution was driven by ideological and religious reflexes, in practice, Iranian policymakers have frequently subordinated ideology to national interests and pragmatic considerations. While Khomeini's revolutionary rhetoric included an apocalyptic world struggle and a call to export the

²⁶⁶ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran", in Raymond Hinnebusch, Anoushiravan Ehteshami (Eds.), **The Foreign Policies of Middle East States**, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014, p. 263.

²⁶⁷ Przemyslaw Osiewicz, **Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Between Ideology and Pragmatism**, London: Routledge, 2021, pp. 13-14.

²⁶⁸ Ramin Jahanbegloo, **Democracy in Iran**, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 13.

²⁶⁹ Mehran Haghiri, "Iran's Pragmatic Foreign Policy in Response to Regional Crises: The Case of the Blockade Against Qatar", in Mahjoob Zweiri, Md Mizanur Rahman, Arwa Kamal (Eds.), **The 2017 Gulf Crisis: An Interdisciplinary Approach**, Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2021, p. 272.

revolution, over time the realities of governance led to a more practical approach that prioritized state interests over ideological crusades. This pragmatic turn has been evident since Khomeini's era and became stronger after his death in 1989. Thus, Iran's foreign policy, especially towards neighbors, reflects a balance where revolutionary ideals often give way to pragmatic politics focused on national survival and strategic calculations rather than pure ideological objectives.²⁷⁰

Iranian fears of foreign interference and their perception of the international environment contributed to the development of the "negative balance" doctrine influencing Iran's foreign policy before and after the revolution. This mindset fueled a strong national drive for political and economic independence, exemplified by revolutionary slogans like "Independence, Freedom: Islamic Republic" and "Self-Sufficiency," which emphasized sovereignty and reducing economic reliance on Western powers. Both left and right political factions believed economic independence was essential for achieving political independence. Consequently, successive Iranian governments pursued import-substitution industrialization, and by the mid-1970s, the state had become the dominant economic actor, a trend that intensified after the revolution, with increased state control and ownership of the economy.²⁷¹

The second component is geographical proximity and geopolitics. All three actors have similar imperial histories of dominating vast territories. With a surface area of 785.350 square kilometers, Türkiye is a crossroads of civilizations and a bridge connecting Asia and Europe.²⁷² Being a bridge makes Türkiye an important actor in cooperation and regional stabilization. Due to its geopolitical position, Türkiye has been a strategic partner with international institutions and regional blocs such as the Sadabad Pact, the Baghdad Pact and the CENTO in the past and NATO and the BSEC today. It is also a critical energy transportation hub. Türkiye's direct connection to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean makes it an important actor in the Five Seas Basin.

Due to its geostrategic position, Türkiye plays a bigger role in the international system than its area, military power, population and economic power. It controls

²⁷⁰ David Menashri, "Iran's Regional Policy: Between Radicalism and Pragmatism", **Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 60, No. 2, 2007, pp. 154-157.

²⁷¹ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran", in Raymond Hinnebusch, Anoushiravan Ehteshami (Eds.), **The Foreign Policies of Middle East States**, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014, pp. 264-265.

²⁷² "Surface area (sq. km) – Türkiye", **World Bank**, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.SRF.TOTL.K2?locations=TR> (Retrieved on 10 August 2023).

important links between the economically developed West and the energy-rich Middle East and Caspian Basin. Its unique geographical position makes Türkiye simultaneously a Balkan, Middle Eastern, Eurasian and Mediterranean state. The strategic location of Anatolia and the possession of the straits create many political and military advantages, but also security concerns.²⁷³ Its straits, which allow it to control passage through two of the Five Sea Basins, have caused security problems with states that have claimed the straits in the past.

Russia has the largest territory in the world, 17.098.242 square kilometers, which is difficult to manage and control.²⁷⁴ Having such vast territories makes Russia both a regional and a global player. Like Türkiye, Russia is a bridge between Asia and Europe and has significant territories on both continents. Unlike Türkiye, Russia plays an active role in both the production and transportation of energy. It exports oil, natural gas, and raw materials to the world. According to 2023 data, Russia exports to the world a large number of mineral products, including crude oil, petroleum gas, refined oil and coal briquettes, as well as precious and non-precious metals, chemical products, animal and vegetable products, textiles and weapons.²⁷⁵ The high share of mineral products in the trade volume makes Russia an energy corridor.

At the same time, as a matter of traditional Russian foreign policy, Russia has overseas engagements. In Syria, Russia has the naval base in Tartus and the air base in Latakia in the Mediterranean within this context. With a navy in the Black Sea, Russia's sphere of influence includes the seas. Russia's direct connection to the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea and also indirect connection to Mediterranean and Red Sea due to its military base in Sudan²⁷⁶ makes it an important actor in the Five Seas Basin.

Iran has 18th largest territories in the world which is 1.648.195 square kilometers.²⁷⁷ For centuries, geography has been a crucial factor shaping Iran's foreign policy. As an ancient landmass empire situated at the crossroads of Eurasia, the modern Iranian state includes regional ambitions that reach across much of western Asia.

²⁷³ Aydın, "Grand Strategizing in and for Turkish Foreign Policy", p. 212.

²⁷⁴ "Largest Countries in the World (by area)", **Worldometer**, <https://www.worldometers.info/geography/largest-countries-in-the-world/> (Retrieved on 10 August 2023).

²⁷⁵ "Russia", **OECD**, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/rus> (Retrieved on 10 August 2023).

²⁷⁶ Basillioh Rukanga, "No obstacles' to Russian Red Sea base – Sudan", **BBC**, 13 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c30del8dz51o> (Retrieved on 20 August 2023).

²⁷⁷ "Largest Countries in the World".

Geography means dual influence on Iran: it enables the expansion of Persian influence throughout Asia. At the same time, it leaves the country vulnerable to great-power rivalries and the diplomatic moves of external states.²⁷⁸

Iran has pursued a more strategic and ambitious approach to expanding its influence across the region. The concept of a “Shia Crescent” appears plausible when considering how Iran has consolidated its presence in Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, and Sanaa. While it does not exert full control over these states, the Islamic Republic is nonetheless capable of disrupting the operations of its declared adversaries within these areas. Additionally, Iran has positioned itself as a key player in the defeat of Daesh. Iran’s mosaic defense strategy, which involves establishing buffer zones around its core territory, may not fully consolidate Iranian control over these areas, but maintaining a disruptive influence there can still advance its broader strategic objectives.²⁷⁹

Iran is a geographically central actor in the Five Seas Basin region, even at its heart. Therefore, it is involved in conflicts and collaborations in the region. It definitely desires to become a regional power. Like Russia, it plays an active role in both the production and transportation of energy. Iran's direct connection to the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf makes it an important actor in the Five Seas Basin.

The third component is economy and energy. According to Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK)’s October 2023 data, Türkiye’s most exported item is “Motor vehicles, tractors, bicycles, motorcycles and other land vehicles, their components, parts and accessories”. The most imported item is “Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products obtained from their distillation, bituminous substances, mineral waxes”.²⁸⁰ According to the same data, while Germany is Türkiye’s top export destination, China is Türkiye’s top import destination. Russia ranks 8th in the list of countries to which Türkiye exports, while Iran ranks 16th. Russia ranks 2nd in the list of countries that Türkiye imports from. Iran is not included in the top 20 countries of this list.²⁸¹ The products that Türkiye sells to Russia are mainly citrus fruits, engine parts and

²⁷⁸ Ehteshami, “The Foreign Policy of Iran”, p. 263.

²⁷⁹ Sebastien Boussois, “Iran and Qatar: A Forced Rapprochement”, in Andreas Krieg (Ed.), **Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis**, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan Singapore, 2019, p. 229.

²⁸⁰ “Dış Ticaret İstatistikleri”, Ekim 2023, TÜİK, <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Dis-Ticaret-İstatistikleri-Ekim-2023-49628> (Retrieved on 20 August 2023).

²⁸¹ Ibid.

accessories and seedless fruits, while the products that Türkiye buys from Russia are mainly refined oil, coal briquettes and wheat.²⁸² Türkiye sells to Iran mainly motor parts and accessories, sulfate chemicals, wood pulp and packaged medicines. The main products purchased from Iran are crude aluminum, crude zinc and ethylene polymers.²⁸³

Oil has been central to modern Iran's development, but the rapid modernization and industrialization in the 1970s greatly increased Iran's dependence on hydrocarbons. This deep reliance shaped Iran's foreign policy and national security, making the country vulnerable to external pressures despite oil wealth being both a source of strength and a critical weakness. After the 1979 revolution, Iran inherited this oil-dependent socioeconomic system. Although the new regime initially attempted to reform the economy, the Iran-Iraq war stopped efforts to reduce dependence on oil, preventing a shift away from the international capitalist system. While Iran remained a key hydrocarbon supplier, its ambition to become a newly industrializing country was decreased due to severed Western alliances and disrupted foreign capital ties, preventing economic diversification and industrial development. Thus, despite maintaining global economic interdependencies, the revolution effectively ended Iran's drive to become a regional capitalist hub, leaving the country temporarily outside the capitalist competition.²⁸⁴

The fourth component is culture, identity, and ideology. Türkiye's unique identity, at the crossroads of East and West and secular and Islamist currents, influences its strategic choices and regional diplomacy. The identity debate within Türkiye shapes foreign policy priorities, including balancing Western alliances with regional Muslim-majority neighbors.²⁸⁵ The Kemalist revolution aimed to establish a

²⁸² "Turkey, Exports to Russia", 2022, **OECD**, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tur?marketGrowthViewSelector=marketGrowthViewOption0&yearlyTradeFlowSelector=flow0> (Retrieved on 20 August 2023).; "Turkey, Imports from Russia", 2022, **OECD**, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tur?marketGrowthViewSelector=marketGrowthViewOption0&yearlyTradeFlowSelector=flow1> (Retrieved on 20 August 2023).

²⁸³ "Turkey, Exports to Iran", 2022, **OECD**, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tur?marketGrowthViewSelector=marketGrowthViewOption0&yearlyTradeFlowSelector=flow0> (Retrieved on 20 August 2023).; "Turkey, Imports from Iran", 2022, **OECD**, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tur?marketGrowthViewSelector=marketGrowthViewOption0&yearlyTradeFlowSelector=flow1> (Retrieved on 20 August 2023).

²⁸⁴ Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran", pp. 265-267.

²⁸⁵ Angel Rabasa, F. Stephen Larrabee, **The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey**, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008, p. 1, 5.

secular, Western-oriented Turkish identity through top-down reforms. This identity framework shaped Türkiye's traditional foreign policy to focus on Western alliances and secular statehood.²⁸⁶

On the other hand, Russia's vast territories in the past and present have always caused it to be in an identity crisis. The Westernization movements that began in Tsarist Russia during the reign of Peter I divided the people of Russia into two camps: "Slavophiles" and "Westernizers". The discussion between those two groups, which has shaped the foreign policy of the Russian Federation from time to time, has its roots in Tsarist Russia.²⁸⁷

During the reign of Peter I, the Russian Empire expanded its territory to the Baltic States and a close relationship between the Russian Empire and the West began. At that time, some Russian theorists questioned Russia's role in Europe and argued that Russia should imitate Western Europe to develop its economy, especially in economic terms. Therefore, the Russian Empire adopted some European methods and institutions in order to strengthen the monarchy and the economy. The group of Westernizers emerged after these adoptions in the 19th century. The Westernizers argued that Russia should become a European state and in order to do that, it should adopt the European values and ideas.²⁸⁸

The Westernists such as Mikhail Speransky advocated Peter the Great's efforts to modernize Russia and supported the widespread introduction of liberal European institutions on Russian soil. While some of the Westernists stressed the need for industrialization of the country, the Slavophiles openly opposed this idea and considered that a policy of industrialization like that of the Western states meant selling Russia to Europe. Slavophiles supported Russia's indigenous traditions, which they presented as a true religious and social community of Russia. The Russian people have their own unique culture and that they have neither a Western nor an Eastern identity.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 32, 92.

²⁸⁷ Magda Leichtova, **Misunderstanding Russia: Russian Foreign Policy and the West**, USA: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014, p. 30.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

They were truly convinced that the West had completed its mission and that Russia should now be at the center of world civilization.²⁸⁹

In other words, Slavophiles assume that Western values are incompatible with the peculiarities of Russian society, especially in terms of the principles of individualism and rationalism. They see the Russian people as a community and admire its culture of solidarity based on the Russian state. The principle of individualism threatens the solidaristic nature of Russian society, the level of loyalty to the Russian state and the willingness to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the Russian state.²⁹⁰

The Westerners-Slavophiles debate has survived until today. In order to comprehend this debate, it is necessary to emphasize the distinction between Atlanticism and Eurasianism. Atlanticism includes establishing close relations with Western countries, trying to emulate them politically and culturally, and finding common interests or goals to build alliances with them. Eurasianism, on the other hand, involves Russia's unique characteristics as a continent like Europe and Asia, and on Russia's religious, political, intellectual and cultural specificity, the maintenance of Soviet patterns and traditions and distrust of Western states due to differences with Russia, such as political regimes. Eurasianism assumes that Russia's unique culture, rich resources and vast territories are its unique qualities, and therefore no state can impose rules, instructions and opinions on Russia; instead, Russia must create and implement its own unique rules and norms.²⁹¹

The phenomenon of the national idea in Russia, which is based on the assumption that Russia is not a European or Asian country, but has its own peculiarities and will continue the traditions of the Roman Empire, thus Russia is considered to symbolize the Third Rome, has always been the main roadmap of Russian foreign policy. For example, in the 19th century, the Slavophiles emphasized Russia's distinctive features, while in the 20th century these features were crucial for the Soviet

²⁸⁹ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "In the Shadow of Nikolai Danilevskii: Universalism, Particularism, and Russian Geopolitical Theory", **Europe-Asia Studies**, Vol. 69, No. 4, 2017, p. 575; Andrei Tsygankov, "Crafting the State-Civilization", **Problems of Post-Communism**, Vol. 63, No. 3, 2016, p. 5.

²⁹⁰ Leichtova, **Misunderstanding Russia**, p. 31.

²⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 26, 32-33; Vügar İmanov, **Avrasyacılık: Rusya'nın Kimlik Arayışı**, İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2008, pp. 39-44; Alexander Dugin, **Rus Jeopolitiği Avrasyacı Yaklaşım**, Vügar İmanov (trans.), İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2018.

Union's foreign policy.²⁹² Today, the Russian Federation followed the footsteps of the Slavophiles and Eurasianists.

The academic reflection of Russia's identity conflict can be found also in Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. Russia is one of the countries in Samuel Huntington's torn country category. Because according to Huntington, Russia is neither Eastern nor Western. It is a country with a transitional identity.²⁹³

The identity-based factors that affect the Iranian foreign policy are the identity of Iranian, and the identity of Muslim. In terms of the identity of Iranian, before the Sasanian Empire, it was non-political but gradually transformed into a politically dominant identity shaped by the Sasanians. This identity, enriched with cultural and historical characteristics, was grounded in the monarchy institution and the Persian language. Various scholars highlight different core components of the Iranian identity: Abdulkerim Surush emphasizes Iranian culture, Islamic culture, and modernity; Mutteheri focuses on Iran and Islam; Shahrukh Meskub stresses the Persian language and history; Hamid Ahmedi includes the monarchy heritage, Persian language and literature, Zoroastrianism, and Shia Islam²⁹⁴; while Nikkie Keddie identifies the Iranian plateau geography, Persian language, and Shia sect as central.²⁹⁵

Iranian identity is deeply rooted in a continuous cultural tradition, passing through literary figures such as Ferdowsi and Hafez, which maintains the cultural continuity to the present day. Historically, Iranian identity is linked to Iran's past sovereignty and power, themes frequently referenced in 20th century literature and political narratives, such as during Mossadegh's era when nationalization of oil was promoted. Components of Iranian nationalism include historical, cultural, racial, and linguistic awareness, with Iran distinguishing itself particularly from Arabs through its language and historical civilization.²⁹⁶

During the Safavid period, the policy of Shiification sought to revive Iranian history and differentiate Iran from other Muslim communities, while threats from

²⁹²Emre Erşen, "The Evolution of 'Eurasia' as a Geopolitical Concept in Post-Cold War Turkey", *Geopolitics*, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 31.

²⁹³ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (United State sof America: Simon & Schuster, 2002.

²⁹⁴ Hamid Ahmedi, *İran: Ulusal Kimlik İnşası*, Hakkı Uygur (trans.), İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2009.

²⁹⁵ Mohammad Rigiderakhshan, "İran'ın Dış Politika Kimliğini Oluşturan Faktörler", *VAKANÜVİS-Uluslararası Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2020, p. 394.

²⁹⁶ Ibid. pp. 394-395.

Ottoman and Uzbek neighbors shaped these identity dynamics. The rise of nation-states in 18th century Europe introduced nationalism to Iran, especially during the Qajar period. Translations of ancient Greek works fueled a resurgence of interest in Iran's pre-Islamic empires, further solidifying nationalism, which spread during the Constitutional Revolution and became official under the Pahlavi dynasty. The Pahlavi regime prioritized Persian language education and modern infrastructure to strengthen national unity and positioned Iranian identity above Islamic identity, using nationalism to legitimize the regime. In foreign policy, Iranian identity emphasized restoring territorial integrity and regional leadership, often linked to fostering a Persian coalition. However, since Ayatollah Khomeini's era, Iran's foreign policy shifted toward political Islamism. During the Iran-Iraq War, nationalist rhetoric reemerged to boost morale, and after Ayatollah Khamenei became Supreme Leader in 1989, Shiite political Islam blended with Iranian nationalism to shape a distinct foreign policy identity.²⁹⁷

Regarding the Islam identity, with the spread of Islam, sectarian divisions occurred during the Safavid period (1501-1736), and Shiism became both a religious sect and a symbol of cultural identity in Iran. The Safavids sought to differentiate Iranians from other Muslim communities by giving Iranian culture an Islamic form and interpreting important cultural elements (such as Nowruz) within an Islamic context.²⁹⁸

In the regime established after the Iranian Revolution, politics and religion are intertwined; the government is based on Islamic jurisprudence, and education and the state's ideological institutions have been reorganized according to Islamic understanding. Foreign policy was shaped on the basis of Islamic unity, with Iran defining its nation-state borders according to the distinction between dar al-Islam and dar al-harb, and basing the export of the revolution on this ideology. After the revolution, Islamic identity became more important than national identity, and national identity was transformed into an Islamic identity. Religious intellectuals played an important role in this transformation. Although nationalism gained strength during the Pahlavi period, its influence declined with the revolution, and religion became more dominant in society. The influence of Islamic thinkers is evident in the shaping of

²⁹⁷ Ibid. pp. 395-397.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 402-405.

Iranian foreign policy before and after the revolution, which was achieved by both making traditional Islamic elements effective in politics and taking material and spiritual elements into account.²⁹⁹

Since the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran and its foreign policy have been fundamentally rooted in an Islamic revolutionary ideology. The goals and guiding factors of Iran's foreign policy were established early in the revolution, emphasizing Islamic principles, resistance to imperialism and Western interference, and reflecting Ayatollah Khomeini's personal perspectives on Iran, Islam, and global affairs. Consequently, Iran underwent a dramatic transformation in 1979, emerging as an ideological state committed to revolutionary and revisionist policies, with pragmatism largely sidelined during the first decade after the revolution.³⁰⁰

The Islamic Republic fundamentally embodies a revolutionary ideological framework across all areas of governance, with Iran's leaders implementing policies aligned with this vision. However, the degree of ideological and revolutionary influence has varied among different presidents, leading to diverse foreign policies and approaches in international relations.³⁰¹ Since 1989, under Ayatollah Khamenei and Ayatollah Rafsanjani, the Islamic Republic shifted from aggressively ideological foreign policy to one emphasizing pragmatism, professionalism, and national interests. Nevertheless, ideology remains a guiding framework with established red lines that continue to shape decisions and limit radical reforms.³⁰² The Islamic Republic shifted away from prioritizing Islamically oriented ideological goals because they proved costly and ineffective in securing immediate national interests, leading to a move toward de-ideologization.³⁰³

As a result, the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran can be handled via four elements which are historical ties of the state, geography and geopolitics of the state, economic relations of the states and lastly identity-based and ideological situation of the states. These are the constant variables that has influenced the foreign

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Haghirian, "Iran's Pragmatic Foreign Policy in Response to Regional Crises", p. 272.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Walter Posch, "The third world, global Islam, and pragmatism: The making of Iranian foreign policy", **Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik**, Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2013, p. 17.

³⁰³ Shireen Hunter, "Iran's Pragmatic Regional Policy", **Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 56, No. 2, 2003, p. 139.

policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran throughout their existence. That's why, in order to comprehend the current foreign policies in the Five Seas Basin, they should be taken into consideration.



2. FOREIGN POLICY MAKING: TÜRKİYE, RUSSIA AND IRAN

2.1. Neoclassical Realism in Foreign Policy Making

Before going into the details of the analysis, it is useful to explain the theoretical basis and conceptual framework that guides this study in order to understand the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran after the Arab Spring and their situation of avoiding the conflict. The neoclassical realist theory of international relations, also referred to as a theory of foreign policy analysis³⁰⁴, is the most appropriate theory to understand and explain the foreign policies of these three actors towards each other and the international system. It is a comprehensive theory which contains both the internal dynamics of the states and the restrictions of the international system. Since those three states are influenced by the restrictions of the international system and also follow foreign policies according to their internal dynamics such as capacities, national interests, public opinions and etc. In order to understand the neoclassical realist theory and apply it to the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran, firstly, the historical development of realist international relations and secondly, the theories that constitute realist international relations should be mentioned.

In order to understand the realist theory of international relations, it is necessary to mention the concept of theory. According to Waltz, a theory examines an organization with different sub-organizations and the interaction between these sub-organizations. A theory gives more importance to some elements than to others and therefore sets some considerations to simplify and comprehend an organization.³⁰⁵ For example, the realist theory in international relations generally has three basic elements: statism, survival, and self-help. In terms of statism, after the Peace of Westphalia

³⁰⁴ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffry W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, **Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics**, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

³⁰⁵ Kenneth, Waltz N, "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory", **The Journal of Interdisciplinary History** Vol. 18, No. 4, 1988, p. 615.

(1648), the most important actor in international politics is the nation state as a unit. The nation states operate in the international system, the main characteristic of which is anarchic. Anarchy means the absence of a central authority in the international system. In an anarchic international environment, survival is the ultimate goal for states, and they can never be sure whether they will survive or not. Since there is no higher authority in the international system, states have to take care of themselves because they do not fully trust any state. This statement refers to the principle of self-help.³⁰⁶

At the same time, realism has three fundamental assumptions. First, humans must live as members of larger groups that command their loyalty and provide security, making tribalism an unchanging feature of politics and society. Consequently, all forms of realism focus on groups rather than isolated individuals. Second, politics involves a constant struggle among self-interested groups competing over scarce resources, which can be material (like military or economic power) or social (such as prestige and status). Groups face ongoing uncertainty about the intentions of others. Third, power is essential for any group to achieve its objectives, whether those aim at universal domination or mere survival and self-preservation.³⁰⁷

In terms of the historical process of realist international relations, within the context of classical realism, Thucydides³⁰⁸, Thomas Hobbes, Niccolo Machiavelli³⁰⁹, Hans Morgenthau³¹⁰ and E.H. Carr are important thinkers. Neorealism differs from classical realism by emphasizing the elements of the international system that restrict state behavior. Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer are crucial figures for neorealism in the context of distinction between defensive and offensive realism. The most comprehensive version of realist international relations, neoclassical realism, includes Gideon Rose, Fareed Zakaria, Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E.

³⁰⁶ Tim Dunne, Brian C. Schmidt, "Realism", in John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (Eds.), **The Globalization of World Politics**, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 87.

³⁰⁷ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, "Introduction: Neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy", in Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (Eds.), **Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy**, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 14-15.

³⁰⁸ Thucydides, **The Peloponnesian War**, Martin Hammond (trans.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

³⁰⁹ Niccolo Machiavelli, **The Prince**, Peter Bondanella (trans.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

³¹⁰ Hans J. Morgenthau, **Politics among Nations**, 7th ed., New York: McGraw-Hill/Irwin, 2006.

Lobell, Alexander Reichwein, Gustav Meibauer, Michiel Foulon, Tudor Onea, Linde Desmaele and Jennifer Sterling-Folker.

Classical realism defines international politics within the framework of struggle for power. Obtaining power is an ultimate aim for every state. In other words, apart from changing national interests of the states, every state struggles for power. The states may have different and various goals like welfare, security, economic development and technological progress, but what is constant is every state is rational actor, and they pursue power in international politics. Other goals are only means to the ultimate goal of obtaining power. Objectives other than the acquisition of power are therefore a means to the struggle for power.³¹¹

In terms of neorealism, with reference to Waltz, international political systems and economic markets have many common points. Firstly, they are both composed of units, and in the case of international systems, these units are nation-states, city-states and empires; they are the basic units of that system, and they define and constitute it. Secondly, the interacting units in the system and the market are solitary and therefore responsible for their own actions and no one can help them in the international structure. From this point of view, it can be said that the fundamental principle of the international structure is self-help. In this international structure based on the principle of self-help, the ultimate goal for the units is to ensure their survival; in other words, states do not seek power but security.³¹²

Another perspective says that money in the markets and power in international relations have similar meanings, and therefore, powerful states can do whatever they want in the international system, just as a person can do whatever he wants thanks to money. The concept of power is at the center of international relations.³¹³ The primary objective for a state is to ensure its survival. After ensuring survival, the state can pursue other goals such as profit and power. According to Kenneth Waltz, unlike Mearsheimer's ideas, power is not an end for any state. He mentions that power is a means to achieve the most important goal, which is survival by maximizing security. Hence, they use power as a means to ensure their security and thus survive in the anarchic international structure. They also prefer not to maximize their power because

³¹¹ Morgenthau, **Politics among Nations**, pp. 4-29.

³¹² Waltz, "The Origins of War", p. 91.

³¹³ Mearsheimer, **The Tragedy of Great Power Politics**, p. 12.

maximizing power destabilizes the natural balance of the international system; it destabilizes the system, and states never want to do that. They prefer to balance rather than maximize their power.³¹⁴

Mearsheimer is an academic of offensive realism and according to his understanding of offensive realism, states generally (or in every case) choose to increase their power because of the system's characteristic of creating opportunities for them. Becoming a hegemon by obtaining so much power, global or regional, is therefore the ultimate goal for states. This power struggle in offensive realism is in line with the principles of Morgenthau's classical realism. However, the difference between these two realisms regarding power struggle is the motivation for this behavior. In other words, for classical realism, states pursue more power and want to become more powerful due to internal factors or their own structures, but for offensive realism, this behavior is motivated by the influence of the structure of the international system on states. While classical realists' pursuit of power for survival is based on intrinsic motivation, offensive realism's pursuit of power is based on the characteristics of the international system.³¹⁵

On the other hand, the anarchic structure of the international system is considered as unstable and in an unstable international system, the dominant states naturally seek to maintain the status quo and their positions. The rising powers try to change this order, because in this case they are not the dominant power. The change means new opportunities for them to increase their power and the chance to become the dominant power. Therefore, it can be said that rising powers want to gain more power and struggle for it.³¹⁶ This approach almost coincides with Mearsheimer's idea of the struggle for more power in an anarchic international system.

In a similar vein, the dominant states begin to decline due to this instability and the challenge of rising powers. According to Gilpin, there are two behaviors that end the decline of dominant powers. These are increasing resources and reducing expenditure. Both of these policies have worked to some extent throughout history. In general, the dominant powers have failed to increase resources and have resorted to

³¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 126-127.

³¹⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

³¹⁶ Robert Gilpin, **War and Change in World Politics**, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 186-187.

the second option of reducing expenditure. However, as rising powers try to change the rules of the game in their favor, the dominant power fails to reduce its spending, making the instability acute. Thus, this persistent instability makes the international system a place of tensions, crises, and uncertainties. Moreover, this situation does not last long and ends in a war.³¹⁷

Neo-classical realism merges internal and external factors in the same analysis by modifying and categorizing the principles of classical realism according to the restrictions of the international system. Both the dynamics of the international system and the domestic politics of states, including their “relative material power capabilities,” are used when examining interactions between states in relation to foreign policy. This makes the thinkers of neoclassical realism both classical realist and neorealist. Relative material power capabilities are important to them, so they are classical realists; however, they also take into consideration the international system dynamics, which is a principle of neorealism.³¹⁸

In other words, neoclassical realism, like classical realism, focuses on the state and its connection to domestic politics. Its primary aim is to develop theories of foreign policy rather than theories of the broader international system in which states operate. However, neoclassical realists seek to employ more advanced methodological approaches than classical realists. At the same time, they accept the core neorealist premise that the international system shapes and limits the policy options available to states.³¹⁹

The states respond to the uncertainties of the anarchic international system by trying to dominate and shape the external environment in accordance with their own interests. They have a desire to increase their influence, and their foreign policies will be shaped according to the extent of their material power resources in the long term. In other words, as states’ relative power capacities increase, they will seek to increase their external influence or control over the external environment, whether regional or

³¹⁷ Gilpin, **War and Change**, p. 197.

³¹⁸ Gideon Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy”, **World Politics**, Vol. 51, No. 1, 1998, p. 146.

³¹⁹ Taliaferro, Lobell, Ripsman, “Introduction: Neoclassical realism”, p. 19.

global. Therefore, it can be said that world leaders must take into account both international and domestic politics.³²⁰

In that sense, Zakaria refers to neo-classical realism as state-centered realism and, in contrast to classical realism, argues that when decision-makers see that “state power” rather than “national power” has increased comparatively, they seek to maximize the state’s influence in the external environment. Thus, neoclassical realism differs from classical realism in terms of decision-makers’ perceptions of the concept of national power. Neoclassical realism has re-emphasized the importance of the concept of state.³²¹

Neoclassical realism offers a comprehensive research agenda rather than a simple theory. It examines more than just the dynamics of the international system, just the domestic politics and relative capabilities of the states. Perceptions of the leaders, social influences, and domestic institutions are the areas of interest for neoclassical realism. It links foreign policy analysis with literature on international relations. In other words, it attempts to bridge the gap between practice and theory. It also has its own unique methodologies, such as qualitative methods, process tracing, and historiography.³²²

There is a range of foreign policy options, from protecting the minimum security of states to maximizing their influence in the external environment. Choosing only one of these options is not correct for neo-classical realism. It assumes that states should conduct their foreign policies by choosing both options. In other words, after assessing the conditions, they should choose one of the options; therefore, the choice should vary from case to case. In other words, the foreign policies of the states are not constant, timeless, or spaceless.³²³

In terms of the relationship between Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and neoclassical realism, FPA is both a distinct subfield and a theoretical perspective within international relations focused on human decision-makers acting individually or in groups. It emphasizes an actor-specific approach, viewing foreign policy decision-

³²⁰ Rose, “Neoclassical Realism”, p. 152.

³²¹ Fareed Zakaria, **From Wealth to Power The Unusual Origins of America’s World Role**, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 35, 38.

³²² Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Steven E. Lobell, **Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics**, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 99-100.

³²³ Zakaria, **From Wealth to Power**, p. 34.

making as multifactorial and multilevel, incorporating insights from political psychology, organizational behavior, and rationalist models. FPA primarily examines individual and small group psychological dynamics, organizational decision-making processes, and the relationship between foreign policy elites and the public.³²⁴

There is some overlap and complementarity between FPA and neoclassical realism, as both consider how policymakers' belief systems, cognitive constraints, and organizational dynamics shape foreign policy. Neoclassical realism prioritizes the international system as the main independent variable, treating domestic factors as intervening variables, whereas FPA privileges domestic (unit-level) variables, sometimes treating the same domestic factors as independent variables.³²⁵

The key disagreement lies in how and when domestic politics influence a state's external behavior; FPA offers a perspective where leader responses depend on various factors including beliefs and perceptions, highlighting a more nuanced interaction between domestic and international forces. Thus, FPA and neoclassical realism are distinct but related research agendas, with differing emphases on the roles of domestic versus international variables in shaping foreign policy.³²⁶

The most fundamental contribution of neoclassical realism to Realist International Relations is the concept of the "intervening variable". The intervening variable makes it possible to identify the effect of state structure and behavior on foreign policy decisions. The inclusion of domestic realm varies in literature. They can be changed from academic to academic in their analysis. For example, Onea³²⁷ discusses strategic interaction, Juneau³²⁸ emphasizes the importance of regime type, and Taliaferro³²⁹ describes the extraction and mobilization capacities of states as the defining principles of the state behavior. Steinsson³³⁰ points out that the misperceptions of elites and internal pressures are quite influential on states' foreign

³²⁴ Ripsman, Taliaferro, Lobell, **Neoclassical Realist Theory**, p. 171-173.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Tudor Onea, "Putting the 'Classical' in Neoclassical Realism: Neoclassical Realist Theories and US Expansion in the Post-Cold War", **International Relations**, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2012, pp. 139-164.

³²⁸ Thomas Juneau, **Squandered Opportunity Neoclassical Realism and Iranian Foreign Policy**, California: Stanford University Press.

³²⁹ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "State Building for Future Wars: Neoclassical Realism and the Resource-Extractive State", **Security Studies**, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2006, pp. 464-495.

³³⁰ Sverrir Steinsson, "Neoclassical Realism in the North Atlantic: Explaining Behaviors and Outcomes in the Cod Wars," **Foreign Policy Analysis**, Vol. 13, 2017, pp. 599-617.

policy decisions. At the same time, according to Schweller³³¹, ideas such as nationalism are also influential; Smith³³² sees neoclassical realism as a guiding framework rather than a simple theory and points out that identity and institutional constraints are the determining intervening variables of neoclassical realism. According to Meibauer³³³, the ideas and individual beliefs of decision-makers influence state behavior.

At the same time, as mentioned above, an increase in the relative power capacity of states will lead to an expansion of foreign policy activities, while a decrease in this capacity will lead to a contraction of foreign policy activities. These processes of expansion or contraction are not regular or sequential, as they are based on perceptions that depend not only on relative material power resources but also on the characteristics, experiences, views, etc. of political authorities. Furthermore, powerful states can convert their material power resources into effective foreign policy activities more quickly than weaker states.³³⁴

The different behaviors of states under the same international system show that the policies, values, or interests of decision-makers determine the foreign policies of states. Therefore, when political elites and interest groups make decisions, they have two criteria: their own “willingness” and the “capability” of the state. Foreign policy cannot be understood solely by looking at its structure; the priorities of statesmen, the political risks of that foreign policy in society, the tendencies of national interest groups, and, of course, the international structure can help to fully understand foreign policy.³³⁵

Before neoclassical realism, two points regarding the foreign policies of states were unclear. The first was who represented the nation and who understood the ups and downs of states’ power and security and how these were perceived. According to

³³¹ Randall Schweller, “Opposite but Compatible Nationalisms: A Neoclassical Realist Approach to the Future of US–China Relations”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2018, pp. 23-48.

³³² Nicholas Ross Smith, “The EU under a Realist Scope: Employing a Neoclassical Realist Framework for the Analysis of the EU’s Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement Offer to Ukraine”, *International Relations*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2015, p. 30.

³³³ Gustav Meibauer, “Interests, Ideas, and the Study of State Behaviour in Neoclassical Realism”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2020, pp. 20-36.

³³⁴ Rose, “Neoclassical Realism”, p. 167.

³³⁵ Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 47-48.

neoclassical realism, the answers to these questions are that “central decision-makers” and foreign policy makers represent the nation, and that the ups and downs in the power and security of states are perceived as they are by decision-makers. Therefore, decision-makers and foreign policy makers conduct foreign policy according to their own perceptions, experiences, and characteristics, and all decisions in this regard are their responsibility. The second question is how scientists objectively determine these criteria of power and security. Referring to neo-classical realism, the objectively determined criteria of power and security are the perceptions of decision-makers. In other words, there is no universally accepted measurement method for these criteria.³³⁶

In order to understand power politics in both the international system and domestic politics, decision-makers must monitor and observe the changing internal and external environment, assess these changes in terms of threats to their state’s interests and security, and pursue policies that are fully compatible with their state’s interests, ensure its security, and take advantage of opportunities.³³⁷ Furthermore, foreign policies are determined by decision-makers and political leaders, so the meaning of relative power is determined by the subjective ratios of physical power, in other words perceived capacities of states, and perceptions, experiences, characteristics, views, and preferences. Therefore, the characteristics of decision-makers and political leaders are as important as the capacities between states. Naturally, as mentioned above, the conditions and circumstances of the international system influence states’ foreign policies.³³⁸

In addition, the countries’ internal affairs affect their foreign policies regarding the ambitions and dynamics of states to expand their territories and create their own empires by invading other states or using diplomatic channels. States’ foreign policies are shaped by the strategies of decision-makers with imperial ambitions. These expansionist policies are pursued to secure states and are implemented after cost-benefit analyses by policymakers. Additionally, although the international system

³³⁶ Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, p. 24.

³³⁷ Barry Buzan, “The timeless wisdom of realism”, in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, Marysia Zalewski (Eds.), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 55.

³³⁸ Rose, “Neoclassical Realism”, p. 147.

strongly influences the behavior of states, security-focused imperial or expansionist policies are created by statesmen, not by the system.³³⁹

Neoclassical realism regards state leaders as active participants who shape foreign policy through their perceptions and interpretations of geopolitical realities. These leaders hold perceptions about future material capabilities and geopolitical structures that influence policy formation.³⁴⁰ State leaders interpret and construct how they perceive the international environment and threats, which results in different “predefined geopolitical structures.” These are cognitive frameworks that set the stage within which foreign policy decisions are made. Although foreign policies represent and respond to domestic interest groups (e.g., commercial sectors), this response happens only within the constraints and possibilities shaped by the geopolitical context that leaders perceive and create.³⁴¹

The material environment (the balance of power, resources, threat levels) might remain the same, but if decision makers’ perceptions of this environment change, it leads to shifts in foreign policy. This means that foreign policy is not a simple direct response to material conditions but also depends on how leaders understand and interpret these conditions. Domestic interest groups exert pressure on leaders, but leaders filter and negotiate these pressures through the lens of their geopolitical perceptions. Therefore, the policy outcomes result from the interplay between domestic pressures and the leaders’ interpretation of the international environment. Because states operate in different perceived geopolitical contexts shaped by their leaders, understanding state behavior and foreign policy requires including these state-level perceptual variables. Without this, explanations miss an important factor that influences why states behave differently even under similar material structural conditions.³⁴² State leaders’ perceptions are influenced by predispositions and cognitive filters, which lead them to notice certain aspects of the environment while neglecting others. This can result in interpretations of information that reinforce pre-

³³⁹ Jack Snyder, **Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition**, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 12.

³⁴⁰ Michiel Foulon, “Neoclassical Realism: Challengers and Bridging Identities”, **International Studies Review**, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2015, p. 646.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 653.

³⁴² *Ibid.*

existing images or biases, which then shape state behavior despite contrary evidence.³⁴³

The aforementioned intervening variables in literature have been identified in the context of the cases studied. In other words, each case contributes theoretically to the intervening variable of neoclassical realism. For this reason, intervening variables can be multiplied and diversified as important tools for understanding the foreign policies of states, as well as reduced and simplified. In the next section, the intervening variables affecting foreign policy in Türkiye, Russia, and Iran will be identified.

2.2. The Driving Forces Behind Foreign Policy: Türkiye, Russia and Iran in the post-Arab Spring Period

2.2.1. Key Determinants and Influences of Turkish Foreign Policy

Turkish foreign policy is shaped within the context of the restrictions of the international system and, of course, Türkiye's internal dynamics. The internal dynamics that influence Turkish foreign policy will be identified in light of the literature. In this context, first, sources that use neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework and examine Türkiye's foreign policy as a case study will be analyzed through the intervening variables they use. Second, following this analysis, the factors influencing Türkiye's foreign policy will be identified and detailed. Third, the institutions responsible for Türkiye's foreign policy and how it is conducted will be explained. Fourth, changes in Türkiye's foreign ministers following the Arab Spring and their impact on foreign policy will be examined. Fifth, the leaders' influence on foreign policy will be emphasized in the context of the leaders' characteristics. Sixth, the framework of foreign policy as outlined in the official documents examined will be analyzed.

Academic studies on Türkiye's foreign policy can be examined within the framework of neoclassical realism in the context of certain intervening variables.

³⁴³ Ibid., p. 652.

These variables are classified and evaluated based on factors such as political, economic, social, security, legal, and media.

Political leadership and ideological tendencies play a central role in Türkiye's foreign policy-making. Türkiye's foreign policy outcomes were significantly shaped by domestic variables operating in the unit-level. These domestic variables include the ideological tendencies of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which favored the Muslim Brotherhood as a regional partner, and the AKP's use of foreign policy as a tool to consolidate domestic power.³⁴⁴ Türkiye's shift towards an activist grand strategy, particularly during the AKP era from 2002 to 2016, can be analyzed through the domestic variables which are economic growth and stronger ties between conservative businessmen and statesmen, boosting resource mobilization capacities and increased autonomy of the civilian elected executive due to diminished military influence over policymaking, allowing greater executive flexibility and control.³⁴⁵

Despite Türkiye's long-standing alignment with the West, certain crises (the Cyprus crisis and the Syrian conflict) have deepened alienation through anti-Western ideological stances (secular developmentalist nationalism in the 1970s and Islamist nationalism post-Syria conflict) that shape threat perceptions and foreign policy behaviors. Türkiye's responses to similar systemic pressures have differed due to the changing ideational and domestic political contexts, showing short-term foreign policy behaviors that deviate from long-term strategic alignment with the West. Economic crises and systemic incentives push Türkiye towards realignment with the West, while ideological shifts and domestic politics explain short-term divergences.³⁴⁶

Economic factors are important elements that determine Türkiye's strategic goals in foreign policy. Türkiye's Blue Homeland initiative is fundamentally defense-oriented, contrary to claims of offensive motives. It explains the policy shift between 2004 and 2021 as a result of interactions between international pressures, and intervening variables of a *realpolitik* strategic culture, the authoritarian nature of the

³⁴⁴ Nuri Yeşilyurt, "Explaining Miscalculation and Maladaptation in Turkish Foreign Policy: Arab Uprisings as a Case Study", *All Azimuth*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2017, p. 66.

³⁴⁵ Göktuğ Sönmez, *The Interplay between International and Domestic Factors in Turkey's Grand Strategy-Making: Activism, Disappointment, and Readjustment*, University of London, PhD Thesis, SOAS, 2020.

³⁴⁶ Ali Şevket Ovalı, İlkin Özdikmenli, "Ideologies and the Western Question in Turkish Foreign Policy: A Neo-classical Realist Perspective", *All Azimuth*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2019, pp. 117-121.

domestic political institutions, and nationalist sentiments.³⁴⁷ Türkiye's domestic insecurity, especially due to the Syrian civil war and reduced US support, pushed it toward bandwagoning with Russia, exemplified by the purchase of the S-400 missile defense system. Turkish foreign policy is caused by differing threat perceptions and priorities shaped by internal politics, such as the failed 2016 coup, which together produced the perceptual shock and systematic punishment that characterize the S-400 crisis.³⁴⁸

Domestic factors, the pragmatic foreign policy approach of the AKP government and the active role of the Turkish business community seeking economic opportunities, have mediated and shaped how Türkiye has responded to systemic international and regional changes such as the global shift of power from West to East by Asia's rapid economic growth, and shifting regional dynamics in the Middle East.³⁴⁹ Türkiye's policy towards Israel was shaped by a combination of international structural factors (the bipolar Cold War period, the unipolar post-Cold War era, and the emerging multipolar world), regional political dynamics, and the perceptions and decisions of Türkiye's Foreign Policy Executive (FPE). While identity and domestic factors play some role, material and structural factors largely directs Türkiye's foreign policy decisions towards Israel.³⁵⁰

Türkiye's response to Syrian mass migration can be best understood through looking at state's capacity to challenge the status quo influence the choices they make in migration policy, ideational drivers, such as the ambition to enhance Türkiye's normative power through humanitarianism and elite perceptions regarding the Syrian crisis, serve as intervening variables shaping policy responses.³⁵¹ Türkiye's militarization is a response to both domestic political dynamics such as the shift to a presidentialist regime centralized decision-making around President Erdoğan, political

³⁴⁷ Serhat Süha Çubukçuoğlu, **Evolving Geopolitics of the Global Commons in Turkey: Maritime Policy, Energy Security, And Regional Diplomacy**, John Hopkins University, PhD Thesis, Baltimore, 2022.

³⁴⁸ Nobuhide Mert Matsumoto, "Overcoming Systematic Punishments: A Neoclassical Realist Approach to the US Turkey Relations After the S-400 Crisis", **Journal of Rising Powers and Global Governance**, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2021, p. 8.

³⁴⁹ Emine Akcadag Alagoz, "Turkey's own "pivot to Asia": a neoclassical realist analysis", **Asia Europe Journal**, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2021, p. 292.

³⁵⁰ Andrew James Emmert, **Turkish Foreign Policy Toward Israel Through the Lens of Neoclassical Realism, 1949-2010**, Middle East Technical University, Master Thesis, Ankara, 2020.

³⁵¹ Zeynep Şahin Mencütek, N. Ela Gökalp Aras, Bezen Balamir Coşkun, "Turkey's Response to Syrian Mass Migration: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 17, No. 68, 2020, p. 94.

Islam and Türkiye's assertive manner, and external threats, reflecting a multidimensional approach combining domestic and international considerations.³⁵²

Türkiye ineffectively balanced against Iran between 2005 and 2013, during Ahmenijad period. This ineffective balancing against Iran was due to intervening variables of strategic culture and societal cohesion. Weak societal cohesion did not directly cause insufficient balancing but hindered the formation of alliances with the US and Israel, while a liberal strategic culture directly impeded both internal and external balancing behaviors, resulting in Türkiye's insufficient balancing of the Iranian threat.³⁵³

Türkiye's foreign policy behavior under Bülent Ecevit's leadership during two distinct periods (1978-1979 and 1999-2002) was shaped by personal worldviews of Ecevit and his foreign ministers (Gündüz Ökçün in the 1978-79 government and İsmail Cem in the 1999-2002 government), along with significant domestic economic constraints such as energy needs and debt problems, acted as intervening variables that further consolidated this foreign policy direction.³⁵⁴ On the other hand, AKP's conservative identity and populist agenda, shifted the Turkish foreign policy away from merely overlapping its interests with the West and Türkiye began seeking new regional alignments in the Middle East especially after 2009, when AKP consolidated power and the international environment became less constraining for Türkiye.³⁵⁵

Growing political polarization, security concerns particularly relating to Kurdish autonomy aspirations, and considerations surrounding the AKP's electoral strategy all influenced the timing and nature of Turkish foreign policy towards the Islamic State (IS), because Türkiye joined the anti-IS coalition in September 2014, AKP only intensified its fight against IS about a year later following the Suroç bombing.³⁵⁶ There

³⁵² Samim Akgönül, Muhammed Can, Eda Ayaydin, "Neoclassical Realist Perspective on Militarization of Turkish Foreign Policy", in Mohammad Eslami and Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira (Eds.), **The Arms Race in the Middle East: Contemporary Security Dynamics**, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2023, pp. 141-142.

³⁵³ Botan Buran, **Threat And Underbalancing: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis Of Turkey's Iran Policy During Ahmedinejad Period (2005-2013)**, TOBB ETU, Master Thesis, Ankara, 2021.

³⁵⁴ Fatma Aslı Kelkitli, "A Neo-classical Realist Account of Türkiye's Foreign Policy Behavior: The Comparison of Bülent Ecevit's 1978-1979 And 1999-2002 Governments", **Alternatif Politika**, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2023, pp. 317-318.

³⁵⁵ Mehmet Şahin, "Theorizing the Change: A Neoclassical Realist Approach to Turkish Foreign Policy", **Contemporary Review of the Middle East**, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2020, p. 485.

³⁵⁶ Anne Bunnenberg, "Domestic Politics and the Decision-Making Process in Turkish Foreign Policy", GeT MA Working Paper No. 14, **Department of Social Sciences, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin**, 2018.

is a divergence between Türkiye's public foreign policy discourse and its actual foreign policy practices because Turkish elites strategically rearrange the hierarchy of domestic ideas. Turkish leaders use exaggerated rhetoric on relatively less critical issues (such as relations with the US and Israel) to manage domestic audiences, while mitigating the discussions on more significant security concerns (such as issues related to Iran and Syria).³⁵⁷ Domestic politics and party ideology, state identity and historical perceptions, elite decision-making, national role conceptions, populism and single party dominance, domestic economic and political interests, de-Europeanization and historical and cultural ties affected the Turkish foreign policy between 1923 and 2023.³⁵⁸

In terms of Article 128 of the Presidential Decree No. 1 on the Organization of the Presidency published in the Official Gazette on 10.07.2018³⁵⁹, sets out the duties and responsibilities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The structure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is described in detail, and the job descriptions and areas of interest of the Directorates General and Departments are underlined. In this context, while the President draws the framework of Türkiye's foreign policy, it is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its employees who execute the foreign policy.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye plays a critical role in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. The Ministry carries out preparatory work for the formulation of foreign policy and coordinates it in line with the objectives set by the President. It represents Türkiye before foreign states and international organizations, conducts negotiations, and assists state organs in their international contacts. It also protects the rights of citizens living abroad, improves their quality of life, and manages the processes of international agreements. The Ministry informs the President of the Republic on foreign developments and promotes Türkiye abroad, contributing to the development of international law. It follows international cases of a political nature and cases in the European Court of Human

³⁵⁷ Wayne McLean, "Understanding Divergence between Public Discourse and Turkish Foreign Policy Practice: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2015, p. 450.

³⁵⁸ Bezen Balamir Coşkun, "One Hundred Years of Turkish Foreign Policy in Eastern Mediterranean (1923–2023): A Neoclassical Realist Analysis of Turkey as a Middle Power", in Binnur Özkeçeci-Taner and Sinem Akgül Açıkmeşe (Eds.), *One Hundred Years of Turkish Foreign Policy (1923-2023): Historical and Theoretical Reflections*, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, pp. 143-163.

³⁵⁹ "Cumhurbaşkanlığı Teşkilatı Hakkında Cumhurbaşkanlığı Kararnamesi, 128. Madde", 10 Temmuz 2018, [Mevzuat.gov.tr](https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/mevzuatmetin/19.5.1.pdf), <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/mevzuatmetin/19.5.1.pdf> (Retrieved on 10 November 2023).

Rights, transmits the instructions of representatives appointed on temporary duty, evaluates the requests of public institutions for foreign organizations, and oversees the compliance of foreign contacts with policies on financial and economic issues. It conducts diplomatic and consular relations, develops cooperation with international organizations and coordinates Türkiye's EU accession process. It also fulfills other duties assigned by laws and presidential decrees.³⁶⁰

The institutional structure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also changed in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The number of Turkish diplomatic missions abroad was increased and new embassies were opened in regions such as Africa.³⁶¹ Regional expertise was developed, and the participation of young diplomats in foreign policy processes was encouraged. In particular, security-based issues such as the Syrian crisis, energy issues in the Eastern Mediterranean and the fight against terrorism were among the Ministry's priority agendas. At the same time, efforts to improve Türkiye's image in the international arena through strengthening media and public diplomacy have been an important agenda.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Türkiye's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and foreign policy underwent significant transformations. In this period, along with the impact of regional dynamics, the leadership visions of foreign ministers shaped Türkiye's position in international relations. Ahmet Davutoğlu, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Feridun Sinirlioğlu and Hakan Fidan served as foreign ministers in different terms and shaped Türkiye's foreign policy in line with their approaches.

In 2009, Ahmet Davutoğlu became the Minister of Foreign Affairs and led an assertive, pragmatic and ideological era in Türkiye's foreign policy. The theoretical framework laid out in his book *Strategic Depth*³⁶² emphasized the goal of increasing Türkiye's soft power as a regional power. During the Arab Spring, Davutoğlu supported the wave of democratization and strongly defended the opposition against the Assad regime in Syria. However, his "zero problem" policy faced serious challenges due to the Syrian crisis and support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Davutoğlu's vision aimed to make Türkiye a leading country in the Middle East, but

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ "Türkiye-Africa Relations", **Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-africa-relations.en.mfa>. (Retrieved on 15 November 2023).

³⁶² Davutoğlu, **Stratejik Derinlik**.

this policy also led to regional polarization and deteriorating relations with some countries.³⁶³

Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs between 2014-2015 and 2015-2023, adopted a more pragmatic foreign policy approach in the post-Davutoğlu era. He increased the number of Turkish diplomatic missions and expanded Türkiye's influence in regions such as Africa and Latin America. Under Çavuşoğlu, the emphasis on a security-based foreign policy increased in line with energy security and interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition, Türkiye played an active role in international platforms such as NATO, The Group of Twenty (G20) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), followed international law-based foreign policies, and humanitarian diplomacy. Balanced relations with major powers such as Russia and US have been maintained and multilateral diplomacy has been emphasized.³⁶⁴ Feridun Sinirlioğlu served as Minister of Foreign Affairs in a short-term transitional government in 2015. During this period, there was no major change in foreign policy, focusing more on ensuring continuity and developing temporary solutions to existing crises.

Hakan Fidan was appointed as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2023 and brought his experience in the National Intelligence Organization to the Turkish foreign policy vision. Under Fidan, Türkiye adopted a more security-based foreign policy approach. Relations with countries such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt have been normalizing, and efforts have been made to increase influence in platforms such as NATO, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Efforts to find solutions to regional crises and pragmatism have been the cornerstones of Fidan's foreign policy approach.

According to Fidan, the main priority of Turkish foreign policy is to promote peace and security in Türkiye's near abroad, to deepen the institutionalization efforts of Türkiye in a structured way, to foster an environment of prosperity and to enhance Turkish foreign policy in order to provide solutions to global challenges. The first one,

³⁶³ Zeynep Arkan and Müge Kınacıoğlu, "Enabling 'ambitious activism': Davutoğlu's vision of a new foreign policy identity for Turkey", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2016, p. 385-390.; Bülent Aras, "Davutoğlu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy Revisited", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2014, pp. 414-415.

³⁶⁴ Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Reform or Reset?", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2017, p. 13.

to promote peace and security in Türkiye's near abroad, has two dimensions which are addressing and eliminating threats and challenges and seeking opportunities to develop regional economic and political cooperation. The second one, to deepen institutionalization efforts of Türkiye in a structured way, has two dimensions which are reinforcing Türkiye's current strategic partnerships and forging new ones. The third one, to foster an environment of prosperity, includes that a strong and self-reliant Turkish economy with access to global opportunities boosts economic well-being for the Turkish people and their neighbors, allies, and partners worldwide. In other words, the economic dimension of foreign policy should be prioritized.³⁶⁵

Fidan emphasized that since international affairs extend far beyond classical diplomacy, encompassing security, intelligence, trade, energy, culture, environment, communication, and health, forming a complex interconnected web of global relations. This expansion brings new actors and stakeholders to the forefront, broadening the scope of Foreign Ministries worldwide and requiring Foreign Ministers to actively coordinate national positions with line Ministries and relevant institutions.³⁶⁶

At the same time, Türkiye's Ministry of Foreign Affairs plays a central role in efficiently coordinating all foreign relations to ensure that Türkiye presents a unified voice internationally. This leads to a more holistic, cohesive, and coordinated diplomatic approach, enabling swift and coherent implementation of foreign policy decisions across various domains. Leveraging modern technologies, particularly through initiatives like the Digital Diplomacy Initiative launched in 2019, the Ministry utilizes digital tools for strategic foresight, early warning, public diplomacy, and consular services. Enhancing digital skills among diplomats through continuous in-service training at the Diplomacy Academy is a priority to tackle complex challenges effectively. To better navigate 21st. century global complexities, the Ministry strengthens its analytical capabilities and embraces strategic foresight, facilitated by information exchange with civil society, academia, and think tanks. The Ministry's Center for Strategic Research (SAM) serves as an intermediary and capacity-builder in this regard. Overall, the Ministry's organizational transformation embodies a

³⁶⁵ Hakan Fidan, "Turkish Foreign Policy at the Turn of the 'Century of Türkiye': Challenges, Vision, Objectives, and Transformation", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2023, pp. 14-23.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

proactive, “smart institution” approach, adapting to the evolving global landscape while honoring its centuries-old diplomatic expertise.³⁶⁷

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Türkiye’s foreign policy has evolved in different ways in line with the leadership vision of each foreign minister. Ahmet Davutoğlu’s ideological and proactive approach continued with Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu’s pragmatic and multilateral diplomacy approach, while a security-based approach came to the agenda under Hakan Fidan. During this period, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expanded its diplomatic network, increased its institutional capacity and effectively utilized public diplomacy tools to strengthen Türkiye’s role in the international system. These changes have profoundly affected Türkiye’s foreign policy behavior at regional and global levels.

The characteristics of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the most influential actor in Türkiye’s foreign policy making, should also be mentioned. Erdoğan is a charismatic leader who can mobilize masses with his powerful and impressive speeches.³⁶⁸ He is able to communicate effectively with the public using his previous experience as the Mayor of Istanbul. Having been in politics for years, Erdoğan has turned his political experience into effective communication skills. He is known for his determination and strong will. Despite the problems in domestic politics and the international system, he pursues his own political agenda. He is also a populist leader. Being able to read the common concerns of the public very well and shaping his populist discourse around these concerns.³⁶⁹

At the same time, he has the characteristics of an authoritarian leader and has been particularly criticized for restricting press freedom.³⁷⁰ Erdoğan is also recognized as a nationalist leader. Turkish identity and sovereignty are often emphasized in its discourse. His Islamic conservative identity is reflected in both his domestic and foreign policies.³⁷¹ Although the reflections of his identity on foreign policy are

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Rasim Özgür Dönmez, Kasım Timur, Fatma Armağan Teke Lloyd, “The Nexus of Leadership, Political Empowerment, and Social Mobilization: The Case of the July 15 Coup Attempt in Turkey”, **Insight Turkey** Vol. 22, No. 2, Spring 2020, p. 161; Yalçın Akdoğan, **Siyasi Liderlik ve Erdoğan**, İstanbul: Turkuvaz Kitap, 2017, pp. 73-80.

³⁶⁹ H. Bahadır Türk, “Populism as a Medium of Mass Mobilization: The Case of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan”, **International Area Studies Review**, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2018, pp. 158-159.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 163.

³⁷¹ İhsan Yılmaz, “Erdoğan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist”, **European Center for Populism Studies**, 2021, p 18.

obvious, he has a multilateral approach to foreign policy. For this reason, he maintains close relations with many major powers such as Russia, Iran, the US and the EU, as well as many smaller powers in Africa, Latin America and Asia. He criticizes injustices in his foreign policy based on peace, justice, and values.³⁷² He wrote a book in which he proposed reforms to the United Nations (UN) to address injustices in the international system. In this book, he underlined the injustices in the international system, especially for relatively weak states, and made suggestions for a fairer structure for the UN.³⁷³

Thinking like a businessman, Erdoğan is pragmatic and seeks global recognition. He aims to make Türkiye a great state again. This vision of a great state is a strong Middle Eastern state that can compete with the Europeans and other great powers. He carries the collapse of the Ottoman Empire as a trauma and therefore aims to “remake” Türkiye into a great state.³⁷⁴ This goal of making Türkiye a great state is realized through its relations with Africa, the Western Balkans, and Eurasia. The result of Erdoğan’s policies in these regions has been characterized by Soner Çağaptay as the “Erdoğan Empire”.³⁷⁵ Rhode expresses this aim differently. According to him, Erdoğan’s aim is to turn Türkiye into a major Sunni power and re-establish the caliphate in Istanbul. In this sense, he is described as a “moderate Muslim leader” with whom the West can communicate.³⁷⁶

Within the framework of the vision of the “Türkiye Yüzyılı”, Türkiye pursues a strong foreign policy in the field and at the table with a foresighted and maneuverable diplomacy in a turbulent international environment. Türkiye aims to create conditions for sustainable peace and development by drawing strength from its 500-year diplomatic tradition and central geographical location, as well as its strong institutions and dynamic economy. Foreign policy aims to ensure regional and global peace and security based on counterterrorism, peaceful conflict resolution, mediation and

³⁷² “Dünya 5’ten Büyüktür; BM Küresel ve Bölgesel Sorunlara Ağırlığını Koymalıdır”, **Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı**, 24 September 2014, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/1373/dunya-5ten-buyuktur-bm-kuresel-ve-bolgesel-sorunlara-agirligini-koymalidir> (Retrieved on 10 December 2023).

³⁷³ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, **Daha Adil Bir Dünya Mümkün**, İstanbul: Turkuvaz Kitap, 2021.

³⁷⁴ Soner Çağaptay, **The New Sultan Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey**, London: I.B. Tauris, 2017, p. 3, 7.

³⁷⁵ Soner Çağaptay, **Erdoğan’s Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East**, London: I.B. Tauris, 2020, pp. 299-301.

³⁷⁶ Harold Rhode, “How to Understand Erdoğan & His Neo-Ottoman Strategy to Destory Atatürk’s Turkey”, in **Ally No More Erdogan’s New Turkish Caliphate and the Rising Jihadist Threat to the West**, Washington: Center for Security Policy Papers, 2018, pp. 10-11.

regional ownership approaches. Türkiye leads mediation and peacebuilding efforts in cooperation with international organizations such as the UN, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and OIC.³⁷⁷

By deepening existing relations and developing new cooperation mechanisms, Türkiye aims to create a wide network of cooperation at the global and regional level. It maintains strong ties with organizations such as NATO, the Council of Europe and the OSCE, while preserving the EU membership process as a strategic priority. It is also advancing integration processes with the OTS and various regional organizations. Türkiye aims to shape the diplomacy of the future through innovative steps such as the Digital Diplomacy initiative and the Antalya Diplomacy Forum and works to make the global system more just and inclusive. By continuing its efforts to provide quality services to its citizens abroad and to use technology effectively in all areas of foreign policy, it both secures its national interests and contributes to the common goals of humanity.³⁷⁸

The documents that set the framework for Türkiye's foreign policy are currently the Strategic Plans published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, these Strategic Plans have been published since 2019. For the documents that will be discussed until the Arab Spring period, the government programs between 2011 and 2019 will be used. Based on the foreign policy visions in the government programs, Türkiye's foreign policy will be analyzed. For this purpose, the 59th, 60th, 61st, 62nd, 64th, and 65th government programs will be examined.

According to 59th government program, the foreign policy of Türkiye was determined to maintain and develop the realistic and visionary foreign policy approach of the first AKP government. The aim was to carry the relations with the Central Asian Turkic republics to the highest level and to transform the region into a broad area of cooperation. Stopping conflicts in the Middle East and establishing lasting peace were the main priorities. Türkiye continued to support efforts to achieve peace in Palestine in line with UN resolutions and in to appease the suffering of the Palestinian people. Türkiye pursued a balanced, interest-based approach in foreign policy that aims to

³⁷⁷ "Türkiye Yüzyılı"nda Milli Dış Politika", **Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/genel-gorunum.tr.mfa>. (Retrieved on 10 December 2023).

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

increase regional stability and cooperation, promote peace, and is in line with international realities.³⁷⁹

With reference to the 60th government program, Türkiye aimed to provide regional stability and security especially in Iraq. Supporting the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) by developing trade, culture, tourism, education and basic infrastructure there and ensuring the security and welfare of the Turkish Cypriot people are among the main strategic objectives of Türkiye's Cyprus policy. It is aimed to create a ring of security and prosperity in the region by strengthening economic, cultural, and political ties with neighboring countries. The institutionalization of relations with the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East, Central Asia, the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Caspian and Basra basins are among the priority issues. At the same time, fulfilling Türkiye's historical responsibility to protect Turkic and related states and communities is among the priorities of its foreign policy.³⁸⁰

While, being regional and global actor, a center of peace and stability, caring regional cooperation and multilateralism, using force in a subtle way, and improving the relations with the EU are main priorities of the Turkish foreign policy according to the 61st government program, in reference to 62nd government program, Türkiye was not be a country whose agenda is set by others, but developed policies in line with its own national interests. Türkiye aimed to become a model country where people of different religions, sects and ethnic origins can live together under the umbrella of a democratic state of law. At the same time, the humanitarian, moral, and international law-based stance was maintained.³⁸¹

Türkiye's foreign policy priorities were justice, human rights, democracy, multidimensionality, active initiative, lasting peace, and economic cooperation with reference to the 64th government program. A negotiated, fair and lasting settlement in Cyprus was a key priority. Türkiye's goal was to become a leader. The foreign policy was based on the historical mission of justice and solidarity and aimed to help the oppressed of the world. Efforts were made to democratize the international system and to make justice prevail in politics and the economy.³⁸² According to the 65th

³⁷⁹ "AKP Government 59th Government Program", **Ak Parti**, 2003.

³⁸⁰ "AKP Government 61st Government Program", **Ak Parti**, 2011.

³⁸¹ "AKP Government 62nd Government Program", **Ak Parti**, 2015.

³⁸² "AKP Government 64th Government Program", **Ak Parti**, 2015.

government program, Turkish foreign policy priorities were to make multidimensional, effective, long-term plans on the basis of justice and cooperation; to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties; to stand firm on the Cyprus issue and to stand against double standards in relations with the EU. At the same time, Türkiye's foreign policy aimed to implement the principles of justice and solidarity and to help the oppressed, victimized, refugees, and the needy.³⁸³

On the other hand, according to the 2019-2023 Strategic Plan, Türkiye's foreign policy was defined as an "entrepreneurial and humanitarian foreign policy". This approach aimed to protect national security, economy, and peace. The fundamental principle was "Peace at Home, Peace in the World". Foreign policy aimed to establish multidimensional relations in political, economic, commercial, social, and cultural fields. Türkiye had a wide network of diplomatic missions around the world and played an active role in international relations by using this network effectively. Türkiye aimed to increase its effectiveness in international and regional organizations. In this framework, Türkiye strengthened its relations with international organizations such as the UN, NATO, and the Council of Europe and played an active role in these organizations. Combating terrorism is one of Türkiye's foreign policy priorities. International coordination in combating the financing of terrorism strengthened and propaganda of terrorist organizations combated at the international level.³⁸⁴

Türkiye's foreign policy is being conducted in line with various strategic objectives in order to adapt to changing regional and international conditions, according to the 2024-2028 Strategic Plan. These objectives include protecting the state's national interests and security, contributing to sustainable peace and development, strengthening economic and trade relations, ensuring energy security, and conducting effective diplomacy at the global level. The foreign policy implementation process is carried out by Türkiye's historical diplomatic tradition and well-established institutions. The Ministry pursues a multidimensional and proactive foreign policy in line with national interests through strategic planning activities. Within the framework of this policy, developing cooperation with international and

³⁸³ "AKP Government 65th Government Program", **Ak Parti**, 2016.

³⁸⁴ "T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı 2019-2023 Stratejik Planı", **T. C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı**, 2018.

regional organizations, combating terrorism, preventing conflicts, and crisis management efforts are among the priority objectives.³⁸⁵

2.2.2. Key Determinants and Influences of Russian Foreign Policy

Russian foreign policy is shaped within the context of the limitations of the international system and, of course, Russia's internal dynamics. The internal dynamics that influence Russian foreign policy will be identified in light of the literature. In this context, first, sources that use the neoclassical realism theoretical framework and examine Russia's foreign policy as a case study will be analyzed through the intervening variables they use. Second, following this analysis, the factors influencing Russia's foreign policy will be identified and detailed. Third, the institutions responsible for Russia's foreign policy and how it is conducted will be explained. Fourth, changes in Russia's foreign ministers following the Arab Spring and their impact on foreign policy will be discussed. Fifthly, the impact of Russia's leader on foreign policy will be emphasized in the context of the leader's characteristics. Sixthly, the framework of foreign policy as outlined in the official documents examined will be analyzed.

Russia's position in the global system and its contested internal environment have changed significantly, with declining legitimacy of state institutions and a divided civil society. This makes it more challenging for the state to mobilize society and resources for hard power projection. Consequently, Russia increasingly relies on soft power strategies, such as normative justifications, economic measures, and indirect military tactics, as military options become more costly and less effective both domestically and internationally. That's why, Russia's 2014 intervention in Crimea demonstrates the intervening variables of the strategic use of economic measures, normative justifications, and indirect coercion alongside military tactics.³⁸⁶

Russia's foreign policy and conflict management strategies, as seen in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, cannot be fully understood without considering the interplay

³⁸⁵ "T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı 2024-2028 Stratejik Planı", **T. C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı**, 2023.

³⁸⁶ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi, Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian Empire: the Crimean Intervention through a Neoclassical Realist Lens", **European Security**, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2016, pp .127-128.

between domestic political dynamics and international systemic pressures. The authoritarian structure of Russia, limited state-society interactions, Russia's economic conditions and military capabilities, its long history of autocratic governance, combined with skepticism towards Western norms and structures, Putin's assessment of Russia's military strength and Putin's leadership style and political calculations, including maintaining domestic legitimacy, shapes how foreign policy decisions are made.³⁸⁷

In terms of Russia's foreign policy in the post-Soviet space, state capacity and status recognition are intervening variables. The state capacity refers to Russia's ability to quickly and effectively implement foreign policy decisions, particularly those decided by the executive branch. High state capacity supports the execution of assertive regional policies, including military intervention or coercion. Regarding the status recognition, Russia's perception of its recognition as a great power by other international actors influences its threat perception and behavior. A lack of status recognition can drive more assertive policies to reassert Russia's special role in its neighborhood.³⁸⁸

Russia's foreign policy towards the EU is heavily influenced by its internal political decision-making system, which is highly centralized and personalized around the president and political elites. This centralized and hierarchical decision-making structure limits the efficiency and adaptability of Russia's foreign policy and contrasts with the EU's decentralized and institutionalized decision-making system. Especially political institutions, political culture, and the government-society relationship are critical intervening variables for Russian foreign policy towards the EU.³⁸⁹

In the 1990s and early 2000s, despite systemic incentives to act assertively, Russia's lack of state capacity, defined as political, administrative, and coercive ability of Russia's state apparatus to implement policies, restrained its actions toward the Baltics, resulting in a more passive approach. After the mid-2000s, improvements in

³⁸⁷ Rinata Terkulova, "Russia's Conflict Management Approach and Foreign Policy: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis of the 2022 Ukraine Invasion", *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, No. 45, October 2023, pp. 64-67.

³⁸⁸ Adriana Cuppuleri, *Russia in the Contested Neighbourhood: A Neoclassical Realist Approach to Regional Primacy*, University of Trento, PhD Thesis, Trento, 2021.

³⁸⁹ Nikita Chernyshev, "The Influence of Institutional Decision Making Mechanism in Russia on the Relations with the European Union", *International Organisations Research Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2014, pp. 19-27.

Russian state capacity under Putin allowed Moscow to pursue a more cohesive and assertive policy. Russia a local great power has strong systemic incentives to establish a sphere of influence around their border, especially towards neighboring small states like Baltic countries in order to achieve regional supremacy.³⁹⁰

Russia's conflict with the West over the "common neighborhood" called post-Soviet countries in common, is characterized by subtle but sophisticated soft power competition embedded within broader geopolitical strategies. The great powers like Russia use soft power as a strategic instrument to maintain and expand their spheres of influence against geopolitical rivalries, especially it has the constraints and complexities in using hard power openly in these contested regions.³⁹¹

Russia views NATO's eastward expansion and EU actions as interventions on its spheres of influence especially in the post-Soviet space where Belarus holds a key position. The importance of Belarus to Russia is underlined by the close cooperation between the two in frameworks like the Union State, Eurasian Economic Union, Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which symbolizes Belarus's role within Russia's regional sphere of influence. Russia's assertiveness in its dispute with the West, and its prioritization of Belarus within its regional strategy, are best explained by Russia's internal perceptions, elite consensus, and strategic calculations as intervening variables.³⁹²

Russian foreign policy is shaped by the dominance of a powerful executive branch centered around the President and Prime Minister, especially the President; ongoing debates over Russian national identity, particularly the tension between a European versus Eurasian orientation or Westernism versus Slavophilism or Atlanticism versus Eurasianism; and the conflict between economic interests aiming for profit maximization and political/security agendas.³⁹³

³⁹⁰ Elias Götz, "Enemy at the Gates: A Neoclassical Realist Explanation of Russia's Baltic Policy", **Foreign Policy Analysis**, Vol. 15, No. 1, January 2019, pp. 99-117.

³⁹¹ Vasif Huseynov, **Geopolitical Rivalries in the Common Neighborhood: Russia's Conflict with the West, Soft Power, and Neoclassical Realism**, Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2019, pp. 29-30.

³⁹² Sebastian Blidaru, "The Russian Federation and Belarus in the Dispute with the West. A Neoclassical Realist Paradigm Perspective", **Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov**, Vol. 11 (60), No., 2018, pp. 53-56.

³⁹³ Tatiana Romanovai, Elena Pavlova, "Towards neoclassical realist thinking in Russia?", Asle Toje, Barbara Kunz (Eds.) **Neoclassical Realism in European Politics: Bringing Power Back**, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024, pp. 238-241.

Russia uses energy resources as instruments in its foreign policy towards consumer countries, employing both direct and indirect means of state power mobilization in the energy sector to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Energy resources become tools for Russia to influence other countries and identifies the factors determining the effectiveness of these energy instruments. At the same time, Russia's use of energy as a foreign policy tool combines both coercive and persuasive strategies, and the success of these tools varies depending on the characteristics of the consumer countries. The energy resources of Russia, both as capacity and tool, can be considered an intervening variable especially towards the post-Soviet countries.³⁹⁴

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation is comprehensively structured to protect the country's national interests and implement its foreign policy on a global scale. The ministry encompasses both the central administrative units in Moscow and an extensive diplomatic network abroad.³⁹⁵ The central administration is led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, deputy ministers, Director General of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Federal Agency for CIS, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (*Rossotrudnichestvo*). The Minister of Foreign Affairs is the highest-ranking official in the field of foreign policy, a position held by Sergey Lavrov since 2004. Deputy ministers manage units specializing in geographical regions or thematic issues and provide strategic guidance to the ministry.³⁹⁶

Regional and thematic departments play an important role within the ministry. Regional departments manage relations with specific geographical regions such as Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, while thematic departments focus on global issues such as international organizations, nonproliferation and arms control, new challenges and threats, international information security, etc. In addition, there are also information and press departments in the structure of the ministry.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁴ Giedrius Česnakas, "Energy resources as the tools of foreign policy: the case of Russia", **Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review**, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2016, pp. 10-12.

³⁹⁵ "About the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation", **Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation**, https://mid.ru/en/about/social_organizations/ (Retrieved on 20 December 2023).

³⁹⁶ "Structural diagram of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia", **Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation**, https://mid.ru/en/about/structure/central_office/ (Retrieved on 20 December 2023).

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

In general, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs implements foreign policy strategies determined by the President and the Security Council (SC). The ministry works in coordination with other state institutions, such as the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Economy, to pursue an effective policy in the international arena. The SC of the Russian Federation is an important institutional structure that plays a critical role in foreign policy and makes strategic decisions aimed at protecting the country's national security and interests. The SC operates under the authority of the President and performs policymaking and coordination functions in both internal and external security matters.

The SC contributes to foreign policy by coordinating security and strategic decisions among Russia's top power holders. Its actual independent power is limited by presidential authority, but it serves as a significant platform for formulating and endorsing foreign policy under Putin's leadership. At the turn of the millennium, foreign observers viewed the SC as unlikely to have significant foreign policy decision-making powers. However, by 2001, the SC under Putin had gained a "deciding influence" and became a focal point for coordinating and formulating Russian security policy, including foreign affairs. This shift illustrates how the Council's role is closely tied to the presidency and the political context it operates within. The SC brings together nearly all of the key powerholders in Russia, many of whom hold important posts outside the Council. This "inner circle" is instrumental in security and foreign policy decision-making. Though the SC is not a Soviet-style Politburo, it represents a centralized locus for national security deliberations, including foreign policy matters.³⁹⁸

Unlike during Yeltsin's presidency, when the SC's role fluctuated depending on his personal power struggles, the SC during Putin's tenure has focused more on defending national interests, including foreign policy decisions, rather than internal power contests. This has enhanced the Council's status and embedded it within Putin's regime as an important decision-making body. During the first years of Putin, the SC, especially through its Secretary Sergei Ivanov, assumed unprecedented influence over

³⁹⁸ Milla Olkkonen, "The Role of the Security Council of the Russian Federation: A Power Tool in Russia's Strategic Decision-Making?", Series 3: Working Papers No. 38, **National Defence University**, Helsinki, 2024, pp. 17-22.

foreign policy formulation. Foreign policy decisions were often formulated within the SC, with the Foreign Ministry mainly responsible for implementation.³⁹⁹

External views often paint the SC as a mere rubber stamp body endorsing President Putin's decisions, exemplified by the staged vote on recognizing Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics in 2022. However, the SC constitutionally holds substantial authority and is considered a key arena where strategic foreign policy decisions are coordinated, albeit within the overarching dominance of the presidency.⁴⁰⁰

Sergey Lavrov has remained Russia's foreign minister throughout the post-Arab Spring period. Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, there has been no significant change in the institutional structure of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Sergey Lavrov has served as foreign minister since 2004, and during this time there has been no major transformation in the structure of the ministry.

Under Sergey Lavrov's leadership, Russian foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, has taken a more proactive and interventionist approach. During and after the Arab Spring, Russia adopted various strategies to protect its interests and increase its influence in the region. Russia's military and diplomatic interventions, particularly in the Syrian crisis, reflect Lavrov's foreign policy direction.

Lavrov's foreign policy vision centers on an independent and multi-vector approach that is pragmatic, open, and aimed to advance Russia's national interests without confrontation. This policy is deeply rooted in Russia's unique geographical position, historical tradition, and culture. Russia cannot consider subordinating its foreign policy to any other global player, highlighting the country's sovereign stance. Foreign policy depends on pragmatic diplomacy, constructive international cooperation, and domestic development goals.⁴⁰¹

The vision also includes Russia positioning itself as a balancing factor in international affairs, advocating dialogue based on law and justice, and seeking to unite rather than divide the global community. Russia promotes network diplomacy through

³⁹⁹ Carolina Vendil, "The Russian Security Council", **European Security** Vol. 10, No. 2, Summer 2001, pp. 82-88.

⁴⁰⁰ Olkkonen, "The Role of the Security Council of the Russian Federation", pp. 17-18.

⁴⁰¹ Sergey Lavrov, "Russia's foreign policy philosophy", **International Affairs**, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2013, pp. 1-2.

flexible and overlapping associations like BRICS, G20, and SCO, enabling it to adapt to dynamic international situations. Lavrov rejects attempts to use force or revolutionary slogans to change geopolitical situations. Russia supports settling crises through negotiations and collective efforts within international law frameworks.⁴⁰²

At the same time, Russia does not seek confrontation with the US, the EU, or NATO. Instead, it advocates for broad and inclusive cooperation with Western partners, aiming to create a common economic and humanitarian space. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is designed as a link between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. Lavrov highlights the importance of dialogue based on mutual respect for vital values and interests of all sides. Russia supports principles of law and justice in international affairs and supports resolving global challenges, especially terrorism, through collective actions including countries and international organizations like BRICS, SCO, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the CSTO. It emphasizes partnership of civilizations and respect across cultures and religions as the foundation for long-term success.⁴⁰³

Lavrov also criticizes Western accusations of Russian “revisionism” as unfounded and suggests that the current international relations cannot be governed unilaterally by Washington. He points to the complexity of the modern world requiring multipolar management and fair cooperation among leading states. Pointing out the decline of the Western dominance, Lavrov points to the rise of new global centers, especially China. Russia seeks to assert its rightful role as one of the leading centers of the modern world, building on its historical experience and values. Russian foreign policy is seen as historically continuous, with Russia playing a significant role in European and world history.⁴⁰⁴

On the other hand, Putin’s leadership style is often described as authoritarian. Putin, who has established central authority in Russia, is criticized for suppressing and restricting opposition politicians and the press. As an authoritarian leader, he is portrayed as a strong leader both domestically and internationally. This image of a

⁴⁰² Ibid., pp. 4-5.

⁴⁰³ Sergey V. Lavrov, “Russia’s Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective”, **Russia in Global Affairs**, No. 2 2016, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russias-foreign-policy-in-a-historical-perspective/> (Retrieved on 15 December 2023).

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

strong leader is supported by his physically fit appearance and assertive and confident behavior.⁴⁰⁵

He is also known for his political rationality and strategic thinking. With rational cost-benefit calculations and pragmatic power politics, he brought the Russian Federation, which had weakened and gone through a bad period during the Yeltsin era, back to the international arena.⁴⁰⁶ Having worked in the intelligence service (KGB) during the Cold War, Putin is particularly skeptical and cautious about security issues.⁴⁰⁷ Putin prioritizes national security issues and shapes his domestic and foreign policies in this context. He puts Russia's national interests first in all his policies.

Russia's economic growth is dependent on energy resources. In other words, Russia ensures its economic growth by selling natural gas and oil. In this sense, Putin uses energy as a tool, exploiting neighboring countries' dependence on Russia for energy and manipulating them. His continued pursuit of similar policies despite sanctions imposed on Russia is an example of pragmatic foreign policy.⁴⁰⁸

Putin, who has been at the helm of Russia for twenty-five years as both prime minister and president, is a dominant figure in Russian politics. He has centralized power and reduced the power of federal states. His long reign as an authoritarian and powerful leader has led to the formation of a cult of personality.⁴⁰⁹ At the same time, he is seen as a popular leader both domestically and internationally. His bold foreign policy decisions, such as the invasion of Ukraine, and his emphasis on Russian pride and independence in his speeches have increased his popularity.

The framework of Russia's foreign policy has been outlined in Foreign Policy Concept Documents published since 1993. These documents are prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and approved by the head of state. While the second

⁴⁰⁵ Richard Sakwa, "Putin's Leadership: Character and Consequences", **Europe-Asia Studies**, Vol. 60 No. 6, 2008, pp. 881-882.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 891.

⁴⁰⁷ Kimberly Marten, "The 'KGB State' and Russian Political and Foreign Policy Culture", **The Journal of Slavic Military Studies**, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2017, pp. 131-151.

⁴⁰⁸ Michael McFaul, "Putin, Putinism, and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy", **International Security**, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2020, pp. 95-139.

⁴⁰⁹ Stanislav L. Tkachenko, "The Coercive Diplomacy of Vladimir Putin (2014-2016)", in Roger E. Kanet (Eds.), **Russian Challenge to the European Security Environment**, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017, pp. 115-136.

document was published in 2000⁴¹⁰, the third document was published in 2008.⁴¹¹ The first Foreign Policy Concept Document after the Arab Spring was published in 2013. The Russian Federation's Foreign Policy Concept, approved in 2013 during Vladimir Putin's third term, focuses on Russia's multi-vector foreign policy. The document emphasizes technological progress and innovation policies as key elements of economic development. It stresses the importance of states taking joint decisions within the framework of their equal status in the UN in order to maintain international peace. It is stated that Russia should play an active role in foreign policy through its influential positions in global and regional organizations, such as in the UN Security Council (UNSC). It is emphasized that Moscow should continue its efforts toward economic integration, particularly with the CIS countries, and diversify its economic partnerships. At the same time, it is noted that participation in international agreements on nuclear energy production, disarmament, and nuclear weapons control is supported.⁴¹²

The document mentions that the concept of civilization and civilization-based approaches in international relations have gained importance for the Kremlin. It states that Russia should effectively use its soft power, public diplomacy, and civil society organizations in foreign policy. It emphasizes the need for cooperation with other states on global issues such as monitoring human rights, combating climate change, and sustainable development. It also calls for inter-state cooperation in combating global issues such as terrorism, human and drug trafficking, natural and man-made disasters, and migration. The document emphasizes the importance of Russia establishing relations with EU countries such as Germany, France, Italy, and the Netherlands, as well as with structures such as NATO and the OSCE, on the basis of equal partnership. In this context, principles such as transparency, mutual trust, and predictability are highlighted. Finally, it is stated that Russia's integration with CIS countries with which it has cultural and historical ties is both possible and necessary, and that strengthening

⁴¹⁰ The Russian Federation, the Foreign Ministry, **The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation**, 2000, Moscow: Government Printing Office.

⁴¹¹ The Russian Federation, the Foreign Ministry, **The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation**, 2008, Moscow: Government Printing Office.

⁴¹² The Russian Federation, the Foreign Ministry, **Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation**, 2013, Moscow: Government Printing Office.

relations with Asian countries such as China, India, Korea, and Japan, as well as the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and the Islamic world, is a goal.⁴¹³

The second Foreign Policy Concept Document after the Arab Spring was published in 2016. The Russian Federation's Foreign Policy Concept, approved on November 30, 2016, during Putin's third term, emphasizes that Moscow must continue to establish multilateral relations in foreign policy and strengthen global peace and security. The document defines Russia's economic development and modernization, in parallel with global technological developments, as one of its primary goals. It notes that the global system has become multipolar and complex, with power shifting from the West to the Asia-Pacific region, and that this process has intensified economic and technological competition and civilization-based competition between countries. Soft power is defined as a fundamental tool in Russian foreign policy, and it is emphasized that regional integration will be effective in resolving global economic crises. Technological progress in the energy sector is highlighted as an important factor in the international balance of power. It is stated that the effects of international terrorism, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, must be resolved through international cooperation. The document states that attempt at regime change in some countries have led to social unrest, which has been further complicated by external intervention.⁴¹⁴

The UN is defined as a central actor in global politics, and it is argued that the authority of this structure must be strengthened. It is stated that Russia must continue to participate in international agreements on disarmament and, in particular, on preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. It is emphasized that nuclear weapons capacity should be reduced, the arms race in space should be stopped, missile defense systems should be shared, and the role of the International Atomic Energy Agency in the control of nuclear technology should be strengthened. While the importance of cyber security at the national and international levels is highlighted, it is stated that Russia should take a leading role in international peacekeeping activities, especially in the fight against terrorism. In this context, the participation of Russian civil society organizations and international organizations is encouraged. In addition, combating natural and man-made disasters is listed among the priority objectives of Russian

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ The Russian Federation, the Foreign Ministry, **Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation**, 2016, Moscow: Government Printing Office.

foreign policy. It is emphasized that information technologies should be used as a strategic tool to promote Russian identity, culture, and foreign policy priorities. Finally, it is stated that the CSTO will be used as an important mechanism against regional threats.⁴¹⁵

The third Foreign Policy Concept Document after the Arab Spring was published in 2023. The 2023 Russian Federation Foreign Policy Concept defines Russia as a civilizational state and a Eurasian-Euro-Pacific power based on its more than a thousand-year-old state tradition, multi-ethnic structure, and the concept of the “Russian world” formed with peoples with whom it shares a common history and culture. Moscow claims to be one of the founding actors of the global system as the successor to the Soviet Union, viewing its permanent membership in the UNSC and its nuclear power status as the foundations of this special position. The document clearly sets out the fundamental principles of Russian foreign policy: sovereign equality, non-interference in internal affairs, adherence to international law, multipolarity, and respect for civilizational diversity. Within this framework, Russia’s foreign policy is defined as multi-vector, independent, pragmatic, and peaceful, while the West’s hegemonic, rule-imposing, and neo-colonialist policies are criticized. Moscow argues that its international behavior is based on the UN Charter and the universal principles of international law.⁴¹⁶

In its analysis of the world system, it notes that multipolarity is rising against the Western-centric unipolar order, and that economic and geopolitical power is shifting to the Asia-Pacific region. It states that the West is resisting this transformation, using Russia’s policies, specifically in the context of Ukraine, as a pretext to wage a “hybrid war” and threaten global peace. At the same time, it is emphasized that the UN and multilateral institutions have become dysfunctional under political pressure, and that the concept of a “rules-based order” is being used to bypass international law. Russia’s national interests in the field of foreign policy include the preservation of sovereignty, the maintenance of international peace and security, the protection of citizens’ rights, information security, economic development, and environmental protection. To achieve these interests, Russia aims to maintain the global strategic balance, institutionalize a multipolar world order, and strengthen the coordinating role of the

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ The Russian Federation, the Foreign Ministry, **Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation**, 2023, Moscow: Government Printing Office.

UN. The document prioritizes increasing the capacity of platforms in which Russia is active, such as BRICS, the SCO, the EAEU, and the CSTO, within the framework of multilateralism. In the security architecture, international cooperation is envisaged in areas such as disarmament, strategic deterrence, nuclear security, cyber security, prevention of biological threats, and countering terrorism. Additionally, the document seeks to preserve “traditional values,” oppose the politicization of human rights issues, and resist “neo-liberal ideological impositions.”⁴¹⁷

At the regional level, relations with CIS countries, China, India, and the Asia-Pacific region are a priority. A “comprehensive strategic partnership” with China and a “privileged strategic partnership” with India are being maintained; within the framework of the SCO and the EAEU, the establishment of a “Greater Eurasian Partnership” on the Eurasian continent is being targeted. In relations with the Islamic world, countries such as Iran, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are prominent; cooperation with the OIC, combating Islamophobia, and contributing to the resolution of crises in the Middle East are priorities. In its policy toward the African continent, anti-colonial solidarity is emphasized, while cooperation in the fields of security, energy, agriculture, and health is sought; institutional partnerships with structures such as the African Union and the African Continental Free Trade Area are targeted. For Latin America, a non-ideological, mutually beneficial partnership approach is adopted; relations with Cuba, Venezuela, Brazil, and Nicaragua are to be strengthened.⁴¹⁸

According to the document, the European region pursues a “hostile” policy toward Russia and interferes in Russia’s internal affairs under the guidance of the US. Russia expects European states to abandon this policy and return to cooperation based on equality and neighborliness. The document identifies the US as the leading country in anti-Russian campaigns and argues for the establishment of a model based on strategic balance among nuclear powers. Finally, protecting Russia’s sovereignty rights in global areas such as the Arctic, Antarctica, space, the world’s oceans, and airspace, ensuring environmental sustainability, and developing infrastructure are priority objectives. The document also envisages support for the Russian diaspora, the preservation of the “Russian world,” the defense of the rights of citizens and

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

institutions abroad, and the strengthening of Russia's international reputation through public diplomacy.⁴¹⁹

2.2.3. Key Determinants and Influences of Iranian Foreign Policy

Iran's foreign policy is shaped within the context of the limitations of the international system and, of course, Iran's internal dynamics. The internal dynamics that influence Iran's foreign policy will be identified in light of the literature. In this context, first, sources that use the neoclassical realism theoretical framework and address Iran's foreign policy as a case study will be analyzed through the intervening variables they use. Second, following this analysis, the factors influencing Iran's foreign policy will be identified and detailed. Third, the institutions responsible for Iran's foreign policy and the manner in which it is conducted will be explained. Fourthly, the impact of Iran's leader on foreign policy will be emphasized in the context of the leader's characteristics.

After the revolution, Iran's grand strategic adjustments are shaped and mediated by domestic factors within Iran, rather than purely by external systemic pressures, with ideas and institutional structures playing a predominant role in determining the nature and direction of grand strategy. The intervening variables influenced Iranian foreign policy at that time separated into two. First, ideational-constitutive factors such as independent, anti-imperialist national identity, the Islamic ideology of the regime, ambitious status aspirations, and national interests have been influential. Second, institutional-competitive factors such as the conflicts among elite groups have been effective on Iranian foreign policy.⁴²⁰

The balance of power and threats imposed by the international system generally shape Iran's foreign policy. However, these external pressures are not adequate to explain Iranian foreign policy. Instead, factors such as internal political processes, the identity of the regime, and the perceptions of the elite determine how these external pressures are perceived, interpreted, and implemented. For example, the Iranian regime's perception of itself as a "regional power" and "leader of resistance"

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

⁴²⁰ Kevjn Lim, **Grand Strategic Adjustments in Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Neoclassical Realist Account**, Israel: Tel Aviv University Press, 2016, pp. 27-42.

influences its response to external threats and its choice of allies. Furthermore, internal political conflicts or factions can sometimes lead to inconsistent or even self-contradictory decisions in foreign policy. At the same time, Iran's decisions throughout its history and internal political processes shape its current policies and strategies.⁴²¹

The complex and often tense relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia since the 1979 Revolution are shaped by an interplay of both domestic and international factors. The intervening variables that have influenced this relation are religion, sectarian identity, ideology, leadership perceptions, and internal political dynamics. Iran is Shiite, while Saudi Arabia has a Sunni Islamic sectarian structure. This different sectarian identity plays a fundamental role in religious beliefs and the formation of political culture and identity. These differences lead both countries to support sectarian groups in their efforts to increase their regional influence. Iran's adoption of a religiously based revolutionary and anti-monarchical ideology and Saudi Arabia's monarchical and traditional regime and close relations with the West cause the conflict between two parties. At the same time, these two domestic structures of the states differentiate the decision-making processes within the state.⁴²²

Iran's foreign policy, driven by Islamic ideological discourse and confrontational stances toward the US and Western countries, has contributed to limiting the formation of a developmental state apart from the restrictions of the international system in which the US has imposed various political and economic sanctions, prevented foreign investment, and blocked financial and technical aid to Iran, which have significantly impeded Iran's economic development and the establishment of a developmental government.⁴²³

During Hassan Rouhani's presidency, Iran's foreign policy toward the GCC countries was characterized by a pragmatic and moderate approach aimed at improving relations and reducing tensions. However, Rouhani's efforts were significantly constrained by internal factors, notably the influence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), regional conflicts and economic crises. The IRGC was

⁴²¹ Thomas Juneau, **Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iranian Foreign Policy**, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015, pp. 218-223.

⁴²² Miad Nakhavali, **Iran-Saudi Arabia Rivalry after the Islamic Revolution of Iran**, University of Belgrade, PhD Thesis, Belgrade, 2022.

⁴²³ Yaser Barkhordari, Kianoush Kiakojouri, Mostafa Bayat, "Iran's Foreign Policy and Economic Development: An Analytical Review", **Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 12, No. 1, Winter-Spring 2021, p. 212-213.

particularly influential in regional policy and security matters and held hardline and interventionist views that conflicted with Rouhani's moderate foreign policy approach. For example, the IRGC's influence on issues such as support for the Yemen War led to the failure of negotiations between Iran and the Gulf countries.⁴²⁴

The intervening variables influenced Iranian foreign policy towards Türkiye in the Middle East are revolution and Islamic ideology, the dilemma in the political structure, political fractions and reformist movements and national security concerns. Iran's revolutionary ideology based on the Shi'a Islamic doctrine shapes its worldview and foreign policy priorities, distinguishing it from Türkiye's secular Sunni-majority orientation. Iran's internal political system consists of a dual structure where the clerical establishment (notably the Supreme Leader and the IRGC) wields predominant influence over foreign policy, limiting the President's power in this domain. In the post-Cold War period, the rise of the Reformist camp in Iranian politics (late 1980s to early 1990s) illustrates how internal political contestation influences foreign policy directions. Iran's foreign policy is driven by national security imperatives, regarding Kurdish separatism and the need to maintain regional stability. This common security concern aligns Iran's interests with Türkiye's in limiting Kurdish independence movements, affecting their bilateral relations.⁴²⁵

On the other hand, Iran's foreign policy and behavior in the Strait of Hormuz are driven by a dynamic, threat-based strategic adjustment process. The Islamic Republic reacts to shifting external and internal threats by continuously calibrating its use of power resources in the Strait. This calibration involves a trade-off between leadership confidence in its capabilities and wariness of systemic and domestic constraints. In other words, the intervening variable in this case is the threat perceptions of leadership and the challenges in evaluating changes in relative power.⁴²⁶

Iran's foreign policy towards Russia exhibits both continuity and change, shaped by a complex interplay of individual leadership, domestic constraints, and international systemic factors. While the elected presidents play an important role in

⁴²⁴ Mahjoob Zweiri, "Iran and the Gulf: The Era of Hassan Rouhani", *Insight Turkey* Vol. 24, No. 4, Fall 2022, pp. 72-73.

⁴²⁵ Marianna Charountaki, *Iran and Turkey: International and Regional Engagement in the Middle East*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2018.

⁴²⁶ Abdolrasool Divsallar, "Iran's Strategic Adjustment in the Strait of Hormuz", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 5, 2022, p. 876.

Iranian foreign policy, significant influence also comes from internal institutions (majlis, Guardian Council, Expediency Council) and non-elected actors (such as the Supreme Leader's office, Bonyads, and the IRGC), though the latter are more obvious and difficult to observe.⁴²⁷

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the fundamental state organ that directs the country's foreign relations and organizes its diplomatic activities. The Ministry operates through its central building in Tehran and its diplomatic missions around the world. It has a comprehensive organizational structure designed to defend Iran's interests in the international arena and implement its foreign policies.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, the highest-ranking official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is responsible for determining and implementing Iran's foreign policy strategies. The current Minister of Foreign Affairs is Abbas Araghchi, who took office on August 21, 2024. There are various deputy ministers specializing in different areas under the Ministry. For example, Majid Takht Ravanchi is the Deputy Minister for Political Affairs, and Kazım Gharibabadi is the Deputy Minister for Legal and International Affairs. The Spokesperson and Public Diplomacy Center, which makes official statements on behalf of the ministry and manages its relations with the media, is an important unit of the ministry. Esmail Baqaei currently serves as the spokesperson.

Ayatollah Khomeini introduced a major innovation in Iran's Islamic regime by granting the ulama (Islamic scholars) supreme authority through the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih, the governance of the most learned Islamic scholar. This centralized religious and political power in one faqih, breaking from Shi'ite and Sunni traditions that had multiple religious authorities. By elevating the ulama to the highest state level, Khomeini diminished republican ideals and popular sovereignty, consolidating both political and religious power into a single office.⁴²⁸ Khomeini avoided factional disputes to protect his supreme authority, which was rooted in his opposition to the previous Pahlavi regime. After his death, the office of Supreme Leader lost some

⁴²⁷ Mehdi Zeyghami, **Continuity and Change in Iranian Foreign Policy towards Russia**, Deakin University, PhD thesis, Victoria, 2023, pp. 78-85.

⁴²⁸ Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Where is the Islamic Republic of Iran Heading?", **Australian Journal of International Affairs** Vol. 59, No. 1, March 2005, pp. 26-28.

charisma as his successor, Muhammad Ali Khamenei, lacked Khomeini's religious stature. Nevertheless, the office retained extensive constitutional powers, including command of the armed forces, appointment of top officials (including half the Guardian Council members), and authority over the presidency. The religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as the highest authority in Iran, outlines the general direction and red lines of foreign policy. The Supreme Leader's powers make him effectively immune from public accountability.⁴²⁹

The Supreme Leader, as the *velayat-e faqih*, holds the responsibility for defining and overseeing "the overall policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran," effectively setting the tone and direction for both the country's domestic and foreign policies.⁴³⁰ Serving as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, the Supreme Leader also supervises Iran's intelligence and security operations. He is the sole authority in the nation with the power to declare war or peace. Additionally, he has the authority to appoint and dismiss key officials, including the heads of the judiciary, directors of state radio and television, and the supreme commander of the IRGC. The Supreme Leader also selects six of the twelve members of the Guardian Council, a powerful institution tasked with controlling the parliamentary legislation and approving candidates for public office. Collectively, these powers establish the Supreme Leader as the most influential figure in Iran's political system even in the realm of foreign policy.⁴³¹

The Supreme leader follows policies complying with the *velayat-e faqih* which is a system of the guardianship of the Islamic jurist. It can be said that the main of the foreign policy is the survival of the theocratic regime and sustainable development. However, it also has a pragmatic dimension. For example, Iran has close relations with the People's Republic of China, despite China's bad attitudes towards Muslims in its territory. Also, Iran has maintained good relations with Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Becoming the regional hegemon in the Persian Gulf and one of the key players in the Middle East are some of the goals of Iranian foreign policy.⁴³²

Iran's second highest-ranking official is the president of the country. He is elected to serve four-year terms, with a maximum of two consecutive terms allowed.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Zeyghami, *Continuity and Change in Iranian Foreign Policy*, pp. 20-21.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Przemyslaw Osiewicz, *Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Between Ideology and Pragmatism*, London: Routledge, 2021, p. 3.

Although the president holds a prominent public profile, the constitution restricts his authority significantly by placing the entire executive branch under the Supreme Leader's control. Notably, Iran is unique in that the executive branch has no command over the armed forces. The president is responsible for setting economic policy and holds nominal authority over the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security; however, the Supreme Leader ultimately controls all foreign and domestic security matters. The president is supported by eight vice presidents and a cabinet of 22 ministers, whose appointments require parliamentary approval.⁴³³ The SNSC plays a critical role in determining the strategic direction of foreign policy. The SNSC consists of representatives from the presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Revolutionary Guards, and other security units, and it determines Iran's foreign policy priorities.⁴³⁴

IRGC has a significant and multifaceted influence on Iranian foreign policy. It is not merely a military entity but a highly politicized organization that plays a crucial role in shaping Iran's external behavior.⁴³⁵ The IRGC is a multidimensional political, ideological, and security institution established in 1979 to protect the Islamic Revolution and counterbalance the regular army whose loyalty was considered questionable. Initially formed as a paramilitary force comprised of civilian volunteers, the IRGC has since evolved into a powerful military, political, and economic structure who is influencing many aspects of the Iranian state and society.⁴³⁶

Regarding Iranian foreign policy, the IRGC holds substantial influence mainly through its security and political roles. Its political and security remit includes countering foreign influence in Iran by leading efforts to curtail foreign contractors and promoting a "resistance economy" focused on autarky and self-reliance in line with the Supreme Leader's vision. The IRGC's political power, backed by the Supreme Leader, enables it to resist policies it views as compromising Iranian security and revolutionary values, thereby shaping the country's foreign economic engagements and broader foreign policy orientation.⁴³⁷

⁴³³ Zeyghami, *Continuity and Change in Iranian Foreign Policy*, p. 23.

⁴³⁴ Zeyghami, *Continuity and Change in Iranian Foreign Policy*, p. 110.

⁴³⁵ Bayram Sinkaya, *Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics: Elites and Shifting Relations*, Oxon: Routledge, 2016, p. 68.

⁴³⁶ Hesam Forozan and Afshin Shahi, "The Military and the State in Iran", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 71, No. 1, Winter 2017, p. 73.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-86.

The IRGC has established considerable influence over key institutions involved in Iran's foreign relations, including the Ministry of Information and Security and even majlis, and has strong informal networks within the government that shape policy outcomes.⁴³⁸ It is actively involved in external operations that align with Iran's foreign policy objectives, including supporting proxy groups, which has led to accusations of international terrorism against it. These activities underline the IRGC's role as an instrument of Iran's "asymmetric warfare strategy".⁴³⁹

The Guardian Council is a twelve-member body functioning similarly to an upper legislative assembly. Half of its members, experts in Islamic canon law, are appointed directly by the Supreme Leader, while the other half, experts in civil law, are nominated by the Supreme Judicial Council and appointed by Parliament. The Council reviews all parliamentary legislation for constitutional and Islamic compliance, with the authority to veto or return laws for amendment. It also supervises elections, requiring all candidates, including presidential candidates, to obtain their approval before running. The Expediency Council was established in 1988 to resolve deadlocks between Iran's Parliament and the Guardian Council. It now serves as an advisory body to the Supreme Leader and is among the country's most powerful institutions in name. The judiciary is largely controlled by the Supreme Leader, who appoints its head, who then appoints the Chief Public Prosecutor and Supreme Court.⁴⁴⁰

Ali Khamenei is the Supreme Leader of Iran, a position he has held since 1989. Born in 1939 in Mashhad, Iran, Khamenei came from a religious family and studied in Qom. He joined Ayatollah Khomeini's religious opposition movement in the early 1960s and played an important role in the 1979 Iranian Revolution. He served as president of Iran from 1981 to 1989 before succeeding Khomeini as Supreme Leader. Khamenei's worldview is shaped by historical U.S. interventions in Iran, especially the 1953 coup supported by the US and its backing of the Shah's regime. He believes the U.S. is bent on regime change in Iran through various means including internal collapse, democratic revolution, economic pressure, or military invasion. He has been critical of liberal democracy and views capitalism and the West as being in long-term decline, while also considering Washington inherently Islamophobic. Yet, Khamenei

⁴³⁸ Sinkaya, *Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics*, p. 59.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

⁴⁴⁰ Zeyghami, *Continuity and Change in Iranian Foreign Policy*, pp. 24-25.

is not reflexively anti-Western; he acknowledges the value of science and progress associated with Western civilization and desires Iran to learn from this.⁴⁴¹

Khamenei is often depicted as the prime mover behind Iran's foreign policy, being described as the head of state, commander in chief, and top ideologue. All elected institutions like the parliament and presidency operate under absolute sovereignty.⁴⁴² Regarding foreign policy, Khamenei's control over Iranian policy is significant. His deep-rooted suspicion of the US and skepticism towards Western intentions mean that improving relations with the US is difficult, especially if policies like escalating sanctions continue. Nevertheless, improved relations are not impossible if both sides make significant concessions to accommodate their most important interests at the same time.⁴⁴³ Khamenei holds ultimate control over the state's foreign policy decisions, operating parallel to the formal government structures such as the president and foreign ministry. Khamenei uses trusted personal envoys and advisors like Ali Akbar Velayati to conduct parallel foreign policy outside the official foreign ministry channels.⁴⁴⁴

Khamenei's international relations outlook is essential for analyzing current international affairs, given his long tenure and leadership over the Republic of Iran. His approach reflects a foreign policy that is neither expansionist nor aggressive but accepts the Westphalian international order of sovereign nation-states while rooted in an Islamic political philosophy that integrates principles such as intellect (*'aql*) and political pragmatism (*maslahat*) aligned with Iran's national interests.⁴⁴⁵

At the same time, Khamenei's influence on Iranian foreign policy is substantial and formal, but it operates within a complex power network dominated by the IRGC, making Iranian foreign policy heavily shaped by hardline security and ideological

⁴⁴¹ Akbar Ganji, "Who Is Ali Khamenei? The Worldview of Iran's Supreme Leader", **Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 92, No. 5, September/October 2013, pp. 24-25.; Seyed Mohammad Marandi, Raffaele Mauriello, "Iran's Leader on Diplomacy, Foreign Policy and International Relations", in Nassef Manabilang Adiong and Raffaele Mauriello (Eds.), **Islam in International Relations: Politics and Paradigms**, London and New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 19.

⁴⁴² Behbod Negahban, "Who Makes Iran's Foreign Policy?", **Yale Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 12, 28 March 2017.

⁴⁴³ Ganji, "Who Is Ali Khamenei?", p. 47.

⁴⁴⁴ Will Fulton, **A Window into the Foreign Policy of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei**, AEI Critical Threats Project, 2011, p. 9.

⁴⁴⁵ Seyed Mohammad Marandi, Raffaele Mauriello, "Iran's Leader on Diplomacy, Foreign Policy and International Relations", in Nassef Manabilang Adiong, Raffaele Mauriello (Eds.), **Islam in International Relations: Politics and Paradigms**, London and New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 33-34.

considerations. In other words, his influence is intertwined with the power of the IRGC. The IRGC pressures and enables Khamenei to pursue hardline foreign policies, and its informal power often shapes the extent to which Khamenei must accommodate moderates. At times, Khamenei may even be compelled to support policies pushed by the IRGC against his personal preferences to maintain his own power and the regime's stability.⁴⁴⁶

2.3. The Structure of the International and Regional System in the post-Arab Spring Period

Before discussing the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran through three case studies, it is important to understand the international system, which is a higher level of the regional system, from the past to the present in a panoramic way. The international system can be briefly examined by turning points. The foundations of the international system were built on the hierarchical structures of ancient empires. Great empires such as Rome, Persia, and the Chinese dynasties imposed their sovereignty by controlling vast territories, with power concentrated in the absolute authority of the emperors. Diplomacy during this period took shape through embassies and limited trade routes. Economic networks such as the Silk Road strengthened the international ties of this system. The fall of the Roman Empire triggered the emergence of the feudal system in Europe. During this period, the international system transformed into a multicentric structure divided among many small states and lordships. Although the Catholic Church established an important position in the system as a spiritual authority, this authority was constantly challenged. In the Islamic world, the Abbasid Caliphate experienced a golden age in science, trade, and diplomacy. The international system began to expand through interaction between regional civilizations and cultures. The Crusades and contacts between the Islamic world and Europe accelerated the exchange of ideas, goods, and diseases, initiating a process of "early globalization."

The Thirty Years' War led to devastating consequences in Europe, while the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia established a new paradigm for the international system. The Westphalia Order provided a structure that recognized the borders between sovereign

⁴⁴⁶ Behbod Negahban, "Who Makes Iran's Foreign Policy?".

states and declared that religion and internal politics were independent of external intervention. This marked the birth of the anarchic international system: states emerged as equal sovereign actors.⁴⁴⁷ The centuries following Westphalia brought a new order to diplomacy; embassies and permanent diplomatic missions became widespread during this period. However, this order was Europe-centric and sought to expand globally through colonial expansion. Within this context, the Industrial Revolution fundamentally transformed both the economic and political structure of the international system. European states spread across Asia, Africa, and the Americas in search of new resources and markets, building their colonial empires.⁴⁴⁸ Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal also engaged in fierce competition.⁴⁴⁹ Colonialism reinforced Europe's economic and military superiority, but the pressure exerted on the colonies created serious inequalities in the international system. During this process, the wave of nationalism led to the emergence of nation-states in Europe and the emergence of new powers in the international system.⁴⁵⁰

The Congress of Vienna (1815) reshaped the international system. This system, created with the aim of maintaining balance among the great powers, created a European-centered multipolar order throughout the 19th century. Concert of Europe played a key role in maintaining peace and stability. However, this system could not prevent the power struggle that accelerated with the Industrial Revolution. The establishment of national unity in Germany and Italy and Russia's efforts to strengthen its power shook the balance of power. The imperialist race that began in the late 19th century created new areas of conflict in Asia and Africa and caused the international system to cracked.⁴⁵¹ Furthermore, at the beginning of the 20th century, the international system shifted from a multipolar structure to a chaotic disorder. Germany's aggressive policies, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, revolutionary movements in Russia, and the efforts of Britain and France to preserve the status quo led to a major conflict. World War I was a turning point that fundamentally changed the international system. The post-war Treaty of Versailles

⁴⁴⁷ Hedley Bull, *Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 17.

⁴⁴⁸ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System III: The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730s-1840s*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

⁴⁴⁹ Barry Buzan, George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

⁴⁵⁰ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1988.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

established the League of Nations to increase international cooperation and prevent such destruction from happening again.⁴⁵² However, this new order failed due to political and economic instability and paved the way for World War II.

The first half of the 20th century was a period of turmoil for the international system again, caused by two successive major wars. World War I dealt a blow to the rise of modern nation-states, while the League of Nations' efforts to maintain peace ended in failure. Germany's economic and political dissatisfaction stemming from the Treaty of Versailles combined with the rise of fascism in Italy and militarism in Japan, bringing the international system once again to the brink of war. World War II triggered a global transformation by shaking not only the European-centered balance of power but also the colonial order. The victory of the US and the Soviet Union transformed the international system from multipolarity to bipolarity.⁴⁵³ The United Nations, established in 1945, created a new framework for international cooperation. However, the Cold War that began after World War II divided the international system into two major power blocs: the capitalist West (led by the US and NATO) and the communist East (led by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact). The anarchic system was shaped by the conflict and balance of power policies created by ideological polarization during this period. The proliferation of nuclear weapons made deterrence theory a fundamental part of international relations. Moments such as the Cuban Missile Crisis showed how fragile the system was, even though it narrowly avoided nuclear annihilation. At the same time, independence movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America brought an end to colonial order and introduced new actors into the international system.⁴⁵⁴

On the other hand, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 drove the international system into a profound transformation. The US emerged as the leader of the "unipolar world order" and claimed to expand the liberal international order. The free market economy, democratic values, and globalization became the main elements of the system. However, during this period, the Gulf War and ethnic conflicts in Yugoslavia demonstrated that establishing a peaceful international order would not be

⁴⁵² Edward. H. Carr, **The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939**, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 126.

⁴⁵³ Kenneth Waltz, **Theory of International Politics**, London: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.; Mearsheimer, **The Tragedy of Great Power Politics**.

easy.⁴⁵⁵ The beginning of the 21st century was shaped by two major shocks that transformed the international system. The first was the September 11 attacks in 2001. This event led the US to declare a “global war on terrorism” and invade Afghanistan and Iraq. However, these interventions created instability in the international system and called into question the US’ global leadership. The second major transformation occurred with China’s economic rise and the rapid increase in Asia’s share of the world economy. China became a more influential actor in the international system through projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, Russia’s efforts to regain power manifested themselves in interventions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). During this process, regional actors such as the EU increased their economic and political integration initiatives, but Brexit and populist movements revealed the limits of these projects. The economic dependencies brought about by globalization led to the 2008 financial crisis shaking the international system. In addition, transnational issues such as climate change, cyber security threats, and pandemics revealed the inadequacy of international cooperation.

The first quarter of the 21st century can be defined as a period in which the international system evolved into a multipolar and complex structure. China and Russia, challenging the US global leadership, reinforced multipolarity, while technological competition created a new front in this struggle. Artificial intelligence, cyber warfare, and space technologies became new tools of power balance. The COVID-19 pandemic tested the resilience of the global system, while the effectiveness and cooperation capacity of international organizations were called into question. Climate change opened up new areas of cooperation in the international system, while also triggering resource competition and conflicts. As strategic competition continues between regional and global powers such as Europe, China, India, and the US, the future of the international system has become uncertain.

At that time, the post-1945 liberal international order successfully prevented another world war but failed to ensure sustainable peace and security globally. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, shifts in world order from unipolarity to multipolarity have revealed the inadequacy of current global governance mechanisms in addressing challenges fairly and effectively. Instead, these mechanisms have become arenas for

⁴⁵⁵ Francis Fukuyama, **The End of History and The Last Men**, New York: A Division of Macmillan, 1992.

great power rivalry. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has called for reform of outdated multilateral institutions, a view aligned with Türkiye's longstanding advocacy for reform to create a just and fair international order. This call is urgent amid escalating competition among great powers, increasing global tensions, polarization, and erosion of multilateralism and the rules-based order. The UNSC, responsible for maintaining peace and security, is failing in its mission, destabilizing the international system further.⁴⁵⁶

As mentioned before, the international community faces intertwined political, military, economic, environmental, technological, and social challenges, including conflicts, terrorism, migration, xenophobia, climate crisis, food insecurity, and cyber threats, which transcend national borders and demand global cooperation and governance. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine War near Türkiye has side effects such as inflation, economic stagnation, and food insecurity. Yet relevant global institutions seem incapable of resolving these crises.⁴⁵⁷ Lastly, economic protectionism and uneven wealth distribution worsens disparities; for instance, many people still suffer chronic hunger despite vast technological advancements offering new solutions. These multiple simultaneous crises underscore the pressing necessity and inevitability for substantial transformation of the international system to effectively address current and future challenges.⁴⁵⁸ As a result, it can be said that the current international system is multipolar and full of uncertain crises and events. Due to globalization, these crises are influencing the whole world.

The uncertainty and instability in the international system definitely affects the regional system and Five Seas Basin is one of those regions. Especially during the post-Arab Spring period, the structural transformation which started in the Middle East spread across the other parts of the Basin. The Arab Spring uprisings (starting in 2011) posed an existential threat to ruling elites in key Middle Eastern states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, and Israel. These uprisings represented interconnected challenges by inspiring mass mobilization aimed at political and economic liberalization, threatening the existing authoritarian regional order.⁴⁵⁹ In response,

⁴⁵⁶ Fidan, "Turkish Foreign Policy", pp. 12-14.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ Jonathan Hoffman, "Great-Power Competition in the Middle East and the Counterrevolutionary Bloc", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2021, pp. 88-90.

these states formed an ad-hoc "Counterrevolutionary Bloc" (CRB) comprising Saudi Arabia, the UAE, post-2013 Egypt, and Israel. This bloc focused on stopping the wave of mobilization, restoring the pre-uprisings status quo, and dominating the regional power balance.⁴⁶⁰ The CRB's fears were amplified by a perceived US "abandonment," particularly due to shifting the US policy, evidenced by President Obama's "pivot to Asia" and reduced enthusiasm for sustained Middle East intervention.⁴⁶¹ Traditional American dominance has waned, creating a power vacuum that has encouraged greater involvement from Russia, China, and, to a lesser extent, India and the EU. This shift marks the end of the American unilateralism with no single power currently able to dictate outcomes unilaterally.⁴⁶²

The post-uprising environment has seen a re-emergence of great-power competition, with Russia and China increasing their diplomatic, economic, and military presence in the Middle East. Unlike the Cold War era, these powers do not seek exclusive control or to decrease the impact of the US but rather aim to benefit from the US security umbrella and cultivate diverse relationships across the region.⁴⁶³ On the other hand, contrary to views portraying regional states as mere pawns of great powers, key Middle Eastern countries, including Egypt, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and the UAE, have pursued their own foreign policy agendas. They work with, against, or around outside powers, contributing to a complex and unstable dynamic in the region.⁴⁶⁴

With Trump's presidency (2017-2021), the US made substantial concessions to CRB members to retain influence and deter regional allies from turning to Russia or China. The US escalated weapons sales and issued warnings regarding engagements with rival great powers, reflecting its increased focus on the Middle East as a strategic arena of great-power competition.⁴⁶⁵ The current geopolitical landscape is complex, involving a two-level game where external great powers compete and regional actors maneuver internally to advance their own agendas.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Steven A. Cook, "Major Power Rivalry and Regional Conflicts in the Middle East", Discussion Paper Series on Managing Global Disorder No. 2, **Council on Foreign Relations Center for Preventive Action**, 2021, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁶³ Hoffman, "Great-Power Competition", pp. 88-90.

⁴⁶⁴ Cook, "Major Power Rivalry", pp. 2-3.

⁴⁶⁵ Hoffman, "Great-Power Competition", p. 100.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 103.

The region remains marked by multiple intractable civil and proxy wars in countries such as Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Lebanon. These conflicts are fueled and sustained due to the direct involvement of both regional players and great powers, each acting according to their interests. This involvement has made resolution difficult, diminishing overall regional stability. Despite tensions and occasional confrontations, the major powers have generally avoided direct military conflict with one another in the Middle East. De-confliction mechanisms and diplomatic communications remain active but have not translated into peace or stability because major powers are part of the conflicts, and regional actors are not ready for disarmament.⁴⁶⁷ Some regional states have aligned their interests with external powers: the UAE shares skepticism of Islamist movements with Russia and has deepened economic relations with China; Egypt's leadership aims for economic development aligned with Moscow and Beijing's goals; Türkiye seeks an independent foreign policy and actively engages in regional conflicts, interacting variably with the US and Russia; Iran builds a strategic partnership with Russia and China to counter the US and regional rivals.⁴⁶⁸

At the same time, the Arab Spring and the geopolitical shifts triggered in the broader Eurasian region, the South Caucasus became even more contested among major regional and global powers. The competing interests intensified with Russia remaining the most assertive actor aiming to retain its dominant influence, particularly through frozen conflicts and energy leverage. Moscow views Western efforts to bring South Caucasus countries closer to Euro-Atlantic structures as provocations and threats to its sphere of influence. The 2008 Russian-Georgian war exemplified Russia's geopolitical goal of preventing NATO expansion southwards and maintaining a buffer near its borders. Since then, Russia has used its military presence and energy supplies to deter further Western integration of the region. The US and EU have continued their strategy of promoting Western-oriented reforms and increasing energy security by supporting pipeline projects bypassing Russia.⁴⁶⁹

After Türkiye's role increased strategically as a regional power that counters Iranian ambitions and supports energy transit through the Azerbaijan–Georgia–Türkiye corridor, which offers Europe an alternative to Russian energy dependence.

⁴⁶⁷ Cook, "Major Power Rivalry", pp. 28-29.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴⁶⁹ Khayal Iskandarov, Piotr Gawliczek, "The 'New Great Game' in the South Caucasus: Competition for Power and Influence", **Social Development & Security**, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2020, pp. 31-32.

Meanwhile, Iran advocates for regional cooperation models (such as the 3+3 format) that would keep other external powers at bay and preserve its influence. Following the Arab Spring, China has expanded its Belt and Road Initiative, including projects through the South Caucasus. Its role remains largely economic and non-political but is increasingly significant, reflecting Beijing's long-term interest in energy transit routes and regional infrastructure. Energy transit through the region continues to be a core driver for external involvement. The Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye pipeline corridor particularly gains prominence as a counterweight to Russian energy dominance over Europe, which remains vulnerable to coercion. The unresolved conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and other breakaway regions maintain a backdrop of instability, with Russia playing a key role as a power broker while also deterring further Western influence. These frozen conflicts limit the ability of South Caucasus countries to fully integrate with NATO or the EU.⁴⁷⁰

The post-Soviet space witnessed a unipolar system dominated by the US and NATO; however, Russia's actions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) marked assertive moves towards reasserting influence and contributing to the emerging multipolar system. The South Caucasus gained increasing strategic importance due to its geographic positioning as a corridor for energy transport and a zone of competition between powers. Conflicts and rivalry in the region became intertwined with larger global power dynamics, including those between Russia and NATO. Russia has promoted a policy of "controlled instability" through support for breakaway regions such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, aiming to maintain leverage and prevent NATO encroachment. This has led to a complex relationship between Russia and the South Caucasus states, balancing coercion and cooperation.⁴⁷¹

The US is becoming more passive in the South Caucasus due to its strategic refocusing on the Indo-Pacific and increased competition with China. This shift reduces America's willingness and capability to maintain a strong military and diplomatic presence in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, affecting NATO and EU plans for expansion in the wider Black Sea region. The South Caucasus's geopolitical significance is rising as it lies at the crossroads of great power interests, surrounded by

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Sadiyev Saleh, et al., "South Caucasus and a 'New Great Game': the Communication of Competition in Securitized International Relations", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2021, pp. 287-291.

Russia, Türkiye, and Iran. These regional powers are actively shaping the area's political dynamics, often constraining the geopolitical aspirations of the small states there. The South Caucasus thus serves as a case study for understanding how the emerging post-liberal, multipolar world order manifests at a regional level, particularly through the construction of orders based on exclusion by larger neighboring powers.⁴⁷²

The South Caucasus region is increasingly fractured, with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia following more divergent and tactical foreign policy paths rather than long-term aligned strategies. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War solidified this fragmentation, positioning Türkiye and Russia as dominant powers while Armenia and Azerbaijan grow more dependent on them. Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and to some extent China compete and cooperate in the region. The failures of the West in this region reflect broader challenges facing multilateralism today. Regional cooperation mechanisms like the BSEC and the Minsk Group have eroded or failed, with the Minsk Group's ineffectiveness partly due to the rise of multipolarity. Russia-led, illiberal conflict-resolution approaches now dominate, prioritizing geopolitical maneuvering over long-term peace, as shown by Russia's flexible stance toward Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions and its military presence. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan distrust Russia's intentions but recognize that ongoing tensions benefit Moscow by expanding its influence and military footprint. Since the Soviet collapse, the South Caucasus has evolved into a dynamic and crowded geopolitical space with multiple foreign actors beyond Russia and the West, including Iran, Türkiye, and China. This diversity of actors and interests exacerbates regional fractures and instability.⁴⁷³

The approaches of Iran, Russia, and Türkiye are heavily influenced by their imperial legacies, resurgent in the current shifting world order. While direct control is less feasible today, these powers seek to shape regional orders consistent with their historical zones of influence. They tend to respect each other's red lines, motivated by a balance-of-power logic rather than rivalry, which challenges Western assumptions about their inability to coexist. This imperial-influenced mindset helps explain the actions of these Eurasian powers and also frames China's stance, which respects the Russian sphere of influence and opposes Western security and economic incursions in the region. Overall, the South Caucasus illustrates the complexities of the multipolar

⁴⁷² Emil Avdaliani, **New World Order and Small Regions: The Case of South Caucasus**, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 62-67.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., pp. 81-84.

world order and great power competition, where historical legacies and contemporary geopolitical dynamics intertwine, resulting in persistent instability and fragmented regional cooperation.⁴⁷⁴

Historically a strong sphere of Russian influence, the South Caucasus in the post-Arab Spring period saw a gradual decline in Moscow's dominance, especially exacerbated by Russia's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine. This decline created a power vacuum that regional actors such as Türkiye and external Western actors, notably the EU and the US, sought to fill. Nonetheless, Russia remains an important player and continues to exert selective influence, particularly in Armenia, though its role is now contested.⁴⁷⁵ Azerbaijan's military victory in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war decisively shifted the balance of power in the region. Baku emerged as the dominant actor, driven by energy wealth and strategic infrastructure projects, such as the Rasht-Astara railway linking the Caspian Sea to global trade routes.⁴⁷⁶

The war and its aftermath led to the displacement of the Armenian population from Nagorno-Karabakh and reshaped regional alignments. Türkiye's role in the South Caucasus has significantly increased alongside Azerbaijan, actively promoting economic integration and regional connectivity projects. This ascendance challenges Russian traditional influence and causes concern for neighboring Iran, which seeks to counterbalance Azerbaijani-Turkish initiatives such as the contested "Zangezur Corridor".⁴⁷⁷ Armenia faces the challenge of balancing relations with Russia, its traditional security partner, and closer ties with Western countries. Its strained relationship with Russia and pursuit of diversified partnerships introduce uncertainties for regional stability. Western actors, including the EU and the US, have stepped up diplomatic efforts, especially in mediating peace and promoting economic initiatives, though with limited influence compared to regional actors.⁴⁷⁸

On the other hand, following the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, the Gulf monarchies adopted varied strategies to manage political dissent and preserve regime stability. Notably, in Bahrain, the uprising was met with a harsh crackdown supported

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Emil Ordukhanyan, et al., "A new balance of power in the South Caucasus: How can it lead to regional stability?", **International Journal of Innovative Research and Scientific Studies**, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2025, p. 207.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 214.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 216.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 216-217.

by security forces from Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁴⁷⁹ Regionally, the Gulf states' foreign policies became more interventionist and entangled in regional conflicts and rivalries. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar increased their involvement in neighboring countries, redirecting oil rents into foreign policy pursuits, which further internationalized Gulf politics and sometimes heightened regional tensions.⁴⁸⁰ Simultaneously, the Gulf monarchies deepened their economic and strategic relationships with East Asian powers, particularly China. Saudi Arabia and the UAE emerged as China's critical Middle Eastern trade partners, and projects like the China–Oman Industrial Park under the Belt and Road Initiative expanded Gulf engagement beyond traditional Western allies. However, this expanding Chinese presence also positioned states such as Oman at the nexus of US-China rivalry, compelling them to navigate complex international alignments, as evidenced by US naval access agreements in strategic ports.⁴⁸¹

Qatar is a small but influential and independent state located on the western coast of the Persian Gulf, sharing maritime and land borders with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, and Iran. Historically, it has played a pivotal role in the Gulf region. Qatar has pursued an independent foreign policy, notably maintaining good relations with Iran, a rival of Saudi Arabia. During the Arab Spring in 2011, Qatar supported various rebel groups across the Middle East, including the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas in Gaza, and militias in Libya and Syria, as well as political parties like Tunisia's Ennahda. These actions heightened insecurity among Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, which holds hegemonic ambitions in the region. In 2014, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states previously severed diplomatic relations with Qatar to control its independent foreign policy, but relations improved after an agreement not to interfere in each other's internal affairs. However, in 2017, the Saudi-led coalition again fully severed ties with Qatar and imposed diplomatic isolation, accusing Qatar of supporting terrorism and acting beyond its size and influence.

⁴⁷⁹ Laurence Louër, "Sectarianism in the Gulf Monarchies: Regional and Domestic Factors of Sunni-Shi'i Tensions", in Mehran Kamrava (Ed.), **Routledge Handbook of Persian Gulf Politics**, Oxon: Routledge, 2020, p. 133.

⁴⁸⁰ Jessie Moritz, "Rentier Political Economy in the Oil Monarchies", in Mehran Kamrava (Ed.), **Routledge Handbook of Persian Gulf Politics**, Oxon: Routledge, 2020, p. 180.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

3. THE FOREIGN POLICIES OF TÜRKİYE, RUSSIA AND IRAN IN THE FIVE SEAS BASIN

Türkiye, Russia and Iran are crucial actors of the region of Five Seas Basin. Their historical and cultural ties to the region and geopolitical ambitions towards it make them part of every development in the region. Especially in developments in which they are not involved during the post-Arab Spring Period, they pursue policies that seek to play the role of mediator on the one hand, while turning the emerging crises into opportunities on the other. Syrian Civil War, Nagorno Karabakh Conflict and Qatar Diplomatic Crisis are important crises of the region and in those crises, Türkiye, Russia and Iran are not parties to the crises. Therefore, it can be openly observed the variables of the foreign policies of those three countries by analyzing the crises. It is significant to comprehend the relations among variables in order to analyze the trilateral relations between Ankara, Moscow and Tehran.

The perceptions and decision-making mechanisms of the leaders towards the international system and the balance created between the international system and domestic politics by the state leaders are intervening variables of neoclassical realism. In this study, the intervening variable “leader” is not considered within the context of political psychology and leadership treat analysis. The leader variable is used in terms of his/her ideological tendencies, capacity for molding public opinion, and directing/manipulating the public.

Before getting into the details of the cases, it is better to define the concepts of crisis, conflict, and civil war in order to eliminate ambiguity. A crisis is defined as a situation perceived by the highest-level decision-makers of an international actor where there is a significant threat to the actor’s basic values requiring a responsive decision. More specifically, a foreign policy crisis is a breakpoint along the peace-war continuum involving four necessary and sufficient conditions as perceived by these decision-makers. First, there is a perceived threat from the external environment to the

actor's core values. Second, there is a finite amount of time available to respond. Third, there is a high perceived probability of war. Four, decision-makers feel that a decision is urgently needed due to the situation.⁴⁸² The concept of conflict can be defined as interactions or disputes between states or actors that can involve military or non-military means. Importantly, conflict includes a range of disputes, some of which may or may not escalate to crises or war.⁴⁸³ On the other hand, the concept of civil war is defined as an intrastate armed conflict involving organized political and military actors within the territory of an internationally recognized state, where both sides engage in sustained and reciprocal violence exceeding a threshold of battle-related deaths (often more than 1.000). The government must be a participant in the conflict, and the violence must be significant enough to distinguish the event from other forms of political violence such as terrorism, coups, or organized crime.⁴⁸⁴ In order to eliminate this definitional ambiguity, it is preferred to call one civil war, one conflict and one crisis, as phenomena in general. Because each of them has huge impact and has sustained for a long time.

3.1. Syrian Civil War

Syrian Civil War is an important phenomena that can demonstrate the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran and their relations among each other concretely. It is a crucial case in terms of the relations between Türkiye, Russia and Iran in the Five-Sea Basin region, since they cooperated during the Astana and Sochi processes. In order to comprehend the dynamics of Syrian Civil War, it should be started from the beginning of Syrian independence in 1946.

In 1946, Syria became independent at the end of the French mandate, and the first years after independence were characterized by serious political instability, frequent changes of government and military coups. This period was characterized by internal conflicts that would shape the political culture of modern Syria and the subsequent rise of the Baath Party.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸² Michael Brecher, "Toward a Theory of International Crisis Behavior: A Preliminary Report", *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1977, pp. 43-44.

⁴⁸³ Patrick James, *Crisis and War*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988, p. 9.

⁴⁸⁴ Nicholas Sambanis, "What Is Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 48, No. 6, 2004, p. 816.

⁴⁸⁵ David W. Lesch, *Syria*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019, p. 46.

In the post-independence period, Syria sought political stability through democratic experiments. However, these attempts soon failed due to divisions among political elites, interference from external actors, and economic difficulties. In the early period, the country was politically divided into two main currents: Nationalists and Socialists (especially members of the Baath Party).⁴⁸⁶ The power struggles of these factions led to constant changes of government and instability in governance.

One of the most important events that shaped political life in Syria in the 1950s was the Cold War rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union in the region. This situation turned Syria's domestic politics into an area of intervention by external actors. Syria's rapprochement with the Soviet Union caused discomfort in the regional policies of the US, and the US regional allies (such as Türkiye and Iraq) increased their pressure on Syria. Türkiye-Syria crisis in 1957 can be given as an example of this issue.⁴⁸⁷

These external pressures and internal political turmoil led the country's military officers to become important actors on the political scene. The three military coups of 1949 (the coups of Sami al-Hinnawi and Edib al-Balikli) are a clear example of this.⁴⁸⁸ In 1958, Syria and Egypt formed the United Arab Republic (UAR) in an attempt to address regional political and security challenges, but its existence did not take long. The union ended with a military coup in 1961 on the grounds that it restricted Syria's political freedoms. The Baathist movement, which left its mark on Syrian politics during the UAR period, found wide support in the society with its nationalist and

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ The Türkiye-Syria Crisis was the most serious Cold War conflict in the Middle East between the Suez Crisis and the Six Day War. Turkish, Soviet and American military units were mobilized and deployed on the Syrian and Turkish borders. The crisis exploded in a few months, but in the long run, it laid the foundations for a strategic partnership between the Soviet Union and Syria that lasts to this day. With the signing of the Economic and Technical Assistance Agreement between Syria and the USSR, Soviet dominance in Syria reached a level that neutralized pro-Turkish statesmen and bureaucrats, which was perceived as a threat by Turkish politicians. Therefore, Türkiye deployed a significant military force on the Syrian border. Syria condemned Türkiye's policy at the United Nations (UN) and the Soviet Union acted as a deterrent against Türkiye by stationing part of its Black Sea fleet in Latakia. In the context of the crisis, the US announced that it would support Türkiye decisively. Ultimately, the crisis was resolved with concessions made by the Soviet Union and the parties declared that they would resolve the problem through bilateral talks within the framework of the UN. See, David Easter, "Soviet Intelligence and the 1957 Syrian Crisis," **Intelligence and National Security**, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2018, p. 227; Ali Bilgin Varlık, Richard Ouizen, "Turkey's Deterrence in Emerging Security Environment: Challenges and Prospects," in Sertif Demir (Ed.), **Turkey's Foreign Policy and Security Perspectives in the 21st Century: Prospects and Challenges**, Florida, BrownWalker Press, 2016, p. 262.

⁴⁸⁸ James A. Riley, **Fragile Nation, Shattered Land: The Modern History of Syria**, London: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 2018, pp. 120-132.

socialist ideology. The Baath Party's ideology was based on Arab nationalism, socialism and secularism. The party became especially popular among young military officers and the urban middle class.⁴⁸⁹

On March 8, 1963, a military coup by Baathist officers brought the Baath Party to power. The young Baathist officers who carried out the coup (especially Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Assad) also represented a radical left wing within the party. In the process, the Baath Party's rule resulted in the exclusion of the traditional political elites and complete control of the state apparatus by the party like in the Soviet Union.⁴⁹⁰ The new regime attempted to gain widespread support in society by rapidly nationalizing the economy and implementing comprehensive land reform. However, the policies implemented led to economic decline in rural areas and economic hardship in the cities. In addition, the issue of sectarianism came to the forefront during this period; in particular, the rise of Alawite officers to critical positions in the army exacerbated ethnic and sectarian tensions in Syrian society.⁴⁹¹

In 1966, a coup took place within the Baath Party and representatives of the radical left wing such as Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Assad seized power. Soon, however, differences of opinion emerged between Hafez al-Assad and Salah Jadid. Jadid advocated spreading ideological revolution, while Assad advocated stabilization through strengthening the army and state mechanisms.⁴⁹² Like in the Soviet Union, the divergence between Hafez al-Assad and Salah Jadid can be resembled to the divergence between Leo Trotsky and Joseph Stalin.

This conflict deepened with the defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War against Israel. The war was a major disappointment for both the army and the Baath regime and increased internal conflicts. Ultimately, Hafez al-Assad purged Salah Jadid on November 13, 1970 in a military coup called the "Corrective Movement" (Al-Harakah Al-Tashihyah)⁴⁹³, establishing a strong one-man regime in Syria and opening the door to a long period of authoritarian rule. The early Republican period between 1946-1970 and the establishment of the Baathist regime was a critical period that shaped the

⁴⁸⁹ Lesch, *Syria*; Reilley, *Fragile Nation, Shattered Land*, p. 136-137.

⁴⁹⁰ Lesch, *Syria*, p. 89.

⁴⁹¹ Fabrice Balanche, "Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2018.

⁴⁹² Lesch, *Syria*, pp. 72-73.

⁴⁹³ A. I. Dawisha, "Syria under Asad, 1970-78: The Centres of Power", *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1978, p. 341.

political structure of modern Syria, deepened internal tensions, and laid the groundwork for subsequent authoritarian regimes. The internal and external political struggles during this period are crucial for understanding the origins of the great civil conflict that began in 2011.

From the late 1970s onwards, Assad intervened in the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). While this intervention gave Syria a strategic advantage in the regional power struggle, it also provided the regime with additional opportunities to suppress the voice of political opposition within the country. The Lebanon intervention is seen as a reflection of Assad's pragmatic approach that emphasized his geopolitical interests.⁴⁹⁴

Since the end of the 1970s, the Assad regime has been seriously confronted with the strengthening of the Sunni Islamist opposition. The Muslim Brotherhood movement, the spearhead of this opposition, accused the regime of sectarianism, gained a wide base in the society and organized guerrilla actions against the regime. In this process, attacks against the regime increased, especially in cities such as Aleppo, Hama and Homs.⁴⁹⁵ The Assad regime's response to this threat was harsh. In February 1982, the uprising in Hama, one of the cities where the Muslim Brotherhood was strongest, was violently suppressed by the regime. Thousands of people were killed in nearly three weeks of military operations. This event is considered as the peak of political violence in Syrian history and has become a symbolic event showing that the regime knows no limits in suppressing the opposition. After the Hama massacre, opposition movements in Syria were largely suppressed.⁴⁹⁶ The regime completely controlled the political sphere and pushed opposition activities underground.

In the late 1980s, problems such as economic stagnation, high unemployment rates, and shortages of basic goods became evident. Although these economic problems increased domestic discontent with the regime, the regime's strong security apparatus prevented large-scale protests. With the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, the Assad regime, having lost Soviet support, was forced to make pragmatic foreign policy moves. During this period, steps were taken to rapprochement with the

⁴⁹⁴ Reilley, *Fragile Nation, Shattered Land*, p. 192.

⁴⁹⁵ Omar Imady, *An Inside Story of Modern Syria: The Unauthorised Biography of a Damascene Reformer*, Yorkshire: Pen and Sword History, 2023, p. 56.

⁴⁹⁶ See. Dara Conduit, "The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Spectacle of Hama", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 70, No. 2, 2016.; "Hama massacre: The brutal legacy of Hafez al Assad", *TRT World*, <https://www.trtworld.com/video/digital/hama-massacre-the-brutal-legacy-of-hafez-al-assad-18262453> (Retrieved on 5 January 2024).

US regional policy, and support was given to the US-led coalition in the Gulf War (1990-91).⁴⁹⁷ However, the regime's failure to make progress in peace talks with Israel narrowed its room for maneuver in foreign policy and pushed the country into regional isolation. Domestically, as Hafez al-Assad's health began to deteriorate, succession debates intensified among the regime's elite. When Assad's eldest son, Basil, died in a car accident in 1994, the future of the regime became more uncertain and the 1990s became a period of political stagnation.⁴⁹⁸

After Hafez al-Assad's death on June 10, 2000, his younger son Bashar al-Assad, by then politically and militarily unprepared, became president at the age of 34, thanks to a quick constitutional amendment that lowered the age limit. This transition was interpreted by the outside world as a smooth leadership change with the potential for modernization. Domestically, it sparked a short-lived wave of optimism in intellectual circles and pro-reform actors, dubbed the "Damascus Spring" (Al-Rabi' Al-Dimashqi).⁴⁹⁹

In 2000-2001, under Bashar's leadership, many intellectuals, academics, and civil society representatives were able to regroup. The forums emerged during this period. These forums discussed issues such as political pluralism, press freedom, constitutional reforms, and the rule of law. One of the best known was the Jamel El-Atassi Forum.⁵⁰⁰ This environment allowed long-suppressed political demands to be voiced publicly for the first time. However, these reform movements were soon perceived as a threat by the regime. By late 2001, forums were shut down, and reformist intellectuals (e.g. Riad Seif, Aref Dalila) were imprisoned. Thus, the Damascus Spring was short-lived, the regime prioritized security over calls for reform.⁵⁰¹

Rather than political liberalization, Bashar al-Assad turned to restoring and consolidating the security structure of the state. The military intelligence (al-Mukhabarat) network became an all-pervasive mechanism, spying on the regime's

⁴⁹⁷ Robert M. Kerr, *Syrian Civil War: The Essential Reference Guide*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2020, pp. 170-171.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 171.; Lesch, *Syria*, p. 114.

⁴⁹⁹ Lesch, *Syria*.

⁵⁰⁰ Yasmin Aldemen, "The Roots, Factors, and Reasons that Made the Syrian Crisis a Protracted Crisis", *The Journal of Communication and Social Science*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2025, p. 15.

⁵⁰¹ Reilley, *Fragile Nation, Shattered Land*, pp. 175-176.

opponents and on potential threats within the Baath Party.⁵⁰² During this period, opposition parties remained closed, independent media activities were suppressed, and systems of loyalty within the regime were strengthened.

On the other hand, Bashar al-Assad's most remarkable turn was the transformation of the economy. After 2001, the regime began to implement neoliberal policies in line with International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank recommendations. Measures such as the removal of agricultural subsidies, public spending cuts, the reduction of state-backed loans, and the liberalization of foreign trade were implemented.⁵⁰³ An economic model was implemented to balance social justice and liberal economics, but in practice it has increased privatization and income inequality. This is one of the main factors explaining why, by 2011, the protests started mostly in provincial cities (Daraa, Homs, Idlib). At the same time, in the period between 2006-2010, Syria experienced a critical drought crisis. Hundreds of thousands of families with agriculture-based livelihoods have migrated from rural areas, particularly in the northeast of the country (e.g. Hasaka, Deir ez-Zor), to the suburbs of cities. This wave of internal displacement has negatively affected the social infrastructure in cities and created serious tensions between the poorer new arrivals and the traditional urban population.⁵⁰⁴

In the same years, there was a noticeable softening in relations with Türkiye. Bashar al-Assad paid a historic visit to Ankara in 2004⁵⁰⁵, and the two countries signed a visa liberalization agreement in 2009.⁵⁰⁶ This rapprochement was part of Türkiye's strategy to direct the Assad regime towards reforms within the framework of moderate Islam. However, this process ended with the post-2011 civil war.

⁵⁰² Lesch, *Syria*, p. 133.; Nikolaos Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2017, p. 38.

⁵⁰³ Reilley, *Fragile Nation, Shattered Land*, p. 165; Joseph Daher, Zaki Mehchy, "Syria's Economic Transition: From Kleptocracy to Islamic Neoliberalism in a War-Torn Economy", **The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform**, <https://era.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1842/43106/Syria%27s%20Economic%20Transition%20From%20Kleptocracy%20to%20Islamic%20Neoliberalism%20in%20a%20War-Torn%20Economy-DIGITAL.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y> (Retrieved on 10 January 2024).

⁵⁰⁴ Reilley, *Fragile Nation, Shattered Land*, p. 179.

⁵⁰⁵ "Syrian president makes landmark Turkey trip", **CNN International**, 6 January 2004, <https://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/01/06/turkey.syria.reut/> (Retrieved on 10 January 2024).

⁵⁰⁶ "Joint Statement of the First Meeting of the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council Between the Syrian Arab Republic and the Republic of Turkey, Damascus, 22-23 December, 2009", **Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye---suriye-ydsik-1_toplantisi-ortak-bildirisi_-22-23-aralik_-sam.en.mfa (Retrieved on 10 January 2024).

The 2011 uprising that erupted in Syria, while on the surface appearing to be an extension of the Arab Spring, should be seen as the result of years of accumulated social fractures, political repression and economic exclusion. The neoliberal transformation implemented by the Bashar al-Assad regime favored the capital elites in the big cities, but resulted in unemployment, poverty and lack of services in the provincial cities. The massive drought between 2006 and 2010 accelerated forced migration from the countryside to the urban peripheries, making urban slums even more vulnerable.⁵⁰⁷ Moreover, the dissolution of the social welfare mechanisms traditionally provided by the state has intensified reactions against the regime, especially in cities such as Daraa, Idlib, Homs and Raqqa. In this sense, Daraa stood out as a place where socio-political exclusion had materialized. The region was a periphery that was both politically distant from the center and economically disinvested.⁵⁰⁸ It was in Daraa that sparked the outbreak of events in March 2011. Young people, mobilized by the Arab Spring, wrote the following slogan on school walls: “It's your turn, doctor!”⁵⁰⁹.

The regime's response in Daraa was unresponsive on three levels: local officials were not dismissed, torturers were not prosecuted, and most of the demands were rejected. On the contrary, army troops surrounded Daraa and entered the city with tanks on 23 April, 2011. Electricity, water and communication lines were cut, and snipers were deployed in the city center.⁵¹⁰ By the end of March, protests spread to other cities: Homs, Banyas, Latakia, Idlib, the suburbs of Aleppo and finally the capital Damascus. In these cities, people from different social classes took to the streets: peasants, unemployed youth, students, imams, workers and even some middle-class people. Despite the state's tight media control in Syria, social media and mobile communication technologies played an important role in the spread of the protests. Groups organized on Facebook and uploaded videos⁵¹¹ taken with mobile phone cameras to YouTube, reaching both domestic and international public opinion.⁵¹²

⁵⁰⁷ Reilley, **Fragile Nation, Shattered Land**, p. 193.; Najaf Ali et al., “The Root Causes of the Syrian Crisis: Analyzing Internal and External Factor”, **Remittances Review**, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2024, pp. 221-229.

⁵⁰⁸ Kerr, **Syrian Civil War**, p. 80.

⁵⁰⁹ Creative Memory, “First Graffiti - Creative Memory.” **Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution**, 2011, <https://creativememory.org/chronology/first-graffiti/> (Retrieved on 15 January 2024).

⁵¹⁰ Kerr, **Syrian Civil War**, p. 61.

⁵¹¹ See. Miriam Cooke, **Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience, and the Syrian Revolution**, London: Routledge, 2016.

⁵¹² Dam, **Destroying a Nation**, p. 81.

Initially, the demonstrators demanded not regime change, but the fight against corruption, the abolishing of the security services, the recognition of individual freedoms, freedom of expression and assembly. However, the regime's repressive response to all these demands gradually led the protesters to reject the legitimacy of the regime altogether. The uprising thus transformed from a demand for reform into an anti-regime popular movement. Within this context, Bashar al-Assad made his first public speech on 30 March 2011.⁵¹³ He claimed that foreign powers were conspiring in Syria, without offering any concrete proposals for reform demands.

By August 2011, the regime's repression had become so intense that peaceful demonstrations in many cities became unsustainable. At this point, some protesters began to take up arms, and officers who deserted from within the army turned to forming anti-regime armed formations. The emergence of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) took place during this phase. In September 2011, the FSA emerged for the first time to protect anti-regime protesters and respond to the security forces. Thus, the peaceful and civilian protests transformed into armed resistance because of the regime's increasing violence. This transformation facilitated the emergence of civil war.⁵¹⁴

From the fall of 2011, armed clashes became widespread across the country. Homs, Hama, Daraa, Idlib and the suburbs of Damascus (especially Douma, Daraya and Harasta) became centers of resistance. Homs became known as the "*revolution capital of Syria*"⁵¹⁵ during this period. During this period, the regime began to use security forces, artillery and air power, food and medicine embargoes, electricity and water cuts, and denial of internet access and intelligence-based point operations to suppress the opposition. The regime's fighting against the opposition separated it both militarily and politically. Although the Syrian National Council (SNC), which was established with the support of Türkiye, Qatar and France, wanted to assume the political representation of the opposition, it failed to establish an effective bond with the armed groups on the ground.⁵¹⁶

In the second half of 2012, the groups participating in the conflict diversified. Some armed units, initially under the umbrella of the FSA, evolved into more radical

⁵¹³ "Conspiracy theory", **Deutsche Welle**, <https://www.dw.com/en/syrian-president-blames-protests-on-conspiracy/a-14954192> (Retrieved on 10 October 2024).

⁵¹⁴ Lesch, *Syria*, p. 134.; Kerr, *Syrian Civil War*, p. 239.

⁵¹⁵ Kerr, *Syrian Civil War*.

⁵¹⁶ Lesch, *Syria*, p. 134.; Reilley, *Fragile Nation, Shattered Land*, p. 196.

Islamist groups. The Jabhat al-Nusra Front became a significant force on the ground in mid-2012. The group was directly linked to al-Qaeda in Iraq and defined fighting the regime in Syria as “*jihad*”. The rise of al-Nusra both justified the regime’s fighting against terrorism argument and complicated the West’s view of the opposition.⁵¹⁷ Currently, the number of people directly affected by the civil war has reached millions. According to UN data, more than 14 million Syrian people lost their lives and more than 7.4 million were internally displaced or sought refuge in Lebanon, Jordan and Türkiye, Iraq or abroad.⁵¹⁸

By 2013, the civil war in Syria was no longer just a conflict between the regime and opposition groups, but a multi-layered proxy war in which the interests of regional and global powers intersect. In this period, the diversity of the groups on the ground has increased, and non-state actors (ISIS, al-Nusra) and external states (Iran, Türkiye, the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar) have become directly or indirectly involved in the conflict. In this process, the civil war in Syria has been reshaped on three main fronts: Regime vs. Western-backed opposition (FSA, SNC), Regime vs. radical Islamists (Al Nusra, ISIS), Radical Islamist groups vs. Kurdish forces (Democratic Union Party [PYD]/ People’s Protection Units [YPG]) and FSA.

At the same time, on 21 August 2013, the chemical weapons attack in the Ghouta region of Damascus was one of the turning points of this period. Hundreds of civilians (more than 1,400 according to some reports) were documented to have been killed by sarin gas in the attack.⁵¹⁹ The attack, which caused great outrage in the international community, was a test of then even though the using of chemical weapons was a red line for the US⁵²⁰, the US opted for a diplomatic solution mediated by Russia.

On the other hand, since 2013, the al-Nusra Front has made significant gains in northern Syria. It engaged in clashes with the FSA and other secular opposition groups in addition to the regime. In the same year, a splinter group from the Iraq-based al-Qaeda took the name Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and began to spread rapidly in both Iraq and Syria, claiming to establish a “*caliphate*” under its control. By

⁵¹⁷ Kerr, *Syrian Civil War*, p. 5-6.; Lesch, *Syria*, p. 136.; Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, p. 92.

⁵¹⁸ “Syria Refugee Crisis Explained”, **USA for UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency**, 13 March 2025, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>. (Retrieved on 10 October 2024).

⁵¹⁹ Aldamen, “The Roots, Factors, and Reasons”, p. 22.

⁵²⁰ “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps”, **The White House President Barack Obama**, 20 August 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps> (Retrieved on 10 October 2024).

2014, ISIS controlled large areas such as Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Palmyra and eastern Aleppo.⁵²¹ The rise of ISIS has turned into an existential threat for both the regime and the opposition. However, the regime strategically benefited from this situation. Through these radical terrorist organizations, the regime called itself as a secular power who was fighting against terrorism. At the same time, it made it harder for the West to build anti-regime coalitions. In northern Syria, the Kurds, who declared de facto autonomy in 2012, became one of the most organized and influential forces in the region by 2014. PYD and its armed wing, the YPG, were particularly prominent in their resistance against ISIS.⁵²²

In the fall of 2014, when ISIS attacked Kobani, the US-led international coalition supported the YPG with air support. This support helped the PYD gain legitimacy in the eyes of the West. Türkiye's failure to intervene directly in Kobani and its waiting at the border caused serious reactions both inside and outside the country. During this period, the YPG began the process of establishing a federative structure (later known as Rojava) in northern Syria, aiming to unite the cantons of Afrin, Kobani and Jazira.⁵²³

ISIS's capture of Mosul in June 2014 and the subsequent killing of Yazidis in Iraq⁵²⁴ brought the West's direct intervention to the agenda.⁵²⁵ On 22 September 2014, the US-led international coalition carried out its first airstrike in Syria. The target was ISIS, not the regime. This radically changed the direction of the war in Syria. The US and its allies were now pursuing a military policy that targeted not the regime but its radical opponents.⁵²⁶ In other words, the rise of ISIS paved the way for the regime to cease to be a military target and even indirectly preserve the status quo.

2016 was a critical period in the military balance of the Syrian civil war, which saw a radical transformation in favor of the regime. The most symbolic development of this period was the capture of Eastern Aleppo by the regime forces in December 2016. From the beginning of the war, Aleppo was both a symbolic and strategic

⁵²¹ Kerr, *Syrian Civil War*.

⁵²² Ananaya Chauhan, "Syrian Civil War", *Jus Corpus Law Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2022, pp. 331-347.

⁵²³ Chauhan, *Syrian Civil War*, p. 338.

⁵²⁴ Vicken Cheterian, "ISIS genocide against the Yazidis and mass violence in the Middle East", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 2021, pp. 629-641.

⁵²⁵ Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, p. 92.

⁵²⁶ "Promoting a Stable, Peaceful Transition in Syria", *International Crisis Group*, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/promoting-stable-peaceful-transition-syria>, 30 January 2025, (Retrieved on 01 April 2025).

stronghold of the opposition. The regime's successful completion of the siege of Aleppo was a major military victory, and a declaration of the end of the opposition's influence in the urban centers.⁵²⁷

In the post-2016 period, the UN-led Geneva Talks became ineffective as the balance of power on the ground shifted to the Astana and Sochi processes. Although the regime participated in diplomatic settlement processes, it lost its willingness to make political concessions as it made gains on the ground. The Astana Process, initiated by Türkiye, Iran and Russia, stood out as a new peace initiative that recognized the military balances on the ground and was shaped by the diplomatic initiative of non-Western actors. One of the most important outcomes of the Astana Process was the concept of de-escalation zones.⁵²⁸ However, these areas were soon besieged and subjected to military operations by regime forces and their allies. Especially in areas such as Eastern Ghouta (2018) and Daraa (2018), de-escalation commitments were violated, followed by forced evictions and demographic engineering policies.⁵²⁹

Since 2016, Türkiye has engaged in direct military interventions in northern Syria. The main justification for these interventions was to prevent the presence of the PYD/YPG, which Türkiye perceives to have organic ties with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), along the border. With Operation Euphrates Shield (2016), Operation Olive Branch (2018) and Operation Peace Spring (2019), Türkiye established a military presence in areas such as al-Bab, Afrin and Tal Abyad and adopted the strategy of creating a safe zone in these regions.⁵³⁰

In the post-2016 period, the US deepened its cooperation with the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the fight against ISIS. This partnership resulted in the capture of Raqqa from ISIS in 2017. With the defeat of ISIS in Baghuz in 2019, the organization's physical dominance in Syria came to an end. However, the post-ISIS security challenge remained, especially in Deir ez-Zor and Hasakah countryside.

⁵²⁷ Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, p. 26.; Reilley, *Fragile Nation, Shattered Land*, p. 201

⁵²⁸ Aman Bora, Deepa Mehra Rawat, "Syrian Strife: Understanding the Impacts on Global Stability and Humanitarian Crisis", *SSRN*, 1 December 2024, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5151445> (Retrieved on 10 March 2025).

⁵²⁹ Gregor Jaecke, "De-escalation zones in Syria", *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, 2020, <https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/7938566/De-escalation+zones+in+Syria.pdf>, (Retrieved on 02 September 2024).

⁵³⁰ Kerr, *Syrian Civil War*, p. 127; Lucas Swinnen, "The Syrian Civil War: A Never-Ending Story?", *Institute of Federalism, IFF Paper Working Online*, No 33, 2023, p. 20.

At the same time, the Assad regime has re-established its sovereignty in the western part of the country, particularly around Aleppo, Homs, Damascus and Latakia. However, the northeast (controlled by the SDF), the northwest (controlled by the Turkish-backed opposition) and the south (partially controlled by local reconciliations) belonged to non-regime structures.⁵³¹

On the other hand, a catastrophic earthquake which magnitude was 7.8 and its aftershock hit the southeast Türkiye and northwest Syria in February 2023. The earthquake caused approximately \$5.1 billion damage for Syria, and the continuing crisis in Syria prevented the aid efforts. The earthquake affected the normalization period of Syria into the international society. As a part of normalization period, the Arab League agreed to admit Syria again after twelve year-suspension and in spite of the continuing Western sanctions.⁵³² At the same time, Iraqi Prime Minister and Syrian President talked about the removal of Western sanctions, drug trafficking and the return of Syrian refugees in Damascus in the same year.⁵³³ At the same time, during the years of 2023-2024, especially after the beginning of Gaza War in October 2023, there were clashes between the Israeli forces and Iranian proxies in Damascus. The Iranian proxies attacked the US bases in Syria and also armed conflicts occurred between the Iranian proxies and US forces.⁵³⁴

In December 2024, the Bashar al-Assad regime, which had survived more than a decade of war, collapsed. This was made possible by the regime's loss of military or economic power, and the instability of regime supporter-regional powers. The Gaza War weakened Iran, and the Russia-Ukraine War decreased the influence of Russia. The declining influence of Russia and Iran, coupled with the weakening of the regime, made the collapse of the Assad regime inevitable.⁵³⁵

Following this collapse, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which had been operating from Idlib for many years and previously represented al-Qaeda affiliated structures, emerged as the new central authority in Syria under the leadership of its political leader

⁵³¹ Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro, Arthur Quesnay, **Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

⁵³² "Conflict in Syria," **Center for Preventive Action**, 12 March 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-syria> (Retrieved on 20 March 2025).

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ "Fortifying Influence: Russia's Repositioning in Syria Through the Gaza War", **The Emirates Policy Center (EPC)**, 24 January 2024, <https://www.epc.ae/en/details/brief/fortifying-influence-russia-s-repositioning-in-syria-through-the-gaza-war> (Retrieved on 10 March 2025).

Ahmed al-Sharaa at the end of January 2025.⁵³⁶ Al-Sharaa's past was highly controversial, with links to both al-Qaeda and ISIS. Nevertheless, a significant part of the international community focused on the question of whether this new structure had the potential for transformation.⁵³⁷

The first months after the overthrow of the regime witnessed an atmosphere of freedom for the Syrian people that had been hoped for in the 2011 revolution but never materialized. Damascus was the scene of anti-regime celebrations; political debates could freely take place on the streets, previously banned books were sold freely, and artists performed in public spaces.⁵³⁸ Spaces like the Rawda Café were transformed from intelligence-supervised meeting places into spaces for public deliberation. Exiled writers, academics and journalists began to return.⁵³⁹

Within the context of this governmental chaos, in March 2025, anti-regime demonstrations, which started in Latakia, quickly turned into a wave of mass violence that spread across the country. Alawites in particular became the target of both government forces and uncontrolled Sunni militias. Reports from areas such as Homs, Tartous and Hama showed that hundreds of Alawites civilians were killed.⁵⁴⁰ In the midst of all these developments, at the end of March 2025, it was announced that the HTS-led government had reconciled with the Kurdish autonomous administration, the SDF.⁵⁴¹ This was seen as an important step both in terms of limiting military conflicts and increasing state capacity.

⁵³⁶ Emile Hokayem, Laith Alajlouni, John Raine, Hasan Alhasan, "Regional Reactions to the Transition in Syria," *IISS*, 6 March 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/03/regional-reactions-to-the-transition-in-syria/> (Retrieved on 30 March 2025).

⁵³⁷ Rob Geist Pinfold, "The March Massacres Show That Syria Urgently Needs Solutions, Not Sanctions", *War on the Rocks*, 26 March 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/03/the-march-massacres-show-that-syria-urgently-needs-solutions-not-sanctions/> (Retrieved on 30 March 2025).

⁵³⁸ Tony Gamal-Gabriel, "Books banned under Assad now on sale at Damascus shops", *Al-Monitor*, 27 January, 2025, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/01/books-banned-under-assad-now-sale-damascus-shops>, (Retrieved on 15 April 2025).

⁵³⁹ Laure Stephan, "In Damascus, café Rawda is a 'lounge' for exiled opponents and artists returning to Syria", *Le Monde*, 2 February, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/02/02/in-damascus-cafe-rawda-a-lounge-for-exiled-opponents-and-artists-returning-to-syria_6737684_4.html, (Retrieved on 15 April 2025).

⁵⁴⁰ Rob Geist Pinfold, "The March Massacres Show That Syria Urgently Needs Solutions, Not Sanctions", *War on the Rocks*, 26 March 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/03/the-march-massacres-show-that-syria-urgently-needs-solutions-not-sanctions/> (Retrieved on 15 April 2025); Christopher M. Blanchard, "Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy," *U.S. Congress CRS Products*, 11 March 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33487> (Retrieved on 15 April 2025).

⁵⁴¹ Adam Lucente, "Syria's president announces deal to integrate Kurdish-led SDF into state structure", *Al-Monitor*, 10 March 2025, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/03/syrias-president-announces-deal-integrate-kurdish-led-sdf-state-structure>, (Retrieved on 20 April 2025).

Although the new government's announced "*five-year transition plan*"⁵⁴² included planned elections, constitution drafting and institutional reforms, the first steps were weak. The national dialogue conference in January 2025 was underrepresented. The interim constitutional declaration drafted in February does not clearly define the principle of separation of powers and neglects the accountability of the executive.⁵⁴³

In this new period from late 2024 to the present day, Syria has crossed a historical threshold with the fall of the Assad regime, but beyond this threshold, it has faced institutional fragility, sectarian fault lines, and a lack of governance. Although the transitional government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa has tried to pursue a flexible and pragmatic policy in the shadow of its past jihadist connections, it has serious shortcomings in terms of governance capacity, inclusiveness and social legitimacy.

3.1.1. Turkish Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War

Turkish foreign policy towards the Syrian Civil War can be analyzed through five variables. They are the leadership, the desire to increase or maintain its influence, border security, the impact of public opinion and political parties, and economic concerns. Firstly, the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had an important influence on the Turkish foreign policy towards Syrian Civil War. Secondly, Türkiye had a desire to increase its influence in Syria. This strategy was rooted in the Ottoman past mentioned in the Chapter 1.3. called *The Components of Turkish-Russian-Iranian Relations* and the neo-Ottomanist foreign policy of Ahmet Davutoğlu who had been the Foreign Minister of Türkiye between May 2009 and August 2014. It had three dimensions: (a) playing an active role, following the international law-based foreign policy, supporting Syria's territorial integrity and opposition forces, respectively;⁵⁴⁴ (b) pursuing the policy of "*zero problems with neighbors*" that includes increasing its

⁵⁴² David Gritten, "Syria Leader Signs Temporary Constitution for Five-Year Transition," **BBC**, 14 March 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c70ely2p6e4o> (Retrieved on 20 April 2025).

⁵⁴³ Radwan Ziadeh, "Challenges Facing Syria's Constitutional Declaration", **Arab Center Washington DC**, 4 April, 2025, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/challenges-facing-syrias-constitutional-declaration> (Retrieved on 20 April 2025).

⁵⁴⁴ Ziya Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2014, p. 208.

influence in the ex-Ottoman territories via proactive foreign policy;⁵⁴⁵ (c) following the humanitarian foreign policy and hosting the Syrian refugees.

Table 3.1. Turkish Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War

Turkish Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War				
	Intervening Variables	Dependent Variables	Period	Nature (Strategy, Tactic or Maneuver)
1	The Leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Open Door Policy towards Syrian people and criticizing the EU	2013-2025	Strategy
		Supporting the Sunni Muslim groups	2011-2025	Strategy
		Humanitarian and Entrepreneurial Foreign Policy	2015-2019	Strategy
		Changing the Syrian policy	2011-2025	Tactic
2	The Desire to Increase or Maintain Türkiye's Influence	International Law-Based Foreign Policy	2011-2025	Strategy
		The Policy of 'Zero Problems with Neighbors'	2009-2016	Strategy
		Entrepreneurial and Humanitarian Foreign Policy	2011-2025	Strategy
		Supporting Opposition	2011-2025	Strategy
		Astana Process	2017-2025	Strategy
3	Border Security	Military Operations	2015-2019	Tactic
		TOKİ's building wall in the Syrian border	2017-2018	Tactic
4	Impact of Public Opinion and Political Parties	Voluntary return projects	2022-	Maneuver
		Creating suitable infrastructure in Northern Syria	2016-	Strategy
		Normalization with Assad	2022-2024	Maneuver
5	Economic Concerns	Export-Led Growth Strategy		Strategy
		TOKİ-supporting housing projects		Tactic
		Reconstruction of Syria after Assad	2025-	Strategy

⁵⁴⁵ Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Zero Problems in a New Era", **Foreign Policy**, 21 March 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/21/zero-problems-in-a-new-era/> (Retrieved on 30 April 2025); "Diktatörlerle değil halklarla sıfır sorun dedik", **Anadolu Ajansı**, 25 Ağustos 2013, . <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/diktatorlerle-degil-halklarla-sifir-sorun-dedik/223243>; (Retrieved on 20 April 2025).

Thirdly, border security is crucial for Turkish foreign policy for that crisis. The activities of PKK, PYD and YPG at the Syrian border of Türkiye and their impact on domestic politics were perceived as threats by Türkiye and in its foreign policy, Türkiye had to consider the issue of border security. Fourthly, the impact of public opinion and political parties definitely affected the Turkish foreign policy. Hosting Syrian refugees in Türkiye created a discomfort in the public opinion and especially for the opposition parties like Republican People's Party (CHP) and Victory Party. Fifthly, regarding the economic concerns, with the AKP government, Turkish economy had export-led growth strategy which meant Türkiye opened new markets for growing Turkish businesses and started to diversify and to increase its industrial good exports. Syria has become an important market for this strategy.⁵⁴⁶

Regarding the first intervening variable, the leadership, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has shown a confident and decisive foreign policy stance towards the Syrian crisis. Türkiye proudly proclaimed its open-door policy, showing a more humane and generous approach in contrast to the mostly anti-immigrant stance of European countries. This has strengthened Türkiye's reputation and role in both the regional and global arena.⁵⁴⁷ Erdoğan has harshly criticized the international aid system and especially the EU's lack of support for Türkiye. On many occasions, he emphasized the West's policies that contradicted its claim to defend humanitarian values and stated that the West was shirking its real humanitarian responsibilities.⁵⁴⁸

Erdoğan believes that Westernist, secular and secular elites have led to the erasure of Islam from the public sphere. Therefore, his foreign policy has a vision of uniting the Muslim world. Drawing parallels with Abdulhamid II, he claims to be a leader who defended Islam against the Western powers that destroyed the Ottoman Empire. This approach manifests itself in his foreign policy discourse with the goal of assuming the role of the leader of the Islamic ummah.⁵⁴⁹ One of the reasons of

⁵⁴⁶ Meliha B. Altunışık and Lenore G. Martin, "Making Sense of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East under AKP," **Turkish Studies**, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2011, p. 579.

⁵⁴⁷ "President Erdoğan Addresses the UN General Assembly," **Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye**, 20 September 2016, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/52361/president-erdogan-addresses-the-un-general-assembly> (Retrieved on 10 June 2024).; Süleyman Temiz, "Erdoğan's Political Leadership and Foreign Policy Nexus: The Case of the Syrian Refugee Crisis and Turkey's Role", **Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization of The International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM)**, 2018, p. 135.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁹ Gönül Tol, **Erdoğan's War: A Strongman's Struggle at Home and in Syria**, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Erdoğan's support for the Sunni Muslim groups in Syria is this foreign policy vision. In his political life, Erdoğan has tendencies of power centralization and monopolization of power. His foreign policy is in line with this personal authoritarian meritocracy; he pursues an actively interventionist and entrepreneurial foreign policy in order to increase Türkiye's regional influence and consolidate his political hegemony.⁵⁵⁰

Erdoğan's foreign policy moves are also designed to support the domestic political struggle and identity politics in Türkiye. For example, he similarly sees the Baath regime in Syria and the CHP as minorities representing the secular elite and criminalizes both the elite and the opposition by continuing this line in foreign policy. This is an important example of how Erdoğan's personal political approach intertwines foreign and domestic politics. At the same time, Erdoğan has changed his Syria policy over time. While initially focusing on toppling the Syrian regime, he has developed mutually beneficial relations with the regime and taken pragmatic steps on border security and refugee policies. This shows Erdoğan's personal flexibility to change tactics according to the situation.⁵⁵¹

In terms of the second intervening variable, the desire to increase its influence, the fundamental principles of Turkish foreign policy towards the Syrian Civil War were to maintain Syria's territorial integrity and unity, to stop violence against the public and conflicts and to direct Syria starting the democratic reform and transformation process that would meet the demands of Syrian people from the beginning of the crisis.⁵⁵² In April 2012, regime forces attacked the opposition forces by escaping to the Turkish border and injured a Turkish citizen. In June 2012, Syria downed a Turkish F-4 Phantom fighter jet in a training flight. After these two issues, Türkiye perceived Syria as a threat against its security.⁵⁵³

The security-based cooperation between Türkiye and Syria initiated by the Adana Memorandum signed in 1998⁵⁵⁴ has evolved into a more comprehensive

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵⁵² **Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'ın Barış Diplomasisi: Suriye Örneği**, İstanbul: Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Başkanlığı Yayınları, 2025, p. 61.

⁵⁵³ Burak Bilgehan Özpek, Yelda Demirağ, "Turkish foreign policy after the 'Arab Spring': from agenda-setter state to agenda-entrepreneur state", *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2014, p. 339-340.

⁵⁵⁴ See. "Statement Made By İsmail Cem, Foreign Minister, On The Special Security Meeting Held Between Turkey And Syria October 20, 1998 (Unofficial Translation)," **Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/p_statement-made-by-ismail-cem_-foreign-minister_-on-

diplomatic and economic partnership. The principle of “zero problems with neighbors” adopted in 2009 by Türkiye under the AKP administration with the impact of Ahmet Davutoğlu enabled Türkiye to base its foreign policy on pragmatic rather than ideological grounds.

At that time, the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council established in 2009⁵⁵⁵ made it possible to hold joint meetings at the cabinet level, transforming Türkiye-Syria relations into a diplomatic and a managerial partnership model. In this framework, steps such as the mutual lifting of visas in 2009, the establishment of free trade zones in border regions, and joint cultural projects aimed at deepening the economic and social integration between the two countries were carried out. During this period, the trade volume between Türkiye and Syria increased from 730 million dollars to 2 billion dollars and Türkiye became one of Syria’s largest trading partners.⁵⁵⁶

At the same time, towards the end of the 2000s, Türkiye sought a kind of neo-Ottomanist depth in its relations with Arab countries, and in this context, Syria was considered as a key partner for both opening up to Arab public opinion and institutionalizing its regional leadership capacity.⁵⁵⁷ In this period, Türkiye has been trying to establish balancing relations with the West and the Arab and Muslim world.

In March 2011, the protests in Syria led to a short period of waiting and then a sharp break in Türkiye’s foreign policy towards the Damascus regime. The spread of the Arab Spring to Syria after its impact in Tunisia and Egypt was initially met with optimism in Türkiye.⁵⁵⁸ Ankara publicized its expectations that the Assad regime would abandon its repressive policies against the demonstrators and embark on a reform process that would include social demands. In this process, Türkiye preferred

[the-special-security-meeting-held-between-turkey-and-syria_br_october-20_-1998_br_unofficial-translation_p_en.mfa](#) (Retrieved on 5 May 2024).

⁵⁵⁵ “Joint Statement of the First Meeting of the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council Between the Syrian Arab Republic and the Republic of Turkey, Damascus, December 22-23, 2009”, **Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye---suriye-ydsik-1_-toplantisi-ortak-bildirisi_-22-23-aralik_-sam.en.mfa. (Retrieved on 12 January 2023).

⁵⁵⁶ “Turkish Exports to Syria up Nine Folds”, **Anadolu Agency**, 13 January 2011, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/archive/turkish-exports-to-syria-up-nine-folds/420382>. (Retrieved on 3 November 2023).

⁵⁵⁷ M. Hakan Yavuz, “The motives behind the AKP’s foreign policy: neo-Ottomanism and strategic autonomy”, **Turkish Studies**, Vol. 23, No. 5, 2022, pp. 4-5.

⁵⁵⁸ Ziya Öniş, “Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East”, **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2014, pp. 203-219.

to promote a strategy of regime transformation and adaptation rather than military intervention or sanctions. Statements by then Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu suggest that this approach was based on a pragmatic, rather than normative, pursuit of transformation.⁵⁵⁹

In this process, Türkiye's policy underwent a multidimensional transformation. First, open and institutionalized support was provided to the Syrian opposition. Istanbul became the headquarters of the SNC in October 2011, which Ankara recognized as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.⁵⁶⁰ In addition, the FSA was organized within Turkish borders and provided military training, logistical support and media visibility. Thus, Türkiye became the opposition's supporter not only diplomatically but also operationally.⁵⁶¹ This position has meant Ankara's explicit foreign policy pivot towards toppling the Assad regime. Second, Türkiye's strategy in this period was also reshaped in terms of regional alliances. Together with Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Türkiye played an active role in supporting the Syrian opposition politically and financially.⁵⁶²

The reforms announced by the Assad regime between April and May 2011 - such as the lifting of the state of emergency and the promise of constitutional amendments - did not prevent the escalation of violence on the ground, and the Turkish public and decision-making circles began to question the regime's sincerity. In this process, Türkiye's foreign policy crossed a threshold and Davutoğlu's visit to Damascus in August 2011 went down in history as Türkiye's one of the last diplomatic efforts. During this visit, Davutoğlu conveyed concrete demands to Assad to stop the violence, start reforms and open dialogue channels.⁵⁶³ However, the massacre in Hama immediately after the visit was considered the moment when Türkiye's conciliatory attitude was running out.

As of June 2011, Türkiye started hosting the Syrian opposition on Turkish soil and hosted the establishment of the SNC in Istanbul. Thus, Ankara started to transform

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 209.

⁵⁶⁰ Christopher Phillips, "Into the Quagmire: Turkey's Frustrated Syria Policy", **Chatham House, MENAP BP** 2012/04, 2012, p. 7.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ "Turkish foreign minister meets Syria's Assad", **Al Jazeera**, 9 August 2011, (Access 13 December 2023). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/8/9/turkish-foreign-minister-meets-syrias-assad>, (Retrieved on 13 December 2023).

from an actor supporting the “reformist transformation” of the Assad regime to a background supporter of the opposition coalition forming against the regime.⁵⁶⁴ As of the summer of 2011, Türkiye’s Syria policy replaced expectations of reform with a strategy aimed at regime change. Bashar al-Assad’s massacres in cities such as Hama and Homs and systematic violence against peaceful demonstrations prompted Türkiye to burn all bridges with Assad.

Another critical dimension of this period was Türkiye’s refugee crisis. Since the fall of 2011, the influx of asylum seekers and refugees has been increasing and by 2018 it has exceeded 3.5 million people.⁵⁶⁵ Türkiye initially followed an open-door policy, prioritizing humanitarian responsibility, establishing camp systems for refugees and granting them “*temporary protected status*”.⁵⁶⁶ However, as the number of asylum-seekers increased and the prospects for their long-term stay strengthened, Türkiye was challenged from both socioeconomic and governance perspectives.

Within the context of Türkiye’s entrepreneurial and humanitarian foreign policy, Türkiye’s ultimate goals in Syria were to eliminate any threats to Türkiye’s national security and national interests from Syrian territory, to ensure the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of Syrians and internally displaced people in Türkiye, and to achieve a political solution to the conflict based on Syria’s territorial integrity and UNSC Resolution 2254.⁵⁶⁷ In a similar vein, via Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch, and Operation Peace Spring, Türkiye de-terrorized an area of 8.200 km² of PKK/PYD/YPG and Daesh terrorism. Thus, the security and infrastructure conditions were improved in that area, and 411.000 Syrians could return to their homes.⁵⁶⁸

Türkiye has moved towards building its governance capacity in Syria at the same time as establishing de facto areas of control on the ground. This capacity has deepened

⁵⁶⁴ Christopher Phillips, “Into the Quagmire”.

⁵⁶⁵ Gerasimos Tsourapas, “The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Foreign Policy Decision-Making in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey”, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2019, pp.464–481

⁵⁶⁶ Umur Korkut, “Pragmatism, moral responsibility or policy change: the Syrian refugee crisis and selective humanitarianism in the Turkish refugee regime”, *Comparative Migration Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2016, pp. 2-20.

⁵⁶⁷ See. “Resolution 2254 (2015) Adopted by the Security Council at its 7588th meeting, on 18 December 2015”, **United Nations Security Council**, 18 December 2015, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf (Retrieved on 18 Mayıs 2024).

⁵⁶⁸ Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, *2021 Yılına Girerken Girişimci ve İnsani Dış Politikamız*, Ankara: Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2020, pp. 22-23.

in a wide range of areas, from the use of the Turkish Lira as currency to the Turkishization of education curricula.⁵⁶⁹

As of 2017, Türkiye's Syria policy entered another strategic phase. Having shifted from a normative intervention strategy focused on regime change to a military engagement, Türkiye now turned to transfer its gains on the ground to the diplomatic arena. In this context, the Astana Process was the beginning of a new phase in which Türkiye, together with Russia and Iran, became an active diplomatic actor in the search for a solution to the Syrian crisis. The Astana process was a multilateral diplomacy platform designed to institutionalize ceasefires on the ground and to draw the boundaries of the political framework for the future of Syria. For Türkiye, this process meant not only crisis management but also the diplomatic institutionalization of its claim to be a regional power.⁵⁷⁰

The Astana talks had strategic significance for Türkiye on at least three different levels. First, this process enabled Türkiye to develop a direct diplomatic channel with Russia and Iran independently of its Western allies. Especially at a time when relations were strained due to the US military cooperation with the PYD/YPG/PKK, Türkiye tried to establish a balance on the ground through this platform. Second, the Astana process provided Türkiye with the opportunity to legitimize its de facto control on the ground.⁵⁷¹ Türkiye was able to bring its presence in the safe zones established as a result of Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch to the table as an actor in the Astana process, thus showing both domestic public opinion and external actors that it is an indispensable part of the regional equation.

⁵⁶⁹ Ömer Koparan, "Turkish lira becomes most trusted currency in Syria," **Anadolu Agency**, 13 July 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkish-lira-becomes-most-trusted-currency-in-syria/1909052> (Retrieved on 5 June 2024).; Isabel Coles and David Gauthier-Villars, "Turkey Uses Its Currency to Tighten Grip on Northern Syria", **The Wall Street Journal**, 24 June 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-uses-its-currency-to-tighten-grip-on-northern-syria-11593019438> (Retrieved on 5 June 2024).

⁵⁷⁰ Ahmet K. Han, "Paradise Lost: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy and the Case of Turkish-Syrian Relations", in Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür (Eds.), **Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity**, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013, pp. 55-71.

⁵⁷¹ Meliha Benli Altunışık and Lenore G. Martin, "Turkey and the Middle East and North Africa under the AKP: A Three Level Analysis of Foreign Policy Change", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 20, No. 78, 2023, pp. 79-96

The third and most critical issue emerged in Idlib. Idlib was the most sensitive and complex of the de-escalation zones established under the Astana process.⁵⁷² With the twelve observation posts established there, Türkiye aimed to be a stabilizing force in HTS-controlled areas; it wanted to deter regime attacks on the one hand, and to limit the control of radical groups such as HTS on the other.⁵⁷³ However, the fragmented nature of the armed groups in Idlib, the increasing centralization of HTS and Türkiye's complex relations with these groups made it difficult to go beyond observer status. Over time, Türkiye's observation posts came under siege by regime forces, and in 2019 and 2020, Turkish soldiers were attacked and suffered serious military casualties.

The Astana process also embodied Türkiye's strategy to play a role in the transition process for the future of Syria. Türkiye functioned to bring the demands of the anti-regime opposition to the table on topics such as the establishment of a Constitutional Committee, the safe return of refugees, political transition and the organization of elections.⁵⁷⁴ The process retained its importance in terms of expanding Türkiye's diplomatic room for maneuver and fortifying its military engagement in Syria with a multilateral diplomatic legitimacy shield.

Türkiye also started to use the refugee issue more visibly as a strategic tool for its foreign policy. Specifically, President Erdoğan's statements in 74th session of UN General Assembly debate in 2019 that "*somewhere between one million to two million refugees can be resettled confidently in the safe zone*"⁵⁷⁵ demonstrated Türkiye's positioning of Syrian refugees not only as humanitarian but also as an element serving geopolitical and demographic purposes. This discourse also allowed Türkiye to use the 2016 Migration Deal with the EU as leverage. The refugee card became a bargaining chip against the West and enabled population engineering in areas under Türkiye's control.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷² Under the Astana process, there were four de-escalation zones in Syria. They were Eastern Ghouta zone, Homs zone, Daraa zone and Idlib zone. See. Gregor Jaecke, David Labude, "De-escalation Zones in Syria", **Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Country Report**, June 2020.

⁵⁷³ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁵⁷⁴ Tuğba Bayar and Murat Bayar, "Syria Issue A Source of Competition in Turkish-Iranian Relations", in Serhat Ahmet Erkmén and Mehmet Emin Erendör (Eds.), **The Security Dimensions of the Syrian Civil War: The Case of Türkiye**, Oxon: CRC Press, 2025, pp. 78-89.

⁵⁷⁵ "Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Speech at 74th UN General Assembly", **24 News HD Youtube Channel**, 24 September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azz3cOzP8zE> (Retrieved on 5 July 2024).

⁵⁷⁶ Ayhan Kaya, "Migration as a Leverage Tool in International Relations: Turkey as a Case Study", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 17, No. 68, 2020, pp. 21-39.

The collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime in December 2024 marked a structural break not only for Syria but also for the balance of power in the region. After nearly fourteen years of civil war, regional interventions, demographic destruction and social polarization, the collapse of the regime brought about the delayed and unexpected regime change that Türkiye had been aiming for since 2011. Ahmed al-Sharaa, who took office as the new Syrian President, has been known as a figure with direct links to al-Qaeda and HTS in the past, but over time he has shown a more pragmatic and statehood-oriented leader profile. For Türkiye, the al-Sharaa-led transitional government offers an advantageous partnership. Al-Sharaa's leadership has organic ties with the Syrian opposition groups supported by Ankara and is a natural extension of the military-civilian system Türkiye has established on the ground. Second, the new administration seeks coordination with Türkiye on issues such as border security, trade, reconstruction, and population policies.⁵⁷⁷ In this way, Türkiye has the opportunity to diplomatically consolidate an expanding sphere of influence from the north to the center of Syria.

Türkiye has been the most important and consistent supporter of the opposition parties in Syria since 2011. President Erdoğan and Turkish foreign officials were the first foreign officials to visit Damascus. Al-Sharaa visited Türkiye in February 2025 and personally thanked Erdoğan for his support. This shows the strengthening of Türkiye's influence on the new Syrian administration.⁵⁷⁸ In Türkiye, Erdoğan presented these developments as domestic political victory. He calls Syrian issue as "*Peace Diplomacy*" and he claimed that there was hope for the return of Syrian refugees in Türkiye.⁵⁷⁹

Regarding the third intervening variable, border security, one of the main strategic dilemmas Türkiye faced in this period was shaped in the context of the Kurdish issue. The autonomous structures established by the PYD/YPG in northern Syria were perceived as a national security threat for Türkiye and associated with the

⁵⁷⁷ Mohammad Sio, "Syrian President al-Sharaa voices desire to transform ties with Türkiye into strategic partnership", **Anadolu Agency**, 4 February 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/syrian-president-al-sharaa-voices-desire-to-transform-ties-with-turkiye-into-strategic-partnership/3471864>, (Retrieved on 10 March 2025).

⁵⁷⁸ Emile Hokayem, "Türkiye: The New Regional-Security Architect?," **IISS**, 6 March 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/03/regional-reactions-to-the-transition-in-syria/> (Retrieved on 10 March 2025).

⁵⁷⁹ **Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'ın Barış Diplomasisi**, pp. 267-275.

PKK.⁵⁸⁰ However, direct intervention against this threat would take place after 2015, at which point Türkiye responded to developments on the ground with a strategy of monitoring and indirect balancing.

The year 2015 marks a deep rupture in Türkiye's Syria policy, both conceptually and operationally. After 2011, the normative interventionist strategy aimed at regime change was replaced by a hard power-based foreign policy doctrine based primarily on security concerns. This change was driven by the strengthening of radical elements on the ground, the US's increased cooperation with the YPG under the umbrella of the SDF, and ISIS attacks directly targeting Türkiye. At the same time, with the terrorist attacks in Türkiye's domestic politics and incidents such as Suruç in July 2015 and Ankara in October 2015⁵⁸¹, security threats coming from Syria became a priority issue on the domestic policy agenda.

In this context, Türkiye's first comprehensive military intervention in Syria, Operation Euphrates Shield, was launched in August 2016. The objective of the operation was both to clear ISIS from the Jarabulus-Al Bab line and to prevent the YPG from merging the Afrin and Kobani cantons. This operation, in which the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and FSA components acted together on the ground, is the first concrete step in Türkiye's strategy to create a safe zone across the border.⁵⁸² This intervention can be considered as a threshold where Türkiye started to establish both military and civilian territorial control in northern Syria. Following the Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch was launched in January 2018, targeting YPG forces in the Afrin region. This operation is Türkiye's second strategic move to annihilate what it defines as the "*PKK corridor*" along its border. With the control of Afrin, the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) structures settled in the area and governance processes were initiated through local councils.⁵⁸³

⁵⁸⁰ Haydar Karaman, "Intervention as a Security Tool in Turkish Foreign Policy", in Serhat Ahmet Erkmen, Mehmet Emin Erendor (Eds.), **The Security Dimensions of the Syrian Civil War: The Case of Türkiye**, Oxon: CRC Press, 2025, pp. 39-46.

⁵⁸¹ Eray Alim, "Prudence as an Antidote to Foreign Policy Adventurism: The Case of Turkey in the Syrian Crisis", **Global Society**, Vol. 37, No. 2, p. 308.

⁵⁸² "Fırat Kalkanı Harekâtı", **Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Savunma Bakanlığı**, <https://www.msb.gov.tr/FiratKalkani#:~:text=T%C3%BCrkiye%2CBirle%C5%9Fmi%C5%9F%20Milletler%20S%C3%B6zle%C5%9Fmesi'nin,2016'da%20F%C4%B1rat%20Kalkan%C4%B1%20Harek%C3%A2t%C4%B1n%C4%B1> (Retrieved 10 April 2025).

⁵⁸³ "Zeytin Dalı Harekâtı", **Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Savunma Bakanlığı**, <https://www.msb.gov.tr/ZeytinDaliHarekati#:~:text=Kahraman%20T%C3%BCrk%20Silahl%C4%B1>

2019 ended with Operation Peace Spring, Türkiye's third comprehensive military operation. Launched on 9 October 2019, this operation targeted a 120-kilometer line between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, following the sudden US decision to withdraw from northern Syria. The aim is to create a terror-free safe zone and ensure the return of one million Syrian refugees.⁵⁸⁴ This goal shows that Türkiye has institutionalized the strategy of using refugee management as a geopolitical tool in its foreign policy. After the Peace Spring, Türkiye has taken steps to provide its security and have a say in regional restructuring by establishing a 30 km deep sphere of influence in northern Syria.

Table 3.2. The Military Operations of Türkiye in Syria⁵⁸⁵

Operation Name	Region	Operation Date
Euphrates Shield	al-Bab region	24 August 2016
Olive Branch	Afrin region	20 January 2018
Peace Spring	Between Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad	9 October 2019
Spring Shield	Idlib region	10 February 2020

In 2020, Türkiye carried out its last military operation called Operation Spring Shield in the Idlib region. The aim is to prevent the spread of the regime and ensure the safety of the troops in the region, to prevent migration towards Türkiye's borders due to regime attacks, and to ensure the safety of the people in the region and their safe, voluntary, and dignified return. The operation was concentrated mainly in the southern Idlib, and as a result of operations carried out by the TAF' land and air forces, heavy blows were dealt to regime targets in a short period of time. During the operation, 3.136 regime forces were neutralized, and a large number of tanks, howitzers, air defense systems, and aircraft were destroyed. The operation ended with the ceasefire announced on 5 March 2020, following an agreement reached between President Erdoğan and Russian President Putin in Moscow.⁵⁸⁶

<https://www.msb.gov.tr/BarisPinariHarekati> (Retrieved 10 April 2025).

⁵⁸⁴ "Barış Pınarı Harekâtı", Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Savunma Bakanlığı, <https://www.msb.gov.tr/BarisPinariHarekati> (Retrieved 10 April 2025).

⁵⁸⁵ Salim Çevik, "Turkey's Military Operations in Syria and Iraq", *SWP Comment*, No: 37, May 2022, p. 2, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C37/>.

⁵⁸⁶ "Bahar Kalkanı Harekâtı", Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Savunma Bakanlığı, <https://www.msb.gov.tr/BaharKalkani> (Retrieved on 10 April 2025).; Ethem Emre Özcan, Mahmoud Barakat, "Operation Spring Shield leaves mark on Syria in 2020", *Anadolu Agency*, 30 December 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/operation-spring-shield-leaves-mark-on-syria-in-2020/2093154> (Retrieved on 10 April 2025).

Apart from the military operations, TOKİ (Toplu Konut İdaresi) built a 564-kilometer-long security wall in the border between Türkiye and Syria in 2018. The governorships in the border cities also supported the building of wall economically. The wall was built in order to prevent illegal entries and terrorist activities. The wall also contributed to the TAF' struggle with the terrorist organizations.⁵⁸⁷

In terms of the fourth intervening variable, the impact of public opinion and the political parties, post-2020 period is a phase in which Türkiye reframes its stabilized military and diplomatic position in its Syria policy in line with domestic political needs. In this period, Türkiye's main foreign policy priority was not regime change or new territorial gains, but rather the institutionalization of already controlled territories, managing the rising anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkish public opinion, and maintaining its bargaining power in relations with Europe. The refugee issue became the determining axis of both domestic and foreign policymaking in this period; Syria policy became intertwined with domestic political debates.

As a result of the open door policy implemented in Türkiye after 2011, the number of registered Syrians in the country approached four million by 2020.⁵⁸⁸ This demographic density has started to trigger social tensions, especially in metropolitan areas, and the presence of refugees has become one of the main topics of polarization among political parties. While the AKP-Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) alliance defended refugee-oriented policies, opposition parties, particularly the CHP and Victory Party, emphasized the return of the refugees as a campaign promise.⁵⁸⁹ In this atmosphere, the new foreign policy line developed by the ruling bloc has tended both to encourage “*voluntary return*” projects in the areas created suitable infrastructure by Türkiye in northern Syria in order to appease the public in Türkiye.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁷ Uğur Aslanhan, “TOKİ, Suriye sınırındaki 564 kilometrelik güvenlik duvarını tamamladı”, **Anadolu Agency**, 9 June 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/toki-suriye-sinirindaki-564-kilometrelik-guvenlik-duvarini-tamamladi-/1169975>. (Retrieved 10 April 2025).

⁵⁸⁸ “Distribution of Syrians under Temporary Protection by Year”, **Republic of Türkiye Presidency of Migration Management**, 12 June 2025, <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>, (Retrieved on 15 June 2025).

⁵⁸⁹ “Göçmen ve Sığınmacı Sorununu 2 Yıl İçinde Çözeceğiz!”, **Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi**, 1 August 2022, <https://chp.org.tr/haberler/gocmen-ve-siginmaci-sorununu-2-yil-cinde-cozecegiz> (Retrieved on 15 June 2025).; “10 milyon imzayı TBMM'ye teslim edeceğiz”, **Zafer Partisi**, <https://www.zaferpartisi.org.tr/Haberler/10-milyon-imzayi-tbmm-ye-teslim-edecegiz/> (Retrieved on 15 June 2025).

⁵⁹⁰ See. “Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Irregular Migrants in Türkiye (AVRR)”, **Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs Directorate for EU Affairs**, 22 March 2022, <https://www.ab.gov.tr/assisted-voluntary-return-and-reintegration-of-irregular-migrants-in-turkey->

One of the most significant changes in Türkiye's Syria policy during this period was the open discussion of the possibility of direct contact with the regime. In late 2022 and 2024, Erdoğan's declaration that he was open to talks with Assad marked a radical shift in Turkish foreign policy, which was interpreted both as a signal of normalization to the domestic public. With this normalization, Erdoğan hoped that Türkiye and Syria could make a deal that provided the return of 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Türkiye.⁵⁹¹

Regarding the fifth intervening variable, economic concerns, the most prominent policy in this context has been the launch of TOKİ-supported housing projects in Turkish-controlled areas. In 2022, President Erdoğan announced that one million Syrians would be returned to northern Syria, which also served as a political message to both the EU and the opposition in Türkiye. The voluntary return projects mentioned above were implemented through governance networks coordinated with the governorships of Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa and institutionalized with the support of local councils, and civil society organizations.⁵⁹²

Furthermore, the collapse of Assad created economic opportunities for Türkiye in Syria. This new era has also brought with it significant structural vulnerabilities and foreign policy dilemmas. First, al-Sharaa's past jihadist identity makes it difficult for Western actors to engage with the new government in Damascus. While the US took the view that al-Sharaa's past was an obstacle to the production of legitimacy, the EU, especially Germany, France and Italy, sent diplomatic delegations to Damascus in early 2025 and started to normalize relations to a limited extent.⁵⁹³ This made Türkiye

[avrr- 52296_en.html](#) (Retrieved on 15 June 2025). ; Çiğdem Alyanak, Mustafa Hatipoğlu, "Türkiye prepares new project for voluntary return of 1M Syrian refugees: President", **Anadolu Agency**, 4 May 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkiye-prepares-new-project-for-voluntary-return-of-1m-syrian-refugees-president/2578655> (Retrieved on 15 June 2025). ; Diyar Güldoğan, "Türkiye creating infrastructure for voluntary return of Syrian refugees: President Erdoğan", **Anadolu Agency**, 25 May 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkiye-creating-infrastructure-for-voluntary-return-of-syrian-refugees-president-erdogan/2906013> (Retrieved on 15 June 2025).

⁵⁹¹ Abby Sewell, Suzan Fraser, "A rapprochement between Syria and Turkey is on the table. Here's what it might mean for the region", **Associated Press**, 12 July 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-syria-erdogan-assad-meeting-talks-rapprochement-1fcb9f5a0359639eae5a24ecd48c2f6d> (Retrieved on 15 June 2025).

⁵⁹² Alyanak, Hatipoğlu, "Türkiye prepares new project".

⁵⁹³ Ahmet Gençtürk, "Syria's new administration leader welcomes Italian delegation in Damascus", **Anadolu Agency**, 10 January 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/syria-s-new-administration-leader-welcomes-italian-delegation-in-damascus/3446725>, (Retrieved on 15 February 2025).; Gavin Blackburn, "Germany reopens Damascus embassy 13 years after Syrian war forced its closure", **Euronews**, 20 March 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/20/germany-reopens-damascus-embassy-13-years-after-syrian-war-forced-its-closure>, (Retrieved on 30 April 2025).; "France sends diplomats to Syria to make 'initial contact' with new authorities", **Radio France**

a diplomatic mediator and guiding actor between the West and the Damascus regime. Türkiye serves as a political bridge between Damascus and Western capitals, both to gain international acceptance for the new regime and to play a role in the economic reconstruction of the new era. Within this context, Türkiye plans to be a leading actor in the reconstruction of Syria. It aims to establish maritime borders with Syria and develop energy/trade projects. If stabilized, Syria will be a valuable economic and political ally for Türkiye.⁵⁹⁴

As a result, five intervening variables can be observed in the Turkish foreign policy towards Syria Civil War. They are the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the desire to increase or maintain its influence, border security, impact of public opinion and political parties and economic concerns. As long as Türkiye has the capacity to intervene, the most important variable is the desire to increase and maintain its influence for Türkiye. However, Türkiye's ultimate goal for this phenomenon is to provide border security.

3.1.2. Russian Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War

The intervention in Syria can be understood within the context of historical regional policy in the Middle East, but it is particularly grounded in Moscow's longstanding support for the Baathist regime since Hafez al-Assad assumed power in 1971. The Alawite-led government in Syria has been characterized by secularism and openness to leftist and progressive ideas. Throughout the 1970s, the Soviet Union forged strong ties with Syria, providing aid, arms, and military assistance. This relationship was resurrected when Vladimir Putin became Russia's president in 2000 and Bashar al-Assad took office in Syria, allowing Putin to establish an airbase at Khmeimim (southeast of Latakia) alongside the existing naval base at Tartus; additionally, a military base⁵⁹⁵ was opened in Kurdish-controlled areas in 2019. A

Internationale, 17 December 2024, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20241217-france-sends-diplomats-to-syria-to-make-initial-contact-with-new-authorities>, (Retrieved on 13 January 2025).

⁵⁹⁴ Emile Hokayem, "Türkiye: The New Regional-Security Architect?", **IISS**, 6 March 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/03/regional-reactions-to-the-transition-in-syria/> (Retrieved on 13 April 2025).

⁵⁹⁵ Russia deployed military forces in Qamishli in 2019. However, it had to withdraw from there in 2024. See. Menekşe Tokyay, "Russia's new base in Qamishli is a message. But for whom?", **Arab News**, 16 November 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1584731/amp> (Retrieved on 13 April 2025).; "Russia forces withdraw from Syria's Qamishli airport", **Middle East Monitor**, 16 December

decade later, he maintained his support for Bashar al-Assad against both Syrian opposition groups and Western critics who labeled Assad a dictator. This backing persisted until the fall of the Baathist regime on December 8, 2024.⁵⁹⁶

Table 3.3. Russian Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War

Russian Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War				
	Intervening Variables	Dependent Variables	Period	Nature (Strategy, Tactic or Maneuver)
1	The Leadership of Vladimir Putin	Planned intervention in Syria	2015-2025	Strategy
		Make accepted his importance a global power	2013-2025	Strategy
2	The Desire to Increase or Maintain Russia's Influence	Playing mediator role in Syrian chemical attack	2013	Maneuver
		Military equipment supplied	2013-2021	Strategy
		Modernization in Tartus naval base	2013-2025	Strategy
		Infrastructure in Khmeimim air base	2013-2025	Strategy
		Direct military intervention	2015-2025	Strategy
		Astana Process	2017-2025	Tactic
		Deployment of military forces in Qamishli	2019	Tactic
3	Multipolar Foreign Policy Vision	Vetoed UNSC sanctions proposals	2011-2012	Tactic
		Discourse of 'regime change strategy by West'		Tactic
		Using media against the West		Strategy
		Support Assad militarily and diplomatically		Strategy
		Excluding West from the diplomatic platforms		Strategy
		Astana Process	2017-2025	Tactic
		Normalize Assad for Arab League	2021-2023	Tactic
4	Threat of Terrorism	Discourse of 'fighting against terrorism'		Tactic
		Support Assad militarily and diplomatically		Strategy
5	Economic Concern	Economic agreements signed		Tactic

2024, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20241216-russia-forces-withdraw-from-syrias-qamishli-airport/> (Retrieved on 13 April 2025).

⁵⁹⁶ Raquel Jorge Trujillo, "Russia's foreign and security policy in Syria: historical relations, Cold War paradigms, and contemporary geopolitics", **Front. Polit. Sci.**, Vol. 7, 2025, p. 5.

		Protect its bases in Tartous and Khmeimim		Strategy
		Arms sales	2014-2021	Strategy
		Russian companies' investments		Tactic
6	Impact of Media	Supporting military involvement in Syria	2015-2025	Strategy

The Russian foreign policy towards the Syrian Civil War can be explained via six intervening variables. Firstly, Vladimir Putin, as a strong leader of the Russian Federation, directly affected the Russian foreign policy towards the Syrian Civil War and this variable has its roots in the Russian history. As mentioned in Chapter 1.3. called *The Components of Turkish-Russian-Iranian Relations*, Russia has had strong leaders throughout its history like Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin. Secondly, Russia has the desire to increase or maintain its influence and this desire is coming from the relations between Soviet Union and Syria during the Cold War years. The Cold War heritage is significant for the current Russian foreign policy as depicted in Chapter 1.3. Thirdly, Russia has a multipolar foreign policy vision and accordingly alternative perspective of international order.⁵⁹⁷ The vision and perspective cause Russia to perceive the West as a threat. Russian interference in Syrian Civil War demonstrates its insurrection against the Western-based international order.⁵⁹⁸ Fourthly, due to the Chechen issue in the past and the complex dynamics of Northern Caucasus, Kremlin argues that the fall of Assad's regime would lead to chaos, increased terrorism, and regional instability, which directly threatens Russian national security, particularly in the volatile North Caucasus. Russia positions Syria as a critical front in the global fight against terrorism, using this narrative to secure domestic support and portray its campaign as part of an international effort against terror.⁵⁹⁹ Fifthly, naturally, the economic concern of Moscow is crucial for its foreign policy towards the Syrian civil war since it has two bases in Tartus and Latakia, Syria is an important actor for energy transfer from Middle East to Europe in terms of the Eastern Mediterranean region and Russia was selling

⁵⁹⁷ "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy", **President of Russia**, 10 February 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034> (Retrieved on 5 July 2024); "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", **The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation**, 31 March 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/ (Retrieved on 5 July 2024).

⁵⁹⁸ Moritz Pieper, "'Rising Power' Status and the Evolution of International Order: Conceptualising Russia's Syria Policies", **Europe-Asia Studies**, Vol. 71, No. 3, 2019, p. 365.

⁵⁹⁹ Raquel Jorge Trujillo, "Russia's foreign and security policy in Syria: historical relations, Cold War paradigms, and contemporary geopolitics", **Front. Polit. Sci.**, Vol. 7, 2025, pp. 6-7.

weapons to Syria. Sixthly, the impact of Russian media to influence the Russian foreign policy towards Syrian Civil War is an important element.

Regarding the first intervening variable, the leadership, Putin planned the intervention in Syria in advance and carefully considered its strategic implications. This intervention is seen as a continuation of events that began after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Putin aimed to re-establish Russia's presence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East with only a limited intervention.⁶⁰⁰

With Russia's intervention in Syria, Putin not only fought terrorism but also made Washington recognize its importance in the Middle East. This is an indication that Putin wants Russia to be recognized as a powerful and important actor in the global geopolitical arena. Putin's actions in Syria have been both tough and cooperative, blaming the US for the emergence of terrorism and at the same time proposing to join the anti-ISIS coalition with the US. This is a reflection of his pragmatic but competitive foreign policy that prioritizes Russian interests.⁶⁰¹ In other words, Putin's Russia intervened in Syria with clear objectives: defeating ISIS, preventing regime change by outside powers, and securing Russia's geopolitical interests. This pragmatic approach avoids ideological entanglements, focusing instead on tangible gains like preserving the Assad regime as a key ally and establishing long-term military presence (Khmeimim airbase and Tartus naval facility) under lease agreements ensuring decades-long Russian presence.⁶⁰²

At the same time, Putin's approach reflects realpolitik, recognizing that Assad's control over the entire country is neither possible nor desirable, and that power-sharing with various groups is necessary, even if Assad resists. Russia's insistence on Syria's territorial unity while allowing for Kurdish autonomy illustrates this pragmatic, power-based thinking.⁶⁰³ On the other hand, Putin leverages Syria as a testing ground for military capabilities and a platform to project power. The deployment of advanced air defense (S-300 and S-400), ballistic missiles (Iskander), naval forces including battle

⁶⁰⁰ Jiri Valenta, Leni Friedman Valenta, "Why Putin Wants Syria", **Middle East Quarterly**, Vol. 23, No. 2, Spring 2016, <https://www.meforum.org/middle-east-quarterly/why-putin-wants-syria>. (Retrieved on 22 February 2025).

⁶⁰¹ Angela Stent, "Putin's Power Play in Syria: How to Respond to Russia's Intervention", **Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 95, No. 1, January/February 2016, pp. 111-112.

⁶⁰² Dmitry V. Trenin, "Putin's Plans for Syria", **Russia in Global Affairs**, 18 December 2017, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/putins-plan-for-syria/> (Retrieved on 10 July 2024).

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

cruisers and the aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov demonstrates a calculated use of diverse military assets to extract maximum geopolitical benefit with minimal cost, reflecting Putin's strategic pragmatism and calculated risk-taking.⁶⁰⁴

In terms of the second intervening variable, the desire to increase or maintain its influence, one of the most critical turning points in this process was the August 2013 chemical attack in Ghouta, near Damascus, which killed hundreds of civilians. Western states blamed the Assad regime for the attack, and the US in particular signaled military intervention. However, at this stage, Russia intervened in the process with a diplomatic attack; as a result of the negotiations between Sergey Lavrov and John Kerry, military intervention was prevented in exchange for the Assad regime to hand over its chemical weapons.⁶⁰⁵ In this process, Russia not only saved Assad, but also reinforced its identity as a global actor engaged in a strategic diplomatic bargain with the West.

Following the chemical weapons crisis, Russia started to gradually expand its presence in Syria on a technical and intelligence level. In the post-2013 period, the modernization of the naval base in Tartus was accelerated and infrastructure work was initiated for the construction of the Khmeimim Air Base near Latakia. Despite the lack of official military deployment, the support of Russian military advisors to the regime forces increased, and Russian-made Mi-24 and Mi-8 helicopters, T-72 tanks and air defense systems were supplied to the Syrian army.⁶⁰⁶

The direct military intervention launched by Russia on 30 September 2015 was a structural breaking point that transformed the course of the Syrian Civil War and the international balance and Russia's identity as a global power. This intervention marked

⁶⁰⁴ Genevieve Casagrande, Kathleen Weinberger, "Putin's real Syria agenda", **Institute for the Study of War**, 2017, pp. 1-3.

⁶⁰⁵ "Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Joint Statements", **U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva**, 12 September 2013, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2013/09/12/secretary-of-state-john-kerry-and-russian-foreign-minister-sergey-lavrov-joint-statements%E2%80%8F/> (Retrieved on 10 July 2024).; "Speech by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, and his answers to questions from the mass media during the joint press conference with the US Secretary of State John Kerry, summarising the results of their negotiations on problems in connection with chemical weapons in Syria, Geneva, 14 September 2013", **The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation**, 14 September 2013, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/themes/id/1626070/?lang=en (Retrieved on 10 July 2024).

⁶⁰⁶ Aron Lund, "From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations", **The Swedish Institute of International Affairs**, 2019, p. 28.; Igor Sutyagin, "Detailing Russian Forces in Syria", **Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)**, 13 November 2015, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-defence-systems/detailing-russian-forces-syria>, (Retrieved on 14 July 2024).

the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union that Russia has used direct military force beyond its regional hinterland to become a regime protector.⁶⁰⁷ The intervention not only saved the Assad regime from the brink of collapse but also transformed Russia into the dominant actor in the Syrian war.

The justification for the military operation was presented by Russia as the “*fight against terrorism*” and “*an invitation under international law*”. This intervention, which was carried out at the official request of the Assad regime, was technically based on the principle of self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter.⁶⁰⁸ However, the first targets on the ground were mostly Western-backed moderate opposition groups, not ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra.⁶⁰⁹ This clearly shows that Russia’s priority is to keep the Assad regime in power and that the counterterrorism discourse is merely instrumentalized.

The military architecture of the operation was largely centered around the Khmeimim Air Base and the naval base in Tartus.⁶¹⁰ In a short period of time, the Khmeimim base has become Russia’s largest foreign operation base in Syria, where the SU-24, SU-34, SU-35 fighter jets and Mi-24 and Mi-28 attack helicopters have halted the opposition’s advances in regime-held areas. Moreover, the S-400 air defense systems have significantly changed the air superiority in the region in favor of Russia.⁶¹¹

The direct military engagement in Syria has also served as a critical laboratory for Russia’s new generation warfare strategies, namely hybrid warfare practices. Information warfare, disinformation campaigns, the use of media tools, and the strategy of labeling the opposition as terrorists, conducted simultaneously with aerial

⁶⁰⁷ Anna Borshchevskaya, **Putin’s War in Syria: Russian Foreign Policy and the Price of America’s Absence**, Dublin: Bloomsbury Academics, 2022, p. 69.; Anton Lavrov, “Russia in Syria: A Military Analysis”, in Dimitar Bechev, Nicu Popescu, Stanislav Secieru (Eds.), **Russia Rising Putin’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa**, Dublin: I.B. TAURIS, 2021, pp. 31-39.; Nesma Tarek, “The Russian Foreign Policy towards Syria after the Arab Spring”, **Open Access Library Journal**, Vol. 8, 2021, p. 22.

⁶⁰⁸ Lavrov, “Russia in Syria: A Military Analysis”; Trujillo, “Russia’s foreign and security policy in Syria”, p. 7.; Clement Ndidi Oligie, “Why Russia is involved in the Syrian Civil War: One Issue, Many Views”, **Relations Internationales**, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2019, pp. 93-136.

⁶⁰⁹ Trujillo, “Russia’s foreign and security policy in Syria”, p. 7.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., p. 5-6.

⁶¹¹ Anton Lavrov, “The Russian Air Campaign in Syria A Preliminary Analysis”, **CNA**, 2018, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2018/06/COP-2018-U-017903-Final.pdf>, (Retrieved on 1 July 2024).

bombardments, have shown that Russia has adopted a multi-layered style of intervention that targets not only the conventional but also the cognitive sphere.⁶¹²

In this sense, one of the most decisive factors in the success of the military intervention was that the Assad regime's capacity to regroup was made possible by Russian air support. By the end of 2016, the regime was able to regain control of strategic cities such as Aleppo and the opposition's supply lines in the north were largely cut off.⁶¹³ The regime's capture of Aleppo at the end of 2016 was a turning point in the course of the civil war and was directly attributed to Russian airstrikes.

In the last quarter of 2024, the sudden and dramatic collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime marked a serious break for Russia not only in Syria but also in its overall strategy in the Middle East. With the fall of Assad, the strategic partnership structure that Moscow had systematically built for nearly a decade lost much of its ground and was replaced by an uncertain and multi-actor transition process.⁶¹⁴ This has ushered in a period of Russian foreign policy in which the formulation of support for the state, not the regime, has been tested, but at the same time, pragmatic repositioning has come to the fore.

In this new period, Russia has adopted a strategy of cautious balancing rather than open regime hostility. While Moscow prioritized protecting its gains on the ground (the presence of Tartus and Khmeimim bases, energy and infrastructure agreements signed during the Assad era), it did not engage in direct confrontation with the new regime. In this context, in the face of al-Sharaa's moves to open up to the West and the Gulf countries, Russia preferred to maintain its indirect influence instead of harsh opposition, especially through Turkish-Russian relations to influence Damascus.⁶¹⁵

⁶¹² Trujillo, "Russia's foreign and security policy in Syria", p. 2.

⁶¹³ Holly Yan, Emanuella Grinberg, Yousuf Basil, "Syrian regime says it has taken full control of Aleppo", CNN, 23 December 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/22/middleeast/syrian-regime-takes-full-control-of-aleppo> (Retrieved on 1 July 2024).

⁶¹⁴ Sinem Adar, Muriel Asseburg, Hamidreza Azizi, Margarete Klein and Guido Steinberg, "The Fall of the Assad Regime: Regional and International Power Shifts", No. 9, February 2025, **Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik**; Amelia Sholihah, "The Failure of Russia's "Shadow War" Strategy: The Collapse of the Assad Regime in Syria", **Modern Diplomacy**, 10 May 2025, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/05/10/the-failure-of-russias-shadow-war-strategy-the-collapse-of-the-assad-regime-in-syria/> (Retrieved on 02 June 2025).

⁶¹⁵ Adar, Asseburg, Azizi, Klein, Steinberg, "The Fall of the Assad Regime"; "Syria explores future military presence of Russia and Turkey", Middle East Monitor, 24 April 2025,

However, the sectarian violence that took place in March 2025, known as the “*March Massacres*”, created serious tensions in Russia’s relationship with the new regime. These attacks, which killed hundreds of civilians in traditionally Alawite enclaves such as Latakia, Tartous and Homs, led to the collapse of the Alawite elite networks that Moscow had protected for many years in the Syrian regime and the disintegration of its social base.⁶¹⁶ Despite all these developments, Moscow’s approach to Syria is more in line with a strategy of adaptation to the political transition rather than a radical rupture. Rather than engaging in direct confrontation with the regime, Russia aims to secure its gains on the ground and manage regional rivalry with Türkiye on the plane of shared governance.

Regarding the third variable, multipolar foreign policy vision, the intervention reflects the perception of the West as a threat by Russia, using Syria to challenge especially the US influence and reassert itself as a global power. This is part of a broader narrative that includes recalling Cold War-era tensions and the perception of the US attempts to undermine the Russian government.⁶¹⁷ Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 with peaceful protests, Russia has initially followed the crisis from a cautious and observant position, expressing its concern that a similar scenario might unfold in Damascus following the Western intervention in Libya. Moscow viewed the geopolitical upheaval caused by the Arab Spring as not only regional instability but also a new link in the West’s regime change strategy.⁶¹⁸

In this context, Syria became for Russia a traditional ally and a testing ground for its multipolar foreign policy vision. In the first months of 2011, the Kremlin adopted neutral and restrained language in its official statements on the crisis⁶¹⁹, refraining from directly embracing the Assad regime. However, this cautious stance began to break down with the UNSC sanctions proposals against Syria. Russia,

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250424-syria-explores-future-military-presence-of-russia-and-turkey/> (Retrieved on 6 May 2025).

⁶¹⁶ William Christou, “‘The streets are empty, no one dares go outside’: Syria’s Alawites terrorised by revenge killings”, **The Guardian**, 15 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/15/the-streets-are-empty-no-one-dares-go-outside-syrias-alawites-terrorised-by-revenge-killings> (Retrieved on 20 May 2025); “The March Massacres Show That Syria Urgently Needs Solutions, Not Sanctions”, **War on the Rocks**, 26 March 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/03/the-march-massacres-show-that-syria-urgently-needs-solutions-not-sanctions/> (Retrieved on 22 May 2025).

⁶¹⁷ Trujillo, “Russia’s foreign and security policy in Syria”, pp. 3-4.

⁶¹⁸ “West seeks regime change plan in Syria instead of Geneva process, says Lavrov”, **TASS**, 22 February 2018, <https://tass.com/politics/991268> (Retrieved on 22 May 2025).

⁶¹⁹ Borshchevskaya, “Putin’s War in Syria”, p. 92.

together with China, twice vetoed sanctions against Syria in the UNSC in October 2011 and February 2012⁶²⁰, marking Russia's first institutional and explicit diplomatic support for the Assad regime.

Russia has strategically framed its support for Assad's government in the Syrian war by portraying the Syrian opposition as a Western conspiracy led by the EU and the US to remove Assad and weaken Russia. Russian state-controlled media depict Western powers as aggressors and Assad's government as the legitimate authority. Rather than framing the conflict as a Sunni-Shia divide, Russia presents it as a struggle against foreign intervention, emphasizing anti-Western aggression by groups like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. This narrative serves to justify Russia's actions both internationally and domestically, casting Russia as a defender against Western imperialism and linking Syria's war to other global conflicts.⁶²¹

Russia supports Assad militarily and diplomatically mainly to counter Western influence and maintain a strategic foothold in the Middle East. While safeguarding arms deals and the naval base at Tartus are factors, these alone do not fully explain Russia's involvement. Russia opposes Western-instigated regime changes, as seen in Libya, and fears that allowing intervention in Syria could lead to further interference in its affairs. Supporting Assad helps Russia restore its international status, check U.S. dominance, and assure its allies of its reliability.⁶²²

Moscow's discourse strategy during this period was shaped by the emphasis on opposition to foreign intervention and respect for the principle of sovereignty. Russia defended the Assad regime's right to representation, especially during the negotiations in Geneva, and expressed the position that the solution of the crisis should be carried out by Syrians. This discourse made Russia's regime-centered defense of the status quo visible against Western efforts to recognize the Syrian opposition as a legitimate alternative.⁶²³ Russia continued to advocate on international platforms for the inclusion of the Assad regime in the political settlement process and blamed the failure of the Geneva talks on the West, pointing to the fragmented nature of the opposition.

⁶²⁰ Ibid.

⁶²¹ Izza Saeed, "Russia's Involvement in the Syrian Civil War: Motivation and Consequences", **Social Science Review Archives**, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2025, p. 1031.

⁶²² Ibid., pp. 1030-1031.

⁶²³ Trujillo, "Russia's foreign and security policy in Syria", p. 7.

After 2017, Russia began the process of transforming its military superiority in the Syrian Civil War into diplomatic legitimacy. This phase is a period of playmaking in which Moscow ensured the survival of the Assad regime and took a central role in the peace process that would determine the future of Syria, bringing its dominance on the ground to the table. The most remarkable development in this context was the Astana Process launched in January 2017. This initiative, launched by Russia together with Iran and Türkiye, not only balanced the Geneva-based settlement mechanism led by the West, but also gave Russia the role of mediator. The diplomatic framework of the Astana Process positioned the Assad regime as the legitimate and responsible party to be invited to the table about the future of Syria, while armed opposition groups became representable actors through Türkiye.⁶²⁴

One of the most concrete steps taken within the framework of the Astana platform is the concept of de-escalation zones. Russia's aim in this initiative is to provide short-term stability in areas where the Assad regime has not been able to re-establish its dominance, to buy time for the regime, while at the same time keeping other influential actors on the ground, such as Türkiye and Iran, within a controllable framework. By the end of 2018, the vast majority of the four de-escalation zones designated in the summer of 2017 had been systematically retaken by the regime and Russia.⁶²⁵

The Astana Process increased Russia's diplomatic capacity and limited the West's influence in the Syrian issue. While the Geneva settlement process, a part of Western international order, was attempted under the auspices of the UN, Astana and the subsequent Sochi National Dialogue Congress (January 2018) marked the culmination of Russia's efforts to institutionalize alternative peace processes. The Sochi meeting led to the establishment of a constitutional committee and reinforced Moscow's image as a decisive actor in the reconciliation process of Syria.⁶²⁶ At the same time, creating an alternative table for reconciliation of Syrian Civil War demonstrates the multipolar foreign policy vision of Russia.

⁶²⁴ Lund, **From Cold War to Syria War**, pp. 31-32.; Borshchevskaya, **Putin's War in Syria**, pp. 122-123

⁶²⁵ Jaecke and Labude, **De-escalation Zones in Syria**.

⁶²⁶ Borshchevskaya, **Putin's War in Syria**, p. 124.

Moscow also supported various normalization efforts to break the regional diplomatic isolation of the regime in Damascus. Russia paved the way for new contacts between Damascus and Arab countries, notably Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states, and supported the reopening of diplomatic missions in Damascus by some Arab capitals. This normalization process, which started in 2021, created a ground for the Arab League to accept Syria's re-membership in 2023.⁶²⁷ This process should be read as part of Moscow's strategy to make Assad a ordinary part of the international and regional system again. Thus, within the context of its multipolar foreign policy vision, Moscow plays the role of big brothers of the otherized.

In terms of the fourth intervening variable, threat from radical Islam and terrorism, Russia was of the opinion that the shaping of events in Syria by Islamist groups would encourage the radical elements in its own North Caucasus region. In other words, Russia perceives its national security and regional stability as directly threatened by the rise of radical Islamist groups in Syria, particularly due to potential spillover effects into the North Caucasus region.⁶²⁸

The strategic discourse of Russia's Syria policy was reframed with the theme of "fight against terrorism" as mentioned before. Moscow presented the radicalization of the armed opposition in Syria, specifically the rise of the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front and the increasingly powerful ISIS, as proof of the Assad regime's lack of an alternative in the eyes of the international community. In statements since 2014, Putin claimed that the collapse of the Assad regime would result in terrorist organizations taking over Damascus, thus positioning the defense of the regime as a guarantee of stability and security rather than a crisis of legitimacy.⁶²⁹ Therefore, it can be said that Putin wanted to keep Assad in power not only for maintain its presence and influence in Syria, but also for protect its state from the radical Islamist elements and their variants in the North Caucasus.

Regarding the fifth variable, economic concern, during this period, Russia's military aid to Syria remained limited but showed an increasing trend. Between 2011 and 2012, Russia continued its arms sales to the Assad regime, especially armored

⁶²⁷ Steven Heydemann, "Syria normalization: The failure of defensive diplomacy", **Brookings**, 2 August 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/syria-normalization-the-failure-of-defensive-diplomacy/> (Retrieved on 14 September 2024).

⁶²⁸ Trujillo, "Russia's foreign and security policy in Syria", p. 6.

⁶²⁹ Saeed, "Russia's Involvement in the Syrian Civil War", p. 1029.

vehicles, helicopter parts and air defense systems.⁶³⁰ Russia's strategic interests in the Mediterranean are closely tied to the establishment of military bases like the Khmeimim airbase and the naval port at Tartus. While their main purpose is military, these bases also have economic implications. They enable Russia to move military equipment out of the region and secure permanent access to key regional sea routes.⁶³¹

In December 2013, Syria and Russia signed a 25-year oil and gas exploration agreement focusing on Syria's territorial waters, believed to hold significant Mediterranean reserves. Financed by Russia, this deal symbolizes ongoing cooperation between the two countries. For Russia, the agreement primarily aims to strengthen its strategic interests and position Syria as a potential energy hub.⁶³²

Between 2014 and 2021, Russia supplied military weapons including armored personnel carriers, tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, heavy transport aircrafts and short-range air to air missiles to Syria.⁶³³ Arms sales also provided economic gains for Russia within the context of Syrian Civil War.

On the other hand, in 2018 and 2019, Stroytransgaz Logistic Company (STG), a Russian private company, signed three contracts with Syrian state-owned companies to secure a monopoly on phosphate production and export from mines and the fertilizer plant in the Homs governorate to the Tartous port. At the same time, by October 2020, the Syrian Parliament ratified a contract between the General Establishment for Geology and Mineral Resources (GEGMR) and the Serbian company Womeco (likely a cover for Russian investors) for phosphate extraction from the Sharqiyeh mines.⁶³⁴

Moscow has signed extensive agreements with the Assad regime in the fields of energy, phosphate mining, port management and infrastructure. The 2020 allocation of the Port of Tartus to Russia for 49 years should be seen as part of Russia's goal of

⁶³⁰ Thomas Grove and Erika Solomon, "Russia continues arms sales to Syria despite Western protests", **The Christian Science Monitor**, 21 February, 2012, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Latest-News-Wires/2012/0221/Russia-continues-arms-sales-to-Syria-despite-Western-protests> (Retrieved on 15 March 2024).

⁶³¹ Trujillo, "Russia's foreign and security policy in Syria", p. 6.

⁶³² Ibid.

⁶³³ "Arms Transfers Database," **SIPRI**, <https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/TransferData/transferResults?logic=on> (Retrieved on 15 March 2024).

⁶³⁴ Azzam Al-Allaf and Salam Said, "Russian Investment in Syrian Phosphate: Opportunities and Challenges", **Middle East Directions Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project Policy Brief**, 4 February 2021, p. 3, 5.

establishing a permanent military and economic presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁶³⁵ Russian companies have also undertaken the repair of Syria's electricity infrastructure and the modernization of its oil refineries. In 2023, the Syrian Ministry of Petroleum and Russian company Stroytransgaz formalized an agreement granting the company the rights to extract and export 2.2 million tons of phosphate annually for 49 years. Under this deal, Stroytransgaz receives 70% of the revenues, while the Syrian government obtains the remaining 30%.⁶³⁶

In terms of the sixth intervening variable, the impact of media, the Russian media coverage of the Syrian Civil War is deeply politicized and manipulated to align with the authoritarian state's interests. The media do not serve as independent sources of information but act as interpreters and promoters of the state's political agenda. This results in the dissemination of a distorted, emotionally charged version of reality that supports Russia's foreign policy and military involvement in Syria while suppressing dissenting opinions, expert analyses, and uncomfortable truths. The Russian media which has "*symbiotic relationship*" with the authoritarian Russian leadership used manipulative techniques, wrote one-sided reports, published emotional and repetitive messages, created a distorted reality and thus affected the Russian public and policy.⁶³⁷

3.1.3. Iranian Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War

Syria under the rule of Baath Party has been the most important strategic ally for Iran in the Middle East, especially after the 1979 Revolution. The ruling of al-Assad family has become decisive for Iranian foreign policy towards Syria. Iran and Syria had common interests and similar threat perceptions. That's why this is a compulsory relationship rather than an elective one.⁶³⁸ At the same time, Syria is seen as 35th province of Iran, that's why Syria must be protected by Iran.⁶³⁹ During the first two years of the civil war, Iran supported the Assad regime by playing the role of advisor,

⁶³⁵ Saeed, "Russia's Involvement in the Syrian Civil War," p. 1030.

⁶³⁶ Trujillo, "Russia's foreign and security policy in Syria", p. 6.

⁶³⁷ Dmitry Strovsky and Ron Schleifer, "The Impact of Media on Syria: The Case of Russian Newspapers", *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2020, pp. 1-6.

⁶³⁸ Bayram Sinkaya, "Suriye Krizi Karşısında İran'ın Tutumu ve Şam-Tahran İttifakının Temelleri," *Akademik Orta Doğu*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2015, pp. 153-154.

⁶³⁹ Ziarat Ali, et al. "Iran-Syria Relations," *Dialogue Social Science Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2025, p. 580.

but at the same time it followed cautious policies in order not to provoke the regional and international actors.⁶⁴⁰

Table 3.4. Iranian Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War

Iranian Foreign Policy towards Syrian Civil War				
	Intervening Variables	Dependent Variables	Period	Nature (Strategy, Tactic or Maneuver)
1	The Leadership of Ali Khamenei	Building political solidarity between Syria, Yemen and Iraq	2011-2025	Strategy
		Supporting Syria as a part of resistance movement	2011-2025	Strategy
		Using hard power and soft power instruments together	2011-2025	Strategy
2	Threat Perception from the West and Israel	Discourse of Western-backed conspiracy	2011-2025	Strategy
		Sending Quds Force to Syria	2011-2025	Strategy
		Support Assad regime	2011-2025	Strategy
3	The Desire to Increase or Maintain Iran's Influence	Deployment of Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria	2012-2025	Strategy
		Economically support the Assad regime	2011-2025	Strategy
		Making free trade agreement	2011	Tactic
		Developing student exchange programs	2020	Tactic
		Providing social services	2017	Tactic
4	Impact of Media	Western-led terrorism propaganda	2011-2025	Strategy
		Blaming foreign states for insurgency	2011-2025	Tactic
		Legitimizing the actions of Syrian government	2011-2025	Strategy
5	Islamic Identity and Revolution	Organizing Shiite volunteer militias in Syria	2012-	Tactic
		Changing demographics of Syria		Strategy
		Spreading Shia doctrine	2011-	Strategy
6	Economic Concern	Increasing export volume of Iran to Syria		Strategy
		Power generation projects		Tactic
		Post-war reconstruction projects	2025-	Tactic
		Railway project between two ports		Tactic

Iranian foreign policy towards Syrian Civil war can be analyzed via six intervening variables. Firstly, Ali Khamenei, as a strong leader of Iran since the structure of the regime and directly affected the Iranian foreign policy towards the Syrian Civil War. Secondly, Iran considers the Western states as potential interventionists into its area of influence and perceives them as threats against its

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

national security and Iran has security concerns against Israel. Thirdly, Iran has a desire to increase or maintain its influence in the region due to its historical and cultural ties with Syria and Baath regime. Fourthly, the impact of media is important for Iran to support Assad during the crisis. Fifthly, naturally, Islamic identity and revolution direct the Iranian foreign policy. Sixthly, economic concerns of Iran influence its foreign policy towards Syria because of the economic isolation and embargoes against it.

Regarding the first variable, the leadership, Khamenei's characteristics, such as simplicity, intellectualism, and openness to dialogue, significantly influence Iran's foreign policy, regarding the Syrian Civil War. Khamenei's "*collective authority*"⁶⁴¹ is described as simple, intellectual, and lovely-looking, which helps him build bridges of confidence and dialogue, a contrast to other regional leaders. This approach manifests in Iranian foreign policy by involving various local and regional actors to build political solidarity, as noted in his emphasis on involving the Muslim world and coordinating with allies like Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. His method includes listening to different inputs through a bottom-up consultation process for technical and political matters while maintaining a top-down direction on cultural and normative issues, reflecting a combination of openness and control.⁶⁴²

Khamenei's foreign policy includes Tehran's strategic persistence, ideological commitment, and emphasis on resistance. Throughout the conflict, Khamenei's leadership has been marked by steadfast support for the Assad regime, viewing assistance to Syria as assistance to the broader "*resistance movement*," emphasizing ideological and religious solidarity.⁶⁴³ For example, Al-Assad was welcomed by Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei in his visit to Tahrn in 2019. In this visit, Khamenei told Assad that "*The Islamic Republic of Iran considers the assistance to the Syrian government and people as assistance to the resistance movement and is proud of it*".⁶⁴⁴ Khamenei's characteristics of resilience and ideological conviction show itself in Iran's multi-dimensional approach: combining hard power (supporting militias) with soft power strategies (cultural, religious, social, and economic investments) to maintain and deepen influence in Syria. For example, pictures of

⁶⁴¹ Ahmed Qadoury Abed, "Counteracting the Challenges of Iran's Enemies: Ali Khamenei's Concept of Soft War", **Linguistics & Translation Studies**, No. 28, 2017, p. 20.

⁶⁴² Ibid., pp. 22-30.

⁶⁴³ Ali Akbar, "Iran's Soft Power in Syria after the Syrian Civil War", **Mediterranean Politics**, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2023, pp. 232-234.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 233.

Khamenei are prominently displayed in Syrian ceremonies and Iranian cultural centers, symbolizing the ideological link and Khamenei's central role in inspiring Iran's foreign policy agenda in Syria.⁶⁴⁵

In terms of the second variable, threat from the West and Israel, the 2011 mass protests in Syria were not only a threat to regional stability for Iran, but also an existential crisis for a strategic ally at the center of Tehran's axis of resistance⁶⁴⁶ in the Middle East. Within the framework of the Arab Spring, Iran described the popular movements in Egypt and Tunisia as "*Islamic Awakening*", while in Syria, it characterized these uprisings as "*part of a Western-backed conspiracy*".⁶⁴⁷ This dual approach shows how Iran strikes a flexible balance between revolutionary ideology and pragmatic geopolitical interests.

Towards the end of 2011, however, there was a significant evolution in Iran's approach to Syria. In response to the escalating violence and the strengthening of the foreign-backed armed opposition, Iran decided to project its military support directly on the ground. Advisors, training personnel and technical experts from the Quds Force of the IRGC were sent to Syria. Thus, the Syrian civil war became a strategy of expansionism for Iran, with the Quds Force becoming involved in Syria to support the Assad regime and increase Iranian influence. Since the beginning of its intervention in Syria, the IRGC has created eighty-two fighting units amounting to about 70.000 armed men.⁶⁴⁸ In this process, Iran played an important role in the reorganization of the Assad regime's security apparatus, supporting the enhancement of military intelligence and operational capacity around Damascus and in strategically important areas. Iran's military support was not limited to human resources and consultancy, but also financial and logistical assistance. Especially with the increase in sanctions against the Assad regime after 2011, Iran transferred significant financial resources and increased its shipments of petroleum products to keep the Syrian economy afloat.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 232-234.

⁶⁴⁶ Ziarat Ali, Zumar Zaman, Qurat ul Ain Shahid, Ghulam Mustafa, "Iran-Syria Relations During the Syrian Civil War (2010-2024)", **Dialogue Social Science Review**, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2025, p. 579.

⁶⁴⁷ Damla Taşdemir Kaderli and Ömer Göksel İşyar, "Iran's Defensive Policy in Assad's Syria: Proxy War", **Journal of TESAM Academy**, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2025, pp. 44-45.

⁶⁴⁸ Pierre Bousset, "The Quds Force in Syria: Combatants, Units, and Actions", **CTCSENTINEL**, Vol. 16, No. 6, June 2023, p. 1.

⁶⁴⁹ Ali, Zaman, Shahid, Mustafa, "Iran-Syria Relations During the Syrian Civil War (2010-2024)", p. 586; Taşdemir Kaderli, İşyar, "Iran's Defensive Policy in Assad's Syria: Proxy War", p. 53.

At the same time, Iran has security concerns against Israel, Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei depicted that “*Syria is the golden ring of the chain of resistance against Israel that must be protected*”.⁶⁵⁰ Iran-Syria relations have been shaped since the Hafez al-Assad era, especially during the Iran-Iraq War, and deepened through support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, anti-Israel and anti-imperialist attitudes. This historical background reveals that Tehran’s response to the Syrian crisis is based both on ideological solidarity and on concrete security interests. For Iran, regime change in Syria meant both the cutting off of Hezbollah’s logistical corridor in Lebanon and the loss of an important strategic counterweight to Israel. On the other hand, in the post-ISIS period, the territorial integrity of Syria became much more important for Iran because Iran wanted to maintain its influence, to hinder any aggression by Israel and to create a forward deterrence capability against it.⁶⁵¹

In terms of the third variable, desire to increase or maintain its influence, at the beginning of the uprising, Iran refrained from direct military intervention but rather tried to defend the legitimacy of the Damascus regime in the international community by providing political and ideological support to the Assad regime. Iran’s main strategy in this period is to be effective on the ground through proxy actors instead of direct military intervention. In 2012, within this framework, Iran has more actively deployed Lebanese Hezbollah to the Syrian arena, with Hezbollah militants participating in critical battles in the Damascus countryside, Aleppo and Qalamoun regions in favor of the Assad regime.⁶⁵² Hezbollah’s presence in the Syrian civil war has been one of the most tangible indicators of Tehran’s crisis management model, revealing that Iran has strengthened its regional intervention capacity through proxy networks. At the same time, Iran resorted to new hybrid warfare methods in parallel with the weakening of the Syrian regime’s military capacity. New structures were established to ensure coordination between official army elements and militia groups, and Iranian military advisors assumed active roles in direct frontline management, training, intelligence and cyber warfare.⁶⁵³

⁶⁵⁰ Karim Sadjadpour, “Iran’s Real Enemy in Syria”, **Carnegie Endowment**, 16 April 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2018/04/irans-real-enemy-in-syria?lang=en> (Retrieved on 5 August 2024).

⁶⁵¹ Ali, Zaman, Shahid, Mustafa, “Iran-Syria Relations During the Syrian Civil War (2010-2024)”, p. 581.

⁶⁵² Furkan Halit Yolcu, “Iran’s Involvement with Syrian Civil War: Background, Reasons and Alternatives”, **Bilgi Dergi**, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2016, pp. 35-64.

⁶⁵³ Taşdemir Kaderli, İşyar, “Iran’s Defensive Policy in Assad’s Syria”, p. 55.

On the other hand, the start of the Astana Process in 2017 showed that Iran-Russia cooperation has also moved into the diplomatic arena. In this process, which was initiated with the participation of Türkiye, Iran had the opportunity to consolidate its position as a legitimate actor to have a say in the future in Syria. Iran's main priority in the Astana platform was to preserve territorial integrity, maintain the central state structure and suppress Kurdish demands for autonomy.⁶⁵⁴ In this process, Iran positioned itself as a key party in the negotiations on the future of Syria and managed to bring its military gains on the ground to the diplomatic table. Therefore, by participating in the Astana process, Iran had the opportunity to transform the military reality on the ground in Syria into political outcomes in its favor.

Iran had three policies within the context of Astana Process. First, the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity was emphasized, thus preventing the country's division into a federal structure or Kurdish independence attempts. Second, the continuity of the regime was taken as a basis; it was argued that Assad's legitimacy should not be questioned. Third, the elimination of Sunni opposition groups became a priority; Iran objected to the distinction between radical groups and the moderate opposition and tried to include all armed opposition in the category of terrorists. With the Astana talks, Iran has had the opportunity to back up its military gains through proxy forces on the ground with international legitimacy in the diplomatic arena. Iranian officials have made it possible for the Assad regime to consolidate its control over central areas by squeezing the opposition into certain areas, especially through de-escalation zones agreements.⁶⁵⁵

By 2017, the dynamics of the Syrian Civil War had undergone a significant change and the military superiority on the ground had largely shifted in favor of the Assad regime. In line with these developments, Iran has also made a significant change in its policy direction, not only limiting its presence in the Syrian crisis to the military arena but also becoming a decisive actor in diplomatic processes.⁶⁵⁶ By 2019, the hot conflict dimension of the Syrian Civil War has largely diminished, while the

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid., 57; Ali, Zaman, Shahid, Mustafa, "Iran-Syria Relations During the Syrian Civil War (2010-2024)", p. 581; Yolcu, "Iran's Involvement with Syrian Civil War", p. 41.

⁶⁵⁵ Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Russian Way of War in Syria: Threat Perception and Approaches to Counterterrorism", **Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute**, 2020, pp. 9-10, [1-14].; Farhad Rezaei, **Iran's Foreign Policy After the Nuclear Agreement: Politics of Normalizers and Traditionalists**, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, pp. 71-72.

⁶⁵⁶ Akbar, "Iran's soft power in Syria after the Syrian civil war", p. 233.

construction of the post-war order and the struggle of actors to make their positions on the ground permanent have come to the fore. In this new phase, Iran has maintained its military engagement in Syria, but instead of directly expanding its presence on the ground, it has turned to a strategy of protecting existing gains, consolidating positions, and building an economic sphere of influence.⁶⁵⁷

Iran has been Syria's biggest economic supporter since the early years of the war, providing resources to sustain the regime in many areas, including discounted or free oil products, direct arms shipments, militia salaries, food and credit aid. While the exact amount of oil provided by Iran is not known, it was reported to have sent around 10 million barrels of oil free of charge in the first half of 2015. In response to the economic sanctions, a free trade agreement was signed between Iran and Syria in December 2011, fairs were organized to increase trade volume, and loans totaling \$4.6 billion were extended. Some of these loans financed oil purchases, while others financed imports and food aid.⁶⁵⁸

A part of the Iranian foreign policy towards Syria was to develop student exchange programs, to give scholarships to Syrian students and thus to enhance its influence on Syrian educational system. Within this framework, 750 Syrian students who had scholarship studied at Iranian universities in 2020. Iran opened several schools including programs with Persian language e.g. Rasool Azam complex in Latakia. These schools continued their activities even during the civil war. Also, Iran helped Syria to publish textbooks, to train Syrian teachers and to plan educational curriculum in Syria.⁶⁵⁹

Providing social services in order to influence the Syrian people is another foreign policy strategy for Iran. *Jihad Sazandegi* organization of Iran have activities in various cities of Syria. For example, in 2017, a hospital in Deir Ezzor was built by this organization and with this building, Syrian citizens started to get medical services. Shipments from Iran to Syria were regularly continued during the civil war and thus Syrian citizens could reach tents, blankets, carpets and dishes. Also, Iranians has been

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., 242.; Ali, Zaman, Shahid, Mustafa, "Iran-Syria Relations During the Syrian Civil War (2010-2024)", pp. 588-589.

⁶⁵⁸ Sinkaya, "Suriye Krizi Karşısında İran'ın Tutumu", pp. 145-147.

⁶⁵⁹ Akbar, "Iran's Soft Power in Syria after the Syrian Civil War", pp. 234-235.

effective with its charitable organizations in Syria. Jihad Al-Bina rebuilt sixteen schools in Deir Ezzor.⁶⁶⁰

Despite the US' sanctions against Iran due to nuclear deal, Iran has not completely withdrawn its presence in Syria but has instead opted for a more covert and low-profile model of power projection. The Quds Force has maintained control through local militias, avoiding direct engagement. The presence of foreign Shiite militias such as Fatemi Youn and Zeynabi Youn was not reduced, but rather the organization of new local militias (e.g. Shiite groups of Syrian citizens) was encouraged.⁶⁶¹ Iran's strategy on the ground in the 2019-2022 period also involved building a more localized security architecture. Some divisions of the Syrian army and paramilitary structures were trained by Iran and turned into local security actors loyal to Tehran.

Iran also paid special attention to consolidating its strategic supply lines in Syria. The overland corridor from Iraq to Syria - sometimes referred to as the "Tehran-Beirut Corridor" - has become one of Iran's most sensitive strategic priorities in the region. Through this line, Iran has been able to provide logistical support to Hezbollah while at the same time consolidating its military presence and economic influence in Syria.⁶⁶²

The fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in December 2024 has forced Iran to radically redefine its long-term strategic vision in Syria. Assad's overthrow meant the loss of Iran's most important ally in the axis of resistance, and threatened the future of the military, economic and political gains Iran had built up in Syria over the years.⁶⁶³ Iran initially approached the new government in Damascus led by Ahmed al-Sharaa with caution, but then, taking into account the current circumstances, it sought to establish a pragmatic relationship. Despite al-Sharaa's past ties to organizations such as al-Qaeda and HTS, Iranian decision-makers have opted for a controlled engagement with the new administration, taking into account the balance of power on the ground.⁶⁶⁴

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 238-239.

⁶⁶¹ Ali, Zaman, Shahid, Mustafa, "Iran-Syria Relations During the Syrian Civil War (2010-2024)", p. 580. Akbar, "Iran's Soft Power in Syria after the Syrian Civil War", p. 233.

⁶⁶² Adar, Asseburg, Azizi, Klein, Steinberg, "The Fall of the Assad Regime", p. 5.

⁶⁶³ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

⁶⁶⁴ Giorgio Cafiero, "What Roles Will Russia and Iran Play in Post-Assad Syria?", *Stimson*, 29 January 2025, <https://www.stimson.org/2025/what-roles-will-russia-and-iran-play-in-post-assad-syria/>, (Retrieved on 30 March 2025).; Hokayem, "Regional reactions to the transition in Syria".

Iran's main priority during this period was to protect its military and political positions in Syria and to establish a limited sphere of influence over the al-Sharaa administration. To this end, Iran has tried to maintain its presence in some military bases around Damascus and militia networks in Idlib and Aleppo countryside. Moreover, through Hezbollah and other Shiite militias, an indirect and flexible pressure mechanism was established rather than direct military control.⁶⁶⁵ However, Iran is no longer able to freely transfer weapons and resources to Lebanese Hezbollah as before. Iran's logistics lines in Syria have been cut and its room for maneuver in the region has been severely restricted. Iran's priority seems to be maintaining its low profile in Syria and trying to make up for its losses.⁶⁶⁶

Regarding the fourth variable, the impact of media, Iran was also active in the field of propaganda during this period. For example, Tehran Times, one of the important newspapers in Iran, strongly advocates the Assad regime and blames the rebels and their foreign supporters. The Tehran Times frames the Syrian Civil War as being organized from outside Syria, blaming foreign states such as the US, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, France and Qatar for backing and funding the insurgency. This media depiction uses terms like "*evil doing*," "*cause of crisis*," and "*terror*" to describe the opposition in a negative way. The newspaper tends to legitimize the Syrian government's actions as preventing the chaos caused by foreign states and delegitimizes the opposition as foreign-backed militant groups aiming to destroy Syria.⁶⁶⁷

In terms of the fifth variable, Islamic identity and revolution, by 2012, the crisis in Syria had evolved from a purely domestic political uprising into a regional proxy war. This evolution provided Iran to deepen its engagement in Syria and institutionalize its presence on the ground. Tehran began to view the survival of the Assad regime as a strategic necessity and as a site of sectarian and ideological struggle. Iran has created new pools of fighters in Syria by organizing Shiite volunteer militias. The Fatemi Youn Brigade, composed of Afghan Shiites, and the Zeynabi Youn

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁶ John Raine, "Israel and Iran: conflict in and beyond Syria", IISS, 6 March 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/03/regional-reactions-to-the-transition-in-syria/> (Retrieved on 16 April 2025).

⁶⁶⁷ Meisam Mirzaee, Sajjad Gharibeh, "A Critical Discourse Analysis of Selected Iranian and Saudi Arabian Print Media on Civil War in Syria," **International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching & Research**, Vol. 3, No. 11, 2015, pp. 70-71.

Brigade, composed of Pakistani Shiites, were fielded under the direct guidance of Iran's Revolutionary Guards and became critical elements that changed the military balance in Syria in favor of the regime.⁶⁶⁸ The financing, training and dispatch of these structures have been entirely undertaken by Iran.

At the same time, Iran continues to take the responsibility of protecting the Shia population and Shia holy sites. Especially, Shiite shrines in Damascus (such as the Sayyida Zeinab shrine) have been used in the past by the Quds Force as militia mobilization tools.⁶⁶⁹ This sectarian discourse shows that Iran is leading not only a military but also an ideological proxy war. Within this context, changing the demographics of Syria was another strategy of Iran by relocating people around Damascus and thus providing to maintain Shia loyalty. Iran would like to create a town which hosted the families of militias.⁶⁷⁰

Iran had a highway project which would start from Tehran to reach Mediterranean passing through Iraq, Syria, Lebanon. The project was called as "*Iran cordon/land crossing from Iran to the Mediterranean*".⁶⁷¹ It can be argued that the main aim of the project was to redesign the demographic structure of this route by settling there Shiites and thus facilitating the transfer of manpower and equipment and establishing the Shiite sphere of influence. Therefore, Iran and Assad regime forced the Sunnis to move from some areas of Damascus and Homs and placed these areas the Shiite militias and their families.⁶⁷²

In order to increase the Shiite population in Syria and build loyalty to Iran, cultural and religious activities were intensified in some regions, and Shiite educational institutions and religious centers were opened. Iran tries to spread its Shia doctrine towards Syria in three ways. First, "Pishahangan-e Imam Mahdi" (Heralders of Imam Mahdi or Imam al-Mahdi Scouting Society) was founded in Damascus with the support of Iran and Hizballah. This society aims to influence children aged between 8 and 16 and to give lectures to them on cultural, religious, and social aspects of Shiism. It conducted Shia ceremonies in Syria. Second, forty private Shia schools were

⁶⁶⁸ Ali, Zaman, Shahid, Mustafa, "Iran-Syria Relations During the Syrian Civil War (2010-2024)", p. 580. Akbar, "Iran's Soft Power in Syria after the Syrian Civil War", p. 233.

⁶⁶⁹ Raine, "Israel and Iran: conflict in and beyond Syria".

⁶⁷⁰ Ali, Zaman, Shahid, Mustafa, "Iran-Syria Relations During the Syrian Civil War (2010-2024)", p. 581.

⁶⁷¹ Taşdemir Kaderli, İşyar, "Iran's Defensive Policy in Assad's Syria: Proxy War", p. 52-53.

⁶⁷² Ibid.

opened by Iran in Damascus during the civil war. Some Iranian universities with religious backgrounds like al-Farabi, al-Mustafa, etc. have campuses in Syria. Third, the return trips have been organized by Iran to Deir Ezzor. Thus, Iranian clerics visit the cultural centers and give lectures about Shiism to the residents.⁶⁷³

Regarding the sixth variable, the economic concerns, Iran did not limit its influence in Syria to the military and diplomatic spheres but also sought constant influence through economic investments. Long-term agreements were signed with the Damascus administration, especially in the energy sector, telecommunications and reconstruction projects. Economic concerns of Iran are significant for its foreign policy towards Syrian civil war. Economic concerns consist of four dimensions. First, the export volume of Iran to Syria were increasing especially after 2015. Iran's top exports to Syria included machinery, nuclear reactors, boilers, pharmaceutical products and dairy products, eggs, honey, edible products.⁶⁷⁴ Second, Iran's most important economic investments include power generation projects. For example, in 2017, a contract was signed between two countries with regard to Iran's construction of a mobile phone network by Mobin Group (Iranian mobile telecommunication company) in Syria. Third, Iran has been a significant actor for Syrian post-war reconstruction. Fourth, the railway project between Imam Khomeini port and Latakia port is one of the investment projects of Iran. In order to carry out the project, Iran got the responsibility for running the port of Latakia in Syria.⁶⁷⁵

Iran began to take a serious interest in the reconstruction of Syria. Iranian companies signed investment agreements, especially in the energy, construction and communication sectors, aiming to increase its economic influence after the war. In this context, Iran's policy towards Syria has been shaped on the military-political-economic tripod. For example, Islamic Azad University of Iran offered to help Syria's reconstruction, specifically in the electric power field. Within this context, the contracts worth approximately \$190.000 million were signed to build power facilities and to increase water services.⁶⁷⁶

⁶⁷³ Akbar, "Iran's Soft Power in Syria after the Syrian Civil War", p. 236-237.

⁶⁷⁴ "Iran Exports to Syria", **Trading Economics**, <https://tradingeconomics.com/iran/exports/syria> (Retrieved on 1 June 2025).

⁶⁷⁵ Akbar, "Iran's Soft Power in Syria after the Syrian Civil War", pp. 241-242.

⁶⁷⁶ Ali, Zaman, Shahid, Mustafa, "Iran-Syria Relations During the Syrian Civil War (2010-2024)", p. 581.

At the same time, after the earthquake in southeast Türkiye and northwest Syria in 2023, in order to increase the economic cooperation, Iranian President Ebrahim Reisi visited Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus. The visit was significant, because it was the first visit of Iranian president to Syria since war.⁶⁷⁷

As a result, Iranian foreign policy towards Syrian Civil War can be examined via six variables. They are the leadership, threat perception from the West and Israel, the desire to increase or maintain its influence, the impact of media, Islamic identity and revolution and economic concern. Every variable is crucial for the foreign policy of Iran, but its ultimate aim was to increase or maintain its influence in Syria through soft power instruments such as using its religious identity and making economic investments. The main objective of Tehran in the post-2024 period has evolved in the form of preserving the current position and maintaining partial influences, rather than aiming for absolute domination of the maximum gains of the past. Iran has tried to develop a pragmatic relationship with the al-Sharaa administration, avoiding direct imposition; however, it is no longer as decisive a force in the Syrian arena as before.

3.2. Nagorno Karabakh Conflict

The Karabakh region has always been contested between Azeris and Armenians. While Azeris claim that the region belongs to Azeris historically, according to Armenians, the region has always been Armenian's site of residence. The name of Karabakh comes from Turkish and Persian languages. Kara means black in Turkish and bakh of bağ means garden in Persian and vine in Turkish. The "bağ" transforms "bakh" by Russians. Nagorno or nagorny means mountainous in Russian. It can be said that the region was under the influence of Turks, Russians and Iranians. Therefore, it is possible to see even the name of the region was created by these three great traditions.⁶⁷⁸

Since the Armenian and Azeri sources has different historical background regarding the region, the region's history will be briefly mentioned in the context of

⁶⁷⁷ "Conflict in Syria", **Center for Preventive Action**, 12 March 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-syria> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁶⁷⁸ Aleksandre Alexeichenko, "The Participation of the Russian Federation in Nagorno-Karabakh Resolution", **Caucasus Journal of Social Sciences-Political Science and International Relations**, 2014, p. 70.

dominant power on it. The Nagorno-Karabakh crisis can be examined in nine terms. The first term should be started from the 19th century, because the roots of the crisis can be found at that time. In the first term, 19th century, Russia's expansionist policies in the Caucasus determined the fate of Karabakh. In 1805, the Karabakh Khanate became de facto under the sovereignty of Russia as a result of a treaty with Russia. With the Treaty of Gulistan between Russia and Iran in 1813, Karabakh officially became part of Russia.⁶⁷⁹ The 1828 Treaty of Turkmanchai ended all Iranian claims over the region.⁶⁸⁰ Under Russian rule, the population structure in Karabakh changed drastically. The Russians brought Armenian immigrants from the Ottoman Empire and Persia to the region, changing the population structure in favor of Armenians. In 1810, only 21% of Karabakh's population was Armenian, while this figure rose to 42% in 1916.⁶⁸¹ While part of the Azerbaijani Muslim population migrated to the Ottoman and Iranian territories, the Russian administration saw Armenians as more loyal allies and gave them important roles in the administration of the region.⁶⁸²

In the second term, the early 20th century was a critical period when tensions between the Azeri and Armenian communities in Nagorno-Karabakh and the South Caucasus in general escalated into open conflicts. The weakening of Tsarist Russia, the influence of the Ottomans and Britain in the region, and the vacuum of authority that emerged after the Russian Revolution further escalated tensions between the parties.⁶⁸³ The events that took place during this period deepened the ethnic and political divisions that form the basis of the Karabakh conflict.

The 1905 Russian Revolution weakened the central authority of Tsarist Russia and opened in a new period of instability in the Caucasus. With the weakening of

⁶⁷⁹ Eldar Abbasov, "Armenian Irredentist Nationalism and Its Transformation into the Mass Karabakh Movement "MIATSUM" (1965-1988)", in M. Hakan Yavuz, Michael Gunter (Eds.), **The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives**, Oxon: Routledge, 2023, p. 73.

⁶⁸⁰ Mesiagha Mohammadi, Vasif Huseynov, "Iran's Policies Toward the Karabakh Conflict", in M. Hakan Yavuz, Michael Gunter (Eds.), **The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives**, Oxon: Routledge, 2023, p. 386.

⁶⁸¹ Kamala Imranli-Lowe, "Karabakh: Historical Background", in M. Hakan Yavuz, Michael Gunter (Eds.), **The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives**, Oxon: Routledge, 2023, p. 23.

⁶⁸² Ibid., 22.

⁶⁸³ Havva Kök Arslan, Elmin Aliyev, "The Second Karabakh War and Its Results in the Context of the Changing Dynamics of Turkish Foreign Policy", Nergiz Özkural Köroğlu, Hamoon Khelghat-Doost (Eds.), **Metamorphosis of Turkish Foreign Policy in the 21st Century Opportunities and Challenges**, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023, pp. 195-196.; Orhan Gafarli, "Russia's Role in the Karabakh Conflict", M. Hakan Yavuz, Michael Gunter (Eds.), **The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives**, Oxon: Routledge, 2023, pp. 342-343.

Tsarist rule, tensions between Azeris and Armenians turned into open conflicts. The first outbreak of violence in Baku in February 1905 quickly spread to Shusha, Ganja, Tbilisi and Nakhichevan, turning into a large-scale ethnic conflict.⁶⁸⁴

Shusha, the most important city in the Nagorno Karabakh region at the present time, was one of the regions where these conflicts were most violent. Armenian and Azerbaijani armed groups organized mutual attacks, causing widespread destruction in the city. Although the Russian authorities intervened to bring the situation under control, from time to time they practiced a divide and rule policy, setting both sides against each other.⁶⁸⁵ By 1907, the fighting had settled down, but these events sustained the mistrust between the Azeri and Armenian communities. In 1917, the Bolshevik Revolution ended Tsarist rule and led to the withdrawal of the Russian army from the Caucasus. Consequently, the vacuum of authority left by Russia in the region led to a renewed wave of conflict between Azeri and Armenian groups.⁶⁸⁶

Immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution, the leaders of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia established a joint administration called the Transcaucasian Commissariat and began to act independently from Russia.⁶⁸⁷ However, since the ethnic groups within this administration had very different interests, the alliance soon fell apart. With the withdrawal of the Russians, Armenian and Azeri militias started to fight each other for control of the region.

In 1918, there were major clashes between Azeri and Armenian groups in cities such as Baku, Ganja, Karabakh and Nakhichevan. In March 1918, the Bolsheviks in collaboration with the Armenian Dashnak militia launched attacks on Azerbaijanis in Baku, killing thousands of Azerbaijani civilians. This event is defined as the “*March Genocide*”⁶⁸⁸ by the Azerbaijani side and is seen as one of the biggest breaking points in the Armenian-Azeri enmity. During the same period, Armenian militias in Karabakh

⁶⁸⁴ Svante E. Cornell, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict”, **Department of East European Studies, Uppsala University**, Report No. 46, 1999, p. 6. [1-162].; Svante E. Cornell, “Turkey and the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh: a delicate balance”, **Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol. 34, No.1, 1998, p. 52.

⁶⁸⁵ Cornell, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict”, p. 15, 133.

⁶⁸⁶ Cornell, “Turkey and the Conflict in Nagorno Karabakh”; Ercan Karakoç, “A Brief Overview on Karabakh History from Past to Today”, **International Journal of Human Sciences**, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 1017.

⁶⁸⁷ Cornell, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict”, pp. 6-7.; Karakoç, “A Brief Overview on Karabakh History from Past to Today”, p. 1015.

⁶⁸⁸ “31 March-Day of Genocide of Azerbaijanis”, **Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan**, <https://mod.gov.az/en/march-31-day-of-genocide-of-azerbaijanis-413/> (Retrieved on 5 May 2025).

also launched attacks on Azeri villages, while Azeri forces retaliated against Armenian settlements. After 1918, the Ottoman Empire, Britain and the Bolsheviks directly intervened in the developments in Karabakh and the South Caucasus. Control over the region constantly changed hands and the Azeri-Armenian war turned into a large-scale regional conflict.⁶⁸⁹ In the summer of 1918, the Ottoman Army mobilized to capture Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. The Ottoman-backed Azerbaijani army advanced, clashing with Armenian troops in Karabakh. In September 1918, Ottoman-Azeri forces captured Baku. However, with the Ottoman defeat in World War I and its withdrawal from the region in accordance with the Mudros Armistice, the influence of the Ottoman-Azeri alliance diminished.⁶⁹⁰

After the Ottoman withdrawal, the British entered Baku and took control of the region. In 1919, the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan was established and Karabakh was recognized as a part of Azerbaijan.⁶⁹¹ However, the Armenians in Karabakh did not recognize this decision and started uprisings against the Azerbaijani government. Between 1919 and 1920, the Azerbaijani army carried out large-scale operations to suppress the Armenian rebellions in Karabakh.⁶⁹²

In this process, as the Bolsheviks gained strength in the Caucasus, the Red Army entered Azerbaijan in 1920 and established Bolshevik rule. In the same year, Armenia was also occupied by the Soviets and the independent Republic of Armenia came to an end. In 1921, the Soviet government decided that Karabakh would remain part of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, but the region was granted autonomous status.⁶⁹³ This decision was one of the main reasons for the conflicts between

⁶⁸⁹ Cornell, "Turkey and the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh", p. 52.; Christopher J. Walker, "The Armenian Presence in Mountainous Karabakh", John F. R. Wright, Suzanne Goldenberg, Richard Schofield (Eds.), **Transcaucasian Boundaries**, London: UCL Press, 1996, p. 92.; Karakoç, "A Brief Overview on Karabakh History from Past to Today", p. 1016.

⁶⁹⁰ Cornell, "Turkey and the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh", p. 52.; Karakoç, "A Brief Overview on Karabakh History from Past to Today", p. 1016.

⁶⁹¹ Laurence Broers, **Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019, p. 106.; Karakoç, "A Brief Overview on Karabakh History from Past to Today", p. 1017.

⁶⁹² Karakoç, "A Brief Overview on Karabakh History from Past to Today", p. 1017.

⁶⁹³ Shamkal Abilov and Ceyhan Mahmudlu, "The UN Security Council Resolutions on Nagorno-Karabakh: View from Azerbaijan", M. Hakan Yavuz, Michael Gunter (Eds.), **The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives**, Oxon: Routledge, 2023, p. 130; Arsène Saparov, "Why Autonomy? The Making of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region 1918–1925", **Europe-Asia Studies**, Vol. 64, No.2, 2012, pp. 281–323.

Azerbaijan and Armenia and led to the continuation of tensions in the region in the following years.

In the third term (1921-1987), it was a period in which Nagorno-Karabakh enjoyed an autonomous status within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), but tensions persisted with the Armenian population in the region constantly demanding annexation to the Armenian SSR.⁶⁹⁴ Although the Soviet administration pursued various policies to suppress the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, the ethnic division in the region and the political rivalry between the parties became even more pronounced during this period.

After the USSR seized control in the Caucasus, the status of Nagorno-Karabakh began to be discussed in Moscow. On July 5, 1921, the Caucasus Bureau of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union decided that Nagorno-Karabakh would remain within the Azerbaijan SSR. However, this decision did not involve the direct administration of Azerbaijan, but the region's acquisition of an autonomous status. In this way, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) was created and annexed to the Azerbaijan SSR.⁶⁹⁵

Although this decision was seen as an important achievement for Azerbaijan, it was a great disappointment for Armenians. Although the Armenian SSR demanded the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh, the Soviet leadership did not accept this demand in order to stabilize the region.⁶⁹⁶ Stalin's aim was to strengthen Soviet control over the region by controlling inter-ethnic rivalries in the Caucasus. However, the granting of autonomy to Nagorno-Karabakh, instead of ending ethnic clash in the region, became a source of constant tension in the following years.⁶⁹⁷

In 1923, the NKAO was officially established, and the administrative center was moved from Shusha to Khankendi. Although the region's status allowed it to maintain

⁶⁹⁴ Abilov, Mahmudlu, "The UN Security Council Resolutions on Nagorno-Karabakh", p. 130.

⁶⁹⁵ Farhad Mirzayev, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: International Law Appraisal", M. Hakan Yavuz, Michael Gunter (Eds.), **The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives**, Oxon: Routledge, 2023, p. 168. [168-203].; Audrey L. Altstadt, "Nagorno-Karabakh – 'Apple of Discord' in Azerbaijan SSR", **Central Asia Survey**, Vol. 7, No. 4, 1988, p. 66.

⁶⁹⁶ Karakoç, "A Brief Overview on Karabakh History from Past to Today", p. 1018.

⁶⁹⁷ Jamil Hasanlı, "The Sovietization of Azerbaijan and a Road to Autonomy in Nagorno-Karabakh (1920–1923)", M. Hakan Yavuz, Michael Gunter (Eds.), **The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives**, Oxon: Routledge, 2023, p. 54.

its Armenian identity within Nagorno-Karabakh, it ensured that political and economic control remained largely dependent on Baku.⁶⁹⁸

During this period, the Soviet Union implemented strict centralist policies to suppress local nationalism. Large-scale arrests and repression were carried out to prevent nationalist elements in both Azerbaijan and Armenia from acting against the Soviet regime. Under Stalin's repressive policies in the 1930s, national identities in Azerbaijan and Armenia were largely suppressed and many Azeri and Armenian intellectuals were silenced or exiled by the regime.⁶⁹⁹ On the other hand, throughout the 1960s, the Azerbaijani leadership tried to change the population balance in Karabakh in its favor. While the Azeri population was encouraged to migrate to the region, some Armenian villages were excluded from economic incentives. By the 1970s, Nagorno-Karabakh's population was approximately 76% Armenian and 23% Azerbaijani.⁷⁰⁰

In 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the policies of Glasnost (transparency) and Perestroika (restructuring) were implemented. These reforms revitalized the nationalist movements of ethnic groups across the Soviet Union and reignited the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. By 1987, Armenian political circles again began to raise the demand for the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. During this period, tensions between the Armenian and Azeri communities in Nagorno-Karabakh began to rise rapidly.⁷⁰¹ The Gorbachev administration did not want to intervene directly in the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, and tensions between the parties continued to grow. In late 1987, attacks against Azerbaijanis began to take place in parts of Armenia. This led to retaliatory actions against Armenians in Azerbaijan.⁷⁰²

⁶⁹⁸ Cornell, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", p. 9.; Audrey L. Altstadt, **The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule**, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1992, p. 127.

⁶⁹⁹ Farid Shafiyev, "The Orientalizing of Azerbaijanis and the Armenia-Azerbaijani Conflict", M. Hakan Yavuz, Michael Gunter (Eds.), **The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives**, Oxon: Routledge, 2023, p. 97.

⁷⁰⁰ "Demographics Statistics in Nagorno-Karabakh during the Soviet Azerbaijani rule", **Karabakh Facts**, <https://karabakhfacts.com/demographics-statistics-in-nagorno-karabakh-during-the-soviet-azerbaijani-rule/>, (Retrieved on 15 March 2024).

⁷⁰¹ Karakoç, "A Brief Overview on Karabakh History from Past to Today", p. 1020-1021; Thomas De Waal, **Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War**, United States of America: New York University Press, 2003, pp. 17-26.

⁷⁰² De Waal, **Black Garden**, pp. 22-23.; Cornell, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", p. 13.

By 1988, demands for the status of Nagorno-Karabakh were supported by open demonstrations and political movements. The Soviet Union was no longer able to keep the Nagorno-Karabakh issue under control and the ethnic conflict in the region turned into an open crisis with large demonstrations in 1988.⁷⁰³

In the fourth term (1987-1991), Nagorno-Karabakh became one of the major crisis areas between Azerbaijan and Armenia during the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In late 1987, attacks on the Azerbaijani population in the Armenian SSR began. Armenian nationalist groups used various forms of repression to expel people of Azerbaijani origin from the region.⁷⁰⁴ In November 1987, Azerbaijani villages were attacked in the Kafan and Meghri regions of Armenia. As a result, around 167.000 Azerbaijanis were forced out of their homes and forced to migrate to Azerbaijan.⁷⁰⁵ These events sparked an outcry in Azerbaijan and mass protests against Armenia began to be organized in Baku. The Soviet government failed to de-escalate the situation, which further exacerbated ethnic tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia.⁷⁰⁶

In February 1988, Armenian nationalist groups in Nagorno-Karabakh made a formal request for the annexation of Karabakh to Armenia. The Soviet of the NKAO decided to join Armenia, and this demand was supported by Armenia. However, the Soviet Union rejected this request and declared that Nagorno-Karabakh would remain part of Azerbaijan.⁷⁰⁷ This decision caused massive protests in Armenia and at the same time fueled nationalist sentiments in Azerbaijan. On 26-29 February 1988, a massive pogrom was organized by Azerbaijanis against Armenians in Sumgait, Azerbaijan.⁷⁰⁸ During the Sumgait events, Armenian civilians were attacked, many were killed and injured. The Soviet security forces were slow to take control of the situation, which traumatized the Armenian community. Armenians considered the Sumgait Events as part of Azerbaijan's policy of ethnic cleansing against the Armenian population.⁷⁰⁹ The

⁷⁰³ Cornell, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", pp. 14-16.

⁷⁰⁴ De Waal, **Black Garden**, p. 44.

⁷⁰⁵ Mirzayev, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", p. 174.; Human Rights Watch, "Azerbaijan Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh", United States of America: **Human Rights Watch**, 1994, p. 1.

⁷⁰⁶ Laçin İdil Öztığ, "Comparative Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy on the Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflicts (1988-2020)", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2023, pp. 141-142.

⁷⁰⁷ Cornell, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", p. 14, 20.

⁷⁰⁸ "General Information", **Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Azerbaijan**, <https://genprosecutor.gov.az/en/page/azerbaycan/sumqayit-hadiseleri-1988/umumi-melumat> (Retrieved on 10 April 2024).

⁷⁰⁹ Cornell, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", pp. 16-19.; Shafiyev, "The Orientalizing of Azerbaijanis and the Armenia-Azerbaijani Conflict", pp. 97-98.; De Waal, **Black Garden**, pp. 33-34.

Sumgait Events further strengthened the Armenian separatist movement in Nagorno-Karabakh. Later that year, similar attacks against Armenians took place in Azerbaijan, sharpening the ethnic divide around Nagorno-Karabakh. By 1989, the Soviet Union could no longer control the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijani and Armenian-backed paramilitary groups began to form in the region and armed clashes broke out in villages across Karabakh.⁷¹⁰

In July 1989, the Soviet leadership abolished the status of Nagorno-Karabakh as an autonomous region, attempting to link it directly to Moscow. However, this decision was met with massive protests in both Azerbaijan and Armenia, further complicating the situation in the region. In November 1989, the Soviet leadership gave up and announced that Nagorno-Karabakh was once again part of Azerbaijan.⁷¹¹ In the process, relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia came to a complete breakdown. Major protests were organized in Yerevan and Baku.⁷¹² In December 1989, the Armenian parliament officially approved the decision to annex Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, but the Soviet government declared it illegal. In January 1990, the nationalist movement in Azerbaijan gained great momentum. Mass protests against Soviet rule began in Baku and Moscow took extraordinarily harsh measures to contain the situation.⁷¹³

On the night of January 19-20, 1990, the Soviet army entered Baku and carried out a bloody operation to suppress the protests. In what went down in history as “Black January”⁷¹⁴, Soviet troops killed 137 civilians. This event led to a complete alienation of the Azerbaijani people from Soviet rule and accelerated their demand for independence.⁷¹⁵ During the same year, clashes between the Azerbaijani and Armenian populations in Nagorno-Karabakh intensified. Village raids, kidnappings and armed attacks became common. The Soviet army failed to prevent violence between the

⁷¹⁰ Cornell, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict”, pp. 25-26.

⁷¹¹ Ibid., pp. 21-22.; Öztığ, “Comparative Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy on the Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflicts”, p. 142.

⁷¹² Cornell, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict”, p. 17.

⁷¹³ Gafarli, “Russia’s Role in the Karabakh Conflict”, pp. 345-347.; Karakoç, “A Brief Overview on Karabakh History from Past to Today”, p. 1020.

⁷¹⁴ “No:020/21, Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the occasion of the 31st anniversary of the “Black January” tragedy”, **Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Azerbaijan**, <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/no02021-statement-of-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-on-the-occasion-of-the-31st-anniversary-of-the-black-january-tragedy> (Retrieved on 10 October 2024).

⁷¹⁵ Karakoç, “A Brief Overview on Karabakh History from Past to Today”, p. 1020.; De Waal, **Black Garden**, pp. 90-95.

parties. 1991 was the year when the Soviet Union entered a period of complete collapse and the Karabakh conflict escalated into a major war.⁷¹⁶

At the end of December 1991, Azerbaijan declared its independence and the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast was formally abolished. In response, in December 1991, Armenian leaders in Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence and announced that they would not recognize Azerbaijani rule. This marked the beginning of a full-scale war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In early 1992, major fighting broke out in Nagorno-Karabakh and the First Karabakh War began.⁷¹⁷

In the fifth term, the First Karabakh War was fought between Azerbaijan and Armenia for control of Nagorno-Karabakh between 1992 and 1994, was one of the bloodiest and most destructive wars in the region. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, both countries gained independence, but there was no agreement on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia's support for Armenian separatists in Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan's attempt to protect its sovereignty over the region led to a large-scale war.⁷¹⁸

This war was not only between Azerbaijan and Armenia, but also a struggle shaped by the diplomatic efforts of regional powers (Russia, Türkiye and Iran) and the international community. The war, in which around 30.000 people lost their lives, and more than 1 million people were displaced, ended with a ceasefire in 1994, but the status quo in the region remained unchanged.⁷¹⁹

At the end of 1991, Armenian separatists in Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence, which was not recognized by Azerbaijan. At the beginning of 1992, the Azerbaijani army launched a major military operation to establish its control over Nagorno-Karabakh. However, Azerbaijan faced serious problems both militarily and logistically. In February 1992, Armenian-backed Nagorno-Karabakh Armenian forces

⁷¹⁶ De Waal, **Black Garden**, pp. 90-95.

⁷¹⁷ Öztüğ, "Comparative Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy on the Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflicts", p. 142.; Cornell, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", pp. 26-27.; Cornell, "Turkey and the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh", p. 51.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid.

⁷¹⁹ M. Hakan Yavuz, Michael Gunter, "Introduction", M. Hakan Yavuz, Michael Gunter (Eds.), **The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives**, Oxon: Routledge, 2023, p. 3; "Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", **Center for Preventive Action Council on Foreign Relations**, 20 March 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/nagorno-karabakh-conflict> (Retrieved on 1 June 2025).

attacked the Azerbaijani town of Khojaly. In this incident, known as the Khojaly Massacre, thousands of Azerbaijani civilians were killed. The Khojaly Massacre went down in history as one of the most controversial and tragic events of the war.⁷²⁰

At the same time, there was a major crisis in Azerbaijan's domestic politics. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Azerbaijani army was not fully organized, and internal political rivalries affected military decisions, leading to a lack of coordination in the war. In the spring of 1992, Azerbaijani President Ayaz Muttalibov was forced to resign and political instability increased in Azerbaijan.⁷²¹ The year 1993 was one of the turning points of the war. Armenian-backed Nagorno-Karabakh forces seized seven Azerbaijani rayons around Karabakh, dealing a major blow to Azerbaijan.⁷²²

In April 1993, the Kalbajar region was captured by Armenian forces. The fall of Kalbajar was a major loss for Azerbaijan, as it was a critical link between Karabakh and Armenia.⁷²³ Azerbaijan's loss also resonated strongly with the international community. The UNSC adopted Resolution 822⁷²⁴ demanding Armenia's withdrawal from the occupied Azerbaijani territories, but this resolution did not bring about any change on the ground.⁷²⁵

The political crisis in Azerbaijan also deepened during this period. In June 1993, President Ebulfez Elchibey's government fell due to internal political strife and was replaced by Heydar Aliyev.⁷²⁶ Aliyev's accession to power led to a reorganization of the military in Azerbaijan. In the fall of 1993, the Azerbaijani army began to launch some counterattacks. However, between August and November 1993, Armenian-backed Nagorno-Karabakh forces captured Jabrayil, Fuzuli, Kubadli, Zangilan and

⁷²⁰ De Waal, **Black Garden**, pp. 182-188.; Cornell, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", pp. 30-34.

⁷²¹ "Azerbaijan's President Resigns Over Reports of War Massacre", **The Washington Post**, 6 March 1992, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/03/07/azerbaijans-president-resigns-over-reports-of-war-massacre/b9dcd378-44b7-40e0-b1b8-6f1e59f3883b/> (Retrieved on 1 July 2024).

⁷²² Öztüğ, "Comparative Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy on the Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflicts", p. 143.; Cornell, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", p. 40.; Shafiyev, "The Orientalizing of Azerbaijanis and the Armenia-Azerbaijani Conflict", p. 98.

⁷²³ Shafiyev, "The Orientalizing of Azerbaijanis and the Armenia-Azerbaijani Conflict", p. 98.

⁷²⁴ "Resolution 822 (1993) / adopted by the Security Council at its 3205th meeting, on 30 April 1993", **United Nations**, 1993, (Retrieved on 5 December 2024).

⁷²⁵ Abilov, Mahmudlu, "The UN Security Council Resolutions on Nagorno-Karabakh", p. 131-132.

⁷²⁶ De Waal, **Black Garden**, p. 226.

other regions in southwestern Azerbaijan. With this development, Azerbaijan lost not only Nagorno-Karabakh but also seven regions around Karabakh.⁷²⁷

With the mediation of Russia, a ceasefire agreement was signed in Bishkek in May 1994 between Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Armenian administration of Nagorno-Karabakh. With this agreement, known as the Bishkek Protocol⁷²⁸, the war officially ended, but the core issues of the conflict remained unresolved.⁷²⁹ Following the ceasefire, Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding Azerbaijani territories remained de facto under the control of Armenian-backed Armenian forces. Azerbaijan had suffered a territorial loss of around 20% and had completely lost control over Nagorno-Karabakh.⁷³⁰

In the sixth term, following the Bishkek Protocol, Nagorno-Karabakh remained de facto under the control of Armenian-backed forces. However, Azerbaijan has never accepted this situation and tensions in the region have persisted.⁷³¹ During this period, international mediators, particularly the OSCE Minsk Group (led by the US, Russia and France), tried to find a solution between the parties. However, no concrete progress towards a solution was made. The Minsk Group tried to convince the parties to reach a peace agreement through diplomatic means, but neither Azerbaijan nor Armenia was willing to make concessions on the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh.⁷³² During these years, there were frequent clashes along the border. Minor border violations, sniper attacks, and military operations were frequently reported. There were particularly serious clashes in 2008 and 2016, but they did not escalate into full-scale warfare.⁷³³

Using its economic power, Azerbaijan began to modernize the army and increase its military capacity. In particular, its oil and gas revenues have enabled it to purchase Turkish and Israeli-made unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and advanced weapon

⁷²⁷ Gafarli, "Russia's Role in the Karabakh Conflict", p. 348.

⁷²⁸ "The Bishkek Protocol 5 May 1994", **United Nations**, <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2024/05/bishkek20protocol.pdf> (Retrieved on 2 August 2024).

⁷²⁹ Araz Aslanlı, "The Politics of Ceasefire and the Occupation", M. Hakan Yavuz, Michael Gunter (Eds.), **The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives**, Oxon: Routledge, 2023, p. 158.

⁷³⁰ Ibid., p. 157.; Cornell, "Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict".

⁷³¹ Ibid.

⁷³² Aslanlı, "The Politics of Ceasefire and the Occupation", p. 160.; Mirzayev, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", p. 180.

⁷³³ Öztüğ, "Comparative Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy on the Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflicts", p. 143.

systems. This would give Azerbaijan a major military advantage in the years to come.⁷³⁴

In the seventh term, in April 2016, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia reached its peak, with a short but intense four-day war. The conflict was the largest military escalation since 1994.⁷³⁵ The Azerbaijani army captured several strategic heights on the northern and southern lines of Nagorno-Karabakh. This operation seemed to be a preview of the larger-scale military operations Azerbaijan would undertake in the coming years. However, with Russia's intervention, a ceasefire was reached between the parties, and the war was stopped before it escalated.⁷³⁶ This event demonstrated that Azerbaijan's military capabilities had significantly increased and that it had the capacity to launch a larger operation in the future.

In the eighth term, on September 27, 2020, the Azerbaijani army launched a major military operation to retake the Armenian-occupied territories in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. This war continued intensively for 44 days and was the largest conflict since 1994.⁷³⁷ Using modern UAVs, high-precision missiles and electronic warfare systems, the Azerbaijani army managed to break through Armenia's defense lines. Specifically, Bayraktar TB2 UAVs from Türkiye and Israeli-made kamikaze drones neutralized Armenia's heavy weapons and defense systems.⁷³⁸

In November 2020, the Azerbaijani army captured Shusha. The fall of Shusha made Armenia's defeat inevitable. On 10 November, 2020, a trilateral ceasefire agreement was signed with the mediation of Russia and the war ended.⁷³⁹ According to this ceasefire agreement, Azerbaijan recaptured large areas in Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding regions. Armenia largely lost its military presence in Nagorno-

⁷³⁴ Yavuz, Gunter, "Introduction", p. 9.

⁷³⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

⁷³⁶ Aslanlı, "The Politics of Ceasefire and the Occupation", p. 161.

⁷³⁷ Öztüğ, "Comparative Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy on the Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflicts", p. 145.; Shafiyev, "The Orientalizing of Azerbaijanis and the Armenia-Azerbaijani Conflict", p. 101.

⁷³⁸ Mehmet Sah Yilmaz and Ruslan Rehimov, "Top Azerbaijan official hails Turkey's Bayraktar drones", *Anadolu Agency*, 21 February 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/science-technology/top-azerbaijan-official-hails-turkeys-bayraktar-drones/2153505> (Retrieved on 10 December 2024); Hülya Kınık and Sinem Çelik, "The Role of Turkish Drones in Azerbaijan's Increasing Military Effectiveness: An Assessment of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War", *Insight Türkiye*, 14 December 2021, <https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/the-role-of-turkish-drones-in-azerbaijans-increasing-military-effectiveness-an-assessment-of-the-second-nagorno-karabakh-war> (Retrieved on 10 January 2025).

⁷³⁹ Abilov and Mahmudlu, "The UN Security Council Resolutions on Nagorno-Karabakh", p. 146.

Karabakh. Russia deployed a 2.000-strong peacekeeping force to the region for five years.⁷⁴⁰

In the last term, after the 2020 war, Azerbaijan increased pressure to end the remaining Armenian separatist presence in Nagorno-Karabakh. During 2022-2023, Azerbaijan took control of the Lachin Corridor, cutting Armenia's link to Karabakh. On September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan launched a major military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh. This operation lasted only 24 hours, and the Armenian separatist leadership completely surrendered. The Azerbaijani army took control of the region almost without facing any serious resistance.⁷⁴¹

This led to the migration of a large part of the ethnic Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. Within a week, more than 100.000 Armenians left Nagorno-Karabakh, and the region came almost completely under Azerbaijani control. The Azerbaijani government announced plans to integrate the remaining population in Nagorno-Karabakh into the Azerbaijani state and promised economic development.⁷⁴² However, it remains unclear how the future of the region will take shape and how the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan will proceed.

3.2.1. Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Türkiye's foreign policy on this issue is based on its strong historical and cultural ties with Azerbaijan, historical problems in relations with Armenia, regional energy policies, military cooperation and international diplomacy.⁷⁴³ The relationship between Türkiye and Azerbaijan is based on an understanding of solidarity shaped by the

⁷⁴⁰ Aslanlı, "The Politics of Ceasefire and the Occupation", p. 163.; Mirzayev, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", p. 184.; Irina Ghulinyan-Gerz, "Disappointed in Russia: Armenia's security disillusionment", **Heinrich Böll Stiftung**, 1 November 2022, <https://ge.boell.org/en/2022/11/01/disappointed-russia-armenias-security-disillusionment> (Retrieved on 16 December 2024).

⁷⁴¹ "Azerbaijan launches new military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh", **Al Jazeera**, 19 September 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/19/azerbaijan-launches-new-anti-terror-offensive-in-nagorno-karabakh> (Retrieved on 20 February 2024).

⁷⁴² "Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict"; "Almost all ethnic Armenians have left Nagorno-Karabakh", **The Guardian**, 30 September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/30/almost-all-ethnic-armenians-have-left-nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan> (Retrieved on 20 February 2024).

⁷⁴³ Gökhan Koçer, "Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and Turkey," in Arda Özkan, Göktürk Tüysüzoğlu (Eds.) **Conflict Areas in the Caucasus and Central Asia**, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2022, pp. 19-22.

discourse of "one nation, two states".⁷⁴⁴ This understanding has enabled Türkiye to support Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Table 3.5. Turkish Foreign Policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Turkish Foreign Policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis				
	Intervening Variables	Dependent Variables	Period	Nature (Strategy, Tactic or Maneuver)
1	The Leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Supporting Azerbaijan		Strategy
		Proactive and ambitious foreign policy		Strategy
2	Nationalist-Conservatist Identity	Joint military exercises	2009-	
		Discourse of 'one nation, two states'		Strategy
3	Similar Regime Types (Democratic Backsliding or Power Centralization Tendencies)			
4	Economic Concern	Project of Zangezur corridor	2021-	Tactic
		Getting the investments of SOCAR		Tactic
		Diversification policies on energy issues		Strategy
		Turkish companies' reconstruction projects	2021-	Tactic
5	The Desire to Increase or Maintain Türkiye's Influence	Playing a Mediator Role		Strategy
		Military support and to test its weapons		Strategy
		Joint military exercises		Tactic
		International Law-Based Foreign Policy		Strategy
		The Policy of 'Zero Problems with Neighbors'		Strategy
		Entrepreneurial and Humanitarian Foreign Policy		Strategy
		Defending Azerbaijan' theses in international platforms		Tactic
6	Public Opinion and Media	Voluntarily joining the Azerbaijani army		Tactic
		Discourse of Brother Azerbaijan		Strategy
		Coverage of unlawful claims of Armenia		Strategy

⁷⁴⁴ "Official visit of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev to the Republic of Turkey (May 5-8, 1997)", **Heydar Aliyev Heritage International Online Library**, <https://lib.aliyevheritage.org/en/96196110.html> (Retrieved on 10 December 2024).

Turkish foreign policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis can be understood through looking at the dynamics of the international system and the domestic politics of the Republic of Türkiye. In this part, the foreign policy of Türkiye in the post-Arab Spring period will be analyzed via the intervening variables of Turkish foreign policy. For this case, six intervening variables will be utilized. These are the leadership, nationalist-conservatist identity of AKP government and the notion of Turkish identity, similar regime types, economic concern, the desire to increase or maintain its influence and the impact of public opinion and media.

In terms of the first variable, the leadership, Türkiye's stance especially during the Second Karabakh War was much more active and visible on the ground compared to previous periods. Erdoğan's characteristics of stubbornness, emotionalism, and personal authority reflect in a foreign policy that is assertive, sometimes confrontational, and deeply intertwined with personal and nationalistic ambitions, making the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict both a symbol and a tool in his geopolitical strategy. Erdoğan's approach can be interpreted as an assertion of Türkiye's revived influence in Caucasus affairs, supporting Azerbaijan's stance firmly while leveraging his personal rapport with President Ilham Aliyev, a relationship elevated through the cult of personality and ethnic Turkish nationalism.⁷⁴⁵ In other words, the close relations between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Azerbaijan President İlham Aliyev led to support Türkiye to Azerbaijan.

At the same time, Erdoğan framed the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as part of Türkiye's broader ambition to solve regional issues in the South Caucasus. He presented Türkiye as an active peace actor seeking solutions alongside conflicts in places like Kosovo, Crimea, and Kashmir. His rhetoric conveyed determination and proactive engagement in regional geopolitics. Erdoğan's policy reflected a strategic attempt to reduce Russian influence in the Caucasus by bolstering Azerbaijan's territorial claims. Türkiye's support for Azerbaijan can be seen both as solidarity with

⁷⁴⁵ Anahit Kartashyan, "'Sultan Who Never Became a Caliph': 'Izvestia Portrays the President of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan", in Naira E. Sahakyan, Hriar Cabayan (Eds.), **A Socio-Political Assessment of Turkish and Azerbaijani Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Ilham Aliyev**, ARPA Institute, May 2024, pp. 20-25.

a Turkic ally and as a maneuver within the broader Turkish-Russian contest over Caucasus influence.⁷⁴⁶

Secondly, regarding the nationalist-conservatist identity of AKP government and the notion of Turkish identity, the 2015 general elections and the creation of AKP-MHP coalition directs Türkiye to increase its support to Azerbaijan who is considered a Turkish brother. That means that Türkiye has a responsibility to protect its brothers and sisters.⁷⁴⁷

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's "one nation, two states" rhetoric⁷⁴⁸ has become a symbolic expression of the military and strategic solidarity between the two countries. While during the 1990s, Türkiye did not have enough capacity to support Azerbaijan militarily, during 2010s, Türkiye had both enough capacity and different ambitions like becoming an influential actor in the region.

The joint military exercises conducted between Türkiye and Azerbaijan and the training and logistical support provided by Türkiye to the Azerbaijani army also are important. Türkiye's military support significantly increased Azerbaijan's operational capacity and morale. Türkiye also provided intelligence support to Azerbaijan during the war and played a direct role in building Azerbaijan's military capacity. This explicit support led the international community to perceive Türkiye as a more active party in the conflict.⁷⁴⁹ Türkiye would like to become an influential actor in the Five Seas Basin, and this region is one of the five parts of the Basin. It can be said that Türkiye started to use its hard power in a smart way with its soft power which has been used since the beginning of the conflict.

On September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan announced the launch of an "*anti-terrorist operation*"⁷⁵⁰ in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The Ministry of Defense of the

⁷⁴⁶ Naira E. Sahakyan, "Framing the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: An Analysis of the Narratives of the State Leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey, 2002–2022", *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 43, No. 3, 2024, p. 393.

⁷⁴⁷ M. Hakan Yavuz, "Turkish Foreign Policy and the Karabakh Conflict", in M. Hakan Yavuz, Michael Gunter (Eds.), *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives*, Oxon: Routledge, 2023, pp. 288-289.

⁷⁴⁸ "Ak Parti Grup Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma", *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı*, 16 October 2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/111138/ak-parti-grup-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma> (Retrieved on 10 December 2024).

⁷⁴⁹ Başaran Ayar and Orkun Aslan, "Trembling Chessboard The Effects of Changing Russian-Turkish Relations in The South Caucasus", *Международные процессы*, Vol. 23, No. 74, 2023, p. 108.

⁷⁵⁰ "No: 229, 19 September 2023, Press Release Regarding the Military Operation Launched by Azerbaijan in Karabakh", *Republic Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 19 September 2023,

Republic of Azerbaijan and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye stated that this operation was carried out against the long-standing attacks and provocations of the illegal Armenian armed elements in the region against the Azerbaijani army and security forces.⁷⁵¹ Both Türkiye and Azerbaijan have Turkish identity, and this identity is crucial for Türkiye to support Azerbaijan in this conflict. The public opinion in Türkiye suppresses the government to follow Azeri-backed foreign policy.

Thirdly, the democratic backsliding or power centralization tendencies of Türkiye causes the strategic partnership with Azerbaijan which is an authoritarian state.⁷⁵² After 2015, Türkiye's foreign policy had a radical paradigm shift. This shift is directly linked to both the ruptures in the international conjuncture and the transformation in Türkiye's domestic political structure. The 2013 Gezi Park protests, the December 17-25 corruption investigations and the uncertainty following the 2015 general elections paved the way for a more security-based, centralized and interventionist foreign policy stance. This trend was further reinforced especially after the July 15 coup attempt in 2016, and foreign policy decision-making processes were largely centralized in the presidential office.⁷⁵³ The similarities between regimes also provide to closer the two countries.

Fourthly, due to the fact that the economic and energy-based concerns of Türkiye, on one hand, Türkiye wanted to reconcile with Armenia and on the other hand, increase its economic relations with Azerbaijan via energy and military equipment trade. The Zangezur corridor is a new transportation corridor for Türkiye to Azerbaijan and Central Asia in addition to the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line.⁷⁵⁴ Since Türkiye is depending on Russia regarding the energy issues, it tries to diversify

https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-229_-azerbaycan-tarafindan-karabag-da-baslatilan-askeri-operasyon-hk.en.mfa#:~:text=Due%20to%20the%20long%2Dstanding,operation%20which%20targets%20exclusively%20military (Retrieved on 10 December 2024).

⁷⁵¹ "Statement by Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defense", **Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan**, 19 September 2023, <https://mod.gov.az/en/news/statement-by-azerbaijan-s-ministry-of-defense-49350.html> (Retrieved on 10 December 2024).

⁷⁵² Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, "The Resurgence of Cult of Personality in Turkey and the Transformation of Azerbaijani-Turkish Relations", in Naira E. Sahakyan, Hriar Cabayan (Eds.), **A Socio-Political Assessment of Turkish and Azerbaijani Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and İlham Aliyev**, ARPA Institute, May 2024, pp. 10-11.

⁷⁵³ Ana Jovic-Lazic, "The role of Turkey in the second Armenian-Azerbaijani armed conflict over nagorno-Karabakh as a reflection of continuity and change in its foreign policy", **Международни проблеми**, Vol. 74, No.1, 2022, p. 37.

⁷⁵⁴ Kök-Arslan and Aliyev, "The Second Karabakh War," p. 207.

its energy resources by making agreements with Azerbaijan and also it aims to become an energy hub which transfers the Azerbaijan energy to Europe. SOCAR, the petroleum company in Azerbaijan, has major investments in Türkiye and it is an important factor that Türkiye supports Azerbaijan concretely.⁷⁵⁵

On the other hand, strategic projects in the fields of economic and energy cooperation were realized between Türkiye and Azerbaijan. In addition to the BTC oil pipeline, projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline and Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) have enabled the integration of Azerbaijan with Türkiye and European energy markets. While these projects constitute the energy pillar of the strategic partnership between the two countries, they have also increased Türkiye's political influence over Azerbaijan. The energy partnership provided a strong economic backdrop to Türkiye's political support for Azerbaijan.⁷⁵⁶ At the same time, since Türkiye has already been dependent on the Russian energy, it follows diversification policies for its energy security. TANAP, completed in 2018, has shifted the regional energy balance in favor of Azerbaijan by transporting Azerbaijan's natural gas to Türkiye and Europe. With these projects, Türkiye is ensuring Azerbaijan's energy security and weakening Armenia's regional economic power.

On the other hand, Türkiye's active role during the 2020 war changed the balance of power in the Caucasus and strengthened Türkiye's position as a regional actor. However, he adds that Russia has maintained its mediator role in the region and Türkiye has not been fully effective in the peace process. At the end of the war, Azerbaijan regained large territories from Armenia and took control of strategic points such as Shusha. This victory further strengthened Turkish-Azerbaijani relations and the two countries furthered their military and political cooperation by signing the Shusha Declaration in 2021. With this declaration, the two countries further deepened their military cooperation and pledged to share both economic and military objectives through geostrategic links such as the Zangezur Corridor.⁷⁵⁷

After 2022, Azerbaijan and Türkiye launched comprehensive projects aimed at the reconstruction and economic integration of the region. Türkiye has actively

⁷⁵⁵ Yavuz, "Turkish Foreign Policy and the Karabakh Conflict", p. 289.

⁷⁵⁶ Kök-Arslan and Aliyev, "The Second Karabakh War," p. 205.

⁷⁵⁷ Öztüğ, "Comparative Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy on the Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflicts"; "The role of Turkey in the second Armenian-Azerbaijani armed conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh".

contributed to the infrastructure and superstructure of the liberated regions of Azerbaijan.⁷⁵⁸ Turkish companies were particularly involved in critical infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges, hospitals and schools.⁷⁵⁹ This process further improved the strategic partnership between the two countries.

In order to increase regional cooperation, the Zangezur Corridor project was put on the agenda. This corridor aimed to connect the western regions of Azerbaijan to the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic and thus to Türkiye. The realization of the corridor would facilitate Türkiye's direct access to Central Asia and increase the volume of trade in the region. However, Armenia's preventions about the project and geopolitical dynamics in the region delayed the construction of the corridor.⁷⁶⁰ The Zangezur Corridor project is supported by Türkiye, because of its economic interests and regional ambitions. Türkiye wants to be an influential actor in the Caucasus and Central Asia by using its cultural ties via the Turkish identity. Also, it aims to diversify its energy resources and to increase its trade volume by reaching Central Asia.

Fifthly, in terms of the desire to increase its influence, this variable has two dimensions which are military and political. With reference to military dimension, Türkiye has developed a national defense industry, especially with the UAVs. This conflict is an opportunity for Türkiye to sell its weapons and check them out on the battlefield. That's why, it sold UAVs to Azerbaijan.

In the post-2010 period, Türkiye took an active role in the modernization of the Azerbaijani army, training of military personnel and capacity building. Since 2009, Türkiye conducted joint military exercises with Azerbaijan and Georgia and in 2012, it hosted one of them. Joint military exercises between the two countries have increased, and military cooperation has become more comprehensive. While in 2018, seven military exercises were conducted between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, in 2019,

⁷⁵⁸ Gökhan Ergocun, "Turkish firms take lion's share in rebuilding Karabakh", **Anadolu Agency**, 24 December 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkish-firms-take-lions-share-in-rebuilding-karabakh/2454113> (Retrieved on 10 December 2024).

⁷⁵⁹ The company of Dost Agricultural Livestock Company has a project in Karabakh named "Dost Agropark". The project aims to build a facility to produce nutrients. The phase one of the project began on 26 October 2021 and completed on 20 October 2022. "Dost Agropark Phae 1 Opening Ceremony was Conducted", 21 October 2022, <https://www.dostziraat.com/en/dost-agropark-faz-1-acilis-toreni-gerceklesti/> (Retrieved on 10 December 2024). At the same time, Cengiz Holding has infrastructure projects in the Karabakh region. See. "Azerbaycan'daki Şuşa Otoyolu ve Zabuxçay Barajı'nı Tamamladı", <https://www.cengizholding.com.tr/medya/basin-bultenleri/azerbaycan-daki-susa-otoyolu-ve-zabuxcay-baraji-ni-tamamladi> (Retrieved on 15 May 2025).

⁷⁶⁰ Kök Arslan and Aliyev, "The Second Karabakh War", pp. 206-207.

three military exercises were conducted. According to Davtyan, the relations between Azerbaijan and Türkiye reached the status of military strategic alliance at that time. The last one in 2024 were conducted in Azerbaijan.⁷⁶¹ Azerbaijan and Türkiye decided to cooperate in a project that produce fifth-generation Turkish fighter jet Kaan just before months of Azerbaijan takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh in July 2023.⁷⁶² Türkiye's support reinforced Azerbaijan's regional defense power while sending a clear diplomatic message of deterrence to Armenia.

At the same time, Türkiye wanted to appease the conflicts near abroad, to stabilize the region via playing the role of mediator. Therefore, it supported Azerbaijan and also maintained its trials to talk Armenia before Second Karabakh War.⁷⁶³ However, the mediator role did not work, and the crisis escalated.

Türkiye's military support played a key role in Azerbaijan's success on the ground. In particular, the effective use of Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 Armed UAVs by the Azerbaijani army was considered one of the most important factors that changed the fate of the war.⁷⁶⁴ These UAVs were seen to have played a critical role in ensuring Azerbaijan's superiority on the ground by neutralizing Armenia's air defense systems and armored units. This made it clear in the international arena that Türkiye was strengthening Azerbaijan's power in terms of military technology and support and changing the military balance in the region.⁷⁶⁵ Türkiye is eager to develop its military capability and wants to become a leader regarding the UAVs in the market. Also, Türkiye had a chance to try its UAVs in the battlefield by selling and making use of

⁷⁶¹ Erik Davtyan, "Lessons that Lead to War", **Problems of Post-Communism**, Vol. 71, No. 1, 2024, p. 31; Timucin Turksoy, "Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey Team Up For Military Exercises", **Caspian News**, 6 June 2017, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/georgia-azerbaijan-and-turkey-team-up-for-military-exercises-2017-6-5-1/> (Retrieved on 15 May 2025); Zehra Nur Düz, "Caucasian Eagle exercises continue in Azerbaijan", **Anadolu Agency**, 25 September 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/caucasian-eagle-exercises-continue-in-azerbaijan/1593834> (Retrieved on 15 May 2025); "Opening ceremony of Caucasian Eagle - 2024 joint exercise held - VIDEO", **Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan**, 4 June 2024, <https://mod.gov.az/en/news/opening-ceremony-of-caucasian-eagle-2024-joint-exercise-held-video-51974.html> (Retrieved on 15 May 2025).

⁷⁶² "Azerbaijan, Türkiye to cooperate in creation of Turkish fifth-generation fighter", **Azer News**, 27 July 2023, <https://www.azernews.az/business/212790.html> (Retrieved on 15 May 2025).

⁷⁶³ Ayar and Aslan, "Trembling Chessboard The Effects of Changing Russian-Turkish Relations", p. 108.

⁷⁶⁴ Mehmet Sah Yilmaz and Ruslan Rehimov, "Top Azerbaijan official hails Turkey's Bayraktar drones", **Anadolu Agency**, 23 February 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/science-technology/top-azerbaijan-official-hails-turkeys-bayraktar-drones/2153505> (Retrieved on 15 May 2025); Kınık and Çelik, "The Role of Turkish Drones in Azerbaijan's Increasing Military Effectiveness".

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid.

them by the Azerbaijani military.⁷⁶⁶ Therefore, it tested its military equipment, supported its ally who has common identity and history with it, weakened its rival, Armenia, who has conflictual relations, improving its economic and energy relations with Azerbaijan.

With reference to political dimension, since Türkiye follows foreign policies in the direction of international law, it repeatedly emphasizes the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and illegal invasion of Armenia in the Nagorno Karabakh. In this direction, Türkiye proposed the rights of Azerbaijan for the agenda in the international platforms. Türkiye's foreign policy has been reshaped beyond the classic "*zero problems with neighbors*" doctrine into an "*entrepreneurial and humanitarian foreign policy*". This approach was used to legitimize Türkiye's direct military-diplomatic support in Karabakh. Türkiye's intervention was also presented as a humanitarian intervention within the framework of international law.⁷⁶⁷

In the diplomatic arena, Türkiye has consistently emphasized on international platforms that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should be resolved on the basis of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Within this context, Turkish foreign policy on the Karabakh conflict contributed to keeping the issue alive on the international agenda and preventing Azerbaijan from being subjected to diplomatic isolation. As an example, in his speech at the UN General Assembly, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said, "*As everyone now recognizes, Karabakh is Azerbaijani territory. The imposition of another status on the region will never be accepted*".⁷⁶⁸ He emphasized his support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

Sixthly, Turkish public opinion and media has negative connotations with Armenia and positive connotations with Azerbaijan. The negative feeling is depending on the claims of so-called Armenian genocide, and the positive feeling is depending on the discourse of "brother Azerbaijan" and economic relations with it.⁷⁶⁹

⁷⁶⁶ Can Kasapoğlu and Barış Kırđemir, "The Rising Drone Power: Turkey on the Eve of Its Military Breakthrough", **Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (Edam)**, No. 4, 2018, pp. 1-30.

⁷⁶⁷ Kök Arslan, Aliyev, "The Second Karabakh War", pp. 204-205.

⁷⁶⁸ "Türkiye - President Addresses United Nations General Debate, 78th Session | #UNGA", **United Nations Youtube Channel**, 19 September 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCGSQVY_vIM (Retrieved on 30 May 2025).

⁷⁶⁹ Yavuz, "Turkish Foreign Policy and the Karabakh Conflict", pp. 288-89.

At the same time, there were reports indicating numerous citizens in Türkiye expressing their willingness to volunteer for the Azerbaijani army.⁷⁷⁰ Politicians and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have frequently voiced their support for Azerbaijan on various platforms. The analysis of the news portals, Cumhuriyet, Milliyet and Yeniçağ revealed a predominant use of frames highlighting peace, decisive victory, and independence, emphasizing Azerbaijan's just and strong position. Additionally, there was extensive coverage addressing Armenia's unlawful claims.⁷⁷¹

As a result, six intervening variables of Türkiye affected its foreign policy towards the Nagorno Karabakh conflict in the post-Arab Spring period. These are the leadership, nationalist-conservatist identity of AKP government and the notion of Turkish identity, democratic backsliding or power centralization tendencies of AKP, economic and energy-based concerns of Türkiye, the desire to increase or maintain its influence and the impact of public opinion and media.

3.2.2. Russian Foreign Policy towards the Nagorno Karabakh Conflict

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the priority of the Russian Federation is to provide the stability in all ex-Soviet countries including to regulate armed conflicts around Russia to hinder their spillover to Russian territory and to protect the rights of Russian citizens abroad. However, at the same time, it would like to play its historical protector role. That's why, any potential of interference by Türkiye or Iran into the region irritated Russia.⁷⁷²

Russia's policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict went through a significant transformation after the Russo-Georgian War in August 2008. This war marked the beginning of a more decisive, interventionist and influence-expanding era in Moscow's policies in the South Caucasus. The military intervention in Georgia and the decision to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia revealed

⁷⁷⁰ "İYİ Parti İstanbul İl Başkanlığı'ndan Azerbaycan için gönüllü askerlik dilekçesi", **Independent Türkçe**, 1 October 2020, <https://www.indyuturk.com/node/252231/haber/i%CC%87yi%CC%87-parti-i%CC%87istanbul-i%CC%87l-ba%C5%9Fkanl%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1ndan-azerbaycan-i%C3%A7in-g%C3%B6n%C3%BCll%C3%BC-askerlik> (Retrieved on 30 May 2025).

⁷⁷¹ Betül Pazarbaşı, Selma Koç Akgül, Şehavet Neciyev, "Representation of Turkish Identity and Norms in the Media: 2020 Karabakh War," **Bilgi**, No. 110, 2024, p. 48.

⁷⁷² Kavus Abushov, "Policing the Near Abroad: Russian Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus", **Australian Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 63, No. 2, 2009, p. 191.

Russia's strategy of consolidating its influence through frozen or not conflicts in the region. In this context, Nagorno-Karabakh has been at the center of Russia's policy of maintaining and expanding its regional influence.

Table 3.6. Russian Foreign Policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis

Russian Foreign Policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis				
	Intervening Variables	Dependent Variables	Period	Nature (Strategy, Tactic or Maneuver)
1	The Desire to Increase or Maintain Russia's Influence	Playing a mediator role	2016-2024	Strategy
		Preventing non-regional actors to intervene into conflict	2016-2024	Strategy
		Balancing policy between Armenia and Azerbaijan	2016-2024	Strategy
		Deployment of peace keeping forces	2020-2024	Tactic
2	Economic Concern	Arms sales to both Azerbaijan and Armenia	1996-2022	Strategy
		Energy projects		Strategy
		Zangezur corridor	2021-	Tactic
3	Orthodox Christianity	Supporting Armenia		Strategy
4	Authoritative Allocation of Capacity (Russia-Ukraine War)	Using resources for Russia-Ukraine War	2022-2024	Maneuver

The Russian foreign policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the post-Arab Spring period can be examined via four intervening variables. These intervening variables are as follow: the desire to increase or maintain its influence which consists of geography of near abroad, playing a mediator role and balancing policy between Armenia and Azerbaijan, economic concern, the identity of Orthodox Christianity, and the authoritative allocation of capacity.

Firstly, regarding the desire to increase or maintain its influence, the geography of near abroad is crucial for the Russian foreign policy. Russia maintains to dominate its near abroad and is irritated by any intervention of foreign countries into this region. That's why any intervention into this region is perceived as a threat by Russia. It has ambitious aims regarding this region and always tries to increase its influence on the

region.⁷⁷³ At the same time, it desires to control the conflicts in the region by playing the mediator role in the region's countries.

Russia, while supporting the continuation of the status quo in the Karabakh issue, assumed a more active diplomatic role in the region and intensified its bilateral relations with the conflict parties. On the one hand, it strengthened its military alliance with Armenia and maintained its influence over Yerevan, while on the other hand, it deepened its economic and political relations with Azerbaijan. Russia tries to create a balance between Azerbaijan and Armenia by selling weapons to Azerbaijan and ensuring security guarantees for Armenia.⁷⁷⁴

Russia aims to restrict the regional conflicts regionally. In other words, it wants to prevent the intervention of Western countries into the region, if possible, and at least to challenge this intervention. That's why it much more concerns with Türkiye and Iran regarding the regional conflicts.⁷⁷⁵ Moscow aims to preserve its area of influence and to prevent any foreign intervention into its area, whether regional or global. It would like to integrate ex-Soviet countries into its system.

Within this context, Russia desires to use the conflict as a foreign policy leverage to demand Azerbaijan to enter into the CIS, creation of military bases, guarding the border of Azerbaijan with Türkiye and Iran. After Baku became a member of CIS, Moscow realized that it could be a mediator between Yerevan and Baku in this conflict. While Russia supported the territorial integrity of Baku in a discourse level, it signed mutual defense treaties with Yerevan.⁷⁷⁶

Russia was a strategic partner for Armenia and they have enhanced military relations due to the fact that they are parts of CSTO. At the same time, Moscow has sold arms, military equipment and weapons to Baku in order to rearm the Azerbaijani Armed Forces. Regionally, it would like to sustain its dominance over the Transcaucasian states politically, economically, and militarily. It aims to direct the

⁷⁷³ Ayar, Aslan, "Trembling Chessboard the Effects of Changing Russian-Turkish Relations", pp. 103-118

⁷⁷⁴ Nurlan Aliyev, "Russia's Approaches Towards Armenia and Azerbaijan: Evolution of the Policy or Interests Come First?", *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* Vol. 74, No. 4, 2021, p. 154.

⁷⁷⁵ Aliyev, "Russia's Approaches Towards Armenia and Azerbaijan", p. 160.

⁷⁷⁶ Abushov, "Policing the Near Abroad", pp. 195-198.

foreign policies of those states according to the Russian national interests and to hinder the intervention of other actors like the US, Western states and Türkiye in the region.⁷⁷⁷

By the way, Moscow took its military cooperation with Armenia to a new level. In 2010, the agreement between Russia and Armenia on the use of the 102nd Military Base in Gyumri was extended and expanded. Russia has thus made its military presence in Armenia permanent and long-term, making Armenia's defense dependent on it. This has severely limited Armenia's foreign policy options and made Yerevan dependent on Moscow's policies on Karabakh.⁷⁷⁸

At the same time, Russia made active diplomatic moves to prevent the 2016 conflict from rapidly escalating into a full-scale war. Russian President Vladimir Putin's administration held high-level talks with the leaders of both Azerbaijan and Armenia to broker a ceasefire soon after the conflict began. As a result of Moscow's swift and decisive diplomatic intervention, the fighting was halted for as little as four days.⁷⁷⁹

Following the Four Day War in 2016, Russia increased its active mediation role in the negotiations for the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. As a result of Moscow's initiatives, high-level diplomatic talks between the parties accelerated. In particular, in June 2016, on the initiative of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Saint Petersburg Summit between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan was organized.⁷⁸⁰ This meeting further consolidated Russia's position as a mediator in the conflict and emphasized Moscow's leadership role in the region.

In order to strengthen its military and political presence in the region, Moscow focused on deployment of peacekeeping forces in the occupied areas in 2020 and tried to become a guarantor state. At the same time, it compelled Azerbaijan to enter into Eurasian Economic Union by supporting Armenia politically and militarily. Within this context, Moscow wanted to conduct this "managed instability" to benefit from it.⁷⁸¹

⁷⁷⁷ Aleksandre Alexeichenko, "The Participation of the Russian Federation in Nagorno-Karabakh Resolution", *Caucasus Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2014, pp. 73-74.

⁷⁷⁸ Ayar, Arslan, "Trembling Chessboard The Effects of Changing Russian-Turkish Relations", p. 105.

⁷⁷⁹ Nazim Jafarov and Araz Aslanlı, "Russia's Policy During the 44-Day Karabakh War", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 2021, pp. 221-222.

⁷⁸⁰ "Meeting with Serzh Sargsyan and Ilham Aliyev", *President of Russia*, 20 June 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52189> (Retrieved on 30 May 2025).

⁷⁸¹ Alexeichenko, "The Participation of the Russian Federation", pp. 75-77.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the agreement after the Second Karabakh War was the deployment of a Russian peacekeeping force of around 2.000 military personnel to the region as mentioned before.⁷⁸² Thus, Russia, which has not had a direct military presence in the region since 1994, has de facto returned to Nagorno-Karabakh on the ground. At the same time, with this declaration, Moscow reaffirmed that the Nagorno-Karabakh is an Azerbaijani territory, and it should be respected. In a similar vein, Russia maintained its dominance in the region without the Western interference.⁷⁸³

After Azerbaijan captured the strategically important city of Shusha in Nagorno-Karabakh on 8 November 2020, Russia stepped up its diplomatic initiatives and stepped in to ensure a permanent ceasefire in the region. Ultimately, a trilateral ceasefire agreement was signed on the night of 9 November 2020 between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Russian President Vladimir Putin, with Russian mediation.⁷⁸⁴

One of Russia's most critical objectives in this process was to prevent Azerbaijan's military successes from turning into a political victory completely controlled by Türkiye. Russia maintained its influence in the region by continuing to consolidate its relations with Azerbaijan economically and diplomatically. By not completely blocking Azerbaijan's military gains, Moscow gained a permanent presence in Nagorno-Karabakh, both diplomatically and militarily, by securing a ceasefire agreement.⁷⁸⁵ In this way, Russia both reasserted its influence over Armenia and prevented Azerbaijan from fully integrating with the West or Türkiye.

At the same time, Russia is also a major arms supplier for Azerbaijan and Armenia. Between 2010 and 2025, Russia supplied 59% of Azerbaijani arms⁷⁸⁶ and

⁷⁸² "Declaration on allied interaction between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation", **President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev**, 22 February 2022, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/55498> (Retrieved on 30 May 2025); Aliyev, "Russia's Approaches Towards Armenia and Azerbaijan", p. 161.

⁷⁸³ Ayar, Arslan, "Trembling Chessboard The Effects of Changing Russian-Turkish Relations", p. 105.

⁷⁸⁴ Aliyev, "Russia's Approaches Towards Armenia and Azerbaijan", p. 161.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁶ "Azerbaijan Arms Transfer Database", **SIPRI**, <https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/CSVResult> (Retrieved on 30 May 2025).

83% of Armenian arms.⁷⁸⁷ Russia supplied more than %50 of the arms of these two countries. It is an another indicator for Russian dominance for this conflict.

Secondly, regarding the economic concern, the Russian economy is depending on the energy resources. That's why it aims to have a say or control, if possible, the energy resources and pipelines. Russia wants to benefit from the resources of Caspian Sea.⁷⁸⁸ The main goal of Russia is manipulating the oil in Caspian Sea and pipelines from Central Asia and Caucasia to Europe.⁷⁸⁹

Russia tried to maintain its traditionally neutral stance in the early stages of the Second Karabakh War. It was noteworthy that Russia did not directly intervene militarily in Armenia throughout the war. The reasons for this stance included Russia's unwillingness to jeopardize its economic and political relations with Azerbaijan, the possibility that the military conflict in the region would expand and draw Russia directly into it, and Moscow's desire to pursue a policy of balance in order not to jeopardize its interests in the region.⁷⁹⁰

Moscow expanded its economic cooperation through energy projects to prevent Azerbaijan from turning towards the West. Thanks to this dual policy, Russia further increased its influence in the region by balancing between the two countries. In other words, Russia also deepened its economic relations with Azerbaijan in order not to lose it completely to the West. It has tried to turn the balance in the region in its favor by developing relations with Azerbaijan, especially in the fields of energy and arms trade.⁷⁹¹

Article 9 of the trilateral ceasefire agreement signed in 2020 after the Second Karabakh War⁷⁹², envisages the establishment of a new transportation corridor,

⁷⁸⁷ "Armenia Arms Transfer Database", SIPRI, <https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/CSVResult> (Retrieved on 30 May 2025).

⁷⁸⁸ Abushov, "Policing the Near Abroad: Russian Foreign Policy", pp. 195-198.

⁷⁸⁹ Alexeichenko, "The Participation of the Russian Federation", pp. 73-74.

⁷⁹⁰ Aliyev, "Russia's approaches towards Armenia and Azerbaijan", p. 156.

⁷⁹¹ Ayar and Arslan, "Trembling Chessboard The Effects of Changing Russian-Turkish Relations"; Spyridon N. Litsas, "The Russian Bloodletting Strategy in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: From Success to Hubris", *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2023, p. 221.; Valeri Modebadze, "The Escalation of Conflict Between Armenians and Azerbaijanis and The Problems of Peaceful Resolution of The Nagorno-Karabakh War", *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 03, 2021, p. 109.

⁷⁹² See. "Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation", President of Russia, 10 November 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384> (Retrieved on 30 May 2025).

Zangezur Corridor, between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, which will pass through the territory of Armenia.⁷⁹³ At first glance, this article seems to be an important achievement for Azerbaijan in terms of establishing a direct land connection with Türkiye, but this corridor also has strategic implications for Russia. The realization of the corridor will enable Russia to re-establish some land transportation lines that were severed in the post-Soviet era. The restoration of railroad networks that existed during the Soviet era has been on the agenda, allowing Moscow to consolidate its logistical presence in the South Caucasus, both militarily and economically. Such integration would increase Russia's capacity to exert influence over Azerbaijan and Armenia and give it new room to maneuver in accessing the markets of Central Asia and the Middle East. Moreover, this corridor is in line with China's Central Corridor strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative. Thanks to this new transportation line, Russia can once again become a central actor in the logistics chains stretching from China to Europe.⁷⁹⁴

Following this agreement after Second Karabakh War, Russia supported the revitalization of infrastructure projects and economic links in the region in order to strengthen its diplomatic position. Moscow's proposed regional communication and transport corridors were seen as an important step towards the normalization of relations, especially between Azerbaijan and Armenia. However, there has been no progress in the permanent peace talks between the parties and the peace process has been subject to constant tensions.⁷⁹⁵

At the same time, Russia sold arms to both Armenia and Azerbaijan during the conflicts. Between 2007 and 2018, Russia sold armored vehicles, missiles, air defense systems and artilleries to Azerbaijan. Between 1996 and 2022, Russia sold armored vehicles, missiles, aircrafts and artilleries to Armenia.⁷⁹⁶ It sold its weapons to both

⁷⁹³ Ayar and Arslan, "Trembling Chessboard The Effects of Changing Russian-Turkish Relations", p. 112.; Ayça Ergun, "Azerbaijani perspectives on the geopolitical situation", in Siri Neset, Mustafa Aydın, Ayça Ergun, Richard Giragosian, Kornely Kakachia, Arne Strand (Eds.), **Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War: Prospect for Regional Cooperation and/or Rivalry**, CHR Michelsen Institute, 2023, p. 33.

⁷⁹⁴ Aliyev, "Russia's approaches towards Armenia and Azerbaijan", pp. 162-164.

⁷⁹⁵ Ayar and Arslan, "Trembling Chessboard the Effects of Changing Russian-Turkish Relations", p. 112

⁷⁹⁶ "Arms transfers database", From Russia to Azerbaijan, SIPRI, <https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/TransferData/transferResults?logic=on> (Retrieved on 30 May 2025); "Arms transfers database", From Russia to Armenia, SIPRI, <https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/TransferData/transferResults?logic=on> (Retrieved on 30 May 2025).

sides of the conflict and economically benefited from it. That's why, Moscow desired to continuation of the conflict before Türkiye directly and materially supported Azerbaijan.

Thirdly, Russia sees itself as a protector of the Orthodox Christians. Orthodox Christianity is a significant identity for Russia. Russia started to support Armenia due to their religious fraternity at the beginning of the escalation of the conflict.⁷⁹⁷

Fourthly, like every state, the allocation of capacity is an important restriction on the foreign policy decisions for Russia. The war that began in 2022 with Russia's invasion of Ukraine had a profound impact not only on Eastern Europe but also on the geopolitics of the South Caucasus. During this period, Russia was forced to concentrate most of its political and military resources on Ukraine. As a natural consequence, Moscow's diplomatic interest and military activity in the South Caucasus declined, which created a new environment that weakened Russia's position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.⁷⁹⁸

As Russia's attention shifted to the conflict in Ukraine, Armenia began to feel more isolated in terms of security and diplomacy. During this period, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan openly stated that Russia was not fulfilling its obligations in the region and began to question the security guarantees provided by Moscow.⁷⁹⁹ Yerevan's requests for military support from the CSTO, especially during the clashes along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, went unanswered by Moscow, leading to a decline in Armenia's confidence in Russia's alliance commitments.⁸⁰⁰

In 2023, Azerbaijan's dominance in the region became clearer. In September 2023, Azerbaijan's military operation in the Karabakh region, which resulted in Azerbaijan's complete control over the region, clearly demonstrated the ineffectiveness of Russia's peacekeeping force in preventing the conflict. Following

⁷⁹⁷ Abushov, "Policing the Near Abroad: Russian Foreign Policy", pp. 195-198.

⁷⁹⁸ Mustafa Aydın and Siri Neset, "The Geopolitical Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine", in Siri Neset, Mustafa Aydın, Ayça Ergun, Richard Giragosian, Kornely Kakachia, Arne Strand (Eds.), **Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War: Prospect for Regional Cooperation and/or Rivalry**, CHR Michelsen Institute, 2023, p. 18.

⁷⁹⁹ Andrew Osborn, "Armenian PM says depending solely on Russia for security was 'strategic mistake'", **Reuters**, 3 September 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenian-pm-says-depending-solely-russia-security-was-strategic-mistake-2023-09-03/> (Retrieved 5 June 2025).

⁸⁰⁰ Modebadze, "The Escalation of Conflict Between Armenians and Azerbaijanis", p. 107.

the operation, most of the Armenian population of Karabakh left the region and migrated to Armenia.

As a result, the Russian foreign policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the post-Arab Spring period can be examined via four intervening variables. These intervening variables are as follow: the desire to increase or maintain its influence, economic concern, the identity of Orthodox Christianity and the authoritative allocation of capacity.

3.2.3. Iranian Foreign Policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

From the mid-1990s until 2020, Iranian authorities sought to preserve the status quo in the South Caucasus established after the First Karabakh War and were therefore reluctant to see the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict escalate into active military hostilities. This stance stems from the understanding that ongoing conflict between Iran's two northern neighbors undermines the consolidation of Azerbaijan's statehood, which Tehran perceives as a threat to its own national interests.⁸⁰¹ Moreover, Iran has upheld an official stance of neutrality, affirming both Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and the rights of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh to security and cultural identity.⁸⁰²

The Iranian foreign policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the post-Arab Spring period can be examined via six intervening variables. These intervening variables are as follow: the leadership, Islamic identity and revolution, economic concern, the threat perception from Israel, the West, Türkiye and Russia, public opinion, and the border security.

Table 3.7. Iranian Foreign Policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis

Iranian Foreign Policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis
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⁸⁰¹ Mirmehdi M. Aghazada, "Azerbaijani-Iranian Relations After the Second Karabakh War: Features and Trends", *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 2023, p. 722.

⁸⁰² Valentina Pegolo, "The Impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict on the Middle East Region: Iran's Policy of Strategic Retreat and the Dangers of a New Geopolitical Game in the Caucasus", in Francisco Jose B. S. Leandro, Carlos Branco and Flavius Caba-Maria (Eds.), *The Geopolitics of Iran*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 575.

	Intervening Variables	Dependent Variables	Period	Nature (Strategy, Tactic or Maneuver)
1	The Leadership of Ali Khamenei	Balancing policy between Armenia and Azerbaijan	2016-2024	Strategy
		Support Azerbaijan	2016-2024	Strategy
2	Islamic Identity and Revolution	Support Azerbaijan	2016-2024	Strategy
		Developing closer ties with Armenia	2016-2024	Strategy
3	Economic Concern	Benefitting from both sides	2016-2024	Strategy
		Balancing Policy between Armenia and Azerbaijan	2016-2024	Strategy
		Opposing the project 'Zengazur Corridor'	2016-2024	Strategy
4	Threat Perception (Israel, the West, Türkiye, Russia)	Cautious and balance foreign policy stance	2016-2024	Strategy
		Increasing own diplomatic presence	2016-2024	Strategy
		Opposing the project 'Zengazur Corridor'		Strategy
5	The Public Opinion (The Demonstrations of Azeris in Iran)	No openly harsh stance towards Baku	2016-2024	Strategy
6	Border Security (Border Violations, Clashed and Influx of Refugees)	Conducting large scale military exercises		Tactic
		Preventing the regional conflict to spread Iran	2016-2024	Strategy

Firstly, regarding the leadership, the father of Ali Khamenei is Azeri. That's why, first, he thinks that since Baku and Yerevan are old Iranian cities, so he should follow balancing policy between Azerbaijan and Armenia and second, he supports Azerbaijan instead of Armenia at least in a discourse level. It is important to recognize that Iran's stance on South Caucasus geopolitics is deeply influenced by historical memory. This perspective is reflected in the "*17 cities of the Caucasus*"⁸⁰³ thesis articulated by Supreme Leader Khamenei during the early years of the conflict, after 2016. The thesis argues that the South Caucasus cities, which Iran lost control over following the Russia-Persia treaties of Gulistan in 1813 and Turkmenchay in 1828, now form part of the sovereign territories of the regional republics. Khamenei emphasizes that Yerevan, alongside Baku, is historically an Iranian city, underscoring the need for a balanced approach in relations with the region.⁸⁰⁴

⁸⁰³ Mesiagha Mohammadi, Vasif Huseynov, "Iran's Policies Toward the Karabakh Conflict", in M. Hakan Yavuz, Michael Gunter (Eds.), **The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives**, Oxon: Routledge, 2023, p. 386.

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid.

In a televised address on November 3, 2020, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated, "*All the Azerbaijani territories occupied by Armenia must be liberated and returned to Azerbaijan.*"⁸⁰⁵ He also sought to balance the situation by expressing concerns for the Armenian community in Karabakh, emphasizing that their security must be guaranteed. Finally, Khamenei warned against the presence of mercenaries reportedly involved in the conflict, declaring, "*They should not approach the Iranian border, and if they do, they will certainly face decisive action.*"⁸⁰⁶

Secondly, the Islamic identity and revolution is one of the two pillars of Iranian foreign policy. Naturally, the religious similarity with Azerbaijan affected the foreign policy decisions of Iran. The supreme leader is a dominant actor in foreign policy as well as domestic politics. Therefore, the background and agenda of supreme leader of Iran influence the foreign policy. Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has also expressed his recognition of Azerbaijan's right to reclaim its occupied territories, saying that civilians should not be harmed and the conflict should be brought to a swift end.⁸⁰⁷

Throughout the war, the Iranian government tried to keep the channels of mediation and diplomacy open. During the war, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif called his Azeri colleague, Jeyhun Bayramov and pointed out Iran's strong support for territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and he depicted that Iran was ready to provide peace and stability in the region with Türkiye and Russia.⁸⁰⁸

However, although it might appear natural for Iran, a Shi'a-majority country, to support fellow Shi'a Azerbaijan, relations between the two have been strained since Azerbaijan's independence. This tension stems from Azerbaijan's concerns about Iran's ideological influence, while Iran remains cautious of Baku's potential impact on its own Azeri minority. Consequently, Iran has developed closer ties with Armenia. Shortly after the initial clashes, Iran transferred military equipment to Nagorno-

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 395.

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁷ Aghazada, "Azerbaijani-Iranian Relations", p. 722.

⁸⁰⁸ "Iranian, Azeri Foreign Ministers Discuss Karabakh Dispute", **Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, 15 October 2020, <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/614006> (Retrieved on 10 May 2025).

Karabakh, and Iran facilitated the movement of PKK and YPG fighters into Armenia.⁸⁰⁹

Thirdly, economic concerns in the region influences Iranian foreign policy, simply because the sanctions and isolation against it. Iran wanted to create regional stability with a frozen conflict in order to benefit from both sides economically. Also, it fears the devastating impacts of isolation and tries to find ways to bypass the isolation.⁸¹⁰ Iran has carefully avoided taking a clear side on Nagorno-Karabakh, preferring to pursue a balanced foreign policy between Azerbaijan and Armenia. While Tehran has tried to strengthen its relations with Baku by emphasizing its common cultural and historical ties with Azerbaijan, it has also maintained commercial and energy-oriented cooperation with Armenia.⁸¹¹ By prioritizing its economic interests, Iran has avoided attitudes that would turn the tension between the two countries into a conflict.

Within this context, it became a priority for Iran not to miss economic opportunities in the South Caucasus due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Iran avoided regional isolation by trying to take part in energy, transportation and trade projects between Armenia and Azerbaijan. While establishing relations with Azerbaijan is important for Iran, especially in terms of energy projects and utilizing the natural resources in the Caspian region, Iran has maintained strategic balance in the Caucasus by maintaining relations with Armenia. The unresolved conflict provided Iran with room to maneuver in regional politics. As long as the conflict remained unresolved, Tehran maintained pragmatic cooperation with both Azerbaijan and Armenia, thus creating space for its economic and geopolitical interests.⁸¹²

Despite experiencing the most strained period in their political relations following the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan and Iran have seen an increase in their trade turnover, marking a new trend in their bilateral relations. While crises traditionally lead to declines in trade, the volume of economic exchange between the two countries has grown, driven by efforts to recover from the economic impacts of

⁸⁰⁹ Pegolo, "The Impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict on the Middle East Region", p. 575.

⁸¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 578-579.

⁸¹¹ Mehmet Emin Erendor and Mehmet Fatih Öztarsu, "Iranian Relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia: A Comparative Approach in The Case of Pragmatist Politics", **BAİBÜ Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi**, Vol. 19, No. 1/B, 2019, p. 158.

⁸¹² Ibid.

the COVID-19 pandemic and intensified cooperation on transport projects in the South Caucasus. Notably, trade turnover rose from 339.1 million USD in 2020 to 506.2 million USD in 2022, and imports from Iran to Azerbaijan continued to increase even after political tensions escalated in early 2023. Agreements like the 2021 natural gas swap deal involving Turkmenistan, Iran, and Azerbaijan further exemplify this economic collaboration despite political challenges, highlighting trade and economic relations as a stabilizing factor amid bilateral tensions.⁸¹³

In the post-war period, one of the most important issues on the agenda following Azerbaijan's victory is the Zangezur Corridor between Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, which is planned to pass through the Syunik region of Armenia. This corridor will create a direct land link between Azerbaijan and Türkiye and has the potential to restrict Iran's access to Europe via Armenia. Iran considers this as a threat to its regional projections.⁸¹⁴ In a similar vein, in September 2024, Iran reacted strongly to Russia's support for Azerbaijan's demands for the Zangezur Corridor. Iranian Foreign Minister Sayeed Abbas Araghchi clearly expressed his sensitivity on this issue, saying, "*Any threat to the territorial integrity of our neighbors or the redrawing of their borders is absolutely unacceptable and a red line for Iran.*"⁸¹⁵ The dispute over the Zangezur Corridor has also caused tension in relations between Iran and Russia. Iran criticized Russia's support for Azerbaijan and stated that Moscow's stance could damage friendly relations. This situation shows that Iran seeks a balance between east and west in its foreign policy.⁸¹⁶

Fourthly, Iran does not lean towards the foreign intervention into the conflict. Respectively, Israel, Türkiye, the West and Russia are perceived as threats. The number one threat for Iran is Israel and the relations between Azerbaijan and Israel. Türkiye is accepted as threat because of its ties and close relations with Azerbaijan. In terms of Türkiye, its open political and diplomatic support to Azerbaijan, Russia's military presence in Gyumri and Western countries' interest in the South Caucasus have led Iran to maintain a more cautious and balanced foreign policy stance. Iran considered the intervention of foreign powers in the region dangerous for its geopolitical interests

⁸¹³ Aghazada, "Azerbaijani-Iranian Relations", p. 728.

⁸¹⁴ Ibid., p. 727.

⁸¹⁵ Patrick Wintour, "Iran warns Russia against siding with Azerbaijan in border dispute", **The Guardian**, 6 September 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/sep/06/iran-warns-russia-against-siding-with-azerbaijan-in-border-dispute> (Retrieved on 10 May 2025).

⁸¹⁶ Ibid.

and supported the preservation of the status quo in the region in order to preserve its role.⁸¹⁷

One of the critical factors affecting this period for Iran was the strengthening of Türkiye's political, military and diplomatic support to Azerbaijan and Azerbaijan's deepening defense relations with Israel. Specifically, Azerbaijan's purchase of high-tech weapon systems and UAVs from Israel has seriously affected Iran's security perception in the region. The Iranian government has considered Azerbaijan's deepening military cooperation with Israel as a direct threat to its national security and has issued open diplomatic warnings to Azerbaijan in this regard.⁸¹⁸

On the other hand, Türkiye's growing support for Azerbaijan on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue was perceived as a development that could weaken Iran's influence in the region. Tehran carefully monitored Türkiye's military and political influence in the region and was worried that the rapprochement between Ankara and Baku can affect Iran in a negative way.

At the same time, Azerbaijan serves as a kind of "bridge" connecting the Turkic-speaking states of Central Asia with Türkiye, a role that Azerbaijani authorities have permitted Türkiye to strengthen in the South Caucasus. The upgrade of the Turkic Council to the Organization of Turkic States in 2021 established a formal political framework, enabling Türkiye to advance pan-Turkic ideology through expanding its military-political presence as well as trade and economic ties in the region. This development may lead to the creation of a Turkic belt along the northern borders of Iran, posing a potential threat to Iran's territorial integrity. Consequently, Iran views Armenia as a strategic buffer between the Turkic states, and Tehran's support for Yerevan is partly aimed at safeguarding Iran's territorial sovereignty.⁸¹⁹

Iran carefully monitored Russia's increasing military presence in the region and tried to adopt a parallel but not dependent stance to Russia's Caucasus policies. On the other hand, the involvement of the US and European countries in the conflict resolution through the Minsk Group was found disturbing for Iran. In this period, Iran pursued a

⁸¹⁷ Geoffrey Gresh, "Coddling The Caucasus: Iran's Strategic Relationship with Azerbaijan and Armenia", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2006, pp. 1-13.

⁸¹⁸ Ibid., p. 12.; Anna Gevorgyan, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and Iran's Regional Policy", *Analytical Bulletin of Armenian and Regional Studies*, Vol. 14, p. 75.

⁸¹⁹ Aghazada, "Azerbaijani-Iranian Relations", p. 722.

policy of increasing its own diplomatic presence in order to reduce the influence of foreign powers in the Caucasus.⁸²⁰ Traditional Iranian foreign policy does not accept even the slightest interference by foreign states in Iran's sphere of influence.

At the same time, the Zangezur Corridor, mentioned before, is considered as a threat by Iran due to its negative impact on Iran economically and close relations between Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Iran is concerned that if the Zangezur Corridor is realized, the border with Armenia would be closed and a new route would be created between Azerbaijan and Türkiye that would exclude Iran. Iran's border crossing with Armenia is important for Tehran's strategic role in the North-South trade route, which is why the Iranian leadership has openly described the realization of the corridor as a "*red line*".⁸²¹

Fifthly, the public opinion is an important variable for Iranian foreign policy in that case since 16% of the Iranian population belong to Azerbaijanis.⁸²² Since 2016, with the revival of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Iran's domestic political balances have also been affected. The mass protests and demonstrations organized by the Azerbaijani population living in Iran in favor of Azerbaijan have caused the Iranian government to manage its policy more carefully. These demonstrations, especially in cities such as Tabriz, Ardabil and Urmia in the northwest of the country, have made the Iranian government uneasy, and this situation has increased Iran's concern about the activation of the conflict.⁸²³ The Iranian government has endeavored to manage diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan in a sensitive manner in order to avoid an escalation of tensions in domestic politics.

A considerable portion of Iran's population is made up of ethnic Azerbaijanis, who occupy prominent positions in the military, play a vital role in the country's spiritual and religious spheres, and predominantly reside in the northwestern part of Iran, an economically underdeveloped region. The economic progress of Azerbaijan and the secular lifestyle of its population appear attractive to these southern

⁸²⁰ "Iran criticises Minsk group's peace efforts over Nagorno-Karabakh", *Aljazeera*, 3 October 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/30/iran-criticises-minsk-groups-peace-efforts-over-nagorno-karabakh> (Retrieved on 5 July 2024).

⁸²¹ Mona Hojat Ansari, "Borderlines: Iran's red line", *Tehran Times*, 6 September 2024, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/503324/Borderlines-Iran-s-red-line> (Retrieved on 3 May 2025).

⁸²² "Iran", *World Population Review*, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/iran> (Retrieved on 4 June 2025).

⁸²³ Pegolo, "The Impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict on the Middle East Region", p. 570.

Azerbaijanis, leading thousands of them to visit Azerbaijan annually. Simultaneously, the strengthening of Azerbaijan fuels the rise of nationalism among the Turkic-speaking communities within Iran.⁸²⁴

Iran's second language is essentially Azeri, and its religious ties are stronger with the majority Shia Muslim population of Azerbaijan than with Orthodox Christian Armenia. Azerbaijan has been concerned about the spread of Iran's Shia ideology across its borders, while Iran fears the rise of Azeri nationalism within its own communities, a concern intensified by Iran's suspicions regarding Baku's collaboration with American and Israeli intelligence operations. The Azeri population constitutes perhaps Iran's most influential minority group.⁸²⁵

For the Iranian administration, these demonstrations turned into a worrying domestic issue. The emotional reactions of the Azerbaijani population inside Iran in favor of Azerbaijan made it difficult for the Iranian leadership to take an openly harsh stance against Baku. This led the Iranian government to shift its rhetoric on the war slightly in favor of Azerbaijan; after neutral statements in the early days of the conflict, rhetoric in support of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity gained strength.⁸²⁶

On the other hand, the pro-Azerbaijani stances expressed were not part of Iran's official policy but served primarily to appease its domestic audience. The Iranian Azeri population poses a potential security risk to the country's internal stability and territorial integrity due not only to its size but also its geographic concentration in northwestern Iran and its historical record of separatist tendencies. In contrast, Iranian Armenians form a smaller, well-integrated minority estimated at around 120,000. Consequently, the prevailing sentiment among Persian-speaking Iranians during the conflict was generally pro-Armenian.⁸²⁷

At the same time as the mass demonstrations, the representatives (imams) of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in four predominantly Azerbaijani provinces of Iran—East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardabil, and Zanjan—issued a joint statement fully endorsing the Republic of Azerbaijan. The statement declared, “*There*

⁸²⁴ Aghazada, “Azerbaijani-Iranian Relations After the Second Karabakh War”, p. 722

⁸²⁵ Mohammadi, Huseynov, “Iran's Policies Toward the Karabakh Conflict”, p. 382.

⁸²⁶ Aghazada, “Azerbaijani-Iranian Relations After the Second Karabakh War”, p. 722; “Iranian, Azeri Foreign Ministers Discuss Karabakh Dispute”, **Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, 15 October 2020, <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/614006> (Retrieved on 4 May 2025).

⁸²⁷ Pegolo, “The Impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict on the Middle East Region”, p. 582.

is no doubt that Karabakh belongs to Azerbaijan, is occupied, and must be returned to Azerbaijan.”⁸²⁸ The statement affirmed that the actions taken by the Azerbaijani government to reclaim the occupied territory are entirely legal and align with Sharia law, thereby attempting to implement UN resolutions. Additionally, the statement praised Azerbaijan’s military successes, honored the martyrs, and expressed hope that justice would soon be served.⁸²⁹

Lastly, since the conflict happened so close to Iran, the border security is a significant variable for Iranian foreign policy. In April 2016, when four days of violent clashes erupted between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, the long-frozen conflict was back on the world agenda. For Iran, these clashes were an unexpected and worrying development. Tehran initially called for a ceasefire on both sides, recognizing that the spread of the fighting would threaten stability in the region. Iran has tried to limit the conflict by stepping up its diplomatic efforts to prevent the expansion of the war and the influx of refugees.⁸³⁰

On the other hand, in 2020, Iran faced serious security challenges on its northern borders as the war intensified, again. Some artillery shells and rockets used by the Azerbaijani and Armenian armies during the conflict fell into Iranian borders. The munitions falling into civilian residential areas in Iran’s border regions led the Iranian army to conduct military drills and measures on the border line. This has increased Iran’s concerns about regional stability. Iran has made direct calls for a ceasefire and diplomatic initiatives to prevent the regional conflict from spilling over into the country.⁸³¹ The unintended shelling of Iranian villages, coupled with increasing worries about foreign fighters and Israeli-made drones operating near Iran’s border, made it clear that prolonging the conflict would pose greater risks for Tehran. As a result, prioritizing the freezing of the conflict took precedence over retaining control in the region.⁸³²

⁸²⁸ Mahammadi, Huseynov, “Iran’s Policies Toward the Karabakh Conflict”, p. 392.

⁸²⁹ Ibid.

⁸³⁰ Ceyhun Mahmudlu, Shamkhal Abilov, “The peace-making process in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: why did Iran fail in its mediation effort?”, **Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe**, Vol. 26, No.1, 2018, pp. 33-49.

⁸³¹ Emin Şihaliyev, “Iran’s Armenia and Azerbaijan Policy: Geopolitical Realities and Comparative Analysis”, **Genel Türk Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi**, Special Issue for the 100th Anniversary of the Republic of Turkey pp. 329-340.

⁸³² Pegolo, “The Impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict on the Middle East Region”, p. 579.

Iran has increased security measures on its northern borders in the aftermath of the Karabakh War. Small-scale border violations and clashes along the Azerbaijan-Iran border drew the reaction of the Iranian military and resulted in the strengthening of the military presence in this region. The Iranian Armed Forces have conducted large-scale military exercises along the border with Azerbaijan, clearly demonstrating its resolve and military capacity in the region.⁸³³ These steps showed Iran's discomfort with the geopolitical shifts along its northern borders and served as a warning to Baku.

As a result, the Iranian foreign policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the post-Arab Spring period can be examined via six intervening variables. These intervening variables are as follow: the leadership of Ali Khamenei, Islamic identity and revolution, economic concerns of Iran, the threat perception of Iran from Israel, the West, Türkiye and Russia, the public opinion and the border security.

3.3. Qatar Diplomatic Crisis

Qatar maintained close relations with Saudi Arabia, being viewed as a child state⁸³⁴ under the leadership of Sheikh Mohammad bin Thani and Saudi leader Faisal bin Turki bin Abdullah Al Saud. This relationship changed when Sheikh Khalifa, Mohammad's son, seized power in a coup. Under Khalifa, Qatar implemented three main strategies: "economic liberalization, foreign policy objectives, and state branding". Politically, Qatar shifted by forging closer ties with the Soviet Union, an adversary of Saudi Arabia, and supporting opposing sides in the Yemeni civil war. Additionally, Qatar established diplomatic relations with Iran, started trade relations with Israel, and hosted a US military base to protect itself from Saudi Arabia's blockade.⁸³⁵

The Qatar Diplomatic Crisis (2017-2021) is a serious political and economic dispute between Qatar and the Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia. At the heart of the crisis lies Qatar's assertive and independent foreign policy⁸³⁶ from other countries in the

⁸³³ Gevorgyan, "The Nagorno-karabakh Conflict And Iran's Regional Policy".

⁸³⁴ Mehran Kamrawa, **Qatar: Small State, Big Politics**, New York: Cornell University Press, 2013.

⁸³⁵ Triesanto Romulo Simanjuntak, "Balance of Threat Analysis in Resolving the Diplomatic Crisis of Qatar and Saudi Arabia in 2017-2020", **International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding**, Vol. 11: No. 3, 2024, p. 58.

⁸³⁶ Between 1995 and 2003, significant economic changes under Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani led to major political reforms in Qatar. Influenced by regional threats, particularly the 1990-91 Kuwaiti

region. In particular, Qatar's close relations with Iran, its support for extremist and terrorist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and using the critical broadcasts of the Al Jazeera television channel as a propaganda machine were perceived as a threat by regional countries including Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt.⁸³⁷ Al Jazeera has been accused of employing many prominent Arab journalists affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Its first director, Waddah Qanfar, and many staff members previously worked for the BBC Arabic Service, which itself had a notable Muslim Brotherhood influence.⁸³⁸

In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and the UAE imposed a diplomatic and economic blockade on Qatar, which took regional and international actors by surprise. The blockade involved land, maritime, and aviation closures, representing a significant assault on Qatar's national security interests. This unprecedented blockade was accompanied by cyberattacks, including a hack of Qatar's news agency (QNA) that manipulated reports to falsely suggest that Qatar's ruler had voiced support for Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, as well as criticism of US President Donald Trump.⁸³⁹

These coordinated actions were viewed as a major threat to Qatar. There were concerns that Qatar's survival was at risk due to the blockade's impact on essential imports needed by its citizens and residents. More than simply severing diplomatic ties, the blockade immediately exposed Qatar's heavy dependence on imports for its survival. Consequently, these measures underscored Qatar's vulnerabilities in sovereignty and security across defense, financial, and trade sectors, as well as critical human rights areas like food security. Following these developments, a set of demands was issued.⁸⁴⁰

They also presented Qatar with a list of demands and wanted Qatar to approve them within ten days. These demands were ending its relations with Iran, closing the

crisis and the U.S.'s role as a military deterrent, Sheikh Hamad pursued a diversified foreign policy built on three pillars: international mediation, economic expansion in key global sectors, and investments in culture, education, and sport. With a strategic vision embodied in the "Qatar 2030" plan, Qatar aimed to foster stability and balance with neighboring states, intervening diplomatically in regional crises from Sudan to Palestine and Lebanon. See Miroslav Zafirov, "The Qatar Crisis-Why the Blockade Failed", *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2017, pp. 192-194.

⁸³⁷ Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, "Qatar Crisis and the Deepening Regional Faultlines", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 42, No. 4, 2018, p. 437.

⁸³⁸ Zafirov, "The Qatar Crisis-Why the Blockade Failed", p. 194.

⁸³⁹ Beverly Milton-Edwards, "The Blockade on Qatar: Conflict Management Failings", *The International Spectator*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2020, pp. 37-38.

⁸⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

military base of Türkiye in Qatar, stopping to support the radical and terrorist groups such as Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah, ISIS economically, paying indemnity to them, delivering the terrorists and terminate its support to internal opposition of them.⁸⁴¹ Qatar saw these demands as intervention into its sovereignty and rejected them. On July 17, 2017, Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani addressed Qatar's residents amid the ongoing crisis. He emphasized that the international community does not tolerate injustice or misleading accusations. He noted that many Arab and non-Arab countries either supported Qatar or refrained from supporting the blockade. The Emir criticized the blockading countries for relying on Western allegations of terrorism, stating that both Qatar and the West rejected these claims as they were based on political disagreements and attempts to undermine pluralism by damaging Qatar's reputation. He condemned such conduct as unjust and harmful to the global fight against terror.⁸⁴²

During this period, Qatar quickly established new trade routes to overcome its food security crises. It strengthened diplomatic, economic and military ties with Iran and Türkiye. Türkiye's military base in Qatar became more central to Qatar's approach to regional security. Qatar sought to mitigate its vulnerability by reopening diplomatic channels and forming close partnerships with Iran and Türkiye. Qatar requested Turkish troop deployment and joint military exercises, which Türkiye approved.⁸⁴³

Qatar took swift and significant measures to reduce the blockade's effects on its citizens and residents. This included promoting self-sufficiency in critical areas such as food production, which helped lessen reliance on neighboring countries. Despite expectations that Qatar would face a severe food crisis due to its dependence on imports from blockading states, Qatar quickly secured alternative supply routes. Iran played a crucial role by delivering food via planes and ships, providing vital support in the early stages of the crisis. The blockade initially caused economic instability, with the Qatar Stock Exchange falling sharply and import volumes dropping by nearly 40%. Major Qatari businesses like Qatar Airways had to reroute flights through Iranian

⁸⁴¹ Pradhan, "Qatar Crisis and the Deepening Regional Faultlines," p. 437; Milton-Edwards, "The Blockade on Qatar: Conflict Management Failings," pp. 38-39.

⁸⁴² "Gulf Crisis", **Government Communications Office**, 2017, <https://www.gco.gov.qa/ar/media-centre/in-focus/gcc-crisis/> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁴³ Simanjuntak, "Balance of Threat Analysis," pp. 60-61; Hani Albasoos, Gubara Hassan and Sara Al-Zadjali, "The Qatar Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities", **International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science**, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2021, p. 163.

airspace, circumventing Saudi airspace closures. The blockade led to increased propaganda and attempts by the blockading countries to undermine Qatar's image internationally and domestically. Qatar, in response, sought mediation, including appealing to the International Court of Justice to lift restrictions affecting its citizens abroad.⁸⁴⁴

Mediation efforts to resolve the crisis have failed for a long time. Kuwait took the mediation role from the beginning of the process, but no significant progress was achieved. The US administration, on the other hand, while initially appearing to support Saudi Arabia's side, has recently begun to exert more intense diplomatic pressure to ensure that the Gulf states present a united front against Iran.⁸⁴⁵ Despite its close ties with Saudi Arabia, the US avoided isolating Qatar completely because Doha hosts a significant US Air Force base vital for regional balance against Iran. Qatar's purchase of US F-15 fighter jets worth \$12 billion illustrates a bandwagoning strategy toward the US. Although the US expressed support for the Saudi-led blockade, the large US military presence in Qatar complicated full endorsement of Qatar's isolation.⁸⁴⁶

At the same time, Qatar strengthened ties with Western countries, especially France, from which it purchased military equipment worth €12 billion, including Rafale fighter jets, combat vehicles, and technical training. France's role extended into diplomacy with President Macron supporting reconciliation efforts involving Kuwait as mediator.⁸⁴⁷

In late 2020, as a result of increased diplomatic pressure from the US and Kuwait, steps towards an agreement between the parties accelerated. On January 4, 2021, Saudi Arabia reopened its land and sea borders with Qatar. On 5 January 2021, at the GCC summit in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia, leaders officially declared the end of the crisis and decided to fully normalize relations. At the summit, Saudi Crown Prince

⁸⁴⁴ Mahjoob Zweiri, Md Mizanur Rahman, Arwa Kamal, "Chapter 1 The 2017 Gulf Crisis: An Introduction", in Mahjoob Zweiri, Md Mizanur Rahman, Arwa Kamal (Eds.), **The 2017 Gulf Crisis An Interdisciplinary Approach**, Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2021, pp. 6-10.

⁸⁴⁵ Milton-Edwards, "The Blockade on Qatar: Conflict Management Failings", p. 41, 43.

⁸⁴⁶ Simanjuntak, "Balance of Threat Analysis", pp. 60-61.

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 60.

Mohammed bin Salman and Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim signaled reconciliation with a symbolic hug.⁸⁴⁸

The diplomatic crisis between Qatar and Saudi Arabia from 2017 to 2020 posed a major challenge to Qatar's foreign policy, especially in defense and security. Qatar responded with smart, strategic policies supported by sufficient resources and a consistent approach. It upgraded and expanded its air defense while strengthening military cooperation with allies such as Türkiye, France, and the US. These efforts earned international support, helping Qatar withstand the blockade and embargo by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Qatar's successful defense and security strategy preserved its sovereignty, enhanced military capabilities, and expanded its global relations, demonstrating that smaller countries can overcome significant geopolitical challenges through strategic policies and resource backing.⁸⁴⁹

3.3.1. Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis

The Qatar Diplomatic Crisis began on June 5, 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt severed diplomatic relations with Qatar and launched an economic and political embargo. The main reasons for the crisis were Qatar's ties with the Muslim Brotherhood movement, the depth of its diplomatic and economic relations with Iran, and the critical coverage of Al Jazeera television. Gulf states have demanded that Qatar limit its ties with Iran, close a Turkish military base and end Al Jazeera's broadcasts. Qatar rejected these demands as "*violation of the sovereignty of the State of Qatar and violate the freedom of the media*".⁸⁵⁰

At the outbreak of the crisis, Türkiye was one of the leading countries to express open and strong support for Qatar. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that the blockade was both wrong in terms of humanitarian values and a step that threatened regional stability. Erdoğan took a clear stance against Qatar's isolation and defended

⁸⁴⁸ "Saudi, Qatari leaders hug ahead of Gulf summit", **Anadolu Agency**, 5 January 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/saudi-qatari-leaders-hug-ahead-of-gulf-summit/2098930> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁴⁹ Simanjuntak, "Balance of Threat Analysis", p. 61.

⁸⁵⁰ "Qatar's Ambassador to Romania: Dictates are Rejected and Qatar Sovereignty is a Red Line", **Ministry of Foreign Affairs State of Qatar**, 27 September 2017, <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/qatar/latest-articles/latest-news/details/2017/09/28/qatar-s-ambassador-to-romania-dictates-are-rejected-and-qatar-sovereignty-is-a-red-line> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

Qatar's position in the international community.⁸⁵¹ This position symbolized Türkiye's clear positioning on Qatar's side in the political polarization in the region.

Table 3.8. Turkish Foreign Policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis

Turkish Foreign Policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis				
	Intervening Variables	Dependent Variables	Period	Nature (Strategy, Tactic or Maneuver)
1	The Desire to Increase and Maintain Its Influence	Following revisionist policies	2011-	Strategy
		Bulding military base	2017	Strategy
		Playing a mediator role	2017-2021	Strategy
		Providing aids for Qatar	2017-2021	Strategy
		Joint military exercises	2018-	Strategy
		Using Al Jazeera as a soft power instrument	2014-	Strategy
2	Economic Concern	Economic integration in finance, construction and energy sectors		Strategy
		Increasing Türkiye's export volume	2015-2018	Strategy
		Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement	2018	Tactic
		Swap Agreement	2018	Tactic

The Turkish foreign policy towards the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis can be examined via two distinct variables. According to the first one, the desire to increase and maintain its influence, Özşahin argues that Türkiye and Qatar are the revisionist states in the Gulf region especially in the post-Arab Spring period. Therefore, they implement proactive diplomacy towards the Gulf states. He evaluates the Turkish foreign policy towards the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis from this point of view.⁸⁵² Pala and Aras names this desire as "*ambitious regional power*".⁸⁵³ Türkiye turned crisis into opportunity in two ways. Militarily vulnerable Qatar had to buy weapons and military equipment. At

⁸⁵¹ ""Kardeş Kavgasının Kazanani Olmaz"", **Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı**, 9 June 2017, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/77529/kardes-kavgasinin-kazanani-olmaz> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025); ""Yeni Çatışmaların Fitilini Ateşlemek Yerine, Bölgede Huzur ve Barış İçin Çalışmalıyız"", **Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı**, 19 September 2017, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/83542/yeni-catismalarin-fitilini-ateslemek-yerine-bolgede-huzur-ve-baris-icin-calismaliyiz> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁵² Mustafa Cüneyt Özşahin, "Qatar-Turkey Rapprochement: Challenging the Regional Status Quo in the Gulf Security Sub-complex", in Mahjoob Zweiri, Md Mizanur Rahman, Arwa Kamal (Eds.), **The 2017 Gulf Crisis: An Interdisciplinary Approach**, Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2021, p. 41.

⁸⁵³ Özgür Pala and Bülent Aras, "Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in the Turkish and Qatari Foreign Policy on the Arab Spring", **Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies**, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2015, p. 286.

the same time, Türkiye used the influence of Al Jazeera to increase its prestige, especially in the Middle East.

With reference to second one, economic concern, Türkiye enhanced Qatar's economic independence for itself due to the economic isolation implemented against Qatar. It increased the export volume towards Qatar and widen its scope of economic cooperation.

In terms of the first variable, the desire to increase and maintain its influence, Ahmet Davutoğlu believed that Türkiye had long neglected its Ottoman heritage, especially its Islamic legacy and ties with the Muslim world, due to an emphasis on "Westernization." This neglect had diminished Türkiye's influence on global affairs. With the AKP coming to power, Davutoğlu saw an opportunity for Türkiye to restore its foreign policy by proactively engaging to promote peace and stability in the region. He envisioned Türkiye reestablishing strong connections with the Muslim world, acting preemptively to manage crises, and assuming the role of a leading regional power. Davutoğlu viewed Türkiye as an "*order setter*" in its surrounding region, united largely by Islamic bonds, a vision reflected in his "*strategic depth*" doctrine and Türkiye increased initiatives in the Middle East.⁸⁵⁴ The Turkish foreign policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis can be read within the context of this framework.

The key milestone in the emerging alliance between Türkiye and Qatar was reached in December 2014 and December 2015 when both countries agreed to establish a Turkish military base in Qatar. This agreement involves exchanging operational training, cooperating in the defense industry, and stationing about 3.000 Turkish soldiers at the base to assist in training Qatar's army and engaging in joint military exercises. This move marks a significant shift for Türkiye, which had previously avoided involvement in regional conflicts and maintained distance from contentious issues for decades.⁸⁵⁵ As part of the defense cooperation agreements

⁸⁵⁴ "Perspectives on Turkish Foreign Policy", An Address by Ahmet Davutoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, **The Brookings Institution**, Washington D.C., 29 November 2010, pp. 10-11. http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2010/11/29-turkey/20101129_turkey.pdf (Retrieved on 5 June 2025); Ahmet Davutoğlu, **Teoriden Pratiğe Türk Dış Politikası Üzerine Konuşmalar**, İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2013, pp. 373-374; Ahmet Davutoğlu, **Stratejik Derinlik**, İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001; Nur Çetinoğlu Harunoğlu, "Turkey's Intensifying Partnership with Qatar and Its Implications for Turkish-American Relations", **Middle East Review of International Affairs**, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2016, p. 2.

⁸⁵⁵ Çetinoğlu Harunoğlu, "Turkey's Intensifying Partnership with Qatar", p. 4.

adopted by the Turkish Parliament⁸⁵⁶, Turkish troops were deployed in Qatar and troops and armored vehicles were shipped to the Turkish base in Doha in 2017. The base was renamed "Qatar-Türkiye Combined Joint Force Command" in December 2017 and expanded with the "Khalid Bin Walid Barracks" in 2019.⁸⁵⁷ The meaning of having a military base in Qatar and the demand of blockade countries to close it directly affects Türkiye's strategic presence in the region.⁸⁵⁸

Türkiye initially responded to the crisis by offering neutral, mediatory support to help Qatar reach a resolution. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu and President Erdoğan visited Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia⁸⁵⁹ in the weeks following, aiming to foster reconciliation. However, Ankara's mediation attempts were rejected; UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash tweeted that "*The Turkish President's visit did not carry anything new, and the hasty stance his country had taken made neutrality the best option for Ankara*".⁸⁶⁰ Subsequently, Türkiye firmly positioned itself as a key political and material supporter of Doha. President Erdoğan condemned the blockade as a violation of Islamic values, and Türkiye provided assistance by supplying food and essential goods to Qatar despite the blockade.⁸⁶¹ The 5.000 tons of food aid were supplied with 71 planes.⁸⁶² From the onset of the blockade, around 5.000 Turkish troops were deployed in Qatar. Both Qatar and Türkiye viewed

⁸⁵⁶ "15 Agreements Signed between Turkey and Qatar", **Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye**, 2 December 2015, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/36171/turkiye-ile-katar-arasinda-15-anlasma-imzalandi> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁵⁷ Aziz Armutlu, "Stratejik Ortaklık: Türkiye-Katar İlişkilerinin Tarihsel Gelişimi ve Bölgesel Etkileri", **Anadolu Strateji Dergisi**, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2024, p. 254.

⁸⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁹ President Erdogan dispatched a high-level delegation, including close aides İbrahim Kalın—his special adviser and presidential spokesperson—and Berat Albayrak, Türkiye's Energy Minister and his son-in-law, on a secret mission to Saudi Arabia. The delegation was tasked with assessing the full scope and underlying causes of the crisis and exploring ways Türkiye could promptly contribute to its resolution. Although the delegation returned without definitive answers, it became clear that significant escalation was imminent. See Ali Bakir, "The Evolution of Turkey—Qatar Relations Amid a Growing Gulf Divide", in Andreas Krieg (Ed.), **Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis**, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan Singapore, 2019, p. 209. [197-215].

⁸⁶⁰ "Turkey's Erdogan ends tour with no sign of Qatar progress", **Reuters**, 25 July 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/turkey-s-erdogan-ends-tour-with-no-sign-of-qatar-progress-idUSKBN1A925A/> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁶¹ Nesibe Hicret Battaloğlu, "The Gulf Crisis: Turkey's Soft Power in the Gulf," in Mahjoob Zweiri, Md Mizanur Rahman and Arwa Kamal (Eds.), **The 2017 Gulf Crisis: An Interdisciplinary Approach**, Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2021, p. 263.

⁸⁶² "Katar'a 71 uçakla 5 bin ton gıda gönderildi", **CNN Türk**, 17 Haziran 2017, <https://www.cnnturk.com/ekonomi/katar-71-ucakla-5-bin-ton-gida-gonderildi-648362> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025); Turkish Airlines cargo planes, along with Qatari military and commercial aircraft, quickly transported goods to Doha. The increased daily flights prompted Türkiye to allocate a dedicated terminal for Qatar Airways in Istanbul. Within 48 hours, Turkish supplies had replenished Qatar's markets, effectively preventing the country's isolation. See Bakir, "The Evolution of Turkey—Qatar Relations", p. 211.

the military base's presence as a means to promote stability and peace, not only within Qatar but throughout the Gulf region.⁸⁶³

These developments strengthened Türkiye's capacity to shape regional and international initiatives aimed at reshaping the Middle East's geopolitical and geo-security landscape, a process that has significantly accelerated in the wake of the Arab uprisings and subsequent counterrevolutions. At the same time, the purpose of this action was less to provoke other Gulf states and more to prevent any military escalation of the crisis, safeguarding Qatar by creating a balance of power between the opposing sides in anticipation of a negotiated resolution.⁸⁶⁴

During the blockade years, defense and military cooperation between Qatar and Türkiye intensified, culminating in the opening of the Khalid bin Al Walid Base, the new headquarters of the Turkish Qatari joint forces, in Doha in December 2019. Their partnership expanded into the defense industry, with Türkiye becoming a key supplier of military equipment to Qatar. In 2018, Turkish defense firms such as Baykar, Nurol Makina, BMC, and the Anadolu Shipyard secured contracts with Qatar totaling \$800 million. Additionally, the Turkish company ASELSAN formed a joint venture with Qatar to establish a naval base in the country dedicated to special operations. Qatar also became a financial partner in Turkish military industries, with the Qatar Armed Forces Industry Committee holding a 49,9 percent stake in BMC, Türkiye's largest manufacturer of commercial and military vehicles. Part of their agreement involved producing 40 Altay main battle tanks for Qatar.⁸⁶⁵ In March 2021, Qatar and Türkiye signed a five-year agreement for Qatari pilots to undergo aerial training on Rafale fighter jets in Türkiye, enabling Qatar to operate its fleet of 36 aircraft while maintaining a presence of 250 personnel in Türkiye throughout the duration of the training program.⁸⁶⁶

The agreements were signed to enhance military cooperation and joint training exercises, focusing on increasing Turkish military presence, expertise sharing, and mutual support in regional and international peace efforts. Cooperation expanded into

⁸⁶³ "Erdogan: Turkey-Qatar military base serves regional 'stability'", *Al Jazeera*, 25 November 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/25/erdogan-turkey-qatar-military-base-serves-regional-stability> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁶⁴ Bakir, "The Evolution of Turkey—Qatar Relations", p. 212.

⁸⁶⁵ Nouf Aljassar and Beth Rosenson, "The US Impact on Qatar's Foreign Policy During the Gulf Crisis", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 29, 2022, p. 79.

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid.

the establishment of specialized military units, joint combat training, and increased Turkish military equipment supplies, including Turkish-made armored vehicles and drones supplied to Qatar. The two countries also enhanced naval cooperation, highlighted by Turkish participation in maritime exercises near Qatar. The Turkish base in Qatar received additional submarine units and specialized forces training, reinforcing the strategic military partnership from 2018 onwards, including collaborative maneuvers and shared defense objectives.⁸⁶⁷

As political and diplomatic relations between Türkiye and the UAE and Saudi Arabia have softened, the strengthening of Turkish Qatari relations is seen as positive for intra-Gulf political dynamics and Turkish Qatari political relations. The level of political, economic and military cooperation between Türkiye and Qatar could serve as a model for relations with other Gulf countries.⁸⁶⁸

On the other hand, the US stance towards the crisis has fluctuated. At the beginning of the crisis, US President Donald Trump seemed to support the accusations against Qatar, but differences of opinion emerged within the US administration and the US took a more neutral position in the subsequent process.⁸⁶⁹ Türkiye's open support for Qatar has played an important role in balancing the US and Gulf states' pressure on Qatar. Thus, Türkiye's Qatar policy expanded Qatar's room for maneuver and strengthened its resilience in the face of the crisis.

At the same time, Al Jazeera is one of the most influential media channels in the Middle East, Türkiye's foreign policy towards Qatar was important to convey the Turkish politics and the image of the country to Arabian public opinion. The 50-minute interview with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2014⁸⁷⁰ can exemplify this issue. Also,

⁸⁶⁷ İlqar Verdixahov, "Değişen Güç Dengeleri Karşısında Türkiye'nin Dış Politikası: Türkiye-Katar İlişkileri", *Türkiye Siyaset Bilimi Dergisi*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2024, p. 166.

⁸⁶⁸ Hülya Kınık, "Türkiye'nin Çok Boyutlu Dış Politikasına Bir Örnek: Türkiye Katar İlişkilerinin Gelişimi", *Barış Araştırmaları ve Çatışma Çözümleri Dergisi*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2022, pp. 39-40.

⁸⁶⁹ Sam Fouad, "America's Disconnect on the Qatar Crisis", *Atlantic Council*, 24 July 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/america-s-disconnect-on-the-qatar-crisis/> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁷⁰ "Erdoğan: Turkey's role in the Middle East | Talk to Al Jazeera", *Al Jazeera English Youtube Channel*, 12 February 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NS9npYQnac> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

Erdoğan was honored as a “*Person of the Year*” in a survey in 2016 by Al Jazeera’s Arabic service.⁸⁷¹

Regarding the second variable, economic concerns, Türkiye’s support for Qatar was not limited to the diplomatic and military dimension, but concrete steps were also taken in the economic dimension. Türkiye sent food aid to Qatar by air and sea immediately after the embargo in order to overcome Qatar’s serious problems especially in food and basic consumption materials.⁸⁷² Qatar’s economic isolation was overcome with Türkiye’s logistical support and newly opened trade routes.

After the 2017 Qatar Crisis, Türkiye’s political support for Qatar contributed significantly to the strengthening of economic relations between the two countries. Qatar’s financial support, especially during periods of depreciation of the Turkish Lira, has created a strategic economic security for Türkiye. While Qatar has deepened economic integration in the finance, construction and energy sectors through its investments in Türkiye, the Qatar Investment Authority’s 10% stake in Borsa Istanbul, for example, clearly demonstrates the strategic importance of this relationship.⁸⁷³

Qatar has deepened its relationship with Türkiye, establishing the two nations as key trading partners. In the initial four months following the blockade, Türkiye played a vital role in securing food supplies for Qatar, leading to a rise in Turkish exports to the country and the trade volume between Türkiye and Qatar enhanced by 57%. By the end of 2018, trade between Qatar and Türkiye reached \$1.6 billion⁸⁷⁴, marking a 20 percent increase from 2017⁸⁷⁵, and by 2019, trade volume surged to about \$2.2 billion.⁸⁷⁶ Türkiye also benefited from this partnership; during its 2020 currency crisis,

⁸⁷¹ Sibel Uğurlu, “Al Jazeera survey names Erdogan 'Person of the Year'”, **Anadolu Agency**, 9 January 2017, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/todays-headlines/al-jazeera-survey-names-erdogan-person-of-the-year-/722466> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁷² Nesibe Hicret Battaloglu, “Ideational Factors in Turkey’s Alignment with Qatar and Their Impact on Regional Security”, **The International Spectator**, Vol. 56, No. 4, pp. 101-118.

⁸⁷³ Armutlu, “Stratejik Ortaklık”, p. 256.

⁸⁷⁴ “Turkey’s Exports and Imports”, **The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC)**, 2018, https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tur?selector2297id=trade_i_baci_a_92&selector345id=2018&selector343id=Export ; https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tur?selector2297id=trade_i_baci_a_92&selector345id=2018&selector343id=Import (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁷⁵ “Turkey’s Exports and Imports”, **The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC)**, 2017 https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tur?selector2297id=trade_i_baci_a_92&selector345id=2017&selector343id=Export ; https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tur?selector2297id=trade_i_baci_a_92&selector345id=2017&selector343id=Import (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁷⁶ “Turkey’s Exports and Imports”, **The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC)**, 2019 https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tur?selector2297id=trade_i_baci_a_92&selector345id=2019&selector343id=Export ; https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tur?selector2297id=trade_i_baci_a_92&selector345id=2019&selector343id=Import

Qatar stepped in to support Turkish banks and financial markets through a \$15 billion investment package, in which the Qatar Investment Authority acquired 42 percent of a major Istanbul shopping mall and 10 percent of shares in the Istanbul Stock Exchange.⁸⁷⁷

Specifically, the export of Türkiye towards Qatar was increasing steadily between 2015 and 2018. While in 2015, Turkish export was 423 million dollars, in 2018 it reached the level of 1.096 million dollars. The trade volume between the two countries became 1.431 million dollars in 2018 compared to 913 million dollars in 2017. Also, Türkiye has become one of the important vacation destinations for Qatari tourists at that time. While in 2015, 35.832 Qatari tourists visited Türkiye, in 2018, 96.327 Qatari tourists visited Türkiye.⁸⁷⁸

In 2018, the Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement was paraphed by Türkiye and Qatar. It is depicted that this agreement is a new level of relationship between those countries.⁸⁷⁹ In the same year, a Swap Agreement was signed between the Central Bank of Türkiye and Qatar Central Bank to facilitate the bilateral trade in local currencies (Turkish Lira and Qatar Riyal) and to contribute the financial stability of two countries.⁸⁸⁰ At the same time, the Turkish companies won 17 billion dollar-construction tenders within the context of the World Cup which was organized by Qatar in 2022.⁸⁸¹

The resolution of the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis took place at the GCC summit in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia in early 2021. At the summit, which took place on January 4-5,

https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tur?selector2297id=trade_i_baci_a_92&selector345id=2019&selector343id=Export ;
https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tur?selector2297id=trade_i_baci_a_92&selector345id=2019&selector343id=Import (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁷⁷ Anna L. Jacobs, "Qatar's Regional Relations and Foreign Policy After Al Ula", **Arab Gulf States Institute**, 14 April 2021, <https://agsi.org/analysis/qatars-regional-relations-and-foreign-policy-after-al-ula/> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁷⁸ "Türkiye-Qatar Economic and Trade Relations", **Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-s-commercial-and-economic-relations-with-qatar.en.mfa> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁷⁹ "Türkiye-Katar Ticaret ve Ekonomik Ortaklık Anlaşması Paraflandı", **Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Ticaret Bakanlığı**, 5 September 2018, <https://ticaret.gov.tr/haberler/turkiye-katar-ticaret-ve-ekonomik-ortaklik-anlasmasi-paraflandi> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁸⁰ "Press Release on Swap Agreement Between CBRT and Qatar Central Bank", **Türkiye Cumhuriyet Merkez Bankası**, 20 August 2018, <https://www.tcmb.gov.tr/wps/wcm/connect/06772a2c-bec4-4745-a189-eef8cf4782ad/ANO2018-33.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE-06772a2c-bec4-4745-a189-eef8cf4782ad-mlmKmuw#:~:text=The%20Central%20Bank%20of%20Turkey,limit%20of%203%20billion%20USD> (Retrieved on 5 June 2025).

⁸⁸¹ Verdixahov, "Değişen Güç Dengeleri Karşısında Türkiye'nin Dış Politikası", p. 165.

2021, Qatar and the embargoed countries (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) agreed to normalize relations. This agreement comes nearly three and a half years after the beginning of the crisis. Following the summit, Saudi Arabia announced the lifting of the blockade by opening its land, sea and air borders with Qatar.

As a result, the two variables became important for Turkish foreign policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis which are the desire to increase and maintain the influence in the Gulf region and economic concern. The aforementioned desire is directly related to economic concerns, and it can be said that these two variables are intertwined and should be thought of together. Türkiye's economic concerns are number one priority for its foreign policy towards Qatar.

3.3.2. Russian Foreign Policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis

The June 2017 outbreak of the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis created an important opportunity for Russia to reassert its diplomatic influence in the region and use the balance of power in the Gulf region to its advantage. Moscow initially watched the Saudi Arabia-led United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt's severing of diplomatic ties with Qatar and the imposition of an economic blockade with caution. Since the beginning of the crisis, Russia has refrained from taking sides and adopted a pragmatic position in line with regional balances. In other words, Moscow appeared neutral but showed a little willingness to mediate the crisis.⁸⁸²

In the early stages of the crisis, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov conducted intensive diplomacy in August 2017, including visits to Doha, Kuwait and Abu Dhabi. Lavrov's visit to Kuwait in particular demonstrated Russia's intention to adopt a mediatory and neutral stance in its approach to the crisis. In this context, Russia openly supported Kuwait's mediation efforts and Lavrov's shuttle diplomacy called for dialogue between the parties. Russia's stance made it clear to the countries of the region that Moscow does not favor any side in the geopolitical rivalry in the Gulf.⁸⁸³

⁸⁸² Giorgio Cafiero and Theodore Karasik, "Qatar and Russia: What Do They See in Each Other?", *Middle East Policy*, 11 October 2017, <https://mepc.org/commentaries/qatar-and-russia-what-do-they-see-each-other/> (Retrieved on 7 June 2025).

⁸⁸³ Ali Younes, "Sergey Lavrov calls for dialogue to resolve Gulf crisis", *Al Jazeera*, 30 August 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/8/30/sergey-lavrov-calls-for-dialogue-to-resolve-gulf-crisis> (Retrieved on 7 June 2025); Cafiero, Karasik, "Qatar and Russia".

Table 3.9. Russian Foreign Policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis

Russian Foreign Policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis				
	Intervening Variables	Dependent Variables	Period	Nature (Strategy, Tactic or Maneuver)
1	Economic Concern	Balancing policy between Saudi Arabia and Qatar	2015-	Strategy
		Increasing its export volume	2017-	Strategy
		Qatar's role as a guest country at SPIEF	2021	Tactic
2	The Desire to Increase and Maintain Its Influence	Playing a mediator role	2017-2021	Strategy
		Visits of Lavrov to parties of crisis	2017-2019	Tactic
		Following pragmatic and neutral policy	2017-2021	Strategy

Alqedra evaluates the Russian foreign policy towards the GCC including Qatar and mentions about three determinant which are influential on the foreign policy strategies of Russia: “economic, security and military interests”.⁸⁸⁴ However, in this study, Russian foreign policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis can be examined via two variables. The first variable, economic concerns, Russia have followed a balancing policy between Saudi Arabia and Qatar since 2015 due to economic sanctions against it. That’s why, Russia has continued to mediate the crisis and develop its economic relations with Qatar without disturbing Saudi Arabia. Qatar’s economic isolation was perceived as an opportunity for Russia, and it also increased its export to Qatar. At the same time, making energy-based relations with Qatar would be beneficial since Moscow would like to be a part of energy deals.

The second variable is the desire to increase and maintain its influence and to be an essential mediator. It includes threat perception from the West, the Russian foreign policy towards Syrian civil war and the relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia. Russia aimed to become a fixture of a new security environment in the Arab world and an alternative for the American hegemony in the region. It supported Qatar not in a direct way like Türkiye and Iran, in order not to deteriorate its relations with Saudi

⁸⁸⁴ Ahmed Alqedra, “Russian Foreign Policy towards the GCC”, *Uluslararası Kriz ve Siyaset Araştırmaları Dergisi*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2022, p. 58.

Arabia⁸⁸⁵, but to maintain its cooperation with Ankara and Tehran in Syrian Civil War. On the other hand, Russia would like to increase its influence and to enhance its image in the Gulf region via turning the Qatar crisis into opportunity.⁸⁸⁶

In terms of the first variable, economic concern, despite deep disagreements over Syria, Russia has been careful to maintain balanced economic and political relations with Qatar. The main point of contention between the two countries was their opposing positions on the Syrian civil war and the Assad regime. Economic pragmatism, however, prevented these deep political divisions from completely severing relations. Moscow was pleased to see Qatar reduce its support for the Syrian opposition and increase its economic cooperation with Russia.⁸⁸⁷

After 2014, Qatar reduced its support for the Syrian opposition, leading to a gradual normalization of relations with Russia, evidenced by increased official contacts. Economic cooperation became a focus, with a 2015 Moscow conference where Qatari companies showed interest in partnering with Russia in energy, petrochemical, and agrochemical sectors; yet these intentions did not produce immediate results. Russia maintained interest in arms trade with Qatar, signing a military-technical cooperation agreement in 2017, but no significant contracts followed, partly because Russia remained neutral during the 2017 Qatar blockade crisis, advocating dialogue within the GCC.⁸⁸⁸

The 2017 Saudi-Qatari rift, marked by the Saudi-led blockade, was initially an unpleasant surprise for Russia, which had no prior knowledge of deep GCC divisions. Moscow chose to remain neutral and positioned itself as a mediator, since taking sides could damage its relations with either party. Russia aims to maintain good relations with all GCC members. Historically, relations between Russia and Qatar were strained from 2009 to 2015, so Moscow sought opportunities to improve ties with Doha. Shortly after the blockade began, Russia welcomed Qatar's foreign minister in June 2017, showing readiness to help, which was somewhat surprising given that Russian officials had recently discussed cooperation with Saudi counterparts. Russia's

⁸⁸⁵ Since Saudi Arabia is an influential actor in the Arab/Muslim world, Russia, at the same time, aimed to use this influence on Arab/Muslim world. See. Cafiero, Karasik, "Qatar and Russia".

⁸⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁷ Nikolay Surkov, "Russian Foreign Policy in the Gulf: A Quest for Regional Partnerships and Opportunities", in Nikolay Kozhanov (Ed.), **Russia's Relations with the GCC and Iran**, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 102.

⁸⁸⁸ Ibid.

approach is based on the understanding that in the Middle East, a state's size is less important; Qatar, though small, wields significant influence via media (notably Al Jazeera) and political affairs, is a major LNG exporter, and maintains important ties with Türkiye and Iran—countries vital to Russian interests in the region. The Saudi-Qatari conflict thus presented Moscow with a chance to strengthen relations with Qatar. During Tamim Al Thani's June 2017 visit to Moscow, Russia pledged support in easing Qatar's tensions with the Saudi-led coalition and offsetting the blockade's economic impact. While these offers were largely symbolic and unlikely to be accepted given Qatar's stronger alliances, they signaled Russian goodwill towards Doha.⁸⁸⁹

Despite being global competitors in the energy market, Russia and Qatar have continued to expand their economic ties. Qatar has used increasing its economic ties with Russia as a diplomatic and political strategy. Moscow, on the other hand, welcomed Qatar's steps, aiming to take economic advantage of the political strife in the Gulf region. Russia's continued economic cooperation with Qatar without harming its balanced relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE was part of its pragmatic policy of balancing the region.

Qatar has been more active than Saudi Arabia in investing in the Russian economy, with the QIA acquiring stakes in VTB Bank, Pulkovo Airport, and Rosneft. By 2019, Qatari investment in Russia reached \$2.5 billion, with over 9 billion worth of projects across infrastructure, agriculture, medicine, real estate, and energy under consideration. Both countries aimed to increase bilateral trade to \$500 million. Qatar's role as the guest country at the 2021 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) was seen as a potential catalyst for expanding economic ties with Russia.⁸⁹⁰ Qatar is the only GCC country that has taken the risk to invest in Russia despite the challenging circumstances. In January 2017, the QIA completed its largest deal in Russia, partnering with UK-based Glencore to invest USD 11.3 billion in Rosneft. This investment targeted upstream projects, logistics, and global trading within the energy sector. Representing one-fifth of Rosneft's privatization portfolio, the deal was

⁸⁸⁹ Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russian Foreign Policy towards Qatar and Saudi Arabia: Bridging the Gaps", **Gulf Studies Center Monographic Series**, 6 December 2019, pp. 19-20.

⁸⁹⁰ Surkov, "Russian Foreign Policy in the Gulf", p. 102.

finalized during a visit to Russia by Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, who was there to discuss Middle Eastern geopolitics and energy matters.⁸⁹¹

Moscow sought to capitalize on the economic and strategic opportunities that the crisis brought. With the start of the blockade, Qatar began to look for alternative partners to escape economic isolation and resist political pressure. Russia became an attractive partner for Qatar in this process. Doha sought to strengthen its relations with Moscow by increasing its investments in the Russian economy. In this context, the QIA has expanded its investments in Russian banks, airports and energy companies, especially Russian oil giant Rosneft. In an interview of Doha's ambassador to Moscow, Fahad bin Mohamed Al-Attiyah said that Russia and Qatar were cooperating in an energy realm due to increasing economic relations, we did not have a malign aim.⁸⁹² Since 2022, QIA has held approximately 19% of Rosneft stakes.⁸⁹³

Regarding the second variable, Russia has attempted to position itself as a regional mediator by engaging Arab monarchies on the GCC crisis. One key initiative involved proposing to resume the Russia-GCC ministerial consultations paused after Qatar's 2017 diplomatic crisis, with Foreign Minister Lavrov suggesting concessions for the parties in March 2019. However, these efforts generated little response. The GCC conflict was dominated by mediators from the US, EU, and the Middle East, with Russia playing only a minor role due to its limited influence. The deep and personal nature of the dispute required a mediator with power to enforce agreements, something Russia lacked. As one GCC diplomat noted, Russia needed leverage to be effective in mediation, but it had none.⁸⁹⁴

In March 2019, Sergey Lavrov visited several Gulf countries, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE with the Syrian conflict serving as the central topic of discussion during these meetings.⁸⁹⁵

⁸⁹¹ Alexander Shumilin and Inna Shumilina, "Russia as a Gravity Pole of the GCC's New Foreign Policy Pragmatism", *The International Spectator*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2017, p. 126.

⁸⁹² Polina Ivanova and Katya Golubkova, "Qatari stake in Rosneft paves way for global energy deals: Doha envoy", *Reuters*, 12 February 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/currencies/qatari-stake-in-rosneft-paves-way-for-global-energy-deals-doha-envoy-idUSKCN1Q118Z/> (Retrieved on 7 June 2025).

⁸⁹³ Hazar Kilani, "Qatar Investment Authority holding onto its Russian assets for now", *Doha News*, 2 March 2022, <https://dohanews.co/qatar-investment-authority-holding-onto-its-russian-assets-for-now/> (Retrieved on 7 June 2025).

⁸⁹⁴ Kozhanov, "Russian Foreign Policy towards Qatar and Saudi Arabia", p. 36-37.

⁸⁹⁵ Surkov, "Russian Foreign Policy in the Gulf", p. 89.

On the other hand, Qatar's ties with Iran have strengthened as the crisis deepened. By providing Qatar with airspace and maritime trade routes during the embargo, Iran increased Qatar's resilience against economic and political isolation. This created a strategic opportunity for Moscow. Russia, which has close relations with Iran, saw the Qatar-Iran rapprochement as a development in its favor in terms of regional balances. Russia saw Iran-Qatar relations as an opportunity to reduce the US influence in the Gulf region and increase its own influence.⁸⁹⁶

As the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis began to unravel in 2021, Russia continued to strengthen its position in the region. Moscow welcomed the formal resolution of the crisis and the normalization process within the GCC. However, this did not change Russia's overall foreign policy stance towards the region; Moscow maintained its pragmatic and neutral policy of simultaneously developing economic and political relations with all Gulf countries.⁸⁹⁷

As a result, the Russian foreign policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis can be read via two variables. Each variable has its elements. On one hand, Russia wanted to increase and maintain its influence in the region like other cases, but it did not have capacity to do that. Instead, it related the crisis to Syrian civil war and followed foreign policies that could contribute its foreign policy towards Syrian civil war by continuing to perceive the West as a threat. On the other hand, the variable of economic concern of Russian Federation is so obvious in Qatar Diplomatic Crisis. Moscow's main motivation for that case was to improve economic relations with Qatar and to benefit from the crisis economically. It can be said that Russia mainly conducted its foreign policy towards Qatar according to its economic concerns.

3.3.3. Iranian Foreign Policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis

Although Iran was concerned about Qatari support for groups opposing its interests, it nonetheless aligned with Qatar, adopting a pragmatic strategy focused on its long-term rivalry with Saudi Arabia. Iran demonstrated its willingness to assist in every possible way, promptly affirming strong support for the Qatari emir and

⁸⁹⁶ Alqedra, "Russian Foreign Policy Towards The GCC" pp. 40-72.

⁸⁹⁷ Ibid.

mobilizing all available resources to ensure the supply of fresh goods during the initial weeks of the blockade in order to balance the impact of Saudi Arabia both in the Gulf and on Qatar. The crisis has also enabled Iran to move beyond the traditional sectarian divide, as Tehran has bolstered its ties with Qatar as a Sunni state, despite ongoing rivalries in Syria and other regional matters.⁸⁹⁸

The economic blockade against Qatar raised significant hopes in Iran regarding opportunities for its companies to boost exports to Qatar. Due to the blockade against Doha, land-based access to Qatar became possible only through Iran. Iranian authorities viewed the diplomatic situation as favorable, given their political support for Qatar after the blockade, including allowing Qatari airlines to use Iranian airspace. Developing economic ties with Qatar was also seen as a strategy for Iran to reduce the UAE's dominant role in its foreign trade, potentially making Qatar a new regional trade hub for Iran.⁸⁹⁹

The Iranian foreign policy towards the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis can be examined via two variables. The first variable, the desire to increase and maintain its influence, has two dimensions which are political and security-based. Iran would like to change the balances in the Gulf region. It aimed to balance the impact of Saudi Arabia and prevent the maintenance of its isolation in the region.

Table 3.10. Iranian Foreign Policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis

Iranian Foreign Policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis				
	Intervening Variables	Dependent Variables	Period	Nature (Strategy, Tactic or Maneuver)
1	The Desire to Increase and Maintain Its Influence	Considering crisis as an opportunity to change the status quo	2017	Strategy
		Continuing its diplomatic relations with Qatar	2017-	Strategy
		Security agreement that provided joint patrols	2018	Tactic
		Multiple phone calls and meetings between ministers	2017-2021	Tactic
2	Economic Concern	Increasing its export volume	2016-2018	Strategy

⁸⁹⁸ Luciano Zaccara, "Iran and the Intra-GCC Crisis: Risks and Opportunities", **Istituto Affari Internazionali Papers**, 11 May 2019, p. 12.

⁸⁹⁹ Thierry Coville, "Update on trade relations between UAE/Iran and Qatar/Iran", **Observatoire du monde arabo-musulman et du Sahel Fondation pour la Recherche Strategique**, April 2019, p. 8.

		Signing memorandum of understanding on economic issues	2020	Tactic
		Signing trilateral agreement between Iran, Qatar and Türkiye	2017	Tactic
		Energy cooperation in North Dome/South Pars gas field	2018-	Strategy

The second variable, economic concern, has two dimensions. With reference to first dimension, Iran would like to improve its economic relations with Qatar by signing bilateral agreements. At the same time, Iran and Qatar have joint gas field. Therefore, Iran's good relations with Qatar on energy issues are significant.

In terms of the first variable, the desire to increase and maintain its influence, the June 5, 2017 diplomatic blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt was a critical geopolitical crisis that created significant opportunities for Iran. It provided Iran with a new opportunity to change the existing balance in the Gulf region and elevated Iran's relations with Qatar to a higher level.⁹⁰⁰

At the outbreak of the crisis, Iran sharply criticized the blockading countries and immediately announced its support for Qatar. Iran has pursued a pragmatic foreign policy strategy to turn the fragmentation within the GCC into an opportunity to increase its influence in the region. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said that the “*dialogue deficiency*”⁹⁰¹ between the Gulf states was at the root of the crisis in the region and called on them to sit down at the table. Iran opened its airspace to Qatar Airways after Qatar's airspace and ports were closed due to the blockade and initially sent aid to Doha by airplane to meet food needs.

It is an important demonstration of Iran's increasing influence on Qatar just at the beginning of the crisis that Qatar resumed full diplomatic relations with Iran on 23 August 2017, by sending its ambassador back to Iran.⁹⁰² This decision symbolized a new era in Qatar's relations with Iran. By rejecting the demands of regional countries

⁹⁰⁰ Pradhan, “Qatar Crisis and the Deepening Regional Faultlines” p. 438.

⁹⁰¹ “Iran Calls for Establishment of ‘Regional Dialogue Forum’”, **Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran**, 1 May 2019, <https://irangov.ir/detail/321966> (Retrieved on 10 June 2025).

⁹⁰² In 2016, after an important Muslim cleric was executed by Saudi Arabia, the Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran were assaulted. In that situation, Qatar recalled its ambassador in 2016 from Iran. See. “Qatar restores diplomatic ties with Iran amid Gulf crisis”, **BBC**, 24 August 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41035672> (Retrieved on 10 June 2025).

to cut ties with Iran, Qatar has deepened its economic and political ties with Iran and expressed that it considers Iran an important regional ally.

Tehran recognized an opportunity to support Qatar and successfully gained political and commercial advantages over its Gulf Arab rivals. Just days after the embargo began, Iran took the initiative to counter the blockade by delivering 350 tons of food supplies through air and sea routes. This gesture of solidarity towards Qatar, especially during the holy month of Ramadan, when the country felt isolated by its neighbors, had a significant impact.⁹⁰³

Cooperation between Iran and Qatar has not only remained in the economic and diplomatic spheres but has also taken on new dimensions in security and defense. The two countries signed a security agreement to expand joint patrols along their maritime borders. Iran's military support to Qatar has not taken the form of direct military cooperation, but rather the economic and logistical strengthening of Qatar. During the blockade, Qatar and Iran reached an agreement in April 2018 to expand coordinated patrols along their maritime border. While high-ranking military officers from both countries have frequently visited each other, the exact extent of their military collaboration remains unclear.⁹⁰⁴

On the other hand, Iran's involvement during and following the blockade has led to enhanced popular perceptions of the country among Qatar's population. A survey conducted by Qatar University's Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) between April and May 2018, which included 1,502 respondents (733 Qataris and 769 expatriates), revealed that perceptions of Iran improved among Qataris. In the survey, Iran, along with Türkiye, Kuwait, and Oman, was regarded as one of Qatar's strongest supporters during the blockade by both nationals and expatriates.⁹⁰⁵

One of the important developments in Qatar-Iran relations during this period was the assassination of Qasem Soleimani in 2020. On 3 January 2020, top Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani was killed in a US airstrike in Iraq. Just nine days after

⁹⁰³ Sebastien Boussois, "Iran and Qatar: A Forced Rapprochement", in Andreas Krieg (Ed.), **Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis**, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan Singapore, 2019, p. 228.

⁹⁰⁴ Duygu Dersan Orhan, "Strategic Hedging or Alignment? Qatar's Foreign Policy Toward Iran in the Wake of the Blockade Crisis", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol. 20, No. 80, 2023, pp. 102-103; Mehran Haghiri, "Iran's Pragmatic Foreign Policy in Response to Regional Crises: The Case of the Blockade Against Qatar", in Mahjoob Zweiri, Md Mizanur Rahman and Arwa Kamal (Eds.), **The 2017 Gulf Crisis: An Interdisciplinary Approach**, Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2021, p. 281.

⁹⁰⁵ Zaccara, "Iran and the Intra-GCC Crisis: Risks and Opportunities," p. 8.

this incident, Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani paid an official visit to Tehran and emphasized his efforts to de-escalate tensions in the region. This was his first official visit to Iran, marking the first time a Qatari national leader visited Tehran. The timing of the visit is noteworthy because the attacks targeting Soleimani were allegedly carried out from US bases in Qatar. During the visit, messages of friendship were exchanged, with an emphasis on easing regional tensions following Iran's retaliatory attacks against US targets.⁹⁰⁶ Qatar's visit was interpreted as a critical diplomatic step to avoid damaging its relations with Iran.

Following the 2017 blockade, Iran and Qatar steadily deepened their engagements through frequent high-level communications, including multiple phone calls and meetings between their leaders. Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif regularly visited Doha, while Qatar's Foreign Minister al-Thani made several trips to Iran. This diplomatic exchange culminated in Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani's first official state visit to Iran in January 2020.⁹⁰⁷

The Al-Ula Summit of the GCC ended the three-and-a-half-year blockade of Qatar and restored diplomatic relations between Qatar and the Gulf states. However, the conditions set by the Gulf countries regarding Qatar's relations with Iran were not met, and Iran-Qatar relations emerged from this process stronger. Even at the end of the crisis, Qatar has continued to strengthen its relations with Iran despite its close strategic partnership with the US. Qatari officials have made it clear that its relations with Iran will not change in the post-Gulf crisis era.⁹⁰⁸ Qatar flatly rejected the Gulf states' demands to cut ties with Iran. This was a turning point that reshaped the regional balance and put Qatar's relations with Iran on an even firmer footing than before the crisis.

Regarding the second variable, economic concern, during the Gulf crisis, Iran played a crucial role in supporting Qatar by permitting Qatari airlines to utilize its airspace and shipping routes. Between 2016 and 2017, Iranian exports to Qatar surged

⁹⁰⁶ Dersan Orhan, "Strategic Hedging or Alignment?", p. 104.

⁹⁰⁷ Haghirian, "Iran's Pragmatic Foreign Policy in Response to Regional Crises", p. 283.

⁹⁰⁸ Samuel Ramani, "The Qatar Blockade Is Over, but the Gulf Crisis Lives On", **Foreign Policy**, 27 January 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/27/qatar-blockade-gcc-divisions-turkey-libya-palestine/> (Retrieved on 10 June 2025).

by 181 percent, and trade in non-oil goods doubled.⁹⁰⁹ In 2017, Iran's exports to Qatar reached \$147 million, increasing further to \$441 million in 2018.⁹¹⁰ Although there was a slight decline afterward, Iranian exports to Qatar remained significantly higher than levels prior to the crisis. This cooperation persisted, and in fall 2020, Iran and Qatar signed a memorandum of understanding covering various economic sectors. According to the head of the Iranian Trade Promotion Organization, bilateral trade between the two countries could reach \$1 billion by 2023.⁹¹¹

While Qatar has long pursued economic diversification beyond oil and gas, the blockade underscored the critical importance of expanding non-hydrocarbon trade. As a result, non-oil trade with Iran surged, with Iranian businesses actively exploring growing opportunities in Qatar, which was seeking new trading partners to substitute ties lost with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Since June 2017, Iranian producers and business delegations have visited Doha aiming to establish lasting connections with the Qatari market.⁹¹² The export of non-oil goods including food and agricultural products from Iran to Qatar increased by 117,5 percent during the first four months of the crisis.⁹¹³

Iran's swift and effective support to Qatar has significantly strengthened economic ties between the two countries. Iran has strengthened economic ties by opening air and sea routes to supply Qatar with the goods it needs. In November 2017, Qatar and Iran signed a trilateral transportation agreement that also included Türkiye. With this agreement, Iran became a transit country for trade from Türkiye to Qatar, thus reducing Qatar's economic isolation.⁹¹⁴

Since January 2018, amid heightened tensions with the UAE which was the number one trade partner of Iran, over banking and trade, Iran has started redirecting

⁹⁰⁹ Giorgio Cafiero and Andreas Paraskevopoulos, "GCC dispute pushes Iran and Qatar closer but with caveats", **Atlantic Council**, 17 June 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/gcc-dispute-pushes-iran-and-qatar-closer-but-with-caveats/> (Retrieved on 10 June 2025).

⁹¹⁰ "Iran's Exports", **The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC)**, (Retrieved on 10 June 2025).

⁹¹¹ "Trade between Iran, Qatar can reach \$1b in next year: TPO head", **Tehran Times**, 20 February 2022, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/470292/Trade-between-Iran-Qatar-can-reach-1b-in-next-year-TPO-head> (Retrieved on 10 June 2025).

⁹¹² Zaccara, "Iran and the Intra-GCC Crisis: Risks and Opportunities", p. 7.

⁹¹³ Irfan Bukhari, "Iran's exports to Qatar surge significantly", **The Peninsula**, 21 November 2017, <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/21/11/2017/Iran%E2%80%99s-exports-to-Qatar-surge-significantly> (Retrieved on 10 June 2025).

⁹¹⁴ Ayşe Hümeysra Atılğan, "Turkey, Iran, Qatar sign transportation deal", **Anadolu Agency**, 27 November 2011, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkey-iran-qatar-sign-transportation-deal/980184> (Retrieved on 10 June 2025).

such activities to Doha to replace its longstanding connections with Dubai. The growth of business-to-business relations has been facilitated by the increase in Qatar Airways' flights to various Iranian cities and the lifting of visa restrictions for Iranian travelers.⁹¹⁵

Iran had also benefited from the rerouting of Qatar Airways flights, which were prohibited from traversing the airspace of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Consequently, these flights must take longer routes to reach the Americas, Europe, and Africa. Iran had welcomed the opportunity to provide access to its airspace, earning significant overflight fees as a result.⁹¹⁶

Leading Iranian shipping companies have initiated transport services to Qatar, with most shipping lines shifting their operations from Dubai and Muscat to Doha to better serve the evolving demands of the Qatari market. Additionally, Iran's largest confectionery firm, the Shirin Asal Food Industrial Group, which generates an annual turnover of 5 billion US dollars, has decided to enter the Qatari retail sector and seeks to secure a long-term supply contract to satisfy the increasing Qatari demand for Iranian products.⁹¹⁷

On the other hand, the main area of cooperation between Iran and Qatar continues to be their jointly owned North Dome/South Pars gas field. Iran holds the world's largest natural gas reserves, with half of these belonging to its portion of the world's biggest gas field—the North Dome/South Pars field. The other half of this field is known as the North Dome, owned by Qatar. These two fields together form a significant offshore natural gas reserve area defined by the maritime border separating Iran and Qatar.⁹¹⁸ Although there are no formal agreements between Iran and Qatar regarding the fields, the South Pars/North Dome fields are regarded as a mutual interest rather than a zone of competition.⁹¹⁹ With Qatar's exit from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in December 2018, energy cooperation with Iran has become more important. By leaving OPEC, Qatar decided to pursue an

⁹¹⁵ Haghirian, "Iran's Pragmatic Foreign Policy in Response to Regional Crises", p. 283.

⁹¹⁶ Zaccara, "Iran and the Intra-GCC Crisis: Risks and Opportunities," p. 8.

⁹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

⁹¹⁸ Jean-François Seznec, "Sharing a Pot of Gold: Iran, Qatar and the Pars Gas Field", **Middle East Institute Policy Focus Series**, 2016-22, August 2016, p. 1.

⁹¹⁹ Haghirian, "Iran's Pragmatic Foreign Policy in Response to Regional Crises", p. 282.

independent path in its energy policies and increased cooperation with Iran in the energy sector and the protection of the joint gas field.

As a result, the Iranian foreign policy towards Qatar Diplomatic crisis can be read through two variables. The first variable is the desire of Iran to increase and maintain its influence in the Gulf region and Iran is doing this via enhancing its partnership agreement with Qatar on different realms including political and military. The second variable is the economic concerns of Iran. Tahrān aimed to turn Qatar crisis into opportunity and increased its economic relations with Qatar including energy relations due to the joint gas field. It can be said that both of these variables are equally significant for the Iranian foreign policy towards Qatar Diplomatic Crisis.



CONCLUSION

Türkiye, Russia and Iran are crucial actors of the region of Five Seas Basin. Their historical and cultural ties to the region and geopolitical ambitions towards it make them part of the phenomena in the region. Especially in phenomena in which they are not involved during the post-Arab Spring Period, they pursue policies that seek to play the role of mediator on the one hand, while turning the emerging crises into opportunities on the other. Syrian Civil War, Nagorno Karabakh Conflict and Qatar Diplomatic Crisis are important phenomena of the region and in those phenomena, Türkiye, Russia and Iran are not parties to the crises. Therefore, it can be openly observed the variables of the foreign policies of those three countries by analyzing the phenomena. It is significant to comprehend the relations among variables in order to analyze the trilateral relations between Ankara, Moscow and Tehran. Due to the emergence of those phenomena, the three states prefer to avoid conflict and try to figure them out to carry out their aims of the desire to increase or maintain their influence in the region and to preserve their economic interests.



Table 3.11. The Intervening Variables of Türkiye, Russia and Iran

	Türkiye	Russia	Iran
Syrian Civil War	The Leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	The Leadership of Vladimir Putin	The Leadership of Ali Khamenei
	The Desire to Increase or Maintain Türkiye's Influence	The Desire to Increase or Maintain Russia's Influence	Threat Perception from the West and Israel
	Border Security (Threat of Terrorism by PYD/YPG and PKK)	Multipolar Foreign Policy Vision	The Desire to Increase or Maintain Iran's Influence
	Impact of Public Opinion and Political Parties	Threat of Terrorism	Impact of Media
	Economic Concerns	Economic Concern	Islamic Identity and Revolution
		Impact of Media	Economic Concern
	The Leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	The Leadership of Vladimir Putin	The Leadership of Ali Khamenei
Nagorno Karabakh Conflict	Nationalist-Conservatist Identity	The Desire to Increase or Maintain Russia's Influence	Islamic Identity and Revolution
	Similar Regime Types	Economic Concern	Economic Concern
	Economic Concern	Orthodox Christianity	Threat Perception (Israel, the West, Türkiye, Russia)
	The Desire to Increase or Maintain Türkiye's Influence	Authoritative Allocation of Capacity	The Public Opinion
	Public Opinion and Media		Border Security
	The Desire to Increase or Maintain Türkiye's Influence	Economic Concern	The Desire to Increase or Maintain Iran's Influence
	Economic Concern	The Desire to Increase or Maintain Russia's Influence	Economic Concern
Qatar Diplomatic Crisis			

While the Turkish foreign policy can be analyzed via the variables of the leadership, the desire to increase or maintain its influence, economic concerns, border security, impact of public opinion, media, and political parties, similar regime types and nationalist-conservatist identity, the Russian foreign policy can be examined via the variables of the leadership, desire to increase or maintain its influence, economic concern, multipolar foreign policy vision, threat of terrorism, impact of media, authoritative allocation of capacity and orthodox Christianity. On the other hand, the Iranian foreign policy can be read via the variables of the leadership, the desire to increase or maintain its influence, economic concern, border security, impact of media and public opinion, threat perception, Islamic identity and revolution.

In the Syrian Civil War, ten variables of three states can be observed. The foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran can be examined via the variables of the leadership, the desire to increase or maintain their influence, economic concern, border security, impact of public opinion, media and political parties, multipolar foreign policy vision, threat of terrorism, threat of the West and Israel, and Islamic identity and revolution. Due to these foreign policies, they prefer to avoid conflict with each other and even cooperate to stabilize Syria in the Astana Process.

The foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran are based on different priorities, tools, and strategic understandings. All three actors have intervened in this crisis with similar motivations but have continued their interventions with their own unique foreign policy repertoires. From Türkiye's perspective, the Syrian Civil War is shaped by both regional ambitions, border security and economic concerns. For Russia, Syria is a field for status preservation and accordingly the construction of a multipolar order against the West, while for Iran, it has become an area of influence where religious, ideological, and geopolitical interests converge.

Türkiye's foreign policy has been caught between domestic politics and external security concerns, becoming increasingly flexible over time. In the early stages of the crisis, a normative strategy was pursued within the framework of "Entrepreneurial and Humanitarian Foreign Policy" and "Zero Problems with Neighbors," with the aim of regime change through support for the opposition. However, with the intensification of security threats after 2015, more concrete and military-level tools have been brought into play in Türkiye's Syria policy. Security-oriented and technical instruments such as cross-border military operations, the border wall built by TOKİ, and efforts to

establish infrastructure in northern Syria have come to the fore under the pretext of the terrorist threat posed by the PYD/YPG. After 2022, Türkiye increased its maneuverability in foreign policy by signaling normalization with the Assad regime, due to both domestic pressure on the refugee issue and economic reasons. Türkiye's approach has been based on tactical and adaptable steps rather than long-term institutional strategies.

Russian foreign policy, on the other hand, is characterized by a more consistent and long-term strategic vision. Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia radically changed the balance on the ground with its direct military intervention in 2015 and secured the survival of the Assad regime. This intervention supported the regime and consolidated Russia's strategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean with permanent infrastructure investments such as the modernization of military bases in Tartus and Khmeimim. In addition, Russia has sought to push the West out of the process on the diplomatic front, actively using the media to generate legitimacy with rhetoric such as "regime change conspiracy."

Iran's Syria policy demonstrates an approach that combines ideological identity, asymmetric use of power, and logistical continuity. From the beginning of the crisis, Iran has positioned itself alongside the Assad regime, deployed the Quds Force in the region, and strengthened its direct military power by using proxy actors such as Hezbollah. At the same time, it has organized Shiite militias in Syria based on sectarian identity and has also brought soft power elements such as social services, student exchange programs, and reconstruction projects into play. Iran's Syria policy is security-oriented, and a multifaceted foreign policy shaped by sectarian influence and ideological expansion.

The policies of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran towards the Syrian Civil War have expanded the three actors' regional rivalries while at the same time paving the way for them to develop a pragmatic cooperative relationship by avoiding conflict. Each actor acted with different national interests and strategic priorities; however, aware of the high cost of direct conflict, they preferred crisis management through mutual concessions and diplomatic processes. From a different perspective, despite their differences on multiple matters, Iran and Türkiye have aligned with Russia in opposing

Western-led interventions.⁹²⁰ The launch of the Astana Process between the parties paved the way for the institutionalization of conflict avoidance.

All three actors have sought to advance their own agendas on the Astana platform, while respecting each other's red lines to a certain extent within the diplomatic framework. While Türkiye focused on limiting the PYD's influence on the ground, Iran maintained its goal of protecting the regime's survival, and Russia sought to secure both the regime and its own military bases. This process did not create a full-fledged alliance between the parties but created a fragile basis for cooperation that minimized the risk of conflict and managed competition.⁹²¹

Regarding the relations between Türkiye and Iran, Iran sees Assad's regime as crucial to its strategic interests in the region. Therefore, if Assad were to fall, it would represent a significant strategic loss for Iran by weakening its influence in Syria and the broader Middle East. Such a downfall could enable Türkiye to expand its influence in Syria and the region, as Türkiye supports opposition groups to Assad. Furthermore, Assad's collapse might inspire and embolden internal opposition within Iran against its own regime, potentially exacerbating existing divisions among Iran's leadership. This means the loss would not only affect Iran's external strategic position but also undermine its internal political stability.⁹²² Indeed, Assad's downfall has created precisely these effects in the region.

The relationships between the three actors simultaneously contain partial coordination in areas of common interest and tensions arising from differing priorities. The Astana Process, launched in 2017, brought Türkiye, Russia, and Iran together on a common diplomatic ground; however, the nature of this process has not been a fully institutionalized alliance, but rather an area of cooperation that limits and balances each other. For Türkiye, the process is an effort to maintain its influence on the ground through cooperation with Russia and Iran against the PYD/YPG threat. Russia has used this process to exclude the West and strengthen its regional leadership, while for Iran, the process has been a means of securing the political gains of the Assad regime.

⁹²⁰ Trujillo, "Russia's foreign and security policy in Syria", p. 9.

⁹²¹ Seçkin Köstem, "Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria: An Informal Geopolitical Alignment", **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2020, p. 9, 16.

⁹²² F. S. Larrabee and A. Nader, **Turkish-Iranian relations in a changing Middle East**, Virginia: Rand Corporation, 2013.

In terms of the periods of the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran, at the beginning of the crisis, three actors were developing positional rhetoric during this period, but military engagement was limited. Türkiye was opposed to the regime, while Russia and Iran were pro-regime. Between 2012-2014, Iran and Russia were strengthening their infrastructure, and support for the regime was growing on the ground. Türkiye was not yet involved on the ground at this stage. Between 2014 and 2016, three actors were on the ground. Each acted with different motivations but with increasing military/political engagement. While Türkiye focused on border security and limited intervention, Russia and Iran were engaged in deep intervention focused on regime survival. Between 2016-2019, the Astana Process brought the three countries together on the same diplomatic platform. After 2019, Türkiye, Russia and Iran were aiming for a political solution and lasting influence after the military interventions and were involved in the reconstruction and normalization processes.

In the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, ten variables of three states can be observed. The foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran can be examined via the variables of the leadership, the desire to increase or maintain their influence, economic concern, nationalist-conservatist identity, orthodox Christianity, authoritative allocation of capacity, border security, impact of public opinion and media, threat of the West and Israel, Islamic identity and revolution. Due to these foreign policies, they prefer to avoid conflict with each other and even cooperate to solve the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

The foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran were shaped by each actor's regional priorities, identity policies, perceptions of security threats, and economic interests. All three states were involved in the crisis, seeking to protect their strategic positions and gain advantageous positions in regional order. However, there are clear differences in terms of the nature and continuity of policy tools and the manner of involvement in the crisis.

Türkiye's approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis points to a multi-layered strategy based on both historical and cultural ties and a nationalist-developmental foreign policy vision. The close contacts established with Azerbaijan through Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's personal relationships and the "one nation, two states" rhetoric have strengthened Türkiye's identity-based foreign policy strategy. Joint military exercises, which began in 2009, have both ensured the integration of the TAF with the

Azerbaijani army and enabled the defense industry to be tested in the field. Türkiye's SOCAR investments after 2021, its involvement in the Zangezur Corridor project, and the roles undertaken by Turkish companies in reconstruction projects reflect long-term strategic goals supported by economic tactical tools. Türkiye's policy is also consistent with its foreign policy discourse based on international law and its humanitarian and entrepreneurial foreign policy principles. The "Brother Azerbaijan" discourse shaped by public opinion and the media also shows how internal consolidation and foreign policy harmony are achieved in Türkiye.

Russia's Nagorno Karabakh policy, on the other hand, is based on the goals of managing the status quo, establishing balance between the parties, and keeping external actors out of the region. The mediation activities carried out since 2016 under the leadership of Vladimir Putin and the peacekeeping forces deployed after 2020 are part of Russia's strategy to maintain its influence at both the diplomatic and military levels. Arms sales to both Azerbaijan and Armenia from 1996 to 2022 have increased Moscow's capacity to exert pressure on both sides, while economic interests have been turned into tactical tools in initiatives such as the Zangezur Corridor. Russia's allocation of resources to the Ukraine War, especially after 2022, and its shift of attention to other areas has limited its capacity in Karabakh; however, it had maintained its symbolic presence through its peacekeeping forces.

Iran's policy on Nagorno Karabakh, on the other hand, is an example of the merging of concerns about identity, balancing, and maintaining internal political balance in foreign policy. Under the leadership of Ali Khamenei, Iran has sought to balance its position in the region by developing relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia since 2016. While making statements of support for Azerbaijan based on sectarian and ethnic ties, Iran has maintained close relations with Armenia and avoided taking a clear side between the two parties. In the face of the growing influence of Israel, Türkiye, and the West in the region, Iran has adopted a "cautious and balanced foreign policy" strategy. Iran has opposed the Zangezur Corridor for both strategic and security reasons, perceiving the project as a threat to both its national interest and Western influence.

While Türkiye's influence in Karabakh meant direct interference in Russia's traditional sphere of influence, the pragmatic nature of Ankara-Moscow relations led

to a model of cooperation in competition rather than conflict.⁹²³ According to Russia, Türkiye is one of the important actors in the Middle East. The problems between Türkiye and the West are considered an opportunity to cooperate with Türkiye, but at the same time, Russia does not desire that Türkiye established close relations with the ex-Soviet countries.⁹²⁴

Türkiye's role in Karabakh is interpreted not only as support for Azerbaijan against Armenia, but also as a search for a balance with Russia in the region. Türkiye is trying to avoid direct confrontation with Russia while increasing its influence in the Caucasus.⁹²⁵ In the Second Karabakh War, the Azerbaijani army gained serious superiority over the Armenian forces in Karabakh and the surrounding regions, especially with Turkish-made drones. Russia, on the other hand, although uncomfortable with Türkiye's direct military support to Azerbaijan, preferred to control the conflict through diplomatic means to avoid direct confrontation with Türkiye.

Türkiye had always been seen as a NATO member or a western country by Russia. Therefore, Russia perceived Türkiye as a threat in this conflict. However, despite religious-cultural similarity between Iran and Azerbaijan and the large population of Azeris in Iran, Russia was never suspicious about the intentions of Iran and saw it as a partner. They had a big and common aim to diminish the US' presence in the region.⁹²⁶

A trilateral meeting between Azerbaijan, Iran, and Russia took place in Baku on September 8, 2022, leading to the signing of a declaration focused on advancing the development of the North-South International Transport Corridor (ITC). A key component of this agreement includes the construction of the Astara-Rasht railway and a commitment to increase the transit volume of goods along the corridor to 30 million tons by 2030. Additionally, Azerbaijan's territory serves as the sole direct and cost-effective land route connecting Russia and Iran.⁹²⁷

⁹²³ Jović-Lazić, "The Role of Turkey in the Second Armenian-Azerbaijani Armed Conflict", pp. 43-44.

⁹²⁴ Aliyev, "Russia's Approaches Towards Armenia and Azerbaijan", p. 160.

⁹²⁵ Kök-Arslan and Aliyev, "The Second Karabakh War," p. 198.

⁹²⁶ Abushov, "Policing the Near Abroad", p. 203.

⁹²⁷ Aghazada, "Azerbaijani-Iranian Relations After the Second Karabakh War", p. 729.

When examining the foreign policies of these three countries, what emerges is not a direct alliance but rather a competitive coordination of conflicting interests. The developing strategic partnership between Türkiye and Azerbaijan has forced both Iran and Russia to adopt cautious positions. Türkiye's support for the Zangezur Corridor and its military rapprochement with Azerbaijan have been perceived by Iran as a risk of geopolitical encirclement. On the other hand, Russia maintained its peacekeeping presence to limit Türkiye's influence in the region.

In terms of the periods of the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran, at the beginning of the crisis between 2009 and 2015, while Türkiye conducted joint military exercises with Azerbaijan, Russia had continued to sell weapons to Armenia and Azerbaijan since 1996. Between 2015-2020, Türkiye, Russia and Iran took their positions towards the crisis. While Türkiye openly supported Azerbaijan in a political, economic and militaristic ways, Russia and Iran pursued balancing policy in order to protect their economic interests and maintain their influence in the region. Between 2020 and 2024, the plan of Zengazur corridor was perceived as an opportunity by both Türkiye and Russia. Iran perceived this plan a threat against it. During this period, Türkiye has increased reconstruction and infrastructure investments in the region. Russia has maintained its diplomatic balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan and its military presence in the region. Iran has been concerned with its border security.

In the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis, two variables of three states can be observed. The foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran can be examined via the variables of the desire to increase or maintain their influence and economic concern. Due to these foreign policies, they prefer to avoid conflict with each other and benefit from the crisis economically. Türkiye, Russia and Iran successfully turned crisis into good opportunities for them in that case. Three of them increased the economic relations with Qatar and especially Türkiye and Iran enhanced their influence in the Gulf region through Qatar Diplomatic Crisis.

The diplomatic crisis that began in the Gulf in 2017 with the Saudi-led coalition's blockade of Qatar has caused regional powers to reposition themselves. Türkiye, Russia, and Iran have viewed this crisis as an important opportunity to increase their regional influence, strengthen economic cooperation, and shape the status quo. The policies implemented by each of the three countries exhibit similarities and differences in terms of the tools used.

Türkiye's primary motivation was to increase its regional influence and strengthen its strategic relations with Qatar, one of its allies in the Gulf. To this end, Türkiye established a military base in Qatar in 2017, creating a direct security engagement, and provided humanitarian and logistical aid to Qatar during the same year. During the height of the crisis between 2017 and 2021, Türkiye played a mediating role, attempting to present itself as a "balancing" actor to both the West and regional countries. In addition, joint military exercises conducted since 2018 and policies to use Al Jazeera as a soft power tool demonstrate Türkiye's multifaceted strategic approach based on media and security. Türkiye's moves have been accompanied by economic tools. Its efforts to increase its exports to Qatar between 2015 and 2018 and tactical steps such as the Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement and swap agreement signed in 2018 have contributed to the institutionalization of economic integration between the two countries. Türkiye thus managed the crisis on the political-diplomatic and economic level.

Russian foreign policy towards the Qatar crisis is an example of a more cautious and balanced foreign policy. Moscow saw this crisis as an opportunity to increase its influence in the region but chose not to abandon either Saudi Arabia or Qatar. In this context, a strategy of balancing between Saudi Arabia and Qatar has been pursued since 2015. Russia increased its exports to Qatar after 2017, securing its economic interests. At the diplomatic level, Lavrov's visits to the parties involved in the crisis indicate that Moscow played a tactical role as a mediator. However, it has been clearly stated that a pragmatic and neutral foreign policy strategy was adopted during this period. Russia's invitation of Qatar as a guest country to the SPIEF in 2021 is a tactical initiative that uses economic diplomacy as an element of soft power. In this regard, Russia managed the crisis without directly taking sides; it did not take deep military and symbolic steps like Türkiye but pursued low-intensity strategies for long-term economic and diplomatic gains.

Iran, on the other hand, assessed the Qatar crisis as an opportunity to challenge the status quo like Türkiye and break its isolation in the Gulf. With the outbreak of the crisis in 2017, it maintained its open relations with Qatar. The trilateral agreement signed between Türkiye, Iran, and Qatar in the same year and numerous high-level telephone conversations point to Iran's active diplomatic efforts. In 2018, a security cooperation agreement was signed between Iran and Qatar, and joint patrols were

launched. Iran's economic steps in this process are also noteworthy. Between 2016 and 2018, it sought to increase its export volume, and in 2018, it deepened its energy cooperation with Qatar in the North Dome/South Pars gas field. The memorandum of understanding signed in 2020 indicates the continuation of this process. Iran has thus used the crisis to break out of regional isolation and develop new alliances with Qatar against the West.

The Qatar crisis has strengthened the ties between Iran and Türkiye, who both condemned Qatar's boycott. Since 2014, their relations have deepened through the establishment of a High-Level Cooperation Council that meets annually. They share common concerns about Kurdish autonomy and secession, especially regarding Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, and coordinate on security issues despite differing views on Syria and the US. Türkiye has also criticized Qatar's isolation as "inhumane". Additionally, Iran, Türkiye, and Qatar signed a transportation agreement making Iran the transit hub for trade between Türkiye and Qatar, crucial since Qatar's land access through Saudi Arabia is blocked. This trilateral cooperation on economic and security matters, though informal, has intensified since mid-2017, challenging the dominant Arab quartet of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt. Qatar's alignment with Iran and Türkiye defies Saudi regional authority, escalating regional geopolitical tensions and contributing to increasing volatility.⁹²⁸ The transportation agreement in 2017 to enhance trilateral trade and facilitate the seamless transit of Turkish products through Iranian territory.⁹²⁹ The land route from Türkiye to Iran's Bushehr Port and to Qatar's Ruwais Port by sea was opened in order to transport the goods in September 2017. The cost of transportation of the goods was decreased considerably with the land trade route through Türkiye, Iran and Qatar. The Iranian companies like Valfajr Shipping Company and Pasargad Shipping Lines started to service to Qatar just after the opening of these routes.⁹³⁰

The interaction between the Qatar–Türkiye coalition and Iran is marked by pragmatism but differs from the hostile stance of the Saudi-led coalition, which views Iran as a threat to Sunni identity. Turkish Iranian relations are context-dependent; Türkiye supports Iran's nuclear program for peaceful purposes but condemns Iran's involvement in Syria alongside the Assad regime. Qatar follows a pragmatic foreign

⁹²⁸ Pradhan, "Qatar Crisis and the Deepening Regional Faultlines", pp. 439-440.

⁹²⁹ Haghirian, "Iran's Pragmatic Foreign Policy in Response to Regional Crises", p. 281.

⁹³⁰ Bukhari, "Iran's exports to Qatar surge significantly".

policy aimed at balancing relations with Iran, Gulf States, and the U.S. Notably, after the 2017 blockade, Qatar's relations with Iran became friendlier. Similarly, despite instability after the Syrian Civil War, Türkiye's relations with Iran improved, driven in part by Türkiye's concerns over Kurdish militants connected to the YPG and PYG.⁹³¹

Looking at the effects of the three actors' foreign policies on each other, Türkiye and Iran's rapid rapprochement with Qatar has strengthened the perception of an anti-Saudi Arabia bloc. This situation has forced Russia to remain in a balancing position; neither Türkiye's military presence in Qatar nor Iran's energy partnership has been directly opposed. Instead, Russia has adopted a "balancing but passive" strategy through economic cooperation and diplomatic activities. Türkiye and Iran, on the other hand, have established an implicit partnership of interests in Qatar, but this partnership has remained largely tactical in nature.

In terms of the periods of the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran, at the beginning of the crisis, between 2011 and 2016, while Türkiye started to establish strategic relations with Qatar before the crisis erupted, Russia and Iran maintained their economic relations. Between 2016 and 2018, Türkiye and Iran were more proactive on the ground, while Russia played a balancing and measured role. All actors tried to turn the crisis into an economic opportunity through different means. Between 2018 and 2021, all three states continued to be active but with less intensity. In this phase, diplomatic tools and long-term economic projects came to the fore. While Türkiye's and Iran's positions on the ground remained consistent, Russia made diplomatic gains with limited visibility.

Table 3.12. Differences and Similarities between the Intervening Variables

	Variables	Syrian Civil War	Nagorno Karabakh Conflict	Qatar Diplomatic Crisis
1	Economic Concern	Türkiye	Türkiye	Türkiye
		Russia	Russia	Russia
		Iran	Iran	Iran
2	The Desire to Increase or Maintain Its Influence	Türkiye	Türkiye	Türkiye
		Russia	Russia	Russia
		Iran		Iran
3	The Leadership of the Leader	Türkiye	Türkiye	
		Russia	Russia	

⁹³¹ Özşahin, "Qatar–Turkey Rapprochement", p. 45.

		Iran	Iran	
4	Identity	Türkiye	Türkiye	
		Iran	Russia	
5	Border Security	Türkiye	Iran	
6	Threat Perception	Türkiye	Iran	
		Russia		
		Iran		
7	Public Opinion, Political Parties and Media	Türkiye	Türkiye	
		Russia	Iran	
8	Multipolar Foreign Policy Vision	Russia		
9	Similar Regime Types		Türkiye	
10	Authoritative Allocation of Capacity		Russia	

Within the context of the phenomena and the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran towards these phenomena, seven findings are crucial. First, in the foreign policies of Türkiye, Russia and Iran regarding the Five Seas Basin in the post-Arab Spring period, there are similar intervening variables or domestic motivations of the states like the leadership, the desire to increase and maintain their influence, the impact of identity, economic concerns, the impact of public opinion and media and the threat perception. On the other hand, there are different internal factors such as similar regime types, multipolar foreign policy vision, and authoritative allocation of capacity. Second, in authoritarian states or the states having power centralization tendencies, it is difficult to distinguish between individual-level analysis and unit-level analysis, as the phenomena of leaders and states are intertwined. Since the perception or ideological attitude of the leader is seen as the perception and ideological attitude of the state, treating the perception of the leader as a separate intervening variable causes repetition in the analysis. Within the context of this study, it can be said that the number of leader level analyses of Türkiye, Russia and Iran towards Syrian Civil War, Nagorno Karabakh Conflict and Qatar Diplomatic Crisis is much lower than the number of unit level analyses. This fact also exemplifies the second finding.

Third, the systemic independent variable or the restriction of the international system that pushes or pulls Türkiye, Russia and Iran closer to each other stems from the fact that all three actors are otherized by the West (US and EU) to a certain extent. At the same time, the power vacuum left by the US withdrawal from the Five Seas Basin is being filled by the Basin's ambitious actors, Türkiye, Russia and Iran. Fourth,

while Russia and Iran's policies have more long-term strategies, Türkiye is more tactical than Russia and Iran. Türkiye's tactical move is thought to stem from its traditional balancing policy between East and West since the Ottoman Empire. Through this balancing policy, and hence short-term tactical policy, Türkiye continues to harmonize with Russia and Iran in the Five Seas Basin and build relations by avoiding the conflict. This does not mean that Türkiye has a pragmatic foreign policy in the region. On the contrary, Turkish foreign policy has constant variables like history, geography and identity as mentioned in the Chapter called *The Components of Turkish-Russian-Iranian Relations* and these constant variables determine the main direction of the foreign policy. The traditional balancing policy of Türkiye is one of the outcomes of these constant variables and through the practice of balancing policy, Türkiye can manage its relationship with Russia and Iran on one side and the US and European states on the other side. In other words, due to its balancing policy practices and the flexibility through these practices, Türkiye can comply with the foreign policies of Russia and Iran.

Fifth, the crises, as disturbances in the foreign policy analysis literature, in the Five Seas Basin improve the diplomatic relations, defined as a practice of gathering in a platform, of Türkiye, Russia and Iran. They all take on the role of mediator and via playing mediator role, try to increase or maintain their influence in the Basin, while improving diplomatic relations. Sixth, while both in Syrian Civil War and in Nagorno Karabakh Conflict, minimum four intervening variables are detected for Türkiye, Russia and Iran, in Qatar Diplomatic Crisis, two intervening variables are detected for the three states.

Seventh, it can be said that during the post-Arab Spring period, as long as the three states benefit from the crises economically in the Five Seas Basin, they maintain their relations by avoiding the conflict. They all have the desire to increase and maintain their influence in the Basin, but at the same time they prioritize their economic concerns. The reason for their desire is rooted in their imperial past and their historical, cultural and even economic ties with the countries in the Basin. Prioritizing their economic concerns keeps them away from conflict.

On the other hand, the difficulties encountered during the study can be summarized into two points. First, it was difficult to access official sources from the Iranian government. Unlike in Türkiye and Russia, Iran's official sources cannot be

accessed through its website, and even its official websites are periodically unavailable due to maintenance. The fact that the few sources that were accessed were in Farsi and that the researcher did not know Farsi, reduced the extent to which Iran's official documents could be utilized. Second, the subject of the research is a broad one, both geographically and in terms of actors and cases. The breadth of the subject made it difficult for the researcher to conduct analysis around the research question.

In terms of future projections, it can be said that Türkiye, Russia, and Iran will continue to avoid conflict as long as regional conflicts in the Five Seas Basin maintain. The crises in the Basin ensure that the three actors control their desires to increase their influence. For this reason, it can be argued that the actors will be in conflict when crises in the region come to an end. In this regard, the fact that Türkiye, Russia and Iran continue to benefit economically from the ongoing crises in the region is considered the most important factor preventing conflict among them.

The study, examining the foreign policies of the three actors in a basin and their relations with each other, is naturally open to further development or more advanced research. Contributions to the study can be made in three different contexts. The first context is theoretical diversification. As mentioned earlier, the literature lacks a leader level analysis of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran towards Syrian Civil War, Nagorno Karabakh Conflict and Qatar Diplomatic Crisis. For this reason, leadership trait analysis can be conducted in terms of the impact of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Vladimir Putin, and Ali Khamenei on the foreign policies of the three states. On the other hand, neoclassical realism was used as the theoretical background for the research. The study can investigate the impact of international systemic constraints on the behavior of the three actors through neorealism. At the same time, the relationship between the three actors can be examined from a liberal international relations perspective through the concept of economic interdependence, as well as from a neo-Marxist perspective in the context of the three countries being semi-peripheral countries in the international system. Furthermore, the policies of the three actors in the Five Seas Basin could be evaluated in the context of post-colonial international relations, and the impact of the colonial pasts of all three states on their current relations with the basin states could be a striking topic. Finally, the impact of the hegemonic masculine structures of the leaders of Türkiye, Russia and Iran on the foreign policies and on their relations with each other could also be examined.

Secondly, empirical contributions can be made to the study by selecting different cases instead of the Syrian Civil War, the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, and the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis. The current crises in the study were crises in which none of the three states were parties and could approach them as mediators. However, in a different study, phenomena could be selected in which one state could approach as a mediator, but the other two states were direct parties. For example, a new study could be conducted using the cases of the Russia-Ukraine War and the Iran-Israel Crisis. In this study, Türkiye would be in a position to act as a mediator in both crises, but Russia and Iran would be direct parties to the crises. In this hypothetical study, the impact of Türkiye's role as a mediator in conflicts involving the other two actors on its relations with Russia and Iran could be examined. Thirdly, instead of the Türkiye, Russia, and Iran triangle, the foreign policies of three different actors in the Five Seas Basin can be examined. It may be appropriate to select three states that have conflicting interests and similar ambitions but are also in an economic relationship and capable of avoiding conflict. For example, in a hypothetical study, Israel, Azerbaijan, and Saudi Arabia could be examined as different actors in the basin. In fact, this examination could result in the formation of a pattern for future research.

As a result, it can be said that the common variables for Ankara, Moscow and Tehran for the region of Five Seas Basin are the desire to increase or maintain their influence and their economic concerns. In all cases, although they had the desire to increase their area of influence, they avoided conflict with each other. Their economic concerns and aim to follow economic interests led to preventing a conflict between the three actors. In other words, as long as they benefited economically from the crises, they continued to avoid conflict.

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