# Miscalculation in Proxy War: The United States and Russia in Syrian Civil War from the Neoclassical Realist Perspective

## Vekâlet Savaşında Yanlış Hesap: Suriye İç Savaşında Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve Rusya'ya Neoklasik Realist Perspektiften Bakış

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**Abstract**

*This article aims to puzzle why the leading military power of the world, namely the United States, was pushed back from the negotiating table in the Syrian Civil War, and conversely, how and why the world's declining power, namely Russia, became the sole actor in that conflict. The article will try to answer this question from the neoclassical realist perspective. In this perspective, states do not always act rationally. Instead, they can fail because of miscalculations. The United States, in this respect, miscalculated on the Syrian Civil War as well as its domestic politics. In contrast, Russia behaved in accordance with its strategic culture, which resulted in its dominance both in the field and in diplomacy. The systemic stimulus, which is the independent variable, forces both countries to form alliances in the civil war. The domestic actors of both countries, which are the intervening variables, diversified the systemic stimuli in opposite directions. While the US political elite was misguided due to the divided structure, the Russian elite was more unified, which resulted in outcomes in favor of the latter.*

***Key Words:*** *Syrian Civil War, Neoclassical Realism, Miscalculation*

**Öz**

*Bu makale dünyadaki en büyük askeri güç olan Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin Suriye İç Savaşında nasıl masanın dışına itildiğini, dünyanın gerileyen gücü Rusya'nın ise tam ters şekilde nasıl tek aktör haline geldiği sorusunu çözmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Makale bu soruya neoklasik realist bakış açısıyla cevap verecektir. Buna göre devletler her zaman rasyonel davranmazlar. Yanlış hesap sonucu başarısız olabilirler. Bu bakımdan ABD de Suriye'deki iç savaşı ve politikayı yanlış hesaplamıştır. Buna karşılık, Rusya stratejik kültürüne uygun olarak sahada ve diplomaside hakim hale gelmiştir. Bağımsız değişken olan sistemik uyarıcılar her iki ülkeyi de ittifaklara zorlamıştır. Ara değişken olan iç aktörler ise her iki ülkenin farklı istikametlerde davranamsını sağlamıştır. ABD siyasi eliti bölünmüş bir yapıda olduğu için yanlış hesap yapılmış, Rus eliti ise daha birlik olması dolayısıyla etkili sonuçlar elde etmiştir.*

***Anahtar Kelimeler:*** *Suriye İç Savaşı, Neoklasik Realizm, Yanlış Hesaplama*

### Introduction

The Syrian Civil War had been driven not only by warring factions but also international actors, namely Russia, the USA, Iran, and Turkey etc. This makes

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the war more complicated than the existing segregationally situation. The country was already divided by four factions since the beginning of the war.[1] On top of it, foreign interventions do not only forms and breaks alliances in Syria but also creates competition among traditional alliances in international level. Thus, it affects choices and calculations of outsider actors.

However, the choices and calculations do not necessarily end up with intended outcomes. In other words, the choices are not always rational in Syrian Civil War. Instead, some actors are disappointed due to the Pareto Efficient nature of the war. In that sense, the disappointing results are reasoned not only by the power capabilities of the actors but also by taking the wrong steps in the field. This leads us to comment that, the military capacity should be supported by accurate calculations in order to obtain the best response. Otherwise one can be taken down even though it has the leading military capacity. That is to say, the US, which has the leading military capacity around the world, pushed back from the table in Syria. Converesely, the declining hegemon of the international system, namely Russia, became the dominant actor in the Civil War. Thus the question why the most capable country is unable to implement its policies arise. More specifically, why the US failed in Syria and Russia became the dominant actor in Syrian Civil War. This article seeks to explain the reason for this outcome.

In this regard, this article will explore the Syrian Civil War from Neoclassical Realist perspective. By taking the issue from the Neoclassical Realist perspective, we try to demonstrate how miscalculations and counter maneuvers resulted in shift in balance of power in the Civil War. More specifically, it is argued that the US miscalculation caused Russian expansion in Syria. The first section will frame the neoclassical realist theory for the analysis. That is to say, miscalculation in foreign policy will be located in the context of neoclassical realism. This will be followed by the US and Russian attitudes in Syria respectively. The effects on the international community of the both cases will take place before the conclusion.



## Miscalculation in International Relations

As a relatively recent approach, neoclassical realism bridges the gap between systemic perspective of neorealism and domestic perspective of classical realism. When Gideon Rose coined the term, he asserted that the neoclassical realism incorporates both external and internal variables.[2] From that point of view, the political outcomes are not directly depended on the states' place in

1 Regime and its supporter Iran-backed paramilitary groups such as Hezbullah, Opponents (Fragmented structure which has caused failure), DAESH / Al-Qaeda, PYD.

2 Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 146

international system. Instead, their place in the international system proceeded by domestic perceptions. Therefore, an intervening variable is necessary to understand the political outcomes. Thus, a transmission belt connects the relative place of the state in international system and its material capabilities.

The transmission belt, thus, is the domestic institutions and leadership of the state which is shaped in accordance to its own strategic culture and structure. At the end of day, "Ideas that form a strong component of national identity or strategic culture are likely to be almost unconsciously shared among ruling elites and foreign policy institutions".[3] Therefore, the foreign policy attitudes of states are shaped not only by their relative position in international system but also their ideas and identities which lead us to conclude that states do not necessarily take a strict offensive or defensive position. Instead, they have variety of choices such as being defensive, offensive, balancing, bandwagon etc. In this regard, both Schweller[4] and Ripsman et al. put forward the four dimension to balance and under-balance the external threat which are elite consensus and cohesion government or regime vulnerability and social cohesion[5] While the elite consensus and cohesion determine the willingness to balance, regime vulnerability and social cohesion determine the ability to extract resources for balancing. In case there is elite consensus and social cohesion, states do not behave ambiguous but pursue their own policies based on their identity[6] or strategic cultures[7].

The importance of neoclassical realism shows up at this point. It is asserted that "the notion of a smoothly functioning mechanical transmission belt is inaccurate and misleading"[8]. Indeed, it is seen that states may fail to recognize a clear and present danger or may not reacted to it in paltry and imprudent ways which is described as "under-balancing".[9] Therefore, unlike mainstream IR theories and traditional realist theories, neoclassical realism considers that states may not always act rationally. Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobel furthered this particularization of the theory. Having divided the neoclassical realism into three "Types", they argued that Type I neoclassical realism guides readers to explaining anomalies in foreign policy.[10] Accordingly, states do not always response properly against the threats or external changes

3 NICHOLAS KITCHEN, "Systemic pressures and domestic ideas: A neoclassical realist model of grand strategy formation," *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 01 (2010): 141
4 Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security* 29, no. 2 (2004)
5 Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 27
6 KITCHEN, "Systemic pressures and domestic ideas"
7 Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics*
8 Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," p. 158
9 Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," 159
10 Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics*, 26

due to the false perception of elites, unclear signals from the international system, irrational decision making or mobilization problems.[11] Thus, a state's response to threats is determined by both the perception of the elite and their ability to extract resources. When the leaders perceive the systemic stimuli incorrect, or even they perceive it correct, they may follow irrational responses.[12]

Yet, of course that does not necessarily mean that leaders always misperceive the systemic stimuli. Apart from perception, states and particularly great powers have strategic cultures. Thus, especially highly institutionalized states have not only international but also domestic constraints be it public opinion and bureaucracy in democratic states or party elite in dictatorships. Regardless of the content, their strategic choices are limited by their domestic considerations. In that case, neoclassical realism can be used as a theoretical approach to explaining foreign policy, which is called Type II neoclassical realism.[13] This type of neoclassical realism serves us to understand the behavior of a particular state in a broader sense.

This study will look for the reason why Russia became more effective in the Syrian Civil War basing on this model. Despite being the most significant power of the world, the question of how the USA has been excluded over time and Russia has become more effective will be sought. In this respect, neoclassical realism offers a model to help us. In fact, neoclassical realism explains both miscalculations and strategic culture of particular states. From that point of view, this article will explore the US and Russian policies regarding to the Syrian Civil War. It is argued that while the US had miscalculations (Type I) towards the War, Russia acted in accordance to its strategic culture (Type II).

**Arab Spring and Development of Syrian Civil War**

It is assessed that Syria is the most affected country among the ones countries considered in the Arab Spring. Unlike other countries, the war in Syria has ceased to be a civil war and became international. Countries like the USA, Russia, Iran, and Turkey was forced to intervene. In this way, civil war has turned into a proxy war between the USA and Russia.

The wave of violence that started in March 2011 in Syria has reached a terrible extent with the influence of organizations such as the DAESH terrorist organization affiliated with Al Qaeda and FTS (Foreign Terrorist Warriors). Terrorist organizations operating in Syria have benefited from the chaotic environment and caused global security problems, especially in the countries of the region. Crimes against humanity - such as establishment of slave markets in the region - excessive use of force by the regime against the opponents, ac-

11 Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics*, 20–24
12 Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics*, 22
13 Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics*, 29

tions of terrorist organizations caused millions of Syrians to migrate.

Due to the civil war more than 360000 people died, millions of people left their homes and the cost of destruction is estimated to be 400 billion dollars (Deutsche Welle 2019). Uncontrolled areas in Syria have led to the establishment of new terrorist academies and logistics networks. The discriminative and left-wing terrorist organizations that followed the Al-Qaeda ideology in the region, especially the DAESH terrorist organization, performed, coordinated terrorist activities from Syria in the region and at the international platform.

This leads us to conclude that the systemic stimulus in the Syrian Civil War forced states to take action against their threats. The non-state actors, namely DAESH or Al-Qaeda are considered main threats by both the USA and Russia. In that sense, global terrorisms generated a threat against the two great powers. As a result, both Russia and the USA intervened in Syria to some extent. In that sense, the increasing terror activities make the independent variable of the Civil War. Additionally, the intervention of both cases constituted another constraint for both cases. Thus, the two countries responded differently from one another against the same threat. From this point of view, the following section will examine how the USA and Russia interpreted systemic stimuli. In other words, the intervening variables will be explored.

**How the US Miscalculated the Non-State Acitivties?**

In this section, we will examine how the US was pushed out of the table in Syria over time. In this context, two basic arguments will be highlighted. The first is the argument that the United States is a scattered structure. Since neoclassical realism gives importance to the domestic factors, fragmented structures in domestic politics can lead to anomalies in foreign policy. Hence, the multiple structures within the USA has also caused expectations to be fruitless in Syria policy. The second is that the USA could not get what was expected for in the field because of miscalculation. Trying to solve the problem with non-state actors in the field, the USA did not get the desired result in this policy, neither. This will be examined in detail below.

There are a few reasons for the multiple structures in the USA. Firstly, there were changes in the management structure of the USA in the process. That is to say, the Obama and Trump administrations exhibit sharp contrast. During the Obama period, the Arab Spring was supported by the USA in Syria as in other countries.[14] The US administration saw the Arab Spring as an opportunity for the democratic transformation in the region to be fully integrated into the international community. In addition, many politicians and intellectuals expressed their view that a new era has begun for the region. Obama em-

14 Cenap Çakmak and Ali O. Özçelik, "The World Community and the Arab Spring," 2019, 141, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60985-0

phasized that this riot was a proof that authoritarian regimes were no longer working. During her official visit to Israel Hillary Clinton pointed out that those riots were important for the construction of common interests, security and stability of Israel and the USA. The Obama administration preferred to support the multilateral and stakeholder uprisings rather than direct intervention.[15] In this context, along with Britain and France, in February 2012, the USA brought up a plan that included regime change in Syria at the UNSC, and this plan was vetoed and blocked by Russia and China.[16]

Nevertheless, Obama's Syrian policy has changed over time. Obama administration commissioned the Asia Pivot policy in 2012, and the focus of US foreign policy shifted to Far Asia instead of the Middle East. In this context, Obama administration first emphasized that Assad should go five months after the start of the events, and secondly emphasized that the use of chemical weapons in 2012 was the red line for the military intervention of the USA. In 2014, after Iran and Hezbollah supported the Assad administration in an operational sense and increased DAESH's effectiveness in the region, Obama administration put its priority about sending Assad to the second place. In August 2013, when the use of chemical weapons by the Assad administration was proved, the removal of the chemical weapons from the Assad regime in the context of Russia's proposal made the Obama administration weak. The Obama administration politically supported the UN's four-part negotiation-based conflict resolution strategy, which was started in 2012 and adopted as the Geneva Process. In the scope of that strategic plan, it was planned to support the moderate opposition with the help of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Arab countries, Turkey, Jordan, France and the UK, fight against terrorism and provide humanitarian aid. That political effort did not reach the expected result due to the incompatibility of the opponents and Russia's support for the regime at the UNSC and in the military field. In August 2014, following the strengthening of DAESH in Syria and Iraq, the Obama administration directed air strikes in the fight against terrorism along with regional and international coalition partners. In addition to the air strikes, the Obama administration sent its specific forces to train and advise opponents in the region.[17]

As for the Trump administration, there was a sharp contrast compared to the Obama administration. Unlike Obama's policies to continue US hegemony, Asia pivot coming in the first place, Trump advocated more introverted policies. In this scope, Trump's statement that he would withdraw his soldiers

15 Çakmak and Özçelik, "The World Community and the Arab Spring," 143–44

16 Magnus Lundgren, "Mediation in Syria: İnitiatives, strategies, and obstacles, 2011–2016," *Contemporary Security Policy* 37, no. 2 (2016): 276, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2016.1192377

17 Strategic Comments, "The future of US Syria policy," *Strategic Comments* 23, no. 1 (2017): ix, https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2017.1298264

fighting against the DAESH terror organization in the North of Syria in November 2018 caused the countries that were parties to the Syrian civil war to perceive that statement as a threat and re-indicate their targets and also affected the Middle East policy of the USA.[18] The USA started to take a less intrusive attitude in the Middle East issues, especially in Syria matter after that date. In a sense, he shifted the US policy to "uncertainity strategy".[19]

Secondly, there was no consensus within the US administration during either Obama or Trump periods. During the Obama period, the most obvious example to this was seen between the pentagon and the Presidency. General Joseph Dunford described Russia as an existential threat in the summer of 2015, while the President's press spokesman Josh Earnest and Secretary of State John Kerry made a statement on the same day stating that Russia was not an existential threat to the USA and that it was the personal opinion of the General.[20] In other words, while pentagon described Russia as a threat and emphasized that Syria, its most important ally should be stopped, the vice president implicitly implied that the Asia Pivot strategy should be continued. In a similar way, during the Trump period, incompatibilities were observed between the Presidential office and other offices, especially in the context of working with non-governmental actors. Trump withdrew the US troops in the region as an implied acceptance for Turkey which started to move against SDG / PKK / KCK / YPG / PYD terrorist organization trying to establish a state in northern Syria. A fast and more intense reaction was formed in the corporate sense against this decision of Trump, senators made explanations that SDG / PKK / KCK / YPG / PYD terror organization was left alone while a decision on sanctions for Turkey was made at the House of Representatives and transferred to the Senate.

These Trump decisions profoundly influenced the past Syria policy of the USA. Numerous evaluations were made in the direction that the motivations that prompted Trump to take those decision were dominantly the domestic policy and the election process. The spokesman of US Department of Defense (Pentagon) Jonathan Hoffman said in a statement that Turkey acted alone and organized the operation, and they changed the region unwillingly in order to prevent any damage to the soldiers.[21] Trump frequently accuses the Obama administration, especially with regard to the Middle East policies, and

18 Strategic Comments, "The US withdrawal from Syria," *Strategic Comments* 25, no. 1 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2019.1580960

19 Mehmet S. Erol, "Trump-Putin Zirvesi'nin Aktörler Bazlı Analizi," ANKASAM, https://ankasam.org/trump-putin-zirvesinin-aktorler-bazli-analizi/

20 John Herbst, "Assessing and Addressing Russian Revanchism," *PRISM* 6, no. 2 (2016): 165

21 BBC Turkish, "Barış Pınarı Harekâtı - Pentagon: Türkiye'nin Olası Harekât Güzergâhı Üzerindeki Güçlerimizin Yerini Değiştirdik," 2019, accessed November 4, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-49980630

cannot withdraw the US troops from the "wars he considers meaningless and fruitless" due to the pressures of the security bureaucracy and the politicians. However, he tactically avoids getting his troops into heavy conflicts.[22]

In this regard, the miscalculation which was the main reason for the USA for not getting the desired result in Syria, is related to the issues ignored while working with non-governmental actors, because the US administration chose radical groups and PYD as its allies, and that choice was not supported as expected as PYD was the enemy of Turkey, the traditional ally of the US. Furthermore, PYD is considered as a greater threat than the Assad regime or other elements in the region for Turkey. Therefore, it cannot use the advantage in the field effectively. However, it was now difficult to create pressure against the Assad administration by using opponents stuck in the Idlip region suspected of al-Qaeda connections due to their connections and propaganda, when the area of control and number of armed members of the USA is considered despite PKK / KCK connection, it is evaluated that it cannot break its ties with SDF / SDG.[23] However, this policy of the United States seems to be stuck as it was unable to convince Turkey and did not allow Assad management to negotiate with SDF / SDG.[24] The USA and Syrian sources point out that a fragmented opposition strengthens Assad's hand.[25] The leader of the DEASH terrorist organization Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was killed in an operation carried out on October 27, 2019 by the USA and Trump made statements about the contributions of Turkey to the operation. While Trump relatively relaxed with the instruction of the operation when the DEASH leader was killed in a period when efforts related to the impeachment process continued, the internal public opnion and elite pressure in the USA for Turkey due to SDF and S400 crises were also relieved

Another miscalculation related to nongovernmental actors is that the opponents in the region have radicalized and strengthened DAESH. The fact that the weapons supplied to the opposition by the USA were acquired by the organizations that adopted the Al-Qaeda ideology such as DAESH and the military training provided to the opposition fighting against the regime all happened after those people joined the same organizations. The support of the regime opponents who brought a burden of billions of dollars to the US budget and the defeat of the DAESH terrorist organization led to a longer

22 Michael Crowley and Carlotta Gall, "In Trump, Turkey's Erdogan Keeps Finding a Sympathetic Ear," New York Times, accessed November 4, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/08/us/politics/trump-erdogan-turkey-visit.html

23 Lara Seligman and Colum Lynch, "As Assad Gains Ground, New Syria Talks Offer Little Hope of Peace," *Foreign Policy*, 2019, accessed January 2, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/12/as-assad-gains-ground-new-syria-talks-offer-little-hope-of-peace/

24 Seligman and Lynch, "As Assad Gains Ground, New Syria Talks Offer Little Hope of Peace"

25 Seligman and Lynch, "As Assad Gains Ground, New Syria Talks Offer Little Hope of Peace"

process due to these events, resulting in increased costs.[26] The weapons, including anti-tank missiles, which were given to the groups supported by the USA, which were seized by the DAESH terrorist organization, are considered to pose serious threats to the US special forces in the region and the groups they support.[27] Participation of the Free Syrian Army from the Free Syrian Army to the DAESH and other al-Qaeda ideologies, as well as the participation of the DAESH terrorist organization in the training given by the US to the Free Syrian Army and Police[2829] caused another controversial issue. Some of the trainees were caught in Syria in a short time by organizations such as Al Nusra that followed the al-Qaeda ideology with their weapons and equipment.[30]

While the international efforts of the USA were prevented by the Russia vetoes before the UN, the solution-based Geneva process was used by Asad to save time and did not have serious consequences in the course of the Civil War. The Astana process, which was initiated in 2017 in the initiative of Russia independent on the USA and other western states, is considered to be more successful in reflecting on the field compared to the Geneva process. The US State Department emphasizes that there was no significant change in Assad's attitude for a solution in the Geneva process.[31] The expectations of the American administrations and elites in the direction that the civil war would end in a short time and that there would be a Libya-like change lost its effect in a short time with the influence of Russia. It is considered that the effect of the terrorist wave supported by the sectarian conflict in the example of Iraq and the ignorance of the sectarian link of the Nusayris towards Assad played a role in the formation of this situation.

**Russia's Strategy in Syria**

The most important factor for Russia to be effective in the Syrian Civil War lies in its approach to this country within the framework of its strategic culture. The most important strategy that emerged after the Cold War, especially during the Putin period, was to stand against the unipolar order. In this context, with the declaration published in 2000, he said that Russia would not allow a unipolar

26 Kenneth M. Pollack, "Building a Better Syrian Opposition Army," Brookings Institution, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Building-a-Better-Syrian-Armyweb.pdf, 23

27 Alex Horton, "ISIS Stole U.S.-Supplied Rockets Weeks after They Arrived in Syria, Report Says," *Washington Post*, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/12/14/how-u-s-weapons-helped-isis-fuel-the-industrial-revolution-of-terrorism

28 Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman, and Michael S. Schmidt, "Behind the Sudden Death of a $1 Billion Secret C.I.A. War in Syria," *New York Times*, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-train-trump.html

29 Erika Solomon, "Syria Rebels Mull Joining Jihadis Amid Russia-backed Regime Gains," *Financial Times*, 2016, https://www.ft.com/content/372f99c6-d16c-11e5-92a1-c5e23ef99c77

30 Paul Mcleary, "The Pentagon Wasted $500 Million Training Syrian Rebels. It's About to Try Again," *Foreign Policy*, 2016

31 Seligman and Lynch, "As Assad Gains Ground, New Syria Talks Offer Little Hope of Peace"

system led by the USA and would promote the multipolar structure.[32] Therefore the USA started to exhibit a stand, especially against its traditional allies and in the backyard against unilateral interventionism. At this point, Russia's Syria strategy was based on two fundamentals. First, it shows its strength using hard power. Secondly, by using its structural power, it tries to protect the legitimacy of both the Assad regime and its existence in the region.

Indeed, Syria has been Russia's most important ally in the Middle East since the Cold War, and their relations have always been at this level. Considering the Tartus Port and the arms trade between the two countries, it is seen that this tradition continues after the Cold War. Additionally, Russia's near abroad policy is featured by increasing its influence to provide stability and security.[33] As a natural consequence of this, it is seen that the protection of the Syrian Regime has a strategic importance. Arms trade has an important place in Russian economy and Syria has been one of its most important customers for years. Therefore, since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, Russia has sold large quantities of weapons to Syria. In other words, the regime of a government in Syria not close to Russia is considered an unacceptable result by Putin and other Russian elites.[34] In that sense, Russia appears to be acting with the awareness that the impact of the Western states on the Syrian Civil War would ne negative in terms of its interests and the extent of the conflict.[35] The most important argument that Russia advocated at this point was that an intervention by the Western states could lead to the emergence of radical movements in the region. Indeed, the increasing radicalization of opposition groups was a subject that Western states did not calculate but that Russia envisaged due to Chechnya experience.

Therefore, in 2015, Assad asked for military and economic assistance from Russia to fight against domestic and foreign opponents. The Russian military aid included land troops, air support and naval support from the port of Tartus. With the support of Russia, the regime took the southern part of Aleppo from the rebels and DAESH which strengthened Russia's hand due to its justified anti-DAESH opposition. Putin carried the military achievements in the diplomatic field and called on the parties for talks involving the UN.[36] It is



32 Foreign Policy Concept, "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm

33 Mehmet S. Erol and Aidarbek Amierbek, "Soğuk Savaş Sonsrası Dönemde Rusya'nın Dış Politikasında Yakın Çevre ve Orta Asya," Türk Dünyası İncelemeleri Dergisi XIV, no. 1 (2014): 157

34 Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: Explaining alignment with a regime in crisis," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 802–3, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12046

35 Matthew D. Crosston, "Cold War and Ayatollah Residues Syria as a Chessboard for Russia, Iran, and the United States," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (2014): 102

36 Joseph Lutta, "How russian intervention in syria redefined the right to protect in armed conflict," *Russian Law Journal* 6, no. 2 (2018): 25–26, https://doi.org/10.17589/2309-8678-2018-6-2-4-38

evaluated that Russia's and the regime's hand was strengthened as the opposition was profoundly dominated by the organizations and groups and jihadists / Radical Salafists / Jihadic Salafists who followed the al-Qaeda ideology[37] and the global hatred towards the ideology of Al-Qaeda caused an implied acceptance for this alliance at the international arena.

The rise of DAESH in the region and the possibility of FTW to return from Europe strengthened the hand of Russia and Assad regime, which struggled with these groups. In addition, the active participation of the soldiers of Iran, which saw a strategic depth in the Civil War in Syria, and the paramilitary group of Jerusalem to the conflict in Syria[38] contributed to Russia's strategic plans. Putin called for an international coalition against terrorist activities in Syria at the UN in 2015.[39] In addition to its military activities, Russia tried to overcome the bottleneck of Assad regime with international and regional diplomatic moves.[40] Lavrov continuously emphasized that Russia was in Syria as a result of the invitation of the legitimate regime.[41]

As a result of this, Russia takes steps to ensure the continuation of the Assad regime against the international community. Russia affected the decisions that were tried to be taken against the regime at the UNSC.[42] Russia made efforts to prevent a Libya-like initiative to be taken for Syria. In other words, Russia opposed an international operation to change the current regime. Lavrov stated that it was very dangerous to try a Libya-like initiative for Syria and other countries of the region.[43] Russia, along with China, vetoed the plan, including the regime change in Syria, at the UNSC in February 2012.[44] Similarly, Russia vetoed UN resolutions proposing military action against Syria.

At this point, it can be claimed that Russia uses its structural power more effectively than the USA. In the end, non-military measures are the most important aspect of Russian warfare.[45] After the chemical gas attack that oc-

37 Thomas R. Pickering, "A Diplomat's Perfect Storm: How to Move Forward in Syria," *PRISM* 4 (2014): 8

38 W. A. Terrill, "Iran's Strategy for Saving Asad," *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 2 (2015): 230–33, https://doi.org/10.3751/69.2.1

39 Julie Wilhelmsen, "Putin's Power Revisited: How Identity Positions and Great Power Interaction Condition Strategic Cooperation on Syria," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 7 (2019): 1091, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1602594

40 Wilhelmsen, "Putin's Power Revisited," 1101

41 Wilhelmsen, "Putin's Power Revisited," 1102

42 Shahram Akbarzadeh and Arif Saba, "UN paralysis over Syria: The responsibility to protect or regime change?," *International Politics* 56, no. 4 (2019): 542, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-018-0149-x

43 Allison, "Russia and Syria," 798

44 Lundgren, "Mediation in Syria," 278

45 Mehmet S. Erol and Şafak Oğuz, "Hybrid Warfare Studies and Russia's example in Crimea," *Gazi Akademik Bakış* 9, no. 17 (2015): 275

curred in March 2013, the tension in the international arena reached the highest level. Obama warned the regime and warned that the use of chemical weapons was their red line. The regime denied its involvement in the incident, and Putin approached more cautiously demanding the UN to assign independent investigators for investigating the use of chemical weapons. The perpetrators could not be identified in the report prepared by the UN.[46] Following Obama's harsh comments on the use of chemical weapons, Russia proposed that Syria's chemical weapons be put under control, and the US Secretary of State John Kerry stated that Syria's chemical weapons stock should be destroyed.

As mentioned above, there were different views on the military intervention in the US public opinion and the congress, while the consensus in the Russian bureaucracy and the public was that such an intervention was not to be done. As a result, these formulas did not come true because the USA had a restricted capacity and could not use its structural strength effectively. As a result, Russia became more effective and Russia and the USA agreed on the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons under the supervision of UN. Putin's decisiveness, Obama's reaction to military intervention in the Middle East and especially in Syria, and Russia's acceptance of the proposal due to the possibility of failure to approve the military intervention at the Congress[47] strengthened Russia's hand more in Syria in perceptional terms.

In short, Russia made significant efforts to keep international initiatives towards the Syrian crisis at the political solution point. While doing this, Russia reinforced its presence in the region with hard power on one hand while struggling for a political consensus with an extensive participation on the other hand. Iran started the Astana process with Kazakhstan and Turkey in 2017 which was more influential in the region and could be an alternative to the West due to the deficient reflection of the process in the field during the Geneva negotiations. It benefited especially from incuding Turkey in the process, which supported the Free Syrian army consisting of groups opposing Russia and Assad[48] and the fact that the USA could not calculate Turkey's sensitivity against SDG / SDF linked to the PKK / KCK terrorist organization. In this way, it both benefited from the disagreement within NATO and invited the legitimate ones among the non-state actors to the table. Russia also confined the Al-Qaeda-linked groups in this Idlib region and declared this region as Tension Relief Zone with Turkey.[49] Russia continued to carry out military operations with the regime in the Tension Relief Zone and continued to weaken these groups.



46 Lutta, "How russian intervention in syria redefined the right to protect in armed conflict," 17–18

47 Pickering, "A Diplomat's Perfect Storm: How to Move Forward in Syria," 9–10

48 Marwan Kabalan, "Can the Astana Process Survive the US Withdrawal from Syria?," 2019, accessed January 12, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/astana-process-survive-withdrawal-syria-190215144132776. html

49 Kabalan, "Can the Astana Process Survive the US Withdrawal from Syria?"

**Effects on International Community**

These attitudes of the USA and Russia lead us to examine the question of how the two countries use their structural strength. Examination of the policies that the USA and Russia produced against the developments in the Syrian Civil War with the countries in UN and other countries and their policies established at the international level is important in terms of evaluating the contributors to the institutional and intellectual policy making of the two countries. Considering the above situations, it will be seen that Russia uses the international community more effectively as mentioned in the related section.[50] In the first place, the decision of the UN Security Council in February 2012 after the emergence of the Syrian crisis and its transformation into a severe humanitarian crisis was not implemented due to the vetoes of Russia and China.[51] Instead, with the decision no. 66 / 253 of February 2012 taken by the United Nations General Assembly, it was decided to act collaboratively wih the Arab Union and Kofi Annan, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, was appointed as Syria Special Representative in order to find a solution to the increasing violence in Syria.[52]

Both the UN and Kofi Annan, Syria special representative of the Arab Union created a plan with six articles for establishing peace in Syria, even if not intending to end the Assad regime, but dominantly in line with the demands of the opposition. In summary, Annan's Peace Plan emphasized to start a political process that would meet the demands of opponents and the public, providing a cease-fire under UN supervision for the protection of civilians, taking the army troops from the residential areas of the regime, taking necessary measures for the referral of humanitarian aid primarily, ending the arbitrary interrogations and arrests, necessary measures taken by the parties to allow the press to carry out their duties, and ensuring the regime respect the right for political convening and performing peaceful demonstrations. The Syrian regime initially stated that it accepted the plan, but it was not implemented long-term.[53] After Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Brahimi, Staffan de Mistura and finally Geir O. Pedersen were appointed as special representatives in February 2019.[54]

50 Muriel Asseburg, Wolfram Lacher, and Mareike Transfeld, "Mission impossible? UN mediation in Libya, Syria and Yemen" (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit, Berlin, 2018), https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-60446-4, 34

51 Asseburg, Lacher and Transfeld, "Mission impossible? UN mediation in Libya, Syria and Yemen," 34

52 UN Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, "Special Envoy Syria," accessed January 26, 2020, https://dppa.un.org/en/mission/special-envoy-syria

53 BBC Turkish, "Suriye Annan Planı'nı kabul etti," 2012, accessed January 26, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2012/03/120327_syria_annan

54 UN Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, "Special Envoy Syria"

During the Kofi Annan period, a road map was created in Geneva in 2012 regarding the peace process, including the transition government with the participation in the states that could be effective in the Syrian crisis. This roadmap, which was accepted as the Geneva Communiqué, could not end the crisis in Syria due to discussions regarding the situation of Assad in the political process.[55] During the period of Staffan de Mistura, UNGK made a decision in 2015 numbered 2254, which included a roadmap on the political solution to the Syrian Crisis in 2015.[56] In the decision, the emphasis was placed on the humanitarian situation, physical destruction and increased sectarianism in Syria, it was stated that the Geneva Communiqué should be fully implemented and problems should be resolved through the political process, and the diplomatic efforts of the International Syrian Support Group were encouraged. In the decision, there was a call for a ceasefire in accordance with the Geneva Communiqué, preparation of the constitution in line with international transparency and accountability, maximum participation of the government and the opposition in these processes, the organization of fair elections, the support of members of the International Syrian Support Group and all member states for the ceasefire, effective fight against the actors of the terrorism strategy, primarily Al-Qaeda, DEASH and HTS, giving the necessary permits to ensure that the humanitarian aid reach to the intended destinations, not to target the civilians, and acting within the scope of International Law.[57] Despite all these calls, the Syrian parties have come together eight times in Geneva, but the expected result has not been achieved. Therefore, the solution suggestions supported by the USA failed at the end of the process.

In contrast, the expected impact of the International Communty started to be seen when Russia, Turkey and Iran began to sit around the table because the ceasefire and the gathering of the parties happened with these processes. With the joint initiatives of Turkey, Russia, and Iran usual Astana negotiations were started from January 2017 for the implementation of ceasefire in Syria and in addition to the usual Astana negotiations, ten more meeting was held in order to ensure the participation of more parties from Syria. At the 6th Astana meeting held in September 2017, Idlib was accepted as Tension Relief Zone, and observation points were formed, consisting of military personnel to monitor the cease-fire violations and to be responsible for preventing conflict between parties.[58] At the meeting held on January 30, 2018 in Sochi within the scope of Astana Negotiations, it was decided to establish a Constitutional

55 Lundgren, "Mediation in Syria," 276
56 Lundgren, "Mediation in Syria," 278
57 United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 2254" (United Nations Security Council, 2015), https://unscr/files/2015/02254.pdf
58 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Türkiye - Suriye Siyasi İlişkileri," accessed October 28, 2019, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey%e2%80%93syria.en.mfa

Committee for political solution. The Constitutional Committee, where the opposition committee was chaired by Hadi El Bahra, and the regiome committee was chaired by Ahmed Kuzbari was declared to be esestablished on September 23, 2019 and it was decided to hold its first meeting at the UN office on September 30, 2019.[59] Although efforts towards a political solution continue in Syria, millions of people have been forcibly displaced and conflicts have been going on for 8 years.

For these reasons, on one side the international community is represented by Russia and Iran in the Syrian Civil War, on the other side Turkey entered the process, which came closer to Russia, but not the most effective force of NATO, that is the United States, has entered into more converging process in Turkey circuit with Russia. In this way, Russia has formed the legitimacy of the solution on the one hand, and it has received a medium-sized state as a counterpart, not a superpower on the other hand.

**Conclusion**

The Syrian Civil War caused not only a humanitarian tragedy but also the emergence of the non-state actors in the region, namely DAESH and Al-Qaeda. Thus, the global war on terror shifted from Afghanistan to Syria. Therefore, the systemic stimuli forced both Russia and the USA to shift their attention to the region regarding their security. Yet, both countries responded differently from one another due to their domestic structures and calculations.

At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, while the strategic plans of the USA for the Middle East, whose perception and security perception shifted to distant Asia and the Pacific overlapped the Arab Spring, it is observed that the decisions taken in the Syrian crisis were the scene of conflict between leaders, diplomatic bureaucracy and elites. The Obama doctrine as the cornerstones of these strategic deviations can be listed as Trump's disabling the strategic culture in decision making processes. In this way, it is seen that the US, which is the superpower, is increasingly reflected in its foreign conflicts. It is seen that the USA made important mistakes in this process. While starting the fight in Syria with the Free Syrian Army fighting and Turkey, the continuation of SDG / SDF affiliated to PKK / KCK terrorist organization caused controversial issues regarding NATO's survival. In addition, the relations with non-state actors further increased his legitimacy, let alone wear the Assad regime, because the militants of the opposition groups supported by the USA have lost their armed or military capacity to radical movements over time. So there was a result that even the US itself did not expect.

59 Yasin Demirci, "Suriye Krizinde "Anayasa Komitesi" Dönemeci," Anadolu Ajansı, accessed October 28, 2019, https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/info/info/infografik/15990

It is observed that Russia is acting more consistently in Syrian crisis, simply because Russia acted with its strategic culture. As a result of its alliance with Syria, Russia continued its support for the regime in all areas from the Cold War to the present day. As a result of this long-lasting alliance, there is an important link between the two countries, not only in the context of leaders, but also in the context of security and diplomatic bureaucracy and intellectual elites. It also positively affected the mode of action in the crisis between these two countries. While keeping the international community on the table, Russia also acted in the military and strategic area with the regime and Iran, making the opposition suspicious at the point of altitude with al-Qaeda and PKK / KCK terrorist organizations. For this reason, Russia did not fall behind using its hard power. Despite the aircraft crisis, Turkey has started the process of Astana working closely with the US ally. In other words, they used the structural power effectively. In this regard, Russian leaders and elites are thought to associate Moscow's security and interests with the Assad regime and the USA ignored this issue.

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