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Oil, Gas and Geopolitical Dimensions of the Syrian Civil War: A Neoclassical Realist Assessment

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Sciences in International Relations and Security Studies at The University of Waikato

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Abstract

This thesis considers the geopolitical dimensions of the Syrian Civil War. It addresses three key questions, including: (1) how sectarianism in Syria has impacted the geopolitical landscape; (2) how Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have responded to political instability in Syria; (3) and how these stakeholder states have positioned themselves to gain influence over the global oil and gas trade in Syria, which has regional and international implications.

Neoclassical realism is used to examine the role sectarianism has played in causing and perpetuating the Syrian Civil War. Historically, sectarianism has always played a role in the Syrian geopolitical landscape, but prior to the Syrian Civil War the Ba’athist party, under Bashar al-Assad’s leadership, was able to balance the interests of competing sectarian groups using the threat of military force and the promise of Pan-Arab liberal reform. The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings were the catalyst for the Syrian Civil War, and highlighted sectarian tensions between Alawite Shia, Sunni and Kurds. While initially united in their opposition to the Assad Government Arab Spring protesters split along sectarian lines, seeking support from allied states in the Middle East. Balance of power theory and the Heartland theory are used to explain the policy decisions of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in response to political instability in Syria. It is argued that these stakeholder states utilised existing sectarian alliances within Syria to gain strategic influence over Syria’s land power. This contains the potential for Syria to act as an energy corridor and makes it a contested territory for two competing pipeline projects that pre-date the Civil War: Iran-Iraq pipeline, favoured by Iran, and the Qatar-Turkey pipeline, favoured by Saudi Arabia and Turkey.
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Introduction

With the promise of the Arab Spring and the attempt to achieve a new realignment of Middle East domestic state civil order in 2011, the political climate that had held Syria together for 40 years dissolved in violence. Pre-existing divisions that were suppressed re-emerged. Different cultural, social, economic and religious agendas in the domestic sphere lent weight to the political aspirations of different domestic groups, and external actors seeking to secure power and achieve their geopolitical goals intervened. Domestic groups sought ties with external powers with which they shared interests. At the same time, they set themselves against other groups with opposing geopolitical economic, military and domestic objectives.

This thesis considers some of the important regional geopolitical factors facing Syria prior to its Civil War (before 2011) and during the Civil War (2011-2018). The thesis begins by examining dominant paradigms in political science, and outlines the rationale for the adoption of a neoclassical realist theoretical framework to answer the primary research question: how has sectarianism in Syria impacted the geopolitical landscape? It also uses balance of power theory, and the Heartland theory (Gray, 2004; Mackinder, 2014) to consider two other research questions: how have the states of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia responded to political instability in Syria? What strategies have the Middle East states of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia used to position themselves for influence of the global oil and gas trade? As such, this thesis considers the domestic political landscape of Syria; regional state responses; and links to the global oil and gas trade.

Syria is important militarily and economically and it has the potential to provide external states with advantages in the regional and international spheres. Continued political instability threatens those same potential benefits. The ‘distribution of power is comprised of many factors amongst them economic power, military power, domestic resources, population etc. However, this thesis is only considering one element of the distribution of power – the relative sectarian balance (by population size). This is because it is the focus of research question one and word limits do not allow it to extend beyond this to a full explanation of the Balance of Power.

There are a number of external states with interests in Syria, and this thesis considers three of these stakeholder states: Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. These states are in a web of alliances. Iran is an ally of the Assad Government (and ally with Russia); Saudi Arabia is allied to Syrian opposition forces (and ally with the US); and Turkey is as an ally to Syrian opposition forces. These three states have economic, military and domestic interests in Syria, which stand in opposition to each and which serve to maintain conflict. Furthermore, Syria could potentially act as a key energy corridor for surrounding Middle Eastern states, as the construction of Qatar-Turkey pipeline would benefit Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey, whereas the construction of Iran-Iraq pipeline would benefit Iran, Iraq and Syria. Both these pipelines stand in opposition to one
another and were key issues prior to the Syrian Civil War. The story of these pipelines is outlined and considered in this thesis, as they are key motivations behind the actions of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia in Syria.

The focus on Middle East regional geopolitics instead of the global international context was a pragmatic decision due to the word limit. While regional and international spheres of geopolitics are important subject matters, the reason the regional sphere is being analysed in favour over the global sphere is that the largest effects of the Syrian Civil War have been on Syria and its Middle East neighbours. Impacts on the international system are longer term, but do not call for an immediate response as those that plague the Middle East. For this reason, the geopolitical analysis of the Middle East has taken precedence in this thesis.

Scope of the Thesis

Focus

Neoclassical realism, balance of power theory, and the Heartland theory, are used in this thesis to address three key questions. These are:

(1) How has sectarianism in Syria impacted the geopolitical landscape?
(2) How have the states of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia responded to political instability in Syria?
(3) What strategies have the Middle East states of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia used to position themselves for influence of the global oil and gas trade?

Chapter One will provide an overview of the International Relations Paradigms and their Relevance to the Syrian Civil War. The primary theory known as Neoclassical Realism is outlined to examine state behaviours and how they form policy decisions. Neoclassical Realism is combined with Heartland theory, as this theory is compatible with Neoclassical Realism. Heartland theory focuses on material resources and so is intended to supplement the use of Neoclassical Realism, and thus enhance the explanatory power of the chosen theoretical framework. From this, theoretical framework Neoclassical Realism supplemented with Heartland and balance of power theories is used throughout the thesis to consider conditions prior and during the Syrian Civil War itself, and examines how external actors have impacted the geopolitical landscape.

Chapter Two will provide the reader with a historical overview and highlight the Sectarian Players. Firstly, it will outline the pre-civil war failure to enact liberal reform of the Assad Government. Secondly, the Sunni and Shia populations of the Middle East and the internal placement of ethno-religious groups within Syria will be outlined. Thirdly, the political environment of the Syrian domestic sphere is outlined. Fourthly, the politically significant sectarian groups within Syria, comprised of the Arab Alawite (Shia), Arab Sunni and Kurds are outlined. Fifthly, the underlying
geopolitical aspects that contributed to the start of the Syrian Civil War are outlined. Finally, a historical overview and sectarian players will be discussed to provide context for answering question one: how has sectarianism in Syria had impacted the geopolitical landscape?

Chapter Three will examine the geopolitical significance of Syria in terms of its geography and two potential pipelines which explain some of the Middle East stakeholder state interests in Syria. It will firstly discuss the application of Mackinder’s Heartland theory to outline Syria’s importance, with an emphasis on land power. Secondly, the significance of oil and gas to economic stability is examined in Syria and its effect on the Middle East. Thirdly, it will examine the competition of Iran-Iraq and Qatar-Turkey oil and gas pipeline proposals through Syria as a potential energy corridor, to outline the groups that position themselves for influence of the global oil and gas trade. Finally, the context of the geopolitical significance of Syria, in the of the case of gas and oil pipelines will be discussed to provide context for answering question three what strategies have the Middle East states of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia used to position themselves for influence of global oil and gas trade?

Chapter Four will examine the three Middle East stakeholder states of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Firstly, it will examine the case of Iran: during the time of pre-civil war and civil war periods; explain Iran’s domestic sphere, sectarian considerations and regional security; and outline the geopolitical significance of oil and gas to Iran and discuss Iran’s strategic position. Secondly, it will examine the case of Saudi Arabia: during the time of pre-civil war and civil war periods; explain Saudi Arabia’s domestic sphere, sectarian considerations and regional security; and outline the geopolitical significance of oil and gas to Saudi Arabia and discuss Saudi Arabia’s strategic position. Thirdly, it will examine the case of Turkey: during the time of pre-civil war and civil war periods; explain Turkey’s domestic sphere, sectarian considerations and regional security; and outline the geopolitical significance of oil and gas to Turkey and discuss Turkey’s strategic position. This will be followed by a timeline that outlines positive and negative actions during the Syrian Civil War to the Assad Government. Finally, the case studies of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey will seek to answer how have the states of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia responded to political instability in Syria? And what strategies have the Middle East states of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia used to position themselves for influence of the global oil and gas trade?

Chapter Five will seek to apply Neoclassical Realism theoretical framework to the context of the Syrian Civil War, with the context outlined in chapter two, three and four. Firstly, it will discuss the history of the Ba’athist Party and Assad Government takeover (1966-2010) and outline the connections between the role of Individual Leadership with neoclassical realism, to discuss how sectarianism in Syria impacted the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. Secondly, it will discuss connecting sectarianism with neoclassical realism, to outline the sectarian alliances that existed prior to Syria’s Civil War, and discussion on
Heartland theory and the connection of land power to Syria’s significance as an energy corridor. Thirdly, it will discuss how Internal widespread disenfranchisement sectarian groups who were angered by the lack of liberal and economic reform, and outraged at the Assad Government’s use of military force to resolve the Arab Spring instead of responding with more peaceful means which was the catalyst for the Syrian Civil War, and how these sectarian opposition groups sought out Middle East states for military and economic support.

This is followed by an examination of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey’s policy response to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War overtime (2011-2018). Connecting neoclassical realism and balance of power theory to explain the progress of Middle East and Russian (as a part of Iran’s response bring Russia into the civil war) state’s responses to instability and driven by the incentives of constructing a pipeline with the post-civil war Government of Syria answering question three what strategies have the Middle East states of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia used to position themselves for influence of the global oil and gas trade? Finally, an examination of the neoclassical framework will demonstrate distribution of power within Syria and the Middle East has affected domestic and international perceptions, influencing the behaviour of Shia-led and Sunni-led states. Discussion on neoclassical realism through the policy decisions of Syria and other Middle East states in regards lean towards incentives and away from threats affected their sectarian motivated state behaviours initiating responses of their own policy decisions which sought to strengthen sectarian allies and gain end the Syrian Civil War with their own pipeline interests acting as an economic incentive as well as sectarian security.

In conclusion this thesis will argue that sectarianism has impacted Syria, as it has plunged it into civil war by undermining the authority of the state, and pitted sectarian groups against each other in the attempt to gain land power and ultimately dominate the domestic geopolitical landscape. Moreover, the states of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia can be seen to have responded to political instability in Syria by strategically supporting sectarian groups whose interests align with their own geopolitical aspirations for influence of the global oil and gas trade. Iran’s alliance with the Assad Government was motivated by its desire to secure the construction of the Iran-Iraq pipeline, whereas Turkey and Saudi Arabia hoped to secure an alternative government with stronger Sunni ties to see the Qatar-Turkey pipeline constructed. The Middle Eastern states of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have thus utilised sectarian alliances to increase their influence over any potential post-war Syrian Government, as doing so will give them a strategic position of influence for control over the global oil and gas trade.
Chapter One

International Relations Paradigms and their Relevance to the Syrian Civil War

This chapter will outline the three significant theoretical frameworks from the field of international relations and political science: liberalism, constructivism and realism. These theories function throughout this thesis as analytical tools to consider the contextual history of the Arab Spring and political instability within Syria. Such analysis will be supplemented by an examination of classical realist, neorealist and neoclassical realist approaches. Neoclassical realism. Neoclassical realism is the primary theoretical framework employed throughout this thesis to examine Syria’s recent history, the impacts of sectarianism, and the significance of oil and gas to the Middle Eastern and European region. This chapter will also highlight the impact of the Arab Spring on the Syrian Civil War and the geopolitical context of the wider Middle East. Drawing on different theoretical models, this chapter considers the links between domestic, regional, and global geopolitical influences within the Syrian context (Rathbun, 2008). Particularly through the ‘Heartland’, Balance of Power, and Neoclassical Realist theories. This thesis is only considering one element of the distribution of power – the relative sectarian balance (by population size). This is because it is the focus of research question one and word limits do not allow it to extend beyond this to a full explanation of the balance of power.

This chapter will highlight the impact of the Arab Spring on the Syrian Civil War and Middle Eastern geopolitical context. It presents possible alternatives of international relations paradigms, and ideologies, but proposes ‘the Heartland’ and the balance of power theories, are the best suited theoretical frameworks with which to address the interlocking facets that contribute to the ongoing Syrian Civil War. This chapter makes the case that neoclassical realism is an appropriate theory to investigate the links between domestic, regional and global geopolitical influences (Rose, 1998). It therefore explains why neoclassical realism, is superior to the alternative theoretical paradigms, such as liberalism, neoliberalism, constructivism, classical realism, and neorealism, when applied to the geopolitical sphere of Syria, and demonstrates how the Syrian Civil War can be interpreted by neoclassical realism as affecting and being affected by the Middle East, and its relations to the international oil and gas trade.

Neoclassical realism suggests that the international sphere exists in a constant state of anarchy. The absence of an international sovereign is attributed as a primary cause of war (Rathbun, 2008). These claims posed by neoclassical realism will be examined against the geopolitical positions of Syria, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia in relation to the Syrian Civil War. This theory also serves to highlight the role of global oil and gas trade as it has influenced the geopolitics of the Syrian Civil War (Maniruzzaman, 2009). This analysis is intended to expand the reader’s understanding of
the military, economic and domestic factors that have contributed to the Syrian Civil War, as well as their potential for resolution. (Goddard & Nexon, 2016). This chapter will examine the limitations of alternative theoretical frameworks and explain the use of a Neoclassical Realism as the primary theoretical framework throughout this thesis. Liberalism considers economic and cultural interdependence as key factors in the international system (Russett, Layne, Spiro, & Doyle, 1995). Neoliberalism provides an explanation of the ways in which military-enacted democracy motivates groups to pursue economic and cultural interdependence (Kegley & Hermann, 1995). Constructivism’s assumptions that socially constructed character are a means of theoretical framework to explain the international system, and need not be shaped by constant structure will be examined (Dunne, 1995). This thesis questions the constructivist critique of materialism used by realist and liberalist arguments, as well as its focus on a more collectivist approach to security in the international system (Guzzini, 2000; Wendt, 1999). This thesis offers an explanation of three strands of realism: classical realism, neorealism and neoclassical realism (Rose, 1998; Taliaferro, 2000). This chapter examines the similarities and differences of these strands of realism, and the ways in which these theories align with ‘the Heartland theory’, balance of power theory, concept of land power, and power balance. This comparative analysis examines economic resource transport and political influence within Syria (Paul, Wirtz, & Fortmann, 2004). This chapter concludes with a critique of liberalism (Greenwood & Jenkins, 2013), neoliberalism (Börzel, Risse, & Dandashly, 2015; Rustin & Massey, 2014), constructivism (Smith, Hadfield, & Dunne, 2016) and realism (Alden & Aran, 2017). Highlighting the use of the balance of power and Heartland theories (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018; Toft, 2007) to explain why neoclassical realism is best suited to inform this research (Jervis, 1999; Nuruzzaman, 2018).

Liberalism

Liberalism originates from philosophical theory and finds its roots in international relations theory, born out of political opposition to Monarchies in the 17th and 18th centuries, also known as the Enlightenment period. Liberalism could be used to facilitate a peaceful resolution to violent conflict as cultural and economic factors act to secure a collective standard in geopolitics, and in doing so neutralise competitive relations between states (Gabay, 2004; Polišenský, 1971).

A key objective of liberalism is to encourage the interdependence of states and for these states to work together as a collective with shared goals (Wendt, 1994). The interdependence of states relies on three key factors: cultural, economic and fiscal relationships between states (Abizadeh, 2002); that state security is not the main objective of state-to-state associations (Grieco, 1988); and the use of the military force should be regarded as a last resort (Chandler, 2004). It asserts that states can work together and collaborate under the guidance of international institutions, and that well-operating international institutions will prosper
and conflict will decline. Prosperity acts as a deterrent to intrastate and interstate conflict. International institutions are therefore considered the main geopolitical actors rather than states (Schimmelfennig, 2000).

There are two main branches of liberalism, liberalism itself and neoliberalism. Both branches share unifying principles: A consideration of international relations beyond power politics; (Chomsky, 1999) Criticism of the military principle of the realist security paradigm (Moravcsik, 1997); And advocacy for a collaborative policy and international co-operation agenda (Keohane, 2014). The theory that authority comes from international companies, groups and non-state actors. These actors all influence the preferences of the state, and in doing so influence state policy (Bernstein & Cashore, 2007). What unites liberal theories is the belief that international relations operate best when international institutions work to maximise interdependence between states (Fougner, 2006).

**Liberalism interpretations**

Liberalism fails to provide a convincing explanation of Syria’s Civil War and broader regional geopolitics. Particularly as it does not explain the failure of international institutions to prevent war through a collective response to the conflict in Syria (Newman & Aloyo, 2018). The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is divided over the best course of action, stalling efforts to achieve peace (Griffin, 2018). If international institutions are the main actors within the international system, and if peace is their ultimate objective, they have failed to address the Syrian Civil War. This war is a conflict that may conclude due to state military power and not as a result of international institutional actions (Weiss, 2014). Liberalism views matters of international accountability as paramount, but are instead secondary to the fundamental interests of UN member states (Morris, 2013; Wood, 2017). This means International institutions have not been able to bring an end to the Syrian Civil War because they wield no power over the state of Syria in the international system or individual member states. This re-enforces the notion that the international system is anarchic and no decisive authority exists above that of the state (White, Cunningham, & Beardsley, 2018).

The persistence of the Syrian Civil War goes against the liberal objective of peace and is an issue which has yet to be solved by international institutions (Duncombe & Dunne, 2018). Liberalism is good at addressing collaborative approaches, yet this approach has failed within Syria, therefore military response is required (Hashemi & Sahrapeyma, 2018). The use of military force does not hold much weight in the liberal paradigm, however it is a prominent feature of the Syrian Civil War (Heydemann, 2018). Liberalism is insufficient to address the geopolitical created factors in the Syrian Civil War, which are essential to understanding the origins of this war and its persistence. (Friedman & Thrall, 2018).
The failure of international institutions to accommodate refugees, despite international mandates for adequate welfare of Syrian refugees, affirms the insufficiency of international institutions to exert autonomy over the Syrian Civil War (Ostrand, 2015). Liberalism suggests that states are constrained into international institutions within the international system (Mearsheimer, 1994). International institutions do not have unimpeded authority if states do not cede their autonomy. Therefore, the Liberalist view of institutional supremacy is false (Mearsheimer, 1994). This is because international institutions require states to comply, and do not exert decisive authority over states. The liberalist assumption that international institutions are the main actors in international system is debatable (Brown, 2018). So long as authority rests with self-determining states that act in will of their own self-interests, liberalism will remain unable to account for the Syrian Civil War (Abubakar, 2017; Johnson, 2018).

Liberalism fails to address the role of cultural and economic ties in sustaining the Syrian Civil War. A premise of Liberalism is the belief that culture and economic ties should have the ability to stop instead of increase violence, without military intervention (Rukavishnikov & Pugh, 2018). Iran shares cultural and economic ties with the Assad Government and is funding the Syrian Civil War to continue, not conclude, through peaceful means (Heydemann, 2018; Oktav, Dal, & Kurşun, 2018). This directly opposes the principles of the liberal paradigm. If collective ties based on culture and economic factors could shift international relations towards peace, as liberalism claims, the Syrian Civil War would have been resolved by now (Johny, 2018). Yet cultural and economic factors are fueling the competing interests of neighbouring Middle East states, ensuring the continuance of the Syrian Civil War. Liberalism fails to address how these ties are exacerbating the problem instead of providing solutions without military force (Guéhenno, 2018; Krickovic & Weber, 2018).

**Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism became a dominant school over liberalism splitting from the liberalist paradigm in the late twentieth century (Letizia, 2017). This departure was a response to the belief that democracy can be spread by military action, as democracies do fight in conflicts (Duffield, 1999). The counter to this argument, however, is that very few conflicts are fought by democracies against democracies due to their shared economic ties, which are established and maintained by capitalism (Starr, 1997). Democracies depend on their economies and as such will seek peace diplomatically rather than resort to conflict, as this is “bad for business” (Larke, 2012) As Neoliberalism asserts, democratic individuals are not inclined to view individuals from other democracies as hostile opponents because of their shared common values and morals (Béland, 2005; Street, Inthorn, & Scott, 2015). Opposing democratic state’s in political conflicts are therefore less likely to be perceived as enemies. The priority of a democratic state is to protect its own security, political and
economic objectives (Axtmann, 2004; Connolly, 2013). Peaceful solutions amongst democratic societies thus are more likely than military solutions (Hegre, Bernhard, & Teorell, 2018).

Neoliberalism’s interpretations of the Syrian Civil War

The neoliberal paradigm considers the role of the military with Syrian conflict, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of civil war than that offered by liberalism (Godfrey, Brewis, Grady, & Grocott, 2014). A weakness of a neoliberalism analysis of the Syrian Civil War is its assertion that war and military application can be legitimate to proliferate democracy (Nash, 2012). Syria is not viewed as a democracy, and also lacks the factors necessary to qualify as a democracy, particularly as sectarian groups seek to divide and fragment Syria (Cortés & Merheb-Ghanem, 2018). Though Rojava, which is a Kurdish autonomous region with the goal of full secessionist state, may be seeking to establish some form of democratic pseudo-state apart from Syrian governance. This would not be democracy throughout the state of Syria (Schiano, 2015). Instead, it would involve the secession of a small part of the former state, by Syrian Kurds. Stakeholder regional states Turkey and Iran have mobilized their military forces in the Syrian Civil War not to spread democracy, but for their state’s own geopolitical (Lynch, 2018; Oktav et al., 2018).

Neoliberalism also fails to account for the Syrian Civil War and the failure of the Arab Spring. It was unsuccessful in almost all nations and served to initiate hostilities that escalated into war in some countries (Lynch, 2018). It was competing states, instead of international institutions, that intervened out of their geopolitical self-interest, and not out of a desire to spread democratic ideals (Hinnebusch, 2018a). Cultural and economic aspects of neoliberalism can be better addressed and explained with more clarity with the addition of military factors (Hîncu, 2015). Furthermore, neoliberalism denies that a balance of power exists because globalization, international institutions and democratic peace have transformed the international system, shifting it away from the domain of power politics (Story, 2018). If balance of power theory attributes can be accounted for and applied to the Syrian Civil War, then the neoliberalist sub-field is ill-equipped to address the issues of the Syrian Civil War as compared to the neoclassical realist sub-field (Barker, 2018; Fearon, 2018; Hinnebusch, 2018b).

Constructivism

Constructivism asserts that international relations are constructed through social and historical mechanisms (Reus-Smit, 1999). For constructivists, International relations are not shaped by factors like human nature, instead, constructivism focuses on socially constructed character (Wendt, 1999). Social constructivism suggests that features of human existence are not inherently natural, but rather learned and produced through social practices. (Wendt, 1992). Constructivism is a critical framework that exists
in opposition to both realist and liberal paradigms (Guzzini & Leander, 2005; Risse-Kappen, 1995).

Constructivism asserts that state identities are the main determinant that shapes the behaviour of these states (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). As such, the identities and interests of a state are crucial guiding principles that inform the actions of any given state (Hopf, 1998). Constructivism highlights the flaws in neorealism and neoliberalist arguments, which focus on material factors (He, 2008). Constructivism rejects the assumption that the international system exists in anarchy as reasonable motivation of the state or international actors (Hurd, 1999). Constructivism suggests that it is necessary to consider the identity and concerns of international actors as a central focus of analysis: the interplay of competing international actors takes precedence over the self-interested actions of a state within this theoretical framework (Bueger & Gadinger, 2018). Constructivism asserts that actors, ideas and material possessions are viewed differently by different actors and it is these key differences of meanings the characterise a constructivism analysis (Smith, 2001). Ideas and meaning are important features of constructivism – more so than the actors themselves (Coen & Pegram, 2018; Wendt, 1992). Constructivists argue that changes in the nature of social interaction amongst states would affect a rudimentary shift in the direction of increased international security (Meyer, 2005).

An important feature of constructivism is that of intersubjective understandings between actors (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016). This is instrumental to the social process of constructivism the emphasises the relationship between actors (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016). Wendt states that “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt, 1992). If anarchy is indeed what states ‘make of it’ (Wendt, 1992), then the war that anarchy generates does not have a fixed meaning between corresponding states, but rather is determined by the ideologies and beliefs of respective state actors. States subjectively interpret conflict and, there can be no uniting understand of what qualifies as anarchy, as such, anarchy does not equal perpetual conflict (Wendt, 1992).

The structure of the state matters in terms of both its actions and the social practices of the state in question. Constructivism reflects the realist-based assumption that the international system is structured on the state behaviours, suggesting that the main geopolitical actors are states (Hall, 1993). The constructivist assumption focuses social relationships between states behaviour However, its account is too abstract because it does not constrain its analysis to state domestic, economic and military factors, motivating state behaviours and policy decisions (Hopf, 1998). In place of constant variables and universal principles, there is recognition of a lack of constant structure in constructivism (Best, 1993).

Alexander Wendt purported that constructivism, “does not predict whether two states will be friends or foes, will recognise each other’s sovereignty, will have dynastic ties, will be revisionist or status quo
powers, and so on” (Wendt, 1992). Such assertions require evidence of the main actor’s identities and interests (Wendt, 1995). Constructivism asserts that if states are convinced of the idea of collective security then security competition in the international system would be a less competitive one (Mearsheimer, 1994). Ideally, the increase of one state’s security would not be viewed by other states as a threat, because all states would be sharing a cohesive interest in security. Therefore, the increase in the security of one state would serve to increase the security for all states (Kets de Vries, 2011).

**Constructivism’s interpretation of the Syrian Civil War**

Although a useful theoretical model, constructivism is best applied to the Syrian Civil War alongside theoretical models interested in the material means through which war is enacted. According to Maja Zehfuss, (Zehfuss, 2002) constructivism is theoretical model inadequate to explain the Syrian Civil War. It places prominence on the social interactions and dynamics between actors in the international system without being able to establish a standalone structure in international relations theory (Zehfuss, 2002). Constructivism emphasises the idea that states and/or international institutions do not always make rational choices. This suggests that constructivists doubt the existence of a rational structure within the international system (Howard & Stark, 2018; Wendt, 1999). As the social aspects of civil war are in constant flux, it is near impossible to focus on these factors as a stable measure of conflict. The perception and interpretation of social realities differs among constructivists which often produces contradictory conclusions (Fromm, 2018). Constructivism suggests that belief can shape reality (Morin & Paquin, 2018). Peace as a collective social construct is based on the terms of each actor in the international system. Peace as a collective social construct is based on the individual understanding of what qualifies as peace according to any given actor within the international system. Peace as a concept differs according to each individual and thus, there is always the potential for conflicting interpretations of peace— or any given concept— to occur. The peace therefore demanded by each actor does not necessarily align with another’s’ terms and interests (Stedman & Rothchild, 1996). Constructivism considers the social factors contributing to the decisions and political actions of any given state, and the ways in which varying individuals conceptualise violence. This model exposes war as taught behaviour and the societal practices which maintain it (Walter, 2002). Constructivism looks at the ways in which ideologies of war and conflict are maintained in everyday practice. (Stedman, 1997; Stedman & Rothchild, 1996).

This thesis claims that constructivism is an analytical tool best applied to geopolitical events in hindsight rather than as a predictive or pre-emptive analytical tool (Hobson & Lawson, 2008). As the Syrian Civil War has not yet concluded, constructivism lacks utility (Koma, 2018). Constructivism looks at the ways in which ideologies of war and conflict are maintained in everyday practice (Berzonsky, 1993; Wendt, 1995). The
constructivist emphasis on reciprocal interactions means it has less potential to provide a theoretical analysis to address the potential resolution of the Syrian Civil War (Lind, 2016). Constructivism might be more useful a framework when merged with other theoretical framework like neoclassical realism when analysing the Syrian Civil War (Arias-Maldonado, 2011; Basrur, 2006).

If realists and liberals disagree on what relevant variables are in the consideration of civil war, they are united in their belief that constant variables exist and are best understood through a diverse range of theoretical structures (Slaughter, 1995). Constructivism, therefore, is a useful theoretical framework when supplemented by other paradigms like liberalism, or in this case neoclassical realism (Wendt, 1992).

Constructivism is not considered a suitable analytical tool throughout this thesis as it views international relations as a patchwork of actions that is added to by identities over time (Neep, 2018). It fails to explain why alliances do not seek peaceful resolution with other alliances, as each alliance is more concerned with self-preservation (Kahler, 1998). It instead emphasises viewpoints of the different groups regarding the Syrian Civil War. As constructivism aims to understand the competing narratives surrounding war, and how these functions fuel oppositional mentalities (McLauchlin, 2018). The Syrian Civil War has escalated beyond resolution of these opposing identities. This escalation requires more focus on economy, military, and domestic factors. The kind of analysis provided by neoclassical realism (Badran & Smets, 2018; Guha-Sapir, Schlüter, Rodriguez-Llanes, Lillywhite, & Hicks, 2018).

Furthermore, constructivism offers a limited theoretical framework to address the Syrian Civil War, as the solutions it offers depend upon abstract factors instead of material-based actions (Hosoki, 2017; Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). Constructivism asserts that belief and meaning differ according to context. This is actually a fundamental analytical tool – particularly in the Arab Spring – as it recognises the cultural, religious, and contextual differences of each community involved in this war (Wendt, 1995). While most theories look at the larger picture, constructivism investigates the implications of war on the individual and what belief systems are informing this war. These factors are able to be explained and addressed through the distribution of power within the anarchic international system (MacKay & Levin, 2018). Particularly through the distribution of power amongst the sectarian populations of the Middle East analysed by the combined balance of power and neoclassical realist theoretical frameworks (Lobell, 2009; Lobell, 2018; MacKay & Levin, 2018; Taliaferro, 2006).

Constructivism encourages people to perceive others as elusive and unpredictable actors, because you cannot possibly profess to know as someone else knows as our knowledge is informed by our own experiences (Geels, 2010). However it misses the anarchic massed
intentions of state interests in the Syrian Civil War (Açıkalın & Bölücek, 2014). If it were simply identity which shapes dialogue which shapes actions, it must be asked why much of the conflict exists between people with similar social and historical backgrounds (McLauchlin, 2018)? These identity politics are enacted by the materials on which this thesis focuses. Warfare does not come from anywhere: it is important to understand the beliefs that inform it, as constructivism suggests it is still important to emphasis material capabilities (Thomas, 2005). This thesis focuses on economic and military factors which require material capabilities to support political policy decisions (Schuringa, 2016). Though action has not yet been resolved the Syrian Civil War, it is these factors that will ultimately bring the Syrian Civil War to an end. This indicates that, in this instance, action is preferable to discussion. (Ryan, 2018; Stokke, 2016). This is because negotiation in good faith will not occur unless each separate group has had their goals meet. However the respective goals of each group are at odds over the control of land, people and resources which are domestic factors that require internal material capabilities (Ryan, 2018). The involvement of more actors increases the likelihood of disagreements and in turn will result in more people fighting to realise their groups domestic material capabilities in the Syrian Civil War (Stokke, 2016).

For these reasons outlined and discussed above, realism as a paradigm, and more specifically neoclassical realism. Constructivism as an additional theoretical lens to supplement a heavily neoclassical realist Thesis provides the best conceptual basis from which to view the activity regarding the Syrian Civil War in internal state, regional and international system levels (Ibryamova & Kara, 2017).

Realism

Realism consists of several schools of thought, as such it can be broken down into subcategories (Lobell, 2009; Waltz, 1993, 2010): classical realism, neorealism and neoclassical realism (Lobell, 2009; Waltz, 1993, 2010). The branches of realism will be used to perform an analysis of the following factors, assessing their efficacy as theoretical frameworks: the Syrian Civil War and how it effects and is affected by geopolitics; the Syrian state and its regional geopolitics with the stakeholder states of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey; and the Syrian Civil War connections to the global oil and gas trade (Lobell, 2009; Waltz, 1993, 2010).

Classical realism

Classical realism is a prominent analytical tool within international relations theory (Brecher, 2018). The goal of realism is to define structure, understanding, and analyse events in international relations (Brown, 2018). The paradigm of realism breaks down into many different schools of thought. All schools of realism apply the following premises. First, the main actors in international politics are states, instead of individuals and international organisations (Mearsheimer, 1994). Though the latter can be
a source of secondary influence. Second, the international system of politics is anarchic in nature. There is no existent supranational authority that can supercede a state's autonomy (Collard-Wexler, 2006). Third, rationality is applied by actors in the international system of politics (Kahler, 1998). Classical realism asserts that rationality is not motivated by the glorification of conflict and does not allow the possible application of morality in international politics (Korab-Karpowicz, 2010). What classical realism does, however, is assert that rational actors possess and use the ability to choose the most 'moral' action, action would be of most benefit to the state (Dyson, 2016; Rathbun, 2008). To realists, the morality of an action does not come from an abstract notion that is something is moral, but rather from a utilitarian calculation of the best interest of the state (Beitz, 1979). Thus, rationality is used to decide which decisions are most appropriate on the basis of each action’s potential political consequences, which is to say actors will proceed with the actions that maximise their own interests (Putnam, 1988). Power is the economic and / or military factors that allow for the state to influence the behaviour of people, or enable a state to respond in a particular way (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2015). Power allows leadership the “authority to make discretionary decisions as long as followers accept this discretion” (Lunenburg, 2012). Power is constituted as a driving factor, and as the will to dominate. Together, these are viewed as the fundamental facets of human nature (Schmidt, 2005). Power is geopolitical motivation, as it is wanted by states as a means to ensure and secure the state (Wendt, 1992).

Classical realism focuses on the idea that it is the nature of humans to pursue power and it is in pursuit of political domination that informs the behaviour of the state, and individuals pursue their personal interests (Wendt, 1992). Realist theory suggests that the state should operate in its own self-interest as a first premise (Sterling–Folker, 1997). As a result, self-interested states will vie for security and power (Sterling–Folker, 1997; Taliaferro, 2000). The role of the state is to use geopolitical resources within its control, through its economics and military (Mearsheimer, 2007).

**Realism’s interpretations of the Syrian Civil War**

Realism is the preferred paradigm of the ‘English school of international relations theory’ for explaining this particular geopolitical context. Its strengths are found within these main principles: the state is the main actor in the international system (Buzan, 2003); the state acts in its own best interests to survive an anarchic international system (Wendt, 1995); there is no complete authority above the state. This implies there is no institutional global authority which exerts power over self-motivated states (Waltz, 2001); the state helps itself and can only rely on itself to survive (Mitzen, 2006); All states will act rationally in order to survive the anarchy of the international (Goldgeier & McFaul, 1992).

The above principles are applied to the Syrian context here, as the Syrian Civil War will only cease when the Syrian state itself and neighbouring supporting states decide it will end (Aalberts, 2004; Khalaf,
2015). It cannot be controlled by international institutions such as the United Nations (Khan & Khan, 2017). This indicates that the state is the main actor in Syrian Civil War, as the actions of international institutions are virtually powerless (Griffin, 2018; Khan & Khan, 2017).

In the absence of an international enforcement authority, the Assad Government violates international law to survive. Namely by blocking transportation of humanitarian aid resources to areas that are not under Assad Government control (Footer, Clouse, Rayes, Sahloul, & Rubenstein, 2018) The Assad Government has ignored the legislature of international institutions, and does not cede its authority to the UNSC (Khalaf, 2015). Instead, it is the main actor and its interest in surviving the Syrian Civil War take precedence over adhering to international requests (Levocz, 2015). This implies there is no institutional global authority which exists with power over self-determining states (Lake, 2003). In the Syrian context, the United Nations (UN) is failing as an authority in matters of international security (Fung, 2018).

As such, the UN’s self-professed authority is called into question in the context of Syria, as the UN is viewed to be filibustering. Former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon admits “the road to peace is long” (Bellamy, 2017; UN General Assembly, 2009). This lack of authority means that as an international institution, the UNSC main interests remain secondary to the fundamental interests of member states (Bellamy, 2017). For example, on October 8, 2016, the French and Spanish co-drafted a resolution to prevent Syrian and Russian aerial continued bombardment of Aleppo, which was vetoed by Russia (Mercier, 2016; Wahba). This resolution was just one of many UNSC meetings that have proven counter-productive, due to vetoes, and further highlights the UNSC (and other international institutions’) failures to control independent state authorities (Gifkins, 2012).

The Syrian government cannot rely on other states, although these states have vested interests it Syria remaining under Ba’athist party authority (Keohane & Martin, 1995). Iran is predominately Shia and by supporting the Alawite Assad Government (Abdo, 2017) it helps itself to survive the Syrian Civil War and preserve its interests in the Middle East (Nasr, 2018). The Middle East is dominated by predominately Sunni controlled states (Wehrey, 2018). This means that while Iran supports the Assad Government in Syria, it has a stronger position in the Middle East due to its strengthened alliances with other Shia controlled states (Nasr, 2018). The Syrian state, under the Assad Government, shares the desire for Alawite control as a main goal with Iran (Juneau, 2018). Iran’s survival interests are aligned with Shia geopolitical control of states in the Middle East. Iran therefore holds an interest by way of their Alawite allies the Assad Government maintaining power in the Syrian Civil War (Lesch, 2012, 2018b). Another area crucial to state survival is maintaining economic advantage over other Middle Eastern states, like economic influence in the global oil and gas trade (Milani, 2013).
The promise of establishing more direct economic trade routes, via pipelines that require Syrian state territories for gas and oil transportation, acts as an economic incentive for stakeholder states like Iran to commit themselves to alliances with the Syrian Government (Sadeghi, Horry, & Khazaee, 2017). To help their own state survival in the anarchic international system, they are prepared to offer support: be it in economic, military or domestic factors (Milani, 2013; Sadeghi et al., 2017).

The anarchic international system refers to circumstances in which there is no actor that supersedes the power of the state (Goldgeier & McFaul, 1992). The Assad Government acted in a rational way to survive, as Alawites are the minority of the Syrian pre-civil war population (Groarke, 2016). An uprising in the domestic sphere, with the possibility of more fundamental Sunni groups taking over if the protest had continued, meant that military suppression via force was a rational option (Blanchard, 2005). Arguably, another way to rationally achieve an end to the Arab Spring in the Syrian state would have been via economic means (Ansani & Daniele, 2012; Dahi & Munif, 2012). However, those means could not be economically achieved in the short-term, which was what was being demanded. The only other option would have been to hand over power to others, which would mean the Assad Government would not have survived the Arab Spring (Gause, 2011). Therefore, conceding power to another party – and in this case another state – would have been irrational as the pro-Assad state would cease to exist. Again, it was a rational decision not to cede these positions. The only short-term rational option to address issues brought about by the Arab Spring’s call for pan-Arab liberal reform was to use military force to suppress them (Byman, Doran, Pollack, & Shaikh, 2012).

Neorealism

The most significant difference between classical realism and neorealism, is that neorealism allows more leniency to discuss the multifaceted levels of analysis above state level, which is the structure the balance of power be it multipolar, bipolar or unipolar systems (Waltz, 2010). Whilst in the case of classical realism the international system is seen as the anarchic structure of the balance of power effected by the nature of the state’s individual leadership nature which are viewed as drivers of that state (Hobson, 2000). In any case, both theories posit that because no overarching authority exists within the international system, sovereign states are ‘equal’ in the sense they are all lone actors motivated to provide for their own interests (Hurd, 1999). Thus, states are self-interested, and will seek to create offensive military capabilities for the purpose of foreign influence and interference to maintain or expand their own political power base and alliances (Doyle, 1983; Waltz, 2010). Neorealism’s focus on the anarchic structure of the international system as a primary cause of state conflict challenges neoliberalism theoretical framework (Powell, 1994; Walt, 1998).

Neorealism and balance of power theory
Neorealism is centered on the idea that the anarchic structure of the international system, rather than human nature, is the most appropriate focus for understanding international relations (Buzan, 1993). Balance of power is an international relations theory which asserts that security at a state level is increased when military capabilities are distributed in such a way that no singular state has cultural strength to dominate others (Huntington, 1996). Balance of power theory suggests that if a state were to become stronger than other states, it would act on this advantage through conflict towards weaker neighbouring states (Brzezinski & Mearsheimer, 2009). This would in turn force the weaker state to collaborate with other states to create a defensive alliance (Brzezinski & Mearsheimer, 2009). Defensive alliances are formed to deter the possibility of war between the rival states and seek to bring about equilibrium of external power between conflicting sides in terms of state power (Layne, 1993; Snyder, 1984).

This leads to what is known as the balance of power, which proposes that states are equal in their aspirations, but are unequal in their capability to realise these aspirations (Hyde-Price, 2008). The capabilities of a state are the primary factor in determining their ranking within the international system (Waltz, 1993). To affect change in the balance of power, states must either ‘balance’ internally or externally (Rose, 1998). Internal balancing involves states increasing their capabilities through economic or military expansion (Schweller, 2018). Externally balance involves geopolitical alliances between states for the purpose of limiting more powerful states or alliances (Schweller, 2018). Therefore, balance of power theory argues that states are unlikely to become too powerful because other states will look to balance the threat (Walt, 2000).

This theory can be separated into two variants: offensive neorealism, which claims that states seek to increase their own power within an anarchic international system, reflecting human nature and the will to dominate (Walt, 1998). Defensive neorealism, however, claims that states seek to defend themselves in order to survive in the anarchic sphere, reflecting human nature and a desire to make alliances to ensure self-preservation (Schweller & Wohlforth, 2000). Human nature drives an ‘offensive’ intensive view of international relations, making the actions of actors aggressive as states seek to enhance their power and weaken that of their rivals, regardless of the opportunity cost (Schmidt, 2005).

Offensive neorealism is defined by John Mearsheimer as contradictory to the balance of power theory. Offensive realists do not recognise balancing as a motivation in the geopolitical system (Mearsheimer, 1995). Instead, offensive realists focus on strength versus weakness, and the constant pursuit of ever-increasing power in order to secure the dominance of ‘Great Power’ states, like the United States of America (US), the Russian Federation, and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). These are some examples of states which would, in modern times, be considered ‘Great Power’ states (Mearsheimer, 2007). Offensive realists propose geopolitical actors seek to increase their own power base
in the international system (Nye, 2004; Snyder, 2002). Offensive realism does not recognise minor power states as main actors, only those states deemed ‘Great Power’ states (Snyder, 2002).

Defensive neorealism asserts that a state’s primary objective is survival. Defensive realism as defined by Kenneth Waltz, asserts that balance of power theory is indeed a viable theory as defensive realists do recognise balancing as an action in the geopolitical system (Waltz, 2000). This is because balance of power makes state actors adapt their actions to the anarchic geopolitical system, particularly by promoting moderation and defensive collaboration with their neighbours (Waltz, 2000). This gives the opportunity for states with small capabilities to exercise power within the international system, and by doing so limit the incentive for aggressive and expansionist state actions (Waltz, 2000). Defensive realists act to influence geopolitics to increase their own power and the power of states that they collaborate with in the international system (Mearsheimer, 1994). Defensive realism thus opposes offensive realism through the suggestion of a collective mentality to counter offensive acts. When the geopolitical system changes, the balance of power will adapt to neutralise that aggressive action (Snyder, 2002).

**Neoclassical realism: assumptions and concepts**

Neoclassical realism, according to Gideon Rose (Rose, 1998), is a combination of classical realism and neorealism, with an emphasis on defensive realist theory (Rose, 1998). Neoclassical realism provides a more useful theoretical framework to analyse the geopolitical context of the Syrian Civil War than that of neorealism (Lobell, 2009). Neorealism is a useful tool for discussing and interpreting political motivations, and can offer insights into the actions of states based on both military and economic factors (Lobell, 2009; Rose, 1998). However, Gideon Rose has asserted that neorealism needs to be extended to include domestic factors that can have an effect on the state and its geopolitical relationships (Rose, 1998). The addition of intrastate variables extends neorealism to neoclassical realism (Lobell, 2009; Rose, 1998). Within the neoclassical realist paradigm, the independent variable is the distribution of power in the international system (Lobell, 2009; Rose, 1998). The intervening variable is the domestic perception of the system and/or domestic incentives (Lobell, 2009; Rose, 1998), and the dependent variable is the state’s policy decision (Lobell, 2009; Rose, 1998). Using this format, neoclassical realism is useful as a research tool as it includes the theoretical principles of neorealism, whilst extending this analysis to explain why certain kinds of political outcomes occur (Lobell, 2009; Rose, 1998). Thus, equal geopolitical importance is given to a combination of military, economic and domestic factors (Rose, 1998).

Neoclassical realism shares some of the assumptions of Waltz’s conception of defensive neorealism, particularly his assumption that the predominant motivation of states is their desire to survive in the anarchic international system, and respond to threats to security via military and
economic means (Buzan, 2008; Waltz, 1988). Neoclassical realism also supports some of the assumptions of offensive realism, as it acknowledges states act with a predominant goal of advancing their own ambitions in the international system (Toft, 2005). This thesis will apply neoclassical realism in order to analyse the military, economic and domestic factors that are of geopolitical significance to Syria (Stein, 2017). In particular, the links Syria and other regional stakeholders have to the oil and gas industry, and how the Syrian Civil War affects the power balance within the Middle East (Hokayem, 2013). In essence, this thesis asserts that the international relations system and community exist in a state of anarchy between state actors (Kitchen, 2010); that states are the primary geopolitical actors and possess some offensive military capability, and that states can never be certain of the intentions of other states. They will therefore act out of self-interest for both offensive and defensive reasons (Kitchen, 2010).

**Neoclassical realism and balance of power theory**

The shortcomings identified in neoclassical realism can lead to under expansion or under balancing: an insufficient balance response is when a threat has emerged, the consequences of which can be an imbalance of the regional sphere, further resulting in the rise and fall of states and, in some instances, conflict (Adler & Greve, 2009).

Balance of power theory can be applied to the analysis of the Middle East in relation to the Syrian Civil War. It proposes that two or more state actors will interact in ways that maximize their own gains and minimize their own losses (Griffin, 2018; Jervis, 1991). Thus, they are self-interested rather than altruistic. In the Syrian Civil War, these actors are Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Ennis & Momani, 2013; Hokayem, 2014; Phillips & Valbjørn, 2018). Turkey seeks to keep Syria weak because a weak Syrian state is less of a threat to the self-preservation of the Turkish state. This has motivated Turkey (Du Buisson, 2018) to invade Syria on January 20, 2018 to keep it weak. (Favier, 2018). Balance of power theory emphasizes vigilance. States are seen as aware and acting within their capabilities to balance possible rival states (Marks, 2018). For example, when a state’s allies become weaker, Iran needs to be aware and react in a corrective manner to address this potential threat (Carpenter, 2013; Hokayem, 2013). Iran seeks to strengthen Syria by providing military and economic support to the Assad Government because it perceives a weakening of the Alawite leadership of the Assad Government. Undermining Shia’s political influence in the Middle East would weaken their strategic alliance (Carpenter, 2013; Hokayem, 2013). Flexibility of action is seen as a critical factor within neoclassical realism (Özcan, 2018). The Assad Government and its leadership were unable to respond to the altered conditions brought about by the Arab Spring, which weakened the state. It then resorted to military force and caused a civil war in Syria (Gelvin, 2015). Balance of power theory suggests that states will join less-threatening sides in a conflict if they are free to do so, as the stronger state is a greater threat, so a weaker state needs to be paired
within a conflict to balance the more powerful state (Layne, 1993; Schweller, 1994; Walt, 1985).

The Assad Government’s predominance was, however, counterbalanced by instability in the Syrian domestic sphere. Particularly by the combined strengths of opposition forces, some of which are supported by Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Ayoob, 2012; Gause, 2014; Hokayem, 2014). The ratio of state aid in terms of economic and military power balancing does not matter. What is important, however, is that rival capabilities are sufficient to check or balance the dominant power (Levy & Thompson, 2010; Lobell, 2018; Paul, 2018). In the case of the Syrian Civil War, Syrian sectarian groups supported by regional stakeholder states have been able to check the predominance of the Assad Government’s internal balance of power, despite not being able to defeat it because of Iranian and Russian support (Abdo, 2017; Lobell, 2018). As states must be able to project power, the ability to enforce rule via military means to maintain security is critical (Khalaf, 2015; Roessler & Ohls, 2018).

As of 2018, the Assad Government’s reliance on the external balancing of its allies, Iran and Russia, has allowed for an overbalance. The internal balance of power was thus restored in its favour, making the Assad Government stronger than it has been since the beginning of the War (Ulutaş & Duran, 2018). War is seen by balance of power theory as a legitimate instrument of statecraft, and the balancing of power among neighbouring states in the Middle East is evident in their preparation for war (Lenihan, 2018). Turkey, on December 5, 2011 (Manna, 2012), and Saudi Arabia in late December 2012, (Khalaf & Fielding-Smith, 2013) responded to instability in Syria with indirect economic and military support for the Sunni opposition groups. This was an effort to make up for the imbalance created by Iranian support of the Assad Government (Clary, 2017; Harris, 2018; Ulutaş & Duran, 2018). The Civil War outbreak in Syria can be seen to affirm that the balancing of power is operating in this context (Heydemann, 2018; Ulutaş & Duran, 2018). What occurred in the Middle East is known as ‘Appropriate balancing’ (Lobell, 2018), and occurs when a state predicts another state’s intentions and compensates for that imbalance. ‘Appropriate balancing’ is evident in Iran’s anticipation and indirect involvement on September 5, 2011 (Hokayem, 2014). Iran estimated that the Sunni population made up the largest proportion of Syria and as such would threaten the minority political elite of Alawite that holds authority under the Assad Government. Saudi Arabia and Turkey then responded through indirect involvement in the Syrian Civil War on behalf of Sunni opposition forces (Lobell, 2018; Ulutaş & Duran, 2018). On June 6, 2015, Iran’s initial indirect response escalated into direct intervention (Fisk, 2013), reinforcing its own economic and military support to the Alawite Assad Government (Hokayem, 2013; Hughes, 2014).

Turkey has taken territory from Syria on March 18, 2018 (Dubreux, 2018), in the North following the weakening of the Syrian state by civil war (Harris, 2018). This kind of maneuver is anticipated by the balance of power theory. According to balance of power theory, states
must be able to align and re-align themselves with other states, based on power options (Lobell, 2018; Walt, 2009). Many factors contribute to the allure of possible alliances in response to perceived threats to the balance of power (Lobell, 2009; Lobell, 2018). Pre-civil war Turkey was on neutral terms with Syria under the Assad Government. Power was balanced and strong enough to survive in the anarchic regional and international system or it would have been overthrown before the Syrian Civil War (Lin, 2015; Park, 2015a). The phenomenon known as ‘Under balancing’ occurs when a state fails to balance because of inefficiency, or incorrectly perceiving a state to be less of a threat than it is, resulting in an imbalance (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016). In an effort to balance against Iran’s intervention on the June 6, 2015 (Fisk, 2013), and Russia’s intervention on September 30, 2015 (Vasquez, 2016), Turkey responded with its own direct intervention as it annexed the Afrin region from Northern Syria on March 18, 2018 (Du Buisson, 2018). Claiming it threatened Turkey’s own state security (Harris, 2018; Lin, 2015; Park, 2015a). Turkey’s attempt to balance against Iran and Russia’s interventions is an underbalance as, when this occurred, the Assad Government had secured most of the land in Syria (Bakos, 2018).

Alliance barriers exist for the Assad Government in the form of ideology. For instance, sectarian violence in the domestic and Middle East between Alawite Shia and Sunni (Ulutaş & Duran, 2018). Personal rivalries also exist in the form of Turkey’s opposition to the Assad Government, as well as the opposition Kurdish forces in the Northern-eastern areas of Syria as a result of Kurdish-Turkish rivalries (Gunes & Lowe, 2015). Historical national hatreds also persist, such as ongoing strained relations between Syria and Saudi Arabia, which precede the civil war (Matthiesen, 2013). These have continued during the civil war and are evident in the Syrian Ba’athist party’s hatred of monarchist states, such as Saudi Arabia (Joffe, 2005). Territorial disputes also create alliance barriers, as these factors affect the options of alliance on offer (Jervis, 1985; Jervis, 2002). These constitute “alliance handicaps” (Jervis, 1985; Jervis, 2002), as they decrease the viable options for a state searching for alliances.

Geopolitical influences can also be used to gauge the difference between alliance options that appear prima facie desirable, and others that are potentially on offer within the regional and international systems, which might be superior in terms of balancing a state’s interests and positions (Lake, 2009). The existence of “alliance handicaps” oppose the conventional thought that in a multi-polar system, states experience greater flexibility when choosing strategic alliances (Copper, 1975; Dorsey, 2016). The pursuit of moderate war objectives tends to be favoured, as the current enemy could become a future ally and vice versa (Grygiel & Mitchell, 2017). However, balance of power can be over balanced when the actions of a state are too expansionist, so states are cautious to avoid violent or reckless behaviour, as this may force other states to act against them by military means (Schweller, 2006). This is known as ‘inappropriate balancing’ or ‘overbalancing’ (Schweller, 2004).
This occurs when a state fails to identify another state as a threat. The state may use a disproportionate or inordinate amount of resources to bridge the perceived lack of balance, resulting in an imbalance (Schweller, 1994).

‘Non-balancing’ (Korolev, 2018; Schweller, 2004) occurs when a state avoids balancing and instead exerts influence on another state through a proxy, with the original state remaining on the side-lines (Lobell, 2018; Schweller, 2004). States may choose this course of action or inaction for multiple reasons, including an inability to balance themselves (Schweller, 2004).

Neoclassical realism is therefore useful for examining the internal dynamics of Syria and its geopolitical significance in the Middle East, as economic and military factors play a very significant role in the actions of states and actors intervening and supporting factions in the conflict (Kamrava, 2018; Lobell, 2009; Lobell, 2018; Rose, 1998).

**Neoclassical realism’s interpretations of the Syrian Civil War**

The neoclassical realist paradigm and the defensive neorealist paradigm have some unifying, particularly the application of balance of power theory (Rathbun, 2008). Neoclassical realism adds the ideological view that states’ lack of confidence in one another and their incapacity to predict other states, or state actors (leaders) motivations and actors adds to the anarchic international system (Lobell, 2009; Lobell, 2018; Onuf, 1991; Schweller, 2004). The main goal of all states, according to neoclassical realism, is survival of the state (Taliaferro, 2006). Some states act as rational actors by using their resources and strategic planning to maximize their prospects for survival, and some states think strategically about how to survive in the international system (Česnakas, 2010; Taliaferro, 2006). Because of this, both divergent fields of realism, offensive and defensive, can be applied to analysis of state actors (Česnakas, 2010). This thesis has therefore supplemented a neoclassical realist paradigm with some defining principles of offensive and defensive neorealism (Česnakas, 2010; Lobell, 2009; Rathbun, 2008).

Liberal, neoliberal and constructivist interpretations alone cannot explain the conflict that has occurred in Syria since the Arab Spring. Therefore, this thesis draws on neoclassical realism and balance of power to analyse the geopolitical significance of Syria in the Middle East since the Arab Spring. It also uses the same theory to analyse the significance of the global oil and gas trade in the Syrian Civil War.

**Mackinder’s Heartland theory**

Mackinder’s Heartland theory sub-sections of the geopolitical international system in order to better define and analyse the motivations of stakeholder
states in different regions and the strategies they use when seeking to become the influential political centres of the international system (Gray, 2004). Mackinder, writing in 1904 sub-sectioned the world into three main regions in terms of the world’s surface land mass. The first was the “World-Island” (Gray, 2004) grouping comprising the land masses of Africa, Asia and Europe, which was the largest in terms of size, population and the yielding of economic resources. The second was the “Offshore Islands” (Mackinder, 2014) grouping comprising the British Isles and the collection of Japanese Islands. There was the “outlying Islands” (Mackinder, 2014) group, comprising continents such as Australasia, Northern America and Southern America (Gray, 2004; Mackinder, 2014).

The geographical boundaries of the World-Island group follow the Volga and Yangtze rivers and encompass the vast area from the Artic to the Himalayas. The World-Island contains and controls over 50% of the world’s resource wealth and is therefore geopolitically significant on a global scale (Gray, 2004). Mackinder hypothesized that within this World-Island there is a geopolitically dominant Heartland which was dominated by Imperial Russia, and has been succeeded by the United Soviet Socialist Republic or USSR, and later the Russian Federation (Gray, 2004; Mackinder, 2014).

The significance of the Heartland comes from geostrategic positioning within this sub-section of the World-Island, as well as the international system itself. Its geostrategic importance is such that Mackinder claimed “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world” (Fettweis, 2000; Mackinder, 2014). The centrality of the Heartland’s positioning in the World-Island has also made it important controlling the flow of economic resources and exerting influence over the World-Island itself (Gray, 2004).

Heartland theory interpretations

Mackinder did not include contemporary states like Syria, and its competing Middle East neighbours within the Heartland theory as in 1904, the Middle East fell under the control of the Ottoman Empire (Kayali, 1997). It was positioned peripheral to the Heartland, which today would probably consist of parts of Russia, Eastern European states and some European Union nations that border them (Mackinder, 2014).

Mackinder also highlighted the strategic importance of both land and sea power and proposed that while sea power had been influential in terms of access and trade, land power would come to be more important (Gray, 2004; Kennedy, 1974; Mackinder, 2014). He was able to predict the waning efficiency of Imperial Britain’s sea power as land transportation increased accessibility to the Heartland for both economic and military reasons (Kennedy, 1974). Mackinder’s theoretical framework will inform this thesis as it provides the lens of geostrategic land power (Mackinder, 2014). Land power is closely linked to the geopolitics of states, and is
explained by Viktor Nagy as “during the course of history, a political entity’s total power consisted of land power and sea power. Land power is supported by sheer landmass, the natural resources and the size of the population a nation possesses assets that enable a nation to build land armies” (Nagy, 2012). Because land power allows authority over the land, as well as the resources on and below the land, it is useful for creating and maintaining a state’s cultural, military and economic strategies (Nagy, 2012). Land power’s influence on strategies is “formed by geography and by other groups of people whose actions are formed by their own geographies” (Nagy, 2012). Land power is useful as a theoretical lens through which to examine Syria’s geopolitical position, and geostrategic significance within the Middle East, and in the international system (Garfinkle, 2003; Gray, 2004; Knorr, 2017; Nagy, 2012).

However, Mackinder did not anticipate the strategic importance of the Middle East and its significance as an energy corridor of the oil and gas trade (Gray, 2004). This thesis will analyse the geostrategic land power Syria possesses and its utility for the transportation of oil and gas. Syria has a stake in potential pipelines and, due to its centrality, is key for land power transportation of these economic resources (Chang, 2015). Control of Syria is thus geo-strategically important as two competing potential pipelines in the Middle East are in contention, and whichever group controls Syria will increase their influence on global oil and gas, as a supplier of Europe (Chang, 2015). It will thus come to exert geostrategic influence over the European region through its influence of the trade of oil and gas resources (Fettweis, 2000; Garfinkle, 2003; Gray, 2004).

As Mackinder’s Heartland theory suggests, Russia’s provision of military and economic intervention (Vasquez, 2016) to the Assad Government on September 30, 2015 can be seen as an attempt to exert control over both the Asian regional area of the Heartland and the European regional area of the Heartland to exert influence and control over the Heartland itself (Garfinkle, 2003; Knorr, 2017). Russia is thus allied with Iran and Syria and influences some control over the decision on which pipeline will be constructed. If the Qatar-Turkey pipeline (which is looked at in more detail in chapter three) is established, Russia could lose much of the control it exerts over the East European Union states because it is currently the major oil and gas exporter to the European Union (Garfinkle, 2003; Knorr, 2017). This gives Russia control over the economic resources of the European Union, and means it is able to exert its political influence. Being allied to the states will influence the Asian regional area of the Heartland, and will mean Russia would continue to exert political influence over the majority of the Heartland. Doing so would produce a better geostrategic position to increase its influence and exert power over the European, Asian and African “World-Island” (Garfinkle, 2003; Gray, 2004; Knorr, 2017).

The neoclassical realist paradigm supplemented with land power informs the analysis of this project as this framework is able to extend Mackinder’s theory to include geopolitical and strategic factors beyond the
geostrategic elements on which Mackinder’s analysis focuses. This reflects contemporary realities that were not anticipated by Mackinder in the early 20th Century (Garfinkle, 2003; Gray, 2004; Knorr, 2017).

**Conclusions**

This chapter has highlighted the impact of the Arab Spring on the Syrian Civil War and Middle Eastern geopolitical context. It has described the influence of the English School of International Relations theory, which can be used to analyse the interests, motives and actors of states. Liberal, constructivist and realist paradigms within the English School were described along with their variants and their potential as theoretical frameworks with which to analyse the Syrian Civil War and the impacts of sectarianism and oil and gas in the Middle East. It was argued that liberal and neo-liberal theories place insufficient emphasis on military factors, which have significant relevance to the analysis of conflict and war. These paradigms were therefore considered inappropriate for the examination of the geopolitical significance of the Syrian Civil War. Constructivism was rejected as an analytical tool, as it has limited “real world” practical application and is of more use for retrospective analysis over the analysis of the present conflict. Sub-schools within the realist paradigm were discussed which included classical realism, offensive and defensive neorealism, and neoclassical realism. It was argued that neoclassical realism, supplemented by the use of concepts from offensive and defensive realism, is the most applicable paradigm for the analysis of the Syrian Civil War. It is therefore proposed that the combination of neoclassical realism, balance of power theory and Mackinder’s Heartland theory, and an emphasis on land power, could provide the most useful theoretical framework. Thus, the theoretical framework with which to analyse the role that sectarianism and the oil and gas trade have had on Syria, as well as on key regional stakeholders, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which have the capacity to prolong or resolve the Syrian Civil War.
Chapter Two
Syria: A Historical Overview and the Sectarian Players

This chapter provides an historical overview of the geopolitical landscape of Syria prior to the Syrian Civil War. It begins with a discussion of Syria’s geopolitical utility in terms of land power and the domestic factors that created political instability and economic dissatisfaction in the context of a rising movement for pan-Arab liberal reform. The political environment in the Syrian domestic sphere is then discussed, particularly in terms of the balancing of sectarian interests by the Assad Government, and the implications of ethnic and sectarian rivalries for the Middle East. This chapter outlines Sectarian groups that have political influence within Syria with particular focus on the relationships between the Assad Government and the Arab Alawite, the Arab Sunni and Kurds. The Arab Spring movement and the Assad Governmental use of disproportionate military force to suppress this civil uprising are considered as precipitating events that escalated into the Syrian Civil War. This discussion is intended to provide an explanation of the role of the role of sectarianism within Syria its impact on the geopolitical landscape.

Syria: A Brief Historical Overview

Syria is geopolitically useful in terms of land power, as it is geo-strategically situated between Europe and the largest oil and gas field in the world, the South Pars / North Dome gas condensate (Chang, 2015; Monshipouri, 2015). Allies to the Assad Government, Russia and Iran, are concerned with increasing Iran’s oil and gas supply transit through Syria (Cohen, 2007; Monshipouri, 2015). Likewise, opposition forces’ allies Saudi Arabia and Turkey are concerned with increasing Qatar’s oil and gas supply transit through Syria (Monshipouri, 2015; Tangör & Schröder, 2017).

Pre-civil war period

Before the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the Assad Government failed to enact economic liberalized reforms, which were being slowly added to Syria’s economy (Haddad, 2011). In 2006, promises were made in Assad’s five-year-plan to install a variety of social and economic reforms to liberalise Syria. These included free trade, liberalizing of the prices of goods and services, and an enhanced social welfare safety network (Coutts, 2011). Whether these promises were genuine or meant to pacify the Syrian people, few of the proposed reforms were kept prior to the start of the Syrian Civil War (Coutts, 2011). The exception was an Assad-established Agency for Combatting Unemployment. However, this was under-funded and mismanaged and therefore had minimal effect on
the welfare of Syrian citizens (Coutts, 2011). It is possible that this proposed liberal reform was to be implemented at the end of 2011 as this was the final year of the five-year-plan. However, this coincided with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. This seems unlikely, but it is worth noting that after the Syrian Civil War started any additional liberal reforms were abandoned (Coutts, 2011). The Syrian economy relies upon economic aid through lines of credit guaranteed by Iran, Russia and China (Carpenter, 2013; Yazigi, 2014). This is connected to the fact that Syria was in debt before the Syrian Civil War started in 2005 Russia had forgiven “Syria’s $13.4 Billion debt” (Freedman, 2010). Even if the Assad Government intended to enact liberal reform it would not have been economically viable a policy decision, due to the foreign debt Syria owed in pre-civil war (Borshchevskaya, 2010; Lynch, Freelon, & Aday, 2014).

Muslims in the Middle East Ethno-Religious groups in Syria

The Middle East is comprised primarily of Muslims, many of which belong to Sunni and Shia sects. In 2015, their collective number estimated around “317,070,000 or 93%” (Hackett et al., 2015) of the overall 341,020,000 Middle East population. Shia make up “36.3%” (National Geographic Society & Mehler, 2008) of the overall Middle East population and “38.6%” (Finon & Locatelli, 2008) of the Muslim population in the Middle East’ (National Geographic Society & Mehler, 2008). Sunni make up the remaining “63.7%” (Abdo, 2017) of the Muslim population in the Middle East.

The four largest states in terms of population in the Middle East are: Iran around 81,871,500 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2009), comprised of a Shia majority at around “92.5%” (Aghajanian & Thompson, 2013; Martin & Zacharias, 2003) and a “7.5% Sunni” minority (Aghajanian & Thompson, 2013; Martin & Zacharias, 2003). Turkey around 80,810,525 (Kiliç, 2018) in which, Shia make up “16.5%” (US Department of State, 2007) and the Sunni majority “80.5%” (US Department of State, 2007). Iraq around 39,339,753 (Saaf, Brouwer, Peters, & Plataroti, 2018) in which, “Shia make up the majority 64-69%” (Central Intelligence Agency, 2009) and a “29-34% Sunni minority” (Central Intelligence Agency, 2009). Saudi Arabia has a population of around 28,080,000 (Jianping et al., 2014), in which “Shia made up 10-15%” (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016) and the “Sunni majority 75-85%” (Central Intelligence Agency, 2012). All of which are motivated by sectarian interests. Iran and Iraq, for example, are motivated by Shia geopolitical interests to support the Alawite Assad Government. Whilst Saudi Arabia and Turkey are motivated by Sunni geopolitical interests to support Sunni opposition forces in the Syrian Civil War. These sectarian-motivated interests include two competing pipeline proposals. Iran and Iraq support the construction of the Iran-Iraq pipeline: a pipeline which would go through Alawite and Shia populated lands in Syria, Iran and Iraq (Türkozan, Taskavak, & Ilgaz, 2003). In 2003, Syria declared its maritime zone to extend beyond the Mediterranean Sea border of 12 nautical miles recognised under the UN Law of the Sea, to cover a stretch of 1,550km² (Capotosti, 2008). The Mediterranean coastal region of Syria
contains the two main port cities of Syria Latakia and Tartus. The largest population in this region are Alawite (Harmer, 2012; Kasparek, 1995). Saudi Arabia and Turkey, however, support the construction of the Qatar-Turkey pipeline which would have gone through Sunni populated lands in Syria, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

**Figure 1. Syria Ethno-Religious Composition***

*Description*

**English:** Syria ethnoreligious group composition map. Using modified Syria Political Governorates Map and info from Struggle For Syria.pdf

Although sparsely inhabited, the unmarked areas are Sunni areas.

**Date Retrieved**

December 21, 2012, 12:04:35

December 1, 2018.

**Source**

This file was derived from: Syria Political Governorates Map 1976.jpg


**Author**

Institute for the Study of War

701 × 600 pixels. Other resolutions: 281 × 240 pixels | 561 × 480 pixels | 899 × 769 pixels.
Political environment of the Syrian domestic sphere

The political environment that directly preceded the Syrian Civil War is described as a period of ‘hoped liberalization’ for Syria (Seifan, 2010). Influential factors include the legalization of non-Ba’athist parties (Coutts, 2011), and the formal endorsement of a market economy and reduced control of the domestic economic system (Coutts, 2011). Although implementation of the ideals put forward by Assad were poor, he sowed a seed within the Syrian domestic sphere which would grow into the protest for pan-Arab liberal reform brought forward under the Arab Spring (Coutts, 2011). The lack of action to liberalise the domestic sphere resulted in protests against the Assad Government. In response to this protest, Assad enacted violent and oppressive means to suppress its political opposition (Coutts, 2011). In September 5, 2011, a bloody stalemate ensued (Carpenter, 2013) in the wake of both Assad’s forces and opposition forces mobilizing for war (Berti & Paris, 2014). The intended liberalisation was never realized, prior to the civil war, Bashar al-Assad only served to increase his power in Syria, developing on the political position his father, Hafez al-Assad, had taken (Leverett, 2005). Bashar al-Assad removed his Islamic political rivals and attempted to build relationships that would allow for greater political clout with Syrians outside of his Alawite power base, with moderate Sunni (Assaly, 2014; Ghadry, 2005).

Sectarian groups of political influence within Syria

The main sectarian groups that have had significant political influence in Syria are: Arab Alawite Shia, Arab Sunni, and Kurds (Fildis, 2012; Sly, 2018). Other Sectarian groups are also participating in the conflict, although they do not have as significant influence in the political sphere (Sly, 2018).

The Arab Alawite Shia
The Alawites are a syncretic sub-sect of the Twelver Shia branch, which is the main Shia branch of Islam though Alawite deviate on some issues of faith from other Twelver Shia like those in Iran, they have closer ties to other Shia then they do with Sunni. Alawite Syrians numbered around 2,670,000 before the commencement of the Syrian Civil War (Drysdale & Hinnebusch, 1991) and have a majority population in areas like Latakia and Tartus (Gambill, 2013). Since the coup during November 12-16, 1970 led by the Ba'athist party and Hafez al-Assad (Bashar al-Assad's father) (Ali, 2004), the Alawite population of Syria has increased its economic and political dominance (Gause, 2011; Hinnebusch, 2012).

Politically, most Alawites support Bashar al-Assad the current president as he is Alawite (Heneghan, 2012). However, there are some Alawites who are part of the opposition to the Assad Government and who have attempted to voice a non-sectarian narrative of political unity (Heydemann, 2018). Organizations like members of the ‘National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces’ based in France are Alawites who oppose the Government, but do so without encouraging disunity (Heydemann, 2018).

The goal of the Assad Government is to make a more defensible area for Alawites to live in within Syria by threatening and removing the Sunni from their dwellings and taking their resources (Milani, 2013). This area has been forcibly acquired by Alawite from the Sunni Syrians who inhabit near areas adjacent to the Nusayriyah (Alawite) Mountains (Fildis, 2012). If the Assad Government and Syria were to fail, the result may see the re-establishment of the Alawite state that existed from 1920-1936 (Firro, 1997). This region has experienced low hostility during the ongoing Syrian Civil War (Fisseha, 2017).

The conflict within Syria is an acutely sectarian war (Potter, 2014). The main catalyst for the commencement of the conflict is recognized as being the military takeover of Government by the Ba'athist party, which is influenced and controlled by the pre-dominantly Alawite minority (Potter, 2014). The Alawites are subsect from the Twelver Shia branch of the Islamic religion; as such, other Shia are natural allies of the Ba'athist party in Syria, including those from states which share political ideals, such as Iran (Potter, 2014).

During the Syrian Civil War, Alawites have faced increasing violence from the Sunni Arab majority population (Fildis, 2012). Although Arab in ethnicity, Salafists and fundamentalist Islamic Sunni view Alawites to be infidels - even more so than people of Christian and Jewish faiths (Schmid, 2014; Sly, 2018). The conflict within Syria is an acutely sectarian war (Potter, 2014). The main catalyst for the commencement of the conflict is recognized as being the military takeover of Government by the Ba'athist party, which is influenced and controlled by the pre-dominantly Alawite minority (Potter, 2014). The Alawites are subsect from the Twelver Shia branch of the Islamic religion; as such, other Shia are natural allies of
the Ba’athist party in Syria, including those from states which share political ideals, such as Iran (Potter, 2014).

**The Arab Sunni**

The forced displacement of the Syrian Sunni majority by the Assad Government is an important factor that has given rise to the sectarian issues within the Syrian Civil War (Tabler, 2013). The Sunni Arab numbered 13,800,000 before the commencement of the Syrian Civil War (Holliday, 2011). Sunni Arab make up the largest proportion of opposition to the Assad Government and a small part of the Assad Government itself (Dark, 2014; Schmid, 2014; Sly, 2018). Politically, Sunni Arabs are represented by high ranking officials within the Assad Government such as the Prime Minister of the Syrian Republic Wael Nadar al-Halqi, Minister of Defense General Major Fahd Jassem al-Freij, and the Foreign Minister Walid Muallem (Dark, 2014). A small proportion of the Sunni Arab population that support the Assad Government do so because they blame not just the Assad Government but opposition forces for their suffering (Dark, 2014). They see the Assad Government as a quicker way to end their strife, caused by the persistence of the Syrian Civil War (Dark, 2014). Some moderate Sunni also fear the rise of Sunni based control of the internal geopolitical landscape of Syria under Salafists or fundamentalist Islamic control (Albrecht & Koehler, 2018). Sunni Ba’athist party loyalists also make up large numbers of pro-Assad Government militias like the Ba’ath Brigades (Dark, 2014). This is because the Ba’athist party have historically highlighted pan-Arab ideals that resonate with many Sunni Arab nationalists under those principles (Zabad, 2017). The largest opposition-controlled areas of Syria are controlled mainly by Sunni Arab Syrians (Albrecht & Koehler, 2018; Dark, 2014; Schmid, 2014). Sunni have claimed that the Alawite militias known as ‘Shabina’, are responsible for provoking the start of the Syrian Civil War (Neggaz, 2013). The conflict began when Shabina started murdering Sunni, in retaliation, Sunni militia were formed with the objective of killing and taking Alawite hostages (Neggaz, 2013). Other non-governmental death squads of Alawite Islamic groups have been accused of instigating sectarian acts of violence, such as the murder of prisoners of war as retribution killings (Ahram, 2015).

Border settlements between Sunni-dominated areas and Alawite-dominated territories like the Sunni farming communities of Houla and Qubeir have been sites of deliberate slaughter (Ahram, 2015; Leenders, 2013).

This being the case a large position of the Sunni majority in Syria opposes Syria remaining under the control of the Ba’athist party and Bashar al-Assad, and align instead with Sunni-led Saudi Arabian, Turkey and Persian Gulf states (Potter, 2014). Other religious and sectarian groups have formed their own independent claims to self-autonomy, representation and/or in some cases secession within the Syrian Civil War (Moberg, 2016). These opposition groups are formed based on a combination of different ancestral heritage and religious affiliations (Berti & Paris, 2014). If a sectarian group can control the land power within Syria, it
can control the oil and gas supply transit through Syria and affect the global oil and gas supply routes of Middle East (Garfinkle, 2003; Gray, 2004; Knorr, 2017). As these different groups are seeking different political goals, they are not just in conflict over the resources within particular areas, they seek to secure their economic future via land power transportation, and guarantee security and political autonomy (Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011).

**The Kurds**

The Kurds numbered between 2,000,000 to 2,500,000 prior to the conflict (Holliday, 2011). They are of Kurdish ethnicity and live mainly in the Northeastern and Northwestern regions of Syria (Radpey & Rose, 2017). The Kurds vary in terms of religious beliefs being Sunni and Shia Islamic, as well as Kurdish Christian (Van Bruinessen, 1991). Kurdish Syrians have been subjected to systematic discrimination and harassment from the Assad Government (Hof & Simon, 2013a). Most Kurds seek political autonomy for the Kurdish population living in North and Northeastern Syria under the goal of establishing a “Syrian Kurdistan” (Hof & Simon, 2013a). The Syrian National Council (SNC), is a main opposition organisation to the Assad Government (Caves, 2012; Yezdani, 2011). Its leader, Abdulbaset Sieda, is an ethnic Kurd (Caves, 2012). The Kurds are governed by a Supreme Kurdish Committee within the greater de facto autonomous region of Rojava (Federici, 2015) which is comprised of the cantons of Cizire, Kobani, Shahba, and used to include the Afrin region based on a nonreligious state (Du Buisson, 2018). Kurds under the Assad Government had their language, culture and religion suppressed, often violently (Dummett, 2001).

**The Arab Spring**

Beginning in Tunisia on December 18, 2010, the Arab Spring spread across Northern Africa and the Middle East, dramatically affecting states like Syria (Brynen, Moore, Salloukh, & Zahar, 2012). The Arab Spring reflects the underlying features of many Middle East states (Brynen et al., 2012) which are strained by pre-existing domestic factors, such as authoritarian governments (Brynen et al., 2012), and economic factors (Bellin, 2012). Syria’s economy relies on the consistency of the world price of oil and gas (Ratner & Nerurkar, 2011), but its domestic environment is characterised by poverty (Rocchi, Romano, & Hamza, 2013), sectarianism (Phillips, 2015), and human rights violations (Donnelly & Whelan, 2017). Since the Arab Spring there has been political instability and this instability has resulted in numerous defections from the military (Carpenter, 2013); a transition into civil war (Hof & Simon, 2013b; Hokayem, 2013); and continued violence within Syria. Millions of people and leading to the deaths of 400,000 lives and counting (Goalwin, 2018; Phillips, 2018).

The neoliberal paradigm provides a useful theoretical framework through which to examine the objectives of the Arab Spring. Namely, the spread of democratic values (Tagma, Kalaycioglu, & Akcali, 2013).
Neoliberalists seek to supplant pre-existing domestic factors with economic freedom, increasing employment rates, democracy, free elections, an increase in human rights and state regime changes (Tagma et al., 2013). These issues are multifaceted and affect both the regional and international system (Tagma et al., 2013). The Arab Spring protest was a strategy intended to achieve these pan-Arab liberal objectives (May, 2015). The dearth of Syria’s internal capabilities to balance the expectations of the Arab Spring caused the failure of the state and its collapse into civil war (Cunningham, 2013).

The Syrian Civil War

Peaceful political solutions moderated by the Arab League and United Nations peace envoys, have been incapable of addressing oppressive authority of the Assad Government over the Syrian population (Gibson, 2018; Murthy, 2018; Weinlich, 2014). The internal oppressive authority acted as a catalyst to the political risings in the Middle East, which are known as the Arab Spring (Murthy, 2018). These domestic and regional political shifts have brought about civil uprising, violent rebellion, and major military opposition to combat the violent means of suppression used by the Assad Government and its military forces (Malik & Awadallah, 2013). The deterioration of the domestic political environment in Syria has led to a shift from non-violent protest to conflict and the escalation into all out civil war (Berti & Paris, 2014).

The potential for Syria to collapse into several sectarian based autonomous states is viewed by some as being dangerous to the geopolitical landscape, in the sense that sectarian violence could spill into the wider Middle East (Byman & Shapiro, 2014; Lemon, 2013). This threat may lead to larger schisms of geopolitical secession occurring throughout the Middle East (Smith & Page, 2015).

Conclusion

This chapter provided a contextual analysis of the distribution of power in the international system. It examined the Muslim Ethno-Religious populations between Shia and Sunni states by way of analysis of power distribution in the Middle East, as well as the sectarian Ethno-Religious composition within Syria.

This chapter has addressed the distribution of power in the international system as an independent variable to examine the sectarian population divide between Shia and Sunni in the Middle East, the Ethno-Religious composition within Syria, the political environment of Syria’s domestic sphere, and the different sectarian groups that are influential within the Syrian Civil War. This provides an overview of the different sectarian groups that have influenced the governmental positions held by state and non-state actors within Syria, that have a stake in the internal and external geopolitical landscape. These sectarian players are states, the states behaviours which are motivated by securing incentives and
deterring threats to their sectarian influenced ethno-religious groups. Thus, the sectarian population divide between Shia and Sunni motivates the behaviour or the intervening variable, which is the behaviour of the states in the Middle East.

In the domestic environment, prior to the commencement of the Syrian conflict, many threats arose from continued conflict among sectarian groups. One such risk remaining is the potential for the Syrian state to fragment into several autonomous states. This makes Syria politically unstable as sectarian violence could spiral out into the Middle East. This threat may lead to larger schisms of geopolitical secession occurring throughout the Middle East. This provides context for answering research question one posed by this thesis: how has sectarianism in Syria has impacted the geopolitical landscape?
Chapter Three
The Geopolitical Significance of Syria:
A Case Study of Geography and Two Pipelines

This chapter will examine the geopolitical significance of Syria in the context of two competing pipeline proposals: the Iran-Iraq and Qatar-Turkey oil and gas pipelines. The respective proposals inform the relationships between Syria and Middle East stakeholders as well as various sectarian groups that are influential to the Syrian conflict. This chapter will provide an overview of the positions of groups within the Syrian conflict, particularly in regards to their influence over key political figures with stakes in the geopolitical sphere. Firstly, this chapter will discuss the application of Mackinder’s Heartland theory to outline Syria’s geostrategic importance, particularly in terms of its land power. Secondly, it examines the significance of oil and gas to economic stability in Syria, as well as its effect on the Middle East. Discussion of the competing Iran-Iraq and Qatar-Turkey oil and gas pipeline proposals will demonstrate Syria’s potential as an energy corridor and explain how the stakeholder states of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have positioned themselves for influence of the global oil and gas trade. Finally, this chapter will provide insights into Syria’s geopolitical significance as a keystone state for the construction of oil and gas pipelines to provide a context for answering the research question of strategies used by Middle East states of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to position themselves for influence of the global oil and gas trade.

Mackinder’s Heartland Theory: Interpreting Syria’s Importance

The position of Syria in regards to geostrategic land and sea power with the Mediterranean region could enable easier access to Southern European Union states that have Mediterranean regional borders, as well as access northward to Turkey and through into Eastern European Union states (Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011).

Syria is geographically positioned in the center of the Middle East itself. As discussed in Chapter One, Halford Mackinder’s theory of geopolitics is based around the concept of a “World-Island” (Mackinder, 2014) which highlights the geostrategic relevance of Syria and how this correlates to land power (Gray, 2004; Mackinder, 2014). The Middle East was not recognised as a geopolitically significant region by Mackinder, as it was instead considered part of the Ottoman Empire when he developed his analysis (Gray, 2004). Oil was found as early as 1908 in Masjed Soleyman in what is currently Southwestern Iran (close to the South Pars / North Dome gas condensate) (Owen, 2008). Its significance was firstly recognised by the British First Lord of the Admiralty Quitin Hogg as a
potential supply reserve for naval battle ships, giving the Middle East strategic and military importance. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Owen, 2008), Syria would be recognised as a keystone for its central geostrategic position within the Middle East (Fettweis, 2000; Mackinder, 2014). Despite British recognition of this Middle East significance, Mackinder did not focus on the Middle East because he believed that the sea power would diminish and would not remain as geostrategically significant as land power (Gray, 2004; Kennedy, 1974; Mackinder, 2014). Building on Makinder’s emphasis of land power, the Heartland theory can be used to further to explain Syrian land power and its geopolitical importance for other states in the Middle East. This is also a useful analysis for states outside of Syria that are competing for international political influence (Fettweis, 2000; Gray, 2004; Kennedy, 1974; Mackinder, 2014).

**Syrian significance and the impact of oil and gas on the Middle East and Europe**

The significance of the Syrian state is overlooked by some in terms of its geopolitical positioning (Trenin, 2016). It sits within the Middle East region, which is the largest producer of oil in the international system (Li, 2011). The state of Syria is situated within the central Middle East, meaning that uncontained conflict will have implications for the Middle East, possibly prolonging conflicts in neighbouring states due to the weakening of other states (Hokayem, 2013). As Syria is weakened by the constant state of conflict and politically fueled violence only begets more politically motivated violence, the possible externality of conflict occurring in the other states in the Middle East (Kaldor, 2013).

Oil and gas are significant commodities within the Middle East, particularly as they can provide economic stability for some states (Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011). In terms of in the Syrian domestic sphere, the oil and gas trade is essential funding of competing rivals seeking influence of oil and gas wealth (Lynch, 2018). The resources are also used to maintain the military efforts of different political regimes and opposition groups (Humud, Pirog, & Rosen, 2015). Likewise, the oil and gas trade within the Middle East is transported through Syria and inter-connected multiple states (Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011). These export trade routes connect to global economic markets and, for certain states, can act as a barrier in the regional sphere (Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011). States in the international system that depend - or will come to depend on - the oil and gas trade within the Middle East region, will be drawn into the conflict that ensues in Syria (Carpenter, 2013). As oil and gas scarce commodities, there has been increasing demand for these resources and trade is expected to increase too (Hall & Klitgaard, 2018; Le Billon, 2001). Syria’s land power thus makes it a keystone state in Middle East for potential influence on the global trade in oil and gas (Garfinkle, 2003; Gray, 2004; Knorr, 2017).
Competing oil and gas pipelines through Syria

A unifying feature of the nations that are involved in the Syrian Civil War is a stake in the oil and gas trade (Carpenter, 2013). Syria is less significant to the states around it in terms of its own supply of oil and gas, especially when compared to other oil and gas rich Middle East states surrounding it like Iran and Saudi Arabia (Ozturk, Yuksel, & Ozek, 2011). Other neighbouring states like Turkey produce less oil and gas than they consume, and are reliant on importing these energy resources (Ozturk et al., 2011). The major export of Syria has been oil, and this resource has been a key source of trade between Syria and the European Union, as Europe relies on imported oil and gas (Portela, 2012; Schubert, Pollak, & Kreutler, 2016). Syrian territory is therefore instrumental in terms of land power as an energy corridor linking the oil and gas rich Middle East states to European states that require oil and gas (Bianco, Scarpa, & Tagliafico, 2015; Schubert et al., 2016). However, the lack of alternative energy corridor pipelines is causing the European Union to suffer due to its reliance on the energy corridors that come from Russia and the geopolitical and political influential power of Russia over the European Union - both economically and politically (Casier, 2011). If other energy corridors were to be established that could challenge the oil and gas pipeline geopolitical influence that Russia has established (Winrow, 2013). If this dependence on Russia oil and gas was removed by increasing alternative supply pipelines of states not allied to Russia. USA lead sanctions on Russia grow increasingly viable as an option when the European Union can rely on the alternative pipelines to supply oil and gas. By diversifying their reliance on Russian pipelines, the European Union can lessen the risk of Russian economic and political retaliation (Dickel et al., 2014; Finon & Locatelli, 2008). Syria is therefore geopolitically important as an energy corridor, in terms of land power for influence of global oil and gas trade as it has the potential to link the South Pars / North Dome gas condensate in the Middle East to the second largest oil and gas consuming market in the world, the European Union market (Garfinkle, 2003; Gray, 2004; Knorr, 2017).

Syria is a significant actor in the Middle East, particularly for its potential as an energy corridor for surrounding Middle East states (Chang, 2015). This importance would increase if the Qatar-Turkey pipeline went ahead as it would benefit Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey. Also, if the Iran-Iraq pipeline that would benefit Iran, Iraq and Syria went ahead (Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011). Syria is the only state required for both prospective pipeline plans (Chang, 2015). Both pipelines would trade and transport oil and gas from the same place and would originate from the Southern Pars / Northern Dome gas condensate field, which is the largest oil and natural gas deposit in the world (Ratner & Nerurkar, 2011; Tangör & Schröder, 2017). This reserve holds an estimated 51 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, and has further potential for 7.9 billion cubic meters of natural gas condensates (Ghazifard, Aghda, & Taherynia, 2014; Zanitti, 2012). The sum of all other major natural gas fields in the world are almost equal to the recoverable resource reserves.
from this area, making it the most geopolitically strategic natural gas reserve in the world (Tangör & Schröder, 2017). Syria’s geographic position between the European continent and the Middle East states of Iran and Qatar make its land a gateway for both states as it can utilise land power to connect the Southern Pars / Northern Dome gas condensate field in ways that position it for use as a significant energy corridor (Ghazifard et al., 2014; Zanitti, 2012).

Prior to the Syrian Civil War, Syria had two rival major pipeline offers (Ahmed, August 30, 2013). The first pipeline plan was offered by Qatar in 2009 and is called the “Qatar-Turkey pipeline” (Ahmed, August 30, 2013; Elbakyan, 2015). Had the Qatar-Turkey pipeline deal gone ahead it would have connected gas from the Northern fields of Qatar’s territory of the Southern Pars / Northern Dome gas condensate field starting from the Persian Gulf and pass through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey where it would link into the Nabucco-West pipeline and into Europe via Bulgaria (Ahmed, August 30, 2013; Elbakyan, 2015). The Nabucco-West pipeline was a pipeline that was rejected in 2013, and would have connected Europe to Middle East passing through Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Austria (Ahmed, August 30, 2013; Elbakyan, 2015).

The Trans-Adriatic pipeline was introduced when the Assad Government declared that Syria would not support the Qatar-Turkey pipeline. It cut Turkey off from the potential economic benefits as the Iran-Iraq pipeline does not go through Turkey (Elbakyan, 2015). Assad Government would not accept the Qatar-Turkey pipeline due to geopolitical reasons, one being that the Turkish President Erdogan had always shown anomosity towards Alawite control of Syria (Antonopoulos & Cottle, 2017). This tension is due to Assad being pro-Shia and an Alawite, whereas Erdogan is a Sunni, and he views Alawite and Shia as heretics (Farha, 2016; Lin, 2015). Iran is also pro-Shia thus while the Qatar-Turkey pipeline would have had significant economic benefits for Saudi Arabia and Turkey, who have supported opposition groups in Syria their support of sectarian groups is not solely motivated by economic gains, as sectarian religious rivalry had geopolitical influence in the region (Antonopoulos & Cottle, 2017; Chang, 2015; Farha, 2016; Lin, 2015).

The second pipeline plan was offered by Iran, and is called the “Iran-Iraq pipeline” (Chang, 2015; Milani, 2013). This proposal was for a pipeline from the Southern fields of Iran’s territory in the Southern Pars / Northern Dome gas condensate field, through Iraq and Syria, and into an ocean pipeline under the Mediterranean Sea to connect the European continent via Greece (Chang, 2015). This deal was prefered by Assad Government and supported by Russia (Omar & Ali, 2017; Paknejad & Mahdavian, 2007)). The Iran-Iraq pipeline would utilise territory that is predominately populated by Alawite unlike the opposing Qatar-Turkey pipeline which would be utilising territory that is predominately populated by Sunni (Chang, 2015; Damianova, 2015). A further motivation for Syria to support the Iran-Iraq pipeline is that the economic stimulus will be
shared among three Middle East states, whereas in the case of the Qatar-Turkey pipeline, Syria is one of five Middle East states. Assad is therefore likely to have chosen to support the pipeline that allowed Syria to exert the most geostrategic influence, in order to gain for a larger share of revenue from the pipeline when it is in use (Chang, 2015). This proposal would bring more economic benefits for Alawite and Shia both in Syria and in Iran (Chang, 2015). This is not the only reason that Iran is the preferred partner, however. It is also geopolitically significant that Russia has investments in oil and gas extraction and exportations in Iran, whereas Qatar has more support from the US (Bilgin, 2009; Medlock, Jaffe, & Hartley, 2011). The US has invested in the Qatari-US airbase within Qatar, and while Russia is reluctant to cede any of its influence over the European Union as its largest supplier of oil and gas, Iran and Russia have a functioning relationship making Iran Russia’s preferred alternative supplier (Milani, 2009; Ratner, Belkin, Nichol, & Woehrel, 2013). Russia thus has an interest in maintaining the Assad Government at the conclusion of the Syrian Civil War, and has helped establish and maintain the Assad Government so as to influence its preference for Iran as an alternative European Union oil and gas supplier (Chang, 2015).

Russia and Iran have allied with the Assad Government to ensure this pipeline is completed (Chang, 2015). However, construction within Syria has been stalled due to the Syrian Civil War (Chang, 2015). The Assad Government has regained control of all the territory required, yet in order to secure construction the Syrian Civil War needs to be brought to an end, as the territory that the pipeline will pass through is still threatened by opposition groups to the north and south (Slee, 2018). The part of the Iran-Iraq pipeline that connects the Assaluyeh refinery in Iran with Iraq, and which transports gas from the South Pars / North Dome gas condensate to the main power plants and storage facilities in Diyala Governate in the Governate of Baghdad, has been completed (Saad, 2016). This is in the area in Iraq where the Iran-Iraq pipeline, once constructed, would redirect gas from across Iraq to the Syrian border and through to the Syria City of Homs which has been regained under Assad Government control as of 2018 (Damianova, 2015; Masud, 2018). Some parts of this territory were under the control of opposition forces right up until May 21, 2017 threatened the future of the Iran-Iraq pipeline (Lavrov, 2018). Parts of the Iran-Iraq pipeline are still under construction within Syria, particularly since November 19, 2012 (Minin, 2013, May 31), though some areas have been stalled until the Syrian Civil War can be settled and the security of the pipeline assured (Kalehsar, 2016; Minin, 2013, May 31).

Another important factor in the future of Syrian oil and gas supply is the lack of capital the Assad Government has available to construct this pipeline as building its section of the $10 billion pipeline (Hafidh & Faucon, 2011) is extremely costly (Finkel, 2018). The Syrian Civil War forces the Assad Government to direct funding to the military which could otherwise be used for infrastructure. The Assad Government would be wise to finish the war and re-establish an economy that would enable greater access to its finances, rather than commit so much of its budget on war efforts.
Investment in infrastructure development, such as this pipeline, would provide a long term revenue to ease the costs the Assad Government incur to rebuild Syria after the Syrian Civil War has concluded (Finkel, 2018). Syria will not have to fund this pipeline alone, either. Russia has also agreed to invest $50 billion USD into Iran oil and gas as of July 14, 2018, and Russian business Rosneft and Gazprom are interested in investing a further $10 Billion in Iran oil and gas, increasing its own influence on Iran and geostrategically supporting the Iran-Iraq pipeline (Hetou, 2018; Mehdi-Zadeh, 2018; Rezaei, 2018). Russian support of Iran to extract and refine a greater quantity of gas from the South Pars / North Dome gas condensate field to supply its own domestic economy and export to the European Union market therefore also benefits Syria (Finkel, 2018; Hetou, 2018; Mehdi-Zadeh, 2018; Rezaei, 2018). The cost of the Iran-Iraq pipeline was estimated at $10 Billion USD, and concerns existed over who would pay for its construction with Iran and Syria both under sanctions (Hafidh & Faucon, 2011). The solution was Russia as the $50 Billion USD it has invested into oil and gas, has enabled Iran to continue to bankroll the Assad Government’s economy (Hafidh & Faucon, 2011; Hetou, 2018; Mehdi-Zadeh, 2018; Rezaei, 2018).

Russia supports the Assad Government because it wants to be in alliance with those that will govern Syria at the conclusion of the Syrian Civil War (Al Makahleh, October, 2017). The Assad Government will support the Iran-Iraq pipeline, which is Russia’s preferred candidate for a direct pipeline from the Southern Pars / Northern Dome gas condensate field as a direct pipeline from an unfriendly state would, in the long term, put Russia in direct competition for the European Union market (Al Makahleh, October, 2017; Chang, 2015). This would threaten Russia’s political influence as it is the largest exporter to the European Union Market of gas and oil (Al Makahleh, October, 2017). Because Russia and the Assad Government are allies, and a strategic relationship with Iran will benefit Russia, Russia has agreed to invest $50 Billion USD into Iran’s oil and gas sector (Al Makahleh, October, 2017; Rezaei, 2018). Iran is then the preferred state to support in establishing a deal for a direct pipeline, as Russia will have an ally state in control of this pipeline (Hetou, 2018). This means Russia may not need to worry about losing its political influence, particularly if Iran and Russia co-ordinate together to exert political influence over the European Union (Hetou, 2018; Mehdi-Zadeh, 2018; Rezaei, 2018; Unger, 2014). Syria is significant both in economically as it could alter Russian dominance of the European oil and gas market, and geopolitically as the oil and gas trade is a key feature of Russia’s political relationship with the European Union (Hetou, 2018; Mehdi-Zadeh, 2018; Rezaei, 2018; Unger, 2014).

**Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the geopolitical incentives and threats created by sectarian instability in Syria, particularly for the stakeholder states of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in order to examine the motivations for the
behaviour of these states. This chapter argued that oil and gas are important resources for Syria, and are significant geopolitical determinants for stakeholder states' intervention in the Syrian Civil War. It explained sectarian groups' occupation of the land within Syria as a critical tool for political and economic dominance. Land ownership equates to land power as it enables control of the oil and gas supply of Syria and its use as an energy corridor. This affects the oil and gas supply routes of the Middle East, as well as export and import trade routes. It has been argued that groups within the Syrian conflict have competing aims for territorial gains and the resources within disputed regions so as to economically guarantee their in future security and political autonomy. The alignment of sectarian interests with the interest of stakeholder states has been discussed explain Syria's potential as an energy corridor for the Middle East states of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey and the ways in which this has motivated their strategic support of sectarian groups within Syria, so as to position themselves for influence of the global oil and gas trade.
Chapter Four
Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey
the Middle East stakeholder states

This chapter focuses on the geopolitical influence of the key stakeholder states in the Middle East: Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. These states were selected because of the influential role in the Syrian Civil War. Particular focus will be given to their interest in the oil and gas trade, as well as their stake in a post-civil war Syria, to determine what motivates these stakeholder states to provide military and economic support to domestic or opposition forces within the state of Syria.

This chapter will outline the respective histories of these stakeholders prior to and during the Syrian Civil War, as well as any significant domestic and regional security issues that exist within these states. This chapter will also provide an overview of the geopolitical significance of oil and gas within each state and their current strategic position in relation to Syria and the Assad Government. Finally, this section considers the potential roles of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in the prolongment or resolution of the Syrian Civil War.

Iran’s History / Background

Pre-civil war period

The state of Iran is in alliance with the Assad Government and has provided logistics as well as tactical military and economic assistance in aid of the Assad Government (Juneau, 2018). Particularly, as control of Syria by the Assad Government benefits Iranian interests in the Middle East (Kamrava, 2018).

Civil war period

During the Syrian Civil War, Iran offered direct military intervention on behalf of the Assad Government and trained Syrian National Defence Forces (NDF) in Iran and Syria (Lund, 2015, January 23). The numbers of direct military personnel support deviates from source to source; some claim Iran has contributed hundreds, whereas others suggest at least 10,000 (Sherlock, 2014). As of 2016, the Gatestone institute proposes the number of military personal at a minimum of 15,000 (Rafizadeh, 2016). Iran has also used the Lebanese paramilitary group Hezbollah, which is a main contributor, as an additional go between (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2017). Hezbollah joined the Syrian Assad forces as early as 2012 (Sherlock, 2014), with Iran becoming directly involved as military combatants as late as June 9, 2013 (Saul & Hafezi, 2014). The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is the title for the Iranian forces directly involved in the
Syrian Civil War (Asadzade, 2017). Iran’s combatant casualties number more than 2,000 and counting (Asadzade, 2017).

In January 2013, Iran instigated a prisoner trade between opposition groups and the Assad Government (Milani, 2013). In this trade, 2,130 prisoners were traded by Assad Government to the opposing forces in exchange for 48 IRGC Iranian personnel (Milani, 2013).

Iran’s Domestic sphere and Sectarian Considerations

Iran transferred surveillance security intelligence technology to Assad’s Government which was meet with protest within Iran (Worth & Fathi, 2009). Iran’s surveillance intelligence technology enabled a breach of individual privacy led to many Iranian protests (Tait, 2006; Worth & Fathi, 2009). Particularly around the 2009 and 2010 Iranian elections (Worth & Fathi, 2009). The technology was capable of the surveillance of cell phones, social media and email accounts, which were at the disposal the Syrian-based Assad Government (Tait, 2006).

Iran supports the Alawite-led Assad Government because it is led by Alawite (Juneau, 2018). In domestic sphere of Iran, Shia make up the majority population at around 92.5%, with a 7.5% Sunni minority (Aghajanian & Thompson, 2013; Martin & Zacharias, 2003). In terms of sectarian politics, Iran will support Syria’s minority Alawite population under the Assad Government, which governed over the pre-dominant Sunni population of Syria (Juneau, 2018).

Iran and regional security

In terms of the regional sphere, the political reason for Iranian support of the Assad Governance of Syria is the continued alliance between these two states. This alliance has existed since the 1979 Islamic revolution (Goodarzi, 2009). Iran views Assad-led Syria as an important ally to politically position Iran well within the Middle East (Nasr, 2018).

Syria also connects Iran and Lebanon, enabling continued support of the Islamic population via the supply and training of Lebanese paramilitary. Like that which occurred through the City of Zabadani in Syria (De Luce, 2015; Kazemzadeh, 2018). Geographically, Syria is viewed by Iran as a critical buffer zone between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Mabon, 2015). Particularly as Saudi Arabia has close ties to the US (Little, 2008). Economically, Iran funds as much as $6 - $15 billion annually in aid to the Assad Government to keep it in power for every year that the Syrian Civil War continues (Lake, 2015). The Iranian supplement of Syrian arms and ammunitions is done to counterbalance the anticipated supplement of opposition groups in Syria by Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Rydell, 2017).

The geopolitical significance of oil/gas to Iran
In terms of the international system, Iran is supported by Russia (Rezaei, 2018), which has invested interest in the success of their own allies over the allies of the US (Katz & Kozhanov, 2018). Particularly as the US seeks to break European Union’s dependence on Russian oil and gas (Högselius, 2012). Iran is supported by Russia because together Iran and Russia could maintain control of direct pipelines to the European Union and collectively control the pricing of oil and natural gas (Chang, 2015; Newnham, 2011). This would not be possible if the Assad Government, which has close ties to Iran, is replaced by a Government that opposes such ties (Salem, 2013, December 24). If the Assad Government fails to secure the pipeline deal, it may instead go to the opposing pipeline bid, causing the loss of a major economic opportunity (Lin, 2015). This is worth more than the funding that Iran has already committed to the preservation through the Assad Government so, by aligning with Russia, Iran are positioning themselves for a return on their investment, plus interest (Salem, 2013, December 24).

Iran holds its own interest in the both the domestic sphere of Syria, the Middle East regional, and international system (Costigan, 2017). Building the Iran-Iraq pipeline would be a means to secure economic power for Iran. The Iran-Iraq pipeline would require direct access through Syria to build and maintain the world’s largest supply of oil and gas to the European Union (Costigan, 2017). Iran’s population is predominantly Shia, therefore the Alawite Syrian Government under Bashar al-Assad supported the Iran-Iraq pipeline as they both share military security and economic land power goals (Costigan, 2017). This produced contention between Middle East states in support the Qatari-Turkey pipeline, and the sectarian forces and groups that are supported by aforementioned states (Costigan, 2017). Iran seeks to solidify its power as strongest Islamic state in the Middle East. This involves securing likeminded political states (like Syria) under a similar pro-Shia Assad Government, as well as well gaining the support of Hezbollah in Lebanon (Chang, 2015; Rydell, 2017). To increase the chance of the Assad Government maintaining power, Iran has bankrolled the Syrian Assad Government (Rydell, 2017). The Iran-Iraq pipeline requires the state of Iran as it has a point of access to transfer oil and gas from the largest supply point on earth, the Southern Pars / Northern Dome gas condensate field (Costigan, 2017). If the opposition is granted the right to build the Qatar-Turkey pipeline, this will pose a threat to the Iran’s regional and global oil and gas power. Rivals to Iran would lay claim to a pipeline that connects one of the largest oil and gas consumption markets in the world - at one of the highest market rates the European Union - to the largest producers of oil and gas in the world: the Southern Pars / Northern Dome gas condensate field (Costigan, 2017). If Iran were to construct the Iran-Iraq pipeline, however, then Russia will have an ally state in control of the alternative direct pipeline. In such a case, Russia may need not worry about losing influence, especially if Iran and Russia co-ordinate together in mutual interests when exerting political influence over the European Union (Costigan, 2017). This will increase Iran’s power in the international system against Qatar which is supported by the US (Phillips, 2017). This would also increase the Iranian power
exerted within the Middle East as Turkey would be unable to pass a pipeline through Syria. Without Syria’s geostrategic power, Turkey will not be able to achieve its pipeline ambitions (Costigan, 2017). Thus, both Iran and Shia influence is consolidated once more within the Middle East as Iran gains more economic and political power within the international system (Chang, 2015; Phillips, 2017; Rydell, 2017).

**Iran’s strategic position**

Though members of the Iranian Government are sympathetic to former Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahin, they have indicated that Iran’s interests are not in maintaining Bashar al-Assad’s position in power permanently (Yolcu, 2016). Instead, they seek to reestablish him temporarily to bring authority and economic land power back under a moderate Alawite lead system of Governance in Syria (Carpenter, 2013). As such, a political arrangement would not consist of fundamentalist Sunni extremist elements (Ryan, 2012).

**Saudi Arabia’s History / Background**

**Pre-civil war period**

The House of Saud leads the kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Lawson, 2011). The main religion is conservative Sunni Islam and because of this monotheistic composition, the vast majority of the Saudi Arabian population, who are Wahabi (Bowen, 2014), share more common faith with Sunni opposition groups in Syria than they do with the Alawite Assad Government (Hashemi & Sahrapeyma, 2018). Both states were establishing members of the Arab league in 1944 and hostilities between the two states have fluctuated in significance over time (Stanton, 2018). Tensions rose in the 1950’s and 1960’s due to Syria’s alignment with Egypt and Gamal Nasser, Saudi Arabia’s opposition to Nasser’s policies which advocated for pan-Arab nationalism, Syrian support of the USSR during the cold war, and Saudi Arabia’s alignment with the US and its policies (Sayigh & Shlaim, 1997). When the Ba’athist party took control of Syria in 1963 (Al-Saadi, 2012), tensions between Saudi Arabia and Syria escalated due to the Ba’athist party policy of hostility towards monarchy-led states which included Saudi Arabia (Mann, 2006).

In November 1970, Hafez al-Assad took control of the Ba’athist party and overthrew the previous regime. This removed Salah Jadid as president (Seale, 1990) and overturned the policy of hostility to all monarchies (Mann, 2006). This improved relations between Syria and Saudi Arabia as both states became open to diplomatic dialogue again (Mann, 2006). The death of Nasser in 1972 added to the thawing of hostilities (Al-Saadi, 2012). This relative hiatus continued until the early 1980’s when Syria and Saudi Arabia supported each other’s actions (Dawisha, 1983). However, this ended when they took opposing sides in the Iran-Iraq Civil War as Syria supported Iran and Saudi Arabia supported
Iraq (Byman, 2005). In 1982, when King Fahd ascended to the throne of Saudi Arabia, he and Hafez al-Assad shared a friendship that again calmed relations between the two states (Dawisha, 1983). This continued throughout Fahd’s reign from 1982 to 2005 (Byman, 2005). Saudi Arabia and Syria both aligned themselves with the US headed U.N mandated force to liberate Kuwait from invasion by Iraq in 1990 (Halliday, 1991).


Civil war period

During 2011, Saudi Arabia had a strained relationship with Syria due to its support of opposition forces supplying weaponry to anti-Assad Government forces (Bröning, 2012). King Abdullah was also the first diplomat to denounce Assad’s Government in August 2011 (Jacobs, 2012). By the time of the Syrian Civil War, relations between Saudi Arabia and Syria had worsened to the point where, on January 22, 2012 Saudi Arabia withdrew from the Arab League’s peacekeeping expedition. This action was subsequently reinforced by the closing of its embassy in Damascus and the removal of the Syrian ambassador in February, 2012 (Bakri, 2011; Mencütek, 2014).

Relations between Syria and Saudi Arabia have continued to worsen, as on April 18, 2018, Saudi Arabia was prepared to mobilize and deploy its own military forces into Eastern Syria in order to counter the threat opposed by Iran-supported Assad Government forces (Mowlana, 2018; Phillips & Valbjørn, 2018). Despite Saudi Arabia’s threat of direct intervention, it accepts that Assad is not likely to be removed from the governance of Syria (Hokayem, 2013). The Prince Mohammad bin Salman also mentioned Saudi Arabia’s disapproval of US movements which involved the removal of special forces units positioned in Eastern Syria which had supported the Syrian opposition forces there (Bowden, 2019; Ulrichsen, 2018).

Saudi Arabia’s Domestic sphere and Sectarian Considerations
Primarily, groups that have gained support from Saudi Arabia are those that are comprised predominantly of Sunni members, such as the Army of Conquest and al-Nusra. Both of which share political ties to some branches of al-Qaeda (Sengupta, 2015). In July 2017, the Saudi Arabian airline Silk Way Airlines, which flies into Turkey for transport over the boarder to Syrian rebel forces, was found to have been transferring arms from Saudi Arabia (Herbert, 2013). Entire flights were sold to weaponry producers and then filled with containers packed with ammunition and weaponry destined for Syria (Gimigliano, 2017). This information was bought to light by Bulgarian newspaper Trud which is renowned for journalistic enquiries into criminal organisations (Gimigliano, 2017).

To avoid breaking international law on arms trading, these flights secured the permission of the Bulgarian state for over-flight and docking and obtained assent from Saudi Arabia (Gimigliano, 2017; Herbert, 2013; Mazzetti, Goldman, & Schmidt, 2017). By obtaining these states permission, US weaponry producers were able to transports over $1 Billion USD through Silk Way Airlines using other states as go-between (Barnard & Shoumali, 2015). US organisations, such as Culmen International LLC, Chemring Military Products and Purple Shovel LLC were thus able to supply US armaments to Syrian opposition forces (Barnard & Shoumali, 2015; Gimigliano, 2017). After making an initial stop at Azerbaijan military airfields, weaponry could then be transported using civilian terminals and aircraft to supply military technology aid in a covert manner (Barnard & Shoumali, 2015; Chivers & Schmitt, 2013; Herbert, 2013).

**Saudi Arabia and regional security**

In terms of regional security, Saudi Arabia benefits from Syria’s allegiance. However, under the Assad Government, Syria has been closer to Iran than Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabia’s other allies (Carpenter, 2013; Taylor, 2014). Weakening Syrian Alawite, or seeking to replace the Assad Government, are both two opportunities to benefit the security of Saudi Arabia (Hokayem, 2013). Saudi Arabia’s potential intervention would be motivated by an effort to support the group that replaces the Assad Government in the hope that they may be more willing to deal with Saudi Arabia (Hokayem, 2013).

The state of Saudi Arabia has been supplying weaponry and ammunitions to opposition forces in Syria for several years (Chivers & Schmitt, 2013; Mazzetti et al., 2017). These arms primarily include, but are not limited to, the large-scale purchase of Yugoslavian produced automatic recoiless small arms (Chivers & Schmitt, 2013). These have been sent through the Jordanian-Syrian border into areas that are sympathetic towards the Syrian Sunni Arabs’ cause, and have been used against the Alawite who support the Assad Government and their Iranian allies (Chivers & Schmitt, 2013; Ryan, 2014).
During November 2015, Saudi Arabia increased its military aid to Syrian opposition forces by providing large amounts of ground equipment and weaponry, including anti-tank weaponry (Bassam & Perry, 2015). This was in response to Russia’s direct intervention in the Syrian Civil War on September 30, 2015, (Vasquez, 2016), when it supplied air support to the Assad Government’s forces (Parker, 2017).

**The geopolitical significance of oil/gas to Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia supports the creation of a new oil and gas pipeline (Chang, 2015). This Qatar-Turkey pipeline would need to pass through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey and Syria (Chang, 2015). In a Guardian article from August 30, 2013, blog journalist Nafeez Ahmed (Ahmed, August 30, 2013), claimed that Saudi Arabian support of Syrian opposition forces was fueled by oil and gas interests, not the chemical weapons concerns that it claimed was its motive (Entous, Malas, & Coker, 2013). It is possible that the reason this pipeline has not been approved by Syria is “to protect the interests of [its] Russian ally, which is Europe's top supplier of natural gas” (Ahmed, August 30, 2013).

Saudi Arabia would gain economically from the Qatar-Turkey pipeline only through its usage fees and employment when building its section of the pipeline (Carlisle, 2009). It would also be to its economic advantage to have the pipeline built through Saudi Arabia (Carlisle, 2009). However, the competing Iran-Iraq pipeline, provides a direct threat (Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011). Both pipelines require access to Syrian land power - or the land and the resources on and below it - to build and maintain a direct route for oil and gas to be transported into the European Union (Carlisle, 2009; Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011). Iran is predominantly Shia in population and so Saudi Arabia views Iran as a rival state (Al-Rasheed, 2011). The Assad Government has supported the Iran-Iraq pipeline and not the Qatar-Turkey pipeline, which is supported by Saudi Arabia (Carlisle, 2009; Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011). To increase the chances of the Assad Government’s succession by a Sunni-led Government state, which would be more open to approving the Qatar-Turkey pipeline, Saudi Arabia has supported anti-Assad Government Sunni opposition groups (Hamid & Fahimeh, 2014). This is motivated by the hope that Saudi Arabia might prosper economically in the long term through their support of the majority Sunni Syrian population in the Syrian Civil War (Hamid & Fahimeh, 2014).

A deal was stuck between Saudi Arabia and Syria in 1972, which stipulates that free trade between each state exists, and neither Saudi Arabia nor Syria are able to tax imports or exports going through each nation state via the other (Mann, 2006). Though both states attempted to remove this stipulation in 2008, those attempts were not successful. If a Qatar-Turkey pipeline was to go through Saudi Arabia to link into Syria, they would be unable to add commission onto Saudi Arabia’s use of the line through taxes or tariffs (Chang, 2015; Hoekman & Zarrour, 2009). Because Saudi Arabia and Syria already have trade relations, it is
economically beneficial for Saudi Arabia to continue to support opposition forces, as they stand to achieve greater economic gains from the Qatar-Turkey pipeline should it to become a reality (Chang, 2015; Hamdar, Hamdan, & Kinawi, 2017; Hoekman & Zarrouk, 2009).

**Saudi Arabia’s strategic position**

Saudi Arabia strategically supports groups that would remove the Assad Government’s authority and governance of Syria (Jacobs, 2012). Strategic positioning within the Syrian conflict is primarily measured by its economic and military aid for Sunni opposition groups. Individuals, such as Prince Bandar bin Sultan, have led the Saudi Arabian efforts to defeat the Assad Government (Entous et al., 2013; Gimigliano, 2017; Harris, 2018; Mazzetti et al., 2017). Saudi Arabia has also used its economic influence to establish training camps in Jordan for Syrian combatants, as well as commuting the death sentence of Saudi Arabians in return for them fighting in the Syrian Civil War (Harris, 2018; Natali, 2017).

Saudi intelligence has also attempted to provide evidence that the Assad Government has used chemical weaponry in the Syrian Civil War to provoke the US and other western nations into more direct involvement in the war (Mearsheimer, 2014, January 2).

On August 29, 2017, Saudi Arabia’s position was to disengage its strategic economic and military support of Sunni opposition forces (Fakude, 2017), reflecting its diminishing interest in Syria’s potential as an energy corridor (Chang, 2015; Fakude, 2017; Yorucu & Mehmet, 2018).

**Turkey’s History / Background**

**Pre-civil war period**

Prior to the commencement of the Syrian Civil War, Turkey and the Assad Government were on good terms with one another (Aras & Karakaya, 2008). They had enjoyed a good relationship since the expulsion of Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan from Syria by Hafez al-Assad in 1999 (Aras & Karakaya, 2008). This relationship dissolved as the Arab Spring protests began in Syria 2011 (Salt, 2012). Turkey viewed the response to protests by the Assad Government as excessive force and joined several other states calling for an end to hostilities. They wanted Bashar al-Assad to step down as leader of the Ba’athist party and as President of Syria (Carpenter, 2013; Zalewski, 2013).

**Civil war period**

From July 2011, Turkey has been supported opposition groups indirectly in terms of military aid and sanctuary (Manna, 2012). These groups have all been groups formed to fight against the Assad Government. Turkey has trained defectors and combatants in Turkey (Manna, 2012) and was
established the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (Carpenter, 2013; Manna, 2012). In addition to providing the F.S.A with training and military intelligence, the Turkish forces also guaranteed protected zones for the Head Quarters and base of operations for the F.S.A (Carpenter, 2013). In collaboration with Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Turkey has also provided a steady supply of weaponry, ammunition and military technology (Blanga, 2017). In June 2012, Syrian forces downed a Turkish fighter jet which led to an escalation in hostilities between Turkey and the Assad Government forces (Aras & Mencütek, 2015). Following this in October 2012, border skirmishes between Turkish and Assad Government forces occurred multiple times (Aras & Mencütek, 2015). On January 20, 2018, the Northwestern region of Syria (Du Buisson, 2018), known as the Afrin region on March 18, 2018 had completed the annexation of the Afrin region (Du Buisson, 2018).

**Turkey’s Domestic sphere and Sectarian Considerations**

Since June 2014, Turkey has removed much of its support for al-Nusra amidst allegations from leader of the Turkish Government opposition Kemal Kilicdaroglu. He claimed that President Reccep Tayyip Erdogan supports terrorist organizations in Syria (Phillips, 2014). This view is also shared by Turkey’s Republic People’s Party (CHP) as Government official Ihsan Ozkes who confirmed that the Interior Minister of Turkey Muammer Guler has authorized in writing that Turkey provide aid for al-Nusra against Syria’s Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) (Hameed, 2013; Hubbard, 2015).

The domestic sphere of Turkey has been affected by the influx of Syrian refugees (Akgündüz, van den Berg, & Hassink, 2015). Turkey ensured Kobani would not be conquered by ISIL, however, they made little effort to prevent this and protesting broke out as a result. This led to the involvement of the Turkish police force in the form of high pressure hoses, tear gas and live ammunition to control different protesting groups, injuring and killing refugees and supporters in cities including Ankara, Antalya and Eskişehir (Cagaptay & Menekse, 2014). Turkey was reluctant to fight against ISIL in Kobani because the opposition forces defending the city were Kurdish and the Turkish Government are enemies with the Kurdish (Üstün & Kanat, 2015). As Kurdish forces were involved, and due to the support that Turkey had for ISIL linked forces, Turkey was unwilling to collaborate with the defence of Kobani during October 7, 2014 (Phillips, 2014). Whilst the Battle of Kobani was being fought, protesting increased, as did the efforts of Turkish forces suppressing rioting from these groups (Letsch & Traynor, 2014). As a result, Turkey has taken in 200,000 Kurdish refugees from Kobani area and, as Erdogan mentioned in October 11, 2014 (Kirişci, 2014), the protesters have “disrupted political and economic stability” (Al & Tugdar, 2018). Hostilities in Southeast Turkey escalated once more between Turkish military forces and PKK or Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Sentas, 2018).
Historically, Turkey has appeared to be supporting al-Nusra and other Sunni opposition Syrian groups with the intention of making them more moderate in their political goals in exchange for continued support (Jones, 2013). Al-Nusra had settled their military encampments along the Turkish-Syrian border areas in March 2016, and have been supplied from Turkish townships such as Azaz (Jones, 2013). The Russian International Television Network (RT TV) reported that unhindered military aid in the form of Turkish military escorts have been sighted operating via the Bab al-Salam of Syria crossing to Azaz in Turkey (Pastore, 2018; Phillips, 2014).

Turkey has been accused of collaborating and aiding ISIL since it was established in June 2014 (Phillips, 2014). Turkish Government officials such as Berat Albayrak are accused of having affiliations to ISIL and aiding their expansion into Syria (Taheran, 2016). Turkish newspaper The Begun published pictures of trades of weaponry and explosives from the Akcakale border security post between Turkey and Syria being overseen by Turkish military border guard units (Taheran, 2016).

**Turkey and regional security**

Turkey's reluctance to fight against ISIL forces in Syria has led to its perception as non-confrontational when up against ISIL forces in instances like the ISIL instigated siege of Kobani (Oğuşgil, 2016). It is suspected that Turkey has been threatened by ISIL forces during the Syrian Civil War and has maintained a deal of restraint against the group (Gunter, 2016). This is also due to the shared affiliation with other Sunni opposition groups (Carpenter, 2013; Hokayem, 2013). Distrust of Kurds forested an inability to cooperate with opposition Kurdish groups which prevented Turkey from contributing to joint efforts against ISIL when they involved Kurdish forces (Gunter, 2016; Pike, 2004, May 21).

Despite these claims of restraint, instances of force have been enacted by Turkish forces in response to violence made by ISIL. During a crossfire on the July 23, 2015, a sergeant in the Turkish Army died from an ISIL shot (Azzam, 2018). In response, the Turkish Army used four tanks to open a barrage onto ISIL positions in Syrian territory (Azzam, 2018). Turkey also employed the use of smart bombs fired by Turkish F-16 Fighting Falcons at ISIL military positions all over the area of Kilis province (Azzam, 2018).

Turkey's security is still threatened by the possible secession of Rojava from Syria and the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish state (Torelli, 2017). This would not only neighbor the Turkish state, but would also promote the political independence of Kurds residing in Turkey, which would threaten the autonomy of Turkey in its own domestic sphere (Anas, 2018). Of particular threat is potential annexation by Rojava (Al, 2018), as well as the enduring violence known as the Kurdish-Turkish conflict (Tezcür, 2009). Turkey is threatened by groups like Kurdistan Freedom Falcons or TAK are independence groups that is for Turkish Kurds.
residing in the East and Southeast of Turkey, with designs to establish a secessionist state from Turkey (Gunter, 2011).

Turkey has made efforts to strategically defend against Kurdish political and military branches of Rojava and those with strong ties to Kurdish communities residing in Turkey (Federici, 2015). Namely, Turkey has instigated a blockade of Rojava’s economic trade (Kaya & Whiting, 2017); has continued isolate the possible secession of Rojava as a state from Syria (Grigoriadis, 2015); has refused to cooperate with forces fighting against ISIL when they include Rojava’s forces in their ranks (Federici, 2015); has given military and economic support of Sunni opposition groups that fight against Kurdish opposition forces (Federici, 2015); has used military forces against Rojava forces (Federici, 2015); and through the annexation of the Afrin region on March 18, 2018 (Du Buisson, 2018).

There is domestic pressure within Turkey to stop the threat of a secessionist Kurdish state of Rojava out of North-east Syria (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016), Erdogan stated on the June 26, 2015 (Elhadj, 2018), that he would “never allow the establishment of a Kurdish state in Northern Syria” (Elhadj, 2018). The annexation of the Afrin region as a buffer zone would prevent cross-border hostilities with incursions into Turkey (Lindgaard, Dessi, Tassinari, & Özel, 2018) and would also provide an area to place Syrian refugees living in Turkey (Aksu Kargin, 2018; Du Buisson, 2018; Koca, 2015). This would allow the Syrian refugees to repatriate themselves into Syria (Aksu Kargin, 2018; Du Buisson, 2018; Koca, 2015).

The geopolitical significance of oil/gas to Turkey

Turkey’s intention to establish control in the region of Syria is an important feature of the Qatar-Turkey pipeline. Turkey has responded to the instability caused by the Syrian Civil War was by supporting Sunni opposition groups like ISIL, the Army of Conquest and al-Nusra (Hashim, 2014; Lin, 2015). This is because those opposition groups are against the Syrian Government would also profit economically and politically from securing control of the region so that the Qatar-Turkey pipeline could be completed (Lin, 2015).

Originally, it was to the advantage of Turkey to construct the Qatar-Turkey pipeline. However, Turkey would need to rely on Syria’s cooperation. In order to achieve the construction of the Qatar-Turkey pipeline, the Assad Government would need to be removed and replaced with pro-Sunni groups (Gray, 2004; Kennedy, 1974; Lin, 2015; Mackinder, 2014). Erdogan stated that Turkey would “Cultivate a favorable relationship with whatever government would take the place of Assad” (Epatko, 2012). As such by May 2012, Sunni opposition groups were being taught and equipped by the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (Stern & Ross, 2013). As the Syrian Civil War persisted, Turkey’s Qatar-Turkey pipeline ambitions were limited without the Assad
Government’s approval (Lin, 2015). The Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey, Mehmet Simsek stated that “We can’t say that Assad must go anymore. A deal without Assad isn’t realistic” (Jain, 2017) during January 20, 2017.

**Turkey’s strategic position**

The territories around Syria have geostrategic significance that also warrants consideration. To the North and North-west, Syria is bordered by Turkey (Otu, 2017). As of February 2018, Turkey hosted 3,540,648 Syrian refugees which Turkey used to justify its annexation of the Afrin region of Syria on March 18, 2018. An area which it continues to occupy (Du Buisson, 2018; Polat, 2018). Whilst Turkey has claimed that the annexation of the Afrin region of Syria during the Syrian Civil War was necessary to resettle the Syrian refugees, it is possible to look at Turkey’s track record in Syria and see this as an act of encroachment (Akturk, 2018). An example can be made of the Turkish annexation of the Hatay Province on June 29, 1939, a territory which Syria has never given up its claim on (Kalpakian, 2017; Osman, 2018).

The Assad Government has hostile relations with Turkey as the Turkish Government has supported opposition forces in the North and North-west of Syria as well as sent forces to invade and annex the Afrin region of Syria in 2018 (Du Buisson, 2018; Manna, 2012; Polat, 2018). Despite this hostility, the Assad Government is engaged in tri-lateral peace negotiations with Turkey, Iran and Russia with the hope that the Afrin region will be ceded back to Syrian control (Lindgaard et al., 2018). Turkey’s geostrategic interests in Syria exist as it recognises Syria’s value as an energy corridor, which has the potential to make Turkey useful as an energy corridor as part of the Qatar-Turkey pipeline proposal (Yorucu & Mehmet, 2018). Other factors that contribute to Turkish perceptions of Syria as significant, such as the potential for the North-eastern region of Syria to secede and become Rojava (Park, 2015b). The creation of a secessionist state could encourage the Kurds that live within Southern Turkey to rise up and demand their own state by annexing some of Turkey’s Southern territory for their own state, or even joining Rojava as a member state (Park, 2015b). Claiming Turkey-controlled territory would cause it to lose territory, or to use force to prevent the outbreak of its own civil conflict (Barkey, 2016). Turkey therefore fears Kurdish autonomy spreading from Syria across its borders, as Turkey and Rojava would be at odds with each other, as Sunni and Kurds have a long history of mistrust (Gunter, 2016).

Turkey and the Assad Government have a strained relationship due to the skirmishes which have led to many deaths and injuries on the border between the two nations. This fraught relationship is compounded by the support and aid of opposition forces by Turkey against the Assad Government (Carpenter, 2013; Chang, 2015; Manna, 2012).

As a result, Turkey has built up support amongst opposition groups like the Army of Conquest, ISIL and other Sunni formed by different
fragmented Salafist and fundamentalist Sunni opposition groups united by common interests (Balanche, 2016). Turkey supports the groups by using the Turkish border to move people and weaponry ammunition, and provide economic support for anti-Assad and anti-Kurdish sentiment (Blanga, 2017). Turkey has directly confronted against the Kurdish opposition and ISIL via military intervention to ensure its economic, military and political security-related goals regarding the Syrian Civil War (Du Buisson, 2018).

Turkey does not approve of Kurdish autonomy and the possibility of Rojava as a successor state, which is a de-facto autonomous region formerly within Northern Syria (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016). On August 24, 2016, the Turkish forces started direct military intervention with the goal of fighting ISIL and Kurdish Group opposition forces (Jager, 2016). According to Erdogan, SDF and YPG forces were “seizing and ethnically cleansing territories which don’t belong to Kurds” (Beauchamp, 2017) which was supported by the Democratic Union Party (PYD). On the September 19, 2017, Ergun stated that “these events are what also made it a necessity for us to start this intervention” (Ergun, 2018).

On October 7, 2017, Turkey commenced ground operations in the Northern area Idlib in collaboration with Russia (Fouad et al., 2017). Erdogan mentioned Turkey’s commitment to the fight for liberation of the areas of Manbij and Afrin on January 9, 2018 (Anas, 2018). This was followed by the commencement of Operation Olive Branch which involved Turkish military intervention in the Afrin region of Syria (Du Buisson, 2018).

Turkey has allowed more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees to migrate to Turkish lands and erected over 22 state-run camps cities along the Syrian-Turkish border that house near 30% of the Syrian refugees. The remaining refuges in other areas of Turkey (Aksu Kargin, 2018). Camp cities have existed since July 2011 and continue to operate within Turkey and are maintained by the Turkish state (Bircan & Sunata, 2015; Dinçer et al., 2013).

**Figure 2. Timeline: Positive and Negative actions to the Assad Government**
Chronological Timeline of the Syrian Civil War, including stakeholder state’s indirect involvement, direct interventions and list of the state responses, and positive and negative actions affects to Assad Government.

Date Created: December 1, 2018.

Source: Oliver Hartley. (Microsoft Word SmartArt)

Author: Own Work.

Size of this Timeline: 8.89cm height x 15.24cm width external image size, 3.56cm height x 15.15cm internal arrow image size. Image/Microsoft Word SmartArt.

Key code:
- Complete green (+) = Pre-Syrian Civil War positive for Assad Government (Ayoub & Mahdi, 2018; Wehrey, 2018)
- Pink with yellow outline (-) = Arab Spring begins negative for Assad Government (Nepstad, 2011)
- Black with pink outline (-) = The Syrian Civil War begins negative for Assad Government (stalemate) (Carpenter, 2013)
- Red with white outline (+) = Iran’s indirect involvement begins positive for Assad Government (Hokayem, 2014)
- Yellow with blue outline (-) = Turkey’s indirect involvement negative for Assad Government -0.5 (Manna, 2012)
- White with green outline (-) = Saudi Arabia’s indirect involvement begins -0.5, negative for Assad Government -1 (Khalaf & Fielding-Smith, 2013)
- Complete red (+) = Iran’s direct intervention begins +1, positive for Assad Government 0 (stalemate) (Fisk, 2013)
- Complete blue (+) = Russia’s direct intervention begins +1, positive for the Assad Government +1 (Vasquez, 2016)
- Complete yellow (-) = Turkey’s direct intervention begins -1, negative for the Assad Government 0 (Du Buisson, 2018; Gunes, 2019)
- Green with purple outline (+) = Saudi Arabia disengages from indirect involvement +0.5, positive for the Assad Government +0.5 (Fakude, 2017)
- Blue with white outline (+) = Secured by Iran and Russia the Assad Government forces regained over 2/3 of Syrian territory +0.5, positive for the Assad Government +1 (Gray, 2004; Perthes, 2018)
Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the geopolitical significance of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey and their interests in the relation to domestic and regional security, Syrian relations to the trade of oil and gas, and their desire to avoid sectarian conflict within their own state and the wider Middle East.

Iran has supported the Assad Government to secure the future of the Iran-Iraq pipeline which proposes to use Syrian territory as an energy corridor. Iran also has an interest in maintaining Alawite dominance in Syria because it is one of the only pro-Shia dominated states in the region, and an Alawite Syria would have value as an ally with similar religious and geostrategic objectives.

Saudi Arabia seeks to undermine the Assad Government because Saudi Arabia has a predominantly Sunni support base led by a monarchy, and a desire to see the Sunni majority in Syria take over the governance. Saudi Arabia has an interest in establishing a Qatar-Turkey pipeline, which was declined by the Assad Government. Iranian forces therefore seek to overthrow the Alawite Assad Government to achieve more geostrategic influence over land power in Syria as an energy corridor for the global trade of oil and gas. Saudi Arabia has provided economic and military supplies as well as training and intelligence to opposition forces within Syria with the aim of destabilising and removing the Assad Government.

Turkey, like Saudi Arabia, opposes the Assad Government and has an interest in the Qatar-Turkey pipeline. Unlike Saudi Arabia, it has a direct border with Syria, meaning instability in Syria has a greater effect on domestic and regional security for Turkey. It has supported opposition forces in the North and North-eastern region to secure its borders. In addition to providing weaponry, ammunition and military technology, Turkey allowed access to its territory and infrastructure to transport troops and supplies into Syria. Turkey is hosting 3.5 million Syrian refugees which invariably puts pressure on its domestic and welfare services. It sought to annex the Afrin region in order to repatriating these Syrian refugees, as well as to defend against mounting armed resistance in an attempt to establish Rojava as an independent Kurdish state.

This analysis examines the ways in which Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have interwoven historic, domestic and regional security interests which serve to perpetuate the Syrian Civil War. The oil and gas trade is a significant factor in this ongoing conflict as Syria has geostrategic and economic potential as an energy corridor to link the significant oil and gas reserves in the South Pars / North Dome gas condensate to the lucrative European Union Market.

Whichever pipeline proposal is ultimately successful will enable the involved states to gain economic and geopolitical influence within the Middle East and the international system. Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey
therefore have competing interest to achieving peace and geostrategic land power in Syria on their own, often conflicting terms.

Chapter four outlines how have the states of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey responded to political instability in Syria. They did by directly and indirectly supporting different sectarian groups with economic and military aid throughout the Syrian Civil War. Chapter four also outlines the strategies used by the Middle East states of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to position themselves for influence of global oil and gas trade. As these states moved to support different groups based on their shared sectarian goals the Middle East states of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey also sort to influence these sectarian groups in of favour themselves to garner support for the construction of pipelines that would require the cooperation of the post-War government of Syria. Thus, increasing their strategies were in part incentivised by the prospect of strengthening their state’s positions for influence of the global oil and gas trade.
Chapter Five

Neoclassical Realism and the Syrian Civil War

There are three levels of analysis within the neoclassical realist paradigm: The independent variable, the intervening variable, and the dependent variable. This section outlines these three variables in the Syrian Civil War. The structure and distribution of power in the international system is an independent variable within the Syrian Civil War. This thesis only considers one element of the distribution of power – the relative sectarian balance (by population size) because it is the focus of research question one, and word limits do not allow this thesis to extend its analysis to full explanation of the balance of power. Domestic perceptions and/or incentives affect the behaviour of a state which is the intervening variable. Whereas the state’s policy decisions, which are informed by its political leadership are the dependent variable within this research. This approach gives equal consideration to military, economic and domestic factors within Syria. In this chapter, the theoretical principles of neoclassical realism have been used to explain why certain kinds of political outcomes have occurred within the historical context of Syria, and the impacts these outcomes have had on the structure and distribution of power in the Middle East and international system (independent variable). The application of the balance of power and heartland theories links the neoclassical realist theoretical framework outlined in chapter one with the evidence given in chapters two, three and four to address the research questions posed in the introduction of this project. These questions ask: How has sectarianism in Syria impacted on the geopolitical landscape? How have the states of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia responded to political instability in Syria? What strategies have the Middle East states of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey used to position themselves for influence of global oil and gas trade?

Chapter Five will seek to apply Neoclassical Realism framework to the context of the Syrian Civil War, building on the description of this war given in chapters two, three and four. Firstly, it will discuss the history of the Ba’athist Party and Assad Government takeover (1966-2010) and outline the connections between the role of Individual Leadership with neoclassical realism, to discuss how sectarianism in Syria impacted the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. Secondly, it will discuss connecting sectarianism with neoclassical realism, to outline the sectarian alliances that existed prior to Syria’s Civil War, and discuss the Heartland theory and the connection of land power to Syria’s significance as an energy corridor (prior to 2011). Thirdly, it will discuss how dis-enfranchised sectarian groups protested in response to the lack of liberal and economic reform and the Assad Government’s use of military force to resolve the Arab Spring. These sectarian opposition groups sought out Middle East states for military and economic support. This is treated throughout this thesis as the catalyst Syrian Civil War. This is followed by an examination of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey’s policy response to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War overtime (2011-2018). Connecting neoclassical realism
and balance of power theory, this section aims to explain the trajectory of Middle East and Russian state’s actions by way of response to this civil instability. This section is also interested in the proposed pipelines as incentives to engage in political conflict, and the strategies used by the Middle East states of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to position themselves for influence of the global oil and gas trade. Finally, application of the neoclassical framework will demonstrate how the distribution of power within Syria and the Middle East has affected domestic and international perceptions, and have ultimately influenced the behaviour of Shia-led and Sunni-led states. Neoclassical realism, as it is applied to the policy decisions of Syria and other Middle East states, focuses on the motivations and potential gain for stakeholder states within the war as motivation of their engagement in civil war, as opposed to this engagement as reactionary violence to political threats. Each state is motivated by their respective pipeline interests which act as economic incentive. These incentives, combined with their sectarian motivated state behaviours, have led to the state response policy decisions. These state policy decisions sought to strengthen sectarian alliances and end the Syrian Civil War.

Ba’athist party and Assad takeover: Considering the Role of Individuals

The Arab Spring occurred as the result of a shift in social and political expectations (Brynen et al., 2012). This growing movement for pan-Arab liberal reform was evident in the wider Middle East (May, 2015), where peaceful regime change had occurred in Tunisia (Brynen et al., 2012). Libya and Bahrain experienced violent conflict in an effort to balance internal political power away from their states and into disaffected sectarian groups (Tagma et al., 2013). In Syria, this political dissatisfaction was amplified by the lack of progress made towards the pan-Arab liberal reform that the Assad Government had promised in 2006 (Coutts, 2011; Schmidt, 2006). The consequent shift in the internal balance of power strengthened sectarian groups’ in their opposition to the Assad Government. Thus adding power to the sectarian divide that had already existed between the Assad Government and other internal sectarian groups (Cunningham, 2013). This was the result of under balancing of the power of the Assad Government (Lesch, 2018a). As the Assad Government had not appropriately balanced against the threat of sectarian disaffection when it had emerged, it had misperceived the threat and failed to balance appropriately (Cunningham, 2013; Lesch, 2018a, 2018b).

Political leadership plays a significant role in decision making concerning military, economic and domestic policy. It is considered a dependent variable in neoclassical realism (Lobell, 2009; Rose, 1998). Bashar al-Assad’s leadership of the Ba’athist party can be seen to have fuelled sectarianism within Syria, as he failed to deliver on the Ba’athist party’s promise of pan-Arab liberal reform (Coutts, 2011). When the Ba’athist party took control of the state of Syria in a coup d’état in 1963, it
did so in pursuit of pan-Arab socialism (Hinnebusch, 2001). This was followed by another internal coup in 1966, in which Hafez al-Assad became Defence Minister (Rabinovich, 1972). This second coup led the Ba’athist party firmly support political leadership enforced by the military power (Ali, 2004). A third coup was led by Assad to remove the leader Salah Jadid (Ali, 2004). Jadid’s intense focus on pan-Arab nationalism led him to support the combination of Syria and Egypt into a United Arab Republic, consisting of a union between Egypt, Syria and parts of the Palestinian territories (Ali, 2004). Jadid, who had made Hafez Assad his Defence Minister, was overthrown by Hafez Assad himself, who became the undisputed leader of Syria from 1971 until his death in 2000 (Ali, 2004). Hafez Assad’s Government departed from the Sunni aspirations for pan-Arab nationalism, and sought to reposition Syria out of Egyptian influence (Alianak, 2007). This repositioning strengthened the Alawite leadership of Syria, undermining other sectarian groups and weakening their political influence (Reich, 1990).

Hafez Assad had groomed his first-born son Bassel al-Assad to replace him. However, Bassel al-Assad’s fatal car accident in 1994 meant that younger brother Bashar al-Assad had to be assigned a position within the military forces to strengthen his military power base for leadership (Schmidt, 1994). Prior to his brother’s death, was a university student pursuing postgraduate studies in ophthalmology and was an eye doctor at Western Eye Hospital in London (Leverett, 2005). He was fast-tracked through Officer training as heir apparent and was given control of Syrian forces within Lebanon in 1998 (Leverett, 2005; Schmidt, 1994). Bashar al-Assad was elected by Syrian referendum twice with no opposition in 2000 and 2007. In his third election in 2014, a strawman candidate opposed him and he secured re-election (Barnard, 2014; Black, 2007; Nohlen, Grotz, & Hartmann, 2001). This era of Bashar al-Assad’s leadership saw the balance of power shift further leaning towards Alawite and Shia influence, creating a wider and more volatile sectarian divide (Salem, 2012).

Though Bashar al-Assad claims his leadership is secular, both the state and Bashar al-Assad himself rely on internal sectarian divides between the Sunnis, Kurds and Christians to keep the Alawite minority Government in power (Hof & Simon, 2013a). In the past, al-Assad balanced the other minorities with promises of liberal reform and the threat of political turmoil. He claimed that a Sunni majority would take control of Syria, worsening conditions for other religious and ethnic groups (Hinnebusch, 2012). Likewise, moderate Sunni were persuaded to maintain the Alawite’s balance of power over both other sectarian groups and extreme fundamentalist Sunni (Tashjian, 2012). Sectarian divides did not prevent resistance to the Assad Government, and Alawite control of the armed forces was used to maintain military deterrence to ensure sectarian groups did not disrupt or destabilise the government (Hof & Simon, 2013a). Sectarianism thus altered the geopolitical landscape within Syria. Under Assad’s leadership, the sectarian divide increased in response to Alawite dominance and force was needed to suppress this opposition (Bhalla, 2011). Assad thus utilised the sectarian divide to
maintain the Alawite’s political leadership within the internal state of Syria, and used military force to ensure the balance of power was in his favour (Phillips, 2015).

An increase Alawite power within Syria and the election of the Assad Government amplified the influence of Shia Arabs in the Middle East (Öniş, 2014). Under Bashar al-Assad’s leadership, alliances with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran were strengthened, increasing the Shia’s military and economic power base (Salamey & Othman, 2011). This can be seen as an attempt to address the historical imbalance of Shia power in the Middle East. Particularly as an effort to rebalance the strength of Sunni states like Saudi Arabia with its economic power, Turkey’s military power, and Qatar with its alliance to the US (Mabon, 2015; Nasr, 2004). Sectarian interests in Syria thus impacted on the regional geopolitical landscape, between (1966-2010) (Luttwak, 2016) as Alawite expansion in Syria seemed to have achieved an uneasy balance of power both within Syria, and in the Middle East, where Sunni-led Saudi Arabia and Shia-led Iran remained the dominant geopolitical actors (Ali, 2017).

**Sectarian Alliances Prior to Syria’s Civil War**

Sectarianism plays a significant role in domestic perceptions and / or incentives of a state which affect the behaviour of that state and is considered an intervening variable in neoclassical realism (Lobell, 2009; Rose, 1998). Internal sectarianism in pre-civil war Syria can be seen to alter the external geopolitical landscape (Groarke, 2016). Prior to the Syrian Civil War, the Assad Government sought to support Shia in states like Lebanon and Iraq, hoping to establish a pro-Shia Lebanese state from which to increase Shia geopolitical influence (Wehrey, 2018). These alliances were intended to increase pro-Shia state allies, which would enable the Alawite (Syria) and Shia-led states, like Iran, to balance against the power of Sunni-led states in the Middle East (Fei, 2016; Mamadkul, 2017). Alawite pro-Shia sectarianism in Syria thus strengthened external alliances based on the shared pro-Shia political views, and in doing so affected the behaviour of neighbouring states. This is particularly true of Saudi Arabia, which perceived rising Shia power as a threat with the potential to destabilise its Sunni power base (Nasr, 2006). As predicted by Halford Mackinder’s Heartland theory, land power has grown to be more influential then sea power over time (Mackinder, 2014). The rejection of the Qatar-Turkey pipeline proposal in 2009, and the agreement to build the Iran-Iraq pipeline in 2011, increased Syria’s land power and geostrategic significance as it held economic influence over the global oil and gas trade (Chang, 2015). Thus, while pre-civil war Syria held little significance in terms of balancing power in the international system, it became significantly influential after its potential as an energy corridor was established (Gray, 2004; Kennedy, 1974; Lin, 2015).

Syria’s economic potential as a keystone energy corridor state was further enhanced when Russian-supported influences invested in the construction of the Iran-Iraq pipeline. This enabled Iran to gain greater
control over the global oil and gas trade in the Middle East, and to increase its power and influence of the international system (Hetou, 2018). The Assad Government’s decision to reject the US-supported Qatar-Turkey pipeline and accept of the Russian-supported Iran-Iraq pipeline, therefore threatened to adjust the lean of the balance of power in the international structure, in favour of Russian-supported and Shia-led states like Iran. Thus threatening the economic interests of US-supported and Sunni-led states like the Qatar and Saudi Arabia. (Chang, 2015; Gabbard, 2017; Hokayem, 2013).

The sectarian preferences of the Alawite Assad Government - which favoured Shia over Sunni - as well as past territorial disputes between Syria and Turkey created alliance barriers (Chang, 2015). When Syria rejected an alliance with Saudi Arabia and Turkey in the oil and gas trade, it decreased their viable options for economic and geo-strategic alliances (Yorucu & Mehmet, 2018). Accepting one pipeline instead of another, or both, can thus be seen as significant both economically and geo-politically (Yorucu & Mehmet, 2018). As a result, Saudi Arabia and Turkey’s state behaviour and relationship to the Assad Government is volatile, and Iran’s state behaviour more likely to support the Assad Government (Salem, 2013, December 24).

The shift in balance of power both in favour of Alawite within Syria and Shia in the Middle East, directly contributed to the construction of the Iran-Iraq pipeline and created incentives for Sunni-led states like Saudi Arabia and Turkey to seek regime change (Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011). They were able to increase their influence within Syria by exploiting the internal state sectarian divide between Sunni and Alawite Syrians which Assad had previously manipulated to his own advantage (Coutts, 2011; Hof & Simon, 2013a). Sectarianism in pre-civil war Syria thus contributed both to Assad’s hold on power and, following the pipeline decision, the external resentment that ultimately destabilised his government (Chang, 2015; Coutts, 2011; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011).

**Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring, combined with the already unstable internal geopolitical landscape and growing sectarian political pressure brought about by external stakeholders, helped to facilitate the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War (Al-Harake, 2014). Previously, the Assad Government had utilised sectarian distrust to pacify Syrians and maintain its rule by pitting each sectarian group off against each other (Coutts, 2011). However, the sectarianism brought about by the Arab Spring threatened Bashar al-Assad’s leadership of the Ba’athist party, as he had not delivered on the promise of eventual pan-Arab liberal reform, which was now being demanded (Coutts, 2011). Sectarian opposition groups, united by the Arab Spring movement, opposed his leadership necessitating a response from the Ba’athist party (Donker, 2017). If neither the promise of economic pan-Arab liberal reform nor the threat of internal sectarianism could be used as effective domestic policy tools to suppress the Arab Spring, then Bashar
al-Assad’s political leadership of the Ba’athist party had only one possible policy option available: to use the policy of military force to suppress the Arab Spring (Barany, 2011; Coutts, 2011). This decision to enact military-enforced suppression on the growing sectarianism fuelled by the Arab Spring impacted on the geopolitical landscape by making the internal sectarian divide so large that political instability in Syria lead to civil war (Barany, 2011; Yom & Gause, 2012).

The use of military force against Arab Spring protestors tipped the internal balance of power in the Assad Governments favour, prompting sectarian opposition groups to seek external support from their regional allies, Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Carpenter, 2013; Yom & Gause, 2012). Saudi Arabia and Turkey sought to weaken the Assad Government and to build the strength of opposition groups so that a Sunni-led Syria might exist post-Arab Spring (Carpenter, 2013). This was intended to shift the leaning power imbalance in the Middle East back in the favour of Sunni-led states. This political shift would increase the chances of the construction of economically and geo-strategically significant Qatar-Turkey pipeline by a pro-Sunni Syrian Government, should the Assad Government be overthrown (Antonopoulos & Cottle, 2017). The weakening of Bashar al-Assad’s leadership due to his inability to meet the sectarian demands of the Arab Spring was compounded by the discontent of Saudi Arabia and Turkey over the rejection of the Qatar-Turkey pipeline; a proposal which would alter the external geopolitical landscape (Elbakyan, 2015; Lesch, 2010). Political instability in Syria thus provided a justification for Saudi Arabia and Turkey to intervene in support of sectarian groups seeking regime change, as this had the potential to strengthen their own power and influence over Syria (Hokayem, 2013).

The Assad Government sought to suppress the renewed strength of sectarian groups in order to retain power in the domestic sphere (Barany, 2011; Yom & Gause, 2012). Internally, the catalyst for the Syrian Civil War was the widespread disenfranchisement of Sunni, Kurds and other sectarian groups who were angered by the lack of liberal and economic reform and outraged at the Assad Government’s use of military force to resolve the Arab Spring instead of responding with more peaceful methods (Coutts, 2011; Hof & Simon, 2013a). By exploiting the outbreak of the Arab Spring to undermine the Assad Government, Saudi Arabia and Turkey fuelled the sectarian divide and manipulated it to their own advantage (Hokayem, 2013). This affected the balance of power within Syria, polarising opposition groups and reducing co-operation among them (Hokayem, 2013; Lobell, 2018). Giving them the economic and military tools to fight the Assad Government on their own terms, rather than in collaboration with other opposition forces, created the conditions for civil war (Carpenter, 2013). Recognising that Syria had a Sunni majority population, the Sunni-dominated leadership of Saudi Arabia and Turkey justified their support of sectarian opposition groups by claiming for the right to protest the “legitimate” Alawite Assad Government’s lack of liberal reform and use of disproportionate military force (Hokayem, 2013; Ryan, 2012).
Outbreak of the Syrian Civil War: Policy Responses by Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey

The outbreak of the civil war had significant implications for the military and economic interests of the external states. In turn, this affected their domestic perceptions by offering opportunity to approach and affect the Syrian state’s geopolitical instability, and altered their strategies to protect and pursue their interests (Ripsman et al., 2016). Domestic perceptions, are considered an intervening variable in neoclassical realism (Lobell, 2009; Rose, 1998). Whereas the policy decisions of states are considered the dependent variable in neoclassical realism (Lobell, 2009; Rose, 1998). The existing sectarian divide that led to the geopolitical instability of Syria and contributed to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, was exacerbated by the policy responses of the states of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Blandchard, Humud, & Nikitin, 2015; Hameed, 2018; Taşpınar, 2012). These stakeholder states' policy responses before and after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War were informed by their sectarian and geostrategic interests, and should be viewed in the context of struggle for influence of global oil and gas at the conclusion of the Syrian Civil War (Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011; Lin, 2015).

In the domestic sphere, the dominance of power achieved by the Government’s use of military force was motivated by suppressing Arab Spring protestors (Carpenter, 2013). This forced sectarian groups that were already arming themselves to mobilise (Kahf, 2013). Sunni opposition forces allied to Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and Kurdish opposition forces within Syria began to fight not just the Assad Government forces, but also between themselves (Nasr, 2018; O'Leary, 2018). The hostilities continued to escalate to the point where what began as multiple groups protesting against state oppression, failure to keep promises of pan-Arab liberal reform and other different objectives broke into civil war. Each sectarian group sought to gain an advantage in the destabilised internal sphere, leading to further instability (Coutts, 2011; Hof & Simon, 2013a).

At the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War on March 15, 2011, the Assad Government made a policy decision to use military force to maintain control in Syria and suppress sectarian opposition groups. Prompting policy responses from Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Fahim & Saad, 2013; Hokayem, 2013). On December 5, 2011, Turkey attempted to shift the balance of power in favour of Sunni sectarian oppositions forces by beginning to supply economic aid, military, supplies and training to pro-Sunni opposition forces (Manna, 2012). Similarly, in late December 2012, Saudi Arabia implemented a policy to provide economic aid, military supplies and training strategies to strengthen these sectarian opposition forces (Khalaf & Fielding-Smith, 2013). Saudi Arabia and Turkey perceived this as a strategic move through which they could strengthen their sectarian allies in Syria and, in turn, strengthen their own ability to use Syria as an energy corridor (Chang, 2015). Thus, Saudi Arabian and
Turkey’s strategies, which were aimed at increasing the power of sectarian opposition forces, can also be seen as motivated by a desire to position themselves favourably in the global oil and gas trade (Antonopoulos & Cottle, 2017; Hof & Simon, 2013a). On June 9, 2013, Iran responded to the instability in Syria and the weakening of the Assad Government by strengthening its alliance with Syria (Fisk, 2013). Iran employed strategies to economically bankroll the Assad Government and provide soldiers, weaponry, training and military intelligence (Lake, 2015). Iran’s strategic support for this alliance with Alawite Syria of Shia-led states against Sunni-led states can also be viewed in the context of the global oil and gas trade (Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011). By strengthening its already formed alliance, which involved the economic incentive of an Iran-Iraq pipeline, Iran and strengthened its own influence over the global oil and gas trade (Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011). Had it not intervened in the removal of the sectarian Alawite Assad Government from control, and the subsequent replacement with a pro-Sunni Government, it would be likely that the Qatar-Turkey pipeline would go ahead, and prevent construction of the Iran-Iraq pipeline. Thereby neutralising the potential strengthening of Shia economic influence (Lin, 2015).

When the states of Saudi Arabia and Turkey responded to political instability in Syria by joining with internal sectarian opposition groups, they and weakened the Assad Government and strengthen Sunni influence (Wehrey, 2018). However, when Iran supported the Assad Government, Alawite and Shia influence, it was able to lean the shift of the balance in its own favour, and against Sunni control. This led to prolonged conflict (Katz & Kozhanov, 2018). The struggle for control of Syria should therefore be considered in terms of its efforts to re-balance power in the Middle East (Cortés & Merheb-Ghanem, 2018). When the balance of power shifted in lean away from the Assad Government in favour of Sunni opposition forces aided by Saudi Arabia on and Turkey, and Iran restored balance in favour of the Assad Government, enabling them to retain power (Larrabee & Nader, 2013). This resulted in a stalemate, as neither side gained enough of an advantage to dominate and defeat the other (Jenkins, 2014). The interstate involvement in the Syrian Civil War thus established a proxy war amongst Middle East states which manifested in the internal conflict among Syrian sectarian allies (Harris, 2018).

Appropriate balancing occurs when a state predicts another state's intentions and duly compensates (Lobell, 2018). Appropriate balancing is evident in Iran’s indirect involvement in the Syrian Civil War as it predicted that the large proportion of Syrian Sunni’s would receive support from Sunni states, in an effort to undermine the minority Alawite who held power (Hokayem, 2013; Lobell, 2018). Predicting the behaviour of Middle East stakeholder states, Iran implemented a policy decision to counterbalance by way of preemptive strike. This balancing strategy of indirect involvement on September 5, 2011, is considered appropriate balancing (Hokayem, 2014) and can be seen as an attempt to oppose the Sunni-led states of Turkey on December 5, 2011 (Manna, 2012), and Saudi Arabia on late December 2012 (Khalaf & Fielding-Smith, 2013) as
they attempt to strengthen their sectarian power base both in Syria and in the Middle East (Juneau, 2018; Lobell, 2018).

It is evident that the states of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey responded to political instability in Syria by positioning themselves for influence over the global oil and gas trade (Carpenter, 2013; Chang, 2015; Elbakyan, 2015; Hof & Simon, 2013a). Each state capitalised on existing sectarian ties, resulting in a hostile stalemate and the persistence of the Syrian Civil War (Ortiz, 2014).

On the September 30, 2015, (Postma, 2017; Van Volkenburg, 2018) Russia intervened in the Syrian Civil War and broke the stalemate that had existed from June 6, 2015 (Fisk, 2013). This again lean shifted the balance of power and created further political instability in Syria by strengthening the Alawite Assad Government (Vasquez, 2016). On August 29, 2017, Saudi Arabia reconsidered the construction of the Qatar-Turkey pipeline as a viable option (Yorucu & Mehmet, 2018). Saudi Arabia's policy response was to then cease economic and military support of Sunni opposition forces (Fakude, 2017), reflecting its diminishing interest in Syria's potential as an energy corridor (Chang, 2015; Fakude, 2017; Yorucu & Mehmet, 2018). With the Qatar-Turkey pipeline proposal blocked by Russia, Saudi Arabia did not see the benefit in continuing to intervene in the Syria Civil War (Lin, 2015; Perthes, 2018).

The Qatar-Turkey pipeline proposal challenged Russia's ability to exert geostrategic influence over the oil and gas trade with the European Union (Yazji, 2016). To mitigate a shifting power imbalance in the global sphere, Russia exacerbated the internal conflict in Syria with the intention of ending the prolonged stalemate of hostilities and tipping the internal balance of power in favour of the Assad Government (Ibonye, 2018). This strategy was intended to enable Russia and Iran to end the Syrian Civil War, and reassert their influence over the post-civil war Syrian Government (Parasiliti, Reedy, & Wasser, 2017). The strategic alliance between the Assad Government, Russia and Iran would thus ensure the construction of the Iran-Iraq pipeline construction (Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011). Iran's strategy of alliance-building with Russia has thus positioned Iran for greater influence over the global oil and gas trade then it had prior to the start of the Syrian Civil War (Chang, 2015; Hafidh & Faucon, 2011).

Iran's direct economic and military support of the pro-Shia Assad Government balanced the power of the indirect economic and military support provided by Saudi Arabia and Turkey to pro-Sunni opposition forces (Yorucu & Mehmet, 2018). This stalemate of hostilities in the geopolitical landscape was broken by Russia, which became directly involved in the Syrian Civil War on September 30, 2015 (Postma, 2017; Van Volkenburg, 2018). Russia's intervention caused an imbalance of power in favour of the Assad and Iranian Government's, impacting on the geopolitical landscape by strengthening the Alawite Assad Government to a point where the stalemate of hostilities was broken (Van Volkenburg,
2018). This intervention is likely to ensure that the Syrian Civil War will end without the Assad Government being removed from power (Parker, 2017). Though Russia is not a Middle East stakeholder state, it played a decisive role in supporting Iran’s strategy for Syria.

**Conclusion**

Neo-classical realism has been used throughout this chapter as an analytical framework to demonstrate how distribution of power within Syria and the Middle East has affected domestic and international perceptions, and influenced the behaviour of both Shia-led and Sunni-led states.

The role of individual political leaders has influenced the behaviour of sectarian groups within Syria. This led the minority Alawite within Syria to consolidate its power behind the Ba’athist Party and Assad’s political leadership through its control of the military. The lean of the shift of balance of power within Syria towards Alawite Shia and away from Sunni influence has affected the external geopolitical landscape in the Middle East, prompting neighbouring states to re-evaluate the threats and incentives posed by Syria as well as its potential as a keystone energy corridor. When presented with competing pipeline proposals, the Assad Government followed its sectarian preferences, favouring the interests of Shia-led Iran in the Iran-Iraq pipeline over the interests of Sunni-led Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the Qatar-Turkey pipeline. When Syria was destabilised by the Arab Spring uprising, this policy decision enabled sectarian groups to gain direct and indirect support from stakeholder states seeking to further their own interests in the global oil and gas trade. The sectarian distribution of power within Syria and in the Middle East has thus influenced the behaviour of stakeholder states, informing the policy decisions made by their political leaders in response to the outbreak of the civil war in Syria. However, their military and economic support of sectarian groups within Syria can be seen to be motivated by a desire to exert geopolitical influence over a post-war Syrian Government, in order to utilise Syrian land power and benefit economically from the construction of a favourable oil and gas pipeline.

The policy decisions of Syria and other Middle East stakeholder states can thus be seen as an effort to preserve incentives that favour compatible sectarian interests, and/or weaken the threat posed by opposition sectarian groups. This is evident in Syria and Iran’s decision to ally with Russia in order to over-balance power lean shift in favour of Alawite Shia control of Syria to break the stalemate and bring the Syrian Civil War to an end.
Conclusion

Sectarianism has impacted on the geopolitical landscape both prior to and within the context of the Syrian Civil War. Prior to the commencement of the Syrian Civil War, tensions were present between Alawite Shia, Sunni, Kurdish and other sectarian groups within Syria. The Alawite Assad Government was able to utilise sectarian mistrust to its political advantage by promising pan-Arab liberal reform and balancing against the threat of other less-moderate sectarian groups taking control of Syria. In the broader Middle Eastern context, Alawite leadership of Syria was, to some extent, able to weaken the dominance of Sunni-led states by supporting the construction of the Iran-Iraq pipeline and securing the economic and political benefits that would accrue from its construction. Its policy decision to reject the Qatar-Turkey pipeline, which would have increased Sunni economic and political influence over the global oil and gas trade, was a factor that, when combined with the catalyst of the Arab Spring, made for the political instability that led to and is maintaining the Syrian Civil War.

Sectarianism within Syrian created a state of instability within the domestic sphere with the potential for Syria to fragment into several different autonomous states along sectarian lines. Prior to the Arab Spring, the Ba'athist Party was able to retain control by offering economic stability and liberal reform, which appealed to moderate Arabs. However, its policy decision to use military force to suppress the Arab Spring uprising led to an escalation of hostilities, as moderate Arabs saw this as disproportionate and incompatible with liberal reform. Opposition groups within Syria, which initially united in an attempt to overthrow the Assad Government, later reached out to their sectarian allies outside of Syria in an attempt to seize political control. Sectarianism thus not only plunged Syria into civil war by undermining the authority of the state, but also pitted sectarian groups against each other in the attempt to gain land power and ultimately dominate the domestic geopolitical landscape.

Saudi Arabia and Turkey’s desire to use Syria as an energy corridor had been undermined by the Assad Government. This influenced their policy decisions to indirectly intervene in the Syrian Civil War by supporting Sunni opposition groups. In response, Iran - by directly intervening - swung the balance in support of the Assad Government, as this would secure its interest in the Iran-Iraq pipeline. The stalemate that resulted from the intervention of stakeholder states has perpetuated the Syrian Civil War as neither the Alawite-led Ba’athist Party, nor Sunni opposition forces have been able to gain sufficient power to bring the Syrian Civil War to an end by use of force. The states of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia can thus be seen to have responded to political instability in Syria by strategically supporting sectarian groups whose interests align with their own geopolitical aspirations for influence of the global oil and gas trade. However, Iran has been able to do so under the guise of supporting the “legitimate” authority of an “elected” government, while Turkey and Saudi Arabia have claimed to support the legitimate right of Syrian citizens to engage in protest action.
Syria’s geographic position between the South Pars/ North Dome gas condensate and the European Union means it has significant land power, as it has strategic importance as an energy corridor. The Middle Eastern states of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have strategically supported sectarian groups within Syria for the purpose of increasing their influence over any potential post-war Syrian government, to benefit from this land power. Iran’s alliance with the Assad Government was in part motivated by its desire to secure the construction of the Iran-Iraq pipeline, whereas Turkey and Saudi Arabia hoped to secure an alternative government with stronger Sunni ties to see the Qatar-Turkey pipeline constructed. The Middle Eastern states of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have thus utilised sectarian alliances to increase their influence over any potential post-war Syrian Government, as doing so will give them strategic influence over the global oil and gas trade.

It is therefore evident that internal sectarianism is one of the underlying causes of the Syrian Civil War, and that the policy decisions of the Assad Government led to its outbreak. First, its pro-Shia sectarian alliances motivated it to accept the Iran-Iraq pipeline and reject the Qatar-Turkey pipeline leading Sunni stakeholder states to support opposition forces. Secondly, the use of military force to suppress the Arab Spring uprising provided a justification for these states to indirectly intervene. Its alliance with Iran enabled the Assad Government to remain in power during the civil war but has not allowed it to bring the conflict to an end. However, now that Russia has intervened, due to its ties to Iran and its interest in retaining influence over the global oil and gas trade, it is likely that the Ba’athist party will retain control over Syria. Sectarian opposition groups now appear unlikely to be able to overthrow the Assad Government, as Russia has overbalanced in the Assad Government’s favour, blocking Turkey and Saudi Arabia from gaining greater influence over the global oil and gas trade. With the support of Iran and Russia, it seems probable that Syria will continue to support pro-Shia geostrategic interests in the Middle East, enabling the Iran-Iraq pipeline to be constructed, and securing Iran and Russia’s dominance of the global oil and gas trade.
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