The Syrian Civil War
An Analysis through the lens of Offensive Realism

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Introduction

Offensive Realism is the doctrine proposed by John Mearsheimer to analyse international relations in his acclaimed book "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics" from 2001;[1]

The Offensive Realism doctrine is based on five bedrock assumptions:

- 1st assumption: the international system is anarchic, since the system comprises independent states that have no superior authority above them;
- 2nd assumption: great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability, which gives them the wherewithal to hurt and possibly destroy each other;
- 3rd assumption: states can never be certain about other states' intentions; specifically, no state can be sure that another state will not use its offensive military capability to attack the first state;
- 4th assumption: survival is the primary goal of great powers; specifically, states seek to maintain their national integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order; survival dominates other motives because if a state is conquered it would be in an unlikely position to pursue its other goals;
- 5th assumption: great powers are rational actors; this means that they are aware of their external environment and think strategically about how to survive in it;

None of these assumptions alone dictates that great powers should behave aggressively toward each other, however, when the five assumptions are married together, they create powerful incentives for great powers to think and act offensively with regard of each other; in particular, three general patterns of behaviour result:

- **Fear**: since there is no central authority enforcing rules and order in the anarchical international system, states regard each other with suspicion, not only seeing each other as competitors but as potentially deadly enemies;
- **Self-help**: since no higher authority can guarantee protection, states must rely on themselves to ensure survival; this dynamic encourages the tragic security dilemma;
- **Power maximization**: unlike defensive realists, Mearsheimer argues that states naturally seek as much power as possible, ideally to become regional hegemons to increase their chances of survival;

Following this tragic blueprint, I will try to analyse the great powers' interventions in the Syrian Civil War. The conflict erupted in the March of 2011 as a popular revolt against the Assad regime and, after being violently suppressed, became a civil war by 2012.[2] To be clear, Mearsheimer's theory describes the behaviour of great powers and only US and Russia can be considered as such, while Iran, Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia are regional powers. My argument is that the same structural logic applies at regional level, in which every state face anarchy, uncertainty about the neighbourhoods' intentions and the need for self-help; for this reason, the totality of the six actors is examined within the same framework.

Russia

The Russian Federation decided to intervene directly in the Syrian Civil War in 2015 to avoid the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, marking the first projection of power outside of the post-soviet space since the end of the cold war;[3] officially, the operation was launched to counter

[1]Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). The tragedy of great power politics. New York: W. W. Norton.

[2]Lesch, D. W. (2012). Syria: The fall of the House of Assad. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Phillips, C. (2016). The battle for Syria: International rivalry in the new Middle East. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

[3]Allison, R. (2013). Russia and Syria: Explaining alignment with a regime in crisis. International Affairs, 89(4), 795–823.

Islamic terrorism in the region and globally due to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but in substance that was just a minimum part of the real Russian intentions in the region, which we can summarize in three bullet points:

- Avoid the return of separatist movements in the North-Caucasian regions of Russia inhabited by Muslim populations, that could have started a domino capable to end in the so-called "balkanization" of Russia, following the realist principle of **fear**: since the outbreak of the Second Chechen War (1999), President Putin has always referred to the North-Caucasian region and its crises as existential for the Russian Federation; from 2011 many Chechen militants left Russia to join jihadist groups like ISIS in Syria, so Russian support for Assad regime became crucial to avoid instability in the region that could result in a corridor for terrorist and secessionist Sunni movements in Russian Caucasian territories;[4]

- Maintain the key naval bases of Tartus and Latakia to project Russian naval forces in the Eastern Mediterranean, following the realist principle of **self-help** and **power maximization**: the naval bases in the Syrian port cities of Tartus and Latakia, whose access was guaranteed by the Assad regime, have always had a crucial and indispensable strategic importance to project Russian power in the region, since the access to the Mediterranean Sea from the Black Sea is given by the Bosphorus Strait, under Turkish sovereignty, which can decide to close the strait in peace and war time as well;[5]

- Challenge US-led western hegemony and re-propose Russia as a global great power after the fall of the Soviet Union, following the realist principle of **power maximization**: the fall of Muhammad Gaddafi's regime in Libya (2011), caused by an international coalition led by the US, represented a significant loss for the Russian Federation, due to the several cooperation contracts in matters like weapons and nuclear energy; Russia could not afford to lose another strategic partner in the region like Bashar al-Assad and wanted to demonstrate its renewed capability to project power and influence outside of its "near abroad", exposing US decreasing influence in the Middle East, succeeding in it with the Astana Process (2017) which de facto excluded US by the de-escalation talks;[6]

Iran

Iran is surrounded by declared enemies, the Sunni Gulf Monarchies (Saudi, UAE and Qatar), Israel, Turkey and the US bases in the region, so has to achieve a deep strategical sphere of influence which we can identify in the "Axis of Resistance", composed by Iran, the Syrian Assad Regime and Hezbollah (Lebanon) and with the "Shia Crescent", composed by Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon; as we can observe, in both of these two spheres of Iranian influence that cover from central Asia to Eastern Mediterranean, Syria gives territorial continuity, a crucial factor in assuring a continuous supply line for Hezbollah's militias which guarantee Iran an efficient range of fire against Israel.[7]

Therefore, Iranian actions in the Syrian Civil War are one of the clearest examples of realism in the region: pushed by **fear**, since the regional hegemony is impossible to be pursued, Iran tries to achieve power equilibrium though **self-help** and **power maximization**.

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[4]Prata e Cunha, J. F. (2020). Exploring the Political Chessboard of Syria: An Analysis of the Role of the US, Russia, Iran and Turkey Through the Lens of Realism(s). Master's dissertation, ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa. http://hdl.handle.net/10071/21103

[5]Prata e Cunha (2020).

[6]Allison (2013); Prata e Cunha (2020).

[7]The Military & Security Cooperation between Iran and Russia in the Syrian Crisis with the Approach of Realism 2010-2017. (2024). International Journal of Political Science, 13(4), 23-53. http://oiccpress.com/ijps/article/view/8394; Prata e Cunha (2020).

To avoid a regime-change in Syria, that would have meant the instauration of a pro-western or pro-Turkey government, Iran strictly collaborated with Russia with the common goal of contrasting US hegemony in the region and provided to the Syrian government a wide range of assets, including:

- Oil and financial assistance
- Intelligence support and backing
- Military aid and provision of military equipment
- Experts and technical officers to Syria to train its army forces, like the Quds Forces which trained and reorganized militias such as the National Defense Forces (NDF)
- Proxy Shia militias like Hezbollah (crucial in battles like Qusayr and Aleppo), Fatemiyoun and Zainebiyoun Brigades (Shia Afghans and Pakistanis)[8]

Turkey

Turkey's foreign policy during Syrian Civil War can be summarized in two major points:

- Containment of Kurdish militias growing power and creation of a buffer-zone in north-eastern Syria following the offensive realist principle of **fear**: Turkey hosts roughly half of the world's Kurdish population (12-17 millions), this makes the Kurds the biggest ethnic minority within Turkish borders;[9] since the creation of PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê) in 1978, Turkish government has fought several times with the paramilitary organization and tried to force the assimilation of Kurdish people into Turkish; with the emergence of ISIS in Syria, both US and Russia started financing and backing the YPG (Syrian Kurdish Yekineyen Parastina Gel), another Kurdish military group in close ties with the PKK; Turkey saw the possibility of the creation of an independent and territorially continuous Kurdistan (with the consequent secession of the Turkish territories with Kurdish majority) as an existential threat to be avoided at any cost; this situation ultimately led to strong tensions with the Obama administration and with the Russian regime, often coming close to a direct military confrontation with both of them in the regions occupied by the Kurdish forces; in military terms, this fear led to Operations Euphrates Shield (2016), Olive Branch (2018) and Peace Spring (2019) which resulted in the occupation of a significant portion of Syrian territory by the Turkish army to separate Kurds-controlled areas while the shooting down of a Russian SU-24 in the Turkish-Syrian border almost resulted in a direct military confrontations between the two countries;[10]

- Expansion of Turkey's influence in the region and containment of Iran's influence expansion through hard power, following the offensive realist principles of **self-help** and **power maximization**: following 2011, Turkey pushed for the fall of the Assad regime in favour of a Sunni regime close to the Muslim Brotherhood, in order to strengthen Turkish influence in the former Ottoman space, in line with the "strategic depth" doctrine of Ahmet Davutoğlu;[11] Turkey hosted the Syrian opposition in Istanbul, kept the border open to refurnish the rebels and tried to contain the rival Iranian hegemonic project which was trying to keep alive the territorial continuity of the Shia Crescent. When that strategy failed, Turkey decided to move on direct military power: Turkish forces and the Syrian ally, the Syrian National Army, occupied and started to control a belt of the Northen Syrian territory, administrated through schools, hospitals and Turkish currency, while in the Astana format of 2017 Turkey, Russia and Iran de-

[8]The Military & Security Cooperation between Iran and Russia in the Syrian Crisis (2024).

[9]Gunter, M. M. (1988). The Kurdish Problem in Turkey. Middle East Journal, 42(3), 389–406. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4327776; McDowall, D. (2004). A modern history of the Kurds (3rd ed.). London: I.B. Tauris.

[10]McDowall (2004); Phillips (2016).

[11]Davutoğlu, A. (2001). Stratejik derinlik: Türkiye'nin uluslararası konumu. Istanbul: Küre Yayınları; Cagaptay, S. (2017). The new sultan: Erdogan and the crisis of modern Turkey. London: I.B. Tauris.

facto cut out the US as guarantors of the Idlib de-escalation zone, which resulted, after the clashes of Operation Spring Shield, in the Russian–Turkish ceasefire of March 2020[12]

USA

The United States are the only actor in this analysis who is already a regional hegemon, specifically in the western hemisphere; according to Mearsheimer, a power with that status acts as an "offshore balancer", intervening to avoid other powers to reach the regional hegemony preferring to pass the buck to local allies whenever possible.[13]

The American behaviour in Syria did fit this pattern and can be summarized in three points:

- Contain the jihadist threat of ISIS without deploying significant ground forces, following the realist principles of **fear** and **self-help**: after the proclamation of the caliphate in 2014, the US announced the start of Operation Inherent Resolve choosing as a local partner the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, built around the YPG, allowing the US to defeat ISIS in Raqqa in 2017 losing a limited amount of lives; the price was a severe fracture with Turkey, a NATO ally, which considered the YPG linked to the PKK, therefore an existential threat to its national integrity;[14]

- Obstacle the consolidation of the Iranian land corridor from Teheran to Beirut and oppose the return of Russia in the Middle East, following the realist principle of **power maximization**: the US maintained the base of al-Tanf, near the Iraq-Jordan-Syria border, on the road between Baghdad and Damascus, and struck Syrian government forces in 2017 and 2018 after the regime's chemical attacks and in 2019 enacted the Caesar Act to sanction Assad and its allies; probably the goal was not to win the war but to make the victory as most costly as possible for Moscow and Teheran;

- Avoid another expensive regime-change war after Iraq and Afghanistan, following the realist principle of **self-help** in the form of buck-passing: in August 2013 President Obama did not enforce his "red line" on chemical weapons and accepted the Russian mediated agreement on disarmament;[15] the CIA program to arm rebels, known as Timber Sycamore, was stopped by Trump in 2017;[16] since 2025 Washington has consolidated its presence and has renounced to some bases, like al-Tanf in 2026,[17] while the Congress has repealed the Caesar Act following the request of regional allies like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, leaving to them the stabilization of the new Syria.[18]

Israel

Israel is a regional power with an offensive military capabilities way beyond its neighbours but, as Mearsheimer emphasizes, is a state surrounded by other states which deny its legitimacy and with no-one who can guarantee its survival; in fact, its strategic culture, wonderfully

[12]Phillips (2016).

[13]Mearsheimer (2001); Mearsheimer, J. J., & Walt, S. M. (2016). The case for offshore balancing: A superior U.S. grand strategy. Foreign Affairs, 95(4), 70–83.

[14]Phillips (2016).

[15]Goldberg, J. (2016, April). The Obama doctrine. The Atlantic.

[16]Jaffe, G., & Entous, A. (2017, July 19). Trump ends covert CIA program to arm anti-Assad rebels in Syria, a move sought by Moscow. The Washington Post.

[17]FDD. (2026, February 12). Syrian troops take over key Syria base after U.S. withdrawal [Flash brief]. https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2026/02/12/syrian-troops-take-over-key-syria-base-after-u-s-withdrawal/

[18]Al-Monitor. (2025, December 17). US Congress ends Syria sanctions [AFP report]. https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/12/us-congress-ends-syria-sanctions; Enab Baladi. (2025, December 19). Trump signs repeal of "Caesar" sanctions law. https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/12/trump-signs-repeal-of-caesar-sanctions-law/

synthesized by the "iron wall" image,[19] is based upon deterrence and pre-emption and its goals in Syria are summarised in two points:

- Prevent Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah to establish on the Golan border and to transfer lethal weapons in Lebanon through Syria, following the realist principle of **fear**: Israel occupies the Golan Heights' territories since 1967 and annexed them in 1981 (only the US do recognize this unilateral annexation), and since 2013 conducts a systematic air raids campaign against the Iranian military bases in Syrian territory, without deploying ground forces in the conflict;

- Exploit the void of power caused by the fall of the Assad regime, following the realist principle of **power maximization**: in December 2024 the Israeli forces entered in the buffer demilitarized zone created in 1974, took the summit of Mount Hermon and destroyed through air campaigns the most of the military equipment of the former Syrian army, invoking as the reason beyond these attacks the protection of the Druse population; in July 2026 the Israeli defence Minister Katz told to his American counterpart that Israel was committed to remain I the "security zones" in Syria, Gaza and Lebanon, while the US mediated talks with Damascus are frozen since January 2026;[20]

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is the only actor in this analysis without a stable military presence on the Syrian soil, nonetheless its role resulted to be very important: Syria was one of the main theatres of the Iranian-Saudi regional rivalry which Gause defined as the "new Middle East Cold War";[21] Riyadh can count on its wide financial resources but has no great military capabilities so its strategy was mainly indirect and can be summed up in three points:

- Break the Iranian encirclement, following the realist principle of **fear**: following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran gained influence over Iraq and Lebanon and, since 2014, also in Yemen; Syria represented the portion of land who granted territorial continuity to the "Shia Crescent" so, since 2012, Riyadh financed Syrian rebels, especially Jaysh al-Islam;[22]

- Reduce its security dependence from the US, following the realist principle of **self-help**: the American retreat from the red line on chemical weapons in 2013 convinced Riyadh that Americans were not a reliable ally anymore, while the competition with Qatar and Turkey on which rebel factions to finance divided the opposition; the same autonomy logic resulted in the Mohammed bin Salman's decision to military intervene in Yemen in 2015;[23]

- Adapt to the new regional distribution of power through economic means, following the realist principle of **power maximization**: after the China mediated Iranian-Saudi agreement of 2023, Syria was re-admitted in the Arab League and, after the fall of Assad, Riyadh pushed for the candidacy of the President Ahmed al-Sharaa, who visited Saudi Arabia in the February of 2025, and then signed in the July of the same year, at the Damascus investment forum, a 47 clauses agreement with a Saudi delegation for the

[19]Shlaim, A. (2000). The iron wall: Israel and the Arab world. New York: W. W. Norton.

[20]Enab Baladi. (2026, July). Israel tells US it rejects withdrawal from Syria. https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2026/07/israel-tells-us-it-rejects-withdrawal-from-syria/

[21]Gause, F. G., III. (2014). Beyond sectarianism: The new Middle East cold war (Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper No. 11). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

[22]Phillips (2016); Gause (2014).

[23]Gause (2014); Hubbard, B. (2020). MBS: The rise to power of Mohammed bin Salman. New York: Tim Duggan Books.

value of 4 to 6 billion dollars, marking a strict competition with Qatar, UAE and Turkey for the role of principal contributor for the rebuild of the country.[24]

Conclusion

The analysis shows that each of the six actors acted following the logic exposed by Mearsheimer: **fear** explains the Russian worries for the Caucasus, the encirclement paranoia of Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Turkish anxiety for the Kurdish nationalism, the Israeli worries for the Iranian influence and the American one for the radical Islam expansion; **self-help** explains why no state relied upon the UN, given the continuous Russian vetoes in the Security Council and the competition between the Astana format and the Geneva process;[25] **power maximization** explains the consistent research of bases, buffer zones and spheres of influence, from Tartus to al-Tanf, rom the Turkish belt in northern Syria to Israeli presence on Mount Hermon; the fall of Assad in December 2024 confirmed the sum-zero logic of the anarchical system: the Iranian "Axis of Resistance" lost its crucial Syrian partner and Russia lost its middle-eastern ally, while the Gulf Monarchies, Turkey and Israel strengthened their positions; despite the defeat Russia announced in August 2026 a memorandum with Syrian which established the bases of Tartus and Hmeimim as joint training centres;[26] similarly Ankara obtained in January 2026 through Damascus what tried to obtain through its army, the integration of Kurds forces into the Syrian state, following a Syrian military operation supported by Turkey.[27]

Two limits must be recognized: first, the theory explains why the states act rather than how: ideology, sectarian solidarity and domestic politics, like the Iranian ties with Shia communities or the neo-Ottoman rhetoric for Turkey, have shaped the form of this events, and the Syrians themselves have not been mere pawns; second, the case shows the tragic dynamic in its strict sense: any move made for security reasons, for example the Turkish fear for Kurds, or the Israeli and Saudi fear for Iran, has produced uncertainty in other sectors, fuelling the security dilemma that Mearsheimer poses at the centre of great power politics.

[24]Henderson, S. (2025, August 4). Promises of billions confirm Saudi political support for Syria. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/19466/en

[25]Allison (2013).

[26]Ahram Online. (2026, August 9). Syria says reached deal with Moscow on fate of Russian bases [AFP report]. https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/574294.aspx

[27]Wikipedia contributors. (2026). 2026 northeastern Syria offensive. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_northeastern_Syria_offensive

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