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İÇİNDEKİLER Table of Contents

VI **Editörden /** *Editorial*

IX **MAKALELER /** *ARTICLES*

277 The Determinants of Foreign Direct Investment in Real Estate Market of Turkey: Evidence from a Cointegrated VAR

Türkiye'nin Gayrimenkul Piyasasına Doğrudan Yabancı Yatırımın Belirleyicileri: Bir Eşbütünleşik VAR'dan Kanıtlar

Barış GÖK - Utku AKSEKİ

301 Türkiye'de Yerel Yönetimler Lisans Eğitimi Tecrübesi: Mevcut Durumu, Sorunlar Ve Geleceğine Yönelik Bir İnceleme

Undergraduate-Level Local Governments Education Experience in Turkey: A Review of its Current Status, Problems and Future

Burak Hamza ERYİĞİT - Aydın AKPINAR

331 Türkiye İmalat Sanayinin Teknolojik Yapısının Rekabet Gücü Üzerine Bir Analiz

An Analysis on the Competitiveness of Technological Structure of Turkey's Manufacturing Industry

Murat Ozan BAŞKOL - Selahattin BEKTAŞ

359 AB'nin İşletmelerle Kurduğu Diyalogda Kurumsal Sosyal Sorumluluk: Çevresel Düzenlemeler ve İnsan Hakları Girişimleri Kapsamında Bir İnceleme

Social Responsibility in The Context of EU's Dialogue with Businesses: A Research in The Context of Environmental Arrangements and Human Rights Attempts

Pelin SÖNMEZ

375 Yerel Yönetimlerin Mültecilere Yönelik Yenilikçi Uygulamaları: Gaziantep Büyükşehir Belediyesi Örneği

Innovative Practices of Local Governments Towards Refugees: A Case Study on Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality

Sönmez ALVANOĞLU - Hamza ATEŞ

403 The Analysis of Investment Decisions of Foreign Exchange Investors from the Perspective of Behavioural Finance

Döviz Yatırımcısının Yatırım Kararlarının Davranışsal Finans Açısından İncelenmesi

Turgay MÜNYAS

443 Kent Markalaşmasının Temel Sorunları

Major Issues of City Branding

Ülke Evrim UYSAL

465 Küresel Politikaların Belirlenmesinde Çok Uluslu Şirketlerin Rolü ve Önemi

Determınatıon of Global Policies the Role and Importance of Multinational Companies

Ünal ACAR

491 Analysis of Proxy Wars from a Neorealist Perspective; Case of Syrian Crisis

Neorealist Yaklaşımdan Vekalet Savaşlarının Analizi; Suriye Krizi Örneği

Vahit GÜNTAY

518 **Yayın İlkeleri**

Editorial Policy

MAKALELER

ARTICLES

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Analysis of Proxy Wars from a Neorealist Perspective; Case of Syrian Crisis

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze the proxy wars and the Syrian Crisis from the neorealist perspective of international relations as a recent debate. Syria, one of the most cosmopolitan countries in the Middle East, is among the most strategic actors influenced by the process called the Arab Spring. The selection of the Syrian Crisis as a case study in methodological terms is related to the dynamics of this study. As a conclusion, the study shows that actors are in conflict as a natural reaction in Syria. This is due to the systematic disorders of the international arena and the evolution of diplomacy. The Syrian Crisis has also revealed that inter-state systemic changes will be continuous in terms of international relations.

Keywords: Proxy Wars, Neorealism, Realism, International Relations, Syrian Crisis

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Neorealist Yaklaşımdan Vekalet Savaşlarının Analizi; Suriye Krizi Örneği

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı son dönemde yükselen bir tartışma olarak vekalet savaşlarını ve Suriye Krizi'ni uluslararası ilişkilerin neorealist perspektifinden analiz etmektir. Vekalet savaşlarının tipik örneklerinden birisinin yaşandığı Suriye Ortadoğu'nun en kozmopolit ülkelerinden birisidir ve Arap Baharı'nın etkilediği en stratejik aktörler arasındadır. Metodolojik anlamda örnek olay olarak Suriye Krizi'nin seçilmesi dinamiklerinin bu çalışmaya uygun olması ile ilgilidir. Sonuç olarak çalışma, aktörlerin doğal bir reaksiyon olarak Suriye'de çatışma içinde olduğunu göstermektedir. Bunun sebebi uluslararası alanın sistematik bozukluklarından ve diplomasinin evriminden kaynaklanmaktadır. Suriye Krizi uluslararası ilişkiler açısından, devletlerarası sistemsel değişikliklerin sürekli olacağını da ortaya koymuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Vekalet Savaşları, Neorealizm, Realizm, Uluslararası İlişkiler, Suriye Krizi

Introduction

After the Cold War, proxy war became a method of being active in a third country or fighting against the enemy, mostly through local actors. While this struggle is a hot conflict between local actors, its supporters are only involved when it is necessary (Thies, 2004, Fox, 2019). Proxy wars are blended from factors such as external actors, a third country, the local powers of this country, external actors, local powers, cooperation and mutual interests. Proxy wars come out of the combination of these elements with their various forms (Bar-Siman-Tov, 1984, s. 265).

In terms of proxy war, the neorealist approach has recognized that inter-state cooperation will be limited. That makes proxy war an option. The boundaries of cooperation are shaped over security issues and are based on the logic of dominant security competition. Therefore, it is not possible to speak of a long-term permanent peace or a world free of power struggles (Groth, 2019, s. 86-89).[1]

Studies on the theoretical investigation are related to a minimum of criticism or the determination of underlying assumptions on which daily international political debates are based. At the most advanced level, it is aimed to justify that some assumptions are true or false.

Classical realism tries to explain international relations based on human nature and behaviour. *Neorealism* tries to explain it from the international system and *neoclassical realism* based on intra-state factors. In terms of neorealism and neoclassical realism, discussions about the structure of the states' system offer a more systematic level of analysis in terms of proxy wars. For this study, that is the essential factor in examining the Syrian Crisis and proxy wars from a neorealist perspective.

Neorealism acknowledges that the international system consists of sovereign states. It draws on a structured framework based on the view that these states are functionally similar elements. Neorealism argues that the element that differentiates states from each other is the distribution of power. In general, neorealism creates an international policy philosophy by adding system analysis to the unit level analysis

1 International anarchy explains not only the cause of wars but also why interstate cooperation is difficult. For example, cooperation is never guaranteed in the absence of a central power that can punish those who do not comply with the treaties. Conflict is always a serious possibility. Thus, coexistence in an anarchic environment necessitates self-help for the states.

of classical realism.

In this context, it is thought that proxy wars and the examination of the Syrian Crisis within the framework of theory will contribute to the discipline. As will be discussed in more detail, security, risks and threat perceptions have been at the forefront in terms of the Syrian Crisis and proxy wars. Global and regional actors can influence the course of the war through their interventions and shape it according to their interests. There are more than one interventionist interacting in Syria and more than one intervention of the same state. In other words, the available sources of information often neglect the interaction between intrusive actors.

This study tries to answer two essential questions and proceeds with an analytical method. The first question is, *"How does the neorealist approach explain proxy wars in terms of the states' system?"* and the second question is, *"Which perspective does neorealism offer in the analysis of the Syrian Crisis in terms of proxy wars?"* The research continues with a theoretical framework section after a short introduction. Firstly, the theory of neorealism is emphasized, and the basic approaches of neorealism are explained. Later, with the conceptualization of proxy wars, and analysis level was tried to be established based on the Syrian Crisis.

Neorealism as a System Approach and Methodological Basis

The foundations of international relations emerged at the beginning of the 20th century due to the crisis in international relations. The mission of producing information that will ensure the inter-state war would not repeat again with providing a significant accumulation (Carr, 1981, s. 9; Booth, 2007). The Cold War era is a period in which this discipline both developed and tested in terms of institutionalization. In this period, the focus of the discipline was war, security and conflict issues called *high politics*.[2]

The existence of a configuration that concerns high policy among research topics is related to the emergence of realism, which lived its golden age in the 1950s. Neorealism, which has risen rapidly in the late 1970s after the criticisms of its classical structure, has opened a

2 Realists made some systematic distinctions in the form of *high politics* and *low politics*. They called military and security issues as *high politics*. Because they attached more importance to issues such as power, interest and national security. Other economic, social and cultural issues are named as low politics.

systematic breakthrough.[3] The dominance of a theory stems from a preliminary assumption about what are the main issues to be explained in world politics. This dominance has often been closely related to the US position in world politics (Smith, 2007, s. 5; Waever, 1995).

The view of realist and neorealist understandings on international relations are shaped on the issues of power and closely related to the development of US foreign policy. The relations of the states are examined within the framework of the security gap of the anarchic system, the behaviours that will fill this gap and the distribution of power (Baylis, 2008, s. 72). States are positioned as given units that perform the same functions within the system as a result of the stable security understanding of realists and neorealists (Vasquez, 2004). States cannot avoid the structural differences. This perspective minimizes the effect of structural differences of states on security understanding.

One of the most essential reasons why realism gained importance after World War II was the easy occupation of the weak states in the world's tension lines. The fact that Nazi Germany seized almost all the continental European states and provided that with a powerful army (James, 1995, s. 183; Carr, 1981). That is the fundamental idea of realism. Classical realism evaluates the system nation-state based, unitary and rational. These states were always on the lookout for power. Power was an essential goal for them. From this perspective, realism was considered to be an Anglo-American theory after World War II because it legitimizes the US military spending (Barkin, 2009, s. 234-240).[4]

In the 1960s and 1970s, severe criticism was directed towards realism, and Kenneth Waltz's *International Political Theory* pioneered neorealism.[5] Waltz evaluated international relations with a systematic approach. He stated that there are two types of systems: *hierarchical* and *anarchic*.

3 The perception of human nature as stable and invariable underlies the competitive and confrontational systematic approach of realism. In this respect, realism concludes that states, which are the essential elements of the international system, cannot have a different understanding than individuals.

4 One of the most trenchant criticisms brought to realism is the claim that state behaviours are fixed in the power centre based on human nature. Realism also failed in its future predictions. For example, although it emerged after the World War II, it could not predict that the Cold War would end.

5 *Kenneth Waltz* can be considered an essential representative of the contemporary realist approach. However, it is not generally included in the scope of classical realist writers because Waltz looked at realism from a different perspective and was described as the founder of neorealism.

According to the hierarchical system, the organization of institutions under an authority limits individual and ensures their security with the laws and enforcement power of the state (Waltz, 2010, s. 196-201). On the other hand, the authority gap in the international system creates a security understanding dominated by competition and conflict. There are criticisms that states are insufficient to explain the political changes arising from their internal dynamics. According to the systematic approach of neorealism, states show similar behaviors within the system (Keohane and Waltz, 2000). Table 1 shows the interest of states and the classification of how to achieve survival, human nature and anarchy. The main factor causing structural differences is the power capacities of states. Differences in power distribution cause changes in the structure of the system.[6] In order to prevent any element from dominating the system, it is seen that states are trying to balance the power of other states that they see as threats. The balance of powers that Waltz (2000, s. 23) stated as the basic theory of the international system points explicitly to the bipolar system of the Cold War period.[7]

Table 1
Realism vs Neorealism

	Realism	Neorealism
Interest of States	*Survival*	*Survival*
How to achieve survival?	Increase power because world government unachievable.	Increase power because world government unachievable.
Human nature	Mans is flawed and therefore prone to conflict. This explains why cooperation is never guaranteed and world government is unachievable.	Man may or may not be flawed. Human nature is not essential to an explanation of conflict.
Anarchy	The environment in which sovereign nation-states act.	Describes the social relations among sovereign nation-states that causally explain why wars occur.

6 In the neorealist approach, it is accepted that cooperation between states can be realized, but it will be limited. The boundaries of cooperation will be shaped on security issues and will be based on the logic of dominant security competition. Therefore, it is not possible to talk about a long-term permanent peace or a world free of power struggles.

7 There is no consensus among researchers on the causes and ending factors of the Cold War. The beginning and end of the Cold War cannot be reduced to a single cause or dimension.

Source: Weber, 2010, s. 15

Waltz argued that the bipolar power balance is more favourable in maintaining stability in terms of providing transparency and predictability. Classical realists also mentioned anarchy and power balance. Unlike this approach, Waltz regarded anarchy as a feature of the international structure, regardless of the actors' behavior (Harrison, 2002, s. 145; Waltz, 2010). Table 2 shows the Waltzian Neorealism with structure and its consequences. Waltz's understanding that there is no authority to prevent force use and his imagination. International structure is anarchic and based on the idea that states can only increase their power capacity to ensure their safety. Therefore, they attached more importance to military security (Behr and Health, 2009, s. 331).

Table 2
Waltzian Neorealism

Structure			
	Ordering Principle	*Formal Differentiation*	*Distribution of Power*
Domestic	*Hierarchy *Centered	*Heterogeneous *Dissimilar	Monopoly
Global	*Anarchy *Decentered	Heterogeneous	Oligopoly
Consequences			
	Political Processes	*Relationships*	*Goals*
Domestic	Specialization	High Interdependence	Maximize Welfare
Global	*Imitation *Balancing	Low Interdependence	Maximize Security

Source: Weber, 2010: 21

Within the widening of military security, neorealists divide the international system into three levels according to relationship between the great powers. These three levels are *unipolar*, *bipolar* and *multipolar*. According to neorealism, to define as a great power a state, it must be able to use military, economic and political power at the global level (John, 1993, s. 133; Keohane and Waltz, 2000). Neorealism treats the history of international relations as the history of great

powers. The great powers determine the system. The character of the system is shaped according to the characteristics of great power that can dominate the whole world (Waltz, 2000).[8]

Neorealists state that economical security is essential in addition to military security. One of the issues that led them to this idea is the fact that despite the military superiority, the US did not get the desired result in the Vietnam War. The 1973 Oil Crisis due to the Arab-Israeli Wars and the fact that the Soviet Union did not focus on the economy by paying attention only to military power can be counted as the driving force on the road to this idea (Thies, 2004; Painter, 2014).

One of the critical reasons for realism to gain power in the Cold War is the emphasis on the balance of power. According to neorealists, this balance creates a more stable world. Also, this balance reduces uncertainty (Barkin, 2009, s. 240). Deterioration of balance only means chaos and competition. It should not be forgotten that nuclear weapons are the factors that provide this balance.[9] States or societies are afraid of the destruction of these weapons. For this reason, the actors built an order on interests. Neorealism is not meant by anarchy, entirely a state of turmoil or a violation of the law.

The motivation of collaborations after the end of the Cold War was generally economical and culturally based. States are more willing to cooperate in rapprochements. This cooperation provides advantages to the states in terms of public diplomacy and propaganda as well as a financial interest (John, 1993, s. 137; Keohane and Waltz, 2000). In this respect, neorealists emphasize the concept of suspicion in their security approach. The intention of the counter-state is also vital at this point for a state to perceive a threat.[10]

8 One of the features that make international conflicts between countries is that regions where instability, conflict and destruction continue to export activities such as terrorism. Actors in internal conflict can become radicalized in a short time, as they are not generally bound by international law. They are now part of the global game by adding radicals worldwide to their structure. It is considered that realist perspectives have replaced postmodern theories due to these identity and ethnic-based conflicts.

9 The threat, which is one of the most critical factors affecting international security, has become multidimensional. The world has experienced fear in the framework of the power projections of the two poles, previously separated as West and East. With the end of the Cold War, instead of limiting itself to two power points, there has been a lack of dimension with issues such as terrorism, the spread of nuclear, chemical, biological mass destruction weapons, ethnic and identity-based conflicts, environmental problems and economic imbalances.

10 The tension lines after the Cold War came from the monopoly of the states. In

Proxy Wars between Realist and Neorealist Analysis

Neorealism claims that international politics and the pursuit of security are produced by the positions occupied by states within the system. In other words, actors are closely related not only to their positions and earnings but also to what their competitors earn. Neorealism predicts that the great powers will take over the crucial positions and dominate the system with the high military forces (Harrison, 2002; Waltz, 2010). The most striking feature of this approach is the emphasis on the international nature of the conflict and interests. This interest and conflict motivation combine neorealism and proxy war. One of the most used definitions at the academic level for the concept of proxy war in the Cold War period belongs to the famous political scientist Karl Deutsch and reflects this idea. Deutsch (1980, s. 102) defines the *proxy war* as an international conflict that the two external powers carry out by using the armed power and other resources of the third country in line with their interests, goals and strategies.

With strategic changes and proxy war, neorealism claims that states do not act with a rational decision-making process that they enter on their own. Their decisions are related to the positions of the actors concerned and their competitors in the system (Thies, 2004, s. 171). Based on this approach, proxy wars are frequently used in Syria, but their origins go back to old times and are a conceptually discussed concept during the Cold War. It is a concept used by the Soviet Union in the Cold War period, instead of directly fighting the US, in a third country for its interests (Groh, 2019; Fox, 2019, s. 47). It is important to note that not all countries where the US and the Soviet Union have established bases or deployed soldiers are a field of proxy war. This situation could stem from the alliance relationship.[11]

Figure 1 shows the trends in the global prevalence, and termination of interstate conflicts. The systemic transformation that has taken place with end of the Cold War has been reflected in both numerical and qualitative levels of war and conflict. About 60 percent drop in

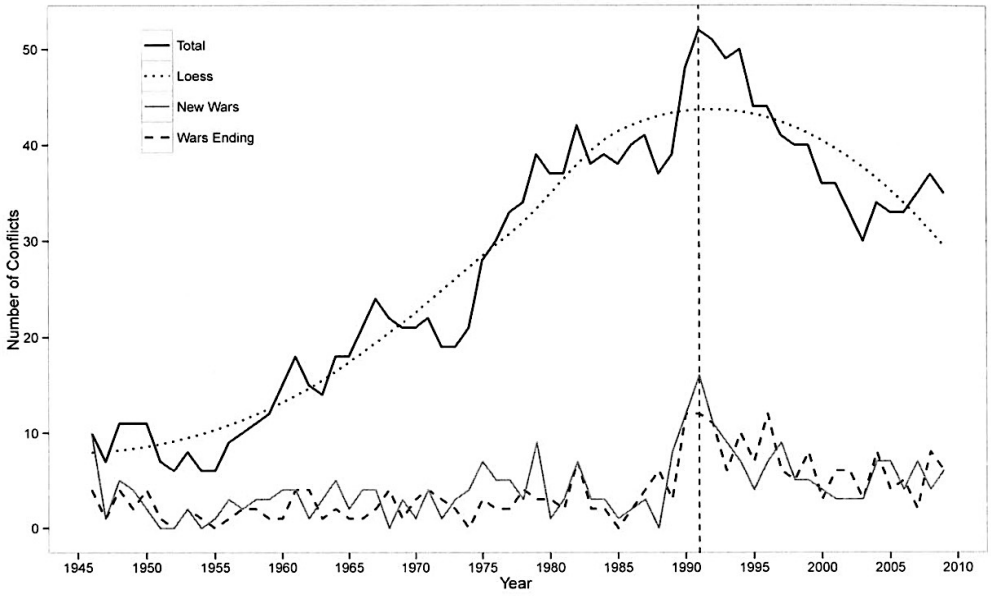
particular, identity and culture-based concentrations, differentiation and tension arising from these differences have also set the international agenda. The way people shape their lives, political lives, and social relations according to the way they define themselves, also spreads to the states they have created.

11 Steady states are the most effective in the formation of international structure. However, as soon as this structure changes, it becomes independent of the states that created it and imposes restrictions on the behaviour of states. While the structure rewards states that comply with these restrictions, they punish those who do not. The structure of the system determines international policy.

conventional battles does not indicate a reduction in conflicts, but a change in character. In this sense, it is possible to say that *proxy* and *hybrid wars*[12] started to replace conventional wars between states (Giegerich, 2016, s. 66-69). That also led to non-state armed actors to gain more space and play more roles in conflicts than during the Cold War era.

Figure 1

Trends in the Global Prevalence, and Termination of Intrastate Conflicts



Source: Anderson, 2016: 15

Due to the systemic change, increasing in the number of actors changes the character of conflict and indirect interventions of states. Indirect intervention does not mean that the external actor should be completely excluded from the conflict (Fox, 2019, s. 46-48). External actors may have to be directly involved in conflicts in cases where proxies are weakened or insufficient. Such situations do not stop

12 *Hybrid war* is used to describe the complex form of warfare. War styles, such as the diversification of international relations discipline and security strategies, have also changed. The difference of the hybrid warfare from classical warfare is that the military effect was very low or absent in the early stages of the war. In this war, it can be used for hired soldiers who do not belong to any state and are not subject to any laws or contracts.

conflict from being a proxy war (Groh, 2019). *The Operation Decision Storm* that started in 2015 under the leadership of Saudi Arabia is a remarkable example in this sense in Yemen.[13]

With indirect interventions, states discover different factors affecting their power potential. Geography, demography, resources and geopolitical elements are among them. The element of power is basically defined through military power. Other power capacities limit the interest-oriented behaviour of states in a structure where there is no central founding authority (Palka, 1995, s. 203-205, Anderson, 2016). Therefore, power factors stand out as the essential elements that will ensure the security of states. In the system, where the future of the state depends on power factors, security is provided by maximizing military power.

The operation of the international system, which does not have a central authority, takes place within the framework of the principle of self-help. In an environment where international norms are not available, the concept of maximum power is legitimized by the states providing for their security. This situation reveals the competitive and confrontational character of the system. It is envisaged that states that cannot adapt to this structure and fail to apply the self-help character will be excluded from the system (Glacer, 1994, s. 54-60, Behr and Heath, 2009).[14]

The *self-help character* can be considered as a formula for keeping the conflict at the local level, primarily because of the danger of nuclear war. The role of the US and Soviet Union in the *Suez Crisis*, where they are not directly involved, is an example of this. After the *Cuban Crisis* and the occupation of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, the weapons, ammunition and financial support provided by the US to local resistance forces were different examples of proxy wars (Groh, 2019, s. 92-95; Fox, 2019). The structure of the international system, the geographical distance and the threat of nuclear war were a warning system in the realist perspectives of the US and the Soviet Union. The US and the Soviet Union's failure to engage in a nuclear conflict

13 The *proxy war* has a multi-dimensional and multi-actor plane, making the solution difficult in Yemen. Despite the negotiations carried out in Kuwait for mediation for three months in 2016, there was no result.

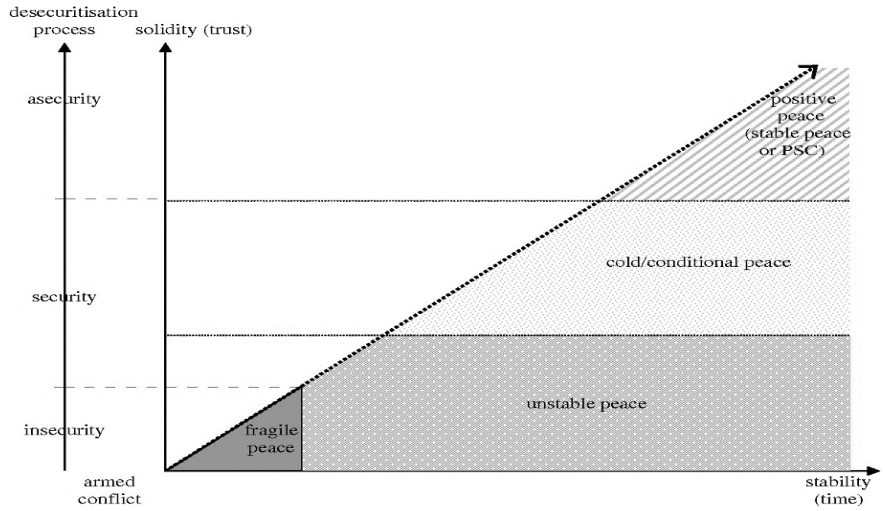
14 In a self-help environment, the primary goal of states is to survive. So, they try to maximize security as rational actors. The way to achieve security is to increase relative strength. Therefore, states pursue relative gains instead of absolute advantages. However, this behaviour causes a security dilemma for other states.

pushed these two forces into reckoning in different regions (Barkin, 2009; James, 1995, s. 192-196). From past to present, the international system is both in a dilemma with this aspect and peace process from the neorealist perspective.

Figure 2 shows the desecuritization and the peace process. Based on the anarchic nature of the international system, the use of local actors complicates the peace process. Anti-regime and pro-democracy protest waves have turned every social dynamic into an actor in the Middle East. The revolt in Syria has rapidly turned into a civil war that attracts foreign interventionists. Multiple interventionists and their multiple interventions have been hugely influential in the change of power balances and the evolution of conflict.[15] In terms of motivations, in the example of Syria, humanitarian concerns seem to lag behind strategic interests (Holtmann, 2013, s. 141-144; Anderson, 2016). It seems that each actor has the opportunity to influence the motivation, methods and timings of others, and none of them is immune from the influence of others' preferences.

Figure 2

Desecuritization and the Peace Process



15 After the two world wars, the Middle East Region has been a constant field of struggle due to its characteristics. The authoritarian regimes of the region have continued their existence as a pressure on their people. However, it was better understood with the start of the process called the Arab Spring, where this structure was not sustainable.

Source: Oelsner, 2007

International System and Syrian Crisis as a Case[16]

The Arab Spring against the authoritarian regime that started in Tunisia and spread throughout the Middle East in 2011 deeply affected the dynamics of the region. The movement that emerged as a part of these revolts against the oppressive Syrian government turned into civil war shortly and then a proxy war of global and regional actors (Ryan, 2012, s. 28-31).

The Syrian Crisis has implications for the balance of power in the Middle East region and on a global scale. The developing process showed that the Syrian Crisis and the actors did not display a stable outlook (Sevilla, 2013, s. 45-49). Over time, the framework of the crisis has changed, and with its depth and diversification of involved actors, it has turned into proxy wars.[17]

The crisis that erupted in Syria in March 2011 contains significant differences in terms of the nature and effects of the crisis we witnessed today. The Syrian Crisis is very sophisticated, versatile and multi-actored. Actors who are directly or indirectly involved in the crisis market have not always been real and rational people. As a matter of fact, as in the case of *ISIS*[18], sometimes difficult to identify actors can be engaged (Mitton, 2016, s. 283-290, Holtmann, 2013).

Considering the complexity and rationality, the claim that the Assad

16 Details on the historical dynamics of the Syrian Crisis are not covered under this title. The main features of the crisis were emphasized as the central axis.

17 As of the current situation, a legitimate, inclusive and effective international organization that regulates the international system could not be created. That can be seen as an element that strengthens the anarchic character of the international system. Although there are various groupings between certain states involving certain regions or subjects, it is not possible to keep an eye on the conflict factor that dominates the international system. As of today, the gap between the systematic foresight based in the West and the search for power and efficiency revealed by the emerging global powers such as China, Russia and India are quite open.

18 *Iraq and Damascus Islamic State (ISIS)*, with the name used until 2014, mainly operates in Iraq and Syria. Any country does not recognize the illegal armed organization that acts against the security forces and civilians in order to establish a caliphate state in this region. The counterpart of the ISIS terrorist organization in Arabic is *"Dawlah al-Islamiyah elephant-'Iraq wa ash-Sham"*. However, despite being in Arabic, this term did not fall out of the terrorist organization. It is an acronym that Obama and France started to use after the 2014 Paris attack. Obama used the term ISIS. *"Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant"*, or *ISIL*, is another form of use for the organization. *Levant* is a geographical term used to represent the eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

regime is not an actor that can stand on its own and affect the flow of events in Syria. Assad needed the technology, workforce and finance provided by Russia and Iran to a large extent. Since the crisis started, the Assad regime had no independent social support, sufficient military capacity and financing. It can be said that Assad was mainly under the control of Iran and Russia (Crosston, 2014, s. 94-98, Sevilla, 2013; Mitton, 2016).[19]

The end of the Cold War signalled that extreme nationalism and ethnic conflicts would lead to extensive instability and conflict (Russett et al., 1990: 220). The Syrian Crisis went down in history as another example of the return to the multi-polar traditional balance of power policies. The Cold War as a period of peace and stability caused by the dominant bipolar power structure and predicted that with the collapse of this system. There would be a return to the great power competition that has led to disasters in international relations since the 17th century (Baylis, 2008, s. 72).

Competition among the great powers makes alliances available when strategic interests come into play. The Syria-Russia alliance and the Syria-Iran alliance are existing collaborations in the light of historical developments and are also compatible with the systematic analysis of neorealism. There has been a long-term strategic protector alliance between Russia and Syria (Allison, 2013, s. 802-810, Crosston, 2014). The increasing Soviet support after the Arab-Israeli War of 1973 turned into Soviet influence after a while. Besides, the Soviet Union has had a naval base in the coastal city Tartus since 1971.[20]

The existence of the alliance between Russia and Syria not only motivated intervention in terms of Russia but also affected the decision-making mechanisms of the US. It prevented a possible early

19 The most substantial relationship between Russia and Syria is undoubtedly Russia's army exports to Damascus. The value of army contracts signed between Russia and Syria since 2005 is around 5.5 billion dollars. Syria's share in Russia's world arms exports is 37 percent, and Russia's share in arms imports by Syria is 71 percent. Damascus has been Russia's most considerable armament since the Soviet Union era. In the inventory of the Syrian army, there are 5 thousand tanks made of Russian, more than 500 aircraft, 41 ships and many military materials (Kamalov, 2013).

20 Moscow wants to have a say in the future of Syria and its surrounding geography. After the Cold War, there was a period when the Russian navy did not land in the Mediterranean for many years. Tartus on the Syrian coast is the only base that hosts Russia's navy in the Mediterranean. It is seen that Putin follows a more expansionary foreign policy and sees the city of Tartus in Syria as a gateway to the Mediterranean. In mid-2019, the Syrian Parliament adopted the bill that transferred the Port of Tartus to Russia for 49 years.

US intervention and changed its method and timing (Sevilla, 2013; Mitton, 2016). No matter how terrifying the situation becomes in the conflict, the US has decided that the Assad regime should be kept away from the battlefield. The alliance relationship between Syria and Iran is a collaboration brought together by anti-imperialism and threats from regional actors. Alliance ties that loosened from time to time have strengthened gradually in the 2000s.

With an alliance relationship dynamic, Russia played a crucial role in sustaining the regime in the Syrian Crisis. It was revealed during the civil war that Iranian support alone was not enough to sustain the Assad regime. In the period when there was no Russian support, but Iran actively fought, the Assad regime always lost its regime and fell into Damascus (Hussain, 2013, s. 42-46; Crosston, 2014). The fate of the regime and the war changed after the Russian intervention. From a neorealist point of view, such a clear intervention of states to crises in different geographies is related to the structure of the system (Keohane and Waltz, 2000).[21]

When we evaluate the structure of the system from a neorealist perspective, Syrian opposition groups have won the support of the US, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. However, when the ISIS threat spread to Syria, the direction of the international support that has existed in the region, started to change (Mitton, 2016, s. 283-290, Holtmann, 2013). The attitude of the US has been decisive in the change.[22] The US has shaped the Syrian security policy by arming YPG, another terrorist organization, in the fight against ISIS. That is a different way of realizing that the security cost of Syria is not wanted to be undertaken by the US. That is the proof of the anarchic international system in the 21st century (Kahf, 2016, s. 21-30).

21 When we look briefly at the role of Russia in the international system after the Cold War, we must first mention the problematic conditions of the 90s. When the Cold War was over, how Russia would keep up with the rapid developments in the international system was related to its internal problems. The 90s were a period in which the economy was shrinking, the crisis was dominant in the markets, and the living standards were falling rapidly for Russia. The transition from the planned economy to the free market economy has been painful, and this has also affected foreign policy negatively.

22 The characteristic feature of both the Obama and Trump administrations has been to try to meet the expectations of the American public, who wanted to leave the Middle East after the US' Iraqi fias and became sceptical of American global leadership. It can be observed that both presidents are back from foreign intervention, and they only give approval to the interventions by the pressure of the public.

As Mearsheimer (2018, s. 3-8) stated, if an ideal process is being built in the international system, this is related to the existence of the sovereign state. The US tried to balance its policies with the strategies of Russia as well as the developments in the region. This situation coincides with the fact that the pursuit of power will end only when the sovereignty is reached. However, it is almost impossible to achieve global sovereignty for any state. The best result that great power can hope for is to be a regional ruler and, if possible, to oversee another nearby area. The great powers are in a constant struggle with each other for this ideal situation (Vasquez, 2014; Weber, 2010; Booth, 2007).[23]

The Arab Spring and the Syrian Crisis provided the necessary environment for the ideal conditions desired by the great powers. The Arab Spring succeeded in bringing the end of three authoritarian regimes. This situation was inspiring for the great powers; on the other hand, it posed significant risks for the West. The unpredictable challenges and threats of the Arab world getting out of control. For this reason, Arab Spring has been perceived as a potential challenge over time, rather than being an acclaimed process in the West.

When potential challenges are in geographies such as the Middle East, the US does not hesitate to be involved. While peaceful demonstrations in Syria were violently suppressed, Obama said that Assad had lost his legitimacy. Obama determined the regime's use of chemical weapons against the opposition as a red line (Davenport and Horner, 2012; Gerges, 2013, s. 303-309, Hussain, 2013).[24] Although it clarifies these words in the following years, the use of chemical weapons against civilians seen as red lines was also an issue that concerned the international system. The attitudes of the authorities towards existing societies should not validate any intervention. This issue is frequently addressed between realist and neorealist discussions (Behr and Heath, 2009; Oelsner, 2007). Unfortunately, Obama did not keep this promise and avoided preventive policies.

23 In the Syrian Crisis case, forces that could not dominate the field felt obliged to receive outside help to destroy their opponents. This situation made the actors in the field more passive. Actors who are parties to the Syrian conflict lost their initiative as the war lengthened. The need for external powers for military support has increased, which has made the influence of external powers more determinative in the region.

24 Obama was distant from the regime change, primarily through external intervention. He wanted to stay away from both uncertainty of post-Assad structure and the perception of the occupying country settled in the Bush era. But this attitude of Obama has been the subject of criticism in the American public. It was criticized for the US to take such a timid attitude about overthrowing an enemy regime.

The US, which is an actor that can determine the future of the Syrian Crisis, has taken on a more uncertain foreign policy character with the Trump period. Identifying the dynamics of US foreign policy with Trump is also not the right approach. The Pentagon also deals with some of the policies from the Obama era (Krieg, 2017, s. 141-146; Kahf, 2016).[25] The US, which does not want to confront the YPG terrorist organization, is more cautious on this issue. In contrast, Turkey, Russia and Iran are a proactive approach in the region (Natil, 2016, s. 75-84; Sevilla, 2013). Systemic anarchy comes out of the classical power relationship of realism and turns into an utterly multilateral equation.

Considering the power dimension of classical realism, the passive position taken by the US is acceptable for Assad. Despite all the humanitarian tragedies against Syria, the most powerful state of the system, there is no intervention to change the shape of the game (Sevilla, 2013, s. 40-61). On the other hand, ISIS terrorism posed a threat to the Assad regime as well. The US' arming of another terrorist organization and supporting it in the war against ISIS reduced the security threat on the regime (Mitton, 2016; Holtmann, 2013). Finally, the policy of US withdrawal and reducing costs paved the way for Russia. Anarchy and balances in the international system strengthened the regime's hand.[26]

Why is Proxy Wars as an Analysis Level in the Syrian Crisis and Neorealism?

The main factor causing the power struggles to turn into a conflictful proxy war after the Arab revolts are the collapse of political authorities and the opportunities of cooperation of local actors with international powers (Ryan, 2012, s. 28-31). The fact that the power vacuum that was created as a result of the leaders' loss of authority due to the riots in Syria, Libya and Yemen could not be filled, paved the way for a new power struggle.[27] The main reason for this is the low level of

25 Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria caused fierce controversy. Having made a very decisive departure brought along comments that it has started to implement a new Syrian policy. Trump, on the one hand, introduced a new policy. It has taken a step towards changing the remaining strategy from Obama. However, the public met this decision cautiously.

26 Although Trump has not acted with a comprehensive and consistent strategy on the Syrian Crisis since he came to power, he has some priorities when looking at his discourses and steps. Israel's security, the restriction of Iran and the defeat of ISIS are among these priorities. Although the strategies remaining from the Obama period on Israel and ISIS continue, Trump strives to produce unique strategies.

27 The regional actors of the proxy war in Yemen are the Gulf alliance led by Saudi Arabia and Iran. These two actors have been positioned against each other since 1979.

institutionalization in the mentioned countries. Therefore, where the political power was overthrown, many international and regional actors, especially the US, were involved in the struggle for power in these countries (Sevilla, 2013, s. 40-61; Hussain, 2013).

The typical and an example of proxy wars, which are continuing intensely in the Middle East, emerged when the US invaded Iraq in 2003. After the invasion, Iraq has turned into a battleground of the US and Iran. Iran has cooperated with many local actors, especially Shia militias, in order to restrict the US during the occupation and to be more effective in Iraq (Fox, 2019, s. 44-71).[28]

Neorealist theory focuses on the understanding of security within the system in its field. The developments in Arab Spring and Iraq signalled the danger of fragility of countries such as Syria or Yemen. Security concerns have not always been prioritized in the foreign policies of Middle East states.[29] Partnerships with international powers have brought systematic anarchy to the fore for proxy wars. Syria has understood the importance of territorial integrity when its problems with international powers have come to the fore (Mitton, 2016, s. 283-290; Sevilla, 2013).

The transformation of Arab revolts, which started with the demand for political change, revealed the inadequacy of the international system in the region. It can be accepted as a normal process that revolutionary processes turn into hot conflicts and civil war. Even the parties of the civil war can get help from external actors (Anderson, 2016). However, the relationship between the external actor and the local powers in proxy wars is beyond alliances and seeking balance. Proxy wars that emerged after the Arab riots are not in the form of conflicts of foreign powers in a third country. Foreign powers want to expand their area

That transcends the classic interpretation of international relations, which considers each state of being the rival of another. This positioning led them to use ideological and hard power elements against each other. Yemen has been one of the areas of a struggle between the two actors (Darwich, 2018: 125-142).

28 Tensions between the US and Iran, two major powers in the region, have been steadily increasing since President Trump withdrew from the nuclear deal signed in 2015. Lebanon Hezbollah, which Israel sees as a threat in the region, is among the groups condemning the activities of the US in the region.

29 The Middle East region is a place where traditional ties are not interrupted by revolutions, at least not by the people. Therefore, it produces a collective response to any reform and foreign policy activities that will displace its values. This situation increases the responsiveness to global powers. It brings dichotomy to the agenda, with its more rules, more irregularities and globalization contrasts.

of activity by cooperating with the actors they support (Groth, 2019, s. 83-124; Fox, 2019).[30]

The Syrian political regime, which transformed from a party-centred movement to a leader-centred regime, caused a social trauma and attracted the attention of international powers. Instead of relying on social legitimacy, the authority relied on fear produced by its intelligence (Hussain, 2013, s. 39-51). This situation caused an accumulation of anger in society against management. In the Middle Eastern countries, the Arab Spring has been seen as an opportunity to overcome fear and the trauma they have caused. The regime attitude turned this opportunity into a systemic problem. For the Assad regime, which is already experiencing a security crisis, the Arab Spring has meant the peak of existential threat (Mitton, 2016; Ryan, 2012).

According to realism, a security crisis turns systemic anarchy into intervention. The relationship between Iran and Hezbollah and other Shia militias in Syria; cooperation between the US and YPG are clear examples of the relationship between global power and local actor in proxy wars (Holtmann, 2013: 135-146). France, Egypt and Russia provide support to the group led by Khalifa Haftar in Libya. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia's cooperation with local government forces and some tribes comes to the fore (Darwich, 2018, s. 125-142).[31]

The most important reason for the Yemeni Crisis to turn into a proxy war can be explained by using the elements in the concept of proxy war. There is a similar process in the Syrian Crisis. Cooperation based on three main elements of the proxy war; local actors, external supporters, and mutual interests between these two elements (Darwich, 2018; Fox, 2019).[32]

30 Each actor has cooperation with international or regional power. This cooperation is not only limited to financial support or arms assistance. Moreover, this cooperation is not a relationship between equal partners. Political powers are partners of strategies that international actors pursue to expand their areas of activity.

31 Globalization in the Middle East has been the application area of all contradictions. Inequality causing divisions in the world broke out with riots in the Middle East. In the global context, popular uprisings emerged when Western policies neglected the human factor. It is better understood that some of the trends brought about by globalization threaten the peoples. The developments in Yemen, Egypt and Syria, are outstanding examples.

32 In the crises in the region; Race, sectarian differences and the results of other social structures attract attention. In societies that have not fully established their national states, the collapse of state structures and the dissolution of the social fabric are observed. Bringing a spiral of violence with them, it brings to the fore the elements such as sect and tribal.

Local actors, external supporters, and mutual interests have become the main parameters of international interests between realism and neorealism. The unipolar structure of international system, which emerged as a result of disintegration of the Soviets, has been replaced by a polar-free, multi-centre structure as a result of the weakening of the US influence area and the 2008 crisis. The emerging power vacuum has triggered regional and global competition (Behr and Heath, 2009, s. 327-349; Barkin, 2009).[33] The elimination of Saddam, one of the biggest obstacles in increasing Iran's influence in the region, has changed the balance. Expanding its influence in the region, Iran tried to balance a group under the leadership of Saudi Arabia (Kozhanov, 2017, s. 105-124). On a larger scale, with a desire to regain its former strength in the Soviet Union, Russia wanted to rejoin the international competition. Seeing the Middle East as a zero-sum game has made the US uneasy about the steps it has taken.

It is also a systematic problem that geography such as the Middle East is regarded as a zero-sum game on the axis of proxy wars. Power and national interest constitute the level of analysis in interventions where the US is concerned (Groth, 2019, s. 83-124). Although the realist approach recognized the importance of power and interest, neoliberals began to argue that in the early 1980s, international structures also played an essential role in international politics. Although neo-realists and neoliberals cannot agree on power, interest, and the relative weight of international institutions, they agree that they explain most of the disputes over international issues (Oelsner, 2007, s. 257-279; Smith, 2007).[34]

According to Waltz (2010), the critical importance of power about international issues is its distribution. This distribution gives the system its characteristic feature. The proxy wars that were going on in

33 The US does not favour the formation of a strong potentially challenging structure in the region and strengthens minority governments. In this way, it evaluates that these structures will transform and disintegrate in the medium term. The US expects the divisions to be de facto and expects that they can manage them through sectarian conflicts. It can be predicted that by making the small region masses, it will try to establish a balance in the Middle East.

34 As William Wohlforth (2008) puts it, we do not exaggerate if we say that international relations are a discussion about realism as an academic study subject. It is difficult to find a second approach, with its assumptions and study programs, that has so much influenced the theoretical debates of the international relations discipline and the practices of decision-makers. Liberalism, under the name of idealism, appeared to be the biggest rival of realism in the formation of discipline between the two world wars.

the Syrian Crisis are related to this distribution. The neorealist theory is based on the argument that no state will provide absolute security due to the nature of the system (Vasquez, 2004; Weber, 2010).[35] The characteristic feature of the international system is insecurity. Foreign policy differs from domestic policy precisely because of this feature. Therefore, the security problem becomes constant anxiety of the states. In this context, it is not a coincidence that Waltz describes (2010) security as the highest goal.

After the Cold War ended with an indirect victory, the security parameter is vital for the US to turn its direction to the Middle East. After the September 11 attacks, the US invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. In the Syrian Crisis, while the US took a harsh stance against the Assad regime on a discursive basis, it preferred to remain passive in the act (Krieg, 2017, s. 139-158). In the background of this situation, the internal problems reduced the possibility of a new military operation in the Middle East. The Obama administration, which came to power in 2008, attached more importance to the Asia-Pacific region in foreign policy. The transformation in the Middle East has tried to redirect through Western powers such as the European Union and Turkey (Hale, 2019, s. 25-40)

Conclusion

As seen in the example of the Syrian Crisis, political actions do not develop entirely based on power. There is an environment that frames, directs and limits political action. Therefore, neorealism, which operates international relations in structural integrity, is an essential perspective at the analysis level of the Syrian Crisis and proxy wars.

The evolution of the Syrian Crisis into the proxy war led to various ramifications at the global political level. It may take a long time to restore political cohesion in countries where proxy wars occur. Afghanistan and Iraq still have not been able to maintain their unity in terms of political administration. Conflicts in the region continue in different forms. We are facing a similar future perspective in Syria.

35 State classification, according to neorealism, stems from their relative strength. The most significant inequality is the inequality in the power distribution of states. Because states are positioned according to the distribution of power in the system. The power of states is defined as real power; that is, military and economic power. According to Mearsheimer (2001), economic power is crucial because it can always turn into military power. In this respect, a military-deficient but the economically stable state is always a potential competitor.

The US, which is in a position to determine the future of the Syrian crisis and the proxy war, has displayed a more uncertain foreign policy character with the Trump period. The interests of actors in the region, such as Russia and Iran, have revealed a resistance that is unexpectedly effective and will change the course of the crisis. Turkey has taken a proactive approach in the region, similar to actors such as Russia and Iran. Systemic anarchy has become a multilateral equation.

Despite all human tragedies, an approach that would change the shape of the game could not be realized in terms of dynamics within the international system. Proxy wars in the Syrian Crisis have become more original with unexpected local actors. While ISIS and YPG terrorism pose a threat to the integrity of Syria, the Assad regime has made concessions to Russia as much as possible to achieve balance. While the US armament of YPG, another terrorist organization against ISIS, reduced the security threat to the regime, it also revealed that the balances could change in a short time. Anarchy and balances in the international system strengthened the regime's hand again.

In the international system, anarchy and balances, the change in the character of the war and the increase in proxy wars have begun to be discussed with different parameters. The war syndrome against terrorism has increased. In addition to its interests in foreign policy, the US also needs to fight terrorism in third countries. Due to public pressure, US also wants to get rid of such crises with minimal injury without falling into Vietnam syndrome. The best formula to achieve this is to engage in proxy wars without using large-scale military units.

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