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Russia's Role and Drivers in the Syrian Conflict
An Analysis from a Classical Geopolitical Perspective

Master thesis

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Abstract

The present master thesis investigates Russia’s role and motivation in the Syrian crises and the country’s support of the current Assad-regime. Due to the topicality of classical geopolitics in Russia, the author took this approach for the investigation, complemented by some concepts of a current geopolitician. There seems to be evidence that Russian foreign politics is influenced by classical geopolitics and the approach delivered some explanatory power to find out about the drivers for Russia’s Syria policy. The qualitative analysis used primary and secondary sources, such as foreign policy concepts, security reports, reports from key conferences, political speeches, letters and statements. The analysis revealed evidence, that Russia’s engagement is driven by security issues, channelled by its own domestic terrorist issues the country is facing. Additionally, the country seems to aim for increasing its power position in the international system. To investigate the second driver, six additional countries, involved in Syria, were considered and their role in the conflict investigated.

Abstrakt

The present master thesis investigates Russia’s role and motivation in the Syrian crises and the country’s support of the current Assad-regime. Due to the topicality of classical geopolitics in Russia, the author took this approach for the investigation, complemented by some concepts of a current geopolitician. There seems to be evidence that Russian foreign politics is influenced by classical geopolitics and the approach delivered some explanatory power to find out about the drivers for Russia’s Syria policy. The qualitative analysis used primary and secondary sources, such as Foreign Policy Concepts, Security Reports, reports from key conferences, political speeches, letters and statements. The analysis revealed evidence, that Russia’s engagement is driven by security issues, channelled by its own domestic terrorist issues the country is facing.
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Klíčová slova

Syrian Conflict, Russia, classical geopolitics, international power struggle

Keywords

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Declaration of Authorship

1. The author hereby declares that he compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.

2. The author hereby declares that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.

3. The author hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.

_____________________
Prague 31.07.2017                             Denise Knorr
# Master Thesis Proposal

Institute of Political Studies  
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Date: 14.06.2016  

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**Proposed Topic:** Russia's Influence in the Middle East

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**Topic Characteristics / Research Question(s):**

The aim of my Master Thesis is to investigate Russia's strategies and influence in the Middle East.

In 2010, the Arab Spring started in Tunisia and expanded to further countries in Northern Africa and the Middle East. The consequences of these events are still prevailing with some countries having new governments now, other countries still struggling and suffering. The demonstrations and protests, targeting the – in most cases authoritarian – governments, lead to a remove or change of the political structures. However, not in all cases this lead to the desired outcome of democratic reforms. In some countries in the Middle East, this lead to a power vacuum, allowing rebels, anti-governmental groups, religious motivated groupings and even terrorists to take advantage of this political instability, aiming for power. The outcome is the questionable existence of Iraq, a quasi state Kurdistan, a proclaimed caliphate covering parts of Syria, Iraq and some parts in Libya and a Syria, characterized by civil war. Especially the current situation in Syria will be analysed by the present thesis, with an investigation of Russia's strategy in this region. While most countries consider Bashar al-Assad, president of Syria, as part of the current issue and refuse to collaborate with him, Russia supports his regime. This hampers the possibilities of a solution found on
the international level. To explore the reasons for this behavior, the present geopolitical analysis investigates different factors and motivations, why Russia is doing this. Besides political reasons, military and economic factors will be taken into account and evaluated.

In order to investigate my hypotheses, I will first review the theoretical literature. Specifically, I will review geopolitical approaches and focus on Russia. This means the post-Soviet geopolitical approaches which consider the neo-Eurasianism (A. Dugin), building up on classical geopolitics (Mackinder, Haushofer). Furthermore, the theoretical framework will include the work of Tsymburski, Gadzhiyev, Kochetov, and Kolosov and Mironenko. Additionally, I will investigate some approaches of International Relations, specifically the realist approach which seems to have a big impact on Russian foreign policy.

This theoretical background will then be connected with the current situation in the Middle East and Russia's foreign policies and the working hypotheses elaborated.

**Working hypotheses:**

1. Hypothesis #1: Russia exerts influence in the Middle East, motivated by political, economic and military reasons
2. Hypothesis #2: Russia aims for utilizing her upper hand in the Middle East to increase her international power status

**Methodology:**

The research question and the elaborated hypotheses will be checked by qualitative means. Therefore I will use mainly primary and secondary literature.

**Outline:**

1. Introduction
2. Theoretical Background
   a) Geopolitical Approaches
   b) International Relations Approaches
3. Current Situation in the Middle East
   a) Short historical overview/ background
b) Arab Spring and following Developments

c) Current Situation

4. Hypotheses

- building on part two and three of the thesis the hypotheses will be elaborated

5. Testing of Hypotheses

6. Conclusions and critical discussion

7. References

8. Appendix

References / Bibliography:


Crienemann, D. (2009). Geopolitical Schools of Thought: a Concise Overview Since 1890 till 2015 and Beyond


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1. Introduction

The aim of this Master Thesis is to investigate Russia's strategies and motivations in the Syrian conflict.

In 2010, the Arab Spring started in Tunisia and expanded to countries in Northern Africa and the Middle East. The consequences of these events are still unravelling.

Syria has long been struggling with challenges similar to other Arab countries which led to deep dissatisfaction of the population. These include restricted upward mobility, high unemployment rate, corruption, repression and restricted political freedoms (Sharp & Blanchard 2013). The Syrian population consists of a variety of ethnicities and religions. Whereas the majority of Syrians are Sunni Muslims, the governing Baath party is made up of the minority Alawite religious group, considered to be one of the Shiite branches in Islam and follows a secular policy (Sharp & Blanchard 2013).

In March 2011, initially peaceful protests took place in Dar’a, calling for economic and political reforms (Humud et al. 2017). The government responded by offering limited reforms, combined with military force opposing protesters. This force lead to an increase in public anger as well as an increase in protest participation (Sharp & Blanchard 2013). A spiral of violence ensued, more religious, ethnic and political groups joined. They saw a chance in the turmoil to stand for their proclaimed goals. In following six years, the intensity of the conflict escalated, leading to the creation of more than 4.8 million Syrian refugees, from an original population of 22 million people. Over 6.3 million people were internally displaced (Humud et al. 2017).

In the course of the conflict, external players got involved as well. The rise of Islamists within the conflict led to two antiterrorism alliances, which are
flying airstrikes. One is led by the USA, the other by Saudi-Arabia. The involvement of more countries, supporting various domestic actors and following different strategies is hampering an international solution. Whereas most Western countries and the Gulf States oppose the government of Bashar al-Assad, Russia is one of the regime’s most reliable allies. Russia has stood by the Syrian regime from the beginning of the conflict and helped keep al-Assad in power. This position sets Russia at odds with other countries in international politics, leading to bilateral tensions.

This thesis focuses on the position Russia has taken and tries to figure out the drivers. Why is Russia ready to accept international isolation and keep to its current Syrian policy? More specifically, this analysis will be done from a geopolitical perspective. Therefore, in the first step, the theoretical background will be provided with the literature review. It drafts the geopolitical perception of the international System, geopolitical features of Syria and Russia, and the works of key classical geopolitical authors. Additionally, the involvement of other countries in the conflict will be illustrated. Building up-on this, two hypotheses for Russia’s motivations will be derived. Following they will be analyzed with qualitative means. In the end, the thesis closes with a discussion and a critical view on the thesis.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Geopolitical Background

Although classical Geopolitcs has its roots in the early 20th century with the thinkers of Sir Halford J. Mackinder, Karl Haushofer, Nicolas Spykman and Alfred T. Mahan, the approach is also nowadays a highly current one, even experiences a revival (Megoran 2010). In other words: “(...) the legacies of Mackinder and Mahan live on (...)” (MacDonald 2007, p. 609).

More specifically it is an approach with explanatory power especially for the
studied issue. Furthermore, Geopolitics and especially the classical approach is quite influential in nowadays Russia (Bassin Aksenov 2006).

Taken these two reasons together, the topicality of the approach and its status in Russia, the present analysis will be done with a classical geopolitical perspective.

To have a clear idea about the approach, this paragraph will discuss the international system in geopolitics and following core authors, concepts and contributions. Specifically, the works of the American Alfred T. Mahan, the British geographer Sir Halford J. Mackinder and the Dutch-American geostrategist Nicholas Spykman. Furthermore, the contributions of the current American geographer Saul B. Cohen, who combines geography with a realist approach of politics and international relations, will be considered.

*International System*

The international system can be characterized with two geostrategic realms. On the global system, this is the highest regional level (Cohen 1991). These are the Maritime World on the one side and the Eurasian Continental World on the other side. However, those labels do not just describe geographic or climatic features but outlooks. Hence, the Maritime World can be described as trade-dependent whereas the Eurasian Continental World is understood as more isolated and inwardly oriented. Furthermore, the Continental World is more heavily equipped with raw materials. Taken those features together, the Eurasian Heartland and more specifically Russia is perceived as „large, well endowed, and technologically advanced power, capable of influencing events in much of the rest of the world“(Cohen 1991, p. 565).

Getting more precise, the geostrategic realm can be subdivided into geopolitical regions. This is considered to be the second level of the
international geopolitical structure (Cohen 2003). However, it is not necessarily the case that a region is a subdivision of a realm. A region can also be caught between them or can even be independent. Still, it is possible to assign North and Middle America, the Maritime Europe with the Maghreb, and the Asia-Pacific Rim to the Maritime Realm. South America and Sub-Saharan Africa – the Southern Continents – are economically dependent upon the Maritime Realm and hence dominated by it. However, strategically this region is of subordinated role.

On the other side, it is possible to subscribe regions to the Eurasian Continental Realm. This is the Russian Heartland and the Trans-Caucasus and Central Asia. To complete the picture on the regional geopolitical level, it is necessary to mention the Middle East Shatterbelt and Eastern Europe. In 2003, Cohen stated that the status of the last mentioned still “remains to be determined” (Cohen 2003, p. 40) either if it will be a Shatterbelt or maybe a Gateway geopolitical region. The first mentioned will be explained in more detail in a following chapter.

Building up on this classification, the state level is subdivided as well. It is assumed that in the international system a certain order of state levels has been evolved naturally. The first order powers are the major powers, followed by the second order powers which are regional powers. The second mentioned compete with the major powers and aspire due to military and economic strength to influence affairs in their region (Cohen 2003, p. 5). These channels of power and influence distinguish them from the third order states. These are states which try to exert power on their neighbouring states through „unique ideological or cultural capacities“ (Cohen 2003, p. 5). The states which belong to the fourth order do not possess or are not able to apply any pressure on other states and those who are considered to be fifth order states have to rely on outside support to be able to survive (Cohen 2003, p.5). Map 1 provides an overview of the outlined geopolitical classification of the
global sphere.

Figure 1: The Geopolitical World: Beginning of the Twenty-First Century
(source: Cohen 2003, p. 41)

In the following, the already mentioned concept of the shatterbelt will be presented. Additionally, the geographical features play an important role. Congruent with the investigated issue, those characteristics will be outlined in the following for Syria and Russia.

\emph{Shatterbelt}

One geopolitical concept which is quite useful for the present analysis is the idea of the shatterbelt.

“Shatterbelts are regions torn by internal conflicts whose fragmentation is increased by the intervention of external major powers in contention over the region.” (Cohen 2003, p.5). This is exactly the case for the Middle East which is considered in that geopolitical approach as a shatterbelt. The Middle East is a highly instable region, depicting an extreme heterogeneous picture concerning ethnical, religious and political variety. Disputes over rare natural
resources intensify already existing disputes (Cohen 2003). The other feature of a shatterbelt – besides its inner fragmentation and instability – is the involvement of foreign major powers. Crucial in that definition is, that two or even more competing powers from different geostrategic realms are operating in the Shatterbelt (Cohen 1991).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and hence the end of the Cold War, the two major powers in this area were the United States and an emerging Europe. They developed a new balance of power, with Russia playing only a secondary role (Cohen 1991).

_Geographical Features of Syria_

For the whole Middle East, it can be stated that a common and unique characteristic is that it is nearly completely surrounded by major water bodies and therefore makes them strategically highly interesting. Therefore, they have always been of crucial interest for foreign powers who tried to gain control (Cohen 2003).

Syria is part of the Levante\(^1\) and located on the Arabian tectonic plate. In the West, it is connected to the Mediterranean Sea. North-Eastern Syria is characterized by porous sand- and limestones which have trapped oil. This is part of one of the richest petroleum reserves in the world. However, the bulk of those resources lie outside of Syria, but there is nevertheless a substantial oil production on Syrian territory (Cohen 2003). This is of big importance. Especially under the fact that some estimations depict that in 2020 the Middle East will have the major share of worldwide oil reserves and after 2025 will dominate the world production of oil (Duncan & Youngquist 1998).

However, the richness in oil of that region is not mirrored in water resources.

\(^1\)Besides Syria, Israel, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority are considered to form the Levante
Syria is involved in conflicts with neighbouring countries about shared water reserves and rivers (Cohen 2003). When having a look at the location of the Middle East and especially Syria, at the junction of three continents of the Old World, it becomes obvious that it is well situated in order to serve as possible Gateway to Iraq as well as to the northern Gulf. Already Mackinder recognized in 1919 that those, who own Damascus, would have access to an alternative route which is going down between the oceans to the Euphrates Valley (Mackinder 1919).

*Geographical Features of Russia*

Even though the dissolution of the Soviet Union lead to an immense loss in land, nowadays Russia is still the biggest political landmass worldwide (Cohen 2015). Also, the country possesses a high amount of natural resources. In respect of natural gas, these are 60 percent of the world reserves and in respect of oil, 10 percent (Cohen 2015). Besides this, Russia possesses large coal reserves, the second biggest worldwide. Furthermore, Russia has a huge nuclear arsenal, an engineering and scientific population as well as a central and strategical position within Eurasia such as spatial depth (Cohen 2015). The drafted geopolitical features enabled Russia to recover from the collapse of the Soviet Union. And this recovery gave Russia the possibility to regain again the status as one of the major powers. And the geographical position of Russia enables the country to control the central heartland and hence can pressure the periphery, especially Ukraine, Iran, and Syria. And this can enable Russia to wield global influence again (Cohen 2015).
Figure 2: Heartlandic Russia and Periphery: Major Geopolitical Features
(source: Cohen 2015, p. 266)

Figure 2 reveals the ecumene of Russia, the area with the highest population density and the highest economic activity (Cohen 2015). This is found in the west, triangle-shaped. Russia’s effective national territory, which is moderately populated but gives information about future strength, is quite large and includes parts of the North Caucasus, the Lower Volga, Lower Ural basins and hence is expanded to Central and Western Siberia (Cohen 2015). Most of the left area constitutes the so-called empty area and is to the biggest extent uninhabitable, even though its natural resources – first to name oil and gas – are of large amount (Cohen 2015). Concluding it is possible to state that the heartlandic position of Russia enables the country to execute a strategic dominance (Cohen 2015). “This centrality is also a factor in enabling Russia to play a continuing role within the Northern Highlands zone of the Middle East.” (Cohen 2015, p. 300).
2.2 Classical Geopolitical Authors

Mahan and the Seapower

Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan was a naval officer, president of the Naval War College and strategist (Moll 1963; Cropsey & Milikh 2012). He shared the perception of the drafted division of the world in a maritime and a continental area, which was presented in the chapter of the international system. Mahan saw the superiority of seapower opposed landpower, however without being a seapower extremist (Zoppo & Zorgbibe 2012).

Mahan’s global perspective was Eurasian centered, a feature he shared with the two following authors (Mahan 1890). According to Mahan, Russia constituted the dominant land power in Asia and the location of Russia makes it unassailable (Cohen 2003). However, whereas other scholars took this as an advantage, Mahan interpreted this landlocked position as a disadvantage. According to him, sea movement was the superior power to land movement (Cohen 2003). He argues that the sea constituted the easier as well as the cheaper option for traveling and for traffic (Mahan 1890).

According to Mahan, there are six crucial factors which make a seapower a strong power. The first three are natural circumstances: “I. Geographical Position. II. Physical Conformation, including, as connected therewith, natural productions and climate. III. Extent of Territory.” (Mahan 1890, p. 32). The three additional factors are “IV. Number of Population. V. Character of the People, VI. Character of the Government, including therein the national institutions.” (Mahan 1890, p. 32).

Also, his contribution to the concept of the Shatterbelt should be mentioned. Already in 1905, he described the instability of the Asian zone “between the
parallels of thirty and forty north” (p. 79) where the seapower and the landpower struggle for an equilibrium (Mahan 1905). This can be understood as quite crucial, emphasizing the importance the region and the concept which was presented in the previous chapter.

Mackinder and the Heartland

One of the core classical authors in geopolitics is Sir Halford J. Mackinder who was introducing the subject of geography at the University of Oxford (Venier 2004). He spanned the applicability of his subject to broader areas and hence paved the way for the field of geopolitics: “(...) we are for the first time in a position to attempt, with some degree of completeness, a correlation between the larger geographical and the larger historical generalizations” (Mackinder 1904, p. 422). He introduced the concept of the Heartland and 'pivot' which are some of the most influential theories in Western strategic thought (Gray 1988).

He distinguished the world into the Maritime World and the Continental World. One big advantage of the Continental World he considered the unattainability by sea and water. Hence, he saw the area of Euro-Asia as the pivot region in respect of world politics which consists of huge space and natural resources (Mackinder 1904). Graphically demonstrated, the pivot area would cover the landmass shown in map 2.

The core of this map constitutes the Pivot Area. Outside of this area there are two crescents found – the inner one and the outer one. The great inner crescent is formed by Germany, Austria, Turkey, India, and China. Britain, South Africa, Australia, the United States, Canada, and Japan on the other hand build according to this classification the outer crescent (Mackinder 1904). Contrary to Mahan, Mackinder saw land transportation as the superior one and as crucial power projection (Zoggo & Zorgbibe 2012).
The core of his concept is that Eurasia is due to the location protected from maritime powers. And out of this he reasoned that the power, who controlled it, would dominate the world (Mackinder 1919). This power, however, does not have to be necessarily Russia. Mackinder even postulated that this could be China, who organizes the Heartland (Mackinder 1919).

![Figure 3: The Natural Seats Of Power](source: Mackinder 1904, p. 435)

Specifically, he considered Europe, Asia and Africa as a joint continent and saw it as an island – the world island (Mackinder 1919). This world island is in Mackinder's view surrounded by three satellites, the new-continents. And the World Island, comprising the Heartland, is seen as “the final geographical realities in regard to sea-power and land-power, and that East Europe is essentially a part of the Heartland” (Mackinder 1919, p. 99). Consequently, there follows one of the key contributions of Mackinder:
Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland: 
Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island: 

Spykman and the Rimland

Another core author is the Dutch-American Nicholas John Spykman. He can be understood as the “intellectual successor to Sir Halford Mackinder (Gray 2015, p. 873). He picked up Mackinder’s idea of the division of the world into a maritime and continental power but modified the idea of the heartland. Precisely, he counter posted the idea of the Heartland with his Rimland concept and substituted it (Zoppo & Zorgbibe 2012).

Furthermore, what makes Spykman quite relevant for the present thesis is the fact that he had a realist perspective and anticipated a permanent struggle for power in the international system (Zoppo & Zorgbibe 2012). According to Spykman “[…] the geographic area of the state […] is the most fundamentally conditioning factor in the formulation of national policy because it is the most permanent.” And he continues “Ministers come and ministers go, even dictators die, but mountain ranges stand unperturbed.” (Spykman 1938, p. 29). However, he did not understand geography and geographical features as deterministic, rather as conditioning (Spykman 1938; Zoppo & Zorgbibe 2012).

Geographical factors, for example location and size, further would affect the security and also the foreign policy and the military of a country (Zoppo & Zorgbibe 2012).

Both scholars, Mackinder and Spykman, accepted the idea of the supercontinent which constituted the world-island, containing Eurasia and Africa. However, opposing Mackinder’s heartland, Spykman saw the potential in the Inner Marginal Crescent in order to explain and enable the exploitation and
generation of relative power (Gray 2015). Concluding, the Rimland, not the Heartland of Eurasia constitutes the pivotal core of international power (Gray 2015).

So, the Rimland can be understood as the key to sustain and create international order by balancing the power between the Heartland and the Continental power. “The ‘Inner Crescent’ of Mackinder’s theory is reborn conceptually and functionally as a Rimland separate from continental landpower and (largely) insular seapower” (Gray 2015, p. 892).

In respect of foreign policy, Spykman considered two aspects as crucial factors – size and location (Spykman 1938). Whereas size can be more understood as an indirect factor which does not necessarily provide information about comparative strength but more to what extent the state can resist other countries’ pressure and hence affects the weighing up between diplomacy and war as political instruments (Spykman 1938). Additionally, size includes the factor arable land and hence man power. Consequently, size can be understood as potential strength, not strength itself (Spykman 1938).

The second factor is location and this is considered as even more significant when it comes to determining a state’s rank within “the hierarchy of world powers” (Spykman 1938, p. 39). Consequently, the geographic location can be understood as one of the most essential factor for a country’s foreign policy.

Furthermore, power and the struggle for power play a crucial role in Spykman’s work and this point was his contribution to the field of foreign politics and international relations. It is possible to say that “he translated geography into the currency of power.” (Gray 2015, p. 884). Especially the fact that there is no central authority which organizes the international system and makes sure that law and order are preserved leads – according to Spykman - to the instance “that individual states must make the preservation and improvement of their power position a primary objective of their foreign
policy.” (Spykman 1942, p. 7).
Spykman’s view is that power is a timeless feature and international politics is a consistent struggle for power (Gray 2015).

3. The Conflict in Syria

The beginning of the conflict in Syria can be traced back to the year 2011 – already six years ago. It started with demonstrations against the government’s brutality and corruption and the people were demanding for political and economic reforms. However, the goals of the people in the country were not fulfilled. Just the opposite is the case. The conflict built up with more and more parties involved, domestic groups but foreign as well.

On the domestic level, the regime of Bashar al-Assad plays the central role and is dividing the involved parties in pro- or anti-Assad groups. Main pro Assad force within Syria is the Iranian-backed Hezbollah.

The Syrian government with its domestic partners are facing opposition groups which are of huge variety. Some of them have secular goals, others openly declare their religious or even extremist goals. However, this variety leads to clashes within opposition groups and hence makes the conflict and a solution even more difficult.

The involved parties are often supported and financed – directly or indirectly – by foreign actors. And with proceeding of the conflict, it was shifted to an international level with other countries following their goals on Syrian ground. Therefore, in the following chapter, foreign countries which are involved in the Syrian conflict will be introduced. Due to the two research questions of this thesis and the limited capacity, the domestic parties and the conflict itself will not be analysed more deeply.
3.1 Involved Parties

Since the conflict turned into an international issue, there are more than just local parties involved. Some sources even talk about a proxy war (Asseburg & Wimmen 2012; Ulrichsen 2016). Initially, most of the Western allies supported the Syrian opposition when the turmoil started. They were joined by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. However, on the other side the regime was strongly supported by its traditional allies, which are Russia and Iran (Kinninmont & House 2014). The opposing parties of Bashar al-Assad, most of the European powers, the US and the Gulf countries, all agree in the view that Syria’s president has lost his legitimacy and hence should step down (Kinninmont & House 2014). However, the Western countries and the Gulf States differ in respect of the priority of this goal as well as in the means to achieve it (Kinninmont & House 2014).

With the beginning of the conflict, the USA were quite reluctant with taking any actions. This was part of a greater strategy of being less involved in the Middle East. Especially in Syria, the government under Obama was initially cautious of implementing any direct policies. The US have not just resisted direct military participation to support the opposition. Instead the USA were assisting with political and economic sanctions to weaken the regime. At the same time, it supported the opposition with intelligence, communications, political and economic non-lethal aid (Haass 2013; Sharp & Blanchard 2013). The USA were facing a difficult task to justify an intervention towards its war-tired citizens (Krieg 2016). However, facing terrorism and security threats lead to the incremental involvement of the United States so far. As it is argued, the Obama administration was choosing the type of surrogate warfare to protect US interests and to maintain US influence in the Middle East (Krieg 2016). In order, not to get involved directly into the conflict, the United States provide indirect support such as training and unmanned and
manned air power (Krieg 2016). With this, the Obama government tried “to avoid putting boots on the ground” (Krieg 2016, p. 107). So, the US government saw itself trapped in a situation, that even local powers in the Middle East were expecting the US to act as the influential power the country has been the last decades (Phillips 2017). Some members of the congress shared this view and claimed that the pursued policy should be more aggressive to reach the defined goal of a regime change in Syria (Sharp & Blanchard 2013). On the other side, the US government was quite reluctant in getting involved in another conflict in the Middle East. However, with the rise of the terror organisation ISIS\(^2\), US security was threatened as well. Some officials define ISIS as direct threat for U.S. interests (Johnson 2014).

And finally, also the US government started to arm the Syrian resistance (Johnson 2014). Whereas the United States stated from the beginning that they want Assad to step down, in the course of the conflict the focus seems to have shifted to ISIS and fighting them (Johnson 2014; Blanchard et al. 2014). To reach this goal, the United States even started flying air strikes, provide weapons and lead the military coalition who operates against the Islamic State. However, the government also stressed the fact that it is not possible for a single actor to control and solve the conflict but still they took the action to conduct military operations, let by the US (Blanchard et al. 2014). As a consequence of the shift in the Obama administration, the US government is also searching for a dialogue and negotiations between the Syrian government and some opposition groups (Blanchard et al. 2014). However, the involvement of Russia in Syria and the rise of IS let the US government to rethink its policy and even considered a cooperation with Russia to fight terrorist groups, even though the two countries disagree about

\[^{2}\text{During the conflict, the terror organization changed its name. Therefore, according to the used sources, the terms Islamic State, IS, ISIS, and ISIL such as the Arab term Da’esh can occur. They all refer to the same terrorist organization}\]
the political future of Bashar al-Assad (Humud et al. 2017). With continuation of the conflict and besides the disagreement within the congress, the USA provided lethal and nonlethal support to some of the opposition groups and in August 2014 the US began flying airstrikes in Iraq to stop territorial expansion of the IS (Humud et al 2017). In September, these airstrikes were expanded to Syria (Humud et al 2017). They were followed by further strikes from the US-led anti-terror coalition.

For **Saudi Arabia**, Syria already played a crucial role before the Arab Spring and the following conflict started in 2011. Saudi Arabia saw Syria as the heart of its strategy to contain the growing influence of Iran in the region (Salloukh 2013). The rivalry of Iran and Saudi Arabia can be traced back for a long time and was manifested in the countries’ foreign policies. For example, Saudi Arabia has been trying to use “their shared Arab identity” (Salloukh 2013, p. 36) to subduct Syria from Iran. Those attempts were coupled with business and financial incentives (Salloukh 2013). Under the rule of Bashar al-Assad, the relation between Syria and Iran strengthened, even though this was a quite unbalanced relationship. Hence, Riyadh was trying to compel Syria to dissociate itself from Teheran by challenging the influence of Syria and punishing it on every occasion for the alliance with Iran (Salloukh 2013). Saudi Arabia rallied the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with the object to overthrow the regime in Syria (Salloukh 2013).

In the following, sectarianism seemed to play an open role for Riyadh and became an important instrument in their regional policy and to manipulate and exploit the existing Sunni-Shia division in that area. This was especially obvious in Syria, where Saudi Arabia tried to undermine the alliance with Iran (Salloukh 2013). Here, the motivation was to topple the existing Alawi regime and to substitute it with a new Sunni protégé (Salloukh 2013). In order to reach this goal, Saudi Arabia supported and sponsored the Free Syrian
Army and facilitated “the mobilization of Salafi-jihadi fighters into the Syrian battlefield” (Salloukh 2013; p. 41).

Prior to the conflict in Syria, Turkey was a close ally of Syria and Bashar al-Assad. The country tried to mediate between Syria and Israel (Salloukh 2013), took steps together to create a zone for free trade and provide visa-free travel, and also to reduce the tensions over the borders of the two countries (Kinninmont 2014; Öniş 2014). With this collaboration, Turkey tried to secure its geopolitical influence, specifically in the Middle East and the Arab World. Furthermore, those efforts were driven by the government’s “‘zero problems with neighbors strategy’” (Öniş 2014, p. 4) according its prime goal in foreign policy: EU membership (Öniş 2014). Thanks to this, the relation between the two countries improved, especially in the 2002-2007 era, after a conflict-driven and tense relation in the 1990s which was characterized by the power struggle between them (Tür 2016).

However, with continuing of the violent handling of the uprisings, Turkey turned into an open critic (Salloukh 2013) and finally became an active ally of Riyadh and Doha in order to topple the Syrian Regime (Salloukh 2013). Turkey made clear that from its perspective, a political future with Bashar al-Assad in Syria is not possible (Ozluk 2016). And hence, it started actively supporting opposition forces (Öniş 2014; Karakoç & Doğruel 2015) and declared openly its aim of a regime change and its support of toppling the incumbent president (Öniş & Yılmaz 2016).

However, what the Arab revolution has been showing so far is Turkey’s limited capacity to play an active and leading role due to its diplomatic and economic possibilities as well as the pragmatism and adaptability of Turkey’s foreign policy (Öniş 2014; Öniş & Yılmaz 2016). However, the stance Turkey took shortly after the uprisings in Syria starting in 2011, seems to be changing. After the peace talks hold in Astana in Kazakhstan with Turkey, Iran and Russia but also representative from Syria and also 14 rebel groups,
it looked like Turkey would be abandoning the United States but instead bonding with Russia in order to end the conflict in Syria (Hiro 2017). This can probably at least partly be traced back to Russia’s engagement after the failed military coup in Turkey in July 2016. President Putin was the first foreign head of state who called Recep Tayyip Erdogan and congratulated him (Hiro 2017). This probably strengthened the bilateral ties. Putin’s words, that Russia would categorically always oppose any activity which is anti-constitutional (Hiro 2017) must have been quite moving for Erdogan. Because hence, Turkey’s president stopped calling on Assad to resign (Hiro 2017).

As a direct neighbor, the **Kingdom of Jordan** is directly affected by the conflict in many ways. Especially the enormous influx of Syrian refugees constitutes a huge burden for the country. In 2016, the population of Jordan reached the number of 9.5 million with 2.9 million people residing in Jordan as ‘guest’ (Ghazal 2016). This makes nearly 31% of the overall population, with nearly 1.3 million Syrians being the majority of this group (Ghazal 2016). And those numbers are pushing Jordan’s capacities in many ways at its limits.

With the beginning of the conflict, Jordan was more passively on the sideline, being affected by the hundreds of thousand refugees. However, with the strengthening of IS basically in front of its borders, Jordan showed the readiness of taking a more active stance (Alrababa’h 2015).

Jordan is hence directly involved in the conflict due to its participation of the military campaign, led by the United States, to fight Jabhat Al-Nusra and the Islamic State. This is probably also a reason for tightening its borders (Achilli 2015). Additionally, the staunch U.S.-ally is considering creating a safe zone. This should be done in the South of Syria and serves the aim of facing the refugee influx as well as providing a protected area for rebel forces where they could be prepared and trained for strikes against the regime of Bashar
al-Assad (Haynes 2016). However, the attempt to install this safety net could have the opposite effect and even undermine Jordan’s security (Alrababa’h 2015).

With less than 300,000 nationals (Dickinson 2014) and a total population of 2.2 million (Katzman 2016), and a size smaller than 12,000 square kilometers (Dickinson 2014), Qatar is “one of the smallest Arab states” (Khatib 2013, p. 417). However, due to its wealth “Qatar has risen in less than two decades to become one of the leading regional actors in the international relations of the Middle East.” (Khatib 2013, p. 417).

Qatar’s foreign policy can be quite difficult to grasp; however, it can be characterized as broad due to the fact that Qatar is trying to make friends with all kind of parties and is avoiding enmities. This can be traced back to political adaptation: Qatar is trying to figure out political trends and then joining and supporting them (Khatib 2013).

Qatar’s foreign policy is driven by the aim of keeping a leading position in the region. Hence, it was reluctant to take a position to oppose the existing regimes in the Middle East. However, with the upcoming of the Arab Spring, the rules changed in that region and Qatar realized that there was quite a possibility that the existing regimes will be toppled. And the country changed its strategy (Khatib 2013). In the beginning of 2012, the Qatari Emir, was even the first Arab leader who called for an armed intervention in Syria (Ulrichsen 2016).

After starting to support the opposition of the Assad government, Qatar adopted an approach to organize the Syrian opposition (Ulrichsen 2016). The country supports rebel groups and Islamists, fighting in Syria against the government of Bashar al-Assad. So, Qatar got directly involved by arming Syrian rebels, for example the Free Syrian Army and even managed to unify factions of the opposition by an umbrella organization – “the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces” (Khatib 2013, p.
Starting in 2011, the government of Qatar created formal mechanisms which enabled individuals and entities to provide funding which reached Syrian rebel groups and the opposition (Ulrichsen 2016). This led to international criticism, that wealthy Qataris would contribute aid in the form of funds and services to radical Islamist organizations (Katzman 2016). From 2011 to 2013, Qatar was the actor which spent the most money on rebels (Khalaf & Field-Smith 2013). However, the majority of the weapons send to this region do not arrive at secular opposition groups but rather arrive at hardline Islamic jihadists (Sanger 2012). This was partly also because of an insufficient organization and logistics (Ulrichsens 2016).

Especially the support of Islamist groups with weapons and financial means and the strong ties to the Muslim brotherhood sets Qatar at odds with the international community and especially the other Gulf States and damaged its reputation quite severe (Ulrichsen 2016; Katzman 2016). The circumstance, that Qatar equipped different interest groups within the opposition than Saudi Arabia, increased the conflict (Abouzeid 2012; Katzman 2016; Phillips 2017).

Qatar is a member of the U.S.-led alliance which is fighting the Islamic State and even flow some airstrikes. Disregarding this alliance, the collaboration is not always easy because the United States and Qatar do not always share the same opinion about which individuals or groups should be labelled terrorists (Katzman 2016).

When Iran started to support the Syrian regime, it was with the argument of fighting al-Qaeda in Syria to avoid fighting them on their own territory. Otherwise Iran would face one day those problems within their own national boundaries. Therefore, Iran even sent the Revolutionary Guards which trained the occurring pro-regime militia (Kinninmont & House, 2014). However, it seems that the motivation of Iran for its involvement is primarily
of geopolitical instead of ideological reasons. Syria constituted a secular state whereas the ideology of Iran, an Islamic Republic, does not concur with these ideas. This disparity though was understood by some scholars even to strengthen their collaboration because it avoids a rivalry of Islamic leadership and legitimacy in the Middle East. And this ally was part of the proclaimed ‘resistance axis', supplemented by the Hamas and the Hezbollah in order to oppose US-American and Israeli interests (Kinninmont & House 2014; Salloukh 2013). However, some scholars name two more important reasons for the Iranian support of the regime if not the two most important. This is on the one side the position of Syria which was already used before the conflict started as land corridor for supplying the Hezbollah with arms. Additionally, the Syrian conflict can be understood as stage where the rivalry of Iran and Saudi Arabia is carried out (Kinninmont & House 2014; Salloukh 2013). Furthermore, the influence in Syria was understood for example by Saudi Arabia as an interference in what is considered as solely Arab affairs (Salloukh 2013) and therefore opened up a possibility for Iran to have some foot in the door in Arab matters. Additionally, Syria is understood – despite its secular form of government – as a Shiite bulwark in the Middle East (Öniş 2014).

3.2 Russia’s Involvement

Already with the beginning of the conflict and the growing opposition in 2011, Russia supported the regime in Syria of Bashar al-Assad and was one of his allies. This backing was intensified when the regime lost ground since September 2015 (Ozluk, 2016). With those developments preceding and the plea of Bashar al-Assad, Russia intervened with its military and turned into a warring party which is actively involved. Also, the military intervention in 2015 constituted the first in post-Soviet time beyond its neighbourhood
(Ozluk 2016; Casula 2015). So, whereas the president of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, is considered by the opposing countries to be part of the issue and even want to achieve his ouster, Russia stands by the president. Precisely, Russia said that no foreign power can lead to the resigning of Assad (Gutterman 2012). Besides, Russia expressed concerns that this could open up the way for extremists gaining the upper hand within Syria and following would destabilise the region (Gutterman 2012).

As further reason, why Russia is backing Bashar al-Assad, diplomatic, military-industrial, and commercial ties between Moscow and Damascus are mentioned (Bagno-Moldavsky 2013). It is also said that Russia’s support is not connected to the president itself. It would collaborate with other political forces as well which would seize power of Syria (Bagno-Moldavsky 2013). Additionally, Russia profits from the access it is granted to Tartus, a naval base on the Mediterranean and Russia’s only one in the region of the Middle East (Bagno-Moldavsky 2013). Furthermore, economic and trade relations are highlighted by some scholars. In an article from 2013, Syria was named as the seventh biggest client in Russia’s defense industry with a trade volume of $1.5 billion between 2003 and 2010. At this time, estimates about the future market potential ranged around $3-4 billions, with another $600 million which should have been possible due to new contracts until 2014 (Bagno-Moldavsky 2013). Yet it has to be stated that this overall share should not be exaggerated and it is tentative to overlook other motivations such as diplomatic reasons.

Since the conflict in Syria was lifted to a religious level and terrorism plays a crucial role, it is also worth considering this situation for Russia and not just for the other involved countries.

In the last decades Russia experienced a revival and a growth in religions, especially in the Orthodox Church. Historically, people in Russia follow the tradition of the Orthodox Church (Lehmann 1998). During the last years of
commonism and the first years after the fall of it, religious identification experienced an increase (Löfstedt 2012). Whereas in 1993 just half of the people in Russia said they were Orthodox, in 2007 80% of the Russian people considered themselves Orthodox (Evans & Northmore-Ball 2012). However, it seems that the Orthodox Church does not just fulfil religious needs and tasks but ethnical and identical as well. There is a general trend in Russia, that religious and national values are understood synonymously (Halbach 2015).

The second biggest religion in Russia is Islam (Lehmann 1998) with 20 million Muslims (Nurullina 2015). The overwhelming majority of them belongs to the Sunni branch in Islam (Lazarev & Biryukova 2016). Having these numbers in mind, it is of no surprise that the Russian President Putin said that Islam is a vital part of Russian culture (Halbach 2015). They are mostly found in Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Bashkortostan and Tatarstan (Lehmann 1998).

The general trend in Russia, an increase in religiosity, is also found in Islam, who recorded a revival as well (Nurullina 2015). However, Putin’s statement of Islam in Russia is only one side of the coin. Especially the fact, that the Muslim population is the only group within the Russian Federation whose birth rate is positive (Bagno-Moldavsky 2013) leads to increasing tensions and a perceived threat (Malashenko & Nuritova 2009). This is probably also intensified by some developments in Dagestand and Chechnya, probably the most religious of the Muslim republics, and the threat of the Islamic Underground in the North Caucasus (Halbach 2015). Chechnya’s president seems to have a twofold strategy. On the one side, he is eager in manifesting his support for the president Putin and that Chechnya constitutes a part of Russia. On the other side, he pursues a policy which separates Chechnya culturally from Russia and creates something like an Islamic republic within the Russian Federation which can be understood as
cultural secession (Halbach 2015). This is accompanied by a general trend in Northern Caucasus to remove from the standard of the Russian constitution. For example, the legalization of polygamy is discussed and on local sphere, Sharia courts seem to have more authority than the corrupt secular judicial bodies (Halbach 2010).

Besides these secessionist, extremist tendencies are an issue as well. In Tatarstan, where according to officials one of the traditionally tolerant models of Islam is taught, at the same time “(...) the events of recent years show that the problem of religious extremism in the region is urgent.” (Nurullina 2015, p. 6). In the North Caucasus, the territory suffers from attacks executed by the armed underground and even terrorist attacks which are fought on a basis characterized of Islamic mobilization and instable regional structures (Halbach 2010). This leads to some kind of customization of the Russian population with violence in the Northern Caucasus who succeedingly perceives this region more and more as a foreign body (Halbach 2010).

With beginning of the 2000’s a range of terrorist attacks happened in some republics which were at this moment considered as quite calm concerning Islamic attacks. In 2004, 336 people died in Beslan in the course of a hostage-taking in a school and in 2005 happened a major offensive of an Islamic terror group in Nalchik (Halbach 2010).

Further numbers flesh out the increasing violence. Whereas in 2008, 795 violently occurrences were reported in Northern Caucasus, this numbers increased to 1100 in 2009. Additionally, the impact is severe since most of the incidents end up deadly. In 2008, 586 fatalities were reported, in 2009 even over 900. Furthermore, suicide bombings quadrupled in 2009 compared to 2008, with most of them happening in Chechnya (Center for Strategic & International Studies 2009).

However, the increase in Islamic terrorism is not a local problem. It is spreading to inner Russia as well. The worst terrorist attacks in 2010
happened in Moscow, where a metro bomb attack killed 40 people (Halbach 2010).

However, there is also a change in the argumentation of terrorist attacks, happening in or coming from the North Caucasus. Whereas in the first time after the collapse of the Soviet Union arguments were primarily national independence, this changed after the first Chechen War in 1996. After that, the armed fight was more and more justified with the Jihad (Halbach 2010). Corresponding to this ideological change, also the sphere of influence changed. Whereas in the 1990s, the attention was put on Chechen territory, it has been spread to the complete North Caucasus where a Caucasian Emirate should be implemented, based on the Sharia. With this ideological change, also the influence of external Islamic forces increased (Halbach 2010). In 2006, several additional unions were found in the region of the Ural and the Volga and an Emirate was proclaimed. However, it is not really sure which territory this should embrace (Halbach 2010).

Taken these events together, Russia was in the last twenty years one of the most targeted settings of terrorist attacks (Halbach 2015).

4. Hypotheses

With this theoretical background, the working hypotheses will be elaborated. Taking the core points of the classical geopolitical authors, the confrontation of the maritime and continental powers, this provides the starting point for the first hypothesis. As it was argued by Mackinder, that Russia and the heartland is impenetrable by seapower, Syria cannot be understood as a classical seapower, even though it possesses access to the Maritime. It does not belong to the Maritime World is in close neighborhood to the heartland. Additionally, when having a look at Figure 2, it reveals the geographical position of Syria. The country is situated in the heartlandic periphery. And
this even close to the Ecumene and to parts of the effective national territory, Russia’s most important political and economic area. And when remembering Spykman’s contribution that geographic factors such as size and especially the location affect a country’s security and consequently its military and foreign policy, it can be derived the first hypothesis the following:

Hypothesis #1: Russia is exerting influence in Syria, motivated by security reasons.

For the second hypothesis, the emphasized struggle for power in the international system which was made by Spykman and by Cohen will be considered. Since those geopolitical authors took the stance that countries struggle for power in the international system and the concept of the shatterbelt having in mind, which states that foreign powers are involved in that fragile region, the second hypothesis will be as follows:

Hypothesis #2: Russia aims for utilizing its upper hand in the Middle East to increase its international power status.

5. Analysis

5.1 Hypothesis 1

A first step in analyzing Hypothesis 1 is to find out about the prevailing perception in Russian politics. When analysing foreign policy decisions, it is essential to consider the foreign policy concepts of the country. In the present case, first the foreign policy concept of Russia from 2008 will be considered. This gives the
possibility to investigate declared foreign policy goals before the conflict in Syria even started.

One of the first points mentioned, on page 1, is the goal “to ensure national security, to preserve and strengthen its sovereignty and territorial integrity [...]” (The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2008, p. 1). This seems to be one of the core concerns of the Russian government. Under the background of the situation of Muslim republics in Russia, especially with the knowledge of the separatist tendencies, this statement gets really important. Furthermore, the document states that “differences between domestic and external means of ensuring national interests and security are gradually disappearing” (The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2008, p. 2). This means that the area of domestic and foreign policies and political decisions is more and more diminishing. Interpreted and thought about it until the end, this could mean in a strict interpretation that domestic issues can – at least to some extent – even dealt with abroad and on a foreign ‘battleground’ as well. In the present case, it can be considered to support the elaborated hypotheses, that Russia is intervening in Syria due to security reasons. It can be understood as a proxy intervention, motivated by its domestic issues and discrepancies with its Muslim population. The following statement in the document seems to support this interpretation: “In this context, our foreign policy becomes one of major instruments of the steady national development and of ensuring its competitiveness in a globalizing world.” (The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, p. 2) as well as “Russia pursues an open, predictable and pragmatic foreign policy determined by its national interests.” (The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2008, p. 6). This demonstrates the importance foreign policy plays for its domestic interests and issues. At the same time, it points to the intertwined character of foreign and domestic politics. So, fighting terrorism, not just on Russian ground but in the international level as well, is considered not solely as foreign, but as a highly
important domestic policy task (Foreign Policy Concept 2008).
Additionally, what is striking, is the fact that terrorism played an important role in the foreign policy concept of 2008 because it is mentioned several times in different contexts and with different partners. This points to the fact that Russia was already quite sensitive to growing separatism and religious extremism. Having in mind the previous statements, the interconnectedness of domestic and foreign policy, this can point to the instance that Russia could be motivated to take foreign actions, triggered by its own domestic terrorist issues.

Also, what is crucial and fortifies the relevance of the present geopolitical approach, is the mentioning of Russia’s geopolitical position and that the country constitutes the largest power of Euro-Asia and the direct influence on its foreign policy (The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2008, p. 6). Connecting this to the theory, Russia is aware of its heartlandic position and the possibilities connected to this. It enables the country to ‘pressure’ to the inner crescent – in Mackinder’s term – or to the Rimland – in Spykman’s words. And remembering the location of Syria, the closeness to the Russian Ecumene and important parts of the ENT, the effective national territory, this demonstrates the geographical relevance.
However, the importance of the Middle East does not play a crucial role in the policy concept of 2008. It is only stated in one sentence that Russia wants to develop the relations with the countries in that region.

The preceding Foreign Policy Concept was published in 2013, two years after the conflict started in Syria. In this paper as well, one of the first points mentioned is Russia’s security, now it even says that the territorial integrity and sovereignty should be protected and strengthened (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2013a). What is really interesting is the point that Russia is pointing to ideological factors as dominant factor in negatively affecting global stability. And the recent events in North Africa and
the Middle East were considered to be carried out under Islamic values (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2013a) even though the initial claims were for democratic and liberal reforms, not necessarily connected to religion.

Furthermore, what is striking, is the circumstance that geography seems to play a central role because it is mentioned several times in the political concepts. And the concept of geopolitics is prevailing. In the case of Russia this means, the perception would be mostly influenced by the spatial depth and the size of the country such as the location on the ‘world island’.

Additionally, terrorism and religious extremism are consistently recurring points. It is explained that all possible means will be considered to protect Russian citizens and the country of terrorist attacks (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2013a).

Also, Russia makes clear that it’s foreign policy is based on domestic interests and that foreign policy is seen as a tool which can be used to ensure a country’s development and competitiveness in the world (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2013a).

In the newest foreign policy concept, from 2016, the ensuring of the national security, territorial integrity and sovereignty are even mentioned as first aim in the paper (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016b). What is interesting is the fact, that with each concept the space and attention extremism and terrorism takes, is larger. Also, the collaboration between the government and institutions of the most important confessions is mentioned in the documents of 2008, 2013, and 2016. However, only the Orthodox Church is explicitly named (The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2008; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2013a; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016c).
In the National Security Strategy of Russia from 2015, it also states that one of the main threats to public security and state are – besides others – “activities connected with the use of information and communication technologies to disseminate and promote the ideology of fascism, extremism, and separatism, and to endanger the civil peace and political and social stability in society” (Russian National Security Strategy 2015, point 43). This is in accordance with the Foreign Policy Concept and underlines the relevance and the Russian sensitivity for those points, especially the foreign policy. Furthermore, the national security strategy emphasizes that the defense capability of the country should be improved and efforts will be put on the strengthening of the unity within Russian society in order to ensure a social stability and interethnic accord, such as religious tolerance (Russian National Security Strategy 2015). It seems that Russia and especially politics and the security bodies got aware of the threat of social, ethnic, and religious fragmentation and the possible security threats as a consequence. In Section III, where it is dealt with National Interests and Strategic National Priorities, it is even getting more interesting for the present analysis and research question. The first point mentioned for the national strategic interests do contain the points as independence, sovereignty, territorial and national integrity, and to ensure the inviolability of the constitutional order of Russia (Russian National Security Strategy 2015). It seems that some important aspects of the security issues which are prevailing in the Northern Caucasus are touched here. The literature review revealed already the problematic situation in this area and the currently discussed paragraphs from the security concept seem to deal with the developments in North Caucasus as direct political reaction. The separatist tendencies, if they are political or cultural, seem to constitute a thread to Russian integrity. Having in mind the perception of the intertwined domestic and foreign politics, this point becomes highly relevant for the present analysis and Russia’s intervention in Syria.
Further main threats which the Russian state and the public security see itself opposed are “activities of radical public associations and groups using nationalist and religious extremist ideology (...) and also individuals, focused on destroying the unity and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, destabilizing the domestic political and social situation (...) and destroying traditional Russian religious and moral values” (Russian National Security Strategy 2015, p. 9).

Additionally, one aim is the neutralization and prevention of interethnic and social conflicts and the participation of Russian citizens in terrorist groups abroad (Russian National Security Strategy 2015). What is interesting is that both aims were mentioned within one point. Especially the last remark is of crucial interest for the present analysis. Due to the topic and the drafted fact, that domestic issues play a crucial role for the foreign policy as well, this statement delivers some support for the present hypothesis.

To investigate and analyze the first hypothesis more deeply, in a further step statements of politicians and official representatives will be investigated. Recalling that there was an increase in religiousness in Russia not just in the Christian Church but in Islam as well, the Russian perception about religion in this conflict is also important. Especially under the background of the terrorist attacks which happened in Russia in the last couple of years, executed by Sunni rebels.

Sergey Lavrov points to the Christians which are in danger in the Middle East and in his words threatened by genocide committed by extremists – and to the importance of ceasing this. Also, Russia would be ready to take all necessary steps in order to stop this violence (Lavrov 2017). Furthermore, he takes up the confessions in the conflict and already states that the conflict would be gaining interconfessional dimensions, which would disturb Russia very seriously (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012). This is especially of high relevance, when considering another statement of Lavrov from 2012. He said
that Russia is concerned by the developments in Syria because it constitutes a danger of a split within Muslims. In this interview, he also mentioned the ingoing complex processes in Russia (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2012a). With the background in mind, that Russia was facing Sunni terrorist attacks in the last decades and there is a conflict going on in geographical close distance with confessions and especially the Sunni and Shia distinction playing an important role, these statements get highly relevant for the present hypothesis. It could be understood, that Russia is very sensitive to the rivalry which is carried out between Muslims in Syria and especially those of extremists and terrorists.

The Russian ambassador Alexander Lukashevich, who is permanent representative of the Russian Federation to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) stated during the Security Days Panel in Prague that “Russia is self-sufficient, but we are a Eurasian state, naturally interested in a well-being of our common continent” (Lukashevich 2017). This corresponds to the presented classical geopolitical approach of the self-sufficient heartland. However, it seems that the concept of a world island is also present. This becomes clear by the used term of the ‘common continent’. According to this, it seems to support the prevailing classical geopolitical perception including the possibility of pressuring to the periphery of which Syria is a part of.

Furthermore, he sees Russia’s security threatened by huge challenges. Besides refugees and migrants, the first danger he named was that “[his] country has long been a target of radical Islamists.” (Lukahsevich 2017). So, this first statement seems to point to a perception, which is influenced by a classical geopolitical view combined with a fear of terror attacks, more precisely by Islamists. However, from where those terrorists are is not more specified.

This fear seems to be intensified by statements such as, Russia would face another wave of jihadism, which was made towards Foreign Minister Sergey
Lavrov during the UN General Assembly in September 2015 by not closer defined former colleagues (Zakharova 2016).

Even more precise are the statements from Oleg Syromolotov, Deputy Foreign Minister. In an interview in 2016, he affirmed that Russia’s goals in Syria are as follows. The terrorist potential should be reduced in Syria, but for Russia as well. By stating that terrorists were fought in Syria from Russian power he connects them with fighters from Russia combating in Syria. Specifically, he says that Russia’s goal is to liquidate terrorists who would return to Russia otherwise. He states that many citizens from Russia, especially from the Volga Region and the North Caucasus, were fighting in Syria. So, Russia is aware of the terrorists within their own country, their departure to Syria, that they fight for terrorist organizations there, and a potential return to Russia, radicalized and constituting a security threat due to their terroristic training and experiences (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016b). Also, he sees himself confirmed and the involvement in Russia as a success. At least in the mentioned point about the security threat due to terroristic fighters. He said, that they, Russia, have pushed away the terrorist threat from Russia (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016b). Another interesting point is the fact, that Russia is conducting antiterrorist operations on its own territory, in Muslim areas with terroristic tendencies (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016b). This, and the fact that Russia is aware of the people from these regions leaving to Syria, seems to give support that Russia is – at least to some extend – fighting also its own terrorist problem on Syrian ground.

The concern about Russian fighters in Syria is also shared by the Russian president Vladimir Putin. In an open letter from 2013, addressing Americans and American politicians, he worried about foreign militants fighting in Syria and then coming back to their countries with experiences acquired on the battlefields in Syria. And already in 2013, he mentioned the Russian citizens
involved in the Syrian fights and expressed his deep concerns about this (Putin 2013). This is even rendered more precisely in 2015. According to a letter from the Russian ambassador V. Semivolos, there would be circa 5,000 to 7,000 people fighting for ISIS who are originally from Russia or other Commonwealth of Independent States members. And citing president Putin, the ambassador claimed that they should be destroyed within Syria. Russia could not allow those fighters to make use of the experiences they acquired in Syria on their home ground in Russia (Semivolos 2015).

This aim, to fight terrorists, corresponds to Sergey Lavrov’s statement about antiterrorist coalitions. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation stated that weakening the terrorists in Syria and the Syrian government at the same time would be a dubious strategy and that the Syrian government would be needed to fight the terrorists, first to name IS. According to him, all forces who are motivated to fight IS should be united, this includes the Syrian army, moderate opposition groups, Kurdish militias, and all other groups which are ready to join (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2015a).

Following this thinking and pattern of argumentation, it helps to explain why the Russian government sticks to the Syrian government and supports the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

According to Lavrov in 2015, Russia put all other interests aside in order to focus only on this issue – fighting terrorism, especially IS. And the country wanted other members of the alliance to pursue this strategy as well. He even drew parallels to the fight against the Nazis during the second World War, when ideological gaps were ignored and laid aside in order to reach the top priority – fighting the same enemy (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2015a).

He also gets one step further and does not just consider political differentials but religious as well. So, he calls the Shia and the Sunni to reconcile in order to find a common ground for a productive cooperation (The Ministry of
Taken the results from the analysis of the foreign policy concepts, the security report and the official statements from various Russian politicians together, there seems to be support for the first hypothesis. For Russian politics and especially the foreign politics, geopolitical perceptions seem to be quite important. This underlines the approach of this analysis and the explanatory power. Furthermore, the domestic terrorist threat seems to contribute to Russia's motivation to intervene in Syria. Extremists fighting in Syria with Russian background are perceived as severe security threat. Besides this, it helps explaining why the Russian government supports the Syrian government. The Russian government seems to find support in the Syrian government in the terrorist fight.

5.2 Hypothesis 2

In this chapter, the second hypothesis will be analyzed, which was as follows: Russia aims for utilizing its upper hand in the Middle East to increase its international power status.

In order to analyze the second hypothesis, like in the previous analysis, three foreign policy concepts from the Russian Federation, military and security reports as well as political statements will be considered and analyzed. Beyond that, reports of key events such as international meetings, statements made during and after those meetings and political decisions will be considered and analyzed in a qualitative way. For this hypothesis, this is not solely done for Russia but also – according to the research question – made for other involved countries and their politicians as well.
In a first step Russia’s perception of the international system, the country’s position in it and the achieved goals concerning its positioning will be analyzed.

In a second step, the results from the international level will be transferred to the concept of Cohen. Therefore, his contribution to the Middle Eastern shatterbelt will be introduced here.

Cohen (1991) drafted the situation in the fragile shatterbelt until 1991, including local and external powers. As visible in Figure 4, from the 1950s until the 1980s there was some equilibrium in the Middle East, guaranteed by the two competing superpowers, the United States and the USSR. In the beginning of the 90s, there was, according to Cohen, a disequilibrium with the United States as only external dominant power (Cohen 1991).

Figure 4: Equilibrium and the Middle East seesaw
(source: Cohen 1991, p. 570)

In a future scenario, included in Figure 6 in the appendix, Cohen subscribes a minor role to the USSR but more influence to Europe\(^3\)

\(^3\) Since it was about a future scenario created in 1991 and hence constitutes an old outlook on nowadays, the presented figure excludes this last figure
To update the presented concept, it is necessary to define the term power. In the present analysis, power is defined as “the ability to influence the decisions or actions of others.” (Thorelli 1986, p. 38) After having defined the present understanding of power, it is crucial to define the different channels of influence which can be exerted in the studied conflict of this case study.

One of the most important criteria in this qualitative analysis is the presence, involvement and influence on the international level such as conferences, meetings, and negotiations. Furthermore, the domestic influence plays a crucial role as well such as military presence. As a third factor, there is an influence such as money, fighters and ideologies. Based on these criteria the concept of Cohen will be updated.

When analyzing the Foreign Policy Concepts, it is striking that Russia considers itself in a really important and responsible position in global and international affairs and makes no secret about its aim to strengthen its position within the world community. To achieve this, the country considers its foreign policy as one of the most important tools (Foreign Policy Concept 2008). According the international system, Russia is aware of the fact that the bipolar system is over and hence sees the civilizational and cultural diversity of the world as gradually in evidence (Foreign Policy Concept 2008). And this international system would be characterized by a political and a psychological policy to contain Russia, set in motion by the monopolistic position of the West (Foreign Policy Concept 2008). This perception seems to be quite present in Russian Foreign Politics. It was mentioned by the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2012, Sergey Lavrov, too. In his opinion, the bloc mentality would still be prevailing among some political elites and hence call for a curbing of Russia (Lavrov 2012).

Russia’s Foreign Policy is characterized by the believe of being one of the guiding states in the world, also because of its geopolitical position and as a
permanent member in the UN Security Council (Foreign Policy concept 2008).

According to Russia, the international system in a new emerging world order should have several leading States, representative in geographical terms. In the following sentence, it is demonstrated that Russia will engage more intensely in various formations and groups (Foreign Policy Concept 2008). Russia is expecting an emerging multipolarity and points out the necessity of this type of international order, especially under the background of strategic stability and security issues (Foreign Policy Concept 2008). The mentioning of the geographical representability is of crucial interest. In a classical geopolitical understanding, this means that Russia due to its size and position, should take a leading and major role in world politics and the system. And having the theoretical background again in mind, also the possible access to the inner crescent – according to Mackinder – or the Rimland – according to Spykman – and hence the Middle East, and consequently Syria. Furthermore, this means an opposing of other major powers, such as the United States or Europe.

In 2013, five years after the above mentioned Foreign Policy Concept and two years after the start of the conflict in Syria, Russia seems to be more self-confident and considers itself even more responsible in the international system. Facing the developments in the 21st century and the global processes, Russia states that the country has an increased responsibility for the international agenda, in shaping international relations and perceives itself as a competitive and influential pole in modern world, who contributes to a well-balanced, unifying and positive international agenda and the settlement of regional and global problems (Foreign Policy Concept 2013).

In the following Foreign Policy Concept, the one from 2016, Russia again takes up the idea of an international system which is multipolar and getting increasingly complex. One of the most important trends in shaping this
system would be a permanent struggle for dominance (Foreign Policy Concept 2016). This corresponds to the theoretical background. Spykman already pointed to the importance of a struggle for power in the international system. And this approach was taken up by Cohen and plays a crucial role so that it was even taken as point of origin for the second hypothesis. And it delivers some support for this research question. The official statement from Russia in this document, the Foreign Policy Concepts, is dealing with this perception and draws the line to Russian foreign politics.

This is complemented by the defined goal in the Russian National Security Strategy from 2015, to increase Russia’s role in forming a polycentric international order and world (Russian National Security Strategy 2015). Furthermore, the document takes up the Eurasian region as a concept and states that the West would create tensions in this region in order to hamper the realization of Russia’s national interests (Russian National Security Strategy 2015). Additionally, Russia’s position as one of the leading world powers in the polycentric world should be strengthened (Russian National Security Strategy 2015).

This perception is also repeated by Russian politicians. For example, it was stated that Russia is permanently strengthening the position within the world arena (Lavrov 2011).

Concerning the situation in Syria, the Russian government has been experiencing the happenings as a shift in the geopolitical landscape (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2011b). This fortifies again the significance of the current approach and the influence in Russia’s perception of the international system and world politics. And hence this could make them intervene according to the struggle of power. When realizing, that the happenings there lead to a reordering or at least a shift in the geopolitical order, it would give some space for Russia to aim to a power position in Syria and consequently in the Middle East and therefore manifests
and strengthens its power status. An openly proclaimed goal of Russia as the previous analysis revealed so far. In respect of the international arena and modern conditions the Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov makes clear that it is Russia’s interest to strengthen and intensify the country’s weight as being one of the most important power centers and aims to exerting influence in the new emerging polycentric world (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2011b). And furthermore, an important motivation in foreign policy is the promotion of Russian interests (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2011b).

However, the region of the Middle East is not just considered as one of the geopolitical zones. It is even denominated as a key geopolitical region (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2011a). This points to the fact that Russia is aware of the key position of the shatterbelt and can hence be motivated to get involved there. Grasping again the definition of the shatterbelt, where at least two competing foreign powers from different geopolitical realms, so two external major powers, are involved. This could be a possibility for Russia to encounter the United States or Europe in order to react to their - by Russia perceived - containment policy. So, the shatterbelt, as Lavrov recognized as key geopolitical zone, can be a possibility for Russia to increase its international power position by directly confronting other major powers and at the same time react to their policy.

According to Russia, representatives of the Syrian opposition consider Russia as balancing factor in the Middle East and apparently requested Russia to stay there. According to Lavrov, Russia shares this view (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2012a).

So far, the analysis revealed Russia’s perception of the international system, in which it seems to be aiming to a strong position. The desired system should be multipolar. And, Russia perceives the pursuit policy by some Western countries as an effort to contain Russia. And also, it seems that the country
wants to oppose this. Therefore, the recognition of the Middle East as key geopolitical region, transferred to the theory, the shatterbelt, gives Russia the chance to oppose other powers and search for its own place in the international power position.

But did Russia reach this aim? Therefore, it is essential to investigate the process of negotiations and the position of the involved parties on the international level.

One of the first initiatives was the six-point peace plan suggested by the then UN-Arab League envoy to Syria and UN Security General Kofi Annan. He released a six-point peace plan to end the fighting in Syria (Arab League Online 2012). The main addressee was the Syrian government and it was requested to stop the fighting, recognize the requests of the people in Syria, facilitate humanitarian assistance and the document tried to sustain the rights of different persons such as journalists and persons who were detained arbitrarily (Security Council 2012a). The Syrian government initially agreed to implement the plan and the United Nations adopted the resolution 2042 which facilitates to send an unarmed military team up to 30 observers to monitor the implementation of the six-point plan (Security Council 2012b). With resolution 2043, the capacity was even extended to 300 people for initially 90 days – the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) (Security Council 2012c).

However, to achieve the pursuit ceasefire failed and hence Kofi Annan resigned in August 2012 (Arab League Online 2012). As a reaction to the failure of the implementation of the six-point peace plan, Germany, France, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States presented a draft resolution. This draft also included the possibility to put sanctions on the regime of Bashar al-Assad (Security Council 2012d). However, this was not adopted due to the veto of Russia and China as permanent members of the
According to Russia, the document was extremely unilateral, unrealistic in reaching the ceasefire, trying to put pressure only on the Syrian authorities and hence unacceptable for Russia (Lukashevich 2012a). And according to Russia, consequently this would incite extremist and terrorist activities from the opposition and lead to escalation (Lukashevich 2012a). Russia in reaction presented their own appeal, addressing all Syrian parties (Lukashevich 2012a). However, it was not put for a vote at the Security council (Security Council 2012d). The representative for Russia at the Council’s meeting made clear that Russia would not accept the possibility of a military intervention or sanctions (Security Council 2012d).

Representatives from Great Britain, France, and Germany showed horrified reactions about Russia vetoing the third time against a resolution, hence hampering an agreement and taking side for the Syrian regime (Security Council 2012d).

Susan Rice, from the United States, said that the two previous vetoes were already destructive. But this one would be deplorable and dangerous (Security Council 2012b).

Taken these points together, it becomes clear that Russia – at this point due to its status as permanent member of the Security Council and its veto right – has already some influential power in the international sphere. However, the pursuit policy sets Russia at odds with other countries, a risk Russia is apparently ready to take, having in mind its unflinching and stable support of the Assad regime.

On 30th of June in 2012, the meeting of the Action Group for Syria met in Geneva at the office of the United Nations. It was attended by “the Secretaries-General of the United Nations and the League of Arab States, the Foreign Ministers of China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States, Turkey, Iraq (…), Kuweit (…) and Qatar (…), and the European Union High
Representative for Foreign and Security Policy” (Action Group for Syria 2012, p.1). The meeting was later on known as Geneva I Conference. The goal was the “full implementation of the six-point plan and Security Council resolutions 2042 and 2043” (Action Group for Syria 2012, p. 1). A crucial fact was the transitional governing body with full executive powers. It is explicitly stated that members of the current government can be included and it is at the Syrian people to decide for their country’s future (Action Group for Syria 2012). But still, having a look at the participating countries, there was no representative of any of the Syrian parties – neither the government, nor any one of the opposition groups were represented. Following the meeting, Russia was calling for Iran and Saudi Arabia to join the Action Group for Syria in order to find a solution for the crises. Mikhail Bogdanov, the Deputy Russian Foreign Minister, said that the Action Group for Syria should become more representative. Hence, he suggested to consider the two additional powers which exert the greatest influence in Syria to the group - Iran and Saudi Arabia (The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland 2012). Furthermore, he considered geographical aspects and explained that the neighboring countries of Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, could help towards a settlement in Syria (The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland 2012). The absence of the suggested other countries was, according to Bogdanov, due to the position which was taken by other partners (The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland 2012). He even said that the mentioned countries should get their stake – even at the expense of other external powers (Trend news agency 2013). And seemingly to underline its role and readiness to take an important position, Moscow offered to hold the next meeting of the Action Group (The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland 2012). The fact, that Russia was motivated to consider the rivals Iran
and Saudi Arabia is highly interesting. Whereas Iran is an ally of the Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad, Saudi Arabia is an open critic of it. On the one hand, it could contribute to Russia’s preferred international order, a multipolar system. Having more influential powers in the action group would facilitate this. On the other side, with Iran being a member of the group, this will strengthen the Syrian regime’s and Russia’s position with Iran being a supporter of Bashar al-Assad, but at the same time hinder the work of the group to find a common and unified solution. This is underlined by the Saudi ambassador Faisal Trad. He clearly stated that Saudi Arabia does not share the opinion that a political solution presented in the communiqué from Geneva I will be successful with Bashar al-Assad. So, according to Saudi Arabia, it was essential to find a solution without al-Assad, all foreign forces should be deducted, including the Hezbollah, and the ambassador even stated that Iran then would stop interfering in internal affairs in the region (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a).

The reaction of the USA, when the UN Secretary General invited Iran, was quite clear. Jen Psaki, then Department Spokesperson, stated that Iran needs to accept the Geneva Communiqué to the full extent. This includes especially the transitional governing body. According to Psaki, Iran has never done that before but now there is a public denomination necessary otherwise the invitation needs to be rescinded. Also, it was remembered that Iran supported the Assad regime and hence its brutal campaigns within Syria (Psaki 2014).

Another key event in 2012 was the formation and recognition of the Doha National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Force (Lukashevich 2012b). It was founded in October in Doha. However, Russia was not involved in any of the preparations because the formation would have a unilateral character with the only focus being on the opposition (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2012b). Nevertheless,
Russia officially recognized the formation as well (Lukashevich 2012b). The Coalition even runs an embassy in Doha, Qatar⁴.

However, in 2013 the conflict was intensified and brought to a new level by the use of chemical weapons. Already in its annual report from 2013, the British government was sure that the Syrian government possesses chemical weapons (Cabinet Office National security and intelligence 2013). And the White House stated in June 2013, that it was sure that the regime of Assad was using chemical weapons the previous year multiple times against the opposition (Nikitin et al 2013). However, the international attention was brought to this issue after the use of chemical weapons in Syria in 2013. As a response to the use of chemical weapons in 2013, US president Obama was searching for authorization of the congress for using military force. However, this was followed by a request to postpone the vote because of a diplomatic initiative of the US secretary of state and the Russian Foreign Minister. John Kerry and Sergey Lavrov presented a suggestion to eliminate the chemical stockpiles in Syria in order to prevent a military intervention. In the framework, which was presented on the 14 September, the two parties regulated that the chemical weapons should be removed and destructed and also that the executing personal, such as the OPCW, the United Nations, and others, do have full access to all sites in Syria and the allowance to inspect them (The Russian Federation and the United States of America 2013). In the same month, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov met with Walid Al-Muallem, the President of the Council of Ministers, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic, who acknowledged that Damascus will collaborate and fully liquidate the chemical weapons (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2013b). And whereas the Syrian government always denied

⁴ See http://en.etilaf.org/ for the official website
possessing chemical weapons, it turned its political course and was ready to collaborate with the US and Russian government in 2013 (Nikitin et al 2013). Although the United States worked together with Russia on the framework and released the paper, it is considered to be initiated by Russia (UN News Centre 2013a).

Even though there are still doubts that the Syrian government possesses and used chemical weapons (Ban 2016), this demonstrates the influence Russia exerts not just on the international level but within Syria as well.

Following, the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov together with John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, announced the second Geneva conference. Although the hopes before for a breakthrough were not too big, the importance of the conference was stressed in order to agree for a political solution instead of a military one. This was considered as really meaningful for a de-escalation and a following peace (Barnes-Dacey & Levy 2014). Also, it was the first time to conduct negotiations that included the Syrian government as well as the Syrian opposition (UN News Centre 2013b).

According to Secretary of State, John Kerry, the aim of the Geneva II Conference was the implementation of the Geneva Communiqué (Kerry 2014). A further reaction was that of Secretary of State, Hillary R. Clinton, who suggested – due to the repeated failure of Syria’s government to fulfil the six-point plan – an imposition of sanctions on Assad’s regime (U.S. Mission Geneva 2012).

When officially announcing the conference, Ban Ki-Moon named Iran and Saudi Arabia as two possible participating countries (UN News Centre 2013b). And Saudi Arabia joined the talks. So, it seemed that more external powers, as Russia wished, would be included. The statement by Ban Ki-Moon was even followed an invitation for Iran. However, shortly before the talks, he withdrew from his invitation (Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014). In a statement by the Iranian Foreign Ministry
Spokeswoman however it was made clear that Iran has not intended to attend the Geneva II conference because of the set condition by the United States. However, in case Iran would participate in the talks, this would happen without any preconditions (Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014).

Turkey’s statement to the conference was that the country sees a political solution as the only possible and is interested in an ending of the conflict. However, the country repeated its position that a leader and the associates who would have lost legitimacy cannot stay (Davutoğlu 2014). The last statement can be understood that he meant the present Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad and his government. It was stated openly by Turkish politicians that al-Assad would be the source of the problems in Syria and therefore should transit out (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015a). Also, Turkey expressed its disappointment that no concrete results were achieved during the Geneva II conference, specifically that no transitional governing body was established (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014). Qatar’s stance concerning the conference was already made clear in advance. The country welcomed the conference but was calling the other Arab countries to take a united position at the talks and addressing the Syrian government (Gulf Times 2013). Additionally, the Qatari Emir met with the Turkish president Erdoğan and agreed to a collaboration to ensure a united appearance of the Syrian opposition and to strength it (Daily Sabah 2013).

Another pathbreaking incident was Assad’s call in 2015 for Russia to step by and support him. This was followed by a military intervention of Russia to fight international terrorism (Zakharova 2015). At this time, the Syrian regime was at its weakest point and threatened to be overthrown. However, with the help and the military intervention of Russia, it was possible for Bashar al-Assad to stay in power and fight terrorist groups. This demonstrates
Russia’s influence not only on the international level but on the domestic one as well. With Assad’s plea, Russia acted according to international law – a fact Russia was always eager to emphasize, that this should be the base for all international actions. And with the support, Russia ensured its domestic influence through Assad as well.

Transferred to the theory, this plea puts Syria in the place of a country of the fifth rank. Recalling the definition, this means that the country is not able to exist by its own but has to rely on outside support. On the other side, Russia is put through this in the position of a country of the first order and hence fortifies its power position. Both countries, Russia and Syria, are from the same geostrategic realm, the Eurasian Continental World. However, they are from different geopolitical regions. And this is important that Russia cannot just be considered as a second level power, a regional power, but a major power.

Another important step in the process of solving the crisis was the Zabadani Ceasefire Agreement negotiated by Iran. The ceasefire agreement was another attempt to find a solution to the crisis and was set in September 2015. It involved Iran and mainly Hezbollah and shows the influence Iran can exert on the pro-Assad Hezbollah (Musarurwa & Kaye 2016).

In the same year the Vienna Process was initiated by the key players United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Musarurwa & Kaye 2016) after previous attempts to settle the conflict in Syria failed. After the meetings on the 30th of October and on 14th November 2015, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) released an official statement which was accepted by all participants. Those include the Arab League, Egypt, China, France, the EU, Germany, Iraq, Iran, Italy, Jordan, Oman, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Russia, United Arab Emirates, Turkey, the UK, the UN and the US (European Union External Action 2015). The interesting point here is that the meeting
has enabled Saudi Arabia and Iran sitting at one negotiating table. However, as it can be seen on the participation list, no Syrian representatives joined the meeting, neither from the government, nor from the opposition. The proclaimed goals from the ISSG were a ceasefire in Syria and the formation of a transitional government body as already agreed on 2012 in the Geneva Communiqué. The ceasefire however does not include actions against any groups which were defined by the ISSG as terrorists, such as Da’esh or Nusra (European Union External Action 2015). And in order to achieve these goals, each participant should as a single country exert influence on the parties they support in Syria (European Union External Action 2015). Also, as single country the Kingdom of Jordan was mentioned for its effort in determining terrorists (Security Council 2015). However, the results were criticized for being too vague and the fact that there was no agreement for the date of the following meeting underlines the difficulties with the different interests of the international players (Black 2015). Also, Saudi Arabia announced to provide possibly heavier weapons to some of the supported rebel forces if the aspired transition does not take place until the following year’s August (Black 2015).

Another important meeting in this year was the Riyadh conference in November 2015, initiated by Saudi Arabia and Turkey. It targeted on the opposition and demonstrates the cleavages between the external powers involved in Syria. It was repeated by the two countries that they support the moderate opposition in Syria and do not see a future in Syria or a solution of the conflict which involves Bashar al-Assad (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015; Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015b). According to this view, Turkey’s military support of the opposition was stressed during the meeting and the importance of the alliance between Saudi Arabia and Turkey. At the same time, Saudi Arabia’s political support of the opposition was emphasized, especially in the frame of holding
the conference (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015) and further meetings with the head of the opposition (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017). These efforts, the talks and collaboration with the opposition seem to increase the tensions between the two local rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran (Federal Foreign Office 2016). An important result of the conference was the creation of the International center for Fighting Terrorism (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b). The center functions to support and coordinate military operations of the founded military alliance led by Saudi Arabia combining 33 Muslim countries (Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in United States of America 2017). Interestingly, the Shia Iran, Syria and Iraq are not members of the alliance. At the same time, it puts Saudi Arabia in a position to be recognized by other countries and coalitions as strong partner. So is the country perceived by the United States as strong partner in respect of security issues and counterterrorism efforts (U.S. Department of State 2017).

In February 2016, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) met again in Munich to continue their efforts to implement the declared goals. Especially Humanitarian accesses should be ensured and additionally a cessation of hostilities should have been achieved (United Nations Secretary-General 2016). From the Russian side, it was reported that a meeting took place from Mikhail Bogdanov, the Deputy Foreign Minister, with Riad Haddad, Syria’s Ambassador where both parties were discussing the implementation of the cessation of hostilities (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016a).

Another important step in the process of negotiations were the Astana Peace Talks initiated by Russia, Turkey and Iran. The first talks were held in January 2017 in Astana and included the Syrian government and also representatives from armed opposition groups (United Nations 2017). Additionally, the talks were supported by the UN, the US and Jordan (The Ministry of Foreign
Affairs of the Russian Federation 2017b). Until July 2017, the Astana peace process included five meetings during which the three initiating countries were working on de-escalation zones and verification and monitoring mechanisms (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2017c). However, although no agreement was reached concerning de-escalation zones, still Russia reported that the process shows some positive developments (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2017c). This positive picture is supported by Turkey, whose Minister of Foreign Affairs, H.E. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, emphasized the achievement Turkey made together with Russia and occasionally with Iran. Also, he stressed the importance of the Astana talks in respect of confidence building on the one side and the importance of the Geneva talks in respect of political transition and solution on the other side (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017). US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, also expressed his hope for the Astana talks and that Russia is taking a constructive in implementing a ceasefire through the Astana talks. This, he considers being the fundament to start the political process (U.S. Department of State 2017b).

Also, this cooperation demonstrates that Russia and Turkey can have a constructive collaboration again. The bilateral relations were quite tensed after Turkey shot a Russian airplane in 2015 (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2015b).

After having analyzed key events during the process of talks, negotiations and conferences, the results will be transferred to the concept of Cohen (1991). Therefore Figure 4 was taken as point of origin. The updated graph is visible in Figure 5.

The updated figure is elaborated as follows. Syria constitutes the bowl in the middle of the seesaw, representatively. On the upper line are the local forces,
below the line are the external forces located. The position gives information about the alliances, the size about the influence.

The two current external forces are Russia and the United States, whereas the United States includes the involved European countries. Since none of these countries were eager to take a leading role and an independent initiative, they are included in the American triangle, corresponding to the American-led alliance. This inclusiveness was already the case in the figure from Cohen for 1990-1991 and is adopted for the present update.

![Figure 5: Middle East Equilibrium and Seesaw 2017](source: author)

Even though its initial reluctance of taking a strong lead in the Middle East, the US government is one of the strongest parties in the negotiating processes. This was demonstrated by the initiative the country took within the talks and in respect of the organization and hosting of some of the biggest and most important talks and conferences. Besides this, the USA tries to collaborate with Russia, even though the tensions in the bilateral relations and the disagreement about certain political points, especially the question about
Bashar al-Assad and his political future within Syria. Additionally, the country possesses as permanent member of the Security Council a veto right. Furthermore, the USA lead the anti-terrorism alliance and fly air strikes, hence directly intervening in Syria. This makes it possible for the USA to exert on the international diplomatic level quite important influence. Besides this, the country provides lethal and non-lethal support to foster some of the opposition groups. Taken these points together, the United States can be considered as one of the most important actors in the conflict.

This involvement is opposed by Russia, who is an ally of the Syrian government already from the beginning. From an initial veto-power, Russia managed to take one of the leading roles within the talks and conferences and is one of the most important negotiating partners. The country even organizes its own series of talks, the Astana Peace Talks, where it could manage to overcome the tensions with Turkey after the shot of a Russian airplane. In the course of the talks, Turkey even changed its direction and stopped calling Assad to step down. Besides this, with Iran being one of the partners in the Astana Peace Talks, Russia is accompanied by another pro-Assad force. The initiative from Russia after the use of chemical weapons helped that the situation does not escalate because of an American intervention. Besides this international presence, Russia can exert domestic influence in Syria through Assad. This was shown in the same example, that Bashar al-Assad was ready to collaborate and deliver the chemical stockpiles and grants access to foreign inspectors. Even though this is accompanied by the possibility that the Syrian government still possesses some weapons. So, this manifests the fact that Russia can exert some domestic influence in Syria. However, the extend is not unlimited. This also got clear under the circumstance that the concerted ceasefires were not hold. However, this problem seems to be an issue for the other involved actors as well.
The other actor which is possible to define as a pro-Assad regime is Iran. This can also be understood as one of the key actors in the conflict and a local rival to Saudi-Arabia. Iran mainly ensures its influence through the support of the Hezbollah and supports the Syrian government in various ways. This can be understood as a mean to ensure Shiit influence in the region. This strong support puts Iran in a power position comparable to that of Saudi Arabia. Also within the talks Iran is an important partner. However, the country ensures its influence mostly by its support of the domestic actors in Syria.

The local rival to Iran is Saudi-Arabia. The country founded the Military Coalition, the second antiterror coalition and is a strong partner in the antiterrorism fight. Besides this, the country supports some of the opposition and rebel groups directly for example by the delivery of weapons. This enables Saudi Arabia not just to exert influence on the international sphere, but within Syria as well.

Another key local player is Turkey. The country is also member of the antiterror alliance and intervenes militarily in Syria. The country exerts influence on some armed groups which are fighting on the ground in Syria. Also, Turkey is a key actor due to its involvement in the Astana Talks and other conferences. However, it seems that Turkey does not possess the role of a major player in this conflict. Even though its strong position as important ally and member, on the international level, the country does not exert comparable influence than the other described parties.

Additionally, there is Qatar. Qatar was for a long time using the last-mentioned channel of influence, through sending money, weapons and ideology to rebel groups in Syria. However, recently it seems that the country was changing the strategy because this effort sets it at odds with other actors
in the international system. But still, this is difficult to control because the ways which were set in motion to collect and transfer for example money and supply are also run by individuals. Politically however is Qatar mainly involved with the coalition and opposition groups for example the country put effort in uniting them.

The last considered country is Jordan, which is directly affected by the Syrian refugees since the country is a neighbor to Syria. Jordan constitutes a reliable partner in the fight against terrorism, is motivated to make progress concerning this and even trains groups for this purpose and wants to provide a safe zone. However, the country is not able to exert a leading role on the international level.

Summarizing, by drafting the process of international negotiations, peace talks and conferences, it was possible to sketch the influence the actors involved in the conflict play and also the channel of influence they make use of. According to this, Cohen’s concept was updated and hence the momentous power constellation in the Middle East presented. There is some evidence that Russia is aiming at increase its power status. And further, there seem to be some support for this, revealed by this qualitative analysis. Russia managed to become one of the key actors in the Syrian crisis and one of the most important external player. This sets Russia in a position to confront other major powers directly due to the character of the shatterbelt. And hence, the conflict in Syria can be transferred to an international level.

The presented concept is suitable for the present case study and is useful in explaining the power constellation in the Middle East. However, the concept can be modified or include further actors or other points of time. This opens up space for future research.
6. Conclusion

This analysis aimed at figuring out Russia’s motivation to back the Syrian regime in the Syrian conflict.
After providing the theoretical background of core classical geopolitical authors and the contribution from a relevant current geopoliticians, the two hypotheses were derived as follows:

Hypothesis #1: Russia is exerting influence in Syria, motivated by security reasons.

Hypothesis #2: Russia aims for utilizing its upper hand in the Middle East to increase its international power status.

To investigate the hypotheses in a qualitative way, foreign policy concepts and security reports were used, as were political statements, speeches and letters.
For the first hypothesis, the analysis was done for Russia. For the second hypothesis, due to the nature of the research question, this was done for other countries involved in the Syrian conflict as well. Additionally, the previously mentioned sources, reports from key conferences, meetings and talks were all considered, and political statements and actions were analysed on the international level, providing a huge variety of qualitative sources. It was possible to find support for the hypotheses. As geopolitics such as geographical factors seem to play a crucial role in Russia’s foreign politics and the perception of the international system.

This analysis considered one domestic driver for Russia’s intervention, the security issue, which seems to contribute to Russia’s motivation to intervene in Syria and support its regime.
Evidence was found that security issues in the form of terrorist threats within Russia seem to contribute to Russia’s motivation to intervene in Syria. Furthermore, this variable helps explaining why Russia supports the Syrian government in order to bundle different agencies to deal and focus on this issue.

The qualitative analysis further revealed the different channels the involved countries are using to exert influence in the Syria conflict and what role they play. This was transferred to Cohen’s concept, to represent the current situation in the Middle East. However, this is only a momentary picture due to the fragility of the region. However, the presented concept was dealing with the region up until 1991. The present analysis updated it to the present time.

By considering the power constellation at the international level and the possibilities of the other actors to exert influence in the conflict, it was possible to draft the current situation. Due to its multiple channels of influence Russia is exerting in the Syrian conflict, the country represents the second key external actor in the Middle East besides the United States. So, compared to the point of origin – Cohen’s concept until 1991 – it seems that Russia increased its presence and hence its power position.

So, this thesis used a traditional and regarding Russia an influential approach, the classical geopolitics, and combined it with an up-to-date research question. Especially the work for the second hypothesis, the updating of the concept of Cohen about the equilibrium in the Middle East, which was only done until 1991, accounted for this theoretical contribution.

However, the author has to mention that with the complexity of the topic, some limitations are connected. So, the author solely focused on states as involved actors and excluded domestic actors, for example the Kurds or IS.
This gives space for further research. Another limitation was the access to sources. The author only used English and German sources. However, taking the methods and the results together, the present thesis delivers a valuable contribution in explaining Russia’s intervention and stance in the Syrian conflict. At the same time, it points to the necessity for future research in considering and investigating the role of non-state actors and domestic groups, which was not possible to cover in this analysis due to space.
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Appendix

![Equilibrium and the Middle East seesaw](source:Cohen 1991)

Figure 6: Equilibrium and the Middle East seesaw

(source: Cohen 1991)