



# Universiteit Utrecht

## Center against center in a battle for 'Syria'.

A study on the involvement of Iran in the Syrian Civil War as the result of an imperialist proxy-war with the United States for influence in the Middle East



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## Introduction

In December 2011, the Institute of the Study of War published a report in which the Iranian support for the Syrian regime under leadership of al-Assad was assumed. After Iran's initial voiced disapproval of the violence unleashed upon the protesters by the Syrian regime, the Iranian Qods force was said to help advise and equip the Assad's security forces with electronic eavesdropping, jamming, and crowd control equipment and techniques (Kagan, Majidiyar, Pletka and Cochrane Sullivan, 2013). Over the last two-and-a-half years, the involvement of Tehran in Syria has intensified, ultimately culminating in the decision to send 4,000 troops to aid the Syrian government in June 2013. Iran has become fully committed to preserving Assad's regime, according to pro-Iranian sources which have been deeply involved in the Islamic Republic's security, even to the extent of proposing to open up a new 'Syrian' front on the Golan Heights against Israel (Fisk, 2013).

Curiously enough, the Iranian leaders have tried to pin the rebellion in Syria on the United States and other Western countries, and not on the Syrian protesters themselves. Half a year after the Syrian Civil War started on March 11<sup>th</sup> 2011, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei of Iran characterized this crisis as a ploy of the United States to change the Syrian regime. Khamenei said in an interview on June 30, 2011: "In Syria, the hand of America and Israel is evident". And after these words, Khamenei affirmed his unwavering support for battered Syrian President al-Assad, noting, "Wherever a movement is Islamic, populist, and anti-American, we support it" (Abdo, 2011). The rest of the Iranian regime seemed to agree with Khamenei about the American hand behind the protests. In August of that same year, chairman of the Foreign Policy and National Security Committee Alaeddin Boroujerdi, said: "Having lost Egypt, the U.S. has targeted Syria" (Abdo, 2011). Two years later, the Iranian rhetoric about the Syrian Civil War being a foreign conspiracy, remained largely the same. When the launching of military strikes against Syria had supposedly failed, commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, Major General Mohammad-Ali Jafari did not hesitate to pin the blame on foreign conspiratorial forces. "So far, the enemies' plot for military intervention in Syria has failed," he said in September 2013. The general further noted that almost all the evil schemes drawn up by the enemies had failed. "Given the fact that enemies cannot overcome the Resistance Front in Syria, they definitely cannot take any action against the Islamic Republic of Iran," the commander underlined (Press TV, 2013: a).

Given the fact that the United States have of yet not send any troops to Syrian soil in order to support the opposition, naming the U.S. as the culprit behind the Syrian crisis seems somewhat of an exaggeration (Nasr, 2013). Yet the Iranian regime seems determined to underline the fact that their moral and military aid to al-Assad is (partly) an act of resistance against American evil imperialism, despite the fact that even the United States and Iran have never been at war. This research is

therefore directed towards the question as to why Tehran seems so determined to 'resist' against the United States in the proxy-setting of Syria. The central question that guides this research is subsequently as follows:

*Using the framework of informal imperialism, how might Tehran's involvement in the Syrian 'Civil' War from March 2011 until June 2013 be understood as part of a proxy-war between the United States and Iran for influence in the Middle East?*

As Iran has been (secretly) involved in the Syrian Civil War almost from the beginning, March 2011 is chosen as the start of the research time period. The end date, June 2013, needs clarification. This specific time period is chosen because of Tehran's decision to send 4000 troops to aid Assad. This decision made clear that Tehran is out of hiding and has decided to openly support Assad with every means possible. The decision speaks loud and clear: helping Assad stay in power is important enough to give up even the pretense of disapproving the actions of al-Assad.

The main research question is supported by several sub-questions, each answered in a different chapter. The first chapter is directed towards the solving of the complication inherent in the research puzzle. As the conflict in Syria is called a civil war, this label should logically exclude foreign involvement by Iran, the United States or any other state. In chapter one, we shall therefore establish to what extent the Syrian Civil War entails more than just a civil war, thereby identifying the different actors by their geographical scale. The second chapter is directed towards establishing a theoretical framework, and two possible motivations behind the foreign policies of Tehran are studied. First, the importance of the alleged Shiite Crescent is clarified, concluding that religious fault-lines are unlikely the sole motivator of Tehran's foreign affairs, but they are important for the shaping of political discourse. Second, different aspects of the framework of informal imperialism are explained, such as the concepts of hegemony, the different strata within the world-economy and subsequent power relationships. In chapter three, the framework of informal imperialism is then applied to the historical relationship between Iran and the U.S. It is studied to what extent this relationship is grounded in the resistance of Tehran, since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, against the alleged hegemony of the U.S. in the Middle East. The last chapter is directed towards the question as to what extent the Iranian involvement in Syria is the result of the relationship between Iran and the United States. Finally, the main research question is answered in a concluding summary and a discussion is added to propose further research. Important to note this early in the research, is the fact that Iranian policies with regard to Syria are not solely directed towards attacking America. Syria is supporting al-Assad for example also in order to fight the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni Islamic groups such as al-Qaeda (Holliday, 2011). But given the time period and scope of this research, the other stakes of Iran in Syria are not identified. This might be a good topic for any

further research.

This introduction ends with an account of the research relevance and to what fields it hopefully will contribute. Firstly, the Syrian Civil War and Iran's involvement in it must be studied in order to gain insights in Middle Eastern power politics. Since the Arab Spring, many 'frozen' alliances have been changed or broken. Hamas, former member of the Syria-Iran-Hamas axis, has defected to the enemy camp. Furthermore, Hamas, whose sole ground of existence is said to lie in destroying its host state Israel, is supporting the same side as the Israeli. Iran and Iraq have reconciled in their support for al-Assad, even though they fought each other for eight years during the Iran-Iraq war. New strategic alliances have been established, in what seems to be a revolutionary and a reactionary camp. Iran is leading the revolutionary camp against Saudi Arabia, a client state of the United States and leader of the reactionary camp (Alloul, 2011).

Secondly, the general scholarly opinion has come to assume that the days of the United States as world hegemon are limited. This idea was first coined by Joseph Nye, but was later taken over by political scientists such as Flint and Taylor and Ismael and Perry (Flint and Taylor, 2011; Ismael and Perry, 2014). The argument behind this idea is the fact that the U.S. have come to rely on hard power (coercion) instead of soft power (attraction) to pursue their interests, which Flint and Taylor (2011) call "military overstretch". This research adds to the debate on U.S. hegemony by clarifying to what extent the United States remain the hegemon in the Middle East. As most of the revolutions of the Arab Spring occurred in client states subservient to the U.S. (such as Bahrain and Egypt) and because of the overwhelming American military presence throughout the Middle East, the American hegemony in the Middle East is seemingly also waning (Nasr, 2013).

Thirdly, with this research I hope to shed some light on the importance of religious fault-lines - referred to as the Shiite Crescent - for the shaping of Tehran's foreign policies. Although religious motivations may often resonate within the words of ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad of Iran, the notion that Iran is backing al-Assad out of Shiite solidarity proves difficult. Not in the least because al-Assad is leader of the secular Ba'athist Party, and should therefore by definition not be on the receiving end of Iranian support (Holliday, 2011). With this research, I hope to prove that the political processes in the Middle East are more about the pursuing of geopolitical interests by regional and global super powers than about a Sunni-Shia divide, the latter of which serves an ideological tool to promote said interests.

Lastly, this research relates to two academic fields, *conflict studies* and *international relations*. This research relates to the field of conflict studies because it addresses the civil war in Syria. Classically, conflict studies focuses mainly on internal conflicts, and this research studies to what extent the Syrian Civil War is more than just a civil dispute. Furthermore, this research is

conducted in order to assess the development of relations between Iran and other states, especially the United States. Classically, international relations focuses on the relations between countries as well, and therefore this research is also contributing to that academic field (Repko, 2011).

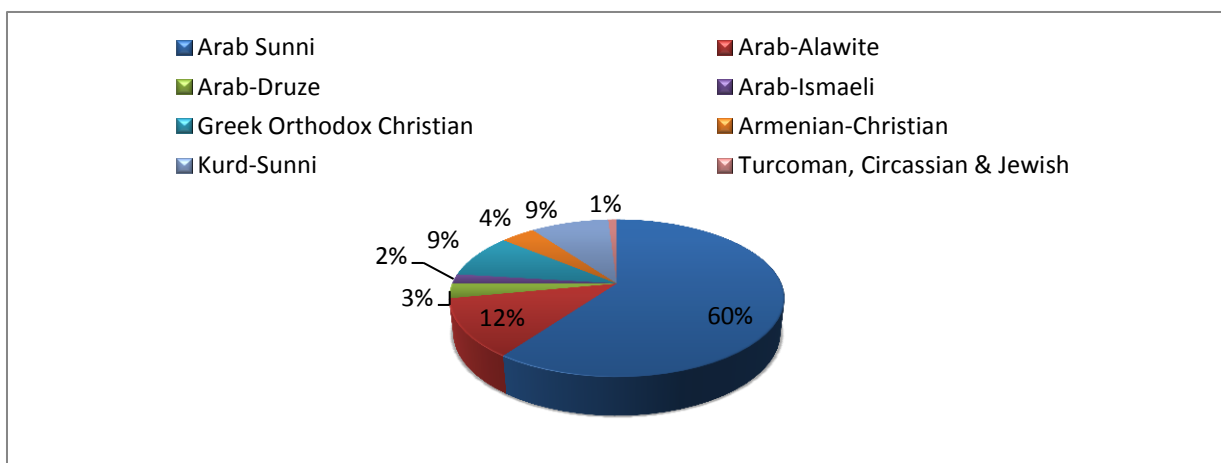
## I. *To what extent is the Syrian Civil War more than just a civil war?*

In this chapter, we will establish to what extent the Syrian Civil War - also called the Syrian Crisis or the Syrian Uprising - has developed into more than a civil war since the beginning in March 2011. The different actors within this conflict will be studied, as well as the extent of their involvement. First the national players will be identified, and thereafter the several foreign states that support them.

### A. Conflict on the national scale

After the start of the Syrian Civil War in March, popular unrest grew nationwide in April 2011. In the cries of the protesters, two demands became clear. Firstly, President Bashar Al-Assad, whose family had held the presidency since 1979, had to resign and step down. And secondly, the fifty-year rule of the Ba'ath Party –the socialist Arab and largest political party - had to come to an end. These demands were interlinked, as Assad is the leader of the Ba'athist Party, which seized power in a coup in 1953 by relying on a base of political power rooted in rural, heterodox Shia groups. Bashar al Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, consolidated control of the Ba'ath Party through the 1960s and rewarded these Shia groups with increasingly preferential treatment. They came to enjoy increasing enfranchisement in education, military and government positions. Despite Syria's Sunni Arab majority, the Assad family constructed a forty-year dynasty on the foundation of Alawites – a branch within Shi'ism - in the country's military and the Ba'ath Party political establishment. But not only the Alawites and by extent the Shiites profited from the Assad regime, as the Ba'athist ideology is inherently secular in outlook and based on nationalism. Christians have enjoyed a protected status and many of the Sunni urban elite, particularly within the business community, have stayed close to the regime (Holliday, 2011).

**Table 1: ethno-religious groups in Syria in percentage of populace of 23 million (Holliday, 2011)**



Bearing in mind this forty-year old political situation, the fault-lines between the actors in the Syrian conflict come to the fore. On the one hand, so it seems, the only ones that lost out during the Assad dynasty, were the non-elite Sunnis, a group that consists of more than half of the Syrian populace. It is not surprising that the Syrian opposition is therefore overwhelmingly Sunni as well. Yet the opposition is not, as the Assad regime has been eager to portray it, all “Salafis, Jihadists, Muslim Brotherhood supporters, al-Qaeda, and terrorists” (ibid). The rebels consist roughly of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), but are divided into many heterogeneous groups confined largely by region. Examples of the rebel groups are the *Khalid bin Walid* Brigade stationed near Homs and the *Hamza Battalion* near Rastan (ibid). A small but important part of the FSA constitutes defectors from the regime’s military security forces. In June 2011, several former officers defected to the insurgents after agents of the secret police and intelligence executed soldiers who refused to shoot civilians. General Harmouth was the first to defect and his video statement started what quickly became known as the Free Officers movement. The manner, tone, and message of his statement have been copied many a time by other officers, and Harmouth’s defection was an important marker in the progression of the armed opposition movement. It continues to hold an important place in the opposition’s discourse. When Harmouth was arrested by the security forces in late September 2011, Colonel Riad Asaad announced the unification of the Free Officer’s Movement and the Free Syrian army (Macleod and Flamand, 2011).

On the other hand, it is also not surprising that the Assad regime has been forced to brutally suppress the insurgency, as the other option - heed the calls of the protesters and introduce substantial reforms - seemed counterproductive. Firstly, the Ba’ath Party would then lose its supreme position. The support for that regime is first and foremost Shiite (Alawite), with the addition of some minor groups such as Christians, the Druze and the Circassians. As is shown in table 1, the Shiites and these minorities together consist of less than twenty percent of the Syrian populace. Should a new representative government be elected, the Ba’ath party rule would be finished, as that party represents only a narrow faction of the Syrians. The second reason is a direct result of the first one: the downfall of the regime would very likely lead to the prosecution of the former elite and its minority-based allies (Holliday, 2011). The Sunni opposition, now in charge within an elected government and angry about forty years of economic and political neglect (not to say repression, as being member of the Muslim Brotherhood was punishable by death), would not take kindly towards the former leaders. The current regime has only to point to the memory of the 1976-1982 Muslim Brotherhood uprising to steel this notion with reality. For six years, members of the Brotherhood carried out terrorist attacks and paralyzed Syrian cities with strikes and protests. And they had wide popular support: in 1982, the Brotherhood led a major insurrection in Hama, rapidly taking over



control of the city. The regime's military force had to bomb the city in order to crush the insurgency and take back control. In the current conflict, the Muslim Brotherhood is - yet again - the most powerful and most organized force within the Syrian opposition (Carnegie, Middle East Center). The Muslim Brotherhood Uprising has shaped the regime's view of the current conflict, and they see the Brotherhood as a Salafist conspiracy to regain historical Sunni (Umayyad) hegemony over the region. Elements of the Assad regime have therefore treated the current crisis in Syria as an existential struggle for the survival of the Alawite minority and by extension modern Syria. (Holliday, 2011). The minorities likewise prefer the current regime over a new Sunni-led elected government. To them, the secular outlook of the Ba'athist ideology is preferable over a decidedly Sunni Islamist government, which would probably impede on their own (religious) rights. Furthermore, the new Sunni-led government would also probably not look favorably towards the minorities that enjoyed precedence over Sunnis for forty years (ibid).

## **B. Foreign interests**

Almost three years after the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, the two national camps remain roughly the same. But as the result of regional and international support, the camps have been hugely extended. Syria lies at the heart of the Middle East and perhaps it *is* the heart: concerns about regional involvement prompted al-Assad to emphasize the risk of regional involvement in an interview with London's *Sunday Telegraph*: "Syria is the fault-line. If you play with it, the whole region will erupt." (Gilligan and Sherlock, 2011). In early December 2011, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki voiced the same warning when he said: "The killing or removal of President Bashar in any way will explode into an internal struggle between two groups, and this will have an impact on the region" (Blomfield, 2011). The words of Assad and al-Maliki proved prophetic: already in the first months of the conflict it became clear that Syria, to many forces, is too important to leave it by itself. Guided by table 2, we shall study the foreign states that have intervened with moral, financial and military aid for either side. Important to note is the fact that in this research, the concept "regional" refers to the states that surround Syria or lie elsewhere within the Middle Eastern region. The concept "international" therefore refers to states that are not geographically part of the Middle East. Furthermore, table 2 does not include *all* of the foreign states and groups involved in the Syrian conflict: for example Venezuela and Argentina are excluded. This is done because not all of the involved forces are relevant for a better understanding of the situation towards which this research is directed. That does not mean that the excluded forces play an unimportant role in the Syrian conflict, but they are irrelevant to the motivations that shape Iranian foreign policies.

**Table 2. Scale of involved parties sorted by geopolitical scale (source: own)**

Geopolitical Scale	Government	Opposition
National	Shiites (including Alawites)	Sunnis
National	Non-Shiite minorities	Free Syrian Army
Regional	Iran	Turkey
Regional	Lebanese Hezbollah	Israel
Regional	Iraq	Hamas in the Palestine
Regional		Conservative Gulf States
International	North Korea	United States
International	China	Great Britain
International	Russia	France

**a. Allies of the al-Assad regime.**

In the course of the civil unrest, the Assad regime has come to rely on allies for the crackdown of the opposition. Of these allies, Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah are the most important and ardent regime supporters and both allies often work together. For fear of losing popular support amongst the Arab masses, President Ahmadinejad of Iran originally tempered his support for the Assad-regime. But after several defeats of the Syrian security forces against the opposition in August and September 2011, Iran became privately committed to ensuring the survival of the regime. Members of the Iranian Qods Force were spotted within Syrian borders and helped to advise and equip the Assad’s security forces with electronic eavesdropping, jamming, and crowd control equipment and techniques (MacFarquhar, 2011). Furthermore, *The Economist* mentioned in February 2012 that Iran had aided Assad with already more than \$9 billion in order to alleviate the sanctions posed on Syria by Western countries (*The Economist*, 2012). In May that same year, a deputy head of the Qods Force admitted in an interview that the Force was actively providing the Syrian government with combat troops (Dehghan, 2012). Iranian aid to the Syrian regime has been substantial: due to the aid sent by Hezbollah and Iran under the leadership of Qassem Suleimani, leader of the Qods Force, the al-Assad government has been able to win back strategic territory from the rebels in 2013 (Filkins, 2013). Hezbollah has affirmed its support for the Assad regime since the beginning of the Syrian unrest. In 2011, the rebel opposition already reported that Hezbollah fighters were participating directly in the regime’s security operations (MacFarquhar, 2011). In January and

February 2012, Hezbollah fighters were spotted alongside the Syrian regime forces during the Battle of Zabadani in Damascus . Later that year, Hezbollah forces took over eight villages inhabited by Shiites in the district of Al-Qusayr. In February 2013, the same district again became the focus for invasion, when three FSA-controlled Sunni villages were attacked by Hezbollah forces backed by Syrian security forces (al-Arabiya, 2013). Also, according to Israeli intelligence sources, Hezbollah has been working to forge loyalist regime militias into a 100,000-strong irregular army to fight alongside the Syrian security forces (Kagan, Majidyar, Pletka and Cochrane Sullivan, 2013).

Apart from Iran and Hezbollah, Iraq has also become increasingly involved in the Syrian Civil War, because Iraq's Shia-led government became concerned that the downfall of Assad would embolden the Sunni tribes of neighboring Anbar province to resist the central Iraqi government – and that concern proved true (Holliday, 2011). In the first few months of the Syrian conflict, Iraq seemed to take a somewhat neutral stance, intercepting foreign planes that were headed for Syria through Iraqi airspace. But in October 2011, the *Washington Post* stated that Iraq had sent financial support to the Assad-regime since the first months of the conflict. The *Post* also warned that, while other Arab states had downgraded ties with Assad, Iraq had moved in the opposite direction, hosting official visits by Syrians, signing pacts to expand business ties and offering political support. According to the *Post*, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki spoke firmly against regime change in Syria in an interview broadcast on Iraqi television September 30. “We believe that Syria will be able to overcome its crisis through reforms,” Maliki said, rejecting U.S. calls for the Syrian leader to step down. (Warrick, 2011). In September 2012, it was mentioned in the *New York Times* that al-Maliki had allowed Iran to resume shipping military equipment to Syria over Iraqi airspace (Gordon, 2012). When President al-Assad met with a delegation of party leaders and politicians from Arab countries in November 2013, he praised Iraq with the words: “Today, there is a brave man making a stand in Iraq who is Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. He has important stances, even though his country is torn and many seek to destroy it” (Al Akhbar, 2013).

As we see in table 2, North Korea has also been supporting Assad. On 21 September 2012, Ali al-Mossawi, media advisor to the prime minister of Iraq, told in an interview with *Reuters* that the Iraqi authorities prevented a North Korean plane from going to Syria, after the Iraqi authorities suspected that the plane was shipping weapons (Al-Salhy, 2012). Earlier that year a UN probe confirmed that North-Korea continued to supply Syria with arms, despite the sanctions imposed on Syria in 2006 and 2009 (*Telegraph*, 2012). In February 2013, the *Jerusalem Post* mentioned the presence of North-Korean military personnel in Syria. The article notes that fifteen helicopter pilots of North-Korean descent operated there on behalf of President Assad's regime. The *Jerusalem Post* also mentioned an October 3 interview with Radio Free Asia, in which Defense Intelligence Agency analyst Bruce Bechtol stated that “in the past few months, there's been an uptick in the number of

North Korean advisers and logistics personnel on the ground that are helping Syrians resupply themselves” (Spyer, 2013). In July 2013, the South-Korean newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* mentioned that dozens of Arabic-speaking Korean People's Army officers had aided in the planning of military operations and had supervised artillery bombardments in the Aleppo area (*Chosun Ilbo*, 2013).

China and Russia have officially claimed neutrality and a non-interventionist stance with regard to Syria, but both states have significant economic and military relations with the Syrian government. Their support was clarified when the two states vetoed three UN Security Council resolutions to isolate the Assad regime (Laub, 2013). The Syrian regime continues to purchase Russian arms and abide by the existing agreements regarding petroleum exploration and naval basing, earning Moscow's allegiance. In late November 2011, Russia took steps that demonstrated willingness to block the possibility of NATO military options by sending its flagship carrier group to Tartus and selling anti-ship cruise missiles to Syria (Holliday, 2011). In September 2012, the *Guardian* mentioned that Russia had supplied the Syrian government with arms as part of a business contract that had been signed before the Uprising had started. According to the newspaper, Russia had also sent advisors to Syria in order to train Syrian soldiers and help repair and maintain weaponry (Hinnant, 2012).

### **Allies of the opposition**

As is clear from the paragraph above, the Assad regime enjoys substantial financial and military support from regional as well as international states. On the other hand, the rebel camp is also not alone. Turkey has aligned against Assad shortly after the conflict started, even after years of deepening relations with the regime. Turkey has assumed a leading role against the regime by allowing both the diplomatic and military arms of the opposition to organize in the country (Holliday, 2011). Ankara also imposed an effective arms embargo in September 2011 and announced a broad sanctions package in early December of the same year (Champion, 2011).

Israeli intervention in the Syrian conflict originally has seemed somewhat elusive, as many of the alleged Israeli actions were denied by either the Syrian or the Israeli government. But late 2012, early 2013, there was a dramatic increase in Israeli presence within and around Syrian borders. In November 2012, three Syrian tanks entered the Golan Heights, and subsequently twelve cross-border shootings occurred between forces of the Syrian regime and the Israeli military (Times of Israel, 2013). In May 2013, the Syrian state media reported that Israeli airstrikes targeted military positions of the Syrian regime forces in Damascus. On July 5<sup>th</sup> the same year, US officials said that Israel was also carrying out strikes against missile supplies in Latakia, Syria (Aljazeera, 2013).

Perhaps the most surprising support for the opposition has stemmed from Hamas, situated in the Palestine in Israel. Hamas, a Sunni operation, used to be part of the 'unbreakable' Syria-Iran-

Hamas alliance, but now has defected to the enemy camp, also mostly Sunnis (Kagan, Majidyar, Pletka and Cochrane Sullivan, 2013). By late 2011, many Hamas officials had already decamped from Damascus, making their way to the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan, and Qatar (Akram, 2012). According to news reports, more than one hundred veteran *al-Qassam* Brigade officers are currently in Damascus, training Syrian rebels in the best tactics to use against Assad's powerful Syrian Army. (Jewish News One, 2013).

Furthermore, the Gulf States have openly supported the rebels as early as 2011. The Gulf States backing the opposition comprise Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman and the UAE (Ismael and Perry, 2014). Originally these states were hesitant to condemn another authoritarian regime, as they themselves are ruled by autocratic monarchies. But in the course of the Syrian conflict, the Gulf states have tried to use their dominance within the Arab League to curtail the growing influence of Iran throughout the Middle East. In early November 2011, when Assad proved unwilling or unable to enact the Arab League's plan to end unrest in Syria by renewing offensive operations in Homs, the League moved forward with measures of isolation (Holliday, 2011). Saudi Arabia and Qatar have proved to be the most ardent supporters of the Syrian opposition. The *Financial Times* reported that in the first two years of the insurgency, Qatar had sent financial support estimating \$3 billion and that Saudi Arabia had become a huge provider of armaments to the rebels (Khalaf and Fielding Smith, 2013). President al-Assad even accused Saudi Arabia of being the major supporter of terrorists and "leading the most extensive operation of direct sabotage against all the Arab world" (Al Akhbar, 2013). He added: "Saudi Arabia led the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council in the battle against all nations and parties that stand in the face of Israel" (ibid).

With regard to the international scale, the United Kingdom, France and the United States constitute the major states that back up the Syrian opposition. All three states have of yet not send military troops to Syria, but have provided the Syrian opposition with moral, financial and non-lethal aid. Within the United Nations Security Council, France and the U.K. have been most in favor of military intervention (Ismael and Perry, 2014). In June 2012, *Reuters* mentioned that British SAS Commandos were conducting covert operations within Syria and that British presence in Syria was growing (Apps, 2012). A year later, Syrian commercial pilots and local residents reported to have seen increased numbers of British military aircraft (Chulov, Mahmood and Borhger, 2013). Paris has so far provided non-lethal aid to Syrian rebels, ranging from bullet-proof vests to communications equipment. France's main focus has been helping to structure the Free Syrian Army's leadership, providing training to rebels in Jordan, and sharing intelligence. In a September 2013 press conference, French President François Hollande stated that France was ready to supply lethal aid to the FSA (France 24, 2013).

Support from the United States has also been substantial. After having already pumped

millions into the Syrian opposition, the Obama administration promised to double non-lethal aid to rebels in April 2013, specifically to \$250 million (DeYoung, 2013). America's aid has of yet mostly constituted covert operations and training. In June 2012, *The Guardian* reported that the CIA was involved in covert operations along the Turkish-Syrian border, where agents investigated rebel groups. Agents also helped opposition forces develop supply routes, and provided them with communications training (Solomon and Malas, 2012). On 13 June 2013, government officials stated that the Obama administration had approved providing lethal arms to the Supreme Military Council, a Syrian rebel command structure that includes representatives from most major rebel groups, but excludes the Islamic extremist elements (Madhami, Michaels and Vanden Brook, 2013). The decision was made shortly after the administration concluded that the Assad government had used chemical weapons on opposition forces, thereby crossing the "red line" drawn by Obama earlier in 2012 (Richter and Parsons, 2012).

## **II. Towards a theoretical framework.**

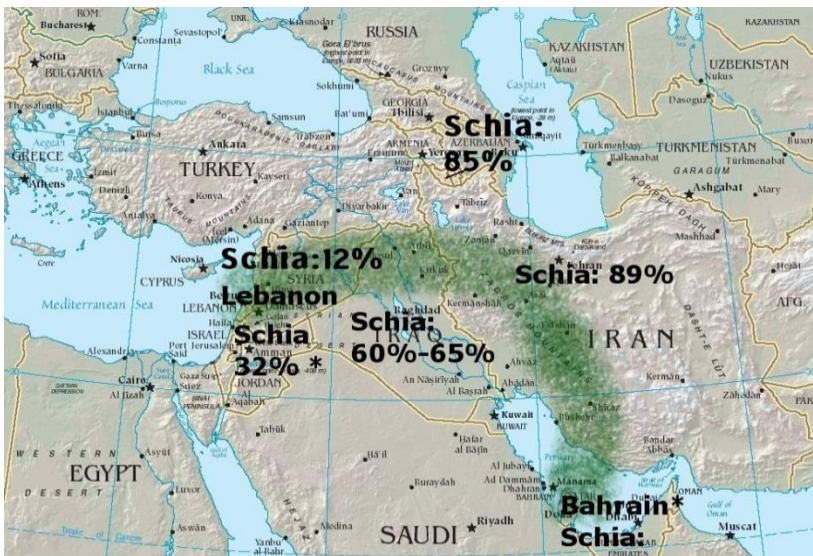
Before we study the reasons behind the national, regional and international divisions over Syria and the involvement of Iran, a theoretical framework must be established. This enables us to view Tehran's foreign policies within a broader context and organize the different aspects into a comprehensible whole. The theory applied to this research is the framework of informal imperialism, a model that has often been used to describe the power relationships between Tehran, the Middle East and the United States. However, informal imperialism is not the most obvious explanation for the policies of Tehran, as the discourse used by Arab States and Iran as well often refers to religious fault-lines. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei of Iran has for example framed the Arab Spring as the "Islamic Awakening", warning the West that it should not think the Awakening was over yet (press TV, 2013:b). In return, leaders of conservative Arab States have pointed to Iranian policy as a Shia-oriented drive for regional supremacy (Ismael and Perry, 2014). In order to give credence to the framework of informal imperialism, we must first establish to what extent this religious discourse concurs with the real motivations behind Iranian policy.

### **A. The Shiite Crescent.**

As stated above, there is much evidence that may be interpreted as proof that Tehran's foreign policies are shaped by religious motivations. This is also the case with regard to the Iranian involvement in Syria. The Alawite Assad family are Shiites, as is the government of Iran (Holliday, 2011). Furthermore, Iran and Iraq were former enemies during the war of 1980-1988 (Takeyh, 2009), but they are both Shia-led states and have reconciled in their support for Al-Assad (Ismael and Perry, 2014). Sunni-led Hamas, part of the not-so-unbreakable Iran-Syria-Hamas axis, has distanced itself from Tehran and is now supporting the Syrian opposition (Sherwood, 2012).

The idea that Tehran's foreign affairs are shaped through religious fault-lines, is based upon the notion of the so-called 'Shiite Crescent' (Ismael and Perry, 2014). This term was first coined by King Abdullah of Jordan in 2004. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia reinforced this notion, and former President Mubarak of Egypt even uttered the famous words that Shiite communities are more loyal to Iran than to their own countries, implying that Iran plays a leading role in this group of states (ibid). The Shiite Crescent today comprises Iran, Iraq, Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, all of whom challenged the status quo made up of the US, Israel and the Arab regimes. There is however much evidence that this Crescent does not exist. The clearest proof would probably be the membership of Hamas, which is a Sunni operation and should therefore by definition be excluded from the Shiite Crescent (ibid). But it is possible that Tehran

shapes its policies around the Crescent anyhow, regardless of whether it exists. There are countless examples of such misguided policies, the most famous probably being the genocide of millions of Jews in World War II as panacea for the “*Die jüdische Gefahr*”, stated in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.



The Shiite Crescent (Source: CIA World Fact book, 2006)

And in an ironic turn towards the topic of this research, President Ahmadinejad of Iran has proclaimed himself to be a holocaust-denier (Youtube, 2006).

But looking at Tehran’s foreign politics in the past, several problems arise with regard to the Shiite Crescent as prime motivator for political

policy. Firstly, the members of the Assad regime are Alawites, but this sect has only recently been admitted into Shi’ism. With influences of Christianity and various other beliefs incorporated within the Alawite doctrine, the Alawites represent such an unorthodox type of Shi’ism that only since the 1970s have they been accepted by mainline Shiite scholars. Moreover, the Assad family are also members of the Ba’athist Party, which promotes secularism, socialism and the idea of one Arab nation without sectarian distinction (Holliday, 2011). If anything, the Ba’athist ideology should clash with the Islamist radicalism within the neoconservative discourse used by President Ahmadinejad of Iran.

Apart from the problems that arise from the view that Tehran supports Assad because both regimes are Shiite, there is other evidence against a religious motivator. For example, Iran and Iraq fought each other for eight years from 1980-1988, and these states are the states with the greatest Shiite majority in the Middle East (Ismael and Perry, 2014). They are now both supporters of the Assad regime, but they do not support each other unconditionally by extent. In October 2012 for example, the Iraqi government ordered two Iranian cargo planes heading for Syria to land in Bagdad to ensure that they were not carrying weapons (Fox News, 2012).

Furthermore, Tehran does not support every Shiite group in the Middle East. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are both reigned by Sunni regimes, who -sometimes brutally- oppress their large Shiite minority, which does not enjoy full religious, cultural or socio-political rights. In the past years, both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have been harshly criticized by the Human Rights Watch for



discrimination and torture of their Shiite citizens. But as yet, Tehran has done nothing to improve the treatment of the substantial Shiite minorities (Human Rights Watch, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2012). Also, Iran has never challenged Russia over the violation of basic rights of the Chechen Muslims, nor did it defend the rights of Muslims in East China (Takeyh, 2009). In the territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh in the 1990s, Iran sided with the Armenians and not with the Shiites in Azerbaijan (ibid). Lastly, the Shiite regime in Iran thought it prudent to imprison, kill and suppress their own Shiites during the election protests in 2009 (Ismael and Perry, 2014).

Regarding these examples, it can be argued that to state that Tehran shapes its foreign policy around Shi'ism is an oversimplification of Tehran's political direction. Undoubtedly religious fault-lines form some part of Tehran's policies - if only through politicizing Shi'ism -, but it unlikely is the sole motivator. Jafaar Alloul, employed by Gent University, stated in his work *The Shi'a Crescent Theory* (2011) that the Sunni-Shia divide is used as a 'soft power' mechanism through the fabrication of sectarian identity. Alloul states that the discourse on the Shiite Crescent both suits Iran and the Arab states with Sunni regimes (especially Saudi Arabia), because the discourse serves their current geopolitical interests. The Arab regimes may use the overstated threat of Iran to silence legitimate opposition. They use the discourse on the Crescent as an excuse to ignore the legitimate socio-political rights of the Shiites in the conservative Arab states, also called the "forgotten Muslims" (Fuller and Francke, 2000). If they can spread Shia phobia by claiming that Iran and the Crescent are a threat, they do not need to attend to domestic problems of human rights violations. The conservative Arab States view any move towards more democracy at home—at least on anyone's terms but their own—as a threat to their regimes, and therefore use the Crescent to move away from discussion about reforms. This situation of overshadowing reforms by discourse on the threat of Shiites, was voiced by Jasim Husain, senior member of the Wefaq opposition party in Bahrain. "The problem [about reforms] is a political one", he said, "but sectarianism is a winning card for them [autocratic regimes]" (Spindle and Coker, 2011). Likewise the Crescent proves a tool of political recognition for Iran, because of its alleged leading role within the Crescent (Alloul, 2011). Through de discourse on the Shiite Crescent, Iran is able to deploy a soft-power mechanism in order to win the support of the Arab Shias (Turner, 2012). The fact that supporting al-Assad would impinge on the image of Iran being the voice of the downtrodden Shiites, was the reason behind Tehran's initial condemning of the repression by the Syrian regime in the early days of the uprising (MacFarquhar, 2011).

## **B. Informal imperialism and hegemony**

Now that we have established that religious fault-lines are used as a soft power tool and are therefore not the major motivator behind Iranian foreign policies, we can turn towards the explanation provided by informal imperialism. According to Flint and Taylor (2011), informal imperialism was first coined by Keith Buchanan in 1972 and is defined as “dominance of a territory outside a state’s borders but without political control” (ibid). Should political control be part of the domination, imperialism becomes formal, also called colonialism. Lack of political control does not mean that informal imperialism is not political. Informal imperialism is still a strategy of dominance, though without legal power over ‘foreign’ territory. Through informal imperialism, states are able to dominate other countries culturally, technically and economically.

Before we apply informal imperialism to the foreign policy of Tehran, certain aspects of said framework must be clarified. The concept of Center -also called the Core- refers to the developed countries of the world. The Center consists of the states that are in lead of the others technically and therefore economically. Because the Center is more developed, other states will try to follow its example in order to ‘catch up’. The underdeveloped countries together are called the Periphery, which is dependent on and subservient to the Center because of the economic processes within the capitalist world-economy. The Middle East used to be in the forefront of progress during much of history, but fell into the role of the Periphery with the rise of the modern world system, in which a fundamental gap in power and wealth divided a group of Center states in Europe and their colonies from the rest of the world (Nasr, 2013).

But informal imperialism also has manifestations *within* countries, not just *between* them. Within the model of informal imperialism, two classes are included. These two classes are also called ‘center’ and ‘periphery’, respectively the dominant and dominated class. The dominant class, or the elite, is in charge of the production and therefore has the economic and political power to suppress or buy off the dominated class, which constitutes the labor force. Within informal imperialism, thus four different groups exist. The first constitutes the center of the Center (cC), the dominant class of the developed countries. Secondly there is the periphery of the Center (pC), which is dominated by cC and consists of the ‘masses’ of the developed countries. Thirdly, the center of the Periphery (cP) is dominated by cC but in turn dominates the periphery of the Periphery (pP). The periphery of the Periphery constitutes the masses in the underdeveloped countries and holds no economic or political power.

Closely linked to the model of informal imperialism is the concept of hegemon, which I would call the “Über Center”. Flint and Taylor describe hegemony as a “position held by a state when it so dominates its sphere of operation that other states are forced to comply with its wishes voluntarily” (Flint & Taylor, 2011). In other words, the hegemon does not need military force in order to

dominate its hemisphere. After World War II the position of hegemon was taken from the British Empire by the United States, the current world hegemon. America has never owned colonies, but with its mode of production based on mass production, it so dominates the world that U.S. presence is found everywhere. One only has to point to McDonalds and Coca Cola, both American brands, which are found all over the world. The contemporary scholarly consensus however, is that the days of the US as world hegemon are limited. Already in 2004, political scientist Joseph Nye lamented that the use of 'hard' power – coercion – had increased dramatically within American policies and actions, resulting in anti-Americanism and a decline in the appreciation of American cultural products, i.e. 'soft power' or attraction. Nye steered his argument with examples of reality, referring to America's "War on Terror" (Nasr, 2013) and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq (Nye, 2004). Nye's arguments fit well within Flint and Taylor's idea that the most significant marker of a declining hegemon is "military overstretch", which means that a hegemon tries to maintain super power status through militaristic means when 'soft power' resources fail (Flint and Taylor, 2011).

The power politics of the United States with regard to the Middle East tend to support this idea of the U.S. as a hegemon in decline. The U.S. military aid to Middle Eastern countries exceeds its economic aid by a ratio of six to one and the U.S. are the only state with military bases within the Middle East, with the exception of Russia, which has the meager amount of one base in Tartus (Ismael and Perry, 2014). By comparison, American military bases are found throughout the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf. With bases in Bahrain, the UAE, Kuwait and Oman, the United States are the most significant foreign military power in the region. Furthermore, arms sales are America's primary commercial export to the Middle East, mounting up to billions of dollars annually. Apart from military overstretch, there is another sign of declining US influence in the Middle East: by all accounts, the Americans are by far the most hated people throughout the region, which is an indication of the decline of soft power resources such as culture or political persuasion through attraction (Turner, 2012).

### **C. Oppression and resistance within informal imperialism.**

Throughout history, states (or regions, such as the West or the Middle East) have tried to dominate each other through various means, also called power relationships. In this research, not all these relations are included, as they are relatively unimportant to Iranian or American policies with regard to the Middle East or Syria. There are however three types of domination and one type of resistance that *do* contribute to this research. We base these power policies upon the four classes and the two states (or regions) described in the paragraph above, whereby the Center (C) and the Periphery (P) both constitute two classes, a dominant (A) and a dominated (B). When we combine these four classes, several power relationships arise.

Firstly, there is the combination CA-PA, referred to as *collaboration*. Within this relationship, the Center of the center and the center in the Periphery combine their forces to organize their joint domination of the periphery in the Periphery. The center of the Periphery constitutes a bridgehead for the center in the Center and serves their common interests. The center of the Periphery (PA) however does not always – or even usually – act as a mere puppet of the center of the Center (CA) and has a considerable amount of bargaining power due to its direct control over the periphery of the Periphery (PB).

Secondly, there is the combination of PA-BA, or *repression*. As the Periphery is not able to accumulate enough wealth, the elites there are unable to buy off the powerless classes through social services. It is therefore likely that the periphery is unsatisfied and therefore prone to rebellion. In order to stay in power and keep exploiting the periphery (PB), the center (PA) has to use coercion.

Thirdly, there is the combination CB-PB, which comprises *division*. In this relationship, both centers use the tactic of ‘divide and conquer’ to separate the interests of the peripheries. In this way, the peripheries will not combine their forces in a joint rebellion against the elites. The Shiite Crescent may be viewed within this type of dominance, as it divides the Arab masses between Sunnis and Shiites.

The world, however, is not made up of solely compliant people. Against these three types of domination, rebellion is possible. With regard to the topic of these research, there are two ways to rebel against a dominator. Firstly, the combination PB-PA, whereby the periphery resists the center, is referred to as a *social movement*. Social movements are best defined as efforts by people in the periphery to resist penetration by the center within one country. Social movements in the Periphery may become violent as the populace is not appeased by the welfare state. In such cases, discontent often leads to a violent attack on the oppressing regime. Social movements primarily have a civil character, which means they occur within the borders of one country. However a very often used strategy is the changing of scale from national to international through media attention, when the social movement is losing against the regime and tries to get support outside the state’s borders. The Arab Spring truly is a social movement, because it is an insurgency made up of the Arab peoples that are resisting oppression by their autocratic regimes. The powerless masses attempt to seize control over the political and socioeconomic direction of their countries.

Secondly there is the combination PA-CA, which I have dubbed *center clash*. Within this type of resistance, the center of the Periphery defies the center of the Center, challenging its supremacy. Center penetration, by definition, infringes upon the authority of local elites. Clashes between centers often arise when the center of the Periphery wishes more influence over the periphery of the Periphery, at the cost of the Centers influence over the periphery of the Periphery (Flint and Taylor, 2011). The Iranian foreign policies in the Middle East fit best within this type of resistance. Iran used

to be the seat of several of the most powerful empires, starting with that of the Achaemenids, and later sporadically resuming its imperial role under the Parthians, Sassassanians and Safavids. These empires could rival with the Empires of Rome, Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire. But when the whole of the Middle East fell into the Periphery after World War II, Iran did so as well. But with regard to its grand history, it is not surprising that Iran rose to resist its oppressor as early as 1979 (Ismael and Perry, 2014). It is to that particular time period we shall turn in the next chapter.

### III. To what extent does the Iranian resistance since 1979 against U.S. influence in the Middle East fit within the framework of informal imperialism?

As was stated in the last chapter, Iranian policies fall within the category of resisting powers, and within the category of *center clash* especially. In this chapter, it is studied why and how Iran has been resisting its geopolitical position as part of the Periphery since 1979. But before we can conclude that Iran falls within the resisting forces, there must of course first be someone to resist. In this chapter, it is therefore first explained how America wields power in the Middle East through client states (CP). Thereafter, the key events in the shaping of Iranian resistance are studied. In the next chapter, we shall then study how the case of the Syrian Crisis fits within the U.S.-Iran relationship of *center clash* in the form of a proxy-war.

#### A. The policies of the US: dominance through client states

The policies of the U.S. with regard the Middle East are best described as the blatant abuse of power and the maintaining of double standards in order to protect and sustain the relationships with client regimes. These policies are motivated by the desire for regional stability and the enhancing of super power status. Ever since America took over the position of world hegemon from the British Empire after World War II, it has tried to dominate the Middle East through aligning themselves with local autocratic regimes (Ismael and Perry, 2014). These regimes used to comprise the Gulf States Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, though *not* Iraq. Other client states were Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya. But unfortunately for the U.S., the Arab Spring occurred in many of these client states, which resulted in a smaller range now constituting the aforementioned Gulf States, Jordan and Yemen. The U.S. has other allies in the Middle East, but these states cannot be defined as client states as they are not (financially) dependent on and therefore not subservient to the U.S. These allies comprise Turkey, Morocco and Israel, the latter being a regional super power in its own right due to its nuclear monopoly in the region (Turner, 2012).

The policies of the US with regard to the Middle East have been guided by *realpolitik* in order to maintain the status quo in the Middle East. This balance of power must remain, as that balance enables the U.S. to dominate the Middle East. The U.S. were challenged by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but when that war ended and in 1991 the Gulf Wars also, it was widely acknowledged that America remained the ultimate foreign power in the Middle East. But although the threat of the Soviet Union had disappeared, America has still been concerned with threats of indigenous movements that challenge U.S. interests in the region. The governments of the America have been led by the perception of a continuing threat from radical forces - be they Islamic or secular - towards the stability in the Middle East, which would disrupt when the rule of pro-Western regimes are

challenged. Even democratic and peaceful movements were thought to have a destabilizing effect in the region, should they gain enough support. This fear of instability has resulted in absolute support for the status quo regardless of a regime's given level of commitment to democracy and human rights - as long as it remains aligned with Washington (Nasr, 2013). Notwithstanding the Bush administration hailing democracy, American support for autocratic regimes in the region -including security assistance for internal repression- actually increased during that period and has since remained high (Ismael and Perry, 2014). And with the loss of several client regimes due to the Arab Spring, the U.S. are all the more determined to try and support those that remain (Nasr, 2013).

Perhaps the most shocking example of this rigid support for client regimes at the expense of democratization and human rights, is Bahrain. The Arab Spring also threatened the regime of that island nation in early 2012, although the autocratic monarchy brutally suppressed the largely non-violent pro-democracy movement (Ismael and Perry, 2014). At the height of the protests, U.S. admiral Mike Mullen flew to Bahrain to assure King Hamad of the strong commitment of the U.S. to the military relationship with the Bahraini defense forces (American Forces Press Service, 2012). When the Bahraini defense forces unleashed violence on the protesters, Obama publicly condemned the actions of the Bahraini government, but did not use the considerable economic and political leverage of the US over Bahrain to stop the violence (Nasr, 2013). Rather than advocating sanctions, as President Obama had done when hell broke loose in Syria in 2011, the U.S. Defense Department announced a proposed sale of \$53 million of weapons to Bahrain's military. In order to defend the arms sale, the Pentagon claimed that the autocratic regime of Bahrain was too important a force for political stability and economic progress in the Middle East (Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2011). Likewise, Washington spoke warmly about the dictatorial regimes of Tunisia and Egypt (both client regimes) when protests broke out in these countries. Not until both regimes were forced to resign did Obama speak eloquent words about the pro-democracy demonstrators (Ismael and Perry, 2014).

Another sign of the US trying to protect its client regimes, constitutes the imposition of (financial) sanctions. While leading the efforts in recent years to impose debilitating sanctions against Iraq, Iran, Libya and Sudan for their violations of human rights, America has used its power of veto to block otherwise unanimous support in the Security Council for imposing the same sanctions on U.S. allies such as Israel, Turkey and Morocco. Another sign that America is protecting its client regimes, is the fact that it uses double standards with regard to nuclear programs. While threatening war at the mere possibility of an Iranian nuclear program, the U.S. have nurtured close ties with states that already possess nuclear arsenals such as India, Pakistan and of course Israel. Failing to heed the call of virtually every Arab nation to establish a nuclear free-zone in the Middle East, the US has added insult to injury by bringing its own nuclear arsenal into the Middle East in the 1950s (ibid.)

## **B. Iran: from client state to revolution and resistance**

Now that we have established that American influence in the Middle East is substantial through its client states, we can determine why Iran has been resisting this dominating force. In this research, it is argued that two key developments have fueled the Iranian resentment and rebellion against the U.S. The first being the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the second being the policies of the US with regard to the Middle East after 9/11. These events are interlinked, as the current Iranian regime draws from the policies and discourse used by ayatollah Khomeini in the aftermath of the Revolution (Nasr, 2013).

Until World War II, Iran was occupied by many states such as France and Great Britain for its strategic location and oil reserves. Iran became an independent state after the War and a new government was elected democratically. But already in the first years of the democratic state, nationalist forces clashed with the supporters of the pro-western Pahlavi Shah in parliament, to the dismay of the U.S. America feared that the nationalists would form an alliance with the leftist forces and it subsequently organized a coup against the constitutional regime in 1953, thereby supporting the Shah as an increasingly oppressive and autocratic client ruler (Ismael and Perry, 2014). The Shah, who owed his position to the US, proved to be a useful and thankful puppet ruler. Throughout the seventies, the U.S. sold him over \$20 billion in advanced weaponry and 8000 advisors were sent to Iranian soil in order to drill the Iranian army into a sophisticated, well-armed military force. Under the regime of the Shah, Iran acted as the major regional policeman for the US in the Persian Gulf. Together with Saudi-Arabia, Iran stood as one of the twin pillars of American influence in the region and was on good terms with Israel. Iran was an active member of the Western security alliance in the region (CENTO) and carried out a proxy intervention in Oman on behalf of the West. For more than twenty years, Iran was one of the most faithful client states. In 1979 however, the American policy of aligning with the center of the Periphery crashed down due to the Islamic Revolution. The compliant Shah was replaced by a regime ardently rejecting the status of client state, and the genius behind these reversed policies was ayatollah Khomeini (Nasr, 2013).

Ayatollah Khomeini ruled from 1979 – year of the Revolution – until 1989 and he transformed Iran into the Islamic Republic. The new regime he founded was a mixture of Islamic clericalism and secular republicanism. This hybrid regime consisted of totalitarian, authoritarian and democratic aspects and has often been defined by the concepts of idealism and revolutionary ideology. The ideological discourse that shaped Tehran's foreign policy under Khomeini was named after him – “Khomeini's Way” or *khathe-imam*, at that time represented by the slogan “exporting the revolution”. Khomeini's way was ideologically grounded in the view that foreign relations should be based on Islamic values and principles. Khomeini also accused the most dominant states and the U.S. in particular of being the cause of the major problems in the world. Khomeini portrayed the West as



arrogant and imperial, a source of corruption, political chaos and instability throughout the globe (Ismael and Perry, 2014).

According to Khomeini, Islamism was the remedy for the evils of the West and therefore Islamism had to be promoted throughout the world. A striking example is the letter Khomeini wrote to Gorbachev – leader of the Soviet Union - in 1989, in which he urged him to adhere to Islamic principles in order to ‘save his nation’ (Trita, 2007). Khomeini wrote: “Islam is not particular to a country, to several countries, to a group of people or countries, or even the Muslims. Islam has come from humanity... Islam wishes to bring all of humanity under the umbrella of justice.” (ibid). Such statements demonstrated the revolutionary ideology that shaped Iranian policy under Khomeini, which did not sit well with Iran’s neighbors and provoked general paranoia under the conservative Arab regimes (i.e. the client regimes of the U.S.). Iran’s policy towards these neighboring states was hostile and aggressive, and as a result the Arab monarchies of the Gulf State retaliated by taking defensive measures to impede Iran’s ambitions to “export the revolution”. They came to rely on American aid (and used the Shiite Crescent to emphasize the Iranian threat to American policymakers), and relations between Iran and the U.S. deteriorated even more. (Ismael and Perry, 2014).

In short, Iran under Khomeini tried to alter the balance of power in the Middle East in favor of Islamist and radical revolutionary forces. An example of this regional revisionist policy was the increased presence of Iranian forces on the Israeli borders with both Syria and Lebanon, where Shiites made up most of the population. Iran supported the Shiites in these countries militarily, economically and politically, out of which (partly) grew Lebanese Hezbollah in 1985. For Iran, Hezbollah has been its crown jewel, the ideal locus for realizing the supranational aspirations of the Iranian Revolution. Through the creation of Hezbollah, Iran became the leader of the struggle against Zionism and furthered its plan to empower Shiite communities throughout the Middle East (Takeyh, 2009). But by trying to gain more influence in the Middle East, Iran has made enemies of its regional neighbors and therefore of America, who has been determined to protect its client states in order to protect U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Fifteen years after the rule of Supreme Leader Khomeini, we see a recurrence of his ideals and policies, starting in 2003. We argue that that this return to Khomeinism is caused by the fact that Ahmadinejad, current President of Iran since 2005, rose to power during a time of insecurity. This insecurity was caused by the discourse of U.S. President George W. Bush and the U.S. interventions in the Middle East after 9/11. Between 1989 and 2005, Tehran’s policies towards the U.S. were conciliatory and directed towards a *détente* (ibid). President Rafsanjani and President Khatami after him both strived to improve the relationship between Iran and the US, forced by domestic problems.

President Rafsanjani had to deal with a socio-economic crisis in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war, and with the end of the Cold War, which showed the U.S. as the supreme power in the Middle East. President Khatami largely followed the line of Rafsanjani, as the foreign relations of Iran were still very unstable and the domestic economic crises were not over. An example of this conciliatory approach is Khatami's expression of regret for the hostage crises in 1979, when American diplomats were held captive for months in Tehran (Ismael and Perry, 2014).

However Iran's approach to foreign policy severely changed in the aftermath of 9/11, when President George W. Bush applied the term "axis of evil" to Iran, Iraq and North Korea in 2002 (YouTube, 2013). Bush's speech and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq raised much fear in Iran for a U.S. plan to change the regime in Iran – yet again, as they had done in 1953 (Takeyh, 2009). Iranian hardliners exploited Bush's discourse and the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq by claiming that Khatami's discourse of "dialogue among civilizations" (CNN, 1998) and his foreign policies could not provide Iran with the necessary security and stability. What followed was the rise of a security state, in which most of the members of the regime took on a hardline stance to frame former president Khatami's policy measures as weak and ill-suited to serve Iran's foreign interests (Ismael and Perry, 2014). The reality seemed to support this claim: in 2004 (and ever since), Iran was geographically surrounded by American troops. They occupied Afghanistan and Iraq and there was American military presence in the Arab monarchies south of Iran, and in former Soviet republics in the north of Iran (Gedalyahu, 2010). As a result, Iran's 2005 presidential election was won by President Ahmadinejad and his support of hardline conservatives. The subsequent policies advocated by Ahmadinejad had a strong anti-American stance, taunting Washington openly in speeches as well as military actions (Takeyh, 2009). In retaliation against the US, Iran began to support Shiite communities in US occupied areas. In the aftermath of the occupation of Iraq, the Shiites there received moral, economic and military support of Iran. Admiral Mike Mullen warned in a 2011 interview: "Iran is very directly supporting extremist Shia groups [in Iraq], which are killing our troops" (*The Telegraph*, 2011). President Ahmadinejad also tried to strengthen the ties between Iran and the European Union in order to avoid a U.S.-EU front. The EU responded to this quite favorably, condemning Iranian nuclear ambitions but welcoming the countering of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East as a staunch critic of US interventionism (Posch, 2010).

Another result from the policies of the Bush administration, was the fact that Iran sought to reinforce its partnership with Syria to advance their shared effort to undermine US presence in the Middle East. Iran gave full support to Syria when the US pressed Syria to assume accountability for its alleged involvement in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. *Al-Ahram Weekly* reported that the investments of Iran in Syria reached an estimated \$3 billion by the end of 2008. Iran also tried to strengthen its ties with Hezbollah, helping it to successfully rebuff the Israelis in the

war of 2006. Because of its support for Shiite communities in US occupied territory, the (partial) rapprochement with the EU and the renewed ties with allies Syria and Hezbollah, Iranian regional influence increased. Consequently, the US Arab client states grew increasingly aggravated and sought to reinforce their ties with the United States. These states interpreted Iran's meddling in regional developments and its sympathy with (Shiite) liberation movements as part of its persistent drive to achieve supremacy. When President Obama met with King Abdullah in Riyadh in June 2009, most of the hour-long meeting was taken up with a royal lecture on the Iranian threat, which the Saudi king wanted for America to fix (Nasr, 2013). At the meeting, the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubeir recalled King Abdullah's frequent exhortations to the U.S. to attack Iran and so put an end to its nuclear weapons program. "He [King Abdullah] told you to cut off the head of the snake," was Jubeir's reported message to President Obama (Colvin, 2010).

John Turner, employed by the University of Surrey, described the power politics in the Middle East as a battle between revolutionary and reactionary blocs. He wrote in his essay in the *Middle East Policy Council* journal: "Iran and its affiliates are transformational actors seeking to limit Western influence and undermine Israel. The status quo actors seek greater regional stability and are willing to tolerate U.S. military presence (on their territory), as it serves as a security guarantor" (Turner, 2012). To me, this is a sharp analysis of the situation. On the one hand, America and its client states wish the political situation in the Middle East to remain the same, as they are then the ones who profit. The client states enjoy American protection, and the U.S. is able to wield influence in the region through its allies. On the other hand, there are those who suffer under the American presence and the rule of autocratic client regimes. These forces seek to challenge the disadvantageous status quo, which is the reason why Iran and the other resisting forces are often referred to as the "Resistance Front" (Press TV, 2013: a), or the "Axis of resistance" (Von Maltzahn, 2013). Iran is the strongest and most stable of these resisting states, with crown jewel Hezbollah at its side, its population of 80 million people and the love of the Arab (Shiite) masses.

Iranian discourse on the Arab Spring is perhaps the most striking example of Iran trying to fight against American influence. As said before, U.S. influence in the Middle East has had a blow from the Arab Spring, as the protests mostly happened in its client states. For Iran however, the Arab Spring brought new opportunities to enhance its influence. Tehran made use of these opportunities by portraying the Arab Spring as inspired and influenced by its own revolution in 1979. From the beginning of the protests, Iran's regime launched an aggressive propaganda campaign to claim ownership of the Arab Spring, using state media and regional Arab-language satellite channels (Kagan, Majidya, Pletka and Cochrane Sullivan, 2013). Ayatollah Khamenei for example commented on the Arab Spring: "Today the events in the North of Africa, Egypt, Tunisia and certain other

countries have another sense for the Iranian nation.... This is the same as 'Islamic Awakening,' which is the result of the victory of the big revolution of the Iranian nation" (Spindle and Coker, 2011). Apart from enhancing regional influence by claiming that the Iranian Revolution had inspired the Arab Spring, Tehran also used the Arab Spring for incriminating America. This was done by portraying the Arab Spring as the result of anti-West and anti-American sentiment. When Islamist groups made hostile and threatening comments toward America, Iranian covered these actions and statements widely. Comments made by liberal or secular forces, aimed at government reforms, failed to get any attention in Iran, regardless of the significance of the commentator. The Arabs, according to the Iranian leadership and media, were against Egypt's Mubarak, Tunisia's Ben Ali and the rest of the Arab leaders not because they were ruthless dictators, but rather because they were pro-American and enjoyed good relations with Israel (Zikbalam, 2011).

#### **IV. How might the Iranian support for al-Assad's regime be understood as an extension of the geopolitical relationship between Iran and the U.S.?**

As we have established in chapter one, it is clear that the Syrian Crisis is much more than just a civil war. From chapter three, we can deduce that the relationship between Iran and the U.S. is one of dominance and resistance, which fits well within the framework of informal imperialism described in chapter two. In this last chapter it is assessed how the Syrian Crisis is an extension of this geopolitical relationship between Iran and the America, which developed in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution and was enhanced by U.S. policies after 9/11.

Iran and the U.S. have fought each other in a proxy-setting before, in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As stated earlier, Iran supported rebellious groups in Iraq after the invasion of the U.S. in 2003. According to a report published by the ISW, Iran and ally Hezbollah supplied weapons, money and advisors to multiple Iraqi resistance groups, consisting of Shiites as well as –surprisingly enough – Sunnis (Kagan, 2007). Apparently, Iran is even prepared to support Sunni groups, as long as they are opposing the U.S. With regard to Syria, the geopolitical relationship between Tehran and Washington becomes clear in two ways. First, Iran uses the Syrian Crisis to attack America by claiming that the Syrian opposition is led by Western conspirators. By portraying the al-Assad regime as a helpless target of Western imperialism, Iran tries to save its image as champion of the poor. Secondly, Iran is unable to abandon al-Assad -even if it wanted to-, because that would mean straying from the revolutionary principles upon which the current Iranian regime is legitimated.

##### **A. Legitimacy in resistance**

The first indication that the Iranian involvement in the Syrian Crisis has something to do with curtailing American influence, is the fact that Tehran continues to support al-Assad despite damaging its own reputation. Iran's foreign policies have been quite popular among the masses of the Middle East (c.q. the periphery of the Periphery), especially in the Palestine, Lebanon and Egypt. This is because Iran openly opposes Zionism and client regimes, and the policies of the US in the region and supports the Palestinian cause (Kagan, Majidyar, Pletka and Cochrane Sullivan, 2013). But aiding President al-Assad in his brutal repression of the opposition has damaged Iran's reputation. And Iran could use some image building, as the repression of the domestic Green Movement by the Iranian regime in 2009 had already altered popular perception of Tehran's regional policies. In order to repair its damaged reputation, Iran has tried to play a diplomatic role in the Syrian conflict, but has of yet been excluded from diplomatic talks by the Western states (Nasr, 2013). But despite of the damage it does to its image, Tehran continues to support al-Assad.

There must therefore be a reason as to why Tehran does this. Ismael and Perry (2014)

describe this position of Iran with regard to the Syrian Crisis quite accurately as a delicate predicament. In their words, it is “impossible for Tehran to save Assad, but equally impossible to desert him” (ibid). They refer to the fact that Tehran has to keep up its support for al-Assad because the legitimacy and identity of the current Iranian regime is based upon revolutionary principles and resistance against the U.S. America and Iran have been at each other’s throats ever since the Islamic revolution toppled the pro-American Pahlavi Shah in 1979. Many contentious issues, clashes and recriminations have alienated the onetime allies, and the truth is that anti-Americanism is embedded in the ideological fabric of the Islamic Republic founded by ayatollah Khomeini. Iran is the last bulwark of resistance: its regime sees power and glory in resistance, cloaking anti-West nationalism in a veneer of Islamic extremism. The current leaders of Iran, particularly President Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, are wedded to anti-Americanism and revolutionary vigor. Especially Ahmadinejad, as he has owed his election and re-election to his fierce anti-American stance (Nasr, 2013). And even after the relatively short cooperation between Iran and the U.S. in ousting the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2003, ayatollah Khamenei warned his diplomats and military commanders: “America is not ready to talk to Iran about regional security issues because that would mean recognizing Iran’s role in the region. In short, America is not ready to accept and live with the Iranian revolution” (ibid).

So Tehran is forced to oppose the U.S. in whatever way possible, and its involvement Syrian Crisis proves that. The Iranian leaders might not like it, but it is better to continue backing al-Assad than to have to endanger their own legitimacy by deserting him.

### **A. Blame America**

Fortunately for Iran, the solution to the problem of losing the support of the Arab masses, also lies with America. As stated earlier, the Arab Spring brought new opportunities for Iran to fight against American influence and thereby enhancing its own. However the Syrian Crisis, part of the Arab Spring, does *not* fit within the grand theory of the “Islamic Awakening” from Western imperialism. With much difficulty, the Iranian regime managed to portray the Libyan regime under Muammar Gadhafi as a Western puppet government. There was however no way the Iranians could portray President Bashar al-Assad as a client ruler as well. Initially, the Iranian solution to this problem was to ignore the events in Syria. But after several independent Iranian writers wrote about the brutal suppression of the Syrian masses, Tehran was obliged to react. And it did so brilliantly, by maintaining that the nature of the uprising and protests in Syria was different from the rest of the Arab Spring. Whereas the uprising in the other Arab countries had been genuine, it was the Israeli and American agents that stirred unrest in Syria against the heroic and revolutionary regime (Zikbakalam, 2011). When we view the Iranian verbal attacks on the U.S mentioned in the

introduction of this research as the attempt to save face, the seemingly unfounded discourse gains meaning. As long as Iran is able to portray the Syrian Crisis as the result of American imperialist aspirations, it is able to sustain its image as a resisting force and thereby maintain its support amongst the Arab masses.

It is however unlikely that Iran will be able to keep up this blaming of the United States. As early as 2011, the Lebanese journal *The Daily Star* already reported that this contradictory portraying of the Arab Spring and the role of the Syrian Crisis within it, would be increasingly hard to sustain (Zikbalam, 2011). But after thirty years of continued battles with the United States, there is no doubt that the Iranians will find another way to impose as the ultimate resisting force in the Middle East.

## Conclusion and discussion

In this conclusion, the answer is given to the main research question , which was as follows:

*Using the framework of informal imperialism, how might Tehran's involvement in the Syrian 'Civil' War from March 2011 until June 2013 be understood as part of a proxy-war between the United States and Iran for influence in the Middle East?*

In the first chapter of this research, we have established that the Syrian Crisis is much more than just a civil conflict, because regional as well as international forces have tried to influence the conflict by supporting either the opposition or the current al-Assad regime. On the national scale, the two camps have been formed as the result of the policies of the forty-year old Assad dynasty. Those who enjoyed preference under this rule (such as Alawite Shiites and Christians), are fighting for the regime forces. The regime itself is unwilling to reform and therefore continues to fight, because it wishes to avoid persecution by a newly elected representative government. Those who have suffered under the al-Assad regime, especially non-elite Sunnis, comprise the opposition. With regard to all of the scales, there seems to be a recurrence of the fault-lines of the Cold War, whereby the opposition looks towards the Western powers, and the regime towards the East, towards Russia and China.

In chapter two we have established that Tehran is not supporting al-Assad out of Shiite solidarity. Tehran's policies in the recent past indicate that the Shiite Crescent is an inadequate political motivator for Iranian leaders. Apart from the Syrian regime being only recently added to Shi'ism and the fact that the Ba'athist ideology is secular, Iran has never opposed the unfair treatment of Muslims in allied states China and Russia. But when we apply the framework of informal imperialism to Tehran's foreign policies, the discourse on the Shiite Crescent may be explained as a soft power mechanism that serves the geopolitical interests of the regional powers in the Middle East. The autocratic Arab States use the Shiite Crescent to underline the Iranian threat to their interests (and therefore American interests) and a diversion to move away from discussion about the legitimate rights of domestic Shiite groups. Iran uses the discourse on the Crescent to gain recognition of its status as regional power and to enhance popularity amongst the Shiite Arab masses, or the "forgotten Muslims". When we apply informal imperialism to Tehran's policies, we further see that these policies can be explained as attempts to resist American influence in the Middle East. American influence in the Middle East is substantial, because America wields power through client states such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. As the Arab Spring occurred in many of the states aligned with the U.S., the latter is all the more determined to protect and maintain the relationships with remaining client regimes. Iran itself used to be a client state of the U.S., but started



to reject and resist this status after the Iranian Revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini founded the Islamic Republic in 1979, which was founded on Islamic and revolutionary principles. “Khomeini’s way” was grounded in the idea that the West and America in particular was the source of all evil in the world, and therefore the revolutionary Islamic values had to be exported as a remedy for these evils. After fifteen years of détente between the U.S. and Iran, we see a recurrence of Khomeini’s ideology in 2005, when Ahmadinejad was elected as President of Iran. Because of the hostile discourse used by the Bush administration and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, fear sparked in the hearts of the Iranians that the U.S was planning to change their regime as well – yet again. In this time of insecurity, Ahmadinejad seized power because of his anti-American stance, which he carried out in speech as well in actions, which became clear when Iran started to support rebellious groups in American-occupied Iraq.

After the proxy-war between the U.S. and Iran in Iraq, we see that the Syrian Crisis is now also used as a site for Iran to resist American influence in the Middle East. Even though Iran’s image as champion of the downtrodden (Shiite) masses has been damaged because of Tehran’s support for al-Assad, Tehran continues to aid the regime. Tehran does this because Tehran’s legitimacy is based upon the revolutionary principles of ayatollah Khomeini. Even if Iran should wish to abandon al-Assad, it is unable to because deserting al-Assad would mean negating Khomeini’s ideology and therefore undermining its own legitimacy. Iran has found the solution to this predicament by blaming the U.S. and its allies for the uprising in Syria. By portraying al-Assad as a battered President harassed by America the imperialist oppressor, Tehran is able to safe face with the Arab masses.

### **Discussion.**

Last but not least, possible topics for further research with regard to geopolitics in the Middle East are proposed. As mentioned in the introduction of this research, not all the motivations for Tehran’s policies with regard to the Syrian Crisis are included in this research. There are several forces that Iran is trying to oppose through supporting the al-Assad regime, but these forces are not aligned with the United States. Various (Sunni) Islamic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda constitute a third party within the Syrian Crisis, fighting for the rebel opposition. But these groups are *not* aligned to America or the West. These various groups may be viewed as the periphery (pP) supporting another periphery against the centers of the Periphery (cP). With regard to the Syrian Crisis, Tehran is resisting the center of the Center, but is in turn resisted against by the periphery of the Periphery (Ismael and Perry, 2014). Further research may study the power relationships between Tehran and the unaligned peripheral groups that fight in Syria.

Furthermore, it may be researched as to what extent the Arab Spring has undermined the hegemonic position of the United States in the Middle East. As it is generally assumed that America is

a hegemon in decline, another study may assess to what extent the Arab Spring has accelerated this demise. This study might also be directed towards the impact America's hesitant reaction to the Arab Spring has had on the relationship between America and its client regimes. Especially the Saudi's saw the U.S. abandonment of Egypt's former President Mubarak as downright betrayal (Nasr, 2013).

Lastly, with regard to informal imperialism and the Syrian Crisis, the relationships between Tehran and the other centers of the Periphery may be further researched. Iran is not the only regional superpower (center) in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia also wields major influence, especially over Sunni forces, and Turkey is increasingly seen by the Arab masses as a moderate and modern alternative to Iran (Ismael and Perry, 2014). Further research may study to what extent Tehran is supporting al-Assad in order to oppose the other centers of the Periphery.

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