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Chess Game of Civilizations

Ambassador Sallama Shaker and Colleen Bromberger

In his article “The Clash of Civilizations” published in the June 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Samuel Huntington argues that,

The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault line between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future. [...] The civilizations to which people belong is the broadest level of identification with which people intensely identify. People can and do redefine their identities, and as a result, the composition and boundaries of civilizations change. Over centuries, differences among civilizations have generated the most prolonged and most violent conflicts.¹

Applying Huntington's theory to the conflicts that the Middle Eastern region is currently witnessing, as a region that is possessor of both ‘the cradle of civilizations’ as well as the three Abrahamic religions, it is evident that the Middle East has been the playground of prolonged wars for the past several centuries. From the 16th to the 19th centuries, the Ottoman Empire (with a largely Sunni population) and the Safavid Dynasty were archrivals during which the two empires fought for control over Eastern Anatolia, the Caucasus region and Mesopotamia (Iraq). Referring once again to Huntington's narrative about ‘the West versus the Rest,’² he emphasizes that,

In the emerging world, relations between states and groups from different civilizations will not be close and will often be antagonistic since the West will always maintain its military superiority in its international agenda, which will shape the future of the world.³

Contrary to Huntington’s narrative on civilizations as inherently clashing in the post-Cold War era, some scholarship indicates that the civilizations of the Middle East are not ‘inferior’ to the West, as Huntington suggests. These civilizations instead have experienced their own rise and fall in the context of changing world order. For example, in *The Rise and Decline of Nations*, Mancur Olson emphasizes that,

Many have been puzzled by the mysterious decline or collapse of great empires or civilizations and by the remarkable rise to wealth, power or cultural achievement of previously peripheral or obscure peoples. The Middle East provides several examples of such collapsed empires.⁴

¹ Samuel P. Huntington. “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, 72, no. 3 (1993): p. 2-3, slightly rev.

² Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996. p. 181.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁴ Olson, Mancur. *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982. p. 1.

Therefore, this paper will approach the ‘clash’ *not* of civilizations, but instead the ‘clash’ of power rivalry in the Middle East. The reader will not be able to appreciate the authors’ argument simply because he or she finds it plausible or consistent with known facts. Hence, the authors will be arguing their case based on assumptions that are enhanced by historical and political facts as well as case studies. This is due to the multiple causal forces and proven theories that can substantiate the authors’ arguments.

The question that will be addressed in the context of Huntington's narrative and Joseph Nye's theory (see footnote 5) of the balance of power is: are the current regional conflicts in the Middle East validated by these theories we are portraying metaphorically as ‘chess games in the Middle East,’ where civilizations have risen and fallen, and thus leave behind them unfinished wars? Linking past with present, the Middle East, after the Arab Uprisings of 2011, has been in continuous chaos and ongoing ethnic conflicts under the guise of a cultural Sunni-Shiite rivalry wherein Islam is being used to justify the endless bloodshed in countries such as Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. The ramification of all these conflicts, as well as the humanitarian crises triggered by animosities and rivalries among the ‘old empires,’ is destabilizing the Middle East since the area is becoming a hot bed for regional and global power rivalries as envisioned in the proxy wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Ultimately, it is important to consider the following question: is the historical chess game repeating itself with different players? Moreover, another question regarding this argument is how Joseph Nye’s theory of power relates to the ‘chess game’ of the region.

Exploring the history of the post-Ottoman Middle East through the lens of a chess game will reveal the reason why geopolitics, rather than differences between civilizations, seems to be the game changer. This metaphor illustrates two key points: first, that the Middle East has experienced several ‘matches’ between various global, as well as regional powers depending on historical context and secondly, that key global power ‘team leaders’ have formed respective teams for personal gain. While both the teams and team leaders differ based on the historical context, a common theme persists in the geopolitics of the Middle East in the 21st century: both global and regional players have consistently used the region as a ‘chessboard’ to tilt the balance of power for self-interest.

So what is the impact of the remapping of the Middle East on the current regional conflicts in Syria and Yemen since the 2011 uprisings? Can these conflicts be considered proxy wars, where regional and global players manipulate the growing tensions in the region to benefit their own self-interest as well as to achieve strategic geopolitical gains in the Middle East? In contrast to Richard N. Haass’ ideas (see footnote 7), the author argues that the Middle East is indeed not only a region of power, but at the same time will always be a region of instability due to the artificial borders drawn by the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. In response, we find that the nearly century-old chess game of the Middle East is reaching a ‘zero-sum’ situation; despite the numerous teams, players, and matches, there is no end, nor one winner in sight. Clearly, this is a chess game where nations like Turkey and Iran are competing in order to resurrect their empires (Ottoman versus Persian) or divisions of beliefs, such as the Sunni Arabs (Saudi Arabia) versus the Shiites (Iran and

Alawite Syria). A catastrophic escalation between regional and global powers could be triggered by the redrawing of maps and borders in the region. If there is no winner, then it is important to consider how the power vacuum in the Middle East will be filled when the 'king' and 'queen' on the 'chessboard' lose their soldiers (i.e. people's support).

So what is 'power' and why is the Middle East considered a region of power? As Nye argues, power is almost impossible to define. But for the sake of this paper, power will be understood through the definition that Nye uses: "the capacity to do things in social situations to affect others to get the outcomes we want."⁵ Nye illustrates the distribution of power as, "a complex three-dimensional chess game" with the first tier as military, the second tier as economic, and the third tier as transnational relations.⁶ Yet all three tiers must work together to create a constant ebb and flow of power dynamics in the international world order.

After the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the two main powers that dominated the region were the U.K. and France. Then the global powers shifted after World War II when U.S. and Russia showed interest in the Middle East, which dragged the whole region into the Cold War power rivalry between the two main superpowers. However, contrary to American-centric critics such as Richard N. Haass who argues that the post-2003 region is not "home to any major power" or "great power competition,"⁷ the Middle East is one of the most crucial 'chessboards' in the 21st century for both global and regional powers alike. More specifically, the roles of both global powers (U.S. and Russia) as well as regional powers (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) are crucial to understanding the implications of the global/regional power rivalry, which, especially in the case of Syria, can eventually lead to a 'remapping' of the region. Contextualizing this understanding of power will help to re-examine the reasons for which the Middle East is not only a region of power, but also how this struggle for power is a chess game played between regional and global competing actors.

In contrast to Haass's assertions that there is a lack of 'great' power in the region, as well as through the multifaceted framework of understanding power in both 'hard' and 'soft' contexts, the region can be re-contextualized through the lens of a chess game. The chess game was selected as a metaphoric lens due to its inherently strategic nature: a player must not only play the game to win, but also must anticipate the other player's moves. However, in this two-person, or team, game, there is not always a designated winner or loser; sometimes, both sides can end in a 'stalemate,' or a 'zero-sum game.' Ultimately, this game is beyond a mere winning or losing, but also must include predicting and assessing how to conquer the opponent through a series of well-calculated moves, sometimes including sacrifice on each player's part. In view of these realities, the Middle East can be

⁵ Joseph S. Nye. *The Future of Power*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2011. p. 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

⁷ Richard N. Haass. "The Irony of American Strategy." *Foreign Affairs*. May/June 2013. Accessed October 09, 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2013-04-03/irony-american-strategy>.

understood ultimately as the chessboard in which the various major superpowers of the world, depending on the era, have partaken in this so-called ‘game.’ In fact, there have been three notable periods in which different ‘matches’ have occurred in the region.

Beginning with the post-Ottoman/European colonial ‘match,’ the Middle East was quickly divided up between the British and the French through the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916; however, this match informally began a few years prior when British and Russian forces invaded the declining Ottoman Empire.⁸ For example, in an attempt to corner the Turks, the British army prepared for an invasion of Iraq in the beginning of World War I (this, of course, was beneficial for the Allies; however it was not just for Britain and France to control the oil rich lands, but also helped contribute to ending the reign of the long-held opponent of Russia.) However, they were not prepared for the Turks to react by closing the supply route through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus to stop Russia’s supply of weapons. Some scholars surmise that this struggle of power would ultimately contribute to the fall of the Ottoman Empire, or the final illness of the “Sick Man of Europe.”⁹

Once the Empire fell, the two primary external forces of Britain and France conquered the region. Both the British and the French were eager to claim territory in the region for its geostrategic location, as well as its natural resources. While there was an attempt of some internal/regional participants to play the ‘game,’ such as the Hashemite family as evidenced in the Husayn-McMahon Correspondence,¹⁰ ultimately the region in the colonial-era game was played between the external powers of the British and the French. For these two superpowers of the time, the chessboard of the region was mapped from the creation of artificial borders (e.g. Gertrude Bell and the formation of Iraq),¹¹ to the implementation of artificial government structures that remapped Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.

The second ‘match’ of the Middle East chess game was the shift from the colonial era powers to the United States (U.S.) and the Soviet Union (USSR) during the Cold War. Suddenly, the chess game had different rules; no longer was the region the product of colonial creation, it was now the region in an era of maintenance in the context of containment and strategic intervention.¹² Fragile nation-states from the colonial era were left to their own devices; governments which had been previously established and propped up by the colonial powers underwent transformations as some leaders advocated for a Pan-Arab or Arab nationalism. Minorities not included in the division of states continued to

⁸ Kylie Baxter and Shahram Akbarzadeh, *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Roots of Anti-Americanism*. London: Routledge, 2008. p. 17.

⁹ William R. Polk, *Understanding Iraq: The Whole Sweep of Iraqi History, from Genghis Khan's Mongols to the Ottoman Turks to the British Mandate to the American Occupation*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005. p. 69.

¹⁰ Baxter (2008), p. 11.

¹¹ Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. New York: Norton, 2006. p. 185.

¹² Joel S. Migdal. *Shifting Sands: the United States in the Middle East*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. p. 46.

fight for autonomy, and ultimately, the intervention of U.S. and USSR worked strategically for self-interest.

It is during this period in which nation-states within the region that were not necessarily powers functioned as ‘pawns’ for global power ‘teams.’ While there were certainly ‘teams’ of this chess game before the period (for example, Baxter notes the critical mistake of the Ottoman Empire siding with the Central Powers during World War I, ultimately hammering one of the final nails in the Empire's coffin),¹³ the Cold War context transformed the chess game from a two-member match led by colonial superpowers, to a two-team match in which the superpowers counted advantages based on who and where their respective teammates resided in geostrategic locations. In what some scholars call “the Broader Middle East,” nation-states, such as Afghanistan, became critical pawns in the game due to their geostrategic locations, and the intervention of states as well as the strategic partnerships between regional and global powers functioned as critical alignments, or ‘teams’ in the ‘chess game’ for regional dominance. Overall, both superpowers functioned on the premise that the Middle East in the Cold War context was a geostrategic region that required continual maintenance to avoid the opposing power from emerging victorious.¹⁴

In the post-Cold War context, the rules of the game, as well as the players, changed once again. Gone was the dual power rivalry, as well as “zero-sum relationship” that the U.S. and the USSR projected for almost half century.¹⁵ Instead, a new game emerged in which one player remained (or as some authors argue remains) unchallenged: the United States. The nature of the game transformed as well — scholars allude to the lessening importance of strategic partnerships and instead to the growth of an unchallenged hegemony as the United States made decisions ultimately based on self-interest.¹⁶ Migdal alludes to one such example of the post-Cold War U.S. Presidents George H.W. Bush and William Clinton as they, “took some time [...] to map out the new lay of the land.” Migdal is ultimately referring to the administrations of the aforementioned presidents, in which “ad hoc” decisions were made as the, “US. Foreign policy in the 1990s tended to be by the seat of the pants rather than driven by a coherent decision.”¹⁷ Migdal emphasizes that the post-Cold War policy decisions (or lack thereof) were based on the rise of neoconservative thinkers who during the 1990s focused efforts on strong foreign policy measures based on American values. While neoconservative outlooks were indeed forming during the post-Cold War and pre-9/11 years, this shift in foreign policy, marked with George W. Bush’s administration post-9/11, would be the best example of reflecting the changing attitudes (e.g. invasion of Iraq and the removal of Saddam Hussein) of neo-conservatism as an appropriate outlook, or as Migdal states “a new view of the world,” in U.S. foreign policy.¹⁸

¹³ Baxter (2008), p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁵ Migdal (2014), p. 88.

¹⁶ Baxter (2008), p. 177.

¹⁷ Migdal (2014), p. 212.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

Re-contextualizing through the lens of the chess game, the post-Cold War, pre-9/11 era of the 1990s was an era of the Middle East ‘chess game’ in which the newly unrivalled and increasingly hegemonic U.S. sought new reasons to justify its invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 on the basis of human rights, or as Lila Abu-Lughod states “authorizing moral crusades,” and Iraq in 2003 to build democratic institutions.¹⁹

In order for Russia to recover the losses in Afghanistan and its role in the Middle East and to counter the U.S.’s presence in the region, Vladimir Putin stated, “Russia must act to balance America’s dominance by taking a more proactive approach in the international arena and promoting a bi-polar global situation.”²⁰ As a result, the emergence of either pro-American or anti-American rhetoric/policies became critical in the formation of new ‘teams’ in the region (e.g. Saudi Arabia for the former and Iran for the latter).²¹ But it is important to note that this rhetoric was not based upon a difference in culture or civilizations, but instead upon the differences in power struggles as well as strategic partnerships in the chess game of the region.

Returning to the core metaphor, the rise of unlikely or unassuming players in the Middle East, especially those not on the superpowers’ teams, once again forced other players to renegotiate their positions. For example, with the ‘rise of Iran,’ now unchecked by Iraq (a consequence of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq), other nations in the region must re-evaluate their partnerships, or their teammates, to ensure they are on the team that is most beneficial to them. An important question that must be re-evaluated is: does the team benefit the self-interest of the superpower/team leader? The answer of course depends on each player’s goals in the region as it varies with the maintenance of power, dominance, and world order.

While our discussion is primarily focused on the global vs. global teams, there are regional and non-state actors that are in the midst of playing their own ‘game.’ The most notable example is undoubtedly the Sunni-Shia conflict, in which the 2003 invasion of Iraq upset the centuries-long ‘winning’ team of the Sunnis to re-strategize their ‘game’ against the opposing Shias. In addition, non-state actors, such as the aforementioned political Islamists and stateless Kurdish population, also threaten the status quo of regional Sunni-Shia/U.S./nation-state order.²² However, in the case of the Sunni-Shia conflict, it is important to note that the primary underlying tension in the 21st century is not on the religions nor any cultural divide, but instead upon the power struggle between rising powers in the region. Thus, culture and civilization clashes are merely a façade for the ongoing power struggle.

¹⁹ Lila Abu-Lughod, L. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. p. 54.

²⁰ Shay Har-Zvi, “The Return of the Russian Bear to the Middle East,” Bar Ilan University, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, *Middle East Security Studies*, no. 120.

²¹ Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, p. 158.

²² Baxter (2008), p. 173.

In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini became another ‘game changing player’ in the chessboard of the Middle East, which was already losing some of the strong battalions. The region witnessed a tidal wave of political Islam, and the Sunni-Shia conflict was politicized due to the war in Iraq. Iran thus transformed itself as a new regional player; in fact, Migdal traces the intricate moments in which the United States, after the end of the Cold War, attempted to determine who the new major player in the Middle East would be, that is to say, who the new opponent or the ideal strategic partnership for the U.S. would be. It was here that the U.S. guessed wrong, since they assumed that they would be playing the chess game of the Middle East against Iraq; they had not closely observed the new emerging player of Iran.²³

This ‘rise of Iran’ upset the power balance not only for global, but regional powers as well. In regards to the latter, this upset of the power balance derives not only from the standpoint of a theological perspective (i.e. Sunni-Shia conflict), but also from a political perspective. Countries such as Russia, China and the U.S., to a certain extent (more recently with the Iran Nuclear deal), attempt to create and maintain strategic partnerships with Iran in the region.²⁴ This is a marked shift from the once politically isolated Iran of the late 20th century; now that the balance of power has tipped in the favor of Iran, more players, such as Russia, Hezbollah, and China, are attempting to join a growing ‘team’ of pro-Iranian regional dominance.²⁵

As a player as well as a ‘team leader’ for Shia populations in the Middle East, the ‘rise of Iran’ has led to both an increase in strategic partnerships as well as support for Shia groups in the region. For example, in Phillip Smyth’s “How Iran Is Building Its Syrian Hezbollah,” he notes how Shia opposition groups in Syria, “show loyalty to Tehran, over even the Assad regime, marking an important shift in the wartime dynamic.”²⁶ Smyth describes the ‘hezbollahization,’ a process that began in 2012, of such Syrian Shia groups as marking a partnership between Iran and Russia. In fact, many of the groups in Syria refer to themselves as “Hezbollah in Syria.” These are not the first non-state actors that Iran has influenced; in fact, Smyth points to similarities involving Iran in other regional conflicts, such as Iraq, which are, “multifaceted and carry out ideological as well as other regional power-projection goals.”²⁷ Ultimately, Smyth opines that with no end in sight to the conflict in Syria, the infiltration of Iran in the region is a testament to the regional power’s growing strength, clearly evident in the chess game of the Middle East.

The contemporary Middle East, especially considering the likely redrawing of borders that Haass indicates, is in a state of flux that will ultimately result in a rebalancing of power. This rebalancing, as noted in the previous section, is not self-contained in the redrawing of

²³ Migdal (2014), p. 196.

²⁴ Thomas Friedman, “Iran and the Obama Doctrine,” *The New York Times*. April 5, 2015.

²⁵ Shay Har-Zvi, “The Return of the Russian Bear to the Middle East.”

²⁶ Phillip Smyth. “How Iran Is Building Its Syrian Hezbollah.” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016.

²⁷ Ibid.

borders; the rebalancing is likely to affect the regional and ultimately global power balance of nation-states. While the author previously noted many critical historical matches in which Syria functioned as a pawn, the following section will turn to the current situation in Syria, which can be best defined as its decimation and ultimately self-interested calculated moves by regional and global powers alike. The author's argument is indeed validated by focusing on the Syrian conflict that erupted in 2011. Exploring the past will help us figure out the various players' roles in a chess game that seems to have no rules.

The region commonly known as Syria today was once a cradle of civilization and culture in the Middle East, marked by numerous cities of culture and religion. Before the post-Ottoman chess game, Syria was geographically situated where 'East' and 'West' met both culturally and metaphorically, since the region's primary function was as a trading center in the ancient cities of Damascus and Aleppo. There the mixing of cultures such as Mesopotamian, Phoenician, Roman and the growing Islamic empires interacted as well as established political authority. The state of Syria did not exist until the end of World War I; instead, until the end of the Ottoman Empire, it was a land in which major cities such as Damascus were crucial points of Christian and Muslim intellectual thought, as well as freedom to co-mingle under the borderless and diverse Empire.²⁸ However, as the authors mentioned previously, the consequences of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement (officially the Asia Minor Agreement) and the imperialist artificial borders, have contributed to a plethora of tension for groups in the current Syrian border.

The transformation of Syria in the context of the chess game of the Middle East is stark: Syria has never been a team leader, or even team player, but instead a pawn on the 20th and 21st century chessboard. Migdal notes Syrian importance as well as its demise due to its 'team' of the USSR (one has only to examine the current political situation in Syria to see the long-term effect that choosing the USSR held for Syria). Migdal stresses that Syria, while possibly choosing the wrong team, has been a critical pawn in the 'chess game' of the Middle East. In fact, he notes that, "[Syria] had tipped the balance of power in one direction or another through the ages [...]. When Syria was controlled by or allied with one of the two powers, that bloc tended to dominate."²⁹ In the context of the chess game, Syria was a pawn that, due to its strategic position, had the possibility of benefitting its teammates; however, it could also be easily disposed of as well as experience a polar opposite reaction to whichever team the country was playing for. While Migdal does not elaborate on Syria's history as a critical region for power domination, his reference supports the idea that Syria is ultimately subject to the will of the powerful countries which control it.

An important discussion that can be linked to Migdal's reference is that Syria has been the pawn for proxy wars, wars that are controlled by remote countries. The hegemonic players did not become directly involved, ultimately reflecting the movement of power in either

²⁸ Ellen Lust. *The Middle East*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2014. p. 764.

²⁹ Migdal (2014), p. 141.

direction. These proxy wars by no means ended with the end of the Cold War and the rise of American hegemonic power in the region; in fact, the conflict in Syria today is evidence that proxy wars are still very critical to the involvement of global powers in the region.

Using proxy war as a basis to discuss the current conflict in Syria is not favored by all scholars of the region; in fact, Lionel Beehner's "How Proxy Wars Work" focuses on how the current situation regarding Syria in the Middle East should not be categorized as a proxy war, but instead a "multidimensional war."³⁰ Aside from the semantic issue of definition of proxy war in regards to the overall conflict, Beehner's argument fails due to the fact that there is more evidence, especially through the lens of the 'chess game,' that substantiates the usage of 'proxy war' in defining this conflict. Beehner notes the implications of defining Syria as a proxy war as the following:

First, describing the Syrian quagmire as a proxy war implies that the conflict is mainly about larger fissures in the region, especially the rift between Sunni and Shiite, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Second, it suggests that the conflict will be resolved chiefly by outside actors hashing out their differences at the table. Third, the phrase indicates that the conflict is an incredibly high-stakes game involving existential issues over which compromise is impossible."³¹

However, as has been previously stated, these three requirements of a proxy war are very much applicable in the case of Syria. In particular, the 'rift' between the divisions of Islam, as represented by Iran and Saudi Arabia, is a major contributor to the overall power balance within the region, and therefore, their subsequent involvement (e.g. the aforementioned Iranian funding of Shia groups in Syria to support al-Assad) has major implications on the war overall. Furthermore, it is most likely that the only solution to the proxy war in Syria is that "outside actors [will hash] out their differences;" this is evident in the historical cycle of superpowers selecting pawns for their game. Only when the game has ended between the two chess teams (U.S./pro-rebel/Saudi Arabia/Turkey and Russia/Iran/al-Assad/China) will there be peace in Syria.

The current situation in Syria is leading toward a 'zero-sum' game, where neither of the players (both regional and global) have committed to a clear cause. In a sense, the strategy in which the game in Syria is being played is all in the context of self-interest for each of the players. While this is hardly a new concept in realism-based foreign policy, the actual consequences of such motivations and strategies based on self-interest are that no two regional or global players desire the same outcome in Syria. In particular, the current clash of interests can be seen in the basic disagreement of the current standing regime: Bashar al-Assad, supported by Russia as well as Iran (i.e. teammates) versus the removal of al-Assad,

³⁰ Lionel Beehner, "How Proxy Wars Work And What That Means for Ending the Conflict in Syria," *Foreign Affairs*. November 12, 2015. p. 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

as urged by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the U.S. Yet within even the issue of maintenance or removal of al-Assad, there are different motivations.

More specifically, Russia wants to prop up the al-Assad regime because of the history of Syria as a crucial ally of the Soviet Union since the Cold War. For example the Congressional Research Service states that Russian military involvement in Syria dates back to the 1950's when the former Soviet Union embraced Syrian nationalist rulers as a counterbalance to U.S. regional partners. Soviet and Russian Federation naval forces have accessed a facility at the Syrian port of Tartus since the early 1970s, using it as a logistical hub to enable longer Mediterranean operations. Former Syrian president Hafiz al Asad (1971-2000) regularly hosted Soviet military and economic advisors but resisted attempts by Moscow to leverage its military assistance to gain greater access to shore facilities. Syria eventually became the largest Middle East recipient of Russian equipment and training, with Russia supplying the majority of Syria's tanks, artillery, fixed-wing aircraft, and helicopters.

While Russian personnel have since been based in Syria to maintain Russian military equipment and train Syrians, their numbers have fluctuated over time. The number of Soviet and Eastern European military technicians in Syria reached approximately 5,800 in 1983, according to CIA estimates, then gradually declined. By 2006, there were only 2,000 Russian military personnel, according to an academic study. Some reports suggest that Russian personnel numbers further declined to a few hundred, many of whom were withdrawn for security reasons prior to recent redeployments.³²

Furthermore, Syria is not just a pawn on the Middle East chessboard for ideological purposes (though the humanitarian crisis has shed light onto many of the atrocities such as war-torn Aleppo), but also in the recurring theme of 'teammates': it is no coincidence that Iran and Russia support the same goal, and that Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the U.S. support another. These are teammates supporting their respective teams so as to not ultimately overhaul the strategic partnerships developed so carefully in the chessboard of the Middle East, all of which are guilty of servicing self-interest over reform. Douglas Lovelace notes that:

Regional and global powers, including Iran, Turkey, the Arab Gulf states, Russia, and the United States, responded to the uprising and emerging conflict in Syria in ways that prioritized their own interests and perspectives. Funding, weaponry, political support, and personnel offered by outside forces—both state and nonstate—have contributed directly to the intensification and continuation of fighting across Syria from 2012 to the present.³³

³² U.S. Congress. "Russian Deployments in Syria Complicate U.S. Policy." By Carla E. Humud, Steven Woehrel, Derek E. Mix, and Christopher M. Blanchard. *Congressional Report*. 2015. p. 2.

³³ Douglas C. Lovelace. *Terrorism: Commentary on Security Documents*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. p. 176.

Within the context of power and world order, the authors would like to highlight important and very relevant issues. Haass formulates his judgment from an advantage and self-interest point, but just because there is not anything there for the United States does not mean there is not power at all; in fact, there is almost too much power, and the attempt to balance has resulted in chaos. This chaos is not due to the intended disruption of order by clashes between civilizations, but instead by an attempt to create order that is not Eurocentric, as is evidenced by the struggle for power. Yet the ongoing ‘chess game’ is at the expense of this regional order. The interest of what would benefit the region politically is pushed aside for the global powers as well as regional powers attempting to use their region for personal gain. There is clearly no simple solution; however, dismissing the region as lacking power is not a helpful framework for development. If anything, it dismisses the very chess game that has allowed superpowers to fight for, as well as maintain, hegemony at the expense of others. As early as the 1950s, Lester Pearson warned in his book, *Democracy in World Politics*, that humans were moving into:

An age when different civilizations will have to learn to live side by side in peaceful interchange, learning from each other, studying each other’s history and ideals and culture. The alternative in this overcrowded little world is misunderstanding, tension, clash and catastrophe.³⁴

Clearly, the Middle East is in this critical era where the clashes of civilizations and power rivalry are catastrophically threatening peace and world order.

Ultimately, the chess game of the Middle East is manifested in a variety of different players. The ‘chess game’ of the Middle East is a result of centuries-long power struggles between the great empires and the void they left after endless wars. Perhaps it is best to re-contextualize the triad of regional chess games in the three-tiered model illustrated by Nye; however, rather than the levels containing different forms of power, each tier represents the simultaneous games played by various actors in the Middle East. With the global superpower match on the first tier, political Sunni-Shia conflict on the second, and finally non-state actors on the third, all three ‘games’ are evidence of the critical nature regarding why the Middle East is not only one of the most power-possessing regions of the century, but also one of the most volatile in that none of the three games have a clear ‘winner.’

³⁴ Lester Pearson, *Democracy in World Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955. pp. 83-84.

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