

International Security After the Arab Spring: Domestic and International Sources of the Syrian and Libyan Conflicts (2011-2020)



EFE CAN GÜRCAN

Asst. Prof.
Department of International Relations, İstinye University

Efe Can Gürcan is Associate Dean of Research and Development for the Faculty of Economics, Administrative and Social Sciences at İstinye University. He is also Chair of the Department of Political Science and Public Administration and a faculty member in the Department of International Relations, İstinye University. He serves as Research Associate at the University of Manitoba's Geopolitical Economy Research Group. Gürcan completed his undergraduate education in International Relations at Koç University. He received his master's degree in International Studies from the University of Montréal and earned his PhD in Sociology from Simon Fraser University. He speaks English, French, Spanish and Turkish. His publications include three books as well as more than 30 articles and book chapters on international development, international conflict and international institutions, with a geographical focus on Latin America and the Middle East. His latest book is Multipolarization, South-South Cooperation and the Rise of Post-Hegemonic Governance.

ABSTRACT

The so-called Arab “Spring” may be considered as the most significant geopolitical event and the largest social mobilization that have shaped Greater Middle Eastern politics in the post-Cold War era. The present article examines how this process turned into an Arab “Winter”, having led to the world’s largest humanitarian crises since World War II. Using a geopolitical-economy framework guided by narrative analysis and incorporated comparison, this article focuses on the countries where the Arab Spring process led to gravest consequences: Syria and Libya. The research aim is to develop a comprehensive and multi-dimensional framework that gives due attention to the dialectics of internal and external factors underlying armed conflicts. I argue that the failure of Syria’s Baathist development project constitutes an important root cause for Syria’s tragic destabilization, since it created a favorable environment for foreign intervention and the exploitation of ethno-religious differences by foreign powers. The same can be said of Libya’s domestic policy failures inscribed in its extractivism, liberalization and nepotism, which are coupled with its cultural and socio-demographic vulnerabilities. As far as the external factors of the Syrian conflict are concerned, the evidence suggests that the transformation of ethno-religious tensions into a proxy war is strongly mediated by the foreign policy imperatives of key countries involved in the Syrian conflict. In both cases, geopolitical factors – including energy and human security, military alliances, and foreign-policy commitments – seem to have served as strong incentives for the emergence and diffusion of conflicts.

Keywords: Arab Spring; human security; international development; international security; political ecology; political economy

THE SO-CALLED “ARAB SPRING” MAY BE considered as the most significant geopolitical event and the largest social mobilization that have shaped Greater Middle Eastern politics in the post-Cold War era. It was triggered in December 2010, when Tunisian working class and civic organizations massed after the self-immolation of a street vendor who had been repressed by police forces. Social mobilization was so vigorous and united in its aims that the president was forced to resign after three weeks. Inspired by this success, similar mobilizations began in Egypt, Libya, Syria and elsewhere. Indeed, the Arab Spring conjuncture provided a unique opportunity for global and regional powers to take advantage of the emerging power vacuum in advancing their own geopolitical interests. This being said, Arab

Spring mobilizations differed importantly in their degree of civil society organization and the extent of meddling by foreign powers (Otero & Gürcan, 2016; Chen, 2019/2020).

Eventually, the Arab Spring turned into an Arab “Winter” (Prashad, 2012; Koray, 2019/2020). In Egypt, with considerable popular support, the July 2013 coup d’état restored military rule. Under foreign intervention, Libya became mired in a full-fledged war that has produced tens of thousands of casualties. Many foreign-backed mercenaries in Libya would eventually move on to the Syria campaign. Thanks to continued Western support, Syria and Libya were center stage of one of the world’s largest humanitarian crises since World War II (Otero & Gürcan, 2016; Gürcan, 2019b; 2019e).

The severity of this situation in the Arab Winter conjuncture prompts us to think about the underlying causes that have led to such a wide-scale conflict with grave consequences for international security. Grasping these causal mechanisms would certainly improve our knowledge on how to prevent the emergence and diffusion of such conflicts in the future. From a conventional International Relations perspective, one could indeed grant primacy to external factors associated with the role of geopolitics, proxy war, and foreign intervention. Nevertheless, one point remains to be clarified: what are some of the major domestic factors that have rendered Syria and Libya vulnerable to these external influences in the first place? With this question in mind, the present article employs a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach that combines conventional International Relations approaches with political economy and political ecology.

This article is organized into three sections. The first presents the conceptual and methodological framework used to study the case of Syria and Libya. The two remaining sections explore the internal and external factors underlying the Syrian and Libyan conflicts, respectively.

Conceptual and Methodological Issues

By conventional International Relations approaches, I mostly refer to the study of geopolitical factors leading to the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Libya. For example, Sunni sectarianism and Kurdish autonomism in Syria are among the most pronounced geo-cultural factors that have shaped the regional conflicts through foreign intervention, whereas geopolitical factors are perhaps most clearly identified with energy and human security, military alliances, and the

foreign-policy imperatives of key countries involved in the region, including Syria and Libya (Gürcan, 2019e).

In turn, what I call the domestic factors concern Syria and Libya's political-economic and political-ecological transitions. Particularly, they are related to the exhaustion of Syria's resource-based, or extractivist development model, neoliberal restructuring and environmental de-regulation, which have converged to generate deep-rooted socio-economic tensions paving the way for the Syrian conflict (Gürcan, 2019b). In the case of Libya, policy failures such as oil extractivism, state decentralization and tribalism, liberalization, nepotism and corruption stand out as key factors underlying the Libyan conflict.

Before tackling the case of Syria and Libya, a few words are in order about the methodology that has been employed. My comparative study combines narrative analysis and incorporated comparison within the framework of geopolitical economy. As a school of international relations established by Radhika Desai (2013) and later developed by Efe Can Gürcan (2019a; 2019c; 2019d), geopolitical economy studies how interstate struggles and their interactions with non-state actors are entangled with economic relations. The critique of imperialism and neoliberal capitalism lies at the heart of geopolitical economy. Moreover, geopolitical economy refutes transnationalism and re-asserts the persisting centrality of nation-states in world politics. As such, it allows for a balanced study of how conflicts are shaped by the dialectics of domestic and external factors (Desai, 2010; 2013; 2015a; 2015b; 2016; Gürcan, 2019a; 2019c; 2019d; Tutan, 2019/2020).

In turn, incorporated comparison is a comparative method that "seeks to understand the complexity of global phenomena by addressing

cross-case commonalities, mutual influences, and interdependencies in tandem with spatial or temporal variations, historical specificities, and internal tensions for a fuller understanding of a global configuration at hand” (Gürcan, 2019: 6). Therefore, case selection is made based on the principle of historical connectivity and mutual conditioning (McMichael, 1990; 2000). The rationale for focusing on the case of Syria and Libya in this study is thus to reveal how the Arab Spring conjuncture evolved into a “winter” of conflicts and chaos. Syria and Libya epitomize the ways in which this process unfolds, as different from other major Arab Spring countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, which did not really witness wide-scale conflicts that gravely damaged international security (Otero & Gürcan, 2016).

Finally, the case of Syria and Libya is examined here by means of a narrative strategy (Silver, 2008). This strategy portrays social phenomena as “temporally ordered, sequential, unfolding, and open-ended stories” (Griffin, 1992: 405). In doing so, it logically and chronologically discerns relations of contingency and critical combinations of events or circumstances that create conditions for the emergence and development of social phenomena under study (e.g. Libya’s extractivist policies and their consequences; Syria’s initiation of economic liberalization in 1986, its acceleration in 2006, and the amplification of its negative impact with the multi-season drought in the period 2006-2011) (Griffin, 1992).

Internal Factors in the Syrian and Libyan Conflicts

What are the domestic factors that have played a major role in rendering Syria and Libya vulnerable to foreign intervention? My overall argument is that the failure of Syria’s Baathist development

project constitutes an important root cause for Syria’s tragic destabilization, since it has created a favorable environment for foreign intervention and the exploitation of ethno-religious differences by foreign powers. The same can be said as to Libya’s domestic policy failures inscribed in its extractivism, liberalization and nepotism, which are coupled with its cultural and socio-demographic vulnerabilities.

The development model pursued by contemporary Syria can be traced back to the 1970s following the military coup that brought Hafez al-Assad to power. The Hafez al-Assad regime represented a moderate form of Ba’athism, which consists of a secularly-oriented and socialistic form of Arab nationalism in Syria. While the emphasis on nationalization and agricultural reform was retained, the economic model of moderate Ba’athism developed a claim to a pluralistic economy based on partnership between the public and private sector (Norton & Lampros-Norton, 1982; Bellamy, 2004; Azmeh, 2016).

Hafez al-Assad’s Ba’athism failed in its attempt to create a competent industrial sector, mostly due to the hindrance of an excessive reliance on oil revenues and other energy resources. This reliance was fueled by the oil price boom, especially in the 1970s. Syrian Ba’athism thus opted for an extractivist model and turned into an oil exporter regime following the nationalization of the petroleum sector in 1964 and the completion of the pipeline construction in 1968, which connected oil production of the Northeast region to the port of Tartous. Although Syria’s oil reserves were minor in comparison with other oil giants in the Arab world, the Baathist socialistic project was heavily financed by oil revenues. The excessive emphasis on the oil sector – and the increasing relevance of the natural gas sector since the 1980s – had hindered the development

of a competent and diversified industrial sector. Consequently, the majority of the non-energy sector was only represented by the food production and processing sector. In 1998 alone, the oil and mineral sector contributed to almost 70% of Syrian exports (Collelo, 1987; Azmeh, 2016).

Started in 1986, Syria's early phase of liberalization (ta'addudiyya, or economic pluralism) had already eliminated certain subsidies, facilitated private investments and allowed for a gradual liberalization of prices, trade and foreign exchange.

According to the World Bank (2016), oil rent accounted for over 20% of Syria's GDP (gross domestic product) in 2004. It is therefore not surprising that Syria has been among the countries with the highest rates of energy and agriculture subsidies in the Middle East and North Africa by 2000 (Azmeh, 2016). Eventually, the depletion of Syrian oil reserves in the 1990s revealed the poor sustainability of this extractivist model. According to the US Energy Information Administration, Syria's annual unrefined oil production declined from 582,000 barrels per day in 1996 to 368,000 barrels per day in 2009. Worthy of note that Syria's oil production saw a considerable decline with the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring, from 383,000 barrels in 2010 to 340,000 in 2011 and 23,000 in 2014. Consequently, the Assad regime was unable to generate as much oil revenue to ensure economic and political stability (EIA, 2017).

Besides extractivism, another development that has marked the course of Syrian and Libyan development is liberalization. Started in 1986, Syria's early phase of liberalization (ta'addudiyya,

or economic pluralism) had already eliminated certain subsidies, facilitated private investments and allowed for a gradual liberalization of prices, trade and foreign exchange. The new investment laws adopted in the 1990s were aimed at encouraging the private sector, including rewards such as tax holidays. This process gained momentum when Bashar al-Assad took power in 2000 with a promise of economic and political reform. The objective of building a social market economy was introduced at the Baath Party's 10th Regional Congress in 2005. Syria then focused its efforts on attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), which mostly originated from Arab countries interested in speculative and non-productive sectors such as real estate, finance and tourism, to the detriment of the productive sector and infrastructure investments. As part of the Five-Year Plan (2006-2010), Syria eliminated the state monopoly on imports; liberalized prices, including that of diesel, gas, gasoline and electricity; deregulated the real estate market; licensed private banks; instituted the stock exchange; and consolidated the regulations in favor of the protection of private property (Dahi & Munif, 2012).

It is possible to argue that agriculture was hit the hardest by this economic restructuring through the liberalization of agricultural prices and the elimination of subsidies on energy and agricultural inputs. In fact, the abolition of state farms had already begun in June 2000 (Ababsa, 2013). Under the Five-Year Plan, the price of diesel increased by almost 280% with the cancellation of the subsidy on diesel in May 2008. Although the abolition of subsidies on diesel and fertilizers was beneficial for the environment, the failure of the regime to propose alternative policies that could alleviate agricultural producers' hardships aggravated the political-ecological crisis by undermining producers' access to agri-

cultural inputs at favorable prices. Syria's crisis eventually led to a rural exodus and massive migration to urban areas. In view of these developments, it is not surprising to observe that the first protests against the regime were triggered in Dar'a, a city in the south of the country, known as an agricultural center and a strategic support base for the Syrian regime. Protests against the bankruptcy of new economic policies and corruption later spread to other rural centers like Homs, Idleb and rural areas in Aleppo and Damascus (Azmeah, 2016; De Châtel, 2014).

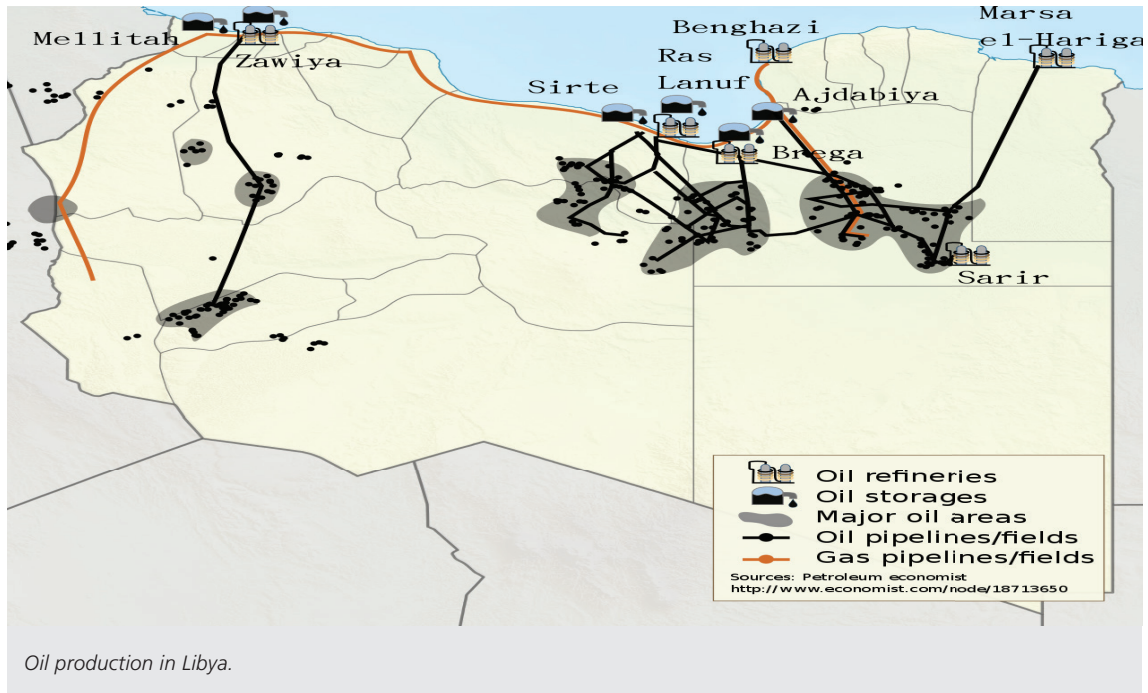
Indeed, the destabilizing effects of extractivist and neoliberal policies have been amplified by major supra-seasonal droughts that are partly attributed to climate change. The 2006-2011 period experienced a multi-season drought, which saw the worst droughts in Syria's modern history, leading to countless instances of crop and livestock devastation and the dislocation of Syrians. The cost of these droughts is beyond measure considering that more than 46% of Syria's population lived in rural areas and 15% of the workforce was employed in agriculture before the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. Overall, it is estimated that the drought – combined with policy failures and other related factors – affected 60% of Syria's agricultural land and killed 85% of livestock in the 2004-2008 period alone (Richani, 2016; Gleick, 2014).

The Syrian crisis is also reflected in the Baathist regime's unsuccessful planning and policy efforts, which find their sharpest expression in the overexploitation of underground water resources and environmental deregulation. Agricultural subsidies were directed towards industrial crops requiring extensive usage of water such as cotton and wheat. Moreover, the regime failed to carry out the modernization of its irrigation infrastructure with the aim of reducing water consumption and making agricultural

production more efficient, which was attempted in 2005 but remained as a failed attempt. Meanwhile, available estimates on Syria indicate that 50% of irrigation depends on groundwater systems and that 78% of groundwater extraction is carried out in an unsustainable way, resulting in the over-pumping of water by wells (Ababsa, 2013; Barnes, 2009; Balanche, 2011; Balanche, 2012; Feitelson & Tubi, 2017; Forsythe, 2017; Gleick, 2014; Salman & Mualla, 2013).

A similar situation applies to the case of Libya. Libya's economic and political instability –which paved the way for foreign intervention and the fall of the Gaddafi regime– has much to do with the extractivist development model adopted in the Gaddafi era (1969-2011). Libya had experienced tremendous human development by the 1980s thanks to rising oil revenues. This was noticeable, not only in rising literacy rates, women's improved status, improved housing and public health-care system, but also in Libya's national average income, which increased by nearly 50% between 1969 and 1980 (World Inequality Database, 2020). Oil revenues reached the peak with a rise of over 96% in the 1970-1984 period, from around 1.57 million to 3.1 million of Libyan dinars. However, Libya failed to take this opportunity to consolidate and diversify its industrial base, which impeded the sustainability of its human development gains in the longer term (Ali, 2011; Otman & Karlberg, 2007; Prashad, 2012; Wehrey, 2018; St John, 2013). Oil revenues fell to a record low of 1.34 million of Libyan dinars by 1986, which accounted for nearly 54% of total government revenues, dropping from 69% in 1984 (Ali, 2011).

Libya epitomizes the problem of resource curse, where the profitability of abundant natural resources leads to poor economic development and excessive dependency on a fluctuating



world market despite impressive but short-term gains. Falling crude oil prices (nominal, per barrel) –from \$37.42 in 1980 to \$16.56 in 1999 (Bilgin, 2016: 40) – helped paralyze the Libyan economy and intensified socioeconomic inequalities. This went hand in hand with a nearly 50% decline in average national income in the 1980s and an almost 20% decline in average national income in the 1990s (World Inequality Database, 2020). Moreover, a quick look at Libya’s oil revenues prior to the fall of the Gaddafi regime would reveal the impact of its policies. Oil revenues accounted for over 90% of public revenues, 75% of the national budget and 95% of export revenues before Gaddafi’s death (Kane, 2016).

In Libya, Western sanctions had combined with the negative consequences of decreasing oil revenues and the 1987 defeat in the war with Chad to encourage Gaddafi to give serious compromises in its domestic and foreign policy (Otman & Karlberg, 2007). Gaddafi abandoned his intentions to radically transform Libya’s clan

structure and opted for a decentralizing strategy of inviting a number of allied clans to local governance and security forces, which gained a certain level of autonomy from the state (Erdağ, 2017; Hüsken, 2019; Joffé, 2013). Indeed, this strategy impeded the process of nation-state building and contributed to the further heterogenization of Libyan society. Libya’s cultural heterogenization can also be associated with Gaddafi’s stateless state model, theoretically modeled on direct democracy, customs and community (i.e. tribe and clan) engagement. The idea of stateless state (the *Jamahiriyya*, or the state of the masses) acted as a hinderance to the formation of well-functioning and stable institutions at the national level (Northern & Pack, 2013; Erdağ, 2017; Sawani, 2013; Prashad, 2012).

What is more, Libya started to normalize its relations with the West in 2003 (Erdağ, 2017; Otman & Karlberg, 2007; Wehrey, 2018; St John, 2013). Libya also underwent three successive waves of liberalization in (1987, 1993, and 2003),

which weakened the organic bonds between the state and the working masses. Privatization went hand in hand with massive corruption and increasing cost of living, which in turn had an alienating effect on the working masses (Otman & Karlberg, 2007; St John, 2013). Interestingly, Libya was praised by the International Monetary Fund for its “ambitious reform agenda” in early 2011, prior to the Western intervention (Prashad, 2012: 93).

It is possible to suggest that Libya’s geographic and demographic structure serves to amplify the negative consequences of policy failures.

Under liberalization, Gaddafi’s close circle and tribe (i.e. the Qadhafa) took the lead in crafting a nepotist state structure (Erdağ, 2017; Prashad, 2012; Joffé, 2013; St John, 2013). Privatization and rising nepotism resulted in the Gaddafi regime abandoning its former anti-imperialism and devoting special efforts to overcoming political and economic isolation after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Erdağ, 2017). Liberalization and the penetration of Western companies in the Libyan market were accompanied by American military officers and contractors establishing organic ties with Libyan officers, some of whom were to take active part in the Western intervention in in 2011 (Wehrey, 2018). Consequently, Libya became a base of systematic torture and interrogation for suspected terrorists servicing the United States and Britain in the 2000s (O’Sullivan, 2018; Prashad, 2012; Wehrey, 2018). In the final analysis, one could argue that the heterogenization of Libyan society through liberalization, decentralization

and globalization has served to expose Libya to foreign intervention in the longer term.

It is possible to suggest that Libya’s geographic and demographic structure serves to amplify the negative consequences of policy failures. Libya is Africa’s fourth largest country by surface area, despite being ranked one of the countries with sparsest population (Otman & Karlberg, 2007). 95% of Libya’s population is estimated to concentrate in coastal regions, which represent only 1% of the total surface area. Tripoli is home to one-third of the population (Otman & Karlberg, 2007; Cole & Khan, 2015). What is more, Libya is fragmented into nearly 140 tribes and clans originating from neighboring countries such as Tunisia, Chad and Egypt (Erdağ, 2017). Tribal and clan affiliation co-exists with religious identities even in urban areas, even though Libya does not suffer from the problem of sectarianism, unlike Syria (Hüsken, 2019; Sawani, 2013; St John, 2013). Indeed, this situation renders Libya highly vulnerable to global security challenges.

Besides persisting tribe and clan heterogeneity facilitated through decentralization strategies, Libya is divided into three separate regions with different historical and cultural legacies (the Eastern region of Cyrenaica, the Western region of Tripolitania and the Southern region of Fezzan) (Otman & Karlberg, 2007; Prashad, 2012). In Libya, there has been a historical rivalry between the East and the West in the post-colonial era. King Idris’ reign (1951-1969) in the pre-Gaddafi era was based on Libya’s Eastern part, and the country’s axis of power shifted to the West under Gaddafi’s rule. In the Gaddafi era (1969-2011), Libya’s Eastern region was relegated to underdevelopment, despite its contribution to two-thirds of national oil production. Not surprisingly, Libya’s marginalized Eastern region served as a strategic base for anti-Gaddafi forces in the 2010s (Erdağ, 2017; Prashad, 2012; Kane, 2016).

To finish with this section, it would be difficult to over-emphasize the importance of political-economic, geo-demographic and political-ecological factors in the Syrian and Libyan conflicts. The evidence shows that one of the most important causes of the Syrian tragedy relates to the outbreak of a political-ecological crisis whose origins are to be found in the long-term consequences of Syria's (a) oil-centered extractivist model of development adopted since the 1970s and its legacy reflected in the government's failure to generate adequate livelihood, (b) neo-liberal restructuring that has widened inequalities and bankrupted the agriculture since 2000, and (c) environment-blind policies that have neglected the severity of droughts, encouraged water intensive crops and the over-exploitation of water resources, and failed to address the modernization of the irrigation infrastructure. In a similar fashion, Libya's policy failures such as extractivism, liberalization, and nepotism combined with cultural heterogeneity and other geo-demographic factors to facilitate socioeconomic and political instability.

Internal Factors in the Syrian and Libyan Conflicts

The arguments highlighting the role of the geopolitics of ethno-religious conflicts on a global scale and foreign intervention in the Syrian conflict are perhaps better known than Syria's political ecology and political economy (Otero & Gürcan, 2016; Gürcan, 2019b). First of all, the fragmented state of Syria's ethno-religious configuration is beyond question: 12% of the Syrian population belongs to the Alawi community, of which President Bashar al-Assad is a member; 64% of the population is part of the Sunni Arab community, while Christians, Kurds and Druze represent 9%, 10% and 3% of the Syrian population, respectively (Phillips, 2015). The impli-

The role of broader geopolitical factors in the transformation of the Syrian conflict into a proxy war cannot be ignored, either.

cations of regional interventions for ethno-religious conflicts are of an utmost importance for the diffusion of the Syrian conflict. Indeed, the contemporary resurgence of sectarian and ethno-political conflicts is due in large measure to US military intervention in Iraq, whereby Kurdish autonomy and Islamist terrorists gained ground in the entire region. Moreover, donations offered by foreign individuals and governments of the Arab Gulf states to various Islamist factions have also played a crucial role in the emergence and spread of the Syrian conflict. These actors have mainly aimed at extending the regional Sunni hegemony and proactively opposed Iran's increased activism. Rough calculations point to a spending of about \$3 billion by Qatar in the 2012-2013 period and over \$10 billion by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in the 2013-2015 period alone (Jaafar & Woertz, 2016; Richani, 2016). Similar to the Arab Gulf states, Turkey has been contributing the Syrian conflict by supporting Sunni sectarianism in order to motivate the pro-Turkish Sunni and jihadist opposition in Syria with the aim of expanding its sphere of influence (Otero & Gürcan, 2016).

The role of broader geopolitical factors in the transformation of the Syrian conflict into a proxy war cannot be ignored, either (Gürcan, 2019e; Otero & Gürcan, 2016). For example, Syria's strategic position on energy routes and the discovery of abundant natural gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean in 2010 have attracted regional players such as Israel, Turkey and Qatar, which had a vested interest in destabilizing Syria in order to implement their own energy projects and

counter Iran's regional influence (Delanoë, 2014; Engdahl, 2013; Otero & Gürcan, 2016; Ipek, 2017; Winrow, 2016). The discovery of large conventional gas reserves takes on a greater relevance to Syria's strategic position as a center of attention in geopolitical conflict in light of the global integration of natural gas markets and a 25% increase of global gas consumption in the last decade, which seems to support the idea of a "Golden Age of Gas" (Bridge & Bradshaw, 2017).

As part of Turkey's energy aspirations, the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline was initiated in March 2015. Its successful construction would open up a gas corridor from Azerbaijan through Georgia and Turkey to Europe (Nader, 2013). According to Delanoë (2014),. Interestingly enough, the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline project was accepted in 2010 and formally announced in 2011 right before the onset of the Syrian conflict (Ahmed, 2013; UPI, 2011). This project presented a direct competition to the Qatar-Turkey pipeline project. The Qatar-Turkey project was to connect Qatar's natural gas over Turkey via Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria. Syria rejected this project in 2009 to protect the interests of Russia – Syria's main economic partner. As such, Syria's rejection is one of the main reasons for Turkey and Qatar's active involvement in the Syrian conflict (Nader, 2013). Qatar does not conceal its ambition to become the world's leading liquefied natural gas exporter (Engdahl, 2013). One could therefore argue that regional players' intervention seeks to prevent Syria from engaging in energy cooperation with Iran and Russia and claiming the abundant energy resources in the Levantine basin. Regional players seem to resort to destabilization attempts in the case of failed deterrence.

Libya's geopolitics is equally important from the perspective of global and regional powers seeking to advance their own agendas by taking

advantage of the emerging power vacuum in the Arab Spring conjuncture (O'Sullivan, 2018; Prashad, 2012). Libya constitutes a strategic bridge that connects the Middle East, Africa, and Europe (Erdağ, 2017; Wehrey, 2018). It owns Africa's largest oil reserves and fifth largest natural gas reserves. Meanwhile, Libya's oil is called "sweet crude" for its low cost of production, low sulfur content, and proximity to Europe. Libya's control is also crucial for controlling the entire Levant, where newly discovered natural gas and oil resources intensify geopolitical rivalry. The Mediterranean region is not only home to one-third of global maritime commerce, but also possesses one of the most abundant sources of natural gas in the world. Furthermore, Libya dominates African migratory flows towards Europe and other Middle Eastern countries in the region (O'Sullivan, 2018; Prashad, 2012). Controlling Libya also means controlling migratory flows, which can be used as a strategic leverage against regional countries.



Syrian soldiers hold Syrian flags on the Tal al-Harrah in the northwestern countryside of Daraa Province, Syria, July 19, 2018. (Xinhua)

A common mistake is to call the Libyan conflict a "civil war". This conflict is rather escalated by foreign powers who take advantage of the regional power vacuum. As Ramazan Erdağ

(2017: 31) argues: “The use of force by NATO and allies and the military assistance it provided changed the balance of power in favor of the opposition. It is not improper to say that the Libyan revolution could not have been achieved in the absence of the external transformation in neighboring countries and NATO’s intervention.” The conflict following the NATO intervention in 2011 is led by Khalifa Haftar, a Libyan-American warlord supported by countries such as France, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Haftar fights against the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA). Similar to GNA, Haftar’s forces heavily rely on militias from neighboring countries and even Salafist elements in the region. In supporting Haftar, France seeks to outrival Germany and Italy’s political and economic influence in the region. 11% of France’s oil consumption originates from Libya (Northern & Pack, 2013). As a matter of fact, Italy used to be Libya’s biggest trade partner as the most important oil producer there (Northern & Pack, 2013). It is also known that as much as 11% of Germany’s oil demand depends on Libyan oil. Germany has crucial infrastructure and energy investments in Libya. Similar to Italy, Germany used to count on the Gaddafi regime in controlling migratory flows from Africa. Moreover, Egypt and the UAE are primarily interested in cleaning the region of radical religious elements and ensuring border security. The UAE’s drive to assert itself as an independent geopolitical player and a proxy for US interests is also to be taken into account. Egypt and the UAE’s rivalry with Turkey and Qatar could also be seen as an important factor in their support for Haftar’s forces (Rickli, 2016; Ulrichsen, 2016; Wehrey, 2018; Northern & Pack, 2013).

Russia seems to be fully aware of Libya’s strategic position that can be leveraged against European powers that are fearful of migratory flows and concerned with their energy security (Gürcan, 2019d). This may also explain the presence of the Wagner Group, a Russian military contractor in Libya as well as Russia’s position as a powerful mediator in the conflict. Russia has crucial geopolitical and economic interests in Libya (Larssen, 2016; Prashad, 2012), which can be broadly summarized in two major points. First, Russia’s increasing engagement contributes directly to the multipolarization of world politics by constraining Western powers’ prestige and military influence. The general opinion about the Libyan crisis is that the Western intervention for regime change in Libya, and the West’s lack of engagement after Gaddafi’s death, are the chief factors contributing to the chaotic environment of the post-Gaddafi era (Gürcan, 2019d). Therefore, Russia sees the Libyan conjuncture as a great opportunity to fill the power vacuum created by the Western powers (Neale, 2018). Russia had also shown interest in constructing naval bases on Libya’s eastern coasts in 2008 and 2009. Therefore, Russia’s increasing involvement in post-Gaddafi Libya could be indirectly associated with its intention to increase its global military influence by contributing to the multipolarization of world politics. In Russia’s quest for global military influence, against the backdrop of its intensifying confrontation with the Western powers, the Mediterranean basin is of crucial importance. Relatedly, Libya’s proximity to Europe is a great source of concern for European powers, who have already been suffering a historic wave of migration from Arab Spring and African countries. Russia’s political, economic, and military involvement would certainly force its hand in influencing Europe’s

geopolitics (Eljarh, 2018; Neale, 2018). Second, Gaddafi's death dealt a huge economic blow to Russia, which lost contracts worth billions of dollars in strategic sectors such as energy, construction, infrastructure, and defense. Russia is now interested in regaining its former economic concessions in the face of Northern economic sanctions and stagnation. Russia is therefore seeking both to contribute to Libya's reconstruction efforts and to exploit its vast oil resources (Eljarh, 2018; Kuznetsov, Naumkin & Zvyagel'skaya, 2018; Neale, 2018; Gürcan, 2019d).

Libya and Syria's foreign policy attitudes are also a cause for Western resentment as another driving factor behind foreign intervention.

As another key player in the Libyan conflict, Turkey seems to be facing direct and concrete threats originating from the Mediterranean region. Since the early 2000s, the Greek Cypriot governments have been illegally declaring exclusive economic zones and expanding its drilling zones in the Levant. Israel, the United States, Greece and the Greek Cypriot governments have been holding military drills such as Noble Dina and Nemesis, directly targeting Turkey. Turkey also seeks to desperately improve its energy security and to be in closer proximity with Egypt for expanding its military influence against the Sisi regime as a Muslim Brotherhood rival. In addition, the so-called Seville Map – prepared with the European Union and Greece's initiative – unilaterally limits Turkey's maritime area to a small zone around the Bay of Antalya, despite the fact that Turkey possesses the longest coastline in the Mediterranean region. Indeed, Qatar is Turkey's key ally in the region as a rival of the UAE, recently alienated from the United

States and its regional allies. It thus supports Libya's UN-backed government (Ulrichsen, 2016; Rickli, 2016).

Libya and Syria's foreign policy attitudes are also a cause for Western resentment as another driving factor behind foreign intervention. For example, Western powers had long been resenting Syria's foreign policy commitments and alliances. Syria had opposed the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Prior to the invasion, Syria defied US sanctions by receiving Iraqi oil, facilitated sales of arms to Iraq, and allowed the movement of thousands of Arab resistance fighters across the Iraqi border. After the invasion, certain fleeing Iraqi officials took refuge in Syria (Hinnebusch, 2009). As acknowledged by Raymond Hinnebusch (2009: 18-19), these moves reflected Syria's stance for the "Arab nationalist identity rather than a pure calculus of interest", which displeased the United States and Europe by making Syria look like "the last remaining voice of Arab nationalism". Furthermore, the US invasion of Iraq also consolidated Syria's partnership with Iran against the US (Hinnebusch, 2009). For Iran whose participation has been crucial in the course of the Syrian conflict, sustained cooperation with the Assad regime offers guaranteed access to Lebanon and the rest of the Middle East along with an opportunity to expand its regional Shiite influence and constrain Israel's regional power (Türkeş, 2016; Öniş, 2014). Iran's presence in Syria is also related to its concerns about Assad's possible departure, which could result in a Sunni government and concomitantly Iran's regional isolation (Barfi, 2016). Indeed, Hezbollah – which has been present since the very beginning of the Syrian conflict and associated with Iran's proxy war – would greatly suffer from such outcomes. Last but not least, Syria is still home to the Russian naval facility in Tartous, which provides Russia's sole access to the Mediterranean for commercial and military purposes (Gordon, 2017).

Syria's isolation from the West – as a key factor that has indirectly fueled the Syrian conflict in 2011 – was not merely rooted in the Iraqi question, the Perso-Syrian alliance, and Russia's involvement.

As far as the external factors of the Syrian conflict are concerned, the evidence suggests that the transformation of ethno-religious tensions into a proxy war is strongly mediated by the foreign policy imperatives of key countries involved in the Syrian conflict.

In Syria's eyes, Lebanon is seen as a natural sphere of influence that is crucial to Syria's national security. It was known that Syrian opposition elements took refuge in Lebanon. Moreover, due to its geographical location, the Syrian regime cannot afford Lebanon to become an Israeli or Western outpost that could also constrain the reach of Arab nationalism. The Lebanon-based Shiite Hezbollah is of strategic importance for Syria in its efforts to constrain Israel's regional power and consolidating its alliances with Iran. Additionally, the West was also troubled with the Syrian intervention in Lebanon in 2005, which resulted in sanctions being placed on Syria. In addition, Syria was blamed for the assassination of Lebanese ex-Prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, who was seen as an important ally of the Saudi Arabia regime (Phillips, 2015). In addition, Israel's involvement in Syria is also worth addressing. Not only is Syria a strategic gate for Iran, which seeks regional hegemony as Israel's arch enemy, but also Israel is interested in dominating the gas and oil and water resources in the Golan Heights and the Levantine basin by undermining Syria's national security (Ağdemir, 2015). As was discussed in the previous section,

Libya was similarly isolated by the West due to its anti-imperialist foreign policy stance before the 2000s. It would be worthwhile to mention here how Libya's anti-imperialism alienated the West and resulted in the US sanctions imposed in 1986 and the United Nations sanctions adopted in 1992. The cost of the UN sanctions to the Libyan economy alone is estimated at \$33 billion (Otman & Karlberg, 2007; Prashad, 2012; Wehrey, 2018).

Review and Discussion

The Syrian and Libyan cases are illustrative of how extractivist development strategies could inhibit industrialization and generate over-dependency on external markets. Certainly, neoliberal restructuring has done nothing but exacerbate these outcomes by completely destroying these countries' social fabric and intensifying the already-existing socioeconomic tensions. Furthermore, Syria's mismanagement of environmental problems demonstrates that the environment is more than a mere development issue and that it also constitutes a national-security issue. In the future, the case of Syria and Libya is hoped to encourage multi-disciplinary research on the political-economic and political-ecological foundations of national security.

As far as the external factors of the Syrian conflict are concerned, the evidence suggests that the transformation of ethno-religious tensions into a proxy war is strongly mediated by the foreign policy imperatives of key countries involved in the Syrian conflict. In both cases, geopolitical factors – including energy and human security, military alliances, and foreign-policy commitments – seem to have served as strong incentives for the emergence and diffusion of conflicts. The centrality of geopolitical factors in shaping the Syrian and Libyan conflicts calls attention to the region's need for constituting strong regional cooperation mechanisms, which

would prioritize key issues such as Western interventionism, national sovereignty, military cooperation, and human and energy security. Eurasia and Latin America's experience of regionalism (Gürcan, 2019c; 2019d) – e.g. the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Collective Security Treaty Organization, Union of South American Nations, Bolivarian Alliance for Our America – would provide crucial hints in constraining the Western military aggression, while establishing stable, institutionalized channels of political, economic, military, and cultural cooperation between Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Iran, and Russia, among others. 🌐

References

- Ababsa, M. (2013). Crise Agraire, Crise Foncière et Sécheresse En Syrie (2000-2011). *Maghreb – Machrek*, 1(215), 101–122.
- Ağdemir, A. M. (2015). Israel and the Gas Resources of the Levant Basin. *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, 6(2), 136–154.
- Ahmed, N. (2013, August 30). Syria Intervention Plan Fueled by Oil Interests, Not Chemical Weapon Concern. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2013/aug/30/syria-chemical-attack-war-intervention-oil-gas-energy-pipelines>.
- Ali, I. (2011). *Oil revenue and economic development case of Libyan economy (1970-2007)* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=4463&context=theses>.
- Azmeh, S. (2016). Syria's Passage to Conflict: The End of the 'Developmental Rentier Fix' and the Consolidation of New Elite Rule. *Politics & Society*, 44(4), 499–523.
- Balanche, F. (2011). Géographie de La Révolte Syrienne. *Outre-Terre*, 3(29), 437–458.
- Balanche, F. (2012). La Modernisation Des Systèmes d'Irrigation Dans Le Nord-Est Syrien: La Bureaucratie Au Coeur de La Relation Eau et Pouvoir. *Méditerrané*, 8(119), 59–72.
- Barfi, B. (2016, January 24). The Real Reason Why Iran Backs Syria. *The National Interest*. Retrieved from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-real-reason-why-iran-backs-syria-14999>.
- Barnes, J. (2009). Managing the Waters of Ba'th Country: The Politics of Water Scarcity in Syria. *Geopolitics*, 14(3), 510–530.
- Bellamy, A. (2004). *Security Communities and Their Neighbours: Regional Fortresses or Global Integrators?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bilgin, M. (2012). Energy Transitions and International Security in the Twenty-first Century. In S. F. Krishna-Hensel (Ed.), *New Security Frontiers Critical Energy and the Resource Challenge*. London: Routledge.
- Bridge, G. & Bradshaw, M. (2017). Making a Global Gas Market: Territoriality and Production Networks in Liquefied Natural Gas. *Economic Geography*, 93(3), 215–240.
- Chen, Y. (2019/2020). China's Potential Role in the Remaking of Regional Order in the Middle East: Motivations, Opportunities and Challenges. *Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly*, 1(1), 55–66.
- Cole, P. & Khan, U. (2015). The Fall of Tripoli: Part 1. In P. Cole & B. McQuinn (Eds.), *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath* (pp. 55–80). UK: Oxford University Press.
- Collelo, T. (1987). *Syria: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO.
- Dahi, O. S. & Munif, Y. (2012). Revolts in Syria: Tracking the Convergence Between Authoritarianism and Neoliberalism. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 47(4), 323–332.
- De Châtel, F. (2014). The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising: Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 50(4), 521–535.
- Delanoë, I. (2014). *The Syrian Crisis: A Challenge to the Black Sea Stability*. Istanbul: Center for International and European Studies, Kadir Has University.
- Desai, R. (2010). The Absent Geopolitics of Pure Capitalism. *World Review of Political Economy*, 1(3), 463–484.
- Desai, R. (2013). *Geopolitical Economy: After US Hegemony, Globalization and Empire*. London: Pluto Press.
- Desai, R. (2015a). Introduction: From the neoclassical diversion to geopolitical economy. *Research in Political Economy*, 30(1), 1–44.
- Desai, R. (2015b). Introduction: The Materiality of Nations in Geopolitical Economy. *World Review of Political Economy*, 6(4), 449–458.
- Desai, R. (2016). Introduction: Putting Geopolitical Economy to Work. *Research in Political Economy*, 30(2), 1–21.
- EIA (2017). Database, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/data/browser/#/?c=410000002000060000000000000000>

- 00020000000000000001&vs=INTL.44-1-AFRC-QBTU.A&vo=0&v=H&end=2015.
- Eljarh, M. (2018, February 20). Russia's Ambitions in Libya. *Valdai Discussion Club*. Retrieved from <http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-s-ambitions-in-libya>
- Engdahl, F. W. (2013, January 27). The New Mediterranean Oil and Gas Bonanza (Part II: Rising Energy Tensions in the Aegean—Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Syria). *Global Research*. Retrieved from <https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-new-mediterranean-oil-and-gas-bonanza/29609>.
- Erdağ, R. (2017). *Libya in the Arab Spring From Revolution to Insecurity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Feitelson, E. & Tubi, A. (2017). A Main Driver or an Intermediate Variable? Climate Change, Water and Security in the Middle East. *Global Environmental Change*, 44(1), 39–48.
- Forsythe, D. P. (2017). Water and Politics in the Tigris–Euphrates Basin: Hope for Negative Learning? In J. A Cahan (Ed.), *Water Security in the Middle East* (pp. 167–84). London: Anthem Press.
- Gleick, P. H. (2014). Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria. *Weather, Climate, and Society*, 6 (1), 331–340.
- Gordon, S. (2017, April 8). Russian Resolve: Why Syria Matters to Putin. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/russian-resolve-why-syria-matters-to-putin/article34643406/>.
- Gürcan, E. C. (2019a). BRICS Ülkelerinin Afrika'daki Yükselişine Jeopolitik Ekonomi Penceresinden Bir Bakış [A Geopolitical-Economic Perspective into the BRICS' Rise in Africa]. *Gümüşhane Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 34(1), 59–88.
- Gürcan, E. C. (2019b). Extractivism, Neoliberalism, and the Environment: Revisiting the Syrian Conflict from an Ecological Justice Perspective. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 30(3), 91–109.
- Gürcan, E. C. (2019c). Geopolitical Economy of Post-Hegemonic Regionalism in Latin America and Eurasia. *Research in Political Economy*, 34(1), 59–88.
- Gürcan, E. C. (2019d). *Multipolarization, South-South Cooperation and the Rise of Post-Hegemonic Governance*. New York: Routledge.
- Gürcan, E. C. (2019e). Political Geography of Turkey's Intervention in Syria: Underlying Causes and Consequences (2011-2016). *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research*, 11(1), 1-10.
- Gürcan, E. C. (2019/2020). Building a Fair World Order in a Post-American Age. *Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly*, 1(1), 6-16.
- Griffin, L. J. (1992). Temporality, Events, and Explanation in Historical Sociology: An Introduction. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 20(1), 403-426.
- Hinnebusch, R. (2009). Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar Al-Asad. *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, 1(1), 7–26.
- Hüsken, T. (2019). *Tribal Politics in the Borderland of Egypt and Libya*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ipek, P. (2017). Oil and Intra-State Conflict in Iraq and Syria: Sub-State Actors and Challenges for Turkey's Energy Security. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 53(3), 406–419.
- Jaafar, H. & Woertz, E. (2016). Agriculture as a Funding Source of ISIS: A GIS and Remote Sensing Analysis. *Food Policy*, 64(1), 14–25.
- Joffé, G. (2013) Civil Activism and the Roots of the 2011 Uprisings. In Pack J. (Eds.), *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kane, S. (2016). Barqa Reborn? Eastern Regionalism and Libya's Political Transition. In P. Cole & B. McQuinn (Eds.), *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath* (pp. 205-228). UK: Oxford University Press.
- Koray, S. (2019/2020). The Belt and Road Initiative is Opening up New Horizons. *Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly*, 1(1), 17–22.
- Kuznetsov, V., Naumkin, V. & Zvyagelskaya, I. (2018). Russia in the Middle East: The Harmony of Polyphony. Moscow: *Valdai Discussion Club*. Retrieved from <http://valdaiclub.com/files/18375/>
- Larssen, A. K. (2016). Russia. In D. Henriksen & A. K. Larssen (Eds.), *Political Rationale and International Consequences of the War in Libya*. UK: Oxford University Press.
- McMichael, P. (1990). Incorporating Comparison within a World-Historical Perspective: An Alternative Comparative Method. *American Sociological Review*, 55(3), 385-397.
- McMichael, P. (2000). World-Systems Analysis, Globalization, and Incorporated Comparison. *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 6(3), 385-397.
- Nader, S. (2013, October 11). Natural Gas Resources May Be Backstory in Syria War. *Center For Geopolitical Analysis*. Retrieved from <http://icmu.nyc.gr/%20Natural-Gas-Resources-May-Be-Backstory-in-Syria-War>
- Neale, E. (2018, February 14). Russia: Is Syria's Fate Libya's Future? *Atlantic Council*. Retrieved from

- <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/russia-is-syria-s-fate-libya-s-future-2>
- Northern, R. & Pack, J. (2013). The Role of Outside Actors. In J. Pack (Ed.), *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Norton, A. R. & Lampros-Norton D. J. (1982). Militant Protest and Political Violence Under the Banner of Islam. *Armed Forces & Society*, 9(1), 3–19.
- O’Sullivan, S. (2018). *Military Intervention in the Middle East and North Africa The Case of NATO*. New York: Routledge.
- Otero, G. & Gürcan E. C. (2016). The Arab Spring and the Syrian Refugee Crisis. *The Monitor: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*, 22(5), 16–17.
- Otman, W. & Karlbeg, E. (2007). *The Libyan Economy Economic Diversification and International Repositioning*. Heidelberg: Springer- Verlag.
- Öniş, Z. (2014). Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East. *Mediterranean Politics*, 19(2), 203–219.
- Phillips, C. (2015). Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(2), 357–376.
- Prashad, V. (2012). *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter*. California: AK Press.
- Richani, N. (2016). The Political Economy and Complex Interdependency of the War System in Syria. *Civil Wars*, 18(1), 45–68.
- Rickli, J. (2016). The Political Rationale and Implications of the United Arab Emirates’ Military Involvement in Libya. In D. Henriksen & A. K. Larssen (Eds.), *Political Rationale and International Consequences of the War in Libya*. UK: Oxford University Press.
- Sawani, Y.M. (2013). Dynamics of Continuity and Change. In Pack J. (Eds.), *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Salman, M. & Mualla, W. (2013). The Utilization of Water Resources for Agriculture in Syria: Analysis of Current Situation and Future Challenges. *Erice International Seminars on Planetary Emergencies*, 30th session, 263–274. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1142/9789812702753_0031.
- Silver, B. C. (2008). *Forces of Labor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- St John, R.B. (2013). The Post-Qadhafi Economy. In: Pack J. (Ed.) *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tutan, U. (2019/2020). Political-Economic Reconfigurations in Global Power Systems: From the 18th Century up Until Today. *Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly*, 1(1), 31–42.
- Türkeş, M. (2016). Decomposing Neo-Ottoman Hegemony. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 18, 191–216.
- Ulrichsen, K. (2016). The Rationale and Implications of Qatar’s Intervention in Libya. In D. Henriksen & A. K. Larssen (Eds.), *Political Rationale and International Consequences of the War in Libya*. UK: Oxford University Press.
- UPI (United Press International). (2011, July 25). Islamic Pipeline’ Seeks Euro Gas Markets. Retrieved from www.upi.com/Business_News/Energy-Industry/2011/07/25/Islamic-pipeline-seeks-Euro-gas-markets/UPI-13971311588240.
- Wehrey, F. (2018). *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Winrow, G. M. (2016). The Anatomy of a Possible Pipeline: The Case of Turkey and Leviathan and Gas Politics in the Eastern Mediterranean. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 18(5), 431–447.
- World Bank. (2016). Online Database. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org>.
- World Inequality Database. (2020). World Inequality Database. Retrieved from <https://wid.world/>