

MASTER'S THESIS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

# Seeking Status in the Middle East

**A Social Identity Theory-exploration of Russia's Middle East Policy (2011-2016)**

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## **Abstract**

Moscow's Middle East policy has propelled Russia towards an influential regional role as a power broker in the wake of American retrenchment since the early 2010s. Yet, Russia's new role has come with unenviable burdens and, moreover, is poorly explained by referring to Russia's clear material interests in the region. Through insights of Social Psychology's Social Identity Theory, this study presents status aspirations as the main impetus of Russia's Middle East policy. By employing a process-tracing method, this study has found that Russia sought to pursue great power status through the exercise of two identity management strategies, social competition and social creativity, from 2011 to 2016. Despite an array of military and diplomatic successes in Syria and beyond, it remains doubtful whether Russia possesses sufficient material vigor to acquire recognition as a great power in the Middle East.

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## **List of abbreviations**

CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IR	International Relations
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISSG	International Syria Support Group
LAS	League of Arab States
NCR	Neoclassical Realism
SC	(UN) Security Council
SIT	Social Identity Theory
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

# I

## Introduction

The Russian flag waves triumphantly over Kohani Air Base on 15 November 2019, as Mi-17 helicopters descend onto the airfield's runway and Russian troops eagerly take control of the compound. Roughly two years earlier, in 2017, Kobani Air Base was built by US forces in Northern Syria to serve as the largest and main logistical hub in support of the US-led military intervention against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (D'Agata, 2019). Now, on 15 November 2019, not much but abandoned barracks is left of the former presence of US troops on the base. Until November 14<sup>th</sup>, merely a day before Russian soldiers were found filling the barracks left by their American counterparts, US forces were flown out of Syria through Kobani, as part of the abrupt withdrawal of the majority of US forces from Syria that was ordered by US President Trump in October 2019 (New York Times, 2019). The presence of Russian troops in Kobani is explained by Moscow's efforts to prevent escalation and continuation of the Turkish offensive, dubbed 'Operation Peace Spring', into areas in Northeast Syria under Kurdish control. Russia seemingly fills the void that is left in the wake of general American retrenchment from Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, by taking up the role as the region's power broker. The entering of Kobani Air Base by Russian troops on 15 November 2019, hastily abandoned by the US merely one day before, conveys that same message in a symbolic, but definite manner: 'now the Americans have left, the Russians take over.' The supposed demise of US influence and the ascendancy of Russian might in the Middle East has been plentifully announced ever since (Rumer, 2019a; Talbott & Tennis, 2020). Kurpershoek (2019) even went as far as to proclaim the coming of the *Pax Russica*.

The events of November 2019 seem to be a continuation of increasing Russian involvement in the Middle East which has commenced since the early 2000s. Over the course of roughly two decades, Moscow has successfully been able to present itself as an important regional actor, capable of defying American might in the Middle East and, moreover, willing to defend its regional interests through both military means and an impressive degree of diplomatic activity (Kozhanov, 2016). The Middle East has suffered a fair portion of neglect from Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but has regained Moscow's foreign policy attention from the early 2000s onwards, when Putin began to deem the region as a theatre through which it could assert Russian influence and defy US hegemony, and as the evolving Arab Spring started to pose clear threats to Russia's political, strategic, and economic interests (Karasik & Blank, 2018). Ever since, Russia has manifestly, and often vigorously, asserted itself through reliable support for Syria's Bashar al-Assad since 2012, a startling 2015 military intervention in Syria, continuous involvement in the Middle East's most prominent political settlements (among which the Syrian peace talks, the Israeli-Palestinian question, and the Iranian

nuclear deal), a “blossoming relationship” with many regional actors such as Israel and the Gulf states, and eventually the enforcement of a Turkish-Kurdish ceasefire in October 2019 (Rumer & Weiss, 2019). Although the announcement of a *Pax Russica* is somewhat of an exaggeration (for Moscow’s toolkit for projecting and sustaining its power and influence in the region remains particularly modest due to “weak economic foundations, a political/military footprint limited to specific countries and issues, and a lack of reliable and mutually beneficial alliances”), it is evident that Russia has managed to adopt a role as an influential power broker in the wake of American retrenchment from the Middle East (Lund, 2019, p. 34).

### *1.1. Jack of all trades, master of none*

In the Middle East, Russia has been able to successfully leverage its slim military and economic power towards a prominent regional position, defined by an unwavering commitment to sit down with all relevant regional actors. Moscow succeeds in positioning itself between, in the midst of, and sometimes above the fierce rivalries which define the region’s geopolitical complexity (Trudolyubov, 2019). Russia’s Middle East policy is presented as secular, transactional, and nonideological, offering cooperation without political strings attached. Consequently, we find Russia dealing with actors that have often been inimical to one another, carefully balancing between Israel and Syria, Iran and Turkey, Iran and the Gulf States, Iran and Israel, and Turkey and the Kurds (Lund, 2019; Rumer, 2019b). As such, Russia is able to ensure it has neither all-out allies nor all-out adversaries anywhere in the region. “[Such] presentation of ideological neutrality.” Wasser (2019, p. 5) points out, “increases the number of available opportunities for influence, economic investment, diplomatic mediation, and, in some cases, disruption.” Certainly, these efforts have allotted Moscow its fair share of recognition. Few regional actors would question Russia’s return to the top tier of Middle East politics, and even less would refuse negotiations with Putin.

Yet, it is my no means clear how Russia is to gain from its new role, talking and selling to everyone (Rumer, 2019b). Leadership in a region as torn and volatile as the Middle East comes with costly, unenviable burdens. US president Trump certainly seemed to be aware of this maxim when he bluntly pronounced that someone else ought to “fight over this long bloodstained sand,” shortly after reaffirming US retrenchment from the region on 23 October 2019 (New York Times, 2019). Although Trump’s ‘betrayal’ of the Kurdish forces in the Turkish-Syrian border region is widely scandalized across the West, the decision to withdraw US troops from Syria is not in the least considered a strategic miscalculation (Walt, 2019; Yavlinsky, 2019). Moscow’s commitment to building and maintaining relations with all relevant actors in the region has forced Russia into a complicated balancing act. Not only does Russia’s multi-partner approach prevents it from bolstering long-term relationships (since unbiased engagement invites only limited depth), it also risks putting Russia in the

middle of entrenched rivalries and regional escalation. As such, “Russia has found itself walking a tightrope to ensure it does not anger or become too indebted to one side over another” (Wasser, 2019, p. 8). Furthermore, a lack of means limit what Russia can achieve in the region (Rumer, 2019b). The sheer absence of major power projection capabilities and economic resources delimit Moscow’s role to a valuable interlocutor at best (Yavlinsky, 2019). Finally, sustaining Russian military engagement in Syria and its regional activities elsewhere would put more pressure on Russia’s flagging economic power. By remaining entangled in Syria, Walt (2019) adds, Russia will only be diverting costly resources from primary regions of interests elsewhere in the world, such as the post-Soviet space, into a country of “little strategic value”.

### *1.2. Theoretical puzzle*

Consequently, many question Moscow’s involvement in the affairs of one of the world’s most volatile regions (Rumer, 2019b; Trenin, 2019; Walt, 2019). One is left wondering why Russia, despite all risks and burdens, further pursues an enhanced role in the Middle East, strengthening ties with all major actors in the region but lacking sufficient political, economic, and military weight to exert lasting influence. Many International Relations (IR) theories have been employed as a framework to understand the complexities of the Middle East. Few, however, seem to explain the region, plagued by enduring conflict and crisis, as well as *realism* does. As voiced by Hinnebusch (2003, p. 1), “[the Middle East] appears to be the region where the anarchy and insecurity seen by the realist school of international politics as the main feature of states systems remains most in evidence and where the realist paradigm retains its greatest relevance.” Thus, one would expect a realist reading of Russia’s growing involvement in the Middle East to serve this puzzle best.

The volatile and anarchic setting of the Middle East breeds systemic insecurity. Confronted with the unpredictable intentions of others, realism expects states to take part in a constant struggle for relative power. As such, power ought to be considered, in the words of Mearsheimer (2001, p. 12), “the currency of international politics.” Then, from a realist perspective, Russia’s presence in the Middle East arises from concerns about the stuff power is made of – that is, relative economic and military capabilities. Moscow has been a long-standing major supplier of oil, gas, grains, and – to some extent – nuclear energy to the region, and its most important economic interests in the Middle East boil down to ensuring and expanding that role. In addition, several countries in the region - Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and Syria – have been principal customers of the Russian arms industry for many years. Moreover, the proximity of the Middle East to Russia’s borders renders it an region of obvious strategic interest. Syria houses a Russian military facility in the port of Tartus, Russia’s only naval foothold in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, instability, enduring conflict, and Islamist extremism risk spilling over into Russia’s immediate post-Soviet neighborhood, adding fuel to the fire of extremist

and terrorist movements in the Caucasus region which have been afflicting Russia since the 1980s (Rumer, 2019b; Trenin, 2016). Sladden et al. (2017) argue that Russia equates preservation of the *status quo* in the Middle East with serving its robust material interests across the region. Hence, a realist would argue, Russia seeks to address any threats to that *status quo* by balancing against them. As such, Russia's efforts to prevent the downfall of the Assad-regime by military intervention in 2015, or to deter Turkey from continuing its offensive into Syria in early October 2019 can be explained, in typical realist terms, as an attempt to (yet again) prevent enduring conflict and instability in the Middle East. Likewise, Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria can be considered to arise from these same concerns of regional stability and power-balancing, even more so in the vacuum of the anticipated United States' pullback. In addition, Russia's enhanced presence in the Middle East can be explained as being part of a greater effort to counter both regional and global US hegemony in cooperation with Syria and Iran. Indeed, Putin (2007) has been vocally critical of what he perceives to be the illegitimacy of American unipolarity and subsequent Western interventions in, for example, Iraq and Libya, "plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts."

It seems, however, that Russia's Middle East policy has been structurally conflicting with its clear economic and military interests in the region. Contrary to realist expectations, Russia has been feeding into regional instability instead of restricting it, and, moreover, has failed to pursue a concise balancing strategy. Surely, regional stability is badly served when Moscow is strengthening the military capabilities of either actors inimical to one another (such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, or Iran and Israel) or 'rogue countries' (like Iran and Lebanon) by selling them large amounts of arms. Furthermore, it remains to be seen how one of Russia's key interests in the region, countering extremist and terrorist movements, is served by offering huge contracts for the supply of weapons to Persian Gulf states – the same actors which are known for supporting the very jihadism Russia is fighting in Syria and the Caucasus (Yavlinky, 2019). Finally, we find Russia protecting the interests of Turkey, a NATO-member, in the Turkish-Syrian border region; pursuing rapprochement with the staunchest US ally in the region, Israel; and doing its best to maintain particularly cordial relations with Saudi Arabia, which is both a long-standing rival to Russia's own ally, Iran, and an almost exclusive US partner (Rumer, 2019b; Trenin, 2019). In conclusion, an array of contradictions in Russia's regional policy limits what it can achieve in the Middle East, and at times directly challenge Moscow's regional interests.

Realism fails to explain why Moscow is so keen on playing a regional role that is too often inimical to Russia's direct global and regional interests. Consequently, one wonders why Russia is getting involved, as Yavlinky (2019) points out, "in complex regional clashes, acting in the interests of anyone, but not in its own national ones." It is precisely at this point, where considerations of power no longer seem to enjoy preeminence in foreign policy making, that realism falls short of providing a

satisfying explanation of Russian engagement in the Middle East. Here the puzzle of this study is born. How can one explain Russia's willingness to brush key interests aside in pursuit of a regional role that brings evermore risks and unenviable burdens with it?

### *1.3. Status aspirations*

Prominent scholars in IR have argued that Russia's foreign policy historically is largely guided by one consistent objective: the pursuit of great-power status (Neumann, 2008; Tsygankov, 2018; Zevelev, 2002; Hopf, 2002). After the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia suffered a rapid decline in its status and loss of its position as great power, being pushed to the periphery of global politics (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010; Karaganov, 2014). Russia was treated as a defeated power by the West, although it certainly did not feel like it was. The refusal of the US and its Western allies to recognize Russia as a great power unleashed "some kind of Weimar syndrome" in Russia – that is, a sense of grave humiliation and a deeply felt desire to recover the dignity and recognition Russians feel they deserve (Karaganov, 2014). Consequently, Russian foreign policy can be said to be defined by a constant struggle for 'greatpowerness' (*velikoderzhavnost*). As such, a number of scholars have underscored the importance of status aspirations in explaining Russia's Middle East policy (Allison, 2013; Rumer, 2019b; Trenin, 2016). According to Wasser (2019), Russia is driven by a belief that, as a great power, it has a role to play in the region. Involvement in the Middle East, where so much of global importance is unfolding, is simply understood as a logical consequence of Russia regaining its great power status (Milosevich, 2018). As such, Moscow's complicated balancing act in the Middle East is meant to bolster Russia's claim to a seat at the table for future key settlements, to enhance Putin's image as a global leader, and to elevate Russia's global status (Rumer, 2019b). In addition, Larson and Shevchenko (2010) suggest that the compelling desire for status may motivate rising powers, such as Russia, to take on greater responsibility for maintaining regional stability. Such status-seeking actions can be largely symbolic, overriding rational interests and the search for material power (*ibid.*, p. 94). This quest for status would explain Russia's unwavering willingness to accept the costs of upholding stability and maintaining influence in the Middle East - a region that is often considered "secondary at best to its vital interests" (Wasser, 2019, p. 14). Accordingly, this study will explore this argument by engaging with the following research question:

*How can Russia's pursuit of status explain its engagement in the Middle East (January 2011-February 2016)?*

To this effect, this study will draw on insights of Social Identity Theory (SIT), which argues that social groups strive to achieve a "positively distinctive identity" (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 2). Building upon the works of Tajfel (1974; 1978; 1982), SIT assumes that people derive part of their

identity from membership in various social groups. They compare their own group's achievements and qualities to a 'reference group', one that is equal or slightly superior. Groups that are generally believed to be superior on valued dimensions have higher status. Consequently, in their search for self-esteem and pride, people desire the acceptance or recognition from these higher-status groups. In the same way, states seek status. They, too, "are concerned with intangible needs for positive self-esteem and recognition as well as power and wealth" (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014, p. 271). According to SIT, a social group seeking to improve its standing may pursue one of three identity management strategies: *social mobility*, *social competition*, or *social creativity*. Applied to international relations, enhancing one's status can be done respectively "by joining elite clubs, trying to best the dominant states, or achieving preeminence outside the arena of geopolitical competition" (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 67).

#### *1.4. Scientific and societal relevance*

Within the field of International Relations (IR), the importance of status (or prestige) as an impetus of state behavior has been plentifully pronounced by an array of prominent authors (Gilpin, 1981; Larson & Shevchenko, 2014; Lebow, 2008; Morgenthau, 1948; Renshon, 2016; Wohlforth, 2009). Yet, IR scholars have at large failed to grasp the concept of status in systemic theorizing. Both realism and constructivism have tried to deal with status, providing a general background for theorizing about the concept in IR, but lacking the ability both to fully exhaust key dimensions of status and to think about the concept in a more theoretically sophisticated way (Forsberg et al., 2014). This study seeks to fill the theoretical gaps left by mainstream IR-theory through incorporating insights from Social Identity Theory (SIT). In addition, there have been only few attempts to marry SIT into the discipline of IR (Clunan, 2009; Larson & Shevchenko, 2010; Lebow, 2008). Consequently, this study will try to put some empirical 'flesh' on the bones of SIT-theorizing in the field of IR. Hence, this study draws its scientific relevance from its attempts to both contribute to the theoretical understanding of status and to incorporate SIT - a socio-psychological theory that bears significant potential for IR - into the discipline while doing so.

Furthermore, this study draws its societal relevance from its engagement with, what Klijn (2011, p. 17) called, Europe's "distant neighbor" – Russia. To be sure, Russia has formed an integral part of the European security architecture for centuries: it fought the Ottoman Empire, drowned the Napoleonic Era at Berezina, captured Nazi Berlin, and drew an Iran Curtain across the European continent. Anno 2020, Russia continues to be a painstakingly relevant geopolitical power, as it asserts its influence in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. If one poses to understand the realm of international affairs and those within it, then one must understand the forces that propel it forward. By examining status as an important motive of Russian foreign policy, this study attempts to contribute to the understanding of

post-Soviet Russia in world politics – an actor which equally often confronts Europe at its borders as it is misunderstood while doing so.

### *1.5. Thesis outline*

Chapter 2 will pose to embed the concept of status in a larger theoretical framework, discussing how both realism and constructivism have incorporated status into its theoretical bodies, before presenting SIT as a new theoretical approach to status in IR. Chapter 3 will outline this study's methodological framework, presenting how status will be operationalized and measured. Moreover, it will discuss this study's preferred method of inquiry – process-tracing. Chapter 4 will provide a broad overview of Russia's status aspirations since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, before discussing at length Russia's Middle East policy from 2011 to 2016. Finally, the fifth chapter will conclude if and how Russian involvement in the Middle East can be explained in terms of status aspirations, before presenting an array of recommendation for future research.

## II

### Theoretical framework

The pursuit of status (that is, one's standing or rank in a hierarchy) has generally been acknowledged as an integral part of world politics.<sup>1</sup> This perspective has been shared by scholars from diverging traditions in International Relations (IR), uniting realists and constructivists alike (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014; Renshon, 2016; Wohlforth, 2009). In *War and Change in World Politics* (1981), Gilpin argued that "prestige, rather than power, is the everyday currency of international relations."<sup>2</sup> Morgenthau (1993, p. 50) recognized status as one of the three basic manifestations of state action, describing it as a "potent dynamic force determining social relations and social institutions." And Lebow (2008, p. 171) declares status to be the driving motive in more than half of the wars fought since 1648.

Despite the considerable agreement within the political science discipline and foreign policy community that status matters in world affairs, Renshon (2017, p. 3) writes that "the depth of our understanding has lagged far behind our confidence." IR scholars have at large failed to grasp the concept of status in systemic theorizing. Rather, both realism and constructivism seem to deal with status on their own terms, providing a general background for theorizing status in IR, but lacking the ability both to fully exhaust key dimensions of status and to think about the concept in a more theoretically sophisticated way (Forsberg et al., 2014). This study seeks to fill the theoretical gaps left by mainstream IR-theory through incorporating insights from Social Identity Theory (SIT). Before engaging with SIT, it is briefly explained how both realism and constructivism have incorporated status into its theoretical bodies. It is then argued that these classical theoretical approaches fall short of providing a satisfactory account of status and its influence in shaping international relations. Consequently, SIT will be presented and discussed at length as an approach that will allow such reasoning in IR.

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<sup>1</sup> Status is joined in IR literature by a variety of concepts which are often used interchangeably, such as esteem, prestige, reputation, rank, respect, social power, and even honor (Forsberg et al., 2014). Its meanings overlap and differ in various ways. However, this study isn't able to provide an exhaustive overview of all concepts, lacking both the capacity and the purpose to do so. In this study, status will be treated as a positional, perceptual, and social good. Where significant and possible, conceptual differences and nuances will be addressed.

<sup>2</sup> Although 'status' and 'prestige' are often used interchangeably, and are undoubtedly very alike, they do not mean the same thing. 'Prestige' is understood as the reputation for power, or the perceptions of other states with respect to a state's capacities and its ability and willingness to exercise these capabilities (Gilpin, 1981, p. 31). In other words, prestige refers both to the credibility and recognition of one's capabilities. Status, on the other hand, can best be described as a *social rank* in the hierarchy of prestige among states (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019). In that sense, prestige implies status. For the more one's capabilities are recognized, the greater one's prestige will be, and the higher one's standing (that is, status) among others will become.



## 2.1. Realism and status

Status and its role in world politics is treated exceptionally ambiguously in the theoretical bodies of realism. Either it is deemed to be the “everyday currency of international relations”, or it is entirely omitted from any theoretical consideration altogether, as is the case in Waltz’s structural realism (Gilpin, 1981, p. 301). Most of the realist literature on status and prestige can be found within classical realism and neoclassical realism (NCR). Whereas structural realism explains the behavior of states in terms of the structure by which they are constrained, NCR wonders “how statesmen grasp their contours from the inside” (Friedberg, 1988, p. 8). Neoclassical realists acknowledge, just like structuralists do, that states are first and foremost driven by its place in the international system and its relative power capabilities, but they maintain that these structural considerations are channeled, mediated, and redirected through complex domestic political processes (Guzzini; 2004; Rose, 1998; Schweller, 2004). If power is thought to determine the course of international politics, then, according to Wohlforth (1993), it must do so largely through the perceptions, intentions, and desires of statesmen. As Rose (1998, p. 147) argues, “foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and elites, and so it is their perception of relative power that matters, not simply relative quantities of physical resources or forces in being.” Hence, when power is ascribed to a given state, it is done so not only on the basis of its economic and military capabilities, but also by the way in which these capabilities are perceived and understood by others. That reputation for power – that is, the perceptions of other states with respect to a given state’s power and its ability and willingness to exercise that power – is called ‘prestige’. And from prestige, follows status.

The importance of prestige in influencing world politics has, at least within the (neo)classical realist tradition, been echoed by a wide array of prominent thinkers, from Hans Morgenthau (1948), E.H. Carr (1939), and John Herz (1951) to Robert Gilpin (1981) and William Wohlforth (1993; 2009). Although all recognized that the primary objective of foreign policy ought not to be the reputation for power, but rather its substance, many understood that “what others think about us is as important as what we actually are” (Morgenthau, 1993, p. 87). Getting others to perceive one’s power in a favorable way will increase the likelihood of successful diplomacy. For if one’s relative power is recognized, then there’s no point in showing it by means of conflict, as well set forth by Hawtrey (1952, p. 64): “War means the imposition of the will of the stronger on the weaker by force. But if their relative strength is already known, a trial of strength is unnecessary; the weaker will yield to the stronger without going through the torments of conflict to arrive at a conclusion foreknown from the beginning.” As such, one can simply achieve one’s aims by diplomatic means, without having to coerce through force (Carr, 1979). Hence, NCR regards the pursuit of prestige as a natural objective of foreign policy, nearly as strong as the desire to accumulate ‘real’ economic and military capabilities (Herz, 1951; Sterling-Folker, 2002; Wohlforth, 1993;).

Despite the way in which NCR links ideational factors to material capabilities, it continues to stress the primacy of structural-systemic factors (Dueck, 2009). That is to say, “ideas matter, but if they matter too much, states will misjudge invariant elements of an objective material reality” (Rathbun, 2008, p. 319). Misperception leads to a situation where a state might find its prestige to be valued unequally to its real power (Hawtrey, 1952). Such ‘status inconsistency’ arises when perceptions of power lag behind changes in the actual capabilities of states. To Gilpin (1981), this mismatch in power relationships and prestige hierarchies is an important factor in determining international political changes and, moreover, a prelude to eras of conflict and struggle. Since a faulty hierarchy of prestige invites correction, states will work to gain the status they think they deserve, either by means of diplomacy or conflict. Hence, states ought to prevent their ideas from distorting an objective reading of interests and power (Rathbun, 2008). Consequently, NCR maintains that the reputation of power cannot – and certainly must not - be separated from its ‘true’ substance. Prestige is not created out of thin air. Power is not what we make of it. Rather, the way how one thinks about another state’s power is always underpinned by an actual or ‘real’ material capacity. In short, realism conflates status with material capabilities. Status is thought to follow logically from, and to be confined by, economic and military power. Henceforth, neoclassical realists deem status to be a function of state power (Clunan, 2012; Gilpin, 1981). Finally, prestige is explicitly treated as an instrumental end, not an intrinsic one.<sup>3</sup> Its value is deemed to lie in its ability to “signal competence or provide access to power and resources” (Renshon, 2016, p. 520).

## 2.2. Constructivism and status

Realist assumptions about the principal importance of material structures in international politics have been challenged by constructivism, which initially emerged as a critique of rationalist thought but has rapidly become one of the main theoretical approaches in IR (Guzzini, 2000; Ruggie, 1998; Wendt, 1999). Unlike realism, constructivism emphasizes the inherently social nature of international politics. In the words of Guzzini (2000, p. 174), “constructivism is epistemologically about the social construction of knowledge and ontologically about the (social) construction of the social world.” Contrary to realist thought, constructivism emphasizes that the behavior of states, their interests, and relations need not be pre-determined by the anarchic structure of international politics. Rather, agents and structure are co-constituted. That is to say, actors are able to transform the structure through their practices (Tsygankov, 2018). According to constructivism, what matters in international politics, is how actors give meaning to the world through social interactions and shared understanding (*intersubjectivity*). In processes of social interaction, identities are constituted, since understandings of

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that prestige can’t be pursued intrinsically. Surely, history is filled with wars solely waged for honor, prestige, and glory. Rather, NCR stresses that fighting for the purpose of prestige alone, without taking in account material objectives and interests, will inevitably lead to strategic mistakes and, eventually, failure.

who we are always imply an idea of an external Other. In turn, identities signal the interests of actors and inform their behavior (Wendt, 1999).

To constructivism, the behavior of actors is determined by socially constructed identities and resulting standard or norms of international practices. Status as a propeller of international behavior, however, hasn't gained much attraction within the constructivist realm. Constructivists remain awfully quiet about the way states react to the (non-)recognition of their social rank. It can easily be said that the lack of attention for status in constructivist thought is surprising. As discussed later on in this research, status is an intersubjective evaluation of one's standing in society. Moreover, it is crucial in reaffirming one's sense of self. As such, "[status] is a perfect example of social constructions in international relations" (Forsberg et al., 2014, p. 262).

In sum, status is badly served by mainstream theoretical approaches in IR. Whereas structural realism omits prestige and status from its theoretical body altogether, neoclassical realism merely treats the pursuit of prestige as instrumental and subordinate to the pursuit of power (Markey, 1999). In addition, constructivism provides a general background for theorizing status, but has at large failed to engage with the concept in a theoretically sophisticated way (Forsberg et al., 2014). Rather, the constructivist literature has mainly focused on the importance of identities and norms in steering international behavior, but without allowing status (and concerns thereof) into the equation. As such, status is largely left unexplored. According to Forsberg et al. (2014) many key dimensions of status, such as its role in structuring and verifying a distinctive identity, remain unaddressed. Consequently, students of international politics largely have to rely on studies found in other disciplines, especially social psychology, for more substantive theories on status. Within the IR-discipline, some scholars (Clunan, 2012; Lebow, 2008; Sasley, 2011) have turned towards Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT) for further theoretical insight. To Clunan (2012, pp. 3-4), SIT provides the micro-foundations of social psychology necessary to complete the theoretical understanding of status in IR: "Social identity theory (SIT) allows constructivists to ground the study of international status in social psychology and its explanations for the formation of group identities. SIT provides the motive—the need for positive self-esteem—missing from structural accounts—that is required to explain why individuals and collectives seek to improve or maintain a positive status. (...) SIT enables international relations scholars to link micro-motives of group identity formation and intra-group behavior with international and national structural factors that are both material and normative." What, then, is SIT? And how can it help explain the conduct of states in international politics?

### 2.3. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) originates from Social Psychology, where it has greatly contributed to the study of intergroup relations (Brown, 2000). Building upon the seminal works of Tajfel (1974, 1978, 1982), SIT starts from the assumption that people derive part of their identity – called, *social identity* - from their membership in various social groups, for example: gender, race, religion, political affinity, or nation. Because people are held to strive to maintain or enhance their self-esteem, they cradle a deep-born desire to protect, enhance, or achieve a positive self-image (Tajfel, 1982, p. 24). That is, they want to like themselves and to be liked by others. A positive social identity is crucial in achieving that goal (Commins & Lockwood, 1979). Group membership refers back to the *self*. In other words, it tells people something about their place in society, making them feel better or more confident because of it. Consequently, SIT maintains that one’s social identity “may be positive or negative according to the evaluations (which tend to be socially consensual, either within or across groups) of those groups that contribute to an individual’s social identity” (Hogg & Abrahams, 2001, p. 101). In shorthand, people care about the way in which their social groups are evaluated, because it tells them something about themselves.

Because membership to social groups reflects back on them, people want their ‘ingroup’ to have, what SIT calls, “positive group distinctiveness” – to be not only different but better (Tajfel, 1974; Turner, 1975; Turner et al., 1979). In the words of Mercer (1995, p. 242) “we maintain or enhance our self-esteem by maximizing the difference between our group and other groups on those dimensions that we think reflect positively upon our group.” Anyone who has ever found themselves playing competitive team-sports is likely to recognize that sense of pride and self-esteem when one’s team had managed to reel in another victory. People enjoy winning contests and they especially like their team to be better than competing ones. It simply feels good, because, well, it’s flattering to one’s perceived qualities as a sportsman- or woman. As such, a positive social identity is evaluated through social comparisons and established relative to other ‘outgroups’. Nevertheless, Tajfel and Turner (1979, p. 41) stress that “ingroups do not compare themselves with every cognitively available outgroup: the outgroup must be perceived as a relevant comparison group.” Since the aim of group differentiation is to pride oneself, the intergroup comparison has to be worthwhile. To stick with the sports analogy, being victorious over a team of Sunday dabblers isn’t nearly as flattering as defeating a premier team that is similar, or even slightly better, than one’s own (given, obviously, that the ingroup itself is not regarded a party of Sunday dabblers and ne’er-do-wells). The comparison is only meaningful when carried out among recognized peers. Consequently, a state such as Norway is not competing for status with China or Russia. Rather, it will seek to distinguish itself from a peer group of small- and middle-sized states that, too, are rich and democratic – for example, Canada, the Netherlands, Switzerland, or Sweden (Wohlforth et al., 2018). Groups that are generally believed to be superior on valued dimensions are

awarded higher status (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019, p. 3). Likewise, groups which are deemed to be inferior on given dimensions enjoy lower status. Due to their need for self-esteem and a positive social identity, people prefer to belong to higher-status groups, and eschew being identified with lower-status ones.

### 2.3.1. *Status, hierarchy, and recognition*

What is status, then? In SIT, status is defined and valued along various dimensions - often described as being both a *positional*, *perceptual*, and *social* good (Renshon, 2016; Wohlforth et al., 2018). First and foremost, status is the outcome of intergroup comparison, reflecting “a group’s relative position on some evaluative dimensions of comparison” (Hogg & Abrahams, 2001, p. 103). As such, status is *positional*: it implies filling a place in a social hierarchy and reflects a group’s ranking on some trait valued by society. In terms of international relations, a state’s international standing “depends on its ranking on prized attributes, such as military power, economic development, cultural achievements, diplomatic skill, and technological innovation” (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019, p. 3). Second, status is *perceptual*. It is based upon what actors think of themselves and others. However, Renshon (2017, p. 36) points out, “status is not one actor’s beliefs about one other actor.” Rather, status is *social*. It requires agreement among a group of actors about a given actor’s relative position in a social hierarchy. These collective, widely-held, and shared beliefs determine an actor’s status (Wohlforth et al., 2018). Accordingly, status-seeking actions can solely be aimed at influencing the perceptions and beliefs of others. They don’t necessarily have to entail the acquisition of material power (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010). Finally, SIT points out that status refers back to an *identity*. As previously pointed out, group memberships constitutes an important part of how one sees or validates oneself. Consequently, people care a lot about how their groups compare to other groups. Status is a reflection of that evaluation, almost like an award, and thus becomes an object of fierce desire and pursuit. Here, SIT diverges from existing theoretical approaches such as NCR by showing that status is not only sought because of purely instrumental reasons, but for intrinsic ones too.

### 2.3.2. *Seeking status: three identity-management strategies*

Status is held dearly by social groups and its members. As pointed out in the above, it’s imperative for satisfying the collective need for self-esteem and a positive social identity. Being ‘seen’ and valued accordingly is to Wohlforth et al. (2018, p. 6) “in many ways the most fundamental and crucial of statuses.” Various ‘status concerns’ may motivate the members of a group to better its standing in society. A group might fear the loss or decline of its status; it may want to preserve its current standing or to slow its decline; or its members may feel like they aren’t awarded the status they deserve. Consequently, SIT argues that groups will try to seek status through one of three identity management

strategies: moving into a higher-status group by emulating its values and practices (*social mobility*); matching or surpassing the dominant group on salient dimensions (*social competition*); or altering the dimensions on which intergroup comparison is based (*social creativity*). The choice of one strategy over another depends on (1) the permeability of group barriers and (2) the security (that is, both legitimacy and stability) of the status hierarchy. According to Larson and Shevchenko (2019b, p. 11), “the pecking order [status hierarchy] is stable when change in the prevailing status hierarchy appears to be unlikely and legitimate when the lower-status group accepts that the criteria for social status are applied fairly.” Moreover, the permeability of group barriers is determined by the extent to which morals, culture, ideology, and material capabilities prohibit a group (or its individual members) to pass into another, higher-status group.

#### 2.3.2.1. *Social mobility*

As previously pointed out, people are hesitant to be associated with lower-status groups, since it impedes a positive social identity and, thus, their sense of self-worth. Consequently, low status usually implies an attempt to achieve upward social mobility, to pass from a lower- to a higher-status group. If status-seeking groups believe that social group barriers are permeable, they may conform to the norms of higher-status groups to gain acceptance (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theorists describe social mobility both as an individual *and* a collective strategy (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019a). A group member might try, on an individual basis, to leave or dissociate himself from a lower-status group (see Figure 1): “the low status of one’s own group is not thereby changed: it is an individualist approach designed, at least in the short run, to achieve a personal, not a group, solution” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 43). However, according to SIT, impermeable in-group barriers (pragmatic, moral, cultural, and ideological prohibitions) arouse stronger in-group identification among individuals, and prompts them to act as group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ellemers, 1993). As such, individuals are less likely to ‘betray’ their in-group by moving to one of higher status. Instead, they will adopt a group strategy of becoming “more like the superior group”, aiming for cultural, social, and psychological assimilation of the group *as a whole* – as illustrated in Figure 1 (Tajfel, 1978, p. 94)

In international politics, states may seek social mobility through emulating the values, norms, and practices of higher-status groups to gain acceptance into ‘elite clubs’ or more prestigious social categories such as middle power, great power, and perhaps super- or world-power (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019b; Wohlforth et al., 2017). For example, Russian Czar Peter the Great (1672-1725) notoriously tried to smother the general European understanding of Muscovite Russia as an Asiatic, backward country by assimilating it to European norms and practices of diplomacy, law, education, and fashion. His attempts “to sever the people from their former Asiatic customs and instruct them how all Christian peoples in Europe comport themselves” were so fervent, that he himself went on to

shave off the beards of his officials and nobles, cut off their long sleeves, and prescribed Hungarian and German dress (Sumner, 1950, p. 45). Moreover, Larson and Shevchenko (2019a) describe how, in the post-Cold War era, many Eastern and Central European states adopted liberal and capitalist reform policies to be admitted into Western ‘clubs’, such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As such, the following hypotheses can be derived from the theoretical discussion of SIT so far:

Figure 1. *Graphic representation of a social mobility strategy.*

*H1: If group barriers are permeable, states will try to move into a higher-status group by emulating its values, norms, and practices.*

*H1a: If both in-group barriers and out-group barriers are easily permeable, states will try to achieve social mobility on an individual basis, thereby leaving the lower-status group.*

*H1b: If in-group barriers are difficultly permeable and if out-group barriers are easily permeable, states will try to achieve social mobility on an collective basis, thereby aiming for the assimilation of the lower-status group as a whole.*

#### 2.3.2.2. *Social creativity*

When higher-status groups are impermeable and the status hierarchy appears to be secure (that is, both legitimate and stable), groups may pursue a strategy of social creativity, by aiming to alter the dimensions on which intergroup comparison is based. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), a social creativity strategy may entail (1) finding a new dimension of comparison between the in-group and the out-group, (2) redefining existing negative group characteristics as positive, or (3) finding another, lower-status out-group as a comparative frame of reference (and, more importantly, ceasing to use the high-status out-group as a target of comparison). In international politics, “indicators that a state is pursuing social creativity include advocacy of new international norms, regimes, institutions, or a developmental model. In contrast to social mobility, the essence of social creativity is the attempt to stake out a distinctive position, emphasizing the state’s unique values or contributions. Often social creativity is accompanied by high-profile diplomacy, with charismatic leaders who take a prominent role on the world stage, such as de Gaulle, Nehru, or Gorbachev” (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 75). Examples of social creativity strategies can be found in the attempts of, most notably, China and Russia to revalue positive international state conduct, no longer in terms of adherence to human rights, liberal interventionism, free and open markets, and the promotion of democracy, but along norms of non-intervention, self-determination, and state sovereignty (Schweller & Pu, 2011).

Figure 2. *Graphic representation of a social creativity strategy.*

Figure 2 describes such a social creativity strategy: actor A is being depicted as having a superior position within the prevailing status hierarchy on dimension A, whereas actor B suffers an inferior position on that same dimension. B decides to enhance its status by altering the dimension on which intergroup comparison is based. Consequently, the following hypotheses can be derived from SIT’s second identity management strategy – social creativity:

*H2: If higher-status groups are impermeable, and if the status hierarchy appears to be secure (that is, both legitimate and stable), states will seek to alter the dimensions on which intergroup comparison is based.*

*H2a: If higher-status groups are impermeable, and if the status hierarchy appears to be secure (that is, legitimate and/or stable), states will seek to find a new favorable dimension of comparison between the in-group and the out-group.*

*H2b: If higher-status groups are impermeable, and if the status hierarchy appears to be secure (that is, legitimate and/or stable), states will seek to redefine existing negative in-group characteristics as positive.*

*H2c: If higher-status groups are impermeable, and if the status hierarchy appears to be secure (that is, legitimate and/or stable), states will seek to find another, lower-status out-group as a comparative frame of reference, and will cease to use the high-status out-group as a target of comparison.*

In this way, SIT modifies the prevailing zero-sum conception of status, as understood by – for example – realist theory. Intergroup comparison need not be competitive when social creativity strategies are applied. One group *can* gain more status without another gaining less, since groups have multiple traits upon which they can be evaluated. As such, two groups may be equally superior, albeit in different areas. Nevertheless, social creativity strategies might result in conflict anyhow if a higher-status group refuses to acknowledge the efforts of a lower-status group to increase its status by altering dimensions of comparison. Consequently, “when a group’s action for positive distinctiveness is frustrated, impeded, or in any way actively prevented by an out-group, this will promote overt conflict and hostility between the groups” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 46). In other words, recognition matters.

#### *Recognition and non-recognition*

Groups do not live in a vacuum. Status – being both a *perceptual* and *social* good - cannot be attained unilaterally; it can only be conferred. Every attempt at social mobility, social creativity, and social competition hinges on the extent to which resulting status claims are recognized by others. As Sergunin (2016, p. 63) points out, even “having superior military capabilities does not necessarily bring with it superior status, acceptance, or respect.” What is required, is the acceptance of recognized peers – that is, higher-status groups. Inability to obtain recognition, or the perpetual refusal of others to

convey it, is humiliating. It reduces one's self-esteem and dignity, violating "both an actor's sense of entitlement and some positive elements of what he deems to be its publicly accepted social identity" (Forsberg et al., 2014, p. 264). Consequently, the discrepancy between an actor's self-perception and its *perceived* intersubjective position in a status hierarchy may result in what Forsberg (2014) calls 'status conflicts'.<sup>4</sup> Such conflicts, and the grievances resulting from it, can evoke strong emotions of mistreatment, resentment and anger, well capable of overriding rational interests in improved economic ties or security considerations (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 94). If lower-status groups begin to regard the status hierarchy as *unstable* (susceptible to change) and/or *illegitimate* (that is, unfair to or unappreciative of the status one feels it legitimately owes) SIT predicts them to lash out against it (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As Tajfel (1978b, p. 52) notes, "a combination of illegitimacy and instability would become a powerful incitement for attempts to change the status quo." In international politics, rising powers, such as contemporary China or Wilhelmine Germany, may find the prevailing status hierarchy susceptible to change, and feel like they should occupy a higher position in it (so to speak, attain one's "place in the sun"). As a result, lower-status groups will adopt a strategy of social competition.

#### 2.3.2.3. *Social competition*

If out-group barriers are impermeable, and if the status hierarchy is increasingly perceived as unstable and illegitimate, SIT argues that lower-status groups may adopt a strategy of social competition (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). That is, to "reverse the relative positions of the in-group and out-group on salient dimensions" (ibid., p. 44). Social competition entails direct competition with the out-group – a zero-sum game. That is to say, one cannot be better unless the other is worse – very unlike the strategies of social mobility and social creativity. Outdoing a higher-status group in the area on which its status claims rest, provides dramatic and equivocal evidence of one's preeminence. At this point, status can no longer sensibly be denied, neglected, or avoided. Rather, it has been earned and proven. In international politics, "social competition often entails traditional geopolitical rivalry, such as competition over spheres of influence or arms racing" (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 73).

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<sup>4</sup> Forsberg (2014) argues that both one's self-perception (and from it, one's claim to status) *and* the level of received status granted by others are equally subjectively perceived. As such, it may occur that various actors are perfectly willing to grant a status-seeking actor higher status, but that these actions are not perceived as such by the latter. This so-called 'gap in perceptions', Forsberg maintains, is the *real* source of the long-standing 'status dilemma' between Russia and the West. According to him, the West is not purposefully ignoring or undermining Russia's status. Rather, it's intentions and actions are wrongly perceived by Russia.

Figure 3. *Graphic representation of a social competition strategy.*

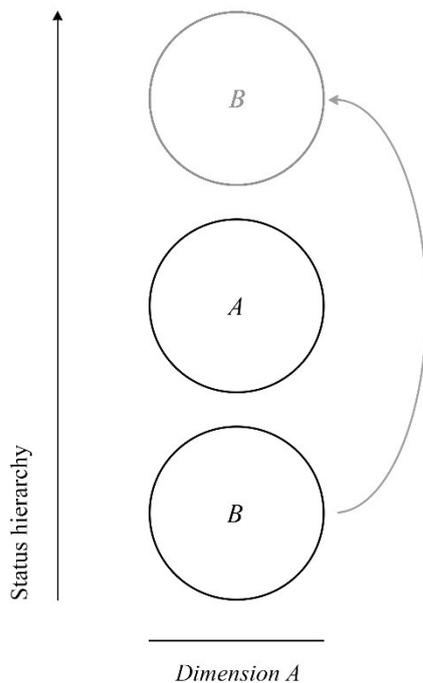


Figure 3 describes such a social competition strategy: actor A is being depicted as having a superior position within the prevailing status hierarchy, but is to be outdone by actor B on the same dimension upon which A's status rests. Finally, the following hypotheses can be derived from SIT's social competition strategy:

H3: *If higher-status groups are impermeable, and if the status hierarchy appears to be insecure (that is, illegitimate and/or unstable), states will seek to out-do the higher-status group on salient dimensions.*

### 2.3.3. Debating Social Identity Theory

The habit of explaining group phenomena in terms of individuals and their interactions is rarely left uncriticized – and for valid reasons, too. Studies of social psychology often resort to a lower level of analysis because, well, they have little options left. The arena of psychological phenomena is the individual human brain. Outside of it, in groups or states, psychology cannot occur (Hogg, 1993). As such, Mudrack (1989, p. 38) observes, “researchers are forced to examine *individuals* in order to gain a glimpse of *the group*.” As a consequence, the problem of *reductionism* arises. That is, wrongfully assuming that the whole is no greater than the sum of its parts, by averaging the latter in terms of the former. Consequently, any attempt “to conceptualize the causes of war and the conditions for peace that starts from individual psychology rather than from an analysis of the relations between nation-states is of questionable relevance” (Kelman, 1965, p. 5). In the same vein, the application of SIT into the IR-discipline is deserving of some explanation.

Needless to say, groups lack consciousness and emotions. They cannot think, feel, or act. Instead, the individuals which constitute them *can*. This, however, raises the question if and how SIT is able to examine intergroup behavioral processes of status-seeking without reducing the group to the mere sum

of its parts. Is it possible for social psychologists – and perhaps for political scientist as well – to make inferences about groups without resorting to reductionist practices? How does SIT safely transfer individual emotions (such as humiliation, pride, and the desire for self-esteem) to groups? To Jonathan Mercer (1993, pp. 237-238), the first scholar to make IR and SIT acquainted, it is wrong to believe that using social psychology to explain anything beyond individual behavior is necessarily reductionist:

“While individuals constitute all social entities (such as armies, social structures, or states), this does not mean that all social entities can be explained by reference to individuals. For example, individuals make up bureaucracies, but we cannot understand the characteristics of bureaucracies (such as resistance to innovation) by examining only the beliefs of individuals. Likewise, individuals constitute groups, but we cannot understand behavior characteristic of groups - such as intergroup competition, discrimination, ethnocentrism, and in-group cohesion and conformity - by reference to the psychology of individuals. Some social phenomena have "emergent" qualities that cannot be derived from the beliefs, motives, or powers of individuals.”

Precisely the “emergent qualities” of which Mercer speaks are the focus of SIT and, moreover, make it possible for SIT to infer beyond the individual, to social groups. SIT puts the ‘social’ into psychology, the group in the individual, to explain how a group is different than the mere sum of its parts. As previously pointed out, group membership constitutes an important part of an individual’s sense of self. Being part of a social group does not only lead individuals to see themselves as group members, but also brings them to identify closely with the group, “adopting its perceptions and representations as their own” and experiencing any event or action aimed at the group as if aimed at themselves (Sasley, 2011, p. 457). Consequently, interactions between groups are “largely determined by group memberships of the participants and very little – if at all – by their personal relations or individual characteristics” (Tajfel, 1979, p. 401). That is to say, individuals in social groups behave as group members instead of unique, self-contained entities. The same holds for experiencing strong emotions, such as humiliation, pride, or anger. To Smith and Mackie (2008, p. 436), “emotions pertain to an *identity*, and not to a biological individual.” As such, individuals react emotionally to actions aimed at their group, such as the denial of status claims, because the group constitutes an integral part of the personal self (the fierce emotions of soccer fans watching their preferred team play, is an example that speaks to the imagination; the fans do not participate in the match themselves, yet their fervent anger or joy arises from that part of the self which has been reserved for their favorite soccer team) (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014). In sum, SIT is particularly valuable because it’s a *social* theory of intergroup behavior, that, to Hogg (1993, p. 92), is “grounded in the critique of reductionism.”

Besides concerns of reductionism, there remains the issue of cross-disciplinary translation (Huddy, 2001; Hymans, 2002). That is to say, can we safely apply SIT to the study of international politics? Can we equate *minimal* groups (that have been the object of study of social identity theorists) with large and complex collective entities such as states? Indeed, a state is a large and complex political entity. Unlike minimal groups, its members share a common history, cultural traits, and political, religious, and ideological sentiments. Yet, according to Sasley (2011, p. 465), “it is still a group.” That is to say, as long as individuals identify with a state, that state becomes part of the individual self, and individuals will experience any event or action aimed at the state as if it is aimed at themselves (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014) . Accordingly, individual members of the state converge on the same emotions, such that one can speak of a ‘single’ emotion, prototypical of the state at large – a ‘state emotion’ (Sasley, 2011). As such, emotional transference from individuals to states is made possible by the same processes of identification. Hence, it is theoretically sound to regard states as unitary groups, whose members all think, feel, and act alike – not as “as unique individuals, but rather as relatively interchangeable members of the group” (Mackie, Maitner, & Smith, 2009, p. 287). Thereby, SIT is well able of being applied to the discipline of IR.

In sum, SIT bears great potential for the study of status in IR, trumping traditional theoretical approaches, such as realism and constructivism, in its ability to engage with the concept. As previously pointed out, the realist tradition in IR either (1) neglects status altogether, or (2) reduces it to an instrument in the pursuit of power, thereby both brushing aside key dimensions of status and smothering its intrinsic worth. Furthermore, although constructivism does provide the ontological and epistemological framework in which the theoretical concept of status can best be understood, it fails to engage with the concept in a theoretically sophisticated way. Identities and norms do inform status claims, but they hardly suffice in explaining resulting status-seeking behavior. In contrast, SIT is able to point out (1) why states desire for status, (2) why the way in which states seek status may vary, and (3) how status-seeking efforts are determined by both the permeability of group barriers and the security of the status hierarchy. Consequently, SIT will help this research to determine whether, to what extent, and why Russia is exhibiting status-seeking behavior in the Middle East.



### III

#### Methodology

Chapter 2 provided a broad overview of existing IR-theorizing on status, identified a lack of theoretical depth within it, and presented SIT as a refined theory that is capable of engaging with the concept of status in a theoretically sophisticated way. This chapter seeks to set out how this study is to carry out its research; how the hypotheses that were derived from SIT will be measured and assessed; what data is to be used, and how that data is to be processed.

#### 3.1. Research design

This study will employ a qualitative, single case study design. According to Seawright and Gerring (2008, p. 296), a case study can best be defined as “the intensive (qualitative or quantitative) analysis of a single unit or a small number of units (the cases), where the researcher’s goal is to understand a larger class of similar units (a population of cases).” Here, the goal is causal inference, rather than descriptive or predictive research. To that effect, this study must ask how it will infer above and beyond the particularities of Russian engagement in the Middle East (2011-2016). Theoretically, all states can be expected to display status-seeking behavior in one way or another, since status has been and continues to be an established motive of international behavior, as was argued in Chapter 2. The findings of this study on the applicability of SIT to Russian state conduct carry, therefore, potential significance for explaining the behavior of all state actors.

One can, however, reasonably argue that Russia is part of a smaller population of rising powers – among which one may count China and India – for whom the findings of this study are of particular significance. These rising powers share a number of characteristics, such as: a steady and considerable increase in material capabilities; vast geographical size and natural resources; nuclear capabilities; and, more importantly, a developed desire to gain international stature and recognition as a result. Surely, the so-called ‘Chinese Dream’ of national rejuvenation has been a well-articulated concept within Chinese foreign policy; whereas before 1839, “many Chinese considered China the center of the world, the only true civilization,” the First Opium War (1839-1842) introduced “the century of national humiliation,” during which China suffered an inferior role to Western imperialism (Wang, 2014, p. 4). India, too, has developed a historical fixation on recognition as a great power (Pardesi, 2015). India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (2004, pp. 222-223), already expressed in 1946 how India – the land of Ghandi and the home of one quarter of the human race – was to “reclaim in universal history the rank that ignorance has refused her for a long time and to hold her place among the great nations.”

These old and proud civilizations saw their international stature and, henceforth, their positive social identity crumble under the pressure of a new Western-led global order. Hence, one may reasonably assume that among these states, status aspirations will play an increasingly prominent role in determining foreign policy interests and international conduct for the coming decades, as their increasing material might and the establishment of a multipolar world allows them to reassert – once again - a prominent international position. To that effect, the findings of this study might be generalizable to the population of the aforementioned rising powers – China and India.

### **3.2. Method of inquiry**

This study will employ the research method of *theory-testing process-tracing*. According to George and Bennet (2005, pp. 206-207), process-tracing refers to “attempts to identify the intervening causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable.” It allows scholars to peer into what is generally known as the “box of causation”, seeking to locate that what lies between cause and effect (Gerring, 2008, p. 164). In doing so, process-tracing enables scholars to solve two inferential problems that often remain unaddressed by statistical methods: causal direction (does X cause Y? Or does Y cause X?) and spuriousness (does X cause Y? Or may there be some third, omitted variable involved?) (Bennett, 2010). Despite its competence in uncovering causal processes, process-tracing methods are particularly valued because of its ability to discriminate between alternative theoretical explanations. Beach and Pedersen (2019) identify three distinct process-tracing methods: *theory-testing*, *theory-building*, and *explaining outcome*. Theory-testing process-tracing, the preferred method of inquiry for this study, attempts to determine whether a hypothesized causal mechanism is present in a single case. As such, theory-testing process-tracing is a deductive exercise: one gathers empirical evidence to see whether predicted observable manifestations, as hypothesized by theory, is present in a given case.

#### *3.2.1. Appropriate evidence*

To Bennett (2010, p. 13), process-tracing remains an exceptionally powerful tool to discriminate among rival explanations of historical cases, as long as those who wield it “have the right kind of evidence.” That is to say, not all evidence is created equal. Some pieces of evidence have higher inferential power than others (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). Appropriate evidence is able to discriminate strongly between competing theoretical explanations. Ideally, it supports one explanation, and rejects others. The more inconsistent evidence is with alternative explanations, the more convincing other explanations become (ibid., 2015). In that sense, appropriate evidence signals the competence of an explanation through its ability to rule out other explanations. This does require practitioners of

process-tracing, however, to be “fair” on evidence that fails to fit the explanation that interests them the most, as well as evidence that fits explanations that interests them the least. According to Bennett and Checkel (2014, p. 31), a process-tracing study must cast its net widely for alternative explanations and “be relentless in gathering diverse and relevant evidence”, albeit within reasonable boundaries. In that case, this research ought to fully consider evidence that fails to fit the explanations set out by Social Identity Theory (SIT) and, moreover, to consider more structural or realist accounts of Russia’s policy in the Middle East. If, by any chance, this study finds evidence that is contrary to the theorized predictions of SIT, then it follows that such pieces of evidence lower the likelihood that SIT is a valid explanation of the phenomenon at hand.

Process-tracing builds its claims on the likelihood that alternative explanations are plausible around four empirical tests (see: Table 1). These tests assess evidence with different kinds of probative value (that is, its ability to discriminate between alternative explanations) found in the process trace along two dimensions: uniqueness and certainty (Van Evera, 1997).

1. *Hoop tests* - these involve evidence with a high degree of certitude, but no uniqueness. Failing such a test rejects a theory or explanation, but passing it confers next to little support. In the words of Van Evera (ibid., p. 31): “To remain viable the theory must jump through the hoop this tests presents, but passage of the test still leaves the theory in limbo.”
2. *Smoking-gun tests* are unique, but provide no certitude. Passing a smoking-gun test strongly corroborates an explanation, but is not necessary to build confidence in an explanation. In addition, little doubt is cast on an explanation that fails a smoking-gun test.
3. *Double-decisive tests* use evidence that provides a high degree of both uniqueness *and* certitude – passing it is necessary and sufficient to provide confidence in an explanation. As such, double-decisive tests are decisive both ways: “passage strongly corroborates an explanation, a flunk kills it” (ibid., p. 32).
4. *Straw-in-the-wind tests* provide rather weak evidence - truly like a ‘straw in the wind’ - that is neither unique nor certain (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). Such tests are indecisive in themselves, although they can add to the total balance of evidence.

Table 1. *Process-tracing: four tests for causation.*

<b>Sufficient to establish causation</b>			
		<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Necessary to establish causation</b>	<b>No</b>	<p><b>Straw in the wind</b></p> <p><i>Passing</i> affirms relevance of hypothesis but does not confirm it.</p> <p><i>Failing</i> suggests hypothesis may not be relevant, but does not eliminate it.</p>	<p><b>Smoking gun</b></p> <p><i>Passing</i> confirms hypothesis.</p> <p><i>Failing</i> does not eliminate it.</p>
	<b>Yes</b>	<p><b>Hoop</b></p> <p><i>Passing</i> affirms relevance of hypothesis, but does not confirm it.</p> <p><i>Failing</i> eliminates it.</p>	<p><b>Double decisive</b></p> <p><i>Passing</i> confirms hypothesis and eliminates others.</p> <p><i>Failing</i> eliminates it.</p>

*Note.* Adapted from *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool* (p. 17), by A. Bennett & J.T. Checkel, 2015, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3.2.2. *Case selection & demarcation*

Why Russia? There is, quite possibly, no other state to be found for whom the quest for status has been such a consistent, important, and candid objective of its foreign policy, as it has been for Russia. “From early contacts between Muscovy and the Holy Roman Empire through the rapid increase in contact during and following Peter the Great’s reign and finally during the Soviet period,” Neumann (2008, p. 128) writes, status has been an ongoing concern of Russian politics. Likewise, few states have enjoyed as much status, and conversely, suffered as great a loss of it, as Russia did. The persistence of Russia’s quest for great power status throughout history, and its centrality to both historical and contemporary “Russian identity politics”, forges the expectation that *if* status-seeking behavior is to be found anywhere in the international realm, then it should be found in Russia; that *if* SIT applies to any particular international actor, then surely Russia should be an excellent case to find out whether it does (ibid., p. 129). As such, this study treats Russia as a representative case for testing Social Identity Theory in the discipline of IR.

Where, then, to begin the process trace? According to Bennett and Checkel (2015, p. 27), a reasonable point of departure usually is the time “at which a key actor or agent enters the scene or gains some material, ideational or informational capacity” – a time neither too far back, nor too proximate. Russian involvement in the Middle East is, unlike often supposed, not an entirely new thing; neither are Moscow’s endeavors to obtain a foothold in the region or to increase its expenditures to it. Even in recent modern history, examples of Russian (re)engagement are numerous: the introduction of the Soviet Union to the Middle East in 1945; the 1980s Soviet campaign in Afghanistan; reinvigoration of economic and diplomatic ties under Putin in the early 2000s; strong involvement in the Syrian crisis after the 2011 Arab Spring and, specifically, the downfall of the Qaddafi-regime in Libya; and the 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria (Lund, 2019; Wheeler, 1959). Each of these time points represented an significant increase in Russia’s regional involvement.

To Lund (2019, p. 20), however, “the watershed moment really is the Arab spring.” In 2011, a collection of popular uprisings swept through the Middle East in a stirring fashion: regimes fell, others arose, and a whole set of disruptive actors entered the geopolitical scene during the turmoil that followed. The cards were shuffled, and many had to reassess their hand. Russia did, too. For Russia, the wake of the Arab spring gave rise to both threats, opportunities, and frustration. From 2011 onwards, Moscow really began to fear what it perceived to be US-backed, Sunni-motivated, extremist uprisings, similar to the ‘color revolutions’ that shook the post-Soviet neighborhood in the early 2000s (ibid., 2019). The sheer turmoil in the Middle East, as well as the evolving unrest in Syria, prompted a significant change in Russia’s involvement in the Middle East (Rumer, 2019b). Moscow quickly committed itself to renewing its political and economic presence in the region, up to the point when, from 2012 onwards, Russian diplomatic activity rose to a level that was “unprecedented since the fall of the USSR” (Kozhanov, 2016, p. 25). Consequently, this study will begin the process trace in 2011, for that year seems to signal a critical change in Russia’s involvement in the Middle East up till then. Moreover, 2011 is a time point neither too distant nor too proximate in time, allowing this study to give a feasible, detailed account of contemporary Russian Middle East policy, without having to skip long periods of history or politically momentous events.

Eventually, this case study will extend into late February 2016, specifically 26 February 2016, when the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2268 (Vasiliev, 2018). By doing so, the international community implemented the agreements between Russia and the US on a ceasefire in Syria. By then, Russia had employed military force in Syria, initiated several high-profile meetings among a wide array of both global and regional players, engaged in (largely) successful dialogue with the US, co-headed the influential International Syria Support Group (ISSG), and, consequently, gained substantial international recognition because of these endeavors. Since then, Russia’s presence in the Middle East and, specifically, Syria was accepted as a definite feature of “a new geopolitical reality”

(Kozhanov, 2016, p. 73). Everything that followed afterwards (such as a US-Russian settlement plan for Syria in September 2016 or joint Russian-Turkish military patrols along the borders of north-east Syria from October 2019 onwards) reasonably be regarded as a reaffirmation of Russia's definite role in the Middle East. By choosing February 2016 as the endpoint of this process trace, it is made feasible for this study to provide an in-depth assessment of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East, without drowning in empirical profusion or receding in futile repetition.

### **3.3. Operationalization**

Before this study can test the predictions of SIT against the case of Russian engagement in the Middle East (2011-2016), it is necessary to clarify as much as possible “the facts and sequences within a case that should be true if each of the alternative hypothesized explanations of the case is true” (Bennett & Checkel, 2015, p. 30). As virtually all theories, SIT is stated in rather general terms, and it is therefore needed to operationalize and adapt them to this study's specific case. Despite the laudatory and pioneering efforts of Larson and Shevchenko (2010, 2014, 2019b) to introduce SIT to the discipline of IR, they failed to formulate clear observable predictions and measures of SIT's key terms and predictions. Therefore, this study will take up the arduous task of presenting observable indicators of SIT's most central tenets by itself.

#### *3.3.1. Status, stability, and legitimacy*

As previously pointed out, status is both a positional, perceptual, and social good. Consequently, status is reflected by collective beliefs about a given state's relative position (or ranking) on salient dimensions in a social hierarchy (Wohlforth et al., 2018). The aforementioned social hierarchy in which status is reflected, will in this study be referred to as a ‘status hierarchy’. Observing and unwrapping a status hierarchy to find a given actor's position within it is not easily done; states do rarely keep lists of theirs and others positions within a status hierarchy, nor is it feasible to ask governments worldwide if they would care in writing such a list. Neither is it viable to measure relative positions via objective indexes of, for example, civil liberties, military capabilities, technological innovation, or economic development. Status is based upon what actors think of themselves and others; it rarely mirrors, and often varies significantly from, a calculable distribution of resources and capabilities. If, however, status cannot be calculated, then how is it to be measured?

Delineating a status hierarchy is far from inconceivable. Although status hierarchies might not be written down or calculated, they are implicitly indicated. According to Volgy et al. (2011, p. 13), diplomatic exchanges have been generally used as a reliable measurement of status attribution: “The

behavioral correlates of status attribution should reflect choices made by states to seek routinized contacts and formal consultation with those they perceive to be major powers and will likely influence their security and well-being.” Such diplomatic exchanges may effectuate in official state visits – indicative of a clear desire to consult with the state and reflective of the importance of the state relative to others. In addition, useful places to look at are international organizations, often “hierarchical in their rights and functioning, as exemplified by the weighted voting structures” (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019b, p. 5). Likewise, international coalitions are alternative sites where status hierarchies are reflected and implied. Who champions the coalition? Who is involved? Who decides? Who doesn’t? Questions like these are able to tell us a great deal about how and to whom status is attributed, as the composition and functioning of organizations, coalitions, or groupings often reflect a clear, widespread consensus about the position of leading powers – and, likewise, of those who rank below of them. As such, one is able to tell which actors are esteemed, apprised, and respected; conversely, one might identify those actors which are repulsed, excluded, or defied – indicating a higher or lower status. This study, then, measures Russia’s status by assessing both the volume and success (that is, positive reaffirmation by relevant states of) its diplomatic exchanges (such as, official state visits, high-profile meetings, multilateral diplomatic efforts). To this effect, this study will assess the records of official state visits and meetings of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, as provided by the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see Appendix 1 & 2).

Furthermore, the way in which states reflect on the status hierarchy, either by voicing their concerns or by virtue of their international behavior, indicates its ‘security’ – that is, stability and/or legitimacy. According to Larson and Shevchenko (2019b), a status hierarchy is *stable* when it is not susceptible to change. The lower-status group cannot conceive of alternatives to the status quo, and therefore accepts existing status distinctions, “prevailing power relationships and the acknowledged identity of the leading powers in international institutions.” Conversely, a status hierarchy is *unstable* when states refer to prospective changes in the balance of power and to the subsequent decline and rise of states within it. Furthermore, a *legitimate* status hierarchy is indicated by “general consensus on the norms of the system, as indicated by the lack of concerted pressure for a new world order” (Larson & Shevchenko, *ibid.*, p. 13). Lower-status groups deem the criteria for status attribution and recognition to be applied fairly. Conversely, evidence of an *illegitimate* status hierarchy is found in statements of dissatisfied lower-status states referring to “exploitation, unfairness, and ‘double standards’” (*ibid.*, p. 11). Like status itself, this study will assume the security of the prevailing status hierarchy to be reflected in diplomatic exchanges; a sudden increase or decline in routinized diplomatic exchanges will indicate a shift in the stability of the prevailing status hierarchy, signaling the willingness of states to adjust their diplomatic efforts to prospective changes in power relationships or according to perceived illegitimacy. To this effect, this study will assess the records of official state visits and

meetings of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, as provided by the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see Appendix 1 & 2).

### 3.3.2. *Permeability of group barriers*

The impermeability of out-group barriers is understood in this study as the inability of lower-status states to pass into higher-status groups, either because of (a) the inability of the lower-status states to meet criteria, standards or norms of higher-status groups; or due to (b) the unwillingness of higher-status states to admit or consider a particular state for membership in higher-status groups. The aforementioned ‘group barriers’ can entail anything between pragmatic, moral, cultural, and ideological prohibitions, such as military or economic strength, adherence to democratic norms, or degree of technological innovation. Evidence for impermeability would, for example, be signaled by the refusal of established powers “to consult with the state on issues affecting its interests or their rejection of its claims for a voice” (ibid., p. 11). Conversely, permeability is indicated by the concern of established powers for the interests and desires of lower-status states.

Measuring the permeability of out-group barriers, however, is not easily done. Since states have multiple traits upon which they can be evaluated, there is not one single higher-status group conceivable. There are many, in multiple arenas. Most of them define themselves along different dimensions, and, thus, maintain different standards for admission. Consequently, it would be foolish to take a set of admission criteria from one group and pretend that these are equally nursed by other groups. To operationalize the permeability of higher-status group barriers, then, is to necessarily make a set of assumptions about the salience of certain dimensions within that group and, consequently, the prominence of certain standards in signaling that permeability.

The idea of ‘greatpowerness’ and the search for recognition as a great power has stood central, both historically and in the post-Soviet period, to Russian politics (Smith, 2014; Tsygankov, 2018; Urnov, 2014; Zevelev, 2002). This study will embark on a deeper, empirical assessment of Russia’s great power aspirations in Chapter 4, but shall, for now, assume that Russia’s desired higher-status group is one of established great powers. The criteria for admission into the great power club have been much debated. Traditionally, neorealism and liberalism have stressed the prominence of respectively relative military and economic capabilities in signaling greatpowerness; constructivists, like Neumann (2008, p. 148), have noted that greatpowerness is not only rooted in material might, but also attached to a social idea of what it *means* to be a great power as defined by the prevailing great powers, encompassing “liberal standards of civilization”, such as an diversified economy, an innovative and free private sector, and an established and respected rule of law – on top of substantial military and economic capacities. To Fordham (2007), however, great powers distinguish themselves by their

foreign policy behavior – entailing both the ability and the willingness to pursue and defend their interests beyond their immediate neighborhood. In sum, this study will distill the following criteria of greatpowerness from the aforementioned approaches: *a great power is a state with substantial military, economic, and moral qualities, which is both able and willing to pursue and defend its foreign policy interests beyond its immediate neighborhood*. Consequently, this study, having defined Russia’s significant out-group and its admission criteria, will measure the permeability of out-group barriers by assessing (a) the ability of Russia to meet the aforementioned great power standards, and (b) the willingness of established great powers to recognize that ability – as, for example, signaled by Russia’s admission to informal great power groupings, such as the G7, or by respecting Russia’s foreign policy interests.

### 3.3.3. Operational predictions

This study has derived a series of process-level hypotheses from SIT, each of which represents one of three identity management strategies – social mobility, social creativity, and social competition – that actors, seeking to enhance their status, employ. Each of these hypotheses are presented below and operationalized in causal chains. Distinctive observable implications for each step of each causal chain have been evinced as well.

#### 3.3.3.1. Social mobility

If Russian engagement in the Middle East can be explained by referring to the pursuit of status, and if, in doing so, Russia employs a social mobility strategy, this study should find evidence of the following intervening phenomena: Russia suffers low status, thereby having its positive social identity threatened; given that group barriers are permeable, Russia will try to move into a higher-status group by assimilating to its values, norms, and practices (see Figure 4). If Russia proves to exert a social mobility strategy, what then would this study expect to find? In international relations, evidence of social mobility is found in a state’s emulation of the institutions, practices, norms, and values of higher-status states (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019). States may even voice the explicit goal of joining a higher-status group or organization. Table 2 displays the observable manifestations for each part of the hypothesized causal chain. In addition, this study seeks to find evidence of a social competition strategy in UN speeches and important national addresses (such as the yearly Presidential Address to the Russian Federal Assembly).

Figure 4. Causal chain of a social mobility strategy.

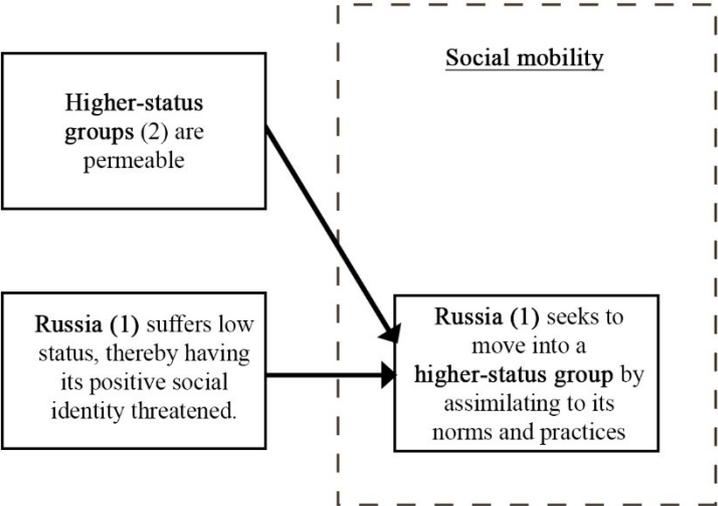


Table 2. Theoretical predictions and observable manifestations of a social mobility strategy.

Theoretical predictions	Observable manifestations
Russia suffers from low status	Russian diplomatic exchanges with other relevant states are meager and unsuccessful;
Higher-status group is permeable	Russia has substantial military, economic, and moral qualities;  Established great powers admit Russia into informal great power groupings, and show respect for Russia’s foreign policy interests;
Russia seeks to move into a higher-status group by assimilating to its norms and practices ( <i>social mobility</i> )	Russia emulates the institutions, practices, norms, and values of established great powers; Russia voices the explicit goal of joining a higher-status group or organization;

### 3.3.3.2. *Social creativity*

Likewise, if Russia exerts a social creativity strategy, this study should observe the following chain of events and facts during the process trace: Russia suffers low status, thereby having its positive social identity threatened; given that (a) higher-status group barriers are impermeable and (b) the status hierarchy appears to be secure, Russia will seek to alter the dimensions on which intergroup comparison is based; causing Russia to (1) find a new favorable dimension of comparison between itself and the higher-status group of preference, (2) redefine negative Russian characteristics as positive, or (3) find another, lower-status group as a comparative frame of reference (see Figure 5).

According to Larson and Shevchenko, 2019, p. 13), “indicators that a state is pursuing social creativity include advocacy of new international norms, regimes, institutions, or developmental models.” Moreover, social creativity may be indicated by a state’s efforts to carve out a distinctive international position of its own, stressing its uniqueness, stature, and qualities, through instruments such as soft power, nation branding, and high-profile diplomacy – although without trying to alter the status hierarchy in the international system.

This study will expect to find evidence of all three distinct social creativity strategies in UN speeches and important national addresses (such as the yearly Presidential Address to the Russian Federal Assembly), where (1) Russian officials are found routinely stressing new dimensions of comparison with established great powers, other than traditional great power criteria, such as substantial military and economic capabilities or the pursuit of foreign policy interests beyond the immediate neighborhood; (2) Russian officials are found routinely stressing a dimension on which Russia compares negatively to established great powers such as the US, while redefining it as a positive characteristic; or (3) Russian officials are found routinely comparing Russia to international actors, other than established great powers such as the US. Table 3 displays the observable manifestations for each part of the hypothesized causal chain.

Figure 5. Causal chain of a social creativity strategy.

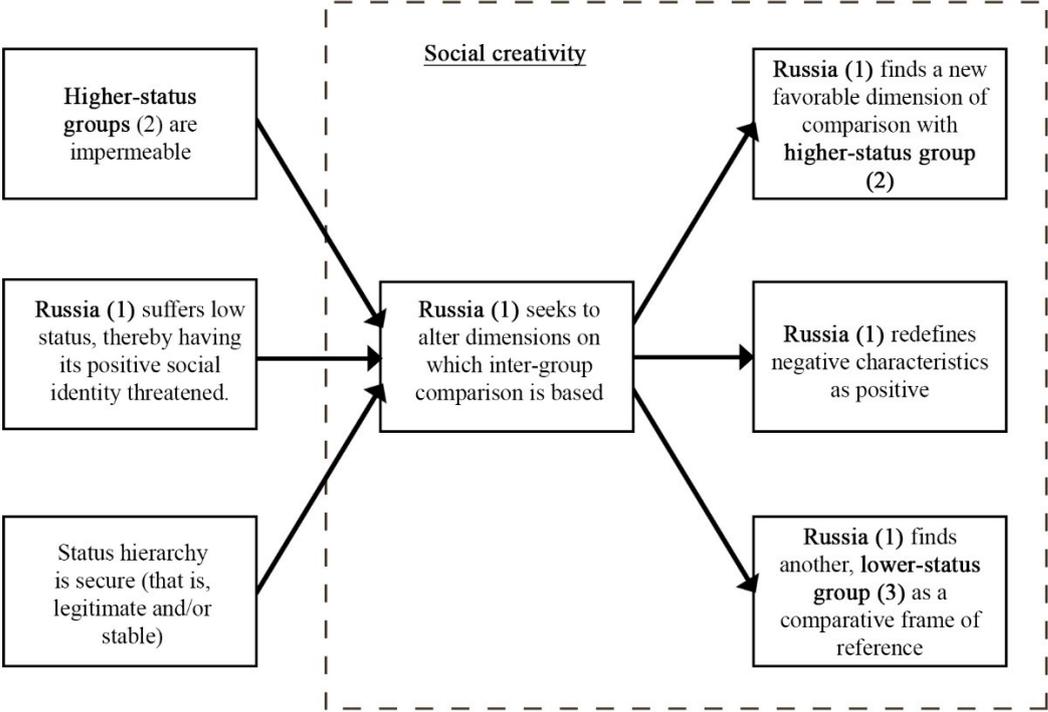


Table 3. Theoretical predictions and observable manifestations of a social creativity strategy.

Theoretical predictions	Observable manifestations
Russia suffers low status	Russian diplomatic exchanges with other relevant states are meager and unsuccessful;
Higher-status groups are impermeable	Russia does not have substantial military, economic, and moral qualities;  Established great powers refuse to admit Russia into informal great power groupings, and show a lack of respect for Russia’s foreign policy interests;
The status hierarchy is secure (that is, legitimate and/or stable)	There is no sudden increase or decline in routinized diplomatic exchanges (official state visits, high-profile meetings, multilateral

	diplomatic efforts) observable;
Russia seeks to alter the dimensions on which inter-group comparison is based	<i>As indicated by:</i>
Russia finds a new favorable dimensions of comparison with higher-status group	In UN speeches or important national addresses, Russian officials are found routinely stressing new dimensions of comparison with established great powers, other than traditional great power criteria, such as substantial military and economic capabilities or the pursuit of foreign policy interests beyond the immediate neighborhood;
Russia redefines negative characteristics as positive	In UN speeches or important national addresses, Russian officials are found routinely stressing a dimension on which Russia compares negatively to established great powers such as the US, while redefining it as a positive characteristic.
Russia finds another, lower-status group as a comparative frame of reference	In UN speeches or important national addresses, Russian officials are found routinely comparing Russia to international actors, other than established great powers such as the US.

3.3.3.3. *Social competition*

Finally, if Russia employs an identity management strategy of social competition, this study would observe the following causal chain of facts and events: Russia suffers low status, thereby having its positive social identity threatened; given that (a) higher-status group barriers are impermeable and (b) the status hierarchy appears to be insecure, Russia will seek to out-do the higher-status group on salient dimensions (that is, those dimensions on which the status of the higher-status group rests) (see Figure 6).

According to Larson and Shevchenko (2019), social competition usually manifests itself in geopolitical rivalry. It should be stressed, however, that the purpose of social competition is to alter

the status hierarchy and reverse the position of the in-group and out-group within it. As such, social competition is strictly based on rivalry over position. Although social competition is often indicated by a show of weaponry and material might (since that proves to be the stuff on which status in international politics largely rests), it doesn't necessarily have to entail a showdown of force. Its purpose here is to "influence others' perceptions rather than to attain security or power" (ibid., p. 11). Evidence of social competition would then be found in any attempts to willfully reverse relative positions within the status hierarchy - as indicated by arms racing, geopolitical rivalry, military intervention, spoiler behavior, and competition over client states. Table 4 displays the observable manifestations for each part of the hypothesized causal chain.

Figure 6. Causal chain of a social competition strategy.

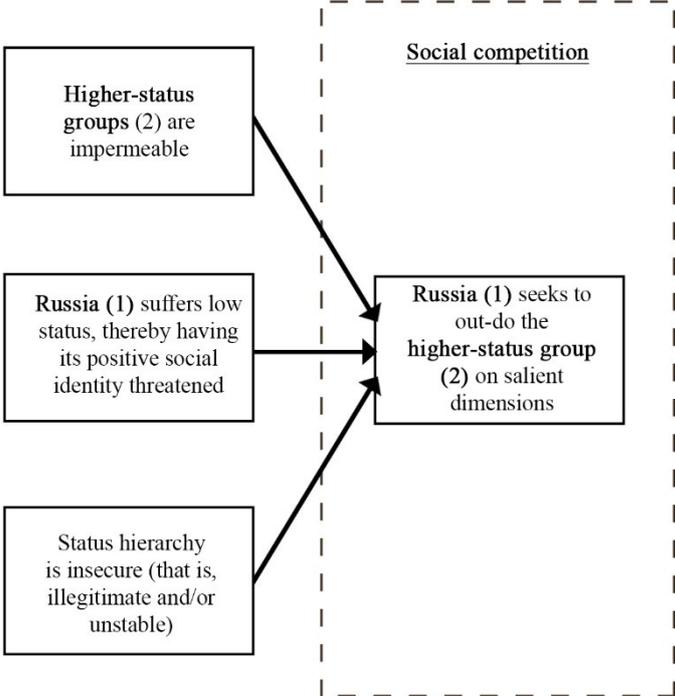


Table 4. *Theoretical predictions and observable manifestations of a social creativity strategy.*

<b>Theoretical predictions</b>	<b>Observable manifestations</b>
Russia suffers low status	Russian diplomatic exchanges with other relevant states are meager and unsuccessful;
High-status groups are impermeable	Russia does not have substantial military, economic, and moral qualities;  Established great powers refuse to admit Russia into informal great power groupings, and show a lack of respect for Russia’s foreign policy interests;
Status hierarchy is insecure (that is, illegitimate and/or unstable)	There is a sudden increase or decline in routinized diplomatic exchanges (official state visits, high-profile meetings, multilateral diplomatic efforts) observable;
Russia seeks to out-do the higher-status group on salient dimensions	Attempts to willfully reverse relative positions within the status hierarchy, as indicated by: vetoes; arms racing; counter-balancing; geopolitical rivalry; military intervention; spoiler behavior; competition over client states

**3.4. Data & sources**

This study will draw from a wide variety of both primary and secondary sources. In order to grasp Russian status concerns or frustrations and status-seeking behavior, this study will assess primary sources such as statements of Russian government officials and accounts of UN Security Council meetings, bilateral negotiations, and high-profile international events. Moreover, secondary sources

such as established literature on Russian foreign policy and conduct in the post-Cold War era and the Middle East will be reviewed extensively.

In assessing both types of sources, this study will, at all times, consider the potential for bias – either Western- or Russian-bred. That potential, to be sure, is substantial; to write about status is to write about a nervous, sensitive feature of the sense of self. Certain sources will, therefore, be approached with extra caution. This study will, for example, consult landmark works on Russian Middle East policy such as Vasiliev's *Russia's Middle East Policy* (2018) and Primakov's *Russia and the Arabs* (2009); both authors have assumed seats in various prominent foreign policy positions and Russian government institutions, and were influential in constructing Russian global and Middle East foreign policy. Hence, it can reasonably be assumed that these books (and others) describe historical events from a particular, biased point of view.

## IV

### Empirics

Russia's engagement in the Middle East does not occur in a void, but takes place within "a definite and discernible context" of historically persisting status aspirations (Karasik & Blank, 2018, p. 29). Therefore, this study will first provide a short but much-desired overview of the context and events that shaped Russian foreign policy in the Middle East *before* the turmoil of 2011. Specifically, the Russian self-concept of a great power, as well as the critical role of the West in denying and reaffirming that self-concept, will be discussed. In addition, this study will show how a sequence of status claims, denial, and frustration has led Russia to envision the Middle East as a theatre in which it is able to secure recognition as an established great power. Consequently, this chapter will present an in-depth analysis of Russian involvement in the Middle East from 2011 to 2016. Finally, Russia's Middle East policy will be interpreted along the theoretical lines of SIT.

#### 4.1. Historical context of Russian status-seeking (1989-2011)

Few themes in the literature surrounding Russian foreign policy have been as well developed as Russia's engagement with the idea of 'greatpowerness' (*velikoderzhavnost*) and its quest for great power status, both historically and in the post-Cold War period (Hopf, 2002; Neumann, 2008; Smith, 2014; Urnov, 2014; Zevelev, 2002). A combination of its enormous geographical size, vast resources, nuclear capabilities, military might, and extensive contribution to the world's cultural riches has firmly locked into Russian consciousness the belief that Russia cannot be anything less than a great power. In the words of Meshkov (1999, p. 10), "Russia cannot help but conduct itself in the world as a great power. (...) Russia is fated for this role by history." Moreover, the preconditioned characteristics of Russian 'greatpowerness', to Putin, determines the mentality of Russians and the policy of the government throughout the history of Russia – and it will continue to do so at present (Hopf, 2002).

##### 4.1.1. *Status denial during the Yeltsin era*

Russia's *status* as a great power, however, has been far from stable. Likewise, its quest to secure international recognition as an established great power has not been without problems – even more so after the ending of the Cold War (Neumann, 2008). The collapse of the Soviet Union greatly threatened the Russian self-concept as a great power, and consequently prompted the rise of "profound internal and external identity crises" (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014, p. 272). The disintegration of what was once a superpower, only matched by the United States in kind, into fifteen independent republics not only entailed an unprecedented loss of status for Russia, but also ripped, what Karaganov (2014)

called, an “open wound” in the Russian sense of self. In the early 1990s, Russia, struggling to find a place for itself in the post-Soviet era and battling an enormous economic depression, had to watch how “the Western world, in the meantime, celebrated the end of communism and inhaled (...) liberal democracy as a universally held, post-historical ideal” (Klijn, 2011, p. 81). President Yeltsin and his Foreign Minister Kozyrev sought to secure the swift integration of Russia into Western institutions such as GATT, IMF, and even NATO by incorporating “the new rules of the international security game premised on democracy, acting and thinking from Russia’s weakened status” (Neumann & Pouliot, 2011, p. 132). It was reasoned that, now Russia had ‘arrived’ among the Western liberal democracies, it should be embraced accordingly (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014). Under Clinton, however, the US proved unwilling to recognize what Russia believed to be its legitimate place among established Western powers – a position to which the US believed Russia, as a highly weakened economic and military power, could no longer lay claim. The inability of Yeltsin to consolidate the admittance of Russia to Western institutions pressured the relations with Washington (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014). Moreover, Russian elites had to watch how NATO expanded into post-Soviet space in the late 1990s and early 2000s; how Moscow’s voiced opposition against the 1998 NATO intervention in Kosovo was scorned; and how the US withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002 to enable the pursuit of missile defense platforms on NATO soil (Roberts, 2018). In addition, Russia was only reluctantly admitted to the Group of Seven (G7) in 1998, primarily to mitigate for the humiliation incurred by NATO-enlargement (Krickovic, 2018). While Russia’s admission was indeed a “most significant post-Cold War status marker”, Moscow nevertheless remained excluded from discussions on economics and finance because of its relatively inferior position in these fields (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019, p. 200). Furthermore, the West’s enduring refusal to respect Russian interests - especially in the post-Soviet neighborhood - or to consult Moscow on matters of global importance strengthened the feeling that Russia was no longer recognized as an established great power, whose interests were to be considered and respected by the international community. Despite Russia’s accession to the WTO and the G7/8, Moscow perceived that it was driven into the periphery of global politics, despite Yeltsin’s clear hopes and strong efforts to retain Russia’s status as a great power (Karaganov, 2014). The Yeltsin era, as neatly described by Roberts (2018, p. 240),

“coincided with the loss of empire, domestic political instability, and a shifting geopolitical climate in which Russia’s status was diminished. Russia remained a key nuclear power, but by any other metric its status as a major global power was in freefall. Russia was essentially denied reasonable opposition to NATO expansion on the grounds that, as an aspiring democracy, it had nothing to fear from a non-hostile alliance that could shoulder the burden of European security in an uncertain time. Russia was denied its rightful position of influence within the former Soviet space, or what some Russian leaders termed, “the Near Abroad,” a designation that was understandably disconcerting to Russia’s sovereign

neighbors, as well as its right to consider the presence of US military power near its borders as a threat to its security interests. NATO's growth in post-Cold War Europe served as a symbol of Western accomplishment and Russian defeat.”

#### 4.1.2. *From Primakov to Putin: partners, not lackeys*

The demise of the Soviet Union left Russia bewildered and adrift – seeking to accept the novel realities of geopolitics, and inclusion within it, without relinquishing its desired status as a great power. Yet, the West did not recognize the degree of status which Russia continued to claim. Conversely, Russia felt that it could not merely be a subordinate of US hegemony, as Duma member Lukin (1999) expressed: “[The West] can’t treat Russia like some lackey. We’re partners, not lackeys.” Nevertheless, Russia was largely left wanting. As a consequence, Russia, having been denied its status as a great power, suffered profound identity crises, of sorts, in which the “Russian Great Power disposition” once again resurfaced as a vision of Russian foreign policy (Neumann & Pouliot, 2011, p. 132). Under Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov (1996-1999), Russia pursued an ‘Eurasianist’ foreign policy vision, questioning what was generally held to be Kozyrev’s unconditional Western orientation and, instead, seeking to establish itself as an “independent center of a multipolar world” (Primakov, 2006, p. 2). Once again, Russia claimed back its desired status as a great power, and demanded to be welcomed in an “equal, mutually beneficial partnership” with the West (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 80). As such, Russia was to act as a “corrective to American hegemonism”, constraining the US to act unilaterally and against Russian interests (Ambrosio, 2001, p. 53). To that effect, Russia took an increasingly assertive stance on NATO; sought to establish counter-alliances to “American domination of the international system”, such as the so-called Russia-India-China ‘triangle’ and the Russian-Belarusian Slavic Union (ibid., p. 53); posed to mediate in Iraq (1998) and Kosovo (1998) to obstruct US military action; and, finally, occupied the Pristina airport during the aftermath of the Kosovo War – barely avoiding a clash with NATO-forces while doing so (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014). Yet, Primakov’s balancing strategy did little to restrain both NATO-expansion and US military action in Iraq and Yugoslavia, or to consider Moscow’s interests, leaving Russia – once again – humiliated in its “unrelenting quest for symbolic recognition” (Neumann & Pouliot, 2011, p. 135).

When Putin took office in December 1999, he inherited the burdensome legacy of the Yeltsin era (1991-1999), during which Russia had been confronted with a relentless decline in its international stature, and of Primakov’s assertive stance, whose attempts to reverse the suffered loss of status proved to be largely futile. Putin sought to maneuver Russia toward a new relationship with the West, his leitmotif being the “search of a comfortable and respectable niche for Russia in the world” (Zevelev, 2002, p. 460). Recognizing Russia’s weak international position, Putin sought to avoid an

open fight against US hegemony and, instead, looked for an equal partnership with the West, based on common European values. Despite a short-lived revival of US-Russia relations – which was largely based on unilateral concessions from Putin’s part - in the context of the ‘war on terror’ in 2001, Putin quickly came to see that the Bush administration did, in fact, not regard Russia as an equal (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010). Despite Russia’s vocal objections, the West increasingly interfered in the post-Soviet space - as marked by Washington’s meddling in the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict (2003), US support for the so-called ‘color revolutions’ in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), and American (unsuccessful) efforts to broker NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia. In the words of Zevelev (2002, p. 459), “the post-Cold War US perception of self, and its vision of the world, did not allow for the kind of bilateral relationship for which Russia was striving. (...) The US wanted to ‘engage’ Russia and bring it closer to — but not into, at least for a time being — the American-led Euro-Atlantic community that was founded on common identity.” Steadily but surely, Putin came to be disillusioned about his initial, yet misplaced, hopes of an equal, respectable partnership between Russia and the West. Not only seemed the West unwilling to recognize Russia’s status as a great power, but it also actively sought to undermine Russian influence in the post-Soviet space.

The growing mismatch of Russia’s desired status and its occupied, lesser role within the status hierarchy of the 90s and early 00s bred a widely-held resentment against US unipolarity (Neumann & Pouliot, 2011). The status conflict reached its zenith during Putin’s speech at the Munich Conference in 2007, where he accused the US of disdain for international law, imposing regime change, and overstepping “its national boundaries in every way” (Putin, 2007). Moreover, Putin (ibid.) reaffirmed that “Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and has practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy. (...) We are not going to change this tradition today.” Russia was no longer to yield in the face of Western preeminence.

#### **4.2. Overview of Russian involvement in the Middle East (2011-2016)**

The ‘Primakovian’ multipolar vision of world politics continued to form the intellectual basis of Russian foreign policy under Putin: it had entailed a departure from the unrestricted Western orientation under Yeltsin and Kozyrev, and had meant a renewed attention for Eurasian regions other than Europe, such as the Middle East (Casula & Katz, 2018). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian involvement in the Middle East was further reduced; Russia’s relations with the region were characterized by a low level of trade, relatively negligible economic relations, and suffering diplomatic ties. Moreover, Moscow’s attention had shifted to “the perimeter of its own borders – to Europe and, later, the Asia-Pacific region” (Vysotsky, 2014, p. 42). Russia had neither the strength nor the inclination to maintain strong relations with the Middle East as it had done during the

Soviet era (Kozhanov, 2016). Yet, under Putin, the Middle East once again became a region of interest; particularly because of its potential as a theatre where Russia is able to act as a counterforce to Western influence, such that it “will force Washington (...) to take Moscow at its own self-valuation and acknowledge a truly multipolar world with Russia as the US’s equal” (Blank, 2018, p. 5). To that effect, Putin sought to intensify his involvement in the Middle East: in 2003, he declared that the Arab countries were one of the main vectors of Russian diplomacy; joined the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) and signed a memorandum of understanding with the League of Arab States (LAS) later that year; presented a regional security concept in 2007; and carried out official visits to Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE from 2003 till 2008 (Kozhanov, 2016, p. 9).

The increasing volume of diplomatic exchanges between Russia and the Middle East under Putin would suggest a slow but sure increase in Russia’s status. Yet, Putin’s frequent efforts to establish Russia as an established regional power failed to deliver political results of any real significance, as Malashenko (2013, p. 8) points out: “[Putin] was unable to conclude a number of proposed economic contracts, including an agreement with Saudi Arabia on a joint railway-construction project (although Russia signed a similar contract with Libya in 2008). Putin’s proposal to create a regional security system was also rejected by Arab governments.” Moreover, Russia had been unable to prevent the US from invading Iraq in 2003, displaying Moscow’s inability to *really* affect the course of events in the Middle East – a geopolitical reality of which many Middle Eastern states were painfully aware (Vasiliev, 2018). Russian diplomatic efforts to carve out an influential position in Middle Eastern politics, thus, remained a chiefly symbolic endeavor, substantiated by little *real* diplomatic successes. Hence, Russia’s status among the Middle East powers remained rather meager and even continued to fade as the region approached a stirring turn of events which was to unleash in early 2011 – the Arab Spring.

#### 4.2.1. *Libya and the Arab Spring (2011-2012)*

Initially, Moscow failed to see at face value the scale and gravity of the series of popular uprisings that swept across the Middle East from 2011 onwards. Russia was primarily trying to stay aside from what it considered to be an “intra-Arab conflict” and limited its response to the Arab Spring by stating – only modestly – the necessity of peaceful settlements of the conflicts in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen (Kozhanov, 2016, p. 15). President Medvedev, who had taken office in 2008, refused to continue to intensify relations with the Middle East, like Putin had set out to do from the early 00s onwards. If anything, Medvedev considered the region “a trading item in order to bargain preferences in its relations with the West” (ibid., p. 23).

Hence, when the fall of the Libyan Qaddafi-regime was impending and Western pressure on Moscow was increasing, President Medvedev (reluctant to sour relations with Washington any further and, quite probably, hopeful of locking in economic gains in the wake of Qaddafi's possible fall) decided to abstain from the vote on UN Resolution 1973 on March 2011, which authorized the international community to use all means necessary to protect Libyan civilians (Lund, 2019; Trenin, 2013). By doing so, Russia *de facto* paved the way for Western and Gulf Arab intervention in Libya. UN Resolution 1973 soon evolved into a NATO-led operation to overthrow Qaddafi. Medvedev's decision to refrain from blocking intervention in Libya was not received well by his prime minister, Putin, declaring it an "unforgivable sign of weakness" (Lund, 2019, p. 19). Soon enough however, Medvedev realized how erroneous his step was; Moscow was quick to side against the bombings of Libya, but its protests were to no avail (Vasiliev, 2018; Vysotsky, 2014). Qaddafi's regime was toppled in October 2011, and while Libya descended into a failed state, Russia was left empty-handed, with the larger part of its Libyan economic contracts abandoned (Malashenko, 2013).

As early as 2012, it became evident that "Russia was the unquestionable loser of the Arab Spring," as "her last allies, inherited from the USSR, are departing, and their predecessors are hostile to Moscow, while those with neutral positions have nothing to offer Moscow" (Vysotsky, 2014, p. 59). Post-Qaddafi Libya, as well as other newly erected governments in the Middle East, blamed Russia's inaction during the Arab Spring and condemned Moscow's denunciation of regime change in the Middle East. As a result, Putin concluded in 2012 that "Russian companies are losing their decades-long positions in local commercial markets and are being deprived of large commercial contracts" (Putin, 2012). To Russia, the Arab Spring not only entailed the loss of diplomatic and economic relations, increasing political instability, and the encroachment of Islamic extremism and terrorist threats ever closer to Russian borders; in addition, it had embodied further humiliation and impediment of Russia's regional stature. Moreover, the Western eagerness to rush to the support of protests across the Middle East had unleashed a revival of the 'color revolutions'-trauma which Russia had endured during the early 2000s. In Russian perception, "the Arab Spring was but the newest form of Western-inspired, Western-led regime change" (Trenin, 2013, p. 12). In sum, with the arrival of the Arab spring, Russia was left berated by newly erected regimes, deprived of economic contracts, and anxious of spreading instability and extremism. Moreover, Moscow had failed to prevent an intervention in Libya, nor was it able to establish meaningful diplomatic contacts in the region. In terms of status, Russia occupied an inferior position in the prevailing status hierarchy in the Middle East: by no means was it able to convince others of its rightful place among established regional powers, let alone present itself as an equal to the US.

When Putin returned to the presidential office in early 2012, he began restoring relations with the Middle East, which under Medvedev had suffered substantial damage (Kozhanov, 2016). Putin's

rapprochement with the Middle East after 2012 was largely motivated by the increasingly troubled relations with the West, which had become exceptionally bitter after Moscow's opposition in the dialogue over the Syrian Civil War and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. As a consequence, Russia suffered great economic damage due to Western sanctions – catalyzed by a drop in oil prices - and, moreover, risked isolation in international affairs. In addition, the upsurge of turmoil, instability, and Islamic extremism in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring raised grave concerns of potential security threats for Russia and its Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Kozhanov, 2016; Rumer, 2019b). As such, Moscow was compelled to “reject its previous vision of the region as a chessboard for its games with the West and to become more deeply involved in Middle Eastern affairs” (Kozhanov, 2016, p. 30). It seems, then, that Russia's return to the Middle East after Medvedev was chiefly motivated by immediate interests of security and commerce. In broader terms, however, Russia's troubled global and regional position provided all the more impetus for Moscow to try to better its standing.

#### 4.2.2. *Standing tall on Syria (2012-2013)*

After the successful regime change in Libya, Syrian rebels and opposition forces became more confident of their ability to establish a similar result with respect to Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad. Both regional – Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia - and Western powers “counted on a rapid fall of the regime, did not take into account its real steadiness and hoped for a possible ‘Libyan option’ – a direct foreign intervention” (Vasiliev, 2018, p. 455). Russia, however, was not willing to abandon Assad. The Russian position on the Syrian Civil War largely converged around the believe that Syria's future was to be decided by the Syrians themselves, and that the world should stay clear from any form of forceful intervention – a position Moscow had failed to defend both in Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011). US policy fiascoes in Iraq and Afghanistan had reinforced the belief that Western-imprinted regime changes would lead to little else but enduring turmoil and regional instability, exacerbated by the loss of Russian economic and political influence and the impediment of Russia's regional stature. According to Lukyanov (2013), “modern Russian society does not believe in revolutions: there is too much turmoil, hopes that turn out to be illusory, and disappointments. The value of stability is shared —so far—by both the elites and the grassroots. (...) The results of change in the countries of the Arab Spring do not offer any grounds for optimism – not in any of them.” Moreover, the grievances of being sidelined in the decision-making surrounding both interventions in Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011) - its concerns scorned and voice ignored - continued to linger vividly in Moscow.

Russia's fear for rising instability and Islamic extremism in the possible wake of Assad's fall and clear frustrations with enduring status denial on the West's part led Moscow to adopt a strategy of spoiler behavior in the Middle East. Lavrov declared in early 2013 that the US should “learn the lesson” of

dealing with Russia “on the basis of equality, balance of interests and mutual respect” (Kozhanov, 2016, p. 45). As such, Russia vetoed four UN Security Council Resolutions from 2011-2015 that called for military intervention in Syria under Article VII of the UN Charter.

According to Kozhanov (2016), Russia’s tough stance on Syria and its successful attempts to prevent Western military intervention there reaped substantial respect and recognition among regional powers; it showed that Moscow was capable of counterbalancing US influence in the region and, moreover, that it was to be regarded as an important diplomatic player whose opinion needed to be taken into account. As Vysotsky (2014, p. 61) maintained, “the countries of the region were appreciative of Russia’s logical alternative to the Western position, and quickly made 180-degree changes in their public discourse: Russia had changed from a country that supported the ‘dying, blood-spattered Syrian regime because of Empire mania’ to become a popular partner inspiring high expectations.” Whereas Primakov’s efforts of rapprochement to the Middle East had primarily been met with contempt and rejection (Israel’s Peres scorned Primakov during an unofficial meeting in 1996 with the remark that only *one* regional broker was needed, which “should be the United States”), Russian diplomats were now welcomed in Teheran, Ankara, Damascus, Tel Aviv, Riyadh, Ramallah, and Cairo (Primakov, 2009, pp. 296-297). Hence, from 2013 onwards, Russia sustained a degree of diplomatic activity in the Middle East which was unprecedented since the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Kozhanov, 2016). Moscow continued to mediate in large regional matters, such as the Syrian internal talks, the Iranian nuclear deal, and the Israeli-Palestinian question. Even the US was found increasingly willing to pursue close cooperation with Russia “in almost all aspects of the regional agenda” - despite all their mutual quarrels on Crimea and the position of the Assad-regime (Vyotsky, 2014, p. 62).

#### 4.2.3. A faltering status hierarchy (2013-2015)

The eagerness of virtually all relevant actors in the Middle East to engage diplomatically with Russia, even against the backdrop of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, reinforces the idea that regional actors were willing to look beyond the prevailing status hierarchy, as championed by the US. By then, Russia had repeatedly dwelled on the *illegitimacy* of American leadership in the Middle East – a point raised again in a statement Putin made in 2014 address to the Russian Federal Assembly, following the annexation of Crimea:

“The USA prefers to forge foreign policy on the principle that “might is right.” They have started to believe they are an exception; they think that only they can be right. That was exactly what happened in Yugoslavia ... There was Afghanistan and Iraq, and the blatant violations of UN Security Council resolutions in Libya. There was the whole series of ‘color revolutions’. (...) As a result, instead of democracy and freedom, a time of terror has started, violence has flared up. The ‘Arab Spring’ has

become an ‘Arab Winter’” (Putin, 2014).

In 2013, however, the *stability* of the reigning, American-led status hierarchy began to corrode as well. When the Assad-regime reportedly had used chemical weapons against Syrian civilians in August 2013, crossing Obama’s pronounced ‘red line’ by doing so, few doubted that an US military intervention in Syria was impending (Serchuk, 2019; Vysotsky, 2014). Yet, it turned out that the American threats and demands were not matched by the willingness to enforce them. Hence, an intervention in Syria did not occur. Instead, Russia was able to broker a deal between the Assad-regime and Washington in September 2013, compelling the Syrian government to relinquish and destroy its chemical weapons stockpile (Vasiliev, 2018). The events of August-September 2013 served as an important status marker for Russia. By avoiding a military intervention in Syria through diplomatic resolve, Putin was able to portray Russia as a responsible, reliable, and indispensable partner, while showcasing the inability of Washington to live up to its declared objectives (Serchuk, 2019). Moscow correctly sensed that Washington was attempting to pivot away from the Middle East toward the Asia-Pacific region, where more pressing US interests were developing. The reluctance of the US to act forcefully against the Assad-regime provided an opening for Russia to defy the US’s position in the prevailing status hierarchy and, henceforth, assert its “rightful place in the ranks of the global great powers” (ibid., p. 33). It could be argued, then, that from 2013 onwards, prospective changes in regional power relationships were emerging, signaling an ever more insecure status hierarchy, which in turn led many actors in the Middle East to reassess their relations with Russia.

As it sensed the impending insecurity of the status hierarchy, Russia became ever more confident of its abilities to act as a mediator in the Middle East’s regional matters, both in Syria and beyond. Moreover, Western and regional powers were now, more than ever before, willing to award Moscow that stature. Despite considerable disagreement with Russia’s stance on Syria’s future and the role of Bashar al-Assad within it, both the West and several regional powers (such as Turkey, Israel, and the Gulf-states) came to understand that they could not afford to refuse dialogue with Moscow any longer. The Middle East was becoming increasingly turbulent, as ISIS captured control over considerable parts of Iraq and Syria; as the Syrian opposition became evermore fragmented and radical; and as foreign jihadists from Russia, the West, and Central Asia were now spilling into the Middle East to add fuel to the regional turmoil (Kozhanov, 2016, pp. 56-57). Russia could no longer be avoided and ignored for its enduring support to Damascus, nor for what it had done in Ukraine; its help was needed to stabilize the region.

A substantial increase of diplomatic exchanges from 2013 to September 2015, coupled with a sequence of various successful political settlements, bolsters the idea that Russia’s status was indeed rising. Alongside representatives from the US and UN, Russia coordinated the Geneva II-conference

that took place on 22 January 2014; 39 countries and several international organizations partook in the conference, in a multilateral effort to launch the process of Syrian national reconciliation. In addition, Israel's Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, visited Russia in late January; there, it was concluded that Israel was to adopt a neutral position on Russia's annexation of Crimea, in exchange for Moscow's assurance that the Iranian nuclear program was to be settled "in such a way as to eliminate any security threats to Israel" (Kozhanov, 2016, p. 26). In January and April 2015, Moscow posed to further facilitate intra-Syria dialogue by hosting two meetings (the so-called 'Moscow I' and 'Moscow II' meetings) between Damascus and the non-extremist Syrian opposition. Shortly after, US Secretary of State, John Kerry, visited Putin and Lavrov in Sochi on 12 May 2015 to discuss a variety of prominent regional matters, among which the situation in Ukraine, the Syrian Civil War and its opposition groups, the Palestinian-Israeli crisis, and the deteriorated Russian-Turkish relations (Kozhanov, 2016; Vasiliev, 2018). Next arrived US special envoy for Syria, Daniel Rubinstein on 18 May, followed by a phone call between Putin and UK's David Cameron on 26 May, in which both leaders agreed on a closer Russian-British dialogue on Syria.

#### 4.2.4. *Military intervention in Syria (2015)*

The unprecedented successes of Russian diplomacy in the Middle East, however, did not lead Moscow to soften or abandon its stance on Syria and Western involvement in the region. On the contrary, Russia became evermore convinced of its cause and invigorated its military support to the Assad-regime, as Syria's extremist opposition, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS were encroaching onto Damascus. In July 2015, Bashar al-Assad formally invited Russia to help combat international terrorism. From mid-August 2015, Russia steadily increased its military presence in and around Syria by drawing military delegations, fighter jets, helicopters, and navy vessels into the country (Kozhanov, 2016). In his address to the UN General Council on 28 September 2015, Putin once more lashed out against the West's enduring support for the Syrian opposition, asserting that Western foreign interference had resulted in "a brazen destruction of national institutions", on top of "violence, poverty and social disaster" (Washington Post, 2015). Finally, on 30 September 2015, the Russian Parliament granted the Putin's request to deploy Russian aerospace forces into Syria - a decision which took the larger part of the international community by sheer surprise. By November 2015, Russia had vigorously launched airstrikes against both radical and moderate Syrian opposition groupings, not only saving Damascus from impending downfall, but also enabling it to "stabilize its front lines and make a few territorial advances" (Kozhanov, 2016, p. 68).

Russia's decision to intervene militarily in Syria sprang from two major concerns: first, the legacies of Libya, Iraq, and – to a lesser extent – Afghanistan still lingered vividly in the Russian consciousness. Prospects of instability and jihadists threats spreading to Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia in the

wake of Assad's downfall incited little optimism in Moscow. Russian Foreign Minister Bogdanov maintained that the collapse of Damascus would lead to little more but "a sea of blood and destruction." In addition, he contended that the "if the government fell, there would be no political settlement. There would be complete disintegration, rampant terrorism and extremism. Chaos. Look at Libya" (Vasiliev, 2018, p. 491). Furthermore, Putin asserted in his 2015 address to the Russian Federal Assembly that "the militants in Syria pose a particularly high threat for Russia," going on to explain that "if they get sufficiently strong to win there, they will return to their home countries to sow fear and hatred, to blow up, kill and torture people" (Putin, 2015). Second, via its allegiance to the Assad-regime, Russia had managed to position itself as an indispensable player, without whom the Syrian conflict could not be resolved (Kozhanov, 2016). Generally, Moscow was esteemed for its ability to uphold dialogue with Damascus. In March 2015, UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, noted: "[The] Russian Federation has leverage, has contacts, that we don't have, or no one has except perhaps Iran, with the Syrian authorities. So their involvement is important and useful" (De Mistura & Williams, 2015, p. 6). This, in turn, provided leverage over the West in the Middle East and, more importantly, allowed Russia to enforce status recognition. If Damascus fell, then Russia would lose one of the few sources (if not, the sole determinant) in the Middle East of its status as an influential power – equal and comparable to the likes of the US.

#### 4.2.5. *Diplomatic successes after 2015*

After the its successful military intervention in Syria, Russia pursued a remarkably active diplomacy in its attempts to resolve the Syrian conflict through both international and national dialogue. By early 2016, Russia had largely convinced the Middle East of its importance to the region. Moscow's status seemed wholeheartedly acknowledged among a wide variety of Middle East actors since the 2015 intervention. During his official visit to the Kremlin, the Emir of Qatar, Tamin bin Hamad al-Thani, acknowledged that "Russia plays a fundamental role in global stability today" (Presidential Executive Office, 2016). Earlier, King Abdullah II of Jordan stressed that "the only way of finding a political solution in Syria is with the strong role that both you [Putin] and Russia play" (Presidential Executive Office, 2015). In addition, both Putin's and Lavrov's agendas were lavishly filled with an abundance of official state visits and high-profile ministerial meetings, signaling a rise in Russia's international status. From 29 September 2015 to 26 February 2016, Putin and Lavrov met 41 times with their presidential and ministerial counterparts from the Middle East, Europe, and the US to discuss Middle Eastern regional issues, among which there were twelve official state visits (see Appendix 1 & 2).

A series of high-profile diplomatic summits finally bolstered Russia's status position in the Middle East: on 23 October 2015, Lavrov met with the foreign ministers of the US, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey in Vienna to prepare new multilateral peace negotiations with regards to Syria; later, on 30 October

2015, they were joined by representatives from the UK, Iran, Egypt, UAE, Qatar, Jordan, China, France, Germany, and Italy (Vasiliev, 2018). These states met again in November 2015 under the name of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), in which Russia received a position as co-chair alongside the US. The ‘Vienna talks’ resulted in international support for Syria’s territorial integrity, its governments secular character, and the affirmed need to uphold Syria’s remaining institutions – points which supported “many long-standing Russian positions” (Kozhanov, 2016, p. 69). Finally, the Vienna statements were adopted under Resolution 2254 by the UN Security Council on 18 December 2015. On 22 February 2016, Putin and Obama agreed on the terms of a ceasefire framework in Syria – terms which were unanimously adopted by the UN Security Council four days later, on 26 February. Hence, from late February 2016 onwards, Russia had successfully left its mark on the Middle East through a series of successful diplomatic and military efforts: Russia’s presence in the Middle East and, specifically, Syria was accepted as a definite feature of “a new geopolitical reality” (Kozhanov, 2016, p. 73).

#### **4.3. Russia’s Middle East policy and identity management strategies**

So far, this chapter has presented an empirical overview of Russia’s Middle East policy from 2011 to 2016. In the Middle East, Russia seems to have transitioned from a political outcast since early 2011, unable to *really* affect the region’s course of events, to an influential diplomatic broker from 2015 onwards, which had been able to maneuver itself into the center of the region’s most pressing political issues, such as the Syrian Civil War, the Iranian nuclear talks, and the Israeli-Palestinian question. Substantial amounts of evidence have been found which support the notion that Russia has been able to successfully enhance its status position in the Middle East by employing two identity management strategies, as theorized by SIT – social competition and social creativity.

##### *4.3.1. Social competition*

The events of 2011-2016 seem to signal the pursuit of a *social competition strategy* by Russia. Various factors have contributed to the choice of that strategy. First, on top of a series of unsuccessful diplomatic efforts during the 00s, the Arab Spring had greatly contributed to the decline of Russia’s regional stature: many newly erected governments across the Middle East were vigorously frustrated with Moscow’s reluctance to support the surge of democratic protests. As such, Russia’s status was decidedly low when the Syrian Civil War emerged as a hotbed of regional turmoil in March 2011. Second, Russia’s desire to be recognized as a great power and counterforce to Western influence went unacknowledged by both the West and the Middle East: the US-led interventions in Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011) had impeded Russia’s voiced concerns and foreign policy interests, hence, showing the impermeability of the ‘great power’ higher-status group. Moreover, This led to clear status frustrations

on Russia's part, as Putin vigorously professed in his Address to the Russian Federal Assembly, shortly after the annexation of Crimea in 2014:

“They [the West] have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed us before an accomplished fact. This happened with NATO's expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders. They kept telling us the same thing: “Well, this does not concern you.” That's easy to say. (...) Today, it is imperative to end this hysteria, to refute the rhetoric of the Cold War and to accept the obvious fact: Russia is an independent, active participant in international affairs; like other countries, it has its own national interests that need to be taken into account and respected” (Putin, 2014).

In line with the expectations of SIT, the suffering of low status, the impermeability of the 'great power' higher-status group, and the perceived illegitimacy of the prevailing status hierarchy (in which the US held a particularly prominent position at the expense of Russian status claims) converged into a deeply-nourished dedication to try to change the status quo to Russia's benefit.

As such, Russia vigorously opposed Western policy on Syria by vetoing a series of UN SC Resolutions between 2011 and 2015, by allocating both military and financial support to Damascus, and finally by deploying a multi-faceted military force (mainly consisting of fighter jets, some naval vessels, and a couple of squadrons of special forces) into Syria from 2015 onwards. The 2015 military intervention in Syria can reasonably be regarded as the continuation of the social competition strategy which Russia had already adopted at the outset of the Syrian Civil War in early 2011. It reaffirmed Russia's position as “an indispensable power broker”, capable and willing to employ military force in order to serve its foreign policy interests (Rumer, 2019b, p. 11). For the first time in post-Soviet history, Russia sustained a military intervention in “a remote theatre of operations”, conveying the image of a legitimate great power (Vasiliev, 2018, p. 494). Moreover, the intervention had maneuvered Russia right into the middle of the Syrian Civil War, forcing regional actors to consult Moscow and to *really* take its concerns into account. By successfully preventing the downfall of Damascus through “high-profile military deployment in a region long dominated by the United States,” Rumer (2019b, p. 4) writes, Russia not only demonstrated to the West that “their policy of isolating Russia, marginalizing it in world affairs, and forcing it to retreat under the weight of US-EU sanctions was doomed to fail”, it also undermined Washington's relative position towards Russia in the prevailing status hierarchy. While Russia showed that it was reliably willing *and* able to defend its partners when needed, the US, in the meantime, failed to challenge Russia's geopolitical offense – conveying the appearance of a weak and retreating regional power.

*Assessing material interests and ideational motives*

Often, the role of status concerns in determining Russia's policy on Syria is diminished in favor of explanations that eagerly stress the prominence of strategic and economic interests or ideational motives. Frequently mentioned are: the preservation of Russia's naval base in Tartus as one of "the only significant Russian power projection facilities in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East" (Jensen, 2018, p. 269); Damascus' decades-long strategic alliance to Moscow; and lucrative Russian-Syrian arms sales. Yet, in the words of Vystosky (2014, p. 40), "it is perhaps a mistake to assume that Russian interests were so pragmatic." Generally, Russia's Syria policy seems to largely revolve around keeping up appearances. First, the strategic and military importance of the Tartus base is generally overstated. In 2013, Tartus existed of little more than three floating piers, a repair shop, some warehouses, and a few barracks housing about 50 Russian personnel – hardly any material for substantial power projection (Allison, 2013; Trenin, 2013). Moreover, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Bogdanov announced in 2013 that "the base does not have any strategic military importance" (RT, 2013). According to Malashenko (2013), the Tartus base chiefly serves a political purpose – to demonstrate Russian military presence in the region and to portray Russia as a great power with substantial geopolitical reach.

Second, Moscow's support to Damascus is often assumed to emerge from some sense of shared identity, underpinned by historical Soviet-Syrian affinities (Allison, 2013; Vasiliev, 2018). Yet, according to Trenin (2013, p. 19): "The much talked-about Russian-Syrian alliance was a myth." Any close association between the USSR and Syria was based on strategic interdependence, rather than ideology or identity (Allison, 2013). Moreover, Moscow felt little loyalty to or compassion with Damascus at the outbreak of the Syrian uprisings in 2011. In fact, Russia had little trust in Bashar al-Assad's abilities to retain power and, moreover, did nothing to prevent the likely fall of his regime (Vasiliev, 2018). It was only after Western intervention in Syria was impending and the Syrian opposition grew evermore radical that Moscow, fearful of regional instability and spreading jihadism, began to support Damascus. Moscow's extraordinary support for Damascus generally seems to arise from a particular view of Syria as an "important vestige of past grandeur that should be retained and might still be leveraged to regional geopolitical advantage or to uphold Russia's global status as an indispensable power." (Allison, 2013, p. 818). Hence, preventing regime change in Syria via Moscow's support for Bashar al-Assad would not only display Russia's ability to counter Western regional influence, it would also demonstrate geopolitical potency reminiscent of an era when Russia's political outreach was only matched in kind by the US.

Lastly, arms sales have indeed been an important component of Russia's engagement with the Middle East: from 2000 to 2016, almost a fifth of Russia's arms exports – worth an estimated amount of \$21.4 billion – were sold to the region (Borshchevskaya, 2018). And within the Middle East, Syria has been

one of Moscow's biggest arms consumers. Yet, while arms sales are an important source of revenue, they serve a highly political purpose as well. Arms exports as such constitute the most important (and in some cases, the sole) element of Moscow's relations with many Middle Eastern states. As such, arms exports are "an effective instrument for advancing [Moscow's] national interests, both political and economic," as Putin (2012) reaffirmed in July 2012. Hence, Russia's extensive arms exports to the Middle East can be lauded by Moscow as both a gauge of economic might, as well as a political vehicle through which it can exert political influence. In sum, Russia's supposedly palpable material or ideational interests in Syria prove to be underpinned by a deeper layer of status aspirations - a thoroughly nourished desire to retain and uphold the appearance of a legitimate great power, served through Russian military presence in Tartus, guardianship over the al-Assad regime, and a leading position in the Middle East's arms market.

#### 4.3.2. *Social creativity*

Despite the relative successes of Russia's 2015 show of military might in Syria, Moscow seemed to make an active effort to complement its strategy of social competition with one of social creativity, due to clear limits to Russia's military outreach and economic vigor. The Kremlin made no illusions about its abilities to resolve the Syrian conflict on its own; to be sure, Russia had been able to prevent the downfall of the Assad-regime, but it was not able – by no means – to enforce an outcome to what was, and continued to be, a civil *and* proxy war of enormous complexity. By 2016, Russian military involvement in Syria had been relatively modest in its scale, "especially when measured against America's toils in the region" (Serchuk, 2019, p. 34). Russia deployed little more than 60 fighter jets, a few naval vessels, and a handful of special forces. Evidently, Russia did not possess the required economic resources to sustain a long-term, draining military employment with large-scale ground-based capabilities in Syria – unlike the US had done during the Gulf War (1990-1991), the War in Afghanistan (2001-present), and the 2003 invasion in Iraq. In terms of SIT, the prevailing status hierarchy had proven to be insecure enough for Russia to defy American regional leadership by intervening in Syria, but it remained too stable to reverse the status positions of both Russia and the US within the Middle East. For the larger part, any status recognition which Moscow had been able to yield in the Middle East revolved around its influential position in the settlement of the Syrian Civil War. Outside of Syria, Russia could not compare to and compete with American material might. In addition, Moscow had been able to pursue such an assertive Syria policy, not because of superior economic and military capabilities, but largely due to the vacuum that had been left by general American retrenchment from the region. As such, Russia's social competition strategy had been able to greatly enhance Russian status, but attaining great power recognition remained an impossibility.

However, like Primakov before him, Putin was not willing to concede Russia's inability to meet the criteria of membership in the great power club (Clunan, 2009). Instead, Putin sought a different dimensions along which Russia was to compare to established Western great powers, as he strikingly put forward in his 2013 Presidential Address to the Russian Federal Assembly:

“We [Russia] do not claim to be any sort of superpower with a claim to global or regional hegemony; we do not encroach on anyone's interests, impose our patronage onto anyone, or try to teach others how to live their lives. But we will strive to be leaders, defending international law, striving for respect and national sovereignty and peoples' independence and identity” (Putin, 2013).

Unlike Russia, Putin (2014) maintained, “our Western partners led by the United States of America” care little about stability and responsibility in the international order: “[they] prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies, but by the rule of the gun. They have come to believe in their exclusivity and exceptionalism, that they can decide the destinies of the world, that only they can ever be right.” To Putin, Russia was holding the superior distinction of being a responsible and sober international actor, as a genuine great power should, whereas the US was misusing its material might to destabilize the international order and unilaterally impose its will on other sovereign countries. NATO's expansion to Central and Eastern Europe, the interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, and “a whole series of controlled ‘color’ revolutions” from 2011 onwards had proven that Russia's Western counterparts “are still dominated by their Cold War-era bloc mentality and the ambition to conquer new geopolitical areas” (Putin, 2015). While the West had been breaking down the international order since the unipolar moment of the early 1990s, Russia has - supposedly – demonstrated “immense responsibility and leadership” during divergent global crises, among which the Syrian Civil War (Putin, 2013). In his 2013 Presidential Address to the Russian Federal Assembly, Putin professed the successes of Russia's responsible statehood in Syria:

“So far, at least, we have been able to avoid external military intervention in Syria's affairs and the spread of the conflict far beyond the region. Russia made significant contributions to this process. We acted firmly, thoughtfully and carefully. We never jeopardized our own interests and security, nor global stability. In my view, that is how a mature and responsible nation must act” (Putin, 2013).

As such, Putin's social creativity strategy was meant to alter Russia's negative position on the existing dimension of comparison with established great powers (that is, material might) and to cast Russia “in a more positive and distinctive light”, by creating a *new* dimension of comparison (Clunan, 2009, p. 91). Russia's newly proposed defining dimension of greatpowerness was not centered around

enormous material capabilities or the ability to act unilaterally and forcefully in the pursuit of one's interests – criteria Russia was not able to meet. Instead, it entailed responsibility, pragmatism, and a resolute dedication to the preservation of international order, global stability, and national sovereignty.

## Conclusion

Building upon Social Identity Theory (SIT), this study expected to find evidence of one or several identity management strategies (social mobility, social creativity, and social competition) if the pursuit of status served as a major impetus of Russian engagement in the Middle East from early 2011 till early 2016. The choice of either of these three identity management strategies was theorized to be determined by three variables: that is, the suffering of low status by Russia; the permeability of the desired higher-status group (which, for Russia, has been the great power club); and, finally, the security of the prevailing status hierarchy. As such, this study's research question is presented:

*How can Russia's pursuit of status explain its engagement in the Middle East (January 2011-February 2016)?*

This study has found that Russia's Middle East policy is largely driven by a desire to retain and uphold a positive social identity as a great power. Apart from constituting a historical continuity, Russia's quest for status emerges from the loss of recognition as a great power after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the consequent refusal of the Western-led international order to satisfy Russian status aspirations. In their attempts to recover much of the status that was lost during the humiliating post-Soviet years of the early 1990s, Primakov and – after him – Putin voiced a particular vision of international relations and Russia's distinct and determinate place within it during the early 2000s. Russia was to reclaim its legitimate place as an independent, respected center of a multipolar order. In that vein, the Middle East served as a useful theatre through which Russia could challenge Western hegemony and, hopefully, enforce status recognition.

From early 2011 onwards, Russia, unable to establish meaningful diplomatic and economic relations in the region, continued to suffer low stature. Moscow had failed to assess the Arab Spring's weight and impact on the Middle East, and chose to denounce what it perceived to be Western-bred regime change. Hence, to a compelling amount of newly erected governments, Russia continued to suffer an inferior position as a political outcast in the Middle East's status hierarchy. In addition, the 2011 NATO-intervention in Libya which was carried out despite Moscow's voiced opposition reaffirmed that Russia was by no means able to *really* affect the course of Middle Eastern politics, let alone present itself as a legitimate great power and an equal to the US. In line with the expectations of SIT, the suffering of low status, the inability of Russia to get accepted into the 'great power' higher-status group, and the perceived illegitimacy of the prevailing status hierarchy (in which the US held a particularly prominent position at the expense of Russian status claims) led Russia to adopt a strategy

of *social competition*. Moscow sought to enforce status recognition by vetoing a total of four UN Security Council Resolutions from 2011-2015 that called for military intervention in Syria, by enhancing its financial and military support to Damascus, and finally by deploying a multi-faceted military force into the country in 2015.

In addition to its social competition approach, Russia pursued a *social creativity* strategy which was meant to alter its inferior position on the existing dimension of comparison with established great powers such as the US. A combination of Moscow's political successes in Syria and general US retrenchment from the Middle East convinced an increasing variety of actors of Russia's importance in the settlement of regional issues. By nourishing a *social creativity* strategy, Russia posed to present itself as a responsible and reliable power – distinct from established great powers such as the US which, from Moscow's perspective, had been destabilizing the Middle East through forceful and unilateral interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. To that effect, Russia sustained an unprecedented degree of diplomatic activity in the region and, henceforth, acquired the reputation of an important broker in much of the Middle East's prominent issues, such as the Syrian peace talks.

By late February 2016, Russia had successfully put its mark on the Middle East's political settlements; Moscow's diplomatic and military presence was accepted as a new geopolitical reality by the same regional actors who had opposed and rejected Russia on a variety of regional issues since 2011, especially with regards to Syria. Instead of being sidelined and ignored, as was the case with the US-led interventions in Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011), Russia was recognized as an important regional actor by 2016. Certainly, the sheer amount of presidents, emirs, kings, princes, and ministers which were found attending Moscow to consult Russia on prominent regional issues bolster the notion that Russia's status had indeed risen substantially since the early days of the Arab Spring (see Appendix 1 & 2). Moreover, the central role that was awarded to Russia – as co-chair of the ISSG and broker of Syria's ceasefire besides the US – during negotiations on political settlements in Syria serve as an important status-marker. By pursuing a social competition strategy, Russia had been able to successfully enforce status recognition across the Middle East through its opposition to Western positions on Syria and, finally, by displaying its military resolve during the 2015 intervention in Syria. In addition, a successful social creativity strategy displayed Russia as a responsible and mature global player, distinguishing itself from the likes of the US by serving regional stability through diplomatic resolve, instead of forceful and 'illegitimate' military intervention.

The ability of Russia to obtain an impressive amount of status recognition *despite* clear deficiencies in its military and economic capabilities supports the idea that status does not necessarily depends on power. Russia's Middle East policy from 2011 to 2016 argues for the argument that wielding influence and amassing material might are not one and the same. As such, the seemingly irregular relationship

between status and power (meaning that greater power does not necessarily entail greater status) trouble long-standing realist ideas which emphasize the preeminence of material capabilities in establishing international stature. However, such is not to say that Russia has been able to acquire the particular kind of status which it feels it legitimately owes – that is, recognition as a great power. Instead, much of Russia's increased status in the Middle East emerged from its efforts to sustain an impressive degree of regional diplomatic activity – a willingness to present itself as an influential broker, instead of a powerful military or economic actor. Russia has simply been able to serve its positive social identity by establishing a new dimensions of comparison, centered around responsibility and pragmatism, by which it could be esteemed. To that effect, it remains doubtful whether Russia is able to acquire great power status through its accomplishments in Syria and beyond. Moscow's Middle East policy has done much to obscure the absence of underlying sources of strength, but awfully little to reverse it. As such, Russia is likely to continue to suffer the impediment of its positive social identity as a great power, unable to *really* elevate its status position among an array of established and rising regional powers.

#### *Alternative explanation*

While status aspirations can reasonably be regarded as an overarching motive of Russian foreign policy, both in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world, status has not been the sole propeller of Russia's Middle East policy from 2011 onwards. On the contrary, immediate Russian interests of security and commerce have been a reoccurring factor throughout this study's research. First, the Arab Spring greatly contributed to the revival of a deeply nourished Russian aversion to revolutions, regime change, and political instability. Moscow strongly feared the increasing regional turmoil in the wake of the Arab Spring as a propeller of Islamic extremism and incentive for terrorist factions to encroach ever closer to the borders of Russia and its Commonwealth of Independent States. Second, Putin's rapprochement to the Middle East after 2012 was largely motivated by the increasingly troubled relations with the West, which had become exceptionally bitter after Moscow's opposition in the dialogue over the Syrian Civil War and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. As a consequence, Russia suffered great economic damage due to Western sanctions – catalyzed by a drop in oil prices - and, moreover, risked isolation in international affairs. Finally, arms exports to the Middle East constitute an important source of revenue for Russia, in addition to its function as an useful instrument in Russia's foreign policy arsenal. In sum, impending Islamic extremism and growing economic deficiencies forced Russia to consider the Middle East as a region that is deserving of Moscow's increased attention and devotion. As such, status aspirations can best be regarded as a *sufficient* but *unnecessary* cause of Russian engagement in the Middle East from 2011 till 2016.

### *5.1. Recommendations*

Considering the results of this study, additional research is needed to further explore SIT as a promising theoretical framework for the field of IR, to strengthen the methodological foundation of the largely undiscovered concept of status, and to provide the socio-psychological framework of SIT with some much-needed empirical ‘flesh’ in IR. First, the concept of status needs methodological refinement. Despite some academic attention for routinized diplomatic exchanges as indicators of status attribution, there has been little exploration of useful methodological tools which are able to capture the theoretical concept of status in all its sophistication. As such, this study has had to make some unavoidable decisions in the measurement process, choosing to employ routinized diplomatic exchanges (such as, official state visits, high-profile meetings, multilateral diplomatic efforts) as an indicator of status recognition. Due to the multi-dimensionality of the theoretical concept of status (being both a positional, perceptual, and social good), it would be desirable to include additional indicators of status recognition, such as the establishment of permanent embassies, to enhance the internal validity of future research on status.

Second, much of SIT remains unexplored in its translation to the domain of international politics. For example, this study has concluded that Russia simultaneously pursued two identity management strategies in the Middle East from 2011 to 2016 – both a social competition and a social creativity strategy. It is unclear whether SIT allows for such simultaneous strategizing, or how distinct strategies are constituted in comparison to each other. Moreover, much of the application of SIT in IR has focused exclusively on renowned status-seekers, such as Russia and China – states with a remarkable historical and well-described desire for status recognition who have found their sense of superiority humiliatingly suppressed under the pressure of a Western-led international order. It would be desirable to see whether SIT applies just as well to less consistent status seekers found elsewhere in global politics, and to find out how status aspirations compare to or converge with material interests or ideational motives.



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## Appendix I

Table 5. *Putin official meetings from September 2015 to February 2016.*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Country or organization</b>	<b>Representative</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Location</b>
September 29, 2015	US	President	Barack Obama	New York, US
October 11, 2015	Saudi Arabia	Deputy Crown Prince and Defence Minister	Mohammed bin Salman al-Saud	Sochi, Russia
October 11, 2015	UAE	Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander	Mohammed al-Nahyan	Sochi, Russia
October 20, 2015	Syria	President	Bashar al-Assad	Moscow, Russia
November 10, 2015	Kuwait	Emir	Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah	Sochi, Russia
November 16, 2015	Saudi Arabia	King	Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud	Antalya, Turkey
November 23, 2015	Iran	Supreme Leader; President	Ali Khamenei; Hassan Rouhani	Tehran, Iran
November 24, 2015	Jordan	King	Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein	Sochi, Russia
November 26, 2015	France	President	Francois Hollande	Moscow, Russia
November 30, 2015	US	President	Barack Obama	Paris, France
November 30, 2015	Israel	Prime Minister	Benjamin Netanyahu	Paris, France
December 15, 2015	US	Secretary of State	John Kerry	Moscow, Russia
January 18, 2016	Qatar	Emir	Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani	Moscow, Russia
February 8, 2016	Bahrain	King	Hamad bin Isa al-	Sochi, Russia

			Khalifa	
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*Note.* Retrieved from the Presidential Executive Office of the Russian Federation (2020).

## Appendix II

Table 6. *Lavrov official meetings from September 2015 to February 2016.*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Representative</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Location</b>
October 1, 2015	Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)	Foreign Minister of Qatar;  Foreign Minister of Kuwait;  Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia;  Foreign Minister of Bahrain;  Foreign Minister of Oman	Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah;  Khalid bin Mohammed al-Attayah;  Arabia Adel al-Jubeir;  Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa;  Yusuf Bin Alawi bin Abdullah	New York, US
October 11, 2015	Saudi Arabia	Foreign Minister	Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir	Sochi, Russia
October 13, 2015	UN	UN Special Envoy on Syria	Staffan de Mistura	Moscow, Russia
October 23, 2015	US	Secretary of State	John Kerry	Vienna, Austria
October 23, 2015	Jordan	Foreign Minister	Nasser Judeh	Vienna, Austria
October 28, 2015	Israel	Minister of Immigration and	Ze'ev Elkin	Moscow, Russia

		Absorption; Minister on Jerusalem Affairs; Co-Chair of the Russian-Israeli Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation		
October 30, 2015	Egypt	Foreign Minister	Sameh Shoukry	Vienna, Austria
November 4, 2015	UN	UN Secretary- General for Syria	Staffan de Mistura	Moscow, Russia
November 10, 2015	Kuwait	Deputy Prime Minister; Foreign Minister	Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah	Sochi, Russia
November 14, 2015	International Syria Support Group (ISSG)			Vienna, Austria
November 18, 2015	Lebanon	Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants	Gebran Bassil	Moscow, Russia
December 15, 2015	US	Secretary of State	John Kerry	Moscow, Russia
December 16, 2015	Bahrain	Foreign Minister	Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa	Moscow, Russia
December 18, 2015	International Syria Support Group (ISSG)	Ministerial meeting		New York, US
December 25, 2015	Qatar	Foreign Minister	Khalid bin Mohammed al- Attiyah	Moscow, Russia

January 18, 2016	Qatar	Foreign Minister	Khalid bin Mohammed Al Attiyah	Moscow, Russia
January 20, 2016	US	Secretary of State	John Kerry	Zurich, Zwitterland
February 1-2, 2016	United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Foreign Minister	Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan	Abu Dhabi, UAE
February 2-3, 2016	Oman	Foreign Minister	Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdallah	Muscat, Oman
February 11, 2016	US	Secretary of State	John Kerry	Munich, Germany
February 12, 2016	Iran	Foreign Minister	Mohammed Javad Zarif	Munich, Germany
February 12, 2016	International Syria Support Group (ISSG)			Munich, Germany
February 12, 2016	Saudi Arabia	Foreign Minister	Adel al-Jubeir	Munich, Germany
February 12, 2016	Lebanon	Prime Minister	Tammam Saeb Salam	Munich, Germany
February 13, 2016	US	Secretary of State	John Kerry	Munich, Germany
February 26, 2016	Oman	Foreign Minister	Yusuf bin Alawi	Moscow, Russia
February 26, 2016	Libya	Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation	Mohammed al-Dairi	Moscow, Russia
February 26, 2016	Yemen	Foreign Minister	Abdul Malik al Mukhlafi	Moscow, Russia

*Note.* Retrieved from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2020).