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**THESIS**

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2020

BUDAPEST BUSINESS SCHOOL  
FACULTY OF INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT AND BUSINESS  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
MASTER

TURKEY'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR WITHIN THE  
DICHOTOMY OF SOFT AND HARD POWER

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Budapest, Fall,2020

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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AKP THE JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY

USA UNITED STATES AMERICA

NATO NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION

GMEI GREATER MIDDLE EAST INITIATIVE

DAESH AD-DAWLAH al-ISLAMİYAH fī 'l-'IRAQ WA-SH-SHAM

PYD PARTIYA YETKIYA DEMOKRAT/ DEMOCRATIC UNION PARTY

YPG YEKINEYEN PARASTINA GEL/ PEOPLE'S PROTECTION UNITS

SDF. HAZEN SURIYA DEMOKRATİK/ SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES

PKK PARTIYA KARKEREN KURDISTANE/KURDISTAN WORKER'S PARTY

EU EUROPEAN UNION

G-8 THE GROUP OF EIGHT

DG ECHO DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EUROPEAN CIVIL PROTECTION AND HUMANITARIAN AID OPERATIONS

NGO NON-GOVERMENTAL ORGANIZATION

UNICEF UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FOUND

UN UNITED NATIONS

## **Acknowledgement**

I am so pleased to acknowledge Emre Saral who has been always friendly and objective throughout the work of this thesis for accompanying me. I have benefited a lot from his orientations and suggestions.

Furthermore, I would like to express my deepest love to my best friend, my love and fiance Ivar Sagbakken for cooking everyday for me and giving his emotional support while I was writing this thesis. Most importantly, my immense gratefulness goes to my family, Pakize Taşçı Çam, Kemal Çam and Ömer Çam, who invested a lot to me emotionally and economically. I would not be here, if they would not have been there for me.

My appreciation also goes to both the Hungarian government and Budapest Business School who have given this opportunity. Without all of mentioned support, this dissertation would not have been possible.

P.S. It gives me a great honor to thank to Pioneer of the Republic of Turkey, Atatürk and his both woman and men commanders. Again, Thank you.

ABSTRACT

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The Middle East concept was first introduced by the American naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan in 1902. Mahan defined the geography between the Arabian Peninsula and India with the concept of the Middle East. Since then, the concept of the Middle East has been changing with different political dynamics. Syria's role has been essential due to its geopolitical position in the region in its relation with the other countries. Turkey and Syria have had a longstanding relationship with roots back to the Ottoman Empire. The Levant<sup>1</sup>, the region where Syria is located, is the cradle of civilizations with big strategical importance, and plentiful natural sources, with a coast to the Mediterranean sea. Therefore, the region has also been a scene of rivalry between the great powers of the era such as France, Britain, USA, and both pre- and post-Soviet Russia. This essay aims to provide an understanding of the historical process of Syria and its political and historical relationship with Turkey, the latter having the longest land border and strategical importance to Syria. In this regard; the conceptual framework of the international relations approaches, such as the use of hard and soft power by the great Powers of the era are respectively dealt with. Contemporary analysis of Turkey and Syria entails evaluation of different components. In this manner, this thesis' mission is to look at the historical background of the territory, to look at the political history of Syria and to the multi-actor involvements in order to understand the evolution of the approaches to soft-hard power of Turkey towards Syria. Turkey's increased close relationship with Syria and the Middle East since the rise of the Justice and Development Party, should be analyzed according to this framework. Recognizing how many foreign policy changes are included in the aims of different states, the national integrity from the point of Syria, international politics and responses of regional dynamics points out who aims at what in the Middle East and Syria. Henceforth, as the region has been passing through critical processes, the present situation of Syria could be analyzed broadly. Within this framework, this paper aims to identify the significant break points for the countries involved in Syria by analyzing their political backgrounds and then figuring out the existing attitudes of Turkey and Syria towards each other under the shadows of the gloomy scene which has been going on in Syria.

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<sup>1</sup> The Levant region comprises **Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Israel** and **Jordan**.

## INTRODUCTION

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Syria, which has hosted many civilizations in history was the name of a wide geography, which was used to describe a geographical nature, mostly meaning " the place where three continents meet", as described by the ancient Greeks, which includes today's Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel and Syria. Syria's importance is due to its fertile mineral deposits and arable land as well as its Mediterranean coast. This strategic importance brings with it that the geography of Syria has been part of the ambitions of the great states due to the fact that it has been the host of important trade routes throughout history. In the past, Syria has also been under the rule of Egypt, the Roman Empire, the Phoenician, the Mamluks. The region's entrance to Ottoman rule coincides with the period of Yavuz Sultan Selim. After the Wars of Mercibadık and Ridaniye, the region that included Iraq, Syria and Egypt came under Ottoman rule, and the Ottoman rule in this region lasted until the end of the First World War.

Syria has been the cradle of different civilizations since 3500 BC. Since the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD, The Mamluks and The Ottomans established long-term dominance in Syria. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, foreign influence and nationalist activities that developed in parallel with this began to be seen in the region. Starting from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the region became the scene of German-British-French rivalry. In this manner, the impact of The Sykes Picot Agreement should be considered as a proof of both Britain and French foreign policy. The treaty when adapted to today includes Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine. According to the 1916 Treaty, five administrative units would be created: from Baghdad to the west of the Gulf, the northern half of today's Iraq, Jordan, the Negev Desert and the Sinai Peninsula, including Kuwait, would be under British influence, while Syria and Lebanon were paid to France. An international regime was decided for the Palestinian territories.

Sir Mark Sykes was the pioneer of the secret agreement, whose knowledge has been deemed very important in terms of the policies to be established during the approach of World War I. The following statements that Sykes made before the war are very paramount in terms of perceiving British foreign policy back then : *“The British have an endless interest in the area extending from London to Calcuta. (India) Our communication from land, sea or the channel in peace or war should never be disconnected.”*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sir Mark Sykes- was an English traveller, [Conservative Party](#) politician, and diplomatic advisor, particularly with regard to the Middle East at the time of the [First World War](#).



With the defeat of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, according to the Sykes Picot Agreement, the French mandate regime began in Syria. Britain and France, which supported nationalist activities towards the Ottoman Empire in the Arab Middle East, became the target of Arab nationalism as the mandate of the region. The French Mandate Administration envisaged the formation of the Shi'a state in the northern part of Syria, the Sunni in the central region, the Druze in the southern region and the Christian state in the Lebanon region, in order to weaken Arab nationalism and promote ethnic-religious differences. Syria was governed geographically by the French who divided it into five regions, including the Lebanese region, which includes the present-day Lebanese territory, the Cebel-i Druze region, which includes Damascus and the surrounding lands, the Latakia region, which includes the lands on the Mediterranean coast, and the Hatay region, which is subject to special autonomous administration.<sup>3</sup> After France taking over the governance in Syria, it violently suppressed nationalist uprisings in Syria between two world wars, nonetheless, on the eve of the Second World War, the Hashim Attasi government established in Syria was recognized by France, the southern and northern regions were united under the roof of the Syrian State and a separate state was accepted in Lebanon. The independence of the Syrian state was declared as a result of the military operation carried out by the allied states, especially Britain, against Nazi German who took control of France and the French mandate administrations in 1946, and as a result of it France completely withdrew its military presence in Syria.<sup>4</sup>

After the withdrawal of France, the region transformed its geographical identity into a political structure and the application area of the 'Great Syria' ideology. By establishing a single Arab state in the Middle East, the ideology which aims to bring together the scattered Arab integrated structure with the theory of resurrection and regrouping, has turned into an integrated structure with the term 'Ba'ath', which means resurrection. The Ba'ath Party was a movement close to the Soviet Union, both politically and philosophically due to Soviet being the antithesis of the 'capitalist' West, during the Cold War years. For this reason, the Ba'ath Party has been targeted by the US and NATO in the Arab countries where it has shown its presence such as Iraq and Syria.<sup>5</sup>

To be able to understand the involvement of Turkey in Syria, and make and analysis of the existing situation of Syria, it becomes crucial to take into account the historical background of

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<sup>3</sup> Fildiş, Ayşe Tekdal (2013). "Günümüzde Suriye'de Yaşanan Sorunların Tarihsel Arka Planına Kısa Bir Bakış.", "Ortadoğu Analiz", 171-192. p. 58

<sup>4</sup> Özdağ, Ümit (2012). "Küçük Ortadoğu Suriye" p. 19-22

<sup>5</sup> Çalışkan, Muhammed Ali (2016). "Baas Partisi'nin İdeolojisi ve Tarihi.", URL: <https://www.stratejikortak.com/2016/06/baas-partisi-nedir.html>

both Turkey and Syria's former foreign policies as regional powers and their surroundings. Turkey's intervention in Syria was and still is driven by a mutually reinforcing interaction of geo-political, geo-economic and geo-cultural factors.

Simultaneously, during the period between 2003 (when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power for the second term) and 2011, especially when the Arab Spring broke out, Turkey's foreign policy toward Middle Eastern countries gained importance. First being the foreign policy adviser AKP, then Foreign Minister, and then Prime Minister of the period, Ahmet Davutoğlu attributed a strategic importance to Syria, not only because Turkey shares its longest common border with Syria, but also in terms of dominating the wider Mediterranean geopolitics.<sup>6</sup> Davutoğlu argued that Turkey sits at the main power corridors and energy routes in the Black Sea and Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> The absolute geo-strategic objective in the long term therefore, consisted mainly of transforming Turkey from a regional into a global power<sup>8</sup>. Turkey's expansion was to start from the closest basin, especially the Middle Eastern region. , In this period, until Operation Cast Lead in 2008 in Gaza, Turkey even tried to heal the nemesis relationships between Israel and Syria by mediating indirect talks between Damascus and Tel-Aviv which was part of Turkey's attempt to play a leading role in the region.

Nevertheless, the foreign policy of USA, who is Turkey's ally, towards Middle East has been a hard power partly due to the 11th of September attack. After the invasions to Iraq and Afghanistan, with the parallel of its military hard power politics, US administration launched The Greater Middle East Initiative. The AK Party administration interpreted that "The Greater Middle East Initiative" led by US, gave an opportunity for Turkey to be a regional and global power. However, the mushroomed Arab Spring which began in Syria in 2011 and evolved into a civil war, caused Turkey to deviate from its proactive foreign policy focused on the principle of 'zero problems with neighboring countries' which had been applied in the Middle East till this point.

In this regard, it would not be wrong to say that Turkey's changing foreign policy of soft power to hard power towards Syria was shaped by external factors, particularly US foreign policies. The further developments in the Middle East, in particular, made it compulsory for Turkey to revise and determine its domestic and foreign policies. Turkey's Neo-Ottomanist geo-strategy therefore has been weakened with the developments in its land border neighbor, the results of the Arab Spring and the deteriorating relations between the allies Turkey and USA, due to the

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<sup>6</sup> Davutoğlu, Ahmet, "Stratejik Derinlik", 2001, p. 60

<sup>7</sup> Gürçan, Efe C. " Political geography of Turkey's intervention in Syria: underlying causes and consequences (2011-2016)", " JOURNAL OF AGGRESSION, CONFLICT AND PEACE RESEARCH", 2017

<sup>8</sup> Davutoğlu, Ahmet, "Stratejik Derinlik", 2001

threat of the establishment of a contiguous US-backed Kurdish autonomous state under the control of PYD/YPG who Turkey recognizes as terrorist organization. On the other hand, Post-Soviet Russia as a ‘‘devoted’’ ally of Syria was about to change the dynamics in the Syrian civil war where everyone was expecting the same ending like the other countries such as Libya and Egypt which was also exposed to ‘‘Arab Spring’’.

Meanwhile, along with the weakness of authority, sectarian problems fueled by the fire-fueled invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and multi-interventions, additionally, extreme Jihadist groups such as DAESH and the Nusra Front was not belated in the involvement to the unique conflict of Syria.

In this context, the Arab Spring in Syria brings along the thesis that the boundaries are no longer valid, as well as the emergence of political and military non-state formations after the demonstrations, and proves that Sykes Picot is no longer adapting to the realities and needs of the region.<sup>9</sup> Thereupon, Turkey’s policy can be understood by the following quote of Ahmet Davutoglu: *‘‘A new Middle East is being born. We shall keep being the master, leader and servant of this new Middle East. In this new Middle East, not suppressions, oppressions or dictates shall reign, but the popular will, people’s voice and the voice of justice shall. Turkey shall be the strong advocate of this voice, and a new zone of peace; a new zone of stability and wealth shall be created’’*<sup>10</sup>

This study efforts to analyze the changes of the foreign policy elements of the involved countries and their aims in Syria.

## THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: REALISM AND HARD-SOFT POWER

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*‘‘The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.’’ (Sun Tzu)*

The conceptual framework of this article, which provides analytical expansions in the analysis of the relations between Turkey and Syria, were built on the concepts of hard power and soft power. For this reason, these two concepts were preferred as the analytical tool of the research. Accordingly, this research puts efforts to analyze how the soft power policy of Turkey changed towards Syria due to the problematic relations between them. Thus, the factors that lead to

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<sup>9</sup> Gürseler Ceren, (2016) ‘‘Yeni’’ Olgusu: 100. Yılında Sykes-Picot Antlaşması, Orta Doğu ve Türkiye\* ‘‘Phenomenon of ‘‘New’’: Middle East, Turkey and the Sykes-Picot Agreement in Its 100th Year’’ 9:18, p. 80-83

<sup>10</sup> Demir, Idris, (2017) ‘‘Turkey’s Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East: Under the shadow of the Arab Spring’’, p.13

foreign policy change in the relation between the two countries will try to be determined. In the thesis, there are studies which claims that the relation between Turkey and Syria must be considered in the Realistic framework due to the PKK terrorism and security and water sharing problems, which caused the maintaining hard power policy. The real reasons of the foreign policy vision of the AK Party government to soft power since 2003 on the Middle East have been tried to be explained based on the qualitative research. Therefore, this thesis focuses on the reasons for the transformation in the relations between the two countries between 2003 and 2011, the changing foreign policy after the Arab Spring, the effects of the Soviet Union, Russia and America, by considering Syria's pragmatic foreign policy. In terms of theoretical methodology, this article follows to conduct secondary research based on literature and document analysis. The method is descriptive and analytical.

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#### THE CONCEPT OF SOFT POWER AND HARD POWER

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The concept of power, which plays a central and founding role in the discipline of international relations, is discussed in the literature on a multidimensional level.

Robert Dahl put forward a multidimensional definition of power with a measurable, actor-oriented and intuitive conceptualization of power.<sup>11</sup>

Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz highlighted the second dimension of power as creating and controlling the agenda that cannot be directly observed.<sup>12</sup>

In developing the concept of soft power, Joseph Nye made use of the second dimension of this power explained by the above mentioned. Steven Lukes, on the other hand, made the distinction between potential and present power in his work.<sup>13</sup>

Realism theory, which established the discipline of international relations, developed a theory of power. Realists have depicted international politics as the inevitable struggle for power by assigning a central role to the concept of power.<sup>14</sup> The pioneers of classical realism, Thucydies and Machiavelli, considered power politics ontologically as a result of human nature and from this point on, international politics was reduced to power politics.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Dahl Robert A. (1957). "The Concept of Power", Behavioral Science, 3/2: p.201-215

<sup>12</sup> BACHRACH Peter - Morton S. BARATZ (1962). "Two Faces of Power", The American Political Science Review, 56/4: p.947-952

<sup>13</sup> LUKES Steven (1974). Power: A Radical View, New York: Palgrave Macmillan

<sup>14</sup> SCHMİDT Brian C. (2007). "Realist Conceptions of Power", Power in World Politics, (Ed.) Felix Berenskoetter and Michael J. Williams, London and New York: Routledge, p. 44

<sup>15</sup> SCHMİDT Brian C. (2007). "Realist Conceptions of Power", Power in World Politics, (Ed.) Felix Berenskoetter and Michael J. Williams, London and New York: Routledge, p.45

Although the founders of realist theory, Edward H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau, have revealed that power includes non-material elements, the concept of power in realism is mainly considered as hard power and military power.

On the other hand, Soft power was theoretically mentioned by Nye for the first time in 1990 in the 'soft power' article published in Foreign Affairs magazine, the enhanced version of the article was published in the name of 'Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power' in the same year.<sup>16</sup> In this work, Nye has developed the concept of soft power against the allegations that the US power is weakened. Contrary to what is believed, the US power does not consist of military and economic power (hard power) alone, it is soft power that reflects the 'universal' values, culture, lifestyle, position and image in international systems and institutions claimed to be.<sup>17</sup>

Hence, Nye defined the concept of power in two dimensions as; hard power and soft power. According to him, hard power consists of military and economic power, while soft power consists of culture, values, institutions and foreign policy which works by attracting others. He argued that '*Power is the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants. But there are several ways to affect the behaviour of others. You can coerce them with threats; you can induce them with payments; or you can attract and co-opt them to want what you want.*'<sup>18</sup> While hard power is mostly based on military means and threats, soft power is based on consent that works through volunteering such as temptation and example, as in Gramsci's concept of hegemony.

In this context, Turkey's Syria policy periods can be divided through a theoretical and conceptual framework: The period between 2003-2011, where the soft power was on Turkey's agenda, and the time from 2012 which is a period of hard power and coerce of military intervention.

## TURKEY'S EVOLVING POLICY STRATEGY TOWARDS MIDDLE EAST

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*"Religion is a matter of conscience. Everyone is free to obey their consciences' orders. We respect religion. We are not against thinking of thoughts. We only try not to mix the religious matters with nation's and state matters, and we avoid fundamentalist acts emerging from*

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<sup>16</sup> NYE Joseph S. Jr. (1990 a,b). "Soft Power", Foreign Policy, Twentieth Anniversary, LXXX (80): 153-171.

<sup>17</sup> LAYNE Christopher (2010). "The Unbearable Lightness of Soft Power", Soft Power and US Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives, (Ed.) Inderjeet Parmar, Michael Cox, London and New York: Routledge, p. 52,81

<sup>18</sup> Joseph, Nye, "Soft Power: The Means to success in World Politics, New York: Public Affairs, 2004

*intention and action. We will never give a chance to reactionaries.”<sup>19</sup> Mustafa Kemal Atatürk - an excerpt from the Secularism part, which is one of Atatürk's 6 principles.*

As a successor state of the Ottoman Empire, the Republic of Turkey, which was founded after the War of Independence, has built on its foreign policy maintaining its presence. In this context, it can be said that Turkey's Middle East policy, until the AKP period, has mostly been conducted by hard power and a security perspective.<sup>20</sup>

Turkey's Middle Eastern policy was avoided on purpose by the pioneer of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, instead focussing on developing a new 'national' identity for Anatolia. Even though, some agreements with neighboring countries were made in order to avoid intimidation from USSR, such as the Baghdad Pact. Atatürk rejected the Ottoman-Islamic tradition and make the transition to secularism, replacing Eastern oppressive mentality with Western democratization and national development. The political view of Atatürk in order to establish the Republic can undoubtedly be summarized with the fundamental notions of Kemalism. The corner stones of Kemalism were actual sovereignty and progress in a nutshell. Progress was mainly considered by him as reaching the level of contemporary civilizations back then, and sovereignty as the formation and protection of sustainable freedom which is institutionalized by the establishment of a republican regime. In this manner, the Arab world has been considered problematic, sectarian and religious in the Turkish mental map and to be associated with it has been considered something negative.

Considering, as The Republic of Turkey was established by fighting with the neighbors and major powers in 1923, in order to the pursue of existence, realistic and hard power security-orientation was adopted as a foreign policy strategy. Especially, Middle East policy was directed by a defensive hard power due to these founding dynamics until the 2000s. Atatürk's successors also continued Kemalist's neutrality policy on regional issues throughout the Second World War. Strengthening this neutral policy in the Middle East, from the perspective of the Turks, was motivated by distrust punctuated by the 'Arab Revolt', which, from the Turks' point of view, made it easy for the West to overthrow the Ottoman Empire in the First World War and is considered as an unforgivable 'betrayal'.<sup>21</sup> For Arabs' point of view, this distrust stems from resentment to the pressure of the Young Turks and Ottoman rule, which delayed the development of the Arab national consciousness.

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<sup>19</sup> T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, URL: <http://www.kultur.gov.tr/TR,25406/din-ve-laiklik.html>

<sup>20</sup> Ekşi M. (2018). “*Türk Dış Politikasının Ultimo Rationis: Yumuşak Güçten Sert Güce Türkiye'nin Suriye Politikası*”, Karadeniz Araştırmaları, p. 72

<sup>21</sup> Makovsky, Alan ‘The New Activism in Turkish Foreign Policy’ SAIS Review, 1999, p.2

Yet, the legacy of the Justice and Development Party (The Justice and Development Party, abbreviated officially AK Parti in Turkish as an acronym is a conservative political party in Turkey) was about to rise in the beginning the of 2000s. During the AK Party period, the vision of Turkish foreign policy has been determined as soft power.<sup>22</sup> The main components of the soft power policy are zero problem policy with neighbors, being a role-model country and strategic depth approaches. Ahmet Davutoglu stated that "zero problems with neighbors" policy approach was based on improving relations with neighbors on the contrary of the previous Kemalist elites and governments. According to Davutoglu, it was crucial to eliminate the common psychology that Turkey is surrounded by constant threats, and a consequently growing defensive reflex.<sup>23</sup> The soft power vision and discourse for the AK Party government is claimed to be the camouflage of its ambitious and revisionist foreign policy based on the search for a model country in the Middle East and regional hegemonic leadership.<sup>24</sup> In particular, with the AK Party government having a the background from the Islamic tradition, the Muslim majority countries in the Middle East has changed the outlook on Turkey positively. According to Davutoglu, the Kemalist elites' 'Middle East the quagmire of problems'- understanding, Turkey has alienated the neighboring countries and lost and opportunity to become a regional power in the Middle East. In this context, it would not be wrong to say that, since 2003 the determining factor in shaping AKP's Middle East policy has been the changing perspective on the Middle East.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF TURKEY-SYRIA RELATIONS

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As it is stated by Aras & Köni, historical myths, legends, stories about the past events and the understandings coming from the beliefs about historical figures might have an impact on changing the existing picture since they all can influence the choices of people, the reactions towards challenges, their behaviours and even their fundamental attitudes.<sup>25</sup> Thus, since the relation of Syria and Turkey should be evaluated attached to Turkish-Arab relations, the roots of conflictual relations are taking their roots from mainly the image for both sides against each other which were created in the First World War era. Apart from this trust issue, on the other hand, certainly by gaining their roots from this distrust, there have been primal concrete

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<sup>22</sup> TAŞPINAR Ömer (2012). "Turkey's Strategic Vision and Syria, The Washington Quarterly, XXXV, (3): p.127-140

<sup>23</sup> DAVUTOĞLU, Ahmet (2009). "Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy", (The speech that he made in Washington, Mayflower Hotel) SETA Foundation's Washington D.C. Branch, 8 December 2009, URL:

<https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/38512649/principles-of-turkish-foreign-policy-setaf>

<sup>24</sup> EKŞİ Muharrem (2018). "Kamu Diplomasisi ve AK Parti Döneminde Türk Dış Politikası", p. 248

<sup>25</sup> Aras, Bülent & Köni, Hasan "Turkish-Syrian Relations Revisited", ASQ, 24: 4, 2002, pp. 52



problems emerging between Syria and Turkey throughout their history. Among these sets of occurrences can be mentioned the Hatay province issue, the water problem which is the dispute over the appropriation of Euphrates and Tigris waters and at last but not the least the support of Syria to the terrorist organization PKK which is declared as a national problem by Turkey, as the most significant ones.

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### HATAY PROVINCE ISSUE

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Nominately by the leadership of Hafez al-Assad, the so far solved Hatay issue has been brought to Syrian foreign affairs agenda again. The issue, albeit, is going far past; The latest official decision on the province, was taken in 1939 by the unification of the Sanjak of Alexandretta (Hatay) with Turkey. However, this unification was not welcomed by the Syrian side which was claiming that Hatay was a stolen territory gained by cheating on Syria and should have been remained in the Syrian lands. Hatay issue, barely, was put on the back burner after a relatively more important problem, the establishment of Israel and Turkey's quick recognition of it.<sup>26</sup> However, the decision of unification has never been declared as a legitimate fact by the Syrian government and even on some national maps Hatay is still counted as a part of Syrian territory.<sup>27</sup>

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### WATER PROBLEM

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Another problem between two countries has been the water sharing issue regarding the distribution of the downfalls of Euphrates from Turkey to Syria. The roots of the problem is going back to the 1970's as Turkey started to build some dams and irrigation projects over the two rivers Euphrates and Tigris. Under the name of South Eastern Project<sup>28</sup> Turkey has constructed some dams such as Keban Dam (1976-1987), Karakaya Dam (1976-1987) and Atatürk Dam (1990) on Euphrates and Tigris.<sup>29</sup>

This being the historical background of the problem, it led the two countries into deterioration again when Damascus and Ankara signed a protocol in 1987 which was guaranteeing Syria a

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<sup>26</sup> Altunışık, Meliha & Tür, Özlem "From Distant Neighbors to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations", *Security Dialogue*, 37: 2, 2007, p. 231

<sup>27</sup> Uğurlu, Fatih "Adana Mutabakatına Giden Süreç ve Sonrasında Türkiye Suriye İlişkileri", Ankara Üniversitesi International Relations Master Thesis, 2005, p. 38

<sup>28</sup> Generally known with Turkish acronym which is GAP (Güney Doğu Anadolu Projesi)

<sup>29</sup> Olson, Robert "Turkey-Syria Relations since the Gulf War: Kurds and Water", *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, 9: 1, 1995, p. 169



flow of 500 cubic meters per second from the Euphrates. Even though initially, the agreement was seen as advantageous by the Syrian side because Syria believed that it could have opened a door to turn this protocol into a treaty and, thus, it may have increased the quota, the interpretations of the international law and the “Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Use of International Watercourse” which was adopted by United Nations in 1997, has paved the way for an imprescriptibly disagreement between Syria and Turkey on the issue.

Although the relations on water problem have reached to another level and started to be seen as a technical issue rather than a political one by the visit of Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan to Damascus in 2004 that carried with it a Free Trade Agreement between the two countries<sup>30</sup>, the significance of the water dispute had dominated the conflictual relations of Syria and Turkey associatively with a more crucial problem, namely the terror issue, between 1990’s and the early 2000’s. In this sense; the 1995 Turkish Foreign Minister Deniz Baykal’s words demonstrated the shrouded meaning of the issue: *“Syria as a neighbor country should stop being the headquarters of a terrorist organization. It can be thought that hands with the blood of terror could be washed with more ‘water’. However, Turkey will never bargain the use of terror for water.”*<sup>31</sup>

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### PKK TERRORİSM

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One of the most important Turkish foreign policy aims in the Cold-War era was eliminating the perceived threats because it was believed that they, such as the myriad religious, ethnic and border conflicts, may displant the national security. Among these sets of perceived threats are the separatist activities, further the terrorist organization, as it is declared by NATO and UN, PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) which has been put in the priority of even the diplomatic relations by Turkey.<sup>32</sup> Turkey has long been in trouble with Partayen Karkaren Kurdistan or Kurdistan’s Workers Party, PKK, since the first half of 1980’s<sup>33</sup> which has resulted in more than estimated 40.000 deaths in total. The roots of the party were founded in the mid 1970’s by a group of young Kurdish activists. The movement was considered as student movements back then, but after a while the enlargement of member numbers necessitated an official body and it took its final party form in 1978. The ideological identity of PKK evolved over time in the

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<sup>30</sup> Tür, Özlem “Turkish-Syrian Relations: Where are we going?”, UNISCI Discussion Papers, 23, 2010, p. 169

<sup>31</sup> Altunışık, Meliha Benli “Türkiye’nin İsrail Politikası”, URL: <http://www.circassiancenter.com/cc-turkiye/arastirma/0407-turkiyenin-4.htm>

<sup>32</sup> Aykan, Mahmut Bali “The Turkish-Syrian Crisis of October 1998: A Turkish View”, *Middle East Policy*, 6, 1999, p. 174-175

<sup>33</sup> “Kurdistan Workes’s Party” URL:

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kurdistan-Workers-Party>

range of orthodox Marxism to Kurdish nationalism and thus, the demands of the organization have also been altered. Among these set of eventual and latest demands the most prevalent one is the demand for recognition of Kurdish social, economic and political rights by the state of Turkey. However, although Turkey's recent past is full with several misguidances and misinterpretations in defining comprehensive dynamics of the Kurdish problem and PKK's distilled demands are being highly supported even among the civilian Kurdish population (which makes up approximately 20 % of the Turkey's population), it is noteworthy to state that the course of actions of PKK does not represent the totality of the Kurdish population. Even so, even the Kurdish political party structure which is the voice of Kurds in the Turkish parliament is known with obvious and close affiliations with PKK and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Hence, the organization acquires a prominent position for the Kurdish majority in Turkey. In summer 2009, AKP government announced the Kurdish Initiative (Democratic Opening), which is considered as the first concrete step taken throughout the all Turkish Republic's history. Despite this initiative provided to the people who has been through so many fatal and bad experiences, hope and optimism, later political miscalculations and lack of compromise culture prevented the process to come out to be good, backfired and even caused ruinous consequences. Indeed, as of 2012, the violence between PKK and Turkish military resurged by resulting in the highest casualties and numbers of deaths since the late 1990's.<sup>34</sup> According to the data conducted by International Crisis Group, in fourteen months of a time period between 2011 and 2012, more than 700 people were died in Turkey because of the conflict.

The PKK terror started to disturb the already tensioned relations between Syria and Turkey in 1980's when the organization found a shelter in Syria and the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon which was dominated by Syria. Thus, the support of Syria to PKK terrorism and the residence of the head of PKK, Abdullah Öcalan in Damascus, have been mainly impactful on the escalation of the relations especially during the 1990's. In this manner, in 1995, the main criterion of bilateral relations of the two countries was decided to be based on the Syrian aid to PKK and the ways for eliminating this support, by the Turkish authorities. At this point, it would not wrong to say that one of the most stressed times of the relations was 1996, when Syria rejected the official request of Turkey to extradite Abdullah Öcalan. Upon this decision of Syria, all official contacts with Syria was suspended by the Turkish government. In addition to these, in following times, there happened several attacks and terrorist activities including bomb explosions in Damascus

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<sup>34</sup> Micheal Gunter, " The continuing Kurdish problem in Turkey after Ocalan's capture" p.88, URL: <https://library.fes.de/libalt/journals/swetsfulltext/11375720.pdf>

and PKK operations in Hatay.<sup>35</sup> All these incidents brought a recrimination for both Syria and Turkey. Turkish government has threatened Syria by saying that it would try its best to ensure that Syria should not have been removed from the list of “countries sponsoring terrorism”.<sup>36</sup> From the Syrian perspective, behind these attempts and assertive attitude of Turkey, it was laid the close relations with Israel, the biggest enemy of Syria. Indeed, a very short time later Turkey signed "Military Education and Cooperation Agreement" with Israel, and Faruq Al-Shara, the former Foreign Minister of Syria, claimed that this decision was encouraged by outside circles which was most likely referring to Israel.<sup>37</sup> According to some scholars, this understanding of Syria, indeed, is correct the reality because after some diplomatic meetings with Turkey and Turkish Defense Minister's visit to Golan Heights, Israel had accepted the PKK as a terrorist organization for the first time.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the 1998 Adana Accord gained its roots from this background. The diplomatic efforts which dominated up until 1998 had all failed and Turkey chose to toughen its stance against Syria and take steps to finalize “the undeclared state of war”<sup>39</sup> with Syria. After Turkish President Süleyman Demirel's speech in parliament in which he was warning Syria to quit its support to PKK and claiming that there had remained no patience of Turkey<sup>40</sup>, Turkish government issued a final ultimatum to Syria. This act resulted in the giving up of Syria, and as a result the Adana Agreement was signed on 20 October 1998. In accordance with this agreement; Syria declared that it was breaking all PKK activities off in Syrian territories and expelling Öcalan.

Furthermore, although Syrian conceding the Adana Agreement is seen as a stepping back of Syria by many people, the diplomatic benefits and political interests need to be taken into account when analyzing the practices of states as it should be in almost every international relations case. In this regard, Bashar al-Assad in an interview in 2009 explicated that the cooperative actions of Syria with Turkey in those times were not because of fear but because of preference. In the same speech, he claimed that “*We would either be friends with the Turkish people or prefer the Kurds and lose you. Because our preference was with you, we sent Öcalan out*”<sup>41</sup> Even so, for the sake of argument, it should also be considered that the potential risks

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<sup>35</sup> Gresh, Alain “Turkish-Israeli-Syrian Relations and Their Impact on the Middle East”, *Middle East Journal*, 52: 2, 1998, p. 193

<sup>36</sup> Olson, Robert “Turkey-Syria Relations since the Gulf War: Kurds and Water”, *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, 9: 1, 1995, p. 177-78

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Faruq al-Shara in Damascus in October 1997.

<sup>38</sup> Gresh, Alain “Turkish-Israeli-Syrian Relations and Their Impact on the Middle East”, *Middle East Journal*, 52: 2, 1998, p. 194

<sup>39</sup> BBC “World: Middle East Turkey losing patience with Syria”, 04 October 1998, URL:

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/185992.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/185992.stm)

<sup>40</sup> Gökcan, Özkan, (2018) “Türkiye-Suriye İlişkilerinde bir Kırılma Noktası, Ekim 1998 Krizi veya Diğer bir İfade ile İlan Edilmemiş Savaş” 13/1 p.180-185

and existing assets of the states do effect their decisions taken on the relations with other states. As it is assumed by some scholars, the lack of modern weapons and technologies in the Syrian army, and further the Syrian economy's being in a tight corner have had a big impact on altering Syrian attitude towards Turkey.<sup>42</sup>

## JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY & BASHAR AL-ASSAD GOVERNMENT

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Much has been written about the once brotherly relationship between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. As above highlighted, undeniably, this relationship assembled the base of Turkey's move towards the Arab World and its re-engagement with regions on which Atatürk and his successive Kemalist Generals had a shut door.

Erdogan reached out touch faith to the Syrian President once the AKP came to power. Bashar Al-Assad on his part, conversed not just Hafez Al-Assad animus towards Turkey but also the historic mistrust between Syrians and Turks.

When we look at the post Adana Accord period, we see that the bilateral relations between Syria and Turkey quickly developed and even the undeclared state of war was left behind for both parties. Turkey and Syria's cooperation in 1998 to provided the result of the removal of the terrorist Abdullah Ocalan in Syria and the two countries began to normalize their relation with the Adana Accord. The relation was not only recovered after the agreement but reached a fever pitch in almost less than a decade. As sundry examples for these developments, from the Syrian side, it showed a big effort by cutting all contact with PKK by closing the PKK camps, information agencies and forbidding all supports getting through the organization. Additionally, the Turkish side immediately cancelled their planned simulated military operation with Israel which was sort of an indicator of a trial to put some distance with Israel. Hence, several meetings started to be realized especially after the approval of 'Security Cooperation Agreement' by the Joint Security Committee which included military officials and diplomats from both countries.<sup>43</sup> The underlying denominators of this unprecedented convalescence between the two countries could be analyzed under a number of topics. Under the following topics, one of the main reasons of this convergence was the US-led Iraq War and the attitudes

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<sup>42</sup>Tür, Özlem (2010) "Turkish-Syrian Relations: Where are we going?", UNISCI Discussion Papers, 23., p. 164-65

<sup>43</sup> Uğurlu, Fatih (2005) "*Adana Mutabakatına Giden Süreç ve Sonrasında Türkiye Suriye İlişkileri*", Ankara Üniversitesi International Relations Master Thesis, p. 80-81

of the two countries against this war. Various factors played a critical role in the dizzying rapid development of the relations between the two countries during the AK Party period. First of all, it is possible to argue that the 1st of March 2003<sup>44</sup>, motion which took place in the Turkish parliament, was the critical factor influencing a deeply negative perception of the image of Turkey, in the eyes of Middle East and the Arabs. Turkey, in the eyes of Arab Middle East, had often been seen as a distant country, an ally of the US and NATO, and thus a pawn country, plus, a country portraying secularism. Therefore, for a long time, Turkey was perceived by the Middle East as a "gendarme of the West" and the USA in particular. However, this picture has more in the direction of being a role model in the region during the AK Party rule.<sup>45</sup> Turkey being able to say no to its strategic ally, USA, to deploy American troops in Turkey and open a northern front in Iraq, aroused great enthusiasm in the Middle East as well as other parts of the world.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Turkey's previous governments' secular policy causing the perception of a "secular country" image in the Middle East has begun to change into a more positive picture especially due to the Islamic rhetoric of AK Party elites, strongly including Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Apart from the Syria and Iraq rivalry in terms of Baath Party regimes in both countries, the 2003 Iraq War had another crucial outcome for Syria. It heightened the fears both in Syria and also in Iran of the possibility of one of them being the next target of USA and Western powers as a consequence of "War on Terror".<sup>47</sup> Thus, it was obvious that Syria was not willing to show an open contempt for USA, to avoid the same fate as Iraq. In the broad scale, it is worth noting that before the invasion of Iraq, although they were not strong attempts, Syria tried to block the decisions taken in UN and the Arab League by establishing some coalitions.<sup>48</sup> In addition to these, since any initiation of a speech on the Iraq issue with Syria would have most likely led the negotiations to the future of Golan Heights, the Bush administration was also hesitant to discuss with Syria.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, in Turkey, the outcomes of the US invasion to Iraq paved the way for very lively debates and even thousands of people demonstrated against the AKP proposal that let USA to use Turkish territories. As a consequence, these civil society

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<sup>44</sup> Turkish-American Relations faced a serious crisis on 1 March 2003 when the Turkish Parliament voted down the Turkish government's motion to deploy American troops in Turkey and open a northern front into Iraq.

<sup>45</sup> KEYALİ Macid (2014). "Arap Dünyasında Laiklik, Demokrasi ve Liberalizm Krizi", Al Jazeera, URL: <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/gorus/arap-dunyasinda-laiklik-demokrasi-ve-liberalizm-krizi> 06.09.2017, AKGÜN Mensur – Sabiha Senyücel GÜNDOĞAR (2012). Ortadoğu'da Türkiye Algısı, TESEV

<sup>46</sup> Kaya, Karen (2011) "The Turkish-American Crisis An Analysis of 1 March 2003", MILITARY REVIEW, p.69

<sup>47</sup> Mohammed, Idrees (2011) "Turkey and Iran Rivalry on Syria", *Alternatives*, 10: 2-3, p. 91

<sup>48</sup> Hinnebusch, Raymond (2009) "Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar al-Asad", *Orta Doğu Etütleri*, 1: 1, p. 18

<sup>49</sup> Zisser, Eyal (2009) "Syria's Diplomatic Comeback: What Next?", *Mediterranean Politics*, 14: 1, p. 109-10

activities worked and in 2003 the proposal by USA of having a force against Iraq at the Turkish border was rejected by the Turkish parliament. Thus, it can be said that the already twinkling relation between Turkey and Syria gained another important dimension by the US-led Iraq War. When Erdoğan had paid a visit to Damasacus for two days in November in 2004, agreements were signed to initiate the economic and political relations between the two contries and they were put into effect in 2007. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had paid a historic diplomatic visit to Turkey on 16-19 October in 2007. The reason why Bashar al-Assad visited Turkey seemed to be aimed at congratulating Abdullah Gül's new presidential position but in parallel of the time of his visit, Turkey was in the preparation of military action in Northern Iraq,<sup>50</sup> and Syria's worries about being subjected to international pressure since the Israeli air attack on September 6<sup>51</sup> causes a different meaning to the visit. At this point, it should be highlighted that the visit took place at a time when security concerns arising from the neighbors of the two countries were at the top level.<sup>52</sup>

Although the growing anti-US discourse was prominent in both Syria and Turkey, the fundamental reason of both countries' opposition to this intervention was their fears related with the Kurdish Issue and the risks of possible establishment of an independent Kurdish State in the Northern Iraq.<sup>53</sup> For both Turkey where considerable amount of Kurdish population lives, and Syria being another Kurdish populated country,<sup>54</sup> the scenario of an autonomus Kurdish state in Iraq was of vital importance. Though, the uprisings that occurred in 2005 in Kurdish areas put the boot in these fears.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, it is plausible to say that, apart from the facts that Syria was seen as an important step for Turkey to be able to increase its weight in Middle East and Turkey being a useful ally for Syria to build up its economic situation, the common security concerns for both have played an important role on improving the relations after 2003. On the other hand, domestic factors, considerations and the consequences of these elements should also be added to the analysis of the relation. These can be counted broadly as

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<sup>50</sup>Keskin, A. Funda (2008) "Turkey's Trans-Border Operations in Northern Iraq: Before and After the Invasion of Iraq"

<sup>51</sup> Operation Outside the Box, URL: <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/outside-the-box-israels-strike-on-syrias-nuclear-plant-547870>

<sup>52</sup> TASAM- 'Başar Al-Esad'ın Türkiye'yi ziyareti ve Bölgesel güvenlik' 2007

<sup>53</sup> Tür, Özlem (2010) "Turkish-Syrian Relations: Where are we going?", UNISCI Discussion Papers, 23, p. 167-68

<sup>54</sup>Kurdish population in Syria is accepted as approximately between 1,8 and 2 million, and %10 of the Syrian population. URL: <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-278366-syrian-kurds-and-turkey.html>

<sup>55</sup>Altunışık, Meliha & Tür, Özlem (2007) "From Distant Neighbors to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations", *Security Dialogue*, 37: 2, p. 240-41



the change in Turkey's political scene after the AK Party was elected in 2002 and the important new policies in foreign relations towards Middle East which was implemented. On the Syrian side, the economically worsening situation of the country and the need for a reform, meanwhile having troubles with Western powers, increased the enthusiasm to build good relations with the strong neighbor country of Turkey by Bashar al-Assad leadership as from 2000's. Furthermore, after the fall of the Peace Process in 2000 after approximately a decade, the al-Aqsa intifada, the Turkish government's and Prime Minister Erdoğan's emphasis on Israel operations in Gaza Strip and counting these as a state terror, tensed the relations between Israel and Turkey. Even though Israel and Turkey enjoyed the good relations in 1990's, after the government change in Turkey, the relations was observed as fluctuating until the break point in 2009 when the Davos Crisis happened. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was the Prime Minister at that time and walked off the stage after an angry exchange with the Israeli president, Shimon Peres. In a heated exchange, Erdogan told Shimon Peres that the Israeli air strikes and invasion of the Palestinian territory were "*very wrong*" and said "*many people have been killed*". The crisis took a place at the World Economic Forum, after a lengthy debate about Davos about the Israeli offensive, in which at least 1,300 Palestinians were killed.<sup>56</sup> In the after math of the Davos Crisis, the mediator role of Turkey between Israel and Syria deteriorated. This tension gave acceleration to the recovery process of Syria-Turkey relations, and the two countries conducted a military drill together in the early 2009 which made Israel harried.<sup>57</sup> As a consequence, it can be said that, all these deteriorative associations of Turkey with Israel, by all means, Syria being the long-lasting rival of Israel, affected Syrian conditions in the region regarding its stance related with Israel. On the other hand, Bashar al-Assad, like what his father Hafez al-Assad had done in the past to other countries, chose the way to vary its relations with regional countries as looking for a way out from US, Israel or France pressures. In this sense, as a country which was opposed to the Iraq War that could have led United States to have a more influential role in Iraq and which was defending Syrian interests against Israel by not intervening its own domestic affairs, Turkey became the perfectly suited option for him.<sup>58</sup> Thus, significantly after 2003 up until the uprisings had been ripened in 2011 in Syria, the pathway for mutually assumed cooperative agreements between Turkey and Syria were opened. Pursuant to the consent of both sides, the

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<sup>56</sup> Support the Guardian, 'Recep Tayyip Erdoğan storms out of Davos after clash with Israeli president over Gaza' URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jan/30/turkish-prime-minister-gaza-davos>

<sup>57</sup>Salık, Nuri (2011) "Pragmatism in Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar al-Assad and the Future of Turkish-Syrian Relations", Ortadoğu Analiz, 3: 35, p. 24

<sup>58</sup> Salık, Nuri(2011) "Pragmatism in Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar al-Assad and the Future of Turkish-Syrian Relations", Ortadoğu Analiz, 3: 35, p. 30

mutual visits and meetings have become significant in the mid of the first decade of the 2000's. The primal focus of the concrete steps was on economic issues. Since the aftermath picture of Syria following Hafez al-Assad's death was more likely underwhelming, many scholars believed that being able to improve the Syrian economy was like an authority test for Bashar al-Assad.<sup>59</sup> Hence, Turkey was not defined as only an economical market but it was also brought to Syrian administration's agenda as an economic development role model. For instance, in the 2007 participation to the Turkish Syrian Business Forum, the Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan did constantly emphasize their willingness to support Syria in advancing their foreign trades. On the other hand, for Turkey's side, Syria had also been representing a significant role for Turkish prosperity. Syria was both a budding market for Turkish goods and it was also a transit country for the flux of goods from Turkey to other regional markets.<sup>60</sup> In 2007, by coming into force of the Free Trade Agreement which was signed in 2004 between Syria and Turkey, the bilateral trade volume increased. The state-owned Turkish Petroleum International Company and its counterparts in Syria started to import and export oil products as well as crude oil in 2008.<sup>61</sup> Following this year, another important development was done and the visa requirements between the countries were abolished. This act was embodied when the historically twin and artificially separated cities Gaziantep and Aleppo and the people of Syrians and Turks no longer needed to apply for visa in order to visit each other. In the celebrations of this decision in Hatay, the Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu addressed to Syrians and stated that: *"Turkey is your second country and Turkish people are waiting for you."*<sup>62</sup> Ironically, these words of Ahmet Davutoglu became a reality just a few years later, however, in an unexpected and grievously manner. In this manner, the cooperation and good relations with Syria had lasted for ten years until the Arab Spring broke out in 2011 and brought radical changes in parallel with the crisis in Syria. At this point, Turkey's policy toward Syria has undergone a transformation, increasing the use of hard power, and supported the establishment a new regime in Assad's place, even though Recep Tayyip

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<sup>59</sup> As an example; David Lesch,(2005) "The New Lion of Damascus – Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria", *New Haven: Yale University Press*, p. 208

<sup>60</sup> Mohammed, Idrees (2011)"Turkey and Iran Rivalry on Syria", *Alternatives*, 10: 2-3, p. 90

<sup>61</sup> According to Turkish Undersecretary of Foreign Trade data while in 2004 the official trade volume conducted with Syria was about \$ 0.75 billion, it went beyond \$ 1.750 billion in 2008. (Ari, Tayyar & Pirinçci, Ferhat "Turkey's New Foreign Policy Towards The Middle East and The Perceptions In Syria and Lebanon", *Akademik Bakış*, 4: 7, 2010, p. 10)

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkish Vision of Regional and Global Order: Theoretical Background and Practical Implementation", Oxford University, *Political Reflections*, 1: 2, p. 47, 11 May 2010 URL: <https://cesran.org/turkish-vision-of-regional-and-global-order-theoretical-background-and-practical-implementation.html>



Erdoğan used to call Bashar al-Assad his brother and had declared Syria as Turk's second house.<sup>63</sup>

## REFUGEE QUESTION

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The extension of the Arab Spring was the precarious environment for the citizens in Syria. When the issue had reached to another important dimension for Turkey whereafter the refugees started to flee to Hatay/Alexandretta, although the Turkish government had already done many things to stop Bashar al-Assad regime, it was observed that Ankara's rhetoric became more severe. Especially, the incident where Maher al-Assad forces entered into Hama and many people were killed, caused the traumatic thoughts of Turkish government from the 1982 Hama Massacre have been raised again. Therefore, throughout the on end promises of Bashar al-Assad to make reforms given to the international community, the hardened warnings continued to be given from the Turkish side. In the beginnings, even though Bashar al-Assad declared that there will be elections and the scope of general amnesty would be broadened, the developments did not get realized in a healthy manner and the operations against protestors did go on.<sup>64</sup>

Related with these fears, assuredly, a refugee flux also started to be expected. In a little time, these anticipations came true and Turkey was subjected to a heavy refugee flow. As a natural result of the multi-actor civil war, the first Syrian refugees to Turkey was followed by millions since 29 April 2011. In terms of international migration, Turkey is known as the 'transit country' hosting 58.018 total number of refugees who have international protection in 2011, which. By 2020 has exceeded over 3.5 million people. Beside the fact that the flow was a considerable economic burden to Turkey, people coming to Alexandretta scared Turkey since it was possible that there were PKK members among them and it could cause a national security issue for Turkey. The other information which is not healing the scene is that the Syrian branch of the PKK is well organized and the risky ignition of Kurdish nationalistic movement and sympathizers settling in Kurdish cities along the border may create a problematic situation in the country.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Journal of Sabah- ' Syria is Turk's second house'

[https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2009/12/23/suriye\\_ikinci\\_evimizdir](https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2009/12/23/suriye_ikinci_evimizdir)

<sup>64</sup> Salik, Nuri (2011) "Pragmatism in Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar al-Assad and the Future of Turkish-Syrian Relations", *Ortadoğu Analiz*, 3: 35, p. 27

<sup>65</sup> Mohammed, Idrees (2011) "Turkey and Iran Rivalry on Syria", *Alternatives*, 10: 2-3, p. 90

Even though the recent numbers are varied from resource to resource<sup>66</sup>, according to the Foreign Minister of Turkey, the numbers show that nearly 59.427 refugees host in refugee camps which is stated in southeastern Anatolia. According to data, updated on September 10th 2018 and adopted by the UN, within the definition of "refugee", there are about 4 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey. However, about 95% of the refugees live outside of the camps, 70% of them are women and children.<sup>67</sup> In one of the camps, the defecting military officials who call themselves Free Syrian Soldiers, which were organized to topple down the Syrian government, were settled.<sup>68</sup> The camp was protected by Turkish military officials; however, the situation led the Turkish Foreign Ministry Ahmet Davutoglu, to call for help from the international community since the border control was getting more and more difficult. Turkey has not sent any Syrians back who entered Turkey's border, moreover the 'temporary protected status' is given according to Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection Law. The law preserved the geographical restriction on the definition of refugee in the 1951 Geneva Convention. With the Law No. 6458, the concept of asylum seekers has been replaced by the term 'conditional refugees'. In addition, this law has governed the principle of non-refoulement, which is important in terms of international law norms. According to Law no. 6458, conditional refugees are those '*who are fleeing from events outside Europe, and who must await resettlement to a third country*'.<sup>69</sup>

With increasing length of stay of the Syrian refugees in Turkey, it assuredly, induced economic, social, multidimensional crisis as a result of cultural and security predicaments. Syrians in Turkey, although not only becoming an issue of concern to Turkey, the future of the EU and its policies is a concern with importance and influence. The situation of Syrians, which is a concrete proof of the importance of common and supranational level asylum and immigration policy making in the EU and considered under the name of the '*migrant crisis*', is tried to be managed in line with the objectives of the EU's border management policy. In this sense, the dialogue with Turkey on EU immigration and asylum has gained a new dimension. December 16<sup>th</sup> 2013 Readmission Agreement signed between Turkey and the EU foresees the return of immigrants entering the EU illegally via Turkey. With the Readmission Agreement,

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<sup>66</sup> Abrams, Elliot "How Many Refugees from the Assad Regime are there? Try 500,000", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 06 April 2012, Available at: <http://blogs.cfr.org/abrams/2012/04/06/how-many-refugees-from-the-assad-regime-are-there-try-500000/>

<sup>67</sup> 2017 Fact Sheet: Turkey. The United Nations Refugee Agency. URL: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/60548>. (13.09.2018)

<sup>68</sup> 'Suriye sınırından izlenimler', URL: <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/suriye-sinirindan-izlenimler-1-20884850>

<sup>69</sup> Directorate General for Migration Management 3, Turkey, URL: <https://en.goc.gov.tr/>

negotiations on visa-free travel of Turkish citizens to the EU started. The negotiations attain anywhere about visa-free issue since that until today, 2020.<sup>70</sup> EU utters that to be able to have visa-free travel for Turkish citizens the criterias the EU request from Turkey must be fulfilled which has not been completed. This conducts the dialogue as a conditionality principle.<sup>71</sup>

Since 2013 Turkey and EU have been embodying the substances such like in general; prevention of asylum seekers who have temporary protected status in Turkey to immigrate into to the EU illegally through Turkey; humanitarian assistance, social and economical terms to be provided to the Syrians under temporary protection status in Turkey, and increasing the Coast Guard capacity as agreed in The Joint Action Plan in 2018.<sup>72</sup> In return of this agreement, EU has accepted to provide 6 billion Euro to Turkey in order to provide proper help to the Syrians. Relations between the EU and Turkey has been tense from time to time due to the first half of the funds not being transferred sufficiently quick and the promises made by EU not being honored.<sup>73</sup>

In the light of all intricate features and Turkey's stance of being a crucial country in regard to Syrian conditional refugees, it can also be understood that the EU and Turkey relations have been under the impact of limbo until today.

Furthermore, the admission of Syrian refugees has been a matter of debate between the Turkish people and the AK Party governance. The fear of the having "Arab citizens" in the country have triggered the trauma of losing the secularism which is so essential for the Turkish people while also witnessing other neighbor countries' religion-oriented administration.

As rule of thumb, in urban spaces, people are constantly in social interaction and the characteristics of individuals are also important, because their habits and cultural characteristics, such as race, play important role in the reconstruction of the space.<sup>74</sup>

In this respect, with the consideration of the phenomenon of immigration, people, who have to change places, assuredly, adapt to the country where they go, in order to integrate to the culture of the host country. On the contrary, in the case of Turkey, as a result of the crisis of Syrian refugee influx, one can see that they particularly concentrated to bring their cultures and beliefs

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<sup>70</sup> First Meeting Of The EU-Turkey Visa Liberalization Dialogue, 2013, p. 1

URL: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/data/agreed%20minutes%20ve%20annotated%20roadmap.pdf>

<sup>71</sup> Third Report on the Progress by Turkey in Fulfilling the Requirements of its Visa Liberalisation Roadmap,

URL: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/MEMO\\_16\\_1625](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/MEMO_16_1625)

<sup>72</sup> EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan, 2018, URL:

[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO\\_15\\_5860](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_15_5860)

<sup>73</sup> 'AB-Türkiye Mülteci Anlaşması: AB fonları nereye ve nasıl harcanıyor?' URL :

<https://tr.euronews.com/2018/03/26/ab-turkiye-multeci-anlasmasi-ab-fonlari-nereye-ve-nasil-harcaniyor->

<sup>74</sup> Aytaç Ömer (2007), "Kent Mekânlarının Sosyo-Kültürel Coğrafyası" p. 200,

into Turkey. Therefore, the lifestyle in Turkey's social structure has changed in some cities because the Syrian refugees have spurned staying in the refugee camps in Alexandretta. The Syrian refugees are mostly known as ‘‘People who are quite different from us and foreign to us’’ in Turkish society, as a consequence of refusing to become accustomed to Turkish lifestyle. When the topic of aid is asked that is said to be provided to Syrian refugees is also one of the most important factors shaping the Turkish people's negative perception of Syrian refugees. However, when asked to Syrian refugees, the fact that some of them do not receive help but make a living with their own means is actually two different factors, an indicator of perception. In addition to the physical losses caused by the war, psychological traumas are also an important element that should not be neglected. In short, what happened has caused the perception of both sides (refugee-local people) to be negative.

Unwillingness of the Syrian refugees for cultural integration was a tip of the iceberg for Turkey and Turkish people. To cut to the chase, in the context of the economical approach, these are understandable the natural consequences of hosting nearly 4 million refugees which is exemplified by Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s speech in 2016;

*‘‘ We have spent \$12.5 billion so far. Our NGOs and municipalities have spent as much as that, which means we have spent nearly \$25 billion in total. How much have we received from the world? The support the UN, under whose roof we are right now, has provided us so far is \$525 million. That is it. Has anything come from the European Union? Unfortunately, the EU has not been able to keep its promises. They have sent \$178 million to the UNICEF. That is all. However, they have not sent any help to Turkey for this issue .... The European Union and the countries that promised to contribute in this regard have not kept their promises. We expect them to keep their promises. We also expect the promises given by the UN to be kept.’’*

The framework of the existing cooperation between the EU and Turkey, which has been an active case since November 29, 2015, are drawn up by the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan. The Common Understanding document published in the 'Financial Assistance Program for Refugees in Turkey, was established on February 5<sup>th</sup> 2016. The EU-Turkey Joint Statement was updated on March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016. The first tranche of funding coordinated under the program was 3 billion euros (1 billion from the EU budget and 2 billion from the Member States), which was fully contracted at the end of 2017. The last date of the application period of the first tranche is 2021. The second 3 billion euro tranche (2 billion from the EU budget and 1 billion from the Member States) was launched in July 2018. It was contracted by the end of 2019 and will be

fully implemented by 2025. Under the first tranche, 1.4 billion euros was allocated to the humanitarian area managed by DG ECHO.<sup>75</sup>

## USA POLICY AND TURKEY

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Historically speaking, although the USA appeared on the world stage during the First World War, it took on a role as an influential actor during and after the Second World War. It can be said that the US's entry into the Middle East was also due to conjunctural developments. Britain, starting to withdraw from the region in the post-World War period paid way for American influence in the region to increase.<sup>76</sup> The emergence of a power vacuum in the Western world after the Second World War prepared the environment for the US's active participation in world politics, not to leave it again.<sup>77</sup> In the period following World War I, oil is being used as the main energy source and with the appreciation of it, which is defined as "black gold" since the first half of the 20th century, the strategic importance of the Middle East, and therefore the land and sea routes passing through it, has increased incomparably more than anywhere else. While discussing the contemporary American foreign policy, it should not be overlooked that the Cold War played a very important role in the acquisition of the current foreign policy identity of the USA. After the Second World War, the efforts of the Soviet Union to spread ideologically in Eastern Europe and to establish a hegemony in the Middle East served the emergence of a new ideology in the foreign policy of the USA. In trying to understand the foreign policy identity of the United States, it is necessary to fine-tune that there are different facets of this country's foreign policy, rather than the simplicity of calling it "imperialist". The fact that the USA uses soft power elements in its foreign policy gives it a great leverage in its foreign relations. In this respect, the US has not wanted to appear as a hegemonic power based solely on real politics.<sup>78</sup> Hereof, for instance, the fact that the US is the power behind the Dayton Peace, which ended the war in Bosnia, the Eisenhower Doctrine and Truman Doctrine applied during the Cold War with US's unique soft power elements, were all evidences that USA was trying to establish the

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<sup>75</sup> Universalia, 2019, "Avrupa Birliđinin Türkiye'deki mülteci krizine İnsani Yardım Müdahalesinin değerlendirilmesi"  
URL: [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/sites/echo-site/files/echo\\_turkey\\_refugees\\_-\\_exec\\_summary\\_-\\_tr\\_-\\_18.12.19.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/sites/echo-site/files/echo_turkey_refugees_-_exec_summary_-_tr_-_18.12.19.pdf)

<sup>76</sup> Akbaş, Zafer, (2011) "The Sustainability of the USA Policy and Power Struggle in the Middle East"  
"Relationships of The USA and The Great Middle East Special Issue", p. 2

<sup>77</sup> Sümer, Gültekin,(2008) "Amerikan Dış Politikasının Kökenleri ve Amerikan Dış Politik Kültürü",  
"Uluslararası İlişkiler" 199-144, p.128

<sup>78</sup> Sümer, Gültekin, (2008)"Amerikan Dış Politikasının Kökenleri ve Amerikan Dış Politik Kültürü",  
"Uluslararası İlişkiler" 199-144, p.137

understanding that international relations without its operative participation will become much more chaotic in the global arena.

## NATO AND TURKEY

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Examining the relations between Turkey and USA through NATO and being part of West against Soviet Union, it is worthy to note that for Turkey and its security, it was very crucial to be in a consociation with USA. For instance, Turkish Straits were the fundamental concerns of Soviet Union even in the final years of the Second World War. At the Potsdam Conference in the summer of 1945, they wanted to revise the situation of Straits which had been cited in the Montereux Convention on the basis of the idea that Straits were the key to Soviet security and control of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean region. Additionally, it was believed that there was a growing perception of ethno-territorial threat to USSR, referring to the possible influence of Turkey over the large Muslim/Turkic peoples of the Soviet regime.<sup>79</sup> Although, it is not right to reduce the reasons of Turkey's inclusion in both NATO and the Western bloc into the analyses of Soviet threat only. Ideological and economic reasons should also be taken into account while considering the reasons of Turkey's entrance to NATO. As mentioned in the above, the ongoing changes in the world forced Turkey to reconsider its own regime and political system. Therefore, in the late 1940's a transition to a multi-party system started to be conceived in Turkey.

In the sense of being an ally of NATO and the Western world, the major aim of Turkish foreign policy started to be balanced and find its main priorities among opportunities and risks regarding Caucasia, Middle East, Central Asia and Balkans through Europe. Turkey's policies demonstrated its integrity with Western policies and this convergence was also reflected in its attitudes towards Middle East. Furthermore, The Menderes government<sup>80</sup> was solicitous to show the essentiality of Turkey for Western interest in Middle East<sup>81</sup> The most important occurrence regarding Middle East can be counted as the alliance of Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia against the Baghdad Pact which was made between Iraq and Turkey, Iran and Britain.

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<sup>79</sup> Altunışık, Meliha, Tür Özlem, "Politics in the Turkish Republic", *Turkey Challenges of Continuity and Change*, Routledge, 2005, Chapter 2

<sup>80</sup> URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/adnan-menderes-turkey-s-first-democratically-elected-prime-minister/1490439>

<sup>81</sup> Altunışık, Meliha, Tür Özlem, "Politics in the Turkish Republic", *Turkey Challenges of Continuity and Change*, Routledge, 2005, Chapter 2

As a matter of fact, the Baghdad Pact has caused disintegration in the region rather than being uniting, causing new conflicts in the region. Amid the Arab League<sup>82</sup> members, only Iraq's approval and participation to the Pact was heavily criticized by the opposing countries. In addition, Britain's participation as a former colonial country, the participation of pro-Western policy countries such as Turkey, Iran and Pakistan to the pact was severely criticized by countries opposed, and considered as a new form of Western colonialism.<sup>83</sup> However, The fall of the Shah in<sup>84</sup> Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan created an instability fear in the region which has always been regarded as vital to US interests.

As of 2003, Turkey's decision to put all American arms and military bases in Turkey under the control of Turkish military can be counted as a drastic attitude. As can also be said about the rejection of the call for invasion by the USA to the Turkish parliament to be an active member of the US led coalition forces in Iraq. Yet, since such developments emerged in the Greater Middle East, Turkey and USA strategic cooperation in the 1980's strengthened again.

Although USA has come up as a different example in this regard, it is witnessed that when the struggle for hegemony and security escalates, it has stepped back from democracy and human rights, and their Middle East politics has often turned into a hard power based on military force, especially after the September 11 attacks.<sup>85</sup>

## THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

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The September 11, 2001 attacks caused very important changes in the US policies towards the Middle East. A group of terrorists considered to be members of the al-Qaeda terrorist organization attacked the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon, the Defense Department building in Washington, causing almost 3000 deaths in this attack. The US gave the message that it will continue the fight against terrorism not only domestically but also outside the country after the attacks. The identities of the activists who carried out the attacks drew the attention of the USA to the Middle East. Considering that the status quo in this region and the excess of social and economic conditions are the fountainhead of international threats that could harm the United States, according to Washington, the Bush administration expressed its intention to change the regimes in countries believed to support global terrorism. The US

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<sup>82</sup> Dönmez, Gökhan ‘‘ ARAP BİRLİĞİ: SİYASİ VE HUKUKİ NİTELİĞİ’’

<sup>83</sup> ‘‘Bağdat Pakti’’, İSLAM ANSİKLOPEDİSİ, URL: <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/bagdat-pakti>

<sup>84</sup> URL: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Iranian-Revolution>

<sup>85</sup> Sümer, Gültekin, ‘‘Amerikan Dış Politikasının Kökenleri ve Amerikan Dış Politik Kültürü’’, ‘‘Uluslararası İlişkiler’’ 2008, 199-144, p.138



administration under George W. Bush did not only use military power, but also resorted to soft power. The Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI) came into existence in parallel with the Preemptive Strike<sup>86</sup> doctrine adopted after September 11. The main assertive tools of USA in this direction was, ostensibly, that it wanted to dominate the definition of human rights, bearing up to development of democracy, freedom, the rule of law, civil society and the market economy in the Middle East region.<sup>87</sup> The US continued its policy in this direction and put the initiative forward at the end of 2003. Henceforth, American policies, which had a different image in the Middle East due to the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, began to be replaced by policies that strongly supported the establishment of liberal democracy, the establishment of the free market economy, and the reform of the education system, because the weaknesses in these areas were thought to lead to global terrorism. However, this project was unofficially shelved in the period following the Obama administration's coming to power and with the US accepting its military stuck in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, the political movements that took place in the Middle East, for instance, the Greater Middle East Project, were interpreted as a product of the fiction that Washington administration put forward to reshape the Middle East. However, the USA, which has never missed the discourse of democracy from its agenda, has always pursued a politics in line with its political and economic interests. In this context, the assertion that the political movements during the Arab Spring were triggered by external fictions, that resulted in the overthrow of the Ben Ali and Mubarak administrations in Tunisia and Egypt, where the USA and western states have close political and economic relations, is weakened. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that the wave of change taking place in the Middle East is a combination of product of external fiction and the internal demands of the peoples of the region.<sup>88</sup> In this regard, it can be remembered as Noam Chomsky has mentioned that the main reason and source of global terrorism, described by the famous American journalist-writer Robert Fisk as "*the evil and terrifying cruelty of the oppressed and humiliated people*", is the fundamentalist Islamic value

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<sup>86</sup> Strauss, Barry "Preemptive Strikes and Preventive Wars: A Historian's Perspective" URL: <https://www.hoover.org/research/preemptive-strikes-and-preventive-wars-historians-perspective>

<sup>87</sup> Augustus R. Norton, "The Puzzle of Political Reform in the Middle East", and Michael C. Hudson, "The United States in the Middle East", Lousie Fawcett, International Relations of the Middle East, New York: Oxford University Press 20

<sup>88</sup>Orhan, D. Dersan, (2013)"Ortadoğu"nun Krizi: Arap Baharı ve Demokrasinin Geleceği.", p. 17-29.



judgments as well as the income imbalance of the size of the gap between the rich and poor people in today's world.<sup>89</sup>

#### FACTORS DETERMINING THE AK PARTY'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST INITIATIVE

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Turkey has borders with three countries of the Middle East, so in terms of security interests, stability in the region is very important for Turkey, as well as economic terms. As abovementioned, the AKP's foreign policy, on the other hand, was not parallel to Turkey's traditional diplomatic approach to the Middle East. AK Party elites have claimed that the party's foreign policy understanding is based on the principles of multi-lateralism, multi-dimensionality, good relations with neighbors and active politics. Multilateralism especially took a central place in the new foreign policy initiative of AKP. This means not only taking part with one side but developing the diplomatic relations with almost all actors. According to AKP's foreign policy, Turkey was a "core country" more than being a bridge between different regions. Ahmet Davutoglu has argued that if Turkey succeeds in balancing security with freedom and democracy, it could be the core country and a sample taken by other countries. Davutoglu has argued that foreign policy should also include economic, cultural and demographic factors. In addition to that, it was underlined that it should not be forgotten that Turkey is an heir of a great civilization, and having the need of assertion of to improve a new diplomatic approach based on self-confidence by virtue of having different identities such as European, Asian and Middle Eastern. In this regard, the foreign policy understanding of the GMEI and AKP complements each other rather than being compatible.<sup>90</sup> GMEI has provided Turkey with an opportunity to become the leading advocate of democracy across the Middle East, which supports Turkey's desire to be a global power with an active foreign policy. Indeed the participation to the Sea Island Summit as a democratic partner, strengthened Turkey's international position in the face of the EU and G-8.<sup>91</sup> The new policy of AK Party enabled Turkey to become a foremost actor in the region, on the way of being a "major regional power." Turkey's active territorial position as a mediator not only between Israel-Syria but also in

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<sup>89</sup>Chomsky, Noam. (2002), "Amerikan Müdahaleciliği", p. 19

<sup>90</sup> Laçiner, Ömer, (2004) "Büyük Ortadoğu Projesi", Journal of Birikim 179,

<sup>91</sup> "U.S.-EU-Turkey Cooperation on the Broader Middle East and North Africa: A Strategic Dialogue", Program Brief (Nixon Center), 16, 2004.

Lebanon has been pointed out in many articles.<sup>92</sup> Within this frame of reference as abovementioned, after the Davos Summit the dynamics changed for Turkey in the international area. Mshari al-Zaydi wrote an article which stresses the new foreign policy of Turkey with the title "*The Return of Ottoman Empire*". He pointed out that "*Turkey is now turning towards its Ottoman past after neglecting it for so long*"<sup>93</sup>

Viewed in this way, Turkey had a pattern of pragmatic foreign policy due to the influx affairs in Middle East and especially in Syria. AK Party elites through the policy of making Turkey a model country in the Middle East, continues through the concept of soft power as they have done for over 15 years. It can be said that this policy of the AK Party is implemented in parallel with The Greater Middle East Initiative.<sup>94</sup> In the GMEI policy, Turkey has adopted the role of a model country with its soft power policy. The US-NATO ally Turkey, as a country in the EU accession process with its Western values, was thus intended to be a model among Arab Muslim-majority countries.<sup>95</sup> With this framework, Turkey and USA, between the years 2003 and 2011, has acted in terms of common interests before the revolts in the Arab Spring process in Middle East escalated. Erdogan, who was the prime minister at the time, announced that he was the co-president of The Greater Middle East Initiative.<sup>96</sup> In this sense, Turkey and USA have developed a "Shared Vision and Structured Dialogue to Advance the Turkish-American Strategic Partnership" policy in basis of the common interests.<sup>97</sup> In a nutshell, the actuation of AK Party with the soft power policy in order to be a model in the Middle East has been influential in the development of Turkey-Syria relations. Because Turkey had identified Syria as being a pilot country to implement its policy on, in regards of it having a dominant role in the Middle East.<sup>98</sup> Even though Syria was included in the "evil triangle" and was applied sanctions by USA at the time of the Bush administration, due to the Lebanon issue and allegedly having chemical weapons, USA was silent when the relations between Turkey-Syria was

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<sup>92</sup> As an example; Tisdall, Simon,(2009) "Turkey's Decisive Role", *The Guardian*, January 19,

<sup>93</sup> Al-Zaydi Mshari,(2009) "The Return of the Ottoman Empire", Asharq Alawsat, URL: <https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/mshari-al-zaydi/opinion/the-return-of-the-ottoman-empire>

<sup>94</sup> BAĞCI Hüseyin - Bayram SİNKAYA (2006). "Büyük Ortadoğu Projesi ve Türkiye: Ak Parti'nin Perspektifi", Akademik Orta Doğu, 1-1: p. 21-37.

<sup>95</sup> Aydıntaşbaş Aslı – Kirişçi Kemal (2017). "The United States and Turkey Friends, Enemies, or Only Interests", Brookings, Turkey project policy paper, XII (12): p.1-27.

<sup>96</sup> URL: <https://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/121091-erdogandan-bop-esbaskani-elestirilerine-yanit>

<sup>97</sup> UZGEL İlhan (2013). "ABD ve NATO'yla İlişkiler", Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar

<sup>98</sup> Ekşi, Muharrem (2018) "Türk Dış Politikasının Ultimo Ratiou: Yumuşak Güçten Sert Güce Türkiye'nin Suriye Politikası" XV/60: p. 71-99

developing and was supportive of moderating Syria through Turkey's soft power policy. Thus, according to some of scholars, US had used the developing relations between Turkey and Syria for its own interests in its Middle East policy.<sup>99</sup>

## 2.THE CASE OF USSR AND POST-SOVIET RUSSIA'S EURASIAN POLICY

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Among Russia's balancing policies, one of the most consequential outlined movement has been Syria. Syria was one of the most paramount allies of the USSR in the Middle East, despite the US-led Western Block during and after the Cold War. (1947- 1991).

The close relations between Russia and Syria have mostly been established in the fields of military, economy and diplomacy.<sup>100</sup>

The effects of the Eurasian geopolitical approach are seen in the interior and foreign policy of Post-Soviet Russia, which is one of the global powers playing an active role in the Middle East. On one hand, the short-term plan and the grand strategy of Russia called Eurasia was endeavouring to complete the influence of the USA. On the other hand, the plan aimed to remove the USA from the Middle East and South Asia, thus becoming the sole sovereign power in this region in the long run. Henceforth, Russia believes that its national security goal is to re-establish Russia as a great power, and hence be able to encounter the dominance of the USA in the international area.<sup>101</sup>

### THE RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST

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USSR and Syria's political relationship was established right before the achievement of independence of Syria from the French mandate between the years of 1943 and 1944. In spite of the French intervention, USSR recognized Syria's sovereignty utterly.<sup>102</sup> The political life in Syria between 1945 and 1949 which was calm and inactive compared to the following periods, introduced a period of instability from 1949 on.<sup>103</sup> Relations between the two countries moved to a higher level with the Non-Aggression Pact which was signed on April 10, 1950. Consequences of that was the relations gradually improved with cooperation and agreements

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<sup>99</sup> Yeşilyurt, Nuri (2013). "Orta Doğu'yla İlişkiler", Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar, p. 416

<sup>100</sup> Akengin Hamza- Yaşar Ayşe (2018)'SYRIA-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF SYRIA'S GEOPOLITICAL POSITION' Journal of Süleyman Demirel University Institute of Social Sciences ,Number:32, p. 25-57

<sup>101</sup> Akengin Hamza- Yaşar Ayşe 'SYRIA-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF SYRIA'S GEOPOLITICAL POSITION' Journal of Süleyman Demirel University Institute of Social Sciences 2018 , p.26

<sup>102</sup> Okur, M. A. (2004). 'Fransız Manda Yönetimi Döneminde Suriye' Yılmaz, T., Şahin, M., (ed.). 'Ortadoğu Siyasetinde Suriye İçinde.' Ankara: Platin

<sup>103</sup> Akengin Hamza- Yaşar Ayşe 'SYRIA-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF SYRIA'S GEOPOLITICAL POSITION' Journal of Süleyman Demirel University Institute of Social Sciences 2018 , p.26

made in various periods which emerged as a natural result of the bipolar World conjecture during the Cold War. In addition to these the important events, political events and international interventions in the Middle East caused Syria and the USSR to converge.

In line with the principles and goals of the Eurasianism theory, Russia's longstanding relations with Syria, which have gradually increased in size, have certain reasons, especially stemming from Syria's geopolitical position. The most important of these reasons is the wish to reconstruct a bipolar system in the world where a unipolar system operated by the USA after the collapse of Russia's Soviet Union has previously been dominant. In this direction, the most important area in which Russia struggles with USA is the Middle East.<sup>104</sup>

This region witnessed the power struggle between the two countries during the Cold War period, where Soviet Union and USA tried to grab allies from the Middle East. Today, the most obvious example of the business struggle is taking place in Syria. It can be said that the main reasons why this struggle is happening in Syria today are the geopolitical importance of Syria and the Syrian civil war that started in 2011. The two countries are combating a proxy war with each other by supporting the opposing sides in the Syrian civil war.<sup>105</sup>

In addition to the importance of Syria being a Mediterranean coast country, in terms of geopolitics and regarding Russia's ideal of going down to warm seas for centuries, Syria is an important geopolitical power in the Mediterranean and gives Russia an opportunity to play a role in the Eastern Mediterranean Energy basin. Accordingly, Syria transferred a naval base to the Soviet Union in 1971 in the city of Tartus on the Mediterranean coast. The Bashar Al-Assad regime, on the other hand, gave Russia an air base in Latakia in 2015, which has increased its military presence in this base since 1971. This base, called Hmeymim airbase, became the second base that provided Russia with a movement area in the Middle East and the Mediterranean.<sup>106</sup>

One of the other paramount factors were the increase in the influence of the Ba'ath Party, which stood close to the USSR in terms of ideology and the doctrine on which it was built, in the administration of the country since 1945.<sup>107</sup>

Since 1949, the participation into the army of Ba'ath members have been encouraged in Syria.

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<sup>104</sup> Aghayev, Elvin, Katman, Filiz (2012) "Historical Background and the Present State of the Russian-Syrian Relations." p. 2066-2069

<sup>105</sup> Moraes, Victoria "Syrian Conflict: Proxy or Civil War?" URL: <https://impakter.com/syrian-conflict-proxy-or-civil-war/> September, 2020

<sup>106</sup> Wojtowicz, Tomasz, Barsznica, Izabela, Drag Kamil (2019) "The Influence of Russian Military Involvement in The War in Syria" p.85-99

<sup>107</sup> Kiraz, Sami (2016), "Bağımsızlıktan 21. Yüzyıla, Suriye-Rusya Siyasi İlişkileri

Since Eisenhower came to power in the USA in 1953, the idea of building a security structure in the orbit of the West in the Middle East to prevent the spread of Russian influence was born. In this regard, USA designed a security agreement to be made, firstly as Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and states like Syria could have been exposed to any Soviet attack or influence.

However, due to the increasing pressure from Egyptian President Abdul Nasser and the opposition to Israel's presence in the region, as abovementioned, Syria had not leaned towards the Pact of Baghdad pact and did not participate in it. In 1955, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and the UK joined this Pact, where the USA enjoyed observer status.<sup>108</sup>

Syria, which had come closer to the USSR due to the opposition of the Baghdad Pact, had therefore prepared the ground for the acceleration of the process of blocking in the Middle East.<sup>109</sup>

Another event that caused Syria and the USSR to converge is the Suez Crisis. The crisis, which started with the desire of the Egyptian President Abdul Nasser to nationalize the Suez Canal, deepened with the attack of Britain and France on Egypt.<sup>110</sup>

At this point, the USSR's stance in favor of the nationalization of the Suez Canal brought the USSR closer to Egypt and Syria. All this increased the ideological influence of the USSR in Egypt and Syria. It is noteworthy that since 1957, the influence of USSR-backed socialism in Syria started to increase.

It should not be overlooked that it is understood that the strategy followed by the USSR towards Syria during this period was twofold.<sup>111</sup> Tellingly, the USSR strengthening its hand by supporting those who sympathized with socialism in Syria, increased its military aid to the country. Then, on March 8, 1963 a group including officers who were members of the Ba'ath Party, carried out the a coup, which would later be known as the 'Ba'ath Revolution'.<sup>112</sup>

After the coup, the Ba'ath Party and especially its military base became the most important actor of the political life in Syria.<sup>113</sup>

Baath Syria, which has assumed a Pan-Arab nationalist, socialist and secular character since 1963, has become an important power affecting the Middle East region.

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<sup>108</sup> Check the NATO-TURKEY part for more detailed informaiton.

<sup>109</sup> Aghayev, Elvin , Katman, Filiz (2012) " Historical Background and the Present State of the Russian-Syrian Relations." p. 2066-2069

<sup>110</sup> Voinea, A. Ioana e-International Relations URL: <https://www.e-ir.info/2011/07/27/examining-the-1956-suez-crisis/>

<sup>111</sup> Baş, Arda " 1957 Suriye Krizi ve Türkiye", History Studies. 4-1 p. 89-109

<sup>112</sup> Isaac, Steven " "The Ba'th of Syria and Iraq" The Encyclopedia of Protest and Revolution URL: <http://www.longwood.edu/staff/isaacs/Ba'th%20Excerpt.pdf>

<sup>113</sup> Şatlık, Amanov, (2004) "Hafız Esad Dönemi Suriye Dış Politikası"

Although the Ba'ath Party established close ties with the USSR, the rapid development of relations between the two countries coincided with Hafez Al-Assad coming to power in 1970. Another event that influenced the development of Syrian-USSR relations was the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The Soviet Union perceived this war not as a territorial dispute between Arabs and Jews, but as augmenting American power in the region with its alliance to Israel.

According to the Soviet Union, this intervention was made to prevent and suppress the Arab peoples' national independence movements. Moreover, the Soviet Union elaborated on conspiracy theories as a manifestation of the USA's desire to overthrow anti-Western regimes in Egypt and Syria.

Henceforth, the Soviet Union declared on June 10, 1967 that it had severed diplomatic relations with Israel. In addition to that, the Soviet Union mediated the ceasefire with the USA on June 10 and prevented Israeli invasion which could have advanced all the way to Damascus. After the war, the Soviet Union provided a force consultancy assistance with the demands of Egypt and Syria.<sup>114</sup>

Historically speaking, Hafez al-Assad was aware of the fact that Syria would gain multidimensional advantages with a foreign policy initiative towards Arab regimes and the Soviet Union in his first years of power. In this context, Hafez al-Assad gave the impression that he would make a foreign policy preference close to the Soviet Union, which is an unwavering support to an anti-West mentality by making the first foreign visit to the Soviet Union in 1971. The friendship established between Syria and the USSR continued in the following years. During the years of the Cold War, the base in the port of Tartus on the Mediterranean coast was given to the Soviet navy with the agreement signed between the Soviet Union and Syria in 1971. The Soviet Union installed its naval military base in Tartus, according to an agreement with the Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad, giving the Soviet Union a constant presence in this vital region.<sup>115</sup>

The settlement of the USSR on the Tartus base in Syria can be regarded as a symbol showing Moscow's permanence in the Middle East and the Mediterranean because the Tartus naval base has a very significant location which provides the entrance of Russian naval forces to reach the open seas from the Mediterranean via the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits from the Black

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<sup>114</sup> Dosbolov, Abzal, "Arap-İsrail Sorununda Rusya Federasyonu'nun Rolü", *Journal of Barış Araştırmaları ve Çatışma Çözümleri*

<sup>115</sup> Lund, Aron, (2019) "From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations", *The Swedish Institute of International Affairs* p. 6-10

Sea.<sup>116</sup> Hafez Al-Assad's diplomatic visit to Moscow involved an Arms Deal worth 700 million dollars which was signed between the two countries.<sup>117</sup> Parallel to this, in the Arab-Israeli War that reappeared in 1973, just like in 1967, the Soviet Union provided arms and diplomatic aid to Syria. In 1980, a 20-year Friendship and Cooperation Agreement was signed between the two countries. With this agreement, the Soviet Union became the guarantor of Syria, and Syria displayed a satellite state image. Thus, the two allies signaled that they developed close relations with each other in all kinds of problems they encountered in the international arena and that this would continue. Attaching importance to partnership in the nuclear field, these two countries signed an agreement involving nuclear cooperation in 1983.<sup>118</sup>

However, with the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in the USSR in March 1985, Syria and the USSR, which had developed very close relations until the mid-1980s, began to deteriorate their relationship.

Nevertheless, Gorbachev stated in 1986 that they would fulfill their commitment to provide military equipment to Syria, and put pressure on Syria to provide and support Soviet interests in the Middle East in return for military assistance. This new foreign policy approach of the Soviet Union towards Syria, though, caused Syria to balance the USSR with other alternatives in foreign policy, to diversify its foreign policy by taking advantage of the balance of power, and to fill the vacant place with other countries.<sup>119</sup>

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Syrian-Russian relations also deteriorated. The collapse of the Union had caused Syria to lose its strongest ally and patron in the international arena. The first manifestation of Syria's pragmatic and multifaceted foreign policy approach after the collapse of the Soviet Union is evident in its attitude during the 1st Gulf War in 1991. The operation launched by the US-led coalition forces against Iraq in the middle of January 1991 gave Syria the opportunity to stand by the US. The fact that Hafez Al-Assad joined the coalition troops while trying to convince Saddam Hussein to withdraw from Kuwait, scholars argue, proves that Syria followed the idea of pursuing a pragmatic policy in this case.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Deniz, Taskin (2013) "Suriye'nin Durumu, ABD-Rusya ve Türkiye'nin Tutumu, Journal of Marmara Coğrafyası, 27. p. 314-332

<sup>117</sup> Özel, M. Suna (2012) "Rusya'nın Sıcak Denizlerdeki Son Kalesi: Suriye"

<sup>118</sup> Çalışkan, Burak (2016) "Rusya-Suriye İlişkileri ve Ortadoğu Krizlerine Etkisi" İstanbul İHH İnsani ve Sosyal Araştırmalar Merkezi

<sup>119</sup> Kiraz, Sami (2016), "Bağımsızlıktan 21. Yüzyıla, Suriye-Rusya Siyasi İlişkileri

<sup>120</sup> Mercan, H. Muhammed (2012) "Suriye: Rejim ve Dış Politika"

The new born Russia continued its withdrawal policy in the Middle East until the late 1990s. However, it can be said that this foreign policy started to change when Yevgeny Primakov became foreign minister and later prime minister in 1996. Russia's interest in the Middle East started to increase again in the 2000s. With Vladimir Putin taking the head of the country in 1999, a period came where Russia started to follow an active policy in economy and international politics and started again.

From this period onwards, the aim of Russia is to be a state having a say in the regional and international arena. After Hafez Al-Assad's death, his son Bashar Al-Assad, who succeeded him in 2000, was presented a different impression than his father. Bashar Al-Assad, as a British educated dentist, had a more secular and reformist image. His wife, Asma Al-Assad, the eldest child and only daughter of a Syrian cardiologist father and Syrian diplomat mother, was born into the upper echelons of London society in 1975. It can be said that the expectations of a coming democratic regime were very high at the time because of the image of the couple. However, the changing political dimensions, especially with the process that started with the invasion of Iraq, the problems Syria faced with Western countries, especially the USA, and the USA's invasion to Iraq and Afghanistan, Damascus found itself in a surrounded situation. Hencefort, Bashar Al-Assad's unwillingness to respond to the increasing expectations in the country, caused an increasing internal opposition. The political discourse of Western countries to support the internal opposition increased this uneasiness. The issue that needs to be underlined in this respect is that the settled trauma of the invasion of Iraq and Syria's fragile situation with its national integrity under threat, caused the Assad administration to turn to Russia, where relations are already good. As the target of the Eurasianism geopolitical theory, which is basically followed by Russia, is trying to eliminate the Atlanticist bloc represented by USA in many regions of the world, put an end to the unipolar world discourse and bring a system in which Russia itself is one of the most important powers that can change the dynamics and be one of the most important actors in the East.<sup>121</sup> Syrian-Russian relations, which have been very close since the independence of Syria, have turned into a full alliance relationship since 2011. Due to the great advantages provided by Syria's geopolitical location, this ongoing bilateral relationship seems to continue in further dimensions in the time coming.

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<sup>121</sup> Akengin Hamza- Yaşar Ayşe (2018) 'Syria-Russia Relations in the Context of Syria's Geopolitical Position' Journal of Süleyman Demirel University Institute of Social Sciences 2018 , p.36-42



### 3.THE ‘‘ARAB SPRING’’ IN SYRIA AND THE EXTERNAL FACTORS

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The Arab uprisings that started in Tunisia in 2010, referred to as the "Arab Spring" in the literature, have profoundly transformed Turkish foreign policy, including the Middle East policy. With the uprisings, authoritarian regimes of Arab countries, which lasted for 80 years, were destroyed one by one with the domino effect. The Arab Spring, which spread to most of the countries in North Africa, started to affect the Middle Eastern countries in a short time. One of these affected countries is Syria. Initially, the uprisings were evaluated as a product of democratization. The entrenched reasons are the country being trapped in a single party state, interweaved powers of military and government, high level of corruption and human rights violations on a massive scale. This is why the uprising movements were described as the ‘‘Arab Spring’’. However, the aftermath of the collapse of the regimes after the uprisings did not bring democracy, but a coup on Egypt, and a civil war in Libya and Syria. The Arab Spring spread to Syria in 2011. The beginning of the Arab Spring process in Syria was not much different than in other countries, but unlike Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has accomplished to protect his regime and existence, even if the riots turned into a civil war. The Syrian crisis has caused Turkish foreign policy, which has been focused on soft power since 2003, to turn into a hard power because with the start of the civil war, due to the emergence of security threats against Turkey, the government was obliged to follow necessarily hard power-oriented policies.

In Deraa, Syria, in March 2011, protests started with demonstrations against the regime, open writings on public walls criticizing the governments and several young people were arrested. These protests embraced the opponents of the Assad regime, and the opponents, encouraged by the Arab Spring incidents, spread the protests to other cities. The opponents, who declared March 15th as a "day of anger", organized large-scale demonstrations in many cities across the country on this date. On March 18th, the biggest protests in the last 30 years in the history of Syria took place in many cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia, Hama, Homs and Banyas, and several demonstrators were killed by the Syrian Army forces who intervened in the movements.

The next day, clashes took place at the funerals of the deceased and thus the Arab Spring fuse was ignited in Syria. The Bashar Al-Assad regime did not take the protests seriously when the events started and described the protesters as ‘puppet terrorists’ of the imperialist powers.<sup>122</sup> In

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<sup>122</sup> Polat Ş. Doğan, (2016) ‘‘Arap Baharı ve Suriye Savaşı’’, ‘‘ Uluslararası Politikada Suriye Krizi’’ p.142

the early stages of the protests, the regime forces crushed the demonstrations in Deraa and the resulting reactions increased the risk of spreading the crisis. However, there was no diplomatic glitch between Turkey and Syria at this point, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan had shared with the Turkish media that he carried out his dialogue with Assad himself. Even though Erdogan particularly underlined the reform issues that should be taken into consideration in the dialogs, Turkey, in the beginning, had stood away from taking a position against the Assad regime despite the ongoing conflict in Syria.<sup>123</sup> As the death toll increased and started to deteriorate, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu paid an official visit to Damascus in April 2011 for a 'reform-themed' diplomatic meeting. Davutoğlu had stated that the reason for having a diplomatic visit to Syria was not to interfere with the internal affairs of Syria, but to share the recommendations of a friendly country. After the meeting, Davutoğlu made a statement about the Arab Spring process and stated that the states cannot survive with the arrogance of a "nothing will happen to me" mentality.<sup>124</sup> The period up until June 2011, was spent with Ankara's efforts to persuade Assad's regime to reform.

In the early period of the uprisings Turkey believed that its influential role on Damascus and the close ties with the Assad regime would be helpful to push Assad to make the necessary reforms. Further, Turkey was considered as giving the benefits of doubt to the Syrian regime and sent some technical delegations until the late April, and several long meetings were held with Syria under the force of the Foreign Ministry of Turkey. The Turkish Prime Minister, right after the uprisings emerged, declared that he personally had been warning Assad to make reforms including the abolishment of the emergency law, release of all political prisoners, a new election law and permission to create political parties. However, according to scholars, the expectations of the Turkish government to change the destiny of uprisings by giving some warnings and trusting on the allied relations with Assad regime, could have been seen as naive and optimistic.<sup>125</sup>

When the movements reached serious proportions, various reforms were made by the Assad regime in order to calm the protests. In this context, a law was passed, which reduced the duration of military service from 21 months to 18 months. At the request of the public, the governor of Deraa, who intervened strongly in the movements, was dismissed, partial amnesty

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<sup>123</sup> Stein, Aaron (2014) 'IV. Stumbling in Iraq and Syria, 2011–14', Whitehall Papers, 83:1, p.62.

<sup>124</sup> "Ankara'nın Şam mesajı: Reformlara öncülük edin" (08.04.2011) URL:

<https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/ankara-nin-sam-mesaji-reformlara-onculuk-edin-17492212>

<sup>125</sup> Salık, Nuri "Pragmatism in Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar al-Assad and the Future of Turkish-Syrian Relations", Ortadoğu Analiz, 3: 35, 2011, p. 30

was accepted, including a number of types of crime, and it was announced that there would be a change in management staff. In addition to that, the most important step was that the state of emergency applied in 1963 would be lifted and a new constitution would be made. Taking decisions such as using effective mechanisms to combat corruption, making regulations on the law on political parties, and preventing arbitrary arrests were also steps taken in this direction. In order to calm the events, 260 prisoners were released and Kurds, who had not been granted citizenship for years, were granted citizenship. Bashar Al-Assad appointed a commission to examine the situation of 300,000 Kurdish people who had been without identity cards for half a century. After that, he came together with Kurdish tribes in Hasakah. Kaynak ekle!

However, the steps taken by Bashar Al-Assad were not found sincere and sufficient by the opponents and they were not enough to calm the events. When Assad announced the highly anticipated reform package on June 20, 2011, it announced that the reforms would come into effect in September the same year. In Turkey, a reaction to the package's failure occurred. Erşat Hürmüzlü, chief advisor to former President Abdullah Gül, emphasized that the reforms should not be spread over time, but should be implemented immediately. Even though Prime Minister Erdoğan had stated that the new reform package contained some important material, he also underlined that Turkey had not been satisfied by the report which did not include constitutional regulations and laws allowing for the creation of new political parties. Assad's circle had interpreted the international pressure as a tactic to rise the tension between of the regime and opponents, even though the administration had passed new laws in order to calm the revolts. Turkey's name was not mentioned in the comment but was implied. As response to that comment from Assad, Prime Minister Erdoğan had made a statement which caused deteriorated relations in further days, between Turkey and Syria, stating that "*Syrian administration has begun a black propaganda against Turkey, we no longer have confidence in the Syrian administration, I am in a position to cut off talks with the current Syrian administration.*"<sup>126</sup>

While the bilateral bickering was continuing amid the two countries, Assad gave an interview to the Arab Press in 2011, lashing out against Turkey's criticism of his regime, saying, "*some in Turkey are still clinging to the dream of reinstating the Ottoman Empire.*"',

Adding "*Know that this dream is impossible, so they are trying to exploit parties with a religious agenda to expand their influence on the Arab world.*"<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Anderson, Tim, (2015) "Syria: Bashar al Assad and Political Reform" URL:

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/298215369\\_Syria\\_Bashar\\_al\\_Assad\\_and\\_Political\\_Reform](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/298215369_Syria_Bashar_al_Assad_and_Political_Reform)

<sup>127</sup> "Assad: Turkey seeking to recapture imperial days" URL: <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4153293,00.html>

As the numerous attempts of the Turkish government did not come to fruition, Ankara shifted its attitude towards the Assad regime. Respectively from almost all administrative officials, varied declarations were reached against the force usage of Bashar al-Assad on Syrian citizens. Henceforth, it was understood that Turkey's quest for a diplomatic solution was not enough to change the attitude of Assad. Thus, the relationship between Turkey and Syria, growing nearly eight years of friendly relations since 2003, turned out not to be sufficient influence the Assad regime. Whereas, Turkey had planned to control the Arab Spring process in order to be a model.<sup>128</sup> However, due to the Assad regime's policies that led to the civil war, the so-called friendship between Syria and Turkey was seemingly over.<sup>129</sup>

Thus, upon the fruitless attempts of Turkey to influence the Assad regime, Turkish foreign policy began gradually to change in favor of the Syrian opposition.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, one of the first signals of diplomatic estrangement between Turkey and Syria was to begin with the established contact with Syrian opposition groups in the second quarter of 2011. The first step to the deterioration of the relations, was the conference organized by Syrian opponents in Antalya.<sup>131</sup> A conference inviting the representatives of opposition groups were hosted in Antalya by AK Party and some important figures such as the members of Syrian Muslim Brotherhood organized visits and held conferences in Istanbul. In the last speeches of Riyad Şakfa, Muslim Brotherhood General Secretary, he clearly argued that the priority on a possible intervention to Syria should be given to Turkey.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, the resistance group Syrian National Council was also formed in Istanbul in early October 2011, and were welcomed by Turkey. On the Turkish side of the coin, the major aim of its support especially the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood could be elaborated by looking at the other dynamics including the religious propinquity of AK Party and SMB. On the one side, the existence of a government ruled by or at least shared with a Sunni Islamist movement in Syria was beneficial because of their similar philosophy, but on the other hand it was seen that it would be advantageous and

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<sup>128</sup> “TURKEY’S ROLE IN THE ARAB SPRING AND THE SYRIAN CONFLICT” 2017 URL:

[http://turkishpolicy.com/article/844/turkeys-role-in-the-arab-spring-and-the-syrian-conflict#\\_ftn10](http://turkishpolicy.com/article/844/turkeys-role-in-the-arab-spring-and-the-syrian-conflict#_ftn10)

<sup>129</sup> Demirtaş, Birgül (2013). “Turkish–Syrian Relations: From Friend ‘Esad’ to Enemy ‘Esed’”, Middle East Policy, 20: p.111–120.

<sup>130</sup> OKTAV Özden Zeynep (2013). “The Syrian Uprisings and the Iran-Turkey- Syria Quasi Alliance: A View from Turkey”, Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity, (Ed.) Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür England: Ashgate Pres

<sup>131</sup> “Model Türkiye” (2011) URL: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/model-turkiye-17923840>

<sup>132</sup> Zaman, “Müslüman Kardeşler Genel Sekreteri Şakfa: Suriye krizini ancak Türkiye çözebilir”, 16 March 2012, URL: <http://www.zaman.com.tr/haber.do?haberno=1259425&title=musluman-kardesler-genel-sekreteri-sakfa-suriye-krizini-ancak-turkiye-cozebilir>

helpful for AKP to consolidate its influence and power in Middle East and the North Africa region.<sup>133</sup>

From 2012, Turkey had leaned towards a regime change policy in Syria and began to contribute to the establishment of the Sunni led-Free Syrian Army against Assad.<sup>134</sup> Especially when Turkish F-4 Phantom reconnaissance jet was intercepted and shot down by the Syrian Army in international airspace in 2012, Turkey changed the rules of engagement against Syria and officially began its hard power politics. After the incident of 3-4 Syrian artillery shells landing in Akcakale, a Turkish border town, Turkey fired on Syrian government targets in response to the shelling.<sup>135</sup> Thus, Turkey's Syria policy as well as being driven by hard power, now included to use of military vehicles. In this context, the soft power of Turkey's Syria policy between 2003- 2011, with the liberal win-win strategy being adopted during this period, from 2012 carried out a strategic realism that demoted to the military vehicles.<sup>136</sup> In light of these events, Turkey established its policy of overthrowing the Assad regime together with its ally USA. As Turkey boosted support for the opposition forces in Syria, AK Party grew frustrated with the Obama administration's reluctance to take more decisive measures to overthrow the Assad regime. In line with the new US foreign policy (Obama Doctrine), the Obama administration supported the development of regional initiatives and prioritized diplomatic efforts on Syria contrary to global expectations in regards to previous attitudes of USA.<sup>137</sup>

But worthy noting, the USA policy on Syria was directly related to Israel's security concerns, beyond its own interests. The fear of an anti-Israel conservative regime in Syria had been effective in the US's policy of not wanting to overthrow the Assad regime.<sup>138</sup> In this regard, USA had agreed with Russia at the point of destruction of chemical weapons in Syria. Even though the new policy of USA was quite passive towards the Arab Spring, the chemical weapons in Syria, which the Obama administration considered as a red line, were destroyed as a result of bargaining with Russia, and Syria's threat to Israel was eliminated.<sup>139</sup> Scholar Muharrem Ekşi argues that the rapprochement of Russia and USA in this context was a bargain

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<sup>133</sup> Aras, Damla "The Syrian Uprising: Turkish Syrian Relations Go Downhill", *Middle East Quarterly*, p. 9: 2, 2012

<sup>134</sup> Özcan Gencer (2017). "Rusya'nın Suriye Bunalımına Müdahalesi ve Türkiye", Gencer Özcan, Evren Balta, Burç Beşgül (Der.), *Türkiye Rusya İlişki- lerinde Değişen Dinamikler: Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, pp. 269-297.

<sup>135</sup> URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18554246>

<sup>136</sup> Oğuzlu, Tarık (2007). "Soft Power in Turkish Foreign Policy", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, LXI (1): p.81-97

<sup>137</sup> "Obama's Syria legacy: Measured diplomacy, strategic explosion" URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38297343>

<sup>138</sup> Çalışkan, Burak "Uluslararası Güçlerin Suriye Politikası", *İnsamer*, p.5

<sup>139</sup> Uzgel, İlhan (2017). "Suriye'de ABD-Rusya Uzlaşması", *Gazeteduvar*,

that chemical weapons were to be destroyed in return for Assad's stay.<sup>140</sup> Therefore, it was no longer necessary for the USA to overthrow Assad's regime. Among the allegations, there are arguments that the US, in return for Assad's stay, severed the military settlement concession from Russia through the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Union (YPG).<sup>141</sup> As a result of this change in US policy, Turkey's issue was not only being left alone in the overthrowing of Assad, but also Turkey was confronted with the PYD/YPG, an extension of the PKK which is recognized as a terrorist group both by Turkey and USA.<sup>142</sup>

But this is not the case, according to Colin Kahl, deputy assistant to former US president Barack Obama and national security adviser to former US vice president Joe Biden. Kahl argues in his article called "Foreign Policy" that he accompanied Joe Biden in the visit to Turkey in 2014 and that USA had offered to carry out an operation to the Northern Syria against DAESH. The offer was accepted by Davutoğlu but it was dropped by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. According to Kahl, Turkey's refuse to go into Syria to fight against DAESH led the USA to work with YPG.<sup>143</sup> With all due respect to scholars, it would not be wrong to say that Turkey's priority shifted from supporting a regime change in Syria to prevent the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish area in Syria.

In this new process, where Turkey's quest for hegemony in the Middle East was previously supported by USA, with the Syrian crisis still going on and Turkish- American relations coming to a halt, Saudi Arabia and Iran started to fill USA's space. In this context, competition for hegemony started between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, in the Syrian crisis, had cooperated with Turkey until 2016, but in the time to follow, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have begun to take place in different blocks. This situation has led to a rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Turkey. In particular, it brought the two countries face to face in the Qatar crisis. Qatar was accused by Saudi Arabia of *"assisting and hosting Iran-backed terrorist groups in Middle East"*. However, Qatar's close stance with Iran against Saudi Arabia politics and Turkey's initial support to Iran and Qatar has worsened the relation.<sup>144</sup> (Contemporary

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<sup>140</sup> Ekşi, Muharrem (2018) "Türk Dış Politikasının Ultimo Ratiosu: Yumuşak Güçten Sert Güce Türkiye'nin Suriye Politikası, p.85-86

<sup>141</sup> Ekşi, Muharrem "Türk Dış Politikasının Ultimo Ratiosu: Yumuşak Güçten Sert Güce Türkiye'nin Suriye Politikası", Karadeniz Araştırmaları, XV/60: 71-99. p.85

<sup>142</sup> Russia is one of the few countries who did not acknowledge PKK as a terrorist organization. Along with China, India, and Egypt.

<sup>143</sup> "5 soruda YPG'nin ABD ve Rusya ile ilişkisi" URL: <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-39937178>

<sup>144</sup> Ekşi, Muharrem, "Türk Dış Politikasının Ultimo Ratiosu: Yumuşak Güçten, Sert Güce, Türkiye'nin Suriye Politikası" 2018, p 86



speaking, the relation between Saudi Arabia and Turkey got worse due to the mysterious death of Saudi origin, journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabic consulate in Istanbul in 2018<sup>145</sup>)

By the agency of the abovementioned historical articulations and the efforts on building cooperative and strategic relations with Syria, it would not be wrong to say that the Arab Spring has left Turkey in between pursuing its premeditative zero problem strategy to its neighbors (becoming regional a major power) and being a ‘‘an errand boy’’ by obeying to USA within the frame of adhering to 'US rules'. So far, Turkey has chosen to stand up for its own interests and outlined the importance of its integral security tirelessly. Consequently, the dilemma of Turkey created by the Arab Spring, has worked against the tinkered relations between Syria and Turkey. In this new picture, the borders are redefined and the ancient ‘‘distance’’ between the two countries has resurrected.

## THE INVOLVED MILITIAS

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### FREE SYRIAN ARMY

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As the uprisings in Syria turned into a civil war, the officers who abandoned the army against the regime's attitude towards the people and formed the first opposition group in the country with the name of the Free Syrian Army with Riyadh al-Assad as its leader, who was resigned while serving as a colonel in the Syrian Army, the FSA has been positioned as the legitimate military wing of the opposition in the country's civil war.<sup>146</sup>

The FSA, representing the opposition, could not create a homogeneous and controllable structure, and as a result, many independent groups emerged in the opposition ranks. The group contains many different factions such as Hazm Hareketi, Ceyşu'l-Mücahidîn and 5<sup>th</sup> Corps.<sup>147</sup> The common aim of all the associations was to overthrow the Assad regime. In addition to the support of Russia and Iran came the arrival of Shia foreign fighters to Syria to fight on the side of Assad and the sectarian dynamics in the nature of the conflict started to gain weight due to the Sunni origin of FSA. Consequently, FSA, originating from Idlib and consisting of 11 groups, 30 groups included, gained under the name of " The National Liberation Front ‘‘

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<sup>145</sup> URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45812399>

<sup>146</sup> ‘‘Guide to the Syrian rebels’’ URL:<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>

<sup>147</sup> Yüksel, Engin (2019)‘‘Strategies of Turkey proxy warfare in Northern Syria’’  
URL: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2019/strategies-of-turkish-proxy-warfare-in-northern-syria/>

associating with the Syrian National Army, was created.<sup>148</sup> Syrian National Army had accompanied to Turkey's in three cross-border operations in Syria.

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THE DEMOCRATCC UNION PARTY (KURDISH: PARTIYA YEKÎTIYA DEMOKRAT (PYD) - PEOPLE'S PROTECTION UNITS (YPG)

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The Syrian Kurds, historically ignored by the Assad regime and subjected to economic and political classifications, are grouped under the The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Defense Units (YPG). The PYD is the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)<sup>149</sup>, a group mixed of Turks and Kurds that has been fighting Turkey since 1984 and has been on USA's terrorism list. The idea of PYD was established at the time Öcalan was living in Syria. As abovementioned, Syria had deported him according to the Adana Accord.

Syrian Kurds densely live in the cities of Jazira, Kobane and Afrin, which lie along the Northern Syria line, which are demographically disconnected from each other. The PYD has adopted a strategy expressed as the third way in the uprisings in Syria and the civil war that followed. The PYD stated that the current conflicts took place among Arabs and that it was a religious-sectarian struggle; it argued that they should not be directly involved in this conflict.<sup>150</sup> However (with the questionable withdrawn of Syrian Regime forces from several parts of northern Syria), based on the idea that the civil war in Syria will deepen over time and the central authority will weaken following this, they have taken steps to establish their own administrative, political, economic and security systems in the regions where the Kurdish population is densely populated.<sup>151</sup> In addition to not entering into conflict with the Assad regime, PYD had not provided support to the Free Syrian Army which was fighting against the Syrian regime, and aimed instead develop and consolidate its own domination area where it was active. PYD troops built autonomous cantons on the basis of the understanding of "democratic autonomy" in order to strengthen the infrastructure of the regions they seized. In

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<sup>148</sup> "Free Syrian Army Transforms into Syrian National Army" URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/free-syrian-army-transforms-into-syrian-national-army/1607384>

<sup>149</sup> Barfi, Barak (2016) "Ascent of the PYD and the SDF", "The Washington Institute for Near East Policy" Research Notes, p.2

<sup>150</sup> Trichilo, Giorgio "How did we get here?: A short history of Syrian Kurds in Rojava"

URL: <https://www.brusselstimes.com/news-contents/world/145319/iran-summons-french-german-ambassadors-following-condemnation-of-execution/>

<sup>151</sup> Kerman, İbrahim-Efegil Ertan "Analysis of Civil War Strategy of Terrorist Organization of PKK/PYD in Syria" p. 169,170



other words, regional legislative, executive and judicial bodies have been systematically established in the cities of Afrin, Kobane and Jazira which has very important oil deposits.<sup>152</sup> Viewing the PYD as a PKK extension, Turkey has been alarmed by the post trauma of terrorism in 2012 the PYD quickly the PYD began asserting its control in northern Syria, to which Recep Tayyip Erdogan responded, “*We will never allow a terrorist group to establish camps in northern Syria and threaten Turkey*’”.<sup>153</sup> Turkey has tried to convince USA that the PKK and PYD are two sides of the same coin. But USA has not taken this argument into consideration.

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#### IRAN BACKED HEZBOLLAH AND PRO-ASSAD MILITIAS

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The other important actor of the Syrian regime's survival process was Iran and Iran-backed Hezbollah. As different from the its neighboring countries, Iran owns up the issue of Palestine and has anti-Israel-US rhetoric. Syria is a very important ally for Iran in order to provide the assistance to Lebanon-Hezbollah which combats against Israel in Lebanon; additionally, the two countries have close ties in the Shi'a sectarian wise. Therefore, a possible regime change in Syria would mean Iran losing both its most important ally in the region and losing its connection with Hezbollah through Syria. For these reasons, unlike its attitude towards the uprisings in other Arab countries, Iran found the opponents unjustified and made an effort to keep the regime in power.<sup>154</sup> The political interests were primary and soft power terms were implemented by Iran in order to prevent the influence of USA in Syria.<sup>155</sup>

Iran and Syria, which did not have relations in the period before the Iranian revolution, became closer after this date as a result of the solidarity shown in the face of regional problems. The Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982 took the relations between of the two countries to another dimension.<sup>156</sup> At this point, the Assad regime provided a possibility to Lebanese Shiites to reach Iran. Relations between Syria and Iran have been strengthened through this structure, especially with Hezbollah led by Iran, gaining effectiveness in Lebanon.<sup>157</sup>

Hezbollah, was established with the aim of saving Lebanon from Israeli occupation. According to Hezbollah, Israel is an illegitimate state established on occupied territories. According to the

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<sup>152</sup> Kerman, İbrahim-Efegil Ertan “ Analysis of Civil War Strategy of Terrorist Organization of PKK/PYD in Syria p 167

<sup>153</sup> “Kurdish Worries Drag Turkey Deeper into Syria War,” Ekurd Daily, July 27, 2012, URL: <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/7/turkey4049.htm>

<sup>154</sup> Kazdal, Melih “ İran'ın Arap Baharı Sonrası Suriye Politikasını Anlamak” 2018, p. 6-10

<sup>155</sup> Batrawi, Samar, “Pandora's Box in Syria”, “ Anticipating negative externalities of a re-entrenching regime” URL: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2020/pandoras-box-in-syria/1-the-nature-of-the-syrian-regime/>

<sup>156</sup> Çalışkan, Burak “Uluslararası Güçlerin Suriye Politikası”, INSANMER, 2016, p. 13

<sup>157</sup> Mariano V. Ospina, “Syria, Iran and Hizbullah : A Strategic Alliance”, Global Security Studies, 2014

US Treasury Department, Hezbollah has been training regime forces in Syria since the beginning of 2011.<sup>158</sup> Expressing that Hezbollah will fight alongside Assad and will not allow Syria to "fall into the hands of the USA, Israel and radical jihadists", Hasan Nasrallah (the General Secretary of Hezbollah) added: "The existence of the Shiites is in danger."<sup>159</sup> In addition, Nasrallah used the expression "backbone" for Syria in his statement where he admitted that they were fighting alongside the Assad regime in Syria.<sup>160</sup> Because without Syria because Iran's support to Hezbollah will be harder and more risky.<sup>161</sup> Without this assistance, Hezbollah's own military capacity would be more isolated. A possible regime change in Syria is another factor that worries Hezbollah. Due to the unclearness who will come to power after the potential fall of the Assad regime and the opposition's anti-Iran and anti-Hezbollah rhetoric, Hezbollah does not feel assured that after a possible regime change, Syria's assistance will continue. The worst case scenario for the organization is the seizure of power in Syria by the groups that they describe as "Sunni extremists".

Ceyş'uş-Şa'bi , Asaib Ehli'l-Hak Örgütü, Liva Ebu'l-Fadl Abbas (LEFA), Ketâibü Seyyid eş-Şüheda (KSSŞ), Liva el-Zulfikar, Liva Ammar İbn Yasir, Bedir Tugayları, Kuvvet Şehid Muhammed Bakır es-Sadr are some of the Shia origin external militias who backed the Syrian Regime.

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DAESH (ISIS)<sup>162</sup>

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Historically speaking, scholars argue that the rising of radical Salafist<sup>163</sup> Jihadist<sup>164</sup> organizations is related to the unending invasions to Middle East. The settled trauma of the regions' people started with the Soviet invasion to Afghanistan lasting through 10 years of

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<sup>158</sup> "Treasury Designates Hizballah Leadership" US Department of the Treasury

URL: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1709.aspx>

<sup>159</sup> Kazdal, Melih, " Hizbullah'ın Suriye Savaşı" 2018, URL: [https://insamer.com/tr/hizbullahin-suriye-savasi\\_1824.html](https://insamer.com/tr/hizbullahin-suriye-savasi_1824.html)

<sup>160</sup> "Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's speech on Syria", 25 Mayıs 2013, URL:

<http://www.voltairenet.org/article178691.html>,

<sup>161</sup> Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria",p. 9-10.

<sup>162</sup> **Foreign Minister of France, Laurent Fabius** called on the World for the sake of fair political discourse in 2014 that " *This is a terrorist group and not a state,* " , " *I do not recommend using the term **Islamic State** because it blurs the lines between Islam, Muslims and Islamists. The Arabs call it 'Daesh' and I will be calling them the 'Daesh cutthroats.'* "

<sup>163</sup> URL : [https://www.ide.go.jp/library/Japanese/Publish/Download/Seisaku/pdf/201307\\_mide\\_08.pdf](https://www.ide.go.jp/library/Japanese/Publish/Download/Seisaku/pdf/201307_mide_08.pdf)

<sup>164</sup> URL: <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/salafi-jihad-religious-ideology>

resistance, and continued with the First Gulf War led by USA, Britain and Saudi Arabia.<sup>165</sup> The ideological existence of the organization dates back to 2006.<sup>166</sup>

In a nutshell, scholars argue that; the potentially grave consequences of the Abu Ghraib torture and prisoner abuse<sup>167</sup> was not taken seriously by USA, and additionally, the nature and sectarian differences of the region's inhabitants had not been correctly read and once the wars were over, the things left behind in Afghanistan and Iraq was a severe hatred towards great powers of the Era, such as Soviet Union, US plus a variety of sectarian power games. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi played a very critical role in this frame. Zarqawi was very close to the Pioneer of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden whom USA had accused of being responsible for the 9/11 attack. There was only one major difference between Bin Laden and Zarqawi, namely that while Osama Bin Laden in addition to an anti-West/USA rhetoric was the supporter of gathering all Muslims under the same roof, Zarqawi did not include Shi'a Muslims in this picture.<sup>168</sup> It can be understood from the missive Zarqawi had written to Osama bin Laden in 2004 describing how to attack Shi'a Muslims in Iraq.<sup>169</sup>

As of 2004, based on this major difference between them, Zarqawi declared himself as the 'emir'<sup>170</sup> of the Al-Qaida. The group had used a different way to provoke the West, and USA in particular, than before; They had uploaded and shared of beheaded USA soldiers and journalists in social media. This way of having attention is inherited to DAESH from Al-Qaida. The followers of al-Zarqawi, along with new fighters from both inside and outside Iraq and Syria broke out from Al-Qaida and funded the new organization named the 'Islamic State of Iraq' in 2006.<sup>171</sup> (It is preferred to use the Arabic original name 'DAESH' in this study) DAESH, as an extension of the Al-Qaida, is a unique example of a contemporary analysis of the Salafist jihadist organizations in the Middle East.

As of the beginning of 2014, when DAESH captured Mosul and declared the 'Islamic State' as the Caliphate and Raqqa as the capital of the caliphate, international Coalition Forces were

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<sup>165</sup> Gürçan, C. Efe, 'Arap Baharı Sonrası Uluslararası Güvenlik: Suriye ve Libya Çatışmalarının Yurtiçi ve Uluslararası Kaynakları (2011-2020)' 2020, p.71

<sup>166</sup> URL: <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-50434154>

<sup>167</sup> URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/30/world/meast/iraq-prison-abuse-scandal-fast-facts/index.html>

<sup>168</sup> 'Understanding Zarqawi' URL: <http://www.jihadica.com/category/islamic-state/>

<sup>169</sup> 'Zarqawi Letter' URL: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm> US, Department of States

<sup>170</sup> Originally simply meaning "commander", it came to be used as a title of leaders, governors, or rulers of smaller states. In modern Arabic the word is analogous to the title "Prince".

<sup>171</sup> 'Abu Musab al-Zarqawi is the man who founded ISIS' URL : <https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/11/who-founded-isis-abu-musab-al-zarqawi-started-the-terror-group.html>

formed to fight radical terrorism. With DAESH's attack on Kobane, the PYD has become an important local force in the fight against the DAESH threat. At the beginning of 2014, when DAESH started to seize the regions formerly under the control of the YPG, the resulting conflicts occurred between DAESH and the YPG.<sup>172</sup>

The strategic reason for DAESH to have Kobane as its primary target was to seize the Jazira region, because the capture of the Jazira region meant taking control of the most important oil wells in Syria.<sup>173</sup> US airstrikes helped the YPG dislodge the DAESH from the northern Syrian border town of Kobane. Developing relations between USA and the Syrian Kurdish fighters coordinated other airstrikes in the northern provinces. As the YPG increasingly became the most effective fighting force against the extremist DAESH, US amplified its assistance.

The most radical change in Turkish policy came under the sway of two pillars directly, which led Turkish military forces to enter Northern Syria. The first is that, Turkish forces joined the USA forces to combat DAESH in 2014 however, Turkey's active role in the border operation caused DAESH in return to declare war against Turkey, named "conquest of Istanbul". Shortly after the statement of DAESH, many suicide bomb attacks took place in Turkey which caused more than hundred deaths between 2015 and 2016.

As for the second, with the rise of PYD/YPG steamrolling through northern Syria, capturing key border towns from DAESH and creating a near-contiguous Kurdish zone on Turkey's southern border, Turkey came to a point due to the experiences with PKK terrorism since 80s, that having a YPG-dominated zone right next to its border as a threat to Turkish territorial integrity was unacceptable.

Turkey was criticized of its softened (due to the civil war in Syria) border control, which facilitated DEASH's rapid growth of its territorial gain and thereby astronomical progress. Turkey had asserted to itself that it would never be a deliberate intention for Turkey to allow foreign fighters to enter Syria. However, strengthening the border security was not enough to defend the security of Turkey, hence "Operation Euphrates Shield" was launched.

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<sup>172</sup> "YPG returnees: Counterterrorist fighters under suspicion" URL: <https://www.dw.com/en/ypg-returnees-counterterrorist-fighters-under-suspicion/a-51884403>

<sup>173</sup> Kerman, İbrahim-Efegil Ertan " Analysis of Civil War Strategy of Terrorist Organization of PKK/PYD in Syria p.172

## TURKEY'S MILITARY INTERVENTIONS IN NORTHERN SYRIA

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### OPERATION EUPHRATES SHIELD

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In conformity with Article 51 of the United Nations (UN) Charter, Turkey exercised its “right of self-defense” and declared to the international community the launch of Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016. Turkey’s major defenses were to establish border security, estrange the DEASH existing in Syria, pushing it out from the area between Jarablus and Al-bab and forestall the establishment of the PYD / YPG corridor from being uninterrupted from the Iraqi border to Alexendretta by uniting the cantons in the region.<sup>174</sup>

Many tanks and armored units of the Turkish Armed Forces crossed the border leading hundreds of members of the Free Syrian Army to gain forces with Turkmen and Arabs. Within the scope of Operation Euphrates Shield, at the end of 198 days, 243 settlements and an area of approximately 2015 km<sup>2</sup> were taken under control by the Turkish Armed Forces and Free Syrian Army. In addition, the Turkish Armed Forces made the statement that, *"Lands will not be annexed, but left to the Syrian National Coalition and its military wing Free Syrian Army."*<sup>175</sup>

Co-chairman of PYD, Şahoz Hasan stated that, as long as there is no political solution to Syrian crisis, the military intervention of Turkey and Iran continues and as long as the Al-Qaida origin groups still exist in Syria, it would be better to maintain the coalition of USA and PYD.<sup>176</sup>

One of the most important outcomes of this unilateral operation is the change in the Syrian equation. In between the successful military operation which lasted about seven months, Russia had changed its existing policies towards Turkey, the relationship between the two countries seemed again to become more friendly, after a period of dispute especially after the incident where a Turkish air craft was shut down by Russian aircraft, causing the relations between the two countries deteriorate. Indeed, this process began with Astana in 2017 which provided the formation of the Russia-Iran-Turkey axis, especially against the USA.

Moreover, Russia, Turkey and Iran announced an agreement in Sochi, to sponsor a conference aimed at achieving a peaceful settlement of the Syrian war.

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<sup>174</sup> Aydıntaşbaş, Aslı “ A new Gaza: Turkey’s border policy in northern Syria”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020

<sup>175</sup>URL:

[https://web.archive.org/web/20160927042435/http://www.basbakanlik.gov.tr/Forms/\\_Article/pg\\_Article.aspx?Id=2a0e4e31-1a6d-4d65-9074-cc8b7097d0f6](https://web.archive.org/web/20160927042435/http://www.basbakanlik.gov.tr/Forms/_Article/pg_Article.aspx?Id=2a0e4e31-1a6d-4d65-9074-cc8b7097d0f6)

<sup>176</sup> İnat, Kemal“ABD ile ‘Dost’ Olmanın ve Olmamanın Bedeli!”

URL: [https://www.setav.org/abd-ile-dost-olmanin-ve-olmamanin-bedeli/ABD\\_ile\\_‘Dost’\\_Olmanın\\_ve\\_Olmamanın\\_Bedeli!](https://www.setav.org/abd-ile-dost-olmanin-ve-olmamanin-bedeli/ABD_ile_‘Dost’_Olmanın_ve_Olmamanın_Bedeli!)

Onur Tetik argues in his article that, the military interventions that Turkey made to Northern Syria cannot be simplified by calling it "fear of a Kurdish contiguous state", but in line with political and economic interests, the prospect of "losing geographical contact with the Arab world" was the major issue of Islamic leader Erdoğan.<sup>177</sup>

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OPERATION OLIVE BRANCH

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Initially, Turkey and USA had an aim to overthrow the Assad regime, but ironically with the changing security concerns and interests, Turkey was now combating PYD which was backed by USA. In other words, Turkey was clashing with USA by proxy.<sup>178</sup> Turkey had adopted the strategy of taking over the control of Euphrates's west to preventing the PYD from reaching out the Mediterranean. According to this strategy, Turkey's force could control the west of the Euphrates directly itself. As a matter of fact, this operation prevented USA and the PYD from organizing and nationalizing in cantons. Thus, Turkey closing the outlet to the Mediterranean Sea for PYD, has been a disruptive factor in the geopolitical fight in Syria.

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OPERATION PEACE SPRING

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The arguments of Operation Peace Spring can be listed as follows:

To clean the border of terror elements threatening Turkey's national security, ensuring the safety of the people of the region living in the north of Syria, to prevent illegal activities by controlling the M4, which is used by the terrorist organization YPG as a supply line and to prevent the division of the country by preserving the territorial integrity of Syria.<sup>179</sup>

The Operation Peace Spring's analyses should be addressed from Turkey, USA, Russia and the YPG/PYD front.

Turkey fulfilled the aim of having a safe zone in the south of its border by taking a strategic and critical step in putting an obstacle to the establishment of a contiguous Kurdish state.

The USA, on the other hand, has withdrawn from most of the areas in the north of Syria where it was for years, due to the operation, and undoubtedly, it has also lost ground due to the heavy

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<sup>177</sup> Tetik M. Onur, "Zeytin Dalı Operasyonu" "Güvenlik: Kargaşa ve Belirsizlik Çağından Nereye?" 2018, p.106

<sup>178</sup> Ekşi Muharrem,(2017) "The Syrian Crisis as a proxy War and the Return of the Realist Great Power Politics Warfare Special Issue,1 (2) p.106-129

<sup>179</sup> Anas, Omair(2018) "Implications of Turkey's Operation Olive Branch in Syria"

damage of the PYD/YPG it supports. However, USA preserved areas for PYD/YPG in the area further south of the Euphrates and has maintained its presence in critical points of Syria by deploying its soldiers from the north to the Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah provinces where there are oil fields.<sup>180</sup>

From the point of view of the Russian Federation, Russia has achieved the most important gains from the process. Deploying troops in Syria with the invitation from Syrian Regime as of 2015 and controlling the Syrian airspace with the Hmeymim base in Latakia, Russia has started field patrols in these regions with the withdrawal of the USA from the northeast of Syria after the Peace Spring Operation.<sup>181</sup>

In connection with Russia, the Syrian Regime has also achieved many gains in this process. The PYD-YPG is the party that suffered the greatest loss due to the Operation Peace Spring, because the operation area and the so-called cantons of the organization were split right in the middle; Their plans to have control an area from Iraq to the Mediterranean have been completely shelved.<sup>182</sup>

Although the PYD-YPG-SDF continues to exist on the Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah line, the post-Operation Peace Spring process has dragged them in between the interests of USA, Russia and the Syrian regime.

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#### IDLIB ISSUE

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Since early 2020, Turkey's focal point has been the Idlib upon Syria. Idlib is the last region opposed to the Assad regime, mostly under the control of jihadist groups such as;

- Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, a jihadist alliance)
- National Liberation Front (Turkish-backed rebel alliance)

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<sup>180</sup> “US-backed SDF captures Syria's largest oil field from 'Islamic State’”

URL: <https://www.dw.com/en/us-backed-sdf-captures-syrias-largest-oil-field-from-islamic-state/a-41066879>

<sup>181</sup> “Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring in northern Syria: One month on”

URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/8/turkeys-operation-peace-spring-in-northern-syria-one-month-on>

<sup>182</sup> “How Turkey’s ‘Peace Spring’ changed the dynamics of Syria’s war”

URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/10/14/how-turkeys-peace-spring-changed-the-dynamics-of-syrias-war/>



- Hurras al-Din (pro-al-Qaeda HTS offshoot)
- Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP, Chinese Uighur-dominated jihadist group)

There are two major factors for Turkey's intention to this area; the first is that, the majority of the inhabitants is Sunni-Arab in northern Syria, who are dependent on Turkey's economic, logistical and political assistance. This fact is parallel to AKP's Neo-Ottomanist foreign policy "in which Turkey is the guardian of Muslims beyond its borders." secondly, Turkey sees the military marks there as a precondition for controlling territory in other parts of Syria such as Afrin and the Euphrates Shield Zone.<sup>183</sup> However, Idlib is the last region in the hands of armed groups fighting against the regime in Syria. Jihadist organizations are also among the groups that keep Idlib under control. Within the scope of the conflict agreement Sochi conflict agreement, signed in 2017, between Russia and Turkey, both Turkey and Russia established military observation posts in Idlib. President Erdoğan stated that Turkey is faced with a new wave of refugees and added that there is no more capacity for Turkey to endure it in return of The Syrian Army's preparatory operations in Idlib.<sup>184</sup> Upon this development, The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) started to build reinforcements and stockpiles at the observation points in Idlib. While reinforcement troops were advancing in a convoy, it was announced that TSK was shot at artillery fire opened by the Syrian army. Russia asserted Syrian Army's innocence and added that Turkey had not informed the regime army about the operations in Idlib. In return, Erdogan had stated that Syrian army positions were hit by storm howitzers, mortar fire and F-16 warplanes and 30 to 35 Syrian army soldiers were killed. President Erdoğan underlined that only the Syrian army was the target in retaliations and told the Russian authorities, '*Our addressee here is not Russia, but the regime.*'<sup>185</sup>

Erdoğan paid a visit to Moscow in March, 2020 where Russia and Turkey decided to continue working within the Astana format with the declaration of agreeance on the territorial integrity of Syria.<sup>186</sup> Erdogan also added that the degradation of reconciliation in Idlib is a result of the Syrian regime actions. As of March 6th 2020, it was stated that all military activities in the

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<sup>183</sup> Aslı, Aydıntaşbaş "A new Gaza: Turkey's border policy in northern Syria", "European Council in Foreign Relations" 2020

<sup>184</sup> "İdlib'de Türkiye ve Suriye ordularını karşı karşıya getiren çatışma hakkında neler biliniyor?" URL: <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-51355155>

<sup>185</sup> "İdlib'de Türkiye ve Suriye ordularını karşı karşıya getiren çatışma hakkında neler biliniyor?" URL: <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-51355155>

<sup>186</sup> "Russia should stay out of Turkey's fight against Assad regime, Erdoğan tells Putin"

URL: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/russia-should-stay-out-of-turkeys-fight-against-assad-regime-erdogan-tells-putin>



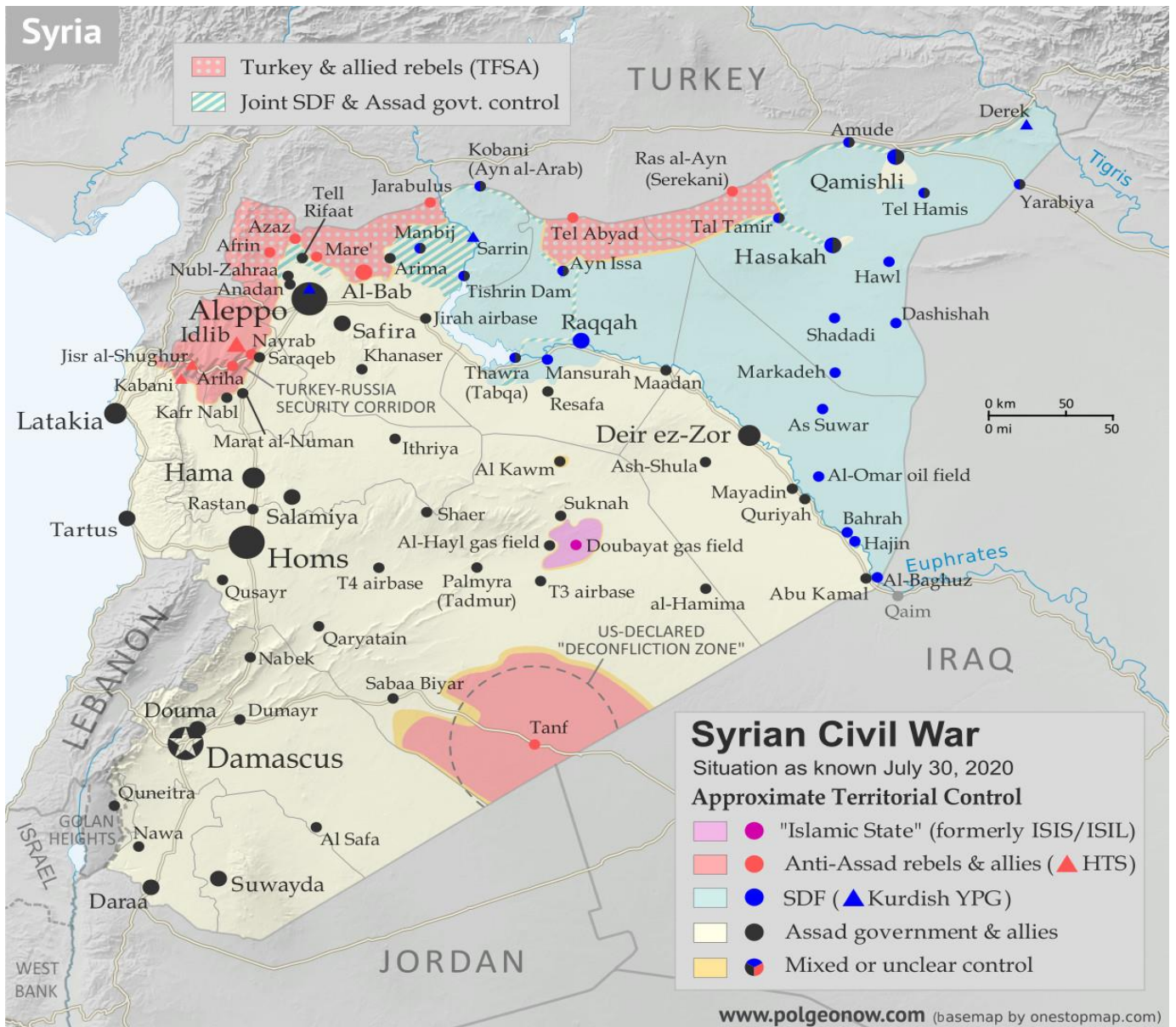
region was halted. For the time being, as one can derive information from the map, the Syrian Regime seems to have taken control of about 70% of the country and is on the way of rebuilding it again. 30% of the unconquered regions includes, Idlib (with the existing of Turkish forces and Russian observation posts), which is under control of Jihadist organizations, mainly by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, and the Northeast of the country which is controlled by the Kurdish administration PYD-YPG.<sup>187</sup>

For the time being, the Idlib issue can be described as a bomb ready to explode. As of March 2020, as the world surrendered to the Covid-19 outbreak, the question of "What is actually happening in Northeast Syria" seems to have been thrown into the deep freezer for now.

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<sup>187</sup> Yılmaz, Salih (2016) "Rusya neden Suriye'de?" URL: <http://old.qha.com.ua/tr/roportajlar/quot-putin-doktrini-quot-bu-kitapla-desifre-oldu/146056/>

FIGURE 1 SYRIA CONTROL MAP & REPORT: FRONTLINES STABLE - JULY 2020



In regards to USA front, before Joe Biden won the elections which took place in USA in early November, 2020, Reuters had analyzed

Turkey's improved relations with Russia, writing that " *Turkey stands to lose more than most other countries if Joe Biden is elected president since he is expected to toughen the U.S. stance against President Tayyip Erdogan's foreign military interventions and closer cooperation with Russia.* "

It is a conundrum for now what the future holds when Joe Biden is going to take office in USA. However, it is worthy of noting one part of Joe Biden's election n victory speech: *"America is back, and ready to lead the world, not retreat from it"*<sup>188</sup>

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#### GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS

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After the expropriation of the oil sector in 1964 and the completion of the pipeline construction in 1968, connecting the oil production of the Northeast region to the port of Tartus, Syria turned into an oil exporting country. Although Syria's oil reserves were limited compared to other oil giants in the Arab world, the Syrian Baathist socialist regime was largely financed by oil revenues. Syria was among the countries with the highest energy subsidies in the Middle East and North Africa until 2000.<sup>189</sup>

Nader Sami argues that it cannot no longer be ignored that the war in Syria has not only been about *"the simple question of a people fighting for the right to participate in government and determine their own fate. Nor can the conflict be defined solely within the parameters of a Sunni-Shiite contes"*. Even if, those arguments are undeniable, according to Sami, the situation in Syria is intricate than normally depicted. Syria's energy routes, strategic location and the abundant amount of gas reserves discovered off its Mediterranean coast, are highly contributing to the fact that Syria is at the center of a geopolitical conflict.<sup>190</sup>

For instance, The Qatar and Turkey project was deliberately blocked by the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline project. The Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline project was officially announced after its adoption in 2010, just before the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011. The Iran-Iraq-Syria collaboration was a direct competitor to the pipeline project of Qatar and Turkey. With the project, natural gas from Qatar was planned to be transported through the Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria, and aimed to reach to Turkey. Syria rejected this project in 2009 to protect the interests of its main economic ally Russia.<sup>191</sup>

Scholar Efe C. Gunduz argues that, Syria's opposition to this project, is one of the main reasons for Turkey and Qatar to take an active role in the Syrian conflict. Therefore, it can be said that

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<sup>188</sup> URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-55057751>

<sup>189</sup> Gürçan, C. Efe, "Arap Baharı Sonrası Uluslararası Güvenlik: Suriye ve Libya Çatışmalarının Yurtiçi ve Uluslararası Kaynakları (2011-2020)" 2020, p.71

<sup>190</sup> Gürçan, C. Efe, "Arap Baharı Sonrası Uluslararası Güvenlik: Suriye ve Libya Çatışmalarının Yurtiçi ve Uluslararası Kaynakları (2011-2020)" 2020, p.76

<sup>191</sup> Nader, Sami "Natural Gas Resources May Be Backstory in Syria War" URL: <http://vista.sahafi.jo/art.php?id=827a823ba97c5624bd1fae77c0e6a21362ae5703>

regional actors have been trying to prevent Syria from entering into energy cooperation with Iran and Russia and lusting for be closely involved with the decisions taking in regard to abundant energy resources in the Levant Basin.<sup>192</sup>

In this context, it is predictable that Russia will turn out to be a profitable one from Syria's multi-actor civil war. There are two main pillars of this argument; The first is that, the intervention of Russia was more legitimate than the other countries involved, since it was "invited" to Syria by the Assad regime in 2015. It cannot be denied that this "invitation" played into the hands of Russia in the frame of its *"Mediterranean Dream"*. Scholar Salih Yilmaz argues in his last book "Russian's Foreign Policy towards Syria" that, as of 2014, the strategy referred to as the "Putin Doctrine" has entered the implementation phase. Accordingly, the West is no longer a reliable partner of Russia. According to Moscow, international law is no longer the norm that provides a set of rules and international coordination. Yilmaz underlines that it is the beginning of an attempt to establish a Russian Empire.<sup>193</sup> It should be stated that the issue is not to sustain the regime in Syria, but to protect and expand Russia's military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>194</sup> Additionally, after the isolation caused by the Ukraine invasion<sup>195</sup> crisis, Russian President Vladimir Putin has afforded to bring Russia back to the international political scene with the Syrian move. Russia aims to assert its international image as a "great power" by administering the Syrian war. So far, it seems like Russia's century long *"Mediterranean Dream"* is about to appear on the horizon.

## CONCLUSION

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The AK Party government had aimed to become a model and leader country in the Middle East with its soft power-oriented foreign policy strategy. It has made incomparable progress, compared to previous governments of Turkey, towards the Middle East. In this context, Syria has been chosen as the pilot country of the Turkey's Middle East policy. As being ruled by democracy, having a liberal economy and being on the way of accession to the EU, Turkey had adopted the idea of lending a hand in reconciliation between East and West, as being the country geopolitically and culturally situated between them. The soft power strategy of Turkey was an

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<sup>192</sup> Gürcan, C. Efe, "Arap Baharı Sonrası Uluslararası Güvenlik: Suriye ve Libya Çatışmalarının Yurtiçi ve Uluslararası Kaynakları

<sup>193</sup> Yılmaz, Salih "Rusya'nın Suriye Politikası", Preface part

<sup>194</sup> İnat, Kemal "Rusya, Suriye'de Ne İstiyor?" 2019, URL: <https://www.setav.org/rusya-suriyede-ne-istiyor/>

<sup>195</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ukraine, URL: <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/10-facts-you-should-know-about-russian-military-aggression-against-ukraine> - Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/kommentarii\\_predstavitelya/-/asset\\_publisher/MCZ7HQUMdqBY/content/id/70034](https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/kommentarii_predstavitelya/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQUMdqBY/content/id/70034)

element to attract the Middle East who had not kept up with the globalization. As being a Muslim majority country, as the phrase goes, having a grip with the cultural languages of both West and East due to its geography, Turkey had embraced the idea of being a "great power" like it used to be once upon a time.

As is mentioned in Ahmet Davutoglu's "Strategic Depth" book; Turkey has embarked on a quest of being a potential regional power and a global actor within the frame of Ottoman historical depth with active diplomacy following. In this context, AK Party has brought a great dynamism to Turkish foreign policy and as a result of the increasing influence in the global level, Turkey has indeed enjoyed a period of holding center stage. The "Arab Spring" served an opportunity to Turkey on a silver plate in order to expose its political accomplishments with the new soft power policy.

Especially with the advent of the civil war in Syria, with the point of threatening the national security of Turkey, the AK Party abandoned the soft-power strategy which had been continued with great success and was forced to switch to hard power strategy.

However, faced with the reality, as Syria received its share from the mushroomed Arab Spring, Turkey's fruitless attempts of persuading the Assad regime upon the necessity of political reforms, gave evidence of the superficial ameliorated relations with dizzying speed. Thus, the Arab Spring process, not only upset the relations between Turkey and Syria, also conducted by the AK Party government since 2002, but also brought the last of soft power-oriented foreign policy by Turkey. Gaddafi's fall could have been considered as an example of the possible reactions of the region's people who was under control of authoritarian regimes. The conceivable effects of the Arab Spring on the Syrian branch, however, had not been foreseen. Moreover, the miscalculation that the assumption that the Assad regime will fall after the riots, which the policy had built upon, overturned the policies that had been carried out for ten years by the AK Party. In addition, the "realism" approach which has developed over human nature in international relations elements, was not taken into account and the assumption that "eternal" alliance with USA will continue, was one of the mistakes made.

During the next period of the new chapter, Turkey struggled due to the emergence of threats along its border such as DAESH, Democratic Union Party / PYD and People's Protection Association/YPG. In addition, a contiguous US-backed Kurdish-administered area was recognized as a "terrorism corridor" and "existential threat" by Turkey.

In the Syria case, political classifications, sectarian differences and being in the saddle by holding the governance over decades, led into a civil war. It should not be overlooked that Syria

had been ruled by state of emergency rules for more than 45 years. The state of emergency law, which had been in force since the Ba'ath Party came to power in Syria in 1963, had prohibited many fundamental rights, including freedom of assembly and movement, and had allowed the arrest of people suspected of posing a threat to security. As above mentioned, Bashar al-Assad had a different image in the country than his father, Hafez al-Assad. The Syrian people had visualized him with a ‘‘Western’’ mindset and fresh blood to substitute the authoritarian regime. Indeed, his efforts and political discourses at the beginning of his reign were promoting the idea of a democratic, secular Syria, not only in the eye of Syrian people but the whole international community. A so called ‘‘Damascus Spring’’ was about to appear on the horizon for the Syrian people.

However, in regard to Middle East’s history and the new developments such as the Arab Spring, it is once again understood that Middle East is complicated to cope with and without sensitive calculation of the regional power equations included in the global interests of the countries, it is hard to survive without strong allies and cooperation. In this respect, the general motivation of the regime was to survive from the multi-actor civil war, and also including armed opposite groups.

In the frame of ‘‘realism’’, the national integrity concerns, and maybe the arrogance and stubbornness to not leave the governmental power, had made the regime ending up with Russia and Iran, who have different concerns and desired outcomes for the region, to find a way out from the gloomy scene in Syria. In other words, the regime put the cats among the pigeons.

Tellingly, Turkey has stood to lose more than the other countries in regard to the refugee crisis, national security and most importantly the lustfulness of being a regional power, which has been on velvet. Furthermore, the Turkish foreign policy, especially the Middle East policy, has led to imprisonment by the Syria case. Turkey, beyond losing its gains in the region, still struggles to uphold its position.

This study efforts to analyze Turkey’s coercive steps into a hard power in Syria rather than soft power policy. In conclusion, through Nye’s conceptualization of soft power diplomacy was as the method using diplomatic tools by attracting attention with higher political, economic and cultural conditions instead of military interventions one can say that the soft power policy which was implemented by Turkey in Syria was not effective on the Assad regime.

*ÖMÜR ÇAM*

As last words, it is sincerely and humbly worthy of noting that, with an eye on outcomes of armed interventions, it is proved over again that the use of force is a dangerous instrument which is most likely to backfire, leaving behind it more victims than victors.



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