



Turkey's Syria Policy: Constant Objectives, Shifting Priorities

Muhittin Ataman* & Çağatay Özdemir**

Abstract

Turkey's foreign policy approach started to transform from a more liberal and humanitarian foreign policy to a more realistic and pragmatic one in 2016, which was manifested in the Syrian civil war. In this period, Turkey started to prioritize the use of hard power in order to prevent the threats resulting from the civil war. This paper asserts that while Turkey's objectives in the Syrian crisis have remained stable, its priorities have changed especially in recent years. So, while from 2011-2016 humanitarian norms dominated Turkey's Syria policy, after 2016, these norms became secondary priorities, and were replaced by hard power-based military assertiveness. To support this hypothesis, six main objectives of Turkey's foreign policy are taken into consideration: Managing the humanitarian crisis, materializing the fall of the Assad regime, aiding the opposition forces, waging a proxy war with Iran, eliminating the threat of Daesh, and preventing the PYD/YPG from creating an area of dominance.

Keywords: Turkey, Syria, Foreign Policy, Humanitarian Norms, Military Assertiveness

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Türkiye'nin Suriye Politikası: Değişmeyen Hedefler, Değişen Öncelikler

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Öz

Türkiye'nin dış politika yaklaşımı, 2016 yılında liberal bir çerçeveden ayrılarak realist bir anlayışa sahip olmuştur. Bu değişimin en net göstergesi ise Suriye iç savaşıdır. Zira Türkiye, Suriye iç savaşından kaynaklı tehditleri önlemek amacıyla askeri güç kullanımını önclemiştir. Bu makale, Suriye krizi karşısında Türkiye'nin hedeflerinin sabit kaldığını ancak son yıllarda önceliklerinin değiştiğini iddia etmektedir. Nitekim 2011-2016 yılları arasında insani normlar Türkiye'nin Suriye politikasını belirlerken, 2016 yılı sonrasında bu normlar ikincil öncelikler olmuş ve sert güç odaklı askeri operasyonlarla yer değiştirmiştir. Makale bu varsayımı desteklemek amacıyla Suriye krizine karşı Türk Dış Politikası'nın altı temel amacını merkeze almıştır. Bu amaçlar sırasıyla; Suriye'de ortaya çıkan insani krizi yönetmek, Esed Rejimi'nin yıkılması, muhalefet güçlerine destek, İran ile yapılan vekalet savaşı, DAESH tehdidini yok etmek ve PYD/YPG'nin hakimiyet alanı kurmasının engellenmesidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Suriye, Dış Politika, İnsani Normlar, Askeri Kararlılık

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1. Introduction

A Brief Overview of Turkey-Syria Relations

Since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, Syria has been one of the Arab countries with which Turkey has had its least friendly relationship. Artificially set up after WWI by British and French victors, Syria has adhered to a revisionist foreign policy from its very beginning on the basis that its historic geography was divided. Turkey has been one of the recipients of such a policy. Amongst many issues between the two countries, the most important has been the borders issue, especially concerning the Province of Hatay.¹ In addition, having two confronting understandings of nationalism, Kemalism and Ba'athism,² these two countries positioned themselves on opposite poles during the Cold War. Moreover, the Kurdish question and the water controversy have been two key issues on their agenda for a long time worsening already tense relationships.

In the last decades, taking into consideration the security concerns, improving relations with Syria became one of Turkey's most important foreign policy objectives. In 1998, these two countries, until then on the brink of war,³ signed the Adana Agreement, which marked a turning point in their relationship.⁴ The agreement accelerated the solution of some contentious issues regarding the Hatay Province, the water issue, and the PKK. Syria's recognition of the PKK as a terrorist organization and the expelling of Öcalan from Damascus paved the way for a friendlier relationship.⁵ Between 2004 and 2010, Syria was the first country with which Turkey developed high-level cooperation as a result of its "zero-problem" and "maximum cooperation with neighbors" foreign policy doctrine. With the signing of the Joint Political Declaration on the Establishment of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC)⁶

¹ Thowhidul Islam, "Turkey's AKP Foreign Policy toward Syria: Shifting Policy during the Arab Spring," *International Journal on World Peace* 33 (2016): 8.

² Islam, "Turkey's AKP Foreign Policy," 14.

³ Michael Bishku, "Turkish-Syrian Relations: A Checkered History," *Middle East Policy* 19 (2012): 45.

⁴ "Turkey's Political Relations with Syria," Republic of Turkey MFA, accessed November 12, 2018, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-syria.en.mfa>.

⁵ Bishku, "Turkish-Syrian Relations," 45.

⁶ "Joint Political Declaration on the Establishment of the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council Between Governments of the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Iraq." Republic of Turkey MFA, 2009.

in September 2009, Turkey and Syria had come to organize joint cabinet meetings.⁷ In the light of these developments, a free trade agreement was signed between Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon in the first half of 2010. Known as the “Levant Quartet,” such a step was considered crucial regarding regional integration.⁸ According to the then Minister of State, Zafer Çağlayan, trade volume between Turkey and Syria increased to \$2.5 billion in 2010, which was \$1.5 billion in the previous year.⁹ However, by the end of 2010, the uprisings in the Arab world, which started off first in Tunisia, strongly affected Turkey’s relationship with these countries in the region, and consequently with Syria.

The Syrian crisis became one of the most influential developments on Turkey’s domestic and foreign policy. Previously seen as the fundamental determinant of Turkey’s Middle East policy, the crisis due to the developments of the last years has eventually become an effective and determining factor of Turkey’s domestic policy as well as its national security agenda. Breaking out as a civil war, the Syrian crisis transformed into a proxy war through the intervention of regional and global actors. Despite the fact that its actual effects are only felt directly by its local victims, the true influencers in the crisis are regional and global actors.

Iran and Hezbollah have aided in prolonging the crisis by mobilizing their vast resources to provide the Assad regime’s forces with material, manpower, and military support at a time when the regime was about to fall. When the Shi’a militias sent to Syria were deemed insufficient, Iranian and Hezbollah troops directly entered the conflict zone. Later, when Iran’s presence on the field proved not being sufficient in tipping the balance to its advantage, Iran enabled Russia to intervene. Together they succeeded to change the situation in their favor, which implied at least the guarantee that the Assad regime would remain an influential actor on the field.

Under these circumstances, Turkey became one of the most critical countries concerning the Syrian crisis. According to some national platforms, it is Turkey, who is responsible for the continuation of the chaos

⁷ Turkey’s Political Relations with Syria. Republic of Turkey MFA.

⁸ Bishku, “Turkish-Syrian Relations,” 36.

⁹ “Güriş’ten Komşuya Dev Yatırım,” *Hürriyet*, January 15, 2011, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/guristen-komsuya-dev-yatirim-16769922>.

in Syria. This assertion was mainly voiced by Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the main opposition party in Turkey.¹⁰ On the basis of these allegations, Turkey's Syria policy has been deemed unsuccessful. Although Turkey's Syria policies have not been totally effective, it is not correct to claim that the continuation of the conflict is a result of Turkey's stance towards the crisis. Except Iran, Russia and some other countries, all major regional and global actors shared a similar stance towards the Syrian crisis. Only later did their policies start to differ. In fact, it were the differences in visions and projections of regional and global actors concerning the Middle East that caused eventual differences and conflicts in the Syria policies of these actors. Therefore, today's developments are nothing but the result of exploiting the political conjuncture and using the crisis environment to further pursue short- and long-term projects.

The fact that many different actors are included in the Syrian crisis has made it more difficult to find a solution. The lack of direct US political or military involvement in Syria, and US support for the PYD/YPG (Democratic Union Party/ People's Protection Units), an offshoot of the PKK, a terrorist organization, has complicated the situation even further. Moreover, even while some positive efforts have been undertaken - i.e. Astana talks bringing together three determining actors: Turkey, Russia and Iran - major dilemmas and divergences impeding the settlement of the Syrian civil war remain to be solved.

This article aims at evaluating the changes in Turkey's Syria policies during the Syrian crisis. It is argued that Turkey's foreign policy in Syria has moved from a liberal policy focus dominated by humanitarian norms towards a more realistic and pragmatic policy with hard power-based military assertiveness, which has been manifested especially through the military operations conducted in 2016 and 2018. Having this said, the main hypothesis of this article is that while the political priorities of Turkey have shifted, its objectives have remained unchanged in this period of time. To support this hypothesis, the study focuses on six stable parameters that are considered the main objectives of Turkey's Syria policies. These

¹⁰ "Kılıçdaroğlu'ndan Irak ve Suriye Açıklaması," *Time Turk*, September 09, 2017, accessed November 12, 2018, <https://www.timeturk.com/kilicdaroglu-ndan-irak-ve-suriye-aciklamasi/haber-731089>; "CHP TBMM Grup Toplantısı" *TBMM*, November 19, 2013, https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/haber_portal.aciklama?p1=126769.

objectives are: managing the humanitarian crisis, realizing the fall of the Assad regime, aiding the opposition forces, waging a proxy war with Iran, eliminating the threat of Daesh (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham), and preventing PYD/YPG from creating an area of dominance.

Based on the analysis of the above mentioned stable objectives, it is argued that Turkey's policies towards the Syrian civil war can be separated into two phases, between 2011-2016, and from 2016 until present. August 24, 2016, the day on which the Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) started, is considered a turning point in Turkey's policies towards the Syrian civil war because alongside its humanitarian stance, Turkey started a military operation, which successfully ended on March 30, 2017. In brief, the paper argues that in the first phase humanitarian norms dominated Turkey's foreign policy. As a result, the priorities of Turkey's foreign policy objectives were led primarily by the humanitarian intervention, the fall of the Assad regime, aiding of the opposition forces, preventing the PYD from creating an area of dominance. The threat of Daesh and the proxy war with Iran were secondary priorities. These objectives remaining stable, their priority changed in the second phase as follows: the threat posed by PYD and Daesh became top priority for Turkey and all the other objectives became secondary priorities.

2. Determining Factors of Turkey's Syria Policies

It is difficult for one state to develop policies in an environment, where the intentions of other states are unknown.¹¹ As a result, it is even more difficult to pursue a stable policy in a period of uncertainties on national, regional, and international levels. In Turkey's case, there has not been a significant change in its main objectives towards Syria. However, according to the conjuncture and developments in the region emerging on the course of the crisis, it was the way Turkey approached to these goals, the tactics it used in order to achieve them, and Turkey's political priorities that changed.

This section will examine the six objectives of Turkey's Syria policy, and analyze how the priority therein has changed from the first phase to the second.

¹¹ John J. Mearsheimer, "Conversations in International Relations: Interview with John J. Mearsheimer (Part II)." *International Relations* 20, no. 2 (2006): 231-243.

2.1. Focusing on the Humanitarian Crisis

Prior to 2016, one of the most important dimensions influencing Turkey's Syria policies was the humanitarian problem emphasizing the refugee crisis. According to the latest numbers, there are currently 3.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey.¹² From the beginning of the Syrian crisis and the resulting displacement of large parts of its population, the focus of Turkish officials has been on how to meet the immediate basic needs of the thousands forced to leave their homes, and seek refuge elsewhere. Turkey, who has considered the humanitarian aspect of the crisis as its utmost priority, despite being the country most negatively affected and bearing the brunt of the costs of the Syrian crisis, has also been the country, which is most found at fault by international platforms,¹³ instead of being commended for its endeavors. Turkey has taken important humanitarian measures concerning refugees and displaced Syrians. The Turkish agenda for solving the humanitarian problem has a threefold solution: (i) to accommodate the urgent needs of Syrians, who were forced to leave their homes, and seek refuge in Turkey, (ii) to pursue measures in order to prevent new waves of refugees and displacements from occurring, and lastly (iii) to push for a secure region to be established within Syrian borders in order to stem migration.

That being said, Turkey was able to realize only the first of the three main precautions it wanted to take in solving the humanitarian crisis. Despite the other two initiatives falling short due to factors not originating from national politics and capabilities, Turkey's endeavors in solving the humanitarian crisis can thus be deemed unsuccessful.

At this point, it can be said that the humanitarian crisis ceased to be Turkey's main priority in the last three years as emerging threats evolving from the Syrian civil war, namely Daesh approaching Turkey's border, and the PYD/YPG gaining more territory and so directly threatening the national security of Turkey, contributed to Turkey's foreign policy shift. Therefore, Turkey moved further from its liberal soft power policies to a more realistic hard power policy by responding militarily to the threat posed by Daesh and the PYD/YPG.

¹² "Türkiyedeki Suriyeli Sayısı", *Mülteciler Derneği*, January, 2018, <http://multeciler.org.tr/turkiyedeki-suriyeli-sayisi/>.

¹³ Behlül Özkan, "Turkey, the U.S. and Europe Are All Partly to Blame for the Festering Syria War," *Huffington Post*, January 14, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/behlal-azkan/turkey-us-europe-syria_b_8964242.html.

2.2. Ensuring the Fall of the Assad Regime

Just like in other Arab revolutions, when the Syrian crisis broke out in 2011, it was a spontaneous uprising of the people against the regime. For the first six months, Turkey advised the Assad regime to initiate a comprehensive reform program meeting the demands of the people in order to maintain political stability.¹⁴ The Assad regime, however, with Iranian support, chose to take a very firm stance against the people, causing bloodshed which led to the protests eventually resulting in a full-scale civil war.¹⁵ In early January 2013, Bashar al-Assad declared that his regime would defeat the Syrian opposition. “Syria will remain as it is and will return, God willing, stronger,” the President assured his loyalists. “Your steadfastness over two years tells the whole world that Syria is impervious to collapse...,” he said.¹⁶ Refusing to remain indifferent to the humanitarian crisis, Turkey started to support the Syrian opposition in defending themselves and striving to change the regime.¹⁷

Although the fall of Assad was Turkey’s first priority concerning the Syrian crisis, Turkey was unable to ensure this priority, either because of its reluctance or inability to use the necessary means needed to do so. Moreover, the support of some regional and global actors, i.e. Iran, Russia and the US, made it even more difficult for Turkey to pursue its goals including the fall of Assad. In January 2017, the Deputy PM, Mehmet Şimşek, stated that Turkey thinks that “the suffering of Syrian people and the tragedies, clearly the blame is squarely on Assad. But we have to be pragmatic, realistic. The facts on the ground have changed dramatically, so Turkey can no longer insist on a settlement without Assad, it’s not realistic.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Islam, “Turkey’s AKP Foreign Policy,” 9.

¹⁵ Joseph Holliday, “The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War,” *Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War*, 2013.

¹⁶ “President al-Assad: Out of Womb of Pain, Hope Should Be Begotten, from Suffering Important Solutions Rise,” *Syrian Arab News Agency*, January 6, 2013.

¹⁷ Francesco D’Alema, “The Evolution of Turkey’s Syria Policy,” *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, October, 2017, <http://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/evolution-turkeys-syria-policy>.

¹⁸ “Turkey Can no Longer Insist on Syria Settlement without Assad - Turkish Deputy PM,” *Reuters*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/turkey-can-no-longer-insist-on-syria-settlement-without-assad-turkish-deputy-pm-idUSKBN1541IJ>.

By devoting the majority of its energy and attention to humanitarian efforts until the first half of 2016, Turkey was not a part of the military and security action on the field. In an environment, where only those armed have been taken seriously, focusing on the humanitarian aspect resulted in Turkey's inability to achieve its political aims. For a long time, Turkey tried to gain some ground through diplomatic methods but after experiencing a parting of the ways from its allied countries, Turkey acknowledged that its diplomacy did not bear fruit.

Today, due to the consideration of Russia's and Iran's importance in international organizations and their penetration of the Syrian Arab Army's command-and-control mechanisms,¹⁹ a transition without Assad is less deliberated. Despite the Assad regime's breaching of all red lines declared by the US, these countries -Russia, Iran and the US- have abandoned problematizing Assad's regime on a variety of issues. As a result, debates on whether Turkey should re-establish dialogues with the Assad regime have resurfaced.

All in all, after 2016, instead of prioritizing the fall of the Assad regime, Turkey has focused mainly on the territorial integrity of Syria, and the restoration of peace in the country. The main reason behind this change of policy was the support provided by Russia and Iran to the Assad regime. Such a change in the regional balance accompanied by the indifference of the US has left Turkey with no other option than to remove the fall of the Assad regime from its priority list.

2.3. Aiding Opposition Forces

One strategy used by Turkey to achieve the fall of the Assad regime was the unification of all opponent groups under one umbrella. In addition, Turkey advocated leaving the governance of Syria to opposition forces that foresaw a democratic and pluralistic administration for individual freedoms and collective rights. Furthermore, Ankara created international platforms and held meetings in order to help the opposition groups to put aside their differences, and get mobilized with a common goal against the

¹⁹ Cristopher Kozak, "Iran's Assad Regime," *Washington D.C.: Critical Threats Project and Institute for the Study of War*, March 8, 2017, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/irans-assad-regime>.

Assad regime.²⁰ Nevertheless these attempts were not successful as the opposition forces started to fragment as a direct consequence of the division of regional and global actors' activities in the region. As every international actor involved in the Syrian arena has attempted at instrumentalizing local and regional actors in order to increase own effectiveness on the field, the required unification of the Syrian forces necessary to advance their interests could not take place.²¹

Even while the fall of the Assad regime is not among Turkey's main priorities anymore, Ankara continued to support the opposition groups both at the table, where Turkey has strongly supported the opposition groups via the Astana process, and on the field.²² Moreover, the Astana process is very important for Ankara because the 3.5 million refugees living in Turkey can return in Syria only if peace is established. At this point, it is important to emphasize the fact that the Astana process is currently the only effective one, and the closest effort to a possible solution for Syria as the Geneva talks have been blocked as Turkey and the opposition groups did not approve the invitation of terrorist groups such as the PKK/PYD. On the other hand, Turkey has supported opposition groups on the field with its successful military operations, namely the Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) in 2016, and later in 2018 with the Operation Olive Branch (OOB). OES started in August 2016 to clear Turkey's border from Daesh, and to stop the PYD/YPG from merging Ayn el-Arab and Afrin. The operation in northern Syria supported the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to fight against Daesh until they secured the city of al-Bab, where life has returned to normal, and Syrians are turning back to their homes.²³

²⁰ "Chairman's Conclusions Second Conference of The Group of Friends of the Syrian People," Republic of Turkey MFA, 2012, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/chairman_s-conclusions-second-conference-of-the-group-of-friends-of-the-syrian-people_-1-april-2012_-istanbul.en.mfa.

²¹ Mariam Karouny and Nick Tatterstall, "Syrian Opposition Voices Frustration with International Backers," *Reuters*, April 20, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-conference-idUSBRE93J0EI20130421>.

²² Lakshmi Priya, "Astana Talks: A Prelude to Peace in Syria," *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, November 27, 2017, https://idsa.in/backgrounder/astana-talks-a-prelude-to-peace-in-syria_lpriya_271117; Arhama Siddiqa, "Third Round of Astana Talks: A Gordian Knot in the Making?" *Institute of Strategic Studies*, March 24, 2017, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Final_IB_Arhama_dated_24-03-2017.pdf.

²³ "MGK Toplantısı Sona Erdi! İşte Yapılan Açıklama," *Habertürk*, March 29, 2017, <https://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1443471-mgk-toplantisi-sona-erdi>.

Turkey has launched another operation in Syria on January 20, 2018. Through this operation, named “Operation Olive Branch,” an important step was taken in order to end the existence of the PYD/YPG and Daesh in the western part of the Euphrates.²⁴ After the Operation Olive Branch, Turkey has mobilized for the reconstruction of regions in northern Syria. In particular, Turkey has taken steps for the social development of this region.²⁵ Aiding opposition forces is an important factor in Turkey’s Syria policies. Even though the priorities have changed, the Turkish support did not end, and as the only main regional actor supporting anti-regime opposition forces, Turkey has shown that it has the power to change the balance in the Syrian crisis.

2.4. Proxy War in the Context of Regional Competition with Iran

An important dimension of Turkey’s Syria policy is the proxy war, beginning with Iran’s intervention in Syria. Together with some of the Gulf countries, Turkey worked against the ambition to turn Syria into a satellite state of Iran. Syria, falling under Iran’s zone of influence combined with the “Shi’ism or Shi’ization” of Iraq and its transformation into an activity zone for Iran, would result in tipping the regional balance in favor of Iran.²⁶

As Ataman has argued, since the 1979 Revolution, the Iranian state has simultaneously followed two distinct foreign policy strategies. Both strategies, which necessitate the instrumentalization of Islam and Shi’ism, facilitated the expansion of Iran’s role and influence. The first strategy utilized is pan-Islamism based on which Iran tried to export its revolutionary ideas to other Muslim states, Sunni and Shiite alike. Iran used the religion of Islam as a tool of Iranian expansionism by presenting itself as the only revolutionary power representing oppressed peoples in the region against pro-status quo states.²⁷ The second strategy is pan-Shi’ism. With the

²⁴ “Press Release,” *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri*, 2018, http://www.tsk.tr/BasinFaaliyetleri/BA_74.

²⁵ “Turkey to rebuild areas liberated from terrorists in Syria,” *Daily Sabah*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2018/03/13/turkey-to-rebuild-areas-liberated-from-terrorists-in-syria>.

²⁶ Nader I. Nasur, “Syria-Iran Relations (2000-2014),” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 4, no. 12 (October 2014): 85.

²⁷ Muhittin Ataman, “The Impact of Iranian Over-expansionism on Regional Politics,” *Daily Sabah*, December 22, 2016, <https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2016/12/22/the-impact-of-iranian-over-expansionism-on-regional-politics>.

advent of the Arab revolutions, Iran abandoned its pan-Islamic strategy, and began to emphasize the Shiite identity. Since then, Iran has focused on all Shiite-related groups, including all versions of Shi'ism, and mobilized them for its foreign policy objectives. By following a two-layered Shiite regional policy, Iran initiated a process of *tashayyu* (to convert someone to Shi'ism). In the first layer, Iran initiated political *tashayyu* in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon; and it has followed social and religious *tashayyu* in other regional countries such as Turkey, Egypt and Tunisia. As the only country that pursues a non-sectarian regional policy, Turkey also remains the single regional balancing power to normalize Iran and to hinder its destabilizing infiltration in the region, especially in Syria.

For a long time, Turkey has been considered an important actor to balance the spread of Iran's Islamic revolution in the region, which has been strongly supported by the West.²⁸ Although initially favoring the stance of Turkey and its allies, some actors turned now against Syrian opposition forces and in favor of Iran. This comes as a result of the US and other Western countries engaging in negotiations with Iran and so normalizing relationships with the country. This was particularly manifest during the Obama Administration. This followed by the support of the US to the PYD, and Russia's and Iran's support to the Assad regime, which both act against Turkey's and the mainstream Syrian opposition forces' interests, have had a negative impact on Turkey's Syria policies.

Turkey opposed Syria falling into Iran's zone of influence because Turkey does not have the means to counterbalance Iran in this regard. Thus, one can say that Turkey was stagnant in gaining ground until the end of the first half of 2016. Until that time, the proxy war in Syria was quite asymmetric as Iran and Russia provided the regime forces with all kinds of military support including army units,²⁹ whereas Turkey and its allies tried to help by only providing political and partial ammunition support. In addition, while Iran successfully mobilized support through its the Shi'a identity,³⁰

²⁸ Mehmet Ögütçü, "Islam and the West: Can Turkey bridge the gap?" *Futures* 26, no.8 (1994).

²⁹ Genieve Abdo, "How Iran Keeps Assad in Power in Syria: The Weapons, Technology, and Expertise Tehran," *Foreign Affairs*, August 25, 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2011-08-25/how-iran-keeps-assad-power-syria>.

³⁰ Nasur, "Syria-Iran Relations," 80.

Turkey was unable to generate a similar motivation for the downfall of the Assad regime.

However, there were two developments that changed the balance. First, the OES gave an upper hand to Turkey, and made it possible for Turkey to take its position as a decisive actor in the Syrian crisis.³¹ This has allowed Turkey “to promote a political solution based on a democratic, inclusive and non-sectarian system while preserving Syria’s political unity and territorial integrity.”³² The same can be said for Turkey regarding the second military intervention, Operation Olive Branch. The second development is related to the government change in the US. Unlike Obama, Trump has contended the nuclear deal with Iran, and has continuously argued for its annulment or to create a new legislation that would effectively reshape the nuclear agreement.³³ Just two months after Trump became president, Tillerson, then the Secretary of State, revealed that the US will resume sales of fighter jets to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, which had been suspended by Obama.³⁴ This decision demonstrates Trump’s outreach to traditional Gulf Arab allies, which he sees as a barricade against Iranian expansion. Moreover, in April, 2017, the US fired Tomahawk missiles at the Shayrat Syrian airbase after the chemical attack in the Idlib province by the Assad regime. In this regard, the US has started to slowly push Iran out of the Syrian crisis.

While it is still early to speak about the direct impact of these policies, and the future of the Iranian influence in the Syrian crisis, one thing is certain: The proxy war in Syria is no longer asymmetric. This became evident even in the Astana process. Turkey and Russia, key actors supporting opposing groups in the Syrian war, sponsored negotiations between the Syrian government delegation and opposition groups. For Turkey, taking such a

³¹ Murat Yeşiltaş, Merve Seren and Necdet Özçelik, *Operation Euphrates Shield: Implementation and Lessons Learned* (Ankara: SETA, 2017); Can Kasapoglu and Sinan Ulgen, *Operation Euphrates Shield and the al-Bab Campaign: A Strategic Assessment* (Ankara: EDAM, 2017).

³² Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, “Turkish Foreign Policy in a Time of Perpetual Turmoil,” *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 12.

³³ Farhad Rezaei, “Iran’s Nuclear Agreement: The Three Specific Clusters of Concerns,” *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (2018).

³⁴ Guy Taylor, “Trump to Approve Weapons Packages to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain Blocked by Obama,” *The Washington Times*, February 7, 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/feb/7/trump-ready-to-approve-weapons-packages-to-saudi-a/>.

step towards the solution of the war implies that Iran may face hurdles in its way towards expansionism.

Considering all these aspects, it can be argued that while the competition with Iran regarding the regional domination has for a long time been part of Turkish foreign policy objectives, now, it is no longer a priority for Turkey. The transition of Turkey's foreign policy towards a pragmatic foreign policy have neither changed Turkish objectives nor the priority to compete with Iran.

2.5. Threat of Daesh

The defeat of Daesh has been a major objective for Turkey since the organization's emergence.³⁵ Moreover, Daesh has been determinant regarding Turkey's relations with Syria given its spread into Syria within a short period of time. Finding for itself a scope of action in Syria, which had been a result of wrong policies of regional and global actors involved in the Syrian crisis, the previously Iraqi-based Daesh turned into a pretext for western states to provide the PYD/YPG with military and political support, and required from Turkey to remain in a defensive position.³⁶ Western states did not provide the necessary military and political aid to the mainstream opposition groups within the first two years of the uprising; therefore, Syrians facing the danger of being killed by the Assad regime were exposed to radical groups such as Daesh. It can be said that Daesh, expanding at the expense of Syrian opposition forces and Turkey, has served well as a functional instrument for Western states. Militants from all over the world came to Syria to fight in Daesh's ranks,³⁷ and in doing so, they caused the most damage to Syrian opposition forces. Indirectly, Daesh has acted like a tool of intervention serving the interests of global actors in the Syrian crisis.³⁸

³⁵ Murat Yeşiltaş, Rifat Öncel and Bilgehan Öztürk, *Turkey's Fight against Daesh* (İstanbul: SETA, 2016).

³⁶ İlker Girit, "Turkish Support Crucial in Fight against DAESH," *Anadolu Agency*, October 14, 2016, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis-news/turkish-support-crucial-in-fight-against-daesh/664699>.

³⁷ Efraim Benmelech and Esteban F. Klor, "What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?" *National Bureau of Economic Research* (2016), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w22190>.

³⁸ Çağatay Özdemir, *Amerikan Grand Stratejisi: Obama'nın Ortadoğu Mirası*, (İstanbul: SETA, 2018), 204.

Defeating Daesh has always been Turkey's objective. However, it became a chief priority when Daesh started to fire rockets into Kilis, a Turkish city, killing several citizens, and showing that now Daesh posed a direct threat to Turkey as it had come close to the Turkish border. Turkey responded with implementing OES, which as mentioned previously is also the visible turning point in Turkey's Syria policies. This operation, which lasted for approximately seven months, proved effective in three aspects: (i) Turkey cleared its border from Daesh, (ii) with the help of Turkey the FSA gained territory in Syria, what enabled Syrian people to turn back to their homes, (iii) the operation led to a significant decline of Daesh's power. In 2016, Daesh suffered substantial losses both in terms of territory and its fighters, and territory.³⁹ According to McGurk, the main political figure in the struggle against Daesh during the Obama administration, Daesh had lost approximately 11,000-15,000 militants, remaining with roughly 18,000 to 22,000 fighters.⁴⁰ The number of losses increased even more after Turkey started OES. From August 24, 2016 until March 30, 2017, Daesh's main losses were located alongside the Turkish border, and in Mosul. By the end of 2017, Daesh lost 79% of the territory it controlled in Iraq, and in Syria it was up to 76% by August 2014.⁴¹

A weakened Daesh serves the Turkish interest as it means to have more secured borders; however, the same cannot be said for the external powers that support other terrorist organizations such as the PYD/YPG. A diminution of the Daesh threat would leave these powers without a rationale for their support to the PYD/YPG. For this reason, defeating Daesh had always been among the vital objectives of Turkey; however, its priority has changed over time. Such a change of policy was reflected during OES. Nevertheless, after the success of OES, Turkish priorities regarding its Syria policies changed once again. The Daesh threat from a top priority fell back to a secondary and was replaced by the threat posed by the PYD/YPG.

³⁹ Çağatay Özdemir, "Suriye 2016," in *Ortadoğu Yıllığı*, eds. Muhittin Ataman and Kemal İnat (İstanbul: Kadim, 2017).

⁴⁰ John Hudson, "Top U.S. Official: Islamic State Has Lost 47 Percent of its Territory in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, June 28, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/28/top-u-s-official-islamic-state-has-lost-47-percent-of-its-territory-in-iraq/>.

⁴¹ "Daesh Areas of Influence," *Global Coalition*, 2017, <http://theglobalcoalition.org/en/daesh-areas-influence-september-2017-update/>.

2.6. Preventing the PYD/YPG from Creating an Area of Dominance

Like the threat posed by Daesh, the threat posed by the PYD to the Turkish national security has always been among the top priorities of Turkey's foreign policy. Notwithstanding, Turkey's fight against the terrorist organization created by the civil war in Syria is important for regional stability. In this context, Ankara had set aside the struggle against the PKK/PYD as it made the within Syria a priority. However, when Syria fell under the control of the PYD/YPG and their cooperation with global powers lasted, the regional balance changed to the disadvantage of Turkey. As a result, Ankara changed its perspective, and shifted its opposition from being against the very existence of the PYD/YPG to the rejection of its domination over northern Syria.

When the PYD/YPG and Daesh emerged as the most serious threat to Turkey's security, Turkey took military measures for its defense.⁴² Ankara, in particular, is fighting against the PYD/YPG's aim at establishing an area of dominance, which can result in a demographic shift in the region. Due to the Arabs and Turkmens, who also live in the northern region of Syria, Turkey does not want this region to turn into another short or long-term conflict zone with the interference of global powers. It is for this reason that Turkey has declared the advancement of the PYD/YPG to the west of the Euphrates River as its red line.⁴³

In this context, the basic aims of Ankara in Syria remain the same, but changes in priorities have come to the fore,⁴⁴ whereby preventing the PYD/YPG from creating an area of dominance has become the main priority.

⁴² Hümeyra Pamuk and Ümit Bektaş, "Turkey fires on U.S.-backed Kurdish militia in Syria offensive," *Reuters*, August 24, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/turkey-fires-on-u-s-backed-kurdish-militia-in-syria-offensive-idUSKCN10Z07J>.

⁴³ Henri J. Barkey, "Syria's Dark Shadow over US-Turkey Relations," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (2016).

⁴⁴ Murat Yeşiltaş, "Turkey's Strategic Reasoning behind Operation Olive Branch," *SETA Perspective*, no. 34 (January 2018), https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2018/01/34_Perspective.pdf.

3. Conclusion

Turkey's policies towards Syria have met problems as discrepancies between political objectives and instruments utilized for such have recently increased. Turkey has defended Syria's territorial integrity because of its belief that any geographical change would inhibit political stability, and thus also economic development in the region. Throughout the crisis, Turkey has opposed regional and global powers' *fait accompli* policy.⁴⁵ This is why Turkey differs in its thinking with the US and other western countries concerning the PYD. In addition, asserting that the continuation of the Syrian crisis will lead to the continuation of secular and religious radicalization in the country, Turkey strives to end the crisis as soon as possible.

As Keyman argues, Turkish foreign policy in the last years has not only been reset but a new form of foreign policy has emerged. More precisely, the Turkish foreign policy's proactive nature and main principles are shaped by 'moral realism,' "that combines hard power-based military assertiveness and humanitarian norms in addition to new capacity-and strategy-based parameters."⁴⁶ This can be best exemplified in Turkey's Syrian policies. Upon the arguments of this article, it can be asserted that Turkey's Syria policy can be divided into two phases, and that OES has marked a turning point. In the first phase, from the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011 until August 2016, Turkey was occupied with humanitarian norms, which as a result had set the priorities of Turkey's foreign policy objectives. In other words, Turkish foreign policy aimed at a humanitarian intervention in Syria, which should have later been followed by the fall of the Assad regime, the aiding of opposition forces, the prevention of the PYD/YPG from creating an area of dominance, and more secondary priorities such as fighting the threat of Daesh, and the proxy war with Iran. During this period, Turkey was partially successful in its policies. Turkey allocated a lot of effort to

⁴⁵ During the civil war in Syria, Turkey has aimed at preventing global and regional powers to act contrary to international law and its national interests. For this reason, Turkey has loudly condemned the support provided by the US to PKK/PYD, which is a terrorist organization that threatens the national security of the Turkey and negatively affects the stability in Syria. Nevertheless, the United States has continued its support to PKK/PYD which has resulted in a *fait accompli* policy.

⁴⁶ E. Fuat Keyman, "A New Turkish Foreign Policy: Towards Proactive 'Moral Realism'" *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 1 (2017).

humanitarian relief, and pursued a comprehensive and successful policy in meeting the needs of Syrian refugees, who have been displaced due to the crisis. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Turkey's endeavors at its political and military fronts during the first phase. Its bilateral negotiations have often been unsuccessful in terms of efficacy and garnering support on regional and international platforms.

A reason for the ineffectiveness of Turkey's Syria policy during the first phase is its abandonment by both regional and global allies. Especially after the Egyptian military coup, some Gulf States followed a policy of isolating Turkey in the region. On the other hand, the US and other western countries also adopted an anti-Turkey attitude, and supported the PYD/YPG in their fight against Daesh. Despite strengthening its position in the region through its re-cooperation with regional Sunni countries, especially the Gulf States Turkey's conflicting Syria policy with that of western countries in the context of changing regional balance since 2015 still creates tension.

As a result, it can be said that in contrast to the general belief, Turkey's initiatives in the first phase had largely been humanitarian rather than political as it was Turkey who has borne the brunt of humanitarian costs. While on one hand, the Syrian crisis inhibited Turkey's regional objectives, on the other hand, it forced Turkey to a defensive position concerning both its domestic and regional politics. Not only did the crisis prevent Turkey from realizing its regional foreign policy priorities, but it also created a national security threat to the integrity of the country.

In order to get back on track, Turkey needed to establish a new and robust network that would enable global powers in the region to reconnect with Turkey. This is what Turkey did during the second phase (from August 2016 until present). The humanitarian perspective remains an objective of Turkish foreign policy but is no longer considered a top priority. Instead, the threat posed by the PYD/YPG and Daesh became a top priority for Turkey, and all other objectives such as managing the humanitarian crisis, materializing the fall of the Assad regime, aiding opposition forces, and waging a proxy war with Iran, became secondary priorities. At this point, Turkey started to act militarily in order to prevent the PYD/YPG from creating a political entity in Syria, and to clear its border from Daesh. While Turkey did successfully force Daesh to move away from its border through OES, it started a second operation, OOB, against the PYD/YPG.

All in all, in recent years, Turkey's Syria policies have not only been humanitarian but too hard power-based. On the course of the crisis, military assertiveness has become the dominant approach in Ankara. Such a change in foreign policy has increased the role of Turkey in the region, and Ankara has become a decisive actor in the future of Syria.

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