Turkish Policy towards the Syrian Crisis (2011 - 2023): Determinants and Transformations

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Abstract: *Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011, Turkey has faced two main threats that have shaped its policy and stance towards the crisis: the influx of refugees and terrorist organizations in northern Syria. Turkey's policy priorities have shifted to adapt to the requirements and changes of each phase of the Syrian conflict, without significantly altering its main overarching goals. This research aims to uncover these changes in Turkish policy towards the Syrian crisis and the factors leading to these periodic changes by monitoring the differences in Turkish intervention and handling of the Syrian conflict from one period to another. In the context of its consistent strategy of demanding and working towards establishing a safe zone inside Syria and ensure the security and stability of that region, Türkiye adopted a policy consistent with the international and Western position supporting the Syrian opposition and calling for the overthrow of the Assad regime until 2014. Subsequently, Turkey adopted a more pragmatic policy, focusing on combating the threat of terrorist organizations and abandoning the overthrow of Assad as a priority. This shift coincided with its military intervention in northern Syria, while maintaining the containment of the refugee influx as a constant goal. By the end of 2021, in line with its new "zero problems" policy, Ankara began attempting to normalize and restore relations with the Assad regime. However, the normalization process has not yet been completed due to deep disagreements over some intractable issues between the two sides.*

Keywords: Turkish foreign policy, Syrian crisis, Safe zone, Terrorist organizations

Abbreviations
SNC: The Syrian National Council.
NCS: The National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.
ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and al - Sham.
JAN: Jabhat Al - Nusra.
HTS: Hay'at Tahrir al - Sham.
FSA: Free Syrian Army.
SNA: The Syrian National Army.
OES: Operation Euphrates Shield.
OOB: Operation Olive Branch.
OPS: Operation Peace Spring.
PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party.
PYD: Democratic Union Party.
SANES: Self Administration of North and East Syria.
SDC: Syrian Democratic Council.
SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces.
SIG: Syrian Interim Government.
TAF: Turkish Armed Forces.
TSO: Turkish - Supported Opposition.
YPG: People's Protection Units.

1. Introduction

With the beginning of the popular protests and uprisings in the Arab world, known as the Arab Spring, Syria was one of the countries where a popular revolution calling for freedom, democracy, and political reform broke out in March 2011. The conflict gradually intensified, and the peaceful Syrian demonstrations quickly turned into an armed movement against the Syrian regime in response to his adoption of a security and military approach to confront popular protests. the Syrian revolution turned into a civil war in which many international parties intervened to support their warring local allies, so the Syrian scene became very complex and disintegrated, and this chaos created a large political and security vacuum on the Syrian map, which constituted a danger and a source of concern and threat for all the countries surrounding Syria. Türkiye, Syria's northern neighbor, was the country most exposed to the repercussions and threats of the Syrian crisis .

Since its beginning, the Syrian crisis has caused several problems and threats facing Turkey, the first of which was the problem of refugees, whose numbers increased day after day until Turkey became the country hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world. But the greatest threat that Turkey faced because of the civil war in Syria was the emergence of terrorist organizations in northern and eastern Syria, such as ISIS at the beginning of the crisis, and the Kurdish separatist organizations that took control of the Syrian lands from which ISIS later withdrew, including the areas adjacent to the Turkish border. While ISIS posed a global terrorist threat, Kurdish armed parties, and factions, such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG), later known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), posed a threat to Turkey and its national security in particular .

Turkey saw that the most appropriate solution to eliminate the threat to its lands and borders was to create a "buffer zone" along its border with Syria. This will be a safe area subject to a no - fly zone under Turkish protection, providing safety for the Syrians residing there, including civilians fleeing the Syrian regime forces and Terrorist organizations. The establishment of this region constituted a strategic goal for Turkey, in order to eliminate the possibility of terrorist and separatist organizations attacking its borders or establishing an independent political entity under its administration. The region also ensures the presence of Turkish forces inside Syria to engage directly in the event of any threat to Turkish national security. Turkey worked to establish this zone by carrying out several successive military operations inside Syria in cooperation with the Syrian opposition factions. These operations were accompanied by political maneuvers with influential international and regional actors in the Syrian conflict (the United States, Russia, and Iran) to ensure the success of its strategy .

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis and the worsening of its risks and repercussions, Turkey has begun its efforts to address those risks and threats resulting from the crisis, especially the issue of security along its southern borders, and

was forced to partially change its policy in the region, according to the requirements of each stage. Turkey has adopted several political and military strategies appropriate to the interim changes and developments, related to external and internal developments, and the changing balance of power in the Syrian conflict. This paper attempts to monitor the shifts in Turkish policy towards the Syrian crisis over time - over 12 years - , and to reveal the temporary determinants and motives for that change, in addition to presenting the Turkish position on the active parties in the Syrian conflict, whether those parties are local or international, and presenting the change in That position depends on changing public policy.

Turkey's policy towards the Syrian crisis (2011 - 2014):

Since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, Turkish - Syrian relations have been generally unfriendly, due to several controversial issues between the two countries, the most important of which is the issue of political borders. Syria has always been dissatisfied with the division of its historical geography and the expropriation of some lands over which it claims the right to sovereignty, the most important of which is Turkish "Hatay Province". Some other issues, such as the Kurdish issue and the dispute over water resources, have contributed to the exacerbation of tension between Ankara and Damascus, as these two issues have remained on the foreign policy agenda of both countries for a long time. Turkish foreign policy has tended to improve relations with Syria in recent decades, considering security concerns during this rapprochement, and mutual diplomatic efforts between the two countries continued until they were able to sign the "Adana Agreement" in 1998, which constituted a turning point in Turkish - Syrian relations after the two countries were on the brink of war. This agreement contributed to resolving some contentious issues related to borders, the issue of water sources, and the position on PKK. According to this agreement, Damascus recognized PKK as a terrorist organization and its leader, Ocalan, was expelled from Syria. This step paved the way for Syria to be the first country with which Türkiye developed high - level cooperation within the framework of the "zero problems" and "maximum cooperation with neighbors" policy, which Ankara followed between 2004 and 2010 (Ataman & Özdemir, 2018: 15).

The Syrian crisis that began in 2011 has become the most influential development on Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. The transformation of this civil war into a proxy war due to the intervention of regional and international actors made the Syrian crisis a determining factor for Turkish foreign policy and national security, especially regarding the issues of the influx of refugees and terrorist organizations. The development of the crisis forced Ankara to change its policy in line with the interim changes, and forced it to Political, and later military intervention in the Syrian conflict, to be part of regional and global actors in Syria (Ataman & Özdemir, 2018: 16).

Following the street protests in Syria in March 2011, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan urged Syrian President Bashar al - Assad not to suppress the protesters. Instead, he called for long - term political, economic, and social reforms. Türkiye believed it could encourage reform in Syria and influence the Syrian regime based on its accumulated political relationships with Damascus during the era of the Justice and Development Party. However, it became evident that Turkish pressure on Assad was limited and incapable of bringing about real change. Erdogan faced personal humiliation after false promises by Assad regarding his intention to carry out internal reforms (Schuringa, 2016: 33).

Türkiye was compelled to abandon its "zero problems" policy due to the escalating violence by the Syrian government against protesters and the increasing influx of Syrian refugees into southern Türkiye. Türkiye was faced with the dilemma of "ethics versus self - interest", and two months after the start of the protests, Türkiye chose to relinquish the commercial and investment interests it had built with the ruling regime in Syria, and to ignore the personal relationship between Erdogan and Assad, which proved to be extremely weak. Türkiye condemned Assad's suppression of protests, called for his resignation, hosted leaders of the Syrian opposition and provided refuge for defectors from the Syrian army. Türkiye assisted opposition military personnel in forming the FSA. In response, the Syrian ambassador in Ankara warned that Damascus might take retaliatory measures and resume support for PKK. Indeed, shortly afterward, Syria allowed PYD, affiliated with PKK, to control a significant portion of the Kurdish - inhabited border region (Schuringa, 2016: 34).

After Türkiye's attempts to mediate with the Assad regime for a peaceful resolution to the limited Syrian uprising failed, Türkiye transformed from a state with close ties to Syria into one of the most outspoken critics of the Assad regime. Türkiye immediately began contributing to the formation and support of the emerging Syrian opposition in 2011. During this period, Türkiye leveraged its relationship with Islamic political forces within the Syrian opposition. Over the next two years, Türkiye collaborated with several countries to provide political and financial support to the Syrian opposition. It worked closely with its NATO allies, including the United States, and collaborated with Arab countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia. These countries sent weapon shipments to Syria through Türkiye (Oyosoro and Herbert, 2016: 11).

With the onset of events, Türkiye's official discourse focused on the necessity of improving the humanitarian situation and supporting the Syrian opposition. Türkiye supported The National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCS), a recognized Syrian opposition body, acknowledged as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by 120 countries and organizations. Türkiye encouraged NCS to assume governance responsibilities and provide services during the transitional period – between the end of the civil war and the establishment of a new Syrian government – in accordance with the demands and needs of the population. Despite the fact that this transitional period never commenced, Türkiye continued to sponsor NCS and its military wing, FSA, for years. However, Türkiye avoided directly using Turkish civil and administrative tools to support NCS in reclaiming or restructuring the liberated territories from the grip of the Assad forces. This reflects Türkiye's humanitarian and conscious policy towards issues and security implications (Leeuwen & Veen, 2019: 2 - 3).

Türkiye assisted in transporting military and non - military support to Syrian rebels and allied with the United States

against ISIS in the initial stages of the conflict. It allowed the United States to use the Turkish airbase "Incirlik" as a launching pad for its operations and military airstrikes against ISIS, giving Türkiye leverage as one of the international parties involved in the Syrian conflict. Simultaneously, Türkiye conducted airstrikes against ISIS targets and armed Kurdish groups. While both Türkiye and the United States were jointly attacking ISIS, Türkiye unilaterally bombed Kurdish forces allied with the United States. This led to political disagreement and a division between the two NATO allies. Türkiye continued to target Kurdish groups out of fear that these forces might succeed in establishing an independent entity in Syria, potentially leading to the partition of Syrian territories. This situation could serve as a nationalist inspiration for the Kurdish community in Türkiye, potentially causing internal discord and civil war (Haider and Khan, 2020: 406).

During its first years, the Syrian conflict led to the death of tens of thousands and the displacement of millions of refugees inside and outside the country. Therefore, on the international scene, talk began about the proposal to establish a "safe zone" inside Syria to protect Syrian refugees. This proposal clashed with the official position of the Syrian government, which remained strongly opposed to any an initiative of this kind, and a refusal to impose any safe zones on Syrian territory (Turan, 2021: 49). Countries neighboring Syria, with Türkiye being the foremost among them, were most affected by the negative consequences and security risks resulting from the Syrian civil war. Consequently, the issue of creating a safe zone has been a prominent part of Turkish political discourse since the early stages of the Syrian crisis. Türkiye was the first to propose the establishment of a safe zone in early 2012 as the influx of Syrian refugees into its territory increased. Ankara believed that creating such a zone would strengthen the Syrian opposition and support efforts to weaken and overthrow the Assad regime (Orhan, 2015: 2).

Türkiye was the most insistent and determined to establish a safe zone in northern Syria. Through diplomatic efforts, Türkiye sought to impose its plan for the safe zone on its international allies. It consistently called on major powers to support the imposition of a no - fly zone in northern Syria, using political rhetoric to highlight the benefits of such an operation, including containing refugee waves within Syria and hindering the passage of jihadists and extremists from Syria to Türkiye and onward to Western countries (Schuringa, 2016: 40 - 47). Prominent figures in Turkey's ruling party emphasized the humanitarian dimension and moral responsibility of the safe zone, and that its establishment should not depend on the UN Security Council resolution (Harunoğlu, 2019: 21).

Turkey's tireless efforts to convince the international community and major powers of the necessity of establishing a safe zone, and its efforts to provide international diplomatic and military support for Turkey to do so, stem from Ankara's awareness of the difficulty of Turkey implementing a no - fly zone and establishing a safe zone unilaterally without international legitimacy and broad Western support. Despite being a regional power, Türkiye ideally needed authorization from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (Schuringa, 2016: 12). However, in general, Türkiye's demands for the establishment of a no - fly zone or a "safe zone" did not receive a real response or support from the international community or any major power before 2016 (Yeşiltaş, 2015: 18 - 20).

Changes in Turkish policy towards the Syrian crisis (2015 - 2016):
It was difficult for Ankara to follow a stable policy towards the Syrian file, due to the lack of clarity of the intentions of other countries, and the uncertainty of the nature of the agenda of the actors in the Syrian arena at the national, regional and international levels. Despite this, it can be said that Turkey's main goals have not witnessed a significant change, but the circumstances and developments that the region has witnessed in the context of the continuation of the Syrian crisis have changed the methods and policy priorities that Türkiye follows to achieve its goals (Ataman & Özdemir, 2018: 18).

The change in priorities was linked to the interim requirements of the Turkish intervention in the Syrian crisis, and also to the emergence of local parties - specific organizations or parties - or the entry of international parties into the arena of the crisis. In the first phase, humanitarian standards dominated Türkiye's foreign policy towards the war in Syria. Its political efforts were primarily based on humanitarian intervention and reducing human losses among Syrian civilians, by assisting the Syrian opposition forces and supporting efforts to overthrow Assad politically and logistically. As for the proxy war with Iran and dealing with the ISIS threat remained secondary priorities at that stage. The goals remained stable in the second phase, but priorities changed, so combating the threat of extremist and terrorist organizations such as ISIS and PYD became a top priority for Türkiye, while all other goals became secondary (Ataman & Özdemir, 2018: 18). By tracking the course of Turkish policy, it can be said that Türkiye remained committed to overthrowing the Assad regime until the beginning of 2021, despite its unwillingness to sever relations with Iran (Mirza and Others, 2021: 46).

Gradually, over the years, each international party's affiliation with the supported Syrian faction became clearer. Türkiye remained the primary supporter of FSA, while the United States and Western countries supported the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Meanwhile, Russia continued to support the Syrian government forces and PYD, and Iran remained the main supporter of the Assad regime on the ground. The only common ground among these parties was their opposition to the ISIS organization (Demir and Yılmaz, 2020: 15).

Türkiye has consistently been a crucial sponsor of the Syrian rebellion, serving as the birthplace of FSA and hosting key institutions and figures of the Syrian political opposition. However, changes in the priorities and agendas of the intervening states in the Syrian conflict eventually led to Ankara becoming the sole supporter of the armed Syrian opposition. This shift occurred after Gulf countries and the United States gradually disengaged from the Syrian opposition post - 2015, the year when Russia directly intervened in favor of the Syrian regime, altering the political landscape in the Syrian scene. Türkiye gradually and

reluctantly assumed this role, and it was evident that it did so not in pursuit of Islamic ambitions or a "New Ottoman" agenda but in response to threats primarily related to its internal security, specifically Kurdish separatism and the influx of refugees (Pierret, 2021: 1).

The humanitarian and moral discourse remained dominant on the lips of Turkish officials until early 2016 (Harunoğlu, 2019: 21). However, Türkiye's motivations for establishing the safe zone began to shift in line with its political priorities (Adar, 2020: 1). Türkiye consistently renewed its calls for the establishment of a safe zone throughout the Syrian crisis. Over time, the objectives and motivations behind Türkiye's demand for a safe zone evolved. As terrorist organizations, according to Ankara's classification, approached and gained control of areas adjacent to the Turkish border in northern Syria, Türkiye's priority shifted to preserving the security of its borders and national security from any potential threat and penetration. After YPG took control of the city of Tel Abyad in June 2015, and with the advancement of ISIS towards Azaz, Türkiye reintroduced the issue of the safe zone, now referred to as a "terror - free zone". Türkiye proposed the creation of this zone along the border between the cities of Azaz and Jarablus (Orhan, 2015: 2).

The persistent issue of containing the flow of Syrian refugees remained a driving force for Türkiye to advocate for the establishment of a stable safe zone where displaced Syrians could seek refuge. The increasing number of Syrian refugees in Türkiye placed a growing burden on the economic and social life in the country. Additionally, Türkiye faced heightened security and political risks that the government had to address with greater caution and seriousness. Türkiye viewed the safe zone as a means to alleviate the burden on its shoulders and as a solution to the refugee issue, not only for Türkiye but also for Europe. Europe had started to complain about the influx of Syrian refugees heading towards EU countries. Neglecting the areas along the border and leaving them under the control of either ISIS or YPG would decrease the possibility of delivering international humanitarian aid to the internal regions of Syria. In fact, it might eliminate the possibility altogether, exacerbating the humanitarian situation (Orhan, 2015: 3).

The year 2016 marks a pivotal turning point in Turkish policy towards the Syrian crisis. Several internal and external factors converged, compelling Türkiye to act more boldly and decisively, and to take unilateral initiative without relying on the international community or Ankara's allies. Türkiye began to feel isolated in its Syria policy, with diminishing international support for its efforts to support the Syrian opposition in toppling the Assad regime, especially after direct Russian intervention in the war on Assad's side. Türkiye realized the futility of its firm stance in insisting primarily on overthrowing the Assad regime, as the balance of power began to tilt in his favor (OZAN, 2017: 39). Additionally, Türkiye no longer had time to address the looming security threat to its borders after The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) forces controlled most of the border areas with Türkiye, and the danger reached its territory after several suicide and missile attacks in which ISIS targeted several Turkish cities, such as;

Istanbul, Gaziantep, and Kilis in the years 2015 and 2016 (Yeşiltaş and Others, 2017: 14 - 16).

During the same period, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) intensified its attacks inside Türkiye, carrying out several terrorist attacks in Turkish cities. This occurred within the context of a "war of attrition" waged by the PKK to create internal security pressure on Türkiye, draining its security resources and diverting its focus away from northern Syria. This aimed to support the efforts of PKK's allies – PYD and the People's Protection Units (YPG) – in establishing autonomous governance in northern and eastern Syria. PKK exploited the state of war and armed conflict between its Syrian branch (PYD) and ISIS to expand geographically at the expense of ISIS - held territories, legitimizing this expansion internationally by capitalizing on the global consensus to combat ISIS as a terrorist organization. This served PKK's strategy to control areas extending along northern Syria, bordering Türkiye from Iraq to Afrin. Türkiye considers this region an integral part of its national and regional security (Yeşiltaş and Others, 2017: 16) .

Indeed, the hostile relationship between PYD and ISIS – both considered terrorist organizations from Ankara's perspective – altered the international view towards the parties involved in the Syrian conflict. Western countries began to view PYD and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), as legitimate actors deserving military support in their fight against ISIS. This stance was reinforced after YPG successfully repelled ISIS attempts to capture the city of Ain al - Arab (Kobani) in 2014. The international coalition led by the United States (US), established to combat ISIS, directly provided military assistance and support to YPG. Since then, the US has established military and strategic cooperation with PYD, which has continued to the present day (Ulutaş, 2017: 13). This development has provoked Türkiye's dissatisfaction and concerns regarding US policy. Türkiye strongly criticized the US for its perceived double standards in supporting one terrorist organization against another, as well as its reliance on Kurdish armed groups in the fight against ISIS instead of cooperating with Türkiye, its NATO ally and a member of the international coalition against ISIS, this is in addition to the US' repeated rejection of Turkish demands to impose an aerial blockade to neutralize the Syrian regime's air superiority, which would reduce the movement of Syrian refugees into Turkish territory (Pelino, 2018: 6).

These accumulated and successive factors and events necessitated a radical change in Turkish political leadership's policy, adopting a new realistic policy that deals more effectively and seriously with the developments of the current situation, and follows strategies that are compatible with the changing circumstances. This new policy focuses on priority objectives for its national security, such as border security, and relinquishes the goal of regime change in Damascus as a top priority in the Turkish agenda, despite Türkiye not abandoning its stance against Assad. The resignation of Ahmet Davutoğlu from the prime ministership and the assumption of office by Binali Yıldırım in May 2016 represented the practical starting point and indicator of change for this policy towards the Syrian file) Ozan, 2017: 39 - 40) .

This gradual shift in Turkish policy coincided with the partial closure implemented by Ankara on the Syrian border in March 2015, abandoning the "open door" policy it had followed since the beginning of the war. Not stopping there, Turkish authorities began constructing a concrete wall along its border with Syria, with a length of 764 km. This massive project covers most of the Turkish - Syrian border, which is 911 km long (Adar, 2020: 2).

Turkish policy accompanying military intervention (2016 - 2021):

Thus, in 2016, Türkiye found itself caught between an ally unsympathetic to its needs – US – in eastern Euphrates, and a strong competitor – Russia – in the Syrian territories west of the Euphrates (Stanicek, 2019: 2), This is in addition to a growing competitive Iranian presence that was supportive of Türkiye's adversary, the Assad regime. Tensions were predominant in Turkish - Iranian relations at that time (Pelino, 2018: 7) This sense of growing danger in northern Syria, coupled with Ankara's feeling of international isolation and frustration over the US' disregard for its security and regional concerns, ultimately led Türkiye to take direct military action and enter the Syrian scene as a real player on the ground to secure its borders and neutralize the terrorist threat that posed a threat to its national security. This action took the form of consecutive military operations: "Operation Euphrates Shield" (OES), which began on August 24, 2016, executed by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) in cooperation with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and with support from the air elements of the international coalition. This operation was primarily aimed at ISIS. Then, TAF and the FSA carried out "Operation Olive Branch" (OOB) on January 20, 2018, targeting control over Afrin in northwest Syria and driving out the militias of SDF. The latest operation, carried out on October 9, 2019, under the name "Operation Peace Spring" (OPS) saw Turkish army collaborating with FSA against SDF (Polat, 2020: 58).

The main and common goal of all these operations was to push terrorist organizations away from the border and prevent their attacks on Turkish border provinces, as well as to cut off the corridor along the eastern - western line in northern Syria, thereby thwarting attempts to establish an independent Kurdish region under the administration of PYD and SDF)YEŞILTAŞ and Others, 2017: 16) . Ultimately, as a natural result of the military operations, Türkiye would be able to establish a safe zone in the geographic area controlled by Turkish forces in collaboration with Syrian opposition fighters [The Syrian National Army (SNA)], presenting it as a comprehensive solution to the Syrian refugee crisis by containing them within protected areas managed by Syrian opposition institutions [The Syrian National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCS) and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG)] under Turkish supervision (Çevik, 2022: 2). and the goal of establishing a safe zone for Syrian refugees and opponents of the Assad regime was not less important than other objectives for Türkiye (Yeşiltaş and Others, 2017: 16).

The stance of international parties and their handling of Kurdish political and armed organizations in the Syrian arena is the primary determinant of the course of Turkey's new policy, which considers this issue the most sensitive regarding its national security. Therefore, Ankara's choices and scenarios for alliance and alignment with one or some of these parties against others centrally depend on the extent of agreement on the unity and integrity of Syrian territory and the rejection of establishing a self - governing Kurdish entity within Syria. The key international actors involved in the Syrian scene are Russia, Iran, and the US. It was necessary for Ankara to pursue a balanced and cautious policy that considers the agendas of these parties while simultaneously ensuring Turkey's interests and protecting its national security. This involved leveraging the common ground Ankara shares with Moscow, Tehran, and Washington, and playing on the varying interests and agendas of these capitals in Syria (Güner & Koç, 2017: 127 - 128).

By 2016, Turkey sought to overcome its isolation in foreign policy, starting by improving relations with Russia. The Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, sent a message to the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, aimed at easing tensions between the two countries after the incident of shooting down the Russian aircraft. Through this reconciliation with Russia, Turkey aimed to play a more influential role in addressing security issues in Syria and to pave the way for its military intervention in coordination and cooperation with a strong ally in the Syrian arena. This indeed led to the successful execution of the OES. Additionally, the reconciliation with Russia enabled Turkey to play a significant role in the "Astana Peace Process, " overseeing the ceasefire as an international guarantor for the Syrian opposition (Ozan, 2017: 44).

Within the framework of the "gaining friends" policy, Ankara pursued another parallel policy based on "multilateralism in foreign policy and international cooperation, " to enable Turkey to achieve a political balance through which it could benefit from all international parties, while simultaneously making these parties reliant on Turkey as an indispensable partner. Turkey demonstrated a commitment not to depend solely on one superpower or a single international alliance for security matters. Despite being a NATO member, Turkey has frequently sought non - Western alliances, viewing the security guarantees offered by the West as insufficient and feeling that Western countries do not consider Turkish security sensitivities and concerns. However, alongside this, Ankara aimed to maintain its position and partnership with Western allies. Even as it sought to improve and develop its partnership with Russia—the West's main adversary—Turkey showed no intention of leaving NATO or any other Western organization. Turkish multilateral policy was not limited to superpowers; it also worked on enhancing communications and improving relations with regional actors such as Israel, Egypt, the Gulf countries, and Iraq (Ozan, 2017: 45).

Starting from Turkey's understanding of the nature of its relations with Moscow, and because it wanted to avoid the risk of relying on a unilateral relationship with a superpower like Russia, as well as wanting to avoid increasingly provoking the US due to its closeness with Russia, Turkey sought to improve its relations with Washington to achieve a balance against its relationship with Moscow. Turkey took advantage of the arrival of the new administration in the White House with the election of President Donald Trump, leveraging President Trump's political orientation which tended to focus on traditional U. S. allies in the Middle East.

Turkey indeed succeeded in making significant progress in coordination with the US on the Syrian file despite serious disagreements regarding U. S. support for the PYD/YPG (Ozan, 2017: 46). This Turkish - American cooperation was clearly demonstrated in OPS and its aftermath (iMMAP, 2019: 17).

Through its balanced policy, Turkey was able to assert its regional and international role as an integral part of the Syrian conflict equation, securing for itself a seat at the international negotiating table alongside Russia and the US. Turkey portrayed itself as an indispensable power to both Washington and Moscow, eventually reaching effective agreements with these superpowers (Siccardi, 2021: 23). OPS represents the pinnacle of success of the "balance and multilateralism" policy pursued by Turkish diplomacy during the Syrian crisis. During this operation, Turkey managed to conclude two simultaneous agreements with the US and Russia. The Turkish - American agreement was signed on October 17, 2019, to mend relations between Turkey and NATO, where the United States acknowledged Turkey's legitimate security interests along its southern borders, thereby also legitimizing Turkish military operations. The US also accepted the establishment of a safe zone and emphasized its importance. Five days later, on October 22, 2019, Turkey reached an agreement with Russia regarding the Turkish military intervention in Syria. The Turkish - Russian agreement supported maintaining the new status quo created by the Turkish military operations. The agreement stipulated that the Turkish operation area would extend 30 km deep into Syrian territory and 480 km along the Turkish - Syrian border, and that Turkish - Russian joint patrols would be conducted outside the OPS area, 10 km from the Turkish - Syrian border. Additionally, both parties committed to combating terrorism and encouraging the safe and voluntary return of refugees (Szénási, 2019: 3 - 4).

Many international attempts and initiatives were made to find a political solution to the Syrian conflict after 2011, and numerous mediation efforts were executed in an attempt to end the conflict. The collective term for these initiatives and mediations was dubbed the "Syrian peace process". Among the most prominent initiatives and attempts were the Geneva Process in Syria and the Vienna Peace Process in 2015 (Cengiz, 2020: 2 - 7). International failure encouraged the initiation of new initiatives aimed at resolving or at least managing and freezing the conflict. This paved the way for the launch of the Astana Peace Process, also known as the Astana Platform. After the success of intensive talks between Turkey and Russia, resulting in an agreement to cease hostilities in Aleppo in December 2016, which allowed the safe evacuation of over 45, 000 civilians from the city, a nationwide ceasefire was subsequently implemented. Following this, Turkey, Russia, and Iran began organizing high - level meetings in the Kazakh capital, Astana, since January 2017, to maintain the ceasefire and ensure the adoption of confidence - building measures between the conflicting parties. One of the outcomes of the Astana Platform was the designation of De - escalation areas and the establishment of the Constitutional Committee. The three countries acted as guarantors of the process and agreements, with Turkey representing the Syrian opposition, and Russia

and Iran representing the Syrian regime (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

The Astana Platform proved to be the only international initiative that made a tangible contribution to resolving the Syrian conflict and producing positive outcomes that mitigate the losses and damages of the conflict. The frustration with the West's handling of the Syrian crisis served as a unifying factor for Turkey, Russia, and Iran, even though their interests and agendas differed. This led them to engage in the Astana Process in 2017 to manage the conflict in line with their national and security interests (Michiels and Kızılkaya, 2022: 3 - 18). The military presence of the Astana trio - Turkey, Iran, and Russia - provided the necessary strength and effectiveness for these guarantor states to implement the terms and outcomes of the negotiations on the Syrian battlefield. They succeeded in establishing four "de - escalation zones, " securing relative stability within them, and restricting the use of force by the conflicting parties - the Syrian regime and the Syrian opposition - leading to a freezing of the conflict (Michiels and Kızılkaya, 2022: 1 - 3).

After 2017, the US began gradually withdrawing from the Syrian file both politically and militarily. In December 2018, following the achievement of the primary objective of defeating ISIS, President Donald Trump unilaterally ordered the withdrawal of US ground forces from Syria. However, the US later announced on February 22, 2019, that instead of a complete withdrawal, it would keep a small emergency force stationed in Syria, and its withdrawal would be partial and conditional. Nevertheless, the withdrawal of most US forces from Syria in 2019 marked a significant turning point for Western intervention in the Syrian conflict. Other parties, especially Turkey and Russia, benefited from this withdrawal. Turkey exploited the American withdrawal to launch its offensive in northeast Syria in October 2019. Overall, the sudden withdrawal of most US forces in 2019 accelerated the marginalization of Western countries, paving the way for Turkey, Russia, and Iran to consolidate their roles and enhance their military and political presence in Syria, thereby increasing their control over the Syrian conflict (Klaz and Mariani, 2022: 8 - 9).

Despite sharing motivations with the guarantor states of the Astana agreement, Turkey's interests and goals differ. Among the three countries, Turkey has been the most adversely affected by the Syrian crisis, suffering economically, socially, and in terms of security due to the influx of Syrian refugees and the terrorist attacks resulting from the Syrian conflict. Turkey's primary goal in engaging in the Astana process was to reduce the costs of the Syrian crisis and ensure its security and national interests (Cengiz, 2020: 10). Additionally, Turkey aimed to support relative stability in areas of Syria under the control of the Syrian opposition, in order to establish a safe zone conducive to stability and security. This would enable Turkey to implement deep administrative and service reforms in those areas to accommodate war refugees and prepare them for permanent settlement. Furthermore, Turkey sought to initiate deep political reforms in Syria through the negotiation process in Astana. Turkish officials reiterated the necessity of introducing democratic mechanisms into governance in Syria, thereby involving the

Syrian opposition in power alongside the Syrian regime (Klaz and Mariani, 2022: 15).

Turkish initiatives and attempts at normalization with the Assad regime (2022 - 2023):

After nearly 12 years since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Turkey has begun attempting to normalize relations with the Assad regime, at least trying to implement a partial political opening with Damascus. Ankara worked to enhance the discourse of normalization and intensify its movements and diplomatic efforts in this direction. This step taken by Ankara represents a significant turning point in its general policies towards the Syrian crisis. Turkey, as the biggest and most important supporter of the Syrian opposition, seeking normalization with the Assad regime will have direct implications on the reality of the Syrian conflict and its parties. Although Turkey is the last country to resort to normalization with the Assad regime, it is politically and internationally expected, given the magnitude of the differences between the two parties. However, Turkey's adoption of a normalization policy was not unexpected or surprising, as changes in the Syrian conflict equation and realistic requirements compelled Turkey to change its policy towards the Syrian crisis as it did before in 2016 (Cengiz, 2023).

The first of these realistic changes that pushed Turkey towards normalization was the Syrian regime's emergence by the end of 2019 as a militarily victorious party in the conflict, after regaining control of most Syrian territories it had previously lost. With the assistance of Russia and Iran, the regime managed to expel Syrian opposition forces from these areas. This prompted many Arab and European countries to begin the normalization process with the Damascus regime, in response to the dictates of the current situation (Cengiz, 2023). Moreover, Turkey's abandonment of the goal of toppling Assad as a primary objective in favor of national security priorities—border security and counterterrorism—in 2016 gradually paved the way for the option of normalization later on. This was another Turkish response to the changing dynamics of the Syrian crisis after 2020 (Lister, 2023: 1).

One of the direct reasons that prompted the Turkish government to expedite the normalization process with the Syrian regime was the approaching presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey, scheduled for May 2023. The issue of Syrian refugees emerged as the most prominent electoral card in the campaign rhetoric and political agendas of Turkish opposition parties, especially amidst a significant increase in the inflation rate approaching 90% and rapidly rising prices. This led to an economic crisis in the country, burdening Turkish citizens, which consequently influenced the opinions and inclinations of the Turkish public. The Turkish opposition took advantage of the dire economic situation and made Syrian refugees a primary cause of the deteriorating economic conditions and high unemployment rates. They intensified their focus on the refugee issue as a core component of their campaign against the ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), aiming to attract Turkish voters who were increasingly discontented with the growing number of Syrian refugees and others in the country (Lister, 2023: 2).

In general, the factors that prompted Turkey to engage in direct talks with the Syrian regime are :

1) Facilitating and expediting the process of Syrian refugee return from Turkey to Syria before the presidential elections, through agreement and coordination with the Assad regime in this regard .
2) Enhancing the security of the Turkish border and protecting it from emerging challenges and volatile situations in Syria .
3) Opening up avenues for joint coordination with the Syrian regime to eliminate the threat posed by the Syrian branch of PKK (PYD/YPG/SDF) in Syria. Turkey sees that normalizing relations with the Syrian regime would reduce the options of Kurdish self - administration in northeastern Syria and deprive them of a potential ally - the Assad regime (Cengiz, 2023).

Since the beginning of 2022, there have been ongoing indicators suggesting Turkey's serious move towards normalization with the Syrian regime. Details and developments of this normalization process have emerged, with numerous statements from Turkish officials, culminating in actual meetings between Turkish officials and officials from the Assad regime, mediated and sponsored by Russia (IMMAP, 2022: 8).

On August 19, 2022, the Turkish President announced that Ankara was not seeking to overthrow Bashar al - Assad. On August 22, the head of the Turkish intelligence agency met with his Syrian counterpart in Moscow. The Turkish Foreign Minister stated on August 23 that Turkey had no preconditions for starting dialogue with Damascus but emphasized that the talks should be purposeful. In response, the Syrian Foreign Minister stated on the same day that his government wanted to see an end to Turkish military presence on Syrian soil and an end to Ankara's intervention in Syrian affairs and support for opposition groups. On September 15, the heads of the Turkish and Syrian intelligence services, Hakan Fidan and Ali Mamluk, met again in Damascus. The next day, the Turkish Foreign Minister described the Syrian regime's demands regarding the withdrawal of Turkish forces from Syrian territory as unrealistic. President Erdogan stated on October 6 that he would meet with the Syrian President when the time was right. On October 12, 2022, the Turkish Foreign Minister stated that reconciliation between the opposition and the Syrian regime alone could achieve stability in Syria. Then, the spokesperson for the Turkish presidency stated on October 18 that Ankara had no plans for direct contact with Damascus (IMMAP, 2022: 8 - 9).

At the end of the year, the normalization process reached a significant development with the unexpected visit of the Turkish Minister of Defense, Hulusi Akar, and the head of Turkish intelligence, Hakan Fidan, to Moscow on December 28, 2022. They met with their Syrian counterparts under Russian sponsorship and facilitation. This meeting was the first of its kind at this official and diplomatic level, following Turkey's severance of its political relations with the Syrian regime in 2011 (Cengiz, 2023).

Damascus's primary interest in this rapprochement and normalization is to end Turkey's support for the Syrian military and political opposition. It also seeks to pressure

Turkey into pushing the Syrian opposition to accept an agreement with the regime that keeps Assad in power and as the dominant figure in Syria. The Syrian regime also wants to unify efforts with Turkey against the perceived common enemy, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and the U. S. presence in northeastern Syria, in addition to mutual economic interests related to opening borders, crossings, and trade. However, the main obstacle to the success of normalization remains the issue of Syrian refugees and how to facilitate their return to their country. Turkey continues to demand that the regime take serious steps to ensure the safety of refugees to encourage their return, which the Syrian regime avoids and ignores. The second obstacle lies in the regime's continued insistence on the complete withdrawal of Turkish forces before Turkey receives security guarantees to ensure its national security, border integrity, especially with regard to the self - administration of the SDF, and prevent future waves of refugees, complicating negotiations further. Additionally, Turkey is expected to face disagreements regarding its support for the Syrian opposition, as it does not want to lose what it has heavily invested in since 2011 (Al - Ghazi, 2023). For these reasons, Ankara vehemently rejects discussing Damascus's precondition for normalizing relations, which is the complete withdrawal of Turkish forces from Syrian territories (Khalifa, 2023).

The victory of Erdogan and his party in the presidential and parliamentary elections held in May 2023 did not significantly affect Turkey's policy in Syria. For the Syrian opposition and Syrian refugees who were concerned about the consequences of the Turkish opposition's victory, Erdogan's win provided them with some relief. On the other hand, those who support the regime or the Syrian Democratic Forces had little reason to celebrate. Ankara's priorities in Syria remained unchanged, focusing on addressing the perceived threat from the SDF and halting the regime's offensive in Idlib, which could lead to further displacement towards Turkey (Khalifa, 2023).

it remains more likely that Syrian - Turkish talks will stumble, and their results will remain temporary and partial due to ongoing disagreements between Ankara and Damascus over issues that may not be fully resolved or agreed upon. The issues at hand are extremely complex, multi - layered, and protracted. Therefore, the parties involved may opt for piecemeal and unilateral solutions instead of a framework that paves the way for a more comprehensive and enduring resolution. However, it is unlikely that a gradual approach will lead to significant changes in the current situation, which, in its current form, satisfies neither Turkey nor the central authorities in Syria. Deep change will necessarily require understanding and cooperation between Turkey and Syria, with support and mediation from Iran and Russia. The possibility of reaching an agreement is enhanced through Russia's role as a mediator, its efforts to undermine Western interests in Syria, and its goal of achieving diplomatic victory through repairing relations between Syria and Turkey (Al - Wahibi and Tokmajyan, 2023).

2. Conclusion

The Syrian crisis, which began in March 2011, has become one of the most influential developments on Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. This is due to the civil war evolving into a proxy war involving many regional and international actors. Turkey quickly found itself facing two main threats: the large influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey and the emergence of terrorist organizations, from Ankara's perspective, in Syria controlling areas bordering Turkey. This made the Syrian crisis a decisive factor in Turkish foreign policy and national security for years to come .

in the first ten years of the Syrian crisis, Turkey's main goals did not undergo significant changes. However, the circumstances and developments in the region, in the context of the ongoing crisis, changed Turkey's priorities and political approach to achieving its goals. The change in priorities was linked to the interim requirements during the Turkish intervention in the Syrian crisis, as well as the emergence of local actors—specific organizations or parties—or the involvement of international parties in the Syrian conflict .

Humanitarian standards dominated Turkey's foreign policy towards the war in Syria in its early years. Its efforts primarily focused on reducing civilian casualties among Syrians and providing humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees. Turkey also adopted a political stance aligned with the international community in general and Western countries in particular, calling for and working towards the overthrow of the Assad regime, and providing political, military, and logistical support to Syrian opposition forces and institutions .

Turkey saw the most important step in contributing to the resolution of the Syrian crisis and avoiding its humanitarian and security repercussions as the establishment of a safe and buffer zone within Syrian territory. Since 2012, Turkey has been one of the earliest and most ardent advocates for the creation of a safe zone. The issue of containing the influx of Syrian refugees remained a constant driver for Turkey towards establishing a stable safe zone for displaced Syrians. Ankara also considered that the creation of such a zone would strengthen the Syrian opposition and support efforts to topple the Assad regime .

Turkey's goals remained stable in the second phase that began in 2015, but with changing priorities. Combating the threat of extremist and terrorist organizations like ISIS and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) became the primary and most important objective instead of overthrowing Assad. Ankara focused on maintaining the security of its borders and national security from any potential threats. It ended the "open - door" policy in 2015 after the rapid increase in the number of refugees. Turkey continued to insist on the establishment of a safe zone, although the main motivations for this demand changed in line with Turkey's shifting priorities. Diplomatically, it tried to impose a plan for creating the safe zone on its international allies, but it did not find international support and acceptance for its efforts to establish the safe zone, even from its NATO allies .

The year 2016 marked a pivotal turning point in Turkey's policy towards the Syrian crisis. Several internal and external factors converged, compelling Turkey to act more boldly and independently, without relying on the international community or Ankara's allies. The waning international interest in overthrowing Assad and the declining support for

the Syrian opposition, coupled with Turkey's sense of isolation in its Syrian policy, especially after Russia's direct intervention in the war alongside Assad, played a significant role. Additionally, Turkey became increasingly frustrated with the double standards practiced by Western countries regarding terrorist organizations in the Syrian conflict, particularly the deliberate disregard by the United States for Ankara's security concerns about Kurdish armed groups in Syria, as well as the political and military support provided by the U. S. to these groups .

After the Democratic Union Party (PYD) /People's Protection Units (YPG) crossing all red lines and terrorist attacks reaching Turkish territory, Turkey could no longer avoid direct military intervention in the Syrian conflict. This included joint military operations by Turkish Armed Forces and Syrian opposition forces within Syrian territory. These operations, conducted between 2016 and 2019, aimed to establish a safe zone controlled and managed by the Syrian opposition under direct Turkish protection .

The success of Turkish military operations primarily depended on the consent or cooperation of the major powers involved in Syria, namely the United States and Russia. Ankara followed a balanced and cautious policy that considered the agendas of both Moscow and Washington while ensuring Turkey's interests and national security. This was achieved by leveraging common interests and mutual benefits that Ankara had with both Moscow and Washington, and by exploiting the divergent interests and agendas of these capitals in Syria. Turkey later benefited from the waning international interest and the gradual U. S. withdrawal from Syria. It engaged in a collaborative effort with Russia and Iran to manage the Syrian crisis within the framework of the Astana peace process, resulting in significant outcomes such as ceasefire agreements and the delineation of de - escalation zones. Turkey played its role as a guarantor state representing the Syrian opposition in these agreements .

After ten years since the start of the Syrian crisis, Turkish policy towards Syria entered a third phase, characterized by attempts to restore and normalize relations with the Syrian regime. Thus, Turkish policy towards Syria shifted from seeking to overthrow Assad to abandoning the goal of his ouster as a primary objective and then attempting to normalize relations with Assad's regime. This change in Turkey's stance came within the framework of the "zero problems" and "making friends" policy adopted towards the Middle East since 2021. Despite mutual statements between Ankara and Damascus on this issue and practical steps towards normalization taken during 2022, which developed into high - level diplomatic and military meetings between representatives of the Ankara and Damascus governments, the normalization process has yet to be completed. The anticipated meeting between Presidents Erdogan and Assad has not taken place, and the normalization process remains stalled without any progress due to faltering negotiations between the two sides. This impasse is exacerbated by Ankara's rejection of Damascus's unrealistic preconditions and Erdogan's hesitation to proceed with normalization after winning the Turkish presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2023. The prospects remain contingent on Turkey's relationship with the Syrian regime and the progress or regression of the normalization process between the two countries.

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