

‘Soft Tensions’ on the Eastern Mediterranean and Reflections on Turkish Diplomacy: Meis and Samos Island Cases in the 1920-1930s

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Abstract

This study focuses on the diplomatic responses of Turkey to the power struggles on the Eastern Mediterranean during the interwar period. After the Lausanne Treaty in 1923, Turkey had to tackle with the unsettled territorial border questions with the Great Powers. Specifically, the Mousul dispute with Britain and Alexandria dispute with France have long been discussed. However, the maritime border questions in the same period have not attracted much scholarly attention. Taking into account the delicate balances on the Aegean Sea and its significance for the Eastern Mediterranean politics in the interwar period, this study analyzes the diplomatic responses of Turkey to this issue. Two major ‘soft tension’ cases on the Aegean are examined in depth in reference to the historical sources, namely the Meis Island (Castellorizo) tension with Italy and Samos incident with Britain. These cases are elucidated in the framework of the “soft tension” notion, which is introduced to the literature as a new analytical instrument. The Turkish diplomatic attitude in regard to these maritime tensions is described in reference to a position which is called “defensive proactivity”. It is argued that managing these soft tensions with the Great Powers during the critical atmosphere of the interwar era contributed to the diplomatic competences of Turkey as one of the new actors of the international order. So that it was able to follow a more competent strategy during the Second World War.

Keywords

Eastern Mediterranean, Aegean, Turkish diplomacy, soft tension, interwar period.

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Doğu Akdeniz’de ‘Yumuşak Gerilimler’ ve Türk Diplomasisine Yansımaları: 1920 ve 1930’larda Meis ve Samos Adası Vakaları

Özet

Bu çalışma Türkiye’nin İki Savaş arası dönemde Doğu Akdeniz’deki iktidar mücadelelerine verdiği diplomatik yanıtlara odaklanmaktadır. 1923 Lozan Antlaşmasından sonra, Türkiye Büyük Güçlerle çözülemeyen kara sınırları sorunuyla uğraşmak durumunda kalmıştır. Özellikle İngiltere’yle olan Musul sorunu ve Fransa’yla olan Hatay sorunu uzunca tartışılmıştır. Ancak aynı dönemdeki deniz sınırı meseleleri akademik düzlemde pek tartışılmamıştır. Ege Denizi’ndeki hassas dengeleri ve bunun İki Savaş arası dönemde Doğu Akdeniz politikası açısından önemini dikkate alan bu çalışma, Türkiye’nin bu meseleye diplomatik yanıtlarını analiz etmektedir. İtalya ile Meis (Castellorizo) ve İngiltere’yle Samos vakaları olmak üzere Ege’de iki önemli ‘yumuşak gerilim’ vakası tarihi kaynaklara referansla derinlemesine incelenmiştir. Bu vakalar literatüre yeni bir analitik kavram olarak sunulan ‘yumuşak gerilim’ kavramı çerçevesinde izah edilmiştir. Türk diplomasisinin bu karasuları gerilimleri karşısındaki tavrı ‘savunmacı etkinlik’ kavramı üzerinden tanımlanmıştır. İki Savaş arası dönemin kritik atmosferinde Büyük Güçlerle bu ‘yumuşak gerilimleri’ yönetmenin, uluslararası düzenin yeni aktörlerinden biri olarak Türkiye’nin diplomatik kapasitesini geliştirmesine ve böylece İkinci Dünya Savaşı sürecinde daha yetkin bir strateji izleyebilmesine olanak sağladığı öne sürülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Doğu Akdeniz, Ege, Türk diplomasisi, yumuşak gerilim, iki savaş arası dönem.

1. Introduction

Profound reflections on the notion of power in diplomacy leads to the suggestion of more elaborate and sophisticated concepts as alternative analytical instruments. The role of postmodern literature on power is undeniable in these new openings.¹ The “soft tension” concept is introduced here as a specific means of power exertion, by which the conflicting parties test one another to decide on whether to maintain, regenerate or violate the status-quo. These tensions usually take the form of military show offs between the conflicting parties or harsh debates touching upon the achilles’ heels of the adversary. In this sense, soft tensions can be regarded as one of the most common cases of international

1 Jan Selby, “Engaging Foucault: Discourse, liberal governance and the limits of Foucauldian IR”, *International Relations*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (September-October 2007), pp. 324-345.

diplomacy. The history of international relations is deplete with these kinds of soft tensions. However, these soft tensions are usually taken in isolation and discussed in reference to the peculiar dynamics of the bilateral or multilateral conflict at hand. Alternatively, it is suggested here that general conceptual references of the soft tensions should also be worked out as an independent analytical unit in itself. In other words, diplomatic significance of the soft tensions is still a hanging question on the analytical level. In that sense, this study has a dual purpose; to introduce the concept of “soft tension” to the diplomacy literature to conceptualize the way how states manage the most delicate conflicts and to examine the way how the newly established Turkish Republic responded these tensions during the interwar period.

Although the soft tensions can be easily recognized, they can not be conceptually framed so easily. A number of factors can be put forward as the reasons behind this conceptual elusiveness. First, it should be admitted that the motives behind each soft tension are so unique that it is hard to make generalizations. Second, soft tensions are usually taken into account when legal or institutional forms of conflict resolution intervene or it turns to close combat by further escalation. Otherwise, they are regarded as temporary fluctuations of international relations. For this reason, they are usually excluded from conceptual analysis. They are not treated as a diplomatical analysis unit in themselves. However, this study suggests that irrespective of the descriptive story behind the conflict at hand, soft tensions function as influential policy instruments in themselves. As a destabilizing force, soft tension provides a ground for the parties to make a decision on the maintenance, regeneration or violation of status-quo in bilateral or multilateral relations.

Border conflicts constitute the usual cause of soft tensions between the states. Therefore, the border questions, especially the maritime border conflicts constitute the main area of this study. As observed in current international politics, delimitation question on the Eastern Mediterranean gave way to a series of soft tensions, where the parties explicitly display their military strength against the other party or parties as a thinly-veiled threat.² Similar kinds of soft tensions arise in regard to the airspaces as well. These kinds of soft tensions occur when one or the other party flies over a contested zone of airspace. Especially, the dog fights between the neighbouring states is the most explicit example of these kinds of tensions. Weigand’s qualitative work reveals that the average duration of territorial disputes in the world is fifty three years and their endurance prolonged

2 Eric R. Eissler and Gözde Arasil, “Maritime Boundary Delimitation in the Eastern Mediterranean: A New Conflict between Cyprus, Turkey, Greece and Israel?”, *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 159, No. 2, (May 2014), pp. 74-80.

due to several unresolution positions adopted by the states.³ This quantitative data indicate two facts about the soft tensions in general. First, following a recurrent pattern, most soft tensions are stretched over a long-time period. Second, soft tensions do not necessarily give way to close combat, if the parties take an unresolution position. This unresolution alternative demonstrates that the diplomatic inactivities of the conflicting parties are as meaningful as their activities. However, interpreting this unresolution position requires a more complex analysis. Literally speaking, such an analytical endeavour means to read between the lines in the absence of the retaliation actions between the parties to comment on. If the parties take this unresolution position, the soft tension usually inflames the public agenda, the matter is discussed on the media for a while and forgotten until another inflammation in a recurrent pattern. The conflicting parties may not even take formal diplomatic initiatives like diplomatic notes, ultimatums or negotiations. If the parties take such a stance, soft tensions can serve well for the maintenance of status-quo, though it may sound like a paradoxical statement.

The kind of soft tensions described here refers neither to a state of inertia nor to a serious military action in the form of close combat but a policy of temporary escalation to see what to do about the existing status-quo. By these tensions, the parties can see the new challenges or opportunities in the contested area. These soft tensions can be artificially created or perpetuated on the military field or in other fields as well.⁴ Or sometimes they can genuinely spark off strong reactions and escalate the conflict. In any case, these soft tensions can be evaluated as special diplomatic moves by which the conflicting parties experience their own limits and that of the adversary. So that they can understand how far they can proceed to change the status-quo for their advantage or where they should retreat taking into account certain restraining factors. Indeed, these back and forth movements of the parties in a tension or in a series of tensions provide a venue for the parties to renegotiate their positions in regard to the status-quo. So that the diplomatic parties can make a decision about what to do with the existing balances. They can maintain the balances, or status-quo in other other word, by retreating to their original position after the temporary escalation. Alternatively, they can change the balances and regenerate the status-quo in a different form. Or, they further escalate the tension and transform the situation into a close combat. The below table is a conscience account of the soft tension as an analytical category.

3 Krista E. Wiegand, *Enduring Territorial Disputes: Strategies of bargaining, coercive diplomacy, and settlement*, Georgia, University of Georgia Press, 2011, 86.

4 Bahar Rumelili, "Liminality and Perpetuation of Conflicts: Turkish-Greek relations in the context of community-building by the EU", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 9, No. 2, (June 2003), pp. 213-248.

Table 1. Soft Tensions According to their Frequency, Course, Resolution and Diplomatic Outcomes

Frequency	Potential Courses	Resolution Alternatives	Potential Diplomatic Outcomes
Recurrent Soft Tension	Unresolution, Escalation, Close Combat	Formal Diplomacy, Legal Agreement, Public Discussions	Maintenance, Regeneration, Violation of Status-quo
One off Soft Tension	Unresolution, Escalation, Close Combat	Formal Diplomacy, Legal Agreement, Public Discussions	Maintenance, Regeneration, Violation of Status-quo

Parallel to this analytical framework, this study examines two soft tension cases in which Turkey was a party. One is the Meis Island tension with Italy and the other one is the Samos Island incident with Britain. While the Meis case is an example of a recurrent soft tension fixed by a legal agreement, Samos case is a one off tension that was resolved by formal diplomatic meetings. Both cases enabled the engaged parties to renegotiate their bilateral relations and to revise their position in regard to the regional politics.

1. The Meis Island Tension with Italy

The question of Aegean Islands was settled by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty signed to conclude the First World War between Turkey and the Great Powers along with Greece. According to the Lausanne Treaty, the Eastern Aegean Islands were left to Greece, the Dodecanesse Islands were left to Italy and Turkey got the Islands geographically affiliated with the Straits, namely Imros (Gökçeada), Thenedos (Bozcada) and Neandros (Tavşan Adaları).⁵ According to this Settlement, Meis Island came under Italian rule along with the Dodecanese Islands. This settlement put Turkey into a constant alert position in regard to the Aegean Islands because of their geographical proximity to the Anatolian shores. Therefore, the young Republican regime in Turkey took extra measures to maintain national security after the Lausanne Treaty. Although the demilitarized status of the Aegean Islands was fixed theoretically in the Lausanne Treaty in 1923, the security concerns continued in practice. Especially, the militarization of the Dodecanes by the revisionist Italy and the common military drills of

5 Hüseyin Pazarcı, *Dođu Ege Adalarının Askerden Arındırılmış Statüsü*, Ankara, Ankara Üniversitesi Basın-Yayın Yüksekokulu, 1986, 7-9.

Greece and Britain on the Eastern Aegean Islands drew the attention of Turkish Government to these Islands.

The Turkish Delegation in Lausanne had tried hard to obtain especially the Meis Island, because of its strategic position. The Head of Italian delegation Mr. Montagna assured İsmet Pasha, the head of the Turkish delegation, that they would not pose any threat to Turkey from this Island. After long discussions, İsmet Pasha concluded that this Island was one of the natural extensions of Anatolia, however they gave up their sovereign rights on this Island for the sake of peace in the world.⁶ İsmet Pasha was well aware of the strategic position of the Aegean Islands. Different sorts of struggles for these Islands by the Great Powers during the interwar period proved İsmet Pasha right. The maintenance of peace in the whole Eastern Mediterranean region was dependent on the maintenance of balances among the Great Powers on these Islands. In fact, the Lausanne settlement had established a system of balances between Britain and Italy on the Aegean. In this conjuncture, the newly established Turkish Republic was searching ways to display its strength and consolidate its own position, while fine-tuning among the Great Powers at the same time.

It is observed that the early Republican regime made occasional appearances on the Aegean, throughout the 1920s and 1930s to remind the Great Powers about its existence as an equal and independent player in the regional politics. Shortly after the conclusion of the Lausanne Treaty, Turkey claimed sovereignty on the islets encircling the Meis Island. Turkey argued that the status of the islets were not decided by the Lausanne Treaty. For this reason, Turkish authorities did not recognize the Italian sovereignty over the islets around Meis. In addition, Turkish authorities reminded that the smuggling activities directed from this Island to the Anatolia shores may lead to diplomatic tensions. The smuggling activities between this Island and the *Kaş* district on the Anatolian shores could hardly be prevented at that time.⁷ However, the key concern of the Turkish government was to be able take its guard against the Italian military threat rather than preventing smuggling.

After the Lausanne Treaty, the Italian Delegate in the Lausanne Conference Cesare Montagna was appointed to Ankara as the Italian Ambassador and the mutual declarations of good will followed one another to improve the bilateral relations. However, this sentiment did not last long. A famous Turkish journalist Ahmet Emin (Yalman) wrote that “almost not a day goes without an incident

6 Fuat İnce, “Lozan Barış Antlaşması ve Ege Adaları,” *Ankara Üniversitesi Türk İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü Atatürk Yolu Dergisi*, Vol. 53, No. Special Issue on the Lausanne Treaty (2013), s. 120.

7 Hazal Papuççular, *Türkiye ve Oniki Ada*, İstanbul, Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2019, s. 31.

between Turkey and Italy to evoke misunderstandings”.⁸ On June 1, 1924 Turkish Press reported that Italy was deploying arms on the Rhodes Island. On the other side, Italians believed that Turkey supported the rebels in Libya to threaten Mussolini.⁹ Therefore, the Aegean Islands question was extended to the Eastern Mediterranean shortly after the Lausanne Treaty.

The following incidents exposed mutual distrust between the countries. On the fall of 1923, Turkish administrators paid occasional visits to the Kaş district, which is very close to the Meis Island, in the company of military authorities for a show of strength. Furthermore, Turkish authorities reminded their citizens shuttling between the Kaş district and the islets around Meis to evacuate the region because of the planned military operation. Then, Turkish flags were planted on the contested islets. The people on those islets were ordered to leave their places within fifteen days. Italian authorities replied in the same way and they replaced the Turkish flags with their own flags. The shows of Italian and Turkish flags on the islets and diplomatic notes followed one another until 1932.¹⁰ That means the Meis tension displayed a recurrent pattern according to the above analytical categories. However, the escalation of these soft tensions were prevented by resorting to the mutual “misunderstandings”. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the question was resolved.

In 1926, during the Mousul crisis with Britain, Turkey was pressed hard on the Aegean by Britain and Italy.¹¹ The Meis question was further complicated with the involvement of Britain. Since then, it was no longer an Aegean question but concerned the whole Eastern Mediterranean region. Thus, the Aegean Islands question was transformed into an Eastern Mediterranean question. The joint action and collaboration of Britain and Italy to press Turkey on the Aegean did not last long. The dynamic equilibrium on the Aegean forced the parties to revise their allegiances towards the end of the interwar period. The international atmosphere started to change dramatically since the early 1930s. The soft tensions on the small islets were replaced by more serious threats of Italy manifesting its revisionist intentions leading to the Second World War. Despite the fact, Italy and Turkey managed to resolve the Meis question by diplomatic means.

8 Yeter Mengeş, “İkinci Dünya Savaşı’nda Menteşe (Rodos, 12 Ada ve Meis) Adaları”, *Çağdaş Türkiye Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi, Journal of Modern Turkish History Studies*, Vol. 34, No.17 (Spring 2017), p. 289.

9 Mevlüt Çelebi, “Atatürk Dönemi ve Sonrasında Türkiye-İtalya İlişkilerini Etkileyen Faktörler”, *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi*, Vol. 31, No. 91 (November 2015): 105-106.

10 Papuçular, *Türkiye ve Oniki Ada*, pp. 40-41.

11 Dilek Barlas, “Friends or Foes? Diplomatic Relations between Italy and Turkey, 1923-36”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (May 2004), pp. 235-36.

The two states decided to establish a Territorial Waters Commission to resolve the Meis tension. The parties signed a Protocol in 1932. According to this Protocol, Turkey obtained one of the islets close to the *Bodrum* bay, namely the *Kara Ada*.¹² Consequently, the diplomatic negotiations yielded a legal solution to these recurrent soft tensions on the Meis Islands. However, this resolution was not an indication of Italy's retreat from the Aegean. Because, a year after in 1933 Italy seized power on the Cyclades Islands under the sovereignty of Greece.¹³ According to the Fascist plans, Cyclades and Sporades were to be included among Italy's Aegean possessions.¹⁴ It seems that Italy turned to Greece for Aegean domination after testing Turkey.

The Meis problem was not the only soft tension that Turkey had to manage during the interwar years. As was noted before, the international order faced more menaces in the 1930s. The new world order atmosphere of the 1920s was replaced with serious threats jeopardizing the world peace. In this conjuncture, Turkey had to deal with another soft tension with Britain this time. The below section analyzes the Samos incident that took place in 1934.

2. The Samos Island Tension with Britain

Samos is one of the Eastern Aegean Islands encirculated by Chios, Patmos and Dodecanese. During the Ottoman rule, the Islanders shuttled between the Island and the Western Anatolia shores, especially for trade. The Island was captured by Greece at the start of the Balkan Wars.¹⁵ Since then, the status of the Island turned to a matter of international contest along with the other Aegean Islands. In the Ottoman period Samos was known for the smuggling activities and pirate operations, which turned to an international matter from time to time.¹⁶ In addition, the Island was located on a militarily strategic position.¹⁷ The proximity of the Island to the Anatolian shores gave way to long discussions during the Lausanne Conference in 1922-23. According to the Lausanne settlement, Samos Island was left to Greece in a demilitarized status along with the other Eastern Aegean Islands. However, after the conclusion of the Treaty

12 İsmail, Soysal, *Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Siyasal Antlaşmaları (1920-1945)*, Ankara, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1989, 340-343.

13 Papuççular, *Türkiye ve Oniki Adalar*, p. 97.

14 Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation during the Second World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 85.

15 Ekrem Erozan, *Tarihi Ege Adalarından Kıbrıs, Girit, Sisam, Rodos, Sakız, Midilli Tarihleri*, İzmir, Kardeşler, 1949, pp. 1-8.

16 Nikos Vafeas, "Banditry and Separatism in the Greek Island of Samos (1914-1925)", *Chronica Mundi*, Vol. 11, No.1, (2016): 171-197.

17 Charles W. Koburger, *Wine-Dark, Blood Red Sea: Naval Warfare in the Aegean, 1941-1946*, London, Praeger Publishers, 1999, p. 3.

Turkish intelligence services gathered several information about the armament attempts of Greece and the activities of the British Navy around these Islands.¹⁸ The activities of the British Navy on the Aegean Islands during the Mosul conflict between Turkey was also mentioned in the British Navy reports.¹⁹ That means the Aegean question of Turkey was not limited to the Dodecanese, but the situation of the Eastern Aegean Islands formally belong to Greece but patronized by Britain was also problematic. The Samos incident in 1934, during which the British battleships displayed a military show against Turkey expose the Eastern Aegean Islands question in the most explicit way.

The Samos incident took place between British navy forces and Turkish coastal guards on 14 July 1934. A British Navy officer was killed and another one was wounded as a result of the Turkish coastal forces firing at the British navy officers who illegally tried to step on to the *Kuşadası* district of Turkey despite the official warnings of the coast guards.

According to the official report of the British Mediterranean Fleet:

On 14 July Turkish patrols fired on a small skiff carrying three British naval officers from the cruiser Devonshire. The ship was on a visit to the Greek Island of Samos, close to the Turkish coast. A Surgeon-Lieutenant was killed and another officer wounded. The Turks claimed the man had been regarded as smugglers and in an apparent misunderstanding over the meaning of signals had refused to stop. The British Government eventually decided to accept the Turkish ‘expression of regret’ over the ‘genuine misunderstanding.’ Although the body was never recovered, on 21 July a memorial service was held at sea with Queen Elizabeth, London and Devonshire as well as a Turkish destroyer taking part. The Turkish Government offered a compassionate grant of 2000 sterling to the next of kin.²⁰

Ankara was also alarmed by this incident. At first, a telegraph traffic started between Ankara and the local administration of the *Kuşadası*, the districted from where the British officers were shot. Two days after the incident on 16 July, the local administrator, *Kaimakam*, of *Kuşadası*, Dilaver Bey, sent a telegraph to Ankara noting that a British battleship was approaching to their port and he asked what to do. The Prime Minister İsmet İnönü replied that not the *Kaimakam* but the port officer should welcome them. İnönü insisted on the idea that if the British authorities want to see the *Kaimakam*, they should visit him in

18 Papuççular, *Türkiye ve Oniki Ada*, p. 54.

19 Paul Halpern, *The Mediterranean Fleet, 1919–1929*, New York; London, Routledge, 2016, pp. 481-83.

20 Halpern, *The Mediterranean Fleet*, p. 9.

his office. It is understood from this reply of İnönü that the Turkish party rejected a condescend visit to the British authorities as a diplomatic gesture.

Then the two British military officers visited the *Kaimakam* in his office. The officers forwarded the messages of their government. Nevertheless, the officers addressed to the Ottoman government, instead of the Republic of Turkey. Upon this major diplomatic mistake, the *Kaimakam* reacted and corrected them saying that he was an administrator of Turkish Republic, not the Ottoman Empire. This deliberate or undeliberate diplomatic address did not facilitate the dialogue of course. Then, the officers declared the ultimatums of the British government: 1. A written guarantee that the Turkish side will not fire at the British boats, which will sail on Turkish shores to search for the dead body of the deceased British officer. 2. Apologizing from the British flag and paying indemnity for the family of the deceased British officer. 3. Turkish soldier Musa, who is accused to kill the British officer according to the investigations of the British authorities will be suspended from his duty in the army and punished by the court. The British authorities will be informed about the punishment. This ultimatums arrived at Ankara soon. Then, the Turkish Foreign Minister Tevfik Rüştü Aras sent a letter to the *Kaimakam* to forward it to the British authorities there. In this letter, he offered to accompany to the British boats to search for the dead body of the British officer. He added that they started an investigation about the soldiers who were engaged in this incident.²¹

The President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was also informed about the incident. He was paying a visit to *Kızılcahamam*, a district of Ankara, when the incident occurred. He took the stage about the last point of the British ultimatums on the punishment of the accused soldier. It is reported that upon the information about the arrival of British battleships at Turkish shores in a threatening manner, Atatürk raised his voice in an equally threatening tone saying that; “We can wage war with British Empire once more for our soldier Musa. He fulfilled his duty.”²² However, as will be explained in detail in the below section, this reactionary tone of Atatürk did not find resonance on the Turkish newspapers. The political tone of the British newspapers were equally temperate in general.

Although this escalating tension was appeased in a few days, the diplomatic attitudes of the parties during this crisis deserves special attention. The first diplomatic initiative was taken by the British side. The Turkish Ambassador in London Ali Fethi Okyar was invited by the British Foreign Secretary immediately after the incident. In addition, the British Ambassador in Ankara Percy Loraine received an order from his government to meet with the Turkish Foreign Minister to ask official information about the incident.

21 Halit Çapın, “Kuşadası Kanapıçe Koyu Olayı- 3”, *Takvim*, Augustus 3, 2005.

22 Ali Ergül, “Kanapıçe Koyu Olayı”, *Kuşadası Yerel Tarih Dergisi*, Special Edition (2008), p. 8.

The matter was debated in the British Parliament as well. A member of the House of Commons, Antruther Gray, asked the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs whether he could state the circumstances, under which a party of British officers bathing off the island of Samos were fired on by Turkish soldiers and a British officer killed. Sir John Simon, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs replied:

I am not yet in a position to give much information beyond what has already appeared in the notice which was issued yesterday by the Admiralty to the Press. According to the reports received by the Admiralty, the boat in question was a skiff belonging to His Majesty's Ship "Devonshire" which was lying off the Greek island of Samos. The skiff had approached under sail to within 100 yards of the Turkish mainland when some 10 soldiers appeared and, according to the reports received by the British naval authorities, waved the boat away. The boat immediately went about, but the soldiers opened fire, killing Surgeon-Lieutenant Robinson and slightly wounding Lieu tenant Maunsell in the shoulder. Search is being continued for Surgeon-Lieutenant Robinson's body.²³

The diplomatic attitude of the British Foreign Secretary was influential in alleviating the tension in the British Parliament. Upon another question about whether the boat was in the prohibited area or not Simon avoided replying this question saying that he did not want to make statements, which might be challenged later. He just noted that they were exchanging information with the Turkish authorities. When the diplomatic authorities reached an agreement on 23 July 1934, he explained to the House of Commons that: “There is reason to think that the signal was misunderstood; at any rate, when the skiff moved away the Turkish guard repeatedly fired with the lamentable result that Surgeon-Lieutenant Robinson was killed and fell into the water.”²⁴

However, it was not an easy task to appease the British Parliament and the public. The Foreign Secretary faced with the incessant questions of the parliamentarians for further explanation. From their point of view, it was not an incident to be undermined at all. When the press reports about this incident are checked, it is understood that the public opinion also took it as a grave incident at first. When the news about the incident just arrived in Britain, it was carried to the headlines of some newspapers as “Warships Gather at Samos”.²⁵ It is

23 British Parliament House of Commons Archives, (HC) *Deb 17 July 1934 vol 292 cc.936-7936*, <<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1934/jul/17/turkey-firing-on-british-naval-boat>>, (accessed 21 December 2020)

24 HC Deb 23 July 1934 vol 292 cc1513-41513, <<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1934/jul/17/turkey-firing-on-british-naval-boat>>, (accessed 21 December 2020)

25 *Dundee Courier*, 18 July 1934.

reported that British cruisers the London and the Queen Elisabeth hastened to Samos.²⁶ Another newspaper asked from the headline, “Has Turkey Received an Ultimatum?”²⁷ However, the tone of the newspapers started to change a couple of days later. The Evening Telegraph announced on 20 July 1934 that “The Foreign Ministry communique states that there is no indication of malice on either side concerning the Samos shooting incident. The two Governments have reached a friendly decision.”²⁸ A day after, the liberal oriented Northern Whig newspaper reported on 21 July 1934 that “The Samos Incident Settled”. The newspaper pointed out to Turkey’s regret and underlined the misunderstanding as the cause of the incident.²⁹ The other newspapers followed a similar path and featured the tragic story of the deceased British Surgeon-Lieutenant Robinson.³⁰ The news about the appearance of sharks on the sea where the death body of the deceased Lieutenant was being searched jointly by the British and Turkish naval sources took away the diplomatic sensitivities of the issue and turned it into a tabloid style popular horror story for the readers.³¹ Nevertheless, it is observed that the same local newspaper retained the critics as well. Or it can be considered that the newspaper recounted the story by resorting to the unpopular “Turk” image this time to create another popular story. The newspaper used a derogatory language against Turks writing that “Samos shooting which is a form of Turkish gesture causes error”.³²

Then the question is how the same incident resonated in the Turkish public opinion. An overview of the Turkish newspapers manifest that not all the newspapers highlighted the Samos incident in their banner headlines. Some Turkish newspapers reported the issue directly from the Reuters news agency, which published the official speech of the British Foreign Secretary in the House of Commons. These Turkish newspapers did not add any single word to the Reuter’s news, neither an official declaration by the Turkish diplomatic sources nor a commentary on the issue. They simply translated the Reuters’ news.³³ Some other Turkish newspapers giving the news from a column of the front page

26 *Leeds Mercury*, 17 July 1934.

27 *Western Morning*, 18 July 1934.

28 *The Evening Telegraph*, 20 July 1934.

29 *Northern Whig*, 21 July 1934.

30 *Larne*, “Death under Tragic Circumstances,” 21 July 1934; *Belfast News-Letter*, “The Samos Tragedy,” 23 July 1934.

31 *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 20 July 1934.

32 *Leicester Evening Mail*, 26 July 1934.

33 *Akşam* “Kuşadası Hadisesi: İngiliz Hariciye Nazırı Avam Kamarasında Beyanatta Bulundu,” (Kuşadası Incident: British Foreign Secretary Made a Statement in the House of Commons), 18 July 1934; *Hakimiyet-i Milliyet*, “Müessesef Sahil Hadisesi: Sir Con Saymen Hadise Hakkında Sorulan Suallere Cevap Verdi,” (Regrettable Coast Event: Sir John Simon Replied the Questions), 18 July 1934.

reported the official declaration of the Turkish government on the issue.³⁴ A couple of days later, the Turkish press took a stance similar to the one observed in the British press in general. The “misunderstanding” was underlined by the Turkish press as well, as the root cause of this tension between the countries. Besides, some Turkish newspapers implied that the soldiers shooting the British Lieutenant was right because the British authorities should have known that Samos Island laid at the heart of the smuggling activities.³⁵ However, Atatürk’s strong challenge to the British government over the Turkish soldier Musa, which was reported so many years later in reference to the the Kaimakam’s memoirs, has not been found on the newspapers of the day. At least the most prominent mainstream newspapers of the day searched so far does not reflect such a strong challenge to the British government. Otherwise, it might have been more difficult to alleviate the tension.

The role of the British Ambassador was also influential in the resolution of this conflict. Upon the Samos incident, the Turkish newspaper *Cumhuriyet* titled the official visit of Loraine to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs as, “A Frankly Meeting between the Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister and the British Ambassador”.³⁶ The attitudes of some influential agents like the Ambassador Loraine played an important role in convincing the British public that the negative attributions about the Turks are groundless.

However, it is understood that the Commander in Chief of the British Navy did not share the same stance with the Foreign Secretary and the Ambassador in this diplomatic tension. The Chief Commander of the Royal Navy, Fisher, had been staying at a hotel in Cyprus when the incident took place. He gathered 2 battleships, 3 cruisers and 7 destroyers at Samos within 36 hours, believing that

34 *Cumhuriyet*, “Sisam’dan Sahillerimize Gelen Esrarengiz Sandal,” (The Mysterious Skiff Coming to Our Shores from Samos), 16 July 1934; *Son Posta*, “Ege Kıyımızda Bir Hadise,” (An Incident on Our Aegean Shore) 17 July 1934.

35 *Son Posta*, “İngiliz Bahriyelisinin Müessesef Ölümü: Müşterek Bir Heyetin Tahkikat Yapması Muhtemeldir,” (Deplorable Death of British Naval Officer: Investing of a Joint Committee is Expected) 19 July 1934; *Halkın Sesi*, “Londra Büyük Elçimiz İngiltere Hükümetine Kuşadası Hadisesi Münasebetile Hükümetimizin Tessürlerini Bildirdi,” (Our Ambassador in London Expressed the Regret of Our Government about the Kuşadası Incident) 17 July 1934; *Milliyet*, “Kuşadası Hadisesi: İngiliz Hariciye Nazırı Dün Avam Kamarasında Sorulan Suale Cevap Verdi,” (Kuşadası Incident: British Foreign Secretary Replied the Questions Yesterday in the House of Commons), 18 July 1934; *Cumhuriyet*, “Kuşadası Civarındaki Hadise: Hariciye Veklimizle İngiliz Sefiri Arasında Samimi Mülakat,” (The Incident around Kuşadası: A Sincere Meeting between Our Foreign Minister and the British Ambassador) 18 July 1934; *Türk Sözü*, “Dilburun Hadisesi Dostça Hallediliyor,” (Dilburun Incident is being Resolved Friendly) 20 July 1934.

36 *Cumhuriyet*, “Kuşadası Civarındaki Hadise: Hariciye Veklimizle İngiliz Sefiri Arasında Samimi Mülakat,” (The Incident around Kuşadası: A Sincere Meeting between Our Minister and the British Ambassador) 18 July 1934.

a show of force would be appropriate. Nevertheless, it is understood that he was stopped by the British Foreign Secretary. Although Fischer finally reached the point that “there must be higher considerations to be advanced by the Foreign Office,”³⁷ the cleavage between the British Navy and the foreign policy was explicit.

From the point of Fischer, the Samos affair was not the only case where the British Royal Navy fell to loggerheads with the Turkish government. Fischer took a more reactive position in the Samos affair, mainly because of another maritime tension with Turkey in 1929. When commenting on the Samos affair, he referred to this matter as an indication of the Turkish uncompromising attitude. He mentioned the Turkish reluctance to return to the call made by the British Mediterranean Fleet in 1929. He had cabled to the Foreign Secretary: “I personally deprecate any visits, however brief to Constantinople.” In addition, Rear Admiral Thurn reported that except for the initial exchange of calls with the *Vali* and the General Commanding, the Turkish authorities entirely ignored the presence of London and that was ‘so contrary to the welcome invariably extended by other countries that they visited. The Admiral wrote that he had felt that they had been an embarrassment to the Turks, because they had not welcomed their presence.’³⁸

The discord between the Royal Navy and the Turkish government went on after the Samos affair. On November 1934, Fischer was once more annoyed by the Turkish refusal to permit HMS Frobisher to visit Khelia Port (Dardanelles) and Imbros.³⁹ The Royal Navy was the direct witness of the series of smaller scale soft tensions with Turkey on the Aegean that was ongoing since the 1920s. Therefore, Fischer was tended to evaluate the Samos incident an escalated version of a series of soft tensions ongoing since 1920s. However, Fischer’s previous concerns were not taken seriously by the Foreign Office. Therefore, the Samos incident was a one-off soft tension upon which they felt the need to take some diplomatic initiatives. The previous discontents of the Chief Commander of the Navy might have been undermined by the Foreign Office. Because, the British Foreign Ministry had greater concerns in mind and did not mind these small maritime tensions so much. Especially, at a time when the war horns were blowing once more to ruin the First World War settlement, the British foreign policy was tackling greater problems on the Aegean, such as the revisionist Italy. The Great Power rivalry on the region generated delicate balances. Then the question is how the Turkish diplomacy responded to this rivalry and made presence in the region.

37 Anthony Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower*, London, MacMillan Press, 1986, p. 447.

38 Halpern, *The Mediterranean Fleet*, p. 7.

39 Halpern, *The Mediterranean Fleet*, p. 8.

3. Eastern Mediterranean Struggle and the Turkey’s Regional Role

As the variety of soft tensions during the 1920s and 1930s manifest, Turkey was always in an alarmed position against its neighbors on the Aegean. Nevertheless, the responses of Turkey to the actual or perceptual threats coming from the Aegean demonstrates that it was not taking an all-defensive stance against these threats but sometimes took a proactive position as the Meis case obviously manifests. The diplomatic actions taken by Turkey on the Aegean in the inter-war period does not only indicate that it simply aimed at protecting its own waters but they also imply that the nascent Turkish Republic was trying to consolidate its position in regard to the regional politics.

The soft tensions on the Aegean is formulated in this study as a preliminary stage of the Eastern Mediterranean struggle. That means the Great Powers tested one another on the Aegean at first. As was mentioned before, the British-Italian cooperation on the Aegean did not last long. As the revisionist Italy made territorial claims elsewhere, Britain followed an appeasement policy at first. However, after the Abyssinia affair Britain changed its policy towards Italy. Upon the Italian assaults on the Abyssinia, Britain realized that it must have a base on the Eastern Mediterranean comparable to the Italian one on Leros.⁴⁰ Then Britain returned to the Aegean with a greater force. Another reason why Italy made greater advances on the Aegean was the fact that the British Royal Navy was preoccupied with the Far Eastern affairs at that period.⁴¹ As part of its Aegean strategy, Britain made a show off by a military drill with Greece on the Samos Island in 1934. Then the British Royal Navy collaborated with Turkey in another military drill on the Dodecanese in 1935.⁴² Thus, a rapprochement started between Turkey and Britain a year after the Samos tension because of the greater regional threats.

Both the Meis and the Samos cases provided opportunities for the engaged parties to test one another and renegotiate their positions in the larger context of the regional politics. To start with the Meis case, it can be argued the final resolution by a protocol after the recurrent tensions directed Italy to the new ventures on the Aegean. As was noted earlier, Italy turned to Greece after testing Turkey for the Aegean domination by seizing power on the Cyclades; however, it clashed there with Britain. The British-Italy rivalry on the Aegean took a serious turn in 1934, at the time when the Samos incident broke out. At that time, Italy

40 Panagiotis Gartzonikas, “Amphibious and Special Operations in the Aegean Sea 1943-1945: Operational Effectiveness and Strategic Implications”, PhD diss., Naval Postgraduate School Monterey CA, 2003, p. 24.

41 André Gerolymatos, “The Turkish Straits: History, Politics, and Strategic Dilemmas”, *Ocean Yearbook Online*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2014), p. 71.

42 Papuçular, *Türkiye ve Oniki Ada*, pp. 100, 109.

was preparing for the seizure of Abyssinia and Mussolini openly talked about the “parasitical” presence of Britain on the Mediterranean.⁴³ Thus, it became unavoidable for all the parties to revise their position and alliances on the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, it can be argued that the resolution of the Samos tension between Britain and Turkey might have been facilitated by the rising Italian threats. In any case, Turkey managed to take diplomatic advantage out of these soft tensions and consolidated its position on the Aegean and affected the Eastern Mediterranean policy at large.

The kind of soft tensions analyzed in this study provided Turkey opportunities to renegotiate its role in the regional politics. Both Meis and Samos cases changed the delicate balances not only on the Aegean but also on the larger Eastern Mediterranean region along with the other developments on the international arena. The Protocol signed in 1932 between Italy and Turkey to limit the territorial waters around the Meis Island implied a concession from Italy, since *Kara Ada* was ceded to Turkey. The Protocol did not remain in isolation on the face of the contrary developments,⁴⁴ but signified a turning point both for the bilateral relations and the Eastern Mediterranean balances. Since the mid-1920s Italy was following a policy to win Turkey on its own side for its ambitions on the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean. The Turkish-Italian Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality signed in 1928 was the first serious outcome of this policy.⁴⁵ The Italian concession under the 1932 Protocol can be seen in the same line as part of the same strategy. Nevertheless, these developments do not mean that Italy renounced its ambitions on the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean but only changed track. The Italian landing on the Greek Cyclades in 1933, a year after signing the Protocol with Turkey manifested that Italy revised its plans and changed its path for Aegean domination. In addition, the Cyclades attack by Italy was an open challenge to Britain as well on the Aegean and on the larger Eastern Mediterranean area also. Upon this attack, Britain needed to revise its approach to Italy and reminded that it should have a military force comparable to Italian military base on the Leros Island to be able to control the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean waters as well. If Turkey had not averted the Italian threat on its territorial waters, the course of the regional politics could have followed a different path.

Although Turkey could change the course of events on the Aegean for its own advantage, Italy found new ways to be able to continue to control Turkey from another strategic location, which was Thrace. When the recurrent soft

43 Robert Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War, 1933-1940*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 35.

44 Yücel Güçlü, “Fascist Italy’s Mare Nostrum Policy and Turkey”, *Bellefen*, Vol. 63, No. 238 (December 1999), p. 813.

45 Çelebi, *Atatürk Dönemi*, p. 107.

tensions with Turkey on the Aegean did not produce the expected results for Italy, it turned to threaten the territorial borders this time. Although there are arguments alleging that Turkey responded to the “perceived” threats from Italy somehow in an extremely anxious mood,⁴⁶ there are also accounts underlying that Turkey took the Italian threat as a mere bluff.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, these social psychology oriented evaluations should not distract our attention from diplomatic analysis, although the perceptions can sometimes replace the facts in diplomacy and determine the course of actions.⁴⁸ It is true that Turkey was alarmed by the threatening and instigating speeches of Mussolini in 1934, although by way of inferences.⁴⁹ However, when the diplomatic results are examined, it comes out that Turkish diplomacy could avert the Italian threat once more by the Balkan Pact initiative this time. Italian newspapers harshly criticized this new alliance on the Balkans.⁵⁰ This Pact provided Turkey collaboration opportunities in another region and consolidated its position in the international order as a non-revisionist state. Moreover, as as Raphaelides suggests Turkey took a diplomatic advantage out of raising Italian threats. The military menaces posed by Italy on the Aegean since 1933 provided Turkey a ground to exert its presence in the League of Nations and seek the revision of the Lausanne Treaty’s provisions on the Straits for its own advantage. Due to the Italian threat, Turkey could renegotiate the Straits issue and successfully managed to changed the status-quo for its own advantage and established its national sovereignty on the Straits by the Montreux Convention.⁵¹

Consequently, as the Italian revisionism was taking military forms, Turkey was coming close to Britain. The Samos incident that occurred in 1934 at a very critical point in time generated another significant influence on the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean balances at large. The resolution of the Samos tension in a few days without further escalation was literally grounded on the mutual misunderstandings. However, it is argued here that this soft tension reflected a microcosm of the regional politics. The resolution of the Samos incident helped to improve the bilateral relations between the countries as well. By way of this soft tension, Turkey and Britain could revise their bilateral relations and determine their position about the regional politics.

46 Robert L. Baker, “Turkey in an Anxious Mood”, *Current History and Forum*, Vol. 40, No. 6 (September 1934), p. 760.

47 Güçlü, *Fascist Italy’s Mare Nostrum*, p. 831.

48 Richard G. Colbert and Kenneth R. McGruther, “The Role of Perception in Naval Diplomacy,” *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (September 1974), p. 3-20.

49 Hasan Rıza Soyak, *Atatürk’ün Hatıralar II*, İstanbul, Yapı Kredi Bankası Yayınları, 1973, p. 526.

50 Aptülahat Akşin, *Atatürk’ün Dış Politika İlkeleri ve Diplomasisi*, Ankara, TTK Yayınları, 1991, 268.

51 S. J. Raphaelides, “Separate Spheres: An Overview of United States Policy in the Interwar Years towards Greece and Turkey”, *The Journal of Modern Hellenism*, No. 8 (1991), pp. 122-123.

Millman argues that until 1934, the role of Turkey was not taken so seriously in Britain and viewed as an heir to the fallen Ottoman Empire. Their concern about Turkey was mainly concentrated on the repayment of the Ottoman debts, the status of the stateless subjects of the Ottoman Empire like the Armenians and Assyrians and the property rights of the British subjects living and/or trading in/with Turkey. However, among other things, it seems that the position of Turkey in the British eyes started to change with the League of Nations membership of Turkey. They noticed the significance of Turkey especially when Turkey took side with Britain in the LN on the Abyssinia affair. However, Millman underlines that the kind of relationship between Britain and Turkey was just an alignment not an alliance yet.⁵² That means the British-Turkish relations were lingering between a kind of alignment and alliance, when the Samos incident broke out, since the British authorities were not fully convinced about the advantage of an alliance with Turkey.

Some circles in the British administration did not take the idea of alliance with Turkey so serious and still preferred Italy to Turkey. A British Memorandum dated 1936 noted that:

Our interest lie in a peaceful Mediterranean and this can only be achieved by returning to a state of friendly relations with Italy. This should be our aim even in the earliest steps we take to liquidate the Mediterranean situation...The assistance we could expect from Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia is very small. These countries would give more than it receives. The burden would fall upon the Forces, and we hope that all means will be adopted to reduce the likelihood of war and the period of tension.⁵³

However, as was noted before, some others in Britain had already turned to Turkey and Greece to prevent the Italian aggression in the region. The joint military drills with Greece and Turkey on the Aegean in 1934 and 1935 had already displayed the official British policy about the regional alliances. The rapprochement between Turkey and Britain had already started shortly before the Samos incident and it would not be unsettled for a soft tension. The British Ambassador in Ankara, Percy Loraine. Just a month before the Samos incident on June 1934, he wrote to London:

The Gazi said he had the greatest esteem for England and that he wished for friendship with England. Why could we not come closer together? Did England attach no value to her (Turkey's) friendship? He realized that to us Turkey might not seem a very important factor. She was not a large country;

52 Brock Millman, *Ill-Made Alliance: Anglo-Turkish Relations, 1934-1940*, Montreal; London, McGill-Queen's Press, 1998, pp. 16-17.

53 Millman, *Ill-Made Alliance*, p. 15.

nor rich, nor populous, nor strong, although she was determined to be strong enough to defend her territory against any aggression...I feel rather keenly that we are at a happy turning point in our relationship with Turkey and that we only need to manage the position sympathetically and intelligently to make it rather an important one; and that the snag of embarrassing or entangling commitments, often present at such occasions is in this case rather conspicuous by its absence.⁵⁴

From an agent-centered diplomatic analysis perspective, the presence of an ambassador like Loraine in the office during the Samos incident can be evaluated as a facilitating factor for the resolution of the diplomatic tension between the two countries. Loraine had established personal connections with Atatürk and other Turkish statesmen as soon as he arrived in Ankara as the British ambassador. Loraine quickly became a prominent figure in Turkish political circles and acted as a genuine arbiter of the Turkish-British relations. Based on his acute observations, he realized the lack of Turkish trust towards Britain. He emphasized in his letters the necessity of winning the hearts of Turks. For instance, he noted the fact that Britain and France were the only Great Powers who were not invited to the celebrations of the eleventh anniversary of the Turkish Republic and tried to convince the Foreign Office to raise the British profile in Turkey by these kinds of diplomatic gestures.⁵⁵ Kemalist Turkey, Loraine wrote, is anti-revisionist; is pro-League of Nations; is content with her own frontiers; is hostile to splitting up of Powers into opposite camps or blocs; is an advocate of international cooperation; works for the reduction of international frictions.⁵⁶

Loraine interpreted the position of Ankara in the Samos incident not as an anti-British stand of the Government but as a xenophobia aiming at uprooting all foreign influences in the political and economic life of the country.⁵⁷ Consequently, the Samos incident helped Britain to develop a closer insight about the new regime in Turkey. On the other side, the newly established regime in Turkey could assert itself in the British politics and gained credit in the international order as an anti-revisionist state, as was very well expressed by the British Ambassador. Thus, Turkey and Britain could act together against the Italian military threat on the Eastern Mediterranean as was demonstrated by the

54 Millman, *III-Made Alliance*, p. 15.

55 Seçkin B. Gülmez, “Do Diplomats Matter in Foreign Policy? Sir Percy Loraine and the Turkish-British Rapprochement in the 1930s”, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (January 2019), pp. 71-72.

56 Nicholas Tamkin, *Britain, Turkey and the Soviet Union, 1940–45: Strategy, Diplomacy and Intelligence in the Eastern Mediterranean*, New York; London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, p. 1.

57 Otto Kienitz, “The Emerging Storm: Sir Percy Loraine and Anglo-Turkish Rapprochement, 1934-1935”, *Penn History Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall 2016), p. 5.

common military drill on the Aegean in 1935. That means the rapprochement between the two countries could generate concrete outcomes.

These soft tensions helped Turkey to find its way and determine its alliances in an international atmosphere where the states were somehow forced to decide on their side for an approaching war. It is suggested that Turkey responded to this delicate international atmosphere with a “defensive proactivity” strategy. As flag planting quarrels during the Meis tensions indicate, Turkey did not hesitate to take a proactive military stance to protect its territorial waters. That means Turkey did not hold an all defensive position but also took proactive steps both militarily and diplomatically. Especially, convincing the Great Powers for the Montreux Convention shows the competence of Turkish diplomacy and demonstrates how it could turn these soft tensions into national advantage.

As a result, Turkish diplomacy was professing by these soft tensions. Indeed, Turkey’s defensive proactivity concerning these soft tensions can be evaluated as a quest for asserting itself as a regional middle-power. “Turkey’s responses to these Mediterranean challenges were typical examples of a middle power’s diplomacy: Ankara tried to mediate between the Great Powers and sought multilateral solutions to the security challenges in the region.”⁵⁸ Although these soft tensions might have jeopardized the security of the country, it seems that Turkey made use of these tensions as a venue to show a diplomatic presence and to test its own limits vis a vis the other parties, while giving the same chance to the other parties as well. Besides, different kinds of soft tensions proved influential for Turkey to maintain the balances among the Great Powers. Thus, these fine-tuning knowledge and experiences in the interwar period could be transferred to the Second World War period.

Concluding Remarks

This study introduces “soft tension” notion as an analytical unit in itself. The soft tensions are generally taken as the natural fluctuations of international relations and excluded from diplomatic analysis. However, this study underlines that “soft tensions” matter. Because, they reflect a microcosm of the regional politics. Therefore, the soft tensions can well be studied as a venue to analyze regional politics. The history of international relations prove that soft tensions operate especially when the balances are the most delicate. These tensions provide opportunities for all the involved parties to renegotiate their roles in the region and they decide by this way what to do about the existing status-quo. That

58 Nathalie Tocci, Meliha Benli Altunışık and Kemal Kirişci, “Turkey as a “Mediterranean Power”, *German Marshall Fund of the United States Report* (2011), p. 63.

means the soft tension concept is critical to understand how the status-quo or critical balances are maintained, regenerated or violated.

It is indicated that the soft tensions that Turkey faced on the Aegean during the interwar period are overshadowed by the territorial disputes unsettled in the Lausanne Treaty. This study reveals that Turkey was not only dealing with the Great Powers on the field of territorial disputes but also on the maritime disputes. As İsmet Pasha had also pointed out during the Lausanne Conference, since Turkey left the Aegean Islands and Dodecanese for the sake of world peace, it had to assume the difficult task of managing the balances on the region.

It is emphasized that the maritime disputes with Italy and Britain on the Aegean were extended to the Eastern Mediterranean soon after the Lausanne settlement and instigated rivalry among the Great Powers during the interwar period. In this conjuncture, Turkey had to fine-tune among the Great Powers, while protecting its borders and asserting itself in the international order as a newly established regime. The Turkish diplomatic endeavours in this framework is examined in depth in reference to the two specific cases, namely the Meis and Samos tensions. These cases reveal that Turkey followed a proactive defense strategy concerning the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean questions and changed the course of the regional politics by its resilience. Turkey managed to transform these tensions into diplomatic achievements as was manifested by the Montreux Convention.

These soft tension experiences helped to develop the competences of Turkish diplomacy about handling the Great Power balances. Therefore, it can be concluded that Turkish diplomacy transferred its interwar experiences to the Second World War to position itself on a safe ground. In that sense, the interwar soft tensions provided an influential testing ground for Turkey.

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