

TÜRKİYE AND US RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamics and implications of the Syrian crisis on Türkiye-US relations, covering the period from 2011 to 2020. It delves into the evolution of Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria, transitioning from a soft power approach during 2011-2015 to a more assertive stance post-2016. Concurrently, the article examines the shifts in the US's Syria policy under the administrations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, highlighting the strategic and ideological transformations. The core of the study focuses on the bilateral relations between Türkiye and the US within the context of the Syrian civil war, analyzing the complexities and challenges that emerged during the Obama and Trump eras. This comprehensive analysis aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how the Syrian conflict has reshaped the geopolitical and diplomatic landscape between Türkiye and the US, offering insights into future implications for regional stability and international relations.

Keywords: Syrian Civil War, Türkiye -US Relations, Foreign Policy Analysis, Obama, Trump

SURİYE İÇ SAVAŞI EKSENİNDE TÜRKİYE VE ABD İLİŞKİLERİ

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ÖZET

Bu makale, 2011-2020 dönemini kapsayacak şekilde Suriye krizinin Türkiye-ABD ilişkileri üzerindeki dinamiklerini ve etkilerini incelemektedir. Makale, 2011-2015 döneminde yumuşak güç yaklaşımından 2016 sonrasında daha iddialı bir duruşa geçiş yapan Türkiye'nin Suriye'ye yönelik dış politikasının evrimini incelemektedir. Eş zamanlı olarak makale, Barack Obama ve Donald Trump yönetimleri altında ABD'nin Suriye politikasındaki değişimleri incelemekte ve stratejik ve ideolojik dönüşümleri vurgulamaktadır. Çalışmanın özü, Suriye iç savaşı bağlamında Türkiye ile ABD arasındaki ikili ilişkilere odaklanmakta, Obama ve Trump dönemlerinde ortaya çıkan karmaşıklıkları ve zorlukları analiz etmektedir. Bu kapsamlı analiz, Suriye ihtilafının Türkiye ile ABD arasındaki jeopolitik ve diplomatik manzarayı nasıl yeniden şekillendirdiğine dair incelikli bir anlayış sunmayı ve bölgesel istikrar ve uluslararası ilişkiler açısından gelecekteki etkilere dair iç görüşler sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye İç Savaşı, Türkiye-ABD İlişkileri, Dış Politika Analizi, Obama, Trump

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2011, the Syrian crisis has become one of the most complex and influential events in the Middle East and international politics. This crisis has important strategic and humanitarian dimensions for both regional powers and global actors. Türkiye and the United States of America (USA) have approached the developments in Syria with different perspectives and policies. For Türkiye, as Syria's neighbor, the policies of both countries have created direct security and refugee influx problems, while for the United States, they have emphasized regional stability and counterterrorism. Also, this article examines in detail the impact of the Syrian crisis on relations between Türkiye and the United States. In particular, we discuss the background and implications of Türkiye's shift from a soft power approach between 2011 and 2015 to a more hardline policy adopted in 2016 and beyond. At the same time, we examine how US policy on Syria evolved, first under Barack Obama and then under Donald Trump, and how this evolution reflected on Türkiye-US relations. In this framework, the diplomatic, military and strategic interactions between the two countries will be analyzed. The aim of the paper is to gain an in-depth understanding of the complex effects of the Syrian crisis on Türkiye-US relations and to reveal the broader implications of this process on regional and global politics.

The civil war in Syria since March 2011 has significantly affected both Türkiye's foreign policy and its Syria policy. As a matter of fact, since 2011, the vast majority of Türkiye's foreign policy has been centered on Syria and the issues arising from the developments in Syria. When we look at the relations between the two countries until 2002, it is seen that it was built on a slippery ground with a lot of disagreements. With the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) coming to power in 2002, Türkiye changed its Middle East policy and aimed to conduct a more effective policy in the region. Within the scope of the "Zero Problems with Neighbors" policy put forward by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu, relations with Middle Eastern countries were sought to be strengthened. In this context, positive steps were taken in terms of diplomacy between the two countries. In the context of the zero problems with neighbors policy, Türkiye aimed to become a "model" country in the Middle East, to act as a bridge between Europe, the US and the Middle East, and to play a more active role in the region. In the context of its policy, Türkiye has adopted the "soft-power" element in its foreign policy. Relations with the countries in the region have been conducted within the framework of social, cultural and common values based on soft power. The diplomacy developed with Syria was important in the context of Türkiye's new foreign policy. As a matter of fact, these common values and cultural elements are clearly stated in Davutoğlu's book "Strategic Depth", in which this policy is laid out. "The fact that Türkiye and Syria are so close geographically and culturally, yet so far apart diplomatically and politically can only be explained by this psychology of mutual detachment" (Davutoğlu, 2001, 409). This discourse explains that the policy of zero problems with neighbors is based on cultural and regional values.

From 2002 until 2011, relations, which had been progressing well, started to crack with the Arab Spring in the region. The two countries, which have had chronic problems throughout history, came to a breaking point when the spring gave way to civil conflict in Syria. Türkiye, which did not want to lose its influence and deterrence in the region, both pursued its own interests while developing policies in Syria and wanted to balance its influence in the region by taking advantage of the authority vacuum in the countries in the region. (Öztop, 2019, 109). Türkiye's Syria policy since 2011 until today has two phases. From 2011 to 2016, Türkiye's Syria policy was carried out in coordination with allied countries within the framework of economic and political sanctions, away from military intervention. Since 2016, Türkiye has changed maneuvers in its Syria policy and turned to "hard-power". By acting more actively in the region, Türkiye has added military interventions to political and economic sanctions. In this context, Türkiye's Syria policy has developed within the framework of a policy in which all diplomatic instruments - military, political, humanitarian and economic - have been actively used in the field.

America's aggressive foreign policy since the Cold War period has led the countries in the Middle East to search for a new order. Iran, which has always been anti-American, entered into nuclear armament on the grounds that it felt threatened in this process. The most important collaborator of Iran's power based on the Shiite axis in the Middle East has undoubtedly been Syria. On the other hand, taking advantage of the weakening power of the US globally, Russia has established strong alliances in the region and turned its energy resources into an opportunity. So much so that the radical Islamic groups supported by the US during Russia's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 have turned into terrorist groups that the US is fighting against in today's Syrian civil war. (Cerrah, 2016, 322).

In its policies towards the Middle East in general and Syria in particular, the US pursued an aggressive, hard power policy based on military force until Barack Obama assumed the presidency in 2009. Relations with Syria were partially positive from the time Obama assumed the presidency until 2011. In fact, the two countries, whose political dialog was interrupted due to the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, were re-established in 2010 with the appointment of the US Ambassador to Damascus (Fakı, 2022, 66). However, the course of relations changed when popular uprisings spread to Syria and the uprisings turned into a civil war. The US policy towards Syria in the context of the crisis was realized in two phases: the 2009-2017 Obama era and the 2017-2020 Donald Trump era. While the US government pursued a policy based on soft power and public diplomacy in Syria during the Obama era, the US under the Trump administration has pursued a policy based on hard power, with more military intervention in the field.

This paper has aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the intricate effects of the Syrian crisis on Türkiye-US relations, delving into their diplomatic, military, and strategic interactions.

The evolving nature of these relations, set against the backdrop of the Syrian crisis, offers a vital lens through which to understand the broader implications for regional and global politics. This introduction sets the stage for a detailed exploration of these dynamics, underscoring the pivotal role of the Syrian crisis in shaping the contemporary geopolitical landscape.

1. TÜRKİYE'S SYRIA POLICY

Türkiye's Syria policy entered a deep transformation process with the Syrian civil war that started in 2011. During this period, Türkiye had to conduct a complex foreign policy with both regional security and humanitarian dimensions. Securing its border with Syria, responding to the influx of refugees and maintaining regional stability were among the main priorities.

Türkiye's initial approach was to impose diplomatic and economic sanctions against the situation in Syria. However as the civil war dragged on and Türkiye's security concerns increased, it started to assume a more active military role, especially since 2016. In this period, Türkiye took action against the terrorist threat and aimed to increase border security by intervening militarily in some regions in northern Syria.

This policy shift was also reflected in Türkiye's regional and international relations. In particular, relations with the United States and the European Union have at times been strained, and Türkiye's role in NATO and its relations with the West has frequently been the subject of Türkiye debate. Moreover, Türkiye's Syria policy has also affected its relations with Russia, Iran and other regional powers. Overall, Türkiye's Syria policy can be considered as part of the country's efforts to consolidate its position as a regional power and play a more active role in the international arena. In addition to reflecting Türkiye's security and foreign policy objectives, this policy also signals a broader strategic transformation in regional and global politics. However, the long-term effects of this policy and its contribution to regional stability are still under debate.

1.1. The Soft Power Era in Syria Policy 2011-2015

The concept of soft power, on the other hand, was theoretically developed by Nye within the framework of Gramscian critical theory and constructivism's conceptualizations of power in his article "Soft Power" published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1990 (Nye, 1990a) and in *Bound To Lead: The Changing Nature Of American Power* published in the same year (Nye, 1990b): *Bound To Lead: The Changing Nature Of American Power* (Nye, 1990b). In these works, Nye developed the concept of soft power in response to claims that US power was weakening and argued that contrary to popular belief, US power was not only military and economic power (hard power) but also soft power, which reflected 'universal' values, culture, lifestyle, position and image in the international system and institutions (Layne, 2010, 52).

The vision of Turkish foreign policy in the AK Party era was defined as soft power (Taşpınar, 2012, 128). The main components of soft power policy are the zero problems with neighbors policy, model country and strategic depth approaches. Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was first the chief foreign policy advisor of the period and later the Foreign Minister and Prime Minister, stated that the zero problems with neighbors policy approach was built on the idea of getting rid of the psychology of the previous Kemalist elite and governments that Türkiye was surrounded by enemies and the defensive reflex that developed accordingly, and to bring relations with all neighbors to a good level. Davutoğlu defined the policy of zero problems with neighbors as first solving existing problems with neighboring countries and then ensuring maximum cooperation. Davutoğlu's approach and the policy of zero problems with neighbors became the basic approach and rhetoric of Turkish foreign policy during the AK Party era (Ekşi, 2018, 76). Between 2003 and 2011, the government pursued a policy of developing its Middle East policy and relations with the countries in the region through the zero problems with neighbors approach (Erol, 2007, 35).

On the other hand, this soft power vision of the AK Party government and the policy of zero problems with neighbors has led to the abandonment of the security perspective in relations with Syria (Oğuzlu, 2007,92). The policy of zero problems with neighbors first aimed to solve or minimize the problems if possible, and after the obstacles to developing relations were resolved with this approach, it was aimed to develop friendly relations with neighboring countries.

In response to the Assad regime's tough stance, Türkiye announced unilateral economic sanctions in November 2011, such as freezing the regime's accounts and halting lending (Abdi, 2016, 450). As the sanctions and suggestions against the Syrian regime did not yield any results, tensions in the region increased. This situation has brought Türkiye's long-standing policy of zero problems with neighbors to a dead end. When Syria shot down Türkiye's unarmed RF-4E Phantom reconnaissance aircraft in June 2012, relations became the most tense since the beginning of the crisis. As a result of this incident, Türkiye announced a change in the rules of engagement. According to the new rules, in case of any violation by Syria against Türkiye, Türkiye would respond with weapons. This move of the Assad regime was publicly characterized as hostility. After this crisis, Türkiye started to use its deterrence capability against Assad by making its support for Syrian opposition forces more open (Karan, 2012). Following the airplane crisis, regime forces fired artillery shells at the Akçakale district of Şanlıurfa on October 3, 2012. This aggressive attitude of the Assad regime against Türkiye was harshly criticized by Türkiye, which responded by changing the rules of engagement (AA, 2012).

There was a situation where Türkiye requested NATO's assistance in response to the Assad regime's aggressive policies and regional security threats. This request was made to ensure the security of Türkiye's borders and to protect Turkish citizens. In particular, Patriot missiles were requested to be deployed in the Southeastern region. Russia and Iran reacted to this request by claiming that Türkiye would intervene militarily in Syria. However, NATO responded positively to Türkiye's request and Patriot missiles were deployed by the Netherlands, Germany and the United States in Gaziantep, Adana and Kahramanmaraş in January 2013. In the same period,

Türkiye was concerned about the increasing influence of the PYD/YPG terrorist organization in the region and emphasized that a separatist organization would never be allowed. Türkiye's Syria policy has become harsher compared to previous years, but Türkiye has adopted a stance in favor of diplomatic resolution of the crisis rather than military intervention. Türkiye also made international calls for the fall of the Assad regime, made efforts to unite the opposition forces and continued to provide aid to Syrian refugees.

In 2013, Türkiye continued its policy of "regional ownership" within the framework of its deterrence in the Middle East. In 2013, Türkiye's policy of regional ownership in the Middle East was characterized by continued military support for the opposition in Syria and support for the overthrow of the Assad regime and the establishment of a transitional government in its place. In this process, Türkiye expected more support from global actors, especially the US and its NATO allies. However, the relative passivity of the US policy on Syria and Russia and Iran's support for the Assad regime limited Türkiye's influence in the region. Strained relations with Russia and Iran pushed Türkiye to act more cautiously. Türkiye has also had to contend with domestic problems such as its own border security and the growing refugee burden. This situation has led Türkiye to shape its policies in the region within the framework of both its own internal dynamics and the actions of global actors. In this framework, Türkiye has adopted an approach focused on protecting its own security and stability against conflicts and crises in the region.

In 2013, as the Assad regime increased the scale of violence, countries opposed to the Assad regime tried to put pressure on Assad. In this context, the US, the EU and the Arab League countries started to impose embargoes one after another. In addition to the embargoes, Syria's membership in the Arab League was suspended at this time. With these sanctions by global and regional countries, diplomatic relations with Syria were completely severed. Economic and political sanctions were intended to weaken Assad's hand. Following the increased pressure on Assad, a peace program was put forward to resolve the crisis. This peace program included the cessation of military aid to the opposition forces and a negotiated settlement, the return of Syrian refugees, the planning of a transitional period and a general amnesty (Miş, 2014, 165). Bashar al-Assad's policy since the beginning of the Syrian crisis has been evaluated negatively by Türkiye. Türkiye did not find Assad's non-diplomatic, aggressive stance and his disregard for reform demands sincere and therefore developed distrust towards him. Assad's inability to stop the violence in his country and his portrayal of opposition groups and all those who oppose the regime as enemies were among the main reasons for Türkiye's distrust. This has shaped Türkiye's attitude towards the Assad regime. At the same time, Western countries generally agreed with Türkiye's assessment and criticized the Assad regime's approach. This common view has been an important factor affecting Türkiye's Syria policy.

In February 2013, a car bomb exploded on the Turkish side of Cilvegözü Border Gate on the Turkish-Syrian border. The explosion occurred about 40 meters away from the border gate, killing 13 people and wounding 28 others, 13 of them seriously (BBC, 2013). Not long after the Cilvegözü attack, the Syrian regime carried out another car bomb attack in Reyhanlı in May.

As in the first attack, the Syrian regime did not claim responsibility for the attack and claimed that it was carried out by the opposition. However, these statements of the Syrian regime were interpreted as deflecting the target. As a matter of fact, it was revealed in October that the attack was sponsored by the regime.

By 2014, the Syrian crisis had entered a new phase, marked by shifting dynamics due to the increasing influence of terrorist groups in the region. The rise of ISIS significantly impacted the policies of Western nations, particularly the United States and EU countries, towards Syria. ISIS's aggressive tactics against both opposition forces and regime loyalists, combined with the threat to Türkiye's border security, added a layer of terrorism to the already complex crisis. In a way, ISIS's clashes with opposition groups inadvertently strengthened Bashar al-Assad's position and bought him time. The conflict between ISIS and the PYD/YPG terrorist organizations also triggered a new wave of refugee migration towards Türkiye. The total number of Syrians under temporary protection registered in Türkiye was 3 million 237 thousand 585 (Mülteciler Derneği, 2023). This has also caused a burden on the Turkish economy.

In the context of the developments in 2014, Türkiye's Syria policy was shaped around the overthrow of the Assad regime, managing refugee migration, and combating terrorist groups. This was also the year when the second round of the Geneva talks, aimed at resolving the Syrian conflict, took place. Before these talks, Bashar al-Assad accused Türkiye of supporting terrorist groups, specifically referring to Syrian opposition forces. Assad's allegations were an attempt to internationalize the conflict and seek sanctions against Türkiye. Additionally, Assad's aggressive stance towards Türkiye continued with border violations, including the shooting down of two Syrian aircraft by Türkiye on March 22, following Türkiye's revised engagement rules in 2012 which allowed for retaliatory action in case of airspace violations.

Another notable event in 2014 was the Assad regime's announcement of an election on June 3. This move was criticized by Türkiye and other opposition-supporting countries as manipulative and illegitimate. The Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) dismissed the election, asserting that the Assad regime had never been democratically elected and had been maintaining a dynastic dictatorship for 44 years. Despite these criticisms, Assad ran in an uncontested election and remained in power, with the election results not recognized as legitimate by most countries outside his circle of allies.

The rise of terrorist organizations in 2014, such as ISIS, altered the priorities of major actors in the Syrian conflict. The US and EU countries prioritized combating ISIS over regime change in Syria. Türkiye, while trying to prevent the formation of groups like ISIS and YPG/PYD along its borders, also emphasized that the instability caused by the Assad regime was the root cause of these terrorist organizations. Türkiye argued that the overthrow of the Assad regime would hinder the growth of groups like ISIS. The hostage situation of 48 Turkish citizens at Türkiye's consulate in Mosul by ISIS also made Türkiye cautious in its actions against ISIS (BBC, 2014).

The changing priorities of these actors contributed to the deepening of the Syrian crisis. Türkiye, being significantly affected due to its geographical proximity, found itself in a policy dilemma. To address this, Türkiye advocated for the creation of a "safe zone" for three main reasons: to protect its national security from the threats posed by conflicts between terrorist groups, to prevent the autonomous structuring of PYD/YPG, and to manage the influx of refugees due to the ongoing conflict.

The events of October 6-8, 2014, known as the Kobani incidents, exemplified the national security threats Türkiye had repeatedly expressed. Clashes between ISIS and PYD/YPG in Kobani led to protests in Türkiye, organized by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which resulted in significant damage to property and loss of life. These developments also had a substantial impact on the peace process in Türkiye, which eventually ended in 2015.

In 2015, one of the key aspects of Türkiye's Syria policy was dealing with the threats posed by ISIS and PYD/YPG terrorist groups. This period saw the intensification of conflicting interests among actors involved in Syria. Türkiye continued its policy, initiated in 2011, of seeking the overthrow of the Assad regime, supporting the opposition, and resolving the refugee crisis. However, unlike previous years, the urgency to address the escalating security issues became more pronounced. Post-2015, Türkiye modified its Syria policy to include military intervention alongside political measures, driven by the evolving situation. The threat posed by PYD/YPG's establishment in Northern Syria, especially towards Turkmen communities, became a critical factor influencing Türkiye's policy in Syria. In 2015, the strengthening of PYD/YPG and ISIS heightened Türkiye's security concerns to an extreme level. Both terrorist organizations targeted Türkiye through propaganda and attacks. ISIS, in particular, conducted successive attacks in Türkiye, first in Suruç and then at the Ankara train station. These attacks justified the growing security concerns and prompted Türkiye to take action against potential ISIS networks within the country. Various operations were conducted to disrupt these networks, and ISIS gathering points and command centers identified as security threats were targeted and eliminated (Acun, 2016, 182-186).

In 2015, a significant event in Türkiye's Syria policy was the aircraft crisis with Russia. Russia, already a supporter of the Assad regime, intensified its efforts to strengthen its position in the region. The global shift in focus from regime change to combating ISIS presented an opportunity for Russia. It was revealed that Russia's attacks in Syria under the guise of fighting terrorism also targeted Syrian opposition forces and Turkmen, limiting Türkiye's strategic options in the region. Despite Türkiye's repeated warnings about airspace violations, Türkiye a Russian SU-24 was shot down by Türkiye on November 24 after violating Turkish airspace (NTV, 2015).

Following the 2015 aircraft crisis, tensions escalated between Türkiye and Russia. Russia responded to Türkiye's defensive action by intensifying its military operations and openly challenging Türkiye. In response, Türkiye, seeking support from NATO allies, increased its military preparedness to secure its borders.

Although NATO allies provided support in this crisis, their generally passive stance in Syria and the resulting threats to Türkiye's border security, along with the economic burden of refugees, continued to pose significant challenges for Türkiye.

1.2. 2016 and Beyond: The Hard Power Era in Syria Policy

2016 can be considered as an important turning point in Türkiye's Syria policy. Since this year, Türkiye has hardened its policy, aiming to play a more active role in Syria. This hardening marks a period when national security is under threat and changing dynamics in the region have led Türkiye to a situation that requires military intervention. Moreover, the Syrian crisis has become the leading foreign policy agenda item. The strengthening of the PYD/YPG terrorist organization in the region, which is supported by the US, Russia and the Assad regime, has worried Türkiye. The growing strength of this organization in the region posed a serious threat to Türkiye's national security. Moreover, Türkiye was openly targeted by terrorist groups during this period. A series of terrorist attacks were carried out by the PYD/YPG. Since March, the PYD/YPG started to form cantons covering Afrin, Kobani (Ayn al Arab) and Jazira regions, making Türkiye's national security even more dangerous. This situation led Türkiye to further harden its Syria policy and intervene more in the events in the region (Öztop, 2019, 123).

There are several number of factors shaping Türkiye's Syria policy. These factors include the threat to Türkiye's national security, the United States' isolation of Türkiye in the region, and the airplane crisis with Russia. For these reasons, Türkiye felt the need to create a new security concept. The new security concept adopts an approach that includes military intervention as well as political activities. It no longer emphasized only defense, but the intention to directly intervene militarily under any threat. In addition to this military intervention strategy, it also includes factors such as energy security and the humanitarian dimension of the crisis. The main motivation for Türkiye's new security concept has been the demand for a terrorism-free safe zone. In this framework, Türkiye has organized various military operations and implemented its new security concept on the ground. These operations reflect Türkiye's aim of protecting its national security and waging a more effective fight against terrorist organizations in Syria.

In August 2016, Türkiye directly intervened militarily in Syria for the first time since the beginning of the crisis. Starting on August 24, 2016 and continuing until March 29, 2017, the Euphrates Shield Operation was launched against the backdrop of insecurity. Türkiye carried out this military intervention within the scope of self-defense in accordance with Article 51 of the UN (Ekşi, 2018, 88). Through its military operations, Türkiye has aimed to repel the ISIS terrorist organization on its border and to prevent the PYD/YPG terrorist organization's attempts to create a possible corridor. In addition, one of its objectives was to repair the damage caused by terrorist organizations in the region. Operation Euphrates Shield was not only a military intervention but also had a political significance. It aimed to clearly communicate Türkiye's intention to play a more active role in Syria to other states operating in the region.

These operations emphasized Türkiye's determination to ensure security and stability in the region and drew the attention of regional players.

The ISIS terrorist organization launched several missile attacks against Türkiye in April and May, which made it imperative to prosecute ISIS from Türkiye's border. Indeed, just before the operation was launched, the attack in Gaziantep, which resulted in the deaths of 54 civilians, accelerated the preparation for the operation. TAF and FSA acted together in the operation. The operation was carried out in four phases. The first of these was the Jarablus-Sajur phase, which took place on August 24-28. As a result of the operation, ISIS was cleared from the region. The PYD/YPG terrorists withdrew to the east of the Euphrates River. This US guarantee for the withdrawal of the PYD/YPG ended the operation (Yeşiltaş, Seren, & Özçelik, 2017, 17- 25). The second phase of the operation took place between September 3 and October 12 in the Çobanbey (Rai) and Dabık regions. Since Turkish troops could not go to the Manbij region due to the US, the TAF and the FSA carried out the second operation here. As a result of the operation, Dabık was taken under control and ISIS was cleared from the region. Türkiye has also successfully captured 1300 square kilometers of territory (Şafak, 2020, 15).

The third phase of the operation was carried out in the Dabık- Al-Bab regions between October 17 and December 26. With the capture of Dabık, Türkiye gained a great advantage and weakened the hand of ISIS. After the successful control of Dabık, the target was Al-Bab. Taking control of the Al-Bab region was important for Türkiye to create a safe zone free of terrorism. The third phase of the operation was more complicated than the other phases. This is because the Syrian regime forces started to operate in the field. As a result of the PYD/YPG terrorist organization's attacks on the Mera'a region, which was cleared of ISIS by Türkiye, Türkiye launched airstrikes against the PYD/YPG in order to stop their advance. Following the defense against the PYD/YPG, TAF and FSA military forces started to move towards the Al-Bab region. Between December 21 and March 30, 2017, the operation was successfully concluded with the Al-Bab operation. ISIS's presence in the areas where the operation was carried out was ended. Likewise, the PYD/YPG terrorist organization was prevented from advancing by narrowing its area of operation. The operation was a significant achievement in terms of removing terrorist groups from Türkiye's borders. For Türkiye, 2017 was a year of changing balances in Syria. As a result of the military operations that lasted from 2016 until March 2017, Türkiye gained an advantage in terms of diplomacy. In this context, Türkiye, which did not receive the necessary support from the US, entered a new era in foreign policy within the scope of the Astana Process with Russia and Iran. Türkiye's dialog with different blocs has been an indication that Türkiye is an important factor in Syria (Fakı, 2022, 62).

With the ongoing political dialogues, Türkiye has continued to search for a solution at the table, while on the other hand, it has continued military operations to solve the terrorist problem. After 2016 and 2017, Türkiye launched Operation Olive Branch in 2018. The operation was launched in cooperation with the Turkish Armed Forces and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) against the PYD/YPG terrorist organization in Afrin between January 20 and March 18, 2018.

Türkiye launched Operation Olive Branch to prevent the organization from controlling the region, to protect its national security, and to prevent the organization's military training. In addition, Afrin has a strategic importance for the organization and constitutes an important base for terrorist attacks against Türkiye (Deşilmek & Duman, 2019, 85).

With the launch of Operation Olive Branch, Türkiye's Syria policy has also changed. At the beginning of the civil war, the policy focused solely on the overthrow of the Assad regime and refugees but changed its priority to fight against terrorist organizations. During the 58-day operation, Türkiye aimed to prevent the PYD/YPG terrorist organization from establishing a separatist state in northern Syria. In line with this goal, Türkiye's strategy was to prevent the PYD/YPG from reaching the Mediterranean Sea by capturing the west of the Euphrates River (Ekşi, 2018, 90). Türkiye's operation prevented the PYD/YPG terrorist organization from reaching the Mediterranean Sea and thwarted the organization's plan to establish a terrorist state.

Another important development in 2018 was the decisions taken for Idlib at the Sochi summit. Türkiye and Russia came together on September 17 to implement Turkey's long-standing call for a demilitarized zone in Idlib. In this context, the memorandum includes the establishment of de-escalation zones and clearing the region of terrorist groups, strengthening Türkiye's observation points, Russia's caution against any possible attack in Idlib, and the establishment of a peaceful environment in the region by the guarantor countries within the scope of the Astana process (Fakı, 2022, 64).

In sum, the Syrian crisis has had a devastating political and economic impact on Türkiye. While the security dimension of the crisis worries Türkiye, the number of Syrian refugees inside the country has put a great pressure on the social and economic structure. Since the beginning of the crisis, Türkiye has pursued a policy of keeping its doors open to Syrian refugees. This people-oriented approach has been of great importance in the humanitarian dimension. However, the large number of asylum-seekers has been a challenge for Türkiye in terms of social peace and financial resources.

2. SYRIA POLICY OF THE US

The relations between the US and Syria have historically been tense and complex. The main reasons for these tense relations are related to the US policies in the Middle East. Especially from the post-Cold War period to the present day, Syria's being an important ally of Russia and the US policy of defending Israel's interests in the region have negatively reflected on the relations between the two countries. Factors such as Syria's close sectarian ties with Iran and Syria's opposition to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 have been influential in determining the US policy towards Syria. During this period, Syria was included among the countries defined as the "axis of evil" by then US President George W. Bush, along with Iraq, Iran and North Korea, and was subjected to threats of military intervention.

The policies pursued by the US led Syria to establish strong relations with Iran and Russia and to build its foreign policy on anti-Israel and anti-Americanism. These developments have led to deteriorating and complicated relations between the US and Syria.

The aggressive foreign policy adopted by the US since the Cold War period pushed the countries in the Middle East to seek a new order. During this period, Iran, which had long opposed the US, felt threatened by the US policies in the region and embarked on a nuclear armament program. Iran was positioned as a power in the Middle East based on the Shiite axis, and Syria became an important collaborator for Iran in this period. At the same time, Russia, taking advantage of the weakening power of the United States globally, built strong alliances in the region and took advantage of having energy resources. The radical Islamic groups supported by the US, especially during the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, have turned into the terrorist groups that the US is fighting against in the Syrian civil war. In conclusion, the US policies in the Middle East and Russia's influence in the region in the post-Cold War era have had a major impact on the complex and volatile dynamics of the region and caused these countries to reshape their security and foreign policy strategies (Cerrah, 2016, 322).

In its policies towards the Middle East in general and Syria in particular, the US pursued an aggressive, hard power policy based on military force until Barack Obama assumed the presidency in 2009. Relations with Syria were partially positive from the time Obama assumed the presidency until 2011. In fact, the two countries, whose political dialog was interrupted due to the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, were re-established in 2010 with the appointment of the US Ambassador to Damascus (Amerika'nın Sesi, 2010). However, the transformation of popular uprisings into a civil war in Syria drastically changed the course of relations. The US policy towards Syria was realized in two phases: the Obama administration between 2009 and 2017 and the Donald Trump administration between 2017 and- 2020. During the Obama administration, the US government pursued a policy towards Syria based mostly on soft power and public diplomacy, emphasizing diplomatic means to resolve the conflict. However, under the Trump administration, the US policy towards Syria entered a period in which military intervention on the ground was emphasized and hard power elements came to the fore. In these two different periods, the US policy towards Syria changed according to the development of the conflict and foreign policy priorities. While the Obama-era approach was more diplomatic and negotiation-based, the Trump era has adopted a more hard-line and military interventionist stance.

2.1. US Syria Policy under Barack Obama

Barack Obama, upon assuming the presidency of the United States, generally pursued a foreign policy centered on political dialogue, multilateral relationships, and minimizing military force. At the core of this approach was the desire to rectify the perception of the United States as an "occupying nation" worldwide, particularly due to its military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

During his campaign, Obama frequently emphasized his intention to withdraw American troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, avoid further involvement in hot conflicts, and focus on domestic issues. The 2008 economic crisis was one of the factors that influenced Obama's foreign policy. Dealing with economic challenges, reducing military expenditures, and revitalizing the American economy were internal issues that affected Obama's foreign policy approach. Furthermore, international developments such as the rising economic power of China, Russia's increased influence in the Middle East, and Iran's nuclear ambitions also had an impact on the Obama administration. In particular, the desire to avoid escalating tensions with Russia led the United States to adopt a more cautious approach in crises like the Syrian civil war. During this period, the US played a more passive role in Syria and intervened less against the Assad regime. Therefore, Obama's foreign policy doctrine reflected a focus on improving America's international image, reducing military interventions, and promoting political dialogue. This approach was shaped by a combination of domestic and international factors and aimed to redefine the role of the US in international relations.

It would not be wrong to say that Obama's constructive policy in the Middle East was put to the test with the onset of the popular uprisings. As a matter of fact, Obama, who had set his foreign policy focus on the Asia-Pacific region when he assumed the presidency, was forced to shift his focus back to the Middle East after the uprisings spread to Syria (Gerges, 2012, s. 96). In general, Obama has conducted his Syria policy within the framework of "leading from behind". In this context, he has not been directly active in the field and has put allied countries in the forefront. Obama's policy aimed to minimize the costs of the civil war for the United States and put the burden on other countries. As a matter of fact, he did not take any significant action until the developments in the region threatened American interests (Fakı, 2022, 67).

The fact that Obama only criticized the violence in Syria was also due to the fact that the aftermath of the uprisings in Libya, which resulted in the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, was not a good one. Although he has often stated that he would not be involved in any military intervention in the Middle East, the fact that Gaddafi's overthrow took place with the support of NATO and the UN inevitably made the US a party to military intervention (Harunoğlu, 2019, 1167). On the other hand, since the beginning of the civil war, Russia's siding with and providing assistance to the regime has made it difficult for the Obama administration to take steps in Syria. The Russian administration has taken steps to deter the US from a possible military intervention, arguing that every US intervention in the Middle East has resulted in instability (Council, 2012, 7-10).

In 2012, the US under the Obama administration stated that the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war was a "red line" and that military intervention against the Assad regime would be possible if chemical weapons were used. Soon after, on June 14, 2013, Washington announced that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons against the opposition and civilians (BBC, News, 2013). The international community had expectations that the United States would impose military sanctions against the use of chemical weapons.

However the issue was resolved when Russian President Putin assured the United States that the chemical weapons would be removed from Syria. This cautious stance of the US in Syria was met with criticism from allied countries, including Türkiye. President Obama's approach was also seen as an indication of his reluctance to confront Russia again.

In 2014, the United States shifted its Syria policy from focusing on the overthrow of the Assad regime to prioritizing the fight against ISIS. On September 10, 2014, the US laid out its strategy to combat ISIS. President Obama based this strategy on four pillars: conducting aerial attacks against ISIS by the US, supporting groups in the region fighting ISIS, cutting off funding to ISIS, preventing foreign individuals from joining ISIS, and providing humanitarian aid to those affected by ISIS attacks (Pirinççi, Orhan, & Duman, 2014, 12).

In 2015, Russia's active involvement in the Syrian civil war resulted in a constrained operational space for the United States. While ISIS was the main focus of US foreign policy, Russia's support for the Assad regime by joining the war strengthened Assad's position. These developments led to a deadlock in President Obama's Syria policy. Obama's passive approach in Syria not only empowered regional rival countries but also undermined the trust of allied nations like Türkiye, leaving them isolated (Yağcı, 2015, 70). Although Obama rhetorically stated that he was on the side of the Syrian opposition and its people, this situation did not translate into concrete steps in practice.

2.2. US Syria Policy under Donald Trump

In the 2017 US presidential elections, Donald Trump took office, succeeding Barack Obama. Trump, in contrast to Obama, displayed a more assertive foreign policy stance. During his campaign, he conveyed intentions to be more proactive in Syria. Initially, US allies, including Türkiye, positively received Trump's approach to Syria, hoping it would restore American influence in the Middle East, which they believed had waned under Obama. Despite frequently criticizing Obama's policies in Syria, once in office, Trump struggled to implement a structured and concrete policy. He conducted specific military interventions but largely continued the Syrian policy he inherited from Obama.

Former US President Trump's Middle East and Syria policy was founded on three main pillars: safeguarding the interests of Israel, combating ISIS, and diminishing Iran's influence. This approach was primarily aimed at bolstering America's active role in the region. The 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) can be viewed as a component of this policy. This strategy highlighted the United States' global deterrence, military strength, defense capabilities, and cost-sharing with allies, with the goal of reinforcing and recognizing America's international power. These policies can be seen as a reflection of the United States' efforts to rebuild its influence in the region (Esen, 2018, 3-5).

From the outset of his presidency, one of Trump's initial actions was to impose a travel ban on seven predominantly Muslim countries, including Syria, and to restrict the entry of Syrian refugees into the United States. The affected countries were Libya, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, and Iran. Trump's move was widely perceived as Islamophobic by the international community. It can be argued that this travel ban undermined the efforts of the Obama administration to improve the US' image in the Middle East. Additionally, Trump announced his intention to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran, which was signed during Obama's tenure. Trump justified the cancellation of the Iran deal by arguing that it was contrary to the interests of Israel and the US, claiming that Iran supported terrorist groups and exacerbated the refugee crisis (Kurt, 2019, 13-14).

Shortly after Trump was elected president, in April 2017, with the revelation that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons against civilians in Idlib, the Trump administration, unlike Obama, intervened militarily in Syria for the first time. Al Shayrat Air base in Syria was hit by missile attacks carried out by ships (BBC News, 2017). Trump's second intervention in Syria took place on April 14, 2018. After the Assad regime used chemical weapons against civilians again, the US, England and France hit the regime with missiles for the second time (NTV, 2018).

During his presidency, a pivotal moment in the US policy towards Syria under Donald Trump was the decision to withdraw American forces. Trump announced this decision on December 19, 2018, via his social media account. He justified the withdrawal from Syria by stating that ISIS had been defeated, rendering the US presence in Syria unnecessary. This move by Trump was met with surprise and confusion both within US domestic politics and internationally. This led to a series of resignations in the US administration. Firstly, US Defense Secretary James Mattis submitted his resignation, followed by Brett H. McGurk, the Special Representative for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, who had been in his position since the Obama administration and was known for his favorable stance towards the PYD. Moreover, Trump's decision was also met with concern by the PYD, which had been supported by the US. Amid internal disagreements in the US over this policy, Trump slowed down the withdrawal process. Shortly after the announcement of the withdrawal, in January 2019, US National Security Advisor John Bolton stated that the US would not withdraw from Syria until ISIS was completely defeated and that the security of the PYD/YPG, considered a terrorist organization by some, would continue to be assured by the US (DW, 2019).

Since the appointment of former US Ambassador to Ankara, James Jeffrey, as the Special Representative for Syria in August 2018, there has been a noticeable shift in US policies towards Syria. Continuing the strategy inherited from Obama, which primarily focused on ISIS, the Trump administration began to effectively utilize economic sanctions alongside military interventions in its Syria policy. After declaring ISIS completely defeated and signaling a withdrawal in 2019, the US started implementing economic measures aimed at limiting the influence of Russia and Iran in Syria. Despite the Assad regime regaining control over a majority of Syrian territory, the US maintained its influence in regions rich in agricultural and oil resources.

This strategic presence was intended to economically weaken Assad and his supporters, Russia and Iran. By controlling these key resources, the US aimed to strengthen its position against Syria and its allies, whose economies were already on the brink of collapse. This ongoing crisis, lasting over a decade, has been a significant economic burden for all actors involved in the region.

3. TÜRKİYE AND US RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

The diplomatic relations between Türkiye and the United States have a long history, but they intensified notably after Türkiye joined NATO in 1952. During this period, when Türkiye faced threats from the USSR, the two countries cooperated against what they perceived as a common threat. Despite various tensions and incidents such as the opium crisis, the Johnson Letter, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Cyprus Peace Operation, the alliance between the US and Türkiye generally remained intact. Until the Syrian crisis, the relationship between Türkiye and the US, though marked by ups and downs, generally progressed positively. However, the uprisings in the Middle East in 2011 put the relations between these two countries through a challenging test. The Syrian crisis has become a point of considerable disagreement between Türkiye and the US, highlighting the differences in their approaches and interests in the region.

3.1. Türkiye-US relations under Barack Obama (2009-2017)

From 2009, when Barack Obama became President, until 2014, during the escalation of the Syrian crisis, Türkiye and the United States maintained normal relations despite various disagreements. In fact, upon becoming President, Obama described the relationship with Türkiye as a "Model Partnership" and frequently emphasized Türkiye's significance as a key ally. Throughout the Syrian crisis and the formation of various terrorist organizations, no insurmountable issues arose in the mutual relations between the two countries.

Following the escalation of the Syrian uprisings into a conflict, both Türkiye and the United States aligned on the same side, sharing similar views. The US even acknowledged Türkiye's leading role in the region, expressing their support. This stance was positively received by Türkiye, which was aspiring to be a rising model country in the region. Both countries, in the early years of the crisis, exerted efforts to resolve the issue diplomatically through international organizations. The Syrian issue was brought to the agenda of the United Nations in search of a solution. As the Assad regime increased the severity of violence, both nations called for Assad to step down. Subsequently, they agreed to provide financial support and military training to Syrian opposition forces (Erimtan, 2014, 1).

The first major disagreement between Türkiye and the United States emerged over the issue of supporting opposition forces in Syria. Türkiye's backing of groups aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood was met with disapproval by the US, a concern they voiced openly in the following year.

The US primary apprehension was about the ideology of the potential government to succeed the Assad regime, particularly wary of an Islamic ideology-based group coming to power due to perceived threats to Israel's security. On the other hand, Türkiye, due to its geographical proximity, was concerned about the conflict spilling over into its territory. Indeed, the influx of refugees fleeing the war into Türkiye led to irregular migration and the spread of regional instability to the Turkish border. The second major rift in Türkiye-US relations arose over the establishment of a safe zone in the region. The influx of refugees into Türkiye led to the country requesting the establishment of a NATO-controlled buffer zone, a request that was not positively received by the United States. This can be seen as a consequence of the passive approach that Obama's administration maintained from the beginning of the Syrian crisis.

The US' reluctance to be physically involved in the region was part of a broader strategy to keep a distance from such issues. However, this stance of the US laid the groundwork for future trust issues between the two countries. It increasingly appeared to Türkiye that they were being left to face the challenges in the region alone, despite being a NATO ally, fostering a sense of abandonment (Fakı, 2022, 73-74). Up until 2014, the passive and reactive policy of the United States in the region inadvertently allowed Iran and Russia to gain strength. Simultaneously, it led to Türkiye, a NATO ally, grappling with the economic burden stemming from security concerns and refugee issues. This situation contributed to Türkiye feeling isolated and progressively limited its maneuverability in the region. Despite Türkiye's persistent requests for a safe zone, the US, while often mentioning the need for joint action to share costs, did not adequately address either the refugee crisis or security concerns. Furthermore, the Obama administration's inaction in response to the use of chemical weapons, which had been declared a red line, also caused discomfort in Türkiye.

In 2014, the US shifted its focus to ISIS and chose the PYD/YPG, the Syrian extension of the PKK, as its ally in the fight against ISIS. This decision, along with the events in Kobani between October 6-8 and their repercussions in Türkiye, led to a significant escalation of tensions. Despite Türkiye repeatedly presenting evidence that the PYD/YPG and the PKK were essentially the same organization, the US continued to overlook this and insisted they were separate entities. Although the US recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization, it maintained its stance on the PYD/YPG and provided them with military support. The events in Kobani, which were provocatively transformed into actions within Türkiye, further highlighted the link between these two organizations. Türkiye consistently voiced its concerns that the weapons provided by the US to the PYD/YPG could eventually be used against Türkiye by the PKK, arguing that using one terrorist organization to fight another was unacceptable. Additionally, Türkiye's cautious approach to the coalition formed by Obama to combat ISIS, particularly after ISIS captured Mosul and Turkish citizens were taken hostage there, led to actions from the US that Türkiye was not fulfilling its role in the fight against ISIS (Landler, Barnard, & Schmitt, 2014).

In 2015, the US began to characterize Türkiye as an "unreliable actor" (Özdemir, 2016, 92). The relationship that began with the rhetoric of a "model partnership" eventually evolved into a situation marked by a crisis of trust for both Türkiye and the United States. Türkiye's decision to open the Incirlik Air Base for the US to use in the fight against ISIS helped to alleviate the atmosphere of distrust to some extent. However, while the issue of creating a safe zone remained unresolved, the cessation of the peace process in Türkiye led to the resurgence of PKK terrorist attacks, which in turn strained relations with the US once again.

Another issue that escalated tensions in Türkiye-US relations during the Obama era was the Manbij issue. The PYD/YPG's taking control of Manbij with the support of the US and its attempts to create a planned "Kurdish Corridor" by connecting it with Afrin were met with reaction by Türkiye (Kesepera, 2019, 20). Despite the United States' assurances that PYD/YPG forces would withdraw to the east of the Euphrates River after gaining control in Manbij, this did not materialize as promised. Türkiye repeatedly expressed concerns that the presence of the terrorist organization west of the Euphrates River would lead to serious security issues, but the US did not adhere to its commitment. The crisis in Manbij eventually accelerated Türkiye's decision to conduct military operations in Syria.

On the other hand, the Obama administration attempted to reassure Türkiye by stating that the weapons sent to PYD/YPG had serial numbers and would be collected back. However, the increase in the PKK's weapons and equipment capabilities, evident in the attacks carried out in Türkiye, not only raised doubts about the US's commitment to retrieve the supplied arms but also indicated the extent of training that the organization's militants had received (Kanat, 2017, 324).

In 2016, the failed military coup attempt by the Gülenist Terror Organization (FETÖ) significantly worsened the relationship between Türkiye and the United States, although it was an event independent of the Syrian conflict. The presence of the group's leader in the US and the refusal of the US to extradite him to Türkiye deepened the rift. Relations between Türkiye and the US, especially under the Obama administration, suffered unprecedented damage. Factors such as the US leaving its NATO ally Türkiye isolated in the Syrian crisis, collaborating with Syrian extensions of the PKK—a terrorist organization Türkiye has long combated—and increasing Türkiye's refugee burden, have prompted Türkiye to turn towards other international blocs.

3.2. Türkiye-US relations under Donald Trump (2017-2020)

The inauguration of Donald Trump as the President of the United States in 2017 was initially met with optimism by Türkiye, as there was a hope for an improvement in the bilateral relations that had been significantly strained during the Obama era. Trump's statements specifically about Syria raised Türkiye's expectations. Additionally, Trump referred to Türkiye as a "strategic partner." However, as events unfolded, it became evident that the poor trajectory of the US- Türkiye relationship, inherited from the Obama administration, largely continued. President Trump maintained and, in some cases, exacerbated the policies initiated by Obama.

One of the major issues in Türkiye-US relations during Trump's presidency was the continued US support for the PYD/YPG, groups Türkiye considers terrorist organizations.

In 2017, Türkiye and the United States experienced a major diplomatic incident. During this period, the US administration suspended the issuance of visas to citizens from Türkiye. This decision was taken following the arrest of Metin Topuz, who worked at the US Consulate General in Istanbul, for his alleged links to the FETÖ terrorist organization. In response to this step by the US, Türkiye also suspended visa issuance to US citizens. This event marked an important turning point in relations between the two countries (AGOS, 2017). On the other hand, in 2017, Türkiye's airstrikes in the Sinjar region in April significantly affected the dynamics in the region. These strikes were strongly condemned by the US, particularly for allegedly harming the YPG forces fighting against ISIS in Raqqa. This further exacerbated the tensions in relations between Türkiye and the US and highlighted the difficulties in diplomatic and military relations between the two countries (Kanat, 2018, 290-291).

Türkiye conveyed to the US that the operation against ISIS in Raqqa could be carried out in coordination with the opposition. However, the US did not look favorably on this issue. The US insistence on the PYD/YPG was interpreted as a pretext for ISIS to increase its deterrence in the region. As a matter of fact, the US, which states that cost and risk sharing should be done with allies on every issue, has refrained from acting on a common ground when Türkiye's security is under clear threat. It has tried to establish a presence in the region by using members of terrorist organizations. This has been the embodiment of Trump's "America First" rhetoric in the field. One month after this development, Donald Trump and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met in Washington. The meeting was significant as it was the first face-to-face meeting since Donald Trump assumed the presidency. During the meeting, Türkiye reiterated its red lines such as the extradition of FETO ringleader Fetullah Gülen and the cessation of support for the PYD/YPG terrorist organization. However, Türkiye's demands were again ignored by the US. The US continued its rhetoric that the PYD/YPG terrorist organization is not the same organization as the PKK. Upon Türkiye's refusal to accept this situation, the US made statements that the support given to the PYD/YPG terrorist organization was temporary (Kesepera, 2019, 29-30).

In 2017, a major source of tension in relations between Türkiye and the United States was the S-400 missile defense system crisis. For many years, Türkiye has faced serious threats to its border security and these threats have increased, especially with the outbreak of the crisis in Syria. This situation pushed Türkiye to search for new defense systems. Türkiye requested NATO's support in this regard, but failed to achieve the desired result. In this process, the purchase of the FD-2000 air defense system with China first came to the agenda, but after NATO's opposition, Türkiye started negotiations with Russia for the purchase of the S-400 missile defense system as an alternative. This step marked a significant transformation in Türkiye's defense policy and affected its relations with its NATO allies (Elias, 2017). The United States has strongly opposed Türkiye's purchase of the S-400 missile defense system from Russia.

The US reaction is based on the fact that Russia is one of the biggest competitors of the US and the potential damage this deal could cause to the security relations between the two countries. In particular, the US has based its opposition on the security vulnerabilities and potential threats to the F-35 fighter jets. This has created a new point of tension in the military and strategic relations between Türkiye and the United States, and has led to debates on the long-term implications of this deal.

The US' discomfort with Türkiye's S-400 purchase was partly due to Türkiye's increasing cooperation with Russia in the context of the Syrian crisis. As a key NATO ally, Türkiye's diplomatic and military rapprochement with Russia, which is part of a bloc seen as an opponent of the United States, has raised concerns that it would harm US regional interests. Türkiye, on the other hand, responded to these criticisms by raising issues such as the failure of the US to fulfill its previous commitments and the failure to deliver the expected defense systems to Türkiye despite having paid for them. This became an issue that increased the tension in Türkiye-US relations and brought the issue of mutual trust to the forefront.

In February 2018, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson paid a visit to Ankara while the disagreements between the two countries continued. The main agenda of the meeting was again the arms aid provided to the PYD/YPG terrorist organization. At the same time, the PYD/YPG's increasing military presence in Manbij and Türkiye's operations in Syria were discussed. Türkiye reiterated its call for the confiscation of the weapons given to the terrorist organization. However, Secretary Tillerson stated that no significant weapons were provided to the terrorist organization and therefore there were no weapons to be confiscated (BBC News, 2018).

In April 2018, Tillerson left his post to CIA Director Mike Pompeo. Following Pompeo's appointment as the new Secretary of State, a meeting was held with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in June. As a result of the meeting held in Washington, it was stated that the weapons given to the YPG would be collected and the terrorist organization would withdraw from Manbij. Çavuşoğlu said after the meeting: "The step we will take is important for the future of Syria and it is also an opportunity to put our deteriorating relations with the US back on track. Therefore, this road map needs to be fully implemented (SDE, 2018). In a statement by Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu, it was observed that reaching an agreement on the Manbij issue has created an expectation for Türkiye that the tense course of relations with the US will improve.

Another incident that escalated tensions between the two countries occurred during the trial of US citizen Pastor Andrew Brunson, who was arrested in 2016 as part of a FETÖ investigation. Brunson, whose extradition was requested by the US, was put on trial in Türkiye, which resulted in a further escalation in relations between the two countries. The S-400 crisis and the Brunson incidents led the US Congress to raise voices in favor of sanctions against Türkiye. During this period, Donald Trump's unorthodox "twitter diplomacy" and hostile attitude towards Türkiye caused the relations to continue to deteriorate.

President Trump's tweets targeting the Turkish economy caused the Turkish lira (TL) to plummet against the US dollar, while also raising the prospect of tariffs on imports from Türkiye (Fakı, 2022, 81).

As a matter of fact, it was soon decided to impose sanctions on Türkiye in accordance with the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which was previously enacted by the US in 2017 against Russia, North Korea and Iran. In this context, it was stated that the purchase of F-35s to Türkiye was at risk, that other defense systems could not be procured in addition to the F-35s that military partnerships within NATO could be disrupted, and that entering into a military exchange with Russia would cause mutual security problems (Kıbaroğlu, 2018, 15). In the following processes, sanctions against Türkiye were not limited to the United States. Germany, Italy and France also suspended arms exports to Türkiye for a while (Emmott, 2019). F-35 issue resulted in Türkiye's exclusion from the program in 2019.

In 2018, the US attempt to establish observatories on the Turkish-Syrian border brought the two countries face to face again. The US justified the establishment of the observation posts on the grounds of protecting Türkiye from the ISIS threat. This move of the US is undoubtedly due to the fact that the PYD/YPG terrorist organization wants to be protected by the US. As a matter of fact, Türkiye rejected this initiative, emphasizing that the US government's rhetoric does not reflect reality. By establishing observation posts, the US aimed to prevent any Turkish operation against the PYD/YPG (Selçuk, 2020, 157-158).

Another important development between the two countries in the same year was Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria. This sudden withdrawal decision of the US was not welcomed by Türkiye. As a matter of fact, the fact that the US had been supporting terrorist organizations for some time, providing arms aid and suddenly announcing that it would withdraw from Syria made Türkiye uneasy. Türkiye stated that the weapons provided to the YPG should be confiscated and that if there is to be a withdrawal, it should be done in a coordinated manner after the region is stabilized. Türkiye's growing security concerns resulted in military operations as before. Trump immediately reacted to Türkiye's statement that it would carry out a military operation in Syria. As he had done before, Trump tweeted, "I will completely destroy Türkiye's economy (which I have done before)" (DW, 2019). In his rhetoric, Trump threatened that if Türkiye launched a military operation, it would wreak havoc on the Turkish economy. Trump told President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "Don't be a tough guy, don't be a fool" (HT, 2020), sparking great controversy. The style of diplomacy displayed by Trump, which is considered distant from traditional diplomatic norms, has been met with significant criticism from Türkiye.

In 2020, some issues remained in the background due to the US presidential elections and the COVID-19 pandemic in the world. In Syria, the most important agenda item was the Idlib issue. However, in statements made by the US, it has been stated many times that the US will not intervene in Idlib. The US government has stated that increasing its military presence in Syria does not bring a solution.

On the other hand, the US has stated that it stands by Türkiye against the attacks on Turkish soldiers and that it can provide intelligence if necessary. (Üstün & Yücel, 2021, 94- 95).

CONCLUSION

The Syrian crisis has had a significant and varied impact on Türkiye-US relations. The crisis has revealed the two countries' different approaches to counterterrorism and the YPG/PKK, with Türkiye seeing the YPG as a threat by associating it with the PKK and the US supporting the YPG as an ally in the fight against DAESH. Moreover, the Syrian refugee crisis has affected Türkiye's domestic and foreign policy, leading to criticism that the US and other Western countries are not providing sufficient support. The strategic cooperation between the two countries has been challenged by the fact that Türkiye's Syria policies have at times clashed with US regional strategies. The Syrian crisis has complicated the strategic cooperation between Türkiye and the United States, and the two countries' different approaches based on regional security and political interests have at times led to disagreements and tensions.

For Türkiye, the Syrian crisis has been a major foreign and domestic policy concern. Türkiye's approach to the crisis has changed over time, influenced by the challenges posed by terrorism and the refugee crisis. Despite significant gains from military operations, threats from groups such as the YPG and ISIS persist. Moreover, hosting millions of Syrian refugees has put significant pressure on Türkiye's economy and social fabric. On the other hand, US involvement and policy in Syria has changed significantly. Initially calling for Assad's resignation, the US later shifted its focus to the fight against ISIS. The US support for the YPG as a proxy in the fight against ISIS has been a controversial issue, especially in the context of US- Türkiye relations.

Relations between the US and Türkiye have been strained, especially due to the US support for the YPG, which Türkiye views as a threat. The future of this relationship depends on resolving trust issues and harmonizing interests between the two countries.

The US is expected to maintain its presence in Syria, balancing its strategic interests and countering the influence of Russia and Iran. The interplay of economic and political engagements between the US and Türkiye will be crucial in shaping future relations and the regional geopolitical landscape. In conclusion, the conflict in Syria has had far-reaching effects, not only affecting the people and infrastructure in Syria, but also changing the geopolitical dynamics in the region and the relations between key global powers.

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