



Syria in Türkiye-US Relations: Security, Terror and Strategic Dilemmas

Türkiye-ABD İlişkilerinde Suriye: Güvenlik, Terör ve Stratejik İkilemler

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Abstract

Historically, relations between Türkiye and the US have been influenced by periodic developments and can become strong or fragile at times. In this context, relations between Türkiye and the US have been dragged into a deep crisis due to the presence of the PKK/PYD/YPG in northern Syria and the US's support for these groups. Türkiye views the PYD/YPG as an extension of the PKK, considering it a terrorist organization and a direct threat to its national security. The existence and activities of these terrorist organizations raise serious concerns for Türkiye's security. The US supports this group by rebranding it as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and describing it as the most effective ground force against DAESH. This situation has damaged relations between the two NATO allies, leading to diplomatic crises and regional strategic incompatibilities. Türkiye's cross-border operations and the US's support for the PYD/YPG are the most significant points of tension overshadowing the common interests of the two states. Despite these challenges, Türkiye and the US have the potential to protect their common interests in the fight against terrorism and regional security issues. This study analyzes how Türkiye's policies in Syria have been shaped by US support for the PYD/YPG and how the tensions in this context have affected the strategic goals of both countries. Türkiye's national security strategies and cooperation dynamics with the US can be reshaped through diplomatic negotiations and strategic cooperation mechanisms. In this context, relations can progress on a more constructive basis if both parties act with mutual understanding and flexibility.

Keywords

Türkiye, US, Syria, military operations, pkk/pyd/ypg

Öz

Türkiye ve ABD ilişkileri tarihsel olarak dönemsel gelişmelerin etkisinde kalmakta, zaman zaman güçlü ya da kırılgan bir hal alabilmektedir. Bu bağlamda olmak üzere, Türkiye ve ABD ilişkileri, Suriye'nin kuzeyinde PKK/PYD/YPG'nin varlığı ve ABD'nin bu gruplara desteđi nedeniyle derin bir krize sürüklenmiştir. Türkiye, PYD/YPG'yi PKK'nin bir uzantısı ve terör örgütü olarak görmekte ve ulusal güvenliğine doğrudan bir tehdit olarak değerlendirmektedir. Bu terör örgütlerinin varlığı ve faaliyetleri, Türkiye'nin güvenliği açısından ciddi endişelere yol açmaktadır. ABD ise bu grubu ismini Suriye Demokratik Güçleri (SDG) şeklinde değiştirterek DEAS'a karşı en etkili kara gücü diye nitelendirerek desteklemektedir. Bu durum, iki NATO müttefiki arasındaki ilişkilere zarar vermiş, diplomatik krizlere ve bölgesel stratejik uyumsuzluklara yol açmıştır. Türkiye'nin sınır ötesi operasyonları ve ABD'nin PYD/YPG'ye verdiği destek, iki devletin ortak çıkarlarını gölgeleyen en önemli gerilim noktalarıdır. Bu zorluklara rağmen Türkiye ve ABD, terörle mücadelede ve bölgesel güvenlik konularında ortak çıkarlarını koruma potansiyeline sahiptir. Bu çalışma Türkiye'nin Suriye politikalarının, ABD'nin PYD/YPG'ye desteđiyle nasıl şekillendiđini ve bu bağlamda yaşanan gerilimlerin iki ülkenin stratejik hedeflerine nasıl etki ettiđini analiz etmektedir. Türkiye'nin ulusal güvenlik stratejileri ve ABD ile olan işbirliği dinamikleri, diplomatik müzakereler ve stratejik işbirliği mekanizmaları ile yeniden şekillendirilebilir niteliktedir. Bu çerçevede, ilişkilerin daha yapıcı bir zeminde ilerleyebilmesi her iki tarafın da karşılıklı anlayış ve esneklik içinde hareket etmesi ile mümkün olabilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Türkiye, ABD, Suriye, askeri operasyonlar, pkk/pyd/ypg

Introduction

PKK/PYD/YPG are terrorist organizations, regardless of the different evaluations they may receive internationally. These organizations are notable for their ideological foundations, organizational structures, and terrorist activities. PKK, a terrorist organization that adheres to Marxist-Leninist ideology and aims to establish an independent Kurdish state, has been carrying out terrorist attacks in Türkiye since 1984, resulting in the deaths of thousands of civilians and soldiers. These attacks include village raids, landmine and bomb attacks, bombings in city centers, and assassinations, causing significant harm to Türkiye's security. PKK also finances its activities through illegal means such as kidnapping, extortion, and drug trafficking.

PYD/YPG, emerging from the power vacuum created by the Syrian civil war, are structures that act as ideological and organizational extensions of the PKK. These organizations have established control over vast territories in northern and eastern Syria, where they have set up local administrations to impose their ideologies. YPG employs guerrilla warfare tactics, including landmine and bomb attacks, and conducts terrorist activities that pose a threat to Türkiye's border. The organic ties between the PYD/YPG and PKK exacerbate the threat these organizations pose to Türkiye, leading to cross-border attacks and infiltration attempts that undermine Türkiye's security.

The terrorist actions of PKK/PYD/YPG pose serious threats to Türkiye's national security. They harm Türkiye's territorial integrity, economic stability, and social peace. Additionally, these actions divert Türkiye's economic resources toward counter-terrorism efforts and negatively impact regional security policies. The terrorist activities of PKK/PYD/YPG also create challenges in Türkiye's international relations, leading to tensions in cooperation processes with allied states. Therefore the recognition of PKK/PYD/YPG as terrorist organizations and addressing their activities in this context on the international stage is crucial for Türkiye's security and interests.

Although relations between Türkiye and the US have historically been shaped on the basis of alliance and cooperation, in recent years, security dynamics in northeastern Syria and issues related to the PKK/PYD/YPG terrorist organization have made these relations complex and tense. The region in northern Syria, due to its strategic importance and the various actors operating there, is a significant focus for the foreign policies and security strategies of both states. The fact that the PYD/YPG, which poses a threat to Türkiye's national security, is supported by the US has further heightened existing concerns. In this context, Türkiye's military operations in northern Syria and the diplomatic crises with the US deeply affect the balance of power in the region.

Türkiye views the presence of the PKK in the region, the US support for the PYD/YPG in the fight against DAESH, and the provision of weapons and training to these groups as a direct threat to its territorial integrity and national security. Türkiye considers the YPG as the Syrian branch of the PKK and emphasizes that the terrorist activities empowered by this support pose a greater threat to Türkiye. Therefore, the tensions in Türkiye's cross-border operations and its relations with the US reveal a significant misalignment in the strategic goals and counter-terrorism policies of the two countries. However, despite all these strategic deadlocks, the potential for cooperation in common security interests and counter-terrorism between the two countries cannot be ignored.

The US's strategic objectives and counter-terrorism policies in the region often conflict with Türkiye's security interests. The US views the PYD/YPG as the most effective ground force in the region and argues that support for these groups should continue to maintain the fight against DAESH. Türkiye, on the other hand, aims to neutralize these groups and ensure its border security through cross-border operations. These opposing perspectives increase the conflict dynamics in Türkiye-US relations and threaten regional stability. Nevertheless, Türkiye-US relations are assessed not only on the axis of conflict but also on the basis of cooperation and common interests. An example of this situation can be seen in the efforts to diplomatically prevent the PYD/YPG from establishing its political, administrative, military, and security structures, as exemplified by the local elections announced in April 2024, which were postponed from May 30 to June 11 and then to August. The goals of both countries in counter-terrorism and ensuring regional security overlap. Diplomatic negotiations and strategic cooperation mechanisms can contribute to the more constructive progress of relations between the two countries in line with common security interests and counter-terrorism objectives.

Türkiye views the PKK's presence in Syria, as well as US support for the YPG/PYD in the fight against DAESH, including the provision of arms and training to these groups, as a direct threat to its territorial integrity and national security. Recognizing the YPG as the Syrian branch of the PKK, Türkiye emphasizes that these terrorist activities, strengthened by US support, increase the threats directed against it. Therefore, Türkiye seeks to neutralize this threat through cross-border operations and diplomatic initiatives. However, this process has led to significant strategic misalignments and diplomatic crises between the two countries. Nevertheless, there are also shared interests between Türkiye and the US in counterterrorism and regional security. Understanding the root causes of the tensions in Türkiye-US relations requires examining the strategic objectives and security concerns of both countries in Syria. In this context, the study focuses on the following key research questions:

- 1- How are Türkiye's national security policies shaped in response to US support for the PYD/YPG?
- 2- How has strategic cooperation between Türkiye and the US been affected by the presence of the PKK/PYD/YPG in northern Syria?
- 3- How have Türkiye's cross-border operations in Syria shaped diplomatic crises between the two countries?
- 4- As two NATO allies, around which common interests can Türkiye and the US cooperate in counterterrorism and regional security?

The aim of this study is to examine in depth how relations between Türkiye and the US are shaped in the context of the Syrian issue and the PKK/YPG. By analyzing Türkiye's national security strategies developed in response to US support for the PYD/YPG, the study seeks to understand how these dynamics influence the points of strategic cooperation and conflict between the two countries. Additionally, the impact of Türkiye's cross-border operations in response to the YPG/PYD threat on regional security dynamics and bilateral relations is evaluated.

1. Türkiye's Primary Security Concerns in the Context of Syria and the PKK/PYD/YPG

In early 2011, social movements that began in Tunisia and quickly spread across the Middle East reached Syria's Deraa city, leading to ongoing conflicts against the Assad regime. The brutal and relentless response by Assad's security forces to peaceful protests transformed these demonstrations into violent clashes. During this period, the number and diversity of opposition groups increased. Syria's ethnic and sectarian composition also played a significant role in deepening the conflicts, with clashes between Sunni opposition and regime-supported Alawite groups taking on a sectarian dimension. Additionally, the involvement of regional and global actors turned these conflicts into a proxy war. While states like Russia and Iran provided military and economic support to the Assad regime, the US and Türkiye adopted an anti-regime stance. This situation in Syria radically altered Türkiye-Syria relations.

Months of peaceful demonstrations that failed to yield results and the increasing casualties from regime attacks eventually led the opposition to armed rebellion. During this period, soldiers who opposed the regime's actions against the public left the Assad army and joined the opposition, forming the first opposition group known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) shortly thereafter (Ulutaş, Kanat, & Acun, 2015, s. 8). The FSA, estimated to consist of around 40,000 soldiers, is one of the strongest armed groups against the Assad regime but has not achieved the expected success due to a lack of significant external weaponry and financial support (Deniz, 2013, s. 321-322).

The opposition movement, which began with a quest for freedom and rights in Syria, underwent significant transformation over time. Exploiting the power vacuum caused by the civil war, the influence of foreign fighters linked to al-Qaeda and radical groups increased. The capture of extensive territories by the DAESH terrorist organization led to serious divisions and radicalization within the Syrian opposition. The widespread sense of despair among the public fueled radicalization, leading to new alliances among opposition factions (Ulutaş, Kanat, & Acun, 2015, s. 1-40). This process of radicalization made the Syrian opposition more susceptible to external interventions. Global and regional powers, particularly the US, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, supported various opposition groups in line with their strategic interests, while states like Russia and Iran supported pro-Assad groups. Such external interventions caused further fragmentation among opposition groups and prolonged the civil war up to the present day.

Groups such as PYD/YPG and FSA and the al-Nusra Front intensified clashes from late 2013 onwards, trying to exploit the power vacuum in Syria for territorial gains. DAESH quickly captured strategic areas like Azaz, Atmeh, Raqqa, Idlib, and parts of Aleppo. Opposition groups formed a coalition against DAESH to reclaim these regions. Strategic areas like Raqqa and Aleppo changed hands multiple times between the two sides (Lawson, 2014, s. 1355). The emergence of numerous opposition groups and the power vacuum in Syria increased and diversified Türkiye's security concerns. Two actors, in particular, have been significant sources of these concerns: the PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK, and the presence of DAESH, an al-Qaeda offshoot. Türkiye considers both groups as terrorist organizations (Orhan, 2016, s. 12). Consequently, Türkiye found it necessary to reshape its policy towards Syria.

From Türkiye's perspective, northern Syria holds great strategic and geopolitical importance. The Syrian civil war and international interventions have complicated the security dynamics in this region, turning it into a battleground for numerous local and international actors. Therefore, the strategic importance of northern Syria has significantly influenced Türkiye's security strategies and measures against regional activities. Consequently, changes in Türkiye's policy towards Syria and its increasing military interventions can be seen as reflections of heightened security concerns in the region.

Historically, significant disputes such as water issues, support for the PKK, and the Hatay issue have existed between Türkiye and Syria. Although these issues were sidelined following a positive shift in bilateral relations after Hafez Assad's death in 2000, they resurfaced with the onset of the Arab Spring. The bilateral relations deteriorated again in parallel with developments in Syria, exacerbated by Türkiye's open support for the opposition, making Türkiye a party to the conflict (Yılmaz, 2014, s. 187). Türkiye's current policy towards Syria aims to maintain Syria's territorial integrity and unity, end conflicts, meet the legitimate demands of the Syrian people, conclude the political transition process peacefully, and ensure security by clearing the border area of terrorist elements (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

Türkiye's security policies towards northern Syria have been shaped by the presence of the PYD/YPG, the Syrian extensions of the PKK, and the support these groups receive from the US. The PKK, which has been conducting armed struggle against Türkiye since 1984, is recognized as a terrorist organization by both Türkiye and the US. The PYD/YPG, prominent during the Syrian civil war and operating under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), are considered terrorist organizations by Türkiye. The support provided by the US to these groups is seen as a significant threat to Türkiye's national security. Türkiye fears that the strengthening presence of the PKK in Syria will lead to an increase in terrorist activities and instability along its southern border. In this context, Türkiye's military strategies and diplomatic efforts towards northern Syria aim to neutralize the extensions of the PKK in this region and ensure border security.

The intensification of the Syrian civil war has increasingly harmed Türkiye. Conducting operations against DAESH in cooperation with the US-led Coalition Forces, Türkiye became a target of this organization, leading to hundreds of civilian

casualties. Although the joint efforts of global and regional powers have diminished the influence of DAESH, the non-state actors supported during this process have laid claims to territories in Syria. This situation has heightened Türkiye's concerns about the establishment of a terrorist state by the PYD/YPG on its border. Consequently, Türkiye has supported the FSA against the terrorist organizations in the region (Kadioğlu, 2020, s. 2181-2182).

The direct impact of events in Syria on Türkiye is evident in attacks by terrorist organizations like DAESH, PKK, and PYD/YPG targeting Turkish civilians, as well as incidents such as mortar shells hitting Akçakale and Kilis, the Cilvegözü Border Gate attack, the Reyhanlı attack, the downing of a Turkish jet, and the Kobani incidents. These developments are among the fundamental dynamics driving the change in Türkiye's security-focused engagement rules.

Taking advantage of the power vacuum in Syria, the PYD/ YPG declared authority over certain regions along the Turkish border, establishing cantons. In response, Türkiye initially sought to define its relations with the PKK-KCK and the Assad regime. Following assessments, Türkiye set concrete conditions for the PYD to establish a political relationship, including avoiding autonomy declarations, severing ties with the PKK, and becoming part of the legitimate Syrian opposition. During this period, clashes between DAESH and PYD/YPG led to an alliance between the US and PYD/YPG. Despite the US's portrayal of PYD/YPG as representatives of Syrian Kurds, Türkiye identified the group as the Syrian arm of the PKK following the end of the reconciliation process in Türkiye (Acun & Keskin, 2017, s. 7-8).

While the PKK gains support from the US under the pretext of fighting DAESH, it also collaborates with Russia in regions like Afrin and Tel Rifaat, maintaining its presence in the area. Additionally, the implicit cooperation between the PKK and the Assad regime since the onset of the Syrian civil war has provided a favorable environment for both parties to pursue their objectives. Under these conditions, the PKK has been attempting to establish canton-style structures in the region to secure a lasting presence, becoming a primary reason for Türkiye's security pursuits (Özcan, 2019, s. 1-2). Consequently, Türkiye has been compelled to conduct a series of cross-border military operations.

Türkiye's security policies in northern Syria also impact its relations with regional and international actors, particularly with the US. Developments in northern Syria are a significant source of tension in Türkiye-US relations. The US support for PYD/YPG exacerbates Türkiye's security concerns and leads to diplomatic crises between the two countries. However, there is also potential for cooperation between Türkiye and the US. The shared interests of both countries in counter-terrorism and regional security provide a solid basis for collaboration.

The security dynamics in northern Syria are of great importance to Türkiye's national security strategies. Türkiye aims to eliminate the PKK's presence in Syria to neutralize security threats in this region. In pursuit of this objective, Türkiye has shifted from soft power elements to a more radical approach, focusing on hard power. Through military operations and diplomatic initiatives, Türkiye seeks to shape the security dynamics in the region.

2. The Issue of Terrorism Testing US-Türkiye Relations: Dynamics of Conflict and Cooperation

Relations between Türkiye and the United States have historically developed within a framework of intense cooperation on NATO alliance, Cold War strategic partnerships, and regional security issues. Although these deep relations between the two countries have occasionally experienced tensions on various foreign policy and security issues, they have generally been conducted in line with mutual interests. However, in recent years, the Syrian civil war and the security dynamics in northern Syria have strained relations between the two countries. At the core of these tensions is the support the US provides to terrorist organizations like PYD/YPG in Syria, which Türkiye sees as extensions of the PKK.

Security issues form the focal point of relations between Türkiye and the US. Historically, bilateral relations have been complex and have faced various challenges at different times. In this context, bilateral relations have been explained with concepts such as strategic alliance, traditional ally, strategic partnership, and model partnership, depending on the changing circumstances. After Türkiye became a NATO member following World War II, Türkiye-US relations entered a closer period of strategic cooperation. However, the strategic interests of the Cold War era transformed with issues such as counterterrorism in the 21st century. Especially in recent years, with the Syrian civil war and the emergence of DAESH, the regional security interests of Türkiye and the US have frequently clashed. Northern Syria lies at the center of this conflict. The US support for terrorist groups in this region is perceived as a threat to Türkiye's national security. Despite all this tension, Türkiye and the US share common interests and strategic goals. There are many potential areas for cooperation between the two countries, particularly in counterterrorism. Strategic ties like NATO membership and the importance of regional stability are significant factors shaping the cooperation dynamics in Türkiye-US relations.

With the end of the Cold War, the nature of Türkiye-US relations also began to change. During this period, efforts were made to move bilateral relations beyond traditional security-centered alliance. During this process, Türkiye became a more active actor in international politics. Reassessing its strategic role during this period, Türkiye emerged as a key player on the international stage in response to events in the Middle East and crises in the Balkans and Southeastern Europe. Türkiye-US relations were significantly impacted by this process, and efforts were made to transform bilateral relations from a classic alliance to a strategic alliance (Doğan, 2019, s. 134). Especially after the collapse of the USSR, the resulting power vacuum led to great chaos in the Middle East. In response, Türkiye had serious concerns about border security and strived to maintain good relations with both the US and regional countries to resolve the chaos in the region. Bilateral relations entered a tense period following the September 11 attacks, and a relative cooling occurred in relations after the 2003 Iraq War (Küntay, 2021, s. 580).

The Arab Spring, which began in 2011 and spread to Syria, marked a significant process that altered regional balances in the Middle East. Over time, the popular movements in Syria evolved into a civil war that disrupted regional balances. This situation

led to a complex security environment involving regional and global actors. In operations launched against DAESH in 2014, the US supported PYD/YPG, operating under the SDF umbrella, as its main ground force. This support included providing arms, training, intelligence sharing, and air support. The US support for PYD/YPG in the fight against DAESH deeply affected Türkiye's security policies and its relations with the US. Türkiye views YPG as the Syrian branch of PKK and considers this support a threat to its national security. The PKK is defined as a terrorist organization that has conducted armed actions threatening Türkiye's territorial integrity and internal security for many years. Therefore, the US support for PYD/YPG complicates Türkiye's fight against PKK and escalates tensions between the two countries.

Amid the war environment in Syria, the partnership between the US and PYD/YPG has turned PYD/YPG, a proxy force, into a local "force multiplier" with limited autonomy for the US compared to a typical proxy fighter. The strong partnership and commitment between the US and PYD/YPG are maintained within a win-win understanding. The continued threat of DAESH also ensures the continuation of this partnership. Moreover, the involvement of global and regional actors such as Russia and Iran as competitors and the cross-border reflections of the war lead the US to define the PYD/YPG terrorist organization as one of the most suitable partners in the region (Ertem, 2024, s. 117). This situation strengthens the PKK and increases its threat to Türkiye. Thus, the foundation of the conflict dynamics in US-Türkiye relations lies at this point.

Since 1984, the PKK has been defined as a terrorist organization conducting armed struggle against Türkiye. The PKK has posed serious threats to Türkiye's territorial integrity and internal security, causing the deaths of thousands of civilians and security personnel. Türkiye is concerned that the strengthening of PKK's presence in Syria will lead to increased terrorist activities and instability along its southern border. Therefore, Türkiye finds the US support for PYD/YPG unacceptable for its national security and believes this support increases PKK's terrorist activities against Türkiye. In this context, Türkiye's military operations in northern Syria have been a significant source of tension in its relations with the US.

The civil war in Syria, through the proxy war conducted via terrorist organizations, has evolved into an atmosphere of power struggle among global and regional actors, causing millions of people to become homeless. The consequences of this war not only affect Syrians but also regional states. The establishment and US support of PYD/YPG particularly threaten Türkiye's security. In this context, operations such as the Euphrates Shield in 2016, the Olive Branch in 2018, and the Peace Spring in 2019 are the most notable examples of Türkiye's efforts to ensure its border security (Babahanoğlu, 2023, s. 408). These operations were conducted as part of Türkiye's efforts to secure its borders and eliminate the terrorist threat.

Türkiye's operations have led to serious diplomatic crises with the US. While the US criticizes Türkiye's cross-border operations, Türkiye harshly condemns the US support for PYD/YPG. These mutual criticisms and diplomatic tensions complicate strategic cooperation between the two countries and create distrust in relations. Türkiye argues that PYD/YPG aims to establish a terrorist state in the regions it controls and views this situation as a threat to its territorial integrity. The US, on the other hand, defines PYD/YPG as the most effective ground force against DAESH and considers its support for these groups as part of its counterterrorism strategy.

The existence of Syria-based threats to Türkiye's security, the US isolating Türkiye in the region, and the plane crisis with Russia necessitated a new security concept for Türkiye. This concept included not only political activities but also military operations. The focus has shifted from a defense-oriented approach to a situation where military intervention is carried out against any threat when necessary. Additionally, factors such as energy security and the humanitarian dimension of the crisis have come to the fore. Türkiye's operations are also evaluated in this context and are seen as the implementation of the new security concept in the field (Şenyurt, 2024, s. 362).

During the Peace Spring Operation, US President Donald Trump's threats of economic sanctions against Türkiye and his statements questioning Türkiye's NATO membership escalated tensions between the two countries. These tensions have had negative impacts on Türkiye-US relations not only in the context of security policies but also in diplomatic and economic areas. Türkiye has made various diplomatic efforts in the international arena due to the US support for PYD/YPG and has voiced this situation on many platforms.

Despite all these tensions, there are potential areas for cooperation in Türkiye-US relations. The two countries conduct various military and strategic cooperations within the framework of NATO alliance and act in line with common interests on regional security issues. Joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and counterterrorism activities conducted within NATO are concrete examples of cooperation between the two countries. Additionally, there are important areas where Türkiye and the US can cooperate on issues such as energy security, economic cooperation, and regional stability. Both countries share common interests in counterterrorism. Both Türkiye and the US develop various strategies to neutralize terrorist organizations in the region and ensure regional security. In this context, diplomatic negotiations and strategic dialogues play a crucial role in reducing tensions and revealing cooperation potentials between the two countries. Türkiye and the US can develop a common strategy in counterterrorism and work together to ensure regional security. This cooperation can reduce tensions in bilateral relations and yield positive results at the regional level.

As an indicator of cooperation between Türkiye and the US, the Counterterrorism Consultations have been restarted. Following the agreement reached at the Türkiye-US Strategic Mechanism held in Washington in March 2024, the Counterterrorism Consultations were held in Ankara under the leadership of the Foreign Ministries of both countries. During the consultations, many issues concerning national security, including terrorist organizations such as PKK/YPG/PYD, DHKP/C, DAESH, and FETÖ, were discussed. Additionally, satisfaction was expressed with the visit of US Department of State Coordinator for Counterterrorism Ambassador Elizabeth Richard to Türkiye (Altun, 2024).

3. Strategic Dilemmas and Military Operations in Turkey-US Relations with a Special Focus on Syria

The increasing influence of DAESH in the region has affected not only regional security but also the relationships among proxy actors. Initially aiming to overthrow the Bashar al-Assad regime, the US shifted its strategy following the rise of DAESH, prioritizing the elimination of DAESH over Assad (Ekşi, 2017, s. 114). The US began using the PKK/YPG terrorist organization as a proxy actor in the fight against DAESH. This situation led to the deterioration of relations with Türkiye, a NATO ally (Oğuz & Çelik, 2018, s. 54). Especially during Trump's tenure, US support for the YPG increased significantly. Furthermore, Trump publicly declared that he would provide heavy weaponry support to the YPG (Atmaca, 2016, s. 110).

The US's disregard for the concerns of its allies in Syria negatively impacts its relations in the region. In this context, the US, having faced serious crises with Turkey, is perceived as having suffered a significant loss of trust from Ankara's perspective. As a result, Türkiye has conducted military operations without considering Washington's reactions. The US House of Representatives is divided between those advocating for more decisive steps in Syria policy and those questioning how much of a threat Syria poses to US security. The differing views among decision-makers have led to the current inconsistency in US Syria policy. Ignoring the priorities of allies like Türkiye has resulted in the prolongation of the war and outcomes contrary to the interests of the US and its regional allies (Telci & Acar, 2023, s. 200).

In the post-Cold War period, US policy has been shaped by alliances with marginalized groups in the countries where it intervenes to overthrow regimes. Türkiye has closely experienced this policy, particularly during interventions in Syria and Iraq. In both countries, while attempting to overthrow Ba'ath regimes within the framework of liberal interventionism, the US accepted Kurdish groups as allies. This situation greatly facilitated the empowerment of the PYD/YPG terrorist organization. Although Trump's inward-looking efforts did not completely isolate the terrorist organization, they at least limited their progress compared to the Obama era. This allowed Türkiye more freedom in its Operation Peace Spring and Operation Olive Branch. Consequently, the US's retreat from interventionism has opened the way for Türkiye to pursue policies more aligned with its national interests in its near surroundings (Korkmaz, 2022, s. 321).

The chaos and instability caused by the war in Syria continue to persist. The PKK's Syrian extensions are intensifying their pressure, threats, and efforts on the local population. The terrorist organization employs all means, from displacing people who do not submit to them or pay tribute to using child soldiers. The underlying motive is to establish a "terroristan" along Türkiye's southern border. It is understood that the issue is not about the fight against DAESH, but rather the implementation of a sinister plan targeting Türkiye and its region step by step (TRT Haber, 2024). Therefore, Türkiye does not hesitate to use hard power elements in its policies towards the region.

Due to changes in Türkiye's perception of internal and external threats, it has pursued active military policies on the ground. When the PKK/YPG's efforts to establish a terror corridor along the southern border were added to DAESH's increasing activities within the country and its provocative stance from the border, Türkiye decided to act (Yeltin, 2018, s. 208-209). With the internal and external conditions maturing and the context being suitable, Türkiye launched Operation Euphrates Shield on August 24, 2016, in accordance with the legitimate defense right under Article 51 of the United Nations (UN), using military force against DAESH elements in cooperation with the FSA.

Operation Euphrates Shield is Türkiye's first large-scale military operation in Syria. Although this operation was conducted against DAESH, it also aimed to prevent the YPG's westward expansion. In Operation Euphrates Shield, Türkiye controlled strategic regions such as Jarabulus, Azaz, al-Rai, and al-Bab, and sought to establish stability there. This operation marks the first significant step of Türkiye's military presence in Syria and is part of efforts to secure border security.

The operation, initiated on July 26, 2016, was temporarily halted on March 29, 2017. The main reason for this was the intention to capture Manbij, controlled by the PYD/YPG north of the Euphrates River, and Raqqa, controlled by DAESH, when the internal and external dynamics were appropriate. Thus, Türkiye aimed to ensure its own security and bring political stability to Syria (Özalp, 2018, s. 170). After Operation Euphrates Shield, Türkiye left the town of al-Bab under the control of the FSA, creating a barrier between Manbij and Afrin, which were under PYD/YPG control. Additionally, through the Sochi process initiated with Iran and Russia, Türkiye extended its reach to the Idlib region further south, but could not eliminate the possibility of the PYD/YPG, supported by the US, reaching the Mediterranean from Afrin. Amid these concerns, Türkiye entered a prolonged preparation phase for an operation in Afrin. The US announcement that it would form a 30,000-strong military force under the "Syrian Border Security Force," including the SDG, the main component of which is the PYD, triggered a new operation from Türkiye (Köylü, 2018, s. 79-80).

The Euphrates Shield Operation includes significant messages that Türkiye conveyed to the international community. With this operation, Türkiye demonstrated that, contrary to popular belief, it does not have objectives such as gaining territory in Syria. The initiation of this operation to cleanse the region of terrorist elements and its conclusion after achieving this goal proves this point. However, this operation did not end the war in Syria; the ongoing conflicts continued with all their intensity. This situation implies that threats towards Türkiye persisted (Acet İnce, 2020, s. 74). Therefore, shortly after the Euphrates Shield Operation, Türkiye launched the Idlib Operation in October 2017.

Fearing that civilians in Idlib would flock to its borders, Türkiye sought a peaceful resolution to the issue. Various sources indicate that Türkiye, bearing the burden of approximately 5 million Syrians, could not handle a new wave of migration from Idlib. Hence, Türkiye increased its diplomatic initiatives, firmly addressing this issue in the Astana Talks conducted with Russia and Iran (Sanyürek and Kocatepe, 2022, s. 129). The Idlib Operation, jointly initiated by Türkiye and Russia, was carried out with the mutual agreement of Russia, Iran, and Türkiye within the framework of the Astana Talks, where Syria's future was discussed. The joint objective of this operation was to establish a non-conflict environment in Idlib and provide a safe living

area for civilians. Another significant aim for Türkiye was to prevent the formation of a Kurdish corridor and limit the PYD's presence in Afrin (Kurt, 2017). Therefore, Türkiye had to launch the Olive Branch Operation on January 20, 2018.

The Olive Branch Operation is an essential operation aimed at eliminating the YPG presence in the Afrin region. Afrin is one of the areas controlled by the YPG. Afrin holds strategic importance due to its use as a base for PKK attacks and its proximity to Türkiye's southern border. The Olive Branch Operation became one of Türkiye's most comprehensive military operations against the YPG, significantly clearing the YPG presence in the region. This operation was conducted as part of Türkiye's efforts to ensure border security and weaken the PKK's presence in Syria.

Before the operation, it was estimated that around 8,000 PKK/PYD terrorists were in the region. These terrorists were joined by DAESH terrorists, whose exact numbers were undetermined, joining the organization after clashes in places like Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. DAESH terrorists were included in the organization with promises of freedom on the condition that they fight against Türkiye. Additionally, it was observed that the Arab Jaysh al-Suwar faction under the SDF umbrella, along with PKK terrorists, attempted to resist Türkiye. Some PKK/PYD and SDF terrorists participated in the training and equipping program conducted by US Special Forces. In this way, it was determined that the terrorists established reinforced defense lines on the northern, eastern, southern, and western fronts under the consultancy and supervision of US Special Forces. This situation demonstrates the extent of the strategic defense preparations of the terrorist groups in the region (Özçelik & Acun: 2018, s. 16).

Given the situation in Afrin, Türkiye acted within the scope of legitimate defense, citing the escalating terrorist attacks domestically and the attention of the international community. The 58-day operation reached its goal on March 18, 2018, with the Turkish Armed Forces and the Free Syrian Army taking control of the Afrin city center and administrative buildings. The Olive Branch Operation made Türkiye a stronger actor in the Syrian civil war. While this operation forced the US to reconsider its plans in northern Syria, it also compelled Russia to abandon its longstanding use of the PYD as leverage against Türkiye. This development complicated plans for establishing a Kurdish federation in northern Syria, contributing to preserving the country's territorial integrity. Additionally, the Olive Branch Operation boosted the morale of the weakening Syrian opposition, preventing the Assad regime from gaining full control of the country and allowing for continued efforts to find solutions for power-sharing within the country (Bayraktar, 2019, s. 51-66).

Another of Türkiye's most comprehensive military operations in Syria is the Peace Spring Operation, launched on October 9, 2019. This operation aimed to eliminate the YPG presence in northeastern Syria and create a 30-kilometer-deep safe zone along the Türkiye-Syria border. The Peace Spring Operation drew significant international criticism, particularly from the US and European countries. However, Türkiye argued that this operation was necessary for its national security and aimed to stabilize the areas cleared of the PYD/YPG.

The Peace Spring Operation contained a unique feature compared to Türkiye's other operations. What distinguished this operation was its direct confrontation with the US, an active actor in the region that openly supported the terrorist organization with its rhetoric (Demirkol, 2020, s. 82). Besides the US, Türkiye also faced Russia during the Peace Spring Operation. The US announced it would impose economic sanctions on Türkiye. Although Türkiye and the US reached an agreement to halt the operation, the operation continued because the US did not meet Türkiye's expectations (Baharççek & Ağır, 2020, s. 11).

Despite US objections, Türkiye initiated the military operation and, after a 9-day operation, reached various agreements with the US and Russia. Through these agreements, Türkiye effectively defended its interests. Consequently, the targeted Syrian border was cleared of terrorist elements. As a result of these agreements, Türkiye not only eliminated terrorist elements along the Syrian border but also demonstrated the deterrent power of its military, drawing the world's attention to the region. This process revealed the effectiveness of Türkiye's military and diplomatic strategies (Acar & Pekcandanoğlu, 2022, s. 97) and reshaped the power balance in the region.

The Peace Spring Operation is a significant operation where military operations were carried out in harmony with diplomacy. Operations initiated on the ground continued through diplomatic channels. The contribution of the UAVs produced by Türkiye during this operation was particularly noteworthy. Through these operations, Türkiye prevented the project of an American-supported terrorist corridor from being established along its border. Thus, Türkiye turned the geopolitical situation that was intended to be established against it in its favor (Babahanoğlu & Örselli, 2022, s. 175).

Faced with organizations threatening its vital interests and conducting various terrorist attacks domestically, Türkiye resorted to using force as a last resort. While it is considered that the timing of Türkiye's operations was later than expected, several underlying factors contribute to this. These factors include the expectation of direct intervention by regional and global actors in the Syrian crisis, Türkiye's reluctance to bear the full burden of ousting the Assad regime and cleansing the region of DAESH, the downing of a Russian warplane, the July 15 coup attempt, and the US's refusal to recognize the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organization (Taşdemir & Özer, 2017, s. 56). In response to these internal and external political developments, Türkiye abandoned its defense-oriented security concept and adopted an active military force approach against elements threatening its security.

Conclusion

The future of relations between Türkiye and the US largely depends on the success of diplomatic negotiations and strategic dialogues. To reduce tensions and unlock the potential for cooperation between the two countries, mutual trust must be established. In this context, it is crucial for Türkiye and the US to act in line with common interests and develop mutual

understanding. Particularly, reassessing the policies concerning the developments east of the Euphrates and the PKK may contribute to placing the relationship on a more constructive foundation.

The security dynamics east of the Euphrates shape Türkiye's national security policies and regional strategies. Türkiye has developed various military and diplomatic strategies to weaken the PKK's presence in Syria and secure its borders. These strategies are part of Türkiye's efforts to protect its national security interests and ensure stability in the region. However, developments in the region also affect Türkiye's relations with the US and other international actors. In this regard, Türkiye's security policies east of the Euphrates have significant implications at both regional and international levels, influencing Türkiye's strategic priorities.

The US support for the PYD/YPG has reshaped Türkiye's national security policies and brought cross-border operations to the forefront. In response to this support, Türkiye has sought solutions both by using military force and through diplomatic means. Through military operations, Türkiye has aimed to block the PYD/YPG's attempt to establish a terror corridor and has made progress toward creating a safe zone along its border. Moreover, Türkiye's security strategies are shaped not only by military operations but also by diplomatic initiatives. Negotiations with the US and diplomatic balancing with Russia are key elements of Türkiye's security policies. The US support for the PYD/YPG has led Türkiye to reshape its national security policies through cross-border operations and diplomatic negotiations. Türkiye has sought to neutralize this threat through both military force and diplomatic efforts.

Türkiye's military operations east of the Euphrates are aimed at neutralizing the PKK's extensions in Syria and securing its borders. The Euphrates Shield Operation, conducted in 2016, was Türkiye's first large-scale military operation in Syria. Although this operation was conducted against DAESH, it also aimed to prevent the YPG's westward expansion. During the Euphrates Shield Operation, Türkiye took control of strategic areas like Jarablus and al-Bab, working to establish stability by training local security forces. The Olive Branch Operation in 2018, another significant operation, aimed to eliminate the YPG presence in the Afrin region. Afrin is one of the areas under YPG control and is of strategic importance due to its proximity to Türkiye's southern border. The Olive Branch Operation was one of Türkiye's most comprehensive military campaigns against the YPG, significantly reducing the group's presence in the region. The Peace Spring Operation, conducted in 2019, was one of Türkiye's largest military operations in Syria. This operation aimed to eliminate the YPG presence east of the Euphrates and create a 30-kilometer-deep safe zone along the Türkiye-Syria border. The Peace Spring Operation sparked significant international backlash, especially from the US and European countries. However, Türkiye defended the operation as necessary for its national security and aimed to restore stability in areas controlled by the YPG.

Strategic cooperation between Türkiye and the US has faced deep tensions due to the presence of the PKK/PYD/YPG in northern Syria. The US's view of the YPG/PYD as the most effective ground force against DAESH and its support for these groups has created strategic dilemmas between the two NATO allies. While Türkiye considers the PYD/YPG as extensions of the PKK, the US views them as allies in counterterrorism efforts. These conflicting interests have weakened Türkiye's trust in the US and led to diplomatic crises between the two countries. Differences in their security interests have replaced cooperation with tensions and distrust. However, shared interests in counterterrorism and regional security suggest that the potential for cooperation remains.

Türkiye's operations in Syria, including the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring operations, have led to significant diplomatic crises with the US. Türkiye's goal of limiting the effectiveness of the US-backed YPG/PYD through these operations has been criticized by the US and has led to numerous diplomatic disputes, including economic sanctions. Nonetheless, Türkiye has viewed these operations as acts of self-defense in line with its national interests and continued them despite international reactions. The US's threats of economic sanctions during the Peace Spring Operation further strained relations between the two countries. Despite this, Türkiye remained insistent on its security policies, prioritizing border security.

Despite current tensions, there are shared interests between Türkiye and the US in counterterrorism and regional security. Both countries have the potential to cooperate in the fight against DAESH and other terrorist organizations. While Türkiye employs both its military force and local elements in its fight against DAESH, the US supports the YPG. The fact that both countries are NATO allies provides opportunities for intelligence sharing and military cooperation. Additionally, there are possibilities for cooperation in areas such as energy security and regional stability.

In conclusion, relations between Türkiye and the US have historically been built on strategic alliances and shared interests. However, developments in Syria and issues related to the PKK have led to significant tensions in the relationship. The US's support for the YPG/PYD heightens Türkiye's security concerns and creates diplomatic crises. Nonetheless, shared interests in counterterrorism and regional security offer a strong foundation for cooperation. Reducing tensions and realizing the potential for cooperation between the two countries depend on the success of diplomatic negotiations and strategic dialogues.

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Araştırma ve Yayın Etiğı Beyanı

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Yazarların Makaleye Katkı Oranları

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Çıkar Beyanı

Yazarın herhangi bir kişi ya da kuruluş ile çıkar çatışması yoktur. Ayrıca herhangi bir potansiyel çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.