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Turkish Foreign Policy as a structural force: security, migration, and reconstruction in post-Assad Syria

Çağlar Özer[a]

[a] İstanbul Kent University, Faculty of Economics, Administrative and Social Sciences, Political Science and Public Administration, İstanbul, TÜRKİYE.

ABSTRACT

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8, 2024, marks a turning point in which the strategic positioning that Turkish foreign policy has been accumulating over thirteen years is truly tested. This study analyzes this transformation within the framework of Susan Strange's structural power theory and political economy approach, and questions whether Türkiye's Syria policy has turned into an integrated hegemonic power strategy on the axes of security, migration management and reconstruction. The study uses a single-case design with embedded units of analysis, in which the three axes are treated as units within one case, and draws on official government documents, academic literature and think-tank reports as primary and secondary sources covering the period from December 2024 to the first half of 2026. The findings reveal that Türkiye has gained significant structural power in the security and production structures, but has not yet established decisive influence in the finance and knowledge structures. The article argues that in order for this hegemonic strategy to be permanent, it is imperative to manage domestic political constraints, strengthen Syria's institutional capacity, and transform policy coordination between the three axes into concrete structures.

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Introduction

The thirteen-year period from the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011 to the collapse of the Assad regime opens a unique analytical window to observe the structural transformation of Turkish foreign policy rather than its periodic preferences. In this process, Türkiye takes the stage not only as a state coping with a crisis in a neighboring country, but also as an actor that grows, learns and repositions itself step by step in its capacity to shape the future of Syria (Altunışık, 2016; Öniş, 2014). Few cases in the analysis of Turkish foreign policy are layered in this way: a state that had to abandon the normative stance built on the discourse of "zero problems with neighbors," opened its doors to millions of refugees, mounted successive cross-border operations, and finally saw a government close to it come to power in Damascus. The transitional administration formed on December 8, 2024, when opposition forces led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) seized Damascus, marks the point at

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR Çağlar Özer, İstanbul Kent University, İstanbul, TÜRKİYE. Email: caglarozer_62@hotmail.com

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which thirteen years of accumulated capacity came to fruition (*Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı* [SETA], 2025).

Understanding this transformation requires situating Türkiye's emerging role within the broader historical architecture of Syria's external dependency relationships. As Konukçu (2026) demonstrates in her analysis of the Syria–Iran alliance between 2011 and 2023, the Assad regime's survival was predicated on a multilayered system of military, economic, and cultural support from external actors operating through both state and non-state channels. This earlier alliance configuration, driven by regime security imperatives and regional balance-of-power calculations within a neorealist framework, constitutes the structural baseline against which Türkiye's post-2024 positioning must be analytically measured. The collapse of that alliance architecture on December 8, 2024 did not dissolve Syria's structural dependency on external powers; rather, it opened a geopolitical vacancy that is now being actively contested and partially filled by new actors, chief among them Türkiye.

The current academic literature mostly deals with Türkiye's foreign policy transformation in the context of Syria in a fragmented manner. While the migration literature mainly examines the issue of Syrian refugees within the framework of integration, temporariness and governance debates (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016), foreign policy analyses focus on the security and border management dimension (Sert, 2019), while the reconstruction literature largely focuses on technical-economic variables such as post-conflict economic recovery and infrastructure costs (World Bank, 2017). This creates a fragmented academic structure that limits the systematic linking of reconstruction processes to broader foreign policy and security strategies. This fragmented approach can also be associated with the tendency to decouple policy areas from each other, to be technicalized and depoliticized (Ferguson, 1990). However, security, migration and reconstruction processes are not independent policy areas, but rather components of a strategic whole that mutually reproduces and complements each other. In this context, it is not possible to be decisive in reconstruction processes without security capacity. Actors who cannot effectively manage migration experience fragility in both domestic and foreign policy, and powers that cannot take part in reconstruction processes cannot turn their short-term military gains into long-term structural effects.

The main thesis of the study is as follows: Türkiye's Syria policy is in the process of transforming into an integrated hegemonic power strategy in the security-migration-economy triangle after December 2024. This strategy simultaneously operates the security, production, finance and information dimensions in Strange's (1988) conceptualization of structural power and has the potential to transform Türkiye into a structural power that shapes the transition process of Syria. The thesis must be advanced with caution: the transformation in question is not an accomplished fact but an ongoing process, fragile on several fronts, that requires testing against empirical criteria (Fidan, 2025). In line with this goal, the article clearly defines the criteria of hegemony and systematically evaluates the extent to which these criteria are met in each case. The originality of the study stems from the fact that it neither accepts the claim of hegemonic power as it is nor completely rejects it, but that it meticulously tests this claim through operational criteria while simultaneously making its vulnerabilities visible.

The significance of December 2024 as an analytical turning point warrants brief elaboration. Prior to Assad's fall, Türkiye's Syria policy operated under a constraint that no

operationalization of hegemony could fully overcome: the absence of a friendly, or even minimally cooperative, government in Damascus. Structural power, as Strange (1988) conceives it, is exercised through the shaping of frameworks within which other actors operate, and it presupposes some degree of access to the institutions being shaped. The Assad government's hostility foreclosed this kind of access across all four structures simultaneously, regardless of Türkiye's regional capabilities. December 2024 therefore did not merely change the balance of power on the ground; it removed the single precondition — a receptive counterpart in Damascus — without which none of the three axes examined in this study could have moved from latent capability to structural embedding. This is why the study treats 2024 as a genuine discontinuity rather than an incremental data point, even though, as later sections show, the resulting structural gains remain partial and contested.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The theoretical framework combines Strange's (1988) structural power theory with the political economy approach and defines the three operational criteria of hegemony. The account of research method sets out the research design and the methodological rationale for the boundaries drawn between units. The case studies analyze the axes of security, migration, and reconstruction as embedded units of analysis, mapping each to Strange's four structures and three operational metrics. The comparative findings are then interpreted, and the conclusion presents policy recommendations.

Theoretical framework: Structural power, hegemony and operationalization

In the international relations literature, the concept of power continues to be the subject of an ongoing debate as well as an analytical tool. In this discussion, Susan Strange's (1988) conceptualization of structural power is distinctively useful, particularly in resolving the tension that arises when state behavior is read through foreign policy analysis. Strange argues that power in international relations manifests itself in two qualitatively different forms: Relational power refers to the capacity of one actor to compel another to take, or to refrain from taking, a particular action, while structural power is a much deeper form of influence: "the power to determine the framework within which others will choose from the options presented to them" (Strange, 1988, p. 25). An actor holding structural power is decisive because, without issuing demands or applying pressure, it shapes what other actors find desirable, what options exist and what costs are affordable.

Strange (1988) argues that this power is established on four basic structures. The security structure is the dimension that determines who provides physical protection and the conditions on which it is provided. The actor who offers security guarantees directs the protected state not by direct order, but by the functioning of the dependency relationship itself. The production structure defines the determinant of decisions about what will be produced, how and by whom, and infrastructure dependencies, supply chain control and energy relations constitute the most concrete manifestations of this structure. The financial structure governs the creation of credit and the direction in which capital flows. Control over development finance and investment flows exemplifies the practical functioning of this structure. The knowledge structure shapes communication channels, technology transfer and normative frameworks. Decisive influence across all four structures at once gives an actor a hegemonic position and enables the capacity to reproduce an international order compatible with the interests of that actor.

It should be acknowledged that Strange's original formulation has itself been the subject of sustained critical engagement in the decades since 1988. Norrlöf (2014, pp. 1055–1056) argues that Strange's benchmarks lack precision and clarity, and that Strange gives no compelling account of how the four structures interact, that is, of how gains in one structure translate into, or are constrained by, another. This study does not attempt to resolve that underlying theoretical ambiguity; rather, by adapting Murinson's (2006), Barnett and Duvall's (2005), and Nye's (2011) extensions of the framework to middle-power and non-great-power contexts, it operationalizes the four structures for a single empirical case, leaving the broader question of inter-structural interaction for future theoretical work. Migration is treated in this study not as a fifth structure standing alongside Strange's security, production, finance, and knowledge structures, but as a cross-cutting governance mechanism that operates through them: Türkiye's management of the Syrian refugee population functions simultaneously as a security instrument (border and return management), a production lever (labour-market integration and remittance flows), a financial claim (EU and international burden-sharing arrangements), and a knowledge practice (data collection and normative framing of "temporary protection"). This reframing, developed further in the migration management axis below, is what allows migration to be analyzed within Strange's original four-structure architecture rather than requiring a fifth, analytically autonomous category.

In this work, hegemony is based neither on the production of ideological consent in the Gramscian tradition nor on military and economic superiority in the Neo-Realist tradition. With a conceptualization that overlaps with Strange's (1988) pragmatist framework of political economy, hegemony is defined as the capacity to determine rules, norms and expectations.

However, this definition, while conceptually sufficient, is not empirically testable on its own. Drawing on the power typologies of Murinson (2006) and Barnett and Duvall (2005), and on Nye's (2011) conceptualization of smart power, all of which extend Strange's theory to middle powers, this study develops three operational criteria to test the existence of hegemony.

The first criterion is the structural preference constraint: Is there evidence to suggest that Syria makes its decisions in certain policy areas within the set of options determined by Türkiye? This criterion directly operationalizes Strange's definition of "framing of choice:" unlike relational power, it requires that the cost of Syria's "non-choice" be high even in the absence of concrete pressure. The second criterion is dependency asymmetry: Is there any structural evidence that the cost of substituting security, infrastructure or humanitarian services offered by Türkiye with alternative suppliers is increasing? This criterion is necessary to distinguish hegemonic dependence from relational power. The third criterion is institutional sustainability: Is there evidence that dependency has acquired institutional continuity, such as documented bilateral protocols, technical standards harmonization, or personnel integration mechanisms? This criterion is critical to distinguish that the hegemonic position is the product of a structural relationship, not a temporary conjuncture.

The political economy approach is joined to this theoretical ground in three ways. First, it evaluates the state and the market from an integrated perspective, making visible how the components of security and economy transform each other. Second, it does not ignore the permeability between domestic and foreign policy and makes it possible to see how the refugee issue shapes both Türkiye's electoral dynamics and the negotiation balances it

establishes with external actors (Danış & Nazlı, 2019). Third, by framing the relationship between the actor and the structure as a dynamic tension, it reveals how Türkiye uses structural opportunities and what constraints it has to deal with.

Table 1 summarizes the adaptation of Strange's four structures to the Türkiye-Syria context and how the three criteria apply to each construct.

Table 1. Adapting Strange's structural power dimensions to the Türkiye-Syria context and the operational criteria

Structural Dimension	Strange's Unique Definition	Türkiye's Response in Syria	Operational Metric
Security	Supplier and determinant of conditions for physical protection	TAF (Turkish Armed Forces) operations, Syrian army training, safe zone establishment, equipment transfer	Are Syrian security decisions taken within Turkish norms?
Production	The decision-making mechanism that determines what, how and by whom	Infrastructure reconstruction, energy pipelines, TİKA projects, positioning of Turkish companies	Can infrastructure dependency be substituted with an alternative supplier?
Finance	Credit creation and control of capital allocation	Bilateral economic protocols, JETCO, channeling Gulf financing	Can Türkiye determine the flow direction of development finance? (The analysis in Table 2 shows that this criterion is not currently met.)
Information	Communication, technology and the formative of the normative framework	Intelligence diplomacy, military training norm transfer, capacity building	Are institutional norms and technical standards compatible with the Turkish framework?

Research method

This study adopts a single-case study design with embedded units of analysis, following Yin's (2014) methodological framework, within the qualitative research tradition. The single case is Türkiye's post-2024 Syria policy; the axes of security, migration management, and reconstruction are treated not as independent cases but as embedded units of analysis within that single case, examined under a common theoretical framework, Strange's (1988) structural power theory. The methodological question to be answered at this point is not whether the three axes constitute separate cases, but how sub-unit-level dynamics converge into, or diverge from, a case-level pattern of structural power accumulation. In Yin's (2014) embedded design, the analytical boundary between units is drawn according to the differentiation of the mechanism to be explained, not according to any claim that the units are themselves independent cases. The mechanism to be explained in this study is which of Strange's four structures structural power gain occurs faster within Türkiye's overall Syria policy, and why it differs across units. This question enables a meaningful within-case comparison, as the relations of capacity and dependency develop at different speeds and with different tools across the three units: the security unit mainly proceeds with direct state capacity transfer, the migration unit transforms legal uncertainty into a strategic tool, and the reconstruction unit engages market actors and multilateral financing channels. This difference in functioning makes the three units analytically distinguishable while remaining embedded within the single case. The migration unit, in particular, is analyzed partly

through Türkiye's bargaining relationship with the European Union; this EU dimension is treated here as an instrument through which Türkiye's Syria-related migration policy is projected and leveraged, and not as a separate unit of analysis about Türkiye-EU relations in its own right — the referent object throughout remains Türkiye's Syria policy.

Four types of sources were systematically used in the data collection process. Official primary sources include statistics and press releases from the Presidency of Migration Management of the Republic of Türkiye, documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye (PMM, 2025) and the annual report of the *Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı* (MİT, 2026). Within the scope of think tank reports, the studies of SETA (2025), ORDAF (Fidan, 2025), İGAM and the Migration Institute were examined. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2025), World Bank (2025) and International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2025) reports were used as multilateral organization data. For the academic literature, international peer-reviewed sources were surveyed. The methodological constraint on source dependency should be transparently acknowledged: the proximity of institutions such as SETA and Divan to Turkish policy circles necessitates the verification of the findings obtained from these sources with independent second sources, and it should be noted here that *Divan Araştırma ve Eğitim Derneği* publishes a standing analysis series on MİT's own annual reports, so Erol (2026) and MİT (2026) should not be treated as two independent sources on Turkish security conduct — confirmed directly by Erol's (2026) own reference list, which cites MİT's 2025 and 2026 annual activity reports as primary sources. This requirement has been observed at every stage of the analysis: claims resting on a single source are identified as such, and a margin of caution is left when they are interpreted.

The analysis was carried out in four stages: descriptive identification of the pattern in each unit, systematic mapping onto Strange's four structures and the three operational criteria, within-case comparison across the units, and integrated interpretation. The levels of structural power gain reported in Table 2 were determined as follows. The "medium" level describes a situation where at least two of the three operational metrics are supported by multiple resources, but institutional embedding is not yet complete or independent verification is lacking. The "early-stage" level, on the other hand, characterizes a situation where only one criterion is partially met, and empirical evidence relies heavily on a single source. At the level of each individual operational criterion, a criterion is treated as fully met when it is corroborated by at least two independent, non-government sources; as partially met when it is supported mainly by official government or think-tank sources without independent corroboration; and as not met when no supporting evidence could be identified. This scale was deliberately kept to three tiers due to the ongoing period under study and the lack of primary field data, thus ensuring that the criteria that have not yet been met remain clearly visible.

Case studies: three axes as embedded units of analysis

Security axis: decisive influence in the security structure

Türkiye's security presence in Syria has reached its current form through three different periods. In the 2011–2015 period, Türkiye's attitude was based on a normative framework that was functionally compatible with Davutoğlu's (2001) doctrine of strategic depth and centered on the discourse of "solidarity with the Syrian people" (Altunışık, 2016). After Russia's direct military intervention in Syria in 2015, this framework collapsed and foreign

policy took a pragmatic, security-centred course that shifted from normative discourse to hard-power instruments (Öniş, 2014). The Euphrates Shield (2016–2017), Olive Branch (2018) and Peace Spring (2019) operations are concrete manifestations of this shift. Türkiye's interventions in northern Syria should be evaluated not only from a military security perspective, but also within the framework of a multi-layered safe zone strategy that includes political, social, and administrative dimensions (Kibaroğlu, 2019). After December 2024, this accumulation takes on a new meaning: the production of security is no longer merely an operational output but has begun to perform the function of structural power described by Strange (1988).

This transformation is most concrete in the transfer of institutional capacity. As documented by Erol (2026) in a report for the Divan Research and Education Association, Türkiye provides direct training to new Syrian Army personnel through the Turkish Armed Forces, delivers domestically produced armored vehicles to Syrian security forces, and renews the radar infrastructure of Damascus Airport with Turkish technology. These transfers, the contacts of MİT Director İbrahim Kalın in Damascus and the intelligence diplomacy conducted through Abu Ahmed Zekkur, an adviser to Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa are independently verified in the security radar report of SETA (2025) as well as Erol (2026). As the Syrian security apparatus is equipped with Turkish equipment and shaped by the Turkish training curriculum, the first operational criterion defined by this study, namely the structural preference constraint, is partially met, and the technical standards of Syrian security institutions are drawn from Turkish norms.

The qualitative distinction between Türkiye's current approach and the security strategy previously pursued by Iran is analytically significant in this regard. As Konukçu (2026) documents, Iran's security presence in Syria was organized primarily through transnational proxy networks — including the Fatemiyoun Brigade, the Zaynabiyoun Brigade, and Hezbollah — operating under the command of the IRGC Quds Force, with an estimated 80,000 Shia militia fighters deployed at the height of the conflict. This approach maximized Iran's operational reach but produced a fundamentally asymmetric and externally imposed security architecture that failed to transfer institutional capacity to the Syrian state itself. By contrast, Türkiye's current security engagement is explicitly oriented toward embedding Turkish norms within Syrian state institutions through equipment transfers, training curricula, and intelligence frameworks. This distinction is consequential for Strange's (1988) criteria: whereas Iran built relational influence through proxy dependency, Türkiye is pursuing structural power through institutional norm transfer.

Iran's post-2024 experience functions in this study as a contrasting negative case rather than a mere backdrop: it shows that regional-power engagement in Syria does not automatically translate into durable structural power, and that the same country (Syria) can serve simultaneously as a case of externally imposed relational dependency (Iran, pre-2024) and of institutionally embedded structural influence in the making (Türkiye, post-2024).

This institution-building narrative should not obscure the more coercive dimension of Türkiye's security presence, which independent human-rights monitoring has documented in detail and which the Turkish- and government-origin sources relied on elsewhere in this study do not foreground. Human Rights Watch's 2026 World Report notes that the Turkish military continued to occupy and exercise control over substantial areas of northern Syria, and that former Syrian National Army factions — which fought the Assad government with Turkish backing and were subsequently folded into the new Syrian military — continued through 2025 to detain, mistreat, and extort civilians, with some implicated commanders

appointed to influential posts (Human Rights Watch, 2026). The same report documents a March 2025 drone attack, attributed to Türkiye or Turkish-backed factions, that killed seven Kurdish children and three adults near Kobane. These findings complicate a straightforward reading of Turkish security engagement as institution-building alone: the same equipment transfers and training curricula that consolidate the structural preference constraint documented above coexist with continued territorial control and documented abuses against the Kurdish population — a tension that the three operational criteria used in this study are not designed to capture, and that future applications of the framework should address explicitly.

Independent Syrian analysis corroborates the broader picture of expanding Turkish influence from outside Turkish and Turkish-adjacent sources. The Omran Center for Strategic Studies — a Syrian research institution headquartered in Damascus and staffed by Syrian researchers — documents rising discussion of possible Turkish military bases in Palmyra and rural Homs alongside visits by Turkish security delegations, and characterizes Türkiye as "the most direct actor" balancing against Israeli influence in Syria, noting that Ankara treats the country "not as a peripheral arena, but as a vital sphere of influence tied to its national security and regional position" (Al Mustafa et al., 2026). This independent assessment corroborates the study's central claim of expanding Turkish structural influence, while also situating it within a wider and more contested regional balance — alongside the United States, the Gulf states, Jordan, and Egypt — that similarly constrains unilateral action by any single external power, including Türkiye itself.

Two structural barriers nevertheless limit these gains on the security axis. The first and most enduring is the determination of the United States to maintain its connection with the SDF. As stated in the analysis of ORDAF (Fidan, 2025), the United States continues to exclude the east of the Euphrates from Türkiye's security architecture. This leaves the second operational criterion, dependency asymmetry, geographically incomplete: there are alternative security partners to Türkiye in the eastern regions of Syria, and the cost of replacing these alternatives is not high. This presence of the USA continued during the Trump era, and former US Ambassador to Syria James Jeffrey's statement that "we need ground forces, they do not necessarily have to be American" shows that Washington's strategic calculation was a deliberate one (Fidan, 2025). The second is Israel's territorial occupation and systematic airstrikes in southern Syria, which constitute a rival narrative to Türkiye's security guarantor framework and make the third operational criterion, institutional sustainability, difficult to achieve across Syria as a whole.

This picture changed rapidly in the first half of 2026. Following a Syrian government offensive against SDF-held territory in January 2026, Damascus and the SDF concluded a ceasefire and phased integration agreement (18–30 January 2026) under which SDF units began to be absorbed into the Syrian Arab Army and Damascus assumed administrative and military control of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor (Al Jazeera, 2026a, 2026c). The United States, which had underwritten SDF autonomy as the region's principal external security guarantor, subsequently completed a phased withdrawal from all its remaining bases in Syria, concluding with the handover of Qasrak air base in April 2026 (Al Jazeera, 2026b). By mid-2026, the great majority of SDF fighters had been formally integrated into Syrian state structures, although negotiations over the status of several thousand remaining personnel, and over command and administrative authority in the northeast, were still ongoing (Rustom, 2026). These developments require a substantial revision of the geographic constraint identified above: the alternative security guarantee that once limited Türkiye's

structural reach east of the Euphrates has been significantly weakened, even as the outcome for Kurdish self-governance and for the durability of the integration process itself remains contested and only partially institutionalized.

Migration management axis: instrumental governance and structural leverage

Türkiye's position as the country hosting the highest number of registered refugees in the world continued in 2024. Consistent with the reframing set out in the theoretical framework above, migration is analyzed here not as an independent structural domain but as the axis through which Türkiye's leverage in the security, production, finance, and knowledge structures is most visibly exercised; the EU relationship discussed below is one channel of that leverage rather than a separate claim about EU-Türkiye relations. According to data from the Presidency of Migration Management of the Republic of Türkiye (PMM, 2025), as of December 2024, the number of Syrians under temporary protection is approximately two million eight hundred and ninety thousand, exceeding 3% of the Turkish general population, with Istanbul, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa standing out as the cities with the highest concentration. After Assad's overthrow, more than four hundred thousand Syrians voluntarily returned from December 9, 2024, to April 2026, and the total number of voluntary returns since 2016 has approached one million one hundred and fifty thousand (PMM, 2025). UNHCR's (2025) estimate for the total return to Syria from neighboring countries exceeds six hundred and forty thousand. These figures matter, but the governance logic behind them tells us more than the figures alone.

The "from refugees to settlers" framing developed by İçduygu and Diker (2017) shows that the temporary protection status applied by Türkiye to Syrians is not a mere legal category. As stated by Sert (2019), this status represents an intermediate position that grants neither full refugee rights nor grounds for mass deportation and functionally works in two directions. In terms of domestic politics, temporary protection postpones the political cost of permanent integration and provides flexibility to continue the discourse of return. In terms of foreign policy, the same uncertainty feeds Türkiye's asymmetric bargaining power over border control in its negotiations with the EU (Danış & Nazlı, 2019). Kirişci's (2014) characterization of this approach, which is shaped around the discourse of "hospitality," as "conditional hospitality" explains how the discourse differs from practice at the conceptual level. The billions of euros of refugee financing transferred by the EU to Türkiye are the concrete financial equivalent of this asymmetry and the strongest indicator of the structural preference constraint, which is the first operational criterion, on the migration axis: The EU is negotiating within the framework of the conditions set by Türkiye.

The "go and see" visit policy, implemented after December 2024, is a concrete reflection of this instrumentalization logic in the new period. Kadkoy's (2025) independent assessment documents that this policy functions as a mechanism to encourage de facto return while formally preserving the principle of voluntariness, making it clear that conditions in Syria do not yet make large-scale returns safe. The workshop report of the Migration Institute and Gaziantep University (2025) lists the main obstacles for those who want to return as follows: lack of documentation, limited access to basic services and economic uncertainty for individuals who have worked informally for a long time. The employer liability mechanism, which came into force in January 2026, has in practice become a form of systematic pressure exercised under the discourse of voluntariness, with the regulation holding employers who employ unregistered foreigners responsible for the cost of deportation. The Syrians Barometer study conducted by Erdoğan (2024) reveals that

Turkish society considers the refugee issue among the country's top three problems. This domestic political pressure paradoxically both strengthens and weakens the second operational criterion, the dependency asymmetry: as Türkiye feels compelled to accelerate the return, its capacity to use leverage on the EU is restricted, while the demand for labor and consumption on the Syrian side created by the returns feeds a channel that deepens Türkiye's economic influence.

The post-Assad period has also generated return and reintegration dynamics that go beyond the pre-2024 temporary-protection framework discussed above, and independent Syrian and international sources complicate a straightforwardly voluntary reading of these returns. The Syrian Network for Human Rights, an independent Syrian human-rights organization, documents that the political transition removed the principal obstacle to return but exposed a dense web of material, legal, social, and psychological barriers — from the absence of functioning property registries and civil documentation to the slow pace of transitional justice — that complicate reintegration and indicate that return is a multi-phase process rather than a single event (Abdulghany, 2025). The piece is a commentary by the organization's founder and director rather than one of its numbered reports and is read here accordingly. This picture is reinforced by evidence that not all post-Assad returns have been voluntary in practice: Human Rights Watch has documented the coercion of Syrians into signing "voluntary return" forms since 2017, with over 85,000 deportations from Türkiye recorded in 2024 alone, while several European governments suspended asylum processing for Syrians within days of Assad's fall (Yüksel & Strik, 2026). Read together, these sources suggest that the "from refugees to settlers" framing analyzed above is being succeeded, in the post-Assad period, by a comparably fraught politics of return — one in which Türkiye's structural leverage over the pace and framing of returns coexists with limited attention, on the Turkish and Syrian government side alike, to the institutional preconditions for genuine reintegration.

The reconstruction axis: strategic positioning in the production structure

The current state of the Syrian economy clearly reveals why reconstruction will be a long-term and foreign-dependent process. According to the World Bank's (2025) *Syria Economic Monitor*, the Syrian economy shrank by 1.5% in 2024, while the 2025 growth projection remains at only 1%. As Kaya (2025) shows, a significant portion of the physical infrastructure stock remains damaged, keeping energy and logistics costs structurally high. The IMF's (2025) data presents a partially positive picture: the return of more than a million refugees is stimulating consumption spending and labor supply faster than expected, indicating that reconstruction will be a "U" shaped process, not a "V" one, that is, it will be a process spread over years and dependent on external resources. This picture provides a decisive background for the third operational criterion, namely institutional sustainability: Syria's need for resources over a decade provides a structural basis for the dependency relationship to gain institutional depth.

Two dimensions of Türkiye's position in the reconstruction process draw attention: competitive advantage and coordinator role. The comparative agency evaluation of Kaya (2025) shows that TİKA's development assistance effectiveness differs positively from organizations such as USAID and the French Development Agency, while the project history of Turkish contracting firms in the Middle East and North Africa supports this institutional know-how with concrete implementation capacity in the field. Independent

financial reporting highlights the Gulf countries' limited operational experience despite their strong financing capacity: Saudi Arabia's announcement of $6.4 billion in investment agreements in July 2025 (of which approximately $2.9 billion was allocated specifically to real estate and infrastructure, with the remainder covering telecommunications and other sectors), and a further $14 billion package of infrastructure, transportation, and real estate agreements signed with Qatar, the UAE, and other international partners in August 2025 (Al Jazeera, 2025a, 2025b), demonstrate their great financing capacity, while the operational absence of these countries in the Syrian field makes Türkiye a de facto obligatory intermediary. This asymmetry is meaningful in terms of the second operational criterion, dependency asymmetry: It is difficult for Gulf financing to be effectively reflected on the ground without Turkish operational capacity.

On the institutional dimension, JETCO, established in September 2025, is the strongest indicator for the third operational criterion, institutional sustainability. JETCO is intended to move the bilateral trade relationship to a more institutional and sustainable ground, though independent confirmation of this outcome could not be located. Türkiye's exports to Syria in 2025 are expected to exceed two billion dollars, and the realization in the first seven months exceeded one billion two hundred million (Alpay, 2025). In the field of energy, Türkiye has started supplying natural gas to Syria, and efforts to reactivate the Türkiye-Syria Natural Gas Pipeline have been concretized. Kaya (2025) treats the goal of transforming Aleppo into a regional logistics hub connected to the Turkish road network as the most direct expression of this position in the production structure. If these developments are complemented by infrastructure projects designed on build-operate-transfer models, Syria's export routes and trade corridors will be significantly added to Turkish logistics capacity. Assessed against the three operational criteria, the position is as follows: the structural preference constraint is partially met, dependency asymmetry is evident, and institutional sustainability is advancing through JETCO and the energy agreements.

This assessment should be qualified in one important respect: much of the evidence above reports announced deals, memoranda of understanding, and projected figures rather than institutionally embedded outcomes, and independent reporting suggests the distinction matters. Deknatel (2026) documents that Turkish companies and entities had secured more than $11 billion in contracts for Syrian infrastructure projects by late 2025, corroborating the scale reported by Turkish sources above, but cautions that these commitments — like the wider $14 billion in Gulf-linked infrastructure pledges announced in August 2025 — were largely non-binding memoranda of understanding, negotiated with little transparency by a small circle of officials around President Ahmed al-Sharaa, and so far unaccompanied by public consultation or independent accountability mechanisms. Deknatel (2026) draws an explicit parallel with the opaque, patronage-driven reconstruction schemes of the Assad era, warning that investor-driven reconstruction risks benefiting a narrow circle of domestic and foreign elites rather than the displaced Syrians most in need of housing and infrastructure. This does not invalidate the finding that Türkiye occupies a favorable structural position in the production structure; it does suggest that the institutional sustainability of that position — the third operational criterion used throughout this study — should be read as considerably more provisional than the volume of announced contracts alone would imply.

Comparative findings and discussion

When the analyses of the three units are evaluated together, the most basic finding that emerges is that the axes of security, migration and reconstruction are not disjointed policy agendas, on the contrary, these axes work as parts of a functionally articulated whole. The security axis strengthens Türkiye's legitimacy and institutional presence in Syrian territory (Erol, 2026; SETA, 2025). The migration axis offers an indispensable tool for both managing domestic political pressure and establishing an asymmetric lever abroad (Danış & Nazlı, 2019; Erdoğan, 2024; Kadkoy, 2025). The axis of reconstruction has the potential to transform this asset and leverage into long-term economic dependencies (Kaya, 2025; Rakipoğlu, 2025). However, as the analysis in the previous sections shows, the question remains analytically open whether this integration is the product of deliberate coordinated planning or of overlapping national interests. To answer it, the fact that the three axes developed by similar means in the same period is not enough; documentary evidence of coordination is required. The annual report of MİT (2026) deals with economic, security and migration policies within a common Syria framework, and public statements showing the agenda items of high-level diplomatic contacts indicate that the three axes are being processed simultaneously. However, since these sources are of government origin, independent verification has not yet been possible. Therefore, the question of whether integration is the product of deliberate coordination or the overlap of parallel national interests cannot be answered definitively, and what this study has been able to determine is that the result is compatible with coordination but does not prove it.

A comparative perspective is further indispensable when contextualizing the novelty and limits of Türkiye's structural power ambitions in Syria. Konukçu's (2026) neorealist analysis of the Syria–Iran alliance (2011–2023) establishes that even a deeply embedded external partner — one that deployed tens of thousands of fighters, extended multi-billion-dollar credit lines, and signed comprehensive military and economic cooperation agreements — ultimately failed to institutionalize its influence in ways that survived the political transformation of December 2024. The lesson for Türkiye is twofold: on the one hand, the depth of Iran's prior engagement demonstrates the scale of external investment required to sustain structural presence in Syria; on the other, the rapid erosion of Iranian influence after the regime's collapse reveals the limits of alliances built on regime security rather than on broader institutional and societal anchors. Türkiye's challenge, therefore, is not merely to match Iran's former level of engagement but to build a qualitatively different form of structural embeddedness that survives political transitions — a task that Strange's (1988) framework suggests requires simultaneous consolidation across security, production, finance, and knowledge structures.

When systematic mapping is performed on Strange's four structures and three operational metrics, it is seen that the gains are unevenly distributed between axes and dimensions (see Table 2). In the security structure, Türkiye significantly consolidates its role as the primary security supplier, a gain in this dimension evidenced by the equipment and training transfers documented by Erol (2026), meeting two of the three operational criteria, with the geographic constraint tied to the US-SDF connection leaving the third only partially satisfied. In the production structure, JETCO and energy integration efforts form the institutional skeleton of production dependency, and two of the three criteria, the preference constraint and institutional sustainability, are partially met (Kaya, 2025; Rakipoğlu, 2025). Türkiye has not yet established decisive influence in the financial

structure: most reconstruction financing comes from the Gulf states, and Türkiye's coordinating role does not meet the structural power criteria there (IMF, 2025; World Bank, 2025). The knowledge structure operates partially, through MİT channels and norm transfer, but institutional sustainability on this dimension rests on a single source and independent verification is insufficient.

The most important inference to be drawn from this table is that Türkiye's levels of achievement in four structures differ significantly from each other, and this differentiation clearly reveals that the hegemonic strategy in question is not yet completed, but an actively building process, and that there are serious deficiencies, especially in finance and knowledge structures. It is both more realistic and analytically functional to define Türkiye not as a completed hegemon, but as an actor that advances structural power building in the dimensions of security and production but has not yet fully met its hegemonic claim due to the inadequacy of finance and information.

The three-tier coding rule set out in the account of research method above (fully met / partially met / not met, based on independent non-government corroboration) is applied to the assessments made in the running text above; Table 2 is presented as an illustrative summary rather than a cell-by-cell reapplication of that threshold, and individual cell labels should be read alongside the corresponding textual discussion rather than as independently corroborated ratings.

Table 2. Levels of structural power gain: three axes, four structures and three operational criteria

Structural Dimension	Security Axis	Axis of Migration	The Reconstruction Axis
Security Structure	Medium: Two of the three criteria were met. TAF training and arms transfer (Erol, 2026). Geographic constraint: US-SDF connection (Fidan, 2025), weakened since Jan/Apr 2026 (see the security axis above).	Early stage: A criterion partially. There is a preference restriction in border management, independent verification is limited (PMM, 2025).	Early stage: A criterion partially. The presence of a safe zone, but Israeli pressure is restrictive (Fidan, 2025).
Production Structure	Medium: One of three criteria was met. Defense industry exports and technology transfer, institutional continuity has not yet been established (Erol, 2026).	Early stage: One of the three criteria partially. Labor market integration has advanced, but documentation is insufficient (Erdoğan, 2024).	Medium: Two of the three criteria were met. JETCO, TİKA, energy pipeline, corporate settlement documented (Kaya, 2025).

Finance Structure	Early stage: Only a benchmark partially. There are no defensive credit mechanisms, independent verification.	Medium: One of three criteria. Negotiation leverage and the cost of alternatives increased in EU refugee financing (Danış & Nazlı, 2019); read as leverage exercised through the EU channel, not as direct Turkish financial control over Syria (see the migration management axis above).	Early stage: One of the three criteria partially. Channeling Gulf finance, Türkiye does not have direct financial control (Rakipoğlu, 2025).
Knowledge Structure	Early stage: A criterion partially. MIT channels and norm transfer, independent verification is limited (Erol, 2026).	Early stage: No criteria are fully met. The migration governance framework has produced normative impact, no measurable institutional impact (Kadkoy 2025).	Early stage: Only a benchmark partially. Technical standards and training transfer have started, institutional continuity has not been documented (Kaya, 2025).

In this context, it is necessary to clearly underline three structural constraints. The first constraint is that the US-SDF connection geographically divides the structural power gain in the security axis and indirectly restricts the production and migration axes (Fidan, 2025), although this constraint held only until early 2026: it has since been substantially weakened by the January 2026 Damascus–SDF integration agreement and the completion of the US withdrawal in April 2026, with the durability of the integration process and the outcome for Kurdish self-governance still uncertain. The second constraint is the question of domestic political sustainability: public pressure shown by Erdoğan's (2024) Syrian Barometer data leaves Türkiye caught between contradictory demands between maintaining the instrumental status quo and accelerating its return. The third constraint is Syria's institutional capacity gap: As pointed out by Kaya (2025), the new administration has limited public service experience, making it difficult for institutional transfers to find an interlocutor.

When evaluated in the context of the literature, the findings open several important theoretical dialogues. Öniş's (2014) normative-pragmatist tension framework confirms that the pragmatist pole predominates in the post-Assad period, and Danış and Nazlı's (2019) observation of the tension between humanitarian discourse and instrumental practice shows that this dichotomy is a contradiction that is constantly reproduced. The limits that Altunışık (2016) identifies in her analysis of regional power closely match this study's findings on the third constraint. In terms of Strange's (1988) theory, the most original contribution of this study is that, in line with Murinson's (2006) analytical framework on the conditions for middle powers to acquire structural power, it shows that the conceptualization of structural power is productive for the study of emerging regional middle powers as well as of great powers, and that it repays operationalization for that purpose.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study applied Strange's (1988) structural power theory to Türkiye's post-Assad Syria policy by equipping it with operational criteria and revealed three main findings. First, there is a functional integration in the axes of security, migration and reconstruction, and when this integration is evaluated with three operational criteria, it is partially met in security and production structures. Second, the levels of achievement in four structural dimensions differ significantly, progress in the security and production structures (Erol, 2026; Kaya, 2025; Rakipoğlu, 2025; SETA, 2025) being ahead of progress in the finance and knowledge structures. Third, the US-SDF nexus (Fidan, 2025) — substantially weakened since the January 2026 Damascus–SDF integration agreement and the April 2026 completion of the US withdrawal, though not fully resolved (see the security axis above) — together with domestic political refugee pressure (Erdoğan, 2024) and Syria's institutional capacity constraint (Kaya, 2025), remain real obstacles to the full establishment of the hegemonic strategy. When these findings are read together, it is a requirement of analytical honesty to characterize Türkiye's position in Syria not as a "completed hegemony" but as "an active structural power building process that progresses in security and production structures and is deficient in financial and knowledge structures."

In terms of theoretical contribution, the study offers two unique dimensions. First, against the security-migration-economy divergence in the Turkish foreign policy literature (see Sert, 2019), it integrates the three axes in a single analytical framework, thus proposing a systematic alternative to the structure of fragmented literature. Second, by engaging with Murinson's (2006) analysis of middle powers, it takes Strange's (1988) structural power theory beyond the analysis of great powers and makes a concrete methodological contribution to the literature by developing the necessary operational criterion framework for the application of the theory to middle powers. In the context of policy recommendations, the three priorities are derived directly from the findings. The weakness in the financial structure stems from the second finding: As long as Türkiye's coordinating role is not institutionalized, Gulf financing will remain ad hoc and project-bound rather than sustainable. For this reason, the establishment of a multilateral Syria reconstruction fund and making Türkiye a founding partner in this fund is the most functional way to eliminate the deficiency in the financial structure. The institutional capacity deficit stems from the third finding: Türkiye's structural power transfers remain superficial for as long as they lack an interlocutor, so capacity building programs for Syrian bureaucrats and technical experts directly serve Türkiye's strategic interest. The contradiction in the migration-development nexus stems from the first finding: to resolve the tension between domestic political pressure on return and the maintenance of the instrumental status quo, a flexible status system linking migration and development policies would both meet domestic demands and provide human resources to the reconstruction process.

Four priority agendas are proposed for future research. Longitudinal field research on the reintegration experiences of Syrians returning from Türkiye will make the individual and social dimensions of the migration axis visible and close the existing data gap (Migration Institute, 2025). An examination of trade relations within the framework of JETCO from the perspective of Turkish and Syrian firms will enable an independent empirical assessment of structural power gains in the production structure. A comparative analysis of Türkiye's Syria experience with Libya and Iraq will test the regional generalizability of the concept of hegemonic strategy and will make an important

contribution that advances Murinson's (2006) analysis of the middle power in the context of the Middle East. Finally, studies investigating how Syrian technical and political bureaucrats experience their relations with Türkiye will produce evidence that has been missing so far confirming the structural preference constraint that is the first operational criterion.

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Notes on Contributors

Çağlar Özer is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Faculty of Economics, Administrative and Social Sciences, at İstanbul Kent University. He holds a PhD in International Relations from Kocaeli University. Prior to his academic career, he served as a General Staff Colonel in the Turkish Armed Forces, from which he retired. His research interests include Turkish foreign policy, international politics, and international institutions.

ORCID

Çağlar Özer https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3090-4740

Author contributions

The article is the work of a single author. Çağlar Özer designed the study, collected and analysed the source material, and wrote the manuscript.

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This study draws exclusively on publicly available documentary sources: official publications and statistics of Turkish state institutions, reports of think tanks and international organizations, published human-rights documentation, and press reporting. All sources are cited in full in the reference list and are publicly accessible at the addresses given. No new data were generated or analyzed in the course of this study.

Ethics approval statement

This study is based on documentary analysis of publicly available published material. It involves no human participants, and ethics committee approval was therefore not required.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Claude (Anthropic) between July and September 2026, covering the original submission and both revision rounds, for organizing the structure of the revisions, for cross-checking citations and figures against their sources, and for Turkish-to-English translation support, affecting the Introduction, Theoretical Framework, Methodology, Case Studies, Comparative Findings, and Conclusion sections, and the accompanying reviewer response letters. All output was reviewed and verified by the author against the cited sources, who takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.