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A Dance of Entanglement: The US-Turkish Relations in the Context of the Syrian Conflict

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ABSTRACT

Alliances under unipolarity operate with different logic than under bipolarity. Unipolarity makes the twin dangers of abandonment and entrapment more likely for the weaker states that need the unipole for the pursuit of their regional security interests. The article takes the US-Turkish relations within the context of Syrian conflict as exemplary and shows how the strategic discrepancies between the US-Turkish positions paved the way for Turkey's abandonment in Syria. The article concludes that the unipole's strategic alliance commitments are no longer reliable for regional allies to assume risky regional restructuring roles as they face the risk of abandonment on the halfway.

Keywords: Alliances, Unipolarity, the US, Turkey, Syria

Karmaşıklığın Dansı: Suriye Uyuşmazlığı Bağlamında ABD-Türkiye İlişkileri

ÖZET

İttifakların tek kutuplulukta işleyiş mantıkları iki kutupluluktakinden farklıdır. Tek kutupluluk, güvenlik çıkarları için tek kutup-devletin desteğine ihtiyacı olan zayıf müttefiki terkedilme ve tuzağa düşürülme ikiz tehlikelerine daha çok maruz bırakmaktadır. Bu makale, Suriye krizi bağlamında Türk-Amerikan ilişkilerini tek kutupluluk altında ittifak ilişkilerinin bir örneği olarak ele almakta ve Türkiye'nin Suriye politikasında stratejik müttefikince nasıl terkedildiğini anlatmaktadır. Sonuç olarak makale, tek kutup-devletin ittifakına veya diplomatik taahhütlerine tam olarak güvenilemeyeceği savına dayanarak tek kutup-devlete bağlı bölgesel yapılandırma girişimleri gibi riskli güvenlik politikalarının yarı yolda bırakılma tehlikesini eskisine göre daha yüksek oranda barındırdığının altını çizmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İttifaklar, Tek kutupluluk, ABD, Türkiye, Suriye

Under unipolarity, the reliability and credibility of the alliances are at stake as the fulfillment of the commitments is at discretion of the unipole.¹ Differently from alliances under bipolarity, as Stephen Walt argues, unipolarity reverses the twin dangers of abandonment and entrapment to the benefit of the unipole and makes the twin dangers more likely for the weaker states who need the unipole for the pursuit of their regional security interests. Based on Walt's approach to alliances under unipolarity, the article looks at the US-Turkish relations within the context of Syrian conflict as exemplary. For this purpose, it starts with underlining the changing nature of alliances under unipolarity for regional actors. It argues that it was the declining US power that pushed the Obama administration to pursue retrenchment strategy for redistributing its resources from peripheral to core US security interests and commitments. It stresses that the Obama's retrenchment strategy defined the contours of the US strategy toward the Middle East and Syria and the Trump administration deepened US retrenchment further to put 'America First'. The article focuses on the processes that lead to strategic discrepancies between US-Turkish positions and show how they paved the way for the allies' eventual mutual abandonment in Syria. It highlights that the regional power vacuum created by the absence of Turkish-US alliance facilitated involvement of other actors such as Russia and Iran with their competing interests in the conflict. The article concludes that the unipole's strategic alliance commitments are no longer reliable for regional allies to assume risky regional restructuring roles as they face the risk of abandonment on the halfway.

Alliances under Unipolarity: Abandonment and Entrapment Problematique

American primacy is still the key determinant of international relations despite arguments for its decline in the current global power distribution.² The US has economic, technological and geographical primacy and the 'command of the commons,' that is the military dominance over the sea, air, and space.³ The current international system is, therefore, unipolar both by the conventional definitions of polarity and the standard measurements of power. The major implication of the US unipolarity is that there is no possibility of a counter hegemonic alliance formation against the US. In the absence of such balancing, the US as the unipole enjoys greater flexibility in its relations and alliances.⁴ It can select among different alliance partners to form 'coalitions of willing,' act unilaterally or prefer to stay aloof as it has greater leeway to opt for its preferences.⁵ The US's grand strategic flexibilities shaping its alliance formation have implications for the global, regional and local actors. Its power position makes it the primary factor in shaping others' perceptions and strategic calculations.

1 Stephen Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World", *World Politics*, Vol.61, No.1, 2009, p.86-120.

2 G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, State Behavior, and Systemic Consequences", *World Politics*, Vol.61, No.1, 2009, p.1-27.

3 Stuart Kaufman, Richard Little, and William Wohlforth (Eds.), *The Balance of Power in World History*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; Barry Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundations of U.S. Hegemony", *International Security*, Vol.28, No.1, 2003, p.5-46.

4 Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World", p.92.

5 Ibid., p.99.

Under unipolarity, Stephen Walt argues, the reliability and credibility of the alliances are at stake and, that is a serious concern for the allies of the unipole.⁶ Alliances depend on the belief that the commitments will be honored; however, as the unipole depends less on its allies for achieving its objectives it will be less willing to comply with its pledges. The lesser allies face the risk of being left alone. There is a possibility that the unipole will not aid them when they are threatened or the unipole will back them out of its own self-interest. The weaker partners need to pay higher price for the support they receive from the unipole and need to make harder effort to keep the unipole engaged in their security concerns. Although the primacy of the unipole does not render the weaker partners without leverage, their capacity to assure engagement of the unipole or extract concessions from it are limited if the unipole is not in need of the weaker party's critical assets like strategic geographic location.

Incidentally, unipolarity, as Walt states, tames the tension between the twin dangers of abandonment and entrapment significantly on behalf of the unipole: the weaker states tend to worry about the abandonment due to the unipole's declined dependency on their resources or allegiances, which decreases the likelihood of the unipole to be dragged into conflicts by its reckless and adventurist allies.⁷ Under unipolarity, it is the weaker states that are more vulnerable to the entrapment as the unipole can push the weaker states to participate in the coalitions of willings or in wars that they do not want to take part in because such demands might be more costly or contradictory with their own interests as regional powers.⁸ It is possible to argue that under unipolarity, while the unipole demands the full allegiance with its demands based on the alliance commitments, the weaker states cannot rely on their 'strategic' or 'special relations' with the unipole.

Unipolarity leaves the fulfillment of the commitments stemming from the formal or informal alliances to the discretion of the unipole.⁹ Considering that the unipole may be distracted by a wide array of security problems and domestic priorities, it may prefer to refrain from managing and shaping the system due its costs and let others to deal with the emerging security threats. It may even pass the buck on various regional powers rather than letting vice versa. In other words, having enjoyed considerable margin of safety due to its predominance and geography, the unipole can be the one who free rides on international security matters, especially on the regional ones. It may let weaker states to solve their own problems in order to preserve its power position by reducing the costs of involvement in other regions. As even doing nothing appears to be a less costly and less risky strategy to the unipole, in the cases of divergent perspectives and non-mutual interests, the weaker states are obliged to make a strong case to convince the unipole for its engagement in to their concerned security problems and regions. Moreover, the weak states have very limited capacity in engaging the unipole in regional affairs if it already decided to not to do so. In overall analysis, under unipolarity, the twin dangers of abandonment and entrapment is reversed as risk-averse grand strategic choices render formal or informal forms of security cooperation – alliances and strategic partnerships- unreliable for guaranteeing the weaker states' security and interests.

6 Ibid., p.97.

7 Ibid., p.98.

8 Ibid., p.99.

9 Ibid., p.99-100.

The Obama Doctrine in the Global Context: A Doctrine for Internal Balancing

Idiosyncratic character of unipolarity requires combining system, state and individual levels-of-analysis for understanding the unipole foreign policy behaviors.¹⁰ Therefore, under American unipolarity, it is necessary to contextualize and understand the presidential doctrines to understand the strategic choices of the unipole. The Obama Doctrine defined the contours of the US-Turkish relations within the context of Syrian conflict with its interlocked implications in the global and regional context. The Obama Doctrine reflected domestic and international lessons of the previous administrations.¹¹ It is, therefore, necessary to examine the Obama Doctrine beside the Bush Doctrine,¹² shaped by the 9/11 attacks and led to the consecutive wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). The decline of the US power was major concern for the Obama administration. To focus on internal balancing and prevent further decline of the US power, the Obama administration built its election campaign on two things: the cost of wars and 'nation-building at home'. Having inherited a recession-hit economy and desired a lasting personal legacy in US politics, President Obama promised to use American taxpayers' money in domestic economic recovery rather than being entangled in unnecessary wars abroad.¹³ Therefore, in the global context, the Obama Doctrine prioritized the US's domestic recovery over the international commitments.

Retrenchment is essentially a response to a decline in power and requires redistribution of resources from peripheral to core commitments.¹⁴ It emphasizes the reduction of international military commitments and costs by means of cutting defense spending and expenditures, reducing strategic-military deployments abroad, withdrawing from some alliance obligations, minimizing risks and/or pursuing all at the same time.¹⁵ The implication of this strategy for foreign policy is a decline in international liabilities, refocusing in certain geographic areas and defining some issues as less critical.¹⁶ This strategy enables the shift of burden by passing foreign policy obligations onto allies and reallocating resources from peripheral to core. The Obama administration's retrenchment strategy had significant implications for the global security as it redefined the US' relations with regional (Turkey and Iran) and global actors (China and Russia). Counterbalancing China under Asian pivot strategy became the focus of the Obama Doctrine, which had significant implications for Russia's global and regional security calculations.

The Obama administration decided to 'reset' confrontational relations with Russia by building up trust and cooperation over a gradually expanding range of issues. This was expected to broaden and change mutual interests and expectations over time.¹⁷ President Obama envisioned acquiring

10 Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective", *World Politics*, Vol.61, No.1, 2009, p.188.

11 The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 2010; The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 2015.

12 The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 2002; Robert Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol.118, No.3, 2003, p.365-388.

13 Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine*, p.33.

14 Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment", *International Security*, Vol.35, No.4, 2011, p.11.

15 Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine*, p.15-16.

16 MacDonald and Parent, "Graceful Decline?", p.11.

17 Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine*, p.66.

Russia's cooperation in addressing the situation in Afghanistan, in managing the confrontation over Iran's nuclear program and in continuing the elimination of nuclear weapons. Russia meanwhile used 'the US's reset and accommodate policy' to rebuild its sphere of influence in its 'Near Abroad'. Russia seized Crimea, occupied part of Georgia and intervened in Ukraine. Additionally, it extended its sphere of influence to the Middle East by vetoing UN sanctions against both Iran's nuclear program, and Syria and thus by providing technical and political/military support.¹⁸ The US's reset and pivot strategies created a permissive global and regional power vacuum for Russia to exploit. It facilitated Iran's involvement in Syria crisis as ally of Russia and Syria and led them form a tripartite alliance with their competing approaches to the conflict. Eventually, Russia not only built its regional status in the Middle East but also used the Syrian conflict as a ground for further enhancing Russia's overall status and prestige in international politics *vis-à-vis* the US and other global – regional powers.

The Obama Doctrine in Regional Context: A Doctrine against Entrapment in the Middle East

The Obama Doctrine designed to override the legacies of Bush Doctrine. The Bush Doctrine was both militarily and globally assertive and centered on reshaping the Middle East after 9/11 attacks. It had four elements: a strong belief that domestic regimes determine foreign policy as suggested by democratic peace thesis and the US should support such transformation of international politics; preventive war is the necessary tool for fighting against global threats like terrorism or the proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction; strong willingness to act unilaterally if required and peace and stability demanded the US to assert its predominance in the world politics.¹⁹ It directly targeted Saddam regime in Iraq by use of counterterrorism and the prevention of the proliferation of nuclear weapons as justifications for waging a preventive war. It was assumed that the regime change in Iraq would not only bring democracy but also embolden democratic forces in the rest of the Middle East.²⁰ The announcement of the US-Middle East Partnership Initiative was an illustration of the Bush administration's assertive engagement in the region.²¹

After September 11 attacks, as Jack Snyder argued, the Bush administration facilitated the opportunity to exploit the discretionary preemptive war based on its ideology.²² The unipolarity enabled the Bush administration to sell the 'myths of empire,' (for instance, the argument that the conquest of Iraq would be a 'cakewalk' for the US) and convince American public that Middle East could be transformed with low risk and cost.²³ The Obama administration, however, targeted the Bush administration's 'wrong war' on Iraq for its high risk and cost to the US economy and military. By interpreting the Iraq war through the prism of its ideology and domestic political considerations, the Obama administration used the same freedom of action assured by US disproportionate power

18 Ibid., 103.

19 Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine", p.365.

20 Philip H. Gordon, "Bush's Middle East Vision", *Survival*, Vol.45, No.1, 2003, p.155-165.

21 Ibid.,162.

22 Jack Snyder, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, "Free Hand Abroad, Divide and Rule at Home", *World Politics*, Vol.61, No.1, 2009, p.162.

23 Ibid, p.165.

and changed the US strategy in favor of retrenchment. As opposed to the Bush administration's neoconservative grand strategy of securitization and prioritization of the Middle East that equated the regime change in the region with the elimination of the threat of terrorism and the safeguarding of the US security, the Obama administration built its grand strategy on deconstruction, de-securitization and decentralization of the region.

Excluding the Iran nuclear deal and Israel, the Middle East became the primary focus of the President Obama's retrenchment strategy. The Obama administration redefined the Middle East as a region with increased insecurities and the vulnerabilities for the US. In this redefinition, the US used several arguments for the domestic and international audience. The 2008 financial crisis's lasting economic implications on the US economy provided a strong tool to the Obama administration in convincing war-fatigued American public for the cuts in its overseas military expenses specifically in the Middle East in favor of the economic recovery. The Obama administration, on the military side, argued that the US armed forces' presence and its assertive regime change strategy in the Middle East were not only counterproductive but also made the US the target of the terrorist attacks.²⁴ On the political side, the Obama administration promised to restore and preserve the US leadership in the international arena by rebuilding its economic capacity and by preventing counterbalancing with policies of benevolence. In this sense, the Obama administration's retrenchment strategy in the region, in general, and the withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq, in particular, aimed to influence the great powers, which were very uncomfortable with the Bush administration's doctrine of preemptive war strategy and unilateralism. The new administration stated its commitment to multilateralism through retrenchment and its desire to share the burden of the collective goods like fighting against terrorism in the Middle East with the international community rather than making the US a direct target of terrorists.

The Obama Doctrine's strategy multilateralism had significant strategic and operational implications for the US's dis/engagement besides its allied relations in the Middle East.²⁵ Strategically, the doctrine emphasized collective action through building military coalitions, and aiding local partners - allies' individual capacities to deal with the security problems that were not primary for the US.²⁶ This approach became more dominant in the second term of the Obama administration. The National Security Strategy 2015 stated that "The threshold for military action is higher when our interests are not directly threatened. In such cases, we will seek to mobilize allies and partners to share the burden and achieve lasting outcomes."²⁷ Implying the war in Iraq, it further detailed that the US decision to use force would reflect a clear mandate with feasible and legitimate objectives in all cases of the use of force. The document additionally underlined that the decision of war would be taken on "a serious appreciation for the risk" to the mission, the global responsibilities, and costs at home and abroad.²⁸ Operationally, this low-

24 Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Behind the Curve: Globalization and International Terrorism", *International Security*, Vol.27, No.3, 2003, p.50-52; Christopher Layne, "America's Middle East Grand Strategy After Iraq: The Moment for Offshore Balancing Has Arrived", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 35, No.1, 2009, p.24.

25 Andreas Krieg, "Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East", *International Affairs*, Vol.92, No.1, 2016, p.104.

26 The White House, *National Security Strategy*, Washington DC, 2010, p.26.

27 The White House, *National Security Strategy*, Washington DC, 2015, p.8.

28 Ibid, 8.

cost and risk approach prioritized surrogate warfare which emphasized the use of technological devices, the Special Forces and CIA operative to achieve the non-vital strategic objectives rather than direct deployment of US forces on the ground with high costs to the US economy and American lives.²⁹

Historically, surrogate wars have never been outdated in international relations and considered important tools of non-direct and cost-effective confrontation for the pursuit of strategic and ideological goals.³⁰ During the Cold War, proxy wars even prevented direct confrontation among the superpowers. Having learned lessons from past, the Obama administration kept the option of surrogate war as a cost-effective option against non-urgent military conflicts. This served the Obama administration's cautious politics of preventing the US entrapment in complicated regional conflicts, in general, and the Middle East, in specific. As noted above, with the exception of Iran, the Obama administration located the Middle East within the framework of its counterterrorism strategy.³¹ The region's loss of primacy in the Obama administration's agenda, becomes noticeable in the National Security Strategy of 2010 in which most of the Greater Middle East discussion was placed under the heading on "Complete a Responsible Transition as We End the War in Iraq".³² Considering that Obama elected for his plan to withdraw from Iraq, the engagement by surrogates was a viable option to prevent further operational risks and to decrease US military casualty.³³ Surrogate war was in tandem with the Obama's overall "leading from behind" strategy as³⁴ it provided the safe distance for the US in its involvement in the Middle East. It answered the US needs of deniability, legitimacy and cost efficiency in the face of lessened urgency.³⁵ Even though the US administration preferred a regime change in favor of democracy, President Obama was unwilling to interfere directly and militarily due his policy of grand strategic priorities.³⁶ The US's involvement in Libya under UN Security Council authorization with NATO allies was a warning signal for the Obama administration's position regarding Syria as of 2011.

Syrian Conflict: The US's Retrenchment *versus* Turkey's 'Active Engagement'

The US-Turkish relations within the context of Syrian conflict turned out to be an illustrative example of how the twin dangers of abandonment and entrapment worked under unipolarity. It is possible to see how the tendency of the US to prevent the risk of entrapment in the Middle East politics increased eventually while Turkey strived to entangle its longtime NATO ally and strategic partner and prevent its abandonment. The Obama administration's retrenchment strategy signaled a power vacuum in the Middle East. Turkey, under the Justice and Development Party (JDP) since 2008,

29 Michael J. Boyle, "Do Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Go Together?", *International Affairs*, Vol.86, No.2, 2010, p.347; Krieg, "Externalizing the Burden of War", p.105.

30 Mark O. Yeisley, "Bipolarity, Proxy Wars, and The Rise of China", *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol.5, No.4, 2011, p.75-91.

31 National Security, 2010, p.26.

32 *Ibid.*, 25.

33 John Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.84, No.6, 2005, p.44-54

34 Charles Krauthammer, "The Obama doctrine: Leading from behind", *Washington Post*, 29 April 2011.

35 Krieg, "Externalizing the Burden of War", p.102.

36 "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa", 19 May 2011.

stepped in to fill the vacuum and actively engaged in the region. Until the Arab Spring, Turkey's active engagement in the Middle East was based on the 'Zero Problem with Neighbors Policy', which looked for ways of developing and restructuring relations with the Arab States. Being inspired by the model of security community in the Europe, Turkey acted as the architecture of regional peace and went ahead to pursue its ambitious project of regional integration through use of its soft power and economic interdependence as tools for conflict resolution.³⁷

Turkey's increased role, in the Palestinian conflict, in the Israel-Syrian peace negotiations, its election to the non-permanent membership to the UN Security Council in 2009, and its participation in G20 in the same year were all used to project Turkish power. 'One-Minute' reaction by the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to then President of Israel, Shimon Peres, in Davos World Summit 2009, reinforced its regional image of a power capable of reshaping the dynamics of the Middle East in domestic and international realms.³⁸ During the Arab Spring, the JDP leadership used uprisings as an opportunity to promote 'Turkish model' and create a peace zone in the region.³⁹ These expectations got stronger when the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt won the elections. JDP's hopes for new regional order from 'Sudan to Syria', that would be established on "the same political structures, the same political language, the same vision of the future within ten years to come" increased.⁴⁰ When recently after coming to power the *Ennahda* in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt declared that they would take the JDP as role model for themselves, Turkey's self-image seemed to be accepted in the region. Thereafter Turkey solidified its self-perception as the regional leader and order-provider in the Middle East.⁴¹

As opposed to the Obama administration decentralization of the region, the JDP leadership defined the Arab Spring and the Middle East as the 'national matter' in the domestic and foreign policy discourses.⁴² Accordingly, Turkey's 'Zero Problem' policy evolved into a democracy-based normative discourse similar to that of the US. Turkey's democracy promotion, however, had an interventionist tone with "liberal, assertive, normative and humanitarian" features.⁴³ In other words, the JDP turned from 'trading state'⁴⁴ with a pacifist democratic agenda into a 'democratic

37 Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, Küre Yayınları, İstanbul, 2010, p.83; Kemal Kirişçi and Neslihan Kaptanoğlu, "The Politics of Trade and Turkish Foreign Policy", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.47, No.5, 2011, p.719; J. Zacharia, "Turkey Hopes to Grow Economic Ties and Influence within the Middle East", *Washington Post*, 8 April 2010.

38 Gencer Özcan, "If the Crisis is What We Make of It: Turkey and the Uprisings in Syria", Fuat Aksu and Helin Sarı Ertem (Eds.), *Analyzing Foreign Policy Crises in Turkey: Conceptual, Theoretical and Practical Discussions*, Cambridge Publishing House, 2017, p.179-198.

39 Oğuz Dilek, "Constructing Security and Community in the Middle East: A Security Community Approach to the Structure and Agents of the Arab Spring", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol.11, No.42, 2014, p.51-74.

40 İbrahim Karagül, "Müslüman Kardeşler Dünyası Kuruluyor!", *Yeni Şafak*, 19 June 2012 <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/ibrahimkaragul/musluman-kardeler-dunyasi-kuruluyor-32883> (Accessed on 03 April 2019); İbrahim Karagül, "Yüzyıllık Yalnızlık Bitti", *Yeni Şafak*, 19 November 2012 <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/ibrahimkaragul/yuz-yillik-yalnizlik-bitti-35032> (Accessed on 03 April 2019); Özcan, "If the Crisis is What We Make of It", p.180-181.

41 Murat Yeşiltaş and Ali Balcı, *A Dictionary of Turkish Foreign Policy in the AK Parti Era: A Conceptual Map*, Ankara, SETA, 2013, p.15-16

42 Gencer Özcan, *2000li Yıllarda Türkiye Dış Politikası (2002-2016)*, Boğaziçi Üniversitesi-TUSİAD Dış Politika Forumu, İstanbul, 2017, p.26.

43 Tarık Oğuzlu, "The 'Arab Spring' and the Rise of the 2.0 Version of Turkey's 'Zero Problems with Neighbors' Policy" *SAM Papers*, Vol.1, No.1, 2012, p.7.

44 Kemal Kirişçi, "Turkey's 'Demonstrative Effect' and the Transformation of the Middle East", *Insight Turkey*, Vol.13, No.2, 2011, p.33-55.

state' with interventionist agenda acting on the flawed premises of the democratic peace theory.⁴⁵ Rather than resembling to the Obama's exemplarist approach, the JDP's democracy promotion was similar to the Bush administration's vindicationist approach,⁴⁶ defined also as "messianic globalism".⁴⁷ Messianic globalism simply based on "the idea that democracy and reform will make [Middle Eastern states] stronger and more stable, and make the world more secure by undermining terrorism at its source."⁴⁸ Similarly, the JDP leadership adopted "messianic regionalism" as "Turkey's value-based approach and emphasis on democracy and popular legitimacy have underpinned its policy toward the uprisings in the Middle East."⁴⁹ The then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu argued that the archaic regimes in the Middle East were remnants of the Cold War and the only cure was democratization.⁵⁰ He further confirmed the JDP's commitment to regime change in the region and stated that "our government contemplated how we could assist the Arab people's quest for democracy; we firmly agreed that we will pursue an *Ankara-based policy* and act in line with our value-based evaluation of the developments."⁵¹ In line with this policy, Turkish model was projected for reshaping the Middle East.

The evolution of the JDP leadership's understanding of democracy promotion from exemplarist to vindicationist approach becomes more striking in its policy towards Syria. Although the Turkish-Syrian relations was the symbol of the success of the 'Zero Problems with Neighbors' policy, as Gencer Özcan noted, the JDP government redefined the Syrian conflict as a 'national matter' and started to view regime change and democratization in Syria as the jewel in the crown for its regional leadership.⁵² In his interview with the TIME on 11 October 2011, the then PM Erdoğan replying a question on the break-up with the friendly Al-Assad regime stated that "It is impossible to preserve my friendship with people who are allegedly leaders when they are attacking their own people, shooting at them, using tanks."⁵³ In the same interview, the friendly and harmonious relations with the Obama administration and the both leaders' agreement on the necessity of regime change in Syria were underlined.

In his speech on 19 May 2011, the President Obama stated that "the Syrian regime has chosen the path of murder and the mass arrests of its citizens. The United States has condemned these actions and working with the international community" and the US would act in line with the sanctions on Al-Assad regime.⁵⁴ President Obama further noted in this speech that the

45 Sebastian Rosato, "The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory", *American Political Science Review*, Vol.97, No.4, 2003, p.585-602; Christopher Layne, "Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace", *International Security*, Vol.19, No.2, 1994, p.5-49; Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine", p.365-388.

46 Jonathan Monten, "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in US Strategy", *International Security*, Vol.29, No.4, 2005, p.129-145.

47 Ibid., p.112.

48 White House Press, "Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy", 6 November 2003. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

49 Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring", *SAM Papers*, No.3, 2012, p.7. Emphasis is added.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., p.9. Emphasis is added.

52 Özcan, "If the Crisis is What We Make of It", p.181-182.

53 Recep Tayyip Erdogan, "Ten Questions for Recep Tayyip Erdogan", *Time Magazine*, 11 October 2011.

54 "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa", 19 May 2011.

Syrian people demanded transition to democracy and “President Al-Assad now has a choice: he can lead that transition or get out of the way.” He also demanded that the Al-Assad regime to stop shooting demonstrators, allow human rights monitors to access cities like Dara’a and start dialogue to facilitate democratic transition. President Obama concluded that “Otherwise, President Al-Assad and his regime will continue to be challenged from within and will continue to be isolated abroad.”⁵⁵ In May 2011, the opposition groups including the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood convened the first large scale meeting in Antalya and called for regime change. In July, by Turkey’s active encouragement, the Syrian National Salvation Congress gathered in Istanbul.⁵⁶ As of 2011, both the US and Turkey were on the same page regarding the full support to be given for transition to democracy in Syria and thought that the Syrian opposition was strong enough to mobilize people and to topple Al-Assad as swiftly as possible.⁵⁷ This, however, was a serious misinterpretation of the capabilities of the Syrian opposition and internal factors within Syria.⁵⁸

Despite this, the Obama administration’s position regarding the toppling of the Al-Assad regime remained ambiguous. This ambiguity toward Al-Assad based on the idea that he might be useful in peace negotiations with Israel and in nuclear deal with Iran.⁵⁹ The JDP’s position, contrariwise gained more clarity. The eight-month long Turkish diplomatic efforts to convince Al-Assad for reforms ended with no positive results.⁶⁰ The FM Davutoğlu’s last visit to Damascus, which brought the Al-Assad regime and the Syrian opposition together to negotiate peace under Turkey’s guidance, eliminated the option of a regime change in Syria with Bashar al-Al-Assad.⁶¹ Upon this visit, on 11 August, President Obama and PM Erdoğan exchanged ideas on Syria on the phone. Following this exchange on 18 August, the President Obama stated that “For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Al-Assad to step aside” and declared the imposition of sanctions on the Al-Assad regime.⁶² President Obama reiterated that “The United States cannot and will not impose this transition upon Syria. It is up to the Syrian people to choose their own leaders, and we have heard their strong desire that there not be foreign intervention in their movement.”⁶³ In line with his grand strategy, President Obama declared that the US would pressure President Al-Assad to back down and stand for the universal rights of the Syrian people together with the international community.⁶⁴

On 21 September, Turkey closed its airspace for flights bound for Syria. Four days later Turkey called the regime to abandon power as the Al-Assad regime lost its legitimacy and initiated

55 Ibid.

56 Aron Lund, *Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria’s Opposition Factions*, The Olof Palme International Center, Uppsala, 2012, p.17.

57 Gencer Özcan, “If the Crisis is What We Make of It”, p.190.

58 Ibid.

59 Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine*, p.84.

60 Davutoğlu, “Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy”, p.10.

61 Tolga Tanış, *Potus ve Beyefendi*, İstanbul, Doğan Kitap, 2015, p.478.

62 The White House, “Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria”, 18 August 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

sanctions against Syria along with the Arab League states.⁶⁵ This decision was welcomed by the Obama administration. The US in a statement declared that Turkey's sanctions would increase international pressure on Syria. It was also noted that "the President Obama has coordinated closely with the Prime Minister Erdoğan throughout the crisis in Syria and would continue to do so going forward."⁶⁶ In the meantime, PM Erdoğan stated that he saw "Syria as an internal matter" not as an "external one."⁶⁷ By eliminating the internal/external distinction with respect to the Arab Spring, in general, and to the toppling of the Al-Assad regime, the JDP aimed to enhance its image as the regional power.⁶⁸ After the US withdrawal from the region as of November 2011, Turkey assumed its leadership position to fill the regional power vacuum.⁶⁹ However, Russia and Iran also stepped in to fill the power vacuum as allies of the Al-Assad regime. In other words, after November 2011, the competition for the spheres of influence in the region between Turkey, Iran and Russia intensified over the Syrian regime.

The JDP leadership's regional power status was bolstered by the success of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and by the Western media. On 14 December 2011, TIME magazine listed PM Erdoğan among the most influential Islamic leaders with capacity and capability to urge people in Tunisia and Egypt to build secular democracies and to affect the central events in the Middle East.⁷⁰ Starting from 2012, the JDP government began to talk about a 'new regional order in the Middle East and started to play a more assertive role.⁷¹ From JDP point of view, the toppling of Al-Assad was the last decisive step needed for the realization of new regional order. Thereafter Turkey took active part in organizing the diplomatic initiatives like Friends of Syria Conference and hosted the second meeting of the initiative in Istanbul in 2012. This initiative proved ineffective due to the differences of ideas. By the mid-2012, when armed factions within the Syrian opposition succeeded on the ground and top-level Syrian officials started to defect the Al-Assad regime, expectations about the nearing end of the regime were high.⁷² Overtime, the expectations proved wrong despite the significant amount of arms and logistic support from Turkey and the US to the opposition and warring factions.⁷³

The failure of the Syrian opposition to deliver expectations of democracy, led Turkey to search for options of allied military intervention. Turkey tried to convince the US and its allies in the region,

65 Özcan, "If the Crisis is What We Make of It", p.183-184; Nafiz Albayrak, "Suriye'nin Silahına İzin Verilmeyecek," *Milliyet*, 25 September 2011, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/suriye-nin-silahina-izin-verilmeyecek-siyaset-1442699/> (Accessed on 03 April 2019); "Turkey Imposes Sanctions on Syria", *The Guardian*, 30 November 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/30/turkey-imposes-sanctions-on-syria> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

66 White House, "Statement by NSC Spokesman Tommy Vietor on Turkish Sanctions Against Syria", 30 November 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/30/statement-nsc-spokesman-tommy-vietor-turkish-sanctions-against-syria> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

67 Umut Tütüncü, "Erdoğan, Davutoğlu'nu Şam'a Gönderiyor", *Habertürk*, 8 August 2011 <https://www.haberturk.com/dunya/haber/656181-erdogan-davutoglu-nu-sama-gonderiyor> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

68 Özcan, *2000li Yıllarda Türkiye Dış Politikası (2002-2016)*, p.31.

69 Ibid.

70 Tony Karon, "Person of the Year 2011, Recep Tayyip Erdogan", *TIME*, 14 December 2011, http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2098471_2098472_2098512,00.html (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

71 Özcan, "If the Crisis is What We Make of It", p.184.

72 Steven Heydemann, "The End Game in Syria", *Foreign Policy*, 11 July 2012.

73 Tanış, *POTUS ve Beyefendi*, p.272-275

the Saudi Arabia and Jordan, to intervene in Syria.⁷⁴ According to New York Times article, after the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff presentation in early 2012, the Obama administration had taken possibility of a military intervention in Syria off the table. The US also decided not to impose no-fly zone because it required 70.000 military personnel to dismantle Syria's anti-aircraft system. Additionally, on the eve of his second-term elections, President Obama questioned the policy of arming the rebels and the possibility of the US weapons getting in the wrong hands -the jihadists and terrorists. He opted for anonymous classified operations. This was a clear indication of the US's unwillingness to intervene.⁷⁵ On 13 February 2012, in Washington, Hillary Clinton informed the Turkish side about the position of the Obama administration.⁷⁶

Toward the end of 2012, Turkey and the US started to drift apart further as the choices of proxies in Syria differed. The JDP government opted for radical groups such as *Jabhat al-Nusra* and other *Al-Qaeda* affiliated groups for their fighting efficiency on the ground. The US meanwhile suspended its support to these groups, specifically after *Al-Nusra* affiliated terrorists got involved in the US's Benghazi Embassy attack on 11 September 2012. Recalling the US's mistake of arming radicals in Afghanistan that later gave birth to *Al-Qaeda* during the Cold War, this attack led the US to reformulate the Syria question from the toppling of President Al-Assad to dealing with radical Islamist terrorists.⁷⁷ The Obama administration did not want to ruin its legacy by creating another failed state in Syria, which could turn into a breeding ground for anti-American radical Islamist terrorists. The Obama administration not only changed its proxy-choice from weaponing the radical Islamist groups in Syria but also started to support secular Kurdish militias, Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat-PYD*) and People's Protection Unit (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel-YPG*), that Turkey considered the branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan-PKK*).

Moreover, the US started to demand Turkey to terminate its support for the radical Islamist groups. The wedge between the two allies deepened as the US openly blamed and accused Turkey for supporting radical groups like *Al-Nusra* and even the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that proclaimed its state in Syria and established itself in Mosul in 2013. Although Turkey have repeatedly refused the US accusations as such and asked for factual proofs, the US continued its criticism. For instance, Vice President Joe Biden criticized the Sunni regional allies by saying that "Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE had promoted 'a proxy Sunni-Shia war' in Syria and 'poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Al-Assad."⁷⁸ Although Biden later apologized for this statement, he revealed the disturbing divide between the allies on the preferences of the proxies and the future of Al-Assad regime.

In 2013, the US gave a strong signal of abandonment to Turkey in Syria. Despite Turkish arguments for intervention after the chemical attacks that took place on Ghouta near Damascus,

74 Michael D. Lumpkin, "Obama's Uncertain Path Amid Syria Bloodshed", *New York Times*, 22 October 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/23/world/middleeast/obamas-uncertain-path-amid-syria-bloodshed.html> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

75 Ibid.

76 "Davutoğlu ve Clinton'dan Ortak Açıklama", *Hürriyet*, 13 February 2012, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/davutoglu-ve-clintondan-ortak-aciklama-19911958> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

77 Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine", p.365-388.

78 Patrick Cockburn, "Whose side is Turkey on?", *London Review of Books*, 6 November 2014, p.8-10.

the US desisted from intervening. The Obama administration acted against its own statement that the Al-Assad regime's use of chemical weapons would be 'red line' not to be crossed.⁷⁹ The US refused to be dragged into 'Syrian quagmire' especially when it was on the eve of brokering nuclear arms deal with Iran. The US diplomatic efforts were therefore centered on pressuring President Al-Assad to remove Syria's chemical stockpiles and on convening a peace conference, which was already proposed by Russian President Vladimir Putin. On 14 September, the US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared that the US and Russia reached an agreement "for Syria's arsenal of chemical weapons to be removed or destroyed by the middle of 2014 and indefinitely stalled the prospect of American airstrikes."⁸⁰ This agreement not only stalled the military intervention in Syria but also showed that the US was willing to abandon its strategic allies and to reap the benefits of the reset with Russia. The Obama administration was determined to rip the benefits of its "reset" diplomacy with Russia on Syria and on Iran's nuclear deal. The deal indicated that any solution to the Syrian conflict would be negotiated between the US and Russia first rather than the regional powers.

A Case for Mutual Abandonment: The US-Turkish Break-Up over Proxies and Engaging Russia

Turkey's biggest abandonment and disappointment resulted from the US's choice of proxies in Syria. After souring of the relations between the JDP and Al-Assad, the Syrian regime revived its connections with the PKK. Al-Assad allowed the PKK militias entry into Syrian territory and released others from the prison. The PKK terrorist organization mainly targeting Turkey's security, its citizens and military-security personnel helped the PYD to form a military wing called the YPG.⁸¹ The Syrian regime used the PKK/PDY as leverage against Turkey and the Syrian opposition. Proclaiming statehood the ISIS attacked the Kurdish town Kobane (Ayn al-Arab). In the fight for Kobane the PYD gained international legitimacy and received open Russian and US support.

In early 2015, the Syrian opposition supported by the Saudi Arabia and Turkey gained territory in Idlib. Thereafter Syrian Army started to retreat, and Russia backing Al-Assad, started its airstrikes over Aleppo-Latakia region. Through airstrikes Russia simply aimed to prevent "Western effort to impose a 'no-fly' or 'no-bomb' zone over parts of Syria, which blocked any realistic path for externally-backed regime-change by military means– as happened in Iraq and Libya, precedents loathed by Moscow, which is bent on preventing a repetition in Syria."⁸² This move ended the *de facto* no-fly safe-zone Turkey secured since June 2012 and empowered the PYD forces.⁸³ It also provided Turkey an opportunity to test its NATO allies as the airstrikes violated the Turkish airspace. Upon Turkey's request, Brussels had a meeting and condemned Russia's incursion. Turkish PM Davutoğlu warned against the risk of conflict escalation in Syria. The US Secretary of State Kerry, on the other hand, warned that the incident could have led to Turkey shooting down

79 Lumpkin, "Obama's Uncertain Path Amid Syria Bloodshed".

80 Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. and Russia Reach Deal to Destroy Syria's Chemical Arms," *New York Times*, 14 September 2013.

81 International Crisis Group, "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within a Struggle", *Middle East Report*, No.136, 2013, p.2.

82 International Crisis Group, "Russia's Choice in Syria," *Middle East Report*, No.47, 2016, p.4.

83 Gencer Özcan, "Rusya'nın Suriye Bunalımına Müdahalesi ve Türkiye", Gencer Özcan, Evren Balta and Burç Beşgül (Eds.), *Kuşku ile Komşuluk: Türkiye-Rusya İlişkilerinde Değişen Dinamikler*, İstanbul, *İletişim*, 2017, p.284.

the Russian plane.⁸⁴ In January 2015, NATO agreed to deploy the Spanish Patriot defense missiles in the south-eastern city of Adana along with the German and American batteries, stationed in Kahramanmaraş and Gaziantep respectively.⁸⁵ It was stated that the Patriots were there for defense purpose under NATO and not targeting Russia. By October, Germany and the US withdrew Patriot batteries and Spain declared that it would not act alone.

Turkey's NATO-allies engaged in the Syrian conflict without an active engagement corresponding the demands of Turkey.⁸⁶ Thereafter, Turkey focused on bringing its case to international platforms like G20, the EU and NATO. It underlined the humanitarian aspect of the conflict as well as its security aspect. On the humanitarian side, Turkey emphasized the need for a safe-zone and financial aid for the Syrian refugees. It stressed that Russian incursions were a direct violation of Turkey's and NATO's airspace. As of 2015, the Turkish policy-makers, diplomatic, academic and military circles started questioning the sustainability of the US retrenchment.⁸⁷ Hasan Basri Yalçın, the Director of Strategy Research (SETA) discussed options that could help Turkey to change US retrenchment in the Middle East and prevent Turkey's abandonment.⁸⁸ He argued that in case of a confrontation with Russia, the US would be forced to keep its NATO commitments to Turkey as the otherwise would mean 'the fall of NATO'. He also stated that rather than being the 'loyal strategic ally', Turkey can turn the asymmetric alliance relations to its advantage by taking drastic steps, like forming an alliance with Russia and Iran⁸⁹ He further noted that Turkey should show the US that the change of regional balance of power in favor of Russia and Iran would mostly hurt the US interests.⁹⁰ He suggested that Turkey must 'take bold actions' immediately to 'entangle and drag the US in Syria' as this is the less-risky and cost-effective way of dealing with the PYD.⁹¹

In G20 meeting, President Erdoğan emphasized Turkey's uneasiness regarding the Kurdish corridor formed due to the Russian intervention and declared Turkish determination to act unilaterally if required.⁹² Once again, despite the talks of a land operation, Turkish arguments for a safe-zone and US-led allied military intervention were overruled. The situation in Syria evolved against Turkish interests as the international support given to the PYD/PKK increased. Meanwhile, Russia increased its airstrikes over Aleppo-Latakia benefiting from the conditions after the ISIS Paris attacks in November 2015. In this atmosphere, on 24 November, the Russian Su-24M aircraft violating Turkish airspace in the Turkish-Syria border was shot down. Turkey's PM Davutoğlu stated that the Russian jets were shot down under his command and underlined

84 Andrew Rettman, "Turkey and US Say Russian Jets Could be Shot Down", *EU Observer*, 6 October 2015, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/130566> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

85 "Spain Joins Patriot Missile Defence Mission in Turkey", *NATO News Room*, 26 January 2015 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_116890.htm (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

86 Aaron Methda and Jeff Schogol, "U.S. Pulls F-15 Fighter Jets from Turkey", *AirForce Time*, 16 December 2015, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2015/12/16/u-s-pulls-f-15-fighter-jets-from-turkey/> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

87 Hasan Basri Yalçın, "ABD'nin Suriye Stratejisi", Hasan Basri Yalçın and Burhanettin Duran (Eds.), *Küresel ve Bölgesel Aktörlerin Suriye Stratejisi*, İstanbul, Seta Kitapları, 2016, p.42-43.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., p.47-49.

90 Ibid., p.47.

91 Ibid., p.52.

92 Özcan, "Rusya'nın Suriye Bunalımına Müdahalesi ve Türkiye", p.285.

that “the Turkish airspace that was subjected to the violations is also NATO’s airspace.”⁹³ Although it is not possible to know the decision making processes that led to the shooting of the Russian jet, in the light of the strategic advices discussed above, as Özcan notes, one can rightfully ask the question that whether Turkey shot the Russian jet as the last resort to entangle the US that it could not convince diplomatically neither for the regime change nor for the safe-zone in Syria.⁹⁴ This bold strategic move did not serve that purpose, if the aim was to entangle the US. Despite PM Davutoğlu’s statement,⁹⁵ neither NATO nor the US desired to be part of the increasing tension between Turkey and Russia.⁹⁶ As a response, Russia deployed its S-400 missiles to Latakia and further strengthened its position in Syria.

On February 2016, the YPG, which enjoyed US backing as well as Russia’s support in Afrin started to make an advance eastward.⁹⁷ Turkey, fearing that the YPG could stretch from Jarabulus to Afrin, demanded the US to act swiftly. However, once again Turkey’s concerns over the corridor that YPG was establishing were ignored. On 9 August 2016, President Erdoğan talked with President Putin regarding the Kurdish corridor. President Putin assured that Russia would not object to Turkey’s plans and would prevent Assad’s military from countering the offensive. On 24 August 2016, Turkey started Euphrates Shield Operation with the members of the Free Syrian Army to drive away ISIL and US-backed YPG militia from its border with Syria. The abandonment in the Euphrates Shield strengthened Turkey’s mistrust towards the US. Turkish FM Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu underlined that as long as the mistrust between the two countries continued and Russia’s support stood with Turkey, it seemed impossible for Ankara and Washington to act together on critical issues such as Syria.⁹⁸ Having been convinced that it was abandoned by its Western allies, Turkey set its diplomatic relations with Russia on track with an apology for the shooting of the fighter jet. On 20 December 2016, Turkey, Russia and Iran agreed to revitalize the political peace process to end the Syrian conflict with the Moscow Declaration. All parties reiterated “their full respect for sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as multi-ethnic, multi-religious, non-sectarian, democratic and secular state.”⁹⁹ The Moscow Declaration excluding the US signaled the change of JDP’s policy of regime change in Syria and Turkey’s abandonment of the US in favor of Russia.

93 Ibid., p.288.

94 Ibid., p.293.

95 Ibid., p.288.

96 Robin Emmott, “Exclusive: NATO Agrees Turkey Air Defense Package, Seeks ‘Predictability’”, *Reuters*, 18 December 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-nato-exclusive/exclusive-nato-agrees-turkey-air-defense-package-seeks-predictability-idUSKBN0U123520151218> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

97 Deniz Zeyrek, “How did ‘Operation Olive Grove’ Turned into ‘Operation Euphrates Shield’?”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 29 January 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/deniz-zeyrek/how-did-operation-olive-grove-turn-into-operation-euphrates-shield-126422> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

98 Ibid.

99 Russian Foreign Ministry, “Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey on Agreed Steps to Revitalize the Political Process to End the Syrian Conflict”, 20 December 2016, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2573489 (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

Concluding Remarks

The Syrian conflict turned into a dance of entanglement between once strategic partners, the US and Turkey and ended up with mutual abandonment. As Walt suggested, the Obama administration used its 'freedom of action' for rehabilitating the US economy and international status by following a retrenchment strategy. Having decentralized the Middle East from its security agenda, the US administration avoided to be dragged into another military conflict in the region that it deemed as non-vital for the US interests. The US consistently refused to be entangled by its allies in the region that pressured the US by using moral, legal and reputational arguments to uphold its alliance commitments.¹⁰⁰ The US responded to these by sidestepping costly commitments, diplomatically deterring the adversaries, dissuading allies from initiating and/or escalating the conflict, inserting loopholes in the alliance agreements or sometimes by just ignoring its alliance commitments.

As the US avoided entanglement and abandoned its long term strategic partner and regional and NATO ally -Turkey in the Syrian conflict, Turkey became more entangled in the region. The Turkish foreign policy objectives based on the regime change and establishment of a new regional order led to its self-entrapment in the Syrian quagmire. The more Turkey engaged in the Syrian conflict with expectation that the US would intervene, the more it was entrapped with problems like the flow of the refugees and the creation of a Kurdish canton with the support of the US and Russia. As Özcan puts it, Syrian conflict has become "what Turkey make of it" and ironically Turkey ended up allying itself with Russia and Iran.¹⁰¹ The mutual abandonment of once strategic partners reinforced Russia's regional and global role.

The real challenge in Syria for Turkey is now to prevent the US, Russian and European backed PYD/YPG from establishing a Kurdish state in its southeastern border. Since coming to the office, the Trump administration did not change the US policies and strange partnerships continued and deepened over Syria. On the one hand, the US damaged its strategic partnership with Turkey for building an asymmetric alliance with the YPG (a non-state actor and terrorist network which Turkey considered as a national security threat) against the ISIL.¹⁰² On the other hand, a NATO country, Turkey partners with historically and ideologically adversaries of the US, namely Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹⁰³ In the meantime, there is an international coalition fighting against the ISIL in Syria. In 2017, in Sochi agreement, Russia and Turkey agreed to establish a demilitarized zone in the Idlib region without the US.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, Turkey decided to buy S-400 air-defense system from Russia to lessen its dependency on the US and NATO's Patriot system. This purchase not only shows the rapprochement with Russia but also Turkey's tendency to balance one global power with another for its interests.

100 Michael Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of US Defense Pacts", *International Security*, Vol.39, No.4, 2015, p.7-48.

101 Özcan, "If the Crisis is What We Make of It", p.189.

102 Sedat Ergin, "What Are the Reasons Behind The US's Last Decision On The PKK?", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 9 November 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/sedat-ergin/what-are-the-reasons-behind-the-uss-last-decision-on-the-pkk-138704> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

103 Sedat Ergin, "Turkish-Russian Cooperation, From Foe to Partnership", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 22 September 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/sedat-ergin/turkish-russian-cooperation-from-foe-to-partnership-137096> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

104 Ibid.

On 20 January 2018, Turkey carried out an Operation Olive Branch in Syria. Turkish FM Çavuşoğlu stated it was for “correcting for America’s flaws and laying the groundwork for a sustainable peace”¹⁰⁵ and to weaken the YPG in Afrin. On 12 December 2018, President Erdoğan gave signals of another military operation on Northeast Syria while the US declared its concerns for uncoordinated military operation.¹⁰⁶ The last days of December 2018 came with stunning news that the US would withdraw its forces in Syria. It was reported that on phone call to discuss possible Turkish operation in the Northeast Syria, President Erdoğan convinced Trump that the almost complete defeat of ISIS forces rendered the US forces in Syria unnecessary and that Turkey can deal with the remaining ISIS forces.¹⁰⁷ Contrary to the views of his security advisors, President Trump pledged to withdraw the US forces via his Twitter account by stating that the US does not wish to be the policeman of the Middle East and spend trillions of dollars to do unappreciated work for others.¹⁰⁸ Although the withdrawal is on the agenda of President Trump, the stalling on the timetable for the protection of the Kurdish zone during the coming Turkish operation seems like to be another matter of conflict in the bilateral relations.¹⁰⁹

President Trump’s call for focusing on ‘America First’ by withdrawing from Syria and delegating fighting against the ISIS to regional powers is consistent with the Obama administration’s retrenchment strategy. Considering that the President Trump is facing a governmental shutdown due to his demand of \$5bn to fund building border wall, the decision for withdrawal seems palatable for the domestic audience. Similarly, President Erdoğan will be credited in the coming municipality elections for the US withdrawal, if happens. What lies ahead in terms of the US-Turkish relations seems uncertain because of unipolarity and President Trump’s personality. It is, however, certain that under unipolarity, the strategic alliance commitments and institutions that are the remnants of bipolarity are no longer reliable for regional allies to assume risky regional restructuring roles. It should be kept in mind that the unipole is not a reliable and predictable partner and can easily abandon its regional allies for its changing domestic and foreign policy interests.

105 Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, “The Meaning of the Olive Branch”, *Foreign Policy*, 5 April 2018.

106 “US Voices ‘grave concern’ Over Turkey’s Planned Syria Operation,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, 13 December 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-voices-grave-concern-over-turkeys-planned-syria-operation-139682> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

107 Matthew Lee and Susannah George, “Trump Call with Turkish Leader Led to US Pullout from Syria”, *The Associated Press*, 21 December 2018, <https://www.apnews.com/ec2ed217357048ff998225a31534df12> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).

108 @realDonaldTrump, 20 December 2018, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump> (Accessed on 20 December 2018).

109 “Syria Withdrawal Slows Down Amid Fare-up as Trump ‘Wants to Protect Kurds’”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 3 January 2019, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syria-withdrawal-slows-down-amid-flare-up-as-trump-wants-to-protect-kurds-140224> (Accessed on 03 April 2019).