

Turkey's Security Policy towards Northern Syria and Iraq amid Regional Chaos (2011-2019)*

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Abstract

This study seeks to explain Turkey's policies towards Iraq and Northern Syria in the context of regional geopolitical competition. The paper first explains the structure of the regional competitive system in the Middle East by taking into consideration the role and impact of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Secondly, by focusing on the strategic goals of the regional actors, the paper contextualizes the logic of strategic rationality behind Turkey's military and political engagements in Syria and Iraq. Finally, the research is addressing Turkey's strategy for settling the Syrian crisis. One of the most important threats against Turkey during this period has been the emergence of the YPG, the Syrian offshoot of the PKK terrorist organization, which became the central component of the counter-terrorism policy of the US against ISIS. With the deepening of the crises in Syria and then in Iraq, as well as the failed military coup in Turkey in 2016, the government has changed its strategy and has consolidated itself as one of the most effective players in the Syrian crisis. The overall assessment of this research is that Turkey has managed the emerged threats in northern Syria and Iraq by pursuing a twin pillar policy and relying on diplomatic and especially hard power capacities and eventually, has become a pole in resolving the Syrian crisis since 2016 when gradually moved away from the Western coalition.

Keywords

Turkey, international system, regional chaos, Iraq, Syria.

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Introduction

The Middle East has been in turmoil since 2011 with numerous religious and ethnic unrests so that domestic stability has been lost, and the regional order has collapsed. It could be claimed that the conventional nation-state system maintained regional stability with some fluctuations until 2011. For instance, the Iraq-Iran War in the 1980s and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the 1980s and 1990s ended up with a balance of power in the region. One of the essentials of regional stability was to maintain the security of the institution of the state, which is necessary to maintain domestic security. In post-2003, the fall of Iraq's state structure led to an imbalance of power in the region in favour of other regional powers. Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the US strategic preferences in the context of the rebuilding of the Iraqi state, the central component of the region changed significantly. The fall of the governments in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, as well as the turmoil that led to the emergence of failed states in Syria, Yemen and Iraq after 2011, have led to the loss of stability in the Middle East. Subsequently, the regional security that was based mainly on a strong state structure almost collapsed, and the region entered a new hybrid disorder in which the decline of the state structure, the proliferation of non-state armed groups and contested territorial space became the central pillars (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş). Eventually, the entire region as a system underwent political and territorial collapse, and governments like Syria, Iraq and Yemen lost their control over some parts of their territory (Fawcett).

One of the basic pillars of stability is the provision of security. With increasing street riots throughout the region, the erosion of power centres within the states in the region paved the way for a series of proxy wars. Imbalance in the power relations in the region and domestic turmoil led to the emergence of terrorist groups and the collapse of domestic security entities in some countries such as Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Iraq. These groups concentrated their activities on the destabilization of weak states, which caused regional anarchy. The attractive slogans of the radical groups led to a flood of fundamentalists joining terrorist organizations in the region (Salem 11-14).

Kenneth Waltz (111) resembles states to organizations and believes that organizations have at least two goals: "to get something done and to maintain

themselves as organizations”. Many activities of organizations as well as those of governments tend towards the second goal. In political decision-making, the first and most important issue is to ensure the continuity and maintenance of the organization. Governments, like organizations, have a duty to protect themselves.

With this assumption by neorealists, Turkish foreign policy has been under significant challenges since the regional order has collapsed following the Arab uprisings. Firstly, Turkey's domestic security was destabilized by the PKK and ISIS simultaneously. The weakening of the state structure in Syria and Iraq and the change in nature and tactics of the armed groups targeted Turkey's domestic stability. Secondly, as the Syrian civil war transformed into a regional proxy war, Turkey's border security was seriously threatened due to the decline of state structure and the mass mobilization of FTFs (Foreign Terrorist Fighters) from Europe to Syria. As part of the regional competition articulated around the Syrian civil war, Turkey's regional strategic orientation was disrupted since the security competition among the regional countries had increased. Thirdly, not only the military involvement of the US in Syria by supporting the YPG as the main local partners in the fight against ISIS but also the Russian military support to the Syrian government dramatically changed Turkey's security and strategic landscape and paved the way to the emergence of a new security understanding and strategies vis-à-vis Northern Syria and Iraq. Hence, the present article aimed to respond to the following research questions: What was Turkey's strategy for confronting extremist groups? Is the structure of the international system suitable for the manoeuvres of regional actors like Turkey? How has Turkey managed the crises amid systemic chaos? Thus, the present study examines Turkey's changing security policies toward Northeast Syria and Iraq by taking into consideration the neorealist framework of analysis.

Literature Review

As the regional dynamics are dependent on an international hierarchy, scholars are in consensus on studying the Middle East in light of neorealism (Hinnebusch). A review of the academic studies on the Middle East and specifically Turkish security issues show that Turkish policymakers are keen on repelling the security threats arising from neighbour regions. Manhoff's (11-13) report sheds light on Turkey's pragmatic and relative success in its

policies towards all its opponent groups in Syria after 2016. In this line, some authors such as Yüksel and Van Veen (2019) believe that Turkey has not been successful in managing the Syrian crisis.

McCowan (7-9) argues that the PKK is involved in both the Syrian and Arab wars, and numerous credible sources indicate that the PKK has established the YPG¹ and the YPG-led SDF². He has observed that the PKK and its satellite groups in Syria are terrorist organizations and in this regard, he believes that the conflict between Turkey and the PKK could turn into a wider regional conflict. Orton lays out the PKK's forgotten dimensions and explains that the group, with its communist ideas, has failed to keep itself in line with changes in international politics. He mentions that the PKK was accused of crimes against humanity in the 1990s for violent acts. Orton's report broadly highlights the PKK's threat to the national security of Turkey and the region and the PKK's proliferation in various groups in the region as well as its destructive activities in Western countries (Orton). Some others believe that US support for the PKK and its satellite entities in Syria has endangered Turkey's vital interests and made it difficult to resolve the Syrian war. Therefore, Turkey is trying to prevent the dominance of the PKK-related groups over Syria (Ataman and Özdemir 17-18). Oztig sheds light on the border security and failures of the Turkish non-intervention policy, and then he comes to hold the belief that this policy caused several issues in national security. He believes that following these troubles, the Turkish policymakers launched their first operation named Euphrates Shield in 2016 (121-122).

Methodology

Researching Turkish policy in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Syria, requires a multidimensional perspective. Similar to other conflicts, the wars in Syria and Iraq after the years 2011 and 2014, respectively, had national and international reasons. However, the present qualitative research focuses on the reflections that the conflicts in Syria and Iraq had on the security of Turkey. The primary and secondary data were collected to evaluate the crisis in a chronological manner and as neorealism attributes significant priority to the security of states, it was selected for this study. To study these complexities, a theoretical analysis is inevitable for an in-depth understanding of the structure of the Middle East subsystem. Since systemic

developments have disrupted regional equations, a theoretical study of the regional system provides an understandable framework for analyzing the complexities of policymaking in the Middle East.

Neorealism and Security

Depending on different periods, the survival strategies of the states have shown variation. Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome followed security policies in accordance with their geography and territorial conditions. The contemporary security issue is one of the main debates in international relations discourse, and the developments of the international system in terms of security and survival are still key questions for international relations scholars: How do states perceive foreign threats? How do they respond to threats?

Kenneth Waltz as one of the leading scholars of neorealism, emphasizes the importance of security in state decision making, noting the following:

In anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit, and power? Because power is a means and not an end, states prefer to join the weaker of two coalitions. They cannot let power, a possibly useful means, become the end they pursue. The goal the system encourages them to seek is security. (Waltz 126)

Thus, he argues that security serves as a roadmap for states in the international arena and that the actions of governments stem from their concern for security and survival. Following Waltz, Baldwin (21) mentions that “no theory of international politics emphasizes security more than neorealism, which posits it as the primary motivation of states”. Moreover, Kocs (1994) argues that the basic belief of the neorealist theory is that states obtain the power to strengthen their security. In other words, as believed by Waltz, security is the end goal of states and the lack of balance between security and power could give birth to increasing threats to the state’s stability and survival.

A specific feature of the international system is that states are the main actors at the macro level and within subsystems and international institutions are not sufficiently independent to resolve important international issues such

as peace and security. In the case of a system collapse, the state system will reconstruct it. As described by Mearsheimer:

There is a powerful tendency for states to imitate the successful practices of other states in the system. It also makes sense to identify balancing as a strategy that states would want to imitate, although it is not clear why states need to be socialized to balance against aggressors [or any major threat]. The structure of the system alone should compel states to balance against dangerous rivals [or any big danger against survival] or rely on other states to contain them. (Mearsheimer 166)

Accordingly, states are responsible for their security in an anarchical and restrictive system and their security policies mean a reduction in the security of competitors. Therefore, the chain of the uncertainty of the units reduces the security at the system level. In this regard, although the dynamics of the system limit the units, the behaviour of the units (big and even middle powers) also affects it, which is the focus of this study.

Regional Power Structure in the Middle East

Looking into the international system and its structure, one can see that the contemporary Middle East is an unstable part of the international system. The conflict in Syria makes a direct impact on Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, although Saudi Arabia does not have the same territorial threats as Turkey and Iran. Since Turkey did not support non-governmental groups until the year 2011, Turkish authorities had to use the army directly to enforce their tactics in Syria and Iraq. Following the collapse of the balance of power in the Middle East during the post-2011 period, the main three countries started to fight indirectly against each other. Thus, the imbalance of power gave great powers the possibility to enter the region and to follow their interests, which were against the regional actors. The chaos caused national issues in Turkey (e.g. the PKK's ceasefire breakdown in 2015) and in Saudi Arabia (e.g. demonstrations in the Shia-settled region since 2011 and the war against Yemeni groups since 2015).

Strong competition between the three countries was accompanied by regional troubles which intensified day after day since 2011. By using the power vacuum in the region, the PYD³ established YPG and YPJ⁴ in the

years 2011 and 2013, respectively. During that time, Turkish authorities somewhat underestimated the reality of PKK-oriented extremist groups or did not estimate that it might become an urgent issue in the near future, although, they protested the PKK's measures. It seems that during the battle for Ain al-Arab in 2014, the Turkish officials underestimated the YPG crisis and the PKK-supported activities as a key factor in Northern Syria and the Syrian war as a whole. Similarly, after the occupation of Mosul by ISIS in June 2014, the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) took advantage of the opportunity to obtain their goals and emphasized the referendum. Prior to this crisis, Turkey, like the other regional actors, underestimated the KRG's tendency for separation.

Turkey's Regional Policy during the Rule of the AK Party⁵

The Turkish foreign policy led by the AK Party in the 2000s was based on the goal to establish a stable and peaceful region, in which Turkey would be able to base its economy on a regional system. By usage of Turkey's geostrategic location, the AK Party attempted to empower Turkey by investing in its economy, military and technology. Economic progress helped the Party to implement its program, which was aimed to make Turkey a leading actor at regional and international levels. The period beginning in the year 2003 consists of three main periods of foreign policy: the first period is from 2003 to 2011 (Arab Uprising), the second is from 2011 to 2016 (failed coup attempt) and the last one is the period after 2016. The main issue in the first period was the development of the AK Party's political agenda and the formation of foreign policy in accordance with its discourse. This was the strategic depth doctrine of Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was the chief foreign policy advisor of the government and who later became foreign minister. During this period, Turkey sought to introduce itself as a model in the region.

The AK Party even endeavoured to resolve the long-standing problems that Turkey had with some of its neighbours. In January 2004, Syria's President Bashar al-Assad had an official visit to Ankara. With this endeavour, Bashar al-Assad accepted the Turkish rule on the Hatay Province in 2005 (Phillips 36) and Prime Minister Erdoğan made a retaliatory visit to Damascus in December 2004 (Damla Aras 44).

In this context, Turkey used the concept of proactive diplomacy, which resulted in new moves in the Turkish foreign policy due to their desire to mediate in some crises, such as the Palestinian-Israeli, Syrian-Israeli, Iranian-Western and Bosnian-Serbian conflicts. This was a new and updated version of Davutoğlu's strategic depth (Yeşiltaş and Balcı 12). This period of proactive foreign policy was characterized by engagement in the region, as well as direct non-intervention policy in the regional wars. In the pre-election program of 2011, Turkey was named as a "Leader State" that would become a "Global Leader". Accordingly, Turkish foreign policy focused on achieving those goals to become one of the leading powers of the world in the 21st century (Jenkins).

The catastrophic Middle East crisis persuaded Turkey to change its priorities in the region and to alter its policy to adopt a non-intervention tactic based on politically supporting opposition groups by asking for reformation in some countries or leaving the elites in some others. Turkey intended to support the opposition to rapidly resolve the crises in some countries and prevent future crises (Yeşiltaş and Balcı 12). These changes and the continuing war in the region caused serious problems in the Turkish foreign policy, especially in relationships with superpowers, neighbours, and regional actors.

Although Turkey tried to stabilize security in the region by means of active diplomacy, given the war in the region was multifaceted, this policy did not help to settle the crises. At this stage, Turkish policymakers sought to develop their policies as a middle power to support the opposition in countries such as Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Libya. As a result of some troubles, such as the inability of non-state actors to build a long-term policy and the lack of hope to unite them in the future and build a coordination system, this attempt was not successful.

The third phase starts with a failed coup attempt in July 2016 that posed direct threats to the Turkish sovereignty and national security. Turkey applied a defensive policy based on an aggressive tactic. As the defensive realist approach "sees states as focused on maintaining security by balancing others and essentially preserving the status quo" (Blanton and Kegly 27), Turkey used defensive principles for defeating threats to its vital interests. In this respect, the Turkish policymakers decided to minimize losses. The

regional crises gave birth to destabilization in the domestic policy of Turkey as terrorist attacks increased, especially after 2015. To minimize these issues, Turkish politicians have tried to deal with them on two levels.

Turkish Twin Pillars for Addressing the Crises

Given that Turkey encountered crises in foreign policy in the post-2011 period, the government attempted to resolve these issues with a series of measures. In 2015, there was a risk of a war between Turkey and Russia, however, with a pragmatic approach, Turkish officials gradually resolved the issue. In any case, Turkey has played a significant role, at two levels, in creating a lasting status in Syria and Iraq in partnership with regional and global powers.

Pillar One: Regional Cooperation

Iran, Iraq, and Syria were inevitable components of crisis management for Turkey. In that stage particularly, cooperation with Iran yielded constructive results because of its effective influence in Syria and Iraq. Like Turkey, Iran has been subject to common threats in Syria and Iraq and, hence, tended to cooperate with Turkey. There is historical heritage in the relationship between the two countries, which stems from their old history, especially from the rivalry between the Empires of Ottomans and Safavid since the 16th century. Besides, the simultaneous collapse of the two empires in the 1920s led to scepticism and the idea of struggling against the great powers in the foreign policy of the two states, especially against Russia and the West (Hentov 21). Therefore, with such a mindset, Turkey initiated negotiations with some partners at the regional level, the results of which have been constructive in the management of crises.

In Iraq

Iraq was the most important country in which Turkey was able to resolve the vital risk to its sovereignty with close cooperation with Iran and the federal government of Iraq. Between 1991 and 2017, the Kurdistan Regional Government in the North of Iraq internationalized the Kurdish issue with the strong support of Western actors and in order to obtain a strong position to separate from Iraq, underwent three main periods: infrastructure construction (1991-2003), fast development (2003-2014), and the waiting process for independence (2014-2017). During these three

stages, the regional government did not display a strong reaction against the armed groups like the PKK, the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, the Komala⁶, the PJAK⁷, the KDPI⁸ and other groups which nested in its territory.

Prior to this, Ankara signed the Border Security and Cooperation Agreement with Baghdad in 1983 as part of the fight against terrorism in the north of Iraq. Moreover, the comprehensive security agreement that was signed between Ankara and Baghdad in 2007 emerged as a cooperation platform against the PKK and affiliated terror organizations in Iraq. The agreement meant that Turkey could eliminate security threats from Iraqi territories through operations previously approved by the Iraqi government (Semin 2015). Before the KRG crisis, the main obstacle to regional cooperation was the competition between Iran and Turkey, which led to the strengthening of the PKK and other illegal associated groups. For the first time, the two countries perceived the KRG referendum as a real and vital threat. Prior to the referendum, Iran and Turkey did not expect the KRG to have a claim to separation. Subsequent to the last referendum for independence in September 2017, President Erdoğan clearly explained this as follows:

We did not expect Barzani to go wrong like this until the last moment, so we were wrong. In a period when our relations are at the best level in history, this decision was taken without any prior consultation; thus, it is obviously betraying our country. (Mehmet 2019)

Turkey's rapprochement with Iran and Iraq Federal State was an important step to settle the KRG referendum crisis. As previously mentioned, any separatism in Iraq would spread across the whole region, especially to Turkey and Iran. With a pragmatic and realistic choice, Turkish officials managed the crisis effectively and took advantage of the regional alliance against the new disaster. Thus, with the adoption of a soft approach, such as the suspension of flights and the imposition of economic sanctions by Iraq, Turkey and Iran, the KRG was forced to withdraw its claims in October 2017. Needless to say, this crisis has been temporarily resolved and the regional government officials are waiting for another opportunity.

In Syria

A similar threat against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Turkey has emerged in northern Syria in 2011. From 1980 until 1998, Damascus allowed the PKK to operate training camps in Syria and Lebanon's Beqaa Valley against Turkey (McCowan 7, Orhan 2014). Therefore, the Syrian government actively supported the PKK and played a crucial role in the survival of the PKK's communist ideology and like-minded groups. Therefore, it can be claimed that the Syrian government has been raising a group against its territorial integrity, and today, the government is impotent to expel the PKK, its Syrian branch the PYD and associated groups from northern Syria due to the US support of them.

The PYD was founded in Syria by former members of the PKK in 2003. From 2012 onwards, the group has gradually captured a wide territory owing to the weakness of the Assad government and the lack of power. In November 2013, they announced the Northern Syrian territory as an autonomous region (Natonalia 2013), and then an autonomous federation. These provocations showed that the regional actors were unable to predict such an event and failed to prevent extremist groups to form and act. Today, the PYD acts freely after receiving support from Western actors in the name of cooperation against ISIS. Enjoying this unprecedented support, the co-chair of the PYD threatened Turkey, Iran, and Iraq in 2017 by emphasizing that they were, "...against the threats of the regional powers, including Turkey, Iran and Syrian regime against the will of the Kurdish people" (Arafat 2017).

When the referendum took place in northern Iraq, the leaders of the PYD said they would fight against any attacks on Peshmarga of KRG⁹. Salih Muslim, head of the group said, "despite the disagreements, if Kurdish people needed help, they will offer assistance and the YPG stands with Iraqi Kurds against any aggression" (Hamidi 2017). This statement shows that the PYD, the YPG, and the PKK have the same goals and will join any front against regional actors in the future.

There are highly convincing documents which prove that the PYD and the PKK are fighting toward the same goal. An American journalist, David Enders, reports that in 2012, about 2,000 PKK elements moved

into northern Syria and had taken control of a border crossing to the Iraqi Kurdish region. When he left Syria and was crossing into Iraq near Fish Khabur, he wrote that the PKK militia was actively helping Syrian Kurdish refugees to cross the border (Caves 21). This report shows that the PKK is taking advantage of the power vacuum in Syria and Iraq and enjoys unlimited freedom in its operations in the entire Kurdish region in Syria and Iraq.

Rapprochement with Iran and Russia has enabled Turkey to reach its goals in Syria. Only a month after the failed coup in Turkey in 2016, the Turkish army was able to stop the advances of the PKK-affiliated groups in northern Syria by cutting off the eastern and western regions of Northern Syria with Operation Euphrates Shield (Özel 142-145). The next step was taken with the Operation Olive Branch between January and March 2018. In this operation, despite all the opposition from all sides, especially from Western states and the media, Turkey controlled the Afrin Canton in northern Syria, which was seized by the PYD and its allies (Usta 2018). This is one of the three cantons claimed by the PKK-affiliated groups, who planned to enter the Mediterranean Sea in the future by capturing the rest of northern Syria. The last step, which was taken with Operation Peace Spring, enabled Turkey to control a 4000-kilometre-square area jointly with Russia (Avundukluoglu 2019) from 9 to 28 October 2019 (Uras 2019). In consequence, the PYD's ambition of establishing an autonomous region across the southern borders of Turkey was severely damaged, and in this way, Turkey prevented a geopolitical change from taking place in the region.

Pillar Two: Dealing With Great Powers

To overcome the security threats from the Syrian territories, the Turkish officials engaged in intensive talks with Russia and the United States. Negotiations with the US did not yield conclusive results due to the support the US authorities gave to the PYD and its branches, however, close relations with Russia brought the Syrian war close to a settlement. The three operations by Turkey in northern Syria proved that Turkey is keen on securing its borders and offsetting separatism in the region. During this period, the main point that emerged was that Turkish security concerns did not overlap with the geopolitical aims of the great powers and any one-sided step requires huge cost.

The United States

Kyle Orton argues that the YPG influenced the Western volunteers by the usage of a communist ideology; hence, a high number of volunteers joined the group and therefore the PYD and the YPG would be a threat to the West in the future. He highlights that “in 2017, there were 27 terrorist attacks by anarchist and left-wing groups in Greece, Italy, and Spain, a sharp increase over the previous year. These extremist groups continued to engage in street-level violence and recruitment efforts online and on university campuses” (Orton 126). As a result, the PKK or the PYD would impact global stability, however, Turkey is making efforts to persuade the Western allies to quit their support of the PKK and its satellite groups throughout the region.

The PYD played a dual game on the ground in the Syrian conflict. From the group's perspective, the US has to help them, as the US does not have a proxy group in the conflict zones in the Syrian war. As a result of secret negotiations, on one hand, they received strong support from the US, nonetheless, on the other hand, the group kept its relations with Russia as a Syrian government defender. As it is transparent, the PKK and its satellites did not have a fixed preference in getting foreign states' support and they were helped by both American and Russian forces against their enemies. This suggests that the US and Russia supported the group against Turkey and all other states that these groups are fighting against them. However, by the usage of diplomacy and negotiation instruments, alongside the military steps, Turkey has managed the PKK and its associate groups in Syria relatively. Nevertheless, the United States and Russia still have not accepted the PYD linkage with the PKK. Turkey and the US had different strategic views regarding the Syrian crisis, and it was one of the reasons for disputes between them. The US did not firm a strict stance against the Assad government after observing the determined support he received from Russia and Iran. Moreover, after ISIS appeared in 2013, the priorities of the US were changed (Allison 795-796). In this regard, the US Secretary of State confirmed in Ankara that the US would not try to overthrow Assad anymore (O'Connor).

As afore-mentioned, the PKK and its Syrian satellites were posing the main survival threat against Turkish vital interests, and this was not of concern to the Turkish NATO allies and even to its neighbours. In the crisis between

Turkey and Iraq after attacks by ISIS in Iraq, the US has backed Iraq and did not support Turkish official arguments (Barkey 32). The trouble was that Turkey's regional security concerns did not matter much to the US and therefore, Turkey had to cooperate and strengthen its relations with Russia and its allies. Turkey's relationship with the US deteriorated after the failed coup in Turkey in 2016 (Arango and Yeginsu 2016), and thus, Turkey headed toward Russia. These fluctuations are reflected in the Middle East crises and increased the role of Russia and the US in the region.

In the end, Turkish policymakers managed the crisis and persuaded the US to suppress the armed groups near the Turkish border. In 2018, the US accepted to withdraw from northern Syria. After a phone call with President Erdoğan, the US President Donald Trump said, "We discussed ISIS, our mutual involvement in Syria, and the slow and highly coordinated pullout of U.S. troops from the area. After many years, they are coming home" (Politico). Although the US did not withdraw from Syria at that time, it seemed that Turkey received the US's approval in its negotiations. Although Trump stopped the withdrawal process after the protests by the US government and the Parliament, the two countries had several negotiations in the aftermath of that decision. Again in October 2019, the US president decided to enforce the operation of withdrawing from Syria, leaving the north of Syria and agreeing to launch a safe zone. Trump announced:

The Kurds fought with us, but were paid massive amounts of money and equipment to do so. They have been fighting Turkey for decades. I held off this fight for almost 3 years, but it is time for us to get out of these ridiculous Endless Wars, many of them tribal, and bring our soldiers home... Turkey, Europe, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Russia and the Kurds will now have to figure the situation out, and what they want to do with the captured ISIS fighters in their neighbourhood. (*The Guardian*)

Although the extent of the US exit is still unclear, it does indicate that Turkey understands the importance of the presence of superpowers and talks with them to resolve its security problems. Trump's tweet is exactly a production of this new policy shift by Turkish officials.

Russia

Looking through the Russian Middle Eastern strategy, Putin sought to restore Russia as a Great Power and for this sort, the strategic goal of Russian authorities in the Middle East was to defeat the Western coalition policy. To gain political influence, Putin attempted to consolidate Russia as a rival to the United States. In this line, Turkey is a key actor for Russia in the Middle East and the Mediterranean field (Sadri Alibabalu and Sarkhanov 98), both economically and strategically and due to this, Russia prefers to maintain its relationship with Turkey in terms of arms and energy (oil and gas) sales, as well as nuclear reactors.

The January 2000 Foreign Policy Concept defined Moscow's priorities in the Middle East: "to restore and strengthen positions, particularly economic ones" in the new age. Also, the doctrine highlights the importance of developing ties with anti-American actors in the region to compete with the US like Iran and Syria, and pro-American actors in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia (Borshchevskaya). In this framework, Turkey takes the advantage of the competition between Russia and the US and attempts to balance the USA by using a two-column game and getting closer to Russia in the Middle East.

Needless to say, the Turkish relationship with Russia is more sophisticated and even after the shutting down of the Russian bomber plane on 24 November 2015, the relationship between the two countries was severed. Russia allowed the PYD to open an office in Moscow in February 2016 (Oliphant). Prior to the plane accident, Russia was not sure of its position about the opening of the Turkish Peoples' Democratic Party's (HDP) office in Moscow. In this regard, Turkish ex-diplomat Murat Bilhan, who has served in Moscow, believes that "the PKK had an office in Russia and from time to time it received assistance and support from Russia in the 1990s; Russia never considered PKK as a terrorist organization" (Jones).

The severe acts by Russia showed that Moscow was trying to use the Kurdish card against Turkey. Regardless, with pragmatic policy, Turkey managed to persuade the Russians to consider Turkish interests in their policies. As mentioned before, Turkey, like other countries, was unable to accurately estimate and respond to the crisis at the beginning of the riots in Syria. The

developments related to the PKK and its Syrian branch, the PYD illustrated that Turkey underestimated the dimensions of the regional incidents. The structure of the competition in the Middle East allowed the US and Russia to use these groups as a trump card at odds with countries that had a Kurdish minority.

In addition to the issue of northern Syria, Turkey has intensified its cooperation with the parties involved in the Syrian war to resolve the Syrian crisis since 2016. In the wake of the close cooperation between Turkey, Russia, and Iran in December 2016, the Moscow Declaration was issued which formed the Astana negotiation mechanism with the participation of the three countries and the Syrian sides. Therefore, the Astana talks began with the participation of the local parties involved in the Syrian war under the leadership of the three countries (Sadri Alibabalu). This cooperation was the genuine onset of putting an end to the war in Syria, which seems to be a relatively successful measure. In the fourth round of talks in May 2017, a memorandum was signed between the three countries to create four separate de-escalation zones in Syria (Kiselyova and Barrington). The next step was the Sochi agreement between the presidents of Turkey and Russia in September 2018, which prevented Russia and its allies from attacking the province of Idlib (Baresh). As of December 2019, Turkey has resettled a total of 371,000 Syrian refugees in areas that have been out of PYD control since 2016 (Anadolu Ajansı). The fourteenth Astana Process talks took place in December 2019, and the parties' concerns were conveyed to each other through negotiations, particularly on Idlib (Güler).

As discussed earlier, after the operations of Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch, the Turkish Army launched Operation Peace Spring in the PYD controlled areas of northern Syria. This operation was launched after a complicated process since proactive diplomacy by the Turkish policymakers had made Russia satisfied apparently with Turkish measures in Syria. Moreover, alongside the US, Russia vetoed a UNSC statement condemning the Turkish operation in northern Syria in 2019 (Daily Sabah).

Conclusion

In the present study, Turkey's position in the regional order during the conflicts in Syria and Iraq after 2011 was analyzed. This research showed

the presence of threats that emerged from the PKK-affiliated groups against Turkish territories during the wars in Syria and Iraq after 2011. According to neorealists, the anarchical structure of the international system is the main factor in world politics and states are the most influential actors. Neorealism emphasizes the maintenance of security at any cost. Turkish policymakers have endeavoured to minimize the losses and maximize gains in relation to security alongside their interest in the region. In the first stage of the crisis, Turkey failed to predict appropriately the threats that emerged in Syria and Iraq. After this antagonistic period, the developments in the region increased the tensions among all regional powers, including Turkey. It seems that even if the crisis declines in the near future, the regional disputes will continue in the medium term.

Therefore, prior to 2016, the Middle East regional order posed a critical threat to Turkish national security, and Turkey attempted to eliminate the threat by means of a multilateral and multidimensional policy with regional and global powers. In this path, Turkey pursued diplomatic ways as long as it did not need a hard response. However, when it was inevitable, the Turkish authorities did not hesitate to use the army on the ground and to enforce rivals or enemies to accept the Turkish factor. Although the US and Russia, as key players in the Middle East, attempted to exploit the Kurdish issue as the trump card in front of Turkey, Turkish officeholders have managed the crisis by establishing a balance between the US and Russia. Turkish policymakers are aware that the two mentioned actors would use this card in the future. Hence, Turkish relations with the US and Russia have been in line to balance both sides in order to prevent their support from the groups in northern Iraq and northern Syria, which conduct terrorist operations against Turkey.

The structure of the international system is still state-centred and hence, actors like Turkey need to co-operate with others to build a collaboration platform to their benefit. As a country with geostrategic significance in the region, Turkey could eliminate the regional concerns with a well-defined long-term vision. The dynamics of the Middle East are quite sophisticated, and any sudden, unpredicted action gives birth to survival threats to the region. Instability will give way to the likelihood of empowering different terrorist groups and will certainly bring a new disaster to the Middle East.

Therefore, the anarchical structure of the international system forced Turkey and even other regional actors to take steps to ensure their security. As there is anarchy and uncertainty in world politics, states have to handle threats prudently.

Notes

- 1 People's Protection Units have been formed by the PKK in 2011.
- 2 Syrian Democratic Forces group was founded in 2015.
- 3 Democratic Union Party was founded in 2003 in Syria and activated its operations after the Assad government suppressed the demonstrations in 2011.
- 4 Women's Protection Units: By attracting teenagers, the PKK has been able to introduce its members as "defenders of freedom and human rights" to the world. In fact, these teenagers, especially the girls, act as a tool to legitimize the PKK and affiliated groups' political demands. Their success in the field, with the support of the US army, has made them legendary heroes for humankind in the Western media.
- 5 Justice and Development Party (JDP).
- 6 Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan has been founded by Iranian Kurds in 1969 and started their terroristic attacks in 1979, after the Islamic Revolution of Iran. Following an intense war between Iran's armed forces and Komala militia, they escaped to the Iraqi Kurdish region and nested there.
- 7 The Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), as the Iranian branch of the PKK was founded in 2003. Iran's army suppressed the group heavily and they had to escape to the Iraqi Kurdish region. However, the group occasionally conducts terrorist attacks inside Iran.
- 8 Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI) has been founded by Iranian Kurds in 1945. However, Iran's armed forces suppressed its members. As the main group of Iranian Kurds, the group occasionally carries out terrorist attacks against the Iranian forces.
- 9 Peshmarga is the army of Kurdistan Regional Government in Northern Iraq.

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Bölgesel Kaos Ortasında Türkiye'nin Kuzey Suriye ve Irak'a Yönelik Güvenlik Politikası (2011-2019)*

Sayyad Sadri Alibabalu**

Öz

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'nin Irak ve Kuzey Suriye'ye yönelik politikalarını bölgesel jeopolitik rekabet bağlamında açıklamaya çalışmaktadır. Araştırma ilk olarak Türkiye, İran ve Suudi Arabistan'ın rolünü dikkate alarak Ortadoğu'daki bölgesel rekabet yapısını açıklamaktadır. İkinci aşamada, çalışma, bölgesel aktörlerin stratejik hedeflerini açıklayarak, Türkiye'nin Suriye ve Irak'taki askeri ve siyasi angajmanlarının arkasındaki stratejik rasyonalite mantığını bağlamsallaştırmaktadır. Son olarak araştırma, Türkiye'nin Suriye krizini çözme stratejisini incelemektedir. Bu dönemde Türkiye'nin karşılaştığı en önemli tehditlerden biri, ABD'nin IŞİD'e karşı terörle mücadele politikasının kritik bileşeni haline gelen PKK terör örgütünün Suriye kolu YPG'nin ortaya çıkması olmuştur. Suriye ve ardından Irak'taki krizlerin derinleşmesi ve 2016'da Türkiye'de yaşanan başarısız askeri darbe girişimiyle birlikte hükümet stratejisini değiştirerek, Suriye krizinde etkili oyunculardan biri olarak kendini yeniden konumlandırdı. Araştırmanın genel değerlendirmesi, Türkiye'nin kuzey Suriye ve Irak'ta ortaya çıkan tehditleri çifte sütunlu bir politika izleyerek ve Batılı koalisyonundan uzaklaşarak diplomatik ve özellikle sert güç kapasiteleriyle yöneterek, Suriye krizinin çözümünde bir kutup haline geldiği yönündedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Türkiye, uluslararası sistem, bölgesel kargaşa, Irak, Suriye.

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Политика безопасности Турции в отношении Северной Сирии и Ирака в условиях регионального хаоса (2011-2019 гг.)*

Сайяд Садри Алибабалу**

Аннотация

Это исследование призвано объяснить политику Турции в отношении Ирака и Северной Сирии в контексте региональной геополитической конкуренции. В документе сначала объясняется структура региональной конкурентной системы на Ближнем Востоке с учетом роли и влияния Турции, Ирана и Саудовской Аравии. Во-вторых, сосредоточив внимание на стратегических целях региональных акторов, документ контекстуализирует логику стратегической рациональности, стоящую за военными и политическими действиями Турции в Сирии и Ираке. Наконец, исследование касается стратегии Турции по урегулированию сирийского кризиса. Одной из важнейших угроз для Турции в этот период стало появление YPG-сирийского ответвления террористической организации РПК, которая стала центральной составляющей контртеррористической политики США против ИГИЛ. С углублением кризисов в Сирии, а затем и в Ираке, а также неудавшимся военным переворотом в Турции в 2016 году правительство изменило свою стратегию и закрепилось в качестве одного из самых эффективных игроков в сирийском кризисе. Общая оценка этого исследования заключается в том, что Турция справилась с возникшими угрозами на севере Сирии и Ирака, проводя политику двух столпов и опираясь на дипломатические и особенно возможности жесткой силы, и в конечном итоге стала полюсом в разрешении сирийского кризиса с 2016 года, когда постепенно отошел от западной коалиции.

Ключевые слова

Турция, международная система, региональный хаос, Ирак, Сирия.

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