



Turkey and Armed Opposition Groups in Syria: The Case of Operation Euphrates Shield

Türkiye ve Suriye'deki Silahlı Gruplar: Fırat Kalkanı Operasyonu Örneği

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Abstract

After Arab Spring, Turkey's Syria policy has had many original dimensions. Among these original dimensions, one of the most striking is undoubtedly Turkey's relation to the Free Syrian Army. This relation, a new example regarding Turkey's foreign policy and its relation to non-state actors in security policy, is worth investigating. In this study, the relations between Turkey and FSA will be evaluated from the beginning and discussed with concrete examples, and will be examined within the framework of Operation Euphrates Shield, one of Turkey's longest-running cross-border operations after a long time.

Keywords: Free Syrian Army, Euphrates Shield, Syria, Turkish Foreign Policy, Civil War.

Öz

Arap Baharı'ndan sonra Türkiye'nin Suriye'nin politikası pekçok özgün boyut taşımaktadır. Bu özgün boyutlar arasında kuşkusuz en dikkat çekici olanlardan birisi Türkiye'nin Özgür Suriye Ordusu ile ilişkileridir. Türkiye'nin dış politikası ve güvenlik politikasında devlet dışı aktörlerle olan ilişkileri bağlamında yeni bir örnek olan bu ilişki incelenmeye değerdir. Bu çalışmada Türkiye ile ÖSO arasındaki ilişkiler başlangıcından itibaren değerlendirilip, somut örneklerle anlatılırken, uzun bir aradan sonra Türkiye'nin en uzun soluklu sınır ötesi operasyonlarından birisi olan Fırat Kalkanı Operasyonu çerçevesinde irdelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Özgür Suriye Ordusu, Fırat Kalkanı, Suriye, Türk Dış Politikası, İç Savaş.

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Introduction

In Syria, the harsh interventions of the government in the incidents that began as democratic mass demonstrations in March 2011 drove the country into an internal disturbance for years. Despite the fact that it is insufficient to explain the drift of Syria to civil war with only the government's harsh reaction to the demonstrators¹, there has been a civil war in Syria over the last 11 years, involving neighbour states, non-state actors from outside this country and regional and global forces. Turkey, on the other hand, tried to play a role in solving the problems by establishing a close dialogue with the Syrian government at the beginning of the process and negotiations continued intensively until the meeting between Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and the Syrian President on August 9, 2011. After that date, relations between two countries were completely strained, and it continued until Turkey closed its embassy in Damascus on March 26, 2012. However, the developments emerging at that time indicate that Turkey has not been indifferent to Syrian armed opponents since the beginning.

Since Turkish authorities hitherto declined to assume responsibility of supporting armed groups operating abroad, the longevity and magnitude of support to armed groups in Syria extended by Turkey set an unprecedented example. When addressed within this context, it is an exceptional example of using armed opposition organizations as an instrument for Turkey, in accordance with the foreign policy and security policy objectives in Turkish foreign policy. One of the most serious and obvious cases of this example is the Operation Euphrates Shield.

The article will shed light on characteristics of the relationship between Turkey and Syrian armed opposition groups by taking into consideration

the reasons for this exception. The article will try to confirm two hypotheses: The first hypothesis is that Turkey has instrumentalized armed opposition groups in Syria within the framework of its own foreign and security policy priorities? The rationale for this instrumentalization is that Turkey does not only demand a clear regime change in a neighbouring country, but also seeks to eliminate the threat posed by the developments in Syria. Since Syria has been dragged into a civil war, Turkey has developed a special relation with armed opposition groups like many other regional countries. The second hypothesis is that Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield is not only aimed at removing terrorist organizations from the region, but also more generally associated with a perceived threat. Turkey has used armed opposition groups as an instrument within the framework of this threat perception.

In this context, in the introduction of the article, Turkey's relation with the armed groups in Syria will be defined in general terms and it will be revealed in which framework and how the relation has developed. In the second part, the relation between Operation Euphrates Shield and the armed groups, participating in it, will be analyzed and the position of this example will be tried to be defined.

Turkey and Armed Opposition Groups in Syria

When discussing the subject, there is a point that needs to be clarified first. In this article, armed opposition groups are referred to local groups that are in a dispersed or organised form, taking part in or cooperating with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) then Syrian National Army (SNA). None of the statements in the article should be considered as Turkey's supporting terrorist organizations such as al-Nusra Front -which is the extension

¹At this point, there is a remarkable aspect of the Jisr Ash- Shugur Case. On June 6, 2011, about 120 Syrian soldiers were killed at the end of a clash, which is controversial how to have occurred in Jisr ash- Shugur, a crossing point near the border of Idlib Governorate with Turkey. Until then, violence was practiced only by the government. However, this attack was regarded as a signal that the demonstrations would turn into a military movement. After this, the local and scattered groups of people began to bear arms in different provinces and districts. For this reason, the critical role played by the first organized opposition military action of the civil war in Syria at the onset of the clash should also be part of the explanations. For different explanations of how the incident occurred, see Nicholas Blanford, "Syria's regime cracks down hard. But is the military on board?", Christian Science Monitor, June 12, 2011, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0612/Syria-s-regime-cracks-down-hard.-But-is-the-military-on-board> (accessed 14 November 2022) ; "Secrets from Jisr Al-Shughour," Majalla, April 5, 2012, <http://eng.majalla.com/2012/04/article55230561/secrets-from-jisr-al-shughour> (accessed 14 August 2021); Joshua Landis, "What happened at Jisr al-Shagour?" 13 June 2011, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/what-happened-at-jisr-al-shagour/> , (accessed 16 September 2022).

of Al-Qaeda in Syria-, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) or PKK/YPG. These organizations are accepted as terrorist organizations by Turkey.

Although Turkey began to call the Assad Regime for democratization soon afterwards the demonstrations started in Syria, Turkey's policy towards Syria in this period initially did not resort to solve the incidents in Syria by military means and completely withdrew support from the Syrian Regime. On the contrary, Turkey hosted a big opposition meeting when the developments in Syria did not yet a fully fledged civil war and the government tried to suppress the protestors by force. About 400 opponents from various anti-regime fractions participated in the convention titled "The Conference for Change in Syria", carried out in Antalya on June 1-2, 2011. There was no proposal of military solution from this meeting. Opponents urged Bashar al-Assad to resign and hold transparent elections (Ayhan & Orhan, 2011: 8-16). However, two days after the end of that meeting, the incident in Jisr Ash-Shugur changed the course of the events in Syria.

After the protests in Syria were turned into clashes, local groups were begun to form across the different regions of the country. These groups initially failed to establish a unity among themselves as they attempted to be organized on street, neighbourhood or village/town scale. Therefore, the FSA is used to address the various armed groups that represent anti-regime forces in Syria, rather than a formation that represents a single organization/group (O'Bagy, 2013: 10). The first significant group that was established after the beginning in the wake of of the first armed clashes is the Free Officers Brigade, led by Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Harmush, one of those who first defected the army and was later kidnapped in Turkey and killed in Syria (Fares, 2015: 151). On the same dates, in different parts of the country, local groups were formed and had no communication to each other; yet they had common goals to overthrow the regime (Lister, 2016: 5). However, it took about 1,5 months for the groups to reach a large-scale organization and turned it into named as FSA.

FSA was established on July 29, 2011 by Riad al-Assad, who as of July 2011 was the highest level army officer ever defected: Riad al-Assad established his group in Turkey and announced his manifesto in Turkey as well (Spyer, 2012: 47). The first group of defectors preferred TR for its geographical proximity. Nevertheless, the merger of the organization with other groups took place on September 23, 2011. The merger coincided with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan' the announcement that "Turkey suspended the relations with Syria and participated put sanctions in effect. This situation was the most remarkable indicator that Turkey's Syrian policy changed completely. Hence, early in 2012, the Syrian Government increased its military operations and thus FSA expanded stepped up and its military activities. Shortly after that, Turkey brought to the agenda the establishment of a "safe haven" by claiming that the number of immigrants who took refuge in Turkey from Syria for the first time reached 25 thousand and that it would exceed 100 thousand if it did not stop, and that stability should be ensured ("Başbakan Erdoğan'dan Önemli Açıklamalar", 2012). Although the "safe haven" was elaborated by some organizations at that time, it was not carried into effect (Orhan, 2012: 30-40).

After that date, the FSA remained to be disorganized suffering from lack of coordination among its forces despite its rapid growth in weapons, manpower and land. Despite the organization's attempts to get united several times in 2012 and 2013, to create a central command and to consolidate its activities, these efforts did not provide any tangible results. In the region, countries such as Great Britain, France, the USA, Qatar and Saudi Arabia formed sponsored miscellaneous groups encouraging many of them to operate in tandem with the FSA (Ulutaş, 2016: 33-37).

Britain and the USA sought to support the southern groups through Jordan. Therefore, the meeting of *Friends of Syria Group* was held in Antalya in December 2012. After that meeting, the Supreme Military Council (SMC) was formed following the meetings organized Jordan and in Turkey. Apparently, the fragmented character

of FSA continued after the establishment of this formation, which aimed uniting these forces together under a single umbrella. Although there were continual efforts to get these groups streamlined (Lister, 2016: 5) strife among them never ceased to exist. In some cases, disagreements among FSA affiliated groups were manifestations of disagreements among the countries which sponsored these groups. Because of the conflicts within the group and the disagreements among the countries supporting the armed opposition forces, some forces separated from FSA and formed various alliances. Even if some of these alliances stayed in the framework of FSA, some engaged with forces out of FSA, but not linked with forces such as ISIS and al-Nusra. These different alliances clashed with ISIS, al-Nusra, YPG, the Syrian Government and each other based on local interests, personal disagreements, financial support and patronage relationships.

Despite the fact that in the north Turkey had shoulder a role similar to Jordan carrying out in the southern front, and provided a logistic hub to the countries supporting the opponents; Turkey could not have a power of full control over the forces in FSA or other oppositional forces other than FSA. During that time, Turkey has close relations with the opponents in the area, which is called the Northern Front, largely covering Idlib and Aleppo (O'Bagy, 2013: 10). But if necessary to re-express, Turkey was not the only active state on opposition forces in the north. For instance, FSA forces, trained in Turkey by the USA within the scope of the program known as "train and equip", were controlled by USA not Turkey.

Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) and Its Place in Turkey's Security Policy

OES took place during a unique intersection of Turkey's domestic and international security issues. The increasing terrorist attacks by PKK and ISIS since July 2015 and their transformation into a flurry of large-scaled assaults at the end of the same year exposed Turkey to a serious security problem. In autumn of the same year, PKK attempted to seize control of some parts of towns and district centres in South-eastern Anatolia, but because of the security operations

carried out, occupation attempts could only be terminated completely in the spring of 2016. Concordantly, the terrorist acts of PKK had moved to metropolises since the beginning of 2016. In this period, PKK aimed to spread its terrorist campaign towards big cities in Turkey.

On the other hand, it was seen that ISIS terrorist organization had started a wave of terror attacks against Turkey from mid-2015. The attacks in cities such as Istanbul, Ankara and Gaziantep dragged Turkey into struggle with this organization (Yalçınkaya, 2016). In addition to these, the July 15 Coup Attempt by the Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETO) increased to instability in Turkey.

While these incidents were occurring in the country, developments in Syria started to pose a different security risk and strategic threat to Turkey. In September 2015, Russia's direct and explicit involvement in to the Syrian War shifted the power balance in the region to the detriment of Turkey. In the period between the end of 2015 and mid-2016, Turkey's focus was on domestic security issues rather than Syria due to the above-mentioned developments. During that time, FSA lost many regions to ISIS, especially from Cobanbey to Azzaz in the north of Aleppo.

Thus, the Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) began after the coup attempt with the intersection of conditions in domestic and foreign policies although it was stated that Turkey had to fight with these two organizations not only in Turkey but also across the borders before the coup attempt. (Karagül, 2016) Nevertheless, it cannot be assessed only in the context of the fight against terrorism although OES was largely conducted towards the districts under the control of ISIS. Particularly, the threat that YPG, which is the Syrian branch of PKK in the north of Syria, would create a de facto federal region in the north of the country was one of the most significant triggers of the operation. (Jager, 2016) Indeed, after YPG captured Manbij, which had a critical importance to unite Afrin and Kobani Cantons, it started to get ready to move towards Jarablus as its last move (Yeřiltař et al, 2017: 17). After the capture of Jarablus, with the thought that it would be

easier for YPG, which could proceed from the borderline of Turkey, to combine the two regions, TAF and FSA started to implement OES 10 days after YPG took over Manbij on August 14.

It can be argued that the OES, which started on August 24, 2016, basically had three main objectives, starting from the explanations made at that time and the military developments afterwards²:

- To remove terrorist organizations like ISIS and PKK from the border to reduce the terrorist threat to Turkey
- To prevent the formation of a federal zone under the control of YPG in Northern Syria.
- To develop alternatives to the coalition in Syria led by the USA.

The operation has strategic objectives developed in line with these three main objectives. These were to place FSA elements in the region extending Jarablus, Cobanbey, Manbij and northern al-Bab to create a zone that could be safe, defensible and permanent for some time in controlled areas, and to remove the dominant power in the specified geography by military means in order to achieve this goals, and to let other Syrians, who escaped from the war, settle in with the local people in the secured zones.

In order to reach these strategic goals, the operation was divided into tactical steps: the first was to block the progress of PYD and remove ISIS from the border by taking over Jarablus from ISIS. At the second stage, Jarablus-Cobanbey line was to merge once the area was brought under control till Manbij. At the third stage, it was aimed to move towards south from Cobanbey to get al-Bab and to establish a safe zone in this region.

At the first stage of the operation within this framework, Jarablus was cleared from ISIS and

there were clashes between FSA and YPG in the south of Jarablus. FSA, supported by TAF, captured many villages as a result of the clashes with YPG to the south along the Euphrates, and with ISIS in the west of Jarablus. The first phase of the Operation ended on August 29 in the Sajur River in the north of Manbij.

The second stage started without any delay on August 30. At this stage, the main objective was to merge the line between Jarablus and Cobanbey, and to clean it from ISIS to remove ISIS completely from the Turkish border. This stage, which lasted until September 5, ended with the merger of two towns and the removal of ISIS from the border of Turkey and Syria as planned. Contrary to the first stage, the number of villages that FSA took over from ISIS was more at this stage, and clashes with YPG came to a stop with one exception or two.

The third stage started on September 16, 2016. At this stage, Dabiq and its environs, which had political and symbolic significance for ISIS, were seized, and then the operation for al-Bab town started. Even if Dabiq, which was the first part of the third stage, was easily captured, the town of al-Bab, one of the strongest sites of the ISIS in the region, was brought under control after a long siege and violent clashes. This stage of the operation became so important that OES, originally named as Operation Jarablus, started to be called as Operation al-Bab after a while. As a matter of fact, OES was ended shortly after al-Bab was taken under control (Ülgen & Kasapoğlu, 2017).

Briefly, the operation was long and bloody because of several reasons such as weather conditions making air support more difficult, urban terrain obstructing to fight, tendency of groups left by ISIS in al-Bab for suicide attacks, and Turkey's lack of expected support from its allies. The operation was virtually halted shortly after the seizure of the town centre of al-Bab, where the siege of al-Bab lasted until mid-March. OES was officially announced to come to an end by the National Security Council on March 29, 2017.

² For different opinions on this subject, see Fatma Taşdemir ve Adem Özer, "The Operation Euphrates Shield from the Perspective of Use of Force Law," *Akademik Hassasiyetler Dergisi*, <http://dergipark.gov.tr/download/article-file/307200>, p. 55.

FSA Forces Participating in OES and Their Relations with Turkey

It has been explicitly declared and accepted for the first time that Turkey has been operating with armed oppositional forces in Syria since the first public announcement of OES ("Mevlüt Çavuşođlu: Özgür Suriye Ordusu Sınırı Geçti", 2016). Until that day, it was claimed that Turkey provided FSA with political and economic support as well as military support. Although Turkey did not explicitly accept those allegations, it did not deny, either. However, Turkey's relation with FSA has reached a level of conducting joint military operations across the border through

OES.

During the operation, TAF and FSA elements fought together against ISIS and YPG. Nevertheless, the relations with FSA were not limited to the stage in which the military operation was conducted. After military operational dimension of OES ended, the relation between Turkey and FSA continued. It can be argued that there are two basic dimensions of the relation to understand the nature of this relation: operational cooperation during the cross-border operation under the concept of anti-terrorism, plus, training and organizational activities carried out in order

Category	Basic Characteristics	Names of the forces
Nationalist and anti-regime forces	Oppositional organizations led by former army and other security forces mostly secular, with nationalist tendencies. These groups, which had to withdraw from the regions seized by ISIS, Syrian Army and YPG, and consequently were trapped in Azez, Northern Aleppo and İdlib regions, had a wide human potential before OES.	Jaysh al-Tahrir, Al-Mutasim Brigade, Suqour al-Jabal, Ahrar al-Syria, Free Idlib Army.
Forces based on the Muslim Brotherhood	Forces that have ideological ties with the Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood and which are originally broken out of these groups that are active in other regions, or are formed by their branches around OES.	Faylaq al-Sham, the Levant Front, Fa Estaqim Kema Umirt Brigade.
"Moderate" Salafis	The branches of the forces around OES embracing salafism; mainly organized in Aleppo, Hama, Hums and Idlib; but that differ from ISIS or Al-Nusra as extremism, organization and leadership.	Ahrar as-Sham and Nurad-din Zengi.
Nationalist Turkmens	Nationalist forces composed of Turkmens in OES region	Mehmed the Conqueror Brigade, Muntasir Billah Brigade.
Operational forces without any ideological background	Operational forces that do not have an ideological organization established at the beginning of the operation.	13 th Division, Sultan Murad Division, Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Hamza Division, Northern Division, Samarkand Brigade, Suleyman-Shah Brigade, Jaysh al-Ahfad, 51 th Division, Mustapha Brigade.

to ensure security in the field after the end of the military operation, or to expand the operation.

As mentioned above, the main units which Turkey relied on were FSA forces. It has been suggested that about 4000 Turkish soldiers and approximately 7000 persons from various FSA forces joined the operation (Yeşiltaş et al, 2017: 20). Although the forces differed in their ideological engagement, ethnicity, size and effectiveness within the scope of this operation, they cooperated with TAF during the operation and suffered heavy casualties. Approximately 470 FSA fighters have also been killed and another 1,700 injured (Sönmez, 2017: 9).

TAF acted together in this operation to take the region under control with FSA forces throughout OES. However, apart from being in collaboration with Turkey, these groups had no common denominators. The diversity among the groups can be seen from the table. The diversity of the groups within FSA are attributable to their ideological engagements and ethnic identities forces participating in OES can be basically grouped into 5 categories in terms of their ideological engagement: Nationalist and anti-regime forces, forces based on the Muslim Brotherhood, "moderate" Salafis, Turkish Nationalists, operational forces without any ideological background.

There is another point to be noted. Although the forces participating in OES have had good relations with Turkey, they already had diverse affiliations with other regional countries. Many forces participated in the operation on the purposes such as land control, financial support and returning to their lost settlements, although they got support from the countries such as the United States, Qatar and Turkey.

Some of the forces in the Table (e.g. Mehmed the Conqueror Brigade, Muntasar Billah Brigade, Samarkand Brigade, Suleyman Shah Brigade) have close relations only with Turkey, whereas some of them have close relations with international coalition led by the states such as the United States (Sultan Murad Division, Hamza Brigade, Nur ad-Din Zengi, Free Idlib Army

and others) and Qatar (Ahrar as-Sham, Faylaq al-Sham, Fa Estaqim Kema Umirt Brigade.). However, at a later stage of the operation, a considerable number of these forces have entered into closer co-operation with Turkey, setting aside former relations. Therefore, there have been changes in the nature of the cooperation between the initial phase and the progressive phase of OES. For instance, immediately before the third phase of OES started, US troops, their affiliated forces, TAF and its affiliates experienced a tense conflict in Cobanbey, and then US-affiliated forces were observed to withdraw from the field ("ABD askeri Çobanbey'den...", 2016). In addition, this support was completely cut off after the first days of the 3rd Phase, although there was limited air support, especially by the International Coalition to OES. Within this context, OES soon turned into an operation carried out entirely by Turkey.

It has been observed that Turkey's basic motivation created a coalition that can fight both YPG and ISIS by forming a network that spreads as wide as possible. Indeed, Turkey implemented a large and comprehensive joint operation model from a narrow-scale special force operation model by establishing a different operation model (Jager, 2016) from the one FSA and other states, especially the USA, formed.

In sum, Turkey's cooperation with FSA does not involve innovation with only military tactical dimensions, but also it is important to indicate that Turkey does not act with an ideological priority. Mobilization by bringing many different forces together within a single operation seems to be a rational choice arising from field requirements. In this framework, Turkey's operational cooperation with FSA forces within OES took place based on joint military operations to fight against ISIS (and in the first phase against YPG) and to protect the areas taken under control. In this period, the relations between Turkey and FSA deepened and the region firstly became a military security zone by increase and participation in OES of the forces that came from the forces in the region or from the other regions. However, after the end of the military operation, Turkey's presence in the region and the relationship with the FSA forces

moved to another dimension and continued.

On-going Status after Operation

After the official announcement that OES ended, some TAF units were withdrawn from the area. Some of the combatant forces have returned to Turkey, while some have retained their presence in the region. It appears that the region has been transformed into a training ground for FSA so that it can remain secure and safely operate as a forward base in future operations for FSA. In the wake of the termination of the combat phase, some units were withdrawn, yet groups of liaison officers and units geared for training of the FSA forces remained in the OES area".

After OES came to an end, Turkey's regional anticipation has gained two new dimensions: the first is the transformation of the territory, where OES was carried out, into a habitable area for the Syrians. The second is the importance of the region in terms of the possible operations in the future within the framework of Turkey's threat perceptions. Since these two dimensions are closely related to FSA, Turkey's relation with FSA has continued intensively following OES.

From the beginning of the operation, one of the most notable emphasis of Turkey regarding OES has been that it will create a region where the Syrian are able to return in the region cleared from ISIS. Thus, infrastructure work in the region was accelerated following the completion of the military operation (Karakuř, 2016). However, since the first condition to ensure the return of the Syrians to the region is the establishment of security, Turkey's relations with FSA has gained a new dimension.

FSA has become both a security source and a security problem in Euphrates Shield Region (ESR). FSA was given the mission to remove dormant ISIS cells in ESR, and to protect the boundaries of ESR against possible attacks of YPG and Syrian Army. In this context, it has carried out special operations in certain regions, especially starting from periods of military operation. It has

also entered into a bilateral but limited fight with other actors on the boundaries of the region, and has been the main factor in securing the region. On the other hand, the increase in the number of FSA in a short time due to the necessity of the military operation caused a security problem after a while.

Some FSA forces, acting as disorganized, military discipline-free military forces, embarked on a conflict of interest in ESR from the very first moment. In fact, it is known that in the early days of the OES, there were quarrels among the forces on the control of the border gate and some undesired incidents in the process of controlling some villages occurred, even though it was not reflected in the press. Therefore, Turkey also struggled with FSA forces in order to smooth their possible extremism and ensure the security.

Following the end of the military operation, this dimension of Turkey-FSA relations inevitably started to come to the forefront. While Turkey wanted to speed up infrastructure services such as schools, hospitals, post offices and roads in the region in order to ensure the return of the Syrians, some forces contributed by providing security or by providing political and military support to the local administrative committees formed, while others tried to prevent this process. In particular, forces from other regions of Syria, involved in the conflict in ESR, assumed the region as an obtained right and themselves as a savior, and tried to extort money from the Syrians who wanted to return, or hinder their return.³ Hence, it emerged from time to time that Turkey intervened directly or with other members of FSA forces closely cooperating with Turkey in others, resulting in local conflict and security problems (Eř, 2017).

Turkey started to develop a discourse that there might be operations towards Menbij and Raqqa provided the fight against terrorism necessitated on the days when OES ended. It was repeatedly stated that terrorism problems arising from ISIS were solved by OES, and also YPG and PYD put a threat at least as important as ISIS for Turkey. Thus, ESR gained a strategic significance for

³ This information is based on the interviews and observations made by the author of the article on the fieldwork carried out in ESR between 14th -19th August, 2017.

possible anti-terror operations by Turkey in the future. In this context, while the presence of TAF in ESR was shifted to Tal Rifaat, al-Bab and Menbij line, which are the possible operational regions, the training given to FSA groups to participate in future operations is increased. Owing to this training, it was aimed to increase FSA in number and quality. Therefore, the number of FSA troops with 7000 soldiers during OES, according to some sources, rose to 17,000 in the summer of 2017 (“TSK’dan Sınır Ötesi 4 Bölgeye Operasyon Sinyali”, 2017; “Türkiye ÖSO’dan 17 bin kişilik güç hazırladı.”, 2017). However, in the first hand data collected during the preparation of this article, it was learned that this number was exaggerated and the number reached was about 13,000.

Nevertheless, Turkey did not count FSA as an actor only within the scope of a possible combat operation against YPG. When Turkey’s deployment of troops to Idlib was put on the agenda within the framework of conflict-free zones, it came to the fore to cooperate with FSA. Turkey sought to bring FSA from ESR against the possible conflict between TAF and Hay’at Tahrir as-Sham, the core of which is composed of Nusra Front, the Syrian extension of Al-Qaeda in Idlib. In September 2017, when Idlib Operation was on the agenda, 5000 FSA members were announced to participate in the operation with TAF. (“TSK’dan ‘Hazır olun’ talimatı!”, 2017). Even though the Turkish authorities initially stated that the operation would be carried out in conjunction with FSA and even that FSA got in (“İdlib’de çatışmalar başladı, Türk askeri sınırda konuşlandı”, 2017) FSA forces from ESR were not able to participate in the operation because of the opposition of HTS.

Conclusion

In this article, the relation between Turkey and the armed opposition forces in Syria has been defined and tried to discuss how an original example in Turkish Foreign Policy has operated. Since the foundation of Republic of Turkey, it has sometimes developed relations with non-state armed actors either in bilateral relations or in regional politics KDP in Northern Iraq in

1990s can be given as an example. However, Turkey’s relation with FSA is different from other examples.

Although Turkey has advocated a change of regime in neighboring countries both in the Cold War period and later in the post-Cold War period, it has not sought to realize this change by supporting armed oppositional forces. Nevertheless, the first hypothesis of the article is that Turkey has instrumentalized the armed opposition forces in Syria within the framework of its foreign policy and security policy. As exemplified in the study, the relation between Turkey and FSA has been shaped within the scope of Turkey’s foreign policy aiming at the regime change in Syria and the policy to ensure domestic security. Turkey politically supported the Syrian oppositional forces against the Bashar al-Assad Regime, which it did not consider to be legitimate, as it has accepted the government established out of the country as the real Syrian government and supported FSA as the armed force of this legitimate government. Therefore, it is different from all the relations that Turkey has developed with non state actors in foreign policy. Moreover, supporting FSA against terrorist organizations such as ISIS, YPG and al-Qaeda extensions can be given as an example of cooperation within the framework of the desire to eliminate the threat perceived from the developments in Syria. However, this relationship should not be regarded as original and unique, especially due to the example of eliminating the threat, which Turkey perceived from PKK, by cooperation with KDP in 1990s.

The second hypothesis of the article is that the relation between Turkey and FSA has a quality that exceeds the scale of counter-terrorism by OES. This hypothesis tried to examine Turkey’s relations with FSA through concrete examples. Turkey considers the united region, which PYD is trying to establish in Northern Syria, as a strategic threat to its national security. Although the primary objective of the Operation seems to struggle with ISIS in the context of the removal of ISIS from the border by means of OES, it should not be overlooked that it comes between the regions that PYD seeks to unite and seeks

to ensure the settlement of Syrian oppositional forces in this region. Hence, it can be said that the Turkey's relations with FSA in the framework of OES are beyond the dimension of only fight against terrorism, and aim at eliminating strategic threats. Likewise, the statements and initiatives that FSA would fight together with TAF in the possible military operations such as Menbij, Tal Rifaat, Afrin and Idlib, which were on the agenda after OES was over, have indicated that the relation between Turkey and FSA is beyond counter-terrorism perspective, and that strategic Operation Euphrates Shield aiming at ensuring the security does not only intend to eliminate the terrorist organizations from the region, beyond this, it is associated with Turkey's perception of threat in general terms. Turkey has used armed opposition forces as an instrument within the framework of this threat perception.

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Extended Summary

In Syria, the harsh interventions of the government in the incidents that began as democratic mass demonstrations in March 2011 drove the country into an internal disturbance for years. Despite the fact that it is insufficient to explain the drift of Syria to civil war with only the government's harsh reaction to the demonstrators, there has been a civil war in Syria over the last 6 years, involving neighbour states, non-state actors from outside this country and regional and global forces. Turkey, on the other hand, tried to play a role in solving the problems by establishing a close dialogue with the Syrian government at the beginning of the process and negotiations continued intensively until the meeting between Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and the Syrian President on August 9, 2011. After that date, relations between two countries were completely strained. However, the developments emerging at that time indicate that Turkey has not been indifferent to Syrian armed opponents since the beginning.

Looking at the past practices of Turkish foreign policy, it is not seen that Turkey has provided open and long-term economic, political and military support to foreign anti-regime/anti-government armed groups, operating in the land of another country. Although Turkey has advocated a change of regime in neighboring countries both in the Cold War period and later in the post-Cold War period, it has not sought to realize this change by supporting armed oppositional forces. When addressed within this context, it is an exceptional example of using armed opposition organizations as an instrument for Turkey, in accordance with the foreign policy and security policy objectives in Turkish foreign policy. The most serious and obvious outcome of this example is the Operation Euphrates Shield.

The article put forward that Turkey has instrumentalized the armed opposition forces in Syria within the framework of its foreign policy and security policy. The relation between Turkey and FSA has been shaped within the scope of Turkey's foreign policy aiming at the regime change in Syria and the policy to ensure domestic security. Turkey politically supported the Syrian oppositional forces against the Bashar al-Assad Regime, which it did not consider to be legitimate, as it has accepted the government established out of the country as the real Syrian government and supported FSA as the armed force of this legitimate government. Therefore, it is different from all the relations that Turkey has developed with non state actors in foreign policy. Moreover, supporting FSA against terrorist organizations such as ISIS, YPG and al-Qaeda extensions can be given as an example of cooperation within the framework of the desire to eliminate the threat perceived from the developments in Syria. However, this relationship should not be regarded as original and unique, especially due to the example of eliminating the threat, which Turkey perceived from PKK, by cooperation with KDP in 1990s.

Another hypothesis of the article is that the relation between Turkey and FSA has a quality that exceeds the scale of counter-terrorism by OES. This hypothesis tried to examine Turkey's relations with OES and later with FSA through concrete examples. Turkey considers the united region, which PYD is trying to establish in Northern Syria, as a strategic threat to its national security. Although the primary objective of the Operation seems to struggle with ISIS in the context of the removal of ISIS from the border by means of OES, it should not be overlooked that it comes between the regions that PYD seeks to unite and seeks to ensure the settlement of Syrian oppositional forces in this region. Hence, it can be said that the Turkey's relations with FSA in the framework of OES are beyond the dimension of only fight against terrorism, and aim at eliminating strategic threats. Likewise, the statements and initiatives that FSA would fight together with TAF in the possible

military operations such as Menbij, Tal Rifaat, Afrin and Idlib, which were on the agenda after OES was over, have indicated that the relation between Turkey and FSA is beyond counter-terrorism perspective, and that strategic Operation Euphrates Shield aiming at ensuring the security does not only intend to eliminate the terrorist organizations from the region, beyond this, it is associated with Turkey's perception of threat in general terms. Turkey has used armed opposition forces as an instrument within the framework of this threat perception.