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## SOĞUK SAVAŞ VE SONRASI DÖNEMDE TÜRKİYE-SURİYE İLİŞKİLERİ

Öz

Suriye ve Türkiye, çeşitli kültürel ve tarihi bağlara ve hatta akrabalığa sahip iki komşu ülkedir. Bu bağlar, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun topraklarını fethettiği 16. yüzyıldan imparatorluğun dağıldığı 20. yüzyıla kadar şekillenmiştir. 20. yüzyılın ortalarına doğru bağımsızlığını kazanan Suriye ile komşusu Türkiye arasındaki bu bağlar bazı sorunların önüne geçmeye yetmemiş, Hatay Sorunu ile ilişkiler ciddi anlamda gerilirken, su sorunu her şeyi daha da kötüleştirmiştir. İki ülke arasındaki en büyük gerilim ise Türkiye'nin onlarca yıldır uğraştığı terörizmle ilgilidir. Bu sorun nedeniyle iki devlet adeta birbiriyle savaşan halinde haline gelmiştir. Her şeye rağmen diplomasi sayesinde sorunlar aşılmış ve en az birkaç yıl sürecek bir barış ortamı sağlanmıştır. Ancak 2010'ların başında alevlenen Arap Baharı sonucundaki olaylarla birlikte başa dönmüş, 10 yılı aşkın bir süredir iki devlet arasındaki ilişkiler her zamankinden daha kötü hale gelmiş, diplomatik ilişkiler ise kesilmiştir. Bu süre zarfında oluşan kitlesel mülteci akınları ve askeri operasyonlar nedeniyle orta vadede muhtemelen iyi ilişkiler kurulamayacaktır. Bu yazıda özellikle Soğuk Savaş koşulları ve sonrasında Suriye ile Türkiye arasındaki ilişkiler incelenmiştir. Bu kapsamda; su sorunu, terör problemi, 1990'ların sonunda yerini barışa bırakan potansiyel çatışma dönemi, Arap Baharı ve sonrasındaki süreç bu karmaşık ilişkiyi anlamak için ayrıntılı olarak ele alınmıştır. Arap Baharı ise günümüzü doğrudan ilgilendirdiği için diğerlerinden daha detaylı olarak irdelenmiştir. Arap Baharı ile ilgili olarak özellikle şu üç soruya dikkat çekilmiştir: Türkiye'nin geçmişten bugüne yaşanan olaylara bakış açısı nasıldır, yıllar geçtikçe Türk dış politikasında olaylara yönelik bir değişiklik olmuş mudur, Türkiye-Suriye ilişkileri son gelişmelerden nasıl etkilenmektedir?

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Türkiye-Syria Relations During Cold War and Post Cold War Period

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Suriye, Terör, Arap Baharı, Mülteciler

TÜRKİYE-SYRIA RELATIONS DURING COLD WAR AND POST COLD WAR PERIOD

Abstract

Syria and Türkiye are two neighboring countries have various cultural and historical ties and even relatives. These ties were formed from the 16th century, when the Ottoman Empire conquered its territory, to the 20th century, when the empire broke up. These ties between Syria, which became independent towards the middle of the 20th century, and its neighbor Türkiye were not enough to prevent some problems. While relations with the Hatay Problem were seriously strained, the water problem made everything worse. The biggest tension between the two countries is related to terrorism that Türkiye has been dealing with for several decades. Because of this problem, the two states had come to a point where they were almost at war with each other. Despite everything, thanks to diplomacy, the problems were overcome and an atmosphere of peace that would last at least a few years was ensured. However, with the events of the early 2010s, it was returned to the beginning. For more than 10 years, relations between the two states are worse than ever, there are no diplomatic relations. Perhaps better relations will not be established in the medium term due to massive refugee flows and military operations. In this article, the relations between Syria and Türkiye, especially in the conditions of the Cold War and after, is examined. Particularly, the water problem, the terrorism issue, the potential clash being replaced by peace at the end of the 1990s, the Arab Spring and its aftermath period are analyzed in detail to understand this complex relation. The Arab Spring, on the other hand, is emphasized in more detail than the others, as it directly concerns our day. Regarding the Arab Spring, attention is drawn to the following three questions: What is Türkiye's perspective on events from past to present, has there been a change in Turkish foreign policy over the years, how are Türkiye-Syria relations affected by the latest developments?

Keywords: Türkiye, Syria, Terror, Arab Spring, Refugees

Introduction

Syria is one of Türkiye's 8 border neighbors and has the longest border with Türkiye, 911 kilometers. While Türkiye became an independent republic thanks to its independence struggle after the First World War, Syria passed under the French mandate control (Gelvin 1994: 24-27). Türkiye and Syria have had a complicated relationship since these times, it's hard to talk about a stable peacefulness or hostility. If we try to examine the reasons for the fluctuating relations from past to present, three events come to the fore: Hatay conflict, transboundary waters problem and terrorism issue.

Hatay, which is located on the national borders of Türkiye's National Pact but was left to Syria due to the difficult conditions of the period, joined Türkiye in 1939 through a referendum, thanks to the agreements made between France and Türkiye. Despite this, the





inclusion of Hatay within the borders of Türkiye was not accepted by Syria and they argued that the agreements between Türkiye and France were not legal. For this reason, Syria continued to show Hatay as their territory on their maps (Gaub 2016: 2).

Another issue causing tension between the two countries is the Southeastern Anatolia Project, which started in 1980. The project has two legs: The first part refers the Tigris River and the second part including the Euphrates River, which covers both Türkiye and Syria. Türkiye saw this project as a means of using water resources more efficiently and wanted the Euphrates to be evaluated within the scope of transboundary waters law, while Syria wanted the Euphrates to be evaluated within the scope of international waters (Kolars 2000: 102-106). Since both countries did not want to make concessions, there was no solution to the tension.

At this point, Syria decided to take advantage of the terror problem in Türkiye. Syria established a base for the PKK terrorist organization in their own country and hosted Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the organization. Syria has not done terrorism only to prevent the Southeastern Anatolia Project, it has used it to weaken countries that they perceive as rivals and threats to their Greater Syria ideals. This situation has caused serious problems in Türkiye's domestic and foreign policy for many years. In the 1980s and 1990s, Türkiye made various diplomatic warnings to reduce the tension between the two countries, and mutual security protocols were also signed, but this did not prevent Syria from supporting terrorism. The situation got so bad that the two countries almost went to war with each other in 1998. As Türkiye and Syria came to the brink of war, other states engaged in mediation activities and not only persuaded Syria to deport Abdullah Öcalan, but also managed to get Syria to sign the 1998 Adana Agreement, which included the joint struggle against the PKK terrorist organization, namely cooperation. In this way, the problems experienced for a while have been shelved and the relations between Syria and Türkiye have stabilized again (Mahfudh 2012: 21-24).

At the beginning of the 2000s, important events took place in the domestic politics of both countries. In Syria, Bashar Assad came to power and took control and the AKP, led by Erdoğan, managed to become the new government in Türkiye with a good percentage of votes in the elections. Thanks to the new foreign policies in the two countries, relations have developed, and strategic partnerships have been established. In this period, Türkiye's policy of zero problems with its neighbors can be observed in relations with Syria. The friendship between Türkiye and Syria, which was formed through the new policies adopted by the new governments, lasted until 2011. The devastating effects of the Arab Spring also showed its effect in Syria. The demands of the people turned into uprisings after a point, and these uprisings turned into civil war. Despite Türkiye's efforts, relations with Syria and the Assad government, which did not accept reform, deteriorated, and eventually broke completely (D'Alema 2017: 2-6).





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In this study, it is tried to be examined why Türkiye has so many problems with Syria, one of its main neighbors. In particular, all the problems are touched one by one to interpret them from time to time. The Arab Spring have been dealt with in more detail than the others, as it directly concerns our day. It is paid particular attention to three questions in the Arab Spring: What perspectives have been applicable for Türkiye's on the events, whether there has been a change in thoughts as the years passed, and finally as a regional power how it is affected by what happened.

This article consists of 4 parts: Historical information about the relations between Türkiye and Syria are given in the first part and it is explained how this background to shape the article. In the second part, "Transboundary Waters Issue and Its Effects to the Terrorism Problem", the information about Syria and its domestic politics are delivered in order to better understand its applications and the water problem is examined in this regard. The third part contains the terror problem, the aftermath of the 1998 Adana Agreement and the improved relations. In the fourth part, it was focused on the Arab Spring and is tried to explain its effects on current relations.

### 1. Political Structure of Syria

The political and social structure of Syria is more or less like other MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries. Just like in other Arab countries, a single-family form and rules the political regime in Syria, and these families also represent an ethnicity. In Syria, the Shiite minority rules the Sunni majority through the Assad family and democracy has remained in the background, because most MENA governments are extremely authoritarian and totalitarian. Finally, just like in other MENA countries, it doesn't matter so much what the society wants in Syria, so that there are not even non-governmental organizations (Holliday 2013: 2-13).

After gaining its independence in 1946, Syria witnessed military coups and political instability. With a military coup in 1963, the Baath Party seized power and has been still in power. When Hafez Assad got the power in 1970, the Baath Party and ten other Socialist and Arab nationalist political parties, that were active at that time, united in 1972. They called it the National Progressive Front and according to the 1973 Constitution, the leader of this formation is none other than the Baath Party (Galvani 1974: 3-9).

The Baath Party, which has been in power since 1963, shares its power in part with other parties within the National Progressive Front. For this reason, other political parties are represented in the People's Assembly and the Government, as well as the Baath Party. However, opposition parties are parties that are dependent on the regime and cannot be an alternative. The living opposition was either suppressed or driven out and the real power in





Syria is in the hands of the President. The President is also the Chairman of the Ba'ath Party, the Chairman of the National Progressive Front, and the Commander of the army. The leader of the country is elected in every 7 years and there is no limit to be a president (Dawisha 1978: 342-348).

Another feature that can be observed in Syria is that the society is not ethnically but religiously diverse. The majority of the population consists of Arabs, the remaining population is Kurds, Turkmens and Armenians. In terms of religion, a significant part of the country is Sunni, including Kurds and Turkmen. Shiites are a minority, and a significant Christian population also lives in the country, although not many (Lenczowski 1966: 36-42).

There is a deep Kurdish and Arab tension in the country. The Baathist government, whose power is based on the dominance of the Arabs in the country, does not grant citizenship rights to hundreds of thousands of Kurds. The reason for this is that they have doubts about the Kurds, and accordingly they carry out Arabization policies. However, due to the protests in 2011, the government announced that Kurds would be granted citizenship by issuing their identity cards. Another polarization is between Shiites and Sunnis and in the Baath rule, Shiites minority were brought to important roles in the state. In other words, the bureaucracy in the country is dominated by this group. This caused them to accept the moves against the Baathist government as being made against them at the same time. For this reason, the Shiite population and the Shiite bureaucracy have always been on the side of the Baath Party. So much so that when Hafez Assad died in 2000, various changes were made in the constitution so that his son Bashar Assad could take over the country, the most important of which was lowering the age to be elected president. Bashar al-Assad became president in 2000 with almost all of the votes, but considering the ineffectiveness of the opposition, these all-previous elections were quite artificial (Rais 2004: 149-156).

The ideological basis of Hafez Assad's Syrian foreign policy was the Baath ideology based on secular Arab nationalism. The ultimate goal of this policy was the Greater Syria ideal. However, as the conditions changed, this ideal began to be shelved. Especially with Bashar Assad's takeover, this ideal has shifted towards ensuring Syria's prestige in the region. In addition, establishing good relations with the European Union and neighboring countries and getting out of the list of terrorist states were among Bashar Assad's goals (Becker 2005: 82-90).

## 2. Transboundary Waters Issue and Its Effects to the Terrorism Problem

In the 20th century, the serious increase in the population raised the need for water resources at the same rate. States had to take various measures to manage water resources. These measures have also caused problems between states, the region where these problems occur mostly have been the MENA region. Especially the Euphrates and Tigris rivers have caused serious tensions between Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq because these three states have







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developed and tried to implement projects on the use of these waters. In 1946, the Friendship and Good Neighborhood Agreement was signed between Iraq and Türkiye. Although Türkiye tried to negotiate with Syria in the same way, no results could be obtained. The main tension for this water problem was actually between Iraq and Syria, but after Türkiye's projects, these two countries put aside the problems they had with each other and took their place against Türkiye (Scheumann 1998: 113-126).

One of the projects developed by Türkiye to better use its water resources is the Keban Dam, which was built in the 1960s. Then, in the 1980s, the Southeastern Anatolia Project came into existence, which was mentioned that this project is related to the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. This situation drew the reaction of Iraq and Syria because if Türkiye could implement this project, the share of Iraq and Syria from these two rivers would have decreased significantly. Especially in 1990, during the construction of the Atatürk Dam, the most important pillar of the project had been the problems related to water had given Syria and Iraq and it was the exact opportunity for them to bring the event to the international arena. In addition, the two countries took advantage of nationalist feelings and tried to take the Arab League against Türkiye. Since there is no definite provision on this issue in international law, the problem cannot be solved definitively (Tann et al. 2018: 2-4)

The main reason for the water problem between Iraq, Syria and Türkiye is related to the perspective of the countries. According to Türkiye, the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers are transboundary waters, on the other hand, Iraq and Syria claim that the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers were international waters. In other words, while Türkiye claimed that it could use the water resources in its own country according to absolute sovereignty, Syria and Iraq were acting in line with the indivisible unity thesis (Dohrmann et al. 2014: 568-574).

The fair use of transboundary waters was based on the 1966 Helsinki rules, which was also approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1997, with the proposition not to cause significant harm to others (UN 1997: 12).

Syria wanted to take advantage of terrorism in order to achieve what they demanded in this regard. Syria, which turned a blind eye to the activities of the PKK terrorist organization to acquire bases in its territory, led to an increase in the terror problem in Türkiye in the 1980s. This problem was tried to be resolved with the cooperation protocol signed during the visit of Turgut Özal, the Turkish Prime Minister of the time, to Syria in 1987. However, the protocol signed with Syria did not yield the results that Türkiye wanted, and the Syrian administration continued to turn a blind eye to the PKK members, who carried out terrorist acts in Türkiye, to enter Syria. In 1990, Syria claimed in the international arena that Türkiye was trying to control the water completely and that the common water was used as an advantage against them, or rather continued to argue (Gleick 2014: 331-335).





Although most of the two rivers were in Türkiye, Syria was demanding more than it deserved. Türkiye did not want to compromise its sovereign rights and continued to believe in a peaceful solution. For this purpose, the Peace Water Project has been put forward by Türkiye. However, Türkiye once again received a negative reaction contrary to what it expected. Türkiye did not give up on the peaceful solution and pioneered the Middle East Water Conference in 1991. In the face of this attempt, which was in an environment where the Gulf War created new and different balances, the Arab opposition led by Syria did not want to make the slightest concession to the conference led by Türkiye, and the summit ended before it could be convened. This issue has still not been resolved and does not seem to be solved in the light of current balances (Paul 2001: 28-36).

Having problems with Türkiye because of the water problem, Syria saw terrorism as a tool for weakening factor and a covered threat. In this respect, Syria has a significant impact on the development of the PKK, because it allowed the establishment of terror camps on its territory and helped to train them. It has implemented policies of systematically weakening Türkiye through separatist movements in Türkiye, against the water issue, which has gained importance since the 1960s and became a problem in the 1980s, especially with its claims on Hatay. Syria continued its systematic support to the terrorist organization in the 1990s, but relations reached a turning point in 1998, when Türkiye became unable to tolerate Syria's terror policy. While Türkiye was trying to take necessary measures against the increasing PKK terrorism in the early 1990s, it met with groups and countries that were thought to support the organization (Gorvett 1998: 33-38).

In this respect, there has been some activity in Türkiye-Syria relations. The aim of these meetings is to ensure that the support given to the terrorist organization is cut off and to find a solution to the terrorism problem that has been consuming Türkiye's energy for years. As a result of Türkiye's pressure, a security protocol was signed at the end of the negotiations between the two countries in 1992, Syria finally accepted the PKK activities as terror activities and their members as terrorists in 1993, and because of bilateral negotiations and the insistence of the Turkish side, it took the decision to close the PKK camp. In the note that was given by Türkiye in 1996, stated that Syria used the separatist PKK movement to impose a solution in its favor on the water problem and it was the main responsible for the losses suffered. In addition, Türkiye warned Syria that since it harbors the PKK and its leader on its territory, so Türkiye considers this a violation of the United Nations Charter. Türkiye asked Syria to immediately cease all activities of the PKK, to prosecute the criminals, and to hand over Abdullah Ocalan, together with his deputies. Türkiye stated that it reserves the right to demand compensation from Syria for the damages it has suffered due to the activities of the PKK, and additionally it has the right to take measures against Syria as long as it harbors the PKK and Öcalan and it will use this right whenever it sees fit (Marcus 2007: 76-83).





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Against Syria, which did not comply with the agreements signed in 1987 and 1992, Türkiye started to build up a military standing on the Syrian border, and relations between Türkiye and Syria became very tense. Arab states, especially Egypt and Iran, played a mediating role and began to seek diplomatic solutions to this process, which was called the October Crisis. Syria took a step back on its policy of weakening other states by using terrorist organizations that had been going on for years. Syria deported Abdullah Öcalan to Athens in 1998 and stated that it would meet Türkiye's demands regarding PKK activities. In 1998, Syrian and Turkish officials came together in Adana, and due to the negotiations called the Adana Agreement, Syria declared that they had deported Öcalan and that they would not take him back to their country. It was also announced that all PKK settlements would be closed, and the PKK would be prevented from setting up camp in Syria again. With the Adana Agreement, the problems between the two countries have decreased and the relations between the two countries have become more moderate (Bengio 2017: 25-31).

#### 3. Relations after 1998 Adana Protocol

With its new government, Türkiye started to follow the principle of zero problems with neighbors. Naturally, Syria, which has historical, religious, and cultural partnerships, was one of the targets of this policy. After the early 2000s, Türkiye started to take various steps to improve relations with Syria. A Cooperation Council was established between the two countries to contribute to the stability and peace of not only these two countries, but also the region. One of the concrete steps taken was the mutual abolition of visas (Mahfudh 2012: 22-24).

With the death of Hafez Assad in 2000 and his son Bashar Assad's takeover of power, Türkiye-Syria relations gained momentum. Especially the first official visit of the then Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer to Syria for Hafez Assad's funeral had positive reflections in Syria and was accepted as the beginning of a new era in relations with Türkiye. The fact that both Türkiye and Bashar Assad, who became the President of Syria in 2000, attaches importance to the development of bilateral relations in all fields and the efforts made by both sides in this direction have been effective in the development of relations. In this context, mutual visits, and contacts between the two countries at the president, prime minister, minister and other levels have also increased. Bashar Assad, who came to power in 2000, initiated a political, economic, and social liberal initiative called the Damascus Spring in his early years (Ziadeh and Alsaleh 2015: 230-233).

With the coming to power of Bashar Assad, Türkiye-Syria relations started to follow a more positive line; instead of emphasizing the problems that would lead to conflict, the parties sought ways to develop cooperation. The close relations between Türkiye and Syria are also extremely important in terms of national and regional security. These two countries have







solicitousness about the future of their neighbor Iraq, and they also need to increase their possible cooperation in order to contribute positively to the peace and stability of the region. In this context, Syria's Deputy President Abdulhalim Haddam first came to Ankara to revive relations with Türkiye. During his two-day visit, Haddam conveyed Assad's message of goodwill to President Ahmet Necdet Sezer and stated that they were determined to increase relations in political, economic, military, and cultural fields. The ground, which was softened by political visits, spread to military areas in the following periods. The Syrian military delegation, which made two official visits to Türkiye in 2001, had taken the first step of a strategic change in the region. Türkiye, on the other hand, stated that joint military exercises may be on the agenda in the coming years, giving the impression that it had begun to balance the Israeli-dominated regional policies to some extent and considering that it would have an impact on building trust between the two sides. Thus, in the period that passed after Öcalan's expulsion from Syria, the Syrian-Turkish relations began to return to normal in almost every field (Bakir 2011: 4-7).

George W. Bush elected as the US President in 2001 and September 11 attacks can be perceived as the initiating of the process of isolating Syria from the international system. With this incident, the process of exclusion of Syria from the international system and self-isolation had begun. The US had invaded Iraq and had a security policy that had devastating effects on the Middle East. US' main interest was depending on securing the rich oil resources in Arab countries, but not so for Syria. Therefore, the main motivation in the US policy on Syria can be seen as Israel's security. Israel's security depends on the solution of the Palestinian and Lebanese problems. At this point, Assad's two main goals were formed: The first is to keep Syria alive amid all these external threats. The second is to keep himself in power against all internal threats (Ma'oz 2005: 2-6).

After the invasion of Iraq, Türkiye gave support to Syria by reacting to the US and Israel's raising agenda of a possible attack against Syria. Everyone knew that the US wanted to create a Kurdish state to increase its influence in the Middle East, and since this was a development that Syria and Türkiye did not want, cooperation was inevitable for the two states. Assad's visit to Türkiye in 2004 for this purpose was welcomed by the regional states. Another significance of this visit for Türkiye is that it was the first one of a Syrian president after 1946. Again, in the same year, Erdogan's visit to Syria proved the sincerity of the two countries regarding cooperation. As a result of mutual visits between the two countries in 2004, not only an increase in trade volume was achieved, but also visa procedures were facilitated. In addition, the mines on the borders of the two countries were cleared. Thanks to all these developments, the relations between the two countries have developed so much that even a free trade agreement has been signed. After the assassination of the former Lebanese president in 2005, Syria has faced enormous international pressure. But Türkiye has shown its friendship even under these conditions. Moreover, in 2008, Türkiye took the role of mediator





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in Syria's peace talks with Israel, taking its cooperation to another dimension (Kandil et al. 2008: 421-33)

Thanks to the new policies of the new governments, the relations in the fields of trade and tourism have become better through the atmosphere of peace and the trade volume of the two countries with each other has increased considerably. With the abolition of visas by the two countries in 2009, the tourism income of the two countries raised significantly. As a result, a council was established when the Syrian president visited Türkiye in 2009 and this reinforced the relations between Türkiye and Syria, which developed after the 2000s. So, Türkiye and Syria entered the process of realizing the cooperation with the changing regional balances, good relations between the two countries and perceptions of common interest (Cohen 2013: 37-39).

### 4. Relations after the Arab Spring

In the 2010s, a series of public protests broke out in the MENA and the spark that started in Tunisia suddenly burned the whole region politically or internally. Small protests were so large that they could even cause civil wars, and all this created a domino effect. It was inevitable that Syria would get its share from this. At the beginning, just like in other countries, the people were organizing protests for innovative reforms, and just like in other countries, the protests turned into a civil rebellion or even a civil war due to the harsh response of the government to these protests (Al-Azm 2014: 202-208).

The Arab Spring has been a breaking point in its foreign policy for Türkiye, which believes that democratization and modernization will spread in the countries of the region and make the MENA countries more stable and secure as the Turkish model, and that it will become the leader of the MENA peace process (Murinson 2012: 16-23).

Turkish government argued that these protests should be led peacefully, because the balances in the MENA had changed and being not accepting this reality would only have worse consequences. For this reason, it was recommended to implement innovative reforms to the Assad administration either. It was also stated at this point that Türkiye was open to all kinds of assistance in the process of creating and designing reforms. However, Assad was a hardliner about the demanded reforms and responded to the protests quite harshly (Akram 2011: 24-29).

The tension with the Syrian government, which had been indifferent to the political suggestions, was triggered by hundreds of refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria. Those arrivals meant an economic burden for Türkiye and negatively affected its internal stability. As Türkiye started to take its share of the unfavorableness in Syria, her voice began to rise against the Syrian administration. The idea that Türkiye, as a model country, would direct the





democratization movements in the MENA in general and in Syria in particular, collapsed when Assad responded violently to the reform demands in Syria. The friendly ally or strategic partnership relationship between Türkiye and Syria has been replaced by hostility since then. As a result, a package containing various economic, political, and military sanctions was prepared. Following the sanctions package, Syria suspended the trade agreement it signed with Türkiye. In 2012, it shot down a Turkish warplane on the so-called grounds that it violated Syrian airspace. Thereupon, the parliament in Türkiye authorized the army units to cross the Syrian-Turkish border and make a military intervention in Syria in case of a violation, such as the downing of a plane (Young et al. 2014: 16-21)

By starting to support the moderate opposition wing in Syria, Türkiye aimed for the Assad regime to fall from power and reacted more harshly to the civil war in Syria than the western states. Türkiye, following policies in the coordination of the West, even welcomed the idea of military intervention, which came to the fore at the United Nations. As a matter of fact, this situation, which was prevented by the veto of Russian Federation (RF) and People's Republic of China (PRC) in the United Nations Security Council, pushed the West to the idea of overthrowing Assad, which was Türkiye-oriented (Hale 2019: 26-32).

Initially supporting the opposition wing Free Syrian Army with the support of the US, Türkiye turned its policy towards the fight against terrorism after the DAESH terrorist organization appeared on the Syrian scene in 2014. Then, US has left Türkiye alone in its Syria policy through supporting the YPG/PYD which are PKK extended and defined as a terrorist organization by both countries. Terrorist organizations that emerged by taking advantage of the authority vacuum in Syria have created a national security problem for Türkiye. Additionally, having experienced serious security problems again since this period, Türkiye have become uneasy about the formation of a terrorist state on its border and produced policies in the context of security. The negative developments experienced have caused Türkiye to return to the pre-1998 period in its security problems and relations with Syria (Salih 2015: 4-9).

Dozens of people lost their lives in Syria because of the harsh and brutal response of the government to the people's desire for reform. Some members of the army, who were against the actions of the government, changed sides and joined the armed forces of the opposition. The opposition, which gained strength with the participation of the members of the army, established the Free Syrian Army to organize its armed resistance. What happened in Syria could no longer be described as a protest because the people were armed and fighting for power. With the establishment of the Free Syrian Army, Syria has almost turned into a war zone and could only be explained in one way, the civil war (van Veen et al. 2021: 15-22).

Foreign aid was also coming to the opposition, especially from many Western countries. The then US president, Barack Obama, called on Assad to resign and lots of





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countries also began to impose embargoes on the Assad administration. Later, Erdogan openly stated that he took sides with the opposition in the face of what had happened and criticized Syria while the political wing of the opposition was gathering in Türkiye. At the very beginning of the uprisings, Assad released radicals from prisons to cut support for the opposition, but it didn't work. Besides Iraqi supporters also joined the opposition against the government's repression. Additionally, Assad's army had to withdraw helplessly, especially from the cities dominated by the Kurds. This withdrawal took place without conflict, as the balance of power was against them. Syria did not recognize the rights of citizenship because it sees the Kurds as a threat and during the civil war, the Kurds took the opportunity and formed the YPG terrorist organization. Members of this organization are also affiliated with the PKK. After Assad's move against Türkiye, the YPG became the main force in Afrin and Kobani, and YPG flags were hung on the Turkish border (Orton 2018: 160-168).

The Iranian administration, which did not want to lose Assad and one of its most important allies in the region, was providing weapons and militia support to the army of Damascus. In early 2013, Iran's Revolutionary Guards announced that one of its commanders had been killed by the opposition in Syria. Meanwhile, the opposition had captured many settlements. With the support of Hezbollah and Iranian militias under the leadership of Qasem Soleimani, Assad began to seize important regions (Entessa 2021: 1-4).

When the date showed 2013, a claim was made by the US that Syrian regime was using chemical weapons. There were also those who thought that this allegation was just a perception, but a few months later, the regime actually used poison gas against the people. As a result, hundreds of people died. However, the turning point of the war was what happened between the US and RF after the gas attack, and ultimately the US changed its stance on the Syrian civil war. Obama, who is expected to intervene in Syria, requested military authorization from the US Congress. After Obama's move, an agreement was made with the Putin regime, which is known to be the most important supporter of Assad. According to this agreement, the poisonous gases owned by Syria would be confiscated and transferred to another country. After that date, the US gave limited support to the opposition and did not openly intervene against Assad. This situation led to comments that the Obama administration, which was close to the nuclear agreement with Iran at that time, abstained in Syria in order not to increase the tension with Tehran. Meanwhile, the strengthening of the Muslim Brotherhood among the dissidents created uneasiness in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries (Adams 2014: 1-8).

In 2013, attacks on the Raqqa region began, and the target of this attack was the opposition. The source of these attacks was none other than the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria





(ISIS) or ISIL<sup>1</sup> or DAESH<sup>2</sup> at the leader of this state's command, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In early 2014 they managed to take over the city with the claim of being caliphs, and accordingly they described Raqqa as the capital of the caliphate. Some groups that left Raqqa as defeated took refuge in Idlib because they had no other choice. This was a concerning progress for Türkiye because the number of radical groups was increasing at the border. ISIS was gaining strength fast and was recruiting more militants, so much so that some studies report that they had around 30,000 fighters at the time. A year later, ISIS had grown so much and strengthened that they had reached the capacity to commit terrorist acts in other countries, unfortunately, including Türkiye (Gambhir 2015: 10-21).

ISIS gained strength in 2014 and even succeeded in seizing Mosul. Not content with that, they launched attacks on some Kurdish-administered areas close to the Turkish border. In the same period, the US, which targeted ISIS for the first time with air bombardments in the Sinjar region of Iraq, carried out its first aerial bombardment in Syria about a month later. As the civil war in Syria progressed against the YPG, the balance began to change with the help of the US openly. One of the important actions of the YPG during the changing balances was the successful defense of Kobani against ISIS because there was an image that they would have lost the city without the aid. With the self-confidence brought by the YPG gaining power, it succeeded in capturing many regions close to the Turkish border. Then they attacked Raqqa and took it from the Iraqis. All these developments completely stopped the solution process in Türkiye. The resolution process, which had a great shock in the Kobani incidents, came to an end when Türkiye hit ISIS targets first in Syria and then PKK targets in Northern Iraq. The fact that the YPG was on Türkiye's border was a huge threat. Türkiye had no choice but to put a stop to it. In addition, the ISIS threat in the border areas could not be completely eliminated. Thereupon, Türkiye started the Euphrates Shield Operation in 2016, aiming to ensure border security in the region. This action was carried out for security purposes and was followed by the Olive Branch Operation in 2018, which was carried out for the same purpose (Lindenstrauss and Shavit 2018: 1-2).

It had been four years since the war began, while the US was involved in the war with its aid to the YPG and PYD after a point, Türkiye was dealing with two major operations. But RF was not involved yet and was only supporting the Assad regime morally. But after the US and Türkiye upset all the balances in the region, they were also directly involved in this war through aerial bombardments. The Syrian regime, which had problems and was losing the war until the intervention of the Russians, had succeeded in gaining power and the war had begun to progress in the scenario they wanted. RF was naturally against Türkiye as the side it was involved in the war, but the relations between the two countries were stable until

<sup>1</sup> Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

<sup>2</sup> Dawlah al-Islamīyah fī l-'Irāq wa-sh-Shām







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November 2015. A Russian plane was shot down at that time. The reason was that it violated Turkish airspace. Later, the tension between RF and Türkiye gave way to cooperation. Meanwhile, Türkiye's relations with the US were getting worse due to the support given to the YPG. Plus, RF and the US were almost playing chess, so instead of engaging in a hot war, they were fighting each other over the support they gave to certain groups. For this reason, RF has never made direct attacks against YPG areas and has only launched attacks against ISIS-controlled areas. But since Donald Trump became president, it was the first time the US has fired a missile at a Syrian army base and a year later it fired once again (Hale 2019: 31-38).

Just a few years after a small group fleeing the conflict first arrived at the Turkish border in 2011, Syrian refugees numbered in the millions. Syrians, who have left their homes for good, have sought asylum in Europe. The influx of immigrants to Greece through the Aegean Sea began. The path paved by the Syrians was so great that refugees from Afghans, Pakistanis, Iraqis, and many other countries formed huge immigration queues. Europe was naturally afraid of this situation, and they had to do something. For this purpose, they made an agreement with Türkiye in 2016. In this way, they pressed the refugee groups that were at their doorstep to Türkiye, so to speak. However, in February 2020, at a time of tension between Türkiye and the European Union, Erdogan announced that he had opened the doors to immigrants, but many immigrants who went to Edirne to cross the border were sent back after being subjected to harsh interventions by the Greek police (BBC 2020).

By the way, US President Trump announced in 2018 that there was no territory under the control of ISIS and that he would withdraw US from Syria. However, because of the reactions, he was able to withdraw very few of US soldiers. On the other hand, the Syrian army, along with Russian mercenaries and Iranian militias, continued to fight ISIS. After a phone call with Erdogan in 2019, five years after Obama started helping the YPG, Trump once again announced that he would withdraw from Syria. After that, Türkiye launched the Peace Spring Operation against the YPG that was to be completed in two weeks. For this, it was agreed first with the US and then with RF. According to this agreement, YPG militants would be withdrawn from Türkiye's border and this amount was decided as 30 kilometers. In addition, American and Russian troops would be placed in the region where the YPG had withdrawn (Lindenstrauss and Shavit 2019: 1-4).

When the ISIS problem, which dominated a large part of the war, disappeared to a large extent, signals of change began to emerge in the approach of first Arab countries and then European countries towards Assad and the Baath Party. There were messages between Türkiye and Syria that the two countries could cooperate against terrorist organizations and that Assad could work if the Syrians preferred him in the democratic elections. Some Arab countries, which want to limit Iran's influence and have already given up on supporting the





opposition, reopened their diplomatic representations in Damascus, some sent ambassadors and even Assad was accepted as a representative again by Arab League. As we approached the 12th year of the war, Assad remained in power even though he was now dependent on RF and Iran more than ever. Syria, which is actually divided into three parts, continues to be the scene of satellite warfare after 12 years (Hayman and Guzansky 2023: 1-4).

### Conclusion

Relations between Syria and Türkiye have been often problematic and unstable. A problem experienced triggered another problem, and in this way, even the possibility of war arose. There was friendship from time to time, but this was not long-term. The event that triggered the deterioration of relations between the two countries was the Hatay problem. Even if a war was avoided in the environment of instability in the world at that time, the problems between the two states deepened. Then, a series of problems occurred during the Cold War period. With the water problem, the problems between the two countries have increased in size and a psychological war has emerged between the two countries. Countries that want to weaken each other have made some moves in this regard, for example, such as humiliating or blaming the other country in the international arena. There are also policies to attract the support of the other state and to leave the opposing state alone. Undoubtedly, the most critical of these moves was the support of the terrorism moves. At that time, Syria's efforts to enlarge Türkiye's biggest and most important terror problem, to make it more deadly with supporting them, brought psychological warfare to the level of hot conflict. Thanks to the mediation activities of other states, a common point was found and peace was achieved. With the new governments in the two countries, relations have become even more friendly, but with the crisis of the early 2010s, it has turned to the beginning again.

In this study, it was tried to be examined why Türkiye has so many problems with Syria, one of its main neighbors. In particular, all the problems were touched one by one to interpret them from time to time. The Arab Spring was dealt with in more detail than the others, as it directly concerns our day. It was paid particular attention to three questions in the Arab Spring. It was sought answers to the questions of what kind of Türkiye's perspectives has been available on the events, whether there has been a change in thoughts as the years passed, and how it has been affected by what happened. The first two questions are easy to answer that Türkiye has been at the same point since the beginning, continuing its reaction to what happened in Syria. As for the question of how it is affected, it can be only explained through few dimensions. First of all, because of the instability in the region, there is a war that has been going on for more than 12 years across Türkiye's border, so, element of threat at the border is always there. The other issue is the refugees, and the third dimension is international politics. The great powers are actually quite active in the war in Syria, and the strangest part is that Türkiye is experiencing tensions with both major powers, RF and the US. Türkiye is





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trying to keep the border areas under control by carrying out various military operations on these tensions. In short, the problems with Syria caused serious problems both in domestic and foreign policy.

Relations between Türkiye and Syria have not been very promising except for some short periods. Perhaps the basis of some problems that laid while the Ottoman Empire have still been standing. Even though relations that were already bad at that time became more hostile with the accession of Hatay to Türkiye. Then, deteriorating relations with water-related problems brought along the periods when two states started to make moves against each other and followed a policy of weakening the other. The most important agenda between them was terrorism. So much so that the two states came to the brink of war, but the problems were resolved. In fact, this is what complicates relations between Türkiye and Syria. The problems of almost 50-60 years could be solved in a short time. Today, the two states are once again experiencing serious problems. Considering the situations, perhaps the relations between the two states will not be easily improved due to the inclusion of some external factors, because the event is not only state-based. After all, the 1998 peace talks show us that we shouldn't be so desperate about a friendly future. After the stability of the region is ensured, the relations between Syria and Türkiye can improve again, at least the hostility will end.

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